THE 60 BEST PRODUCTS OF 2007

December 2007

Vandersteen’s Quatro Wood | Sonus Faber’s Elipsa | Pioneer’s Pure Malt Speaker
DeVore’s Gibbon Nine | Audioengine’s 2

Special Speaker Review Issue

★ Equipment Reports ★
Parasound & Boulder Amplifiers
Simon Yorke & Scheu LP Players
AKG & Shure Headphones

★ Music Features ★
New Orleans’ Musical Legacy
Naxos’ Klaus Heymann

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Harry Pearson [Founder, Chairman]
The Absolute Sound - Issue 167

“THE KINGS are simply great. We loved them. Go get a pair”
THE INNER EAR- Volume 17, Issue 1

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

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Anniversaries, Appreciations, Aleatorics, & an Apology

John Atkinson

It was the strangest feeling to be part of something yet without any understanding of how what I was doing fit into the whole. Back in the early 1980s, I had graduated from playing miscellaneous instruments in an early-music ensemble to devoting myself to the recorder (the end-blown fipple flute, not the audio archiving machine). My teacher, Nancy Winckelmann, had introduced me to various ensembles, and one Saturday afternoon, an ad hoc group of us was working with a composer of so-called "aleatoric" music, literally, music by chance.

"It situationed into other chords. The musical consensus that emerged from those contributions. I raise this experience because it is very much relevant to how Stereophile chooses its annual Products of the Year, the 16th edition of which is featured in this issue (p.53).

We operate a two-stage voting process, with a first round of votes to produce a short list, then the magazine’s reviewers and editors voting on the top three choices in each category. This process has been criticized by readers and by some reviewers on the grounds that because no single reviewer will have heard all the products reviewed in the past year, any individual’s selection will be meaningless.

But as with the aleatoric recorder composition, while each reviewer will have heard only some of the nominees, as long as they vote for those products they have heard and feel to be outstanding, when the voting is examined as a whole, a consensus emerges. End of sermon.

In November’s "As We See It," I noted the 45th anniversary of Stereophile’s founding by J. Gordon Holt, who offered some acidic, even angry comments on how the high-end world has changed. The major manner in which the world of magazine publishing has changed, of course, was the introduction of the World Wide Web in the mid-1990s. We agonized over whether Stereophile should enter that world (see, for example, www.stereophile.com/aswesecit/995aws), but it was a chance encounter in spring 1997 with musicologist, audiophile, cashed-out audio retailer, and self-proclaimed Web Monkey Jon Iveron who led to www.stereophile.com emerging from the dark on December 1, 1997.

Out of the blue, Jon had sent me an essay, "The Tiger Wags Its Tail," which I published in the April 1997 issue (www.stereophile.com/aswesecit/497aws). In subsequent conversations, it emerged that not only did Jon have considerable insight into the magazine and its doings, he had strong ideas about how Stereophile should approach the brave new world of Web publishing. Jon visited then-publisher Larry Archibald and me in Santa Fe, pitched us a plan that we didn’t have to think twice about adopting, and the rest is history—10 years’ worth.

Jon is still our Web Monkey and more than 300,000 unique visitors now "hit" www.stereophile.com each month. Stephen Mejias, Wes Phillips, Fred Kaplan, and Robert Baird blog there regularly—even daily—and the site’s forum and photo gallery are where readers can interact with the magazine’s writers and editors, as well as with each other. Back issues and Stereophile CDs and LPs can be purchased from our e-commerce page. We update the home-page news and “Vote” every Monday, as well as add four or five reviews or articles to our free online archive. Our goal is eventually to have everything Stereophile has ever published available in the website archives, and we are well along the road to reaching that goal. Getting on for 1500 equipment reviews, going back to the 1960s, are now available online, along with a large number of interviews, every "Recording of the Month" going back to mid-1992, every "R2D4" feature, and many, many, many technical and musical articles. Not only have we posted every "As We See It" essay going back to January 1997, but also a large number of editorial leaders going all the way back to the magazine’s founding.

Thank you for 10 great years, Jon, and thank you for choreographing that giant step forward for the magazine. I can’t imagine how a magazine could survive without a website to complement its print activities.

Something else you can find in the archives are the five years’ worth of Art Dudley’s "Listening" column (www.stereophile.com/artdudleylistening). Yes, this issue sees the publication of the 60th edition of "Listening." It seems only yesterday that Art told me he was leaving Listen, the audio magazine he’d founded with his wife, Janet, and would I be interested in his contributing to Stereophile? Would I? I’d been a fan of Art’s writing since the 45th anniversary of Stereophile’s founding.

In the very first "As We See It" in Vol.1 No.1, J. Gordon Holt had included a throwaway remark: "Other things that need looking into are...equipment-testing standards and, I suppose, subjective criteria for evaluating fidelity." We started routinely accompanying Stereophile’s equipment reports with measurements in summer 1989 (see "Must We Test? Yes, We Must!" www.stereophile.com/aswesecit/489), using, among other pieces of gear, an Audio Precision System One two-channel measurement system, which operates in both the analog and digital domains.

That Audio Precision One is still doing sterling service, but it’s getting long in the tooth and is not really up to the task of assessing the best-performing modern components. I was very pleased, therefore, to get an e-mail out of the blue last summer from Audio Precision’s Tom Williams. Tom told me that AP was appreciative of the work I was doing with the System One, and wondering if I would like to try their top-of-the-line Model 2722, which has both significantly greater resolution and greater bandwidth than the System One. Would I?

So, beginning next month, I will be testing their test regime to the System 2722. Thank you, Tom, and thank you, Audio Precision. And thank you, Tom, and thank you, Audio Precision.

Correction

John Marks reviewed the Ars-Sonum Filarmonía integrated amplifier in our October issue. Unfortunately, when we referred to this product on our October cover, we described it as “Italian Art.” The Filarmonía is, in fact, Spanish. Our apologies for the error to Ars-Sonum, and to their US distributor, Bobby Palkovics, of Merlin Music Systems.
FEATURES

Products of the Year
Stereophile writers and editors vote for the products they have loved over the past year.

Klaus Heymann
A 20th anniversary chat with the founder of Naxos.
By Jason Victor Serinus

New Orleans' Musical Legacy
Battered by Katrina and almost down for the count, New Orleans remains in critical condition. Fortunately, its music scene has more than a pulse. Stereophile's John Swenson, a part-time resident, gives his first-hand account of the Crescent City's pain and progress.

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(Wes Phillips)

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107 Audioengine 2 powered loudspeaker
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119 Simon Yorke Series 9 record player
(Michael Fremer)

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(Art Dudley)

137 Boulder 810 line preamplifier
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(Fred Kaplan)

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(Wes Phillips)

129 Denon DL-103 MC phono cartridge
(Art Dudley)

142 Boulder 860 power amplifier
(Wes Phillips)
As We See It
Last month, we celebrated 45 years of magazine publication. This month, John Atkinson celebrates 16 years of choosing the magazine’s “Products of the Year,” 10 years of Web publishing, and 5 years of editor at large Art Dudley contributing to Stereophile.

Letters
This month, readers write in with props for Gordon, Jim, and Art; with whines and views, and blame, attitude, and a gauntlet. Get on your Soapbox! Visit www.stereophile.com.

Industry Update
High-end audio news, including dealer seminars, the 2008 Stereophile Buyer’s Guide, a new German brand, and England’s annual Heathrow Hi-Fi show. Want to know more? Go to the “News Desk” at www.stereophile.com for up-to-the-minute info.

Sam’s Space
This month, Sam listens to the Parasound Halo JC 1 and JC 2 power amplifier and line preamplifier and the C Crane Model CCRadio SW table radio.

Analog Corner
Michael Fremer brings us news of the Intelligent Record-Cleaning Fluid, Scheu Analog Das Laufwerk No.2 turntable and Acoustic Sounds’ Ultimate Analog Test LP.

Listening
Art Dudley listens to the DeVore Gibbon Nine loudspeaker.

The Fifth Element
John Marks listens to the AKG 701 headphones and the Pioneer Pure Malt speaker.

Record Reviews
For 2007’s final “Recording of the Month,” we’ve chosen the epic Miles Davis boxed set, the complete On the Corner Sessions. In classical, we have a survey of Rene Jacobs’ superb trio of Mozart operas. In rock/pop, there’s reissues of Bob Dylan and Moby Grape as well as the latest by Thurston Moore. And in jazz, a pair of heretofore unheard Charles Mingus live dates get a critical listen.

Manufacturers’ Comments
This month, we hear from Analogue Productions, Audio Intelligent, Vandersteen, Sonus Faber, Simon York, and Boulder about our reviews of their products.

Aural Robert
Jazz pianists playing the music of Elvis and Joni Mitchell? Sometimes the weirder the crossover idea the better. Robert Baird on the latest from Herbie Hancock and Cyrus Chestnut.
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World Radio History
LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Accolades for Gordon
Editor: Jim Austin's review of the NAD C 372 [October 2006] and now the Marantz SA8001 [October 2007] are much appreciated. I also would like to note that recent examples of Jim's writing seems to be a better fit for Stereophile. His earlier work seemed to be more of the formal, peer-reviewed-journal style. I look forward to more of Jim's level-headed reviews.

Bob Reynolds
reynolds_bob@lafinanka.net

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Bob Reynolds
reynolds_bob@lafinanka.net

Accolades for Art
Editor: 2007 has come and gone, and I do not recall any printed accolades to Mr. Art Dudley for his insightful and cleverly written contributions to the 2007 Stereophile Buyer's Guide. His clarity and sense of humor made what might have been the driest of topics into something both fascinating and thought-provoking. Audiophiles and non-audiophiles alike have appreciated his candor and wit. I am compelled to wish that he will not write for the same publication again, for fear that it will fail to live up to the standard now set. Having said that, I would not be surprised if he managed to surpass it. Thanks for the delightful work, Art!

David Tyree
Denver, CO
tyreewohn@comcast.net

Where is the Buyer's Guide?
Editor: Although I subscribe to Stereophile, I have trouble finding the special Buyer's Guide edition. Is this something like the old Audio magazine's once-a-year edition, in which all the specs for speakers, amps, CD players, etc., were listed?

Mike Reed
White Cloud, MI
mmreed767@peoplepc.com

Yes, the Stereophile Buyer's Guide has inherited the mantle of the long-defunct Audio publication. It is sold on newsstands and from our website (see p.13), and the 2008 edition is available now. I share your appreciation of Art's essays in the 2007 Guide; Mr. Tyree's contributed one essay to the 2008 Buyer's Guide; the other essays were written by Jim Austin, Robert Deutsch, Michael Fremer, Fred Kaplan, John Marks, Stephen Mejias, and Wes Phillips. All good stuff!

—John Atkinson

A crybaby and whiner responds
Editor: I would like to chime in on the side of all of us "crybabies, whiners, and other whining nerds out there!" ("Letters," Patrick Bajtka, October 2007, pp.9-11). I am certainly used to bandpassing content and filtering out personal soapboxing. So I agree with Mr. Bajtka that you're doing a good job with the magazine. But unsolicited personal rhetoric is still annoying, because it gets in the way. And it's also annoying because it's presumptuous. Whether I agree or not, the author is thinking I might magically find his personal political opinions relevant to the music or equipment I'm thinking of buying. I really do enjoy a lot of the work of Philip Glass, so when an acquaintance suggested I look at the DVD of Passages, I went to Amazon and read the peer reviews. Now, here's a case where the reader is pre-sold on the music; for me, it was just a question of which 'pass DVD to try. Most reviews that I saw would have me think Passages is a thinly disguised leftist commie pinko plot to one end only: to define the whole idea of capitalism. One writer took it upon himself to explain for the benefit of all that wealth is good, and probably intrinsically so; folks mired in the rust of a third-world slum or caste system would do well to look at certain political philosophies in the USA for a get-real explanation of how they're going to feed the family tonight. I do think wealth is simply ducky, though I don't have a lot of it, and I could probably have articulated the Amazon reviewer's political position better than he did, though I mostly disagree, and just don't give a rat about his opinion anyway. Worse, once I'd filtered out all the editorializing, I didn't find out anything about whether the DVD could possibly be interesting. One reviewer actually did remember to mention the music. I think the word he used was lame. Hell, I just bought the DVD to find out for myself if I can supply meaning to the video that fits the music.

—Alex Forbes
Castro Valley, CA

Unintentional clues
Editor: I agree with John Atkinson ["What's Past Is Prologue," September 2007] that many of the features of DVD-Audio and SACD failed to be perceived as benefits by would-be customers. And he gives the major clue unintentionally at the end of his interesting prologue, where he describes the relative sound benefits of high-resolution recordings: "Surface noise, crackling...seem to float free from the movie image of the singer." I appreciate this improvement, and I am aware that high-end audio is only too often about small improvements. But, obviously, this is not enough to change people's minds, let alone bring them to add a significant number of hi-rez recordings to their CD collections.

From my point of view, the multichannel feature of the hi-rez formats is a much greater step forward toward a convincing sonic illusion, because it can solve the problem of inadequate sound envelopment one has in normal listening rooms compared to concert halls. By adding reverberation from the side and rear speakers, the envelopment is much more realistic, together with a tremendous improvement in stage depth presentation.

In my opinion, the overall improvement is significantly greater than that coming with higher sampling rates/bit depth, and it is much easier to perceive by would-be customers. This feature is not highlighted enough in the marketing of DVD-A and SACD, and in some recordings it is not even used at all, the side/rear channels being occupied by sonic effects instead of reverberation.

Paradoxically, this feature, which especially improves the reproduction of many classical and acoustical jazz recordings, is neglected by many listeners of exactly this
We’re to blame?
Editor: Re: John Atkinson’s September 2007 “As We See It” (p.3), and cutting to the chase: I blame your magazine and others, The Absolute Sound in particular, for the failure of SACD to take off. Not entirely, of course, because many other factors contributed—including the recession following 9/11/01, and Sony’s lack of long-term commitment to the format.

I first found out about SACD—not from your rag or from TAS, though I used to subscribe to both—in late 2000 or ’01, from a Barnes & Noble copy of Positive Feedback, in which David Robinson and others shot down the rafters that, finally, we have digital done right.

I recall Sam Tellig’s somewhat irrelevant whining about lack of content (if you don’t feed the chicken, it will die and lay no eggs of any kind). Both magazines gave far too little praise to the format—an issue of style and serious deficit in emphasis—thus creating doubt in our all-too-conservative and shrinking numbers of audio hobbyists. Given the relative wealth of audiophiles in general, what would have been the downside of more enthusiasm?

Anyway, I still admire your efforts to keep the flame burning. I may even review my sub someday! I am just sorry that you didn’t follow Positive Feedback’s lead.

James Randi offers big bucks to audiophiles
Editor: I thought Stereophile might be interested in this item from Gizmodo.com: “James Randi Offers $1 Million If Audiophiles Can Prove $7250 Speaker Cables Are Better.”

Take Randi’s challenge
Editor: After all that noise about picking up James Randi’s $1,000,000, I have to give you a poke and see what the holodeck is. Let’s put this to rest and get you that $1,000,000 (and shut up types like him in the process)! What’s the plan?

Why are you attacking Randi?
Editor: I wonder, what in Randi’s deeds or words have made you resort to ad-hominem attacks without mentioning any reason for your rejection of his challenge? I’ve never seen personal attacks in Stereophile before, not in print and not on the Web. In a world full of illusionists, what makes Randi so special as to deserve your attention, research into his personal history, and verbal onslaught?

A bad attitude?
Editor: Does Stereophile have a bad attitude toward SACD?

James Randi seems to be talking about the product, as most of the article is spent schooling the listener in his philosophy (interesting in itself) and extolling the virtues of SACD. Mr. Austin favorably compares the SA8001 with the higher-priced Marantz model. Yet nowhere do I see the impression that Mr. Austin really likes the player. In his summation, Mr. Austin seems to hedge his bets to the nth degree: “In the right room, with the right mood, combined with the right components, the Marantz SA8001 might [i] be just what you need to achieve musical satori.”

I wonder; what in Randi’s deeds or words could have caused you to resort to ad-hominem attacks without mentioning any reason for your rejection of his challenge? I’ve never seen personal attacks in Stereophile before, not in print and not on the Web. In a world full of illusionists, what makes Randi so special as to deserve your attention, research into his personal history, and verbal onslaught?

Lecon newsgroup
Editor: We’re just starting one up and thought you might be interested: http://groups.google.com/group/lecon-audio. John Mysterwy

These three letters are a representative selection of a number I received referring to an essay posted on his website by professional myth debunker James Randi on September 28 (www.randi.org/fr/2007-09/092807.html#4). This concerned a new review given by Positive Feedback’s Dave Clark to an expensive cable, the Ayon, manufactured by Peer Audio. Randi challenged Clark to distinguish the Peer cables from Monster cables, offering $1 million if he succeeded. I have never heard the Peer cables and had not even heard of them, nor have I reviewed these cables, so I was puzzled why I was getting so many e-mails on this subject. But when I read Randi’s online comments, I was dismayed to read the following: “John Atkinson of Stereophile Magazine made great noises about being ready to snap up the million, then got distracted by things such as gullible readers who accepted his claimed abilities, and backed out.”

There is not one word of Randi in Randi’s text. I have not been contacted by Randi about taking his Million-Dollar Challenge. I have not committed to take part in his Challenge nor did I make “great noises” about snapping up the million. I have backed out from taking part in his Challenge. And Mr. Byng: If James Randi is not trustworthy in a small matter such as this, why would you think him any more trustworthy when $1 million of his own cash is at stake?—John Atkinson
If you’re serious about music and movies, don’t settle for less than Anthem® Statement electronics. Critics call them “extraordinary;” the world’s finest in digital audio and digital video processing for serious music and home theater enthusiasts.

You can spend more, but nothing will match the incredible performance of Anthem® Statement electronics.

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*All channels driven into 4 ohms. Stable into any impedance down to a short circuit at full output.
The other day Dave Wilson was vexed by the sound of the crossover in a new loudspeaker. Engineer Vern Credille brought him a piece of graph paper covered from top to bottom with equations. The result at the bottom of the page, he calmly announced, was the solution to the design issue they were wrestling with. Subsequent listening demonstrated that Vern's claim was, in fact, correct.

The ability to translate the problems of high-end audio reproduction in real-world situations into the language of mathematics and back again is not what you'd expect from your garden-variety engineer. Part of Vern's talent lies in the multiplicity of his degrees: math, electrical engineering, and electronics technology; he's even studied the science of air turbulence (the influence of the last bearing directly on the revolutionary port designs for Alexandria™ and the WATCH Dog™ subwoofer.)

Certainly no modern loudspeaker company would choose to do without their multi-processor computers, digital spectrum analyzers, and other exotic tools of the trade. At Wilson Audio, however, we assign equal—if not greater—value to a piece of paper and a sharp pencil in the hands of a true polymath named Vern Credille.
Those promoting audio-related seminars, shows, and meetings should fax (do not call) the when, where, and who to (212) 915-4164 at least eight weeks before the month of the event. The deadline for the February 2008 issue is December 3, 2007. Mark the fax "Attention Stephen Mejias, Dealer Bulletin Board." We will fax back a confirmation. If you do not receive confirmation within 24 hours, please fax us again.

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

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

Arizona

AudioNut announces the grand opening of their newest shop. Located on the 101 Expressway and Olive Avenue in Peoria, AudioNut will stock CDs, DVDs, and LPs for two-channel listening and home-theater systems. For more info, call (623) 487-1116 or e-mail question@audionut.com.

California

Thursday, November 29, 7-9:30pm: AudioVision SF (1603 Pine Street, San Francisco) will host an evening with Dynaudio loudspeakers, Simaudio Moon electronics, and Nordost cables. The seminar will feature several new products, including the Nordost Reference ODIN cables, Simaudio’s entry-level CD-1 CD player and i-1 integrated amplifier, and Dynaudio’s limited-edition Sapphire loudspeaker. Refreshments will be served, and a drawing will be held for some free goodies. AudioVision SF promises a wonderful and informative evening. For more info, visit www.audiovisionsf.com. RSVP: (415) 614-1118.

Saturday, December 15, 12-4pm: The Los Angeles and Orange County

US: Your Local Newsstand

John Atkinson

Hitting newstands as you read these words, the 2008 Stereophile Buyer’s Guide is bursting with technical specifications for more than 5000 audio components. Loudspeakers, amplifiers, CD players, turntables—every component category is listed in full, and we worked extra hard this past summer to make sure that the products of every manufacturer were included in its 228 pages.

But wait—there’s more. Members of Stereophile’s indomitable team of experienced reviewers have each contributed an essay on a subject dear to his heart. In the cases of Michael Fremer, Jim Austin, and Stephen Mejias, it is how to prioritize your system purchases and work out what will best suit your needs; in the case of Wes Phillips, it is how to get the best from two of his current passions, music servers and personal listening on headphones; John Marks recommends that audiophiles on a budget explore the one-box solutions that are now proliferating; Art Dudley recommends you check out the market in vintage gear; and both John Marks and Fred Kaplan offer advice on how to listen and what to listen for.

Like its predecessors, the 2008 Stereophile Buyer’s Guide will help make your music sound better than ever. It’s available on newsstands and from our eCommerce page, http://ssl.blueearth.net/primedia/home.php, for the cover price of $6.99.

Germany: Hamburg

Paul Messenger

Despite or because of an obdurate individuality that has often flown in the face of high-end orthodoxies, Naim Audio has slowly but surely grown into Britain’s leading brand of serious hi-fi electronics. Naim has always been determinedly system-oriented, strongly proselytizing the use of DIN plugs and its own relatively mundane and inexpensive interconnects and speaker cables, even if the newest Naim models have shown a greater readiness to interact with the rest of the world by including the odd phono socket, etc. And despite all the activity and debate that can be found on its popular website forum, Naim has always done its best to discourage all forms of tuning and tweaking—largely, one suspects, because the company believes it has already taken care of such issues at the design stage. Naim has therefore plowed its own furrow, and to some effect, but it remains something of an outsider. Among British brands, only DNMs has gone a similar route, with an approach that’s arguably even more isolationist.

The German brand Phonosophie (pronounced with soft s’s, as in opera, throughout) is run by the irrepressible Ingo Hansen, who began by modifying Thorens turntables, then distributed Naim products in Germany during the 1980s. Naim and Phonosophie parted company in the 1990s, and since then Hansen has developed his own range of electronics. The components show a strong Naim influence, right down to the DIN sockets and external power-supply upgrades, and are clearly oriented in the same general direction sonically, but they also have a distinctive individuality that reflects Hansen’s personality.

Unlike the Naim guys, Ingo Hansen is an arch-tweaker. He takes center stage at hi-fi shows, demonstrating strange devices such as the Audio Animator and the Artkustik Room-Animator to large rooms packed with enthusiasts. While I remain skeptical about the weirdness of these devices and techniques, Phonosophie has a whole collection of more conventional accessories, including a number specifically oriented toward DIN connectors that are just as practical.
**Connecticut**
Saturday, December 1, 12pm: The Connecticut Audio Society will hold its annual holiday meeting. Guest speaker Barry Diament, of Soundkeeper Recordings, will discuss his approach to audiophile recording. Visitors are welcome. For more info, call (860) 986-9156.

**Illinois**

Tuesday, November 27, 5–9pm: Holm Audio (Woodridge) will host a Nordost seminar with factory representatives on hand. Nordost products, including the ODIN Supreme Reference cables, will be demonstrated, and several attendees will have the opportunity to win a free pair of Nordost cables. Holm Audio asks that you please join them for an enjoyable evening of music. For more info, visit www.holmaudio.com or call (630) 663-1298.

**Indy Audio Society** will hold its 14th Annual Holiday Gala and Awards Ceremony at the Holiday Inn Buena Park. Dennis Had of Cary Audio Design will receive the Society's Founder's Award and give the keynote speech. Kevin Deal of Upscale Audio and audiophile Robert Greene will discuss the current state of the hobby and the audio industry. A holiday buffet will be included, and dress is holiday casual. A raffle, with up to $20,000 in prizes, is planned. All paid and lifetime members are invited; the event is free to the first 150 members and guests. For more info, visit www.laoaudiosociety.net or call Bob Levi at (714) 281-5850.

**Connecticut Audio Society** will hold its Annual All Music Software Swap Meet at the Holiday Inn Buena Park. Dealers, producers, members, and visitors are invited to sell or swap all forms of software, including LPs, CDs, SACDs, DVD-As, LDs, tapes, etc. One featured dealer, Eastwind Import, will bring hard-to-find JVC XRCDs and other CDs and SACDs from Japan. Tables will be provided, and lunch will be served free of charge. Each participant is asked to donate one piece of good-quality software to a raffle. For more info, visit www.laoaudiosociety.net or call Bob Levi at (714) 281-5850.

**UK: London Heathrow Paul Messenger**

Every fall, just as the first hints of changing colors start spreading through the trees, one of British hi-fi's annual rites takes place in a hotel at Heathrow Airport, on the edge of London. This annual show has been through all manner of changes over the years, but still somehow manages to limp along, attracting enough visitors to ensure that it will take place the next year as well.

Last year, two rival shows, the oldest being run by English magazine Hi-Fi News, concurrently competed for attention at Heathrow and created some confusion. This year, Hi-Fi News had bowed out, leaving the field clear for Chesterfield Communications. However, I still heard exhibitors complaining of insufficient promotion and publicity. This wasn't helped by uncertainty over the hours the show would be open, and poor attendance on the Friday trade-only day. However, both public days seemed quite busy, so I suspect we'll all be back next year. Still, I wonder whether any other exhibitors will be tempted to join high-end distributor Audiofreaks, which successfully outboarded in an adjacent hotel.

The 2007 show was a bit smaller overall than the combination of the 2006 events, and once again, leading brands such as Arcam, B&W, Cyrus, and KEF were conspicuously absent. Still, it took me two full days to get round, despite repeatedly pointing out to exhibitors that I was there to report on the show, had 80 or so rooms and stands to visit, and didn't want to spend 20 minutes at a demo that was unlikely to resemble what I might hear at home.

Happily, September usually provides a good crop of interesting new products, and this year none more so than a radical loudspeaker from Paul Burton. Involved as a consultant in designs as diverse as the Sumo Aria, Sequence, Cyrus Icon, and Podium, Burton has an impressive track record of originality, and has introduced the Omnimon loudspeaker (£4600/pair, $9400/pair) under his own brand, Rountree Acoustics (Rountree is his partner's surname). The Omnimon's 6.5" main driver, a top-quality ScanSpeak Revelator, is mounted face down, its central pole-piece denoting their efficacy in a Phonosophie system, and with more equivocal results. However, I am very impressed with the LS-2 speaker cable and the Bi- /Tri-wiring Adaptors.

I don't mean to imply that Phonosophie's accessories will necessarily improve a Naim system, or that they won't. I like and respect Naim's "no tweaking" approach, though I'm also aware that many enthusiasts enjoy tinkering with things that change—and perhaps improve—the sound of their systems. What I'm suggesting is that a variety of Phonosophie's accessories do offer Naim system owners a genuine opportunity to indulge in tweaking and tuning if they want to.

Though not currently distributed in the US, Phonosophie can be contacted direct in Germany at www.phonosophie.de, or, if the language difference is a worry, via UK distributor Uberphon.

**Rountree Omnimon**

Omnimon's 6.5" main driver, a top-quality ScanSpeak Revelator, is mounted face down, its central pole-piece denoting their efficacy in a Phonosophie system, and with more equivocal results. However, I am very impressed with the LS-2 speaker cable and the Bi-/Tri-wiring Adaptors.

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**Roundtree Omnimon**: right, complete; left, with enclosure and ribbon tweeter assembly removed.
Famous for his ‘Il Libro Del Cortegiano’ (The Book of the Courtier, 1528), Renaissance humanist Baldesar Castiglione coined the word 'sprezzatura' to describe the ideal for courtly behaviour. He insisted that in order to be worthy, exceptional virtuosity should be conveyed with an unaffected, effortless dignity. In essence, sprezzatura is the art of making something difficult look easy.

Created from the finest materials and complex technologies, our superlative Platinum loudspeakers are a sophisticated blend of craftsmanship and science, but make music so gracefully that it sounds naturally effortless.
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"I'm not sure you can escape from an audition without buying. You have been warned."
Sam Tellig, Stereophile, November 2005 - 1027 Be

"Highly recommended."
John Atkinson, Stereophile, June 2006 - 1007 Be
INDUSTRY UPDATE

THAILAND

Thursday–Sunday, November 22–25, 11am–9pm: Bangkok Hi-End & Car Audio Show 2007 will be held at the Adriatic Palace Hotel in Bangkok. For info, visit www.whatgroupthai.com.

to 32Hz. A ribbon tweeter is decouple-mounted on the main driver motor, and the crossover occupies an external box. Although the tweeter is directional, the speaker's omnidirectional sound radiation combines the outputs of the port and the main driver with significant augmentation from the carefully distributed enclosure modes. The Omnimon impressed a lot of visitors and could well turn out to be the ultimate two-way speaker.

More conventional and probably commercially rather more significant, Krell Industries' brand-new Modu-lare Duo two-box speaker system ($35,000/pair in the US) might well acknowledge the influence of Wilson Audio's famous WATT/Puppy combo. But one could also argue that proper competition for that long-established high-end stereotype is long overdue; the decidedly muscular Modulare is also less expensive than one might expect.

It was hard not to be impressed by the dynamic heft of Nola's enormous, multidriver Pegasus Reference Xtreme II. It was equally difficult to ignore the fact that the complete system occupied roughly half the floor area of the small room. More practical floorstanding newcomers included the pretty little Prio 520 from Finnish brand Amphion, and the somewhat chunkier model from Triangle's new, mid-priced Genese range. Among stand-mounted designs, Opera's revised Callas is unusual in featuring no fewer than five (!) tweeters, two on the front and three on the rear. And ProAc's new Response D Two is a classy, up-to-date variation on the theme of the classic 0.5-cubic-foot mini-monitor.

Stylish high-end electronics abounded. Solid-state examples included Chord Electronics' gorgeous, slant-loading RED Reference CD player, with 176.4kHz upsampling and 1024- or 4096-tap digital filtering, demonstrated alongside Chord's new 275Wpc integrated amplifier, the SPM 3350, based on the SPM 3300. dCS has been exceptionally busy lately: following the introduction in April of its Scarlatti three-box CD player, the English firm has now introduced the similar but somewhat less expensive, sleekly silver finished Paganini system, with fewer features and a more modest disc-drive mechanism. By the time this appears in print, the one-box Puccini SACD/CD player with DSD upsampling should also be available for £9499 ($20,000).

At rather less extravagant prices, the UK's Leema Acoustics and Canada's Simaudio Moon have created less costly variations on their respective familiar themes. Moon's CD-1 CD player and i-1 integrated amplifier (£1200/$2450) both find economies in the casework and presentation. Leema's Stream CDP CD player (under £1000) uses 16 DACs compared to the 20 in its Antilla, while its Pulse power amplifier (under £1000) incorporates a moving-magnet/moving-coil phono stage. In contrast, Pioneer has been busy upgrading its recently introduced and well-received separates, and now offers 9-series models with more power and better performance than the original 6 series (still available).

It was good to see—and hear—Norwegian amplifier brand Electrocompaniet back, and on an apparently strong footing. Three years ago, the company was taken over by Mikel Draggevik, a successful electronics businessman and longtime hi-fi enthusiast, who has busied himself sorting out the firm's product line and setting up international distribution. I see some parallels here with French speaker brand Triangle, having recently visited Paris and met Triangle's new owner, Olivier Decelle is a hi-fi enthusiast who has enjoyed success in business and is now investing his time, money, and expertise.
in expanding one of his favorite brands. Those with the ideas and perception to create original hi-fi equipment often lack the acumen and enthusiasm required to build a business; partnership with people with money and business skills is a good thing.

Tube equipment seems to become more widespread and elaborate every year. Korean brand Emillé and Greek operation Trulife Audio (TLA) both showed strikingly beautiful upmarket amplification products, though their philosophies are as different as their stylings. German brand Einstein has finally added a tube-based CD player to a lineup that includes a preamplifier that selects between inputs by switching the appropriate tubes on or off. Italy's Unison Research has opted push-pull operation for an attractive new 70 Wpc integrated amp, the P 70, which cutely shows off its tubes behind a panel of Murano glass.

Hybrid amplifiers combining tubes and solid-state devices might well offer the best of both worlds. Canadian manufacturer Magnum Dynalab showed the MD-309, a 200Wpc integrated amp designed to match their stylish touchscreen MD-109 tuner and incorporating two digital inputs with 24-bit/192kHz DACs. French brand Advance keeps prices low by manufacturing in China, while AMR (Abbingdon Music Research) has cleverly designed loudspeakers to match the appearance of its CD-player and amplifier models.

The term passive preamplifier is arguably a contradiction in terms, but passive system controllers are highly regarded by purists, and Music First Audio's transformer-based Passive Magnetic Volume Attenuator has a cult following here in Britain. The £7850 ($116,000) price of the new Reference version might seem over the top, but its main transformers have denser cores, and there are extra transformers for the Tape Out, as well as other using one of these inexpensive, no-frills devices for the past few weeks and have found it very good indeed.

Turntables were very much in evidence. Michael (son of the late David) Gammon had brought along a complete archive of the extraordinary Transcriptor models from the 1960s and 1970s to illustrate the heritage of his new Spider and Ikos models. While founder Peter Suchy is still very much at the helm of Clearaudio, it was his daughter Veronika who showed me the entry-level Emotion Red (£520/$1050); a family succession seems assured here, too.

More turntables: Terry O'Sullivan's Garrard offers the alternative of idler-wheel drive, has recently moved to larger premises, and promises to The Origin Live tonearm range continues to grow.

The Origin Live tonearm range continues to grow.

soon put the upmarket 601 model back into production. Mark Baker's Origin Live has been growing steadily for many years now, and now offers no fewer than six tonearm models. Onetime Pink Triangle proprietor Arthur Khoubesserian caused a stir last year when he launched Funk Firm with a cute entry-level turntable, the Funk V. For 2007 he's come up with an altogether more serious variation on a similar theme: the Funk Saffire (£1850/$3775) features vector drive, an Anniversary bearing, and an outboard DC motor supply. He was also demonstrating, to very good effect, a much cheaper alternative to Linn's Keel subchassis for the Linn LP12: his own lightened, carbon-fiber subchassis.

It would be wrong to call 2007's Sound & Vision Heathrow event an unqualified success, if only because there was much more sound than vision on display (for which yours truly was very thankful). However, attendance over the weekend looked healthy enough to indicate that we'll all be heading west out of London again in 12 months' time. 

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Flea-watt amps are fine, but sometimes a reviewer needs more muscle. So, nearly five years ago, I purchased a pair of Parasound Halo JC 1 monoblocks, which Mikey Fremer reviewed in the February 2003 Stereophile (Vol.26 No.2).

Each JC 1 is rated to deliver 400W into 8 ohms or 800W into 4 ohms. What's more, the amp is said to deliver 25W pure class-A into 8 ohms. A pair originally sold for $6000, but they're still a steal at $7000/pair. John Atkinson wrote that the Halo JC 1 "ranks right up there with the best high-end heavyweights." It weighs 81 lbs. At $3500/amp, that's $43.21/lb—a very good deal.

Parasound has the JC 1 made, to their specs, in Taiwan, where build quality, overall, is still better than in mainland China. John Curl designed it. In the 1970s, John designed the JC 1 head amp and JC 2 preamplifier sold under the Mark Levinson name. In 1981, he founded Vendetta Research ("I'll show the bastards!"). whose most famous product was the SCP-2—still considered by some as the best phono preamp. I would have bought one had I had a spare $15,000, but they're no longer available, now that Bob's not around to build them.

John Curl told me that the Halo JC 1 could sell for less, if it weren't for the high-quality parts that Crump picked out: a Vampire RCA input jack of gold-plated, oxygen-free copper; Neutrik XLRs; gold-plated speaker binding posts from Superior Electric; REL and Nichicon Muse capacitors; and so on. The power supply uses a 10 ampere (continuous) toroidal transformer encased in an epoxy-filled steel canister. High-speed, fast-recovery rectifier diodes and four humungous, 33,000uF Nichicon Gold Tune electrolytic filter capacitors feed the high-voltage B+ and B- supply rails for the output stage.

The JC 1's input is a "complementary differential" J-FET stage—in another word, balanced. This is followed by two stages of hand-matched push-pull MOSFETs driving nine pairs of Sanken bipolar output transistors. The Sankens attach directly to the heatsinks that run along each side. "Think of the Halo JC 1 as a class-A, 25W amp," Richard Schram suggested. That's the way it runs most of the time—unless you turn down the biases switch on the back and have it run at a B+ of 10W in class-A. You can flip this switch on the fly—no need to turn off the amp.

I heard little difference between the two bias settings. The low setting is useful in summer, or for leaving the amps on without running up your electric bill. The JC 1s raise the temperature of our living room, even in winter. Needless to say, there's no Energy Star rating.

The JC 1 has balanced XLR (pin 2 is hot) and unbalanced RCA inputs. As mentioned, only the initial J-FET input stage is balanced. According to Schram, this yields "all the advantages of a very high common-mode rejection ratio to null out noise coming into the amp in the audio line. For the money, this is the better approach. If the amps sold for twice as much, they could be fully balanced and they would be as good as they are now."

Nulling out noise is why Parasound recommends running balanced into the amp. That's nice, when you can run balanced from your CD player and from your preamp. Most of the time, I could not. Even so, using the unbalanced inputs, I could hear no loss of performance, and no noise I could identify as coming from the Halo JC 1s. This is a very quiet amp, balanced or unbalanced. The same could not be said for its mechanical hum. One of my amps had a transformer that buzzed from time to time. In the unlikely event you do encounter any nonmechanical noise, you can lift the ground with a switch on the rear of the amp. No need to mess with possibly unsafe cheater plugs.

The Halo JC 1 uses some negative feedback (as little as possible, says John Curl). So do most other solid-state amplifiers. They have to, to remain stable. It's possible to design a solid-state amp without introducing feedback (other than local feedback). Charlie Hansen has done it with his stunning Ayre Acoustics MX-R monoblocks, but such a design is expensive to implement; they retail for $16,500/pair.

The Halo JC 1 needs feedback to meet THX Ultra2 certification. The issue of feedback is complex—there are times when dialing in more of it improves the sound. A lot depends on the circuit topology.

When my Halo JC 1s arrived, the original Triangle Magellan loudspeakers still resided in our living room. Selling for $32,900/pair and standing over 6' high, they could use the power. Driven by the wrong amps, they could also sound a little edgy.

The Halo JC 1s drove the Magellans beautifully—nary a touch of solid-state sterility or high-frequency stridency. I was so pleased I went to Ikea and...
bought a pair of $12.99 Lack side tables to put the amps on. To lower them, I had my carpenter saw their legs off. Nice amp stands—perfect for the Parasounds.

I’d had the Parasounds for about two weeks when another pair of monoblocks arrived to disturb my peace. These sold for around $30,000/pair—six times the price. I could have them for 10 days. Oh, joy.

Maybe I would have liked them better after 10 weeks. As it was, I had trouble listening to the new amps for more than 10 minutes. The amps struck me as excessively analytical, more for audiophiles than for music lovers—or for those who get erections at the test bench. There’s a lot less of that sound around now, as more solid-state amps catch up with Parasound. Heh-heh-heh. I laugh my evil laugh.

Over the past five years, I’ve used the Halo JC 1s with as many as two dozen loudspeakers. I never ran out of power. Experienced hi-fi buffs know that you can more easily damage a loudspeaker with too little power than with too much. The JC 1 delivers clean power, and lots of it—without taking you to the cleaners.

Of course, there are limits to how much power any speaker can withstand, particularly on a sustained basis. Don’t be afraid of 400W; respect them. If your loudspeaker’s manual says the speaker can handle up to, say, 200W, be careful with your volume levels. A high-powered amp is like a high-performance car: It can get you high, but it costs more for audiophiles.

Don’t be afraid of 400W; respect their limits. Experienced hi-fi buffs know not to make these recordings sound so good for so little money; but I don’t know about it.

I listen to many less-than-perfect recordings—early Duke Ellington and Louis Armstrong, Jascha Heifetz and Artur Schnabel. One advantage of low-powered amplifiers—particularly single-ended triodes—is that they don’t make these recordings sound worse by exacerbating their shortcomings. In fact, many recordings from the 1920s and 1930s have a musical idiosyncrasy...unless they’re played through solid-state amplifiers tweaked for the test bench and made mainly to impress audiophiles.

The Halo JC 1, unlike a lot of solid-state amps, is kind to older recordings. I don’t want to say “forgiving,” because that implies that an amplifier loses definition and detail and sounds excessively warm and fuzzy. No, the JC 1 is capable of plenty of definition and detail. It just doesn’t analyze the music to death, squeezing the life out of the performance. The JC 1 sounds more musical than merciless. Of course, some listeners like to suffer. Take your medicine. Never mind the taste. It’s good for you.

I don’t want to pick on any one solid-state brand, and I do think things are getting better. But a few years ago I had an encounter at a dealer’s with another well-reviewed solid-state monoblock. He was playing the very speaker model I then had at home for review, and which had been playing superbly with the Parasounds. But at the dealer’s, with much more expensive amps, the sound was all wrong. Detail, detail, everywhere, but timbres were harsh and unlistenable. Spatial resolution—a strong point with the Parasounds—wasn’t so hot. Audiophiles so often get the sound they deserve.

Everyone agrees that John Curl is one of the world’s best, most experienced solid-state designers. But he really has it in for the measurement geeks—as does Ayre’s Charlie Hansen. No one is saying that measurements aren’t important. They’re very impor-

THERE MAY BE ANOTHER POWERFUL AMP THAT SOUNDS SO GOOD FOR SO LITTLE MONEY; BUT I DON’T KNOW ABOUT IT.
Charged with creating a new high-powered amplifier that would continue our tradition of offering near state-of-the-art performance at a fraction of the cost, it seems that Steve McCormack has instead simply gone ahead and established a new benchmark of performance to solid state amplifiers. Read what Peter Montefief has to say in International Audio Review (IAR 80):

"For music lovers, this brand new power amp has now captured the top honor as the best solid-state amp on the planet. ... The sound of the DNA-500 combines relaxed authority, effortless transparency, grace and subtlety, and a musically natural liquidity. ... the new McCormack DNA-500 brings true musical naturalness to solid-state ... Its reach, and its grasp, are both broad and deep, exceeding far beyond the musical capabilities of other solid-state amps in many different ways, and in each and every way to a startling degree."

Visit a McCormack Audio dealer to hear for yourself just how power and grace combine in the DNA-500 to bring you closer to the music.
juice—that is, varoom the voltage so that
amplifiers and passive preamps with
power supply. Some low-level noise—
or grunge from a less than adequate
detail, perhaps. Some electronic glaze
hear some drawbacks. Some loss of
dynamic ease.

With the JC 2, nada—no noise. This
was true whether I used it in balanced
mode, with the JC 1 power amps, or
unbalanced, with the Quicksilver SET
Monos. Score one for the Halo JC 2.

John Curl sketched out the JC 2's
design six years ago, when he did the
JC 1. That it took this long to get into
production says something about the
difficulty of tweaking a preamp. It may
also be due to the fact that the JC 2 is
made in a different Taiwanese factory
from the JC 1. As with the JC 2, Carl
Thompson laid out the boards, and
Bob Crump tweaked the design and
picked the parts. Same trio that did the
Blowtorch. I wish I'd bought one. I
wish I'd had the $15k. Too late now. I
blew it.

The Halo JC 2 derives from the
Blowtorch, according to Curl. There
are certain circuit similarities. Lessons
learned in designing the Blowtorch
were applied to the JC 2. But the JC 2
is not a Blowtorch at a blow-out price.
The former is said to be a champ at stop-
ping noise from coming in via the AC
power line. (You can read about all this
in the JC 2's manual, available on Para-
sound's website.) The intent is to
achieve extremely low noise levels so
that music emerges intact from a silent
background—more body, more bloom,
better macro- and microdynamics.

The Halo JC 2 is fully balanced from
inputs to outputs. Two balanced
XLR inputs can be changed to unbal-
anced RCA inputs at the flip of two
switches. There are four more unbal-
anced RCA inputs, for a total of six
THE JC 2 ALLOWS MUSIC TO EMERGE INTACT—
WITH BODY, BLOOM, AND DYNAMICS, WITH
DEFINITION AND DETAIL—FROM AN UTTERLY SILENT
BACKGROUND.

Son of Blowtorch: Parasound's JC 2 new preamp.
Why your arm needs to be a foot

SME Model 20/12: With the introduction of the magnificent SME 20/12 turntable, SME has yet again set a new standard for its class. This newest offering represents an exciting new phase for SME in that it is the first for the new engineering team within SME collaborating with Alastair Robertson-Aikman, SME's legendary chairman. As such, it represents a successful changing of the guard.

The choice to develop the SME 20/12's 12" tonearm came about from the dual role the 20/12 is asked to perform; as both a state of the art turntable and as a pure transcription device for archival purposes. In this latter role, SME prioritizes a design that produces significantly less tracking error and distortion. Happily, this reduction in distortion benefits audiophile playback of vinyl.

The technical challenges to creating a 12" arm were carefully considered and overcome through the use of an extremely rigid, high precision, lightweight magnesium arm tube. Precision, clarity and focused sound result from the tonearm's effortless tracking.

SME 20/12 incorporates a tonearm of this size does require a far more substantial chassis to fully optimize its operation. The SME 20/12 is almost twice the mass of its smaller brother the SME 20/2. In addition, it is equipped with a large diameter platter that weighs substantially more and has a more robustly designed bearing to handle this larger platter. It utilizes a subchassis which is both wider and thicker, suspended on elastomeric bands placed in tension. The resultant resonance, however minor, is then eliminated by having its frequency and amplitude dissipated into a large reservoir of silicone damping material.

The SME 20/12 reveals the hidden qualities of your treasured vinyl records. For the first time music will emerge from a totally "black" background, with both a rock-steady stereo image and ultra-deep soundstage. $28,000
You may want to grab last month’s issue of Stereophile to have a better look at the adjoining picture as we describe the architecture of our Desktop Audiophile System in the diagram below.

In the center of the block diagram is the HeadRoom Desktop Amp. We’ve called it an “amp” because it’s a headphone amp, but it’s also a pre-amp when used in a desktop system.

To the right, you can see the analog audio sources. We’ve shown an iPod and an FM tuner, but you can use any audio sources you’d like, such as a phono-stage, tape deck, satellite radio, whatever. To the left are the digital inputs: the USB input is for your computer; the optical and coax S/PDIF inputs can be for any digital output source. Once you’ve got a full complement of inputs, you’ll go through some switching to get to the output section. The crossfeed is to improve imaging on headphones and can be defeated for speaker listening. The gain switch allows you to adjust the coarse gain stage of the amp to adjust for the wide variety of headphone efficiencies out there. The volume pot controls both the headphone and the variable pre-amp output. The mute switch on the pre-amp side allows you to mute the speakers when you’re listening to headphones.

A new product for HeadRoom will be our Desktop Class-D Power Amp. This sweet little amp will put out 50 smooth and articulate Watts per channel, and remain cool as a cucumber.

Next month we’ll talk about the computer side of things. ‘Til then, we hope all is well this holiday season, right between your ears.
organized over the polarity of each CD in his collection. Clark Johnsen, author of The Wood Effect, would love this, too. Isn’t hi-fi great? You can worry about such unimportant things. I leave the JC 2 at correct polarity most of the time. When a recording lacks spaciousness 2, which itself runs warm because its high-current, low-impedance audio power supply is larger than that of many amplifiers. Most people will leave the JC 2 on all the time for better sound.

Few do.

As you can see from the photograph, Maxik, our cat, loves to curl on the Parasound gear. If I run the JC 1 in low-bias setting, he sleeps on one of them. In high-bias, he jumps to the JC 2, which itself runs warm because its high-current, low-impedance audio power supply is larger than that of many amplifiers. Most people will leave the JC 2 on all the time for better sound.

So, what’s there to say about the sound of the JC 2?

Nothing.

Only kidding. The JC 2 does what it’s claimed for it. It allows music to emerge intact—with body, bloom, and dynamics, with definition and detail—from an utterly silent background. It allows your CD player and other sources to do their stuff. One more thing: the JC 2 excels at the reproduction of space. It helps the JC 1 power amps throw a huge soundstage. (I used Verity Audio Rienzi speakers for most of my listening.)

My guess is that the Parasound Halo JC 2 can compete successfully against preamps, solid-state or tubed, that sell for twice the price—or more. Like the JC 1, the JC 2 is up there with the best of them, but down to earth in price. I could curl up with this preamp. As a matter of fact, I will.

C. Crane CCRadio-SW AM/FM/shortwave radio

Like me, the people at C. Crane Company are radio geeks. Accessories. Antennas. FM transmitters for the home. And, of course, radios.

So when Jessica called to ask if I’d like to consider reviewing the CCRadio-SW AM/FM/shortwave radio ($149.95), I couldn’t say no. I still love shortwave—even though there’s less of it since the BBC pulled the plug on most of its shortwave broadcasts on July 1, 2001. I find it impossible nowadays to scare up the BBC on shortwave, either at home or in my travels.

But some shortwave broadcasts in English still exist, including excellent news programs from Radio Netherlands. I can listen to news from China and from Radio Albania, too. I find myself listening to Vatican Radio for something you almost never hear: intelligent discussions of theology. Of course, there are more programming choices on the Internet, and most are available 24 hours a day. But the fun of shortwave is the chase—and not knowing what might turn up. It’s less fun now.

The CCRadio-SW looks like something from 20 or 30 years ago. It seems almost military, like those shortwave receivers R.L. Drake used to make. It’s big—11½ wide by 7½ high by 2½ deep. With four D batteries installed, it weighs exactly 5 lbs—I know because I weighed it the same way I tip the scale with Maxik, our cat. First, I weigh myself. Frightening. Then I weigh Sam holding Maxik. You don’t want to lug this radio. On the other hand, you might want to take it out on the backyard deck, or even camping. A carrying case is $30 extra, but you may not need it.

The sound is quite good for a portable/table radio with a 5” speaker. It can play loud outside—louder than, say, a Tivoli PAL, whose sound can get lost in the great outdoors.

The main thing is that the CCRadio-SW’s FM and AM reception are superb—which makes it the perfect portable radio for our area, where FM stations are packed close together on the dial. AM signals, for the most part, are weak. The CCRadio-SW copes with both situations. I’ve even used it with my two hi-fi systems—instead of a measly miniplug, it has two proper RCA line outputs.

The CCRadio-SW sounds better from batteries than it does from the supplied AC wall wart. You can toggle between four D or four AA batteries. A built-in charging circuit recharges NiMH batteries inside the unit. The batteries are on you.

I can quibble. Automatic gain control would have been nice on shortwave—although I didn’t expect it at the price. There’s no direct keypad entry, but there are fast and slow tuning and 50 memory presets. There’s a timer and an alarm—good for a boat or a camping trip.

The CCRadio-SW doesn’t receive in-band digital (HD) broadcasts, but I’m not sure HD is the future of radio. There are too many problems: reception issues, limited bit rate, high prices for HD receivers, and the lack, so far, of any battery-powered portables. More likely, the future is WiFi Internet radio. Sam’s got one such radio on the way—stay tuned. (It’s time to buy a wireless router.)

Meanwhile, you can order C. Crane’s FM antenna ($69.95) and send the audio signal from your computer to the CCRadio-SW. The sound quality will depend on the quality of the bitstream. For casual listening, especially news and talk, this is just fine. After all, I can listen to the BBC World Service on the Crane.

Made for radio geeks: CCRadio-SW has superb FM and AM( ), as well as shortwave.
YG Acoustics enclosures start life as massive slabs of aircraft-grade aluminum. Critical parts use ballistic-grade alloy, which is otherwise not available commercially. The material is precision-milled on Haas (U.S.A.) CNCs. Quality is supervised by Fridenzon Technologies, a military-aerospace machining specialist. YG Acoustics' fine tolerances cannot be met by extrusion and cost-cutting tooling.

The machined parts are precision-ground on a custom-made Kuhlmeyer (Germany) CNC polishing robot. YG Acoustics' proprietary finish combines extraordinary surface-hardness with unsurpassed visual refinement.

A loudspeaker design is only as good as its production quality. For this reason, YG Acoustics does not merely possess the most advanced technology. Unlike some "boutique" (read: garage-based) manufacturers, YG Acoustics' state-of-the-art factory, located near Denver Colorado, utilizes the most advanced techniques. Much of the machinery used is without parallel in the industry. Here is a brief glimpse into the process:

Thanks to our unique combination of unsurpassed technology with highest-quality production, we are confident in our commitment that with a correct system and setup, the YG Acoustics Anat Reference Professional is indistinguishable from live sound. Period.

Cabinets are assembled by master-craftsmen using machine screws only (never glue), so future technologies can be fit onto existing units. Thus, one never needs to replace a YG Acoustics loudspeaker. Instead, upgrades are performed by adding expansion modules, or updating existing ones.

Drivers are made by Scan-Speak (Denmark), to YG Acoustics' specifications. Features that exceed the supplier's capabilities are produced in-house. This offers the best of both worlds - YG Acoustics' proprietary design with Scan-Speak's driver-know-how.
YG Acoustics' proprietary software is unique in that it can optimize both amplitude and phase at once. Mr. YG himself designs a custom crossover for every precisely-matched pair. All speakers get the same care as the reference prototype.

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Every pair of loudspeakers undergoes a full measurement battery at YG Acoustics' state-of-the-art lab, and thorough listening. All parts are tested, and data is archived in the rare case that a replacement is ever needed.

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Turntables, Fluids, & a Test LP

Michael Fremer

There are 5000 neatly boxed LPs next to a dumpster on 76th Street near York Avenue, the phone message announced, "and if you don't get them, they'll end up as landfill."

Never mind that it was 10:30pm on the Saturday of Labor Day weekend and I'd just consumed a few too many ribs and perhaps too much Casanova di Neri Rosso (the Brunello is only for special occasions). I hopped in the wife's Honda Odyssey and headed for Manhattan, forgetting that, by coincidence, I was wearing a "33½" T-shirt.

The call had come from Hansen Audio's Wes Bender, who was traveling back to Brooklyn with Danny Gonzales, setup guy for Harry Pearson, founder and erstwhile editor of The Absolute Sound, and I'd just consumed a few too many ribs.

Goldstein had put thousands of his most treasured LPs in storage, but ran out of time and money to ensure that no chemical residue—which is important.

The Return of Audio Intelligent fluids

Paul Frumkin, developer of the excellent Audio Intelligent Vinyl Solutions line of record-cleaning fluids, threw in his fluid-soaked towel a while back, prompting Stereophile to remove his products from "Recommended Components."

Since then, popular demand has inspired Frumkin to make the line available once again, this time manufactured and distributed by Missouri-based Osage Audio Products, LLC. Osage president Jim Pendleton recently sent me samples of the new line, including 16-oz bottles of Enzymatic Formula ($18); alcohol-free Premium Archivist Formula ($18); Super Cleaner Formula, which uses research-grade isopropanol ($18); and Ultra-Pure Water ($10), which Audio Intelligent claims is 50 times purer than distilled water. Larger, cost-saving sizes and combos are available online at www.audiointelligent.com, as well as through Music Direct, Needle Doctor, and KAB.

I tried some of the Enzymatic Formula on side 1 of a literally moldy oldie I'd recently acquired, and my reference Disc Doctor two-step fluid on side 2. They removed the visible mold equally well. I followed up on side 1 with AI's Super Cleaner Formula and then Ultra-Pure water, but only Ultra-Pure on side 2. Both sides looked equally clean and, when played, sounded equally quiet, and neither left fuzzy residues on the stylus or in my ears. Next I played a record previously cleaned with Disc Doctor fluid, then cleaned it with Enzymatic, Super Cleaner, and Ultra-Pure water. I couldn't hear a difference, which, at the very least, proved that the Audio Intelligent fluids didn't leave an audible residue—which is important.

The Scheu Analog Das Laufwerk No.2 turntable

I don't know which turntable design came first—that of the late Thomas Scheu (Scheu Analog is now run by his widow, Ulla Scheu), or of TW Acustic's Thomas Woschnick. It doesn't matter, but there are some conceptual similarities between Scheu Analog's Das Laufwerk No.2 ($5995) and the TW Acustic Raven ($10,000), even if the materials—and the sounds—are quite different.

The Laufwerk No.2's inverted ball bearing and acrylic platter also bear a striking resemblance to those of the Metronome Gaia Excellence ($35,000), which I reviewed here in February 2007. Like the Gaia's, the Laufwerk's all-acrylic platter is about 3" tall, but weighs 14 lbs;
the Gaia platter’s 16.5 lbs. Also like the Gaia’s, the Laufwerk’s platter rides on an inverted bearing of hardened steel fitted with an aluminum-oxide ceramic ball riding on a Teflon thrust pad. Both tables are driven, via knotted nylon threads, by electronically regulated outboard DC motors with fine adjustment of speed. (Depending on the context, the German noun Laufwerk means drive mechanism or pulley cradle or tracks and suspensions.)

Like the TW Raven, the Laufwerk No2 is a mass-loaded design whose bearing system is anchored in a heavy, circular pedestal of stainless steel and bronze that’s bolted to the plinth. But while the Raven, with its dense, copper-topped platter of proprietary composite and its composite plinth, weighs almost 170 lbs, the bonded acrylic, and the entire turntable weighs about 84 lbs. The Laufwerk’s plinth rests on three massive stainless-steel feet threaded for leveling. All three feet end in steel caps, one of which is taller and tapped to accommodate a cantilevered armboard that attaches with a single bolt and allows a wide range of pivot-to-spindle adjustability. The other two caps can be so fitted as well, for a total of three tonearms mounted simultaneously. The review sample came with a second tapped cap and acrylic armboard, and an optional rechargeable battery power supply ($239) for the motor in place of the standard 3Comm wall-wart supply.

Also supplied was a Scheu Cantus 12” unipivot tonearm ($1400) made from a single piece of acrylic and cut to resemble a girder. The Cantus sounded surprisingly pleas-
The star of the Scheu show is the Laufwerk's stellar bearing system and the massive way it's attached to the plinth. After all, you're talking about a big hunka acrylic platter and a big hunka acrylic plinth, though the really massive steel feet and arm mounting platform obviously add visual luster. The acrylic armboards subtracted somewhat—I'd prefer to see armboards made of some more massive material. (They are also available in bronze.) Overall, though, the Laufwerk's quality of machining and fit'n'finish were outstanding. Of course, with the euro now worth about $1.33, you pay a premium for an imported product, but even with that disadvantage, the Scheu is competitive in the US market in terms of build quality and, especially, sound.

Sound: The Laufwerk No.2 produced smooth, well-detailed, solid overall sound, rich in the midrange and with reasonably solid, well-controlled, pitch-sensitive bass. It couldn't compete with the Grand Prix Monaco (reviewed last month) or the TW Acustic Raven (reviewed in December 2006) in the bottom octaves, or in overall slam and focus, nor could it deliver the airy transparency and lightness of being of the recently departed Merrill MS21. I also wrote about last month—but hell, all three of those 'tables are far more expensive. For a lot less money, the Scheu produced sound that, while not as good, was difficult to fault. Its mostly good balance of sins of omission made listening to it always more than merely pleasing.

As I write this I'm listening to The Real Ambassadors (LP, Columbia OS 2250), a stereoddity recorded in 1961. It's the soundtrack to a never-produced musical written by Dave Brubeck and his wife, Iola, starring Brubeck, Louis Armstrong and his band, Carmen McRae, and Lambert, Hendricks & Ross. Recorded at Columbia Records' famous 30th Street Studios, its lively vibrancy and spaciousness will be familiar to connoisseurs of Miles Davis' Kind of Blue, though here it's applied to voices rather than brass and reeds. The Scheu's quiet backdrops allowed the production of satisfying low-level detail and subtle decay into aural blackness that helped produce a vivid, supple, "living" sonic picture I could gaze...
Analog Productions’ The Ultimate Analogue Test LP

Naming any product the “Ultimate” anything only invites the ultimate scrutiny, so let’s scrutinize The Ultimate Analogue Test LP (Analogue Productions AAPT 1), pressed on 180gm vinyl ($39.99).

The instructions on the back of the jacket are disappointingly sketchy, with a system that’s in electrical balance. Though the “Starting Point” box does pressed on 180gm vinyl ($39.99), I could easily ignore this quality.

After a month of listening to Scheu Analog’s Das Laufwerk No.2, it was easy to understand why this smooth-sounding import has found a sizable US following.

Of course, if you determine that your channel balance is off and your preamp doesn’t have a balance control (few do these days), there’s little you can do except to note by how much it’s off.

I’m not sure why producers Clark Williams and Barry Wolfiston chose to record the 1kHz reference tone at 7cm/s mono (in-phase, lateral), when the industry standard used on most test discs is 5cm/s (3.54cm/sec stereo). But that’s not really a big issue.

Also, the suggestion to check the cantilever zenith angle using the Test LP’s first track and an oscilloscope is odd. While this method will work for the few who own tangential-tracking tonearms (those that actually are tangential), for users of pivoted arms there will be some measurable phase error, because track 1 begins and ends before the first of the two null points, which are the only two locations across the disc surface where there should be zero phase error between the channels. But never mind that—how many of you own an oscilloscope?

Tracks 2 and 3 are 1kHz reference tones for the left and right channels, respectively, and are essential for properly setting azimuth. The wide spacing between the tracks makes them easy to identify, which is extremely helpful—it allows you to disconnect your speakers (substitute a power resistor to provide a load) so you don’t have to endure ear-splitting 1kHz tones. (On some other test LPs, these tracks are so close together that the only way to be sure you’re on the right one is to hear it.)

However, being told to “twist the cartridge about its radial axis until the measurements from Track 2 and 3 are as low as possible and very close to equal for both channels” is about as useful as a bicycle in Venice. It’s the crosstalk that needs to measure as low as possible and close to equal when the azimuth is correct. Perhaps that’s what the writer meant; if so, he surely didn’t make it clear.

No procedure for measuring crosstalk is provided. Fortunately, it’s detailed with great precision on my 21st Century Vinyl DVD; the combination of The Ultimate Analogue Test LP and 21st Century Vinyl gives you what you need to adjust azimuth.

While tracks 4–8 on side 1 are useful for mastering-lathe engineers needing to check and calibrate their RIAA equalizers, and can help you determine the accuracy of your phonograph, few consumer-grade phono preamp EQ adjustment.

Track 9 purports to allow you to optimize your cartridge’s vertical tracking angle (VTA) by using an intermodulation distortion (IMD) tester to set minimum IMD. Again, how many of you have such a device? Even if you did, you’d be able to set VTA in this way only for records cut with the same cutter-head system—for example, the Neumann SX-74 cutter used to produce this test disc.

Track 10 lets you check wow and flutter—assuming you have a wow and flutter meter. Given that most LPs are pressed with some degree of eccentricity, such measurements aren’t particularly useful, and are even less so when the test track is the last one on the side, where the effects of eccentricity are the most pronounced.

Side 2’s first track, designed to help you set antiskating, features a 315Hz lateral amplitude sweep to 12dBu, which the instructions say should be “clean in both channels up to the highest levels.” Like the highly modulated tracks on the Hi-Fi News & Record Review test LP, this track is way too high in level to provide an accurate antiskating setting. How much music is cut at that level? I get emails all the time from nervous audiophiles who ask what’s wrong with their rigs because they can’t track the Hi-Fi News disc’s highly modulated inner grooves. “Nothing,” I tell them. “The problem is with the test record.”

Side 2’s last track, which is supposedly used for cartridge “demagnetization” and to break in a cartridge suspension. Track 4, an out-of-phase 1kHz tone, is useful (when summed to mono using a mono switch or Y-connector on the tonearm cable output) for monitoring tracking artifacts—ideally, the left- and right-channel tones should cancel out, leaving no signal. However, track 4 is not a useful test for checking antiskating, as claimed in the instructions.

Track 5, a vertically cut sweep from 1kHz down to 10Hz, is supposedly useful for finding tonearm/cartridge “resonance anomalies.” It isn’t. To be useful, there should be two separate tracks, one cut vertically and one horizontally, with discrete, announcer-identified low-frequency tones from around 20Hz to 4Hz, produced in conjunction with higher-frequency “pilot” tones. At some point between the upper and lower limits of each track, the tonearm will begin to violently shake, indicating the hori-
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horizontal or vertical resonant frequencies of the arm/cartridge. The pilot tone provides audible confirmation by warbling as the arm resonates. If there is no observable resonant frequency, it is occurring either above 20Hz or below 4Hz, neither of which is good.

Track 6 is a silent, unmodulated groove for checking rumble and turntable isolation.

And that's it. The "ultimate" test disc? Perhaps for Barry Wolfson, who maintains the mastering lathe at Sterling Sound, but for the rest of us? No.

I would have preferred a reprise of the antiskating track on Telarc's long-discontinued Omnidisc test LP. It's located ideally on the disc, and contains an increasing modulation and a higher-frequency pilot tone. If the left channel breaks up first, that means too much antiskating is applied; if the right channel breaks up first, there's too little antiskating. When both start to break up simultaneously, antiskating is set correctly.

That, and horizontal and vertical resonant-frequency tracks, would have gone a long way toward making this an "ultimate" consumer test LP, even with the inclusion of some tracks useful only to mastering engineers. While The Ultimate Analogue Test LP includes a few useful tracks, along with many that have no use at home, it also contains misinformation that will take time to correct.

**CONTACTS**

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I don't want a symphony orchestra in my room: That's crazy. I want their music, played with enough realism that I can hear how it's done.

My room is 12' wide by 19' long, with an 8' ceiling, and it's made of wood and Sheetrock. There's no way any sane person would want to sit there and hear the same loudness level they'd hear in a concert hall, in the presence of a full orchestra. Count me among them.

I also wouldn't want to sit in that room and hear quite the same physical scale as a real orchestra—which is neither here nor there, since there doesn't appear to be any way of quantifying such a thing. But because it is possible to measure and quantify loudness peaks and the amount of voltage or current required to reproduce them, some people in our hobby have become obsessed with amplifier power, and many others are overly tolerant of salespeople who would have us believe that a nice, neat number of watts can correlate with one's enjoyment of records—that, and not timing or momentum or flow or correctness of pitch relationships or anything else that might actually have to do with music, for God's sake.

The appeal of their message is easy to understand: When a consumer is led to believe that the enjoyment of music is quantifiable, he or she is left with the idea that enjoyment is easy to attain. That conclusion also carries a hope in the existence of audio egalitarianism, of affordable satisfaction. Countless hi-fi companies have been built on little other than the promise of cheap power—more watts for the dollar—along with the suggestion that the more power you buy (from them, of course, since all other manufacturers are notorious liars), the more satisfying your music system will be.

It's rare to hear a thrifty-minded company offer more tone for the buck—or more tunefulness, more momentum, more flow. Not unheard of, but still—rare.

Like other people, I enjoy listening to music systems that can startle me with the strength and suddenness of their dramatic swings—or hold my attention with the sense of sheer physical touch they find in every recording they play back. But from what I've heard in years of serious listening, none of that requires an extraordinary amount of power: just a wisely designed amplifier mated to an appropriate and similarly well-thought-out loudspeaker. My own system, in which a 10Wpc Shindo Cortese amplifier drives 98dB-sensitive Audio Note AN-E loudspeakers, does quite well.1

Would more power make my system even better? Maybe. And maybe not. Last month, while preparing a product review for the November Stereophile, I observed that swapping out my Shindo Cortese for an amp five times as powerful made my system sound flatter and less compelling. Nor was that the first such counterintuitively disappointing amplifier "upgrade" I've experienced.

A powerful amplifier may be capable of doing one or more things better than an amp with a tenth as much power, all else being equal. And there may well exist some disagreeable quality in music replay that's more surely banished by a high-power amp than a low-power one, and that I'm simply less sensitive to than other hobbyists—just as I'm less sensitive to being deprived of knowing every performer's precise location on something called a "soundstage." Whatever. The real question, as always, is: Which variables, of the hundreds that exist, are the ones that have consistently proven most important to me, and to my listening enjoyment? Me, me, me.

It's all about me

A memo to the electronics industry: "I don't want you to sell me more power, any more than I want you to sell me more tone regulation, more power-supply capacity, flatter frequency response, greater channel separation, or more damping factor. None of those things can guarantee that an amp will be good at the thing it was supposedly designed for—playing music—and no single one of them is necessarily more important than the others. What I really want is for you to sell me more music. When you think you're ready to do that, give me a call."

But because the finest-sounding amps in my experience have mostly been low-power things, I dare say you'll help your own cause as much as mine by forgetting the watts-per-dollar thing for at least a little while, and concentrating on something else. You needn't worry: There's a growing number of new loudspeaker manufacturers that specialize in high-sensitivity, high-efficiency designs. Thank you.

One of my favorites is DeVore Fidelity—not just because they make very good loudspeakers, but because it's impossible to spend more than a few minutes talking with company

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1 In the technical measurements that accompanied my review in May 2006 of the similar Audio Note AN-E Lexus Signature, John Atkinson observed lower sensitivity than Audio Note had claimed in their published specs: 92.5dB vs 96dB. Still, John described the AN-E as "one of the more sensitive dynamic speakers I have measured."

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One Nine.

founder and chief designer John DeVore without realizing: This guy just plain gets it. A performer in his own right (on drums), DeVore also has great taste in music: the focus of virtually every conversation he and I have had since we met five or six years ago. During those years, two other things have dawned on me: Most DeVore Fidelity loudspeakers combine higher-than-average electrical sensitivity with sensibly high impedance curves, and most DeVore dealers also carry one or more amplifier brands noted for low power and high music quality, among them Shindo and Audio Note.

The opportunity for my first in-home DeVore Fidelity experience came last summer, when John DeVore offered to deliver and install a pair of his brand-new Gibbon Nines ($65000/pair). Not every loudspeaker in the DeVore line is referred to as a Gibbon—the current exception is the flagship Silverback Reference ($150000/pair), which Mikey raved about in the March 2006 Stereophile—but they all benefit from an evidently unique approach to crossover technology called the Gibbon Circuit, the precise workings of which are a closely guarded secret. “It isn’t a first-order, second-order, or third-order filter,” DeVore says, “although it uses resistors, caps, and coils [of the usual sort]. It isn’t a Band-Aid: Notch filters are offensive. Zobel networks are offensive.”

As DeVore explains, the first step in creating a good crossover circuit is to create good drivers. “Any speaker with a very stiff, undamped diaphragm that rings like crazy will create an enormous spike—and the standard practice is to design a circuit to compensate, and make it flat. The problem is, no matter what you do, the amplifier won’t see it as flat.” That’s one reason DeVore gave the Gibbon Nine a 0.75" Silk-dome tweeter, built in Europe to his specifications: It has “response to 40kHz—and no breakup.” The other two drivers in the Nine are 6.5" plasticcone woofers, also designed by DeVore and made for him by SEAS. In the 2.5-way Gibbon Nine, the lowest-frequency driver—the upper range of which rolls off before 100Hz—has a treatment applied to the inner surface of its cone, to alter its resonant frequency.

Back to DeVore’s design overview, which he calls the Gibbon Philosophy: “What makes the speaker easy to drive? Sensitivity and impedance are important, sure. But you also have to look at the entire loudspeaker as part of the amp, as part of a complete circuit. I want that interaction to be such that the amp stays as happy as it can, whether it’s a Shindo or a Krell.” Thus the system requires a well-behaved cabinet to go along with the well-behaved drivers—and DeVore accomplishes the former in a number of ways. The cabinet is made from two different densities of MDF, assembled with three different types of adhesive: “The selection of the glue for each part depends on whether the idea is to conduct resonances or isolate them,” DeVore says. Damping treatment also involves three different materials; the result is a cabinet in which every panel exhibits a different resonant frequency from every other.

As to acoustical loading, the Nine is a bass-reflex loudspeaker, but with different ports for the two different low-frequency drivers. The Nine comprises two separate chambers; the upper one is, for all intents and purposes, a complete DeVore Gibbon Super 8. The lower port is longer than the upper one, and is thus tuned to a lower frequency. “Ports put out a lot of energy at a narrow band of frequencies,” DeVore says, which can contribute to disturbing the relationship between amplifier and loudspeaker. By breaking them apart, so to speak, DeVore aims to spread out the peaks and minimize their effect on the amp.

The Nine’s internal wiring is stranded copper, using what DeVore describes as “very thin conductors, very heavily silver plated.” The crossover itself is potted in soft epoxy—as much to guard DeVore’s trade secrets as anything else—and suspended within its own separate chamber. The lowest frequency driver is recessed slightly on the (inner) side of the cabinet, to provide room for a removable circular grille. And the generously sized support spikes are adjustable, with enough travel that the entire cabinet can be tilted one way or the other by several degrees.

The result of all that work is a narrow, medium-size floorstander (38” tall without spikes) with a nominal impedance of 8 ohms (5.6 ohms minimum), 91 dB sensitivity, bass extension down to 31Hz, and a relatively high degree of placement flexibility; in other words, a loudspeaker that seems able to do just about anything.

All for the Nines

The weekend of John DeVore’s arrival was my fourth anniversary of living in this house—and, as you can imagine, dozens of other loudspeakers had been here before the Nines. All have been positioned carefully: my hardwood floor bears the marks of countless pointed feet, and the residue of countless pieces of tape that show where each speaker worked the best.

On each side of the room, for each channel, most of those bits of tape seem clumped together in two areas. One is about 5’ from the front wall and less than 2’ from the sidewall, and the other is very close to the sidewall and just 1’ away from the front wall. DeVore tried the Nines in all of those positions and settled on the ones that were well away from the front wall, but with a key difference: He moved the left-channel speaker about 7’ farther from the left side wall than is normally the case, and moved the right speaker about 7’ closer to its respective side wall. The placement had now become, in a sense, an extension of the speaker’s own design, swapping one resonant peak for two less severe ones, and thus spreading our hurdles much closer to the ground.

It took a day to get used to it—I moved my listening seat, even moved my rug off center, so I could make the installation appear more symmetric and thus more audiophile-approved—and I liked what I heard. So, for that matter, did my spectrum analyzer, which found bass extension that was only 2DB down at 31.5Hz and 6DB down at 25Hz, with the Nines arranged as described. The most notable departure from bottom-end perfection was that the midbass was a bit shelved down (between 40 and 63Hz), including a persistent and at least partly room-related response notch at 50Hz. With the Nines toed-in about 30° (I could still see the inside edges of the cabinets from the center of the now off-center listening area),

2 DeVore Fidelity, Brooklyn Navy Yard, 63 Flushing Avenue, Unit 259, Brooklyn, NY 11205. Tel: (718) 855-9999. Fax: (718) 855-9998. Web: www.devorefidelity.com.

3 In an effort to make my copy sound a little less Peabody-Sherman than is usually the case when discussing such things, I’ve removed all the standard disclaimers— that the spectrum analyzer is an Audio Control Industrial 3050, that the test signal came from its analyzer’s build-in pink-noise generator, that I averaged the results from a range of microphone positions, and that the numbers I’ve reported are all best-case examples—and put them down here instead.
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their treble rolloff was the gentle sort I've come to associate with a natural, unfussy sound.

As I discovered weeks later, more bass could be had by putting the Nines all the way back into the corners of the room. But the positions John DeVore selected gave a more enjoyable and less colored performance overall, and let the speakers do their best in a variety of ways while delivering good bass heft. Away from the walls, the Nines could shiver my timbers with the loud orchestral drums in the classic Aldeburgh Festival recording of Britten's Noye's Fludde (LP, Argos ZK1), yet still catch all the timbral complexity and sometimes precarious tunefulness of the chantey-like recorder parts. And they did a very convincing job with the spatial aspects of the recording, from left to right and from front to back, including the almost insufferably cute sound of children, representing cats and mice, scampering from stage right to stage left while singing “Kylie eleison” at the tops of their lungs. Nice!

The Nines were wonderfully nuanced. Listening to them in place of the audibly more sensitive but undoubtedly more colored Audio Note AN-E/Spe HE speakers, it was easier to hear subtle vocal inflections in particular. On Larry Sparks’ classic “John Deere Tractors,” from the album of that title (LP, Rebel REB 1588), the Nines made it easier to hear how Larry draws the word John into a descending line of three separate notes—albeit very quickly and subtly, more like Hank Snow than Hank Williams. It was also easier to follow and enjoy Monk’s cantabile toward the end of “Blue Monk,” from Thelonious Monk Quartet with John Coltrane at Carnegie Hall (LP, Mosaic MQ1-231).

Even at their best, the DeVore Nines weren’t capable of sounding as big as the Audio Notes—a quality related to the corner placement for which the latter were designed. (In a good AN-E installation, the corners from which they play tend to function as horns, and the early reflections combine with the obvious room gain to enhance the speakers’ sense of scale.) It also took some coaxing for the DeVores to deliver the kind of force that seems commonplace with the Audio Notes. But they did well enough after I put the Miyabi 47 phono cartridge and Shindo Cortese amplifier back in my system—in which case the Nines had a fine sense of touch with both small- and large-scale classical music.

I’m not a huge Arthur Rubinstein fan, but I like his recording with the Guarneri Quartet of the Brahms Piano Quintet in F Minor (RCA LSC-2971), and the forcefulness that makes this recording such a good one was put across well by the Nines. The DeVores also left the plucked cellos in the first movement of Solti’s great recording of Mahler’s Symphony 1, with the London Symphony Orchestra (LP, London CS 6401), with just enough naturalness or randomness of touch, for want of a better expression, that the playing sounded enjoyably human and nonmechanical.

The DeVore Gibbon Nines were, simply, consistently fun to have around. They delighted me as much this morning as they did three months ago. The Nines responded clearly to the differences between various triode output tubes in my Fi 2A3 Stereo amp, and to the changes in scale between the different Shindo amps I’ve tried. More important, they responded to real music. On their first day here it was Stevie Wonder’s uncannily modern-sounding “Pastime Paradise,” from Songs in the Key of Life (LP, Tamla T13-34062); this morning it was “Senjase” and “The Bells of Love,” from Big Dipper’s Craps (LP, Homestead HMS 122-1). Every time out, they’ve made my music sound involving, impressive, and right.

Not to get too Zen about it or anything, but the Nine’s greatest strength was its multitude of strengths—that and the manner in which it dispensed with all of my expectations. Compared to the typical high-sensitivity loudspeaker, the DeVore Nine was more open and less colored, with a significantly greater degree of spatial performance. At the same time, compared to the typical high-end speaker, the Nine was not only easier to drive, it was easier to love. It had more drama and sheer humanity than I’ve ever heard from such an outwardly conventional loudspeaker, and it never sounded boring or constricted.

To put it more bluntly: Horns and such are a great deal of fun—but if you don’t have the money or the space or the patience required for a good horn speaker, and if you’re not willing to sacrifice openness and transparency and decent imaging in order to experience the world of very-high-quality, low-power amplification, there is now an alternative. And it’s a good one, and it’s a nice, neat number.
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Gift Ideas 2007

I want to start this year's gift recommendations by briefly revisiting the results of my Musical Cultural Literacy for Americans write-in competition, which ran in the April issue. All 12 winning entries of 12 selections each are posted online at www.stereophile.com/thefifthelement/407fifth/index3.html.

I thought a few entries included one or two selections that were a cut above some of the selections on my original list. So I've harvested those recommendations, from both winning and non-winning lists, with a mind toward helping your holiday gift-list making.

One problem I had with some entries was that the lists were full of works or recordings that were undoubtedly important and influential, but that did not strike me as things people would listen to simply for pleasure today. So, although my picks might not be the same ones you'd encounter in a music-history course, I think that you can buy any of the following 12 recordings unheard and have a very rewarding experience. To restate that: This meta-list is not the master list of musical cultural literacy for Americans, it's merely a list of nifty little inglenooks you can discover along the way. Just for fun, I tried to line up complementary pairs.

The next two selections are distinctly American, extreme workouts for the auditory memory, I'd say that the AKG 701s the most pronounced treble, and the 701s the most pronounced treble. Highly recommended.

THE AKG 701S' APPEARANCE AND BUILD QUALITY ARE FIRST-RATE, AND I FOUND THEM EASY TO WEAR.

AKG 701 headphones

Well, I finally got a chance to try out these excellent phones, and the virtues that have made Sam Tellig and Wes Phillips confirmed fans were immediately apparent. (Wes's coverage can be found at www.stereophile.com/headphones/806akg.) Driven by Grace Design's m902 DAC-linestage-headphone amplifier, the 701s exhibited clarity and detail in abundance, as well as bass that was powerful and well defined. Mechanical noises and stray buzzes and rattles deep within my organ recording would be Bill Evans' Conversations with Myself and Hovhaness' "Mysterious Mountain" (with a preference for the recent recording by Gerard Schwarz and the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic, Telarc SACD-60604).

AKG 701S headphones

The next two are both about raising (trained) voices to get in touch with God:
5) Take 6: Take 6
6) Morten Lauridsen: O Magnum Mysterium

Evergreens from the Great American Songbook, interpreted first by a woman and then by a man, both from the younger generation:
7) Linda Ronstadt: Lusti Life
8) Harry Nilsson: Nilsson Schmilsson

Great piano playing that can only be American:
9) Errol Garner: Concert by the Sea
10) Bill Evans: Conversations with Myself

Great orchestral music that can only be American:
11) Samuel Barber: Adagio for Strings
12) Alan Hovhaness: Symphony 2, "Mysterious Mountain"

If I had to uber-recommend only two recordings from this list, they would be Bill Evans' Conversations with Myself and Hovhaness' "Mysterious Mountain" (with a preference for the recent recording by Gerard Schwarz and the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic, Telarc SACD-60604).

FIFTH ELEMENT

John Marks

Pioneer Pure Malt Speakers

And now for something completely different. Pioneer is offering a limited edition of small two-way loudspeakers, the cabinets of which are made entirely from recycled Suntory whisky barrels. The loudspeakers are called Pure Malt Speakers, which is less unwieldy than their model number of S-A45PT-PM. The Pure Malt Speaker ($598/pair) is about 9.75" tall, 6" wide, and 7" deep, not including grilles or binding posts—a size smaller, so to speak, than the BBC LS3/5a and its descendants. Each speaker weighs about 8 lbs.

The drivers are a 4" woven-fiber woofer-mid that appears to be made of Kevlar, and a 0.75" soft-dome tweeter. The nominal impedance is 6 ohms, with a claimed sensitivity of 84dB. The owner's manual claims a frequency
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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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range of 50Hz–40kHz, which strikes me as a bit generous at both ends. (Someone must at least partially agree; the bass-extension figure listed on Pioneer US's website is 60Hz.) Bass loading is via a small port on the rear panel, about the size of the thumbhole on an artist's palette. The speakers are said to be magnetically shielded.

The Pure Malt sure is purty. All surfaces, including the rear panel, are made up of narrow, short fillets of solid North American White Oak, each about 1" wide and 4–8" long. I had been expecting the wood pieces to be more stave-like, but it would appear that, to prevent warping, smaller fillets were used. The fillets appear to be butt-joined. It's impossible to tell how thick the panels are, but the rear panel feels about 1" thick at the port. The fillets vary slightly in shade, giving something of a muted butcher-block look.

The design of the cabinet is, in typical Japanese fashion, subtle. (The design is Japanese, but the speakers themselves, like nearly everything nowadays, from bowling balls to Buicks, are made in China.) The sides and top are slightly chamfered at the front, back to a distance of about 1" or so, which gets the shape away from that of a plain shoebox. The side panels flank the top and bottom panels to the extent of about ¼" separated by a dado reveal the width of a saw blade, as you can see in the photo. The front panel, flanked at sides and top to about ⅛" and ⅛" at the bottom, is of solid oak, and carries four metal posts or dowels for mounting the plastic-framed grilles, which are of an extremely dark green cloth. In addition to a multilingual owner's manual, Pioneer provides 2.5m speaker cables of the same specification as the speakers' internal wiring, and self-adhesive, nonskid pads.

The wood these cabinets are made from is about 150 years old. The trees were at least 100 years old when they were felled to make large whisky barrels. I was unable to find out how large the barrels were, but judging from the Japanese website http://sfc.jp/ie/lineup/naikan/tree/look/oak/story.html, they may be 125 gallons or more. Nor could I discover any prices for barrels of that size, but a new European oak wine barrel half that size costs about $600. Each retired barrel is said to make one pair of speakers. (I think, though, that something has been lost in translation; Pioneer apparently also makes a larger Pure Malt Speaker, not sold in the US. I'd think that there should be more wood to be salvaged from one whisky barrel than would be needed for a pair of these speakers.)

After being made into barrels, the 100-year-old oak did three 15-year stints aging Japanese whisky before the whisky was bottled. In order to increase the uptake of oak tannins into the whisky (which, when distilled, is clear), the interiors of oak barrels are "fried," or charred. (The same is done for some wine barrels, but usually not to the same extent.)

To use the oak in speaker cabinets, the barrels were disassembled, and the wood soaked in hot water and pressed to reduce the curvature of the staves. The staves were then planed to remove the charred inner surface and to true the sides and edges. The result is a very dense, finely grained speaker cabinet. The finish is in a light rather than natural oak shade, and has a very fine feel. The rear panel carries what appears to be a burned-in "brand" mark.

I still had on hand the lovely Filarmonia integrated amplifier from Ars-Sonum, and used that for all my listening with the Pure Malts, which broke in for more than 50 hours before I did any serious listening. Just to be sadistic, for some of the break-in period I used the Repeat button to play Winfried Böing's wonderfully varied recital on the fabulous Orgelbau Klais organs at Köln Cathedral (Motette CD 12191), which feature a resultant 64" Voice of the Whale" stop, the low C of which is pitched at about 16Hz, with a wavelength of about 70'. The Pure Malt's 4" "woofer" tried its best, I'm sure. Short.

Which brings up the fundamental limitation of this charming little speaker. It can make very pleasant, engaging sounds with pop music, most rock, and some jazz. But because the Pure Malt is even more limited in the bass than the LS3/5a and its descendants, it just didn't cut it for classical music with lots of dynamics or deep bass. Your options are therefore to live within its limitations or add a subwoofer.

Apart from that, I thought the Pure Malts sounded just fine. Their excellent imaging was a strong point. Directly compared to the five-times-more-expensive Verity Audio Rienzi Monitors, the Pure Malts were a tad veiled through the midrange and treble, and not as smooth in the upper treble. No surprises there.

But I don't really see the Pure Malt as the center of someone's sole serious stereo, anyway. Anyone whose speaker budget is under $1000 will be better off buying something with a less fascinating story to tell but bigger woofers, such as the Usher V-601 ($700/pair). The V-601's 7" woofer has 306% more frontal displacement than the Pure Malt's nominal 4". That will make a substantial difference in bass extension—though not, I hasten to point out, a 300% difference. Given the logarithmic nature of musical frequencies, it's probably something more like half an octave: four notes.

The other side of the coin is that I can imagine people for whom these speakers will be gotta-haves. When you consider the work that went into the solid-wood cabinets, the surprise isn't that the Pure Malts cost $600/pair, but that they don't cost more. The cabinets are obviously superior in design and construction to
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some sonically more ambitious but more utilitarian-looking speakers costing twice as much and more.

The Pure Malts would look great in a bedroom, office, study, den, kitchen, or vacation home. Buy a well-preserved, blue-dial Marantz receiver on eBay and an inexpensive universal disc player, and you're in business for probably under $1000. If Pioneer would only make a two-way speaker from Chardonnay or Châteauneuf-du-Pape barrels, and with a 6.5" woofer, I'd sign up.

To sum up: Pros: fascinating story; looks; hand-craftsmanship; exclusivity; agreeable sound. Cons: expensive for driver complement and cabinet size; limited bass extension. Conclusion: If the definition of a good gift is something the recipient would not buy for him- or herself, the Pioneer Pure Malt Speakers are probably a great gift for a certain someone.

Anna Netrebko's Russian Album

A friend gave me a CDR of a legal download of Anna Netrebko's Russian Album (Deutsche Grammophon 815 302), and I was hooked. Her radiant voice, to my ears, is less that of a Grande Dame and more that of the girl next door who happens to be a world-class opera singer. And what a life story: She cleaned floors at the Mariinsky Theater before she ever sang there. Her website (www.annanetrebko.com) has lots of photos; I particularly love the ones in which she's wearing a Russian Special Forces parka and is fooling around first with a machine pistol, then the ones in which she's wearing a Russian composers from Glinka to Prokofiev fits Netrebko like a glove.

The repertoire of songs and arias by Russian composers from Glinka to Prokofiev fits Netrebko like a glove. The Compline liturgy is quiet, contemplative, and introspective, as befits prayer at the transition between day and night and before sleep. Outside of monastic communities, the tradition lives on, somewhat modified, in Anglican Evensong.

Although for centuries most Compline music consisted of Psalms chanted monophonically, as the storms of Reformation and reaction buffeted England in the 16th and 17th centuries, some of the greatest church music of any era was written for Compline, in polyphonic style by Tallis, Byrd, and their contemporaries. This kind of thing must drive record-company people and outside publicists to the bottle, but no sooner had one truly excellent Compline CD landed on my desk than a truly excellent Compline SACD took up residence near it. The SACD, Music for Compline (Harmonia Mundi HMU 807419), is the debut of a new directorless English vocal group, Stile Antico, which comprises 12 or 13 members. A commonality among some of their surnames suggests that some might be siblings or cousins. They are all young, having started while in college and having made their public-performance debut in 2005.

Stile Antico's program is all music from the English Renaissance: Tallis, Byrd, Shepard, White, and Aston. The singing and the recorded sound...well, chums, it doesn't get any better than this, only different. My only quibble is the occasional Britischized Latin pronunciation, such as pocem pronounced as PAHS-sem rather than PA-chewn (soft ch).

Harmonia Mundi has gone all out. The SACD, recorded at All Hallows Gospel Oak, London, is pure DSD from end to end, and has a surround program as well. The booklet, texts, notes, and photography are world class. Even if Renaissance church music is not your usual thing, if you care about the survival of the SACD format, vote soon with your wallet and support Harmonia Mundi in this, or repent at leisure.

The Compline CD is John Rutter and the Cambridge Singers' Lighten Our Darkness (Collegium COLCD 131). This is the more adventurous program, including pieces by de Victoria, Guerrero, Jacob Handl, and Rachmaninoff, as well as the usual English Renaissance composers. For me, the great discovery and absolute high point is Josef Rheinberger's Abendlied "Bleib bei uns." Absolutely, heartbreakingly beautiful: 3:23 of bittersweet bliss.

Lighten Our Darkness was recorded in the Lady Chapel of Ely Cathedral, using a slightly more distant perspective than the Stile Antico project. If at this stage of the game the Cambridge Singers don't have quite the incisive freshness of Stile Antico, they pull even—at least—by knowing this repertoire in their bones, with a resultant sense of musical flow that is equally treasurable.

I highly recommend both recordings (there is a modest degree of overlap in their repertory). But if you can get only one, I'd go for the Cambridge Singers CD, just for the Rheinberger. It is that special.

Not to be forgotten is the golden oldie Brother Sun Sister Moon (1988), another Cambridge Singers outing (American Gramaphone AGCD588). Although the CD clocks in at only about 38 minutes, it works very well as a program, and, anyway, there are times when 38 minutes of a cappella religious singing are quite enough.

The program is in two halves, Music of the Morning Rite and Music of the Evening Rite. With works by Palestrina, Taverner, and Durufle, there's less repertory overlap with the newer discs than you might expect. Recorded in the Great Hall of University College School in London, the sound has stood up very well. This CD has been around for quite a while; copies go for peanuts on eBay.

Finally, the Tallis Scholars have re-recorded one of the pieces with which they first made their mark (in 1980), Allegri's Miserere. I have made a careful comparison of the new (Gitell
CDGIM 041) and old (Ginell GIMSE 401) recordings. If you’re familiar with the Miserere, the new one is well worth seeking out. It’s not only a new recording, but a new interpretation as well. I think the Scholars are entitled; they’ve performed the work more than 300 times, including a memorable occasion at the Sistine Chapel, which was made into a DVD.

The chant verses on the 1980 recording were sung to Tone 2, while on the new one they are sung to Tonus Peregrinus or “wandering tone.” Furthermore, the new CD contains two different complete performances. The first track is the Miserere as it is usually sung, with the solo group and high soprano singing the same phrases for each verse. The performance on the last track uses differently embellished phrases for each verse. (The new embellishments are set out in musical notation in the liner notes.)

On the other hand, if you’re not familiar with the Miserere, the 1980 version remains in the catalog, reissued at about half price. Miserere is a great piece of music—one of the greatest. For something written ca 1638, it has as powerful a hook as any radio-friendly rock song of the past 50 years. The story goes that performance of it was restricted to the Pope’s private chapel, until the teenaged Mozart memorized it in one hearing and later wrote it down. I highly recommend either or both of these versions.

Great Books

Mahler: His Life & Music, by Stephen Johnson

This is the best one-volume introduction to Mahler’s life and music I know of. Furthermore, it contains nuggets that will be new even to devoted Mahlerians. I was surprised to learn here that when Mahler’s widow, Alma, who outlived him by more than 50 years (her post-Mahler antics inspired a Tom Lehrer song), specified the music to be performed at her funeral, none of it was by Gustav. I was even more surprised to find out that this was news to Mahler authority Jerry Bruck, who made haste to buy a copy.

Even better, the book comes with two CDs of movements from Naxos recordings of Mahler’s symphonies and other works that are keyed to coverage in the text. It also includes a URL and password for a dedicated website with many more musical examples and reference materials. Highest recommendation—can’t beat it with a stick.

Something in the Air: Radio, Rock, and the Revolution that Shaped a Generation, by Marc Fisher

Just buy this well-written, fast-moving labor of love. Fisher does a fantastic job of finding the human stories buried in the rankings, ratings, and statistics of the history of popular radio programming, from the period immediately following WWII to just about yesterday. Everything from Todd Storz’s development of the Top 40 format to Internet radio and podcasting is covered with a connoisseur’s eye and a music-lover’s heart.

But one suspects that, perhaps even more than music, what Fisher truly loves is the mystery of the miracle that music just appears out of thin air—there’s “Something in the Air.” My favorite section was the coverage of Jean Shepard, the late monologist and late-night radio personality: “Excel- sior, you fathead!” Most highly recommended.

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Well, ladies and gents, it's been a long year. As I write this, on an unusually humid and hazy October morning, I'm still feeling the lingering effects of my beloved Mets' sudden and tragic collapse from the top of the National League East. I sat there, at Flushing Meadows' Shea Stadium, covered in peanut shells and with tears in my hazel eyes as the scoreboard went cruelly blank and Coldplay's "The Scientist" wept over the stadium loudspeakers. It was brutal.

Here in the office, it hasn't been much better. Debunkers of all shapes, sizes, and levels of amazingness are, at this very moment, scaling the walls of 261 Madison Avenue, trying to get a piece of John Atkinson, while music editor Robert Baird is sweating like mad, struggling to decide how much to pay for Radiohead's new album. I'm not kidding. But what's gotten us through these and countless other nags and nuisances, remaining constant and comforting through all the haze and heat, is—as I'm sure you all know—our love for music.

Music: timeless and tireless and spiritrousing. As JA likes to say, "It's good stuff, that music." Indeed, it is good stuff. We are here, then, to celebrate music and the audio components that bring that music home to us, to our hearts and souls, relieving us of our trivial worries and helping us through the truly tough times.

Since 1992—those glory days of Nirvana, John Gotti, and Madonna's Erotica (which forever changed my life)—Stereophile has annually named a few choice components as its "Products of the Year." In doing so, we happily recog-
2007 PRODUCTS OF THE YEAR

The voting is simple: Each of Stereophile's hardware reviewers is asked to nominate up to six components in each of the eight categories. To be a contender, a product must have been reviewed in Stereophile in one of the issues from November 2006 through October 2007, in a full Equipment Report, a Follow-Up review, or in one of the regular columns by Art Dudley, Michael Fremer, John Marks, Kalman Rubinson, and Sam Tellig. That way, only those components could be nominated for which a writer had put his opinion in print for public scrutiny. We then put together a ballot form listing all components nominated by three or more writers and/or editors. This process ensures that most of the nominees in most of the categories will have been auditioned by most of the reviewers. The magazine's 15 editors and reviewers (or contributing editors) gave three votes for his first choice in each category, two votes for his second choice, and one vote for his third choice (if any). A consensus emerged and the winners became clear. JA tallied the votes; address your love letters and hate mail to him.

The prices listed were current as of the end of September 2007. To order back issues mentioned in this article, call (888) 237-0955, or visit www.stereophile.com (MasterCard and Visa only). "WWW" indicates that the review is available free of charge in our online Archives.

And, now, the winners:

2007 DIGITAL SOURCE COMPONENT OF THE YEAR

Chord Choral Blu CD transport & Choral DAC64 D/A processor
($15,400; reviewed by Wes Phillips, Vol.30 No.8, August 2007 WWW)

RUNNERS-UP (in alphabetical order)
Esoteric SA60 SACD player ($4600; reviewed by Michael Fremer, Vol.30 No.10, October 2007 WWW)
Marantz SA8001 SACD player ($1000; reviewed by Jim Austin, Vol.30 No.10, October 2007 WWW)
Muse Polyhymnia universal player ($7150; reviewed by Wes Phillips, Vol.30 No.10, October 2007 WWW)
Nagra CDP CD player ($13,495; reviewed by Wes Phillips, Vol.30 Nos.5, 7, & 8, May, July, & August 2007 WWW)
Naim CD555 CD player ($30,850; reviewed by Michael Fremer & Art Dudley, Vol.30 Nos.2 & 10, February & October 2007 WWW)
Rega Apollo CD player ($995; reviewed by Art Dudley & Sam Tellig, Vol.29 No.6 & Vol.30 No.3, June 2006 & March 2007 WWW)
Simaudio Moon Evolution SuperNova CD player ($5900; reviewed by Wes Phillips, Vol.30 No.1, January 2007 WWW)

With a whopping six first-place votes and 22 votes overall, the eye-poppingly gorgeous Chord combo ran away with the prize, topping the second-place Logitech Transporter by a solid 10 votes. Fortunate Wes first encountered the Chord Choral Blu and DAC64 at CEDIA 2006, and it was nothing less than love at first sight: "My eyes widened. My nostrils flared. I did everything short of snort, paw the ground, and run my trembling hands along these products' well-formed flanks."

Alright, maybe that's lust, but you get the point. The Chord combo, each piece a delicate and compact jewel milled from a solid billet of aluminum and custom anodized in lustrous black, is serene and lovely. More than mere audio jewelry, however, these sexy beasts pack some serious technology. The Choral Blu uses a Philips CD2 transport powered by a switch-mode power supply with its own AC filter, and upsamples digital signals to 88.2 or 176.4kHz before sending them to a Watts Transient Aligned filter. Meanwhile, the DAC64 applies 64-bit, seventh-order noise shaping and 2048x oversampling using Chord-specified Gate Arrays. I know: It almost seems unfair. JA was floored by the Chords' outstanding measured performance.

But it's the sound that we really care about, right? The Chord combo nailed that, too. With an uncanny ability to deliver the "life essence" of music-making, the Choral Blu and DAC64 had Wes shouting, "Hallelujah!"
Most loudspeakers can’t show nuances.

Music is more than a series of notes. And a loudspeaker should be more than a series of technical specifications. Can you really be sure that you’ve ever heard “Authentic Fidelity”? Listening to a Dynaudio loudspeaker is like listening to music for the very first time. Our highly skilled audio engineers, with their vast knowledge and understanding of music reproduction, have invented a unique driver technology that has resulted in an extensive range of high-performance loudspeakers crafted in Denmark. Hear our 30 years of experience and enjoy all of the fine musical nuances you have been missing.

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2007 AMPLIFICATION COMPONENT
OF THE YEAR

**Ayre Acoustics MX-R monoblock power amplifier**
($16,500/pair; reviewed by Wes Phillips, Vol.30 No.4, April 2007 WWW)

Man, talk about sexy—when the Ayre Acoustics MX-Rs walk into the room, you better lock the doors, pull down the shades, get the kids to cover their eyes. When Wes originally submitted his MX-R review, the entire Stereophile office—the people, the walls, the windows, everything—caused fever and blushed. He wrote: “I kept gazing at my hi-fi shelves, visually caressing the sleek Ayre MX-R monoblocks. Sexy? God help me, I do think so.”

Who could blame him? Artfully carved from a 75-lb billet of aluminum, each MX-R is routed into “a hunksa hunksa shiny, anodized audio presence.” Plus, the amp is a total powerhouse. Check the specs: output power of 300W (600W into 4 ohms), frequency range of 0Hz–250kHz, input impedance of 2 megohms. And all this in a sleek, compact shell just 11” W by 3.75” H by 18.75” D—an audio lover’s dream.

In the end, though, the MX-R’s sex appeal was “just gravy.” It was its sound that most fielded Wes. The Ayre’s ability to present the complete musical picture, portraying the clarity of individual parts as well as the wonderful whole, was unrivaled. And it wasn’t just Wes who thought so—the MX-R monoblocks won more first-place votes than any other component in our competition, and outscored our runners-up, the DarTZeel NHB-18NS and Krell Evolution 600, by a stunning 13 votes.

**RUNNERS-UP (in alphabetical order)**

- *Ars-Sonum Filarmonía integrated amplifier* ($4000; reviewed by John Marks, Vol.30 No.10, October 2007 WWW)
- *Audio Research Reference 3 preamplifier* ($9995; reviewed by Paul Bolin & Robert J. Reina, Vol.29 No.12 & Vol.30 No.6, December 2006 & June 2007 WWW)
- *Audio Research Reference 110 power amplifier* ($9995; reviewed by Robert J. Reina, Vol.30 No.8, August 2007 WWW)
- *Ayre Acoustics K-1x preamplifier* ($7000; reviewed by Wes Phillips, Vol.30 No.6, June 2007 WWW)
- *DarTZeel NHB-18NS preamplifier* ($23,250; reviewed by Michael Fremer, Vol.30 No.6, June 2007 WWW)
- *Halcro dm38 power amplifier* ($19,990; reviewed by John Atkinson, Vol.27 No.10 & Vol.30 No.1, October 2004 & January 2007 WWW)
- *Krell Evolution 600 monoblock amplifier* ($30,000/pair; reviewed by Wes Phillips, Vol.29 No.12 & Vol.30 No.4, December 2006 & April 2007 WWW)
- *Shindo Masseto preamplifier* ($11,500; reviewed by Art Dudley, Vol.30 No.7, July 2007 WWW)
- *Simaudio Moon Evolution P-8 preamplifier* ($12,000; reviewed by Kalman Rubinson, Vol.29 No.11, November 2006 WWW)
- *VTI Reference TL-75 Mk.II preamplifier* ($16,500; reviewed by Brian Danko, Vol.30 Nos.5 & 6, May & June 2007 WWW)

2007 ACCESSORY
OF THE YEAR

**RealTraps MondoTraps**
(MondoTrap, $300; Corner MondoTrap, $350; reviewed by Kalman Rubinson & Jim Austin, Vol.29 No.11 & Vol.30 No.8, November 2006 & August 2007 WWW)

**RUNNERS-UP (in alphabetical order)**

- *Audyssey Sound Equalizer* ($2500; reviewed by Kalman Rubinson, Vol.30 No.3, August 2007 WWW)
- *Ayre Acoustics L-5xe Power Filter* ($1500; reviewed by Michael Fremer, Vol.30 No.7, July 2007)
- *Cayin Audio HA-1A headphone amplifier* ($795; reviewed by Sam Tellig & Wes Phillips, Vol.29 Nos.6 & 11, June & November 2006)
- *Furutech DFV-1 Disc Flattener* ($1480; reviewed by Michael Fremer, Vol.30 No.10, October 2007)
- *Ray Samuels Emmeline The Hornet headphone amplifier* ($350; reviewed by Wes Phillips, Sam Tellig, & John Atkinson, Vol.29 Nos.9 & 12, September & December 2006 WWW)
- *Shunyata Research Hydra V-Ray AC power conditioner* ($3995; reviewed by Michael Fremer, Vol.30 No.7, July 2007)
- *WallyTractor universal alignment gauge* ($149; reviewed by Michael Fremer, Vol.30 No.10, October 2007)

Six different components earned first-place votes in this year’s crowded competition, but the RealTraps MondoTrap led the pack with 17 votes overall. How excited can a guy get over a large panel of rigid fiberglass and some sound-transparent fabric? Let me tell you: pretty darn excited when it gets you closer to the music, which is exactly what the MondoTrap did for Jim Austin. It lifted a veil from his room, making music even more involving, while taming room modes and giving bass instruments a fuller, clearer, more palpable sound.

If that sounds like some sort of magic, well, it is, but it’s the sort of magic we audiophiles most appreciate—a magic deeply rooted in science and designed to serve the music. The MondoTraps’ rigid fiberglass works to absorb sound energy and dissipate it as heat. Their large size is due to the fact that they work on the lower frequencies, where size really does matter. But it wasn’t the ‘Traps’ mondo size that stood out in Jim’s mind—it was the mondo effect they had on the sound.

The WallyTractor universal alignment gauge came in a distant second place with nine total votes, while the lovely Cayin HA-1A headphone amp and purposeful Audyssey Sound Equalizer earned seven votes apiece. First-place votes were also awarded to Ray Samuels’ bijou Emmeline The Hornet and Shunyata Research Hydra V-Ray AC power conditioner.
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Quintet $495

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"I found [the Marantz SA-7s1] sound difficult to fault, and indeed it often aggressively reminded me that the much-higher-priced players simply find it difficult to justify their prices in listening terms alone. The Marantz is a superbly built and superb-sounding unit. It is, in short, a bargain for what it offers."

—Robert E. Greer, The Absolute Sound, September 2007

SA-7s1 $6,499

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2007 PRODUCTS OF THE YEAR

2007 JOINT LOUDSPEAKERS OF THE YEAR

**Dynaudio Confidence C4**
($18,000/pair; reviewed by John Atkinson & Wes Phillips, Vol.26 No.3 & Vol.30 No.3, March 2003 & March 2007 WWW)

**Wilson Audio Specialties WATT/Puppy 8**
($27,900/pair; reviewed by Wes Phillips, Vol.3C No.6, June 2007 WWW)

**RUNNERS-UP (in alphabetical order)**

- **Focal Electra 1037 Be** ($10,995/pair; reviewed by Michael Fremer, Vol.30 No.7, July 2007 WWW)
- **Harbeth HL-P3ES2** ($1895/pair; reviewed by John Atkinson, Vol.30 No.4, April 2007 WWW)
- **JL Audio Fathom f113 subwoofer**
  ($3400; reviewed by Larry Greenhill, Vol.30 No.9, September 2007 WWW)
- **NHT Classic Three** ($800/pair; reviewed by Robert J. Reina, Vol.29 No.11, November 2006 WWW)
- **Peak Consult El Diablo** ($74,995/pair; reviewed by Michael Fremer, Vol.30 No.5, May 2007 WWW)
- **Pioneer S-1EX** ($9000/pair; reviewed by Kalman Rubinson, Vol.30 No.3, March 2007 WWW)
- **PSB Alpha B1** ($279/pair; reviewed by John Atkinson & Wes Phillips, Vol.30 Nos.5 & 9, May & September 2007 WWW)
- **Sonus Faber Guarneri memento**
  ($15,000/pair; reviewed by Michael Fremer, Vol.30 No.8, August 2007 WWW)
- **Wilson Audio Specialties Sophia Mk.2**
  ($13,990/pair; reviewed by Brian Damkroger, Vol.29 No.11, November 2006 WWW)
- **Wilson Benesch Arc** ($4500/pair; reviewed by John Marks, Vol.30 No.10, October 2007 WWW)

The Wilson WATT/Puppy 8 edged out the Dynaudio Confidence C4 by only two votes in this year's competition. Judging by looks alone, an outsider might conclude that these two designs couldn't possibly occupy the same component category—if the Dynaudio is a loudspeaker, then the Wilson must be something else. But these excellent performers merely take different routes to stirring our emotions and conveying music's charms.

As Wes points out in his review, the WATT/Puppy system has always been symbolic of the High End's fanatical devotion to detail. While the "meticulously constructed" W/P8 retains the W/P7's two 8" woofers and 7" midrange driver, it uses a new 1" titanium-dome tweeter derived from that used in Wilson's MAXX 2. To improve on the WATT's already stellar design, David Wilson worked hard to better control the release of stored energy. The implementation of an "anti-jitter" crossover circuit and Wilson's refined M composite material seem to have done the trick.

Wes concluded, "What was a very good speaker to begin with has just gotten better."

Mr. Phillips also had the pleasure of living with our second winner, the "freaking large" Dynaudio C4. With its twin tweeters flanked first by twin 6" midrange units and then by twin 8" woofers, the C4 stands 69" tall and 175" deep, but somehow manages to remove itself from the scene, leaving behind only the performers and the performance space, and absolutely transporting the listener. Wes thought he could actually hear drummer Louie Bellson listening as he followed Sarah Vaughan's lead. Impossible? Probably, but that sort of illusion is what this hobby is all about.
2007 PRODUCTS OF THE YEAR

2007 JOINT ANALOG SOURCE COMPONENTS OF THE YEAR

Linn Sondek LP12 turntable with Keel modifications ($7870; includes LP12 with Lingo power supply; Keel alone: $3250; reviewed by Art Dudley, Vol.30 No.10, October 2007 WWW)
Lyra Skala phono cartridge ($3200; reviewed by Michael Fremer, Vol.30 No.3, March 2007 WWW)
Kuzma Stabi XL turntable ($18,975; reviewed by Michael Fremer, Vol.30 No.4, April 2007 WWW)

RUNNERS-UP (in alphabetical order)
Air Tight PC-1 phono cartridge ($5500; reviewed by Michael Fremer, Vol.30 No.6, June 2007)
Koetsu Black phono cartridge ($1600; reviewed by Art Dudley, Vol.30 No.7, July 2007 WWW)
Linn Ekos SE tonearm ($4950; reviewed by Art Dudley, Vol.30 No.10, October 2007 WWW)
SME M2 tonearm ($1399; reviewed by Michael Fremer, Vol.30 No.5, May 2007)
Transfiguration Orpheus phono cartridge ($5000; reviewed by Michael Fremer, Vol.29 No.12, December 2006)

It was an extremely tight race in the category of "Analog Source": three worthy products emerged victorious. The nearly essential Keel subchassis modification for the venerable Linn Sondek LP12 turntable and the smooth and speedy Lyra Skala cartridge each received two first- and two second-place votes, for a total of 10 votes apiece. They barely edged out the rock-solid Kuzma Stabi XL turntable, which earned three first-place votes, for a total of nine votes overall.

For Linnies, the Keel is a godsend. A single-piece subchassis, tonearm board, and Linn-specific tonearm mounting collar, the Keel surpassed Art's every reasonable expectation, providing greater size, richness, and detail without altering the LP12's singular character. "It's like buying a huge piece of land," Art said, "and being given the opportunity to add another 50-year-old tree to the mountainside: crazy, exorbitant—and something no man would pass up if he could afford it." A bit gluttonous? Maybe. But so what?

It seemed that Mikey Fremer felt similarly about the Lyra Skala. The first fifth-generation Lyra design matched the speedy transient attack, finely detailed textures, three-dimensional spatial presentation, and tonal neutrality of the Lyra Helikon, but added the warmth and smoothness that the Helikon missed. It was that touch of warmth and smoothness that gave Joni Mitchell’s voice just a bit more flesh, Charlie Byrd’s guitar just a bit more body and texture. And, around here, we find that getting even the slightest bit closer to our favorite artists is a whole lot of fun. But is it worth the extra money? Definitely, according to Mikey. With the Lyra Skala, you don’t just get a cartridge that sounds different; you get one “that sounds considerably better.”

Finally, the Kuzma Stabi XL charmed Mikey with its brassy good looks and impressive design. With a 50-lb platter of aluminum and acrylic, two 15-lb brass motor assemblies, and a 30-lb, height-adjustable tonearm tower, the hefty Stabi XL is “a work of mechanical and physical art.” Of course, Mikey was most impressed by its way with music. Notes exploded from the speakers and quickly decayed into black backgrounds, leaving behind “convinving musical apparitions.” In fact, the Stabi XL was so scary-good that MF considers it among the best turntables currently available. That's saying a lot, coming from a guy who owns a Continuum Audio Labs Caliburn, last year's champion.

Top to bottom: Linn Sondek LP12 turntable with Keel modifications, Lyra Skala phono cartridge, and Kuzma Stabi XL turntable.

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In our multichannel category, the Cary Cinema 11 won the most first-place votes, while the Audio Research MP1 was nominated by the most reviewers. Both components, however, ended up with 11 overall votes and outpaced the runner-up Mark Levinson No.433 by a solid four strides.

First of all, Kal was struck by the Cary's simplicity and its clear, distinctive operation—which, I hear, is especially important for those Upper East Side multichannel cats. "This is one digital box that an analog refugee could operate without a paradigm shift," he extolled. On top of that, the Cinema 11's finesse and clarity, and especially its lack of tizz or glare, left Kal "thoroughly infatuated" with its sound.

But it was the all-analog Audio Research MP1 that really lit Kal's cigar. "Yesss?" Kal whooped. "There's still a need for analog multichannel!" The MP1 can accommodate three 5.1-channel inputs and four stereo inputs without having to use an external switch box, and it's that sort of freedom that can make an audiophile sing. "If you're thinking of assembling a single system to do both multichannel and two-channel duties, the Audio Research MP1 would be an ideal choice," said KR. Besides its ease of use and great versatility, the MP1 exhibited a rich, warm, coherent sound that transported Kal to "some unknown but very comfortable space."

As far as we know, he hasn't come back yet.
MX-R mono amplifier

pure analog...

Stereophile, April 2007 — Wes Phillips
"...its sole purpose appears to be to praise music and to glorify it."
"...full-bodied, liquid, and three-dimensional..."
"...one of the most remarkable performers at any price."

Stereo Sound, Winter 2006 — Takahito Miura
"...a radiant, supple musical quality, with incredibly spacious sound."
"The life-sized soundstage was so vivid it gave me goosebumps."
"...a magical transparency that illuminates the individuality of each performance from within"

Hi-Fi+, June 2007 — Roy Gregory
"...these amps rewrite the rulebook on power."
"...when it comes to musical enjoyment, the effect is smack you in the face obvious."
"...the Ayres establish a benchmark for all round excellence."
2007 BUDGET PRODUCT OF THE YEAR

PSB Alpha B1 loudspeaker

Deep down inside, the “Budget Product of the Year” category strikes a special chord with us all—perhaps because it reminds us of our hi-fi beginnings, perhaps because it has a way of rekindling our enthusiasm. For newcomers to the hi-fi hobby, our category of “Budget Product of the Year” is reserved for components that are absolutely, honestly good, without a doubt, affordable. Meanwhile, for more experienced audiophiles, it’s refreshing and exciting to rediscover how much musical pleasure can be achieved for so very little money.

Again, we had a large class of impressive candidates, with seven earning first-place votes. The PSB Alpha B1 was a runaway winner. It was with great pleasure, noting “superb measured performance” and marveling at the PSB’s ability to perform even large-scale orchestral works—into rich, vibrant focus. JA was very impressed by the extension, its glorious midrange and solid stereo imaging. The PSB Alpha B1 can bring a wide range of musical performances—even large-scale orchestral works—into rich, vibrant focus.

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The PSB Alpha B1 is exactly the kind of product this hobby needs—one that brings the high-end down inside, the “Budget Product of the Year” category strikes a special chord with us all—perhaps because it reminds us of our hi-fi beginnings, perhaps because it has a way of rekindling our enthusiasm. For newcomers to the hi-fi hobby, our category of “Budget Product of the Year” is reserved for components that are absolutely, honestly good, without a doubt, affordable. Meanwhile, for more experienced audiophiles, it’s refreshing and exciting to rediscover how much musical pleasure can be achieved for so very little money.

The PSB Alpha B1 is exactly the kind of product this hobby needs—one that brings the high-end sound into nearly any home. Though the Alpha B1 makes compromises in loudness capability and low-frequency extension, its glorious midrange and solid stereo imaging bring a wide range of musical performances—even large-scale orchestral works—into rich, vibrant focus. JA was very pleased, noting “superb measured performance” and marveling at the PSB’s ability to perform even large-scale orchestral works—into rich, vibrant focus. JA was very impressed by the extension, its glorious midrange and solid stereo imaging.

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This year’s “Product of the Year” category found an extraordinary nine products winning first-place votes, spanning nearly the entire spectrum of prices and component categories, from the JL Audio Fathom f113 powered subwoofer ($3400) to the Krell Evolution 600 monoblock power amplifier ($30,000/pair). One very special piece of kit, the Shindo Masseto preamplifier, actually received three-and-a-half votes. I’m not sure if that’s even possible, but there you have it. It all goes to show that what makes a product “high-end” is its devotion to meeting the needs of audiophiles and music lovers, an undeniably diverse bunch. Indeed, there is a hi-fi component out there to be had for each and every one of us.

This year’s prestigious winner might even be the amp that all audiophiles can love. Eight of our 15 reviewers placed their bets on the sexy, powerful Ayre MX-R monoblock. Perhaps what makes the Ayre most extraordinary is the way it obliterates the usual audiophile distinctions separating solid-state from tube designs. Said Wes, “it was fast as the dickens” while also being “unusually clean in its retrieval of detail.” It was “free from added color,” but was also “capable of delivering convincing stereo solidity.” It appeals to the inner audio geek, it has that certain lust factor, and it makes beautiful music. It’s our 2007 Product of the Year. Congratulations to Charlie Hansen and everyone at Ayre Acoustics, and thank you.

2007 PRODUCT OF THE YEAR

Ayre Acoustics MX-R monoblock power amplifier

This year’s “Product of the Year” category found an extraordinary nine products winning first-place votes, spanning nearly the entire spectrum of prices and component categories, from the JL Audio Fathom f113 powered subwoofer ($3400) to the Krell Evolution 600 monoblock power amplifier ($30,000/pair). One very special piece of kit, the Shindo Masseto preamplifier, actually received three-and-a-half votes. I’m not sure if that’s even possible, but there you have it. It all goes to show that what makes a product “high-end” is its devotion to meeting the needs of audiophiles and music lovers, an undeniably diverse bunch. Indeed, there is a hi-fi component out there to be had for each and every one of us.

This year’s prestigious winner might even be the amp that all audiophiles can love. Eight of our 15 reviewers placed their bets on the sexy, powerful Ayre MX-R monoblock. Perhaps what makes the Ayre most extraordinary is the way it obliterates the usual audiophile distinctions separating solid-state from tube designs. Said Wes, “it was fast as the dickens” while also being “unusually clean in its retrieval of detail.” It was “free from added color,” but was also “capable of delivering convincing stereo solidity.” It appeals to the inner audio geek, it has that certain lust factor, and it makes beautiful music. It’s our 2007 Product of the Year. Congratulations to Charlie Hansen and everyone at Ayre Acoustics, and thank you.
A very different product category for my personal award of 2007! When I want the highest sound quality, I still reach for a physical disc: LP, CD, SACD, or DVD. But these days almost all of my more casual listening—when I'm writing, for example, or working on the Stereophile website—depends on a WiFi music player accessing my iTunes library. I began with the inexpensive Squeezebox from Slim Devices (now owned by Logitech), which was my 2006 “Editor's Choice,” but following Wes Phillips' enthusiastic review of the Slim Devices Transporter last February, I bought one for my main system and relegated the Squeezebox to my bedroom. The advantage of the Transporter is that it can handle high-resolution music files recorded at 96kHz (though not at 88.2kHz). Until recently, however, few such files were available, other than those I'd recorded myself as part of my Stereophile Recordings activities.

Now there are two sources of hi-rez music files: Super HD from www.musicgiants.com, and Studio Master from www.linnrecords.com. The high-quality downloads from these companies are entirely (Linn) or mostly (MusicGiants) free of Digital Rights Management (DRM), and are available as FLAC or WMA (Linn) or Windows Media Player (MusicGiants) files. The Linn downloads are all taken from their own catalog, MusicGiants offers music from labels including ABKCO, EMI, Fantasy, OJC, and Telarc.

A Mac guy, I have so far purchased and downloaded hi-rez files only from the Linn website—the 24-bit 96kHz FLAC files of the Mozart Requiem, with Sir Charles Mackerras conducting the Scottish Symphony Orchestra, took just under an hour via my home DSL connection. The results sound superb. And because the files are free from DRM, I can burn them to DVD-Audio using Minnetonka Software's inexpensive Discwelder Bronze program. Next, I need to set up a PC so I can download MusicGiants files, I will report in a future issue how I get on.

In the meantime, my hat is off to these two companies for leading audiophiles—and me!—into the brave new world of high-resolution downloads.

—John Atkinson

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WHEN HONG KONG–BASED music lover and electronics-equipment distributor Klaus Heymann, now 70, first began organizing classical-music concerts as a way to boost sales, he had no idea he would end up founding the world’s leading classical-music label. But after starting a record-label import business and meeting his future wife, leading violinist Takako Nishizaki, the German-born entrepreneur sought a way to promote her artistry. First he founded the HK label, which specialized in Chinese symphonic music (including Nishizaki’s recording of Butterfly Lovers, the famous violin concerto by Chen Gang). Next he started Marco Polo, a label devoted to symphonic rarities.

By 1986, when his Pacific Music had become the biggest international classical distributor in Southeast Asia, Heymann envisioned a budget-priced CD label that would offer his Southeast Asian customers classical CDs at the same price as LPs. Naming the new label Naxos, after the Greek island long associated with art and culture, he released the first five of an anticipated 50 titles. Then, on discovering that the major labels had virtually no interest in entering the bargain market, Heymann seized one opportunity after another to expand his vision.
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In an interview last summer, as Naxos celebrated its 20th anniversary, Heymann told Newsday International that his label is now in the position to survive and thrive without selling CDs. Wondering if Naxos was planning to stop selling CDs, I contacted the label's former US publicist, Mark A. Berry, to arrange a chat. A week later, Heymann and I spoke via Skype.

JASON VICTOR SERINUS: In Alexandra Seno's Newsday International article of July 30, 2007 (www.newsday.com/id/19887678/site/newsweek), you're quoted as saying, "We could live very comfortably if from tomorrow we never sold another CD."

KL AUS HEY MANN: What I was trying to say is that our revenue from other sources is now big enough to let us not only survive but lead a healthy, profitable existence. Of course, we don't want to lose the physical sales, which are still the daily bread and butter. But if it all went away, and we had to live solely on download revenue from our streaming library, licensing, ring tones, and all the other stuff, we'd still be extremely profitable—maybe more profitable than we are now.

JVS: Maybe more profitable? Are you losing money on CDs?

KH: Basically, on most new recordings, especially with orchestral material that's in copyright, we nowadays don't recoup our investment. We record to broaden our catalog and make more stuff available.

JVS: Your catalog of over 2500 titles is amazingly rich. Sometimes it seems as though you intend to record every piece of classical and new music ever written. Do you record some pieces simply so they can be recorded and available to libraries, and as an act of love and dedication? I would think that some of these titles can't possibly make you money.

KH: [Laughter] The repertoire policy is quite diverse. There are many factors we consider when we make a recording. Number one is, we want to have a well-rounded catalog of all really important standard repertoire. You will not believe it, but there are still gaps in our catalog. We don't have all the Haydn masses, for example, so they are being recorded over the next three years. We don't have all the Mozart masses. We don't have the Haydn piano trios. We just finished all the Monteverdi madrigals, and are now starting on the Gesualdo madrigals. There are chunks of repertoire that we haven't yet recorded that are essential for any company that claims, as we do, to be a complete classical label. Second, we have a lot of big series underway: Schubert songs, Schumann songs, Liszt piano music, Scarlatti piano sonatas... all these have to be continued at a reasonable pace. Third, we have all the national series that are going on: Spanish Classics, Japanese Classics, American Classics, and so on. Those series have to be fed.

Then we have a very substantial business of licensing music to educational book publishers. To feed that market, very often we have to look at what's still missing in the history of classical music. If you buy Grout and Palisca's A History of Western Music [Norton], it comes with CDs whose music is supplied by us. The music may not all come from Naxos—we license from other labels—but basically the music that comes with music-appreciation books and music-history books nowadays is normally supplied by Naxos. Someone at Naxos is now going through Grant's history and marking down every work he makes note of, because we plan to record every work mentioned in the book. Whether the title sells or not is really not essential, because we make money from licensing and other applications.

Then we need music for the Naxos Music Library. It's an essential resource. I meet people who can't imagine life without it. You have access to 20,000 recordings at the click of the mouse, complete with playing times, music notes, and so forth. They often have ideas of what they'd like to do, some of which we accept. We have to keep them happy.

Other projects are brought to us by artists or orchestras who want to record certain things. We accept several but not all of them. Then we have to keep our house artists busy. We have people with whom we have a long-term relationship. These include Marin Alsop, JoAnn Falletta, Ilya Kaler the violinist, and quite a few others. They often have ideas of what they'd like to do, and we try to work with them. We have to keep them happy.

Then there are relationships with festivals. We do all the productions for the Rossini Festival in Germany, which means we'll eventually have all the Rossini operas in our catalog.

In other words, there are a great variety of reasons why we record a work.

JVS: Let's talk about sound quality. I am finally posting clips from my

2 When Heymann called my landline using Skype, he mildly berated me for not taking advantage of Skype's free computer-based phone service. While offering lame apologies, I decided not to tell him that I don't even own an iPod.
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BH: Bose audio equipment in Hong Kong and China.

KH: Of course. Basically, I’ve thought of everything [double take], because I’m in the business of thinking about what might happen in the future. I also come from a hi-fi background. In an earlier life, I built high-quality recording studios and sound-reinforcement systems. For many years, I was a distributor of Bose audio equipment in Hong Kong and China.

JVS: Oh my God. You realize that when you mention Bose, a number of audiophiles are holding up a cross to protect themselves.

KH: Yes, yes. Look, I beg to differ. I’m not an audiophile in a sense that I have these big, huge speakers with the ultimate bass response and everything. But I like good sound. Whatever people may think, Bose does deliver good sound. Certainly it delivers much better sound than most people are used to.

I hooked up my Naxos Music Library with a special computer and a special soundcard, which is quite important to my home-theater hi-fi system. At 128kbps, it sounds pretty damn good. Most people who come to the house don’t know that I’m not playing CDs. Of course, especially since I’m married to a violinist who has very acute hearing, we can hear that the high frequencies are missing and it doesn’t have a lot of depth. But this is only a temporary situation. Don’t forget that a lot of countries don’t have the kind of broadband that you need to listen to lossless files. We are ready to post lossless. Our first batch of 200 to 300 titles that we think can most benefit from lossless format is ready to go.

Have you tried our ClassicsOnline.com site? We’ll have 300 titles available in FLAC lossless before the end of March 2008. FLAC is smaller than WAV—about 50%. However, the more complex the audio, the less compression there is.

We can also sell WAV files. But the files are so huge that not many people can download them smoothly. In some places in the US, and probably in Korea and Japan and Taiwan and Hong Kong, which are very much ahead of the rest of the world in terms of infrastructure, it’s possible. But where else? Try to download a Mahler symphony as a WAV file in Germany. You have to make the calculations. It’s an enormous amount of data that we are dealing with. You have to look at the cost of server space, and the need for substantial and flexible bandwidth. If 10 people try to download the Mahler symphony at the same time, you need an enormous pipe to make that happen. And it’s not going to be a very good business, because while people are not willing to pay more for a WAV file than for a physical CD, the cost of making the WAV file of a Mahler symphony available is probably greater than the cost of manufacturing an actual CD. There are benefits of selling a WAV file over a physical CD—we don’t have to carry inventory, we get paid right away, there are no returns—but it’s not good business.

FLAC lossless is another issue. You can probably make pretty good money selling those files for less than a physical CD, which is what we want to do. So there will be lossless files available from ClassicsOnline.com and other sites. We’re even ready to go to WAV files as well, but we haven’t figured out how to make money from them.

JVS: Although you’ve stopped selling SACD and DVD-Audio releases, you’re still recording in surround sound. Do you see Naxos releasing titles in high-resolution surround formats in the future?

KH: We record all choral and orchestral releases in surround. This means we create 40 to 60 new surround recordings a year, which we save for the day when we have a really good medium for them. I think SACD was never meant to be a surround medium; it was designed as an upmarket stereo medium, with surround capability added as an afterthought. Technically, DVD-A is a much superior format because of the amount of data it can carry. You also have longer playing times.

Unfortunately, DVD-Audio never took off, and SACD is dying. Even though smaller companies still sell SACDs, they’re hybrids. People buy hybrid SACDs because that’s the only format available to them, and they mainly play the normal CD-quality stereo layer. We actually have the market data.

For two or three years, we released all our big-budget productions in all three formats: CD, DVD-A, and SACD. When we sold DVD-A and SACD at a higher price, people only bought the CD. If people today had to pay a premium for SACD, they wouldn’t buy it. That’s why we’re currently trying to recoup our manufacturing costs by selling all our remaining SACD and DVD-A titles for the same low price as our regular CDs.

JVS: HD DVD and Blu-ray can support higher-resolution data.

KH: And that’s what we’re going for. We’re waiting until HD DVD and/or Blu-ray have good market penetration, then we’ll release all our surround recordings in that format. You can have AC-3, discrete surround, encoded surround, stereo, and video all on the same carrier, manufactured at a price no greater than the price of manufacturing either SACD or DVD-A.

JVS: When you founded Naxos, did you envision it expanding to such an extent?

KH: Absolutely not. When I started, all I was trying to do was sell a CD at the price of an LP. It was a marketing idea for the Hong Kong and Southeast Asian markets. I never imagined we’d become a powerhouse, with 300 employees worldwide, and 60 programmers and systems analysts in our Information Technology department. We’re the only record company in the world with our own digital platforms. We have our own download and streaming sites, handle digital distribution for some of the labels we distribute physically, and also have books, audio books, and educational materials.

For me, being in classical music has always been a lifestyle decision. For years, we didn’t make any money. I’ve invested an enormous amount of money—$80 million US—in the entire catalog and range of products, and never had a normal return until, thanks to the advent of digital platforms, I made a decent return last year. I’m extremely happy. I’m doing what I love, and I’ll finally make some money from it.
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You're doing a hell of a job Brownie! Despite their precarious situation, musicians like the members of Papa Grows Funk continue to play their craft in NOLA.

New Orleans music weathers the storm

by John Swenson

It's a hot summer morning in my neighborhood, the Bywater section of New Orleans, about a mile downriver from the French Quarter. In the nearly two years since Hurricane Katrina caused a massive failure of the levees, flooding the city, not much has changed. The street signs are still twisted at crazy angles to each other. Most local stores remain closed. Piles of rubble, each representing the ruins of another family's life, linger on the sidewalks, and the acrid smell of house fires fills the air.

The fires are a constant reminder of everything that has gone wrong. The causes most often given by authorities for the fires are faulty electrical wiring or gas leaks, but some of them are set by owners whose insurance companies wouldn't pay flood damage, others by careless squatters, or people using the abandoned buildings as crack dens.
The fires seem random, and even when the soot lands on your windowsill and you breathe a sigh of relief that at least it’s not your own house burning down this time, a collective terror still underlies all this seeping destruction. The city’s slow descent encompasses everyone and everything. In the two years since Katrina, only the few blocks that constitute the main tourist area of the French Quarter have been revitalized. Habitat for Humanity raised $140 million for Katrina relief efforts, such as their highly publicized “Musicians’ Village” in the Ninth Ward, but two years later, only $15 million has made it to the New Orleans chapter of Habitat, and only 72 houses have been built. Meanwhile, according to CNN’s Anderson Cooper, twice that amount—$30 million—has gone to Habitat’s fundraising and public relations arms.

Thousands of volunteers have come to New Orleans looking to help; a more honest effort by Habitat might have put those people’s efforts to efficient use, but it’s fallen to less self-promoting organizations—such as Common Ground, the Arabi Wrecking Krewe, and the Tipitina’s Foundation—to put those volunteers to work. Such grassroots organizations help to buoy spirits in the worst-hit neighborhoods, but however welcome their work is to the few who benefit, it’s a drop in the bucket.

In a city whose history has always been traceable in the weather-beaten façades of abandoned houses in all but the richest neighborhoods, the rapidly advancing decay of New Orleans is a giant Dorian Gray moment for the entire populace. Across St. Claude Avenue lies the widespread destruction of the Upper Ninth Ward—desolation that continues for miles to the east, through the Lower Ninth and Chalmette. That’s where Big Chief Alfred Doucette, leader of the Flaming Arrows Marth Gras Indians and longtime owner of the Nite Cap Lounge, one of the city’s most important jazz clubs, nailed his Mardi Gras Indian costume to the front of his destroyed house on Rocheblave Street, as a spectral reminder of the culture destroyed by the flood. Every one of the members of his tribe has left the city.

Doucette is among the few old-timers who are sticking it out. The only well-known musician who died during the week of chaos following Katrina was Barry Cowsill, who survived the flood but was found dead days later, apparently murdered. Since then many more have passed on, most probably before their time, given the strain of the losses they had to endure and the lack of proper medical care available in the city post-Katrina. The list of dead is an uncomfortable litany of essential lost pieces of New Orleans’s musical heritage: Clarence “Gatemouth” Brown, Alvin Batiste, Earl Turbinton, Wilson “Willie Tee” Turbinton, Oliver “Who Shot the La La” Morgan, Vernell “Joe Gunn” Joseph, Charlie Brent, and George Brumat, owner of the club Snug Harbor.

Elvis Costello and Allen Toussaint have been to Piety Studios since Katrina.

Many other great local musicians have simply left town because it was less difficult to pursue their livelihood from another base. Pianist Henry Butler is gone, as are pianist Art, singer Aaron, and percussionist-singer Cyril Neville; as well as folksinger Mike West, harmonica player Rockin’ Jake, singer Shannon McNally, trumpet Maurice Brown, and guitarist-keyboardist Peter Holappelle. A number of former residents, such as guitarist Dave Malone of the Radiators, now commute to New Orleans gigs from other spots in Louisiana. Members of local brass bands who’ve moved to Atlanta and Houston now drive hundreds of miles to play their New Orleans dates. Some musicians, especially those with families, are reluctant to return.
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to the city because of escalating violence. It's easy to see why they feel this way — Dinerral Shavers, the drummer for the Hot 8 Brass Band, was shot to death while driving in his family car earlier this year. Keith Moore, a mainstay of the city's experimental music scene and the son of blues legend Deacon John, was another murder victim, and filmmaker Helen Hill was killed in her home by an intruder who also shot her husband as he held their baby in his arms.

Heavily armed gangs rule the streets. Robbery, murder, and cold-blooded executions have become commonplace in New Orleans, now the murder capital of the US. It's all part of a pattern of government neglect that starts with the scandals devouring US Senator David Vitter (consorting with a prostitute), Congressman William Jefferson (alleged bribery), ex–city councilman Oliver Thomas (who resigned after being named in a kickback scandal involving city contracts), and extending to the understaffed and ill-equipped fire department, a severe shortage of healthcare and hospitals, a dysfunctional school system, a demoralized and corrupt police force, and an infrastructure riddled with broken underground water pipes that bleed the city's drinking water and cause sinkholes to open up in the middle of busy streets. Every rainfall triggers scattered power outages throughout the city, despite the fact that the utility bills have tripled. Nevertheless, home prices have skyrocketed and rents have more than doubled, making it next to impossible for renters to return. A homeowner myself, I know firsthand how property taxes were arbitrarily raised tenfold with no serious recourse for small owners to contest the additional burden. To top it off, the Army Corps of Engineers recently admitted that the levees won’t be strengthened enough to contain routinely projected storms until 2011. Until then, New Orleanians will have to keep their fingers crossed that another Katrina doesn’t strike.

Despite all these negatives, New Orleans continues to be a powerful lure to young adventurers and artists of all ages. Tulane University was recently listed as one of the hottest in the nation. Young artists from around the country have flocked to

NEW ORLEANS REDUX

PAPA GROWS FUNK. Mr. Patterson’s Hat (Funky Wreko)
Funk is the lingua franca of New Orleans, the link to the past glory of the Meters, and the future direction of the city’s music as a medium for fresh beats, creative improvisation, and that ever-important party atmosphere. Keyboardist-vocalist John Gros, a veteran of Meters cofounder George Porter Jr.’s band, leads this funk supergroup, which features guitarist June Yamagishi of the Wild Magnolias, former Galactic saxophonist Jason Mingledorff, and the incendiary rhythm section of Marc Pero on bass and Jeffrey “Jellybean” Alexander on drums. PGF rose to the occasion post-Katrina to make its best album, Mr. Patterson’s Hat, highlighted by the tribute to Mardi Gras Indian legend “Tootie” Montana and the self-actualization anthem “Walking In Our Own Shoes.”

ANDY J. FOREST: True Stories (Slang)
Andy J. Forest is one of the city’s top entertainers, the featured harmonica player in the Washboard Chaz Band, and a songwriting partner with Anders Osborne. In the past decade Forest has written more memorable songs than anyone about life in New Orleans, and True Stories is a treasure trove of such tales. “Let ‘Em Die” is the ultimate post-Katrina anthem, a detailed account of the horrors that accompanied the Federal Flood that doesn’t shirk from placing blame, but manages to avoid preaching while keeping the party fires well stoked. “Trailorless Man,” “Breach in the Levee,” “Swing Is Everything,” and “Maintenant (We Gotta Go)” are all gems of post-Katrina topical songwriting.

BONERAMA: Bringing It Home (www.bonerama.net)
Bonerama, with its five-trombone front line, has developed one of the most distinctive new sounds in New Orleans music over the last decade: a combination of brass-band exuberance and ingenious arrangements of material ranging from heavy-metal rock to Thelonious Monk. The band’s third live album is its most fully realized statement of purpose, featuring virtuoso trombone performances from Mark Mullins and Craig Klein, in particular, on an inspired romp through a pair of Beatles songs (including an electric “Yer Blues”), the Meters’ “Cabbage Alley,” Led Zeppelin’s “Ocean,” and Thelonious Monk’s “Epistrophy.” Sousaphone master Matt Perrine contributes several original tunes and arrangements.

Zeke Fishhead, aka Ed Volker, keyboardist-guru of the venerable New Orleans roots band the Radiators, helps that group celebrate its upcoming 30th anniversary in 2008 with the solid Dreaming Out Loud, but his solo album, Prodigal, is an unforgettable series of reflections about waking up without a city to go home to. Volker’s tortured odyssey is transmogrified through his eccentric sonic visions into the haunted “Exile On Fillmore,” the R&B chant of “somebody help me get away from here” in “Evacuation,” the soul-freezing invocation of the dead on “Boo,” and the apocalyptic “K”—all wrapped around Volker’s Fellini-esque theme music, “The Circus Animals Return.”

KIDD JORDAN: Palm of Soul (Aum Fidelity)
People of the Ninth (Flying Note)
A week after Katrina, when he still didn’t know that his son Marlon Jordan had survived the flood trapped on a rooftop for three days with two broken ankles, New Orleans tenor-saxophone patriarch Kidd Jordan traveled to Brooklyn, New York, to record the astonishing Palm of Soul, a trio album with bassist William Parker and drummer Hamid Drake. Jordan stayed in New York to
the city, often taking up residence in abandoned housing. Musicians who could establish themselves elsewhere return to revisit the inspiration that drives their work. While the small businesses that cater to the tourist trade are in hysterical denial about the perils faced by the city, and rail against the reports of mayhem, musicians take in the destruction, the death, and the horror, and translate their emotions into the healing force of their craft.

New music venues have sprouted up in unlikely spots around the city, and musicians have emerged from the woodwork to fill them, often with unusual sounds not previously associated with New Orleans. Avant-garde and experimental jazz groups are flourishing along with a variety of electronic and post-rock bands. The futures of traditional jazz, R&B, brass band, and Mardi Gras Indian music are critically endangered by the destruction of the neighborhood culture that created them, but enough of it remains to satisfy the tourists, while new music thrives in amalgamated styles that defy categorization. Funk still reigns as the city's lingua franca, providing an essential tie to the mainstream via the jam-band scene, which has accepted a number of New Orleans touring bands into its fold.

In fact, aside from gambling, music is the only major industry that has made a serious revival in New Orleans since Katrina. In the immediate wake of the flood, each club opening was a cause for celebration, the Voodoo Festival proved that the city's music still had a future, and the renewal of the New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival was treated as a civic miracle. Musicians seemed to sense their new importance—artists who'd resorted to tired repetitions of their repertoire, such as trumpeter James Andrews, suddenly found new passion in their work; and bands of average ability, such as Country Fried, made quantum leaps in quality, playing as if their lives depended on it. It was as if the spirits of the dead were on those bandstands, urging these musicians to reach beyond previous limitations in search of a new language to soothe their uneasy transition from this world to the next. Songs written before Katrina took on new and deeper meanings.

"'Louisiana Rain,'" by guitarist Anders Osborne, morphed from a carefree expression of freedom into a passionate description of Osborne's reason for moving to New Orleans and commute to New Orleans to participate in the avant-garde Vision Festival, and to record an incredibly moving aural tribute to the hardest-hit New Orleanians, People of the Ninth, with multi-instrumentalist Kali Fasteau and drummer Michael Thompson. The cries of Jordan's saxophone on these two albums perfectly articulate the spirit of the tragedy.

MARVA WRIGHT: After the Levees Broke (AIM International)
Marva Wright is part of a long line of New Orleans R&B divas that includes the iconic Irma Thomas, the dazzling Charmaine Neville, and the underrated "Sista Teedy" Boutte. Wright has overcome her own Katrina tragedy in dramatic fashion, landing a knockout residence in the Ritz Carlton, where she holds court alongside Jeremy Davenport, and releasing her strongest album yet, which includes two extremely moving accounts of Katrina's devastation, "The Levee Is Breaking Down" and "Katrina Blues," both written by Wright's bassist, Benny Turner. New Orleans piano legend Allen Toussaint sits in.

DIRTY DOZEN BRASS BAND: What's Going On (Shout Factory)
The brass bands and the Mardi Gras Indians are two aspects of New Orleans African-American culture that have been threatened with extinction by the social and economic upheaval that has gripped the city with the destruction of the city's poorest neighborhoods. Many of the Mardi Gras Indians have not returned. The brass bands have resumed a strong presence, even though many members of those bands remain displaced and commute to New Orleans to play. The Dirty Dozen Brass Band remains an exemplar, releasing its most ambitious album after Katrina, a recasting of the Marvin Gaye classic What's Going On. The album is a creative shuffling of the record's message and musical themes rather than a straight cover, which gives it a contemporary sound. Kirk Joseph uses his sousaphone in a brilliant interpretation of the legendary Motown bass sound, and several raps include a spectacular turn from Ivan Neville.

TOM McDERMOTT: Live in Paris (STR Digital)
Tom McDermott is one of the most accomplished contemporary "professors" of New Orleans piano, a player who avoids dazzling the listener with his technique in favor of making you think along with him as he cruises easily through the history of the city's pianisms and suggests novel combinations of elements, reaching out to Beatles compositions and Brazilian choro music. This live recording is an overview of his approach, from his own "Copasetic Boogie" to Jelly Roll Morton's "New Orleans Joys," on which he demonstrates what Professor Longhair and his disciples owe to Morton's style. On "Midnight in Seville/Tico a la Booker," McDermott builds a construct that leads from Louis Moreau Gottschalk's classical grandeur to James Booker's eclectic flourishes.

THE CAMPBELL BROTHERS: Sacred Funk (www.marcstonemusic.com)
This recording documents an amazing night of music at the Old Point Bar in Algiers, when New Orleans guitarist Marc Stone assembled an all-star cast of locals to play with the Campbell Brothers, whose searing version of "sacred steel" gospel music centered one of the most jubilant post-Katrina celebrations. With Stone
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Out Loud (Sci Fidelity) there. Guitarist James Blood Ulmer went in to make his Katrina record, Bad in the City: The Piety Street Sessions (Hyena). Ed Sanders of the Fugs traveled to New Orleans to read a lengthy poem he'd written about Katrina and the history of New Orleans, and while in town he stopped by Piety to set it to music played by locals. Quintron, Rotary Downs, Happy Talk Band, Schatzy, New Birth Brass Band, Tom McDermott, Liquidrone, and Tab Benoit are among the scores of New Orleans artists to have recorded at Piety since the storm.

The most dramatic shakeout post-Katrina was the abdication of New Orleans' "first family of music," the Neville Brothers. Not only has the group abandoned its traditional closing-day slot at the Jazz Fest, it has quit playing New Orleans altogether. Ditto the Meters, the Art Neville—led band that was making tremendous strides in its pre-Katrina comeback bid. Aaron's son, vocalist Ivan Neville, has stepped into breach, soaring to the top of the local funk scene with his hot band Dumpstaphunk, which includes his cousin Ian Neville, and cofronting the New Orleans Social Club, an all-star touring group of mostly New Orleans expatriates. The younger Neville has also emerged as a top producer, playing and cowriting on singer-pianist Leslie Smith's torrid Feel Me (self-released).

Papa Grows Funk is another local institution that has stepped into the void, releasing a terrific live album recorded at the Maple Leaf, and a great new studio set, Mr. Patterson's Hat (M80).

New Orleans Jazz Vipers: Hope You're Comin' Back (NOJV)
Anders Osborne: Coming Down (M.C.)
Papa Mali: Do Your Thing (Fog City)
Matt Perrine: Sunflower City (self-released)
George Porter Jr.: It's Life (www.georgeporterjr.com)
Preservation Hall Jazz Band: Made in New Orleans: The Hurricane Sessions (Preservation Hall)
Quintron: Jam Skate (RSR)
Kermit Ruffins: Live at Vaughan's (Basin Street)
Paul Sanchez: Between Friends (Paul Sanchez Music)
The Schatz Band: Nocturnal Wild Life Journal (gregoryschatz@hotmail.com)
Bill Summers, Donald Harrison Jr., Big Chief Bo Dollis, and the Wild Magnolias: Wade in the Water Live (Kula)
Rick Trolsen: Sunrise on Bourbon Street (LorT)
The Valparaiso Men's Chorus: Guano + Nitrates (Velvet Pod Music)
Washboard Chaz: Hard Year Blues (self-released)

All of these recordings are available through the Louisiana Music Factory: www.louisianamusicfactory.com.
Luke Rowley is loading a "spoil board" on the KOMO Computer Numeric Control Router. In a few moments he'll begin cutting the component panels of a Wilson loudspeaker out of Wilson's proprietary X material. It took the Wilson and KOMO engineers a little while to refine the cutting programs so that they weren't wearing out a $600 carbide bit each day. The problem is, X material is a phenolic resin, as rigid as tempered steel but with greater hardness. It also costs fourteen times as much as MDF, the material of choice for nearly every speaker builder. Why use X material? Because of the way it sounds (or more accurately, doesn't sound: It damps resonance to an extraordinary degree.)

But the story doesn't end there. After lots of testing, we found another substance, M material, that produces greater beauty, linearity and accuracy in the midrange. Then we had to devise cutting programs for that, as well as proprietary and unique glues to bond each of these materials together. One thing we don't worry about is how well the pieces will fit: the KOMO routinely routes to a tolerance of 1/1000 of an inch.

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FITO ON THE BAYOU

Crescent City survivors (left to right): The Radiators, Terence Blanchard, and the Sibduces.

(Funky Krewe), filled with well-written tributes to such New Orleans legends as Big Chief Allison “Toone” Montana and the Maple Leaf regular whose haberdashery inspired the title track. Big Sam’s Funky Nation, George Porter Jr., and Billy Iuso and the Restless Natives have also released excellent new funk albums.

A number of the first records made after the storm celebrated the sheer survival of the city and vowed to restore it to its former glories. James Andrews’ “New Orleans New Orleans” and Cowboy Mouth’s “On the Avenue” both became survivors’ anthems, but the strain has shown. Cowboy Mouth suffered a major personnel shift when founding member Paul Sanchez suddenly departed, and Andrews has lamented how difficult it is to keep his band together. The optimistic vows to continue have become less convincing as the situation has deteriorated, but the artists who have steeped in their anger and grief to write more personal observations have created some durable work.

Andy J. Forest’s True Stories (Slang) has several riveting Katrina-inspired tracks, topped by the blood-curdling “Let ‘Em Die,” a diatribe against the federal, state, and local officials who sat on their hands for a week while the poor, the elderly, and the infirm died in the streets of New Orleans, waiting in vain to be rescued. Unlike most political screeds in song, “Let ‘Em Die” tells a detailed story that is likely to last as long as the harrowing tales of disasters from the 1920s and ’30s that populate the classic blues canon.

Several of the city’s best songwriters produced remarkable comments on the psychic ravages of the storm. The best of these recordings is Prodigal (www.radiators.org, www.livedownloads.com), by Radiators keyboardist Ed Volker, written in the immediate aftermath of Katrina, when he was stranded out of town for several months.

Other local writers, incredibly, seemed to sense the storm’s approach. When released in 2006, the Subdudes’ great Behind the Levee (Back Porch)—with its tribute to second-line culture, “Social Aid and Pleasure Club”—was widely believed to have been recorded after the hurricane, but had actually been completed before. Similarly, Morning 40 Federation’s Twanganda (M80) resonates with Katrina-like themes that it was recorded at Piety before Katrina (the title is an Iroquois word meaning “the land between the waters”). The most amazing example of this phenomenon is Davis Rogan’s The Once and Future DJ (Sousaphonk), finished and sent to the pressing plant the day Katrina hit. It includes the Katrina anthem “Hurricane I Ain’t Goin’,” a description of local residents who, armed with a camp stove, a shotgun, and a pirogue (a Cajun flatboat), refused to leave town when the hurricanes came.

Out in the street, where all New Orleans music was began, and against all odds, locals continue to turn out astonishing stuff. Though the poor neighborhoods are depopulated and the biggest names in New Orleans’ brand of hip-hop, Bounce, have left town, returnees are bringing their music back with them bit by bit. Gotti Boi Chris released the amazingly defiant “Cut It Up.” In the accompanying video, Chris and a large posse of homies dance like crazy to furious beats in front of the boarded-up Magnolia housing projects and the ruined, abandoned Circle Supermarket. Even as the city burns and their relatives are cut down by gangland violence, Chris and his friends are determined to party among the ruins. It may not be a formula for reconstruction, but somehow it manages to articulate the people’s unwillingness to give up. The true spirit of this city that refuses to die even as its vital signs go flatline.

Jazz trumpeter Terence Blanchard has just released a requiem of sorts for New Orleans, the impressive A Tale of God’s Will. The beautifully orchestrated tracks expand on themes Blanchard composed for the soundtrack of Spike Lee’s film When the Levees Broke, which ended up unexpectedly starring Blanchard’s mother, whose unrestrained grief at her loss, and her son’s tearful attempts to comfort her, became a powerfully dramatic example of the tragedy.

Lee’s documentary may end up being one of his most important works. This is a story that needs to be told from the black perspective, and Lee is a skillful filmmaker who knows how to present that point of view accurately, without patronizing the voices he documents. He is careful to point out that the devastation hit people of all colors, but the African-Americans interviewed knew of Lee’s work and understood that they could talk directly to him about...
FITO ON THE BAYOU

their concerns without resorting to the carefully considered language delivered to “official” sources. The black community’s depth of anger and sense of betrayal can be measured by the certainty of those who believed they heard the levee being blown up. The undisputable physical evidence of the barge that crashed through the wall of the Industrial Canal and sat in the Ninth Ward for months didn’t deter a belief based more on generational memory than physical observation. The same land was flooded in 1927, when it was farmland worked by black sharecroppers. Back then, the levees below New Orleans were blown up to save the city. The grandparents of those who drowned or were displaced by the post-Katrina federal flood of 2005 had told them the stories of white political betrayal from 1927, and when the waters rose, these folks knew who to blame.

They still know who to blame today for what is hard not to call a systemic political attempt by the current city, state, and federal governments to keep these same people from returning to their homes—a massively uncoordinated attempt on the federal, state, and local levels. A deadly combination of incompetence, personal vanity, political expediency, and greed on the part of a host of politicians has betrayed all of New Orleans, but it was the poorest communities—the heart of what had been an 80% black city before the storm—that took what now appear to be mortal blows. Does it really matter whether it was dynamite or political corruption that caused all those people, and the world they created in New Orleans, to die?

What does matter is the future. Will New Orleans be finished off by another massive hurricane sometime in the next three years? The consensus on the ground is that another Katrina-like event will break the backs, wills and hearts of those who stayed and have since returned. Many homeowners are waiting to repair their houses until they see how this plays out, and it looks as if the poor who’ve been dispossessed have no real shot at returning any time soon.

The New Orleans of the future will be strikingly different. It will be smaller, wealthier, and younger. Recent college graduates are flocking to the city to pursue idealistic goals. These people are the audiences for the young musicians and artists who have found New Orleans to be one of the few open cities left in the US where they can pursue their visions without interference. The inheritors of the Afro-American roots that run so deeply through New Orleans’ history are not going to let that future obscure their heritage, even if the communities that nurtured them are gone. Charismatic young black musicians such as multi-instrumentalist and bandleader Troy “Trombone Shorty” Andrews, trumpeter Christian Scott, and pianist Jonathan Batiste are ensuring that the tradition will at least endure through their own lifetimes, while such iconic leaders as saxophonist Donald Harrison, trumpeters Terence Blanchard, Irvin Mayfield, and Kermit Ruffins, and the peerless Wynton Marsalis, provide the aesthetic leadership that may yet inspire a black cultural renaissance in the city. The odds against them are formidable, but no lover of music would bet against them.
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Richard Vandersteen was in good form at the 20th-anniversary seminar held by retailer Advanced Audio on November 11, 2006. When asked about his priorities in loudspeaker design, he sat erect in the seat next to me and thundered, “I will not [slams table with open hand] spend one red cent on cosmetics that I could have put into improving the sound of a loudspeaker!”

On one hand, I wasn’t shocked. Vandersteen has long been known for his iconoclastic opinions on audio design—views that have led him to wrap his speakers in plain-looking “socks” rather than in exotic veneers. “I just don’t think people have a clue what sonic price they are paying for having that acoustically reflective wood next to the drivers,” he told me.

On the other hand, hadn’t he just sent me a pair of his Quatro loudspeakers that were—how should I put this—clad in veneer?

“Well, our dealers begged me to make a version of the Quatro that looked more upscale,” Vandersteen said. “I thought I could do it for a slightly higher price, so I just took a pair of Quatros off the line, squared off the edges, and wrapped them in veneer. We took it into the sound room, and it was just not the same loudspeaker. All that beautiful shiny veneer so close to the drivers had a catastrophic effect—I’ve known that for years, which is why we build speakers the way we do.

“Now we had a speaker that cost $1500 more and didn’t sound as good as the fabric option. Initially, I added the new composite phenolic-epoxy plinth, which wasn’t enough in itself, then I upgraded the tweeter, and we kept tweaking it until it was a little bit better everywhere than the fabric one—because I just wasn’t going to charge more for a speaker that didn’t deliver more. Ultimately, we got a speaker that was noticeably better, but it wasn’t a $1500 upgrade, it was $3700.”

That means the Quatro Wood sells for $10,700/pair. Some speaker manufacturers won’t even cross the street for that little money.

The field has sight, and the wood a sharp ear

The Quatro Wood is based on the Quatro, which Michael Fremer reviewed in July 2006 (www.stereophile.com/floorloudspeakers/706vandersteen). It’s still a first-order, four-way design that includes an internal subwoofer with a 250W amp and two 8” carbon-loaded cellulose-cone drivers. The midbass and lower midrange (100-900Hz) are handled by the same 6.5” woven-fiber cone driver Vandersteen designed for the fabric Quatro, but the upper midrange and low treble (900Hz-5kHz) and upper frequencies (5kHz to “beyond 30kHz”) are handled by drivers based on those in the Vandersteen 5A.

The midrange driver is Vandersteen’s patented 4.5” open-basket design, featuring a woven composite driver and cylindrical alnico-magnet structure—which allows Vandersteen to vent much of its rear wave into “a transmission line to prevent those reflections from interfering with the direct sound.” The driver’s chassis is invested metal, as opposed to the regular Quatro’s filled nylon—which, Vandersteen remarks, “delivers a bigger sonic dividend than you’d expect.”

The 1” ceramic-coated, alloy-dome tweeter is a tuned dual-chamber design, also transmission-line loaded. Vandersteen says he chose that acoustic damping and a precision phase plug to extend its high frequencies “past audibility without the excessive ringing associated with open or underdamped metal-dome tweeters.”
The “Kick-Ass” Speaker makes everything irrelevant except the music.
The other critical difference is that composite phenolic epoxy plinth, which Vandersteen says is unbelievably inert—and ungodly expensive. "A 4' by 8' sheet costs $1000, and then it has to be milled like aluminum, although at even slower speeds."

The Quatro Wood shares the Quatro's adjustable EQ network and its battery-biased, passive high-pass filter, but since Vandersteen claims most people don't understand this approach, I should perhaps speak of it a bit more.

The Quatro has a terminal strip on its rear panel that accepts two sets of speaker cables. (Another example of Richard Vandersteen's refusal to bow to convention: "I've tested all the expensive binding posts and [terminal strips] still sounds best." One set feeds the subwoofer and midbass (everything below 900Hz); the other feeds 900Hz and above. However, unlike conventional designers, Vandersteen rolls off the bass below 100Hz with a passive, first-order filter that sits between preamp and amplifier. The balanced module costs $795; the single-ended version goes for $695.

The ultimate advantage of using a high-pass filter is increased transparency in general, because you're getting the deep bass out of the amplifier and the midrange and HF drivers," Vandersteen said. "Now, if I'd put only a powered sub in there, the 6.5" driver would be hopping around like crazy because it's getting all the bass—not to mention the [intermodulation] and the heating up the voice-coil, which leads to thermal compression—and it's just a big old can of worms. You're putting power into a driver that just can't respond to it. Now put a high-pass filter in there, and you clean all of that up."

The powered subwoofer, which is fed from the passive woofer terminals, thus has to be re-equalized to get back that mid- and low-bass energy. It actually incorporates an 11-band equalizer, to allow the best integration to be obtained with the owner's room acoustics.

Vandersteen supplies his dealers. In this two-person process, one participant sits in the sweet spot with the meter and the other dials in each of the EQ bands on the speakers' rear panels. Each speaker is tuned separately. After adjusting the EQ, you tune in the amount of bass reproduced with the woofers' level controls. Vandersteen says that customers who buy the Quatros used and have no Vandersteen dealer to set them up can substitute the wafer tones on Editor's Choice (CD, Stereophile STPH016-2) for Vanderstones, the owner's manual posted on his website has the instructions.

The final setup chore is adjusting the speakers' rake, so the signal is time and phase coherent at the listening position. "For time- and phase-aligned designs, the vertical height of the drivers in relation to the listening position is vital," Vandersteen said. "You can have a huge horizontal window if you address the tilt correctly. We believe that waveform preservation is crucial."

To communicate the subtlest universal truths by means of wood, metal, and vibrating air

As Art Dudley is wont to say, John H. Tuill! Vandersteen wasn't kidding about that huge horizontal window, as I discovered on listening to Paavo Jarvi and the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra's recording of Elgar's Enigma Variations (SACD, Telarc SACD-60660). The soundstage was immense—both wide and deep. Not only was the CSO's bass section hefty and solid, but the acoustic of Music Hall was almost frighteningly detailed—a sure sign of clean deep-bass response, in my experience.

The percussion and brass fortissimo in Variation VII almost propelled me physically deeper into the room. If you want to hear orchestral power, the Quatro Wood ought to rocket onto your list. At the same time, the strings had delicacy, sheen, and gloss that were convincing and extended.

That high-frequency smoothness and extension were put to the test with the Hot Club of San Francisco's Yerba Buena Bounce (CD, Reference RR-109CD). On track 1, "Mystery Pacific," violinist Evan Price and solo guitarist Paul Mehling leapt into the stratosphere with flybys of notes over the chugging rhythms of bassist Ari Munkres and guitarists Jeff Magidson and Jason Vanderford, and never came down for air until the disc was done.

Price's quicksilver fiddle was bright and bold, but never astringent. Oh, there were gobs of harmonic overtones shooting off the fundamentals, indicating beaucoup HF extension, but Price's tone was sweet and plangent. And, oh momma, is Mehling ever one fast-fingered guitarist! Whooowee, what runs, what frets—and the Quatro Wood sorted them out with panache.

For female vocals, I've heard few speakers that equal the Quatro Wood. Jacqui McShee's pure soprano on "Willy O'Winsbury," from Pentangle's Solomon's Seal (CD, Castle 555), was honed. Its purity and transparency were rivaled only by the solidity of the sonic image—which was life-sized and present. If you can remain unmoved after hearing this Child ballad through the Quatros, you've a heart of stone (and ears to match, I fear).

Male vocals, particularly baritones, did not fare quite as well. Listening to John Cale's "Sylvia Said," from his The Island Years (CD, Island 524235), I found his

IF YOU WANT TO HEAR ORCHESTRAL POWER, THE QUATRO WOOD OUGHT TO ROCKET ONTO YOUR LIST.

Without touch we are but hunks of wood

The Quatros are a tad more complicated to set up than most loudspeakers. Fortunately, your audio dealer should be the one having to do that job. The high-pass filters need to be set for your amplifier's input impedance via internal DIP switches. The speakers are then located within the room for optimal midrange coherence, and the woofer's 11-band EQ is calibrated using an SPL meter and Vanderstones, a CD

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voice lacked body. Cale's voice may be an acquired taste, but it's one I acquired in 1970, and I know that voice as well as I know that of anyone I have never actually met. It may have vast crevices, but it's rooted in a definitely physical body—and that body was less than present but it's rooted in a definitely physical body. Cale's voice may be an.

That slight loss of propulsion was also evident on Sugar Hill: The Music of Duke Ellington and Billy Strayhorn (SACD, Chesky 333), particularly in Javon Jackson's tenor saxophone sound, which is quite warm and full-bodied. It continued to have warmth and heft through the Quatro Woods, but was slightly smaller—

The Quatro's powered subwoofer must have its response shaped by the inverse of this high-pass rolloff, which, all things being equal, will compromise the low-frequency noise floor by the amount of the boost. I can only assume that, as the rolloff and corresponding boost are mild, this will not be an issue. Certainly I heard no rise in low-frequency noise in my own auditioning of the Quatro and Quatro Wood. And reflecting on the design, it is indeed optimal to high-pass the upper woofer's feed at line-level than in the crossover, as the latter's filtering action modified by the interaction between the drive-unit's impedance and the series impedance of the crossover filter.

Like the fabric Quatro, the Quatro Wood's cabinet was inert in the extreme, even without the damping effect of

The high frequencies were more pronounced, and much of the "presence" not talking about a complete loss of physicality or drive—just an area where the Quatro is neither as transparent nor as invisible as throughout the rest of its range.

One other minor quibble—and I do mean minor—is that you optimize the Quatros for your seated listening position, which is fine: That is, after all, one other minor quibble—and I do mean minor—is that you optimize the Quatros for your seated listening position, which is fine: That is, after all, one other minor quibble—and I do mean minor—is that you optimize the Quatros for your seated listening position, which is fine: That is, after all, one other minor quibble—and I do mean minor—is that you optimize the Quatros for your seated listening position, which is fine: That is, after all, one other minor quibble—and I do mean minor—is that you optimize the Quatros for your seated listening position, which is fine: That is, after all, one other minor quibble—and I do mean minor—is that you optimize the Quatros for your seated listening position, which is fine: That is, after all, one other minor quibble—and I do mean minor—is that you optimize the Quatros for your seated listening position, which is fine: That is, after all, one other minor quibble—and I do mean minor—is that you optimize the Quatros for your seated listening position, which is fine: That is, after all, one other minor quibble—and I do mean minor—is that you optimize the Quatros for your seated listening position, which is fine: That is, after all, one other minor quibble—and I do mean minor—is that you optimize the Quatros for your seated listening position, which is fine: That is, after all, one other minor quibble—and I do mean minor—is that you optimize the Quatros for your seated listening position, which is fine: That is, after all, one other minor quibble—and I do mean minor—is that you optimize the Quatros for your seated listening position, which is fine: That is, after all,
had evaporated. *Hmm*, I thought. *This is the difference you get when you become a participant rather than an observer.* I sat down to ponder that, and suddenly everything popped back into focus and I leapt to my feet—only to sit back down again.

Yes, Vandersteen's adherence to "waveform preservation" does lock you into an optimal listening position, but, as he pointed out to me one day, many loudspeakers don't even give you that. The reason it took me so long to notice that the Quatros lost some of their magic when I stood up sucked out when he stood up to play along with the music. The crossover between the midrange unit and the woofer is just 30" from the floor, but this is the axis that gives the flattest measured response for the Quatro Wood. Listen on or above the tweeter axis and you'll hear what Wes described.

The rather complicated graph in fig.5 confirms this. The blue trace on the right side of the graph is the Quatro Wood's farfield response averaged across a 30° horizontal window on the tweeter axis. The elevated top octaves and the poor integration between the tweeter and the midrange unit on this axis are readily apparent. The red trace is the response averaged across a 30° horizontal window on the woofer axis. The integration between the top three drive-units is much better, though the low treble is a little forward. The listener can fine-tune the treble balance by tilting the speaker back and forward so that his ears lie somewhere between the woofer and midrange axes.

All of these responses were taken with the speaker's grille in place, the frame of which is shaped to surround each drive-unit with a smoothly profiled surface. Remove the grille and large suckouts develop in the mid-treble, due to interference between the direct sound and the reflections from the cabinet edges.

The crossover between the midrange unit and the tweeter appears to lie at 4.6kHz, that between the woofer is just 30" from the floor, but this is the axis that gives the flattest measured response for the Quatro Wood. Listen on or above the tweeter axis and you'll hear what Wes described.

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The rather complicated graph in fig.5 confirms this. The blue trace on the right side of the graph is the Quatro Wood's farfield response averaged across a 30° horizontal window on the tweeter axis. The elevated top octaves and the poor integration between the tweeter and the midrange unit on this axis are readily apparent. The red trace is the response averaged across a 30° horizontal window on the woofer axis. The integration between the top three drive-units is much better, though the low treble is a little forward. The listener can fine-tune the treble balance by tilting the speaker back and forward so that his ears lie somewhere between the woofer and midrange axes.

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PSB Synchrony

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tros did not quite match. On the other hand, the Wilsons put a little more rosin on Evan Price's bow, giving his fiddle a sharper sound than did the Vandersteens—which, without reducing extension or harmonic overtones, made him sound sweeter and smoother.

"Sylvia Said" sounded more like the John Cale I know through the W/P8s—his voice projected his size and power, while the Quatros slimmed him down a weight class. The Vandersteens delivered a smoother, calmer Cale—which, oddly enough, has actually happened over the years, but had not when he recorded this track. I did think the sound of the organ and Cale's viola had a more plaintive sound through the Quatro Woods, however.

Sugar Hill had more Javon Jackson through the WATT/Puppies—not an immense amount, but there was more honk in his tenor. It didn't change his sax into a soprano, but there was a difference in perspective and power through the Vandersteens. Gill's bass did seem more propulsive through the Vandersteens, although in general, the Wilsons had a bit more bouncy energy throughout the comparison.

And yes, I did manage to add a Tele to the Allmans' Fillmore East: 1970 with the Wilsons. I can't play rock'n'roll sitting down—I don't develop the full extent of my guitar face sitting down, so I have to stand, which the W/P8s accommodated better than the Quatros. Strangely, my playing still sucked.

By and large, the Vandersteen Quatro Wood is a worthy competitor to the Wilson WATT/Puppy 8, which is high praise. In fact, if you've auditioned the Wilson and found it a bit too present midrange and upper woofer around 850Hz. These responses were taken with the high-pass filter in place and set for the input impedance of the amplifier used; the red and blue traces below 400Hz are the complex sum of the midrange and upper woofer responses, measured in the nearfield. Both responses are down 3dB at 100Hz, but because the usual upper-bass bump, due to the nearfield measurement technique, is absent, it is likely that the rolloff actually starts higher in frequency.

The colored traces to the left of fig.5 show the nearfield response of the Quatro's powered subwoofer module, with the Contour control set to six settings ranging from the minimum (blue trace) to the maximum (magenta) positions. (The Quatro's 11-band equalizer was set to the control positions that Richard Vandersteen had determined to be optimal for WP's room, hence the rather lumpy appearance of these traces.) As with the fabric Quatro, the Contour control trades off low-frequency extension against the amount of midbass boost. WP had it set to the middle, 12 o'clock position for his auditioning (black trace).

The Quatro Wood's lateral dispersion was basically identical to the Quatro's, so I refer you to fig.7 in Michael Fremer's July 2006 review. As I did for MF's review, I performed a spatially averaged measurement of the Quatro midrange and upper woofer unit (red), woofer (blue), and subwoofer with Contour set to 12:00 (green). (25ms time window, 1kHz bandwidth)
and punchy, the Quatro Wood might be precisely the speaker you're looking for.

**Heap on more wood**

I adored the Vandersteen Quatro Wood. It isn't perfect, but no speaker is. The slight tonal shift in its lower-midrange/upper-midbass area was noticeable, but no more annoying than other highly lauded loudspeakers' HF tilt or slight bass bloat—indeed, to some ears, far less so.

What the Quatro Wood did well, it did so well that I find it easy to forgive its shortcomings. When the speakers were tuned to my room, they had deep, tight bass that really recreated the majesty of music's foundation. They delivered a huge, detailed, transparent soundstage that gave me all of the music without obscuring any of its details. And I found the speaker's representations of female voices, stringed instruments, and ambient detail about as good as those of any speaker I've ever heard—which, from an old Quad owner, is high praise indeed. Factor in price, and you've really got something. Eleven grand ain't cheap, but the Quatro Wood is essentially handmade, and its levels of build and engineering are extremely high. All of its drivers are designed and/or built by Vandersteen, and it features unique technologies, such as its transmission-line backwave loading, that other speaker manufacturers haven't even thought about. All of that come at a price, but the other speakers to which I would compare it cost two and three times more.

**RICHARD VANDERSTEEN, AN AMERICAN CLASSIC HIMSELF, HAS COME UP WITH A SPEAKER AS FORTHRIGHT AND DOWN TO EARTH AS HE IS.**

Richard Vandersteen, an American classic himself, has come up with a speaker as forthright and down to earth as he is. That's really saying something [slaps table with open palm].

Wood's response in the reviewer's room. I took 10 measurements each for the left and right speakers individually, in a grid centered on the position of WP's ears in his listening chair. I had used an AudioControl SA3050A ½-octave spectrum analyzer for the 2006 measurements; for this review, I used an Earthworks omni mike, a Metric Halo ULN-2 mike preamp-A/D converter, and SMUG Software's Fuzzmeasure 2.0 running on my Apple PowerBook. The results are shown in fig.6.

Despite the differences in listening rooms and measurement hardware, the Quatro Woods' response in WP's room is eerily similar to that of the original Quatros in MF's room: a smooth rolloff throughout the treble, which, given the absorptive influence of room furnishings, is what I expect from a neutrally balanced design in this region; good if uneven low-frequency extension; but a gross lack of energy in the lower midrange. WP noted that male voices lacked body, and this, indeed, is what I heard when I auditioned the Quatro Woods in his system before taking the measurements.

The high-pass filter's internal DIP-switch settings were correct for the input impedance of WP's Krell amplifier, which was what he was using when I visited to take the in-room measurements. All I can conjecture, therefore, is that the outputs of the midrange unit, the upper woofer, and the active subwoofer overlap to some extent in the lower midrange, and that the lack of in-room energy is due to less-than-optimal integration of their outputs in this region. To investigate this, fig.7 shows the individual step responses of these three drive-units, all taken with the high-pass filter in front of the amplifier. The midrange unit's step is shown in red, the woofer's in blue, and the subwoofer's in green. All three units are connected with positive acoustic polarity. However, the positive-going woofer step is counteracted by the negative-going overshoot of the midrange unit; in turn, the positive-going subwoofer step is counteracted by the negative-going overshoot of the woofer.

This is a very oversimplistic analysis, as it takes no account of the differing distances of each drive-unit from a nominal farfield listening position. But it does suggest that this lack of lower-midrange energy is inherent to the loudspeaker and not an effect of room acoustics, as I conjectured in the "Measurements" sidebar of MF's review of the Quatro.

The Quatro Wood's farfield step response on the woofer axis describes a superbly time-coincident right triangle (fig.8); this is one of the small number of loudspeakers that reproduces musical waveforms without distortion. The Quatro Wood's cumulative spectral-decay plot (fig.9) is also very clean, other than some residual modes at 2 and 7kHz, neither of which is high enough in level to degrade sound quality.

In some ways, the Quatro Wood demonstrates excellent measured performance, but in others it is quite disappointing. It should also be remembered that measuring a speaker as complicated as this is in some ways an exercise in frustration. Wes very much liked what the Quatro Wood did in his system, so I will let him have the final word.

—John Atkinson
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LOUDSPEAKER

John Atkinson

DESCRIPTION

DIMENSIONS 49" (1245mm) H by 21.7" (550mm) W by 17.9" (455mm) D. Weight: 107 lbs (48.5kg) each, net; 250 lbs/pair (113.5kg), shipping.

FINISHES Natural Maple or Graphite, medium-gloss, ecologically sensitive lacquer.

SERIAL NUMBERS OF UNITS REVIEWED 003.

PRICE $20,800/pair. Approximate number of dealers: 90.

MANUFACTURER Sonus Faber, 36057 Arcugnano (Vi), Italy. Tel: (39) 444-288788. Fax: (39) 444-288722. Web: www.sonusfaber.com. US distributor: Sumiko Audio, 2431 Fifth Street, Berkeley, CA 94710. Tel: (510) 843-4500. Fax: (510) 843-7120. Web: www.sumikoaudio.net.

It is the audio writer's nightmare that the combination of the large number of exhibitors at a Consumer Electronics Show and the very limited amount of time the Show's doors are open will lead him to miss the event's biggest story. I came close to living that nightmare last January, at the 2007 CES, when I realized that I had missed an entire floor of Las Vegas's Venetian Hotel. And it was, of course, the floor where, among other high-profile high-end companies, Sumiko was debuting the Cremona Elipsa from Italian speaker manufacturer Sonus Faber.

I rushed up to the Venetian's penthouse floor, where I was just in time to get a demo of the speaker before the Show closed for the evening. Of course, my camera's memory card turned out to be full, so I couldn't include a photo with our live coverage (see http://blog.stereophile.com/ces2007/011407elipsa), but, as I reported then, the sound of the new speaker was extremely impressive. I asked for a pair of Elipsas for review once the speaker was in production, and they arrived at the end of May. I settled down for a summer of serious listening.

Cremona Elipsa

Sonus Faber's Cremona line of speakers comes in at lower prices than their top Homage and Anniversario models; the latter's stunning, hand-lacquered, seven-
layer, deep-gloss finishes are replaced in the Cremonas with a semi-matte finish. Even so, these are still handsome speakers; when I reviewed the original Cremona in March 2004, I was very much taken by the combination of well-balanced sound and excellent fit'n'finish at a very affordable price of $7495/pair (back in those far-off days of a strong US dollar and a weak euro). I very much agreed with Sam Tellig that the Cremona's sound was "sweet, smooth, completely free from grain" (January 2003).

At $20,800/pair, the Cremona Elipsa is significantly more expensive than the original Cremona. While similarly finished, it is a much larger loudspeaker, its shape echoing the top-of-the-line Stradivari Homage, which Michael Fremer reviewed in the January 2005 issue. Rather than the Cremona's lute-shaped, narrow but deep cabinet, the Elipsa's enclosure is wide and shallow, its plan section (from above) being, naturally enough, an ellipse. The cabinet is constructed from layers of wood joined with a polymer glue that provides internal damping and is reinforced with internal ribs. The center of the front baffle is covered from base to top with black leather, and flanked with panels of naturally polished maple. The side panels are finished in semigloss black with concave cutaways that lend an elegant edge to the speaker's appearance. As with all Sonus Faber speakers, the grille consists of silicone-rubber cords covered in black silk and vertically strung from top to bottom of the baffle at low tension, to ensure that any vibrations are well below the audioband.

The Elipsa is a three-way design. A 1" ring-radiator tweeter sits 36" from the floor, mounted very close above a 6" pulp-cone midrange driver, the diaphragm of which has a concave dustcap to continue the smooth profile. The midrange driver handles a wide range, 250Hz-2.3kHz, and is acoustically loaded within its own elliptically shaped subenclosure, this vented to the speaker's rear with a 2.25"-diameter port. Whereas the Cremona has twin 6" woofers, the Elipsa uses a single 10" woofer, the cone of which is formed from an alloy of magnesium and aluminum. This driver is acoustically loaded by two 3"-diameter flared ports on the cabinet rear and, rather than a dustcap, has a stationary metal phase plug on the front of its central pole piece.

The crossover is specified as using second-order slopes. Electrical connection is via a single pair of high-quality binding posts at the base of the cabinet rear, beneath the lowest of the three

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**MEASUREMENTS**

The Cremona Elipsa has a usefully higher voltage sensitivity than average, at an estimated 90dB(B)/2.83V/m. Though this is slightly lower than the specified 91dB, the shortfall is not important. While it will therefore require less of a voltage swing to play loud, the speaker is still a demanding load for the partnering amplifier, with an impedance magnitude that drops to 2.5 ohms throughout the upper bass (fig.1). There is also a punishing combination of 4 ohms magnitude and -50° electrical phase angle at 70Hz that will suck gobs of current from the amplifier.

There is a suspicious-looking wrinkle in the impedance traces around 125Hz. Investigating the vibrational behavior of the cabinet panels with an accelerometer, I did find a resonant mode in that region on the front and rear panels, along with others at 154 and 387Hz (fig.2). These may well be associated with the slight warmth I noted in my auditioning.
ports and set, like them, on a leather-covered panel. The black metal bottom plate can be fitted with spikes of differing lengths front and back to allow the speaker to be raked back.

**Sonus Sonics**

The Elipsas were set up in my room by Sumiko principal John Hunter. As he had when setting up the Cremonas and the Amati anniversaries (which I reviewed in May 2006), Hunter used the duet between bassist Rob Wasserman and singer Jennifer Warnes on Leonard Cohen’s “Ballad of the Runaway Horse,” from Wasserman’s *Duets* (CD, MCA MCAD 42131), to get positions that resulted in the optimal balance through the upper bass and lower midrange. He then experimented with the speakers’ rakeback to bring the image into focus. Compared with the Amatis, it took him a lot less time to get a sound that he felt was representative of what the Elipsas were capable of in my approximately 24′ by 14′ room.

After several months of living with minimonitors, several of them very worthy in their way, it was instructive to go back to a pair of high-quality, full-range loudspeakers. I had forgotten how much music’s dynamic contrasts need to be diminished to fit within the loudness window of a pair of small speakers. Without my really being aware of the change in my listening habits, with the smaller speakers the frequency of my playing of the larger-scale orchestral music that *Stereophile* founder J. Gordon Holt continues to insist high-end audio gear was created to play (see the November issue’s “As We See It”) had diminished in favor of

**AFTER SEVERAL MONTHS OF LIVING WITH MINIMONITORS, SEVERAL OF THEM VERY WORTHY IN THEIR WAY, IT WAS INSTRUCTIVE TO GO BACK TO A PAIR OF HIGH-QUALITY, FULL-RANGE LOUDSPEAKERS.**

After several months of living with minimonitors, several of them very worthy in their way, it was instructive to go back to a pair of high-quality, full-range loudspeakers. I had forgotten how much music’s dynamic contrasts need to be diminished to fit within the

- impedance graph. Some sort of acoustic resonance is present at this frequency, which might also have contributed to the feeling of upper-bass warmth I commented on in my “Sonus Sonics” section. The notch in the midrange unit’s low-frequency response indicates that its port is tuned to a low 43Hz; though that port does have a very slight peak at that frequency, the main peak in its output occurs an octave-and-a-half higher in frequency, where the midrange unit has its rolloff “corner” and the woofer ports have a deep notch. The reflex tuning of the midrange unit and its port is presumably affected by the series impedance of the high-pass crossover filter.

Predicting how these four individual low-frequency outputs will add in the farfield is not trivial. The blue trace to the left of fig.4 shows the complex sum of the nearfield responses, taking into account both acoustic phase and the different distances of each radiator to a nominal listening position. The broad, smooth hump in output in the mid- and upper bass will be due in part to the nearfield measurement technique, but it does suggest that the Elipsa has a little too much bass energy to sound truly neutral in all but very large rooms. The resonant problem in the upper bass results only in a mild perturbation of the calculated response. The speaker’s output rolls off sharply below 30Hz.

Higher in frequency, the Elipsa’s farfield response is impressively flat, though the details of that flatness do depend quite critically on exact listening axis, which is why experimenting with the baffle’s rake angle produces relatively large changes in perceived treble balance. The red trace in fig.4 shows the response on the tweeter axis, 36′ from the floor, the blue that on the midrange axis, 32′ from the floor. It should be apparent that for a seated listener

![Fig.3](image-url)  
**Fig.3** Sonus Faber Cremona Elipsa, nearfield responses of midrange unit (black), upper port (green), woofer (blue), and lower ports (red), all plotted in the ratios of their radiating diameters.

![Fig.4](image-url)  
**Fig.4** Sonus Faber Cremona Elipsa, anechoic response without grille on tweeter axis (red) and midrange axis (blue) at 50°, averaged across 30° horizontal window and corrected for microphone response, with the complex sum of the nearfield responses plotted below 300Hz.
recordings of chamber and vocal music. But with the Cremona Elipsas, there was an ease to the sound even at high volumes that had me reaching not just for Mozart but for Mahler as well.

On the recording I produced of Antony Michaelson performing the Mozart Clarinet Concerto (SACD, Musical Fidelity MSFACD017), the strings’ high frequencies sounded smooth without being rolled off, the solo clarinet was completely believable in its natural tonal quality, and the cellos and double-basses sounded rich and warm. Perhaps a bit too warm? A touch gruff-sounding? The Elipsa’s mid-upper bass could be warm or even a bit lumpy, depending on the music played. Listening to the half-step-between 80 and 100Hz as it did above (CD, Stereophile STPH016-2), the spaced tonebursts on Editor’s Choice were reproduced without audible distortion or port wind noises, even at high sound-pressure levels. Bass extension was excellent, with usable output down to 25Hz, though the 20Hz warble tone was inaudible at normal listening levels.

It’s fair to say that the lows didn’t have the tight slam of, say, the Wilson Audio Sophia or the ultimate weight of the Dynaudio C4’s lows, though the Sonus Faber also never sounded anything less than tuneful in this frequency region—just a bit of upper-bass character, was all. But there was no coloration—pink noise on the optimal frequency region—just a bit of upper-bass character. When he was unpacked the cardboard box with its familiar swoosh logo. Yes, this recording sounded smooth through the Elipsas, but not in the sense of detail being obscured or the high frequencies being

whose ears are 36° from the floor (the average found by UltimateAVmag.com’s Tom Norton back in the early 1990s, when he was Stereophile’s Technical Editor), tilting the speaker back will reduce the top-octave level but increase the presence region a little.

All the measurements so far were taken with the grille removed. However, as with other Sonus Faber speakers I have measured, the vertical-string grille has only a mild effect on the farfield frequency response, with some mild comb-filtering apparent (fig.5).

The Elipsa’s lateral radiation pattern is superbly wide and even in the mid-treble and below, but features a sharp discontinuity at 7.5kHz (fig.6). Above that frequency, the wide baffle drastically restricts the tweeter’s off-axis output. As a result, the speaker might sound a little airless in large rooms. In the vertical plane (fig.7), a large suckout develops at 2.3kHz, the upper crossover frequency, for listener ear heights above the tweeter axis. As discussed above, the asymmetric spikes should be used to place the listener’s ears somewhere between the tweeter and midrange axes, though exactly where will depend on the room acoustic and the tonal character of the listener’s system.

Fig.8 shows how all this quasi-anechoic measured behavior summed in my listening room. I took four ⅓-octave-smoothed responses for each speaker individually at 10 microphone positions in a grid centered on the position of my ears in my listening chair, using an Earthworks omnidirectional microphone and SMUG Software’s Fuzzmeasure program running on my Apple laptop. This technique integrates the direct output of the speakers with the reverberant field in the room, a large extent smooths out the effect of low-frequency room resonances. The peaks at 30 and 150Hz and the dip at 45Hz are residual room effects; the suckout in the middle of the midrange is due to the Allison Effect, in which the direct sound of the midrange unit is interfered with by the reflec-
suppressed; instead, the balance between the midrange and the high frequencies seemed in natural proportion. Both the timpani strokes that lead into the chugging rhythm of the symphony's Scherzo and the thunderclap hammer blows in the final movement were beautifully defined, for example, as were the individual characters of the orchestra's string, woodwind, and brass choirs. I kept coming back to how grain-free, how clean the Elipsa's treble was above 4kHz, yet without the music sounding rolled off. The triangle Mahler uses for emphasis, for example, neither sounded exaggerated nor dulled.

Piano recordings don't have as much energy present in the top two octaves, yet they also sounded superbly natural through the Elipsas. September's "Recording of the Month," Zenph Studios' "re-performance" of Glenn Gould's 1955 recording of Bach's Goldberg Variations (SACD, Sony Classical 88697-03350-2), convincingly put me in the hall when played on the Sonus Fabers, as did my own recording of Robert Silverman performing Beethoven's Diabelli Variations (CD, Stereophile STPH017). The differences between pianos—a Yamaha Disklavier Pro for the Goldbergs, a New York Steinway in the Diabellis—were clearly delineated, as were the acoustic characters of the recording venues: respectively, the small, rather dry acoustic of the Glenn Gould Studios in Toronto; and the larger but rather characterless Austad Auditorium at Weber State University in Ogden, Utah. And as with the Mahler, the climaxes seemed effortlessly reproduced. When Bob Silverman pounds the piano's bass notes in the Diabellis' final fugue, my room shuddered.

Over time, however, I became convinced that there was a narrow band of brightness in the speaker's mid-treble—not so much that any coloration was audible, but the speaker was definitely a bit fussy with recordings with a lot of energy in that region. For example, I had the Elipsas set up while I was doing the final mixes for the new CD from the Minnesota male choir Cantus—titled, with commendable imagination, Cantus (Cantus CTS-1207). The DPA microphones I like to use to record Cantus have a touch of excess sparkle in the presence region, so when mastering their CDs I generally apply a touch of equalization to get the most neutral treble balance. Not much—perhaps a shallow trough 0.75dB deep between 2 and 5kHz—but auditioning the master files with the Sonus Fabers, I felt that a bit more reduction in presence-region energy was needed.

The Elipsas definitely worked better in the treble with the darker-hued Mark Levinson No.33H monoblocks than with the lighter-balanced Parasound.
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Halo JC 1 monos. The Boulder 860 stereo amp proved silky smooth in the highs with the Sonus Fabers and got the best from the speaker of the three amplifiers I used while preparing the review. However, it couldn’t match the low-frequency impact of the Parasound and Mark Levinson monoblocks, both of which gave a better marriage with the Elipsa’s low frequencies. The slam of the bass and kick drum in guitarist Eric Johnson’s "Desert Rose," on his Live from Austin TX (CD, New West NW6084), had to be heard to be believed through the Elipsas, though this recording’s overcooked highs were definitely pushed forward in the soundstage.

The question has to be asked: How does the $20,800/pair Elipsa compare with the $30,000/pair Amati anniversario? The latter are long gone from my listening room, but I consulted my auditioning notes to remind me of what I had experienced. I loved that speaker. "The Amati anniversarios opened onto the recording venue a clean, uncolored, undistorted window," I wrote in 2006. The window opened by the Elipsas was less clear, a little more blurred, in that the imaging was not quite as delicately delineated, the speakers disappearing not quite as effortlessly.

I also wrote that the Amati loved female voices. And so did the Elipsa, though the less-expensive speaker’s mid-treble was balanced a touch more forward than I remembered the Amati’s as being. With the Boulder amplifier still in the system, I dug out a DVD-Audio disc I hadn’t played in a long time, Joni Mitchell’s Both Sides Now (Reprise 9362-47620-9). Her husky, cigarette-stained alto and the Elipsa’s midrange clarity were made for one another. Every small nuance of the singer’s phrasing, the grace notes and ornaments, the difference between tremolo and vibrato, was clearly evident, without being confused by the loudspeaker’s own character. The backing orchestra was arrayed behind Joni in a deep, supportive semicircle (in two channels, of course), and I quite forgot I was supposed to be listening critically.

In the final analysis, that’s what matters: the musical experience. As I write these words, I’m listening to the 24-bit/96kHz FLAC download of Linn’s recording of the Mozart Requiem with Sir Charles Mackerras conducting the Scottish Symphony Orchestra, decoded by the Slim Devices Transporter WiFi DAC and reproduced by the Sonus Faber Cremona Elipsas driven by the Parasound Halo combo of JC 2 preamp and JC 1 power amps that Sam Tellig reviews in this issue’s "Sam’s Review." It’s a delicious mystery to the performer. It also looks stunningly beautiful. If you can stretch your budget by 50% for the Amati anniversario and be prepared to work harder to integrate it in your room, that might be, overall, the better choice. If not, the Cremona Elipsa is a loudspeaker for which no apology need be made.—John Atkinson

Overall, I was impressed by the Sonus Faber Cremona Elipsa’s measured performance. It demonstrates some excellent loudspeaker engineering, although, as with some other expensive loudspeakers, I do wonder if a simpler low-frequency arrangement might produce more consistent results. But this is a minor quibble, considering how fine the speaker sounds.

—John Atkinson

Fig 10. Sonus Faber Cremona Elipsa, cumulative spectral-decay plot at 50° (0.15ms risetime).
Hat Trick: Conrad-Johnson scores again with the LP275M mono-block amplifier. This 275 watt power house completes a trio of reference amplifiers (together with the 70 watt/channel stereo LP705 and 140 watt mono LP140M) evolved from the legendary Premier Eight, Eleven, and Twelve (reference standards of the 1990s). An updated gain/driver circuit and significant parts upgrades make these our best sounding amplifiers ever.

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Audioengine 2

POWERED LOUDSPEAKER

Robert J. Reina

In nearly 25 years, it's been rare that I've reviewed an exciting breakthrough product. The Audioengine 2 is such a product—not because it performs at an extraordinary level (though it does), and not because it's such an incredible value for money (though it is), but because it creates a new market, a new application for high-end audio, and a chance for audiophiles to enjoy music in ways they may have never considered before.

The Audioengine 2 is a powered bookshelf speaker—not a new type of product per se for the California-based company, which for years has sold the Audioengine 5 ($350/pair), a powered bookshelf speaker designed for larger rooms. Audioengine founders Brady Bargenquast and Dave Evans came up with the idea for the 2 after becoming frustrated with the low quality of many computer speakers in the market. What he's done to create the 2—which is designed for use on desktops and in offices and bedrooms—is put the 5's silk-dome tweeter and a smaller woofer in a much smaller cabinet, for $199/pair.

Design

I look at the Audioengine 2's technical specifications and scratch my head. How can the company sell this speaker for $199/pair? All drivers, transformers, magnets, and wiring harnesses are custom-made to Audioengine's specs—they're not
REGA'S SOUND SENSE

When you first get a Rega product home you know that you have something a little different from the crowd. Whether it's a turntable, CD player or speakers you can be sure that your feet will start to tap and the air guitar will come out of its cupboard. You see Roy Gandy and the folks at Rega have some strange ideas in these modern times of ours.

Rega believes that some audio components actually sound better and more musical than others. That by precision engineering you can get more information off of CDs and albums. That electronics should not get in the way of the musical signal and speakers reproduce the sheer emotion of a recording.

Rega also has a notion that in order to reproduce the emotion of a recording, care and attention has to be paid to how something is built. So all Rega products are exactingly made in the UK, and not built off shore to a price.

Furthermore, Rega also believes that their products should be sensibly priced, allowing them to easily out perform units many times their price. Strange goings on indeed in the world of overpriced audio.

If these atypical ideas make sense to you, pop along to your local Rega dealer. All you need is some music and your ears. Tell them Roy sent you.

Rega — crafted with soul. Roy wouldn't have it any other way!
The Audioengine 2 has a 20mm silk-dome tweeter with a neodymium magnet and a 2.75" woofer of Kevlar woven-glass aramid composite with a rubber surround. The 2 has a front port under the woofer and is shielded for video applications, and is rugged enough that Audioengine decided to dispense with a grille altogether.

The amplifier is a 15Wpc dual class-AB monolithic analog type, mounted vertically in the left speaker for maximum protection from mechanical shock. Audioengine claims that the amplifier's gapless-core toroidal transformer has a smaller radiated magnetic field, with the result being lower noise. The left speaker has dual RCA and miniplug inputs; each speaker has a pair of five-way binding posts for a single cable to connect the right speaker to the amp in the left.

The Audioengine 2 comes with accessories—two pairs of interconnects (miniplug) in lengths of 6.5' and 8", a 2m run of speaker cable, and an external power supply—all packaged in attractive cloth drawstring bags. The shipping box serves as a carrying case. The speaker is sold factory-direct, but also via a regular dealer network; it comes with a 30-day money-back guarantee if purchased on-line. The speakers are available in glossy black or white. I found the colors equally sexy; the black reminded me of an attractive Wilson Audio or NHT design, and the white was a perfect match for my Apple iPod.

I reviewed the Audioengine 2 as I do all bookshelf speakers, using my Celestion Si stands loaded with sand and lead shot, and comparing it with several entry-level bookshelf speakers. Rather than the included wires, I used result in highish low-frequency distortion when the speaker is played at high levels. Placing the speaker on a high stand in the middle of my listening room to reduce the effect of room modes on the measurement, setting the 2kHz playback level at 86dB at 12", then playing a tone at 127Hz resulted in audible distortion. The second and third harmonics both lay at -38dB (1.2%) with respect to the fundamental. Fig. 3 shows that reducing the level by 10dB

The input impedance of the Audioengine2's integral amplifier was 21k ohms at high and middle frequencies, rising slightly to 24k ohms at 20Hz, both figures usefully higher than specified. Channel separation (not shown) was superb, at >100dB above 2kHz. The amplifier offered a voltage gain of 26.8dB at 1kHz, 100mV input giving an output of 2.18V at the right-channel speaker terminals. Because the amplifier for both channels is contained in the left-channel loudspeaker, which has a pair of speaker output terminals for the right-channel speaker, I was able to look at the Audioengine2's basic speaker parameters. Fig.1 shows the right speaker's impedance magnitude and phase. It averages 6 ohms, though a combination of 5 ohms and -45° at 190Hz will stress the built-in amplifier at high playback levels. More important, the little box is tuned to quite a high frequency, its narrow, slot-shaped port resonating at 75Hz. Without equalization, this speaker would produce very little low-frequency output.

However, the Audioengine2's amplifier does include equalization; fig.2 shows that it gradually boosts the output below 2kHz, reaching a maximum amplification of +9dB between 40 and 100Hz. The boost decreases to +4dB at 10Hz, but the 2.6"-diameter woofer will be driven into high excursions by music having anything much in the way of subsonic content. And the 9dB boost will

that you can hold in the palm of your hand? I tried to forget the Audioengine's size and price and just listen to the music.

First, in my affordable reference system, with every tune I played, I heard no noticeable coloration throughout the speaker's entire range; it was as neutral-and detailed, and the Audioengine 2 was able to recreate room ambience and low-level dynamic articulation at levels of quality I'm used to hearing from far more expensive speakers.

What shocked me most about the measurements, continue,

dropped the second harmonic to a more acceptable $-44$dB (0.6%), but the third harmonic remained at $-40$dB (1%). Repeating this test with a 61Hz tone at the higher playback level, where the required cone excursion will be more extreme, gave second and third harmonics at a very audible $-32$dB (2.5%) and $-26$dB (5%), respectively, with wind noise coming from the port. Again, reducing the playback level by 10dB reduced the level of the second harmonic, which now lay at $-36$dB (1.5%), but the third remained at $-26$dB. Given BJR's satisfaction with the Audioengine's low frequencies, I conjecture that the harmonic engine added by the non-linearity deceives the ear into thinking that there is more bass present than there really is, at last until the woofer reaches its end-stops!

All the acoustic measurements were performed on the left-channel speaker, driven by its internal amplifier with the equalization. It would be unusual if the tiny cabinet had any low-frequency panel resonances, and indeed, investigating the panels' vibrational behavior with an accelerometer uncovered only a single mode, at 477Hz (fig.4). This is high enough in frequency and low enough in level to be benign, I feel.

The Audioengine2's farfield response, averaged across a 30° horizontal angle on its tweeter axis, is shown to the right of fig 5. The speaker is impressively flat and extended in the treble, though its upper midrange is shelved down by up to 5dB. The rise in measured output below 400Hz will partly be due to the nearfield measurement technique used in this region, but mainly reflects the equalization described above. The individual responses of the woofer (blue trace) and port (red) are shown, scaled in the ratio of the square roots of the radiating areas; the black trace in the bass is the sum of their outputs, taking into account acoustic phase. Even with the equalization, the speaker rolls off below 90Hz or so; but when used on a desktop,
Audioengines was how large they sounded. All vocal recordings were completely devoid of coloration, and vocal images were holographically projected at lifelike size with all low-level phrase articulations intact. Mighty Sam McClain’s delicate, guttural growl on *Give It Up to Love* (CD, JVC JVCXR-0012-2) was reproduced with the requisite chestiness, richness, and vibrancy. On the female end of the vocal spectrum, Sequentia’s disc of Hildegard von Bingen’s *Canticles of Ecstasy* (CD, Deutsche Harmonia Mundi 0547277320 2) caused me to note: “glorious, shimmering vocals, holographic in space, wide and deep hall sound of the Köln Cathedral.”

The Audioengine’s rich midrange capabilities induced me to mine my jazz-piano recordings. Tord Gustavson’s introspective, space-filled piano phrasings in *The Ground* (CD, ECM 1892) were as woody, rich, articulate, and involving as I’ve heard from any budget speaker. The 2s’ retrieval of midrange ambience was amazing. I set my iPod to Shuffle Play and heard some crowd sounds in a familiar space. Without cheating, I accurately guessed that it was the beginning of “I’m So Glad,” from Cream’s Royal Albert Hall: London May 2-3-5-6 2005 (CD, Reprise 49416-2)—the very concert I’d attended in London.

How deep could the bass from such a small speaker possibly go? With the Audioengines on the Celestion Si stands—ie, not cheating by getting a little subjective midbass bump from placing the speakers on a desk or coffee table—I spent a good bit of time listening to solo acoustic jazz bass. There was not a thing missing, even in the instrument’s middle-lower registers. I was riveted by bassist Peter Warren’s infectious opening riff in my favorite Jack DeJohnette tune, “Zoot Suite,” of course, it will benefit from some boundary reinforcement in this region.

As can be expected from such a small speaker, the Audioengine2’s lateral dispersion is wide and even (fig.6), though there is a slight but unexpected flare at the bottom of the tweeter’s passband—unexpected because of the small diameter of the woofer, which, all things being equal, should maximize its radiation pattern at the top of its passband. The 20mm tweeter is less directional above 10kHz than a 1" dome would be. In the vertical plane (fig.7), a large suckout develops at what I assume is the crossover frequency, 3.6kHz, more than 5° above the tweeter axis, suggesting that the Audioengine2’s owner sit on or below that axis. High stands or bookshelves will work best, or, if the speaker is used on a desktop, tilting it back a little would be worthwhile.

In the time domain, the speaker’s step response (fig.8) suggests that both drive-units are connected with positive acoustic polarity, though there is an odd bump in the step around 500µs after the initial output of the woofer. A reflection from the cabinet’s rear panel? A surround effect? Whatever, it is associated with the delayed energy seen between 500Hz and 1kHz in the Audioengine2’s cumulative spectral-decay plot (fig.9). Other than that, this graph reveals a very clean initial decay, something generally associated with a grain-free treble presentation.

I wasn’t sure what to expect from the Audioengine2. My experience of the plastic desktop powered speakers sold for use with computers has been universally negative, and the Audioengine2 doesn’t cost much more than those underachievers. I was impressed, however, both with the level of audio engineering it demonstrates and with the quality of its fit’n’finish. Yes, its distortion on high-level tones at low frequencies is no better than I would have expected, but for desktop use, this will be less of a factor than if the speakers were used in open space.

—John Atkinson
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from Special Edition (CD, ECM 1892); the lower notes of that riff had slam, dynamics, and didn't lose a bit of power. Ditto for Ray Brown's solo in "I'm an Old Cowhand," from Sonny Rollin's Way Out West (CD, JVC VICJ-60088).

I wouldn't expect high-level blasts of bombastic bass from the Audioengines, however. My normal subjective criterion for a speaker that's not bass-shy is that it produce a convincing 55Hz with normal program material. I'll wager John Atkinson's measurements will reveal that the Audioengines miss that mark, but I never felt I needed a subwoofer to enjoy music through the 2s. Transient articulations shone: I analyzed in detail the interplay of bassist Chris Jones and drummer Mark Flynn on my jazz quartet Attention Screen's Live at Merkin Hall (CD, Stereophile STPH018-2). Flynn's bass drum and snare technique was very easy to follow, and Jones' mid-bass rumbles thundered when required.

I also wondered how well the Audioengines could soundstage. They're not exactly matched, are they? One cabinet has a stereo amplifier in it, the other doesn't. One cabinet is internally wired, the other via a cable from the first speaker. That said, they reproduced without a hitch the soundstage width and depth, the image specificity, and the hall sound of Antal Dorati and the Symphony of the Thousand Islands, in Niagara Falls. Without her knowledge, I stuck the Audioengines 2s and iPod on a folding table about 20' from the picnic table. One classical-music-loving friend said, "I can't believe how many crappy outdoor speakers and boom boxes I've been forced to listen to at barbecues." His teenage daughter will be getting a pair of Audioengines for her birthday.

The following week, at a barbecue at my nephew's house, I listened to his teenage daughter will be getting a pair of Audioengines for her birthday.

This summer I hosted a barbecue the night before my Century ride with my bike-fanatic friends. My wife's nephew also attended (actually, he cooked). Instead of my usual procedure of setting up, in my son's bedroom window, a pair of NHT or Nola bookshelf speakers—connected to the Speaker B output of my Creek Destiny integrated amp via a 50' run of Black Orpheus speaker cable—and blasting them out into the yard of my 1/4-acre property, I plunked the Audioengine 2s and iPod on a folding table about 20' from the picnic table. One classical-music-loving friend said, "I can't believe how many crappy outdoor speakers and boom boxes I've been forced to listen to at barbecues." His teenage daughter will be getting a pair of Audioengines for her birthday.

The following week, at a barbecue at my nephew's house, I listened to his iPod on his docking-station stereo, marketed by a large, well-publicized audio manufacturer who shall remain nameless. I looked at the source of the sound, then at my nephew. His face told me he wasn't enjoying the sound nearly as much as he'd enjoyed the Audioengines the week before. "How much did this thing cost?" I asked. "$300!" he said, and angrily stomped away.

I bring my own music and wine to any family event whose host I can't trust to provide good varieties of both. This lets me play the part of the selfish antisocial bastard quite nicely. At a recent in-laws function (I love my wife's family, but don't have much in common with a large subset of them), I grabbed my bottle of dry Lambrusco red, set up the Audioengine 2s and the iPod on a folding table behind me, and
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reveled in Giles and George Martin's mixing capabilities on the Beatles' Love (CD, Apple 3 79808 2), smiling and nodding to my wife's relatives as I ignored everything they said. I was awakened from my stupor when one of them handed me her credit card. "No, I'm not a dealer for these speakers; you'll have to go to their website."

Of course, I got the best results at home, with a high-quality line-level input. However, during my road trip, I visited a friend who's a fan of Attention Screen. I wanted to play him an experimental recording JA had made of the quartet plus two saxophonists, but my friend had recently moved, and his CD player was still packed away. We plugged his Sony Discman into the Audioengine via the Sony's headphone output—not the purest approach, but with judicious setting of the two volume controls, I was able to precisely discern JA's microphone placements.

Although the Audioengine 2 is designed for small rooms and desktops, I had no problem getting dramatic, room-filling sound in my regular listening room—and even a reasonable volume outdoors. Audioengine does caution, however, that the 2s aren't designed to be blasted into large spaces, and that doing so can compromise their performance and cause distortion. I tell you this because I listened to three samples of the Audioengine 2. I tested the upper volume limit of the first pair by playing some aggressive big-band recordings outdoors. The next day, when I resumed listening indoors, I noted that the bass was distorting at fairly low volume levels, which it hadn’t done before. JA and I postulated that I'd damaged the woofers the day before. Audioengine said this was impossible, as the speakers are stress-tested to withstand considerable abuse. I sent the 2s back to Audioengine, who then reported that they were working fine. All were confused.

The second pair I listened to worked fine the first day. On the second, I got no music out of either speaker; just a regular, continuous popping sound. This pair, too, went back to Audioengine; and the company also reported that they could find nothing defective with the speaker.

The third pair worked flawlessly; these are the ones JA measured. When working properly, the three review pairs produced identical sound. Given Audioengine's liberal return policy and three-year warranty, my experiences with the 2s don't make me hesitate a bit in recommending them to you.

**Others**

I compared the Audioengine 2 ($199/pair) to the Infinity Primus 150 ($198/pair) and the Paradigm Atom v.3 ($189/pair). The latter two speakers, now discontinued, are both more expensive than the Audioengine 2 in that neither includes an amplifier, but they were the least expensive designs I had on hand.

The Infinity Primus 150 had more extended and detailed high frequencies than the Audioengine 2, and a somewhat richer lower-midrange balance. The Infinity's bass extended deeper than the Audioengine's, and its high-level dynamic performance was superior. However, the volume of the Infinity's cabinet is nearly five times that of the Audioengine's. All in all, the performance gap between the speakers was less than I'd anticipated.

The Paradigm Atom v.3 had a much richer midrange than the Audioengine 2, and its high-frequency extension and resolution of detail were superior to the Audioengine's, but not the Infinity's. The Paradigm's high frequencies also had a bit sweeter balance on top. I found the Atom v.3's bass extension and high-level balance somewhat between the those of the Audioengine and the Infinity.

**Payoff**

I have never been more impressed with or more stunned by a component I’ve reviewed for Stereophile than I was with the Audioengine 2. The level of sound quality produced by this uncolored, detailed, articulate, and dynamic speaker, in all situations, was beyond reproach, and its ratio of value to cost borders on the criminal. It extended my enjoyment of music into a new realm of portability that I hadn’t before thought possible. I can’t think of a single reason why every reader of this magazine should not go out right now and buy a pair of Audioengine 2s. I couldn’t decide which finish I liked better, the white or the black. I bought a pair of each.

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1 I reviewed the Paradigm Atom v.3 in the September 2002 Stereophile (Vol.25 No.9); Wes Phillips reviewed the v.5 in September 2007. I will be comparing the two versions in a future "Follow-Up."
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Simon Yorke Series 9

Simon Yorke is an artist, a machinist, an electronics whiz, and a political idealist. He's also an analog enthusiast who melds aesthetic and technical considerations into eye-catching, densely packed, compact record-playing devices that are ruggedly built and functionally elegant. His turntables' smooth, matte-gray, metallic finishes and efficient lines make them among the most visually pleasing ever made.

But while Yorke plays up the "artisan/hand-built" aspect of his products, it should also be noted that he's also supplied the National Archives with exceedingly flexible, sophisticated, and reliable custom-specced, high-performance, bidirectional, variable-speed record players driven by state-of-the-art electronics, which, with an associate, he recently moved to the new Library of Congress Audio Preservation Facility in Virginia.

Nor is Yorke a Simon-come-lately to the analog party. His best-known player is probably the Series 7, which I reviewed back in the June 1998 Stereophile (Vol. 21 No.6; see www.stereophile.com/turntables/398yorke), then purchased to replace my former reference, the VPI TNT. Years earlier, Yorke had designed and manufactured the dramatic-looking Zarathustra, imported to the US by David Manley. But the name was "hijacked" by a German company, according to Yorke, and he decided to let it go.

Like the phono cartridges made by Jan Allaerts, which often appear in photos of Yorke turntables, Yorke's products—which he hand-builds with his son, Spencer—are
chronically backordered. A few years ago, after he'd sold his home in the English countryside and moved to Spain, it was rumored that Yorke would retire from making record players. That period of inactivity didn't last long; soon he was once again building S7s and, more recently, the smaller, less expensive Series 9, which sells for $8250, including Yorke's "captured" unipivot tonearm.

Yorke insists on calling his designs "record players" instead of "turntables" because he sells them only as integrated tonearm-turntable systems. He grudgingly made an exception for me when I bought my S7 sans arm; for reasons that will become clear in the "Setup" section, as elegant and clever as Yorke's tonearm is, it wasn't practical for a reviewer who needs to swap out cartridges quickly and often.

**Design**

Like the S7, the Yorke Series 9 is a compact, mass-loaded turntable with a circular plinth, into which is drilled a hole that contains the bearing sleeve and bushings. Like the austenitic (nonmagnetic) steel of the S7, the S9's far smaller, lighter plinth is also made of austenitic (nonmagnetic) stainless steel. But whereas the S7's bearing is centered in the plinth, the S9's is off-center.

The spindle bearing's shaft of hardened stainless steel rides on a hardened thrust pad. The S9's dynamically balanced platter weighs 8 lbs, is 11" in diameter, and rides on a small platform, through which the spindle protrudes. Yorke supplies a smooth-to-the-touch graphite record mat.

An outboard "wall-wart" type regulated power supply provides +12V DC to an electronic motor controller contained within a substantial rectangular aluminum motor housing atop which is a three position switch for selecting 33 1/3 rpm, 45 rpm, or "off." A pair of rear-mounted potentiometers allows fine tuning of either speed. A domed, grooved pulley drives the platter via an O-ring that rides in a groove machined into the platter's periphery.

As in the S7, the S9's cantilevered armboard is sculpted from a dense, multilayer wood laminate that's painted and then bolted to the plinth. A wooden armboard? When I asked Yorke about this unusual choice while reviewing the S7, he insisted that he'd tried every likely material, from carbon fiber to a promising-looking substance he'd retrieved from a highway, only to find that the laminate provided what he felt to be the best overall sound.

Yorke's unipivot arm is unique in having no headshell. Instead, the damped, sealed armtube terminates plainly as a tube. Yorke supplies a pair of small discs, each flat on one side and scalloped on the other to accept the tube, thus producing a flat "sandwich." Both discs are drilled to allow long screws (supplied) to pass through them and at an angle to provide the proper offset of 23.64°. The pivot-to-stylus distance, or effective length, is 233.2mm, or about 6mm less than that of Rega's cast armtube, or the tubes of the VPI JMW-9 and the Continuum Audio Labs Cobra and Copperhead, all of which share the Rega geometry with many other arms.

Yorke's tonearm is also unique in featuring a Teflon bushing fitted over the unipivot bearing shaft just below the bearing point, on which rides a U-shaped bracket attached to the bearing-cup housing. Thus, while the bearing tip is of the simple hardened-steel-point type, which usually permits a wide range of azimuth adjustment, the bracket-stabilized design permits adjustment only at the headshell. The Teflon bushing provides a virtually frictionless ride for the pivot.

The arm's main bearing shaft is held in place by a grub screw that's threaded into a collar fitted to the armboard. Loosening this screw allows the user to move the shaft up and down while setting the vertical tracking angle (VTA). Yorke supplies two counterweights, of 35gm and 50gm, for setting the vertical tracking force (VTF). Of course, if possible, to maximize the arm's performance be sure to use the heavier weight, set closer to the pivot, rather than the lighter weight set near the end of the counterweight shaft. A string, one end of which is attached to a hole drilled in the U-bracket and the other fitted with fishing-tackle "grape" split shot (1), draped over an angled bracket to provide antiskating bias. Yorke provides additional split shot should more antiskating bias prove necessary.

The tonearm is wired with two twisted pairs of somewhat stiff, thick silver-plated copper insulated with Teflon. These exit the arm through an opening on the side of the tube just in front of the pivot point. Each wire is terminated with a cartridge clip at one end and a gold-plated sleeve on the other; the latter slips over one of four pins attached to two RCA jacks mounted on an L-bracket fitted to the bottom of the armbord.

**Setup**

Despite what Yorke's perfunctory instructions would have you believe, adjusting the S9's tonearm can be tricky even for an experienced analog devotee (see below). Otherwise, setting up the S9 was fast and simple, especially as the arm-pivot assembly comes already mounted on the armboard, which is also attached to the plinth. Still, my experience in setting up the S7 helped more than it should have—Yorke's instructions for setting up the S9 include no illustrations [this unit was shipped without the usual detailed instructions—Ed.]. No pictures had accompanied the original S7 instructions either, until I bitched about it in my review, so here goes again: Simon, without visual aids, setting up the S9 is not as simple as you might think.

Place the plinth on your chosen level platform (the S9 offers no level adjustment of its own), with the Yorke logo facing forward, which places the arm pivot at about 2 o'clock. Remove the rubber stopper from the bearing opening and inject 1ml of light-viscosity sewing-machine oil into the well, then insert the bearing shaft in the hole and press down gently on it until it bottoms out—easier said than done, due to the tight shaft-bearing clearance—or carefully place the platter atop the bearing and let gravity do the work. Be sure to wipe away any excess oil that might seep from the well so that the armboard isn't contaminated. And be sure there's enough oil in the shaft to prevent scoring of the shaft and sleeve. It's better to add a bit too much, then wipe away the excess, than to run the top of the shaft dry.

Although it's perfectly strong and durable once set in place, the graphite mat is brittle and easily broken, so take care in placing it atop the platter. Next, gently lower the tonearm assembly onto the pivot point, ensuring that the U-shaped bracket properly caresses its Teflon mate. Dress the rear terminating wires carefully through the hole in the RCA jacks' mounting plate and attach them to the pins. Yorke identifies these wires with nonstandard colors, so be sure to follow the instructions!

Installing a cartridge in the S9's headshell-less tonearm requires that you pre-assemble the two-disc sandwich (being careful to align the bolt holes so the off
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move it forward more than a few millimeters, be sure to recheck and adjust. While setting overhang is obviously easy, the fixed bolt holes make setting the zenith angle (to ensure the cantilever’s tangency to the groove at the protractor null points) somewhat problematic. Though the S9’s cartridge mounting doesn’t provide much play compared to slooted-headshell designs, I found it to be sufficient. However, adjustment requires loosening both bolts; if you’re not careful, you’ll upset your hard-won overhang adjustment.

Yorke advises setting the azimuth (ie, the cartridge cantilever’s perpendicularity to the groove) at the same time you set the overhang, by making sure the cartridge body is parallel to the record surface. That, of course, will only give an approximation as it assumes the motor geometry is parallel to the body; if you want to dial in azimuth properly—and you should—use a voltmeter and follow the instructions on my 21st-Century Vinyl turntable-set up DVD, available from the e-commerce page at www.stereophile.com. Unfortunately, adjusting azimuth requires you to once again loosen the long bolts, and thus run the risk of throwing off both the overhang and the zenith angle as you lock in the azimuth setting.

**IF YOU'RE CONSIDERING BUYING A YORKE S9, BE SURE TO PLACE IT ON A RIGID STAND, PREFERABLY ON A NONSPRINGY FLOOR, AND IDEALLY ON A MASSIVE, FLAT SLAB OF SLATE OR GRANITE.**

While setting up the S9 tonearm is a bit fussy compared to some other designs, once you’re done, I promise that you’ll appreciate this record player’s elegance and ease of use. Properly set up, the S9 is as convenient and easy to use as a Rega. Finally position the motor housing about 10” from the spindle, at 3 o’clock, fit the O-ring around the motor pulley and platter circumference, and plug in the power supply. Be sure to use a strobe to check speed accuracy and adjust as needed.

**Use**

Using the S9 couldn’t be easier. You place an LP on the platter, put the record weight on the spindle, flip the switch to the correct speed, press your finger against the stub end of the arm, move the cartridge over the lead-in groove, and lower the cueing lever. The platter gets up to speed almost instantly and the arm behaves crisply and predictably.

Because the bottom of the S9’s plinth presents a relatively large, flat surface to whatever it sits on, it makes an efficient mechanical connection; in other words, whatever you place the S9 on will significantly affect its sound. This was also true of the heavier, flat-bottomed S7, despite its thick O-ring interface. Yorke recommends you use slate under the S7, but importer Sounds of Silence sells S7s with the Vibraplane (active or passive) air stand. The S9 comes without stand, although, like the S7, it’s available as a package with the Vibraplane. I first tried it atop an original Finite Elemente Pagode rack that I’d ordered from Europe after seeing it at a Frankfurt audio show, before Immedia took over FE’s US distribution. I later tried a Symposium Ultra stand, which fit neatly into the FE’s top tray. Later, I used a set of Harmonix feet between the Symposium and the FE’s tray.

While each support system changed the sound to some degree, none prevented a finger tap on the stand from reaching the cartridge and being reproduced at relatively high volume. This is less of a problem than you might think,
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materials, masses, drive systems, and, ultimately, price. But there was a familial resemblance.

Like the S7, the S9 is a carefully "tuned" system. It may very well be that the cantilevered wooden armboard injects an element of midband richness into the sound, while the hard, metal structure of the plinth provides counteracting doses of slam, weight, and control on the bottom and transient resolve on top. The S9 shares the S7's midband richness, but has a bit less of the S7's resolution and control at the frequency extremes, and its reproduction of dynamic range wasn't as wide. The result was a warmer, richer, somewhat more restrained sound than with the S7—a sound that I found equally enticing and, more important, well balanced.

The Yorke S7 remained my reference turntable for almost a decade as a parade of superb other models passed through my system, many of which bettered the S7 in one or more performance parameters. The Rockport System III Sirius was better in just about every way, but in the end, I happily went back to the S7 for its impeccable overall balance of richness and resolution. I was about to pull the trigger on the aptly named Brinkmann Balance when the Continuum Audio Labs Caliburn showed up, which bettered every turntable I've ever heard in every way but one: it only equaled the S7's even-keeled balance.

Despite its diminutive size, the S9 produced a big, generous picture that didn't skimp on the music's colors or textures. If anything, it was too generous, but you probably won't notice unless your system tends toward an enriched, "tubey" sound. If it does, then the S9 might provide too much of a good thing. The music I heard in my listening room was almost the cartoon opposite of the parched, thin, pinched sound of most "Red Book" CDs. It was generous, giving, and enveloping, with a reach-out-and-touch-me tactility and voluptuousness.

As with clichéd "tube-sound," the S9 excelled at reproducing instrumental touch, textures, and harmonic colors. The sound was rich but not rotten—don't worry about double basses turning to jelly, or young sopranos suddenly sounding menopausal. The somewhat truncated transient attacks were more than compensated for by a mesmerizing sustain of notes that hovered in space and lingered long before gently dissolving. Had the top been any faster or the bottom any leaner and/or tighter, the sonic picture would have fallen apart to expose the S9's seams—but that never happened during the time the S9 was in my system. Only returning to the Continuum Caliburn fully revealed the flaws in the S9's distinctive but wholly formed personality.

The S9's arm proved capable of handling with ease a wide variety of cartridges, including the Air Tight PC-1 (which costs around half the S9's price), Helikon SL, Clearaudio Stradivari, and Koetsu Vermillion (reviews of the last two in the works). But given the S9's personality, I'd pair it with something tending toward the lean and the fast. The S9 made the Helikon SL sound more like a Lyra Skala (see www.stereophile.com/phonocartridges/3071yra), which proved as serendipitous a combination as the Clearaudio Stradivari, a lean, fast, transparent machine that perfectly complemented the S9.

With the Yorke S9, I'd also opt for a fast, detailed phono preamplifier, such as the Graham Slee Era Gold by Reflex—but in the end, all of these choices are system dependent.

I never thought the S9's bass lacked definition and punch, or that its timing was ragged and confused, or that its imaging and soundstaging were vague—but if all you feed your ears is rock music driven by electric guitars, you'd probably be happier with a turntable with a leaner, tighter sound.

On the other hand, if you listen to a wide variety of music, the S9's rock performance won't sound geriatric, and what it did with acoustic music and vocals will draw you in and keep you happy well into the unpleasant-sounding digital future.

While the S9 is guaranteed for two years, during which time parts will be replaced without charge, except when damaged through careless handling or operation, Simon Yorke says he'll continue to support the warranty at his discretion, if he feels he's somehow "screwed up." He also recommends against operating the S9 whilst extremely drunk, sexually possessed or psychotic. I admit to having done so under two of those conditions without encountering any problems or causing any damage to the review sample or to myself.

Conclusion

Designed and hand-crafted by artisans, rugged, compact, beautiful to look at, and exceedingly pleasurable and simple to use, the Simon Yorke Series 9 record player is a highly individualistic, almost idiosyncratic, turntable, both physically and, to some degree, sonically. It will even run on a single 9V battery should you choose to remove it from the grid.

The S9's rich, generous, and enveloping sound is enticing and intoxicating, and its distinctive nature is quickly swallowed by the music, which pours forth purposefully and coherently, delivering its essence from top to bottom. However, the S9 has been designed to a price point, don't expect the considerable sonic achievements of the S7, especially at the frequency extremes. Still, this very different-sounding turntable is consistent with Simon Yorke's sonic philosophy.

I enthusiastically owned the Simon Yorke S7 for almost a decade, despite an endless parade of enticing prospective replacements. I can predict with a fairly high degree of confidence that if you like the S9 enough to buy it, you'll end up loving it—and happily spinning LPs on it for many years to come.
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In 2007, you can still buy a brand-new Denon DL-103—for the almost jarringly small sum of $229. It has outlived The Fantasticks by five years. I'm sure that no one at the Denon of 1962 could have foreseen such a thing, and I'm doubly sure that no one at the Denon of 1982, which introduced the world's first pro-audio CD player, could have seen it coming either.

But here we are: The DL-103 is almost as old as I am, and continues to attract a great deal more attention. Record collectors love the DL-103 because it's cheap and it has gobs of real musical tone. Internet retailers love it because it's consistent—damn consistent—and rugged. And OEMs love it because, like the Garrard 301, the Quad
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Description

Enter Zu Audio, a seven-year-old company that specializes in the design and manufacture of cables and loudspeakers. Founded in Ogden, Utah, by a pair of ex-Kinbero, ex-Talon, ex-Wasatch engineers named Sean Casey and Adam Decaria, Zu has already impressed a number of reviewers with its clean-slate designs and clear emphasis on affordability. Zu’s marketing sensibilities are also unmistakably fresh: I can’t help liking a company that would name one line of cables Mother, and another Saint Julian.

Zu’s founders are also younger than the Denon DL-103—which may be significant. Far from an exercise in nostalgia, Casey’s and Decaria’s interest in the DL-103 came only recently, when they learned of the cartridge from friend and phonophiliac Phil Ressler. “Phil told me about this amazing cartridge, how it had more tone than anything else for the money,” Casey says. “We checked it out, and he was right—and we saw some areas that needed improvement…”

Before going further, let’s have a closer look at the stock Denon DL-103. It’s a resolutely old-fashioned pickup in which a two-piece aluminum cantilever drives a cross-shaped armature wound with several turns of exceptionally fine-gauge copper magnet wire. The armature rests against a sky-blue rubber damper, under tension from a taut length of the stock cartridge is ground to a spherical tip— the version that Zu and I both prefer, for its dependably musical, unsassy sound. And while thousands of words can be written on the subject—Is a spherical tip less susceptible to interchannel phase distortion than an elliptical tip? Should a stylus endeavor to ride on the very bottom of the groove, where damage is supposedly less pronounced? All else being equal, will there be an appreciable difference in record wear when a user switches from a 2gms downforce to one of 2.5gms?—I propose to leave it alone for the time being.

I am, however, interested in the manner in which the DL-103’s stylus is fastened to its aluminum tube. While this is normally done in a single machine operation in which the end of the tube is crimped flat and the shank is punched through it from the top, examining the DL-103 under a microscope shows that the business end of its cantilever is machined away—surprisingly neatly—leaving a sort of an inverted scoop in which an opening for the diamond shank is then punched or milled. In terms of shank alignment alone, the Zu DL-103, my own stock DL-103, and every other Denon I’ve examined under a microscope have had the most accurately and cleanly made stylus assemblies I’ve ever seen.

In common with its early broadcasting contemporary, the EMT, specifications for the stock DL-103 show a highish source impedance (40 ohms). The two brands also exhibit similarly low compliance and high downforce (5x 10^-6 cm/dyne and 2.5gms, respectively, for the Denon). The comparison falters from there, in light of the DL-103’s comparatively low output (0.3mV) and low overall mass, the latter owing to its two-piece plastic body.

Back to 2007: For a variety of reasons, Casey and company decided to dispense with most of the Denon’s plastic body. The most common complaint about the DL-103 is also the truest: Its good motor is compromised by a too-flimsy mounting arrangement, with open-edge bolt channels that prevent the cartridge from being rigidly fastened to a headshell. Additionally, according to Sean Casey, “The plastic body is a drag on the frequency extremes.”

Casey also determined the need to minimize mechanical impedance differences among three major parts of the system: the magnet, the pole piece, and the base that holds them all together. Knowing that, and knowing that the cartridge will almost always be mounted in an aluminum headshell, the decision was made to create a new body for the DL-103 out of 6061 “aircraft” aluminum—CNC-milled right there in Ogden, Utah—and to tie those major components together using a ferrous-based epoxy. That the low-compliance DL-103 is thus made significantly heavier is an advantage, according to Casey, who also recommends using his cartridge with the heaviest accessory counterweight available, preferably with a rigid mounting.

Finally, a very different, slow-set epoxy is used to encapsulate the DL-103’s motor, damping its structure and further tying the sides of the aluminum body to the stock Denon cradle.

Setup

One stock spec I neglected to mention: The distance between the DL-103’s stylus tip and the center line of its mounting holes is 7.5mm—a standard to which Linn and various other companies have adhered in making their own MC cartridges.

In my Naim Aro tonearm, a stock Denon DL-103 requires no fiddling whatsoever to achieve accurate van Baerwald alignment, measured with a Denissen protractor. Significantly, the Zu DL-103 also exhibited literally perfect overhang and offset in the Naim, indicating that Zu Audio has been careful to retain all of Denon’s original mounting dimensions in the design and manufacture of their cartridge body. (Used with the Denissen and similar gauges, the very square-sided Zu makes it a breeze to judge offset angle in particular.)

For those reasons alone, most of my listening to the Zu DL-103 was done with the Aro—and I did use the heavier of Naim’s two counterweights, with
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which the Zu performed slightly better than with the stock weight. A mild caution: Neither the stock nor Zu DL-103 can be used in the Aro if the arm's signal-lead connectors have been changed to ones that are longer or bulkier than stock. For the right-channel pins in particular, the connectors will foul against part of the Aro's headshell structure.

I also used the new DL-103 in a Rega RB300 tonearm—upscale versions of which were relied on by Zu while developing the cartridge, also with heavier-than-usual aftermarket counterweights—mounted on a Rega P3 turntable. The results were fine. Note that, in a properly installed Rega RB300 arm, a DL-103 can be correctly aligned in accordance with van Baerwald geometry, but only barely. The outermost of the two mounting bolts will have to be pushed as far forward as the slot allows, with the innermost one set back no more than 1mm, to optimize the offset angle. Curiously, the downforce adjustment of the RB300 can accommodate the DL-103's required 2.5gm downforce, but the arm's antiskating adjustment maxes out at 2gm. Such is life.

Measured in the Naim Aro, using the excellent Hi-Fi News & Record Review test LP, the Zu DL-103 exhibited a lateral resonant frequency centered at 11Hz, with significant residual jiggling at 9 and 13Hz. In the vertical plane, it went off at about 12Hz. (I didn't measure the cartridge's resonant behavior in the RB300; if anything, given the Rega arm's marginally higher effective mass, those numbers might have been very slightly lower. Which is still fine.) Tracking was acceptably good, but it was apparent while viewing the cartridge-head-on during record play that the Zu would have liked a little more antiskating force than the Aro could provide at even its highest setting.

In my experience, any DL-103 cartridge is best enjoyed through a good-quality step-up transformer, the primary impedance of which must be suited to the cartridge's own, relatively high impedance. The K&K Audio transformer ($275 kit, $335 assembled), which I wrote about in the September and October 2007 issues of Stereophile, is an excellent choice; the Auditorium 23 Standard ($975), described in the October issue, is even better. Without a well-selected tranistie, the DL-103 can sound dull, uninvolving, and rolled off at both frequency extremes.

Listening

As I'm sure the Zu folks would agree, the stock Denon DL-103 is very much worth a spin. Its sound is pleasantly forward, free from exaggerated brightness and sibilance, endowed with excellent bass depth and impact, and downright exciting. In a perfect world, one might hope it to be exciting but still neutral—but it isn't, quite. The stock DL-103 departs somewhat from perfectly flat response, though it's the sort of thing that sneaks up on you after a while rather than screams in your face. While bass instruments sound just as quick and impactful as you'd want them to, musical tones in that region are a bit thick and timbrally less open than the ideal. More severe is something that sounds like a response peak in the neighborhood of 1kHz, and that may in fact add a bit to the excitement, especially with otherwise listless-sounding records—but if a recording is too hot or forward, the stock DL-103 can make it sound just a bit more forward than ideal.

The Zu modification tamed that quality without banishing it altogether: Voices and brass instruments were still a little more pungent than neutral—acceptably so, I thought, in the context of such a fine abundance of tone overall. More important, the Zu mod turned up the Denon's sense of impact. Sound leaped from the silence better with the Zu—much better. Whenever I gave it a well-made recording of an orchestra, such as Josef Krips and the London Symphony's LP of Schubert's Symphony 9, my attention was held from beginning to end. Even the horn solo at the beginning of the first movement—something I've listened to literally hundreds of times—was more present and commanding, and more like distant music than merely distant sound. (This recording is easy to find on London STS 15140, but sounding slightly better on Decca SXL-2045, the latter also available in a really excellent Speakers Corner reissue.)

The Zu was consistently, engagingly tactile—literally the best I've heard in that regard for less than $1000. Charles Sawtelle's guitar fills on "Pow-wow the Indian Boy," from the first, eponymous Hot Rize album (Flying Fish FF206), were almost as punchy as in real life. More than any cartridge short of my Miyabi 47, the Zu drove home the fact that listening to this album on LP and CD are two very different experiences. Similarly, when I played the Replacement's "Alex Chilton," arguably the strongest number on the uneven Pleased to Meet Me (Sire 25557-1), not only did Tommy Stinson's electric bass have more color and tone with the Zu DL-103 than with the stock cartridge, but Chris Mars's drumming sounded more dramatic, with an even richer, more impactful kick-drum sound.

On natural-sounding classical and folk-music recordings—the latter including the Cisco reissue of Ian & Sylvia's Northern Journey (Vanguard VS-79154)—the Zu was consistently colorful and well-textured. Compared with the Denon, the Zu was even better at filling in the sound at the center point between the speakers. Instruments behind soloists had more substance, and less of a tendency to sound phoney or irrelevant. Even with the a cappella "Texas Rangers" from that Ian & Sylvia record, in which there's little bleed-over between Ian's voice in the left channel and Sylvia's in the right, the Zu allowed the performance to sound more like that of two singers who happened to be on opposite sides of a (reverberant) room, and less like an annoying "dual-mono" studio creation.

Hall sound was also nicely handled on the well-loved recording of Rumsky-Korsakov's Scheherazade by Fritz Reiner and the Chicago Symphony (RCA Living Stereo LSC-2446), as was the sense of orchestral scale overall. Again, the Zu's good center-fill characteristics helped restore body and presence to solo flute, violin, and the like, while instruments at the farther edges of the "stage" were also pleasantly substantial. Above all, in playing that record's many thunderous moments, the Zu DL-103 bowed to no other cartridge in its great sense of impact without the slightest bit of strain. What would you get by spending

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World Radio History
more money—say, $1600 for the Koetsu Black that I reviewed last July? In my system, the Black has lots of beautiful tone and texture, while sounding less colored, less pungent, than either version of the DL-103. But for all that, the Zu DL-103 in particular was capable of sounding bigger, and had a better, more impactful way with uptempo music. In that respect, the Zu was more stirring—more involving—than all but my Miyabi 47. Really.

In many instances, the Koetsu Black or the EMT JSD 5 (also here on loan) had a prettier, even more realistic sound—a flute with a clearer timbral signature here, a more realistic guitar tone there—but for sheer fun, the Zu was usually the one I turned to.

**Conclusions**

When I met Sean Casey at Home Entertainment 2007 in New York City, I asked him what Zu meant. I don’t recall his exact words, but the response was something to the effect of: “Long story.”

I forgot about it until today, when I happened to glance at Casey’s business card on my desk—except that now, the card was turned 90 degrees clockwise, and I saw the stylized Zu-in-a-circle logo from a different angle. It’s clearly a picture of a bunny.

Zu’s first phono cartridge is like their logo: What you make of it depends on the direction from which you approach it. It also depends on what you bring to it in terms of experience, attitude, even the records themselves. The Zu DL-103 doesn’t much reward the quest for subway-train noises or the “sounds” of the walls of recording venues, arguably because it’s too busy finding the momentum, impact, and tone of the music in the groove. Whether or not that notion pleases you will determine, in large part, whether the Zu itself will please you. I already own a Denon DL-103, so you can pretty much tell where I stand on the matter.

The stock Denon DL-103 is a superb cartridge and a remarkable buy; if $229 is the limit of your moving-coil cartridge budget, you can do no better, assuming you’re prepared to work with it and to toe the setup line described above. But for almost twice the money, the Zu DL-103 will indeed bring that much more pleasure, and then some. The Zu doesn’t just slay giants: It rips their beating heart from their chests, shows it to them, finishes them off, then chases their souls and drags them down to hell. Recommended.

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Boulder 810 & 860
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EQUIPMENT REPORT

Fred Kaplan

Boulder Amplifiers, named after the Colorado town where the company has resided since its founding 25 years ago, makes some of the most elegant-looking solid-state amps around. Chassis are anodized, aircraft-grade aluminum with rounded edges, machined and finished in-house. The two models reviewed here, the 810 line preamplifier and the 860 power amplifier, each have a sleek, compact build—stacked atop each other, the two stand just over a foot high—owing to extremely efficient packing of the circuitry inside. These are the company's "entry-level" electronics, but there's nothing cheap about them—the preamp retails for $6900, the amp for $8500—and for all their economical size, they look like luxury goods as well.

Description and Design

The 810 line-stage preamp is a dual-mono design with two circuit boards horizontally attached to the rear panel, one for each channel. The volume controls, though also dual-mono, are integrated into a single, elegant volume knob with a proprietary, 200-step ladder network in 0.5dB increments. If you've ever wondered what a half-decibel volume adjustment sounds like, now you can hear it. The network also lets you set and re-set volume levels with very fine precision.
Boulder's chief engineer, Jeff Nelson, has a thing about keeping noise to a dead minimum. The 810's signal paths are kept short, wires are few in number and length, circuits are surface-mounted to the degree possible, power supplies are regulated and shielded, and there are two toroidal transformers: one for the audio signal, the other for the display's digital logic control. (The two toroids are kept separate so that the latter's noise doesn't leak into the former.) Even the feet comprise four layers of damping material, each with a different resonance that cancels out the resonances of the others. It works, I think. Let's put it this way: I put three spikes or cones under most amps and preamps, and they almost always improve the sound. With the Boulder 810 and 860, they made no difference whatever.

The 810 also includes a microprocessor that lets you program the display (to read, for instance, "CD" instead of "Input 1") and set default volume levels for each input, if you wish. In a strictly stylish bit, the display is made of mirrored glass, and the input-selection buttons are stainless-steel ball bearings—just because (as Boulder's sales manager, Richard Maez, put it to me) there shouldn't be any plastic on a $6900 preamp. As proper a philosophy as any.

The 860 power amp has a chassis of the same material, the same four-layer damped feet, and the same emphasis on short signal paths, low noise, and isolation of components. It has a large, magnetically shielded toroidal transformer and 16 bipolar output transistors. Output devices are clamped to the heatsinks on a machined bar, with a proprietary damping material separating them to avoid ringing. The input and gain sections are balanced; the output stage is not. As with the 810, all inputs are three-pin XLR. The binding posts for speaker cable are custom-made, with very large (ie, very visible, very easy to grasp) thumbscrew adjustments.

Boulder's watchword seems to be quiet. Nothing should be heard except the unadulterated audio signal: the music. How did that sound?

MEASUREMENTS

The Boulder 810 preamplifier turned out to be immune to grounding problems between my Audio Precision test set, always a sign of competent engineering. (With well-engineered products, I end up tearing out much less of my hair in trying to find which combination of signal generator and analyzer and amplifier signal and chassis ground connections minimizes hum loops. Sometimes it's "none of the above.") With the volume at its maximum setting of "100," the 810's voltage gain was exactly to specification, at 20dB. Accordingly, the unity-gain setting of the volume control was "+20." The preamplifier preserved absolute polarity for both balanced and unbalanced inputs—ie, was non-inverting—with pin 2 of the input and output XLR jacks wired as hot.

The input impedance was a high 86k ohms at low and middle frequencies, dropping inconsequentially at 20kHz to 74k ohms. The balanced output impedance was a usefully low 100 ohms at all frequencies; running the preamp unbalanced results in an impedance exactly half this figure. The 810's frequency response with the volume control set to "100" is shown in fig.1, into 100k ohms (top) and 600 ohms (bottom). The output is flat within the audioband, down 1.8dB into both loads, and doesn't change with the volume-control setting. The 810's channel separation (not shown) was simply superb, at better than 125dB below 1kHz and still a very high 110dB at 20kHz. The worst-case signal/noise ratio (ref. 1V output with the input shorted but the volume control at its maximum) was also excellent, at 90dB A-weighted, worsening to 75dB with a wideband, unweighted measurement.

Fig.2 shows how the THD+noise percentage in the 810's output changes with output voltage, into 100k ohms (bottom trace) and 600 ohms (top). The maximum output voltage was a high 18V into 100k ohms and 15V into 600 ohms. The downward slope of the traces below 7V or so is due to the distortion lying under the noise floor below this level. Accordingly, I plotted the THD+N percentage against frequency at 7V to be sure of revealing the actual distortion (fig.3). Even so, the THD rises above its vanishingly low level only in the top audio octaves, and even then, to maxima of only 0.015% at 35kHz into 100k ohms and twice that into 600 ohms.

That this is a very linear preamplifier is confirmed by the spectrum of its output driving a 50Hz tone at 10V into 600
Setup & System
I did most of my listening to the 860 and 810 together, as that's how they're generally sold, or at least marketed. Then I listened to the 860 hooked up to a different preamp and the 810 hooked up to a different power amp. In both of the latter cases I used the Krell FBI Fully Balanced Integrated amp, which can be configured as a preamp only and as a power amp only. I chose the Krell for three reasons. First, it was handy—I'd reviewed it for the July 2007 Stereophile and still had it around (though not for much longer). Second, its sound is exceptionally neutral. Third, the FBI's preamp and amp sections have nearly identical sonic signatures, so any colorations or distortions it might add would be the same in both sets of comparisons.

I used balanced cables throughout (Boulder products have only balanced inputs), except when the FBI was serving as a preamp; then, I also used its CAST inputs.

Sound
There's one sonic category in which the Boulders beat maybe every other amp—and certainly every solid-state amp—I've ever heard in my system: the ability to throw precise images of an
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instrument, a singer, or the sections of an ensemble onto a very wide, deep soundstage. On a few of the tracks of her gorgeous *Poetica* (CD, Anzic 1301), clarinetist Anat Cohen plays with a string quartet as well as a standard jazz quartet. When I'd heard these tracks—most notably, her cover of John Coltrane's "Lonnie's Lament"—through other amps, the string quartet, though lovely, sounded like massed strings. Through the Boulders—especially the 860 power amp—each of the four instruments was buzzing and being bowed from a particular spot, and the four players were spread across the soundstage, each of them distinct, several feet behind Cohen's clarinet.

About halfway through the first movement of David Zinman’s recording of Górecki’s Symphony 3 (CD, Nonesuch 79282-2), when a fair number of the London Sinfonietta’s musicians sit out and the remaining members take on the sound of a chamber orchestra, I got a clear sense of both the hall’s natural reverberations but also of the semicircle in which the musicians were sitting. This effect wasn’t an audiophile gimmick—it lent the music an eerie palpability. I felt, for a moment, that it was going on right before not only my ears but the downward slope toward the left of this graph indicates that the THD is actually buried beneath the amplifier’s noise at levels below 20W or so. I therefore looked at how the THD+N percentage changed with frequency at 10V output, which is equivalent to 12.5W into 8 ohms,

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**THE BOULDERS BEAT** MAYBE EVERY OTHER AMP I'VE EVER HEARD IN MY SYSTEM [IN] THE ABILITY TO THROW PRECISE IMAGES OF AN INSTRUMENT, A SINGER, OR THE SECTIONS OF AN ENSEMBLE ONTO A VERY WIDE, DEEP SOUNDSTAGE.

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### Measurements, continued

ohm at 20kHz. As a result, the modification of the 860’s frequency response due to the usual Ohm’s Law interaction between this impedance and that of the loudspeaker was very small, at ±0.1dB (fig.6, top trace). The output was flat within the audioband into 8 ohms, and down 3dB at a high 100kHz into that load. Into 2 ohms (fig.6, bottom dashed trace), a very slight, ~0.35dB droop appeared at 20kHz. The 10kHz squarewave response was commendably square (fig.7).

Channel separation was better than 100dB in both directions below 10kHz (not shown), with the A-weighted S/N ratio (ref. 2.83V into 8 ohms, with the input shorted) an excellent 99.2dBA. It was a still-excellent 89.1dBA with a wideband, unweighted measurement.

As shown by fig.8, the Boulder 860 more than met its specified power, with 210W continuously available at clipping into 8 ohms (23.2dBW), 338W into 4 ohms (22.3dBW), and 455W into 2 ohms (20.6dBW). However, the amplifier went into protection a few seconds after reaching 455W into 2 ohms. It returned to normal operation once I’d backed off the drive signal. As with the B10, the downward slope toward the left of this graph indicates that the THD is actually buried beneath the amplifier’s noise at levels below 20W or so. I therefore looked at how the THD+N percentage changed with frequency at 10V output, which is equivalent to 12.5W into 8 ohms,
my eyes. Similarly, in the opening moments of Michael Tilson Thomas and the San Francisco Symphony Orchestra's wondrous performance of Mahler's Symphony 9 (SACD/CD, SF Symphony Orchestra's wondrous performance of Mahler's Symphony 9 (SACD/CD, SF Symphony Orchestra's wondrous performance of Mahler's Symphony 9 (SACD/CD, SFSO 821936-0007-2), the horn blasts from the back row sounded as if they were coming from way back there—in my case, from across the street. The Boulders, especially the 860, rendered a sense of depth—and continuous layers of it—as convincingly as a superb tube amp. I got a sense of peering through the soundstage, as if lights were switched on, from front to back, left to right, floor to ceiling, and all places in between.

An amplifier's transparency and knack for picking up spatial cues are usually matched by its fidelity to harmonic overtones, and the Boulder 860 followed this pattern. When trumpeter Dave Douglas and violinist Mark Feldman play in unison on Douglas' "Charms of the Night Sky" (CD, Winter & Winter 910015-2), I had no problem telling the enhance the room, his speakers, and a generous helping of his reference discs, including "Masterpieces by Ellington" (CD, Sony 4694072), which I immediately adopted as one of my own. I came prepared to hear something pretty special, but Fred's invitation was open-ended enough that I wasn't sure what to expect.

When I arrived, Fred ushered me to the sweet spot, asked for a disc, put it in the player, handed me the remote, and left the room. I cue'd "(What's So Funny About) Peace, Love, and Understanding?" from the Holmes Brothers' "State of Grace" (CD, Alligator ALCD 4912).

Something didn't sound quite right. While the harmonic overtones of the electric guitar were sweet and extended, and the bass was deep and taut, there was a band of coloration in the upper midrange that made the Holmeses' tight harmonies sound muffled and opaque. Only after the song was over did Fred come in and ask what I'd heard. I told him and he sat down. "I know," he said. "Isn't that odd?"

We played a few other tracks, including "Solitude," from "Masterpieces by Ellington"—all of them had that strange upper-midrange frizziness. "I'm going to try using the preamplifier from the FBI," said Fred. He must have seen panic on my face. "Don't worry, I won't ask you to help move it."

**WES PHILLIPS TAKES A LISTEN TO THE 860**

When Fred Kaplan asked me to come over to his house and listen to the Boulder 860, he gave me no clue as to what he was hearing. "Just bring some source material you're thoroughly familiar with," he e-mailed.

I'd been by his place before, to drop off a universal player, and had listened to his Parsifal Ovation loudspeakers with the Krell FBI integrated amplifier, which he reviewed in July 2007 (www.stereophile.com/integratedamps/July07Krell). So I'd heard his room, his speakers, and a generous helping of his reference discs, including "Masterpieces by Ellington" (CD, Sony 4694072), which I immediately adopted as one of my own. I came prepared to hear something pretty special, but Fred's invitation was open-ended enough that I wasn't sure what to expect.

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**measurements, continued**

25W into 4 ohms, and 50W into 2 ohms (fig.9). The THD is vanishingly low into all loads below 1kHz, but rises slightly at high frequencies due to the usual reduction in the circuit's open-loop bandwidth in this region.

As well as being very low in level, the THD was predominantly low-order harmonics, even at high powers (figs.10 and 11), while intermodulation distortion was also very low, even at a level close to clipping into 4 ohms (fig.12).

Both the Boulder 810 and 860 offer superb measured performance and are well engineered. I found no clue in the measurements as to why FK liked the preamplifier but was less impressed by the power amplifier. It is always possible that there was a compatibility issue with Fred's...
piano pedal, a slight accent on a snare drum. One of my favorite tests of this quality is "Resting on the Road," the penultimate track of Don Pullen's Sacred Ground (CD, Blue Note CDP 8 32800 2). Pullen was a master of dynamic shadings and rubato, and if an amp does its job right in this realm, his bittersweet hesitations in this song bring a tear to my eye. The Boulder did its job. It also passed the Blink Test with k.d. lang's "Constant Craving," the last

Later, John Atkinson wrote me. "You went to Fred's to hear the Boulder? What did you think?" I told him what I'd heard. "That's quite odd," he wrote. "It measures well. I guess I'll listen to it in my system for a bit." After a week or so, he wrote again: "When I return the Vandersteen Quatro Woods to you, could I leave the Boulder 860 for you to listen to in yet another system context? Since it measured well, but sounded compromised in one system and better in another, I'd like to get as many different takes as possible on it."

But of course. I recalibrated the Quatro's high-pass filter for the Boulder's 100k ohm input impedance, connected the Ayre K-1x preamplifier to the high-pass/Boulder combo with Shunyata Antares Helix interconnects and Andromeda speaker cables, and let 'er rip.

"(What's So Funny About) Peace, Love, and Understanding?" was startlingly present. Wendell Holmes' lead vocals were gritty and focused, and the sound was seamless from top to bottom. No glare, grit, or fuzz—anywhere. The top end was pure silk; the bottom was as deep as bedrock. Ellington's "Solitude" sounded warm and full-bodied. If there was any upper-midrange coloration going on, I couldn't detect it.

"I Saw an Angel Die," from Chickasaw County Child: The Artistry of Bobbie Gentry (CD, Shout! DK 32278), was a revelation. Gentry's voice was pure and breathy, but the Boulder let me hear—to notice for the first time—that its purity owed a lot to Gentry's inexperience in the studio. She moved in and out of the microphone's plane of focus, which might annoy audiophiles but charmed this music lover. What it lacked in professional experience it compensated for with its sense of discovery.

I take that as evidence of how well the Boulder 860 revealed dynamic variation and detail—an observation further borne out by listening to Morimur (CD, ECM New Series 1765). The explication by Christoph Poppen and the Hilliard Ensemble of Helga Thoene's "decryption" of the Ciaccona of J.S. Bach's Partita 2 in d for Solo Violin, BWV 1004, may have been intended as an aural thesis in musicology, but it has survived in my "to-play" queue for six years because it is profoundly beautiful, not to say heartfelt. The Boulder 860 revealed its core qualities of purity and passion.

Despite what I heard at Fred's, the Boulder 860's performance in my system was revelatory. It was an amplifier that I would gladly spend time with and money on. It was also another demonstration, as if one were needed, that your mileage may vary. —Wes Phillips

speakers and/or cables. I therefore auditioned the 860 with the Sonus Faber Elipsa loudspeakers that I review elsewhere in this issue using the system described in that report. While I agree with Fred on the amplifier's rather loose quality at low frequencies, I found the Boulder's high frequencies to be silky smooth, without any trace of the upper midrange being a bit glaring or violins sounding "steely," even on the same Andrew Manze Bach recording that Fred mentioned. I also found the image depth thrown by the amplifier quite extraordinary, as did Fred.

As Wes Phillips had already auditioned the Boulder 860 in FK's system and heard what Fred had heard, I asked him to take a listen to the amplifier in his system. He reports on his findings in the sidebar to the main review. —John Atkinson

![Figure 11](image1.png)

![Figure 12](image2.png)
BLUE NOTE REISSUES

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track of *Ingénue* (CD, Sire 26840-2): At the start of this song, the hard guitar strums and drum thwacks should make you blink on each beat. With many amps, even otherwise beefy ones, they don’t; with the Boulder, they did.

In other respects, though, the 860—much more than the 810—had some problems. Most troubling, the upper midrange was at once dark and a bit glaring. Pianos sounded a bit hooded—not quite as if the lid were shut, but as if it had been lowered more than it should have been. Voices had a veiled quality, as if the singers were cupping one side of the mouth with one hand (or as if the loudspeakers were covered with a grille). This went for a great variety of voices: Dawn Upshaw, Donald Fagen, Lorraine Hunt Lieberson, Joni Mitchell, Bob Dylan, Leonard Cohen, k.d. lang, Bonnie Raitt, Sarah Vaughan, Ella Fitzgerald.

The same was true for strings, though less so for massed violin sections than for solo violins. For instance, Andrew Manze and Rachel Podger’s recording of J.S. Bach’s solo and double violin concertos with the Academy of Ancient Music (SACD/CD, Harmonia Mundi HMU 807155) is one of the most glorious-sounding digital albums I own. The violins are (as I noted in my review of the Krell FBI amp in July) shiveringly silky. Yet, played through the Boulders, the violins had a steely edge. High-pitched crescendos—such as those in Górecki’s Symphony 3, the deep bass lines—which dominate the work's first few minutes and continue to rumble throughout the first movement—sounded boomy, even bloated.

I singled out the 860 because, when I plugged the 810 into the Krell FBI’s power-amp stage, these flaws were much less noticeable, and some disappeared. The 810, in other words, seemed to do very well what a line-stage amp is supposed to do: pass the audio signal from a source to the power amp with minimal distortion along the way. With the 810 plugged into the Krell FBI’s amp inputs, violins weren’t the slightest bit steely; they were silky, if not quite as sweet as with the FBI operating as an integrated amp. The bass was not at all bloated, though neither was it quite the last word in tightness. The 810+FBI combo also sounded warmer all around, and it matched—but did not exceed—the 810+860 system in dynamic contrasts. And the 810+FBI wasn’t as impressive as the all-Boulder amp-preamp setup in imaging and soundstaging.

**Conclusion**

The Boulders are handsome pieces of gear, inside and out. The 810 preamp sounded very neutral, with only a slight softening in the bass and an even slighter rolloff in the upper octaves. The 860 power amp was superb at capturing harmonic overtones and dynamic contrasts, at placing images precisely on a soundstage, and at illuminating that soundstage—at letting the listener peer all the way into the stage, from left to right, from front to back, from floor to ceiling. However, the glare and darkness in the upper midrange, as well as the fuzziness in the deep bass, were, in my mind, out of character for an $8500 amplifier. Overall, I was left admiring the music, but rarely fully engaged.
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Shure SE530
IN-EAR HEADPHONES

first saw the Shure SE530 at the 2006 Consumer Electronics Show (http://blog.stereophile.com/ces2006/010606shure), when it was dubbed the E500. The '500 shared the current product's three-armature driver technology and in-ear, sound-isolating, sleeve fitting scheme, but that early prototype seemed almost crude in comparison with the SE530.

During the year or so it took Shure to bring the SE530 to market, it went through some changes, including its model designation. Shure added modular cables (different lengths are available), as well as a standard in-line volume attenuator and a Push To Hear (PTH) module ($50) that "allows you to activate the VoicePort microphone and adjust levels of external sound for clarity—ideal for brief conversations without removing your earphones."

During that same time, Shure developed a new isolating sleeve (called black foam because it's made of, you guessed it, black foam) with a more durable lining. The company also began offering its sleeves in a greater variety of sizes; research had indicated that the biggest impediment to achieving good sound with in-ear 'phones was that there was far greater variety of size and shape in peoples' ear canals than previously suspected. (Shure's manager of Personal Audio Products, Matt Engstrom, refers to one of the new sizes as the "John Atkinson jumbo" model.) The SE530 comes with three types of sleeves, in eight sizes. It also comes with three handy extras: an "airplane attenuator" to make the low-capacitance
phones mate better with high-output sources, such as airline entertainment systems; a two-prong converter that lets you use your headphones on older airline entertainment systems; and a handy little pod to carry your headphones and accessories in. It all comes in a handsome aluminum case, which may take a bit of the sting out of the SE530's price of $449.

The ear is the true only writer
When I say that the SE530 went through a lot of changes before the version I reviewed, I don't just mean on the inside. The original E500 shared the compact body of the E3c, which JA reviewed in May 2004 (www.stereophile.com/headphones/504shure), and the E4, which Jim Austin reviewed in April 2007 (www.stereophile.com/headphones/307shure). The SE530 has a much larger ABS plastic housing.

"That's because the two low-frequency drivers are vented and share a common "spout," or acoustic channel, which has a passive LF drivers share a common "spout," or chamber is what it does for the double the drivers and port them into get more bass, but the real reason we acoustic reaction to that space— you do "end," said Matt Engstrom. "There's an quency drivers are vented and share a dynamics and texture of the bottom

The ear does not sound
At the risk of repeating a point both JAs have made explicit, getting the proper fit between your ear canals and the Shure monitors is the key to making them sing. The new sleeves and sizes go a long way toward solving this problem, but you still have to carefully insert the 'phones and dress the cables or you'll lose bass response—and possibly the 'phones. I found that the SE530s tended to fall out of my ears if I didn't follow Engstrom's instructions to dress the cable to the front and around the upper edge of my pinnae (well, the auricular sulcus, if you want to get specific), which also puts the junction between the two channels behind my head.

Even then, I found that vigorous motion—running, bending abruptly, twisting—could dislodge the SE530s. Steady motion—striding, using an elliptical trainer, bicycling (not recommended)—posed no problems. Your fit may lead to different results.

Once you do get a good fit, the SE530s offer a very high degree of noise reduction—not quite on a par with that of a custom ear mold or Etymotic's triple-flanged tips, but better than what I've experienced with most noise-reducing headphones—and with far greater sound fidelity than any noise-reducing headphone I've tried. (Shure offers a triple-flanged tip similar to the ones Etymotic uses, but it was not a good fit for my ear canals.)

One last usage note: The Shure SE530 is, hands down, the best-in-ear 'phone I've ever paired with a personal portable. My iPod Video drove it easily, even giving me tons of deep, fast bass—something it can't properly do with my longtime reference Etymotic ER-4S and more recently acquired Ultimate Ears UE-10 Pros, because of their lower impedances. Don't get me wrong—adding a headphone amp delivered even better sound—but the unamplified sound of the Shure was better than that of any other high-aspiration in-ear headphone I've heard to date.

And if you use any generation of the iPod Shuffle, that, plus the short modular cable, translates into the best-sounding, least-hassle version of a gym

MEASUREMENTS

As I've written before, I have no means of assessing the frequency response of headphones—Keith Howard wrote an excellent article on this subject in the October 2007 issue of the British magazine Hi-Fi News—but I did measure the electrical impedance of the Shure SE530s with the headphones inserted in my ears. The measurements will thus include the acoustic loading of my ear canals, which I assume is not too different from the typical Stereophile reader's (though yes, the diameter of my "jumbo" ear canals is larger than average). The result is shown in fig.1. The low-frequency magnitude is 25 ohms, rising to 36 ohms just above 1kHz. The electrical phase angle is moderate over most of the band, and the minimum magnitude is 10 ohms at 5kHz, with then a con-

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The Shures will thus be generally easier to drive than the Ultimate Ears UE-10s, which Wes Phillips reviewed in October 2006 (see www.stereophile.com/headphones/1006ue/index1.html). The UE-10s averaged 13 ohms at low frequencies, which made them sound lean in the bass with earlier iPods, which had a rising source impedance below 100Hz due to the physically limited size of the output coupling capacitor. The Ultimates' minimum value of 9 ohms is not too different, however, from the Shures' 10 ohms.

—John Atkinson
prices, comparisons are even harder than with other components, essentially because of factors you can’t completely control, such as compensating for impedance differences and insertion depths.

For example, I felt the UE-10s had a bit more deep-bass impact than the SE530s, but less bloom and body—but how much of that was caused by the closer proximity of the UE-10s’ acoustic channels to my eardrums, and how much by the Shures’ combination of crossover and port? Either way, the UE-10s seemed to go deeper, but the Shures surely better integrated that bass into the rest of the spectrum.

Similarly, the Etymotics had a more tipped-up top end, which gave them a more revealing (or, if you prefer, ruthless) quality, whereas the Shures, while not lacking for extension or clarity, balanced their extension better with their midrange.

And let’s not forget that, sans headphone amp, the Shures trumped both sets of phones in control and dynamics across the spectrum.

Give every man thy ear

Does that make the Shure SE530s my favorite in-ear headphones? If I had to choose just one set of phones that would work in all of the circumstances in which I use them, yeah, they would be—if only because their impedance makes them work so well with unamplified portable media players.

The SE530s are sonically well balanced, having both extended bass and a smooth, soaring top end, and at $449, they fall between the $299 Etymotics and the $1000 Ultimate Ears. I really like the Etymotics’ superior noise isolation, and the UE-10 Pros driven by a good headphone amp are my refuge of choice for intercontinental air travel. Yet for everyday use, day in and day out, I tend to grab the Shure SE530s and just go.

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World Radio History
On June 1, 1972, producer Teo Macero called musicians together for a Miles Davis session. Several were already veteran Davis collaborators. One of the newcomers, Indian percussionist Badal Roy, had played with the guitarist John McLaughlin on the latter's My Goal's Beyond. The self-taught Roy had a unique style that blended Eastern and Western concepts of rhythm and tonality. His approach was one of the keys to the new kind of music Miles was envisioning, a sound as big as the world—music not just hot or cool, fusion or funk, but music beyond category: everything at once, endless, spiritual, the sound of creation itself, the primordial musical stew which rhythm and melody coalesce in a numinous ebb and flow, bass vamps provide the architecture for a maelstrom of sound in an unlikely elements that work together in uncanny fashion. Roy's powerful tabla backbeat and Michael Henderson's monumental bass vamps provide the architecture for a maestro's stream of sound in which rhythm and melody coalesce in a numinous ebb and flow, mesmerizing and overwhelming, seething with the solemn emotion and density of a Bach mass. Hancock, Chick Corea, and Harold Ivory Williams layer otherworldly keyboard textures through an interlacing of McLaughlin's guitar, Colin Walcott's sitar, Dave Liebman's soprano saxophone, and a percussion bed of furious beats from Don Alias on congas, Billy Hart on various beaters, and Jack DeJohnette on drums—and, of course, Miles on electric trumpet, conjuring stark, probing sounds from the deepest subconscious. So delightfully challenging at the time, this music sounds perfectly contemporary today. The sound throughout is variable: sometimes very compressed, sometimes more natural.

The Complete represents Davis's studio work from the On the Corner sessions through 1975, material that would also provide tracks for Big Fun and Get Up With It. It documents an incredibly fertile period of Miles' career, a time when he was developing a futuristic music in the studio while keeping up a grueling tour schedule and fighting the lingering pain from the 1972 car crash that broke both his legs. At the end of this run, those injuries forced him into a six-year hiatus.

Over the course of these sessions, which run roughly chronologically except for the previously released material that makes up disc 6, and which was originally included in On the Corner, Get Up With It and Big Fun, Davis moves further into the realm of funk as Michael Henderson, the only other musician who took part in every one of these sessions, assumes a more monolithic role in the mix. Roy is still on board for the 1972 and January 1973 sessions on discs 2 and 3. Roy and percussionist Munique build the percussion bed for this more stripped-down lineup including Reggie Lucas on guitar, Al Foster on bass, Khalil Balakrishna on sitar, Chick Corea on keyboards, and Miles on organ for the previously unreleased "Chieftain," then with Carlos Garnett on soprano sax and Miles on trumpet for "Turnaround" and "U-Turnaround."

Through the rest of 1973 and into '74, Dave Liebman adds his soprano or tenor sax and flute to the previously unreleased tracks that make up the rest of disc 3, and the Get Up With It material that makes up disc 4. Disc 5 continues the Get Up With It material with Sonny Fortune on soprano sax and flute, and includes the previously unreleased "Hip-Skip," its hypnotic bass line answered by what sounds like bass clarinet but must be a synthesizer; the high-stepping funk of "What They Do," with its false ending and screaming tracer-bullet fusillades of guitar notes; and the beautiful "Minnie," a reminder of Miles' fondness for exploring a simple melodic phrase.

This completes Columbia/Legacy's series of metal-spined Miles Davis boxed sets among the most impressive jazz archival series ever assembled. Though it's not the chronological end of Davis's career, it certainly feels like it.

—John Swenson

This is the final installment in the trilogy of the Mozart/da Ponte operas led by René Jacobs, and it's something to behold. It is enthralling from start to finish, played with more color than any other version I've ever encountered before. That said, how you hear it will depend on whether or not you agree with Jacobs' view of the central and title character, about which more below.

As performed here, the overture's opening moments give an ideal picture of what the opera has to offer. After the massive opening chords, with their lag from the double-basses, the gut-strung violins, played utterly without vibrato, give off an absolutely hellish chill—much like the Commendatore's handshake in the opera's final scene. It's eerie and disconcerting. The remainder of the overture is played at a good clip and with spirit—the gioiosa part of the afore-played dramma—but with the lower strings always prominent and the timpani thwacking away forcefully, Jacobs peculiarly slows down in the overture's final seconds and strolls leisurely into the opening scene, which finds Leporello leisurely, if bitterly, strolling about awaiting the Don; as his moments alone end with the appearance of the Don and Donna Anna, the pace noticeably quickens. The version presented is the Vienna, with an appendix consisting of recitatives, Leporello's "Ah, pieta, signori miei," and Ottavio's "Il mio tesoro." The voices please. Beginning somewhere in the middle, Alexandrina Pendatchanska's Elvira is both brilliant and dark; she's the ideal manic-depressive. Her coloratura is accurate and bright and her chest voice is dusky and troubled. We get it in her opening number: When she sings "Gli vo' cavare il cor" (I will rip his heart to pieces), she dips down for the second syllable of cavare in a manner that can only be called vicious. Throughout, she leans into notes with a little whine that's meant to irritate. The Donna Anna of Olga Palchichyk is brilliantly sung if perhaps not quite as well delineated as Elvira. She presents a woman unready for life with Don Ottavio. Her dignity never fails her, not even in her impassioned "Or sai chi l' onore," but perhaps that's the point. She's sensual but noble, in contrast with the sensual but bawdy Elvira.

Kenneth Tarver as Ottavio exhibits a tightly focused tenor fearless of any heights, fluent in fast music, and endless of breath (he takes the ridiculously long one in "Il mio tesoro" with ease). Jacobs gives him appoggiaturas and embellishments and grants him plenty of rubato—perhaps a sign of strength. Lorenzo Regazzo's Leporello, very dark-hued, has the timing of a born cynic and refuses to mug; his diction is impeccable and the voice is young and firm. Sunhae Im's Zerlina, as suggested above, is no shrinking violet; she's chock-full of peasant earthiness (for all I know somewhere in the middle, Alexandrina Pendatchanska's Elvira is both brilliant and dark; she's the ideal manic-depressive. Her coloratura is accurate and bright and her chest voice is dusky and troubled. We get it in her opening number: When she sings "Gli vo' cavare il cor" (I will rip his heart to pieces), she dips down for the second syllable of cavare in a manner that can only be called vicious. Throughout, she leans into notes with a little whine that's meant to irritate. The Donna Anna of Olga Palchichyk is brilliantly sung if perhaps not quite as well delineated as Elvira. She presents a woman unready for life with Don Ottavio. Her dignity never fails her, not even in her impassioned "Or sai chi l' onore," but perhaps that's the point. She's sensual but noble, in contrast with the sensual but bawdy Elvira.

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of the star petulance of a Justin Timberlake. (Or is it Mark Wahlberg? Steven Seagal? Never mind.) What this Don lacks is gravitas. (Mozart's first Don was only 21 and later became a tenor, so light may be right.) You may not mind because the argument is so solidly made, but one must feel that something heavier than brattiness is going on if hell is the end result. At my fondest moments of appreciation for this interpretation, I believe that Jacobs is going for a particularly chilling type of irony, and is succeeding brilliantly. And it's funny, too.

That said, as if you haven't figured it out, this set is a knockout. Even if you want your Don grittier, Jacobs and his cast present a glorious, well-characterized, energetic, spontaneous-seeming performance, vocally and instrumentally. You'll hear things you've never heard before, and will wonder why other conductors haven't spotted certain subtleties and not-so-subtleties. You may not always agree, but you won't find it "wrong." The tension in this performance is always present, with an inevitability that's close to Furtwängler's 1954 reading, with which it has nothing tangible in common other than the notes on the page (and even there we find many differences). Both readings are important, and even there we find many differences. Each informs the other conductors' approaches. A comparison rundown: The two dead-in-the-water Barenboims aren't worth it; Haitink is a bore; Davis lacks profile (though it's just the right combination of Classical and Romantic); the Ostman and Norrington are worth re-hearing, the former because it's lean and mean, the latter because it reads like an experiment in vibratoless performance practice; the Fricsay sounds nice but doesn't mean much; there are some surprisingly good parts in the sets led by Bertrand de Billy, Gustav Kuhn, and Max Rudolf, but I can't recall what they are; Klemperer's performances are too large; Karajan (DG) creates a well-polished ball of lead; Abbado's is drama-free; Solti's is clean and uncommitted; the Böhm (1967) and Gardiner are excellent in entirely different ways with regard to texture; Muti and Mackerras are good enough, but not quite; and the "I've got an ideal" attitude of Harnoncourt's is more trouble than it's worth.

My recommendations favor this new Jacobs, with Gardiner a close second for period-instrument readings and Daniel Harding's (on Virgin) a fascinating, mania-filled third. For a more traditional view, the Mitropoulos on Sony (a live performance from 1956) is terrific.

Harmonia Mundi's sound is grand and pungent, with near-perfect balances among voices and between players and singers. Jacobs may have misread the main character, but his view is alternative rather than wrong-headed, and he makes a great case for it. It's like hearing Mozart anew.

—Robert Levine

BOB DYLAN

Dylan
Various orig. prods.; Jeff Rosen, compilation prod.; Mark Wilder, remastering. AAD; TT: 3:48:45
Performance *****
Sonicks *****
The Other Side of the Mirror: Live at the Newport Folk Festival 1963-1965
Film *****

There are plenty of creative ways to anthologize and bundle a career as boundless as Bob Dylan's. Columbia chronologically offered dozens of his rare and officially unreleased recordings in the first three volumes of the Bootleg Series; on the equally satisfying, 3-CD Biograph, Dylan classics and lesser-knowns mingle, with recording dates irrelevant to the track order. Then there are such commercially minded sets as The Essential Bob Dylan (2000), a 30-song greatest-hits offering.

With 51 tracks (27 of which appeared on Essential), the new, digitally remastered Dylan collection is glorious, if predictable. Even the staunchest Dylanophile still has to marvel at disc 1's incredible musical explosion from his early days, which begins with "Song for Woody," one of only two Dylan originals on his John Hammond-produced debut album, released in 1962. The next year brings "Masters of War" and "A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall," and, from '65, "My Back Pages," "Mr. Tambourine Man," and "Like a Rolling Stone."

Like the Beatles in the same time frame, Dylan was evolving at warp speed. You can't listen to disc 1 without hearing how the times were a-changin', "An audiophile disc par excellence, in glorious HDCD. I recommend it warmly." —Lessard, UHF (RR-110)

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and how Dylan refused to stay in one place longer than the blink of an eye. To grasp the extent of Dylan's reach at the time, various songs on disc 1 were hits by artists as different as Peter, Paul & Mary, Cher (her version of “All I Really Want To Do” made the Top 20), and Jimi Hendrix. Not to mention the Byrds (of course) and the Four Seasons.

Discs 2 and 3 are nearly as compelling, and because the running order is essentially chronological (the songs are ordered by release date, which isn't always the same as the recording date), it provides a fast-track sampling of many of Dylan's best-known songs. For non-Dylanphiles, there's no better place to start exploring. Two songs each from Planet Waves and Blood on the Tracks are clearly not enough, but Dylan nicely serves its overarching purpose of career overview. Among the way are mighty bolts of creativity, including 1975's “Hurricane,” a cry for boxer Rubin Carter's vindication, and a throwback to some of Dylan's topical material of the 1960s.

The collection continues its roller-coaster whirl, bringing listeners right up to modern times with tracks from each of his most recent albums. It might sound as if many lifetimes separate “Blowin' in the Wind” from Time Out of Mind's “Make You Feel My Love” or Modern Times’ “When the Deal Goes Down,” but that's the idea. Dylan fan or not, you can't listen to these nearly four hours of recordings without being taken by their immensity and utterly original intensity. Sure, it's culturally indispensable stuff; it's also a lot of fun.

As is The Other Side of the Mirror: Live at the Newport Folk Festival 1963–1965, the revelatory new film directed by Murray Lerner, whose résumé includes documentaries about Hendrix and Isaac Stern. Its 83 minutes comprise footage from Dylan's performances at the 1963, '64, and '65 Newport Folk Festivals and, even more than the early tracks on Dylan, give a time-defying look back at those strange, magical days. In one scene from 1964, Dylan has just left the stage after finishing an acoustic version of “Chimes of Freedom.” The rabid crowd wants him back, but his set is over, and announcer Peter Yarrow (of Peter, Paul & Mary) implores them to get ready for Odetta and Dave Van Ronk.

The crowd won't relent, and Dylan runs back on stage, giddily, to appease them, melodically saying, “I want to thank you... I love you.”

There are moments of Dylan and Joan Baez looking playful at one another during “It Ain't Me, Babe”; Johnny Cash saying, “We think he's the best songwriter of the age since Pete Seeger”; and Seeger introducing Dylan: “He said he ran away from home 17 times and got brought back 16.”

Most thrilling are the moments when Dylan, with Al Kooper, Mike Bloomfield, and other members of Paul Butterfield's band, went electric on the evening of July 25, 1965. The crowd is mixed up and confused as it hears “Maggie's Farm” and the just-released “Like a Rolling Stone.” Dylan, meanwhile, couldn't look cooler with his Fender electric, even as flash bulbs light up the “NEWPORT FOLK FESTIVAL” sign behind him. The juxtaposition of these electrifying moments at this folk festival is the stuff from which history was made; after the two songs, Dylan leaves the stage and returns with his acoustic.

Lerner does a masterful job of presenting the footage, about 70% of it available here commercially for the first time, without comment or narration, and with just a few snippets of crowd or artist interviews thrown in for color. The DVD also includes a 25-minute bonus feature with the filmmaker. Back in the mid-1960s, Dylan was often said to be a mirror of what people were thinking and saying in those turbulent times. But by getting so up-close to the genius dynamo, Lerner shows viewers something much more personal and harder to penetrate. It truly documents the other side of the mirror.

—David Sokol

**MOBY GRAPE**

**The Columbia Reissues**

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**Performance** 4 1/2 stars

**Sonic** 3 stars

San Francisco's Moby Grape has been widely mythologized as the great lost American band of the 1960s, and with good reason. Comprising five distinct, diverse singer-songwriter-instrumentalists, the band arrived in 1967 with an almost impossibly accomplished first LP that strongly suggested that they were destined for long-term greatness. The eponymous debut disc's high-energy folk-rock/country/psychedelic/blues stew boasted inventive three-guitar arrangements, soaring harmonies, and focused, infectious songwriting that contrasted with that era's hippie indulgences.

But the versatile quintet quickly fell victim to a series of misfortunes—including record-company hype, the resulting public backlash, management problems, and mental illness—that caused them to lose artistic and career momentum. In the decades since, convoluted legal hassles have kept the band's recordings out of print for long periods. Sundazed's typically well-executed quintet of expanded Moby Grape reissues—all featuring interesting selections of bonus out-
RECORD REVIEWS

takes, demos, and non-LP tracks—marks the first time that the band's original Columbia albums have been legitimately released on CD.

Four decades after its original release, Moby Grape sounds as magnificent as ever. The album brilliantly captures the band's vibrant creative chemistry, whipping up an array of styles and sensibilities—Skip Spence's acid whimsy, Peter Lewis's dreamy pop, Bob Mosley's scrappy blue-eyed soul, Jerry Miller's punchy guitar heroics—into an irresistible whole that's effortlessly quirky yet wholly accessible. The five bandmates trade lead vocals with instinctive abandon, and combine their voices into various unconventional combinations. Every track here, from the hippie spoof "Hey Grandma" to the rousing rocker "Fall On You," from the lilting country ballad "8:05" to the inscrutable yet uplifting epic "Omaha," is a gem. David Rubinson's uncluttered production lends focus and clarity to the band's potentially unruly assortment of elements.

Although Moby Grape's reputation rests largely on that first album, the band continued to make worthy, distinctive music afterward, although with less consistency. When released in 1968, their sophomore effort, Wow, was regarded as a massive disappointment. That perception was supported by the fact that it was originally packaged in tandem with Grape Jam, a collection of aimless studio jams that take none of the band's strengths. Although lacking the first album's collaborative cohesion, Wow nonetheless contains plenty of worthy, adventurous music; eg, Mosley's operatic "Bitter Wind," Spence's tongue-in-cheek "Motorcycle Irene," and Miller and drummer Don Stevenson's soul workout, "Can't Be So Bad." With Wow and Grape Jam now packaged separately, it's easier to appreciate the former and avoid the latter.

Moby Grape '69, recorded after Spence's departure, contains solid performances and memorable songwriting. But the band's early creative alchemy is notably absent, as is the sense of playfulness that balanced the first two albums' experimentalism. The group had whittled itself down to a trio of Lewis, Miller, and Stevenson by the time they made the last-gasp Truly Fine Citizen, which offers scattered glimpses of their former greatness but is otherwise more competent than inspired.

For the unconverted, Columbia/Legacy's Listen My Friends! The Best of Moby Grape is a sensible 20-track collection that offers a good sampling of the band's salient virtues, although a persuasive argument can be made that Moby
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the acoustic guitar and violin save it from being classified as such, and hint at how SY might sound unplugged. In the closer, "Thurston @ 13," we find a curious, bored teenager at home with a cassette recorder, a can of Lysol, scissors, and other random objects. He announces, "What you are about to hear is me taking off the cap of a Lysol spray disinfectant can [pop]...There... What you are about to hear is the scissors snapping away at random [snip, snip, snip]... There" This proceeds for nearly two minutes before Thurston wonders, "Um, what am I going to do next for your ears to taste?"—an excellent question, in light of the surprise of Trees.

The booklet, which contains excerpts of early writings and very youthful images of Moore and his wife, Kim Gordon, resembles a child's diary or scrapbook. Though technically Moore's second solo album, Trees Outside the Academy is a collaborative effort greatly strengthened by its supporting cast: one man's personal work brought to life with the help of some close friends. Sonic Youth fans will be intrigued by this look into Thurston Moore and may very well wonder what influence, if any, this work will have on the band's next record.

—Stephen Mejias

CHARLES MINGUS
Cornell 1964 & In Paris

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—Stephen Mejias
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a successful two-month run at the Five Spot in New York, with a book full of new compositions that would become classics. But it appears to be an amateur recording, the sound is abysmal, and it was one of those nights when you had to be there. Most of the tunes (and the solos within them) are far too long. The press release talks about how loose the band was, and the “joyous sense of fun that emanates throughout the concert.” They were loose, all right. They laugh and goof and chatter to one another during the music, and noodle around with songs, and take half an hour each to get through “Fables of Faubus” and “Meditations.” (Three other numbers run 15 to 17 minutes each.) “Faubus” is representative. It has a wandering trumpet excursion by Johnny Coles, a piano solo in which Jaki Byard plays for laughs with silly quotes from “Yankee Doodle,” a disconnected tenor spot by Clifford Jordan, and a six-plus-minute solo-bass indulgence from Mingus, made mostly of more quotes (“Dixieland,” “Old Gray Mare”). It’s not until 23:02 that we get to Eric Dolphy, who makes one of the most scattered, meandering statements of his distinguished, tragically short career. (He would be dead in three months at 36.)

It’s difficult to separate the musical and sonic issues. Mingus’ arrangements always contained fearless tempo changes and fierce riffs and shifting horn parts behind soloists, and such elements have no chance to contribute here because they are all obscured and distorted by the sound. Cornell 1964 is like a bad fax of the event.

Six-and-a-half years later, when he made In Paris, Mingus was no longer on a roll. He had arrived in France in 1970 broke, paranoid, and creatively blocked. He had not made a studio recording since 1963, and the band he’d brought with him, while it included such strong Mingus veterans as Jaki Byard and Dannie Richmond, also included new players—obscure then and now—such as trumpeter Eddie Preston and tenor player Bobby Jones. The liner notes by Stéphane Ollivier admit that it was “a little too early” for this band to record, but Mingus was trying to force himself out of his period of depression and silence.

It’s not all bad. Several tracks are throwaways, but there are credible versions of three Mingus tunes. “Reincarnation of a Lovebird,” a fervent elegy for Charlie Parker, has an elegant solo by one of Parker’s most gifted disciples, Charles McPherson. It also has one of Jaki Byard’s epic history-of-jazz-piano solos. “Peggy’s Blue Skylight” is one of those ambiguously self-transforming pieces that only Mingus wrote. “Pithecanthropus Erectus” was one of Mingus’ most ambitious and revolutionary concepts from 1956, never recorded until In Paris. The version here is competent but tame compared to the original Atlantic recording.

Disc 2 contains dispensable incomplete and alternate takes and false starts. The sound of In Paris is undistinguished, but is positively audiophile after the banging microphone stands and overall misery of Cornell 1964.

Charles Mingus was a towering figure of American culture, and every artifact he left behind merits attention, but these two releases are for Mingus completists only. —Thomas Conrad
“Power and Substance... the oasis in the MP3 desert”
- Home Theater Magazine

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Analogue Productions The Ultimate Analogue Test LP

Editor:
Thank you for the opportunity to respond to Stereophile's review of The Ultimate Analogue Test LP.

Your reviewer and readers would benefit from knowing the origins of this test disc and its intended audience. The Ultimate Analogue Test LP was originally created for professional mastering engineers and serious audiophiles who not only have access to the requisite test equipment, but also understand how to measure the relevant parameters without needing detailed explanations. Feedback from professional users about the disc's ease of use and effectiveness has been uniformly positive, so in that regard, it has successfully met its objectives.

The album is also a valuable tool for that set of users who have the knowledge and interest to attain the highest performance from their record players. Although that may not include all of Stereophile's readers, the response from hundreds of users so far has indicated that, even if using only the basic reference tones, it is possible to quickly and easily calibrate their systems.

Barry Wolfson
Sterling Sound

Audio Intelligent Vinyl Solutions products

Editor:
Osage Audio Products LLC wishes to thank Michael Fremer for his review of our Audio Intelligent Vinyl Solutions product line. We find it especially useful to know the thoughts of someone possessing the experience and knowledge that Mr. Fremer does.

We have made a number of improvements to our product line over the past several months, and have added two new products. In doing so, we used a very simple premise to guide our efforts: A record is either clean or it's not. With this thought in mind, we went about developing products and making product improvements that would result in producing reliable tools for getting records clean. Just as important, we also paid close attention to the results of varied cleaning methodologies, and we spent a considerable amount of time experimenting and learning about how best to clean records. No matter what brand of record-cleaning products a hobbyist chooses to use, there are some procedures and tips that should be followed to get the best results. We have posted this information on our website in hopes that it can be useful to everyone in the hobby.

As Mr. Fremer mentions, there is no audible residue left behind after using our products. That's because, when using sensible cleaning procedures, there is no residue left behind. We took great care in ensuring that this would be the case, and we have also chosen not to introduce any type of lubricant or conditioner into any of our formulations, for the same reason. All of the components, including the enzymatic components, in our formulations have been carefully chosen for their purity, effectiveness, and non-residue properties.

Once again, thank you, Mr. Fremer and Stereophile, for taking the time to give us a look.
Jim Pendleton, President
Osage Audio Products

Vandersteen Quatro Wood

Editor:
On behalf of all of us at Vandersteen Audio, I'd like to thank Wes Phillips and John Atkinson for the thorough and professional review of our Quatro Wood speaker. John noted a discrepancy with the 3dB-down point on the M5-HPB high-pass filter and correctly states how important it is for this to be accurate. This issue is addressed in the Quatro owner's manual as part of the dealer setup procedure, in which the dealer uses the Vanderstones test disc and a voltmeter to verify the actual 3dB-down point and how to correct it if any discrepancies exist. The importance of achieving the proper balance between the treble and the bass is also addressed in the owner's manual. This alignment should be adjusted according to a chart on p.10 to achieve proper tilt.

Thank you again for the excellent review.

Richard Vandersteen
Vandersteen Audio

Sonus faber Cremona Elipsa

Editor:
Thanks for John Atkinson's always-thoughtful commentary on Sonus faber's Cremona Elipsa. "I forgot I was listening to the music...In the final analysis, that's what matters: the musical experience...It doesn't get much better than that." All these form a mosaic of impressions that are obviously highly positive.

There is also a small mystery referred to within the body of the review; the different voicings revealed by three quite different amplifiers. In the end, that Cremona Elipsa was able to sound thoroughly different with each of these speaks to the high level of truth this remarkable device elicits. More so than perhaps any speaker our team have used by other manufacturers is somehow a true of the S7. However, the actual unit we tested was shipped to the Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas in a matter of hours following its completion. Should MF, or anyone else, for that matter, require a manual, we'll happily e-mail a full, photographically complete instruction manual (PDF format) by return.

Regarding tonearm geometry: Mr. Fremer seems to imply that the Rega geometry used by other manufacturers is somehow a standard. I disagree. I'd say that there are a multitude of possible tonearm geometries, all of which make various claims as to degree of absolute accuracy, but no true absolute exists. The S9 uses the tried-and-tested SME geometry, which has been around for donkey's years. It works.

It was implied that there is no azimuth adjustment possible with the S9 tonearm. Again, this is incorrect—the headshell assembly provides for this and most other adjustments—though I'd agree with Mr. Fremer that making all available adjustments at one point (namely, at the headshell) does make for a more finicky setup procedure (though well worth the effort in the end).

Mr. Fremer makes many comparisons with the S7 he previously used for many years—a good comparison point, for the S9 is very much a progeny of the S7. But MF

Simon Yorke Series 9

Editor:
Regarding [Michael Fremer's] mention about how the S9 (and S7) sport instruction manuals that have no photographs or images: This is completely erroneous. The S9 is equipped with a detailed instruction manual, complete with photographs to outline each and every step of the installation. The same is true of the S7 and will be true of the S10. However, the actual unit we tested was shipped to the Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas in a matter of hours following its completion. Should MF, or anyone else, for that matter, require a manual, we'll happily e-mail a full, photographically complete instruction manual (PDF format) by return.

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They say 20 minutes is as long as the preferable. Horses for courses, and all that very much doser to the S7 than MF recalls. passing what might be erected. Ultimately, nal; it does "exactly what it says on the tin":
cal purpose, winning brownie points, or is for playing records, not for some analytical if it's a pleasure-giving device. It's for getting doser to "god." It's for knowing how a lathe can be used.

This problem had occurred consistently when the 860 was in each system, we'd quietly take our lumps and go back to the drawing board. But since it didn't, and since two other listeners did not experience the same issue in their systems in separate sessions, the 860 was the source of the problem, or somehow not as capable of revealing existing low-level negative information as it is the positive. Somewhere, somehow shot the messenger.

Boulder 810 & 860
Editor:
I'm in a hotel room halfway across the country from home with a good bout of the flu and a high fever and trying to write this "Manufacturer's Comments" without sounding crabby. If I fail, then at least I have a good excuse.

When we received the preprint of the 810-860 review, we were all pretty enthusiastic about it, to a point. We learned of four listening sessions and one testing session among three different people, and how the 810-860 combination allowed all of them to enjoy what they heard to an incredible degree. Wes Phillips even considered the 860 "revelatory" when he took the amp home. Twice. We also learned of a problem that occurred in only one person's system that diminished but did not disappear with the removal of the 860. This problem did occur in all any of the other systems. To quote one person here at the factory, "Is that it? Where's the part where he figures out what the problem was?" Err, yeah. About that...

Boulder is an engineering firm, and thus our way of thinking is biased toward scientific methodology and eliminating all of the variables that may be the source of a problem, one by one, until an issue is discovered and can be eliminated. Our first inclination when hearing a wealth of positive information as well as some negative, especially when the negative was still there to some extent with the 860 substituted and completely removed from the system, would be to try to find the source of the issue by removing and replacing each of the other components, one at a time.

It seems to us that the 860 was incredibly revealing of beneficial hidden musical information, but was also revealing of sonic problems previously hidden elsewhere in one of the four systems. We are, of course, about as biased as you can get when coming to that conclusion (we'll readily admit to that), though leaving the problem unsolved means to us that, in this case, the review process isn't finished—the review is only halfway done. The review has presently ended on the assumption that the 860 can reveal only positive information, but is incapable of revealing sonic issues upstream. Finding the source of the problem would not only allow Fred [Kaplan] to possibly hear an improvemnt in the sound of the music in his home and hear the 860 without distraction, it would also provide a little more reliability and confidence (for readers as well as other manufacturers) in his future review findings. We know from prior experience that the problem could be something as silly and simple as a bad or dirty connection on a cable.

We're not crying sour grapes here—if the problem had occurred consistently when the 860 was in each system, we'd quietly take our lumps and go back to the drawing board. But since it didn't, and since two other listeners did not experience the same issue in their systems in separate sessions with the amp, we have a hard time accepting that the 860 is the source of the problem, or somehow not as capable of revealing existing low-level negative information as it is the positive. Somewhere, somehow shot the messenger.

At this point, our only recommendation to you, Dear Reader, is to trust the ears that matter most: your own. We test, measure, and listen to everyone product we ship prior to shipping it. We've seen hundreds of products shipped to you, the listener, and you may find something as silly and simple as a bad or dirty connection on a cable.

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Rich Mazz
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A

s I enter our sixth-floor reception area, its walls lined with magazine racks, I see pianist Cyrus Chestnut intently looking through an issue of *Diesel Power*, a new, very successful magazine owned by the folks who publish *Stereophile*. When he asks to use the men's room before our interview begins, I walk him back down the hall and punch in the security code. As I push the buttons, he turns to me. "You know, a lot of people want all these fine automobiles, these fancy cars. What I really want is a big diesel pickup truck." When I laugh, he stares at me. The man is serious.

Big-block diesel trucks are not a hot subject for most jazz pianists, but then, Chestnut ain't your average post-bop jazz pianist—as his new record, *Cyrus Plays Elvis*, makes abundantly clear.

Chestnut's *Elvis* sojourn is one half of a pair of new jazz-piano albums that go in unexpected directions. The other half is from Herbie Hancock, who, with *River*, has decided to take on the catalog of Joni Mitchell. This isn't purely a Mitchell affair—Hancock throws in renditions of Duke Ellington's "Solitude" and Wayne Shorter's "Nefertiti." A much grander affair than Chestnut's Elvis trio session, *River* features the additional talents of Mitchell's talented ex, Larry Klein, as coproducer, and the always welcome presence of two instrumental heavyweights, saxophonist Shorter and bassist Dave Holland.

But the knockout punch comes from an unexpected source: Tina Turner, who, at 68, proves again what a great *singer* she is, in a wonderfully light and uncharacteristically quiet performance of Mitchell's "Edith and the Kingpin." That one cut is worth the price of *River*. Downloaders, fire up those wireless networks—it's time to gut another album just to get one song.

The fact that these two pianists, both well known—one hugely so—have turned to pop music for inspiration can be read any number of ways, depending on your level of cynicism. Jazz artists have always turned to pop music for material but this pair seems further afield than most. Whether they are even remotely jazz is an endless discussion for another time. Both records however are clear examples of the dreaded crossover phenomenon, and could easily be taken as signs that both men are at a low ebb ideawise. Happily, despite these concerns and some less than thrilling moments on both records, both projects actually work—in some spots, spectacularly.

But on the scale of the truly bizarre, the Chestnut project wins hands down. Elvis? The man who never wrote a song, and made stacks of inane, unwatchable films? The sad drug addict who, after a brief burst as one of popular music's greatest innovators, became the universal symbol for cheese? Chestnut says he came up with the idea after he cut a version of "Love Me Tender" with Chinese singer Bei Xu.

"In listening to the music, connections were made. I connected to it. I honestly like the music. I still have Elvis in my iPod."

After listening to and then reading about Elvis, Chestnut discovered that there's much more to him than gawky outfits, liquid Dilaudid, and plugging unsuspecting television sets, and decided that doing a record of Presley's music was too good an idea to pass up. He's also aware that, by focusing an album on a man many black artists regard as having stolen their music, he would run head on into the issue of Elvis and race. As outlined by Elvis biographer Peter Guralnick in an August 11, 2007 *NYT* op-ed, there's a nascent controversy, reignited by the 30th anniversary this year of his death, of whether Presley actually thought what an interviewer once quoted him as saying in 1957 in *Jet* magazine, that "people were people," or whether he was what Public Enemy's Chuck D in 1990 called a "straight-up racist."

"I look at it this way: eighth notes are eighth notes and quarter notes are quarter notes; no one has a copyright on them. So Elvis did what he did. It was his time, he reacted to what he heard, all the music coming out of the black community, and he dug it."

Despite the nice touch of paying tribute to Elvis' first LP with similar pink and green cover lettering, what was inside of Chestnut is a mixed bag. While he lapses into some fairly nauseating smooth jazz on "Can't Help Falling in Love," a tune completely sunk by Mark Gross's Kenny G-like sax moaning, he closes the album with a trio of striking readings: "Heartbreak Hotel," "In the Ghetto," and the classic hymn "How Great Thou Art." "Heartbreak" gets a spacious, impressionistic arrangement complete with what Chestnut calls an "eerie opening" and a "not so comfortable" vibe throughout. He plays "In the Ghetto" as a stirring, ruminant ballad. "How Great Thou Art," which both Chestnut and Presley related to on a deeper level because of their ruminant ballad, "How Great Thou Art," which both Chestnut and Presley related to on a deeper level because of their...
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