Smooth Sound from NAD
THE M3 AMPLIFIER

CD REISSUE ROUNDUP

SUPER AMPLIFIERS from Creek & Halcro

HIGH-END CD SOUND: Simaudio’s SuperNova player

ARCAM’S JOHN DAWSON on Blu-ray and HD DVD

2006 ARTICLE INDEX
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d music. And games. And computers. We also talked to our Sony artists. We game developers, how can we make it work can experience more than you ever imagined. More, in every sense. sony.com/bluray

Sony Pictures Entertainment on Blu-ray Disc
Full HD 1080p resolution. For stunning visual clarity, closer details, more action and up to seven channels of uncompressed audio.

Sony VAIO AR Blu-ray Disc-Enabled Notebook Computer
The high-definition experience isn't limited to your home theater. Select VAIO AR Series notebooks feature a Blu-ray Disc read/write drive that lets you watch, capture, edit and even burn home movies in Full HD 1080p onto BD-R or BD-RE Blu-ray Discs.

Sony Internal Blu-ray Disc Drive and Sony Blu-ray Disc Blank Media
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Sony BMG Music Videos on Blu-ray Disc Media
Feel the passion of great live performances through high-definition video and uncompressed surround sound. Get deeper into the music with extras such as interviews, behind-the-scenes and interactive angles.

PlayStation 3 with Blu-ray Disc movie playback
Unleash a brilliant high-definition entertainment experience whether it’s gaming or movies. PlayStation 3 takes you where you’ve never dreamt possible - a place to PLAY BEYOND.
Presenting the only Blu-ray Disc™ product made by people who make movies. And when we set out to create the most powerful hi-def experience ever, we didn't just talk to our engineers. We asked moviemakers, what do you want out of Blu-ray Disc™ technology? We asked musicians and producers, what's harder for what you're trying to do? The answers were surprising, and inspiring. The result? Now you can see what your favorite directors want you to see, and experience it in Full HD 1080p picture resolution that is capable of up to 7.1 channels of surround sound. Rigid beam construction and off-center insulated feet prevent distortion. The ideal player for AV enthusiasts.

Sony BDP-S1 Blu-ray Disc Player Sony worked with filmmakers to create Cinema Tuned™ Picture Presets that optimize to the lighting conditions in your home theater. So not only do you get to see what your favorite directors want you to see, you get to experience it in Full HD 1080p picture resolution that is capable of up to 7.1 channels of surround sound. Rigid beam construction and off-center insulated feet prevent distortion. The ideal player for AV enthusiasts.
It's called the "Cocktail Party Effect." You may be immersed in the middle of a crowd of audiophiles all talking at once, but when someone says something that catches your attention, such as your name, you can focus on the sound of that person's voice and exclude the babble. The noise suppression can be 9-15db; it's the sound being concentrated on seems to be three to four times louder than the ambient noise, according to Wikipedia (see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cocktail_party_effect). The exact mechanism of the Cocktail Party Effect is not known, but it is conjectured that it has something to do with the binaural nature of human hearing; the fact that we have two ears allows us to apply spatial discrimination to what would otherwise be a jumble of sound.

In mid-September I was given a strong, if inadvertent, reminder of the usefulness of the Cocktail Party Effect. During my subway ride into the office the day after my flight back from this year's CEDIA Convention (see http://blog.stereophile.com/cedia 2006), while listening to music through my usualcombo of Apple iPod, Emeline The Hornet headphone amp, and Ultimate Ears UE5 headphones, I noticed that the soundstage was pulled a little to the right. A few days later, I woke up with no hearing at all in my left ear— not only was I completely deaf in my left ear if I snapped my fingers next to it, but there were rushing and whistling sounds in my left ear if I snapped my fingers next to my left ear. It sounded like someone was shouting at me, and I could hardly make out what was being said unless he or she was standing right in front of me. In such a noisy environment, one good ear didn't seem to be much better than two deaf ones, and the feeling of being besieged by incomprehensible monaural muttering was distressing and tiring.

I'm sure critics of this magazine are already thinking, "So what's new about JA being deaf?" But I have to tell you that, with almost all of both my creative and recreational lives dependent on my being able to hear, losing even one ear was a depressing matter.

The next three weeks went very slowly— though I did regain some hearing in my left ear. And I can still hear the tone when it reaches 15 kHz, but with almost all of both my creative and recreational lives dependent on my being able to hear, losing even one ear was a depressing matter.

Among the first people that I discussed this with was my GP, who said, "I'd say your hearing was perfect!" I told him that, if I was deaf, I could hardly make out what anyone was saying unless he or she was standing right in front of me. In such a noisy environment, one good ear didn't seem to be much better than two deaf ones, and the feeling of being besieged by incomprehensible monaural muttering was distressing and tiring.

"How old are you?" asked the specialist. "58," I replied. "In which case," he said, "I'd say your hearing was perfect!"

Perfect. You read it here! Guess I needn't hang up my reviewing credentials quite yet. But my experience underlines the fact that the listener's ears are the primary component in his system.

**Attend a Stereophile session**

Back in 1992, Stereophile got into the business of concert promotion when it booked Canadian pianist Robert Silverman for two evenings of recitals in order to record his performances for a live double CD, *Concert* (STPH005-2; see www.stereophile.com/musicrecordings/315). We don't believe in rushing to repeat a success, so 15 years later we're promoting another concert, this time featuring Attention Screen, the quartet led by Stereophile reviewer and jazz pianist Bob Reina (see www.myspace.com/attentionscreen).

Attention Screen features Don Fiorino on guitar, lotar (a four-string Moroccan lute), lapsteel, and extended ukulele, Chris Jones on fretless bass guitar, and Mark Flynn on drums. They will perform two sets of jazz improvisations in the superb acoustics of Manhattan's Merkin Concert Hall, just north of Lincoln Center at 129 West 67th Street. As well as capturing the concert straight to hard drive, I will give a lecture in the intermission on how I chose to make the recording, and concertgoers will be able to purchase the eventual CD at one-third off list price.

Tickets are available for $15 (auditorium) and $10 (balcony) from the Merkin box office (see ad on p.156 for details).

I look forward to seeing Tri-State readers at Merkin—this will be a night to remember.
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Inventing the Future—Properly
Steve Harris talks to Aram founder John Dawson.

Reissues Redux
The second half of our overview of the record-breaking wave of music reissues that swamped listeners at year's end.

EQUIPMENT REPORTS

90  NAD Master Series M3 integrated amplifier (Michael Fremer)
99  Creek Audio Destiny integrated amplifier (Robert J. Reina)
109 Simaudio Moon Evolution SuperNova CD player (Wes Phillips)
119 Vandersteen 2Ce Signature Edition Mark II loudspeaker (Art Dudley)
131 Fujitsu Ten Eclipse TD712z loudspeaker (Robert Deutsch)
141 Era Acoustics Design 4 loudspeaker (John Atkinson)
145 Era Acoustics Sub 10 powered subwoofer (John Atkinson)

FOLLOW-UP

149 Merlin VSM-MX loudspeaker (Michael Fremer)
151 Halcro dm38 power amplifier (John Atkinson)
As We See It

Ever wonder why your name sounds louder (when spoken by someone at a distance) at cocktail parties? Or why John Atkinson is such a success at hearing all manner of intricacies in live and recorded music? Wonder no more, come be a part of the process at February's Stereophile Recording Session and see us in action!

Letters

This month, readers write in about faulty products sent for reviews, the search for truth and beauty, their appreciation of Robert Silverman's Diabelli Variations, our dwindling classical reviews, cheer for Robert Baird, the price of listening today versus then, the first classical recording to try, our acknowledgement of computer technology in audio reproduction, the high-end's stubborn demise, and a quest for measurement help.


Industry Update

High-end audio news including dealer-promoted seminars, plus: A serious but non-fatal bicycling accident for Ayre's Charlie Hansen, Bob Dylan's anti-modern sound quip gets more airplay, results from Gramophone's summer listening-habit poll, more on transconductance amplification, and Naxos' MPkey classical downloads. Want to know more? Go to the "News Desk" at www.stereophile.com for up-to-the-minute info.

Sam's Space

Sam Tellig takes us on a tour of some great-sounding Opera and Unison Research products.

Analog Corner

Michael Fremer reports from London's Hi-Fi News show.

Listening

Art Dudley brings us part II of the Funk Firm turntable mods.

Music in the Round

Kalman Rubinson listens to surround-sound at CEDIA and to the NHT Controller preamplifier-processor and Power5 multichannel power amplifier.

Record Reviews

To start the new year we have the surprising new record by The Who. While Endlesswire may not be Who's Next, it's fine enough to be the first "Recording of the Month" of 2007. In classical music this month, we have a pair of new performances of Handel's Messiah. In Rock/Pop, there's L.E.O., My Morning Jacket, and the new Frank Sinatra boxed set, Vegas. In jazz, we have reviews of recent recordings by Billy Hart and Charles Mingus.

Manufacturers' Comments

This month, we hear from Zanden, Fujitsu Ten, Creek, Merlin, and Era about our reviews of their products.

Aural Robert

Is There Ever A Bad Time To Shop For Records? A honeymoon perhaps?
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Faulty products, consumer chances
Editor:
I just finished reading Michael Fremer’s review of the Zanden 5000 Mk.IV/Signature D/A processor and 2000 Premium CD transport (November, p.109). I was shocked at the poor measurements John Atkinson reported for the DAC, especially after MF had raved about it. Then I read the “Manufacturer’s Comment” from Eric Pleis (November, p.144), where he revealed that the unit in question had “faulty wiring.”

I’m sorry, but at the combination’s price of $43,440, one expects, and should get, perfection. How did this unit leave the factory with faulty wiring? I understand that products can be damaged in shipping, but to leave the factory in this condition is unacceptable, especially for a pricey, limited-production component. It amazes me when Stereophile reviews an insanely expensive product and it turns out to have a manufacturing defect. If manufacturers aren’t fussy about what they send reviewers, what chance do we consumers have?

Kudos and Silverman’s Diabellis
Editor:
In the November issue’s “Letters” (p.12), Tim Coop tried to explain the inferiority of digital sound, as compared to vinyl. I won’t attempt to refute his claims, only to ask the question: Have you not yet heard John Atkinson’s latest recording, of Beethoven’s Diabelli Variations, superbly played by Robert Silverman, have you, Mr. Coop? I am a veteran vinyl lover, but this recording, played on good-quality digital gear, would, I believe, stand up well against the best vinyl playback. Outstanding work, and kudos to Robert, John, Ray Kimber, and the rest of the Iso-Mike recording crew. Don B. Thomas
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Shame and classical reviews
Editor:
For some time now Stereophile has been cutting down on its classical-music coverage, but with the November issue it reached a new low—now there aren’t any classical music reviews in Stereophile at all! (Kalman Rubinson’s “Recordings in the Round,” on p.50, does not count.) I assume that this was a conscious decision, either because you no longer consider classical music to be important and/or relevant, or because you could not find any classical-music recordings to review. Whichever excuse you want to use—shame on you.

Peter Axopalis
sveiki@internet.net

Cheer up, Robert Baird
Editor:
I never thought I would have enough motivation to write in to Stereophile, but I have to try to cheer up Robert Baird. He seems so down at the demise of the record store (“Aural Robert,” November, p.154).

As one of his over-40s, I think I can speak from experience. When in my teens, I built all my own equipment, begging my brother for 10,000F caps after blowing mine up by connecting them the wrong way around. Every penny went to components, and it was so painful never to be able to afford to buy real records. I had to make do with cassette sources of copied music and the radio, which were all free... College gigs were way cheaper than records, and memories of free or almost free concerts by the Steve Miller Band, Rory Gallagher, Enid, Clash, Buzzcocks, Tangerine Dream, Thin Lizzy, and many others. I could not mind faster than memories of my then-paltry record collection of Gary Glitter, Elton John, KTEL Top 20 compilations (if you were lucky), or the curious series of “Top of the Pops” recordings of top-20 hits, complete with covers featuring large-breasted models wearing thigh-high boots, recorded in a hutty by studio musicians (if you weren’t so fortunate).

My point is that affordable recordings and available recordings amount to the same thing; the only thing that matters is that both live music and free or almost-free recorded music continues to be available. This week I went to a magnificent sold-out concert of the Be Good Tanya’s. As well as their own songs, they played Townes Van Zandt and Neil Young songs, and most of the audience was half my age. The PA, a fairly ancient ElectroVoice, was excellent.

On the contrary, Robert, I am really excited about a brave new world of young talent being aware of more music and performing live, vastly expanded Internet versions of FM radio, even cheaper outmoded CDs and LPs. I will gladly give up the high-priced record-store route to increase my collection of 4000 LPs and 2000 CDs if those more important musical experiences can stay, even if I share your sadness that the record store is no more now that I am the right age to be able to afford to buy real records. I speak from experience. When in my teens, I built all my own equipment, begging my brother for 10,000F caps after blowing mine up by connecting them the wrong way around. Every penny went to components, and it was so painful never to be able to afford to buy real records. I had to make do with cassette sources of copied music and the radio, which were all free.

As one of his over-40s, I think I can speak from experience.

Cheers,

John Atkinson
CD transport

Old arguments, new thoughts
Editor:
I don’t mean to fan the flames of an unmanageable fire, but my recent return to this hobby led to a compelling revelation. Before last night, whenever I read in Stereophile debates over whether accurate reproduction is more or less important than beautiful sound, I would tend to take the side of euphony—if it sounds good, it is good.

For various reasons, I recently set up my system in my newly purchased home after six months of storage. I had been listening to music through very modest equipment until then, and I enjoyed it greatly. However, when I played some Neko Case on the six months of storage. I had been listening to music through very modest equipment until then, and I enjoyed it greatly. However, when I played some Neko Case on the

When we have done research into our readers’ musical tastes over the years, it is readily apparent that they are an eclectic bunch. Jazz and rock are favored as much as orchestral classical music, with opera, chamber music, and world music lagging some way behind these three. So, in the necessarily limited space the magazine has for reviews of recordings—limited compared with the magazine’s primary focus, which is the hardware on which to play those recordings—we try to treat all music equally. This inevitably means that some issues will be light in some kinds of music. I would also point out that Kal Rubinson’s “Recordings in the Round” is not to be treated so cavalierly.

—JA

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MOON Andromeda review, March 2006

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Jeremy Bidwell
ulgreycatl@yahoo.com

Exorbitant CD prices?
Editor:
The record industry’s financial woes are often attributed to the “exorbitant” pricing of CDs. How so? When I was a college freshman in 1977, an LP cost $7.50 (at New Haven’s excellent Cutler Records). Adjusted for inflation, that is about $21.50 in 2006 dollars. When does anybody pay that much for a CD? Pricing is only ever a small part of the financial success. Again, when I was a freshman, a year’s tuition at Yale cost $4500. My round-trip ticket from Europe was $1100. In 2006, Yale costs $40,000+. The ticket can now be had for $500–$700! People don’t look down because it is cheap but because it is free (and illegal). Of course nothing ever happens because of one single reason. Maybe pricing has something to do with poor CD sales. But then again, maybe not.

Ali Elam
New York, NY
aelam@nyc.com

A question for Art
Editor:
I’ve been reading Stereophile for a few years now, since before Art Dudley joined the team, and have enjoyed it immensely. I have one question for Art: If you could recommend me—a 26-year-old fan of jazz, modern underground psychedelia/noise/free-folk/free-jazz/indie rock, the Grateful Dead, and Neil Young—one readily available, well-recorded classical album (on vinyl), preferably featuring solo violin, what would you recommend? I do not own a single classical recording and am looking for a good place to start, and it seems the violin and expressive stringed instruments move me at the moment.

James Deacon, Jr.
Deacon@erik.net

The Fate of the High End
Editor:
I found John Atkinson’s final comment in his excellent review of the Sonos ZonePlayer ZP80/400 WiFi Music System (October, p.140) both telling and all too readily apparent: “It’s just a shame, I guess, that these ground-breaking audio products didn’t come from an established high-end audio company.”

In the past three months, Stereophile has reviewed: a $6500 “Red Book” DAC—transport combination, a $7500 line pre-amp, a $39,990 pair of monoblock power amps, an $8000 phono cartridge, and a $24,900 integrated amplifier (which the manufacturer refused to call an integrated amplifier). None of these products from the big boys in high-end audio offers any functional advantage over the stereo setup your dad introduced you to in the 1960s. In addition, while the audio quality is undoubtedly better than your dad’s rig, for most listeners the differences from what they can purchase at Circuit City or Best Buy are not materially significant or even recognizable.

Contrast this with the pace of innovation displayed every month in the home-theater magazines and it becomes all too apparent that the audio industry is either going nowhere, or it will be led to the promised land by companies entirely outside the established order. The home-theater industry, for example, has managed to reduce the cost of 1080p video reproduction by a factor of five in less than three years. That is an example of a technology push to benefit consumers unmatched in the whole history of audio reproduction.

These companies are on the verge of rapidly propagating multichannel sound-track standards (Dolby TrueHD and perhaps DTS-HD) that will exceed, in fidelity to the source and flexibility of use, anything the High End has ever considered. I can hardly wait, but I can’t help but be puzzled because many HT engineers have roots in the High End. Is childhood’s end near?

The best shot the High End had to control its own fate was in embracing the introduction of multichannel SACD and DVD-Audio. The refusal of high-end companies (with the notable exception of Meridian; you’ve got to love Bob Smart) to embrace ITU 5.1 multichannel as the new high-end reproduction standard and lead the audiophile community along with it has doomed the whole bunch to either increasingly anachronistic pursuits—how many more angels can dance on the tip of a moving-coil stylus—or me-too status.

Perhaps an industry that is arrogant enough to charge $100,000 for a turntable but can’t or won’t embrace multichannel deserves its fate.

Donald C. Bingaman
delingaman@earthlink.net

Resources?
Editor:
I very much enjoy Stereophile, and John Atkinson’s contributions in particular. I have no training in electrical engineering or any technical audio training, but I am capable of understanding technical information. Is there a resource you can recommend so that I could understand the technical analysis JA presents?

Rob Eakins
rob@eakinsfamily.com

We have published a number of articles about what all those graphs mean, all of which are available in the magazine’s free online archives. Loudspeaker measurements are covered at www.stereophile.com/features/99, features/100, and features/103. Digital products are covered at www.stereophile.com/features/112, and some amplifier measurements at www.stereophile.com/reference/158, reference/60, and reference/810.

—JA
"... Try some Crystal Cables and find out for yourself that small rules..."
Vade Forrester, SoundStage.com, September 2006

"... the Micro’s are arguably one of the most transparant cables I’ve heard to date..."

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Mike Silverton, UltraAudio.com, May 2006

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Srajan Ebaen, 6moons.com, June 2006

"... after playing with these cables for a while, I find more and more that Crystal Cable is as neutral as possible. No own sound, no own colour. Transparant to the bone..."
Rene van Es, HiFi.nl, May 2006

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Dalibor Beric, Stereoplay, November 2005

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CALIFORNIA

 Saturday, January 6, 10am: The Bay Area Audiophile Society will host Lee Landesberg of Landes Audio for a demo of Aes Aures loudspeakers and associated components. Amplification and DACs from Art Audio and Ensemble may also be part of the event. The demo will take place in a private residence in Oakland and will be open only to BAAS members. For more info, visit www.planeteria.net/home/BAAS.

 Sunday, January 28, 1–4pm: The Los Angeles & Orange County Audio Society will host the third annual All Music Software Swap Meet. Participants can bring any type of music format to sell or trade. There is no cost to participate, and many tables will be available. Guests and new members are invited. For more info, visit www.laocaudiosociety.net or call Bob Levi at (714) 281-5850.

US: BOULDER, COLORADO

Wes Phillips

On Saturday, September 30, Ayre Acoustics founder and president Charlie Hansen sustained serious injuries while bicycling in the foothills near his Colorado home. Charlie, a former top-rated amateur cyclist, was descending a steep grade in a canyon when a motorcycle traveling uphill crossed the yellow dividing line and struck Charlie on his bicycle.

Miraculously, Charlie did not sustain any head injuries of any kind. He was fully conscious after the accident and was even able to provide important information to others about his condition, where he lives and his phone number. He was wearing a helmet at the time of the accident and it worked beautifully and as intended. Even at the hospital, he was coherent and easily talking to the doctors. Charlie sustained multiple broken bones which are all expected to heal without any complications. However, Charlie sustained damage to his spinal column that required extensive surgery following the accident. While the surgery was a success, Charlie is still waiting for feeling to return to his lower extremities. It is difficult to predict at this early stage, but it will likely take a number of months of rehabilitation before we will know the long-term affects of this accident.

Ayre's North American sales manager Steve Silberman told Stereophile that Hansen was in good spirits and had a poor opinion of the functionality of the medical devices he had encountered in the ICU. "That's not how I'd design that," Hansen repeatedly said, according to Silberman.

Ayre's COO Jeff Deese told Stereophile, "Our primary concern is helping Charlie's recovery in any way possible—and, since we're not medical specialists, the best way we can help him is to keep the company running the way Charlie planned it to work. We'll continue to build the best electronic components in the world and shipping them to the best dealer network in the world."

Hansen has established a weblog—http://blogs.ayre.com/charlie—to express his appreciation for the "outpouring of concern from my family, friends, and the audiophile community" and to help keep us all abreast of news of his continuing rehabilitation.

Stereophile's thoughts and best wishes go out to Hansen and his family.

UK: LONDON

Paul Messenger

Most Stereophile readers are aware that Bob Dylan's first album in five years recently appeared. Modern Times has sold well on both sides of the Atlantic, thanks in part to a publicity campaign that included an extended and controversial interview of Dylan by US novelist Jonathan Lethem in the September 7, 2006 issue of Rolling Stone (reprinted in the UK in the Sunday Observer). [See Steve Guttenberg's "As We See It" essay in December 2006, p.5.—Ed.] In the interview, Dylan made some uncomplimentary remarks about the current state of recording quality that will doubtless strike a chord with many audiophiles. "I don't know anybody who's made a record that sounds decent in the past 20 years, really," he said, describing modern recordings as "atrocious...there's no definition of nothing, no vocal, nothing, just like—static."

For some obscure reason, the London office of Reuters, the international news agency, decided to follow this up, and contacted the British Audio Dealers Association (BADA) for comment. A rather surprised BADA had the good sense to contact Peter Thomas, managing director of loudspeaker maker PMC, and who just happens to be one of relatively few members of our industry with equal experience in both the professional and audiophile fields. Reuters interviewed Thomas for the better part of an hour, then boiled it down to a two-minute video clip posted on its website (www.bada.co.uk/news7.html). Predictably, the result was rather superficial from an audiophile perspective, so I decided to discuss Dylan's comments on the state of modern recording with Thomas directly.

Although he felt that the whole purpose of the saga was to generate publicity for the new album, Peter Thomas nonetheless feels that there was some value in getting people thinking and talking about sound quality, and querying the automatic acceptance of digital audio recording techniques. He's had plenty of feedback about his comments, especially from the pro side, where he finds a dichotomy between
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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.
those who believe implicitly that a digital copy is by definition a perfect copy, and others who feel that CD mastering can screw things up. Yet there's also the view of many in the record industry that audiophiles who care about sound quality are a tiny minority, and that the overwhelming majority of consumers are happy enough with the status quo.

A big fan of historic analog recordings, Thomas is very conscious that digital techniques are not as perfect as their proponents suggest. He feels that the subjective limitations of digital recordings—weak spatial imaging and loss of fine detail—are proving hard to pin down when it comes down to causes. "There've always been good and bad recordings, but what's bad has changed, and I don't think we've got used to it yet. The flaws we encountered with analog (noise, frequency response, etc.) were well known, and we developed the measuring tools to assess these, but they're irrelevant to digital recording. Yet we have no methodology for measuring image depth or height, or detail."

Thomas referred to an investigation, carried out by professional DAC manufacturer PrismSound, that failed to find an objective reason why CDs produced in different plants from identical masters appeared to sound different. He pointed out that in the days of analog and vinyl, the mastering engineer took full control of the process right up to the cutting stage. Today the mastering engineer creates only a digital master, at which point the pressing plant takes over, replaying that master to create the glass master. Such a division of responsibility could well explain the variability that has been encountered.

I recently bought copies of Dylan's Modern Times on both CD and LP, and the vinyl does seem more musically satisfying, with better rendition of the subtle textures of the instruments. Obviously, this solitary example proves nothing, but it does add some weight to Peter's speculations.

UK: LONDON

Jason Victor Serinus

Surprise! If you love Beethoven, Schindtke, Reich, and Richard Strauss, and frequently play classical music on your iPod or hard drive, you're far from alone. Results of a summer 2006 Internet poll commissioned by the British magazine Gramophone reveal that 75% of those surveyed use 21st-century media—everything from PCs to MP3 players—and 57% have ripped some of their classical CD collection to their hard drives. In fact, 20% of respondents not only download classical music legally, but prefer to listen to it on their MP3 or other digital music player.

James Jolly, Gramophone's anything-but-aged editor-in-chief, told Stereophile that the detailed online survey was initially sent to 500 classical music lovers in the UK. Then, shortly before the response deadline, it was also forwarded to Gramophone's e-list subscribers.

Given that most aficionados of classical music are keen to share their opinions—Gramophone usually receives more requests than responses—we developed the measuring tools to assess these, but they're irrelevant to digital recording. Yet we have no methodology for measuring image depth or height, or detail."

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UK: LONDON

Paul Messenger

In the January and December 2005 issues of Stereophile (Vol.28 Nos. 1 and 12), Art Dudley wrote about the very unusual First Watt amplifiers designed by leading US amplifier guru Nelson Pass. The other day I got to hear a prototype UK amplifier that operates on the same rare and radical principle of transconductance (aka current source). The results were so interesting and so impressive that I decided to float the boat one more time, this time with a British flag at its masthead.

But don't get too excited. Transconductance amplification might be interesting, impressive, and have some unique properties quite different from the usual voltage-source approach, but its practical applications are essentially limited to those who use horn-loaded speakers based on single full-range drivers.

I got to hear the amp because designer David Wright had made it specifically for Eric Thomas to use with his Beauhorn speakers. I was putting together a system for a review in HiFi+ magazine, and thought the combination of the high-sensitivity Beauhorn Rhapsody B2 speakers with the low-powered Unison Research Preludio tube amp would work well with Rega CD and LP sources. While that particular combination did seem to work rather well together, Eric (who has a wicked sense of humor) suggested I might like to hear the transconductance amp he'd put on the van and was planning to use at the hi-fi show at Heathrow Airport the following week. Intrigued, I connected it up in place of the Preludio.

I was astonished at the resulting...
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UNIVERSAL APPEAL

The McCormack UDP-1 universal disc player has an enthusiastic following of listeners impressed by its reference quality performance with DVDs, DVD-A, SACDs, and "red-book" CDs alike. The new UDP-1 Deluxe further raises the bar on audio performance by upgrading strategically chosen resistors and capacitors in the audio circuits and their power supplies. We invite you to audition one soon at a McCormack Audio dealer to hear for yourself the capabilities of this remarkable player.

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improvement. This unassuming little prototype sounded altogether more crisp and clean, with less obvious boxyness and time smear, a wider bandwidth, and more pronounced and realistic dynamic expression. But I'm not comparing like with like, so these comments shouldn't be taken as criticism of the voltage-source Preludio. Rather, they reflect the fact that the prototype current-source amp is particularly well suited to driving the full-range Fostex driver used in the Beauhorn, and actually provides some very worthwhile compensation for that speaker's usually unavoidable response limitations at both ends of the audio band. Indeed, David Wright believes that, ideally, an amplifier should be designed to match the specific partnering speaker. This combination of horn-loaded speaker and transconductance amp might be seen as the apotheosis of such a symbiosis.

With apologies for stating the obvious, all of our music-reproduction systems, from the wind-up gramophone through to the latest digital encoding techniques, rely on creating some sort of model of the original acoustic music signal. All sorts of modeling techniques—analogue and digital—have been adopted as storage media down the years, mostly, I'd say, magnetic (tape), and optical (CD). But, invariably, the signal is converted into electrical form to be passed along the audio chain, to finally be restored, at the speakers, as an analogue acoustic signal. For that final stage of driving the speakers, the signal is invariably modeled as a varying voltage, though that might be a historical accident: it suited the characteristics of the tubes used as amplification devices.

With today's technology, it's equally feasible to model the signal as a variable current, though to do this the amplifier must offer a relatively high source impedance, which has at least two major implications. First, it means that the damping factor is effectively nonexistent—the amplifier no longer supplies the usual braking effect on cone excursion. Second, the amplifier's signal is unaffected by changes in the impedance of the load.

The lack of damping factor effectively rules out using the amplifier to drive a conventional direct-radiating drive-unit, because the bass output will sound overblown and lacking in control. However, high-sensitivity horn-loaded designs tend to be bass-light, so some bass boost is likely to be beneficial, while the horn itself (which acts as an acoustic transformer between the cone and the air in the room) provides a measure of natural damping operating directly on the cone surface.

Furthermore, the transconductance amp ignores variations in impedance. One possible benefit is that the speaker is immune from any of the power-compression effects that can arise from the increase in impedance that occurs when a voice-coil heats up. But since the changes in impedance created by filters form the whole basis of crossover networks, it's impractical to use a transconductance amplifier with a multiway speaker system. However, such an amplifier also ignores the rising impedance (due to inductance) that affects any voice-coil at high frequencies, and therefore provides significantly stronger upper-treble output than a conventional amplifier (David Wright reckons this will be 3–6dB at 20kHz).

These increases in output at the top and bottom of the audioband are just what's needed to compensate for the limitations of a practical domestic horn speaker like the Beauhorn—or, presumably, the otherwise impressive and stylish 3rd Rethm, which I recently tried. Most intriguing of all, perhaps, after initially using the transconductance amp with conventional cables, Eric produced some speaker cables with silver-on-copper conductors just 0.2mm in diameter! Counternintuitively, the system continued to work beautifully, with no apparent loss of bass and, if anything, a slight improvement in sweetness and coherence.

David Wright's Beauhorn-driving transconductance amp is a simple, compact, warm-running affair that delivers just 3.4Wpc from an output impedance of around 15 ohms. It's a hybrid design—a class-A MOSFET solid-state output stage is driven from an ECC83 tube driver stage—and has very little loop negative feedback (about 10dB).

Wright's is not the first UK example of a hi-fi transconductance power amplifier. The principle was described in an AES paper by Paul Mills and Malcolm Omar Hawksford, of the University of Essex (JAES, October 1989, Vol.37 No.10, pp.809–828). Mills subsequently moved to Tannoy, where he used the principle primarily to avoid power-compression effects, in a subwoofer codenamed 625ALF, which I reviewed in 1994. The 625ALF fulfilled the single-driver criterion, though not, of course, the horn loading, and so used an extra sensing coil to provide velocity feedback in order to keep the bass under control. Tannoy seems unlikely to repeat the exercise anytime soon; such specialized electronics are expensive to make. Instead, Mills has recently been kept busy creating the new crossover networks for the Special Edition upgrades of Tannoy's Prestige line, which were launched in Tokyo in fall 2006.

It seems unlikely that transconductance amplifiers will find much applica-
If You Can’t Hear the Difference, You Probably Don’t Need These.

“This cable maximizes everything you can think of.”

Richard Bona,
One of the best bassists on the planet

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tion beyond single-driver horns, though the few who use such speakers ought to check out what these amps can do. However, there's also obvious potential for using them in active speaker systems, which dispense with the passive crossover filters, in combination with a conventional voltage amplifier driving the bass end. David Wright has developed just such an amplifier as part of a new scaled-down Ferguson Hill FH007 sub/sat package. With super-stylish transparent horns operating above 340Hz, the FH007, described as “the ultimate executive PC sound system,” sells for a very tempting £599 ($1200).

While I look forward to trying the FH007, I also want to find out whether the impressive dynamic expression I heard with the Beauhorns can be achieved using conventional dynamic drivers, with transconductance amps covering the mid and top end of an active multiway speaker.

**US: FRANKLIN, TENNESSEE**

**Jason Victor Serinus**

Naxos, possibly the world's largest classical music label, has taken a leap into the virtual universe of digital downloading. In an unprecedented collaboration—among Naxos of America, the country's largest independent distributor of classical music; eMusic, the world's second-largest digital music service; and bricks-and-mortar retailers such as Borders—Naxos has introduced MPkey, an exclusive series of downloadable classical music collections. Available for purchase only at bricks-and-mortar retailers (exclusively at Borders stores through December 1), MPkey enables consumers to painlessly download preselected Naxos collections of classical music.

On first encountering an MPkey product, the casual observer might mistake it for a boxed set of CDs. Further examination reveals that no CDs are packed within; instead, there are complete liner notes for a preselected classical collection, as well as a “key” the size of a credit card that contains a unique code.

Buy the collection ($14.99 SRP for a three-hour collection, $19.99 for six hours), turn on your computer, go to the Naxos website, type in the unique code, and all of the collection's music is painlessly downloaded to your hard drive in MP3 format. You can then burn CDs, transfer the music to your MP3 player, and/or play it through your computer speakers.

Why MPkey? While retail sales of Naxos CDs continue to surpass those of downloaded product, of all of Naxos of America's marketing initiatives, digital downloading is growing fastest—the company's digital streaming library reported record sales in August. This corresponds to recent data from the Consumer Electronics Association indicating that Apple iPods and other MP3 players are outselling all other consumer-electronics components.

“We're all beginning to realize that download sales are having an impact,” Naxos of America's CEO, Jim Sturgeon, told Stereophile. “More and more people are making a decision to consume digitally rather than purchase hard copy. What was once thought of as an incremental business has become one of sure growth, and is beginning to erode some of the physical business.”

One of the main factors inhibiting sales of downloaded media, however, is the time it takes to search for desired tracks. The process is simply too cumbersome, time-consuming, and off-putting for many consumers. “Our time is our greatest commodity,” says Sturgeon. “With MPkey, you don’t have to spend hours in front of the computer performing searches. MPkey makes the process very simple and enjoyable; it isn’t daunting.”

On examining iTunes track lists for Naxos CDs, Naxos discovered that most down loaders buy The Very Best of Mozart and assorted wedding samplers rather than recordings of hardcore repertoire (eg, Berio's Sequenzas, Bolcom songs, the works of George Rochberg, or Bartók’s string quartets, to name just a few recent releases in the remarkably extensive Naxos catalogue). MPkey's first 12 titles are thus geared toward the downloading neophyte rather than the classical afficionado. Lest there be any question, check out these titles:

- Art and Music: Da Vinci/Raphael/Caravaggio (illustrated biographies of the artists accompany a collection of Renaissance music)
- A to Z of Classical Music
- Chill with Classical Music, Volume One
- Classical Music for Book Lovers
- Chill with Classical Music, Volume Two (Chopin, Tchaikovsky, Rachmaninoff)
- Cinema Classics
- Great Symphonies (Beethoven, Mozart, Mendelssohn, Brahms, Haydn, Saint-Saëns)
- Mind/Body/Spirit (classical music to soothe and restore; includes two short guides to nourishing your mind, body, and spirit through meditation and diet)
- The Perfect Lullaby

The Perfect Wedding Music for All Occasions

The Very Best of Bach, Mozart, Beethoven

The Very Best of Classical Guitar

“Hardcore listeners are more concerned with quality and the full musical experience,” says Sturgeon. “The best place to find that remains on a shiny disc. Downloaders are looking more for the convenience of finding exactly what they want, immediately. Hardcore listeners aren’t satisfied with downloading MP3 files because they aren’t lossless. I don’t know of anything other than lossless compression that will satisfy audiophiles and hardcore music lovers.”

Naxos expects that as computer memory grows ever less expensive, more people will consider the downloading of space-consuming lossless files a viable option. Sturgeon and crew are thus investigating options for making lossless files available in the future. Meanwhile, Naxos is sticking with MP3 and making more of its liner notes available online as downloadable JPEG files. [Absent from the pre-release publicity was any mention of which MP3 format will be initially available, but eMusic's default option is VBR (variable bit rate), with an average of 192kbps rate.—Ed.]

By feeding consumers preselected product, is Naxos playing to the lowest common denominator rather than giving people the wherewithal to venture into the unknown? No, says Sturgeon: “The field of classical music is daunting. It's like walking into a wine store and not even being able to pronounce Pinot Noir and Merlot, let alone knowing the difference in taste. More than any other label, Naxos is doing the primary job of getting more and more people interested in classical music. We are helping people understand the fundamentals, giving them a basic foundation from which to expand their knowledge. Even our initial MPkey collections include composers most neophytes have never heard of.”

For those attached to playing an actual CD with liner notes in hand, Sturgeon offers reassurance: he does not foresee a time when CDs will be replaced by downloadable files. “Retail is never going to go away,” he says with confidence. “People still love the experience of going into a store and flipping through things. Meanwhile, as downloading increases, MPkey is a way to include bricks-and-mortar retailers in our downloading arm rather than leaving them out.”
Right Between Your Ears

Good grief! Why in the world would we spend four months (and counting) to tell you about balanced headphone audio? You must know what it’s like talking to people who’ve never experienced high-end sound: they just stare at you wondering what the heck you’re talking about... wondering why someone would spend tens of thousands on a stereo. But you know they have no idea what they’re missing. If only they could HEAR it; then they’d understand. Well, we feel the same way when we try to explain high-end balanced headphone listening to audiophiles: they have no inkling that an intimate, exquisite, and, in some ways, superior ultra-high-end listening experience is available at a fraction of the price with a balanced headphone system compared to speaker-based rigs. So we spend the time and dough needed to get the message out.

We’re not going to stop there, however. In an effort to win the ears of audiophiles we’d like to make you a limited time offer: Buy one of our Home or Max balanced amps and a pair of Sennheiser HD650, AKG K701, or beyerdynamic DT880 headphones, and we’ll recable them for balanced operation at no charge. (Don’t worry, all warranties and guaranties still apply.) Whether you select the relaxed sound of the Sennheiser HD650, the right-down-the-middle punchy articulation of the AKG K701, or the clear and lively presentation of the Beyerdynamic DT880, you’ll be simply amazed at how these headphones come fully alive under the control of a state-of-the-art HeadRoom balanced amplifier.

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Sam Trades in His Hi-Fi For a Victor Talking Machine

When manufacturers or other guests come calling, if I don't pull out Spike Jones, I love to trot out The Complete Recordings of Enrico Caruso: nearly 260 performances on a 12-CD boxed set (Naxos 8.101201). The recordings were made between 1902 and 1920 (Caruso died in 1921), and all of them are acoustical: no microphone, no electronics, no tubes. Caruso bellowed into a horn, and the sheer force of his voice, acoustically amplified by the horn, cut the discs. When you play back the recordings on a mechanical, wind-up gramophone with horn, no electronic circuitry comes between The Great Caruso and you.

I have such an apparatus—a pristine, wind-up, tabletop Victrola that was a wedding anniversary present from our pal Val. It is the antipode of the iPod. I sometimes set it up on the dining-room credenza with a stack of 78s and a box of cactus needles—one needle per side. You don't want to gouge the grooves, after all. Mikey should have one of these. “I've traded my hi-fi for a Victor Talking Machine,” I tell my guests.

The frequency response is limited—it's all midrange—as are the dynamics. But there's a startling, lifelike immediacy to the sound that even Naxos' excellent Caruso transfers don't quite capture electronically. These acoustical recordings were meant to be played back acoustically.

Caruso, born in 1873, was a native of Naples, where he launched his career. In 1903, he made his debut with New York's Metropolitan Opera and took the world by storm. The following year he began his lifelong association with the Victor Talking Machine company. Some might say he made the Victor Talking Machine company, which RCA gobbled up in 1929. His 1902 recording of “Vesti la giubba,” from Leoncavallo’s Pagliacci, became the world’s first million-selling gramophone record.

Whenever time allows, Giovanni escapes into the countryside in his Chrysler minivan to fill it with case after case of the finest Italian wine, all purchased at cantini (as vineyard headquarters are known). Only Italian wine—for Giovanni, there is no other. Have you ever seen a restaurant in Italy that features French wine...or a restaurant in France that highlights the best Italian wines?

Opera is also, undoubtedly, the only hi-fi company with its own caffè. The company is located in a new industrial park—no shade, except for one olive tree in front of the fabri;a that Giovanni managed to save. (The property had been farmland.) There's no sidewalk caffè within walking distance or even a quick drive, so he built one next to his conference and meeting room. Espresso, anyone? A glass of prosecco?

In a world in which many electronics manufacturers are part of global con-
glomeration and stuff is often designed by committee, it’s refreshing to deal with Italian hi-fi. Real personalities produce real products that reflect those personalities’ tastes and priorities and culture. Italian hi-fi is like no other in the world, which is why it sells around the world. Whatever the make, Italian hi-fi gear tends to share a distinctive sound. The treble is sweet, the midrange sings. It’s the voicing. Designers and engineers take months, sometimes years, to get the voicing just right.

Opera’s first model, the Caruso, has long since been discontinued, and bears no resemblance to Opera’s new flagship model of the same name, which is something altogether more ambitious. (Opera’s best-selling model to date has been the Callas, which is still in production.) Last spring, signer Nasta invited his distributors and a few journalists to hear the new Caruso at his fabbrica. There would be a surprise in store, he promised.

Opera is unusual in building its own speaker cabinets, something most speaker makers outsource. In fact, signer Nasta bought an entire furniture factory to make his cabinets. (Producing the cabinets within the fabbrica created problems. Dust. Smells. Of those speaker manufacturers who build their own cabinets, almost all do so off-site.)

Speaker drivers for Opera’s current models are sourced from SEAS, of Norway. The drive-units are customized, and SEAS engineers are involved in designing the crossovers and cabinets. Technical matters are under the supervision of Dr. Mario Bon (physicist on the faculty of the University of Padua), a big, burly native of Venice who looks like a lion, and whose forebears, it is said, number among that city’s doges. Il Leone di Venezia, Nick Green, of Opera’s UK distributor, calls him. And with every reason. Mario possesses a dark, wicked sense of humor—a true Venetian, I’m told.

Dr. Bon’s meticulous notebooks could rival those of Leonardo da Vinci for their neatness and exquisite penmanship. Dr. Bon, an academic, is always teaching. I’ve seen him do it on the vaporetto in Venice, explaining technical matters to the assembled guests, distributors, and journalists—auditioned the new Carusos in Opera’s main listening room at the fabbrica, driven by Unison’s Reference electronics: the Reference Pre ($19,900) and the Reference monoblocks ($19,900 each). That’s a total of $39,600 for preamp, power amps, and Carusos.

Details of a crossover to signer Nasta—or in the middle of a vineyard, wine-glass in hand, telling my colleague Paul Messenger about a new speaker. What’s perfetto on paper may not always be so in practice, however. Signor Nasta always has the last listen, and often asks for changes.

Ah, the Caruso. You might possess a palazzo for this speaker—or a large villa. Each one weighs more than 220 lbs (100kg). I’d be happy if I got down to 220—it’s my resolution for 2007. At $39,900/pair, the Caruso is no purchase to be taken lightly. On the other hand, if you’re prepared to pay that, the Caruso is a must-hear, even if you have to fly to Venice to do it. Finishes are cherry or silver lacquer.

“You can look at the Caruso as a two-way with a passive subwoofer in the same cabinet,” wrote Dr. Bon. On the speaker’s front panel are four midrange/woofer drivers and a tweeter. Four 8” woofers are set into each cabinet’s inward-facing side. The rear panel has four tweeters that take over from 2kHz up.

For all its drivers—13 per speaker—Dr. Bon refers to the Caruso as a “two-way.” And for all its weight, the Caruso sounds fleet of foot—indeed, like a small two-way monitor in terms of imaging, soundstaging, and focus—coherence, if you will. This is due, in part, to Dr. Bon’s way of attenuating the bass drivers so that they reinforce but don’t overwhelm. The same idea is found in Opera’s new Quinta model, which I’ll get to in a moment. And the Quinta is affordable: $3895/pair.

We—the assembled guests, distributors, and journalists—auditioned the new Carusos in Opera’s main listening room at the fabbrica, driven by Unison’s Reference electronics: the Reference Pre ($19,900) and the Reference monoblocks ($19,900 each). That’s a total of $39,600 for preamp, power amps, and Carusos.

Each Unison Reference monoblock uses four 845 output tubes to produce 70W of single-ended-triode (SET) sound. I’d heard the Reference gear a year before and been mightily impressed. This time, too. The sound was full-range, dynamic, and—what’s especially important—full-bodied. Light from within, truth of timbre, harmonics in register. In 2005, I spent an entire day with these amps—solo most of the time, while my wife, Marina, was shopping in nearby Treviso, returning with two handbags, three sweaters, and some assorted trinkets.
The Nº433 triple monaural design combines multi channel flexibility with the legendary performance characteristics of our traditional single and dual monaural designs.

The Nº433 boasts three independent massive linear power supplies, each consisting of an ultra low noise proprietary Mark Levinson toroidal transformer and a bank of low loss capacitors to insure copious energy storage. Control of this power reserve is the task of the voltage gain and output stage circuitry, an area in which Mark Levinson amplifiers have always excelled.

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The affordable G06: "...assured, detailed and refined... this is a really music-loving piece of hi-fi equipment. Meridian has achieved a high and consistent standard with this player... a highly recommendable item."

—Richard Black, Hi-Fi Choice (UK), July 2006

The impressive G08: "I've not heard a more elegant sound emanate from a transistor-based system in quite some time."

—Sue Kraft, The Absolute Sound, February/March 2005

The incomparable 808: "I've had a Meridian 808 in my reference system for about three months and frankly, I can't imagine my system without it."


There's a Meridian CD for you.
Monitors. Vivaldi. And they image like mini-dous authority—they can erupt like Mount Vesuvius when the music calls for it. Think Verdi! Yet the speakers also have exceptional delicacy. Think Vivaldi. And they image like mini-morns.

At the moment, no dealer in North America is displaying this $100,000 combo. Alora. Fly to Venice and one of Giovanni Nasta’s sons, Bartolomeo or Riccardo, will pick you up at Marco Polo Airport for the 20-minute drive to the fabria. Be sure to contact Bartolomeo in advance: bartolomeo@operaloud speakers.com. While there, you can check out the caffé and tour the wine cellar. Your spouse or significant other can explore beautiful Treviso, which is free of tourists and where prices are much lower than in Venice.

Signor Nasta’s surprise was another day with the Carusos and the Uni Son Research Reference gear—this time at the villa in the famed vineyard of Livio Felluga, about an hour away in the far northeast of Italy, a few kilometers from Slovenia. Now in his nineties, Livio Felluga has handed things over to his son, Maurizio—a melomane! The family villa sits in the center of one of Italy’s largest vineyards, and perhaps the largest in the North. The cantina, where the wine is stored and bottled, is in town, a few minutes away.

Across the street from the cantina is a fine small hotel. (Request a room facing the back and your balcony will open on a small vineyard.) One of the guides at the cantina was born in Italy, grew up in New Jersey, and has wisely moved back home. I learned more from him in a half-hour than on any other wine tour anywhere. Felluga has an excellent website, www.liviofelluga.com. While there, you can check out the caffé and tour the wine cellar. Your spouse or significant other can explore beautiful Treviso, which is free of tourists and where prices are much lower than in Venice.

Is Maurizio Felluga’s hi-fi the finest in all of Italy? I had only a few minutes to listen to it with him before dozens of people, wineglasses in hand, crowded into the listening room. And, of course, nothing had a chance to settle in. But I think it’s one of the finest hi-fi systems in the world. The Carusos have tremendous authority—they can erupt like Mount Vesuvius when the music calls for it. Think Verdi! Yet the speakers also have exceptional delicacy. Think Vivaldi. And they image like minimorns.

Dr. Mario Bon (left) and journalist Paul Messenger at Maurizio Felluga’s villa.

**Opera Quinta loudspeaker**

Back down to earth, and back home in the US, I received review samples of the second iteration of Opera’s Quinta loudspeaker ($3895/pair) and a very simple integrated amplifier from Unison Research, the Preludio ($2995), said to pump out a mighty 14Wpc.

The standard finishes for the Quinta’s side panels are cherry and mahogany. Add $400 if you want coats and coats of piano-black lacquer. (Ever see a Fazioli piano? These, the world’s most beautiful pianos, are produced in the same general area of Italy.) The original Quinta sold for $2995/pair—alas, the US dollar. But the higher price does get you a better speaker than the old.

Each Quinta measures 46.3” high by 9.5” wide by 15.15” deep. The cabinet is made of MDF, its sides curved to prevent standing waves. The side cheeks are finished in real-wood veneer, of course. (Vinyl? This is Italy.) The top plate and the front and rear baffles are sumptuously finished in padded leather. A front baffle of soft, padded leather helps deal with soundwave refractions. Some speaker designers use felt pads, but leather is altogether more elegant. A metal brace at the back of the base gives the Quinta outstanding stability, even on carpeted floors.

You could regard the new Quinta as a diminutive Caruso. The estimable Dr. Mario Bon had a hand in designing both, as did the engineers from SEAS, in Norway; and the development of the two speakers was more or less concomitant: trickle-down technology meets leak-across. Whatever thinking and sweat went into the new Caruso (and Opera’s new Tebaldi) went into the new Quinta as well.

The Quinta’s frequency response is given as 30Hz–20kHz, though without a ±dB specification. The sensitivity is stated as 89dB/W/m, the nominal impedance as 6 ohms (8 ohms maximum, 4.8 ohms minimum) from 100Hz to 2kHz. Each Quinta weighs 75 lbs (34kg).

Professor Bon took the lectern: “The electrical impedance curve of the Opera Quinta is always above 5.9 ohms; and although not completely resistive, it is extremely regular with phase [angles] close to zero over a wide range of frequencies from 200Hz upwards. This ease of drive makes the Opera Quinta very rare and contrary to the prevailing tendency of the vast majority of loudspeakers currently produced.”

The minimum amplification recommended for the Quinta is 10W—meaning that near-flea-watt amplifiers (although not those of the 2–3W variety) might apply. I used Unison Research’s Preludio integrated and Rega’s new Saturn CD player.

The new Quinta, like its predecessor, is described as a 2½-way design. It’s that extra half that’s interesting. The cabinet comprises two chambers. In the upper chamber are two SEAS drive-units: a 1” fabric-dome tweeter (the same as is used in the Callas) and a 6.5” aluminum-cone midrange/bass driver. The crossover point is at 2.3kHz. This upper chamber serves, in effect, as a mini monitor. The lower chamber houses two more SEAS 6.5” bass/midrange drivers identical to the one on top, and attenuated by a passive, resistor-capacitor network. The lower chamber has a rear port.

Up to about 400Hz, all three bass drivers receive the same electrical power, explained Dr. Bon. Then, in a “transition zone” between 400 and 800Hz, the output of the single bass driver in the upper chamber increases, while that of the two lower bass drivers decreases. Above 800Hz, the outputs of the lower drivers are attenuated by about 6dB/octave. The result is that the two lower drivers don’t drag the speaker down by their own weight. These drivers are thus simultaneously heard (in terms of bass rein-
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Constructed using the same principles as our flagship Valhalla Cables, we offer Baldur, Heimdall (pictured), Frey and Tyr.

“The Heimdalls were as uncolored, as tonally neutral, as any other wires I’ve heard...”

-Art Dudley
Stereophile, October 2006

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amplifiers in the world.

Listening to the Preludio with my Triangle Comete Anniversaire loudspeakers, I did note that, while the bottom end was always controlled, tight, and well-defined, it could have had more authority—compared to, say, Musical Fidelity's new X-T100 integrated amp. But that was what I expected to hear. The Musical Fidelity is rated at 70Wpc, the Preludio at 14Wpc.

The Preludio is a wonderful integrated amplifier that can probably drive all but the most current-hogging North American loudspeakers to realistic levels in most listening rooms. If your listening room is of small to medium size, do you actually need anything bigger?

If you do, there are two larger integrated amps in the series: the Sinfonia (two KT88s per side), and the backbreaking, $9500 Performance (three KT88s per side), which I reviewed in my May 2005 column (Vol.28 No.5). Yes, I know: the power, the sweep, the panorama. Multiple output tubes do that sweep thing: expansiveness. But one KT88 per side? Magistico. As almost any SET enthusiast can attest, there's an inherent magic to that. It has to do with keeping the harmonics in register, with truth of timbre.

The exquisite little Preludio does what you'd want of an Italian amplifier. It sings. It soars. It produces some of the sweetest midrange and treble I've heard—without obscuring fine detail, thickening the bass, or romanticizing the sound. The Preludio does need to run in for 100 hours or so; after that, it needs to be warmed up for about an hour before any critical listening. But what's so different about that? I've fallen in love with this thing: its looks, its sound, its utter simplicity.

By the way, the Preludio runs very quiet—no mechanical noise, and no electrical noise to speak of. It also runs fairly cool, though you do want to give it plenty of ventilation. And anyway, who'd want to hide something this beautiful inside a cabinet?

I'm sure Maurizio Felluga is enjoying his Unison Reference gear with the Canisos. Meanwhile, as I write, I'm savoring his magnificent Pinot Grigiot 2004 (I pay about $22 per bottle)—and I'm especially enjoying my Preludio with the Opera Quintas. Do I feel envious of signor Fulluga? Nah. Only a little.
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missed this year’s CEDIA Expo—because in less than two weeks I visited Milan’s Top Audio and Video Show, Focal-JMlab in France (see www.stereophile.com/news/101606focal), and, finally, the Hi-Fi News Show at London’s Heathrow Airport.

I made the trip (on my own dime) to meet in Milan with the Italian and German distributors of my turntable-setup DVD, 21st Century Vinyl, and to work on translations and other logistics for the upcoming PAL version. Because I now write a column for Hi-Fi News, the magazine’s editor, Steve Fairclough, had asked me to deliver my turntable-setup seminar (twice!) at the Heathrow show, and the four days between the Top and HFN shows provided the ideal opportunity to take up Focal-JMlab on their longstanding invitation to visit. It would be a busy trip!

As it turned out, the busier I was, the better. The evening before leaving, we’d made the agonizing decision to put our beloved 12-year-old Bernese mountain dog, Eno, to sleep. Though his lymphoma had returned after 18 months in remission following chemotherapy (we were told that 8–10 months was all we could expect), he couldn’t stand up on his own, and his failing kidneys meant he needed to be carried outside every few hours, even all through the night, he was still determined to carry on. But with no one strong enough to carry him around in my absence, and with the vet telling us his kidneys were probably only days away from failure and a resultant painful death, we had no choice—though Eno still was not ready to go. It was I who had to go.

Though I knew our decision was the correct one, I left in a miserable mood, with unshakable feelings of guilt and betrayal. To honor our friend’s memory, I vowed to make this trip as productive and useful as possible and to live every minute of it fully.

The flight to Milan was made most pleasant when I found myself seated next to a retired teacher of high school music from Greenwich, Connecticut, who’d been an early champion of electronic music and an acquaintance of such pioneers as Vladimir Ussachevsky and John Cage. I told her about my work with Wendy Carlos on the soundtrack of Tron, and we stayed up most of the night talking about music. At one point a name escaped her memory, but by her description I guessed that it was Harry Partch.

“We’re probably the only two passengers onboard this plane who even know the name, not to mention the music,” she remarked. “What are the odds of us being seated next to one another?” The rest of the trip was equally serendipitous.

Top Audio and Video Show: Best hi-fi show I’ve ever attended

Milan’s Quark Hotel is an ideal venue for an audio show. A spiral staircase in the center of the lobby leads down to two floors of exhibits, large board rooms and smaller rooms off the exhibit areas offer opportunities for both major and minor players to show off their gear, and a recently added large convention hall off the main-floor lobby provides space for static A/V displays, software vendors, and the growing category of “home automation” (though the last is, in my book, about as welcome at a hi-fi show as bird flu). Most of the world’s major video manufacturers set up shop in yet another large exhibit space directly off the hotel’s main entrance. There was even a side-by-side comparison of Blu-ray and HD DVD.

The Top show is the event that the organizers of Primedia’s Home Entertainment shows dream of: robust industry participation, over 20,000 attendees in four
of sitting in front of a pair of enormous loudspeakers and hearing something wondrous, and maybe he'll grow up to become an audio enthusiast. Duh.

Exhibitors at Top must pay more for a room or booth to make up for the shortfall in admission fees, but given the attendance, they find it worthwhile. In fairness to our HE Show, the business paradigms are different: the nonprofit Top show is organized by the Association for the Promotion of High Fidelity (APAP) and not, as ours is, by a single publisher. Still, when you charge $30 for a three-day pass, you limit attendance to the already initiated, and almost guarantee that a guy will not bring his family along.

Plenty to See, Hear, Eat! Analog was nearly nonexistent at the 2000 Top show, as I recall, but 2006 was a different story. The amount of new and used vinyl was enormous, and there was plenty of news. The first afternoon, I visited the S.A.P. room to see and hear their Tempo direct-drive turntable (review in this column), and to meet Marco Benedetti, who is to Italy’s Audio Review magazine what I am to Stereophile.

IN HEAVY ROTATION

1) The Mars Volta, Scabdates, Gold Standard Labs 180gm picture-disc LPs (2)
2) Bob Dylan, Modern Times, Columbia 180gm LP (2)
3) Elvis Costello & Allen Toussaint, The River in Reverse, Verve Forecast 180gm LPs (2)
4) Monty Alexander Trio, Full Speed Ahead, Pure Audiophile 180gm LPs (2)
5) Salvatore Accardo, The Violins of Cremona, Foné 45rpm 180gm LPs (4)
6) Louis Armstrong, Plays W.C. Handy, Pure Pleasure 180gm LPs (2)
7) John Lee Hooker, The Healer, Rock the House/Classic 200gm Quiex SV-P LP
8) Gerry Mulligan Meets Ben Webster, Verve/Speakers Corner 180gm LP
9) Gerry Mulligan Meets Scott Hamilton, Concord/Mobile Fidelity 180gm LP
10) Aretha Franklin, Aretha Now, Atlantic/4 Men With Beards 180gm LP
Visit www.musicangle.com for full reviews.

Benedetti brought along a few selections from his formidable collection of cartridges (from a photo I saw in Audio Review, more than 30 top-shelf models), each in a detachable headshell, for what he calls a “Cartridge Waltz.” The crowd got to hear them in a Dynavector tonearm mounted on an S.A.P. Tempo ‘table. Unfortunately, the presentation was in Italian, so I understood little, though the technical discussion touched on both the mechanical and electrical aspects of loading a moving-coil cartridge—something I’ll someday do in this column.

At the end of that first busy day, I spent a wonderful evening at a most excellent wine bar with S.A.P. Audio’s Vicenzo Latour, an electrical engineer by training and a designer of tube electronics, loudspeakers, and the Tempo ‘table. He also imports Nagra products to Italy, so Matthieu Latour, Nagra’s international sales manager joined us. Over vino incredible, fresh buffalo mozzarella, olives, prosciutto, and other prepared meats the likes of which you will not find at your local Italian deli, I was told Nagra would introduce the PLP, a dedicated phono preamplifier, at the 2007 Consumer Electronics Show in January.

In the Nagra room the next day I played Latour some tracks from one of the CDs I’d brought along, recorded from my Continuum Audio Labs Caliburn turntable. That evening I received an e-mail from him asking if I’d bring the discs to his room at the 2007 CES. Those who scoff at the $100,000 Caliburn just haven’t heard it.

I spied a new (to me, at least), customer-suspended turntable from CD-player manufacturer C.E.C. (welcome aboard!) sporting what looked to be an AudioQuest tonearm, and there was a new turntable from V.Y.G.E.R. that looked far less ambitious than the glitzy, air-bearing designs that company used to market. This one featured a standard ball/thrust-pad bearing set into a triple-fingered plinth available in various colors. The arm was an SME.

But mostly I saw familiar turntables from brands you already know about. I’ll just say that they seemed far more plentiful this year than in 2000. Then, unexpectedly, as the Top show was about to end, I wandered into the Mad For Music room and hit the analog jackpot.

Fanatics often schlep to shows EMT turntables that are no longer in production, so that wasn’t news—but there, glowing between a pair of vintage EMT ‘tables, was the brand-new, retro-looking JPA-66 preamplifier (this year is EMT’s 66th anniversary). EMT’s marketing manager, Jules Limon, ran me through the full-function JPA-66. It’s got vacuum tubes, point-to-point wiring, two line and four phono inputs (three moving-coil, one moving-magnet), and offers...
The Masters Series catapults technology and design far ahead and sets an exciting new benchmark of performance. The legendary Bjorn Erik Edvardsen, has taken NAD’s “Music First” philosophy – a design discipline that puts your listening pleasure first and has earned NAD an impressive string of five-star reviews – to new heights. While others talk about build quality, only NAD offers you something more attuned to your highest expectations. We call it Build-Artistry™. Think of it as brilliant engineering – but to an exponential level. So while no expense was spared in development, the cost to you is less than with other premium brand offerings.

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adjustable loading, gain, and among the most complete and flexible (infinitely adjustable) phono-EQ facilities I've ever seen on a preamp. Cost hasn't been finalized, but in America I expect it will be in excess of $15,000.

I also spotted one of EMT's legendary "banana" tonearms, looking like new in its original box. It was new—and not as in new old stock (NOS). The arm has been put back into production using the original 1960s tooling, with manufacturing supervised by Glaser, the original designer, now in his mid-80s, who taught a youngster of 55 how to do it shortly before suffering a stroke (from which he is now recovering). How well it fares against newer competition remains to be heard. Its detachable headshell strikes me as a serious compromiser of rigidity, but my ears remain open. It certainly is convenient.

EMT also introduced two new cartridges: the GSD5 (€2000) and GSD6 (€1600), which the company claims are the best it's ever produced. The design features a partially open case milled from a block of "purest special" aluminum; the GSD5 comes with a Gyger S stylus, the GSD6 with a Super Fineline, both styli fitted to boron cantilevers. How tucked away was the Mad For Music room? As the show ended, I mentioned it to Ken Kessler, but even he had missed it—and very little escapes KK's attention.

I ran into Be Yamamura (now back in Japan, though he formerly lived in Italy) in front of a Verdier turntable. You can always count on Be for some interesting, useful, and often esoteric information, and this encounter was no exception. He described an early moving-coil cartridge, designed by Western Electric, in which the coils were mounted at the stylus tip instead of near the back end of the cantilever, and with the magnet assembly mounted above, suspended from the front of the tonearm (as best as I can recall it). Imagine how much more quickly such a generator would respond to stylus movement.

As for non-analog gear that impressed me, much of it is not exported to the US. On the other hand, Jamo's intriguing-looking, open-baffled R909 loudspeaker, with two big woofers, sounded so good that, on my return to the States, I inquired about getting a pair to review after CES. I also plan to evaluate the Italian-made Nebula speaker from Eventus Audio, now distributed in the US by AA Audio Imports.

My meetings with the overseas distributors of my turntable-setup DVD were useful, and accompanied by meals and wines that have been seared into my palate—par-
ticularly the saffron risotto with truffles one evening and marinated T-bone steak another, accompanied by antipasti such as I'd never tasted, and fine vintages of Sassiaca, Tigniello, and Pio Cesare Barolo. All is good in DVD land!

Other fond memories of Top Audio 2006 include dinner with Ken Kessler and Eve Anna Manley; another with Giulio Cesare Ricci, the irresistible owner of classical-record label Foné, who is also a recording engineer, winemaker, and connoisseur of fried potatoes, and his lovely wife—and witnessing Audiophile Sound magazine's Pierre Bolduc coaxing a room full of show attendees to sing along with an opera record played back on the big Clearaudio Statement turntable.

Least fond memory: Italians walk as they drive. If you don't brace yourself, they just barrel into you and knock you over. They talk incessantly, which made listening in many rooms almost impossible, and finally, the musical tastes on display in most of the rooms I visited were shockingly predictable: Eagles, Patricia Barber, Diana Krall, etc. I didn't say "bad," just... predictable. Otherwise, a great show! You should go.

**Pressing Matters at PortalSpace Records**

After landing in the UK and checking into my hotel, I was immediately off to PortalSpace Records, a vinyl-pressing plant in Hayes-Middlesex, near where EMI's legendary pressing factory once stood. Built using what remained of EMI's plating and pressing machinery and run by Roy Matthews, who designed much of that original equipment during EMI's heyday, PortalSpace...
"Having now spent a month living with and listening to...Kimber's Monocle XL loudspeaker cables, I have essentially lost all interest in listening to any other speaker cable."

"...with the Monocle XL cables, I have discovered nuance and subtlety that I did not know had been captured in her (Diana Krall's) recordings..."

"Ray Kimber has come up with something special in this cable."

audioreview.com

Select Series Technology
Affordable Price! – Monocle-XL
Longtime *Hi-Fi News* writer Ken Kessler announced at the show that he was quitting the magazine, leaving me to host an event that both of us were to have jointly conducted. I supported Ken’s decision, of course, but I was unprepared for a solo act. When I entered the room, I found speakers and electronics with which I was unfamiliar, and a computer hooked up to the system with a very large gentleman at the keyboard.

Well, when things go bad, they go worse, though I haven’t the space to lay it all out here. In the end, no harm done, and why should I humiliate myself in my own column (not that what happened was all my fault)? It was just that kind of show, though there were some bright spots as well. Consumers with whom I spoke seemed less concerned about the dueling shows than were the industry insiders.

The two turntable-setup seminars I conducted were well-attended and went off without hitches, and there were some interesting events and exhibits, including an audio museum, assembled by collector John Howes, filled with vintage gear from Lowther, Leak, and other legendary British manufacturers (see blog, stereophile.com/hifinews2006). Dave Wilson, Ivor Tiefenbrun, and many other industry notables spoke at well-attended presentations. And I finally had the pure pleasure of meeting vinyl-rieseus specialist Pure Pleasure’s Tony Hickmott and cutting engineer Ray Staff, both of whose work I’ve come to admire over the years.

Franc Kuzma showed a prototype of his 12" Stogi tonearm, there was a new Music Maker Classic from The Cartridge Man, a new Reflex phono preamp from Graham Slee Engineering, the top-of-the-line Enterprise tonearm, and Acoustic Signature’s new flagship turntable, the Grande. Clearaudio’s Robert Suchy showed me his new Ambience ‘table, featuring a plinth made of a sandwich of aluminum and Staron, a synthetic stone sourced from Samsung; and a floating acrylic platter using opposed neodymium magnets and a zirconium-oxide bearing. The magnets let the platter float without a ball bearing for 10 times less friction and lower noise, but skeptical Mikey couldn’t help mentioning to Suchy that that would make the platter a spring and break the mechanical ground.

Among the most interesting products I heard at the *Hi-Fi News* show were two Hungarian amplifiers. One, from Meidy Audio Industrial Revolution, is claimed to use “magnetic flux fluctuation,” The other, from Lizard Wizard Audio, uses “PMC amplitude to velocity” technology. Both were driving Meidy’s unattractively boxy No Woodoo loudspeakers, which looked homemade but sounded superb. I think both amps use the same technology and that there’s some relationship between Meidy and Lizard Wizard, but the language barrier and my shaky technical knowledge—especially when the claims appear to transcend normal circuit design—combined to leave me confused. Go to www.meidy.org and www.lizardwizardaudio.com and see if you can make sense of it!

**Traveling Gear**

My two weeks on the road provided a good opportunity to test out three new portable products: Shure’s new triple-driver E500PTH in-ear headphones ($499), HeadRoom’s upgraded Total BitHead headphone amplifier ($199), and Belkin’s TuneTalk iPod recorder.

Though Shure’s E500PTH in-ear headphones each include two woofers, a tweeter, and a crossover network, this new top-of-the-line model is smaller...
...a visceral believability I'd never before experienced.
- Michael Fremer

...addictive.
- John Atkinson

and lighter and thus more comfortable than the E5c it replaces. More important, it sounds even smoother and richer in the mids than the excellent-sounding E5c, while retaining the earlier model's remarkably deep, articulate bass and extended top end.

Ergonomically, the Shure E500PTH is a mixed bag. Its cord terminates in a stereo miniplug a short 19'' from the ears. The idea is that you can add either an extension cord or the Push To Hear (PTH) module, which contains a microphone and a muting circuit (both are supplied). Running or working out with the extension cord is annoying, as it's longer than necessary and the weighty connector bounces back and forth.

The PTH is a handy option on an airplane. The phones isolate 37dB of ambient noise, better than the 20dB of the "leading" (Bose, I suppose) active noise-canceling competition. When the flight attendant talks, you have to dislodge a phone from one ear to hear him or her. With the PTH, you slide a switch that mutes the music and activates the microphone. Why Shure chose a tricky slider switch instead of a simpler, more responsive pushbutton is a mystery to me. Final kvetch: the "L" and "R" graphics on the drive-units are stylish, but for older eyes, unreadable without reading glasses. Quibbles aside, I'm buying the E500PTH and retiring my E5c.

HeadRoones Total BitHead is now less expensive, comes in a transparent case, has a Sensitivity switch, and no longer leaks thumpy DC into the volume pot when you adjust it. It still sounds great, and is an essential enhancement of travel; it goes in my travel bag.

Finally, Belkin's TuneTalk is an inexpensive, compact, 44.1kHz (CD-quality) stereo recorder and microphone that plugs into the bottom of Apple's video iPod and the new Nano iPod. It's ideal for interviews and taking audio notes, as I found out while interviewing PortalSpace Records' Roy Matthews at the Hi-Fi News show. The sound quality is outstanding, and each memo is automatically identified on the iPod's screen by date and time. Syncing and uploading to iTunes is easy, making transcribing a snap. Finally, I can retire my microcassette recorder!
Let the Music Begin...

The revelation revisited.

More than a decade ago, the Guarneri homage redefined Sonus faber's approach to loudspeaker design. Guarneri's unique shape and handcrafted construction, inspired by the Old World methods of the master lute makers of Cremona Italy, looked and sounded unlike anything before it.

Guarneri homage effectively became the blueprint for the design ethos Sonus faber loudspeakers embody, which have delighted music lovers for decades. Melding today's advanced driver, crossover and metallurgy technology with the same artisan manufacturing, Sonus faber have created Guarneri memento.

Beginning afresh where homage concluded, memento embodies all of its predecessor's qualities and considerably more. Overall refinements result in breakthroughs in dynamics, inner detail, and openness, which will both seduce and enrapture.

Guarneri memento – the revelation by Sonus faber continues in the service of music.

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Here's something that's difficult to visualize but nonetheless true: If you attempt to isolate from their environment the working bits of a record player—the main bearing, platter, tone-arm, and cartridge—by means of an elastic drive belt and a suspended sub-chassis of the usual sort, you'll create almost as many problems as you solve.

If your suspension system is designed correctly, then the fragile relationship between cartridge stylus and record groove will be less vulnerable to certain kinds of interference; additionally, the soft drive belt may indeed filter out some of the noise generated by the motor. But any system that's free to rotate in relation to the rest of the world, and to an energy source such as an electric motor, will do just that: Torsional modes will be set up, and the subchassis will attempt to rotate about its own center. If the center of the suspension happens to coincide with the platter bearing—as is the case with most such record players—you'll be left with a slight, continual twisting movement between the platter on one hand and the tonearm and cartridge on the other, resulting in a slight, continual modulation of the signal. And that ain't good.

I never gave any of that a thought until 1985, when an engineering-school graduate named Touraj Moghaddam introduced the first Roksan Xerxes turntable to the audio world. Moghaddam understood the problem and addressed it in two distinct ways. First, because he regarded groove drag as among the causes of the torsional modes described above, Moghaddam gave the motor casing its own bearing and restricted its long-range movement with a sprung tether, so that the revolving armature could still drive the system. Brief, momentary increases in drag were thus absorbed by the motor itself, and changes in platter acceleration were mitigated. Second, Moghaddam devised a turntable suspension that was less free to move in the lateral plane than most, thus restricting the rotation of the suspended parts relative to the motor.

An interesting side note: Some Linn aficionados think that the stringent requirements for adjusting and clamping the LP12's tonearm cable might accomplish the same thing. A properly dressed cable allows the suspension to bounce nicely up and down, but restricts its ability to rotate in one direction or the other. Makes sense.

As it turns out, Roksan wasn't the only company to notice the problem—or offer a solution. In the 1980s, Pink Triangle designer Arthur Khoubesserian created a lightly sprung turntable in which the center of the suspension and the platter bearing were separated by a considerable distance—mitigating the relative movement between tonearm and platter, and preventing the phase modulation of the signal, as he described it.

Then, in the mid-1990s, for Pink Triangle's Anniversary turntable, Khoubesserian went a step further: He put the motor right on the subchassis, leaving, as the only links between his turntable's working parts and the rest of the universe, the three suspension springs and an intentionally delicate signal connection. Which was almost the same as having no links at all.
decouple it from the Anniversary's honeycombed subchassis. Further, in keeping with the Pink Triangle design theory that I described in last month's column, Khoubesserian placed the motor between and in line with the main bearing and the tonearm pivot—at the 2 o'clock position, viewed from above. (For you latecomers: Having the motor in either the left-front or right-rear position puts the drive belt more or less in line with rather than perpendicular to the cantilever of the phono cartridge, so that the motor will contribute the least possible amount of vibration to the signal output.)

Whether for those or some other reasons, Pink Triangle's Anniversary remains among the four or five turntables that have most impressed me over the years, and I was sorry when the company went out of business. But now that Arthur Khoubesserian has returned to the hi-fi world with a new company, The Funk Firm, one might wonder how many of the Anniversary's design distinctions have survived from that life to this. The answer: almost all of them.

**Wow is a noun**

At least in a functional sense, the new Funk Firm Vector turntable ($1449 without tonearm) and its less expensive brother, the Funk ($859 without arm), both resemble a Pink Triangle Anniversary subchassis—albeit one that has been distended in one direction and perched on three feet rather than hung from a frame-type plinth. Both players are distinctively spare, low-mass designs, and both use DC motors, compliantly mounted in line with the platter bearing and tonearm pivot.

In addition to those products, Arthur Khoubesserian designs and manufactures modification kits for certain Pink Triangle turntable models, and for the Linn Sondek LP12—the latter being the focus of my attention. The Funk Firm offers two levels of LP12 modification kits (contact Funk Firm for exact details): Stage 1, called Funk Link ($1599), combines the carbon-fiber top plate I described last month, plus an ironless-rotor DC motor and an outboard power supply for same; Stage 2, the Vector Link ($1859), adds an upgraded DC motor, an upgraded power-supply PCB, and an entirely new subchassis, plus various interesting bits and pieces to facilitate installation. The Vector Link also includes a light, semirigid platter mat, the Achromat, which is available as a separate accessory for $100.

If you buy both kits at once, you get a nice break of $299 on the price (for $3159 total), and two of the elements described above are combined into one: The motor comes premounted to the subchassis, with a specially made wooden motor plate and three metal-and-rubber "bumpers" of the sort used to fasten together different segments of an Alfa Romeo driveshaft, albeit on a different scale. And that's how my review samples of the motor and subchassis were supplied: together.

Moreover, the subchassis came fitted with Stage 2's Vector Drive: a mechanical system comprising two 1"-long axles bolted to the subchassis from beneath, and two molded pulleys designed to ride those axles once they've poked their way up through the openings made for them in the Funk Firm top plate. Used with the kit's own belt, those idler pulleys combine with the motor pulley to form a three-point drive intended to prevent wobbling in the platter bearing—and thus the noise and unwanted movement that may well result.

My original plan was to try the different Funk Firm modifications in an incremental fashion. But in light of all the above, after installing the carbon-fiber top, I couldn't see a practical alternative to skipping directly to The Big Finish.

1 I could be unkind and describe the distinction as favoring the Funk Firm, for the greater apparent durability of their "bumpers." But I won't.
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brilliant. Musical timing, freedom from pitch uncertainties, and overall emotional effectiveness were at least the equals of those of any other source component I've had at home, and the sonic presentation was wonderfully open and clean. Interestingly—make of this what you will—the tonal balance of the Funked Linn was closer to my recollection of the Pink Triangle Anniversary than that of the LP12 itself. Well-loved recordings seemed clearer and more transparent than ever, as if lit from within. And while I freely admit that the change caught me off guard, and even today I'm still not sure how the small, frightened, woodland-animal part of my brain really feels about it, the LP12's upper-bass emphasis and warmth were gone. Completely.

What's more, my LP12's ability to suggest a spatial dimension to the sound of two-channel stereo recordings—to portray, howsoever fancifully, the locations of various musicians within that space—got a real shot in the arm. The end result was a turntable that did a good job with both the music and the sound, not unlike that fondly remembered Anniversary. Nothing wrong with that!

It was the sort of change I'd expect to hear from an entirely new and entirely superior record deck. The Byrds' "Here Without You," from Mr. Tambourine Man (in this instance, the superb Sundazed reissue of Columbia LP 5057), sounded startlingly clear, open, and musically involving. It was as if, in previous listenings, there had been some noise or interference going on in the background, like a headache I didn't know I had until it went away. Suddenly, I was hearing only what was on the record. And the spatial aspect of the recording sounded impressively big and deep—much more so than I'd ever heard from this album.

Similarly, Chris Stamey's endearingly offbeat recording of John Lennon's "Instant Karma," from his Instant Excitement EP (Coyote COY 007), was simply clearer with the full Vector Link, the guitar, electric keyboard, and drums all seeming to be played with more force. The spooky guitar chords on the next number, "When We're Alone"—done here in an altogether nicer and more atmospheric way than the version that came out on 1987's It's Alright album—had more in the way of pitch stability, and a greater level of cool, clear listenability, than on any other LP12 incarnation.

I then went even further: I added the Funk Firm Achromat, which combines a light and porous polymer fill with two sides of rigid skin, to form a record support that's intended to act as a nonreflective sink for the excess resonant energy thrown off by transduction. I'd actually tried the Achromat metal, and installed the Funk Firm's DC motor in my LP12 in such a way that its plastic pulley was just high enough to drive the subplatter without also causing the rubber belt to "hunt" up or down for the right position.

Out came all the new bits—except for the carbon-fiber top plate, of course. Back to Linn's original steel subchassis went the platter bearing. (No oil spill this time.) By now, I could dress a tonearm cable in my sleep.

The result was one of the least decisive, most ambiguous comparisons I've ever made:

**IN DIRECT COMPARISON WITH THE COMBINATION OF THE STOCK LP12 AND NAIM ARMAGEDDON POWER SUPPLY, THE LP12 WITH THE FUNK LINK REMAINS SUPERIOR IN TERMS OF ITS OPENNESS, SPATIAL PERFORMANCE, AND DETAIL.**
ever made—which, I suppose, may be the same as saying that the Stage 1 kit, in and of itself, is the Funk Firm’s most cost-effective LP12 mod.

As of this writing, my Linn is still holding at Stage 1—and I’m completely happy. In direct comparison with the combination of the stock LP12 and Naim Armageddon power supply, the LP12 with the Funk Link remains superior in terms of its openness, spatial performance, and detail, while being no less capable of getting the notes and the beats dead to rights. And now I’ll confess: I also think that the Stage 1 Funk Link kit retains more of the Linn’s innate upper-bass warmth than the Stage 2 Vector Link kit. For that reason alone, some LP12 enthusiasts may want to go for the less expensive approach and pitch camp there indefinitely.

I saw in the news recently that the world’s first pet-cloning service has closed its doors, owing to a lack of paying customers. Evidently, not enough people thought that Snowball II would be worth $50,000. I missed my chance to get a Pink Triangle Pink Link when the getting was good—not to mention the Pink Triangle Anniversary turntable. And I admit that I went into this current project hoping for a sort of Pink Link II and all that would follow: Better music. Better sound. Perhaps even my hairline would be restored to its 1996 borders.

But the sound is amazing. Right now, the fully Funked LP12 is my favorite LP12—and I think that the Stage 1 Funk Link kit is the most cost-effective approach to modernizing my much-loved Linn. The specifics of marketing the Funk Firm kits in the US are being finalized, but Clark Williams, director of sales for Acoustic Sounds, says that the kits will be available from a number of retailers who have been selected as much for their turntable-setup skills as for anything else. Anxious—and ambitious—LP12 owners who already have at hand a couple of Post-Driv screwdrivers, a hollow-shaft ⅛” nut driver, and a setup jig (or at least two piles of books) can use these pics as a guide and get a head start. Either way, the Funk Firm kits are heartily, effusively recommended.
Dielectric-Bias System
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Noise-Dissipation System
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The most delicate finesse
Millions of aural colors.

What more could you want?
The annual Expo of the Custom Electronic Design and Installation Association (CEDIA) moved to Denver for 2007, and while the venue was new for all of us, I still felt like an outsider. Too few exhibits gave anything more than lip service to audio, and then usually only as a meek handmaiden to video and home theater. And that’s okay—Primedia’s Home Entertainment shows and the Consumer Electronics Show can be overwhelming in their size and intensity. CEDIA remains, at least for me, a relatively relaxed exhibition.

Rather than list scads of new products that have already been reported on in our CEDIA blog (http://blog.stereophile.com/cedia2006), I’ll talk here about the trends that, even in this den of videology, are of specific interest in terms of audio, especially multi-channel audio. These include automatic equalization and system setup, multi-channel and digital amplifiers, and, of course, loudspeakers.

There were speakers all over the place at CEDIA’s Expo 2007, but most of them were in-wall models and few of them were impressive, even those from pedigreed sources. “Real” ie, floorstanding or stand-mounted speakers of note included the complete replacement of Paradigm’s Reference Signature and Reference Studio lines, along with the introduction of their new Millenia models aimed at the “lifestyle” A/V market. The new Reference Signature v.2 series will feature tweeter domes of pure beryllium, and midrange and mid-woofer cones of pure cobalt-infused aluminum. (How pure can the aluminum be if it’s infused with cobalt?) Woofer cones will still be made of mineral-filled polypropylene. In addition to updates of the Signature S2, S4, and S8, Paradigm has added the small S1 (two-way, 6" woofer, $1600/pair) and the delectable S6 (three-way, two 7" woofers, $4500/pair). Paradigm’s speaker cosmetics are as luscious as ever, and the new Studio line will sport the gold-anodized aluminum tweeter domes from the original Signature models, as well as new anodized-aluminum mid and mid-woofer drivers. New center-channel and surround models have been added to the core Reference Studio lineup of the 20 ($899/pair), 40 ($1399/pair), 60 ($1799/pair), and 100 ($2499/pair).

Revel showed a completely new line of speakers, the Ultima2s, to succeed the highly praised Ultimas. The Ultima2s’ cabinet designs are less radical in appearance than their predecessors’, but the execution and finish are beyond cavil. Each model has a new waveguide-mounted 1" dome tweeter, and, like the respective original Salons, the Salon2 is a four-way with three 8" woofers ($22,000/pair), the Studio2 a three-way with two 8" woofers, and the Voice2 a three-way center-channel with two 8" woofers and vertically arrayed midrange and tweeter. The Gem2, intended for rear- and side-channel use, has a more conventional (ie, not midrange-tweeter-midrange) driver array, with a fairly shallow depth and more mounting options than the Gem. A wide-ranging but brief two-channel demonstration of the Salon was among the two best I heard at the Expo.

Also in that category of my personal two or three Best in Show was a multi-channel room with Vandersteen Quatro speakers ($6995/pair), Audio Research electronics, and Kubala-Sosna cables. Whether playing blues or classical, the Vandersteens disappeared into the trees (both figuratively and literally, given the many potted plants in the room)—only the music seemed present. Also right up there was the Thiel Audio room. Even with the ambient noise filtering through the prefab walls, their multichannel setup with the new CS3.7 speakers (price not yet announced) for the left and right channels, and the newer, single-driver SC54 ($1000 each) doing center- and surround-channel duties, made for one of the most seamless surround presentations I heard in Denver.

Theta Digital showed the prototype of their innovative multichannel Virtu power amp, to be connected to their forthcoming multichannel pre-amplifier-processor, the Valis, with digital interconnects. The amplifier was described as a “PowerDAC”—no analogy until the speaker!

Denon Electronics was emphasizing their CI models of disc players and A/V receivers, which provide custom-installation (hence the initials CI) options for system integration and control. Within this category, the top-of-the-line AVR-5805CI (price TBA) now includes Audyssey MultEQ Pro setup and calibration, with software similar to that in Audyssey’s standalone Sound Equalizer, which I am now installing. While this is planned as a CI function, the projected low cost of the external software and hardware may make it an option for hobbyists as well. The word is that such expanded EQ
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of side-firing woofers, and integrating an active subwoofer with a pair of small monitor speakers. Both philosophies culminated in the Xd series of DSP-EQ'd active loudspeakers, which I had the pleasure of reviewing in the November 2005 issue. My first reaction to the concept was “Why hasn’t anyone done this before?” The results completely justified an approach that, I believe, points loudspeaker design in a new direction.

But...electronics from a speaker company? For NHT’s Xd speakers, the amps came from PowerPhysics, the all-important EQ from DEQX. NHT supplied only the speakers and, of course, many of the ideas. Now they’ve released a multichannel preamplifier-processer, the Controller ($2750), and...
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a matching five-channel power amplifier, the Power5 ($2000). Either would be an audacious release from a speaker company, but NHT is no longer just a speaker company.

In October 2005, NHT became wholly owned and managed by the Vinci Group, which also includes Vinci Labs (www.vincilabs.com/newproducts/products.html). The significance of this is that Vinci Labs, based in Tampere, Finland, and with facilities in Thailand and Singapore, has been responsible for the design and production of OEM devices that are the building blocks, if not the heart and soul, of many multi-channel audio products at almost all price points. Vinci has as much experience in feature sets, design, and implementation as anyone out there. Their alliance with NHT creates a formidable combination, and the results of their collaboration are apparent in these first two products.

**NHT Controller:** Sounds like the title of an action movie, no? Well, the Controller is just a preamp-processor, but its features are what set it apart. They include an outstandingly clear, large, communicative front-panel display touchscreen that makes use of the onscreen display a choice of convenience, not necessity. While you're listening, the Status screen tells you which source you've selected, how it's connected, how its signal is being processed, and the volume setting. You can dim the display, or set it to turn off 10 seconds after last use. More remarkable, the display features a proximity-detection sensor that, on sensing the approach of your hand, switches to Start Screen, from which the user can access the Sound Mode, Source, and Setup screens. But having the Controller detect your presence is not the only sexy bit. The Touch Wheel, surprisingly reminiscent of something you'd find on an Apple iPod, makes volume adjustments a breeze, and can also be used as a menu-navigation control. Add a light-touch Standby switch and a headphone jack and that's it for the sculpted front panel.

I rarely touched that front panel—I found the almost too-compact remote control so much handier to use. Anything you can do at the front panel you can do from the remote, and for most of those operations the remote provides direct access without stepping through menus. It's one of the friendliest remotes I've ever used, suffering from only one fault that made it less than completely intuitive in operation:

The volume is adjusted via buttons bearing left- and right-pointing arrows, not up- and down-pointing ones. Surely the latter would have been just as suitable for input selection. Even after two months of using this remote, I often still change the input when I want to adjust the volume. Also, I'd like the remote's oval Power button to be round or square, to avoid the suggestion that it can be adjusted up and down. But don't get the wrong idea—this minuscule wand did everything else very well. Mebbe I need another month or two with it...

Around back is the familiar thicket of audio and video inputs and outputs arranged in logical groups. Notable among the digital and stereo analog inputs are the 71-channel analog input, the 71 analog output, and the outputs for a second zone for stereo that's independent from the main output in source selection and volume. Multiple video inputs for composite, S-video, component, and HDMI sources and outputs in each format are provided, but no scaling or deinterlacing. Some format transformations are available (eg, composite/S-video inputs to component/HDMI outputs), but component and HDMI are unfortunately not mutually convertible. In addition, the audio on the HDMI input/output is at present limited to Dolby Digital, DTS, and stereo PCM, although NHT promises an HDMI 1.3 upgrade. (For other in/out issues, see www.nhtifi.com/2006/products/s/controller.html.)

With each new processor, the big hump to get over is setup. The Controller made this easy—it's one place where Vinci Labs' real-world experience shows. The only small issue, for me, was that the menu hierarchy is skewed toward the convenience of those who own NHT speakers. But that's the home-field advantage, and as you'll see, there's a lot to it. In the meantime, those who don't have NHT speakers must begin by choosing the last option on the Speaker Setup menu, and tell the Controller how many speakers you have and whether they're Large, Medium, or Small. Crossover frequencies for Medium and Small speakers are independently selectable in 5Hz increments from 20 to 200Hz. After that, with the help of a built-in signal generator and your own level meter, you can manually enter the speakers' distances from the listening position and set their output levels—but you'd be better off using NHT's Auto Distance and Auto Level routines with the supplied microphone. Enter these modes and plug in the microphone when prompted. The calibration procedure tests each channel three times to ensure accuracy and consistency.

If you do own NHT speakers, you begin with the first item, NHT Speaker Wizard, and select from lists which speaker model serves each channel (mixes of speakers made by NHT and other companies can also be accommodated). You don't have to say how big any NHT model is—the Controller already knows that, and many other aspects of these members of the family. According to Esa Piirila of NHT Europe, among the digital and stereo analog inputs are the 71-channel analog input, the 71 analog output, and the outputs for a second zone for stereo that's independent from the main output in source selection and volume. Multiple video inputs for composite, S-video, component, and HDMI sources and outputs in each format are provided, but no scaling or deinterlacing. Some format transformations are available (eg, composite/S-video inputs to component/HDMI outputs), but component and HDMI are unfortunately not mutually convertible. In addition, the audio on the HDMI input/output is at present limited to Dolby Digital, DTS, and stereo PCM, although NHT promises an HDMI 1.3 upgrade. (For other in/out issues, see www.nhtifi.com/2006/products/s/controller.html.)

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Reviewed by Neil Gader, Absolute Sound Issue 146, and 2006 Editors' Choice Awards Issue 165

**Magic Link One Interconnect:**
"You may find other pricier interconnects that excel in one specific area or another, but when it comes to overall system synergy, this [Harmonic Technology Magic Link One interconnect] is one cable you'll be 'wearing' like a favorite pair of shoes."

Awarded by Sue Kraft, Absolute Sound, 2006 Editors' Choice Awards Issue 165

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define inputs by name and to select video source, digital audio source, analog audio source, gain offset, and audio preset (tone controls, channel trims, and lip-sync offset) for each input. Preferred processing modes (DPL IIX, Neo:6, Dolby EX, Surround 6.1, etc.) can also be preset, and are accessible from the remote control. All in all, the Controller is extremely logically structured.

Here's the feature I liked best: The 71-channel Analog Direct input uses the channel-balance adjustments specified for the digital inputs and adds analog bass management! For this unique input, you can select from the menu All Small speakers, All Large, or L&R Large (with the rest Small), and a fixed 80Hz crossover is applied to all settings. Sure, I'd like more options, such as L/C/R Large and/or adjustable crossover frequencies, but short of redigitizing the multichannel input, I don't expect it. For those of us who insist on using high-resolution SACD and DVD-Audio players with minimal or no bass management, the NHT Controller is one of the most audio-friendly pre-amps yet.

**NHT Power**: This five-channel, 200Wpc power amplifier has the same sculpted front chassis as the Controller. It, too, has a touchscreen switch for On/Standby, and a bank of LEDs to indicate channel status. When a channel's LED is green, the channel is on and working properly. When red, the channel is in fault mode—but I never saw red.

The Power's specs are impressive, with low distortion (<0.05% THD+noise at 200W each, all channels driven simultaneously, 0.001% IM and 0.01% TIM), soft clipping, and comprehensive protection features. The rear panel has five RCA jacks and five pairs of multiway binding posts. There are AC connections, a 12V trigger loop-through, and, interestingly, an Ethernet jack to permit the Power to communicate with the Controller so that the latter can control the Power's On/Standby/Standby status. If set to two-channel output, the Controller will also shut down the Power's center three channels so that its power supply can be optimized for output and heat reduction. In addition, the Controller can continuously monitor the Power's operation. Full details and specs are available at www.nhthi-fi.com/2006/products/s/power5.html.)

**Hooking Up**: I'd just converted my system to all-balanced Kubala-Sosna connections between my Meridian 861 processor and Bryston 9B-ST power amplifier. And because I planned to incorporate the new Audyssey Sound Equalizer into this system, I also needed at least two sets of six RCA cables each. After discussions at Home Entertainment 2006 and the CEDIA Expo with cable designer Jay Victor and Belkin, I decided to try PureAV Silver Series RCA cables (AV50300). These are beautifully constructed, with hybrid PCOCC conductors, silver-solder joints, and substantial, color-coded connectors plated in 24K gold. And at only $39.99/12m, they seem underpriced. I especially like the solidity of the rubber grips on the connectors, and the PureAVs' slithery jackets make it easy to route them through the tangle of cables behind my rack. I briefly swapped the PureAV Silvers in the L/R channels for some pricier RCA cables from AlphaCore and Straight Wire that I dug out of my closet, but found the Silvers equally clear and quiet. Firmly fitted to the NHT electronics, the Silvers were just the ticket for this system, and a challenge to higher-priced RCA links.

**Up and Running**: There was much to enjoy about the NHT's sound. The Power's amp was lively, powerful, and completely lacking in noise or hum. It had more than adequate power for the Paradigm Reference Studios, whether they were bass-managed or run full-range. Blockbusters like the Penderecki Credo (SACD, Polskie Radio PR SACD 1) or the new recording of Mahler's Symphony 6 from Christoph Eschenbach and the Philadelphia Orchestra (SACD, Ondine ODE 1084-SD) presented the Power with little challenge, even with all channels blazing. subtlety and delicacy were served as well, as was evident with a lovely disc of Sibelius songs for soprano and orchestra; on Luonnokr, Soile Isokoski's voice soared over the orchestral flying carpet provided by Leif Segerstam and the Helsinki Philharmonic (SACD, Ondine ODE 1080-5). Compared to my reference Bryston 9B-ST, the Power seemed less overtly muscular while clearly not lacking for power. In fact, the more I listened to it, the more convincing it became—all of the audible spectrum was smoothly in balance.

The combination of the Power and Controller was addictive and will remain in my system a fair bit longer. The characteristic consistency across the channels made for a relatively seamless surround soundstage that rivaled that of the Meridian 861, especially with hi-rez SACDs and DVD-As, which the Meridian must redigitize. Run from the analog outputs of the Simaudio Moon Orbiter universal player, and with bass below 80Hz EQ'd by the Velodyne SMS-1, the five-channel output was remarkably transparent at all output levels through the Paradigms, and with simple as well as complex music. The Penderecki and Mahler SACDs mentioned above were perfect demonstration discs, and all my long-term references confirmed the sound's honesty and consistency. Even nondiscrete surround sources were sources of delight. The 5.1-channel DTS soundtrack of a new DVD-V of Prokofiev's Love for Three Oranges, with Stéphane Denève conducting soloists and the Rotterdam Philharmonic Orchestra (BBC Audio Arts OA 0957D), was colorful and exciting, the voices up there on stage and the orchestra immediate and dynamic. The NHT Controller's DPL IIX processing did a dandy job with cable TV movies and music, too.

Overall, the $4750 combination of NHT's Controller and Power rivaled the best processor-amp pairings I've used, and would be worthy of speakers even more sophisticated than the Paradigm Reference Studios. The Controller, in particular, offers a unique combination of intelligent design, audiophile considerations, and outright good sound far better than you'd expect at the price.

**Next time in the Round**

The new Audyssey Sound Equalizer and AudysseyPro software have just been installed between the NHT Controller and Power, and I can say only two things about it at this point. First, when operated in bypass mode, the Audyssey's presence is marked only by slightly lower system gain. Second, when operated as intended, the new Audyssey is more effective than the version used in the Denon AVR-4806 receiver that I wrote about last. This, and more, next time in the Round.
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"THIS WON'T BE A SHORT JOB," says Arcam's president, John Dawson. He's talking about the challenge of engineering the next generation of Arcam home-theater products to embrace the new high-resolution video formats. It's possibly the biggest technical challenge English company Arcam has faced since, almost exactly 30 years ago, Dawson and his original business partner, Chris Evans, launched their first product—an unpretentious, 35W hi-fi amplifier called the A&R Cambridge A60.

It was Dawson's own personal combination of technical know-how and commercial enthusiasm that got Arcam off
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the ground in the first place. In the years since, the company has embraced new technology with an alacrity unusual for a specialist hi-fi maker.

In the mid-1980s, Arcam learned how to build better-sounding CD players, and introduced one of the first separate digital-to-analog converters. In the early 1990s, its NICAM tuner introduced hi-fi users to high-quality stereo sound from UK television broadcasts. In 1992, with the arrival of Dolby S noise reduction, Arcam launched a high-quality, UK-made hi-fi cassette recorder—although the market in high-end cassette decks was killed soon after by the announcement of the Digital Compact Cassette (DCC) and MiniDisc. In 1998, Arcam was first with a DAB digital radio tuner for the UK, European, and Canadian markets. And in 2000, Arcam launched its first DVD player, followed in 2002 by a state-of-the-art A/V processor.

All of this has been made possible by a high level of in-house expertise, and by effective collaborations with key semiconductor companies.

JOHN DAWSON: There is a symbiotic relationship between the chipmaker and the specialist companies like us, who need the help of the chip companies to develop a variation of the product that, hopefully, will have something special about it. Most of my job today is in brokering these relationships, identifying the right people—finding the ones that will be enthused to work with us. Our engineering team is clearly getting recognition as a world-class team because the products we've done are pretty good, and that really helps.

STEVE HARRIS: But the latest format war of HD DVD vs Blu-ray makes things doubly difficult for specialist companies.

JD: It is staggering that these two groups weren't able to get themselves together too. Too much corporate pride, too much patent and intellectual-property income in the way. And deep rivalry between Toshiba, who snatched the DVD business from Philips' and Sony's patent pool, and Philips and Sony—Sony in particular, who really didn't want that to happen a second time around. I do have opinions on which is more fit for purpose as a replay medium, and it's not Blu-ray. But that is irrelevant. We have to see how the market develops. It's going to be very confused for quite a while.

The situation at the moment is that we have a very successful format called DVD, which is selling fantastically well. We also see, particularly in the USA and Japan, increasing amounts of high-definition video material from broadcast. And we see mainstream display technology rapidly developing to support better quality—and, much more important, to be much less intrusive. We are just going to have an explosion of people replacing their old televisions with flat-panel displays. In the UK we're in the process of embracing high-definition broadcasting via satellite, through Sky initially, and including programming from the BBC and others.

So the movie industry wishes to support high-definition video on disc as well. The problem is that unlike DVD—where there were two initial proposals, but with some head-bashing they were integrated into one physical format—in the case of high-definition DVD, there are actually two versions in production, which use physically incompatible discs. One, HD DVD, uses an extension of the existing DVD format for its discs: two 0.6mm discs sandwiched together with the information in the middle. With a blue-violet laser that gets you 15G Bytes per layer, about three times that of DVD. Blu-ray puts the information very near the reading side of the disc. That's the opposite of CD, in fact, where the information is almost all the way through the plastic.

As I understand it, BD (Blu-ray Disc) was developed not as a ROM, a playback-only medium, but as a recording medium for Japanese high-definition television broadcasts. And

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if it has one, is less playing capacity, but with a modern video codec, that doesn't get in the way. With BD, you need totally new disc-manufacturing lines and more complex optical pickups, both of which add significant cost.

So we have the two sides squaring off to each other, and you can say, legitimately, that this is insane. And that is a real dichotomy for companies like us, because although we'd like to support this area, it's going to be challenging in the first place to support even one format. So what is the way forward right now? I really don't know. We have to watch and observe and see how it shakes out.

A company like Arcam has a position to defend with the highest-quality DVD players, and we continue to work on that format, because it's not done and dusted yet. If you as a consumer want the best video and audio performance from a video-disc player at this time, there is a case to be made for just spending the bulk of your money on a DVD player! This is particularly true now when there are two formats coming up, and both are in their very early phases and will undoubtedly be flaky at the beginning, as we are already seeing. Both systems are four or five times more complex than DVD because of all the extra interactivity they want, with Net-sourced video and so forth, which is going to be very challenging in software terms.

SH: And another reason for the complexity in the new formats is their copy-protection systems.

JD: AACS [Advanced Access Content System] is the content-access control system for both Blu-ray and HD DVD, and it is very powerful, much more powerful than CSS [Content Scrambling System], which was put together for DVD. CSS, as you know, was cracked because somebody in the computer industry was careless and left the keys exposed. A company implementing it didn't follow the rules. Nevertheless, the genie was out of the bottle, and that is supposed to stand independently, interact with another set of rules by BD+, which looks around to make sure the player is secure and the environment is secure.

There are bound to be issues in how BD+ and AACS, which is supposed to stand independently, interact with each other. There is much FUD (fear, uncertainty, and doubt) and misinformation going around about this at the moment, and this will become clear only when everything is finally published in at least some sort of public domain. It's potentially a big can of worms.

Is the system needlessly complicated? I suspect it is! I saw a lovely piece on one of the websites the other day which said, “For God's sake, with all this interactivity, and getting the director's comments in multiple languages blended in with the video, and all the other things streaming off the Net at the same time for the Easter eggs that are supposed to be there, and the game-playing, why not have a big button on the front marked PLAY THE BLOODY MOVIE?”

There was a paper from Harvard Business Review published recently on the needless complexity and “feature creep” of products, which is very pertinent. Because one does wonder if the marketing people, in their eagerness to try to make the system more compelling than DVD, have made it needlessly complex to implement, with all that that implies for actual playability and support—because we know how bad it was with DVD in the early days.

We wouldn't wish to suggest that you shouldn't buy an HD player of your choice to play the handful of HD movies available. However, for playing the tens of thousands of standard DVDs, not to mention your audio CDs and the high-resolution audio formats, we believe that a modern, high-performance DVD player such as Arcam's DVI37 will outperform the first- and second-generation HD players in almost every way.

SH: Coming back to DVD, your first player was launched in 2000. How did you manage to get up and running with that technology so quickly?

JD: We teamed up with Zoran, based in Silicon Valley, the first company to make the DSPs for Dolby Digital audio—very experienced in audio as well as video. And we reached an agreement for a material sum of money to take their reference DVD design, and to have some training on how the
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kernel of the system worked and the support around it that was needed, so that we could adapt the basic design to our requirements. From that came our DV88 player.

Following that, we were then able to cooperate with Zoran on a later generation of chipset, both to support DVD-Audio and to do a better job on regular audio and video. It cost us a lot of money to make the move. We were even able to have a comprehensive bass manager written for that on the audio DSP part of the chip, which I don’t think anybody else has done. The relationship with Zoran continues, with the first of our third-generation players, the DV137, just hitting the market. This has still better video and audio performance!

That detailed knowledge of Zoran’s parts, and the support we’ve had from them, allowed us to be first out of the gate (or second, really, after Pioneer!) with HDMI, which was built into our D79 player. We wrote all our own support code and implemented Silicon Image’s HDMI solution pretty much as soon as it came out. We’re very proud of that. In the third-generation products we’ve also worked closely with another Silicon Valley company, Anchor Bay Technology, to get the very best possible video processing in place after Zoran’s MPEG decoder.

**SH:** Things were obviously moving toward A/V in the late 1990s, but then you worked closely with system design house Roke Manor Research, and with the BBC, in the race to be the first to market with a DAB digital radio tuner. Was it worth the effort?

**JD:** Would we do it all again? Knowing what we know now, and how the broadcast people would degrade the potential performance of the system [with low bit rates], I’m honestly not sure. There are so many advantages to the system that it’s very frustrating when the quality gets thrown out to some degree by the pressures for programming and more content.

We got our money back on the first-generation DAB products—just. And since then, the kind of interface we invented is pretty much copied worldwide. But it’s good to be able to include it in a product like Solo, our one-box music system. No question—it’s a differentiator.

So I’m very glad we did the work on DAB; it’s been a lot of fun. And I still have hopes that if more spectrum becomes available, then at least the BBC will see its way to increasing those data rates. And then, suddenly, people would realize what this format is capable of.

**SH:** This touches on the whole broader issue of quality of carriers, like downloading music. People end up not being aware of the quality that they could have.

**JD:** And that’s a shame. We will continue to make products that support very high quality. In fact, the iPod, which does have two-thirds of that market in terms of product value, is capable of very-good-quality sound. There’s an iPod just sitting on a bench here (because I cracked and bought one for myself) that has got 50 or 60 albums on it, losslessly. And that, I have to tell you, is pretty good. Our view has been to embrace it as another format or source and to try to provide a bit of education to at least a percentage of that user base, especially that they don’t have to use it at the default 128k bits per second setting. You’ve probably seen that note from the [British Federation of Audio] about this! Turn up the data rate, you’ve probably still got more music on there than you can listen to, and it’ll sound quite a bit better.

We now have a little lead you can plug into Solo, into the serial port and into the audio inputs, that gets you decent audio quality and allows you to control the iPod from the remote on the Solo, with the display on the front panel doing the job. There will be more products, I’m sure—not just from us—to do this.

But I still think there’s a very decent market for CD. People still like hard copies of things, not least because otherwise, if your hard disk crashes, you’ve lost the lot! So I think disc-replay systems are going to be part of our future for as far ahead as I can see; it’s not all going to move to downloading. Two-thirds of the world, even the developed world, doesn’t yet have broadband! Whether there’s much of a market for deluxe audio is a different issue.

**SH:** Meanwhile, you’ve continued to develop better home-cinema products, with the HDMI-equipped FMJ AV9 processor, new receivers…

**JD:** Our first AV receiver, the AVR100, was based on an existing platform developed for another company and made in the Far East. We did a lot of work on it, changing its power supply to use a toroidal transformer, for example, and respecifying literally hundreds of parts. We did get a surprisingly good sound out of it.

Now, separately, in Arcam’s FMJ range, we’ve been developing the AV8 THX processor, which was state-of-the-art when we launched it. But we were able to learn from that and reuse some of the circuit techniques, which we took across to the receiver, albeit with cheaper parts. And second, we’d learnt a lot about the user interface and the way the software for the control of the system should look like. From this the AVR300 was born. And that was a truly collaborative effort between us and our Chinese colleagues, who designed software to our spec.

We also worked with Wolfson, our Scottish semiconductor friends, on a new audio-codec part they had—which we inadvertently helped specify at the previous [Audio Engineering Society] UK conference by giving a recipe for what we wanted to see in a general-purpose audio/video codec. We were able to integrate that part, with its very-high-quality DACs, and build our own audio-processing board. We also had developed what was, for the time, an absolutely state-of-the-art video upconversion system and a top-quality audio power-amplifier module. The result was the AVR300 receiver, which has sold in many thousands around the world and has since been further refined into the AVR350, which we’ve managed to make sound even better.

It shows just some of what you have to do. It’s a lot of engineering. And there’s going to have to be a lot more work done in the future to cope with some of the new format requirements that are emerging. This won’t be a short job. Because we want to do it properly.
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Some rockers were born to be sidemen, it seems, but Ron Wood has always managed, when handed his status as second (or even third) banana, to make banana daiquiris. A bassist with the Jeff Beck Group, and then a guitarist with the Faces and the Rolling Stones, Wood’s careening solos—especially on slide—are the very definition of rock’n’roll at its loose, chaotic, boozy best. Wood is less distinguished as a singer and songwriter, but he’s created enough good material over the years that a best-of—even one with a title including the cheesy double entendre Cresscion—is warranted.

Cresscion is split into two discs: one features material from Wood’s solo career, the other his efforts with Beck, the Faces, the Stones, and two earlier bands, the Birds and the Creation. The solo material can be sublime, as on the raw, flinty “I Can Feel the Fire,” with Mick Jagger and David Bowie joining Wood on vocals. Equally fine is the languid George Harrison cover, “Far East Man,” and Wood’s ragged take on Bob Dylan’s “Seven Days,” recorded live at the Bobfest tribute concert. The previously unreleased “You Strum and I’ll Sing” is a choice rarity, a warm duet between Woody and Rod Stewart.

Wood’s solo sessions were often crowded in between
more pressing band matters, however, and what could sometimes be charitably thought of as a spontaneity born of necessity is, in reality, just a mess. Some of Wood's songs were underdeveloped beyond their core riffs, while on others his vocals are buried in the mix. A line from his Slide on This album serves as a summary of the solo stuff: "You always wanted more than I could give you."

On disc 2, the Birds and Creation songs are an amusing listen, especially "The Girls Are Naked," a 60s flashback for sure. Wood wasn't the featured player on the Beck tracks, of course, but his bass playing is integral to the hard-hitting greatness of "I Ain't Superstitious" and "Plynth (Water Down the Drain)."

Woody's best work was done with the Faces and on Stewart's early solo work. He cowrote such gems as "Gasoline Alley" and "Every Picture Tells a Story," both included here—as is "Stay With Me," perhaps Wood's high-water mark in terms of sheer guitar greatness.

During his tenure with the Rolling Stones Woody's songwriting credits have been sparse, as reflected in the inclusion of only two songs here, "Everything Is Turning to Gold" and "Black Limousine." His best work with that group, it seems, is done onstage.

Another letdown is the anthology's packaging. There are vintage photos, Wood's (very) brief comments on each track, and quotes from famous friends, but minimal song credits and no proper liner notes.

That's too bad. Ronnie Wood's work sometimes feels a bit tossed off, but at his best, you'd be hard-pressed to find a second banana with more appeal. Sorry, but Wood deserves better than this set—and that pun—can muster.

—Daniel Durechholz

PETE TOWNSHEND
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PETE TOWNSHEND/RONNIE LANE
Rough Mix
Performance *****
Sonic *****

All Five: Jon Astley, remastering.

One can never accuse the post-Who Pete Townshend for resting on his laurels. Throughout his lengthy solo career the guitar legend has been afflicted by a type of creative ADD, jumping skittishly from project to project and from style to style, and from film and children's musicals to plays and short stories, not to mention a host of ambitious thematic efforts in pop-rock, all of which make an innovative work like Tommy seem downright conventional. This peripatetic path makes it difficult to discern a continuous thread in his work, some separate sort of consistency to latch on to. But Townshend's projects are so diverse that no thread exists other than his yearning voice and, perhaps, a sense of lyrical intimacy. For that reason, Townshend's creative ambition outpaced his fan base; the further away he wandered from his raw Who roots, the more inscrutable and unfamiliar he became. Also for that reason, the further back you travel in his solo catalog, the more rewarding the results.

With the early Who, prickly Pete was best served by stripped-down material, and that applies to his solo work as well. His most effective writing came earliest, with his solo debut, Who Came First, and Rough Mix, his lovely duet project with the Small Faces' Ronnie Lane. Both are exhilarating and delightful homespun discs, with Townshend, fresh off his Who brilliance, digging into alternate material deemed impractical for that band. Who Came First, here given Deluxe Edition treatment, contains frequent nods to Townshend's spiritual guru, Meher Baba, as well as some outtakes from Lifehouse, a Tommy follow-up, a bristling version of "The Seeker," and three bonus tracks, all of which appear here for the first time: the country-time banjo gem "Mary Jane," from one of his album odes to Baba, the Merseybeat blues "I Always Say," and the sweet "Begin the Beguine."

Many feel that Rough Mix, with Lane, spotlights some of the best work of Townshend's career. While that may make for lively debate, the album does include a handful of epic tunes that could have been fabulous Who songs, including "Keep Me Turning" and "Heart to Hang Onto." This acoustic-based set is a long way from the turbulent Live at Leeds, with Lane's contributions especially wistful. Lane's modus operandi also pressed Townshend to loosen up his own work, with amazing results. Three bonus tracks—two Lane tunes and a jam—don't much enhance the overall package, and may even take away from the abbreviated brilliance of the original collection.

As his solo career matured, 1980s New Wave kicked in and Townshend essentially jumped the shark. Like many artists of the era, he stepped into a booby trap of synthesizers, studio polish, and eye shadow, all of which helped to produce his least appealing work. Empty Glass, with "Rough Boys" and "I Am an Animal," is passable. It's recently been remastered to tamp the sterile sheen, and packaged with four alternate takes. But from this point, Townshend, sober and emboldened by his new approach, began to overreach. All the Best Cowboys Have Chinese Eyes, Deep End Live, and White City: A Novel are embarrassing and overwrought, expanded with bonus tracks and improved remastering that beg the question, "Why would you want a second helping of a mediocre dish?" The Iron Man, another of Townshend's stabs at a conceptual recording, this time for kids, is perhaps his most misguided effort, despite the bizarre presences of John Lee Hooker and Nina Simone. Even through 1993's PsychoDelicia, Townshend was plagued by a glut of ambition; again and again he tried ramming a huge square peg of conceptualism into a small round hole of rock'n'roll. Worse, his subject matter had become excessively egocentric. "I became the central character in my own dark (but amusing) rock opera," he admits in the liner notes to Scoop 3.
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Which is why we should all thank the gods for the Scoop remasters. These two-disc collections are the perfect antidote for Townshend's errant ambitions and a great way to reconnect with his raw writing abilities. The first Scoop is a set of stripped-down demos, alternative versions, and out-takes that has, since its 1983 release, pleased Who fans with fresh, alternate renditions of familiar tunes like "Squeezebox," "Magic Bus," "Behind Blue Eyes," and a positively giant "Love Reign O'er Me." Another Scoop, originally released in 1987, nearly surpasses the first with consistently good outtakes of classics: "Happy Jack," "Substitute," "Pinball Wizard," and "The Kids Are Alright," among others, 27 in all. Scoop 3 doesn't succeed the way its predecessors do. Most of the worthwhile vintage demos had already seen release, and so Townshend didn't have much in the well from which to draw. Still, it provides an intimate look at his inner creative sanctum, even though its focus on later-period, synth-based work might not thrill everyone. None of the Scoop sets features additional tracks, just stellar remastering by longtime Who associate Jon Astley. As this batch of reissues illustrates, Townshend's solo work begins strongly, then tapers off. As his ambitions grew, his results diminished. Still, his remastered canon provides a fascinating and all-encompassing overview of one of rock's true iconoclasts.

— Bob Gulla

JOURNEY
Five Reissues

Infinity
Performance ★
Sonics ★★★

Evolution
Performance ★
Sonics ★★★

Departure
Performance ★
Sonics ★★★

Escape
Performance ★★
Sonics ★★★★

Greatest Hits
Performance ★★★
Sonics ★★★★

When Journey began in San Francisco in 1973 it was a promising fusion-inspired ensemble fronted by guitarist Neal Schon and keyboardist Gregg Rolie, both late of Santana. By the time of 1981's gazillion-selling Escape, however, Journey was lowest-common-denominator arena rock, largely thanks to vocalist Steve Perry, who'd joined prior to the fourth album, 1978's Infinity. True, Perry possessed an operatic set of pipes; that Perry's schnozz rivaled Rod Stewart's for sheer bulbosity was also indicative of the man's ability to sniff pop's cheesiest elements and lay 'em out like a backstage deli platter. Indeed, the stench set in from the get-go. Infinity, despite several rockin' tunes ("Wheel in the Sky" had a Pink Floyd-ish vibe), was a-slog with Velveeta ballads and ersatz prog-pop. That formula would dominate 1979's Evolution and 1980's Departure—was there ever a tune so musically overripe as the excruciatingly titled "Lovin', Touchin', Squeezin'"?—and Rolie wisely bailed after Departure, replaced by ex-Babys Jonathan Cain. Before you could shout "Havarti," the Perry-Schon-Cain songwriting team strong-armed Escape into the Top Ten via hit singles "Open Arms," "Who's Crying Now," and "Don't Stop Believin'". The last, admittedly, was compelling in its unabashed, beat-the-odds anthemism. But even on that tune, Perry's smug, overwrought delivery was nigh-on insufferable. Yeah, I know—he's still laughing all the way to the bank. (This reissue of Escape contains four bonus tracks, three of them live; Departure also includes a pair of extras.)

Cut to the present and, at a newfound distance, Greatest Hits (originally issued in 1988) is strangely enjoyable, coasting on such guilty pleasures as "Wheel," "Believin','" and pulse-quickening pomp-rocker "Separate Ways" (from 1983's Frontiers). It's not great in the literal sense—too many ballads sap the momentum—but it's Gouda 'nuff.

—Fred Mills
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THE BYRDS
There Is a Season

Performance *****
Sonics ****

The four-CD, one-DVD There Is a Season represents the culmination of Columbia/Legacy's decade-long overhaul of the Byrds' back catalog, which put into fans' hands remastered, vastly expanded editions of all the original records. In theory, it also replaces 1990's four-CD The Byrds, and it's instructive to compare the two sets.

There Is a Season boasts the same sparkling 20-bit remastering job that producer Bob Irwin oversaw for the reissue program. TIAS has 99 tracks, nine more than The Byrds, five of these being previously unreleased live cuts. By contrast, The Byrds contained what were, at the time, 25 never-before-heard tracks, so in a sense its initial "Whoa!" factor was greater. TIAS, though, is more exhaustive in its purview, dipping back to 1964 with a brace of tunes the musicians cut as The Jet Set and The Beefeaters, as well as intriguing soundtrack material from Candy and Banjoman and a whopping 16 live tracks (compared to The Byrds' four) from the fertile performing period of 1969-70.

The DVD is a worthy bonus, but clocking in at less than a half-hour and comprising 10 TV appearances solely from 1965-67 (why nothing from the Untitled era?), it's a tad underwhelming. Still, it's fun to watch the band smirking and lip-syncing while go-go-booted Hullabaloo dancers twirl around them. Three songs from Swedish TV circa 1967 feature a four-man lineup that lacks Gene Clark, who'd quit a year earlier; by the time of a Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour appearance later that year (the lone color clip among the 10), Clark's back in the lineup, awkwardly miming to "Mm Mm Mm Mm Mm Spaceman" and filling in for the recently fired David Crosby.

The massive booklets accompanying both TIAS and The Byrds are exemplary; for both, journalist David Fricke supplied exhaustive liner notes, expanding on his original essay for The Byrds. Tom Petty wrote a brief appreciation for the 1990 box, and a new one for TIAS. Gary Louris of the Jayhawks also weighs in, astutely observing that the Byrds "created a genre, and there are very few bands that can say that."

Should you replace your copy of The Byrds with There Is a Season? Byrds obsessives tend to want it all, so for them it's probably moot. The sound, song selection, and DVD do tend to give TIAS the edge—but if you pick it up, don't automatically unload the earlier set on eBay. Not only does The Byrds contain a handful of tracks available nowhere else (notably, tunes cut at a 1990 summit of Crosby, Roger McGuinn, and Chris Hillman), it was released at a time when multiscide career anthologies were still considered somewhat artistically radical and not necessarily a sure commercial thing. The Byrds carried uncommon emotional heft in 1990; 16 years on, it still has a unique resonance.

—Fred Mills

JOHN LEE HOOKER
Hooker
Shout Factory 10198 (4 CDs). Jeff Palo, prod.; Pat Kraus, eng. MD. TT: 5:01:48

Performance ****
Sonics ***

"Fancy chords don't mean nothing...throw the fancy chords away," John Lee Hooker admonishes during "Teachin' the Blues," which he recorded in 1961. "Just get this slow beat."

Hooker would hang his best music on that slow beat and simple chords. He built songs around the nuances and interior rhythms of his electric guitar, from the one- and two-chord structures he learned from players, including his father-in-law, growing up in Clarksdale, Mississippi. He knew when to play, but, perhaps more important, he knew when not to.

Hooker's unusual style was difficult for sidemen to follow, and, using his feet as percussion and that "slow beat," Hooker became a solid one-man band. That frugal economy of style extended to his recordings. "I don't take no three days to make a record," he jokes while in a Los Angeles studio with Canned Heat in 1970.

His performing style notwithstanding, Hooker became a sophisticated and lyrical songwriter, with "Boogie Chillen," "Crawlin' King Snake," "I'm in the Mood," "Dimples," "Boom, Boom," "I Cover the Waterfront," "One Bourbon, One Scotch, One Beer," and "I'm Bad Like Jesse James" among his eternal contributions to the blues songbook.

But other than an all-too-short two-disc Rhino compilation, an overview of Hooker's lengthy career has been unavailable. That void has now been filled by the four-CD Hooker.

Though hundreds of LPs were released under a number of Hooker aliases, this anthology's creators list 67 albums recorded as albums. (For comparison, Bob Dylan's Modern..."
it would be hard to argue otherwise. Buddy Guy, Milt Hinton, James Jamerson, Pops Staples, and piano ("my 88 man," Hooker calls him), Charles Brown, next-gen 1960s bands (including three of the Canned Heat includes his first great combo period, including work with Louis Jordan than Robert Johnson. Disc 2 generously documents a good selection of Hooker's seminal singles for Vee Jay in the late 1950s and 1960s, and the equally influential albums he recorded for Riverside during that time.

For a musician so difficult to follow in his early years, Hooker later became the master of collaboration. Disc 3 includes his first great combo period, including work with next-gen 1960s bands (including three of the Canned Heat recordings), as well as sides that include T-Bone Walker on piano ("my 88 man," Hooker calls him), Charles Brown, Buddy Guy, Milt Hinton, James Jamerson, Pops Staples, and many others. Disc 4 follows his later collaboration period, beginning with The Healer, and concluding with a 1998 version of "Boogie Chillen." recorded with Eric Clapton just three months shy of 50 years of that first recording.

Miles Davis, who worked with Hooker on the soundtrack for The Hot Spot, called him the funkiest man alive, "up to his neck in mud." After these five hours of Hooker, it would be hard to argue otherwise.

SPOON
Telephono & Soft Effects
Performance ***
Sonics **

Spoon first surfaced in 1994, and the Austin group's subsequent trajectory could be seen as the archetypal experience of the independent band. Signing with Matador Records, Spoon recorded an album and an EP; the resulting industry buzz took 'em straight to the major leagues, and in 1998 Elektra issued their A Series of Sneaks. But if indier-than-thou types emitted a collective poot of dismay at their heroes' apparent sellout, consternation turned to indignation when, soon after, the label dropped the band. Happily, by 2001 Spoon was back in indiedom on Merge, their 1997 EP, Soft Effects, takes things back to where it all started. Each remastered disc comes in a gatefold mini-LP sleeve, both housed together in an outer slipcase; Telephono also adds the video for "Not Turning Off."

It's not hard to see why the band was so beloved. Two songs into Telephono and, with the Pixies-meet-Wire "Not Turning Off," you're awash in a jagged yet melodic brand of postpunk that's at once familiar yet forward-looking. Spoon can be abrasive (the crunching "Claws Tracking," featuring frontman Britt Daniel at his most coarse-lunged) or tuneful (the powerpoppish "Plastic Mylar"), but with energy reserves galore, the band is never uninteresting. Nor was Soft Effects a stopgap effort, highlighted as it is by the Sonic Youth-like "Mountain to Sound" and the jangly ballet of "Loss Leaders." It's somewhat lo-fi, but don't think of that as a drawback—the sound is emblematic of Spoon's Amerindie roots.

—Fred Mills

THE MONKEES
Deluxe Editions

The Monkees: Deluxe Edition

More of the Monkees: Deluxe Edition

Both:
Performance ****
Sonics ***

Hey hey, we're the Pre-fab Four! Some pundits will suggest that the Monkees set the stage for the contemporary milieu fueled by American Idol and Making the Band, but calling The Monkees an early reality show is revisionist and flawed: it was a comedy series. Meanwhile, no one ever mentions that Monkees records were pretty damn swell! Rhino now sets the record straight with remastered and expanded versions of the first two albums. It's not the first trip to the archival well; we've already seen two boxed sets, three volumes of rarities (Missing Links), and the three-CD Headquarter Sessions. Now, Deluxe Editions of 1966's The Monkees and 1967's More of the Monkees present both the original stereo and mono mixes as well as wealths of relevant bonus tracks, all spread across two discs apiece.

Intriguingly, mono trumps stereo here, and that's not nostalgia talking (although I'll confess that in 1966 I received my first kiss while The Monkees blared on a drop-down Magnavox—Debbie, if you're out there, get in touch). A/B'ing "Last Train to Clarksville" offers striking evidence: On the stereo version, percussion, guitar licks, harmony vocals, etc., poke distractingly out of the mix like stray threads on an ill-tailored suit; the mono version is seamless and has an immediacy, a visceral pop punch, that its sibling lacks. The newly remastered CDs additionally represent a sonic upgrade over the 1994 single-disc editions.

Music-wise, who'll argue with the iconic songwriting likes of Boyce & Hart, Goffin-King, and Neil Diamond? A
he's in the room...

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curmudgeon might grouse that “Clarksville” (by B&H) or “I’m a Believer” (by Diamond) are simple-minded fluff, but try getting 'em out of your head. “(I’m Not Your) Stepping Stone” (B&H again) and “Mary, Mary” (by the band’s own Mike Nesmith) are tough-as-nails garage rock, period. Admittedly, Nesmith, Davy Jones, Micky Dolenz, and Peter Tork were barely guests at their own party; save a lone rhythm guitar part on one song, Tork didn’t even appear on the first album. But their vocals, abetted by some of the greatest session players in America (notably members of L.A.’s famed “Wrecking Crew,” mainstays of many a Beach Boys project), helped lend the proverbial sum-greater-than-parts heft.

For collectors, the 35 bonus tracks aren’t specifically Monkees manna; many of them previously surfaced on the Missing Links discs, and only eight tracks make their first official appearance here. However, intelligently appended to make chronological and contextual sense, they’re worthwhile session-wise. For proof, check out non-album gems such as the neo-baroque “(I Prithee) Do Not Ask for Love” and an early stab at the anthemic “Valleri”—later re-recorded for 1968’s The Birds, the Bees & the Monkees.

Each track is exhaustively annotated in one of the two 28-page booklets, and reissue coproducer and Monkees biographer Andrew Sandoval’s in-depth notes give you plenty of behind-the-scenes tales. Today’s crop of American Idol aspirants would do well to heed the nasty clashes (and still-lingering acrimony) between Nesmith and Don Kirshner, the band’s machiavellian musical supervisor, who, revisionism or not, was by some means the [shudder] Simon Cowell of his era.

—Fred Mills

ROBERT PLANT
Nine Lives
WEA/Rhino R2 78778 A-I (9 CDs). Robert Plant, others, prods.; various engs.
AAD? TT: 7:43:10
Performance **** Sonics ****

The music business is built upside down in so many ways, and one of its most notable shortcomings is artist development. Even when a superstar act lasts long enough to be said to have stood the test of time, it often turns out that the album that made the most impact was their debut, and that they’ve spent the rest of their career producing slight variations on it, hanging on to what fame they’ve been accorded without progressing much musically—never mind that fame and fortune should give them the means and the time to actually improve. A quarter century or more into their careers, how many artists have put out a record that could be said to be their best work? Precious few, but Robert Plant is one of them.

If you take Plant’s solo career as a whole—and the boxed set Nine Lives invites you to do exactly that by presenting the former Led Zeppelin frontman’s nine albums in their entireties, plus bonus tracks and a DVD documentary—you’ll see that with each album Plant progressed, went deeper, and moved ever forward, driven by a thirst for musical knowledge that seems to know no bounds. From his days with the New Yardbirds (aka Led Zep), he was already a student of English and Celtic folk music and American blues from both the Delta and Chicago. Zeppelin turned those influences into thunderous hard rock—some would call it heavy metal—and took the occasional excursion into world music. What was staggering was how purely they synthesized it all, making something completely new under the sun—the occasional Willie Dixon lawsuit notwithstanding.

When Zeppelin came crashing to the ground—oh, the humanity!—with the death of drummer John Bonham, Plant had a choice: travel the path of least resistance and continue to produce the sort of music that had turned him into one of rock’s golden gods, or try something else? Amazingly, Plant chose the latter.

To an already impressive body of work built on a wide, deep foundation of musical influences, Plant further developed his love of world music, incorporating into his sound West African rhythms as well as Arabian and Indian influences. That sound also took strides forward in terms of rock, thanks to the new technology being made available as his solo career got underway. Plant also displayed an extraordinary humility, taking on new collaborators who, in terms of fame or accomplishment, were nowhere near his equals, though he treated them as such, cowriting and coproducing with them, keeping his music fresh no matter the cost to his ego.

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if not exactly standing in for Jimmy Page, proved a worthy foil, helping Plant bring out new colorations in his music. At first the steps were somewhat tentative, but Plant found his way on the searching “Burning Down One Side” and the grinding, pulverizing “Slow Dancer” (both from *Picture*), and the buoyant “In the Mood” and the languid “Big Log” (both from *Principle*). Drummer Phil Collins contributed to both records, and while he clearly is no Bonzo—nor does he try to be—his drum sound, which was nearly ubiquitous at the time, pegs these albums as artifacts of the early 1980s. But that also goes for the drum-machine sounds and mechanized handclaps on some songs, and the cheesy New Wave saxophone on “Pledge Pin.”

*Shaken N’ Stirred*. Plant’s third and final collaboration with this band—which this time featured Little Feat’s Richie Hayward on drums—relies heavily on synths and drum machines, and even Plant’s vocals seem affected by the techno-heavy environment. Still, the album gave him his first solo hit, “Little By Little,” and a chance to musically progress even as he playfully referred to his former band’s legacy, noting with disdain on “Pink and Black” that “People say that I won’t change / The song will remain the same.”

Between the last two of those albums, though, Plant took an unexpected excursion, making *The Honeydrippers: Volume One* (1984), an unapologetic trip back in time to the music of his youth. Recorded with collaborators Page, Jeff Beck, Nile Rodgers, and Paul Shaffer, the mini-album finds Plant at his loosest, least studied, and most fun, waxing rhapsodic on “Sea of Love” and indulging in a tinge of Elvis impersonation on “Rockin’ at Midnight.”

Plant’s second band featured keyboardist, songwriter, and coproducer Phil Johnstone, and with them Plant discovered that his quest for new sounds could coexist with his famous past. The realization produced immediate results with his first solo hit, “Little By Little,” and a chance to musically progress even as he playfully referred to his former band’s legacy, noting with disdain on “Pink and Black” that “People say that I won’t change / The song will remain the same.”


**Performance ****
  Sonics *****

For *Fate of Nations* (1993), Plant eschewed technology in favor of a return to his folk roots for an album that was a pointed call to action to defend the environment against the greed and pollution that were the twin legacies of the first Gulf War. The East-leaning “Calling to You” and the hymn-like “Great Spirit” led the way, though the album traveled in other directions, too, including the lovely (if lyrically biting) “29 Palms” and a lush cover of Tim Hardin’s “If I Were a Carpenter.”

Cover versions played an even bigger role on *Dreamland* (2002), on which Plant reimagined such songs as Jesse Colin Young’s “Darkness, Darkness,” Bob Dylan’s “One More Cup of Coffee,” and Bukki White’s “Funny in My Mind (I Believe I’m Fixin’ to Die”). But the best of the lot are Plant’s reconstruction of a number of blues classics into “Win My Train Fare Home (If I Ever Get Lucky)” and his gorgeous reading of Tim Buckley’s “Song to the Siren.” After a long break from recording, the album was a way for Plant to restart his career once again, as well as a warmup for his new band, Strange Sensation, as they prepared Plant’s magnum opus, *Mighty Rearranger* (2005).

Thanks in large part to Strange Sensation’s varied pedigrees—they come from such forward-looking outfits as Portishead, Cast, and Roni Size and Reprazent, while Egyptian-raised guitarist Justin Adams’ playing of Arabian styles comes naturally—*Mighty Rearranger* is Plant’s most complete synthesis of all of his influences, from folk, blues, and R&B to world music and electronica. Tracks such as “Another Tribe,” “Freedom Fries,” and “Takemba” make the disc a stunning achievement, especially considering it was made more than 35 years after Plant first shook the world with his alternately pleading, purring, insistent moan. It is Robert Plant’s singular voice, after all, that ties this entire collection together. Listening to *Nine Lives* from end to end is to hear an artist who has never taken the easy way but has nonetheless triumphed. The rest of the music world could learn a thing or two from him.

—Daniel Durchholz

**THE POGUES**

**Five Reissues**

*Red Roses for Me*


**Performance *****
  Sonics *****

*Rum Sodomy & the Lash*


**Performance ****
  Sonics *****

*If I Should Fall from the Grace of God*


**Performance *****
  Sonics ****

*Peace and Love*


**Performance ****
  Sonics ****

*Hell’s Ditch*


**Performance ****
  Sonics ****

The Pogues were the Rolling Stones to U2’s Beatles in the great awakening of Irish rock that took place in the 1980s. Though both bands were inspired by the punk rock coming out of London in the late 70s, U2 went on to become the friendly face of videogenic arena rock, while the Pogues piled a roots-derived vision that emerged from the darkest alleys of Irish poverty, fury, and despair.

The group’s principal songwriter and vocalist, Shane MacGowan, may not be the last of the Celtic prophets, but he is certainly the final voice in a centuries-long tradition of Irish poets and songwriters who articulated the defiant “hope without hope” of a nation despoiled by Britannia’s haughty rule. The Ireland of poverty and exile that MacGowan knew as a child, and learned more about in story and song from his ancestors, is now an economic engine of the European Union, an unrecognizable place compared to a generation ago. None of the contemporary
Irish-American rock bands—such as the Dropkick Murphys, Flogging Molly, and scores of others who fuse Irish jigs and reels with pogoing punk-rock rhythms—would exist had the Pogues not coined what was then such a radical style.

Without MacGowan’s songwriting, the first Pogues album, *Red Roses for Me* (1984), would have sounded like a very interesting Irish traditional album played by musicians influenced by rock, if not necessarily by punk. Instrumentals like “The Battle of Brisbane” and “Dingle Regatta” roll along on the instrumental prowess of Jimmy Fearnley's accordion, Spider Stacy's pennywhistle, and Jim Finer's banjo like any number of good young Irish musicians having a pub session. But when you added Cúchulainn’s bass and Andrew Rankin’s drums, you had a rock band.

MacGowan, a man who would go on to give Johnny Rotten a run for his money, made the band something else again. His singing was rooted in the Irish story-song tradition, but he spat out lyrics in manic bug-eyed frenzy, the embodiment of a man pushed by drink and madness to the point where his words became a shaman’s revelation. He made “Transnecropolitan” a statement of purpose, creating a new music equal parts punk and Irish through the sheer force of his relentless delivery. But MacGowan’s songs described the punk’s “no future” landscape with more than booze-fueled fury. The wasteland of “Dark Streets of London” had a strange, surreal, poetic beauty, and “Boys from the County Hell” and “Streams of Whiskey” brought a punk sensibility to Irish resistance songs. But “Down in the Ground Where the Dead Men Go” was something completely MacGowan, a hair-raising, full-moon dance of delirious horror punctuated by bloodcurdling screams. Rhino’s reissue of *Red Roses* includes six tracks that show more of the band’s traditional side, including a version of “And the Band Played Waltzing Matilda” and the drunken sing-alongs “Whiskey You’re the Devil” and “The Wild Rover.”

By 1985 and *Rum Sodomy & the Lash*, the band’s style had coalesced; whether by accident or design, producer Elvis Costello got MacGowan to articulate his singing more clearly than on any other Pogues album. Philip Chevron was added on guitar, Fearnley added organ to his repertoire, and Costello recorded them like a rock band, with drums up in the mix. The dramatic flourish of “The Sickbed of Cuchulainn” opens the album with a veritable definition of the Pogues, double-time marching rhythms driving Celtic melodies in a tale of death and rebirth that mixes ancient myths with contemporary sociology. The glorious rocker “Sally MacLennane” similarly argues that punk rock itself owes a debt to Eire. Costello is also a master at ballad portraiture, and *Rum* features two of MacGowan’s signature laments, “The Old Main Drag” and “A Pair of Brown Eyes,” as well as an audacious recasting of the Ewan McColl classic “Dirty Old Town” that made the song MacGowan’s forever. The album closes with an epic 8:14 delivery of “And the Band Played Waltzing Matilda.” Bonus tracks include three MacGowan compositions from the *Pogues/F@#k* EP, the Costello-influenced “London Girl,” “Rainy Night in Soho,” and “Body of an American,” a kind of Americanized mirror image of “Sickbed”; Finer’s Ennio Morricone tribute, “A Pistol for Paddy Garcia”; and a wonderful sendoff with the Irish pub favorite “The Parting Glass.”

If I Should Fall from the Grace of God (1988) featured what has become the Pogues’ signature song in jukeboxes around the world: “A Fairytale of New York.” This Christmas Eve loveletter about an embattled couple united by their complaints about each other is a tour de force, a dramatic exchange between MacGowan and Kirsty McColl, Ewan’s daughter and the wife of the album’s producer, Steve Lillywhite. The perfection of this recording, with its gorgeous string arrangement, befits a band whose moment had arrived. Nevertheless, the Pogues still managed to be branded by the English government as terrorist supporters for the song “Birmingham Six,” a defense of what turned out to be innocent people accused of bombing a pub. MacGowan, who had been badly injured in an auto crash before making the record, seemed obsessed with if not particularly worried about his own death on the raucous title track, and contributed the beautifully written “Lullaby of London” and “The Broad Majestic Shannon.” The band’s expanded lineup now featured multi-instrumentalist Terry Woods (Darryl Hunt replaced O’Riordan on bass) and developed a dense interlacing evident on “Turkish Song of the Damned,” “Bottle of Smoke,” and “Metropolis.” Versions of “The Irish Rover” and “Mountain Dew” with The Dubliners highlight the extra material on this reissue.

Lillywhite returned to produce *Peace and Love* (1989). MacGowan is clearly in decline here, but the rest of the band more than makes up for it. Each bandmember participated in the songwriting, with Finer, who cowrote “A Fairy Tale of New York,” contributing the majestic ballad “Misty Morning, Albert Bridge.” MacGowan’s best moments are the nostalgic “White City” and “Boat Train” from the original release, and the bonus track “Yeah Yeah Yeah Yeah Yeah,” from the EP of that title.

MacGowan’s physical condition had by now so deteriorated that he began to miss important gigs, but the band had reached the point where they could do it without him. MacGowan made one last album with the Pogues, *Hall’s Ditch* (1990), with occasional bandmember Joe Strummer producing. The former Clash frontman brought the band’s sound back to the basics on the opening track, “The Sunnyside of the Street,” but MacGowan’s badly slurred lyrics now sound tired instead of surly, and the overall feel of the session is more elegiac than rocking. On songs like “Sayonara,” “Rain Street,” and the eerily beautiful “Summer in Siam,” MacGowan is no longer the defiant punk, but sounds like a man proudly displaying his disabling war wounds. The bonus tracks include more collaboration with The Dubliners on “Whiskey in the Jar” and “Jack’s Heroes.”—John Swenson
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DIMENSIONS: 17½" (435mm) W by 5¼" (135mm) H by 15¼" (386mm) D. Weight: 51.8 lbs (23.5kg) net, 67 lbs (30.5kg) shipping.

SERIAL NUMBER OF UNIT REVIEWED: H61M300702, 300813.

PRICE: $2799. Approximate number of dealers: 100.


Older audiophiles remember the splash NAD made in the late 1970s with the introduction of their 3020 integrated amplifier ($175). Ridiculously cheap, it looked graceful and sounded warm, inviting, and holographic. Removable jumpers between the 3020's sections permitted enthusiasts to determine whether the magic resided in its preamp, its power amp, or in some synergy of both.

In the opinion of most listeners, it was both. But while the 3020's relatively low-powered amplifier (conservatively rated at 20Wpc into 8 ohms) limited it to driving small, efficient loudspeakers, its remarkably fine-sounding preamp section, complete with a decent moving-magnet phono stage, inspired many buyers to eventually add a more powerful outboard amp and go the biamp route—or, given the 3020's low price, to ignore the NAD's power amp altogether. Consumer demand led NAD to later release the preamp section on its own, as the bargain-basement-priced 1020.

NAD was able to achieve such high performance at such low prices by avoiding the high capitalization costs involved in building a factory to produce its products. Instead, it had them manufactured to its specifications in existing factories in Taiwan. While this arrangement is commonplace today, back then it was unusual—radical.

The M3 dual-mono integrated amplifier, one of NAD's new "Masters Series" products, appears to be the company's latest attempt to produce another two-channel classic, this time one combining excellent build quality with cutting-edge electronic engineering, 21st-century remote-control ergonomics, and high-end sound. Like the 3020, the M3 is the product of NAD's director of advanced development, Bjorn Erik Edvardsen, and Asian manufacturing expertise, this time in the People's Republic of China. The more things change, the more they stay the same.

Unlike the 20Wpc 3020, which was inexpensive and looked it, the 180Wpc M3 costs much more than many entry-level two-channel integrateds. Even so, its build quality seems that of a product costing many times its $2799 price. The chassis is made of 2mm-thick milled steel plates, the front panel of extruded aluminum and diecast zinc. Feet of aluminum and silicone rubber help isolate the circuit boards from vibrations. Line-level connections are made via gold-plated, chassis-mounted RCA jacks. The finish comprises a brownish powder coating and an advanced automotive paint; these, along with the chassis' smoothly rounded contours and heatsinks, give the M3 a coherent, understated beauty that's rarely achieved in audio at any price.

Digital nerve system, analog musculature

With six pairs of single-ended and one pair of balanced inputs, the M3 offers enough versatility for almost anyone's audio system. Two sets of speaker output terminals are provided on the roonny, cleanly laid out rear panel, each using those annoying Euro-spec plastic-protected connectors—fine for banana plugs, pins, or bare wire, not so fine for audiophile-grade speaker cables, most of which are terminated with spade lugs.

The simplicity of the M3's front panel hides a versatile, feature-packed preamplifier section with seven custom-namable inputs (including a balanced XLR),
electronically activated bass, treble, and "Spectral Tilt" controls, dual-mono, stereo, mono left and mono right modes, a balance control, independent source selection for a second zone, and two preamp outs, one of which features a selectable biamp mode with built-in 40, 60, 80, and 100Hz low-pass analog filtering for use with a satellite/subwoofer system.

Dominated by a large, fluorescent display, the front panel includes a row of small pushbuttons labeled Listen (input selection), Record/Z2, Mode, Balance, Tone, Bi-Amp, and Speakers. A single large knob controls not only the volume, in continuous 0.5dB steps over a range of —7.7.5dB to +10.0dB, but setup as well. While using the Listen button requires you to scroll through the entire list of inputs to reach the one you want, large pushbuttons on the remote provide direct access.

According to NAD, all of this versatility and control come at no sonic price. Level adjustments (volume, balance, tone) are accomplished using digitally switched 1% resistors. Sources are switched via precision sealed reed relays similar to the ones McIntosh uses in its top-of-the-line C1000 preamp. NAD says that, along with ensuring precise control, use of these technologies means that all actual switching and adjusting components can be located optimally within the circuit, and that the analog signal doesn't need to be routed to the front panel's "virtual" controls. Careful circuit layout, short signal paths, miniature surface-mount components, and multilayered circuit boards all help contribute to NAD's claim of "infinitesimal levels of noise and distortion."

The preamp section is an all-discrete design using low-noise, high-impedance JFET buffer amps at the input and proprietary high-current, low-output-impedance, class-A gain modules. The claimed result is wide dynamic headroom, high output current, and a signal/noise ratio in excess of 100dB (IHF). The balanced XLR line input uses identical JFET buffers that feed a discrete differential amp claimed to yield common-mode rejection in excess of 80dB.

The dual-mono amplifier's power supply features custom-wound Holmgren toroidal transformers, separate unregulated and discrete-regulated supplies for various stages of the circuit, high-current rectifiers, and low-ESR (effective series resistance) filter capacitors. An independent power supply is used for the display and digital functions to help keep noise to a minimum.

**MEASUREMENTS**

As usual, I preconditioned the NAD M3 by running it at one-third its specified power into 8 ohms for one hour with both channels driven. While the measured percentage of THD+noise remained constant throughout this period, at a low 0.0035%, the chassis got almost too hot to touch, and the side-mounted heatsinks definitely so. Measured at its speaker terminals, the M3 offered a maximum voltage gain of 39.2dB into 8 ohms for both balanced and unbalanced input signals. With the volume control set to "0.0dB," the overall voltage gain was 29.2dB. This was also the gain of the power-amplifier section on its own. Looking at the preamplifier section on its own, this offered a maximum gain at the preamp outlet jacks of 10dB, as expected, with the unity-gain setting of the volume control "0.0dB," also as expected. All inputs and outputs preserved absolute polarity.

The M3's input impedance was high, at well over 100k ohms unbalanced and twice as high balanced. The power-amplifier input impedance was much lower, at 22k ohms across most of the audioband, dropping slightly to 14.5k ohms at 20kHz. The preamplifier section's output impedance was a low 100 ohms across the band; the power-amplifier section's output was a low 0.08 ohm at low and midrange frequencies for both channels, rising inconsequentially to 0.11 ohm at 20kHz.

With its low source impedance, the M3 offered only ±0.1dB of response variation with our simulated loudspeaker load, 8, 4, 2 ohms (0.5dB/vertical div., right channel dashed).

**THE CLAIMED RESULT IS WIDE DYNAMIC HEADROOM, HIGH OUTPUT CURRENT, AND A SIGNAL/NOISE RATIO IN EXCESS OF 100dB (IHF).**

![Fig.1 NAD Masters Series M3, volume control at "0.0dB," 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).](image1)

![Fig.2 NAD Masters Series M3, small-signal 10kHz squarewave into 8 ohms.](image2)
NAD's PowerDrive circuit continually monitors output current and adjusts the power-supply voltage rails to maximize the dynamic power sent to the speakers. According to NAD, PowerDrive makes the M3 sound far more powerful than its rated 180Wpc. (For a detailed explanation of PowerDrive, see the sidebar "What is PowerDrive?" in Jim Austin's review of NAD's C 372 integrated amplifier in the October 2006 Stereophile)

The power-amp circuit uses a wideband, current-mode, class-A voltage amplifier and an NAD-patented current-amp output stage with small amounts of feedback to help deliver less than 0.002% distortion at all audible frequencies. The output stage's four pairs per channel of 150W discrete bipolar output transistors deliver 50 amps of peak output current.

Setup and use
Throughout the review period, I didn't remove the M3's jumpers to audition its pre- and power-amp sections separately, nor did I use its second-zone function, or its second-preamp output with the selectable low-pass filters for sat/sub or biamp use. Instead, I used the M3 the way I figured most Stereophile readers interested in it would: as an integrated amplifier.

Operation of the M3 was straightforward, thanks to its ergonomically pleasing remote control (it's not backlit, though the buttons do glow in the dark) and its easily legible fluorescent display. Switching among inputs and adjusting the volume, modes, and other operating parameters were handled crisply and cleanly. In terms of build quality, ergonomics, and functionality, it seems the M3 should cost far more than a relatively modest $2799. When I look back at my time with the M3, the phrase that comes to mind is “bulletproof.” And its front and rear panels also serve as handles that make lifting and installing the M3 a pleasure.

Warm and lush
Should you use a $2800 integrated amplifier to drive a $46,000 pair of Wilson Audio Specialties MAXX2 speakers—or, for that matter, a $70,000 pair of Peak Consult El Diablos? Well, why not? With its 180Wpc, the M3 should be more than capable of effectively driving, without strain, most moving-coil speakers—if not to their dynamic maximums, then at least to satisfying sound-pressure levels. Makers of expensive loudspeakers often

IN TERMS OF BUILD QUALITY, ERGONOMICS, AND FUNCTIONALITY, IT SEEMS THE M3 SHOULD COST FAR MORE THAN A RELATIVELY MODEST $2799.

speaker load (see www.stereophile.com/reference/60), and only minor reductions in level into lower impedances (fig.1). The small-signal bandwidth was wide, with a -3dB point of 180kHz, this higher than the specified 80kHz. As a result, the M3's reproduction of a 10kHz squarewave demonstrated very short risetimes, with a complete absence of overshoot and ringing (fig.2).

Measuring the effect of the Tone controls was initially problematic. Instead of the specified ±5dB of response variation, I obtained just a tenth of that figure. It turned out that the effect of these controls is affected by the volume-control setting. At "-10.0dB," you get the full effect of the controls when set to their maximum and minimum positions (fig.3, top and bottom pairs of traces). But with the control set to "0.0dB," the maximum boost and cut drops to 0.5dB (fig.3, middle pairs of traces). And with the volume control set to its maximum, +10.0dB, the Tone controls have no effect at all. The situation was similar with the Tilt control, though the maximum amount of response modification is ±3dB. Contrary to what I expected, setting the Tilt positive, to +3dB, rolled off the highs and boosted the bass, and vice versa (fig.4).

Channel separation (not shown) was better than 100dB in the treble for the preamplifier section alone, 95dB below 1kHz for the power-amp section alone. The power amplifier's noise levels were very low, at
like to point out how relatively easy their speakers are to drive, how inexpensive watts have become, and how much more you get from a marriage of expensive speakers and cheap electronics than the reverse.

Judging by how pleasing the Wilsons and Peaks sounded driven by the NAD M3, those speaker makers have a point. While neither pair sounded as harmonically surefooted, dynamic, and detailed as when driven by my Musical Fidelity combo of kW preamp ($11,000) and kW monoblocks ($23,000), I know that what I heard from them with the M3 was far superior to anything I'd hear from $34,000 worth of electronics driving $2800 worth of loudspeakers. Count on it.

The biggest differences between the megawatt/buck Musical Fidelities and the M3 were in dynamics and bass control. While the M3 could make the Wilsons or Peaks play loudly and cleanly without sounding strained, it wasn't (I assume) able to produce enough current to deliver the bass extension and control of which both speakers are capable. While the following sonic memory is almost a year old, and thus perhaps unreliable, the $649 RR2150 receiver from Outlaw Audio (see my review in the March 2006 Stereophile, Vol.29 No.3) dug into the Wilsons' bass bins somewhat more effectively than did the M3, though with less textural subtlety. The M3's deep-bass performance sounded generally somewhat soft, and less capable of plumbing the depths than the more powerful and more expensive audiophile-grade solid-state gear. The M3's bass performance was almost tube-like—which, depending on your perspective, is a compliment or an insult.

That said, I doubt most buyers of the M3 will use it to drive expensive, current-gulping speakers. And no, I haven't contradicted myself. I'd still prefer the M3-Wilson combo to any pairing of cheap speakers and expensive amp you might come up with. The M3's smooth, like to point out how relatively easy their speakers are to drive, how inexpensive watts have become, and how much more you get from a marriage of expensive speakers and cheap electronics than the reverse.

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coherent top-to-bottom presentation would allow that imaginary owner of an M3 and Wilson MAXX2s to thoroughly enjoy the partnership.

The M3's top end was also somewhat lacking in extension and control (ie, transient speed and clarity) compared to the Musical Fidelities, but as it will more than likely be paired with lower-priced speakers not equipped with the smoothest, highest-resolution tweeters, that combo should provide excellent sound as well. With the M3-Wilson and M3-Peak combos, the NAD's softer, sweeter top worked beautifully with the softer, less extended bottom end.

In short: Driving the $46,000/pair Wilson MAXX2s, the NAD M3 was far more musically enjoyable and impressive than it had any right to be. The reason was an overall sophisticated, coherent balance that was so right that, instead of spotlighting any obvious deficiency, it fooled the ear-brain into adding what was missing. For example, had the M3 combined an iron grip and extension on the bottom with its soft, sweet top—or soft, limited extension below with fast, extended highs—either resulting sound would have been annoying: one bass-heavy and probably dull overall, the other mini-monitor-thin and shrill, or tending in that direction.

Instead, the M3's overall presentation was both impressively coherent and evenhanded tonally, particularly in the all-important midrange, where it sounded smooth as peach fuzz and rich and delicate as a souffle, with neither hard edges nor lopped-off soft ones. And while the M3's overall sense of pacing was less than high-stepping, the top's velvety richness and the bottom's relative softness combined to produce a coherent rhythmic picture.

I figure that, driving a smaller speaker with limited bass response and a somewhat sizzly tweeter (a combo typical of inexpensive speakers), the M3 would, within limits, deliver performance analogous to what I heard via the Wilson MAXX2s. How swell is that?

The more I listened to the M3, the more I was reminded of NAD's original monic (fig.7).

The third harmonic makes an appearance at high powers into 8 ohms (fig.8) and 4 ohms (fig.9), but its level remains very low in absolute terms. And even at a level close to waveform clipping into 4 ohms, intermodulation distortion was virtually absent (fig.10).

The NAD M3 offers excellent measured performance, and in my auditioning I was struck by how smooth it sounded: "as smooth as silk," according to my listening notes.

—John Atkinson
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NAD MASTERS SERIES M3

3020 integrated. I can't think of a higher compliment. While the M3's output, build quality, and cost far exceed the 3020's, its smooth, even-keeled, slightly soft sound was as enticing, if not more so, than that of the original 3020, and leagues above that of NAD's high-value entry-level products, good as they are for the money.

The 3020 made the big splash in the audiophile community that it did not because it competed with the best audiophile gear of that era, but because, despite its limitations, it produced an involvingly musical experience rarely achieved at the price. The same can be said of the M3. I spent a few days comparing commercial CDs and CD-Rs I'd made from vinyl, playing them on a recently received Naim CD555 CD player ($28,000) and switching between the M3 and the Musical Fidelity gear. (I promise you, the Naim contributed nada to the soft or the rolled-off anywhere in or out of the audioband.) The message was consistent as relayed above; I thoroughly enjoyed listening to the M3's even-handed presentation.

The M3's dynamics were equally well balanced. Its subjectively low noise floor means that its handling of microdynamics would be exceptionally good at any price, and also meant that its less-than-explosive macrodynamic performance while powering big, difficult-to-drive speakers was easier to ignore.

The LP tracks I'd compiled on CD-R proved particularly useful. "Do I," from Warm and Wonderful (Columbia CS 8488), a luxurious-sounding Les Paul and Mary Ford album, sounded as velvety—as rich, tubey, and cushiony—as rich, tubey, and cushiony—through the M3 as it did through the MF gear: the sonic pictures floated convincingly free of the speaker baffles instead of snagging on bright leading edges.

The leading-edge sparkle was somewhat muted with the Small Faces' "Lazy Sunday Afternoon," and the track's astounding bass extension was a bit curtailed—but what remained struck an attractive balance of midband warmth, detail, and resolution of low-level details.

While the M3's overall dynamics didn't jump out at me when they should have, compared to an amp capable of ten times the wattage, I could hear deeply into the lowest level of musical minutiae. In "Tourist Town," from Marti Jones' Used Guitars (A&M SP 5208), the surprise kick drum near the beginning usually knocks me off my chair. Through the M3, it merely startled. On the other hand, as the opening guitar line fades into black before the kick drum, I could hear way into the decay. In other words, the longer ago I'd heard the big amps' presentation, the easier it was to accept and appreciate what the small M3 could offer.

I can already hear some of you: "It's got tone controls—why not boost the bass and treble a dB or so to get the weight and sparkle you think are missing?" I tried that. All I got were some standout sparkle, some elevated boom, and a hole poked through the M3's coherent membrane. No thanks.

Conclusions

NAD makes at least four integrated amplifiers that cost less than the M3. I haven't read any reviews that grant any of them the special status that seems reserved for the legendary 3020 alone. The M3 is the first NAD integrated amplifier since the 3020 to have captured the spirit and addictive sound of that still-lauded design, even as it ratchets up the levels of technology, build quality, ergonomics, overall sonic performance, and (especially) power output to the state of the art. That's why I consider it a better value than the 3020, even though, when adjusted for inflation, its price is five times as high.

It may have been unfair to test the M3 with my very expensive speakers, but it seemed appropriate, given NAD's ambitions for the product. I'm only speculating, but I'll bet the combination of the M3 and a good $7000/pair speaker would create a solid foundation for an exceptionally fine-sounding music system costing less than $15,000.

The powerful, feature-packed, superbly built M3 is easy to recommend. The combination of its smooth, sophisticated sonic balance, exceptionally silent background, overall musical coherence, and, especially, its freedom from obvious sonic glitches produced consistently attractive and musical sound that was easy to live with. If there's any justice, the M3, like the 3020 before it, should attain the status of audiophile legend. This latest creation of Bjorn Erik Edvardsen is a work of art.

ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

ANALOG SOURCES Continuum Audio Labs Caliburn, Kuzma Reference XL, Metronome Gaia turntables; Graham Phantom, Continuum Cobra, Kuzma Airline tonearms; Lyra Titan (stereo, mono), Lyra Skala, Transfiguration Orpheus cartridges.

DIGITAL SOURCES Naim CD555 CD player; Alesis Masterlink BPT-modified, hard-disk-based recorder.

PREAMPLIFICATION Manley Steelhead, ARS Basis Exclusive phono preamplifiers; Musical Fidelity kWp preamplifier.

POWER AMPLIFIERS Musical Fidelity kW monoblocks.

LOUDSPEAKERS Wilson Audio Specialties MAXX2, Peak Consult El Diablo.


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-Michael Fremer
The Ayre 5-series components, including the C-5xe universal stereo player, the K-5xe preamplifier, and the V-5xe power amplifier, feature zero-feedback, fully-balanced circuitry. The result is an unprecedented level of musical integrity and vitality. Ayre pioneered this advanced technology over a decade ago—one day all high-performance audio equipment will be designed this way. Experience the future now at your local Ayre dealer.
The one thing I've liked designer Mike Creek of Creek Audio as much as his design talent is his predictability. I've been following his integrated-amplifier designs for nearly 20 years now, having reviewed, in sequence, the CAS4140s2 (for another magazine), the 4240SE (Stereophile, December 1995, Vol.18 No.12), and the 5350SE (March 2001, Vol.24 No.3). In each case, I was sufficiently impressed with the review sample that I bought it and made it my new reference in my second, affordable system. The predictable part comes from Creek's traditional nomenclature: an "s2" or "SE" (Special Edition) designation has always denoted a modest upgrade, and a numerical uptick in the model number a more significant upgrade, the level of significance denoted by the specific digit being increased. Hence, the update from 4240 to 5350 is intended to indicate a greater improvement in sound than the update from 4140 to 4240.

But with his latest integrated amplifier, Creek has thrown his entire numerical upgrade system out the window. In his view, the Creek Destiny ($2200) is such a giant step up in design and sound from its predecessor, the $1495 5350SE, that it requires entirely new nomenclature. Still, he's keeping the 5350SE, now slightly redesigned and rechristened the Creek Classic, in production as well.

The Creek Destiny's external appearance indicates significant improvements in...
construction quality and cosmetics. The spartan, minimalist aesthetic of earlier Creek gear has been replaced by the sleek, the sexy, the modern, the rugged—the Destiny's 22-lb weight reminds me more of Krell gear than of Creek. In an e-mail, Mike Creek explained: "The Destiny amp is enormously strong and could probably withstand being driven over with a car, although nobody has tried this yet, due to the value of the parts involved." Moreover, the front-panel controls are logically laid out, and the elaborate remote control is designed to also control the companion Destiny CD player.

My comments here reflect the Destiny integrated's performance with my usual analog and digital front-ends, as well as with the new Destiny CD player. 1 (Roy Hall, of Creek importer Music Hall, insisted on sending me a Destiny CDP as well.) I listened to the Destiny with a number of different loudspeakers, but most of my conclusions here were drawn in the context of Monitor Audio's RS6 Silver and Joseph Audio's RM7 XL Special Edition speakers (a review of the latter is underway).

The Design
For the Destiny, the discrete analog MOSFET circuitry Creek has used since 1993 was refined and upgraded with the introduction of separate power-supply and voltage-referencing circuits for each channel. The Destiny also includes Surface Mount Technology (SMT) to reduce the space taken up by the amplifier circuits and improve the layout. This, according to Creek, allows the signal path and amplification to be located on the top layer of the circuit board, and the power supplies and ground to be located on the bottom layer. The Destiny is

![Fig.1 Creek Destiny, 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).](image)

![Fig.2 Creek Destiny, small-signal 1kHz squarewave into 8 ohms.](image)

1 Creek Audio's 24-bit/192kHz Destiny CD player ($2500) visually resembles the Destiny integrated amplifier and seems cut from the same sonic cloth. It shared with the Destiny integrated the same pristine, extended, and delicate high frequencies, along with portrayals of ambience, air, and subtle low-level dynamic articulation that more resembled a good vinyl front-end or analog master tape than anything digital. Unlike Creek's CD53 Mk.II, a sample of which I own, the Creek Destiny so clearly outperformed my California Audio Labs Icon MK.II Power Boss that I was looking for some way to justify its purchase. The CAL made my decision easier: Toward the end of the review- ing process, after 15 years of loyal service as my reference CD player, the CAL gave up the ghost.

—Robert J. Reina
CREEK AUDIO DESTINY

also fully dual-mono, and its low-noise, 300VA toroidal transformer has separate windings for the preamp and power-amp circuits. In addition, the left and right channels have their own low-impedance DC power supplies, fed from two separate Shortky-barrier diode bridge rectifiers and multi-capacitor reservoirs, for a total of 20,000μF. Creek claims outputs of more than 100Wpc into 8 ohms (both channels driven) and 200W into 4 ohms (one channel driven).

The Destiny’s elaborate array of protection circuits is designed to monitor temperature, current, DC offsets, power-supply status, and overdrive situations. If any of these conditions exceeds preset conditions, a microprocessor takes action and either mutes the input signal, separates the speaker outputs, or, in extreme cases, shuts off the main power.

These protection circuits turned out to be a problem with my first sample of the Destiny, which shut down several times for seemingly no reason, the shutdown in each case preceded by a slight, phasey high-frequency distortion in one channel. I sent the amp back to Mike Creek, who couldn’t replicate the problem but said that the sample was from an early production run and may have included some off-spec capacitors. The second sample he sent me, from a later production run, ran flawlessly. Aside from the minor hiccup with the first sample, the two Destinys sounded identical.

The Destiny has five line-level inputs, a tape-monitor loop, a headphone amplifier, and two sets of speaker outputs, which can be run concurrently or separately. The Destiny will eventually have optional plug-in boards for either a moving-magnet/moving-coil phono stage or an integrated DAC, but...
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.

Wilson Audio • Authentic Excellence
as these were not yet in production, I used the phono-stage plug-in from my 5350SE and an additional pair of interconnects. The Destiny’s preamp and power-amp sections can be used separately, and, although the integrated has a passive preamp section, there’s also the option of switching in an additional gain section in the line stage, which can add up to 9dB in increments of 3dB.

I have mixed views about the unorthodox speaker terminals on the rear panel. They’re rugged and angled—literally impossible to short them out—but they’re designed for bare wires or banana plugs. I’m used to spade lugs and five-way binding posts, so this disturbed me at first. And with the spade lugs fastened to the Speaker A terminals, the odd angle made it impossible to fit a second pair of banana plugs into the Speaker B terminals. That said, I found that the Destiny’s posts grabbed the spade lugs on my speaker cables better than most five-way types do.

The Sound
I can’t comment on the timbral characteristics of the Creek Destiny because, across the entire frequency spectrum, I heard not a single deviation from neutrality—this is the least colored component I’ve ever reviewed. Here are its strengths:

• pristine, extended, and detailed high frequencies with no trace of hardness, and a purity and delicacy that reminded me more of the prior Jeff Rowland Design Group products than of older Creek designs; appearing in my listening notes many times: “Clean! Clean! Clean!”
• an organic rendering of low-level dynamic articulation and subtleties that reminded me of expensive tubed gear, and a powerful sense of high-level dynamic slam that, with the right recordings, could be startling
• superb rendition of inner detail across the frequency spectrum, combined with abilities to render hall sound, image specificity, and ambience that rivaled much more expensive separates

It’s that detail thing that most got me. Throughout my notes appear such comments as: “never heard that bongo part,” “vocal phrasings I’d never noticed before,” “guitar detail I’d never heard before”—all about recordings I’d heard dozens of times before. The Destiny is the kind of amplifier that made me want to put down my pen, kick back, and listen to music. Which I did—for many, many hours.

The Destiny’s rich, silky, holographic presentation of Madeleine Peyroux’s voice on her Dreamland CD (Atlantic 82936-2) was one thing, but I focused more on Marc Ribot’s finger-picked dobro. Although very familiar with this disc, this was the first time I’d noticed that Ribot uses different dynamic attacks on his instrument’s lead, rhythm, and bass strings. Similarly, listening to the a cappella “Our Prayer,” from Brian Wilson’s SMiLE (CD, Nonesuch 79846-2), I was easily able to follow the dynamic inflections of

monic in nature, even into low impedances (figs.5 and 6), though some third harmonic appears into higher impedances. Despite its decreasing linearity at the top of the audioband, the Destiny performed well on the punishing high-frequency intermodulation test, producing a 1kHz difference component at —80dB (0.01%) at a power level just below visible waveform clipping on the oscilloscope screen (fig.7).

The Creek Destiny’s measured S/N ratios and channel separation are adequate rather than good, and care obviously needs to be taken that it isn’t asked to drive high signal levels continuously into loudspeakers that drop to 2 ohms or below. Otherwise, it offers good measured performance.

—John Atkinson

each separate vocal line.

Listening to Timothy Seelig and the Turtle Creek Chorale's recording of John Rutter's Requiem (HDCD, Reference RR57-CD) was a treat. Aside from the glorious and airy voice of soprano Nancy Keith and the extended upper register of the flute, I was amazed at how easy I could follow the low-level organ-pedal lines way down in the mix. They were deep, effortless, and uncolored. My notes: “with tears in my eyes, the naturalness, the drama, ahhh!”

Twentieth-century chamber music lets the Creek strut its stuff on difficult high-frequency passages. The shimmering extended partials of all the percussion instruments in George Crumb's Night Music (LP, Candidle 31113) were breathtaking. Swedish composer Christer Lindvall's bombastic chamber work Earth Bowl, from Rhizome (CD, Phono Suecia PSCD 154), features electric guitar and percussion—my speakers seemed to disappear, with all instruments placed precisely along the wide, deep soundstage.

The Destiny's ease with highly modulated passages of orchestral recordings made it easy for me to analyze each work's structure. Listening to David Chesky's Violin Concerto, from Area 31 (SACD/CD, Chesky SACD299, CD layer), it was very easy to hear the subtle pitch inflections on the timpani, violinist Tom Chiu's phrasing in his solo passages, and the low-level bassoon line under the hairier orchestral parts.

Jazz freaks will love the Destiny. On "I Heard It Through the Grapevine," from Bill Frisell's East/West (CD, Nonesuch 79863-2), the Creek's superb articulation of transients let me follow the subtle dynamic inflections of Kenny Wollenberg's brushes as if I were attending a live performance. With Keith Jarrett's Radiance (CD, ECM 1960/61), I could follow the master's inflections and dynamics in excruciating detail—it was as if I could see his fingers on the keys. The upper ranges of the piano were shimmering and extended without a touch of brightness. The neo-romantic dynamic swells that are critical to this music shone through as they do when I see Jarrett live in performance. And the tandem crescendos of Don Fiorino's guitar and Mark Flynn's drums in "Crushing Heaves of Silence," from Attention Screen's La Tressuire (CD, Hojo HOJO110), were reproduced without strain or hint of compression.

The Creek's high-frequency purity came through in spades with Sonic Youth's "Bezurz," from Washing Machine (CD, Gofen LSCD-24825). The upper registers of Thurston Moore and Lee Ranaldo's just-intonation Fender Jazzmasters shimmered with endless decay and pristine drama. The Destiny's abilities in high-level dynamic slam were particularly noteworthy with recordings that had dramatic and extended bass information. When I cranked up Kraftwerk's "Man Machine," from Minimum/Maximum (CD, EMI ASW 60611), to well past 100dB through both the Monitor and Joseph speakers, the lowest bass-synth blasts caused visible and tactile movement of my pants legs from across the room.

The Others

I was dying to compare the Destiny ($2200) to my own Creek 5350SE integrated ($1495). John Atkinson also sent along NAD's C 372 integrated ($899), which Jim Austin favorably reviewed in the October 2006 Stereophile.

Like the Destiny, the 5350SE is a neutral performer, although its midbass is very slightly warmer. To me, this implies that the Destiny may have set a new standard for midbass clarity in my system. Dynamics at both extremes were superior with the Destiny, whose highs were more detailed, delicate, and extended. The Destiny also revealed more inner midrange detail and had a greater sense of ease. Both amps were superb at articulating transients.

The NAD C 372 had a sweet, delicate midrange, but revealed less detail than the Destiny, and vocals were not as holographically presented. The NAD's highs were less extended and airy, while the Destiny revealed more hall sound and ambience. The NAD's midbass, too, was warmer and not as defined as the Destiny's, which also did better with high-level dynamics.

Conclusion

I've been a fan of Creek Audio for many years, but even I was surprised at how impressed I was with the Destiny—Mike Creek had already set his standard very high with the 5350SE. But I'm happy to make the Destiny my new reference in affordable integrated amplifiers, and have decided to buy Creek's superb Destiny CD player as well. In fact, I was intoxicated by the combination of the Destinys with the Monitor Audio Silver RS6 speakers. The trio produced a detailed, delicate, dynamic, uncolored sound that rivaled what systems costing twice as much can manage. I strongly suggest that dealers who sell both Creek and Monitor gear audition this system.

Mike Creek, you've done it again. Keep raising that bar!
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Tony, a mechanic friend of mine, once ran down for me his "national characteristics" theory of automobile engineering. Germans, he said, love precision engineering but don't take repair into account, so their engines are always placed in wells so perfectly proportioned that skinned knuckles are inevitable. British cars, he said, are marketed to a nation of tinkerers, hence the existence of dual carburetors. And Italian cars? "Well, let's just say they all resemble espresso makers."

He said it—and he was the proverbial Fiat mechanic named Tony.

I think of Tony's theory every time I hear a component from Simaudio. True to the Canadian national stereotype, Simaudio doesn't much brag or cause a lot of fuss. Their gear is always impeccably constructed, intelligently engineered, and easy on the ears. Easy on the eyes, too, if you buy into its Corbusierian aesthetic of form follows function.

Despite Simaudio's 25 years of quality audio, every time I receive one of its components, I'm surprised yet again to learn all of those things I already know.

Case in point: The Moon SuperNova CD player ($5200), which I agreed to review after hearing it at Home Entertainment 2006 and promptly forgot about—until Simaudio's Lionel Goodfield called to inform me that it had shipped. Even
though I'd seen early-production prototypes, I was stunned when a huge carton arrived, weighing about 50 lbs and only just compact enough to fit down my Jeffersonian stairwell.

Unpacking the SuperNova, I was struck, as if anew, by its rigid corner-post-and-panel chassis, its clean lines, its exceptional finish. I screwed in its four conical leveling spikes, set it up on a Black Diamond Racing carbon-fiber The Shelf, and cued up violinist Claude Chaloub's eponymous CD (Teldec 8573-83039-2), thinking I'd set it and forget it while I ran it in and let the power supply stabilize.

I never made it out of the room.

What did it take to force me to remember the SuperNova? Hearing it, that's all. And that was before it settled down.

A Wizard/A True Star

The Moon SuperNova employs a Philips transport and upsamples the 16-bit/44.1kHz audio signal to 24-bits and 352.8kHz sample rate and before sending it to differentially balanced Burr-Brown PCM1798 DACs. Internal clocking is accomplished by “a very accurate 25 PPM digital clocking system,” according to Simaudio's website.

The analog and digital power supplies are separate, and the voltage regulation includes Independent Inductive DC Filtering (PDCF), which means that each chip—op-amp, DAC, digital filter, etc.—has its own inductor, for a total of 20. Circuit boards are all four-layer pure copper, and analog and digital circuits are both fully differential and dual-mono. The signal paths are said to be capacitor-free and use a DC servo circuit with a 6dB/octave analog filter.

That's pretty much standard audio jewelry for an ambitious player of “Red Book” CDs—and the SuperNova is impressive—but it has something that most CD players don't: a digital input.

**MEASUREMENTS**

The Simaudio Moon Evolution SuperNova put out a maximum of 4.132V at 1kHz from its balanced jacks, and exactly half that level from the unbalanced jacks, the latter 0.3dB above the CD standard's 2V RMS. Both outputs preserved absolute polarity (ie, were non-inverting), and the source impedance was a low 50 ohms unbalanced, 100 ohms balanced. Error correction was superb, the player not studdering until the laser-cut gaps in the data spiral on the Pierre Verany Test CD were 2.4mm in length! (When a player has a digital output, I monitor the error-flag bit in the digital data-stream for errors, using RME's DIGICheck program. Unusually, DIGICheck indicated that bit 18 in each digital word was set permanently to “On” with CD data.)

Because the SuperNova has a digital input, I was able to test it with external high-resolution data as well as use it to play test CDs. The SuperNova locked successfully to data with sample rates ranging from 32kHz to 96kHz. With 96kHz data, the player’s frequency response extended to 45kHz or so (fig.1, top traces above 20kHz), the smooth rolloff continuing the beginning of the top-octave decline seen with CD data (fig.1, middle traces at 20kHz). The CD response dropped to just −0.35dB at 20kHz.

Channel matching was superb, but the response with a pre-emphasized CD revealed a broad, 0.75dB-deep trough in the treble (fig.1, bottom traces). Channel separation was also superb, at better than 125dB below 8kHz from both sets of outputs, and was still 115dB at 20kHz.

Playing CD data representing a dithered 1kHz tone at −90dBFS, the 3-octave audioband spectrum (fig.2, top...
for that extra digital source lurking in your audio system. (In mine, it was a Slim Devices Squeezebox.)

The centrally mounted, red dot-matrix display is big and readable, and the front-panel controls are many and well labeled. The SuperNova’s massive remote controls all Simaudio Moon components. Rear connections include the usual single-ended RCA and balanced XLR inputs, RCA S/PDIF input, RCA S/PDIF and AES EBU digital outputs, and a global power switch/IEC module. An RS-232 bus, SimLink loop, and IR input round out the connection possibilities.

The SuperNova is designed to be left on at all times; the front-panel Standby control powers down the display and the analog output section.

**Big bang**

For the first few days, I just left Claude Chaloub playing on repeat in the acoustically treated small listening room next to my office, driving my Musical Fidelity Nu-Vista preamp/300 power amp stack and a pair of Dynaudio Special Twenty-Five loudspeakers, the idea being to let it settle in and do whatever it is that components do when they break in. I thought I’d stay out of the room for a few days—some folks believe that what’s really broken-in during this period is the listener. The problem with that theory was that I kept hearing music coming out of there—engrossing, compelling, engaging music that made continuing my self-imposed exile an act of will.

After the break-in period, I also tried the SuperNova in my big-boy rig upstairs—Krell Evolution 202 preamp and Evolution 600 monoblocks driving Dynaudio Confidence C-4 speakers—as well as in a system mating Ayre’s K-1x preamp and MR-X monoblocks.

Pair of traces) held no surprises, the traces exactly touching the -90dBFS line at 1kHz, suggesting minimal DAC linearity error. There are also no AC-supply or distortion spuriae evident. In fact, all these traces show is the recorded 16-bit dither noise. Feeding the external data input with 24-bit data representing the same signal, the noise floor dropped by 18dB in the low treble, implying that the SuperNova’s DACs actually have 19-bit resolution, which is superb. At lower frequencies, the increased bit depth unmasks some AC noise, but at close to -130dBFS, these are still vanishingly low in level.

One thing that puzzled me was that when the SuperNova was not playing any signal, the Audio Precision System One still indicated an output of 25mV or so, with a frequency of around 225kHz. To check this out, I performed another ¼-octave spectral analysis while the SuperNova played data representing a -1LSB DC offset. The resultant spectrum (fig.3) reveals the massive noiseshaping used by the player’s DAC chips to achieve the extremely high resolution. It was this noiseshaping giving rise to the Audio Precision reading. Some poorly designed amplifiers—though not Simaudio’s own, of course—might have problems with the presence of this ultrasonic content.

The SuperNova’s plot of linearity error (fig.4), taken with 16-bit CD data, really shows only the effect of the dither noise used to record the signal. Fed undithered data representing a 1kHz tone at exactly -90.31dBFS, the Simaudio’s output waveform was essentially perfect, the three CD voltage levels clearly evident and the waveform offering superb symmetry around the OV line (fig.5). Fed undithered 24-bit data, the Simaudio’s waveform was a pretty good sinewave despite the very low signal level (fig.6).
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If you think all drivers of the same make and model are alike, think again! In fact, inconsistencies often exceed +/-1.5 dB, and severely limit realism. Manufacturers try to mitigate the problem — some match drivers to pre-designed crossovers; others tighten tolerances of other parts, to at least prevent the situation from getting worse...

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with Vandersteen Quatro Wood speakers. In all that exalted company, the SuperNova was right at home.

Who you calling a white dwarf?
Starting with the Chaloub disc, I was immediately impressed with the detail and dynamic contrast offered by the Moon SuperNova. The sound was direct and grain-free, with a great low end balancing a crisp top end. The soundstage was wide but seemed a tad shallow.

Out came Telarc’s latest wonder disc: Paavo Järvi and the Cincinnati Symphony’s performance of Elgar’s Enigma Variations, coupled with Britten’s The Young Person’s Guide to the Orchestra and Four Sea Interludes from Peter Grimes (CD-80660). Well, nothing shallow about that soundstage. As with the Chaloub, I was again impressed by the heft of the bottom end and the SuperNova’s subtle delineation of dynamic contrast. The sound was articulate and vivid without seeming unusually forward or crisp, yet I was very aware that its presentation was forward rather than laid-back.

Many of us choose our concert seats based as much on our sonic preferences as on our finances. I like to sit farther back in a hall, where the space’s acoustics tend to soften the orchestra’s direct sound. However, many people prefer the intensity of a front-row seat, where the direct sound predominates. The SuperNova has a lot of that upfront acoustic excitement, but not too much—I’d rank it around row G.

In fact, I’d say it was the perfect match for the forward sound of pianist Robert Silverman’s performance of Beethoven’s Diabelli Variations on the magazine’s latest CD, Variations (Stereophile STPH017-2). Bob’s aggressive attack in, say, Beethoven’s 32nd variation on Diabelli’s theme had heft, vigor, and intensity. The Steinway’s direct sound was the focus, but the SuperNova also vividly reproduced the Mark Evans Austad Auditorium’s acoustic. The decay (and sustain, of course) of the piano’s overtones was rendered with clarity and microprecision.

John Atkinson has written about his experiences recording Variations (www.stereophile.com/music-recordings/506dia). He mentioned “a faint whistle underlying the music” that was left behind.

Harmonic distortion was very low in level. With a full-scale 1kHz tone, the THD levels (true sum of the harmonics) were 0.0007% left and 0.0015% right. The right channel’s higher amount, though still very low in absolute terms, was due to a higher level of third-harmonic content, at –97dB (fig.7). The second harmonic was the highest in the left channel, at just –106dB (0.0005%). With a dithered tone at –90dBFS, all the distortion harmonics were buried in the noise floor (fig.8). Intermodulation distortion was also extremely low in level, the second-order difference tone resulting from an equal mix of 19kHz and 20kHz tones lying at –110dB (fig.9).

I assessed the SuperNova’s rejection of word-clock jitter with the Miller Analyzer, which examines the player’s output spectrum for sidebands around a high-level tone Fig.7 Simaudio Moon SuperNova, unbalanced spectrum of 1kHz sinewave at 0dBFS into 4k ohms, DC-10kHz, 16-bit data (linear frequency scale).
Fig.8 Simaudio Moon SuperNova, unbalanced spectrum of 1kHz sinewave at –90dBFS into 4k ohms, DC-10kHz, 16-bit data (linear frequency scale).
Fig.9 Simaudio Moon SuperNova, unbalanced HF intermodulation spectrum, 19+20kHz at 0dBFS peak into 4k ohms, 16-bit data (linear frequency scale).

www.Stereophile.com, January 2007 113
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turned out to be caused by his recorder/laptop's cooling fan. Stereophile Forums member “Todd” asked about it in a thread about the recording that he initiated, and readers jumped in, speculating that the sound might exist in Todd’s system, not the recording. I listened carefully through the SuperNova and at first didn’t hear it. I listened again at a far louder volume than I would have done for pleasure, and sure enough—there it was, faintly underscoring the music. This proved several things: 1) Todd has big ears, 2) the SuperNova has resolution and top-end extension, and (maybe) 3) Todd listens loud—not that there’s anything wrong with that.

Unusual spectra

Let’s not forget the SuperNova’s gimmie: its digital input. I mentioned that I found it handy for my Slim Devices Squeezebox, but I didn’t mention how much of an improvement it made over the Squeezebox’s internal DAC. The low-end weight was immediately noticeable, but extended listening also revealed a lot more space and air throughout the audioband. Is this another way of saying what JA said in his review of the Squeezebox in the September 2006 Stereophile—that, sans an external converter, “the ‘silences between the notes’ [did not have] the clear definition” we have come to demand from digital music? Yes. Exactly.

If you have an outdated or not-up-to-par digital source, the SuperNova can be a lifesaver. Don’t get me wrong.

I like the Squeezebox, and think it sounds awfully good for $300—but the SuperNova made it sound a lot better, and all I had to do was add a digital cable to the system.

What is that worth? You be the judge, but it seems like a huge bonus to me.

THE SUPERNOVA SEEMED TO RENDER THE ATTACK OF THE MARIMBA, GLOCKENSPIEL, AND XYLOPHONES WITH GREATER CRISPNESS; THE AYRE SEEMED TO FLOAT THE RICH HASH OF OVERTONES MORE FIRMLY IN THE ACOUSTIC.

Stellar evolution

Because the Moon SuperNova costs about the same as my current reference digital player, Ayre’s C-5xe ($5950; see www.stereophile.com/hirezplayers/705ayre/), it seemed logical to compare the two. The Ayre, of course, is a universal player that also handles the DVD-Video, DVD-Audio, and SACD formats, but the “Red Book”—only SuperNova has its own bonus: that digital input. It all depends on how much hi-rez discs mean to you.

Although the recording industry in general has done a great job of guaranteeing that hi-rez music remains of interest to only a handful of us, Telarc has done a great job of guaranteeing that hi-rez music remains of interest to a handful of us, Telarc isn’t one of the companies starving us for choices. I had both the CD and SACD versions of the Elgar disc on hand. I would much rather listen to the SACD, so doing a cross-platform comparison, even one level-matched to within 0.1dB at 1kHz, perhaps wasn’t fair. The Ayre had more presence, more definition, and a greater sense of solidity—not huge amounts, but noticeable.

Not a level playing field, you insist? Okay. I next tried to play my Squeezebox through the Ayre. Oh wait—you can’t do that. So I decided to compare the CD version with the two players. The differences, of course, were far less noticeable. Although the Ayre and Simaudio do give slightly different perspectives on the recording, there were more similarities. Both provided oodles of detail, reproduced the acoustic of Cincinnati’s Music Hall with great precision, and laid down an impressive foundation of bass information. However, I felt I heard a tad more direct sound from the SuperNova, which may be another way of saying that I thought its top octave was slightly more detailed than the Ayre’s.

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No animals were harmed in the making of this ad.
suspicion. Bob Silverman’s Steinway had more clang through the Simaudio, more air through the Ayre. I’m not implying that this was a matter of good and better, because I didn’t feel the differences were substantial. In fact, I classify them as comparison differences, noticeable primarily because the artificiality of comparing components fairly begs that differences be audible. Listening to each component on its own, I tended to be completely satisfied, and to find each of them true to the music.

Finally, I listened to the CD layer of Nemesis’ eponymous dual-layer percussion (five percussionists). The SuperNova seemed to render the attack of the marimba, glockenspiel, and xylophones with greater crispness; the Ayre seemed to float the rich hash of overtones more firmly in the acoustic.

Which did I prefer? Both were absolutely convincing—after all, as Wallace Stevens observed, “music is feeling, then, not sound.” And both players conveyed the feeling.

HyperNova!

Note to self: Simaudio belongs in the exalted company of the best high-end manufacturers currently plying the trade. The proof, if needed, is the Moon SuperNova, which is not only good but memorable.

The SuperNova is competitive with other digital players in the $5k price range and ranks among the best-sounding “Red Book” players I’ve heard. And its fit and finish are superb. If you care enough about music to spend five grand on a CD player, then music is too important to you to be relegated to the background. No worries there—the Moon SuperNova will put you front and center.

I would be remiss if I didn’t emphasize just how useful that digital input was. It allowed secondary digital sources to impress me again with how good they could be, which went a long way toward making them primary sources. Maybe no music server lurks in your system, but you could use the SuperNova’s digital input to improve the sound of your satellite radio (up to the limits of its resolution, of course), or to sweeten any other source that has ceased to compel.

I truly enjoyed listening to the Moon SuperNova, and that I definitely won’t forget.

\[NOTE TO SELF: SIMAUDIO BELONGS IN THE EXALTED COMPANY OF THE BEST HIGH-END MANUFACTURERS CURRENTLY PLYING THE TRADE.\]

SACD: a recording of Thierry Pilote’s percussion music recorded in Montreal’s Église St. Jean-Baptiste (Fidelio FACCD017). The recording is atmospheric, dynamic, and rhythmically complex (well, yeah—it’s a recording of...)

ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

DIGITAL SOURCE: Ayre C5-xc universal player.

PREAMPLIFIERS: Ayre K-1x, Conrad-Johnson ACT2, Krell Evolution 202, Musical Fidelity Nu-Vista.

POWER AMPLIFIERS: Ayre MX-R, Krell Evolution 600 (both monoblocks); Musical Fidelity Nu-Vista 300.

SPEAKERS: Dynaudio Special Twenty-Five, Dynaudio Confidence C-4, Dynaudio Contour C-1, Vandersteen Quatro Wood.


ACCESSORIES: Audience adeptResponse power conditioner; Furutech eTP60 & RWL-1 acoustic treatment panels; Furutech FP20A duplex outlets; RealTraps RFZ, Mondo Traps, Mini Traps; Shunyata Research Hydra AC power-distribution system; OSAR Selvay/Magruder equipment racks; Ayre Myrtle Wood Blocks.

—Wes Phillips

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There are three requirements: You must invent a very good loudspeaker that sells for between $1000 and $2000/pair. You have to make enough of them, over a long enough time, to achieve a certain level of brand recognition and market penetration. And you must create a dealer network of reasonable size, with an emphasis on well-promoted specialty shops.

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Think you can do it? Good. Richard Vandersteen could use a little competition.

His company, Vandersteen Audio, has been in business almost 30 years, and for most of that time a loudspeaker known as the Vandersteen Model 2 has been his Toyota Camry, his Apple iMac, his Linn LP12. Today, the Model 2 and its variants endure as the most successful American loudspeakers in high-end audio, with close to 200,000 sold.

Description
The Vandersteen 2Ce Signature II of 2007 shows little in the way of outward
“I'll buy you out of bad sound” *

Just trade in whatever interconnect, speaker cables or power products you own to Sound by Singer, and I will pay you 15% of the retail price of any Nordost cable you purchase from us to replace it, to get you out of bad sound.”

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*offer expires Feb. 28, 2007

There is not much debate about the fact that Nordost Valhalla is the finest signal cable in the world once it is thoroughly broken in. As a seasoned audiophile you probably know that. What you might not know is that a little while ago Nordost introduced an entirely new line of high performance, reasonably priced interconnects and loudspeaker cables (the Norse Series) which carry through that Valhalla kind of speed, lucidity, transparency and weight right on down the line.

Having only been a Nordost dealer for about a year I only recently learned that substituting any Nordost Norse or Reference series cable in a system for any other similarly priced wire is the sonic equivalent of cleaning windows that have not been touched in 20 years. This was a revelation too important not to share with any music lover out there. So Joe and I decided to make it easy. Trade in your cable. We'll give you a credit for whatever its value actually is, from zero on up plus pay you 15% of the retail price of the Nordost cable you purchase from us to replace it. How could anyone say no?
change: its fabric exterior conceals the same sort of segmented, minimal baffle structure that distinguished early Vandersteens from most of the competition of their day. Now as then, the spare, carefully shaped enclosure is used to time-align the outputs of the three front-firing drivers by ensuring that their wavefronts are launched from the same vertical plane. (The design also prevents potentially sound-smearing diffraction effects by eliminating unnecessary surfaces and rounding off sharp edges, thus minimizing early soundwave reflections.) It was with that in mind—not the opportunity for physical time alignment—that Richard Vandersteen experimented with limited-baffle designs in the first place.

Alongside time alignment, the Model 2's other calling card is phase coherence: that quality whereby a loudspeaker preserves not just the relative amplitudes of tones within a complex wave, but also the correct phase relationships between those tones. Just as watts ain't watts and bits ain't bits, tones ain't tones—and Richard Vandersteen has put a great deal of effort over the years into demonstrating, under test conditions, the audibility of phase distortion in loudspeakers where that design aspect has been neglected, however accurate those products may be in other regards.

Although time alignment and phase coherence are interrelated, the two qualities can be realized in different ways. In the 2Ce Signature II, as in all of his speakers, Richard Vandersteen accomplished phase coherence by means of careful crossover design—

1 In the late 1970s, a handful of other designers, especially Jim Thiel of Thiel Audio and John Fuselier, paralleled Richard Vandersteen in pioneering the use of minimal, stepped baffles. Today, such things are as common as tattoos.

MEASUREMENTS

My estimate of the Vandersteen 2Ce Signature II's voltage sensitivity was 84dB(B)/2.83V/m, which is significantly below average. Its impedance, however, remained between 6 and 8 ohms over almost the entire audioband (fig.1), the only exception being the mid-treble with the treble control set its maximum position, when the impedance dropped to 5 ohms at 6.2kHz and 9kHz. The electrical phase angle is also close to 0° over most of the audioband, meaning that the Vandersteen will be an easy load for an amplifier to drive. This will compensate, to some extent, for its low sensitivity.

The cloth-covered design of the 2Ce made it impossible for me to fasten my usual accelerometer to the cabinet to search for panel resonances. Listening to it with a stethoscope, however, revealed nothing untoward.

I usually measure a loudspeaker's frequency response on its tweeter axis, which is almost always where the designer has intended the individual drive-unit outputs to sum in-phase. Measuring the Vandersteen on this axis, however, produced a significant suckout centered around 4kHz, which I suspect is the frequency at which the tweeter crosses over to the midrange unit. The speaker's plot of vertical dispersion (fig.2) showed that this suckout filled in below the tweeter axis, so I performed almost all the remaining measurements on the midrange axis, which is also where the speaker produced the most time-coherent step response (see later). However, unless the Vandersteen is used on its bases, this axis is just 31" from the
specifically, by relying on first-order (6dB/octave) filter slopes. Strictly speaking, outside the digital domain there’s no such thing as a phase-perfect filter; they all draw the signal out to some extent, first-order being merely the least offensive of the bunch, with its 90° of phase shift at the frequency where one unit hands over to the other. But through judicious use of signal attenuation and extreme care in choosing drivers, a clever designer can combine two or more first-order filters into a crossover network that is phase-correct overall—and that’s precisely what Richard Vandersteen has set out to do.

Over the years, the Vandersteen 2 has most evolved in terms of driver design, and the 2Ce Signature II continues that trend. Compared with its immediate predecessor, the 2Ce Signature ($1549/pair), the new version’s most significant refinement is its use of the same proprietary midrange driver that Vandersteen developed for his Model 3A: a 4.5" plastic-cone model with a cast-alloy frame, whose English alnico magnet structure is sized and shaped to prevent backwave reflections from impinging on the polymer cone itself. The result is said to be a less colored, more open sound.

The other drivers are similarly purposeful. The tweeter uses a 1" aluminum-alloy dome covered with a thin coat of ceramic, a molded waveguide is hand-fitted to the front, its position adjusted to suppress the dome’s first breakup mode. The woofer is an 8" Vifa molded cone with a 2" dustcap and a double-wound voice-coil. Its free-air resonant frequency is 28Hz, and while the sealed woofer enclosure can be expected to raise that number somewhat, the effect is tempered by the presence of an additional bass driver in the same enclosure; an actively driven, rear-firing 10" cone whose effect on the speaker’s bass system is similar to that of a passive radiator. The supplemental woofer’s upper-end response is limited to 55Hz, largely because its long-fiber cone is damped by the addition of a disc of MDF some 5.5" in diameter. I’ve always believed that if a big piece of floor—a little low for most chairs, which place the average listener’s ears at a height of 36".

The impedance characteristic is a little unusual at low frequencies, being typical of neither a sealed box nor a normal reflex design. The woofer’s response (fig.3, red trace) did show the minimum-motion notch of a reflex design, this centered on a low 26Hz, but the output of the rear-facing, mass-loaded “supplementary” woofer (fig.3, green) both peaked a little higher in frequency and rolled off rapidly above 70Hz. The absence of the usual nearfield “bump” in the woofer’s upper-bass response suggests that it is tuned to be rather overdamped. The woofer can be seen to cover a very wide passband, its upper -6dB point not occurring until around 2kHz. This results in a broad region of overlap with the midrange unit (fig.3, blue) of almost two octaves. The 2Ces’s upper-frequency output is flat, but with a number of small peaks and dips apparent. The usual metal-dome tweeter resonance occurs at a high 27kHz, well above audibility.

The traces in fig.3 were taken with the midrange and treble controls set to their central, “0” positions, as was the Vandersteen’s overall response, averaged across a 30° horizontal window on the midrange axis (fig.4). The treble in this graph seems balanced to be a couple of dB higher in level than the midrange and bass, this accentuated by a slight lack of energy in the middle of the midrange. The speaker offers respectable bass extension, with useful output apparent down to the high 20Hz. Again, however, the absence of the usual upper-bass hump that results from the nearfield measurement technique implies an overdamped woofer alignment that is optimized for clarity and transient attack rather than for weight per se.

Fig.5 shows the effect of the two tone controls set to their maximum (red trace) and minimum (blue) positions. Both traces are normalized to the tweeter-axis response, so that the differences made by the tone controls stand revealed. The treble control provides a maximum of 6dB cut or boost at 8kHz and a little less at higher frequencies, while the midrange control offers a similar degree of adjustment centered on 3kHz, which is technically in the “presence” region. Perversely, backing off the midrange control actually increases the true midrange level, but by a maximum of only 1dB.

![Fig.4 Vandersteen 2Ce Signature II, anechoic response on listening axis at 30°, averaged across 30° horizontal window and corrected for microphone response, with the complex sum of the nearfield responses plotted below 350Hz.](image1)

![Fig.5 Vandersteen 2Ce Signature II, effect on tweeter-axis response of midrange and treble controls set to their maximum (red) and minimum (blue) positions (2dB/vertical div.).](image2)
wood can’t be counted on to slow a fiber woofer cone, nothing can.

The construction quality of the 2Ce Signature II is remarkably good for the price. Driver enclosures are made of 0.75”-thick pieces of MDF, shaped on a CNC milling machine and assembled using a combination of fasteners and adhesives. MDF bracing is abundant as are strategically placed bits of wool felt, to further tame sound diffraction. Except for the drivers and the felt, all of the interior surfaces are sprayed flat black, to keep them more or less invisible through the grille—shades of the Quad ESL—yet the level of finish is decent enough that the inner cabinets, stripped of their grilles and loosed from their moorings, wouldn’t look out of place in certain rooms. Such as mine.

But you needn’t. Instead, the essential cabinetry of the Vandersteen 2Ce Signature II is topped and bottomed with MDF plinths, themselves capped with nicely oiled veneers. The plinths are joined with four wooden dowels, 1.25” in diameter and just over 37” long. The dowels comprise the frame around which a black double-knit grille sack is wrapped, tightly and permanently: Like a shear bolt or a deer tick, you can’t remove it without destroying it. But you needn’t.

**Installation and setup**

Vandersteen Audio supplemented my 2Ce Signature II review pair with their sand-filled bases, a $150/pair option whose primary purpose is to stabilize each shallow enclosure with two thick, spiked feet at the front and a third one at the rear, about 5” beyond the enclosure’s rear edge. The rather long, threaded spikes also provide some small measure of tilt, where needed; I took advantage of that, to compensate for the fact that my ears are slightly farther from the floor than average. I did it with Richard Vandersteen’s blessing—and, for that matter, with Richard Vandersteen’s assistance, when he dropped by for a visit in September of 2006.

While he was here, Vandersteen agreed that my review speakers per-

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I haven’t shown the 2Ce Signature II’s horizontal-dispersion plot because it is very difficult to interpret. It does suggest that the crossover-region suckout on the tweeter-axis response tends to fill in to the speaker’s sides, which means that the listener can experiment with toe-in, tilt-back, and the tone controls to get a flat, even balance of the treble and upper midrange. However, the lack of on-axis energy in the middle of the midrange persists off axis. To examine this further, I used Christopher Liscio’s FuzzMeasure 2.0 program (SMUG Software, www.supergualtragroovy.com) running on my Mac PowerBook to produce a spatially averaged response curve for the 2Ce Signature in my room. FuzzMeasure uses a one-second “chirp” and FFT analysis instead of the continuous pink noise and 1/3-octave spectrum analysis I’ve used in the past. This is a very much faster means of capturing an in-room response. I captured 20 individual spectra for the left and right speakers individually in a rectangular window centered on the position of my ears in the listening seat; the resulting 1/3-octave—smoothed, FFT-derived spectrum is shown in fig.6.

The bass region in fig.6 offers good extension but is shelved down somewhat. I did have to place the speakers a little farther out in the room for this measurement than would be optimal, which deprived them of some of the usual boundary reinforcement. Even so, the overdamped nature of the woofer alignment will make the Vandersteen sound a bit lean unless care is taken in placement. The upper midrange and treble in this graph are very smooth, with the slight downward tilt of the curve reflecting both the increased amount of room absorption at high frequencies and the tweeter’s increasing directivity. The midrange is disturbed by two troughs. The lower-frequency one is, I suspect, due to the Allison Effect, in which the direct sound of the speaker interferes with the reflections from the nearest room boundaries. The upper-frequency trough is a little too high in frequency to be due to the Allison Effect; it is also suspiciously close to the lack of energy seen in the quasi-anechoic response (fig.4).

In the time domain, despite the Vandersteen’s multi-way design, its impulse response (fig.7) is as time-coherent as that of the single-driver, crossoverless Fujitsu Ten Eclipse TD712z, reviewed elsewhere in this issue. The tail of the impulse also seems very clean, up to the visible glitch just before the 8ms mark, which is the first reflection of the speaker’s sound from the area of floor.

---

**Fig.6** Vandersteen 2Ce Signature II, spatially averaged, 1/3-octave response in JA’s listening room.

**Fig.7** Vandersteen 2Ce Signature II, impulse response on midrange axis at 50” (5ms time window, 30kHz bandwidth).
formed best when placed about 56" from the wall behind them and about 16" from their respective sidewalls: Unlike my Quads, the Vandersteen 2Ce Signature II needs to be kept away from all room boundaries. We used my Audio Control Industrial SA3050A spectrum analyzer to get it right—Vandersteen uses the same model himself, as it turned out—and while deep-bass response was a bit weaker than specified at 6dB down at 31.5Hz in my room, there was useful output in the bottom octave. It's important to note that the deep-bass response of the 2Ce Signature II rolled off very gradually, not with the steep, now-you-hear-it-now-you-don't dropoff associated with other bass-loading schemes.

During their stay here, I used the Vandersteens with a variety of amplifiers, ranging from my 21W Lamm ML2.1 monoblocks (it was Vandersteen’s idea—honest—and we were both surprised at how fine the combination sounded on 98% of the material we played) to the 200Wpc i-7 integrated amplifier from Simaudio (review to come). I also used a variety of cables, and discovered two things of no small importance.

First, the 2Ce Signature II is equipped with separate low- and high-frequency inputs, to facilitate biwiring or even biaamping. That in itself doesn’t seem extraordinary, but the prospective owner should know that Vandersteen recommends single-wiring only as a temporary measure—and so much so that low-to-high-frequency jumpers aren’t even included (although the excellent owner’s manual contains instructions for making your own).

Second, in upgrading the 2Ce to Signature status a while back, Vandersteen dispensed with the usual oversized speaker connectors, for their susceptibility to skin effects and eddy currents (see “Listening” columns passim) and their overall high levels of ridiculousness. Instead, he opted for a single bar-

The Vandersteen 2Ce is one of the best-selling high-end speakers of all time, and most of the measured performance of its Signature II iteration is beyond reproach. I am loath, therefore, to make too much of the lack of integration I noted between its low-frequency and midrange units. But it puzzles me, nevertheless. —John Atkinson

between it and the microphone. The step response (fig.8) also features a time-coherent, right-triangle shape, though there is a rather faster decay than I expected.

I investigated this further by looking at the step responses of the individual drive-unit sections on the midrange axis. These are shown in fig.9: the woofer section’s positive step (blue trace) actually overlaps the negative-going overshoot of the tweeter/midrange section’s step (red). The latter will tend to cancel the former, leading, I suspect, to the suckout in the middle of the midrange seen in figs 4 and 6. Measuring and listening higher than the midrange axis will move the woofer output back in time with respect to that of the midrange, but then a treble suckout develops between the outputs of the tweeter and the midrange unit. An enigma. I note that AD was not bothered by any midrange response anomalies; it is possible that this behavior looks worse than it sounds.

Finally, the 2Ce Signature II’s cumulative spectral-decay plot on its midrange axis (fig.10) shows an extremely clean initial decay, confirming the speaker’s time-coherent nature in the upper midrange and treble, though with some delayed hash evident in the mid-treble. This may well be the result of early reflections from the trim above the tweeter.
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rrier strip of small, gold-plated screw terminals. I share his point of view—even as the limited connection option forced me to scramble a bit and modify a few of my own cables to fit.

But one cable option deserves special mention: I had excellent results with a pair of Alpha-Core AG-1 speaker cables that were sent to me a couple of weeks into the review period. These flat-conductor silver cables were set up for biwiring, with large spade connectors at the amplifier end and sensibly small ones at the speaker end, the latter cleverly stamped from the conductor material itself. It was a short (4') pair intended for use with monoblock amplifiers scooted as close to the speakers as possible, and the level of system synergy was stunning, with leading-edge transients that were sharp but not too sharp, and tremendous tunefulness, texture, and presence overall. What a great match!

On another front: Some hobbyists will be surprised by two features of the 2Ce SigII that aren’t generally associated with high-performance loudspeakers: rear-mounted level controls for the tweeter and midrange driver, for use in contouring the sound to suit dull or bright rooms; and, for the 8" woofer, temperature-sensing protection circuits, whose job it is to reduce the signal and alert the user with a front-mounted LED during moments of sonic duress. During the review period I did not use the former—they were set to their central “0” positions—and I don’t think I used the latter.

Listening

The Vandersteen 2Ce Signature II made itself at home from the word go. It liked my records, my room, and the rest of my system. The speaker was superbly balanced from bottom to top. It didn’t have quite the transparent, hear-through quality of a Quad ESL—I’ll come back to that aspect in a moment—but the Vandersteens’ tonal proportions, for want of a better term, were very much the same. Its treble range was soft but substantial, and perfectly suited to its bottom-octave response. The 2Ce SigII was neither bright nor dull; it was simply right, and consistently listenable.

Earlier, I described the bass loading chosen for the 2Ce SigII and how it resulted in an especially gentle rolloff, with audible response into the music’s lowest octave. Whether by design or coincidence, the speaker’s high-frequen-
Great components are just the beginning of exceptional sound.

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sures in 20th-century music.

Voices came across well: There was no exaggeration of sibilants, plosives, or the like, and the sorts of gross frequency-response aberrations that plague other loudspeakers were completely absent. I’ve heard other, more expensive speakers reproduce singers with somewhat greater immediacy and realism; compared with various electrostatic panels, for instance, the Vandersteens were a bit veiled. Nor did voices—or, for that matter, solo violins and the like—have that amazing, pop-out-of-the-mix presence that I’ve heard with various Lowthers.

But it’s rare to find such extreme qualities in a package as well balanced as this one—the 2Ce Signature II was musically satisfying in every way. It was also consistently clean, uncolored, and enjoyable—in those regards, it stood comparison to virtually anything I’ve heard—and for $1995/pair and almost no setup work, it was amazing: a loudspeaker with no musical shortcomings or obvious sonic faults.

Conclusions

Today, as 20 years ago, the current Vandersteen Model 2 is an easier recommendation than most of its similarly priced competitors: How can you not like something that sounds this good, plays music this convincingly, isn’t at all fussy, and sells for just under $2000/pair?

With effort and luck, you might find a similarly priced loudspeaker that does certain things a bit better. So be it.
The Vandersteen’s greatest strength was an aggregate strength: It was better than average at virtually everything one expects from a loudspeaker. It was the consummate all-rounder. Knowing that Vandersteen Audio has done so well, and that the Model 2 has come this far, is comforting in a way.

So we’re back to where we came in. Today’s 2Ce Signature II is an unambiguously fine loudspeaker, and from what I recall of its forebears, the latest refinements have endowed it with even more openness and clarity. When friends came by to visit, I didn’t drag them into the hi-fi room to show off the Vandersteens, as I sometimes do with my homemade Lowthers or rebuilt Quads. But while the speakers were here, every time I brought home a new record or remembered an old one, regardless of style, I played it without worry and loved it without measure.

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Robert Deutsch

Fujitsu Ten
Eclipse TD712z
LOUDSPEAKER

All right, it’s time for a pop quiz in Loudspeaker Design 101. Answer the following, and justify your answer.

What is the ideal number of drivers in a loudspeaker system?

a) two
b) three
c) four or more
d) none of the above

You have your answer? Good. Next question:

What is the best type of crossover in a loudspeaker system?

a) first order (6dB/octave)
b) second order (12dB)
c) third order (18dB)
d) fourth order (24dB) or higher
e) none of the above

Got that one, too? Well, if you’ve noticed what kind of speaker is being reviewed here, you’ve probably figured out that the answers to these questions are d) and e): “none of the above.” The ideal number of drivers in a system is one, and the ideal crossover is none—that is, if that single driver is able to reproduce the entire frequency range without neglecting or emphasizing any part of the range,
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FUJITSU TEN ECLIPSE

The Eclipse TD712z's voltage sensitivity was to specification but significantly lower than average, at an estimated 83.5dB(B)/2.83V/m. However, its impedance remains above 6 ohms at almost all frequencies (fig.1), and rises in value above the midrange, this due, I assume, to the effect of the single drive-unit's voice-coil inductance. This speaker will be easy to drive, even by low-powered tube amplifiers.

The traces in fig.1 feature a couple of small discontinuities in the upper midrange, but the loudspeaker's beautifully finished, egg-shaped enclosure was effectively free from vibrational resonances. All that an accelerometer revealed was a very slight degree of movement at 130Hz (fig.2), and nothing at all above the graph's -30dB noise floor at higher frequencies. However, the nearfield response of the rear-facing reflex port (fig.3, red trace) features a fairly low-level resonance at 700Hz, this the frequency of one of the discontinuities in the impedance traces. It is possible that because the port faces away from the listener, this, in combination with the low level of the mode, will minimize its audibility.

The saddle centered on 55Hz in the impedance-magnitude trace indicates that this is the port's tuning frequency, which is confirmed by the fact that this is also the frequency of the minimum-motion notch of the drive-unit's nearfield response (fig.3, blue trace). However, the port's output peaks a little lower in frequency, meaning that it

MEASUREMENTS

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doesn't quite fully reinforce the drive-unit's output below the system resonance. As a consequence, the sum of the drive-unit and port outputs, taking into account acoustic phase and the distance between the two radiators (fig.3, black trace below 300Hz), shelves down a little before the usual 24dB/octave reflex rollout. As Robert Deutsch found, this speaker's balance is somewhat light in weight.

Higher in frequency, the upper-midrange and treble regions are shelved up by a couple of dB, which will
er, but at the time it was available from only two dealers in the US, not the five required by Stereophile’s editorial policy. However, a few weeks later I received an e-mail from Mickey Tachibana, North American representative for Fujitsu Ten Eclipse, stating that the line had been picked up by three more dealers. The review was on, and in due course I received a pair of TD712z’s—the same pair that had been demoed in Las Vegas.

**Description and Design**

As a glance at the photo accompanying this review shows—saving me a thousand words of description—the TD712z looks nothing like your typical box loudspeaker. A single 4.7” driver with a glass-fiber cone is mounted in an egg-shaped enclosure of artificial marble, with a rear-facing port 1.5” in diameter. The speaker comes with a matching shaped enclosure of artificial marble, with a rear-facing port 1.5” in diameter. The speaker comes with a matching sand-filled stand; the interface between the aluminum used in the 512 and thus has three times the specific gravity of the less expensive model 512 in that its action. The TD712z differs from the Fujitsu Ten, this allows the driver’s diaphragm to exhibit ideal piston action. The TD712z differs from the less expensive model 512 in that its stays are made of zinc diffusion, which separated. Of course, there has to be something that stops the driver from flopping around when the cone is going back and forth to produce sound; in the TD712z it’s a 7.3-lb iron weight called the Grand Anchor. According to Fujitsu Ten, this allows the driver’s diaphragm to exhibit ideal piston action. The TD712z differs from the less expensive model 512 in that its stays are made of zinc diffusion, which has three times the specific gravity of the aluminum used in the 512 and thus provides better damping. The vibrational mass of the TD712z driver is 10% lower than the 512’s, and there is a 20% increase in magnet flux density. These differences are reflected in the specifications: a frequency response of 40Hz–17kHz and a sensitivity of 85dB for the 512, and 40Hz–20kHz and 83.5dB, respectively, for the TD712z. A sensitivity of 85.5dB is still below average for an audiophile speaker, but it compares favorably with the 82.5dB of the famed BIC LS3/5a.

The TD712z is the brainchild of Fujitsu Ten engineer Hiroshi Kowaki, who drew on the speaker-design theories of Hiroyuki Yoshii of the Time Domain Corporation. (See www.fujitsu-su-ten.co.jp/english/company/researchdev/gihou/en_pdf/18/18-3.pdf.) In a phone conversation, Kowaki told me the story of how the design of the TD712z and other Eclipse TD speakers came about.

Kowaki was trained as an electrical engineer and has a strong background in digital signal processing (DSP). His initial thinking was that he could develop the perfect loudspeaker by measuring the impulse response of a speaker and designing a Finite Impulse Response (FIR) inverse filter that can make the speaker very revealing of recorded detail (as RD mentions in his auditioning notes) but perhaps a little unforgiving of problems with source and amplification components (which RD didn’t find to be the case). Though the treble region is flat overall, there is a succession of small peaks and dips of approximately equal amplitude. As might be expected from a speaker with a single drive-unit, the frequency response rolls off quickly above 10kHz. RD does comment that the lack of top-octave extension actually better balances the TD712z’s limited low-frequency output than would be the case with a conventional design.

The speaker’s horizontal radiation pattern is shown in fig.4, plotted at 5° intervals, each trace normalized to the on-axis response. (The TD712z’s symmetrical cabinet design means that the vertical pattern was basically identical.) The dispersion is superbly even below 4.35kHz, but there is a sharp discontinuity at that frequency, with a rapid rolloff to the speaker’s sides. Usually, this kind of behavior would give a speaker a rather lifeless quality in...
ceded out the irregularities in the impulse response. He pursued this approach for some time, but eventually concluded that it couldn't be made to work: the "corrected" speaker measured quite well but just didn't sound right.

Kowaki abandoned the DSP-based approach and turned his attention to developing speakers that would produce excellent impulse response through the reduction of mechanical resonances in the driver and enclosure. The stated aim of Fujitsu Ten's Eclipse TD line of speakers is to produce "Authentic Waveform Reproduction," which depends critically on the timing of different components of the waveform. According to Kowaki, the measure that relates most directly to this capability is the impulse response, and he feels that focusing on getting the frequency response to be more linear may actually impair the impulse response. He suggests that while multiple-driver systems may have some advantages for achieving linearity of frequency response, a single-driver system, which by definition eliminates the potential waveform-distorting effects of crossovers, has the greatest potential for accurate waveform reproduction. The

TD712z is the top model from Fujitsu Ten to embody this approach.

Setup
Setting up the Eclipse TD712z was surprisingly easy. The speaker enclosure fits precisely on the stand, secured by three bolts, and there's a template supplied to help set the angular adjustment bolt. I set this at level (0°), which seemed to work well, the sound achieving its best focus at my normal listening position—so I didn't fiddle with it. The feet are simple to adjust, and the lack of spikes means that the speaker can be moved around quite easily to find the right position. In my room, those positions were pretty much the same as for other speakers I've had there, the Eclipses forming a more or less equilateral triangle with my listening position and aimed at me (not straight ahead). I like to use a laser pointer to aim speakers, making sure that the left and right cabinets are pointed at my left and right ear, respectively—but the TD712z's curved surfaces didn't permit consistent positioning of the laser pointer. I had to eyeball the alignment, closing each eye to judge whether the speaker was pointed right at me. The Eclipses didn't seem overly sensitive to positioning.

I used three amplifiers with the Eclipses: the Audipax Model 88 and PrimaLuna ProLogue Seven the listening room, but the shelved-up treble output might well compensate for this, at least up to 10kHz.
The Eclipse TD712z's impulse response (fig.5) is typical of a design with a single drive-unit, with a sharp up/down spike of energy, though this is followed by some low-level ringing; this is probably associated with the small peaks seen in the frequency response's treble region. The step response (fig.6) has an excellent, time-coincident, right-triangle shape, though again, some lower-frequency ripples are evident. As a result, some ridges of delayed energy can be seen in the cumulative spectral-decay plot (fig.7), the most prominent lying at 1.2kHz (the frequency of the response step seen in fig.3) and 5.7kHz.

Considering its unusual design, the Eclipse TD712z measured much better than I was expecting. As RD notes, this is not a speaker that will go very loud or very deep, and tonally it is not all that neutral. However, it does offer other benefits, particularly in its time-coincident presentation and freedom from cabinet resonances. And it looks stunning!

—John Atkinson

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monoblock tube amplifiers, and the PS Audio GCC-100 digital integrated amplifier. The TD712z was highly revealing of amplifier differences—the character of each of these amps was immediately apparent on switchover. In different ways, all three amplifiers were good matches, but my overall favorite was the PrimaLuna, which had much (not all) of the sweetness of the Audioscopax, but with better bass and a more authoritative sound. The combination of the TD712z’s relatively low sensitivity and the PrimaLunas’ extra power might have been a factor here. My comments about the Eclipse’s sound refer to this combination.

**Sound**

I’ll get the negatives out of the way first: The Eclipse TD712z wouldn’t play very loud and didn’t go very low. And that was it.

As I played a variety of CDs and LPs, the system with the Eclipses had a clarity, transparency, resolution, timbral accuracy, and specificity of imaging that were simply breathtaking. The speaker did particularly well with voices, which had a human flesh-and-blood quality, an effect that I suspect was due to the absence of the mechanical resonances present with other speakers. We normally accept these resonances as inevitable and so must mentally tune them out. The difference with the TD712z was that these resonances simply weren’t there—there was nothing to tune out. That wasn’t literally true, of course—no mechanical device can be entirely free of resonances—but the TD712z’s were at an exceedingly low level, and masked by the distortions of other aspects of the recording/playback process as well as by the music itself. This lack of resonant signature or coloration and this sense of transparency to the source brought to mind Quad electrostatic speakers—such as the original ESL-57, a pair of which I used to own.

Two of the words I’ve here used to characterize the TD712z are transparency and resolution. By transparency I mean the ability of a speaker or other audio component to impose on the music as little character of its own as possible, so that we get an unimpeded sense of what’s on the recording, and—assuming that the recording engineers did their job right—a sense of the sounds made by the musicians in the studio or wherever the recording was made. At best, this is a kind of sonic time travel, and the TD712z did this in a way that I have not heard bettered by any other speaker. Live recordings were particularly convincing. Listening to “Lamento di Federico,” from Clea’s L’Arlesiana, on Mario Lanza’s 1958 Royal Albert Hall concert (CD, Live from London, RCA 61884-2), brought tears to my eyes from the sheer beauty of the sound (and from thinking of the all-too-premature death of this gifted artist). My Avantgarde Unos speakers are better at seeming to bring performers into the listening room (the they-are-here effect), but the Eclipses were superior at transporting me to the recording site (the I-am-there effect).

Allied to the notion of transparency is that of resolution: the ability to differentiate sonic differences rather than gloss over them. Here, too, the TD712z was in the highest class, matching the ultra-high-resolution Avantgarde Unos. Some readers may recall my mentioning what appears to be an edit point or other recording artifact at 1.35 of track 10, “All the Things You Are,” on Sylvia McNair’s Sure Thing: The Jerome Kern Songbook (CD, Philips 442 129-2). With some speakers and systems this is noticeable only if you deliberately listen for it; McNair’s voice just seems to get momentarily fuzzy at that point. With the TD712z, it was clearly a sort of echo of the voice, as if McNair is singing an overdubbed duet with herself for part of the phrase “that lights the star.” I think it’s interesting—and not surprising—that the list of testimonials for Eclipse speakers (the 512, the TD712z is too new) includes a number of highly respected recording engineers, including Simon Rhodes of Abbey Road, Mike Ross-Trevor of Sony Music, Klaus Hiemann of Emile Berliner Studios, and composer and record producer Brian Eno. These folks want to hear exactly what’s on the records they make.

Speakers that are highly revealing of faults in recordings are normally thought to be “unforgiving,” making all but the most pristine recordings sound unlistenable. Paradoxically, the TD712z proved to be nothing of the sort. Although faults in the recording were certainly audible through these speakers, they also communicated more of the music on the recording. It’s analogous to considering noise in relation to signal. The noise (audible artifacts) may be higher, but the signal (musical detail) is correspondingly higher still, so that the ratio of signal to noise remains higher than with a speaker that glosses over the subtleties of both music and recording artifacts. At no point in my auditioning of the TD712z did I feel that I had to restrict myself to listening only to the most technically perfect recordings. On the contrary: I got the greatest enjoyment from listening to recordings that I knew were far less than perfect. Through the TD712z, I had the sense that I was hearing more of what my recordings “really” sounded like.

The TD712z’s precision of imaging and soundstage definition were virtually in classes by themselves. With the right recording, instruments and voices were placed precisely in space, with no change in position when the music went high or low. This must be one of the effects of having a single driver reproduce all frequencies; there was no shifting of the image when the reproduction of a given instrument was transferred from being, say, tweeter-dominated to midrange-dominated. In a multiple-driver system, a physical offsetting of drivers and selective delay of a range of frequencies through a crossover are supposed to solve this problem, but with the single-driver TD712z there is no problem to solve. When I listened to the difficult “Depth of Image” tracks on Best of Chesky Jazz and More Audiophile Tests/Vol.2 (Chesky JD 68), the clickers recorded at distances of 60’, 70’, and 80’—which through most speakers sound the same as the one recorded at 50’—were clearly distinguishable from each other through the Eclipses.

What about those limitations in loudness and bass extension? Well, while perceived loudness depends on the actual sound-pressure level, it’s also a psychological function, related in a complex manner to the dynamic rise and fall of the music, the presence or absence of distractions, the time of day, the person’s liking for the music, and individual preferences for how loud reproduced music should be. (Some people routinely listen at levels that make your ears bleed, whereas others never turn the volume up past the background listening level.)

I think it’s fair to say that if you like your music reproduced at the level of a live rock concert or a symphony orchestra going full tilt, the TD712z is not the speaker for you. Its 4.7” driver is an amazing device, but it has its lim-
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**DIGITAL SOURCES** PS Audio Lambda II CD transport, Perpetual Technologies P-1A/ModWright P-3A digital processors with Monolithic Sound P3 power supply, Ayre CX-7e CD player.

**PREAMPLIFIER** Convergent Audio Technology SL-1 Ultimate.

**POWER AMPLIFIERS** PrimA Luna Prologue Seven and Audiopax Model 88 monoblocks; PS Audio GCC-100.

**LOUDSPEAKERS** Avantgarde Uno.


**ACCESSORIES** PS Audio P500 AC regenerator, Bright Star Little Rock (atop CD transport), Shakti stone (atop Monolithic Sound P3 power supply), Arcici Suspension Rack, Vistek Aurios 1.2 MIB component supports, PolyCrystal amplifier stands, Furutech RD-2 CD demagnetizer.

--Robert Deutsch

The Fujitsu Ten Eclipse TD712z's claimed low-frequency response limit is 40Hz, but this is at roughly 6dB. That's still a lot to ask of a 4.7" driver, especially one that must reproduce the rest of the audioband as well. But, surprisingly, with the standard level set at 80dB using the RadioShack SPL meter (C weighting, fast; Stereophile Test CD

2), the bass in my room actually held out to the 40Hz range, helped by a room mode at 50Hz. So, at least at this level (I didn't want to push it higher than 80dB with test tones), the Eclipse's bass was more extended than one might expect, given the size of its driver and enclosure. In normal listening, the bass was very smooth and even, apparently rolling off in a gradual way that suggested greater bass extension than was in fact produced. String bass was particularly clean, with enough of the fundamental not to sound too threadbare and an absence of transient overhang. The bass drum in the opening of Ramirez's Misa Criolla (Philips 420 955-2) was convincing enough that if I hadn't heard it reproduced by a speaker with greater bass extension and power I might not have thought there was anything missing.

A factor that undoubtedly helped to make the TD712z's bass sound more impressive than it might have been in purely objective terms was the speaker's tonal balance. The treble was smooth, lacking in grain, sufficiently extended to communicate instrumental overtones and transients, but not overextended. A well-known trick of loudspeaker design (pay attention; this could be on the next test) is a careful balancing of the amount of bass and treble. A speaker with highly extended, powerful bass will sound best if it has correspondingly extended treble, but if the treble is relatively weak then the speaker will sound bass-heavy, and if the speaker has relatively weak bass but extended treble it will sound too bright. The TD712z's balance of high and low frequencies was such that they seemed to be in just the right proportion. It was mostly when playing music with a lot of low bass at a high level that the TD712z's bass-response limitations became obvious: the low-bass synthesizer notes on Mickey Hart's Planet Drum (Rykodisc RCD-10206) were simply missing in action. But again, what was there was clean, and the imaging and clarity of the transients were almost enough to make up for what was missing at the low end.

**THE FUJITSU TEN ECLIPSE TD712Z IS AN EXTRAORDINARY LOUDSPEAKER WHOSE CLARITY, TRANSPARENCY, RESOLUTION, IMAGING, AND TIMBRAL ACCURACY MATCH OR EXCEED THOSE OF JUST ABOUT EVERY OTHER SPEAKER I'VE HAD IN MY SYSTEM OR HEARD AT SHOWS.**

**Conclusion**

The Fujitsu Ten Eclipse TD712z is an extraordinary loudspeaker whose clarity, transparency, resolution, imaging, and timbral accuracy matches or exceed those of just about every other speaker I've had in my system or heard at shows. Offhand, the only speaker I can think of that's in the same league as far as these characteristics are concerned is the latest Quad electrostatic, the ESL-2805. The TD712z's limitations—which it shares with the Quad—are an inability to play very loud (especially in large rooms), and bass response that, while satisfactory for most music, is more limited in extension than what you can get for the price from more "normal" speakers.

My own Avantgarde Unos represent, in a way, the opposite end of the spectrum: They can play extremely loud with very little power, and their twin powered subwoofers provide as much bass as any sane person would want. Another obvious difference is in the level of coloration: the Uno's is low for a horn hybrid, but still much higher than that of the TD712z.

What these two speakers with very different design approaches have in common is an ability to make music sound alive, I wish I could afford to have—and had the space for—both. As I write this conclusion, the Unos are still in storage in another room of the house, and I haven't listened to them for a couple of months. When I do so again, I'll have to give serious consideration to whether I want to keep the Fujitsu Ten Eclipse TD712z's instead. They're that good.
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Design 4

LOUDSPEAKER

The first time I attended the Las Vegas Consumer Electronics Show, in January 1986, I didn't get there until the second day of the Show. Still, by the beginning of the fourth and final day I'd managed to visit every high-end audio exhibit, and still had time to go back for seconds to the rooms that had sounded the best. Twenty years later, CES has grown so much that it's impossible for a single writer to visit even a quarter of the exhibits in which he might be interested. And even with the sort of team reporting Stereophile now practices, covering the Show has become an exercise in applied logistics for the busy journalist: “Should I wait for the free shuttle bus? Should I get a taxi—though I might get caught in Las Vegas's increasing traffic jams, or even just get stuck at the city's interminable traffic lights? Or should I take the new monorail—though that goes nowhere near the hotel in which [insert name of hot company] is demming its products?”

During the four days of the 2005 CES, I estimated I spent eight hours in taxis, buses, and their respective queues. But I did make the effort to visit the Signal Path International suite at the Mirage Hotel, because the Musical Fidelity distributor was introducing its own new brand of speakers, Era Acoustics, designed by Jim Spanhour and David Solomon, engineered by Aerial Acoustics' Michael Kelly, and manufactured in China.

I was particularly struck by the Era Design 4, selling for just $600/pair. Driven, naturally, by Musical Fidelity amplification, a pair of these tiny two-way speakers
produced a much bigger sound in the hotel suite than they had any right to. Yes, they were benefiting from some boundary reinforcement, but this was definitely a loudspeaker that punched above its weight. I asked for a pair for review, along with a pair of Era's SUB10 powered subwoofers. Bob Reina shouldn't get to review all the affordable speakers, right?

The Design 4
This little speaker stands just short of 10" tall, its front baffle almost completely occupied by its two drive-units. These are both rabbeted into the baffle and securely mounted with Allen-head wood screws. The tweeter appears to be a conventional design: its 1" silk-dome tweeter is set back within a shallow flare in the front plate, and its woofer, constructed on a diecast 4" frame, uses a 3"-diameter Kevlar/fiber-composite cone and a substantially sized magnet. The woofer is reflex-loaded with a small, deep port on the rear of the wood-veneered cabinet. This is flared on both ends to minimize wind noise, and below the port are two rubber-grommet-covered keyholes to allow the speaker to be mounted on a wall.

It came as no surprise to find that the tiny Era Design 4 was not very sensitive, 2.83V drive raising just 83.5dB(B) at 1m. However, its impedance remained above 8 ohms at almost all frequencies, with a minimum value of 6.2 ohms at 204Hz (fig.1). This speaker will not ask for much in the way of current from the partnering amplifier. In fact, it might work well with high-powered tube designs. The impedance traces are free from the wrinkles and discontinuities that would imply the existence of panel resonances. Nevertheless, investigating the cabinet's vibrational behavior with a simple plastic-tape accelerometer, I found some fairly high-level resonant modes at 395Hz, 490Hz, and 680Hz. Fig.2 shows a cumulative spectral-decay plot calculated from the output of the accelerometer when it was fastened to the center of the cabinet sidewall. These resonances should be sufficiently high in frequency that their audibility will be minimal, though I do wonder if they might be the source of the slight lack of lower-midrange definition I noted. The saddle centered on 51Hz in the impedance-magnitude traces suggests that this is the tuning frequency of the rear-facing port—significantly lower in frequency than I would have expected from a speaker of this size. The low port tuning, according to an e-mail I received from Signal Path's Jim Spainhour, was done so that the speaker could be mounted on a wall "and not have one-note bass pounding away." The plot of the woofer's nearfield output in fig.3 indicates that the minimum-motion frequency is indeed 51Hz, though the plot of the port's output reveals that its peak is displaced a little below that frequency. The sum of the individual responses (top trace below 200Hz in fig.3), which takes into account both acoustic phase and the greater distance of the port from a nominal farfield measur-

**Measurements**

![Fig.1 Era Acoustics Design 4, electrical impedance (solid) and phase (dashed). (2 ohms/vertical div.)](image1)

![Fig.2 Era Acoustics Design 4, cumulative spectral-decay plot calculated from the output of an accelerometer fastened to the cabinet's side panel level with the lower woofer (MLS driving voltage to speaker, 7.55V; measurement bandwidth, 2kHz).](image2)

![Fig.3 Era Acoustics Design 4, anechoic response on tweeter axis at 50", averaged across 30° horizontal window and corrected for microphone response, with the nearfield responses of the port and woofer, and their complex sum, plotted below 600Hz, 300Hz, and 300Hz, respectively.](image3)
ducive to placing speakers close to the wall behind them. I ended up with the Design 4s about 48" out into the room but just 12" from the sidewalls, which would give some boundary reinforcement at low frequencies. The speakers were mounted on 24" Celestion stands whose central pillars were mass-loaded with a mixture of dry sand and lead shot.

My first impression, other than noting that the Eras' low frequencies did not sound lean, was of the enormous yet stable soundstage they threw. I had no sense of sound emanating from the actual physical positions of the Design 4s. Instead, they allowed a window to be opened onto the stereo stage of each recording I played. This was particularly noticeable with my own recordings: Whether it was the spacious acoustic of Sioux Falls' Washington Pavilion on Cantus' There Lies the Home (CD, Cantus CTS-1206); the more anonymous modern hall at Utah's Weber State University on Variations (CD, Stereophile STPH017-2); the reverberant ambience of Santa Fe's Loreto Chapel on Duet (CD, Stereophile STPH012-2); the small-church acoustic of Chad Kassem's Blue Heaven Studios in Salina, Kansas, on Mosaic (CD, Stereophile STPH015-2); or the small Santa Monica recital hall I used to record all 32 of Beethoven's piano sonatas (CD, OrpheumMasters RSP830), there was virtually no sense that the speakers were imposing their own interpretation on the original venues' sizes and shapes.

Moreover, those acoustics seemed wider and deeper, more tangible, than I'd been used to with the last two speakers I'd used, the Revel Ultima Studio and the Snell LCR7XL. The members of the backing choir on Stanford's "Outward Bound" (from There Lies the Home) stood unambiguously behind and around the
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baritone soloist, and the piano back a bit farther still, just as they had at the original sessions. Some speakers achieve a wide soundstage but leave the center of the stage a little unstable, images tending to pull to the sides. That was not the case with the Era Design 4; the image of the dual-mono pink-noise track on Editor's Choice (Stereophile STPH016-2) remained well defined at the center of the image.

And this enormous, stable soundstage had not been achieved—at least not obviously so—by the Design 4s throwing the necessary recorded treble detail forward at the listener so that the sonic dues to image depth could be more easily decoded. Tonally, yes, the Era's low treble was a little exaggerated in absolute terms, but this didn't flatten the image. What it did do was make the speaker rather intolerant of poor source quality. A favorite CD of mine, of orchestral works by Delius, is La Calinda (CD, EMI CDM 7 69534 2), a collection of recordings from 1962 through 1977. Not only was the analog tape hiss on the older transfers very audible through the Design 4s, so were tape compression and distortion. But with more modern recordings, such as Richard Hickox and the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic performing Gerald Finzi's Intimations of Immortality (CD, EMI CDC 7 49913 2), the speaker's top two octaves sounded smooth and grain-free.

The Design 4's lower midrange sounded a little reticent and lacking in ultimate definition. This was particularly noticeable on Duke Ellington's "The Mooche," from the Jerome Harris Quintet's Rendezvous (CD, Stereophile STPH013-2). I had balanced Harris' acoustic bass guitar quite low in the mix. Had I monitored with the Eras when I mastered this album, I would have brought the bass-guitar level up a tad. The low and midbass were missing in action, of course, the half-step-spaced tonebursts on Editor's Choice sounding audibly threadbare below 80Hz. However, there was a degree of upper-bass bloom that sounded not unpleasant. This also contributed to the illusion that the Design 4 was producing more bass than it actually was, and also subjectively balanced its slight excess of mid-treble energy.

With a woofer having a radiating diameter of just 3", the Design 4 necessarily had a limited dynamic range. At levels approaching 90dB, the upper midrange started to sound rather thickened. The men's voices on Peter Schickele's "Jonah's Song," from There Lies the Home, sounded a little "intermoddy" when they changed from singing in octaves to parallel fifths.

**With the Sub 10**

For the remainder of my listening sessions, I set up the two Era SUB10 subwoofers about a fifth of the way into the room from the wall behind the speakers (Signal Path recommends a third of the way, which wasn't possible in my room), with one each against the left and right walls. I continued to run the Design 4s through the SUB10s' filter, polarity, and level controls by ear to give the best integration with the satellites. The red trace in fig.7 suggests I did well, though I obviously have a liking for exaggerated low bass! The levels of the subwoofers should have been brought down by at least 6dB for a truly neutral in-room low-end response.

In the time domain, the Design 4's step response (fig.8) indicates that both of its drive-units are connected in positive acoustic polarity, and the excellent integration between the HF and LF steps correlates with the good integration between them in the frequency response's crossover region. The cumulative spectral-decay plot (fig.9) is superbly clean.

This is excellent measured performance, even if you don't take into account the Era Design 4's price of $600/pair.

—John Atkinson

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![Fig.7 Era Acoustics Design 4s, spatially averaged, 6-octave response in JA's listening room with (red) and without (blue) two SUB10 subwoofers.](image7)

![Fig.8 Era Acoustics Design 4, step response on tweeter axis at 50° (5ms time window, 30kHz bandwidth).](image8)

![Fig.9 Era Acoustics Design 4, cumulative spectral-decay plot at 50° (0.15ms risetime).](image9)
Stereophile's 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!"

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full-range, driven by the Halcro dm38 stereo amplifier, but took a second set of interconnects from the Mark Levinson No.326S preamp's unbalanced outputs to the SUB10s' RCA inputs.

The SUbl0 (US$2000 each) is a hefty sealed unit weighing 65 lbs and standing almost 19" high on its spiked feet, by 14.2" wide and 12.5" deep. Finished in the same choice of real-wood veneers as the Design 4, it is a fine piece of furniture in its own right, though the blue LEDs on its front and back faces when it comes out of standby are a mite garish. It uses a 300W amplifier to drive a downward-firing, 10" mineral-loaded polymer-cone woofer. Left and right High (speaker) and Low (line) level inputs are provided, along with passthrough outputs. Both low-pass filter frequency and level are adjustable with continuous rotary controls, and a polarity switch allows selection of 0° or 180° for optimal matching to the satellites. The low-pass filter can be bypassed to allow an A/V receiver's crossover to be used instead, and boundary EQ can be switched into circuit to optimize the SUB10's performance when used on its side, in, for example, a custom-install setup.

After some experimentation, I ended up with the SUbl0s' low-pass filters set to 100Hz and the polarity to 180°. I set their level by ear, and, as you can see from the "Measurements" sidebar, I was a bit generous. The effect of adding the SUbl0s was to turn the Design 4s into genuine full-range speakers. I had resisted the urge to play classical orchestral recordings through the Design 4s alone, but with the lower octaves fleshed out by the SUbl0s, such large-scale favorites as Sir Adrian Boult's 1969 performance with the London Philharmonic of Elgar's oratorio The Kingdom (CD, EMI CMS 7 64209 2) were reproduced with impressive sweep, though the ultimate dynamics were still rather restricted.

As is usual with satellite-subwoofer systems, the Design 4s and SUbl0s never achieved the sense of leading-edge definition you get from a true full-range loudspeaker like the Revel Studio, the Era's low bass always lagging slightly behind the musical pulse and sounding a bit "woofy." This wasn't much of an issue with the E191. But with well-recorded rock, such as No Quarter: Unledded, the DVD-V of Jimmy Page's and Robert Plant's 1994 MTV performance (Warner Video R2 970324), I got the weight of the kick drum and bass guitar but not the timing. Nevertheless, provided I didn't play the music too loud, the effect was agreeable, and not even close to the "one-note bass" too often heard from satellite-subwoofer systems. And Robert Silverman's Steinwayкультурной подготовки, о которой в этом номере журнала мы хотим немного рассказать. Мы не ищем новых нюансов, а хотелось бы показать, как музыка может быть увлекательной и интересной для слушателя. Мы рассмотрим некоторую музыку, которая может быть интересна для всех слушателей, и представим некоторые идеи, которые могут быть полезны для множества аудио-любителей. Мы хотим показать, как музыка может быть интересной и увлекательной для всех слушателей.

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В этом номере мы рассмотрим некоторые идеи, которые могут быть полезны для множества аудио-любителей. Мы хотим показать, как музыка может быть интересной и увлекательной для всех слушателей.
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Merlin Music Systems VSM-MX
When I favorably reviewed the Merlin Music Systems VSM Millennium loudspeaker in 2001, I noted that Merlin’s Bobby Palkovic had been tweaking and upgrading the two-way floorstander since 1994. Back then, seven years seemed a long time to stick with a product, given the competitive speaker market, though there are precedents: for example, Wilson Audio Specialties’ WATT/Puppy series (since 1988) and Vandersteen’s 2 (since, I believe, 1977).

Now five more years have passed, and while many other speaker designers have moved on with brand-new products, Palkovic is still poring over and tweaking his 1994 design. It was time to give another listen to the VSM, which was rated “Class A” in Stereophile’s “Recommended Components” and has increased in price by more than 25%, from $8150 to $10,500/pair.

The latest Merlin VSM, the MX, looks identical to the earlier version I reviewed, and both the outstanding 1” Dynaudio Esotar D330A tweeter and Merlin’s custom version of the 6½” ScanSpeak 854506 woofer (another version of which is used in the Wilson WATT), have been retained. But inside, much else has been modified or upgraded. Palkovic says his goals were to improve the VSM’s top-to-bottom “continuance,” shift the spectral balance “a hair lower,” improve pitch definition in the bass, improve micro- and macodynamic response, and just plain make the speaker sound “more right.”

Starting at the bottom and working up: The speaker’s floor coupling and stability have been improved by changing the placement and arrangement of the threaded inserts for the feet, as well as their number: two in the front and three in the rear. This offers the option of two and one feet or two and two, depending on which sounds better in a given location.

Palkovic told me that, since I wrote my review in 2001, he has stopped making the cabinets of MDF and now uses “pan fiber,” a heavier, more inerter material whose higher proportion of wood pulp to binder means it rings less. (When I went back to my original review, I found that the change had already been made by then.) The adhesive was also changed to a new polyurethane glue that never completely hardens but is ten times stronger than the conventional wood glues used previously.

A small resonance below the port on the VSM’s front baffle is said to have been greatly attenuated by extending the double-thickness front baffle below the port to the intersection between the cabinet and the base’s sand chamber. A radius was milled on the inside edge of the port and its length recalculated, which was said to minimize port turbulence and the “chuffing” that was interfering with the purity of the midrange response—and which flapped John Atkinson’s pants legs from 10’ away.

New proprietary inductors jointly developed by Merlin and Hovland over a three-year period are claimed to have very low equivalent series resistance (ESR), high power handling, and extremely linear operation. The result, says Palkovic, is lower distortion and cleaner, more organic sound. And he spent “years,” Palkovic says, searching for just the right balance of cabinet primer/scaler and the top coat of automotive finish that would offer more rigidity but less energy storage. The cryogenic treatment of crossover networks, and critical improvements in electrical and mechanical damping, are claimed to further reduce the VSM’s already low level of high-frequency “grain and grunge.”

The speaker’s Super BAM bass-enhancement module, which provides a boost of about 5dB at 35Hz, has also been totally redesigned, in part to make it EU-compliant. First the “wall wart” and matching overseas transformer were jettisoned, and replaced with a 500kHz switch-mode power supply that allows the BAM to work anywhere in the world at 50 or 60Hz, and from 100 to 240V. A 200kHz filter is said to remove the negative effects of the switching circuitry. The BAM’s charging capacitors were replaced with Nichicon Muse series caps, and the voltage regulators were changed to enable the power supply to draw 20% more current from the battery pack. The new battery pack allows the BAM’s running time to remain the same despite the greater current draw.

Setup and Listening: Palkovic and his assistant, Rich Brkich, set up the VSM-MXs where the VSMs had been located last time: well out into the room and much closer together than I’m used to, each speaker toed-in toward the listening position by 10° because the Esotar tweeter is best located last time: well out into the room and much closer together than I’m used to, each speaker toed-in toward the listening position by 10° because the Esotar tweeter is best

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with a stable 10 ohm load. However, if you’re using a solid-state amp terminated with a Zobel network (ask the manufacturer), you’re best off not using it, as the two networks in series will create a resonance-inducing “tank circuit.”

**Have the upgrades improved the sound?** So much has changed in my system in the five years since 2001 that making definitive statements about peripheral upgrades made to a speaker whose cabinet and drivers have not changed is better left to pontificating audio gurus needing to assert their hearing acumen. That said, I think I heard an even better VSM than before, though the differences were subtle. That makes sense—the speaker was so well-voiced before.

The Dynaudio Esotar D330A, which is also used in the Rockport Antares, is one of my favorite tweeters. As implemented in the Merlin, it offered airy, ultratraded, grain-free high frequencies and electrostatic-like resolution. Like the VSM Millennium, the MX’s low-level resolution and microdynamic presentation were positively mesmerizing, resulting in “cascading reverberant trail-offs extend[ing] into seemingly impossible depths of time and space, exposing new layers of ultra-low detail from even the most familiar recordings,” as I wrote in the original review.

Despite its awesome resolution of detail, the VSM-MX never sounded mechanical or fattiging. For a two-way, its overall performance was impressively seamless, its midrange remarkably uncolored. It avoided a pronounced midbass bump while providing reasonably good, satisfying bass extension.

Having the speakers positioned so close together took some getting used to, but thanks to the Esotar tweeter’s dispersion and the VSM-MX’s ability to sonically “disappear,” when the lights were out it was easy to think the speakers were much farther apart than they were.

The biggest improvement I think I heard was at the bottom end, though even with the BAM, the VSM is not a room-shaker. Although a pair of these speakers can fill a large room, bombas-

**THE VSM-MX CONTINUES TO BE A VERY SPECIAL LOUDSPEAKER THAT’S EASY TO DRIVE AND OFFERS AN EXQUISITELY BALANCED SONIC EXPERIENCE.**

always seems to be votted among the “best sounding” at audio consumer and trade shows. At such events the VSMs are almost always driven by tube electronics; I found the VSM-MX sounded best powered by the tube Music Reference RM-200.

**Conclusion:** The increase in price to $10,500 from $8150 five years ago makes this two-way, two-driver design a bit of a harder sell (though the VSM-MM version, introduced in what Merlin calls Studio Black, costs only $8200 with a single-ended Super BAM and $9400 with a balanced Super BAM). Merlin’s VSM-MX/MM faces some serious competition—for instance, from the Vandersteen Quatro with powered woofers ($7000/pair, or $10,000/pair in wood finish). However, the VSM-MX continues to be a very special loudspeaker that’s easy to drive and offers an exquisitely balanced sonic experience. The VSM-MX has limitations compared with larger, more powerful speakers, but the almost fanatical intensity and dedication with which it has been refined and tweaked over the years is what high-performance audio is all about.

—Michael Fremer

**Halcro dm38 power amplifier**

When I reviewed the 180Wpc Halcro dm38 stereo power amplifier in October 2004 (see www.stereophile.com/solid-stateamps/1004halcro), I found a rather higher level of distortion just before the amplifier reached its clipping point than was specified by the manufacturer. I also concluded that while the solid-state dm38 sounded superb, particularly with respect to its effortless dynamics and its astonishingly clean presentation, the amplifier is balanced toward the cool side of the spectrum, and will work best with speakers and source components that don’t themselves sound lean.

After the review sample (serial no.110015) had been returned to Halcro in Australia, designer Bruce Candy informed me that they had found that a small capacitor in the amplifier’s circuit was out of tolerance, and that they would send me a second sample. This sample (serial no.1100130) duly arrived, and after a delay while I reviewed other products, I unpacked it and used it for much of my usual review auditioning. The front end for my listening was the Mark Levinson No.30.6 D/A processor driven by the digital output of a Classe cpd-202 CD/DVD-Audio player and the Ayre Era Design 4, Stirling LS3/5a Mk.2, Harbeth HL-P3ES 2, and Snell LCR7 XL loudspeakers. My comments on the amplifier’s sound are based on my experience with all of those speakers.

While I had some doubts about the universal applicability of the first dm38 sample, I had no such misgivings about the second. Far from sounding cool, its character—if an amplifier as neutral as this one could be said to have a character—was, if anything, slightly warm. “Rich-sounding,” “weighty,” “authoritative,” read my listening notes—the dm38 seemed to offer a superbly clean window into the recorded soundstage. That soundstage was also wide and deep where appropriate, with superbly well-defined and stable instrumental images.

I used the Halcro while applying the final touches to my two most recent recording projects, Variations (Stereophile STPH017-2) and There Lies the Home (Cantus CTS-1206), feeding the 24-bit/88.2kHz files from my laptop to the Levinson DAC via the AES/EBU data output of a Metric Halo MIO2882 FireWire interface. Dynamics seemed unstrained with the full-range Revel speakers, and while I still feel my reference Mark Levinson No.33H

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1 The dm38 costs $18,790, Halcro, 118 Hayward Avenue, Torrensville, South Australia 5031. Tel: (61) 8-8238-0807. Fax: (61) 8-8238-0852, US distributor: On A Higher Note, LLC, 26081 Via Estrella, San Juan Capistrano, CA 92675. Tel: (949) 488-3004. Fax: (949) 488-3284. Web: www.halcro.com.
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monoblocks have a little more low-frequency authority, the dm38 is no slouch in this area. If anything, the Halcro's higher-frequency presentation was even freer of grain, judging by the sound of my own master files.

But it was the conflict between my measurements of the dm38 and the specified performance that was the primary motive for my doing a "Follow-Up." Fig.1 shows how the first sample of the dm38's percentage of THD+noise varied with increasing output power into 8, 4, and 2 ohms. The downward slope of the traces in this graph below 20W or so indicates that if there is any distortion present, it is buried in the amplifier's noise floor. Above that level, it does appear that the THD is higher than specified, up to the point where the amplifier starts to clip.

Fig.2 clearly indicates a predominance of third-harmonic content.

Turning to the new sample of the dm38, my initial measurements of the second sample were identical to those of the first. Before I published them, however, I needed to check out my measurement equipment.

The first suspect was the signal generator of my 17-year-old Audio Precision System One DSP. This had been checked out by the factory a few years back, and at the output required to drive the Halcro to a level where I had been finding third-harmonic content, the THD+N level was just 0.00055%, or one-tenth that of the amplifier. To examine the harmonic content of the generator's output, I first fed it to the National Instruments measurement card in my PC, which is the platform for the Miller Audio Research software suite, but the only harmonic apparent above the noise floor in the graph (not shown) was the second.

I therefore fed the residual signal after the 1kHz fundamental had been notched out to an external 24-bit A/D converter (a Benchmark DAC1) and fed that unit's AES/EBU output to the input of a PrismSound DScope 2 to perform FFT analysis. The resultant spectrum, with 128 samples averaged to further reduce the noise content, is shown in fig.3. The combination of the gain applied by the Audio Precision's analyzer and the Benchmark DAC1 was 60dB, meaning that 60dB must be added to the numbers in this graph's vertical scale to give the true level of the harmonics.

The AP's monitor output is unbalanced, and the electrical connection to the A/D converter, then to the DScope card in a second computer, introduced some grounding spuriae in this graph, most noticeably at 60Hz, 180Hz, and 300Hz. These should be ignored. The primary distortion harmonic in fig.3 is the second at 2kHz, which lies at ~52dB; i.e., ~112dB (0.0005%), once the 60dB of gain is taken into account. The third, fifth, and seventh harmonics can also be seen just above the ~60dB (~120dB) line. But the point to note is that the Audio Precision's own distortion is well below what I measured in the dm38.

The next suspect was the test load. My standard load is a matrix of noninductively wound 8 ohm, 1% Dale power resistors, each with a power handling of 250W and mounted to a heatsink. Double-pole, double-throw switches allow these to be configured
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with values of 8, 4, or 2 ohms. I had last checked the switches and wiring in 2003, but my next test was to acquire new power resistors and hook them up without any switches in the signal path, paralleling them as required using 12-gauge jumper cables. These gave identical results to my usual load.

In an e-mail he had sent me following my tests of the Halcro dm88 (published in the August 2006 issue), in which I had also found slightly higher levels of distortion than Halcro specified, Bruce Candy had suggested an additional test, to examine the linearity of my test load: “Connect, say, ten 1 ohm, 2W metal-film resistors in parallel to give 0.1 ohm in total. Connect one end of this resistance in series with your 4 ohm loudspeaker earth [ground] and the other to the amplifier’s positive terminal. Adjust the Audio Precision’s output signal to a value that results in 450-500W [with the dm88], then measure the THD across the 0.1 ohm resistor. This should be low; if not, the load is nonlinear and thus the source of the problem.”

The dm88 had been returned to the distributor by this time, but I performed Candy’s test on the dm38, at a level close to clipping into 4 ohms. To my surprise, while the test load appeared to be linear with the amplifier’s right channel, I found some third harmonic present with the left. I then found that the third harmonic moved to the right channel when I swapped the channel wiring—but, to my even greater surprise, not when I swapped back the loads but not the wiring. Only one explanation correlates with this behavior: The observed distortion was coming from the wire (with its connectors), not the load resistors or the Halcro amplifier!

To facilitate the hooking-up of amplifiers in my test lab, I use 6’ lengths of 14-gauge multistrand cable fitted with stackable dual banana (4mm) plugs and short adapter cables fitted with a dual banana plug at one end and, at the other, single bananas, spade lugs, or bare ends. It turned out that the connection of one of the dual bananas to one of the 6’ cables was not as conductive as it should have been, due to oxidation of the cable conductors under the banana plug’s grub screw. Mystery solved—though I don’t have a clue why the nonlinearity manifested itself only at high currents.

I removed all the banana plugs from the cables, restripped the cable ends, reattached the plugs, and redid the distortion tests on the Halcro dm38 using the new load. Fig.4 shows how the THD+N percentage changes with output power into 8 and 4 ohms. By comparison with fig.1, it can be seen that the THD+N figure does not increase until the amplifier clips, with the sawtooth nature of the traces due to the fact that the dm38’s distortion is at the residual level of the Audio Precision’s resolution. The audioband distortion is now just 0.00072% into both 8 and 4 ohms, and fig.5 reveals that while it is almost as low in harmonic content as the Audio Precision’s generator output, there is still a hint of third harmonic.

But overall, the Halcro dm38 now conforms to its specified low distortion at high powers and, possibly, the dm88 as well.

With its measured performance exonerated by my final series of tests and a sound quality even better than I remember of the first sample, the Halcro dm38 continues to occupy its position in the first rank of recommended amplifiers.

—John Atkinson
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To be a staunch Who fan is to be a long-suffering fan of Pete Townshend, a man whose occasional transgressions include soldiering on with the Who following the demise of Keith Moon, and then again after John Entwistle’s death. Time has proven the former strategy an artistic disaster, and nowadays you won’t find too many champions of the Kenny Jones-era Who (take 1981’s Face Dances or 1982’s It’s Hard—please).

But maybe it’s too early to tell whether the Who’s post-Ox incarnation is folly. The current touring ensemble—Townshend and Roger Daltrey, plus drummer Zak Starkey, bassist Pino Palladino, keyboardist Rabbit Bundrick, and guitarist Simon Townshend—passes the blindfold test for all but the most recalcitrant Who purists. And though on paper this first studio album in a quarter century to be released under the Who imprint may resemble a Pete Townshend record with guests, Endlesswire does, in fact, feel and sound like a Who album.

The album’s backstory: After composing two new tunes for Then and Now, a 2004 collection of Who hits, Townshend felt reinvigorated enough to halt the band’s slide into a touring oldies franchise. Endlesswire ultimately came together after he’d completed the titular mini-opera comprising the album’s second half.

Townshend strikes gold at the outset with “Fragments,” which is overtly “Baba O’Riley”-ish with its undulating keyboard loop, tumbling drums, and signature Townshend suspended-chord riffs. “Are we breathing out or breathing in / Are we leaving life or moving in,” sings Daltrey, as his partner slips in an “Undertone”-like lick, and while the lyric is consistent with Townshend’s metaphysical navel-gazing, the rhetorical query can also be read as a manifesto: We’re back.

Then Endlesswire prematurely falters with the mawkish angst-folk of “A Man in a Purple Dress” (about merchants of self-righteousness, another familiar Townshend theme) and the overblown pomp of “Mike Post Theme” (whose cumber-some lyrics deal with media-spawned alienation). Thankfully, the band shakes off the torpor with “Black Widow’s Eyes,” a brawny, emotional vocal, supplying a climax worthy of Tommy.

Thematically, the mini-opera is complex. It roughly concerns some childhood friends who form a band (shades of the Who) and encounter the means to musical transcendence via a Matrix-like device. To grasp the storyline you need to read Townshend’s “weblog novella,” The Boy Who Heard Music (published online at www.petetownshend.co.uk), and be familiar with the utopian and technological themes Townshend explored on the abandoned Who project Lifehouse and his 1993 solo album, Psychoderelict. Ultimately, though, as an album, Endlesswire—while not the equal of the classic records it occasionally references—is a very satisfying addition to the Who canon.

Endlesswire was recorded in analog, with subsequent digital tweaking and deployment of computer software. In Townshend’s “Recording Notes,” he recounts the entire recording process, down to a painstakingly detailed list of every last piece of equipment and why he used it. Regardless of all the digitalia, the results have a natural, warm, nondigital feel. Though the sound is not as primal as Who’s Next, the wide soundstage of Endlesswire makes it a middle sibling between Quadrophenia and Who Are You.

Endlesswire is available in a confusing array of configurations. There’s the 19-song Endlesswire proper; a 21-track version containing extended versions of two songs (“We Got a Hit,” “Endlesswire”) as well as a five-song bonus DVD, Live at Lyon; and a Best Buy-only edition that adds a third disc, a seven-song live CD also titled Live at Lyon. Rest easy, punters: the Who’s complete July 17, 2006 concert at Lyon, France, from which the CD and DVD live tracks have been culled, is available separately as part of the band’s mailbox-only Encore Series of concert recordings.

Speaking of which, the live material offers a potent reminder of the mighty ‘60s performing prowess, from the warhorses “Won’t Get Fooled Again” and “Baba O’Riley” to the often overlooked “Naked Eye” and Endlesswire’s “Mike Post Theme,” the last substantially more convincing than its studio incarnation. This further suggests that as the Who unveil more and more of Endlesswire in concert, those tunes, too, will evolve and come into their own. Townshend himself told Mojo that not only was he looking to make a good record, he wanted a collection of songs that would be gratifying to play live. Indeed, Endlesswire, already a solid record, brims with the kind of adrenalin-fueled potential that has always marked the Who at its most vital. Start queuing up for tickets now.

—Fred Mills
Well, if it's the end of one year, the beginning of another, or anywhere near Easter, it's time for another recording of Handel's Messiah. There are now about 100 complete recordings (more or less) of this work available, and choosing among them is nearly impossible unless you vaguely know what you want going in. If you dislike period instruments, you can eliminate perhaps 25; let's say you disapprove of old music on modern instruments—there go a dozen. Hate countertenors? Get rid of about 30.

Then there's the edition problem. There is no authoritative or "best" edition; Messiah was performed frequently and in different places during Handel's lifetime, and he tended to adapt the work to the performers available. There are alternate arias, and some arias were repositioned for different voices. It's best to not care, really. But the two new performances under consideration here are, in fact, each one of a kind: The one led by Edward Higgensbottom (on Naxos) offers "the only modern account of Handel's unique London performances in April and May 1751, when he used treble voices for both choruses and arias," and the Jacobs presents a version sung in 1750 in which Handel had at his disposal a lineup of virtuoso singers, including the famous castrato Gaetano Guadagni, who was later to create the title role of Gluck's Oedipus. The latter show must have dazzled its audience rather than impressed with its piety, and Jacobs, the Jacobs role of Gluck's Oedipus. The latter show must have dazzled its audience rather than impressed with its piety, and Jacobs, the

In fact, he dazzles a bit too much. Jacobs is one of the great early-music (ie, and also through Haydn) conductors of our day, and I have rarely disagreed with any of his decisions, whether in Mozart (a near-definitive Gol) or Monteverdi (Orfeo, the 1610 Vespros), which have invariably grown out of the music's sense of drama. But here the listener sits up and says "wow" more often than necessary, and Messiah becomes a large selection of little parts.

Quirks: "Behold the Lamb of God" is here a seemingly endless dirge that threatens to bring the entire oratorio to a halt; "Rejoice greatly" is so fast it almost leaves soprano Kerstin Aveno in the dust; and tenor Kobie van Rensburg's "Thou shalt break them" is so hurried and furious that he sounds insane—though with every note impeccably in place. The chorus in "All we like sheep" aspires to some melismas, so that "astray" becomes "astray-hay-hay-hay-hay"; there is some surprising staccato singing in "For unto us a child is born" that sounds puzzlingly playful on the words "Prince of peace"; and the "Amen" chorus is almost bluesy.

Wonderful moments: Bass Neal Davies sings "The people who walked in darkness" in a spooky, vibratoless high voice that is very evocative, and alto Patricia Burdon and countertenor Lawrence Zazzo present a gorgeous, always quiet "He shall feed his flock." The trumpet and vocal lines are thrillingly embellished in "The trumpet shall sound," turning it into the celebration it should be. And there are appoggiaturas everywhere you turn.

Listeners will agree or disagree with these choices, but I suspect few will enjoy what begins as a nice oddity and eventually becomes a dreadful tick, and that has to do with dynamics. Jacobs places wacky sforzando-pianos on certain words in choruses. The marking—not in the score, but that's not the point—means "forcefully quiet" in Italian, and this little piece of oxymoronia's effect is that of a note sung with a fair amount of volume that suddenly almost disappears before coming back fuller than ever—all within a few seconds. It happens first on the final word of "His yoke is easy," and you think someone has done something to your controls (or your ears); it returns on the final "glory" in "He is the King of glory," and, golly, it happens again on the first syllable of "Hallelujah." Moments like these draw attention to themselves, and you begin to wonder about them too much. The "Worthy is the Lamb" choros, by the way, is preceded by an improvised organ florish, in case you didn't know it was coming.

Of course, the performances—ie, what comes out of the singers and players—are topsnotch; indeed, dazzling. This is an exciting, theatrical performance, but it's also affected in a way that occasionally irritates the music. We don't expect anything other than thoughtful, superbly prepared performances from Jacobs, and that's what we get here—my only worry is that you may not like your Handel quite so lit up; it shouldn't be Messiah and His Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat.

In contrast, Edward Higgensbottom's performance is simply splendid. You'll come away from it thoroughly satisfied, and not feeling as if someone has been trying to convince you of something. The Choir of New College Oxford has a terrifically balanced tone despite the absence of women's voices; occasionally, boys' choirs can sound too white, but here we get a great deal of warmth and depth. Granted, it does, in fact, leave us with a somewhat light-sounding Messiah (the non-hen singers, soloists included, also have lightish sounds), but that's an observation, not a criticism. Still, grander moments, such as "The trumpet shall sound," do seem a bit undernourished. Tempos are invariably just right for the music—fast enough to keep it going, but not crazily fast except in "All we like sheep," which feels a bit like a stunt. Highlights include a fluid "Rejoice greatly," given to the tenor (a fine Toby Spence); a ravishing, tastefully embellished "He shall feed his flock" in which the divine countertenor Iestyn Davies joins treble Orta Jones; "I know
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that my redeemer liveth," sung by treble Henry Jenkinson offering lovely trills. This is a straightforward telling of a story, with no exaggerated theatrics, plugged-in piety, or mannerisms—just Messiah, wonderfully performed. All of the singing is topnotch, and so is the playing.

The engineers in the Jacobs have opted for a matte sound—not unappealing, but lacking brightness. The Naxos recording seems wholly natural and spacious. To sum up: The Higginbottom version is one I suspect I'll return to often; the Jacobs will be played for friends to show how odd yet interesting it is. And let's see what the Easter releases bring.

—Robert Levine

rock/pop

RECORD REVIEWS

L.E.O.
Alpacas Orgling

Performance ****
Sonics ****

One of the best lines from This Is Spinal Tap was the observation by David St. Hubbins that there's such a thin line between stupid and clever. Rarely has that been more true than in this brilliant and/or uncool tribute and/or sendup of the Electric Light Orchestra. It takes a few listens, but suddenly you get it: Boston pop producer and player Bleu McAuley wants it both ways.

After "Overture"—exactly the kind of overblown, semiclassical gesture that ELO cofounder Jeff Lynne has always thought of as a good idea for an op ener-comes "Goodbye Innocence." With such lines as "You got a lot of love to give / even if it's a bunch of new-age junk," the song confirms exactly what the game is: It's all a joke, but then again, it's not. What began as a tribute record to ELO became a sendup whose music is very accomplished power-pop that alternately parodies and celebrates Lynne's style in "Nothing Will Ever Change," in which the vocal accents of "No, No, No" are howlingly funny—or the fact that the flavor of ELO's hit "Evil Woman" is woven into half the songs here—is nothing short of beautiful.

You even get the distinct feeling that the album includes some self-help suggestions for Jeff Lynne himself when, in "Distracted," the layered voices chime: "I'm so distracted / the simple fact is / I need to practice / letting go." Alpacas Orgling is that very rare tribute record: one that keeps a sense of humor about its subject.

—Robert Baird

MY MORNING JACKET
Okonokos

Performance ****
Sonics ****

Watching the DVD of My Morning Jacket's Okonokos concert film the other night, I unexpectedly found my attention diverted to my five-year-old. Mouth slightly open, he was thrusting toward the TV screen in an unconscious pantomime of an actual concertgoer's stage-push. The Kentucky combo is legendary for its furiously riffing, hair-swinging live displays, and as "One Big Holiday" (a key song from 2003's It Still Moves) came crashing to its appropriately riotous conclusion, my son was so caught up in the moment that he started hopping on one foot and swinging his arms in the air.

Whether or not this will prove to be his Beatles-on-Ed-Sullivan moment, only time will tell; but the incident speaks volumes of My Morning Jacket's ability to reach out and touch fans. Okonokos is the fifth MMJ album, the follow-up to 2005's Z, and as a vérité document of the Z tour—it was recorded on Halloween at San Francisco's venerable Fillmore West—its captures the band at an artistic and commercial cusp. Bonnaroo-tested and -approved, sure; but on the evidence here, a group transcending its roots and reaching for greatness.

Witness, for example, Okonokos' three-song opener: dreamy overture "Wordless Chorus," the psychedelic/periodic "It Beats for You," and hypnotic rocker "Gideon" magically combine to transport you to a celestial listening room. The celebratory "One Big Holiday" is powered by a swelling, insistant riff and Jim James' keening, soaring vocals; when he throws back his head and wails, he's a man possessed, and you feel the spirit move. And a 21-minute, jam-heavy segment pairing up Z mood piece "Dondante" with It Still Moves' grandly anthemic "Run Thru" is like being baptized by John Coltrane, Santana, Neil Young and Crazy Horse, Quicksilver Messenger Service, and Gov't Mule—holy water, holy music.

Okonokos comes in three formats: two CDs; the aforementioned DVD, a film directed by Sam Erickson featuring 5.1-channel surround sound mixed by Michael H. Brauer (ATO/RCA 82666-85661-9) and missing the CD tracks

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February 2006
“At Dawn,” “Dancefloors,” and “I Think I’m Going to Hell”), and a limited edition of four LPs that include four non-CD bonus tracks (Badman 940).

There’s an old saying that if you’re not already sold on a band, a live album won’t win you over—the Who’s Live at Leeds being the classic exception to the rule. Okonomikos, though, is that rare artifact that’ll make disciples of nonbelievers. —Fred Mills

Frank Sinatra
Vegas

Performance ****** to ****
Sonics ****** to *****

Say what you want about Francis Albert Sinatra the human being, and in most cases you’d be right. By all accounts he was temperamental, volatile, a classic diva with underworld connections. As Quincy Jones says in his essay for this set, “He either loved you from the bottom of his heart unconditionally, or he was capable of running you over in a Mack truck...backwards.”

Sinatra the singer is another matter entirely. He remains a gigantic, towering artist whose gifts were ridiculously numerous. An unfailling vibrato; perhaps the greatest gift ever for instinctive phrasing; sharp, precise diction; and a smooth, sexy tone—all were parts of his art. Yet it’s the sense that no emotional investment was too high that ultimately defines his greatness. No one could sell a tune or stamp a song with his own mark as Sinatra could. He is the greatest singer of popular songs—what he liked to call a “saloon singer”—who probably ever will be.

Ava Gardner, Frank’s great tragic love, is commonly tagged as the source of comments that while the man was often a cretin offstage, he was an angel when he sang. Never was that more true than during Sinatra’s many years of playing Las Vegas, his second home of sorts. He began headlining there in the mid-1950s, when the town was in its infancy and his voice was at the peak of its powers. On these recordings you can hear the confidence he felt in that burgeoning hive of good times and corruption as he jokes with the crowd, lays on the Cagney and Yiddish accents, good-naturedly hacks on Dean Martin, and generally stays clear of the kind of embarrassing statements he often made onstage.

Often, when a musician’s estate begins digging into unreleased material, some of which he or she had held back for valid artistic reasons, the results can be mixed. Lately, some of the dredgngs from the estates of Jimi Hendrix, the Grateful Dead, and now, sadly, the recently passed Johnny Cash, have begun to be less than thrilling. No worries in that regard here. The earliest two shows presented, from 1962 and 1966, are begun to be less than thrilling. No worries in that regard here. The earliest two shows presented, from 1962 and 1966, are prime Sinatra. The two later events, from 1982 and 1987, show that while his voice was waning, the old lion could still roar.

Examples of why Sinatra was a genius, in the most lofty way...hold on to your handbags.” The 1966 recordings, with Count Basie and his band, come from the same live shows that provided the material for Sinatra’s landmark live album, Sinatra at The Sands, yet everything heard on this disc has remained unreleased until now.

The two sets from the 1980s have a completely different vibe. Vocally Sinatra is much diminished, with a thinner tone and a ragged edge to everything. Yet he also plays with the phrasing more often, pulling it like taffy, emphasizing different words, dragging words or phrases dramatically behind or in front of the beat. In the ’82 set he also changes song lyrics—adding “Did ya know” to the opening line of “The Lady Is a Tramp,” and “she’s flat, that’s that” to one reprise of its chorus. Instead of “cold and damp,” California is now “smogy and damp.” His wisecracks have also mellowed, though Sammy and Dean each get their obligatory shots: “old brown eyes” and “old red eyes.”

By 1987 there’s more talking than singing going on, yet it’s still Sinatra, and that at 50% or even 25% is still better than 100% of any other singer. And when he raves it up in a raucous “Mack the Knife,” it’s clear that there was still more than fumes left in the tank. The DVD, from a 1978 date at Caesar’s Palace, is Sinatra at his smoothest: schmoozing the crowd, telling by-now-hackneyed jokes, very aware he’s being filmed. It’s Old Blue Eyes in his hammy glory—but when he eases into “Someone to Watch Over Me” or “Send In the Clowns,” fans can do little else but smile and shake their heads.

Even the backstage footage, as he adjusts his tie 700 times, is worth a look. Newcomers to the Chairman of the Board may want to dip into his studio albums before plunging into this Vegas pool, but for fans, this set is easily worth the $80. The packaging, which includes a 60-page book and ribbons under the CDs (the better to lift them out), is better than the usual boxed-set fare. And the pair of early live sets of absolutely knockout Sinatra, recorded in remarkably good sound with an impressive amount of you-are-there presence, are wonderful treats. Sonically, the later recordings, while obviously better recorded in terms of dynamics, lack the excitement of the two earlier sets, and feel a bit boxy and closed. Yet all four CDs and the DVD have remnants of the electricity that charged the air when Sinatra performed live. As proof, there are the crowds—adoring, appreciative, laughing at literally everything that comes out of his mouth. As far as undiscovered, unreleased material goes, this is easily the pick of the 2006 boxed-set crop.

—Robert Baird

www.stereophile.com, January 2007
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Out-of-print LP Treasures
Jazz
BILLY HART
Quartet

Billy Hart, drums; Mark Turner, tenor sax; Ethan Iverson, piano; Ben Street, bass
Performance ****
Sonic ****

Independent labels such as HighNote are the lifeblood of jazz. HighNote records many of the best players in New York, and does it with style: excellent sound quality, real liner notes, cool photos and graphics. Engineer A.T. Michael MacDonald recorded Quartet on an eight-channel Sony Sonoma DSD system. The sound is so good that only the music is there.

Over 40 years, drummer Billy Hart has played with a long list of important musicians, including Hancock, Tyner, Getz, and Charles Lloyd, who said of him, “Billy’s the best. He’s not about keeping time.” Hart’s clamorous cymbal line on the opening track, “Mellow B,” is broken by asymmetrical snare accents that gather complexity and erupt and recede but never settle. Hart indeed does not “keep” time but implies it. His swing is his own, existential and relative, and highly stimulating to his adventurous band. Hart is free to create ongoing percussive texture and color because bassist Ben Street is a powerful throb at the core of this music.

Mark Turner is probably the least celebrated of the current major voices on tenor sax. On all nine tracks, he plays fascinating lines that are impossible to anticipate, from the full range of his horn. On “Neon,” by the band’s pianist, Ethan Iverson, he partners with Hart to trace the theme’s fanfare, then starts over in his solo to build his own bold, independent comment. He opens Coltrane’s “Moment’s Notice” with wrong croaking notes, then shows it was for fun as he rounds into form and flies away with it. On “Charvez,” composed by Hart for his wife, Turner stays in the ensemble until 5:13; then, when he solos, it is in long, stunning, high cries that transform the song’s fervor.

The most surprising player is Ethan Iverson, who here sounds nothing like the bombastic pianist of The Bad Plus. Strategic and concise, he finds interesting, edgy ways to fit in with and add to this music’s volatile lyricism.

—Thomas Conrad
Charles Mingus, bass, piano; Lonnie Hillyer, Hobart Dotson, trumpet; Jimmy Owens, trumpet, flugelhorn; Charles McPherson, alto sax; Julius Watkins, French horn; Howard Johnson, tuba; Dannie Richmond, drums

Sunnyside SSC 3041 (2 CDs). 2006. Sue Mingus, prod.; UCLA Technical Staff, engs. AAD. TT: 87:31

Performance ****
Sonics **

With one foot in the bebop mainstream and the other in the avant-garde, Charles Mingus was a genre unto himself, a cranky colossus whose music still stands slightly outside the jazz canon a quarter-century after his death. This concert recording captures the bassist-bandleader in his prime, temper tantrums and all, as he spans a stylistic gamut that runs from classical to Dixieland.

Mingus composed this material for the 1965 Monterey Jazz Festival, but his set there was cut short, so he presented the complete program a week later at the University of California, Los Angeles. The performance was recorded by UCLA technicians and issued as two LPs on Mingus's own mail-order label under the title Music Written for Monterey, 1965. Not Heard... Played in Its Entirety, at UCLA. The master tapes were subsequently discarded, and these CDs were made from the original LPs. The sound quality falls well short of optimal, but the music still dazzles.

Mingus referred to his bands as "workshops," and their performances were virtual public rehearsals, filled with digressions and interruptions. Here, in a relatively mild outburst, he stops the band twice, and dismisses half of the musicians for one number before bringing them back onstage.

Distinctive brass sonorities were a Mingus trademark. At UCLA he assembled an unusual octet of three trumpets, French horn, tuba, and alto sax, plus bass and drums. Howard Johnson often plays the bass lines on tuba, leaving Mingus free to double on piano or bow his bass, as he does on the opening "Meditation on Inner Peace." The band is pared down to a quartet for "Ode to Bird and Dizzy," with saxophonist Charles McPherson and trumpeter Lonnie Hillyer spinning abstract variations on familiar bebop themes. The octet is back on "They Trespass the Land of the Sacred Sioux," which features a surrealistic dialogue between McPherson's sax and Mingus's piano.

Trumpeter Hobart Dotson, an obscure but impressive high-note specialist, is spotlighted on "The Arts of Tatum and Freddy [sic] Webster," an elegiac tribute that has less to do with the virtuoso pianist Art Tatum than with the short-lived swing-era trumpet player Freddie Webster. "Once Upon a Time, There Was a Holding Corporation Called Old America," which Mingus would later record as "The Shoes of the Fisherman's Wife Are Some Jive-ass Slippers," wanders to a climax over Dannie Richmond's surging drums. After the brief levity afforded by the Dixieland standard "Muskrat Ramble," the octet returns to solemnity with "Don't Be Afraid, the Clown's Afraid Too," a complex, multi-themed piece that's muddled by uneven mixing. The concert ends with "Don't Let It Happen Here," in which Jimmy Owens, on flugelhorn, evokes Miles Davis and Mingus, finding inspiration in paranoia and beauty in rage, and reciting his own version of a well-known poem attributed to the anti-Nazi German pastor Martin Niemöller.

—Larry Birnbaum
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As We See It

Building Bridges (Atkinson) ... 2-3

Dog Legs and Feet: the Marginalization of High-End Audio (Atkinson) ... 1-5

500 Components. Recommended. (Atkinson) ... 10-3

A High-End Audio Horror Story (Marks) ... 5-3

Modern Sounds (Gutenberger) ... 12-3

The Mystery of Music (Serinus) ... 6-3

A Script for a High-End Audio Demonstration (Marks) ... 7-3

Saying in Touch (Serinus) ... 9-3

Strawberry Fields: Auditory Objects & Bad Science (Atkinson) ... 4-3

What's Real? (Serinus) ... 8-3

You Hear! What? (Serinus) ... 8-3

Recording of the Month

Neko Case: Fox Confessor Brings the Flood (Baird) ... 2-13

Dr. John: Memory (Baird) ... 6-163

Keith Jarrett: Tokyo Solo & The Carnegie Hall Great (Lehnert) ... 10-199

Jerry Lee Lewis: Last Man Standing (Baird) ... 12-153

Mallor: Symphony 8 (Levine) ... 7-117

Mozart: Violin Concertos 3–5 (Levine) ... 4-195

One for All: The Lineup (Conrad) ... 11-131

Grand Parsons: The Complete Repertoire Session (Baird) ... 8-111

Tchaikovsky: Symphony 6, Serenade for Strings (Steanis) ... 5-129

Verdi: La Traviata (Levine) ... 8-111

Wagner: Tristan und Isolde (Lehnert) ... 2-23

W. Wadat: Five-Chor (Henderson) ... 9-137

EQUIPMENT REPORTS

Amplifiers (integrated)

ASR. Emitter II Exclusive (Fremere) ... 10-149

Audinax SAM V2 (Marks) ... 6-49

Ayre AX-3 (Dudley) ... 1-143

DK Designs V5.1 Reference ML III (Reina) ... 6-131

EICO LIF-81 (Steenwegen) ... 7-133

Exposure 2010x (Austin) ... 2-133

Music Hall a252 (Tellig) ... 4-25

NAD C 372 (Austin) ... 10-169

Parlons Classic One ML III (Tellig) ... 12-23

PS Audio GCC-100 (Deutsch) ... 1-128

Rega Mira (Austin) ... 9-127

Sogides A21SE (Tellig) ... 4-25

Amplifiers (power)

Atoll AM200 (Tellig) ... 9-25

Audiodax eighty-eight SE monoblock (Deutsch) ... 1-128

Audio Valve Balder 70 (Fremere) ... 4-149

Ayre V-3xe (Tellig) ... 5-19

Bel Canto e.One Ref100 monoblock (Rubinson) ... 11-29

Bel Canto e.One S300 (Rubinson) ... 11-49

Claron 2419 14000 Ultimate monoblock (Bolin) ... 3-83

Halcro dm58 monoblock (W. Wadat) ... 2-127

Halcro Logic MC280 (Dudley) ... 4-85

Krell Evolution 610 monoblock (Phillips) ... 12-133

Mund 9007 monoblock (Fremere) ... 9-99

Musical Fidelity Nv-Visa 300 monoblock (Phillips) ... 6-121

Philips SA-Reference (W. Wadat) ... 9-107

Portal Paladin monoblock (Rubinson) ... 9-109
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Paul Bolin, Stereophile (April, 2003)

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Art Dudley, Stereophile (October, 2004)
### Amplifiers (preamps)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Product Name</th>
<th>Manufacturer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Auro PM300</td>
<td>Tellig</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Audio Research Reference 3</td>
<td>Bolin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Auray X-Sue</td>
<td>Tellig</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cary SLP 05</td>
<td>Dudley</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conrad-Johnson CT75</td>
<td>Phillips</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Krell Evolution 202</td>
<td>Phillips</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mark Levinson No. 3265</td>
<td>Atkinson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>McIntosh C1000</td>
<td>Fremer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Music First Passive Magnetic</td>
<td>Tellig</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Placeto Reference Volume Control</td>
<td>Damkroger</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primusita ProLogic Three</td>
<td>Fremer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simaudio Moon Evolution P-6</td>
<td>Rubinson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sonic Euphoria PLC</td>
<td>Damkroger</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sutherland Direct Line Stage</td>
<td>Tellig, Damkroger</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Amplifiers (phono preamps)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Product Name</th>
<th>Manufacturer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Art Audio Vinyl Reference</td>
<td>Fremer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Artenia Labs PH-1</td>
<td>Dudley</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Audio Research PH-5</td>
<td>Fremer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ayre P-Sue</td>
<td>Tellig</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beltrami VP129</td>
<td>Fremer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Einstein Audio Turntable's Choice</td>
<td>Fremer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enceinte Fossiodio</td>
<td>Damkroger</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jasmine Audio LP120</td>
<td>Fremer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Juicy Music Blueberry Xtreme</td>
<td>Dudley</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oracle Templete</td>
<td>Fremer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pro-Ject Phono Box Mk II</td>
<td>Fremer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PS Audio GC194</td>
<td>Fremer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pro-Ject Debut III</td>
<td>Fremer</td>
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<tr>
<td>Michell TecnoDec</td>
<td>Fremer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marantz TT-15S1</td>
<td>Fremer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Funk Firm Vector</td>
<td>Fremer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Continuum Cobra</td>
<td>Fremer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arysta 4/4 /Mk IV</td>
<td>Fremer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clearaudio Goldfinger</td>
<td>Fremer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clearaudio Concerto</td>
<td>Fremer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dynavector DRT XV-1S</td>
<td>Fremer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clearaudio Goldfinger</td>
<td>Fremer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clearaudio Master</td>
<td>Fremer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ortofon SP'-Meister Silver</td>
<td>Dudley</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pro-Ject Phono Box Mk II</td>
<td>Fremer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Continuum Caliburn</td>
<td>Fremer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newcomer 2412</td>
<td>Dudley</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VPI V-12</td>
<td>Damkroger</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wilson MAXX 2</td>
<td>Bolin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wilson Sonatas</td>
<td>Dudley</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Digital Components

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Product Name</th>
<th>Manufacturer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Atoll CD2000 CD player</td>
<td>Tellig</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ayre C-Sue universal player</td>
<td>Tellig</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ayre C-X+ CD player</td>
<td>Dudley</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classic cd202 CD/DVD player</td>
<td>Atkinson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cyrus CD 8x CD player</td>
<td>Dudley</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ICU PH-3D</td>
<td>Fremer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denon DVD-3910 universal player</td>
<td>Rubinson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Rubinson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Musical Fidelity LW DM25 CD player</td>
<td>Dudley</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Musical Fidelity X-Ray V3 CD player</td>
<td>Fremer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Music Hall CD252 CD player</td>
<td>Tellig</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Olive Symphony Wifi music server</td>
<td>Atkinson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quad 99 CDP-2 CD player</td>
<td>Phillips</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rega Apollo CD player</td>
<td>Dudley, Tellig</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ReQuest F2250 audio server</td>
<td>Phillips</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sibley Speakers Squeezebox WiFi D/A processor</td>
<td>Atkinson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flipper</td>
<td>Fremer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 2006 e-Newsletter, 12-82</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sony C-1200ES/1200ES</td>
<td>Fremer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zanden 2000 Premium CD transport</td>
<td>Tellig</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zanden 5000 Mk. IV / Signature D/A processor</td>
<td>Fremer, Atkinson &amp; Fremer</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Loudspeakers & Subwoofers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Product Name</th>
<th>Manufacturer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Audio Note AN-E Lexus Signature</td>
<td>Dudley</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Audio Physic Scorpio</td>
<td>Dudley</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Audio Physic Tempo IV</td>
<td>Dudley</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B&amp;O Z-1</td>
<td>Reina</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canton Vento Reference 1 DC</td>
<td>Phillips</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DALI Ikono 6</td>
<td>Reina</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DeVore Fidelity Silverback Reference</td>
<td>Fremer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dynamic Focus 140</td>
<td>Phillips</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dynamic Special Twenty-Five</td>
<td>Phillips</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ESP Concert Grand S1 (Mark)</td>
<td>Fremer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focal-JMlab Electra 1007 Be (Atkinson)</td>
<td>Fremer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Genesis Advanced Technologies 5.2</td>
<td>Fremer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Horning Perikles</td>
<td>Dudley</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JBL Studio L860 (Reina)</td>
<td>Fremer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JL Audio Fathom F113 subwoofer</td>
<td>Rubinson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KEF IQ-9 (Reina)</td>
<td>Fremer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Klipsch Heritage La Scala II</td>
<td>Tellig</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legacy Whisper</td>
<td>Bolin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monitor Silver RS6</td>
<td>Reina</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NHT Classic Three</td>
<td>Reina</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NHT X6 (Atkinson)</td>
<td>Fremer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nola Mini (Alan Lil' Kasual)</td>
<td>Reina</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Penaudio Serenade (Phillips)</td>
<td>Dudley</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quad ESL-2305</td>
<td>Tellig</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HER Conerta F12 (Rubinson)</td>
<td>Dudley</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sainfini Hotel (Dudley)</td>
<td>Dudley</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Smaller Aubert (Reina)</td>
<td>Fremer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Svel LCR7 (Atkinson)</td>
<td>Dudley</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Svel LCI7 XL (Atkinson)</td>
<td>Dudley</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sonus Faber Amati anniversario (Atkinson)</td>
<td>Dudley</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thiel CS2.4 (Phillips)</td>
<td>Dudley</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Triangle Conere Anniversaire (Tellig)</td>
<td>Dudley</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Triangle Eprit Antal (Tellig)</td>
<td>Dudley</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Triangle Endot Celsius (Tellig)</td>
<td>Dudley</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vandersteen Quatto (Fremer)</td>
<td>Dudley</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vienna Acoustics Beethoven Grand (Fremer)</td>
<td>Dudley</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wilson MAXX 2 (Bolin)</td>
<td>Dudley</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wilson Sonatas</td>
<td>Dudley</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Phono Cartridges

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Product Name</th>
<th>Manufacturer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Blue Angel Pink Ivory/Ruby Mansis (Fremer)</td>
<td>Dudley</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brinkmann EMT Titanum (Dudley)</td>
<td>Dudley</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clearaudio Concerto (Fremer)</td>
<td>Dudley</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clearaudio Goldfinger (Fremer)</td>
<td>Dudley</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dynavector LKT XV-15 (Fremer)</td>
<td>Dudley</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miyabi/47 Laboratory (Fremer)</td>
<td>Dudley</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ortofon SPU Meister Silver (Dudley)</td>
<td>Dudley</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rega Apheta (Dudley)</td>
<td>Dudley</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transfiguration Orpheus (Fremer)</td>
<td>Dudley</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Tonearms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Product Name</th>
<th>Manufacturer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Continuum Caliburn</td>
<td>Fremer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Di Vinci Grandezza</td>
<td>Fremer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graham Plasmon B44</td>
<td>Dudley</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ortofon AS 2125 (Dudley)</td>
<td>Dudley</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VPI VMJ-12.6 (Damkroger)</td>
<td>Dudley</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Williams MAXX 2</td>
<td>Bolin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Williams Sonatas</td>
<td>Dudley</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Turntables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Product Name</th>
<th>Manufacturer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Continuum Caliburn</td>
<td>Fremer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Di Vinci Grandezza</td>
<td>Fremer</td>
</tr>
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<td>Graham Plasmon B44</td>
<td>Dudley</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ortofon AS 2125 (Dudley)</td>
<td>Dudley</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VPI VMJ-12.6 (Damkroger)</td>
<td>Dudley</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### FM Tuners

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Product Name</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Day-Sequerra FM Reference</td>
<td>Greenhill</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Music Hall KD12-1 table radio</td>
<td>Dudley</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outlaw RR2500 receiver</td>
<td>Fremer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sony ICF-5400 The Radio table radio</td>
<td>Dudley</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Music Surround Components

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Product Name</th>
<th>Manufacturer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bryston S12 preamplifier-processor (Rubinson)</td>
<td>Dudley</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denon AVR-48006 receiver (Rubinson)</td>
<td>Dudley</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meridian Reference 861 controller-processor (Rubinson)</td>
<td>Dudley</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Dali of Denmark presents “The Mentor Series”
designed to redefine the beauty/performance/value paradigm of loudspeakers
Recording Equipment
Grace 201 microphone preamplifier (Marks) .................................................. 8-41
Sound Devices 722 portable audio recorder (Marks) ........................................ 10-49
TASCAM DV-RA1000 digital recorder (Marks) .................................................. 8-41
True Systems P2 analog microphone preamplifier (Marks) ............................... 8-41

Accessories & Headphones
Acoustic Revive RL-30 MK.3 record demagnetizer (Fremer) .............................. 10-33
Acrolink 6N-NCT isolation transformer (Fremer) .............................................. 6-33
AKG K 701 headphones (Phillips) .................................................................. 8-97
Alera Copy Cruiser CD-R burner (Tellig) .......................................................... 6-25
Apple iPod Hi-Fi (Phillips, Fremer) .................................................................. 6-33
Audio Technologies Inc. SLM100 SPL meter (Fremer) ...................................... 6-33
Ayre Mystic Blocks (Dudley) ......................................................................... 3-41
Bard Audio Bardone wireless system (Fremer) .................................................. 11-33
Belkin TuneStage iPod accessory (Fremer) ....................................................... 3-31
Blue Note KYMYAS LP treatment (Freiner) ...................................................... 6-33
Bright Star 635 IsolRock/Little Rock isolation system (Rubinson) ...................... 11-49
Cayin HA-IA headphone amplifier (Tellig, Phillips) ............................................ 6-25, 11-128
C. Crane FM transmitter (Tellig) .................................................................... 8-21
CoolCopy CD2CD CB-9168 CD-R burner (Tellig) ............................................. 6-25
Feikert Universal Protractor (Fremer) ............................................................... 10-33
Finite-Elemente Pagode equipment rack & Ceraball feet (Damkroger) .............. 2-119
Funtech De Mag record demagnetizer (Fremer) ................................................. 10-33
Goldring D150 and D100 headphones (Tellig) ..................................................... 12-33
Goldstar Concertino iPod accessory (Fremer) .................................................... 3-31
Grace m902 Reference D/A headphone amplifier (Atkinson, Phillips) ............... 4-186
Gryphon Black Exorcist cartridge demagnetizer (Fremer) ................................. 5-27
Halcyonics Micro 40 vibration isolation system (Fremer) ................................. 6-33
Hainl Aragon record cleaning machine (Fremer) .............................................. 1-35

HeadRoom Desktop 13/A headphone amplifier (Phillips) ..................................... 4-171, 11-125
iPort iPod dock (Fremer) .................................................................................. 11-33
Monitor i-Deck iPod accessory (Fremer) ............................................................ 3-31
Naim i-Supply iPod power supply (Fremer) ...................................................... 3-31
Panamax Max 2 Sub (Rubinson) ...................................................................... 2-49
Pre-Ject Speed Box Mk.II LP motor controller (Fremer) ..................................... 7-31
PS Audio PS500 Power Plant AC conditioner (Deutsch) .................................... 2-132
Ray Sanders Audio Esmeline The Hornet headphone amplifier (Phillips, Atkinson, Tellig) ................................................................. June 2006 eNewsletter, 9-25, 12-23 & 147
RealTraps Tri-Corner bass traps (Rubinson) ..................................................... 11-49
TAW-Global Whide House Gold Edition FM transmitter (Tellig) .................... 8-21
Ultimate Ears UE-10 in-ear headphones (Phillips) ............................................ 10-193
WHT Nextgen Signature phono plugs (Dudley) ................................................. 3-41

Interconnects, Speaker Cables, Data Links, AC Cords
Cardas Golden Reference AC cord (Dudley) ..................................................... 3-41
Kubala-Sosna Anticipation interconnect (Rubinson) ......................................... 7-49
Kubala-Sosna Emotion AC cord (Rubinson) ...................................................... 7-49
Kubala-Sosna Expression data link (Rubinson) ................................................. 7-49
Kubala-Sosna Fascination speaker cable (Rubinson) ......................................... 7-49
Nordost Heimstall interconnect & speaker cable (Dudley) ............................... 10-187
TARA Labs The Zero interconnect (Fremer) ..................................................... 12-139

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Zanden Model 5000 Mk.IV/Signature
Editor: I must first apologize to the Stereophile staff for the confusion we caused by sending an incorrectly wired Model 5000S DAC [Stereophile, November 2006]. I would like to thank Mr. Fremer and Mr. Atkinson for their patience and compliment them on the integrity of the Stereophile review process: the complete separation of bench-test information and listening results until the end of the review process. We further appreciate the opportunity to submit a second unit with correct wiring [Stereophile, December 2006], which measured much better and, as stated by Mr. Fremer, "was clearly better." Eric Phelps
Zanden Audio North America

Fujitsu Ten Eclipse TD712z
Editor: Whereas designers of conventional loudspeakers attach importance to a frequency characteristic, I mainly designed the Eclipse TD series to focus on reproducing the wave pattern precisely. The characteristics of this sound are as follows: clarity, precise reproduction of transients, with short rise- and fall-times, and good imaging and soundstaging.

With a conventional audio system, the listener tends to evaluate it on the basis of its frequency-domain characteristics, such as powerlessness of the bass frequencies, and in many cases the clarity and extension of the high frequencies. By contrast, our priority is to deliver sound closer to "a tone of a musical instrument." This means increased transparency and more sonic clues to allow the listener to "see" the skill of the performers.

I tried to design the Eclipse TD series not only for audiophiles, but also for music lovers who would appreciate the ability of the reproduction of the moment, such as the "momentary tension as the bow plays the strings of a violin...." Hiroshi Kowaki
Fujitsu Ten Limited

Creek Audio Destiny
Editor: Thanks for allowing me an opportunity to respond to this great review of the Destiny amplifier. I am flattered to think Bob [Reina] is prepared to use it as his new reference standard affordable integrated amp. It certainly helps to keep the old design juices going to receive such positive feedback for the effort my team put into developing this radically new Creek product. While all the bases are pretty well covered by the review, I would like, if possible, to provide just a little bit more of the designer’s insight into this product, if you will allow it.

My quest at the beginning of the development process was to extract the best performance I could out of the existing Classic 5350SE and produce a more upmarket product that would be an evolution of that model without changing it fundamentally. In other words, if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it. So, initially, I set to work observing what effect each and every component part had on the overall performance, and how substituting better components in critical places, or improving the layout, could achieve a change in quality without losing the essential musicality of the original. I did my best to identify most of the areas that could be improved on while still maintaining the essential Creek affordability.

Perhaps I could have introduced it much earlier had I not decided to radically change the case construction to the fully extruded style now used. However, the strength and acoustic isolation achieved have definitely raised the level of acoustic performance over the folded-sheet-metal construction used in the 5350SE. As Bob has already explained, the SMT components used in the Destiny allowed me to squeeze the circuitry into a smaller space and separate the power supply and grounds on the bottom layer, while routing all signal-path components and tracks on to the top layer. It was fortunately necessary to use only two layers, but the new layout is much more symmetrical, so left- and right-channel performance is much closer than before. Perhaps the biggest improvement I found was in separating the power supplies for each channel so that, apart from the common transformer windings, the rectifiers and smoothing capacitors are completely dual mono.

The power-amp circuitry is essentially the same as in the 5350SE but runs at a higher power-supply voltage, with more current available from a bigger mains transformer. A separate mains transformer is also used for all the housekeeping functions, and keeps all the digital circuitry completely separate from the analog stuff. This has the bonus of allowing the Destiny to run in standby mode with a very small power consumption (0.7W) that is below the proposed European and Californian recommendations. So it is, in effect, a green amplifier as well.

Some of the hidden developments under the hood are in software and controls that allow the user to connect the amp and CD player together using a CAN bus system. A small external interface unit is currently being made to translate CAN into an RS-232 interface that will, if required, allow the Destiny products to be used in custom installations and be remotely controlled from other locations, using proprietary room controllers.

As Bob mentioned, the plug-in Destiny Phono stage was not available for his review. I can now confirm that we are producing it, and I am pleased to say that it certainly has got me trawling through my vinyl collection again, which can't be bad.

Thanks once again for allowing this space for my comments. I look forward to hearing what Bob thinks of living with the Destiny for a longer period. Needless to say, my development quest will, hopefully, make sure that Creek Audio continues to provide Bob's first choice of affordable integrated amplifier.

Mike Creek
Creek Audio

Merlin VSM-MX
Editor: We at Merlin would like to thank Michael Fremer and John Atkinson for their continued interest in our VSM loudspeaker. We appreciate that five years have gone by and that Mr. Fremer's system has undergone many changes. Perhaps the improvements to our speaker would have been more noticeable if compared on the original system. Again, many thanks to both of you.

Bobby Palkovich
President, Merlin Music Systems

Era Design 4
Editor: Many thanks to John Atkinson for reviewing the Era Design 4 loudspeaker in a fair and honest manner. Admittedly, we were a bit fearful of handing them over to John. His reviews find faults in the very best of speakers, and the $4 retail for only $600/pair. Yikes! However, John's reviews give you everything: the good and the bad; science and opinion; and that's all you can expect as a manufacturer or a Stereophile reader. So the kind words are very much appreciated.

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ADVERTISER INDEX

Aestheticx........................................... 88-89, 164
Alpha Core........................................... 104
Analyse Plus......................................... 26
Anthem................................................... 14
Arch Audio............................................. 177
Art Audio............................................. 96
Atmosphere........................................... 96
Audia Flight....................................... 165
Audio Advisor..................................... 117
Audio Connection................................. 179
Audio Plus Services................................. 94
Audio Vision SF.................................. 172
Audoineering...................................... 176
Audophile Systems................................. 183
AudioQuest........................................ 174
Audiox............................................. 170
Ayre Acoustics.................................... 98
Balanced Audio................................. 106-107
Basic Audio........................................ 146
BC Acoustique...................................... 53
Bel Canto........................................... 24
Boulder Amplifiers................................. 56
Bryston.............................................. 50
Bryan.................................................... 50
Cable Company................................... 128
Cardas Audio....................................... 118
Car Audio........................................... 7
Class Audio......................................... 77
Coincident.......................................... 176
Conrad Johnson................................... 46
Consumer Electronics Assn..................... 167
Crystal Cable....................................... 18-19
CSA Audio......................................... 169
David Lewis Audio............................... 150
Dynaudio............................................ 84
Echo Busters....................................... 159
Elusive Disc Inc.................................. 152, 154, 156
Escolante Design.................................. 160
Flat Earth Audio................................. 176
Furutech........................................... 152
Gallo Acoustic..................................... 144
Gamut.................................................. 146
Gateway Sound.................................... 177
Globale............................................. 156
Guthrie.............................................. 174
Harmonic.......................................... 60
HCM Audio....................................... 148
HD-DVD............................................ 89
HeadRoom......................................... 28
Immedia............................................ 108
Jombit Cable....................................... 158
Joseph Audio..................................... 139
JPS Labs............................................. 46
JS Audio............................................ 155
Kimber Kable...................................... 44
Krell................................................... 77
Lamm Industries................................. 170
Latan............................................... 176
Legacy Audio..................................... 48
Magico............................................. 118
Marley Labs........................................ 174
Mark Levinson..................................... 31
MBI of America.................................. 46
McMackin Audio................................. 24
Meridian............................................ 32
Merkel............................................... 174
Montana Loudspeakers......................... 78
Moscode............................................ 162
Music Direct...................................... 42-43, 75, 87
Musical Sounds................................... 166
Musical Surroundings............................ 126
Musikmatters..................................... 72
NAP.................................................. 41
Nagra............................................... 68
Naim.................................................. 81
NE Plus............................................. 138
Needle Doctor.................................... 104
Nordost............................................ 34
Olive.................................................. 38
Opera.............................................. 51
Outlaw............................................. 62
Overture.......................................... 126
Park Avenue...................................... 132
Parts Express.................................... 53
Pass Laboratories................................. 44
Pioneer............................................. 29
PS Audio........................................... 130
Reno Hi-Fi......................................... 177
Sanus............................................... 64
Shunyata.......................................... 31
Sitech............................................. 114
Simaudio.......................................... 16
Sony Electronics................................. C2, 3, 4
Sound & Cinema.................................. 174
Sound By Singer................................. 120
Sumiko............................................. 47
Symposium........................................ 174
Toret Acoustics................................... 12, 13
Triangle............................................. 36
Upscale Audio..................................... 70-71, 116, 140
VAD Industries.................................... 175
Verity............................................... 169
Vincent Audio..................................... 173
VTL................................................... 66
Walker.............................................. 162
Wave Left Audio................................. 175
WATT .................................................. 68
Weinhardt Design.................................. 177
Wilson Audio...................................... 20, 102
YG Acoustics...................................... 112
ZVOX.............................................. 160

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So there I was in Florence, strolling along the narrow, winding Via Dei Neri, fulfilling my pledge to my new wife of “no music obsessiveness” during our honeymoon, when what to my love(lust)-&-ed eyes did appear? No, not Santa and eight tiny reindeer, but a great record store filled with vinyl vintage and modern: Firenze’s Data Records.

While my wife chose to remain outside, fending off the unwanted advances of a tipsy stranger, I, oblivious to her struggles, had already entered Data, to behold there the wonders of a great vinyl emporium. So few stores like this are left that, when you find one, you have to open the senses and drink.

Behind the counter of this temple of cover art and big, black, grooved discs was owner Giampiero Barlotti, who, when I walked in, was playing a copy of Lynyrd Skynyrd’s unjustly neglected *Gimme Back My Bullets*. One sonic whiff of track 2, “Every Mother’s Son,” and I knew I was home. Balled and I looked each other up and down, smiled, and kind of nodded; both aware we were in the presence of spiritual kin.

Data, which evolved from a shop Barlotti started in 1977 under the name Contempo, is, as you can see from the photos, the kind of place where Stereophile’s Michael Fremer would be happy to someday lie in state. Records, in the LP sense of the word, fill multiered racks and line the walls of two large rooms. The categories of “New Wave,” “Jazz,” and “Electronica” each eat up multiple rows of bins. Singles in their slip covers, framed two at a time, side by side, line whatever wall space is left.

Turntables, one a J.A. Michell GyroDec, share the counter with the cash register.

As in all great record stores, the good stuff ain’t cheap. The holy grail of jazz vinyl collectors—original Blue Note albums from the 1950s—were priced in the thousands of euros. White-vinyl copies of the Beatles’ “White Album” were also very dear. A conversion rate of €1=$1.33 didn’t help much.

Nor did the language barrier. Barlotti doesn’t speak Inglese, and beyond Buongiorno and Buona Sera, my understanding of Italian is limited to a selection of profanity (for sensing impending trouble) and food nouns (for menu reading). Fortunately, Barlotti’s friend and employee, Frederico Orlandi, speaks halting English, so we managed to conduct an interview of sorts. Yes, by this point, my promise about no music obsessing had long since been shattered, but my bride, good-natured soul that she is, drifted off to the nearest shoe and/or chocolate store and let me wallow.

“I think that downloads and vinyl can coexist,” Barlotti said. “It’s the CD that may get left out.” When asked about the health of the Florence vinyl business in 2006, he smiled, said it was tough, then showed me his Web address. For a look at what’s in Data Records—and in other piles of vinyl I have a feeling Barlotti has stashed all over Firenze—bring up www.superecords.com. Much of what he has for sale is listed there, with descriptions in English. Best of all, the site is updated weekly, if not daily: new stuff is added, sold items are removed, and special sale discounts appear—40% as this went to print. If you don’t see what you want, Data specializes in sleuthing out want lists. I love my wife, and our honeymoon was great—but this here, friends, was sumphin’ else entirely.

Barlotti also runs a record label, Contempo, which releases mostly late-’80s New Wave from Italian bands—like his best-known act, Pankow, which sounds a little like a harder-edged Italian version of Nine Inch Nails. Contempo was also an independent distributor of labels foreign and domestic, such as America’s 4AD Records, which meant that Barlotti handled albums by Throwing Muses, Dead Can Dance, and the Pixies. The label is currently dormant, but Barlotti winked and assured me that he has plans for more releases in the future.

Afterward, as I strolled along thinking of all the records I hadn’t bought (ain’t it always the way?), a voice broke through my needle-in-the-groove reverie.

“Here we are in Tuscany, amid all this gorgeous renaissance art and culture, all this great food, the best leather-goods shops in the world, and ME! And what do you want to do? Go to a record store!”
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