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The second criticism concerns the Classes themselves. "With a list split into Classes A+ through E, doesn't that mean that a component rated in Class D or Class E received a failing grade?"

No. We recommend every component listed. Each is included because of the advocacy of one or more of the magazine's reviewers. Every one will make music in a satisfying manner when used with a synergistic system.

The final criticism, and perhaps the most important, is, at first reading, more serious: If we recommended so many products—between 500 and 700 in a typical list—doesn't this alone invalidate the list's usefulness?

I wrote about this in the October 2004 issue's "As We See It": "It is important to note that not only does more than one person's opinion contribute to 'Recommended Components,' so do their individual tastes in both sound reproduction and music. While all products strive to reach the goal of high fidelity, even the best fail in different areas, which in turn means that there cannot be an absolute sound rating, only one that reflects the individual preferences of a specific reviewer." I also wrote about this subject in the October 1998 issue. "The listing...intended to be the central depository of the collective wisdom of the magazine's team of equipment reviewers. It's the only place where the experiences of all of those reviewers are taken into account when determining the ultimate value of a component, whether it be the heights of Class A or the value-for-money Classes D and E."

This third criticism stems from a far too limited view of what "Recommended Components" is and what it is to be used for. It is not—repeat, not—a list of the single best component in each category. How can there even be a single "winner"? While all products have as a goal the highest fidelity, even the best fail in different areas. In addition, audiophiles have different needs, tastes, rooms, and systems. As we have said since almost the beginning, "Recommended Components" will not tell you what to buy any more than Consumer Reports would presume to tell you whom to marry. Instead, it is intended to be used as sonic triage, to enable readers to match the magazine's phrase "the listing is intended to be the central depository of the collective wisdom of the magazine's team of equipment reviewers" to the listings themselves.

There are three criticisms of "Recommended Components" that crop up every time. The first involves our dropping someone's favorite product from the list. As I write in the introduction to "Recommended Components," my policy is to delete models that have been discontinued, and not to list a component for more than three years following the original publication of its review unless at least one of the magazine's writers has had continued experience with it. I chose three years because I can't be wholeheartedly sure of the rating after that long a time without further auditioning, and because this is pretty much the median lifetime of the products we review. But deletion of a component does not invalidate a buying decision someone has made. If it was a good buy when purchased and it's still making music, what's the problem?


did so, in November 1986, though these days I have the invaluable help of assistant editor Stephen Mejias, who writes the text for the new entries, and our summer intern Kristina Roman, who checks the price and availability of each and every entry. But the task remains the same: condensing the review opinions of our writers that have been published over the previous six months and coming up with a ranking for the products to be included in the new list. Reading the results of this process, of course, is when readers' sunny dispositions turn cloudy, their tempers are irked, their emotions riled, and when Microsoft Outlook is fired up to send STLetters@Prismedia.com a metaphorical missile of a message. (No, she did not wear army boots.)

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Don Byron
So he used to wear dreads, refuses to stay with one style, and does whatever strikes his fancy. So what? Rest assured, Don Byron is not your daddy's clarinet player. But he's also not as out there as you might expect. Robert Baird's conversation with one of jazz music's most adventurous voices.

EQUIPMENT REPORTS

140 Sonos ZP80 & ZP100 WiFi music systems (John Atkinson)
149 ASR Emitter II Exclusive integrated amplifier (Michael Fremer)
161 Sonic Impact 5062 Super T amplifier (Wes Phillips)
169 NAD C 372 integrated amplifier (Jim Austin)
179 BG Z-1 loudspeaker (Robert J. Reina)
187 Nordost Heimdall interconnects and speaker cables (Art Dudley)
193 Ultimate Ears UE-10 in-ear headphones (Wes Phillips)
As We See It
This issue includes the 41st edition of "Recommended Components" to have been compiled by editor John Atkinson. JA offers some thoughts on this venerable institution.

Letters
This month we hear from readers who love our lusty ways, our choice of music, our wit and cynicism, our depth, our joy, our website, our information (good and bad), our parades, our religion, and our evolutions!

Industry Update
High-end audio news including dealer-promoted seminars, plus: News from Triangle, Talon Audio, and Max Townshend.
Want to know more? Go to the "News Desk" at www.stereophile.com for up-to-the-minute info.

Sam's Space
Sam Yellin visits Triangle in France and listens to the large Magellan Grand Concert SW2s and the small La Comete Anniversaire edition limitée.

Analog Corner
Michael Fremer listens to the Clearaudio Goldfinger and Miyabi/47 Laboratory MC phono cartridges with the Funk Firm Vector turntable using the Furutech and Acoustic Revive LP demagnetizers and the Feickert Universal Protractor.

Listening
Has Artie got a deal for you... the BlueBerry Xtreme preamplifier and the art of bluegrass.

The Fifth Element
John Marks records with the Sound Devices Model 722 portable audio recorder on his continued tour of "historical and significant" pipe organs of Rhode Island.

Record Reviews
For October's "Recording of the Month," we've chosen two different recordings, in two different mediums, by a single artist: Keith Jarrett's DVD Tokyo Solo and his audio CD, The Carnegie Hall Concert. In classical music, we have John Luther Adams, the 12 Cellists of the Berlin Philharmonic, and part of a new Beethoven cycle. In Pop/Rock, there are reviews of new releases by Spencer Dickinson, Allison Moorer, The Handsome Family, and Thom Yorke. In Jazz, there's a new record by Tomasz Stanko and a Serge Chaloff reissue.

Manufacturers' Comments
This month we hear from Clearaudio, Furutech, Acoustic Revive, BG Corp., and NAD on our reviews of their products.

Aural Robert
As the music business shrinks, consolidation is inevitable. Combining the assets of three labels, Telarc, Fantasy, and Concord, the new and much larger Concord Records seems to be a good thing. Or is it? And what are their plans for all this storied content?
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-Jeff Fritz, SoundStaee on the Studio 100

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Afrika, 1985). This version has a slow, driving bass line that would be merely Masekela’s LP Waiting for the Rain (Jive, another version of “Stimela,” on piece of music: “Stimela,” by Hugh per (August 2006), Paul Bolin mentions a Editor:

I wish you had flipped Clearaudio your Master Reference with Clearaudio’s Goldfinger cartridge were sweet. But I Ken, your observations on the Clearaudio approach. Ken may live in the UK, but he hande@yahoo.com New York, NY

Lust, madness, and audiophiles Editor: Why print reviews of costly equipment? Because they inspire lust. Perhaps even madness. And without lust, there can be no audiophiles. Peter Roberts Canary, CA proberts@rocketmail.com

Focus, depth, and presence Editor: My high-end CD transport died a sudden and unexpected death the other day. Unable to face the week or two without my CDs, I borrowed my wife’s DVD player—about £25 from the local super- market, a Yamada something-or-other. As a standalone player using its onboard DAC, it sounds awful, but it has a coax digital output. Well, I thought, I can feed that to my high-end DAC, so at least I can play some CDs, even with grotty sound. Ummm…actually, this is the best- sounding CD transport I’ve ever heard, and I’ve owned Mark Levinson, Musical Fidelity, Quad, Cyrus, etc. The transparency, focus, stage depth, and presence are genuinely transportable. It kind of sets you thinking, doesn’t it? Jerry Jacobs, UK subscriber jnjac100@hotmail.com

Newsletters, Joy, and Squeezeboxes Editor: I read your two recent newsletters talking about the Slim Devices Squeezebox summarized in the September Stereophile, pp.128-134, with measurements data and further auditioning notes—Ed. I am an SB3 user from Hong Kong. As I am sure you are aware, Hong Kong is full of audiophiles. Very often we are so obsessed with the tiniest bit of change in sound when we try out a new cable that we “forget” to enjoy music. SB3 brought all the joy back. While I understand that, as a reviewer, you should primarily focus on the absolute performance of the SB3, I hope you will not oversee the other factors that may not be at the top of many audiophiles’ priority lists. Whereas the iPod gave consumers a new way to access and listen to their music on the go, the SB3 gave consumers that accessibility, flexibility, and customizability at home. Frankly, I do not see how a wired connection can sound better than a wireless connection, but even if it does, what does it matter? Perhaps one can only access one’s music from one or two locations via wired connections, but the flexibility of wireless connections means music for everyone in the family. It is important to remember that the SB3 can be used in two roles: as a player or as a transport substitute. I never even considered using the SB3’s analog output. And most important, the SB3 needs to be looked at in the perspective of its price and advantages over a standard disc player. Since converting all my CDs to lossless files last year, I have sold my Linn CD12 and am now happily using an SB3 with an EMM Labs DCC2, and my Mark Levinson No.33H monoblocks driving a pair of Revel Salon speakers. The convenience factor cannot be overstated. I use a Tablet PC as remote control, using the Touch theme (http://yourslimserver:9000/Touch). You can also stream your music to, say, your office from home. If you open the right port on your router and firewall, SlimServer will real-time-compress your audiostream if your uplink has too low a limit. Stereophile’s reviews have helped me in purchasing decisions before—I bought my first pair of audiophile speakers, B&W Silver Signatures, much because of JA’s review in the June 1994 Stereophile. I hope I have shown you how a real user is taking advantage of the SB3, and how it has brought the joy of music back into my life. In short, this is simply the best $299 anyone can spend on a piece of audio equipment! Wai-Shan Lam Hong Kong

iPods, SACD, and warranties Editor: According to Apple’s website, the $350 iPod is warranted for one year. According to the dCS website, the $14,000 iPh SACD [player] is also warranted for one year. So, as the hi-fi press retreats into analog LPs, Jason Serinus proclaims that the Emperor isn’t naked—it is listeners who simply cannot perceive the beauty of his new clothes (June 2006, p.3). Let me propose that the problem is not so much with listeners as it is with the absurdity of the hi-fi audio industry. $14k for 20-year-old technology that functionally does far less than an MP3 player, has an extremely limited music
library (a dead format at that), whose sonic 
quality assures me of no
greater manufacturing quality than a
portable device—well, that is just plain silly.
Who is the real music lover? If I had
to spend the rest of my life with either a $14k
SACD player with a library of 15 CDs that
I actually liked or a $350 iPod with the
music I actually want to hear on it, I am
going to go with the iPod. Suedly enough, I
have to wonder how many hi-fi reviewers
would choose the the expensive audio system
with the extremely limited library
playing on functionally retarded technology.
I love hi-fi, but it’s the music that
comes first, not fidelity. What good is a
system that doesn’t allow you to play the
music you love?
It never ceases to amaze me how an
industry with so little innovation over the
last 20 years attempts to sell gear at such
high prices. The high end should be blazing
trails to musical freedom (not just
fidelity) instead of playing follow the
leader—or, in some cases, ignoring
the leader! And we should have seen greater
drops in cost as well. Yet the likes of dCS
and many other manufacturers are merely
upgrading products they had practically
mastered a decade ago. For example,
Rockport Technologies sells the Sirius III
turntable for $73,750, but will provide
only a two-year parts-and-labor warranty
for it. Still, Stereophile gives this product an
A+ rating! You’d think that a company
like Rockport would be willing to stand
behind their own $74k turntable for
more than two years. Or at least the
audiophile press would question the real
manufacturing quality of such “hi-fi” that
isn’t promised to cost me less than
$36,500 per year?
Perhaps the masses haven’t embraced
hi-fi because, in far too many cases, it is an
overrated, antiquated, poor investment
heralded by “audio prophets,” month after
month, as the best thing since sliced bread.
Most of us don’t believe the hype, so why
would we expect the masses to fall for it
too? More important, perhaps we’d be
more inclined to share hi-fi with our une-
terred friends, such as CPO, Tudor, etc. I, too,
have discovered many new and outstanding
labels, such as CPO, Tudor, etc. I, too,
am glad that many other smaller labels
are getting serious about SACD, despite
Sony’s abandonment of the format.
However, there is one more thing that
I wish the audio magazines would do to
help speed up the acceptance and under-
standing of the format: pressure recording
companies to stop releasing both a “Red
Book” CD and a hybrid SACD of the
same title! Telarc and Harmonia Mundi
are two outstanding labels that immedi-
ately come to mind. If the labels plan on
releasing a title as a hybrid SACD, then
simply release it is that and do not release a
“Red Book.” The price difference is
usually negligible.
SACD is a great format. Though still
not quite up to great vinyl, it is still a
superb format for classical and jazz. Let’s
hope it stays that way!!!
Mark Wagner
Austin, TX
nikofan@austin.rr.com

SACD? Amen!
Editor:
I just read Kalman Rubinson’s “Music
in the Round” section [in the May issue] on
multichannel sound and SACD. I have one
word for his comments on SACD: Amen!!!
I am a huge fan of the SACD format, and
my SACD library is rapidly
approaching 400 titles. One thing that I

love so much about the format is that I
have discovered many new and outstanding
labels, such as CPO, Tudor, etc. I, too,
am glad that many other smaller labels
are getting serious about SACD, despite
Sony’s abandonment of the format.

Surround and Evolution
Editor:
I have never been convinced of the
advantages of surround sound as applied
to movies or audio. Now, I believe I
understand why.
Yesterday, I took my children to see
Pixar’s Cars. For the most part it was
restrained in its use of surround effects.
But a scene at a dirt track highlighted for
me the artificiality of surround. The scene
is initially a close-up of two cars, with the
audio centered. Quick cut, change of
camera angle, and we now view them
more distantly and from the left side.
Logically enough, the sound now comes
abruptly, and almost exclusively, from the
speakers on the right side of the theater.

But while the video effect is hardly
noticeable, the audio is jarring and almost
launderable. I’ve encountered this problem
in many other movies (helicopters from
off screen seem ubiquitous)

So why is the shift okay in video but
not audio? First, because we are used to
the quick cut in video, but also because
that cut mimics our occasional video
experience—g, coming out of a tunnel
and the view before our eyes instantaneous
ly changing.
I think, however, that it is an evolution-
ary adaptation that makes the audio expe-
rience so startling. Our hearing system is
very effective at localizing sounds. It is a
significant protection system that tells us
where that new and potentially danger-
ous sound stimulus is coming from. It is
an alarm, and indeed can be alarming. So
when we hear the cars suddenly shift
their position by 90°, we jerk, our heads
around and essentially say, “What was
that?” It distracts us rather than involves
us in the movie experience.
Our vision, by contrast, is full-frontal,
and although evolutionarily very impor-
tant for our survival, it does not give us
side and rear information in the same way
hearing does. (This may all be different for
animals such as horses, who have an eye
on each side of the head!) It does give us
depth information, which is why when a
distant visual stimulus in a film is suddenly
brought right before us, it is also quite
startling. Filmmakers, being keenly aware
of the visual, therefore use this type of
effect only when their intent is to shock.
What does all this have to do with
music? (After all, many Stereophile readers,
myself included. don’t even care much
about movies.) I think what it tells us is
that surround effects with music need to
be very subtle—a little bit of hall ambi-
ence, but nothing more—or they will pro-
duce an unnatural, attention-grabbing,
potentially startling effect.
When I was a teenager, an older audio
buff showed off his quadrophonic system
for me. Delighted, he reveled in being
completely engulfed by the orchestra.
For a long time I was impressed by this, and
wondered why we seemed to re-create the
comparatively dull, frontal concert
hall setting. But I’ve realized that having
the orchestra behind and to the sides sim-
ply produces head-jerking effects, not a
satisfying musical experience. After all,
your conscious mind may tell you that that
is a bassoon sounding behind you, but a
second, more quickly reacting part of your
mind will snap to alert because, for all it
knows, that could be a wild bear bearing
down on you. It is only after this reaction has
occurred that your conscious mind
makes sense of what it has heard.
I think it is also not an accident that
composers have typically kept our atten-
tion on the front. Yes, there are the Venet-
ian masters of the baroque who exploited
the spatial qualities of St. Mark’s with
works of polychoral splendor, but these
were big, ceremonial works designed to
produce big effects. When the music is
primary, even in opera, composers do not
distract us with spatial effects and let us
absorb the music.

Christopher Rothko
New York, NY

It is an interesting exposition. Sure, we hear all around us, and undoubtedly that has been of great survival value to us as a species. However, Mr.
Rothko’s initial revelation was in response to a
tapid shift of perspective, both visual and auditory.
That he was more willing to accept the visual
than the auditory shift may be due to our long-time
exposure to visual movements in the artificial
environment of movies and television, where, over
the same time span, the audio perspective was
left entirely stable and frontal. That may be changing.
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World Radio History
Lately, I have been enjoying the Dolby 5.1-channel sound that accompanies the TV show Numb3rs. The producers shift visual perspectives no more or less than other such shows, but they seem to take care to match the audio perspective to it. That means that I can hear a door opening behind me before the actors and I turn to see who is there. It is an entirely involving but not startling effect.

Yes, I agree: For all music composed for the traditional frontal-stage presentation, surround effects should be confined to capturing the ambience of the performance space. However, for new music and performances created to move around (and around us), a congruence of the auditory and the visual is appropriate, even if the visual component must remain only imagined because of the current state of video. Media and people evolve.

—Kalman Rubinson

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Wrong information

Editor: In his August "Analog Corner," Michael Fremer talks about LP disc plating. I believe he got his wires crossed: the metal part he identifies as a "positive" is in fact called a "negative," and vice versa.

— Doug Powenover, powenoveraudio@att.net

My semodylez got in the way, Doug. My crossed wires had the negative as the groove and the positive as the ridged version, for what I think are obvious reasons (one goes "in," the other "out"). However, I understand that the positive is the final result, the LP; and the negative is the stamper from which it was pressed, and that's how they're referred to in the recording biz.

—Michael Fremer

The passing parade #1

Editor: I had dealings with Stereophile in regard to the Aura turntable, which Dick Olsher reviewed in April 1990. Sadly, I have to tell you that the Aura’s designer, Dave Whittaker, passed away on Monday, July 10. He had the heart bypass some years before, but had ongoing problems with his heart.

Dave was a true gentleman, always honest, fair, and far too generous when he had to charge for something. He was also a true music lover, his preferences being Handel choral works and the like. Dave used to be a Franciscan monk and played the oboe. A tribute can be found at www.audioenz.co.nz/forums/showthread.php?7=2896.

—Mike Kontor, mike@louaudio.com.au

The passing parade #2

Editor: Sadly, longtime hi-fi enthusiast, manufacturer, and all-around really nice guy Frank Dennesen passed away on Sunday, July 23. Apparently, he had been ill and hospitalized for some time. I got the news from Peter Madnick of DTG (formerly of Audio Alchemy fame). I had worked with both Peter and Frank back in the 1970s.

—Dick Pierce, dpierce@cartmulk.org
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INDUSTRY UPDATE

FRANCE: SOISSONS
Paul Messenger

Speaker manufacturer Triangle might be in France, but they're also less than four hours' drive from my home in Kent. Popping down to Soissons provides an opportunity to check out the latest Triangular developments while, at last, stocking up on inexpensive French wine and visiting a rather fine bistro in nearby Laon.

Much has happened in the two years since my last visit to Triangle. Crucially, founder Renaud de Vergnettes has acquired a wealthy partner, Olivier Decelle, whose substantial investment in the business has produced some obvious results [see "Sam's Space" elsewhere in this issue—Ed]. In short, Triangle is going for it: the company has doubled the size of its premises, the laboratory was stuffed with the latest hi-tech goodies, and there seemed to be several more engineers scattered around a much-expanded research-and-development section than on my previous visit.

In our computer-dominated world, products tend to become increasingly homogenous—obvious enough among the cars on the road, and equally true of loudspeakers. What distinguishes Triangle from the herd is that it has always taken its own individual—some would say maverick—approach to speaker design. This is most obvious in its persistent use of doped-fabric surrounds for its midrange drivers, a technique that went out of fashion back in the 1960s but that, to my ears, gives Triangle's speakers great dynamic expression and "speed." Rivals point out that such surrounds lead to more coloration than when cones are terminated with the usual soft rubber surrounds, and I wouldn't dispute the assertion; the Triangle experience has always been exciting and involving, but tends to be a bit edgy and unrefined.

That seems to be where the new investments are changing things. The extra R&D money has bought a lot more computing power and advanced analysis tools, and that in turn has resulted in considerable extra refinement of the drive-units, which remain the core of the Triangle experience. Computer simulation makes the creation of "virtual prototypes" simple and cost-effective; when physical prototypes are built, the predicted behavior matches very closely that of the actual hardware. Triangle's "3D printer" beavers away through the night, creating horn shapes and baskets in resin directly from the computer drawings, while advanced software, such as the Klippel measurement suite, help the engineers eliminate driver nonlinearities.

Besides wanting to show me all their shiny new R&D toys—as well as a good-size anechoic chamber that's not the least bit shiny—Triangle wanted to play me their latest top models. Both the full-size, three-box Magellan Grand Concert and the smaller, one-box Magellan Concerto now have "SW2" suffixes, and share with their predecessors only their basic shapes and driver configurations. The drive-units and networks are all new—for example, those midrange surrounds are now formed as a single rather than a double S—and even the enclosures are significantly larger and stiffer than their predecessors.

I don't trust my ears to make reliable judgments when listening to unknown equipment in unfamiliar surroundings, but the demonstration of the two new Magellans was most impressive. They not only seemed to have retained all the dynamic virtues that traditionally make Triangle speakers and the music they play unusually interesting to listen to, they also seemed to combine this with new levels of smoothness, sweetness, and transparency.

While Triangle is introducing its latest engineering developments in these two large speakers, the plan is to trickle down elements of these advances gradually into less costly models. Other, smaller Magellans are expected to be introduced as successors to the mid-priced Stratos range. Triangle is committed to manufacturing everything possible in-house, and has ambitious plans to move further up the ranks of European speaker makers.

US: CORALVILLE, IOWA
Jason Victor Serinus

Just as the mythical Phoenix always rises from its own ashes, the birds of the Talon Audio line have again taken flight, this time as Talon Loudspeakers. On August 7, Rives Audio (www.rivesaudio.com) acquired Talon Audio and plans to reintroduce many of the company's most successful models.

Richard Rives Bird, 40, who founded...
What you see in the photograph above is a steel ball striking an inch thick piece of one of Wilson Audio's proprietary cabinet materials—in this case legendary X material. The purpose of this test is not to demonstrate that X material can resist being hit by steel balls; that's a given. In fact, X material is so rigid, a one inch board foot could withstand the weight of three F15 fighter jets.

Over the years, Wilson has conducted more research into the sonic properties of various materials than any other loudspeaker company. The original quest was to find the ideal cabinet material. But Wilson's engineers quickly came to understand a basic acoustic principle: no single material is suited for all loudspeaker applications. The cabinet "wish list" of midrange drivers is fundamentally different from the desires of the woofer.

Each material has its own "sound," determined largely by three factors: a) the resonant frequency of the material b) its monotonicity (does it ring just one frequency with no overtones?) and c) damping (how long does it ring?). How this impacts (pun intended) the sound of a loudspeaker is an object lesson in the complex interplay of physics, more worthy of a textbook than a magazine ad.

One paradox that has long plagued speaker designers: materials that provide excellent damping are typically soft. Soft cabinets are poor launching pads for the loudspeaker's drivers. The beauty of modern composites (X material) and laminates (M material) is they can be engineered to be at once rigid and highly damped.

All of Wilson's cabinet materials, including X (which has proven its superiority as a bass cabinet composite) and M (which mates beautifully with midrange drivers), have undergone years of development—from theoretical computer modeling to steel ball tests. The final and most critical experiment is to listen to each material in blind comparisons. No matter how good a material looks on paper, it must ultimately possess the rare ability to convey musical beauty.

Even then, the process isn't done. The restless quest for perfection at the heart of the culture at Wilson Audio dictates that the search for new and better materials is never done. So if you ever have the opportunity to visit the Wilson facilities, don't be surprised if you hear, from behind a closed laboratory door, the faint sound of a steel ball hitting a solid object.
INDUSTRY UPDATE

Colorado
Friday—Sunday, October 20–22: The Rocky Mountain Audio Fest takes place at the Denver Tech Center Marriott. For more info, visit www.audiofest.net.

Illinois
Thursday, October 12, 7pm: Quintessence Audio (5701 W. Dempster, Morton Grove) will host a seminar with Richard Vandersteen to discuss the Quatro Signature and the importance of waveform preservation. RSVP: (847) 966-4434.

Maryland
Thursday, October 5, 6:30pm: Soundworks (10526 Connecticut Avenue, Kensington) will host a seminar with Richard Vandersteen to discuss the Quatro Signature and the importance of waveform preservation. RSVP: (301) 929-8600.

Michigan
Tuesday, October 10, 7pm: Audio Dimension (31968 Woodward, Royal Oak) will host a seminar with Richard Vandersteen to discuss the Quatro Signature and the importance of waveform preservation. RSVP: (248) 549-7320.

New Jersey
Saturday, October 7, 4pm: Audio Connection (615 Bloomfield Avenue, Verona) will host a seminar with Richard Vandersteen to discuss the Quatro Signature and the importance of waveform preservation. RSVP: (973) 239-1799.

North Carolina
Tuesday, October 3, 6pm: Audio Advice (8621-117 Glenwood Avenue, Raleigh) will host a seminar with Richard Vandersteen to discuss the Quatro Signature and the importance of waveform preservation. RSVP: (919) 881-2005 or e-mail info@audiodvice.com.

Tuesday, October 3, 6–9pm: Audio Advice (8621-117 Glenwood Avenue, Raleigh) will host an evening of music and movies with the team from Mark Levinson. RSVP: (919) 881-2005 or e-mail info@audiodvice.com.

Ohio
Saturday—Sunday, September 23–24, 12–6pm: Don Better Audio (Shaker Heights) will host a seminar with Julian Pelchat of Verity Audio, John Quick of Rives Audio in April 2002, first encountered Talon Audio cofounder Mike Farnsworth at the 2003 Consumer Electronics Show. Rives had brought several of his Parametric Adaptive Room Compensation (PARC) units to the show, planning to demonstrate them in several rooms. (The Rives PARC, which adjusts and controls bass in the analog domain, so impressed Stereophile’s Kal Rubinson when he reviewed it for the July 2003 issue that it received our 2003 Accessory of the Year Award.) Farnsworth asked to try a PARC, in hopes of correcting a serious room-related bass issue in the room Talon Audio was sharing with Tenor Audio.

“The PARC enabled Mike’s Firebird [loudspeaker] to perform as it was intended to perform, without fighting the room,” says Bird. “When he heard the difference, he was so impressed that he asked to keep the unit. I, in turn, felt Mike’s speakers were really quite incredible at their price point. We quickly became really good friends.”

As the years progressed, it became apparent that Farnsworth’s forte was manufacturing speakers, not running a business. “I wish I’d sold the company to Richard three years ago,” Farnsworth acknowledges. “I’m glad to have someone who appreciates the technology and innovation of the designs and doesn’t want to compromise the sound. We’ve worked very hard, through trial and error, to get the sound we really like. Now, hopefully, more people will be able to hear what the Talon sound is all about.”

Talon Loudspeakers has been launched with two speaker series. The Performance line comprises the Raven two-way floorstander, the Falcon two-way stand-mount, and the active Roc subwoofer. The Reference line is the Hawk stand-mount, Hawk Cinema, and the top of the line, the Firebird. No longer in production are the Khorus and Khorus X (which, with its final, 2005 upgrade, serves as my reference loudspeaker), or the Firehawk prototype that was displayed at the 2005 and 2006 CES. Richard Rives Bird acknowledges that Talon Audio made some poor marketing decisions. The company sometimes released speakers before perfecting their designs (g, the Khorus and Khorus X). Loudspeakers also used drivers that required so long to break in that some consumers threw in the towel before ever hearing their full potential. As a result, Talon was impelled to make several significant design changes and modifications in the first year or two of a model’s life, and to break in the drivers for extended periods before assembly.

Another problem was Talon Audio’s marketing strategy. Some of its dealers offered deep discounts on the Web and via mail order, undercutting other dealers and eroding consumer confidence. Claims of model misrepresentation also surfaced.

As a result, Rives Audio has pledged to manufacture only “mature” models whose time-tested and perfected designs will yield exceptional performance. These speakers will bear the new company’s insignia: “Talon Loudspeakers: A Rives Audio Company.”

Farnsworth, who continues to work with Talon as a design consultant, assures consumers that all Talon speakers manufactured since January 2005 include the latest design modifications. (Rives Audio should be able to track the manufacturing date of most speakers by their serial numbers.) If significant numbers of owners of earlier Talons request upgrades, Rives hopes to be able to make them available in the future.

Speaking from my own experience, the latest mods to the Khorus and Khorus X have made all the difference in the world, from a more open, light-filled treble to far more profound bass.

Talon Loudspeakers’ distribution network will be protected in the same way Rives Audio protects its own current network. Only dealers who can demonstrate fully broken-in speakers and offer a very high level of customer service will be accepted. Neither Internet/mail-order dealers nor those who transship across state lines to customers they have never met will be accepted into the network.

A asked what makes Talon speakers unique, Farnsworth cites advances in crossover design. “We offer a phase-accurate crossover with steep slopes. There’s less phase shift in our crossover than in a first-order (6dB/octave) crossover. The less the phase shift, the less the loss of information, color, and timbre, and the more analog-like the sound. We also use the same common-mode rejection circuitry to lower noise as that employed in military circuits. I don’t know of other manufacturers who use such circuitry, because it requires the same amount of parts as a third-order crossover, and demands extensive experience and knowledge to pull off successfully.”

For his part, Richard Rives is thrilled to be able to further expand a company that, in a little over four years, has not
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**INDUSTRY UPDATE**

**PENNSYLVANIA/ TRI-STATE AREA**

Saturday, October 7, 1-4pm: Overture Ultimate Audio/Video (Wilmington, DE) will host “Meet the Professor,” featuring recording engineer and Spectral Audio head of design Dr. Keith O. John-turing recording engineer and Spectral son, along with Spectral’s president, Richard Fryer. For more info and to RSVP: (800) 838-1812.

**TEXAS**

Saturday, September 30, 4pm: Audio Concepts, Inc. (2200 SW Freeway 105, Houston) will host a seminar with Richard Vandersteen to discuss the Quatro Signature and the importance of waveform preservation. RSVP: (713) 527-0774.

Wednesday–Saturday, October 11–14: Sound Mind Audio (Austin) celebrates its eighth anniversary with its fall Seminar Series. Festivities begin with an Open House on Wednesday, October 11, at 7pm. Boulder, Focal-IMLab, AudioQuest, TARA Labs, and other manufacturers will have representatives on hand for the series. For info and to RSVP: (512) 377-2834 or e-mail bk4music@soundmindaudio.com.

**UTAH**

Tuesday, October 24, 7pm: Aris Audio (1413 Spring Lane, Salt Lake City) will host a seminar with Richard Vandersteen to discuss the Quatro Signature and the importance of waveform preservation. RSVP: (801) 272-1690.

**WISCONSIN**

Tuesday, October 17, 7pm: Ultra Fidells (740 N. James Lovell Street, Mil-waukee) will host a seminar with Richard Vandersteen to discuss the Quatro Signature and the importance of waveform preservation. RSVP: (414) 221-0200.

**BELGIUM**

Saturday–Sunday, September 30–October 1, 10am–6pm: Brussels HiFi & Home Cinema 2006 will take place at the Brussels Sheraton Hotel. For more info, visit www.brussels-hifi-show.be.

only produced the PARC but has also established a 60-strong dealer network in the US alone, and become the country's leading acoustical engineering and design firm for small-room acoustics. (Rives Audio is responsible for a good 40 acoustic room designs a month, over 90% of which are residential.)

"Over the years, we’ve exhibited a lot at shows with Talon loudspeakers," he says. "I have the Thunderbirds in my reference system and Hawks in my office. I bought them because I thought they were the most fabulous speakers out there. I love their sound. When I decided to use the Talon Hawk at my CES 2006 demo, I had no idea I’d buy the company eight months later."

**UK: EAST MOLESEY, SURREY**

Paul Messenger

It pays to keep an eye on Max Townshend—or rather his website, www.townshendaudio.com. Few members of our industry have come up with more unusual innovations over the years, and he nearly always has something radical and intriguing on the drawing board or up his sleeve. He could be fairly described as an arch-tweaker: his continuously evolving products and his own personal system cover such a broad span, encompassing racks, cables, loudspeakers, turntables, and electronics—but that would sell short the solid engineering background on which they’re based.

These days, Townshend spends much of his time satisfying demand for his Maximum ribbon superwoofer (claimed to be good up to 90kHz) and the cryogenically treated Isolde interconnect and speaker cables. But he’s always working on new projects, so plenty of other interesting things are going on. Having seen the secondhand prices that his Rock turntables are fetching on eBay, he’s contemplating putting one—maybe two—versions of his classic vinyl spinner back into production, and perhaps the Excalibur tonearm too. And he’s an enthusiastic advocate of high-resolution audio formats such as DVD-Audio and SACD, so the development of multichannel components is also high on his agenda.

Though unquestionably very effective at isolating equipment from structure-borne vibrations, Townshend’s original Seismic Sink Stand was always a little flaky—the inner-tube arrangement used to “float” its structure required occasional assistance from a bicycle pump. Although I recall Townshend discussing an auto-inflation mechanism some years back, since then he has instead come up with a relatively maintenance-free isolation mechanism based on encased and tuned lossy rubber springs that, a little like car shock absorbers, operate under tension. This system, initially developed to support Townshend’s large, heavy Glastonbury III loudspeaker, of which it is an integral part, is now also used as the basis of the latest Seismic Sink Stand, the Versatile, or VSSS, which is much more attractive and flexible than its predecessor and has adjustable glass shelves.

No less interesting are Townshend’s Speaker Stands and Cradles, designed to isolate a speaker completely from the room structure above 1-3Hz by effectively converting the speaker from stiffness loading (with conventional stands and spikes) to mass loading. This is somewhat controversial, though a number of respected commercial speaker makers (g. B&W, Naim, Triangle) deliberately introduce controlled mechanical decoupling between their drive-units. Townshend claims that total mechanical decoupling reduces colorations and substantially improves bass clarity.

Also in the interests of clearer bass, Townshend is working on analog filters to “notch out” bass resonances. He’s already using a passive filter in his personal speakers, but this approach will have to be configured for the specific loudspeaker model. More versatile and universal is his TA712 active filter, again all-analog and built with the highest-quality components and audiophile standards throughout. This tuneable notch filter sits between the preamp and power-amp stages (or in a tape loop) and is designed to null the most intrusive of the main room modes, which are usually found in the 50–70Hz range.

Max Townshend evinces obvious glee in adopting, in virtually every component he designs, a determinedly heretical stance. While the complete Townshend system comprises every category of component and accessory in the audio chain, and is evolving steadily toward a coherent, unified whole, it’s also possible to pick’n’mix individual elements. Each component is determinedly radical in its own way, and usually forces a rethinking of any preconceptions about the way things are supposed to work. I’m intrigued to hear what a pair of B&W 800D loudspeakers can do when isolated from my wooden floor by Townshend Seismic Speaker Cradles.
At Overture, our goal has always been to create a playback system that reproduces a fine recording the way it was meant to be heard. With so many choices and so much marketing hype, the consumer faces a daunting task in choosing the right components. Sadly today, only a handful of companies are driven by a “passion” for music. Many once cherished high-end lines have sold out to mass-market chain stores or are focused on car audio.

At Overture, our criteria for selecting brands has never changed. It is based on value, authentic quality, and the integrity of the company behind the product. We invite you to visit us to see and hear our entire collection. We think that you'll agree with our customers, that Overture and our recommendations are “the best of the best.”

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**Audio Research Reference 110 Stereo Amplifier**
The perfect solution for music lovers who want the musicality of the Reference 610T or 210 mono amps, but don't require their ultra high power. The all-new Reference 110 offers remarkably similar performance at a more affordable price. We haven't found a speaker it won't drive, and the sound is just incredible! Well done ARC! Price: $9,995.00.

**Avalon Acoustics Isis**
Designed for Avalon Acoustics by Neil Patel, the Isis starts where the extraordinary Avalon Diamond leaves off. Avalon speakers are designed for music enthusiasts. The Isis delivers one of the most convincing musical experiences you will ever hear. Remarkably detailed, incredible dynamics, spot-on tonality, and a holographic soundstage clearly establish the Isis as a “musical masterpiece”!

**Classé Audio CDP-202 CD Player**
The CDP-202 represents Classé’s latest thinking in a CD playback. Elegant styling, superb build quality, and ease of use are backed with remarkable musicality. The CDP-202 plays a wide variety of digital formats including DVD-A. The sound is detailed and dynamic, with an enormous dimensional soundstage. A new “Reference” in its price range. Price: $6,500.00.

**Classé Audio CA-M400 Monaural Amplifiers**
London's Abbey Road Studios are best known for the Beatles' greatest recordings, plus 100s of more recent classical, pop and film scores. But did you know that they've just purchased no fewer than 33 CA-M400s as their Reference amplifier? Their already superb recordings are about to get even better! Price/pr: $10,000.00.
B&W 800 “Diamond” Series Speakers
Already a “fixture” in the world’s top recording studios and home music systems, the 800 Series has taken a giant step forward in musicality. Newly developed driver technology, including a “Diamond” tweeter, has once again made it the choice of London’s world famous Abbey Road Studios. From the affordable 803D to the awe-inspiring 800D, you must hear these incredible speakers. Price/pr: from $8,000.00.

Rotel RDV-1092 1080p DVD Player
The RDV-1092 is the type of product we always are looking for: an over-achiever. It provides all the disk-reading flexibility you could want. It’s a superb DVD player and a remarkable CD player. The RDV 1092 is one of the most advanced digital components available. Its sonic presentation rivals or exceeds far costlier players. It’s a winner! Price: $1,499.00.

Meridian 808 Reference CD Player
Meridian has been a leader in digital technology for nearly 20 years. Their latest Reference quality player offers stunning musicality. The 808 is so good, even die-hard analog enthusiasts are buying it! Price: $12,995.00.

McIntosh MC 501 Monaural Amplifiers
Extraordinary musicality, superb build quality, virtually unlimited power and a remarkable value are the qualities that we look for in an amplifier. The 501s deliver those qualities and then some. Easily one of high-end audio’s best buys, these extraordinary amps can handle the most demanding or delicate passage with ease. Dynamic, dimensional and oh so smooth! You will love them! Price/pr: $9,400.00.

Audio Physic New Avanti IV
“Giant killer” describes the all-new Avanti IV. Our listening tests confirm the new Avanti is a worthy successor to its predecessor, and one of the best speakers in the world, regardless of price. Made in Germany to the highest standards, the Avanti IV features several “breakthroughs” including a new tweeter that is truly remarkable. The new Avanti represents one the the best buys in audio today. Price: $14,995.00.

MIT Magnum “Maximum Articulation” Interconnect and Speaker Cable
Based on the incomparable “Oracle MA” series, the new Magnums offer similar performance at a more affordable price. Remarkable clarity, bass “slam” and holographic sound-stage make the Magnum series a remarkable sonic achievement and value. MIT Interconnects from $2,499.00; Speaker Cables from $7,995.00.

Wilson Audio WATT/Puppy Series 8.
Dave Wilson never stops searching for perfection. The all-new Series 8 design delivers significant improvements over their excellent predecessor; The 8s extend the world renowned reputation of the 7s. The qualities that Wilson speakers are famous for are all there, along with a new level of refinement and musicality. The new WATT/Puppy 8s assure the continued success of this unique audio classic. Congratulations to Dave and his team! Price/pr: $27,900.00.

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The sound begins with a TAD driver featuring a Beryllium tweeter, concentrically configured within a Magnesium midrange for improved coherence and seamless linearity to 100kHz. The bass driver, with unique one-piece cone and center cap to eliminate resonances, is powered by a Neodymium magnet and massive 65mm voice coil that delivers maximum power handling and dynamics.

“Perfect Time Alignment Design” ensures simultaneous arrival of frequencies from each driver. The EX Series' massive, multi-layered cabinet with radius edges and curved—not stepped—baffle, has been painstakingly engineered and fabricated to minimize diffraction effects that color sound. The flagship S1-EX incorporates ABD (Acoustic Balance Drive) to minimize vertical standing waves that plague most enclosures.

Engineered by experts and fine-tuned at world-renowned AIR Studios, the EX Speaker Series is built to uncompromising standards of fit and finish to be the centerpiece of the finest two- or multi-channel system. Like yours.

Audiophiles searching for sonic perfection will want to learn the whole story. Read an EX Speaker Series white paper and locate your nearest dealer at our website www.exspeakers.com

TAD

The Pioneer EX Series is comprised of the S-1EX Floor Stander, S-2EX Compact Monitor, S-7EX Center Channel, and S-W1EX Powered Subwoofer. Dedicated stands sold separately.
First the hot news. France’s summer heat wave of 2005 sparked a boom in ice-cream sales throughout that country, and a riot of colorful and exotic flavors. Mustard ice cream, anyone? Roquefort cheese—flavored sorbet? How about grass-flavored glace?

One ice-cream purveyor, Pôle Sud (South Pole), says it was asked to make a cigar-flavored sorbet. They gave it a go. They failed.

I have a hunch that it might have been Renaud de Vergnette, founder of Triangle Electroacoustique, and his wife, Thérèse, who asked for the cigar sorbet. Both are avid stogie smokers—and I don’t mean those little ladies’ cigars you see in Denmark.

Then again, the de Vergnettes were probably too busy this summer. 2006 marks Triangle’s 25th anniversary, and the company has lots to celebrate, having grown to become France’s second-largest loudspeaker manufacturer largely by making loudspeakers that everyday people can actually afford.


Renaud is...well, a little quirky. Which makes him all the more endearing. Why tool around in a Maserati or Ferrari when it’s far more fun to take the wheel of a Mini-Cooper? Why do e-mail when your wife can handle it for you? Or cell phones, for that matter? The area in and around Soissons, in northeastern France, seems to suit Renaud just fine. It’s a place time—and the planners—forgot. Neither superhighway nor high-speed train service links Soissons, the first capital of France, with the present capital, Paris, where Renaud was born in the Seventh Arrondissement, literally under the shadow of the Eiffel Tower. Renaud likes the quiet country life.

Now, at long last, as Triangle celebrates its 25th, Renaud and Thérèse are building their dream house, in a small village about 10km from nowhere. The place is as rustic as you can get. The roads, not always paved, are one lane. “Population 71,” noted Renaud as we toured the construction site. “That includes six sheep, four horses, and three pigs. We don’t count the chickens.”

Or cats. There’s room for farm animals. I suggested a cow.

“Ah, une ruche. Une bonne idée” A good idea. Peut-être, une chèvre. Perhaps a goat.

I nudged my wife, Marina. Now this is where to live—a place for a recluse. Who could ever find their way?

Renaud was very much involved in the architecture. I saw something very interesting. The heating system was being installed in the subfloor, which will be covered by tiles. That should chase any chill away. I have no idea whether this would work in colder climes.

The new house will also have a listening room purpose-built for Triangle’s new flagship speaker, the Magellan Grand Concert SW2. Large room. High ceilings. There will be a small adjoining office where Renaud can work on designs, away from telephones and, of course, e-mail. I suggested a cow.

“Il n’y a pas d’objets si précieux que la santé et la paix de...”

“Ah, une ruche. Une bonne idée!” A good idea. Peut-être, une chèvre. Perhaps a goat.

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You didn’t hear about that one? Archaeologists have found some ancient Roman ruins just outside Triangle’s newly expanded factory building. There’s a dig going on outside Triangle’s digs. When Triangle expands again, they may have to build a second story.

I was struck by the similarities of producing wine and making hi-fi gear. They’re very much alike, as the new principal owner of Triangle, Olivier Decelle, is most likely aware. When costs don’t constrain, when money is no object, you can do wonderful things. But maybe the greater challenge is to produce that affordable wine you can afford to drink with dinner two or three times a week. Same with speakers.

Even before selling the company, Renaud was taking Triangle more upscale and upmarket. The idea was not to abandon the loyal customer base, he assured me at the time—Triangle should still mainly make the affordable loudspeakers it has become famous for. But moving upmarket, too, made sense all...
Then, using laser sensors, the perfor-  
parts as a speaker basket or tweeter horn.

promising, Triangle can produce a full-  
properties. When a virtual driver looks  
process begins with computer simula-

tions that produce virtual drivers with  
many stages of development. The  
to the measuring room, it undergoes  
 synthetic foam wave absorbers.

The second layer consists of V-shaped  
with cellular sound- 
proofing is made of rock wool covered  
crete cube. The first layer of sound-

high, the room is housed in a vast con-  
ry looks about twice the size it was the  
Renaud showed me around.

All in all, the newly expanded facto-  
three years ago: the SW2, developed at the  
new R&D facility by an expanded  
engineering staff, which continues to  
be led by Aurélien Demouthier.  

Now there's a new Magellan series, the  
series, one of the largest in Europe. Over 18’  
high, the room is housed in a vast con-
crete cube. The first layer of sound-
proofing is made of rock wool covered  
with cellular sound-absorbing tiles;  
the second layer consists of V-shaped  
synthetic foam wave absorbers.

Before an assembled speaker makes it  
to the measuring room, it undergoes  
many stages of development. The 
process begins with computer simula-
tions that produce virtual drivers with  
measurable mechanical and acoustical  
properties. When a virtual driver looks  
promising, Triangle can produce a full-  
scale physical prototype in a matter of  
hours, using a 3D printer to make such  
parts as a speaker basket or tweeter horn.  
Then, using laser sensors, the perfor-
mance of the physical prototypes can be  
measured and compared with the  
measurements taken of the virtual versions.  
I asked one of the engineers if sur-
prises occur.

Rarely, he told me. The measurements  
of the virtual and physical prototypes dif-
fer by only a small amount—typically 1%  
or less. In short, Triangle knows in  
advance what will work and what won’t.  
And because Triangle makes its own dri-
vers, they don’t have to think twice about  
customizing a driver for a particular  
loudspeaker application. They aren’t  
forced to use something “off the shelf.”

Cabinets count too, of course. Tri-
angle bought a vibration-measuring  
system that uses a laser beam to track  
cabinet movements at different fre-
cuencies and at different places on the  
cabinet exterior. Engineers can model  
the internal vibrations and make  
adjustments as needed to the cabinet  
structure. This is a big help in avoid-
ing cabinet colorations and cleaning  
up the sound, I was told.

Ultimately, the assembled speakers  
are auditioned in the R&D department’s  
new listening room, where, of  
course, Renaud has the final say as to  
what is or is not a Triangle speaker.

Incidentally, Triangle can rebuild  
most drivers, even the worn-out dri-
vers of speakers 20 years old. Driver  
baskets go back to the factory for  
reconing and whatever else is neces-
Sary. (Triangle can supply replacement  
drivers for recent models from stock.)

Like other loudspeaker manufac-
turers, Triangle’s design philosophy  
has changed over the years. For  
instance, as Renaud explained, they no  
longer aim for sensitivity above all, as  
if there is magic in the number. A  
speaker’s—or a driver’s—impedance  
characteristics are at least as impor-
tant, in terms of making the speaker  
easy for an amplifier to drive. The  
aim, according to Renaud, is to make  


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I once asked a French manufacturer (not Renaud) how many loudspeakers were sold each month in France at prices of say, $30,000 and up. He didn't now, exactly, and admitted that his estimate might be a little off. But 25–30 pairs per month in France was his guess, and that's all loudspeaker manufacturers, not just the French ones. If you want the new Triangle Magellan Grand Concert SW2, the US price is a mere $52,000/pair.

I listened at the Triangle factory, comparing the new Magellan Grand Concert to the original Magellan, which graced my own listening room (albeit on loan) for nearly six months. Comparisons were difficult, of course. Different rooms, the passage of time, the aging of Sam, etc. But I can say things for certain.

The new Magellan is even more formidable than its predecessor—in its technology, its construction, and its sound. The bass goes lower, for instance—down to a rated 28Hz (vs 0Hz with the older Magellan). The speaker sounds more dynamic, better balanced across the frequency spectrum. It seems to operate without limits, as it should for the price. Want more Mahler in your living room? Well, better make sure you have a big enough living room, with high enough ceilings. But if you can afford a pair of Magellans, I'm sure your room is big enough.

Like the original Magellan, each Magellan Grand Concert SW2 consists of three cabinets. The top and ottom cabinets, mirror images of each other, each contain two 8.2" (210mm) bass drivers and a port. Most of the music is produced by the middle cabinet, of course, which features, front and back, a 6.3" (160mm) midrange driver and a 1" (25mm) titanium-dome horn-loaded tweeter.

Triangle has developed a more secure locking system. Insert the supplied torque wrench (its tip is in the shape of a triangle), and a tapered-edge sliding bolt locks the cabinets together with one ton of clamping pressure.

There are many more details, of course; the Magellan Grand Concert W2 is a tour de force. But why spoil it for the lucky reviewer who gets to listen to it? Would you like someone else; I don't have a big enough room with high enough ceilings. Other Magellan SW models are coming down the road, and at least two of them will be [asp] relatively affordable. That trickle-down stuff again.

The Magellan Grand Concert SW2 is joined by the single-piece Magellan Concerto SW2, which will retail in the US for $26,000. I heard a pre-production sample at the factory near Soissons, but that's still a bit pricey for Sam. I have my eyes on the third model down from the top, a smaller, one-piece floorstanding not yet named or priced. This will be joined by a fourth Magellan model, a stand-mounted monitor.

**Want something more affordable?**

Alors ...

What about a mini-Magellan for under $2000/pair? Leave it to Renaud. He won't let the 25th anniversary of Triangle pass without making something that almost all Triangle customers can afford, even if they have to stretch their budgets a bit. Enter la Comete Anniversaire édition limitée, of which 1,000 signed pairs will be made to commemorate Triangle's 25th anniversary. The price is $1595/pair, not including the excellent Boomerang stands.

The Comete was not Renaud's first loudspeaker. That was the Model 1180, back in 1980. Nor is the Comete Triangle's best-selling model of all time. That honor most likely belongs to the Antal, said Renaud. But the Comete has long been one of Renaud's own favorites.

True, you can buy the regular Comete—la Comete Ordinaire—for $949/pair, plus stands. It contains the very same drivers as the edition limitée: a 6.3" (160mm) doped-paper bass/midrange driver, crossing over to a 1" (25mm) horn-loaded titanium tweeter at 3kHz. Sensitivity is given as 91dB/W/m. Impedance is nominal 8 ohms, not falling below 4 ohms. Each speaker measures 16.5" (420mm) H by 79" (200mm) W by 13.4" (340mm) D and weighs 22 lbs (10kg). The Comete Anniversaire's frequency response is given as 55Hz–20kHz, ±3dB.

By deliberate choice, Renaud did not change the Comete's drivers, which he feels are the best possible for this speaker at this time. Besides, the Comete has received lavish praise, particularly from the French hi-fi press, and Renaud wanted the édition limitée to be a real Comete. Change the drivers and, even with every good intention, you might change the sound. He has used Triangle's new laser-beam accelerometer to measure and reduce cabinet vibrations, thus reducing colorations.

But Renaud has sure improved on the looks of the cabinet: exquisite furniture as opposed to the utilitarian vinyl of the Comete ordinaire. What you get for your extra money is one of the most beautiful gloss-finished cabinets I have ever seen. The real-wood veneer is finished to Magellan standards—very high. Indeed, it's made in the same place by the same people who make the Magellan cases. As is appropriate at this level of quality, each pair of speakers comes with pairs of chamois covers and white gloves. You
don’t want your paw prints on these.

As soon as I saw a pre-production prototype of the Comete Anniversaire édition limitée at the factory, I snagged a pair. I can now tell you that, as of this writing, there are no more than 999 pairs left—and probably far fewer. Seriously, if you want a pair of these, don’t put it off. Fewer than 100 pairs are presently allocated for the US and Canada. And when French audiophiles and melomanes see these...

Remember what I said about small speakers in smaller rooms and big speakers in bigger rooms? Well, one advantage of a smaller listening (or living) room or modestly sized apartment is that you don’t need a large pair of speakers to fill up the room and achieve that big-speaker density. The Cometes were wonderful in our living room. I don’t mean to suggest that they were lost, though a subwoofer could have provided some extra authority and weight.

What I got, after an interminable break-in period (several hundred hours of driver workout, as is typical with Triangle and probably most other speaker manufacturers), was exceptionally clear, spacious sound with pinpoint imaging.

Space! Sam likes space. The Comete put space around soloists and their instruments as do few other speakers. Detail, delicacy, definition— it’s all here, along with a cabinet that should score 100% WAF (wife acceptance factor). A wife or nonaudiophile partner may take a while to get used to the appearance of the Boomerang stands (Marina actually likes them), but they’re among the best-sounding stands I have ever encountered.

There is a funny phenomenon with loudspeakers, and it seems to be psychoacoustic: The better a loudspeaker is with regard to high-frequency extension, detail, definition, finesse, whatever, the more it calls attention to any relative lack of weight at the other end.

This is something that Renaud and Triangle never do. They never extend or fatten the bass at the expense of definition, detail, finesse, speed, and clarity elsewhere. Unlike me, Triangle speakers are never weighed down by their own bottom ends. (This is true of the new flagship Magellan Grand Concerto SW2 as well.) The fact that the Cometes have fairly high sensitivity and present an easy load for amplifiers is icing on the cake.

There are alternatives to using a subwoofer (or two). You can—heh-heh (I laugh my Beavis laugh)—cheat. You can disregard what the manufacturer and John Atkinson and tons of other people have told you. You can deliberately “misplace” your speakers. You can try them close to the corners and even (this is totally incorrect) almost equidistant from the rear and sidewalls. They’re your speakers; it’s your room. Hear what happens.

Even better, perhaps, you can do what I did when I took my Comete Anniversaires to my listening room, which is smaller and squarer than our living room. There, I could space the Cometes 8’ apart and about 5’ from my big toes (spread out on a footstool, of course). The Cometes, like only a few other great small monitors, most of them way more expensive, did their amazing thing. They threw a limitless soundstage, but with pinpoint imaging and—this is where those horn-loaded tweeters may come into play—no high-frequency beaming.

As always with Triangle speakers, amplifier sound quality counts a lot. I tried my favorite flea-watt single-ended triode amp—the Sun Audio SV-2A3, as hot-rodded by Blackie Paganò, who recently moved to L.A. (New York City tube enthusiasts are sorry to see him go.) I didn’t think that this stereo amp had enough power. An amp—or amps—using a 300B output tube to produce 8–10W might do the trick.

The Comete Anniversaire responded beautifully. It is icing on the cake.

Above: Renaud de Vergnette; below: Sam’s wife, Marina, picks up bad habits from the French. Both Renaud and his wife Therese are enthusiastic cigar smokers.

If he doesn’t, he’s off chasing spiders elsewhere in the house. Maxik was very pleased with the Comete Anniversaires. I know because he bit me. He does that when he’s contented and excited at the same time—sort of a love bite that’s a thing with the Korat breed.

In the spirit of Renaud, I lit up a cigar. “Not in the living room, you don’t!” scolded Marina. “Plocitoyr Bad (boy).”

As usual with loudspeakers, I consulted Maxik, our cat. If he likes the sound, he stays in the living room or comes for an extended visit.

Renaud continues with Triangle. The Comete Anniversaire is by no means his parting shot. Indeed, the new Magellan SW line is likely to lead to some exciting things down the road. Those models look to the future, while the Comete Anniversaire, as befits a commemorative edition, looks to the past.

Now, since I’m not allowed to smoke inside the house, perhaps I should see if any progress has been made with that cigar-smoke glace. Thérèse would know about it, if not Renaud.
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Excuse my skepticism, but before wasting another nanosecond on this nonsense, I needed at least a semi-plausible explanation—even one from Peter Belt.1 I got reasonably good explanations from spokespersons for both products. Apparently the dye infused into clear PVC to make records black contains metallic, easily magnetized contaminants that can interfere with a phono cartridge’s motor. That’s plausible, I guess. I decided to waste some nanoseconds after all.

I’m sorry to report that demagnetizing LPs works—consistently and decidedly. Nor am I the only one to hear it, but I’m not going to Bob Novak anyone here. I’ll let those listeners blow their own covers (at least one of them has a well-known byline).

For whatever reasons, demagnetizing an LP definitely removed a high-frequency glaze or glare and seemed to enrich the midband—or seems to do the latter by removing the former. Period. It did. Every time. I documented this by playing “Banquet,” from my original promo copy of Joni Mitchell’s For the Roses—a record I’ve been playing steadily since 1972. I recorded the track on the Alesis MasterLink hard-disk recorder, then demagnetized the LP, then recorded the track again, then went back and forth between the two recordings. The difference was obvious.

Then I asked myself: What records do I own that I think are really great recordings marred only by an “edge”? I thought of Nanci Griffith’s Storms and Peter Belt purveys creams and foils that he claims cause profound sonic changes in audio systems. See www.beltdemon.co.uk.

I gave them the same treatment as “Banquet,” and the results were convincing—witnessed, heard, and confirmed first by that well-known audio writer, and later by a confounded equipment importer. I’ll spare you the list of the other LPs I’ve demagged. Demagnetizing LPs works. Better yet, once a record has been demagnetized, it seems to stay that way.

What about clear vinyl? I demagged a David Bowie album that Rykodisc had reissued on clear virgin vinyl tinted slightly green. I heard no difference. I know, I know—it’s because I didn’t want to. Maybe, but believe me—I didn’t want to hear a difference with black vinyl either.

The problem is the cost. The Furutech costs $1800, the Acoustic Revive a heaping $2995. Let’s say it costs Furutech a reasonable $225 to make their device (a slice of the general cost of doing business factored in, as it must be). They sell it...

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1 Peter Belt purveys creams and foils that he claims cause profound sonic changes in audio systems. See www.beltdemon.co.uk.
appreciated its dust cover. Make sure the Furutech's uncovered surface is clean before you put any freshly scrubbed vinyl on it. And do not try one of these devices unless you're prepared to buy it.

**Clearaudio Goldfinger MC cartridge**
I've always considered Clearaudio's Peter Suchy to be more of a technocrat than an artist. Yoshiaki Sugano was an artist. I didn't spend a great deal of time with Clearaudio's Insider phono cartridges, but the one I heard was more easily appreciated than loved. However, in the past few years the Clearaudio cartridges I've heard have achieved great sonority without hyper-romanticism and without sacrificing resolution.

The Concerto ($2000, www.musicalsurroundings.com), which I reviewed some years ago, was the best Clearaudio cartridge I'd ever heard. The new Goldfinger, the top model of the same line, takes the Concerto's performance to a whole new level and has a price: $8000. The Goldfinger shares the Concerto's irregular, gear-shaped top plate, which is said to break up resonances, but instead of wood, the plate and the rest of the body are made of gold. Clearaudio claims that gold's density and mass make it a good damping material. The moving coils are wound with 24K gold wire.

With all that gold, the Goldfinger weighs 16g. Not every tonearm can accommodate such a heavy cartridge, though its medium-compliance rating should make the Goldfinger compatible with most arms of medium to high mass. The only problem most users might encounter is not having a heavy enough counterweight. I understand that SME's Alistair Robertson-Aikman was so enthralled by the Goldfinger that, to better accommodate it, he put a special high-mass counterweight into production for his SME V arm.

Protruding from the Goldfinger's body is a long, unprotected cantilever of boron, terminated with an ultra-low-mass "HD" diamond stylus. Eight powerful, carefully matched magnets are said to create an ultrasymmetrical drive system with a relatively high output of 0.8mV. Clearaudio claims exceptional crosstalk—more than 45dB— but using the Cardas test record and an accurate digital voltmeter, I was able to achieve only slightly more than 30dB, which is still plenty good. (Most cartridges with a claimed crosstalk of 30dB don't achieve more than 28dB or so.) Nor can I vouch for the test record's accuracy. Clearaudio also claims a dynamic range of 100dB, but I didn't confirm or reject that using measurements.

Clearaudio recommends that the Goldfinger track at 2.9gms, which is on the heavy side of the 1.75-2.00gms norm. Of course, back in the 1960s, tracking claims of 1gm were common with ultra-high-compliance cartridges and low-mass arms. I can't tell you how many records I ruined in my quest to track (too) light. I'm not worried about tracking at 2.9gms.

**The Midas Touch:** Once it was perfectly aligned, fully broken in (at least 50 hours), and loaded to around 100 ohms (no 47k ohms for this cartridge), the Clearaudio Goldfinger provided an exciting, unforgettable listening experience. Easily the "fastest" cartridge I've ever heard, it was also among the purest, most transparent, and most effervescent—like the finest electrostatic loudspeaker, but one with both extension and exuberant dynamics. The Goldfinger was not edgy, crunchy, bright, or overly analytical. If it had any sort of tonal character at all, it was one of smooth forwardness in the upper mids to lower highs that helped develop an enormous, bubble-like overall presentation.

The Goldfinger's transient response was lightning-fast, but each initial impulse was followed by an enticing, delicately supple afterglow that helped keep the sound free of any crunch or etch. The cartridge produced breathtakingly well-defined images that were cushioned in the manner of delicate crystal surrounded by bubble wrap. The result was utterly convincing pianos, brass, reeds, and especially female voices.

While the Goldfinger is said to have been designed with classical music in mind, I found it equally convincing with rock, jazz, and even electronica, though if those were what I listened to exclusively, I'd probably consider something with more bottom-end punch.

Excellent low-level dynamics and resolution often brought new information subtly to the surface. Speaking of surface, perhaps due to the HD stylus profile, the Goldfinger proved an ultra-quiet groove tracer, deftly casting off noise and unwanted impulses. It also was an excellent tracker. At 2.9gms VTF, it damn well better be!

But more than any of these picky parameters, what the Goldfinger did better than any other cartridge I've ever heard was to deliver and sustain instrumental lines. Familiar riffs that used to stop, get lost, or even lose my interest, suddenly rolled on. Last night, playing my original Elektra gold-label pressing of Love's For-
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The Miyabi/47 Laboratory cartridge ($3950) has been around for a while, but I hadn’t heard it. I borrowed one from the importer (www.salcurasystems.com) and have spent a lot of time listening to it, trying to figure out why something that sounds so old-school was so appealing.

The cartridge is the result of a collaboration of Miyabi’s Haruo Takeda and Junji Kimura, the audio iconoclast behind 47 Laboratory. While the cartridge’s low internal impedance of 2 ohms was designed to complement a 47 Lab phono preamp, it worked very well, thank you, with a Manley Steelhead with its multi-tap transformer set to 25 ohms (which is where Lyra’s 3 ohm cartridges also perform optimally).

Weighing 9gm, tracking at 2gm, and outputting 0.3mV, the Miyabi/47 Lab should mate well with all tonearms of medium to high mass. It has powerful alnico magnets, copper-wound coils, a line-contact stylus, and a stubby, big-ass alnico magnet cantilever. It also has a plastic body, a flip-down stylus guard, and requires nuts and long mounting screws. Old-school enough for you?

The Miyabi/47 Lab’s warm, rich sound was the polar opposite of the Clearaudio Goldfinger’s. The Miyabi/47 was all about the richness and communication inherent in the midrange, where most of the music lives. It produced rich, neaty, big images without seeming to shortchange detail. It also had a generous, full-size bass response. I’d been having a grand time playing Fiona Apple’s whimsical breakup album, Extraordinary Machine (CleanSlate/Epic E 286683), through the Goldfinger. Through the Miyabi/47, Apple’s voice grew to almost alarming size between the speakers: round, full, billowy. The weight and impact of the pizzicato strings on the title tune was seismic. With this cartridge, kick drums really kicked and standup bass response.

It’s easy to understand why reviewers are unanimous in their praise for the Miyabi/47 Lab. I found it big, bold, nuanced, surprisingly well-detailed, rich and chocolatey in the mids, and smooth up top. It wasn’t the last word in air and detail on top, but it was so well balanced, so easy to listen to, so surprisingly fast for what it did deliver in that region, that I didn’t notice the loss of air and resolution at the very top. At one point, the phrase “high-end Wurlitzer!” entered my mind.

If I played a lot of 45rpm singles and could afford it, I’d keep one of these on reserve. I don’t mean that as a slight to this wonderful cartridge. It’s been tuned a specific way and makes great music. It’s not for every taste or every system, but it’s a vision fulfilled, and that’s what makes an audio product great.

The Clearaudio Goldfinger and the Miyabi/47 Laboratory are polar opposites. How can I love both? I can and I do. The problem with some pompous boors who write about audio is their need to declare this or that “the king” or “the best” or “the new champ,” while at the same time declaring that the last thing they so crown is now unlistenable and worthy only of the audio scrap heap. I hate that crap. This is reproduced music. It’s about having fun. Were I to fall in love with the Miyabi/47 Lab, I know I could make it work perfectly by going for a phono preamp with a leaner balance—say, the Art Audio Vinyl Reference. I wish I had one here now to review the Miyabi/47 Lab, but I don’t. I can only extrapolate that the combination would probably knock me out. As it is, I’m still reeling from the one-two punch of the Clearaudio Goldfinger and the Miyabi/47 Laboratory.

Funk Firm Vector turntable

I first encountered this whimsical turntable in the UK, at the 2005 Hi-Fi News show. The Funk Firm Vector, looking like an antique from Thomas Edison’s laboratory, comes from the mind of Pink Triangle founder Arthur Kloubsersian, who slipped from sight during the analog twilight. But analog’s back, and so is Arthur. (Funk Firm is distributed in the US by Acoustic Sounds, www.acousticsounds.com.)

At $1350 without tonearm, the Vector is the more expensive of the Funk Firm’s two turntable models. A Rega RB300 arm adds $350. If you want an RB300 wired with Incognito cable, as I did, add another $250. A 5mm-thick platter instead of the standard 3mm costs another $100. Grand total: $2050.

The Vector’s irregularly shaped plinth is designed to be a light, fast transmitter of energy capable of quickly evacuating bad vibes before they’ve had a chance to rattle around and feed back through the system. It sits on three clear plastic globes decoupled with Sorbothane.

The DC motor has an ironless rotor and is mounted directly to the plinth. It drives a subplatter via a flat belt and an asymmetrical three-pulley system not unlike the one Harry Weisfeld used on the early VPI TNTs. The idea is to spread the “motor tug” so that the bearing isn’t pulled toward the inevitable gap between the bearing spindle and its sleeve. The bearing has an optically polished sapphire thrust bearing.
ANALOG CORNER

The Funk Firm Vector is a turntable with Incognito Wired Rega RB300 and Clearaudio Maestro cartridge. A Chromat platter is said to be a perfect mechanico-acoustic match to vinyl. Whatever the lightweight, white material is, bubbles are added to it during manufacture to reduce the platter's weight and increase its internal damping. The 5mm-thick platter's extra height means that it's suitable for use only with tonearms with adjustable vertical tracking angle (VTA). Mine was, so I got the thicker platter. While adjusting VTA was not exactly convenient, the tonearm locking collar provided sufficient rigidity without degrading performance. The Vector has a threaded spindle and an accompanying record clamp, which you're advised to not overtighten.

After adjusting the platter's speed via two internally mounted potentiometers, I mounted a Helikon SL cartridge on the Rega RB300 arm. True, the cartridge costs more than the table, but the Rega can handle the Helikon, and I wanted to hear what the Vector could do when not hamstrung by the limitations of a cheap cartridge. The Funk Firm Vector proved surprisingly fast, smooth, and tonally neutral. There was no sense of added warmth or of lower-midbass bloat. Overall, I found the Vector's tonal balance smooth, rich, and free of the etch and edge that often mar the performance of modestly priced turntables. The Vector's excellent rhythmic abilities reminded me very much of the Rega P5's. Rhythm and pacing were pleasingly fast, with a satisfying sense of continuity. The Vector's biggest problem was one common in turntables at or near its modest price: a relative lack of dynamics, though only when compared to far more expensive tables. I'll take a dynamic deficiency over a serious tonal coloration any day.

When I replaced the Helikon SL with Clearaudio's Maestro wood-bodied moving-magnet cartridge ($1000; more about this next time), I was rewarded with a rich musical palette that was rhythmically taut while offering a smooth sense of flow and plenty of...
Feickert Universal Protractor and disc.

detail. The bottom end didn't have the heft of more expensive 'tables, but what was there was well controlled, and in time with the rest of the music. I'm listening right now to the excellent-sounding  *The Jazz Composer's Songbook*, reissued on 200gm Quex SV-P vinyl (Straight-Ahead 103). Judging by the sound of Danny Grissett's piano, the Vector gets the midband just about right.

I really enjoyed listening to the Funk Firm Vector, even with two super turntables on adjacent racks. It spun at the right speed, was compact, fun to use and to look at, and offered a smooth-sounding tonal neutrality that some far more expensive turntables don't achieve. The 'table as reviewed, with Incognito-wired RB300 arm and 5mm platter, cost $2050. There's plenty of competition at that price, including VPI's outstanding Scout with JMW Plus arm (at $1800). Harry Weisfeld goes with an acrylic platter and AC motor; Arthur Khoubassarian thinks DC and his lightweight platter are superior. Without both here to compare, I can't tell you who's right, but either gives greater musical satisfaction than almost any CD player I can think of. But you knew I'd say that.

**Feickert Universal Protractor**

The Feickert Universal Protractor ($250, www.acousticsounds.com) truly is universal in that, instead of taking a one-size-fits-all approach, it takes into account both the distance from the tonearm pivot to the platter spindle and the tonearm's effective length. It's also ruggedly built and an ingenious design. Included are a precisely made two-sided disc (one side featuring Baerwald tonearm geometry, one side Lofgren) and a sturdy aluminum protractor, which can be adjusted precisely to match your tonearm's pivot-to-spindle distance. I won't go into the details of how the Feickert is used except to say that you must know your tonearm's pivot-spindle distance and effective length. It works best with a gimballed arm whose horizontal bearing assembly is visible (such as the Tri Planar), so the protractor's point can be precisely placed, but it wasn't difficult to find the pivot points of other arms, including the unipivot Graham Phantom. Proper overhang and zenith angle can be easily and reliably set using the Feickert.

I highly recommend the Feickert Universal Protractor. Unfortunately, it arrived after my turntable setup DVD had been shot, or I would have used it in the demos. Next time!
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Berries in Season

I needed them—certainly not the way good ol' Don would. And I suppose that might have been true. I hadn’t yet committed to Geico, so I changed my mind back to the old way of thinking and let Don’s girl write up the policy: “We’ll leave out the full glass and bump your deductible up a little bit, so you can save 20 bucks a year compared to the original quote. Geez, Artie, if you’d told us in the first place that money was a problem…”

A couple of years after that I moved downstate and started getting interested in high-end audio. I became friendly with a salesman at an audio salon in the suburban city where I lived, and he sold me a Rega Planar 2 turntable. I didn’t regret paying full price because the Rega was unambiguously wonderful—I still think so—and I was grateful for all the good advice.

Early Rega tonearms were made in Japan by Lustre, and they weren’t very good: I could see lots of friction in the bearings of mine, and I began to get nervous about the condition of my records—rightly so. More than anything else, the desire for a better arm motivated me to bring my Planar 2 back to the shop and trade it in toward a Planar 3. But before I did, paranoid audiophile that I was, I put a tiny, discreet mark on the tonearm pillar. Sure enough, when I got home, I saw that the arm on my new Planar 3 was just as sticky—and when I looked, there was the mark. I’d paid a couple hundred dollars to get my old arm back on a different plinth.

I called to complain. My new friend yelled at me—quite loudly, in fact—for being a paranoid audiophile, and for calling him about such nonsense on a busy Saturday afternoon. The funny thing was, I was living in Manhattan by then, and outsourcing my masochism to a smaller city. I was way ahead of my time.

Then, in a final twist to a strange story, I went back to my friend the audio salesman a few years later, and he gave me a modest discount on a new Linn LP12 turntable. (I set it up myself.) And I still like him.

The best deal is the only deal

Modern consumers want all kinds of crazy things. We want low prices. We want the latest technology, too, not to mention the latest styles. And we want choices—whether it’s a big selection of colors to titillate our uninquisitive minds, a big selection of sizes to encircle our big bodies, or a big enough selection of music recordings so we can buy something new every week and not hear the same shiny noises twice.

To some extent, audio consumers follow suit. These days, all but the most rapacious or delusional hi-fi enthusiasts accept the fact that high prices, in an absolute sense, are inevitable when it
comes to products made largely by hand in very small numbers, so we're happy just to get the best reasonable deal. But we still want to know we're getting the latest technology and styling, and we still want a big enough selection that we can audition all of the products we're interested in before making The Cash Commitment.

Add to that mix our own special request: The best hi-fi shopping experiences are the ones where we can hear the audio products and the music systems of our dreams being demonstrated in a comfortable setting by a salesman who isn't a sociopath. Coffe would also be nice.

Fewer and fewer audiophiles have local dealers that can satisfy all or even any of those requirements. More to the point, fewer and fewer audiophiles have a local supplier at all. Audio enthusiasts who live in Pierre, South Dakota, or Mapleton, Maine—two nice cities that have not, to my knowledge, outlawed audiophiles—can drive from sunup to sundown and still not reach a store where they can audition Cary amplifiers, Thiel loudspeakers, or Rega turntables. Hell, there aren't even any stores left in Manhattan that sell Quad electrostatic loudspeakers, or stores in Las Vegas that sell Audio Research amplifiers. A damn shame, no matter how you spin it.

This is the petri dish from which a whole new strain has, spontaneously and innocently, developed: audio manufacturers who sell direct to the consumer, either through a website of their own or through a single mail-order retailer.

My reviewer colleagues and I have written about products from many such firms in these pages, including PrimaLuna, Sonic Euphoria, and Moscode. Now another one has hanged its shingle in the ether: a northern California–based maker of tube electronics called JuicyMusic.

I admit that when I first heard about this company's bread-and-butter product, the BlueBerry preamp—sorry for mixing my food metaphors—I assumed that the electronics themselves are built in China, and that JuicyMusic exists solely to name them and sell them. I mean, really: a full-size, all-tube preamplifier, line and phono sections under one roof, with balance controls, a mono switch, and a solid wood cabinet—for $1500? It sounds unlikely, but the BlueBerry is all that and more, and it's made right here in the USA.

But let's back up a few steps. JuicyMusic was founded in 2004 by a fellow named Mark Deneen, fresh from the computer industry. Before that, Deneen worked in—ta-da, you guessed it—perfectionist audio. Like Löffthers and herses, being a preamp manufacturer is something you can't get out of your system.

Beginning in 1975, Deneen owned and operated Paragon Audio of San Carlos, California, designing and manufacturing affordable tube electronics. Then, in 1979, he sold Paragon to ADC. After staying on to help manage the line for a short while, Deneen left audio altogether and moved back home to California: "The IBM PC had just been released—personnel computers were the hot thing at the time—and I had actually spent the first part of my career as a programmer and systems analyst." It was a good move—Deneen did well enough that he could "semi-retire" a few years ago, moving himself and his wife to the picturesque coastal village of Ferndale, just 90 minutes from the Oregon border.

Once there, Deneen spent his first ten months designing preamplifier circuits. "I decided that if I couldn't get beyond a 'me too' position and come up with something that wasn't already available, then I wouldn't be interested in getting back into audio," he says. "And I elected to do something where I could have fun, and could just look forward. The kind of workday I wanted— and the kind where I can look back and say, 'Man, did I have fun today?'"

Deneen's sense of fun and his quest for originality came to fruition in his first BlueBerry, a tube preamplifier that stands proud of the pantheon with the likes of (47k ohm) moving-magnet phono inputs, a solid wood cabinet, and an acrylic front panel done up in shades of purple, blue, and orange. Trophy boys need not apply.

The circuits are refreshing in their own ways—and completely devoid of feedback. For moving-magnet phono inputs, the signal is amplified first by a 12AT7 dual-triode tube, then sent to a passive RIAA equalization circuit before being amplified anew by a 12AX7 dual-triode. Another 12AT7, used as a cathode follower, picks up the phono signal from there, lowering the impedance and driving the volume control. Beyond that, phono and line signals alike are amplified by a single stage 6DJ8 grounded cathode gain stage with 20dB of gain.

The BlueBerry's power supply is similarly clean and simple: While the heater voltages are rectified and regulated by solid-state devices, the all-important rail voltage is rectified by a 12X4 tube and left unregulated: a necessity for natural sound, according to Deneen. "Why would anyone go to the trouble of designing a beautiful-sounding, feedback-free preamp," he asks, "and then attach it to some regulated power supply?"

The only deal is the best deal

Useful features abound. The JuicyMusic BlueBerry has a pair of individual level controls, ganged with the master volume, that can be twiddled to adjust side-to-side balance. Those controls are also useful in adjusting the preamplifier's output to match the input sensitivity of the amplifier being used—which, as Mark Deneen points out, can range from 0.5V to 2.5V. The BlueBerry has no fewer than two pairs of (47k ohm) moving-magnet phono inputs. It has a Standby switch, for maximizing tube life. And, wonder of wonders, the BlueBerry has a Mono switch. Saints be praised.

Something else cool: For an extra $500, JuicyMusic will configure one of those pairs of phono inputs for low-
The MC-12 Digital Controller is the industry standard for music and film reproduction. It is the product of continual research and design and successfully integrates the best elements of technology, performance, and design. With three zones, twelve configurable inputs, optional room EQ and now 6 HDMI inputs, the MC-12 reaffirms its position as the industry standard.
output moving-oil-use, to create a product called the BlueBerry with Cream. Deneen uses a pair of Jensen step-up transformers for the job rather than an active gain stage because he thinks trannies sound more natural. So do I.

In fact, it's Deneen's taste for natural, unconstricted, organic sound that guides his efforts, right down to his company's name. "The 'organic' thing is what we've been all about—and that's why we call it JuicyMusic. That's the characteristic I'm always looking for when I design: Does this give me the real, honest flavor of music? I mean, we're all kidding ourselves—but let's at least have a good time while we're kidding ourselves!"

JuicyMusic's website, www.juicymusicaudio.com, makes a point of saying they don't offer home trials per se—but they will refund the entire purchase price, less shipping, if a customer returns the unit within seven days. Thus, it seemed that I could borrow a review sample and almost—almost!—put myself in the position of the average consumer. So I did.

Deneen and I decided that my best choice would be something called the BlueBerry Xtreme: the same audio circuitry, tied to a beefier but no less tubey power supply, with much larger output coupling caps and a sprinkling of metal-film resistors for good measure. My only disappointment was that the Xtreme's faceplate is black and gray. "I'll be honest with you," says Deneen; "90% of the people who saw the styling of the BlueBerry thought it was stupid, but 10% really loved it. It's so cool to get away from the plain black box... But I kept hearing from people who said, 'I'd buy that if it were black.'"

Though it may not be as striking as the standard BlueBerry, the BlueBerry Xtreme is a fine-looking thing in its own right. The cabinet of dovetailed solid wood is the perfect complement to the low-sheen acrylic front, and I like the fact that rotary switches—with solid machined-aluminum knobs—are used for most functions instead of the usual pushbuttons. On the rear panel, all of the input and output jacks are arranged in a single horizontal row: They're mounted to the back edge of the circuit board, which is aligned with an opening on the panel. There's an IEC socket at the far end, so owners can experiment with AC cords that cost as much or more than the preamp itself—which sells for $2290, including Cream.

Installation is straightforward: Open it up, plug in the tubes, close it back up, start playing records. The BlueBerry Xtreme does invert phase. But it doesn't hum, heat the room, scare the cat, or make noises that blow the fuses—or the tubes—in my peerless but mildly exotic Lamm amplifiers.

Used as a line-level preamplifier with CD players or external phono preamps, the BlueBerry Xtreme sounded great—astoundingly great for the price. Its frequency balance wasn't tilted up or down, and there were no egregious colorations. It did textures especially well—like the sound of Bill Monroe's wonderfully choppily mandolin on any of a hundred different singles, or the powerful attack of Nathan Milstein's violin on J.S. Bach's Sonatas and Partitas (LP, Deutsche Grammophon 2721087)—without adding any grunge of its own. And its rhythmic performance was acceptably good, if not quite up there with the Naims and the other Naim.

The BlueBerry Xtreme was also notable for the sense of physical presence it gave to vocal and instrumental sounds on good stereo recordings. Listening to the BlueBerry, I was reminded of the great tube preamps of the early 1980s—such as the Audio Research SP6 and the Conrad-Johnson Premiere Three: It had the same caliber of spatial performance I remember hearing from those landmark designs, in which individual "images" have a chunky, three-dimensional quality. Also like those older designs—and distinctively unlike the ones that followed right after—the BlueBerry's stereo-imaging performance wasn't fussy or overcooked: It added to my enjoyment of the music, rather than supplanting it.

An example: I've never heard a more beautiful, more convincing version of Wagner's Siegfried Idyll than the one recorded in the mid-1960s by Georg Solti and members of the Vienna Philharmonic (LP, London RDN 5-15), and I can't deny that its spatial qualities are among its charms, despite my usual antipathy toward same: the wholeness of the sonic images of the performers is remarkable on almost any system. But with the BlueBerry in place, that characteristic was taken up another notch. Even more extraordinary was Wagner's Kinderkatechismus—his wife, Cosima's, "other" birthday present—that follows at the end of the side: For two minutes and change, the BlueBerry brought some of the spatial characteristics of a child's chorus and small orchestra to brilliant, ringing life in my room.

By my reckoning, the weakest of the BlueBerry's performance areas was the timbral balance of its phono section, which wasn't as neutral as the line section alone. With my review sample of the Linn Akiva low-output MC cartridge driving its Jensen trannies, the BlueBerry sounded slightly tipped-down in the upper bass as compared with the two outboard phono preamps I tried: the Artemis PH-1 and the EAR 834P, the latter of which has earned its status as a reference for medium-priced units.

But the JuicyMusic Cream option isn't medium-priced: It's cheap—just $500. And its performance is still quite good overall: Flexible and quiet, with none of the ringing or other nastiness that can make damaged records, in particular, so hard to listen to.

When I asked Mark Deneen about one other shortcoming—the BlueBerry's lack of a mute switch—his answer was refreshingly honest: "Why no mute switch? I don't know. Maybe if I had five other engineers working for me, one of them would have said, 'Hey—where's the mute?' But this is a totally human product: a one-man thing. It comes out the way it does because that's the way my brain is wired."

That's what you get from the BlueBerry: not just a great-sounding, well-engineered preamp with styling that pretends the last 25 years didn't happen, and not just a preamp that sells for roughly half of what you'd pay for a similar product at an audio salon. You get all that and the human touch, and from a decent human being at that. Mark Deneen may not let you beat him at gin rummy—then again, maybe he will, for all I know—but he will make it easy for you to buy and enjoy an audio component that's designed, built, and sold with loving care. And sounds that way.

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music festival of its kind in the Northeast, celebrated its 30th anniversary in July, with performances by 53 acts over the course of four hot and mostly sunny days. (I was going to count the number of G-runs played there from start to finish, but decided against it.) Among this year’s headliners were the Del McCoury Band, Ricky Skaggs and Kentucky Thunder, Steve Earle and the Bluegrass Dukes, the Gibson Brothers, the Jerry Douglas Band, Tim O’Brien and Cornbread Nation, Larry Sparks and the Lonesome Ramblers, and the consistently brilliant Dry Branch Fire Squad, led by mandolin player and national treasure Ron Thomason.

Bluegrass music on Ancramdale’s Rothvoss Farm began in 1976, with a lineup that included Red Allen, the Osborne Brothers, J.D. Crowe and the New South, and the father of bluegrass, Bill Monroe. The formula has varied somewhat over the decades, and this year’s schedule occasionally forsok genuine bluegrass for hours at a stretch in favor of what can only be called artsygrass. Still, most of the music was superb (kudos to Stereophile reader John Servies, who did the monitor mixes!), the tireless Grey Fox volunteer staff did a brilliant job of maintaining order, and a thoroughly wonderful time was had by all. Special thanks to God for the (mostly) no-rain thing.

If you want to attend next year’s Grey Fox Festival—and you should—watch for details on www.greyfoxbluegrass.com.

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O
r, if you will, the apotheosis of the iPod.
For those of you who can peel off and drop 25 or so $100 bills on what would be, for most of us, a sheer self-indulgence, I can confidently state that the Sound Devices Model 722, a hard-disk-based high-resolution portable audio recorder ($2650), is the coolest, most desirable piece of audio hardware I have encountered in a dog's age. Although designed as a rugged, high-performance, foolproof, battery-powered portable stereo recorder for electronic newsgathering (ENG) and video- and film-sound recording (especially nature documentaries), the 722 can also serve as the ultimate personal stereo.

To wit, you can play your precious old vinyl and run the line-level output of your phono stage into the 722's line-level XLR analog inputs, configure the 722's onboard analog-to-digital converters to 24-bit/192kHz, and record 10 hours of higher-than-CD-standard-resolution digital audio onto its internal 40GB hard drive. iTunes be damned.

Then, on a plane or at the beach, you can connect a good pair of stereo headphones and listen using the 722's not-at-all-shabby DACs and headphone amp, at 4x “Red Book” data density. Standard ¼” TRS (tip-ring-sleeve) stereo headphone plugs will require use of the adapter cord Sound Devices includes. This is because real estate is so scarce on the 722's petite chassis (it's the size of a large paperback book) that all the connectors save the XLR mike/line inputs are miniature. Indeed, space is so tight that part of the legend on the slide switch for Input 1 is hidden behind that input's XLR release tab. Not a square millimeter has been wasted.

As Charles Goren often said on his TV show about bridge, let's review the bidding. Sound Devices' 722 contains two professional mike preamps with 48V phantom power. These inputs are reconfigurable as line inputs. The inputs are routed to the two hard-disk recording tracks in any of 16 possible combinations, either through menu choices or front-panel keystroke shortcuts. The inputs are linkable: one rotary control controls gain for both channels while the other sets balance between them, or each knob controls one channel's gain. Both gain knobs extend and retract from being flush with the front panel, so their settings will be less likely to be accidentally disturbed.

Furthermore, the input channels can be sent through a true cross-fading M-S matrix, in which case the “L-C-R” indicator on the LED screen's main menu becomes “M-S”. Deeper levels of the menu structure enable low-cut EQ and dynamic limiting settings. So you start off with a high-quality, full-featured professional mike preamp. But wait, there's more!

Next up is a 24-bit/192kHz-capable A/D converter. The sample-rate choices are 16 and 24 bits, with redithering from 24 to 16 as another menu option. A stereo AES/EBU digital input can be routed through Channel 1's XLR; otherwise, S/PDIF in and out—on BNC connectors—are on the opposite (right) side of the chassis. Audio data are stored as .wav or MP3 files (why bother?) on the 40GB hard drive.

Furthermore, the 722 has a FireWire port, allowing it to connect to a computer as a mass storage device, so all its files can be accessed or copied. Or the FireWire port can be used to connect an external hard drive, although I can't imagine needing that much storage. So factor in, too, the value of a high-quality ADC and a data-storage and file-management system.

Monitoring and playback are through an onboard 24/192 DAC and a very robust yet detailed headphone amp. Left and right line-level analog outputs appear on three-pin TA3-M miniature connectors and a mini stereo headphone jack. Factor in all that as well.

Were all that not enough, the 722 has a slot for a Compact Flash (CF) memory card, which can be configured to serve as either backup or reserve/removable recording capacity. The lithium-ion battery included with the 722, a standard Sony professional type, provides about four hours of use. Larger-capacity batteries are available, and a battery charger is included. The charger charges the battery even if the 1 The folks who marketed the Ginsu knife on late-night television filed for bankruptcy in Rhode Island. In the Trustee's Notice of Sale newspaper ad, and in at least one court order, the proceedings were interrupted so that the words "But wait, there's more!" could appear in the middle of the page.

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722 is not powered up, or can charge as it runs. The 722 can also be reconfigured to run off external battery packs through its charging port.

It's not cheap, but, criminy, the 722 sure gives you your money's worth! I can't imagine how they can provide all the functionality they do and charge only $2650 (slight discounts available). Of course, data storage has gotten radically cheaper over the years, as has computing power; one could look at the 722 as a notebook computer that has been customized for audio. But skinning that cat on your own would involve buying a USB mike preamplifier and A/D converter, and either forgoing a few of the 722's mixing capabilities, or buying USB mike preamps and a compact mixer, then an ADC, and then a computer. I can't get that arithmetic to work.

Economics aside, the other area where the 722 comes in ahead of a computer-based solution, in my estimation, is ease of use. Because the 722 was designed with ENG in mind, where the usual job is "run and gun," it is as user-friendly as possible, consistent with its tremendous capabilities. You power up the 722 and it's ready to record a new audio file, date-and-time-stamped and titled with a pre-selected scene name. You don't even have to say "Please."

One aspect that might take a bit of getting used to is that, to start recording, all you need do is press Record. Sound Devices has chosen to leave behind the two-button approach to recording still found on most digital recorders: press Record to prepare for recording, then Play to actually do it. That goes back to the old needs to first physically engage the record head against the tape path, and then to get the tape reels spinning. It takes some relearning, but after a while it becomes second nature.

The other reason to do things Sound Devices' way is that you can set the 722 to buffer audio from its inputs into a cache, up to 10 seconds' worth at 44.1kHz (or 5 seconds' worth at 96kHz or 2 seconds' worth at 192kHz). In other words, as long as the 722 is powered up and has signals at its inputs, it is caching the audio, and when Record is pressed, it writes the cache to the hard disk as the beginning of the current sound file—great insurance against clipped starts. But with hours of hard-disk time, even at 24/192, it seems silly not to err on the side of just letting it run in Record mode.

While recording, pressing Record again starts a new .wav file. There is a brief pause as a new file is created and named, but again, no audio is lost, thanks to the buffering-and-cache arrangement. From Stop, pressing Play replays the last audio track recorded.

In short, Sound Devices has put lots of thought and lots of practical experience into the Model 722. It's not quite foolproof, but it's clear they've been looking out for the end-user.

The owner's manual and the LCD screen's menu structure, if they did not quite fill me with trepidation, at least made me acutely aware that I had started off doing editing with a razor blade. But then I just said, "Hey, let's use this as backup—how bad can it be?" A few successful takes later, I was grinning. The 722 is built like a tank, by the way, as backup—how bad can it be?" A few successful takes later, I was grinning. The 722 is built like a tank, by the way, as backup—how bad can it be?" A few successful takes later, I was grinning.

It is one measure of the functionality packed into the 722 that its main menu has 78 subscreens. Given that the 722 is essentially a computer customized for audio, nearly everything you could possibly want is variable, adjustable, or defeatable: the LCD screen's contrast, illumination, and brightness are all adjustable; there are a tone generator and optional warning chimes; the recording-level LCD meters' "ballistics" are selectable; and on and on. The combination of LCD screen plus a raft of LED status lights makes things very intelligible, once you've spent the necessary time on the learning curve.

Sound Devices also makes a four-channel model, the 744, which has two XLR/mike-preamp inputs and two line inputs. That is both for real-estate and practicality issues. You can record two main stereo tracks, mix as many as four other mikes on a Sound Devices companion mixer, and route them to the other tracks at line level. For short-run ENG, Sound Devices makes non-hard-disk, CF-only recorders, and, for film and television use, time-code-enabled recorders.

Sound Devices' website, www.sounddevices.com, is well worth a visit. Just stop drooling! I particularly recommend their demo of 24-bit vs 16-bit recording. Even in MP3, I think the case is made. Sound Devices is, as you will see, agnostic about mike cables. Their pitch for 24-bit recording is from a practical standpoint: using all the headroom, and thereby risking nasty digital "overs," is a lot less critical when you have 24 bits to play with instead of 16 (www.sounddevices.com/tech/24-bit.html).

I first laid hands on a Sound Devices 7-series recorder at a small dinner party given by Peter McGrath, of Wilson Audio Specialties, which coincided with Home Entertainment 2005. Jerry Bruck had brought a 7-series recorder along for all of us to ooh and aah over. (But there's nothing like recording with one.) John Atkinson was in attendance, and I think it fair to say that he was gobsmacked to hear Bruck's reminiscences of Gustav Mahler's widow, Alma, seeing as Mahler himself died in 1911. (Bruck is a dealer in professional sound-recording equipment and a Sound Devices distributor. He brings a wealth of practical experience to the transaction. See www.posthorn.com.)

I don't know how realistic the prospect of buying a 722 is for someone who doesn't make live recordings but who does want to listen to music on the go at higher-than-CD resolution, but seeing as a 722 costs less than some pairs of interconnects I could mention, I quote Carlos Mencia: De-de-de!

Around and about
I used the Sound Devices 722 to record some M-S stereo matrix demo tracks courtesy of blues guitarist extraordinary Thom Emrigh (www.thomemrigh.com). Emrigh, an alumnus of both Roomful of Blues and the John Cafferty Beaver Brown Band (of Eddie and the Cruisers fame), came to my living-listening-demo-recording room and noodled for a while. He, too, was stricken by lust for the 722. By the time you read this, an M-S demo track, as well as a bonus,
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unplugged version of Enright’s own song “Watch You When You Go,” should be up on www.stereophile.com/thefifthelement/ along with the August column, which explains the M-S technique.

Continuing our slow-motion pilgrimage among the historical and significant pipe organs of Rhode Island for the RI chapter of the American Guild of Organists, I stopped in at the Old Narragansett Church, which houses what is reputed to be the oldest pipe organ in North America that is still in regularly scheduled use for worship. The organ has been authoritatively identified as the ca-1680 work of the legendary German-English organ builder Bernard “Father” Smith (né Schmidt), who built the first organ at the then-new St. Paul’s in London. Smith was organ maker to Charles II, and a friend and colleague of both John Blow and Henry Purcell.

Recent scholarship suggests that the Old Narragansett Church organ contains wooden bass pipes that date back to about 1640, and which came from an organ damaged in the Great Fire of London of 1666. Those pipes, the experts say, were salvaged and reused, and still show signs of smoke damage. To record a musical instrument that predates all of J.S. Bach’s known output is quite a thing, I assure you. Mark Steinbach played two short pieces by a 19th-century Rhode Island composer.

I wish I could tell you that it was the Music of the Spheres. It sounded like a wooden box full of old bicycle parts being thrown down the stairs, with a reed organ in the background. By which I mean, the treadle-action bellows pump was pretty noisy. The Old Narragansett Church has no electricity, and never has. It was built elsewhere in 1707, and decades later was disassembled, then reassembled at its present site on Church Lane in Wickford, Rhode Island (www.episcopalri.org/organ.cfm). There isn’t room enough inside to swing a cat.

I used to spend a few weeks in Wickford every summer when I was a boy, as my aunt and uncle lived at 25 Main Street, about three blocks away from Old Narragansett Church. Wickford was not then the chichi destination for New Yorkers it is now, but a down-at-heels seaside village with a spillover of Navy housing from Quonset. (The local quip about such a place is “A quaint drinking village with a small fishing problem.”)

My brothers and cousins and I used to set out minnow traps and sell the poor creatures as fishing bait for 35¢ a quart, then go to the movies. I don’t think I’d have the heart to do it now. Indeed, once I’d put a few minnows in a large goldfish bowl and spent hours marveling at their sleek and subtly colored beauty, I was less eager to turn them into cash.

We also visited the Christian Science Church in Providence, where Peter Krasinski plays a 1912 Hutchings-Votey organ (www.krasinski.org). That instrument sounded as lush as velvet, with a decidedly dark tonal luster. Just to prove that one size does not fit all, the same mike setup that served well at the First Baptist Church (August, p.41) did not work out as well at the Christian Science Church, although it seemed okay on headphones. The bass was just too prominent, so some judicious EQ or a re-record is in order. (That was a situation where having the four-track Sound Devices 744 RECII-NT SCHOLARSHIP SUGGESTS THAT THE OLD NARRAGANSETT CHURCH ORGAN CONTAINS WOODEN BASS PIPES THAT DATE BACK TO ABOUT 1640.

might have paid off: dual figure-8 M-S on two tracks, spaced omnis on the other two.) Peter played M. Searle Wright’s Lyric Rhapsody, a little-known American masterpiece.

Peter also humored me by playing two thrilling improvisations on Parry’s setting of Blake’s poem “Jerusalem,” which, if it does not figure in your worship tradition, you may remember from the first and last scenes of the film Chariots of Fire. I think it would be a very fine thing if someone would record a dozen contemporary organists on a dozen great organs, each improvising on Parry’s “Jerusalem.” (Backers or angels: Please e-mail me at jmrcs@jmrcs.com.) I commented to Peter that I was grateful for his willingness to play “Jerusalem,” as I hadn’t expected to get anywhere asking for a medley of Procol Harum’s greatest hits. To which Peter replied “All of them?” while engineer Steve Dreyfuss pretended to be able to remember only one. Instead, Peter played a couple of measures of “Stairway to Heaven.” I’ll get around to that someday, too!

Seeing as the 722 was serving as backup to the backup, I experimented
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by recording some takes of Wright's Lyric Rhapsody at 24/96 and the "Jerusalem" improvisations at 24/192. They are really something.

So, you may feel tempted to ask, now have we immanentized the eschaton? Sorry, still not quite. The Sound Devices 722 is beyond great, no doubt about it. Sorry, still not quite. The Sound Devices have we immanentized the eschaton? "Fifth Element"—but only in DSD combination of the three, I don't know. I tests I've made that the 722 lacked. Whether this has to do with the Grace, the Tascam, DSD, or some combination of the three, I don't know. I completely understand Sound Devices' not offering DSD equipment. There is the likelihood that the circuitry could not fit within the chassis they now use. More to the point, as I understand the current state of things: Apart from a handful of classical-music producers and recording engineers, there is simply no demand for DSD equipment.

The right book
We are now in a new Golden Age of pipe-organ building, as least as far as organs for major concert halls go. Meyerson Hall in Dallas, Walt Disney Hall in Los Angeles, and Verizon Hall in Philadelphia all have had important organs installed in recent years. It is very unlikely that a new major concert hall would be planned today without provision for a pipe organ, even if the real motivation were more "bragging rights" than music.

There are two major reasons why this should be so. First, more than 100 major orchestral works call for an organ, and by no means are all of them organ concertos. Yes, you can perform Brahms' Ein deutsches Requiem and Elgar's Enigma Variations without an organ, but what you get is not what the composer intended. Second, electronic organs playing through loudspeakers are simply not a substitute. Anyone who has ever heard the Sinfonie section of Strauss's Also sprach Zarathustra with a rented and trucked-in electronic organ will assure you of that.

Thirty and forty years ago, things were quite different. The concert-hall organ was at its lowest ebb. Isaac Stern reportedly said that a pipe organ would be installed in Carnegie Hall over his dead body, an assertion that must have had quite a few people thoughtfully mumuring. "The idea has possibilities." The organ in Philharmonic Hall (now Avery Fisher Hall) was removed and sold to California's Crystal Cathedral, perhaps in an effort to minimize the variables in that hall's ongoing series of "we squeeze it here but it bulges there" acoustical remediations. The organ in Cleveland's Severance Hall was, for the love of God, Montesor, walled off. As were others.

How the place of the organ in our musical and communal life went from its exalted status in the early decades of the 20th century, through trying times and riving controversies over how an organ should sound and how it should be played, to the veritable renaissance of the past few decades, is engrossingly told in Craig Whitney's All the Steps: The Glorious Pipe Organ and Its American Masters. Whitney, a New York Times editor who is also an amateur organist, strikes just the right balance. The book is a fascinating cultural history for the general reader, yet has backstories and insights that will intrigue the professional.

On the eve of the 1929 Crash and the ensuing Great Depression, no marble-halled stately mansion would be complete without a real pipe organ to entertain its guests. Even department stores were so caught up in the cultural striving that Wanamaker's, in Philadelphia, built one of the largest organs in this hemisphere. But a whole generation would soon rearrange the landscape and put most organ builders firmly on the road to extinction.

First, the Crash and Depression dried up public and private sources of cash for luxury spending. Municipalities, wealthy individuals, and churches all had to cut back. Second, talking motion pictures replaced not only movie-house pianists and pianos but also organists and organs. Finally, substantial improvements in microphones, radios, and phonographs meant that people no longer had to leave the house in order to hear something that sounded enough like live music to meet that need in their lives.

The story of the organ through the 20th century and up to today organizes itself in nearly Hegelian terms, the dialectics of which were often concretized in professional and even personal rivalries. From E.M. Skinner's disputes with G. Donald Harrison over voicing through the rivalry between E. Power Biggs and Virgil Fox for recording and concert market shares, through the Goliath-and-David contest between the American eclectic "organ for all seasons" and the builders of new organs in truer Renaissance and Baroque styles, Whitney crafts a business-history page-turner. Virgil Fox comes off as a main-chancing exploiter of those closest to him, and a first-class jerk in general. C.B. Fisk, whose track-action No.45 (1965) I often hear in Westerly, Rhode Island, comes off as a true gentleman on a sacred mission; I wish I'd met him.

On the cover of the hardcover edition is a dim black-and-white photo of the famous Methuen organ; the cover art of the paperback edition is a color photo of the Rosales/Glatter-Gotz organ in Los Angeles' Walt Disney Hall, donated by Toyota and looking like a cartoon of an explosion at a lumber yard. Better yet, the publisher's website hosts an MP3 audio mini-documentary narrated by Whitney: www.publicaffairsbooks.com/publicaffairsbooks-cgi-bin/display?book=1586481738. Bravo. Most highly recommended!

For information about the Walt Disney Hall organ, see www.rosales.com. For streaming audio of an excellent radio documentary on it, see www.kcrw.com/cgi-bin/radio_wrap.cgi?ot/of041231Celebrating_the_Walt. For information about the Verizon Center organ, see www.dobsonorgan.com/html/instruments/op76_philadelphia.html. And for a QuickTime video about it, see www.whyy.org/artsandculture/index.html.

Epistles and brickbats (what's a brickbat, anyway?): jmrcds@jmrcds.com
COMPONENTS LISTED here have been formally reviewed in Stereophile and have been found to be among the best available in each of four or five quality classes. Whether a component is listed in Class A or Class E, we highly recommend its purchase.

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

Some products listed have not yet been reported on; these are marked (NR), for "Not Reviewed." Others have received coverage in our free bimonthly eNewsletter—back issues are archived at www.stereophile.com/enewsletters. We recommend that you read any product's entire review before seriously contemplating a purchase (products without reviews should therefore be treated with more caution)—many salient characteristics, peculiarities, and caveats appear in the reviews, but not here. To obtain back issues of the magazine, visit our website: www.stereophile.com. We regret that we cannot supply photocopies or e-mail copies of individual reviews. Some reviews are reprinted in our website “Archives” Section: these are marked “WWW.” More are added each week, so check the on-line listing. PDF files of past listings are also available for purchase. Each $9.95 file includes a complete year’s worth of “Recommended Components.”

In general, components do not remain listed for more than three years unless at least one of the magazine’s writers and editors has had continued experience with them. Discontinuation of a model also precludes its appearance. In addition, though professional components—recorders, amplifiers, monitor speaker systems—can be obtained secondhand and can sometimes offer performance that would otherwise guarantee inclusion, we do not generally do so. Stereophile’s “Recommended Components” listing is almost exclusively concerned with products currently available in the US through the usual hi-fi retail outlets.

HOW RECOMMENDATIONS ARE DETERMINED
The ratings given components included in this listing are based entirely on performance—i.e., accuracy CAN'T FIND AN HONEST OPINION? LOOK NO FURTHER AS STEREOPHILE EDITORS GO OUT ON A LIMB AND PICK THE INDUSTRY'S BEST AUDIO PRODUCTS.
RECOMMENDED COMPONENTS
2006
of reproduction—and are biased to an extent by our feeling that things added to reproduced sound (eg, flutter, distortion, colorations of various kinds) are of more concern to the musically oriented listener than are things subtracted from the sound (eg, deep bass or extreme treble). On the other hand, components markedly deficient in one or more respects are downrated to the extent that their deficiencies interfere with the full realization of the program material.

We try to include in "Recommended Components" every product that we have found to be truly excellent or that we feel represents good value for money. Bear in mind that many different tastes are represented. The listing is compiled after consultation with Stereophile's reviewing staff and editors, and takes into account continued experience of a product after the formal review has been published. In particular, we take account of unreliability and defects that show up after extended auditioning. The fact that a product received a favorable review cannot therefore be regarded as a guarantee that it will continue to appear in this listing.

The prices indicated are those current at the time the listing was compiled (August 2006). We cannot guarantee that any of these prices will be the same by the time this issue of Stereophile appears in print.

Where we have found a product to perform much better than might be expected from its price, we have drawn attention to it with a $$$ next to its listing. We also indicate, with a $, products that have been on this list in one incarnation or another since the "Recommended Components" listing in Vol.21 No.10 (October 2003). Longevity in a hi-fi component is rare enough that we think it worth noting (although it can also indicate that the attention of design engineers has moved elsewhere).

We are not sympathetic toward letters complaining that the Symphonic Bombast A-123 that we recommended heartily two years ago no longer makes it into "Recommended Components." Where deletions are made, we endeavor to give reasons (there are always reasons). But remember: Deletion of a component from this list does not invalidate a buying decision you have made.

Individual reviewers mentioned by their initials are: John Atkinson, Paul Bolin, Lorne Brownell, Martin Colloms, Brian Danker, Robert Deutsch, Adam Dudley, Michael Fremer, Larry Greenhill, John Marks, Paul Messenger, Thomas J. Norton, Wes Phillips, Bob J. Reina, Kalman Rubinson, Markus Sauer, Jonathan Scull (J-10), Chip Stern, Sam Tellig, and Barry Willis.

HOW TO USE THE LISTINGS

The classes each cover a wide range of performance. Carefully read our descriptions here, the original reviews, and (wherever forbid) reviews in other magazines to put together a short list of components to choose from. Evaluate your room, your source material and front-end(s), your speakers, and your tastes. With luck, you may come up with a selection to audition at your favorite dealer(s). "Recommended Components" will not tell you what to buy any more than Consumer Reports would presume to tell you whom to marry!

CLASS A

Best attainable sound for a component of its kind, generally denoted as "the most musical compromise." A Class A system is one for which you don't have to make a leap of faith to believe that you're hearing the real thing. With Super Audio CD, 24/96 DAC, and DVD-Audio, we have created a new Class A, AT, for the best performance in those digital categories. Class A now represents the best that can be obtained from the conventional 16/44.1k -- 1/2 CD medium. We also created Class A+ category for turntables and phono preamps, to recognize the achievements of the Rockport Sirius and Boulder 2008, respectively.

CLASS B

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

CLASS C

Satisfying musical sound, but these components are either of significantly lower fidelity than the best available, or exhibit major compromises in performance—limited dynamic range, for example. Bear in mind that appearance in Class C still means that we recommend this product—it is possible to put together a musically satisfying system exclusively from Class C components.

CLASS D

Applying only to loudspeakers, this "Entry Level" classification includes products that may have obvious defects, but are both inexpensive and much better than most products in their mid-fi price category.

CLASS H

"Keep your eye on this product." Class H is for components that we have not reviewed (or have not finished testing), but that we have reason to believe may be excellent performers. We are not actually recommending these components, only suggesting you give them a listen. Though the report is yet to be published in print, and so the writer and editor sometimes feel confident enough that the reviewer's opinion is sufficiently well formed to include what otherwise would be an entry in one of the other classes, noted (NR).

TURNTABLES

A+ Continuum Audio Labs Calliburn: $99,500 with tonearm and stand

"Part New Jersey diner, part Wurlitzer jukebox," the 160 lb Calliburn is the brainchild of Mark Doehmann, whose clever, purposeful design is based on rigorous scientific methodology using finite-element analysis computer programs. While the only serious competition for the Calliburn is the Rockport System III Sirius, MF decided, "The Calliburn beats the Rockport's overall performance by a considerable margin," adding, an "emotional majesty" that made the Rockport seem ana lytical. "Better than sex?" cried Mikey's wife. The ultra-rigid Castellon stand, made of chromed, aircraft-grade aluminum, costs $35k on its own (phew). (Vol.29 No.1; WWW)

Rockport Technologies System III Sirius: $73,750

What can you say about a $73,750 "table and arm? The System III Sirius is all air-driven, exquisitely constructed, and 550 lbs in its stocking feet, with a "captured" linear-tracking, high-performance, low-flow arm and bearing. It took all of 30 seconds for MF to realize that "it was in every way laughably better than anything I'd ever heard." How so? Its overall presentation was so much bigger, more focused, solid, three-dimensional, sure-footed, dynamic, and seamless, that I lost my footing. Literally. I was floored. It rotates the LP with utter precision, "puts the stylus on a straight and true path across the record surface, while allowing for precise adjustment of all parameters, which it then reliably holds indefinitely." (Vol.23 No.8; see also "Letters" in Vol.23 No.10; WWW)

A Avid Acutas: $13,500

Based on a main chassis that includes three spring-suspension towers and a cast-aluminum subchassis, the Acutas is built to "extremely rigid but not critically damped." MF: "The theory behind all of this is to allow vibrational energy at the stylus/record interface to be quickly and efficiently transmitted to the main bearing and then to the subchassis, where, much like an electrical 'diode,' it can't travel back in the other direction." Though MF was disappointed by the Acutas being more than a little sloppy, it was among the handful of the best turntables he's heard: "This baby matches SME 30/2 in the way the music emerged from jet-black silence," reminding him of the Rockport System III Sirius. "The Avid's bass was deep, powerful, very well-focused, and rhythmically nimble, though it couldn't match the SME's weighty, drive, solidly, or ultimate control. The Acutas has an airier top end because I didn't find the overall sound at all bright, though tonally, despite running slightly slow, there was slightly more overall leading edge." (Vol.26 No.5)

Brinkmann Balance: $14,850

The ready-to-play Brinkmann Balance is a plinthless table with an attractive, low-profile base available in a variety of sizes and configured for specified tonearm masses. Its high-tech feet are designed to effectively isolate the supporting base from horizontally and vertically induced vibrations, and its platter's speed can run at precisely 33.3 and 45rpm. Combined "deep, tight, articulate" bass performance with "the lightest, airiest, purest" soundstages to breathe new life into MF's favorite LPs, adding "grander holography of imaging but without squish." With the exception of the Rockport System III Sirius, the Brinkmann combo was the best turntable system Mikey had ever heard. Brinkmann 10.5 tonearm adds $3650, Brinkmann EMT cartridge adds $2850. (MF Review No.5)

ELP LP-2XRC: $19,000

Uses a five-laser pickup to retrieve and transmit the groove information via a series of mirrors and lenses. Use
A "genuine bargain," according to MF, the 88-lg Stabi Reference is a split-plinth, motorless design that lacks sex appeal but offers rugged build quality and exquisite machining. Its performance was "rock-solid, dynamic, stable, and dramatic," with authoritative bass extension and midrange. MF comments, "I don't think anyone else is doing it this way anymore." The SME Model 30/2, according to MF, "isn't just a good idea, it's the real deal." The SME Model 30/2 was on display at the 2006 High End Show in Munich, with an impressive array of SME products, including the SME M2 tonearm with low-output MC cartridge.

**VPI**

**VPI Scoutmaster:** $10,500, with tonearm

Harry Weisfeld's efforts to produce the ultimate turntable include a plinth of acrylic/aluminum-silver laminate, an inverted bearing assembly, the addition of a perimeter clamping ring, and replacement of the output motor and flywheel with a single unit. Simple, small, more luxuriously appointed, and better built than the TNT, the HR-X also eliminates the TNT's pervasive warmth and softened dynamic transients, to offer a much more neutral overall presentation. BD concurs, "The HR-X struck me as a stable, inert, and nearly neutral platform that simply supports a cartridge and lets it do its own thing." Price includes: VPI's JMW-12 tonearm (see "Tonearms").

**VPI TNT M V: $6000**

Modular design allows owners of older models to upgrade easily and inexpensively, or less the experienced owner to begin with the TNT Jr. and upgrade as finances allow. With the TNT Jr.'s fully damped, high-fidelity, and highly refined sound quality, it's a great starter turntable. The VPI TNT M V is a complete system that includes a high-fidelity MC cartridge and a high-quality turntable motor, making it an excellent value for the money. The VPI TNT M V is also available with a built-in phono preamp, allowing for even greater flexibility in your audio setup.

**VPI HR-X:** $4950

Perhaps the greatest mid-priced bargain in analog today, see MF. Rigged up, with precision-machined, 24- lb aluminum platter. Should last a lifetime or even two. The SME Model 30/2's precision-machined parts, when auditioned with Origin Live's Encounter tonearm, have been praised for their stability and low noise floor, making it an excellent choice for any serious music lover. The SME Model 30/2 is also available with a built-in phono preamp, allowing for even greater flexibility in your audio setup.
Clearaudio Emotion: $999, with tonearm

A simple design uses a thin acrylic slab for a plinth, another thin slab for the platter, a short spindle bearing of polished steel, and acrylic cones for feet. Good pitch stability. With Clearaudio’s “elegantly simple” Satin tonearm, the Emotion offered “reasonably good” overall sound, and a “surprisingly agile” bottom end with an overall balance on the “smooth, soft side,” said MF. The motor was somewhat noisy, an audible hum emanating from both the plinth and platform surfaces. (Vol.27 No.6)

Marantz TT-1551: $1799

Marantz’s first turntable in 20 years, the attractive, quiet, well-damped TT-1551 is built to Marantz’s specifications by Clearaudio, whose Virtuoso Wood Ebony MM cartridge is included. “Basically an upgraded Clearaudio Emotion,” per MF, the TT-1551 features a taller acrylic platter, differently shaped acrylic slabs, and three substantial aluminum feet. The Virtuoso Wood cartridge offered the TT-1551 a “startlingly full, coherent, dynamic sound.” “Given Marantz’s extensive distribution network,” said MF, “the TT-1551 should serve as a good call.” (Vol.31 No.6)

Michell TecnoDec: $1695, with tonearm

J. Michell’s entry-level turntable features a vinyl-combo, “declared ME He questioned the player’s stability for improved isolation, an unstable platter designed (Vol.26 No.2, Vol.28 No.3) for an improved sound, and a “surprisingly agile” bottom end with an overall balance on the “smooth, soft side,” said MF. The motor was somewhat noisy, an audible hum emanating from both the plinth and platform surfaces. (Vol.27 No.6)

Kuzma Reference turntable, the Phantom was a bit less airy and effusive, slightly more reserved and grounded Goldring adds $990. (Vol.29 No.5)

The Air Line’s linear-tracking design “seems rigorous, security, and repeatability,” and uses a porous-wall air bearing. The lack of a damping trough, combined with a high horizontal moving mass, means that the arm’s stability and tracking effectiveness will depend on its being absolutely level. When conditions were ideal, however, the Air Line was a “major league home run sonically.” MF: “Ultra-black backgrounds; enormous, airy, startlingly stable soundstages; palpable images, perfectly placed and sized; razor-sharp harmonic, dynamic, and transient complexity. With the addition of a damping trough, the Air Line could very well be the finest turntable ever built.” In combination with the $7000 Kuzma Reference turntable, MF found “top-shelf performance at mid-level price.” However, with the Simson Yorke System 7 turntable, “the Air Line arm seemed to have a slightly more romantic and airy upper midrange, but not quite the same bottom-end heft and weight.” (Vol.27 No.8 & 9 WWW)

Rega P3: $1295, with tonearm

This two-speed belt-drive turntable features six record platters, two RB700 tonearms, and 24V, 50Hz motor outputted “the sort of emotional and intellectual involvement that comes only when a hi-fi component gets the musical essentials down right,” said AD. Compared with Rega’s Regaroid P3.1 model, the new P3 5 was “nicely detailed and significantly better at putting across soundstage, dynamics, and rhythmic integrity. He also found the Ekos’ bass to be “more tuneful and "open" than that of the original Ikto. AD and PM prefer the Nam ARO on the LP12, however, and that adjustment is not possible. While other, similarly priced turntables provide on-the-fly adjustment of VTA, MF concluded that, “Based on listening and sourcing, the fixed-pivot Ekos is competently designed and executed, and sounded and job competitively with other arms priced at around $3000.” Some users have reported long-term problems with the bearings; the sample JA bought in 1989 has been okay in this respect. (Vol.12 No.6 & 7, Vol.13 No.6, 7,11 WWW)

DaVinci Audio Labs Grandezza: $6700

The handsome Grandezza sports an armoire of Grundenwood wood and a base and headshell of bronze, features magnetic anti-skating, and is available in lengths of 9", 10", and 12". MIkey had problems with VTA adjustment and was disappointed to find that the Grandezza’s vertical pivot was not aligned to match the headshell’s offset angle. Though greater accuracy and more precise mechanics are available elsewhere, the Grandezza “always sounded musical, enveloping, well-balanced, and refined.” Only borderline Class A. (Vol.29 No.3)

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Continuing our saga: "Bourgeois" in nature, the Ekos' bass to be "more tuneful and "open" than that of the original Ikto. AD and PM prefer the Nam ARO on the LP12, however, and that adjustment is not possible. While other, similarly priced turntables provide on-the-fly adjustment of VTA, MF concluded that, “Based on listening and sourcing, the fixed-pivot Ekos is competently designed and executed, and sounded and job competitively with other arms priced at around $3000.” Some users have reported long-term problems with the bearings; the sample JA bought in 1989 has been okay in this respect. (Vol.12 No.6 & 7, Vol.13 No.6, 7,11 WWW)

VPI Aries Scout deleted in favor of Scoutmaster; Music Reference, a Breuer-like gimbaled-bearing design that features an outboard DC motor with adjustable speed, and uses a Rega 250 arm modified with Michell’s TechNoWeight. Setup was a snap, “Turntables don’t get simpler than the TecNoWeight,” said MI. MF installed a Lyra Helikon cartridge and was especially impressed by the resulting size, precision, focus, and stability of the system, which acts to laterally stabilize the arm at the pivot point. AZ also preferred a different headshell over the Lyra Cartridge and was especially impressed by the addition of the Speed Box Mk.II ($119), which allows for electronic switching between 33 1/3 and 45rpm. “The inexpensive Debut III suddenly had swagger,” said MF. “The combo is laughably good.” (Vol.29 No.7)

Debut III: $299-$329 $$

Every aspect of earlier Debut is taken a step up in the Debut III, which comes equipped with an Ortofon OM-5E MM cartridge. It offered surprisingly quiet backgrounds, along with impressive image stability and dynamics. "This tonearm's technology and design but is bigger and offset angle. Though greater accuracy and more precise mechanics are available elsewhere, the Grandezza "always sounded musical, enveloping, well-balanced, and refined." Only borderline Class A. (Vol.29 No.3)

Contemporary Classic: $12,500

The Cobra also includes original and ingenious methods for azimuth stabilization and adjustment. “The Caliburn-Cobra produces the most convincing, believable, solid, and airy sound picture I’ve heard,” said MF. (Vol.29 No.1 & 6, WWW)

Platina turntable, which acts to laterally stabilize the arm at the pivot point. AZ also preferred a different headshell over the Lyra Helikon cartridge, the Radius5 delivered a relaxed airy and easy.” (Vol.29 No.5)

Linn Ekos: $3000

MC also found the Ekos’ bass to be "more tuneful and "open" than that of the original Ikto. AD and PM prefer the Nam ARO on the LP12, however, and that adjustment is not possible. While other, similarly priced turntables provide on-the-fly adjustment of VTA, MF concluded that, “Based on listening and sourcing, the fixed-pivot Ekos is competently designed and executed, and sounded and job competitively with other arms priced at around $3000.” Some users have reported long-term problems with the bearings; the sample JA bought in 1989 has been okay in this respect. (Vol.12 No.6 & 7, Vol.13 No.6, 7,11 WWW)

Nam ARO: $3500

“An inner balance and harmony consistent with the musical message,” says MC of this unipivot design. MS found the Air Line’s linear-tracking design “seems rigorous, security, and repeatability,” and uses a porous-wall air bearing. The lack of a damping trough, combined with a high horizontal moving mass, means that the arm’s stability and tracking effectiveness will depend on its being absolutely level. When conditions were ideal, however, the Air Line was a “major league home run sonically.” MF: “Ultra-black backgrounds; enormous, airy, startlingly stable soundstages; palpable images, perfectly placed and sized; razor-sharp harmonic, dynamic, and transient complexity. With the addition of a damping trough, the Air Line could very well be the finest turntable ever built.” In combination with the $7000 Kuzma Reference turntable, MF found “top-shelf performance at mid-level price.” However, with the Simson Yorke System 7 turntable, “the Air Line arm seemed to have a slightly more romantic and airy upper midrange, but not quite the same bottom-end heft and weight.” (Vol.27 No.8 & 9 WWW)

VPI JMJ-W: $12,400

Unipivot tonearm features vestigial anti-skating, which does not compromise the Air Line’s linear-tracking design “seems rigorous, security, and repeatability,” and uses a porous-wall air bearing. The lack of a damping trough, combined with a high horizontal moving mass, means that the arm’s stability and tracking effectiveness will depend on its being absolutely level. When conditions were ideal, however, the Air Line was a “major league home run sonically.” MF: “Ultra-black backgrounds; enormous, airy, startlingly stable soundstages; palpable images, perfectly placed and sized; razor-sharp harmonic, dynamic, and transient complexity. With the addition of a damping trough, the Air Line could very well be the finest turntable ever built.” In combination with the $7000 Kuzma Reference turntable, MF found “top-shelf performance at mid-level price.” However, with the Simson Yorke System 7 turntable, “the Air Line arm seemed to have a slightly more romantic and airy upper midrange, but not quite the same bottom-end heft and weight.” (Vol.27 No.8 & 9 WWW)

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Music Direct Recommended
MANDATORY ACCESSORY list!

POWER CONDITIONING

- Shunyata Hydra 8
  - $2495
- Shunyata Guardian 4
  - $595
- PS Audio UPC-200
  - $499
- Nordost Thor
  - $3200
- Audio Prism Quietline Filters
  - $29.99 (ea)

ANALOG ACCESSORIES

- Onzow Zercust
  - $69
- VPI 6.5
  - $699
- PS Audio UPC-200
  - $499
- Nordost Thor
  - $3200
- Audio Prism Quietline Filters
  - $29.99 (ea)

VIBRATION CONTROL

- AudioQuest Nordost Cardas
  - $29.99
- Cardas Finale Elemente Ceraball
  - $125 (set of three)
- Black Diamond Racing Cones
  - $60 (set of three)
- Still Points Cones
  - $299 (set of three)

ACCESSORIES

- Musical Fidelity X-10x3
  - Tube Buffer
  - $399
- VPI 6.5
  - $699
- VPI 6.5 Speed Strobe
  - $39 (ea)
- Cable Elevators
  - $20 (ea)
- The Best Cables from
  - AudioQuest / Nordost / Cardas
  - $16.99
- Optix CD Clarifier & Cleanser
  - $19.99
- Agre Bukuh CD
  - $19.99
Avalon
ISIS
Designed by Neil Patel
Where time and space become One

Exclusive Proprietary Technologies:
Neodymium Drivers
Precious Metal Conductors
Constrained Layer Cabinet Damping
Low Noise Crossover Magnetics

www.avalonaoustics.com
Lyra Helikon Mono: $2395

MF says that, even at the price, the aluminum-chassis Helikon from Scan-Tech is a steal. "A well-balanced performer with little character of its own compared to most other cartridges...Not as fast and exciting as some, but smooth, transparent, and ultra-detailed." He also noted "an addictive, plush, creamy midband and total freedom from edge, grain, and[mechanicalness]." Detailed and seamlessly articulate, with unrivaled palpability. Mono version uses two separate coils wound on the two sides and opposite ends of a common bobbin, which was then cemented together, the manufacturer explained, "so as to reduce the mechanical motion of the tonearm mechanism, and thus avoid the cartridge from being unnecessarily plucked when the tonearm is stationary, as it always is in a stereo system." And the rotating coil assembly is seated within the headshell. Lyra Titan: $4500

The Titan's body is machined from a single piece of titanium alloy to minimize standing waves, internal reflections, and resonances. Two symmetrical pole pieces are arranged vertically so that no pole pieces are in the direct line of a stereo source. Long magnets generate a strong magnetic field, and the pole pieces are designed to be the quietest phono cartridge he's ever used. (Vol.26 No.5, Vol.29 No.8 WW)
We really didn’t know what was going to happen when we introduced the world’s first balanced headphone amplifier, the HeadRoom BlockHead, five years ago. We didn’t know if getting rid of the common ground on headphones would make much difference. We didn’t know how many headphones could be successfully re-cabled to a balanced configuration. We didn’t know if balanced headphone drive was going to sound better—or even if it would sound good. We just knew it could be done and that we had to try. Man, are we glad we did; balanced-drive headphones sound great! It is a new idea though, so we thought we’d help you understand what we’re talking about.

A normal headphone cable plug has three connections on it: the tip is left; the ring is right; and the sleeve is ground. The tip connects to a wire that goes to the positive (+) lead of the left headphone driver coil; the ring connects to a wire that goes to the positive lead of the right driver. The sleeve connects to a wire that goes to both negative (−) terminals of the drive coil; this wire usually has a solder joint in the “Y” or in the earpiece where ground wire from the plug splits into separate wires that are connected to the negative terminals of the driver coils.

The most important thing to note here is that as the left and right channels of the headphone amplifier drive the left and right driver coils, the return current from the drivers gets joined together and travels some distance before returning to the amp’s audio ground. This common pathway has some—possibly significant—electrical resistance from the wire, solder joints, contact resistance at the plug/jack, and so on, which causes a common signal to appear at the negative terminal of both driver coils. This common signal (a low-level summation of the left and right channel) will generate low level cross-talk and distortion in the sound heard on headphones. Just how low depends on the quality of the whole headphone/amplifier system (and, of course, we do a lot to minimize the problem with our amplifiers and re-cabling services), but it will always be there. There is, however, a way to completely get around the problem: balanced headphones.

Balanced headphones are just regular headphones that have been re-cabled in a special way. The normal three-conductor cable with the common ground connection is replaced with a cable that has four conductors: right positive and right negative conductors to the positive and negative connections of the right driver coil; and left positive and left negative conductors to the left driver coil. The cable is terminated in two XLR male connectors, one each for the left and right channel. A special headphone amplifier is used that has “balanced” outputs where each channel has a normal audio drive signal and a mirror image inverted drive signal. The trick here is that there is no “ground” to the headphones anymore, so there is no opportunity for the crosstalk distortion described above.

Well... there’s actually another trick: an amp that makes perfect mirror imaged balanced signals to drive balanced headphones. But, we’ve run out of room, so it will have to wait until next month’s ad. Until then you may want to reread the above gobbledygook until it makes sense-- Right Between Your Ears. (Sorry---couldn’t resist.)

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of cartridge performance were the state of the art or close enough. The Lyra Titan seemed to sail through the passages without having to worry about wear, scratches, and other defects, while retaining and delivering a level of musical nuance that is in a different league than other cartridges I’ve heard.”

RD seconds the Class A rating. (Vol.26 No.6)

**Shelter 90X:** $2700

The top- of- the- line Shelter cartridge increases the 901’s output to 0.6mV and adds 0.6µm of mass. “A luxuriously- sounding cartridge,” said MF, the 90X combined “the 501 MK.II’s midrange magic with the 901’s transparency, dynamics, and frequency extension.” While it lacks the technological sophistication of the Lyra or Transfiguration cartridges, it maximizes the performance from more traditional motor and body designs. (Vol.28 No.2)

**van den Hul Condor Gold:** $4680

A light trigger designed for tearaway 12-20gm mass and with a recommended tracking force of 1.35-1.5gm, the Grasshopper Condor Gold uses a nude design and features a cross- shaped modulator, machined crystal gold wire, a plastic mounting platform, and 0.35mV output. With “immeasurably additive top- to- bottom smoothness,” “absolutely no edge, overall resolution or spaciousness,” the Condor excelled at creating a natural acoustic space while remaining “almost neutral,” said MF. Mikey most enjoyed the Condor with classical, acoustic jazz, and folk music. (Vol.28 No.3)

**Benz ACE Mono:** $550

The ACE Mono, optimized for playing back mono LPs, has a blue acrylic housing, uses a solid boron cantilever with a line- contact stylus, and has a recommended tracking force of 1.8 to 2gm. Its sound was a “little tizzy,” but after some running- in it matured into “a tight, neutral- sounding pickup with an exceptionally good sense of scale on big music and an unusually smooth and non- grainy top end,” said AD. (Vol.28 No.6 WW)

**Cartridge Man MusicMaker:** $995

Loosely based on the Grado Signature series, the MusicMaker uses a proprietary grain- oriented, high- contact- areas stylus profile and a multi- piece cantilever that’s damped inside and out. Mounted on the Hadcock 242 tonearm, and after a lengthy break- in, the MusicMaker impressed MF with its dynamic resolve, crystalline clarity, and silent backgrounds. Subtle textural shadings were sacrificed in favor of outstanding resolution of low- level detail and ambient cues. “If you like your transient attacks right there and your top end slightly on the sharp side, you probably will like the MusicMaker,” said MF. (Vol.28 No.7)

**Clearaudio Virtuoso Wood:** $800  **$500**

BJR couldn’t come up with one even one criticism of this wooden- bodied version of the excellent Aurum Beta $. It shares that cartridge’s transparency, midrange naturalness, extended treble and bass definition, and dynamics, but adds an additional layer of detail resolution, sweetness, and subtle low level articulation. BJR decided that the Virtuoso Wood might be the affordable cartridge for lovers of jazz, classical, and rock music. “The performance of the Clearaudio Virtuoso Wood was so ear- opening that I recommend that anyone thinking of spending up to $500 on a moving- coil cartridge consider buying the [$800] Wood instead.” (Vol.25 No.12 WW)

**Ortofon SPU Meister Silver:** $1630

Ultra- low- compliance cartridge with a nude elliptical stylus, a large aluminum cantilever, and a recommended tracking force of 4gm. The Meister Silver

provided all of the bass notes and treble sparkle that the $980 Ortofon SPU Classic A missed, while maintaining the SPU’s “thrilling way with dynamic peaks.” AD: “One heck of a fine pickup.” Proved a much better match with the N- H- T Concept 124 package than with more modern turntable- to- arm combinations. (Vol.29 No.5 WWW)

**Shelter 501 MK.II:** $850  **$500**

One step up the Shelter line from the 301, the 501 MK.II has the Class C301’s output to 0.6mV and adds 0.3µm by 0.7µm null elliptical diamond stylus. Nearly identical to the $2650 Crown Jewel SE, which Mikey once owned, the 501 MK.II exhibited all of the CJ’s sonic characteristics: a warm, overall balance with smooth high- frequency extension and solid, authoritative bass response, all completely free of grain and glare. “I recommend the Shelter 501 MK.II without hesitation.” (Vol.28 No.2)

**Shelter 901:** $1500

The 901 increases the 501 MK.II’s output to 0.5mV, improves the channel- balance tolerance to 0.8dB, and weights 1gm more. However, at almost twice the price, the 901 was not twice as good, said MF. “With the 901 you gain transparency, transient quality, extension, detail, saturation, transient snap, transparency, macrodynamics, bass control, and image focus, and you lose one big thing: the 501 MK.II’s upper- midrange magic.” (Vol.28 No.2)

**Sumiko Blackbird:** $799  **$500**

The Blackbird’s 0.3µm by 0.81µm elliptical stylus, has a compliance of 120c2u, and tracks at between 1.8 and 2.2gm. Like the Sumiko Blue Point Special, it lacks a body around the generator, but it’s high output of 2.5mV means that it can be used with a standard moving- magnet phonor pre- amp. The Blackbird’s strongest points were its background, quiet the power, and extension, focus of its bass. It threw a big, wide- open soundstage, revealing plenty of low- level detail, and brought forth a slumbering, well- balanced top end with no hint of brightness or edge. More supple mids and highs, and more delicacy, and palpability, will come only with spending more money. “A strong Class B cartridge,” said MF, “a real sweetheart.” (Vol.27 No.1)

**Clearaudio Aurum Classic Wood:** $200  **$100**

Supplied with the Clearaudio Emotion turntable and Satisfy tonearm. The Satisfy’s single- screw design made cartridge alignment a bit tricky. The cartridge attaches to an aluminum plate that then attaches to the tonearm, and its highish output of 2.5mV means that it can be used with a standard moving- magnet phonor pre- amp. The Blackbird’s strongest points were its background, quiet the power, and extension, focus of its bass. It threw a big, wide- open soundstage, revealing plenty of low- level detail, and brought forth a slumbering, well- balanced top end with no hint of brightness or edge. More supple mids and highs, and more delicacy, and palpability, will come only with spending more money. “A strong Class B cartridge,” said MF, “a real sweetheart.” (Vol.27 No.1)

**Dynavector 10X5:** $380  **$180**

The latest in Dynavector’s entry- level series, the high- output 10X5 moving- coil proved “ridiculously good for the money.” AD: “This colorful, well- balanced, chunky- sounding cartridge played music extremely well, with a bonus of very fine stereo imaging... Money can buy more drama, impact, scale, and transparency... But the Dynavector 10X5 should give you more than surprised by its overall balance of strengths and absence of obvious weaknesses.” (Vol.27 No.6)

**Sinnikko Blue Spot Special:** $399  **$299**

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

Editor’s Note: There are no class B phonor cartridges currently listed.

**Deletions**

Audio Technica AT-95E no longer available in the US; Transfiguration Temper W, Benz Micro L2, Audio Technica AT-95E, all not auditioned in too long a time to be sure of rating.

**PHONO ACCESSORIES & RECORD CLEANERS**

**Air Tight Disc Flatter:** $1995

Place a warped record on the glass surface, close the lid, wait four hours—two for heating, two for cooling—and your warped records come out flat as a board. Won’t cure pressing of defects serious deformaties, but will flatten a record completely without damaging the grooves. Serious low- Q, narrowband warps may need a double treatment. (Vol.27 No.6)

**Allopo Orbitas 2 (model #77500) record cleaner:** $49.99

Highly recommended for optimum vinyl hygiene—he uses it to clean records before using a vacuum- operated cleaning machine. Otherwise, he maintains, the machine’s intake pads become contaminated and, in turn, contaminate every future record cleaned with this machine.伟利 (model #22923) cost $799. (Vol.20 No.1 & 4)

**Benz/Aesthetix MC Demagnetizer:** $199

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

**Blue Note Kynyas Hi End LP Treatment:** $75

This LP treatment is composed of a cleaning fluid and may be audible at the end of records—check by buying a “wonderfully human- sounding cartridge” and then, with the SPU, with warm, waning impres- sive spatial performance,” and AD of the dedicated mono version. His only disappointment was that it didn’t track lead singing voices and loud piano chords quite as cleanly as did the Benz ACE and Lyra Helikon. (Vol.21 No.6, Vol.23 No.4, Vol.28 No.6 WWW)

**Linn Adito:** $350

MF: “The basic sound of the Adito was clean, crisp, fast, reasonably detailed, and a bit cool. It did a nice job with fast, high- frequency transients, such as cymbal lunches and female vocal syllabics. Fitted with a removable Gyger II stylus, it proved an excellent tracker at 1.75gm. Naturally, it lacked the subtle harmonic and dynamic gradations of far more expensive cartridges, and it was less than super- transparent.” (Vol.27 No.2)

**Shelton 301:** $550

Combining relatively low output (0.3mV) with an old- fashioned conical stylus, the least expensive cartridge in Shelter’s line also offered the poorest value, according to MF. “The 301 sounded tonally pleasing, harmonically on the warm side, and reasonably dynamic, but somewhat cold and thin.” Though it lacked power, detail, and excitement, the 301 nevertheless proved a “worthy product for casual LP listeners still interested in getting the full measure of instrumental harmonics.” (Vol.28 No.2)

**Sinnikko Blue Point Special EVO III:** $399  **$299**

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

Editor’s Note: There are no class B phonor cartridges currently listed.
now hear this.
a restoreative polymer coating that's claimed to "cure" scratches on LPs. However, so few. Though records were made "for more musically palatable," the result were still present and annoying. In addition, even after long cleaning periods, MF found that a single play left a large blie of blue note's polymer coating on the stylus. "If you have interchangeable stylus cartridges, that you treasure, you may want to keep them separate and just touch the stylus to C-1-R," he advised. (Vol.29 No.6)

**Clearaudio Outer Limit Turntable Ring:** $900 

Heavy, stainless-steel ring acts as a speed-stabilizing flywheel, damps the record, and flattens outer-groove warps, However, MF cautioned, its weight means that you have irreplaceable scratched records that you treasure. If this is the case, using an aluminum slug for damping. He concluded of the Strobeclamp used as a damp, "The sound seemed pellmg me to clean virtually every record I play—and I did not want the advantages of that record to another. MF warned, it's expensive to pre-clean records for best results. While the vacuum-cleaning Nitty Griddy does a job on dusty albums nearly equivalent to that of the similarly priced PVI HW-16.5, CA felt that the PVI's hard-brushed bristles did better with really dirty LPs than Nitty Gritty's velvet one. He found the effect of both was to produce a less colored, more detailed midband sound from LPs, as well as provide the expected reduction in surface noise. (Vol.30 No.1, Mini Pro; Vol.7 No.5, Vol.8 No.1, Vol.23 No.6, 2.5Fi; Vol.17 No.5, 1.5Fi.)

**Nitty Griddy Model 1 record-cleaning machine:** $335 55$ 

**Audio Advisor Record Doctor III:** $229 

Both of these machines (the latter is manufactured for Nitty Gritty by Audio Advisor) can offer the least expensive way to effectively clean LPs. Record Doctor II differs from the original in that it has a roller bearing to make turning the LP easier when the vacuum-cleaning motor is on. The earlier model cannot be fitted with a roller because the 2.5Fi's vacuum-suction motor is not available for $15 including S&H from K-A-B Electro-Acoustics, P.O. Box 2922, Plainfield, NJ 07062-2922—which fits beneath the existing platter. The Nitty Griddy 1.0 is also available as the oak-finish ed 2.0 for $329. (Vol.25 No.10)

**Premier! Record cleaner:** $19.95/can; $179.40/12 cans 

Great for removing mold-release compound from new LPs, says MF of this spray-on cleaner from www.micro-care.com, and for quick cleaning of used LPs to see if the record is worth a closer look. It is a vacuum cleaning. Contain Delbou's Vertex CE, which is said to be ozone-friendly. (Vol.25 No.10)

**Rega cartridge torque wrench:** $145 

Expensive, but a must, MF felt, "for serious analog aficionados and professional installers." Agreed, of course, but "for God's sake be careful with this thing, especially with the new Grado wooden-bodied cartridges—best used with very strong-bodied cartridges—I use Rega's 10gm version. (Vol.19 No.11)

**Japanese extended-stroke new-cartridge record cleaner:** $1800 

The best record weight J-10 has used on his Forrell turntable, "but none," Michael Frenner agrees. "In sorry

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**Tonearms**

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**Accessories**

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Introducing the all new XT100 Hybrid Tube Integrated, XRAYv8 CD player and the Triple X Power Supply

Musical Fidelity Tube performance with separate power supply at less than 1/2 the price of previous models.

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Save $400 when purchased as a package: $3000

*Bought as a package the X-RayV8 connects to a separate input on the Triple-X.

If bought alone, the X-RayV8 would need its own Triple-X as a power supply at an additional $600.
to say that everything positive I've ever read about it is absolutely true. "Ridiculously expensive, however. That's this thing's lure," says MF. MF always the opposite: "I'm worried. It's a heavy weight," he says, but "I've never heard one that is absolutely true. It produced a richness, clarity, three-dimensionality, natural liveliness, and harmonic richness that must be heard to be appreciated." (Vol.17 No.10/Vol.26 No.11)

The Disc Doctor's Miracle Record Cleaner: $23.50/plus $7.20 S&H • The DiscDoctor's Stylus Cleaner: $25/18ml, S&H

Chemist Dean Goldman, the Disc Doctor, claims this stylus cleaner is a mixture of sub-micron filtered water and separately sub-micron treated +99.5% 1-pretreated alcohol—leaves no residue on the styli or cartridge. Come with a spare brush for the first wet cleaning of the stylus. After that, the good Doctor recommends a natural-bristle brush that's been cut down at an angle or been given a crew cut, as Mikey put it. Quart of fluid, $36.25/785 S&H; half gallon, $58.75/8.55 S&H; size A for LP brushes, $14/2 pair, $4.50 S&H; size B for 45s, $50/pair; replacement brushes, $14/4, Quick-Wash solution, quart, $25, half gallon, $41. (Vol.20 No.3/Vol.23 No.11/Vol.26 No.7)

Torumna TM-7-XH Record Cleaner Solution: $16.99

MF's lowest Torumna TM-7-XH mostly to clean noisy or scratched LPs, "which seem to benefit from its slight lubricating action." (Vol.24 No.7)

VPI HW-17 record-cleaning machine: $1200

VPI HW-16.5 record-cleaning machine: $525

Clearly an industrial-quality machine of reassuring presentation.. Imaging was expansive, solid, and pre- sently. Eerily transparent, superbly silent, and with extra-ordinary bass performance. It made music sound almost as real as the real thing. (Vol.27 No.7 WWW)

Art Audio Vinyl Reference: $4590

The exquisite internal construction of the VPI 17 cleans one side at a time, seems effortless, and is slower than the Nyte Gritty. "Best I've used," says LA. Latest version has a heavier-duty vacuum system. The 16.5 is a manually operated version with a motorized motor. Adjusts automatically to thickness of record; gets used quickly. Of the 11W-17F, MF says, "Fast, convenient, beautifully constructed, and can be used indefinitely without overusing the engine. The fan version of the '17 is worth the extra money for those post-garage-sale/record-convention analog ages, when only cleaning the whole pile will do!"

The 17F is probably the best record-cleaning machine available," says MF, "and a true workhorse." (Vol.8 No.1/Vol.19 No.6/Vol.23 No.6/Vol.17F-5 Vol.5 Nos. 7 & 9 original HW-16/Vol.17 No.5/Vol.19 No.6/Vol.15 No.6/Vol.17 No.6)

VPI VTA adjinator for Rega tonearm: $150

"Seems to maintain the desired rigidity while allowing only cleaning the whole pile will do. "Which the 17F  is probably the best record-cleaning machine available," said MF, though he doesn't rate it as distinct from artificial," with "a consistently, pleasingly good sound of finesse and ease on LP," he wrote. "The 11W-17F represents one of the best values in phono preamps now available," said MF, "and a true workhorse." (Vol.8 No.1/Vol.19 No.6/Vol.23 No.6/Vol.17F-5 Vol.5 Nos. 7 & 9 original HW-16/Vol.17 No.5/Vol.19 No.6/Vol.15 No.6/Vol.17 No.6)

ASR Basis Exclusive: $9590

The battery-powered Exclusive is made of two complete, fully balanced stereo phono preamplifiers on a single chassis, entirely independent except for a shared, switchable output—a major convenience for audiophiles with more than one turntable or with two tonearms mounted on a single table. MF listed the Exclusive's strong suits: "Rhythmic snap; among the deepest, cleanest, most dynamic basses; midrange and high-frequency transparency is flawless, without grain, excellent brightness." Leaving the Boulder 2008 aside, the Exclusive joins a handful of the finest phono preamps Mikey has ever heard. (Vol.26 No.10)

Balanced Audio Technology VK-P105E, with Super Pak: $8800

The Super Pak option replaces the electrolytic passive-supply capacitors used by by-passes in the first and second stages of the original VK-1050B with additional paper-in-oil coupling capacitors, creating "an arsenal of gold qualities." Like the VPI HW-17, the EXR-1 has a nearly balanced cartridge loading, high and low gain settings, and built-in transformers attuned to the Super Pak's flexibility. Early transparent, superbly silent, and with extraordinarily good soundstaging and imaging, the Super Pak found its place alongside the Boulder 2008 and Manley Stellwood as one of the top phono preamps Mikey has heard. (Vol.28 No.10)

Audio The Heavy Weight tonearm counterweight no longer available; Living Voice Mystic Mat now available for tonearms whose effective weight is 0.35 to 1.11 grams. (Vo123 No.6)

"A serious and downright smart assault on the state of the art of phono amplification," wrote JA, regarding EAE EAR 324, features both MC and MM inputs, with switchable input impedances. While the 324 offers many choices of inputs and settings with provisions for accommodating many different phono cartridges, it had no outstanding sonic signature of its own. AD found the EAR's overall performance to be tight and rhythmically correct with an outstanding sound stage. Its presentation was "organic, distinguishable from artificial," with "a consistently, pleasingly good sound of finesse and ease on LP," he wrote. "The 11W-17F represents one of the best values in phono preamps now available," said MF, "and a true workhorse." (Vol.8 No.1/Vol.19 No.6/Vol.23 No.6/Vol.17F-5 Vol.5 Nos. 7 & 9 original HW-16/Vol.17 No.5/Vol.19 No.6/Vol.15 No.6/Vol.17 No.6)

Manley Steelhead as one of the top phono preamps Mikey has ever heard to date. "What the 2008 MF could never have been prepared for what the 2008 Pixar has ever heard. (Vo126 No.10)"
RECOMMENDED COMPONENTS

$1600; it's a major accomplishment in terms of dead quiet, neutral tonality, frequency extension, and overall tonal transparency, though I found it slightly overpriced or overpowered in extended bass to sound almost as bright as bright. An A13-long term reference. (Vol.21 No.6, Vol.26 No.11 WWW)

Manley Steelhead: $7500

The transformer-coupled Steelhead's multiplicity of gains and preamps (plus processors) prompted MF to dish it "the most flexible, user-friendly phono section" he'd ever encountered. While it's almost impossible to categorize the specific sound of the Steelhead, MF noted a few constants: "unusually low-noise, spectacular transient response, and an infinite degree of dynamic ease. At the lowest level, with all of the quietness and transparency, and uniquely astounding dynamics." Though its flexibility is perhaps its most striking feature, it might also be the Steelhead's flaw. Some audiophiles might be left forever wondering whether their chosen setting is the correct one. Nevertheless, the "fast, fast, ultra-quiet" Steelhead is a MF favorite and PhD's reference. Compared to the ASR Bias Exclusive, the Steelhead laid out "more mellow overall balance, softer transient, and greater emphasis on midbass warmth... but it couldn't match the ASR's sheer excitement, and it lacked the low-level transients and spark relief, all without sounding bright, etched, or overly detailed," said MF. The Steelhead's "fast, fast, ultra-quiet" preamp offers two sets of inputs and gain levels of 50, 60, and 70dB. "A refinement of Ayre's house sound, offering a richer, I more palatable, improved-three-dimensionality and body, greater bass texture, and a smoother sound overall, with less detectable noise," said MF. Required a long break-in period to provide "dead-quiet, jet-black backgrounds with outstanding microdynamic abilities." The P-See offered a softer ride than the Musical Fidelity X-1, but with the X-1's thunderous dynamic performance. MF likened it to the Wharton PhonoStage2X. "A fast, ultra-quiet preamp and a headphone amplifier in a single chassis. It surprised MF with its "golden-sweet" midrange, "nicely extended, fast, and clean" top end, and "satisfyingly punchy bass." The Bellari VP129 gets my highest recommendation, and is the budget phono preamp I will now enthusiastically recommend for every genre of music." (Vol.29 No.2)

MUSICAL FIDELITY X-KW: $3500

"An extremely quiet, incredibly dynamic and musically focused phono preamp from which music erupted as from jet-black backgrounds, its X-W combines separate circuits and input jacks for moving-magnet and moving-coil cartridges, and features both RIAA and IEC equalization. The X-W provided a "tubefully revealing" phono preamp that could also provide a robust and musically involving performance with great bass extension and tonal control. Some audiophiles, MF warned, may find this phono preamp cold: "Its transient delivery could sometimes edge toward harshness, and its harmonic development seemed to stop at the water's edge compared to a tubed design." When cable choice is critical, this first work of phono-preamplary art from Musical Fidelity is "easily a Class A pick for 'Recommended Components.'" (Vol.28 No.6)

RAY SAMPSON'S Audio Emarinelle XR-1B: $4500

Unlike the Ray Sampson XR-2, the "sensorial" monoblock XR-1B offers almost unlimited flexibility on the fly, including three switchable phono inputs, with six loading, capacitance, and gain options independently adjustable on the front panel. MF compared the ray XR-1B to the Manley's "elegant and sober" design is based on the proprietary Gain Cell module. It miss in fully differential mode and accommodates moving-coil and moving-magnet cartridges. It has Mono and stereo modes, offers 64 choices of resistive loading and three choices of capacitance. Compared to the Pro-Ject Tube Box and the Monolithos Sound PS-2, the Trigon offers the deepest, widest range of dynamic contrasts, and greatest transparency, delicacy, and extension in the highs. "It's easy to say," said MF, "as it sacrifices an occasional slight raggedness on sibilants." Add $495 for the Volcano II power supply. (Vol.27 No.7)

WHEAT Audio PS.20 + MU.20: $2595

The small, uninspiring PS.20 + MU.20 surprised MF with its "ultra-quiet" sonic performance, driving comparisons to the much more expensive Manley Steelhead. "Liquid without being soft, yet properly edgy without being too sharply etched," the Wheat "seemed to equal the $7300 Manley's dynamic expression, image solidity, and uncanny focus... yet it came in at $300 less." While MF praised the Wheat Audio PS.20 + MU.20 with "fluidity, precision, and with reasonably good detail." (Vol.27 No.7)

Eastern Electric Minimax: $1495

The Minimax is a tubed moving-magnet/moving-coil unit designed in Hong Kong and built in China with a fit'nfinish and parts quality that belie its price. MF: "The Minimax is one of the most faithful, addictive in the midrange, rhythmically satisfying and true to the source, softness of the sweet bass, and an overall rhythmic softness. Dynamics were not as extended as with some other outstanding phono preamps. Still, MF called it "a monumental achievement that sets new standard for value, sound, and performance at any price in a phono preamp." IB noted that the PhD's "purity and freedom from electronic haze is quite special—something that every analog lover should hear for him- or herself." IB cautioned the user to "set the PhD's gain to the lowest level that will be compatible with the cartridge output, the need to keep the noise floor below audiibility, and the amount of gain applied by the system preamplifier." (Vol.27 No.1 Vol.28 Nos.5 & 12 WWW)

Audio Research PH-1: $1955

The PH-5's hybrid design uses five JFETs per channel in phase-inverting-zero feedback input stage, and four 602Z twin-triodes in the gain and output stages. With its light, delicate, involving, and nonfudging sound, the PH-5 offered long-term enjoyment. To briefly summing it was a lack of bass control and solidity. Among the "best-balanced, most listenable phono preamps I've heard," said MF. (Vol.29 No.2)

AYRE P-See: $2350

This zero-feedback, FET-based, MM/MC preamp offers two sets of inputs and gain levels of 50, 60, and 70dB. A refinement of Ayre's house sound, offering a richer, more palatable, improved-three-dimensionality and body, greater bass texture, and a smoother sound overall, with less detectable noise," said MF. Required a long break-in period to provide "dead-quiet, jet-black backgrounds with outstanding microdynamic abilities." The P-See offered a softer ride than the Musical Fidelity X-1, but with the X-1's thunderous dynamic performance. MF likened it to the Wharton PhonoStage2X. "A fast, ultra-quiet preamp and a headphone amplifier in a single chassis. It surprised MF with its "golden-sweet" midrange, "nicely extended, fast, and clean" top end, and "satisfyingly punchy bass." The Bellari VP129 gets my highest recommendation, and is the budget phono preamp I will now enthusiastically recommend for every genre of music." (Vol.29 No.2)

EAR 834P: $1295 economy model

Tim de Paravicinis designed, three-trio (12AX7) MM stage that also offers, for MC use, a pair of step-up transformers (3-50 ohms). MF: "The 834's sound was superior bass extension and control. MF: "An inexpensive, fine-sounding phono preamp that's competently designed, built, and reasonably priced. MF: "We've found the XLR balanced interface to give a more solid, well-focused sound, with greater detail and extension." MF's only flaw, "was an occasional slight raggedness on sibilants." Add $495 for the Volcano II power supply. (Vol.27 No.7)

WHEAT Audio PS.20 + MU.20: $2595

The small, uninspiring PS.20 + MU.20 surprised MF with its "ultra-quiet" sonic performance, driving comparisons to the much more expensive Manley Steelhead. "Liquid without being soft, yet properly edgy without being too sharply etched," the Wheat "seemed to equal the $7300 Manley's dynamic expression, image solidity, and uncanny focus... yet it came in at $300 less." While MF praised the Wheat Audio PS.20 + MU.20 with "fluidity, precision, and with reasonably good detail." (Vol.27 No.7)

Monolithic Sound PS-2: $599

An improved version of the PS-1, the PS-2 features upgraded internal components and higher gain options to better serve lower-output MCs. DIP switches allow you to select among gain settings from 42dB to 80dB and load resistors from 50 to 150k ohms. MF noted the slight midrange of the less expensive Pro-Ject Tube Box, it produced more solid, well-focused images, with superior bias extension and control. MF: "An inexpensive, fine-sounding phono preamp that's competently designed and built." Add $79 for the 11G-1P power supply. (Vol.27 No.7)
It has been said that the most demanding challenge is to follow up success with another. If so, Vienna Acoustics has passed with flying colors. The all-new Grand Series from this first-rank speaker house builds upon their previous offerings in every way.

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

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Vienna Acoustics Grand Series—beauty personified coupled with sound quality that is expensive, exquisite and refined.
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Ayre C-5xe: $5950

A turntable's an event, the C-5xe was not only a "fabulous CD player" combining musical integrity with true audiophile pre-technology Bugle, all not auditioned in too long a time to be sure of rating.

Separate signal paths are used in this two-channel (SACD) player for standard "Red Book" CD and SACD data-tracks so that the best possible performance can be extracted from either medium. J-10 found that the Omega performed well with "Red Book" CDs and that SACD's were communicated with an exquisite "superiority of playback." In SACD mode, J-10 noted a "mudshine loudness," while CDs were played with "sharp focus" and "dynamics up the hoo-hah." Characteristic of both formats was sound that remained "big, full, dramatic, colorful, detailed, and airy." J-10 recommended running the Omega balanced for best results in each format. "If I didn't already have the Acouphile and the Line Magnetic, Omega would be my choice for the one machine that does it all." PB compared the Omega to the Esoteric DV-50: "The Classé's presentation was less forward and its images were a tad rounder, more palpable and lifelike. To me, the Omega ultimately sounded more like a superb LP played under perfect circumstances, while the DV-50's sound was more like that of an analog master tape. Heads, you win; tails, you win." (Vol.24 No.11, Vol.26 No.8 WWW)

Classé CDP-202: $4500

The cdp-202, which plays all current disc formats, including DVD-A but not SACD, is Classé's attempt to bring to market a true reference CD player with better audio circuitry than the older cdp-102. Like its predecessor, the cdp-202 features stunning looks, with a front panel audio circuitry that's more like what I get from SACD." (Vol.123 No.2, Vol.126 No.7, WWW)

JCS Verdi Encore: $17,495

The JCS Verdi Encore was the second SACD/CD player that uses Audeze's CP-2000 monitor-driver for its DAC and Linn Unidisk 1.1 transport system controller, the 800 can be considered a really good reference transport, with notable bass definition and treble purity. Superior with 24/96 decoding, it upsamples both "Red Book" CDs and also plays other players at a disadvantage, feels JA. Also has both in-the-clear and encrypted 96kHz data output. But, as KR summarized, it "is a great system correction DAC and D/A output. SACD playback but no video-based formats, and uses dCS's Ring DAC, a discrete, 3-bit converter running at a 64x oversampling rate: 2.822MHz for both DSD and CD data. While the player's overall presentation was detailed and transparent, offering a wealth of recorded information within a wide, deep soundstage, JA found that CD's and SACD's which balanced on the hot side sounded "a touch relentless. Caution is recommended in selecting ancillary components to complement the 882's analytical character. However, the richness of the recordings outweighs the deficiency, at least in the classical music." (Vol.23 No.4 WWW)

dCS P7i: $13,995

This single-box, two-channel SACD/CD player has a volume control, two digital outputs, two digital inputs, and uses dCS's Ring DAC, a discrete, 5-bit converter running at a 64x oversampling rate: 2.822MHz for both DSD and CD data. While the player's overall presentation was detailed and transparent, offering a wealth of recorded information within a wide, deep soundstage, JA found that CD's and SACD's which balanced on the hot side sounded "a touch relentless. Caution is recommended in selecting ancillary components to complement the 882's analytical character. However, the richness of the recordings outweighs the deficiency, at least in the classical music." (Vol.23 No.4 WWW)

dCS Verdi Encore: $17,495

The LK version of the esoteric-tuned-box SACD/CD transport of the Esoteric-tuned-box SACD, CD, CD-R, and CD-RW, has been replaced by the Esoteric, which adds digital inputs. The La Scala adds the functionality of the Perrelli upsampler to dCS's no-longer available Verdi, upsampling "Red Book" CDs to the 2.822MHz standard of DSD. DSD output is on a fiber optic and coaxial digital inputs as provision for analog inputs (A/D) and outputs (D/A), gain/system control, upsampling, and future multichannel audio and DSP room correction. KR used it mostly as a source for the Reference 861 Digital Surround Controller in his Meridian surround-for-music exposé: "Via the analog outputs from the I/A plug-in, it was as good as digital gets today." Clarke and impact were beyond reproach, with notable bass definition and treble purity. Superior with 24/96 decoding, it upsamples both "Red Book" CDs and also plays other players at a disadvantage, feels JA. Also has both in-the-clear and encrypted 96kHz data output. But, as KR summarized, it "is a great system correction DAC and D/A output. SACD playback but no video-based formats, and uses dCS's Ring DAC, a discrete, 3-bit converter running at a 64x oversampling rate: 2.822MHz for both DSD and CD data. While the player's overall presentation was detailed and transparent, offering a wealth of recorded information within a wide, deep soundstage, JA found that CD's and SACD's which balanced on the hot side sounded "a touch relentless. Caution is recommended in selecting ancillary components to complement the 882's analytical character. However, the richness of the recordings outweighs the deficiency, at least in the classical music." (Vol.23 No.4 WWW)

www.Stereophile.com, October 2006

DACS, DVD-A, & CD PLAYERS & TRANSPORTS

Editor's Note: SACD and DVD-A player ratings are based on how they sound with their respective hi-res media, not CD.

Ayre C-5xe: $5950

"An impressive bank of audio jewelry," the C-5xe is a music-only, two-channel only disc player that uses a Pioneer universal transport, a Burr-Brown 151792 DAC chip, and a Sony C307DSX3 SACD decoder. In combining musical integrity with true audiophile precision, the C-5xe was not only a "fabulous CD player" but a revelation with hi-res media, finally introducing high-end coupled with weighty though clean and neutral performance.

The transport is a computer DVD-ROM drive with a 2.822MHz standard of DSD. DSD output is on an Ethernet/LAN as provision for analog inputs (A/D) and outputs (D/A), gain/system control, upsampling, and future multichannel audio and DSP room correction. KR used it mostly as a source for the Reference 861 Digital Surround Controller in his Meridian surround-for-music exposé: "Via the analog outputs from the I/A plug-in, it was as good as digital gets today." Clarke and impact were beyond reproach, with notable bass definition and treble purity. Superior with 24/96 decoding, it upsamples both "Red Book" CDs and also plays other players at a disadvantage, feels JA. Also has both in-the-clear and encrypted 96kHz data output. But, as KR summarized, it "is a great system correction DAC and D/A output. SACD playback but no video-based formats, and uses dCS's Ring DAC, a discrete, 3-bit converter running at a 64x oversampling rate: 2.822MHz for both DSD and CD data. While the player's overall presentation was detailed and transparent, offering a wealth of recorded information within a wide, deep soundstage, JA found that CD's and SACD's which balanced on the hot side sounded "a touch relentless. Caution is recommended in selecting ancillary components to complement the 882's analytical character. However, the richness of the recordings outweighs the deficiency, at least in the classical music." (Vol.23 No.4 WWW)

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PHONO preprocessors

Record Players, Preamplifiers, SACD, CD Players, CD & DVD Players, Digital Surround preamplifiers, SACD preamplifiers, digital sound processors, digital sound processors, preamplifiers, preamplifiers, preamplifiers.

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**Recommended Components 2006**

**Arcam DV-7:** $1499

"Simply a great DVD-Audio player with up-to-date video and communication facilities," the JV-79 has eight analog outputs, coax and TosLink digital outputs, a full array of video outputs, and uses a 32-bit Zoran 120P chip along with 24-bit/96kHz Wolfson ICs. KR notes that although the CD section is "a spaces and "spaciously defined" digital stage," the Cary's proprietary DSP-300 upsampling digital filter is offset by the Dirondo's overall open, airy, and sweet presentation, which resulted in "a distinct sonic personality that never interfered with the music," said JA. (Vol.28 No.7)

**Ayre CX-7e:** $2950

In his measurements, JA found that the original CX-7 integrated CD player was "a model of modern CD-playing design." It sounds as clean as it looks. Its balance is vibrant, its bass well-defined and deep, and its highs clean, detailed, and well-resolved. The improved CX-7e has undergone several upgrades, including a new FPGA chip. Sounding "superbly rich, smooth, and detailed," with "velvety highs and an enormously deep range," the 001 was "a bit too gorgeous-sounding," BD notes. "If your top priority is sound but you appreciate good video, you should find the Orbiter, at $7200, really attractive." (Vol.29 No.1, Vol.30 No.11, Vol.31 No.7)

**Atoll Electronique CD200:** $2000

This CD player uses a Philips disc transport with superior specifications and a Burr-Brown DAC. "Its superb ability to achieve "good, colorful, dramatic, wide-open sound," while preferring the Cary in non-sampling mode, noting "a more involving, less rhythmically ambiguous musical performance," BD favored maximum upsampling for "the cleanest, most refined highfidelity digital signals." Either way, they ultimately agreed: "an easy Class B recommendation." (Vol.28 No.10, Vol.29 No.9)

**Demon DVD-5910:** $3500

The DVD-5910 will play almost any 5" disc, and has analog and S/PDIF outputs in addition to Demon's proprietary D-Link and the more-or-less standardized IEEE1394 encrypted digital audio outputs. In video features include a plethora of outputs and the first consumer product implementation of Silicon Opta's Realta-HQ video processor. KR auditioned the 5910 in conjunction with Denon's AVR-6700. While this zafiq partner offers no savings in size or weight over separate, together they comprise a complete system, communicating with each other through a single audio cable (D-Link or Fire Wire). (Vol.29 No.1)

**Ensemble Dirondo:** $6990

Simple and well-built CD player, with particular attention paid to mechanical and electrical isolation, the Dirondo uses a toploaded driving mechanism based on Philips Pro2M and offers upsampling, filtering, and 24-bit/192kHz D-to-A conversion. KR notes that the Dirondo's output was "heretofore a great determinant of sound quality," and especially so in this case. The best possible way. Its "decisively chunky sound" was detailed and organic. JA: "I've never heard the UDP-1's fundamental digital performance seemed as good as the Dirondo's." KR noted an overall "lighter, more diaphanous sound" from the Creek. The Sugden, however, offered a slightly more dramatic presence, which was detailed and organic. JA: "I've never heard the UDP-1's fundamental digital performance seemed as good as the Dirondo's." KR noted an overall "lighter, more diaphanous sound" from the Creek. The Sugden, however, offered a slightly more dramatic presence, which was detailed and organic. JA: "I've never heard the UDP-1's fundamental digital performance seemed as good as the Dirondo's." KR noted an overall "lighter, more diaphanous sound" from the Creek. The Sugden, however, offered a slightly more dramatic presence, which was detailed and organic. JA: "I've never heard the UDP-1's fundamental digital performance seemed as good as the Dirondo's." KR noted an overall "lighter, more diaphanous sound" from the Creek. The Sugden, however, offered a slightly more dramatic presence, which was detailed and organic. JA: "I've never heard the UDP-1's fundamental digital performance seemed as good as the Dirondo's." KR noted an overall "lighter, more diaphanous sound" from the Creek. The Sugden, however, offered a slightly more dramatic presence, which was detailed and organic. JA: "I've never heard the UDP-1's fundamental digital performance seemed as good as the Dirondo's." KR noted an overall "lighter, more diaphanous sound" from the Creek. The Sugden, however, offered a slightly more dramatic presence, which was detailed and organic. JA: "I've never heard the UDP-1's fundamental digital performance seemed as good as the Dirondo's." KR noted an overall "lighter, more diaphanous sound" from the Creek. The Sugden, however, offered a slightly more dramatic presence, which was detailed and organic. JA: "I've never heard the UDP-1's fundamental digital performance seemed as good as the Dirondo's." KR noted an overall "lighter, more diaphanous sound" from the Creek. The Sugden, however, offered a slightly more dramatic presence, which was detailed and organic. JA: "I've never heard the UDP-1's fundamental digital performance seemed as good as the Dirondo's." KR noted an overall "lighter, more diaphanous sound" from the Creek. The Sugden, however, offered a slightly more dramatic presence, which was detailed and organic. JA: "I've never heard the UDP-1's fundamental digital performance seemed as good as the Dirondo's." KR noted an overall "lighter, more diaphanous sound" from the Creek. The Sugden, however, offered a slightly more dramatic presence, which was detailed and organic. JA: "I've never heard the UDP-1's fundamental digital performance seemed as good as the Dirondo's." KR noted an overall "lighter, more diaphanous sound" from the Creek. The Sugden, however, offered a slightly more dramatic presence, which was detailed and organic. JA: "I've never heard the UDP-1's fundamental digital performance seemed as good as the Dirondo's." KR noted an overall "lighter, more diaphanous sound" from the Creek. The Sugden, however, offered a slightly more dramatic presence, which was detailed and organic. JA: "I've never heard the UDP-1's fundamental digital performance seemed as good as the Dirondo's." KR noted an overall "lighter, more diaphanous sound" from the Creek. The Sugden, however, offered a slightly more dramatic presence, which was detailed and organic. JA: "I've never heard the UDP-1's fundamental digital performance seemed as good as the Dirondo's." KR noted an overall "lighter, more diaphanous sound" from the Creek. The Sugden, however, offered a slightly more dramatic presence, which was detailed and organic. JA: "I've never heard the UDP-1's fundamental digital performance seemed as good as the Dirondo's." KR noted an overall "lighter, more diaphanous sound" from the Creek. The Sugden, however, offered a slightly more dramatic presence, which was detailed and organic. JA: "I've never heard the UDP-1's fundamental digital performance seemed as good as the Dirondo's." KR noted an overall "lighter, more diaphanous sound" from the Creek. The Sugden, however, offered a slightly more dramatic presence, which was detailed and organic. JA: "I've never heard the UDP-1's fundamen..."
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A refinement of Cyrus' entry-level CD 6, the CD 8x uses two Burr-Brown D/A chips with a power supply that features two power transistors and a more extensive approach to DC regulation. Any CD 6 can be upgraded to CD 8x status for little more than the difference between the models' retail prices. The CD 8x offered a sound "remarkably similar" to the Ayre CX 7e's, with good tonal balance, texture, and imaging, but lacking in emotional involvement. "A respectable performer and a pretty good value for $1995," concluded AD, suggesting "entry-class" as a suitable rating. Optional PSK-1 power supply adds $795. (Vol.29 No.1 WWW)

Music Hall cd25.2: $599 $$$

ST enjoyed noting the benefits of upsampling: "air, atmosphere, dimensionality—the illusions, at least, of more in-leto reze. Though the Musical Fidelity Trivista 21 offered more space, dimensionality, resolution, and dynamics, it was stripped away from the spaces between notes, allowing neither musical meaning and texture to shine while removing the bass. "Very strongly recommended," said JA, adding that compared to the Elgar driven by the dCS DV-10, the Music Hall Maverick's Bipolar line, measures just "9" wide. A Philips transport is coupled to a Philips TDA1549 DAC. ST heard "an lovely liquidity, a generous, full-bodied way with harmonics, a sweet midrange, extended highs." He recommended the CDMaster especially for vocals, solo piano performances, and chamber music. "If you’re looking for a CD player that doesn’t sound harsh, bright, and harmonically threadbare, JA concluded, "to those who do care about sound quality and have large CD collections, I confidently recommend the Moon Equinox." (Vol.27 No.9 WWW)

Sugden CDMaster: $1995

ST: "One more point: CDMaster's output board consists of CD player and both drives, "both region was "refreshingly free" from any tendency to leakage. Its sound "remarkably similar" to the Ayre CX 7e's, with impressive dynamics, detailed, and extended frequency extremes. JA: "Excellent, cost-effective audio enginnering from an unexpected source." Sugden's "Editor's Choice" and "Budget Player of the Year" for 2006. Current version slightly revised. (Vol.26 No.10 WWW)


Dell: Esoteric P-70 now called the P-03 at twice the price, Denon DVD-3910 no longer available.

DIGITAL PROCESSORS

Editor’s Note: The sound of any particular CD transport/digital processor combination will be dependent on the datalink used—see "Bits is Bits?" by Christopher Dunn and Malcolm Omar Hawksford, Stereophile, March 1996, Vol.19 No.3 (WWW). Unless mentioned, processors are limited to 32/44.1/48kHz sample rates. To be included in Class A+, a digital processor must be capable of handling DSD or 24-bit 96kHz PCM data.

dCS Elgar Plus: $13495 &

A remote-control D/A processor with digital volume control that’s future-proof so that it will decode two-channel DSD and 24-bit recording formats (it doesn’t lack H1C3 decoding). "The Elgar sounds simply superb and has a measured performance to match," JA gushed about the original version. While there were differences between the two units, Our Fearless Leader felt the Elgar was within striking distance of his long-time reference, the Mark Levinson No.306. However, he added, "the sound of 96kHz 16-bit tapers reconstructed by the Elgar was simply more real. And that is what the High End is all about." Compared with the original Elgar, the Plus adds support for DSD, SDIF-2, and IEEE 1394 interfaces, the ability to slave to an outside word clock, adhesive output, and substantially expanded function menus. With these upgrades, J-J found the best sound to be "dictated into the amps [no active line-stage necessary]." Not musically IIGS, but with a choice of four filter settings. "In a way, the elegance of the Elgar Plus is all about the highs," he decided. The rest of the frequency spectrum is a knockout as well: very liquid and nuanced. MF added that compared to the Elgar driven by the dCS Verdi on CDs, its No-Vista 3D sound seems somewhat more musical. MF can’t compete, nor can its spatial presentation." The dCS combo must have caught our analog maven in a moment of weakness. "I thought, ‘If CDs had sounded like this in 1982, I’m not sure there would ever have been an Analogue Corner’ ended as far as what sets the dCS system apart notionally. I’ve seen it starts with the proprietary Rap-Up DAC, continues with the math encoded on the DSD chips, and ends with the structural integrity and quality of the parts. But as good as it sounded on SACD—it was the closest MF’s ability to extend the performance capacity and dimensionality from CDs that most impressed me."

The only criticism MF could muster was for the dCS's

is the appropriate rating. (Vol.27 No.8)

Cyrus CD 8x: $895

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Music Hall cd25.2: $599 $$$

ST was surprised by this "overachieving" CD player. Using a track from album 1982 by the Dutch band 4*4, Tranquility is a two-channel Maverick SACD player is made exclusively for Music Hall by Shanling, and uses a Crystal CS825 upsampling chip along with a Burr-Brown PCM1738 DAC. ST enjoyed noting the benefits of upsampling: "air, atmosphere, dimensionality—the illusions, at least, of more in-leto reze. Though the Musical Fidelity Trivista 21 offered more space, dimensionality, resolution, and dynamics, it was stripped away from the spaces between notes, allowing neither musical meaning and texture to shine while removing the bass. "Very strongly recommended," said JA, adding that compared to the Elgar driven by the dCS DV-10, the Music Hall Maverick's Bipolar line, measures just "9" wide. A Philips transport is coupled to a Philips TDA1549 DAC. ST heard "an lovely liquidity, a generous, full-bodied way with harmonics, a sweet midrange, extended highs." He recommended the CDMaster especially for vocals, solo piano performances, and chamber music. "If you’re looking for a CD player that doesn’t sound harsh, bright, and harmonically threadbare, JA concluded, "to those who do care about sound quality and have large CD collections, I confidently recommend the Moon Equinox." (Vol.27 No.9 WWW)

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Balanced Audio Technology

From the beginning, we've shared your passion for music. Our first two products were launched at the 1995 Winter Consumer Electronics Show, where they generated tremendous excitement among the audiophiles, dealers, and journalists present. Since then we've been gratified by the continued support of music lovers and the extraordinary loyalty of our customers. Thanks to all of you for making our first ten years so rewarding.

The name Balanced Audio Technology refers to more than just our use of balanced circuits. It reflects our commitment to overall excellence. We bring the same uncompromising standards to every aspect of engineering—as well as to visual design, customer service, and dealer support.

We take pride in our record of innovation:

1. **Making fully balanced circuits the high-end audio standard.** When many were skeptical, we staked our future on the premise that "balanced is better." Today its virtues are acknowledged and balanced circuits dominate high-performance designs.

2. **Combining massive power supplies with purist signal paths.** Our products demonstrate the decisive advantages of supporting a simple, direct signal path with an unshakeable foundation.

3. **Pioneering the Unistage™ circuit design.** All BAT line stages employ an elegant single gain stage without buffers or followers.

4. **Introducing a high-current two-gain-block amplifier.** We complement the Unistage circuit with an innovative output stage to produce high-power solid-state amplifiers that use zero feedback and just two gain blocks.

5. **Bringing the 6H30 SuperTube to the audio industry.** Launched in the revolutionary VK-50SE line stage, this ultra-high-linearity tube is considered by many designers to be the finest device for audio amplification in existence.

6. **Perfecting a true audiophile volume control.** Our discrete electronic shunt attenuator offers a near-continuous gradient, yet places only a single premium resistor in the signal path.
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Breaking the sound barrier between tubes and solid-state. By transcending conventional wisdom, acclaimed BAT designs have brought both tube and solid-state circuits closer to the musical ideal.

Maximizing the value of your investment. Through modular circuits and careful product design, we have strived to provide an intelligent upgrade path wherever feasible.

All BAT products display impeccable build quality. It’s a matter of pride, and it’s our commitment to you—you can count on BAT gear to deliver the open, dynamic, unfettered spirit of music, year in and year out.

We stand behind that pledge. Pick up the phone and call us. You’ll probably speak to one of our founders—Geoff, Victor, or Steve. Whether it’s advice on component matching, system setup, or arranging an upgrade, we’re happy to help. All our technical achievements mean nothing until you’re delighted with your BAT system.

Exciting things are still to come. If you’re not yet a member of the BAT community, stop by your BAT audio specialist and celebrate with us. All you have to do is listen.

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**PHONO PREAMPS**

"truthful, analytical delivery and lack of tack-on warmth." Acting as the clock master in an all-digital system, the Elgar automatically recognized when a CD was inserted in the Purcell or an SCD to the Verdi, appropriately switching its inputs, noted JA. "More important," he added, "there was a complete absence of the fingering high frequencies that are so attendant with CD playback." (Vol.27 No.11, Vol.27 No.12, Vol.27 No.5, Vol.28 No.3, WWW; see also the Sony SCD-1 review in Vol.22 No.11.)

**dCS Purcell:** $8999

Audiophile version of the $6995 dCS-972 digital/digital preamplifier (reviewed, Vol.23 No.4). The Purcell (Vol.26 No.4, Vol.28 No.3, WWW) accepts sample rates of 32-96kHz and outputs 32-192kHz at -126 dB in a variety of digital formats, as well as DS1. Noise-shaping and dither options are switch-selectable. J-10 found the Purcell's sound, in conjunction with the Elgar plus DAC, to be "smooth, liquid, and uses a proprietary, discrete DAC architecture. JA: "If digital audio does get better than this, it's probably not by much." The MDA1000 makes each digital recording sound analog and musical." (Vol.27 No.7)

**Benchmark Media Systems DAC1:** $975

Features two front-panel headphone jacks, RCA single-ended and XLR balanced analog line outputs that are switchable between line, trim-pot set, calibrated level, and variable level. Compared to the three-times-more-expensive Marantz SA-14, JM found the DAC1 to be "slightly more articulate in the musical line, and slightly more detailed in spatial nuances, particularly the localization of instruments, and in soundstage depth." A technical virtue, feels JA, thinking the DAC1 is a great way to get hearing modern sound from a DVD player or an older CD player. JA discovered superb measured performance in both the DAC1's digital and analog domains, and decided, "Whether considered as a standalone IVA converter or a versatile headphone amp, Benchmark's DAC1 is an audiophile bargain." (Vol.26 No.7, Vol.27 No.5, Vol.29 No.4, WWW)

**Grace Design m902:** $4995

A "simple but nice-looking black box" with an onboard power supply, the Beck is a perfectionist-quality analog preamplifier. With the Beck acting as a dedicated DAC, the Beck's "refined transparency" and "detailed expression" provide a "subtle but noticeable" improvement in spatial positioning and soundstage. JA rated it 9 of 10, and noted it "evokes the sense of ease." Si: "If digital audio does get better than this, it's probably not by much." The MDA1000 makes each digital recording sound analog and musical." (Vol.27 No.7)

**Wavelength Brick:** $1750

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**Echo Indigo 10 PC soundcard:** $199

Easy to install and use, this CardBus-format soundcard for PCs and Macs has one set of stereo outputs, a two-channel analog input, and features a 24-bit, 128-times oversampling A/D converter running at sample rates up to 96kHz. It offers a 24-bit Marceola DSP for mixing and monitoring, a headphone amp with volume control, and, if your music-production software supports multiple discrete outputs, the Indigo will appear as though it actually has eight separate outputs. While it lacks the sound quality of high-end separations, especially in terms of imaging and imaging, and, in particular, the Indigo was "perfect for turning a laptop into a portable, high-quality test system." (Vol.23 No.11, WWW)
The same exceptional loudspeaker design and engineering soars on new wings.
THE SPHERES OF INFLUENCE
outboard DAC. JA noted a cleanness to the sound that easily surpassed the performance of the Apple Airport Express driving the same DAC. Analog outputs are only okay, however, hence the Class D rating. The Spaceport box handles a wide range of 16-bit/44.1kHz file formats and can recognize and play files encoded with Apple Lossless Compression, but DRM-protected AAC-encoded songs downloaded from iTunes are not an option. Ethernet version: $249, JA bought the review sample. (Vol.29 No.9 WWW, March & April 2006, eNewsletters)

M-Audio USB Transit, Metric Halo MIO 2882, Lynx Studio One PC sound card, Zanden 5000 Reference.

Deletions
dCS Delin discontinued; Esoteric D-03 at almost twice the price; Theta Digital Generation VIII and Naga DAC not auditioned in too long a time.

MUSIC SURROUND-SOUND COMPONENTS

(Other than speakers and disc players)

Bryston 9B-SST: $5295

The 9B-SST power amplifier (called 9B-11X at the time of the review) boasts five channels, 120Wpc into 4 ohms, and is built like a pro gear, i.e., like a tank. Hand-soldered, double-sided glass-epoxy boards and elaborate grounding ensure from special-grade steel toroidal transformers. According to JA, "the excellent set of measures indicates solid, reliable engineering." LG was impressed by this amp's speed, power, extensions, in tightness and definition in the bass, and its "excellent" midrange. Fully the equal of more costly amps, with wide dynamic contrasts and "invoking" vocals, and tonally similar to previous Bryston ST amps. THX confirms, at your [2] warranty, and a reasonable price makes this beefy, reliable amp an attractive package—a perfect choice, suggests LG, for home-theater and multichannel music systems. KR's long-term multi-channel reference. (Vol.23 No.9 WWW)

Bryson Audio Labs 9B-SST: $5295

A contender for audiophiles who want the best of both worlds, "the 9B-SST matches the top-flight preamp with a flexible, state-of-the-art digital processor, and adds an audiophile's transition from stereo to multichannel." KR observed, "the GFA-7805 delivered full, extended bass, a balanced midbass and midrange, and treble, which could be a benefit in brighter rooms. Central images lacked etched specificity. KR decided that whatever little silver disc I put into the 800-861, it would sound superb." Meridian's new MConfig processor replaces pages of configuration options with a drag-and-drop graphic user interface, and offers guided channel-level settings and room-correction setups. KR: "The upgraded 861 Reference's sound was delightfully and characteristically transparent. Still Class A After All These Years," Price varies with options chosen. (Vol.23 No.2, Vol.26 No.8, Vol.29 No.7 WWW)

Adcom GFA-7805: $2599 $$$

The 300Wpc, five-channel, add-on-channel amplifier embodies the same spirit as its stereo ancestor. The GFA-7805's "lots of power, no frills, good value." Listening with all five channels at work, KR noted "a general feeling of smoothness and balance, with no particular part of the spectrum out of place." Power varies with options chosen. (Vol.23 No.4, Vol.26 No.8, Vol.29 No.7 WWW)

Linn Chakra 3400/3400 multichannel power amplifiers: $2675/$3000

Using technology trickled down from Linn's Klasik line, the 56Wpc Chakra feature highly efficient switching power supplies, and a monolithic amplifier module that handles all low-level signals all the time, calling on a discrete, external power stage to minimize heat when required. Their sleek, sexy appearance, low weight (13 lbs), and relative size make them ideal for multichannel systems. With the right speakers and/ or bass management, they proved music-altering for the most demanding material, and offered nearly unparalleled transparency and soundstaging. "The potency of these small amps knocked me out," said KR. (Vol.28 No.11 WWW)

McIntosh C45: $3800

Two-channel preamp that can accommodate and switch two multichannel inputs but lacks internal channel balancing for multichannel sources, or even L/R balancing for stereo. KR applauded its large, bright-front-panel display, substantial remote control, slick front-panel knobs, and overall build quality. The C45 was "the most intuitive and pleasant-to-use preamplifier I have yet encountered." He compared it to the Bel Canto P16E and the McCormack MAP-1. "It seemed a bit brighter than the P16E at the upper end, but was equally formalized and convincing. The transparency of the C45 and the P16E seemed equal... . The C45 and MAP-1 sounded even more alike: Their balances are similar, but the MAP-1 is a bit tighter at the bottom." (Vol.27 No.3 WWW)

Meridian Reference 861: $17,000-$19,000, depending on options

Multimedia controller with video, DSP-based decoding for matrixed and discrete multichannel audio sources. Functions as analog preamplifier-controller, digital and video controller, and A-D/A-D-A converter. Built-in, reprogrammable decoding of multichannel sources (Dolby Pro Logic, Dolby Digital, JTS, Ambisonic, etc.), plus TI4X and Trifield output from two-channel sources. All inputs digitally processed. Of Trifield's synthesized multichannel programs, "the most intuitive and pleasant- to-use preamplifier I have encountered," said JA. KR observed, "a contender for audiophiles who want the best of both worlds," the SP2 mates a topflight analog preamp with "perfect choice, suggests LG, for home-theater and multichannel music systems. KR's long-term multichannel reference. (Vo129 No.9 WWW)

Dean D-4806 receiver: $3500

The AVR-4806 multichannel receiver has myriad inputs and decoding modes (including DCDI), 24-bit/192kHz Burr-Brown DACs, seven 130W amps, and remote control satellite receiver that can be used with a Connect&Play antenna. In addition, since the DVD-5910 player can pass all audio to it in digital format, the AVR-4806's format-decoding and bass-management functions are accessible for DVD-Audio and SACD playback without redigitizing. The sound was detailed and dynamic, with only the slightest veiling. KR: "Denon's top-of-the-line DVD-5910 universal disc player and nearly-top-of-the-line AVR-4806 A/V receiver are as talented as any, and are representative of good-quality, mainstream home theater gear." (Vol.29 No.1 & 3 WWW)

Linear Audio Model 10: $4595

A "single-box solution," the 12Wpc Model 10 is a single-channel integrated amplifier featuring a circuit-free output section, "marginal, more open, and tighter than the best," "marginally quieter, more open, and tighter than the previous generation," and "marginally quieter, more open, and tighter than the best," "marginally quieter, more open, and tighter than the best." Meridian's new MConfig processor replaces pages of configuration options with a drag-and-drop graphic user interface, and offers guided channel-level settings and room-correction setups. KR: "The upgraded 861 Reference's sound was delightfully and characteristically transparent. Still Class A After All These Years," Price varies with options chosen. (Vol.26 No.1 WWW)

McCormack MAP-1: $2495

Remote-controlled, line-level, multichannel analog pre- amplifier. Uses Meridian's Ambience Recovery Mode (ARM), which derives center, sub, and surround signals from stereo inputs to simulate a true six-channel source. KR: "ARM was nowhere near as impressive or as useful in simulating ambience as Meridian's 12X-based TriField. ARM helped only with congested source material, while TriField was enjoyable with almost all two-channel recordings." Unlike the Sony TA-P9000ES, the MAP-1 comes with a separate stereo preamp and a built-in setup procedure that makes channel selection and balance easy enough to accomplish. Overall sound was also "marginal, quiet, open, and clearer, and the Sony's with all sources." (Vol.26 No.9 WWW)

No Class Rating

Harman Technology Harmony Rainbow: $310/1wm with RCAs or BNCs, $40/additional meter

Six individual color-coded cables in a single bundle for multichannel systems, this was KR's Salvation from "Carrie Hell." (See "Cable Hell" in Vol.25 No.7)

RS Audio Cables "The Solution" 8179, $20, $20 additional 0.5m

Another excellent 6-conductor multichannel cable at a competitive price. Uses Canarc RCA's (like the Rainbow Harmony) but with a slightly brighter sound, according to KR. Choose between them depending on room and speaker. Available from www.rs cables.com. (Vol.26 No.6)

LLT Controller, LLT Power.

Low-cost power module. Outlaw AudioICBM discontinued.

Two Channel Preamplifiers

Editor's Note: Apart from the Cary '98, Connoisseur, Conrad-Johnson, Musical Fidelity, and CAT, all the Class A preamplifiers offer balanced inputs and outputs, and while noted, the preamplifiers listed do not have phono stages. Note that the 2-Systems rdp-1 is...
Noisy AC Power delivery negatively affects every aspect of your Audio/Video system. From diminished resolution and dimensionality in audio to lifeless colors and poor contrast in video playback.

Also, the ever-present risk of severe voltage spikes on power lines caused by everything from machinery to common household appliances to lightning strikes threatens your system.

TORUS Power Isolation Units totally ISOLATE your audio/video system from these harsh AC power line realities and provide you with state-of-the-art protection and performance.

While most line conditioners simply filter, limiting power, Torus provides full isolation through massive triple-screened toroidal transformers for open power and incredible noise attenuation.

Torus Power products are marketed worldwide through Bryston Limited.

www.bryston.ca
The Bumiester 001's overall measured clarity and transparency were consistently top-shelf, and excellent dynamic performance throughout the listen.
Building on a Legacy - The Montana EPS, introduced in 1997, amazed critics and audiophiles alike. Reviewed in the Nov 1999 issue of Stereophile it easily attained a scorecard with a preponderance of “Excellent” and “Very Good” grades. The EPS sailed onto the “Recommended Components” list under the “A” category and stayed there for years.

PBN Audio is proud to introduce the EPS2, the best in value and as Barry Willis, TAS, puts it, this speaker is an all-positions player. In his recent review of the EPS2 he states that the strength of this speaker is the ability to play such a variety of music so well. Come experience the EPS2 for yourself.

For more information on the EPS2 (pictured above) or any of our other Montana Loudspeakers, please visit our website at www.pbnaudio.com
The X-10 uses a subminiature 6112 military tube and a "rich, full-bodied, and sweet, yet detailed and reasonable" sound. It offered long-term listenability, tunefulness, and emotion. For JA, the TL-7.5 was "a delight to test"; it displayed "virtually bombproof measured performance." PB chose the TL-7.5 over the Halcro dm10, BAT VK-100, and other preamps, citing its "complete lack of discernible sonic character. It's the finest pure line stage I have heard, barely nipping the Harco by a few thousandths of a second at the finish line of this Grand Prix." Slighty soft on the bottom, thick, full-bodied, and sweet, yet detailed and reasonably good sound free of etch, grain, or harshness. But lacking a hint of agility and snap. An "extraordinary preamplifier," said JA. An "easy call." agreed MF. (Vol.28 No.12 WWW).

Musical Fidelity X-10 3/4: $3995 $$$

The X-10 uses a subminiature 6112 military tube and was produced in a limited run of 4800 units. Intended to remove any mismatch between source device and amplification stage, the X-10 shows its CD player, DAC, or other source a high input impedance while offering a low output impedance. Adding more depth and dimensionality to the sound, with more body and weight, the X-10 "brought the X-Ray's performance up to that of a world-class CD player," said ST. Offers no gain, however, and has its own control functions. "Class for what it is" he sums up. (Vol.27 No.12).

Placette Audio Remote Volume Control: $1000

A paperback-sized black box with one set of unbalanced inputs and outputs, a toggle switch and remote, a row of LED's that light up to indicate the relative volume level, and a 12-step attenuator built entirely with super-premium Vishay S-102 foil resistors. The Placette centered and locked images into place, improved transparency by removing grunge, and snapped some pictures into focus. BD: "The result was stunning." MF: "The Director offered a linear, smooth, and friendly parametric equalizer. The best way to correct tonal imbalance in speakers and source material." Accepts only digital inputs; current production can handle 96kHz sources. "Editor's Choice" for 1998. (Vol.21 No.7 & 12 WWW).

Atoll Electronique PR300: $2000

The PR300 offers five line inputs and a bypass for a surround-sound process. Atoll's only concession to home theater and multichannel sound, and one of its gain section built entirely on discrete components. In combination with the Atoll C100 CD player and AM300 amp, the PR300 offered a sound that was "sweet and harmonically rich—never threadbare or hyperanalytical," with a slightly laid-back overall presentation. Otherwise smooth, clear, and quiet, the PR300 sounded a bit congested and hard during heavy-going orchestral passages. But "very quiet, neatly detailed, hard to name another solid-state amp at the price which outperforms the Atoll," he sums up. (Vol 29 No 9).

Blue Circle B3C Galatea Mk.II: $4995

The original Blue Circle B3C Galatea Mk.II preamplifier-a class-A triode design improved CS with its understated elegance and red-echerry handwoven knobs. Each channel's volume control in a 31-step true-mono resistor ladder. CS: "firm, laid-back musicality, sweet and silky...yet quick and slamming, the midrange was 'warmed and glowing,' yet never overcharged resolution, rhythm, or pacing. Excellent soundstage depth and imaging. The Effeliten One also found it airy and extended—"immersive," as he put it. Inverts absolute phase. The Mk.II Galatea features an outboard 2.5V power supply in two channels, the only way to back it up to its full potential. A neat-sounding layout, and larger coupling capacitors. The Mk.II was "well-mannered in every regard," with no apparent texture of its own, and brought forth "an unambiguously dynamic and linear resolution" while remaining well balanced on vocals and textures," said AD. "Emphatically recommended—high Class B." (Vol.23 No.8, MJK, MJK II, Vol.27 No.12 WWW).

Music First Passive Magnetic: $2995

Music First Passive Magnetic's two line transformers provide 6dB of optional, totally passive gain at the flick of a switch on the preamp's rear. ST noted "exceptional resolution and transparency" with a "sensibility characteristic of magnetic transformers." The First what a preamp should do; it enabled you to digitize your sources and your power amp to perform at their best. The only real drawback San could detect was a slight rolloff of the high frequencies. Compared with the Statherd Direct, the Passive Magnetic had a much more slightly open, slightly more transparent presentation, but with less extended highs. Brighter ear Class A. (Vol.29 No.1).

Sonic Euphoria PLC: $1295

Sonic Euphoria PLC was impressed by this autoformer-based passive line stage's overall presence and excellent dynamics, and by how it produced solid, dimensional images. While BD had no trouble integrating the PLC into his system, JA's measurements indicated that careful construction and layout were taken in matching source components and power amp. Otherwise, "a well-engineered piece of kit," concluded AD. Tuned accurate pitch relationships, and excellent musical flow and momentum, with absolutely no dynamic compression or bias attenuation. "Consider the PLC's $1295 price to be the audio equivalent of the Black Error in Your Favor card in Monopoly——and jump on it." Price is for single-ended version. Balanced version adds $700; remote control, $250; WBT RCA upgrade, $40/pair; additional inputs/outputs. $40/pair. (Vol.29 No.1 & 2 WWW).

Sugden Headmaster: $1095 $$$

New headphone amplifier also makes an excellent line stage, according to ST. "The Headphones & Headphone Accessories," to the Superior Direct Line Stage originally called The Director features substantial casework, offers four RCA line-level inputs and two RCA outputs, and automatically selects source components or preamp if you have ready access to backup sources. "Something ST hoped for and received in upgrade, something ST level." Then a special version. The Director has an active preamp should do it" provided a large, smooth, clear volume amp, with the attenuator better dynamics and superior dynamic shifting, compared to most passives. Head-in-head against the Music First Passive Magnetic, the Director gave more extended highs, going much more "green and go" and making the Passive Magnetic seem "a tad dull." But "avoids the solid-state milling," he sums up. Offers excellent build quality, as imaginative and intuitive user interface, and cost-effective price. Decided BD. Though the DLS lacked spatial and temporal precision when compared to much more expensive preamps, felt BD, it offered extraordinary clarity and dynamics. "The Director gets you down to the uppermost echelons of current audio gear for a relatively sane price." (Vol.29 No.9).

Sutherland Direct Line Stage: $3000

The aural, versatile, and simple. Direct Line Stage (originally called The Director) features substantial casework, offers four RCA line-level inputs and two RCA outputs, and automatically selects source components or preamp if you have ready access to backup sources. "Something ST level." The Director was an active preamp should do it" provided a large, smooth, clear volume amp, with the attenuator better dynamics and superior dynamic shifting, compared to most passives. Head-to-head against the Music First Passive Magnetic, the Director gave more extended highs, going much more "green and go" and making the Passive Magnetic seem "a tad dull." But "avoids the solid-state milling," he sums up. Offers excellent build quality, as imaginative and intuitive user interface, and cost-effective price. Decided BD. Though the DLS lacked spatial and temporal precision when compared to much more expensive preamps, felt BD, it offered extraordinary clarity and dynamics. "The Director gets you down to the uppermost echelons of current audio gear for a relatively sane price." (Vol.29 No.9).

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

Audio Research Reference 3, Placette Active Line Stage. (Vol.27 No.8) K

Audio Research Reference 3, Placette Active Line Stage. (Vol.27 No.8) K

SACD/DVD & Co-Players

Recommended Components 2006
Can you hear the sound of passion?

The audience gathers. An eager anticipation is felt in the air as everyone waits for the lights to dim and the curtain to rise. Alas, the band emerges and the first notes ring through the crowd. Therein lies the sound of passion. And the closest one can get to the thrill of a live performance, where the energy on stage is perfectly recreated in your own home, is by remaining true to the passion of music. Exquisite materials, advanced technology, innovative design and meticulous craftsmanship drive Dynaudio’s passion for performance, perfectly embodied by the company’s most refined compact loudspeaker to date: the Confidence C1. Featuring the Esotar soft dome tweeter and proprietary MSP (magnesium silicate polymer) mid/woofer equipped with a large 75 mm aluminum voice coil wound on a Kapton former and a powerful dual neodymium magnet system, the C1 is not only Dynaudio’s greatest compact offering, it is likely the greatest compact loudspeaker available anywhere. Can you hear the sound of passion? Visit your local Dynaudio dealer to experience the Confidence C1 and the answer will be perfectly clear.

For further information, please contact Dynaudio North America, 1144 Tower Lane, Bensenville IL 60106. Tel: 630.238.4200, Fax: 630.238.0112, E-mail: info@dynaudiouusa.com

Dynaudio Confidence C1. The sound of passion.
The compact, beautifully built V-Sxe delivers 150Wpc into 8 ohms and features single-ended and balanced inputs and speaker-wire terminals made by Cardas. Though it lacked some power in the bass and sacrificed "a little of that you-are-there-ness" produced by the best single-ended-triode amps, the V-Sxe offered a highly resolving, dynamic, harmonically pleasing sound that was never fatigueating. "Open, airy, and sweet," said ST. "What must you want?" (Vol No.3 WWW)

Lamm Industries M1.2 Reference monoblock: $21,690/pair

The 110W M1.2 with hybrid front end and MOSFET output stage, comprehensive shock-isolation protection, and high loss impedance settings offered "breathtakingly lucid in conveying the true nature of the music that passed through it," said PB. "Utterly continuous and effortless from top to bottom," the M1.2 combined resolved transparency with warm resonance, timbral richness, and grace. (Vol.28 No.2 WWW)

Mark Levinson No.331 monoblock: $24,000/pair

"If I go on a length about how great the [510W]3311 sounds, I've forced to admit it has a sound," kreeted WP. "Sounding...was phenomenal—deep, detailed, holographic. Tonal balance was natural, and possessed poetry and clarity galore. Low-level detail never leaves one unsatisfied, but exists naturally within the musical gestalt...Paradoxically, the No.331 exists on a plane where the news isn't about more, it's about less. It had no grain, no grit, no electronic character that I could detect. It had no warmth...no MOSFET blur, no transistor note...no tubey euphony. It was practically anachronistic—except that it did what it did better than anything else I've ever heard," JA's reference (he bought a pair). (Vol.21 No.1 WWW)

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

This 350Wpc (500W at clipping) powerhouse has "Shetman-tank construction, an overkill power supply, and the best components money can buy," according to LG. "Listening to the No.436 was an unusual pleasure," he wrote. "It provided the same open, detailed, lush, sophisticated character... It reproduced music with a beautiful textured..." (Vol.27 No.334, as well as the same appealing midrange power and deep bass—management. It's clear to me that the No.436's trimmer chassis, cooler operation, and convenience give the owner even more value than earlier models. It's a significant evolutionary progress in practical amplifier design." (Vol.26 No.8 WWW)

Mark Levinson No.431: $7000

The 200Wpc, two-channel No.431 is shorter, deeper, wider, and 7 lbs lighter than its predecessor, the No.334, but is not more expensive. It is also new: There is no longer any 60Wpc, 80Wpc, or 100Wpc model; all are 200Wpc. LG: "There was a slight reduction in bass solidity and punch when the thin No.431 was compared with the massive No.334 through the Revel Ultima Salons, but there were also improvements in midrange detail and treble extension through the Quads." Despite "rusty" very warm, the No.431 proved to be "a well-engineered powerhouse of an amplifier," said JA. (Vol.28 No.5 WWW)

mbl Reference 9007 monoblock: $36,600/pair

The 440W Reference 9007 can be used as either a balanced monoblock or a single-ended stereo amplifier and has provisions for biwiring and biamping. It uses mbl's Direct Push/Pull circuitry design and built Gain Cell technology, and its gleaming black exterior is decorated by a large, gold mbl logo. Sacrificing bloom and supple- ness for crystalline transparency and offering tightly focused imaging, shimmering highs, and deep-damped bass, the 9007 was one of the most exciting and engag- ing amplifiers in MF's experience. His recommendations only concerns the 9007 used as monoblock pair, and it is a remarkable evolution in high-end power measured performance. (Vol.29 No.9 WWW)

McIntosh MC501 monoblock: $9400/pair

"A singular combination of value and performance," the 500W (720W at actual clipping) MC501, rated to deliver more than 100 amperes of output current, is McIntosh's latest and most expensive solid-state ampli-
IMMEDIA
Sound Refinement
www.immediasound.com  510.559.2050
**Musical Fidelity kW750: $10,000**

on the subtly warm and rich side of the sonic spectrum, dynamic, transparent and rhythmically supple, if a little SSS *.

Parasound Halo JC 1 monoblock: $7000/pair

and invited back in the love of music for its own sake.”

the Halcro dm58s’, with superlative width and sense of erous” without sacrificing dynamic nuance or retrieval performance left JA scratching his head and advising all character imparted a sense of relaxation and flow captured the wholeness of an event rather than focusing subtle, velvety, and erased the line between transistors and tubes. MF commented on the XA 160’s ability to

SainTellig's—"JointAmplificationComponent" for 2003. And the amps weren't even broken in.”SrwcreophiPs—and

brought the soundstage forward. Tonally, the Parasounds was an overall sense of ease. Dynamic ease. Listening ease. firmed up, the sound wasn't strained in any way, and there

Sugasen MusicMaster: $1995 $$$

Part of Sugden’s 9-wide, I pum p line, the pure class-A MusicMaster offers 15W. pc ST heard “a very smooth sound, rich harmonics, and a sweetly extended top end.” The MusicMaster didn't deliver the slightest, most extended bass, and ran out of power during difficult musical passages. Might work best in a small room or office with a pair of higher-sensitivity speakers such as models from Triangle and Jmlab. (Vol.29 No.11 WWW)

Audiopax Model Eighty Eight monoblock: $7000/pair $$$

MF heard exactly what this high-power 400W pc specified, 380W at clipping—John Curl-designed amp's specs showed “ultra-wide bandwidth, high-current capability, low noise, a high S/N ratio, and a fast slew rate, among many other indicators of outstanding amplifier performance. There was an honesty to the overall tonal and harmonic presentation that transcended technological stereotypes.” MF found the overall sound to be powerful, refined, smooth, organized, disciplined, and tubes. The Parasound, it ranks up there with the best high- end heavy-wights.

Audiopax ML1.1 monoblock: $25,000/pair $$$

Audiopax ML2.1 monoblock: $42,000/pair $$$

Audiopax ML3.1 monoblock: $60,000/pair $$$

Pass Labs XA160: $18,000/pair

Specified for 160w RMS at 8 ohms, this 200W-class solid-state monoblock reached only 118W on JA's test bench: “This is excellent measured performance. The Halcro JC 1 is not only the best amplifier to come from Para乩on, at least up there with the best high-end "big guys". MF was surprised by the Rocks' tendency to squeeze images elsewhere, MF warned. The kW750 exhibited “exem-

B+ fuses, simplification of the feedback loop. KR described it as “powerful, clean, and

Simaudio Moon Evolution W-8: $8,1000

An outstanding, 110W class A design, the ML1.1 is a single-ended design that uses one 300B triode per channel. The ML2.1 is a classic 890管理制度器, the 890 made up one of the “most sonically fault-

Audiopax ML5.1 monoblock: $10,000/pair $$$

Audiopax ML6.1 monoblock: $15,000/pair $$$

Audiopax ML7.1 monoblock: $20,000/pair $$$

Audiopax ML8.1 monoblock: $25,000/pair $$$

Audiopax ML9.1 monoblock: $40,000/pair $$$

Audiopax ML10.1 monoblock: $60,000/pair $$$

Audiopax ML11.1 monoblock: $100,000/pair $$$

Audiopax ML12.1 monoblock: $200,000/pair $$$

MCdrcs MC275: $3900

The revered 75Wpc MC, MC275, preserves the look of the original while adding modern innovations. Chimneys
are used to cool the tubes by convection, and three circuit boards have been replaced by a single board on which are mounted all components, tube socket, and power-supply parts. ST: "I heard all the dynamic quality, all that aliveness of the original, plus a level of transparency that brings the MC295 definitely into the 21st century. The MC200 came to his reference No-Vista 300. Its spatial presentation and overall transparency were exemplary. It was especially adept at layering 3D images in three-dimensional space without spotlighting or tacking on artificial 'edge definition. It's a real sleeper in a real-world price." ST concurs. "Class A for this baby. I wish I had my hands on it first. A beautifully built, beautiful-looking amp that sounds as good as it looks." MF's long-term reference for tube amplifier performance. (Vol 25 No 4 WWW)

Sun Audio SV-2A3: $1440

3.5Wpc! "The fiddler-wonder world," cries ST. "Underpowered or not, there's a magic about this amp," he gurgled. The SV-2A3 is self-biasing, with no low-noise feedback around the output stage! Superb resolution of low-level details. Spacey soundstage and a striking image of the big bass. Harmonic presentation to die for,... a lovely liquidity that I can describe only as ravishing, especially with woodwinds and female vocalists. You get the idea. ST even used the SV-2A3 to drive the full range Triad, 4.5, $3000/pair Triad Matrix Magellan speakers. "The sound was superb—alive, immediate, harmonically right. I heard stunning immediacy. The presentation sounded like music, not like hi-fi," said WP. Even at less than half the price, the $1,000 fared comparably to the Ceda 55, lacking not a bit of the latter's drama and control. "I can only recommend this with enthusiasm. It is exceptionally well-built," JA thought it had "Good measured performance" for its relatively low price. His first experience with the $1,000 indicated that it shouldn't be paired with speakers whose impedances dip below four ohms. "A small, elegant amplifier with a major impact. The SV-2A3 proved a good match for the Omega Grande 6 loudspeaker, ST found, offering fine resolution, coherence, retrieval of low-frequency detail, and a very solidly built, cool-running chassis." (Vol 26 No 6, Vol 26 No 6, Vol 27 No 11)

VTL S-400 Reference: $22,500

First Watt P2: $2500

The 50W (65W at actual clipping) S5 is a solid-state stereo amplifier with Class-A output. It's DC-coupled and uses a FET input. MOSFET voltage-gain stage, high-speed bipolar current-gain stages, and no overall feedback. The S5 sacrificed tonal accuracy and nuance for the physical power of rhythm and pace, as well as some imaging, creating solid, focused images. Still, MF was impressed with the $500 gain tube. "If your response to music, or life, is to dance, swing, play tennis, or climb,诸如此类, then this is the amplifier for you." (Vol 28 No 8 WWW)

Antique Sound Laboratory Explorer 805 DT monoblock: $2995/pair

Unlike Nelson Pass's earlier F1, the F2 uses a single-ended topology with only three active devices in each channel: a power supply based on bipolar power transistors and extremely short signal paths, and features selectable input impedance. The F2, the F2 was "uncommonly quiet" but offered a level of transparency and overall presentation that "The 78-SST is a courteous guest who didn't impose but always added grace to the proceedings. It was especially adept at laying down images in three-dimensional space without spotlighting or tacking on artificial 'edge definition. It's a real sleeper in a real-world price." ST concurs. "Class A for this baby. I wish I had my hands on it first. A beautifully built, beautiful-looking amp that sounds as good as it looks." MF's long-term reference for tube amplifier performance. (Vol 25 No 4 WWW)

Atoll Electronique AM200: $2000

The 100Wpc AM200 has two pairs of MOSFET output transistors and can be configured as a monaural power amp to deliver 36W into an 8 ohm, or as a stereo power amp to deliver 18W into an 8 ohm. The AM200 was offered a sound that was completely free from fizziness and phrasiness, with a slightly softened overall presentation and tight, tuneful bass. (Vol 29 No 9)

Bryant Audio monoblocks: $6590/pair

The 7B-SST raises the power rating of the ST version from 500W to 600W, and features standard SST-upgraded power transformers, bipolar output transistors, and powerful supply filter capacitance. "This was the older amplifier that was slightly brighter and more forward, the newer was more neutral. I came to rely on the 7B-SST as a courteous guest who didn't impose but always added grace to the proceedings. It was especially adept at laying down images in three-dimensional space without spotlighting or tacking on artificial 'edge definition. It's a real sleeper in a real-world price." ST concurs. "Class A for this baby. I wish I had my hands on it first. A beautifully built, beautiful-looking amp that sounds as good as it looks." MF's long-term reference for tube amplifier performance. (Vol 25 No 4 WWW)

Channel Islands Audio D-100 monoblock: $1599/pair

The 500Wpc, solid-state MX-D1 is beautifully finished, compact, cool-running MX-D1: "The Yamaha offers both a custom-built 800VAC toroidal, 15 high-speed bipolar power transistors and extremely short signal path, and features selectable input impedance. The MX-11 offered a surprising balance of power and grace, as well as the ability to convey musical nuance, and its utterly remarkable dynamic range into higher-impedance loads, creating "a deep, continuously unfolding sonic texture" that not only satisfied but was real. "What separates the MX-11 from the pack," said WP, "is that it is different... It is unapologetically and enthusiastically what it is." (Vol 29 No 6 WWW)

Quicksilver Audio Mid Mono monoblock: $1895/pair

"Beautiful without being showoffish," the Mid Mono offers 50W into 8 or 4 ohms with its standard Tesla EL34 output tubes. ST noted "very good resolution and convincing harmonics," but felt the Mid Mono was "a little shy in dynamics." The Quicksilver offers solid-state speed and clarity for the sweetness and warmness. Chrome option adds $300/pair. (Vol 28 No 8 WWW)

Yamaha MX-D1: $5000

The 500Wpc, solid-state MX-D1 is beautifully finished, offers extremely high quality of construction and parts, and features selectable input impedance and ultradynamic range, the MX-D1 produced dead-silent backgrounds, well-defined bass, and a minimal balance that fell slightly on the lean side. Its strongest character and fault, however, was the difficulty it had accommodating the MC20 in its circuitry, resulting in "an emotional or even physical response." Proved just a bit of musical-sounding compared to AD's reference Lamm ML2.1 monoblocks. (Vol 29 No 4 WWW)

World Radio History
The form is artistic. Beautifully crafted like the body of a musical instrument.
The sound is exquisite, and the combination of perfect craftsmanship and state-of-the-art technology is unique. This new Canton loudspeaker series represents pure musical enjoyment and timeless design. Its name is Vento.

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THE HIGH END COMPANY THAT COULD

Face It! Sonically, tube amplifiers rule! Do now, always have. Historically, there were only four objections anyone could have to them:

1. Heat  
2. Bass control  
3. The tube changing blues/biasing  
4. Power output

While VTL couldn't do anything about the heat (a good tube amplifier has to run warm!). They did revolutionize tube amplifier performance and user friendliness when they introduced their Siegfried 800-watt monobloc ($45,000 per pair) and Reference S-400 watt per channel stereo power amplifiers. ($22,500) Combining the speed and agility of a low powered single ended tube amp with the effortless bass punch and control associated with Leviathan sized solid state amps, the Reference S-400 and Siegfried amps also obviated any reservations audiophiles had about tube changing and reliability.

Unlike most contemporary designs, the VTL Reference amps incorporated a precision regulated power supply and an automatic tube biasing circuit with a full range of diagnostic aids on board which would determine when a tube was faulty, shut off power to that tube only, indicated by a numbered LED readout which tube was bad and let the amp continue to play until the user got around to changing the one bad tube. About as difficult as swapping a light bulb. Eureka!, the modern tube amplifier was born.

The first application of this technology to reasonably priced tube amplifiers is the exceptional MB 450 Mark II monobloc. At $13,500 per pair the 450 watt MB 450 Mark II is remarkably close in performance to the Reference S-400 at about half its price. I compared them through the VTL 6.5 Linestage (at $8,500 simply the best one out there under 15K). What I heard with the MB 450 Mark II was a little less power, true, a little less resolution perhaps, but simply amazingly musical and authoritative sound. Vise tight bass, superb midrange and high end, lots of power and zero tube maintenance blues. How could you leave it in the store? The answer is you can't.

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SOUND by SINGER

18 East 16th Street (5th Ave & Union Square West) New York City, 10003 (212) 924-8600
very high power and very high dynamic range at a very affordable price.” (Vol.26 No.4 WWW)

Yamamoto SoundArt A-08: $2250

“A fine alternative to new costing unmusical high-end audio products,” this 2W/p (r) two-channel, single-ended-triode design features “serene, elegant, and eye-catching” styling with a wooden chassis accentuated by a champagne gold-colored other screen for the transformers. “The Yamamoto A-08 was fun to have, fun to use, swap tubes in and out of, and, most of all, fun to listen to,” said AD, though he cotton that its system requirements will ruck even to most audiophiles. With its high legs of distension, mattening the A-08 proved “an exercise in frustration” for JA. He conceded, howev- er, “That it does look very handsome and it is beautifully made.” (Vol.29 No.3 WWW)

Viva Solista: $9950

The 2W/p Solista uses single-ended topology, direct-coupled output tube triode, zero feedback, paper-in-oil capacitors, inclusion wound transformers, and high-grade components. A 6L6 output stage is di- ated in glassy automotive lacquer. Thick, solid images were brought forward and spread across a larger-than-usual soundstage, and small details sparkled with life for the listener. “It was an ease about the Performance—a flow, an exceptional dynamic quality, both microdynamic and macrodynamic.” Though bass was ample, it was not muscu- lar in any way, said AD. The Solista was the only component that the amplifier has inadequate heatsinking for sus- tained high-power output use. (Vol.28 No.2 WWW)

Lavardin Technologies IT: $6695

The 50W/p IT is a no-frills design that, according to ST, doesn’t try to approximate the sound of a tube amplifier, but in fact sounds more like a transistor. “It’s slower, quieter, cleaner, quieter, not to mention more relaxing.” Its extraordinary evolution brought ST to the live performance in a way that came very close to a sin- gle-ended triode at its best. “Among the finest I have heard.” (Vol.30 No.6 WWW)

Lavardin Technologies IS Reference: $3695

The 30W/p Lavardin, a bare-bones integrated ampli- fier completely free of frills, uses a single pair of output transistors per channel to achieve a “remarkably prais- ible, tubelike sound” while avoiding the power power- limits of single TET tube amps. “Pulls off the neat trick of tethering linearity, truth of timbre, and lifelike immediacy while avoiding the heat, unlistabil- ity, and maintenance issues of tubes.” ST found the IS “an excellent sympathetic with the sound of Tri- angle LS speakers. Remote control is optional. Moving magnet phono stage adds $400. (Vol.28 No.3)

Magain Dynamount MD-208: $2975

Removable-controlled 100W/p solid-state receiver with digital tuning, 80W mono amplifier and separate record and preamp outputs. The MD-208 took forever to bursting in and open, said CS, but once it had warmed to its task it was “a no-compromise high-end design that could easily live with over the long haul.” “Impressive for any number of musical styles, though it really shines on acoustic music.” He also noted a “sweetness and grace” to its “ laid-back style of music reproduction—smooth and refined, though not with- out guts and grit.” A lot of bang for the buck, he decided. LG checked out its RF performance, “Its FM tuner section was surprisingly sensitive and quite selec- tive,” though it didn’t handle multipaths in the upper part of the FM band as well as some more expensive tuners, without quite its transparency and bass response. Thermovolt musical performance nonetheless, he decided, and “an excellent value.” JM: “The MD-208 quietly eulogizes classicism to a delight to listen to.” LG: “The MD-208 receiver’s FM section produces excellent Class B sound.” (Vol.24 Nos.1 & 3, Vol.28 No.10 WWW)

PS Audio GCC-100: $4995

The GCC-100 is a conventional integrated amplifier, it is capable of being driven by an outboard preamplifier or surround preamplifier-processors. It uses a class-AB output stage. The GCC-100 combined resolution and transparency with an almost total lack of some character, with impact of the frequency range slighted or overemphasized; “A super-biollnding product,” said JD. (Vol.29 No.1 WWW)

Unison Research: Performance: $9900

The 40W/p Performance is a single-ended design that uses three KT-88s per side and has four line-level inputs, a tape monitor loop, and a special input for using a Unison Research Simply Phono stage. It combined a tackle soundstage with an unusually sweet midrange and tre- ble to present a more robust, strong, and dynamic sound than ST has heard from other integrateds. “There was an ease about the Performance—a flow, an exceptional dynamic quality, both microdynamic and macrodynamic.” Though bass was ample, it was not muscular in any way, said AD. The Solista was the only component that the amplifier has inadequate heatsinking for sus- tained high-power output use. (Vol.28 No.2 WWW)

Recommendations 2006

INTEGRATED AMPLIFIERS & RECEIVERS

A

ASR Emitter II Exclusive: $24,900

See MF’s review in this issue.

Audionet SAM V2: $4500

The 110W/pc SAM V2 features construction quality beyond its price. All components are hand-selected, a new all-tube upgrade option including remote control, a phono module for MM and MC cartridges, and a DAC module. JM was struck by the SAM V2’s “enchanting imaging and dynamics and very impressive bass control.” Compared to the very much enviable imaging and dynamics and very high power and very high dynamic range at a very affordable price.” (Vol.26 No.4 WWW)

Krell KA-400xi: $5200

WPs: “Great Krell ever,” the 200W/p non-linear output, 22W/p clipping) KA-400xi is a solid-state, remote- controlled receiver with five line-level inputs and one set of single-ended preamplifier outputs. WI: “The KA-400xi retained the 500’s best qualities—control and unimplicated timbre—while improving on it across the board, especially at the fre- quencies extremes.” Combining surprisingly clear omission with unreplicating detail and non-tapping rhythm and pace, the KA-400xi emphasized the music’s emotional impact. “I would avoid pairing the amplifier with loud- speakers that drop below 4 ohms,” JM advised, adding that the amplifier has inaudibly backbreaking for sust-ained high-power output use. (Vol.28 No.2 WWW)

Consolidated Components of Trinity

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The GCC-100 is a conventional integrated amplifier, it is capable of being driven by an outboard preamplifier or surround preamplifier-processors. It uses a class-AB output stage. The GCC-100 combined resolution and transparency with an almost total lack of some character, with impact of the frequency range slighted or overemphasized; “A super-biollnding product,” said JD. (Vol.29 No.1 WWW)

Unison Research: Performance: $9900

The 40W/p Performance is a single-ended design that uses three KT-88s per side and has four line-level inputs, a tape monitor loop, and a special input for using a Unison Research Simply Phono stage. It combined a tackle soundstage with an unusually sweet midrange and tre- ble to present a more robust, strong, and dynamic sound than ST has heard from other integrateds. “There was an ease about the Performance—a flow, an exceptional dynamic quality, both microdynamic and macrodynamic.” Though bass was ample, it was not muscular in any way, said AD. The Solista was the only component that the amplifier has inadequate heatsinking for sus- tained high-power output use. (Vol.28 No.2 WWW)

Remote Control: $2795

The Unico SE uses four pairs of MOSFETs per side to deliver 140W/p into 8 ohms and, like the standard Unico, has four line-level inputs and a tape monitor loop. ST was captivated by the SE. “It’s sweet, open, transparent, and powerful. Fast and responsive. Trans- istors are clean, crisp, crisp. As for harmonic presentations, the Unico combines the magic of tubes with the control—and economy—of solid-state.” ST’s pick for “Component of the Year.” Priced includes phono stage. (Vol.26 No.5)

Viva Solista: $9950

The 22W/p Solista uses single-ended topology, direct-coupled output tube triode, zero feedback, paper-in-oil capacitors, inclusion wound transformers, and high-grade components. A 6L6 output stage is di- ated in glassy automotive lacquer. Thick, solid images were brought forward and spread across a larger-than-usual soundstage, and small details sparkled with life for the listener. “It was an ease about the Performance—a flow, an exceptional dynamic quality, both microdynamic and macrodynamic.” Though bass was ample, it was not muscular in any way, said AD. The Solista was the only component that the amplifier has inadequate heatsinking for sus- tained high-power output use. (Vol.28 No.2 WWW)

B

Cayin A-88T: $1895

The Cayin A-88T delivers 22W/p in triode mode or 45W/p in ultralinear, and offered a “life-like quality that was nearly the sound of a single-ended
The Moon i-3 is a true integrated amplifier capable of 100Wpc into 8 ohms and operating in class-A/B without dual-mono construction. Also like the standard Unico, the Piccolo employs a single "a very clear, deep midrange, a lack of top-end sibilance, and no apparent hidden in human voices." The CD section impressed with "a very clear, deep midrange, with remarkable bass and very good resolution at the frequency extremes of a good solid-state amplifier," said ST. His only quibble: the A21SE runs very hot and should be "seated comfortably with a lot of junk mail includes invitations to join AAR!, perhaps the ergonomics of this otherwise fine amp will exacerbate the dinners out of your life." Optional MM/MMC plug-in phono card adds $100. (Vo127 No 5 WWW)

Consonance Cyber 10 Signature 2A: $1955

The 11Wpc Unison Research Unico uses only NPN transistors in its class-A-biased output stage. Lacks modern conveniences such as a remote control and a headphone jack, and suffers incremental shortcomings in midrange intelligibility and timing, but produces an overall sound that ST found "consistently satisfying and seductive." The amp runs very hot and should be "seated comfortably with a lot of junk mail includes invitations to join AAR!, perhaps the ergonomics of this otherwise fine amp will exacerbate the dinners out of your life." Optional MM/MMC plug-in phono card adds $100. (Vo127 No 5 WWW)

Linn Classic Music: $1550

Remote-controlled 75Wpc (into 4 ohms) CD receiver with MCMOSFET output stage, clock, AM/FM tuner, three line-level inputs, tape loop, and headphone jack. "A near-and-completely "all-in-one-Linn system," enthused EJ, "an instant classic" that "achieves a 'polite' sound that was 'a tad bland and less than exciting performance: 'Here was a product that could satisfy both the flat-earthers and the high-end snooty-camp.'" Imaging, pitch, and rhythmic control were wonderful, but couldn't match the X-150's resolution and bass performance. "A lovely piece of gear," said ST. Best 2006 product. (Vo127 No 5 WWW)

Music Hall Maven: $999

The 100Wpc Maren receiver, "a great choice for those who want good two-channel sound, convenience without complications, and an uncluttered systems," delivered "pure, smooth, low-distortion sound." Surprisingly robust and less than totally involving," but nevertheless assured and powerful. Maren exclusive for Music Hall by the Chinese hi-fi firm Shanting, the Maven offers AM/FM radio and also features an upsampling Crystal CS8420 chip and a phono stage capable of playing 78s. (Vo127 No 5 WWW)
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tape loop, and headphone jack. Though the -25.2's bass was somewhat weak, its midrange was excellent and its toptop was nicely extended. While the Vogel AD21E ($3195) offered more detail and spatial resolution, the -25.2 delivered an easy, sweet, smooth sound without the slightest suggestion of fatiguing texture. "Avoids the clinical, sterile sound of so much cheap solid-state. A very pleasant surprise," said ST. (Vol.29 No.4)

NAD C320BEE: $399 $$$

A 50Wpc integrated from veteran designer Björn-Erik Edvardsen—hence "BEE"—with very clean layout and excellent build quality, featuring five line-level inputs, two tape loops, and sets of preamp-out and amplifier jacks. AD: "The NAD C320BEE sounded surprisingly good at the basics of playing music—listening to this amp was consistently more an exercise in fullness than abandon. The C320 reproduced stereo recordings with excellent depth. [It] preserved the music's sense of flow, regardless of style... The NAD is musically and tonally accomplished, and is probably about as close to organic sound as you can get for this kind of money... One of the greatest bargains in amplifiers today." (Vol.29 No.7 WWW)

Outlaw Audio RR2150: $599 $$$

This 100Wpc, two-channel receiver showcases deceptively looks and a full range of features that include line, input, and USB digital inputs, tape and processor loops, mmf, and bass and treble settings, headphone output, speaker equalization, bass management, and an on-off line-level subwoofer output. JA: "was astonished" to discover what the bargain-priced-$195 RR2150 offered, both on the test bench and in the listening room. The RR2150's self-explanatory setup, versatility and conveniences, and open, focused, and well-organized overall sound (though somewhat opaque and not fully fleshed out) make it "a great intro to hi-fi for a youngster," said MF. Problems with production led to issues with the Opto ID and volume settings, and JA couldn't make a "great intro to hi-fi" out of it. But by the time July 2006, the situation should now be resolved. (Vol.29 No.3 WWW)

Vincent SV-121: $1300

This 50Wpc, line-level, remote-controlled integrated uses two pairs of Sanken bipolar output transistors per side, operating in class-AB. Strong bass, a smooth midrange, and swept extended treble allowed all to contribute to an "almost tubelike warmth and generosity of timber." Though the Vincent was "always pleasuring," it was far from the ultimate in resolution and detail. ST commented: "The system included a line-level output of the master cylinder of the main unit, the instrument's microphone, and continuously provided a "clear, clean, transparent, and immensely satisfying, truly high-end system around any of our class D and E recommendations. That's why they're listed—and why you should consider buying them." (Vol.27 No.5)

Harman Kardon HK 3480: $449

The 120Wpc remote-controlled HK 3480 is one of the few two-channel receivers still available. From his home in southern Rhode Island, JM was able to bring out Boston FM radio stations, and found the 3480 to be a good match with the Magnepan MMG speaker 8080B efficiency and 8 ohm load. "And an entry-level CD player you have a dorm-room/vacation-home system that you should now be resolved. (Vol.27 No.9 WWW)

NHT Evolution Tc6: $4000/system $$$

The NHT Tc6's "notchless" quality and "notchless" speakers "notchless" among the "Class A, B, and C (Restricted Extreme LF)" for those speakers that are state of the art in every other way. Candidates for inclusion in this class must still reach down to at least 40Hz, below the lowest notes of the string-fourth-bass and bass guitar. In addition, such has been the recent progress in loudspeaker design at a more affordable level that we have a class D, for: 'Entry Level.' Someone once asked us why Stereophile bothers to review inexpensive loudspeakers at all: In effect, aren't we insulating our readership by recommending that they buy inexpensive models? November: 'It's possible to get a musically satisfying, truly high-end system around any of our class D and E recommendations. That's why they're listed—and why you should consider buying them.'

Focal-JMlab Nova Utopia Be: $37,500/pair Stereophile's "Joint Loudspeaker of 2004." (Vol.27 No.6 WWW)

Innersound Kayao: $20,000/pair One of Stereophile's "Joint Loudspeakers of the Year" for 2005. (Vol.27 No.12, Vol.28 No.5 WWW)

Focal-JMlab Micro Utopia Be: $6000/pair Stereophile's "Joint Loudspeaker of 2004." (Vol.27 No.6 WWW)


Rockport Technologies Merak II/Sheridan II: $34,500/system

Includes SUB225 powered subwoofer modules. Stereophile's "Joint Loudspeaker of 2000." (Vol.23 No.9, Vol.25 No.8 WWW)

Wilson Audio Specialties MAXX Series 2: $44,900/pair Stereophile's "Joint Loudspeaker of the Year" for 2005. (Vol.28 No.8, Vol.29 No.6, WWWW)

DALI Euphonia M55: $13,950/pair

The DALI MS5 houses two 8" woofers, a 6.5" midrange, a dome tweeter, and a ribbon supertweeter in a cabinet that stands 50" tall and weighs more than 150 lbs. JM: "Pros: Superb value for dollar, all the bass extension one should need; rich and full sound at lower volume levels; engaging detail and musicality. Cons: Not a speaker for small rooms or nearfield listening; bass extension is not realistic, requires careful room equalization or dynamic two-ways will often need some form of electronic correction." (Vol.27 No.3 WWW)

DeVore Fidelity Silverback Reference: $15,000/pair

The DeVore Silverback is reminiscent of an Audio Physic Viggo III on steroids and uses a 0.75" silk-dome tweeter, a 6.5" midrange unit, and two long-throw, 8" woofers. "The combination of "pulsing with musical life," producing an enormous, wall-to-wall soundstage with vivid images, and continuously provided a "clear, clean, transparent view into the musical event," said MF. Though the Silverback offered excellent bass extension and an evening response in-room throughout the midrange and treble, JA was disappointed by the speaker's low-frequency performance. Nevertheless, "Class A," say WP and MF. (Vol.29 No.3 WWW)

Dynaudio Confidence C4: $18,000/pair

The Dynaudio C4 has much in common with its cost-no-object cousins in Dynaudio's Evidence line, without giving up a thing. Uses the Esotar tweeter featured in the Special Twenty-Five. The first-order crossover and four drivers overlapping through the upper-bass region meant JA had some trouble finding positions in his listening room where the speakers worked optimally. He ended up settling for low frequencies that were more moderate than the C4's natural, but was still pleased. "While the Dynaudio Confidence C4's low frequencies will sound most neutrally balanced in large rooms, its top octave might then sound a little mellow. But in the right room, the listener will be shocked out of his name: everything meaning, its high-frequency transparency and lack of grain, and its well-defined, stable stereo imaging, noise of which have been at the expense of the speaker's musical communication." (Vol.26 No 3 WWW)

ESP Concert Grand SI: $40,000/pair

The unusual-looking Concert Grand stands 64" tall, weighs about 330 lbs, and its upper-frequency drivers are mounted in a D'Appolito array on its angled front baffle. The SI version employs inductors loading for the upper-frequency drivers' and component crossovers and drivers. The Concert Grand's "sturdily coherent midrange, seductive and beguiling in its tonal richness," was enough to fool jazz legend Max Roach into believing he'd heard a live, reportedly, JA, too, was impressed. "The soundstage lacks density, and the coherency, the stereo imaging, impressive soundstage depth, a richly detailed midrange, and very-well-defined low frequencies." Lacked the lowest bass; setup proved critical; restricted high-treble dispersion will make the speaker sound too,nullow in large, over-damped rooms. (Vol.29 No.4 WWW)

Focal-JMlab Electra 107 Be: $7495/pair

"The Electra 107 Be strikes me as great," said ST, "not something that was built down from Utopia standards, but built up to nearly reach those standards." The beryllium-dome tweeters that were once reserved for Focal-JMlab's flagship line are now found in their Electra series, but without the former's tannin-coated ring. The 107 Be's open and extended treble was matched by excellent bass response that only begins to fall off below 35Hz. With the 107 Be, JM was able to transcend the shortcomings of his favorite old recordings and not only appreciate the subtle details of the playing, but also to feel the magic and historic importance of the music. The result was a set that gave "just about every bass" at $7500/pair. "Can be a little lean... but has how French loudspeakers are," he cautioned. (Vol.28 No.1)

Focal-JMlab Micro Utopia Be: $6000/pair (stands necessary)

Is this similar to the small loudspeaker in the Utopia Be line, ST was very impressed by the beryllium dome tweeter. "I heard stunning focus and clarity—no smearing, no Edge over aggressiveness whatsoever. The music had
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Habrecht Super HFL-5: $3995/pair (stalls necessary)

"A classic for more than a quartet of a century," the latest version of the HFL speaker uses a 8" injection-molded glass-fiber cone woofer and a 1" aluminum-dome SEAS tweeter, and a 36" Anadux titanium-dome super tweeter.

"If the glory of the Super HFL is its neutral midrange, the treble is exceptionally well presented—extended, open, and sweet. Give it a good amount of power, space to breathe, and "set downs for a long run, relax, listen. Then listen some more," ST advised. Saut's been bought the review pair." (Vol.28 No.2)

Isophon Europa II: $11,500-$15,600/pair, depending on finish

"The Boerstandge's New Europa II uses Roland Gansel's Acoustic Hologram Technology midrange-driver configuration and a bandpass woofer section. LG found that the Europa's drivers blended well, offering a "wide soundstage and fine ambience retrieval." Treble response was "extended and open, sweet and non-fatiguing," while the reproduction of vocal music was "impossibly good." The Europa excelled at capturing the natural textures of musical instruments and at placing images in the soundstage. Though the Europa featured excellent bass extension and definition, the deepest bass notes were weak. (Vol.27 No.6 WW)

Krell Resolution 1: $13,000/pair

A "bold, powerful speaker" with an "ambitious design," the 5.5-foot Resolution 1 features a multi-driver array comprising a 1" ring-radiator tweeter, 4" polypropylene-cone midrange, 8" magnesium-cone mid-woofer, and two 10" aluminum-cone woofers. Despite their complexity and size, the Resolution 1's "disappeared immediately," combining an "immense and particularly lofty soundstage with a palpable and easily impressive phantom center image." The Krells sacrificed transient speed, transient accuracy, and punchy imaging in the interest of authority, expansive dynamics, and a smooth overall response. MF heard it like JA measured it: "Extended low bass, a warm midbass, a smooth midrange, a subwoofer top end." (Vol.27 No.11 WW)

Legrand Andona: $15,750-$17,500/pair (depending on finish)

Standing over 66" tall and weighing 210 lbs, the large, unusual-looking Whisper is a four-way, biampable design employing 10 driver-units (including four 15" woofers mounted in a dially array) and Legacy's Step One external bass processor. Combining the tight, fast bass performance of a panel speaker with an even, balanced midrange and slightly forward top-end, the Whisper offered a laid-back presentation that was "extraordinarily faithful to the sounds of all types of music," meriting PB. Though too-nim proper critical, the Whisper's combination of open-air woofers and external bass processing makes it relatively immune to room interaction. Provisional rating until JA can get a sample on the test bench. (Vol.29 No.8 WW)

Lipinski Signature S2: $4590/pair (pair necessary)

Lipinski's original rendering for use as a studio monitor, the L-707 features a 1" Vifa ring-radiator tweeter and two 7" glass-fiber cone woofers in a Y-Porto application, and is shipped in carrying cases of rigid black nylon. The portable L-707 excelled at communicating the dynamics of the midrange and treble frequencies above 650Hz, while three 7" aluminum-cone woofers conferred the bass foundation. LG: "The C8 features a flawless blend of drivers, a beautiful appearance, user-friendly portability, superb ambience retrieval, pinpoint imaging and soundstaging, and transparency." Not a speaker for low-budgets, the C8's high-end soundsteps above $4000, which is the current version of the classic ESL-63, and is "one of the world's greatest speakers—maybe the world's greatest loudspeaker ever—in every manner. Moving from room to room, the Callas played music with as much tunefulness, more openness, and the ability to play loud, while still ultra-clear, well-defined, and detailed, was "transparent and silky-smooth, the midbass more pronounced and fleshed-out, the bass fuller and more tense." (Vol.29 No.2 WW)

NHT XD: $6000/system

The spectacularly finished XD system includes: the XD's two-way, acoustic suspension, magnetically shielded, stand-mounted loudspeaker with molded composite enclosure and stand-mounted tweeter; the XW acoustic suspension powered bass module, with two side-mounted 10" aluminum-cone woofers; and the dedicated XD, a 150W RMS 1EQX-based DSP crossover, equalizer, and four-channel class-D power amp. Setup was quick and simple—"all cables and parts are included, as well as speaker terminals, and a brace that extends from top to bottom and can be adjusted to make the speaker absolutely rigid. Supremely transparent, absolutely free of coloration, phonemically quick, and utterly non-fatigating. If the 2805 had a limitation, it was its lack of deep bass and its inability to play very loud. ST was in agreement: "I know I am going to have to sign the contract for another system, they are just that good," he added."

"The 989 played music with as much tunefulness, more openness, and the ability to play loud, while still ultra-clear, well-defined, and detailed, was "transparent and silky-smooth, the midbass more pronounced and fleshed-out, the bass fuller and more tense." (Vol.29 No.11 WW)

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Pascal C8 LTD: $17,000/pair

The Piaga C8 LTD's defining design element is its ribbed, driver. A 4" by 8" coaxial planar design that covers the midrange and treble frequencies above 650Hz, while three 7" aluminum-cone bass-woofers confer the bass foundation. LG: "The C8 features a flawless blend of drivers, a beautiful appearance, user-friendly portability, superb ambience retrieval, pinpoint imaging and soundstaging, and transparency." Not a speaker for low-budgets, the C8's high-end soundsteps above $4000, which is the current version of the classic ESL-63, and is "one of the world's greatest speakers—maybe the world's greatest loudspeaker ever—in every manner. Moving from room to room, the Callas played music with as much tunefulness, more openness, and the ability to play loud, while still ultra-clear, well-defined, and detailed, was "transparent and silky-smooth, the midbass more pronounced and fleshed-out, the bass fuller and more tense." (Vol.29 No.2 WW)

Pacheco Xs: $2200/pair, depending on finish $55 (stalls necessary)

The Signature S2, with its high-tech, high-dynamic-range drive-units—a 1" gold-anodized aluminum-dome tweeter and a 7" mica-loaded polymer-cone midrange—delivers a "smooth, accurate, uncolored sound." Though the Europa featured excellent bass extension and definition, the deepest bass notes were weak. (Vol.27 No.4 WWW)

Pianoforte Serenade: $9000/pair

The three-way, floorstanding Serenade is "very a special loudspeaker that delivered the midrange and highs with a delicacy that never failed," said WP. Optimal sound, consequently, performance were never achieved, however, as the speaker did not mesh well with Wees's room. JA's measurements revealed a paradox: "A small speaker with somewhat limited dynamic range that will sound is best at low levels in large rooms." (Vol.28 No.7)

Quad ESL-2805: $9000/pair

An ESL-988 with a sleek new appearance, the ESL-2805 features a rounded, steel top plate finished in piano-black lacquer, a stainless-steel base, improved spikes and speaker terminals, and a brace that extends from top to bottom and can be adjusted to make the speaker absolutely rigid. Supremely transparent, absolutely free of coloration, phonemically quick, and utterly non-fatigating. If the 2805 had a limitation, it was its lack of deep bass and its inability to play very loud. ST was in agreement: "I know I am going to have to sign the contract for another system, they are just that good," he added."

"The 989 played music with as much tunefulness, more openness, and the ability to play loud, while still ultra-clear, well-defined, and detailed, was "transparent and silky-smooth, the midbass more pronounced and fleshed-out, the bass fuller and more tense." (Vol.29 No.2 WW)
**Wilson Benesch A.C.T.: $13,500/pair**

Standing 42" high and weighing nearly 100 lbs, the new A.C.T. is the same size and shape as the original A.C.T., but with the internal volume of the lower cabinet hit by its two-way design uses Wilson Benesch’s proprietary Tactic 7" bass and midrange drivers and a 1" hand-painted, silk-dome tweeter.

**Quad ESL-988: $6650-$7300/pair, depending on finish**

Full-range electrostatic that, for the most part, is an updated version of the classic Quad ESL-63 (WWW). Worth it, what could be an audacious want is to pair it with ESL-988, you will get world-class resolution. Superb, stable soundstaging. Spectacular transient response. Sound as neutral as ages. The only thing you don’t get are very deep bass, the ability to play crazy loud, and very stable. In upgrades overs the ESL-63 includes a stiffer, more rigid frame, better-quality wiring in the delay lines, and higher-quality copper in the electrodes. ST found that these changes resulted in a mid-range extension and bass response.

**Legacy Audio Focus 20/20: $54498/pair**

The Legacy uses seven drivers in a five-way configuration, and for setup and associated equipment, it is a unique and fascinating slice of speaker technology. "A unique and fascinating slice of speaker technology," advised JM, who decides that low Class B is the finest value that I have ever encountered in high-end audio. Borderline Class A. (Vol.27 No.9 WWW)

**Tannoy Dimension TD12: $58,350/pair**

Three-way, reflex-box loudspeaker built around the Tannoy's own matching and, with the exception of the 1" by 1" titanium-dome tweeter. The TD12s are "large speakers that behave like large speakers, requiring a lot of space for optimum performance." Green enough room, the Tannoy's distinguished themselves at great speakers with a dark, midrange, not as hand-speakers with an objectionable coloration. "Notably even with a quick, clean bottom end," says JM. Spatial performance was "superb.""sens of scale was "tremendous," and the overall presentation was "superbly balanced, with a good sense of scale and spaciousness."

**Audio Physic Virgo III: $795-$7995/pair, depending on finish**

"A very well-made, meticulously executed, and gorgeous" three-way floorstanding speaker that is basically a minimonitor allied to a subwoofer. Unlike earlier Virgos, the II gives a subwoofer system with its typical radiators, each sidewall houses a vertical array of woofer and ribbon tweeter, with the woofer and tweeter placed as near as possible, to achieve an even approach and a tight, very rich, and tractable bass. The overall presentation was none more akin to the Magnepan GM3.6/4.4. The sweet, delicious highs, the rich, clean, and powerful—not only was its bass extension impressive, but the Virgo II was the finest value that I have ever encountered in high-end audio. Borderline Class A. (Vol.27 No.9 WWW)

**Canton Vento 809 DC: $5000/pair**

The "product of a concerned engineering effort that has paid off in real-world performance," the 809 DC is a three-way, bass-reflex design with a slender, curved, monocoque cabinet made of six layers of laminate. Drive-units include a 1" aluminum-magnesium dome tweeter, a 7" aluminum-magnesium midrange, and two 8" aluminum-cone woofers. WP was impressed by the Canton's tweeter, "which put out a musical amount of spark and air," and contributed to the speaker's overall "light, agile, and accurate" character. Though it could sound "a tad lightweight," the 809 DC offered excellent clarity and detail, and delivered powerful bass when combined with the 809 DC's "subwoofer for the money," and WP. (Vol.28 No.6 WWW)

**Audio Note AN-E Lexus Signature: $12,000/pair, depending on finish**

The AN-E Lexus Signature features a high-efficiency 1" fabric-dome tweeter and 8" paper-cone woofer, and has a specified sensitivity of 98dB (92.5dB per JAV measurements). AD decided he could live with and love the AN-E infinitely. They produced a sound that was "intimate, tactile, emotive, and above all, musically immediate, with a superlative soundstaging; room-friendly and easy to set up; powerfree, yet metamorphosed. Con: Although the new model's improved bass is excellent—very quick, very clean, and powerful—all midrange drivers and a 1" silk-dome tweeter.

**McIntosh MA9800: $13,500/pair**

"Gracious, stable, and authoritative" speakers with an objective coloration. "Notably even with a quick, clean bottom end," says JM. Spatial performance was "superb.""sens of scale was "tremendous," and the overall presentation was "superbly balanced, with a good sense of scale and spaciousness."

**Bowers & Wilkins CM1 D: $6995-$7999/pair, depending on finish**

This "light, agile, and accurate" speaker is basically a minimonitor allied to a subwoofer. Unlike earlier Virgos, the II gives a subwoofer system with its typical radiators, each sidewall houses a vertical array of woofer and ribbon tweeter, with the woofer and tweeter placed as near as possible, to achieve an even approach and a tight, very rich, and tractable bass. The overall presentation was none more akin to the Magnepan GM3.6/4.4. The sweet, delicious highs, the rich, clean, and powerful—not only was its bass extension impressive, but the Virgo II was the finest value that I have ever encountered in high-end audio. Borderline Class A. (Vol.27 No.9 WWW)
Computer simulations show that not all geometries use their conductors uniformly. As frequencies rise, less of a typical round conductor is used, as presented in the current density plots (far right) for cables of the same cross-sectional area, plotted on the same scale. The Analysis Plus hollow oval design clearly uses the conductor more efficiently, and the result is shown in the measured resistance. The hollow oval cables maintain a low resistance value, even at 20 kHz, where the resistance of the round cable has increased dramatically. This increased resistance and slow rise time rolls off the high frequencies, which leads to the difference between the measured signal at the amp and the signal measured at the speaker terminals. This design principle is utilized throughout the Analysis Plus product line, and is the reason why hollow oval cables look and sound better than any competitor’s products.

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Opera Quinta: $3695/pair

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Sonus Faber Cremona: $8995/pair

Sonus Faber Fiamma: $10,500/pair

PSB Signature Center: $9995/pair

PSB Signature Elite Center: $14,995/pair

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tastes only." (Vol.29 No.2 W.W.W.)

B&W 705: $1500/pair (stands necessary)

The moderately sized, two-way 705 replicates B&W's. CD
Image Monitor 706. With the 1" aluminum-dome tweeter and
the 6.5" woven-Kevlar cone woofer are made in
house. The 705 was free from the brightness so com-
monly associated with speakers that use metal-dome
tweeters, instead portraying high frequencies that were
smoothly balanced and without grain. Instruments were
consistently presented with their thumb-nail through-out
the frequency range, and with their sounds free from
strain at moderately loud levels. Bass extension was
respectable. JA: "The 705 might not have enough bass or
good enough for those wanting affordable full-
range performance, but within its limitations, the new
B&W is an astonishingly good loudspeaker." "Could be
smoother, but lively and informative," adds PM. (Vol.27
No.2 W.W.W.)

BG Corp. Radio 5201: $3998/pair

Using a 26" ribbon driver to cover the midrange and
tweel, the BG-Radi 520 stands 70" high by 8" wide.
LG head "clean, nonfatiguing sound, superb sound-
ing that placed the instruments and voices with un-
clouded stability, a wide dynamic range, and overall
transparency. The velvet-mid and lows is prematurely
toted off but in a well-controlled man-
ner, making its natural choice for use with a subwoofer.
JA's measurements uncovered an unwavish in the
ribbon unit's frequency response, and, though he agreed
with LG's evaluation of the speaker's performance, he
would have liked a bit more top-notch-ery. (Vol.27
No.12. Vol.28 No.1 W.W.W.)

Dynaudio Focus 140: $1800/pair (stands
necessary)

Designed to bridge the gap between Dynaudio's entry-
level Audience and higher-priced Confidence lines, the
Focus series features asymmetrical cabinets with real-
wood veneers, first-order crossovers, and proprietary
Euros + drivers—1.1" soft-dome tweeter and a 6.5"
wooden-center Focus 400, the larger of the line's two-stan-
dings. The Focus 400 proved "solid and true and very
physical," offering a vivid and mighty sound with "tonal
consistency and un-bowed rhythmic tension" that belied
its small size. WP found that about 250 hours of break-
in time were required for an astonishing enhancement in
sound quality. 1-expert gave the Focus 400 a 9-pair price, a
toned "excellent measured performance." (Vol.29 No.3
W.W.W.)

Dynaudio Special Twenty-Five: $5200/pair
(stands necessary)

The Special Twenty-Five borrows technology from
Dynaudio's top loudspeakers. J.A.: "How does it sound?
Fabulous! But with high-quality parts, conservative
(first-order crossover) design, and flawless execution,
what's not to like? (Well, okay—the Euro-nano-speaker
terminals are not to like.) [(5000/pair)] A pair is indeed
rather stiff, but the audible family resemblance to the
Evidence and Confidence goes a long way in justifying
that." Although further evaluation convinced JA that the
Twenty-Fives "a superb loudspeaker" with a grain-
free treble, a natural-sounding midrange, excellent
soundstage, and a lack of graininess was also true, they
bowed "superbly extended bass despite its conventionally
small footprint. BJR was surprised by the 155's dynamics and
dass extension, lack of coloration in the mid bass, and
good overall distortion. He raved: "The Special Twenty-Five
and exceptional Silver RS6 gave me more listening pleasure than any other loudspeaker
I have reviewed." (Vol.29 No.3 W.W.W.)

ProAc Tablette Reference 8 Signature: $1800/
pair (stands necessary)

The Aluminum-8 Signature series uses a 4.5" dipole-
cone bass/midrange driver with a large copper phase
plug cross-over to a 1" silk-dome tweeter. Despite its
size, the Reference 8 offered large dynamic swings and
tightly controlled soundstaging. Its imaging was magical, its
presentation stable and sure, though the "image was
ultimately lacking in terms of resolution and reflec-
tiveness. (Vol.27 No.2)

Reference 3A MM de Capo i: $2500/pair
(stands necessary)

High fidelity speakers name doubt approved of
everything else: "A nice-looking small speaker with
much higher sensitivity than average for the binned.
Goes loud and big, and has decent if not earth-shatter-
ing bass. Some superfluous darkness in the mids, but
everything's balanced overall, and it communica-
tes strongly, if not dramatically. But a super-accurate,
highly damped, and excellent soft-dome tweeter was
good pitch definition and an utterly superb sense of flow
and human feel. Can be driven by some SETs in a small
room, crossing over at 4kHz to a 1" soft-dome
tweeter. Its especially clean sound was never
exaggerated but always honest and convincing. Though
a sub would be needed to reach any deep lows, the
58e's bass was always well-defined, precise, and fast.
A smooth midrange combined with stunning har-
monic presentation to give the illusion of live music.
ST warmed up simply: "Resolution. Focus. Coher-
cence." The 58e speaker features a 6.5" woofer and a 1"
soft-dome tweeter, compared with the 58e's 8" woofer
and a cabinet that's in no way smaller in di-

dimensions. Even so, the 58e produced only a bit more bass
than the much smaller Harbeth HL-13ES-2. J.M. felt
that the dramatic improvement in bass offered by the
58e made it the better value. (Vol.28 No.6 & 12
W.W.W.)

Thiel CS2.4: $4900/pair, depending on finish

"An awful lot of speaker for $4900/pair," the CS2.4 has
a 1" tweeter mounted coaxially inside a 3.5" midrange
cone, both driven by a single voice-coil, and a first-order
crossover between the woofer and midrange unit. While
Ad thought this speaker's name dumb but approved of
everything else: "A nice-looking small speaker with
much higher sensitivity than average for the binned.
Goes loud and big, and has decent if not earth-shatter-
ing bass. Some superfluous darkness in the mids, but
everything's balanced overall, and it communica-
tes strongly, if not dramatically. But a super-accurate,
highly damped, and excellent soft-dome tweeter was
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than the much smaller Harbeth HL-13ES-2. J.M. felt
that the dramatic improvement in bass offered by the
58e made it the better value. (Vol.28 No.6 & 12
W.W.W.)

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World Radio History
This "Step Response" graph is from a time- and phase-accurate speaker where all drivers work in concert to replicate the waveform produced by the amplifier.

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"Music flows and pulses in an utterly natural unrestrained way that brings performances to life..."

"...what the Herron does is allow the elements in a recording their own identity, separate from the fabric that constitutes the sound. Or to put it another way, rather than presenting the music, which is constituted from these various instruments or voices, it delivers those instruments and voices and allows them together, to create the music. That might sound like a semantic nicety, but think about what it means. Suddenly, each player’s intention and contribution is writ clear, his or her part in the whole laid bare, whilst at the same time, the chemistry thus revealed keeps the whole greater than the sum of the parts. The results are impressive, engaging and informative in equal measure,

—Roy Gregory, HiFi Plus Magazine, Issue 42

Herron Audio VTSP-2 Vacuum Tube Stereo Preamplifier

www.herronaudio.com
Totem Model 1 Signature: $2150/pair (stands necessary)

An improved parts package marks the difference between the Model 1 and the Signature version. LG writes of "astounding LF response for such a small speaker, with improved reproduction of vocal music, dynamics, soundstaging, and bass response [compared to the Model 1]." The larger, more expensive Totem Modell Signature bears out the latter three claims, though his bass notes lack some mass. (Vol.16 No.4, Model 1; Vol.21 No.1; Vol.26 No.4, Signature Model 1 WWW)

Triangle Antal Esw: $1999/pair

ver wiring and larger, polypropylene-bypassed capacitors. LG: "the wiring and capacitor upgrades have improved the speaker's overload characteristics, its midrange reproduction of vocal music has become more involving, and the soundstage now extends from wall to wall of my listening room." The treble remained relatively unharmed by this doubling of parts, but bass notes lack some mass. (Vol.16 No.4, Model 1; Vol.21 No.1; Vol.26 No.4, Signature Model 1 WWW)

Triangle Heliose E: $1199/pair

Sami's favorite of the Es series, a "scaled-down Cellos, the Antal Esw offers easier placement for corners than the Sun." The Es series a "scaled-down Cellos, the Antal Esw offers easier placement for corners than the Sun." The Es series offered a bit more bottom-end authority, but the Antal was just as good, if not better, at placing instruments precisely within a soundstage. "If the Cello is out of your price range, you won't miss much by opting for Antal," said ST. The Es version of the Antal ES features a 1" titanium-loaded dome tweeter with a 2.4" diameter horn-loaded enclosure and has a lighter voice-coil, with damping material added behind the cone to absorb the backwave. ST noted smoother and sweeter treble, better integration between the treble and midrange, and greatly improved spatial presentation. (Vol.26 No.1; Vol.23 No.3, Esw)

Triangle Heliose E: $1199/pair

The smallest of the three floorstanders in the Es series, the three-way bass-reflex Heliose uses the same 1" beryllium-titanium-dome compression tweeter, along with its 5.5" base/midrange driver and 5.5" woofer. Perhaps a more suitable option for a small room. LG added: "the treble is perfectly placed in the soundstage." The soundstage was moderately hard with music of any significant weight, but increasingly so with music of any significant weight, but increasingly so with loud, complex material. (Vol.26 No.1; Vol.23 No.3, Esw)

B&W DM603 S3: $1000/pair

The elegant, slim-profile, drop-dead gorgeous B&W DM603 is a 2-way, reflex-loaded floorstander with a 1" aluminum-dome tweeter, a 6.5" Kevlar-bass/midrange driver, and a 6.5" aluminum woofer. BJR could detect a slight flaw in the DM603S3: "it exhibited notable deviation from neutrality across its coherently presented frequency spectrum, wide and linear dynamic contrasts, and exemplary detail resolution and soundstaging." In addition, both he and his wife appreciated the B&W's "sexy, unabashed exciters." Despite the DM603's rather lively cabinet, JA thought it exhibited "impressive audio engineering, a classic look, and frequency characteristics.

Amphion Helium 6: $1595/pair

This attractive 3-way, bass-reflex floorstander features two 6.5" woofers, each housed in a diecast aluminum chassis. (Vol.28 No.1 Lanaudiere Cabinet Company of Forth for $2900) (Vol.28 No.8 WWW)

DALL Ikon 6: $1595/pair

This attractive 3-way, bass-reflex floorstander features two 6.5" woofers, each housed in a diecast aluminum chassis. (Vol.28 No.1 Lanaudiere Cabinet Company of Forth for $2900) (Vol.28 No.8 WWW)

BG Corp. Z-1: $499/pair (stands necessary)

See BJR's review in this issue.

Epos ELS-3: $329/pair $359/pair (stands necessary)

This Chinese-made, 100-watt, 10-lb speaker uses Epos' proprietary 1" aluminum-dome, neodymium-magnet tweeter and a 3.5" polypropylene-cone woofer. The ELS-3 had superior midbass definition and a moderately wide range of program material, high-level dynamic bloom. However, what I'd reasonably expect from a speaker of its size, a level of detail resolution I normally associate with speakers approaching $1000/pair, said BJR. For size, however, the ELS-3 exhibited excellent mid-range and high-bass response, and the tweeter is superb. BJR felt it lacked some detail, but overall, the L860's low-bass extension and high-level dynamic realism were superb. BJR felt it was well equipped with a home-theater speaker. "sets a new benchmark for low bass extension and definition and high level dynamic slam within the realm of affordable speakers," he adds. JA: enjoyed his in-depth analysis. (Vol.29 No.9 WWW)

Jean-Marie Reynaud Arpeggione: $1895/pair

A floorstanding speaker with 6.5" midwoofer and 1.5" soft-dome tweeter, the individualistic Arpeggione was supposedly designed to re-create the experience of live music. It delivered "deep, tuneful bass and a wonderful sense of musical richness and fullness," found JM. While it was exciting and easy to listen to, he was not impressed by the speaker's central position for high-frequency detail. It appeared very sensitive to system interaction, thus requiring much attention to associated equipment. (Vol.26 No.11 WWW)

KEF Q9: $1200/pair

The three-way, front-ported Q9 is the top model of KEF's Q line, and features KEF's unusual Uni-Q coin-cident-driver/transparent 1x aluminum-dome tweeter placed at the center of a midrange cone. While the Q9 offered a detailed, transparent, colorless midrange with "a parametrically-tuned bass management," the speaker was remarkable for its Dynaudio's "sensitive" bass management with good multichannel source material." "Their transparency and detail are what earns them Class B," said BJR. ST:35 dedicated stands add $200/pair. (Vol.28 No.4)

Horn Shoppe Horn: $775/pair

Despite its minuscule drive unit, the Horn is very sensitive, at an estimated 94dB/2.83v/m. The Horn is described as "very transparent," with an internal, exponential horn constructed of numerous small panels. Colored, said JA, but AD likes what they did: "The Horns played music with guitars and cymbals. They had a sure, tight sense of pitch and attack, and they presented the instruments and vocals with much clarity." The Horns were fun and communicative at all times, and faultless to the nuances and textures of my favorite instruments and singers. While the quantity of bass was always satisfying, the quality was somewhat low, with sometimes sounding "plummy" and sometimes "too resonant." (Vol.27 No.1 WWW)

Magneplanar MC1: $750/pair

Magneplanar CC3: $990

The wall-mounted MC1 (reviewed as the MGMC1) is a small (46" by 10.25") two-way, magnetically-shielded speaker with a 1" dome tweeter, a 6.5" Kevlar-dome compression tweeter, and a 6.5" midrange driver. (Vol.28 No.12 WWW)

Epos M5: $650/pair $$$ (stands necessary)

Epos M5: $650/pair $$$ (stands necessary)

The newly finished M5 is a shielded, bistable, two-way bass-reflex design using a 5.4" mineral-loaded polypropylene-cone woofer and a 1" dome tweeter with a gold-anodized aluminum-alloy diaphragm. Offered midrange naturalness, detailed and high-frequency performance. "Epos has established a new benchmark at the very affordable price of $650/pair," said BJR. ST:35 dedicated stands add $200/pair. (Vol.28 No.4)

Omega Grande 6: $795/pair

Recommended only to those who love high-sensitivity speakers, the Grande 6 uses a single 6.5" Fostex paper-cone driver having a 95dB sensitivity and no crossover made it as ideal companion for the Sun Audio SV-2A3 SET amplifier. ST: 111
be able to deliver excellent sound, a lot of detail, and plenty of dynamics, as well as a focused and precise presentation of the entire dynamic range. The B25 combined a "slightly bootsy quality" in the upper midrange and lower highs, which was corroborated by JA's measurements. JA noted "a second strength was "a level of transient articulation, clarity, and naturalness in the midrange and lower highs" with all recordings. BJR: "An overall positive evocation of the midbass, and "a slight prominence in the lower registers. Fundamentals were not there, but through a striking combination of second harmonics and realistic ambience, this two-way, transmission-line speaker. Tweeter is mounted below the PVC-coated paper-cone, dual-voice-coil woofer. The M.I. HI's wide-dynamics, high-resolution "a level of dynamic articulation" impressed BJR, and made it one of the "most naturally-sounding sound bookshelf speakers he'd ever heard. Nonetheless, the M.I. HI suffered from limitations in high-level dynamics and low-bass extension. JA warned of the woofer loading: "It doesn't go low enough" and "a slightly less than life-like quality" in the upper midrange and upper highs that reproduced perfectly well with a wide range of musical genres, as did BJR. The M.O.A's unique two-way design features a full-range driver, a 5" polypropylene bass/midbass cone, and is integrated stands that function as part of the woofer cabinet. As a result amplifier, the M.O.A offered a combination of wide, deep soundstage and consistent, organic low-level articulation. High-level dynamic capabilities were limited. "You can ask for quite much from a 4" driver, but not full range," said JA. Price includes steel stands, add $150 for aluminum stands. (Vol.28 No.9 WWW)

Jean-Marie Reynaud Twin Signature Mk.III: $1295/pair (stands necessary) This two-way, reflex-loaded monitor uses a 1" aluminum dome tweeter and a 5" four-layer, paper-cone woofer. BJR noted "extraordinary detail, transparency, and lack of coloration" in the lower midrange, along with "lightning-fast articulation of transients at all dynamic levels." JA's measurements found cabinet resonance "at a slightly raised quality" BJR heard in his listening. Highly recommended T-45 stands add $525/pair. (Vol.27 No.11 WWW)

Triangle Comete Es: $949/pair (stands necessary) "A beautiful and sophisticated loudspeaker" crafted with an attention to detail uncommon in its price range, this two-way, reflex-loaded 2-way uses a 1" aluminum dome tweeter and a 5" four-layer, paper-cone woofer. BJR noted "extraordinary detail, transparency, and lack of coloration" in the lower midrange, along with "lightning-fast articulation of transients at all dynamic levels." JA's measurements found cabinet resonance "at a slightly raised quality" BJR heard in his listening. Highly recommended T-45 stands add $525/pair. (Vol.27 No.11 WWW)

Totem Rainmaker: $950/pair (stands necessary) "A two-way monitor using the same horn-loaded, 5" titanium-dome tweeter and a 5" four-layer, paper-cone woofer. BJR noted "extraordinary detail, transparency, and lack of coloration" in the lower midrange, along with "lightning-fast articulation of transients at all dynamic levels." JA's measurements found cabinet resonance "at a slightly raised quality" BJR heard in his listening. Highly recommended T-45 stands add $525/pair. (Vol.27 No.11 WWW)

Polk RT-14: $320/pair ($300/pair) (stands necessary) This two-way, reflex-loaded monitor uses an 1" dome tweeter and a 5" paper-cone woofer, which result in a smoother, flatter, more extended frequency response. Likewise, JA found "superb measured performance," considering the speaker's very modest price. (Vol.28 No.11 WWW)

DAlmarmo M0A: $1200-$1800/pair, depending on finish A relative newcomer to the US, Almarmo has produced "an attractive, engaging speaker that's a superb value and performer with a wide range of musical genres," as said BJR. The M.O.A has unique two-way design features a full-range driver, a 5" polypropylene bass/midbass cone, and integrated stands that function as part of the woofer cabinet. As a result amplifier, the M.O.A offered a combination of wide, deep soundstage and consistent, organic low-level articulation. High-level dynamic capabilities were limited. "You can ask for quite much from a 4" driver, but not full range," said JA. Price includes steel stands, add $150 for aluminum stands. (Vol.28 No.9 WWW)

Spendor 53/5SE: $51449-$1549/pair, depending on finish (stands necessary) Makes a big difference," sums up ST (Vol.27 No.11 WWW). The "drop-dead gorgeous" X-719 performed best with female voices. "Rich, focused, immediate, and unveiled," while bass was "tight, tuneful, clean, round, and fairly extended." Low bass was limited, but "quite satisfying." BJR sometimes heard "a slightly hokey quality" in the upper midrange and lower highs, which was corroborated by JA's measurements. JA noted "a severe peak, not at the crossover frequency, at around 1kHz in an otherwise 'well-engineered' design." Matching stands cost $299/pair. (Vol.27 No.9 WWW)

Usher Audio Technology S-520: $400/pair ($350/pair) (stands necessary) "This two-way, front-port speaker with a 5" dome tweeter and a 5" polypropylene midbass cone, and is available in colorful gloss finishes (add $25/pair) or standard black. BJR noted some highlighting of the lower highs and a lack of lower-octave air; but admired the S-520's midrange and high-frequency resolution. Low-end clarity and articulation were especially impressive—the deepest bass notes were produced with striking realism. The Usher exhibited "some solid audio engineering" for its bargain-basement price, said JA. (Vol.27 No.9 WWW)

Wharfedale Diamond 9.1: $350/pair (stands necessary) "A relative newcomer to the US. Almarmo has produced "an attractive, engaging speaker that's a superb value and performer with a wide range of musical genres," as said BJR. The M.O.A has unique two-way design features a full-range driver, a 5" polypropylene bass/midbass cone, and integrated stands that function as part of the woofer cabinet. As a result amplifier, the M.O.A offered a combination of wide, deep soundstage and consistent, organic low-level articulation. High-level dynamic capabilities were limited. "You can ask for quite much from a 4" driver, but not full range," said JA. Price includes steel stands, add $150 for aluminum stands. (Vol.28 No.9 WWW)

Apple iPod Hi-Fi: $349 The shiny, white, 15-B Hi-Fi is Apple's one-piece iPod music system comprising dock, battery charger, and speaker. It has four class-D amplifiers, two 3.14" treble-midrange drivers in separate sealed internal enclosures, and a 5.1" woofer in a dual-ported internal enclosure. An optical S/PDIF input allows users to integrate the Hi-Fi into a WAN network using Apple's Airport Express. This iPod Hi-Fi's slick industrial design, simple user interface, extra-long power cord, internal power supply and battery compartment make comparable desktop music systems seem "chintzy," said WP. "It sounds pretty good, too—bass, treble, and midrange are all balanced and "superb measured performance,"" considering the speaker's very modest price. (Vol.28 No.11 WWW)

DFVerge ProSticks: $369 This PC speaker system uses a 7 sealed-box subwoofer for "superbly tight and tuneful bass" that surpassed the performance of the sometimes "thumpy" Acoustic Energy AEGO2. While the ProSticks couldn't match the expansiveness of the AEGO2's soundstage, they provided slightly better focus and transparency. "An excellent recommendation for computer listening," said WP.

Paradigm Atom V-3: $219/pair (stands necessary) Though he was a bit put off by its very low price and very small size, BJR was quickly set at ease by the Atom's "delicate, simple acoustic music and bombastic, electronic rock recordings, while setting a new benchmark for bookshelf speakers in terms of bass extension and high-frequency response. The Atom delivered a touch of warmth to the bass instruments, which result in a smoother, flatter, more extended frequency response. Likewise, JA found "superb measured performance," considering the speaker's very modest price. (Vol.28 No.11 WWW)
he's in the room...

CD555
Reference CD player

From the creators of world class sound comes the ultimate in musical performance.
of the lower midrange. Nevertheless, "Congratulations discussion with startling realism." However, BJR confessed, "in hindsight, AudioPhysic Caldera Ill too expensive for Wilson Sophia 2, Canton Vento Reference One DC, "An audiophile-quality mini-audio system," the 315 is shielding adds $20/pair. (Vol25 No.9 WWW) phile performance that anyone can afford." Magnetic to Paradigm for setting a new benchmark for true audio-phonic three-way— and proved extraordinarily versatile in managing crossover slopes and frequencies. LG heard no electronic eddies and noted only the slightest loss in soundstage depth. "I found the 108's SUB's sound, clean, transparent, and neutral—as good as I've ever heard from an outward crossover." (Vol 18 No.5, Vol 28 No.11 WWW)

**Genecal HTS4B: $3750**

This powered SUB uses a magnetically shielded 12" driver on the front and one 12" passive radiator on each side for deep, solid bass with punch and immediacy. "Pretty miraculous, no sign of the distortion, overload, or bloat that is heard with some other subwoofers of this size." Genecal's HTS4B produces solid, fight, and well-rounded sound in the low frequencies, but in the midrange and high frequencies, it has a bit of a lack of detail. However, the HTS4B offers excellent value for its price point. Genecal's HTS4B is a great choice for those looking for high-quality, low-frequency performance without breaking the bank.

**Grace Design m902: $1695**

This revision of the Grace 901 headphone amplifier includes an onboard DAC that handles sampling rates of up to 192 kHz, and a three-band equalizer that can be adjusted to provide the perfect listening experience. The m902 has a sleek design and offers high-quality audio performance, making it a great addition to any collection of high-end audio equipment.

**Benchmark Media Systems DAC1: $975 $$$**

This DAC offers excellent measurements in both the analog and digital domains, making it a great choice for audiophiles looking for high-fidelity sound. It's a great addition to any system, providing excellent sound quality and performance.

**AKG K 701: $450**

The K 701 is a large, open-back, circumaural, dynamic design with a neodymium magnet system. It features wide frequency response, a leather headband, and a replaceable earcup system. The AKG K 701 offers exceptional sound quality and is a great choice for audiophiles looking for high-quality audio performance.

**AKG Q 800**

This headphone is a great choice for audiophiles looking for high-quality audio performance. It features a replaceable earcup system and offers exceptional sound quality. The Q 800 is a great addition to any collection of high-end audio equipment.

**Benchmark DAC1: $975 $$$**

This DAC offers excellent measurements in both the analog and digital domains, making it a great choice for audiophiles looking for high-fidelity sound. It's a great addition to any system, providing excellent sound quality and performance.

**B Violet: $1249**

The B Violet is a great choice for audiophiles looking for high-quality audio performance. It features a replaceable earcup system and offers exceptional sound quality. The B Violet is a great addition to any collection of high-end audio equipment.

**Cambridge Audio Azur 851P: $1999**

This amplifier offers high-fidelity sound and is a great addition to any collection of high-end audio equipment. It features a replaceable earcup system and offers exceptional sound quality. The Azur 851P is a great choice for audiophiles looking for high-quality audio performance.
using a pair of I.CCS8 tubes. ST: “Yes, it’s much better than the V2. Gone is the cylindrical chassis, its volume essentially doubled and now it’s loud!”

The amplifier sounds more pristine—more resolution, more dynamic authority with wary of a hint of hum.” Using a short adapter cord with a headphone jack on one end and two RCA’s on the other, ST happily converted his X-10 into a solid-state phono stage so that “if you’re going to be listening through Sennheiser HD-600’s or HD-700’s (or AKG-1000’s, for that matter) and you’re going to be listening at home, the X-Can® remains hard to beat.” [Vol.27 Nos.1 & 2, Vol.28 No.9 WWW]

Sennheiser HD-650: $549.95

The HD-650’s are an evolution of Sennheiser’s very successful HD-600 open-back dynamic headphones, claimed to provide superior results due to hand-selected parts with closer tolerances and the use of a specially developed acoustic-silk warrant for the drivers. Compared to the Grado SR325, the Sennheisers sounded richer but slightly darker. JM found that their very effective seal created a resonant cavity that produced “that which is both quite deep and a treble inhabitter.” JA’s new reference earphones. [Vol.28 No.6 WWW]

Sennheiser HD-650s, AKG K1000, Sennheiser HD-700s, and the Headmaster BM guitar headphone amp. WP: “If you’re going to be listening through Sennheiser HD-600’s or HD-700’s (or AKG-1000’s, for that matter) and you’re going to be listening at home, the X-Can® remains hard to beat.”

Voice: “For a long time, the X-Can® has been a favorite of mine. These headphones are comfortable and well-balanced, offering a smooth frequency response that closely resembles that of an analog signal. The headphones are also very durable and well-constructed.”

Day-Sequential FM Reference Signature Modification: $1680 (+ cost of tuner)

David’s Day’s Sig Mod effectively addresses this ultimate FM tuner’s aesthetic/attitude/stability issues. A full-featured, 3-in-1 solution that offers a wide range of volume levels.” It was in their use as playback monitors that Dual found they produced “a very fine” active preamp, and has a remote volume control and three line-level inputs. Paired with ST’s Sennheiser HD-650s, the HeadMaster BM might forth a “rich and full-bodied” sound. Using a preamp to drive Cayman CD-1055, Matthias found that the sound was “superb”—tube-like, with no solid-state harshness or “huntness.” Maybe the ideal choice for otherwise bright and modern-sounding systems. [Vol.27 No.8]

Ultimate Ears UE-5: $890

See WP’s review in this issue.

Ultimate Ears UE-5c: $550

These lightweight, sound-isolating, in-ear headphones feature dual balanced armatures, a passive crossover, and an 8” stereo mini-jack. Their use of custom-fitted earpieces makes them important to have a mold correctly fitted for each of your ears. Insertion and removal of the earpieces was initially problematic but, soon became second nature. They offered excellent isolation from external sounds, were easily comfortable for long listening sessions, and could be a good headphone amplifier.” WP: “If you’re going to be listening through Sennheiser HD-600’s or HD-700’s (or AKG-1000’s, for that matter) and you’re going to be listening at home, the X-Can® remains hard to beat.”

JL Audio: $179

The JL Audio C5-1000 is a broadcast-quality stereo system that incorporates a high-quality 5” woofer and 3” midrange, a passive crossover network, and a high-quality stereo amplifier. The system is designed to provide high-quality sound reproduction in a range of home theater environments.

The JL Audio C5-1000 is a broadcast-quality stereo system that incorporates a high-quality 5” woofer and 3” midrange, a passive crossover network, and a high-quality stereo amplifier. The system is designed to provide high-quality sound reproduction in a range of home theater environments.
Once you've got used to it in the system, taking it out means no music - it's as simple as that"  
Roy Gregory  
Hi Fi+ Issue 35

Thor is an elegant, full rack width, 6-way AC mains power distribution unit featuring sophisticated circuitry for dealing with mains noise and voltage spikes without limiting dynamic headroom. The unit is wired throughout with award winning Nordost Valhalla power cable to achieve optimum signal transfer and performance.

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"The loudspeakers are simply great. We loved them. Go get a pair"
THE INNER EAR-Volume 17, Issue

I recommend the Hansen Audio THE KING Loudspeaker most highly. They are artistic and technological marvels."
AUDIOPHILIA - September, 2005

The level of realism is shocking. These speakers just disappear leaving a full deep bass, an enormous dynamic range with plenty of air…"
ENJOY THE MUSIC - SUPERIOR AUDIO EQUIPMENT

Hansen Composite Matrix, a Hansen Audio exclusive material, has set the standard in Acoustic design of speaker enclosures. Hansen Audio has reformulated this benchmark product by adding the “CLOAKING DEVICE”, an internal fourth layer in the Matrix. With the advent of the Hansen Audio “CLOAKING DEVICE”, any sonic signature of any crossover is now more audible. Implementing the new V2 DAT (Driver Assimilation Technology) Upgraded Crossover, Hansen Audio has successfully lifted yet another veil in further lowering the distortion floor. The magical experience of listening to recorded music has become less corrupt.

Sound. Redefined in a complete line of speakers.
Just like the Model One, but on "stereo-oids," the Model Two uses the same 3" speaker and the same warmer tuning, but adds a dedicated Aux position. It's many features take some getting used to, but ST loved its many features and for what it is, and for not pre-neutralizing, especially in what is basically a radio. ST admired the Model Two for what it is, and for the Magnum Dynalab MD-108 not having its own dedicated Aux position. Its AM receiver is a Tivoli Audio Model One table radio: $119.99. The Tivoli Model One is a radio stripped to its essence, with Parametric Adaptive Room Compensation (PARC) for $269. With Parametric Adaptive Room Compensation (PARC), the PARC was completely transparent in both the critical midrange and the remarkable upper treble range. "The PARC was changing the sound, as intended." By 7.1" H by 7.1" W by 3.6" D, the RDR-1 offers FM and AM presets and a dedicated Aux position. Sound quality through the built-in 2.25" speaker was very good, though not quite up to par with that of the Velodyne SMS-1. The Velodyne didn't extend those speakers' LF response, but linearized and flattened the RDR-1's in-room frequency response, but linearized and flattened the SMS-1. The Velodyne didn't extend those speakers' LF response, but linearized and flattened the SMS-1. The Velodyne didn't extend those speakers' LF response, but linearized and flattened the SMS-1. The Velodyne didn't extend those speakers' LF response, but linearized and flattened the SMS-1. The Velodyne didn't extend those speakers' LF response, but linearized and flattened the SMS-1. The Velodyne didn't extend those speakers' LF response, but linearized and flattened the SMS-1. The Velodyne didn't extend those speakers' LF response, but linearized and flattened the SMS-1. The Velodyne didn't extend those speakers' LF response, but linearized and flattened the SMS-1. The Velodyne didn't extend those speakers' LF response, but linearized and flattened the SMS-1. The Velodyne didn't extend those speakers' LF response, but linearized and flattened the SMS-1. The Velodyne didn't extend those speakers' LF response, but linearized and flattened the SMS-1. The Velodyne didn't extend those speakers' LF response, but linearized and flattened the SMS-1. The Velodyne didn't extend those speakers' LF response, but linearized and flattened the SMS-1. The Velodyne didn't extend those speakers' LF response, but linearized and flattened the SMS-1. The Velodyne didn't extend those speakers' LF response, but linearized and flattened the SMS-1. The Velodyne didn't extend those speakers' LF response, but linearized and flattened the SMS-1. The Velodyne didn't extend those speakers' LF response, but linearized and flattened the SMS-1.
Music Direct Recommended

FAVORITE COMPONENT list!

Just like Stereophile, we have compiled a short list of some of our favorite components. This is just the tip of the iceberg, so please call us at Music Direct and we will help you configure the system of your dreams. As always, all components are covered by our 100% Money Back Guarantee.

DIGITAL COMPONENTS

**Esoteric DV-60**
$5600

**Marantz SA-11**
$3299

**Musical Fidelity X-DAC/X-10v3; X-3SU**
$1299

AMPLIFICATION

**BAT VK-31SE**
$5995

**Aesthetix Calypso**
$4500

**Valve Audio Predator**
$2995

**Musical Fidelity X-10v3**
$399

LOUDSPEAKERS

**Epos ELS-2**
$329

**Legacy Focus 20/20**
$6500

**Legacy Whisper**
$15,750
just turn it on, hold it against the speaker's front panel, turn to AudioPrism's QuietLine Parallel AC line filter Eiclunann Bullet Plugs: $40 in copper (set of 4), WWW
A great idea improved—similar to the original Post-sleeve. AD heard $99 in silver (set of 4) www.markertek.com JM: "A small but powerful specking-stuffer. You'll feel like a pro!" (Vol.25 No.12 WWW)
Eichmann Bullet Plugs: $40 in copper (set of 4), $99 in silver (set of 4)
RCA connector using a clever design in which the hot electricity, becomes conductive. Furthermore, it does the best sound from loudspeakers." It's easy to use—turn it on, hold it against the speaker's front panel, turn to AudioPrism's QuietLine Parallel AC line filter.

The expensive dual-transformer 6N-NCT effectively improved the sound of every component RD tried. Described as a "regenerative AC synthesizer," the Power Plant is a two-channel, class-A/B bipolar balanced design with twin transformers—essentially, an audio power amp with a (variable) single-frequency output and a regulated output voltage. It is intended for use with source components at a maximum load of 200W, RD was much snifter: "The benefits...were such that it took a real effort of will to take it out of the system." The most striking effect was in the upper midrange and above, which was "striped of electronic overlay. Recordings old and new sounded fresher, midrange and above, which was "stripped of electronic overlay. Recordings old and new sounded fresher, more immediate—more like real music." Other pluses:

AudioQuest binding-post wrench: $10.00 +
A great idea improved—similar to the original Post-sleeve. AD heard $99 in silver (set of 4) www.markertek.com JM: "A small but powerful specking-stuffer. You'll feel like a pro!" (Vol.25 No.12 WWW)
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New CLASSIC HD

STEREOPHILE on the Legacy Whisper, August 2006

“...Unsurpassed ability to re-create an illusion of space from recordings.”

“The Legacy Audio Whisper is a fabulously enjoyable speaker system.”

STEREOPHILE on the Legacy FOCUS, January 2004

“...A tremendous performer, highly adept at resolving low-level detail.”

“... The finest value that I have ever encountered in high-end audio.”

I am excited to announce the introduction of the new Legacy Classic HD. Every element of this loudspeaker is superior to its renowned predecessor.
for Sterovia's "2000 Accessory of the Year," JA is equally impressed, finding that the P300 illuminated equipment, and front-panel display of a wide range of the extra $250. PS Audio's latest thinking on regeneration that I consider it a mandatory option well worth seduced his car and backgrounds were more black. RD

Contains three of PS Audio's high-current Ultimate products, and BrickWall and Empower products, the 3.5 uses Trans- zorbers and MOVs for parallel-mode surge protection. "For those unfortunate souls whose audio systems are

PS Audio Ultimate Outlet: $299

Uses terminal screws made of silicon bronze and inter-

ACOUSTICS

ASC SubTrap: $438 as reviewed

Originally called the Cube Tower, the Tower Trap is a "big, chunky black box" sits under a subwoofer of the ' Buster, KR recommending the $345 Echo Buster

 Echo Buster Decorative Room Treatments

Echo Buster Phase4: $345 each

Bass Biter: Helmholz quarter-rounded bass absorber, wood-framed with foam core, $498 pair. Echo Buster: Echobuster Decorative Room Treatment FB-3000, $165 and $235 each. Double Biter: flat, mid-to-high-frequency absorber, wood-framed with rigid convex panel core, $160 each. Echo and Double Busters can stand free or be hung on a wall. Effects were often subtle, but worth the effort. With the Bass Busters, BD found, "The room had gone from essentially unlistenable to having excellent bottom-end balance, and ambience." Of the Echo Busters, he said, "Improved image focus was probably the biggest benefit, manifesting itself most obviously in an increase in the dimensionality and "reachability"—the sharpness of images." Double Busters improved soundstaging, "expanding and opening up the stage, increasing the space between performers, and creating around them a space that was more detailed: "Ahh, yes—glorious bass without the bass hot spot while mitigating pesky short reflections

"small, more cosmetically acceptable, more affordable

oom for MartinLogan SL3 electrostatics, while BD used 'em to optimize his room while auditioning the Thiel CS7.5. Using the Music Articulation Test Tone (MAT T) from Stereophile's Test CD 2 (STPH004-2), he first positioned them for smoother overall response, and then "for beauty, richness, and ambience." And BD chart-recordergraphicallyshowed the changes. In the end, "The room was fantastic," quoted BD, who recommends them unconditionally.

ASC Tower Trap: $715

Originally called the Cube Tower, the Tower Trap is a "big, chunky black box" sits under a subwoofer

ASC Tube Trap: $53S-5798, depending on size and style

Relatively inexpensive but remarkably effective room-acoustic treatments. Tube Traps soak up low-to-high

Bass Biter: Helmholz quarter-rounded bass absorber, wood-framed with foam core, $498 pair. Echo Buster: Echobuster Decorative Room Treatment FB-3000, $165 and $235 each. Double Biter: flat, mid-to-high-frequency absorber, wood-framed with rigid convex panel core, $160 each. Echo and Double Busters can stand free or be hung on a wall. Effects were often subtle, but worth the effort. With the Bass Busters, BD found, "The room had gone from essentially unlistenable to having excellent bottom-end balance, and ambience." Of the Echo Busters, he said, "Improved image focus was probably the biggest benefit, manifesting itself most obviously in an increase in the dimensionality and "reachability"—the sharpness of images." Double Busters improved soundstaging, "expanding and opening up the stage, increasing the space between performers, and creating around them a space that was more detailed: "Ahh, yes—glorious bass without the bass hot spot while mitigating pesky short reflections
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improvements in imaging, detail, and soundstage width: "Every sound in the room, real or reproduced, is more defined in character and location." While KR was greatly satisfied with the results, he admitted that the panels were visually imposing: "The stand-mounted Hi-F Minitraps are in the way all the time." Minitraps: $199/9", $119/9. Mono Traps: $179/99, $799/99, stands: $69 (Vol. 28 No. 1 WWW).

**RPGD** Diffrusors Systems Acoustic Tools for Home Theater

Effectively method of adding diffusive and absorptive treatment to a listening room. RPD Diffrusor Systems, Inc. offers the line of room-treatment products and packages called CineMusic (TM). Web: www.rpgdiffrusor.com (Vol. 11 No. 4, Vol. 16 No. 5; see also TNJ's article on listening rooms in Vol.14 No. 10 WNV.).

**Sensible Sound Solutions** Fabric-Wrapped 2" Fiberglas Panels

Near and effective sound absorbent panels, according to KR. Wall-mounted or constructed into corner/sidelf bass traps, these come in a variety of GOM fabrics for high WAF. Other sizes and configurations are available (Vol. 29 No. 7 WWW).

**State Technology Research** Collimators:

- *Fiberglas Panels*
- *Sensible Sound Solutions Fabric-Wrapped 2" Fiberglas Panels*

These panels were used to improve the listening room's acoustic properties, providing a better sense of musical flow and momentum, with no evidence of change of timbre or frequency extension, no slouch, just a bit off the standard set by the very best I've heard. (Vol. 25 No. 8 WWW).

**Audio Quest Cheetah:** $1250/1m pair

The Cheetahs use perfect-surface silver (PSS), single-conductor, solid-core stranded wire, Telon Air-Tube insulation, and a Triple Balanced design. A Dielectric Bias System (DBS)—a 12V DC bias—"charges" the cable's insulation. AD decided that the DBS had no influence on the Cheetah's performance one way or another. Compared to its expensive, homemade interconnects, the Cheetahs had "surprisingly" low distortion and was "marginally better" at conveying deeper, darker shadow, and was "sounding beautifully, and there was nothing musically unnatural or sonically pinched or distorted about it." MF found that the Cheetahs added bass control and higher HF extension to his Musical Fidelity kWP-kW combo. AJA thought the seven-foot Cheetahs were detailed, distinct, and densely filled-in and three-dimensional. The midrange took on a richer, more full-bodied texture, and the top remained extended, detailed, and ultra-revealing, but not quite as right. In comparison to the Valhallas, the Monsters should sound great in any system. Full kit with speaker cables and interconnects costs $4500. (Vol. 27 No. 2 WWW).

**Audio-Technica** Furutech RWL-1 Room Tuning Panels.

Furutech RWL-1 Room Tuning Panels.

**LOUDSPEAKER CABLES & INTERCONNECTS**

**Editor's Note:** Rather than place cables in the usual "Recommended Components" classes, we've just listed those cables that members of the magazine's review team either have chosen to use on a long-term basis or have found to offer good value for money. They are therefore explicitly recommended. Where a cable has been found to have specific matching requirements or an identifiable sonic signature, it is noted in the text: "You before you buy" mandatory with cables, many dealers have a loaner stock to make this easier.

**INTERCONNECTS**

**Acoustic Zen Silver Reference:** $948/1m RCA; $998/1m XLR

The top of Acoustic Zen's line and made of seven-nines silver: the SR II offered, according to PB, a near-ideal balance of superb low-level resolution, harmonic richness, and musicality. Bass was firm, deep, and defined, the midrange open, silky, and richly detailed. The interconnects worked equally well with hard and solid-state components, he found, concluding "I would not have been surprised had their price been twice as high." However, "not the best choice for a system that already sounds bright or forward." $5000 for longer cables, 15% off for 0.5m. (Vol. 26 No. 1 WWW).

**Analysis Plus Solo Crystal:** $439/1m

*M:** For transient clarity, linearity, low-frequency uniformity, high-frequency extension, and overall cleanliness, the Analysis Plus was extremely impressive. It was neat and tidy, left no loose ends, and was free of glare, grain, or other annoying artifacts. The fast attacks were a delight, and the bass was handled with impressive clarity and ease. The bass was very tight, extended, well-controlled, and correctly sized. (Vol. 26 No. 4 WWW).

**Audience AU24:** $552/1m pair, unbalanced, $336/1m pair, balanced, $672/2m pair, $1272/6m pair

- The AU24s had a neutral, reduced sound, said B13, "with good extension at the frequency extremes and a wide, deep soundstage." However, they did not reach the density of imaging of the more expensive interconnects of the expensive Nordost Valhalla. Nor could they match the Nirvana SX-Ltds. incredibly natural soundstage reproduction. Nevertheless, "The AU24s were no slouch, just a bit off the standard set by the very best I've heard." (Vol. 25 No. 8 WWW).

**AudioQuest Cheetah:** $1250/1m pair

The Cheetahs use perfect-surface silver (PSS), single-conductor, solid-core stranded wire, Telon Air-Tube insulation, and a Triple Balanced design. A Dielectric Bias System (DBS)—a 12V DC bias—"charges" the cable's insulation. AD decided that the DBS had no influence on the Cheetah's performance one way or another. Compared to its expensive, homemade interconnects, the Cheetahs had "surprisingly" low distortion and was "marginally better" at conveying deeper, darker shadow, and was "sounding beautifully, and there was nothing musically unnatural or sonically pinched or distorted about it." MF found that the Cheetahs added bass control and higher HF extension to his Musical Fidelity kWP-kW combo. AJA thought the seven-foot Cheetahs were detailed, distinct, and densely filled-in and three-dimensional. The midrange took on a richer, more full-bodied texture, and the top remained extended, detailed, and ultra-revealing, but not quite as right. In comparison to the Valhallas, the Monsters should sound great in any system. Full kit with speaker cables and interconnects costs $4500. (Vol. 27 No. 2 WWW).

**Nordost Heimdal:** $599/1m with RCA cables; $500/1m with XLR cables

Although these cables are "impressively expensive," BD was sure that you'll love what they do for your system. Images were detailed, distinct, and densely filled-in and three-dimensional. The soundstage moved out farther than BD had ever experienced. However, while it was obvious that the Valhallas were special, it was also obvious that they had a distinct tonal signature. BD wrote, "The system always had a lighter, drier sound with the Nordost—the total balance was shifted slightly upward, and the overall presentation was a touch cooler than with other wires." RD: "Expensive, but boy, are they good!" ADX's reference interconnect (Vol. 24 No. 11 WWW). Pure Silver Connection (PSC) PST 8: $450/1m pair

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

**Siltech SQ-110 Classic Mk. 2 G5:** $2500/1m pair, $3500 additional 0.25m

The G5 Classic cables evolved from Siltech's highly regarded G3 series, and are designed to maximize the pickup of RF and EM interference while maintaining low inductance, low capacitance, and low resistance. The wires were "open, extended, and smooth," with a "voluptuous and rounded" midrange, "beautifully extended to end off, and very controlled, deep, and precise" bass. Due to their "slightly more laid-back presentation and mellower overall character," PB suggested they be used with components that are a bit forward. (Vol. 27 No. 10 WWW).

**Silverwinds Audio Silver:** $1400/3ft

$1450/3ft balanced pair

Silverwinds Audio's purist approach to interconnect design features two conductors (three for balanced) suspended in individual Telon tubes and bundled into a single larger tube and a mesh shield of silver-plated copper. The Silvers occupied "a great middle ground" between the Nirvana SX-Ltds and Nordost Valhallas.
combining zeal neutrality with well-defined images and a slightly laid-back presentation to provide "a nice combination of strengths and weaknesses that will make them a solid performer no matter the situation," said BD. (Vol.28 No.6 WWW)

Stereo evaluations: $599.99/1m pair

Flexible wire, available with tons of detail and not too much in the tight frequencies. "Yes, I've heard better cables, including Stereosonic's flagslap SE-600, "see WP," but the Colibri interconnects balance performance against price superbly," (NR)

Crystal Cable, DeMarzio, Acorlift 7N-1JA6000 Mecel.

Deletions

Alpha-Cor Micro-Puri-Tone or Tune Q Silver, Howard Music Groove 2 touring wire, Kimber Kable Silver, Synergistic Research Designers' Reference X2 and Alpha Sterling X2, all withdrawn.

LOUDSPEAKER CABLES

Acoustic Zen Satori Shotgun: $1188/8ft pair

The all-silver Concorde Shotgun has a total gauge of 7 AWG. PW: "The [Acoustic Zen Silver Reference II] represents a step forward in every way. And in Acoustic Zen, Satori took the concept of value into another universe: Design, detail, nuance, and even by sounding slightly muted at times...Tonal neutrality, and produced well-defined images, powerful and fast-transients, and incredible transparency. The only nit BD could pick was a slight compression of front-to-back soundstaging depth. "A big jump in performance from the company's S/L." Add $50/pair for biwire configuration." (Vol.28 No.10 WWW)

Nordost Heimdal: $1499.99/2m pair ($175/0.5m pair)

See A/D's review in this issue.

Nordost Valhall Speaker Cable: $4950/m pair, with banana-plug or spade termination; additional length, $290/m

The Valhall consists of 40 individually copper micro-annular conductors, each cloth-covered with a monofilament spacer prior to encapsulation in the Teflon tubing. Similar to the Valhall interconnect, the speaker cable's overall presentation was "clean, airy, and detailed," according to BD; "without ever being over-erotic or harsh. The portrayal was incredibly compelling from top to bottom, while the midrange...seemed almost holographic. [They] sounded almost relaxed—but still clean and precise—and their images were dense, detailed, and dimensional." An A/D favorite. (Vol.24 No.11 WWW)

Pure Silver Connection (PSC) R50: $1250/3m pair

Features a silver-soldered, silver-coopered cables to improve with gold-plating, and is "the art of computer simulation." The best relatively inexpensive speaker cable Mikey has heard. "You won't find the concept of value into another universe: Design, detail, nuance, and even by sounding slightly muted at times...Tonal neutrality, and produced well-defined images, powerful and fast-transients, and incredible transparency. The only nit BD could pick was a slight compression of front-to-back soundstaging depth. "A big jump in performance from the company's S/L." Add $50/pair for biwire configuration." (Vol.28 No.10 WWW)

Harmonic Technology Magic Reference Woofer: $2995/8ft quad set, $280 each additional 6ft quad

See Pro-Silway II interconnect for build details. All Harmonic Technology cables are "made for plus and minus, each composed of a silver ribbon configuration. (Vo128 No.10 WWW)

Silver Cable: $2950/8ft pair

The Silver Cable consists of completely separate units for plus and minus, each composed of a silver ribbon suspended in a mesh-covered Teflon tube and terminated with spade-type connectors sized to match speaker binding-post diameters. See "Interconnects." (Vol.28 No.6 WWW)

Stereovox Firebird: $799.99/8ft pair

Like Stereovox's Colibrino interconnect, these flexible, real-speaker cables get you most of the way to cost-no-object loudspeaker cables, but without sacrificing convenience (best speaker/bass/interconnect ever) or aesthetics, according to WP. "Do I mention they have detail, detail, and detail?" (NR)

Crystal Cable, Wireworld Gold Eclipse 4, Golden AudioQuest Turbo, all not auditioned in a while.

Deletions

Alpha-Cor Platinum M12, AudioQuest CV-4, Kimber Kable, Home Audio Interconnects, MIT M-1570 Shun- giri, Synergistic Research Absolute Reference Speaker Wire X2, all not auditioned in a while.

This is the largest ever "Recommended Components" listing, which unfortunately meant that some very interesting products had to be left out. Opinions are "Digital Delay Lines," "Stands, Spikes, Feet & Racks," and "FM Antennae."
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New York Magazine, David Denby Movie Critic

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Zagat Survey 2006

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SP in durmast
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In and out. It's a subject Don Byron knows intimately. We're not talking about sexual motion here, we're talking about the two sides of jazz, as well as of Byron's career: Repertory (in) music vs Free (out) music. Or, if you prefer, through-composed music vs improvisation.

In and out also describes Byron's catlike ability to dodge and shift, from record to record, to immersing himself in whichever music or composer catches his interest. From free jazz to klezmer music, from Duke Ellington to 1970s funk, and now from short through-composed, classically-influenced pieces to the music of soul-music icon Jr. Walker, Byron has had an extraordinarily varied career since he first became a presence on the New York jazz scene in the mid-1980s. His varied résumé widens the fissure between musical purists and those who don't mind artists who mix flavors, have a wide range of interests, and refuse to remain in one style.

"What I've found is that each of these styles has completely different people that check them out. A lot of those people feel betrayed by my doing something that they wouldn't normally listen to."

Practically every article ever written about Byron begins with some variation on these themes and concludes that he's a fascinating guy, a bold artist, a genius who can play in and out and everywhere else, a player equal parts bomb-thrower and crazy.

"There is this kind of weird...kind of like, 'You're a jazz musician and you're supposed to do this and you're supposed
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to do that. It's almost like people kind of rob you of the ability to entertain different groups of people."

While he says that he lives, creatively, in a lonely place, Byron also clearly relishes the aura of unpredictability. He also enjoys the confusion engendered among both players and fans by his wide-open musical vision, which has encompassed klezmer music (Plays the Music of Mickey Katz), Ellington tunes, the music of Raymond Scott and the great John Kirby (Bug Music), 1970s funk (Nu Blaxploitation), and classical vocal music (A Fine Line: Aria and Lieder).

Leaning back in his chair one sultry morning in a French bistro on Park Avenue South, Byron, the fearsome innovator who in person exudes a certain musical nerdiness, says he often thinks of the controversies surrounding his work in terms given him by his New England Conservatory of Music composition teacher, George Russell.

"Most people, it's like, 'Oh, is it out or is it in?' His thing was like, well, 'How out is it? How weird is it? How different is it? And why is it different? To what degree is it a little out there? There's guys who are straight down the pike, and then there are guys who are a little out there. Stevie Wonder is a little out there. Joe Jackson is a little out there. Prince is a little out there."

When you talk with Byron about this, it helps if your brain is a little, well, out there. "You can be a little out there and still be in there. I think people are so aware of the not-a-little-out-there things that I do that when I'm a little out there they think I'm a lot out there. I always admire people who can sneak it in. I really like people who are really dealing with normal people and they're sneaking it in. And you're like, 'Damn, I can't believe that's in there, that's really cool.' I'm more interested in trying to control how in there it is."

To those who appreciate the variety, Byron's in-vs-out dichotomy is the most interesting thing about his career, and with the recent release of two new projects, that variety has not narrowed. Unlike most musicians who just make records, Byron's endeavors are always "projects" in the fullest sense of the word. Much thought and preparation goes into each one.

The first of his latest projects to hit the racks is A Ballad for Many, a collection of classical-leaning pieces, all played by the hard-to-classify (hence their appeal to Byron) Bang on a Can, the composers' collective and new-music ensemble. The disc opens with Eugene, a piece commissioned by Bang on a Can and meant to accompany a episode of Ernie Kovacs' TV comedy show that featured a silent character of the same name.

If there was ever a visual partner who was a natural fit with Byron's eclectic vision (and Bang on a Can's kaleidoscopic playing), it's Kovacs. Starting in TV on a local station in Philadelphia in 1950, he went on to create a number of fantastical idiosyncratic and funny recurring sketch characters, such as Auntie Griesome and Percy Doventonsil. He also made the medium of television itself part of his act, making sight gags out of fades, wipes, superimpositions, and other camera tricks. When Kovacs married singer Edie Adams, his second wife, in 1954, music by Stravinsky, Prokofiev, and Haydn, among others, became a bigger part of his act. Byron says that one of his earliest memories is of sitting on the couch with his parents watching Kovacs' television show.

"His work has a very artistic feeling. A lot of his concepts about reality and gravity and what makes graphic sense always challenged, even though he didn't have a lot of the
"It is the completeness of their performance that leads to the magic of their sound."

Jeff Fritz, UltraAudio.
technical stuff to play with that a video guy from today would have. And he was a guy who liked him some Bartók and Stravinsky and stuff like that, and then he liked all this kinda crazy Esquivel-type stuff, too. His sense of taste in music and mine are very similar. A lot of the same things for a lot of the same reasons. I was just really feeling him.”

One of the player-songwriters whose music was used on the Kovacs show was Sidney Bechet, a legend of the clarinet with whom Byron—who quickly lists Jimmy Hamilton, Arne Shaw, and Tony Scott as his favorite clarinet players—has a tenuous relationship.

“One of the most difficult things about playing clarinet is that you've got three registers, and if you don't do something about it they sound completely different. Intonation-wise, the top of the register is going sharp, the bottom register is going flat. The middle register is what you tune. A good classical player has everything kind of sounding the same. Tone-wise, Bechet is opposite of a classical guy, who's got everything figured out and smoothed out. His bottom is kind of scratchy. He's kind of like a gospel guy, who has that quirky tone. What he's playing is amazing, how he's playing I can't really listen to.”

Opening with a first movement dominated by a clock-like beat and Lisa Moore's muscular piano chords, Eugene moves along at a brisk pace through its six movements in less than 20 minutes. Rhythmic almost to a fault, the piece's avant-garde-ish edges are balanced with more recognizable tonal bursts. The closing movement is particularly strong, thanks to the galloping efforts of cellist Wendy Sutter and clarinetist Evan Ziporyn. One odd constant in Bang on a Can is Mark Stewart's electric guitar.

“The real problem with writing for electric guitar is that there's something about the texture that's always out of your control. You hit a note on an electric guitar and it's morphing [shakes his head, makes guitar sound], it's doing things, and every time you play the same line, you never really get the same execution.”

But as a composer, can you turn the guitar's tonal instability to your advantage?

“Sometimes. And then sometimes it's like, ‘Man, I really don't hear that.’ I wish they had a guy that was playing classical guitar, because when you start to write chords and stuff and you just want to hear a chord, you don't want some inner voice of the thing going [strums guitar sound].”

“I've played with Frisell, Ribot, Vernon Reid, and they all have that. There's something about the tone of their guitar that nobody really fully controls. They just kind of stand aside and let it happen and then all the cats in the audience go, ‘Wow, that's really cool. It must be the pedals.’ But it's not really the pedals, it's just that the electric guitar is not a fully controllable instrument. I think a lot of the composers that write for [Bang on a Can], they're kind of frustrated with the guitar and they leave it out.”

After Eugene, there are four pieces that range from the busy and fairly humorless Blinky Blanky Bloke, led by violin and piano, to the short but charming and intelligent Spin, to what is perhaps Byron's finest through-composed, classical-leaning composition ever: Basquiat, a dreamy, mournful serenade for electric guitar and clarinet. The balance of the album is made up of the score to The Red-Tailed Angels, a documentary film about the WWII-era Tuskegee Airmen and commissioned by the Roosevelt Library of Hyde Park, New York. What Byron, chuckling, calls “a little government job I got” is shown at the library’s visitors' center to highlight first lady Eleanor Roosevelt's interest in the black flyers. The pilots, officially the 99th Fighter Squadron, inspired the 1995 HBO film The Tuskegee Airmen and have long interested Byron. His debut album, Tuskegee Experiments (1990), focused on another subject with Tuskegee in the title, the notorious experiments done on black men from 1932 until 1972 with strains of syphilis.

Overall, the music for The Red-Tailed Angels is much more sedate than that of Eugene, and much of it–like the see-saw violins of You Can Fly, which evoke flight, or the military drums of Finally in 1941–is very tonal and accessible. Neither Eugene nor The Red-Tailed Angels is currently available on DVD, though Byron and Kovacs' widow, Edie Adams, have discussed the legalities of possibly releasing a DVD version of the film and music done for Eugene.

A player-composer for whom sound has always been a concern, Byron mentioned that he's proud that the sonics of Bug Music won special praise when it was made Stereophile's "Recording of the Month" for January 1997. For A Ballad for Many, Byron says he wanted a more natural room sound with natural reverb, and mastering that “sounds pretty hot.”

“I was looking for a rich sound, but not too overproduced. Not too many horrible effects. I mean, you're talking about classical musicians, whatever happens sound-wise, they want to be in control of it. Which leaves whatever sounds you get up to the writer or the players, and then you have to capture that.”

In a left turn typical of Byron's roving, hard-to-satisfy
A better way to get from here to there

Great components are just the beginning of exceptional sound.

System matching is the balancing of all components within your system — each device has its own set of electrical characteristics. Balancing the interactions comes from carefully matching cables to each “circuit” (e.g. amp + speaker + cable is a circuit). Choosing the best cables to get from component to component is the key to great sound. This will allow your exceptional components to perform to their design ideals, and your system to transcend the components to get closer to the music. Use our Lending Library containing $2.5 million in cable samples to know for sure before you buy.

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The Restless Mind of Don Byron

musical journey, the other new record bearing his name to sing many of the tunes that ended up on Do the Boomerang. That was very unusual. You could say George Benson maybe moment was to reflect the gospel technique that their job at that time was to reflect the gospel technique that their singer was using and accompany him or her with lines that reflected those technical elements.

"Jr. Walker was one of the few people who I thought was his own vocal inspiration and his soloist at the same time. That was very unusual. You could say George Benson maybe had something like that. [But there] you can't even tell if the vocal stuff is influencing the guitar or vice versa. Jr. didn't play anything on the saxophone that he couldn't sing."

To understand the core of Walker's music, Byron learned to sing many of the tunes that ended up on Do the Boomerang. It's an idea Byron says he learned from alto-sax player and M-Base founder Steve Coleman, who years ago immersed himself in the vocal peculiarities of James Brown. Byron practiced singing, being especially drawn to the tide tune, which refers to a long-forgotten dance or is, he says with a smile, "some kind of reference to, like, conjugation." Yet again with Byron, we're back to the old in-and-out.

The clarinetist/composer's sonic aims here were different from the Bang on a Can project. The engineer of the Boomerang sessions was Brandon Mason, a friend of Byron's who, he says, works mostly on indie rock projects. "We wanted it to sound like an Eric Clapton record or some kind of contemporary rock record in terms of its impact, the way the rhythm section sounds, the way it's knitted together."

Sparked by a stellar band that includes Byron (tenor sax, clarinet), Curtis Fowlkes (trumpet), David Gilmore (guitar), Chris Thomas King (guitar, vocals), George Cooligan (bass), Rodney Holmes (drums), and Dean Bowman (vocals), Do the Boomerang is in some ways a kind of floaty time. So I feel like I'm doing more of those kinds of things, where Jr. would stay right in the eighth notes of the moment. I think I'm trying to be a little more vocal, but referring to vocalists other than Jr. Walker. I think I'm thanking Fred Hammond and Hezekiah Walker, some of the contemporary gospel guys I've really learned a lot from improvisationally."

One advantage of staying close to the original is that the originality and the soul of Walker's dancier tunes shines through. It's that, and the fact that Walker was the only instrumentalist on Motown Records to ever make a solo instrumental album and become a star, that drew Byron to this project.

"The Motown stuff, everybody thinks of it as this super-black music. It's really crossover music. That's why a lot of the singers that were raw were not on Motown. It was like Diana Ross. All these guys were smooth, and they had a way of simplifying the blues shit so it didn't sound quite so improvisational. When you saw them live, it was a different story, but when you hear their records they nannied things. There was a regularity."

"Walker's more Southern. He's more like a Stax/Volt kind of act in a lot of ways. I liked his presence on Motown and that he got to do these things, some of them instrumentally, in really interesting ways, and still he was doing enough business to justify his being on Motown. Somehow he made it happen."

Now that Don Byron has made Do the Boomerang happen, he's curious to see if it does any business of its own. "I never know what people are going to say and I thought Bug Music wasn't going to do any business, and it did a lot of business. These records, from one time to another, are a crap shoot. A lot of things, like what kind of press you get, they help, but they're not the entire equation. People respond subliminally to a well-recorded record in a way that they can't explain. Something like Bug Music, to me, it's the production. The quality of production is about 40% of what people respond to."
“sex, lies, and video”

The untold story about power—and a new way to improve it.

Sex

OK, we admit it.

We’re audio/video geeks. What’s sexy to us might be a little different. But this is just too sexy to ignore...

And hey, there’s a sexy video for you as well! But first, the lies...

Lies

You probably own a power conditioning (PC) device that claims to protect your system from power surges.

But did you know that you’re having unprotected entertainment? That’s because the PC marketing types have, ummm, stretched the truth about surge protection. Here’s the real truth of the matter...

Most high end power conditioners offer some sort of spike protection. But NONE of them offer surge protection! That’s right. None! At any price.

The inside story

We’ve looked hard at all of the so-called high-end power conditioners. Fact is, even most of our own units couldn’t deliver real surge protection.

That’s because today’s power conditioners use a common technique that clamps incoming voltage above a certain value, usually between 180–220 volts. But voltage that high comes from a spike, such as you might encounter from lightning.

But a surge is something much more likely to happen than a lightning strike, and until now, you had no way to know if or when it was happening!

For example, after a power outage, it’s not uncommon for power to return in the form of a surge. We define a surge as something above 130 volts in the US, often reaching 150 volts or more.

The sneaky thing about surge damage is that it often doesn’t take out a component’s circuitry on the first surge. The effect is additive. So that, on the second or third surge (or even later), you might lose your component.

And if you happen to own vacuum tube gear, the so-called unreliability that some folks tout is often nothing more than the result of undiagnosed and unprotected power surges.

Do no harm

Most of us have found out the hard way that some items sold as power conditioners actually harm our sound and video. That’s because these devices use long lengths of small gauge wire, wrapped in numerous turns around a ferrite core.

Of course, they will often measure better at filtering of a noisy line. In fact, the very use of more wire and smaller diameter to be able to make more turns virtually guarantees some noise improvement (at least on a test bench).

Here’s a simple test you can perform in the privacy of your own home. Plug the large gauge power cord from your amplifier into a coiled 20-foot-long 18-gauge extension cord.

Now listen to your system. That’s almost as bad as what happens with

When bigger is better

While we’re thinking of wire gauges, one of the most insidious tricks that really hurts your system’s performance is the use of small gauge wire or, shockingly, PC traces to carry the voltage and current in most power conditioners.
real surge protection, while improving your sound and lowering ac line noise.

The first two products to incorporate this new technology are the Duet and Quintet. Plus, the new Soloist is the world’s first and only in-wall high-end power conditioner! Based on a new Ultimate Outlet technology, the Soloist features cleaning and protection right in the wall outlet itself.

The Duet and Quintet incorporate a radical new nanocrystalline high-permeability soft magnetic material. This material means significantly fewer turns of wire are needed for noise filtering. So you get real (measurable) noise filtering without the harmful side effects from too much wire.

**Over and under**

The Duet and Quintet offer true over-and-under voltage surge protection, utilizing an ingenious new circuit that monitors the incoming voltage at all times. Not only that, you’re warned if voltage is surging to a dangerous level!

When the PS Power logo starts flashing, it’s warning you that your line voltage is over 125 volts. At 130 volts, its ever-vigilant circuit automatically shuts down to protect the life of your components.

**Zoning out**

The Duet offers two isolated zones, so that you can power your digital components on the two-outlet zone, and your analog components on the other two.

The Quintet offers five (!) isolated zones, so that you can isolate any components any way you like.

Additionally, the Quintet provides high voltage spike protection for up to two separate CATV sources. So you could have your high speed Internet on one and the TV on the other. Or satellite TV on one and local CATV on the other.

**System approach**

We recommend that you begin with a Soloist in-wall unit at any outlet where you have a/v components.

If you already have a power conditioner (even one of ours), plug it into the Soloist. It’ll provide even more noise filtration, thereby enhancing the performance of your conditioner.

**The really big question...**

At $199 for the Soloist, $299 for the Duet, and just $499 for the Quintet, the question isn’t whether or not you can afford them.

No, the big question is can you really afford to be without them?

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Sonos ZP80 & ZP100
WIFI MUSIC SYSTEM

Don't get the wrong idea. I don't watch trash TV. I am not interested in the doings of people who are famous merely for being famous. I was probably the last to realize that Paris Hilton was not the name of a French hotel. But the kitchen TV just happened to be tuned to Channel 4 when I switched it on while I was preparing dinner. No, I do not watch NBC's Extra, but as I was reaching for the remote I was stopped in my tracks by what I saw. The show was doing a segment on the new L.A. home of Jessica Aguilera, or Christina Simpson, or... well, it doesn't matter. What does matter was the host's mention of all the cool stuff the bimbette had had installed in her new pied-à-terre: "... and a Sonos audio system, of course."

Sonos has obviously arrived. Any doubts I'd had about making the Santa Barbara-based company's new ZP80 and older ZP100 the subject of a Stereophile feature review, or about featuring the Sonos CR100 system controller on this issue's cover, disappeared. But I had already been given an inkling that this company was on an upward path when I visited a dealer last March and had seen a large stack of

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**ZP80 ZONE PLAYER** Sonosnet-connected D/A processor and line preamplifier. Connectors: Ethernet (two), analog line in (RCAs, auto-detecting), analog line out (RCAs, variable or fixed level), digital S/PDIF out (RCA coaxial and TosLink). Front-panel buttons: Volume, Mute. THD: <0.09%. 20Hz–20kHz. No other specifications listed.

**DIMENSIONS** 5.3" (136mm) W by 5.4" (139mm) D by 2.9" (74mm) H. Weight: 1.5 lbs (0.7kg).

**FINISH** Light-gray “PC Grade” plastic.

**SERIAL NUMBER OF UNIT REVIEWED** 00-0E058-20-02-D8:F and 00-0E-58-20-02-9A:4. Hardware version: 1.1.16.3-1. Software version: 1.3 (build 4426090a).

**PRICE** $349.

**ZP100 ZONE PLAYER** Sonosnet-connected D/A processor and integrated amplifier. Connectors: Ethernet (two); analog line in (RCAs, auto-detecting); analog line out (RCAs, variable or fixed level); subwoofer autodetecting, RCA, with 80Hz crossover frequency; spring-loaded speaker connectors.

Front-panel buttons: Volume, Mute. Maximum output power: 50Wpc into 8 ohms (17dBW), 20Hz–20kHz. THD: <0.02%. No other specifications listed.

**DIMENSIONS** 10.1" (260mm) W by 8.2" (210mm) D by 4.4" (113mm) H. Weight: 10 lbs (4.5kg).

**FINISH** Die-cast matte-aluminum enclosure on light-gray base.

**SERIAL NUMBER OF UNIT REVIEWED** 00-0E-58-10-2D-0E:A. Hardware version: 1.1.3.0-1. Software version: 1.3 (build 4426090a).

**PRICE** $499.

**CR100 CONTROLLER** Handheld, Sonosnet-connected remote control for Zone Player system, with 3.5"-diagonal, full-color LCD screen, touch-sensitive scroll wheel with central selector button, nine backlit function buttons, and rechargeable Li-Polymer battery. Supplied accessories: battery charger.

**DIMENSIONS** 6.4" (165mm) W by 3.8" (97mm) D by 9.6" (245mm) H. Weight: 12.5oz (0.36kg).

**SERIAL NUMBER OF UNIT REVIEWED** CR0601 00-0E-58-00-68-39:B. **PRICE** $399. (Charging cradle adds $49.99.)

**COMMON TO ALL**

**FILE FORMATS HANDLED** MP3, WMA AAC (MPEG4), Ogg Vorbis, Audible, Apple Lossless (as of software v1.3), FLAC lossless, WAV, AIFF. Native support for 44.1kHz-sampled files; additional support for 48kHz, 32kHz, 22kHz, 16kHz, 11kHz, and 8kHz sample rates. Firmware upgradeable for future audio formats. Audio services supported: Rhapsody (PC only), Audible, with suitable high-speed Internet connection. Internet radio supported: streaming MP3 and WMA, with suitable Internet connection. Computer operating system compatibility: Mac OS X, Windows XP.

**ZP80 BUNDLE PRICE** $999. (includes two ZP80s, one CR100 Controller).

**ZP100 BUNDLE PRICE** $1199. (includes two ZP100s, one CR100 Controller).

**APPROXIMATE NUMBER OF DEALERS** >500, as well as sold direct.

Sonos boxes in their custom-install warehouse. “Sonos is the easiest way of putting together a multiroom system,” the dealer told me. “The stuff literally walks out of our door.”

**Media Service**

I have been writing about ways of implementing a media-server-based system for a while now, beginning with my May 2005 review of Apple’s $129 Airport Express WiFi Hub, which, with its line-level and digital outputs, is still the cheapest, if not the easiest, way of feeding music around the home from files stored on a PC. But the Airport Express was supplemented by the $299 Slim Devices Squeezebox (see September 2006, p.128), which takes the level of audio performance up a notch, and allows direct control of the remote media server from the listening chair.

The Sonos system is more sophisticated than the Squeezebox in that it sets up its own proprietary, encrypted WiFi network, said to be optimized for streaming audio files rather than for making use of a general-purpose network. It can also dispense with the computer, working with a network-attached storage (NAS) hard drive, which can operate as a standalone source of media files. Most important, it moves the display from the processor to the remote. The Sonos CR100 controller’s ($399) full-color, 3.5” LCD screen not only allows easy navigation of your music files on up to 16 network devices, it will also display all the metadata associated with each track, including the album-cover art, if you’ve stored that. This controller is
one of the newest consumer-electronics products I have encountered: it is sealed to prevent damage from liquid splashes; it has modes for both deep and shallow sleep, from which it can be roused by being picked up; and as well as a motion sensor, it has a light detector so that its control buttons are automatically backlit when the ambient light drops below a preset threshold.

I had put off reviewing the Sonos system because its first product, the ZP100 Zone Player ($499), included a power amplifier—all the owner needed to add was a pair of speakers. As useful as this feature is for non-audiophiles, it didn’t fit with my own vision for server integration: a unit with line-level and digital outputs that could be painlessly integrated with an existing high-end system. But when, in May, Sonos introduced its ZP80 ($349), which omits the amplifier, it was exactly the trigger I needed. I asked for a review sample.

**Zone Players**

I didn’t get just the ZP80, but the company’s ZP80 Bundle ($999), which comprises two ZP80s, a CR100 with charging cradle ($50), and a ZP100. While a Sonos system can be set up with a single ZP80, this means the host computer needs to be in the same room as the audio system, as there needs to be a wired Ethernet connection between it and the Zone Player! (or a wired connection between the ZP80 and a network drive, which allows the computer to be turned off). The beauty to me of a distributed-music system is that the nosy PC can be in a different room, and for that you need two ZP80s. The first acts as the WiFi hub, and can also be used to access the Internet for Rhapsody (PCs only) and other streaming services, as well as for Sonos’ own software updates. The second ZP80 (and a third, a fourth, etc., as well as one or more ZP100s, up to a maximum of 32 players in all), as well as the CR100, all log on to the network created by the first ZP80.

The ZP80 is a small, elegant plastic box with three buttons (for Mute and Volume Up/Down) and a white LED on its front; and, on its back, two Ethernet ports, a pair of RCA jacks for analog output, another pair of RCAs for analog input, and a pair of S/PDIF digital outputs, one on an RCA, the other on an optical TosLink jack. The ZP100 looks similar but is larger, is finished in darker gray with a perforated top panel, has the same buttons on the front and the same array of jacks on the back, with the addition of two pairs of heavy-duty, spring-loaded speaker terminals. The terminals are fed from a class-D amplifier section rated at the CD standard’s 2V RMS. The output preserved absolute polarity—i.e., it was noninverting—and was sourced from a usefully low impedance of around 93 ohms across most of the audioband, this rising to 224 ohms at 20Hz. This rise will be inconsequential with typical preamplifiers having an input impedance of 1k ohms or more, but with the low, “torture test” load of 600 ohms it does result in the response starting to roll off at low-bass frequencies, reaching −3dB at 14Hz (fig.1, bottom pair of traces). Into 100k ohms (fig.1 top traces), the LF response was flat to 30Hz or so. At the other end of the spectrum the output is down 0.5dB at 20kHz, which will not be audible. (The ZP80’s tone controls were bypassed for all the testing.)

Channel separation (not shown) was superb, at better than 110dB below 3kHz, and still 96dB at 20kHz. Spectral analysis of a dithered 1kHz tone at −90dBFS was free from AC supply artifacts, though the noise level was a little higher than the best 16-bit D/A's (fig.2). Extending the...
50Wpc into 8 ohms, this powered from a quite hefty toroidal transformer.

Zones
I set up one ZP80 in my basement test lab, which is where the Mac mini that houses my iTunes library resides, and connected it to the computer with an Ethernet cable. (Sonos players work with both Mac and Windows XP computers.) The second ZP80 went in my main listening room, connected to my Mark Levinson No.30.6 D/A processor with AudioQuest's OptiLink-5 TosLink optical link, and to one of the unbalanced pairs of inputs on the Mark Levinson No.326S preamp. The ZP100 went upstairs in the bedroom, driving my 1983-vintage Celestion SL6 speakers, which are usually driven by a Linn Classik receiver. The ZP100 had no problem being recognized by the Sonos network and playing back audio files without glitches, despite being two floors and many walls away from the server in the basement.

Once the Sonos Desktop Controller software had been installed on the Mac mini and was running, it recognized the three Zone Players, and each was initialized by my simultaneously pressing the front-panel Mute and Volume Up buttons. The Desktop Controller also searched the Mac mini for music files, finding and listing both the music in my iTunes Library and the other music files that are stored on the computer's hard drive. That, other than naming each Zone Player—"Den," "Media Room," "Master Bedroom," etc.--and setting the defaults for each, such as Fixed or Variable volume, was all it took to set up the distributed audio system. No messing about with IP addresses, passwords, or security settings. It couldn't have been easier.

One thing I really liked about the control interface was that while each zone's player can have different music playing, all selectable by the handheld controller even if you're not in the same room, it's possible to link two or more players—or, in what Sonos calls "Party Mode," all of them—so that they all play the same music in accurate synchronization. If, as I do, you have players set to different defaults—the listening-room ZP80 is set to Fixed output level, the bedroom ZP100 to Variable—the master volume buttons on the Controller.

At the very end of the review period, the CR100 controller stopped working, apparently terminally. The LED turned red, indicating that it needed to be recharged, but after I'd connected it to the charger, it wouldn't turn on again. The manual states that the CR100 can be reset by holding down the Mute and Music buttons for at least three seconds or until it beeps, but this didn't help. Neither did resetting the Sonos Controller on the host computer.

measurement bandwidth to 200kHz and repeating the spectral analysis, playing a file comprising a −1LSB DC offset revealed a rising level of ultrasonic noise well above the audioband, due to the noise-shaping used in the DAC to achieve 16-bit performance (fig.3).

Linearity error was low to below −100dBFS, with almost all the apparent error actually resulting from the dither used to encode the 500Hz test signal. The ZP80's reproduction of an undithered 1kHz sinewave at exactly −90.31dBFS, which consists of just three voltage levels, showed excellent waveform symmetry.

The ZP80's analog output offered very low levels of harmonic distortion, though at maximum level (fig.4) some low-level, higher-order harmonics could be seen in addition to the third harmonic at −84dBFS (0.006%). Reducing the load to 600 ohms increased the level of the third harmonic to −80dB (0.01%), but did not affect the levels of the higher harmonics (not shown). Dropping the signal level to −90dBFS resulted in all the harmonic components lying at or below the ZP80 DAC's noise floor (fig.5). This graph, by the way, was taken under the same measurement conditions as fig.2. The observable differences between these two graphs, such as the fact that the noise floor is flat in fig.5 but slopes upward with frequency in fig.2, are due to the different analyzers used: a swept analog 1-octave bandpass filter and a logarithmic frequency scale in fig.2, FFT analysis and a linear frequency scale in fig.5.

Regarding intermodulation distortion, the second-order difference component resulting from feeding the ZP80 with an equal mix of high-level 19kHz and 20kHz tones was very low in level. However, some higher-order component reached −70dB (0.03%), and an aliasing product was present at 24.1kHz.

To test the ZP80's rejection of word-clock jitter, I fed it 16-bit/44.1kHz WAV data representing a high-level 11.025kHz tone over which had been superimposed the...
The ZP80 is limited to the normal low number of 24-bit AIF and WAV files sample rates, but it also seems restricted all of them to WAV the next time you system. If you need to reset one of them to will apply to all the Zone Players in your system. However; this is a global preference that affects only the applicable players.

As supplied, the Zone Players’ line-level analog inputs default to lossy compressed WMA. This saves WiFi bandwidth, but results in both a quality hit and significant latency. This was not a problem with the ZP80s, which had been integrated into an existing system and whose analog inputs were thus superfluous. But my wife and I watch movies in the bedroom, and I wanted to connect that room’s ZP100 to the DVD player’s analog output jacks. However, the latency makes the input unusable, the sound lagging behind the picture by 3 seconds. Fortunately, the analog input’s encoding can be set to the uncompressed WAV format, which both minimizes the latency and sounds better. However, this is a global preference that will apply to all the Zone Players in your system. If you need to reset one of them to WMA, you’ll need to remember to reset all of them to WAV the next time you watch a DVD.

### Zounds

The ZP80 is limited to the normal low sample rates, but it also seems restricted to 16-bit music data. I have a large number of 24-bit AIF and WAV files on my Mac mini; while I could browse these files with the Controller, attempting to play them either gave a “Corrupt File” error message, or the file immediately switched to Pause. But when used to feed 16-bit/44.1Hz digital data to my high-end Mark Levinson No.30.6 DAC, the ZP80 performed flawlessly. I was hard-pressed to hear much of a difference between the Levinson driven by the ZP80 receiving Apple Lossless Compressed or AIF files, and the original CDs from which I had ripped the tracks, as played back by the Classe or Ayre players feeding the DAC the same data via AES/EBU links.3

Anyone who harbors doubts about the legitimacy of computer-based audio needs to hear a high-end DAC fed by the ZP80’s digital output. During the review period I was mixing and mastering my latest CD for Cantus—songs for soloists and chorus accompanied by cello, guitar, and piano—and auditing my work on the Mac mini using headphones. But for serious auditioning of the changes I’d made, I simply walked into the listening room and auditioned the same files on the combination of Sonos ZP80 and Levinson DAC. In the past I had either to run a domestically unacceptable 45’ length of Canare AES/EBU cable to the Levinson to audition my work, or use the sneakernet, burning the files to CD-R and physically carrying them into the listening room.

When I played back files representing a complete album’s worth of music, there were no glitches between tracks, and no clipping of the start of a track. This was particularly noteworthy with CDs such as my new recording of Robert Silverman performing Beethoven’s Diabelli Variations (Stereophile STPH017-2), where there are almost no gaps in the music between variations/tracks.

The ZP80’s analog outputs were not near the same class as those of the megabux Levinson fed by the ZP80’s digital output, with levels matched to within 0.1dB at 1kHz. This is to be expected, of course. But even with the Benchmark DAC-1 ($1000), again with levels matched, the ZP80’s analog outputs had a flatter presentation, both with respect to soundstage depth and musical involvement, and had less low-frequency weight. But to put the ZP80’s perfor-

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3 The lid mechanism of my usual CD transport, a Mark Levinson No31.5, recently broke after a decade of nonstop service.

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### measurements: continued

LSB toggling off at 229.6875Hz. Both these frequencies are exact integer submultiples of the sample frequency, so there is no quantizing distortion to obscure the DAC performance. The Miller Audio Research Jitter Analyzer (software running on a National Instruments PC card platform) then performs a narrowband FFT analysis of the device under test’s analog output signal and identifies sideband pairs due to inadequate jitter rejection.

The results of the ZP80 with this test are shown in fig.6. The calculated jitter level was 388 picoseconds peak–peak, which is low, especially considering how much processing is performed within the ZP80 and Sonosnet. Sidebands associated with the low-frequency toggling are indicated with red numeric markers; other than the pair at 11.025kHz ±229Hz (red “4” markers), all of these are at the residual level of the test signal. The main jitter-related sidebands lie at ±11.2Hz (purple “1”), ±278Hz (purple “2”), ±38.6Hz (purple “3”), ±763Hz (purple “7”), and ±1476Hz (purple “10”). Note also the slight widening of the central peak in this graph. However, I have no idea what mechanisms produce these sidebands, and it is fair to note that any correlation between this sort of behavior and sound quality has not been established.

The ZP80’s analog inputs had a usefully high impedance of approximately 38k ohms in the bass and midrange, rising slightly to 45k ohms at 20kHz. They feed a 16-bit A/D converter running at 44.1kHz, and the sensitivity of this converter needs to be set with either the handheld controller or the Desktop Controller running on the host computer. With the sensitivity set to High, an input level of 598mV at 1kHz gave a digital level of 0dBFS, assessed with RME’s DIGICheck running on a PC. Set to Low, the ZP80’s analog input needed 2.27V to give 0dBFS. The High and Low labels thus refer to the analog sources’ sensitivity and not, as I had originally thought, to their level. These sensitivities have been sensibly chosen.

As with other relatively low-cost A/D converters I have examined, signals close to the maximum level should be avoided. Fig.7 shows spectral FFT analyses, performed in the digital domain by a PrismSound DScope 2, of the ZP80’s analog input fed 1kHz tones at −1dBFS (red) and −33dBFS (blue). A regular series of harmonics is evident in...
mance into perspective, its analog outputs sounded significantly more refined than CDs played by the $50 Toshiba DVD player that was the subject of so much Internet buzz a year or so back, and by the $150 Pioneer DV-578A SACD player that I bought as a reference for budget CD sound.

In my report last month, I had expressed the opinion that the Slim Devices Squeezebox was pretty much equivalent to the Pioneer when it came to the quality of its analog outputs. Compared to the Squeezebox, the ZP80 had more solidity and image depth, as well as a little less treble hash. It’s fair to note, however, that this is with the Squeezebox powered by its wall wart supply, which some feel compromises the sound quality of its analog outs. Even so, while I don’t recommend the unmodified Squeezebox for use as a high-end source other than when used with its digital output feeding an external DAC, the ZP80’s analog outputs are good enough to be used in non-critical applications, such as a bedroom system including an older two-channel receiver that lacks a digital input.

I didn’t use the ZP100 in my listening-room reference system, so my thoughts on its ultimate sound quality are perhaps more of anecdotal than definitive usefulness. But the ZP100 provided sterling service in my bedroom system, driving the Celestion speakers to high levels without strain and with excellent woofer control. The treble balance seemed a bit more airy than I was used to with these speakers driven by a Linn Classik receiver, and the sound a little drier overall. The ZP100 did sound very clean, however, and produced a wide range of dynamics from movie soundtracks fed to its line inputs.

**Zumming up**

I thoroughly enjoyed my time with the Sonos Zone Players. While I feel the optimal way of integrating the ZP80 into a cost-no-object high-end system is to use its digital output to feed an outboard D-A processor, the sound of its analog outputs was acceptably good overall, taking into consideration the very affordable price. The ZP100, too, offers excellent value for money, and is a no-brainer purchase for setting up a distributed-audio system in a room that doesn’t already have a sound system.

I also love that CR100 handheld controller. Not only are its ergonomics superb; the sheer convenience of being able to browse my music collection from wherever I am in the house, and to control music for any system in the network regardless of what room I happen to be in, are boons. I should also give a shout-out to Sonos’ superb user manual, and the support information on the Sonos website.

But the real beauty of the Sonos system is the way in which it marries excellent audio engineering to a system design that allows foolproof and efficient setup of a distributed-audio system. It’s just a shame, I guess, that these groundbreaking audio products didn’t come from an established high-end audio company.

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The ZP100 uses a hefty toroidal transformer.

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**Fig.6** Sonos ZP80, high-resolution jitter spectrum of analog output signal (11.025kHz at -6dBFS sampled at 44.1kHz with LSB toggled at 22.9kHz), 16-bit data. Center frequency of trace, 11.025kHz; frequency range, ±3.5kHz.

**Fig.7** Sonos ZP80, analog input, digital-domain spectra of 1kHz sine-wave at -1dBFS (red) and -33dBFS (blue), DC–20kHz (linear frequency scale).
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As you read this, are you listening to your stereo? Whatever the music, what you’re actually hearing is your public utility’s AC as modulated by your power amplifier. No matter how good the gear, the final result can be only as pure as the power feeding your components. Unfortunately, plenty of sonic schmutz usually comes along for the ride.

The purveyors of line conditioners, power regenerators, isolation transformers, and the like have been bombarding us with that message for years now, and it seems to have taken hold. Though the message comes larded with multiple helpings of BS, its basic truth is no longer in doubt.

Cleaning up the AC is good, but getting off the grid altogether and powering one’s stereo system with batteries is even better. In the early 1980s, the inexpensive and surprisingly quiet Marcon PPA-1 MC head amp, powered by a 9V battery, effectively made the case for many audiophiles. More recent products include Sutherland’s PhD phono preamp, powered by 16 Alkaline D cells; and ASR’s Basis Exclusive phono preamp (which I reviewed in my October 2003 “Analog Corner” column), tethered to a boat anchor of a rechargeable battery. Battery options are also available for phono preamps from Trigon and Phonomena, among others.

But none of those components requires all that much power. ASR’s Emitter II Exclusive is a battery-powered amplifier. Sort of. Its rechargeable battery powers only the amplifier’s driver stage, which the designer feels is the most critical. What’s more, the
battery supply is a plug-in option. Housed in its own heavy case, the battery supply contains six 6V, 12 ampere-hour batteries and a total of 400,000µF of capacitance. Once fully charged, the battery can power the driver stage for approximately 100 hours. The instructions recommend that you turn the Emitter II to Standby overnight after approximately two days of playing in order to limit the discharge level and keep the battery well conditioned. All battery operations, including charging, and auto-switching to AC power when the batteries are low, are controlled by optical digital logic circuits.

In practical terms, the ASR's battery power supply was transparent, never requiring my attention. Friedrich Schäfer made clear to me that he does *not* regard the Emitter II as an integrated amplifier—although the instruction manual calls it just that, and although it includes a volume control.
and input switching. Instead, he told me, it's a 250Wpc or 500Wpc (into 8 or 4 ohms, respectively) multi-input power amplifier with relay-based switching facilities and volume control. [This is exactly what Stereophile defines as an integrated amplifier—Ed.] The volume is adjusted via a rotary pulse encoder controlling 32 precision stepped relays. The input signal is attenuated up to volume level "50." At "51," the signal does not pass through the volume control, he assured me. From "52" up to the maximum setting of "76" is gain, but, accompanied by ultralow noise. During our conversation, Schäfer told me that there is approximately 20dB of gain at "51," but the instructions claim that the signal passes through the amplifier "unchanged." Hopefully, John Atkinson's measurements will clear all this up.

The Emitter II provided for review included five mirror-imaged sets of line-level, unbalanced RCA inputs, one set of balanced inputs (the signal is converted internally to unbalanced), and two RCA Tape Out jacks (other input options are possible). One of the RCA inputs, labeled Direkt, bypasses the switching relays and connects directly to the volume-control relays with silver wire. This input features separate ground paths. Though the Direkt input offers the purest and, potentially, the best-sounding, lowest-noise signal path, it can be used only in a single-source system. Switching to another input will not remove the Direkt input's signal from reaching the amplifier, and two signals will be heard simultaneously.

The Emitter II can be custom-built to offer two sets of speaker terminals, a front- or rear-mounted headphone jack, and a tape monitor switch. The review sample had none of those.

Testing the Emitter II Exclusive's power-delivery at clipping was an exercise in frustration, as the amplifier's protection circuitry would turn the amplifier off before it actually clipped, and flash a red warning light on the front panel. The protection circuitry had to be reset by turning the amplifier fully off. There also appeared to be some kind of "history" effect, in that once the amplifier had shut itself off, it would not allow as much power to be delivered to the test load the next time I tried to clip it. So bear all of that in mind when you look at the traces in fig.3, which plots the ASR's THD+N percentage against output power into loads ranging from 8 ohms down to 2 ohms. The bottom trace was taken with both channels driven into 8 ohms; it stops at 285W (24.5dBW), which is where the amplifier shut down, not where it clipped. Subsequently tested with both channels driven into 4 ohms (middle trace), the ASR shut off at 128W. But with one channel driven into 2 ohms (top trace), the Emitter II didn't shut itself off until it was putting out 830W (23.2dBW).

The shape of the traces in fig.3 suggests that the Emitter II's distortion lies under the noise below output powers of 10W or so. I therefore examined how the THD+N percentage changed with frequency at 11.5V output, equivalent to 16.5W into 8 ohms. The results are shown in fig.4, which shows that while the THD is very low at low and midrange frequencies, it does rise with both increasing frequency and decreasing load impedance, though not to any level that might be thought to be subjectively significant.

Fig.5 suggests that the distortion's harmonic content is predominantly low-order, although a peculiar discontinuity in the distortion waveform at the start of each sinewave cycle is more pronounced into low than into high impedances.

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which was fine with me.

The building blocks of the Emitter II include a FET op-amp IC input stage, a "very fast" MOSFET driver stage, and five high-power audio MOSFETs per channel in the output, with separate power supplies for each channel. ASR claims that the amplifier operates "mostly" in class-A, and with no capacitors in the signal path, for full direct-coupled operation with offset regulation. Each outboard power supply, containing a pair of massive transformers, produces separate voltages that are individually rectified and pre-buffered, to separately supply the input, driver (if the optional battery supply is not used), output, and microprocessor-control circuits.

All amplifier operations are controlled by microprocessors. In the superb-sounding Basis Exclusive phono preamp, Schärer used a seemingly unlikely microphone preamp op-amp. Here he's chosen a video op-amp for the input stage. He told me that it sounds better, less "mechanical" than the audio op-amps he tried, thanks in part to low open-loop gain (i.e., less negative feedback required).

**Setup and use**

The Emitter II's main chassis alone is rather large. Because it can also have two— or, with the battery option, three— large boxes tethered to it, placement can be problematic. The racks fill up quickly. In systems like mine, with sources and preamp located on one sidewall and amplifiers placed between the speakers, the choice is either to run very long lengths of speaker cables, or multiple long lengths of interconnects from source components to amp. The latter proved to be the best option for me, though most buyers will probably place the Emitter II and all source components on racks between the speakers. I also tried the Manley Skipjack, a passive, relay-controlled, programmable switch box that permits, among other things, switching among four inputs. Using it, I needed only a single long run of interconnect from all of my source components to the ASR.

The ASR's big, beefy terminals made speaker connection easy and secure. Though the amplifier incorporates various kinds of protective circuit-
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Deep sound

Your New York–based Stereophile flight crew was invited to hear a pair of Emitter II Exclusives in action at Lyric HiFi recently, driving the four-tower Nola Grand Reference loudspeaker system. In-store demos are notoriously tricky, unpredictable, and often unsatisfactory, but usually the experienced listener can come away with at least a general sense of a product's quality. Lyric's combo of Nolas and Emitter II Exclusives was bass-heavy, and produced Godzilla-sized images on a sweepingly large soundstage. I'm not big on 25'-long harpsichords. However, there was an effortlessness to the overall presentation that made me want to hear an Emitter II at home and review it here.

My curiosity was rewarded with the best overall musical performance I've heard yet from my Wilson Audio MAXX2 loudspeakers. Though the Wilsons' production of depth had always been good, from the first note I heard with the ASR there was an immediate sense of unlimited depth that I'd not previously experienced from the Wilsons in my listening room. A vast, expansive soundstage opened up that no previous amplifier had managed to create with a pair of speakers that had nonetheless always delivered big, dramatic pictures, even when driven by undernourished electronics.

Disc after disc, the Emitter II produced a tube-like sense of open space "way back there" and, at the same time, a floor-to-ceiling expanse of sound that helped produce an sensation of almost being outdoors—the walls, floor, and ceiling seemed to drop away. This spaciousness was accompanied by image solidity without hardness or unnatural edge definition, and an uncanny three-dimensionality. The sonic pictures produced by the Emitter II Exclusive were immediately and continually stupefying throughout the month and a half it was in my system.

That's what I noticed right away. It was followed by the remarkable floating sensation of effortlessness and ease that had been apparent during the otherwise less-than-stellar demo at Lyric HiFi. That sense of inviting ease, along with its remarkable transparency, were the Emitter II Exclusive's greatest achievements. They help explain why I listened more intently, more often, and longer into the night than during any other month and a half of my life. That's how much listening I did.

The Emitter II Exclusive was as free of "electronica" as many of the tube amps I've heard, but it also had an upper-octave expansiveness, clarity—and, especially, transparency—that no tube amp I've heard has managed to produce. Its midband performance was as lush and rich as a tube amp's, but without euphonic colorations. And the Emitter II's control of the MAXX2s' woofers was iron-fisted without being over-damped. This can probably be partially explained by the amp's remarkably low (subjectively; at least) noise floor. I thought the mbI 9007 monoblocks that I reviewed in September were silent, and they are, but the ASR took the noise floor down more than a few stories.

Shortly after the ASR was installed, I was listening to The Essential Hollywood, a film-music compilation (2 CDs, Sony Classical 82876-77086-2), in preparation for reviewing it for my website, www.musicangle.com. I was startled by the superb sound of the main title music for Gone With the Wind. When I checked the meager annotation and saw that the conductor was Charles Gerhardt, I realized that this track had been culled from a wonderful series of film-score recordings engineered by Kenneth Wilkinson and issued by RCA Red Seal on Dynavox vinyl in 1974. I had the whole set, so I put on the original LP (ARL 1-0452). The sound was absolutely astonishing, Dynavox notwithstanding. The
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lusciousness of the strings, the bite and tone of the brass, the sheer physicality of the orchestra, the scale of the presentation—all were well beyond anything I'd had sitting in this chair.

This led me to pull another disc in the series, Sunset Boulevard: The Classic Film Scores of Franz Waxman (ARL 1-0708), which includes music from Prince Valiant, A Place in the Sun, Sunset Boulevard, and the Theremin-enriched Bride of Frankenstein. For sheer orchestral bombast, Prince Valiant can't be beat, but the sultry suite from A Place in the Sun (which starred Elizabeth Taylor and Montgomery Clift, who, I've just read, was once the lover of the original Jimmy Olsen, Jack Larson), with its distant, boozzy, lone saxophone, tinkly cocktail piano, lush strings, crashing horns, and heartbreaking horns, put my enthusiasm for this amplifier over the top—way over the top. The lusciousness of the massed strings, the redness of the sax (placed way back stage left), the piano's uncanny, woody clarity, and the horns' sleek edge, produced a perfectly ripe, almost overwhelming sonic picture that never sounded canned or electronic.

The majesty of this recording was such that I insisted that JA pay a visit to hear it, then take the amps with him, instead of me shipping them to him for measurements. I wanted him to hear what I was hearing to give me some measure of cover, should the measurements indicate some mismesmerizing coloration, à la the Harmonic Technology CyberLight cable (see my review in the August 2005 Stereophile), that somehow escaped my attention. If there is one or more measurable colorations, I didn't detect it; I found the Emitter II Exclusive to be the most colorless (in the best sense of the word) piece of electronics I've heard.

I tried everything to find the chinks in this amp's armor. MOSFETs can sound soft—maybe the Emitter II Exclusive sounded too soft for rock? So I started pulling stuff, including, for some reason, an original pink-label pressing of Jethro Tull's Stand Up (Island ILPS 9103). But instead of finding "soft," I found the brash cymbals on "A New Day Yesterday" perfectly sorted out, with just the right attack: sharp transients intact, plenty of simmer, and organized with astonishing clarity. Ian Anderson's edgy, breathy flute had a wonderful balance of air and metal, and convincingly stood center stage forward.

Night after night, I found myself pulling out familiar records and rediscovering old favorites in a vain attempt to find the Emitter II's weak suit. I tried LPs of female vocals: Nanci Griffith's Storms (MCA 6319), Janis Ian's Breaking Silence (Analog Productions APP027), an original pressing of Canteloube's Song of the Auvergne (Vanguard VSD2090), and Martin Jones's wonderful, under-appreciated Used Guitars (A&M SP 5208). All confirmed that the incredible depth produced by the ASR was not due to a lower-midbass heaviness that can show up as a chestiness in vocals.

I taxed the Emitter II's bass-producing abilities with Telarc's old D2D recording of Michael Murray Playing the Great Organ in the Methuen Memorial Music Hall (LP, 5036 DD-2), which I hadn't played for more than a decade. The amp produced prodigious amounts of muscular, well-textured organ bass from the MAXX2s. (I also noticed in the credits that the recording was made at the suggestion of Aerial Acoustics' Michael Kelly, who then worked for a/d/s, whose speakers were used by Telarc's Jack Reimer for monitoring.) Then I tried Jon Hassell's City: Works of Fiction (LP; Opal 26153-1), on which my friend Dan Schwartz plays monster bass. The LP was not shortchanged by the amp, or by the MAXX2s.

Trying to find recordings that might overwhelm the Emitter II's dynamic capabilities, I dug into some of the thousands of classical LPs I was given last year, and found some astonishing, obscure (at least to me!) recordings—including Vincent d'Indy's Istar, conducted by Pierre Dervaux (EMI-Pathé Marconi C069-14043)—that confirmed electronic music were equally satisfying, including Everything Ecstatic, Part 2 (Domino Wig.Lp 173), the latest LP of pleasing bleeps, blops, and squiggles from Four Tet. Finally, I played some recordings that just plain suck, that make my ears bleed or can turn an expensive audio rig into a Bose Acoustimas system. Guess what? They still sucked.

Mostly, though, rather than searching for recordings to trip up the Emitter II, I just stayed up every night happily spinning discs, delving into dark corners of my record collection (and, thanks to the amp's low noise floor and high resolution, the dark corners of my favorite recordings) in which I hadn't set foot in years or, in some cases, decades, enjoying and marveling at the supple, tactile, harmonically complete, rhythmically persuasive, spatially convincing, utterly effortless presentation of this impressive performer.

Conclusions
The four-box ASR Emitter II Exclusive proved to be among the most neutral-sounding pieces of audio gear I have ever heard. It bridged the gap between tubes and solid-state as has no other piece of electronics in my experience. It sounded neither tube-like nor transistorly. The usual solid-state negatives at the extremes—dryness, etch, edge, overdamped bass, mudd, muddling—simply didn't apply to the Emitter II Exclusive. From solo violins and harpsichords to full orchestral climaxes, the amp produced the most natural and realistic sonic pictures I've yet heard in my listening room. In doing so, it took itself out of those pictures, and dragged the speakers out of both the ASR's spatial prowess and its prodigious dynamic capabilities.

I pulled originals and reissues of some favorite Roy Orbison albums to hear how well the amp distinguished each one's particular sonic signature, and the Emitter II was impressively neutral and revealing. Recordings of
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- LP = AAP 1035-45 $39.99 (two LPs, 45 RPM, 180-gram)

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the way along with it. Other listeners, experienced and novice alike, heard it do this too.

Aside from the high cost—though remember that it doesn’t need a pre-amp—the biggest problems presented by the Emitter II are those of space and complexity raised by having to find somewhere to put its four big boxes. Audiophiles with source racks on the side and power amplifiers between their speakers will have a hard time finding somewhere to put the Emitter II. If its four boxes end up between the speakers, it will either require a total system reconfiguration or lengths of expensive interconnect running from each source. The other option is to use a passive switcher like the Manley Skipjack, but for some reason I found putting even a carefully designed, relay-driven device like the Skipjack between sources and the Emitter II’s direct input added a trace of grain and edge and detracted from the transparency and purity the amp is capable of delivering. So even if you’ve got $24,900 to drop, first consider the logistics.

Postscript
After an experience such as that provided by the Emitter II Exclusive, the real test is when I reinsert my reference into my system. After they’d warmed up, I was still impressed by my reference Musical Fidelity kW preamplifier and kW power amp. They are prodigious performers in their own rights, and believe me, the ASR has not suddenly rendered them amusical or sonically unsatisfactory. On the plus side, the kW’s huge power reserves produce an equally effortless presentation, if not more so. The MF combo’s dynamic capabilities remain unsurpassed, including by the Emitter II Exclusive, good as it is dynamically.

However, as demonstrated to me by the kW’s baby brother, the powerful and bargain-priced ($10,000!) kW750 that I reviewed in December 2005, the kW sounds slightly forward and a bit cool. But with that slight chill come a clarity and a transient authority that tend to compensate to some degree.

So yes, sitting in my chair now writing this, listening to that Franz Waxman disc that so wowed me through the ASR, I hear it a bit cooler and a bit more forward through the MF combo—but also, perhaps, with slightly more air, dynamic authority, and solidity—factors that almost compensate for what, now that the ASR is gone, I’m no longer getting. I’m tempted...
why don’t you review affordable gear?

Readers always pose that question to Stereophile, and it doesn’t matter what we think affordable means—to a large percentage of our readers (or at least of our letter-writers), we don’t get it.

So when a Forums participant put the question to John Atkinson last winter (http://forum.stereophile.com/forum/ubbthreads.php), our fearless leader responded along the lines of “Like what?”

“Like the $39 Sonic Impact power amplifier. It’s surprisingly good—and not just for the money.”

Well, $39 is affordable by any definition, and John’s response was immediate. “I ordered one. I’ll report my impressions.”

Time went by. It wasn’t that JA didn’t want to listen to the little amp that was causing all the buzz (unfortunate choice of words); it’s more that his life is controlled—nay, oppressed—by deadlines. Listening for “fun” has become a distant memory. One afternoon, as the two of us plotted how to get the mighty Canton Vento Reference 1 DCs over to his test lab, an optimistic expression flitted across John’s face.

“If only we had a product you could carry home in one hand that you could
review this month...why, oh yes, I do believe I have something that fits the bill right on my bench."

"Now hold on, hoss," I said. "Don't you try to palm off none of that cheap hi-fi on me—I'm on to your tricks!"

"I wouldn't do that to you, Wes. Sonic Impact sent me their upgraded, $159 model. You can review that."

Heh-heh. In the end, I got mine. The Model TA2024 Super T amplifier has proven to be so much fun and so full of surprises that John's been waiting on my copy long past the deadline.

Never lose your sense of the superficial
If $159 isn't affordable enough for you, you can buy the base model for $39, but you'll need to add a 12V DC power supply (or batteries), and you won't get the nice aluminum case, higher-quality RCA inputs, or five-way binding posts. And no, I'll tell you up front that I haven't compared the upgrade against the plain-vanilla model. Sonic Impact says it made changes based on the feedback of its audiophile customers, and that Tripath made more than 14 modifications to its chip (see below), so you're not simply paying extra for the audio jewelry.

So what the heck is this thing? Basically, it's a simple class-D power amplifier based on the Tripath TA2024 chip (www.tripath.com/downloads/TA2024.pdf). According to Tripath's data sheet, the TA2024 produces 11W into 4 ohms or 6W into 8 ohms—and that's what Sonic Impact claims, too.

The TA2024 is 725” H by 3.5” W by 75” D, and its narrow front panel is dominated by a huge, central volume knob, a smaller power button, and a blue power LED. The sides of the case

MEASUREMENTS

preconditioned the Sonic Impact Super T amplifier with both channels running at one-third maximum output power for an hour into 8 ohms, but, as expected with an amplifier with a high-efficiency switching output stage, the chassis was as cold at the end of that period as it had been at the start. The THD+noise percentage was 0.0911% at the start and 0.0916% at the end; ie, no significant change. The maximum voltage gain into 8 ohms was a little lower than usual, at 25.1dB, and the amplifier inverted signal polarity.

The input impedance depended both on frequency and on the setting of the volume control. With the latter set to its maximum, the input impedance measured a fairly low 7.8k ohms in the bass and midrange, dropping slightly to 6.5k ohms at 20kHz. With the volume control set to 12:00, these rose to 19k ohms at low and midrange frequencies and 13k ohms at high frequencies.

The output impedance was a moderately high 0.35 ohm at 20Hz and 1kHz, rising to a very high 5 ohms at 20kHz, the latter due, I imagine, to the series output filter, however, will interact with the load impedance, and this interaction can be seen in fig.1, which shows the Super T’s frequency response with the amplifier driving resistive loads ranging from 2 to 8 ohms, as well as Stereophile’s standard simulated loudspeaker. While the high-frequency response is drastically curtailed into 4 ohms and below—the output into 4 ohms is down by 2dB at 20kHz and a very audible 6.5dB into 2 ohms—it actually peaks by 1.5dB at 23kHz into 8 ohms. This gives rise to a noticeable overshoot in the Sonic Impact’s reproduction of a 1kHz squarewave (fig.2), though the 10kHz squarewave confirms that there is no ringing, the overshoot being well-damped (fig.3). These graphs were all taken with the volume control wide open; there were no significant changes in response at lower settings. Channel separation was excellent at almost 90dB in both directions at 1kHz, this decreasing (due to the usual capacitive

Fig.1 Sonic Impact Super T, frequency response at 2.83V into (from top to bottom at 2kHz): simulated loudspeaker load, 8, 4, 2 ohms (0.5dB/vertical div., right channel dashed).

Fig.2 Sonic Impact Super T, small-signal 1kHz squarewave into 8 ohms.
are unadorned, and the rear panel sports a DC input, two RCA inputs, and some perforations, presumably for ventilation, although the TA2024 shouldn't need much of that at a claimed efficiency of 81% at 11W into 4 ohms.

What else do you get? A simple switching wall-watt power supply, a cable that lets you run the TA2024 off your car battery, and some “gimme” speaker cable. What did you want for $159?

The Super T isn't so much an integrated amplifier as a power amp with a volume pot—you get no source switching or buffering, neither of which seems crippling given its proposed use of providing affordable, easily portable power amplification.

People think it must be fun to be a supergenius, but they don't realize how hard it is to put up with all the idiots in the world

The first thing I did was plunk the Super T right in the middle of the system I'd been reviewing: Canton Vento Reference 1 DC speakers, Conrad-Johnson CT-5 preamp, and my trusty Ayre C-5xe universal player. Wired with Stereovox's Colibri interconnect and Firebird speaker cable, my system didn't even have a cable that cost as little as the TA2024. Heck, my Furutech wall socket cost more!

That might seem unfair, but my custom is to introduce only a single variable, then play around with more over time. It's not so much that I'm scientific as that I have OCD and I must do things a certain way. Otherwise, the world will come to an end, and an audio review just isn't worth that.

coupling) to a still-good 70dB (L-R) and 62dB (R-L) at 20kHz (not shown).

As with all amplifiers that use a switching output stage, examining the Sonic Impact's distortion performance was complicated by the presence of RF energy in its output. Even at the level of a few millivolts, unless this energy is filtered, you can never be sure that you're not actually measuring the interaction between the RF content and the test gear instead of the absolute performance of the amplifier under test (again, see www.stereophile.com/integratedamps/106ps/index4.html). Therefore, to ensure that I was measuring what I thought I was measuring, I repeated the THD-related measurements using an active sixth-order low-pass filter set to 30kHz.

Fig.4 plots the percentage of THD+N in the Sonic Impact's output against output power in watts, taken without the low-pass filter. The bottom two traces show the behavior with a 1kHz sinewave into 8 and 4 ohms. The amplifier just fails to meet its specified power into 8 ohms: instead of 6W (7.8dBW), I measured 5.5W (7.4dBW) at clipping (defined as 1% THD+N). The shortfall was a little worse into 4 ohms: 9.2W (6.6dBW) instead of 11W (7.4dBW). Into 2 ohms, the amplifier didn't clip but simply stopped at 13W (fig.4, top trace). These measurements didn't surprise me. The amplifier's power supply is a 12V, 3A wall wart, and even with the Super T's high-efficiency output stage, there just aren't enough volts and amps to be delivered into the load to generate higher powers than these. Interestingly, the Super T clipped at lower powers when powered by the linear 12V Monolithic supply with which Wes Phillips experimented.

Peculiarly, the Super T is more linear at low frequencies into low impedances than it is into high ones (fig.5). Above 1kHz, however, the amplifier clearly has trouble
So I maxed the Super T's volume knob, using the CT-5 as source selector and volume control, and cued up "The Mooche," from the Jerome Harris Quintet's Rendezvous (CD, Stereophile STPH013-2).

I was promptly amazed. Not that the Super T worked—I'd figured it would work. But the Super T wasn't too bad—in fact, I sort of forgot about listening to the Super T and zoned out on Marty Ehrlich's alto-sax solos. "The Mooche" is pretty much trombonist Art Baron's showpiece, but for me, Ehrlich comes awfully close to stealing the show on his, second set of variations at the end of the track.

That was good. Now how about some Manu Katché...?

But enough with this music stuff—what about the sound? Forcing myself back into my analytic mode, and despite being impressed that my system's sound hadn't gone all tarnifion, I had to admit that, compared to the $3500/pair Portal Paladin monoblocks it had replaced (see my review in the September 2006 issue), the Sonic Impact Super T had less focus, more grain, a slight haze overall, and less bass control in the deeper passages. In fact, Rendezvous turned out to be a good opening selection, because lesser systems always rob Jerome Harris' Taylor acoustic electric bass of its punch and pop—both of which were essentially MIA with the Super T. Still, the Super costs $159—and who in his or her right mind would connect a 7.5"-tall, 11Wpc amplifier to 6'-tall reference speakers?

Anyway, I'd proven that the Super T "worked"; now it was time to get real. I took it downstairs to my newly created "small" listening room (9' W by 15' L by 7.8' H) and connected it between a Musical Fidelity X-Ray³ CD player and a pair of Linn Tukan speakers with Kimber PBJ and 8TC speaker cable—still no budget system, but all components that I've lived with for years and know well.

Now we were talking! I heard a lot less grain, haze, and hash, and was just as entranced by the music. I started spending a lot of time in my "lesser" listening room, listening long into the night. I was stunned by the amount of bass impact the Super T produced through the Tukans. On Claude Chaloub's eponymous CD (Teldec 8573-83039-2), the sound of his Stradivari violin was more than counterbalanced by the immense bass sounds (augmented by synths, I at first suspected) the Sonic Impact wrested from the disc. Sonic Impact? Hmm, good name.

Yet I was convinced that still lurking in the Super T was performance I wasn't exploiting. I placed a Shakti Stone on top of it and an immense amount of

![Fig.6 Sonic Impact Super T, 1kHz waveform at 2W into 4 ohms (top), 0.108% THD+N; distortion and noise waveform with fundamental notched out (bottom, not to scale).](image1)

![Fig.7 Sonic Impact Super T, 1kHz waveform at 4W into 4 ohms (top), 0.108% THD+N; distortion and noise waveform with fundamental notched out (bottom, not to scale), with 30kHz sixth-order low-pass filter.](image2)

![Fig.8 Sonic Impact Super T, spectrum of 50Hz sinewave, DC-1kHz, at 6.5W into 4 ohms (linear frequency scale).](image3)
the remaining haze disappeared, giving the amp a heretofore unsuspected clarity and, yes, focus. No, I have no idea why the Shakti Stone works, other than to bet it’s not for any reason given as the “one, true” explanation—but that’s what I heard.

I was so emboldened by that change that I wanted to go further. Dubiously eying that switching power supply, I remembered that I had a Monolithic Audio Perpetual Power Plant on the shelf and that it put out more current than the Super T’s 3A. Sure enough—again, the sound was transformed. Now the bass on Chaloub’s disc had less of that shuddery synth sound and a lot more of that bass-drum-head-flapping tautness. I was starting to question whether there was any bass augmentation going on. Things were getting really good.

Things were also getting out of hand. I was no longer reviewing the Super T, exactly, but a Frankenamp. However, à my defense, it had been a long time since an audio product had gotten my juices flowing the way the Super T did. It made me want to play—play with it, and play music with it.

Common sense always takes a hasty and superficial view. So back to the stock power supply (but keeping the Shakti Stone on top), I began to switch speakers around. The Tukans were fun, so I thought I’d substitute the Dynaudio Focus 140s ($1800/pair), which I reviewed in May (www.stereophile.com/standloudspeakers/506dynaudio/). The Dynaudios are about twice the price of the Linns, and the performance difference seemed to justify that. With the Super T, at least, the Linns had an exaggerated presence at around 50Hz that began to explain my reaction to the bass-drum sound on the Chaloub disc—it was far more controlled with the 140s.

Yet the 140s sounded less exciting throughout the presence region, precisely where a violin recording ought to excite. Deciding I’d try another loudspeaker, I looked into my magic

—83dB (0.007%), with the third and fifth harmonics lying at −90dB (0.003%). (These odd-order harmonics disappear if the load impedance is increased to 8 ohms, leaving just the benign second harmonic as the primary spurious component.) But with a 1kHz sinewave at the same power into the same load, again with the 30kHz low-pass filter in front of the analyzer’s input (fig.9), the third is now the highest-level harmonic, at −66dB (0.05%), and some high-order components can be seen, correlating with the spikes seen in the waveform graph.

Finally, the relatively poor HF linearity seen in fig.5 results in somewhat disappointing performance with the amplifier driving an equal mix of 19kHz and 20kHz tones into 4 ohms, even at a power level below visible waveform clipping (fig.10).

The Sonic Impact Super T amplifier’s measured performance is impacted by its use of a small external power supply and by its disappointing high-frequency linearity. But at its very affordable price, it should provide acceptable performance when matched to high-sensitivity speakers.

—John Atkinson
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storeroom of wonders and beheld a pair of Dynaudio Special Twenty-Fives ($5200/pair). Hmmm, kind of silly... but what the heck.

As ridiculous as it sounds, the combination was magical. At first I was concerned that the Special Twenty-Fives would tax an 11Wpc amplifier, but this speaker spends a lot of its range in the 6 ohm region, which seemed to make the Sonic Impact quite happy. With the Special Twenty-Fives, Jerome Harris rejoined the band he leads on Rendezvous. His bass burbled under, snaked around, and just generally pushed the other musicians wherever he wanted them to be. Welcome back, Jerome!

Claude Chaloub’s Strad was far more in proportion to that big bass drum, too. It had a sheen and shimmer that made me remember how loud a violin can be when you're in its field of focus. Well, hello, Claude.

The superfluous is very necessary I had no sub-$200 amplifiers to compare the Super T to, so I pulled out Channel Island Audio’s D100 monoblocks, which at $1399/pair are only 9 times the Sonic Impact’s price. I’d like to report that the Super T was the D100’s near equal—we all love David-vs-Goliath stories (not that even two of the little D100s could be considered a Goliath)—but the Channel Islands, which also use a class-D output stage though not from Tripath, were just plain better.

It’s not so much that the D100s had the edge in smooth sound or drive, although they were superior in both areas. No, it was the resolution of detail, whether spatial or temporal. Sounds started and stopped better with the D100s, which made Rendezvous snap and crackle with more energy. This was especially evident in Billy Drummond’s drum sound, which is woody and rich, and in his rhythmic drive, which is artistry that approaches magic.

The Super T got close; the D100 brought it on.

I was intrigued enough by the disparity between the amps that I pulled out all three pairs of stand-mounted monitors and listened to them with the D100s. I clearly heard the differences among the three speakers, but they seemed less extreme than they had with the Sonic Impact. I’ll read JA’s measurements with interest; I suspect that the Super T’s frequency response may vary with impedance, suggesting that choosing the right speaker is the secret to extracting maximum performance from the Super T.

Well, that’s just super All of which seems practically dunderheaded in how it misses the points. First: The Sonic Impact 5062 Super T costs $159! Second: It’s pretty darn good—and can be tweaked to sound even better without spending a ton of money or putting yourself in danger. Third: It sounded good enough that I rediscovered my (not so) inner audio geek, spending hours trying different fixes, making comparisons, doing weird stuff just in case.

The Sonic Impact TA2024 Super T is not going to cause Krell or Halcro any sleepless nights, but it’s good enough that it might cost you some snooze time as you stay up late playing records you haven’t heard in a long time. If you’re an old fart like me, it might reconnect you to the time when hi-fi was fun. And if you’re a young’un, it just might persuade you that it is.

And did I mention that it costs only $159?

“At $3500/pair, the Portal Paladin isn’t quite a budget component, but ... (it) offers sound that equipment twice its price would be hard-pressed to match, much less better.”


Read the rest of Wes Phillips’ review of the Portal Paladin Monoblocks:

www.portalaudio.com/paladin.html

ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

DIAGNOSIS SOURCE: Ayre C5-xe universal player, Musical Fidelity X-Ray CD player.

PREAMPLIFIER: Conrad-Johnson CT-5.

POWER AMPLIFIERS: Portal Paladin, Channel Island Audio D100 (both monoblocks).

SPEAKERS: Canton Vento Reference 1 DC, Dynaudio Special Twenty-Five, Dynaudio Focus 140, Linn Tukan.

CABLES: Interconnect: Audience Au24, Kimber PBJ, Shunyata Research Aries, Stereovox Cobrili.

Speaker: Kimber 8TC, Shunyata Research Lyra, Stereovox Firebird.

AC: Shunyata Research Anaconda & Orion.

ACCESSORIES: Monolithic Audio Perpetual Power Plant external power supply, Audience adeptResponse power conditioner, Shunyata Research Hydra AC Power Distribution System; OSAR Selway/Magruder, Salamander Synergy Solution equipment racks; Ayre Myrtle Wood Blocks, Shakti Stones. —Wes Phillips

www.Stereophile.com, October 2006
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EQUIPMENT REPORT

NAD C 372
INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER

Jim Austin

The NAD C 372 isn’t flashy. On the shelf just below my Marantz SA-15 SACD player, with its blue lights and scrolling text, it looks rather plain. It’s handsome enough, but no one who’s used to the look of more expensive gear is likely to buy the C 372 for its looks. Still, there’s an integrity to its design that is appealing: it looks like what it is.

The C 372 succeeds the C 370, which received a lot of good press, including a favorable review by Chip Stern in the January 2002 Stereophile; he called it “an exceptionally solid, versatile, musical performer.” The C 370 also won the Amphi-
fier of the Year award from the European Imaging and Sound Association, and was, for a while, a Stereophile "Recommended Component."

For the C 372, NAD beefed up and refined the C 370 formula. They upgraded the power supply with a larger transformer and better capacitors, which made it possible to up the power from 120W to 150W. They improved the preamp and driver-stage modules (both of which are claimed to be pure class-A), improved the tone-control circuit, and revised the layout of the circuit boards to further reduce the C 370's already low distortion. The remote was upgraded and the cosmetics were changed. Voilà—the C 372.

For a feature-rich amp, the C 372's front panel is exceptionally simple and clean. There's a Power button, separate buttons for each of two sets of speakers, and buttons for the seven line-level inputs—including two tape loops. The Bass and Treble controls can be bypassed for a shorter circuit path via a front-panel switch. There is also a Balance control and, of course, a Volume knob. Everything but the tone and balance controls can be adjusted from the remote.

Around back, NAD's designers went for flexibility, not minimalism. The rear panel contains seven line inputs, two sets of speaker outputs, and two preamp outputs, one of which has a volume control. That volume control allows you to use any amplifier, regardless of gain, to drive your speakers, if you're so inclined. One of the pre-outs can also be connected to a powered subwoofer or two. There is also a power-amp input, which allows inser-

**Measurements**

I preconditioned the NAD C 372 by running both channels for 60 minutes at one-third the measured continuous clipping power into 8 ohms. With the amplifier cold, the THD+noise percentage was 0.0037%; it had risen very slightly after 60 minutes to 0.0046%. The top panel was also quite hot at that time—just under 60°C—but I could keep my hand on it.

The maximum voltage gain into 8 ohms was 38.1dB, 29.05dB of this coming from the power-amplifier section, 9.05dB from the preamp. Neither section inverted signal polarity; i.e., the amplifier as a whole preserved absolute polarity. The input impedance was higher than specified, at >200k ohms over most of the audioband, dropping inconsecutively to 114k ohms at 20kHz. Measured at the Link jacks, the power amplifier's input impedance was a fairly low 10k ohms at all frequencies, while the preamplifier section's output impedance was a usefully low 70 ohms.

The left channel's output impedance at the speaker terminals was 0.1 ohm in the bass and midrange, rising slightly to 0.14 ohm at 20kHz. As a result of this low value, the modification of the amplifier's frequency response by the usual Ohm's Law interaction between its source impedance and that of the loudspeaker will be small (fig.1, top trace at 2kHz). This graph, taken with the tone controls defeated, also indicates that the amplifier has a wide small-signal bandwidth, the −3dB point into 8 ohms lying at 200kHz. This bandwidth did not significantly change with different volume-control settings, but it did decrease slightly into 2 ohms (fig.1, bottom dashed trace).

The C 372's reproduction of a 10kHz squarewave was excellent, with no overshoot or ringing evident (fig.2). Fig 1 was taken with the volume control set to its maximum; the small degree of imbalance visible in the 8 ohm traces doubles into 4 ohms, the right channel having a slightly greater output impedance. This channel imbalance also increased slightly at lower volume-control settings. Channel separation (not shown) was good rather than great, at 80dB in the midrange, decreasing at the top of the audioband to 55dB (R—L) and 67dB (L—R). The C 372's treble and bass controls have sensibly limited ranges of operation (fig.3). Assessed with the volume control at its maximum but the input shorted, the C 372's unweighted, wideband signal/noise ratio was good, at 78.5dB (left) and 78.9dB (right), both figures ref. 2.83V into 8ohms. A-weighting increased the S/N ratios to 91.1dB and 94.0dB respectively.

With its commutating output-stage voltage rails and the option of Soft Clipping, the NAD's maximum output power will depend on the test circumstances. Driven with a continuous tone without Soft Clipping engaged, the amplifier's plot of THD+N percentage against output power (fig.4, lower trace) was conventional, with the THD buried in the noise until just before the point where the output waveform began to square. At clipping (1%
tion of a parametric equalizer or a high-pass filter, such as the one required by Vandersteen's 2Wq subwoofer. All inputs and outputs (except, of course, for the speaker binding posts) are unbalanced RCA.

The amplifier section can be bridged via a rear-panel switch to create a single 300W monoblock. The rear panel also contains a switch to defeat NAD's Soft Clipping feature, which, though it might be very useful in a less powerful amplifier, wasn't needed in my relatively small living room, where clipping is unlikely to occur at the levels at which I listen. I thought—I wouldn't swear to it—that I perceived a slight loss of sound when Soft Clipping was engaged, so I turned it off for most of my listening.

The C 372 doesn't have a phono stage; it does, however, have a headphone amplifier with a single ¼" connector on the front panel, the volume controlled, as usual, by the preamp section's volume knob. Speaker outputs don't automatically mute when headphones are inserted, but speakers can be turned off at the front panel or with the remote.

Another NAD feature that merits a mention is what the company calls PowerDrive. This, apparently, senses the load impedance and compensates by adding a second high-voltage rail to the power supply to increase the available power in the short term (see Sidebar).

### Logistics

Despite the flexibility that the C 372 allows, its operation was intuitive; the front-panel layout is simple and ele-

---

THD+N), the NAD gave out 190W with both channels driven (22.8dBW), slightly higher than the specified 180W. Engaging Soft Clipping increased the distortion above a few watts output due to the waveform rounding that occurs, and reduced the continuous 1% power to 125W into 8 ohms (21dBW, fig.4, upper trace).

I didn't measure the maximum continuous power delivery into loads lower than 8 ohms. For that I used the Miller Audio Research Amplifier Profiler, which allows THD to be measured using a short-duty-cycle toneburst, in this case 10 cycles of 1kHz followed by 400 cycles of silence. The results of this testing with Soft Clipping off are shown in fig.5. No fewer than 300W are available at 1% THD (true sum of the distortion harmonics, horizontal magenta line in fig.5) into 8 ohms (red trace), which is 1dB higher than the continuous power rating. The C 372 delivered 535W into 4 ohms (24.3dBW, black trace), 940W into 2 ohms (23.7dBW, blue), and 1450W into 1 ohm (22.6dBW, green). The latter is equivalent to an instantaneous current of 39A, although, of course, the amplifier can maintain this current for only a very short time.

With Soft Clipping engaged, the maximum output power into all loads was reduced (not shown), but interestingly, the amplifier now behaved more like a perfect voltage source, its 1% THD output power on tonebursts doubling each time the load impedance was halved: 200W into 8 ohms, 400W into 4 ohms, 800W into 2 ohms, and 1430W into 1 ohm, all but the last equivalent to 23dBW.1

---

1 When rating amplifier output power in dBW, I use the convention established by British reviewer Martin Colloms 20 years ago, which is to use an 8-ohm watt as the reference. This is a true voltage-source amplifier will offer the same dBW rating into all impedances, which I feel is an easier paradigm to grasp than one in which the rating increases by 3dB for each halving of the load impedance.

---

![Strobe NAD C 372 THD-N (%) vs Output Power (W) into 8 ohms W/O Soft Clipping](image1)

![Strobe NAD C 372 THD-N (%) vs Output Power (W) into 8 ohms](image2)

---

Fig.4 NAD C 372, distortion (%) vs 1kHz continuous output power into 8 ohms with soft clipping on (top) and off (bottom).

---

![Fig.3 NAD C 372, frequency response at 2.83V into 8 ohms with treble and bass controls set to their maximum and minimum settings (2dB/vertical div., right channel dashed).](image3)

![Fig.5 NAD C 372, Soft Clipping off, distortion (%) vs 1kHz toneburst output power (10 cycles on, 400 cycles off) into 8 (red), 4 (black), 2 (blue), and 1 ohms (green).](image4)
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Contact John or Carl to design your dream system. www.audiounlimiteddenver.com
Like most industries, hi-fi has its share of empty marketing slogans—so many that it makes sense to regard manufacturers' claims about their equipment with a certain degree of skepticism. I kept this in mind as I pressed Greg Stidsen, NAD's director of product development, to explain to me just what the company's PowerDrive technology is.

A lot of what makes high-end monster amps powerful and expensive is the extra balls required to drive a difficult loudspeaker load—one of very low impedance, perhaps in combination with a large phase angle—at frequencies where music has a lot of energy. Such loads require extra power to keep the amplifier from distorting and to keep the character of the sound from changing. In traditional designs, that extra power is used only when the load would stress a lesser amp—when the amplifier isn't working hard, all that extra power is wasted. "So at 8 ohms, all these big parts that you paid extra for" in that monster amplifier you just bought "are just loafing along," wrote Stidsen in an e-mail.

NAD's PowerDrive amplifiers give your speakers what they most crave. When the load is difficult, the circuit maximizes current delivery, but with easier loads—those that don't require so much current—the amplifier switches to "a second, higher voltage winding [that] allows us to employ the full current capability we already have and make it available into 8 ohms," said Stidsen. Simple but clever. Stidsen claims that what sets PowerDrive apart from other designs—such as the "class-G" approach commonly found in pro-audio equipment—is the way it determines which of these two voltage supplies should be used at any given moment. The circuit senses the operating conditions of the output stage (voltage, current, heat) and decides which rail to switch in, high current or high voltage. For short-term power output, even at 4 ohms, it will stay on the high-voltage rail. "Only when the load starts to stress the amplifier does it switch to the low-voltage, high-current rail. The result is "very low distortion into any loudspeaker load, and we get the maximum power from the parts we use," wrote Stidsen.

How does this affect the sound? "I find that the PowerDrive amplifiers never get that 'strained' sound, the hardening and roughening that occurs with many lesser amplifiers," wrote Stidsen. I don't know if PowerDrive is the reason, but I certainly found the C 372 to have a relaxed sound.

—Jim Austin

Fig. 6 shows how the percentage of THD+N in the C 372's output varies with frequency and load impedance, taken at a moderately high level of 10V. The distortion is very low under all conditions, though the amplifier is clearly less happy driving 2 ohms in the top audio octaves.

Note also the fact that the THD+N percentage is higher from the right channel than the left. The harmonic content of the distortion at low power levels can be inferred from its waveform (fig.7) to be a combination of third-harmonic
What does *ne plus ultra* mean?

*ne plus ultra*  

\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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tion with no troubling noise or significant sonic defects, the C 372 might be just what you’re looking for. The fact that, at $899, it’s also cheap by audiophile standards is merely a bonus.

In this most important part of the review, I find myself with little to say. Driven by the C 372, my speakers went as deep as they ever go, and as high. The C 372 was not the least bit tube-like, yet the sound had plenty of body, and the images it produced were dense and corporeal while also being precisely located in space. I heard none of the added richness and—I thought—slightly blunted transients provided by the Exposure 2010S integrated. The transient, metallic character of Sir Roland Hanna’s Beesendorf piano on the first nine tracks of Swing Me No Waltzes (CD, Storyville)—which went missing during the listening for my “Follow-Up” review of the Exposure in the January 2006 issue—was restored through the C 372. The presentation was spacious but not especially airy. There was a lovely sense of ease to the sound. The C 372 was dead quiet; there was no detectable noise through my 86dB-efficient Vandersteen 2Ce Signature speakers at any volume setting, and I could detect no spurious sounds between the notes.

The C 372 resolved everything I played through it to the limits my speakers and room allow—which is to say, I’ve never heard better resolution from these speakers with any other amplifier. Those of you who must share space with others, or who have neighbors and thin walls, will be happy to know that the C 372 sounded good at low volumes, and that its headphone section drove my Sennheiser HD 650s just fine. The C 372’s tone controls alter the character of the sound delicately enough to be useful—a tweak of the Treble control could tame a bright recording—and if you don’t want to use them you can remove them from the circuit path.

I feel I ought to say something critical about the C 372; otherwise, the folks on the Internet discussion groups are likely to take me to task. I haven’t yet heard an amplifier that makes acoustic music sound acoustic—any kind of music I’ve ever heard reproduced electrically sounds electrically reproduced. The C 372 was no exception. It’s a clean, quiet amplifier, but it is an amplifier and it sounds like one. I also detected, or thought I did, a
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slight channel imbalance; images were
pulled just a little to the right of where
I was used to hearing them. This could
be fixed, of course, with a slight adjust-
ment of the Balance control, and in any
case I could be wrong about it. We'll
see what John Atkinson's measure-
ments reveal. Perhaps a better system
in a better room would have revealed
flaws in this amplifier's sonic presenta-
tion that I couldn't detect. Then again,
maybe not.

Getting what you need
As I look back over what I've written
about the NAD C 372, I worry that my
choice of modifiers—neutral, lacking char-
acter—might not do it justice. Reading
between the lines, people might con-
clude that I didn't particularly like this
integrated, which isn't true. I liked it
very much.

John Marks has written that some-
times a component just sounds right. I
haven't had that experience—not in con-
nection with a piece of hardware, any-
way—but I know what he means. My
own reference point is writing: It's hard
work, you do your best, and some-
times it comes out right—
really right—and
that's special. But
that align-
ment of the
stars doesn't happen very often, and one
of the few bits of wisdom I've acquired
in 42 years is that it's foolish to try to
force them to align, whether with color-
ed foils, plastic chips, scotch, or what
have you. In audiophilia as in life, the
best approach is to make good, smart
choices, remain skeptical but open-
minded, trust your own ears but not too
much—and hope that every now and
then the gods smile on you. But it isn't
particularly healthy to live for that fix
from day to day.

It's all about being a basically ratio-
nal person who believes in the value of
a hard day's work but who also
believes that, even if it's uncommon,
there are such things as, say, art,
music, or love. Audio, which has ele-
ments of all three, requires a lot of
sweat over the long term. Sure, we
crave those transcendent moments,
but ultimately you come to value the
sweat as much as the stars.

The NAD C 372 is not an aligner of
stars, nor did I expect it to be. It's
arguably something better: a job well
done. It's one of the things you can con-
trol as you wait and hope that the stars
will align. It is sufficient—entirely suffi-
cient—and that's really saying some-
thing. There's poetry in that, too.
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**Dimensions:** 13" (330mm) by 7.1" (180mm) by 9.5" (240mm). Weight: 13 lbs (5.9kg).

**Finish:** Cherry or black ash veneer.

**Serial Numbers of Units Reviewed:** 001001/2.

**Price:** $499/pair. Approximate number of dealers: 125

**Manufacturer:** BG Corp., 3535 Arrowhead Drive, Carson City, NV 89706. Tel: (775) 884-1900, (888) 875-2627. Fax: (775) 884-1276. Web: www.bgcorp.com.

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Last summer, John Atkinson and I were playing a jazz gig poolside at my local club, and during a break we began discussing equipment. As JA adjusted his microphones and I became increasingly nervous about the running, jumping kids splashing chlorinated water on his Nagra digital recorder, he asked me if I’d like to review the Z-1 loudspeaker from BG Corp. “It’s an interesting little bookshelf speaker featuring a ribbon tweeter.” Hmm—an affordable bookshelf speaker matching a ribbon tweeter to a dynamic woofer? Very interesting. “Sounds good,” said I, and resumed my ivory duties.

**Company**

Bohlender-Graebener Corporation, now known as BG Corp., is a Nevada-based company that since 1994 has produced a broad range of loudspeakers, all of them featuring BG’s proprietary ribbon-tweeter technology. In addition to a line of conventional speaker pairs—the flagship of which, the Radia 520i ($4000/pair), Larry Greenhill reviewed in December 2004—BG manufactures a wide range of in-wall, on-wall, and custom-installation speakers. The Z-1 ($499/pair), the first model in BG’s affordable Z series, is a fairly unassuming shielded bookshelf speaker in which BG’s ribbon tweeter is coupled with a 5.25" aluminum-cone woofer.
BG feels strongly that a ribbon driver is the best way to reproduce midrange and high frequencies. The mass of BG's tweeter diaphragm is 30–50 times less than that of a typical dome tweeter. Thus, according to BG, the tweeter's mass is comparable to that of the air that is vibrating along with the diaphragm. It can be energized more quickly, stores much less energy and inertia, can stop vibrating sooner, and its decay pattern is cleaner.

BG credits two major developments in materials science over the last two decades that have enabled further advancement in ribbon technology. First, neodymium has become less costly, making it viable for use in the motor structure of ribbon tweeters. Magnets made of neodymium have magnetic energy 20–30 times greater than the ceramic magnets used in the ribbons of the 1970s and '80s. Second, BG makes their diaphragms of Teonex film, developed by DuPont in the 1990s. BG feels that Teonex can withstand higher temperatures and is stronger than the Mylar film used in earlier ribbon designs.

BG set out to design a ribbon tweeter with smooth frequency response, low noise, wide horizontal dispersion, and high efficiency, all at low cost. Their patented ribbon design uses fewer magnets than conventional ribbons by eliminating side magnets positioned close to the clamping frame and, instead, placing strips of acoustically semitransparent absorptive material close to the diaphragm in the area between the diaphragm and the metal plates. BG says this allows them to largely retain the transducer's necessary sensitivity while providing sufficiently wide horizontal dispersion.

I placed the Z-1s on my trusty Celestion Si stands, loaded with sand and lead shot. Although BG felt there would be a slight improvement in sound on-axis with the speakers' grilles removed, I got the most timbrally natural sound with them left on, which is how I did most of my listening. The difference was slight, however.

**Sound**

The Z-1's detailed, delicate, coloration-free, and holographic midrange presentation impressed me with all vocal recordings. The notes I took while listening to the a cappella introduction of Brian Wilson's "Our Prayer," from SMILE (CD, Nonesuch 79863-2), read the same as my notes for Madeleine Peyroux's "Hey, Sweet Man," from Dreamland (CD, Atlantic 82946-2): "gorgeous, silky, holographic vocals." The Peyroux track also had me fixated on Marc Ribot's dobro; the extended and detailed high-frequency capabilities of the Z-1's ribbon tweeter revealed levels of detail, delicacy, and immediacy that I'm not used to hearing from a $499/pair speaker. The Z-1's resolution of the high frequencies removed, I got the most timbrally natural sound with them left on, which is how I did most of my listening. The difference was slight, however.
of vocal sibilants was so accurate that I felt I was listening to Janis Ian's "Breakin' Silence" (CD, Analogue Productions CAPP 027) for the first time—a tough thing to do, considering that it's the most-played recording I own. The Z-1's combination of low-level dynamic articulation and what appears to be a remarkable tweeter let me hear tactile nuances from this recording that I'd not noticed before through any speaker costing less than $2000/pair.

I began to mine my collection for recordings of acoustic stringed instruments. Don Fiorino's lotar—a fretless, four-string Moroccan lute—on Atten- ments. Don Fiorino's lotar—a fretless, four-string Moroccan lute—on Atten- ments. Don Fiorino's lotar—a fretless, four-string Moroccan lute—on Atten- ments. Don Fiorino's lotar—a fretless, four-string Moroccan lute—on Atten-

The Z-1 was also able to articulate transients with senses of speed, delicacy, and attack that I've come to associate only with much more expensive speakers. The transient attacks, decays, and timbre of Gary Burton's vibes on his first album, New Vibe Man in Town (LP, RCA LSP-2920), were sufficiently lifelike that I dropped my notebook.

One aspect of the Z-1's HF performance concerned me, though only with certain recordings. If I played music with significant high-frequency energy and fast transients, such as the Jamie Saft Trio's Astaroth (CD, Tzadik TX 7348), the highs seemed to have an "etched" quality, particularly when the speakers were driven hard. But this, the Z-1's sole deviation from neutrality, reared its head only occasionally.

ior of the panels with a simple plastic-tape accelerometer, the primary resonant mode, very strong and detectable on the top panel and both sidewalls, lay at 750Hz (fig.2).

The saddle centered on 57Hz in the impedance magnitude trace suggests that this is the tuning frequency of the nearfield output of this port, plotted to the left of fig.3, peaks between 30Hz and 100Hz, but its midrange rolloff is marred by two peaks: a mild one at 500Hz and a severe one centered at 800Hz. The latter is strong enough, in fact, to give rise to a small peak at the same frequency in the Z-1's farfield response.

As expected, the woofer's output has its minimum-motion point at the port tuning frequency, and the unit's response rises through the upper midrange before crossing over to the tweeter at 2kHz. The tweeter actually comes in a little early for optimal integration with the woofer; its on-axis output also rises a little at the top of its passband.

Fig.4 shows how the individual drive-unit responses sum in the farfield, spatially averaged across a 30° horizontal window on the ribbon-tweeter axis. The Z-1's output is gently sloped up from the upper bass to the top audio octave, with a slight energy excess in the crossover region. There appears to be a slight boost in the upper bass, but this is the effect of the nearfield measurement technique used for the speaker's calculated output below 300Hz. The Z-1 is actually maximally flat to about 85Hz, with then the expected fourth-order rolloff. This balance suggests that the Z-1 really does need to be used with a subwoofer—or, if not, close to the room boundaries to bring up the upper-bass output, as BJR noted in his auditioning.
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The Z-1’s midbass and upper-bass performance was quite natural. A slight bit of warmth in the midbass was evenly distributed across a broad frequency range and did not detract from the musical experience. Ray Brown’s bass solos on *Way Out West* were warm but natural, it was very easy to follow the pitches, and there was no sense of sluggishness or overhang.

Although the Z-1 never sounded bass-shy, it didn’t seem to have much in the way of low-bass extension. The bass drums on Antal Dorati and the London Symphony’s recording of Stravinsky’s *The Firebird* (CD, Mercury Living Presence/Classic SR 90226) and the CD layer of David Chesky’s *Area 31* (SACD, Chesky SACD282) sounded natural but did not shake the room much, and the lower register of the organ pedals on John Rutter’s *Requiem* (CD, Reference RR-57CD) were missing in action.

To achieve a well-balanced midbass presentation that didn’t sound bass-shy, I had to follow JA’s setup recommendations. Normally, I place bookshelf speakers on stands anywhere from 2’ to 4’ from the front wall, depending on the speaker. To achieve a natural bass balance with the Z-1’s, I had to place them 1’ from the front wall, which affected their soundstage presentation. On any well-recorded acoustic music, the speakers “disappeared,” placing pinpoint holographic images across the soundstage. However, when the Z-1’s were only 1’ from the front wall the depth become somewhat foreshortened. At 2’ from the wall the soundstage depth increased significantly, but then the speakers sounded a bit bass-shy. This effect was suffi-

The Z-1’s lateral dispersion (fig.5) is generally wide and even, but the dramatic narrowing of the speaker’s radiation pattern above 10kHz might make the speaker sound a bit lifeless in large, overdamped rooms. This was unexpected, given the narrow ribbon, but I imagine it must be due to the waveguide surrounding the unit. This restricted off-axis output in the top octave can also be seen in the vertical dispersion plot (fig.6), which suggests that the Z-1 is best used on tall stands so that the listener’s ears are on or just below the tweeter axis.

In the time domain, the Z-1’s step response (fig.7) indicates that the drive-units are both connected in positive acoustic polarity, but with the tweeter’s output leading that of the woofer by a couple of hundred microseconds. More important, the overshoot of the tweeter’s step smoothly hands over to the woofer’s step, confirming the good frequency-domain integration seen in fig.4. The Z-1’s cumulative spectral-decay plot (fig.8) is very clean overall, particularly so in the region covered by the ribbon tweeter.

The BG Z-1’s measured performance strongly suggests that it be used with a subwoofer, or at least close to the room boundaries. Its tonal balance might then still sound lightweight, but its clean, detailed presentation echoes that of, for example, the best-selling ProAc Tablette minimonitor, from the early 1980s.

— John Atkinson
ciently noticeable that I preferred the sound of the Z-1s closer to the wall rather than out in the room.

**THE BG Z-1 WAS A TOP PERFORMER ON A WIDE RANGE OF MUSIC—IT PLAYED A LOT OF MUSIC FOR ITS PRICE.**

For a bookshelf model with limited low-bass extension, the BG Z-1 performed admirably as a rock speaker, and at fairly high volume levels. Wandering down memory lane, I cranked up "Jingo," from *Best of Santana* (CD, Columbia CK 65561), one of my favorite tunes from the set list of my old high school band, and started twitching around the room in my T-shirt and shorts, playing a mean air B-3. (My wife and kids weren't home. The dog looked at me strangely and left the room.) I had a similar reaction to the dramatic power and authority of Kraftwerk's *Minimum-Maximum* at 95dB (CD, EMI ASW 60611).

In fact, almost all the recordings I threw at the Z-1 sounded natural and involving. Bill Frisell's idiosyncratic arrangement of "I Heard It Through the Grapevine," on *East/West* (CD, Nonesuch 79863-2), was devoid of coloration. This live recording sounded so immediate that I felt I was sitting in Yoshi's club in Oakland listening to the band.

**Comparisons**

I compared the BG Z-1 ($499/pair) to the NHT SB-3 ($600/pair), the Nola Mini ($695/pair), and the Epos M5 ($650/pair).

The NHT SB3's rich midrange was similar to the BG's, but with much less detail in the midrange and highs. The NHT's bass extension and high-level dynamics were more impressive than the BG's, however. The Epos M5 revealed more midrange detail than the BG Z-1, and had a tighter, slightly less warm mid-bass. The M5's highs were also rather extended, but the Z-1 was a bit more detailed. The Nola Mini had better resolution of midrange detail than the BG Z-1, and even better articulation of low-level dynamics. The Mini's highs were as extended as the Z-1's, but the BG's highs seemed a bit more delicate. The Nola Mini's bass extension and high-level dynamics were superior, however.

**Summing up**

Overall, the BG Z-1 was a top performer on a wide range of music—it played a lot of music for its price. The Z-1's ribbon tweeter is a detailed and colorless transducer as long as it's not pushed too hard with complex material, and appeared to integrate seamlessly with the speaker's dynamic woofer over a broad range of program material. You may have to experiment with speaker placement, however, to achieve your optimal blend of bass extension and soundstage depth.

I congratulate BG Corp. on producing a cost-effective loudspeaker for audiophiles on a budget who nonetheless seek something a bit more innovative than "two dynamic drivers in a bookshelf box." Excellent work! 

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**ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT**

**ANALOG SOURCES**

- VPI TNT IV turntable, Immedia RPM tonearm, Koetsu Urushi cartridge; Rega Planar 3 turntable, Syrinx PU-3 tonearm, Clearaudio Virtuoso Wood & Aurum Beta 5 cartridges.

**DIGITAL SOURCES**

- Lector CDP-7T, California Audio Labs Icon Mk.II
- Power Boss, Creek CD53 Mk.II CD players; Pioneer DV-333 DVD player.

**PREAMPLIFICATION**

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

**POWER AMPLIFIER**

- Audio Research VT100 Mk.II

**INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER**

- Creek 5350SE

**LOUDSPEAKERS**

- Epos M5, NHT SB3, Nola Mini

**CABLES**


**ACCESSORIES**

- Various by ASC, Bright Star, Celestion, Echo Busters, Salamander Designs, Simply Physics, Sound Anchor, VPI—Robert J. Reina

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Nordost Heimdall
INTERCONNECT & SPEAKER CABLE

The good news: Domestic audio has survived its first half century and continues to live above ground. The bad news: At an age when most hobbies can enjoy the luxury of splintering into smaller factions that hate each other with impunity, ours isn’t big enough. There are too few audiophiles on Earth to indulge that kind of specialization, let alone support the very different magazines that would ensue—so we’ll never get to enjoy such promising titles as Liberal Tube Lover (not that I didn’t try), The Elderly Skeptic, or, of particular interest, Cable Hating for People Who are Barely Audiophiles in the First Place.

Thus hobbyists to whom any cable review is a red flag will simply have to deal with Stereophile’s insistence on continuing to publish same. So too must they cope with the suggestion that a piece of wire more costly than 24-gauge lamp cord or Belden microphone cable might reasonably be considered affordable: The cables reviewed here really are budget versions of the most conspicuously expensive high-end interconnect and speaker cables that I’m aware of, the Nordost Valhallas.

The newest Nordost cable line is named Heimdall, after the sharp-eyed Aesir watchman of Norse Mythology. (Most products in the Nordost line have Viking names; apparently the European market likes that sort of thing, and Aussies fairly eat it with a spoon.) Nordost offers a Heimdall interconnect, Heimdall speaker...
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cables, a Heimdall tonearm cable—even a Heimdall iKable, for use between a portable MP3 player and a variety of domestic and automotive sound systems. By now, I've experienced the first two.

To anyone familiar with the aforementioned Valhalla line, the Heimdalls' outward similarity is unmistakable—especially when comparing speaker cables: Both the Valhalla and the Heimdall speaker cables are flat, ribbon-style things with a distinctively diaphanous look. But the ideas that first manifested themselves in the Valhalla ribbon some six years ago run a good deal deeper than that.

In common with other specialty cable manufacturers, Nordost believes that unwanted interactions between conductors and dielectrics can be a source of distortion and information loss in a very high-quality, high-resolution audio system—and the Valhalla technology was their first all-out effort at taking that particular bull by the horns. Cynics have made much of the notion that electrons are stupid things, and don't know the difference between, say, woofer wires and tweeter wires as they carry energy from one atom to another—which is true.

But that sword cuts both ways: The electron that's too stupid to recognize the path that an amateur audio engineer has laid out for it is also too stupid to know which atom is a conductor and which isn't, at least initially: The poor thing bashes blindly into any adjacent substance, looking for valences—actually energy bands, as described by Pauli, et al.—that are not already filled with energy. Thus do they continually test their limits, not unlike children; and thus does an electromagnetic transmission give up a certain amount of its energy in the presence of an inferior dielectric. (When you try to coax too much current through too little conductor, as with strings of dime-store lights at Christmas time, you feel that energy as heat.)

In a setting such as this, the superior dielectric would be nothing: a vacuum. (A perfect dielectric is perfectly efficient at foolsing separate electromagnetic currents into thinking there's more physical space between them than there really is, I told you these things are stupid.) Barrer the future efforts of some sharp-fanged designer to build an evacuation pump into his or her cable (a ridiculous idea, of course, but now that I've mentioned it I hereby demand a cut of all future profits), the next best dielectric is good old-fashioned air. And that's what Nordost built into their Valhalla cable: By helically winding a sort of plastic thread over each individual wire, Nordost ensured that the majority of the conductor's surface was contacted only by air, not the polymer jacket surrounding it.

So it goes with the Heimdall line, the newest and the least expensive products to incorporate this technology, which Nordost calls Micro Monofilament. The Heimdall speaker cable starts as a 24-gauge, solid-core, oxygen-free copper conductor, over which a 60μm layer of pure silver is extruded. The silver surface is polished, and a thin monofilament made of a polymer called fluorinated ethylene propylene (FEP) is wound around it. Finally, an outer jacket of FEP is extruded over that, touching only the FEP thread. Heimdall speaker cable comprises 24 of those mostly air-insulated conductors, precisely spaced and molded side-by-side in a ribbon that measures 1.35" wide and 0.03" thick. Termination choices include gold-plated spade connectors and gold-plated Z-Plugs (Nordost's proprietary low-mass bananas).

The Heimdall interconnect uses virtually the same conductors, except they're 26-gauge and there are four of them. That bundle is wrapped with a braided shield of the usual sort, then covered with another FEP jacket (outside diameter: 0.15"). The interconnects are marked for direction, and the shield is connected only at the source end. For unbalanced cables, the standard Heimdall connectors are gold-plated versions of the excellent WBT Nexgen RCA plugs; XLRs with gold-plated contacts are a $30 option, for use with balanced electronics.

The most interesting measurement of all: The Nordost Heimdall speaker cable sells for $1500 per 2m pair, vs $7040 for the same amount of Valhalla; the Heimdall interconnect is $600/1m pair, the Valhalla version going for $4000. Those are savings of 78% and 85%, respectively. Quite an improvement.

Setup

My main music system has occupied this particular room for more than three years, arranged with the preamp on a tallish console table off to one side—various source components are nearby—and a pair of mono amplifiers on the floor, each one close to its respective speaker. Thus my system requires a fairly long main interconnect: 4m will do if I don't mind cutting corners, but a 6m cable makes for a neater installation, with less chance of stumbling—and comparatively short speaker cables. I also require shorter interconnects to take the signals from my CD player and phono preamp.

Also during those three years, my main interconnect has been a borrowed 6m pair of Nordost Valhallas: the best-sounding long interconnect I've used. Thus, substituting an identical length of the Heimdall interconnect seemed a pretty fair review comparison, the only other difference being the upgrade to those fancy WBT phono plugs. I used 1m and 1.5m samples of the Heimdall interconnect for my source components. The speaker cables reviewed were 2m Heimdalls, with spades on the source end to suit my Lamm monoblocks, and the excellent Nordost Z-Plugs (a number of which I bought years ago for installing on my other cables) at the loudspeaker end.

Listening

Over the past several weeks I've listened to the new Nordost products in various combinations: sometimes just the speaker cables, with all my usual interconnects in place; sometimes just one interconnect pair at a time, in combination with all the other usual cables; and sometimes—in fact, most of the time—the whole Heimdall pantheon, all at once.

To begin with the latter, the Heimdall cable system was beautifully listenable, and very much in keeping with the qualities that the Nordost Valhallas have led me to expect. The Heimdalls were as uncolored, as tonally neutral, as any other wires I've heard, and did nothing to detract from the qualities I prize in the components I've bought over the years. With the Heimdalls, my music system breathed naturally. There were no constrictions, no sense of the music being squeezed out, strained out, or shot out at me. The Heimdall system was natural, easy, and wide open.

1 Tara Labs has already done this, with its Zero line: see www.taralabs.com/Images/Neversentimental%20reach.pdf —John Atkinson
2 There are one or two fervent old women on the Audio Asylum who will need to have it explained to them slowly, and in very short words—that this is a joke.
A New Touch of Classé at CSA!

Classé has gotten serious about high-end Home Theater with three new products. For outstanding 7-channel signal processing and power, the advanced SSP-600 pre-amplifier and the reference quality CA-5200 amplifier have earned high marks. And, their CDP-300 DVD player is currently recognized as the only source to offer a full implementation of all HDTV resolutions, all the way to 1080p! We have two floors of fantastic gear in our brand new facility, and these components are just a sample of the remarkable Delta-series from Classé that you can audition today. Discover a new level of service, the best brands and an attentive, knowledgeable staff that loves music (and movies!) as much as you do.
As to individual cable applications, my experience told me that the Heimdall interconnect, in generous lengths and used between preamp and power amps, is the family's biggest bargain. After weeks of switching back and forth between the 6m Valhalla interconnect and the 6m Heimdall, I'm still not sure I can reliably hear more than the most ephemeral difference, if any, between them.

An example: On a brilliant new Cisco Music LP of the Heifetz-Plategorsk recording of the Brahms Double Concerto, Op.102 (LDS-2513), Plategorsk's "Batta" Stradivari cello was right there in virtually every sense of realism: spatial, timbral, and textural, as well as sheer size and scale. That was true with both of the Nordost Micro Mono-Filament cable lines—well beyond everything else I have in-house.

But of all the areas in which the performance of the long Heimdall interconnects matched that of the long Valhallas, perhaps the most pleasing was the fact that, with these budget cables in place, my system's sense of presence wasn't diminished one whit. Until now, the Valhallas had been supreme in that sense.

Differences between the speaker cables struck me as more distinct: Going from the Heimdall to the Valhalla was like turning the Music knob clockwise: The Heimdall gave me a lot, the Valhallas even more.

I actively dislike such things as trying to "hear into the stage"; real though those sonic effects may be, they usually distract my attention from the meaning of the music, which is what I'd much rather focus on. That said, and knowing that I'm paid to do more than just have a nice time, it's my duty to say that there was an audible difference between the Valhalla and Heimdall speaker cables in the way that my system let me, er, hear into, um, things. Like stages. Only with the Valhalla speaker cables in place could I hear precisely what the horns and the back-row percussionists were doing in recordings such as a typically fine Speakers Corner reissue of Ruggiero Ricci performing Saint-Saëns' Hamoise, Op.83, and Introduction and Rondo Capricioso, Op.28 (LP, Decca/Speakers Corner SXL 2197). Beyond that and the addition of a bit of artificial texture—itself the most obvious and audible difference, I thought—the less expensive cable was a close second, and was downright brilliant in its own right. With recording after recording it did seemingly everything well, with a conspicuously wide frequency range and apparent freedom from colorations of any sort. I'm sadly unqualified to comment on the cable's image-location performance, affected as I am with a seemingly incurable case of don't-give-a-shit-itis when it comes to that and other effects that some hobbyists obsess over so. Suffice it to say that I was completely satisfied.

I should add that I continued to prefer the Audio Note AN-Vx interconnect as a source to preamp cord—the only application to which the 1.5m pair I own can be reasonably put, in any event. The Audio Note was no less thrilling in its portrayal of the great, manic clatter of "Old Joe Clark," as played simultaneously by eight bluegrass mandolin stylists on Bluegrass Mandolin Extravaganza (CD, Acoustic Disc ACID-35), yet no other cable has matched its dynamic abilities in my system: The Audio Note was better than both the short Heimdall and the short Valhalla at signaling very tiny but musically important changes in dynamics.

Conclusions
Did you know that the Christian Hammer Stradivari violin (1707) just sold for $3.5 million? A year before that, the Lady Tennant Stradivari (1699) went for $2 million. And it's just a matter of time before the Lady Blunt Strad (1721) will come on the market: the only one left that, as far as anyone knows, still has all of its original neck. Most people in the vintage-instrument field believe the Lady Blunt will fetch between $5 and $8 million—or more.

Those instruments are prized not only for their rarity, but because they sound better—leagues, worlds better—than any others. The likeliest reason for that is Antonio Stradivari's proprietary varnish: a microscopically thin layer of spirit gum and insect husks and God knows what else, the precise formula for which is now lost to us.

Half the world's woodies could spend their lives analyzing a sliver of that finish and not find an iota of difference between it and the stuff that's used today on a $90 Chinese fiddle; the other half would refuse the assignment, swearing that the varnish couldn't possibly affect the sound.

But anyone who's ever played a Strad or heard one up close knows that the woodies are wrong—dead wrong, stupid wrong—which only goes to show how incomplete our knowledge remains with regard to why things sound the way they do. In fact, when you get right down to it, we know nothing at all. Nothing. At. All.

The Nordost Heimdalls? Here's the Cliff Notes version, the quick, easy paragraph I'd send to a friend: I tend to like Nordost cables in general, and the Heimdalls are no exception. They sound clear and wonderful, and almost as good to me as the Valhallas. Whether that's a direct consequence of the technology Nordost propounds—and at least some of which sounds convincing to me—or whether it's just a lucky combination of this amp with that wire, is anyone's guess. Caveat whatemptor.

But there's no question in my mind that the Heimdall interconnect and speaker cables are worth every penny, and then some, of their still-not-inconsiderable prices—in which sense, I suppose it really is possible for a four-figure cable to be considered a "budget" product.
Sutherland Direct Line Stage
"...another great bargain from the team of Ron Sutherland and Chad Kassem... The Sutherland Direct Line Stage's performance is credible at any price; for $3000, it's nothing short of incredible. Like Sutherland's PhD, the Direct Line Stage gets you into the uppermost echelon of current audio gear for a relatively sane price...if you're shopping for a line stage - any line stage at any price - the Sutherland Direct Line Stage should be on your audition list. And if you're even remotely considering upgrading from a model of lower or similar price, put down the magazine and pick up the phone. You don't want to miss this one."
— Brian Damkroger, Stereophile, September 2006

Sutherland Ph.D.
"The PhD is a wonderful unit and a great bargain... Its personality, not surprisingly, is very similar to that of Ron Sutherland's earlier, cost-no-object designs, but, as MF noted, at 'a stiff but still minor-league price.' The PhD does many things very well, and its purity and freedom from electronic haze is quite special - something that every analog lover should hear for him or herself. It's on my short list. Highly recommended."
— Brian Damkroger, Stereophile, May 2005

AousTech PH-1P
"The AcousTech PH-1 is marvelous and magnificent... a bargain at twice the price. It is a phase coherent phono stage, the left to right channel RIAA phase matching is perfect and the quiet passages really came alive. This unit has a warmer low end than my tube pre-amplifier. The PH-1 is certainly well made, nice and stable."
— Stan Ricker, Stan Ricker Mastering

Wes Phillips writes after visiting the H.E. 2006 show... "I haven't really paid that much attention to Gamut, but the CD 3, DI 150, and L-7 just flat-out worked for me. Music was alive and filled with the little pleasures that make you smile, nod, tap your foot, or even boogie. Check Gamut out!"
Ultimate Ears
UE-10 Pro
IN-EAR HEADPHONES

Wes Phillips


Cable lengths: 46" (1.18m) or 64" (1.64m). Weight: 1 oz (28gm).

All of a sudden, it seems there’s a renaissance in in-ear monitors. Used to be there was just Etymotic, but now Etymotic, Shure, and Ultimate Ears are all producing high-performance in-ear headphones. It’s almost enough to make me suspect we audiophiles have become a marketing juggernaut.

I suspect, however, that the renaissance in hi-fi in-ear ‘phones is the result of a different juggernaut: the paradigm-shifting Apple iPod, which has sold in the kazillions. Apparently, some small percentage of all those consumers have noticed that the freebie earbuds sound like day-old crap. And a small percentage of those are willing to spend a significant chunk of change on headphones, especially if they can claim to be the best. At $900, the Ultimate Ears UE-10 Pro better be a contender for the title.

Heard melodies are sweet
Actually, the UE-10 Pros are $900 plus the cost of custom ear molds from an audiologist; typically, around $50. Call UE if you’re contemplating a pair and they’ll recommend an audiologist in your area who is capable of doing the molds to their standards. The UE-10s require full-shell molds of the ears’ crus of helix, tragus, and antitragus. In this age of mini hearing aids, the procedure is relatively specialized.

The reason you need that big a mold is twofold: First, it gives you full occlusion of the
PARALLELED TO REDUCE THE LOAD AND INCREASE SECOND, UE NEEDS A LOT OF SPACE INSIDE TO EAR CANAL— AND 26dB ISOLATION, UE CLAIMS. THE BASS DRIVERS— PARALLELED TO REDUCE THE LOAD AND INCREASE SECOND, UE NEEDS A LOT OF SPACE INSIDE TO EAR CANAL— AND 26dB ISOLATION, UE CLAIMS.

I visited the Ultimate Ears factory and watched technicians assembling UE-10s. The balanced armature drivers are tiny boxes connected to “port tubes,” which direct the sound output. Once the three drivers and crossover are assembled, they’re affixed to the ear-mold shell, with the port tubes running through the ear-canal tube. The port lines are then trimmed by a technician running test tones to measure the response against UE’s theoretical “flat response.” Since everyone’s ear canals are a different shape, this is a crucial step.

I say “flat” because the ear canal itself has a huge effect on the sound your ear drum receives, and the insertion point of a driver—in this case, just millimeters away from the eardrum—has a pronounced effect on that sound. Think of the ear canal as a horn loudspeaker in reverse: it filters and amplifies sounds in the 1500-2700Hz region. Therefore, if you stick a transducer within 2.5mm away from the eardrum— in this case, just millimeters away from the eardrum—has a pronounced effect on that sound. I turn it down when I turned down the music. I would have turned it down anyway—the degree of isolation from environmental sounds provided by the UE-10s was superlative.

I was immediately impressed with the natural, ungmimicky sound of voices, whether Dave Alvin’s throaty baritone on Out in California (Hightone 8144, Apple Lossless Processing file), or Cantus in its latest, There Lies the Home (which I’ve heard in several provisional mixes as it lurches its way toward release). There was no paucity of instrumental clarity with the UE-10s, but voices really shone, acquiring a clarity and focus I associate with the best small, stand-mounted monitor loudspeakers.

The top end of the UE-10s was also special. String harmonics and the long decay of tones in large reverberant spaces were illuminated with startling focus. This means you need to be careful to feed ‘em right. Take a compressed contemporary recording with a scant 1dB of dynamic range—say, almost anything you’ll hear on pop radio—and you’ll peel your eardrums with bright, sibilant sound. Take something well-recorded and mastered, such as Stereophile’s "Recording of the Month" for January 1999, ilhaust, and the sound will pop your eyes open with its fidelity, life, and snap (Harmonia Mundi 907212, CD/ALP file; www.stereophile.com/)

MEASUREMENTS

As I’ve written before, I don’t have any means of assessing the frequency response of head-phones. However, I did measure the electrical impedance of the UE-10 Pros with my review samples inserted in my ears to provide the correct acoustic loading. The results are shown in fig.1. The impedance magnitude is significantly lower than that of the less-expensive UE-5s ‘phones, which I reviewed in December 2004 (see www.stereo phile.com/headphones /1204ultimate), with an average low-frequency value of 13 ohms rather than 22 ohms. In addition, the upper-midrange rise in impedance reaches 16 ohms rather than the UE-5s’ 42 ohms. The dip to 9 ohms at 9kHz is similar, however.

The UE-10s’ high sensitivity makes it unlikely that typical portable players will have a problem driving them, but the low impedance at low frequencies will give a leaning- sounding bass with, for example, earlier iPods, which had a rising source impedance below 100Hz due to the physically limited size of the output coupling capacitor. I understand that this will not be an issue with the iPod Shuffle and iPod Nano, but I did find that the UE-10 Pros’ bass performance with my 2003-model iPod benefited from the use of a Ray Samuels Audio Emmeline Hornet head- phone amp.
What makes the Lamms so special is ephemeral, beyond being pinned down by mere words, but it can't be missed by anyone who loves music delivered with heart and soul.

Paul Bolin, Stereophile (April, 2003)

With record after record, the Lamms sounded superior to other amps in the way that an exceptional musical instrument sounds superior to one that is merely good.

Art Dudley, Stereophile (October, 2004)

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.

Featured Component: The Gallo Acoustics Nucleus Reference 3.1 loudspeaker is the most innovative, new speaker available today! Sound quality from bass to the highest trebles is superb, thanks to the creative talents of Anthony Gallo. Come audition the Ref 3.1, a speaker that will leave you stunned by its transparency. For an absolute rave review, see www.theabsolutesound.com/newsletter/150/gallo.html.

...with our eyes fixed on the future.
But did that double-woofer arrangement pay off in the down-low department? That depends, I reckon, on what you consider to be "real" bass. When I was first shaking down the UE-10s, I thought the bass veered from lean to overblown, but some of that was learning to achieve a good seal with the ear molds—miss the seal and you miss the bass. It's that simple.

But bass EQ varies from recording to recording, and once you start focusing on one sonic attribute, you can drive yourself nuts obsessing over whether those normal variations are caused by the device under test or have always been there. Ultimately, you pretty much have to relax and think of England—or anything other than bass qua bass.

My epiphany came, as have so many, while listening to Aretha Franklin's I Never Loved Another Man the Way I Love You (CD, Mobile Fidelity UDCD 574). It was Tommy Cogbill's Fender bass lead-in to "Do Right Woman, Do Right Man" that sold me—it was so fat, so ripe and plummy, and so proportional to the rest of the sound that I just relaxed and began to hear the bass as a part of the music.

And it was good bass—very good. Not best I've ever heard good, but focused, taut, and appropriate.

What is heard must be pondered over

Are the Ultimate Ears UE-10 Pros for you? Even more than with most audio components, that's a very personal issue. First, there's price—at $900 plus, they're a luxury. But you also have to assess how you use headphones. Do you need isolation? If you don't, or if you actually need to hear what's going on around you, the UE-10s' good fit will be a bad fit for you—probably not those jogging 'phones you've been looking for. If you're looking for an extra bump in the bottom, the taut, bass-balanced UE-10s may not strike your fancy. And if your ear canals are sensitive, in-ear monitors may not be for you at all.

I think of the UE-10 Pros as a tool that gives me isolation and accurate sound in places I'd never otherwise have it—which is, after all, what these in-ear monitors were designed to deliver to musicians. If success is achieving what you've set out to accomplish, the UE-10 Pros are more than a success; they're a phenomenon.
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With last year’s *Radiance*, Keith Jarrett returned to the epic solo-piano improvisations for which he’s been famous for 33 years. But with a difference—instead of continuous improvisations lasting almost an hour, Jarrett now stopped when the music stopped, or simply when he had no more to say. This is admirably honest, but I was leery. It seemed that Jarrett was able to reach the heights of such landmark solo albums as *Bremen/Lausanne*, *The Köln Concert*, and *Sun 3ar 3ear*— only through his commitment to the long improvisational form—by simply going on until topped by exhaustion. If this meantisking his own and his audience’s occasional boredom, the price seemed small. *Radiance* seemed to justify my suspicions. It has many passages of brilliance and remarkable variety, but still sounds to me choppy, often labored and charming.

*Radiance*’s last four tracks were excerpts from a concert that has now been released, only on DVD (ECM’s first), as *Tokyo Solo*, and it seems they were selected for their similarity to the rest of *Radiance*—which only added to that album’s doggedness. But the complete *Tokyo Solo*, and *The Carnegie Hall Concert*, both in the new short-improvisation form, are something different. Heard now in their proper context and order, even those four *Tokyo* tracks originally released on *Radiance* shine with greater radiance of their own.

The typical description (mine too) of a Jarrett solo concert quickly devolves into a breathlessly listed menu of some indigestible smorgasbord of influences: Prokofiev, Shostakovich, and Brahms meet Gershwin, Earl Hines, and a churchful of pspliel organists in a mélange of Irish ballads and jazz standards with detours into bebop and the modal musics of the Middle East. But such descriptions too easily mislead the mind. Brahms meet Gershwin, Earl Hines, and a churchful of pspliel organists in a mélange of Irish ballads and jazz standards with detours into bebop and the modal musics of the Middle East. But such descriptions too easily mislead the mind. But such descriptions too easily mislead the mind. But such descriptions too easily mislead the mind.

*Tokyo Solo & The Carnegie Hall Concert*

**Tokyo Solo**
Keith Jarrett, piano

**The Carnegie Hall Concert**
Keith Jarrett, piano

**Both:**
Performance ******
Sonics ******

The Carnegie Hall Concert, recorded in September 2005, is suffused in what sounds and feels like the glow of triumph for both Jarrett and his audience (whose ecstatic applause accounts for 20:31 of the set’s total playing time). They are equally—and highly—recommended, but they differ markedly. *Tokyo* is darker, more interior, more sober in tone. *Carnegie* is more warm and celebratory, more rooted in blues and jazz—in a word, more American, though this is as much the America of Ives, Barber, and Ruggles as of Gershwin, Kern, and Miles Davis. Both are rich in encores. *Tokyo* has “Danny Boy,” full of heart and empty of sentimentality; “Old Man River,” which begins as a meditation for the piano’s top two octaves before moving into stately rolling gospel and Mozartean counterpoint; and “Don’t Worry ‘Bout Me,” a heartbreaker from its first quiet triads to its final enharmonic dusting of notes like fallen stars. *Carnegie*’s five encores are a rare Jarrett composition, “Paint My Heart Red,” from *Munch Conertos*, long out of print; Jarrett’s most famous tune, “My Song”; the standard “Time On My Hands”; and two more improvisations.

The sound on both is ECM’s usual sumptuous three-dimensionality. Jarrett’s Steinway is by turns warm, pealing, and appropriately chalky in the top octave, while the lower octaves are so rich, warm, and perfectly tuned that they sometimes sound like an organ. The five microphones—three more or less in the piano, two at the lip of the stage—give an up-close, pianist’s-eye view that nevertheless shouldn’t bother the aural claustrophobe. On the tracks shared with *Radiance*, the CD sound is a bit harsher in the highs than the Tokyo DVD’s Dolby Digital.

These two sets map new territory for Keith Jarrett and for us, and newer, higher levels of expressiveness and accomplishment. For anyone who loves this sort of music, Jarrett has always been its only purveyor, and these are the best things he’s ever done. Buy both and feel grateful that so few dollars can buy so much uncompromised delight.

—Richard Lehnert
JOHN LUTHER ADAMS
The Mathematics of Resonant Bodies

John Luther Adams, electronic filtering; Steven Schick, percussion
Centaur CA 21034 (CD). 2006. John Luther Adams, prod.; Scott Fraser, eng.
DDD. TT: 69:14
Performance ****
Sonnics ****

Listening to Alaskan composer John Luther Adams’ The Mathematics of Resonant Bodies, I flashed back to a mid-1970s music-lit class taught by University of Arizona choral director John Bloom. Bloom rode herd over the cattle-call class of several hundred students from his turntable pulpit, dropping his needle on crackling representative grooves from Western Music’s past. When it was Bach, Schubert, Beethoven, or Verdi, he would quietly beam a beatific smile. When it was more modern music, particularly the electronic avant-garde, he sang a different tune: “Is this music?” he would mockingly ask. “Some people think so.”

I don’t need a Ouija board to divine where the now-deceased Professor Bloom would stand on this disc. But disappointed as he would be in me, I’ll admit that I do think it’s music. Not that I’m likely to dump my Verdi, Mahler, PJ Harvey, Who, Miles Davis, and Los Lobos discs in favor of nonstop listening to The Mathematics of Resonant Bodies, but I’m impressed with how Adams has transformed an extended percussion piece into a broad metaphysical landscape.

According to his notes on this recording on www.can talouremusic.com, Adams, himself a percussionist, enlisted original Bang on a Can drum head Steven Schick to play eight aptly titled sections of percussion music—Burst, Rumble, Shimmer, Roar, Thunder, Wall, Crash, Stutter—using various drums, cymbals, triangles, and gongs. Adams then electronically filtered these multitracked parts to produce what he calls the “choir of angels” hidden beneath. Basically, these choirs are resonant waves and peaks, skillfully manipulated by Adams into soft afterglows that are the rough aural equivalent of billowing auroras, whale calls, sirens, and buzz bombs. Like the music of Adams’ heroes—Frank Zappa, Edgard Varèse, Morton Feldman—this soundscape is evolutionary in character, full of contrast, and frequently dominated by soft sections. It is in the softest sections where the music is often at its poetic best, as luminous filaments of sound whistle and moan, sing and chime around, over, and through one another with barely any evidence of the original percussion lines that created these washes of sound.

Though what Schick actually played is largely obscured, it is his subtle artistry that gives Adams the shifting material he sculpts. The sections in which Adams alternately reveals and conceals the source material are among the work’s strongest.

—Daniel Buckley

THE 12 CELLISTS OF THE BERLIN PHILHARMONIC
Angel Dances

Works by Bach, Carissimi, Debussy, Mendelssohn, Pärt, Piazzolla, Schott, M. Stockhausen, Verdi
With: Jocelyn B. Smith, vocals; Markus Stockhausen, trumpet, flugelhorn; Members of the Berlin Rundfunkchor

Who would have guessed? Here the 12 cellists of the Berlin Philharmonic present a collection of music originally composed for piano, chorus, stringed instruments, and orchestra. The recording is spotless and finds just the right ambience, and the program is so well planned that there’s never a sense of sameness.

The theme of the CD is vaguely spiritual, but that doesn’t get in the way. Of course, the religious music is clear: the Verdi “Ave Maria” (dating from 1888); two contemporary spirituals by Volker Schott; a prayer from Carissimi’s oratorio Plorate, about Jephtha’s promise of a sacrifice to God; a trio and double quartet from Mendelssohn’s Elijah; and a Bach chorale. Pärt’s Fratres simply implies meditation, the Piazzolla suite is a three-part work on the subject of an angel, and Debussy’s La Cathédrale engloutie is a miraculous depiction of the myth of a cathedral that was swallowed up by the sea, reappears, then disappears again. The final work, by John Luther Adams, electronic filtering; Steven Schick, percussion

Markus Stockhausen (son of composer Karlheinz), is titled Minuitair (einer Seeleereise) (A Soul Journey). It alone is worth the price of the CD: in several parts and lasting 13 minutes, it is elegiac, haunting, jazzy, and graceful by turns, with trumpet and flugelhorn played gently and delicately by the composer. The final couple of minutes sound positively electronic.

Along the way, the cellists’ playing is always flawlessly in tune, filled with spirit and tonal beauty, from whispered to lush. Their Piazzola is soulful; their Impressionist spin on the Debussy outdoes the composer’s piano version. Singer Jocelyn Smith adds some gospel heat, and six members of the Berlin Radio Choir are lovely in the Carissimi. This is a unique CD; if this is crossover, sign me up.

The recording is spotless and finds just the right ambience for each selection, but there’s a problem: you’ll find it necessary to fiddle with your volume controls for different works, and occasionally within works. The quiet sections are divinely so, but only with the volume up a tad—and when it’s up, the big moments can be too big. This is rare, but be warned: It’s worth the trouble. Angel Dances is heavenly.

—Robert Levine
BEETHOVEN
Symphonies 3 & 8

Osmo Vänskä, Minnesota Orchestra
Performance ****
Sonics *****

No new Beethoven symphony cycle in recent years has generated such a uniformly positive buzz as the one by Osmo Vänskä and the Minnesota Orchestra, no doubt because the pairing has proved to be a volcanic concert presence. Also, Vänskä arrived in Minneapolis a seasoned, middle-aged artist with a large, consistently excellent discography, mostly with orchestras from his native Finland. Of course, Beethoven takes him out of the comparative safety of his core Scandinavian repertoire and into territory that is all too well traveled. The cycle’s first installment, Symphonies 4 and 5, was promising but mildly afflicted with Simon Rattle Disease: so many details packed into so little time. This new disc stands on firmer legs—and is competitive with other recent Beethoven recordings.

Vänskä has a strong work ethic, and an unshakable confidence that would seem to come from an objectivist’s letter-of-the-score convictions. Unburdened by responsibilities to bring elemental truths to the ears of his audience, he presents the score in as compelling and faithful way as possible, leaving the meaning to the ear of the interpreter. The result isn’t a redux of such like-minded conductors as George Szell or Arturo Toscanni—Vänskä displays such a healthy suspicion of any sort of received wisdom that you wonder if he’s even heard their recordings. Unlike Szell and Toscanni, Vänskä has a strong sense of using timbre as an expressive entity, sometimes glorying in vivid coloration or, at the opposite extreme, conveying the devastated depths of the “Eroica” funeral march with some of the more compelling pale string sounds you’re likely to hear. You can have stared at the score for decades and be happily astounded by Vänskä’s phrasings, which are refreshingly original but not perversely so.

This is an “Eroica” to live with, partly because the symphony isn’t played hard, but smart. There’s a nice buoyancy to the first movement, its momentum fueled by Vänskä’s particularly stabbing treatment of the many **forzando** markings. Surprisingly, he goes easy on the **fortissimos**; the force usually conveyed by larger masses of sound is accomplished here more by articulation. As a result, the music touches all the necessary emotional bases, and does so well, without jumping outside the kind of sound perimeters you’d expect from music with a basis in Haydn. As a result, Vänskä makes all four movements sound as if they belong together—a feat, when you consider that the piece contains the escalating tragedy of the funeral march’s fugue as well as lighthearted lyricism in the final movement’s recycled music from Beethoven’s Creatures of Prometheus ballet.

Symphony 8 is exceptionally good overall, but not in any particular way. I always hope for an interpretive breakthrough with this smallish, straightforward work, but never expect it. If Beethoven had a compelling need to write this symphony outside of recreation or profit, it’s not apparent. Sound-wise, Vänskä and the MSO’s earlier Beethoven disc gave the music a monolithic grandeur that kept my ear marvelling at the exterior. Now, the SACD sound picture draws me as far inside as I’d want to go. —David Patrick Stearns

www.Stereophile.com, October 2006

MARISS JANSONS/CONCERTGEBOUW
On RCO Live

BEETHOVEN: Symphony 2
BRAHMS: Symphony 2
RCO Live 05002 (SACD). TT: 71:50
Performance ****
Sonics *****

MAHLER: Symphony 6
HENSE: Sebastian im Traum
RCO Live 06001 (2 SACDs). TT: 98:40
Performance ***
Sonics ****

SIBELIUS: Symphony 2
RCO Live 05005 (SACD). TT: 43:44
Performance ****
Sonics ****

RACHMANINOFF: Symphonic Dances
STRAVINSKY: Petrouchka
RCO Live 05004 (SACD). TT: 69:21
Performance ****
Sonics ****

All: Mariss Jansons, Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra 2005. Everett Porter, prod., eng. DSO.

More often, as time goes on, Mariss Jansons is designated a great conductor. He’s passed that milestone age of 60 when good conductors supposedly become great, having spent years with excellent but smaller-city orchestras in Oslo and Pittsburgh and arrived, without a hint of the premature advancement observed in other careers, at the helm of the august Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra of Amsterdam. The growing catalog of recordings on that orchestra’s own label, RCO Live, documents a seemingly fruitful relationship, and, unlike many self-published recordings, are more than documents of noteworthy concerts. The combination of the orchestra’s sound, the Concertgebouw’s famous acoustic, Everett Porter’s excellent SACD engineering, and Jansons’ energetic but nothing-remotely-pervasive approach to the music, make these discs something to return to.

That doesn’t mean that these performances are especially enlightening. Though not as comfortable as Eugene Ormandy’s discography during his peak years with the Philadelphia Orchestra, there is a middle-of-the-road quality here that only occasionally becomes a peak experience. This is an observation rather than a value judgment. One doesn’t always want to climb Wilhelm Furtwangler’s existential Everest in Bruckner’s Symphony 9. Jansons seems to be pure musician rather than part philosopher; his passing the 60-year milestone seems to mean not that he risks more of his own mind with the music, but that all the positive qualities of his younger self are somewhat intensified.

Among the best of Jansons is the Sibelius Symphony 2, a good modern reference version of this oft-heard piece. Though not very active in opera, Jansons has a theatrical sense of animation with most everything he conducts. Though never polyrhythmic or polytonal, the symphony’s occasionally argumentative, often competitive motifs and gestures are anything but tidy rhythmic subdivisions of each other, and Jansons makes the most of that, creating the kind of tension that comes when a symphony has only a tentative truce with itself. Jansons’ rhythmic accompaniment to the big anthem theme in the final movement swings nicely, while the rest of the orchestra surges as few others can.

Given this approach, you’d think Jansons was born to conduct a ballet score as intricately characterized as Stravinsky’s Petrouchka, and indeed he is. Not only do the
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individual instrument groupings make all the right points within the piece's theatrical ecosystem, they also feel highly danceable. The many incidental solos have such personality from the Concertgebouw's principal players that you wonder if they took acting lessons for the occasion. The Rachmaninoff Symphonic Dances are like falling off a log for this team. It's in this disc that you realize how beautifully Jansons' heterogeneous approach toward music making suits the breadth of sound separation of SACD.

The conductor's luck runs low in a work you'd expect to be his apotheosis, Mahler's Symphony 6. Sometimes it seems that the more efficient the performance of this work, the further it strays from the anguished core that less suave conductors of the past, from Dimitri Mitropoulos to Leonard Bernstein, found in it. The polar opposite is Ivan Fischer's recent recording with the Budapest Festival Orchestra (Channel Classics 22905), in which the piece slides by just out of reach. Jansons' isn't as slick as that, but you do find yourself looking to the second disc's filler, the Hans Werner Henze's new Sebastian im Traum, for a reason to justify the set as a whole. But while the Henze is full of some exciting orchestral effects in this impressionistic portrait of the city of Salzburg, several hearings didn't reveal it adding up to anything compelling.

The disc of Beethoven and Brahms shows Jansons at his best: Though Beethoven's Symphony 2 isn't his most profound, Jansons' reading is full of style, fun, and beautifully judged climaxes, the orchestra's distinctive sheen giving a special radiance to the performance. And while Jansons' reading of the Brahms Symphony 2 is middle-of-the-road, it's not conventional. He doesn't go in at all for the typical long lines of musical thought, preferring to break phrases down into two- or three-note motifs that create a mosaic of meaning. You hear that from the historically-informed-performance crowd, but when such principles are applied with Jansons' magnetism and this orchestra's sound, the performance emerges as admirably up to date, and something unlikely to soon go out of fashion. —David Patrick Stearns

— David Patrick Stearns

GUY CLARK

Workbench Songs


Performance ****

Sonics ****

A luthier in his spare time (hence this collection's title), Guy Clark has been a full-time songwriter for nearly 30 years. He remains, however, one of the best of the "Oh, he wrote that?" guys: a song craftsman who, at least in the consciousness of the general public, operates in the shadows, scribbling behind better-known performers who've had hits with his songs—such as Ricky Skaggs, who rode Clark's "Heartbroke" to No.1 on the country charts.

Clark's own records, from the beginning one-two punch of his debut Old No. 1 and its follow-up, Texas Cookin', have all been rough-cut, hard rock, treasures. Thanks to his wry, often darkly amusing songwriting gifts, which mix elements of folk, country, and rock (his bands habitually include a drummer), he has yet to make a bad album. Here, again—in his own gruff, low-key, autobiographical fashion—Clark swings for the fences. With typical understatement, Workbench Songs bristles with simple but pointed melodic turns, as in the swirling, gentle, "Magdalene"; and with guileless lyrics steeped in the power of laughter and tears, as in the merry "Out in the Parking Lot," which he reprises here. (Clark first recorded the song—prematurely, he now thinks—on his 1997 live album, Keepers.) Throughout, his voice remains capable of
being both a regret-choked whisper and a joyous bark.

Sometimes, though, even the greatest songwriter needs a jolt. For this, his tenth album, Clark has collaborated with cowriters such as Rodney Crowell and Gary Nicholson, who among others helped pen 9 of the 11 tunes here. The remaining two are a traditional number and closer, “Diamond Joe,” and “No Lonesome Tune,” by Clark’s beloved friend, the late (great) Townes Van Zandt. Throughout, the very acceptable sound is standard singer-songwriter fare: close-miked voice and guitar front and center, the rest of the players surrounding in a rich, warm spread.

Two songs stand out. The first, “Analog Girl,” could well become the first genuine audiophile anthem of the new century, thanks to verses about cell phones and spam (“in a can”) and a chorus that playfully intones: “Ones and zeros, zeros and ones / She’ll have none of that virtual fini / She’s a real-deal ol’-fashioned analog girl / In a digital world.” The other standout, “Worry B. Gone,” addresses yet another, um, concern of some audiophiles: the preference for a sweet-smelling plant that can make the ol’ listening-with-headphones move a near-religious experience. “Don’t gimme no shit just gimme a hit / I’m smokin’ all day and I can’t get lit / Don’t gimme no guff gimme a puff / You know how I love that stuff.”

— Robert Baird

**SPENCER DICKINSON**

*The Man Who Lives for Love*


TT: 74:17

Performance ****

Sonic $****$

T

his astonishing session, recorded in 2000 and now released for the first time in the US (12 tracks came out in Japan in 2001), hooks Jon Spencer up with the Dickinson boys, Cody on drums and Luther on bass, with Daddy Jim Dickinson getting it all down in the booth. The result is close to rough perfection—so much a screeching, wailing, bad-boy workout that the album, which rolls on through 19 (!) songs, never seems to end.

You don’t want it to. The groove is relentless, and I mean nonstop—what they used to call punk, but is actually more like garage or Blues Magoos and Shadows of Knight—yet recorded with such texture and nuance that it “reads” like an action painting. Blues, well, yes,
but Spencer has never sounded better, swept along by the teeth-gritting paces of Cody’s snare, and bass lines from Luther that more than support Spencer’s crisp accents, stunning guitar slashes, twisted chords, funk filigree, and white noise. “I know what it’s like to be hurt,” Spencer screams, holding the first syllable for a frill measure, on “Flood (The Awful Truth, The Living End).” It’s only one of many extended screams, like the one at the start of “Book of Sorrow,” that Spencer utters throughout. “I hate my mother and dad,” he admits on “I’m Not Ready”; “I hate my country and flag.” Yet “The Man Who Lives for Love” has a bromide for his ills: “Let’s get it on.” And how.

—John Swenson

THE HANDSOME FAMILY

Last Days of Wonder


Performance **
Sonics ***

Albuquerque’s Handsome Family, aka husband-and-wife team Brett and Rennie Sparks, have been issuing quirky records of quality for the past decade, their brand of countryish Americana liberally leavened with Southern Gothicism and a dash of under-a-desert-moon noir. They don’t necessarily get the juke joint jumping—”low-key” doesn’t begin to describe Brett’s immaculately crafted arrangements and deadpan baritone vocals—but Handsome Family fans border on the devotional.

The group’s seventh album, Last Days of Wonder, was born of painstaking digital/analog origins. Brett, who played most of the instruments and wrote the music (Rennie wrote the lyrics and contributes autoharp and banjo), combed through hundreds of samples, experimented with unusual miking techniques and placements, and collected bits of guitar, banjo, pedal steel, and saw from friends via e-mail. Yet despite sounding downright cinematic in places compared to the Family’s previous efforts, Last Days of Wonder feels rather ordinary compared to In the Air (2000), which is equal parts Flannery O’Connor and Gram Parsons and remains the band’s dark masterpiece.

Admittedly, it's a stretch to describe a Rennie Sparks narrative as “ordinary.” One tune here is a character study of mad inventor Nicola Tesla; another concerns a couple who find true love in a forlorn graveyard across the road from a strip mall; and in the chilling “After We Shot the Grizzly,” a survivor of a crash dispassionately recounts how his party dwindled in numbers due to disease, madness, and, it is hinted, cannibalism.

The music, however—awash in polite acoustic strums, tasteful electric leads, and gentle pedal-steel hum, not to mention molasses-slow tempos—is about as lively as an AARP convention. Brett’s carefully enunciated vocals, which approximate those of a pick-led George Jones, only add to the torpor.

Things pick up on the jangly, slightly Byrdsian “Our Blue Sky,” but that’s not until the album’s almost over. It’s telling that the most interesting tune, the creepy “Hunter Green,” flavored with cello and banjo, is the sole number in which Rennie sings the lead.

None of this is to say that Last Days of Wonder is boring; it just never really takes off.

—Fred Mills

LIL’ ED & THE BLUES IMPERIALS

Rattlesnake


Performance ****
Sonics **

Lil’ Ed Williams is a throwback to the era when blues was handed down from generation to generation as a living trust. Most blues guitarists Williams’ age (he was born in 1955), even if they played in bands with older relatives, incorporate into their sound the technological innovations of Jimi Hendrix, Eric Clapton, and Stevie Ray Vaughan, but when Lil’ Ed and his half-brother, bassist James “Pookie” Young, start rolling, the listener is transported back to the West Side Chicago sound of their uncle and mentor, J.B.
RECORD REVIEWS

Hutto. And when Ed whips out the slide, he builds up an intensity reminiscent of another Chicago legend, Hound Dog Taylor, as well as the great Elmore James (and his biggest influence, Robert Johnson). Lil' Ed gives props by covering both Hutto ("That's the Truth") and James ("You Know You're Wrong") on this record, but his own writing prowess is much in evidence on "Nobody's Fault But My Own," and the hilarious raveup "Icicles in My Meatloaf." Pookie also contributes a couple of songs, and Ed's wife, Pam, adds three strong tunes, including the blues tearjerker "You Just Weren't There." Through it all, Rattleshake is the sound of a great band in full flight, driven along by Pookie and drummer Kelly Littleton and featuring a terrific two-guitar sound, Ed's guitar framed by exciting rhythm work from Mike Garrett.

— John Swenson

CHARLIE MUSSELWHITE
Delta Hardware


Performance ★★★

Sonics ★★★★

Charlie Musselwhite runs the table again. It's just me, or is Charlie Musselwhite sounding better than ever? His current creative streak dates back at least as far as 2002's Once Upon a Night in America, in which he used contemporary songs to reflect on the Memphis music of his youth. He followed that with his first record for Real World, 2004's Sanctuary, which paired him with Charlie Sexton, the Blind Boys of Alabama, and Ben Harper.

With Delta Hardware, Musselwhite runs the table again. No star turns here, just a rocking quartet that includes drummer June Core, Randy Bermudes on bass, and electric guitarist Chris "Kid" Anderson. Chris Goldsmith, who produced Sanctuary, is back again. Goldsmith, who also helmed the recent discs by the Blind Boys and Harper, has an excellent way of making roots music sound modern.

"One of These Mornings" and "Clarksdale Boogie," both propelled by a loud kick drum and great riffing from Anderson, set the tone for this down-home blues set. A burst of metallic guitar announces "Church Is Out," an especially melodic upbeat Musselwhite shouter. He and the band play the hell out of Little Walter's "Just a Feeling," and give the business to Billy Boy Arnold's "Gone Too Long," too. Nobody can play that old-time harmonica quite as melodically as Musselwhite.

Written with Goldsmith, "Black Water" is charged with the politics of post-Katrina America. "Oh, black water, it's just a sign of our times," Musselwhite muses over an ominous riff.

— John Swenson

ALLISON MOORER
Getting Somewhere


Performance ★★★★

Sonics ★★★★★

Getting Somewhere would be a breakthrough album for Allison Moorer for its sound alone—a more forceful, alt-rock approach than her previous work. But it's not just the electric guitars that are turned up here; Moorer's lyrics are revelatory, peeling away layers of diffidence and euphemism to reveal the raw emotions underlying her songs. "I'm throwin' out what ain't real," she vows on the opening track, "I've Got a Lot of Work to Do." But Moorer goes much further than simply "clearing my head." She's out to face down her demons and settle some emotional scores, but does it all with a wisdom taught by tragedy and a judicious respect for her subjects.

The centerpiece, "New Year's Day," is an unflinching examination of the scars left by a harrowing childhood shared with her sister Shelby Lynne, shadowed by the horror of their abusive and eventually homicidal father: "turnin' up the volume on the radio / strainin' not to hear the sounds we still cannot let go." In "How She Does It," the abused wife makes the poignant decision to leave and start a new life, a choice Allison's mom never got to make.

Moorer's courage in facing these ghosts seems to give her the emotional scope to write several outstanding existential love songs to her husband and producer, Steve Earle, particularly the beautifully gentle "You'll Never Know" and "If It's Just for Today." The process leads Moorer to the title track, which balances personal tragedies against the images of loss portrayed in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. "I close my eyes and whisper a prayer," concludes Moorer. "I have to believe I'm getting somewhere."

— John Swenson

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The pianist for Yo-Yo Ma’s Silk Road
in their first recording together:
ReferenceRecordings,s.co
THOM YORKE
The Eraser

Performance ** Sonic **

B
ob Dylan meets indie rock in
the music of the Walkmen.
Well, that’s what NPR had to say of A Hundred Miles Off,
the NYC quintet’s third full-length album. Habitúes of the Manhattan-
Brooklyn post-punk scene that spawned the likes of Interpol, French Kicks, and
the Yeah Yeah Yeahs, the Walkmen emerged from the ashes of major-label
flameout Jonathan Fire Eater, issued their debut, Everyone Who Pretended to Like Me is
Gone, in 2002, and followed it in 2004 with Bows and Arrows. Rookie critics loved ’em, hailing the Walkmen’s art’s
tunefulness and brash attitude. (Hold that thought: the band is reportedly readying a song-by-song cover of Harry
Nilsson’s Pussycats.)

With A Hundred Miles Off, though, it’s hard to fathom all the fuss. The Dylan-
goes-indie tag is grossly overstated. Vocalist Hamilton Leithauser does have a
certain Dylanesque sing-song quality, but his stunted range is more yowl than
croon, and when he tries to hit a high or low note he invariably misses. Dylan’s
candal eccentricities grow on you; Leithauser’s grate. Musically, the
hooks that wash over you like warm
Gulf Stream water. The dynamic range
beneath dramatic piano and guitar
layers of computerized rhythms
with its sporadic three-guitar outbursts
and shadowy electricity, than to the elec-
tronic leanings of Stereolab. That is not
with The Eraser, Yorke’s solo debut. Rather
than take a small sidestep from his band, Yorke has opted to discard deci-
bels in favor of a quietly moving bed-
room project.

Produced by Radiohead mainstay
Nigel Godrich, The Eraser is a loose, lap-
top-derived album that serves up simple
layers of computerized rhythms
beneath dramatic piano and guitar
motifs, all iced with Yorke’s eerie,
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opening “The Eraser” and the closing
“Cymbal Rush”—the album has a
blissed-out, hypnotic effect, with gentle
hooks that wash over you like warm
Gulf Stream water. The dynamic range
is strangely limited (one of the disc’s
shortcomings), but it’s that limitation
that makes Yorke’s work consistently
effective. One song fuses into the next like the movements of a symphony,
without jarring transitions. “The Clock”
ends with a rasp guitar motif, and the
following track, “Black Swan,” opens with another shaly minor-key guitar
theme. “Skip Divided,” which follows,
explores the same dark terrain, but with
Yorke’s quivering blues moans as a
backdrop.

Such subtle shifts and dynamic lim-
itations don’t allow for true peaks,

Thom Yorke
The Eraser

Performance ***
Sonic ***

Radiohead’s Thom Yorke has always hovered over the spirit of his band like a sallow-eyed ghost,
wispy and moaning, seemingly burdened with an albatross and a sad soul. But even in its more experimental
incarnations, Radiohead backed Yorke’s ethereal ruminations with a sturdy rock-
n’roll spine. OK Computer, the band’s epic peak, adhered more to Sonic Youth,
with its sporadic three-guitar outbursts
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Such subtle shifts and dynamic lim-
itations don’t allow for true peaks,
which is unfortunate. The fabric Yorke has created would easily accommodate a dramatic dynamic shift or two. But perhaps that's not what he intended. Back in 1995, after The Bends, Yorke admitted to me that he wanted to make a disco pop record. Since then he's written many notes, and Radiohead has produced some startlingly beautiful rock music and become accidental superstars. But perhaps The Eraser, his long-awaited realization of that dance album, is Yorke's real dream come true.

—Bob Gulla

jazz

FRANCESCO CAFISO
Happy Time

Francesco Cafiso, alto sax; Riccardo Arrighini, piano; Aldo Zunino, bass; Stefano Bagnoli, drums
CamJazz 50114 (CD). 2006. Ermanno Basso, prod.; Stefano Ameno, eng. ODD.
TT: 59:52
Performance ****
Sonics ****

I have heard Francesco Cafiso play live many times, in New York City, in Melbourne, Australia, and in Perugia, Italy. Happy Time reveals the inadequacy of recorded music in approximating live music's excitement. It is a strong album, and extremely well engineered. But Francesco Cafiso in person knocks you down and lays you out as no record can.

The fact that you have probably never heard of Cafiso is testimony to the ethnocentrism that still applies in jazz, internationalization notwithstanding. He is the scariest new saxophone talent in at least a generation, but he is Italian. Happy Time was recorded in late 2005, when Cafiso was 16. It is his first recording for a label distributed in the US, CamJazz. It should bring the buzz about Cafiso to this side of the water.

The only things special about Cafiso are: a tone on the alto saxophone almost not of this world in its penetrating purity; blinding speed; immaculate articulation; a switch that he flips to pour out vast lines of astonishing logical elegance without breaking a sweat; and passion and joy in communicating through music.

He is not yet a stylistic innovator. In person, he plays the standard bop repertoire, even including "Cherokee." He plays it in a way that has led Carlo Pagnotta, artistic director of the Umbria Jazz festivals, who knows Charlie Parker's music intimately, to say, "I don't believe in reincarnation, but..."

Happy Time is all Cafiso compositions, which open some fresh frames of reference outside bop. "Louisiana" flies right into furious flourishes and intervallic leaps and held single-note wails (albeit over "Rhythm" changes). The 12-minute "She Loves Me" starts from a simple bright snatch of melodicism and builds successive tiers of embellishments, all cele-
SERGE CHALOFF SEP TET
Boston Blow-Up!

Serge Chaloff, baritone sax; Boots Mussulli, alto sax; Herb Pomero y, trumpet; Ray San tis, piano; Everett Evans, bass; Jimmy Zhang, drums
Stan Kenton, prod.; Michael Cuscin a, reissue prod. ; Ron McMaster, reissue eng. AAD. TT: 45:36
Performance ****
Sonic s ****

Reissued for the first time on CD without fanfare by Blue Note, Serge Chaloff’s Boston Blow-Up! explodes as a remarkable revelation of an obscure jazz baritone saxophonist. While not as historically significant as Thel onious Monk Quartet with John Coltrane at Carnegie Hall 1957, recently unearthed and released last year ( also by Blue Note), this 1955 session for Capitol Records, originally produced by that label’s longtime staple Stan Kenton, testifies to Chaloff’s brawn and beauty on the bop bar. He’s supported by his Boston-based sextet, featuring alto saxophonist Boots Mussulli, who contributes seven of the disc’s 12 tunes, and trumpeter Herb Pomeroy, whose swaying “Herbs” is the subject of two alternate takes not included on the original LP.

Chaloff’s story is another tragic tale of drug addiction and recovery, followed by premature death from spinal paralysis, which cut his life short at age 33 in 1957, two years after Boston Blow-Up! was recorded. Chaloff’s credentials were solid: stints in the bands of ahead-of-his-time arranger Boyd Raeburn (1944) and, later, Woody Herman (1947), then a leader of his own groups (documented on a four-CD Mosaic Records set, The Complete Serge Chaloff Sessions, now out of print). A precursor of cool bari giant Gerry Mulligan, Chaloff plays on this disc with an edgy, grainy tone on such slow-tempo tunes as the show-stopping “What’s New” and a brash, brusque reading of “Body and Soul”— a brilliant, forward-looking companion to Coleman Hawkins’ version on tenor that closes with a brief but pleasing conversation between bari and alto sax.

There’s also a perkiness—the album opens with the bright “Bob the Roblin,” which teems with cascading horn lines buoyed by Chaloff’s deep bari lead, and swings like mad through such brisk, catchy numbers as “Sergical,” “Jr.,” and “Kip.” The horn arrangements are impeccable, as might be expected from a Kenton project, and the rhythm team solidly tethers the groove. But ultimately it’s Chaloff’s show, his low-toned baritone providing the proceedings both gravity and grace.

—Dan Ouellette

TOMASZ STANKO
Lontano

Tomasz Stanko, trumpet; Marcin Wasilewski, piano; Slawomir Kurkiewicz, bass; Michal Miskiewicz, drums.
ECM 1980 (CD) 2006. Manfred Eicher, prod. ; Gérard de Haro, eng. DDD. TT: 76:57
Performance ****
Sonic s ****

Lontano is Italian for far away, but in this, his eighth album for ECM, Polish trumpeter Tomasz Stanko sounds anything but. In this music of great intimacy, delicacy, and strength, the high-pitched squeals and raspy overblowing that often punctuated Stanko’s earlier albums with unavoidable associations of barely suppressed rage, appear barely at all. Stanko’s earlier quartets, sextets, and septet may have challenged him more directly with their older, thornier personalities and odder combinations of instruments, but this trio
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- Michael Fremer

"...addictive."
- John Atkinson

of young Polish jazz musicians seems to have accepted the aging trumpeter in ways new to him, inviting Stanko and the listener into a place within which he sings in a voice more quiet and lyrical than before.

That is audible in Lontano's longest and shortest tracks. Each of the three parts of "Lontano," a free improvisation totaling 40 minutes, begins with a slow coalescing of sounds into music, followed by pianist Marcin Wasilewski's deft balladic musings à la Herbie Hancock in his mid-'60s prime. When Stanko's immense, burnished tone enters, one discovers that there are more ways for a pianist to comp than one had ever suspected. Bassist Slawomir Kurkiewicz and drummer Michal Miskiewicz are just as nimble and delicate in their touch—and then surprising in their power. Overall, "Lontano" leaves an impression of music made by musicians as unafraid of silence as of jazz's inherent unpredictability. Often I was sure the music had ended, when suddenly it became clear that everything I'd heard so far had been only introduction to what was about to unfold. It is difficult to believe that the musicians themselves were any less surprised.

Lontano's shortest track is "Tale," a Stanko composition originally recorded on his first ECM disc, Balladyna, in 1975. The two versions are equals in brevity, austerity, and quiet, but the older take embodies tension and searing anger, the new one acceptance and bittersweetness. What is striking is how much more open and expressive Stanko's tone is now, how much more he communicates with so many fewer notes.

"Song for Ania" is as much elegy as ballad; the liltingly lyrical "Sweet Thing" sounds like a standard lacking only an Ira Gershwin lyric, Wasilewski's chords are gorgeously full in "Cyrla," and "Trista" is a brief sketch retroactively given greater stature by the unexpected power of its last three chords. The sound is ECM's usual darkly luminous conjuring of three-dimensional instruments, each a full-body sensual event.

Lontano is full of the paradoxes embodied by all great music: of silence being given voice; of time simultaneously expanded, condensed, and brought to a full stop; and of the pains and joys of souls far away re-created in the listener's heart. As was true of Soul of Things and Suspended Night, his first two records with this almost telepathic trio, it is the best thing Tomasz Stanko has done.

—Richard Lehnert
Clearaudio Concerto & Goldfinger
Editor:
We graciously thank Michael Fremer for his very positive reviews of the Concerto and Goldfinger cartridges, and for the accolade that the Goldfinger is "one of the great (if expensive) musical cartridges of the post-digital age" (very clever indeed). Princeton University defines a technocrat as an "expert who is a member of a highly skilled elite group." Peter readily accepts this description, as he is a scientist, engineer, artisan, and visionary.

Peter enjoyed reading the review and the interesting and clever use of language: using terms of magnetism (attract, repel) to describe one's assessment of an essentially electromagnetic device. MP's description of the Goldfinger's ability to present the entire musical event—the initial attack and complete musical envelope—was very accurate. "What the Goldfinger did better than any other cartridge I've ever heard was to deliver and sustain instrumental lines" is high praise indeed. Words and phrases such as "purest," "most transparent," "fastest," "enticing," "addictive," "utterly convincing," "magical," and "breathtaking" all reflect Peter's idea of how the musical experience should be. Peter's philosophy is to create cartridges that help music lovers find musical truth.

Peter has achieved his goal and created a cartridge without weaknesses and no tradeoffs. Even its heavy weight has tonearm manufacturers (SME in England) building specific counterweights for the Goldfinger. A weakness is choosing more bass extension when one can have bass extension, definition, and bass texture, or accepting hyper-romanticism and sacrificing resolution. A technocrat could be defined as someone trying to make something that everyone would like. No, Peter is indeed an artist, for an artist and his creation can elicit the complete range of feelings, much as music can.

Garth Leerer
Musical Surroundings
Peter Sudly
Clearaudio

Furutech LP Demagnetizer
Editor:
Thank you, Michael Fremer, for your brave and insightful review! Furutech applies its engineering prowess to each and every element of the power/audio playback chain—no matter how small—using ultrarefined materials and advanced technical processes. We invite interested readers to our website to find out more about our 2-Step Alpha Cryogenic and Demagnetizing Process, Ground Juniper Technology, Axial Locking System, and details on the rest of our affordable line of cables, power distributors/filters, and other beautifully engineered OEM products. Make a refined connection with Furutech!

Frank Yoo
Furutech

Acoustic Revive RL-30 Mk.3
Editor:
For your information, the principle and structure of a demagnetizer were originally developed by Acoustic Revive, and its patent has been authorized and registered in the US by Acoustic Revive under patent number 6058078. Furutech used to buy demagnetizers from Acoustic Revive on an OEM basis. However, they lately imitated it and nowaday produce similar products in China.

However, very precise technology and accurate tuning are required to produce a really effective demagnetizer. Therefore, Furutech's demagnetizers (made in China or Taiwan) are not comparable to the original demagnetizers of Acoustic Revive. Yoshi Hontani, Managing Director

MuSon Project

BG Corp. Z-1
Editor:
We at BG want to express our gratitude to Robert Reina and John Atkinson for reviewing the BG Z-1 speaker. We are very excited that Robert found the Z-1 to be a "top performer" and, as the product's designer, I humbly accept his congratulations for "Excellent work!" We also feel that our Z-1 speaker is a top contender for those who love music and are looking for an affordable speaker that offers state-of-the-art technology and high-fidelity sound. Everyone at BG works very hard to provide exceptional value that delights our dealers and customers.

In addition, we would particularly like to thank John Atkinson for doing such rigorous testing of our speakers and for contributing his excellent commentary. I truly believe that any good review of audio gear should ideally combine subjective findings with objective test results. In loudspeaker design, those are two inseparable aspects of good and professional design practice. Therefore I believe that a review that addresses both the subjective and objective sides is especially valuable for readers and customers. While we find our own measurements, when compared with John's, to be within the range of experimental error—which is to be expected between any two different testing systems—I would like to offer a few comments.

As John rightfully noted, a small passive speaker with high sensitivity cannot have very extended bass. Our position is that the dynamic range and resolution of a loudspeaker are among the most important factors of a good sound. Means that are used to extend bass in a small speaker noticeably compromise its dynamic range and may degrade midrange resolution. The Z-1 was not intended to go very deep; instead, it was designed to play effortlessly and deliver musical details true to the source. While it may lack some very deep bass, we feel the Z-1 offers a highly satisfying and involving performance as it is. Effortlessness and transparency cannot be augmented with a subwoofer, while those customers who seek full-range reproduction can easily pair the Z-1s with a sub of their choice at any time. (BG has some great subs, too!)

With best regards and my continued appreciation to the Stereophile staff and its readers.

Igor Levitsky,
VP Engineering & Research,
BG Corp.

NAD C 372
Editor:
NAD would like to thank Jim Austin for his thorough and thoughtful review of our C 372 integrated amplifier. The C 372 is, as Jim pointed out, an evolutionary design with many unique yet proven design innovations. In all cases, these innovations address real-world operating conditions and do so in a very cost-effective way.

We believe that when an amplifier is doing its job correctly, it should be neutral and free of character. It is the musicians' job to create the sonic color and emotional engagement of music. The ideal amplifier should simply be, to quote audio pioneer Stewart Hegeman, "a straight wire with gain." So when he found "little to say" about the C 372's sonic character, Jim was really giving us the highest possible compliment!

As Jim pointed out, the C 372 does not include a built-in phono stage, but I would like to let vinyl enthusiasts know that we do offer a matching (in performance and value) MC/MM outboard phono preamp, the PP-2, which sells for $129.

Greg Stidsen, Director,
Product Development
NAD Electronics

www.Stereophile.com, October 2006
#### ADVERTISER INDEX

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acoustic Sounds</th>
<th>146-147, 158, 192, 198</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Acoustic Zen Technologies</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AceofJewel Corporation</td>
<td>160</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analysis Plus</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Archive Audio</td>
<td>215</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Art Audio</td>
<td>211</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Audio Advisor Inc</td>
<td>197</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Audio Connection</td>
<td>184</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Audio Monitor</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Audio Nexus</td>
<td>196</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Audio Plus Services Plustar Cam</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Audio Products Intl</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Audio Visual SF</td>
<td>166</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Audio Quest</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Audophile Systems</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Audioaves</td>
<td>184</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avalon Acoustics</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ayre Acoustics</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Balanced Audio Technology</td>
<td>78-79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basis Audio</td>
<td>194</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BC Acoustics</td>
<td>185</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bel Canto</td>
<td>178</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bluebird Music</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boltz LLC</td>
<td>106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boulder Amplifiers</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bryston LTD</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cable Company</td>
<td>136</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canton Electronics Corp</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cardas Audio</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cary Audio Design C2</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coincident</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conrad Johnson</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ConradJohnson</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CSI Audio</td>
<td>190</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David Lewis Audio</td>
<td>182</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divergent Technologies</td>
<td>178</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dynaudio North America</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Echo Busters</td>
<td>212</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elite Audio Video Distribution</td>
<td>210</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ELSS</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EMI</td>
<td>207</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Epitome AV Inc</td>
<td>159</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Esclante Design</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fidelis Audio</td>
<td>214</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flat Earth Audio</td>
<td>211</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gallen Carle Audio</td>
<td>215</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gateway Sound</td>
<td>215</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Globe Audio Marketing</td>
<td>154</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goldmund USA</td>
<td>152</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goodmans High End</td>
<td>186</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graham Engineering</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guivu</td>
<td>209</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hakro Super Fidelity Amplifiers</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hansen Audio</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harmonic Technology</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HCM Audio</td>
<td>168</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HeadRoom</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heron Audio</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hyperion Sound Design</td>
<td>132</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immedia</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Innovative Audio</td>
<td>203</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IPRS Labs</td>
<td>204</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JS Audio</td>
<td>208</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JC Professional</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kimber Kable</td>
<td>15, 20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Krell Industries Inc</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lamm Industries</td>
<td>196</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legacy Audio</td>
<td>122</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lemnook Group</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manley Labs</td>
<td>209</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mark Levinson</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MBL of America</td>
<td>212</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>McCormack</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metronome/ThX Audio</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Merlin Music Systems</td>
<td>209</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mk6 Corporation</td>
<td>211</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Montana Loudspeakers</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Music Direct</td>
<td>38, 39, 61, 120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Musical Surroundings</td>
<td>156, 172</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nagra</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NAIR Audio North America Inc</td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NE Plus Ultra</td>
<td>217</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Needle Doctor</td>
<td>154</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NHT</td>
<td>117</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nirvana Audio</td>
<td>16, 66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nordost Corp</td>
<td>117</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overdrive</td>
<td>22-23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oyaide</td>
<td>112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paradigm AudioStream</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Park Avenue Audio</td>
<td>189</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parts Express</td>
<td>197</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pass Labs</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pioneer Electronics</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portal Audio</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PS Audio</td>
<td>138-139</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reference Recordings</td>
<td>206</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reno Hi-Fi</td>
<td>214</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Revel Loudspeakers</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rhythm Loudspeakers</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rives Audio PT Group</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sansus Systems</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shunyata Research</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Signal Path</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Signal Super-Group</td>
<td>112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Silltech</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simaudio</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sony Electronics</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sound By Singer</td>
<td>94, 128-129</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sumiko</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Symphonic Acoustics</td>
<td>210</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taiga LLC</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tele America</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TheAV Experts</td>
<td>215</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The High End</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Toem Acoustic Inc</td>
<td>8, 9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ultimate Audio Video</td>
<td>154</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upscale Audio</td>
<td>98, 99, 126</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vandenstein Audio</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VAS Industries</td>
<td>190</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weav Acoustics Inc</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Velodyne Acoustics Inc</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verity Audio</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vincent Audio</td>
<td>177</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Virgin</td>
<td>198</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violette Labs</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VMAX Services Inc</td>
<td>150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Waveform Audio</td>
<td>209</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wilson Audio Specials</td>
<td>18, C3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>YG Acoustics</td>
<td>148</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

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A big box of records arrived in my office recently. That's the kind of statement that I can make only rarely these days. As I try to tell my CD-thieving friends who think the mailroom still gets round-shouldered schlepping promos to my office, those days are over. The record business is shrinking dramatically.

CD sales are down, new talent is wobbly and the business is still grappling with the vengeful spirit ofダウンロードers everywhere. Given that climate, I actively look for something nice to say about the record business these days; yes, to break up the monotony of bad news, but also to whistle in the graveyard that it ain't over until it's over.

Believe it or not, in this decade of the download, a new mini-major record label has appeared on the horizon. Concord Records, originally founded in 1949, and since 1999 owned by TV guru Norman Lear and his partner Hal Gaba, has grown into a new industry powerhouse through acquisitions of Berkeley, CA-based Fantasy Records (December 2004) and Cleveland-based Telarc Records (December 2005). Fantasy, of course, along with Verve and Blue Note, is one of the world's great repositories of recorded jazz, being the home of stars like Thelonious Monk, John Coltrane, and Miles Davis. Telarc, which records classical music as well as blues and lite jazz, also has built up a stash of worthy jazz masters from artists like Ray Brown, Joe Williams, and Jim Hall since its founding in 1977.

Now that the smoke from the acquisitions has cleared, and Concord's got upwards of 25 different imprints under one roof, the question on the minds of a lot of jazz fans, hyperbolic critics, and music biz folks is what is the plan for world domination going to look like?

If the box of CDs I received (thanks to Concord good guy Zev Feldman) is any indication, the first projects of this new conglomerate are a mixed bag. Does a new Edie Brickell release signal the start of more rock records? New jazz titles such as (Michael) Bolton Singing Sinatra and Hof's Favorites, a compilation of jazz performances selected by Hugh Hefner (Playboy Jazz is part of Concord), are just plain silly. However, a new Sonny Stitt boxed set, Stitt's Bits, drawn from the Fantasy vaults, is well done, sounds great, and admirably fills a niche in Stitt's discography.

Even better is the RVG Remasters Series, which has kicked in with a vengeance: nearly 20 titles released in just the last few months. RVG is legendary oddball engineer Rudy Van Gelder, who worked out of his New Jersey studio—in Hackensack, and to this very day in Englewood Cliffs—and who supervised these 24-bit remasterings of his original sessions. Van Gelder also worked for Blue Note, which since 1999 has been releasing his fresh remasterings, most including bonus tracks, in its own RVG Edition series, which now numbers 159 titles. Blue Note also pre-empted some of the thunder of Concord's Thelonious Monk and John Coltrane: The Complete 1957 Riverside Recordings with their late-2005 release Thelonious Monk Quartet with John Coltrane at Carnegie Hall.

No jazz fan worth his weight in spit-soaked reeds will turn up his nose at the prospect of another reissue of Sonny Rollins' Saxophone Colossus, which was among the first batch of RVG Remasters to be released. Why reissue an album whose title, when plugged into Amazon's search engine, turns up no fewer than 13 different editions, including a JVC XRCD and a hybrid SACD from Analogue Productions, both in unrivaled sound? Why not first dig into more obscure Van Gelder-engineered projects? Or bring out a much-reissused title with bonus material no one's ever heard, à la Universal's Deluxe Editions reissue program?

I tried to talk to someone at Concord about these and other questions, but after a few days, we just could not connect. In Concord's defense, they're currently engaged in wrestling an unruly corporate beast and trying to incorporate two very large acquisitions.

The centerpiece so far of new product from the evolving jazz powerhouse is the Miles Davis boxed set, The Miles Davis Quintet, The Legendary Prestige Quintet Sessions, which collects the tracks from Miles' Relaxin', Steamin', Workin', Cookin' salad days (1955-56) on Prestige, and his legendary quintet of Philly Joe Jones, Red Garland, Paul Chambers, and John Coltrane. The boxed set arranges everything chronologically. And while an Amazon search for Steamin', just to pick a title, also turned up 13 different versions including both an out of print XRCD (which is still available used) and a Mobile Fidelity edition, the Miles box includes extras worth having like printable transcriptions of five Miles solos and a killer fourth disc containing eight unreleased live audio tracks from radio and television broadcasts from The Tonight Show (with that insufferable hipster doofus Steve Allen), The Blue Note in Philadelphia, and NYC's Cafe Bohemia. One puzzling development with this set is why the 24-bit remasterings on the boxed set were done by Joe Tarantino at Fantasy studios and not Van Gelder who was the engineer on the original sessions.

The big test of Concord's new mini-major-label status will be the September release of a six-CD set, John Coltrane: Fearless Leader. It looks like the kind of blockbuster project that could and should make a firm statement of where Concord wants to go and what kind of label they want to be.

It was always going to take some time for this melding of three diverse corporate cultures, whose stationery is now adorned with 13 different record-label logos, to get its sea legs. When I talk with friends who work there, they tell me the workload these days is crushing. Too many all-day meetings and your eyes no longer focus, your mate walks, and you have to think to breathe. But as I see it, the greatly expanded Concord Records holds two aces. First, they have content—lots and lots of priceless content—which now they must learn how to best package and sell. And second, the place has some experienced, class individuals who know how the business works. I'm thinking they'll get it right. Eventually.

Robert Baird
So here it is.

Wilson Audio's signature product, in continuous production since the 1980s, now appearing in System 8 iteration.

What does that mean to you?

- The anti-jitter crossover technology developed for the MAXX Series 2 and Sophia Series 2 is now part of the System 8. The transition from midrange to treble is significantly more coherent and seamless. Transients are more clearly delineated, without audible overshoot and grain. Bass linearity, impact, and speed increase. The System 8 achieves greater tonal beauty and superior resolution – the same apparent paradox of the MAXX Series 2.

- The tweeter technology first developed for the MAXX Series 2 – then incorporated into the Sophia Series 2 – is now part of the new WATT/Puppy. High frequency noise and grain are audibly reduced. The MAXX Series 2 has been heralded as a true benchmark by many of the audio world's most distinguished voices. Now the WATT/Puppy takes its place alongside that paragon of musicality. The perception of air and extension, combined with sweetness and listenability, far surpasses any other comparable design on the market.

- In compliance with European Union requirements, the use of strategically placed lead ingots in the WATT cabinet has been discontinued. This regulatory mandate inspired a new combination of X material (prized for its lack of coloration and resonance) and M material (prized for its midrange clarity) in a sophisticated internal bracing configuration. The System 8 sounds more effortless, has greater transient impact, and achieves added tonal beauty and purity as a result.

- Finally, the recessed diffraction pads and the pin-grill system first employed in the Alexandria enhance the physical beauty and finish of the system.

Wilson Audio's best-selling multi-cabinet loudspeaker long ago secured its position as one of high-end audio's enduring icons. Not content with that, however, the WATT/Puppy System 8 demonstrates again its determination to be not only a player, but the standard bearer in its class.

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Sam Tellig, Stereophile, November 2005

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