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Are You a Sharpener or a Leveler?

A psychological theory that I've always been fond of is the one that proposes the perceptual/personality dimension of Sharpening is Leveling. As defined by the early Gestalt psychologists, Sharpening is an exaggeration of differences, Leveling a minimization of differences. In visual-perception research on this topic, when test subjects were presented with an asymmetrical figure, some later recalled it in ways that exaggerated the figure's asymmetry (Sharpeners), while others minimized or eliminated it (Levelers).

It seems fair to say that—like those who have a strong interest in wine, food, photography, etc.—audiophiles are devoted to exploring subtle differences; generally, we tend to be toward the Sharpening end of the continuum. But even among audiophiles, some will describe as "night and day" a sonic difference that to others sounds fairly minor: these are Sharpeners, whereas the wire-is-wire, bits-are-bits, all-amplifiers-sound-the-same folks are Levelers.

Where does a tendency toward Sharpening or Leveling come from? The first possibility is that being a Sharener or a Leveler represents an inherent characteristic of a person's sensory system. In technical terms, the difference threshold—the smallest difference that a person can reliably discriminate, also known as the just noticeable difference (JND)—varies among individuals: some have a low threshold (small JND) and are able to discriminate among very small differences, whereas others require differences to be quite large before they can discriminate among them.

No doubt such differences in sensory capacity make some contribution to a person's being a Sharener or a Leveler, but I think it's a minor one. The skills used in evaluating audio equipment are far more complex than those involved in simple experiments in pitch discrimination, and to a large extent they're functions of experience. People are not born Sharpeners or Levelers. A novice audiophile may judge two speakers, when that same figure is presented to him by borrowing a pair of speakers, and identify audible differences that may sound slight to the average person but that audiophiles consider vital. An audio reviewer who is insensitive to these sorts of differences, or who thinks them unimportant, is like a wine expert who thinks that all red wines taste pretty much the same. (For those familiar with the film Sideways—a favorite of mine—our sensibilities should resemble that of the Paul Giamatti character, Miles, and not that of Jack, played by Thomas Haden Church.)

And what, Dear Reader, about you? Are you more a Sharpener or a Leveler? If you're a Stereophile reader, then, almost by definition, you must have some significant Sharpening tendencies. You listen to your system critically, make changes in components, and tweak the speaker positions, always listening for those improvements that bring the sound closer to the real thing. When you're comparing components or evaluating the effect of a small adjustment of speaker positions, I think it makes sense to take the Sharpening approach. But being always in Sharpening mode, listening for the most minute sonic differences, has a downside illustrated by the kind of person who can't listen to music for more than a few minutes without getting up to tweak something in the system, or who buys component after component in the hope of finding the magic one that will allow the system to sound indistinguishable from live music. This is when being a Sharpener has much in common with obsessive-compulsive disorder—and you don't want to go down that road.

My advice: When it comes to selecting components and setting up a system, be as much of a Sharpener as you feel like. But when everything is working more or less to your satisfaction, it's time to switch out of the hyperrcritical Sharpening mode, become more of a Leveler, and have a good time just listening to the music.
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- KIMBER KABLE SILVER STREAK $432 meter pair
- KIMBER KABLE HERO WBT-144 $262 meter pair
- KIMBER KABLE TIMBRE $138 meter pair
- KIMBER KABLE TONIK $74 meter pair

Speaker Cables

- KIMBER KABLE 12TC BARE-BARE $566 8ft pair
- KIMBER KABLE 8TC BARE-BARE $360 8ft pair
- KIMBER KABLE 4TC BARE-BARE $206 8ft pair

HDMI Cables

- KIMBER KABLE GG MINI - AG $645 meter
- KIMBER KABLE GG MINI - HB $390 meter

Subwoofer Cable

- KIMBER KABLE CADENCE ULTRAPLATE $90 meter
- KIMBER KABLE WBT-0144 $129 meter
- KIMBER KABLE WBT-0102Cu $175 meter

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Wobbly webs
Editor:
The December issue just arrived, with its review of the Thiel CS3.7. I have been waiting, in vain, for someone to point out the resemblance between its bass diaphragms and the Lotus "wobbly web" wheel, now over 50 years old. For those who don't mix audio and automotive pleasures, I've attached a fine pic of one variant of the Lotus wheel, taken by Charles Best (www.charlesbest.co.uk) to accompany an article I wrote about it for Motor Sport in 1999.

The Lotus wheel and the Thiel diaphragm are that shape for the same reason. Think of the stiffening effect of corrugation on a thin roof (or in cardboard packaging materials), and how to morph it into a circle to resist either a wobbly web was purportedly copied from—or at least inspired by—the wheels of a US fighter aircraft, I think a Convair. Perhaps another Stereophile reader can enlighten us all as to which.

—Keith Howard
Lydd, Kent, UK

Wobbly wrists
Editor:
It is no doubt the sign of a healthy publication that the editorial staff do not always agree with each other, or that they may even contradict themselves in the same issue.

It was with some amusement, then, that I read in the December issue Art Dudley's disdain for certain "$25,000 ego-wank loudspeakers" (a view which I tend to support), only to then proceed to speaker reviews by Messrs. Tellig, Atkinson, Greenhill, and Fremer (only $17k, but close enough) in which they give themselves the proverbial wrist-ache (to continue the metaphor) in their praises of the selfsame beasts.

Oh, and while I am at it, hats off to Antony Michaelson at Musical Fidelity for trying to create a whole new market for the acoustically insecure with deep pockets. I refer, of course, to the $10,000/pair 750K Superchargers. They do look cool, though, so please excuse me while I go for a...never mind. —Colin Buxton
Mesa, AZ
hoodj82003@yahoo.com

Keysor, not Kaiser
Editor:
In the interest of simple historical accuracy, Robert Baird's article in the December 2008 issue about the Brooklyn record-pressing operation mentions the "Kaiser Century" firm as a manufacturer and supplier of record vinyl. The accurate name is Keysor Century Corporation, founded by James B. Keysor. The firm's most well-known product was a formulation known as B-450, which was used at plants throughout the US and Canada, and was also exported. I was employed by the firm, from the early '70s until the mid-'90s, in various positions in the Kdisc division, which included record-manufacturing facilities and the Hollywood Kdisc mastering studios.

—Bill Lightner, CTS
Santa Clarita, CA
BLightner@amitsystemstinc.com

CDs, not LPs
Editor:
I'm with Mr. Fremer. LPs have got the groove. CDs? Strictly the pits. —Peter Roberts
proberts@rekenmail.com

LPs? Not so good.
Editor:
I'm tired of reading about how great vinyl phonograph records are for music reproduction compared to compact discs. A phonograph record is a mechanical method for sound reproduction. As such, it is subject to numerous physical flaws and shortcomings that can seriously degrade the sound quality and music-listening experience. Among these flaws are scratches, warps, incomplete groove fill, and impurities in the vinyl itself. They cause pops, clicks, nimbles, and other assorted noises and grunge. It's also necessary to align the cartridge correctly, clean the stylus frequently, and keep the dust off the record. Some of the shortcomings are limited dynamic and frequency ranges, inner-groove distortion, and flutter and war caused by speed variations and off-center pressings.

I collected records, mainly classical, from 1960 to 1985. I would estimate that my return rate due to surface noise and other physical flaws was about 33%. There were numerous occasions when I had to go through half a dozen copies of a disc before I could find one I could tolerate. This required a lot of effort, as classical records were scarce where I lived. I don't think I was being overly critical—if I were, there were very few records I would have kept. However, nothing ruins the mood of a beautiful, quiet middle movement of a concerto, such as Beethoven's "Emperor," more than to be jolted back to reality by a loud click or pop.

In 1975 I purchased an open-reel tape deck and an outboard Dolby noise-reduction unit. I managed to acquire about 200 open-reel tapes before CDs came along. It was wonderful to be able to hear the music without distracting noises. Classical open-reel tapes were even more difficult to find than classical records, and after about a decade, the lubrication on these tapes began to disappear, which caused them to squeak loudly as they passed over the tape heads. I gave away all of my open-reel tapes and equipment several years ago.

When CD players became reasonably priced, I bought one, and after that never bought another record or tape. Finally, I could hear classical music with deep satisfaction and realism. CDs? Strictly the pits. —Peter Roberts
proberts@rekenmail.com

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR should be sent as faxes or e-mails only (until further notice). Fax: (212) 915-4164. E-mail: STletters@SourceInterlink.com. Unless marked otherwise, all letters to the magazine and its writers are assumed to be for possible publication. In the spirit of vigorous debate implied by the First Amendment, and unless we are requested not to, we publish correspondents' e-mail addresses. Please note: We are unable to answer requests for information about specific products or systems. If you have problems with your subscription, call toll-free (800) 666-3746, or write to Stereophile, P.O. Box 420235, Palm Coast, FL 32142-0235.

I'm not trying to say that digital music reproduction is better than analog music reproduction, only that phonograph records are a bad medium for reproducing it. Everything else being equal, analog should sound better than digital because nothing is missing from the signal. If we want high-quality analog sound in the home, there needs to be another way to reproduce it besides a phonograph record. Since records were cut from analog master tapes, analog copies of these tapes would be the ultimate in sound quality. Maybe, if they could find some way to make them last, tapes could make a comeback. By the way, I'm curious to know if phonograph records made from recent performances were recorded on analog or digital recorders.

—Richard McDonald
Lakeland, FL
RMCD0@aol.com

A New York State of Mind

Editor:
It appears I am not the first reader to thank Tom Conrad (whom I met seven years ago) for his tour through key Big Apple jazz clubs in the August Stereophile. I had planned a trip back to my home city for a weekend this summer to visit Big Shea prior to its meeting with a ball of the wrecking variety, and to enable my significant other, a Kentucky native, to visit New York for the very first time. The trip was planned with care: a stay at the Waldorf, a visit to MoMA, a meal at one of Mario Batelli's haunts, a stop at Ground Zero, etc.

Upon reading Tom's trip review, my mental Play button was nudged as I realized our trip would not be complete without music—live music. I grew up with my horns and toes dipped in the 1970s jazz scene on Long Island, and I wondered, as Tom dug deeper into the current City scene, how I could ever visit without taking in live music.

The bottom note was this. As a result of reading and rereading his article, I studied the online offerings for the weekend in question and, with a rare on-time flight arrival, we were able to squeeze in a visit to Birdland early Friday evening to catch sizzling drummer Tommy Igoe and the Birdland Big Band. I was shaken, stirred, and blown away by the power, the charts, the ambiance, and my good fortune in nailing the perfect start to a wonderful evening and weekend. The fact that my girlfriend labeled it the highlight of the trip served to punctuate what Tom was trying to convey in his excellent article. Thanks for the kick in the butt, and the reminder of why I still call New York home 30 years later.

—Ken Dawkins
Lexington, KY
kdawkins@teleltaudio.com

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

LETS A H E R O
Recycle Your Magazines!
Elements of Our Enthusiasm
Editor:
I'm rather new, have been reading Stereophile for under a year now, but I was struck by Stephen Mejias's "As We See It" essay about the magazine's intern (December 2008, p5). His comments on the nature of audiophiles who want to teach and spread their passion intrigued me. I think it may be in part because anyone I've ever befriended who has had any audio sense has always been so eager to pass on the things they know. And it never really occurred to me until now how true that is (at least for the experiences I've had). So I wanted to thank you for being part of offering such a dedicated, reliable, source of reference for audiophiles, old and new. But especially the new, because we appreciate all the advice we can get, all the information we can acquire. So thanks. — Conor Sheehan

Gould yes, Tatum no
Editor:
Some years ago, I stood in a museum watching an art student imitate a masterpiece, to the oohs and ahs of passersby. None seemed to see that in his imitation, the student had lost the marvelous feel of the original.

I thought of that as I read Jon Swenson's review of Zenph Studios' re-creation of Art Tatum's piano playing (September, p137), because I gather that JS heard in it the same mechanical impression that I did when I listened to an excerpt online. Specifically, the tones were dramatically improved, but gone was the preternatural fluidity of Tatum's playing. The computer seemed unable to figure out from the scratchy old recordings exactly where to place the notes. The result was a superficially impressive performance that, like the art student's imitation, didn't do justice to the original masterpiece.

I thought the Zenph re-recording of Glenn Gould's Goldberg Variations (reviewed in the September 2007 issue) a much more satisfactory re-creation of the artist's intentions, owing, I suppose, to the superior technical quality of the source material. But even so, it contained some significant rhythmic departures from the original. These seem to have gone unnoticed by ecstatic reviewers, who were perhaps less intimately familiar with the original recording than they would have had to have been to hear them.

This is an exciting new technology, and I hope it will be developed to the point at which it can accurately reconstruct great performances. But for now, it cannot, and I'm afraid we have to look upon it as the audio equivalent of colorization. Congratulations to Stereophile for having heard what the others did not. — Joshua P Hill

Harmonic Resolution Systems SXR
Editor:
I would like to thank Michael Fremer and Stereophile for taking the time to evaluate and listen to the Harmonic Resolution Systems SXR Audio Stand, S1 Isolation Bases, and Damping Plates. We are very pleased MF found the performance improvement "far more profound than anything I'd anticipated," and thus is purchasing the SXR Audio Stand system. To know he is enjoying his audio system more because of what we do at HRS is a significant part of why we enjoy our work, and love pushing the performance envelope forward for our customers.

I worked with Michael Fremer on his evaluation of the SXR Audio Stand and S1 Isolation Bases. I found Michael's understanding of this topic, and his thought process about the impact of vibration and noise on an audio system, to be knowledgeable, intuitive, and open to new possibilities. His extensive background, combined with an open mind, made the evaluation process a fun, informative, and very professional experience.

The SXR Audio Stand has a unique appearance that was a result of the design goal of being a high-performance frame system while offering the customer infinite flexibility in initial configuration. We wanted this system to be at a price significantly lower than our reference-level MXR Audio Stand systems. We even combined our engineering skills with an award-winning furniture designer to obtain the final configuration and look of the SXR. Customers either love the SXR's appearance or, like MF, seem to prefer the look of our reference-level MXR Audio Stand, which he called "a work of the industrial and interior-decorating arts." The nice thing is that the SXR and MXR have very different looks, even though based on very similar engineering principles; our customers can pick the one that fits their particular taste or budget. I think there is a chance Michael is now lusting for the MXR Frame System. The good news for him, and for all HRS customers, is that the isolation bases used in the SXR frame are the same as are required in/by the MXR. If his or any customer's taste, budget, or system needs change in the future, they can not only make changes to the existing system, they can also move all the isolation bases, without any modification, from one Frame System to the other.

As Michael points out in his article, I founded HRS about a decade ago after a long career in engineering isolation systems for aerospace, military, and industrial applications. Many of these systems were engineered to protect the electronics from damage or performance problems related to the shock and vibration environments. For me, the correlation between vibration and performance problems with electronics was given. What was not known many years ago was how far we could push the improvements in a high-end audio system. Early encouragement from Matt Brazeau—a 40-year veteran of high-end audio in Hamilton, Ontario, who believed the importance was much greater than most people imagined—combined with my early development work and testing, led me to believe that there were, indeed, very significant performance gains to be made. I also believed HRS had a unique level of expertise in the many different disciplines required to properly address this issue. HRS has now been at the front, along with some other excellent companies, of the pursuit of advancing state-of-the-art isolation and resonance-control products for high-end audio. To see Michael Fremer clearly experience the results of this near-decade-long pursuit and purchase one of our systems is very rewarding for me and the entire staff at HRS. Thanks again, Michael, for having the experience, insight, and open mind to listen to the results of our work.

Michael Lawn
President and Chief Engineer
Harmonic Resolution Systems

Audio Elegance
Editor:
I wish to thank Art Dudley for his mention of Audio Elegance audio furniture, and you for making him aware of the existence of the product line. These products have been carefully designed and are carefully constructed and finished in the tradition of real, handcrafted furniture. As a result of this attention to detail, all of the pieces carry a five-year warranty to back up our confidence in the quality of these products.

Both the Dakota and James River collections feature accepted audiophile performance features. These features are added in such a way as to not detract from the furniture look and quality of the product. Jeff Dicks and I are justifiably proud of these fine furniture products.

Once again, we thank Mr. Dudley and the staff at Stereophile or their kind mention of our products.

Jim Pendleton
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Raise your AV system's acoustic performance with Sanus Systems' Ultimate Speaker Foundations®. Our quest for the sweetest sound began with a custom base, designed to reduce vibrations. Next came a support of three large-diameter steel pillars for added weight and resistance to vibration. We finished with an ultra heavy-gauge steel top plate complete with brass isolation studs. The result is clean, clear sound for ultimate audio perfection. www.sanus.com
CALANDER

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 April 2009 issue is January 30, 2009. 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

\(^{1}\) Tuesday, January 27, 7—9:30pm: The Arizona Audio Video Club will hold its monthly meeting. Club president Adam Goldfine will offer his CES report, discussing the latest developments in two-channel and multichannel audio and home theater. The club will also hold its annual elections. A raffle will be 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.

\(^{2}\) Tuesday, February 24, 7—9:30pm: The Arizona Audio Video Club will hold its monthly meeting. Paul McGowan of PS Audio will discuss the recent PWT Memory Player and Ultradlink DAC. A raffle is planned and refreshments

THE LOUDSPEAKER MANUFACTURER WANTED TO WORK WITH THE SORT OF MUSICIANS WHO NORMALLY WOULD BE SEEKING TO CONTRACT WITH MAINSTREAM RATHER THAN AUDIOPHILE LABELS.

briel came up with the idea, and B&W saw its potential more in terms of marketing than of making money. The loudspeaker manufacturer didn't really want to start a record label, and certainly didn't want to start signing musicians to long-term contracts. However, did like the idea of getting involved in future ways to deliver recorded music, and wanted to work with the sort of musicians who normally would be seeking to contract with mainstream rather than audiophile labels.

The rather clever business model of the B&W Music Club is more akin to renting than owning a recording. Each month, an artist or band is selected to record an album in Gabriel's Real World Studios, at Box, in Wiltshire. The album is then made available as a download to Music Club members free-of-charge for the first four-track EP from each of three months or $59.95 for 12 months. Sounds like a no-brainer for anyone with a computer, a broadband connection, and a curiosity about the future of hi-fi. In fact, it's high time I signed up... at www.bowers-wilkins.com/display.aspx?infid=3550.

US: SAUSALITO, CALIFORNIA

Jason Victor Serinus

Conceived as “an annual experiment in temporary community dedicated to radical self-expression and self-reliance,” the second all-volunteer Burning Amp DIY fest (http://burningamp.com) took place October 19 near Sausalito, California, at the mouth of San Francisco Bay. At the Presidio Yacht Club, in a cold, dingy, two-level structure perched at the water’s edge in the shadow of the Golden Gate Bridge, 130 or so open-minded DIYers— as well as a few manufacturers from as far away as Denmark, Australia, and Serbia— demonstrated and discussed designs for mostly homemade speakers, power amps, preamps, and D/A converters. Several computer sources and turntable

Some hi-fi-oriented record companies, such as Linn Records, already make their music catalogs available as hi-rez downloads. But Bowers & Wilkins, in close cooperation with rock musician Peter Gabriel, has adopted an interesting and different business model for their Music Club initiative. Gabriel associated with a seminar or similar event.

CYBERSPACE

Paul Messenger

Nefarious activities such as MP3 compression and file sharing might have given the downloading of music files a bad rep, but the practice is still very likely the way high-resolution music will be delivered to the home, especially as Internet access speeds are bound to only increase.

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The rather clever business model of the B&W Music Club is more akin to renting than owning a recording. Each month, an artist or band is selected to record an album in Gabriel's Real World Studios, at Box, in Wiltshire. The album is then made available as a download to Music Club members for one month, after which the musicians can do what they will with their master recording. To ensure that the recordings delivered are to suitably high standards, the downloads are available in the FLAC or Apple Lossless formats. Crucially, all releases from the ninth month onward will also be available in 24-bit resolution.

While the emphasis thus far has been on popular music, the first eight releases cover an extraordinarily wide range of tastes—blues, reggae, world music, and singer-songwriter are just a few of the genres in which some of these albums might fit, though each straddles or defies categories in its own intriguing way. The latest offering is a classical recital by 16-year-old piano prodigy Benjamin Grosvenor; future releases feature UK jazzers the Portico Quartet, and Dengue Fever, an L.A. band that crosses Cambodian pop music with psychedelic rock.

A full subscription costs $39.95 for six months or $59.95 for 12 months. However, I suspect that most of the 30,000 members who had signed up by press

time are taking advantage of the tempting free-trial offer: you can download one four-track EP from each of three albums at lossless 24-bit quality over a three-month period. Sounds like a no-brainer for anyone with a computer, a broadband connection, and a curiosity about the future of hi-fi. In fact, it's high time I signed up... at www.bowers-wilkins.com/display.aspx?infid=3550.

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Audio Society will host its monthly meeting at (714) 281-5850. Visit www.laocas.com or call Bob Levi to unveil a new product to the Los Angeles and Orange County membership. A raffle is planned and recipient of the Society's 2007 Founders Award, will be present.

Table setup time is 12-1pm. Lunch will be served, and guests and new members are invited. For more info, visit www.laocas.com or call Bob Levi at (714) 281-5850.

Sunday, January 25, 2–5pm: The Los Angeles and Orange County Audio Society will host its monthly meeting at Definition Audio Video (2909 W. 182nd Street, Redondo Beach). Featured gear will include Vienna Acoustics' new Klimate Series reference loudspeaker, Tannoy's new Signature Series loudspeakers, and Accuphase’s reference electronics, all wired with Kimber Kable speaker cables and interconnects. Representatives from these companies will be present to speak to the membership. Kimber will donate their cables as raffle prizes and offer an in-home demo. Lunch will be served, and guests and new members are invited. For more info, visit www.laocas.com or call Bob Levi at (714) 281-5850.

Sunday, February 22, 1–4pm: The Los Angeles and Orange County Audio Society will host its fifth annual Super Software Swap Meet at the Buena Park Holiday Inn (7000 Beach Boulevard). Members, visitors, distributors, and producers are welcome to bring any type of music format to sell or trade. There is no cost to participate. Featured vendor Eastwind Import will bring rare Japanese 200gm LPs as well as the latest in jazz and classical SHM-CDs. Special surprise guests will be on hand, and a software raffle is planned. Table setup time is 12–1pm. Lunch will be served, and guests and new members are invited. For more info, visit www.laocas.com or call Bob Levi at (714) 281-5850.

Sunday, March 29, 2–5pm: The Los Angeles and Orange County Audio Society will host its monthly meeting at Upscale Audio (2504 Spring Terrace, Upland). Dennis Had, president of Cary Audio Design and recipient of the Society’s 2007 Founders Award, will be present to unveil a new product to the membership. A raffle is planned and lunch will be served. Guests and new members are invited. For more info, visit www.laocas.com or call Bob Levi at (714) 281-5850.

ILLINOIS

Saturday, January 17, 5–8pm: Next modifications joined an impressive, often fanciful array of tube and solid-state designs. Throughout a day of “I’ll show you mine if you show me yours,” the emphasis was on cooperation, sharing, and mutual support.

Burning Amp is an independent outgrowth of the Internet forum diyAudio (www.diyaudio.com). Festival cofounder Vladimir Simovich (aka AR2) describes diyAudio as “an awesome forum where many professionals and nonprofessionals exchange their ideas and knowledge in the field of audio and create incredible home-built audio gear.” The forum currently boasts over 100,000 registered members from all continents, as many as 4000 active members, and over 1.6 million posts.

As at the Head-HIFI forum (www.head-hifi.com), at diyAudio, fraternity is the order of the day. The main member areas are noncommercial, and tightly moderated to discourage flaming. One of diyAudio's most prominent members, the extremely generous Nelson Pass, has his own section in which he daily answers questions and shares schematics for many of his own past and current designs.

"It's about some guy in Amsterdam helping someone from Argentina who is working with others in Australia and South Africa," says diyAudio's chief moderator and architect, Mark Cronander (aka Varaic). "We don't discuss commercial equipment very much, which makes us less emotional than folk on other forums," adds moderator and veteran DIYer Stuart Yaniger (aka SY).

Founding Vision: Vladimir Simovich, who is also known for his pioneering work in digital photography, came up with the idea for Burning Amp, then enlisted Cronander and Yaniger to make the event a success. "Mark and Stuart embraced my idea wholeheartedly," Simovich explains. "I love the San Francisco Bay Area, with its open-minded culture, so I wanted to incorporate that somehow into our event. Almost instantly, we recognized similarities with another locally conceived event, Burning Man. It, too, has a strong DIY nature, is noncommercial, and has broad communitarian appeal. A dreaded and dramatic part of DIY is failure, so it is not unusual to unintentionally burn what we make, releasing Magic Smoke. That's the origin of the Burning Amp title."

According to the website's home page: “On Sunday night, we'll burn the Amp. As the procession starts, the circle forms, and the amp ignites, you experience something personal, something new to yourself, something you've never felt before. It's an epiphany, it's primal, it's newborn. And it's completely individual.” However, not a single attendee appeared to have followed the Burning Amp dress code: "You've covered your cables in silver, you're wearing a straw hat and a string of pearls, or maybe a skirt for the first time. You withstand the laughter of others." I don't recall seeing a single skirt or string of pearls, not even on one of the few women scattered among the swarms of soldier-coated men, though one had enough piercings to set off every metal detector in a major airport. Still, people's imaginations were wide open. Amid displays of homemade speakers consisting of unfinished, stock boxes were a number of fanciful designs that drew as much attention for their looks as for their sound.

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Level Audio & Video will hold an evening of music at the Doubletree Hotel in Oakbrook (1909 Spring Road) featuring the limited-edition Dynaudio Sapphire loudspeakers mated with Simaudio electronics and Nordost cables. From 5 to 6pm, a cocktail reception will provide an opportunity for guests to mingle with representatives from each company. Seating will be limited. RSVP: (630) 246-0390 or e-mail tyler@nextlevelav.com.

NORTH CAROLINA

Saturday, February 21, 9am–4pm: The Southern Charlotte CanFest, hosted by the Carolina Audio Society, will be held at the Hilton Charlotte Executive Park (5624 Westpark Drive). Exhibitors include Cary Audio Design, Moon Audio, Portal Audio, Ray Samuels Audio, and SinglePower. Joseph Grado will give a presentation on headphones, and there will be door prizes and discounted prices on gear. For more info, e-mail dannyb@carolina.rr.com.

Siegfried Linkwitz: The main speaker of the day was the legendary Siegfried Linkwitz, the veteran Hewlett-Packard engineer known for the Linkwitz/Riley crossover topology. Gratefully acknowledged for the DIY speaker designs he distributes at www.linkwitzlab.com, Linkwitz brought along to Burning Amp his novel Pluto speaker.

Linkwitz launched a PowerPoint presentation that compared the experience of live acoustic music to two-channel audio playback. Referring to how humans of participants younger than 40 affirmed that the successors to the Heathkit builders and DIY-turned-professional veterans of the industry are very much alive and thriving. “It was exciting to see so many really young guys,” Cronander exclaimed afterward. Mostly Free-Form: Among Burning Amp’s exalted guests were John Curl (Parasound, Vendetta), Jan Didden (Linear Audio, AudioXpress), Jack Hidley and Gordon Chang (formerly of NHT, now at Audio Consulting Services), Siegfried Linkwitz (Linkwitz Labs), Danny “Sage” McKinney and ribbon-tweeter designer Aleksandar Radisavljevic (RAAL/Requisite), Nenad Napjalo (NN Acoustics), Nelson Pass (Pass Labs, First Watt), Drgan Solaja (Solaja Audio), and Scott Wurcer (Analog Devices). The event’s sponsors included Pass DIY, RAAL/Requisite, and the magazines AudioXpress and Elektor.

Toward the start of the often free-form day, Hidley and Chang demonstrated one of their first DIY speakers. Years ago, while still attending Cal Polytech, the two set out to build “the biggest, baddest speaker we possibly could.” In typical DIY fashion, they grabbed a friend’s old woofer cabinet, threw in some old SEAS tweeters and discontinued mid-woofers, added a few used 5.25” drivers, built a second-order crossover, cobbled it all together, and spent 75 minutes tweaking the results. “We’ll take any reasonable offer,” Hidley proclaimed to applause as they blasted music at a volume too high to permit critical evaluation.

“The idea is to make this very relaxed,” Mark Cronander told me after the show. “You do what you like.”
man hearing developed as an adaptive and survival mechanism in the eras preceding civilization, he noted that the eyes, skin, and movements of the head play significant roles in how we process sound. (So much for blind testing.) Suspicious of quick A/B switching experiments, whose results he does not necessarily consider meaningful, Linkwitz noted that his goal is to translate to his living room the sound of his ultimate reference: a symphony orchestra performing live in a concert hall.

Among Linkwitz’s requirements: 1) place speakers with left-right symmetry (which leaves out a hell of a lot of our rooms); 2) ensure a minimum distance of 3’ from all reflecting surfaces in order to allow the >6-millisecond delay of reflected sound that enables our two ears to lock on to the direct sound; 3) dipole bass drivers are superior because they excite fewer room nodes; 4) open and closed cabinets are superior to vented enclosures because the latter’s ports are themselves resonant structures that do not accurately emit sound; and 5) realistic playback levels are essential.

Zaph and RAAL/Requisite: Neil Kaye of San Francisco and Stuart Eason of Santa Cruz, two DIYers who met through diyAudio, shared an outlook common to many present. Asked why they’d built speakers based on a design by John “Zaph” Krutke, who gives away his DIY designs at www.zaphaudio.com, and amps based on the old Krell KSA-50, Kaye replied, “Because we could. I’m a recovering audiophile who spent way too much money on audiophile equipment.”

Radisavljevic brought along his company’s first loudspeaker, the RAAL/Requisite Eternity ($80,000/pair),
which he’d just displayed at the Rocky Mountain Audio Fest. An omnidirectional speaker that bears an uncanny resemblance to a wood-burning stove, the Eternity has fifteen RAAL true ribbon tweeters, eighteen 3” midrange drive-units, five 15” woofers, and a parachute in a pear tree, all in an open-baffle configuration. I regret that I missed RAAL’s display at RMAF; Burning Amp’s busy Yacht Club environment, which included a bar on one side of the room, made any serious audition of the very enticing Eternity a challenge.

Bountiful Goodies: Nelson Pass upheld his reputation as DIY community hero by bringing along a truckload of components, chassis, and transformers, including 12 almost-finished Pass amps. These, along with 260 drivers donated by Jack Hidley, were either given away in a raffle or, in silent auction, sold to help provide seed money for next year’s expanded Burning Amp Festival.

Both Pass and his son, Colin, were available throughout the day, dispensing wisdom as freely as hardware. Pass even followed up after the event by helping DIYers complete the almost-finished amps they’d won. As one DIYer confessed about the amp he was toting at the show, “Over the years, Nelson kept giving out hints. Finally, I put everything together and figured out what I needed to know to build this clone.”

Mark Cronander displayed his fanciful version of Pass’s First Watt F4 amplifier. The F4, which some consider a superior alternative to a passive preamp, dispenses with circuitry that can detract from sonic purity by taking advantage of an active preamp’s high output-voltage gain. Pass not only shared his latest iteration of the design with Cronander and other DIYers, but also assisted them during the building process.

Compression: Toward the end of Burning Amp, when yours truly had become a done-in-yourselfer, Jan Didden gave a presentation on audio compression in recordings. His conclusions would not have surprised readers of Stereophile and its website forum (http://forum.stereophile.com/forum/ubbthreads.php). “The most impressive part of the demonstration,” says Cronander, “was when Jan played back samples of the same song released over a span of several decades. Each one sounded worse, more compressed, than the last. It was so shocking that it made people angry.”

 Until Next Year: “Though the event took on a life of its own,” Mark Cronander says in summation, “and was less organized than we had intended, the quality of presentations and cooperation exceeded our expectations. It was heartwarming to see people arrive clutching amps that they had spent months building, and look gratified as they demonstrated their efforts.” He and Vladimir Simovich are already discussing where in the Bay Area to hold the next Burning Amp Festival. They look forward to attracting several hundred more participants to the third annual event in October 2009.

UK: THE “BIG GUNS” TOUR Paul Messenger

The parlous state last fall of the British audio scene convinced many leading brands to stay away from hi-fi shows, among them speaker maker PMC Ltd. However, rather than sit at home wondering when the orders would come in, the company decided to go out on the road with a Big Guns Tour, which ran from September through November.

The tour involved visiting nine of PMC’s leading UK dealers and spending about a week at each, each week culminating in a ticketed musical evening. The Big Gun in question was PMC’s MB2 XBDi. Although PMC’s connections with professional audio mean that this monstrous loudspeaker is less costly than you might expect, it’s still a giant: 68” H by 15” W by 21” D, weighing nearly 200 lbs, and with two transmission-line-loaded 12” drivers.

The tour had three purposes. First, PMC felt that British hi-fi enthusiasts had little or no opportunity to hear what a really big speaker was capable of delivering under good conditions. Dealers simply don’t stock things like the MB2 XBDi, and rarely have demonstration rooms that can take full advantage of their capabilities. Second, through its work with many of the world’s top recording studios, PMC has gained considerable expertise in acoustic treatments, and planned to apply what they’ve learned to the MB2 XBDi demos. They also wanted to experiment with and suggest acoustic treatments for their dealers’ demo rooms. And third, PMC wanted to introduce to staff and potential customers the complete range of their relatively new “i” speakers, which boast improved tweeters, crossovers, and enclosures.

The Big Gun Tour seems to have been a success. Firm orders were taken for three pairs of MB2 XBDIs, as well as for a number of smaller models. Several dealers added the Bryston power amps and CD player to their product portfolios—PMC is Bryston’s UK distributor—and five decided to follow PMC’s suggestions on acoustic treatments. No fewer than 120 people attended the final musical evening, which featured a full surround-sound system in a large conference room at an Ashford, Kent hotel.

I suspect I might have inadvertently provided a dry run for the Tour: A few months earlier, PMC had helped me modify the acoustics of my own listening room, and not long after brought down a pair of MB2 XBDIs for me to review. The room treatment was simple yet effective, consisting of carefully placed panels of 2”-thick Melatech—foamed Melamine that provides effective sound absorption down to around 250Hz. One piece measuring about 3’ by 4’ was suspended between two beams roughly midway between the speakers and the listening area. Two much larger pieces (3.5’ by 6.5’) were hung from a second rod on the window side of the main curtains, so that they could be moved into position to block off a large (10’ wide), and heavily glazed bay window after sunset and for critical listening.

The results were impressive: much improved stereo imaging, with a better focused soundstage; coloration, too, was marginally decreased. There seemed no audible downside, and the cost of the modifications was relatively modest. Indeed, the only difficulty would seem to be determining the right solution for any given room.

PMC’s huge MB2 XBDi loudspeakers seemed an unlikely match for my 14’ by 18’ by 8.5’ room. Indeed, my power-response measurement showed the sub-100Hz bass to be +8dB—but, surprisingly, this seemed to enhance rather than spoil the sound, while the apparently inexhaustible headroom was a major plus. For me, however, the most impressive thing about the MB2 XBDi was its 3” midrange dome, driven by a huge (75” diameter) magnet that supplied exceptional grip and expression. Sadly, the MB2 XBDi is simply too difficult to move aside for someone who is perpetually reviewing different loudspeakers; currently, I’m listening to one of PMC’s Smaller Guns. Happily, sitting above the IB2i’s line-loaded 10” woofer are the same midrange and tweeter as are used in the MB2 XBDi. The IB2i seems to work very well.
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– Dan Babineau, Technical Editor, TONEAudio Magazine

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lightning strikes twice...

In 1996 Ayre introduced the K-1 preamplifier — a design so innovative and with such advanced technologies that more than a decade later it is still considered one of the finest components available. Now in 2008 history repeats itself — the new KX-R elevates the art of preamplification to a higher plane. Building on Ayre's zero-feedback, fully-balanced foundation, the KX-R transcends all other designs with its radical new concepts. The revolutionary Variable Gain Transimpedance (VGT) amplification circuit eliminates the conventional attenuator-based volume control completely. This simplified signal path delivers the music directly for a full and complete experience. Destined to become an instant classic, the Ayre KX-R is the reference for the next decade.
Simpler is better.

"Simple doesn't necessarily mean small in size," observed Bill Conrad, of Conrad-Johnson Design. "You can have large speakers that are simple in design, for instance."

Now, following the "simpler is better" motto of Bill and his friend and business partner, Lew Johnson, comes the Conrad-Johnson Classic preamplifier.

Bucking another trend at C-J, the Classic returns to the company's roots by offering simplicity and affordability. C-J, as it's known, made its reputation with such [ahem] economically priced tube gear as the PV-2a preamp, one of which I bought more than 25 years ago for about $750. I used it with a pair of Quicksilver 8417 monoblock tube amps (about $1000) and Quad ESL-63 speakers. The Classic costs $1750 without phono stage, $2500 with. C-J's other tube preamps are much pricier: the CT5 at $8500, the Act 2 Series 2 (it should have been the Act 2 Scene 2) at $16,500.

Drs. Conrad and Johnson (both hold PhDs in economics) began planning the Classic preamp months before the mortgage meltdown and the collapse of the stock market. Did these two former Federal Reserve economists know something?

"I view the Classic as a way to re energize the base of the business by offering people something they can afford," declared Dr. Bill.

I traded my PV-2a for a PV-5, which sold for around $1500 some 20 years ago. The PV-5 was an improvement; as costlier preamps often do, it sounded much bigger than the PV-2a: bigger soundstage, better dynamics. Jonathan Scull owned a PV-5, too. I mated mine with a C-J MV45 power amp.

"I feel like I have my PV-5 back," I exclaimed to Bill Conrad.

"The Classic is a lot different than your old PV-5," he replied. "The circuitry is much more modern."

Modern? How so?

The Classic offers simplicity and affordability.

"These are zero-feedback circuits in every respect, which I strongly favor, and have the advantage of lower parts count and simpler approach. The older designs had feedbacked circuits."

That sounds more retro than modern, I observed. Does this represent better technology, or wisdom?

"Wisdom, I think. I am learning that things that everyone knew, including myself, weren't right," Bill continued.

Like using a lot of feedback. As you know, feedback was developed by Bell Labs in the late '20s and '30s to stabilize the signals of long-distance telephone lines.2 Something got lost in the way feedback was applied in audio. Rather than ask, "How much feedback do I need to achieve my goal?," the question became, "How much feedback can I put on here?" Feedback got abused.

"Feedbacked amplifiers [and preamps] lose some immediacy, even if done reasonably. Of course, the other thing [required] in order to get feedback [is] you need to achieve about twice as much gain, which might mean two tubes in sequence rather than one, twice as many resistors, and so on."

Speaking of Bell Labs, there was a certain John B. Johnson working there. In 1928, he became the first to measure a resistor's thermal noise, which became known as "Johnson noise." I'll have to ask Lew Johnson about this.

Meanwhile, Bill Conrad continued:

"The Classic's circuit is similar to all of [our] other [current] preamps, with one single triode tube per channel. [That's for the line stage.—ST] That's followed by a FET output—one FET per channel—so the preamp will better drive cable. [This lowers the Classic's main output impedance to a specified 200 ohms.—ST] I have stuck [to] regulated supplies and regulated heaters so it is independent of line balance and gives a low source-supply impedance, which helps the amplifier perform in a linear manner.

"Simple circuits allow me to use high-quality parts. For instance, Vishay plate resistors for the tubes. These are expensive. We use polypropylene caps here and there in the preamp, and this is very unusual in a mass-market product. In comparison with our Teflon caps—the ones we use in the CT5 and Act 2—these are reasonably priced, however. We try to put the quality parts where they matter most, sonically, using our budget efficiently."

It's far better to have economists making these decisions than MBAs.

The Classic has five line-level inputs—four if you choose the phono-stage option. (The phono section is not user-rettifiabile, but the factory can fit it. Bush II was a Yale undergrad and a Harvard MBA. So much for Ivy League excellence.


2 Yes! And one of the tubes that got feedbacked was the 300B, developed by Bell Labs and made by Western Electric —ST.

3 If you want to know exactly why MBAs are evil, read Ahead of the Curve: Two Years at Harvard Business School, by Philip Delves Broughton. Nt, don't buy it: it's a throw-away read. Take it out of the library. Skim it. Bush II was a Yale undergrad and a Harvard MBA. So much for Ivy League excellence.
one in if you change your mind.) There are two preamp outputs—useful for biamping or for a powered subwoofer. In terms of features, that's it. No remote control. No balance control. No tone controls, of course.

"No remote saves a lot of money," said Bill Conrad in full thrift mode. "Not that the remotes themselves are all that expensive, but the supporting circuitry costs a lot."

Volume is controlled by a Noble potentiometer—a noble pot indeed. I have one myself—a noble pot, that is.

When I opened the top cover of the Classic, I saw no parts inside. Well, that's an exaggeration, but the inside of the chassis is mainly air. I asked Bill about it. "That's my goal," Bill declared. "One thing we know about parts is that none of them is perfect. A lot of engineers don't seem to understand that you need to have a good reason to put a part in. You try to do it simple and do it right and then leave well enough alone, which is true about a lot of things in life. Then there are our various governments and other bureaucracies, where you get it wrong and then you try to keep screwing it up."

I returned to the topic of feedback. If zero feedback is so desirable in a preamplifier, why isn't it used in CJ power amplifiers?

"It is," Bill corrected me. "The ET250S that you reviewed last year [July 2008, Vol.31 No.7] has no global feedback."

Apparently, you can do that with a solid-state output stage. But don't tubes sound better?

What Bill Conrad then said is a startling statement from one eponymous half of "mainly tubed" Conrad-Johnson Design: "I'm not really convinced that tubes make the best output stage. All the voltage gain in the tubes, that gives them the sonic signature of the piece. The tubes are being used in a manner that leaves them very happy, not having to swing a lot of current. Tubes are not made to swing current—that's why you end up with transformers and an incredible amount of feedback, to force them to produce the current.

"You can't do zero feedback [in a power amp] entirely with tubes because the output impedance is way too high. You're dealing with two different types of compromise when you get to the output stage. Output tubes run into a transformer. Even if it's a very good transformer, it may be somewhat bandwidth-limited. And the output imped-

ance is inherently somewhat high, no matter what you do. With solid-state output stages, I am limited in my power-supply storage capacitors. If I made the power-supply storage as large as I'd like, the amplifier would be as big as the room and cost as much as the house."

Not surprisingly, Bill recommends the combination of Classic preamp and ET250S power amp for a mostly tubed sound. There's nothing new in this: Drs. Conrad and Johnson have suggested pairing a tubed preamp with a solid-state power amp for years. What's new with the ET250S is that this power amp is a hybrid: tubed input stage, bipolar transistor output stage. Unfortunately, I no longer had the ET250S in my systems, but I trust Bill when he states that the combination clicks.

So did the combination of the Classic preamp with Conrad-Johnson's LP66S power amp, which I reviewed last month. That amp was still around, driving my Harbeth Compact 7 LS-3 loudspeakers. The CD player was a Cary Audio Design CD71. My Rega Planar 25 did turntable duty, along with an out-of-fashion Goldring 1042 moving-magnet cartridge. I think the LP66S is the best-sounding, low-powered stereo tube amp Conrad-Johnson has ever made. Just don't push the power.

The Classic preamp replaced the far more expensive CT5 ($8500). It was a literal swap. One day the UPS man picked up the C-J CT5, the next day he delivered the C-J Classic. Those two economists sure are efficient.

Of course, the CT5 is the superior preamp. It had better be, for nearly five times the Classic's price. But in some ways I preferred the Classic.

One way I preferred it was for its much lower price. For all the frugality evident in its design, the Classic has charms of its own, beginning with the fact that it does remind me of C-J's "classic" PV-2a and PV-5 preamps. Of course, it signs its sonic signature—all components do, and maybe none more so than a preamp. The Classic is open, sweet, slightly forgiving in ways typically tube. There's a directness about the Classic that may come from its simple circuits and low parts count. I don't know how else to express it: the Classic connects.

You want crisply articulated transients? The Classic has 'em. You want surprisingly strong bass from a tubed preamp? The Classic has that, too—maybe in part because of its FET output buffer. I wholeheartedly recommend the Classic as a line stage.

The Classic inverts phase. If your power amp doesn't, you'll need to reverse your speaker cables at the amp—or at the speakers (reverse the red and black leads). Yes, it's a pain, but it eliminates a phase-inversion circuit.

As for paying another $750 for the phono stage, I am less elated. I am hedging here. (I know Obama is going to make hedging illegal.) I first tried the Rega-Goldring combination. With its 6.3mV output, the Goldring cartridge was in danger of swampying the Classic with gain. I loaded the Goldring at 47k ohms (the phono stage's default set-

"I'M NOT REALLY CONVINCED THAT TUBES MAKE THE BEST OUTPUT STAGE." —BILL CONRAD
Unprecedented.

In 2008, The Absolute Sound honored three of our subwoofers with an Editors' Choice Award.

(The other two haven't been reviewed yet.)
me: the phono tubes stay lit, consuming power, and wear out—even when I'm not playing LPs for long stretches of time. I hate such a waste of tube life. The McIntosh C220 preamp (writeup coming soon) that I have in the main listening room lets you turn off the phono-stage tubes when you're not using them, though the procedure involves navigating some complicated menus. Still, the option is there.

I know: the McIntosh C220 costs $4000. But it sounds great and is replete with all manner of convenience features—comfort features, I call them—such as a fine, remotely controlled headphone amp that sounds even better when you mute the output(s) going to the power amp. Nor does the Mac needlessly burn up tubes. I find the Classic's lack of this feature, er...uneconomical.

So I'd consider passing on the phono stage—especially if I were a phono freak, a fremerer. You could take that $750 and put it toward a fine outboard phono stage. Or even buy an outboard phono preamp for $750 or less. Almost any standalone phono preamp will give you more flexibility than the Classic in terms of cartridge loading and, especially important, gain. One of my faves is the EAR 834P ($1595 for the "economy" model), which has resided, on and off, in one of my systems for almost 15 years. For $1750, though, the Classic is one fabulous line stage. Line stage, da; phono stage, nee—for me, at least.

**Haydn & Provocations**

Bill Conrad offered up a provoking thought, as he often does:

> We all know that most hi-fi equipment needs to be run in before it sounds its best—cartridges, speakers, amps, preamps, etc. I think speakers especially, which can make life tough for reviewers.

Bill wondered whether or not the type of music you play to run in a component—or a system—might make a difference in the way it ultimately sounds. I have often thought about this but never articulated it. Do you really want to play the burn-in noise track on Stereophile's *Test CD 3*? Do you want to leave sinewaves sliding up and down 24 hours a day? Mightn't it be better to play Haydn string quartets and piano sonatas? A component or system run in with heavy metal might sound different from one conditioned with Haydn or Mozart. Bill suggested this as a possibility, not a certainty.

To put it another way: If you're good to your hi-fi system by feeding it the best music possible, might your hi-fi system, in turn, be good to you? Do you get the sound you desire? Do I recognize the Jungian aspects of this thinking: that an inanimate object can embody the spirit of its creator—or owner. It mainly applies to art. But we hi-fi scribes do talk about the "art" of designing a preamp or speaker. Does the soul of Alan Shaw reside in each and every Harbeth? Is there some of Bill and Lew in every Classic preamp and LP66S power amp?

I laugh my evil laugh. My dear friend, Giovanni Maria Sachetti, founder of Unison Research, more or less agrees with this notion. So does Giovanni Nasta, owner of Unison and Opera Loudspeakers.

Joseph Haydn died on May 31, 1809. This year represents the 200th anniversary of his death. We would have to wait until 2032 to honor the 300th anniversary of Haydn's birth, by which time I would be 90 and no longer writing for this rag.

There's that wonderful 1792 Haydn portrait by Thomas Hardy that shows the old man holding, if not smoking, a stogie. I, too, loved cigars, until my teeth began to fall out. I still occasionally puff on a Cuban. I'm not sure Haydn had any teeth left by 1792. I do know that Haydn is my man. (Russians call my man Gaydn, because the language has no H. Handel is, you guessed it, Gan...)

This being the bicentennial of Haydn's death, the record companies will try to cash in, big time. In the case of Naxos, I am overjoyed. They've earned the right to cash in. In fact, they've put Papa Haydn on sale, and reduced the price for those who purchase in quantity. Two boxed sets stand out. (Sorry if I didn't do this under "R2D4"—I don't think there are any recordings "to die for"—but I felt the format was constraining.)

I laugh my evil laugh. Instead of buying a power cord for $100 or more, consider buying the Complete Haydn String Quartets, performed by the Kodaly Quartet, of Budapest (Naxos 8.502400). It has been bringing joy into my life for the past three weeks. This beautiful boxed set of 25 CDs (I already had many of the individual CDs) contains some of the greatest chords of all time, a total playing time of 25:42:24, and does not skimp on liner notes. Here are all 68 quartets Haydn is known to have written, plus more that he probably did not. Naxos does love to be complete, even to the point of including works that may have been written by Johann Georg Albrechtsberger, whose own quartets are worth seeking out. (The suggested list price is $99.99; I suggest you pay less by looking for sales at ArkivMusic and elsewhere.)

Haydn didn't claim to have invented the string quartet—he claims to have only happened on the form. In any event, he developed and defined the string quartet, to be followed by quartets by Mozart (who dedicated six of his own finest to Haydn), Beethoven, Schubert, Brahms, and others.

I'm no musicologist, but I've hung out with classical musicians for a long time. Students of Alexander Schneider have told me that "Sascha" didn't consider a chamber-music recital complete without at least one work of Haydn. And now I don't consider any personal, private chamber-music listening session complete without at least one work by Papa.

I love these recordings—even more so now that I have all of them. Beautifully recorded, rather close-in, mostly at the Unitarian church in Budapest, a venue I know, these performances are deeply dedicated to Haydn and to the joy of music making (as well as to the
From Tibetan waterwheel chants to Mississippi Delta blues, Mark Levinson components will perfectly reproduce music and movie performances of every variety in your home — as critical listeners of every kind have been graciously acknowledging for nearly 40 years.

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darker moments in Haydn's quartets).

Ideally, you might pick and choose among performers for different Haydn quartets. The Alban Berg Quartet, now disbanded, comes to mind, but they didn't record all of them. I find myself dipping into the Naxos box at random and playing whatever my fingers pick, famous or not. With the exception of a few of the probably spurious compositions, the Kodály Quartet stays the same throughout the cycle, which was recorded mainly in the 1990s: Attila Falvay, first violin; Tamas Szabo, second violin; Gabor Fias, viola; Janos Devich, cello.

Get this set and then, when you find your favorite Haydn quartets, consider some other recordings. But this is the one to have as a base. I wouldn't want to overstate, but this is probably the most essential chamber music box of all. Don't go for the earlier, more expensive, less complete set. Look for the illustration on this page.

Haydn's complete piano sonatas with Jenő Jandó (Naxos 8.501042) costs $50 list. Again, pay less—look for sales at ArkivMusic and elsewhere. After all, there are only 10 CDs, with a total playing time of only 10:57:18. Per minute, the quartets cost less. The open window on the box looks exactly like the Normafa, our favorite summertime hotel in Budapest.

My wife, Marina, and I are among the few Americans to have heard Jandó (pronounced Yandó) perform live in the US—one in Connecticut, and once at a private recital at the Hungarian consulate in New York. Jandó, born in 1952, doesn't like to jet-set much. He has his home in Budapest, his professorship, his students. I wouldn't leave Budapest either—not with the baths at the Hotel Gellert. I have this from Klaus Heymann, a friend of Jandó's and the founder of Naxos: "In many ways, Jenő Jandó defines the approach which modern classical music labels like Naxos have to their catalogues: innovation, completeness, quality, breadth, and availability. To this can be added, perhaps, the supremacy of the work over the ego of the performer."

Once, Marina and I met Jandó and exchanged a few pleasantries with him. A great pianist, he's especially suited to Haydn. Listen to the Allegro finale of Sonata 33 (disc 5, track 6) and you'll realize that virtuoso Jandó is not afraid to take things at breakneck speed when appropriate.

Alas, I used to play this sonata—not a tenth as well or a fifth as fast as Jandó—before my first wife seized our piano in a divorce settlement. I hope she enjoyed tinkling on the ivories; I sure enjoyed studying piano with my daughter. Sure, I like to listen to Emanuel Ax and Alfred Brendel, too, but they haven't recorded the entire cycle of sonatas and put them in a box for 50 bucks.

Like most of the quartets, the piano sonatas were recorded in the Unitarian Church in Budapest, where Marina and I once heard the Kodály Quartet. Ibolya Tóth produced both cycles, János Bohus engineered them. The Unitarian is austere, not cavernous; the acoustic is clear, with not a lot of reverberation—not too much there there. An ideal recording venue.

And you want to know why Naxos is the greatest classical record label that ever was?
A skeptical reader e-mailed to ask how removing Nagra's VPS phono preamp from its optional VFS platform could have any sonic effect, let alone the "profound" one I claimed to hear! "Explain," he demanded, "exactly how electricity flowing from the input at the power cord, through the preamplifier, to the output, into the power amplifier, can be subjected to a vibration that would be audible when there are no moving parts to be affected." He also asked for an "electrical test" that would show the signal being affected by vibrations.

Of course, the filaments inside vacuum tubes can be "moving parts," moved either by an impulse (such as tapping on the glass) that produces a clearly audible noise when amplified, or by loudspeaker-produced energy that produces a more subtle form of noise caused by energy transmitted to the filaments through the structure on which the tubed component sits, or directly through the air. Either way, the filaments are energized, the energy causes movement, and the movement creates signal-degrading noise.

More obvious is how such a scenario can produce noise in a mechanical transducer, such as a cartridge mounted in a tonearm. Less obvious to many is how a solid-state device such as a preamplifier or amplifier might be so affected. The many speaker designers who "pot" (seal in epoxy) their crossover networks inside the cabinet don't need to be sold on this idea, nor do audiophiles who've heard the audibly positive effects that result from placing their components on well-designed racks. But, as with the sonic effects of demagnetizing LPs, there are skeptical audiophiles who dismiss out of hand the idea that equipment racks can "sound."

One audiophile in need of no such convincing is Mike Latvis. This holder of multiple patents and two degrees in mechanical engineering has had more than 20 years' experience designing, for military and commercial clients, systems that isolate and damp vibrations. He's designed such products for seven major industries, beginning with what his résumé lists as "nuclear power systems" and ending with "high-end audio isolation systems and resonance control products." Latvis is so sure of the sonic benefits of using well-designed racks in high-performance audio systems that he gave up designing isolation systems for weapons, dampers for helicopter rotors, and the like to found Harmonic Resolution Systems (HRS) and devote himself full-time to designing racks and component damping plates.

Anyone armed with such a distinguished résumé, not to mention a well-worn hardcover copy of the salaciously titled textbook Engineering with Rubber, deserves my respect. In fact, that respect began before I met Latvis, when Brinkmann North America's Lawrence Blair set up the Brinkmann Balance turntable in my listening room on a specially designed and superbly built HRS base with a split plinth.

Harmonic Resolution Systems SXR rack, VPI Super Scoutmaster rim-drive turntable

Harmonic Resolution Systems SXR rack. Each 42-lb base is totally isolated from the frame. There is no metal contact.

Harmonic Resolution Systems is based in Buffalo, New York, where they build two modular rack systems that are flexible in their applications. The more expensive, more massive, more attractive MXR line's frame alone will set you back anywhere from $8650 to $9450, depending on the height and which of the two base widths you choose. Add about $2300 each for the isolation bases, $2800 for a premium finish, and another $1990 for walnut burl. You can even build double-width systems—that, or send your kids to college.

The impeccably built MXR system is a work of the industrial and interior-decorating arts that can weigh as much as a small car. Despite the high prices, it has many enthusiastic owners who are convinced that it gives the finishing physical and sonic touches to their state-of-the-art sound systems.

Latvis supplied for review his less ambitious, considerably less expensive SXR frame system with S1 isolation bases, also available in two standard widths, and also based on serious mass loading and isolation. The wider of the SXR's two rigid, four-tier aluminum frames weighs 129 lbs and costs $4995. Each S1 isolation base measures 21" by 19" by 3" weighs 42 lbs, and costs $1395, which brings the total weight of stand plus four bases to a hefty 297 lbs and an even heftier $10,575. Obviously, the SXR system is still expensive; but before passing judgment on its price, you really have to see it, consider how it's made, and—more important—hear what it can do.

The frame is assembled from solid, heavy aluminum struts, these available in three standard lengths to accommodate components of various heights, and beefy, rigid, H-shaped, cross-braced aluminum shelves, into which the struts screw, each joint damped with a thick donut of polymer before being torqued down using a rubber-banded wrench (supplied). Circular holes cut in each cross-brace's four corners accept the base's feet, which support its considerable weight via an elastomer suspension that isolates in both vertical and horizontal planes.

To keep the resonant frequency low and prevent the suspension from bot-
While the aluminum foot shown here contacts the rack, the base bolts to the elastomer insert contained within. The rear of the chassis—each foot of each base can have an elastomer of different compliance. Should you change to a lighter or heavier component, the feet can easily be swapped out.

Not long before press time, HRS announced the availability of solid brace inserts that can be added to the cross-braced shelves to increase each shell's maximum load from 135 to more than 300 lbs, for heavy amplifiers and massive turntables. While it's a bit of a hassle, you can also change the height of the shelves by disassembling the rack and switching out struts. (MRX system shelf height is quickly adjustable with no disassembly required.)

**Force = Mass x Acceleration:** Loudspeakers are the most obvious sources of bad vibes. Vibrational energy from speakers can be transmitted directly to a component through the air, or via the structure on which the component is placed. Obviously, the higher the component's mass, the more energy will be required to move it. A circuit board in a flimsy chassis will vibrate more readily than one inside a massive one.

The same is true of an equipment rack's frame, and especially of the support structure on which the component is placed. There's just no getting around Newton's Second Law of Motion: lightweight frames and shelves will have higher levels of acceleration in response to an external force and in general require less force to accelerate than heavier ones. While isolating a lightweight shelf might keep floor-borne energy out, airborne energy will still cause the thin lady to sing.

Some equipment makers have gotten the mass message. Naim uses rigid, heavy chassis and suspended circuit boards, and Ayre Acoustics machines the chassis of its MX-R power amp from a 75-lb billet of aluminum. But many manufacturers haven't, which makes dealing with such vibrations all the more important.

For those skeptical about just how much solid-state gear can be affected by vibrational energy—and, more specifically, how vibrations can create electrical noise—Mike Latvis described to me how a strain gauge measures mechanical motion by turning it into electricity.
Rather than detail those workings here, I'll just say that they prove that slight movements of a wire in an electrical circuit can produce a slight change in the wire's resistance, and thus a corresponding change in voltage. Latvis contends that many of the electrical components within high-performance audio components, whether or not mounted on circuit boards, will be so affected by vibrational energy, with the results of electrical noise and smeared signals.

Mass alone, Latvis cautioned, is not necessarily enough to curtail the effects of vibrational energy; if you create a more massive component whose resonant frequency coincides with a frequency of the vibration being transmitted, the massive component will resonate at that frequency and, rather than damping the vibration, will actually amplify it. So while making a rack just plain heavy would seem to be a good idea, there's more to it than that.

Its massiveness aside, the SXR system is also designed to isolate the shelf on which the component sits by significantly reducing the amount of energy reaching the shelf. Effectively, SXR shelves are massive and isolated and strategically damped at the ideal frequencies.

Looking at the Finite Elemente Pagode shelf in my system, Latvis said that those who designed it are "serious" and that it works, though differently from his own racks. (The Pagode uses a series of tuning forks to damp the amplitude and spread the "Q" of the shelf's resonant frequency.) Of course, Latvis thinks his heavier, better-isolated system is more effective. He had less kind words for some other racks that, he says, don't respect Newton's Second Law, and that certainly "sound."

Can you really hear a rack? Any equipment rack, good or bad, will affect your system's sound, and especially when in close proximity to a loudspeaker. What you place your audio components on—cones, wood blocks, whatever—and what you place on top of them, such as HRS's damping plates, will also change the sound. According to Mike Latvis, anything that comes into contact with a component will have an audible effect.

I bought my first Finite Elemente rack after seeing one at a German high-fi show, before the brand was distributed in the US. I did so in great part because I liked its looks. I was skeptical about any sonic benefits, but once the Pagode was installed, I immediately heard them. HRS's SXR rack doesn't come close to matching the Finite Elemente's good looks, but it had a far more profound effect on my system's sound: the Cary Audio Design CD306 SACD player sounded far more precise and focused when sitting on the SXR. Even the sound of darTZeel's NHB-18NS preamp, with its rigid chassis and massive battery array, improved—once I'd switched to a less compliant set of elastomer base feet.

Adding the HRS SXR improved my system's focus and low-level resolution, and lowered its level of background noise. Consumers, and manufacturers who, despite the trouble and expense, schlepped the heavy MXR racks to hi-fi shows, had told me to expect a greater sense of overall system coherence and solidity. Even so, what I heard from the SXR was far more profound than anything I'd anticipated. Latvis claims that the MXR produces even greater...
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improvements. I'm sure that many of you, like the incredulous reader who wrote in about Nagra's VFS platform, are still skeptical. I'm not.

Still, even having heard the SXR at work, I maintained an attitude of "show me" as Latvia unpacked four heavy aluminum damping plates with elastomer bottoms, each measuring 14.5" by 4.5" and costing $190. One at a time, he placed them over my Musical Fidelity kW power amp's four large, finned heatsinks while I listened to an extremely revealing piano recording. Again, the focus improved, and the piano's harmonic structure cohered. The somewhat bright-sounding kW became less so. Guess he showed me.

Years—decades—ago, many audiophiles who heard similar results after placing VPI's famous "magic brick" atop their amplifiers' power transformers (or on the chassis top plate just above the transformer) wondered whether the improvement in sound was caused by the weight alone, or by the iron inside the brick improving the coupling between the transformer's primary and secondary windings, or both. I guess both. If you've got some dumbbells lying around . . . well, call me a dumbbell, but I'm buying a Harmonic Resolution Systems SXR rack.

**VPI Super Scoutmaster Reference rim-drive turntable**

VPI's Harry Weisfeld hit the right note back in 2000, with his original Scout turntable. It was compact, had an outboard motor, and, for rigidity's sake, the bearing of the JMW tonearm was sunk into the plinth. Add a $1600 price (now $1800) and a sinking dollar and you had a hit at home and overseas. Everyone loved the Scout. They still do.

But Weisfeld wasn't finished. He never is. He created the Scoutmaster, which costs $2500 with a JMW-9 tonearm. The Scoutmaster doubled the Scout's plinth with a steel plate between the two sections, and threw in the more expensive Aries 3 turntable's 1.75"-thick acrylic platter and inverted bearing. This, too, was a sonic and commercial success, and upgrades were offered: a peripheral outer damping ring, a record weight, and the SDS controller for the 24-pole, AC synchronous motor, which spun at 300rpm.

Weisfeld then crossedbreed the Scoutmaster with his far more expensive HR-X turntable. Their offspring was the Super Scoutmaster ($6000), which had the HR-Xs massive, outboard dual-motor/flywheel drive system and SDS controller. To sweeten the deal, he added the peripheral damping ring and record weight as standard equipment. The Super Scoutmaster's Mini-TNT Stabilizer feet, made of damped Delrin and stainless steel, cost extra but were superior enough to the standard aluminum cones as to be well worth it.

Now comes the Super Scoutmaster Reference Rim Drive turntable ($8200). Standard with this model are the Mini-TNT Stabilizer feet, VPI's Super Platter (a layer of stainless steel sandwiched by layers of acrylic), the JMW-10.5i Memorial tonearm, and the new rim-drive system based on the dual-motor/flywheel module.

The JMW-10.5i Memorial is 12mm longer than the -10 and -10.5 tonearms, and comes fitted with Nordost Valhalla wire. It's larger side-weight stabilizers, and new secondary stabilizer for the cantilevered bearing-support and VTA-adjustment platform, give it far greater rigidity. Knurled set screws make locking the VTA tower and secondary stabilizer convenient. The housing that attaches the unipivot bearing to the cantilevered platform also appears to be more massive than those of other VPI arms I've encountered, and there's now just one joint instead of two between the arm tube and bearing housing, which should result in a big improvement in rigidity.

I still wish VPI improved its arm-lock mechanism—it doesn't really lock—and I still find somewhat disconcerting this arm's tendency to oscillate around its azimuth angle, and the long time it takes to finally stabilize. Ultimately, however, what counts is how the arm tracks an LP. Using a variety of cartridges, it became clear that the JMW-10.5i tracks very well indeed.

Instead of the Super Scoutmaster's platter being driven by the flywheel via a conventional belt, it's directly driven by a grooved wheel 6" in diameter, fitted with a silicone O-ring atop the flywheel. (This system is available as a $999 upgrade to any dual-motor VPI turntable.) VPI claims the absence of belt slippage and/or flexure results in a major increase in speed stability that improves rhythm'n'pacing, spatial cues, and especially the 'table's bass performance and overall sense of "drive."

But every technology has its negatives. Rim drives transfer energy directly, which is good in terms of speed stability, assuming the drive wheel and O-ring are both perfectly machined—any error in either will be repeated more often, as the smaller wheel rotates more often than the larger platter. The price paid is usually in terms of noise: the flywheel's bearing is also directly coupled to the platter, damped...
"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)
only by the O-ring (which may or may not be a sufficient barrier).

Determining the proper distance between the drive mechanism and the plinth is a bit tricky: too close and the platter will turn too slowly, or not at all; too far away, same things. I used a strobe to maximize the accuracy of the platter speed as I experimented with different distances, then used VPI’s SDS controller to attain perfect speed. Once this was done, I didn’t need to re-adjust the system throughout the three months I had the Super Scoutmaster in my system. I don’t consider this product “tweaky.”

Ultimately, what counts is how a product sounds, and the Super Scoutmaster Reference Rim Drive sounded, in a word, fantastic. Without having a second belt-drive motor module on hand to compare to the rim-drive version, I can’t tell you how the two systems’ sounds compared, or whether or not the $999 rim-drive upgrade is worth the price. However, it was obvious to me that this version had impressive bottom-octave heft. Punchy well describes the Super Scoutmaster’s bottom end, which hit aggressively and cleanly and then, just as quickly, got out of the way. In fact, its bottom-end weight and solidity were reminiscent of the superb bass produced by the TW-Acoustic Raven AC turntable, which costs $13,800.

The Super Scoutmaster certainly passed the “Does it play music?” test. Its top-to-bottom coherence had a balance that, on top, leaned slightly toward the warm, enticing side of neutral. (I’ve heard airier performance and greater transient resolution from the Helikon phono cartridge.) But a fact of turntable life is, once you get the bottom octaves fundamentally correct, everything else tends to fall neatly into place; the Super Scoutmaster presented music in one impressively precise, tightly drawn package.

I’ve been comparing pressings of a new reissue of the Band’s eponymous second album (LP, Capitol STA0-132). This infamously murky production was recorded in Los Angeles, in Sammy Davis, Jr.’s pool cabana. Actually, its reputation of “murkiness”—like that of the Rolling Stones’ Exile on Main Street—is based on the shitty turntables then owned by most record reviewers. But a fact of turntable life is, once you get the bottom octaves fundamentally correct, everything else tends to fall neatly into place; the Super Scoutmaster presented music in one impressively precise, tightly drawn package.

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Visit www.musicangle.com for full reviews.
MAJOR & MINOR
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Because IsoMike recordings are uncompressed they are best enjoyed with your volume turned up. We discovered a website with a clear explanation: www.turnmeup.org

*in case you need another reason beyond great kables
The McIntosh C-8 preamp, a lovely Elberg MD12 Mk.III preamp has yet to arrive from its manufacturer, owing to a delay in the availability of certain parts. The Elberg MD12 Mk.III preamp has yet to arrive from its manufacturer, owing to a recent redesign. The Sentec EQ-10 preamp is here but has a broken switch I haven't got around to fixing. The McIntosh C-8 preamp, a lovely vintage piece that's available for peanuts on the used market, is still undergoing renovation by someone who isn't me.

So I'm taking this opportunity to catch up on some of the smaller matters that have piled up in the last six years, none of which quite warrants a column of its own.

It tracks well at 31¢

Ortofon, EMT, Denon, and Miyajima Labs all produce phono cartridges designed to play at downforces of 3.5 or more grams. Yet most tonearms aren't calibrated for stylus forces greater than 3gm, if they're calibrated at all. Similarly, most stylus-force gauges on the market peak out at 3gm—including my beloved Technics SH-50P1, which I've used for over 20 years. (The Technics adds insult to injury by altogether eliminating the 0.1gm calibration lines from their scale between 2.0 and 3.0gm; it's like going to Macy's for an expensive muumuu and being told that they don't do alterations!)

Esoteric Sound, the phono specialists who've inherited the Rek-O-Kut mantle (I wrote about their Re-Equalizer II in last month's column), have a good, cheap solution: the Rek-O-Kut Stylus Force Gauge ($34). It's a simple balance beam, such as the one that comes free with most Ortofon cartridges. But whereas the Ortofon scale is too tiny and ambiguous to be consistently useful—and it, too, tops out at 3gm—the Rek-O-Kut is big and easy, and it comes with a total of 5.75gm in plastic weights, for use in various combinations. Where that isn't enough, the manufacturer recommends using various coins, the weights of which are listed on their website. I've found that three dimes and one penny come out to 9.25gm—perfect for EMT's 78-specific OFD 65i pickup head.

Serious Wood

A couple of manufacturers responded to my column of June 2008, in which I railed against the majority of audio-specific furniture as being ugly, stupid, or both. My opinion remains rooted to the spot, but today that majority seems somewhat less vast.

First came news of a furniture line Anthony Abbate, who makes loudspeaker cabinets for DeVore Fidelity (whose excellent Gibbon 9 speaker I wrote about in my December 2007 column). Abbate's audio-furniture business, Box Furniture Co., specializes in multitiered wood racks that are stable and substantial without being unduly massive. Only premium hardwoods—maple, anigre, and sapele are the main choices—are used for the frames, and the shelves are plywood with similarly nice veneers. All joints are mortise-and-tenon, and Abbate is working on a way to flat-pack the finished product for home assembly to keep shipping costs down. Catalyzed finishes are applied to all surfaces, although Abbate is researching the use of environmentally friendly water-based lacquers for future production.

I have an early Box Furniture creation here at home: a portion of a much larger modular rack that was made for a Consumer Electronics Show display. I think it's a beautiful thing—very Harvey Ellis in a 21st-century way (sans découpage)—and it's quite sturdy. More to the point, the Box Furniture table sounds good—or, rather, equipment placed atop it sounds good. Even my Linn LP12 turntable.

I also received a note from the un-failingly nice Jim Pendleton, whose Audio Elegance furniture line is being developed by Osage Audio, based in Missouri, offers a variety of accessories. Pendleton represents a cabinetmaker named Jeff Dicks, whose Audio Elegance furniture also places an emphasis on aesthetically simple, sturdy designs. Dicks' racks and tables are also modular without appearing clumsily so, and, in an especially nice touch, many of the Audio Elegance equipment shelves. I can't imagine a better approach, especially for a freestanding record rack, whose every surface should be well finished. (Steel shelves are ugly, and probably mess with the sound, too.)

Audio Elegance also makes good-looking hardwood LP racks—also modular—to complement their equipment shelves. I can't imagine a better approach, especially for a freestanding record rack, whose every surface should be well finished. (Steel shelves are ugly, and probably mess with the sound, too.)

Audio Elegance offers three lines; in the upper two, Dakota and James River, only select hardwoods, softwoods, and multidirectional plywoods are used. Biscuit joinery is featured throughout, and finishes include catalyzed lacquers and hand-rubbed oils.
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**Whine-of-the-Month Club**

As someone with an actual, honest-to-God point of view, I expect and welcome e-mails and Internet postings from people whose opinions differ from mine. And while the notion that my column is somehow *calculated* to provoke controversy is true only in the Whine-of-the-Month Club way but in fine details of grammar and usage—I admit to being disappointed when I don't hear back.

Still, an Audio Asylum thread that was brought to my attention a few weeks ago has shocked and amused even me. In it, three or four audiophiles attempted a pile-on—always a creepy thing when middle-aged men with no apparent social skills are involved—in which I was taken to task with no apparent social skills are involved—which I was taken to task for moving my audio system in a different direction by trading in Product A for Product B. Product A, of course, is something that they themselves own, love, and feel obliged to defend.

But when one guy in particular belly-flopped onto the heap, criticizing my more recent recommendations and averring that he has “lost faith” in my abilities, something about his screen name rang a bell. I looked through my e-mails and, sure enough, there he was: As a Stereophile reader, he had begged for my private e-mail address some time ago, so he could glom on to me for free advice—which, witless and trusting dope that I am, I provided without question over the course of several months. Then, when the free advice dried up, and when I acted like a big meanie and sold my (SET, Linn, Lowthers, whatever), it all came down to one thing, and one thing only: *Waaaaaahhhhhhh!!*

Hey, fellas—ies just record players and speakers and stuff, okay? It’s not a love tryst or a suicide pact or a tree house with passwords and secret handshake.

Yes, I parted with an audio component that you’re bessotted with, and I moved on to something else: Get over it. Stop and yourfat selves so damn seriously and lighten up a little, for God’s sake.

**Good Synergy**

Ortofon and EMT, the two companies that still make integrated phonocartridge/headshell units—or *pickup heads*, as I’ve come to call them—have, through the years, offered them in different sizes, for use with different tonearms: If the distance between its stylus tip and its mounting collet is 50mm, the thing is called a G-style pickup head; if that dimension is 32mm, it’s an A-style pickup head.

While EMT settled down to make only A-style pickup heads, Ortofon continued to offer virtually all of their SPU moving-coil cartridges in a choice of A- or G-style headshells—until just a few years ago. Seemingly overnight, pictures of Ortofon’s A-style pickup heads disappeared from the company’s website. Was it, as some suggested, that the person responsible for building the A-style products had passed away? Or was it that the company wanted to condense their product line in the face of a shrinking consumer base?

As it turns out, neither. In 1971, Ortofon moved their operation from mainland Denmark to a small island called Nakskov; in the process, some key parts for making A-style pickup heads simply got misplaced. Demand continued, howsoever humbly, so when the missing pieces resurfaced a little over a year ago, the news was greeted with smiles all around: Ortofon now had enough parts to manufacture *one final run* of A-style pickup heads. Owing to that limitation, and because 2008 was the company’s 90th anniversary, they opted for something special—and the SPU Synergy A is just that. With an elliptical stylus tip and a body made from Ortofon’s recently developed wood-and-resin mix (rather than the more traditional Bakelite), the Synergy A is a shade more modern than its forebears.

It sounds more modern, too—but only in the best ways. In a direct comparison with a borrowed Ortofon SPU Classic A, my review sample of the SPU Synergy A was more extended in the bass and, especially, in the treble, with a more open sound and an even better sense of scale—the latter already an SPU hallmark. All the traditional SPU strengths were present and accounted for: The Synergy A was matched only by the best EMTs in its ability to convey a sense of human touch and force in recorded music, and was exceeded by nothing in its utterly convincing feel of musical flow and naturalness. Not only string tone and texture, but subtleties of bowing technique were communicated uniquely well by this colorful yet uncolored cartridge.

The Synergy A’s cantilever and suspension don’t differ all that much from those of the other models in the Ortofon SPU line—which celebrates its 50th anniversary in 2009—so the new pickup head has more or less the same tracking characteristics: a range of 2.5–3.5g, with 3.0g the recommended number. My review sample actually sounded a little more forceful and dynamic when tracking nearer to 3.5g, at which setting the Ortofon also allowed very loud piano chords, in particular, to sound better than usual. A perfect example: the vigorous chords played by György Sebok about halfway through the first movement of the Brahms Cello Sonata in E minor, in his recording with János Starker (Mercury Living Presence/Speakers Corner SR90392), which sounded cleaner and more assured with the Synergy A than with any other cartridge I’ve tried recently.

The new cartridge does, however, have higher output than the other SPUs—0.5mV vs 0.2mV—but both models seemed to love the same transformer loads equally well, the best for the job being the Auditorium 23 Hommage T1, the Audio Note AN-S8, the built-in transformers on my Shindo Masetto preamplifier, and, of course, the Ortofon Verto, the last two sourced from Lundahl. Whereas the top end of the standard SPU Classic A can be optimized with a vertical tracking angle somewhat higher than the average—no surprise, given its spherical stylus—the Synergy A liked to have the tonearm more or less level with the record’s surface.

$1850 for any cartridge this good would be reasonable; for the last of a historic breed, the SPU Synergy A is a bargain.
The Better Turntables Look, The Worse They Sound...Until Now

The GrooveMaster is the exception to the old axiom. It's from PBN Audio, the company that Peter Bichel Noerbaek built by challenging outmoded status quos in the high-end audio industry. Traditionally, the more a turntable appealed to the high-end market, the more it resembled a contraption developed in Dr. Frankenstein's laboratory. But if it was sleek and had lots of visual sex appeal, it failed the discerning ear test. Eventually, some enfant terrible was bound to defy tradition and break the sound barrier with a piece of eye candy that would not be denied. Noerbaek is that man.

Since Vinyl Staged Its Phoenix-like Rebirth A Few Years Ago, Noerbaek has been reinventing the turntable from the inside out. "There's some indefinably pleasing quality about vinyl records that CDs can't quite measure up to," he muses. "Maybe it's the warmth... it could also be the faint needle-tracking one hears when a speck of dust gets in the way. But above all, it's that certain timbre within the depth of the audio."

Noerbaek spent years perfecting his family of speakers, and developing a series of amplifiers and preamps perfectly matched to each speaker. About three years ago, he set out to create his GrooveMaster turntable. "I have always been an avid fan of vinyl. The trouble was, I could never find a turntable that not only delivered the audio I love, but was also downright beautiful to look at," he observed. "When not in use, most high-quality turntables look god-awful. They lack any come-hither, beckoning appeal. Their visual design should scream "Come play me!"

"The secret to delivering pristine audio from vinyl starts with achieving absolute 33.333rpm," contends Noerbaek. "That's why I incorporated a two-motor, counter-balanced dual-drive system. Then I employed four belts to achieve maximum traction. Add to this a solid wood base meticulously honed from three laminated layers of fine hardwoods. And last, but not least, is the 12-inch tone arm — the legendary SME™-312."

But Noerbaek Has A Secret Ingredient. It's the tone arm support. "On the violin, the little piece of wood that holds the strings above the body is all important. It's called the bridge. The wood it's made from makes all the difference in the sound the violin produces. The same is true of the tone arm support on a turntable. I tried all sorts of materials and settled on a specific wood with an extremely precise density. The wood I use is so rare and of such superior quality, I cannot reveal my source or how I test it. All I can say is, when I find a few planks, I put them under lock and key."

As to the cartridge, Noerbaek leaves the choice to his clients. "The cartridge depends on many factors: The kind of music listened to, what sound qualities work with the system and what the owner likes to hear." He goes on to add: "I've had customers who have bought $13,000 needle/cartridges and had others use $1,000 ones."

Now, You May Be Wondering, what does the basic PBN GrooveMaster cost? Let me just say that if you are putting together a decent collection of contemporary vinyl records, the GrooveMaster is about the same total price. If you want to really nail Peter Noerbaek down, call him directly.

(619) 440-8237 • 380 Vernon Way, Suites I & J • El Cajon, California 92020 • www.pbnaudio.com
In some ways, the Texas band Spoon reminds me of the Beatles during their “White Album” era: not a bad thing at all. Their lyrics are playful and evocative without being overwritten or self-conscious, and much the same could be said of Spoon’s music, which is equal parts adventurous and catchy. And I love the way they use the piano—simple, direct, more like John Lennon or Ian Hunter than Nicky Hopkins or Larry Knechtel or anyone else from that whole dreadful “tasty licks” school of playing—as the basis for so many of their more recent songs, especially since their 2002 album *Kill the Moonlight* (Merge MRG215). I’m also happy that, as with my other favorite contemporary pop artists, Joanna Newsom and Will Oldham chief among them, most of Spoon’s full-length albums and some of their singles and EPs have been issued on vinyl.1 Good music deserves good sound.

For those of us who care deeply about good sound when listening at home, but who care a little less deeply about it while driving or bicycling or shopping at the Gap or drinking smaller lattes than we used to at Starbucks, there are downloads. And if you buy an LP of Spoon’s thoroughly excellent 2007 album, *Ga Ga Ga Ga Ga* (Merge MRG295), you’ll also receive a specially coded coupon that can be redeemed online for one free download of the entire album. (Visit the Shop at www.mergerecords.com.) Think of it: The best available domestic music format, supplied at the same time as an LP.

1 My fondness for Spoon’s music, of course, has nothing to do with format: I bought or borrowed CDs by these artists well before discovering that the albums were also available on LP.
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Made for all countries

‘I’ve used a wide variety of power conditioning systems over the years, but none has ever produced the type or magnitude of benefits I got with the Adept Response.’
Brian Damkroger – Recommended – Oct ’08

“It was as a speaker cable that the Au24 really shone.” Brian Damkroger actually preferred the Au24 to his reference Valhalla in terms of tonal balance, imaging, resolution of inner detail, and sound staging.
Brian Damkroger – Stereophile Recommended Components Vol. 25 No. 8 – Oct ’08

“The wonderfully flexible powerChord too, was a winner, significantly cleaning up the sound by lowering the noise floor, opening up the space between instruments, and significantly improving the system’s resolution of low level and inner detail.”
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I've been chipping away for some time at the task of trying to put together a music lover's stereo system for about half the money of my last such effort: $2500 to $3750 now, vs around $7500 back in 2005. My timing was good: CD and DVD receivers are a hot product category, with several attractive new entries at various prices.

A CD receiver is a single chassis comprising a CD or DVD player, a terrestrial radio tuner (often AM/FM, but usually only FM), a preamplifier, and a power amplifier, all operated by a single remote control. All you need to provide are speaker cables and speakers, and you're in business.

My self-imposed goals, which remain the same, are ambitious: I not only want to find a system or systems that a music lover can derive musical pleasure from, I also want to find a system that I can heartily recommend on the basis of "buy it once and buy it right"—in other words, a system that can fulfill the promise of long-term enrapturement.

As this and the next column will reveal, I think I've been more successful at meeting my first goal. It's possible that I may have set myself the task of designing a square circle: spend half the money or less than on the last system I put together, yet have it still be a buy-it-once-and-buy-it-right system that lets you get off the audio merry-go-round. Although this time the laws of physics, psychoacoustics, economics, and perhaps even human nature just might be against me, there are still lots of very worthwhile products out there. Here are a few.

Carat 157 CD receiver

If the appearance of Primare's DVD10 (see later) can be called Scandinavian Contemporary, then perhaps the 157 ($1995) from Carat, a division of the French firm InoVadis, can be described as Early Franco-Sino Dork. And the 1 SACD playback is almost unknown in CD and DVD receivers; the only exception I'm aware of is Integra's DSR-4.6, a review sample of which should be on its way to me. Similarly, satellite radio seems to be missing in action in CD Receivers.

Indeed, the Carat's joystick CD-function controller is a bit like that: to get it to eject a disc, you push the joystick straight in.

The 50Wpc Carat is of standard component size and proportions, with a front-loading CD tray on the right side of its front panel. The styling is overall black, with touches of blue, green, silver, and gray. That the front panel appears to be of some sort of clear acrylic with a black background, and that the illuminated control legends are ultramarine blue, and the display readouts for track and time are green, might make the cynic suspect that a meeting ended with some Big Cheese saying, "Okay, you can go for the McIntosh Laboratory Tribute look, but don't spend a lot on it."

Carat's website is a bit bling-bling; I gather the Photoshopped images of big diamonds dropped here and there are clues to the origins of the line's name (which I pronounce to rhyme with hurrah rather than carrot). "Carat" appears in muted-gray caps 1" high on the top panel, which also holds two rows of ventilation slots.

From left to right, the front panel has an On switch (actually a standby switch; the master power switch is on the rear); a ¼" headphone jack; the display window, below it a ¼" MP3 player jack; the Function button; a large, silver, centrally mounted volume-control and selector knob; the CD joystick controller; and the disc drawer, a gray HDCD logo lights up blue when an HDCD-encoded CD is played. The Function button allows the volume control to select sources and also enables adjustment of bass, treble, and balance.

The rear panel has good- but not boutique-quality EC-compliant speaker binding posts, the master power switch and power-cord inlet, stereo RCA outputs for preamp and record output, and stereo inputs for TV, Aux, and Tape. The plastic remote control is, as far as I can tell, identical to the one that comes with Music Hall's Trio CD receiver. Packing materials and owner's manual were adequate but not exemplary. All listening was done with GutWire's B16 power cord and Cardas's Neutral Reference speaker cables.

The Carat sounded quite "analog": coherent and continuous, and a little bit on the warm side. Its strong suit was tone; its dynamics were not exemplary. All listening was done with GutWire's B16 power cord and Cardas's Neutral Reference speaker cables.

The Carat sounded quite "analog": coherent and continuous, and a little bit on the warm side. Its strong suit was tone; its dynamics were not exemplary. Putting a few John Marks Records HDCD-encoded CDs in the I57 triggered feelings of rueful chagrin that such a good format as HDCD (mangled metaphor alert) was eclipsed by the false dawns—at least as far as the mainstream market is concerned—of SACD and DVD-Audio.
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“Inspires sincere gadget lust.” PC World
“Superior to most we’ve tested.” CNET
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That the 157 bothers with HDCD at all is a tribute to its audiophile origins and aspirations. The D/A converter chips in question are Burr-Brown PCM1792s, running at 24-bit/96kHz. I don't know how much credit they should get for the 157's engaging sound, but of the six or so one-box CD receivers I auditioned during this hunt, the Carat 157 is, in terms of sound quality, the winner by a nose—not head and shoulders, but a large nose nonetheless.

The Carat's ergonomics weren't bad at all. I like the intuitive feel of a volume-control knob, but I got used to the shifty feel of the joystick. The 157's looks are a bit busy for my taste, but aren't a deal-breaker. An all-around good show, and $$ for excellent value for money.

Primare Systems DVD110 DVD receiver

Primare's drop-dead-gorgeous DVD110 caught my eye some time ago, in its previous CD guise. I requested a review sample, but was informed that because the CD version would soon be replaced by a DVD-based edition that would also have an entirely new amplifier section, I'd just have to wait for the new model. So I did.

Since then, Primare has changed their US distributor to the Sound Organisation of Dallas, Texas, who also import Rega equipment, which must keep them hopping, and Wilson Benesch, which, sad to say, probably doesn't. The good news is that, in the switchover, the US retail price of the DVD110 dropped from $3000 to $2500.

Even outside—or perhaps especially outside—the boundaries of my little project, the 75Wpc DVD110 is an immensely attractive product that could be the ideal solution for apartment dwellers or empty-nesters who don't want separate audio and video systems. The DVD110 has all the video connectivity options you could ask for, as well as a subwoofer output. I think that for many if not most people, two speakers and a sub are all that are needed to enjoy a DVD. However, my project was not to find a DVD solution for empty-nesters, but to get the most audio bang for the music lover's buck.

Although the DVD110 is of standard "component" size, it was obviously designed to be installed out in the open, not in a rack. It's not only that the styling cues extend to the top plate; most of the function buttons and their illuminated indicators are on the front edge of the top plate as well.

The review sample arrived in handsome casework of gray metal and brushed stainless steel (brushed black rather than stainless is also available). The DVD110's appearance is coherent, restrained, and classy in the extreme—it's one piece of electronic gear at which interior decorators will not turn up their noses—and the build quality is best of breed.

As the photo shows, the controls (except for the disc drawer's Open/Close button) are found on the front edge of the top plate, toward the right, as are their indicator lights. The buttons are set in a recessed area that extends from the faceplate to the back, so they don't stand proud and are of the same stainless steel as the casework. Primare's logo is milled into the top recess and front panel.

That front panel is very restrained in appearance. A subpanel with rounded ends contains the display window and the front-loading CD tray, which is offset to the left, and the shape of the CD tray's forward edge mimics that of the subpanel. Display elements and function indicators are illuminated in a restful leaf green, with adjustable brightness. The display shows the source, data such as CD track number and time, and the volume setting in a range of 0 to 79. A mini headphone jack on the front panel, under the Open/Close button, does double duty as an input jack for non-iPod MP3 players.

The Play and Standby buttons have two functions, depending on how they're pressed. A brief press of Play starts the disc playing or advances to the next track; a long press stops play. A brief press of Standby puts the unit in standby; a long press turns it off.

The remote control is very classy, made of matte plastic with the feel of suede. While the DVD110's owner's manual (v2) claims that the remote has an Open/Close button, on the remote furnished with the review sample that button was marked Setup. This is no big deal; if you want the disc drawer open, you're going to have to get up and go to the machine anyway. As for setup, it's pretty much a nonissue for audio listening—the DVD110 is not a multichannel device. By the way, the DVD110 is "smart" enough to close its disc drawer when you press Standby, if the drawer has been left open. However, it won't come out of Standby mode if you press Play, whether on the remote control or on the DVD110 itself.

The DVD110's rear panel is very full: an IEC power-cord inlet; a master power switch; good-quality, single-wire, EC-compliant speaker terminals with rounded lugs that won't take a standard wrench; five video-output sets, including HDMI; three line-level analog audio output RCA's (preamp, recording, subwoofer); three sets of RCA analog audio inputs; an iPod connector; optical and S/PDIF digital outputs; RS-232 and IR remote control jacks; and connections for AM and FM antennas.

The chassis has three compliant feet: two in front, one in back. Packing materials and the owner's manual are exemplary. The DVD110 is a tremendously well-thought-out product from an experienced high-end company.

In my October column, I wrote: "I drove the [Eminent Technology] LFT-16s with Arcam's Solo Music and Solo Mini CD receivers, Primare's new DVD110 DVD-based one-box receiver, and Carat's 157 one-box. . . I divided most of my time between the Primare and the Carat. The Primare was ever so slightly lighter in texture and more agile in articulation—or, if you prefer, the Carat was ever so slightly more mellow and cushiony. The Primare was a stainless-steel French Chablis to the Carat's oaky California chardonnay—a bit amusing, in view of Carat's French headquarters (the 157 is built in China). With the Primare, I was happy with the..."
The heart of Burmester’s Reference Line System is the newly introduced and already world renowned 069 belt driven CD-Player. With its sensational sound characteristics, superior technical features and unsurpassed manufacturing quality, it will proudly continue Burmester’s tradition of setting the highest standards in music reproduction. Combined with the legendary 808 MK 5 Pre Amplifier and the 911 MK 3 solid-state Amplifiers, the B 100 Reference Line loudspeaker drives to perfection. The world patented 948 Power Conditioner eliminates all DC voltage pollution in parallel mode and supplies the whole system with pure balanced AC power. All components are handmade in every detail and entirely assembled in Berlin. Custom made finishes are certainly available on request.

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Renaissance Audio Video Dallas, TX
Sound by Singer New York, NY
LFT-16s' tweeter jumpers in the Low position; with the Carat, I moved them back to Mid."

Further listening did little other than to reinforce those impressions. For example, playing the Tallis Scholars' recent and excellent remake of Allegri's *Miserere* (CD, Gimell CDGIM 041), I found the Carat just slightly richer in the midrange of male voices, a difference that remained constant no matter which speakers I was using: the LFT-16s, Fried Compact 7s, GINI's LS3/5as, or Harbeth's HL-3P-ES2s.

Playing Julie London's *Time for Love: The Best of Julie London* (CD, Rhino R270737) through Harbeth's HL-3P-ES2s, the Primare offered a little too much detail—London's mouth sounds were a bit too present, and there was some chest resonance. Without question, that was a much more detailed, less veiled presentation, but, all things (including money) considered, I preferred—at least with this album—the less expensive, perhaps euphonic combination of the Carat 157 one-box driving the LFT-16s. However, without doubt, London's recording of "I Surrender, Dear" sounded stellar through the Primare-Harbeth combination, which might be just the ticket for you. However, the total price of that combo, including speaker cables and stands, will be closer to $5000 than $3500, and the small Harbeth's lack of deep-bass extension might rattle over time.

The DVD110, again with the small Harbeths, was slightly more percussive on *The Complete Nocturnes of Fauré*, in an excellent traversal by pianist Charles Owen (CD, Avie AV 2133). Compared to the Carat, the Primare made me want to listen at slightly softer levels—but someone else would be happier with the Primare's greater dynamics.

The DVD110 could play way loud and go plenty deep. Driven by the Primare, the LFT-16s were nostalgically punchy with *The Best of Sade* (CD, Epic EK 66686), and grandly opulent with organist James Busby's performance of Herbert Howells' *Master Tallis's Testament*, from *Pipes Rhode Island* (CD, Riago 101). Despite containing a digital amplifier, the Primare ran warmer than the Carat, though not hugely hot.

For much of the time I just listened to music, enjoying the Primare for music, enjoying the Primare for its level of finish are leagues ahead of its price. Veneer of real cherrywood and a nose, the Primare might not piped past by any listeners will be over-shadowed by loudspeaker preferences or room acoustics. You might listen to both and slightly prefer the Primare, as I slightly preferred the Carat. In this price tier, I think that issues such as DVD capability, styling, and ergonomics will play as large a role in many decisions.

Had the dark-horse Carat 157 not pipped past by a nose, the Primare might have been my overall recommendation. For people who want DVD capability as well, the DVD110 is a great DVD receiver at a very reasonable price.

**PSB Imagine B loudspeaker**

The Carat 157 costs $1995, which leaves us with not a huge amount left in the budget for loudspeakers—somewhere between $1000 and $1500. In fact, the risk is of overstating these differences, which for many listeners will be overshadowed by loudspeaker preferences or room acoustics. You might listen to both and slightly prefer the Primare, as I slightly preferred the Carat. In this price tier, I think that issues such as DVD capability, styling, and ergonomics will play as large a role in many decisions.

Had the dark-horse Carat 157 not pipped past by a nose, the Primare might have been my overall recommendation. For people who want DVD capability as well, the DVD110 is a great DVD receiver at a very reasonable price.

The DVD110 could play way loud and go plenty deep. Driven by the Primare, the LFT-16s were nostalgically punchy with *The Best of Sade* (CD, Epic EK 66686), and grandly opulent with organist James Busby's performance of Herbert Howells' *Master Tallis's Testament*, from *Pipes Rhode Island* (CD, Riago 101). Despite containing a digital amplifier, the Primare ran warmer than the Carat, though not hugely hot.

For much of the time I just listened to music, enjoying the Primare for what it offered. Only when I switched between them did the differences between the Primare and the Carat become evident. Essentially, they sounded more alike than different, and both sounded very, very good.

In fact, the risk is of overstating these CD receivers' differences, which for

2 If the solo-piano literature is the major source of your musical nourishment, check out this recording. Owen plays with subtle and poignant poetry (www.charlesowen.net). The CD is an excellent recording job, and the piano itself is well balanced in tone and nicely secure in tune.

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**CONTACTS**


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its sensitivity 89 dB, and its impedance 4 ohms. The crossover is said to be a fourth-order Linkwitz-Riley at 1.8 kHz, and the speaker’s internal volume is 7.7 liters. It measures 13” H by 7.5” W by 12” D and weighs 17 lbs. I used the pair of them on 24” stands, connected with Cardas Neutral Reference cables.

The Imagine B had both clarity and listenability in spades. It also had remarkable bass extension and volume, as a quick check with Master Tallis’s Testament showed. I did feel that the bass was a bit overported; ie, somewhat lush and overripe. However, the cure of stuffing a Gap crew sock in each port was, at the end of a week’s listening, worse than the disease. [PSB does supply optional plugs for the ports. — Ed.]

When I directly and unfairly compared the Imagine B to the twice-as-expensive Harbeth HL-3P-ES2 while playing Donald Fagen’s The Nightfly (CD, Warner Bros. 23696-2), the PSB was more efficient (duh: ported vs sealed box), noticeably plumper in the bass, and a touch veiled (as distinct from rolled-off) in the treble. The pleasant surprise was that the PSB was at least in the same ballpark as the legendary Harbeth in terms of essential tone. When comparing the speakers using Julie London’s Time for Love, the PSB was a little undefined in the bass and unrefined and peaky in the treble, but again, still very creditable.

I then made an even less fair comparison, this time to Sam Tellig’s new personal “last loudspeaker,” Harbeth’s superb Compact 7 ($3495/pair). This revealed the PSB’s midrange to be ever so slightly dry, leaving the impression of something of a “smile” equalization (so called because that’s what a mixing board’s sliders look like when such an EQ has been set). With Charles Owen’s disc of nocturnes, Fauré’s delicate pastel tone colors sounded slightly too bright and saturated, and as if with a touch of added “edge definition.” But the Imagine B should hold its little round head up proudly, leaving the impression of something of a “smile” equalization. I accept the possibility that the Imagine B’s metal-dome tweeter had not had adequate break-in, but that doesn’t negate the overall usefulness of tone controls.

In the event, the fact that the Carat 157 has tone controls allowed me to dial back the treble one increment, which served to make the triangle, cymbal, and square cymbal, or whatever it is that was sticking out in Jane Monheitz’s cover of “Besame Mucho,” from The Frank and Joe Show’s 33 1/3 (CD, Hydra TMF 9320), a part of the musical mix instead of a distraction or an annoyance.

PSB’s Imagine B is an important loudspeaker. I am very impressed with it, and I will return to it next time as I tie up some loose ends and try to make overall sense of this quest. For the moment, I can say with confidence that the Carat 157 and PSB Imagine Bs is superb value for money, and is a system that plays music surprisingly well while seeming to offer very little long-term risk of listener fatigue. Whether it can also be one’s last system is an issue I will take up next time.

Comments or questions: stletters@sourceinterlink.com.

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A CRIME OF PASSION? Depraved indifference to the importance of tuneage? Death by music? The simple fact is that most audiophiles got that way by having too many records. That's right–very few got into this rewarding, non-contact sport because they were aroused by shiny brushed-steel boxes or supersexy speaker grilles. It's because they wanted to hear their piles of music—their Mahler, Monk, or Rick James—sound the best it could. (And, okay, yes: It is cool to show drooling friends your designer gear.)

It's in that spirit that we present our annual "Records To Die For" extravaganza. Each Stereophile writer was asked to choose a pair of recordings, be they CD or LP, of music they would not want to live without. The only restriction is that these recordings must still be available, if only in the deeper, darker recesses of the Internet. Not to get all Fireside Chatty or anything, but in these troubled times, investing in great music and gear—from both of which you can derive endless pleasure and fulfillment—seems a smart move for both the wallet and the head. So please, read on and enjoy!—Robert Baird

NOTE: If a recording listed here has previously been reviewed in Stereophile, whether in "Record Reviews" or in past editions of "Records To Die For," the volume and number of the pertinent issue appear in parentheses at the end of the review. For example, a listing of "(XXI-11)" means that a review of the recording appeared in Vol.21 No.11 (November 1998).
to DIE for

EDITORS’ TOP PICKS
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ESSENTIAL MUSIC
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WITHOUT
A 75-minute master class in how to capture both the impact of and the space around a small jazz ensemble.

-JOHN ATKINSON

John Atkinson

J.S. BACH: St. Matthew Passion, BWV 244 (Last Performing Version, ca 1742)

Nicholas McGegan, conductor; Matthew Brook, Jesus; Susan Hamilton, Cecilia Dormand, soprano; Clare Wilkinson, Annie Gill, alto; Malcolm Bennett, tenor; Brian Bowman-Scott, bass; Dunedin Consort & Players; John Butt, dir., harpsichord continuo

Linn CKD 313 (multichannel/2-channel SACD/CD) 2008. Also available as 48.0kHz/24-bit "Studio Master" (WMA, FLAC, ALAC CD Quality) and 24448s MP3 files. Philip Hobbs, prod., eng.; Julia Thomas at Fishesbridge Ltd., post-prod. DDD, TT: 2:41:00

From the stately dotted ostinato of the opening chorale and its dark-hued baroque oboe odes, which sets the stage for almost three hours of music, this performance of the Christian Passion story grips you by the ears. The use of eight solo voices rather than a conventional double choir emphasizes the drama of the narrative, sacrificing lushness for clarity of line—an admirable tradeoff, in my opinion. Recorded by Linn's longtime tommeister Philip Hobbs at Greyfriars Kirk in Edinburgh, the sound is immediate without being bright, rich without being muddy, close but with a dome of ambience readily discernible around and behind the singers. I list the disc catalog numbers in the heading, but I entered the 21st century by actually downloading this recording as high-resolution, two-channel, FLAC-encoded files—a purchase triggered by my earlier downloading of the Dunedin's highly lauded performance of Handel's "Dublin" Messiah (Linn CKD 285). Here's to a hi-rez B-minor Mass from the same forces!

MIKE GARSON: Jazz Hat


Jazz Hat combines pianist Mike Garson's legendary 15-minute solo improvisation on Gershwin themes, released in 1994 as a "direct-to-CD" single (RR-54CD), and most of an earlier "Record To Die For," The Oxnard Sessions, Volume Two (RR-53CD). Garson's 1993 collection of standards and originals with a small group. (To make room for the Gershwin, Garson's "Rebirth" and the two bonus tracks on Vol.2 from the 1990 sessions for Vol.1 have been omitted.) Erstwhile David Bowie sideman Garson's extraordinary facility with the keyboard has been documented many times in these pages; suffice it to say that his technique is always subservient to his music making. Alto-sax player Eric Marienthal's soaring reading of Leon Russell's "A Song for You" has long been a favorite demonstration track, but the highlights for me are Miles Davis' "All Blues," which features nonpareil bassist Brian Bromberg, and the breakneck reworking of Art Blakey's "A Night in Tunisia." Recorded in 1992 by Keith Johnson, the sound shows no audible omission of its vintage, offering superb clarity, luminously natural tone colors, and the sense of four musicians performing in a believable space, in this case the Civic Auditorium of Oxnard, California. A 75-minute master class in how to capture both the impact of and the space around a small jazz ensemble. (XVI-6, XIX-2)

Robert Baird

AZTEC CAMERA: Knife


Before Mogwai and Belle and Sebastian, there was Roddy Frame and Aztec Camera. The Scots love their shortbread and their music sweet (the women are another story), and post-punk/new-wave Aztec Camera is certainly that. With bursting love songs like the catchy opener, "Still On Fire," the too-exuberant "All I Need Is Everything," or Frame's self-conscious attempt to fashion a funny/serious metaphor in the wonderfully jumpy "Just Like the USA," this is sweet, sunny guitar pop with a nerdy Scottish twist. Knife, the band's sophomore record, has to my ears always had a couple of key advantages over their much-praised debut, High Land, Hard Rain. Some of that edge comes from producer Mark Knopfler, who gives singer-songwriter-leader Frame's sweet melodies lots of interesting textures, many from David Ruffy's snappy, varied drumming. The rest of it comes courtesy of strummed and picked guitars, most played by former Orange Juice guitarist Malcolm Ross, who was part of the band for only this album. After Knife, AC essentially became a Frame solo project. But here, a coherent band still surrounds Frame's winsome vocals with swirling guitars and layers of cheesy new-wave keyboards. The final charm is the off-kilter lyrics by Frame, then 20 years old, which are often wide-eyed and tongue-tied in the same moment: "Where the mad road goes, heath the shapeless glow / Or will we swap ourselves like children / for the value of our innocence / A gentleman's a golden card and a red, red rose." Jabberwocky with a brogue.

ROBBIE FULKS: Let's Kill Saturday Night


Back before the record business crushed its cyanide pill, the paradigm expected that everyone was dying to "get signed." What this meant in actuality was often exactly the opposite of what poor, fragile creative types needed or could survive. From the minute reluctant alt-country star, professional smartass, and genuinely talented songwriter Robbie Fulks got inked to Geffen Records, the bargaining began. Nashvillian Fulks leaned more toward the folkly and acoustic, but the label ears thought the answer was to rock things up. Not opposed in principle to rocking, Fulks got convincingly charged and bashy on cuts like the title-cut opener and the follow-up, "Caroline" (with an effective opening stretch of silence in the right channel and its guitar-wash ending), before cutting loose "Take Me to the Paradise" (with a rising, winning vocals with swirling guitars and layers of cheesy new-wave keyboards. The final charm is the off-kilter lyrics by Frame, then 20 years old, which are often wide-eyed and tongue-tied in the same moment: "Where the mad road goes, heath the shapeless glow / Or will we swap ourselves like children / for the value of our innocence / A gentleman's a golden card and a red, red rose." Jabberwocky with a brogue.

Last Edited 2/1/9
for Me, this 1955 album was Jamal’s first jewels, a lake of tears—you get the picture. There are many judicious insistences, so one by one he opens the doors to reveal Verve B0002682-02 (CD). 1955/2004. Dave Usher, orig. prod.; plus a warmth that’s now often missing.

Eddie Palmieri: Azucar Pa’ Ti (Sugar for You)
Eddie Palmieri, piano; George Castro, flute; Barry Rogers, José Rodríguez, trombone; Dave Perez, bass; Manny Oquendo, timbales, bongos, Tommy Lopez, conga; Ismael Quintana, lead vocals.

Eddie Palmieri was not the first to substitute trombones for the customary trumpets in a Cuban-style band, but it was he who brought the format to its acme with his aptly named 1960s commercial breakthrough, But Not for Me, this 1955 album was Jamal’s first release on Argo, a subsidiary label of Chess. The drummerless trio includes the formidable bassist Israel Crosby and the underated guitarist Ray Crawford, who does his bongo-simulation schtick on “New Rumba” and “I Get a Kick Out of You.” But it’s Jamal’s soft, deftly rhythmic touch on piano that gives the music the spacious feel that Miles Davis so admired and that still sounds modern today. The sound has all the clarity and presence of a contemporary production, plus a warmth that’s now often missing.

Dan Buckley
BARTÓK: Bluebeard’s Castle

Bartók wrote the perfect opera in Bluebeard’s Castle. It’s short (just an hour), cast for two singers (no messy choruses or husky side characters), written in a grandly romantic style, and orchestrated with cinematic impact. The story is simple: When Duke Bluebeard brings his new wife home, she wants to know what’s behind the locked doors of his house. He says no, but Judith insists, so one by one he opens the doors to reveal opulent but creepy contents (a room full of blood-soaked jewels, a lake of tears—you get the picture). There are many recordings of Bluebeard, but none can match the combination of true magic doesn’t happen all that often, not even to labels with high artistic and sonic standards like Sharp Nine. But on a September day in 1998, the Muse spoke to everyone in Systems Two Studio in Brooklyn, starting with engineer Mike Marciano. His analog recording captures the complex sonorities of the vibraphone with an exactitude that has never been surpassed. Locke and Hazelzine play as if shot into this session from cannons. Their commanding of piano and vibes has orchestral sweep, harmonic density, crisp clarity, and merciless swing. Torrential creativity overwhelms and accelerates nominal ballads like “Spring Will Be a Little Late This Year” and “For All We Know.”

Tom Conrad
FRED HERSCH: At Maybeck
Fred Hersch, piano

Whoever (Elvis Costello? Frank Zappa?) said that writing about music is like dancing about architecture was right. And the defiantly subjective, shamelessly sentimental, megalomaniacal act of designating a “Record To Die For” is even more so. At Maybeck, Concord’s series of beautifully recorded solo-piano concerts in Maybeck Recital Hall in Berkeley, California, eventually reached 42 volumes. Almost all are now out of print, but as of this writing, Vol.31, by Fred Hersch, is available for $8.98 through Concord’s website. It contains rapturous interpretations of “Haunted Heart” and “If I Loved You,” and you’d be an utter fool to not buy it.

Joe Locke/David Hazelzine Quartet: Mutual Admiration Society
Joe Locke, vibraphone; David Hazelzine, piano; Esriet Esriet, bass; Billy Drummond, drums.

Eddie Palmieri: Everybody Digs Bill Evans
Eddie Palmieri, piano; Sam Jones, bass; Philly Joe Jones, drums

Everybody digs Bill Evans—at least, everyone I know does. Evans is the quintessential jazz pianist: introspective, nuanced, technically brilliant but free of gratuitous showmanship, and the embodiment of cool. Everybody Digs displays these elements across a range of material, but it’s the three unaccompanied tracks—“Lucky to Be Me,” “Peace Piece,” and “Epilogue”—that showcase his style and talent. JVC’s XRCD sound and production are superb and true to the original in every way: delicate textures, realistic dynamics, tape hiss, and all. Dim the lights, cue up “Oleo,” and swirl the rocks in your scotch. Dig it? (XX-9)

IAN HUNTER: The Truth, the Whole Truth, and Nuthin’ But the Truth

It contains rapturous interpretations of “Haunted Heart” and “If I Loved You,” and you’d be an utter fool to not buy it.

—TOM CONRAD
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Richie Havens isn't the only Woodstock veteran to remain interesting, but he may be the only one who can still make a record this vital. *Nobody Left to Crown* combines seven new Havens originals with a thoughtful selection of covers—his performance of Peter Yarrow's "The Great Mandala" is stunning—and a sound that hews close to that of his earliest records without seeming the least bit stale or unadventurous. Thanks are due in part to cellist Stephanie Winters and the Gerry Conway—esque drumming of Shawn Pelton, but the real stars are Havens' voice—and guitar: His is the virtuosity of earnestness, and his chording remains as unmistakable as ever. This would be essential listening from any artist, at any time of our lives; coming as it does from one of the wisest voices on the scene, it's an event.

**THE QUINTET OF THE HOT CLUB OF FRANCE:** *Hot Jazz*

Stéphane Grappelli, violin; Django Reinhardt, Joseph Reinhardt, Roger Chaput, guitar; Louis Vola, bass

RCA Victor H1-6 (4 78rpm shellac records). 1936-37. Unknown prod., unknown eng. AAA. II: 52:21

To hear the astonishing force of those primal recordings at their primal best: the original, unprocessed, direct-to-disc 78s, from which the astonishing force of every note is loosed as from nothing else. And so it goes here: Most of these eight numbers—"Sweet Chorus," "Runnin' Wild," "Solitude," "Miss Annabelle Lee," Django's own "Mystery Pacific," and three others—are available on numberless LP and CD collections; I would no more send you in that direction than I'd advise you to try snuggling up with your computer to read downloaded versions of The Faerie Queene or Black Elk Speaks. Copies of '78rpm shellacs of this well-chosen collection are available in respectable condition, albeit at a price; the gear that'll unlock it is out there, too. It doesn't matter if you're old enough to remember the format, only that you remember what it's like when a work of art changes your point of view.

**Michael Fremer**

**ROY ORBISON:** *The All-Time Greatest Hits*


Roy Orbison belongs in any record collection wanting to be called one. This ultimate two-LP set from his Monument era (the years that really count) contains all the big hits and some of the lesser ones, like "Working for the Man," that mash to a campy pulp "Chain Gang," "16 Tons," and maybe even "The Banana Boat Song." I don't care if you have the original Monument/
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Columbia issue, the DCC Compact Classics or Self-180gm versions, or all of them—this new one from Mobile Fidelity is easily the best-sounding, and by an ear-bulging margin. You'll hear stuff you've never heard before, and what you have heard before, you've never heard this sound good. (XVI-2)

RACHEL'S: Handwriting
Quarterstick QS 50 (165gm LP). 1995. Rachel's, prod.; Tony French, Bob Weston, others, engs.; John Loder, mastering. AAA. 44:00

I can't remember if I've already R2D4'd this. It deserves a second go around if I did and I saw a copy at Amoeba recently so I bet it's still in print. Rachel's is a loose affiliation of young, classically trained musicians making eclectic, postmodern classical acoustic music. Here they also do jazz on one tune, wickedly crossing Astor Piazzolla and Angelo Badalamente. The music is extremely visual, and so is the minimally miked, hall ambience that make me play this disc over and over. Please do something about that.

Andy Gilbert
BOOKER ERVIN: The Space Book
Booker Ervin, tenor saxophone; Jaki Byard, piano; Richard Davis, bass; Alan Dawson, drums

I can't get over Booker Ervin's sound. Bigger than Texas, limber and elastic, his tenor tone is an existential wail that seems to reach out to the stars. Recorded in a single session in early October 1964, this music captures the gathering tidal force of the 1960s, driven by Alan Dawson's beautifully articulated cymbal work and Jaki Byard's continuously startling piano. But it's the ill-fated Ervin, struck down by a heart attack before his 40th birthday, who keeps me coming back to get lost in his achingly lugubrious rendition of "I Can't Get Started," a definitive ballad captured in a Matrix time.

RANDY WESTON/MELBA LISTON: Volcano Blues
Randy Weston, piano; Melba Liston, arrangements; Wallace Roney, trumpet; Benny Powell, trombone; Tuba Kelker, flute, alto & soprano saxophones; Teddy Edwards, tenor saxophone; Hamiet Bluiett, baritone saxophone; Johnny Copeland, vocals, acoustic guitar; Ted Dunbar, guitar; Lamell Nasser, bass; Charlie Persip, drums; Obo Adly, Neil Clarke, percussion

In the sizzling Los Angeles summer of 1991, Melba Liston captured my heart. A stroke had disabled her left hand, but she still breathed music, and I watched as she crafted succulent nine-piece arrangements from Weston's cassettes. A discursive study of the blues, this album seems to sum up their relationship, from their seminal African-jazz statement "Uhuru Africa" to their love of Dizzy and Monk, Ellington and Basie. I think of Liston toiling in her studio, staring at her Macintosh screen, conjuring a luxuriant world of sound connecting Casablanca and Ghana with New Orleans and New York.

Larry Greenhill
GÓRECZI: Symphony 3, Symphony of Sorrowful Songs
Zofia Kilanowicz, soprano; Henryk Górecki, National Polish Radio Symphony Orchestra

I first met recording engineer Andrew Lipinski when I reviewed his monitor loudspeaker, the Lipinski L-707, for the December 2005 version of Stereophile (Vol.28 No.12). Three years later, at the 2008 CES, I handed me this SACD/CD. I first played it as background music for dinner guests, but Zofia Kilanowicz's sorrowful soprano was so good it stopped conversation. Later, this disc became my favorite for lush orchestral sound—it made my solid-state electronics sound like 1970s-vintage tube gear. The long first movement opens with a slow, balearic dirge on the double basses that is entirely involving. The second and third movements highlight Kilanowicz's soprano, which get one's attention even when played at background levels. Lipinski's engineering talents have captured a totally addicting string tone and hall ambience that make me play this disc over and over.

MARY PRESTON: Organ Odyssey
Works for solo organ by Ives, Karg-Elert, La Montaine, Mendelssohn, Messiaen, Verne, Widor

I learned long ago to take seriously any e-mail announcement by Janice Mancone of Reference Recordings. This past year I got very excited when she notified me that Keith O. Johnson, the label's recording engineer, had recorded a solo pipe organ in the same hall in which he'd recorded my favorite choral work, John Rutter's Requiem (an earlier R2D4 of mine). I was not disappointed. While Johnson reproduces the instrument's deep-bass pedal notes, it's the midrange and treble that captivate me. Mendelssohn's Organ Sonata 1 captures what I hear in live organ recitals but very rarely from recordings: the mixture of brightness and color, with none of that hard, edgy, irritating quality. When I crank up the volume, the music becomes more dynamic without becoming harsh.

Jon Iverson
CALEXICO: Hot Rail

Seems to me that any kid growing up in the 1960s has been pre-seasoned for the music of Calexico. We were repeatedly peppered with romantic notions of neo-Mexicali: Clint Eastwood westerns, Herb Alpert shuffles, and salsa in a jar. It is this cultural amalgamation of North American fantasies that Calexico—two gringos from Tucson—taps into so well: moody vocals, accordions, mariachi trumpets, marimbas, maracas, and strumming, twangy guitars. And when they aren't strolling
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through a dusty town south of the border, they slither into a somnambulant side alley to conjure Tom Waits without the raspy growl.

FLEET FOXES: Fleet Foxes/Sun Giant
Sub Pop SPCD 777, SPCD 781 (CDs). 2008. Phil Ek, prod.; eng., mix. DDD. TT (both): 58:21

What a blast of fresh spring air: flowery harmonies rivaling the Beach Boys, earthy hippie sensibilities, and catchy tunes sprouting everywhere. These two CDs (Sun Giant—a five-song EP) each have key songs and really could have been released on one disc—they total less than 60 minutes and were recorded within months of each other, then released in reverse chronological order. Buy them together (but skip the import, which combines the two discs while omitting one song). The recordings aren't without problems: too much wet reverb, and engineering issues that can be discerned by attentive listeners. But the music is so pretty, and the songs are so catchy, that I won over, and I highly recommend these CDs. The sound isn't great, but the engineers of this particular edition have deaned it up as well as any. —1)

DAVID STOROBIN: Favorite Tracks, Vol. 1
Music for guitar by Giuliani, Pagani, Regondi, Sor
David Starobin, Oren Fader, guitar; Pina Carmirelli, violin; Seva Gargash, viola; David Starobin, prod.; Tony Sobel, eng.; Emmy Rossum, restoration. AAD. TT: 9:00:17

As I write this in mid-November 2008, the world desperately needs champions. So meet David and Becky Starobin, who own Bridge Records and have been clear-minded and nimble enough to outmaneuver their blinkered, big-footed rivals. For over a quarter century the Starobins have, like knights, jousted on behalf of the contemporary composers their label spotlights, and more than 350 new classical-guitar compositions have been written especially for David, who is a heralded virtuoso. He has recorded several of those pieces on other Bridge CDs, but he devotes this one—which he credits his better half with conceiving—to 19th-century works culled from recordings he made between 1979 and 1994. It's a hugely gratifying hour of music by Giuliani, Pagani, Regondi, and Sor, newly remastered for better sound, and an excellent choice for all classical-guitar enthusiasts as well as those who still tend to underrate the instrument.

David Lander
MEMPHIS COUNTRY BLUES: Greatest Hits Vol. I

Eddie Dattel, bred and based in Memphis, champions hometown contemporaries on his Inside Sounds label, but reserves his Memphis Archives imprint for classics like this anthology. It comprises selections by early blues performers associated with the traditionally musical city, and Dattel credits its producer, the late Richard Hite, who was also Canned Heat's bassist, for choosing archival gems that cast their glow beyond the boundaries of purist circles. When Hite selected these 17 performances from 78rpm discs pressed in the 1920s and '30s, he might have been stringing firecrackers—there's not a dull among them. Hite and engineer Rick Caughron transferred the material meticulously, using just enough filtering to minimize artifacts while preserving the music and its vintage character. Some of these artists were rediscovered decades later and reached with laurel, while others vanished, yet all deliver compelling performances here. Vocals are vibrant, ensemble playing is superb, and the spirit that inspired Bob Dylan, the Rolling Stones, and other latter-day apostles of the blues is evident throughout.

Richard Lehnhert
HOWARD SHORE: The Lord of the Rings: The Complete Recordings
Howard Shore, London Philharmonic, London Voices, London Oratory School Chorus, with Emmylou Harris, Renée Fleming, James Galway, Annie Lennox, Mabel Faletolu, Elizabeth Fraser, David Byrne, Sting, Brian Blessed, Miriam Stockley, Hilary Summers, Enya, Renée Fleming, James Galway, Annie Lennox, Mabel Faletolu, Elizabeth Fraser, Edward Ross, Ben Del Maestro, Miriam Stockley, Hilary Summers, Emilia Bunten, Isabel Baykal, Barmak Sisakian, Cheryl Campbell, others
J.A.R. Records imprint for classics like this anthology. It includes recordings he made between 1979 and 1994. It's a hugely gratifying hour of music by Giuliani, Pagani, Regondi, and Sor, newly remastered for better sound, and an excellent choice for all classical-guitar enthusiasts as well as those who still tend to underrate the instrument.
families of leitmotsifs to represent the various creatures, species, characters, tribes, peoples, places, and things of J.R.R. Tolkien's vast novel. In some cases Shore has outdone Wagner; his sinuous theme for the One Ring is far more convincing an embodiment of fatally unsatisfactory yearning than is Wagner's strangely pale motif for Alberich's ring; and Shore's theme for the equestrian Rohirrim is at least as dark, tragic, and noble as the one Wagner wrote for his Volsungs. Shore is also a sensitive and masterful conductor—throughout, the London Philharmonic heaves and sighs in the rhythms of breath, sounding like a huge restive beast. Unlike most film composers, who are seldom given more than a few weeks to compose, rehearse, record, and edit, Shore had time to orchestrate these immense scores himself, and his close attention to details of color, texture, voicing, and inner harmonies is unprecedented for the genre. These are perhaps the best-crafted film scores ever written, and have genuine musical substance; The Return of the King's "The Lighting of the Beacons" is the most inspiring marriage of music and film image I have ever heard and seen. Though hardly examples of audiophile engineering—the number of microphones probably ran into the high two digits—these are also some of the most vivid, well-balanced, three-dimensional, full-bodied orchestral recordings I have heard. The senses of space and orchestral texture (the cymbals! the low strings!) in the 24-bit/48kHz hi-rez versions of all 10 hours of music on the included DVD-Audio discs are not subtle in their differences from the sound on the CDs, which sound perfectly good themselves. The sumptuous and meticulously antiqued packaging matches the aural richness and the music's own high seriousness. Shore's deep generosity in his work here is audible and humbling.

Robert Levine
HAYDN: The Creation
Sandrine Piau, Nadi Gertson, soprano; Mark Padmore, tenor; Peter Harvey, baritone; Neal Davies, bass; Chetham's Chamber Choir, Gabrieli Consort of Players, Paul McCreesh. Archiv 477 7561 (2 CDs). 2008. Nicholas Parker, prod.; Jonathan Stokes, eng. DDD. TT: 108:56

Sung in English, this spotless recording uses the forces Haydn led at a 1799 performance—200 players and singers—and the effect is epic: the world is being created. The massed brasses and winds, along with the huge choir, remind the listener of nothing short of a Technicolor, Cecil B. De Mille spectacular, except that there's no kitsch and the details are never blurred—the use of period instruments assures clarity, with flutes like birds, timpani like God's wake-up calls, and the gut strings alternately mellow and fiercely attacked for emphasis. McCreesh goes for color and expressiveness without being Romantic, and the recording is resonant, bright, and roomy, capturing everything from the gigantic finales of choruses to the softest solo soprano pianissimo without fidgeting. The soloists are superb as well. Put it on and sit back. (X001-7)

RADIOHEAD: In Rainbows

So much was made of the marketing of this CD that the music almost got lost. Well, it's the most approachable album Radiohead has made, but it never cuts corners; Thom Yorke's vocals are more aggressive than introverted this time, but he still knows how to pine. More rock than psychedelia, they've added pianos, celestas, and the wonderful, wacky Ondes Martenot to their palette, which also includes strings and varied electronics. I'm not willing to claim that this is a cheerful CD, but it includes a real love song (the stripped-down "House of Cards"), and a kid's chorus (in "15 Step") that contradicts Yorke's darkness. "Faux Air" is actually reminiscent of the Beatles. But true fans need not fear—the final song, "Videotape," shows Radiohead at their most layered and complex. What gorgeous music!

John Marks
BANTOCK: Omar Khayyám
Catherine Wyn-Rogers, mezzo-soprano; Toby Spence, tenor; Roderick Williams, bass; BBC Symphony Chorus, Stephen Jackson, choirmaster; BBC Symphony Orchestra; Vernon Handley, conductor. Chandos CHSA 5051 (3 multichannel SACD/CDs), 2007. Brian Couzens, prod.; Ralph Couzens, eng. DDD. TT: 2:51:31

Orientalism always exercised a tremendous pull on the British imagination, and here are nearly three hours of settings—as lush and suggestive as an Alma-Tadema nude—for vocal soloists, chorus, and orchestra, of verses by a medieval Persian poet. Granville Bantock's Omar Khayyám (1906–09) is contemporary with Schönbberg's Gurrelieder and Debussy's Le martyre de Saint Sébastien, and it displays the same late-Romantic, fin-de-siècle, overripe opulence. But comparisons to late Elgar, early Strauss, and even Mahler are not out of line either. The scale and scope are such that at times I looked up, expecting to see a David Lean film. I mean that as praise. Plaudits to Chandos for pulling off such a gigantic undertaking as this world-premiere recording—and on SACD, no less.

ISLANDSMOEN: Requiem, Op.42
Hilde Haroldsen Sveen, soprano; Marianne Beate Kieland, alto; Ulf Oien, tenor; Trond Halste Moe, bass; Norwegian Soloists' Choir, Kristiansand Symphony Orchestra; Terje Boye Hansen, conductor. 2-L 2L36SACD (multichannel SACD/CD), 2006. Wolfgang Plagge, prod.; Hans Peter L'Orange. Stale Hetirk Odegården, engs. OD: 50:56

Sigurd Islandsmoen (1881–1964) wrote his Requiem, Op.42, in 1935–36. The work had its premiere in 1943 and was briefly popular in Europe in the post-WWII period, but by 1960 it had vanished. Although the melodic material comes from Norwegian folk songs, the Prelude sounds like vintage orchestral Elgar. Islandsmoen, who studied with Reger, handles his materials and forms deftly. This requiem is more energetic than down in the dumps; the choral sections with organ fills and even Mahler are not out of line either. The scale and scope are such that at times I looked up, expecting to see a David Lean film. I mean that as praise. Plaudits to Chandos for pulling off such a gigantic undertaking as this world-premiere recording—and on SACD, no less.

Stephen Mejias
GRUPO FOLKLORICO Y EXPERIMENTAL NUEVAYORQUINO: Concepts in Unity
I remember the day my uncle Edwin introduced me to these guys. I was in the middle of a deep, deep obsession with New York City salsas, and thought I had a pretty good grasp on things. I'd become familiar with the rhythms and the progressions, I knew the percussionists and the brass sections and the soneros. But then I heard “Anabocca,” and everything I thought I knew about salsa was obliterated. In Grupo Folklorico, a collection of New York City's most versatile and accomplished Latin jazz musicians come together to explore the roots of salsa, and to honor the traditional musical forms of Cuba, Puerto Rico, and Africa. In “Anabocca,” bassist Andy Gonzalez enters with a slow and simple four-note riff. He plays it just twice before the song suddenly erupts into a furious and maddening groove. About three minutes in, Manny Oquendo fashions what might be the most powerful timbale solo ever captured on tape—it's the sound of Puerto Rico, Cuba, Africa, New York City, the oceans, the mountains, and the whole damn world coming together to celebrate life. Everything there is to know about everything is banged out in those perfect strokes. Musical genres and cultural boundaries are erased, leaving only concepts in unity.

**JOHN HANDY & THE CONCERT ENSEMBLE: Projections**

John Handy, alto saxophone, saxello, flute; Michael White, violin; Mike Nock, piano; Bruce Cale, bass; Larry Hancock, drums, tambourine


We were hunting for lost treasures at the Princeton Record Exchange. I pulled *Projections* from the heavy, crowded stacks. “Know anything about this?” I asked John. “Nope, but it looks cool,” he replied. On the cover, John Handy stands alone, dead center, impeccably dressed in a bright red suit, red and black striped tie, light gray shirt, and flamboyantly dressed in a bright red polo shirt and vintage blues that so smitten by the British group's edgy blend of the Rolling Stones, the Velvets, and vintage blues that I wrote a hyperbolic 1000-word review.

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**Fred Mills**

**JACOBITES: Robespierre’s Velvet Basement**


Rock writers generally don’t get groupies, but sometimes our proximity to rock stars makes the notion theoretically achievable. When Nikki Sudden’s post-Swell Maps outfit, the Jacobites, issued their second LP in 1985, yours truly was so smitten by the British group's edgy blend of the Rolling Stones, the Velvets, and vintage blues that I wrote a hyperbolic 1000-word review. Five years later, Sudden comes to town on a rare US tour and, remembering my name, greets me like an old friend. In the dressing room after the show, I’m gazing at his Jack Daniel’s and watching him paw a local groupie known as the Dragon Lady. Noting my apparent envy, Sudden leans over to whisper in the ear of another lissome lass who’d come backstage. She promptly gets up, walks over, slides onto my lap, and begins, ever so delicately, to nibble on my earlobe...

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**Paul Messenger**

**FLEETWOOD MAC: Tusk**


The record-breaking global success of *Rumours* doomed its much-delayed, way-over-budget follow-up. *Tusk* was criticized as overblown, self-indulgent, and lacking direction, all of which had some truth. But it has weathered well. Revisited 30 years on, it’s a mostly delightful if disparate collection of high-class AOR that’s worth a place alongside the Beatles’ “White Album” or the Stones’ *Exile on Main Street.* I can’t speak for the remastered CDs, but system improvements now cut through the overproduction that made the original vinyl confusing, allowing fresh enjoyment of these fine songs and subtle, complex arrangements.

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**ENNIO MORRICONE: The Soundtracks: 75 Themes from 53 Films**


Everyone’s music collection should include some Morricone. The music establishment might sniff at film soundtracks, but in my opinion they’ll be remembered long after most “serious” modern music is forgotten and ignored. Morricone, especially when helping director Sergio Leone reinvent the Western, is a great innovator, adding wit, charm, and tension in his unusual use of voices, whistling, and strange instrumentation. Although I bought an LP of the original soundtrack album of *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* back in the 1970s, finding a good collection proved difficult—until I discovered this Italian compilation, which, at $20 for five CDs, is also a bargain. Hours of Googling have failed to find any provenance whatsoever, though the scores, different from the performances on my OST, have presumably been rerecorded—and to a very high standard.

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**U2: War**


This edition of the 1983 album *War,* part of Universal’s ambitious overhaul of U2’s back catalog, boasts a bonus disc comprising a dozen remixes, rarities, live tracks, and B-sides. It’s the significance of the original LP, however—key cuts such as the soaring anthem “New Year’s Day” and the violin-fueled swooner
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“Drowning Man,” and notwithstanding the glammy rocker “The Refugee”—that gives the record its lasting resonance. Harr decisively catapulted the Irish band to international prominence. Me, too; in a sense: after the opening date of the US tour, I was inspired to start a U2 fanzine, and began to gradually develop sufficient chops and reputation to turn my professional journalist. Now you know who to blame.

Dan Ouellette

BEN ALLISON & MAN SIZE SAFE: Little Things Run the World

Ben Allison, bass, acoustic guitar; Michael Blake, tenor & soprano saxophones; Ron Horton, trumpet, flugelhorn; Steve Cardenas, electric guitar; Michael Sarin, drums


Hands down, Little Things Run the World stands as bassist-composer Ben Allison’s most adventurous CD, and is in the top echelon of 2008’s jazz albums. It’s lyrical, colorful, edgy, and teems with exuberance. Conceived with careful architectural attention, grounded in the tradition of alchemic improvisation, and infused with a richly textured myriad of styles—rock, pop, African, Americana, Latin—Allison’s music has all the earmarks of jazz in motion toward a higher evolutionary plateau. Key to its success is Allison’s new band, Man Size Safe, named after diabolical VP Dick Cheney’s secret White House vault. The interplay of trumpeter Ron Horton and electric guitarist Steve Cardenas stands out, especially in their unison wails in the grooved opener, “Respiration.” Highlights include Cardenas’ melodic gem, “Language of Love,” Allison’s intriguing “Four Folk Songs,” and a salient cover of John Lennon’s “Jealous Guy.”

JENNY SCHEINMAN: Crossing the Field

Jenny Scheinman, violin, piano; Doug Wieselman, clarinet; Ron Miles, cornet; Bill Frisell, guitar; Jason Moran, piano; Tim Luntzel, bass; Kenny Wollesen, drums


2008 was a banner year for Jenny Scheinman. Although she’d already released four albums as a leader, she was best known for her violin support of a range of artists, from Lucinda Williams to Bill Frisell. In 2008, however, she released two disparate albums: her fine, self-titled vocal debut, and this lyrical gem, Crossing the Field traverses an expanse of territory, from Copland-esque melodies and wistful lyricism to funk-inflected grooves and upbeat improvised excursions, highlighted by the rowdy swinger “I Heart Eye Patch” and the rhythm-popping dancer “Hard Sole Shoe.” Her sidemen deliver the goods. Scheinman’s band features Frisell, pianist Jason Moran (who consistently sparks the proceedings), and, on six tracks, 25 strings led by members of the string quartet Brooklyn Rider. The CD is a feast of music through-composed by Scheinman, and buoyed by the improvisational genius of the front line of violin, horns, guitar, and piano inspired by the crack rhythm section.

Wes Phillips

CANTUS: While You Are Alive

Works for a cappella male chorus by Bosch, Gawthrop, Hill, Nelson, Sametz, Takach, Tormis, Vasks, Whitacre

Cantus

Nominating a project engineered by my boss looks like apple-polishing, but apemn, Cantus’s While You Are Alive is some good, as we say down south. Highlights include Edie Hill’s fabulous A Sound Like This, Tim Takach’s Things I Didn’t Know I Loved, and Veljo Tormis’s Kolm mul oli kaunis sana—music you definitely don’t already have. The sound is simply astonishing—aural teleportation. I know what Cantus sounds like in Goshen College’s Sauder Hall, and WYAA reimagines that unique acoustic in my listening room any time I want to go there. Magic is what Erick Lichte, JA, and Cantus do; music is how they do it.

www.HDTracks.com

Taking “Records To Die For” at its words, what I’d run into a burning building to save would be my NAS drive—and increasingly, I’ve been finding myself feeding it new hi-rez files from HDTracks.com. Apple’s iTunes and Amazon.com have huge catalogs but offer only lossy compression. HDTracks is like an indie record store in comparison, but one that stocks all the good, quirky stuff. Best of all, no DRM and no lossy compression; even better, it has a small but growing section of 24-bit/96kHz files. “Better than Red Book” really is better!

Robert J. Reina

THE BEATLES: Love


This latest recording from the nine-voice male vocal ensemble The Beaufs is a reimagining—of 26 classic Beatles tracks to accompany a Cirque du Soleil production is so fresh, so meticulous, that this particular Beatles freak—who has memorized every note of every Beatles release—feels that Love qualifies as a new Beatles recording. Despite the tendency to layer instrumental and vocal lines from songs from different time periods, the recording never devolves into gimmick or cliché. The colorless and pristine sound quality transcends that of other Beatles recordings, which indicates to me that it’s time to remaster the entire Fab Four catalog.

CANTUS: While You Are Alive

Works for a cappella male chorus by Bosch, Gawthrop, Hill, Nelson, Sametz, Takach, Tormis, Vasks, Whitacre

Cantus

This latest recording from the nine-voice male vocal ensemble from Minneapolis features works by composers Eric Whitacre, Peteris Vasks, and Veljo Tormis, as well as several new works commissioned by Cantus. On this CD, the versatile group is equally skilled at navigating dense harmonic textures or melting into the blooming glow of a low-register major triad. This diverse body of work highlights the ensemble’s greatest strengths: a seamless sense of integrated phrasing and an uncompromised control of pitch and timbre. The recording’s closely miked perspective results in an arresting sound that is at once captivating and intoxicating. Musically and sonically, this is my favorite John Atkinson recording. (Full disclosure: John Atkinson is my boss.)
Kalman Rubinon

DVOŘÁK: Cello Concerto, Piano Trio 4 ("Dumky")

Jean-Guihen Queyras, cello; Isabelle Faust, violin; Alexander Melnikov, piano; Prague Philharmonic; and Bělohlávek

The classical music lover needs no introduction to these popular works, which represent Dvořák's Czech heritage at its peak. Each has enjoyed the attention of great performers and is well represented on my CD shelves, but this is the disc I pull out first. The performance of the Cello Concerto, while it cannot supplant the classic performances of Casals or Rostropovich, is in every way their equal, and offers a marvelous balance of warmth and brilliance. Queyras's playing is faultless and, along with his Prague supporters, he interprets with stirring elan. The "Dumky" piano trio is equally delightful; Melnikov and Faust, the latter fast becoming one of my favorite violinists, join Queyras in a performance that is charming, invigorating, and, ultimately, satisfying. The sound balances are nigh perfect in both the orchestral and chamber settings.

Schönberg: Gurrelieder

Yvonne Naef, Robert Dean Smith, Gerhard Siegel, Ralf Lukas, Melanie Diener, Andreas Schmidt, soloists; Chor des Bayerischen Rundfunks, MDR Rundfunkchor Leipzig, SWR Symphony of Baden-Baden and Freiburg, Michael Gielen, conductor

Schönberg's massive, thrilling, post-Romantic oratorio is a series of emotionally charged scenes of beauty, love, and loss. Ranging from intimate scenes to huge orchestral tableaux, it seems to demand the immersive clarity of modern multichannel recording, and this, the first on SACD, is an outstanding performance in every way. It was recorded as part of a tour on the occasion of conductor Michael Gielen's 80th birthday, and I can think of no more appropriate celebration for this master of 20th-century orchestral music. The soloists are outstanding (although those on Chailly's Decca CDs may have the edge), but it is Gielen's focused and insightful direction that carries the day. The recording has all the requisite transparency, detail, and power to sweep the listener into Schönberg's tragic and magical world.

Leland Rucker

BOB DYLAN: World Gone Wrong

They're calling this the worst economic period since the Great Depression. Fifteen years ago Bob Dylan channeled the Mississippi Sheiks, popular among Great Depression audiences because, as he observes, "their songs are faultlessly made for these modern times." And so they are: Songs of hypocrisy, lust, and economic and political turmoil. Songs blaming the other guy. Songs, written decades ago, that show that, as a species, we haven't changed much. Last week Dylan played a Sheiks song on a radio show organized around the theme of "Blood." "Sitting home alone, you're not gonna write a song like this," he said afterward. We could use more of those these days. (XVII-1)

THE KINKS: Muswell Hillbillies

I don't drink that much any more, but when I do, I like to dig out Muswell Hillbillies. I still get the occasional touch of acute schizophrenia disease and find myself screaming something about 20th-century men. In the '70s, we used to catch the Kinks whenever they came to town. Those days, the set was loosely based around Muswell tunes, and reached a climax with Ray Davies' admonition about "demon alcohol." We were sitting right up front one night in 1978 when the guy next to me, already a victim of the demon, splashed his glass of beer right up into Ray's face. Let's just say that Ray didn't react with the same enthusiasm as Country Dick Montana would in years to come. We never saw the Kinks do the "Alcohol" skit again. (XXXI-2)

Markus Sauer

ÉTHIOPIQUES 10: Tzettaz—Ethiopian Blues and Ballads

CALVIN RUSSELL: Crossroads

Two faces of the blues for this year's "R2D4," two records from artists with a French connection. Calvin Russell hails from Texas and spent much of his life as a rather shady character, if stories can be believed. Around the age of 40 (he's now 60) he took up music. It's easy to hear where his roots are—there's a deep feeling of the blues in his music, but there's also a lot of country and rock'n'roll. Russell isn't well known in America, it seems, but was discovered by a French producer and regularly tours in France. Crossroads documents an "unplugged" tour, just a man and his guitar. In the liner notes, Russell says he once read one should "Always decorate construction, never construct decoration," and that on this CD the listener can have a look at the construction without decoration and hopefully will find it solid. Solid it most certainly is; an honest record that rewards repeated listening on the strength of both music and lyrics. The story behind the second CD, Vol.10 in the ongoing Éthiopiques series, merits a longer article. Briefly, Frenchman Francis Faléto hears Ethiopian music from the 1970s and tries to contact the musicians, but learns that the music he likes was stifled by the Ethiopian regime. He then discovers Amha Esheté, the label owner who produced most of the music he likes so much, in exile in Washington. They go to Greece to salvage the master tapes, and are now putting out a series of compilations to international acclaim, while treating the musicians fairly (à la Buena Vista Social Club). This volume collects tracks recorded between 1970 and 1974. The music is accessible to ears that haven't heard much African music; the musicians clearly have listened to a lot of American blues and jazz (John Coltrane would have been proud of some of the sax solos). Fantastic.


68
Here she is in her glorious prime, the exquisite soprano with the angelically floated high notes to die for. This surfeit of riches includes Caballé’s debut recital on RCA; even earlier albums of Zarzuela arias and songs by Granados and Strauss; the duet LPs with Shirley Verrett and Bernabé Marti; the albums of Zarzuela arias and songs by Granado l and riches includes Caballé’s debut recital on RCA; eve  %  earlier the angelically floated high notes to die for. This surfeit o

Here she is in her glorious prime, the exquisite soprano vvii

Jascifi V

This lost gem from late in the last millennium is primarily the work of one guy, singer-songwriter-guitarist Michael Culhane, and his crack New York band. After sold-out gigs at such hotspots as the Mercury Lounge, Culhane and company put together this album of extraordinarily well-crafted, power-pop-tinged confections in the Bill Lloyd and Aimee Mann traditions (yes, it’s that good, and yes, there’s a hidden track). Each of the first six people I played it for had a different favorite. Culhane, with no sense of irony, names George Harrison, Curtis Mayfield, Blue Oyster Cult, and Glen Campbell among his musical heroes, and writes songs that are simultaneously smart and ridiculously catchy. “I Wrote It Down,” inspired by having unexpectedly stumbled, years later, across an old grade-school journal, begins with a Middle East-inflected chorus (Culhane’s room grew up in Baghdad) but quickly vamps into delicious contemporary rock. “Enchanted” is that rare love song that refuses to get gushy. Its video was shot in the shadows of the pyramids (thanks, YouTube). Why Egypt? The band regularly did post-9/11 goodwill tours, sponsored by the State Department, that took them everywhere from Kuwait and Syria to Israel and Palestine. If that indicates how uncynical Culhane is, that’s the point. His sweet, unjaded optimism comes through loud and clear on The Lovely Luna, whose songs get better with every listen. A 10th-anniversary reissue is imminent.

Richard Strauss’s Alpine Symphony is, I suppose, a guilty pleasure. For some, the +100-piece orchestra and 16 offstage

Richard Strauss’s Alpine Symphony is, I suppose, a guilty pleasure. For some, the +100-piece orchestra and 16 offstage brass, along with cowbells, a wind machine, and a holy organ at the summit, are all too much to be taken seriously. But this 53-minute tone poem, intended as a nature-worshipping exercise in moral purification and a repudiation of Christianity, overflows with lush scoring, thrilling climaxes, and a surfeit of romantic excess. I love it. Even in two-channel CD, the extra resolution afforded by DSD trumps recent efforts from Thielemann and Witt. The symphony is paired with a heroic, sensual Don Juan that rivals Fritz Reiner’s. This SACD will highlight every system’s glories and shortcomings.

The Kinks, arguably the best rock band ever, were led by Ray Davies, one of the greatest British literary minds of the latter half of the 20th century. His younger brother, Dave, is legendary in his own right for having invented the proto-heavy-metal riff that propelled the band’s sound. Dave Davies is also an outstanding writer, and the best Kinks albums have a balance of songs by both brothers. Lola ... takes its title from Ray’s gender-bending hit, a scandal-sheet theme that turns on a witty trope worthy of Oscar Wilde. The album is a song cycle about the wretchedness of the record industry, his observations delivered in a set of songs that includes “Powerman,” “Denmark Street,” “The Moneygoround,” and one of my favorite Kinks rockers, “Top of the Pops.” The album also includes Ray’s transcendent “Aperman” and a beautiful love song by Dave, “Strangers.”

This is the music that changed the world. Monk’s 1947-52 recordings for Blue Note are some of the most influential compositions in jazz history. My preferred way to listen to this material is the two-LP Complete Genius release of 1976, which collects everything Monk recorded for Blue Note as a leader. You have to buy an unwieldy four-disc set to get that same material on CD, but this collection touches all the highlights without breaking the bank. Monk’s exotic harmonic shapes, unforgettable melodies, and unique hipity-hop rhythms were futuristic when originally recorded and are completely contemporary today, from the haunting dreamscape of “Round Midnight” through “In Walked Bud,” “Monk’s Mood,” “Thelonious,” “Evidence,” “Epistrophy,” “Straight, No Chaser,” “Mysterioso,” “Four in One,” and “Criss Cross.” Brilliant sidemen, particularly Art Blakey on drums and Milt Jackson on vibraphone, share Monk’s future vision of jazz with incandescent clarionvce in these sessions.
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Note: all of the musicians quoted here are also experienced audiophiles, who fully understand where the state of the art lies with regard to reproducing music. We have found their comments particularly insightful.
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"I was impressed most by... the low level of energy loss... not to mention the speed of the bass, the vastness of the soundstage, the pureness and the accurate focus... The sound it creates... is like live natural sound rather than an electrically reproduced one... [The speaker] responded by... pushing out energy in a gushing flow... It was so live it reminded me of an occasion when I sat one meter from Roy Haynes’ drums... And, when the mid-to-low range of Rachmaninoff’s orchestra made a roaring sound, I felt a strange sensation of wind pressure pushing against my body... What an amazing speaker!

"...let me say here for the record... the Anat Signature II loudspeaker may be the "World’s Most Accurate" as YG’s advertising campaign boldly claims. The Anat Signature II is one of the fastest, cleanest and most accurate sounding loudspeakers I’ve heard... Outstanding performance!"

Mr. Clement Perry - Publisher - Stereo Times
RMAF 2008 Show Report

"...the big Anats...produced sound that was breathtaking in its unforced full-range dynamics and its unexaggerated tonal colors."

Mr. John Atkinson - Editor — Stereophile
RMAF 2008 Show Report

"I’ve never heard such an even-handed presentation... They... make other relatively neutral-sounding speakers seem quite colored... I’d never heard the individual voices placed so precisely in space... The depth the speakers presented was nothing short of miraculous. All other speakers I’ve reviewed seem diffuse, even confused, in comparison... 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."

Mr. Doug Schneider - Publisher — Soundstage
April 2007

"...the sound somewhat shocked me on first hearing... That sense of rolling bass was so real... The Kipod Studios’ depth of soundstage was extraordinary. Images of performers were life-sized and palpable, and they could throw a scary-real image of a vocalist... might as well have been performed right in my room... sounded reach-out-and-touch-you real. The Kipods were truly holographic."

Jeff Fritz - Editor — UltraAudio
May 2007
Bryston
BCD-1
CD PLAYER

**EQUIPMENT REPORT**

**DESCRIPTION**

**DIMENSIONS**
17" (432mm) W by 3.125" (79mm) H by 11.25" (286mm) D. Weight: 18 lbs (8.2kg).

**FINISHES**
Black, silver.

**SERIAL NUMBER OF UNIT REVIEWED**
000275.

**PRICE**
$2695. Approximate number of dealers: 200. Warranty: 3 years parts & labor.

**MANUFACTURER**
Bryston Ltd., P.O. Box 2170, 677 Neal Drive, Peterborough, Ontario K9J 7Y4, Canada. Tel: (800) 632-8217, (705) 742-5325. Fax: (705) 742-0882. Web: www.bryston.com. US: Bryston USA, 30 Coventry Street, Newport, VT 05855. Tel: (802) 334-1201. Fax: (802) 334-6658.

**DESCRIPTION**
Bryston’s first CD player, the $2695 BCD-1, is a drawer-loading player with a front panel of polished aluminum. The slim disc drawer, engraved with the Bryston logo, sits in the panel’s center. To the drawer’s left are an infrared sensor and Open/Close button, then a two-line, 16-character alphanumeric display. To the drawer’s right are the usual transport controls and a power On/Off button. All of these functions are also accessible via the BCD-1’s remote control, as well as two more: Back and Forward. Hold down either and the player moves through the selected track at several times normal speed until the button is released.

The rear panel has sets of balanced and unbalanced right and left analog output jacks, the XLRs wired with pin 2 positive. There are three transformer-coupled digital output jacks—S/PDIF via an unbalanced, gold-plated RCA and TosLink optical, and AES/EBU via an XLR—but no digital input jacks. An RS-232 port allows the BCD-1’s firmware to be updated, and a 2-pin trigger socket mates with a CO11COA-11102 bare-wire terminal block connector (supplied) to remotely power-on the BCD-1 when an external 2-12VDC trigger signal is applied.

Removing the BCD-1’s top panel revealed excellent build quality: minimal point-to-point wiring, high-quality 0.1%-tolerance metal-film resistors and polystyrene capacitors, and all components neatly laid out. Soldered and other gas-tight mechanical connections are used for the signal circuits. The thick, high-quality circuit boards are of double-sided epoxy-glass, with clearly printed component designators. Bryston hand-selects and -matches the BCD-1’s transistors to minimize noise and distortion.

Centered behind the BCD-1’s front panel is its Philips L1210 disc transport. The drive clock and control circuitry sit to the right of the transport, under a metal shield. A full-depth, multilayered PCB just behind the rear panel carries the D/A and analog stages. To the transport’s left are the linear power supplies for the digital and analog circuits, with their reservoir electrolytic capacitors and heatsunk voltage regulators, next to a large toroidal power transformer. A small RC network filters out radio-frequency interference (RFI) on the AC power supply.

The BCD-1’s full-function remote control is made of highly attractive brushed aluminum. It controls everything associated with the CD player—Mute, Track, Open/Close, Power Off/On, and discrete code entry—and it’s backlit for use in the dark. As with other Bryston remotes, this last feature is triggered by a motion detector: the remote illuminates when you pick it up.

I experienced one operational surprise with the BCD-1. Occasionally, when I pressed the Open button on the front panel, the tray motor did not respond for five seconds. I also found it strange that, instead of the usual power-on LED, the BCD-1 has a red Standby light that goes dark when the player is powered on. Otherwise, the
Inner beauty

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BCD-1 functioned flawlessly while I had it in my system; CDs placed in its tray loaded quickly and played without delay.

**Design considerations**

One of Bryston's primary design goals for the BCD-1 was to reduce jitter (i.e., mistrappings of the digital signal presented to the DAC). Bryston replaces the oscillator in the Philips transport's servo circuit with one of its own design, and hand-matches the new oscillator to the drive. The L1210 drive was chosen for its quiet operation and reliability. Bryston rejected other OEM drives because they were actually DVD transports with multiple-frequency clocking circuits, whereas the Philips had been optimized for "Red Book" CD playback, operating at multiples of 44.1kHz.

The signal recovered from the transport is fed to a Crystal CS4398 chip, described as a hybrid, 128x-oversampling 24-bit delta-sigma DAC. The original 44.1kHz data are upsampled to create a new 192kHz sampling frequency. While this process adds no new data to the signal, it shifts noise from the audible spectrum up to ultrasonic frequencies. This allows the DAC chip's digital filter to eliminate noise well above the audible range before converting the data to analog and low-pass filtering it a second time.

In addition to the low-jitter common master clock, the Bryston engineers have done two other things to reduce noise, jitter, and distortion before the D/A conversion stage. Careful routing of the circuit-board traces reduces noise from capacitive coupling between the digital- and analog-bearing lines; and discrete digital and analog power supplies, closely regulated and filtered, help maintain the integrity of the audio signal.

The DAC's analog signal is fed to an output stage running in class-A and assembly replaced the Krell KPS-28c that had been returned to the manufacturer. Having reviewed and loved the sound of Bryston's plug-in digital-to-analog converter module for their B100-DA integrated amplifier (April 2007, Vol.30 No.4), I hoped that the BCD-1, seven

WHILE THIS PROCESS ADDS NO NEW DATA TO THE SIGNAL, IT SHIFTS NOISE FROM THE AUDIBLE SPECTRUM UP TO THE ULTRASONIC FREQUENCIES.

**Listening**

The BCD-1's shape and compactness allowed me to place it on one of my narrow equipment shelves, where it neatly replaced the Krell KPS-28c that had been returned to the manufacturer. Having reviewed and loved the sound of Bryston's plug-in digital-to-analog converter module for their B100-DA integrated amplifier (April 2007, Vol.30 No.4), I hoped that the BCD-1, seven

**MEASUREMENTS**

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Frequency Response at −12dBFS (dBf vs Freq [Hz])</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><img src="image1" alt="Fig.1 Bryston BCD-1, frequency response at −12dBFS into 100k ohms with normal data (top) and preemphasized data (bottom). (Right channel dashed; 0.5dB/vertical div.)" /></td>
<td><img src="image2" alt="Fig.2 Bryston BCD-1, 1/8-octave spectrum with noise and spurious of dithered 1kHz tone at −90dBFS with 16-bit CD data (right channel dashed)." /></td>
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examined the Bryston BCD-1's measured behavior mainly using Audio Precision's top-model SYS2722 system (see www.ap.com and "As We See It" in the January 2008 issue, www.stereophile.com/asweseeit/108awsi), as well as, for some tests, our Audio Precision System One and the Miller Audio Research Jitter Analyzer. As always, I experimented with the grounding between the player being tested and the test set to give the lowest level of measured hum.

The BCD-1's error correction was excellent; the player suffered no dropouts until the gaps in the data spiral on the Pierre Verany Test CD reached 1.5mm in length. When I test a CD player's error correction, I monitor the data output words using RME's DIGICheck utility program, and thus was able to notice that bit 18 in the BCD-1's digital output was permanently set to "1." I doubt this would have any audible consequences if the BCD-1 were to be used only as a transport, but it is somewhat peculiar behavior.

The Bryston's maximum output level at 1kHz from the unbalanced RCA jacks was 2.38V, or 1.5dB above the CD standard's 2V. The maximum balanced output level from the XLR jacks was exactly twice this value, and both sets of outputs preserved absolute polarity; i.e., were non-inverting. (The XLRs are wired with pin 2 hot.) The unbalanced output impedance was low at high and middle frequencies, at 74 ohms, rising to a still low 106.5 ohms at 20Hz. The balanced output impedance was exactly twice these figures, as expected.
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Of course you would. But you don’t have to take our word for it. Here’s a few excerpts from what Srajan Ebaen, publisher of 6moons.com, had to say:

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“I don’t think there’s been something exactly like this in our industry before. Not many would have the necessary experience. Fewer of those would have the writing skills to present trickier concepts simply. Even fewer would be inclined to give it all away. Not that $44.50 is exactly free. But it’s pretty damn close for decades worth of hands-on expertise.... In short, it’s the proverbial slam dunk.”

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years newer than the Krell CD player, might sound at least as good.

Although I didn't do a direct comparison of the two players, my listening notes suggest that the Bryston sounded better than the Krell's own internal DAC, or when the former's digital output was processed by the DAC of a Bryston B100-DA integrated amplifier. The BCD-1 reproduced my CDs' bloom, body, and warmth, with none of the edgy, irritating quality heard from the early-generation D/A processors I had around for comparison purposes.

The BCD-1's imaging was simply sensational. The orchestral beginning of the excerpt Christopher Brown and the Huntingdonshire Philharmonic's performance of Elgar's The Dream of Gerontius, on Stereophile's Test CD 2 (Stereophile STPH004-2), transformed my listening room into a semblance of the acoustic of Ely Cathedral, the choir set far back from the solo singers in the tremendous space. The solo bass was to the far left, the tenor to the right. Through the Burmester B25 loudspeakers, the pipe organ’s deep, solid chords were clearly evident under the choir and orchestra. I also heard a large cathedral ambience in Gnomus, from Jean Guillou’s performance of his own transcription for organ of Mussorgsky’s Pictures at an Exhibition (CD, Dorian DOR-90117). The BCD-1 could also convincingly reproduce the sounds of recordings made in more intimate settings, such as of tenor Gary Ruschman on Eric Whitacre’s Lux Aeternum, from male choir Cantus’s While You Are Alive (CD, Cantus CTS-1208).

The BCD-1's highs were clean, open, effortless, grain-free, and extended. In Henryk Górecki and the National Polish Radio Symphony Orchestra’s recording of Górecki’s Symphony 3, Zofia Kilanowicz’s lucid soprano was entrancing and crystal-clear (SACD, Polskie Radio PRSACD2). Paul Simon’s

---

**Fig.1:** Bryston BCD-1, frequency response, 1/10-octave bands, pre-emphasis data (red line), no pre-emphasis (blue line). The top pair of traces shows the response from 10Hz to 10kHz, with a negligible 0.1dB droop at 20kHz. The bottom pair of traces shows the response with preemphasized data. Like players from Simaudio and Naim, the BCD-1 shows a fairly large suckout in the mid-treble, meaning that preemphasized CDs will sound a bit distant and lacking in dynamics. Fortunately, such discs are rare these days, though I believe the BIS catalog was all mastered using preemphasis. Channel separation (not shown) was superb from both sets of outputs, at 130dB in the midrange, and still better than 115dB in the top octave.

**Fig.2:** was plotted using a 1/4-octave-wide bandpass filter with a center frequency swept down from 20kHz to 20Hz.

**Fig.3:** Bryston BCD-1, FFT-derived spectrum of 1kHz sinewave at -90dBFS into 200k ohms (blue left, red right; linear frequency scale).

**Fig.4:** Bryston BCD-1, 1/4-octave spectrum with noise and spuriae of -115dB (right channel dashed).

**Fig.5:** Bryston BCD-1, linearity error.
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World Radio History
sibilants at the beginning of "Trailways Bus," from Songs from the Capeman (CD, Warner Bros. 46814-2), were natural, not irritating. The ride cymbal played with wire brushes by Billy Drummond at the beginning of "The Mooche," from the Jerome Harris Quintet's Rendezvous (CD, Stereophile STPH013-2), had a realistically shimmering metallic quality.

The BCD-1's midrange reproduction was smooth and effortless. Played through my Quad ESL-989 speakers, Jane Monheit's rendition of "Besame Mucho," from The Frank and Joe Show's 33 1/3 (CD, Hyena SD9320), had the "seductive timbral voluptuousness" John Marks reported on in his column in the April 2006 issue (Vol.29 No.4), Marc Anthony's tenor voice remained warm and crystal-clear, without any tubbiness, during his work on Paul Simon's Songs from the Capeman.

The BCD-1's bass response was particularly involving when it was teamed up with the pair of Burmester B25 speakers I reviewed in December. Although the B25s rolled off quickly below 40Hz, as heard on the low-frequency warble tones, on Editor's Choice (Stereophile STPH016-2), I still found myself enveloped by the sustained pedal chords of the Lay Family Concert Organ during Timothy Seelig and the Turtle Creek Chorale's performance of John Rutter's The Lord Is My Light and My Salvation, from Requiem (CD, Reference RR-57CD), and by the staccato synthesizer notes in "Something's Wrong," from Randy Edelman's score for the movie My Cousin Vinny (CD, Varèse Sarabande VSD-5364). Subtle changes in pitch could be easily discerned in the synthesizer notes in the "Behind the Veil," from Jeff Beck's Guitar Shop (CD, Epic EK 44313), and in the timpani notes in Eiji Oue and the Minnesota Symphony's recording of Stravinsky's Rite of Spring (CD, Reference RR-70CD).

Additionally, the BCD-1 easily captured the wide dynamic range of David Bowie's whisper-to-scream introduction to "Putting Out Fire," from the Cat People soundtrack (CD, MCA MCAD-1498); the eerie synthesizer in "Ascent," from Don Dorsey's 'lime Warp (CD, Telarc CD-80106); the startling piano scales that erupt from black silence during "The Handoff," from James Horner's Sneakers soundtrack (CD, Columbia CK 53146); the firecracker rim shots and drum beats mixed with calls from the audience during the drum solo in "The Maker," from Emmylou

while the BCD-1 played dithered data representing a 1kHz tone at -90dBFS. The traces peak at exactly -90dBFS, suggesting very low linearity error, and are free from harmonic spuriae. A peak in both channels at 120Hz suggests some power-supply noise, but as this noise is better than 116dB down from peak level, I can safely predict that it will be inaudible. Repeating the test but using FFT spectral analysis gave the traces shown in fig.3. Again, no harmonic components are visible, and again, the power-supply component at 120Hz can be seen. However, a couple of very-low-level spurious tones are evident in the mid-treble. Performing 1/2-octave analysis with digital data representing a -1LSB DC offset gave the traces shown in fig.4. As well as the 120Hz component, power-supply–related spuriiae can be seen at 240 and 360Hz, and spectral peaks are visible in the treble, before the noise floor rises at ultrasonic frequencies due to the noiseshaping used by the BCD-1's sigma-delta DAC chip.

Even so, the BCD-1's plot of linearity error was dominated by the recorded dither noise (fig.5), and the player accurately reproduced the trilayered waveform on an undithered sinewave at exactly -90.31dBFS (fig.6).

The Bryston's harmonic distortion was very low in level, even into the punishing 600 ohm load, and was dominated by the subjectively innocuous second and third harmonics (fig.7), but a regular series of higher harmonics

![Fig. 6 Bryston BCD-1, waveform of undithered 1kHz sinewave at -90.31dBFS, 16-bit data (blue left, red right).](image)

![Fig. 7 Bryston BCD-1, spectrum of 50Hz sinewave at 0dBFS into 600 ohms (blue left, red right; linear frequency scale).](image)
Harris's Spyboy (CD, Eminent EM-25001-2); the explosive drumwork from Mick Fleetwood that opens "Dreams," from Fleetwood Mac's The Dance (CD, Reprise 46702-2); and Mark Flynn's flash-bang kick drum and rim shots at the beginning of "Blizzard Limbs," from Attention Screen's Live at Merkin Hall (CD, Stereophile STPH018-2).

**Conclusions**

The only candidate I had on hand for comparison with Bryston's BCD-1 was the nearly-three-times-as-expensive Krell KPS-28c ($7500 when available), which had been connected with Krell's proprietary CAST links to Krell's KCT preamplifier ($8500). That I much preferred the Bryston's sound is probably due to the tremendous improvements in DAC circuitry that have taken place in the past seven years. (I have yet to hear PrimaLuna's ProLogue 8 tube CD player, which was reviewed in the July 2008 issue by Fred Kaplan and John Atkinson, and is far more comparably priced at $2495.) I greatly enjoyed the Bryston BCD-1's detailed, revealing sound. I was just as pleased that its $2695 price gives you an extremely well-engineered, solidly built, compact CD player with a beautifully made, backlit remote control. Mated to my Quad ESL-989 speakers, the BCD-1 played with open highs, detailed imaging and soundstaging, well-defined and authoritative bass, and an ability to reveal the most subtle musical details. Like Bryston's B100-DA integrated amplifier, the BCD-1 CD player connects me to those crucial elements of music: pace, rhythm, and emotion. It's so good that I no longer miss the KPS-28c, and that's a strong recommendation indeed.

**ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT**

**DIGITAL SOURCES** Sony SCD-C555ES multichannel SACD/CD player, Krell KP-28c CD player Bryston B100-DA D/A amplifier.

**PREAMPLIFIER** Mark Levinson ML-7.

**POWER AMPLIFIERS** Mark Levinson ML2 (monoblocks) & No.334.

**INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER** Bryston B100-DA.

**LOUDSPEAKERS** Burmester B25, Quad ESL-989, Revel Ultima Salon2.


**ACCESSIONS** Torus RM-20 Power Isolation Unit; ATI SLM-100 Analog sound-level meter.

**LISTENING ROOM** 26' L by 13' W by 12' H, with semi-cathedral ceiling, moderately furnished with sound-absorbing furniture. Left wall has large bay window covered by Hunter Douglas Duette Honeycomb fabric shades. Rear of room opens through 8' by 4' doorway into 25' by 15' kitchen. —Larry Greenhill

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**measurements, continued**

can be seen. Tested for intermodulation distortion with an equal mix of 19 and 20kHz tones, each at -6dBFS, the BCD-1 gave the result plotted in fig.8. Actual intermodulation products are very low in level, but the noise floor has a peculiar granular appearance.

Finally, tested for its rejection of jitter using a test CD on which had been burned one tone at exactly one-quarter the sample rate at -6dBFS, and a squarewave at the LSB level at the sample rate, the Bryston player performed very well, with around 150 picoseconds peak-peak of jitter—which is basically at the resolution limit of the Miller analyzer. Graphing the BCD-1's analog output with this signal gave the spectrum shown in fig.9. The central peak, representing the 11.025kHz tone, is narrow and spectrally pure, while the evenly spaced low-level spikes are almost all the residual harmonics of the 229Hz squarewave (note jitter-induced sidebands). However, the spuriae immediately to the left of the central tone are all a little higher in level than they should be, while those immediately to the right are all a little lower in level.

Other than that, which is probably irrelevant to sound quality, the Bryston BCD-1 measures close to the state of the art for a CD player.

—John Atkinson

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![Fig.8 Bryston BCD-1, HF intermodulation spectrum, 19+20kHz at 0dBFS peak into 200k ohms (blue left, red right, linear frequency scale).](image)

![Fig.9 Bryston BCD-1, high-resolution jitter spectrum of analog output signal, 11.025kHz at -6dBFS, sampled at 44.1kHz with LSB toggled at 229Hz, 16-bit data. Center frequency of trace, 11.025kHz; frequency range, 3.5kHz (blue left, red right).](image)

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Oops! I forgot the wire

What a senior moment! Last month when I told you all about the Heavyweight Champion Of The World Hi Fi System, I failed even to name the unifying factor which pulls together all of its magnificent parts into a whole which is greater than their sum. What could I have been thinking? (Or not!) Leaving unmentioned, the X Factor which connects each component to the other and extracts the electrical power which brings life to the mighty hi fi engine! And what is it? This uniter of super components:

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The incomparable Nordost Odin power cables

I ask myself how I could have forgotten or at the very least taken for granted these critical catalysts? Perhaps, unconsciously I wanted to single out Nordost Odin from the other components because Nordost Odin does have a singular quality not shared by them.

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World Radio History
Marantz SA-11S2 Reference

SACD/CD PLAYER

UNLESS YOU'VE ALREADY ACQUIRED A LARGE COLLECTION OF SACDs, BUYING A PLAYER IN 2009 NEXISTITATES AN ACT OF FAITH SIMILAR TO THE ONE TURNABLE BUYERS FACED BACK IN 1992. AS WITH THE LP BACK THEN, THE MAJOR LABELS TODAY HAVE ALL BUT ABANDONED THE SACD TO SUCH NICHE PLAYERS AS CHESKY, PROPRIUS, HARMONIA MUNDI, PENTATONE, CHANNEL CLASSICS, 2L, MOBILE FIDELITY SOUND LAB, GROOVE NOTE, AND ACOUSTIC SOUNDS.

Meanwhile, at least for the time being, major labels—even Sony—have gotten back into vinyl in a big way; between them and the independent and reissue labels, there are now far more new and reissued titles on LP than on SACD. It’s not even close. A decade ago, who could have predicted that?

SACD enthusiasts counter that with the DVD-Audio format pretty much a bust, SACD is the only high-resolution choice for new classical and music-only surround-sound recordings. Undercutting that argument is the arrival of high-resolution PCM downloads from AIX, Chesky, Reference Recordings, and others, with more sure to follow.

Amid all the confusion arrives Marantz’s new SA-11S2 Reference, a moderately priced ($3499.99) player aimed at enthusiasts of two-channel SACD who are looking for a reasonably priced upgrade from a budget-priced CD player, and at audiophiles still unwilling to buy a turntable but who want to start collecting the classical and jazz recordings that comprise the bulk of titles currently available on SACD.

Superb build, lots of features

Despite its relatively modest price, the SA-11S2 features a silky-smooth aluminum SACDM-1 transport designed and built by Marantz, a fully balanced analog audio stage utilizing Marantz’s HDAM SA2 amplification modules, a pair of “high-accuracy” Seiko NPC monophonic SM5B66A5 Super Audio D/A converters, Marantz’s phase-error-compensation PEC7772 digital filter, a “high precision” quartz clock with linear voltage regulation, and a copper-shielded toroidal transformer. Rounding out an attractive-looking package that looks and feels as if it costs far more than the asking price are a copper-plated chassis with a double-layered bottom, a heavy, vibration-resistant top plate, and a thick, attractively sculpted front panel.
Vincent Audio SA-T8 Preamplifier

Dick Olsher says it is “an absolute steal at its asking price. In my estimation, nothing else at this price point comes close to equaling its primary twin virtues of crystalline clarity and ample boogie factor.”

Vincent Audio SPT-800 Monoblock

“The SPT-800 closely fulfills the promise of a hybrid design: tube magic with plenty of bass crunch and power drive...”

- Dick Olsher, The Absolute Sound, December 2008
The SA-11S2 has three selectable digital filters, as well as a selectable Noise Shaper, DC filter (with a corner frequency of 17Hz), and Phase Inversion (Polarity). The filters differ in how they manage the trade-off between ultrasonic rolloff and timing precision. They also differ in how they manage CD and SACD playback. Filter 1 in both cases is the most traditional; for CDs it provides linear-phase behavior and a sharp rolloff above 20kHz; for SACDs, it provides the widest ultrasonic bandwidth. Filter 2 results in an asymmetrical impulse response with CDs, with the bulk of the energy occurring after the impulse, which is more like an analog system; with SACDs, it provides a sharper rolloff above 100kHz and is optimized for resolution. Filter 3 rolls off the CD’s top octave in favor of a shorter impulse response; for SACDs, it balances resolution against time-domain performance. The Marantz player is unusual, particularly at this price, in that it can accept an external master dock running at 44.1kHz, 88.2kHz, or 176.4kHz; this is via a BNC input on the rear panel, which also has balanced XLR and unbalanced RCA outputs and coaxial and TosLink digital outputs.

**Operation**

Using the SA-11S2 was a pleasure. The LCD display is of generous size, the front-panel button layout is efficient, the disc drawer functions with Teflon smoothness, and the full-function remote control is ergonomically efficient (though not backlit).

The transport loads quickly and offers a full range of track-access and programming amenities. I do wonder how many end-users play with all of that stuff, as opposed to just playing a disc straight through. Switching between a hybrid disc’s SACD and CD layers can be accomplished in Stop or Play mode. Press the Sound Mode button during play to display the current playback mode (CD or SACD); press it again to stop play and switch modes, then hit Play to begin play-

---

**MEASUREMENTS**

The Marantz SA-11S2 Reference was assessed using Audio Precision’s SYS2722 system (see www.ap.com and “As We See It” in the January 2008 issue, www.stereophile.com/asweseeit/108awsi), as well as, for some tests, our Audio Precision System One and Miller Audio Research Jitter Analyzer.

![Fig.1 Marantz SA-11S2 Reference, frequency response at -3dBFS into 100k ohms, SACD data, with Filter 3 (top) and Filters 1 & 2 (bottom). (Right channel dashed; 2dB/vertical div.)](image1)

![Fig.2 Marantz SA-11S2 Reference, frequency response at -12dBFS into 100k ohms, CD data, with (from top to bottom): Filter 3, Filter 2, Filter 1 without deemphasis, Filter 1 with deemphasis (right channel dashed; 2dB/vertical div.).](image2)

![Fig.3 Marantz SA-11S2 Reference, 1-octave spectrum with noise and spuriae of dithered 1kHz tone at -90dBFS with 16-bit CD data (top), SACD data (middle at 2kHz), and of dithered 1kHz tone at -120dBFS with SACD data (bottom at 1kHz). (Right channel dashed.)](image3)

---

back in the selected Sound Mode. Either SACD or CD can be selected as the default Sound Mode, automatically engaged whenever an SACD/CD is inserted.

Sound
Playing CDs or SACDs, the SA-11S2 produced consistently warm, reasonably detailed sound. Given digital's reputation (deserved, in my opinion) for cool sound, a generally warm picture can be a good thing. The Marantz delivered inviting sound, especially from SACDs. It produced solid, full-bodied, well-textured images on a relatively compact soundstage. Its overall attack was a bit soft and almost tube-like, while using any one of the three digital filters, decays dropped off before being fully resolved, though each filter was beneficial, depending on the quality of the recording.

THE SA-11S2 PRODUCED CONSISTENTLY WARM, REASONABLY DETAILED SOUND.

On "Rainy Day Women #12 & 35," from the SACD edition of Bob Dylan's Blonde on Blonde (Columbia)—a remix of the original four-track master tape because the original two-channel mix was no longer usable—the Marantz produced the opening drums with a thundering thickness that emphasized their intentionally plodding beat and rendered the trumpet and trombone with a schmaltzy New Orleans street vibe. The guys partying and yelling in the background were fully fleshed out, while the tambourine strokes placed greater emphasis on the skin than on the jingles. Dylan's voice, appropriately nasal and well fleshed out, though somewhat thick and less than traces, rolling off by just 0.3dB at 20kHz, 3dB at 50kHz, and 10dB at 90kHz. Filter 3 gave a higher output overall (top pair of traces) and a slightly faster ultrasonic rolloff. Playing CDs (fig.2), Filter 1 gave the flattest top-octave response, with then a sharply defined rolloff (top pair of traces above 10kHz); Filter 2 gave a slightly higher midrange output and a slower HF rolloff starting around 6kHz (second-from-top pair of traces below 9kHz). Filter 3 gave an output 0.4dB higher than Filter 1 (top traces below 9kHz), but with then a more extreme HF rolloff reaching −3dB at 20kHz. The SA-11S2's response with a preemphasized CD showed a very slight positive error in the mid-treble (fig.2, bottom pair of traces below 9kHz). Channel separation (not shown) was better than 130dB in both directions below 800Hz, and a still superb 107dB at 20kHz.

For continuity with my published measurements of digital components (which go back to 1989), I investigate resolution by playing a dithered 1kHz tone at −90dBFS and sweeping a ⅓-octave bandpass filter from 20kHz down to 20Hz. The result with the Marantz playing CD data is the top pair of traces in fig.3; the peak just touches the −90dB line suggesting minimal linearity error, and the traces are free from any harmonic or power-supply-related spuriae. Repeating the spectral analysis with SACD data didn't drop the noise floor as much I would have expected (middle pair of traces), and the Marantz only just resolved a tone at −120dBFS, with 3dB of positive error evident (bottom traces). (The noiseshaping was turned off for these tests, as was the DC filter.)

Fig.4 was taken with the same test signal—a dithered 1kHz tone at −90dBFS from both CD (cyan and magenta traces) and SACD (blue and red traces)—but was derived using a different kind of spectral analysis, FFT. Again the 1kHz tone peaks at exactly −90dBFS with both media. The
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three-dimensional, was pressed against the instrumental backdrop. The bass was well extended and a bit soft on the Marantz, but, more important, complemented the rest of the sonic presentation.

Switching to CDs produced similar findings. B.B. King's recent One Kind Favor (Geffen 80011791-02), produced by T Bone Burnett and engineered by Mike Piersante, sounds as if it was recorded in the mid-1960s. In my world, that's a compliment—this album sounds full, rich, and warm, with a wide stage and dynamics reminiscent of the early days of stereo.

Through the Marantz, and using Filter 1 that leaves the CD signal untouched, the sound was a bit too ripe. According to the instruction manual, Filter 3, which produces very short pre- and post-echoes, results in the greatest detail and definition, and sure enough, it tightened up the bottom end and added some much-needed crispness.

LIKE A WARM-SOUNDING PHONO CARTRIDGE, THE MARANTZ COULD MAKE A SILK PURSE OF A SOW'S EAR, AND DID SO WITH MANY CDs.

I was honored to be asked by Yarlung Records to write the liner notes for Orion, the recorded debut of the young pianist Orion Weiss, and on which he performs works by J.S. Bach, Carter, Mozart, and Scriabin (CD, Yarlung 78873). These beautifully recorded performances confirmed the Marantz's slightly soft attack, warm sustain, and slightly truncated decay, regardless of choice of filter, though this recording was best complemented by Filter 3.

The choice of filters was less important with bright, hard-sounding CDs, of which there are too many; like a warm-sounding phono cartridge, the Marantz could make a silk purse of a sow's ear, and did so with many CDs, particularly recent reissues of vintage pop recordings.

noise floor is quite clean but about 6dB lower with SACD than with CD. I then confirmed the minimal linearity error with CD data by sweeping a dithered 500Hz tone from -60dBFS down to -120dBFS. Even though the SA-1152's noise floor was a little higher than those of the best players I've tested, fig.5 really shows only the recorded dither noise and the player still easily resolved the three DC voltage levels that describe an undithered tone at exactly -90.31dBFS (fig.6). A dithered tone at -90dBFS played back from SACD was reproduced as a good if slightly noisy sinewave (fig.7).

The Marantz's output stage was unfazed by low impedances. Even with a full-scale 50Hz tone into 600 ohms (fig.8), the highest-level distortion harmonic, the third, lay at a very low -110dBFS (0.0003%). The demanding HF intermodulation test, during which I play an equal mix of 19 and 20kHz tones with a combined peak level of exactly 0dBFS, produced no significant levels of sum-and-difference tones, even into 600 ohms. However, it did reveal differences between the three filter settings for CD playback. Fig.9, for example, taken with Filter 1, shows fairly strong aliasing products between 20kHz and 24kHz. The picture was very similar with Filter 3 (fig.10), but with that filter's slower ultrasonic rolloff producing even higher levels of the two aliasing products. The ultrasonic rolloff of Filter 2, however, is apparently so slow that it dumps a large amount of aliasing products back into the audiband (fig.11). The 19+20kHz test signal is very much an extreme case; it is fair to note that this signal will never occur in

Fig.7 Marantz SA-1152 Reference, waveform of dithered 1kHz sinewave at -90dBFS, SACD data (left channel blue, right red).

Fig.8 Marantz SA-1152 Reference, balanced output, spectrum of 50Hz sinewave at 0dBFS into 200k ohms. CD data (left channel blue, right red; linear frequency scale).

Fig.9 Marantz SA-1152 Reference, balanced output, Filter 1, HF intermodulation spectrum, 19+20kHz at 0dBFS peak into 600 ohms, CD data (left channel blue, right red; linear frequency scale).
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Against the Cary 306

After I'd been happily listening for a few months to the SA-11S2's warm, detailed, emotionally involving sound, John Atkinson sent along Cary Audio Design's CD 306 Professional Version SACD player ($8000) that he had reviewed in November 2008 (Vol.31 No.11). He suggested I use it as a benchmark against which to evaluate the Marantz. Direct comparisons of the players' sounds proved enlightening and constructive; the differences remained consistent through the playing of a wide variety of CDs and SACDs. In fact, I could pick any CD or SACD from my collection and hear consistent differences between these two excellent machines.

While the Cary's overall sound was somewhat cooler, its attack was pristine and lightning-fast, and decays seemed to continue for impossibly long times. This resulted in astonishing resolution of recorded detail, along with breathtaking transparency. Images were exceedingly well delineated and separated on a deep, ultrawide soundstage. This sound was among the most enticing and riveting I've heard from any digital source.

Through the Cary, the opening drums of "Rainy Day Women #12 & 35" on SACD sounded faster and tighter, with the initial stroke—and all of the other components that make a drum struck in space sound like one—more cleanly rendered and well separated in three dimensions. The trumpet and trombone were brassier, their images...
It's often said that headphones are a great gateway for n00bs to enter the world of high-end audio because of the low cost. To which we proclaim: Hooey! The astonishing price/performance ratio of reference headphone gear is just as advantageous for grizzled old codgers as it is for youngin's. Want proof? Here's what some experienced audiophiles have to say about our HeadRoom Micro products.

The Press:

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--- Vade Forrester, SoundStage! June 2008

I am acutely aware, here, that I am not just teetering on the edge of the audiophile malarkey abyss; I'm sliding into it on a toboggan. But prolonged listening, and swapping between the outputs of different gear (with and without the DAC) confirmed it. The Micro Amp and Micro Stack really do sound clearly, immediately better than anything else I've got around here.
--- Daniel Rutter, DansData.com (a gadget reviewer and unapologetic audiophile basher)

The Ultra Micro DAC and Ultra Micro Headphone Amp together reproduced seriously good sound with every pair of headphones I plugged in to them. ... The two Ultra Micros really are a perfect pair.
--- Chris Connaker, Computer Audiophile September 2008

Headphone Enthusiasts:

All I can say is why did I wait so long to do upgrade to the Ultra Micro DAC? The sound is overall better, with specific improvements in cleanliness, texture, realism, soundstage, bass, separation, I'm running out of adjectives but you get the point.
--- myinitialsaredac, Head-Fi.org

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---Jeff S, customer comment

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more finely fixèd in three dimensions on a deep, wide, airy soundstàge. Dylan’s voice popped cleanly, standing well in front of the instrumental backdrop. The bass was tauter, more detailed, better extended.

The Marantz’s rendering of the Dylan track was pleasing, reasonably well detailed, and inviting. The Cary’s was mesmerizing and “visual” in a vinyl sort of way, though it still sounded like an artificial construct compared to the more organic-sounding LP. Just to be sure it wasn’t the Blonde on Blonde SACD’s remix talking, I compared “Like a Rolling Stone,” from the SACD of Dylan’s Highway 61 Revisited on the two players and got the same results.

The Bill Cunliffe Trio’s Live at Bernie’s (SACD, Groove Note GRV1009-3), which was also released in two-disc 45rpm Direct to Disc set, was recorded closely miked at Bernie Grundman Mastering, in the common space outside Bernie’s mastering room. I attended the recording session, which was also captured directly to DSD. The sound is of ultra-high quality, though not “audiophile” in the sense of “two microphones in a big space.” In his mix, engineer Michael C. Ross spread the drum kit across the soundstage; he also placed mikes inside the piano, then spread that instrument’s sound across the stage as well.

The Marantz reproduced this exciting-sounding SACD with the inviting warmth and somewhat narrowed soundstage with which it rendered other discs. This helped this recording’s sound to jell pleasingly, while the Cary spread the drum kit and piano across a vast expanse of lateral space, and emphasized the piano’s percussive aspects over its harmonic structure. When drummer Joe La Barbera attacked his cymbals, the Cary’s reaction time felt somewhat slower, its focus not quite as sharp.

The overall impression going from the Marantz player to the Cary was like going from a very, very good rear-projection CRT HDTV capable of delivering 1080x1500 lines, to a full-resolution 1920x1080 picture produced by a fixed-pixel plasma or LCD flat screen. The former loses some resolution, sharpness, and clarity, but has a richness and fullness that the latter produces by a fixed-pixel plasma or LCD flat screen.

For a more analog analogy, the Marantz was like one of the better wood-bodied Grado cartridges, the Cary more like one of van den Hul’s speedy Colibrì or Grasshopper models. While each make has it advocates and detractors, everyone agrees that the vdlHs are more vibrant, resolving, and speedy.

Conclusion
Like Marantz’s SM-11S1 Reference stereo power amplifier, which I reviewed in May 2008, their SA-11S2 Reference SACD/CD player offers a level of build quality seldom seen for $3500.

Understated elegance.

MARANTZ’S SA-11S2 REFERENCE SACD/CD PLAYER OFFERS A LEVEL OF BUILD QUALITY SELDOM SEEN FOR $3500.

CD player offers a level of build quality seldom seen for $3500. Its sound will be more to the liking of those who prefer warmth and harmonic richness to the highest level of detail resolution, which can often entail suffering through recordings that are teeth-graunchedly bright and strident. Your ultimate satisfaction will also depend on your system. If it’s already on the warm side and you’re looking for some chill, the SA-11S2 probably won’t deliver. But if your system is lean in the lower midbass, the Marantz might pay it the perfect compliment.

Choose your favorite music—rock, folk, jazz, classical—and extrapolate, but you’ll reach the correct conclusion: the Marantz SA-11S2 Reference is a sweetheart of a two-channel SACD/CD player. Whatever it gives up in terms of visceral excitement it more than makes up for in its generous sonic comfort zone.

While it probably wasn’t fair to compare this player to one costing more than twice as much, it was useful—and the SA-11S2’s build quality is more than comparable to that of the Cary CD 306. On that basis alone, it’s excellent value for money, and if its sound is to your liking you won’t be disappointed.

ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

Continuum Audio Labs Caliburn turntable & Cobra tonearm & Castellon stand; Graham Phantom tonearm; Lyra Titan i, Koetsu Coralstone Platinum mono cartridges.


Preamplication: Manley Steelhead, Einstein Turntable’s Choice phono preamplifiers; darTZeel NHB-18NS preamp.

Power Amplifiers: Musical Fidelity kW monoblocks.

Speakers: Wilson MAXX 2.


Accessories: Shunyata Research V-Ray Reference, TARA Labs Power Screen power conditioners; Oyaide AC wall box & re|ceptacles; Finite Elemente Pagode, HRS SXR equipment stands; Symposium Rollerblocks; Audiodharma Cable Cooker; ASC Tube Traps, RPG BAD & Alflußor panels; Furutech DeMag & deStat LP treatments; VPI HW-17F, Loricraft PRC4 Deluxe record-cleaning machines.

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Sugden
A21ai Series 2
INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER

Winter has returned to Cherry Valley, New York, and I'm reminded of a bad habit that I used to conceal: On cold mornings I started my car well before driving off, then actually weighted down the accelerator pedal—with the heavy socket tray from my toolbox—in an effort to keep the idle high, and thus more quickly warm the windshield and the interior. Whether my lazy trick had the desired effect is a matter of some debate, but I wish now that I hadn't been so wasteful and so casually fouled the air.

Now I'm happy just to stay at home, listening to music through my favorite class-A amplifiers: just as wasteful, I suppose, but on a small enough scale that I can squint and pretend I don't see it. In a pure class-A amplifier, output devices are biased at a high enough negative voltage that current never ceases to flow across them, even when one device in a complementary pair hands off the signal to the other. This preserves the integrity of the waveform continuum and banishes so-called switching distortion. The amps stay nice and warm, too.

So it goes with the audio amplifiers designed and manufactured by J.E. Sugden & Co., Ltd., the English firm named for a founder who has long since retired. "Sugden's," in fact, suggests that they were the first company to produce a solid-state class-A amplifier for domestic use, their original A21 model, introduced in the 1960s. Today, alongside various preamplifiers and CD players, J.E. Sugden & Co. offers a number of basic and integrated amplifiers, all solid-state, and all with output stages said to operate in class-A. Nice.

Description
The A21ai Series 2 ($2995), which has both line-level and phono inputs, was introduced at the same time as its stablemate, the A21al Series 2 ($2795), a line-only product upgradeable to line-plus-phono status whenever its owner pleases. Because in many fonts the numeral 1 and the lowercase i look very much the same as the other two, I'll spell it out:
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The one with the built-in phono preamp is the “ay twenty-one ay eye,” and the line-only version is the “ay twenty-one ay ell.” Owing to the mildly confusing nomenclature, and because I have difficulty pronouncing Sugden, my wife and daughter are under the impression that the product I’m reviewing this month is simply called the warm, silver amp.

The warm, silver amp is directly descended from the Sugden A21a integrated amplifier, which Sam Tellig reviewed in Stereophile in February 2005, and which went on to impress John Marks and other reviewers. The new model has virtually the same output section as the old, using only NPN output transistors in what is said to be a single-ended topography, yielding about 25Wpc into an 8-ohm load. A key difference is that the Sugden A21ai Series 2 has a much sturdier power supply, with about 50% more current available to the output section. The result is that full or nearly full power is available under a greater range of operating conditions. Flat power response and low distortion are maintained through the use of current (not voltage) feedback, at about 50% of gain.

The active preamplifier section of the A21a has also been changed for the new model: In order to achieve a purer and, I dare say, straighter signal path, both the Balance knob and Mono switch of the older model have been eliminated. (You can guess how I feel about that.) Consequently, the front panel is more austere than it used to be, and arguably a good deal more attractive: thicker, heavier, and available in a choice of titanium (silver) or graphite (dark gray) finishes. From left to right are an unlabeled Inputs selector switch (you might have to count the number of clicks to know which source you’re hearing), a lens for the remote-control IR receiver, a Volume knob, a blue pilot light, and a Power switch.

The rear panel is busier, with phono jacks for the inputs and the outputs—the latter including buffered tape-out and preamplifier-out jacks—and de-

THE WARM, SILVER AMP IS DIRECTLY DESCENDED FROM THE SUGDEN A21A INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER, WHICH SAM TELLIG REVIEWED IN STEREOFILE IN FEBRUARY 2005.

primarily used Stereophile's loaner sample of the top-of-the-line Audio Precision SYS2722 system (see the January 2008 "As We See It" and www.ap.com) to examine the measured behavior of the Sugden A21ai Series 2; for some tests, I also used my vintage Audio Precision System One Dual Domain.

My first test of an amplifier is to run it for 60 minutes at one-third its specified power into 8 ohms, which is thermally the worst case for an amplifier with a class-B or -AB output stage. But a class-A amplifier is at its most efficient when delivering maximum power to the load. Running the Sugden with both channels at one-third clipping power into 8 ohms for one hour resulted in its side-mounted heatsinks reaching around 50°C (122°F). By contrast, letting the amplifier idle for an hour resulted in the heatsinks being too hot to touch; ie, >60°C (140°F). As Art Dudley said, this amplifier "runs hotter than nell's kitchenette!"

The Sugden's maximum gain into 8 ohms was 38.25dB, 10.7dB of that coming from the preamplifier section. As Art suspected, the amplifier inverts absolute polarity from all inputs and outputs. The line input impedance was 24k ohms at low and middle frequencies, dropping slightly to 21k ohms at 20kHz. Set to moving-magnet operation, the phono-stage input impedance ranged from 44k ohms at 20Hz to 47k ohms at 1kHz and 42k ohms at 20kHz. Set to moving-coil mode, the input impedance was 40 ohms rather than the specified 100 ohms.

The MM phono stage gain was a little higher than the norm, at 45.2dB measured at the preamplifier output jacks; in MC mode, it was almost 20dB greater. The MM
bit more about Sugden & Co. itself. They’ve been in the same West Yorkshire building for a long time, and their operation is reportedly so self-sufficient that they still manufacture their own casework and stuff and solder their own circuit boards. Sugden employees are more valued craftsmen than assembly-line slaves; for that reason, and because the company’s product line has for so long remained so stable and so united in meeting a common design goal—as opposed to zigging and zagging from this idea to that and dropping products within one or two years of their introduction—I can’t help thinking of J.E. Sugden & Co. as the Morgan Motorcars of British audio. And that’s a compliment.

**Installation and setup**

My first observation on having set up the A21ai Series 2 is probably the most important: Since its output section is biased to run well into, if not all the way into, class-A, this amp runs hotter than hell’s kitchenette. I was never troubled by that, and had no reliability problems whatsoever with the Sugden, but the integrated amplifier with any accessory that costs more than half its own price. Placing three Ayre Myrtle Block isolation spacers between amp and shelf actually made the A21ai sound noticeably worse: It took on a hollow, ringy timbre that didn’t appeal to me at all. I assume that the Sugden’s chassis was tuned long in whatever system the amp was used at a given time, cable changes made little audible difference—and while substituting a very expensive AC cord for the stock item made a subtle improvement, I don’t see much point in pairing an

**I CAN’T HELP THINKING OF J.E. SUGDEN & CO. AS THE MORGAN MOTORCARS OF BRITISH AUDIO. AND THAT’S A COMPLIMENT.**

**signal/noise ratio (ref. 5mV input at 1kHz) was good, at 54dB, unweighted, wideband, improving to 70dB when A-weighted. However, with the phono input set to MC mode, I couldn’t eliminate a 120Hz hum that compromised the measurement. The amplifier stage’s overload margin was very disappointing. In MC mode, ref. 500µV at 1kHz, it ranged from 9.7dB at 20Hz to 4.2dB at 1kHz and 6.5dB at 20kHz; in MM mode, the stage’s distortion reached 1% at 4.1mV, which is lower than the 5mV at 1kHz reference level for MM cartridges. The margin was similarly poor at the frequency extremes, and equally disturbing was the fact that the phono stage latched once it was clipped: the signal remained clipped even if its level subsequently dropped a little.**

The phono stage’s frequency response is shown in fig.1; as well as the superb matching between channels, it features a fairly low ±0.25dB RIAA error between 40Hz and 12kHz, with the shape of the trace actually flattening the low-treble droop seen with many cartridges. The Sugden implements the IEC modification of the RIAA deemphasis, the low-frequency rolloff reaching −3dB at 20Hz. At the other end of the spectrum, the response is −1dB at 20Hz, −3dB at 38kHz.

The A21ai has useful preamp-out jacks. However, these offer a very high source impedance of 6k ohms, though fortunately this figure doesn’t change significantly across most of the audioband. The amplifier’s output impedance from the speaker jacks was a low 0.12 ohm at 1kHz, rising to 0.39 ohm at 20Hz and 0.25 ohm at 20kHz. As a result, the modification of the amplifier’s frequency response by the impedance of our standard simulated loudspeaker (see www.stereophile.com/reference/60) was low (fig.2, green trace), though the rolloff at the frequency extremes was more extreme into 2 ohms (gray) than into 8 ohms (blue, red), where it was down 1dB at 20kHz. The restricted ultrasonic response resulted in slowed-down leading edges of a 10kHz squarewave (fig.3). The shape of the 1kHz squarewave, however, was excellent (not shown). These graphs were taken with the volume control at its maximum where the channel matching was excellent. At lower settings, however, a channel imbalance of up to 0.7dB was evident.

**Fig.3 Sugden A21ai Series 2, small-signal 10kHz squarewave into 8 ohms.**

**Fig.4 Sugden A21ai Series 2, distortion (%) vs 1kHz continuous output power into (from bottom to top): 8, 4, ohms.**
ago to function quite well as is.

I took advantage of the Sugden's preamp-out jacks, using them to drive my refurbished Quad II monoblocks. This worked well enough, although I observed that most of the Sugden's very generous gain is apparently provided by its power-amp stage.

With its own output section back in play, the Sugden A21ai Series 2 did a fine job of driving my pair of refurbished Quad ESL loudspeakers in the larger (21' by 27') of my two listening rooms. With an impedance range that is, literally, exponentially wide, the ESL is a difficult load to manage, yet the Sugden pulled it off nicely. Only after my time with the amplifier was up did I learn that the original Quad ESL is one of the references used by Sugden themselves. And Sugden importer George Stanwick, of Stanalog, Inc., is himself an ESL enthusiast. In my smaller (12' by 19') room, the Sugden drove a much kinder load: a pair of Audio Note AN-e SPE HE speakers.

The gain of the phono section of the A21ai Series 2 can be set for either moving-magnet or low-output moving-coil cartridges simply by repositioning four tiny jumper blocks on the phono-preamp board. The former setting gives you a resistive load of 47k ohms, the latter a load of 100 ohms—sensible choices both.

Channel separation via the line inputs was modest, at 54dB at 1kHz (L-R) and 66dB (R-L), though these figures remained relatively flat across the audioband. Given that the amplifier's output stages are on opposite sides of the chassis, the crosstalk develops in the preamplifier section, probably at the volume-control potentiometer. S/N ratios (ref. 2.83V into 8 ohms), taken with the line input shorted but the volume control at its maximum, were good rather than great, at 60dB (wideband, unweighted) and 85.4dB (A-weighted).

The bottom trace in fig.4 shows how the THD+noise percentage in the Sugden's output varies with output power into 8 ohms with both channels driven. The distortion emerges from the noise floor around 3W and rises steadily to 21W, where it rapidly increases. This increase is due to the tops of the waveform flattening, presumably because the signal can't go below the OV ground reference. The amplifier reaches 1% THD+N at 24W, insignificantly lower than the specified 25W (14dBV). Into 4 ohms, however, not only did the overall distortion level rise significantly above 1W, the clipping power was only 15W (8.75dBW). I didn't measure the maximum output power into 2 ohms, as the amplifier was clearly in trouble with low impedances.

This can also be clearly seen in fig.5, which plots the THD+N percentage into 8, 4, and 2 ohms at 2.83V. While the distortion is respectably low into 8 ohms (blue, red traces) and 4 ohms (cyan, magenta), it is catastrophically higher into 2 ohms (green). Fortunately, the harmonic content of the distortion is predominantly low-order in nature (fig.6), though higher-order harmonics are also present in a manner that descends more or less linearly with order (fig.7). The Sugden's behavior with the taxing high-frequency intermodulation test (fig.8) was okay, if not outstanding. At an output power just below visible clipping on the oscilloscope screen, the 1kHz difference component lies at -64dB (0.06%); though higher-order products are evident, these all lie at lower levels.

I am disappointed with the Sugden A21ai Series 2's measured performance. When I first became an audiophile in the late 1960s, the late Jim Sugden's class-A

Listening
Because stories about setting up hi-fi equipment have little appeal for people who aren't themselves merchants of tidium, I'll cut to the chase: To sound its best, the Sugden A21ai Series 2 needed lots of run-in and warmup. Because my review sample had spent some time at the 2008 Rocky Mountain Audio Fest before arriving here in upstate New York, I assumed that it was ready to rock; nevertheless, I had to play several al-

fig.5 Sugden A21ai Series 2, THD+N (%) vs frequency at 2.83V into 8 ohms (left channel blue, right red), 4 ohms (left cyan, right magenta), 2 ohms (green).

fig.6 Sugden A21ai Series 2, 1kHz waveform at 6.25W into 8 ohms (top), 0.039% THD+N; distortion and noise waveform with fundamental notched out (bottom, not to scale).
Nuts About Hi-Fi and Focal...

Cranking out great sound for the past 30 years
bells' worth of music through it before its sound opened up. Even the simple act of turning it off and moving it from one system to another caused the amp to lose a little ground: Each time/day I used it, the A21 needed at least a half-hour of playing time before reaching its full performance potential—prior to which it sounded dull and overly thick, yet lacking in bass and treble extension.

A few days into my critical listening, the Sugden's real strengths became apparent: It sounded consistently sweet and dependably comfortable, in the mold of the great class-A amps of the late 1970s and early 1980s—like an early Electrocompaniet Ampliwire, which was something I tended to admire.

In bluegrass-guitar circles, we speak of a select few people as tone players: musicians such as David Grier, Russ Barenberg—and, above all, Tony Rice—who are better than most at pulling rich, complex tone from their instruments. In that vein, the A21ai must surely be considered a tone amp—which is rare in my experience of solid-state products. It reproduced André Gertler's fiddle in the Berg Violin Concerto (LP, Columbia 33C 1030) with superb depth of color and texture, as it did the very nice ride-tom and floor-tom sound from drummer Shawn Pelton throughout Richie Havens's Nobody Left to Crown (CD, Verve Forecast B0011631-02). Well-recorded pianos had wonderful purr, and saxophones, whether in jazz or 20th-century orchestral music, were downright chewy, in the manner of the finest cabs. (I listened to Prokofiev's Lt. Kije Suite more than once, just to enjoy that aspect of the sound.)

Coupled with that characteristic was the manner in which the A21ai drew my attention more to some aspects of the music-making than others. Going back to the Gertler recording of the Berg Concerto: I found myself noticing how the brass instruments—especially the trombones—repeated the wide-interval note patterns played by the solo violin earlier in the piece. And listening to the great, emotionally charged performance of November 30, 1952 of Beethoven's Symphony 9 by Wilhelm Furtwängler and the Vienna Philharmonic (LP, Fonti Ceta FE 33), I simply couldn't pull my ears away from what was going on in the cellos and string basses, even when heard through the Sugden, and compared with my Quad, Fi, and Shindo amps, the xylophone in Scene II of Sir Adrian Boult and the London Symphony's recording of Vaughan Williams's Job (LP, EMI ASD 2673) lacked presence, seeming a good deal less separate from the other instruments. When

**A FEW DAYS INTO MY CRITICAL LISTENING, THE SUGDEN'S REAL STRENGTHS BECAME APPARENT: IT SOUNDED CONSISTENTLY SWEET AND DEPENDABLY COMFORTABLE.**

Amplifier designs were already legendary. But the A21ai doesn't seem to take full advantage of the primary benefit of class-A operation, which is to allow the high standing-bias current to minimize distortion. Yes, its behavior into 8 ohms is respectable, but this amplifier really does not like impedances much below that figure. Its output-stage transfer function becomes increasingly "bent" as the load impedance drops, which will drastically limit the number of loudspeakers with which it will be able to successfully drive. Assuming there was nothing faulty with our review sample's phono stage, its miserable overload margin renders it incompatible with most moving-magnet and high-output moving-coil cartridges. I recommend that, instead of the A21ai ($2995), vinyl lovers investigate using the line-only A21al Series 2 with an outboard phono stage from another manufacturer, though the recent price increase of the A21al from $1895 to $2795 makes that option less competitive.—John Atkinson
HiFi House, one of the premier retailers in home entertainment, is proud to host a rare opportunity to meet two of the most renowned living legends in audio history, David Wilson of Wilson Audio and Dan D'Agostino of Krell Industries. On March 11th and 12th you'll have the chance to meet and listen to these two visionaries speak on their philosophies, design theories, and future directions. Don't miss this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Space is limited, so RSVP today to Danielle Wiley at 610-637-7383 or dwiley@hifihousegroup.com.
I listened through the A21ai to another Boult recording, this time with the London Philharmonic, the densely scored main theme of Humphrey Searle's Symphony 1 (LP, Decca/Speakers Corner SXL 2232), which follows that work's comparatively spare and broadly paced introduction, wasn't as sonically explicit as I wanted it to be. Yet, again, the A21ai focused on other things, drawing my attention to the sweetness of the strings, and bringing welcome substance to the sounds of all the instrument groups.

It would not be unfair to suggest that, with stereo recordings, the Sugden A21ai's performance retained some of the characteristics of very good mono playback. That in itself may explain why I didn't find that aspect of its performance particularly frustrating—although it's equally fair to observe that others certainly will.

Even at their best, bass detail and drive were never among the A21ai's strengths. In “You Got Ya. Cherry Bomb,” from Spoon's Ga Ga Ga Ga Ga (LP, Merge MRG295), the lines of eighth notes played on the electric bass were rather flat and lacking in drama, snap, and timbral distinctiveness through the Sugden. The same was true of the nice bass-and-drum figure that opens that album's “Don't You Evah”—in addition to which, the audaciously loud guitar chords that comprise that track's instrumental solo weren't quite as audacious as through my usual electronics.

Conclusions

The Sugden A21ai Series 2 integrated amplifier has a distinctive, overarching strength and a similarly apparent shortcoming. Its warm, sweet, well-textured, downright chunky sound honors certain instruments and styles of music, while its top end is rather thick, opaque, and lacking in “air” compared with most other contemporary perfectionist amplifiers. No two ways about it: You'll admire it or you won't. This amp has a point of view, and it doesn't try to please everyone.

So much for listener matching; even at its best, the Sugden A21ai will require careful system matching as well. Avoid CD players that are themselves lacking in air (I thoroughly admire Naim's CD players, at every price point in their line, but I can't help thinking they'd be poor matches for the Sugden), and tonearms and cartridges that aren't sufficiently extended in the treble. Avoid thick- or dark-sounding speakers in favor of lighter, more open designs (eg, those from Triangle, Mission, Epos, and perhaps even ProAc and Audio Physic). And avoid flammable curtains (just kidding).

Considered as a piece of hardware, the Sugden represents good value for money. That's a far sight truer when one considers its provenance—in which context the Sugden ceases to be a mere thing and takes on much the same value represented by any handmade audio component in this day and age. If not quite an heirloom amplifier in the sense of a Shindo or an Audio Note—two other class-A choices that also eschew audiophile universality in favor of a distinct musical point of view—the Sugden A21ai Series 2 is a solidly designed, solidly built thing that makes recorded music sound wonderful in its own way. Recommended, but for special tastes and systems.
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It was love at first sight when I saw a Jamo Reference R 909 loudspeaker in sparkling red lacquer on the floor of the 2007 Consumer Electronics Show. It made no sound, but it was beautiful, and I wanted it. It summoned up all my latent predilections for snazzy colors, striking shapes, and dipole speakers. But, as with many passing encounters in life, nothing came of it.

At the 2008 CES, another Jamo, the more modest Studio S 606, caught my eye, and I contacted Jamo USA. While I had Klipsch’s then PR contact, Keith Claytor, on the line, I recalled the R 909 and thought, Hey, why not ask about the R 909’s younger sister, the new Reference R 907? So when I went to a line show put on in Manhattan by the Klipsch Group, Jamo’s parent company, and had a chance to see and hear the R 907 ($10,000/pair), I asked. They were delivered to my apartment the next day.

Had I made a rash decision? Well, the hotel demo room had had a marble floor, three hard, undecorated walls, and a fourth of glass. The only things warm, fuzzy, and absorbent had been one couch, one demo guy, and me. That room would have destroyed the sound of any decent speaker, and dipoles are more dependent than regular box speakers on a good balance of surface reflection, diffusion, and absorption. The R 907s had sounded thin and hard. So much for good looks, I thought. Feeling trapped but still curious, I accepted delivery.

You can look at dipoles in, um, two, er, three ways:

1) A dipole speaker’s elimination of a sealed box is a big plus; all drive-units are fundamentally dipoles, and all enclosures are resonant cavities capable of being excited by energy from the drivers. What this means is that, if the support for the drivers is sufficiently rigid and damped, an open panel won’t contribute any spurious sound.
radiation to add to and compromise the output of the electrically driven diaphragms. It also means that because the diaphragms see an equal acoustic load on both sides, their movements are perfectly symmetrical. I've lived happily with Stax ELS-F81 and Apogee Duetta dipoles, and still remember their purity and precision in this regard.

2) A dipole speaker's radiation of sound results in a cancellation at the speaker's sides, top, and bottom, where the out-of-phase radiations from the drivers' front and back surfaces meet. This creates a null in the plane of the speaker for low frequencies whose wavelengths exceed the dimensions of the speaker's baffle. Consequently, dipoles are less likely to excite room modes in that plane, with a useful reduction in the influence of room acoustics on bass performance.

3) Finally, a dipole's radiation of sound to its rear, reflected from the front and sidewalls, can, when added to its frontal radiation, enhance the sense of spaciousness and greatly increase the size of the soundstage. It also contributes to the observation that the output of dipole speakers falls off with distance much less than does the output of box speakers. In other words, dipoles have a greater "throw."

The other side of dipoles

1) A large, flat panel is far more susceptible to flexing and vibration than the panels of a typical box. This is not a problem for the Reference R 907: its enclosure is made of curved panels of a 1.7"-thick, seven-layer laminate of MDF and glue, rigidly attached to a 53-lb cast-iron base and supported from base to top by a damped, laminated flying buttress,

MEASUREMENTS

The Jamo Reference R 907's voltage sensitivity is specified as 89dB/2.83V/m. My B-weighted estimate on the speaker's tweeter axis, with the grille removed, came in close to this, at 88dB/2.83V/m. The speaker's impedance magnitude and electrical phase are shown in fig.1. Other than a dip to 3 ohms in the midbass, with a rather severe capacitive phase angle just below that region, the speaker is an easy load for the partnering amplifier to drive, with an impedance that remains greater than 7 ohms above 200Hz. (The shape of this trace will give a somewhat tilted-up response with tube amplifiers having a high source impedance, however.) The impedance traces are free from the small glitches that would indicate the presence of cabinet resonances—and, of course, the Jamo doesn't have a cabinet!

The peak at 25Hz in the impedance-magnitude trace suggests that this is the fundamental resonance frequency of the twin, open-baffle-loaded woofers. The sum of the units' responses, measured in the nearfield, is shown as the blue trace in fig.2. The woofers behaved identically, and their combined output appears to peak between 40 and 70Hz. However, this nearfield measurement doesn't take into account the fact that the low-frequency output of an open-baffle loudspeaker will roll off in the farfield below a frequency related to the baffle's physical size. Absent the use of a large, expensive anechoic chamber, the Jamo's low-frequency output can be accurately judged only by taking in-room measurements, which I did do (see later).

Higher in frequency in fig.2, the crossover between the woofers and the midrange unit appears to be set at about 180Hz, a little lower than the specified 250Hz, with initially shallow rolloff slopes. The midrange unit's output (green trace) peaks at 59Hz, which is presumably its open-baffle tuning frequency. The crossover to the tweeter (red) occurs at 1.8kHz rather than the specified 2.5kHz, with what looks like an 18dB/octave high-pass slope for the tweeter feed but a 12dB/octave low-pass slope for the midrange unit's rolloff. The midrange unit has some resonant spikes visible in its output above 5kHz, but these are well suppressed by the crossover. There is also a sharply defined, diffraction-related notch apparent in the midrange output at 1kHz. The tweeter's output is flat in the 3-6kHz octave, but then shelves up by 2-3dB. (This measurement was taken with the speaker's front
with bracing struts connecting it to the rear of the drivers.

2) A dipole's lateral cancellation of low frequencies drastically reduces the amount of bass energy reaching the listener. While this is often accepted as the price to be paid for the advantages of dipoles, it can be worked around. One way is to use an active filter and let the woofer amplifier compensate by boosting the speaker's output below the highest cancellation frequency, as in Siegfried Linkwitz's classic Audio Artistry designs. Another way to restore balance is to passively pad down the mid- and high-frequency drivers, but this results in very low overall sensitivity and a compromise in high-power output. (The Stax ELS-F81 had a sensitivity rating of only 83dB/2.83V/m but choked with high-power amps.) Jamo deals with this by using woofers that are substantially more sensitive than the norm (>100dB/2.83V/m at 200Hz), and more sensitive than the midrange and tweeter. This lets them passively filter and shape the woofer response to integrate with the mids at the system's overall sensitivity of 89dB/2.83V/m.

3) The effects of a dipole's rear radiation on the speaker's frequency response and the size of its soundstage are at the mercy of room dimensions, room surface treatments, and speaker positions. This is the responsibility of the user, and accounts for the poor showing of the R 907s in that Manhattan hotel room. Normal listening rooms such as mine will be much more hospitable. It should be noted, though, that the R 907's tweeter has a sophisticated rear enclosure; only the woofer and midrange function as dipole drive-units.

Now that I've got the two of you alone...

The Reference R 907 looks snazzy and svelte, but with much of its mass in its cast-iron base it's surprisingly bottom-heavy, and hard to embrace and maneuver. After coaxing the pair of them into my listening room, I hooked them up to two channels of the five-channel Classe CA-3200 power amplifier with AudioQuest biwire cables and began fine-tuning their placement and orientation. Although I reversed Jamo's recommendations to site each R 907 3' from the front wall and 4' from grille removed.) The tweeter also has a well-extended ultrasonic response.

Fig.3 shows how these individual quasi-anechoic behaviors sum in the farfield. The R 907's bass response peaks in the midbass. This will be due in part to the nearfield measurement technique, but, as explained earlier, will be compensated for in-room by the dipole cancellation. The response between 300Hz and 6kHz is quite flat, but disturbed by the 1kHz suckout noted earlier, with then the top two octaves shelving up.

Figs. 4 and 5 show the Jamo's lateral dispersion referenced to the tweeter-axis response, first with the actual responses shown at 5° intervals to the speaker's sides (fig.4), then with the tweeter-axis response subtracted from each (fig.5). The 1kHz notch quickly fills in to the speaker's sides, which suggests that it may well not be readily audible. The midrange unit doesn't show much in the way of dipolar behavior within its passband, which perhaps explains KR's feeling that the soundstage was confined to within the speaker positions. To the left of these graphs (which stop at 300Hz), however, you can see the start of the woofer's dipole cancellation notch. (Standing to the speaker's side so that one ear receives the frontal radiation and the other the rear radiation produces an uncomfortable out-of-phase effect at low frequencies, which reveals the efficacy of the dipole principle.) The upper-frequency dispersion is...
the sidewall, I found their suggestion of a 10° toe-in angle ideal. This resulted in the two speakers' on-axis radiations crossing just in front of my listening position, as suggested by Blumenlein, and which I usually prefer to having the axes cross behind me. Jamo also advises using soft, damped surfaces in the vicinity of the speakers, and that was no problem: I had an Echo Buster on each sidewall, an Echo Buster Phase-4 tower in each front corner, and a wall of acoustically lined drapes across the wall behind the speakers.

All should have been fine. At first, however, the Jamos sounded thin and a bit bright. Partly this was a temporary subjective response, due to their very tight and nonresonant bass, compared to box speakers, but I quickly adapted to that. The real problem was that, in my infinite audiophile wisdom, I had removed the R 907s' front grilles so that I could enjoy them en dishabille. Not a good idea. The speakers but I quickly adapted to that. The real problem was that, in my infinite audiophile wisdom, I had removed the R 907s' front grilles so that I could enjoy them en dishabille. Not a good idea. The front and rear grilles are sturdy, and the open-weave cloth of their outer layer is sonically transparent. However, the inner lining of the section of grille covering the midrange and tweeter is a very thin but closely woven cloth that greatly affects the transmission of sound. It seems that Jamo has voiced the R 907 with its grilles; if you want to hear this speaker at its best, I urge you to leave the front grille on.

Their front grilles back in place, the R 907s had an extremely transparent and open sound from top to bottom. The midbass was notable for its lack of boom or excess bloom, which is to be expected from a properly placed dipole. What surprised me, however, was the low-end extension, which, while not equal to that of a good subwoofer, qualified the R 907 as a true full-range speaker. When I played Pipes Rhode Island (CD, Riago 101), the weight and growl of the organ-pedal tones were not only impressively reproduced, but sounded tight and tonally well defined all the way down. Adding a JL Audio Fathom f113 subwoofer below 50Hz made a difference that I could feel more than hear, but I used the sub only for this recording. For normal listening, the R 907s needed no help.

The R 907s' midrange and treble were equally clean and open. With some recordings, such as of live opera or concerts where the microphones had not been optimally placed, they brought the soloists a bit forward. On the other hand, the lovely balance between Jennifer Warnes and the backing singers on "A Singer Must Die," from her Famous Blue Raincoat (CD, Cypress) was slightly askew; Warnes's voice was somewhat detached from the warm, supporting chorus. A swap of power amplifiers from the Classé CA-3200 to the Bel Canto REF1000 monoblocks (with the obligatory Environmental Potentials EP-2450 line filter) restored the balance. The Bel Cantos aren't as forward in the midrange and treble as the Classé, therefore were a perfect complement to the Jamos, and remained in service from then on.

In order to appreciate the Jamos' spatial presentation, I needed to sit with my ears at the level of the R 907s' tweeters, which are 43" from the floor—much above that and I lost too much treble. (No, I didn't sprawl on the floor to hear if the treble's vertical radiation was sym-

**IF YOU WANT TO HEAR THE JAMO SPEAKER AT ITS BEST, I URGE YOU TO LEAVE THE FRONT GRILLE ON.**
metrical.) I also needed to stay carefully centered between the speakers to remain inside their rather small sweet spot—wider than I remember having with the Staxes, but narrower than with the Apogees or, for that matter, the B&W 802Ds. But sitting still isn’t too much to ask of anyone listening seriously and paying attention to the music, is it?

With me and the Jamos properly positioned, aural images were deep and detailed. There was great specificity of voice and instrument placement, and ensembles seemed simultaneously coherent and continuous—very lovely, especially for recordings of soloists and smaller ensembles. With larger groups, the clarity and depth were excellent, but the soundstage width was mostly confined to the space between the R 907s. Remember that, with dipoles, the breadth of the soundstage is more than usually dependent on the surrounding surfaces. Because I’d already been able to meet Jamo’s setup guidelines in my room, I didn’t experiment much with repositioning the acoustic devices; perhaps a slightly more reflective environment would have helped. Even turning up the volume to high levels made for little change in soundstaging, though it didn’t demonstrate that the R 907 is capable of sustained high-level output, especially with the Bel Canto REF1000s (1000W into the Jamo’s 4 ohm load).

This surprised me. My experience with dipoles has suggested that the multiple reflections of the sound radiated behind the speakers help widen the soundstage, sometimes to an exaggerated degree. However, the equally good frequency-domain integration seen in fig.3. Finally, the R 907’s farfield cumulative spectral-decay plot (fig.9) shows a relatively clean initial decay, but with some delayed energy apparent at the frequency of the on-axis suckout at 1kHz (which suggests that this is a cancellation effect of some kind), as well as at 7kHz, where the tweeter output shelves upward.

The Jamo Reference R 907 offers respectable measured performance, and its low frequencies are surprisingly extended in-room. But as Kal Rubinson noted, it really should be used with its front grille in place if it is not to sound a little bright.

—John Atkinson

lower-frequency output in-room can be seen to extend to 25Hz at full level, below which it rolls off quite rapidly. As Kal noted, this is impressive bass extension for a dipole design.

Fig.8 shows the R 907’s farfield step response on the tweeter axis. The sharp initial spike is the tweeter’s output, which neatly integrates with the negative-going step of the midrange unit. The positive-going decay of this driver’s step then smoothly hands over to the slow, positive-going rise of the woofers’ step. The excellent time-domain integration of the drive-units’ outputs, made possible by inverting the polarity of the midrange unit, correlates with the equally good frequency-domain integration seen in fig.3. Finally, the R 907’s farfield cumulative spectral-decay plot (fig.9) shows a relatively clean initial decay, but with some delayed energy apparent at the frequency of the on-axis suckout at 1kHz (which suggests that this is a cancellation effect of some kind), as well as at 7kHz, where the tweeter output shelves upward.

The Jamo Reference R 907 offers respectable measured performance, and its low frequencies are surprisingly extended in-room. But as Kal Rubinson noted, it really should be used with its front grille in place if it is not to sound a little bright.

—John Atkinson

as noted above, the R 907’s tweeter is not a dipole radiator, and therefore doesn’t contribute to the rear radiation. In addition, the R 907’s very wide but curved front baffle might also have been affecting the dome tweeter’s radiation pattern. Considering that the midrange crosses over to the tweeter at around 2500Hz, the rolled-off rear radiation probably makes less of a contribution to “audiophile airiness” than with some other dipoles. Though such added spaciousness is likely a spuriously addition, most of us find it satisfying and enjoyable.

**Conclusions**

I’m wondering if I’ve made too much of the Jamo Reference R 907’s imperfections. Taken together, all of them were not enough to seriously detract from the glories and pleasures of listening to all types of music through these loudspeakers. I found the Jamos second to none in their sonic purity from the top of the audioband to a surprisingly deep bottom. The total elimination of box resonances was enduringly refreshing, and the imaging was beautifully precise within a deep soundstage. Of a modest size and with a striking appearance, the Jamo R 907 provides state-of-the-art performance at a competitive price.
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AC REGENERATOR

Determining whether an idea is brilliant or off the wall is often a matter of perspective—and of looking at the results that follow from the idea. Take the notion of AC regeneration. AC is what comes from the wall socket, courtesy a network of power-generation plants, and it's specified as having a certain voltage and frequency, with the amount of current limited by fuses or circuit breakers in the electrical panel of the house or apartment. Audio components—other than those powered by batteries—are designed to convert this alternating current (AC) to direct current (DC), then produce variable AC that drives the speakers to produce a facsimile of that signal. In short, AC provides the raw material used by audio components to do their job.

Designers of audio components assume that the AC power source will have certain standardized characteristics (in North America, a 120V sinewave at 60Hz), and configure their prototypes' internal power supplies with this in mind. These supplies are usually designed to filter out unwanted high-frequency distortion components that may be present in the AC power source. A separate AC line from the electrical panel, dedicated to serve only the audio system, is considered a good thing, providing a degree of isolation from household appliances and lights that can interfere with the purity of the AC power.

For decades now, devices have been sold that are claimed to purify or "condition" AC, filtering out potential interference-causing parts of the AC waveform and thus easing the work of the audio components' power supplies. Many audiophiles have found these devices helpful to the sound; others have rejected them because of what they felt were undesirable audible side effects, such as an obscuring of detail or a reduction in dynamic range, and because tests have often shown that their measurable effect on the AC waveform was minimal.

**Power to the people**

Enter the PS Audio Power Plant, originally introduced in 1997 as the model P300. Paul McGowan, the P of PS Audio (the S, Stan Warren, left the audio business some time ago), designed the Power Plant to provide a constant and clean AC power source for audio components. According to McGowan, the Power Plant is "required for any serious audio system," and it's easy to see why.

The Power Plant is a high-end AC regeneration system that promises to deliver clean, stable AC power to audio components. It's designed to filter out unwanted high-frequency components from the AC power source, ensuring that the audio components receive a pure signal. The Power Plant is capable of providing up to 1200VA to power the audio components, and its voltage regulation is ±0.5V US, 1VAC Europe/Asia. The output distortion is <0.9% at 230V AC, and the output impedance is <0.015 ohm. The Power Plant is also equipped with a noise reduction feature that reduces noise in the AC waveform, improving the sound quality of the audio components.

The Power Plant is designed to be compact and lightweight, measuring 17" W by 4" H by 16.5" D, and weighing 35 lbs. It's equipped with a variety of connection options, including AC receptacles and power outlets, and is designed to be easily integrated into any audio system. The Power Plant is priced at $2195, and is available through a network of dealers. The Power Plant is a testament to PS Audio's commitment to providing high-quality audio components that are designed to deliver the best possible sound quality.
time ago), has argued that the best way to get rid of undesirable components of the AC is not to try to filter them out, but to “regenerate” the AC supply altogether with a power amplifier that outputs pure 120V at 60Hz. It’s like having your own power plant in the home—hence the name. (To carry the analogy further, perhaps the best thing would be to have your own power generator, fueled by gas or coal. Then you’d really be free of the vagaries of the electrical power grid.)

The output of a PS Audio Power Plant is regulated 120V AC at 60Hz (50Hz in Europe) with low distortion, the maximum power output depending on the model (300W for the P300). I reviewed the P300 in the December 1999 Stereophile (Vol.22 No.12); John Atkinson’s Follow-Up appeared the following May. My conclusion, with which JA concurred, was that the P300 worked as claimed. It wasn’t just a matter of less noise, as expected, but also a generally smoother, more relaxed sound, with such goodies craved by audiophiles as “blacker blacks,” and no loss of resolution or impairment of dynamic range. The P300 and its higher-powered variants have been extraordinarily successful, selling lots of units, winning numerous awards from audio magazines, and finding homes in the reviewers’ systems—including mine and JA’s. In the February 2006 issue (Vol.29 No.2) I reviewed the P500, noting its improvements over the P300.

Like any audio component, the P300 had its limitations. The first was of power output: 300W may be fine for source components and preamps, but it’s not enough for any but low-powered amplifiers. The higher-output P500 produced 500W—better, but still not enough for the big power amps—and if you went for the top-of-the-line P1200 (2200W output), you had a 150-lb component to contend with—and a corresponding increase in your electricity bill. There was also the matter of heat: the P300 ran hot when working hard, and its cooling fan was noisy. The P300 had only four outputs, which meant having to use a power bar in complex systems—not an ideal solution.

Over the years, the design of the Power Plant evolved, with new features such as MultiWave (an alternative to the standard AC sinewave, with a waveform that’s supposed to make components’ power supplies work more efficiently) and CleanWave (an AC power equivalent of variable-frequency signal-degaussing devices). And, to respond to the needs of audiophiles not yet ready to plunge into the world of power regeneration, PS Audio continued work on passive devices, such as the balun-based Ultimate Outlet (which I reviewed in December 1991, Vol.24 No.12), and the ingenious Noise Harvester, which shunts some of the power line’s high-frequency noise to an LED, effectively transforming electrical noise into light. (I use Noise Harvesters in my home-theater system, to good effect.)

**Premier Primer**

Now we have the Power Plant Premier ($2195), which PS Audio calls “the world’s first and only low distortion, high efficiency AC power regenerator.” The key part of this claim is “high efficiency.” Earlier Power Plants consisted of a class-AB stereo amplifier with an efficiency of about 50%—which meant that they had to be very heavy if they were to output substantial amounts of power, hence current. The Premier’s maximum output is 1500W; a Power Plant of the previous design that produced this much output would weigh about 200 lbs. Instead, it’s a far more manageable 35 lbs. This is the result of a new amplifier design that’s 85% efficient—but is not, as might be expected, class-D, which PS Audio determined would produce too much noise for this application. Instead, it’s a development of the usual class-AB amplifier. What’s special about it is a new tracking power supply designed by Bob Stadtherr, PS Audio’s head of engineering, for which the company has received a patent. According to Paul McGowan, the concept of the tracking power-supply design is “elegantly simple, and its execution is breathtakingly complex to make it work.”

Starting with the new higher-efficiency amplifier design, the slim, stylish chassis of the Premier (said to be based on the BMW automobile) includes every bit of AC-related technology that PS Audio has learned in the past decade. There is sophisticated spike and surge protection.

**THE BEST WAY TO GET RID OF UNDESIRABLE COMPONENTS OF THE AC IS NOT TO FILTER THEM OUT, BUT TO “REGENERATE” THE AC SUPPLY.**
Avantgarde Uno Nano speakers, the fan stayed off most of the time; and when it was on, it was very quiet.

One of the most impressive things about the Premier is its ability to reduce harmonic distortion in the incoming AC. At various consumer-electronics shows, PS Audio had earlier demonstrated this effect of the Power Plant design by using a Fluke power-quality analyzer. With the Premier, they've included a built-in harmonic-distortion meter, you can switch the front-panel display to show the THD of the incoming AC and of the output. In my situation, the input THD was in the region of 3–4%, the output around 0.3%.

The Premier allows a choice between sinewave and MultiWave. However, it's missing some options available in earlier Power Plant models: variable-frequency sinewave and a variety of MultiWave settings. I guess PS Audio got tired of people calling customer service and asking, "Is MultiWave 1 better than MultiWave 2, or should I set it at AutoWave?" The MultiWave pattern included in the Premier is equivalent to what was called TubeWave in the last generation of Power Plants. However, not all audio electronics respond well to MultiWave, which shouldn't be used with anything that has an AC motor, and not if, as the Premier's owner's manual puts it, you hear "funny noises" coming from the equipment. For consistency in reviewing digital source components, preamplifiers, and power amplifiers, I've settled on using the sinewave setting, which is the same as normal AC except cleaner, and avoids the possibility of any negative interaction of MultiWave with audio equipment's power supplies.

The Premier has five pairs of isolated AC outlets, all functionally identical, and distributed among three switchable Zones. Again in contrast to some earlier Power Plant models, the Premier has no outlets with only passive filtering. Thus, although one set of outlets on the Premier is labeled Power Amp, that's just for convenience; these supply the same regenerated AC as all the other outlets. The Premier's 1500W maximum output is enough for just about all power amplifiers, so the passive outlets aren't needed.

The Premier also has an ingenius way of dealing with the turn-on power surges of very large power amplifiers: If the current needed exceeds the Premier's regenerated power capabilities, the Premier connects the amplifier directly to the wall AC until the temporary need for high power has abated. For those with amplifiers whose long-term thirst for power is unquenchable (or who can't afford the Premier), PS Audio offers the Duet and Quintet Power Centers, which have filtering and surge protection, but not regenerated power (see sidebar).

The Premier has one more trick up its sleeve: isolation of noise generated by equipment plugged into its AC outlets, using common-mode filters made of "nanocrystalline." No, this isn't another name for Unobtainium, but for FineMet, a recently developed soft material made by Hitachi Metals that has the highest permeability of any magnetic material currently available. The result, according to PS Audio is "an isolation and cleaning network that is both non-intrusive and an excellent performer."
to PS Audio, is "an isolation and cleaning network that is both non-intrusive and an excellent performer."

On the convenience side, the Premier has a remote control (selection of display mode, sinewave/MultiWave, CleanWave, and display lighting), a power sequencer, two 12V triggers, CATV, and two telephone in/out jacks, all providing protection against high-voltage spikes. And here's what it says on the box: "Engineered in Boulder, CO. Manufactured in China."

The Sound of AC
For nearly a decade now, except for brief periods, the source components, preamplifiers, and sometimes power amplifiers and integrated amplifiers in my review system have received their AC power from a PS Audio Power Plant: first the P300, and, more recently, the P500. Each time I've compared the power supplied by a Power Plant with the AC from the wall (usually in the context of the review of a specific component), I've concluded that the sound was better when I used the Power Plant as the current source.

When I received the Premier for review, I did what I usually do with a new component: I plugged it in, made the connections to the system (plugged all the AC cords into the Premier), turned everything on, and just listened without trying to analyze or evaluate the sound in any way. I continued in this vein for several weeks, giving the Premier time to burn in. (Some postings in discussion groups on PS Audio's website suggest that burn-in is a significant issue with the Premier.) The sound was generally fine—but I wasn't wearing my reviewer's hat.

Then, with that hat firmly in place, I listened to an array of highly familiar CDs, paying attention to musically important details as well as to soundstaging and the overall flow of the music. The results were excellent: the combination of the Ayre CX-7e CD player, Convergent Audio Technology SL-1 Ultimate preamplifier, Audiopax Model 88 Mk.II power amps, and Avantgarde Uno Nano speakers (review to come) is a highly synergistic, supremely musical combination.

The next step was to determine what the system sounded like with all those components plugged directly into the AC wall receptacles. I disconnected all the AC cords from the Premier and plugged them into the wall. (Two dedicated AC lines serve my room, each terminated with hospital-grade receptacles.) And listened.

The sound was still very good—a bit more forward than with the Premier in the system, but not annoyingly so. Otherwise, the tonal balance was much the same. These are, individually and collectively, excellent components. Then, as I continued listening, it seemed that some of the finer details of the sound were a bit obscured, and the soundstage, while not obviously more shallow or narrow, was not as precisely delineated as I remembered from when the Premier was in the system. Time to listen again with the Premier as the power source.

I plugged everything into the Premier, turned on the system, and proceeded to listen again to the same recordings, beginning with the Chesky Records Jazz Sampler & Audiophile Test Compact Disc, Vol.1 (Chesky JD37). Based on what I felt had been a fairly subtle degradation of the sound when raw AC was used, I expected the difference in the other direction to be equally subtle.

I've never used the expression jaw-dropping in print or in conversation, and I'm not going to start now. My jaw remained in its usual place. But I was surprised by the magnitude of improvement produced by the Premier. The music became more subtly detailed, the soundstage wider and deeper, the overall sound more natural, less electronic. Noise, which can be a problem with the 105dB-sensitive Avantgarde Uno Nanos, was already quite low with the system plugged into the wall; with the Premier, it was even lower. There was no impairment of dynamics; if anything, it was now easier to hear the music's ebb and flow.

Using the Premier to feed my system its power simply resulted in a superior listening experience, an impression that persisted through repeated switchings back and forth between raw AC and the Premier's regenerated AC. I used the CleanWave function from time to time, and yes, the sound seemed even "cleaner" after this treatment. The ability to activate CleanWave from the remote was very useful, and increased my use of the function.

Except for the digital source, the system described above is all tube. To get a perspective on the effect of regenerated AC on solid-state equipment, I replaced the combination of CAT SL-1 Ultimate preamp and Audiopax 88 monoblocks with PS Audio's own GCC-100 integrated amp (which PSA calls a "variable gain power amp"), which I reviewed in the January 2006 Stereophile (Vol.29 No.1). The GCC-100 sounds very different from the CAT-Audiopax combo: squeaky-clean, essentially neutral in tonal quality (a bit on the cool side), with greater top and bottom extension, but losing out to the tube gear in "musicality"—the ability to make voices and instruments sound like the real thing rather than an electronic reproduction.

ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT
DIGITAL SOURCE: Ayre CX-7e CD player.
ANALOG SOURCE: Linn LP12 turntable with Lingo power supply, Ittok tonearm, AudioQuest AQ7000nxs cartridge.
PREAMP: Convergent Audio Technology SL-1 Ultimate.
POWER AMPLIFIER: Audiopax Model 88 Mk.II monoblocks.
INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER: PS Audio GCC-100.
LOUDSPEAKERS: Avantgarde Uno Nano.
CABLES: Interconnect: Nordost Quattro Fils (single-ended, balanced).
Speaker: Nordost Valhalla. AC: PS Audio xStream Power, TARA Labs Decade.
ACCESSORIES: Arcti Suspension Rack, PolyCrystal amplifier stands, Furutech DeMag RD-2 CD demagnetizer.

Robert Deutsch
In my review of the GCC-100, I had remarked that it sounded so much better when plugged into one of the P500 Power Plant's regenerated-AC outlets that the latter might almost be considered a mandatory accessory. The P500 also has some passive filtered Ultimate Outlets, but the GCC-100 draws relatively little current, so I didn't have to use them. In a recent e-mail, Paul McGowan told me that 90% of P500 owners end up having to use the Ultimate rather than the regenerated-AC outlets for their power amps, and suggested that it would be instructive to compare the P500's hybrid regenerated/passive arrangement with the sound with all the components plugged into the Premier (which supplies regenerated AC to all of its receptacles).

It was instructive, demonstrating the benefits of supplying all components with regenerated AC. My system, with the GCC-100 and the Avantgarde Uno Nanos' subwoofer amplifiers plugged into the P500's Ultimate Outlets, sounded better than when plugged into the wall, but it acquired an extra degree of clarity when the Premier provided all the power. How much of that improvement was due to the purity of regenerated AC and how much to other differences between the Premier and the P500—such as the isolation of the Premier's receptacles using the nanocrystalline technology—is impossible to say, but the comparison confirmed the superiority of PS Audio's latest Power Plant design.

**Conclusion**

In the best of all possible worlds, AC supplied by wall receptacles would be a precise, unvarying 120V: a pure 60Hz sinewave with no distortion or other frequencies riding on it. Within the limit set by the circuit breaker, this flow of current would respond instantly to any demands placed on it by the electronic equipment plugged into the wall. We do not live in such a world. Here, AC voltage varies, sometimes enough to damage equipment, and the waveform is never a pure 60Hz sinewave. All power supplies of all audio components must deal with these realities, and to varying degrees, they do a reasonably good job of it. The vast majority of consumers are perfectly happy plugging their audio equipment into the wall, and except for occasional damage caused by voltage spikes and surges, that equipment generally works. It's only when you compare the sound of equipment supplied raw AC with their sound on a diet of regenerated AC that you realize that such a system can sound better: more like real music and less like an electronic reproduction of same. This is what the PS Audio Power Plant Premier delivers. I wouldn't want to be without it.
When I read Robert Deutsch's Follow-Up on Ayre Acoustics' CX-7e CD player in the January 2008 Stereophile (found, like all of our CX-7e coverage, at www.stereophile.com/cdplayers/840), I was startled to read that "at least two of [my Stereophile colleagues] said that, for CD playback, they preferred the CX-7e [$2950] to Ayre's twice-as-expensive universal player, the C-5xe [$5950]." That was a bit of audiophile buzz I hadn't heard. But, like most 'Murricans, I do love a story in which the plucky underdog bests the champion. Besides, I'm the very happy owner of a C-5xe; if what RD said were true, it would mean that the CX-7e would be a monster CD player indeed. Determined to hear for myself, I requested a review sample. When it arrived, I installed it in my smaller listening room and began the process of (for lack of a better term) burning it in. Ayre suggests that the CX-7e won't achieve its optimal sound quality until after 500 hours of play. Naturally, I listened to it with the system that occupies that smaller room. During the long burn-in period, what music lover could resist getting pulled into a room where music was constantly playing? In the context of that system—Parasound Halo JC 2 preamplifier, Musical Fidelity Nu-Vista 300 power amp, Usher Be-718 speakers—it would have been impossible to ignore the music: the Ushers created a tight soundstage, and the sound was sharp and detailed. Music had snap and sparkle. Methinks we have a winner, methought; the CX-7e is a giant-killer.

Finally, it was time to move the CX-7e up to the big room, where the C-5xe resided in a system that included the VTL TL-6.5 Signature preamplifier, a pair of Parasound Halo JC 1 monoblocks, and YGA Anat Reference II Professional loudspeakers ($107,000/pair). Everything was connected with Stealth Audio Cables like Metacarbon balanced interconnects, Dream speaker cables, and Dream power cords. And yes, Ayre's own Myrtle wood blocks supported and damped all components. I'm being so specific because, where Ayre gear is concerned, everything matters. Titting of the CX-7e's or the C-5xe's display made a huge difference in the sound of each. Ditto damping each chassis with the Myrtle blocks. And making sure that both sources were connected directly to the twin Shunyata Research FP-20A(R) duplex AC outlets on the system's dedicated circuit was revelatory, even though I "knew" there would be no audible difference if one was plugged directly into the Shunyata outlets and the other to Ayre's L-5xe line filter. I don't tweak because I want audio to be complicated; I tweak despite wanting it to be simple—and brutal reality keeps refuting my lovely theories.

I began by listening to "Dedication," from Sheila Jordan and Harvie Swartz's Songs from Within (CD, M•A Recordings M014A) on the CX-7e. It opens with Swartz playing pizzicato very high up on the neck of his double bass—gentle plucks that are more harmonic overtones than fundamentals. Then Jordan enters with some wordless scatting that sent shivers down my spine. The image of the two musicians was tight and focused. The plucked bass notes shimmered delicately, and Jordan's breathy voice had body. No wonder the CX-7e is in Class A of Stereophile's "Recommended Components."

However, the C-5xe, too, is in Class A, and it delivered a larger but still tightly focused soundstage. The reproduction of the recording venue's acoustic was larger, and so were both musicians, in a very physical sense. Through the universal player, Swartz's plucked notes had more bass body—still ethereal, they were now more strongly anchored to the bass's soundboard rather than seeming to float free of it. When Jordan began singing words ("There are so many beautiful musicians that have passed my way"), her voice shifted from head tones to body tones and, well, the C-5xe reproduced that body to scale.

Switching to a live album, KFOG's Live from the Archives 12 (CD, KFOG...
ARCH12; a gift from Stereophile Forums participant Buddah), I cued up the Dirty Bops’ “Ooh La La” on the CX-7e. The soundstage was larger than that of the Jordan-Swartz track, and very airy—live in the best sense of that word. Amanda Barrett’s and Abbey DeWald’s voices blended fabulously, and DeWald’s amplified acoustic guitar really popped. When, in the bridge, Barrett began shaking some maracas, they sounded as if they were in the room—and ditto when she switched to tambourine. The acoustic surrounding the percussion instruments sounded more natural than that of the vocals or guitar—FOH magic, I assume.

Through the C-5xe this track’s soundstage was huge, extending beyond the speakers themselves. Before beginning the song, Barrett (I think) says, “Feel free to stomp your feet,” and DeWald (I think) chimes in: “Please do!” I wouldn’t go so far as to say I could hear the audience complying, but the C5xe had more rhythmic drive than the CX-7e—through the former, I could better hear why the audience might really want to. And DeWald’s guitar had more moxie.

Henry Mancini’s main theme for the 1962 Howard Hawks film Hatari, from Don Byron’s You Are *6: More Music for Six Musicians (CD, Blue Note 32231), sounded focused, and the acoustic was immense through the CX-7e. Milton Cardona, Johnny Almendra, and Ben Wittman lay down a thicket of mixed percussion—talking drums, shakers, cowbell—while Byron and James Zollar (on flugelhorn) practically fade into the background. The soundstage was rock-solid and deep.

That soundstage was deeper through the C-5xe, but the individual sounds were also somewhat more distinct. To say that I hadn’t noticed that bassist Leo Traversa was singing behind the percussion choir in the B section of this ABAC tune would be an overstatement, but it was harder to miss through the C-5xe. And when Cardona began to intone praises (I think) to the deity Chango in the second A section, the words were more distinct and comprehensible—at least to my gringo ears. I still didn’t understand them, but I could recognize that they were distinct words and not just background chatter.

The crescendo-rock band Explosions in the Sky has become a bit of an obsession with me lately, so I cued
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ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

PREAMPLIFIERS
Parasound Halo JC 2, VTL Signature TL-6.5.

POWER AMPLIFIERS
Musical Fidelity Nu-Vista 300, Parasound Halo JC 1 monoblocks.

LOUDSPEAKERS
Usher Be-718, YG Acoustics Anat Reference II Professional.

CABLES

ACCESSORIES
Ayre Myrtle wood blocks; Ayre L-5xe power-line filter; Furutech eTP-609 power-distribution box; Shunyata Research FP-20A(R) duplex AC outlets; Furutech RDP panels, RealTraps Mini & Mondo Traps.

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up “First Breath After Coma,” from The Earth Is Not a Cold Dead Place (CD, The Temporary Residence TRR 61), in the CX-7e to hear some good new-fashioned rock’n’roll. The CD player again was extremely well focused and rhythmically zippy, emphasizing what a monster drummer Christopher Hrasky is. The jam, more than nine minutes long, has almost epic scope, unfolding at an unhurried pace that, as I have experienced with other CD players, at times can seem a little too unhurried. But the CX-7e’s pace and ability to sort out dynamic shifts kept things moving along nicely.

The C-5xe didn’t expand the scale of the soundstage as much with Explosions in the Sky as it had with the other music I’d played, but it did extend the bass, giving bassist Michael James more equal status in the mix. It also sorted out dynamic shifts slightly better than the CX-7e. In addition, it put minor timbral shifts into greater perspective. At the end of “First Breath,” one guitarist (Munaf Rayani?) plays a chiming, downward-turning figure, while the other (Mark Smith?) just unleashes a sonic buzz saw, as the band (what else?) crescendos toward a climax. Through the C-5xe, I was convinced that the sustained grind was courtesy my old friend the Big Muff fuzz pedal—and yes, Virginia, rock instruments (even stomp boxes) do have timbral ranges as complex as those of acoustic instruments. What I will grant, how-
ever, is that not all rock recordings are created equal; The Earth Is Not a Cold Dead Place probably benefited from being produced by a small indie label that lacked the resources to ruin it with studio quackery.

One advantage that recorded classical music frequently has is that many (though far from all) of its producers can actually hear. Thomas C. Moore is obviously one of them, judging from a recent recording of Vivaldi’s The Four Seasons with Boston Baroque and Martin Pearlman (CD, Telarc CD-80698). If you’re an avid classical listener, you may wonder, as I do,

BUT REALLY—HOW BIG WAS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE CX-7E AND THE C-5XE? NOTICABLE BUT NOT HUGE.

why you’d want another Four Seasons, and perhaps one is all you need. I thought so with the old St. Martin-in-the-Fields recording on Argo, and I thought it again with the very fine baroque-music-as-death-metal performance by Il Giardino Harmonico on Teldec, but Telarc’s latest charms me a great deal, not least for its wide, open, brilliant acoustic.

Then there’s Christina Day Martinson’s fiddling, which is lark-swift and very deft. The CX-7e captured the soar and swoop of Martinson’s violin in the Allegro of Spring. The ensemble is centered in a very buoyant acoustic, and the violinist’s flights are very much front and center, though not in the way of mid-1980s Deutsche Grammophon recordings, with their ruthlessly spotlit soloists.

The C-5xe was pretty much the same, only more so: bigger acoustic, broader soundstage, and the soloist better integrated, if only ever so slightly, into the ensemble.

But really—how big was the difference between the CX-7e and the C-5xe? Noticeable but not huge. More to the point, I suspect that in many audio systems the differences might be downright negligible—as was the case in my smaller listening room.
JITTER MEASUREMENTS

You can find full sets of measurements of the Ayre CX-7e and C-5xe at www.stereophile.com/cdplayers/840/index4.html and www.stereophile.com/hirezplayers/705ayre/index5.html, respectively. However, as the Audio Precision SYS2722 measurement system I now use was not available to me when we published those reviews, Wes’s Follow-Up gave me the opportunity to take a second look at the two players’ rejection of jitter using the ‘2722. The 16-bit A/D converters of the Audio Precision System One and the Miller Audio Research Jitter Analyzer, both of which I formerly used, limit their amplitude resolution when measuring 16-bit digital playback gear. By contrast, the SYS2722 uses 24-bit converters to examine analog signals, which means that, with CD players and processors, the analyzer’s noise floor will be below that of the device under test, allowing a much clearer look at what is happening.

The J-Test was developed in the mid-1990s by the late Julian Dunn of PrismSound to investigate the jitter rejection of digital datalinks where the clock is embedded in the audio data: the balanced AES/EBU or AES3 link, for example, or the unbalanced S/PDIF link. The test signal comprises a high-level tone at exactly one-quarter the sample frequency, or $\frac{f}{4}$ to which is added a squarewave at the level of the least significant bit (LSB), at $\frac{f}{192}$. With the twos-complement PCM encoding used by CD data, this low-level squarewave exercises all the bit transitions simultaneously, which is very much the worst case for stimulating jitter. The high-level, high-frequency tone is thus modulated by the jitter and sidebands spaced at the frequency of the $\frac{f}{192}$ squarewave, and its harmonics will appear in the reconstructed analog signal’s noise floor.

With CD data, the high-level tone has a frequency of $\frac{44.1kHz}{4}$

\[ = 11.025kHz \]

while the squarewave has a frequency of $\frac{44.1kHz}{192} = 229.6875Hz$. The digital-domain waveform of this signal is shown in fig.1. Something that is little appreciated is that because both test signals are exact even-integer fractions of the sample rate, there is therefore no quantizing noise/distortion. Any spurious that appear in the reconstructed analog noise floor are due to the behavior of the device under test.

However, there is a problem with the frequencies chosen for the J-Test, as the $\frac{f}{4}$ tone occurs exactly midway between two of the odd-order harmonics of the $\frac{f}{192}$ LSB squarewave. Thus, once the jitter gets low enough, the true sidebands (with 44.1kHz data) at $\pm 229.6875Hz$ and its multiples cannot be distinguished from the naturally occurring odd harmonics at 10,705.312Hz and 11,254.687Hz, etc. This is why I refer in my reviews to the “residual” level of the data-related products.

Strictly speaking, the J-Test is not diagnostic for products that do not embed the clock in the data. In well-designed CD players, for example, a separate clock signal carried on a printed-circuit-board trace separate from those that carry the audio data tells the D/A chip exactly when to convert the data word on its input to analog. Nevertheless, I have found that players vary enormously in their ability to handle the J-Test signal without problems, which is why I continue to use it with such products.

Fig.2, for example, shows a narrowband FFT analysis of the Ayre C-5xe universal player’s balanced analog output while it plays a CD-R carrying the 16-bit J-Test signal (left channel, blue trace; right channel, red). The player’s noise floor lies below $-140dBFS$, which is both superbly quiet and well below the quantization floor of a 16-bit PCM music signal (cyan, magenta traces). The central peak in this graph represents the 11.205kHz tone, and there is very little spectral spreading at the base of the peak, which would result from low-frequency random noise affecting the accuracy of the player’s master clock oscillator. While a regular picket fence of spectral lines can be seen at the base of the graph, these are the residual

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1 Both players are about to be updated with revised digital filters, that hopefully will reflect Ayre’s considerable research into subjectively optimal filter design. As the players implement the filters in a Field-Programmable Gate Array (FPGA) chip, Ayre dealers will be able to update older players in the field.


odd-order harmonics of the $f_1/192$ squarewave. The C-5xe is not emphasizing these components. In fact, the only sidebands visible in fig.2 that are due to the Ayre player are the very-low-level sidebands at 11.025kHz, ±120Hz, and 11.025kHz, ±240Hz. These frequencies indicate that the sidebands are power-supply related, but they are so low in level that they will be of only academic interest. The Ayre C-5xe offers close to state-of-the-art performance on this test.

Fig.3 shows the CX-7e’s performance under identical circumstances. The central peak is almost as well defined as with the Ayre C-5xe. However, the CD player’s noise floor is higher than the universal player’s, with the right channel (red trace) being around 4dB worse than the left (blue). I understand that this results from current production of Analog Devices’ high-speed, low-settling-time bipolar AD844 op-amp chips being noisier than original samples. (Eight AD844s are used for the CX-7e’s direct-coupled analog output stages, and there is no replacement part.) Nevertheless, this is still academic, as both channels are still quieter than the 16-bit quantization floor (cyan, magenta traces).

The sidebands visible at the base of this graph are, at least as far as the left channel is concerned, actually the residual odd-order harmonics of the low-frequency squarewave. However, two sidebands are visible in the right-channel output at ±229Hz; while these are absent from the left channel, I suspect that they should have been present, but are in anti-phase to the residual harmonics at the same frequencies and therefore have canceled them.

Even so, this is excellent performance. I doubt that the differences shown in these measurements contributed to Wes Phillips’ comments on the sounds of the two players.

—John Atkinson

4 Unfortunately, unlike the Miller Audio Research Analyzer, the Audio Precision SYS2722 lacks the software that searches the noise floor for identifiable symmetrical sidebands in order to then calculate a jitter total. This ability was Paul Miller’s innovation.

5 An expanded version of this article, including measurements of all the disc players I have measured with the Audio Precision SYS2722 since I began using it at the end of 2007, is available online at www.stereophile.com/2012/jitter.
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World Radio History
The Usher Be-718 speakers, good as they are, simply lack the bottom-end extension of the YGA Anats, so some of the differences in scale I experienced in my big room simply weren’t audible in the small, where the CX-7e’s focus and slight loss of scale actually worked in its favor. When I put the C-5xe in that system, the differences were practically inaudible. In fact, if I hadn’t had a balanced preamplifier and amplifier in the big-room system, the differences would have been far less noticeable—as they were when I tested that hypothesis.

I had to repeat my listening tests, and reevaluate the differences, when VTL’s Luke Manley pointed out that the line-level input of his TL-6.5 preamp that I’d connected the C-5xe to initially had a gain-matching pot that the input I had the CX-7e connected to didn’t have. The pot wasn’t activated, but it was still in the circuit, so I repeated the listening tests bypassing this pot. Sure enough, what I’d thought were minor differences became slightly more major.

And who knows what other factors contributed to this? Quite possibly, the big room’s dedicated circuit was one. Certainly the YGA Anats, which will get a full review in next month’s issue, provided a very powerful microscope for hearing tiny variations in reproduction. Even with a speaker as good as the

AYRE’S CX-7E CD PLAYER IS A WHOLE LOT OF FUN, AND DESERVES ITS PLACE IN CLASS A OF “RECOMMENDED COMPONENTS.”

Thiel CS3.7, I might not have noticed some of the things I observed. And as for cable rolling . . . let’s not even go there.

My final than Ayre’s C-5xe universal player? Not in the best system I can currently muster—but in other systems it might possibly be just as good. I could live very happily with the CX-7e, but I’m not trading in my C-5xe for it. Yet.

—Wes Phillips
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For many years, music fan, singer-songwriter, and can-tankerous artist Ryan Adams paid homage to what felt right. With his first band of note, the Raleigh, North Carolina–based Whiskeytown, he played a twangy fiddle-and-pedal-steel country-rock birthed on the altar of punk rock and liberally raised with respect for the songwriting and soul of performers like Gram Parsons and Jagger-Richards. Slowly but surely, Adams, founding guitarist Phil Wandscher, and coleader Caitlin Cary began to separate, as Adams came into his own as a songwriter and frontman who could hold audiences in the thrall of his presence, and the guts and majesty of his musical vision.

That's not to say that there weren't a lot of rough spots along the way. Once, back when this magazine was owned by Larry Archibald and John Atkinson, I ventured into a club in the largest city in the Land of Enchantment to see Whiskeytown, who were then signed to Geffen Records, and were perhaps the great hope of the then briefly ascendant alt-country subgenre.

I'd seen the band three times before, but on this night Mr. Adams decided to incite a Destry Rides Again Old West bar fight. Never gracious or secure about criticism, he decided to launch a bottle at a mouthy audience member. This was followed by a colossal WWF stage leap into the crowd. Ensnched in a back booth with an ex-girlfriend who thought the entire experience dodgy to begin with, I eagerly strained to see the action. As the mayhem spread toward us, she rightfully whispered with a distinct edge, “We're leaving!” Adams subsequently incited battles with critics, scraped against a host of personal demons, and gained a well-deserved reputation for being difficult and reclusive.

Artistically, he's been up and down. When, fresh from an indie triumph in Bloodshot's Hitbreaker (2000) and that album's moody single, “Come Pick Me Up,” Adams unleashed the sticky, major-label solo album Gold (2001), his high-gloss valentine to New York City, he hit the artistic trifecta: He'd mastered the art of being a bandleader whose A-level material magically attracts praise from elders and top-drawer sideman talent; he'd honed his convincing, sexboy frontmanerisms; and he'd strutted a pack of unasailable well-arranged, hook-laden, lyrically tight songs. Regardless of what you think of its slick, pushy production values, Gold’s hooks are breathtaking, and every bit as affecting when Adams plays them acoustically. Songs like the falsetto-led midtempo/ballad “When the Stars Go Blue,” or the following track, the sad “Nobody Girl,” suddenly made Adams the rock/roots songwriting whiz kid du jour.

The songwriting afterglow of Gold (and some of its leftover tracks) illuminated the next album, Demolition. Then came the Adams avalanche: first Rock N Roll, then the two-disc Love Is Hell, both in 2003. As they had with Springsteen's The River, one of the obvious antecedents of this flurry of creativity, questions swirled about what might have happened had someone with ears and guts told Adams to cut it all down to a single knockout record. Since then, the singer-songwriter has wisely slowed his output and begun to self-edit, releasing the much more finished Cold Roses and Jacksonville City Nights (2005), the lesser 29 (2006), and another songwriting upswing, Easy Tiger (2007).

Which brings us to Cardinology. Adams’ lyrics, now fully obsessed with picking his love scabs, sound somehow wiser and more resonant, although his habit of ending every tune with a repeated chorus line needs to be broken. Adams’ dreamy, riffy retro-rock can feel tossed-off and formulaic, but it’s steadier here, if more predictable. Adams’ idea now seems to be richness rather than surprise: the gospel according to Ryan, but at lower levels of volume and urgency. Ethel, our boy is growing up. His obvious influences, such as Parsons and U2, have never been used as well. And while many of the songwriting turns are familiar to longtime Adams fans—“Go Easy” could easily have appeared on any record since Gold—he's still capable of writing a transcendent tune like this album’s strongest, “Crossed Out Name,” whose strummed acoustic guitars power a U2-flavored rumination. “Let Us Down Easy,” which adds a Wurlitzer to the mix, is another controlled but satisfying mix of electric guitars. And “Magic,” Adams’ fun tribute to chord-bashing riff rock like “Highway to Hell” or “All Right Now,” is a ball.

Adams’ band, the Cardinals, includes guitarist Neal Casal and pedal-steel player Jon Gr. boff. Throughout Cardinology, they play impeccably like the pros they are, wrapping a low-key yet atmospheric vibe around tunes like the pedal-steel-haunted “Natural Ghost.” And if his songwriting has settled into a groove, Adams’ vocal sklls have continued to grow, as evidenced by his going Bono on “Cobwebs.”

Cardinology has been released on both CD and red vinyl, and on both formats the sound is full-blooded and immediate. The LP has a more spacious and open soundstage, with a breathier top end, while the CD, not surprisingly, is brighter and more forward. Also included is a 7” EP with two more songs, “Heavy Orange” and “Asteroid.”

Artists settling into mid-career can sometimes be less than pretty, but with this album, Adams has righted his often erratic ship with a collection of songs that embody the grace and beauty he’s always aimed to create.

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The Dead's sound system was like weather," Tom Paddock fervently says of the mammoth size and sound of the band's legendary PA system. “It was truly a wall of sound.”

The longtime sound consultant for the band, and now for its on-again, off-again splinter groups, Paddock recalls the time that the entire climatic system blew. “[Drummer] Mickey [Hart] had this solid slab of aluminum that was strung with piano strings and played with a lead pipe. It was like an 8'-tall guitar laid horizontally. And he banged it. Boy, did he bang it. When he told me to take the limiters off and I did, he blew every subwoofer in the entire sound system.” As that story vividly illustrates, Paddock has had some, shall we say, visceral experiences with sound.

And so I was astounded when, three years ago, I heard from longtime Dead publicist Dennis McNally that Paddock had what he felt was a sonic solution of sorts for the problems inherent in compressed audio files such as MP3s. This engineering wonder was contained in the microprocessor of a computer chip, or what's known in techspeak (which sounds like Duncan Hines speak, but okay) as “poured over the top.” I said that I’d be interested, but that was the last I heard of it until a couple weeks ago, when McNally called to ask if I’d be interested in listening to, and viewing a demo of, the aforementioned, long-time-coming product, which is called Sonic Focus.

Let me get this straight: A guy who works on sound issues for the Grateful Dead—that godlike band of immortals known for their ravenous fans, two-hour guitar solos, and good drugs—has solved the sonic limitations of MP3 files? Algorithms and Mary Jane? There was a certain symmetry to it, I had to admit.

So one winter's afternoon, into the ol' sixth-floor conference room of 'philie HQ comes Paddock, and Lee Flanagan of ARC, who now own Sonic Focus—the technology and the company. They quickly set up an HP Touchsmart PC and proceeded to show and tell Ste-}

phen Mejias and me how Sonic Focus adds density, reduces distortion, and makes “cost-challenged” computer speakers sound better.

Paddock has been involved with sound issues with the Dead since 1979, when Mickey Hart and Bill Kreutzmann, billing themselves as the Rhythm Devils, were recording music for the soundtrack of Apocalypse Now. Paddock was instrumental in building the effects racks that Jerry Garcia and Bob Weir played their guitars through, and subsequently built studio sound systems for Hart and Weir. He’s also been a big part of the band’s website, www.dead.net.

One of the genesis points of Sonic Focus was the reunited Dead's pioneering first webcast on December 12, 1995, from San Francisco's Fillmore West. Although Deadheads loved the concept, and AOL—who back then charged by the hour—cleaned up, listener comments about the sound quality were less than complimentary. “They heard dropouts, the top end was terrible, you couldn’t hear the voices,” Paddock remembers. “They loved the idea, but many said it was the worst sound they’d ever heard.”

That started Paddock—who runs with the big dogs when it comes to rapid-fire, audio-engineer technopatter—thinking about how to make compressed audio sound better. “We wanted to find a way to get a good emotional response from compressed audio—to find a fan-pull technology rather than a science-push technology.”

Some high-end manufacturers who are betting that at least part of their future will be portable have decided to use Sonic Focus in their products. John Stronczek, chief designer for Bel Canto Design, is adding it to his new dock for the Apple iPod, which will be released sometime in mid-2009.

“We thought, if we’re gonna do an iPod dock, let’s bring more to the party, so that’s what we’re doing with the Sonic Focus technology,” says Stronczek. “It’s gonna be in there, but we’ll also have a bypass option, so the audiophiles can take their uncompressed data and play it back. We’re accessing the digital data directly off the iPod, and doing our own sample-rate conversions and D-to-A output stage, so we’re offering a lot more than just a fancy analog stage that uses the DACs built into the iPod.”

Stronczek envisions the dock as the center of an entire Bel Canto iPod system that can be hooked up to a pair of powered loudspeakers, or to an integrated amp and a pair of speakers. “Most of the enhancement programs out there are pretty crude,” Stronczek says. “I have enough experience with the Sonic Focus to know that they are doing something really cool stuff. It truly enhances the audio experience without the weird, troublesome artifacts that most of those processes seem to produce, like weird dynamic shifts or unnatural shifts in perspective in the soundfield.

“Is compressed audio ever gonna be as good as either lossless or original uncompressed audio? No, it's not. Once the information is lost, it's lost. But I was pretty impressed by what the Sonic Focus technology could do. It certainly brings something to MP3 that's more interesting, more palatable. They got some good ideas. They've got some good ears.”

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