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THE EMPEROR

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– Absolute Sound
Elements of Our Enthusiasm

With his system finally completed, Ariel left the office one Friday evening and raced home to listen to a few records. The kid was pumped. YES! Imagine his disappointment, then, when he discovered that something was wrong. He sent an e-mail that night: “One of the Usher speakers is screwed up. I’ve switched cables and channels on the amplifier and the same speaker sounded weird... It sounded wet, drowned-out, and simply bad.” This was followed by an appropriately bad four-letter word. Ariel’s elation had turned to despair.

What could be wrong? And how would it be fixed? On the following Monday, after a long, quiet weekend, Ariel returned to the office with his Ushers and handed them over to John Atkinson who had offered to take a listen and run some measurements on them. Meanwhile, Ariel would take his problem to my blog (http://blog.stereophile.com/stephenmejias), which I have been sharing with him. Like our online forums, “Elements of Our Enthusiasm” exists to exchange ideas, share passions, and celebrate the many joys of music and hi-fi. I started the “Elements” blog almost exactly three years ago, and it has mainly traced my own journey into high-end audio: From a fourteen-year-old avid music lover and a fine musician, he had never even imagined speakers beyond his Bose hand-me-downs or an amplifier beyond his Peavey Bandit 112. He came to Stereophile as a completely blank slate, willing to learn and eager to enjoy higher-quality sound. You should have seen how excited he was about piecing together his system. First the Rega RP1 turntable, then the Bellari VP129 phono preamp, the Oppo DV-980H universal player, the Cambridge Audio 540A integrated amplifier, and finally the sparkling white Ushers. Each time a new component arrived, Ariel’s face would explode into smiles, his fists would clench into anxious bundles of energy.

At the end of August, we watched as the number of registered users in our online forums (http://forum.stereophile.com/forum) quickly ticked past the 10,000 mark. Ten thousand registered users! While it might prove interesting to learn just how that number breaks down into men and women, old and young, subjectivists and objectivists, or any of several other demographic and philosophical divides, that would only obscure the point: In our online forums, there are over 10,000 members who are eager to share their enthusiasm for music and hi-fi. What a beautiful thing!

Among the 10,000, there will doubtlessly be some who have been at this game for decades, who have swapped their fair share of tubes, and who have worn out as many phono cartridges as pairs of shoes. The dedication they’ve put into the hi-fi hobby has rewarded them with vast and varied music libraries and the experience necessary to troubleshoot any problems that may arise. But it is not so easy for the newcomer. The most common issues for our more-experienced enthusiasts may seem completely insurmountable and just plain strange to those new to hi-fi, those who are accustomed to boomboxes, RadioShack cable, and red and black, plastic binding posts.

Such was the case when our 20-year-old summer intern, Ariel Bitran, went about setting up his new Usher S-520 loudspeakers for the first time. Ariel, you see, is new to hi-fi. Though he is an avid music lover and a fine musician, he had never even imagined speakers beyond his Bose hand-me-downs or an amplifier beyond his Peavey Bandit 112. He came to Stereophile as a completely blank slate, willing to learn and eager to enjoy higher-quality sound. You should have seen how excited he was about piecing together his system. First the Rega RP1 turntable, then the Bellari VP129 phono preamp, the Oppo DV-980H universal player, the Cambridge Audio 540A integrated amplifier, and finally the sparkling white Ushers. Each time a new component arrived, Ariel’s face would explode into smiles, his fists would clench into anxious bundles of energy.

"Elements" attempts to bridge young and old, straight-up music lovers and die-hard audiophiles, and even subjectivists and objectivists. (We can hope!) It worked very well for Ariel, in fact. Again noting the “muffled, wet, underground” sound coming from the left channel of his system, Ariel called out for help, and reader “Robin” came to the rescue: “Do the Ushers have bi-wire connections? If so, do both speakers have the metal connectors between the two sets of posts in place? If the left speaker doesn’t, it’s possible you only connected the woofer and, thus, muffled sound.” (See http://blog.stereophile.com/stephenmejias/the_system_is_down)

That was it! It was a painfully obvious solution to an exceedingly simple problem, but one that would have never occurred to someone as new to the hobby as Ariel. An important reminder to those of us who have been involved in hi-fi for some time: What is clear to us may be completely incomprehensible to a beginner. Audiophiles fall victim to many negative stereotypes: We have weak social skills, we are total techie dorks, we can’t dance and we smell bad, etc. But the one thing that should never be overemphasized is the audiophiles’ willingness to teach. We all began somewhere, and some of us were fortunate to have great mentors. Without them, we may never have had the will or confidence to tread into a hobby that at first seems to require such a high entrance fee—both in monetary terms and in basic technical knowledge.

In this month’s “Listening” (p37), Art Dudley explains how God makes audiophiles. We each get a certain combination of brain cells representing our loves and hates. I may put more emphasis on my love of stereo imaging, while you’re more concerned about your love of female vocals, but the audiophile’s greatest love of all (to borrow a phrase from Whitney Houston) is our love of sharing—not only knowledge, but passion. We love to teach, we love to mentor. Through this exchange of enthusiasm and information, we’ll help to see that the joy of music, and our fascination with the gear that brings it to life, is preserved.
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Zappa Returns!
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November's Recording of the Month is McCoy Tyner's all-star session with string players, Guitars. In Classical this month, we have a new recording of music by John Corigliano and Virgil Thomson as well as a boxed set of Wagner Operas from Bayreuth. In Rock/Pop, there are reviews of the Black Keys on LP, Death Vessel, and Sonny Landreth. Finally in jazz, the unusual reed pairing of newcomer Grace Kelly and veteran Lee Konitz gets a listen.

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World Radio History
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World Radio History
She did the right thing
Editor:
I'm reading the September issue of Stereophile and just wanted to pass along a best of luck to [ erstwhile managing editor] Elizabeth Donovan (p.15). I'm a stay-at-home dad, so I know the tough decision she made to stay home with her babies. She will miss the working world, especially if she doesn't already realize that raising kids is harder than being in the workplace, but she is absolutely doing the right thing. I hope she cherishes each crazy, hectic moment with her kids.
—John Valvano
valvanoj@gmail.com

He did the right thing
Editor:
Art Dudley's description of David Lee Roth (August, p.35) was hilarious, spot on, and had me laughing out loud. His sideswipes at Springsteen and Squeeze were pretty funny too.
—Agim Perolli
agim.perolli@gmail.com

Not just music critics
Editor:
Finally... somebody comes out and says what we all knew. Enjoyed Art Dudley's "Listening" in August indeed. It made me laugh, it made me nod my head, though it failed to make me shake my booty.

But, Art, if music critics are as such, uh... what does that say about equipment reviewers? I find similar faults with the review industry: falling in love with a certain intellectualism of the whole thing... arguing about some nonexistent ideal, or fascination of certain metrics; poetry-like language in describing things that lead to fascination of certain metrics; poetry-like language in describing things that lead to confusion—just like an Elvis Costello review.

Too many times, I find dogma, and those sad people who spend more time reading reviews or arguing about equipment than listening to their music. I've been in that mind and I want to let you know how the things works and what its sound characteristics are... but you do, so kudos.
—Himoo Kim
himoo.kim@hotmail.com

Revisionist history
Editor:
Congratulations to Robert Baird on his fantastic article on the massively under-appreciated Gamble and Huff (September, p.53). One important point for anyone who remembers Teddy Pendergrass's Mercedes accident for Robert to attribute it simply to "failed brakes" when the incident was embroiled with police corruption, and a transvestite companion is somewhat revisionist history.
—Steve Over
sover1@verizon.net

Unacceptable humor
Editor:
I certainly hope Mr. Weightman was joking about the "bad moment," and the resulting "exaggerated halting stumble" his cat now experiences after walking across his Mac mini keyboard, deleting music files ("Letters," September, p.11). If the cat was smart enough to press "Command" and "Delete" simultaneously, perhaps the cat's owner needs to be taken to a shelter and a vet.

This kind of humor in a national magazine is, at the very least, crude, and at the very most, unacceptable—especially coming from academia.
—Mark Wilson
Winners, CA
wilsonix99@yahoo.com

Moral imbeciles, the whole lot of you
Editor:
I have some serious problems both with Jon Iverson's review of the Sooloos system in September and with the editorial direction of Stereophile. I am not questioning Jon's auditory intelligence, only his verbal and cognitive intelligence: I found myself cringing at his phrases and still not making any sense of them. And I am too old to believe that, if I have not understood it, it is because I am stupid. Actually, I failed to understand because I refuse to stand under his arguments.

Let's start with the fact that an iPod is an MP3 player or a Portable Digital Player. A category cannot contain itself, and an iPod cannot be an iPod; Apple did not invent the technology, they just did a better job at creating a fetish item and coercing the record industry into online sales (no small feat).

Second, do not give me the Five-Bricks Grande Latte Macchiato Skinny bullshied routine. It's not an Ethernet-connectable external magnetic storage device, call it an External (Ethernet or USB) Hard Disk Drive (HDD). That way, we will know what in purgatory it is.

Third, I work on my computer (a Mac) all day long, and I have no intention of looking at a PC at night—ergo, no Internet connection at home. The rest of the country is not Manhattan, digitally connected 24/7/52. Music is to escape the grid, not to be on it. Computers at home are to write your résumé, everything else can be done in the office.

Four, there is no such thing as an "artist." And I seriously resent being told how to organize my mind. First name? How would you call up the Rolling Stones, the Police, or the "Artist" formally known as Prince? How would I look up Scarlatti—by Domenico or Domingo? You can organize music by orchestra, composer, lead singer or violinist, pianist, conductor, even by the composer. Bach is not a composer, he is an orchestrator, and other composers have used his music under current copyright law, Bach would be in jail as a repeat offender.

Sometimes, I want some refined, intelligent piano playing and I go to the Pollini stack; sometimes, I want passionate Georgian playing and I go to the Gergiev stack; sometimes, I want to hear an orchestra toilet-trained at gunpoint and I go to my stack of 33rpm Karajans. I will not adapt to technology, technology has to adapt to my mental maps. I will not have a corporation dictate in mental maps.

Fifth, are you joking? You expect me to have Sooloos, in a Google age, do a metadata search on all my selections, so my personal file at MegaCorp can profile me as containing an Internet search for the Patriot Act and a heavy rotation of godless nihilistic Bolshevik music?! Incidentally, what is Missakovski's first name?

Hobbies wrote that modern capitalistic societies would be populated with "moral imbeciles pursuing their limited self interests." I think Jon (without the H) Iverson qualifies as being a moral imbecile by suggesting that the government, now given the means to do so, should source—to, say, Microsoft (a convicted monopolist also convicted of using unfair business practices)—the job of doing a complete profiling of the US population with a view to identifying and isolating anybody with Car Stevens music on their digital shelf, so we can root out any evildoers and other "miscreant" Muslim terrorist sympathizers. (That is on the record: they denied him an entry visa on those grounds.) Thank the Holy Bush, my Cats are on 33rpm, and the
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feds would have to physically break in to put that into evidence. (I hid them on the Gregorian Chant shelf, between Monteverdi and Palestrina—as what's Palestrina's first name, Jon with no H?)

Or maybe here. Because to connect wirelessly so my neighbors can also check me. After all, the Stas proved this: neighbors are better at surveillance than the State. Click on the little antenna icon at the top right-hand corner of your iMac screen and see how many of your neighbors are home right now. Google catalogs everything you ever searched for—or e-mailed, if you use Gmail. Ever heard of the constitutional protection against unlawful search and seizure and the prohibition against reading others' mail? Be afraid. The biggest threats to democracy are information technologies and imbeciles like Jon (without an H), who thinks that technology is "convenient to society costs.

Sixth, the Digital Millennium Copyright Act (DMCA) specifically forbids anybody making a backup copy of any disk. That means that the 2500 albums on the Sooloos are 2500 violations of the DMCA (with the benefit of Habeas Corpus, you can make a backup copy of a CD, but not make a copy and give it away, under DMCA, you cannot even make a personal copy of an SACD, etc.). And Jon without an H even went so far as to admit they were ripped from Sooloos's employees' private collections. Nice. Throw them under the 6 train at 42nd.

DMCA strictly prohibits the manufacturer, sale, or distribution of any hardware device or software utility, on your HDD or accessible via the Internet, that would allow you to make such a copy. And the Sooloos, strictly speaking, cannot not "does not," store your music on SACD/ DVD-A/Blu-ray storage devices.

Which leaves us with having to buy new music over the Internet, where you are forbidden from making hard copies and are thus left at the mercy of a mechanical magnetic disk spinning at 7200rpm with pickup heads gliding off the surface tension. Look on any HDD and you will find a MTBF (Mean Time Between Failure) of five years or 50,000 hours. Probably two years for an iPod HDD, or 10,000 read/writes on an EEPROM Flash device. Yeah, Flash is archive quality—run a defragmentation utility weekly.

Further, if your unit should fail one day past the warranty expiration, you cannot just replace your McIntosh preamp with a Levinson. Your music investment is Sooloos-dependent, and your only choice is to buy another Sooloos. Sorry, I have my 33rpm Tchaikovsky 4, Karajan on Deutsche Grammophon, and I really fail to see why I would have to buy a new copy every time my music device fails or technology changes. (When I got tired of looking at my Thorens, I got myself a Michell.)

If Stereophile is saying that we should only be allowed to lease music on the monthly subscription model, then have the balls to say so. Long live Napster—all the music you can listen to, but not save to permanent medium, for $12.95 a month. Sure, some people like to borrow books from a library, I personally like to go to a bookstore and buy mine, or more often buy through BN.com.

There is no such thing as "unintended consequences of a particular technology." If you allow someone to look at your hard drive, you entitle him to do what he wishes with that knowledge, including profiling you. And if you accept a download as the only means of buying music, with the provision that you cannot make a backup copy, then you accept a limited time term on ownership. (If not so, you could back up your Sooloos storage device with an external USB drive, which you cannot legally do—you can only mirror the first drive with a second one of their proprietary drives.) If you auction radio bandwidth, you eliminate classical programming; if you accept that my BMW is sold with only a Sirius satellite radio, you have to accept that "classical" means 19th-century German symphonic music; which is what can be referred to as being categorically shifted.

Seventh, on an iPhone, Apple keeps 70% of the revenue, the label 30%, and the "artist”—I still do not know what that means—10% of that 30%. Do the math. Now you know why most "artists" become producers. And why there is no new music, unless somebody is producing their own music.

I will refuse to understand or stand under the digital distribution chain. I have no intention of my recording assets being held hostage by any company or one software technology with the ability to lock me out. Or being at the mercy of a technology with a five-year amortization schedule. I can accept that I lease my software, but I will not lease my music. Hardware platforms have to be company-independent. Software standards have to be hardware-independent. And you, as Stereophile, are failing to point out the limitations of proprietary platforms and technologies. I will not subscribe to technojumbo Starbucks-speak. Or calling a digital media player an iPod. And shame on you for suggesting that to listen to music I have to be on the grid, thinking within the industry's exclusionary categories or dumbed-down search tools, while the fascists in Washington listen in and profile me.

You've lost the moral thread. Moral imbeciles, the whole lot of you. —Marco Fuxa

Miami, FL

11

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Those promoting audio-related seminars, shows, and meetings should e-mail the when, where, and who to stephen.mejias@sourceinterlink.com at least eight weeks before the month of the event. The deadline for the January 2009 issue is October 31, 2008. We will reply with a confirmation. If you do not receive confirmation within 24 hours, please e-mail us again. If you prefer to communicate through fax, the number is (212) 915-4164.

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

Tuesday, October 28, 7–9:30pm: The Arizona Audio Video Club will hold its monthly meeting at the broadcast facilities of KJZZ and KBAQ, the Phoenix jazz and classical National Public Radio stations. Participants will be given a studio tour by a station engineer. A raffle is planned and refreshments will be served. Guests and new members are invited. For more info, visit www.azaudioclub.com or call Adam Goldfine at (602) 524-3974.

Tuesday, November 25, 7–9:30pm: The Arizona Audio Video Club will hold its monthly meeting. Vincent Sanders of VRS Audio Solutions will be on hand to discuss and demonstrate the optimization of computers for audio playback, the qualitative differences between consumer and professional ripping and playback software, and the future of high-resolution downloads. A raffle is planned and refreshments will be served. Guests and new members are invited. For more info, visit www.azaudioclub.com or call Adam Goldfine at (602) 524-3974.

CALIFORNIA

Thursday, October 23, 7:30–9:30pm:


YOUR MEDIA SERVER

John Atkinson

In June 2007, I recorded Minnesota male choir Cantus live on location, this time in the glorious acoustic of Sauder Concert Hall at Goshen College, in Goshen, Indiana. The resultant CD, While You Are Alive (Cantus CTS-1208), is the eighth I have engineered of the group; it is a collection of 20th- and 21st-century works that explores, illuminates, and celebrates all stages of life, from birth to death.

While You Are Alive features works by such luminaries as Eric Whitacre, Peteris Vasks, and Veljo Tormis, as well as four world-premiere recordings of works commissioned by Cantus. Highlights include A Sound Like This, an extended work for nine-part male choir composed by Edie Hill on texts by the Indian mystic poet Kabir, in translations by Robert Bly, and commissioned in conjunction with Chamber Music America. Maura Bosch's The Turning is a hauntingly beautiful three-movement setting of words written by the perpetrators of domestic abuse, commissioned in conjunction with the American Composers Forum. The delightful Tormis piece, Kohn muh olie bruist sana, features Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra fluteist Julia Bogorad-Kogan weaving in and out of the vocal line, supporting and punctuating the words. My favorite is Daniel E. Gawthrop's setting of the Tennyson poem "There Is Sweet Music," a tonal gem that lasts just under three minutes and closes the album.

"Our goal for this album," says Cantus's Artistic Director, Erick Lichte, "was to create an album that celebrates life in all its aspects and stages while, at the same time, pushing all of the boundaries of what a choral album could be. In terms of repertoire, we have tried to bring together new works for male choir that not only represent a barometric reading of the current state of composition in America, but also works of great beauty and emotional truth. We've also tried to bring to these works a new sound in vocal chamber music that fuses razor-tight ensemble singing with soloistic color and chamber-music intimacy. It is our hope that this album shows that both can be possible."

Stereophile reviewer Wes Phillips was also impressed by the sound, writing in his review of the Ayre KX-R preamplifier in this issue, "From the opening notes of Eric Whitacre's Lux Aeterna, I was hearing extremely deep into the hall. The 'beating' within the harmonies sounded phenomenally lifelike, and the distinctive Sauder Hall ambience surrounding Paul Nelson's 'A Lullaby' was as concrete as the singers themselves."

Because of the delicate nature of much of the scoring on While You Are Alive, I placed my microphones a little closer to the singers than I had for earlier Cantus recordings, then opened up the drapes around the periphery of the auditorium to allow the hall's full three seconds of rich, warm reverberation to develop. My main pickup was an ORTF pair of Neumann tube cardioid mikes and a spaced pair of DPA high-voltage omnidirectionals. A second pair of DPA omnis was mounted on a Jecklin Disc a little farther back, to allow me to move the singers a little farther back in the soundstage in postproduction, if that was felt necessary. For the solo flute in the Tormis, I used a close-positioned Earthworks omni to focus a little more tightly on the instrument's sound.

The microphone preamplifiers were low-noise models from Millennia Media, and A/D conversion was performed with a dCS 904 and Metric Halo's ULN-2 and MIO2882. The dCS converter acted as the system's master clock, and the Metric Halos were connected to a Mac mini computer via FireWire. The audio files, featuring 24-bit resolution at a sampling rate of 88.2kHz, were captured to the computer's hard drive using the Record Panel of the Metric Halo Console v.4 software.

The album was mixed in the digital domain using Adobe Audition, and...
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Home Entertainment Magazine
May/June 2004

“Velodyne’s DD-12 has no equal. It’s simply the best small subwoofer in the world.”
Hi-Fi Magazine
April/May 2004

“After using Velodyne’s Digital Drive software, I don’t understand how anyone will be able to go back to tuning a subwoofer by ear.”
Stereophile Magazine
June 2004
AudioVision San Francisco (1603 Pine Street) will host an evening featuring Anthony Gallo Acoustics’ new Nucleus Reference 5LS loudspeaker, Shunyata Research’s signal and power products, and NuForce’s Reference Series electronics. Representatives of each company will discuss the merging of modern design with high-performance audio. Refreshments will be served and a drawing will be held for free prizes. For more info, visit www.audiovisionsf.com. RSVP: (415) 614-1118.

Sunday, October 26, 2–5pm: The Los Angeles and Orange County Audio Society will hold its monthly meeting at Weinhardt Design (2337 Roscomare Road, Los Angeles), owned and operated by audiophile David Weinhardt, former owner of Ambrosia AV. The event, “Discovering What Is Possible,” will feature demonstrations and comparisons of reference-level analog and digital gear, including the 700-lb, custom-object Clearaudio Statement turntable, Meridian’s 808.2 CD player, and the Sooloos music server with Stahl-Tek’s Vekian D/A converter, all played through Magico loudspeakers. Several guests will be on hand to discuss their products, including representatives of Meridian and Sooloos. In addition, Wally Malewicz of WallyTools will provide a turntable clinic at which all of his accessories will be available at special prices. A raffle is planned and lunch will be served. Guests and new members are invited. For more info, visit www.jaocas.com or call Bob Levi at (714) 281-5850.

O Sunday, November 16, 2–5pm: The Los Angeles and Orange County Audio Society will hold its monthly meeting at Sunny’s Home Theater & Music Systems (1370 E. Cypress Street, Covina). The primary demonstration will feature Wilson Audio Specialties loudspeakers, Boulder’s new 2000 Series amplification, and the Sooloos music server. The second system will feature T+A’s new Power Plant and Music Player, combined with Amphion Argon Anniversary speakers and Transparent Cable’s MM2 cables. A home-theater demo will include a Runco projector, Aerial Acoustics System 1 speakers, and JL Audio’s Gotham subwoofers. A raffle is planned and lunch will be served. Guests and new members are invited. For more info, visit www.jaocas.com or call Bob Levi at (714) 281-5850.

Saturday, December 13, 11:30–4pm: The Los Angeles and Orange County Audio Society will host its 15th Anniversary Celebration and Gala at the Buena Park Holiday Inn (7000 Beach Boulevard). Ray Kimber, president of Kimber Kable, will equalized using Adobe Audition and a Metric Halo MIO2882+DSP/d2; editing, mastering, and the final reduction of the high-resolution masters to the CD standard of 16-bit word length and 44.1kHz sampling were performed using IBIOS Peak v5.2. (Set to its time-consuming maximum-quality setting, this program has the most transparent sample-rate conversion I’ve tried—and I’ve tried a lot)

“We have recorded these works in a truly great natural acoustical space, and captured them via state-of-the-art audio engineering. We hope our audience loves listening to this album as much as we feel honored to have made it,” sums up Erick Lichte. Cantus will be singing much of this album’s repertoire on tour during the 2008–09 season. For a full list of the group’s performances across the US, visit www.cantusonline.org.

In commitment to the album’s theme of life, all of the packaging of While You Are Alive is 100% post-consumer recycled paper and plastic printed with 100% soy ink. While You Are Alive is available for the introductory price of $16.95 (plus S&H) from this magazine’s e-commerce page, http://ssl.blueearth.net/primedia/home.php.

UK: THE AUDIO MARKET
Paul Messenger
Europe’s leading market-research operation, GfK, recently gave a presentation to the British Audio Dealer Association (BADA) in which they acknowledged the dramatic loss of consumer confidence that began earlier this year. However, they suggested that things might not be quite as bad as the man in the street would seem to think.

Since 2005, the UK’s overall consumer-electronics sector has proved far more resilient than the retail market as a whole. Sales of audio systems bottomed out in 2006 but have since shown a slight recovery, especially at the higher price points. Although sales of flat-screen TVs still dominate the separates sector, sales of DVD players, A/V receivers, speakers, and turntables have all shown modest growth, while sales of power amplifiers and CD players have declined. Overall, total sales of hi-fi separates in the UK seem to be reasonably stable.

Critics have pointed out that GfK overlooks most of the custom-installation market, which admittedly is much smaller in the UK than in the US. There’s also the possibly crucial point that statistics were available for only up till May 2008, before the current recession had really got underway. Any optimism should be laced with caution.

UK: THE AIRWAVES
Paul Messenger
British television might have suffered significant dumbing-down in recent years, especially since the arrival of digital multichannel services, but the BBC still manages to make some interesting programs. At the same time, advances in medical technologies are adding considerably to our understanding of music.

These came together in two recent examples. Veteran BBC broadcaster...
be there to receive the Society's 2008 Founders Award, and John Atkinson, editor of Stereophile, will address the Society and offer his unique perspective on the state of our hobby. There will be "an extravagant holiday buffet" and raffle prizes. Guests and new members are invited. For more info, visit www.laocas.com or call Bob Levi at (714) 281-5850.

INDUSTRY UPDATE

Alan Yentob hosts Imagine, a consistently excellent and unusually varied cultural program, a recent edition of which examined Musicophilia: Tales of Music and the Brain, by neurologist Oliver Sacks, who was born in the UK but is now based in New York City. More anecdotal than academic, and therefore rather more accessible than books that take a more rigorously scientific approach, Musicophilia is a collection of case histories of strange, often inexplicable psychomusical experiences. Too lengthy to cover in detail here, these alone make fascinating reading, and if the book lacks an overall thesis, it's easy and entertaining to dip in and out of.

The part of the Imagine segment I found most interesting was when Alan Yentob subjected himself to an MRI scan, to see how his brain reacted while listening to several musical extracts. At the end of this experiment, the operator showed how one piece—one of Richard Strauss's Four Last Songs—had caused Yentob's brain to flood with blood, and said he'd never before seen such an extreme reaction.

AT THE END OF THIS EXPERIMENT, THE OPERATOR SHOWED HOW ONE PIECE—ONE OF RICHARD STRAUSS'S FOUR LAST SONGS—HAD CAUSED YENTOB'S BRAIN TO FLOOD WITH BLOOD.

Even more interesting was an installment of the TV series The Making of Me, which followed classical and crossover violin prodigy Vanessa-Mae through a series of tests to try to establish how much of her talent is due to nature (genetics) and how much to nurture (training). Nature/nurture music specialist Professor John Sloboda asked Vanessa-Mae to try to calculate how many hours of her life she had spent practicing the violin. She calculated around 7000 hours.
Perfect Wave Transport and Ultralink DAC. Refreshments will be served. Guests and new members are invited. For more info, call (718) 802-0183 or e-mail dnemzer@earthlink.net.

U TAH
Saturday, October 25, 6–10pm: Aris Audio (1413 Spring Lane, Salt Lake City) will host a seminar on “The Reproduction of Perfect Deep Bass.” Representatives of Sumiko and AudioQuest will be on hand to demonstrate products from Primare, Pro-ject, Sonus Faber, REL, Vienna Acoustics, and AudioQuest. Refreshments will be served and a raffle is planned. For more info, visit www.arisaudio.com. RSVP: (801) 272-1690.

VIRGINIA
Sunday, November 16, 5–8pm: With a focus on “Systems by Budget,” the Richmond Audio Society will hold its year-end meeting, presenting three hi-fi systems at three different price points: $82,500, $85,000, and $810,000. Tentative plans for the upcoming year will also be discussed. For more info, visit www.richmondaudiosociety.org. RSVP: c.alan.givens@dom.com.

hours, which fell neatly into the range of 5000 to 10,000 hours that Sloboda said was typical for a top professional musician. Advantage nurture.

Vanessa-Mae commented that the acuity of her hearing played a huge role in her musicmaking abilities: “My own ears are my toughest critics,” she said. Dr. Claudia Fritz, of the Department of the Science of Musical Sounds, Cambridge, England, tested the violinist’s hearing acuity by asking her to choose, from recordings of three different violins, playing the same note, which one had a slightly different tonality. The test was repeated many times, the tester gradually reducing the difference between the violins, until Vanessa-Mae was reduced to guessing randomly. When the results were analyzed, they were clearly and obviously far better than the norm. Nature or nurture? Probably a lot of both.

Then geneticist Tim Spector, of Kings College, London, invited Vanessa-Mae to witness an experiment in a nightclub. A singer had been briefed to perform in and out of tune before an audience comprising a mixture of identical and fraternal twins. The identicals showed ‘much higher incidence of agreement in detecting the poor singing than did the non-identical twins, indicating that genetic makeup is a critical element in musical appreciation.

Prof. Larry Parsons, of Sheffield, then asked Vanessa-Mae to simulate playing the neck of her violin with her left hand while her brain was being scanned by an MRI machine (there wasn’t room for a violin bow inside the machine). He then asked her to repeat the process, this time using her right hand to simulate playing a violin’s neck. This was a little like learning, as a child, how to play the violin for the first time, and, as the scan revealed, resulted in far more brain activity.

In the final part of The Making of Me, Vanessa-Mae was put through a battery of tests in order to build a complete psychological profile of her. This indicated a dominant personality with high scores for extroversion, conscientiousness, and, particularly, openness to new experiences. Although Vanessa-Mae’s mother, from whom the violinist is estranged, had declined to appear in the program, she had undergone the same tests. Her psychological profile was almost identical to her daughter’s—further evidence of the importance of genetic inheritance.

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"If you could significantly improve the sound of your audio system for under $50, would you do it?"

Some audiophiles believe that acquiring a particular audio component will move their system to a much higher level of performance. But should that be the next step?

The reason I ask

Hello. My name is Jim Smith. You may know me from a few years ago when I imported Avantgarde Acoustic loudspeakers, as well as Audiopax and Zanden. And you may have read my booklet, 31 Secrets to Better Sound. Over 15,000 audiophiles received it. Hundreds wrote or called to thank me for the big improvement in their systems.

During that time, I visited numerous audiophiles and listened to their systems. In all of those visits, I never encountered one system that was performing anywhere near its potential! I know that there must be some, but I certainly never encountered one.

Is it OK to tell the truth?

Few of those systems were performing at even half of the performance of which they were capable! And yet, the common denominator among their owners was the question, "What about upgrading to the (current rave) XYZ component?" Clearly, they thought that buying a new component—amplifier, CD player, etc.—was the path to audio nirvana.

But their priorities were misplaced. There was no need to spend another dime on components until they had gotten their system optimized to be able to "play the room."

Throwing money out of the window

Let's face it. Buying a new component without getting the performance that you ought to get from it is about the same as throwing money out of the window!

Srajan Ebaen wrote eloquently about this subject in a provocative article for Positive Feedback Online. That kind of thinking drove me to create the set-up manual for audiophile music lovers, Get Better Sound.

Disagree slightly

I really appreciate Srajan's recent comments about Get Better Sound. However, I think of the manual not so much as a shortcut, but as a crucial—and affordable—next step to get better sound from any system.

My goal is to show you how to greatly improve your sound, and how to do it without spending a fortune. Plus, when you do make a purchase, you'll be confident that you've selected the very best component. The 202 tips in this manual have provided the highest levels of performance in audio systems around the world—in systems just like yours.

No more secrets

Now you can use the same techniques that I used to win those "Best Sound of Show" press comments* and to receive continuing acclaim from my personal clients for over 35 years.

For much more information, including how to order your copy of Get Better Sound, visit www.getbettersound.com. E-mail: jim@getbettersound.com, or, if you prefer, call me at 770-777-2095.

Best regards,

Jim Smith

*Excerpts and links at www.getbettersound.com

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R
ember Doc Brinkley, the subject of Charlatan, by Pope Brock? I discussed this most famous medical quack in American history in my May column, along with the goat testicles he so often prescribed. Now I'd like to introduce you to another famous 20th-century scoundrel.

Han van Meegeren, the most famous art forger in history, was perhaps the best ever. He conned critics, curators, collectors, and art dealers for nearly a decade. In fact, he might not have been tripped up in his lifetime had it not been for a wartime connection with Hermann Göring, Hitler's No.2 man. Most art forgers are outed because they deceive one person too few; van Meegeren deceived one person too many. See The Forger's Spell: A True Story of Vermeer, Nazis, and the Greatest Art Hoax of the Twentieth Century, by Edward Dolnick (New York: HarperCollins, 2008).

Han van Meegeren was a Dutch painter of middling talent and modest renown who made a good living painting portraits of the wealthy but was scorned by the art establishment. So he decided to get even, and enrich himself in the process. In 1937, he duped a famous Dutch politician and an over-the-hill artist into authenticating a "newly discovered" painting by the great 17th-century Dutch artist Johannes Vermeer. The painting was Christ at Emmaus, and it was a fake.

Van Meegeren created the painting from scratch in his own kitchen. Artistically, it was crude and should have fooled no one, but as a forgery, it was a work of genius. Van Meegeren had found a way to simulate the appearance and the qualities of a centuries-old painting.

The key was Bakelite—an early plastic made of formaldehyde and phenol—which van Meegeren mixed into his paints. (It sounds like a recipe for an exotic speaker cable.) If you touched van Meegeren's "Vermeer" with a cotton swab dabbed in alcohol, the paint would not come off, as fresh paint normally would. Bakelite had hardened it.

Van Meegeren then cooked his "Vermeer" in an oversize oven to achieve craquelure, the network of fine cracks seen in the paint and varnish of old paintings. The surface of the painting looked real, down to the accumulated grime in the cracks, which van Meegeren had rubbed in. He used an old frame from the 17th century, along with an old canvas from which he'd painstakingly removed the paint.

Van Meegeren managed to fool Holland's most famous art critic, leading editors, curators of Holland's most famous museums, collectors, and the art crowd in general. If all the experts said the painting was a genuine Vermeer masterpiece, then it was. Never mind that the painting was only a crude imitation of Vermeer, filled with brick-a-brac from other references to actual Vermeer paintings. Never mind that the faces looked exactly like those in van Meegeren's previous paintings, which were not at all obscure. Nonetheless, the experts were hoodwinked.

But not Edward Fowles, of the Duveen Brothers Gallery, who said that the purported masterpiece looked like "a poor piece of painted up linoleum" (Dolnick, p.189). But should Fowles cry foul? The art crowd didn't want to know. Van Meegeren's genius, aside from the technical aspects, was to realize that the art world wanted the discovery of more Vermeers—so much demand, so little supply (only about three dozen genuine Vermeers now exist). What people want to believe, they will believe. Those who offer audiophiles expensive and outlandish tweaks know this full well.

After the success of Christ at Emmaus, van Meegeren went on to create a half dozen more Vermeers, each more slipshod than the last. He didn't lavish so much care on his subsequent forgeries because the experts were already primed to accept them.

During World War II, van Meegeren went on to hoax Hermann Göring, who was in competition with Hitler to see who could amass the world's greatest "private" art collection. Van Meegeren was tripped up after the war only because Dutch authorities, looking into looted artwork, discovered documents linking him to Göring.

Like Charlatan, The Forger's Spell is all about gullibility.

The Great CDeiver
If memory serves me right, more than 20 years ago, at the Las Vegas Consumer Electronics Show, Sharp introduced a product called the CDeiver. From Sharp minds come Sharp products. (Old slogans never die.) TEAC subsequently issued something similar, called the Music Core. The idea was to combine a CD player, tuner, line stage, and power amp in a single box. TEAC had speakers to go with theirs; I am not sure Sharp did.

I tried to get a CDeiver for review. "Stereophile? What's Stereophile?" a Sharp mind on the convention floor asked to know.

What the hell. Why pursue it? Back then, a lot of manufacturers didn't...
know who we were.

The CDeiver came and went. I never heard about it or saw it again. I think the problem was more the name than the product: CDeiver was too close to dever. I read some comments on the Internet that TEAC's version was quite good; Sharp's was probably okay, too.

The Chinese manufacturer Shanling is canny enough not to call its new product a CDeiver, but that's the idea behind the MC3000: The Music Center. Music Hall, aka Roy Hall, is importing it. For a modest $2500, the MC3000 is no joke. It's made in China, of course. It couldn't be made anywhere else and still look so smashing, sound so good, and cost so little. Why does so much hi-fi have to look so drab, so geekish, so aggressively . . . masculine?

Actually, I think the Abbey Road cable is special.

"Notice that the banana plugs engage very tightly in the sockets, on both the amplifier and the speakers," Roy added.

In fact, the Abbey Roads engage so tightly that Roy had already busted two of the connectors trying to remove the cables. They still made electrical contact, but now fit loosely. Our cat, Mak-sim, could dislodge them. He did.

Roy then proceeded to break the flimsy FM antenna that accompanies the Music Center. The thin wire just broke loose from the connector, which had a strange adapter for use somewhere else in the world, maybe Asia. No matter—any standard 75 ohm connector and antenna should fit just fine, without the adapter. I cannibalized an indoor antenna from a Music Hall RDR radio.

"CD player is a top-loader with three LEDs that create a ring of blue on the acrylic lid. The LEDs—and the blue ring—stay on as long as the MC3000 is powered on, regardless of the input selected. Also, the beautiful illuminated acrylic lid drops with a clatter if you release it halfway down. In the upright position, the lid holds firm. I quickly learned to hold on to the lid and glue it into place myself. The MC3000 defaults to CD when you place a CD in the Philips-made transport. You can see the CD spin around several times, initialize itself, then stop. Then you hit Play.

Remarkably, for all its features, the MC3000 measures 178"W by 614" H by 135" D (452mm by 156mm by 334mm) and weighs 25.1 lbs (11.4kg). This is one substantial box, with a beautiful brushed aluminum chassis that couldn't be made in the West for this price. The feel is fantastic, the look exquisite.1

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Remarkably, for all its features, the MC3000 manages to avoid clutter and not look like some geekish hodgepodge. The On/Off switch is cleverly placed on the left side of the chassis, toward the back. The ¼ headphone jack is on the right side of the chassis, up front. You wouldn't want to enclose the MC3000 too tightly in a cabinet or on a shelf.

The Music Center sits atop four isolating feet that terminate the product's four corner columns. The input selector is atop the left front column. The volume control is built into the top of the right front column. Accessible and unobtrusive. The Chinese are good at ergonomics. Feng shui? The design has the look of a Mid-century modern piece.

THE MC3000 IS MADE IN CHINA, OF COURSE.

IT Couldn'T Be MADE ANYWHERE ELSE AND STILL LOOK SO SMASHING, SOUND SO GOOD, AND COST SO LITTLE.

1 Art Dudley reviewed the similar-looking but featureless Shanling MC-30 in March 2008: see www.stereophile.com/integratedamps/308shan.html.—Ed.
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So, when we say “brace yourself”, we’re really not kidding... you’re in for the ride of your life.
elegance and balance.

Above all, the MC3000 does not look cheap. The chassis is solid aluminum, not polished stainless steel, which is a magnet for fingerprints. The MC3000 is a tube/solid-state hybrid design, but looks all-tube because of the three transformers that covers atop the rear of the platform. Oops—only the center housing covers a transformer. The other two ventilated housings enclose the heatsinks.

Four 6N3 tubes are arrayed in front, each ringed by two acrylic protectors. From left to right, two tubes amplify the line stage, and two more tubes provide output for the headphone amp. As far as Roy Hall knows, there are no transformers in the signal path of the headphone amp. The headphone signal goes through all four tubes.

The main power-amp section uses a single pair of Sanken bipolar output transistors to deliver a claimed 60Wpc into 8 ohms (no 4-ohm rating is specified). Herein, perhaps, lies some of the MC3000's magic: just a single pair of output transistors per channel. In my experience, almost all great solid-state integrated or power amps do this. The magic of the darTZeel NBH-108 power amp? The LFT Integrated Zero amp? Only two output devices per channel.

The digital section uses a single Burr-Brown PCM1794 DAC, with 24-bit resolution and up to 192kHz sample rate. This is not the most up-to-date chip, but I know its sound very well, and what it may lack in resolution it makes up for in musicality. This should be enough to squeeze most of the information from a standard 16-bit CD. SACD playback is not on offer. For Internet radio, the MC3000 cries out for a USB input and internal USB DAC—even though these likely would add several hundred dollars to the cost.

After a few dozen hours of break-in, the MC3000 required about an hour of playing to come on song, as the British like to say. Then the sound just filled out and fleshed out. I could hear the MC3000 begin to open up after half an hour; after another half-hour, the performance was at its peak.

Roy brought over his iPod. So did my kids. Marina docked her iPod, filled with Russian pop—Alla Pugachova, Maksim Galkin, Philip Kirkorov. Next thing you know, Marina's mother will possess an iPod. All were pleased with the Shanling's power delivery. The bass was extended and well controlled—not at all loose, as with some tube amplifiers. At louder listening levels, I ran out of power and the sound compressed—as expected from an amp rated at 60Wpc.

Above all, the MC3000 hit the harmonics just right, in the manner of a good all-tube amp. There was none of the hard, desiccated quality I associate with most solid-state. The music had warmth, body, bloom. I wasn't expecting sound like this from a CDeiver—er, Music Center. Which brings up the question of your budget allows, you might pair the MC3000 with a speaker that costs more than the Music Center. I'd look for one of high impedance (close to 8 ohms) and high sensitivity (90dB or better). But the MC3000 did just fine with the Harbeth Compact 7ES-3s in our living room, despite those speakers' sensitivity of 86dB—so long as I didn't
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ask the amplifier to play too loud. There's a bonus with the MC3000: a tubed headphone amp that isn't merely an afterthought. I tried the MC3000 with my AKG K701 and Audio-Technica ATH-AD700 headphones, and the sound was excellent with each. (The MC3000's power to the speakers mutes when you plug in a pair of phones.) And when you recall that some audiophiles pay $1000 or more for a headphone amp, the MC3000 becomes even more of a bargain. I loved the MC3000 with 'phones. It was so convenient, when Marina went to bed early, to switch over to headphone listening—and I sacrificed very little, if anything, in terms of musical enjoyment.

Headphone listening also allowed me to confirm that the Cary CDP I offered superior low-level resolution to that of the MC3000's onboard CD player. I couldn't care less. With its harmonic rightness and free-flowing musicality, the MC3000 excelled.

One more thing: The MC3000 ran relatively cool, which is always a good thing for component life. You do want to give those tubes adequate ventilation, however, and you need to leave room on the sides for using the On/Off switch and the headphone jack. Anyway, you wouldn't want to hide this component. Flabbergast your non-audiophile friends with the blue ring around the CD-player lid; fool your audiophile friends into thinking the MC3000 is an expensive all-tube job.

Tube/solid-state hybrids are funny: some sound more solid-state than tube, and some the opposite—as was the case here. If you want the slightly soft, warm, immediate sound of tubes but don't want to be bothered with expensive, possibly troublesome output tubes, the MC3000 may be for you—even if you weren't looking for a one-box solution.

For all the MC3000's features, its value is phenomenal at $2500. As an audiophile, you may prefer separates and their attendant upgrade flexibility. But the MC3000 should do splendidly in a second system, and it would make an excellent holiday gift for a parent or family member. You could even throw in that pair of speakers you're no longer using.

The MC3000 is fun to use, lovely to look at, and sounds exceptionally good—especially if tonality is your top priority, as it is mine. I know this will go to Roy Hall's head, but the MC3000 Music Center is very highly recommended.

And I'm no CDeiver DDeiver.
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Don't buy half-speed-mastered LPs. I didn't mean it! No! Did it upset the folks at Mobile Fidelity Sound Lab (and, probably, mastering engineer Stan Ricker)? You betcha!

In a letter saturated with questions (all good ones), reader William asked if half-speed mastering would cure the harsh, bright sound of many of his older records. "I might look into buying the Mobile Fidelity Sound Lab and Nautilus LPs I see on eBay for my favorites," he mused.

I should have led with "Don't buy LPs simply because they're half-speed mastered. While some do sound great, others don't." I did write that half-speed mastering "is no panacea and creates its own problems," which I went on to describe, along with the process's advantages. But by then it was too late—I'm sure some readers were left with the message of "Don't buy half-speed-mastered LPs" and nothing else. I hereby apologize to Mobile Fidelity, Stan Ricker, and anyone else cutting lacquers at half speed.

A Charity Case

As if he doesn't already have enough on his plate, The Soundsmith's Peter Ledermann, designer-manufacturer of phono cartridges, preamplifiers, loudspeakers, and audio test gear, and mentor to countless young audio enthusiasts, recently took delivery of a pair of Neumann cutting lathes. He's already using them to make direct-to-disc recordings in a studio he's built at his manufacturing facility in Peekskill, New York. Ledermann has long been associated with advocacy groups dedicated to helping poor, enslaved, and abused children, of which there are millions throughout the world. Part of the proceeds from his new DirectGrace Records Project (www.directgrace.org), sponsored by the John Herrick Jackson Memorial Foundation, will go to qualified beneficiaries such as the African Network for the Prevention and Protection Against Child Abuse and Neglect (www.anppcan.org). The limited-edition, 180gm LPs will be issued in signed sleeves and will sell for $100 to $150 each. Key to the project's success will be the quality of the recordings and, of course, the music.

Choose the SuperCap2 and you'll also need a Naim SNAXO Burnidy, a multi-pin power cable that connects the Superline to the SuperCap2 ($750). You'll also need a Naim DIN-to-RCA interconnect ($100-$1100) to connect either supply's DIN analog output to your preamplifier's RCA input. You read that correctly: The Naim system routes the phono preamp's analog output back to the power supply. (Naim America offers the SuperCap2 with an extra-cost RCA-jack output modification that lets you use your choice of interconnects. My review sample was so modified, and I used the $1100 interconnect.)

In short, the Superline-SuperCap2 combo costs $11,800. The Superline-HiCap2 is a far more wallet-friendly $5450 (plus $1100 for the DIN-to-RCA interconnect). On the other hand, if you're already a Naim adherent, your total basic investment will be $3300 for Naim's latest phono preamp. As the credit-card ad says, being a member has its advantages.

Like all Naim products, the Superline comes in a substantial chassis of black aluminum designed to minimize eddy currents. Its brass, spring-loaded isolation suspension weighs almost 10 lbs; on it is mounted the circuit board, which is sensitive to microvibrations. The circuit offers a fixed gain of 64dB at 1kHz, with greater than 80dB claimed channel separation as well as an all-new passive, single-pole RIAA equalizer claimed to be accurate to 0.1dB.

The circuit includes a nondefeatable, 10Hz high-pass filter. Such a filter has advantages even if you own a top-shelf turntable with minimal rumble: LPs are almost always pressed imperfectly, and any unintended vertical modulations caused by microwarps will be read by the cartridge as subsonic information that will be amplified as spurious bass content. Though inaudible, these low-frequency modulations needlessly soak up amplifier power; it makes sense to eliminate them as early as possible in the amplification chain.

The Superline's rear panel has both 50 ohm BNC and WBT Nextgen...
RCA jacks, which also float on the suspended subchassis. The default internal loading is 10k ohms resistive and 100 picofarads capacitive, with both resistive and capacitive sockets on the rear panel that allow the insertion of one of four resistive (100, 220, 500, or 1k ohms) and three capacitive (1, 5.6, or 10 nanofarads) loading plugs for a total of 20 possible combinations of resistance and capacitance. Given the ultralow inductance of moving-coil cartridges, capacitive loading is a relatively insignificant issue; it's not clear why Naim has given it so much attention. The Superline's overload margin allows it to accept MC cartridges with outputs rated from 100µV to 500µV (0.5mV).

Given the choice of the HiCap2 or Naim's best power supply, which would you start with? Right! I was advised to prepare for a long break-in period with the SuperCap2, and it was a roller coaster. For the first month or so the sound swung wildly from ultradynamic, dimensional, and deep, to flat, monochromatic, and cold. Eventually, however, good triumphed over evil, and with the exception of one annoying anomaly, I listened happily ever after—or at least until I'd finished writing the review.

That anomaly: Intermittently, during every record I played, the Superfine-SuperCap2 produced a loud snapping that sounded like discharges of static electricity and delivered sufficient energy to trip the protection circuitry of the Luxman M800A power amplifier (reviewed elsewhere in this issue). Naim Audio North America's Chris Koster said he'd heard of only a few other cases of this happening, and suggested I ground my turntable. That helped greatly; the loud, violent snap became a mild pop or click. I lived unhappily with that for a few weeks until, for some reason, it finally stopped. Had to mention it, but if the Superline is on your radar screen, I wouldn't be too concerned.

Grip and More Grip: The Superline plus SuperCap2 produced spectacular, ultrawide dynamics, timbral neutrality, exceptional spatial dimensionality, and, most notably, rhythmic clarity and extended low frequencies. Its bottom-octave grip was almost authoritarian: the Superline-SuperCap2 produced the full measure of the pleasing Naim party line.

The blackest backgrounds, the widest possible dynamic swings, unforced clarity and transparency, and rock-solid imaging—all await buyers of the Super-
ANALOG CORNER

Like every other of the handful of the finest phono preamps I've heard, the Naim combo had that rare ability to seem to stop time—it revealed a greater number of individually discernible musical events within a given time span, each of which then dissolved effortlessly to make room for the next.

For instance, on a superb vinyl edition of Neil Young and Crazy Horse's Live at Fillmore East (LP, Reprise/Classic 44429-1), each of Ralph Molina's cymbal strokes became a unique event with a clearly delineated attack, texture, tonality, and decay, all set against a jet-black backdrop. Only a handful of phono preamps can manage this, and even fewer do it without adding at least a hint of etch or spotlighting, but the Superline was one of them. So is the far less expensive AQVOX Audio Devices Phono 2Ci ($1400), but it doesn't come close to the Superline's dynamic performance at both ends of the scale, nor can it begin to compete with the Naim's subterranean bass extension or, especially, its starting and stopping power. (I reviewed the Phono 2Ci in the July 2008 issue; see www.stereophile.com/phonopreamps/708aqvox.)

Bob Reina was over to give a listen to the Koetsu Urushi Vermillion cartridge installed in my Continuum Audio Labs Cobra tonearm. We listened to the New Music Consort perform a percussion extravaganza by John Cage, Third Construction for 4 Percussionists, on an original pressing of Pulse (LP, New World 319): the Superline-SuperCap2 produced a massive, unrestrained display of sonic fireworks that combined an expansive suggestion of the recording venue—RCA's once great, now dismantled studio in midtown Manhattan—with clean, solid, palpable, ideally crisp, three-dimensional images of the individual percussion instruments. The hard transients were naturally sharp, the softer, skin-based ones suitably well textured.

Overall, I don't think I've heard that LP sound better. Still, the Naim combo's sound was completely different from the warmer, lusher sound of the Nagra VPS that I reviewed in September 2008, whose emphasis was more on drum textures than on transient attack. Which was "correct"? Answering that question with specificity is above my pay grade—it's like asking a politician when life begins. Easier to answer would be "Overall, how good is the Naim Superline-SuperCap2?" It's among a handful of the best phono preamps I've ever heard, and—along with the Boulder 2008, the Connoisseur Definitions 4.0, and maybe one or two others—one of the quietest.

Overall, while the Superline-SuperCap2 won't make you swoon and fall in love with it, as the Nagra VPS might (while deftly seducing you into ignoring its clear but well-tailored colorations), in most systems the Naim pairing will just back off and transparently pass along to you everything your cartridge gives it, at a higher voltage. You won't

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Einstein Audio's less expensive The Turntable's Choice ($5400) incorporates many of the Naim's best qualities: speed, transient clarity, dynamic and rhythmic authority, and transparency, but the Naim's harmonic resolve was more fully fleshed out, its bottom-octave performance more muscular, and it delivered the leading edges of transients more cleanly and with greater subtlety, without sounding soft or too forgiving. The Naim combo also costs more than twice as much as the Einstein (which I reviewed in this column in July 2006).

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get the feathery delicacy the Nagra imparts to the signal, which makes clinical-sounding recordings of massed strings sound pleasingly cushy and well-recorded female voices preternaturally present—but you can't have everything. Besides, there are many benefits on the other side, such as the taut rhythmic presentation for which Naim gear is justly noted. Plus, the Naim combination did what it did so well, without even a hint of etchiness or unnatural edge definition.

What the Superline-SuperCap2 added to the signal was minimal to nonexistent, and as for what it subtracted...I can't say I heard anything. The Superline-SuperCap2 combo remained in my system for a selfishly long time. While switching out the SuperCap2 for the less expensive HiCap2 power supply, I admitted to myself that, were I not in the reviewing business, I could just buy the Superline and SuperCap2 and forget about phono preamps, at least for a few years.

Once broken in, the Superline-SuperHiCap2 had the slam and clarity of the Einstein Audio Turntable's Choice—but more of it—and the suppleness, though not the subtle “tubeyness,” of the tubed Manley Steelhead. The Superline-HiCap2 was a really good phono preamp, even an exceptional one in terms of communicating music's meaning. But its transparency, immediacy, and especially its macrodynamic prowess, suffered to a surprising degree in comparison to the Superline-SuperCap2. If the latter combo exceeds your budget, you could always live with the HiCap2 until you can afford a SuperCap2.

Overall, then, unless your system is exceptionally lean, steely, and bass-shy, and your cartridge is itself lean, steely, and analytical, Naim's Superline-SuperCap2 combo is sure to impress you. The Lyra Titan i, a cartridge best known for being analytical and keenly detailed, partnered effectively with the Superline; the more polite Koetsu Millennium also produced an ideal match. I know an editor, originally from Athens, Greece. Georgiadis's father founded Elnet in 1957 to build precision transformers for military, medical, and industrial applications. The son became an audiophile, poor guy, but at least he was able to use in his designs the knowledge of transformers he'd gained in working with his father. TruLife Audio, founded in 1995, remains a small department within Elnet, which still supplies industrial and military transformers.

The dual mono tubed power supply, contained in a separate chassis measuring about 9" W by 7" H by 14" D, has two EZ80 (6V4) tube rectifiers as well as a custom power transformer and a pair of large chokes. All wiring is point-to-point. The PSU connects via a multipin umbilical to the even larger, 55-lb moving-magnet phono preamplifier (at 13" W by 7" H by 16" D). Inside are pairs of 12AX7 and 12AU7 tubes, two very large chokes, and one pair each of passive RIAA and output modules. The circuit topology is class-A, with zero feedback. The construction is meticulous, with point-to-point wiring and high-quality parts used throughout. The Reikon's gain is claimed to be 44dB, its input impedance 47k ohms, its output impedance 1.1k ohm, and its RIAA equalization 22Hz-40kHz, ±1dB. The claimed bandwidth is 12Hz-50kHz, the distortion 0.02% at 1kHz.

Completing the package is a large step-up transformer for use with cartridges that output less than 1mV. The transformer, featuring a core of an amorphous alloy of 80% nickel wound with enameled wire of single-crystal, 99.9999% pure copper, provides 21dB of gain with an input impedance of 330 ohms and a claimed bandwidth of 10Hz-100kHz. The rear panel has three pairs (input, loading, output) of high-quality RCA jacks and a beefy...
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Furutech grounding post. TruLife provided a pair of 80 ohm RCA plugs.

The Reikon remained in my system for several months. Switching back and forth between it and the Naim Superline-SuperCap2 made for interesting contrasts, that's for sure!

While all-tube, the Reikon was very quiet, and hardly "tube-like" in the clichéd sense of the phrase. In fact, its high-frequency extension seemed unlimited, rendered with all the air and clarity of the finest solid-state phono preamps while providing transients rivaling those of the Naim combo, but with senses of continuousness, effortlessness, and projection to the heavens that few, if any, other phono preamps have been able to manage—all with speed and purity to match.

While both the TruLife Reikon and the Nagra VPS feature transformers and similar tube complements, they sounded very different, no doubt due in part to the TruLife using tube rather than solid-state rectification. The Nagra sounded warm, comfy, and self-effacing by comparison.

Enthusiasts often point to tubes' continuous flow of electrons as the "on/off" quality of solid-state rectification as a reason for tubes' ability to impart a pronounced sense of flow to the reproduction of music. I can't vouch for that, but I can vouch for the TruLife Reikon's ability to induce in me an eerie, floating sensation produced in part by the effortless "flow" of the recordings it reproduced. Cymbals, bells, xylophones, shakers, gourds, and the like were reproduced with markedly less "recording residue" than I'm accustomed to hearing from most phono preamps, particularly in terms of the usual overly literal attack structure tacked on by most solid-state phono preamps. Not only did the Reikon completely avoid this, it did so without any apparent tube softening.

I write this while listening to a very familiar recording, The Modern Jazz Quartet. The cymbals' effortless presence, and the pronounced air surrounding them, constitute a listening experience that, in all the years I've been playing the original LP (Atlantic 1265) and Mobile Fidelity Sound Lab's excellent reissue (MFSL 1-205), I find unique and exceptional. Milt Jackson's vibraharp was equally well finessed, tonally and structurally. The stage on which the quartet is presented, and the size and physicality of the instruments, are larger, more vivid, and more effortlessly believable than I've previously heard them sound.

Top to bottom, the TruLife Reikon reproduced musical textures with uncanny grace and precision, never sounding soft, but never adding edges. Its presentation of the midrange was billowy and unforced, and more expansive than through the Naim or any solid-state phono preamp I've heard—but instruments never lacked the requisite focus, body, or texture.

Played with a Koetsu Coralstone Platinum cartridge, monophonic recordings of Julie London's Julie Is Her Name (an upcoming two-disc 45rpm reissue from BoxStar, mastered by Kevin Gray and Steve Hoffman) and Louis Armstrong's Satchmo Plays King Oliver (Audio Fidelity AFLP 390, original gold label) positively fibrillated with energy, three-dimensionality, and an enormous expanse of air—as well they should have, given that the combined price of cartridge ($15,550) and phono preamp ($43,500) totaled almost $60,000. With a total front-end cost of $200,000, including Continuum turntable, the performers should have been brought back from the dead to appear live in concert in my room. Believe me, what I heard was pretty damn close to that.

The Reikon was a stunningly effortless and natural-sounding performer in every way. I pulled out an original RCA Living Stereo LP of Fritz Reiner and the Chicago Symphony's recording of Strauss's Also sprach Zarathustra (LSC-1806), and the Reikon did it more justice than I've ever heard, reproducing the deep organ with a believable harmonic structure and excellent extension, and delivering lush, feathery strings, tonally complex brass, and timpani with the right balance of malarky and skin. Stage size and, especially, coherence—particularly the timing and proportions of the hall reflections—on that experimental, minimally miked recording, were revelatory.

I then played a two-disc 10" edition of Radiohead's Kid A (don't ask how my internal shuffle mode is programmed). Everything was in its right place, but bigger and richer, with greater spatial coherence, suppleness, and delineation of depth than I was used to hearing from this recording. The Reikon took a recording's suggested mood and insisted on it.

Nothing's perfect. While the Reikon's bass extension was very good, sometimes more compactness, slam, and authority were called for than the TruLife could deliver. It couldn't close the deal on punch and slam, particularly with recordings of hard rock, but that's about the only criticism I have. Otherwise—and especially if you listen mostly or exclusively to classical and/or jazz, and you're unbelievably wealthy, and you've taken the rest of your system as far as you think it can go—you should at least give a listen to this smooth yet detailed, effortless yet compelling, flowing phono preamplifier.

Next time, for the rest of us, three accomplished yet affordable (really!) phono preamps: the Bel Canto phono3, the Vacuum State JLTi, and the Lehmann Audio Black Cube Decade.
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"Then something almost unbelievable happened ..."

... the sound took a significant leap forward. At first I thought I was imagining things, so much more immediate, present, dynamic, and musically thrilling were these sides.

An e-mail exchange with Joe Harley confirmed my suspicion: "I wish we could go back and remaster the first four records" Harley said, "but since then, I went through AcousTech's mastering system and made a major upgrade in cabling." "Uh, with AudioQuest cables?," I asked. "Precisely," said Joe.

Just when you're convinced that it couldn't get any better, it does. Horace Parlan's classic "Us Three" sprang to life with a vividness, weight, and clarity that left the already fabulous-sounding first batch choking on vinyl dust. Veils were lifted, dynamics unleashed, and a connection to the original session was established to a staggering degree.

Wayne Garcia (The Absolute Sound, Issue 180) on the improvement AudioQuest wiring made to the AcousTech Mastering chain. Music Matters' Definitive Blue Note LPs are mastered by AcousTech. (www.musicmattersjazz.com)
When God made me

God loves them all equally well.

By the way, there are no such things as “brain cells of indifference.” If you meet someone who is indifferent to, say, the sound of the banjo, it simply means he wasn’t blessed with the cell for loving it. Too bad!

As an audiophile, your own unique set of loves and hates is, quite literally, a gift from God. If you meet someone who accuses you of hating “high fidelity” just because your list is different from his, you should pity him. If he persists in haranguing you, then you should shun him: That person is clearly an apostate of hell (or perhaps just an overly puritanical audio reviewer—but there’s no sense taking chances).

Crazy things

Men and women set out to accomplish all sorts of crazy things, but we seldom achieve every one of the results we had in mind. So it goes with people who build performance spaces: No matter what an architect has in mind—or an acoustician, or a contractor—rooms and halls and theaters that are designed for music virtually never sound exactly as expected. Music in a given space will always sound like music in that space. Which is perfectly fine with me.

There’s a big old barn nearby that people use for chamber-music performances every July and August, even though the place was designed for something else (storing and drying hay, I would imagine). Music in that space always has a certain distinctive sound: When I listen there, I’m compelled to listen in a certain way, simply because my attention is drawn more to some aspects of the sound and less to others. Which is also fine with me.

The same can be said of literally every place I’ve ever listened—or performed, for that matter. They all sound different from one another, and they all serve to make every performance unique in my memory—aids, in that respect, by a unique combination of sights and smells and emotions, with which that memory will forever be associated: another gift from God. There’s nothing wrong with trying, time and time again, to duplicate a very good musical experience—say, for instance, the Kinks at the Fillmore East in 1971, heard from the front row of the loge—as long as you’re prepared to get something else instead.

Good experiences with live music are just as common as you allow them to be. Some day you’ll hear a sound you thought you didn’t like—whether a Mendelssohn trio or a Sousa march or even a mob of banjo pickers—and the experience of listening to it in that space will bring out some quality you missed before. You might love it!

Here’s how people make amplifiers: Unlike God, they begin with a bias that compels them to do things a certain way—like the bias that compels people to go left or right or straight at every intersection between one place and another—and then they go about soldering parts together, favoring the ones that seem to work well and rejecting the ones that don’t. Some commercial builders are likelier to choose parts based on their cost—cheap ones for the cheap customers, rich ones for the rich buyers—but that’s another matter altogether.

There are literally hundreds of different performance aspects to worry about when creating an audio-frequency amplifier, and different builders emphasize them in very different proportions to one another. So, too, might an individual builder create different amplifiers to satisfy the tastes of different listeners. That approach isn’t necessarily wrong,
Listening

Questions but no answers

Questions but no answers

Amplifiers amplify music, and so do rooms. So do musical instruments, and so do mouths. There's no such thing as unamplified music, except when you're imagining it.

Acousticians—or, more precisely, consulting engineers in the field of architectural acoustics—earn their pay by using science to predict the performance of such large-scale acoustic amplifiers as concert halls and opera houses. Inasmuch as a genuinely, thoroughly, titantically disastrous auditorium is something of a rarity these days, one could fairly conclude that acousticians do at least a decent job overall: We would almost certainly be worse off without them and their craft. Fairness also compels me to say that consulting engineers in the field of architectural acoustics seldom, if ever, claim that their measurements and their predictive modeling can tell you everything. Questions but no answers...
New Aerial designed woofers produced by Scan Speak with exclusive 3-layer cones consisting of a rigid German Rohacell core with woven carbon fiber and glass fiber surfaces. Long linear drive. All-new crossover networks. High power true-ribbon tweeter. Two piece, double wall cabinets. Premium finishes in high gloss paint as well as beautiful mirror imaged veneers.


Aerial Acoustics
100 Research Drive
Wilmington, MA 01887 USA
978-988-1600
aerialacoustics.com
1986 comes to mind, as does the 1988 attempt to reverse some lingering missteps with the addition of freestanding acoustic panels. I can't help but imagine that a number of talented, well-trained acousticians were involved at every stage of those changes; because their efforts were, insofar as one could tell, more or less free of hubris, none has yet been recommended for waterboarding.

But why on earth would anyone claim that science can predict or explain every nuance of the sound of an audio amplifier? And why on earth would anyone with the brains God gave a muile believe such a thing?

The measurements that Neal Newman and I made of the Verdi correlated with many aspects of its sound: It was a warm, rich-sounding, identifiably tube amplifier, with a pleasant but not egregiously soft top end. It allowed Paul McCartney's beautifully melodic electric bass lines to sound colorful and fat, but not slow. Tony Rice's Martin guitar was every inch the Brazilian rosewood bluegrass warrior through the Verdi, and the orchestral bass drum in Elgar's Dream of Gerontius seemed to shake the foundations of the room in which it was recorded. The chorus of knights at the end of Wagner's Parsifal sounded like men, the double-basses behind them suitably portentous. Harps sounded enormous. Best of all was the way Sonny Rollins's tenor saxophone sounded through the Verdi: deeply textured, vividly colored, just plain rich. I listened to a lot of Sonny while that amp was in my system.

Our measurements predicted all of that. But what could have foretold the fact that the Verdi allowed musical lines to flow better than most other amps I've tried in my life? What might have prepared me for the very real sense of momentum in the music I heard through that amp? Could I have seen that in its squarewave response? I guess, maybe. To paraphrase the late Shelby Foote, that might have been the sort of thing I would have expected, but only after I'd learned to expect it.

I'm not mocking the idea of measuring an amplifier, or those people who would seek to do it. The answers I want may have been there all along, but I missed them only because I lack that most sophisticated of all human cognitive skills: the ability to see connections where none appear to exist.

Nor do I pretend that our set of measurements was anything other than very rudimentary. We didn't measure risetime, or high-frequency intermodulation, or any of a number of other pertinent things, either because we couldn't or we didn't know how. Those things might have told us more, might have given us an even fuller idea of what the Verdi sounded like.

But I don't think for one second that any measurement, made by itself or in combination with some others, could have told us everything that a really engaged listener would hear within the first 15 minutes of playing a recording of music.

Measuring domestic playback gear is fun, like tying your own flies: The fish you catch with them won't fight more valiantly or make for a better meal, but for the dedicated enthusiast who wants the full experience, nothing else will do. Count me among them: God gave me that cell, too.

Survival strategies
A fearful outlook once again led me to wonder: If I have to move house in a hurry, what will become of my 3000 or so LPs and 78s? In an emergency, how will I know which ones to grab, or else the Brahms was a record whose performance. I couldn't recall writing those six words, so I decided to stop what I was doing and listen to the record through the Verdi amp, with the Audio Note AN-E loudspeakers at one end of the system and my vintage Thorens-EMT-Ortofon record player at the other. (Because I didn't remember the record, I had to assume that the last time I'd played it was at least a few amplifiers ago.) Either I was deaf and dead wrong when I last put a needle to that groove, or else the Brahms was a record whose very good qualities had eluded my previous system. In any event, the performance was wonderful, if a little sloppy here and there (Rubinstein seemed to cut the corners on some of the snagglier bits), and the sound was actually quite good: very colorful, and very big.

I'll tread carefully here, if only because some readers appear to regard the ability to re-examine one's point of view as evidence of demonic infestation: I was a little dazed at how close I'd come to ignoring, let alone discarding, such a fine record. But more than being discouraged by my occasional foolishness, I was delighted by my more commonplace good fortune—and reminded that real high fidelity means fidelity to the music, and that the system that brings out the music's drama, color, scale, and sheer meaning will always be the one worth buying, no matter what qualities are offered by the competition. God gave me the sense to know that.
A Symphony for the Senses

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Welcome to the wonderful world of firmware and software updates. With almost every audio device now microprocessor-controlled, and the tasks to be performed increasingly complex, it’s not surprising that “finished” products leave the factory only to be stymied by reasonable but unpredicted user practices. It’s not that we’re all becoming beta testers, but we are contributing to the intelligent evolution of product capabilities.

I first came across this with Denon’s AVR-4806 A/V receiver and DV-3910 universal player. Way back then, in 2005, the procedure was still clumsy, requiring the burning of CD-Rs from Web downloads or, as in the case of the otherwise spiffy Bel Canto Pre6, chassis surgery and a bit of machine code! Many machines remain un-updated because users can’t access the firmware, and some require users to sign a document absolving the manufacturer of responsibility if the update turns the device into a costly brick. While Integra requires such a signature, many, including me, have updated the DTC-9.8 preamplifier-processor (which I reviewed in January) without problems. Even better, some new products can be connected directly to the Internet and update themselves, just like the major software applications on your computer. I think that’s great.

The Anthem Statement D2 A/V processor that I wrote about in September can still be updated only via its RS-232 serial port, rather than USB or Ethernet, but the process is painless via a PC’s serial port or a USB-to-serial adapter. I have incrementally updated my D2’s firmware from v1.29 to v1.33, and Anthem Room Correction (ARC) from v1.1 to v1.25. Every update has gone smoothly and without error, and each has either improved the effectiveness of ARC and/or cured nitpicky little issues. So when I see Web forum postings bemoaning this process, and screaming that all these updates indicate manufacturer incompetence in releasing unfinished products, I say that I’d rather have the current version than still be stuck with a perfectly functional v1.0 whatever when others are buying the v2.2 Improved.

Over the past two months, I’ve been enjoying the Statement D2 in my system and playing with Anthem’s almost constant stream of updates. Although my D2 worked fine out of the box, Anthem seems almost obsessive in their responsiveness to user comments. There’s no need for all users to constantly update their systems if they experience no problems, but some of us are almost addicted: “Hey, I never noticed that bug, but boy, am I happy it’s fixed!”

Currently, with no issues in need of attention, my D2 with ARC works and sounds just dandy. I can access two stored sound configurations, for music and for movies, with the push of a button or two. The first includes a tiny correction of my room’s gain (a midbass bump), and the response is corrected up to 20kHz. The second configuration includes a larger correction and, as recommended by ARC, is corrected up to 5kHz. Each is very satisfying in its particular application, but is it as good as I can get? How does it stand up to Audyssey, especially with the latter’s standalone Sound Equalizer and Pro software?

How to get two into one?

Comparisons were not that simple. I could run the balanced output of the Anthem Statement D2 directly to my Bryston 9B-SST power amplifier, and route the D2’s unbalanced outputs via the Audyssey Sound Equalizer (SEQ) to the Bryston’s RCA jacks. Unfortunately, these two routes would result in a huge (15dB) difference in gain: the balanced output benefits from an inherent advantage of 6dB, and the unbalanced route is subjected to a 9dB loss in passing through the SEQ. Moreover, the D2 would be using different output stages, and the unbalanced route would entail additional A/D/A conversions (though I did find these innocuous when I reviewed the SEQ in the March 2007 issue). I suppose I could have used six Y-connectors on the D2’s RCA outputs to feed both directly to one input on the Zektor MAST7 source switcher and, via the SEQ, to another input. But I didn’t have a bunch of Y-connectors.

My solution was to run the D2’s RCA outputs via the SEQ and from there to the Bryston amp, using the SEQ’s Bypass button to engage or disengage it. Not so simple, though. For ARC mode, I had to bump up the D2’s gain to compensate for the loss through the SEQ. In Audyssey mode, I had to turn off the added gain and ARC, as well as adjust the D2’s individual channel gain and crossover settings to accommodate Audyssey’s recommendations.

Having run ARC with eight microphone positions, I tried to repeat those exact eight positions with the Audys-
sey. Amazingly, the speaker distances measured by the ARC and the Audyssey differed by only inches. After completing the Audyssey process, I stored all the requisite settings in the SEQ and D2, and had the D2 store the SEQ results as the Installer Default, the ARC results as the User Default. Thus, to go from Audyssey to ARC, all I had to do was restore the User Default and hit the SEQ’s Bypass button.

**Crunch time**

I was disappointed by the A/B face-off: both sounded very good, both sounded much better than with no EQ and, surprise, they sounded pretty much the same. Back and forth I went, becoming increasingly frustrated that I couldn’t choose a winner. Was the Audyssey ever so slightly tauter in the bottom end? Was the ARC better integrated in the upper bass? Did the Audyssey have a smoother, sweeter treble, or was the ARC more open and transparent? These and many other impressions passed through my mind as I grasped at fleeting minutiae.

Because I was unable to pick a winner by ear, I figured it was time to call in the measurement corps. There is no shortage of tools for this, Room EQ Wizard (www.hometheatershack.com/roomeq) being the most common recommendation, but, lazy as I am, I opted for a newer, handier tool: the XTZ Room Analyzer. For all tests, the pink-noise or swept signals were sent to the analog L/R inputs of the D2, which I used for bass management to reroute the bass to the subwoofer. (Results with the subwoofer input were reasonably similar but, I think, less representative of real-world performance.) First, I used the pink-noise–based real-time analyzer module to confirm that both Audyssey and ARC were providing similar gain levels, and relatively flat and remarkably similar spectral responses from 16Hz to 20kHz.

Switching over to XTZ’s room-mode analysis module, I measured at the first three mike positions used for both the ARC and Audyssey. The XTZ figures show frequency on the vertical axis, time on the horizontal, and indicate sound intensity with color, the scale for which is at the right. With both EQs bypassed, the display in fig.1 shows lots of energy lasting long beyond 50 milliseconds (vertical cursor mark) below 80Hz. Note the intensity of the energy at about 60ms from 125 down to 55Hz, and especially the foci of energy at 41 and 23Hz, both of which extend out to almost 200ms. The 41Hz mode is probably related to the room width, and the 23Hz mode corresponds to an oblique room dimension. Not surprisingly, this correlated with a thick, undefined low bass, and while organ-pedal notes had imposing weight, their tonality suffered.

A single button-push put ARC on-line, and immediately I could hear the improved definition in the organ pedals; if anything, that increased definition focused the energy such that they had, subjectively, even greater weight. What did XTZ say about that? Well, fig.2 shows that, with ARC, all the really high-energy nodes dropped below the 50ms line from its upper-frequency limit of 250Hz down to about 32Hz. A very-low-energy plume is seen at about 70Hz and a stronger one at 29Hz, but the 41Hz node has been greatly reduced in amplitude, and the original 23Hz node is completely quashed. All to the good. In addition to the improvement in transient definition at the extreme bottom, the crossover from the subwoofer to the L/R speakers, set for 40Hz, became inaudible, even though the sub is at the rear of the listening room—something I ascribe to the general reduction in extended energy in the crossover region. Overall, I think the measurements confirm what I heard from the ARC.

Switching to the Audyssey SEQ made little audible change, but XTZ revealed something new. In each of the previous analyses, XTZ had provided a list of the identified modes and some suggested equalization. With Audyssey, what I thought was an error message popped up: “No modes detected!” Indeed, fig.3 shows that almost all energy extending past 50ms lies at very low levels, and the only deviation from silence in that range was that same, very-low-level plume at 70Hz seen with the ARC.

So the Audyssey measured better. Of course, having seen these charts, I then tried to hear what they show, but I can’t say that the Audyssey actually sounded better at the bottom end with music. I could hear a difference with recordings of artillery, but I’m grateful that I have no real-world reference for such sounds that would permit me to say that one rendition was more accurate than the other.

So the residual difference between the Audyssey SEQ and Anthem’s ARC was not at the bottom end but in the

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1 At the moment, neither Anthem’s ARC nor Audyssey’s SEQ permits the user to add his or her own filters to the determined equalization, so I couldn’t attack that 70Hz plume. However, Audyssey announced that in September, at the 2008 CEDIA Expo, they planned to release v3.0 of the Pro software, which will include such capability in addition to other new features. Given Audyssey’s demonstrated ability to rapidly enhance their software, I wouldn’t be surprised to see a similar feature appear in ARC.
Compact Performance: Excite X16.

There is now a high-end loudspeaker that does not require only the highest grade amplifier in order to sound convincing. The new Excite loudspeaker models combine high-end audio performance and pure musicality. This is because the Excite models make the most of any amplifier's or receiver's power, quickly and precisely following the music signal, efficiently converting every watt into nothing but exceptional sound quality. Dynaudio took advantage of its vast knowledge of loudspeaker design to develop a unique and unrivalled driver technology. The Dynaudio Excite models allow the musical capabilities of every audio system and any source will be fully experienced - with any style of music.
MX-R mono amplifier

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."
midrange and treble, where the impressions accumulated through extended listening suggested a tiny but consistent difference. For music, I preferred the silky smoothness and harmonic integration of the Audyssey correction; for movies and video, the honest immediacy of the ARC. But I grasp at straws here. Each confirmed the postulate of the other: In addition to competent acoustical design and treatment, room equalization should be a part of every audio/visual system.

**PARC Place**

With all that rah-rah about digital room EQ, it's too easy to forget that not every music listener has a digital processor, whether or not he or she listens in two or more channels. After all, you can get immense satisfaction from analog sources, or from a superb digital player such as the Esoteric DV-60 or Bel Canto PL-1A feeding an outstanding analog preamp such as the Bel Canto Pre6 or the Audio Research M1! Even so, the room and its modes are still present, and analog solutions aren't so easily found. Sure, you can get an Audyssey Sound Equalizer, but if your system is all analog, you suspect you won't be happy about the necessary A/D/A conversions, even if I tell you that they're a tiny price to pay for the benefits.

Rives Audio's PARC series of analog parametric equalizers to the rescue. In July 2003 I reviewed Rives' Parametric Adaptive Room Compensation (PARC), which provided analog parametric EQ below 350Hz for a two-channel system (www.stereophile.com/accessoryreviews/883). Subsequently, Rives offered the add-on PARC+ to extend PARC to six channels. Now they've released the sub-PARC, which adds a 1200W power amplifier to a single-channel, three-band parametric EQ, crossover making it eminently suitable for use with a passive subwoofer ($5000; see www.rivesaudio.com/PARC/PARCframe-sub.html). In short, the sub-PARC is a crossover and power amp. I didn't use the crossover function—my Anthem Statement D2 does that—and because I have only powered subwoofers, Richard Rives Bird sent along one of the new Talon ROC passive subs (www.talonaudio.com/products/performanceframe.html; Rives also owns Talon Audio).

The sub-PARC looks just like the original line-level PARC from the front, but on its rear panel are RCA and XLR input jacks for the left, right, and LFE channels, RCA and XLR output jacks for left, right, and subwoofer, and a pair of speaker terminals. Both the subwoofer jacks and the speaker terminals benefit from the parametric EQ settings, and all outputs can be subjected to the crossover and level controls. Also on the rear are a 12V trigger, RS-232, and power connections, along with an On/Off switch. Connections are pretty intuitive.

For programming the EQ filters, Rives includes a CD with test tones and a chart for the user to fill in with the measurements, using a calibrated mike or a RadioShack sound-level meter. The user then plots the system's in-room response and calculates the appropriate filters to compensate for the measured response peaks. This worked just fine, but I found it as tedious as I had while reviewing the original PARC in 2003. Rives acknowledges this, offering on their website other tools, including their own Bass and Room Evaluator (BARE), but in this day and age—and for $5000—I would have hoped that such a tool would be included. You must have the basic minimum SPL meter anyway; if you also download the Room EQ Wizard freeware mentioned earlier, you'll have a great toolkit. I took an easier way out: the handy, dandy XTZ Room Analyzer.

In fig.1 mentioned earlier, you can see an XTZ display similar to what I measured with the sub-PARC and the Talon ROC sub replacing my Paradigm Reference Servo-15 subwoofer. XTZ recommended two filters: at 23Hz with a Q of 2.8 and a magnitude of -10.25dB, and at 41Hz with a Q of 5.7 and a magnitude of -8.75dB. I programmed these into the sub-PARC and ran the measurements again. Sure enough, the frequency response was now smoother in the 16-80Hz range, and there was a significant reduction in extended energy—but, surprisingly, XTZ now recommended a third filter, and because I have only powered subwoofers, Richard Rives Bird sent along one of the new Talon ROC passive subs (www.talonaudio.com/products/performanceframe.html; Rives also owns Talon Audio).

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The sound was clean and tight and powerful, as I am coming to expect from a system in which the major room modes have been greatly mitigated. As for the integration of the Talon subwoofer's output with that of the main speakers, that, too, was excellent. But the ROC enjoyed an advantageous position up front, between the center and right main speakers, where, in general definition, it was pretty much the equal of the Servo-15 placed at the back of the room. For a while, I ran both subs. Even better.

However, the big advantage of the sub-PARC is that the signal never leaves the analog domain. All you guys holding the fort for analog systems no longer have an excuse. I can see the sub-PARC as a complement to any no-compromise two- or multichannel system that includes a subwoofer.

**Easy as XTZ**

By now you should have some idea of the uses of the XTZ Room Analyzer. The package consists of a USB-connected microphone, a heavy mike base with a USB-powered signal generator,
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- New Albion Records
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- Quiet Please
- Reader's Digest
- Reference Recordings
- Renaissance Entertainment
- Resonance
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- Sidecho
- Signature Sounds
- Silva Screen Records
- Sin-drome Records
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- Storyville Records
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- Wes Phillips, Stereophile

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- Chris Connaker, Computer Audiophile

"Downloads are "good enough" for most folks, but they're not good enough for you. Enter HDtracks."

- Steve Guttenberg, CNET
cables, software, and brief, illustrated manuals in English and Swedish. Plug the mike into the base, connect the base to a USB port on your laptop and, via the 25' interconnect and splitter (provided), to inputs on your preamp or processor, or directly to your powered sub. The XTZ program opens in its Basic room analysis mode, but because the Advanced mode has similar default values and greater capabilities, I see no reason why anyone wouldn't use the latter. Either mode has two graphic windows, the larger defaulting to frequency response, the smaller showing the spectral decay, but they are swappable. XTZ had no US distributor as of August 2008, but their products are available directly via their website, www.xtz.se. The Room Analyzer costs $320, including shipping to the US.

Across the top of the display is a drop-down toolbar that permits you to print the display, control the display of the toolbar and status bar, switch between the Basic and Advanced modes, and access a Help button (which was empty). On the right, under the smaller graphic window, are tables for the identified room modes and EQ profiles. On the extreme right are controls for performing the measurements, setting the test-signal levels, display (Measured, Modes+EQ, and/or Result), smoothing parameters for the display (2-6 points/octave), setting the post-stimulus time for the frequency display, and buttons to Store, Recall, Save, Export, Overlay, and Clear the displays.

On the bottom is the status bar showing the Time (ms), Frequency (Hz), and Magnitude (dB) represented by the position of your cursor as you poke around the graphs. Finally, two buttons switch XTZ from its time/frequency mode to a 32-band RTA mode (16Hz-20kHz). In the latter, you can monitor any signals coming from the system or measure the system’s response to pink noise generated by the XTZ. Markers for minimum/maximum readings are provided, along with numerical readings for each band to supplement the dancing bar graphs. For the RTA mode, XTZ recommends pointing the calibrated mike directly at the source; the mike becomes directional over 1kHz.

To run the room analysis, you prepare by reorienting the goose-necked mike to point directly up before clicking Measure. XTZ then asks if you want to use one measuring position or three. I used one mike position for quick checking when adjusting reveals the individuality of the Orlando Consort’s voices and places them in a large ambience. Threshold of Night comprises settings for voices, with or without strings, of poems by Dickinson, Poe, Raine, Neruda, and Fletcher. In each piece, O’Regan has captured and underscored the meaning of the words. Although composed over a span of several years, the individual settings combine well to produce an eminently satisfying experience. The Poe poems, The Ecstasies Above, are particularly ripe and moving, and “Threnody” is effectively dramatic. The performances by this large group share with the Orlando Consort a detailed clarity, but with a smoother, more integrated sound in a less engulfing acoustic. The strings are beautifully captured.

BIBER: Rosenkranz Sonatas
Riccardo Minasi, violin; Bizzarrie Armoniche
Arts Music 47735-8 (2 SACDs)
This glorious, ecstatic music is brilliantly performed and beautifully recorded. I have always been a fan of Biber’s rich, spicy, chromatic flavorings, but this is the most colorful realization I have yet heard of these works, aka the Mystery Sonatas. Violinist Riccardo Minasi, recorded fairly close-up, exudes power and brilliance, recalling Jascha Heifetz’s treatment of the Vitali Chaconne, but without overpowering the acoustic or the accompaniment. The latter, by Bizzarrie Armoniche, is varied and far more colorful than in Andrew Manze’s excellent but more conservative recording (CD, Harmonia Mundi HM 907321.22). A winner in every way.

ORLANDO CONSORT: Scattered Rhymes
Music of Gavin Bryars, Guillaume Dufay, Guillaume de Machaut, Tarik O’Regan
The Orlando Consort; Paul Hillier, dir.
Harmonia Mundi HMU 807469 (SACD)

TARK O’REGAN: Threshold of Night
Craig Hella Johnson, Company of Voices, Conspire
Harmonia Mundi HMU 807490 (SACD)

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No beautiful and approachable new music in this new century? Placed in the historic context of Machaut and Dufay, the choral music of Gavin Bryars and, especially, Tarik O’Regan clearly proves otherwise. The polyphonic structures are modernized and endowed with a new clarity and new tonalities, but the choral sounds remain vapourously encompassing. The transparency of the recording reveals the individuality of the Orlando Consort’s voices and places them in a large ambience. Threshold of Night comprises settings for voices, with or without strings, of poems by Dickinson, Poe, Raine, Neruda, and Fletcher. In each piece, O’Regan has captured and underscored the meaning of the words. Although composed over a span of several years, the individual settings combine well to produce an eminently satisfying experience. The Poe poems, The Ecstasies Above, are particularly ripe and moving, and “Threnody” is effectively dramatic. The performances by this large group share with the Orlando Consort a detailed clarity, but with a smoother, more integrated sound in a less engulfing acoustic. The strings are beautifully captured.

SCHMIDT: Das Buch mit Sieben Siegeln
Soloists; Kristjan Järvi, Wiener Singverein, Lower Austria Tonkünstler Orchestra
Chandos CHSA 5061 (2) (2 SACDs)
This magnum opus of Franz Schmidt (1874–1939) is a monumental setting of the Book of Revelation, with all the attendant apocalyptic implications and calls for huge performing forces. Composed in the mid-1930s, its style combines those of early Richard Strauss and late Gustav Mahler, and cries out for high-resolution multichannel sound to convey it all. Kristjan Järvi paces and controls everything dramatically—the explosive setting of the opening of the Sixth Seal is nearly overwhelming. Much of this music is declarative and, ultimately, perorating, but the sounds are simply gorgeous. Chandos’s sound is big, with a wide dynamic range, and greater presence than is usual from the label.

And a big heads up: By the time this issue appears, Universal will have released their first series of Deutsche Grammophon and Decca/London Blu-ray titles (estimated street date: October 28). I managed to get my hands and ears on a check disc of Massenet’s Manon (DG), with Anna Netrebko and Rolando Villazón. The sound is outstandingly good, with a solid mid-hall perspective and excellent balance between singers and orchestra.

—Kalman Rubinson
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speaker positions, for example, but for better room information, XTZ advises using three. You are then prompted to move the mike to each position, left/center/right, before the XTZ emits three or four low-frequency sweeps at (in my experience) a correct, automatically adjusted level. (There is a level control.) After a few seconds of calculation, XTZ provides both the frequency response (at 0ms) and the spectral decay, as well as, in the upper table, a list of the detected modes and the suggested EQ.

I always swapped the spectral display into the big window for several reasons. First, the data richness benefits from the enlargement. Second, I can grab the vertical line in the big window (set by default at 50ms) with the mouse and move it to overlay the frequency response at any post-stimulus time on the 0ms response. Third, I can overlay the response of the recommended filters (as well as any I want to insert) and add the predicted corrected response in the frequency-response window. Neat stuff.

This is all very easy to do. Even better, it's extremely useful. The modes identified by XTZ correlated very well with the peaks shown in the frequency-response graphs provided by Audyssey's SEQ and Anthem's ARC, and, as explained above, the recommended filters did a dandy job when programmed into the sub-PARC. I haven't yet tried this, but there's every reason to think that those filters would be equally effective with other hardware, including the Velodyne SMS-1 (see www.stereophile.com/musicintheround/1105mitr), which, for all its sophistication, doesn't measure or display any time/decay information. But why stop there? If you have a parametric equalizer, the XTZ can be the tool you need to program it more usefully than with only frequency- and magnitude information. Sure, there's nothing here that you can't do (and more) with Room EQ Wizard, ETF/R+D, TEF, and a slew of other great tools. On the other hand, XTZ's Room Analyzer is so easy and intuitive to set up and use that it should appeal to anyone intimidated by those other programs, as well as to the just plain lazy, such as I. Remember what I said about XTZ's Help button? No help is provided, but then again, none is needed.

Erratum
Reader Matthew Freilich writes that, in the July 2008 "Music in the Round," I erroneously stated that "While most Blu-ray machines can also play CDs and standard-definition DVDs, none include SACD among the 'legacy' formats supported." He adds that "Sony's PlayStation 3 plays SACDs, and while it may not be the best choice (or even a good choice?) for an SACD player, it is still one of the most popular Blu-ray players on the market." He is, of course, correct. My only excuse for the error is my general ignorance of and lack of attention to video gaming.

Next Time in the Round
There are speakers, players, and another subwoofer equalizer on the horizon, but the CEDIA Expo, upcoming in early September, will likely determine the priorities for the next column, scheduled to be published in the January 2009 issue.
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With Sanus Systems, you'll always get smart design, high quality and patented technology. Our new, innovative products are easy to install and easy to use, giving you more time to enjoy cherished moments with friends and family. Learn more at www.SANUS.com.
Frank Zappa was well known for a lot of things—his sharp satiric wit, his virtuoso guitar improvisations, his excellence as a bandleader, his fearlessness in combating hostile political forces and crooked record-industry executives. But Zappa is all too rarely given credit for his status as one of the most creative musical imaginations of the 20th century, regardless of genre.

Zappa's real legacy is as a composer. He takes on a new life after death, when the details of his personality are sublimated by the resonating impact of what he has left behind. He was the most prolific composer of the rock era, although his initial background and creative instincts are rooted in the 20th-century "classical" iconoclasts. Edgard Varèse was his childhood hero, and Zappa often invoked Varèse's slogan, "The present day composer refuses to die."

Other elements that contributed to his worldview included the Dadaist movement in art and literature, the theater of the absurd, science fiction, Alexander Calder's moving sculptures, big-band jazz orchestration, 1950s vocal-group R&B, and the raunchy gutbucket blues of Johnny "Guitar" Watson.

A NEW EXPLOSION OF RECORDINGS FROM THE ORIGINAL MOTHER OF INVENTION

BY JOHN SWENSON
Zappa composed at a furious pace throughout his life, famously never leaving his hotel room during tours as he constantly worked on new scores—some written for hybrid jazz-rock bands, others for string ensembles and symphony orchestras. He left hundreds of unperformed compositions behind after his death. He wrote screenplays and operas, Broadway show treatments, and unusual scenarios for live rock-concert performances.

Zappa took his compositional approach into the studio with him, constantly revising elements of already existing works. He developed an approach to composition that he called xenocity (strange organization), in which he would take existing performances, such as a favorite guitar solo from a particular concert, and write new music to accompany it in a completely different context. He was fascinated with the one-man-orchestra possibilities offered by the Synclavier, and wrote over 300 pieces for the instrument but only a handful of them have ever been released. And throughout his career he experimented with sampling and tape manipulation, work that has influenced several generations of producers right up through the present era.

The restlessness of Zappa's compositional imagination extended to his own previously recorded work. In the final years of his life Zappa went back and tinkered with everything he had released up until that point, erasing performances he didn't like and replacing them with new tracks, remixing and remastering in alchemistic attempts to make these recordings match the ideal he envisioned. He made a deal with the CD-only company Rykodisc to reissue his remastered catalog on CD.

In addition to the Rykodisc reissue Zappa started a mail-order business in 1985 to release albums directly to his fan base. In the years before his death Zappa personally oversaw the preparation of numerous titles which would be released posthumously by Rykodisc (London Symphony Orchestra, Läther, Lost Episodes, Have I Offended Someone?, Mystery Disc) or his mail order business (Civilization Phaze III, Frank Zappa Plays the Music of Frank Zappa, Everything Is Healing Nicely).

When he died on December 4, 1993, just 17 days short of his 53rd birthday, he left behind a treasure trove of finished, partially finished, and unrealized projects and compositions in his Los Angeles home studio, the Utility Muffin Research Kitchen (UMRK).

The reworked reissues, all under the Zappa imprint, were bought outright and continue to be distributed by the independent Rykodisc label [see www.stereophile.com/musicrockings/73—Ed.]. But literally thousands of hours of Zappa material remained untouched and numerous projects were in various states of readiness when he died. Zappa's lone-wolf method of making all the production decisions himself left his library in disarray after his death.

Any posthumous release of material from the UMRK must pass the standard set by the Zappa Family Trust to maintain one of Frank's main directives: conceptual continuity. Zappa drew from an immense weltspring of inspiration and source material, all of which made some kind of sense to him in the context of everything else he'd ever done. In some ways, the releases from the UMRK vault continue Zappa's own methods—many of his solo releases were live recordings and/or pastiches of recordings made at different times with different bands. A number of the posthumous releases had actually been produced all or in part by Zappa, but were then lost in the chaotic aftermath of his death.

Zappa did leave one final piece of direction regarding his catalog for his wife, Gail, before he died. "He told me to sell everything and get out of this awful business," Gail Zappa says, with a burst of wistful laughter.

But Gail has since had other ideas, and has guarded her husband's musical legacy with determination and ingenuity, nurturing it with help from their oldest son, Dweezil, and Dweezil's close friend and bandmate Joe Travers, the "vaultmeister" in charge of archiving Zappa's recorded legacy. Gail Zappa has continued the mail-order business begun by Frank. Meanwhile, Dweezil decided to put together the ultimate Frank Zappa tribute band, Zappa Plays Zappa, in which Travers plays drums. By taking on some of his father's stiffest musical challenges, Dweezil has built the band into a successful touring group, drawing rave reviews at Bonnaroo and other festivals, and introducing a new generation of fans to his father's eccentric vision. The DVD Zappa Plays Zappa is proof of Dweezil's outstanding achievement, a venture he felt compelled to undertake to offset what he thought were misrepresentations of his father's music by various cover bands.

"Frank's music is much more like classical compositions than standard rock fare," Dweezil explains. "The cover bands that attempt to do it don't do it well because they're changing things in the music to avoid the difficult parts. Most guitar players have a pattern-oriented mentality, and there's nothing about Frank's music that is pattern-oriented. It's really hard to learn, especially if you're learning things on guitar that were never meant to be played on guitar, like 'Inca Roads' and 'St. Alfonzo's Pancake Breakfast,' things that were written to be played on marimba and keyboards, instruments that are laid out very differently than guitar. It required a complete physical transformation in terms of what I was capable of. I had to change my picking tech-
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Until the Grand Utopia EM, this “ancient” technology was seen as being too complex to employ in home audio speakers; too complex, that is, until Focal figured out how to do it!

The external electromagnetic power supply uses a signal recognition system and offers 6 electrical adjustment levels for a delivered power to the 15 3/4” woofer of 5 watts to 90 watts, permitting virtually unlimited control of the speaker/listening room coupling. As a result, the bass is as close to perfect as can be achieved in any environment; big room, small room, live room, dead room, or a completely acoustically neutral setting!

In addition to solving bass/room coupling issues, Focal extended the frequency response and efficiency of their now famous Beryllium tweeter ensuring seamless blending between drivers and extraordinary focus.

To ensure further that the Grand Utopia EM would be equally at home in rooms of any size and acoustic properties, Focal has incorporated a simply employed system of adjustments for infrabass, bass, midrange and treble, which permits the user to achieve the refined personalization of sound required by the specific listening environment.

Though its 1,458 possible adjustments may seem daunting, in fact, the Focal Grand Utopia EM can be optimized for room acoustics in a few minutes by following the computer generated table of settings supplied with the speakers which describe which adjustments to use in a given acoustical setting.

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nique. It's sort of like training for the Olympics.”

During the live shows, Dweezil gets to “play” with Frank again as Zappa performs appears on a screen behind the band. “One of the personal benefits for me is that it’s a continuation of a relationship with Frank,” says Dweezil. “I get to spend time with him on a daily basis. For me, it’s great, and for the fans, they get a chance to hear him—especially when we use video and he’ll be singing and playing guitar and we’ll be there backing him up. It’s a bit surreal, but it’s cool.”

Frank Zappa’s musical legacy has turned into a thriving family business. The well-designed website Zappa.com has numerous releases for sale, ranging from Zappa’s archival documentaries of his own recording sessions, demo tapes, and previously unreleased oddities, to a slew of live performances, some on DVD, by Zappa’s original groups as well as Zappa Plays Zappa. The catalog has reached the point where it has taken on a life of its own, and Gail now has big plans for the operation to start regularly releasing recordings.

“I own the vault material outright,” Gail points out. “Basically, what I decided to do was put together two labels, Vaultemative and Zappa, so that I could start releasing stuff. It was not possible for me to do that through Ryko because I’ve spent 14 years now working with Joe Travers, our vaultmeister, and when we started way back when, we had no idea what was in the vault, and now we have more clues, although we’re still not completely sure. We can’t find all the things that we’re looking for, but we find things that we’re not looking for, so it kind of works out. My idea would be to get at least eight releases out a year, and at least one or two of those would be DVDs.”

Gail explains that even though Frank spent a lot of time organizing his archives before he passed away, he didn’t leave specific instructions about posthumous releases. “If you went by what Frank said,” she says, “well, what he said one day was the complete opposite of what he said another day. Not to be confusing or arbitrary, but he would have a very fixed idea about something for a period of time, and then it would change. When it changed, he was not one of those people that held onto things. He was constantly reworking everything all the time.

“I don’t want people to think that he doesn’t have the right to have his final word be his music. I don’t care what other people say about him, but when it gets too extreme, you can always go back to his music. And then you know exactly who he is. And that’s the important part of his legacy for me. So that’s still my job.”

Joe Travers carefully catalogs the recordings, listens to their content, and submits suitable material to Gail for potential release. “I started documenting the tapes and listening to them and putting it all in a database, just getting myself familiar with the contents of the vault,” he explains. “After doing it for close to 15 years, I’m probably only halfway through what’s there. But I have found a lot, and I’m accumulating a lot of information as I go. A lot of the stuff that’s coming out is due to the preparation work I’ve done all those years before. There was a period when there was only a certain kind of tape format that I could play in the vault, because a lot of the machines couldn’t play back the tapes that weren’t refurbished. So it wasn’t like I had access to everything when I began—I was limited to the tapes I could play.”

It took Gail years to find the resources to fully fund the venture, but her tenacity has paid off. “We have tapes that don’t last,” she says. “You might get to play them once, if you’re lucky. Who knew that the Utility Muffin Research Kitchen would turn out to be a place where you actually had to bake things?” We’re archiving; we have to protect things. There are certain things we’re looking for that are priorities, but when you hit something that you think is paydirt, you have to deal with that. We have to maintain ancient technology. It’s like dealing with an old space fleet or something. It has to work, and the parts to make it work are disappearing, so the access to the information will be gone as well if we don’t get it transferred.”

The process bears some resemblance to the Grateful Dead’s archive of live recordings, released by Grateful Dead Records in that label’s Dick’s Picks and From the Vault series and sold to fans via mail order and digital down-loads. “The method is similar,” agrees Travers. “They’re picking from their vault, and that’s what I’m doing. The Grateful Dead have more complete shows in their vault.”

The key difference is that the Dead soundboards were made for immediate review of the band’s performances and were not intended for commercial release, which is why the group allowed its fans to tape the shows as well, whereas Zappa viewed everything he did as intellectual property. Zappa not only supervised the recordings but edited and produced them, as if he were considering them for release but never got around to it. “If Frank didn’t like the show,” Travers explains, “he would re-record over the tape.” Nevertheless, Travers has unearthed many Zappa-produced items, and believes there are a lot more he hasn’t yet discovered.

So it is that Frank Zappa has managed to produce a series of releases from beyond the grave, including:

- One Shot Deal (Zappa ZR 20007), a collection of recordings from 1972–1981. “I hope you’re recording this,” Zappa laughs during “Space Boogers,” a guitar-solo-as-electronic-music track. The release also includes the superb 1 Old, deteriorating, magnetic recording tape can be made temporarily playable by baking it in an oven at low heat.—Ed.
Zappa guitar solo “Occam’s Razor,” and an early version of the “Yellow Snow” suite with a different arrangement and much more narrative detail.

- *Wazoo* (Vaulternative VR 2007-2), a concert recording of the last performance by the ensemble that toured in support of Zappa’s big-band albums *Waka/Jawaka* and *The Grand Wazoo* (see Sidebar). A fascinating companion piece to *Wazoo*, *Joe’s Doniage* (Vaulternative VR 20042), is taken from a cassette recording of the early rehearsals of the Wazoo project.

- *The Dub Room Special* (Zappa ZR 20006), a DVD assembled by Zappa from two concerts—a 1974 special for KCET-TV in Los Angeles, and a show at New York’s Palladium on Halloween 1981—with hiliarious material from the editing sessions during its production.

- *Buffalo* (Vaulternative VR 2007-1), a two-CD set from 1980, showcases the breadth of Zappa’s musical landscape and the technical power of the bands he assembled to realize it. The lengthy orchestration of “Easy Meat” moves from a Beethoven-inspired written score to an improvisational section that climaxes in an outstanding guitar solo. Zappa’s satiric side is represented by “Tinseltown Rebellion,” a sendup of the L.A. punk scene, and a lengthy extrapolation of “Dancing Fool,” complete with Sabbath references, that scans like a Will Ferrell screenplay.

- *Trance-Fusion* (Zappa ZR 20002), an instrumental collection of virtuoso guitar solos that works as a companion piece to the *Shut Up ‘n Play Yer Guitar* and *Guitar* releases, and includes an incredible “Chunga’s Revenge.”

- *Imaginary Diseases* (Zappa ZR 20051). These live performances by the Petit Wazoo band, a smaller version of the Grand Wazoo Orchestra, offer a terrific combination of symphonic and rock elements, such as the “Rollo” fanfare, which integrates familiar Zappa melodic themes in an elaborate orchestral arrangement. The audience-participation segment of “D.C. Boogie” is simultaneously humorously priceless and a white-hot improvisation.

- *The Torture Never Stops* (Honker Home Video HHD 1221), a DVD of the film of the 1981 Halloween concert at the Palladium. The title track is a gothic description of a torture chamber that’s still relevant in today’s political landscape, and offers a great example of the amazing guitar interplay between Zappa and Steve Vai.

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After Travers and Gail select and approve material from the vault, it’s sent to an engineer for the final mastering. “Most of the engineering deals with mastering,” says Travers. “Depending on the type of release, we send the projects to different people. Mastering engineers we’ve worked with include people like Bernie Grundman, Doug Sax, and Bob Ludwig. Any of the stuff that Frank had completed, we’ll
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just send that to guys like Doug and Bob and Bernie because they can do their thing—and it'll be a finished product almost by the time they get it. But with some of the stuff in the vault, there has to be a lot of restoration work involved; the tapes aren't in condition, or, if we put a compilation together from a variety of sound-quality sources, it's necessary to use EQ so it will have a flow, sonically as well as [in terms of] content. John Polito's really good at that."

In the case of Buffalo, they gave mixing engineer Frank Filipetti the choice of several shows to work from. "Frank admired Frank's work, so we admire his work," says Travers. "Buffalo, that was one of the shows from an underrepresented tour. We were able to gather all the sources of the tapes of that show and compile a nearly complete performance. We weren't able to do that with all the shows. We submitted a bunch of choices of shows to Frank Filipetti, and he chose that one.

"The fall '80 lineup on Buffalo was the last tour that Vinnie Colaiuta played on. It was Steve Vai's first band, and it had Ray White and Ike Willis on vocals together, which is special on its own. Frank was really daring when it came to guitar soloing during that time. The only albums that showcased that lineup were Tinseltown Rebellion and a lot of the guitar solos on Shut Up 'n Play Yer Guitar, so I thought that was an underdocumented lineup."

The most important release so far from the UMRK has been MOFO (Zappa ZR 20004), a four-disc documentary of the making of Zappa's first album, Freak Out! "The four-disc set is the mother lode," says Travers: "a lot of material dealing with the making of Freak Out! I found a lot of things in the vault that applied to that album and that time period. So it was only appropriate that we put together that package for the 40th-anniversary release of what I feel is one of the most important records in rock history."

Disc 1 of the set (and of the abbreviated two-disc version, Zappa ZR 20005) is the original studio recording, which is significant: Zappa himself altered the material when he digitally remastered it. Those who want to hear Zappa's digital remixes can still get them on the single-disc Freak Out, of course.

"It's the first time the original mix has been available on CD," Travers explains. "Frank constantly redid things, and in some cases he removed tracks and re-recorded them. Our thinking was that there are a lot of people out there who grew up listening to these records and would like to hear them as they originally sounded. We take the original masters and redo them with clean transfers so we can still keep the intent of Frank's choices."

"OUR THINKING WAS THAT THERE ARE A LOT OF PEOPLE WHO GREW UP LISTENING TO THESE RECORDS AND WOULD LIKE TO HEAR THEM AS THEY ORIGINALLY SOUNDED," TRAVERS EXPLAINED.

FRANK ZAPPA: Wazoo, continued

tone poem with incidental narration composed in the knee-jerk Straussian literalism that Zappa favored, and first released in 1978 on Studio Tan in a far superior studio recording. Yes, it's wonderful to hear the score—what there is of it here—laid bare at last, without Zappa's surprisingly toothless and labored attempts at satiric allegory. But Zappa has discarded the music's most successful sections, including one in which, to paraphrase the narration, a group of hippies dances in wild abandon around a towering pile of transistor radios, each tuned to a different station—a fair description of the music itself, and not at all a criticism. Admittedly, this was probably impossible to play live, sans overdubbing, and here FZ has replaced it and other sections with long group improvisations. We hear FZ instructing the various sections of his ensemble to solo in turn in groups, in a fair approximation of successive concerto sections of a baroque concerto grosso. While it's amazing how well these aleatoric passages hold together, I consistently got the feeling that their coherence too often came at the price of an entire row of horns instantly falling into line behind the very first player who seems to have even a rudimentary musical idea. And for some reason, the scored furore of "Movement III" melds into long, tutti, apparently extemore quotations from Stravinsky's Rite of Spring. Okay, interesting, but... why? (a question Zappa seldom condescended to answer with any seriousness). The brief "Approximate," in which time values are predetermined but pitches are not, is a bit braver in execution.

Part of all of these problems is the quality of the recording, which, if I read Gail Zappa's liner note aright, was mixed live to two-track. This means that there was no opportunity to fix anything in the mix, one of the three stages, along with editing and arranging, at which Zappa always most strenuously exercised his considerable discipline and creativity. There was and remains a lot to fix: The balances are not good, there's little bottom, the marimba and vibes are hardly audible, and some instruments, especially Joann McNab's bassoon, are so badly miked that they're barely recognizable. Anyone seriously interested in music should be willing to forgive a great live performance its occasional clams and flawed engineering, but Wazoo sounds like a stage full of musicians laboring in public through works they'd already recorded in far superior studio versions. Listen to Wazoo, then to the same works on Waka/Jawaka, The Grand Wazoo, Sleep Dirt, etc. The Wazoo recordings sound like rehearsals; the latter sound like music—performances not only polished and confident, but moving in their way, complete with depths both sonic and artistic, and ranges both of emotion and of dynamics. The packaging here is sumptuous though, and the liner notes by both Zappas, as well as the reminiscence by trumpeter Malcolm McNab, are fascinating reading.

As good a time as I probably would have had seeing and hearing this rarest edition of Frank Zappa's many bands, on the evidence of this release, any delight would have been more about the idea of such music than about the music itself.

—Richard Lehnert

Gail was a witness to the Fellini-esque scenario Frank created for the making of *Freak Out!*, when he invited a collection of street people and freaks into the studio to create a kind of ambience. The set also includes numerous alternate takes and incidental material. "With *Freak Out*, it's interesting to look at all the tracks and the takes and things that didn't quite make it, and look at it from the standpoint of what was going on in the studio, and here's all this other stuff," she says. "What was also fascinating about *MOFO* is that Frank was making tapes at the same time in the studio, so even though Tom Wilson is the producer—he has that credit, and rightly so—he opted for Frank to come in and make those recordings and have his own recording running simultaneously, and that's what we have from *Freak Out!* That's what we're listening to in *MOFO*—a lot of it is Frank's personal tapes that he was making."

One of the projects scheduled for release from UMRK in the near future is a similar treatment of *Lumpy Gravy* and *We're Only In It for the Money*. "I don't want to mess with what I consider sacrosanct, which is the way the composer put it together," says Gail. "I don't want to say, 'Oh, here's another piece that could have been in there but wasn't,' because it's not like that—they have to stand on their own for all time, and you can't really throw in another 15 minutes. It does have some different edits, different versions of things. I'm trying to see if Ryko will work with me to put a special package together that will include most of the dialog, because there's a really funny story running through it. Probably that would be a separate disc."

Other Zappa-produced projects that are ready for release include an all-Synclavier album, *Dance Me This*, and Zappa's interpretations of works by Edgard Varèse, *The Rage and the Fury*. Recently, Gail has made the *Beat the Boots!* series available at the iTunes Store, Amazonmp3, and other websites via TuneCore.com, the digital music mastering service. Zappa himself reissued the original *Beat the Boots!* series in 1991-92 as two vinyl boxed sets. His idea was to combat the extensive bootlegging of live shows from his career, and though some of these shows are of historical importance, the recording quality is generally poor; they're recommended only for the most serious collectors.

The UMRK has also released recordings from Zappa's files that are of lesser sound quality but that appeal to fans for their historical value or sheer oddity. These include Joe's *Corsage* (Vaultalternative VR 20041), which gathers a lot of pre-*Freak Out!* material including demos of "Motherly Love," "Plastic People," "Any Way the Wind Blows," and "I Ain't Got No Heart," as well as some live tracks like covers of "My Babe (Righteous Brothers)" and "Hitch Hike," (Marvin Gaye); the Wazoo rehearsals, Joe's *Domage*, and the "holiday" release Joe's *XMASage*.

"Our *Corsage* series, they're just random—just examples of stuff that Frank had, intact," says Gail. "We don't do anything to them, we didn't try to construct them in any way. There was this one rehearsal tape that Frank carried around with him on the road, and it was a rehearsal of members of the Wazoo band. That's Joe's *Domage*."

To some, Zappa's work is a giant puzzle of which some pieces have been lost, the ongoing efforts of his archivists are helping to bring the overall image into view. Others view it—as, I suspect, Zappa did himself—as a labyrinth whose shifting corridors entice listeners down promising paths, only to return them to a point they've already passed, where more enticing corridors now await them. It's like a universal, eternal Mobius strip—the ultimate composition.
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Recently, Jeff Ostler of HiFi Live replaced the leading competitor's flagship model with the YG Acoustics Anat Reference II Professional. Following are measurements of both speakers, performed at YG Acoustics' state-of-the-art lab:

Below is an important measurement not typically found in audio magazines: the phase response of the mid-woofers and tweeter(s). The closer the phase-match throughout the range where the drivers overlap, the better the preservation of spatial cues. Both YG Acoustics and the competitor exhibit excellent phase: YG Acoustics offers +/-5 degrees; the competitor offers +/-20 degrees, and counters with a wider frequency-range within that tolerance. YG Acoustics scores a win here; nonetheless, both speakers were clearly well-optimized for phase.

YL Acoustics phase. 700-10kHz. 20 deg div. +/-5 deg from 1.5-4 kHz. Fully covers overlap.

Here is what Jeff Ostler of HiFi Live said after choosing YG Acoustics:

"I never thought this was achievable during this lifetime. There is no other way to describe it other than to say the sound is simply live, exactly live. I've heard the best there is, but this is the first time the music has been live - you are there."

In a review (April 2007), Doug Schneider of SoundStage magazine concurs:

"This speaker shows tonal neutrality and soundstaging prowess that are uncanny. Its way of cutting through a recording and laying out the soundstage with painstaking precision is the best I've heard from any speaker."

CONCLUSION

Are we saying that the leading competitor's flagship is a bad speaker? No - it is a good product. We are saying something more decisive - that ours is the best on Earth.

With a correct system and setup, the YG Acoustics Anat Reference II Professional is indistinguishable from live sound. Period.

Below is the on-axis frequency response of both speakers. YG Acoustics' response was described by several industry-experts as the flattest ever – no compromise was necessary to achieve its perfect phase. The competitor's frequency response is good, but obviously compromised. In this regard, there is no comparison; YG Acoustics delivers far more authentic timbre, for truly authentic reproduction.

YG Acoustics on-axis. 200-20kHz. 5 dB div.

Below is the off-axis measurement (30 degrees). YG Acoustics has excellent off-axis response up to 18 kHz. Its in-room tonal balance thus closely correlates to its unsurpassed lab measurements. The competitor was forced to use a wide overlap between drivers to optimize phase*, which compromises dispersion.

YG Acoustics' phase. 700-10 kHz. 20 deg div. +/-5 deg from 1.5-4 kHz. Fully covers overlap.

*This may be why the competitor chose to somewhat ease the tolerance of its phase, in favor of phase-matching drivers across a wider frequency range, which covers their overlap.
EQUIPMENT REPORT

WES PHILLIPS

Solid-state, line-level preamplifier with remote control.

Ayre KX-R LINE PREAMPLIFIER

I can't think of a product that was as eagerly anticipated as was Ayre's KX-R preamplifier ($18,500). Following in the footsteps of Ayre's MX-R monoblock amplifier, a Stereophile 2007 Product of the Year, and milled, like the MX-R, from a 75-lb billet of aluminum, the KX-R also shares with its monoblock stablemate the Ayre ethos of zero feedback and fully balanced operation.

But what really caused the buzz was the declaration by Ayre founder and chief designer Charles Hansen that the KX-R, with its use of a technology he calls Variable Gain Transconductance (VGT) to control the volume, would set new standards for signal/noise ratio.

"The reason nobody ever talks about this issue," said Hansen, when he previewed the preamplifier to his dealers (and me) just before the CEDIA Expo in September 2007, "is that it's like the air—it's omnipresent, so nobody even thinks about its existence. Almost every preamplifier on the market uses an attenuator [ahead of the output stage] to reduce the gain. There are two problems with this: 1) once you get beyond 10k or 20k ohms [series resistance], you begin to affect frequency response along with the volume; and 2) the active circuitry outputs a constant noise voltage—increase the volume level and you increase the signal/noise ratio. The maximum SNR is therefore at full output, which nobody listens at. With VGT, the SNR is constant, regardless of volume setting."

The KX-R is a seriously gorgeous piece of audio eye candy, so I implored Hansen to let me review it for Stereophile.

"No problem," he told me, "but we've learned from experience. First we need to finalize the design, then we'll satisfy pre-orders and stock our dealers. After that, we'll let the press listen."

Those eight months were long.

Hang time

"Before I talk about the KX-R," Charles Hansen said to me, "I have to explain that it was designed with what I can only describe as an extreme degree of madness. That's to say that, in addition to working the kinks out of VGT, we examined everything, even stuff like the panel display.

"Pretty much 99.99% of all front-panel displays are 'multiplexed,' which means that not all of the dots are on all the time—they flash, much like the pixels on an old CRT monitor—and turning those dots on and off rapidly creates electrical noise that can radiate into the rest of the circuitry, degrading the sound. We found a special display that is not multiplexed—the segments are always on, and no electrical noise is generated. The catch, of course, is price: We take about a tenfold price hit for that."

On to VGT. The active device in the KX-R is a FET (a transconductance device), meaning that the input voltage controls the output current. The current needs to be
I sat there transfixed... the soundstage was literally wall-to-wall...

--- Jim Hannon, The Absolute Sound, October 2007

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changed back to an output voltage later in the circuit, which in a conventional design is typically accomplished with a fixed resistor. This is called a "transimpedance" device because impedance is the opposite of conductance.

"In the KX-R, the idea is very simple," Hansen said. "We simply use a variable resistance instead of a fixed resistance. Changing the value of the resistance changes the gain of the circuit. With a variable-gain circuit there is no input attenuator, as is normally found in a preamplifier. This brings about several advantages: The input impedance is not restricted by the value of the volume control (input attenuator). I mentioned that with conventional attenuators, the frequency response can vary with volume. In contrast, the KX-R has an input impedance of 1M ohm per phase, and the frequency response goes out past 250kHz regardless of volume setting. Another benefit is that the signal path is simplified, and there are fewer switches in the way.

"With VGT, the signal/noise ratio is constant regardless of the volume setting. A typical listening level might be 20dB below full gain, which translates into an effective increase in S/N ratio of 20dB. This is on top of an already quiet circuit, and improves the resolution of low-level detail audibly."

If VGT were simple, Hansen observed, everybody would be doing it "I'm not saying we invented this. PS Audio's VCA technology sounds like they might be doing something along these lines, and I suspect CEC might be doing something in the same ballpark. I don't know, because nobody's talking about the real intricacies of their designs—and neither am I."

Key to VGT was Ayre's development of what they call EquiLock circuitry for the MX-R monoblock. "In a conventional circuit, the gain transistor has a load, usually either a resistor or a current source," Hansen said. "When the current through the gain transistor changes, then the voltage across the load also changes, which, in turn, means that the voltage across the gain transistor is changing. In fact, all of the parameters (transconductance, capacitance, etc.) vary when the voltage across the transistor varies."

"The EquiLock circuit adds another transistor between the gain transistor and..."
the load. (In our case, the load is actually a current mirror.) This extra transistor holds the voltage of the gain transistor at a fixed level while still transmitting the changes in current to the load (the current mirror). By stabilizing the voltage across the gain transistor, all of the parameters of the gain transistor are also stabilized. The circuit is very similar to a cascade circuit, which has been used by other manufacturers, but EquiLock is an improvement over a conventional cascade circuit.

And there are elements that make VGT difficult to pull off. The circuit Hansen developed works only with zero-feedback designs, which just happen to be what Ayre specializes in. "It might take a while for others to catch up," Hansen cackled.

THE CIRCUIT HANSEN DEVELOPED WORKS ONLY WITH ZERO-FEEDBACK DESIGNS, WHICH JUST HAPPENS TO BE WHAT AYRE SPECIALIZES IN. "IT MIGHT TAKE A WHILE FOR OTHERS TO CATCH UP," HANSEN CACKLED.

Hansen chose to set the input impedance at a high 1 M ohm per phase (2 M ohms balanced). "You know how, when you load a moving-coil cartridge up to 47 k [ohms], everything just sounds more

Also, since the signal is not attenuated before entering the active circuitry, source components with extremely high outputs could have been problematic. "We had to do a fair amount of work to ameliorate this potential problem," Hansen said. "With a typical source of 2 V to 4 V balanced output, the distortion is around 0.001% to 0.002%. Increasing the input to 8 V RMS, as some digital products produce, will bring the distortion up to around 0.008% to 0.01%.”

Hansen is also correct that, as the primary noise source in a conventional preamplifier is the active circuitry after the volume control, the noise level tends to remain constant as the volume is reduced. For example, Ayre's K-5xe, which uses a conventional volume control, has a S/N ratio (audioband, unweighted, ref. 1 V output, with the volume control at its maximum) of 94.4 dB, which is very good. However, as the output level is reduced with the volume control, that noise becomes a larger percentage of the signal. With the preamplifier attenuating the input by 20 dB, the effective S/N ratio now becomes 74.4 dB.

By contrast, the advantage of the circuit topology used by Ayre for the KX-R is that when the signal level is reduced with the volume control, the noise level will also be reduced. The S/N ratio, expressed in terms of the signal level, will therefore remain constant. Alternatively, when referred to a constant output level, as is my standard practice, the S/N ratio will increase. For example, the wideband, unweighted S/N ratio (ref. 1 V output) with the volume control set to “59” was 77.4 dB, which increased to 90.7 dB when the measurement bandwidth was reduced to the audioband, and to 93.2 dB when A-weighted. Reducing the volume by 6 dB increased these ratios by 6 dB; reducing the volume control by 10 dB increased the ratios by the same 10 dB. This suggests that at normal volume control settings—Wes Phillips typically listened with the KX-R set to 10–15 dB of attenuation, he told me—the preamplifier will indeed be deathly quiet.

The Audio Precision signal generator has a maximum level of 15 V, which means that with the small amount of maximum gain offered by the KX-R, I couldn't drive it into actual clipping into 100 k ohms (fig.2, bottom trace above 1 V). It is pumping out well over 10 V with low distortion! Into the punishingly low 600 ohm load (fig.2, top trace above 1 V), the Ayre preamplifier clipped (defined as 1% THD) at 5 V, which is still well above the level required to drive any real-world power amplifier to its limit. More importantly, the downward slope of the traces in this graph below 1 V (600 ohms) and 3 V (100 k ohms) means that, below those levels, the measurement is dominated by noise rather than distortion. The actual distortion starts to rise out of the noise around the maximum voltage the preamplifier will be asked to deliver in practical use, meaning that its gain architecture has been sensibly arranged. At 2 V into 100 k ohms, plotting the THD + noise percentage against frequency really shows only noise (fig.3, blue and red traces). While dropping the load impedance to 600 ohms brings up the distortion by a factor of about 10 (fig.3), with the left channel (cyan trace) a little better behaved than the right (magenta), the level doesn't change with frequency. (The

PS: The Mark Levinson No380S, which has been my reference preamp for the past 10 years, has a very different volume control, in that level is controlled by feeding the audio signal to the voltage-reference input of a DAC chip. The value of the DAC's internal resistor ladder is then set by applying an 8-bit word to the data input. This kind of control also gives an improvement in S/N ratio as the volume setting decreases, but not to anything like the extent shown by the Ayre KX-R. The unweighted, audioband S/N ratio with the No380S's control set to its maximum was 94.4 dB ref. 1 V output. At the very lowest settings of the control, this improved by 8 dB.
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The KX-R has the usual Ayre virtues, including Ayre Conditioner powerline RFI filtration. It also has an AyreLink circuit, which allows other AyreLink-equipped gear to be connected via ordinary two-line phone cables. Turning on any AyreLink component turns them all on and, when AyreLink-equipped sources are brought to market, turning on the source will also switch the KX-R to that input. The KX-R also comes equipped with a remote control that, if somewhat large, is convenient for everyday use.

The KX-R doesn't have an external power supply. Instead, each part of the circuit resides in its own milled compartment: The control section, the audio circuit, and the power supply are therefore isolated from one another by substantial aluminum barriers. Hansen had to have made special transformers to get the KX-R to match the MX-R's shape; while the models are the same size, the KX-R's front panel is on what would be a side panel of the monoblock.

**Solid air**

In my line of work, unpacking and setting up new gear is usually relatively unexciting. The KX-R was different. For one thing, it's deceptively small for its 40-lb weight, so just unpacking it was an adventure. Then, the rear panel is laid out logically—at least, according to Charles Hansen. In electronic terms, he's right: the signal paths are short. However, the mirror-image layout on the rear panel of four single-ended inputs, four balanced XLR inputs, two balanced XLR outputs (no SE option), and two balanced XLR tape outputs might confuse ordinary mortals—especially as they're not labeled but numbered. The owner's manual suggests you make notes of what you plugged into where.

Those notes will come in handy at the next stage of setup, which is "activating" those inputs. On power-up, if no inputs have been activated, the

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**Apparent rolloff in THD above 20kHz in this graph is due to the fact that I had the analyzer bandwidth set to 80kHz, meaning that the harmonics of tones with a frequency higher than 20kHz will increasingly be suppressed.**

The KX-R's linearity performance is shown in a different manner in figs. 4 and 5, the spectra of a 1kHz tone at 2V into 100k ohms and 600 ohms, respectively. The only harmonics visible above the noise floor into the higher impedance are the second, at -110dB (0.0003%), and the third, at -106dB (0.0005%). Not only are these harmonics extremely low in level, they are subjectively innocuous in character. Both harmonics rise into the punishing 600 ohm load: to -83dB (0.007%) and -80dB (0.01%), left; and to -74dB (0.02%), right. But this is still not to a level that approaches audibility. Compendiously, no higher harmonics appear into 600 ohms, nor do any power-supply-related spuriae. Intermodulation distortion is also extremely low (fig.6).

The matter of its volume-control idiosyncrasy aside, the KX-R is a superbly well-engineered preamplifier. While it didn't drive the 600 ohm impedance with as much aplomb as it did higher impedances, it will not see this low an impedance in real-life systems, especially as

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**Ayre's own MX-R monoblock, with which the preamp will most likely be used, has an input impedance of 2M ohms. The low maximum gain is something I welcome, as preamplifiers in general are used to attenuate the levels of source signals, not amplify them, and the extremely low level of noise at typical volume control settings is commendable.**

—John Atkinson

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**Fig.4** Ayre KX-R spectrum of 1kHz sinewave, DC-10kHz, at 2V balanced into 100k ohms (linear frequency scale; left channel blue, right red).

**Fig.5** Ayre KX-R, spectrum of 1kHz sinewave, DC-10kHz, at 2V balanced into 600 ohms (linear frequency scale; left channel blue, right red).

**Fig.6** Ayre KX-R, HF intermodulation spectrum, DC-24kHz, 19+20kHz at 2V peak balanced into 100k ohms (linear frequency scale).
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"Great Speakers Always Take Time. PBN speakers always take longer," Noerbaek contends. "Ultimately, each PBN speaker is an individual work of art. If you think in those terms, you will achieve those results. It's the ultimate Power Of Positive Thinking." But along with that power comes a parallel universe in which Noerbaek does not go along with traditional marketing norms. This includes not compromising his creations to meet a market-driven price point.

"If you want the very best, then you should buy a product with only the very best of everything already inside it," Noerbaek emphasizes. "That means it will surely cost more. However, in the speaker industry, greater costs do not always mean better audio quality. The incurable flaw in our industry is all the BS that the consumer must put up with; That's An Unusual Statement To Hear Anyone Espouse. But Noerbaek is an unusual guy motivated by his own sense of ethics and values ... and daring-do motivation. Otherwise, PBN wouldn't have existed at all.

We don't want to delve too deeply into Noerbaek's psyche. But, what drives a talented guy like this to go to such extremes? Was he deprived as a child in his native Denmark? And, if we put him through psychological therapy would we be depriving the world of some of the very best audiophile equipment on the market?

We Shouldn't Be Tampering With Primal Forces. Let's keep things just as they are. Let Noerbaek have his sports cars and whatever other excesses his delusional heart desires. Just let him continue making the world's finest speakers so we can continue sequestering ourselves in our darkened listening rooms relishing every audio nuance as if it had never been heard before.
KX-R automatically enters Setup mode, its display flashing “Set 1 Unused.” On either side of the display is a scroll wheel: the one on the left scrolls through the inputs, the one on the right through a list of names you can apply to the input, ranging from the generic (CD, DVD, Digital) to the specific (all Ayre models). Advanced users can input custom names, if they wish. Other adjustments accessible in Setup mode are of gain offset, channel balance, and bypass (for integration with a surround-sound processor).

Only the inputs that have been named, and thus activated, can receive a signal. When an input is unused, the KX-R removes it from the circuit and lifts its ground (as it does to inputs not currently in use)—which prevents noise from bleeding through to the active input and the rest of the audio circuit.

Once an input has been activated, the two scroll wheels revert to their primary functions: the left one is the source selector, the right controls volume. These wheels are actually optical encoders that send pulses to stepper motors that operate custom-designed, “applied-force” rotary switches with silver contacts. (These motors emit an audible and weighty thump in operation.)

The front panel also sports Standby and Mute touch switches.

All of these functions, and many more, are also actuated by the remote control. The KX-R's volume control has 61 steps of 1 dB each—see “Measurements” sidebar—which effectively meant that I got precisely the level I wanted every time—I never had to settle for “almost right.”

At first I paired the KX-R with my Musical Fidelity Nu-Vista 300 power amplifier, which has only single-ended inputs, so I had to use an XLR-to-RCA adapter, which cost me $6dB of gain—not that I noticed any problems owing to that. Later, Ayre sent me a pair of MX-Rs to audition with the KX-R. My primary source was Ayre’s C-5xe universal player; the speakers used included Wilson Watt/Puppy 8s, Avalon Indras, and Thiel CS3.7s.

Spinning on the air

Ayre claims that the KX-R benefits from break-in, and that, because each input uses a different path on the input circuit board, each requires its own break-in period. Maybe so in their Boulder listening room, but the KX-R sounded good from the go in Brooklyn. I mention this because I sometimes get queries from readers about break-in, asking how long they should “cook” a component before listening to it. My response is pretty much Play it, and count as a blessing every dollop of improvement. The KX-R started out in the front rank; if it gets even better, well, lucky Ayre customer!

THE KX-R JUST KEPT TAKING ME DEEPER AND DEEPER INTO THE SOUNDSTAGE—AND MY GRIN STRETCHED TO RIVAL HEATH LEDGER’S.

I’ll start with something that sounds simple: The KX-R was really quiet. (If this were a movie, somebody would have to say, “Yeah. Too quiet.”) Aren’t all audio components these days? Well, sure, but the KX-R, with an activated input selected and set to regular listening volume, was far more silent than the tomb. As Hansen said about the air, you don’t notice it till it’s gone.

Music sounded especially alive through the KX-R. I noticed this as much with the MF Nu-Vista 300 as I did with the MX-Rs. Want jump factor? The KX-R had it. John Atkinson kindly hand-delivered a CD-R containing his production mix of Cantus’s While You Are Alive (CD, Cantus CTSC1208, available by the time this sees print), and I couldn’t wait to hear it through my system with the KX-R.

Oh. My. God.

Not only is While You Are Alive the best performance I’ve ever heard from Cantus, it’s JA’s finest recording to date. From the opening notes of Eric Whitacre’s Lux Anymaque, I was hearing extremely deep into the hall. The “beating” within the harmonies sounded phenomenally lifelike, and the distinctive Sauder Hall ambience surrounding Paul Nelson’s “A Lullaby” was as concrete as the singers themselves.

Then, when Eddie Hill’s “A Sound Like This” began, with its urgent exhortation to “Listen!” I just about jumped out of my skin. You’d think that triggering my fight-or-flight response would have been an unpleasant experience, but I just sat there grinning at the illusion that I was there. Then Cantus began singing harmonies that chased around the soundstage before blooming into a major chord—all interspersed with more whispered exclamations. The KX-R just kept taking me deeper and deeper into the soundstage—and my grin stretched to rival Heath Ledger’s.

But that was nothing. When I wrote Cantus’s music director, Erick Lichte, to congratulate him on the disc, he informed me that I should hear JA’s preproduction master at 24-bit/88.2kHz resolution—and said to tell JA that he’d okayed a DVD-Audio dub.

O.M.G.?

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and, for the hi-rez version, add only more so—especially any part referring to the acoustics of Sauder Hall. (I'm not describing the hi-rez version only to taunt you—Erick Lichte wants to release it in the not-too-distant future. Stay tuned.)

"9/11," from John van der Veer's The Ark (CD, Naim CD 015), is, yes, an attempt to describe the events of 9/11/01 with five acoustic guitars. It begins with a strummed alarm, evocative of a fire station's call-out bell, and is overwhelmed by an urgent bass continuo and several excursions into melodic fragments. It's close-miked and, in one sense, not "realistic." However, the sonic world the track creates is convincing and immersive. It's also unbelievably moving, and the Ayre vividly conveyed the performance's deep musicality.

My buddy Jeff Wong recently introduced me to the Beau Hunks, the Dutch band devoted to re-creating LeRoy Shield's scores for the Little Rascals and Laurel & Hardy comedies of the 1930s. If, like me, you grew up in an era when local TV stations repeatedly ran those old Hal Roach shorts, this music is practically ingrained in your DNA—but you've never heard it like this.

"Early Morning," from On to the Show! The Beau Hunks Play More Little Rascals Music (CD, Koch Screen 3-8705-2), begins with the theme played by the violins over a wash of vintage saxophone sound, the trumpet taking the high lead—but everybody gets some time in the spotlight, even the baritone saxophonist. Thirty seconds before the end of this cue, a gong is sounded—its tone loftily floats above the group's sound, and its overtones linger for an eternity. It was hard for me to wrap my head around all of this. The Beau Hunks—like a good thing, right? Maybe, but the openness and sparkle of the KX-R made the ACT2's version sound darker and, well, smaller in scale.

"9/11" was slightly less immersive through the ACT2—it seemed to lie more between the loudspeakers than all around me, as it had with the KX-R. The string harmonics seemed less zingy than through the Ayre, and to float above the fundamentals less effortlessly. When the gong is struck in Leroy Shield's "Early Morning," it was less splashily through the ACT2, and not as distinct from the band's harmonics beneath it. Are these drastic differences? No, but they were audible—and as much as I didn't care about them when listening to one or the other, when I compared them, I clearly preferred the KX-R.

The Halo JC 2 nailed the Sauder Hall ambience on While You Are Still Alive, but where the C-J seemed darker than the Ayre, the Parasound sounded leaner—not bleached or lightweight, just leaner. And certainly not lightweight, as it proved with those tolling tocsins on "9/11." They came across with loads of power and leading-edge sharpness, but again the KX-R got the ratio of fundamental to harmonics more believably than did the Parasound. The JC 2 did float that gong perfectly on "Early Morning," but it sounded a little light in the loafers on the sax choir (although the bar was very convincing).

I could live with any of these preamplifiers. In my dreams, of course—the only one I could remotely afford is the Halo JC 2, which ought to say something convincing about what Parasound hath wrought. But I digress—we are gathered today to speak of the Ayre KX-R, and I can't think of a preamplifier that has impressed me more with its fidelity to music as I hear it.

Big air

An "extreme degree of madness" is a very fine description of how Ayre has approached the design of the KX-R. I seriously doubt that any single technology is responsible for the preamplifier's exemplary performance. The VGT isn't possible without an absence of feedback or the linearity that EquiLock brings to the gain transistors. Then there are the "little" touches—that extravagant display, or milling the chassis out of solid aluminum stock to create perfectly isolated pockets for each section—and so on, down to the tiniest detail. That level of fanaticism has its price. Sigh. I suspect there's not going to

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t isn't enough to say that engineer Denis N. Morecroft is one of contemporary audio's few visionaries: He's one of a very few mature designers whose passion for doing things a certain way hasn't abandoned him in the least, and whose well-argued convictions seem stronger than ever. Thus, as others cave in to commerce—the tube-amp designer who offers a solid-state product just to help his dealers fill a price niche, the source-component manufacturer who rails against digital audio one day and starts cranking out CD players the next—DNM Design remains the likeliest of all modern companies to stay its course.

The DNM 3D Six preamplifier ($13,495), the latest realization of Morecroft's ideas on domestic audio, embodies literally all of the design distinctions that have originated at DNM throughout the company's 30 years of existence: low-mass conductors, nonmetallic casework and parts, true star grounding, "spaced pair" signal paths from input to output, three-dimensional circuit layouts, slit-foil capacitors, and the use of subminiature resistive-capacitive networks to tame impedance reflections.

The 3D Six's model designation refers to the number of individual 25V sources in its outboard power supply: three dual-mono boards, for a total of six discrete sources. Prior to this review sample, my experience of the DNM 3D had been limited to the Primus version ($7,995), an entry-level product (for DNM), whose scaled-down outboard power supply incorporates a single 25V source, and which I wrote about in the March 2008 edition of my "Listening" column. DNM also offers the 3D Twin ($10,595), the outboard supply of which contains— you guessed it—two discrete voltage sources.

**Description**

Like most earlier DNM preamps and amps, the 3D Six is considerably smaller than the high-end audio average, with casework and fasteners made entirely of...
How Much Class A?

Our meters don’t go to zero like other meters. They show the current draw of the amplifier’s circuit, which has a fixed minimum known as the bias. When the meter isn’t moving, you are in the Class A region. When the meter moves, you have moved into Class AB.

Class B circuits have no bias current, and they enjoy severe distortion due to the abrupt transition between the positive and negative halves of the output stage. Class A circuits run so much bias current that they have no transition, but they run hot as hell. Class AB amplifiers are a compromise, where a moderate bias current smoothes the transition, and they operate in Class A until the output current exceeds twice the bias current.

How much bias do you want? As much as you can get. The amplifier’s distortion is inversely proportional to the bias current. Most Class AB amplifiers operate as Class A for a small fraction of a watt. At Pass Labs, the least of our amplifiers operates Class A to 15 watts, and our biggest amplifier peaks at 400 watts in Class A.

And that’s why our meters don’t go to zero.

If you would like to know more, Nelson has written a detailed article on the subject of bias at www.passlabs.com

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acrylic and nylon: Given Denis Morecroft’s conviction that recorded sound suffers distortion from eddy currents created within conductive materials by the audio signal itself, the 3D contains as little metal as possible.

In common with other solid-state preamplifiers, the 3D Six’s active circuitry resides on various removable subboards—actually double boards, designed to allow complementary gain devices and supporting parts to be laid out in three dimensions, for consistently optimized spacing and minimal electromagnetic interference. The active boards all plug into a passive motherboard that occupies most of the floor space of the chassis. The motherboard also plays host to various passive subboards dedicated to source selection and attenuation, as well as to a sprinkling of miscellaneous switches and sockets. Under the motherboard and parallel to it, a separate power-supply distribution board determines which outboard power supply can be used: one distribution board suits either the Primus or the Twin; a different one is required for the Six.1

In standard trim, and regardless of power-supply options, the DNM 3D Six has inputs for three line-level sources, labeled Radio, Tape, and Direct; two more, labeled Aux 1 and Aux 2, can be installed by a DNM dealer at extra cost. In each case, signal input is by means of a 5-pin DIN socket in which pin 1 is unused, pins 3 and 5 are hot, and pins 2 and 4 are individual channel-specific grounds—rather than the usual common-ground pair of phono jacks. (Note that the Direct socket is next to the preamp’s Output socket—yet whereas the labels for the other two inputs are directly beneath their respective sockets, the label for the Direct socket is above it, as is the label for the Output. Perhaps it’s just me, but seeing the words direct and output next to one another is something I find almost boundlessly confusing.)

Input sockets (also 5-pin DINs) are provided for up to two phono sources, requiring that one or two pairs of plug-in phono boards be installed on the motherboard. The user can install either moving-coil or moving-magnet boards, switching

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**MEASUREMENTS**

measured the DNM 3D Six’s measured behavior using Stereophile’s loaner sample of the Audio Precision SYS2722 system (see the January 2008 "As We See It" and www.ap.com), as well as my vintage Audio Precision System One Dual Domain. Like Art Dudley, I found that I had to place the power supply as far away as possible from the preamplifier chassis to avoid injecting hum into its output signal. Also, as AD had found in his earlier report on the 3D Primus (www.stereophile.com/artdudleylistening/3081isten), the preamplifier weighs so little that it’s impossible to operate its pushbutton Mute control without using your other hand to hold the unit still.

Looking first at the 3D Six’s phono stage, only the Disc 2 input was operative on this sample. It preserved absolute polarity (ie, was non-inverting), and the voltage gain measured at the Record Out jacks was 48.9dB, which is midway between the 40dB typical of a moving-magnet stage and the 60dB of a typical moving-coil stage. (Another 16dB of gain was available from the line stage.) The input impedance was just over 1000 ohms at low and midrange frequencies, dropping very slightly but inconsequentially to 857 ohms at 20kHz, which will be compatible with most MC cartridges. The unweighted, wideband signal/noise ratio (ref. 1kHz at 500μV input, as is usual for a MC input) was 43dB, increasing to 54dB when A-weighted. This modest figure was due to the presence of odd-order power-supply harmonics, picked up by the unshielded circuitry from the remote power supply, even though I had placed it on the floor well away from the preamp.

Phono-stage overload margins (again measured at the Record Out jacks, and ref. 1kHz at 500μV, the standard for a MC input) were extraordinarily good, at 39-40dB at low and midrange frequencies, decreasing slightly to 37.6dB at 20kHz.

The RIAA equalization error, assessed at the Record Out jacks, is shown in fig.1. The left channel (solid trace) is extremely flat between 100Hz and 20kHz, with then a gentle rolloff at ultrasonic frequencies. The right channel, however, shelves down above 1kHz, reaching -0.75dB at the top of the audioband. This imbalance may not be audible, but it does suggest that the right channel's RIAA network has an out-of-specification resistor. At low

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1 Power-supply distribution boards can be swapped out by a dealer or a very adventurous user, but it can’t be done terribly quickly—which makes it extremely difficult to use a single 3D to compare, say, the Primus and Six power-supply options. Consequently, for this review, I borrowed two 3Ds.
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between them by means of a front-panel toggle. Rather than a rear-panel ground lug of the usual sort, the DNM 3D has a pair of 2mm pin sockets for tonearm or turntable chassis ground leads.

In addition to the aforementioned phono toggle, the 3D’s front panel has a similar toggle for tape-monitor switching, plus a 3.5mm headphone jack (directly driven by the line-amp boards), a pushbutton Mute switch that illuminates when activated, a skirted knob for source selection, and two more skirted knobs for channel-specific attenuation: the volume-control scheme I prefer above all others, for easy channel-balance adjustments without the need for additional parts. A final touch: Snugged between the latter two knobs is a two-position toggle for selecting between stereo playback and a mono blend. Amen!

As with the slightly downmarket 3D Twin, the 3D Six’s outboard power supply is built into a full-size DNM acrylic case. Voltages are knocked down by a hefty Noratel frame-style transformer, fastened to the supply’s own motherboard with a pair of nylon plates that seem intended to absorb mechanical strain. The trannie’s two 27V output leads are directed to a single bridge rectifier, with the 0V center tap referenced to a central point on the star-ground board. DC from the rectifier is smoothed by a pair of DNM’s own chunky T-Network slit-foil capacitors before traveling to a trio of dual-mono plug-in boards, for regulation and impedance control.

Three 45” ribbon cables exit the back of the power supply, each initiating its journey at one of the three subboards, and each ending with a 10-conductor plug pledged to a corresponding socket on the 3D preamp. There’s also a pair of sockets on the back of the power supply for routing the audio signal to the power amplifier, but these don’t function in a way that owners of older British separates might expect. Whereas the shielded cables that carry DC power to Naim preamps in particular are also used to carry the AC audio signals from them, thus making the outboard power supply the grounding center of the overall amplification system, the DNM ribbons are for DC only: Signal-transfer sockets on the back of the 3D Six power supply are provided only for the sake of convenience, for installations where cable- and gear-placement constraints...
make it difficult to do things any other way, and their use depends on two things: bringing the signal from the preamp to the power supply with an extra cable dedicated to that purpose alone, and installing a DNM Power Supply Transfer Board on the underside of the power supply’s motherboard. Although my review sample was equipped with said board, I didn’t try the alternate connection scheme, as it held no hope for a performance advantage.

To look inside the preamp or the power supply was to understand why some hobbyists custom-order the DNM 3D with optional clear acrylic casework: While other engineers have praised such concepts as short signal paths, star ground schemes, and consistent signal-path spacing, those ideals are executed with greater care, ingenuity, and comprehensiveness in the 3D Six than in any other product I’ve seen, in any field. I can’t imagine that artificial hearts, prenatal monitoring devices, or even missile-guidance systems are made with greater skill or precision.

**Installation and setup**

My review sample of the 3D Six preamp was delivered and installed by one of DNM’s American reps, who also brought along a sample of DNM’s four-tier equipment rack, designed to contain a full stack of DNM electronics. At the time the 3D Six was installed, my record player was the only source in use—and, as luck would have it, a mild but steady 60Hz hum made itself known the moment we powered up the system. We tried a couple of different grounding schemes for the turntable chassis and tonearm, which lessened if not quite eliminated the problem. Assuming the hum was just a phono thing and that I was well on my way to banishing it altogether, that’s how we left it, with my hearty approval. But despite my best efforts, the hum persisted with every phono cartridge in use—and, as luck would have it, a slight intermittent hum associated with one of the phono-input sockets, apparently as a consequence of near-daily plugging and unplugging.

None of the amplifiers I used with the DNM preamp—Shindo’s Cortese and Corton-Charlemagne, the Quad II, or Fi’s 2A3 Stereo, not to mention DNM’s own PA30S—were balanced designs. However, prospective 3D Six owners should note that it can be set to a floating-ground mode for driving balanced amps simply by changing the switch settings on the line-amp boards, power-supply distribution board, and motherboard, as explained in the owner’s manual. Switch provisions are also provided on those boards for selecting between normal and direct (noncapacitive) output modes. Ironically, there were no adjustment switches where I might have expected to find them: on the phono boards. The gain on those boards is fixed, as is load impedance (27k ohms for MM, a highish 1k ohm for MC), which prevented me from using my admittedly oddball.

**Fig.5** DNM 3D Six, spectrum of 1kHz sine wave, DC–10kHz, at 1V into 600 ohms (linear frequency scale; left channel blue, right red).

**Fig.6** DNM 3D Six, HF intermodulation spectrum, DC–24kHz, 19+20kHz at 2V peak into 600 ohms (linear frequency scale).
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The Single Ended Concept

Prologue Equipment Rack

Prosценium Black Diamond Turntable

High Definition Links for Speakers

Prelude Record Cleaning System

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Life Is Too Short To Be Bored!
EMT OFD 25, a high-output MC cartridge that overpowered the MC boards yet wished for a load under 500 ohms.

**Listening**

Let me remind you of my experience with the entry-level 3D Primus: Used with the tube amplifiers of my choice, that DNM preamplifier’s most appealing characteristic was its combination of extraordinary clarity with a top end that was very extended yet utterly smooth and “organic,” without any forcefulness or lack of naturalness. Its spatial performance was also strikingly good, with remarkable stage depth and detail: the sorts of things that often don’t appeal to me at all, yet won me over when enjoyed in tandem with the 3D’s undeniable ability to find the musical essence of most recordings. On the down side, my Shindo Masseto had more sonic texture and color and, most noticeably, greater bass depth and impact.

Good though the 3D Primus was, the 3D Six was better in virtually every way—although the distinctions weren’t enormous, and I felt that the more expensive DNM sounded enough like the base model that few careful listeners would fail to hear the family resemblance.

Listening to Albinoni’s Adagio in G Minor, performed by organist Philippe Lefebvre and the Orchestre du Festival de Québec, recorded on the Thorens TD-124 Mk.II turntable, with Thorens 777ES SACD/CD player; Sony PlayStation 1 CD player.

PREAMPLIFIER: Shindo Masseto.

POWER AMPLIFIERS: Shindo Cortese & Corton-Charlemagne, DNM PASOS, Quad II, Fi 2A3 Stereo.

LOUDSPEAKERS: Audio Note AN-E/Sp Es, Quad ESL.


ACCESSORIES: Mana Reference Table (under turntables), Ayre Myrtle Blocks (under Quad II amps).

—Art Dudley

The DNM was also singularly good at clarifying—again, no other word for it—the thick orchestration of Strauss’s Ein Heldenleben, played brilliantly well (and recorded ditto) by Fritz Reiner and the Chicago Symphony Orchestra (LP, RCA Living Stereo/Classic LSC-1807). That one also showed off the DNM’s fine sense of scale: It sounded every bit as impressively, believably large as the Masseto–sheet bigness of sound being among the Shindo’s great specialties. More important, as with all of the finest electronics I’ve tried, the DNM preamp allowed me to relax and enjoy the music as music: Through the 3D Six, the Strauss had a satisfying degree of emotional color—humor in particular, as it should have.

True to its rep for being true to the original, the DNM allowed overcompressed pop records to sound dramatically flat. Examples included such otherwise wonderful records as Mott the Hoople’s Mot (LP, CBS 69038), Cat Stevens’ Tea for the Tillerman (LP, A&M SP 4280), John Lennon’s Imagine (LP, Apple SW 3379), even the Kinks’ Lola versus Powerman and the Moneygound, Part One (LP, Reprise RS 6423). Curiously, all of those selections sounded somewhat more stirring through the Shindo Masseto preamp than through the DNM; as always, and meaning no condescension one way or the other, it’s up to the reader to decide which approach distorts the music and which does not.

But the music-making was of the highest order when I returned to comparatively uncompressed material—such as my favorite recording of Schubert’s “Trout” quintet, by Clifford Curzon and members of the Vienna Octet (LP, Decca/Speakers Corner SXL 2110). Through the DNM 3D Six, the sound was open, clear, and, again, surprisingly big—surprisingly if only for the almost unavoidable subconscious association between small, light playback gear and small, light sound. But here the players and their instruments were spread a good distance from one another, each seeming to occupy the same generous space that they would in a real concert setting. Even the piano was beautifully
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huge, as was Johann Krump's double bass—although I missed that instrument's very deepest tones, of which my Shindo delivered a shade more.

Here, the DNM was every bit as good as the Shindo Masseto in its ability to portray realistic dynamic and dramatic peaks: Curzon's occasional lunges at the keyboard, some of which had escaped my notice through lesser electronics, always sparked my attention through the DNM, as did the consistently good portrayal of more subtle peaks and nuances. As Mahler said, what is best in music is not to be found in the notes—and so it was with this lovely record: Even the decay of the sound of each piano chord, especially in the early measures of the scherzo, seemed freighted with a degree of expression lost by most other playback gear, but captured consistently well by the DNM. For all its cleanliness and timbral fidelity, the 3D Six never skimped on sheer expression: It played not just the sound, but the music.

**Conclusions**

When reviewing a new audio component in combination with a variety of associated equipment, as I do whenever possible, I intend my remarks to represent a sort of aggregate experience. So it goes here—but this time I'd like to shed light on some distinctions that might otherwise be missed.

In particular, when using the DNM 3D Six preamp to drive the many tube amplifiers at my disposal, it seemed that the characters of those amps were especially well presented, even brought to the fore. If anything, the wonderful Quad II monoblocks sounded even more rich and luxuriant than usual. The Flea-powered Fi amp seemed more tuneful than ever, with almost startling presence—again, more than I'd expected. And the Shindo amps were amazingly colorful, dramatic, and alive, the different flavors of the two different models being clearly laid out.

Was all that down to the DNM's low output impedance? Its lack of coloration? Its tendency not to pollute its electrical surroundings with noise? Was it the DNM cable? Or the simple fact that my equipment shelf was resonating at a different frequency than usual, given the reduction of the mass on top of it?

Darned if I know. But even as my faith in the DNM's unique musicality, and the almost peerlessly high quality of the thing as a piece of electronic art, remains rooted in place, I'm even more curious than usual to see what John Atkinson's measurements uncover.

**FOR ALL ITS CLEANNESS AND TIMBRAL FIDELITY, THE 3D SIX NEVER SKIMPED ON SHEER EXPRESSION: IT PLAYED NOT JUST THE SOUND, BUT THE MUSIC.**
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**Luxman M800-A**

**POWER AMPLIFIER**

**DESCRIPTION**
Solid-state, stereo power amplifier with the output stage biased into class-A, bridge-able for mono operation. Inputs: 1 pair each, unbalanced (RCA) and balanced (XLR). Outputs: 1 pair speaker binding posts. Rated output power: 60Wpc, both channels driven into 8 ohms (17.8dBW); 120Wpc, both channels driven into 4 ohms (17.8dBW); 240Wpc into 2 ohms (17.8dBW), 480Wpc into 1 ohm (17.8dBW); 240W bridged into 8 ohms (23.8dBW). Frequency response: 20Hz-20kHz, +0/-0.2dB; DC-130kHz, +0/-3dB. Input impedance: 67k ohms balanced, 51k ohms unbalanced. Input sensitivity: 773mV/60W (8 ohms). Voltage gain: 29dB. Signal/noise (IHF-A): 117dB. Power consumption: 492W (rated power).

**DIMENSIONS**
17.25" (440mm) W by 8.8" (225mm) H by 19" (490mm) D. Weight: 107 lbs (48.6kg) net, 175 lbs (80kg) shipping.

**SERIAL NUMBER OF UNIT REVIEWED**
70800001.

**PRICE**
$16,000. Approximate number of dealers: 12. Warranty: 3 years from date of purchase by original purchaser, or no later than 5 years from date of shipment to authorized dealer, whichever comes first.

**MANUFACTURER**
Luxman Corporation, Japan. Tel: (81) 045-470-6991. Fax: (81) 045-470-6997. Web: www.luxman.co.jp. US distributor: On a Higher Note, LLC, PO Box 698, San Juan Capistrano, CA 92693. Tel: (949) 488-3004. Fax: (949) 488-3284. Web: www.onahighernote.com.

**Founded in 1925, Luxman has long been one of Japan's most highly regarded audio manufacturers. Throughout the 1970s and into the 1980s, Luxman's tube preamplifiers and power amplifiers occupied the top shelves of high-performance audio retailers, and to many older American audiophiles, the Luxman name is as familiar and esteemed as those of such storied American brands as McIntosh and Marantz. Luxman's combination of rich, warm sound, superb build quality, and indelible industrial design made its products fully competitive with other brands then considered among the world's best.**

But, as with McIntosh and Marantz, Luxman was the subject of a series of unfortunate sell-offs and acquisitions that seriously wounded the Luxman name. In fact, Luxman and McIntosh both ended up being bought by makers of car stereos: McIntosh by Clarion, in 1990; and Luxman by Alpine, in 1984.

While McIntosh merely floundered, Luxman nearly went under, as Alpine dragged the brand name into mid-fi hell. A subsequent buyout by Korean giant Samsung was another giant step in the wrong direction, both financially and culturally. Happily for audio enthusiasts, private equity groups rescued McIntosh and Luxman in the early 2000s, allowing them to flourish while returning to their original mission statements. In Luxman's case, the engineering team's loyalty through the dark days allowed the company to introduce, in 2005, two products that had long been planned to celebrate the company's 80th anniversary: the C-1000f preamplifier ($30,000) and B-1000f monoblock amplifier ($48,000/pair).

The more recent M-800A stereo amplifier reviewed here ($16,000), and the matching C-800f preamplifier, are trickled-down versions of those highly regarded "80th Anniversary Commemoration" products. Still, $16,000 is hardly chump change, and...**
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World Radio History
60Wpc into 8 ohms sounds like too few watts for the buck, no matter how well built the M-800A might be.

**Build quality worth talking about**

Weighing a hefty 107 lbs, the relatively compact (17.25" W by 8.8" H by 19" D) M-800A is among the most densely packed pieces of audio gear I've seen. It's also among the most tastefully and elegantly wrapped (the heatsinks are enclosed). The visual highlight of its thick, satiny faceplate is a "floating" aluminum inset with three tiny status lights, labeled, from the top down, BTL, Balance, and Stand By. Two defeatable uncalibrated bargraph power meters, comprised of yellow LEDs, nestle in the vertical grooves between faceplate and inset. A Standby/Operate switch dominates the main panel, which also includes a Display mode switch and an input selector that switches between single-ended and balanced modes.

Dominating the rear panel are two pairs of oversized, vise-like speaker terminals that can accept bare wires, bananas, or spades, and lock them more securely than everything other than the binding posts made by Cardas and maybe a few others. There are also pairs of RCA single-ended and XLR balanced inputs, a main On/Off switch, a Bridge Tied Load (BTL) switch for bridged-monoblock operation, a ground lug, a 12V DC trigger, and an IEC AC jack. There's also a Line Phase Sensor button that's similar to the old—and very useful—Namiki Direction Finder. This lets you know if the live and neutral AC wires have been

To examine the Luxman's measured behavior, I mainly used Stereophile's loaner sample of the top-of-the-line Audio Precision SYS2722 system (see www.stereophile.com/asweseeit/108awsi and www.ap.com).

Before performing tests on an amplifier, I thermally stress it by running it for 60 minutes at one-third the specified power into 8 ohms, which is the worst case for an amplifier with a class-B or -AB output stage. With its class-A output stage, the Luxman easily survived this ordeal; at the end of the hour its chassis was warm, but not so hot that I couldn't keep my hand on it. In that time the THD+noise had risen from 0.007% to 0.0089%.

The M-800A's voltage gain into 8 ohms was 28.8dB for the balanced and unbalanced inputs. The unbalanced input preserved absolute polarity (ie, was non-inverting), while the balanced input inverted polarity, due to the XLR jack being wired with pin 3 hot and pin 2 cold, the opposite of the AES standard. At 43k ohms, the unbalanced input impedance was insignificantly lower than specified at low and midrange frequencies, though this did drop slightly at 20kHz, to 32k ohms. The balanced input impedance was specification at 67k ohms at all frequencies.

The Luxman's output impedance was a little higher than usual for a solid-state design, at 0.12 ohm at low and midrange frequencies, rising to 0.16 ohm at the top of the audioband. Even so, any modulation of the amplifier's frequency response due to the Ohm's Law interaction between its output impedance and the modulus of our simulated loudspeaker's impedance remained within ±0.1dB (fig.1, green trace). This graph also shows that the amplifier's bandwidth changes only slightly with load impedance, the -3dB point lying at 80kHz into 8 ohms (blue, red), and at 60kHz into 2 ohms (gray). This was for the balanced input; the unbalanced input had a wider bandwidth, the response into 8 ohms lying at 120kHz (not shown). The Luxman's reproduction of a balanced 10kHz squarewave had slightly slowed leading edges (fig.2), though there is no sign of overshoot or ringing.

Channel separation was very good, at 90dB in both directions at 1kHz, though it did decrease to 70dB at the top of the audioband (not shown). The amplifier's wideband, unweighted signal/noise ratio (ref. 1W into 8 ohms with the input short-circuited) was modest, at 52.7dB, though this increased to an excellent 81dB when the measurement bandwidth was restricted to the audioband, and increased further, to 83.5dB, with an A-weighted measurement.

The M-800A is a low-distortion amplifier. Fig.3, for example, plots the THD+N percentage against output power into 8, 4, and 2 ohms. The Luxman is specified as delivering a continuous 60Wpc into 8 ohms (17.8dBW) at <0.009% THD+N.1 This is not the power at clipping.

Although it doesn't say so in the M-800A's literature, I suspect that this is the maximum power the amplifier will deliver in full class-A. At higher powers, the output stage progressively transitions into class-B operation until the amplifier eventually reaches its output voltage limit.

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1 www.Stereophile.com, November 2008 93

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The SG-2's phenolic, vinyl and graphite platter with decoupled bearing and high inertia drive ring delivers unparalleled speed stability and tonal balance.

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reversed at the wall socket. (It happens more often than you might think.)

A peek inside the M-800A reveals Luxman’s obsession with build quality and their attention to the smallest details of fit and finish. The 16 output devices per channel are mounted to a large copper plate attached to each ample heatsink, to better dissipate the prodigious amounts of heat generated by this class-A amplifier.

If you visit the website of Luxman’s US distributor, On a Higher Note (www.onahighernote.com/luxman/?c=4&id=35), you can see close-up photos of these and other details of design and construction that make clear the attention paid by the designers. For instance, the Luxman engineers claim that an audio component’s sound can be smeared by the green solder-mask dye seen on the surfaces of most printed circuit boards, and used by manufacturers to identify signal traces and the placement of resistors and other board components. They’ve come up with a material that can be peeled off the PCBs once the signal-path traces have been applied and the mounting holes punched. Gold plating of the PCB traces reduces resistance and prevents corrosion. Copper bus bars directly connect the power transformer’s output to its storage capacitors, attaching with copper screws. Even the AC jack has been subjected to listening tests, with the result that Luxman uses solid brass plated with nickel, in turn plated with gold. Can you hear the difference? Anyone who’s experimented with various plating materials on adjacent AC wall jacks will tell you, with absolute certainty, “yes.”

However, at 1% THD+N (our standard definition of waveform clipping), the M-800A delivered no less than 160Wpc into 8 ohms (22dBW) and 280Wpc into 4 ohms (21.5dBW), both figures measured with both channels driven. And while the rise in distortion above 50W in fig.3 shows that the amplifier is clearly working harder than it probably likes to into 2 ohms, it still manages to deliver 480W into that load (20.9dBW) at 1% THD+N with one channel driven.

Fig.4 plots the THD+N percentage present in the Luxman’s output as it drives 8 and 4 ohm loads at an output voltage of 10V, the level where fig.3 indicates that the THD components begin to rise out of the noise floor. The high-frequency rise in THD above the very low level in the midrange and bass is due to the circuit’s diminishing open-loop bandwidth—there is less gain margin available for the negative feedback loop to do its distortion-reducing thing. Neither channel behaves appreciably differently as the load impedance is reduced from 8 ohms (red trace) to 4 ohms (magenta). However, this plot was taken with the amplifier cold. Once it had warmed up, the midband distortion rose by a factor of four into 4 ohms. Though the absolute level of the THD was still low, this behavior was a little alarming, as looking at the oscilloscope display, the rise in THD into low impedances appeared to be due to a small burst of ultrasonic noise appearing on every positive peak of the waveform.

I repeated the measurement once the amplifier had cooled down, and it behaved perfectly again. And again, once it had heated up, the ultrasonic noise appeared if I used the M-800A to drive loads of 4 ohms or lower. However, now the M-800A wouldn’t drive 2 ohms without instability developing. I checked my cables, replaced my dummy load with another, and repeated the measurement using the Audio Precision System One rather than the SYS2722. There was no change in the amplifier’s apparent unhappiness at driving low impedances once it had warmed up.
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The greatest theoretical sonic advantage of class-A biasing, in which the output device's base current is set to permit constant current flow, is the absence of crossover distortion: instead of the upper and lower output devices each switching off every half cycle at the OV level to hand over to the other (class-B operation), both output devices are always on. The downside is inefficiency and a tube-like production of excess heat. The usual result: a great-sounding, low-powered amplifier that runs very hot.

So while I was surprised when Philip O'Hanlon, founder of On a Higher Note, suggested I pair the 60Wpc M-800A with my Wilson Audio Specialties MAXX 2 loudspeakers, I wasn't at all skeptical: The Bow-Tied One also owns a pair of MAXX 2s, and his listening space is much larger than mine.

But how could such a low-powered amplifier effectively drive the Wilsons? In his “Measurements” sidebar accompanying my review of the MAXX 2s in the August 2005 Stereophile, John Atkinson found the Wilsons to have a sensitivity of approximately 89.7dB, and to be a “demanding load” of 4–6 ohms throughout most of the audioband, with a minimum of 2.25 ohms at 240Hz. They also combine a low impedance of 3.8 ohms and a capacitive phase angle of 33° at 162Hz, where, he noted, music has “considerable energy,” and which therefore would require an amplifier “that can source a good amount of current.”

Somewhat unusually, the M-800A’s 60Wpc output into 8 ohms doubles to 120Wpc into 4 ohms, 240W into 2 ohms, and an amazing 480W into 1 ohm. In other words, the M-800A should love the MAXX 2s. And it did. The more punishing the load, the more power the M-800A delivered.

So after I’d pontificated, in my review of Musical Fidelity’s 550K Supercharger power booster in the September 2007 issue, about the need for a lot of power in order to reproduce wide dynamic swings, Luxman’s M-800A has demonstrated to
We spent a recent Sunday afternoon with the Los Angeles & Orange County Audiophile Society, and all we can say is: WOW!

Audio enthusiasts around the country should take a good look at what Bob Levi, LAOC President, is doing in L.A. No doubt the high-end audio hobby is alive and kickin' in Southern California.

We were pleased as punch to be invited back for a second year and determined to show the West Coasters a good time. In addition to bringing our own load of HeadRoom gear, we invited Joe Saggio of Ultimate Ears to bring along their line of ear canal headphones, and we also invited the headphone enthusiasts at Head-Fi.org and Head-Case.org to showcase some of their amazing rigs.

Bob got into the spirit of the things (just try to stop him!) and brought in Dan Wright of ModWright Instrument Corp to show off his pimped-out Slim Devices Transporter and Philip O'Hanlon, Luxman's USA distributor, to display their new headphone amp offering. And what's an audio event without music? So, Bob also recruited Hajime Sato of Eastwind Imports to provide some sweet reference tracks.

Things got underway with short introductions by the vendors, and Tyll Hertsens, HeadRoom Prez, spent about 20 minutes demystifying class-D amplifiers. Then the crowd dug into hands-on listening sessions with the gear along with a groovy Brat buffet and hearty lubrication at our own private bar. Lastly, bringing in so many vendors made for a superb pile of gear for the various doorprize giveaways. The roughly 160 people in attendance had a GREAT time!

So, thanks Bob! You are a light and inspiration for all of us. We encourage those who run audiophile societies around the country to check out Bob's activity at www.laocas.com. And take heart -- Your hard work & hard play can, and will, help many audio enthusiasts get it right between their ears!
me that there’s more to the issue than pure power. How and where an amp delivers that power also count, and the nominally 60Wpc M-800A was more than up to the task of delivering to the Wilson MAXX 2s enough power to make them sing sweetly and authoritatively.

**Class-A sound**

My reference Musical Fidelity kW monoblocks are exceedingly open, extended, transparent, and dynamically unconstrained, but they can sound a bit cool, and perhaps a tad thin, depending on the associated gear and, of course, the recording. I learned that while reviewing Musical Fidelity’s kW750 in December 2005, which, even at $10,000 (last time I checked), I still regard as one of the bargains in high-powered stereo amplifiers.

But even from a cold start, the Luxman M-800A made music with extra doses of smoothness and unforced ease that the MF kW’s lack. And, like the MF kW750, the Luxman seemed to have no difficulty whatsoever driving my Wilson MAXX 2s. Not for a moment during the many months the Luxman was in my system did I sense that it was coming close to clipping or sounding strained—this from an amplifier that outputs only 120Wpc into 4 ohms, compared to the kW750’s 1100Wpc.

Nor did the M800-A have any trouble maintaining a firm grip on the MAXX 2s’ bass bins. The bottom end was a bit warmer and lusher than my reference kWs, but not at all soft, loose, or sluggish. Kick drums and electric bass had appropriate attack, body, and impact, while acoustic bass sounded full-bodied, woody, and nicely balanced between the attacks of the player’s fingers on the strings and the response of the instrument’s large, hollow body. The lower register of the acoustic piano was draped in a fine layer of transparent velvet that didn’t soften or mute the hammer’s attacks.

The M-800A had enough low-frequency extension and drive to reproduce the spaciousness and full weight of the performing spaces of live recordings made in large and small venues, while never submerging lower-register instruments in the soup—something that warmish-sounding amplifiers can sometimes do.

The Bill Evans Trio’s *Waltz for Debby* produced the sensation of the Village Vanguard’s space and its deep corner window and let in a cold, refreshing tone—something that warmish-sounding amplifiers can sometimes do.

The Luxman’s sound was definitely on the warm, velvety side of the great sonic divide, but this has been achieved without sacrificing immediacy, transparency, or transient clarity—and, most important for the listener, without inducing boredom or lack of interest. A warm sound can do that. Warmth can induce comfort, but too much warmth can make you want to open the sonic window and let in a cold, refreshing slap in the face.

**But warm isn’t necessarily the same as smooth.** Cool-sounding amplifiers (and cables, for that matter) can also sound too smooth, but warm-sounding amplifiers usually suffer from a homogenized smoothness that sacrifices the sharpness of transients. The result can be over-romanticized massed strings that become a congealed, sticky mass, instead of having the more accurate real-life quality of sounding simultaneously “feathery” and edgy, and revealing the fact that multiple bowed instruments are being played.

In my system, the M-800A effectively managed the massed strings of familiar recordings, producing sufficient feathery edge and delineation of individual instruments, as well as a fine sense of the “massed” part of massed strings—the easier part for a warmish-sounding amplifier to produce.

Among the M-800A’s best qualities was its reproduction of the human voice—in rich, three-dimensional images that balanced throat and chest sounds with textural suppleness and believability. The intimacy of a new 45rpm, from a backdrop of aural black velvet (45rpm LPs, Analogue Productions, out of print). Handclaps sounded appropriately fleshy and not at all soggy, and while Paul Motian’s shimmering, dazzling cymbal work was somewhat less brash and metallic than through the kW’s, it didn’t sound softened or muted, and had a sweet, chimey ring.

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World Radio History
180gm vinyl edition of Julie London's *Julie Is Her Name* is truly astonishing (mono, Liberty/BoxStar). Her voice hovers with come-kiss-my-neck believability, backed by Barney Kessel on guitar and Ray Leatherwood on bass. I could "see" London standing behind the microphone—the sound is so convincing, it's what you'd expect to hear before it reaches the mike. This classic of sultry swing was definitely more believable through the Luxman than through my reference amps, which produced a somewhat less vivid, less velvety image of London, though with a somewhat greater volume of surrounding air.

Yet while the M800-A was firmly on the warm side of neutral, it also managed to communicate the obnoxious qualities of bright, spotlit recordings without covering up their character by making them sound pleasant. The Luxman's harmonic presentation was as fundamentally correct as I've heard from any amplifier, tube or solid-state. And in addition to its notable tonal and textural balance, the M-800A developed the sense of "continuousness" I usually associate with tube amps, especially those with tube rectification.

The Luxman produced notably deep, superbly organized soundstages, on which it placed compact, solid, believable images. The stage width was slightly narrower than that thrown by my reference kW monoblocks, especially with familiar live recordings. However, this was a very minor shortcoming.

A big surprise was this 60Wpc amp's ability to reproduce macrodynamics—it seemed to fully render large-scale dynamic contrasts. Side 1 of Lorin Maazel and the Cleveland Orchestra's recording of Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess* contains some short orchestral bursts that the M800-A managed brilliantly (LP, UK Decca). The sound of dice hitting the stage was reproduced with just the right combination of hard, percussive edges and wooden floor; and the bolder's pseudo-tack piano, while not as well rendered as by my reference amps, had an appropriately metallic tinkle through the Luxman.

For whatever reason, the M800-A did less well with this recording's lowest-level microdynamic details, which it reproduced with a mild sense of compression. While the Luxman was notably quiet and produced jet-black backgrounds, the male chorus's ghostly, nearly whispered singing just before "Summertime" sounded somewhat forward, instead of sneaking up to surprise me as it usually does. Overall, the M800-A's production of low-level dynamic contrasts and its delivery of fine, low-level details suffered somewhat in comparison with the Musical Fidelity kWs. In the big picture, however, this proved a very minor issue. When soprano Leona Mitchell hit her first round, pure, appropriately piercing, nonmechanical note in "Summertime," I got the full measure of the M-800A's rendering of the female voice: stunning.

**PHILIP O'HANLON ONCE IMPORTED HALCRO AMPLIFIERS, WHICH I COULD RESPECT BUT NEVER LOVE. I CAN LOVE AND RESPECT THE LUXMAN M-800A—EVEN THE NEXT MORNING.**

The M800A remained in my system for several months, during which every kind of music pulsed through it. I ran it both single-ended and in balanced mode using two preamplifiers: the MBL 6010 D (which I reviewed last month) and the darTZeel NH-18S (which I reviewed in the June 2007 *Stereophile*). I also ran it fully balanced through Luxman's C-800f preamp, which has been voiced similarly to the M800-A. For my tastes and in my system, I found the Luxman-Luxman combo too smooth and insufficiently detailed. I preferred either the MBL or the darTZeel preamps, both of which are leaner and, to my ears, more detailed. They're also a lot more expensive.

After I'd spent a few weeks noting the M800-A's velvety-smooth overall tonal personality, the solidity of its images, its coherent, stable soundstaging, and—especially—its smooth musical flow, the amp simply blended into the landscape of whatever music I was listening to (though it continued to make its presence known throughout the summer by the prodigious amounts of heat it threw off!).

**Back to the Musical Fidelities**

When it was time to ship the M800-A to JA to be measured, I reinstated my reference Musical Fidelity kW monoblocks in the system and, after an appropriate break-in period, played some of the same LPs and, via a Sooloos music server, CDs. The big kWs' soundstage was taller and wider but not deeper than what the Luxman had produced. The MFs' low-level dynamic contrasts were notably more expressive, but large-scale dynamic swings sounded remarkably similar through both, which surprised me. The big kWs produced more air and sparkle on top than the Luxman, but were also somewhat drier overall, less fully realized from top and bottom, and couldn't match the M800A's rich, velvety midband.

**Conclusion**

At first glance, the Luxman M-800A appears to be an expensive, underpowered amplifier best used with sensitive, easy-to-drive loudspeakers. I found that not to be the case. Its ability to double its power output with each halving of loudspeaker impedance made it suitable for driving even loads as difficult as the Wilson Audio MAXX 2. Still, it would be best to consult the importer before buying, to make sure it's up to the task of driving your speakers.

On a Higher Note's Philip O'Hanlon claims that two M800As run in bridged mode can each deliver four times as much power (240W into 8 ohms), and produce explosive dynamics at both ends of the scale, for a vast improvement in the resolution of inner detail and even greater bass solidity and extension. I believe him! But two of them would cost $32,000, and a single M-800A was already plenty good in all those areas.

The M800-A's build quality, finish, and appearance are up there with the finest I've seen—and its binding posts are among the most convenient and secure I've tried. And unless your system is warm and soggy and you're looking for relief, the M-800A's sound leaves little to be desired. If your system's sound is anywhere from analytical to lean, and you want a touch of sonic cushioning without falling into soft springs, the M-800A may be what you need. It presents its case seamlessly and effortlessly, with no significant negatives other than heat. I never thought I could be satisfied driving the MAXX 2s with such a low-powered amplifier. But I can.

Philip O'Hanlon once imported Halcro amplifiers, which I could respect but never love. I can love and respect the Luxman M-800A—even the next morning.
The best relationships in the world work in true harmony, true balance and of course - true love.

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Dimensions: 18" (457mm) W by 5" (127mm) H by 15" (381mm) D. Weight: 37 lbs (16.8kg).

Finish: Aluminum: silver or black.

SACD/CD player

Some reviews take longer to gestate than others. But in the case of Cary's CD 306 SACD Professional Version SACD/CD player, it has taken me literally years to get this review into print. I had visited Cary's impressive facility in North Carolina just before Christmas 2005, when I'd been playing the high-resolution master files of some of my recordings at an event being promoted by Raleigh high-end dealer Audio Advice. Cary's head honcho, Dennis Had, had been playing me music on a system featuring his Silver Oak loudspeakers, with the front-end one of the first samples of the original CD 306, playing discs through the two-chassis Cary SLP 05 preamplifier that Art Dudley ended up reviewing in the September 2006 issue. "Now that's a product I'd like to review!" I enthused, looking inside the CD 306, and I drove back to Brooklyn with a review sample.

However, I had to cut short my auditioning of that first sample (S/N 0530630184): the player would stop playing after a couple of hours' operation, and wouldn't work again until it had been turned off for a while. I let Had know what was wrong—obviously, this sample was not ready for prime time. It transpired that one of the Sony chips in the transport-servo circuitry didn't always meet its temperature-tolerance specification. Once the player had warmed up, the out-of-tolerance chip would stop working reliably.

Had asked me to return this sample to have the problem chip replaced and also to have its firmware upgraded to address some operational problems that had emerged in the field. Cary shipped me a new sample (S/N 053063030280) in April 2006. This sample worked fine, without turning off. However, it also had a minor problem in that it
didn't handle hi-rez data correctly through its digital input. I was wondering whether to return this sample to Cary when I received an e-mail from Dennis: "I am writing to let you know we are in a complete redesign of the CD 306/SACD... The [Pacific Microsonics PMD200] filter chip is no longer available. Therefore we are in a complete re-design mode."

As the first production run of CD 306s had all been sold by this time, there seemed little point in continuing with the review. Dennis agreed to send me a review sample of the redesigned player when it was available, and I would review that instead. The review sample of what was now the CD 306 SACD Professional Version (S/N 08306PV6018) arrived in spring 2008, but such was the backed-up state of my personal review queue that I couldn't begin this one until a couple of months ago.

The Professional Version

Like its predecessor, the CD 306 SACD Professional Version SACD/CD player ($8000) is a handsome front-loading model finished in polished aluminum or black and supported on four conical feet (these can be rotated to level the player). Whereas the earlier version had a circular window in the top panel above the transport section, the Pro has six curved rectangular vents, shielded with wire mesh. Otherwise, it looks identical, with a blue 20-character alphanumeric display in the front panel's central black section, above the thin-profile disc tray. One row of push-buttons on the right of the front panel controls the transport functions (other than Pause, which is found only on the remote), another the choice of SACD or CD, multichannel or two-channel SACD data, and internal disc or external data input. A single row of buttons on the left of the front panel selects the sample rate for the digital output when playing CDs (44.1, 96, or 192kHz), the internal sample-rate converter frequency for CD playback (44.1, 96, 192, 288kHz), reaching –3dB at 45kHz and –12dB at 68kHz. Channel separation (not shown) was superb at >130dB below 1kHz, and still 115dB at 20kHz.

The rather complicated-looking graph in fig.2 shows the spectrum of the CD 306's balanced output under a variety of conditions, taken by sweeping the center frequency from 1kHz to 20kHz. The Cary's maximum output level from its balanced jacks was 5.9V with both CD and SACD data; it was 2.93V from the unbalanced jacks. Both sets of outputs preserved absolute polarity; i.e., were non-inverting. (The XLRs are wired with pin 2 hot.) The output impedance was very low, at 198 ohms at all frequencies, balanced, and 99 ohms unbalanced. Tested for error correction with the Pierre Verany Test CD, the CD 306 was the best player I have encountered, there being no audible glitches until track 37, which has 3mm gaps in the data spiral. However, while there were no audible problems with tracks 34–36, which have slightly shorter gaps, errors were being flagged in the S/PDIF output words.

The Cary’s frequency response was flat within the audioband with both CD and SACD data (fig.1, top pair of traces). Any response error playing back preemphasized CD data was negligible (fig.1, bottom pair of traces). Playing back SACDs, the output began to roll off above 30kHz, reaching –3dB at 45kHz and –12dB at 68kHz. Channel separation (not shown) was superb at >130dB below 1kHz, and still 115dB at 20kHz.


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384, 512, or 768 kHz), and Text Display mode for SACD playback. All functions are also available on the remote control, and the upsampling rate can be changed on the fly, with only a brief silence between settings.

The rear panel carries sets of balanced and unbalanced Left and Right analog output jacks—there are no multichannel analog outputs—with the balanced XLRs wired with pin 2 hot. There are also three digital output jacks (AES/EBU via XLR and S/PDIF via coaxial and TosLink jacks), which are operational for CD playback only, and three digital inputs (again, AES/EBU via XLR, and S/PDIF via coaxial and TosLink jacks).

Finally, an RS-232 port allows the player's firmware to be updated.

Inside, copper-plated partitions run from front to back, dividing the chassis into three sections. The transport—sourced, I believe, from Sony—occupies the central section, with a circuit board behind it carrying the control circuitry and the digital input/output circuitry. To the transport's left is a massive power supply, with heatsunk voltage regulators and multiple electrolytic reservoir capacitors. To the right is a full-depth, multilayer printed circuit board that carries, on its front section, even more power-supply circuitry, and, at the rear, the D/A and analog stages.

For SACD playback, the system's master clock runs at 22.5792 MHz (512Fs) rather than the usual 11.2896 MHz. The two-channel DSD data recovered from SACD are fed to four Burr-Brown PCM-1792u two-channel D/A chips, four used in parallel for each channel to give dual-differential balanced operation.

For CD playback, the PCM data are fed to a Burr Brown DF-1706 oversampling digital filter, which also offers HDCD decoding via external software. The 24-bit/192 kHz-sampled output of this filter is again fed to the array of Burr-Brown PCM-1792u chips, now operating in PCM mode. The DAC outputs are fed to the solid-state out-

frequency of a ½-octave bandpass filter from 20 kHz down to 20 Hz. (I do this test for historical continuity with the library of digital tests I have published going back to 1988.) The top pair of traces shows the spectrum of a dithered 1 kHz tone at -90 dBFS. The traces peak at exactly -90 dBFS, implying minimal linearity error, and are dominated by the recorded dither noise, implying that the Cary's dynamic range is greater than that of the CD medium. The next two pairs of traces overlap below 3 kHz; they are the spectra of a dithered tone at 1 kHz, first with SACD data, then with external 24-bit data. Both show a drop in the noise floor of around 15 dB, suggesting that the Cary player's ultimate resolution is between 18 and 19 bits. The bottom two pairs of traces in fig.2 show the spectra of a dithered tone at -120 dBFS, again with both SACD data and with external 24-bit data. The tone is clearly resolved at the correct level, and no harmonic or power-supply spurious are visible.

The rise in the noise floor in fig.2 with SACD data is most likely due to ultrasonic noise, due to the format's aggressive noise-shaping, increasingly leaking into the ½-octave bandpass filter's passband. An FFT-derived spectrum of the same signal (fig.3) shows uniformly low noise,

1 The sample of the original CD 306 I examined truncated external 24-bit data to 16 bits. By contrast, the Professional Version performed in exemplary fashion with external data.

Fig.4 Cary CD 306 SACD Pro, linearity error, 16-bit CD data.

Fig.5 Cary CD 306 SACD Pro, waveform of undithered 1 kHz sinewave at -90.31 dBFS, CD data (left channel blue, right red).

Fig.6 Cary CD 306 SACD Pro, waveform of dithered 1 kHz sinewave at -90 dBFS, SAD data (left channel blue, right red.)

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with again no trace of spurious. Plotting the CD 306's linearity error with CD data (fig.4) really shows only the effect of the recorded dither noise. The Cary's reproduction of an undithered 16-bit sinewave at exactly -90.31 dBFS is essentially perfect (fig.5), with the three DC voltage levels described by these data in clear evidence, with excellent waveform symmetry. Increasing the bit depth to 24 or playing back DSD data gave the same result: an excellent sinewave with low noise (fig.6).
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The continued evolution of the Benz cartridge line and the culmination of years of research and manufacturing refinements. The S Class incorporates advancements in moving coil and suspension design, materials and new Dynascan stylus.
The Cary offered very low levels of harmonic distortion. Fig.7, for example, is an FFT-derived spectrum of the CD 306's balanced output while playing back a full-scale 1kHz tone from the Sony Test SACD into a high impedance. The only harmonic visible is the second, lying at a roots-of-the-universe — 120dB (0.0001%) in the left channel and — 116dB (0.00015%) in the right. The second harmonic rose by 10dB with external 24-bit data and is joined by a trace of third harmonic (fig.8), but this is still negligible in absolute terms. And intermodulation distortion was also vanishingly low, even into the demanding 600 ohm load (fig.9).

The Cary demonstrated excellent rejection of word-clock jitter, though the measured level dropped a little as the oversampling ratio was increased. With the CD 306's oversampling set to 384kHz, for example, the Miller Analyzer indicated just 246 picoseconds peak—peak of jitter—and, as can be seen in fig.10, this was almost entirely data-related, and close to the residual level in the test signal. However, some modulation of the noise floor to either side of the fundamental tone can be seen in this graph; in this respect, the Cary performs very similarly to the Krell Evolution 505, which Fred Kaplan reviewed in the September 2008 issue of Stereophile.

Finally, the CD 306's digital output operated correctly at 96 and 192kHz, when those rates were selected with the front-panel pushbutton.

Overall, Cary's CD 306 SACD Professional Version offers superb measured performance that is close to the state of the art.

—John Atkinson
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base frequency.) On the other hand, the DF-1706 chip can output filtered data only at a maximum sample rate of 192kHz, so I'm really no closer to grasping the CD 306's architecture than I was when I began writing this paragraph.

I experienced two operational niggles with the CD 306, neither very important: 1) When I placed an SACD in the open tray and pressed Play, the drawer closed and the disc was loaded, but wouldn't actually play until I pressed Play a second time. 2) With some discs, the player defaulted to the multichannel data, meaning that no music was audible. Pressing the Mch./2Ch button restored the sound, but I had understood from the manual that the default priority with fully-loaded SACDs was given to the two-channel data. Otherwise, the CD 306 worked flawlessly all the time I had it in my system, and SACDs were always quick to load and play.

**Sound—SACD**

In a word, smooth. Not smooth as in rolled-off or mellow or dull, but with SACD playback, smooth in the sense of the high frequencies having a natural silkiness, without a trace of unnatural sheen or metallic nature. The violins in Tchaikovsky's Serenade for Strings, with Daniel Gatti conducting the Royal Philharmonic (SACD, Harmonia Mundi USA HMU807394), sounded naturally made recordings, with the soft choral entry of Morten Lauridsen's Lux aeterna, in the recording by Stephen Layton leading Polyphony and the Britten Sinfonia (SACD, Hyperion SACDA67449), opened up the end of my listening room into the acoustic of London's Temple Church, the soft choral entry raising goose bumps.

Paradoxically, with the best audio components, this phenomenon can occur even with unnatural recordings. The Dave Brubeck Quartet's *Take Five* (SACD, Columbia/Legacy CS 65122) was recorded in 1959—analog tape hiss is a little obtrusive—and the miking of the instruments is multiple mono rather than true stereo, though the mono image of Joe Morello's drums does include some space. (In the title track, the recording venue lights up when he solos on snare and kick drums.) But despite the multimono miking, the Cary presented this recording with a sonic unity that made me forget its vintage.

The same thing happened with some rock recordings. I'm a big fan of Peter Gabriel, who has not always been well served when it comes to recorded sound. Many tracks on his mid-80s album *So* (SACD, Geffen Chronicles 069 493 626-2) have been mixed to sound unlistenably bright. But "Don't Give Up," his duet with Kate Bush, had a unity to the sound when played through the Cary. From Tony Levin's ostinato bass-guitar figure through Gabriel's plaintive bleat to the head-expanding character of Kate Bush's double-tracked reassurance, the unity of the Cary's presentation was definitely more than the sum of these processed parts.

The Cary also majored in preserving a recording's sense of space. The stage depth in violinist Tom Chiu's recording of David Chesky's Violin Concerto (on Area 31, Chesky SACD288) was as fully developed as I have experienced, while the spatial bloom that develops in the choruses in the title track of Steely Dan's *Gaucho* (SACD, MCA B0000868-36), as the reverb return of Donald Fagen's phased Rhodes piano is boosted, was simply delicious.

**Sound—CD**

The big question regarding the CD 306's handling of CDs is which upsampling ratio to use. It's easy, using the remote control, to change the ratio while the music's playing, but that can lead to a restlessness that distracts from the mu-

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1 The Ayre KK-R preamplifier reviewed by Wes Phillips elsewhere in this issue, also excels at this aspect of reproduction. I enthusiastically endorse WP's recommendations.
Artisanal recordings made by engineer Ira Norman Segall blending audiophile techniques with outstanding musical artists
When Art Dudley reviewed Cary's CD303/300 CD player, which has the same feature, in October 2005 (www.stereophile.com/cdplayers/1005cary), he found that, as the oversampling ratio was increased, with all CDs "there was an increase in the smoothness and liquidity of the sound: rough edges were definitely being sanded off." But he also found that the effects of the various rates varied from disc to disc. "What was interesting," he wrote, "was that some discs had a distinct 'lock-in' point: I would reach a certain level of performance beyond which the sound would change drastically, becoming dull and colored and downright quacky."

I agree with Art that the smoothness and liquidity tended to improve with the upsampling ratio, but I didn't find drastic reductions in quality, instead, I reached a point where increasing the ratio made no difference. The one exception was in the area of low-frequency definition. This issue's "Recording of the Month," Guitars (CD, Half Note 4537), from veteran jazz pianist McCoy Tyner, features, as well as a litany of A-list axemen—Marc Ribot, John Scofield, Derek Trucks, Bill Frisell, and Béla Fleck—the great Ron Carter on double bass. At 44.1kHz, with no upsampling, Carter's instrument sounded overcooked: weighty, yes, but big and bloated, and pushing the instrument's midbass bloat until, with 768kHz selected, the body of the double bass's tonal quality was in the correct proportion to the attacks.

This was with the Dynaudio Sapphire and PSB Synchrony One speakers, both of which have, et. full:figured low frequencies. But I can imagine that with speakers balanced more on the lean side, such as the Magico V3 (which I reviewed last May), a lower upsampling ratio might be found preferable. But with the highest upsampling ratio, the quality of the Cary's bass with CD began to approach what it produced playing SACDs. For example, I could hear no difference between the SACD and upsampled CD presentations of the symphonic mix of bass guitar and kick drum on Steely Dan's "Hey Nineteen," from Gaucho.

The Cary correctly decoded HDCD, the display correctly identifying such discs. However, it would not decode HDCD-encoded data fed to its digital input I discovered only by accident: I was feeding the CD 306 the digital output of my Logitech Transporter WiFi music server playing the HDCD-encoded "Red Book" files of the recording of John Butt and the Dunedin Consort performing Handel's Messiah (CD, Linn 285). The datastream was not identified as HDCD by the Cary's display, and the replay level was 6dB higher than it should have been. This is a minor problem, given the rarity of such circumstances, but hey, I'm a critic—I'm paid to pick nits!

**Comparisons**

I primarily compared the Cary CD 306 with the Ayre C-5xe, which has been my reference hi-rez player for the past three years. SACD comparisons were made difficult by the fact that I don't have duplicate SACDs, though the fact that the Cary has a digital input made CD comparisons a piece of cake—I simply fed the Ayre's AES/EBU data output to the Cary's data input, then used the Ayre KX-R preamp's Input Offset function to match playback levels to within 0.3dB.

Differences were very difficult to hear. But after a while, playing back my 1998 recording of a Santa Fe Chamber Music Festival performance of Mozart's Piano Quartet 1 in g, K.478, with Pinchas Zukerman, from Bawol (CD, Stereophile STPH014-2), I felt the Cary retrieved just a tad more of the reverberant signature with the solo piano passages. Conversely, on my recording of Robert Silverman performing Beethoven's Piano Sonata 12 on Editor's Choice (CD, Stereophile STPH016-2), I was hard put to hear any difference at all. With Eric Whitacre's Lux aeternam, from While You Are Alive, my new CD from Minnesota choral group Cantus (Cantus CTS-1208), both players developed a delicious sense of the hall ambience around the singers, but again, with the Cary, that hall was very slightly larger.

I repeated the comparison using a DVD-A I had burned of the 24-bit/88.2kHz masters for the new Cantus CD. Again, the Cary just edged out the Ayre when it came to retrieval of hall ambience. The Ayre, however, gave a tad more weight to the bass singers. But these differences were very small, and detectable only in direct comparisons; if I left the room after randomly switching preamp inputs, when I re-entered, I couldn't identify whether it was the Cary or the Ayre that was playing.

I did compare the CD 306 Pro with its earlier version, again with levels matched. Regardless of the potential damage to my audiophile credentials, I must say that I failed to hear any difference between them, even after lengthy comparisons.

**Summing up**

For SACD playback, the natural competition for the Cary CD 306 Professional Version are the Ayre CX-5xe ($5950), reviewed by Wes Phillips in July 2005, and the Krell Evolution 505 ($10,000), reviewed by Fred Kaplan in September 2008. I haven't auditioned the Krell in my own system, but I did listen to it in Fred's system, connected by Krell's proprietary CAST links to his Krell FBI integrated amplifier, where it performed flawlessly. But as Fred pointed out, you get the full measure of the Krell's sound quality only when it is used in an all-Krell system. The Evolution 505's performance via its conventional balanced and unbalanced jacks was less competitive. The Ayre has the advantage of playing DVD-A's and -Vs as well as SACDs and CDs. But the Cary just edges out the Ayre, I think, in terms of soundstage depth and the sheer silkiness of its high frequencies.

I enormously enjoyed my time with the Cary CD 306 Professional Version. It's on the expensive side, but for your $8000 you get a well-engineered, solidly built, superb-sounding player with close to state-of-the-art measured performance. And it has that very useful digital input, for use with a network music player. Recommended.
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Vincent Audio

KHV-1pre

HEADPHONE AMPLIFIER/PREAMPLIFIER

DESCRIPTIN: Hybrid headphone amplifier with two 1/4" headphone outputs and one pair of RCA preamplifier outputs. Tube complement: two 12AX7B. Frequency response: 20Hz-50kHz, ±0.5dB. Nominal output power: 400mW into 300 ohms, 1.75W into 32 ohms. THD: 0.1% max (1kHz, 100mW). Input impedance: 600k ohms. Input sensitivity: 600mV for maximum output. Signal/noise ratio: >90dB.

Dimensions: 10.4" (265mm) H by 6.2" (160mm) W by 8.2" (210mm) D. Weight: 8 lbs (3.6kg).

Finishes: Black, silver.

SERIAL NUMBER OF UNIT REVIEWED: 20050415079.

PRICE: $899.95. Approximate number of dealers: 30. Warranty: 30 days or money back from Audio Advisor, 2 years parts & labor.


YOU know me. I'm not perzackly an audio slut, but I am easy. When Audio Advisor's Wayne Schuurman called me to pitch the Vincent KHV-1pre tube-transistor headphone amplifier, he pretty much had me at "tube" and "headphone." But I wasn't familiar with Vincent Audio.

"That's why I called you," Schuurman said. "I know you were impressed by the Cayin HA-1A. Vincent is also manufactured in China, by Sheng-Ya, but it's designed in Germany. Vincent, in turn, is a branch of Thorens. You're going to be impressed with its build quality." I was.

Paint your palette blue and gray

The KHV-1pre ($899.95) is a vertically configured—tall and skinny, not short and wide—hybrid tube-transistor headphone amplifier with two 1/4" headphone jacks on its front panel. A porthole lets you watch one of its two 12AX7B tubes at work (to get just the right amount of tube glow, you can choose among three levels of illumination,

1 Sam Tellig raved about the Cayin Audio HA-1A in the June 2006 Sterephile. WP wrote about the Cayin in November 2006, see www.stereophile.com/headphones/406head/index3.html.— Ed.
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The AudioQuest GBC is an excellent sounding cable in all areas. The midrange has a very smooth and lifelike quality, while the most minute details in the high end are revealed with great accuracy. And then there is the bass, the foundation of all music. With its special bass conductors, Helical Array geometry, and its large aggregate size of 12AWG, the GBC delivers a tight, detailed, and thunderous bottom end. The beautiful woven PET outer sleeve on GBC is available in your choice of Black, Blue or Clear. GBC comes standard with AudioQuest’s best spade lug, the #P8MS, but a wide range of connector options are available. Single Bi-Wire termination is also available for an additional $30/pr. For other lengths and options please visit our web site at www.hcmaudio.com

A Perfect Match For GBC... AudioQuest Coral/CQ Interconnect Cable

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or off). Below the porthole is a modest-looking volume control.

The KHV-1pre is hefty without being overbuilt. Its sides are extruded aluminum and its faceplate is solid, but not to the point of being porny audio bling. Its rear panel has one set of RCA inputs and one pair of unprepossessing RCA outputs, allowing you to use the KHV-1pre as a preamp. Other accoutrements are the porthole illumination slider switch, a receptacle for the quick-blow fuse, and an IEC power jack. Audio Advisor says that the KHV-I employs a stabilized, proprietary power supply.

**Catch the breeze and the winter chills**

The KHV-1's vertical orientation allowed me to place it next to a Simaudio Moon Evolution SuperNova CD player rather than on a separate shelf, which greatly eased the changing-out of cables. It was also simple and fun to set the amount of tube glow—a silly sort of satisfaction, but it's amazing how juiced you can get from setting the mood for a listening session.

**IT WAS ALSO SIMPLE AND FUN TO SET THE AMOUNT OF TUBE GLOW.**

It probably reflects a lack of mental flexibility on my part, but I've always wondered about headphone amplifiers with two headphone jacks. Other than engineers monitoring a recording session, do audiophiles ever actually share a headphone listening session? Probably not—but as a headphone junkie, I have multiple sets of cans around the house, so I plugged pairs of AKG-701s and Sennheiser HD-650s into the KHV-1pre. Yes, I was being a headphone nerd. I was also curious to see if driving two sets of phones would cause any audible sag.

No worries there. Singly or in pairs, the Vincent had juice to spare. Perhaps I'll never convince my wife that joint headphone listening might be "quality time," but I did get a bigger kick than any sane person should have out of being able to switch headphones in a flash to compare and contrast. Or maybe the KHV-1pre's designers know their audience.

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When Audio Advisor's Wayne Schuurman contacted me about reviewing the Vincent Audio KHV-1pre headphone amplifier, I felt confident that I had everything I needed to handle the task, owning, as I do, both the AKG-701 and Sennheiser HD-650 headphones, which have long been my references. That oughta get 'er done, I thought.

Then I got a phone call from HeadRoom's Tyll Hertsens. "Dude! You have got to hear the rewiring job we've done on the '701s. We hardware a four-conductor Cardas cable directly to the drivers, eliminating at least two solder joints—then we put a Cardas ¼" plug on the end. Un-freaking-believable!"

I already considered the '701s pretty special, so I was skeptical about the level of improvement. I dithered. "What's it cost?"

"It is kind of labor-intensive for us, since we have to disassemble the headphones, hard-solder the tinned leads directly to the terminal blocks. It works out to $322 for a 10' set. (It's also $285 for a 5' set terminated to an ¼" miniplug, if you want to use your '701s with a portable.) While I pondered this, Hertsens explained that he'd been inspired to open up his '701s by the improvement brought about by HeadRoom's Cardas-cable upgrades for the Sennheiser HD-580, HD-600, and HD-650 headphones ($185 for 4' with miniplug or $222 for 10' with ¼" plug), all of which use a standard Sennheiser connector at the earcup.

"The simplicity of replacing the cable makes it possible for people to quickly compare the stock cable and the Cardas cable," he continued. "Pretty much everybody prefers the Cardas. You don't get that ability to quickly compare the AKG—unless you attend one of the HeadRoom road shows we do all around the country." Then he sprang the trap. "Of course, I can send you a pair of '650s with the Cardas and '701s with the Fat Pipe, and you could compare them to your stock sets." Oh, Tyll Hertsens, do lead me into temptation. And the Vincent KHV-1pre would be the perfect testing device for this singular comparison: it has two headphone jacks and a huge amount of testicular fortitude.

But... I didn't really want to hear un-freaking-believable differences between my stock cables and sets that I'd have to shell out extra for—besides, with minor cavils, I liked the sound of my '650s and '701s. Un-freaking-believable differences would make them sound, well, different. I realize that such grumpiness is inconsistent with the audiophile creed of Different is better. Sometimes I just want things to stay the same.

Here's what the cables have in common: They are four-conductor wires, built to Cardas's Constant-Q Golden Ratio configuration, inside and covered with a shield. Both terminate in a hefty Cardas plug with stress-relief wrap. Because standard headphone jacks use a shared ground, the Cardas plug is designed to reduce crosstalk.

The Sennheiser cables are hardwired to custom-built Sennheiser connectors that grip the Sennheiser jacks more firmly than Sennheiser's stock plugs. (My biggest beef with the HD-580s, '600s, and '650s is how that connector loosens as time goes by and you repeatedly toss your cans in your go-bag for monitoring recordings. Problem solved—I think.) The Fat Pipe needs to be hardwired to your '701s by HeadRoom's techs.

My worry that the Cardases would turn either of my fave headphone into something else proved unfounded. The AKGs sounded warmer and punchier, with extra detail throughout their response range. Extra detail isn't code for too much, but an attempt to explain why I heard more air within soundstages, and why those soundstages grew slightly more voluminous. This may well be attributable to that crosstalk-reducing plug—in my experience, quieter usually translates to more detail and space. The bass response was more solid, and extremely tight.
A better way to get from here to there

Great components are just the beginning of exceptional sound.

Cable-matching can balance the interactions between your components. Example: your amp + speakers + speaker cables is a "circuit." Changing any of these variables will change the sound. Unlock the potential in your fine components by careful cable matching. We can help. Use our Cable Library containing $2.5 million in cable samples to know for sure before you buy.

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Now I understand what you tried to say to me

I primarily auditioned the KHV-1 as a headphone amplifier. I did briefly listen to it as a preamp in a system consisting of Definitive Technology Mythos STS tower speakers and a Musical Fidelity Nu-Vista 300 power amplifier. It was certainly an adequate preamp, if a tad less incisive than I would have preferred, but I couldn't escape the suspicion that having only a single line-level input more than somewhat limited its usefulness as a "real" preamplifier. On the other hand, having a pinch-hitting preamp around the house is never a bad thing.

As a headphone amplifier, the KHV-1 was pretty impressive. Its metal casework kept it reasonably cool, and it was quiet as all get-out—a paramount quality in a can amp.

The Vincent delivered the masculinity of Simone Dinnerstein's performances of works by J.S. Bach on The Berlin Concert (CD, Telarc CD-80715), cleanly articulating the clangy attack of her Hamburg Steinway without stinting on the decay of its notes in the big acoustic. As impressive as the Vincent was at delivering the "bigness" of Dinnerstein's sound, however, it was even better at revealing the calm at the center of her talent. She has lots of technique and can deliver cascades of notes at high velocity, but what makes Dinnerstein's Bach special is how she handles the silences between the notes. That's the difference between what I call "sewing-machine Baroque," which just clutters on and on, and the essence that raises Bach above the mundane. The Vincent's power and speed served Dinnerstein—and Papa Bach—very well.

**ITS METAL CASEWORK KEPT IT REASONABLY COOL, IT HAD GRUNT A-PLENTY, AND IT WAS QUIET AS ALL GET-OUT.**

The Vincent also de-murked "The Colors of Chloë," from the Gary Burton Quintet's Ring (CD, ECM 1051). It's a wonderfully recorded disc, but sorting out two bassists, two guitarists, Burton's vibraphone, and Bob Moses' Swiss-watch percussion is a task that confounds less than crackerjack electronics. The KHV-1pre was more than up to it, however. From the swirling vibraphone intro floating above Eberhard Weber's moaning bowed bass to the lyrical flights of Pat Metheny's guitar, the Vincent revealed timbres, nuance, Cardas. What was revelatory, however, was the way Burton's vibraphones cut through the arrangement with the Cardas. The leading edges of his mallet strokes were crisper, and the harmonic overtones were more integrated with the fundamentals.

These are subtle differences. I could be very happy—was very happy—with the stock cables, but now that I've heard the differences, I may not be able to be. This is the problem with being an audiophile: There's always something better, and it usually costs money. People who are happy with good enough aren't attracted to this hobby.

Are the differences too subtle to justify $300? Only you can answer that. Probably, if you're really happy with the sound you're getting from your AKG-701s or the top Sennheisers. But—and this is a big but—if you rely on your Sennheisers and AKGs to extract from a recording every damn thing on it, and/or if you won't be satisfied with even a close second, it's not an unreasonably costly upgrade. Of course, that doesn't mean it can be taken lightly: If I can afford to have only one of my two favorite cans upgraded, which do I choose?

But that's my problem. Your problem, assuming you're brash enough to experience the difference HeadRoom's cable upgrades can make, will simply be, *Should I?* Sure you should.

—Wes Phillips

**headphone-cable Modifications, continued**

Simone Dinnerstein's recent recording of keyboard works by J.S. Bach, *The Berlin Concert* (CD, Telarc CD-80715), was clangier through the Fat Pipe. The acoustic of the Berlin Philharmonie sounded not larger, but more convincingly large. Dinnerstein's percussive technique sounded sharper, the leading transients of her notes crisper, faster, more athletic. And man, the Fat Pipe gave that Hamburg Steinway a super bottom end.

In other words, the Cardas Fat Pipe did nothing bad to the qualities I liked in the AKG-701s, and made very subtle but noticeable improvements in those areas where I felt they could use them.

The Cardas opened up the top end of the Sennheiser models. I can't say it actually extended their HF response, but it gave them some of that sparkle I'd grown to think they needed. That added clarity to all recordings, and expanded the soundstages of those that had any. Another benefit of that Cardas plug? Can't be sure—but that's my guess.

With "The Colors of Chloë," from the Gary Burton Quintet's *Ring* (CD, ECM 1051), the stock Sennheisers had a slightly more closed-in sound that made it harder to distinguish any given note of Mick Goodrick's guitar from any single note of Pat Metheny's. Following the lines of the two guitarists was easy enough, but individual notes seemed buried deeper in the mix than with the Cardas. What was revelatory, however, was the way Burton's vibraphones cut through the arrangement with the Cardas. The leading edges of his mallet strokes were crisper, and the harmonic overtones were more integrated with the fundamentals.

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But that's my problem. Your problem, assuming you're brash enough to experience the difference HeadRoom's cable upgrades can make, will simply be, *Should I?* Sure you should.

—Wes Phillips
and, above all, grace. Forget harps—*Ring* is what heaven ought to sound like.

*Beyond Standard*, by Hiromi’s Sonicbloom (SACD, Telarc SACD-63686), was an ear-opener. I’m still not sure I love the band, but the recording is phenomenal, and their take on “Caravan” is a killer, melding the jet-propelled rhythms and loopiness of Raymond Scott’s “Powerhouse” onto the Tizol-Ellington standard. Hiromi Uehara’s Scott-ish dervish piano figures kick the piece off, followed immediately by Tony Grey’s powerful bass, which in turn is joined by arena-rock heavy drumming from Martin Valihora. It’s only when David Fiuczynski starts playing the melody on his lap steel that the piece becomes recognizable—and then it’s taken through melodic and contrapuntal changes for another eight minutes.

The Vincent gave “Caravan” immense weight. Sonicbloom plays it heavy, and the amp delivered that power with éclat—and how! Grey and Valihora were thunderous but never ponderous. This is not a “Caravan” viewed from a distance, hazy and shimmering in the heat waves; Sonicbloom’s “Caravan” is in your face and diesel-powered. The Vincent delivered everything but the fumes.

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**MEASUREMENTS**

I measured the Vincent Audio KHV-1pre using Audio Precision’s top-model SY52722 system (see www.ap.com) for most of the tests, with some use made of the magazine’s original AP System One. Both the preamplifier and the headphone outputs preserved absolute polarity; i.e., were non-inverting. The maximum gain assessed at the preamp output jacks was 17.1dB; this increased to 25.8dB at the headphone jacks. Both figures are higher than required for real-world listening, meaning that the volume control will be used mainly at the lower end of its range, as WP found. Fortunately, the control’s channel balance was fairly good, the maximum error being 0.68dB in favor of the left channel at the 9 o’clock setting. The best balance was with the volume control set to its maximum, when the right channel was just 0.09dB higher in level.

The KHV-1pre’s input impedance was usefully high, at 38k ohms across the audioband. The output impedance from the headphone jacks was 16 ohms at all frequencies, which is slightly higher than optimal (see Keith Howard’s article on headphone performance in the August 2008 issue). Measured at the preamplifier output jacks, the source impedance was a moderately low 680 ohms at high and middle frequencies, but rose to 6.2k ohms at 20Hz, which will lean out the low frequencies if the KHV-1pre is used with a power amplifier having an input impedance of less than 20k ohms or so. WP used the Vincent as a preamplifier with a NuVista 300 power amplifier, which has an input impedance of 64k ohms, so there weren’t any matching problems there.

Measured at the headphone output, the Vincent’s frequency response was basically flat, with a slight, 0.25dB rolloff at 20kHz and a −3dB point of 120kHz (fig.1). The low end was flat, even into 600 ohms (green and magenta traces). The top-octave rolloff was slightly greater from the preamplifier output (fig.2), but the main point to note in this graph is the premature rolloff at low frequencies into the 600 ohm load (green and magenta) compared with the response into 100k ohms (blue and red). This is due to the Ohm’s Law interaction between the rising source impedance at low frequencies and the load impedance. In practice, of course, the Vincent preamplifier outputs will never see a load as low as 600 ohms. Channel separation (not shown) was better than 65dB across most of the
During my auditioning of the Vincent KHV-1pre, I was never able to remotely tax it with either the AKG-701s or Sennheiser HD-650s. Even if I needed head-banging volume levels driving both pair of cans, I could barely get the Vincent's volume control a little past 9 o'clock. Maybe you have a pair of headphones that could stress the KHV-1pre's output capabilities, but I never came close. It had plenty of headroom.

Perhaps they'll listen now

The Cayin HA-1A, which sort of started this whole thing, was still on hand, so it seemed only natural to compare it to the Vincent. Both have preamp outputs and, with the Cayin's recent price increase (to $875), cost about the same. Both are well built, the Vincent having the heavier casework.

There are some differences. The Cayin has a tube output section that can be run in triode (1.2W/pc) or ultralinear (2.3W/pc) mode. It has a hefty toroidal power supply and weighs twice as much as the Vincent. It also runs quite a bit hotter; thanks, no doubt, to its two EL84 output tubes. The HA-1A also has switchable output impedance, allowing you to set its output to match that of your 'phones—a nice touch, although I never got the impression that the Vincent needed more flexibility in that regard.

audioband, decreasing slightly above 10kHz.

The signal/noise ratio, assessed with the input shorted but the volume control set to its maximum, was respectable at 76.3dB ref. 1V output with an unweighted, wideband measurement. A-weighting increased this to 86.5dB. The plot of the headphone output's THD+noise percentage against voltage into impedances ranging from 60 ohms (the impedance of the AKG K701 headphones used by WP in his auditioning) to 100k ohms (fig.3) is actually dominated by the noise below 1V, any distortion components being buried under the noise floor. True distortion makes its presence known as the rising trend in the traces above 1V, but even into 60 ohms, the Vincent's headphone output can deliver 3V before the THD crosses the 0.1% threshold and 8V is available at the usual definition of clipping (1% THD). The plot of THD+N from the preamplifier output into 100k ohms (fig.4) reveals that the right channel was more linear than the left, but the overall shape of the traces is the same as in fig.3, suggesting that it is overloading of the tube stage that limits the KHV-1pre's headphone output. (The waveform clips asymmetrically as the output level rises above 2V.)

Because it appears to be taken directly from the tube circuit, the preamplifier output will not drive low impedances without adding distortion. Fig.4 indicates that at a 1V level into a high 100k ohm load, the KHV-1pre's left channel still offers respectively low distortion, at 0.066%. When then load was reduced to 10k ohms, a typical figure for many solid-state power amplifiers, the THD rose to 0.24%, which may start to be audible. With 3k ohms, the KHV-1pre suffered from 1% THD at 1V, which was well into clipping. So even if the low-frequency rolloff with low impedances will not be an issue, the Vincent's preamplifier output is best used with a power amplifier having an input impedance greater than 30k ohms.

Measured at the headphone output, the THD+N percentage remains both low and constant with frequency (fig.5), but with the right channel again more linear than the left. Fig.6, taken into 100k ohms, reveals that this is because the left channel has a bit more of the subjectively innocuous second harmonic than the right. Though both channels have almost as much third harmonic as

However, on Burton’s “The Colors of Chloe,” differences became clearer. Both amps did a good job of sorting out Steve Swallow’s plummy bass tone from Weber’s mooey wail, and both gave the bassists a solid bottom, but the Cayin had more of that special glow—that sense of three-dimensionality that distinguishes live from electronic sound.

Similarly, the Cayin seemed to separate the attack of Burton’s mallet work from the hash of overtones that the attacks floated on. It didn’t dissect the music, artificially removing one from the other, but rather allowed me to hear all of the sound, and more readily discern its components. Was it a day-and-night difference? No, but it was audible.

With “Caravan,” both amps had slam, but through the Cayin, Grey’s bass had an extra helping of heft, Valihora’s drums a double dose of slam. The Vincent

measurements, continued

second, these harmonics are low in absolute terms, and there are no higher-order harmonics visible above the noise floor—always an indicator of good sound quality. Drops the load to 60 ohms made very little change in the picture (fig.7) other than slightly increasing the level of the third harmonic and the fourth harmonic making an appearance, although at —104 dB (0.0006%), the latter will not upset anyone.

The intermodulation distortion of the Vincent's headphone output was very low into 100k ohms (fig.8); though the 60 ohm loading brings up the levels of the intermodulation components (fig.9), they remain low in absolute terms. As WP found, the KHV-1pre has no difficulty driving even low-impedance 'phones like the AKG K701.

The Vincent Audio KHV-1pre offers excellent measured performance. The only compromise resulting from using a tubed gain stage is that the preamplifier’s output is limited in its ability to drive impedances much below 30k ohms. But in its prime role as a headphone amplifier, it will be bombproof. Yes, I would like to have seen a lower output impedance, but with higher-impedance headphones such as the various Sennheiser HD models, the Vincent will perform impeccably. Because the AKG K701’s impedance remains relatively constant with frequency (see www.stereophile.com/headphones/806akg/index4.html), there will be little modification of the 'phones' frequency response by the Vincent. Only with the low-impedance Grados (see, for example, www.stereophile.com/headphones/532/index2.html) might the 'phones' low frequencies get a little bit of a boost from the usual Ohm's Law interaction.

Addendum, Sample 2: The second sample of the KHV-1pre measured identically to the first in most respects: maximum gain from headphone and RCA jacks, maximum output levels, frequency response, and distortion spectra. Though the input impedance was a little bit higher, at 45k ohms across most of the audioband, this is inconsequential. While the output impedance measured at the sole headphone jack was the same as the first sample, the preamplifier output impedance from the RCA jacks was a little higher at high and middle frequencies, at 1100 ohms. Most importantly, this was now maintained down to 20Hz instead of rising to >6k ohms, as it had with the first sample. Current production of the KHV-1pre will therefore be better matched to typical power amplifier input impedances, and will not suffer from prematurely rolled-off lows.

—John Atkinson
seemed a tad harder on the attacks—and, perhaps, a shade less rich in timbre.

Which was right? I'm not certain. Michael Bishop recorded Hiromi's Sonicbloom direct to DSD with no editing and was obviously going for an aggressive live sound. Was the Vincent giving me more of that? Was the Cayin "tubier" than the Vincent, which might well be the more honest amplifier? I preferred the Cayin's warmth for the middle. Yes, the Cayin sounded consistently "tubier" than the Vincent, which I grant, is just me being an OCD-afflicted audioweenie, as I never had problems with the Vincent in this regard. I even liked the Cayin's flæwatt output, which drove the Definitive Technology Mythos STS speakers nicely, if not very loudly.

**How you tried to set them free**
The Vincent Audio KHV-1pre is well built and sounds really good. I wouldn't jettison my Cayin HA-1A in favor of it—but if I'd had the Vincent first, I probably wouldn't throw over the Vincent in favor of the Cayin. While I slightly prefer the Cayin, other listeners might find it guilty of sonic sweetening. Chacun à son goût.

As to the question of value, is the KHV-1pre worth $899.95? To a hard-core headphone enthusiast, certainly. It extracts an amazing amount of detail from its input signal, and controls 'phones with an iron hand. On the other hand, if you don't listen to headphones much—or don't have a first-rate pair of them to listen through—probably won't constitute good value. For you.

The only reason to buy the KHV-1pre is to hear everything that a great set of headphones can deliver. In the final analysis, it's how well the Vincent achieves that, plus its feature set—eg, its double headphone sockets—that might compel someone to choose it in lieu of another headphone amp. But driving one set of 'phones or two, the Vincent Audio KHV-1pre's performance was superb.

**Editor's Note**
When Tom Myers of Vincent's North American distributor WS Distributing received the preprint of the preceding review text, in order for him to prepare his "Manufacturer's Comment" letter, he was alarmed because the review sample Wes had written about was more than two years old and the KHV-1pre had since been significantly revised. He therefore asked if we could postpone publication of the review until Wes Phillips had the opportunity to audition a current version. I felt this fair, Wes Phillips' thoughts on the sound of the second sample (serial number 010707K01B111) follow. —John Atkinson

**Addendum: Sample 2**
One obvious difference between the old and new editions of the KHV-1pre is that current production has only a single headphone output jack, not two. In addition, the current model has two line-level inputs and a front-panel switch that lets you toggle between them. I'm told that a circuit change also makes it more tolerant of lower load impedances. The question is, did the new KHV-1pre sound different from the older one?

In a nutshell, not really—although it is slightly better with difficult loads. All the clarity and detail that had captivated me in the original were still present, but I didn't feel there was a noticeable and consistent improvement over the older model, which I still had on hand. However, the new features—the extra input and the front-panel switch—changed my overall impression of the component's usefulness. I already considered the Vincent first-rate as a headphone amplifier, but I questioned its versatility as a single-source preamp. Funny how doubling the inputs made such a difference in my opinion.

Wow, I said to myself on unpacking the new unit, this would be really useful to have around the house. Yes, I was possibly putting a lot of emphasis on that second input, but I'm not a huge fan of single-use tools—and that extra input really does make me think of the Vincent as a preamp with a superb headphone amp built in. What a great system building block: begin with a headphone listening station, add an amp and speakers when finances and space permit, and Bob's your uncle. Handy to have around the house, indeed.

I grabbed my AKG 701 headphones with the Cardas Fat Pipe cables and gave the KHV-1pre a good workout. I chose the 701s because their 60-65 ohm impedance would give me a chance to see if the new KHV-1pre actually delivered higher performance with lower impedances. I cued Simone Dinnerstein's recording of J.S. Bach's French Suite 5, BWV 816 (CD, Telarc CD-80715), and was transported to Berlin. I went back to the older model and ditto—but with minor differences. Through the new model, Dinnerstein's left hand dug a little harder—not enough so that I'd be able to put on my cans and declare within a few notes which version I was listening to, but still: Different. Better.

Hmm, thought I. Wonder what it would do with some really deep bass? I pulled out Robert Rich's Seven Veils (CD, Hearts of Space 11086) and cued "Lapis," through which is woven some extremely deep electronically altered cello. Again, the new KHV-1pre dominated the AKG 701s slightly better than did the older version.

Lather. Rinse. Repeat. Repeated comparisons generated similar outcomes.

Bottom line: Vincent has improved an already noteworthy product. The sonic differences might not be a big deal to many headphone users, but those who own AKG 701s—and, most definitely, Grado 'phones—will derive some benefit from the changes. To my way of thinking, that's almost minor compared to the difference that an extra line-level input makes in the KHV-1pre's flexibility. That makes it a keeper. —Wes Phillips
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World Audio History
Harbeth M40.1 and Audio Note
AN-E/SpE HE loudspeakers

Art Dudley reviewed the Harbeth M40.1 loudspeaker in October (p.153). A large, stand-mounted design in the British BBC tradition, the M40.1 costs $12,995/pair, plus $595/pair for its substantial, 14"-tall stands.

Art was extremely positive about the M40.1’s performance. “Harbeth has the rare ability to bundle tonal neutrality with excellent performance in virtually every other regard that matters,” he said, and concluded that, “Here, finally, is a loudspeaker that achieves flat frequency response without sucking all the life out of recorded music.” However, he had problems getting the most neutral output from this pair of physically large speakers in his room (a point that was driven home when I tried the Harbeths in my own, much larger living room): “There were challenges in getting such a wide cabinet far enough from the sidewalls to avoid minor to moderate bass cancellations while still enjoying a sufficiently wide soundfield,” he wrote. “Even the best-case placement, with the fronts of the speakers just over 6’ from the front wall, didn’t give perfectly smooth response throughout the bottom octaves… The smoothness of the M40.1’s bass response, though acceptably good in a small room, improved as the room boundaries became more distant… Still, the M40.1’s bottom-end response was solid to well below Harbeth’s claims—only 2dB down at 31.5Hz in my small room.”

When I measured the big Harbeth’s frequency response (See October, p.157, fig.3), it did appear that the speaker’s bass response was elevated somewhat. But, as I went into in some detail in my 1999 article on measuring loudspeaker frequency response (see www.stereophile.com/features/103), not having access to a large, expensive anechoic chamber, I assess a loudspeaker’s low-frequency response by measuring the drive-unit and port outputs in what is called the “nearfield”; in, with the microphone capsule almost touching the radiator. First described by veteran speaker engineer Don Keele in 1973, this technique gives a response that accurately reflects a loudspeaker’s low-frequency output as assessed in the off-field, with the important caveat that, mathematically, it assumes that the loudspeaker’s front baffle continues to infinity in all directions, which boosts the measured low-frequency response by up to 6dB. I have pondered over the years whether to apply a correction for this boost, but that correction will not be appropriate for any but very large rooms or anechoic chambers. In the end, I leave the curve uncorrected for this 2pi boost (which I did mention in the review text).

In his “Manufacturer’s Comment” (October, p.203), Harbeth’s Alan Shaw took exception to this measurement technique, feeling the 2pi midbass boost misleading. He had sent me a true anechoic frequency-response measurement for the Harbeth M40.1, this taken in the BBC’s anechoic chamber, which is large enough to allow a reflection-free time window of 300 milliseconds for the measurement. His and my measurements were broadly similar in the midrange and treble, allowing for differences in mike distance and measuring axis, etc., and the shapes of the two curves were broadly consistent at low frequencies. However, compared to his anechoic curve, my nearfield curve was elevated by +5dB or so with respect to the reference level at 1kHz. “What is the real frequency response?” Alan asked in his comment. “Easy answer: Trust the anechoic measurements above all others!”

But no one listens in an anechoic chamber. They listen in rooms of varying sizes. If you think about it, a measurement taken in an anechoic chamber and a nearfield, 2pi measurement are at opposite ends of a continuum of measurement conditions. The first assumes the room boundaries are, in effect, infinitely far away, the second that one of the room boundaries is infinitely close. A speaker that measures flat in the low bass, such as the Harbeth M40.1, will sound as if it has a bass boost in a real room, the amount of that boost depending on the room size.

To investigate this matter, I took

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1 Harbeth Audio Ltd, 3 Enterprise Park, Lindfield, Haywards Heath, West Sussex RH16 2LH, England, UK. Tel: (44) (0)870-803-4788. Fax: (44) (0)600-754442. Web: www.harbeth.co.uk. US distributor: Fidelis AN, 14 East Broadway, Derry, NH 03038. Tel: (603) 437-4769. Fax: (603) 437-4790. Web: www.fidelisav.com.

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the spatially averaged response at the listening position of the Harbeth M40.1s in my Brooklyn room. I then drove the speakers back to Art in upstate New York, and took their spatially averaged response at the listening position in his room.

The results are shown in fig.1. The fact that my room (blue trace) is larger than Art's (red) allows me to move the speakers usefully farther away from the sidewalls. This flattens out the peaks and dips throughout the midrange decade (200Hz-2kHz), though the shape of the curve is similar. In addition, the Shindo tube amplifier I used at Art's has a much higher source impedance than the solid-state Musical Fidelity I used in my room, which increases the height of the peaks around 1kHz and 4.5kHz, which coincide with an increased impedance magnitude in those regions (see fig.1, October 2008, p.155).

The M40.1's spatially averaged response rolls off a little more in the top octave in Art's room than it does in mine. I think this is due to three factors: 1) The Shindo's source impedance will probably increase above 10kHz, which will reduce the top-octave level a little (again, see the impedance graph); 2) my room may well not be as absorptive as his in the top two octaves; and 3) probably most significant, in my room I aimed the Harbeths straight at my listening chair, whereas Art arranges the toe-in so that he listens somewhat off-axis to the sidewalls. Because of the speaker's very limited dispersion above 3.5kHz (see fig.4, October, p.157), this will reduce the level in this region with this sort of spatially averaged response. I certainly felt the Harbeth sounded more mellow, more polite in Art's room than it had in mine.

At the other end of the spectrum, Art's smaller room boosts the midbass more than mine does, but then, his lighter wall construction—my room is solid-walled for the first 4' above the floor—doesn't support the top octave quite as much. But the speaker still has a little more upper and midbass in my room than I have found to sound natural. While I thought the Harbeths scored highly in vocal reproduction and imaging in Art's room, with smooth, clean highs, the lumpy, excessive bass did eventually irritate me.

As is almost always the case with a large speaker that measures anechoically flat down to a low frequency, the Harbeth measures and sounds a touch midbass-heavy in a smallish room...

As is almost always the case with a large speaker that measures anechoically flat down to a low frequency, the Harbeth measures and sounds a touch midbass-heavy in a smallish room. Therefore, the larger the room, the better, especially as the smoothness of the speaker's midrange requires it to be well away from room boundaries. As Art found, the M40.1's treble balance can be fine-tuned by experimenting with toe-in. However, with the listener sitting straight on the tweeter axis and using solid-state amps, the treble does become fatiguing, I felt. While solid-state amps will better control the Harbeth's excessive in-room bass, a tube amp will probably work better with the highs.

Art wrote about the Audio Note AN-E/SPe HE loudspeaker ($6900/pair) in August 2008 (p.104)."Good dramatic impact, a believably human sense of touch, and altogether superior note-to-note flow," he wrote. "If those things top your list of musical qualities that a high-fidelity system should honor above all others, then the Audio Note AN-E/SPe HE should top your list of loudspeakers to covet and consider."

As I had traveled to Art's to measure the Harbeths in-room, it was a no-brainer to ask him to set up the Audio Notes for measurement. Whereas the HM40.1s had been set up several feet from the wall behind them, the Audio Notes were close to the corners. Art explained why in his review: "the AN-E/SPe HEs performed best when they were a little more than 15" from the wall behind them, almost touching the sidewalls, and angled so that their tweeter axes crossed in front of the listening seat. Although I could hear a very entertaining boost at 31.5kHz from a seat near the wall across from the AN-Es, I heard the smoothest response when sitting far from any and all room boundaries: The best-case listening-seat position was about 9" away from the speakers (ie, three-fifths of the way down the length of my room) and slightly to the right of center."

Fig.2 compares the spatially averaged in-room response of the Harbeth M40.1s in Art's room (red trace) with 3 Audio Note UK Ltd., 25 Montefiore Road, Hove, East Sussex BN3 1RD, England, UK. Tel: (0)1273-220-511. Fax: (0)1273-731-498. Web: www.audiofederation.com. US distributor: Audio Federation, Boulder, CO 80303. Tel: (303) 546-4003. Web: www.audiofederation.com.
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I FELT THE AUDIO NOTES SOUNDED CLEANER AND BETTER DEFINED IN THE BASS THAN THE HARBETHS.

of crossing over an 8" driver to a very small tweeter while maintaining flat lower-treble response throughout the entire listening area made itself known as a persistent response dip centered at 2kHz. Every Audio Note AN-E speaker I've tried has made voices and some instruments sound a little dark and thick through a portion of their range. You can see this dip in fig 2, but also a lack of energy between 100 and 300Hz compared with the Harbeth. An aspect of the Audio Note's presentation that did bother me listening to music was a slight cupped-hands coloration, coupled with a rather lean lower midrange. This made Joanna Newsom's voice on Ys (LP, Drag City DC303) sound a little small (ie, more throat tone than chest tone).

This was a consistent factor with the evening's music listening, so I suspect that it is related to the smooth rise in the Audio Note's in-room response between 150 and 900Hz. A listener's reaction to this kind of response depends on whether the ear/brain takes the higher level at 900Hz as its reference...
and thus perceives the lack of energy in the lower midrange, or latches on to the level in the midrange and thus hears the peak in the upper midrange as added detail or excessive forwardness. I suspect that the boosting of the midbass by room modes balances the level at 900Hz, which is why I latched on to the latter as my reference for tonal balance.

The Audio Notes roll off in the extreme highs a little earlier than the Harbeths. However, looking at the individual responses that were averaged in fig.2, the Audio Notes had a much tighter grouping in the treble compared with Harbeth. I don't think this is because the AN-E/SPe HE has wide dispersion per se, but when the speakers are used with extreme toe-in, the change in response for each microphone position is not great compared with what it would have been had the speakers been aimed at the listening position.

Overall, the Harbeths did some things very well in Art's room—my new choral recording of Cantus sounded beautifully unforced, for example, with a very natural midrange quality. But on balance, I would rather live with the Audio Notes in Art's room, if not in mine.

—John Atkinson
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Technically, the title of McCoy Tyner’s new album, Guitars, is a misnomer. It should have been called McCoy with Strings, given that four of his five stringed collaborators are guitarist, while the fifth “guitar” is Béla Fleck’s banjo. However, the mildly misleading title is pardoned, given the performances that this jazz titan of the Although he enlists a stalwart rhythm team (old friends Ron Carter on bass and Jack DeJohnette on drums), Tyner negotiates these 14 tunes with another chordal instrument for only the second time in his storied career. His first and only other guitar-oriented session was in 1982, when he invited Coltrane-worshipping Carlos Santana to record with him on Looking Out.

Even so, as a concept, Guitars was ripe with the potential to be a train-wreck challenge for Tyner, who didn’t have the luxury of settling in with one personality. Instead, he was placed in a recording scheme of having to meet and greet, on the fly, five disparate characters: free-leaning Marc Ribot, mild-mannered Bill Frisell, charged-up and plugged-in John Scofield, studious young blues cat Derek Trucks, and fast-picking Béla Fleck. But against the odds, Tyner rises to the occasion, sounding fresher than on most of his releases since his 1995 Impulse! date, Infinity.

On Guitars, Tyner is totally engaged by the many different points of view. He listens, responds, composes, and shoots off runs that sound rejuvenated, even in such old standbys as “Passion Dance,” “Slapback Blues,” “Blues on the Corner,” and “Contemplation.” He also gets to stretch stylistically, effortlessly moving from his trademark muscular jazz delivery (forceful left-hand striking and speedy right-hand flourishes) to percussive beats and gentle lyricism on tunes that are blues-infused and African-inflected.

Interestingly, an early idea for the album was to surround Tyner with smooth guitar strokers. Producer John Snyder thankfully nixed that in favor of gathering edgier players, which gives the final product a multifaceted sound that begins with Ribot’s short duo improvisation with Tyner and concludes with three sublime Frisell-instigated tracks. Because the sessions were largely impromptu, with minimal rehearsal, creative sparks catch flame throughout. The sound quality is top-tier, the mix meticulous. Carter’s bass, often buried elsewhere, is featured here with his full array of pace-changing note choices, including his signature full-toned walking lines and whole-note pulsations. Likewise, DeJohnette’s drums are rambunctiously present, with crisp cymbal flicks and rapt drum slaps. Tyner’s piano sparkles throughout, and the spotlighted guitars pierce the mix.

Ribot brings the most varied package to the show, opening it, in “Improvisation 2,” with pointed plinks and sliding blips, all met with Tyner’s dashes and clunks in shades of Cecil Taylor. While this is the only real “out” playing on Guitars, it serves as potent notice that what follows will be music that takes Tyner out of his comfort zone. Case in point: the very next track, “Passion Dance,” where Ribot electrifies his already thunderous plunge through the tune with a rocking fury further developed by Tyner’s power-packed pounding, Carter’s glissandoing solo, and DeJohnette’s drum rollick.

Scofield’s hang with Tyner features two bold thrusts. First is John Coltrane’s “Mr. P.C.,” which is powered by the guitarist’s grooved, energized lines, and then their playful dance through “Blues on the Corner.” Béla Fleck brings along two of his own melodic pieces: the exotically tinged “Trade Winds,” which Tyner sails through, and the rootsy “Amberjack,” which DeJohnette tattoos with his stringing rhythms. Speedy and percussive, Fleck brings an entirely different color to Guitar’s palette of stringed sounds, and ups the ante on Tyner’s Trane connection by giving a new, folksy jazz spin to the tried-and-tired “My Favorite Things.” Fleck owns this tune in his extended solo, while Tyner, in his own solo, sprightly Waltzes, as if inspired by hearing it from a new angle.

As Carter’s walk pushes “Slapback Blues,” Derek Trucks flashes scintillating blues licks that lead to Tyner’s low-note dramatic end. Trucks then returns for a slide through “Greensleeves,” another unlikely choice that succeeds because Tyner picks up the melody and rides through it with refined elegance and gleeful booming on the keys.

The best is left for last; Frisell invites Tyner to muse on “Contemplation,” then fascinates him with two captivating tunes spiritedly attuned to the Malian blues sensibility. The first of these tracks is a short, melancholic duet on “Boubacar,” the second a mesmerizing capper through Boubacar Traore’s “Baba Drane.” Tyner sprinkling in a variety of notes to embellish Frisell’s almost hypnotic lead. No bold piano solo here, only grace notes.

The companion DVD included in this package captures the recording sessions, during which a different camera was focused on each player. Not only can you watch each perform individually, but there’s a special treat: In the “four cameras at once” view, the recording comes alive with visual takes on these musicians’ alchemical improvisations. —Dan Ouellette
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-Mike Quinn, Jazz Times

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classical

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CORIGLIANO: The Red Violin Caprices, Violin Sonatas
THOMSON: Portraits 1, 7, 8, 9; Five Ladies
Philippe Quint, violin; William Wolfram, piano
Performance *****
Sonic *****½

I’m not sure I would have thought to pair works for violin and piano by John Corigliano (b. 1938) and Virgil Thomson (1896–1989), but this disc shows off the masterful musical storytelling qualities of both composers, each of whom is represented here by evocative works of considerable technical difficulty, intellectual accomplishment, and emotional impact.

Front and center is Corigliano’s six-movement The Red Violin Caprices (2002) for unaccompanied violin—a set of breathtaking variations on themes from his popular score for the film The Red Violin. Both the music and violinist Philippe Quint’s playing are exquisite—full of lush lyricism, achingly beautiful melody, dramatic range, and truly musical effects. The first variation, for example, is sunny and virtuosic, with a lovely sense of acceleration and flow. The second is sad, dramatic, and passionate, sometimes rustic, and splendidly radiant in the close. By contrast, the fourth variation is highly organic, with a sense of building tension that reaches a dramatic focal point that hurtles without pause into the diabolic, sizzling virtuosity of the final variation. The sound of the violin is near perfect—neither too close nor too distant, with a pleasing sense of the warm hall in which it was recorded. Likewise, Quint’s execution is flawless, rendering with subtlety and passion every nuance of Corigliano’s timeless score.

Corigliano’s Sonata for Violin and Piano (1963) is really a piece of time and place for the New York—born composer, juxtaposing jazzy syncopations and virtuosic flourishes for Quint and pianist William Wolfram with lyrical, swaying dance tunes and jaunty, Shostakovich-meets-Bernstein chromaticism. It ends with a game of musical tag as witty and urban in character as a New Yorker cartoon.

Virgil Thomson’s Three Portraits (ar-ranged for violin and piano by Samuel Dushkin, 1940/1947), Five Ladies (1930s), and Eight Portraits (for solo violin, 1928–1940), for such charming and singular pieces, are seriously underrepresented in the catalog. Succinct, tuneful, yet forward-thinking in their melodic and harmonic unfolding, these pieces, like the Corigliano works here, challenge both instrumentalists’ technical prowess and emotional heart. Most of the people captured by Thomson’s musical brushwork will be unfamiliar to modern audiences, yet one comes to feel a sense of the personalities portrayed. That said, his miniatures Miss Gertrude Stein as a young girl and Alice Toklas—the former set as a lyrical melody in simple truncation and variation, the latter as a folk-like tune evolving in unexpected ways—will tickle modern listeners.

This recital disc is a must for every fan of chamber music, as well as lovers of The Red Violin.

—Daniel Buckley

WAGNER
The Great Operas from the Bayreuth Festival

Birgit Nilsson, Anja Silja, Martha Mödl, Leonie Rysanek, sopranos; Wolfgang Windgassen, Jess Thomas, James King, Erwin Wohlfahrt, tenors; Hans Sotin, Theo Adam, Martti Talvela, Thomas Stewart, Gustav Neidlinger, Josef Greindl, bass-baritones; many others; Bayreuth Festival Chorus & Orchestra; Karl Böhm, Wolfgang Sawallisch, Silvio Varviso, conductors
Performance *****
Sonic ****

This release is remarkable in many ways. Not only does it offer all ten of the major operas in the Wagner canon (not included are Die Fledermaus, Das Liebesverbot, and Rienzi) in a single box only 2.5" thick (a miracle!) and at a list price of $2/disc, it also presents them during live performances (or in rehearsal) in the house that Wagner built: Bayreuth. The added vitality of venue and “live” is palpable. The acoustic of the Festspielhaus—the largest freestanding wooden structure ever built—is legendary. Live, the sound has been described as coming “from everywhere and nowhere.” But Wagner’s notion to have a covered, sunken orchestra pit had nothing to do with acoustics; rather, he wanted to create a “mystical abyss” that would keep the audience focused on what was happening onstage. As it
The house not only has great resonance—the reverb time is 1.55 seconds, peculiarly long, great for low frequencies, and ideal for the heavy stuff that emanates from the stage, which is everything—but the orchestral sound is flung at the stage, where it mingles with the voices before being thrust back into the house, somewhat favoring the voices. Singers love it; they can hear themselves, and therefore control the sound they want to emit. And the audience rarely feels overwhelmed by the instruments, no matter how loudly they play.

Recordings have been made at Bayreuth since the 1950s, and many of them, some in terrible sound, are the be-all of the Wagner discography: The recently released Keilberth Ring from 1955 is a case in point (although the sonics are no problem there). This new Decca compilation, all in stereo but only one digital (the 1985 Parsifal), collects performances taped between 1961 and 1985. Sonically, a couple are magnificent, and a few absolutely capture the Bayreuth sound. One could argue with some of Decca’s choices—the 1985 Parsifal, under James Levine, can’t compare with Knappertsbusch’s 1962 reading—but with only an exception or two, these are terrific shows. And even if you already own some of them, think of the price.

The Holländer, Tannhäuser, and Lohengrin, all led by Wolfgang Sawallisch, date from 1961, ’62, and ’62, respectively. This Holländer, oddly enough, is the three-act version, which eliminates the orchestral intervals and comes in at just over two hours. Fast and focused, it finds a terrific Dutchman in Franz Crass and a wonderfully crazy Senta in Anja Silja, despite her almost too-piercing quality; the others, save for Greindl’s vocally pale Daland, are excellent. The chorus is dynamite. Tannhäuser features Grace Bumbry’s Venus—the historic evening when the color barrier was broken at Bayreuth—impassioned and alluring, if not particularly well sung. Windgassen in the title role gets better as the performance progresses; he’s always believable, and his Rome Narrative is one of the most moving on disc. Eberhard Wächter is rough as Wolfram, and Silja is miscast as Elisabeth. Her heart is in the right place, but the voice is not well controlled or attractive. Sawallisch, leading the Dresden version, brings out all the excitement available, but the recording is shrill, and extraneous noises intrude. Much better is the Lohengrin, in fine, balanced sound, with Silja a lovely, feminine Elsa and Jess Thomas a spectacular Lohengrin (even better than on EMI)—sensitive and valiant. The villains are just as good: Ramon Vinay, as a baritone, tortured and nasty, and Astrid Varnay, as mezzo, sneering and evil as sin. Some of her ugly high notes are gorgeous. A terrific performance.

The Tristan und Isolde under Karl Böhm is a classic, with Nilsson a white-hot Isolde, singing with both security and sensitivity. There were complaints at the time that the voice was too cold and that Nilsson lacked Flagstad’s “womanliness.” Hearing her again, trust me, you’ll have no argument. Windgassen again uses his not-quite-heldentenor to superb advantage, and is truly terrifying in his third-act rantings. Martti Talvela and Christa Ludwig are stunning as Marke and Brangane; Wächter redeems himself as Kurwenal, though his voice remains dry. Here, and in Der Ring des Nibelungen, Böhm leads fast, intense performances, quite the opposite of, say, Knappertsbusch or Furtwängler. His emphasis is on brilliance, and we can hear it in the orchestra—throughout all the operas, the brass is very bright, the oboes very spicy; this, too, is a characteristic of Bayreuth, but is hardly as prevalent in the non-Böhm performances. One might nitpick with individual roles in the Ring—Erda, Gunther, and Gunther come to mind—and some might be unable to listen to a Wotan who lacks the gravitas of Hans Hotter but as far as that’s concerned, Theo Adam’s penetrating reading is superb on its own. Windgasse...
A review...

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Art Dudley
Stereophile Magazine- April 2007

**RECORD REVIEWS**

**THE BLACK KEYS**


Performance ****

Sonic ****½

_Notes, by the way—when Danger Mouse works with a band, he's much better than when he records solo. The sound seriously favors the orchestra—obviously a conscious decision._

Art Dudley
Stereophile Magazine- April 2007

The岩石/流行

 Attack & Release

The remarkable collaboration began in 2007, when Danger Mouse (aka Brian Burton) invited The Black Keys (Dan Auerbach and Patrick Carney) to write songs for an album he was creating with rock legend Ike Turner. However, after Turner's unexpected death in December of that year, the tunes that the band had initially intended for Turner became the groundwork for Attack & Release, with Burton remaining in the production booth.

The producer's influence on the band is subtle but significant. He does nothing to disturb The Black Keys' time-tested brand of blues and groove, but augments it with slightly more eclectic instrumentation and unique arrangements that weave between melancholic, spaced-out psychedelia and classic soul. In "All You Ever Wanted," a gently strummed acoustic guitar takes a sauntering lead while muted electric riffs remain muzzled—until all restraint collapses under a sudden hailstorm of cymbal splashes and heavy organ. Burton and The Black Keys come together best in "Strange Times," where Auerbach's powerful riffs and Carney's big rock drums are matched by an unexpected, otherworldly choir of haunting sighs, jagged piano, and spacey Moog. Thankfully, engineer Paul Hamann allows all of these elements to breathe easily and bloom naturally. Meanwhile, Marc Ribot (lead guitar) and multi-instrumentalist Ralph Carney (flute, clarinet, banjo) leave their inimitable prints throughout, but shine brightest on "Lies," a downright, dirty death knell in which Auerbach's powerful vocals, "I want to die without pain."

Dark and heavy, soulful and bizarre, Attack & Release is a slow, slow burn and an absolute joy, with a bonus for vinyl lovers: The LP boasts half-speed mastering for "audiophile quality sound" and comes with a free promo CD.

—Stephen Mejias

**RY COODER**

_1, Flathead: The Songs of Kash Buk and the Klowns_


Performance *****

Sonic *****

Ever since 1970, when he began exploring on disc the forgotten byways of American roots and popular music, Ry Cooder has demonstrated as much interest in sociology as he has in musicology. More recently, he's embraced 20th-century American weirdness on his loose trilogy of California-themed projects: _Clavez Raven_ (2005), a Lat-
nothing is precious enough for us

DEATH VESSEL
Nothing Is Precious Enough for Us

Performance ****
Sonics ***

Cases of mistaken identity are usually easy to solve, and they're rarely as interesting as the one involving Death Vessel, the too-

menacing alias of mild-mannered acoustic-guitar troubadour Joel Thibodeau. The long-haired, 32/33-year-old Maine native stands accused of impersonating a teenage girl, and his alto voice is at the center of Nothing Is Precious Enough for Us. Thibodeau's unn

usually high register is no strained falsetto or studio trick, nor does it serve any subversive, gender-bending purpose in the vein of Antony and the Johnsons. It's simply another instrument Thibodeau uses to pile pretty atop lovely, which is the order of things on this, his second album.

Like Sub Pop labelmate and touring partner Iron & Wine, Death Vessel plays a soft-as-lamb's-wool brand of folk-pop. But it's not only Thibodeau's little-girl-lost voice that produces the album's wilted-flower atmosphere. The singer's ever-melodious fingerpicking is so burnished with sentiment it can make a listener nostalgic for childhood campfire sing-alongs that never happened. While there's a hush all over this record—from the close-miked vocals to the barely there percussion—it does occasionally break from the room sound routine of singer-songwriter albums: fingers sliding up and down strings, the thump of the guitar body. "Peninsula" is punctuated by Crazy Horse blasts of electric guitar, and a horn section makes "Belt of Foam" a reverie for Salvation Army Band. The best songs here are built on bluegrass reverie for Salvation Army Band. The best songs here are built on bluegrass reverie for Salvation Army Band. The best songs here are built on bluegrass reverie for Salvation Army Band. The best songs here are built on bluegrass reverie for Salvation Army Band. The best songs here are built on bluegrass reverie for Salvation Army Band. The best songs here are built on bluegrass reverie for Salvation Army Band. The best songs here are built on bluegrass reverie for Salvation Army Band. The best songs here are built on bluegrass reverie for Salvation Army Band. The best songs here are built on bluegrass reverie for Salvation Army Band. The best songs here are built on bluegrass reverie for Salvation Army Band. The best songs here are built on bluegrass reverie for Salvation Army Band. The best songs here are built on bluegrass reverie for Salvation Army Band. The best songs here are built on bluegrass reverie for Salvation Army Band. The best songs here are built on bluegrass reverie for Salvation Army Band. The best songs here are built on bluegrass reverie for Salvation Army Band. The best songs here are built on bluegrass reverie for Salvation Army Band. The best songs here are built on bluegrass reverie for Salvation Army Band. The best songs here are built on bluegrass reverie for Salvation Army Band. The best songs here are built on bluegrass reverie for Salvation Army Band. The best songs here are built on bluegrass reverie for Salvation Army Band. The best songs here are built on bluegrass reverie for Salvation Army Band. The best songs here are built on bluegrass reverie for Salvation Army Band. The best songs here are built on bluegrass reverie for Salvation Army Band. The best songs here are built on bluegrass reverie for Salvation Army Band. The best songs here are built on bluegrass reverie for Salvation Army Band. The best songs here are built on bluegrass reverie for Salvation Army Band. The best songs here are built on bluegrass reverie for Salvation Army Band. The best songs here are built on bluegrass reverie for Salvation Army Band. The best songs here are built on bluegrass reverie for Salvation Army Band. The best songs here are built on bluegrass reverie for Salvation Army Band. The best songs here are built on bluegrass reverie for Salvation Army Band. The best songs here are built on bluegrass reverie for Salvation Army Band. The best songs here are built on bluegrass reverie for Salvation Army Band. The best songs here are built on bluegrass reverie for Salvation Army Band. The best songs here are built on bluegrass reveri

--Matthew Fritch

GIANT SAND
proVISSIONS

Performance ****
Sonics *****

It must be maddening to be a Giant Sand fan—or, for that matter, to be Giant Sand—and have to read reviews essentially singing the same old tune each time there's a new record.
What comes through first and foremost on proVISIONS—Gelb’s first recording cut primarily with the “new” Giant Sand, comprising three Danish musicians (there’s also a raft of guest spots, including vocals by Neko Case, Isobel Campbell, and M. Ward)—is the raw, reckless beauty that has always infused Gelb’s songwriting but is sometimes overshadowed by outré or off-the-cuff arrangements. Luminous and lupine, tracks such as the atmospheric, countryish, gently thrumming “Without a Word,” the noirish, hissing “Increment of Love,” and the moonlit swamp-rock of “Pitch & Sway” build a case for Gelb being at the top of his game after several years of making endearing but uneven solo albums. As an interpreter, too, Gelb’s always had the gift, and his cover of PJ Harvey’s “The Desperate Kingdom of Love” is no exception: with his Floyd Cramer–like piano and a vocal that’s urgent to the point of heartbreak, Gelb fully inhabits this elegant ballad.

Add Gelb’s grasp of the psychology of sound—these songs are at once widescreen, full of depth and detail, yet emotionally intimate, as if the band were seated across the room from you—and proVISIONS is the most consistently satisfying thing he’s done since 2000’s Choice of Enchantment. Soon enough, the artistically restless Gelb will veer again—but as long as he keeps coming up with records like this every few years, he’s earned the right.

Early promotional copies of proVISIONS included the nine-minute tour de force “The New Romance of Falling,” a radically overhauled version of “Romance of Falling” (from 1993’s Ramp). At the last minute, however, Gelb bumped it for a “lost” track, “Belly Full of Fire,” that he’d recorded some time ago while on tour with PJ Harvey in Europe. Never fear, fans—“New Romance” is available as a digital-only bonus tune to anyone who purchases proVISIONS.

—Fred Mills

HACIENDA BROTHERS
Arizona Motel

AAD T: 51:58
Performance ****
Sonic ***½

The creativity business is one nasty, often unjust struggle that can dictate sad truths—like sometimes you have to die to sell records. Singer Chris Gaffney, who died young, of liver cancer, earlier this year, has here made perhaps his finest, and now most publicized record with the group he was part of: the very talented Hacienda Brothers, which includes former Paladins guitarist Dave Gonzalez.

The vibe here is much as it was in 2003, when the Haciendas played their first-ever gig, at Stereophile’s Home Entertainment show at the St. Francis hotel in San Francisco: a pioneering mix of classic country (Buck Owens, Merle Haggard) and slow, greasy Muscle Shoals soul music, the latter due in part to the band’s constant co-producer, Muscle Shoals stalwart Dan Penn.

Here, the country persona is rep-
resented by González’s “Big Town City,” with its steely, peppy, Don Rich–styled lead guitar. As a singer, Gaffney was, first and foremost a ballad stylist, and he stretches out on “Ordinary Fool.” González’s guitar prowess, which he generally keeps on a low boil with the Haciendas, shows itself here on his own C&W tune, “Long Way to Town,” and in “Light It Again Charlie,” a straight-ahead instrumental blues workout in which he uses the distinct tone of the baritone guitar to great effect. Throughout the record, David Berzanslcy’s pedal-steel playing shines.

As a songwriter, Gaffney was capable of highlights such as the gospel-tinged, 1960s soul raveup “Soul Mountain,” in which González’s guitar and Joe Terry’s Hammond B3 organ make a rockin’ base for Gaffney to sing and, eventually, shout over. The sound, compressed as on most modern rock records, is generally warm and tilted toward the vocals.

While the “Good Hearted Woman” vibe of “I Still Believe” is obvious and a little tired, and ballads like “Divorce or Destroy” probably drag things out a song too long, the closer, Dan Penn’s “Break Free,” comes with a welcome harmonica accompaniment that ends this sweet, successful swan song of an underappreciated and, now, sadly missed singer-songwriter.

—Robert Baird

SONNY LANDRETH
From the Reach

Performance ****
Sonics *****

Sonny Landreth’s concept for From the Reach was to compose songs for the musicians who have influenced him, then perform each with the person who inspired it. A valid notion, certainly, and it doesn’t hurt when the peers you call on include Eric Clapton, Eric Johnson, Robben Ford, and Mark Knopfler. From the Reach places Landreth comfortably among those elite players with a particularly strong batch of songs.

Landreth just keeps getting better. Guitar fans have long known him as a player of astonishing vibrancy whose shimmering guitar riffs and lead passages soar with the eagles. He’s perhaps less known outside that circle of aficionados, but that’s changing: This spring he topped Guitar Player magazine’s readers’ poll of slide guitarists.

For anyone who remembers the days of “guitar duels,” hearing Landreth mix it up here with Clapton, Ford, Knopfler, and Johnson is a real treat. For your convenience, producer Landreth puts himself consistently in one channel, his guest in the other.

He couldn’t have chosen a better vehicle for Mark Knopfler than “Blue Tarp Blues.” The lyric, which exposes the lingering anger of Louisianans in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, would fit any recent Knopfler collection, and their twin guitars pointedly register that rage. His duets with Eric Johnson on “The Milky Way Home” and Robben Ford on “Way Past Long” stretch the outer sonic limits of lead guitar.

Landreth’s lyrics continue to richen. The wrenching “When I Still Had You” features a nice turn from Eric Clapton, who also burns his way through “Storm of Worry.” With Dr. John and Jimmy Buffett, Landreth whips up some good old-fashioned night-tripping on “Howlin’ Moon,” while Nadirah Shakoor contributes a passionate vocal harmony to the soulful “Let It Fly.”

—Leland Rucker

GRACE KELLY / LEE KONITZ
Gracefullee

Grace Kelly, Lee Konitz, alto saxophone; Russell Malone, guitar; Rufus Reid, bass; Matt Wilson, drums
Performance ****
Sonics *****½

First, full disclosure: When an album by a 16-year-old jazz musician arrives in the mail, the gut reaction of many jazz critics, not excluding this one, is pained skepticism. As jazz writers age, they struggle with the very concept of “16 years old.” Plus, most child prodigies in jazz have chops and not much else.

But 16-year-old alto saxophonist Grace Kelly is good enough to overwhelm the resistance of even the most irascible geezer journalist. That
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Editor:
I was already on page two of Sam Tel-lig’s obituary when the phone rang from the hospital.

“Roy? It’s Sam. It’s okay, the doctors have stabilized me and I’m going to be fine.”

“That’s great,” I said. “I’m so happy for you.”

Sam had been taken into hospital for feeling “poorly.” He was suffering from a chronic case of sarcasm. Marina, having fled a country that had banned sarcasm during Stalin’s time, was terribly upset. She had heard of severe cases that had deteriorated into disdain, mockery, and contempt. These were capital crimes in Old Russia. Fortunately in New Connecticut, there is more understanding, and you are allowed to live. No Gulag for Sam.

Senator Lieberman, on hearing of Sam’s condition, ran off and became a Republican.

I had heard all this from Sam’s son, David. He had called me, and I was under-standably concerned enough to start working on an obituary. But then Sam contacted me with the good news.

Shit! What a waste. The obit had been going just great. I was on a roll.

Sam prefaced his review with a trea-tise on the great Dutch forger Han van Meegeren. I actually had read about van Meegeren in the 1960s. If nothing else, we were taught to read an honest and thorough description of the end-user experience.

Richard Bird
President, Rives Audio

Trulife Audio Reikon

Editor:
I would like to thank Michael Fremer from my heart for his effort to evaluate the TLA Reikon phono stage, but most of all, I’m so happy that he understood our point of view regarding the sound concept of our company.

Playing in blues and jazz bands for the last 20 years has helped me as an engineer to understand that “Stage Energy” is an important facet in communicat-ing the true essence of music. This is what TLA is attempting to provide in bringing the musical fact’s energy to the listener.

We never consider cost as an obstac-le to produce this level of equipment. To do so would detract from the purpose of our existence, and is a large sacrifice to make.

I totally agree with Mr. Fremer’s conclu-sions about the Reikon’s sound. Even we could not express it better.

I thank you once again.

Velissarios Georgiadis
Trulife Audio

Rives Audio sub-PARC

Editor:
First and foremost, I would like to thank Stereophile and Kalman Rubinson for taking the time to review the sub-PARC.

It took many years in development to create a unit that really integrated well—particularly for two-channel stereo or multichannel music.

In the review, Kal Rubinson pointed out that calibrating the sub-PARC with the supplied test CD and an SPL meter was tedious. I agree, which is why all of our dealers have a Rives Audio Professional Test Kit, equipped with the necessary microphone, preamp, and software to test and calibrate a sub-PARC (or PARC) in about 20 minutes. This is why we strongly recommend that customers purchase the sub-PARC from our network of authorized dealers. We offered to set up the system for review, but KR preferred to do it himself. The task was easy, and he preferred the full control of the volume control. We have there-fore developed a circuit that instantly detects a loss of AC power to the unit. At the same time, the power supply has enough reserve capacitance to continue operation for many tens of seconds after the loss of AC power. As soon as the AC power loss is detected, the position of the volume control is written to the controller’s memory and all is well.

Unfortunately, we have to take our lumps for a firmware bug that surfaced in the test unit. With the sophisti-cated “fly-by-wire” control system, it is imperative that the controller always keep track of the position of the volume control. We have there-fore developed a circuit that instantly detects a loss of AC power to the unit. At the same time, the power supply has enough reserve capacitance to continue operation for many tens of seconds after the loss of AC power. As soon as the AC power loss is detected, the position of the volume control is written to the controller’s memory and all is well.

The problem was that this opera-tion was not performed when the preamp was in Setup mode (at the

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is not co-leader Lee Konitz who opens “Just Friends.” It sounds like him: the purified, luminous tone, the deft, glancing touch, the nuanced melodic variations—all could be Konitz. In fact, it is Kelly.

Grace Kelly is not a Konitz imitator. Over the 10 tracks of Gracefullee, it becomes easy to distinguish her edgier overtones and looser phrasing from those of Konitz. But it is a rare teenager who can be mistaken, even briefly, for an 80-year-old master playing in a genre he helped invent: the “cool school” of alto saxophone. Forget the 64-year age gap. Kelly and Konitz are a rarefied two-alto front line: similar enough to blend, different enough to spark in contrapuntal collisions.

The rest of the personnel rocks. Russell Malone, who bathes everyone he accompanies (eg, Diana Krall, Ron Carter) in the flattering light of his glowing guitar sound, works his magic here—the Kelly-Malone duet on “Just Friends” is a rapt unfolding.

Rufus Reid and Matt Wilson provide subtle rhythmic inspiration and meaningful solos. Engineer Joe Marciano is also an important collaborator. His sound makes these five players real, and close enough to touch.

Kelly plays duets with each member of the band. After “Just Friends,” the best is two minutes of swooping, liberated stimulus-and-response with Konitz on “Alone Together.” There are three fully improvised pieces, including a surprising cacophony with the full quintet, “NY at Noon.” The centerpiece is “You Don’t Know What Love Is,” eight minutes of contemplative, detailed, elevated counterpoint among Kelly and Konitz and Malone, gently prodded by Reid and Wilson.

After you get over your annoyance that someone 16 can have her act this together, Gracefullee becomes really fun.

—Thomas Conrad

The saxophonist Grace Kelly.
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Take Sticky Fingers: how much of the inner lives of Jagger and Richards actually clings to that music? Is there biography inspiering these songs or are they just jerking... ahmm, playing around with words and melodies. In music, as in all art forms, one question always looms: how close is the art to those that made it? Is it the artist's life story we're hearing or is the song nothing more than intellectual noddling?

It goes without saying some of the greatest songs of all time are the latter. Despite all the whispers about allusions to the Vietnam War, "Rocky Raccoon" is really nothing more than a flight of fantasy as only Paul McCartney can spin it. The Elton John/Bernie Taupin catalog is rife with song stories like "The Ballad of Danny Bailey" that are masterful fables with little or no autobiographical present. And going back to the Glimmer Twins, they routinely tossed off classics like "Shine a Light" (supposedly about Brian Jones) that could only with the aid of enormous assumptive leaps be connected to the details of their real lives, no matter how many times they (or Jones) had been "stretched out in Room Ten O Nine... with smiles on their faces and a gleam right in their eyes."

The second part of this equation is: do artists who use their life as immediate fodder for their art write better songs when they're happy or when they're sad? At either emotional pole, joy or despair, singer/songwriters can lapse into a form of musical therapy where the listener, like it or not, is dragged along.

In 2007, Lucinda Williams, one of the most talented songwriters of this or any other generation released West, one of the most egregious examples of singer/songwriter indulgence in recent memory. Intimate to the point of being creepy, it spelled out in laborious and repetitive detail her broken-heartedness and bitterness over failed love affairs. The low point was a nasty little number entitled, "Ever Angel" (from 1998's Car Wheels on a Gravel Road), and "Fruits of my Labor" (from 2003's World Without Tears), to name just a few. On West, songs like "Learning How To Live," "Everything Has Changed" or "Where is My Love?" simply asked too much of the listener. Worst of all, the songwriting had taken a backseat to the spew.

Happily, Williams has fallen back in love, this time with her manager Tom Overby—they're engaged—and has regained her melodic and lyrical, not to mention cosmic footing. The ebullient songwriter of "I Just Wanted to See You So Bad," "(with that killer B3 organ background riff) and "Metal Firecracker," (with its easy sway and key line, "All I ask, is don't tell anybody the secrets that I told you") has returned with the marvelous Little Honey.

"Life's always going to bring you those dark, introspective moments," she told me from her home in Los Angeles. "But I've kind of gotten past the angst of all the crazy, up and down, high drama, rock'n'roll relationships that I was in. I've entered a whole new phase of my life. Calmer and more stable. Now, I've got a core to work from. I'm growing as a writer."

The surest sign that she's in a better place is, "Plan To Marry." A gorgeous, tentative questioning of her new love, the track is William's home demo of the song that everyone involved thought could not be topped. Her raw, quiet singing ranks as one of her finest vocal performances on record.

"It's very delicate and kind of tenuous because it was so new, which just adds to it," she says.

When it comes to those "rock'n'roll relationships" she's now beyond, two songs show she's learned from that turbulent past. In "Little Rock Star," a tune she says was inspired by the destructive trajectories of Amy Winehouse and Pete Doherty, among others, she wonders in a typically resonant lyrical turn, "Will you ever know happiness, Little Rock Star/ Or is your death wish stronger than you are/Will you go up in flames like the torches that are carried for you."

Amazingly, Williams' other rock'n'roll admonition is a cover of AC/DC's "It's a Long Way to the Top," in which her vocals not only make the song her own but show that it's a much better song than perhaps anyone knew before. When she sings lines like, "Getting' old/Getting' grey/Getting' ripped off/Underpaid/Secondhand/That's how it goes playin' in a band," it's suddenly clear not only that the great Angus Young and Co. can rock like no one else, but they can also write surprisingly meaningful lyrics.

Williams who was initially reluctant towards the whole idea of including a classic rock cover, now thinks it's genius and gives her new mate the credit for pushing it.

"It was kind of scary, but also fun to take a song out of a genre that you'd never think I'd go to."

At age 55, Williams also says she can relate to the harsh sentiments that the tune expresses. While she can never totally remove herself from the songwriting alchemy, she says she's now trying to find a balance between being too personal and too removed. However, she remains unsure whether being happy or sad makes for better music.

"Whenever I write about something, I'm observing, but I'm also sort of taking part. I'm standing back and looking, but I'm also looking at it from an empathetic point of view as someone who understands."
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