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"Unprecedented exhilarating listening experience."
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The Stereo Times

"THE PRINCE V2 is a truly special speaker."
- Wes Phillips
The Stereophile
 Commonsense System Strategies

There's an old Russian folk tale about a farmer who goes to a fair. He buys a bread roll from a vendor. He eats it, but he's still hungry. So he buys and eats another roll, and then another. Still hungry. Next, he buys a donut from a different vendor. At last, he's no longer hungry. The farmer then says to himself, "I wasted the money I spent on the rolls— I should have just bought the donut first!"

This story illustrates a problem with the way most of us buy stereo equipment: If only we could know in advance what we would end up being happy with, we'd save a lot of the money we spend getting there.

But it's difficult to take the leap of faith and buy, for instance, speakers costing $20,000/pair, when we aren't entirely certain they'll turn out to be worth the money to us. There's a comfort zone in crawling before walking. Proceeding incrementally can be a security blanket, but it also can be a false economy.

The trap lies in losing a lot of money on a long series of small-increment upgrades: "Okay, I really like my $1000/pair speakers, so now I'm ready for $1500/pair speakers." But if the truth of the matter is that, because of where, how, and to what music you listen, the step-by-step process is just a long, painful way of eventually getting to a $20,000/pair of speakers, you're losing out all around.

I think that in putting together an audio system, the single most important fork in the road also happens to be the one that is almost always ignored: Is the system intended to reproduce music to be listened to as an end in itself, or is the music intended to accompany other activities, such as entertaining, reading, sewing, or putting model ships in bottles?

I'm not making snooty value judgments here. I'm just as happy with the notion of good audio equipment serving up "lite" jazz like Claude Bolling in the background when friends gather at the end of the work week, as I am with the notion of someone's listening intensively to Birth of the Cool while following along with the musical score. But these uses are really different, and so the optimal choices of equipment may also be different.

If the music is meant to accompany other activities, you have wider options, and can get good results while spending less money. Listening to Claude Bolling at cocktail time, no one expects to hear a three-dimensional soundstage with precise image locations. What may be more important is that the essential timbres of the music not radically change when people stand up or move about. Some speakers that sound fabulous when you're sitting in their sweet spot sound less engaging when you stand up or walk around. Whether this makes a difference depends on what your system is basically for.

Let's now assume that you want a system for listening to music as an end in itself. The next fork in the road is between systems that attempt to reproduce the full frequency and dynamic ranges of music, and systems that don't.

There's an unavoidable tradeoff here of quality vs quantity. Due to the logarithmic nature of musical frequencies, each additional octave of bass capability requires the reproduction of wavelengths twice as long. It's not at all unusual to see two speaker models from the same manufacturer, the larger costing twice as much as the smaller, but the larger one's bass extension going only 4-6Hz deeper.

Also coming into play here are the specific genres of music you listen to. While some classical works call for huge forces, such as orchestra plus chorus and pipe organ, others are for solo lute or solo flute or solo classical guitar. Death metal and jazz bands are both considered "rock," but one is usually played louder than the other.

Even within the same genre, different listeners listen at different volumes. Mastering guru Bob Ludwig keeps his listening level at an average of 85dBA. If neighbors or sleeping children limit the volumes at which you can listen, that should be taken into account. Don't buy what you can't use.

This is the point at which you have to form some realistic idea of what it is you want your stereo system to do for you. One person might want to hear Claude Bolling, not too loud, as she chitchats with her chums and refills their Camparis. Another might want to hear early James Taylor LPs with transparent fidelity that would have been hard to imagine when those records were new. Another might even want to play electric guitar along with Tom Petty and really crank everything up.

Your choice of music, how loudly you will listen, and the particulars of your listening room will determine which loudspeakers will work best for you. Choose amplification only after you have chosen your speakers. If the best speakers for you are a comparatively difficult load to drive, that limits your amplifier choices. Source components then fall into place, usually according to how much of your budget is left.

If taking a huge leap daunts you, by all means take an incremental approach, but also resolve that it will not become an infinite regress. If John Atkinson's enthusiastic review of KEF's $20,000/pair Reference 207/2 loudspeaker (www.stereophile.com/floorloudspeakers/208kee.php) has you tempted but nervous, ask your dealer if you can get 100% trade-in credit within a year if you buy KEF's $5000/pair Reference 207/2s (www.stereophile.com/standloudspeakers/708kef.php) instead—but don't serially buy all the speaker models in between just because they're there.

Final words: Don't shop only on the basis of price; instead, shop for long-term value. Treat dealers as you yourself want to be treated. And know your own motivations: Audiophilia nervosa is sometimes just shopaholism for males, except that instead of handbags and shoes, they buy DACs and power cords. It's not supposed to be about shopping; it's supposed to be about enjoying music.
FEATURES

45 Christian McBride
The bassist celebrates 20 years in jazz by moving from sideman to star, by Robert Baird.

EQUIPMENT REPORTS

50 T+A Music Player media server
Jon Iverson

56 T+A Power Plant integrated amplifier
Jon Iverson

61 dCS Scarlatti SACD playback system
Michael Fremer

74 Spendor SA1 loudspeaker
John Atkinson

81 darTZeel CTH-8550 integrated amplifier
Wes Phillips

FOLLOW-UP

19 Cambridge DacMagic D/A processor
Sam Tellig

29 Nagra BPS phono preamplifier
Michael Fremer

57 Logitech (Slim Devices) Transporter media server
Jon Iverson

68 Cary Audio Design CD 306 Professional SACD player
Michael Fremer

78 PSB Imagine B loudspeaker
John Atkinson

87 Boulder 865 integrated amplifier
Wes Phillips

89 Auditorium 23 Hommage T1 MC step-up transformer
Art Dudley

90 Pass Labs XA30.5 power amplifier
Erick Lichte

91 Pass Labs Aleph 3 power amplifier
Erick Lichte
As We See It
John Marks offers sage advice on system building strategies.

Letters
Readers praise their favorite Stereophile writers, explain why they've given up on vinyl, and announce a memorial fund for the family of the late John Potis.


Industry Update
High-end audio news, including the release of a new Stereophile CD, a groundbreaking new speaker from KEF, and Marantz issues its Ken Ishiwata-tribute "Pearl" components.

Want to know more? Go to the "News Desk" at www.stereophile.com for up-to-the-minute info.

Sam's Space
Sam Tellig auditions a $250/pair speaker from Mordaunt-Short and compares Music Hall's new dac25.2 DAC with the Cambridge DacMagic.

Analog Corner
It's phono preamplifier time—Michael Fremer spends quality time with the Ypsilon VPS-100 from Greece and the Audio Research PH7 from Minnesota.

Listening
Art Dudley compares RadioShack speaker cables with his long-term reference cable, Naim's NACA5.

The Fifth Element
John Marks is mightily impressed by the Peachtree Nova D/A integrated amplifier.

Record Reviews
For August's Recording of the Month, we chose Dark Night of the Soul, the controversial new collaboration between Danger Mouse and Sparklehorse and a raft of guest vocalists. In classical, we have a new recording of Shostakovich by pianist Jenny Lin. In Rock/Pop, we have new recordings by David Bazan and Van Morrison. And in Jazz, we have the latest from Joel Harrison, Red Holloway, and Charles Tolliver.

Manufacturers' Comments
Responses from Noble Electronics, Klipsch, Audio Valve, Music Hall, Mordaunt-Short, Miyajima Labs, and daTZeel.

Aural Robert
After nearly a decade leading Pedro the Lion, singer/songwriter David Bazan has gone solo...in more ways than one, by Robert Baird.
Music Direct Product of the Year
The Wadia iTransport is a True High End Music Server!

Wadia iTransport in Silver or Black $379

Call us about all of our Money Saving iTransport/DAC Bundles!

Connect Your Laptop or Computer to Your Audio System!

HRT MusicStreamer & MusicStreamer+
Music Direct Best Buys!

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The perfect way to connect your computer to your audio system! Just plug in the Streamer via USB cable and it outputs pure music via an RCA interconnect. Instantly recognized by your computer and is up and running in under a minute. Call for more information!

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Works of Art
Editor:
Over the last years I have enjoyed the articles written by Art Dudley. His latest one, on cleaning records ("Listening," May 2009, p.35), is a work of art. Art writes wonderfully and chooses the illustrations with superb taste. He should be on the World Heritage List. —Kjell Edward Johnson Bergen, Norway kjell.evjohnson@gmail.com

Works of Bob
Editor:
Robert Deutsch's article "Are You a Sharpener or a Leveler?," in February 2009 (see www.stereophile.com/awesome/are_you_a_sharpener_or_a_leveler), is simply one of the best-written articles about audio that I have ever read. I have seen too many heated exchanges, in online audio communities, between the night-and-day-sonic-difference guys and the wire-is-wire folks. I believe Mr. Deutsch's article can end all arguments and flames related to and caused by the subjectivity of our hobby. It should be forwarded, leafleted, and passed on to help bring audiophile world peace. —Gerald Garcia Manila, Philippines geraldmichaelgarcia@yahoo.com

Works of Sam
Editor:
I have been a reader of Stereophile all of my adult life. (I am 59, so that would make it just over two years now.) I don't know if it's me, or if years of therapy are finally paying off, but I consider your May 2009 issue the best I have read. Here's the deal: As long as you continue to publish "Sam's Space," by Sam Tellig, I will continue to renew my subscription. That's a promise.

Thank you for bringing some joy and happiness into my life. —Alan images.alan@gmail.com

Understanding Sam
Editor:
If Sam Tellig prefers CDs' and shellacs' sound to LP and SACD—the latter is "too smooth" he says, no doubt live music troubles him, too—I now have a great literary reference from him. Anything that sounds just right to Sam is likely to annoy me. It finally explains his enthusiasm for HD radio, too. —David Dekert Woodstock, GA dddekert@gmail.com

Hi-Rez Insanity
Editor:
Are HDtracks, Naim, and Linu insane? They're finally doing digital right (hi-rez), yet they want $29 for an album? I complained to iTunes about them offering downloads at 128kbps and they've now upgraded to 256kbps. Perhaps someday the above-mentioned companies will have some mercy on the not-so-independently wealthy among us. All I know is, I'd better bc damn sure I like every track on an album before I lay down $29. —Jim Chambers jameschambers@hotmail.com

"Red Book" Reality
Editor:
Has "Red Book" CD playback evolved to the point where it competes favorably with SACD players? I wonder because the RBCD market is still very strong, so I expect competition to drive innovation. The market for SACD appears to be relatively small, so I expect there to be little innovation. Or is the SACD format so superior that RBCD playback will never really close the gap? —Erik Smith eriksmith@fastmail.fm

The current state of CD playback can be of extraordinary high quality, but see Michael Ferner's review of the dCS Scartatti SACD playback system elsewhere in this issue for another viewpoint. —Ed.

Enough already
Editor:
Many of us just plain sick of hearing stated as fact that LPs are superior to digital. Enough already.

It may be the preference of some of your writers, but that is what it is: a preference. I recently heard a "boutique" half-speed-mastered LP on the $28k SME turntable you recently reviewed, with equipment that included the Audio Research PH7 and Wilson Audio Sophia, then the same music on the remastered CD. I much preferred the CD, and that's not even counting the surface noise, pops, and clicks.

When your writers bash us over the head with analog superiority as fact, it gets real, real old. —Pharoh Master San Diego, CA PharohMaster@gmail.com

Out of control?
Editor:
I just read Saul Adler's message in the March 2009 issue ("Letters," p.9), and I've been thinking the same thing. You guys are out of control. I've been into the audio hobby since I was 12, about 40 years ago, and over that time, it seems like magazines such as yours have gone into the twilight zone, into another dimension of prices that I can't, or even want to deal with. I'm never going back to vinyl, even if it does supposedly sound better. Twenty-five years ago, I gave up the ticks and pops and the constant cleaning, which annoyed the crap out of me. It there is a tiny loss of fidelity, so be it, I don't care. I'm not paying thousands of dollars for a CD or DVD player either. There's a certain price point where more money just goes for status, and I'm not into that. I don't "believe in" cables, either, and won't pay insane prices, and I have to laugh at people who do.

As Saul said, good luck, guys. I'm done! —Barry Felstein Address withheld by request

John Potis Family Relief Fund
Editor:
As you may know, John Potis, a reviewer for SoundStages!, www.6moons.com, and Positive Feedback Online, passed away suddenly at the age of 49. We're working to help his family. We're asking if you'd publish the following announcement in your publication; your support in these difficult times is much appreciated.

John Potis is survived by a wife and two daughters, ages 12 and 9. A Potis Family Relief Fund has been established for contributions to help his family. Cash contributions can be made by sending a check or money order to: Potis Family Relief Fund, 13510 Bleenheim Road N., Phoenix, MD 21131. Contributions can also be sent through PayPal to JDPotis@comcast.net.

Donations in kind can be made by contacting Eric Luebehusen at (202) 720-3361 or cheric@comcast.net. Donations in kind will be auctioned on www.audiofon.com; all proceeds will go to the Potis Family Relief Fund.

With thanks. —Vinh Vu gingko@gingkoaudio.com
With perfect finesse, Meteor speaker cable combines the world's best sounding metals: PSC+ copper and PSS solid silver. Meteor employs the same overall Dual-Quad Spread-Spectrum geometry and 72v Dielectric-Bias System (DBS) which have proven themselves so extremely effective in all-copper Rockefeller and Gibraltar, and in all-silver K2.

The result: sky high performance at a down-to-earth price. ($3,090/8ft. pair, Full-Range or Single-BiWire)
THE INTERNET

John Atkinson

Released in July, Live at Otto's Shrunken Head (STPH020-2) is the latest Stereophile CD from reviewer Bob Reina's jazz quartet, Attention Screen. Unlike the group's first CD, Live at Merkin Hall (STPH018-2, released in 2007), which was recorded with multiple microphones, I captured the eight improvisations on Live at Otto's using a single pair of mikes, DPA cardoids used in an ORTF configuration.

Otto's Shrunken Head, of course, is nothing like Merkin Hall. Merkin is a proper concert hall with plush seating, about 450 people. It features a stage large enough for an entire orchestra, and is known for its outstanding acoustics. By contrast, Otto's, in Manhattan's Lower East Side, is a Tiki Bar. There are leopard-skin chairs for about 25 people, plus standing room for another 25. There is a small, triangular platform for the band in one corner of the room, barely separating the musicians from the audience. There are beaded curtains with paintings of exotic mermaids and hula girls. The room is "treated," so to speak, with straw, grass, and bamboo. While Attention Screen were undoubtedly excited to play in Merkin's grand space, notes Stephen Mejias, he sensed that the band were more comfortable in the intimate, playful atmosphere of Otto's.

I recorded Attention Screen at Otto's five times altogether, but the improvisations on this CD date from just three of those gigs: October 27, 2006, December 4, 2007, and April 11, 2008. The outputs of the two mikes were captured on my Macintosh laptop's hard drive using a Metric Halo ULN-2 FireWire audio interface running at 88.2kHz with 24-bit resolution.

While the new CD doesn't have the clean, open clarity of Merkin, the documentary approach used to create Otto's vividly captures the ambiance of the band playing balls to the wall in the confined space of the famed tiki bar. You can hear the audience, the clicking of glasses and the sounds of the bar's pinball machine, even acoustic breakthrough from the jukebox next door. But most of all, you can hear a solid, two-dimensional image of the band—Mark Flynn's waywardly explosive drums, bassist Chris Jones's fretless grooves and explorations, guitarist Don Fiorino's out-there improvising, and the supporting framework of Bob Reina's Kurzweil electronic piano—and the louder you play the CD, the more there is to hear, which is pretty much the definition of a high-end recording.

Live at Otto's Shrunken Head is presented in a Digipack made from recycled materials and is available from the magazine's e-commerce page—http://ssl.blueearth.net/primedia/home.php. Price is $9.99 plus S&H. But as a special introductory offer, you can save $4 by purchasing Live at Otto's with Live at Merkin Hall for the special "twofer" price of just $18, again plus S&H.

UK: MAIDSTONE, KENT

Paul Messenger

In the 1970s and '80s, when a computer needed its own building and a power station to match, KEF was unquestionably the world leader in hi-fi loudspeaker technology, having pioneered Fast Fourier Transform (FFT) analysis. Since then, however, the company has suffered from takeovers and troubled times. Although its egg-shaped satellite speakers have been notably successful in the home-theater field, and occasional innovations such as activated-carbon (ACE) bass and Uni-Q drivers have kept things ticking along, nothing from KEF has set the world of serious hi-fi alight the way the radical Reference 105 and 104-2 models did decades ago.

That could be about to change. In 2006, KEF established a ritual of showing its interesting flagship loudspeaker projects at the annual Munich show in May, first with the huge Austin Project prototype, and then, in 2007, its much
moves its monthly meeting to the last Wednesday of each month. AudioNut (9299 W. Olive Avenue, #401, Peoria) will host Larry Owens, US representative for Australian manufacturer DEQX, demonstrating the Tikandi loudspeaker system. A raffle is planned and refreshments will be served. Guests and new members are invited. For more info, call Adam Goldfine at (602) 524-3974.

CALIFORNIA

Sunday, July 26, 2-5pm: The Los Angeles and Orange County Audio Society will hold its monthly meeting at Acoustic Image (11124 Sunshine Terrace, Studio City). Society member Elliot Midwood will demonstrate a high-priced, high-end audiophile system, as well as a "recession system" offering great performance at low cost. Attendees will have the opportunity to hear loudspeakers from Tonian Acoustics and meet designer Tony Minasian. A raffle is planned, lunch will be served, and parking is free. Guests and new members are invited. For more info, visit www.laocas.com, or call Bob Levi at (714) 281-5850.

Sunday, September 20, 2-5pm: The Los Angeles and Orange County Audio Society will hold its monthly meeting at Manley Laboratories (13880 Magnolia Avenue, Chino). Society member EveAnna Manley, recipient of the 2009 Founders Award, will give the membership an exclusive tour of Manley's manufacturing facility. A raffle is planned, lunch will be served, and parking is free. Guests and new members are invited. For more info, visit www.laocas.com, or call Bob Levi at (714) 281-5850.

Sunday, October 25: The Los Angeles and Orange County Audio Society will hold one of its biggest dealer events at Weinhhart Design (2337 Roscomare Road, Los Angeles). Society member David Weinhhart will demonstrate a cost-no-object system including the Magico M-5 loudspeakers; an 800-lb, $150,000 Clearaudio turntable; and TARA Labs Reference cables. Several different systems will be available for auditioning, and surprise industry guests will attend. A raffle is planned, lunch will be served, and parking is free. Guests and new members are invited. For more info, visit www.laocas.com, or call Bob Levi at (714) 281-5850.

INDUSTRY UPDATE

Concept Blade is the work of Mark Dodd and Jack Oclusive-Brown. Dodd is a well-established figure probably best known for the Tulip Waveguide he created for Tannoy a few decades ago. Much of his work for Gold Peak, owners of Celestion and KEF, has been in Celestion’s ProAudio (musician) division, but since his appointment in 2001 as head of research for GP Acoustics, he’s taken more of an interest in KEF. Dodd has used his waveguide expertise to improve KEF’s Uni-Q coaxial driver (see “Industry Update,” February 2007 and May 2008), first by modifying the cone profile and surround to avoid secondary reflections, and then by adding the Tangerine Waveguide (named in homage to Altec’s Clifford A. Hendrickson) to simulate a spherical source radiation from the elliptical-section tweeter. Jack Oclusive-Brown, a recent graduate of Southampton University’s Institute of Sound and Vibration Research, is an alleged wiz with mathematics and computers—Finite Element Modeling (FEM) techniques being crucial to speaker development these days—who cut his teeth on KEF’s KHT3005 driver and has done most of the acoustical engineering for the Blade.

The heart of the three-way Blade is a radical new “10th-generation,” 4″ Uni-Q mid/treble coaxial driver that is the subject of four new patent applications and takes Dodd’s earlier waveguide developments to the next level. The midrange cone needs to be very rigid to maintain pistonic action, and hence wavefront integrity, through and above the crossover region. To this end the cone is injection-molded, complete with reinforcing ribs, from liquid-crystal polymer. It’s also driven nodally by a 3″ voice-coil, which increases the bandwidth and incidentally leaves lots of room for the coincident tweeter in its center.

The cone edge, surround, and frame of the driver are smoothly integrated into an indented portion of the molded enclosure proper, the indent flared to extend the wave-
guide. For this prototype the curved enclosure was made from a sandwich of molded carbon-fiber around a balsa-wood core.

The 1" tweeter has a two-part dome of stiffened titanium that combines a spherical cap (for acoustic reasons) with an elliptical substrate (for strength), the combination giving much greater stiffness. A new, more advanced Tangerine Waveguide is used to improve the coupling of dome to air.

For this prototype technology demonstrator. I live just a 40-minute drive from KEF's base in Maidstone, Kent, and managed to wangle an invitation for a "private view" and listen. Although the only room available didn't lend itself to judging the Blade's bass quality, there was certainly ample bass on offer. Impressively, I could feel no vibration through the enclosure, even when music with deep bass was played at seriously high levels. I sat quite close to the Blades, and it was obvious that they have some remarkable properties. The stereo images were more precisely positioned and better focused than I'd ever heard, while the top end had a marvelously sweet and neutral delicacy.

Still, the Concept Blade is only a prototype technology demonstrator. I well recall Laurie Fincham, technical director of KEF through the 1970s and '80s, telling me, "Anybody can build a high-quality hi-fi component involved much more than putting together in a box a collection of specified components. This led him to his experiments in the "dark arts" of hi-fi design—selection of components, grounding techniques, wire routing, etc.—that proved to be the foundation of much of his later work.

After a brief spell with Pioneer, during which he created the hugely successful PL12 turntable by tweaking the all-but-forgotten PL11, Ishiwata embarked on his 30-year career with Marantz. While the company itself has moved across continents and gone through several changes of ownership, Ken Ishiwata himself has provided the sort of technical, philosophical, and sonic continuity that has gone some way toward keeping alive the spirit of founder Saul Marantz in this era of globalization.

I asked Ishiwata about the US, where Marantz USA is currently making serious efforts to get back into serious hi-fi and to re-establish Marantz as a specialist in quality sound—and that the new KI Pearl components are a key part of that strategy.

UK: LONDON
Paul Messenger

Formal press get-togethers have become relatively rare events since specialist hi-fi retrenched from its mass-market hegemony in the 1970s and '80s. Turnout was therefore very good when Marantz tempted the UK press corps with lunch at The Ivy, one of London's leading restaurants, to celebrate Brand Ambassador Ken Ishiwata's 30 years with the company—and, I'm sure not coincidentally, to introduce his latest gift to the Marantz brand, the KI Pearl combo of SACD/CD player and integrated amplifier.

The KI Pearls bear a superficial resemblance to such established Marantz models as the SA-1152 SACD/CD player (reviewed in Stereophile, February 2009) and PM-15S1 amplifier, but that was also always Ishiwata's approach with his earlier Ken Ishiwata Signature (KIS) models. Using an existing Marantz model as a starting point, he "tunes it up" by substituting strategic components to improve the overall sound quality at relatively modest extra cost.

Sexy silk-black finish apart, the KI Pearls' casework, appearance, and some internal building blocks do indeed show superficial similarities to existing Marantz models, but the new duo actually have very different internal architecture and components, and different socketry too.

As Ishiwata pointed out, achieving good technical performance is easy enough these days, but doesn't explain why disc players still sound so different from one another. Having little faith in commercially available CDs, he first made his own new recordings, then used them throughout the development process, his sole objective being to try to better convey the music's emotional content. The process, while taking much longer than he'd anticipated, proved enjoyable and instructive.

No less interesting was Ishiwata's presentation, in which he explained how an early addiction to hi-fi had ultimately led to his long and successful career with Marantz. Having built his first amplifier in the 1950s, when he was 10, he recalled first hearing a serious hi-fi system, based around the legendary US-built Marantz 7C pre-amplifier, in his teens. Ishiwata managed to borrow that 7C in order to try to build a replica for himself, but when he first switched on his copy, he was greeted by silence due to electrical instability. He first had to learn the delicate art of applying feedback correctly, and even then, he discovered that his copy's sound quality fell well short of the 7C's. He therefore also learned early on that creating a high-quality hi-fi component involved much more than putting together in a box a collection of specified components. This led him to his experiments in the "dark arts" of hi-fi design—selection of components, grounding techniques, wire routing, etc.—that proved to be the foundation of much of his later work.

I asked Ishiwata about the US, where Marantz USA is currently making serious efforts to get back into serious hi-fi and to re-establish Marantz as a specialist in quality sound—and that the new KI Pearl components are a key part of that strategy.
Manley Labs
Skipjack Preamp Source Selector

Four-into-one or three-into-two audiophile source selector. Too clever and very useful! Behind the deceptively simple facia is some incredibly clever and thoughtful engineering. A brilliant design!

MANLEY SKIPJACK
PREAMP SOURCE SELECTOR $900

Harbeth
HL-Compact 7ES-3 Speakers

"...practically a textbook on how to make a low-coloration, high-accuracy, compact two-way.

HARBETH HL-COMPACT 7ES-3
SPEAKERS $3,895 (Eucalyptus)

Audience
Adept Response aR12 Power Conditioner

"...12T made the kind of difference in clarity and immediacy that you get when you put a great amp or preamp into a good system."
- Harry Pearson, The Absolute Sound, April/May 2009

AUDIENCE ADEPT RESPONSE aR12
POWER CONDITIONER $8,000 (TEFLON)

Thorens
TD 350

The TD 350 represents the perfect symbiosis of a mass drive and a subchassis turntable and unites the benefits of both technologies.

THORENS TD-350 with RB250 Tonearm
$3,739 (with SME-M2 Tonearm $5,725)

Shelter
501II MC Cartridge .4mv

Owners of this wonderful cartridge have said the Shelter 501 II easily fills the sonic shoes of cartridges costing two or three times as much. It blends its musical presentation with a warm, extremely musical midrange, deep, authoritative bass and a smooth as silk top end.

SHELTER 501II MC CARTRIDGE $995

Symposium Acoustics
Rollerblock Jr.

Rollerblock Jr. consists of 3 tops and bottoms and 3 center bearings to make 3 "Double Stacked" isolator/coupler units. Set of three. (Also available with Tungsten Carbide balls.)

SYMPOSIUM ROLLERBLOCK JR. $169 (TUNGSTEN $219)

Musical Surroundings
Phonomena II Phono Preamp

With 13 gain options and 17 loading options available for proper cartridge/system matching, this unit is the proverbial Swiss Army Knife, offering 221 electrical possibilities.

MUSICAL SURROUNDINGS PHONOMENA II $600

Pro-Ject
RM-5 SE Turntable

Included is a Sumiko Blue Point No.2 high-output moving coil cartridge which is factory mounted for your convenience. Nominal speeds 33/45 RPM.

PRO-JECT RM-5 SE TURNTABLE $999

Exposure
2010S Integrated Amp

"...The 2010S (integrated amplifier) is a powerful, straight-talking amp that trades in some of the refinement and insight of the class leaders for a sizeable dose of fun. If you just want to sit back and enjoy music, give it a whirl."
- What Hi-Fi, 2006

EXPOSURE 2010S INTEGRATED AMP $1,095

AcousTech
Big Record Brush

This model fits across the entire radius of a 12-inch LP. Made of a unique blend of soft natural hairs and conductive synthetic fibers that result in effective static dissipation.

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$34.99 (w/out GROUNDING CORD)
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Thorens TD 2030 Turntable

Koetsu Rosewood Signature Platinum

PMC DB-1 Speakers

Sennheiser HD800 Headphones

Denon DL-301 MKII

AcousTech Stylus Force Gauge

Analogue Productions Ultimate Analogue Test LP

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John Maynard Keynes—rhymes with brain—was lionized as the greatest economist of his era. Yet he sometimes got things wrong.

Today’s business and financial journalists have an even more miserable record of forecasting the markets. I recall all those articles praising AIG, Merrill Lynch, Lehman Brothers, Bear Stearns. How Citigroup was getting a makeover. My favorite was a cover story about how Enron was “reinventing” itself, which appeared in Bloomberg Markets magazine about six months before Enron imploded.

So much “information” is worthless. Or worse.

But I have derived insights from a pair of recent books about finance and market crashes. Frank Partnoy’s The Match King: Ivar Kreuger, the Financial Genius Behind a Century of Wall Street Sandals is a biography of the shady Swedish financier who started out by establishing monopolies on the manufacture of matches in various countries. Then he became a lender to Poland and France. Kreuger invented all sorts of securities no one could understand, including financial derivatives. Next to this financial finagler from Stockholm, Charles Ponzi and Bernie Madoff were small potatoes.

Kreuger was global; he brought down brokerage houses and governments. Yet he was no Bernie Madoff. He built companies, like Swedish Match, that still exist today. (The company makes snuff.) And he discovered Greta Garbo. My late friend Lars thought he was one of the great Swedes of all time.

Another good read is Liaquat Ahamed’s Lords of Finance: The Bankers Who Broke the World. It’s about the men who headed the central banks of the US, Great Britain, France, and Germany in the 1920s and early 1930s. Want to know exactly why the US stock market crashed in 1929? Want to know why central bankers can’t be trusted to tell the truth? This book only underscores how poor was the grounding I got in economics. My professors were as bad as today’s journalists. Better to become an MBA and at least learn something practical—like how to cheat people.

I have to transition to audio somehow. I was reading Lords of Finance while listening to a recording of Rachmaninoff’s Symphony 1 with Gianandrea Noseda conducting the BBC Philharmonic (CD, Chandos CHAN 10475). During the final movement, the lights dimmed and the sound distorted. I rushed to reduce the volume and unplug the amp. Had I damaged the LFD Integrated Zero LE III? The Verity Audio Parsifal Ovation speakers? I decided not to give the amp another stress test and to wait till next morning.

Whew! No damage to amplifier or loudspeakers. Gene Rubin, of Gene Rubin Audio, an LFD dealer, guesses I would have only blown a fuse. I’m not so sure.

The LFD Integrated Zero is rated to deliver 60Wpc into 8 ohms. You can get much more power for a lot less money.

I laugh my evil laugh.

Most consumer electronics, including amplifiers, are mass-produced. This means they can’t be individually tweaked or fine-tuned. But a few amps are not mass-produced, and that’s a big reason you pay more. LFD, Lavardin, of France. Switzerland’s DarTZeel. Among others.

Back to the LFD, which almost broke during its stress test—rather like a bank under FDIC scrutiny. It’s bench-built, and fine-tuned before it leaves the factory—if factory is the word.

At whatever price, audiophiles tend to get the sound they deserve. As a friend, a retired car salesman, liked to say, “There’s an ass for every seat.” To get a quality of solid-state sound comparable to the LFD’s but with much more power, I would have to: a) opt for a similarly priced Lavardin, or b) spend as freely as Frenor. Or even Artie Dudley, these days.

Meanwhile, the LFD Integrated Zero LE III was the best-sounding amplifier—solid-state or tube—that I had on hand to drive Verity’s Parsifal Ovations. I’m not picking on Verity Audio—the Parsifals are hardly pigs for power—but the LFD can deliver only so much current, and small solid-state amps don’t tend to clip gracefully.

Now, Verity has introduced the Leonore floorstanding speaker ($15,995/pair in basic piano black), with a claimed sensitivity of 93dB/W/m and a steady 8 ohm impedance—meaning the speakers shouldn’t suck so much current from the amp. John Quick, of Tempo Sales & Marketing, Verity’s US distributor, delivered the new Leonores to my listening room and took away the Parsifals.
So I was lucky. I had the Parsifals, then the Leonores with which to evaluate the new dac25.2 D/A converter/headphone amplifier from Roy “Music” Hall. (The man is now a brand.) I used the McIntosh MCD205 CD changer or the Denon DCD-1650AR CD player as a digital transport, with Analysis Plus Digital Oval S/PDIF interconnect. The integrated amp was the LFD.

**Music Hall dac25.2**

Roy Hall has been Creek Audio’s US importer for more than 20 years. Did you know that all Creek gear is now made in China? Just like Cambridge Audio, Quad, and many B&W models. Just like some US speaker brands, for which virtually all parts are made in China but are assembled, it’s claimed, in the US. Three cheers for brands like LFD, B&W, Rega, Sugden, and Harbeth—all still made in the UK. For French marques made in France. For Italian products produced in Italy, etc.

Cambridge Audio has been manufacturing in China for more than a decade. Its parent company, The Audio Partnership, also manufactures Mordaunt-Short. I recall the days, not long ago, when British hi-fi manufacturers plastered Union Jacks all over their boxes, and sometimes tagged a knob on the front panel for good measure. I haven’t seen any Chinese flags on “British” gear.

Roy Hall started out manufacturing turntables in Slovakia. He still does. Then he linked up with Shanling.

According to its rear panel, the Music Hall dac25.2 is “Designed and developed in the USA.” I couldn’t find “MADE IN CHINA” on the chassis, but perhaps my review sample was a prototype. Cambridge Audio used to put this in tiny type: “MADE IN PRC.”

I know exactly where the dac25.2 was “designed and developed”: in Roy “Music” Hall’s office at 108 Station Road, in Great Neck, Long Island, New York. I hadn’t thought of scruffy Roy as a designer and developer, but why not? He knows a thing or two about sound quality and offering value for money. And Shanling, in Shen Zen, has years of experience building CD players. So if Hall wasn’t on the ball, Shanling’s Mr. Li would [ahem] re-educate him.

“I want to f--- the competition,” Roy told me, in his best native Glaswegian. Which is a swell attitude, and far better than “f--- the consumer,” a sentiment I’ve heard from more than one manufacturer.

The dac25.2 is available worldwide only from Music Hall. It is not a re-badged Shanling product, and there is no Shanling version of it floating around in Chinatown, or elsewhere on the gray market. The dac25.2 is Roy Hall’s product; it sells for $599.

“It’s amazing how you’ve made yourself a brand,” I said to Roy the other day. He knows what he wants to offer and what he wants to charge. He approached the dac25.2 the same way he does Music Hall turntables: by borrowing and then combining bits and pieces of what’s worked here and there. Pick four from Column A and two from Column B. Just like the Golden Garden Chinese restaurant in Great Neck. That’s a nifty name for Music Hall’s next product.

The dac25.2 is a combination digital-to-analog processor and headphone amplifier. And it’s tubed. It retails for $599, even though Roy, playing to the hilt the role of thrifty Scot, claims it’s worth hundreds more.

Four from Column A: S/PDIF coaxial, XLR, TosLink optical, and USB inputs. And two analog outputs from Column B: RCA single-ended or balanced XLR. There are no analog inputs and there is no iPod dock. But there is a ¼” headphone jack, along with its own volume knob (which can also be used to drive a pair of powered speakers in your office). There’s no remote control, but there’s a lot on offer here. And remember, even Creek is now made in China—just like your GE toaster or your Proctor Silex coffeemaker.

A Texas Instruments (formerly Burr-Brown) 24-bit/192kHz D/A chip provides the dac25.2’s 8x-oversampling digital filter. Upstream, a Texas Instruments SRC4192 takes care of reclocking, jitter control, and sample-rate conversion. I preferred the 192kHz setting for the most airy, open, relaxed sound. Roy says he prefers no upsampling.

The dac25.2 is a substantial component: 10 lbs shipping weight—but what about net? I used the same technique we use to weigh Maksik, our cat. First, I stand on the scale. Then I stand on the scale holding Maksik . . . or the dac25.2. The dac25.2 weighs 7.8 lbs.—about 2 lbs less than Maksik. It (not he) measures 8.5” (220mm) W by 3.75” (95mm) H by 13.5” (345mm) D. Only a mains cable is supplied; as I discovered, the USB cable is on you.

Roy was incredulous. “You bought a USB cable?”

Yeah, I felt I should have that particular cable on hand, so I ran down to RadioShack. Cost me 20 bucks. I cursed under my breath.

I put the dac25.2 on my office desktop and attached it to my Mac mini via USB. I used the ¼” headphone output with mini-adapter to drive my ancient Advent powered speakers. I ran iTunes...
and listened to Internet radio—mainly KCSM, the Bay Area jazz station, and some classical from Cleveland’s WCLV. When I find stations I like, I stick with them. Ask me about car crashes near Dead Man’s Curve (in Cleveland).

With my venerable Advents connected to the dac252.2’s headphone output, I thought the sound of Internet radio was splendid. Same with my Audio-Technica ATH-AD700 headphones: splendid but not stupendous. What can you expect from Internet radio? One thing I didn’t like: Turning off the dac252.2 produced a squeak, followed by something between a speak and a pop. Unplug your ‘phones first. Turn off your powered speakers. I heard no such transients through the dac252.2’s fixed-level analog outputs; this problem seems to affect only the headphone stage.

Art Dudley loves Wavelength Audio’s Cosecant USB DAC, which costs “only” $3500. Funny how Artie has become such a liberal (heh heh) spender, although he does suggest that $100k for The Lars integrated amplifier is a bit over the top. Still, he’s been Fremerized! I haven’t heard Gordon Rankin’s Cosecant DAC, but I believe Artie when he says it’s a honey. I just wonder whether or not I need one for Internet radio. (Much as I like Apple computers, I refuse to buy a laptop and then be chained to it. My Mac mini stays in the office.)

The dac252.2 sounded especially swell with Internet radio. (With Internet radio so readily available, does anyone actually need HD Radio—especially since HDR signals crap out so quickly in the car?) Maybe it’s that single 6922 tube—an ElectroHarmonix made in Russia!—in the dac252.2’s analog output stage, softening the sound, filling in the harmonics. (The 6922 is similar but not identical to a 6DJ8.)

**The competition**

I was interested to hear how the dac252.2 would compare with two of my reference standards: the Cambridge Audio DacMagic D/A converter that I reviewed in March and Musical Fidelity’s V-CAN headphone amplifier (see my May column). Could I have it all in one box?

Bear in mind that the w has no headphone output, the V-CAN has no DAC, and neither has tubes. Funny how Roy has warmed to tubes, now that he sells his own tube products. Funny, too, now Roy is selling tubes, how I’m rediscovering the virtuous of solid-state.

Back and forth I went: Cambridge DacMagic or Music Hall dac252.2?

Two jazz recordings brought differences to the fore. I listened to “Life-light,” from Freddie Hubbard’s *On the Real Side* (CD, Times Square). Drummer E.J. Strickland sounds stupendous at the start, and is magnificently recorded—cymbals, brushwork, whatever it is drummers do. The DacMagic presented transients with crystalline clarity: quick, with no smearing. The dac252.2, by contrast, seemed slightly smeared and slower.

I noted much the same with Shirley Horn’s *Live at the 1994 Monterey Jazz Festival* (CD, Monterey Jazz Fest)—I just melted on “The Look of Love.” With the DacMagic, Horn’s voice and piano, and the work of drummer Steve Williams, grabbed me with an immediacy that the dac252.2 couldn’t equal, for all its spacious, euphonic quality: sound touched by tubes. Or tube.

This is why hi-fi is great: It can resurrect performers who are no longer with us, like Hubbard and Horn. This seems far more important with jazz, in which the performance is paramount, than it is with composition-driven classical music. We have on the one hand Monk, Bird, Clifford, Dizzy, and Satchmo, and on the other Wolfgang, Ludwig, Franz, and Dmitri. Someone could come along and blow away all other performances of Beethoven’s Violin Concerto, but there will never be another Louis Armstrong or Bing Crosby.

I noticed the same thing with well-recorded chamber music, such as the Brahms String Quartets with the Quartetto Casals (CD, Harmonia Mundi HMU 987074). The Cambridge DacMagic imparted more openness, more air. Transients were quicker. The sound was more... magic. I know I’m looking to highlight and magnify differences, but the Magic struck me as the superior DAC.

I also discovered that, like John Atkinson, I now prefer the DacMagic’s Minimum Phase filter. Before I changed transports, I couldn’t distinguish between the Linear Phase and Minimum Phase filters. My preference became clear when I switched a Marantz CD635SE player for the more robust Denon DCD-1650AR, which is something of a tank.

I thought the dac252.2 sounded at least as resolving and sweet as my trusty but outdated Musical Fidelity Tri-Vista 21 DAC. I don’t remember what the Tri-Vista 21 sold for in the US, but it was roughly twice the price of the dac252.2—and it lacks a headphone output and a USB input.

I decided to try the headphone amp. This was easier: I simply attached my Musical Fidelity V-CAN to the dac252.2’s RCA analog outputs. I could go back and forth as easily as pulling the plug. For the most part, I used my Audio-Technica ATH-AD700 phones.

Yeah, I know—there are more resolving headphones, but not for the money, and few are as musical.

I thought the V-CAN was superior in terms of bass control: the V-CAN got a grip on the bottom end that the dac252.2 couldn’t manage. Switching from the dac252.2 to the Cambridge Audio DacMagic only emphasized the difference.

I think this is a problem with many headphone amps: a lack of bottom-end grip—balls, if you will. Ask Hall. The manufacturer specifies “headphone output impedance” (I think they mean output impedance) as 0.3 ohm, which is admirably low, and should drive just about any dynamic headphones. Maybe what the dac252.2 could use is a solid-state output buffer, as in Musical Fidelity’s more expensive X-CAN®. But now we’re talking about almost as much money as the Music Hall for a headphone amp alone—and no DAC included.

The dac252.2 won me over for the fine way it handled Internet radio via USB, for its combination of features for $599, and for the way it placed tubes—et, tube (the 6922 is a double triode)—in the signal path. Even the LFD Zero Integrated III LE seemed to benefit from the touch of tube.

The dac252.2 might be an excellent choice for your office, and all the hi-fi you may need. You can bypass your computer’s soundcard, run a USB cable...
to the dac25.2, and listen with powered
loudspeakers (you may need an adapter)
or headphones. I enjoyed sweet, full-
bodied, nonfatiguing Internet-radio
sound. No product can do it all, espe-
cially for $599. The dac25.2 offers a lot.

Mordaunt-Short Carnival 2 loud-
speaker
Norman Mordaunt and Rodney Short
founded their doubly eponymous loud-
speaker company in London in 1967. I
do love those names. Mordaunt. Short.
Twenty years later, they sold the com-
pany, which in 1999 was sold again, to
The Audio Partnership plc, which also
owns Cambridge Audio.

Norman Mordaunt left us in 1999.
So far as I know, Rodney Short is still
with us, and may he continue to enjoy a
long life. I remember Mordaunt-Short
when it was just Messrs. Mordaunt
and Short; their speakers were known for
good sound and exceptional value—
nothing fancy, mind you, only what
you needed to do the job.

John Bevier, of Audio Plus Services,
was delivering some more serious
equipment when he mentioned the
Mordaunt-Short Carnival 2 loudspeaker.
They were crazy good for crazy cheap,
said he: $250/pair.3 I've known John for
25 years, so I took him at his word.

Available in black or calvados cabi-
nets, the Carnival 2 is worth buying
just to irritate snobbish audiophiles or
visiting manufacturers. You do need a
pair of stands 24" or 28" high.

Each Carnival 2 measures 12.6"
(320mm) H by 6.3" (160.5mm) W by
8.6" (219mm) D and weighs 10.45 lbs
(4.75kg). That's the weight of Maksik
on a dining binge. There are two drive-
units. The bass/midrange driver uses
a 5.5" cone of a woven composite that
looks like Kevlar but isn't. The 1" tweet-
er is a soft fabric dome. The crossover
frequency isn't specified, but the word
from London is that it's around 3.5kHz.
The sensitivity is given as 90dB/W/m,
and the nominal impedance as 8 ohms
with a minimal impedance of 4 ohms.
The Carnival 2 is biwirable.

I wanted to have fun with these
speakers—after all, they're Carnivals. I
placed them close to the corners of my
listening room to load the bass—about
2' from the front wall and 2.5' from
the sidewalls—and toed 'em in. Then I
used the LFD Integrated Zero LE III
integrated amp to run 'em in, just as I
would a serious speaker. I rubbed my
hands in glee as I awaited my first vic-
tim: a visiting hi-fi distributor.

"I've got a great pair of $250 speakers!"

"Did you mean $250 sneakers?"
He knew damned well what I meant,
and he did want to join my circus. Or
carnival. He marched the Carnivals far-
ther into the room corners and turned
them so that their drivers faced the
wall. Amazing how manufacturers just
come in and take over. As soon as he'd
left, I put them back in place.

The Carnival 2s imaged like crazy.
Their soundstage was deep and wide, the
images solid and stable. What's wrong
with these $250 speakers—or speakers?
Nothing. Buy a pair just for fun.

All right, I did hear a certain rough-
ness in the upper midrange—maybe
at or just below the 3.5kHz crossover
point. At any rate, the midrange was
not so refined. (A listen to my Harbeth
Compact 7ES2 speakers in our liv-
ing room, with their reference-quality
midrange, served as a reality check.)
The treble was refined—and surprisingly
ly sweet. Or not surprisingly: the soft-
dome tweeter is made of fabric.

I didn't catch a case of metal-dome
tweeteritis, the way I do with so many
cheap and less cheerful speakers. As
expected, the Carnival 2 lacked deep
d Bass and didn't want to play very
loud. Mordaunt-Short recommends
maximum amplification of 100W. You
might get by with 3W nearfield in a
very small room.

Next, I tried the Carnival 2s in the
nearfield, less than 6' from my listening
throne, about 8' apart and angled so that
the tweeter axes "crossed" just behind
the throne. Once again, they worked
their magic. The imaging was so good,
the treble so sweet, the speakers such fun
that I could care less how they measure.

Maybe a lot of fancy technology—
complex crossovers, exotic metal
domes, etc.—just serves to mess up
a good speaker design. Retailers are
pleased with high tech because they
have a story to sell, and reviewers are
happy because they have measurements
to show—waterfalls and the like. Mean-
while, the listener sets up the speakers
at home and says, "Blah." Maybe the
Mordaunt-Short Carnival 2 is so good
because it doesn't have expensive drivers,
a complex crossover, the latest technol-
gy. I'm reminded of Mordaunt-Short
speakers of yore: simple, direct, unpre-
tentious—and good-sounding.

This article won't appear in print
for several weeks, so I have time to
perform my next trick—or treek, as
my wife, Marina calls it. I will move the
Carnivals back into the corners and
darken the room so that no one notices
their presence. I will make it look as if
far more expensive speakers are con-
ected to the LFD. Then I will conduct
a demonstration.

You can always use an extra pair of
speakers for an office, den, library, or
rec room—or prison cell, if you're a Wall
Street crook headed for the slammer.
Marina is amused that people in the
US are going to prison for economic
crimes—it's just like the Soviet Union!

You know that most other hi-fi writ-
ers won't recommend a speaker that
shares its name with a tacky cruise-
ship excursion. Or not surprisingly:
the soft-dome tweeter is made of fabric.
Unprecedented.

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

(The other two haven't been reviewed yet.)
The best loudspeaker on Earth. Period.
Reason #6: Full Metal Enclosure, not Metal-Hybrid or Wood-Based

YG Acoustics enclosures are completely precision-CNC-machined of solid aircraft-grade aluminum, and pressure-assembled using exclusive technology. Recently, it has become fashionable to use a hybrid construction: aluminum front and back panels, with a wood-based main enclosure.

There has been much debate online with regard to enclosure materials. Specifically, which approach is "vibration-free", "well-damped", or in less scientific terms "more musical". We would like to shed some light on the subject, by offering actual lab measurements of leading loudspeakers.

We have measured several competitors' products at our state-of-the-art lab. The leading European competitor uses a wooden bass enclosure; another competitor, which has received significant press attention, uses a hybrid construction, with machined aluminum front and back panels, and a wood-based enclosure.

Presented here are vibration analyses of both competitors, as well as of the YG Acoustics Anat Reference II. As can be seen, while our construction of fully machined aluminum for the entire cabinet is decidedly more complex and costly to implement than a hybrid enclosure, and even more so than an all-wood design, it offers significant sonic advantages. Ultimately, this is part of what makes the YG Acoustics Anat Reference II Professional the best loudspeaker on Earth.
Bass

As can clearly be seen, YG Acoustics' all-aluminum enclosure is superior to both other designs. Among the two competitors, the hybrid design has an advantage over the all-wood enclosure, but YG Acoustics' extra effort of machining the entire enclosure of solid aluminum pays great dividends.

YG Acoustics bass enclosure.
20–2,000 Hz. 5 dB div.
Competitor with hybrid enclosure, bass cavity (this is a one-box design, so there is no separate bass module).
Leading European competitor with wooden bass enclosure.
The graph plots vibration vs. frequency.
The lower the graph, the better.

Mid/High

In this measurement the differences are even more apparent: while in the bass (former graph) the competitor's aluminum front and back panels managed to somewhat tame the wood-based enclosure, in the critical midrange they are completely ineffective in this respect. Here, the wooden panels vibrate freely. Only YG Acoustics' massive all-aluminum construction makes sure that resonances have no chance of building up at any frequency range. On a side note, please direct your attention to the lower-frequency portion of the graph above — only YG Acoustics' construction effectively blocks low-frequency vibration from coming near the critical midrange and high-frequency drivers. This is yet another advantage of our modular design.

YG Acoustics mid/high enclosure.
20–2,000 Hz. 5 dB div.
Competitor with hybrid enclosure, midrange area (this is a one-box design, so there is no separate mid/high module).
The graph plots vibration vs. frequency.
The lower the graph, the better.

Reviewers Agree

When an enclosure is free from vibration, it allows the speakers to "disappear", and images to float freely with a holographic presence. When reviewing the Anat Reference II Professional (Stereophile March 2009), Wes Phillips commented: "The YGAs floated the nine singers deep in the acoustic..." "But most of all...instead of simply making the music come alive, they presented living, breathing musicians making music in my living room": "...the soundstage so huge I could have walked into it and wandered around for an hour or so.”

In the following issue (Stereophile April 2009), Fred Kaplan compared the Anat Reference II Professional to a Canadian competitor that uses a wood-based enclosure. Here were his comments, which focus on the lack of coloration of YG Acoustics loudspeakers: "On first hearing, I thought the YGAs sounded a bit metallic; after a while, I realized that they were as close to absolutely neutral as perhaps any speakers I'd ever heard. I'd grown accustomed to the "woodiness" of most speakers, even of very rigid models such as those made by [said competitor]. Listening to the YGAs reminded me that, however pleasant, wood warmth is still a coloration.”

Dear prospective dealers,
We have cleaned up our dealer network, to ensure a fair and friendly environment for all our dealers.
If you have been considering YG Acoustics, but are concerned about such issues, please contact us.

1 Measured using a Brüel&Kjær precision accelerometer. Results normalized to account for sensitivity. 2 Another leading competitor uses a resin enclosure for the bass, and a wood-based laminate for the midrange. To see the decided advantage that YGAcoustics’ construction offers over this concept, please see the vibration analysis in our ad titled “Reason x2” (Stereophile July, August and December 2008). 3 Please note that the leading European competitor has no mid-high enclosure to speak of, so it is not measured separately. However, its bass cabinet resonates sufficiently in midrange frequencies to rule it out as a real contender with respect to enclosure quality.
SOME AUDIOPHILES BELIEVE that acquiring a particular audio component will move their system to a much higher level of performance. But should that be the next step?

The reason I ask

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

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

Is it OK to tell the truth?

Few of those systems were performing at even half of the performance of which they were capable! And yet, the common denominator among their owners was the question, “What about upgrading to the (current rave) XYZ component?” Clearly, they thought that buying a new component—amplifier, CD player, etc.—was the path to audio nirvana. But their priorities were misplaced. There was no need to spend another dime on components until they had gotten their system optimized to be able to “play the room.”

Throwing money out of the window

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

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

“Jim’s book is one monster shortcut for the rest of us—if we’re serious about this business of better sound...”
—Srajan Ebaen, Publisher, 6moons.com

Disagree slightly

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

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

No more secrets

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

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

Best regards,

Jim Smith

*Excerpts and links at www.getbettersound.com

Get Better Sound: The Reference Set-up Manual that guarantees better sound from any home audio system!

Internet: www.getbettersound.com • Phone: 770-777-2095 • E-mail: jim@getbettersound.com
In case you hadn’t noticed, I enjoy being the center of attention. So when the gadget website Gizmodo asked to send an emissary to visit me in preparation for his writing a piece about audiophiles (and, I assumed, how nerdy, snobby, and deluded they are), I said yes. As anyone will tell you, even negative press is better than none.

Fortunately, they sent John Mahoney, who is more in love with music than with gadgets, and who later admitted that his visit was, indeed, simply to confirm the unflattering impression he had of audiophiles and audiophilia.

After hearing the first tune on my system, Mahoney exclaimed, “I’ve never heard anything like that before!”—which is what most non-audiophiles say when first experiencing high-performance sound. He was turned. You can read his story at: http://gizmodo.com/5213042/why-we-need-audiophiles.

In other “objectivist” news, many bloggers went after me personally—of the defensive variety. Included was a semi-flattering portrayal of my hobby, and especially—given how many went after me personally—of the hobbyist. Bring it on!

The responses to that story were more hysterical than a writer for another tech site, Boing Boing, said that the “well-crafted” Gizmodo story was “sad” because it hypothesized that, even if “normal” people can’t hear what makes “ultra-expensive gear special,” audiophiles claim that we can (http://gadgets.boingboing.net/2009/05/06/on-being-gizmodoed-b.html).

The responses to that story were even more hysterical, including this jaw-dropper: “Make no mistake why it is this way: the real problems of audio need real engineering to fix them. You need competence and skill to design speakers properly, or to record and replay a fully immersive sound field—whereas anyone can build snake oil products—especially the advertisers in the magazine that employs Michael.” That’s from someone who purports to represent the “objectivist,” “rational” wing of the audio populace.

In other “objectivist” news, many took up my invitation to download two vinyl-sourced files of the same tune, one before, one after “demagnetization.” Spectrum analysis of the two files showed clear differences similar to what was heard, but that didn’t satisfy some commentators, so a new, more formal test protocol was suggested. I will comply and again post the files. I’ll let you know the results in a future edition of “Analog Corner.”

Ypsilon VPS-100 phono stage & MC10 step-up transformer

In the November 2008 issue I reviewed True Life Audio’s Reikon phono preamplifier and step-up transformer from Greece, which cost $43,500. The Ypsilon VPS-100 moving-magnet phono stage, also from Greece, is pricey as well: $27,700, including $2700 for the MC10 step-up transformer for moving-coil cartridges. Still, that’s $15,800 less pricey than the three-box Reikon.

Like the TLA, the Ypsilon is beautifully built, with custom-extruded and -annealed silver wire hand-wired point-to-point, and housed in a substantial aluminum case. Also like the Reikon, the VPS-100 uses tubes in its rectification and amplification stages. But the single-box Ypsilon is no copycat design. It uses a 6CA4 rectifier tube and choke filter. RIAA is accomplished passively with zero feedback, using a transformer-based LCR network instead of the commonly used capacitor/resistor (CR) type. This is said to prevent capacitors’ dielectric absorption, which causes a delayed release of energy that produces a ringing character.

Ypsilon drives its split RIAA network using its own transformer, which features paper insulation and a core made of a special amorphous material. The 2123Hz filter pole uses an air-core inductor with “practically no stray capacitance” at the first gain stage, Ypsilon claims, with the 50–500Hz pole at the output of the first of two gain stages, both of which use Siemens C3g tubes specified for 10,000 hours of use. The first gain stage and 2123Hz-pole coils are mechanically decoupled from the rigid chassis. Ypsilon claims its LCR design sounds more natural, musical, and open than CR networks, and produces “better defined macro and micro dynamics.”

The Ypsilon VPS-100 is expensive, but it’s also beautifully built and impressively specced. Other specifications for this moving-magnet preamplifier include: Gain: 39dB. Input impedance: 47k ohms. Input capacitance: 200pF. Frequency response: 10Hz–40kHz, –3dB. RIAA accuracy: ±0.5dB, 20Hz–20kHz.

There are three wideband step-up transformers available: the MC20, (8Hz–60kHz), MC16 (8Hz–65kHz), and MC10 (8Hz–70kHz), intended for...
use with cartridges having output ranges of 0.2-0.3mV, 0.3-0.4mV, and 0.4-0.6mV, respectively, producing gains of 26dB, 24dB, and 20dB. Input impedances terminated into 47k ohms are respectively 140, 200, and 500 ohms; parallel RCA input jacks permit additional loading, if desired. The custom double-coil transformers are shielded with mu-metal and potted in 10mm-thick enclosures coated with soft iron-nickel. Each transformer costs $2700.

**Sound:** There are many great phono preamps in the category of Reasonable to Reasonably Expensive (under $8000), including the Einstein Turntable’s Choice, the Audia Flight, and the Manley Steelhead, two of which I own and enjoy. There are also some insanely expensive great ones, such as the Boulder Amplifiers 2008 and the True Life Audio Reikon. I haven’t heard the Boulder in a long time, but I hope to again soon; Boulder is about to introduce the 1008, a simplified, less expensive model based on the 2008’s circuitry.

The best tubey-sounding phono preamp I’ve heard is the expansive, smooth-flowing, treble-extended TLA Reikon. The best solid-state phono preamp—and by far the most dynamic I’ve ever experienced—is the Boulder 2008. There’s a reason that, despite its costing over $30,000, Boulder has sold over one hundred 2008s.

If you find the TLA too “tubey,” with insufficient weight and grip on the bottom, and the Boulder too analytical and “clean,” with not enough lushness and magic in the middle, the Ypsilon combined the best of both while costing considerably less than either. It produced an absolutely intoxicating blend of stupifyingly extended high frequencies, resolution, clarity, and transient precision, along with tight, deep, nimble, nonmechanical bass, and an ideally rich—i.e., not too rich—midrange with just the right amounts of body and harmonic structure.

Whether or not all this was the result of their LCR network, the first time I played a familiar record through the VPS-100, I easily heard everything Ypsilon claims for it. And when I played John Atkinson a few tracks, he heard it immediately: more natural, more musical, more transparent, more open, and especially, “better defined macro and micro dynamics”—as claimed.

I heard the high-frequency clarity, air, and extension of the best solid-state phono preamps, as well as the harmonic expression and musical flow of the best tube phono preamps, with none of the negatives of either. The Ypsilon was so quiet; so well-damped, clean,
and extended on the bottom; and so fast, airy, and open on the top, that I'd never have guessed I was listening to tubes. It had the best high-frequency definition I've ever heard from a phono preamp, and its ability to separate out musical strands in the higher frequencies was absolutely unprecedented in my experience.

In fact, the VPS-100's midband was so clean, flowing, and generous that I found myself wondering how a solid-state phono stage could even do that—the absence of any of the sonic signature of tubes was so complete that I kept forgetting that tubes were what I was hearing.

The soundstage was exceptionally expansive and deep—ask JA. Images were solid, dimensional, and of proper size—not inflated, as can sometimes happen on large stages.

The VPS-100 did a better job of clarifying and separating musical strands, particularly in the top octaves, than any other phono preamp I've heard, with perhaps the exception of the Boulder 2008, and did so with no hint of grain, glare, or etch—and I mean none. It absolutely did not sound "electronic," even as it set new standards in my listening experience for high-frequency extension, transient speed, and clarity. Cymbals, bells, xylophones, snare drums—all were reproduced with a fineness of resolution unprecedented in my listening experience . . . with one exception I'll get to in a bit.

The Ypsilon didn't particularly shine with any particular musical genre. It sounded as excellent reproducing electric music as it did with acoustic music. I played and recorded on CD-R a 45rpm lacquer of "Underture," from the Who's Tommy, that I was fortunate to get from Chris Bellman at Bernie Grundman's mastering studio. I'll be sure to bring the CD to the Rocky Mountain Audio Fest in October so that everyone can hear a reasonable approximation of the Ypsilon's abilities.

Shortcomings? Perhaps the VPS-100 didn't produce quite the last word in macrodynamics. Perhaps it wasn't as explosive as the best solid-state phono preamps. But I'm not really sure—I'm just scrounging around for something negative to write.

Another issue was hum. While the VPS-100's transformer is well shielded, I found that, to keep hum to a minimum, I had to position the unit carefully, dress the interconnects with equal care, and experiment with ground wires. Even at its worst, the hum was masked by even the quietest program material, and when I used the balanced outputs, it went away completely.

The Exception: I convinced On Track Audio, US importer of the True Life Audio Reikon, to send back the Reikon's separately housed transformer. It's not available separate from the $43,500 Reikon, but if it were, it would cost $10,000. The Reikon transformer added to the Ypsilon's high-frequency performance another dimension of shimmering clarity, without edge or harshness, but the differences weren't so great that I couldn't get over them once Ypsilon's MC-10 was back in the system and the Reikon had gone home.

Conclusions: I've gone to the expense of buying a number of good phono preamps so that I don't have to rely on my aural memories of their sounds. I compared all of these refer-
ences to the Ypsilon VPS-100, and good as they are—and they're good—the VPS-100 was noticeably better: more extended and resolving on top, richer and fuller and harmonically more expressive in the middle, and more nimble and texturally correct on the bottom, with no loss of deep-bass extension. Listen to Frank Sinatra or Nat King Cole through the VPS-100 and you'll immediately understand.

Right now I'm listening to an excellent-sounding, mono-only reissue of Miles Davis's 'Round About Midnight (LP, Columbia/Speakers Corner CL 949). In "All of You," Miles plays muted trumpet, Red Garland plays right at the top of the keyboard, Philly Joe Jones swishes the cymbals, and it's all just magical: the top piano notes exhibit absolute authenticity of transient structure and tonality; the cymbals ring sharply but naturally, each variation of touch and tone expressed with hair-raising clarity; and the muted trumpet is appropriately edgy and extended without ever sounding artificially crisp or thin, and wonderfully focused and compacted in size.

The Ypsilon VPS-100's price of $27,700 puts it out of reach for most of us, but those who can afford it know who they are, and they really need to hear this component. I haven't gotten over it, and don't expect to for some time. If ever.

Audio Research PH7 phono preamplifier
Audio Research Corp.'s PH7 tube/solid-state phono preamplifier ($5995) features power-supply regulation by three 6H30 tubes, a JFET front end (there's no step-up transformer), and four 6922 dual-triode tubes for additional gain and RIAA equalization. The gain is fixed at 57.5dB, and the output impedance is 200 ohms. While the PH7 has a high-enough overload margin that it can probably accept moving-magnet cartridges, most buyers will use it with
low-output moving-coils, as I did. The build quality is high, as we've come to expect from ARC over the decades, as is the level of user-friendliness: the cartridge loading (47k, 1k, 500, 200, and 100 ohms) can be selected via the remote control, as can Mono, Mute, and On/Off. There's even a monitor that lets you know how many hours your tubes have logged.

One oddity: On the front panel, the fluorescent screen's Mute/Operate notice is directly over the On/Off button, and Mute is the PH7's default status on turn-on. Until you get used to that, you'll inevitably accidentally hit On/Off on the front panel when you mean to un-Mute, meaning you'll have to wait through another startup cycle.

The review sample came well broken-in, with hundreds of hours of play already logged. Still, I found it best to give the PH7 an hour's warm-up before doing any serious listening. I had a yin/yang thing going, with the PH7 and Nagra's diminutive BPS that I reviewed in June ($2399), with both hooked up. The two phono preamps could not have been more different, though they shared one positive attribute: both were relatively quiet. The PH7 produced little in the way of "tube rush," thanks to its JFET front end, yet it sounded about as "tubey" as a good tubed phono preamp can, with maximum musical flow and no hint of etch or grain. The Nagra was lean, fast, tight, and clean. The PH7 was richer, warmer, more delicate, more harmonically complex, and more revealing of instrumental textures and nuances. If you crave more of those attributes, the PH7 delivered them on a platter.

The PH7's overall demeanor was one of effortlessness, with no edge-enhanced hyperdetail, but also no discernible softening or blurring of naturally sharp-sounding transients—at least until it was compared with a good solid-state phono preamp. Then you'll have one of those "tradeoff" discussions, because nothing's perfect except what you manage to produce by creating the ideal sonic recipe within your system.

Solo voices were particularly well served by the PH7, which produced vivid, articulate, three-dimensional apparitions that floated dramatically yet believably between the speakers. String tone was magnificent, brass and woodwinds were burnished and airy, and when 100-plus instruments were playing, the huge soundstage was lit up with a profusion of colors. The PH7 was not shy about producing enormous dynamic swings, and it did the low-level ones with great precision. I've just about worn out my new copy of Villa-Lobos's _The Little Train of the Caipira_, performed by Sir Eugene Goossens and the London Symphony (LP, Everest/Classic SDBR-3041), thanks to the PH7's mesmerizing delivery of this sonic spectacular.

Though its top end was clean and extended, the PH7's overall tonal demeanor was somewhat on the rich, dark side. So while the Lyra Titan can hardly be called a "lush" cartridge, it was through the PH7, and loading it down from 47k to 100 ohms didn't produce a great deal of difference on top. However, it did produce a big improvement in bottom-end articulation and control.

Speaking of which: While the PH7's bottom-end extension was robust, con-
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trol wasn't its strong suit. It could sound somewhat loose and overly voluptuous on bottom, particularly with electric bass, where speed and tautness are necessities—fast and tight are not words that describe the PH7's low-frequency performance. However, if you listen mostly or exclusively to acoustic music and your system is not already overloaded in the direction of assertive warmth, the PH7 won't spoil your party. Listening to orchestral music was always riveting through the PH7, rock less so.

Some astute visitors to my listening room were relieved when I switched from the warm clutches of the ARC PH7 to the Nagra BPS's effervescent speed and transient cleanliness—but within minutes they were missing the PH7's harmonic richness and complexity, and its generously deep and wide soundstaging. "There was something happening there," said one, pointing to the PH7, "that's not happening there," pointing to the BPS. Ten minutes later, he was yearning for the BPS's crisp attack.

And so it went, all evening. —BM

IN HEAVY ROTATION

1) Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young, Déjà Vu Live, Reprise 200gm LPs (2)
2) Richard Holmes & Gene Ammons, Groovin' with Jug, Pacific Jazz/Pure Pleasure 180gm LP
3) Leonard Cohen, Songs of Leonard Cohen, Columbia/Sundazed 150gm LP
4) Big Star, Radio City, Ardent/Classic 200gm Quiex Clarity SV-P LP
5) Thelonious Monk, The Complete Thelonious Monk at The It Club, Mosaic 180gm LPs
6) Donald Byrd, The Cat Walk, Blue Note/Music Matters 45rpm 180gm LPs (2)
7) Santana, Lotus, Columbia/Speakers Corner 180gm LPs (3)
8) Sergio Mendes, Timeless, Concord Jazz/Audible 180gm LPs (2)
9) Super Furry Animals, Dark Days/Light Years, Rough Trade (2 LPs+MP3 download)
10)Andrew Bird, Noble Beast, Fat Possum 180gm LPs (2)

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$59.99 AROR 012 (2 LPs)
I used to be with it, but then they changed what it was. Now what I'm with isn't it, and what's it seems scary and weird. It'll happen to you. —Abraham Simpson

unsurprisingly for such an insecure lot, we audiophiles can't help filtering our joys through the perceptions of others: Will our wives tolerate the looks of those speakers, or the tangle of wires behind them? Do our children risk being burned or electrocuted by our creepy-looking amplifiers? Why don't our younger friends share our passions? Why are there so many ugly people in this neighborhood?

The bad thing—or maybe the good thing—is that I've become less like us and more like them. I won't sacrifice any more floor space to the hobby than I have already. I won't allow in my living room any more record players that look like something a 14-year-old boy would sketch in the margins of his math notebook. Even though my daughter is old enough not to mistake an output tube for a Fisher-Price Chatter Phone, some of my friends have very small children, so I won't allow any more dangerous junk in my home, either.

And those stupid-ass cables are outta here.

**Tightwire**

Years ago, I spent about $200—audio-chump change today, but a considerable sum for me at the time—on a pair of Naim Audio NACA5 speaker cables. I bought the cables to use with a fine-sounding Naim 250 amplifier I'd acquired second-hand; although that amp is now long gone, I've held on to the NACA5s ever since, to use whenever some or another Naim amplifier comes my way for review.

My reasoning: Naim Audio has always insisted that their amplifiers be used only with their own speaker cables. They justify that policy by pointing to the former's lack of a specified output inductance and the latter's abundance of same—both of which qualities they say are intentional—and warn that a mismatch can result in suboptimal performance or even amplifier damage. And Naim won't honor warranties on any products whose repairs, in their opinion, were necessitated by using the wrong wire. Insert skull and crossbones here.

That's never been too big a deal for me. Then as now, Naim's speaker cables were among the most affordable accessory cables in all of high-end audio, often by a significant margin. And the warnings of incompatibility, while arguably overstated and underexplained, never struck me as unreasonable.

What did trouble me—and what troubles me a great deal more today, as I enter my irritable years—was the cable's lack of consumer-friendliness. The NACA5, which has remained unchanged in Naim Audio's product line since 1986, is essentially two chunky runs of stranded heavy-gauge wire twisted into a very tight bundle and molded into a thick sheath of Teflon, or something very much like it. Consequently, the NACA5 is stiffer than Swedish roadkill.1

And the problem with that? Three come to mind:

1) When attempting to make connections that are twisty, tight, or otherwise clumsy, NACA5 is worse than unwieldy: It's often flat-out (haw) impossible to use.

2) In stereo installations in which one loudspeaker is closer to the amp than the other—which most of them are, to one extent or another—the longer of two runs of NACA5 can't very easily be coiled up and hidden from sight.

3) Worst of all: In my living-room system, one especially recalcitrant NACA5 cable persists in disconnecting itself from its respective Quad II mono amplifier. It is, in effect, a wire that doesn't work: an extraordinary thing to say about a product of which so little is asked.

The last time Problem #3 happened was the day I decided to take the most drastic step of all: I drove to RadioShack.

**Tightwad**

In rural America, the local RadioShack outlet is often a smaller part of some larger retail business: a hardware store, an auto-parts store, a drugstore. So it is in Cooperstown, New York, where the RadioShack exists within Bruce Hall, Inc., a locally owned Ace Hardware franchise with which my family has done business for years. Thus, in my community, RadioShack wears a smarter, more helpful, and altogether more familiar face than I otherwise associate with the chain. No offense intended.

Nor do I mean to offend when I speak disdainfully of a recent past when the products sold at RadioShack stores were all made in the company's own factories—to minimize middlemen and maximize profits—and branded with names that meant nothing to anyone: Realistic, Archer, Optimus.2 Today, RadioShack sells real products with real names: BlackBerry, Sony, Apple, Monster.

That's right: You can now visit RadioShack for select audio accessories made by Monster Cable Products Inc.3 And I admit that I was tempted to do so, especially when I saw that my local outlet is often a smaller part of some larger retail business: a hardware store, an auto-parts store, a drugstore. So it is in Cooperstown, New York, where the RadioShack exists within Bruce Hall, Inc., a locally owned Ace Hardware franchise with which my family has

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1 From something called The Unofficial Naim Audio FAQ: "[Naim NACA5] will bend quite easily to allow it to go around corners." No, in fact, it will not: That's the kind of bullshit, along with nonsensical "advice" to let your vinyl clean your records for you and to disregard cartridge alignment entirely, that makes Flat-Earthers look foolish to most other audiophiles, especially here in the 21st century. Nor has the fact that their observations are always worded precisely the same way—whether appearing in consumer magazines and websites or the manufacturers' own literature—done much to enhance the Flat-Earths cause.

2 It's also nice that, in recent years, the RadioShack corporation has made their logo a little less goofy and nerdy. That pleases me no end, although I suppose it displeases those electronics enthusiasts who are themselves goofy and nerdy, and of whom there seems to be no shortage on the Internet.

3 But at RadioShack you can't drink Monster Energy Beverage, play Monster Minature Golf, or get a job through Monster.com.
announcing the “e”
enhanced Au24 cables and powerChords

“You owe it to yourself to hear what the Au24-e/powerChord-e system can deliver from your rig before you commit to any other cable products, at ANY price... You’ll most likely find yourself hearing some of the most engaging music your system has ever created, while saving some money in the process. Most musically recommended.”
Greg Weaver - Writer’s Choice Award - January 09

...existing Au24 cables and powerChords are upgradeable!
I learned that Monster Cable would Cable in bulk for 49¢/foot—and when I learned that RadioShack sells 14-gauge Monster for the cheapest insulated wire capable of doing the job (scientifically speaking, of course), which turned out to be RadioShack’s SW-1650 16-gauge speaker wire ($8.99/50’ roll). My only extravagance was to splurge on RadioShack’s 274-721 solderless banana plugs ($2.99/pair), rather than depend on bare wire to make my connections. It was, after all, payday. I brought home the RadioShack wire and plugs and put together my new cables that evening.

The next morning, I tore with real enthusiasm into my living-room system: Quad ESL loudspeakers, Quad II mono amplifiers, Fi preamplifier, Sony SCD-777ES SACD/CD player, and Linn LP12 turntable. I’d originally intended to do a careful A/B comparison between the old cables and the new, but after reaching behind the Quad II amplifiers and discovering that one leg of the right-channel NACA5 run had pulled itself free of the amp yet again, I became so angry that, without additional bother, I unplugged the Naim cables at both ends and substituted the RadioShacks. The new stuff worked: I became so angry that, without additional bother, I unplugged the Naim cables at both ends and substituted the RadioShacks. The new stuff worked: I became so angry that, without additional bother, I unplugged the Naim cables at both ends and substituted the RadioShacks. The new stuff worked: I became so angry that, without additional bother, I unplugged the Naim cables at both ends and substituted the RadioShacks. The new stuff worked: I became so angry that, without additional bother, I unplugged the Naim cables at both ends and substituted the RadioShacks. The new stuff worked: I became so angry that, without additional bother, I unplugged the Naim cables at both ends and substituted the RadioShacks. The new stuff worked: I became so angry that, without additional bother, I unplugged the Naim cables at both ends and substituted the RadioShacks. The new stuff worked: I became so angry that, without additional bother, I unplugged the Naim cables at both ends and substituted the RadioShacks. The new stuff worked: I became so angry that, without additional bother, I unplugged the Naim cables at both ends and substituted the RadioShacks. The new stuff worked: I became so angry that, without additional bother, I unplugged the Naim cables at both ends and substituted the RadioShacks. The new stuff worked:

The Naim NACA5s also allowed my music recordings to have a more realistic sense of flow: The listening experience was slightly but unmistakably easier and more natural than with the RadioShack cables. (I offer that observation in the utmost sincerity, of course, but I hesitate to mention it, if only because some readers still don’t know what the hell I’m talking about when I go off about the musical essence of Louis Armstrong’s “Within You Without You,” or the Beatles’ “Within You Without You,” or the Beatles’ “Within You Without You,” or the Beatles’ “Within You Without You,” or the Beatles’ “Within You Without You,” or the Beatles’ “Within You Without You,” or the Beatles’ “Within You Without You,” or the Beatles’ “Within You Without You,” or the Beatles’ “Within You Without You,” or the Beatles’ “Within You Without You,” or the Beatles’ “Within You Without You,” or the Beatles’ “Within You Without You,” or the Beatles’ “Within You Without You,” or the Beatles’ “Within You Without You,” or the Beatles’ “Within You Without You,” or the Beatles’ “Within You Without You,” or the Beatles’ “Within You Without You,” or the Beatles’ “Within You Without You,” or the Beatles’ “Within You Without You,” or the Beatles’ “Within You Without You,” or the Beatles’ “Within You Without You,” or the Beatles’ “Within You Without You,” or the Beatles’ “Within You Without You,” or the Beatles’ “Within You Without You,” or the Beatles’ “Within You Without You,” or the Beatles’ “Within You Without Y

Tightfisted

Although the RadioShack cable played music well enough—and did an altogether superior job of staying plugged in—the Naim NACA5 clearly and repeatedly outperformed it in my Quad-based system. But I wondered about the gear in my main system: Audio Note AN-E Spe/HE loudspeakers, Shindo Corton-Charlemagne mono amplifiers, Shindo Massego preamplifier, and a tricked-out Thorens TD-124 turntable with EMT 997 tonearm. That system uses long speaker cables, too: a 6m (19.5’) pair of Audiostol 23 copper. Granted, the Auditorium 23 cable, with its more pliant conductors and attractive green-fabric sheath, is easier to install and to live with than Naim’s NACA5. On the other hand, at $2350 for that 6m pair, the Auditorium 23 speaker cable is considerably more expensive—though still far from the high-end “standard,” I dare say.

Again, I compared my $21 homemade RadioShack speaker cables with a more expensive pair. Again, there were small yet clearly audible distinctions, though of a sort different from those between the RadioShacks and the Naim NACA5s in my other system: more sonic than musical, and slightly more apparent.

And this time the distinctions made themselves known more in the top end than the bottom. Both cables communicated the musical essence of Louis Armstrong’s voice throughout Classic Records’ reissue of I’ve Got the World on a String (LP, Verve MG V 4035). But the RadioShack cables were audibly tizzier. Vocal sibilants were overcooked, and the same was true of the overtones of various acoustic instruments—the drone tambura, and the initial “ick” of the tabula—on the Beatles’ “Within You Without You,” from Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band (LP, Parlophone PMC7027). For its part, the more expensive Auditorium 23 stuff had more color and body and scale: Costlier sounded portlier, in a very good way.

Yet while the sound wasn’t as pleasing as I might have liked, using the cheap cables in my Shindo system was more musically effective than having the same cheap cables in my other system. That’s an important distinction: Ironically or not, I think I could live with the RadioShack wires in my Shindo system if I really had to. That’s good to know, in case some thousand-dollar emergency crops up in the next year or two.

No better than RadioShack zipord: You and I have heard that phrase billions of times, mostly from audio reviewers and high-end cable manufacturers—the two most trusted names in consumer electronics! Mostly we’ve used the phrase as a sort of negative benchmark, the way your parents tried to scare you into behaving by invoking the name of some notorious loser. Today, in the world of perfectionist audio cables, I think the gap between loser and overachiever is less extreme than we’ve worked ourselves into believing—and while the distinctions between various samples are quite real, their importance will vary from system to system and from


www.Stereophile.com, August 2009 35
I cope sequentially

Noriyuki Miyajima is a Japanese record enthusiast who, at age 60, took the unlikely step of launching his own line of phono cartridges (www.rubyattaudio.com). That in itself deserves a certain amount of respect; more to the point, Miyajima has some noteworthy ideas about how to make a better moving-coil cartridge.

Confronted with the challenge of converting a moving series of bumps into a correlated pattern of movement within an electromagnetic generator, most of us would probably be content with any old bearing and lever that could trace the former with minimal wear, and still wiggle a coil of wire more or less as it should be wiggled. Yet when the bearing and lever are the stylus and cantilever of a tiny moving-coil pickup, there’s more at stake than the mere mechanical consequences of getting things wrong. According to Noriyuki Miyajima, the location of the fulcrum about which that cantilever moves—and especially the fulcrum’s position relative to the coil that the cantilever is hurting this way and that—are of critical importance: If fulcrum and coil are too far from one another, he says, then the proportional distinctions within the continually variable output signal will be distorted and incorrect. So Miyajima created an altogether new kind of cantilever suspension, the crossing method, whereby the cantilever’s fulcrum is centered precisely within the former on which the coil is wound.

At least I think that’s the story. The Japanese-to-English translation software used in the creation of Miyajima’s website gives his explanations a sufficiently fanciful tone that I can’t be 100% sure. (Some of the more delightful turns of phrase: “I used obstinate, good wood for the body,” “It is fixed through a rubber damper in York,” and “It has a beautiful luster with a heavy tree.”) Neither can I say for sure if the actual company name is Miyajima, Edison, Otono, or some combination of the three.

No matter: I’ve had the privilege of spending several months with Noriyuki Miyajima’s top-of-the-line monophonic cartridge, the Premium Mono ($980), and it has proven to be more delightful than all the prose on his website put together.

This is mono for people who want a big, substantial sound, but who still want to hear all the instrumental lines as distinctly separate from one another as possible. The Premium Mono does all that—with force. It let me hear how physical Barney Kessel’s chording is on Billie Holiday’s Body and Soul (LP, Verve/Mobile Fidelity MFSL 1-247). And the timpani in the 1953 recording of Artur Rubinstein and the Chicago Symphony Orchestra under Fritz Reiner performing Brahms’s Piano Concerto I (LP, RCA LM-1831) had similarly fine impact, while the piano’s loudest moments were clean, forceful, and free from mistracking distortion. From Rubinstein to Gieseking to Lipatti to Richter, I couldn’t find a single mono piano recording in my collection that could make the Premium Mono lose its grip on the groove.

My favorite version of Strauss’s Don Juan, recorded in early 1954 by Wilhelm Furtwängler and the Vienna Philharmonic (LP, Electrola E 90 093), showed off the Premium Mono’s excellent sense of scale; the instrumental voices in that one had fine, realistic color as well. “I’ve Just Seen a Face” and “Dizzy Miss Lizzy,” from my mono copy of the Beatles’ Help! (LP, Parlophone PMC 1255), sounded so good, and were so much fun, that I couldn’t be bothered to write anything specific about them beyond this. Perhaps best of all, the 60-year-old recording of Bill Monroe’s “Can’t You Hear Me Calling,” from The Classic Bluegrass Recordings, Vol. I (LP, Columbia CCS-104), was tactile and, again, forceful—yet as subtle and eerie as it should be: Mac Wiseman’s lead and Monroe’s tenor vocals leapt from the mono mix with as much whiperack presence as through my beloved EMT OFD 25. That’s strong praise indeed.

And the Premium Mono’s near-total rejection of surface noise was astounding: Throughout my time with it, only the most severe groove damage made itself known. I can’t help wondering if the cross-ring system is even more suited to mono playback than stereo, inasmuch as it can be tuned to respond only to horizontal modulations, while ignoring vertical movement entirely. (As Miyajima’s website puts it, “We deny an existing monaural cartridge so far!”) Only the above-mentioned OFD 25, with its stiffly suspended, garden-tool–shaped cantilever, would seem to be in the same class.

Like the EMT OFD 25, the Miyajima Premium Mono was right at home in my high-mass EMT 997 tonearm. I installed the cartridge in my Yamamoto HS-1A accessory headshell and aligned it for use as a G-style pickup head; it, with 50mm of space between the stylus tip and the headshell collet. Consequently, by moving the tonearm pivot to its rearmost position, I was able to take advantage of the 997’s arm’s full 325mm stylus-to-pivot distance, which contributed to its sure, impertrurbable sound.

Unlike the OFD 25, it would seem that the Premium Mono can be used with more than just old-style removable-headshell tonearms: The modern SME Series V, Ikeda 345 and 407, various of the Helius/Audio Note arms, and perhaps even the Linn Ekos might also be candidates, not to mention discontinued but enduring arms such as the Zeta and the Fidelity Research FR-64s. But low-mass arms, such as my own Naim Aro—and even medium-low-mass arms, such as the Rega RB300 series—would seem insufficiently heavy: Like most of the cartridges in the Miyajima line, mono or stereo, the Premium Mono is a low-compliance device (though none of the others tracks quite as heavily as the Premium Mono’s recommended downforce of 3.5gms).

Numbers don’t lie, as the Woodies in our midst would have us know. For once, I agree, and the price tells the lowest truth of all: $980. For this kind of colorful, vibrant, impactful, and crazily noiseless mono replay, that’s a staggering good value. More important, the Miyajima Premium Mono is the first cartridge I know of that offers a larger audience of contemporary analog enthusiasts the impact, color, and sheer juice of old-style pickup heads. A wonderful product!
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Shaking the Chessboard

When I was a kid, I saw the Marlon Brando remake of *Mutiny on the Bounty*. I'm sure you know the story—lots of bad-guy/good-guy tension between Captain Bligh and Fletcher Christian. There's also an overlay of class conflict, but with a twist: The up-and-comer is the sadist, while it's the aristocrat who is nature's nobleman.

From the outset, Bligh complains about his cabin's not being cleaned properly. In an effort to save time and ingratiate himself with his superiors, Bligh ill-advisedly attempts to round properly. In an effort to save time and about his cabin's not being cleaned nobleman. Bond, my brothers and I thought that "Sir, your cabin is awash." Pre-James Bond, Christian can then report, almost completely inundated by a huge wave. Mr. Christian can then report, "Sir, your cabin is awash." Pre-James Bond, and I thought that was the epitome of ironic sangfroid. We repeated it for weeks.

Not that John Atkinson at all needs me to clue him in on what's happening in the wider world, but I have been tempted to send him an e-mail with the subject line "Sir, your cheeseboard has been shaken." But I'm sure he already knows.

I started the current project of putting together affordable music-lovers' audio systems based on one-box CD receivers in hopes that I could find a cost-effective, generally valid solution. I think that, for a lot of people, I can do that—but I'm not sure how futureproof some of the solutions might be for a lot of other people; and for still others, I have increasingly grown convinced that a CD receiver may not be the optimal solution at all (see "To CD-Receive, or Not" in my April column, www.stereophile.com/TheFifthElement/the_fifth_element_53).

The way it looks to me at the moment (bearing in mind that I still have a few trees to bark up) is that not one of the CD receivers I have yet auditioned will accommodate all sources—which may be fine with you, if your sources and a particular player are in sync. An example: To date, the $1995 Carat 157 has been my favorite overall in terms of sound. Great. And it supports HDCCD playback. Tant mieuw, as they say in China. However, it has no S/PDIF output (you can't use it as a transport) or S/PDIF input, let alone a USB input. So, no network music—unless you use an outboard DAC. And no phono—unless you use an outboard phono stage. And no SACD playback—unless you use a separate SACD player. All of which defeat a major benefit of the one-box idea. So if you have a lot of HDCCD-encoded CDs and don't mind not hearing the DSD layer of SACDs, it's a fine choice. But I fear that these caveats will disqualify the Carat as many people as there are whose listening styles it fits.

**DESPITE SONY'S LESS-THAN-OPTIMAL HANDLING OF NEARLY EVERY ASPECT OF SACD, I THINK THE FORMAT HAS A SECURE FUTURE.**

The other trees to bark up: I've just received Denon's one-box, the RCD-CX1 SACD/CD receiver ($1500). It's a great little machine, with elegant rather than dorky industrial design and excellent build quality. In my April 2009 column, when I wrote about the Integra DSR-4.8, I was under the impression that it was the only CD (in its case, CD/DVD) receiver that could play SACDs. Well, I'd missed the Denon. I had seen their two-box disc player/tuner/integrated amp in Montreal, but had ruled it out on price grounds. I later discovered Denon's one-box, which they were happy to send into the fray. I ultimately didn't go crazy over the Integra because of the sonic limitations imposed by its low build budget, necessitated by its bargain price of $600. So, the Denon RCD-CX1: between a $1500 price and SACD playback, we should be in Goldilocks Country, right? Um, perhaps for most people, but not for all.

The good news is that the Denon RCD-CX1 has phono inputs, switchable between moving-magnet and moving-coil, standard. Also good, a variety of iPod docks are optional accessories. The less-than-perfect news is that it has no USB input. Optical digital out, but no digital in. So the Denon is a real contender—as long as you don't plan on using your computer as a music server, or on listening to Internet radio. Of course, for Internet radio and iTunes, you can buy an external USB DAC and run its analog output to the Denon's Auxiliary analog input—but that is no longer a one-box solution.

The other tree I might bark up is that of the newly announced Naim Uniti, which looks great—but no SACD playback, and as of the time I write this, I don't know its price. But this project has gone on much longer than I'd planned—if you want me to run down every possible option, let me know.

**Format Wo-wo-woes**

About disc formats and player choices: Despite Sony's less-than-optimal handling of nearly every aspect of SACD, I think the format has a secure future. However, that future will consist of a combination of new releases from a handful of classical labels, and an even smaller number of remasterings of old masters from all genres, in both senses of old masters.

I'd pay retail for an SACD remastering of Michael Franks' *Sleeping Gypsy*, as well as Joni Mitchell's *Court and Spark*, Mary Black's *No Frontiers*, and Jennifer Warnes' *Famous Blue Raincoat*. There are enough great-sounding SACD players out there in peoples' systems already—and, pace Sam Tellig, SACD is not just for surround fans. Just two labels, Harmonia Mundi and Avie, between them put out more new SACD releases each month than I can keep up with.

What baffles me is no-video-content classical music on Blu-ray. (Concert, opera, and ballet videos are different, of course!) I understand that, in the full-
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ness of time, Blu-ray may gain a larger installed base than SACD. But a large installed base does not necessarily mean people who know or care about music. Blu-ray seems to be displacing SACD in the more upmarket disc players—and I’m not aware of any player that plays both Blu-ray and SACD, though I might have missed something.1

My thought is, if we really want the ultimate in home playback quality and are willing to pay the price, there are two ways to go: backward, to analog open-reel tape (as The Tape Project has done), or forward, to ultra-high-resolution digital music on removable hard disks.

In theory, I could hire Bob Ludwig to transfer the original 30ips, ½", two-track analog master tapes of Arturo Delmoni’s Songs My Mother Taught Me (CD, John Marks JMR 1) at DXD data density: 24-bits (with 32-bit floating-point precision) at 352.8kHz. Then just clone it, hard drive to hard drive. The well-heeled consumer would need a drive rack such as a Drobo (www.drobo.com), a DXD DAC such as one from Digital Audio Denmark (www.digitalaudio.dk), and software that can handle 352.8kHz PCM, running on a dedicated computer.

At this stage of the game, I think it’s pointless for me to worry about intellectual-property issues. When I ripped my own CD copy of Songs My Mother Taught Me with iTunes, a string of (I assume) Chinese characters popped up where Arturo Delmoni’s name belongs. Someone in the FSU is offering a Songs My Mother Taught Me MP3 album download for five bucks—half the cost of the authorized one from arkip-music.com. (Or it could just be a scam to get your credit-card number so they can charge to it $5000 worth of mailbox-bride introductions.) So lo-rez and perhaps reg-rez are already good enough for some pirates; will more pirates emerge if there are master-tape clones for sale? One laughs ruefully, and hopes that people will be guided by the better angels of their nature.

There are two problems other than piracy with this nitty idea, though. Even at a retail price of $350 per hard disk, it’s not really a moneymaker, when all is said and done and all the bills have been paid. And second, I think what the world of high-performance audio needs is a little less of the fetishization of a small number of anointed recordings, and more of a generalized exposure to a greater number of excellent new recordings from all genres.

Some of our equipment manufacturers could step up to the plate here. I think it would be really cool if all the dealers for a household-name American loudspeaker manufacturer were to open their mail one day and find a copy of Eric Whitacre’s Cloudburst CD, which I rhapsodized about in the February 2007 issue (www.stereophile.com/thefifthelement/207fifth/index1.html), with a note explaining that it was a gift from the speaker company, and advising which tracks make for great demos. Do it four times a year.

Or every other month. Label the discs with a statement that they’re gifts from the manufacturer. If such a program got going, it might cost less than you might think; to get the exposure, any disc importer or distributor worth their salt would sell the discs at wholesale or even less. Might even sell them at cost. If high-performance audio is in trouble, I think a good part of the reason is that we collectively began thinking that it was about being able to switch between triode and pentode modes, instead of remembering that it’s about the music. And to fall in love with the music, a good CD is often good enough, and a good SACD should be all you need.

So as nice as it is to think about people listening to Songs My Mother Taught Me in 24-bit/352.8kHz resolution from a removable hard disk, I think the last thing high-performance audio needs right now is a profusion of incompatible formats—and it’s “format creep” that has turned into the bête noire of my current quest.

When I was a tyke, I sometimes but not always remembered to turn over the inner barrel of the phono cartridge to listen to 78s; then there were the mysterious inner workings of the 45rpm changer adapter; there was even open-reel tape, but that was off-limits. The more things change...

Peachtree Audio Nova USB integrated amplifier

All of which is a long prologue building up to: Seeing as no one has yet built the One-Box for All Seasons (and if they did, I bet most people wouldn’t want it, as it would, by definition, have a function or three that some people would never use), could it be an equally valid approach to system simplification to design a box with the greatest possible commonality and the greatest possible flexibility?

The answer is a resounding yes. Consider my chessboard shaken by Peachtree Audio’s Nova USB integrated amplifier ($1199).

The Nova USB is your grandfather’s integrated amplifier with a few twists—a high-quality internal USB D/A converter feeding (in class-A) a tube line stage, which then hands off to an 80Wpc class-A/B power amplifier—all in one stylish cabinet at a fairly amazing price.

The Nova has eight inputs: five digital (one USB, two coaxial S/PDIF, two optical TosLink), and three line-level analog, the third of which is a home-theater pass-through. Before I move on to the Nova’s other features, let’s size up its functionality, compared to CD receivers. On a case-by-case basis, depending on how much time you spend listening to which sources, setting up the Nova may or may not be more complicated; eg, if you’re going to listen to LP as well as SACD, you have two additional sources to plug into the Carat 157; and if you listen to LP, SACD, and Internet radio, three—at which point the Carat has lost its advantage of simplicity.

The best candidate for a Nova is someone who has already migrated to using a computer as a music server, or who plans to. These days, of course, with storage space so cheap, there’s no reason not to use lossless compression instead of MP3.

If your major source of music is CD, the Nova is still an attractive option: you can buy a DVD player for under $75 to use as a transport, and if you lis-
ten to SACDs, you can connect your player to the Nova's analog inputs, and its S/PDIF output to the Nova's S/PDIF input for CD listening (assuming Nova's onboard DAC is better—if not, stick with the analog connection). So, for SACD listening, the Nova is no more complicated to set up than all the recommendable one-boxes save the Denon, which would need another box, a USB DAC, to listen to Internet radio anyway. As Charlie Brown said: Sigh . . .

As I mentioned in the teaser in my April column, the Nova is uniquely styled. I think its appearance is a very clever homage to the Eames Office firm, as in Eames Chair. The Nova is about 15" (385mm) W by 5" (130mm) H by 13" (335mm) D (from volume knob to speaker terminals). The corners are rounded, and it sits higher than we're used to—the Eames influence. The veneer wrap follows the contours so perfectly it looks totally fake. But I am assured it's real wood, and from certified renewable supplies. The Nova is made in China in an ISO-certified factory, is RoHS-compliant, comes in recyclable packaging, and draws only 1W in Standby mode.

Standby/On and input source are selected by flush buttons surrounded by blue light pipes (red for Standby). Volume is controlled by a large knob. In the opposite corner from the On switch is a ¼" headphone jack. A small, matte-black, non-illuminated remote control of some rubbery material controls Standby/On, Mute, Volume, Input, and the one really questionable thing, as far as I'm concerned: on/off of a blue LED at the base of the line-stage vacuum tube, which is visible through a rectangular window to the left of the volume knob. That lily didn't need gilding, I think.

Connections are good quality, the single-wire, EC-compliant speaker terminals more so than the RCA input jacks. Set into the nonremovable top panel are two sets of black ventilation louvers. Interestingly enough, the left terminals more so than the RCA input single-wire, ESS 9008 Sabre DAC, the ESS 9006 DAC is said to be implemented with a power supply regulated at 11 stages, in a galvanically isolated environment.

Listening: I set up the Peachtree Nova USB with Aerial Acoustics' 5B two-way monitor speakers ($2200/pair) and let it break in. The Nova's digital source was primarily an S/PDIF feed from Luxman's exceptional DU-50 universal player ($5000), using a 2m length of Kimber Kable's DV-30 digital cable ($160). After a week or so, it was time for some critical listening.

Through the combination of Peachtree Nova USB and Aerial 5Bs, my friend Bob Saglio and I listened to "Embraceable You" and "Honeysuckle Rose," from Jane Monheit's Taking a Chance on Love (CD, Sony Classical SK 92495); "I Surrender, Dear," and "I'm in the Mood for Love," from Julie London's Time for Love: The Best of Julie London (CD, Rhino R2 70377); and all the usual suspects from Donald Fagen's The Nightfly (CD, Warner Bros. 23696-2).

We then listened to the same sequence of recordings through the Carat 157, and then back again to the Peachtree.

The results were uniform across all tracks, and a little surprising. I'd been so knocked out by my time with the Nova that I'd forgotten how great a player the Carat is. So, purely on the basis of sound, it wasn't exactly a case of new champ vs old champ.

The Peachtree Nova was more energetic, with punchier dynamics, more pointed articulation, more energetic bass, and slightly more well-defined treble; but, in its own way, the Carat I57 matched the Nova strength for strength in warmth and fullness, and getting lusciously right the middles of the notes (as distinct from the edges). (However, another listener might hear the same comparison and decide that the Carat was soft or even mushy, rather than euphonic). So—perhaps an even tradeoff, by which I mean that I think both represent good value for money (but keeping in mind that the Nova costs $800 less); you just have to decide what's more important for you.

It's a tough call, but, judging by Jane Monheit's bossa-nova-tinged "Embraceable You" (if you have a pulse, you must hear it), I expect that most listeners will plump for the more forward, detailed, and dynamic sound of the Nova USB—especially considering its bypass price. Both components are made in China.) The Peachtree-Aerial combination was excellent, especially for its well-defined bass.

Just a couple of additional matters to note:

Using Luxman's DU-50 player as a transport, with Kimber's DV-30 digital cable, and playing "Peoples' Parties" from Joni Mitchell's Court and Spark (gold CD, DCC GZS 1025), I compared the Nova's S/PDIF digital input to the Nova's USB input as run from my Mac G3 desktop, playing back an .AIF file I'd ripped from the CD using the program Toast. I synced the tracks up to within a few seconds. For this critical listening, I used Denon's excellent new AH-D7000 headphones ($1000), which I'd used twice the previous week in live recording sessions.

Bottom line: Try as I might, I could hear no difference between the S/PDIF
and USB feeds, and I was surprised. For all its prevalence in the consumer world, USB is seldom regarded in the professional domain as a particularly robust or glitch-free protocol. So I won't be surprised if the Nova's digital performance measures very well when John Atkinson publishes his Follow-Up.

Great as the Nova is, it's not the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow; it's just an overperformer in the budget marketplace. The opening track of Court and Spark features some pretty ham-handed piano pounding, closely miked to boot. Through the Nova's internal DAC (S/PDIF), the piano sound was steely and strident. Switching over to the analog outputs of the Luxman DU-50 (Fluency DAC engaged, Kimber Hero analog interconnect), the stridency nearly vanished, and the entire soundstage suddenly snapped into a new, more realistic focus—nor were these differences I had to strain to hear. Similarly, there was less nasality and more body in Mitchell's voice, and less wire and more wood in the 12-string guitar. I preferred the Luxman's sound in every way—and for $5000, why shouldn't I? Just a reality check. No free lunch. Get the Luxman if you can.

Summing Up
If you don't mind using something else as a transport, or if you have a music network up, and $1200 is your limit, the Peachtree Nova USB is totally wowzers. In my book, the Nova is the Dynaco Stereo 70 for the 21st century. (Should I copyright that?)

The combination of the Peachtree Nova ($1199) and the Aerial 5Es ($2200/pair), though by no means perfect, and despite its not really getting into the deep bass, actually surpasses the hopes I had when I started this project. Bravi.

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World Radio History
ass players always get short shrift. Their lives involve standing in the background, bowing at the end of tunes, and occasionally cracking a smile. It's understandable, then, that when a bassist aims for the wider exposure that these days is clearly in Christian McBride's sights, a little egoism run amok is to be expected, even welcome.

This side of McBride's character was on full display recently at Dizzy's Club Coca-Cola in New York, when he climbed onstage in white tennis shoes, holding an unlit cigar and a glass of red wine as props for his verbal and musical conversation with Benin-to-Brooklyn singer Angelique Kidjo. After a rambling interview that went on far too long and flushed out
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A painter paints pictures on canvas. But musicians paint their pictures on silence.
— Leopold Stokowski
World Radio History
only a few interesting moments—the first Cole Porter tune she ever heard was played on a banjo, and her novel theory of rhythm ("follow your heart and you'll always be on [in] time")—McBride and Kidjo finally got down to playing music. The duet of her soaring voice and McBride's broad, toothy grin and superb playing culminated in a rendition of James Brown's "Cold Sweat" in which he mimicked the horn parts on upright bass.

Now leading the celebration of his 20th year in music, McBride is easily one of the current jazz world's best bassists, and probably qualifies in the pantheon of jazz as one of the instrument's most distinctive voices. His technique, as strong on electric bass as on acoustic standup, is phat-toned, unerringly rhythmic, and so virtuosic that he's liable to drop in unexpected quotes from a band like Kraftwerk, just to show off his musical knowledge and mischievous sense of humor.

Although McBride's merry smile may illuminate the way all year long, judging by his schedule, the man will have little rest: he's at the center of a number of projects that he, his management, and his wife, jazz singer Melissa Walker, have devised to raise his profile.

"I remember vividly the day it happened," he says leaning back in his chair at a luncheon to announce his grand plan for 2009. "My manager said, 'When did you move to New York?' and I said 1989: He said, 'Man, next year's your 20th anniversary—we gotta do something!'

Despite McBride's gift of gab and outgoing personality, it stretches human credulity to think that he really didn't foresee the consequences of titling his new record Kind of Brown.

It stretches human credulity to think that he really didn't foresee the consequences of titling his new record Kind of Brown. He's calling the band on Kind of Brown Christian McBride & Inside Straight, or just "The Quintet," to distinguish it from his other working unit, the Christian McBride Band, which includes saxophonist Ron Blake, keyboardist Geoffrey Keezer, and drummer Terreon Gully. Inside Straight is McBride's return to a more straight-ahead sound. He put the new band together to play a week's run at the Village Vanguard in June 2007, his first extended stand as a leader at the venerable downtown jazz mecca in a decade.

"I went to Lorraine [Gordon, the famously salty owner-proprietor of the Vanguard] and said, 'I really would love to play here again,' and she said, 'You're always welcome. I'd love to have you back, but just don't bring that rock band you play with most of the time [the Christian McBride Band]. You have to bring something customized for the club.'

"So I put together a band with Steve Wilson [alto sax], Warren Wolf on vibes, Eric Reed on piano, Carl Allen on drums, and, much to my surprise, we sold out every night, every set, for the entire week. We got a great write-up in the New York Times. All these record execs started coming out to check out the band; I almost felt like an amateur all over again. But at no point did I think of this as becoming a working unit—a week at the Vanguard would be over and I would go back to working with my regular band. But everyone kept saying I had to keep this band together. I didn't know how, because everyone in the band has their own careers, and it's hard enough trying to keep our sideman schedules juggled together."

Inside Straight reunited in 2008 to play the Monterey Jazz Festival, and Detroit's Mack Avenue Records signed the band shortly thereafter. Kind of Brown and Inside Straight feed the McBride fans who for years have been urging him to abandon fusion and make a straight-ahead record.

"It's not like we [the Christian McBride Band] are the
Pass Labs by the numbers:

125 reviews
76 awards
47 products
43 articles/projects
35 countries
18 years
7 patents
1 Nelson Pass

......and counting
Zappa band or anything. It is kind of a straight-ahead band with electric tinges. But as soon as people saw the Rhodes and keyboard and electric bass onstage—not being played, just sitting there—they went 'Oh, fusion.'"

Another part of McBride's 2009 campaign—what his MySpace page calls "All Christian . . . All the Time"—is Conversations with Christian, his XM/Sirius satellite-radio show, on which he interviews musicians, then plays live with them in the studio. This concept has also been transferred to a concert setting at Dizzy's, where he's so far done shows with Angelique Kidjo and Chick Corea.

McBride's galaxy of projects has been self-perpetuating, one spinning out of another. From his radio show will come, in September 2009, an album of the same title, featuring full-blown duets minus the talking, to be released on Mack Avenue. While the project was still being recorded as this went to press, some of McBride's duet partners will be Sting, Carly Simon, Paul Simon, and Diana Krall.

"I even have a ringer with Dolly Parton," McBride says, that big grin stretching across his face. "I was in Nashville and we were trying to hook it up, but it just didn't happen, so we'll see."

As if Kind of Brown weren't enough to stir up the precious, the duets record will probably get the dogmatists barking again. More pop than jazz—hence the coming futur—its crossover nature sparks McBride into a passionate riff on parochial music fans. The nattily dressed bassist—suit, swanky shoes, thumb ring—leans back and waves off the question before it's asked.

"I was always raised to not think of music in different compartments. A lot of that comes from my great-uncle [well-known Philadelphia bassist Howard Cooper], who knew what he liked and taught me what the real stuff was. I think musicians, particularly of an older generation, their whole thing is to try and get you to appreciate the music by downplaying all the other music, or insulting it—'You don't need to listen to Michael Jackson and Prince, listen to this. This is way better, far superior to that kind of music.'"

"What I loved most about my great-uncle was that [he said], 'Hey, don't put away your James Brown, don't put away your Michael Jackson—add this to it so you can see where that stuff comes from.' It was nothing for him to put on Louis Armstrong, followed by Ornette Coleman, followed by Weather Report, followed by Lester Young, followed by the Ellington band, followed by James Brown. So I was kind of raised on hearing all of this music, all at the same time. When I got older, I met all these musicians who had this very black-and-white attitude about what music was good and what wasn't. And it wasn't even different genres—it was within the jazz circle. It was like, 'Damn, I didn't realize it was this deep.' It got to the point where they were like, 'Don't listen to jazz from the '70s, which was bad. There was no pure jazz in the '70s. Jazz from the '50s and '60s is what you want to listen to. Listen to these particular cats, but don't listen to these cats.' And again, we're only talking about the jazz world, and I'm thinking, 'Wow, what about all this music over here? We ain't even talked about that.' And they're like, 'Don't worry about that, that has nothing to do with this.' And I'm going, 'Well, I thought it did.'"

"Most musicians that we admire—you talk about Miles Davis, you talk about Coltrane, you talk about Charlie Parker—they all were influenced by something that wasn't part of the hardcore jazz canon."

"For me, working with Sting or Carly Simon or Paul Simon or whoever, I'm just playing bass; I'm just trying to fill a role to make that music work. I'm not thinking in terms of being part of this tradition or that tradition . . . it's just music."

Both albums, Kind of Brown and Conversations with Christian, will eventually be released on audiophile-quality vinyl enclosed in lush gatefold jackets. McBride maintains that vinyl best reproduces the sound of the upright bass, and that he hopes to someday see most of his catalog—he mentions his last album, Live at the Tonic, in particular—reissued on vinyl with deluxe packaging. Despite his many forward-looking projects, when it comes to sound, he's staunchly a man of the past.

"I firmly believe that most people who are old enough to have listened to vinyl still listen to it," he says. "I know I'd much rather listen to vinyl with certain records than digital. It's just something about the true reproduction of sound that vinyl gives; you can hear the air, you can also visualize it. With digital, you can, quote unquote, hear it better, but you don't feel it the same way. I love my vinyl, man. Bring vinyl back!!!"
Two years ago I discovered my latest guilty pleasure: Internet radio. As long as it’s 192k or higher. My whole buying/download cycle had been reduced. The pleasure and savings have increased. If they succeed in killing Net radio, I’m done with the hobby.”—Reader Peter DeBoer, in response to a recent Stereophile online poll.

Music lovers now have an ever-churning sea of compelling digital audio sources lapping at their feet. Into this vast ocean dive the equipment manufacturers and computer leviathans and their attendant tinkers, trying to channel the steady flow of new formats and datastreams into something usable and sonically acceptable. Thanks to lossy formats like MP3 and the popularity of lo-rez streaming, this hasn’t been easy.

Back in audio’s salad days, before the interwebs, you had radio, discs, and tapes. If only the choices were still so few and so simple. These days, as a result of the dozens of sources for music, audio components can resemble a meal put together from an à la carte buffet. You can choose any combination of amp, preamp, tuner, DAC, disc player, music server, networking device, phono preamp, iPod dock, and more.

As the permutations increase exponentially, in many cases the standard component categories of preamp, disc player, iPod dock, etc., no longer apply.

So the trick for manufacturers is to sort the options down to usable products that tap into the audio zeitgeist of our historical moment of post-disc streaming. With its Music Player ($3600), the German company T+A elektroakustik has made some intriguing choices; the question is whether or not the resultant concoction will satisfy the widely varying tastes of contemporary audiophiles such as reader Peter DeBoer.

The Music Player (MP) plate: CD player, iPod Dock, FM tuner, built-in Web-radio streaming, computer and/or NAS drive networking, and a DAC with input switching for two external digital sources. The MP also has a remote control, and variable output so it can function as a digital preamp (more on this later).

The MP’s design and metalwork are top-notch, with precise fit and finish and an...
T+A ELEKTROAKUSTIK MUSIC PLAYER

examined the T+A Music Player’s performance primarily using the Audio Precision 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 vintage Audio Precision System One. I used my regular CD-R of 16-bit test tones, and also fed data to the Music Player’s optical digital input. I also used some test WAV files stored on a USB flash drive, and fed the MP files over my WiFi network using Windows Media Player 11 as the uPnP client, running on a PC with Windows XP SP3. (For some arcane networking reason, neither of my Macs would recognize the MP.)

The Music Player’s maximum output was 2.4V RMS, or 1.6dB higher than the CD standard’s 2V; this was the same with its output set to Fixed volume, or set to Variable with the volume control set to its maximum. The output preserved absolute polarity with the MP set to Normal, and was inverted, as expected, when the MP was set to Inverted. The output impedance was usefully very low at 22 ohms across the audioband. Used as a CD player, the T+A’s error correction was good rather than great, the MP producing audible glitches and flagging errors in the output data while playing track 30 of the Pierre Verany Test CD, whose data spiral includes 0.75mm gaps.

The T+A Music Player will correctly lock on to and decode datastreams sampled at 88.2 and 96kHz that are fed to its two S/PDIF inputs, but the display stubbornly shows “44.1kHz.” The MP has two settings that affect its frequency response: Filter and Bandwidth. Fig.1 shows the response with the Filter set to “Filter 2” and the Bandwidth set to “Wide,” with both CD data at 44.1kHz (blue, magenta traces) and external 96kHz-sampled PCM data (blue, red). This Filter optimizes the time-domain performance at the expense of a droop in the top octave, which reaches −3dB at 20kHz with CD data. This graph was taken into the high 100kHz laboratory load impedance; the behavior was not affected by dropping the load to the punishing 600 ohms. Fig.2 shows the responses with the Filter set to “Filter 1” and Bandwidth to “Wide.” CD playback is now flat almost to 20kHz, with the 96kHz behavior smoothly continuing the slight rolloff to reach −0.5dB at 40kHz.

Plotted on an expanded scale for clarity, fig.3 shows the effect of the Bandwidth control. Set to Wide (blue, red traces), the output is down just 0.12dB at 20kHz and −0.75dB at 45kHz. Set to Narrow (cyan, magenta), the audio output actually rises by 0.1dB, with the response −0.35dB at 20kHz and −2.35dB at 45kHz. The response error with preemphasized CDs was nonexistent, so I haven’t shown

MEASUREMENTS

Fig.1 T+A Music Player, Filter 2, Wide frequency response at −12dBFS into 100k ohms with external data at 44.1kHz (left channel cyan, right magenta) and 96kHz (left blue, right red). (1dB/vertical div.)

Fig.2 T+A Music Player, Filter 2, frequency response at −12dBFS into 100k ohms with external data at 44.1kHz (left channel cyan, right magenta) and 96kHz (left blue, right red). (1dB/vertical div.)

elegant yet understatedly to-the-point modern style. Curved, satin-smooth side panels of dark metal contribute to the luxe look—this is one component you won’t want to hide in a cabinet. It’s solid and heavy, with no flimsy sheet-metal panels.

Out front, starting at the left, are: a power button, four input selectors—Disc, Radio, SCL (Streaming Client), Dig 1/2 (for the two digital inputs)—and a Menu button. In the center is the monochrome alphanumeric display, below it the disc drawer, and to the right of that the alphanumeric display, below it the disc power button, four input selectors—Disc, Radio, SCL (Streaming Client), Dig 1/2 (for the two digital inputs)—and a Menu button.

Six CD-player buttons: CD Stop, Play, Skip, FF, Favorites, and Mode.

To the Backcave

The rear panel is recessed from the rear edges of the top and bottom plates and the side panels by about 2", which, in an open equipment rack, gives you a very tidy-looking component—all connectors are hidden. A steel bar runs from side to side below the rear connections, over which you can run your wires in a neat array. At the very least, such a rear-panel design lets you push the MP right up against the wall, with all cables tucked out of sight and routed downward—but it also keeps the rear panel in the dark, and forced me to learn Input Braille to find the right jacks when switching cables for comparisons.

Facing the rear panel and starting from the left are: the two-channel RCA analog outputs, an FM antenna jack, S/PDIF RCA digital out, S/PDIF and TosLink digital in, WLAN and 10/100 Ethernet (marked “LAN”) ports, and a USB input for connecting to a USB stick or USB hard drive. There’s also a blanked-off spot for an FM/DAB antenna, if and when it becomes available. Next is an iPod connector that uses an included adapter and cable, and an RS-232 connector for firmware updates and for networking with external control devices such as
those made by RTI, Savant, Crestron, and AMX. Finally, there are two E Link connectors for interfacing with the T+A Power Plant (see sidebar), which then takes over control of the MP. The MP can handle MP3, WMA, AAC, FLAC, OGG-Vorbis, and WAV files, but not AIF files.

Though high-resolution downloads are becoming easier to find, I wasn’t able to use the MP with them. The current product’s network processor, via USB, LAN, or WiFi, peaks at a depth of 16 bits and a sampling rate of 48kHz, though its DAC can handle 24/96 via the S/PDIF input. By the time you read this, however, T+A says it will have released a firmware upgrade that allows the network processor to handle anything up to 24/96 for FLAC or WAV files, which will then grant access to some of the downloadable 24/96 or 24/88.2 files offered by HDtracks, Music Giants, Blue Coast Records, Linn, and others.

The analog outputs can be set as either fixed or variable (controlled from the remote), allowing the MP to be connected directly to a power amp or active powered speakers. Because it has built-in digital source switching, the MP and a power amp may be all some folks will need for a modern, all-digital source system, though a volume control on the faceplate would have made such a configuration even better.

**Setup**

Right out of the box, the MP operates like most CD players: Connect the analog or digital output, pop in a disc, and hit Play. Setting up the Internet-radio or media-server functions takes a bit more time, and T+A has created a handy dedicated website (www.themusicplayer.com) with plenty of pictures and step-by-step instructions to make the job easier.

However, I decided to first take a stab at networking the MP after only a brief glance at the manual. As an extra chal-

![Fig.3 T+A Music Player, Filter 1, frequency response at -12dBFS into 100k ohms with external data at 96kHz with Normal bandwidth (left channel cyan, right magenta) and Wide bandwidth (left blue, right red). (0.25dB/vertical div.)](image)

![Fig.4 T+A Music Player, 1/4-octave spectrum with noise and spuriae of dithered 1kHz tone at -90dBFS with 16-bit CD data (top), 24-bit external data (middle at 2kHz), and of dithered 1kHz tone at -120dBFS with 24-bit external data (bottom at 1kHz). (Right channel dashed.)](image)

but these are well below the CD data's noise floor. However, the wide bandwidth and excellent resolution of the Music Player's D/A section is available only via the S/PDIF digital inputs. Files with sample rates higher than 48kHz on the network or a USB drive were not recognized by the MP, and while it would play 24-bit files with 44.1 or 48kHz...
I tried setting up the Music Player first with a wireless connection instead of hardwiring it directly to my network router. After selecting “WLAN Configuration” in the networking menu, the MP locked on to my local WiFi, showing full signal strength. Piece of cake. However, home networking is still a black art in many ways, and just one incorrect setting, a neighbor’s wayward open network, or a wireless phone system can bring WiFi to its knees or slow data to a crawl. Therefore, unless you’ve got solid screaming WiFi, the LAN/Ethernet port is probably the best way to go if you can get a cable from your router to the hi-fi rack.

The MP’s Burr-Brown digital section first upsamples whatever digital source you’ve chosen to 352.8 or 384kHz, before converting the signal to analog. Two algorithms, selectable via the Audio menu, are available for upsampling: Standard FIR filtering and an Impulse Optimized filter. While Standard FIR sports a more linear frequency and phase response than Impulse Optimized, it also tends to ring a bit more. You can switch between the two filters with the remote, and while the differences were indeed subtle, I found that, overall, I preferred Impulse Optimized, especially for the measurements, continued

sample rates, it truncated these to 16 bits. This is graphically illustrated in fig.6, which shows 1/2-octave spectra of the MP’s output while it decoded, from a USB drive, a 1kHz tone at -90dBFS with dithered 16-bit data (top pair of traces) and dithered 24-bit data (bottom traces). The 16-bit spectrum is the same as that shown in fig.4; due to the truncation (confirmed by FFT analysis, not shown), the 24-bit traces have peaks present at the odd harmonics of the 1kHz tone.

As anticipated from fig.4, plotting the 16-bit linearity error against absolute level really revealed only the effect of the recorded dither, so I haven’t shown that graph. With its low noise and excellent linearity, the Music Player’s reproduction of an undithered tone at exactly -90.31dBFS (fig.7) was essentially perfect, while undithered, external 24-bit data gave a very clean-looking sinewave (fig.8).

The Music Player’s analog output section offered superbly low distortion. Even into 600 ohms, the harmonic spurs lie at or below -110dB, or 0.0003% (fig.9). It was only on the very demanding high-frequency intermodulation tests that the MP stumbled a little, and then only when set to Filter 1. While actual intermodulation products from the high-level 19 and 20kHz tones are very low in level, the audioband noise floor is muddied by what I must assume are mathematical artifacts from the digital low-pass filter (fig.10). Changing to what Jon Iverson felt was the better-sounding Filter 2 gave a much cleaner audioband spectrum (fig.11), though the tradeoff is some image leakage of the primary tones, which can be seen at 25.1 and 24.1kHz. But again, actual intermodulation is vanishingly low.

Finally, I tested the Music Player’s susceptibility to clock.
extra life and subtle detail it gave voices
and midrangey instruments (eg, guitar),
and the added nuance in quiet fades. I
left the MP in this position for most of
my listening and comparing.

Discosaurus
If you didn't know any better, you'd
think the MP was a contemporary-
looking disc player. Unfortunately, it
won't play SACDs or any other hi-rez
disc format—it's a CD player only. But
what a CD player—its sturdy, nonreso-
nant disc tray, made from laminates of
ABS and metal, is powered by Mabu-
chi motors and quietly slides in and
out on two precision stainless-steel
rods. When I tapped the drawer with

a fingernail, it emitted a dull tick. The
entire transport is surrounded in metal
and floated on a vibration-suppression
system.

About the time the MP arrived,
I'd finally tracked down a reasonably
priced copy of Mark-Almond's first
album, Mark-Almond (1971), remas-
tered for CD (Bodyheat BHR-903).
Jon Mark and Johnny Almond had just
emerged from John Mayall's shadow
to create this often-overlooked gem
featuring acoustic guitar, piano, bass,
percussion, sax, flute, bass flute (!), and
fully landscaped gospel chorus. This is
an aged and problematic recording, but
the MP always kept everything under
control, without hiding any of the ana-
log fuzz that has accumulated on the
master tapes over the years. In fact,
even though I wish those tape artifacts
weren't there, I appreciated the MP's
ability to matter-of-factly render them
along with the soulful playing.

Which brings me to the character
of the MP's sound: cool, calm, and col-
lected. Never was it caught out by a re-
cording it couldn't handle with honesty
and control, regardless of pedigree. To
get a feel for the other end of the fidel-
ity spectrum, I pulled out Curandero's
Aras (CD, Silver Wave SD911), as dy-
namic and clean an acoustic recording as
they come. Flamenco guitars and tabla
popped as if they're 6' in front of you,
and the MP revealed the music's vivid

peak representing the tone at one-quarter the sample
rate was very cleanly defined.

Its measured performance indicates that the T+A elek-
troakustik Music Player is a superbly well-engineered
and extremely versatile media player.

—John Atkinson
life and fire with ease.

Later, I inserted Godley & Creme’s 1979 masterpiece, Freeze Frame (Edsel MEDCD 745), and cued up “Random Brainwave and “I Pity Inanimate Objects.” These guys, half of the original 10cc, were at their peak as imaginative masters of the analog recording studio (they eventually went digital), and most of their material still sounds bright and innovative next to today’s Pro Tools sample-cut-and-paste jobs. The MP laid out all the precise production details in both tracks, cleanly realizing the soft sounds of the acoustic guitars against the periodic edgy sheets of electric guitar and highly processed vocals and textures.

Radio Radio
So much for fossilized formats—it was time to put the Music Player through its networking paces. Though T+A has provided a website to make the job easier (more about that in a minute), I started by using the MP’s front-panel menu and remote control to find Internet radio stations and other digital sources. Hit the SCL source button on the remote or front panel and you’re presented with a stack of choices on the display. I had an iPod Touch hooked up to the Music Player via the supplied adaptor cable, so in addition to “Internet Radio” and “Favorites,” my choices included “iPod.”

It took a few minutes to sort out how the menu system works. Using the up and down arrows on the remote or front panel, I selected “Internet Radio,” then used the right-arrow button to move out on a menu branch looking for a station. You can begin by sorting the thousands of stations by very broad categories, such as genre or country of origin. Once you start along a branch, the choices keep branching in logical fashion until you finally reach a station. You can then reverse course and head back up the branch to take a different route.

Tapping your way forward and back along these limbs, testing stations along the way, and hitting plenty of dead ends—it can all be a slow and tedious process. But if you’ve got some time on your hands, it can also be a lot of fun. Somehow, I ended up on a great sunnyside-up station broadcasting from Guyana with a fast-talking DJ playing local music. Another branch yielded a station that broadcasts real birdsong 24 hours a day. Drove the cats wild.

T+A ELEKTROAKUSTIK MUSIC PLAYER

With the Music Player, T+A also sent along their Power Plant integrated amplifier ($2700). The Power Plant (PP) looks almost identical to the MP, and the two comprise a handsome, fully functional audio system in a single modest stack. To make this even easier, you connect the two at their rear panels with a supplied RJ-12 cable (T+A calls this the E Link), which coordinates their functions and allows the MP and PP to be operated with a single remote control.

The front of the PP looks like a typical integrated amp: large volume knob; input buttons; Bass, Treble, and Balance controls; Mute, Loudness, and Flat settings; and a headphone minijack. The tone controls, which pop in and out, are really only touchup controls with limited range. For example, T+A says they limited the range of the Balance control for reasons of sound quality; running it hard left or right moves the image only a few degrees either way.

Audio is routed from MP to PP via regular analog cables, and the PP has additional analog input jacks for the rest of your legacy components, including tape decks, video, and, with the PP’s optional phono board installed, your turntable. There’s also a preamp-out for attaching a separate power amp or subwoofer.

The amplifier section features a toroidal transformer in its power supply and puts out 140Wpc into 8 ohms. Based on the principle of a Pulse Width Modulation (PWM) output stage, the PP is described by T+A as a “switch-mode power amplifier” that uses an output stage where the signal is described as a series of high-frequency positive and negative full-scale pulses. “These new switch-mode output stages were developed entirely in-house, in contrast to the ‘off-the-peg’ integrated ready-made IC amplifiers used by other producers,” says T+A, “and are of discrete construction, equipped with the latest ultra-fast MOSFET transistors and high-energy intelligent driver modules.”

The result is a dynamic-sounding amplifier section that exhibited ample and well-controlled bass along with a smooth, detailed top end. I ran the MP-PP combo over a period of several weeks in two primary systems, and also as part of a small office setup. The main systems included both my MartinLogan Prodigy loudspeakers and a neighbor’s Vandersteen 3A Signatures in a large living/dining area, though I wasn’t sure the PP could adequately power the Prodigys or Vandersteens the way I like to hear them in large spaces.

I shouldn’t have been concerned. In either system, the PP never ran out of steam—it never ran that warm, either—and exhibited the same tight yet musical character as the MP. Both my neighbor, Matt, and I were very impressed with the PP driving his Vandersteens, which he normally uses with a pair of modified Parasound amplifiers. Matt, who particularly favors electric jazz and blues guitar, pulled out discs by Jeff Golub and Ronnie Earl, then switched to his music-stuffed laptop. Each time, he remarked on how detailed and dynamic his speakers were sounding. I had to agree—they sounded wonderful.

Clearly, this combination of T+A Music Player, Power Plant, and a hard drive stuffed with music was all that was needed to coax great sound from the Vandersteens 3As—an altogether impressive and complete system for just under $10,000.

—Jon Iverson
vTuner: 100%
Generation Disco Funk

But more often than not, I was frustrated with most stations' low streaming rates and the pain of having to scroll manually back and forth through thousands of choices. I decided to fire up T+A's vTuner webpage, created exclusively for the MP (http://ta.vtuner.com). The first thing vTuner asks for is the 12-digit MAC address of your particular MP sample so it can find it on your network. Once you've input this (it's accessible via the set-up menu) and your e-mail address and have created a password, you're taken to a screen that lets you sort the 13,000 or so stations by format, location, language, genre, streaming rate, popularity, etc. You can also manually search for a station directly. I entered "Technicolor Web of Sound," the name of one of my favorite Web stations (and which I named as a "Record To Die For" in February 2005), and there it was, complete with a button to add to my "Favorites" list.

The station information was transferred over the network to my "Favorites/60s Psych" folder on the MP, and a few seconds later it was up and running with a solid 128KHz datastream. Sorting the "Oldies" category by "best-sounding stream" returned a Paris station called "100% Generation Disco Funk," which topped the list at 256KHz.

It turned out that the fastest way to set things up was to preview the stations on my computer before adding them to the MP. Bottom line: The MP's front-panel display will get you there steady and sure, but the vTuner webpage is the way to go. Using Google along with recommendations from music websites and blogs helped me quickly establish a focused list of usable stations.

When a station is chosen, the MP not only displays the station name, but also the title and artist of the song then playing, along with the streaming rate and buffer status. With the compromised sound quality of most Internet radio streams, discerning listeners will likely use such sources for one of two things: background music, or as tools for finding music to then buy in full resolution, which is where the artist and song data come in handy. But if you find an Internet radio station you really like, put a padlock on your wallet.

Compared to What?
The MP has few direct competitors, but I suspect this situation is temporary. By the time you read this, Naim should have just released in the US the Naim Uniti ($3750), which mimics the MP in features and price, and also has an optional phono stage. However, the Naim is too new to be included here, after pondering a few CD players that share only the MP's more retro qualities, John Atkinson, who likes comparing any product under review to known benchmarks, suggested focusing on the networking and DAC capabilities of a previously reviewed product.

Assistant Editor Stephen Mejias arranged for Logitech to send a Slim Devices Transporter, which, with half the T+A Music Player's functionality at half the price ($1999), was very favorably reviewed by Wes Phillips in the February 2007 issue (www.stereophile.com/mediaservers/207slim). Though the Transporter lacks a CD drive and FM tuner, it boasts a top-notch DAC and a variety of networking and switching options, including Internet radio, as well as streaming from your digital music library, or online services such as Pandora and Rhapsody.

The Transporter's Web-browser interface is quite slick, especially compared to the old-school look of T+A's vTuner Web portal. The Transporter also does a better job of integrating multiple sources, such as your iTunes music library or favorite streaming services. But this is available only if you use a computer to run the show. One feature of the MP's Web interface, its ability to sort Web stations by streaming bit rate, gave the MP a useful advantage in this important area.

The Logitech and T+A devices use similar approaches in their built-in displays and operation via the front panel or remote control, so there was no clear winner in terms of user interface. The Transporter's display is more easily configurable, and also includes various digital metering modes, but both took about the same amount of time to set up and learn to operate.

Though it seems anathema to use Web radio as a signal source to compare the sound qualities of two audiophile products, I decided to start there in order to address the concerns of readers
"Red Hot Performance at sane prices."
- Chris Martens, Playback magazine

The new Studio Series
Only Paradigm has been rated #1 for nineteen years!*

"Can you say 'sweet speaker technologies at bargain prices'?"

It's been said that almost anyone could build a great loudspeaker system, if given an unlimited budget. A much tougher task, however, is figuring out how to build speaker systems that combine genuinely high performance, classy aesthetics, and high value ... This admittedly tall order defines in a nutshell the exact specialty of the Canadian speaker maker Paradigm; in fact, you could say those guys have turned manufacturing of high-end/high-value speakers into an art form. Want proof? Look no further than the firm's new Paradigm® Reference Studio Series.

Designed, engineered, as well as manufactured in North America: G-PAL™ gold-anodized pure-aluminum domes, S-PAL™ satin-anodized pure-aluminum cones, advanced suspensions for even deeper, louder bass performance and extreme linearity, sculpted real wood veneer cabinets with seven coats of the highest-quality lacquer, hand-sanded between coats ...

The old adage 'you get what you pay for' isn't always apt. With the Paradigm® Reference Studio Series, you get much much more!

*Rated #1 Price/Value, Inside Track annual independent nationwide survey of consumer electronics specialist retailers and custom installers.

All quotes by Chris Martens, Playback magazine.
such as Peter DeBoer (quoted at the beginning of this review). Both products made it easy to "tune in" the same Web stations, and their sound quality was rather close. But the T+A consistently offered a slightly more natural and open top end, which removed some of the steely, compressed, and hollow-sounding gloss generally exhibited by compromised bitstreams. The MP also tended to buffer more of the signal, which meant that it was always a few seconds behind the Transporter when I compared them head to head. I locked in TechWebSound.com on both devices at a measly 128kbps and found each surprisingly listenable. Yes, this sounded no better than really good MP3 audio, but it put to rest my doubts about Web radio's potential to deliver satisfying music—let's hope the economic and political issues can be worked out and the bit rates increased.

Next, I connected the digital output from the Sooloos Music Server to the S/PDIF inputs of the Transporter and MP, and wandered through a variety of musical styles. First up was the recent album by Hector Zazou, In the House of Mirrors (CD, Crammed Discs Craw 47), released late last year just weeks after Zazou's untimely death. The album features master Indian musicians recorded in Mumbai, then processed and "reflected" by Zazou to create a stunning meditation on the sound and expressiveness of each acoustic instrument. Both DACs made beautiful music with the Sooloos; I'd be hard-pressed to tell one from the other on any given day. But relentless further listening revealed less hardness, along with more subtle detail and life in the higher frequency ranges, that ultimately tipped me in the T+A's favor. The MP also produced a slightly tighter bass, which for me was an advantage. Once I got a handle on these differences, they became easier to detect with each new recording. For example, listening to Jon Hassell's latest, Last Night the Moon Came Dropping Its Clothes in the Street (CD, ECM 2077), with its long-tapering ambient fades, the T+A consistently rendered the quieter textures with more character and detail.

It seemed logical to compare the CD transport of the MP to the hard drive of the Sooloos, which was still hooked up to the MP's DAC via S/PDIF. After first hours, then days of listening for differences, comparing the disc in the MP and the same material from the Sooloos's hard drive, I concluded that the DAC was a leveling factor here: they sounded equally impressive. Comparing the MP playing either a CD or an uncompressed music file from iTunes vs the Sooloos using its own internal RME DAC, small differences crept back into the equation that ultimately favored the MP—which, not surprisingly, again had a more natural top end and tighter bass. As Sooloos now offers their Controller with an S/PDIF connection, without the need for the Sooloos DAC in the system, this is a match made in digital heaven.

The Right Choices?
For the music lover who listens to both CDs and downloads, T+A elektroakustik has created a timely and carefully thought-out bridge product with serious audiophile pretensions—no matter the source, the Music Player's DAC easily held its ground and made beautiful music. My only reservation is that I still find a small alphanumeric screen and remote control an awkward way to find potential digital sources and their thousands of choices of artist, song, album, and show. But I'm probably fussier than most about this issue, which is easily resolved by using the MP's excellent DAC tethered to a music server with its own graphic interface, or controlled through the MP's RS-232 port with a Crestron or similar touchscreen controller.

In the end, how to classify the T+A Music Player? Flip a coin: heads it's an excellent-sounding CD player and DAC that will keep up as your online listening habits evolve, or tails it's a Web-enabled control center and streamer with top-notch DAC that also plays your CDs. Either way, I think T+A has made the right choices for a component intended to anchor a modern digital system—especially for the customer with one foot in downloads and the other in discs. Mr. DeBoer? You should be pleased.
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• KIMBER KABLE SELECT KS-1021 $1125 meter pair
• KIMBER KABLE SELECT KS-1011 $700 meter pair
• KIMBER KABLE KCAG $860 meter pair
• 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

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dCS Scarlatti

UPSAMPLING SACD/CD PLAYER & MASTER CLOCK

MICHAEL FREMER

dCS Scarlatti SACD playback system, comprising the Scarlatti Transport, Scarlatti Clock, and Scarlatti DAC. (Scarlatti Upsampler not shown.)

equipment report

dCS Scarlatti UPSAMPLING SACD/CD TRANSPORT

Drawer-loading, dual-laser SACD/CD transport with DSD datastream output via IEEE1394 FireWire interface. Digital outputs: 2 AES/EBU (XLR); 1 TosLink optical S/PDIF; 2 BNC for single S/PDIF-2; 2 each IEEE1394 digital (dCS-encrypted DSD), SDIF-2 BNC. Word clock In/Out, SUC multipin connector for RS232 control. Includes Philips Pronto 9400 remote control, BNC cable, IEEE1394 cable.

DIMENSIONS 20.2” (513mm) W by 5.5” (140mm) H by 16.7” (424mm) D. Weight: 43.2 lbs (19.6kg).

SERIAL NUMBER OF UNIT REVIEWED STT5851.

PRICE $32,999.

dCS SCARLATTI DAC

D/A processor with 5-bit, 2.822 or 3.07MS/s oversampled, dCS-patented Ring DAC topology, switchable reconstruction filters (4-6), remote control, integral digital volume and balance controls.

Inputs: dual and single AES/EBU XLR, 2 RCA, BNC, TosLink, word clock BNC, 2 BNC for 1 S/PDIF-2 PCM or DSD, IEEE1394 In/Out. Digital output: word clock BNC. Analog outputs: XLR balanced, RCA single-ended. Sample rates: 32, 44.1, 48, 88.2, or 96kHz on single-wire interfaces and word-clock input, auto-selected (optical inputs not guaranteed at 88.2 or 96kHz): 88.2, 96, 176.4, or 192kHz on dual AES interface, auto-selected. 2.822MS/s for DSD on IEEE1394 interface requires 44.1kHz word clock. Frequency responses (set to filter 1): Fs=32kHz: 10Hz–15kHz, +0.1/-0.5dB. Fs=44.1Hz or 48kHz: 10Hz–20kHz, ±0.1dB. Fs=88.2 or 96kHz: 10Hz–20kHz, ±0.1dB. Fs=176.4 or 192kHz: 10Hz–20kHz, ±0.1dB. DSD: 10Hz–20kHz, ±0.1dB.

DIMENSIONS 18.3” (465mm) W by 3” (75mm) H by 16” (405mm) D. Weight: 24.9 lbs (11.3kg).

SERIAL NUMBER OF UNIT REVIEWED SDC5904.

PRICE $23,999.

(continued page 62)
**DCS SCARLATTI SACD PLAYBACK SYSTEM**

(continued from page 61)

**SCARLATTI MASTER CLOCK**
Class 1 Master Clock with dual VCXO, temperature-compensated. Clock frequencies: 44.1 or 48kHz. Clock accuracy: better than ±1ppm. Clock stability: ±1ppm when shipped. Lock range: ±300ppm. Startup time: typically 1 minute to rated accuracy.

**DIMENSIONS**
18.3" (465mm) W by 3" (75mm) H by 16" (405mm) D. Weight: 21.6 lbs (9.8kg).

**SERIAL NUMBER OF UNIT REVIEWED**
SCS913.

**PRICE**
$9,999.

**SCARLATTI UPSAMPLER**
Digital-digital processor, with remote control and switchable upsampling filters (4), that upsamples input data to high sample-rate PCM (up to 192kHz) or DSD (1-bit data at 2.822MHz). Inputs: USB2.0, S/PDIF RCA (x2), S/PDIF BNC, S/PDIF Toslink optical, AES/EBU, word-clock in/Out, SDIF-2 BNC. Outputs: IEE1394 (x2), AES/EBU (x2), configurable as single or dual link, S/PDIF RCA, S/PDIF BNC, SDIF-2 BNC.

**DIMENSIONS**
18.3" (465mm) W by 3" (75mm) H by 16" (405mm) D. Weight: 22.2 lbs (10.1kg).

**SERIAL NUMBER OF UNIT REVIEWED**
SUP5862.

**PRICE**
$12,999.

**ALL FOUR FINISHERS**
Silver or Black.

**SYSTEM PRICE**
$79,996.

Approximate number of dealers: 24.

Warranty: 3 year parts & labor from date originally shipped from dCS to original owner only.

**MANUFACTURER**
dCS (Data Conversion Systems), Ltd., Mull House, Great Chesterford Court, Great Chesterford, Saffron Walden CB10 1PF, England, UK.

Web: www.dcsLtd.co.uk. US distributor: dCS America, P.O. Box 544, 3057 Nutley Street, Fairfax, VA 22031.

Tel: (617) 314-9296.

ing the system, and leave yourself with no sound.

So it's important to actively participate in setting up the Scarlatti, and to understand how its various components and connectivity variants interact to bring you the music. The greater your comprehension, the more likely you are to play, discovering the system's many sonic and technical capabilities—and the less likely you are to be intimidated.

**What it is**
The Scarlatti system replaces dCS's combo of Verdi SACD/CD transport, Purcell D/D converter, and Elgar Plus DAC, which I reviewed in the April 2003 Stereophile (Vol26 No.4, www.stereophile.com/digitalprocessors/814) and adds a master clock unit developed from the dCS Verona that John Atkinson reviewed in March 2005 (www.stereophile.com/digitalprocessors/305dc). Calling the Scarlatti an SACD/CD player is like calling the Hubble a telescope.

At least for now, in today's fading disc-based digital world, the heart of the Scarlatti is the SACD/CD transport itself ($32,999), based on the best from Teac/Esoteric. It loads quickly, operates smoothly, is satisfyingly responsive, and upsamples to DSD, if desired. It can communicate with the Scarlatti DAC via coax, TosLink, and/or BNC S/PDIF, AES/EBU, or FireWire (1394) connections, depending on the sampling rate and type of data being transferred.

The fully balanced Scarlatti DAC ($23,999) incorporates a significantly updated edition of dCS's proprietary, oft-written-about Ring DAC technology. Because it incorporates both multiple selectable digital inputs, and control in the digital domain of both volume and balance, in an all-digital system the DAC can be used to directly drive the power amplifier. The balanced analog output uses proprietary discrete circuitry, while the single-ended output is based on op-amps. dCS figures buyers will be running balanced.

While the Scarlatti transport and DAC themselves comprise a complete system, dCS also supplied the optional Scarlatti Master Clock ($9,999), claiming that stripping the clock data from the signal and slaving all components to the outboard clock reduces jitter and produces better sound.

Finally, there's the newest dCS component, the Scarlatti Upsampler ($12,999), which, among other things, corrects one of the Scarlatti DAC's glaring omissions (by 2009 standards) by providing a USB2.0 data port. dCS claims that outsourcing the sample-rate-conversion process to a separate unit instead of doing it in the transport results in significantly better sound. While the transport's CD-upsampling abilities are "limited" to DSD, the Upsampler lets you try 88.2kHz, 96kHz, 176.4kHz and 192kHz PCM and DSD (1-bit data at 2.822MHz). Like the new USB DACs from Wavelength and Ayre Acoustics, the USB connection operates in the preferred asynchronous mode, where the DAC controls the streaming of data from the computer, resulting in very low word-clock jitter. By contrast, USB's usual "adaptive" mode allows the computer to control the data flow, leaving the DAC to try to make sense of the timing information, which results in high jitter and degraded sound quality.

In addition to letting you play back high-resolution 24-bit/96kHz audio tracks downloaded from sites like HDtracks.com, USB connectivity lets you play back many DVD-Audio discs, and even Reference Recordings' 24/176 HRx DVD-R data discs and Chesky's new 24/192 Master Series discs, albeit at a reduced sampling rate of 96kHz, the maximum currently possible via USB2.0. (But if your computer has a 192kHz-capable soundcard, like the Lynx AES16 or JMEI HDSP 9652 Hammerfall, you can run analog to your current preamplifier or digital to the Scarlatti DAC and hear these files in full resolution and bandwidth.)

With the failure of DVD-A and the marginalization of SACD, the future of...
"mainstream" hi-rez sound is via the Internet, which makes USB connectivity mandatory for any digital product—and especially one this expensive—that wants to be considered future-proof. (Sorry, SACD fans—and I'm one of you—but the catalog is limited, even if new titles do come out regularly.)

**A formidable stack**

Getting the most from the Scarlatti system requires multiple connections, including FireWire between DAC and transport and DAC and Upsampler, BNC connections between the Master Clock and its three slaves, dual AES/EBU balanced between Upsampler and DAC, single AES/EBU and RCA S/PDIF between transport and Upsampler, and, in my system, S/PDIF connections between the DAC and my Sooloos Music Server and Alesis Masterlink hard-disk recorder. Add four high-quality AC cables, and behind my equipment rack things got very busy—and costly. But dCS does supply a long USB cable for easy laptop connectivity.

Much has happened in the six years since my review of dCS's Verdi-Purcell-Elgar. dCS has greatly upgraded its products' appearance, to give the Scarlatti stack a more uniform and graceful look; their attractiveness speaks for itself. The external build quality has been improved, and, of course, the price has doubled almost exactly, from $33,985 to $67,997 (not including the Upsampler). I hate when that happens, but previous dCS systems always had the feel of expensive works-in-progress; the Scarlatti stakes a stable, finished claim to the state of the art.

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**MEASUREMENTS**

I assessed the performance of the dCS Scarlatti system using Audio Precision's SYS2722 system (see [www.ap.com](http://www.ap.com) and "As We See It" in the January 2008 issue, www.stereophile.com/asweseneit/108awseit), as well as, for some tests, our Audio Precision System One Dual Domain.

Because of the complexity of this four-box system and the multitude of operational choices—inward or external clock (the latter with or without dither), SACD or CD playback or external 16-bit and 24-bit data via S/PDIF, AES/EBU, or USB, with PCM data upsampled to 88.2kHz, 96kHz, 176.4kHz, or 192kHz PCM or to or DSD, with four different filters offered by both the DAC and the upsampler, and both balanced and unbalanced analog outputs, each with a choice of two maximum output levels—I had to narrow down the choices for the measurements. For evaluating the system's performance with SACD, I used the Sony "provisional" test SACD, with both the Scarlatti transport and Scarlatti DAC clocked by the Scarlatti Clock. For CD playback, I played a test CD-R in the transport, either fed directly to the DAC or upsampled by the Scarlatti Upsampler. I also fed 16-bit and 24-bit PCM data to the Upsampler via a Toslink connection from a PC with an RME soundcard. Again, I either upsampled these data to both 176.4kHz and DSD, or fed them directly to the Scarlatti DAC. I also drove the Scarlatti Clock's USB port with a MacBook running OS10.4.11, using both MP1kHz and 88.2kHz files played from iTunes 8. I primarily tested the Scarlatti DAC from its balanced outputs with the volume control set to its maximum, but I also repeated a subset of the tests from the unbalanced jacks. Phew!

The Scarlatti transport featured the best error correction I have encountered. It played back the Pierre Verany test CD, which has laser-cut gaps in the data spiral of varying lengths, without any glitches or mutes through Track 36, which has 2.5mm gaps. It did mute once per disc revolution on Track 37, which features 3mm gaps. This transport should be able to play even the most beat-up CDs in your collection without missing any music.

The Scarlatti DAC's maximum output level at 1kHz was 1.975V or 6.07V from both balanced and unbalanced outputs, depending on whether the output level was set to "2V" or "6V." Both outputs preserved absolute polarity, ie, were non-inverting. (The XLRs are wired with pin 2 hot.) The balanced output impedance was very low, at less than 2 ohms. While the unbalanced output impedance was higher, at 51 ohms across the band, this is still low in absolute terms.

The Scarlatti DAC's frequency response with SACD data (fig.1, top pair of traces above 40kHz), was flat almost to 40kHz, with then a gentle rolloff reaching —3dB at 70kHz and —26dB at 107kHz. This was the same with all four reconstruction filters. With CD data upsampled to DSD, the response was flat from 10Hz to 20kHz, as was its response with a pre-emphasized disc, so I haven't shown these in fig.1. With non-upsampled playback, there were very minor changes at the top of the audioband, depending

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**Fig.1 dCS Scarlatti, frequency response at −3dBFS into 100k ohms, SACD data (top above 50kHz), and 96kHz PCM data with (from top to bottom at 40kHz): Filter 2, Filter 1, Filter 4, and Filter 3. (Right channel dashed; 2dB/vertical div.)**
has gone by for me to make any direct and meaningful comparisons. However, in listening to the earlier dCS stack—using, among other SACD/CDs, the Rolling Stones catalog (no longer available on that format)—the original vinyl editions had been far superior in terms of transparency and, especially, three-dimensionality; the SACDs sounded noticeably darker, slower, thicker, and more opaque in 2003.

Needless to say, my analog front end has improved considerably since then. Yet now, listening to the Scarlatti, when I again compared the UK editions of the Stones' *Aftermath*, the SACD was much closer to the LP in terms of three-dimensionality, rhythmic nimbleness, and the sensation of "thereness." The LP still won the transparency battle, and still sounded better overall, but the differences now seemed greatly diminished; the SACD was more dynamic overall and more robust on bottom than the LP, while avoiding the sluggishness and bottom-end thickness it demonstrated six years ago in my listening for the Verdi-Purcell-Elgar review.

**Fig.2** dCS Scarlatti, 1/4-octave spectrum with noise and spurious of dithered 1kHz tone at —90dBFS with 16-bit CD data (top), SACD data (middle at 24kHz), and 24-bit data (bottom) with dithered 1kHz tone at —120dBFS with 24-bit data (bottom at 1kHz). (Right channel dashed.)

**Fig.3** dCS Scarlatti, FFT-derived spectrum with noise and spurious of dithered 1kHz tone at —90dBFS with 16-bit data (left channel cyan, right channel magenta) and 24-bit data (left blue, right red), both upsampled to DSD.

**Fig.4** dCS Scarlatti, FFT-derived spectrum with noise and spurious of dithered 1kHz tone at —90dBFS (red) and at —120dBFS, DSD data (blue).
In fact, the two formats were now more similar than different, particularly in terms of the sensation of an absence of a grain more “felt” than consciously heard, and lurking just beneath the surface of the SACD’s sound. In other words, the Scarlatti was able to produce the pleasing, relaxing, “calm” sensation that vinyl regularly elicits, but that digital rarely manages for many listeners. That might have been a result of the Scarlatti’s much-improved resolution of microdynamics over the earlier dCS stack, as well as what sounded like a far better analog output stage.

Telltale digital artifacts once easy to identify, even with SACDs, were essentially gone, and especially edge and grain. The Scarlatti’s top-end and transient responses were as pure, clean, and natural as I’ve heard from any digital component. I was surprised to find that, until I switched, I didn’t know which was playing: vinyl or SACD. As I wrote that last sentence, it happened again: I had the two editions of Aftermath synced and was convinced I was hearing the SACD.

Analysis of the 16- and 24-bit data used to generate fig.3 now being upsampled to 176.4kHz rather than DSD and fed to the DAC from the Scarlatti Upsampler via a dual-AES/EBU link rather than Firewire (fig.5). (This graph was taken with the DAC set to the 6V maximum output, which gives the same 18dB drop in the noise floor seen in fig.2.)

Testing the Scarlatti DAC’s linearity error with 16-bit data only showed the effect of the recorded dither, so I haven’t shown it. With 24-bit data (also not shown), the amplitude error was negligible down to −120dBFS. Playing back an undithered 16-bit tone at exactly −90.31dBFS (fig.6), the three DC voltage levels are clearly resolved, with excellent waveform symmetry, though a very slight degree of DC offset (40pV right, −10pV left) can be seen. With SACD data (fig.7), there is a good facsimile of the sine wave.

The Scarlatti DAC’s analog output stage offers very low distortion, with only the second and third harmonics apparent above −120dB (0.0001%), even into the very low 600 ohm load (fig.8). Though the third harmonic is the highest in level, at −112dB (0.00025%), this is going to be well below audibility. Neither the low level of harmonic distortion nor its spectrum was affected either by the upsampling or by the filter choices.

However, there were some changes in behavior with the HF intermodulation test results. Fig.9 shows the spectrum of the DAC’s output while it decoded a maximum-level 24-bit mix of 19kHz and 20kHz tones, fed directly to the DAC without upsampling from the original 44.1kHz and with the Filter set to F1. Intermodulation products are extremely low, lying close to −120dB, and there are no images of the fundamental tones apparent between 21kHz and 24kHz.

Fig.10 shows the spectrum with the same data upsampled to DSD. Intermodulation products remain miniscule, but a
It was the LP playing on the Continuum Audio Labs Caliburn-Cobra-Castellon combination. When I switched, the differences weren't worth mentioning, which says a great deal about both of these extravagantly priced source components. Fewer of either technology's artifacts were apparent.

Other comparisons of SACDs to LPs made it clear that the Scarlatti sounded less congested and more transparent than, and microdynamically superior to, the Verdi-Purcell-Elgar—as best as I could recall the latter's sound. The Scarlatti's vastly superior sound suggested that dCS has done far more than merely tweak the earlier system.

Melting snow
Neil Young once described early digital sound as "like getting hit with ice picks." Now the ice is "tiny," or maybe more like "snow," he said recently. The Scarlatti's SACD performance melted that snow completely. I heard Christian Tatzlaff perform Shostakovich's Violin Concerto 1 with the New York Philharmonic last night at Avery Fisher Hall, then ran home and played Area 31 (I don't have the Shostakovich on disc). No recording can sound truly "live," but this SACD, through the Scarlatti, floated the violin effortlessly and delicately in three dimen-

sight shaping of the noise floor can be seen above 20kHz. It can't be seen at the scale these graphs are printed in the magazine, but the peaks representing the 19 and 20kHz tones have slightly less wide "skirts" in fig.10 than in fig.9, which suggests that the DSD- upsampled data has even lower jitter. Upsampling the data to 176.4kHz PCM rather than DSD eliminates the noise-floor shaping (fig.11), but the spectral peaks now have slightly wider "skirts."

The Filter setting had no effect on the results of the HF intermodulation spectral analysis when the data were upscaled to DSD or 176.4kHz PCM. However, whereas F1 offered textbook performance with non-oversampled 24-bit data (fig.9), the other three filters introduced major spectral changes. Fig.12, for example, shows the behavior with F4, which, with its slow rolloff, gives the lowest rejection of ultrasonic image energy and the greatest degree of "leakage" into the audioband. Many aliasing products can be seen below 20kHz; while this test is very much a worst-case situation, and unlikely to be encountered with music, it is instructive to see the tradeoff this filter requires for better time-domain performance. F3 is better in this respect than F4 and F2 is better still, though neither approaches the spectral purity offered by F1.

I examined the Scarlatti DAC's rejection of word-clock jitter in a number of circumstances. Fig.13 was generated for the best case situation: CD playback in the Scarlatti transport, upscaled to DSD, with Transport, Upsampler, and DAC all controlled by and locked to the Scarlatti.
DCS SCARLATTI SACD PLAYBACK SYSTEM

The recording of Artur Rubinstein performing Chopin's Piano Concerto 1, with Stanislaw Skrowaczewski and the New Symphony Orchestra (RCA Living Stereo 67902), was like time travel: in any digital version I'd heard, the familiar sound of this hall (I've been there) subtly suggested behind Rubinstein's piano had never sounded so effortlessly solid, three-dimensional, and texturally and harmonically believable. The same was true of the richly textured cellos and basses which dug deep without turning to mush. The CD layer? Not so much.

When I then played an original "shaded dog" of this recording (LP, RCA Living Stereo LSC-2575), an even more believable, more finely resolved, more expansive yet delicate version presented itself—albeit with a few pops, clicks, and other vinyl artifacts some might be unwilling to tolerate (but that

Clock. All the harmonics of the LF squarewave lie at the residual level and the central spike in this graph that represents the high-level, 16-bit 11.025kHz tone is very sharply defined. By contrast, fig.14 shows the worst case, with the 16-bit analytical signal fed to the DAC via 15' of Toslink from a PC fitted with an RME soundcard. The central peak now has noticeably widened "skirts," due to the presence of LF random jitter, sidebands can be seen at ±60Hz, and there is some modulation of the lowest-order sidebands at ±229Hz. In absolute terms, however, this is still very good performance. Feeding the Toslink data to the Upsampler rather than to the DAC and upsampling to DSD eliminates the sidebands (fig.15) and gives a spectrum closer to that shown in fig.13.

Finally, I repeated most the tests feeding 16- and 24-bit data, sampled at 44.1kHz or 88.2kHz from my MacBook to the Upsampler's USB input. This operates in the much-preferred asynchronous mode, where the DAC controls the flow of data from the computer. In all respects, there were no measured differences between the Scarlatti DAC accepting data from the MacBook via USB and playing the same data on a CD with the Transport or feeding it to an AES/EBU or S/PDIF input. And the efficacy of the asynchronous USB protocol can be seen in fig.16, where the spectrum is almost as clean as that in fig.13.

The dCS Scarlatti may be the most expensive disc-playing system Stereophile has reviewed by far, but it offers state-of-the-art measured performance.

—John Atkinson

![Fig.13 dCS Scarlatti, high-resolution jitter spectrum of analog output signal, 11.025kHz at —6dBFS, sampled at 44.1kHz with LSB toggled at 229Hz, 16-bit CD data upsampled to DSD, master Scarlatti Clock. Center frequency of trace, 11.025kHz; frequency range, ±3.5kHz.](image1)

![Fig.14 dCS Scarlatti, high-resolution jitter spectrum of analog output signal, 11.025kHz at —6dBFS, sampled at 44.1kHz with LSB toggled at 229Hz, 16-bit data sourced via Toslink, no upsampling. Center frequency of trace, 11.025kHz; frequency range, ±3.5kHz.](image2)

![Fig.15 dCS Scarlatti, high-resolution jitter spectrum of analog output signal, 11.025kHz at —6dBFS, sampled at 44.1kHz with LSB toggled at 229Hz, 16-bit data sourced via Toslink, upsampled to DSD. Center frequency of trace, 11.025kHz; frequency range, ±3.5kHz.](image3)

![Fig.16 dCS Scarlatti, high-resolution jitter spectrum of analog output signal, 11.025kHz at —6dBFS, sampled at 44.1kHz with LSB toggled at 229Hz, 16-bit data sourced from MacBook via USB. Center frequency of trace, 11.025kHz; frequency range, ±3.5kHz.](image4)
I easily ignored). As with the Rolling Stones SACDs, even I could make a case for either format, LP or SACD—and that’s a new one for me.

Though it definitely sounded richer and breathed more easily when run in balanced mode, the dCS Scarlatti was easily the most satisfying SACD player I’ve heard.

**Cary on**

Cary Audio Design’s impressive-sounding CD 306 Professional SACD player ($8000) that John Atkinson reviewed in November 2008 was available, so I did some comparisons with that. The Cary sounded “fast,” exciting, slightly forward, and a bit “etchy” and mechanical. Good as it was, it was no match for the Scarlatti’s harmonically richer, more dimensional, microdynamically superior, more relaxed, more detailed sound. The Cary was “present,” the Scarlatti nonexistent. One was clearly “great digital,” the other simply great.

David Chesky’s Area 31 (SACD, Chesky SACD288) sounded nothing less than fierce (in a positive way) through the Cary, but with hyper-defined leading edges, akin to turning up a TV’s Sharpness control. Handclaps were hard, and in Chesky’s Violin Concerto, with the Area 31 ensemble conducted by Anthony Aibel, soloist Tom Chiu’s violin was edgier than what would be considered natural, but the presentation still sounded dimensional and exciting. Through the Scarlatti, this spacious recording produced a non-mechanical, artifact-free, three-dimensional, effervescent, texturally supple soundscape in which the performers were more cleanly delineated from the spacious surroundings, while producing a far more convincing presentation of Chiu’s violin.

**Bring out your dead!**

Days before writing this review, I heard from two former owners of the Verdi-Purcell-Elgar stack, both of whom had sold them because they were dissatisfied with the system’s playback of CDs. One missed listening to SACDs, the other couldn’t care less.

The real test of the Scarlatti, then, given the profusion of software, is how well it plays CDs. The problem is, after comparing some 24-bit/96kHz digital downloads played from my Apple G4 laptop vs their 16/44.1 CD versions played on the $32,999 Scarlatti transport, it was easy to conclude that while the Scarlatti system is a much better CD player than the Verdi-Elgar-Purcell, spending big dollars on CD playback in 2009 might not be such a good investment.

The growing popularity of server-based sources and other digital peripherals adds greater utility to a multi-input DAC and makes for a more worthwhile investment. The biggest change, though, has been Internet access to high-resolution audio files. Most current digital recordings are made at higher-than-“Red Book” resolution and some labels—Linn, 2L, AIX, Chesky’s HDTracks, for exam-
DCS SCARLATTI SACD PLAYBACK SYSTEM

High resolution
Right about now you're probably saying, "Fremer shouldn't have been assigned this review." Patience, please. You'll find this out for yourself. If, after comparing a familiar CD you own to its hi-rez version, you decide the CD is good enough, well then, you're all set—but I'll bet "good enough" isn't good enough for most of the enthusiasts who regularly read Stereophile, especially if another 10 bucks will get you greatly enhanced musical performance from a favorite recording.

I accessed 24/96 files of Eiji Oue and the Minnesota Orchestra's Exotic Dances from the Opera—a Dr. Keith O. Johnson sonic spectacular—and compared them to the CD version (Reference RR-71 CD). The difference was ridiculous. The files, played on a $2000 computer via the dCS Scarlatti Upsampler's USB port, regularly read Stereophile, especially if another 10 bucks will get you greatly enhanced musical performance from a favorite recording.

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AT SOME POINT SOON THE FLOODGATES WILL OPEN, AND YOU'LL BE ABLE TO DOWNLOAD HI-REZ DIGITAL FILES OF ALL YOUR ANALOG FAVORITES.

pie—are making high-resolution original digital files available. Meanwhile, the ma-
or record labels are scurrying to convert their vaults full of analog tape to 24/96; at some point soon the floodgates will open, and you'll be able to download hi-rez digital files of all your analog favorites.

However, while hi-rez files can be downloaded today, the selection remains limited, download times are long, and configuring a computer to play audio with full resolution is a genuine pain that turns off or confuses many audiophiles. You can bet that, even as you read this, audiophile and non-audiophile companies alike are working to produce a convenience "skin" that will make the computer "disappear," even though it will still be doing the work below the surface: going online, downloading music files, album covers, and metadata, configuring them for proper playback, and displaying them on an easy-to-use handheld screen.

Server-type devices like the Sooloos Music Server and those from some other companies are already doing this, or are close to. For now, however, the Sooloos can only rip CDs. (By the time you read this, the updated software required to do what I've just described may be available.) But if you have bought one of the server-based systems and transferred your CDs to it, what you're likely to hear is what I heard through the Scarlatti. While "Red Book" CDs sounded as good as they're ever likely to through the Scarlatti system (especially, in my opinion, when upsampled to 24/176), compar-
ing them to native 24/96 versions of the same material fed via USB to the Scarlatti Upsampler will conclusively prove to you what I and others have been saying for decades: upsampled, upconverted, sprinkled with holy water, trimmed around the edges, Bencini-treated—whatever you do to them, CDs just squeak by as a high-performance audio format. Still, played through the dCS Scarlatti, the best ones sounded very good indeed.

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sounded airy, spacious, texturally delicate, and produced a profusion of harmonic colors that were masked by the CD's harder, more constricted sound. The downloaded sound was relaxed and flowing, and made me want to sit down and listen. The CD was harder-edged, spatially constricted, dry. I didn't want to listen—and I didn't. Not that it sounded bad. It's still a great recording, as are many of the recordings shoehorned into the 16/44.1 format.

I listened to the CD "straight up" at 16/44.1, upsampled to 24/176.4, and upsampled to DSD. They sounded different, but no CD version sounded as good as the hi-rez file. I can understand why some might prefer the upsampled versions, but it won't be because there was more information. The DSD sounded smoother for sure, but the 16/44.1 playback had better focus, and on most discs produced greater image solidity and three-dimensionality. The better a CD sounded, the better it sounded "straight up"—though I ended up preferring 24/176 upsampling, which combined excellent image focus and spatiality with the sensation of hearing more information. The harder-edged a disc's sound, the better it sounded upsampled to DSD. As with the Scarlatti DAC's multiple filter choices, listen and choose what you like. What you like will probably change, depending on the source.

Music Served

The question you need to ask yourself at this pivotal point in digital time is: To maximize what's possible from CD while waiting out the future of hi-rez downloads, do you spend a lot of money on an exotic transport? Or do you spend a lot less and dump all your CDs to a hard-drive-based server, thus gaining convenience and what many consider to be sound superior to that of any optical-based system?

It was easy enough to rip CDs to the Sooloos Music Server as FLAC files (Sooloos now handles WAV files) and then compare them to "live" CD playback through the Scarlatti transport. Some say that FLAC files don't sound as good as WAV files—the makers of the Blue Smoke server, for instance, which uses WAV and a system based on Windows Vista. Yet when I compared the ripped FLAC files to the Scarlatti transport's playback, whatever differences there may have been were picked nits compared to what I heard when comparing CDs to hi-rez files of the same material.

I also have the LP, CD, and HRx DVD-R versions of Reference Recordings' collection of overtures by Malcolm Arnold, performed by the composer and the London Philharmonic (RR-48, RR-48 CD, and RR-48 HRx). The LP was sourced from an analog tape, the DDD CD from a Sony PCM 701 ES D/A converter (16/44.1) modified by Keith Johnson, and the 24/176 HRx DVD-R from the analog tape. The CD sounded hard, bright, and glassy, even on the Scarlatti. Turn it up and your ears bleed. Even downconverted to 24/96, the HRx DVD played on a computer via the Scarlatti's USB input sounded full, rich, delicate, spacious, and totally pleasurable at whatever volume I chose. The LP sounded even better, but again, a case could be made for either hi-rez format, analog or digital.

A comparison of the SACD and HD-CD versions of Reference's Tuttil! An Orchestral Sampler (RR-906) produced equally definitive results. The second CD, for example, had better focus, and on most discs produced greater image solidity and three-dimensionality.

I ENDED UP PREFERENCES 24/176 UPSAMPLING, WHICH COMBINED EXCELLENT IMAGE FOCUS AND SPATIALITY WITH THE SENSATION OF HEARING MORE INFORMATION.

CDs to a hard-drive-based server, thus gaining convenience and what many consider to be sound superior to that of any optical-based system?
I'm sitting here with piles of DVD-A and Classic Records DAD discs on the floor, having more fun with digital than I ever thought it possible to have. I've always wanted to hear on my big rig the DVD-As of Curtis Mayfield's Live at Ronnie Scott's (Silverline 288115), The Band's The Last Waltz (Rhino R9 78269), and Neil Young's Harvest (Reprise 48100-9). Harvest sounds great, but my advance test pressing of the AAA 180gm vinyl reissue is even better. All of the companies that produced these DVD-As—AIX, Hi-Res, Silverline, and, I bet, Warner Bros./Rhino—will soon offer them as 24/96 downloads, if they're not already. That's the digital future, and it sounds great!

**Conclusion**

The dCS Scarlatti is the best-sounding, most satisfying digital playback system I've heard. The company's Verdi-Purecall-Elgar stack got my respect but didn't generate the Scarlatti's level of excitement, enthusiasm, and listening pleasure. With hundreds of my CDs ripped to the Sooloos Music Server, I found myself listening to more CDs than ever before. Having instant touch-screen access to so much music profoundly changes how you listen and enjoy what you listen to.

For me, the Scarlatti profoundly narrows the gap between analog and high-resolution digital, and for many it will surely close that gap altogether. Those with big SACD collections—and big bank balances—need to hear its effortlessly transparent, tonally neutral, airy performance as it decodes their favorite SACDs.

The Scarlatti is also an exceptional CD player that makes my two-box Musical Fidelity kW DM-25 ($6500)—also a very fine SACD player with transport—sound cloudy, anemic, and boring. Played on the Scarlatti, the best CDs sounded more vibrant, dimensional, transparent, and effortless than I'd ever heard them.

But as we move into the digital future, do you really want to continue playing CDs optically by investing in an ultra-expensive transport, when you can rip them to a hard drive and have instant access to your music while clearing the clutter from your listening room—all without losing sound quality? Will you really miss those jewel cases and tiny pamphlets? Once you hear hi-rez versions of your favorite CDs, which will make the CDs sound bland, canned, and/or amusical, will you really conclude that CD sounds "good enough"—or will you hear a profound difference? Upsampling isn't the answer, genuinely higher resolution is.

Are you big into SACDs? No question: the entire Scarlatti stack will lift your collection to new sonic heights. However, if you're not into SACD, I can't imagine why, in 2009, given where digital is headed, you'd invest in the Scarlatti transport when you can get a server-based system and probably hire someone to rip your discs for you, all for a lot less than $32,999. And sooner rather than later, you're going to want high-resolution digital versions of both new releases and reissues of what you already have on CD, to play back on a computer-based system—and you'll be getting it, via the Internet, DVD, and, eventually, Blu-ray Disc.

But the Scarlatti Master Clock, DAC, and Upsampler are something else entirely: a system that provides sound of exceptional quality, multiple digital inputs, upsampling to DSD or PCM (or not), and built-in volume and balance controls, to create the hub for a wholly digital system that doesn't need a separate preamplifier. Assuming dCS will sell the Scarlatti components separately, sans transport, they're definitely worth looking into, especially if you don't collect SACDs.

On the other hand if you're a traditionalist who plans to continue playing CDs the old-fashioned way, and you own a lot of SACDs, and you want to download hi-rez files from the Internet, and you have $80,000 to spend, well then: dCS has built a jewel of a four-box system that will make you very happy for a very long time, no matter what the audio future brings. The price is steep, but it's the best digital I've heard.

---

**ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT**

**ANALOG SOURCES**

Continuum Audio Labs Caliburn turntable & Cobra tonearm & Castellon stand; Graham Phantom tonearm, Lyra Titan i cartridge.

**DIGITAL SOURCES**


**PREAMPLIFICATION**

Manley Steelhead, Ypsilon VPS-100 phono preamplifiers; daTZeel NHB-18NS, Musical Fidelity Primo preamplifiers.

**POWER AMPLIFIER**

Musical Fidelity Titan.

**LOUDSPEAKERS**

Wilson Audio Specialties MAXX 3.

**CABLES**

Phono: Hovland MG2 Music Groove, Furutech Ag-12, Esoteric 8N.

Interconnect: TARA Labs Zero, Kubala-Sosna Emotion. Speaker: TARA Labs Omega Gold. AC: TARA Labs The One Cobalt, Audience Au24, Shunyata Research King Cobra Helix CX.

**ACCESSORIES**

Finite Elemente Pagode, HRS SXR equipment stands; Symposium Rollerblocks, Audiodharma Cable Cooker; Shunyata Research Hydra V-Ray II, Audience Adept Response, TARA Labs Power Screen power conditioners; Furutech DeMag & deStat LP treatments; Oyaide AC wall box & receptacles; ASC Tube Traps, RPG BAD & Abffusor panels; VPI HW-17F, Loricraft PRC4 Deluxe record-cleaning machines.

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Two years ago, I embarked on a series of reviews of mostly state-of-the-art, mostly full-range floorstanding speakers: the Sonus Faber Cremona Ellipsa (December 2007), KEF Reference 207/2 (February 2008), PSB Synchrony One (April 2008), Magico V3 (May 2008), Avalon NP Evolution 2.0 and Epos M16i (July 2008), Esoteric MG-20 (August 2008), Dynaudio Sapphire (January 2009), and Revel Ultima Salon2 (March 2009). I had intended to intersperse those reports with coverage of some high-performance minispeakers, but for various reasons that never happened, so in the next few issues I'll be making up that lost ground, beginning with a promising contender from the UK, the Spendor SA1.

The very first SA1 I ever listened to was Spendor's original version, designed by Spencer Hughes. This was back in the late 1970s, and Paul Messenger had the speaker in house for his "Subjective Sounds" column in Hi-Fi News. If I recall correctly after all these years, Paul preferred that SA1 to the classic BBC LS3/5a, though I felt the BBC speaker had superior stereo imaging. The new speaker, designed under the supervision of...
of Spendor's current owner, Philip Swift, ex-Audiolab, has nothing in common with that design. The 2009-vintage SA1 is 12" tall and almost the same size as the LS3/5a, except that the two drive-units are mounted on what would have been the side of that speaker, which was wider than it was deep.

The SA1 shares the LS3/5a's sealed-box loading for the woofer. The latter is made in-house by Spendor on a 6" diecast aluminum chassis; it features a partially transparent, quite deeply flared cone 3.75" in diameter, formed from a plastic material called ep38, which appears to be polypropylene filled with a stiffening material of some kind. The cone is terminated with a half-roll rubber surround and there is no dustcap, the voice-coil former having a bullet-shaped "phase plug" mounted on its end. The 22mm tweeter appears to be sourced from SEAS and actually uses a soft (doped fabric) dome and there is no dustcap, the voice-coil former having a bullet-shaped "phase plug" mounted on its end. The 22mm tweeter is usual, at 4.8kHz. This is made possible, according to Spendor, by the fact that the woofer has a smooth response almost up to 10kHz. The crossover itself is constructed on a high-quality printed-circuit board attached to the rear panel and uses three Claritycap capacitors and two powdered-iron inductors. The internal wiring is silver-plated copper, and while the tweeter connections are soldered, those to the woofer and crossover use clips. Electrical connection to the amplifier is via a pair of WBT binding posts on the rear panel.

The SA1 is superbly finished, the review sample featuring an attractive satin lacquer. Both drive-units are rabbeted into the veneered front baffle and fastened with hex-head bolts; the enclosure, constructed from three different thicknesses of MDF, is veneered on all surfaces, inside and out, and is braced horizontally between the drivers. The sidewalls are mass-loaded and damped with substantial bituminous pads, and there is also a lining of gray foam material. The grille, fabricated from black cloth stretched over a frame, is held in place by four small magnets.

**Listening**

Perhaps because of their restricted low-bass output, it proved relatively easy to find the optimal positions for the Spendors in my room. I used my usual 24" Celestion stands with the SA1s, the single pillar of each stand filled with a mix of dry sand and bird shot. Spiked to the floor beneath the rug, these stands placed my ears just above the tweeter, but I found that I didn't have to slouch to get a good tonal balance. However, pink noise indicated that if I moved my ears even an inch higher, a hollowness began to develop in the SA1's balance, with a narrow band of treble frequencies starting to sound detached from the overall sound.

The speakers that preceded the Spendors in my listening room were the Revel Ultima Salon2s, which I had used for most of the previous nine months. The Revel has almost 30 times the volume of the Spendor, weighs 15 times as much, and is 10 times its price. So I wasn't sure what to expect as I put in the Meridian player's drawer the first CD, a favorite collection of music for strings by Ralph

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**MEASUREMENTS**

A speaker as small as the Spendor SA1 can't be expected to offer a high voltage sensitivity; my measurements indicated that it was a little more sensitive than the BBC LS3/5a, at 83dB(B)/2.83V/m, though this is 1dB lower than specified. Offsetting the Spendor's need for volts is its high impedance. Fig.1 shows the speaker's impedance and electrical phase, the former plotted on a wider 5dB/division scale rather than our usual 2dB/division. The sealed enclosure is tuned to 80Hz, indicated by the impedance peak of 46 ohms at that frequency. The impedance drops below 10 ohms only between 125 and 575Hz, reaching a minimum value of 6.2 ohms at 200Hz, but otherwise remains very high.

The traces in fig.1 are free from the small wrinkles that would imply the existence of cabinet resonances. However, examining the panels' vibrational behavior with a simple plastic-tape accelerometer did uncover a strong mode on the sidewalls (fig.2). At 516Hz, this may well be too high in frequency to have any subjective consequences. (The higher in frequency a resonance, the more quickly it will decay and the less likely it is to be fully excited.) I could easily hear this mode with a stethoscope while I played the half-step-spaced toneburst track from Editor's Choice (CD, Stereophile STPH016-2), not only as the tonebursts passed through its region but also as "ghosts" with higher-frequency bursts. But even after I knew about the existence of this resonance, I couldn't detect with
Vaughan Williams, with Bryden Thomas conducting the LSO (Chandos CHAN 8502, no longer available), and selected track 3, the famous Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis.

Well, perhaps it should go without saying that the Spendor SA1 didn't begin to equal the Revel Salon2 in capturing the music's scale and dynamics. Nor did it have the resolving power of the bigger speaker, especially in the high treble. But it did sound smooth and uncolored, if a little soft in the top octave, and once I'd gotten used to the sound, there was no sense of any "hole in the middle" of the soundstage.

This was a promising start. I reached for another recording currently in heavy rotation chez Atkinson: the Jubilee reissue of Vladimir Ashkenazy's 1970/1971 performances of Rachmaninoff's Piano Concerto 2 and the Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini, both with André Previn and the London Symphony (CD, London 417 702-2). An analog original, this has always had a bit too much tape hiss for my liking through the Revels, but played back through the Spenders, the hiss receded a little. More important, the piano tone was superbly natural, and the SA1's restricted low frequencies proved to be a bonus, in that the Kingsway Hall's infamous subway rumble was banished.

**measurements, continued**

Above 300Hz, fig.3 shows the SA1's quasi-anechoic response, averaged across a 30° horizontal angle centered on the tweeter axis, measured with DRA Labs' MSLSA system and a calibrated DPA4006 microphone. Below 300Hz, there is the usual rise in the upper bass and treble regions impressively even, though with perhaps a slight excess of energy in the tweeter's bottom octave. The grille introduces some unevenness in the mid-treble, and is best left off for serious listening. The Spendor SA1's horizontal dispersion (fig.4) is wide and even, though with a slight depression off-axis at the top of the region covered by the woofer. In the vertical plane (fig.5), a deep suckout develops more than 5° above the tweeter axis; this speaker is best used with stands high enough to place the listener's ears on or just below the tweeter. The suckout is centered at 4.3kHz, which suggests...
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That the PSB is 4dB more sensitive than the Spendor was very obvious in

the dispersion plots. The gentle rolloff above 7kHz is primarily due to the increasing degree of absorption offered by the room's furnishings in this region. At the other end of the spectrum, the small peaks and dips between 100 and 500Hz are due to room acoustic modes that have not been eliminated by the spatial averaging. The Spendors' LF output rolls off below 100Hz, as expected from the high woofer-tuning frequency.

For comparison, the blue trace in fig.6 shows the spatially averaged in-room response of the PSB Imagine B, taken with the speakers in the same positions as the Spendors, which is why the lumpiness in the lower midrange is identical. The PSB's ported tuning and larger enclosure results from the dispersion plots. The gentle rolloff above 7kHz is primarily due to the increasing degree of absorption offered by the room's furnishings in this region. At the other end of the spectrum, the small peaks and dips between 100 and 500Hz are due to room acoustic modes that have not been eliminated by the spatial averaging. The Spendors' LF output rolls off below 100Hz, as expected from the high woofer-tuning frequency.

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side-by-side comparisons. After adjusting for the resultant loudness difference, the Imagine Bs threw a similarly large soundstage to the SA1s', but with less stage depth. More important, their tonal balance was brighter, with more top-octave air, which made the Spendors sound a touch closed-in. On the plus side, the test mixes of the Silverman Brahms recording sounded more spacious on the PSBs; on the negative side, cymbals sounded a bit more sizzly than they did with the Spendors. In the bass, the PSBs had noticeably greater extension, with fairly good midbass weight. While the ported PSB speaker didn't speak as clearly at low frequencies as had the sealed-box Spendor, the former is definitely a more appropriate minispeaker to choose if you play a lot of classic rock. It also played a little louder before developing strain or midrange congestion.

What I did find over extended listening to the PSB was that its midrange had a little more character than the Spendor's. Piano recordings sounded a bit more clangy, and male voices acquired a slightly hoody coloration. The Spendor's midrange sounded more pure in this respect.

In a significantly greater degree of upper-bass energy in the room, with the 32Hz region (which is where my room has its lowest-frequency resonance) usefully higher in level than with the Spendors. The PSBs have more energy than the SA1s both between 3 and 5kHz (which is why I found them to sound brighter) and above 8kHz (which is why the British speakers sounded a little "airy"). In the time domain, the SA1's step response on the tweeter axis (fig.7) indicates that the tweeter is connected in inverted polarity. (Ignore the small wrinkle in this graph just before 7.5ms, which is the first reflection of the HF unit's output from the ceiling; inclement weather meant that I had to perform these measurements indoors.)

Though the tweeter's output (the sharp down/up/down spike at 3.75ms) leads the woofer's (the positive-going right-triangle starting at 4ms), it is smoothly integrated with it, confirming the good match between the drive-units' outputs seen in fig.3. The Spendor's cumulative spectral-decay plot on the tweeter axis (fig.8) is superbly clean overall, though there is a low-level area of delayed energy evident in the top octave of the woofer's passband. The Spendor SA1's low sensitivity and limited LF extension are to be expected from its diminutive size, but offsetting those facts to some extent, it is very easy to drive. Overall, the speaker offers excellent measured performance, as might be expected from its pedigree.

Fig.7 Spendor SA1, step response on tweeter axis at 50° (5ms time window, 30kHz bandwidth).

Fig.8 Spendor SA1, cumulative spectral-decay plot on tweeter axis at 50° (0.15ms risetime).
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As the 2009 Consumer Electronics Show neared its end, I wandered into Blue Light Audio’s room, which was dominated by the innards of darTZeel’s new NHB-458 monoblocks—think of a 3D “exploded” diagram and you’ll be on target. So impressive was that display of brute engineering that I almost didn’t notice the amplifier that was arrimly making the music: the CTH-8550 integrated ($20,300).

Yes, you read correctly: $20,300 for an integrated amplifier. That’s an order of magnitude greater than the typical integrated. Granted, you get a moving-coil input, and it’s built in Switzerland to Swiss standards, and it cranks out 200Wpc into 8 ohms or 330Wpc into 4 ohms, and it’s endlessly user-configurable—but Criminy, that’s a lot of simoleons.

DarTZeel can rightfully argue that each of its products is meticulously engineered by Hervé Delétraz, which means that its products employ unique technologies. And, far from benefiting from any econo-
ties of scale, darTZeel components are about one step short of bespoke—they're made by hand, and mighty close to order. But none of that will matter if you can't get past the sticker shock.

Men are only as good as their technical development allows them to be

If you can get over the shock, however, the CTH-8550 is packed with interesting technologies—such as its optical Pleasure Control (as Delétraz calls the loudness control), with a range of from Less to More. Manufactured and customized for darTZeel by Elma, it's the most responsive knob I've ever fondled. Its tactile feedback was, well, fine—I'll confess to twirling it a few times just for fun as I murmured, "Come in, Rangoon."

Then there's the CTH-8550's display screen, which, along with its CPU, lets you set virtually any parameter to your preference—and includes both a clock and a function that automatically powers the amplifier on or off at a set time. My first thought regarding this "alarm," as darTZeel calls it, was to laugh—but then I imagined a scenario in which my CTH-8550 powered itself on every evening half an hour before I got home from work, and was ready to rock my world as soon as my butt hit the comfy chair. Of course, the problem with that fantasy is that first I'd need a day job—although if I did, perhaps I wouldn't find the price so daunting.

The CTH-8550 uses a large toroidal transformer for its output stage and a smaller one for low-level signals. (If you use it only as a preamplifier, you can turn off the big toroid via that nifty display.) Delétraz has designed an output stage based on paralleled transistors and short signal paths; he doesn't say much about it, except that it is supposed to run cool—oh yeah, and that it sounds good.

**MEASUREMENTS**

I examined the darTZeel CTH-8550's measured behavior using mainly 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); for some tests, I also used my vintage Audio Precision System One Dual Domain.

Before performing any tests on an amplifier, I 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. Cold out of the box, the darTZeel offered 0.083% distortion at one-third power into 8 ohms. After 45 minutes of running with both channels driven at this level, the THD+noise had increased slightly, to 0.093%. More importantly, I cut short the preconditioning at that point, as the top panel was too hot to touch and the side-panels covering the heatsinks were so hot that I was concerned about the amplifier going into thermal runaway. Even with no signal, the CTH-8550's chassis gets very warm after a while—contrary to the manufacturer's claim, this is definitely not a cool-running amplifier.

The MM phono input of our review sample—"Built for T.H.E. Show," according to the front-panel display—wasn't activated, but it did have an MC phono stage. As supplied, this offered 54.7dB of voltage gain at 1kHz, measured at the Rec Out jacks, and the input impedance was to specification, at 1000 ohms across the audioband. The RIAA error was commendably low in the audioband, with superb channel matching, but increased with increasing frequency above 10kHz, due to the manufacturer including the so-called "Neumann 4th Pole" (fig.1). The darTZeel's MC input was quiet, with the wideband, unweighted S/N ratio measuring 51.6dB ref. an input of 500µV at 1kHz. It improved to 69dB when A-weighted. The phono stage's distortion was very low, at typically 0.025%, and the overload margin at low and middle frequencies was superb, at 30dB. The margin dropped to just 5.2dB at 20kHz, however, which is disappointing.

Turning to the line stage, I didn't examine the behavior of the proprietary Zeel and darT inputs and outputs. The conventional unbalanced jacks had an input impedance of 42k ohms at low and middle frequencies, dropping to a still-high 30k ohms at 20kHz. The balanced XLR jacks had an input impedance of 19k ohms across the audioband. All the inputs preserved absolute polarity, ie, were non-inverting, the XLRs being wired with pin 2 hot.

Measured at the speaker terminals, the maximum lineinput voltage gain into 8 ohms, with the volume control set to "+12," was 38.4dB for unbalanced inputs and, unusually, 6dB lower at 32.4dB for the balanced input.

The CTH-8550 has two sets of unbalanced RCA outputs, one following the volume control so that the amp can be used as a preamp, a "darT" output (50 ohm BNC), two "Zeel" inputs (ditto), four unbalanced RCA inputs, plus two more pairs marked MM and MC (MM is optional; an MC module, with user-adjustable gain, comes standard in the US),
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and a pair of balanced XLR inputs. The speaker terminals are substantial—and, even better, they open wide enough to accept thick spades. An IEC mains jack and two USB inputs complete the complement of connectors.

Two USB inputs—whatever for? The CTH-8550 comes with a USB flash drive, which arrives blank; you must register your CTH-8550 online to receive a compressed folder with a .dtz extension. Transfer the file to the USB stick and plug it into a USB slot on the CTH-8550, at which point you upload the latest upgrades to the unit’s firmware, as well as your activation code. Skip that last step and your $20,300 component will work for a mere 15 minutes every time you power it on, then shut itself off.

I can clearly see the benefits of uploading firmware changes to the CPU via flash drive, but the whole concept of having to “authorize” a component after forking out 20 grand for it strikes me as creepy and insulting. I can’t conceive of how that benefits the customer.

As with other DarTZeel products, the cosmetic package of the CTH-8550 is unique. My sample had DarTZeel’s usual livery of gold-anodized faceplate with burgundy chassis (an all-black model is also offered). While the CTH-8550’s fit’n’finish and materials are impeccable, it looks less styled than engineered. In a channel milled into its thick faceplate are 11 LEDs (one per source and one each for the left and right channels) and eight pressure-actuated switches (Menu, Time, Light, Name, Mute, Mono, Balance, Power). There are two massive handles, and another pair on the back, which is good—the lil’ sucker weighs 62 lbs. Between the front handles are the optical control and the display. Most of the CTH-8550’s bling is on the inside.

Four legs good, two legs bad
For all of the CTH-8550’s customization options, I found it simple to use. Most of its settings are set-and-forget. Its heatsinks are mounted under its vented casing, so it can be placed just about anywhere that can support its mass and allows adequate ventilation. For all the pleasure I got spinning the Pleasure Control, in daily use I used the remote control almost exclusively.

The hefty remote proved more useful than the front-panel “Pleasure” control.

measurements, continued

The volume control operated in accurate 0.5dB steps; at "0," the gain at the Preamp Out jacks was 0.27dB and at "+12," it was 12.27dB. These jacks offered a usefully low output impedance of 80 ohms and again preserved absolute polarity.

The CTH-8550’s output impedance was quite high for a solid-state design, at 0.4 ohms in the bass, rising to 0.5 ohms at 20kHz. As a result, the modification of its frequency response by the usual Ohm’s Law interaction between this impedance and the load impedance of our simulated loudspeaker—see www.stereophile.com/reference/60—reached +0.25dB (fig.2, gray trace), which will be audible. The small-signal response into 8 ohms (fig.2, blue and red traces) was flat within the audioband and didn’t reach −3dB until 125kHz. This wide bandwidth correlated with a well-shaped 10kHz squarewave (fig.3), and didn’t vary significantly with the volume control setting. Into increasingly low load impedances, however, the upper −3dB frequency progressively dropped and the beginning of an infrasonic rise in response became evident (fig.2, green trace).

The CTH-8550’s channel separation was good rather than great, at 78dB in both directions below 1kHz, reducing to 65dB at 20kHz. This is rather less than the specified 90dB, however. The background noise level, measured with an unbalanced input short-circuited and the volume control at its maximum setting was −63.6dB ref. 2.83V into 8 ohms (wideband, unweighted measurement). The A-weighted S/N ratio was 87.2dBA, ref. the same level, which is a little lower than the manufacturer’s specification of >115dBA ref. full power.

The DarTZeel comfortably exceeded its maximum power specification. This can be seen in fig.4, which plots the THD+noise percentage against output power into 8 and 4 ohms with both channels driven, and into 2 ohms with
While the display is easy to use up close, much of its information is in a font too small to be seen from across the room, so I opted for its Auto Off feature.

A major fault of conventional integrated amplifiers is lack of get-up-and-go. Sure, lots of them have "rated" outputs of 150-200Wpc, but hook 'em up to a difficult load and they wimp out. Not, apparently, the CTH-8550. It drove the Thiel CS3.7 and YG Anat Reference II Pro speakers as easily as it did the benign Klipsch Palladium 39Fs.

**Progress is not an illusion**

Sonically, the CTH-8550 was very much a twin of dartZeel's NHB-108 power amp: fast, dynamic, and detailed.

On "Skeleton," from the Ginger Baker Trio's Falling Off the Roof (CD, Atlantic 82900-2), the CTH-8550 balanced the power of Charlie Haden's bass against Baker's controlled marching beat (is there such a thing as a contemplative march?)—Haden and Baker seemed to inhabit separate acoustics, with Baker in a larger, more reverberant room. Bill Frisell's guitar is the real star here, and the dartZeel let it "jump." Harmonic overtones sparkled and lingered—the amp was very quiet, so I heard deep into what, with other components, would have been the background. Haden's bass, too, had convincing slam—even though it was close-miked, Frisell's guitar was not given remotely similar heft.

That sense of scale and deep immersion in the acoustic was also evident in "Linden Lea," from the all-women chamber vocal group Angelica's The Beautiful Treasure: Songs from Near & Far (CD, Angelica. www.angelicavoices.org). Recorded in the South Presbyterian Church at Dobbs Ferry, New York, by Len Moskowitz, the singers are placed deep in the acoustic—and through the CTH-8550, very deep. On "Over the Hills," the chorus is joined by hurdy-gurdy and hand drums, and the differences

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**Fig 5** dartZeel CTH-8550, THD+N (%) vs frequency at 10V into: 8 ohms (left channel blue, right red), 4 ohms (left cyan, right magenta), 2 ohms (green).

**Fig 6** dartZeel CTH-8550, 1kHz waveform at 20W into 4 ohms (top), 0.026% THD+N; distortion and noise waveform with fundamental notched out (bottom, not to scale).
in scale were extremely well delineated by the dartZeel. Then there was the setting of Loreena McKennitt’s “Tango to Evora,” which again adds the hand drum plus a guitar—and sets soprano Melanie Anderson against a gentle wash of harmonies. It’s a quiet song, and a very passionate one. The CTH-8550 preserved all of that while giving me intense goose bumps. Analytic it may be, but cold? Not hardly! (If you’re a fan of John Atkinson’s recordings of Cantus, you should just go ahead and buy Len Moskowitz’s Angelica discs—they’re fabulous in completely different registers.)

Guitarist David Russell’s For David: Music Written for David Russell (CD, Telarc CD-80707), recorded in Telarc International’s preferred venue for Russell, the Peggy and Owen Gordon Center for the Performing Arts in Owings Mills, Maryland, has a completely different sonic perspective. Here the guitar is recorded relatively closely, but the hall sound informed and supported the fundamental tones without blurring them. Spoon’s “Don’t You Evah,” from Ga Ga Ga Ga Ga (CD, Merge MRG295), had impact a-plenty through the dartZeel. The bouncy bass-and-drum intro

THE POWER AND CRUNCH OF JIM ENO’S DRUMS WERE PARTICULARLY EVIDENT THROUGH THE CTH-8550. IT RAWKED.

Benjamin Verdery’s Now and Ever II, which uses an alternate tuning (D, G, A, A-sharp, E) and opens in an explosion of chords, followed by a flurry of measures in 7/8, 6/8, and 5/8. It’s devilishly complex, for all that Russell aces it, and the CTH-8550 sorted it out a treat—yes, the guitar was very up-front, had impact and momentum—the song is virtually constructed as it rolls along (“Record that, Jim”), and by the time the vocals enter, guitars, maracas, and handclaps have appeared. The power and crunch of Jim Eno’s drums were particularly evident through the CTH-8550. It rawked. “The Ghost of You Lingers” fea-
tures a completely different soundscape—layered and complex, with instruments like shakuhachi and sound effects—but it, too, was beautifully parsed by the CTH-8550. The darTZeel had me going back again and again for more—and more is what I always got.

To see what is in front of one's nose needs a constant struggle
I still had on hand the Boulder 865 integrated amplifier ($12,000), and it seemed natural to compare the darTZeel to it. The Boulder also features microprocessor-control of its setup, has nearly infinite adjustability, and packs a wallop—150Wpc into 8 ohms or 300Wpc into 4 ohms. Also like the CTH-8550, the 865 is meticulously constructed and beautifully engineered. And heavy.

Just as I indicted my own susceptibility in comparing the Boulder to high-end solid-state separates, it was frustratingly difficult to discover any meaningful differences between the 865 and the CTH-8550. Both were dynamic, offered layered three-dimensional soundstages, and were quieter than the grave. Neither amplifier had a sonic signature—both had neutral neutrality and sheer transparency.

Yet there were some subtle differences in perspective. On "Skeleton," the 865 gave Haden's bass a tad more impact. Just a shade—and that's not to say the CTH-8550 lacked bass extension or impact. However, the airiness of "Tango for Evora" was ever so slightly better served by the darTZeel, especially Melanie Anderson's soaring lead. "Did You Ever" rocked just a touch harder through the Boulder—again, it had just a bit more impact down under. The CTH-8550 certainly didn't lack for authority, but I thought the 865 had that extra gram and a half of snap.

Exception for those extremely minor changes in sonic perspective, the Boulder 865 and the darTZeel CTH-8550 were functionally equivalent. Essentially, they're the two finest integrated amplifiers I have auditioned.

Happiness can exist only in acceptance
We proponents of the High End are fond of citing "intangibles" such as pride of ownership and the satisfaction of knowing you own The Best. These are real and quite considerable—and the darTZeel CTH-8550 delivers them in spades. It is a genre-defining product: a contender for The Best by anyone's definition of the term.

From an engineering perspective, the CTH-8550 is very cannily sorted out. It won't set the thermostat for you, or cook your bacon and eggs, but it can be programmed to do just about anything you could desire from an audio component. And it is hand-built in Switzerland, which means it represents the pinnacle of construction. But all of that comes at a price: $20,300.

I don't think for a moment that darTZeel is price-gouging. All of the metalwork and custom componentry, not to mention that hand-hewn Swiss precision, undoubtedly does cost a lot, but the question of value rests not on

IT WAS FRUSTRATINGLY DIFFICULT TO DISCOVER ANY MEANINGFUL DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE BOULDER 865 AND THE DARTZEEL CTH-8550.
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**Auditorium 23 Hommage T1 MC step-up transformer & DB Systems DBP-6MC Resistive Loading Kit**

This whole thing started up again when I tried to improve the phono-input section of my main system—not to enhance its performance (although you might expect that to happen), but to provide a fairer, more flexible context for evaluating new cartridges.

The technical reason: *Taken in isolation, even the small collection of phono cartridges that I own—Miyabi 47, Rega Elys, Grace F9E, Denon DL-103, and EMT OFD 25—represent a pretty wide range of resistive-loading requirements.*

The low-impedance Miyabi 47 and the high-impedance Denon DL-103, for example, couldn't be more different from one another, despite their similar outputs.

Now: Having cast aside most of the cartridge-alignment tools I've bought over the years—the Cart-A-Lign, the Geodesic, the Densenn Soundtraktor, various incarnations of the Wally-Tractor—in favor of the elegant, accurate, and easy-to-use DBP-10 alignment protractor, my phono-accessory thoughts turned once again to that product's manufacturer, DB Systems. So in February I ordered their DBP-6MC Resistive Loading Kit, an ancient but eminently serviceable thing to have, and very affordable at $49.

The DBP-6MC kit is based around a pair of flexible Y-adapters, each having two phono sockets at one end and a single phono plug at the other. The idea, of course, is to plug the Y-adapters into the phono inputs of your preamp or integrated amp, then to plug your left- and right-channel tonecartrids into each leg of one of the two phono-socket pairs. The remaining sockets can then be loaded with your choice of resistive plugs (also included), to provide a specific value in parallel with your phono cartridge. The DBP-6MC comes with five pairs of color-coded resistive plugs: 10, 20, 50, 100, and 200 ohms. Using any of those values in parallel with 47k ohms will greatly decrease phono input impedance overall, allowing the cartridge's "motor" to electromechanically damp itself. The DBP-6MC also includes an "empty" pair of plugs, into which you can solder the alternate resistor values of your choice.

I pause here to confess the selfish sub-motive lurking beneath all the self-congratulatory twaddle about "fairness" and "flexibility." My reference preamplifier, the damn good Shindo Masseto, has two pairs of phono inputs: one for moving-magnet cartridges, the other for moving-coil, the latter providing additional gain and appropriate loading with a pair of custom-wound Lundahl transformers. (I don't know the specs of those transformers, but because they were said to be designed around the low-output Ortofon SPU series of pickup heads, it's a safe guess that their primary coils are of low impedance and their impedance ratio is high.) As I mentioned above, I also own an EMT OFD 25 mono pickup head: a wonderful-sounding MC device, but with gain so high that, when I use it to drive the Shindo's MC inputs, I'm forced to turn down the volume controls on my Shindo monoblock amps just to keep the resulting loudness from blowing my scalp free of the rest of my head, Mr. Weatherbee style.

Yet while the gain provided by the Masseto's MM inputs would seem ideal for use with the OFD 25's high output, the 47k ohm load impedance wouldn't. Indeed, EMT's distributor recommends for the OFD 25 a load between 100 and 300 ohms.

Thus I reasoned: What could be better than to use the 100 or 200 ohm plugs of the DBP-6MC, alongside the EMT pickup head, into my Shindo Masseto's MM inputs? That would surely sound heavenly.

I began by revisiting the EMT OFD 25 straight into the 47k ohm inputs, with the DB Systems Y-adapters in-line but without extra resistors in place: That experience refreshed my memory of how tonally off-kilter the sound was the last time I tried it. After that, inserting DB Systems' various resistive plugs was a simple enough matter—doable even with the volume turned up.

But the 200 ohm resistors only made my records sound deader and duller, stripped of musical life and sonic presence alike. So did the 100, 50, 20, and 10 ohm plugs, to even greater degrees.

In every sense, used in parallel with every loading resistor at my disposal, the MM inputs on my Shindo Masseto didn't sound good with this high-output pickup head: I appeared to be stuck using the much-better-sounding MC inputs for the rest of my life—oh, the drudgery—and having to compensate by turning down the volume whenever I wanted to hear my mono records.

Or so it seemed. The only combination of in-house components I had never tried—and which I knew would not work—was to substitute Auditorium 23's even higher-gain Hommage T1 step-up transformer ($4695) for the Masseto's built-in transformers, for use with the OFD 25.

I first wrote about the Hommage T1 in my October 2007 "Listening" column. Created by the German design and distribution house Auditorium 23, the T1 was intended as the first of a separate line of statement products that pay homage to the classics of audio's golden era. (The Hommage T1 was preceded by the markedly more affordable, $975 Auditorium 23 Standard step-up transformer, which I also covered in the October 2007 issue.) Indeed, Auditorium 23's Keith Aschenbrenner, whose personal collection of vintage gear is said to be considerable, destroyed a few of his most prized transformers in an effort to...
discover their secrets, and to reproduce them in the Hommage T1.

Among those sacrificed was a product that some enthusiasts regard as the holy grail of all step-up transformers: the Western Electric 618B. Designed and sold as a transformer for WE's own microphones, the 618B's frequency range of 30Hz-15kHz suited it to phono use, as did its 30 ohm primary and approximately 833:1 impedance ratio (for a gain factor of about 29).

Aschenbrenner's Hommage T1 measures somewhat differently, with a primary coil impedance of about 3 ohms and a secondary coil impedance of 2.8k ohms. That's an impedance ratio of 933:1, which works out to a turns ratio/gain factor of approximately 30. The gain in decibels (20 times the base-10 logarithm of 30) is about 29dB. That's a lot—and is, again, one of the reasons I never bothered trying it with the 5mV-output OFD 25.

Until today. Turns out I was a fool for having two such astounding products in my home and never trying them together: great potential that died of a theory. To listen to EMT's classic OFD 25 pickup head playing through the Hommage T1 transformer is to wish, actively and strenuously, that literally every record in my collection is monophonic. The musical and emotional impact I enjoyed with this pairing far exceeded the sonic thrills of even the most convincing spatial effects available from a stereo recording (by a ratio of about 30:1, I'm tempted to say).

What could account for such performance? Hard to say—the Hommage T1 is sealed inside an unopenable box. (I'm told by the importer that, if absolutely necessary, the wooden end pieces can be removed, but that requires a hammer, and the pieces tend to come off in splinters.) An importer of Shindo Laboratory gear who has had to put up with single-ended-triode nerds who reverse-engineered the circuits of his products and published them on the Internet, Keith Aschenbrenner can be forgiven his secrecy, I think.

For whatever reason, and beyond all expectations, this decidedly high-gain, low-primary-impedance transformer has now teased the best performance out of literally every MC cartridge I have. Even a Shindo SPU sounds better through the Hommage T1 than through the custom-wound transformer in Shindo's own Masseto preamp: richer, more colorful, and, above all, more tactile—more exciting. But the pinnacle remains that least likely pairing, with the EMT OFD 25 monophonic pickup head: Listening to a good, chunky, honest, unphased, simply made mono record through that combination consistently helped me distance myself from the reality of the mundane by bringing me closer to the reality of music.

Which is why I have no choice but to buy it.

The DB Systems resistive-loading kit will stay. I'm a loading believer—47k ohms on an MC cartridge is for people whose hearing is shot beyond repair—and I remain convinced of the kit's future usefulness, although I continue to believe that the load presented by the coil of a transformer to the coil of a cartridge will always be better still: empirically superior, howsoever mathematically non-analogous. In any event, I'll be happy to trot out the resistors whenever a cartridge manufacturer requests them.

But until something better comes along, whenever listening for pleasure is the order of the day, the Hommage T1 is the product I'll use. —Art Dudley

**Pass Laboratories XA30.5 power amplifier**

Have you ever dated a girl and then, six months into the relationship, met her superhot younger sister? That pretty much sums up my long-term romance with my old Pass Labs Aleph 3 power amplifier ($2300 when available but long discontinued), and my flirtatious liaison with the utterly sexy Pass Labs XA30.5 ($5500).3

Knowing that I owned an Aleph 3, John Atkinson pumped out an XA30.5 to me so that I might compare the two. I jumped at the chance—I love my Aleph 3,4 and wanted to see how Nelson Pass's design work had evolved into an amp of similar size and function.

The XA30.5 shares the genius of the Aleph 3's high bias into class-A, the use of MOSFETs, and its stated output of 30Wpc into 8 ohms. But beyond that, Nelson Pass's natural selection and evolution have turned the XA30.5 into a new species of amp. The XA30.5 uses Supersymmetry5 that allows the amp to go into push-pull mode for greater peak power, among other significant changes and innovations. And unlike my Aleph 3, it accepts balanced inputs.

Not only has the XA30.5 evolved on the inside, but this girl has had some work done on the outside. Sitting next to my cute but slightly dowdy Aleph 3, the XA30.5 looked all kinds of sexy. Voluptuous curves of thick faceplate, outstretched wings of heatsinks, and an enticingly glowing face—my 30Wpc Aleph 3, it accepts balanced inputs. And speaking of TV, I couldn't help noticing that the Aleph 3's cubical resemblance to the Borg mothership matched well the XA30.5's feel of the Starship Enterprise (the NCC-1701-D, of course).

The XA30.5 also shares with the Aleph that "lit from within" sonic quality that many people speak of when talking about single-ended, class-A amps. Some amps are all about control, which the XA30.5 has, but my overall impression was that this amp lets the music flow instead of micromanaging every aspect of the sound. The music came out as an organic whole, with nothing lacking

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4 Moe Kastanovich reviewed the XA30.5 in April 1997, Vol.20 No.4; see www.stereophile.com/solid_poweramps/674.

5 Brian Damkroger reviewed the XA30.5 in May 2009, Vol.32 No.5.
and nothing overemphasized. It made music out of everything I fed it without stumbling into the pitfall of an overly euphonic, laid-back, hazy sound.

I was blown away by how much unforced musical information the new Pass passed along while retaining a certain sweetness in its sound. The delineations between instruments and their surroundings were easily discerned and musically compelling. Listening to Son Lux’s densely mixed _At War with Walls & Mazes_ (CD, Anticon ABR0082) was incredibly involving. Each instrument, sample, and electronic effect came to life with a patch-worked, kaleidoscopic effect—the effect I think Son Lux (aka Ryan Lott) was after.

I’d bought my little Aleph 3 because it reproduced human voices better than any other solid-state amp I’d heard, so I thought I’d begin my head-to-head Pass comparisons with vocal music. I listened to the Latvian Radio Choir perform Eriks Ešenvalds’s stunning composition _Légende de la femme emmurée_, from their _Glorious Hill_ (CD, GB Records CD009). The work is a subtle tour de force: First the Latvian Radio Choir perform Eriks Ešenvalds’s stunning composition _Légende de la femme emmurée_, from their _Glorious Hill_ (CD, GB Records CD009). The work is a subtle tour de force: First a small choir, toward the rear of the stage, sings a setting of Albanian folk-song texts full of turns and trills. They’re then joined by a large choir in the middle of the stage, and finally by two sopranos in the foreground, singing a heartbreaking duet in English. My Aleph 3 worked its usual magic: Voices were full-bodied and rich, with the sort of resolution and texture in the midbass I normally hear only from higher-bit-rate recordings and/or single-ended tube amps. When I switched to the XA30.5, the voices lost some of the midbass body I’d heard through the Aleph. Sibilants seemed a bit more present through the XA30.5, but had less grain than through the Aleph. The Aleph 3 did a better job—or, shall I say, a more distinct job—of the back-to-front layering of the big choir and the foreground sopranos. Though there were differences in sound between the two amps, they were subtle; a few minutes into the switch, I’d forgotten about them and was just enjoying the music.

Next, I turned to some music of a less subtle nature. Last January I got to hear John Atkinson play “Love Lockdown,” from Kanye West’s _808s & Heartbreak_ (CD, Roc-A-Fella B0012442-02), on his system, which at that time included the Musical Fidelity 750k Superchargers and the Revel Saloon 2 loudspeakers. It was loud and it was wonderful. When I listened to this track at my house, my Aleph 3 couldn’t even come close to what I’d heard at John’s; it just couldn’t play loud enough to make that song do what it’s supposed to. It was with some hope, then, that I tried this track with the XA30.5 driving my Revel F30s. The new Pass amp could certainly play louder, and its presentation was closer to what I’d heard at JA’s house, but it still couldn’t quite stick balls to walls. I found that the XA30.5 gave satisfying renderings of symphonic works containing large but short-term dynamic swings, but neither Pass really fit the bill for the constant pounding of electronic music played at high volume. These are, after all, nominally 30Wpc amps. I conjecture that the bigger amps in Pass Labs’ Aleph and XA.5 series may be able to overcome this limitation.

Initially, I did all of these comparisons using the XA30.5’s single-ended input. Switching to its balanced inputs allowed the XA30.5’s performance to pull away from the Aleph 3’s. Listening to the Fleet Foxes’ _eponymous_ album (CD, Sub Pop SPCD 777) through the balanced connections resulted in a wider soundstage, greater resolution, and even less grain. The sound of the band’s mountain-music-meets-Beach-Boys “White Winter Hymnal” was both more solid in the stereo plane and resolved more of the decay from whatever reverb-drenched space they created. The balanced inputs seemed to pass more musical information than the single-ended. The XA30.5’s slightly leaner midbass presentation and more forward midrange and treble persisted. But again, this was never a problem—many recordings benefited from the slight tonal shift, giving the music a bit more excitement and clarity.

Resistance to loving the sound of either of these amps was futile, yet there were differences. The Aleph 3’s lush midrange and full midbass are paired with a less-airy treble. It’s dynamically limited, especially if you feel the need to rock out hard. The more-resolving XA30.5 can punch even higher above its 30Wpc weight class than can the Aleph 3, with a bit better bass control but with a leaner midbass and a slightly more present top three octaves. And using the XA30.5 in balanced mode improved the amp’s already great performance.

It was a pleasure and a challenge to compare and contrast these two wonderful solid-state amplifiers from Pass Labs. Though still in love with my Aleph 3, I really enjoyed flirting with the XA30.5.

—Erick Lichte
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World Radio History
Various Artists *Dark Night of the Soul*

It's an old story. Long before its current downturn, the music business was always the land of the grand unrealized project sabotaged at the last minute by unseen forces. The path from idea to finished product has always been a perilous one. Many are the supergroups, crossover blockbusters, or multimedia projects, hyped nearly to death at their announcements, that still lie half-finished on a shelf somewhere, or molder away in someone's imagination.

That last category, multimedia experiments, is at the center of the latest music-business-wrestles-itsel controversy. In 2004, producer-songwriters Mark Linkous (aka Sparklehorse) and Brian Burton (aka Danger Mouse) were introduced to each other and began working together. In 2006 they approached film director David Lynch about his providing a visual dimension for a record of vocalists that the pair had composed songs for and assembled from electronics, keyboards, samples, and some acoustic instruments. Unlike most projects of this ilk, the photos were taken to accompany the finished music instead of the other way around. Lynch was charmed by the short collection, which includes a stellar cast of vocalists: the Flaming Lips, Gruff Rhys of Super Furry Animals, Julian Casablancas of the Strokes, Frank Black of the Pixies, Iggy Pop, James Mercer of The Shins, Suzanne Vega, and others. After much wrangling, the Lynchian title *Dark Night of the Soul*, or DNOTS for short, was settled on.

The culmination of the entire project was an exhibition of Lynch's photos, opening in June 2009 and running through July, at the Michael Kohn Gallery, in Los Angeles. If you've seen the film *Blue Velvet* or the television show *Twin Peaks*, you have a pretty good idea of what Lynch's photos are about: mildly weird, not terribly interesting, more a cult happening than anything else—as evidenced by the opening-night crowd at the gallery, which included Heather Graham, Flea, Laura Dern, and other glitterati cooing over the images, each of which had a blue light bulb over it that illuminated when the corresponding song was played. The *L.A. Times* called the photos "giddy enactments out of some weird hyper-realm," and *NME*’s website quoted the world's most unfunny man, Ben Stiller, in full intellectual plumage: "[Lynch] is an amazing visual artist. It's fascinating how the images go with the music," Stiller gushed.

The fly in this electronics is Danger Mouse’s label, EMI, to which he owes four records. EMI threatened to sue Burton for them.

"It's a long standing dispute between Danger Mouse and EMI. It has nothing to do with samples. It has nothing to do with anyone else on the album... It would be nice if Danger Mouse owned it since he created it, he paid 100% of the costs to make it and he was happy to self-release. EMI dragged their heels endlessly and showed no interest in putting it out. There's no reason why a 3rd party would need to own it."

Again, all of this is nothing new in the record business. There's also been the suggestion that the entire affair is a savvy promotional scheme to stir up interest and, ultimately after an "official" release, sell more records. That remains to be seen. At the moment, Burton plans to print and sell 5000 books that he will pay for, each to include a blank CDR and be stickered with a not-so-vague invitation to illegally download the music (see above image). *NPR* is also streaming the record, and certainly many copies of the full project are already out there, sure to be uploaded.

Almost forgotten among all the legal saber rattling and artistic puffery are the soundscapes that inspired Lynch’s photographs. Easily enjoyable without the photos, the music is clearly the product of much hard work, which may be the real problem EMI has with the project: that Burton has spent more good energy on this than he did on his work for them.

Opening with the very Genesis-sounding "Revenge," which features Wayne Coyne sounding for all the world like a cross between Phil Collins and Peter Gabriel, DNOTS moves on to a delightful anti-war number, "Just War," which blends descending keyboard changes, crisp blinging guitars, and Gruff Rhys singing a big, string-backed chorus hook. His pronunciation of dust in the last chorus line, "Crawling through the duuuuhh:hhssst," is a wonderful bit of guttural UK English. Pop sunniness, this time with much quavering organ and overdubbed vocal choruses, continues in "Jaykub," sung by Grandaddy's Jason Lytle. "Little Girl," sung by Julian Casablancas, is the track Strokes fans have been waiting to hear since 2003’s *Room On Fire*, and shines a light on this album’s greatest revelation: that Burton and Linkous are masters at writing songs to match the talents of a specific performer, and/or matching singers to songs that play to their existing strengths or, as in the case of Frank Black in "Angel's Heart," challenge them to stretch and explore.

*continued on page 94*
Deeper down the track list, Iggy Pop falls into his usual voice from the tomb in the dance hit “Pain,” while strummed guitar-pop bubbliness foams around The Shins’ James Mercer in “Insane Lullaby.” Suzanne Vega breathily floats through “The Man Who Played God,” before the album closes with a pair of Lanchin numbers: “Grim Augury,” which opens with a tolling bell and features Vic Chesnutt singing about “Catfish wriggling in blood and gore,” before Lynch himself takes over the title track, singing with heavy echo and effects behind a steady 78rpm-like scratch and futuristic piano comping. Given that it was created by a pair of very talented studio geeks, the sound of DNOTS varies very deliberately from track to track, ranging from experimental lo-fi to nearly pristine.

Will EMI get out of its own way and release Dark Night of the Soul? And even if it does, is the album too highbrow to sell in big or even medium numbers? Stay tuned. Meanwhile, keep streaming.

---

Jenny Lin, piano
Performance *****
Sonics *****

Jenny Lin is probably the finest not-nearly-well-enough-known pianist on the scene; her recording of Bloch’s music for piano (Hänssler Classic) is superb, and Chinoiserie, a collection of “exotic” pieces by Busoni, Grainger, Martinu, Rossini, and others (Bis), is as masterly a piece of programming as it is of playing. With Shostakovich’s Op.87, she comes closest to mainstream repertoire, and her deeply felt, insightful, technically right-on performance should garner plenty of kudos and attention.

Not every highlight can be discussed, but here are a few: To start at the very beginning, the C-major prelude, with its Chopin-esque feel, is properly blissful, and Lin both underlines and gives an utterly natural feel to its surprising ventures into first light, then heavier dissonance. The crazy-busy A-minor prelude should be unplayable, but Lin’s amazingly rapid work is spotless. The E-minor prelude and fugue are an oasis after the snowstorm of notes that make up the G-major fugue; Lin is not afraid of stillness. The quick, angular, weirdly Semitic prelude in F-sharp minor is followed by its deep, dark fugue (the third longest in the set), here captured as a never-ending but graceful study in dread; ie, Shostakovich at his most quietly menacing.

There are periods in this set when Lin sounds as if she’s improvising—the C-sharp minor prelude is a case in point—and they’re as delightful and welcome as the more studied, Bach-like moments (the E-major fugue). There’s great, grotesque wit in the D-flat major prelude, with both hands making equally strong and accents in all the right places, and one can get lost in the faraway B-flat minor prelude. And Lin’s hands are grand enough to make the E-flat major prelude and fugue sound like an orchestra.

In brief, this is a knockout recording, probably now the best available. Lin’s tempos are fleet (one competitive recording takes more than 20 minutes longer, while Ashkenazy’s timings are almost exactly like Lin’s), her accuracy astounding, her understanding of Shostakovich’s moodswings ideal. The recording, too, is glorious, with the piano perfectly balanced, the volume entirely sensible (set it and forget it), the bass response as dark as the treble can be edgy.

---

David Bazan
Curse Your Branches
Performance ****½
Sonics ***½

Seattle’s David Bazan is as polarizing as he is fascinating; some have called him the Neil Young of the Christian indie-rock underground, and that’s not too far off. Operating as Pedro the Lion for much of the past decade, Bazan’s stock-in-trade was a somber-tinged brand of lo-fi pop that gradually grew more expansive as he developed as a songwriter and studio auteur, all informed by a religious outlook that, while overtly Christian, was philosophical and probing, challenging assumptions of faith while outlining his own spiritual crises. In the process, Bazan infuriated hard-core evangelicals, and left more than a few younger acolytes questioning their own faith.

Above all that, however, is the music, and Curse Your Branches represents a stunning stride forward. From sparkling McCartney/Wings-styled numbers (“When We Fell”) to hookah folk-rock for lapsed Wilburys (“Please, Baby, Please”—wait for Bazan’s Orbison-esque falsetto) to chiming, jangly powerpop (“Bearing Witness”), the album extrapolates on musical themes Bazan has visited in the past, though never quite so buoyantly or full-bodiedly. It’s got a slow-burn quality too, sneaking up, sinking its claws, then waiting for you to get to the third, fourth, maybe fifth listen. At that point, well...how does the saying go? “Faith will be rewarded.”

---

Van Morrison
Astral Weeks: Live at the Hollywood Bowl
Performance *****
Sonics *****

Nobody paid much attention when, in 1968, Van Morrison released Astral Weeks, an unusual series of musical vignettes that matched an instinctive young soul singer with an intriguing backup band that included flute,
saxophone, acoustic guitar, vibraphone, bass, and strings. As people gravitated to the albums that began with *Moondance* and *His Band and the Street Choir, Astral Weeks*—all banging acoustic guitars, rambunctious bass, and careening violins—began to find an audience. But even as critics described *Astral Weeks* as a song cycle worthy of genius, Morrison has suggested more than once over the years that producer Lewis Merenstein spoiled his concept for the album.

Now, 40 years after its original release, *Astral Weeks* returns, this time performed live, with a slightly larger band, and apparently with little rehearsal, over a period of two nights in Los Angeles. The debut title of Morrison's new label, Listen to the Lion Records, the album is being released on CD, LP, and DVD, each offering slightly differing versions, which at least suggests that Morrison never has decided on a final version of *Astral Weeks*. But unless you're a purist who feels that the album was perfect the first time around, you shouldn't be disappointed by these retellings. Morrison, as is his wont, plays around with the arrangements. "The Way Young Lovers Do" approximates the original recording, but elsewhere, songs mutate into others. "Slim Slow Slider" almost doubles in length, while "Madame George" comes out almost a minute shorter. He shuffles the song order so that the set ends with "Madame George," as it always should have.

The CD includes two encores: "Listen to the Lion" and "Common One." Each, especially "Lion," fits the ambience perfectly, letting Morrison scat gloriously even longer into the night against those banging, rambunctious, careening instruments.

—Leland Rucker

**Jazz**

**JOEL HARRISON**

*Urban Myths*


Joel Harrison, guitar; David Binney, alto saxophone; Jerome Sabbag, tenor saxophone; Ambrose Akinmusire, trumpet; Corey King, trombone; Christian Howes, violin; Daniel Kelly, keyboards; Stephan Crump, acoustic bass; Fima Ephron, electric bass; Jordan Person, drums

Performance ****

Sonics ****

**G**uitarist Joel Harrison, like violinist Jenny Scheinman—a fellow Brooklyner also transplanted within the last decade from the San Francisco Bay Area—has omnivorous musical interests that include crossing over into singer-songwriter territory. The experimentation is admirable in each case, but both artists make stronger statements in the contexts of their instrumental adventures.

On his latest repertoire-expanding CD, *Urban Myths*, Harrison amply demonstrates his talent and creativity as a keen composer of complex tunes and unpredictable arrangements (no clichés or tired, around-the-horn bebop), a mature bandleader generous with his ensemble's improvisational freedom, and an underappreciated guitarist who exhibits a command of rock voicings that range from shades of psy-
Red Holloway, alto & tenor saxophone, vocals; Henry Johnson, George Freeman, guitar; Chris Foreman, Hammond B3 organ; George Rockingham, drums
Performance **** Sonics ****

Charles Tolliver, trumpet, composer, arranger, conductor; Bruce Williams, soprano & alto saxophone, flute, clarinet; Bill Saxton, soprano & tenor saxophone, flute, clarinet; Todd Bashore, alto saxophone, piccolo, flute; Billy Harper, Marcus Strickland, tenor saxophone; Kenyon Harrold, Cameron Johnson, David Weiss, Michael Williams, trumpet; Mike Dease, Stafford Hunter, Jason Jackson, Ernest Stewart, trombone; Aarion Johnson, bass trombone; Stanley Cowell, Anthony Wonsey, piano; Reggie Workman, bass; Gene Jackson, drums
Performance ****½ Sonics ***½

Born in Arkansas in 1927, saxophonist Red Holloway grew up in Chicago and cut his teeth on the Windy City scene alongside tenor legend Johnny Griffin, just as bebop emerged as the idiom of a new generation. While he landed his first gigs with bluesmen Roosevelt Sykes and Memphis Slim, Holloway absorbed hop's intricacies directly from Charlie Parker, slipping downstairs to hear Bird in the Persian Lounge while on break from his big-band gig with Eugene Wright in the Persian Ballroom.

Holloway has carried forward the blues and hop torch ever since, holding his own against fierce bandstand pugilists such as Dexter Gordon, Gene Ammons, Ben Webster, and Sonny Stitt, with whom he performed and recorded widely in the 1970s. Given his roots, it seems strange that Holloway is making his debut on Delmark, Robert Koester's venerable Chicago-based blues and jazz label, so late in his career (though he does appear on several United Records doo-wop sessions from the mid-1950s reissued by Delmark). Thankfully, Holloway is still in prime form, and here delivers a meaty, satisfying program with a persuasive organ combo.

He's lost none of his up-tempo fluency, romping exuberantly on "St. Thomas" while ripping and snorting through Arnett Cobb's title track. But Holloway is at his most effective when caressing ballads with his big, blustery tone, crooning a smoldering 11-minute version "Deep Purple" on alto sax (Chris Foreman's lithe B3 comping is a tasty bonus). Ever the crowd pleaser, Holloway concludes the album as he often closes a set: by singing a salty blues with energy and conviction.

Though probably still best known for his mid-'60s recordings with Brother Jack McDuff's popular organ combo, Holloway has always had his own stories to tell. Here, he makes the most of the spotlight.

—Andrew Gilbert

RECORD REVIEWS
Charles Tolliver has made four big-band records in his life. Two came in the 1970s, on his own label, Strata-East: Music Inc & Big Band and Impact. They are underground classics. In 2007 he released With Love on Blue Note. It made all the important 2007 jazz polls and was nominated for a Grammy. Now there is Emperor March. It is his best so far.

Tolliver is a self-taught, ambitious, audacious arranger. His 19-piece ensemble contains some of New York’s most accomplished (but not always most famous) section players, and killing soloists like veterans Billy Harper and Stanley Cowell and rising star Marcus Strickland. Emperor March was recorded live at the Blue Note in Greenwich Village. It is an often overwhelming, sometimes bruising listening experience.

It opens with “On the Nile,” an old Tolliver modal composition (Jackie McLean recorded it in 1965) in a new big-band rendering so explosive that the Blue Note (and recording engineer Steve Remote) can barely contain its roaring tumult. “On the Nile” pumps and seethes and throws off three epic solos, by Strickland (shrieking melodies right at the ragged edge of chaos) and Cowell (pummeling wild lyricism) and Tolliver (spattering flame). Tolliver’s band always sounds ready to fly into 19 separate fragments, but never quite does.

The other five tracks offer Tolliver compositions with unusual internal logic and arrangements with many moving, convoluted parts and one startling solo after another, from people like Todd Bashore and Mike Dease and Bill Saxton. The Texas tenor of Billy Harper pours naked passion on the one piece not written by Tolliver, “I Want to Talk About You.” Tolliver’s trumpet solo on “Chedlike” has blistering brassiness and never approaches an idea from the front.

There is harshness and brightness to the sound of this recording that can sometimes make you wince, especially when the ensemble attacks en masse. But there is separation among instruments, the soloists are clear, and the audio-verité rawness puts you smack in the Blue Note on a really good night to be there.

—Thomas Conrad

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Enlightened Audio Designs & Noble Electronics

Editor:

We were delighted to read the lead editorial by John Marks in the May issue, "Tomorrow's Classics Are Today's Bargains." What a great statement for the magazine to make about really putting its readers first! Bravo to you and to John Marks. Keep up the good work!

We are the "ex-factory technical staff," and we continue to service and perform our mods and upgrades to Enlightened Audio Designs products. We still appreciate the insight of the original designers, and we feel honored to be able to keep the EAD legacy alive. Interested owners can visit our website at www.noblelectronis.net.

Greg Palma (former Tech Director, EAD design team)
Noble Electronics

Klipsch Palladium P-39F

Editor:

We are thrilled that our Palladium P-39F speakers, reviewed in the June issue, gave Wes Phillips an intense emotional connection to his music. Emotionally connecting listeners with their music is the mantra we live by daily—and have been for over 60 years, thanks to founder Paul W. Klipsch (PWK). Paul loved to attend live musical performances. Therefore, in 1946, he introduced a way to bring that "live feeling" home with the creation of his revolutionary Klipschom.

Today, we still make products that bring out the passion in music. The Palladium Series is, in fact, the modern embodiment of the Klipsch design philosophy, delivering authentic reproduction of a live performance. Hallmarks of our "live" philosophy focus on attributes that emotionally involve the listener: broad dynamic range and low distortion. We feel we accomplished this, as Wes mentions that the P-39Fs "take you there and get you closer."

The P-39Fs groundbreaking driver designs address performance extremes to ensure high efficiency, smooth, wide bandwidth, and ultra-low distortion. While our white paper describes this in full detail, I find the most impressive attribute to be the THD, which is an order of magnitude lower than comparable speakers. Furthermore, each set of handcrafted P-39Fs is a precisely matched pair of left and right speakers that undergo rigorous evaluation before ever leaving our Hope, Arkansas, manufacturing facility.

To ensure that the P-39F also exceeded every style expectation, we enlisted the help of BMW Group DesignWorksUSA. Before even lifting a pencil, they sought to understand the cultural underpinnings of the Klipsch design philosophy. Designworks USA worked collaboratively with our engineers as we set out to achieve our acoustic and aesthetic goals. It was important to the entire team that the final design delivered beautiful sonic and visual results. An artistic mind will appreciate its external grace, while the technical mind will revel in its internal engineering excellence. I view the P-39F as a passionately crafted product that carries on the PWK torch, while also taking advantage of 21st-century technology and materials.

The P-39F represents the ultimate expression of Klipsch sound technology. For us, it is—and always has been—about live sound performance and how it impacts every listener, whether in the US or overseas.

Wes Phillips mentioned that the P-39Fs delivery of k.d. lang's recording of "Hallelujah" took his breath away and reduced him to tears. That, in a nutshell, is what these speakers are about, and why we all care about hi-fi. On behalf of the entire company, I want to thank Wes for the time and care he took in reviewing these speakers.

Mark Casavant, Vice President of Product Development
Klipsch Group

Audio Valve Conductor

Editor:

I would like to thank Robert J. Reina for an excellent review in the July issue, and for using the Eklipse preamplifier as his long-term reference. In his review of the Conductor, in which he compared it to the Eklipse, he nailed the sound quality on the head. One really has to see and hear the Conductor in person to appreciate its incredible German build quality and beauty. It truly is the heart of a reference-quality audio system.

As for John Atkinson's measurements, the following letter is from Deetes Anderson, of Deetes' Sound Room, in Carmichael, California, the No.1 Audio Valve dealer in the US.

"Ray, this is a case of measurements not being able to capture what really matters, the sound. Having owned an Eklipse now for 7 years and sold several Conductors I can attest that it is, without a doubt, the best preamp I have ever heard! I, of course, don't measure the equipment I sell, nor do I care to. My customers tell me if I am selling them products that improve their listening enjoyment or not. All that have heard the Conductor in my store commented on how incredible the sound is. As you know, the Eklipse preamp has continued to be my best selling preamp. All the customers that purchased the Conductors already owned Eklipse preamps, this tells me that they are real world listeners and they are not concerned with the measurements of their equipment. I guess you might say that the measurements that we do make are not representative of what we hear. If we compared our wives and girlfriends (may they never meet) to the 'ideal' measurements, would we still love the one we chose? I think not. Having been in this business of selling great sounding audio equipment now for 42 years, I can tell you this. The Audio Valve, Audio Note, and Audion equipment are, without a doubt, the best sounding equipment I have had the pleasure of owning and selling to my happy (lucky) customers. Measurements are interesting, like 0-60...but do the others really matter? I think not. We audio listeners, and purchasers of this kind of equipment, really do take the time to listen and decide if we are emotionally moved and satisfied with the products before we put down our hard earned money. We are not concerned with measurements. Perhaps, the products that do measure to the reviewer's ideals might look good on the scope, but would you really purchase it because of that? Don't you want to listen to it? I do, and so do my customers."

Deetes Anderson
Deetes' Sound Room

Thanks again.
Ray Lombardi, Ray's Sound
North American importer of Audio Valve and Audion products

Music Hall dac25.2

Editor:

Since Sam deems it necessary to quote John Maynard Keynes, I thought it appropriate to start my response with a more relevant quote from that great economist: "Words ought to be a little wild for they are the assaults of thought on the unthinking."
Stunning New Cremona M at CSA

We’ve become Sonus Faber dealers just in time for the release of the upgraded Cremona M! Imagine all the qualities of the classic first generation model but with greater refinement, better bass definition, extraordinary dynamics and amazing detail in an even more attractive design. And as usual, our beautiful, two-level showroom is one of very few places you can audition it. Before you invest in any Home Entertainment component visit us and discover a new level of service, the best brands and an attentive, knowledgeable staff that loves music (and movies!) as much as you do!

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Sam is a Luddite, an unthinking one at that. The dac25.2 is designed specifically to listen to music on or through a computer. The USB input at least practically to listen to music on or through it is incumbent on me and others misses the whole point of USB DACs. Nothing wrong with that, except that it is a lover of music and a manufacturer, it is incumbent on me and others in our industry to help retrieve that music and make it sound good—thus the dac25.2.

He did say that “the dac25.2 sounded especially swell with Internet radio.” Surprise fucking surprise. It was designed for that! What he should have done is listened to music through the iTunes software on his Mac and not through his aged (probably acquired for free) CD player. The beauty of our DAC is that it really makes sense of music stored in digital media. It works well with that whore of compression, MP3, and soars, like the lark ascending, with uncompressed files.

Really, Editor, is this the best you can do? Don’t you have any new, young writers who get it? Am I doomed to suffer the rantings of an aged buffoon? I guess so.

Roy Hall
Music Hall

Mordaunt-Short Carnival 2

Editor:
Many thanks to Sam Tellig for his enthusiastic words regarding the Mordaunt-Short Carnival 2 loudspeaker. The entire Carnival range was designed from the ground up by the talented folks under Chief Acoustic Engineer Graeme Fay’s tutelage, within Audio Partnership’s Mordaunt-Short division.

Their goal was simple: offer huge performance in a high-value wrapper (Curly Pynna with flame cabinets they aren’t). I think Graeme and Cambridge Audio’s Matthew Bramble leave their office after work and drink pints together, comparing notes to see who’s outdoing the other by building better gear for less money! And let me put the record straight: When visiting with Sam, I said, “Sam, I have a pair of stupid-good speakers for stupid cheap—wanna hear them someday?” It was like waking a hungry alligator at feeding time, snapping at some hapless duck stuck in the mud. I’ve known Sam long enough to realize he can’t resist good—for a man after my own cheapskate heart. As Sam knows—I’ve heard his evil laugh firsthand—I got into this business only to get my gear at half price!

Let that act as a powerful incentive to all those freshly minted MBAs grads searching for a dubious investment job in lower Manhattan! Better to invest in Carnival 2s; ours is a more honorable way to collect a paycheck, and some good-sounding gear, for less.

Our very best wishes.

John Bevier and the entire
Audio Plus Services/Plurison gang

Miyajima Labs Premium Mono

Editor:
Thank you, Art Dudley, for an accurate and honest review of the revolutionary cross-coil Miyajima Labs Premium Mono phono cartridge. Your ears confirmed what I had heard—mono in all its glory! I performed a demo at the Rocky Mountain Audio Fest 2008 using the Miyajima Labs Stereo Shilabe and the Premium Mono. I played a stereo version of Dave Brubeck’s Time Out as well as a mono version. To a man, everyone who heard the demo picked the mono version as the one to listen to! More emotion, more music, better sound! Just to add insult to “mono better than stereo” injury, the original mono Columbia “six-eye” cost me $1 at a local library sale!

There is so much great music out there recorded in mono, and it is available at a fraction of the cost of even secondhand stereo LPs. Mono LPs are available at libraries, secondhand stores, antique stores. Salvation Army shops, and welfare stores, not to mention the growing number of used-record stores. A dollar or two may buy you a treasure of incomparable listening. Noriuki Miyajima’s love of good music makes mono LPlistening available for audiophiles today. Since owning my Premium Mono, I listen 50/50 to mono and stereo. Hear the music in its original splendor, probably like never before.

Again, thank you.

North American importer of Miyajima Labs

Welsh Audio

Editors:
Now's the time to think about your new headphones. headphone.com has a great selection and outstanding customer service. They really care about their customers.

Editor:
As the new owner of a DAC on a very tight budget, I was grateful to learn about the USB DACs. One of my favorite products is the DAC25.2 from Audio Plus Services. It does a great job of decoding PCM and DSD signals, and it even handles analog inputs. I highly recommend it to anyone looking for a high-quality DAC on a budget.

John Bevier
Audio Plus Services/Plurison gang

Hervé Delétraz, owner
darTZeel Audio SA High End Manufacturer
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-Galen Carol

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In God He Trusts?

The question with Pedro the Lion frontman David Bazan was never Can he sing? (He can.) Or Is his songwriting worthy? (It is.) For a guy whose lyrics are often painfully autobiographical, it wasn’t even Does this song mean he’s cheating on his wife or drinking too much? (Hard to discern, actually) The real issue was always something deeper, something more akin to Just how Christian is this guy?

Over four records and a smattering of singles and EPs, the Seattle singer-songwriter has walked a jagged edge between being a secular mope-rock poet prone to lyrical fits of extreme intimacy and other, um, secular topics, and being a Christian indie artist who, despite the indie-rock trappings, spent much lyrical and emotional energy exploring his feelings about a higher power—in his case, God.

Much to the chagrin of the Christian rock community, who for a time had a genuinely cool indie-rock contend in their midst, Bazan now asks penetrating questions of his life and faith. On his new record, *Curse Your Branches* (see review on p.94), he’s gone from extolling to questioning, from acceptance of an afterlife to advising his children to “Let go of what you know and honor what exists” (“Bear Witness”). While it’s still very clear you know and honor what exists” (“Bear Witness”). While it’s still very clear you know and honor what exists” (“Bear Witness”). While it’s still very clear

Bazan began experimenting in 2005, when Pedro was crumbling, and eventually formed a band whose name, The Headphones, endeared him to audiophiles everywhere. Founded as a twopiece with Bazan on synthesizers and Walsh on drums, the lineup changed when Walsh departed, to be replaced by Frank Lenz (Starflyer 59, Fold Zandura), and was occasionally joined by guitarist Nick Peterson (Fleet Foxes). Not a home run in 2006, but now I’m comfortable not worrying about it. All the Headphones of weird— but I know how they sound.”

Bazan says he uses Sony 7506 ’phones to record on four-track, and while I’m not really great at any one instrument, I’m good at putting things together, which means it’s tough for me to get in a room and communicate my ideas musically. It takes the painstaking process of sitting in front of the multi-tracker and trying stuff out.”

Bazan returned to mix and master *Curse Your Branches*.

In typical Bazan fashion, he’s good at weighing and measuring what went wrong with Pedro. “In the end, one thing Pedro accomplished consistently was pissing off and hurting almost all of my buddies—anybody who basically played in the band. There’s a bunch of guys like me who came up recording on four-track, and while I’m not really great at any one instrument, I’m good at putting things together, which means it’s tough for me to get in a room and communicate my ideas musically. It takes the painstaking process of sitting in front of the multi-tracker and trying stuff out.”

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