Vienna Acoustics’ Ground-Breaking Speaker

Passionate Kisses

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Cutting-Edge Components

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> Hans Turntable
> Bryston DAC

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Stereophile Magazine

THE GRAND MASTER leaves the listener experiencing pure joy. The result is nothing short of a revelation, an unforgettable musical experience. The new standard.
The Recording Angel

Back in the last century, I mused in this space about the essential difference between recorded sound and the real thing (see www.stereophile.com/asweseeit/75). I had been walking to dinner with friends when I heard the unmistakable sound of live music coming from a window. But here was the kicker: rather than the sound of live music coming from a window, it was not a recording being played through those loudspeakers, but real instruments. Their sounds were being reproduced by loudspeakers, yet it was unambiguously obvious that it was not a recording being played through those loudspeakers, but real instruments.

"What on earth can be the readily identifiable difference," I wrote in 1995, "between the sound of a loudspeaker reproducing the live sound of an electric guitar and that same loudspeaker reproducing the recorded sound of an electric guitar?"

I went on to conjecture that the act of recording inevitably diminishes the dynamic range of the real thing. The in-band phase shift from the inevitable cascade of high-pass filters that the signal encounters on its passage from recording microphone to playback loudspeakers smears the transients that, live, the listener perceives in all their spiky glory. And as a high-pass filter is never encountered with live acoustic music, that's where the essential difference must lie. I concluded, quoting Kalman Rubinson (who had not yet joined the magazine's team of reviewers) that "Something in Nature abhors a capacitor."

But two more recent experiences suggest that there must be more to the difference than the presence of unnatural high-pass filters. At the beginning of November, I drove down to the Maryland headquarters of cable manufacturer Stealth Audio to partake in two evenings' worth of live vs recorded music. The idea was simple: two pianists, Genady Zagor and George Vatchnadze, would perform for an hour on a well-prepared Steinway D grand piano, which I would record. Then, after a break, the audience would hear the recital again, this time played back through a system comprising Vivid Giya speakers driven by Convergent Audio Technology JL3 150W tube monoblocks, a CAT SL-1 Ultimate preamp, and Esoteric's five-box digital front end. Cables would all be the ultra-expensive, helium-filled Steath. And to ensure the highest possible digital quality, both the dual-mono Esoteric X-01VU D/A converters and my two two-channel dCS A/D converters, running at 24 bits resolution and a 96kHz sample rate, would be locked to the ultra-high-precision Esoteric G-0Rb "atomic" master clock.

My microphones were a spaced pair of high-voltage DPA 4006 omnis and an ORTF pair of DPA 4011 cardoids, all four amplified by low-noise Millennia preamps. I set up the mikes closer to the piano than I would normally choose, because playing back a recording in the same room in which it was made results in a double hit of that room's acoustic. This can introduce an obvious difference between the live and recorded sounds that will work against the illusion. And, of course, arranging for a room that would allow the piano enough reverberation to "breathe," but not so much as to hobble the loudspeakers, was not trivial. Stealth's Serguei Timachev had done a great job on the acoustics of the room, however, while Philip O' Hanlon, of Vivid importer On a Mission/Audio Alchemy, would perform for an hour on a Higher Note, worried away at the positioning of the Giyas until, by the second night at least, he felt they were working with rather than against the room.

The recital program covered a variety of pianistic styles. George Vatchnadze opened with two Scarlatti sonatas, followed by Chopin's fourth Ballade in f, and Scarbo from Ravel's Gaspard de la nuit. The closer was Ganady Zagor performing Mussorgsky's Pictures at an Exhibition. The live sound of the big piano in the fairly small room, which seated 20 or so listeners, ranged from intimate in the Scarlatti to viscerally explosive in the Mussorgsky. At the climax of Pictures, The Great Gate of Kiev, with Zagor pounding the keys, the walls literally shook. But the Esoteric/CAT-Vivid system got right not only the tone colors of the real thing, but, to my surprise, also both the loudness and the microdynamics. The transients were sufficiently spiky, and the impact of the recorded piano was as viscerally overwhelming, as the real things had been. Certainly the audience seemed impressed by what they heard. However, as pleased as I was with both the recording and the playback system, the "bigness" of the 9' Steinway had been diminished. Even with the same tone colors and sound-pressure level, the instrument and the loudspeakers were exciting the room very differently.

The second experience was hearing the Yamaha AvantGrand N3 piano, which Bob Reina enthuses about in this issue's "Industry Update" (p.16). Whether it was listening to Bob improvising, or to a piano-roll transcription of Rachmaninoff playing his arrangement of Fritz Kreisler's Liebesfreund, the sound of this hybrid electric/acoustic instrument, in which loudspeakers replace the strings, was very convincing—at least, until the same piano-roll transcription was played on a 9' Yamaha concert grand fitted with a Disklavier mechanism. Again, while the electric instrument got both tone colors and loudness correct, it didn't sound as physically large as the real thing, and its relationship with the room acoustic was still different; the "bigness" was closer than it had been in Maryland, but still not quite right.

So these days, I'm starting to feel that it is something that is never captured by recordings at all that ultimately defines the difference between live and recorded sound. The Yamaha AvantGrand and the Vivid/CAT- Esoteric-Stealth audio system succeeded in every sonic parameter but one: the intensity of the original sound. Intensity, defined as the sound power per unit area, is the reason why, even if you could equalize a note played on a flute to have the same spectrum as the note played on a piano at the same sound pressure level, it will still sound different.

Ultimately, therefore, it is perhaps best to just accept that live music and recorded music are two different phenomena. I appropriated the title of this month's "As We See It" from Evan Eisenberg's book-length essay, The Recording Angel: Explorations in Phonography (first edition, McGraw-Hill, 1986; second edition, Yale University Press, 2005), which is essential reading for anyone who, like me, is fascinated by the art of audio recording. Eisenberg's thesis is that any attempt to capture the sound of an original event is doomed to failure, and that stripping a concert from its cultural context by recording only the audio fosters a sterility on the result from which it cannot escape. The recording engineer may be able to pin the butterfly to the disc, but it sure doesn't fly any more. For a recording to make the grade as a work of art, therefore, more is needed than merely darkly echoing the original event. In Eisenberg's words, "In the great majority of cases, there is no original musical event that a record records or reproduces. Instead, each playing of a given record is an instance of something timeless. The original musical event never occurred; it exists, if it exists anywhere, outside history."
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Want to know more? Go to the “News Desk” at www.stereophile.com for up-to-the-minute info.

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www.stereophile.com, February 2010
Finally, An In-Wall Speaker With Nothing to Hide!

The Insider’s clarity and realism sets it apart from other in-wall speakers. $ 2499/pair

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-Mike Quinn, Jazz Times

“The gasps of disbelief when Jeff Joseph revealed the source of his demo’s sound proved how effectively the Insider counters conventional wisdom”
- Wes Phillips Onbifi
Building Blocks...

Two giant steps towards a firm musical foundation

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Oh Happy Day! . . .
Editor:
. . . to have found Stereophile! Reading all the discussion (heated at times)—good, taut sounding about sound! I am a refugee from the audiophile community—sadly, the finer salons are harder and harder to find in my area, and the preponderance of Junk "R" Us electronics stores had made me feel dismayed that audio aficionados had fallen off the face of the Earth.

Happily, I find this wonderful publication—and what a joy! Brings a tear to the eye—having not been in a decent audio salon in many years. The one new piece of electronics (a Nakamichi CD changer) I purchased from one of the "chain gang" stores prompted the fellow to try to sell me the whole 5.1 nightmare: "This isn't your father's stereo!" You bet your tushy it isn't. young Mr. Salesman—who, oh, does not know what I mean by phonograph, or what a Shure V-15 III or a man phonograph cartridge is, exactly (Ya know, the thing that the DJ abuses at the musical gatherings of today . . . ? You can play records on them. . . . those big black things. . . . yeah.)

Anyway, I love this magazine, I love reading up on the new creations, and I love keeping alive my ancient electronic love affairs from Long Island and Binghamton. It's good to be home! —Janine

Address withheld by request

Not paying attention
Editor:
I love reading comments from readers, especially when a reader writes in and complains that Stereophile does not review anything costing less than $50,000, or something like that.

Well, just for laughs, I went back and looked at some of the components that you have reviewed in the past. Such as the KEF iQ9 speakers and the Outlaw RR2150 two-channel receiver. Online, I was able to find the KEF speakers on sale for $799.99, and the Outlaw receiver was about $599.99; then I found a Marantz CC4001 five-disc carousel CD player for about $199.99 on clearance. Not sure if you'd reviewed the Marantz CD player, but it did get adequate user reviews online. Yes, I know that you can get a Blu-ray player for less that might sound better, and there are better CD players out there. But I was thinking more of a dedicated stereo system, and I really hate having to change CDs all the time. Adding speaker wire that you can get at any Home Depot or Lowes for about $20 or less, this system would cost $1620, not including tax or shipping charges.

With that said, either the people who are complaining have a reading problem, or they are just not paying attention. —Dave Noble

Address withheld by request

Paying attention
Editor:
Every month, I read letters from readers complaining about Stereophile's reviews of high-priced equipment. The reviews don't particularly bother me. I can't afford the stuff, and will never buy any of it unless I can buy it five years from now as used equipment. It might be good to know what is considered noteworthy and likely to become tomorrow's classic gear.

For today, however, I have assembled various vintage gear that works just fine for me at relatively low cost: Marantz 2325 receiver, Sansui 9090DB receiver, McIntosh C22 and MC240, Quicksilver full-function preamp with Silver 60 monoblocks, and a Thorens TD-126 Mk.III turntable. I have found excellent used examples of the Alon Lotus, Klipsch CS-3 Epic, and original Solidoquy speakers, as well as Spencers and Sansui. I have a boatload of stuff to switch in and out of my ever-changing system, and I have fun with tube rolling as well. Most of my tubes are high-testing used tubes purchased from a local equipment-restoration shop, including Telefunken and original GE single-plate tubes for a DIY 2A3 single-ended, 3Wpc amplifier.

I have spent less money on all of the above than if I went out and bought a single set of mono amps from the usual high-priced stereo, it's time to give yourself a slap and remember that music existed long before shiny valves and "mesmerizing" turntable revolutions, and it was still good—even the stuff that wasn't to your particular taste.

And so I implore the editors of Stereophile: Please don't spend too much time trying to satisfy the particular requirements of Mr. Danielson's "niche," or commenting on the state of popular music, because that's how venerable institutions become outdated and irrelevant.

—John Burke

Brisbane, Australia

Single-ended wisdom?
Editor:
Wikipedia defines SET lovers, of which I'm one, as "people with more money than sense," and SETs as "dinosaur technology that doesn't stand up to even cheap solid-state": http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Single-ended_triangle

—Lee Westol

toozb@kentology.net

Ah, the modern marvel that is Wikipedia. It's only correct when the entry is about something you know nothing about. —John Atkinson

Hand me my pipe
Editor:
My professional CV once listed "audio-philie" as one of my hobbies, but I have been forced to replace this description with "music fan," due to the negative connotations of the former appellation. Like Lewis Danielson ("Letters," June 2009, p. 9) I lament the decline of recording standards resulting from the perversion of music from art form to disposable commodity. However, I refuse to adopt the notion that all modern rock and pop is, by definition, worthless, as the appeal of a song extends beyond musicianship and reproduction (as much as I value these aspects).

My interest in hi-fi reached a tranquil equilibrium the day I realized that I was in danger of modifying my musical tastes to suit my equipment, rather than vice versa. When you reject a genre of music "because it sounds like crap" on your monstrously expensive stereo, it's time to give yourself a slap and remember that music existed long before shiny valves and "mesmerizing" turntable revolutions, and it was still good—even the stuff that wasn't to your particular taste.

—John Atkinson

Brooklyn, CT

Passing it on
Editor:
I have avoided the "Letters" pages of Stereophile for some time, mostly due to the ridiculous constant debate of at what
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Editor:
I believe the high-end audio business and music-loving audiophiles are failing to promote one of the most important benefits of our hobby: its universal shareability. And because of that, our hobby is in danger of disappearing altogether for lack of sufficient numbers of new audiophile hobbyists to support the high-end component companies.

I don't think of another hobby that's as shareable with nonhobbyists as ours. Collectors of dolls, coins, stamps, and art, or camera buffs, etc., mostly share their interests with fellow enthusiasts. But although they may share their hobby with anyone who's willing to learn about it, unless they're able to raise the nonhobbyist's interest beyond polite curiosity, the sharing will be for a relatively short time, until the novelty wears off.

I have had nonaudiophiles hear their favorite music on a high-end audio system, they may just possibly hear their beloved music with the highest fidelity they've ever experienced. Without even a passing understanding of high-end audio or what audiophiles are about, the novice can often have an instant appreciation of our passion, our obsession with high fidelity: the making of the closest possible emotional connection to the music they love. And that just might be the motivation they need to embrace the quest for high fidelity.

What are nonmusic-loving audiophiles and those who promote our hobby extolling one of its greatest virtues: the ability to share it with almost anyone?—George S. Louis CEO, Digital Systems & Solutions gslouis@gsloouis.com

Sharing the hobby
Editor:
I agree with Mr. Baskin's premise that folks should not abuse the time or take advantage of the knowledge of retailers (“Letters,” November 2009, p.11).

I am a speaker designer and a reviewer, and have been playing and buying records for my children for a few years. They love going to my listening room and listening to records. When my daughter realized the records were for her, she asked to listen to them. After opening the package, she asked me to clean and play the records for her.

While we were listening, she looked at me and said, “Daddy, when do I get a record player?” Oh yeah—she is six years old. My son is three years old and loves spending “man time” searching for his favorite songs on vinyl.

We spend so much time educating our children in so many subjects, but give them an iPod to listen to. We need to take time to educate them about good sound and “share the hobby!” It does not matter what age the child is or the format you prefer. The simple fact is, we need to pass along the love of great-sounding music.

—Jeremy Weishaapt titalos2@verizon.net

The right price
Editor:
I read Mr. Baskin's letter in November 2009 and agree with his conclusions. But I have a different and not uncommon problem. I'm in the market for one of the pricier high-end, full-range loudspeakers reviewed in recent issues of Stereophile. There are three on my short list. For the past 10 years I've been following John Atkinson's quantitative reviews and their companion listening tests. Based on these reviews and on extended listening sessions, I've bought ProAc Response 15C and Vienna Acoustics Beethoven Concert Grand loudspeakers at local bricks-and-mortar stores. I've developed a pretty good idea of what I'll like, how it measures, and which reviewers have similar tastes. But I won't open my wallet without an extended audition. Who would?

Here's the rub: My local dealer cannot afford to buy this kind of product. The market is small and times are tough. By the way, it's not as if I'm living in Podunk—this is the 15th-largest TV market, and home to a half dozen high-end manufacturers!

What to do?
1) Go to some audiofest and listen to a bunch of other people moving about, milling in and out, talking, etc.? The Consumer Electronics Show, maybe?
2) Fly to a distant city, audition at a store in that city, and buy from them, assisting the demise of my local store?
3) Same as 2), above, but then buy from my local guys?
4) Find a used pair, and buy them at a price at which I can flip them and not lose money?

None of these options is very good for this level of product. Something has to change in the current business model. Manufacturers and/or distributors need to find a way to make demo equipment available to local bricks-and-mortar stores that can't afford to buy it themselves. Capital is tight everywhere, but something has to give. I just want to be able to listen to great products and buy them locally. Is that too much to ask?

—Thomas Roshak
Minneapolis, MN
w9tr@comcast.net

The real problem
Editor:
Regarding the letter to the editor in the November 2009 issue (p.11) railing against the abuse of high-end retailers, I would like to provide a counterview.
NEW AWARD AND PRODUCT REVIEWS!

**Au24 powerChord**

"Overall articulation with this cable in place is unparalleled in my experience, yet the sense of life, of body, of breathing, is almost magical. Extension at both frequency extremes seems limitless. And talk about quiet, music is free to emanate from the darkest, most unobtrusive background I've yet heard."

*Positive Feedback Online 2009 Winter's Choice Award*

Greg Weaver, Senior Editor - Nov '09

**aR2p-T Adept Response**

"Folks this is the real deal here. So if you have a high resolution system and want to elevate it just that much further then step right up The aR2p-T is one of the champions at low level retrieval and should help improve overall performance within your existing system. The increase in clarity and natural sounding timbre with both music and vocals was very addictive."

*Enjoy the Music.com - Anthony Nicosia - Dec '09*

**aR6-T Adept Response**

"The system was the quietest that it's ever been. While I've stated in the past that the system was silent, one cannot contemplate any further decrease in the background noise unless one actually hears it. It always amazes me when a further decrease in electrical junk leads to further delineation of the soundstage ambiance, and a more musical presentation."

*Positive Feedback Online 2009 Writer's Choice Award*

Greg Weaver, Senior Editor - Nov '09

**aR8 UK Adept Response**

"No product is perfect, but the aR8 gets damn close. It's strange, if a change this large is laid at the door of a CD player, preamp or power amp, few quibble. Even saying changing the interconnect cables produces this big a difference might be accepted with scant question, but to attribute these sort of improvements to a power product is always viewed quizzically. The fact remains that the Audience adepResponse aR8 makes a big, important difference to the sound, every bit in line with three grand upgrades to electronics further up the food chain. So, set aside your preconceptions and prejudices and listen."

*HiFi+ - Alan Sircom - Editor - Nov '09 issue 69*

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**aR2-T Adept Response**

"The insertion of the aR6T brought a new, dance-like, joyful aliveness to the recording, (a slice of what I had heard at Ozawa Hall), with a natural flow of notes into a wider and deeper soundstage than I ever thought possible in my system. With the aR6T, everything on recordings is just more vital: more musically engaging and inviting. As such, it is indispensable."

*StereoTimes.com - Nelson Brill - Sept '09*
First of all, I agree with Mr. Baskin that it is unethical and wrong for people to intentionally use a retailer’s time to demo products, knowing that their final purchase will be made online. However, that is only half the problem. Outside of a few major metropolitan areas, there simply are no two-channel audio stores for this abuse to take place in. Unfortunately, the vast majority of what used to be stereo retailers are now home-theater retailers. Home theater appears to provide a more lucrative revenue stream for retailers than traditional two-channel audio equipment. Also, a home-theater customer is typically very different from a two-channel stereo customer. Frequently, they know little about the electronics, and even allow the retailer to make selections for them with no demo at all.

Because of this, there is a greatly reduced availability of demo equipment, and when there is equipment available for demo, it is often very specific to home theater and not two-channel audio.

So I find myself with a quite different problem from the one Mr. Baskin outlined. I find that I am expected to pay my local home-theater retailer full retail price for the service of taking my order. The retailer knows little about two-channel products and does not stock them for demo. So I must research on my own, and then buy the product at a typical 40% markup from a retailer who is simply ordering the product from the distributor and providing no other service. This is obviously unreasonable and unsustainable as a business model.

—Tom Shope
Jacksonville, FL

Even parasites have their uses

Editor:
Re: Michael Baskin’s “Customers vs retailers” (“Letters,” November 2009, p.11), and John Atkinson’s comment that this is certainly not a new practice: While studying in the UK in the mid-1970s and having to make do on an extremely tight budget, I was looking for both advice and a bargain in buying a home stereo system. At that time, in London, Tottenham Court Road was home to some well-known hi-fi retailer shops, and between the shops there flourished the inevitable discount stores of that time. Dumps, usually run by an affable guy from the subcontinent who would greet prospective buyers with “Lasky’s is my showroom; go there, choose, and come back”—Lasky’s being the biggest and most frequented hi-fi retailer on that street.

I must admit to succumbing to this marketing technique, but then again, every shilling still mattered back then.

I have long since learned to appreciate the added value of the serious retailer, and I am happy to pay for it. However, I still have fond memories of my first purchase, made possible by that entrepreneurial Indian chap.

So, Mr. Baskin, even parasites perform a useful function, as so often also happens in nature. And the fact that, 30 years on, the market still has room for hard discounters and orthodox retailers proves that they are both important drivers of the high-end audio market. Trust yesterday’s “Mr.GHJ&D” to be tomorrow’s serious big spender.

—Spyros Filaretos
Athens, Greece
spyro@filaretos.com

What do the measurements mean?

Editor:
I read John Atkinson’s testing of various types of speakers with interest. I wonder whether he has written an article specifically on how to test speakers, and what to look for in the measurements so as to provide clues to what makes a good speaker.

—Tuan Tran
tuan_tran@hotmail.com

You can find my thoughts on how to measure loudspeakers and how to interpret the graphs at www.stereophile.com/features/99, features/100, and features/103.

—John Atkinson

Time’s up?

Editor:
When is it time to replace your phono cartridge? Is there a time factor or usage time that is considered?

—Alex Weiss
awmac1@aol.com

There are a number of factors involved, Mr. Weiss. If you live close to an ocean, and or where there is a great deal of ozone (pollutions) in the air, you will find that the rubber damper in the cartridge will either harden or literally liquify over not too long a period. When I lived in polluted Los Angeles, cantilever suspensions used to collapse from the dampers softening after a few years. In other areas, they tend to harden after a number of years. This causes the sound to harden as well, and the cartridge’s tracking ability to degrade. As for the life of styli themselves, I have found that they can last a very long time if the records they play are kept spotlessly clean. Dirt caught in the grooves causes wear by acting as grit (like sandpaper) to wear down the stylus. Also, not cleaning the stylus before each play causes dirt to adhere to it. The heat generated by the friction of the groove being dragged past the stylus causes the dirt to melt, then reharmonize, which causes additional record wear and mistracking, and further shortens stylus life. With clean records, a clean stylus, a high-quality tonearm, and an atmosphere light in ozone, a cartridge should last five years or more.

—Michael Fremer
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Wes Phillips

Back when there was still something called the "classical music industry," one of Stereophile's favorite small labels was John Marks Records, masterminded by the magazine's "The Fifth Element" columnist, John Marks. In fact, it was his recordings that first brought John to the magazine's attention. JMR had a phenomenal run of releases, among them Arturo Delmoni and Meg Bachman Van's Songs My Mother Taught Me, Nathaniel Rosen's cycle of J.S. Bach's Suites for Solo Cello, Delmoni and Rosenberg's Music for a Glass Bead Game, and the three Rejoice recordings of Christmas music for string quartet (also featuring Delmoni and Rosen). That's a pretty solid run for a label that released fewer than 20 recordings.

Marks has now revisited one of his earlier releases, Arturo Delmoni's 1996 performances of Eugene Ysaye's Sonata for Solo Violin, Op.27 No.2, "Obsession", Fritz Kreisler's Recitativo and Scherzo-Caprice, Op.6; and Bach's Partita 2 in d for Solo Violin, BWV 1004.

The disc was recorded in a seminary chapel in the middle of the night by engineer Kavi Alexander, who used two EAI/Minilab microphones in a Blumlein array to feed his Ampeg MR70 open-reel analog recorder. The tapes were remastered by Bob Ludwig for digital transfer and reissued on a gold-plated CD—of which Stereophile has a limited number for exclusive sale on its e-commerce website, http://ssl.blueearth.net/ primedia/home.php, for $24.95 plus shipping and handling. (The aluminum CD is still available from ArkivMusic.)

This disc is an under-acknowledged classic—or at least, in a just world, it would be a classic. The sound is overwhelming: Delmoni plays a 1780 J.B. Guarneri violin, and it's a cannon! The instrument's sound is bold and bright, and the Chapel of Christ the King at St. Anthony's Seminary, in Santa Barbara, supports it with an acoustic that deserves costar billing.

Did I mention that the sound is free of grain and extraordinarily natural? And dynamic? Oh yes it is. Do you like harmonic overtones that just won't quit? Check out the opening passages of the Ysaye's first movement. "Obsession?" You don't know the half of it. And what a great program it is. Ysaye wrote a series of six sonatas inspired by Bach's six works for unaccompanied violin, and dedicated each to a different famous violinist. "Obsession" is dedicated to Jacques Thibaud, but that's almost beside the point—which is that Delmoni learned the sonata directly from Josef Gingold, Ysaye's last student, giving us a direct link to the composer himself. Far from a dry study, "Obsession" sparkles with whimsy, quoting generously from both Bach's Partita 3 in E and the Dies Irae, the latter so beloved of Berlioz and Goth girls everywhere.

Kreisler's Recitativo and Scherzo-Caprice is simply delightful. The impish violinist published it under his own name, rather than trying to pass it off as a "discovery"—the main reason being, one suspects, that he simply couldn't stand to see anyone else's name attached to it. However, even Kreisler would appreciate what Delmoni does with it, especially the way the first movement ends in silence as the string harmonics fade into the chapel's acoustic.

And no matter how many recordings you have of Bach's Partita 2 in d, with its famous Ciakona, you'll find a place in your heart for Delmoni's interpretation, which is quite muscular—and possessed of a linear continuity that is striking.

This reissue of John Marks and Arturo Delmoni's Ysaye-Kreisler-Bach disc is even more audiophile than the original. Its label is double-printed: first completely in black, to prevent the print on the label side from inducing jitter by modulating the disc's reflectivity, and then again with the black-on-white text and ground; the reflective layer is gold. Which makes it definitely cause for celebration—don't miss it this time around, or you'll be kicking your-
Sunday, February 28, 2–5pm: The Los Angeles and Orange County Audio Society will hold its monthly meeting at Visual Sound (841 E. Whittier Boulevard, La Habra). A demonstration will feature dipole speakers, including the Magnepan MG20.1, along with cables from AudioQuest and tube electronics from Audio Research. AudioQuest's Andrew Kissinger will be the guest speaker. A raffle is planned and lunch will be served. Guests and new members are invited, and parking is free. For more info, visit www.laocas.com or call Bob Levi at (714) 281-5850.

MARYLAND/WASHINGTON DC

• Saturday, January 30, 1pm: United Home Audio (10820 Guilford Road, Annapolis Junction) will host a turntable-setup seminar featuring Greg Beron and his new ARCMaster universal tonearm-alignment device. For more info, visit www.unitedhomeaudio.com or call (866) 482-8346.

US: NEW YORK CITY

Robert J. Reina

As a musician who has studied all forms of acoustic and electric keyboard instruments, I have played the gamut of keyboards, from gems to disasters. I think the most significant keyboard developments of the 20th century were the Hammond organ, the Fender Rhodes electric piano, and the Moog synthesizer. These instruments were notable not for their ability to replicate the sound of acoustic instruments, but for the new timbres and textures possible with them, which have since become permanent parts of our musical vocabulary. I have now played an instrument that may prove one of the most significant keyboard designs of the 21st century: the Yamaha AvantGrand N3. The designers of this hybrid electric/acoustic piano have attempted to replicate the touch and sound of Yamaha's CFIIIS 9' concert grand ($125,000) in a piano one-third the size and one-fifth the price. The AvantGrand N3 looks like a baby grand finished in attractive black lacquer. It has the keyboard and action of a standard acoustic piano, but lift the lid and you see not the usual harp and strings, but an array of drive-units mounted on top of an attractive wooden cabinet. Yamaha has digitally sampled the sounds of the CFIIIS at four separate locations on its soundboard, and the AvantGrand N3's interior incorporates four sets of triamplified drive-units, each set at approximately the same spots on where the concert-grand's samples had been taken. The hammers of the N3's action strike sensors, which trigger the playing of the samples, to mirror the dynamics intended by the pianist.

The AvantGrand N3's three pedals are calibrated to replicate the precise pressure envelope of the pedals of an acoustic piano. Furthermore, a "soundboard resonator" built into the cabinet is triggered by an oscillator to emulate the resonances of an acoustic piano's soundboard. Finally, a Tactile Response System (TRS) reproduces, via two transducers in the soundboard, reverberation throughout the entire instrument that can be felt by the player's feet as they...
rest on the pedals. Play two bass notes a half-step apart and you feel the beats.

Some bells and whistles are included: the abilities to alter tuning scales, transpose key signature, and to record a performance to hard drive; the file can then be saved to a thumb drive and reproduced by another AvantGrand. In addition to the sound of the CFIIIS grand, harpsichord and electric-piano patches are included.

I played both the AvantGrand N3 and its upright cousin, the N2, and compared their touches and sounds to those of my two references: a 1923 Steinway B 7' grand, restored to as-new condition by Faust Harrison; and the portable rig I use with my jazz quartet, Attention Screen, comprising a Yamaha P60 88-key MIDI controller, a Kurzweil ME-1 synthesizer using the triple-strike Young Chang 9' grand patch, and a Roland KC-550 keyboard amplifier. My main criterion in assembling the latter rig was portability: together, the Yamaha P60 and Kurzweil ME-1 weigh only 32 lbs. In my opinion, however, this gear—which can be heard on Attention Screen's Live at Otto's Shrunken Head (CD, Stereophile STPH020-2)—replicates 80% of the feel and sound of an acoustic grand piano, though, of course, it presents the sound as a mono source instead of the spatially distributed source that is a real piano. I felt that the Yamaha AvantGrand N3, tested with a wide range of materials, replicated about 95% of the sound of the real thing, and that the feel of its keyboard and pedals were virtually indistinguishable from those of an acoustic. In fact, I'd prefer to play the AvantGrand N3 to most of the grand pianos I've played in my lifetime.

The technology implemented in this instrument is remarkable, flawlessly executed, and with huge potential for not only composers and professional pianists who live in small apartments, but jazz clubs that lack the room for a full concert grand. Stereophile readers will have a chance to hear the AvantGrand N3 for themselves on Saturday evening, April 24, at Yamaha's Artist Services concert hall, in midtown Manhattan, where Attention Screen will perform two sets of wholly improvised jazz—and I'll be
playing an N3. This acoustically excellent space is outfitted with Yamaha's proprietary Active Field Control technology, which uses microphones embedded in the ceiling to pick up reflected sounds, then redistribute the soundfield indirectly via speakers installed in the walls. At intermission, Yamaha executives will talk, and answer questions about the AvantGrand and Active Field Control. The concert, which is open to the public, will be recorded for release on the Stereophile label. Look for further details about the concert and the recording in future issues of Stereophile and on www.stereophile.com.

UK: LONDON
Paul Messenger

At a recent meeting of the UK branch of the Audio Engineering Society, Arcam founder John Dawson described in some detail the extraordinary and tortuous evolutionary path that led to his company's latest multichannel A/V receiver, the AVR600. It got me thinking about the way history seems determined to repeat itself.

I first came to the hi-fi industry in the mid-1970s, at the height of the Japanese hi-fi export boom. Rival consumer-electronics giants—Sony, Panasonic/Technics, Hitachi, Toshiba, Pioneer, et al.—were trying to outdo each other by cramming more and more features into their amplifiers, receivers, turntables, and cassette decks, as well as promoting quadraphonic sound.

At about that time, however, a reaction had begun to set in, and the first buds of today's High End began to appear. In the US, Mark Levinson was making expensive preamplifiers entirely devoid of tone controls; a tiny UK company, Naim Audio, adopted a similar tactic. At the same time, Linn Products was reviving the belt-drive turntable under the persuasive slogan "Simply better." It took more than a decade, but by the late 1980s it was becoming increasingly difficult, here in Britain, to sell a stereo amplifier with serious hi-fi pretensions that also had tone controls. And while the major Japanese manufacturers were still involved in hi-fi—and now, especially, CD players—they had come to dominate the much larger market of video and TV, and were beginning to turn their attention to home theater. I clearly remember my first surround-sound movie experience in my home, in the late 1980s. I'd borrowed an Akai stereo VCR equipped with something called Dolby Surround, a simple matrix-encoded system based on the Dolby Stereo system then used in movie theaters. I visited the local video-rental outlet looking for a suitable VHS tape to try, and picked a movie called The Mission, entirely oblivious of the fact that the legendary Ennio Morricone was responsible for the music. The results were surprisingly and sufficiently impressive (thanks, Morricone) to get me deeply involved in film surround sound, at least for a while.

While its technical performance (ie, channel separation) was limited, the joy of the original Dolby Surround was that it was utterly simple, beautifully nonintrusive, and entirely compatible with stereo. It was perfect for the lover of music in hi-fi stereo who might want to watch the occasional movie, and I mourn its passing.

However, the technocrats who run the engineering side of the audio industry couldn't see how to make much money out of something so simple and elegant. They had to go and make it more and more complex, and hence less and less compatible with the purist mentality that increasingly ruled the hi-fi scene. The arrival of Dolby Pro-Logic, and eventually of Dolby Digital and DTS, might have dramatically increased the degree of channel separation, but it also made it that much harder to achieve good integration with a stereo hi-fi system. I still suffer nightmares from being the first UK reviewer to tackle the original Lexicon consumer A/V preamplifier/processor, the DC-1, an experience that only confirmed my opinion that hardware should make it easy to enjoy music and/or movies, not challenge the user's patience and technical knowhow.

I carried on, battling away on the home-theater scene for about a decade, reviewing dozens of TVs and video displays. I realized the game was up when the first plasma flat screens appeared: No magazine wanted me to tell its readers that these displays offered a fraction of the image quality of regular CRT TVs at several times the price. I returned to reviewing hi-fi.

Meanwhile, in 1995, Arcam had introduced their first home-theater sound product. The five-channel Dolby Pro-Logic Xeta One amplifier switched between composite video inputs and had a total of 51 input and output jacks. Arcam was anxious to retain its reputation for high-quality stereo sound; their early A/V amplifiers and processors were relatively simple affairs that took greater care to maintain good stereo compatibility and sonic transparency. By 1998, their two-box A/V system, while it included Dolby Digital and DTS, kept the stereo and surround circuits as separate as possible. However, the socket count had risen to 65. As John Dawson pointed out at AES, however, the home-theater scene was developing along its own distinct path, and

THE JOY OF THE ORIGINAL DOLBY SURROUND

Was that it was utterly simple, beautifully nonintrusive, and entirely compatible with stereo.

the expectations of its customers were diverging from those who bought two-channel stereo components. A/V customers wanted one-box receivers, with extra power and all the features required to cope with every A/V eventuality. Even by the turn of the millennium, the number of audio and video formats, and the number of power-amp channels required, had led to components that were far more complex (80 sockets!) than anything hi-fi had suffered in the 1970s. The proliferation of features and formats has continued throughout the first decade of the new century, with no relief in sight. Customers now demand a second zone of speakers, 7.1 channels amplified with still more power, video upconversion, etc., etc. Arcam's AVR300 A/V receiver had 104 sockets, even as the next generation of changes required the design of the all-new AVR600.

The battle of Blu-ray vs HD DVD created a temporary confusion, now resolved. HDMI inputs and outputs are now required, but already there have been four generations of HDMI—a new one turns up every two years, and another is due soon. Codec variations from Dolby and DTS continue to proliferate, and of course, the manufacturer of any consumer-electronics product is always dependent on chipmakers delivering their goods on time, and with the promised performance. Arcam is a specialist hi-fi company
REVIEW THE REVIEWS...

"... excellent compared to anything that I have encountered at any price... the beginning of a new era in audio."
Robert E. Greene - The Absolute Sound, Issue 183

"I haven't found a product so instantly and confidence-inspiring in years."
Ken Kessler - Hi-Fi News, July 2008

"Thanks to all those inputs, the DAC1 Pre is a digital source lover's dream come true."
Jeff Drupay - ToneAudio Review, 2008

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with a limited market share and a small number of employees; all of these changes stretch their resources and make life difficult. According to Dawson, the gestation period for the AVR600 comprised 20 man-years of software development over more than three years, and is estimated to have incurred development costs of around £2 million. At one stage, the entire project was delayed when a particular chipmaker canceled production of a specific part around which the AVR600 had been designed, and Arcam had to move to Plan B.

Thanks in part to the flexibility of modular construction, the AVR600 made it to market in early 2009, in the teeth of the worst recession in 80 years. The slide of the British pound meant that the price had to be somewhat above originally planned, but the AVR600 has been very well received. Arcam has kept as its top priority high-quality two-channel sound, paying particular attention to the reduction and control of jitter, and to keeping the microprocessors well clear of and shielded from sensitive audio circuits. A class-G (voltage rail) linear power amp was developed to provide seven 120W channels while running cool (Arcam doesn't believe that digital amplifiers can yet cut the sonic mustard), and the height of the AVR600 had to be increased from that of the AVR300 merely to handle the inevitable increase in sockets—which now total 115.

One of Arcam's more surprising decisions, however, has been to move production of the AVR600 and its sibling, the AV888 preamplifier-processor (reviewed by Kalman Rubinson in December 200, p.41), from China back to the UK. Recent swings in the exchange rate have considerably reduced the cost advantages of Chinese manufacture, especially for small numbers of units. No less important, the extra control and flexibility afforded by bringing production back home gives major advantages in tailoring units to specific market (radio) requirements—not to mention, in the context of the continued and accelerating rapid changes in technology that afflict the A/V scene, the elimination of the six weeks it takes to ship units from China to the West.

That Arcam has managed to keep afloat in the fast-flowing A/V stream is itself impressive, and its approach has been vindicated by the critical acclaim received by the AVR600. Indeed, this hi-fi enthusiast would love to explore this receiver, were he not still seriously afflicted by A/V technofatigue. Meanwhile, I shall continue to mourn the passing of Dolby Surround.

UK: GLASGOW
Paul Messenger

On November 19, Linn Products held a press conference at which they announced that they were ceasing production of CD players, and effectively replacing them with their new DS (Digital Streaming) series of components. The announcement was clearly designed to shock, and thus attract maximum publicity. But it represents Linn's firm belief that digital streaming is the future of hi-fi "beyond CD." While Linn continues to believe in digital music reproduction in the home, the company also believes that streaming music stored as flexible digital audio formats via home networks now makes much more sense than music being restricted to the fixed format of the physical Compact Disc.

At the press conference, Linn's managing director, Gilad Tiefenbrun, explained that when developing their first digital streaming component, the Klimax DS, Linn found that its performance was significantly better than its CD-player equivalent, Linn's top-of-the-line Sondek CD12. The causes seemed to be the elimination of the disc transport, and DS streamer's entirely solid-state construction and operation. Linn's DS players have no display, no hard drive, no CD drawer. They're simply elegant boxes stuffed with solid-state electronics that link to a home network. The music source is typically a network-attached external hard drive of some kind (NAS), and music selection and operation can be controlled by a variety of graphic user interfaces (GUIs): laptop or personal computers, PDAs, iPhones, etc. And because the various DS devices all operate under "open source" software protocols, long-term future proofing and compatibility with the widest possible range of other devices should be assured.

There's no disputing the fact that younger people in particular understand recorded music to be primarily computer-based downloads. Linn feels that their DS approach will provide a bridge that will bring genuine hi-fi to the computer-music generation, and potentially provide a digital audio platform on a par with, or even superior to, vinyl.

Linn backs up their decision with some interesting statistics. Over the last two years they've seen their CD-player sales decline by 40% (by units sold), while sales of their DS components have increased by the same amount. Admittedly, the latter is from a fairly small base of sales, and covers a period when the number of available DS-player models greatly increased, but it's nonetheless significant that DS players now account for nearly 30% of all Linn products sold.

There were also some interesting data from Linn Records. Whereas CD sales have declined by 17% over the last two years, downloads are up by 24%, and now represent more than 50% of Linn Records sales. Furthermore, of the releases available as high-resolution Studio Master recordings, 70% are downloaded at the maximum resolution of 24-bit/88.2 or 96kHz, 25% at CD resolution (16/44.1), and only 5% as MP3s.

Statistics for the music market as a whole reflect the same trend: CD sales are declining steadily as downloads, even of entire albums, grow by similar percentages. Admittedly, downloads still account for only 10% of album sales (whereas sales of singles are now dominated by downloads), but the pattern is clear enough.

At the press conference, Linn demonstrated to good effect their top Klimax DS system. Only a few weeks before, however, I'd visited Brian Pook, former managing director of speaker manufacturer Rogers, who'd spent the last 25 years building a furniture-stripping business—until the EC outlawed the necessary chemicals. Pook has now set himself up, not far from where I live, as a home-based dealer of Linn DS gear. Apart from enjoying our reunion, I got to hear the much less costly Majik DS player and was impressed enough to want to try Linn's DS approach in my own system. I'm now awaiting delivery.

Linn continues to support LPs, not only through its latest upgrades of the Sondek LP12 turntable (with Keel subchassis/armboard and Radikal DC motor), but also by reissuing some of its recordings on vinyl. But it can be argued that Linn's stance has been consistent. In the furor among audiophiles that accompanied the introduction of the Compact Disc, Linn founder Ivor Tiefenbrun, Gilad's father, was openly hostile to the new format, stating that CD was merely an "interim" format that wouldn't last long, and that vinyl would be back in 25 years. I hope he's too big a man to say, "I told you so!"
BLUE NOTE REISSUES

Joe Henderson
Page One
$50 ABNJ 84140 (2 LPs)
$30 CBNJ 84114 SA (SACD)

Ike Quebec
Soul Samba (Remastered)
$50 ABNJ 84114 (2 LPs)
$30 CBNJ 84114 SA (SACD)

Horace Silver
The Tokyo Blues
$50 ABNJ 81593 (2 LPs)
$30 CBNJ 81593 SA (SACD)

Lou Donaldson
Blues Frame
$50 ABNJ 81591 (2 LPs)
$30 CBNJ 81591 SA (SACD)

Hank Mobley
A Cathy For Daddy
$50 ABNJ 84141 (2 LPs)
$30 CBNJ 84141 SA (SACD)

John Patton
A帮 Davie John
$50 ABNJ 84141 (2 LPs)
$30 CBNJ 84141 SA (SACD)

Grant Green
Green Street
$50 ABNJ 84071 (2 LPs)
$30 CBNJ 84071 SA (SACD)

Ober Nelson
The Blues and the Abstract Truth
$50 AORB 006 (2 LPs)
$30 CBNJ 006 SA (SACD)

Charles Mingus
Mingus Mingus Mingus Mingus Mingus
$50 AORB 021 (2 LPs)
$30 CBNJ 021 SA (SACD)

John Coltrane
Coltrane
$50 AORB 021 (2 LPs)
$30 CBNJ 021 SA (SACD)

Ben Webster
See You at the Fair
$50 AORB 021 (2 LPs)
$30 CBNJ 021 SA (SACD)

Gill Evans
Out of the Cool
$50 AORB 021 (2 LPs)
$30 CBNJ 021 SA (SACD)

Diana Krall
All for You
$39.99 AORG 006 (2 LPs)

Diana Krall
Live in Paris
$39.99 AORG 006 (2 LPs)

Diana Krall
The Look of Love
$39.99 AORG 006 (2 LPs)

Nirvana
In Utero
$24.98 AORG 003 (2 LPs)

The Oscar Peterson Trio
Night Train
$59.99 AORG 002 (2 LPs)

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S
kip this if you’re squeamish. My son sent me this news item: http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/8360569.stm. Sweeney Todd is alive and well in Russia.

Last November, Russian police nabbed three homeless men in the city of Perm, 720 miles east of Moscow. The cops charge that the trio killed a 25-year-old man, whom they described as their enemy, with knives and a hammer. They then allegedly butchered the corpse and ate the man. You don’t waste food in Russia, especially meat.

It gets more gruesome: “After carrying out the crime, the corpse was divided up: part was eaten and part was also sold to a kiosk selling kebabs and pies,” the Prosecutor-General for the Perm region said to a hungry local press, who had a feast. So did news organizations around the world, including the BBC. It was not clear whether any of the leftovers were served to customers.

I printed out the BBC tidbit to give to Boris, my cardiologist, who declared dryly, “The quality of meat in Russia has deteriorated lately.” I e-mailed the news to my list of Russian cronies: Lev, Dima, Yosef. My non-Russian cronies, too: Roy, Art, Wezz, The Chief, Stephen—and Mikey, who responded just before dinnertime: “See? That didn’t happen under communism. No one tasted that good back then.”

I do love Russian meat pies. Dima said that, on his next trip to the Motherland, he’ll eat only pasta.

Now you can start reading

About a dozen years ago, a tasty morsel turned up on my doorstep, sent by Bruce Cholka, of DC Sound, in Deland, Florida: a passive preamplifier. Yes, you can have a passive preamp, so long as pre means strictly before. (Why don’t they make preamps in Perm?)

The Halcyon PVA-1 was aptly named. Halcyon—from the Greek al-

kyon, for kingfisher, calmer of the seas—suggests a calm, peaceful, happy, golden time. (It’s also the name of a great Indian beer.)

Far too many preamps—the active sort—have been anything but halcyon. It’s one argument for getting rid of a preamp entirely, by using either a passive preamp or an integrated amplifier; some of the latter have all their gain in the power-amp stage. Some integrateds are amplifiers with lots of gain, input, and volume controls, and no preamp stage as such—like the CAV-50, arguably the best-value product Conrad-Johnson Design ever offered.

Preamps are made because dealers and customers expect manufacturers to make preamps. But a few companies—most of them based in Britain—buck the trend and produce mainly integrateds. Some call such products ‘umble eye-fye.

Like other passive preamps, the Halcyon PVA-1 was strictly an attenuator: you were always working down from unity gain. Your CD player or processor (or other line-level source, such as a phono preamp or FM tuner) drove your power amp. Your source drove your interconnect cables, too—and this remains the rub, in the form of excessive capacitance, which tends to roll off highs.

A passive preamp has no gain; then again, it provides none of the pain that usually comes from gain. If I could, I’d use a wind-up mechanical gramophone. I actually have one—mainly to show off to visiting manufacturers and audio buffs. Cactus needles, anyone? It’s as close as you can get to organic stereo.

When it was available, the basic Halcyon PVA-1 sold for $495 and had no input-selector switch, which at the time I considered negligent; now it seems brilliant. There was one pair of RCA plugs in and one pair out. Want to switch sources? Unplug the RCAs. Models with multiple inputs were available, along with tweak upgrades for the well-heeled and the fastidious.

The Halcyon had separate volume controls for the left and right channels. Typically, I dilly-dallied. When I did get around to writing up the Halcyon, I could reach neither DC Sound nor Bruce Cholka. In my defense, Cholka had not followed up. The Halcyon PVA-1 remained at rest, in my basement, for a dozen years.

But all those years ago, after the Halcyon had arrived unannounced, as it were, I did phone Cholka to ask why his passive preamp had come with a wall-wart power supply. If I’d been less obtuse and read his excellent instructions manual (something I rarely do), I’d have known the answer: A small amount of DC current was needed to operate the Halcyon’s LEDs, which worked as potentiometers to optically (not mechanically) control the light-dependent resistors (LDRs). These, in turn, reduced the volume from unity gain.

I didn’t understand the Halcyon. Perhaps I was overloaded with other equipment. Maybe my system, always in flux—ie, turmoil—was insufficiently resolving at the time.

“You will not hear a ‘preamp’ in the sound reproduction,” Cholka asserts in his manual, which I’ve only recently read for the first time. “Power gain adversely affects the signal with losses of transparency and definition, closes in the sound and adds noise. You do not get something for nothing!”

But Bruce—what about unity-gain buffers?

“A unity gain ‘buffered’ preamp in-
The Zu Essence is the only $5,000 speaker that's been able to give me goosebumps on a regular basis when listening to my favorite rock, jazz and electronic music albums. Combined with the tube amplifier of your choice, the Zu Essence speakers will make your music sound even more enjoyable.

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The Essence is not a new word in the domestic market. It's among the more affordable, low-priced, high-efficiency speakers. It's generally a little under the radar.

The Zu Essence is a milestone with a superb musicality, heartbeat, and natural colors.

It's that good.

www.ZuAudio.com
corporates an active circuit which boosts the current but not the voltage, has high input impedance and low output impedance. These factors make it easier for the source component to drive the amplifier(s), especially with long and/or capacitive interconnect cables with less distortion of the signal than a fully active preamp.

With a passive preamp, the source component—a CD player, digital processor, phono stage, or tuner—supplies all the voltage and all the current to drive the amplifier(s). Is this enough? Those who favor passive preamps say it often is. And I do like having passive on-hand—to hold active line stages accountable for the sonic shit they often introduce.

You may need to make changes in your system to accommodate a passive preamp. For starters, not everyone can live with less than unity gain—especially those who have insensitive speakers. But a lot depends on the size of your listening room, whether or not you listen in the nearfield, and the kind of music you listen to. In my experience, a passive pre will always lack dynamic [ahem] thrust and bass extension compared to an active line stage.

There are those who really don’t like passive preamps. “Mere attenuators,” sniffed Antony Michaelson, of Musical Fidelity, when I told him what I was working on. But there are things to be, um, gained by going passive. If you can get away with it, perhaps you should.

First, there’s the low cost. With few exceptions, passive preamps tend to be inexpensive. Second, even trying to make a passive preamp work in your system will likely improve the latter’s overall sound, even if you ultimately decide to remain or go active. Shorten those interconnects between the source component(s) and the pre—0.5m would be ideal. Shorten the runs between your pre and the power amp(s) to no longer than 1m. No system was ever designed to be confined with Chang Lightspeed, a US-based company.

There are no answers in hi-fi, only compromises.

I liberated the DC Sound Halcyon PVA-1 from its 12 long years in my wine cellar and inserted it in my system. Power amps were the Quicksilver Silver Mono 70s. Speakers, initially, were Verity Audio’s Leonore, with a claimed 93dB sensitivity, which helped compensate for the Halcyon’s lack of gain. With predictably less success, I later switched to the Opera Grand Callas, which has a sensitivity of 88dB. The digital source was a Cambridge Audio DacMagic.

I was smitten by the gain (heh-heh) transparency I heard with the Halcyon, compared to some of the active preamps I’d been using. By this I mean openness, crisply articulated transients, and a lack of things electronic going on—and which still were going on in the rest of my system. I couldn’t get enough... until the Halcyon PVA-1 was no longer attenuating very much at all.

After its 12 years in the cellar, what else could I have expected? Likely, the LDRs gave out; those made in the late 1990s are said to be less reliable than LDRs made today. I sent the unit back, with thanks, to Bruce Cholka, whom I eventually tracked down. He told me he has no plans to revive the Halcyon, but who knows?

In the Halcyon’s instruction manual, Cholka referred to the “signal grunge” caused by the metal surfaces of conventional potentiometers wiping, scraping, and rubbing against each other. Wiping, scraping, rubbing—who wants that? Especially wiping. Without getting scatological, there’s a cleanliness about the Halcyon’s sound, a sanitarness that isn’t sterile.

As far as I know, Cholka didn’t come up with the idea of using LEDs to control LDRs to attenuate volume. Nor did Mark Porzilli, of now-defunct Melos Audio, with his Porzilli Photo Potentiometer, which he used in the Melos SHA Gold line stage and headphone amplifier. Like the Halcyon, it was made in the 1990s. The Swiss manufacturer darTZeel uses this system in the volume control of their NHB-18NS full-featured active preamp (it has a phono stage, too). The NHB-18NS was reviewed by Mike Fremer in June 2007 and sells for a mere $29,500; it may be that rarest of high-end hi-fi products: worth the money. Marina would have bought one for my byrrnmzday, but instead she got me a red Mini Cooper. (Had Citroën revived the Deux Chevaux, I would have wanted that.)

I e-mailed darTZeel designer Hervé Delétraz about the NHB-18NS. He confirmed that it “indeed uses LEDs to control LDRs.” He continued: “Using these devices is not all as simple as one might think. Analog opto couplers behave very differently from sample to sample, and it is a nightmare to match them properly... About 100 opto couplers are used in the NHB-18NS, but the audio signal only passes through one at a time.”

Interesting.

From other sources, too, I hear that, until recently, reliability was a problem with LDRs—a problem that’s apparently been licked. Still, they seem to be a pain to work with, and you know how most manufacturers are: lazy, and far from innovative.

Not so darTZeel. Delétraz said that they sort out over 15,000 component parts. “Then we assemble them together, under various categories. I do not know how other manufacturers did it, but the way we used was the best we found in order to really benefit from this optical technology: full analog path, low noise, high speed, wide dynamic range, and extremely high transparency, without any problem due to contact relay systems.”

Hello, George Hi-Fi

George Stancheff, a camera-repair technician in Sydney, Australia, claims that he was the first to use LEDs to control LDRs, back in the 1970s. He never patented the technology, which is now in the public domain.

First, I love the name. George Hi-Fi, doing business and shipping directly from Sydney, Australia. His Lightspeed Attenuator costs $450 US and is shipped internationally. For the moment, you’ll have to buy your George-approved power supply separately. It appears that George lacks an export license that would allow him to export other than 220V power supplies.

If you want to build your own Lightspeed Attenuator, George can help you, at www.lightspeedattenuator.com. But why would you want to, when you
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can let George do it for $450? And George says he hasn't revealed quite everything. Hervé Delétraz is not the only one with proprietary techniques.

While George says he originated the system roughly 40 years ago, he didn't put his Lightspeed Attenuator into production until a decade or so ago, when LED/LDR packages from Silonex became available. "These were great and, finally, 100% reliable."

Silonex became available. "These were the only one with proprietary techniques. Everything. Hervé Delétraz is not the one with proprietary techniques."

George says he hasn't revealed quite everything. "Ever wonder why your system sounds better after you've done a cleanup of your RCA plugs and sockets? George asks. Indeed.

By George: "The best way to describe the Lightspeed Attenuator is that it sounds like you've plugged your CD player directly into your power amp, with no preamp or contacts in the signal path." George can explain why conventional volume pots—even the "best"—compromise the sound. Like the Halcyon, the Lightspeed Attenuator has one set of RCA inputs and one set of RCA outputs. No switching between multiple sources. This is one of the secrets of its sound.

"Ever wonder why your system sounds better after you've done a cleanup of your RCA plugs and sockets? George asks. Indeed.

The leading edge of the musical signal—also known as the risetime—is greater than 100V per microsecond. "This causes the contacts of conventional volume pots to become poorly conductive...and creates a diode effect that tries to rectify the AC music signal into DC."

I take George's word for it. In plain English, what's going on is no contacts in the signal path, aside from those RCA connectors: no active gain stage, no tubes, no transistors, no long signal paths, and only the most vestigial power supply to run the LEDs and control the LDRs. Speed of light. Get it?

I swapped the Lightspeed Attenuator for the DC Sound Halcyon PVA-1, after the latter no longer attenuated. I thought that the performance of the two units, when functioning, was comparable. If Bruce Cholka returns to the hi-fi business, you might want to buy a Halcyon. It has—or had—dual volume controls, while George's Lightspeed has a single volume knob. The case is plain but superbly finished; the Halcyon was a little rough. But I'd still be happy to have one of Bruce's units, as an alternative, today.

George Stancheff must love to create mischief. In addition to a wall wart power supply (and you must follow George's recommendation or you will screw up the sound), he suggests a lithium-ion battery supply. Without saying which he prefers, he states that the two sound different.

They sure do. But, actually, I don't know which I prefer. Maybe George doesn't, either. I can't, on quick comparison, distinguish one from the other, and George says most other people can't. Still, they sound different. Get both.

I'd enjoyed my Lightspeed Attenuator (the only way I could get one was to buy one) for about a week when, suddenly, the sound became distorted. One week of hi-fi heaven, I thought, and now hell.

Maksim, the hi-fi cat, had dislodged the wall wart from the electrical outlet. He knew he'd done wrong—he raced from the music room, emitting wild, whirring cat noises on his way to the kitchen. (I didn't tell you that our cat talks, did I? He has a meow—or noise—for every occasion. We always know what's up.)

When something goes wrong, blame Maksim Samuelovich Koratsky. Or my wife, Marina. I'm good at this. I, myself, am never at fault.

Musical Fidelity X-CAN® headphone amplifier (and incognito tubed line stage)

You may remember my original write-up of the X-CAN® in my May 2009 column (Vol.32 No.5). I mentioned then that it also made a fine, albeit unintended, line stage. For his last production run, now concluded, Antony Michaelson took my and others' suggestion and added a pair of variable RCA outputs. Good idea—you now no longer have to dangle a pair of interconnects from one of the headphone sockets with an awkward adapter.

You may have a tough time finding one—there won't be any new stock. And be sure to look for the X-CAN®—the plain old X-CAN® lacks the variable RCA analog outs. Other than that, it's the same product. Pick one up if you can.

There remains one hitch: you have just one pair of RCA inputs, in addition to a switchable built-in USB DAC, which I'm going to play around with starting tomorrow. A pair of fixed-level RCA outputs merely passes the signal along untouched by the two EC88 dual-triode tubes or the ALPS volume control.

It would be nice if the X-CAN® had a remote volume control, but that would add to the complexity and, thus, the price ($650). This model's strong point is its simplicity.

Something beneficial happens when you strip down a line stage to the bare essentials. Antony suggested: no multiple inputs, no switches, no long signal...
Pass Labs *by the numbers*:

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...and counting
paths. The X-CAN\textsuperscript{8}P remains the finest headphone amplifier I have heard to date. But lately I’ve been listening to it mainly as an active line stage.

I can’t tell you that the X-CAN\textsuperscript{8}P surpasses the Lightspeed Attenuator in... well, speed, for lack of a better word. If it intrudes itself in the signal path, it does so very lightly... and your system is touched by tubes.

When I told Antony Michaelson about the Lightspeed Attenuator, again he sniffed his disapproval. “Not a proper preamp,” he suggested— or words to that effect. He then suggested a bit of mischief: Run the Lightspeed Attenuator—or any passive preamp—into the X-CAN\textsuperscript{8}P with the preamp’s volume turned all the way up. In other words, use the volume control of your passive pre to control the X-CAN\textsuperscript{8}P.

I can hear George Stancheff groaning all the way from Sydney. This defeats the entire point of the Lightspeed: its stark simplicity. But it did allow me to hear how good the X-CAN\textsuperscript{8}P actually is. (Essentially, its ALPS volume pot was out of the signal path, with no attenuation going on.)

Unfortunately, I’d misplaced my Musical Fidelity X-PSU\textsuperscript{8} outboard power supply, so I had to use the supplied wall wart instead. Let’s see... whom to blame? Maksim, who often makes off with small objects and then leaves them near— or in— his cat food? But the X-PSU\textsuperscript{8} is too big for even mighty Maksim to make off with. Perhaps Marina did it, in her fortuitously rearrangement of everything in the basement. Maybe it’s buried under a pile of clothes. Kitchen utensils. Russian textbooks from the Sovyetskii Soyuz. The collected works of V.I. Lenin.

Nah, this is negligence on my part. Even with its standard wall wart, the X-CAN\textsuperscript{8}P is a far better line stage than some critics have let on. Even Antony seemed subdued. “I don’t want to make too big a deal of it,” he told me on the phone this morning. Meanwhile, if you want to fool around, you can turn any headphone amp into an active line stage. A few, like the X-CAN\textsuperscript{8}P, even have line-level RCA outputs.

Right now, I’m using the X-CAN\textsuperscript{8}P in my office to drive an old pair of powered Advent speakers. I’ve connected my Mac mini computer to the X-CAN’s USB DAC. Exceptional sound from KCSM, the Bay Area’s jazz station. If you look hard enough, you can probably find an X-CAN\textsuperscript{8}P. Now, if only Maksim will help me find that X-PSU\textsuperscript{8} power supply...
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ill vinyl adventures never cease? A volunteer for a Christian charity referred to us by a neighbor stopped by recently to pick up some old clothing and other goods we were donating to help victims of Hurricane Katrina along the Mississippi Gulf. Catching a glimpse of my record collection, he said, "I've picked up thousands of records at people's homes and I have no idea what to do with them."

"Bring them over and let me see what's there," I said. "If there are collectibles, we can sell them for the charity."

A few weeks later, he backed up his truck to my garage and unloaded thousands of records in crates and boxes. I thought the deal we'd made was that he'd bring them by and I'd look first, but no, it was dump and run.

The next morning, about 45 minutes after I'd started thumbing through them, dust balls in my hair and up my nose, I had to admit that there were no collectible or desirable records. Not a single one—unless you want every Jerry Vale, Bobby Vinton, and Jim Nabors album, and every Reader's Digest boxed set of big-band and easy-listening music ever made. This was the largest collection I'd ever seen of the lowbrow junk you find at any Goodwill or thrift store, but with none of the occasional treasures sometimes found lurking in the shadows of The First Family, or The Eddy Duchin Story, performed by Carmen Cavallaro. I should have called Guinness—or quaffed one.

Well, there was one nice box: The Nat King Cole Story in Stereo, three beautifully packaged Capitol LPs, but the condition was merely good, and sonically it didn't compare to the 45rpm test pressings that Chad Kassem's Analogue Productions will soon issue.

Among the wreckage were boxes of 1960s-era evangelical Christian records on the Word label, out of Waco, Texas, featuring some of the unintentionally coolest covers I've ever seen. I found a home for those at Manhattan's Archive of Contemporary Music (www.arcmusic.com).

But the waste of garage space, and the coming months of hauling to the curb each garbage day another small batch of worthless PVC until it's all gone, are worth it just for the laugh I got when I opened a box containing a trove of Word LPs and VHS tapes, including this neat stack of three: Charlton Heston Presents The Bible Volume III; Billy Graham Crusade: Fresno, California, December 8, 2001; and, strategically positioned between them and labeled in large caps, BRITISH IRRITABLE BOWEL SYNDROME VIDEO.

There's nothing set-and-forget about the Spin Clean, but it's cheap and it really, really works. It's not nearly as convenient or as efficacious as a vacuum cleaning system, but compared to playing dirty records? No contest. It's basically a plastic bath into which you pour a specified amount of water and add a measured amount of supplied washer fluid, the chemical composition of which is "secret," though it's claimed to not contain soap, phosphates, or alkalines. (The instructions say to just use "water," but it's better to use inexpensive, easily obtained, reverse-osmosis-purified water such as Aquafina.) More important is the claim that the formula encapsulates the dirt and keeps it suspended in solution, instead of redepositing it on the record. This claim was verified, as the dirt ends up falling to the bottom of the vat. Spin Clean also claims that the same vat of water can be used to clean up to 50 records. At the end of the cleaning session, remove the brushes, squeeze out the fluid, and let dry. It wouldn't hurt to rinse the brushes before using fresh RO water. In fact, before pouring fluid in the vat, I'd rinse the new pads in clean water, just to be sure they don't contain glue or other dirt left over from the manufacturing process.

Three sets of slots hold a pair of rollers that allow you to clean 7", 10", and 12" discs. The rollers hold the record in the fluid just above the label, while the grooved area fits securely between a pair of velvet-like brushes that clean both sides simultaneously. Your job is to rotate the record with
ANALOG CORNER

your open palm, contacting only the edge. Rotate the disc three or so times, then carefully remove it, let the excess fluid drain off into the vat, then dry the LP with one of the supplied soft, cheesecloth-like wipes (you can wash these, but don’t use fabric softener). It’s not the drying that removes dirt and fingerprints—the brushes and fluid do the work, so you won’t be rubbing dirt in again as you dry.

It takes but a few minutes to spinwash and dry a record. You have to be careful to not lose patience and press too heavily with the cloth in hopes that you’ll dry the record faster—you won’t. The cloths become saturated after a few records, so make sure you have extras on hand if you plan to clean many records in one session. But trust me: You’ll quickly tire of the routine, so don’t expect to clean more than a handful at a time unless you’re a glutton for punishment.

While Spin Clean claims you can clean up to 50 records per vat of fluid, I suggest playing it safe and refreshing the vat more often. The fluid is relatively inexpensive. $59.99 gets you the machine, brushes, rollers, and a 4-oz bottle of concentrated fluid—enough to fill the vat 14 times, or to clean 700 LPs. A 16-oz bottle of fluid costs $20, the washable drying cloths $10 for a package of five.

The Spin Clean worked very well. I cleaned some dirty, fingerprint-encrusted records, and when I removed them from the vat, all dirt and fingerprints were gone. Drying with the cloths isn’t the most convenient method, but not everyone wants to spend hundreds of bucks on a vacuum machine, and the Spin Clean got the job done. Just don’t tempt fate and clean too many records before changing the fluid or cleaning the brushes.

Thanks, Chad! And now for something much more expensive...

Concert Fidelity SPA-4B Phono Equalizer: $14,000

Some audiophiles feel that if they’re spending a lot of money on something, they want it to be packed with a lot of stuff. Others feel that less is more, and are willing to pay for the editing work that goes into providing less: shorter circuit paths, and fewer components that accomplish all that more complex designs can—and perhaps more.

Both approaches can yield exceptional results, as proven by Jeff Nelson’s stuff-heavy Boulder 2008 phono preamplifier, and Peter Mares’ elegant and deceptively simple Connoisseur phono preamp, whose chassis is nearly empty. (Lyra’s Jonathan Carr now builds a new version of the Connoisseur using design principles drawn from Mares’ work.)

Silicon Arts Design & Concert Fidelity’s resident audio purist, Masataka Tsuda, has been building tube and solid-state electronics for more than 30 years in Nagano, a region known as “the Switzerland of Japan” for its meticulous manufacturing. He designed this solid-state moving-magnet/moving-coil phono preamp as he’s designed all of his other products, basing it on the philosophy of less is more. Their website states: “Our designs implement our unique Direct Signal Path Technology (DSPT), which follows Einstein’s maxim that things should be made as simple as possible but no simpler!” When you look inside, don’t be

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surprised to find a lot of empty space, with all essential signal-path circuitry hugging the rear of the chassis, near the input and output jacks. Tsuda has kept these signal paths extremely short: the leads of the input and output jacks are soldered directly to the circuit board.

Tsuda chose his components on the basis of their sound quality, and, like the legendary Mares, conceived and built the circuit not on a flat board but three-dimensionally—although, unlike the tiny, impossibly tangled maze inside the Connoisseur, the SPA-4B has two circuit boards, as well as custom-designed and -built power transformers.

The SPA-4B features three class-A push-pull stages based on J-FETs, the first an MC head amp capable of providing 20–30dB of gain, depending on the modules inserted into the multipin connectors on the rear-mounted board. The second and third stages provide a total of 40dB of gain with no negative feedback applied, but RIAA equalization applied between them. Tsuda’s design puts the loading resistors in series with the cartridge, which is unusual. Most load the cartridge output in parallel, whether via DIP switches or plug-in resistors. Take the resistors out and you still get a signal, usually with a default load of 47k ohms.

Masataka Tsuda believes the series-resistor approach results in better linearity and avoids the energy loss he says parallel resistors produce. However, placing the resistors in series means the actual gain results from the ratio of the cartridge’s internal impedance to the sum of the impedances of the resistive load and first-stage negative feedback loop. Therefore, the design of the MC stage—which is intended for only MC cartridges of low internal impedance—features plug-in modules that simultaneously alter the gain and the load resistance. Tsuda prepares these modules for the specific cartridge or cartridges specified by the buyer, using circuit simulations based on the cartridge’s specifications of internal impedance and output voltage. However, since published specs and actual performance don’t always match, variations in the output level and internal impedance specs can profoundly affect the sound.

The SPA-4B’s rear panel has both

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fixed and variable outputs, as well as separate inputs for each, with rear-mounted volume pots for the variables. There are also both MM and MC inputs.

I was supplied with a variety of modules that provided 20 or 25dB of gain with loading impedances of 30 and 50 ohms. Given the Lyra Titan’s 5.5 ohm internal impedance and 0.5mV output level, the 20dB/30 ohm module should have been ideal. But that resulted in insufficient gain. I had to turn the volume up to where noise and hum became problems. I tried the 25dB module, with only marginally better results.

There was no point trying the Ortofon A90, which outputs 0.27 mV and has a 4 ohm internal impedance, or the 0.3mV Transfiguration Orpheus L (currently under review), so I contacted the Concert Fidelity’s chief operating officer, Nori Sayanagi, who lives one town over from me. He suggested that a 25dB/100 ohm module be sent in place of the supplied 20dB/30 ohm module, which, he said, “many people have found optimum with Lyra cartridges.” I inserted the 25dB/100 ohm module and did a lot of listening.

But while there was more gain with the new module installed, there still wasn’t enough to completely overcome the residual noise and low-level hum that intruded during low-level musical passages. With most music it wasn’t usually audible, but still, it was difficult to believe that the SPA-4B was producing anywhere near 65dB of gain.

I tried a variety of shelf positions to make sure the hum wasn’t being generated externally. I changed intercon-...and clean on the inside.

cnects, power cords, and line conditioners, and used a cheaper AC plug, but the hum clearly wasn’t the product of a ground loop.

The shame of the gain/noise problem was that, otherwise, the sound produced by the Concert Fidelity SPA-4B was exceptionally clean, open, well extended, superdetailed, fast, and delicate—just what you’d expect and demand from so costly a product. The transient speed and delicacy of the sound extended from top to bottom of the audioband. And as well as being well-extended and muscular, the bass was taut and exceedingly well defined. The SPA-4B’s transparency and freedom from grain and edginess were exceptional, especially given its airy, open top end. The midrange, though hardly lush, was anything but lean. Massed orchestral strings had a lovely, natural sheen and plenty of textural detail. Classical guitar sounded absolutely well extended, superdetailed, fast, and delicate. The SPA-4B’s magic with a more acoustically demanding recording was all the more impressive, given its affordability and a lower price, well, I’ll be all for listening to that!

Meanwhile, here’s another purist phono preamp, but for a lot less money...

Sutherland Engineering
The Hubble: $3800

Ron Logan Sutherland has been designing phono preamps for decades, starting at least as far back as when analog died, and probably even earlier. Before that he was involved with electrostatic loudspeakers. (He was the “Logan” in MartinLogan.) The Hubble is his latest and, he thinks, best overall phono preamp.

Like previous Sutherlands, the Hubble is battery-powered: 16 alkalines charge two banks of 16 1200μF capacitors each, for a total of 19,200μF per channel. The power source is located very close to the amplification circuitry, which appears to be op-amp based. Sutherland claims that a set of batteries provide 1000 hours of service. At $2.99 per D-cell battery, each thousand hours of use costs at most $40, and considerably less if you buy batteries in bulk. Considering the price of a really top-quality AC cord added to the price of a good AC-powered phono preamp, you’d have to log something like 100,000 hours on the Hubble before the batteries would cost you anything at all. (Okay, that’s a convoluted way of

IN HEAVY ROTATION

1) Neil Young, Official Release Series Discs 1–4, Reprise 180gm LPs (4)
2) Jim O’Rourke, The Visitor, Drag City LP
3) Frank Sinatra and Sextet, Live in Paris, Reprise/Mobile Fidelity Sound Lab 180gm LP
4) Sufjan Stevens, The Brooklyn Queens Expressway: Original Soundtrack, Asthmatic Kitty 180gm LP
5) Fuck Buttons, Tarot Sport, ATP 180gm LPs (2)
6) Nirvana, In Utero, Sub Pop/ORG 180gm LP
7) Nellie McKay, Normal as Blueberry Pie: A Tribute to Doris Day, Verve 180g LP
8) The Rolling Stones, Get Yer Ya-Ya’s Out! The Rolling Stones in Concert—40th Anniversary Deluxe Boxed Set, ABKCO LPs (2), CDs (3), DVD-V (1)
9) Califone, All My Friends Are Funeral Singers, Dead Oceans LPs (2)
10) Blood, Sweat & Tears, Child Is Father to the Man, Columbia/Sundazed 150gm LP

Visit www.musicangle.com for full reviews.
If you're worried about accidentally leaving the Hubble on and blowing through $40 worth of batteries faster than you can say "Pomegranate Margarita," don't be. Sutherland has come up with a neat workaround for your senior moments and drunken/stoned stupors: Each rightward toggle of the control switch adds an hour of run time, as monitored by a series of yellow LEDs. The most you can waste is four hours. Toggle the other way to turn off. When the LED blinks, you have—well, the Hubble has—10 minutes left.

The Hubble is pure dual-mono from input to output—purer than some others, Sutherland says, in that it uses two identical circuit boards containing everything, whereas some dual-mono designs have, for each channel, circuits that are electrically identical but laid out differently for reasons of cost and/or convenience. The Hubble's two channels share only the power-control circuit board, batteries, and substantial chassis.

Sutherland keeps configurability both versatile and closely held, with pairs of gold-plated sockets for each channel located directly adjacent to the signal paths. Four options of gain (45, 50, 55, and 60dB) and six of loading (10k, 4.75k, 1k, 475, 200, and 100 ohms) are contained on plug-in cards: two values per board. Inverting the boards switches between that board's values. Leave the card bay empty and you have the Hubble's default MM loading of 47.5k ohms. In addition, Sutherland provides a pair of blank cards so you can roll your own load impedance. The Hubble ships with a 100 ohm load and 60dB gain installed.

Remove eight knurled screws on the bottom plate, lift off the cover, install the batteries, and you're good to go. Leaving the cover off doesn't expose dangerous voltages, which makes experimenting with loading and gain easier and more convenient.

The Hubble was very quiet. Music poured forth from jet-black backgrounds. This is hardly surprising with battery power, though if a component's grounds. This is hardly surprising with battery power, though if a component's ground is not properly isolated, it can cause problems. The Hubble's were relatively noise-free. The Hubble's were relatively noise-free.

The Sutherland house sound has always been on the warm, rich side to my ears, and the Hubble was no exception—but it was more on the neutral, more exuberant and harmonically fully fleshed out, toms and kick drums throbbed, pianos had woody sounding boards, and singers exhibited life below their necks. Add to the considerable weight macrodynamic exuberance and robust bass definition and punch and you have a strong foundation on which to build a big, stable sonic picture—which the Hubble did with considerable gusto.

The Hubble's basic tonality was rich, lush, generous, and not at all "solid-state sounding," as detractors like to call transistor sound. My only quibble was with the somewhat reticent-sounding very top, which limited the full development of cymbal shimmer and flute air, etc., though how this will play out in your listening will depend on your system, cartridge, and preferences.

High-frequency attacks were reasonably fast and clean, but the sustain of musical sounds seemed somewhat stingy and overdamped, failing to linger as long as it could have. This might account for both the Hubble's high organization skills and its slight deficit of air and shimmer—and I was using the Lyra Titan i cartridge, which is hardly reserved on top; the Ortofon A90, which is about as neutral as they get; and the Transfiguration Orpheus L, about which I can't say because that's next time.

While it isn't cheap, the Sutherland Engineering Hubble is a worthwhile contender at $3800 and even beyond. It's Ron Sutherland's best, most balanced effort, and will prove an ideal fit in many systems—but not in ones already lurking at the dark end of Sound Street.

Sutherland Engineering's battery-powered Hubble is a pure dual-mono design with two identical circuit boards.

The Hubble really excelled was in instrumental body and textures. Horns were meaty and harmonically fully fleshed out, toms and kick drums throbbed, pianos had woody sounding boards, and singers exhibited life below their necks. Add to the considerable weight macrodynamic exuberance and robust bass definition and punch and you have a strong foundation on which to build a big, stable sonic picture—which the Hubble did with considerable gusto.

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On two occasions I’ve caught myself wondering how to afford a pair of Wilson Audio loudspeakers. Interestingly, both happened within the past year. The first was in April 2009, at the Son et Image show in Montreal, during a demonstration of the MAXX Series 3. The experience was notable for its blend of genuinely great sound with genuine musicality: Each performance unfolded of its own natural accord, with human randomness and nuance, and without the fussy, mechanical, shallow artifice that attracts some audiophiles in the way a carnivorous plant attracts flies—and, if they’re lucky, kills them (the audiophiles, that is).

That demonstration was also among those rare hi-fi times when I felt a rash of envy creep up my neck: What a shame, I thought, that such performance could be bought only by hedge-fund managers, real estate developers, film producers, and (not to be snitty about it) successful manufacturers of high-end audio gear—but not me!

The home companion

My second Wilson Triumferi happened last week, while listening to the company’s Sophia Series 2, surely one of the three or four best loudspeakers I’ve ever enjoyed at home. As recently as a year ago, I was no more likely to say such a thing than was to declare a newfound passion for air travel, or to invite Lou Reed to “sing” at my next birthday party. As recently as the 20th century, in fact, I was responsible for an unambiguously negative review of the Sophia’s predecessor, the Wilson Witt (published in the short-lived magazine Fi), and thereafter I wasted no opportunity to make no secret of having no love for the Wilson sound. I was a one-man party of no.

Then came two notable events, one of them unexpected. First, Wilson’s nearly iconic WATT/Puppy, whose proportions and pricing have been aped by so many competitors in its 21-year run, was replaced by a new and slightly less expensive full-range loudspeaker, the Sasha ($26,900/pair). Second, because the folks at Wilson Audio wanted to solicit opinions from other than the usual writers—and, I daresay, because all interested parties, myself included, thought it sounded like a fun idea—it was decided that I should get the first review pair of Sashas.

But: My admittedly offbeat point of view comes from having spent the last 12 years with certain admittedly offbeat loudspeakers, from my horn-loaded Lowthers to my corner-mounted Audio Notes to my beloved but beamy and famously hard-to-drive Quad ESLs. Consequently, it was also decided that I should gradually ease my way toward the Wilson Sasha experience.

Thus did Wilson’s national sales manager, Peter McGrath, arrange the loan of a pair of Sophia Series 2s ($16,000/pair, reviewed by Brian Damkroger in November 2006). And now, for the very first time, I’ve recaptured the mix of feelings I had nearly 40 years ago, when a guest in my parents’ home tossed me a set of keys and asked me to move his Lincoln Town Car. I didn’t think I’d be impressed, but after only a minute, I couldn’t help wondering how it would feel to drive it to the edge of town and just keep going.

A choice loudspeaker

The Sophia Series 2 is a 42”-tall, three-way, dynamic loudspeaker intended for use in rooms of reasonable size. The various panels, baffles, and braces that comprise its one-piece enclosure are machined from phenolic materials called X and M, both supplied to Wilson Audio in sheet form by a company whose largest client is the US military, X and M are prized for their ability to self-damp, which they do without excessive, energy-storing mass. Even the frames for the speaker’s removable grilles are made, exquisitely well, of X and M.

In common with other Wilson speakers, the Sophia’s treble driver is made by Focal: a 1” inverse dome of titanium gilded with a carbon deposit. The 7” midrange driver, built to order by ScanSpeak, has a pulp cone and dustcap, both embellished with a pinwheel of painted slits intended to prevent unpleasant resonant modes from getting their start in life. The 10” bass driver, also made in Europe and also unique to Wilson Audio, has a very smooth, lightweight cone of aluminum.

The Sophia’s front baffles are recessed and covered with neat blotters of dense black foam, presumably to control diffraction; the Focal tweeter is bordered with an additional sheet of wool felt, recessed deeper than the one of foam. Around back, the upper and lower chambers of the Sophia’s cabinet are each reflex-loaded via an aluminum-lined port; these are, respectively, 1” and 3” in diameter.

Wilson loudspeakers are famously non-biwireable, and their maker is just as famous for concealing the secrets of their crossover networks. I did, however, learn that the Sophia’s crossover is completely hardwired, point to point—as McGrath points out, a PCB is like
a sail in the wind, of which there's no shortage inside a loudspeaker—and all of its component parts are selected for being within 0.1% of their target values. I'm also told that the connecting wires inside this and other Wilson speakers are selected and sized for their specific circuit locations: the crossover-to-woofer wire, for example, is chosen for its unique electromechanical properties, and is dressed with a certain number of twists to achieve a precise inductance within the circuit.

Yet none of that connotes the apparent quality of a Wilson loudspeaker, which is considerable. The Sophia's drivers are remarkably serious-looking, made with seemingly great precision and held in place with machine screws of austenitic (nonmagnetic) stainless steel. Austenitic pins hold the grilles in place, too, with a snug and altogether perfect fit that calls to mind the oil-filter housing of a BMW motor. The cylinders within that same car's brake calipers are surely honed with no greater precision than are the Sophia's aluminum reflex ports. The precisely cut sheets of foam and even wool are as flat and perfect as panes of glass. The paint is flawless and smooth, as if the whole of the thing were frozen from a drop of mercury. The Sophia's adjustable feet and their corresponding threaded inserts are made with such precision that leveling and stabilizing each cabinet was more of a pleasure than a chore—no small concern with a loudspeaker that weighs 160 lbs.

Truth told, the latter wasn't a worry: As with any set of Wilson speakers sold by an authorized dealer, my review pair was installed by a factory-trained setup technician—in this case, the estimable Peter McGrath himself. I observed and assisted (mostly observed), and you may rest assured that the process is every bit as systematic, painstaking, and successful as you might have heard: Moving the cabinet as little as half an inch really did have an impact on the sound.

But for now, file that away . . .

House guests

Peter McGrath was our guest near the end of summer, but I was the one with the baggage: A few good Wilson demonstrations aside, I was far from convinced. I didn't think the Sophia Series 2 would prove musically satisfying. Would it sound good? Yes. Would it deserve my respect? Without question. Would I love it? Couldn't imagine it.

Then there's the power thing. My favorite amp these days is the 20W Shindo Haut-Brion, each of whose custom output transformers has only a single 16-ohm secondary winding: scarcely the thing for a high-end loudspeaker with a sensitivity rating of 89dB and something the corner-mounted Audio Notes had missed altogether.

And the Sophias made bass. Not the boomy, overripe, out-of-control bass of early subwoofers, nor the fleshless, pitchless, salami-whapping-an-inner-tube kind of bass that some speaker manufacturers continue to get away with, but real bass: equal parts colorful, substantial, musical, percussive, and heavenly.

The Sophias made treble, too. Scratch that: They allowed treble to happen. There was just enough shimmer, sparkle, detail, and air that I could fool myself into thinking, from time to time, that there was music in my room. That depended on keeping in place the Sophias' grilles: silver-beige things that matched almost perfectly the silver-beige of the enclosures' paint, giving the whole a sculpted, architectural look that was rich, serene, and surprisingly unhi-fi. Without their grilles, the Sophias still sounded fine, but slightly more intense than I care for.

For all that, the Sophias weren't amazing—yet. That didn't happen until Labor Day, by which time I was driving them with Shindo Corton-Charlemagnes (25Wpc, with multitap secondaries on their Hammond output transformers) and listening to whatever suited my mood. Suddenly, one late summer evening, Herbert von Karajan and the Berlin Philharmonic's recording of Strauss's Also sprach Zarathustra (LP, Deutsche Grammophon 2530 402) just locked in: Sound and music alike strapped me to my chair and delighted me. After that came Ruggiero Ricci's recording of the Sibelius Violin Concerto, with Olvin Fjeldstad conducting the London Symphony (LP, Decca/Speakers Corner SXL 2077): more brilliance. The most trying test, although that wasn't why I selected it, may have been Rod Stewart's Never a Dull Moment (LP, Mercury/DCC LPZ-2010). The band's double-time charge at the end of "True Blue" was amazing—the room was electric with that mood change from the moment it began—and every note sung and played on "Mama You've Been On My Mind" was right and real. Drums that were hit hard sounded that way, and when the ensemble of players gained or lost a member, the Sophias'
sense of scale followed suit.

It wasn’t so much good sound or good music as sound in the service of music—the sort of thing Quad ESL owners enjoy every day, except this was on a grander and more impactful scale. Like the Quads, the Sophias were open and clean without robbing the music’s flesh and blood, and were detailed without sounding bright—or even light. As such, the Wilsons brought new understanding to my appreciation of some recordings. For example, listening to them play the famous Jacqueline Du Pré recording of the Elgar Cello Concerto, with Barbierioli and the LSO (LP, EMI ASD 655), I heard as never before how effectively Elgar used the massed cellos to follow up a solo obligato in the last movement. The emotional nuance carried by that distinction, in timbre and sheer force, between the soloist and the entire cello section, came as a beautiful surprise: the sort of thing I never expected to get from the piece this late in the game.

But I’ve left out something important: When that passage from the Elgar Cello Concerto caught my attention, I continued to hear and enjoy a spatiality of different technologies or different market, some of which are the products other impressive loudspeakers on the market, some of which are the products of thinking there remains a distinction: The whole nonresonant-tonearm thing, must come as no great surprise, given how long they’ve been at it. For longer than any one individual I know, David Wilson has been mining this vein—refining the materials, the shapes, and the manufacturing techniques that do the most to prevent the speaker enclosure from adding its own sound to the playback—without ever weering off that course. As he told me in a recent conversation, there are other impressive loudspeakers on the market, some of which are the products of different technologies or different design approaches. But while Wilson stays current with other developments in high-end speaker design, he has no interest in leaving the path he’s on. “My role is to make Wilson loudspeakers,” he said. “That’s what I’m good at.”

Fair enough. But what accounts for the seemingly divergent path of recent Wilson loudspeakers—beginning with the Sophia Series 1, arguably the first Wilson speakers that had non-Wilsonians reaching for superlatives?

David Wilson acknowledges the Sophia as a turning point in the performance of the entire Wilson Audio line, and credits the change to a refinement in what he’s always done best: listening. In describing the technical breakthroughs that have enabled his company’s recent progress, he points in particular to the construction of three new and distinctive listening rooms. Rather than taking the usual approach of building acoustically “perfect” test environments, Wilson Audio designed and built a series of rooms that are good enough to reveal, rather than mask, the sonic effects of various parameters—yet that otherwise offer exemplary, real-world listening conditions. Soon after, according to Wilson, his company began to create loudspeakers that sound beautiful—his word, and quite rightly so—in more than just a handful of idealized settings.

Excitement

Janet and I just spoke in the kitchen. I shared with her my concern that this might be one of those dull columns: the sort I often write when trying to express sincere admiration for a product and come up short.

“Why not just say so?” she asked. Again, fair enough.

When I had the Harbeth M40.1s here, I liked them every bit as much as I said I did in my October 2008 review. I could have lived with them then, and I probably still could now. The Harbeths were obviously—obviously—designed by ear, by someone who knows and loves the sound of music. But when the Harbeths had to go, I was nonetheless ready to get my Audio Note AN-ES back into the system.

Same thing with the very different-sounding Zu Essentials, which I reviewed exactly one year later. The Essentials were, if anything, closer in spirit to what I want from a loudspeaker, given the smallness of the amps I like. It’s a great value, too—especially now that it’s sold factory-direct for $3495/pair. (In saying so, I mean no disrespect to those dealers who work hard both to fairly represent their product lines and to give the customer the best possible music for their money.) I liked the Essentials a lot, and could have lived with it as well. But I was happier still to have the Audio Note AN-ES back in their corners.

The Wilson Audio Sophia Series 2 is on another level. The AN-ES still do a few things better, and I think I’ll probably always love them. But after several weeks with the Sophias, the Wilsons remain the speakers I genuinely want to use. And, as with few other audio products, I know I’ll be sorry as hell when they have to go back. That’s been the biggest surprise of all.
In my life, three much-hyped experiences have actually lived up to all the hoopla: trekking into Machu Picchu on a misty morning, climbing the Great Wall of China on a brisk December afternoon, and auditioning the Ayre KX-R. If it’s not the eighth wonder of the modern world, I say demand a recount.

— Wes Phillips, Stereophile

There is no better sounding, fully configurable, balanced line-stage out there... the KX-R is a genuine cost no object design in which construction, operation and parts quality is uncompromised and performance is everything.

— Chris Thomas, Hi-Fi+

Extremely life-like and vivid. Simply the outstanding preamplifier of our time.

— Takahito Miura, Stereo Sound
February is traditionally the month for music features, so I start this column with some recordings you really should hear. This year I had a greater-than-usual number of worthy candidates for “Records To Die For.” Which discs got nominated as R2D4s and which got column coverage was, to quote the Iron Duke, a near-run thing.

Alexander Tikhonovich Gretchaninov (1864–1956), fascinating in his own right, is as well a prime subject for a game of historical what might have been.” A late bloomer as far as composers go, he claimed not to have set eyes on a piano before he was 14. He had started medical school, but against his parents’ wishes switched to the Moscow Conservatory, where his teachers included Taneyev and Arensky. He later moved to St. Petersburg, where Rimsky-Korsakov became his main influence, as well as a friend and important benefactor.

By the early years of the 20th century, Gretchaninov was recognized as an important Russian composer. His pre-Revolutionary output includes two symphonies (the first premiered by Rimsky-Korsakov), three string quartets, and concertos, operas, and piano and chamber music. Not incidentally, religious music for the Orthodox Church was also an abiding interest of Gretchaninov’s. Indeed, his setting of the All-Night Vigil predates by three centuries the same text in his own All-Night Vigil. In 1910, the Czar awarded Gretchaninov an annual subsidy. I’m not claiming Gretchaninov had the world on a string, but I think it fair to assume that, as the 1910s began, things must have looked pretty good.

As we all know, history had other plans. By 1918, Gretchaninov’s annual stipend was no longer a sure thing, and the market for Orthodox music was heading south—or, at least, west. Gretchaninov left Russia, eventually settling in the US, where he became a citizen and lived to a ripe old age. However, unlike his younger contemporary Rachmaninoff, Gretchaninov seemed unable to earn a living as a concert artist, and perhaps that is the principal reason that Rachmaninoff’s works are in the standard repertoire and Gretchaninov’s are obscure.

What did the disruption of Gretchaninov’s career cause us to miss out on? Keep in mind that when you play a recording is near-flabbergasting; the soundstage depth extends into the next zip code. The balance between direct sound and hall ambience appears to be perfect (the venue was Kansas City’s Church of the Blessed Sacrament). Vocal ensemble—creamy and seamless, tuning, pitch security, breath control— is otherworldly. The combined choral forces number 52; that 15 of them are basses becomes apparent only minutes in. (I assume that, when Gretchaninov wrote Passion Week, the high parts would have been sung by boys. This recording has women singing the high parts, sweetly and smoothly.) All in all, an amazing recording, either to focus on or to let just wash over you.

Don’t be put off by the Holy Week subject matter, if that is of concern to you. First of all, the music is not dramatic and does not use tone-painting; this is not a Bach Passion. Second, the texts are in Church Slavonic, whose roots can be traced back to 10th-century Bulgaria, so the words will float right past you (the album credits include a pronunciation coach, and it shows.)

If I can use the phrase in this context without being excommunicated or having to go into rehab, there is one kick-ass piece of orchestral choral music in Old Slavonic, Janáček’s Glagolitic Mass. When you get right down to it, this work actually sounds a lot more pagan than Christian: the orchestral music is definitely more likely to make you think of Druids than of Jesuits—well, Druids with a big horn section, that is. Check it out.

Simon Rattle’s 1981 recording (1999 remastering, CD, EMI Classics 66995) features blazing brass, crisp choral singing, and a great-sounding organ solo. But I hasten to point out that this recording is far from inferior to the Druids with a big horn section. It is, in fact, a close second.
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As long as I'm discussing recorded media and have already mentioned Brahms, I'll put in a plug for a charming 1951 black-and-white movie available for peanuts ($9.99 list) on budget DVD, and for even less from off-price or used sources: People Will Talk, starring Cary Grant and Jeanne Crain (DVD, 20th Century Fox Home Entertainment FXD000270). The film is equal parts romantic comedy and director Joseph L. Mankiewicz's somewhat heavy-handed but courageous attack on the attitudes then fueling McCarthyism. Grant stars as a Renaissance Man—style doctor and medical-school professor whose unconventional approaches cause a jealous faculty colleague to launch an investigation into his methods, and then an inquisition into his past. In the meantime, Grant falls for a beautiful undergraduate who turns out to be pregnant by her late boyfriend, who shipped out to Korea and was killed before anyone knew she was pregnant.

Apart from the fact that People Will Talk is a charming little movie that grows on you, Grant's character, Dr. Praetorius, also happens to be the conductor of the university orchestra (third-party sources credit Princeton as the location). In addition to some rehearsal scenes, the film ends with a performance of a choral version of the 19th-century German mainstream that included Brahms. This Liechtensteiner had a long career as a teacher; his pupils included Engelbert Humperdinck (composer of the opera Hänsel und Gretel) and Wilhelm Furtwängler.

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Luxman Re-Revisited

I discussed Luxman's DU-50 SACD/CD/DVD/A player ($4990) and L505u solid-state integrated amplifier ($3690) in no fewer than five columns in 2009 (February, April, June, August, October). Furthermore, in the December 2009 issue I chose the L505u as my personal Editor's Choice for Product of the Year. My thoughts on the L505u after more than a year of living with it were:

Luxman's entry-level but heavy-weight integrated amplifier delivers sonic authority, tactility, centeredness, continuity, easefulness, soundstage size, image specificity—you name it—in spades. It's the difference between "This is pretty good" and "This is addictive."

So if you're in the market for a near-universal player or a solid-state integrated amp in their price ranges, I don't really know what else I can say to nudge you in the direction of auditioning the DU-50 or the L505u, or both. By way of wrap-up, I'll put the models in a larger context here, and note a few things I might have not yet mentioned.

If you're curious about weights, dimensions, etc., visit the US importer's website, www.onahighernote.com, or consult the 2010 Stereophile Buyer's Guide.

When US audiophiles think of the oldest firms still making high-performance audio equipment, they usually think of McIntosh Labs, founded in 1948. The UK's Quad traces its corporate origins back to 1936. Japan's Luxman, however, has them both beat: Luxman began making transformers and switches for radio sets in 1925. This is to
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the good; the company obviously has a sense of history. The iffy part is that Luxman's product line, which blends modern and heritage products, is a bit quirkily confusing. Luxman is by no means alone in having a product line that does not make intuitive sense to the uniniated. A prime example is Harbeth's having two loudspeakers both costing $5000/pair, the Monitor Harbeth's having two loudspeakers quirkily confusing. Lwmian is by no modern and heritage products, is a bit Luxman's product line, which blends the good; the company obviously has a love with them. What a great and, in

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FIFTH ELEMENT

that does not make intuitive sense to a sense of history. The iffy part is that 30 and the Super HL5. both costing $5000/pair, the Monitor Harbeth's having two loudspeakers quirkily confusing. Lwmian is by no modern and heritage products, is a bit Luxman's product line, which blends the good; the company obviously has a love with them. What a great and, in

December. With ATC's excellent SCM 11 loudspeakers driven by the Luxman combo, the string bass was robust, the trumpet clear and smooth, there was no tape hiss, the edgy yelps from Coltrane's tenor sax had bite, and the music in general sounded very lively, with great forward propulsion. Switching the ATC's to the Denon, tape hiss was audible, the piano sounded a bit thinner, the string bass was not as authoritative, the组合, the string bass was not as authoritative, the
did have more body and a greater sense of space. (And yes, I did first disable the m902's proprietary crosseyed circuit!) Both Luxman models have lights on their rear panels to alert you if your house's AC outlets have neutral wired to hot, or vice versa—in other words, inverted AC polarity. This is just another example of how much real-world experience has gone into these components, which are completely ready for prime time.

The US importer sets up the DU-50 to play the stereo DSD layer of multichannel SACD/CDDs as the default. However, as far as I can tell, changing this requires that a TV be connected to the player, so you can navigate among the menus.

The DU-50 has front-panel pushbuttons to disable its video functions and to change from the standard digital filter to Luxman's proprietary FE or Fluency DAC, a minimum-phase algorithm that eliminates pre-ringing. After quite a bit of listening, I decided that the Fluency did something I liked but couldn't really define. So JA has agreed to give the DU-50 a listen and a measure. One point is that the Fluency DAC is not optimal for SACD playback; when playing SACDs, you must manually deselect it.

As I said, I think the Luxman LS05u is a screaming bargain. I used it with most of the budget loudspeakers I've covered over the last 18 months, and often with Harbeth's Compact 7s, again as a benchmark. As a bit of a stress test, I took the LS05u and DU-50 to my friend Bob Sagio's place, to try them out with a pair of Wilson Audio Sophia Is that were hanging around, waiting for someone to fall in love with them. What a great and, in the grand scheme of things, reasonably priced setup. The LS05u had no problem at all driving the Sophia Is with big pipe-organ, orchestral, or solo-piano tracks. I don't think I ever had the LS05u's volume knob past the 11:00 o'clock position for sustained listening at any time, even with the Sophias. There seems to be a lot more power on tap than I would ever use. I used both balanced and single-ended connections between the two components and heard not much of a difference, if any.

A reader asked via email about the LS05u's headphone jack. In direct comparison with Grace Design's m902 headphone amplifier, and using the DU-50 as a transport, while the difference was not night-and-day, the Grace did have more body and a greater sense of space. (And yes, I did first disable the m902's proprietary crosseyed circuit!)

However, when I played a great SACD such as Gretchaninnov's Passion Week, using the DU-50's balanced outputs into the LS05u's balanced inputs, it really sounded more like a million bucks than nearly $5000. But the lurking serpent wants to ask whether the tattered remnants of the classical-music recording business will move in the direction of putting hi-rez music on Blu-ray discs.

I hope not. We've confused poor music-loving consumers enough. As I've said before, the optimal hi-rez music-delivery format that should have been but was blocked by the major labels is 24-bit/96kHz stereo PCM on plain old DVD-Video discs. Stereo audio DVD-Vs at 24/96 would have played just fine on the millions of vanilla DVD-V players already in peoples' homes. Instead, what we have today is a "return of the repressed" fully worthy of Sigmund Freud's leather couch: 24/96 stereo PCM as downloads (or, in a few cases, delivered on physical media) becoming the de facto hi-rez standard, with even SACD stalwarts such as Hyperion and Harmonia Mundi selling hi-rez PCM versions of their SACD releases through HDtracks.com.

The small amount of 24/96 material on DVD-V or DVD-A I had handy sounded magnificent through the Luxman DU-50. I played the same recordings for Bob Sagio, first on "Red Book" CD and then on 24/96 DVD. His comment: "To quote Bud Fried, it's like taking the cotton out of your ears." So let's not mess it up this time.

Tough, Affordable Cans

"Professional" headphones are so called not because they sound any better than "consumer" headphones, but usually because they have the combination of attributes and features working professionals want. (I say "usually" because there are some posers.) First of all, pro headphones have to be rugged and durable because they're likely to be sat on, stepped on, or dropped. Second, to minimize sound leakage both ways—though primarily from the headphones to open microphones—they also are almost always closed—rather than open-backed designs. Pro headphones almost always have only one lead, going to the left earcup, because a Y-cord would make it difficult to turn around the right earcup so you can hear what else is going on while listening to yourself in your left ear. (I know, that's not very compatible with worries about leakage.) Also, the cord is usually straight
A KIMBER KABLE KCTG $1944 meter pair

A KIMBER KABLE HERO AG $1574 meter pair

A KIMBER KABLE KCAG $1144 meter pair

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A KIMBER KABLE MONOCLE-X $1140 8ft pair

A KIMBER KABLE TAK Cu $300 meter pair

A KIMBER KABLE KWIK 12 SPEAKER CABLE $235 100 ft

A KIMBER KABLE PALLADIAN PK 10 $1320 6ft

A KIMBER KABLE PK 10 GOLD $370 6ft

A KIMBER KABLE PK 10 $250 6ft

A KIMBER KABLE PALLADIAN PK 14 $1160 6ft

A KIMBER KABLE PK 14 GOLD $310 6ft
Audio-Technica ATH-M50s headphones—
they suit JAA just fine.

rather than coiled, to prevent slingshot episodes and tangling.

For a long time, the industry standard for rugged, affordable studio headphones has been Sony's MDR-7506 (street price: ca $100). Not really inspirational sound, but, as with the cuisine at McDonald's, you know in advance what you're going to get. I'd been idly looking for a new pair of headphones for use in location recording, and my eye was caught by a full-page ad in Pro Sound News in which the great and the good of the industry sang the praises of Audio-Technica's new ATH-M50s studio headphones. I requested the loan of a pair.

As one might assume, the ATH-M50ses are rugged, closed-back, and have one straight cord to the left earcup. They also fold up: the articulated earcup yokes allow the earcups to be levered up into the padded headband. The ATH-M50ses come with a black faux-leather drawstring bag, and are very fairly priced at $199 (with street prices of around $159).

Even before the ATH-M50ses arrived, I had qualified the glowing endorsements from the high-flying producers and engineers with this mental rewrite: "These are the very best headphones ever that we can leave lying around the studio and not throw a fit if they end up missing because some hanger-on attending a session likes them so much he puts them under his coat and walks off with them." So qualified, the endorsements make perfect sense. Because if they literally mean what they say, all I can say is that they need to get out more, or at least hear some headphones that cost more than $140. I can make recommendations.

Indeed, when I was chatting recently at a pro audio event with legendary mastering engineer Bob Ludwig, he asked me about headphones. I told him that while he certainly should hear the Sennheiser HD-800s (which Wes Phillips reviewed in July 2009), he also should hear the Denon 7000s I wrote about in my December column. (Veteran classical engineer Jerry Bruck is trying out the Denon 7000s on a location recording as I write this.) The Sennheisers' list price is $1399, the Denons' $999. Not $199, either of them—but you'd be royally PO'd if either the Sennheisers or the Denons showed up missing after an attended session.

All that said, I cheerfully bought the pair of Audio-Technica ATH-M50ses they sent me, because they're not only rugged (and also fit my head better than did Sam Tellig's favorites, the ATH-AD700s), they are actually, by any reckoning, very fistenable. To the extent that there are errors, they are more errors of omission than commission. These 'phones are basically accurate enough, nonfatiguing, and with a tilt toward warmth, a very solid if somewhat emphasized bass, and a midrange neutrality not always found in the lower links of the headphone food chain. Indeed, after I'd matched levels carefully using Grace Designs' m902 as both headphone amp and DAC/line stage feeding the Luxman L505u, which was powering Harbeth Compact 7 ES3 speakers, the ATH-M50ses had a strong resemblance to the Harbeths' "classic BBC monitor" sound, with the exception that the Harbeths were more extended in the treble. Whereas comparing the open-backed Audio-Technicas Sam bought to the closed ones I bought is like the difference between a fine Sauvignon Blanc and an excellent meatball sandwich. So to speak.

Were I to win the lottery, I'd track down a new-old-stock pair of Ultrasone's Edition 9s that I wrote about in June 2007 (see www.stereophile.com/headphones/607fifth/index1.html). Until that fine day, Audio-Technica's ATH-M50s will suit me just fine. Check them out.

Questions, pertinent or impertinent: sletters@sorc.com.

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Reason #7 — Phase-coherent in reality, not 1st-order in theory.

A good phase-response is necessary in order to accurately portray the soundstage, preserve dynamic realism, and convey the music’s emotional impact.

Traditionally, designers have used 1st-order crossover circuitry in order to optimize phase-response, as in theory it allows for zero absolute phase. However, reality and theory are not the same. In reality, when taking into account the drivers and cabinet, no design offers zero absolute phase. Furthermore, when dealing with real (i.e. non-ideal) designs, the wide overlap of a 1st-order crossover forces drivers to operate outside their optimal band, where performance is highly compromised.

YG Acoustics takes a different approach: rather than traditional crossovers, it employs proprietary circuitry, designed using software developed entirely in-house. The resulting absolute phase matches that of the finest 1st-order designs, but with the added advantage that drivers only operate within their optimal band. Most importantly — relative phase is near-zero, i.e. all drivers radiate as one integral unit1. Only YG Acoustics offers this unique technology, which is part of what makes Anat Reference II the best on Earth.

Reviews

“...the soundstage so huge I could have walked into it and wandered around for an hour or so.”
Wes Phillips, Stereophile March 2009

“The transient response of the Anats, seemed instantaneous, but the flesh in that attack gave music both the sense of immediacy and the rich harmonic texture heard from the real thing.”
Adam Goldfine, Positive-Feedback Issue 45
Absolute Phase

Here are absolute phase measurements of the YG Acoustics Anat Reference II, and a leading competitor with 1st-order crossovers. As can clearly be seen, neither speaker offers zero absolute phase. Instead, each goes through a full 360-degree cycle throughout the audio band. It is important to note that going only once through a 360-degree cycle is a remarkable accomplishment, which represents the current state-of-the-art. Not surprisingly, both speakers' imaging is highly realistic.

Relative Phase

Moving to relative-phase (a measure of how well the drivers are integrated), YG Acoustics' proprietary circuit topology is far superior to the competitor's 1st-order crossover. The competitor's wide overlap leads to a relative phase of +/-90 degrees between drivers, compared to YG Acoustics' state-of-the-art +/-5 degrees. Correspondingly, YG Acoustics offers far superior emotional impact: peaks preserve their dynamic “pop”, but are somewhat “smeared” by the competitor.

Overlap

Finally, the advantage of YG Acoustics' narrower overlap: both designs utilize midrange drivers that can operate smoothly up to 8.5 kHz, and are crossed-over to the tweeter far lower. YG Acoustics' midrange driver is attenuated by over 50 dB at its breakup frequency, whereas the competitor's midrange is only attenuated by 15 dB. Therefore, whereas with YG Acoustics only 0.3% of the sound at 8.5 kHz is generated sub-optimally, with the competitor 18% of the sound is essentially “pure breakup”. Sonically, while YG Acoustics retains its clarity throughout the audio band, the competitor sounds veiled whenever music contains this frequency range.
The soundstage is holographic and convincingly lifelike. Perhaps the 8TC’s award should be for Cable of the Decade…”
Paul Seydor

What people are saying about Kimber Kable

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“These cables do just about everything right and are among the very best I’ve heard.”
Brian Damkroger

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Michael Fremor

Silver Streak
“…represents a major performance breakthrough for the price…”
Sam Tellig

D-60
“Sometimes mercilessly revealing, but never harsh.”
Kalman Rubinson

“The Hero interconnect’s bass lives up to its name Powerful and Well-defined.”
Paul Seydor
Editors' top picks: from Rush to Rachmaninoff, essential music we can't live without.

It's always revealing to see exactly what music people have sitting on their shelves or hard drives. It tells you a lot about them—whether they're kindred spirits (Bill Evans) or something less (Sting). In many ways, our annual "Records To Die For" feature is a kind of mini-window into the musical souls of our contributing editors; may the Gods of Song bless their tortured souls, every one. In the past, such choices as the soundtrack album for the movie Casper have raised eyebrows, if not outright suspicion. Still, along with crowing about our favorite records, we try to keep it all in good fun. What's the title of Stephen Mejias's excellent blog at www.stereophile.com—"Elements of Our Enthusiasm"? Well then, here are some of those precious elements that feed that enthusiasm. Remember: Gear ain't great without something to play on it.—Robert Baird

Note: If a recording listed here has previously been reviewed in Stereophile, whether in "Record Reviews" or in past editions of "Records To Die For," the volume and number of the pertinent issue appear in parentheses at the end of the review. For example, a listing of "(Vol.31 No.7)" means that a review of the recording appeared in Vol.31 No.7 (July 2008).
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JOHN ATKINSON

J.S. BACH: Brandenburg Concertos 1–6
Richard Egarr, dir., harpsichord continuo; Academy of Ancient Music
Young, prod.; Brad Michel, eng., ed. DDD. TT: 96:20

One of the first classical LPs I bought as a teenager was of Harmonia Mundi’s
1959 modern-instrument performances, by Sir Yehudi Menuhin and the Bath Festival Orchestra, of Bach’s Brandenburg
Concertos. I literally wore that HMV album out; it left me with a love for what have been termed the greatest of all chamber-music works. As my tastes matured, I found myself increasingly attracted to “original instruments” such as Gustav Leonhardt’s on Japanese RCA/Secon, the English
Concert’s on Arkiv, and Nikolaus Harnoncourt’s on Teldec. But nothing had prepared me for the sonic assault and battery
committed on these warhorses by the Academy of Ancient Music, led from the harpsichord by Richard Egarr. Not only do the musicians tune their instruments to A=392Hz—a whole step below the modern concert pitch of A=440, and equivalent to a modern G—but the valveless horns, in No.1 in particular, have a rustic, braying quality that is at first off-putting, then refreshing, and finally, with familiarity, essential. Also unusual is the use of a baroque guitar as an occasional continuo instrument, as well as the more familiar theorbo. Perhaps as a curiosity is an equivalent to a modern G—an instrument, as realized by Zenph Studios
Shepherd of Wayne Stahnke’s SE reproducing mechanism.

RACHMANINOFF: Rachmaninoff
Plays Rachmaninoff
Prelude in C-sharp minor, Op.3 No.2; Moments Musicaux, Op.16 No.2; Etudes Tableaux in C and E-flat major, Op.33 Nos. 2 & 7; Dances, Op.38 No.3; plus arrangements for piano of works by Bach, Kreisler, Mendelssohn, Rimsky-Korsakov, Tchaikovsky.

Sergei Rachmaninoff, 1909 Steinway D SE piano, as realized by Zenph Studios

From the opening phrase of Sergei Rachmaninoff’s arrangement of Fritz Kreisler’s Liebesleid, originally recorded in New York City on October 25, 1921, and presented on this CD in stunningly good, if fairly close, modern piano sound (the engineer was the widely respected Richard King), this Zenph CD takes your breath away. It follows in the footsteps of Zenph Studios’ first two SACD/CDs of “re-performances”: Glenn Gould’s 1955 Goldberg Variations, which I made our “Recording of the Month” for September 2007; and Art Tatum’s Piano Starts Here, reviewed by John Swenson in September 2008. In all three, a computer was used to analyze the original recording and then, with pains-taking massaging of the data by Zenph’s Dr. Anatoly Larkin, to produce an enhanced MIDI file capable of controlling a Yamaha Synclavier or, in this case, a beautifully restored 1909 Steinway D fitted with a development by Richard Shepherd of Wayne Stahnke’s SE reproducing mechanism.

ROBERT BAIRD

THE BEATLES: Abbey Road

NEVIRANA: Nevermind

Needless to say, with the much-improved sonics of its 2009 reissue, Abbey Road is even more glorious than before—if that’s possible.

After the usual racking of an increasingly feeble brain, followed by time spent pacing in front of shelves trying to ferret out yet another pair of super-obscure treasures, I sat and pondered which records really were the heaviest in my collection. Which ones really were the indisputable King Kongs? The stone classics that never grow old? Records from which so much else continues to flow?

Once I’d framed it that way, Abbey Road and Nevermind immediately jumped into my head and, despite my best efforts to knock them off their perch, held firm. The only problem was that I was sure that everyone and their mother had already chosen Abbey Road, and probably Nevermind as well, as R2D4s past. Turns out, much to my wondering eyes, that no one in the long history of “Records To Die For” has ever given Abbey Road the nod, probably for the same reason I almost didn’t: they assumed it had already been done to death. And Nevermind had been honored only once.

Needless to say, with the much-improved sonics of its 2009 reissue, Abbey Road is even more glorious than before—if that’s possible. A final burst of whatever camaraderie was left among the fabulous foursome, the album’s set of tunes, some of them admittedly goofy, still make for one of the most consistent albums ever made. There’s nary a bad song here. Favorites include the late George Harrison’s exquisitely sexy “Something,” Sir Paul’s saliva-spewing howl in the sentimental mush of
Herron Audio

Herron VTPH-2 Vacuum Tube Phono Stage

— Roy Gregory, Hi-Fi Plus Magazine, Issue 58

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“The colour and ability to reveal each step in the growing intensity of a crescendo mark out the beautiful balance that the VTPH-2 strikes between the instrumental detail that gives music its beauty and the body and presence that gives it its drama and so much of its passion.”

“The Herron VTPH-2 gives listeners all the benefits of a tube unit with few of the failings and a text-book technical performance to boot. It offers a level of vacuum-tube engineering (carefully combined with solid-state circuitry) that’s rare at any price, unheard of at this one.”

— Martin G. DeWulf, Bound For Sound, Issue #195/196 - Special Products Report “Components of Merit Issue.”

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— Michael Reveler, Stereophile July 2009 Vol.32 No.7

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World Radio History
“Oh! Darling,” and the portentous “The End,” in which you can feel as well as hear the finality. The most astonishing, ascending run of creativity in the history of popular music had ground to a halt. The Beatles were over. (XI-2)

With its ironic title and unforgettable cover image, 1991’s Nevermind was the beginning and the end. It begat Nirvana’s brief run as superstars, and thus the pressures and emotional torment that eventually led to Kurt Cobain’s suicide. It was also the end of something called The Great American Rock’n’Roll Album. We’re still waiting for another. This kind of ecstasy—torment that eventually led to Kurt Cobain’s suicide. It was also Nevermind was the beginning and the end. It begat Nirvana’s

The death-haunted blues ballads that the Virginia coal miner and banjo player Dock Boggs recorded in the late 1920s are among the most chilling in the old-time country repertoire. This CD contains all 12 sides Boggs cut prior to his rediscovery in the 1960s, plus five alternate takes, as well as four outstanding if unrelated tracks by the brothers Hayes and Bill Shepherd. Best are the eight titles from Boggs’ 1927 debut session for Brunswick, including the ominously jangling “Sugar Baby” and the doom-laden “Country Blues,” both of which appeared on the landmark 1952 Folkways compilation Anthology of American Folk Music. On “Down South Blues,” Boggs transforms a 1923 recording by the classic blues singer Clara Smith into a hillbilly song, while on “Pretty Polly,” he turns an 18th-century British murder ballad into a blood-curdling blues.

PETER BREUNINGER

KEITH JARRETT TRIO: Changes
Keith Jarrett, piano; Gary Peacock, bass; Jack Dejohnette, drums

Peter Breuninger

What’s the record with the greatest recorded drum solo of all time? Keith Jarrett’s Changes. Yup, strong words. If you doubt me, spin “Flying Part 2” until DeJohnette goes to town on his kit and becomes God. It’s as if the world is about to end. The drums are simply in your room with thwacks, rim shots, kicks, and sweat that will flap your pants. If your system is dynamic and reproduces bass, this is demo-disc nirvana.

In the early 1980s, the trio of Jarrett, Peacock, and DeJohnette turned their backs on the experimental movement and laid down some of the most straight-up jazz ever recorded. This album stands at the peak of that collaboration, with a timelessness that spans the expanse between hop and the unknown. If you value the purity of a jazz trio and want to hear what a drum kit would sound like live in your living room, look nowhere else. This is a masterpiece!

FRANK ZAPPA/THE MOTHERS:
The Grand Wazoo

The Grand Wazoo is one of those anthems that we (now) grayhairs once worshipped through headphones as our parents slept. Wazoo and its sister album, Waka/Jawaka, are indispensable cornerstones of the hippie era. While Zappa can’t be forgiven for his attention-getting, it was his compositional genius that set him apart from songwriting guitar icons such as Hendrix, Clapton, and Harrison. Zappa’s output at this time was part Edgard Varèse, part Miles Davis, part guitar hero: serious stuff for serious listeners. Wazoo is chock-full of jazz riffs, with muted trumpets, woodwinds, vibes, and even a gong tossed in. It’s as fresh today as it was that first day in my bedroom basement, with homemade corner horns and Dynakit amps. If The Grand Wazoo has been gathering dust in your collection, get it out today and give it a spin. If you’ve never heard it—you’re in for a treat! (X-8)

LARRY BIRNBAUM

AMOS MILBURN: Booze, Babes, Blues & Boogie: The Essential Amos Milburn

Nearly forgotten today, Amos Milburn helped pave the way for rock’n’roll with stomping boogie-woogies and rhythmic ballads, and bridged the gap between blues crooner Charles Brown and Fats Domino. This two-CD set begins with Milburn’s first recordings for Aladdin in 1946 and leaves off in 1951, in the middle of his string of drinking songs (omitting “One Scotch, One Bourbon, One Beer,” revived by John Lee Hooker as “One Bourbon, One Scotch, One Beer”). Nearly all of Milburn’s hits are here, from the rollicking “Chicken Shack Boogie” to the rueful “Bad, Bad Whiskey,” but the hardest rocker is his non-hit version of the Will Bradley Trio’s “Down the Road a Piece,” a white-boogie takeoff that Milburn reclaims as an African-American anthem.

DOCK BOGGS: Country Blues

The death-haunted blues ballads that the Virginia coal miner and banjo player Dock Boggs recorded in the late 1920s are among the most chilling in the old-time country repertoire. This CD contains all 12 sides Boggs cut prior to his rediscovery in the 1960s, plus five alternate takes, as well as four outstanding if unrelated tracks by the brothers Hayes and Bill Shepherd. Best are the eight titles from Boggs’ 1927 debut session for Brunswick, including the ominously jangling “Sugar Baby” and the doom-laden “Country Blues,” both of which appeared on the landmark 1952 Folkways compilation Anthology of American Folk Music. On “Down South Blues,” Boggs transforms a 1923 recording by the classic blues singer Clara Smith into a hillbilly song, while on “Pretty Polly,” he turns an 18th-century British murder ballad into a blood-curdling blues.

What’s the record with the greatest recorded drum solo of all time? Keith Jarrett’s Changes. Yup, strong words. If you doubt me, spin “Flying Part 2” until DeJohnette goes to town on his kit and becomes God. It’s as if the world is about to end. The drums are simply in your room with thwacks, rim shots, kicks, and sweat that will flap your pants. If your system is dynamic and reproduces bass, this is demo-disc nirvana.

In the early 1980s, the trio of Jarrett, Peacock, and DeJohnette turned their backs on the experimental movement and laid down some of the most straight-up jazz ever recorded. This album stands at the peak of that collaboration, with a timelessness that spans the expanse between hop and the unknown. If you value the purity of a jazz trio and want to hear what a drum kit would sound like live in your living room, look nowhere else. This is a masterpiece!

FRANK ZAPPA/THE MOTHERS:
The Grand Wazoo

The Grand Wazoo is one of those anthems that we (now) grayhairs once worshipped through headphones as our parents slept. Wazoo and its sister album, Waka/Jawaka, are indispensable cornerstones of the hippie era. While Zappa can’t be forgiven for his attention-getting, it was his compositional genius that set him apart from songwriting guitar icons such as Hendrix, Clapton, and Harrison. Zappa’s output at this time was part Edgard Varèse, part Miles Davis, part guitar hero: serious stuff for serious listeners. Wazoo is chock-full of jazz riffs, with muted trumpets, woodwinds, vibes, and even a gong tossed in. It’s as fresh today as it was that first day in my bedroom basement, with homemade corner horns and Dynakit amps. If The Grand Wazoo has been gathering dust in your collection, get it out today and give it a spin. If you’ve never heard it—you’re in for a treat! (X-8)
Naxos's priceless Latin-American Classics series spawned a triumph with this disc of orchestral works by Mexican composing giant Silvestre Revueltas (1899-1940). Revueltas was a musical genius who went to extremes of both vision and alcoholism, and produced a powerful and singular body of work that seems to have swallowed Stravinsky whole, digested his food along with all of Mexican folk music, and thrown in some personal demons. Revueltas's well-known Sensemayá is a dark, epic work of extraordinary orchestral color and taut suspense. Less often heard but no less potent are his film score for La Noche de los Mayas and the ballet La Coronella, both heard here in arrangements by other composers. The latter is a distillation of Revueltas's music for the revolution-themed films Vámonos con Pancho Villa! and Los de Abajo. The percussion- and brass-led finale of Mayas is one of the most brilliant orchestral writing of the 20th century. Barrios and his orchestra capture, as few on record have, this music's dark undercurrents and contrasts of playfulness and brutality, along with its distinctive traditional accents.

This all-but-forgotten masterwork—Gil Evans's first album under his own name—is a small vial containing strong magic.
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CHILDREN OF EDEN: American Premiere Recording
Stephen Schwartz, music, lyrics; Danny Kosarin, cond.
Children of Eden had a short run in London's West End in 1991, and the planned transfer to Broadway did not materialize. However, the show has been acquiring considerable following among musical-theater fans, and this recording, based on a major production mounted at New Jersey's Paper Mill Playhouse, shows why. It's really a wonderful piece: richly melodic, and written in a variety of musical styles that include pop, rock, jazz, gospel, and mainstream musical theater. The opener, "Let There Be," has pre-echoes of Schwartz's Wicked, and I was at times reminded of Leonard Bernstein's Mass, for which Schwartz wrote some of the lyrics. Several songs deserve to be musical-theater standards, including "Stranger to the Rain," "In Whatever Time We Have," "The Hardest Part of Love," and the very moving title song. The show is almost completely through-sung, and Schwartz's flair for melodic invention prevents this device from becoming tiresome. Very fine performances, led by Stephanie Mills, and no complaints about the sound.

CHRISTINE ANDREAS: Here's to the Ladies
TT: 51:25
Christine Andreas made her Broadway debut in 1976, in the 20th-anniversary Broadway revival of My Fair Lady, the recording of which I prefer (hereby!), in some ways, to the original Broadway cast recording with Julie Andrews and Rex Harrison. (She's a more gutsy Eliza than Andrews, and I like the fact that Ian Richardson actually does some singing rather than just talking his way through the songs.) Andreas's distinctive voice encompasses the belt as well as the soprano range, with a strong vibrato that I find very attractive. Best of all, she's a real singing actress who tells a story with each song. The concept is a tribute to the great female stars of the musical theater—Martin, Merman, Lawrence, Cook, Streisand, Lansbury, Andrews—but Andreas wisely makes no attempt to sound like any of these ladies, and in the process makes each complete songs and a couple of improvisations that day, including a version of "Now's the Time" that includes the young Davis's first solo on record. But the session is remembered for "Ko-Ko," an up-tempo variation on "Cherokee" that came to epitomize both Parker's virtuosity and bebop itself. The first solo is Gillespie's, on trumpet—notable because he was there to play piano—after which Parker burns phrase after memorable phrase into the listener's mind, with uncanny rhythmic flexibility and harmonic intuition. It's a jazz milestone, and one of the finest, most exciting examples of improvisational music ever committed to record.

"Ko-Ko" and the seven other selections on this 10" LP have been anthologized numerous times, often with good liner notes and great outtakes, but never with better sound than this. The genius of Charlie Parker could transcend any format, but if you crave all the color, presence, and impact there is, seek out the vinyl (and a good mono cartridge).

THE BEATLES: In Mono
If you're among the sane, sound-loving Beatles fans to whom the debate surrounding their newly remastered catalog does little more than call to mind the voice of the fat, ponytailed comic-book dealer from The Simpsons, take my advice: the Beatles' In Mono is the box to buy. It offers the Beatles' first 10 original albums (Please Please Me through The Beatles), plus two CDs of non-album singles, all mastered exquisitely well—I would even say surprisingly well—from the original mono mixes. This is surely the closest anyone will come within my lifetime to the punch and color of the original British LPs, and unless you already own Sgt. Pepper's or The Beatles on import mono vinyl, there are performances in this set that you literally have not heard. A towerin set, and easily the first digital issue that honors rather than obscures the sheer brilliance, originality, charm, and excitement of the music.

EDITH EISLER
BEETHOVEN: String Quartets 12-16, Grosse Fuge, Opp. 127, 130-133, 135
Orion String Quartet: Daniel Phillips, Todd Phillips, violin; Steven Tenenbom, viola; Timothy Eddy, cello.
Virtually every great string quartet, past and present, has recorded the Beethoven quartet cycle, that pinnacle of the literature and ultimate challenge to performers and listeners. The late quartets, born of Beethoven's compositional, emotional, and spiritual maturity, seem to transcend all earthly things in a quest for sublime beauty and perfection. The Orion Quartet, one of my favorite groups, admired and beloved worldwide, has lived with them for many
years; having conquered all technical difficulties, the players are free to enter into and communicate Beethoven's thoughts, feelings, and changing moods, from gentle and quirky humor to sorrow, conflict, joy, and serenity.

**BRAHMS: Cello Sonatas 1 & 2, Opp. 38 & 99**


Steven Isserlis, cello; Stephen Hough, piano


Steven Isserlis is a masterful cellist with a beautiful, expressive tone, but his playing is most remarkable for his complete immersion in the music: one feels he is creating it again and letting it flow directly to the listener. His discography covers all styles; this CD features two works by each of three great romantic composers, each pairing showing opposite sides of its composer's musical personality.

Brahms's Sonata 1 is austerely melancholy, Sonata 2 exuberantly triumphant; Dvořák's Waldesruhe breathes calm serenity, while his Rondo is all elfin lightness; Suk's Ballade projects dramatic passion, his Serenade ingratiating charm. The players capture all these moods, from poetic lyricism to ecstatic ardor, with total identification.

**MICHAEL FREMER**

**ELVIS COSTELLO: My Aim Is True**


Deacon Patrick Aloysius MacManus's raw debut album has never sounded as vital, coherent, and nuanced as it does on this surprising, almost shocking remastering, which stuns the George “Porky” Peckham original LP (UK STIF), as well as the four CD editions that followed (Columbia, Ryko, Rhino, Universal). The glassy overlay and gauzy scrim obscuring all previous LP and CD editions has been replaced with a level of transparency and tactile three-dimensionality that opens a window onto producer Nick Lowe's brilliant, low-budget game plan. Even if you've heard it a thousand times before, you'll hear new, key instrumental lines and backup vocals previously hidden in plain view.

**MATTHEW FRITCH**

**THE MOUNTAIN GOATS: Tallahassee**


A codependent couple heads down to north Florida to bottom out on drugs and tear each other apart—and then things really get ugly. Somewhere between an episode of *Cops* and a Tennessee Williams play, the lyrical narrative running through the brisk folk-pop songs of *Tallahassee* turns us all into voyeurs, witnessing a once-romantic relationship descend into Southern-gothic madness. John Darnielle can sometimes be an overly wordy singer-songwriter, but here, on “No Children,” he gets right to the point as, in an oddly uplifting chorus, the husband character tells his wife, “I hope you die / I hope we both die.”

**KLAUS NOMI: Eclipsed: The Best of Klaus Nomi**


Every year for the past decade or so, I’ve considered dressing up as Klaus Nomi for Halloween. The German-born Nomi favored a far-out kabuki-robot look in the early 1980s, when he sang backup for David Bowie and recorded his own albums—a jarring hybrid of opera, cabaret, disco, and new wave far weirder than any alien-creature outfit he might’ve donned. Nomi had a short career—he died in 1983 due to complications from AIDS—but his style and sound are unforgettable and irreplaceable. To get the complete picture, check out his performance in *Ugh! A Music War* (1981), an excellent multi-artist concert film.

**LARRY GREENHILL**

**BEETHOVEN: Symphony 3**

Andrew Manze, Helsingborg Symphony


Last year, Wes Phillips picked as his “Record To Die For” Chesky Records’ HDtracks.com download service, because he’d found it so valuable a source of digital music files. Wes’s observation that the site’s files have no DRM or lossy compression was persuasive, so I purchased Andrew Manze’s reading of Beethoven’s “Eroica,” with the 59-piece Helsingborg Orchestra, in the form of 24-bit/88.2KHz FLAC files. I was not disappointed. Harmonia Mundi’s recording is balanced, warm, and nonfatiguing. The first movement is spellbinding—I hear subtle ambience cues I usually notice only at
live performances, and the soundstage is wider and deeper than any I've experienced from the best "Red Book" CDs or SACDs. There is an enhanced sense of three-dimensionality, with more precise images of the instruments, more open highs, more detailed imaging, deeper soundstaging, and better-defined bass. All of this connects me to those crucial elements of music: pace, rhythm, and emotion. These hi-res downloads will show off your system's imaging and soundstaging. (XXXII-2)

VALERIE JOYCE: New York Blue
Valerie Joyce, vocals; Lawrence Feldman, alto & tenor saxophone; Andy Ezrin, piano, ars: Tim Lelevee, Jan Herbert, bass; Gene Jackson, drums
Chesky JD316 (CD: 24-bit/96kHz FLAC files downloaded from HDtracks.com).

I first heard Valerie Joyce in hi-def sound when I downloaded a 24-bit/96kHz FLAC file of her cover of Jimi Hendrix's "Little Wing" from Chesky's HDtracks.com. The image of Joyce's almost-whispering soprano was the most three-dimensional and palpable I'd ever heard in my listening room, and was enveloped in a 360° space that extended well behind and in front of her. The most realistic soundstaging image I'd ever heard there, it pulled me into the music, made Joyce's tone and phrasings come alive, and compelled me to download the entire album. For those seeking a sonic standard for female jazz vocals, look no further than New York Blue.

BOB GULLA

VELVET CRUSH: Teenage Symphonies to God

Back in the early 1990s, when rock music had just begun its violent overthrow of my brain, I wrote a local music column for an arts weekly in Providence, Rhode Island. The scene in my little town was fertile at the time, with able bands all vying for post-Nirvana major-label dollars. At the time, Velvet Crush was the ablest, a big fish in a small pond, marked by all the right influences, decked out in all the right clothes, and seen in all the right places. Teenage Symphonies to God is the band's masterpiece and the answer to the question: What would happen if indie rockers merged the Byrds' Sweetheart of the Rodeo with the Stones' Exile on Main Street?

DAVID LINDLEY: El Rayo-X

To know David Lindley is to love him. If you don't know him but purport to love the Rock, then you owe it to yourself to check this one out. This former sideman to Zevon, Dylan, Ronstadt, Browne, etc. made only three official records with El Rayo-X, each more underappreciated than the next. But his 1981 debut ranks as one of the 1980s' great, unsung rock'n'roll recordings, stripped with blistering slide-guitar blues, Tex-Mex, reggae, and R&B.

JON IVERSON

20/20: 20/20 & Look Out!

There was an explosion of great music in the late 1970s that included hundreds of New Wave and power-pop bands. These were not the goofy hair-wavers of the '80s, but more in line with early Elvis Costello, Paul Collins's Beat, and XTC—punchy, noisy pop songs that mashed the recent punk uprising with early-Beatles sensibilities. One of the greatest but least celebrated of these groups was 20/20. Part of the reason for the latter may be that after the release of 20/20 they quickly fell apart musically, and then actually. If you can find a copy of this CD, you'll be richly rewarded—it's like uncovering buried treasure. If there were justice in the rock world, 20/20 would be heroes and Duran Duran a mere footnote. Do your part and check out this disc; be advised that it contains both the band's eponymous debut (the reason for this review) and its weaker follow-up, Look Out!

HECTOR ZAZOU: In the House of Mirrors
Hector Zazou, guitar, percussion, percussion programming, sound treatments; Ronu Majumdar, flute; Nils Petter Molvaer, trumpet; Zoltán Lantos, violin; Diego Amador, piano; Bill Rieflin, cymbals, gong

For In the House of Mirrors, master Indian musicians were recorded in Mumbai, the tapes then minimally processed and "reflected" by Hector Zazou, who thus created a gorgeous musical mutation. I would love to have heard Zazou apply this approach to other styles of music, but he died just after this album's release. Not quite ambient but certainly not heat-driven, this music is what John Lennon might have imagined when he sang, "relax, turn off your mind, and float downstream."

FRED KAPLAN

MILES DAVIS: The Complete Columbia Album Collection
Miles Davis; trumpet; many, many sidemen

Call me a cheat. I'm asked to pull two albums out of the fire, and I grab 52—every album that Miles Davis recorded for Columbia Records, in a 71-CD boxed set? Well, look—it's a compact package that fits easily under your arm. And since Miles transformed the music four or five times in the course of almost half a century, The Complete Columbia Album Collection stands in for an entire history of postwar jazz, at least up to the mid-1980s. And such a stand-in: romantic, garrulous, intense, and always adventurous. The sound is usually excellent, too.

KRONOS QUARTET: 25 Years
Music of Adams, Ali-Zade, Benshoff, Crumb, Feldman, Glass, Golijov, Gorecki, Gulaidulina, Pärt, Pian, Piazzolla, Reich, Riley, Schnittke, Sculpthore, Volans, David Harrington, John Sheba, violin; Hank Dutt, viola; Joan Jeannenaud, cello
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— Marc Phillips, TONEaudio 2008

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With my other hand, I grab this boxed retrospective by Kronos Quartet, released for the 25th anniversary of their formation, though these 10 discs cover a cross-section of only the last 10 years of that period, when they began to record for Nonesuch. That decade preceded their more recent excursions into Multi-"Land," but here are some of the most adventurous pieces of contemporary classical music—by John Adams, Arvo Pärt, Henryk Górecki, Philip Glass, Osvaldo Golijov, Terry Riley, and many more—most of them commissioned by Kronos, who play with vigor, rigor, and finesse throughout. Alternately—and sometimes simultaneously—bracing, soothing, and jarring, and always satisfying. The sound quality is usually quite good.

DAVID LANDER

J.S. BACH: The Well-Tempered Clavier, Books 1 & 2
Angela Hewitt, piano

Johann Sebastian Bach's keyboard works have inspired illustrious disciples. Rosalyn Tureck spent most of her 88 years exploring their contrapuntal intricacies, and in 1955 Glenn Gould all but set fire to Columbia's 30th Street studio while blazing through the Goldberg Variations, for which he was lionized. Now we have Angela Hewitt, who, in 11 years ending in 2005, recorded all of Bach's major keyboard works for Hyperion Records. Then, after a 14-month world tour largely devoted to performances of The Well-Tempered Clavier, she re-recorded that masterpiece for the same label. I don't know which of these artists comes closest to playing Bach as the eminent 20th-century harpsichordist Wanda Landowska claimed she did—"his way"—or which recorded version of a specific work by any one of them should be considered a benchmark, but I love the way Hewitt plumbs these preludes and fugues for joy. The Chairman of the Baroque dances under her spell. (XX-12)

ODETTA AND LARRY: The Tin Angel

The rank and file of folk fans thinned considerably after the 1960s, but Odetta soldiered on. Until shortly before her death, in December 2008, at age 77, she was meeting the demands of a travel and performance schedule that would have derailed most of them commissioning by Kronos, who play with vigor, rigor, and finesse throughout. Alternately—and sometimes simultaneously—bracing, soothing, and jarring, and always satisfying. The sound quality is usually quite good.

ROBERT LEVINE

SIBELIUS: Kullervo

A tale of incest, murder, and suicide, Sibelius's Kullervo symphony has such anguish and darkness at its heart that it must be treated with care. It's a tale of fate and, as such, attains a...
In the May issue of Stereophile we extolled the qualities of Magico’s S90,000.00 Statement Loudspeaker system, the M 5, stating:

“Just like the Magico Mini II and the V-3 which are generally recognized as being the best speakers in their class, the new Magico M 5 simply trounces every other contender in the sub $150,000.00 ranking of super speakers and are just as good and, in most cases, quite a bit better than the few speakers which dare to command an even higher price tag. You see, the Magico M 5s do everything right. They are unbelievably open and reproduce the full bandwidth from extreme low bass to ultra high frequencies with as much authority as anything I’ve ever heard, Displaying a timbral accuracy that is simply uncanny and as transparent as a mountain lake, every nuance is there, every bit of detail, apparent not in an artificial or contrived way, but with that you-are-there quality, which sends goose bumps down your spine and makes you reach for your checkbook.”

Since then, Audiophiles, Music Lovers and all the members of the High-End Audio press have come to agree with us! As Jonathan Valin said in the October 2009 issue of The Absolute Sound:

“The M 5 is, quite simply, the finest big multiway cone loudspeaker I’ve heard in my home (or, for that matter, in someone else’s home or at a show), largely because it is the most neutral and coherent and delicately detailed, lowest-in-enclosure-and-driver-coloration, fullest-range multiway cone loudspeaker I’ve heard in my home or someone else’s home or at a show. Indeed, as I said in my CES report, I have never auditioned a multiway dynamic speaker that comes this close to the “single-driver” ideal or disappears this completely as a sound source. The words “the best” have been bandied about quite a bit in this magazine and on our Web site (avguide.com)—and there is legitimate concern that they are being overused. Unfortunately, no other words will do to describe how I feel about the Magico M 5. Not only has it redefined and entire genre of speakers for me, it has carried me substantially closer to the absolute sound. So close, in fact, that, for the first time, I can imagine the possibility of someday achieving a genuine facsimile of the real thing—not merely parts of it, not merely midrange or treble, voices and violins, but the whole thing from the lowest notes to the highest, from the least dynamic utterance to the most. That is how natural—how complete—the M 5 sounds to my ears. It is, in fact, the most complete loudspeaker I’ve ever heard.”

THE ABSOLUTE SOUND, October 2009.

So stop sitting on the fence if you are ready for the best, and by best I mean the most neutral and accurate speaker in the world, then come down, call up, or email us to order your Magico M 5s—the best speaker you will ever own!

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The Cars
The Cars
Santana
Abraxas
higher goal; Kullervo himself is a sacrifice. Davis has recorded it before, but this performance, taped live at two concerts at London’s Barbican, is much the finer. The opening sets up the work’s grand heroic scope, and the second movement tells us all we need about Kullervo’s loneliness; the entry of the chorus and soloists for Kullervo and his Sister has spectacular drive, tension, and, finally, lamentation. The Battle is grand, and Kullervo’s death and funeral march are stunning—myth come to life. The singers are superb, the LSO brass sound huge, and the final movement’s violins sound ghostly. The sound is warm and forward in two-channel; one can only assume it’s even more so on the multichannel SACD (LSO Live LOS0574). A special work in a remarkable performance.

**Haydn: The Seasons**

Marlis Petersen, soprano; Werner Güra, tenor; Dietrich Henschel, baritone; RIAS Kammerchor Freiburger Barockorchester, René Jacobs

Harmonia Mundi 90182930 (2 CDs). 2004. Alan Blyth, prod.; Martin Sauer, eng. DDD. TT: 2:05:00

As music descriptive of nature, Haydn’s Die Jahreszeiten has probably never been bettered (sorry, Vivaldi); we get sunrises, storms, birds, bees, the grim approach of winter, and the hunt, complete with horns that make you want to get on your horse and race after a fox. Scored for the usual strings as well as double winds, a double-bassoon, four horns, piccolo, three trumpets, three trombones, timpani, triangle, tambourine, and fortepiano continuo, the colors are brilliant. And this, Jacobs’ first recording of the work (and not to be confused with his more recent recording), has top-drawer playing and singing: the latter simple storytelling rather than operatic turns. It’s a positively exhilarating experience, gorgeously recorded, with ideal balances. It’s like a walk in the countryside. (XXVIII-4)

**ERICK LICHTHE**

**The KLF: Chill Out**


The KLF’s classic ambient album, Chill Out, implies an all-night drive through the Deep South. Propelled by coffee, nicotine, and a rusted Ford Galaxie, sounds emerge and recede as the radio dial searches for signals and the traveler’s mind drifts and dreams. Half-mad evangelists, traffic-accident reports, Tuvan throat singing, and endless samples ranging from Pink Floyd to Elvis are set against a backdrop of sustained synths and soulful steel guitar. Without ever playing a proper song, the album motors down lonely, late-night highways as a unified whole.

Chill Out’s journey implies much about America and the open road. To me, it is a masterpiece of sound.

**THE YALE CELLOS OF ALDO PARISOT: Bach Bachianas**

Music by J.S. Bach, Heitor Villa-Lobos

Aldo Parisot, The Yale Cellos; Arleen Auger, soprano


As a young singer and cellist, no album spoke to me as clearly as this one, of the Yale Cellos of Aldo Parisot playing with soprano Arleen Auger. When I bought this album as a high school sophomore, I had no idea I was getting the definitive reading of Villa-Lobos’ Bachianas Brasileiras No.5. The performance is at turns luminous and earthy, ethereal and lusty. In a program rounded out with transcriptions of Bach works for cello choir, the Yale Cellos play with fire and freedom under Aldo Parisot’s sage baton. Auger’s singing is without peer.

**JOHN MARKS**

**DEBUSSY, FAURÉ, RAVEL: String Quartets**

Quatuor Ebène: Pierre Colombet, Gabriel Le Magadure, violin; Mathieu Herzog, viola; Raphaël Merin, cello


The string quartets of Ravel and Debussy are the Cw and Pug of the chamber-music world—one is seldom recorded without the other. They are tremendously if not uniquely accessible—in places, actually jazzy—so if you want to get your feet wet in string quartets, Ruv and Deb are the way to go. Unlike many “accessible” works that lose their charm on repeated hearings (Ravel’s own Boléro comes to mind), the quartets of Ravel and Debussy have real staying power, and have always been very well served on disc. Into this crowded marketplace leaps Quatuor Ebène. This is not teact-up-with-lifted-pinkie playing. Recorded in Limousin, in a magnificent former granary a century old, this is a close-in, ultravivid document of intense performances that turn on dix centuries from propulsive rhythms to stock-still harmonies that hang in mid-air. Yes, you can hear the players breathing, but that’s because they’re blowing the dust off these works. The bonus Fauré quartet pushes the total time past 80 minutes, making this offering competitive with even budget reissues.

**BURGAN: Brideshead Revisited: Music from the Original Soundtrack**

Geoffrey Burgon, uncredited orchestra


My two desert-island video picks would be Patrick McGoohan’s The Prisoner and the 1981 Granada TV dramatization of Evelyn Waugh’s WWII “Catholic” novel, Brideshead Revisited. (I’d have two desert-island video picks, but NBC’s extraordinary 1970s adaptations of John O’Hara’s Giovanni’s Room never made it to home video.) For my money, Granada’s Brideshead Revisited is the greatest dramatic series achievement in television history. A good measure of that credit belongs to Geoffrey Burgon, whose chameleonic score (Haydn one moment, Britten the next) captures the essence of doomed love in a world bent on destroying itself. There’s an old Mobile Fidelity Sound Lab edition on gold CD that I haven’t heard, as it goes for money between crazy and insane.

**STEPHEN MEJIAS**

**VIVIAN GIRLS: Everything Goes Wrong**

In The Red 179 (LP). 2009

Mike McHugh, prod., eng. AAD7 TT: 36:01

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me back to that strange, magical night at Bamboo Beach in the sandy town of Isabela, Puerto Rico, the perfect setting for a Vivian Girls performance. With a smile that illuminates the entire island, Kickball Katy is just inches away, playing these tugging, lassoing riffs on her little Hofner bass; Cassie Ramone is off to the right, kneeling on the floor with her Fender Strat, reverb and the most radiant noise shooting off like white-hot stars in the overwhelming sky. Ali, in bright-red, heart-shaped sunglasses, pounds the kit with lightning rolls and furious passion. All together now, so simply, and pulsing with such great life, they sing, over and over again: “I can’t, I can’t, I can’t get over you.”

RAMSES III: I Could Not Love You More
Type TYPE 052 (translucent orange LP). 2009. Daniel Freeman, prod.; Stephen Lewis, Spencer Grady, prods. ADD; TT: 57:49

Would you like to hear something extremely beautiful? Daniel Freeman, Stephen Lewis, and Spencer Grady sit calmly and wring subtle magnificence from lap-steel guitars, samplers, and keyboards, combining it all with their own pleading sighs and simple field recordings—trickling water, wind in the leaves, the sounds of birds calling to one another—to draw a painfully restrained and impossibly lovely journey. The song titles mirror the moods: “We Shall Never Sing of Sorrow,” “The Kindness in Letting Go,” “All Shall Be Well.” This album amplifies life’s most exquisite joys and makes more bearable its deepest sorrows.

FRED MILLS

JAMES BROWN: Live at the Apollo

I grew up in a small Southern textile town, and one summer afternoon in the early 1960s I observed a caravan of cars and trucks speeding past our house, all bearing US and Confederate flags. Excited, I asked my father if we could join the “parade,” but he explained that “it’s not our kind of parade”—that the people were afraid of all the changes going on in America, and they sometimes went out and did mean things. A year or so later, when I started buying records, I discovered Live at the Apollo, recorded in 1962. The album’s power floored me; in that instant, I understood what those folks had been afraid of.

LEONARD COHEN: Live in London

Admittedly, it’s cheating to include a 2009 release here; albums need years to season before they can prove their greatness. But as I write, I’ve just come back from seeing The Bard put on an astounding concert, and as its set list and performances closely mirrored those of Live in London, I feel confident in my selection. All the classics are here, from a grave yet sardonic “The Future” to a show-stopping, extended take on Cohen’s greatest composition, “Hallelujah.” More important, though, is that voice: older, yes, but no less elegant, still clipped in romance and tragedy, and abetted by an ensemble of sterling musicians and singers. Hallelujah, indeed.

DAN OUELLETTE

RANDY WESTON: The Spirits of Our Ancestors
Randy Weston, piano; Taib Khvue, alto saxophone, alto flute; Devex Redman, Billy Harper, Pharoah Sanders, tenor saxophone; Dizzy Gillespie, Idrees Sulieman, trumpet; Benny Powell, trombone, bass trombone; Alex Blake, Jamal Nasser, bass; Idris Muhammad, drums; Big Black, Azredian Weston, percussion; Yassin Chady, gembri, karkaba, clapping, vocals; Meba Liston, arr. Antilles 314-511 896-2 (2 CDs). 1992. Randy Weston, Brian Bacchus, Jean-Philippe Allard, prods.; J. Newland, eng. TT: 106:37
Stunning New Cremona M at CSA

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One of the high points of rhythm-oriented pianist Randy Weston's career, the vivacious *The Spirits of Our Ancestors* celebrates the African roots of jazz with indelible lyricism, charged percussion, and brilliant musicianship in adventurous, meter-shifting arrangements for a 12-piece band by longtime Weston collaborator Melba Liston. Guests include Dizzy Gillespie and Pharoah Sanders, who join the likes of Dewey Redman and Idris Muhammad in expressing the beauty, joy, and mysticism of Weston's 10 originals. While the full band enthralls during such epic tunes as the spirited "African Cookbook" and the Latin-sparked "African Sunrise," it's Weston's pianistic brilliance that carries the day, especially on the solo pieces that bookend these CDs: "African Village Bedford-Stuyvesant 1" and "A Prayer for Us All."

**HEADS HANDS & FEET: Heads Hands & Feet**

Tony Colton, vocals; Albert Lee, guitar, dobro, vibes, Moog synthesizer, vocals; Ray Smith, guitar; vocals; Chas Hodges, bass, banjo, fiddle, vocals; Mike O'Neill, piano, organ, vocals; Pete Gavin, drums, percussion, vibes, vocals. With: Elton Dean, alto saxophone; Jerry Donahue, Ray Osborne, backing vocals.


To the best of my knowledge, Heads Hands & Feet's eponymous 1971 debut on two LPs has never been issued on CD Stateside. (It was released on CD in the UK in 1996 by See for Miles Records, now out of print.) It's a shame—this jaunt through Americana by a crew of Brit rockers cofounded by guitarist Albert Lee and singer-songwriter Tony Colton is a rare jewel. While the album starts out with a rocking vibe typical of the era, by the time the band gets into the swing-funky "Green Liquor" and the rollicking hoedown "Country Boy" (which became a hit in 1984 for Ricky Skaggs), it's largely a high country affair, with the dobro-flavored, fiddle-spiced "Tryin' to Put You On," the Appalachian-channeled "Devil's Elbow," and the bango-plucked, shuffling "Everybody's Hustlin'," which distinctively enters the Johnny Cash zone (it's a shame he never covered the tune). Lee delivers tasty licks throughout, and Soft Machine alto saxophonist Elton Dean guests on two tracks. The slower tunes are average, except for two beauts: "Look at the Machine" and "A Prayer for Us All." Weston's pianistic brilliance that carries the day.

**KIP HANRAHAN**

Kip Hanahan put together a supergroup for the ages in his 1983 Conjure Project, a collection of song settings and "inspirations" that is tremendously fun to listen to, while remaining true to Ishmael Reed's outlow spirit. Highlights include "Sky-diving" (conclusion: "learn how to fly"), as well as "Yes Grow's" reduction of Reed's 420-page 1972 magnum opus, *Mumbo Jumbo*, to 4:04. I'm also rather partial to the hokum-inspired line "Betty touched his organ / Made his cathedral rock," from "Betty Ball's Blues." The original American Clave LP featured spectacular sound, the Sting-flushed Pangaea CD slightly less so—but this hi-rez download is a revelation.

**ROBERT J. REINA**

**HETH AND JED: Between the In and the Out**


"Betty touched his organ / Made his cathedral rock," from "Betty Ball's Blues." The original American Clave LP featured spectacular sound, the Sting-flushed Pangaea CD slightly less so—but this hi-rez download is a revelation.

**JON HASSELL: Last Night the Moon Came Dropping Its Clothes in the Street**

Jon Hassell, trumpet, keyboard; Eddyne M'Kachiche, violin; Ewind Arset, Rick Cox, guitar; Jan Bang, Bino I.A. Deane, live sampling; Jamie Lohrber, keyboard, drums; Peter Freeman, bass, percussion, guitar; Helge Norbakken, Pete Lockett, drums; Steve Shehan, percussion


This recording is the culmination of all the ambient music composer-trumpeter Jon Hassell has been writing over the last 25 years. Here, the foundations or "continuo" are the sampled acoustic and electronic textures that provide the tapestries that support Hassell's simple melodies for electronically altered trumpet. Kheir Eddine M'Kachiche's Indian-tinged violin provides counterpoint for that trumpet, and Peter Freeman's woofer-busting bass anchors it all. Nor is this recording mere studio trickery—in a stunning and dramatic performance of these works I recently heard at Carnegie Hall, the ensemble pretty much replicated this recording. (XXXII-4)

**WES PHILLIPS**

**GEOFF MULDAUR & THE TEXAS SHEIKS: Geoff Muldaur & the Texas Sheiks**


Listeners who came of musical age during the folk scare of the early 1960s will immediately recognize here the voice of Jim Kweskin—though it's deepened since those early days of "roots music," his mastery of it has grown. This tribute to the early Piedmont string bands of the 1920s and '30s is a hoot, and Muldaur is ably aided by an all-star cast. Best of a very good lot are Muldaur's reprise of "Blues in the Bottle"—a standard back |

**KALMAN RUBINSON**

**STRAUSS: Eine Alpensinfonie, Macbeth**

Marek Janowski, Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra


Strauss's orchestrations of his tone poems are often massive, but their internal precision is such that the performers to carefully balance the inner voices in order that the resulting sound be delicately tempered. A similar burden falls on the shoulders of the recording team, who must capture a huge dynamic range while sacrificing none of the fine-grained detail. Here's how it's done. The Pittsburghers play better than I've ever
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Janowski balances the forward thrust of the narrative while paying careful attention to the jewels he uncovers along the way. The recording team has captured a live performance in Heinz Hall without confining the dynamics or losing any of the luscious instrumental tone of Eine Alpensinfanie. This has been a go-to composition for generations of audiophiles, and this recording takes the cake for ours.

HAYDN: Violin Concertos 1 & 4
MOZART: Sinfonia Concertante, K.364
Rachel Podger, violin; Paolo Bencossi, viola; Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment

Rachel Podger’s recording of Vivaldi’s La Stravaganza (Channel Classics CCS SA 19503), a wonderful union of great art and superb recording, was a revelation to many and a Baroque spectacle. Since then, Podger and engineer C. Jared Sacks have released a slow but steady stream of lovely recordings. This one, however, stands apart for its nearly perfect sound and superb music-making. As with the Vivaldi, Sacks has captured a small ensemble with exquisite detail and a judicious but satisfyingly warm bass. Some reviewers have thought the bass excessive, but the bass is most prominent through the least of my systems, and perfectly balanced through the best. Podger and violist Pavlo Beznosiuk perform Mozart’s Sinfonia Concertante as if conjoined souls, easily edging out, in delicacy and style, the team of Julia Fischer and Gordan Nikolic (SACD/CD, Pentatone PTC 5186 098). And Podger’s soloing—and conducting—in the Haydn concert are models of style and charm. Just brilliant.

LELAND RUCKER
RY COODER: Chavez Ravine

Crazy concept: A 15-song historical narrative about the destruction of a Latino barrio in 1950s L.A., “where the sidewalk ends” to make way for Dodger Stadium at Chavez Ravine: a sleazy tale replete with cool cats, AM radios, ward heelers, a touch of McCarthyism, backroom deals, bulldozer operators—even a Space Vato in a UFO. Even crazier: Tell that story through the prism of the conjunto, R&B, soul, and jazz grooves of that lost world remade by Little Willie G, Lalo Guerrero, and Don Tos. It’s a true tale genuinely worth telling, and it’s Ry Cooder’s peculiar genius that he can narrate this peculiar yarn and make you shake your ass off while you listen. (XXIX-2)

BOB DYLAN: Modern Times

On one album, the most varied musical styles of Dylan’s career—equal parts Bing Crosby, Tiny Tim, Memphis Minnie, Robert Johnson, Muddy Waters, and Chuck Berry—with lyrics that at times play off obscure poems written during the Civil War. It’s perhaps a mellower hard (“my cruel weapons have been put on the shelf”), a fellow now ready to admit that “I’ll be with you when the deal goes down.” But there’s just no way to stop chuckling when you hear Dylan scratch out the phrase “the buying power of the proletariat’s gone down,” or know what he means when he draws, “I’ve sucked the milk out of a thousand cows.” Modern times, indeed.

JASON VICTOR SERINUS
MAHLER: Symphony 8, Adagio from Symphony 10
Erich Wolfgang; Els van den Heever, Laura Claycomb, sopranos; Karin Kerssemaekers, Yvonne Naef, mezzo-sopranos; Anthony Dean Griffey, tenor; Artur Kelsey, baritone; James Morris, bass-baritone; San Francisco Symphony & Chorus, San Francisco Girls Chorus, Pacific Boychoir; Michael Tilson Thomas San Francisco Symphony 821936-0021-2 ( 2 SACD/CDs). 2009. Andreas Neubronner, prod.; Peter Laenger, eng. DSD/DDD. TT: 83:35

With eight strong vocal soloists, three large choruses, and a huge orchestra going full blast, live recordings of Mahler’s Symphony 8 are an equal test for conductors, performers, engineers, and systems—just holding the whole thing together is quite a challenge. Michael Tilson Thomas does far more than that, communicating Mahler’s off-ecstatic heavenly affirmations with eloquent poetic force. His soloists, save for the growing James Morris, are astounding in their vocal beauty. After the exultation of Symphony 8, the cry of pain at the heart of the wrenching Adagio of the unfinished Symphony 10 opens another doorway into Mahler’s epic swings between ecstasy and despair. A recording to live for.

HANS HOTTER: The Great Bass-Baritone
Music of Bach, Brahms, Loewe, Schubert, Schumann, Strauss, Wagner, Wolf
Hans Hotter, bass-baritone; Gerald Moore, piano; many other accompanists

The undisputed Wotan of the electrical era, Hans Hotter’s fame rests on far more than Wagner. For more than 50 years, he wielded his magnificently resonant bass-baritone with eloquence. Equally famed for his grandiose pronouncements as for the lightness he could bring to intimate lied, Hotter’s capacity to convey wisdom, compassion, and suffering transcended the vocal limitations that grew more pronounced with age. These performances of Bach, Brahms, Loewe, Schubert (including the famed 1954 Winterreise with Moore), Schumann, Strauss, Wagner, and Wolf, recorded between 1947 and 1958, magnificently convey Hotter’s ability to speak from his heart to yours. No translations, damn it, not even on the Web.

DAVID SOKOL
RUFUS WAHNWRIGHT: Want One

Three years before returning to the scene and courageously reconstructing Judy Garland’s classic 1961 Carnegie Hall concert, Rufus Wainwright created this gem of his own. A remarkable album that feels like the soundtrack to a gripping Broadway show for the new millennium, Want One is steeped in vulnerability, sexuality, romanticism, hope, and curiosity. Many of the songs, such as “I Don’t Know
What It Is," with its slow build and lyrical nod to Garland herself, are propelled by Wainwright's driving piano playing and have the melodic grandeur of classic late-1960s Beatles and Beach Boys, Really! And his voice, a supple tenor, is a thing of beauty. The supporting cast of musicians includes guitarist Charlie Sexton; drummer Levon Helm; Wainwright’s mom, Kate McGarrigle, on banjo and accordion; and sister Martha Wainwright. Wainwright’s dad, Loudon III, doesn’t perform, but makes a cameo in the lyrics of the final song, “Dinner at Eight,” about a tense father-son dinner date years earlier. It’s provocative and emotional, and very different from the twisted song inspired by breastfeeding that illustrious Dad wrote and recorded; in 1971, about his then-baby son: “Rufus Is a Tin Man.”

**STEPHEN BRUTON: What It Is**

Austin’s Turner Stephen Bruton was always something of a well-kept secret among connoisseurs of hip, contemporary American music. A stellar songwriter, storyteller, and guitarist with a keen wit and an openhearted spirit, he produced memorable albums by the likes of Alejandro Escovedo, Marcia Ball, Jannine Dale Gilmore, Hal Ketchum, and Chris Smither. And for decades, as a touring musician, he performed with Kris Kristofferson and Bonnie Raitt. But T.S., who succumbed to cancer last May, also made some wonderful albums of his own. *What It Is*, his first, is a five-star showcase of his myriad talents, from electrifying Keith Richards-esque playing on “This Train Is Gone” to heart-wrenching vocals and slide guitar on his breakup tour de force, “Getting Over You,” a song lovingly covered by Willie Nelson with Raitt herself. That songs on *What It Is* is like the gorgeous “Too Many Memories,” have also been recorded by such A-listers as the Highwaymen (Kristofferson, Nelson, Johnny Cash, Waylon Jennings) and Patty Loveless is yet another testament to Bruton’s craftsmanship and timeless good taste, which are everywhere on this masterpiece.

**JOHN SWENSON**

**CHARLIE HADEN LIBERATION MUSIC ORCHESTRA: Not In Our Name**

Charlize Haden, bass; Carla Bley, piano, arr.; Miguel Zenon, alto saxophone; Chris Cheek, Tony Malaby, tenor saxophone; Michael Rodriguez, tenor saxophone; Steve Cardenas, guitar; Matt Wilson, drums; Cedric Chace, trombone; Joe Daley, tuba; Steve Cardenas, guitar; Matt Wilson, drums. Venue: 80004949-02 (CD). 2004. Charlie Haden, Carla Bley, Ruth Cameron, prods.; Gerard De Haro, eng. DDD: TT: 68:57

Thirty-six years after their first Liberation Music Orchestra recording, Charlie Haden and Carla Bley again collaborated to strike one more cultural blow against the empire. From Vietnam to Iraq, one constant is that these musicians spoke out, and once again, they did so eloquently. The entire band played as if their lives hung in the balance. Bley’s arrangement of the “America the Beautiful” suite, combining the original with Gary McFarland’s interpretation, “Lift Every Voice and Sing,” and Ornette Coleman’s *Skies of America*, is one of the great moments of history. Bley conducted, but Haden was, as ever, the human metronome, his bass swaying back and forth like a maestro’s baton as he propelled the pulse of this music as only he can. This is the sound of heroism.

**BOB DYLAN & THE BAND: The Basement Tapes**


How can something that existed for years only as myth prove so powerful a reality well after its time? Released nearly a decade after it was made, and now freshly available in a digitally remastered version, these sessions paved the way for the entire range of what is now known as American, and are arguably the greatest performances not only of The Band but of Bob Dylan as well—great not in some concert-setting sense, but great in the sense of music as the carrier of archetype, the moment when dreams overtake consciousness, the blink of an eye when the fiddle is played by the spirit of the ancestors. Outside of time. Channeling field hollers, blues, gospel, and back-porch performances by unknown hillbillies who worked off the tuning produced by a bottle of moonshine and barefoot girls dancing a hoe-down in the dust. Music for falling from a rope swing into a cold mountain lake on a hot summer day.

**SAM TELLIG**

**SIBELIUS: Symphonies 5 & 7**

Paavo Berglund, Chamber Orchestra of Europe


I often attended concerts of the Philadelphia Orchestra when I was living there and Eugene Ormandy was principal conductor. (We had Ormandy almost every week. He liked to stay home.) Throughout his career, Ormandy championed the music of Sibelius—the late RCA recordings of Symphonies 4 and 5 have been reissued by ArkivMusic.com, duplicated from Japanese remasterings. But here’s a real find: Paavo Berglund’s out-of-print Finlandia release of Symphonies 5 and 7, to which I was introduced by John Marks. Smaller forces lead to greater clarity—open, airy, fresh orchestral textures. The playing is as bracingly crisp and clear as glacial runoff. I've discovered the rest of the cycle, which I saw selling used on German Amazon.de (ASIN of the four-disc set: B000024725). Symphonies 3 and 4 are revelatory, in the way light shines through the darkness.

**CAMBRIDGE SINGERS: Lighten Our Darkness: Music for the Close of the Day, including the Office of Compline**

Music of Bourgeois, Byrd, de Victoria, Guerrero, Handl, Lassus, Mundy, Rachmaninoff, Rheinberger, Sheppard, Tallis

John Rutter, The Cambridge Singers; with John Harte, reader; Simon Wall, precentor

Collegium COLCD 131 (2 CDs). David Millinger, prods.; no eng. credited. DDD: TT: 100:15

I first heard this elegiac but uplifting choral-works compilation at John Mark’s place, through Harrieth JESER speakers driven by Luxman’s Neoclassico 10Wpc tube amp and matching solid-state CD player. It sounded divine there, and just as heavenly in my own living room with my Harbeth Compact 7 ESW speakers. I could play the Byrd setting of “Oh Christ who art our light and day” daily. For me, these discs get at the heart of religion: they are about spirit, that which lifts us higher. Meanwhile, down to earth, do your speakers—does your system—do ambience? Here’s how I sometimes close the day without mixing a Finlandia Martini . . . or banish the darkness without turning on the lights.
“Let me conclude by saying that I’ve been searching for affordable, reliable, and flexible tube monoblocks with near-reference quality performance for decades and have finally found them.” — Jim Hannon, the absolute sound Issue 99, January 2010

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Almost every assumption you might make about Vienna Acoustics' Klimt The Kiss loudspeaker by looking at it would be wrong. It is not a stand-mounted two-way loudspeaker. It's a three-way, with a coincident tweeter-midrange. And that ain't no stand—it's an integral part of the speaker. It does not have a conventional cabinet—there are two separate enclosures, complete with micrometer control of both vertical and horizontal axes. And those sure aren't plain-vanilla drive-units—they're about as unique as they come.

When I say you, of course, I mean I. When I first saw The Kiss ($15,000/pair), when Vienna Acoustics debuted its newest addition to their Klimt series at the 2009 Consumer Electronics Show, I misidentified every one of those characteristics. Then I listened to the speakers—and that drew me in for a far more thorough examination. Impressed by its performance before I was intrigued by its potential—it proved a fitting prelude to a Kiss.

Let's kiss afresh, as when we first begun
About that "stand"—with only a single, slightly bowed side-pillar, it struck several of my visitors as looking incomplete. You'll love it or hate it. But if you buy the concept, you buy the stand—it's included in the base price, and its height is calculated into The Kiss's performance parameters.

At the heart of The Kiss is the 7" (180mm) flat, radially ribbed coincident driver first seen in Vienna's Musik. The flat-spider-cone portion of the coincident array is made of a compound that incorporates a proprietary material called X3P, and covers everything from 100Hz to 2.6kHz, where a 25mm silk-dome tweeter carries the response out to 20kHz.

Why ribbed? Well, that's for rigidity—many coincident drivers are conical because a cone has better dynamic stability than most lighter, flat pistons. Vienna Acoustics' chief designer, Peter Gansterer, used finite-element analysis (FEA) to obtain a maximum rigidity that interferes as little as possible with a flat response.

The 9" cone of the woofer, also of X3P, is similarly ribbed and designed in-house specifically for The Kiss. It uses a multiple-radius profile to maximize stiffness and minimize mass, and is mounted on a port-loaded woofer enclosure.

The midrange/tweeter array is mounted in its own enclosure, which Vienna calls the Music Center, atop the woofer cabinet, and "decoupled" from it by a swivel joint of drawn aluminum. That joint allows the Music Center to be
moved in the horizontal and vertical axes relative to the bottom cabinet, the adjustments controlled by two precision-threaded screws on the rear of the cabinets. Each has its own adjustment “meter” to ensure repeatable and consistent results. The idea is to get the placement of each speaker about as right as possible, then fine-tune the rake and toe-in as needed.

The Kiss also has two small switches, labeled "T" (treble, duh) and "B" (bass, ditto). Neither greatly affects the sound—by design, claims Vienna Acoustics. They’re there for minute room-acoustic compensation, especially "1", which was included to add air to over-damped rooms.

The Kiss has substantial low-profile binding posts with big, knurled knobs—it’s easily on my short list for Least Fussy Speaker Connections Ever. The crossover is first-order.

THE IDEA IS TO GET THE PLACEMENT OF EACH SPEAKER ABOUT AS RIGHT AS POSSIBLE, THEN FINE-TUNE THE RAKE AND TOE-IN AS NEEDED.

Kiss me and be quiet
In my room, The Kisses ended up about 4' from my front wall and about 2' from the sidewalls, with a fair amount of toe-in. Adjustments via the speakers' caliper knobs were minimal: I needed only a slight declination in the Music Center's rake (I sit high, as they say), and a more moderate additional toe-in. However, after getting the speakers sited pretty well (I thought), those slight final adjustments truly locked in the sound. Neither the "T" nor the "B" switch added substantially to my musical enjoyment, so I left them in their neutral positions. Nice to have, I reckon, but not necessary in my room.

Although The Kiss is (sort of) a stand-mounted speaker, dainty it ain’t. Almost 2' deep, it occupies about the same footprint as many floorstanders. Also, despite a higher-than-average specified sensitivity of 89dB, it wants a bit of welly from accompanying amplifiers.

My only other setup-related thought is that the asymmetrical stands may not anchor The Kiss as well as a less stylish solution might. Even with meticulous leveling, mine rocked a bit, until I placed 25-lb York barbell plates on their bases—inelegant but effective.
Kill then, and bliss me / But first come kiss me

When I listened to John Sumun's composition "Stone Ridge," from Tomasz Stanko's From the Green Hill (CD, ECM 1680), Anders Jornin's powerful double bass propelled the music along with authority and an astonishing amount of physicality. It wasn't so much that I had to keep reminding myself that The Kiss is a full-range three-way—the sound took care of that—but I was consistently amazed by how extended the bottom end was.

At the same time, Dino Saluzzi's bandoneón was remarkably present—I could hear the breath through its reeds, not to mention the shimmer of their harmonic overtones. Ah, and then Stanko enters. Holy Moly! The Kiss had jump factor aplenty. Stanko's trumpet was powerful, mellow, and utterly convincing.

That sense of presence wasn't a coloration, as demonstrated by "Oh Shenan—

in the woofer's nearfield response, which results from the port resonance's back pressure holding the cone still, lies higher in frequency, at 42Hz (fig.3, blue trace), and the port itself features slight peaks below and above this region (red). There are also a couple of peaks apparent in the port's midrange output, but these are at a low level and will be even further suppressed by the fact that the port faces away from the listener. The woofer itself has a narrow bandpass, peaking between 70 and 150Hz, while the flat midrange unit (fig.3, green trace) rolls off slowly below 300Hz. This results in quite a degree of overlap between the outputs of the woofer and midrange unit. Together with the upper peak in the port's output, this leads to a somewhat boosted output between 80 and 160Hz. Yes, this is exaggerated in this graph by the nearfield measurement technique, but finding the optimal room placement for The Kiss will be critical if the speaker is not to sound overripe.

Higher in frequency in fig.3, the midrange and treble response (taken with the B and T switches down) suffers from a lack of energy in the low treble and a slight on-axis boost in the octave between 8 and 16kHz. Whether this behavior will affect the speaker's perceived balance depends on the dispersion, but I was a little alarmed by the presence of the peak just below 2kHz, which I could hear with pink noise.

Fig.4 shows the Vienna Acoustics' lateral dispersion, normalized to the response on the tweeter axis, which is thus portrayed as a straight line. The speaker becomes somewhat directional between 1 and 2kHz, which will work against the audibility of the on-axis peak in the same region. The off-axis flare above 2kHz looks worse than it is because the on-axis suckout between 2 and 3kHz fills in rapidly to the speaker's sides. The tweeter does get quite directional above 10kHz, which means that the excess would require the services of a crossover somewhere in there.

Not to slight The Kiss's tweeter—the crossover to it was seamless and perfectly balanced. All of Haden's guest string players on Rambling Boy—Metheny, Douglas, Sam Bush, Ricky Skaggs, et al—sounded immediate (and, of course, different), with the requisite amount of Haden or The Kiss—in fact, the combination made me tear up every time I heard it.

The Kiss was exquisitely capable of revealing the emotional core of every type of music I played through it. There are speakers that I judge accurate but never really warm up to. The Kiss was not one of them. Part of its cuddle factor may well have been the seamless response of its midrange driver. Certainly, Vienna Acoustics isn't wrong when they point out that this driver alone covers the entire vocal range—which you'd think would beat any multiple-driver combination, which of course.

I WAS CONSISTENTLY AMAZED BY HOW EXTENDED THE BOTTOM END OF THE KISS WAS.

star Rosanne Cash. That's not a criticism of Haden or The Kiss— in fact, the combination made me tear up every time I heard it.

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VIENNA ACOUSTICS KLIMT THE KISS

of floating overtones. Accurate, yes, but not overdone.

As a counterpoint to the Haden disc, I listened to the dance movement of Suite Castellana, from David Russell's Music of Torroba (CD, Telarc CD-8045). Russell's classical guitar had a darker tone than the steel-string dreadnaughts on Rambling Boy, of course, with a duller (albeit still vivid) overtone structure. Russell was also unambiguously placed within the acoustic of his favorite recording venue: Mechanics Hall, in Worcester, Massachusetts. While Russell was clearly somewhat closely recorded, The Kiss got out of the way of the hall's acoustic, allowing me to hear the support and amplification of that good room.

The Kiss also surprised me repeatedly, even when I wasn't listening attentively. Waiting for my wife to get off work one day, I had my music server on Shuffle and up popped "The Jezebel Spirit," by David Byrne and Brian Eno. Distracted by that week's New Yorker, my first thought was, I've always liked this song. After a minute, it occurred to me that, this time, I wasn't really liking this song. I wandered over to the server's display and saw that I was listening to an old mastering, 1993's Eno Box II: Vocal (CD ripped to ALAC, Virgin 39114) rather than the superior 2009 remastering of My Life in the Bush of Ghosts (CD ripped to ALAC, Nonesuch 79894). So I switched, naturally, and was immediately greeted with dance—and then I did what any audiophile would do: I deleted the file from Eno Box II.

On another day, I was idly listening to the Mothers of Invention's Burnt Weenie Sandwich (CD, Rykodisc RCD-10509) when I was knocked out by the live-sounding drums in "The Little House
VIENNA ACOUSTICS KLIMT THE KISS

I Used to Live In." As a lifelong Zappa freak and audiophile, I know better than to expect sonic integrity from most of his recordings—he loved to edit together snippets from different dates and sessions, wasn’t above using a variable-speed oscillator to convert one key to another, and audio verité just wasn’t his thing.

However, Zappa also leavened all his studio tinkering with substantial sections of essentially unaltered live recordings. “Little House” includes some of the most extended such passages, and, as The Kisses reminded me, is an awfully good example of how excellent the Mothers could sound on the right night in a good hall. But back to those drums: they really knocked me out through the Vienna Acoustics. They were alive and in the hall, with loads of air and crunch.

I’m pretty sure, based on the lack of fancy drum flourishes, that it’s Jimmy Carl Black bashing the skins, and I have to credit The Kisses for their perfect pacing; I frequently forget to credit Black with his phenomenal sense of the naked beat.

After the kiss comes the impulse to throttle

I’ve managed to hang on to the Thiel CS3.7s ($13,000/pair) since reviewing them in December 2008, and thought they might prove an interesting comparison to The Kisses. While the Thiel is a floorstander with a passive-radiator-loaded woofer, it, like The Kiss, employs a novel coincident midrange-tweeter combination.

The Thiel’s Haden’s bass had a slight bit more propulsion through the Thiels. I listened repeatedly to “Ramblin’ Bone” through both and treble are relatively uniform, though there is a trace visible of the peak just below 2kHz, which may have been exaggerated by the fact that the tubed BAT VK-55SE amplifier was used for this measurement. The rolloff above 9kHz is due to the increasing absorptivity of the room’s furnishings in the high treble. As for The Kiss’s balance lower in frequency, I wouldn’t have described it as “relaxed,” as did WP, particularly in comparison with the Thiel CS3.7, which had less energy apparent in-room in the top two octaves. (See fig.8 at www.stereophile.com/floorloudspeakers/1208thi/index4.html, though this response was taken around 36" farther away from the speakers than was that of The Kiss.) However, it’s possible that WP was subconsciously taking as his reference level the Kiss’s upper-bass region, which is about 5dB hotter than the Thiel’s. And, as he noted, the CS3.7’s bass does go somewhat lower than The Kiss’s.

Turning to the time domain, fig.7 shows The Kiss’s step response on the tweeter axis. Despite the concentric design of the tweeter/midrange unit, the tweeter’s output arrives at the microphone about 300µs before that of the midrange; both are connected in inverted acoustic polarity. The woofer’s step is the slowly rising trace beginning at 4.5ms; connected in positive acoustic polarity, it smoothly follows on from the return of the midrange’s step to the time axis. In turn, this correlates with the good frequency-domain integration of their outputs seen in fig.3. The speaker’s cumulative spectral-decay plot (fig.8) is disturbed by some high-Q resonances in the mid- and high treble, but of more subjective import is the ridge of delayed energy associated with the on-axis peak at 1.7kHz. The audibility of this resonance will depend to some extent on kind of music being played; however, as I wrote earlier, I could hear the effect of this behavior with pink noise; I do wonder if it contributes to The Kiss’s excellent retrieval of recorded detail by adding a slight spotlighting effect.

There is much to admire in the measured behavior of Vienna Acoustics’ Klimt The Kiss. But as much as WP liked the speaker’s sound, I was somewhat bothered by that peak in the low treble.

—John Atkinson
Located in the heart of historic downtown Santa Fe, Constellation Home Electronics offers a wide selection of the finest brands of electronics with a commitment to uncompromising service.

Come by to see and hear some of the fine products we have on display including one of our reference systems featuring Vienna Acoustics The Kiss Loudspeakers with Ayre Acoustics KX-R and MX-R reference pre and power amplifiers.
made it awfully persuasive—especially for lovers of vocal music.

'Scuse me while I kiss the sky
I'd put Vienna Acoustics' Klimt The Kiss up against some of my favorite speakers in the world. In fact, in this review, I did. It more than held its own in that company.

The Kiss is a really large speaker masquerading as a stand-mount. In fact, it's both, but visually it "disappears" nicely, and many listeners will jump on it for precisely that reason. The Kiss is also attractive in both its Piano Black lacquer and Sapele finishes, and exquisitely constructed. Furthermore, the innovative rake and toe-in adjustment screws might make The Kiss work better than more conventional designs in many acoustic environments. It doesn't matter how good a speaker is if it doesn't sound good in your room.

Of course, innovation, precision, and construction come at a price, and in this case the price is $15,000/pair. Considering what you get, that seems reasonable to me, but ultimately, you have to go by how your ears and wallet work things out.

I foresee many such a deal sealed with The Kiss.

I'D PUT VIENNA ACOUSTICS' KLIMT THE KISS UP AGAINST SOME OF MY FAVORITE SPEAKERS IN THE WORLD. IN FACT, IN THIS REVIEW, I DID.

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speakers, and found the seamlessly relaxed sound of The Kiss and the precisely articulated extension of the Thiel equally attractive. Too close to call? No, I could hear the differences fairly easily—I just couldn't bring myself to prefer one over the other.

With Russell's Torroba, I was less ambivalent. The Thiel added a slight amount of weight to Russell's guitar—or perhaps it would be more accurate to say more body. The Thiel may have been slightly better at rendering string harmonics and air, but The Kisses were better at putting the instrument itself in my listening room. I preferred the latter, but other listeners might well go the other way.

The CS3.7s just flat knocked me out with Eno and Byrne's "The Jezebel Spirit," however. Yes, the slam and presence of the track through The Kisses continued to impress me, but the Thiel not only upped the "pop" factor in the basses and synths, their slightly brighter balance better matched the song's made-from-found-elements ethos.

That could also be said of the Mothers' "The Little House I Used to Live In," but the Thiel just didn't make Jimmy Carl Black's drums "pop" from the mix as definitively as did the Viennas. The CS3.7s were unswervingly articulate and persuasive, but I really enjoyed that sense of discovery in a 40-year-old favorite that The Kisses granted me.

To put this in perspective, I have to point out that I love, love, love the Thiel CS3.7. I have also fallen under the spell of the Vienna Acoustics Klimt The Kiss. Both speakers are quite special, but I'm not sure they're after the same listeners: If you want punch in the bottom end, the Thiel is probably the way to go. But the smoothness and relaxed seamlessness of The Kiss's midrange to high frequencies

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I'D PUT VIENNA ACOUSTICS' KLIMT THE KISS UP AGAINST SOME OF MY FAVORITE SPEAKERS IN THE WORLD. IN FACT, IN THIS REVIEW, I DID.
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**Denon AH-NC732K**
With good marks for both sound and silence, the Denon AH-NC732K is priced well, packs into a very small hard-sided case, and runs 40 hours on a single AAA battery. A great choice for the frequent traveler who spends a lot of time in the air on long flights. $249.99*

**Monster Beats by Dr. Dre**
While not strongly touted as such by Monster, the Beats by Dr. Dre are indeed noise cancelling headphones that provide moderate isolation. But their biggest talent is a lovely full and rich sound with solid bass and stunningly good looks. A very cool can for hip-hop and urban music fans. $299.95

**Sony MDR-NC500D**
You may cry once shelling out the long green for the Sony MDR-NC500D and their very well designed digital signal processing noise cancelling and acoustic correction circuitry. But thereafter, you'll be blissfully secreted away from the blaring chaos of the world, listening to your favorite tunes. $399.99

One more important note: In-ear headphones like the Shure SE530 and Etymotic hf5 provide better noise isolation and sound quality, but you have to be content with sticking something in your ears. If you'd like more information, come to our blog and search for “noise cancelling” for a comparative review, or simply call our expert sales team for personal help. We'd love for you to get it right between your ears.

* call for best price

Hanss Acoustics
T-30

ART DUDLEY

Two-speed belt-drive turntable with 2 AC synchronous motors, 2 tonearm mounts, 1 outboard power supply. Speeds: 33.3rpm, 45rpm. Wow, flutter, rumble: unspecified.

Dimensions: 24.8" (635mm) W by 8.7" (222mm) H by 17" (435mm) D. Weight: 83.2 lbs (37.8kg).

A07093396.

$4600. Approximate number of dealers: 5.


Description

The T-30 is more or less the midpoint of the Hanss turntable line. Indeed, their current catalog reflects a modular approach, with successively dearer models sharing the same basic design, yet with more: more motors, more tonearm mounts, more drive belts, more platter mass, more layers of plinth.

To dissipate unwanted vibrations as effectively as possible, the basic Hanss plinth is a sandwich of thin aluminum plates and thick acrylic sheets, bonded together and

1 Apparently, until a few years ago, these basic designs were offered under the Canadian brand name Amari Acoustics.
machined into a shape that, viewed from above, suggests a very large North American blue crab. But the shape is less fanciful than van der Rohe. Three of its five organic-looking pods incorporate Hanss’s sturdy support modules—each using an assembly of powerful rare-earth magnets and a rounded metal foot—while the remaining two pods contain the T-30’s tonearm supports. Hanss’s standard practice is to supply the T-30 with one armboard cut for a Rega RB300 or similar tonearm, and the other cut for an SME arm. The Lotus Group, which distributes Hanss turntables and record cleaners in the US, says they can also supply blank armboards, or ones cut for such alternative tonearms as the Triplanar. The Lotus group’s Neil Levy adds that Hanss hasn’t yet devised a mounting arrangement for such extralong arms as the EMT, the Schick, the Shindo, or various others, new and old—but they intend to.

The T-30’s feet used opposed magnets to provide an isolating spring action. Similarly, the 2.73”-thick, heavy, black-anodized aluminum platter is supported by an appropriately robust bearing, using magnetic opposition to relieve some but not all of the contact pressure between parts. The bearing’s rare-earth magnet probably could do the whole job, but Levy says that a properly adjusted T-30 bearing allows contact between the ceramic lower spindle, stainless-steel thrust ball, and brass bearing well/thrust pad, to achieve the proper degree of mechanical grounding. The inner surface of the height-adjustable bearing well is machined with a spiral groove, presumably to help circulate the relatively light oil within.

Hanss supplies two AC synchronous motors with the T-30, each topped with an acrylic drive pulley and snugged into a multi-tiered aluminum base that’s intended to not touch the plinth. The two bases look identical but are of slightly different heights; thus, the three silicone-rubber drive belts powered by the left-hand motor ride the platter a bit higher than the three belts powered by the right-hand motor, for even drive distribution. At my test bench, the AC cords from both motors plug into the back of a common outboard power supply, nicely styled to complement the T-30’s plinth. In addition to producing clean, stable sinewaves for the motors, a battery-powered GRS (generate, rotate, synchronize) optical speed counter. Hanss takes speed stability seriously!

**Installation and setup**

One sign of a good company is good packing—and the Hanss T-30 had very good packing. Its heavy, generously sized carton was fitted with three layers of sculpted foam, into which the turntable’s various parts fit unambiguously well. The installation manual was sparse but sufficient, and literally every step began with the word *please* I like that in a manual.

The T-30 requires an open shelf space measuring at least 25” W by 18” D, so I placed it on the top surface of my Box Furniture D3S rack, which also did a fine job of supporting the T-30’s 83 lbs. Lowering that heavy plinth into place may have been the only real challenge: Installing the bearing assembly on the plinth took half a minute, including the time it took to open the bearing’s plastic pouch. Installing the platter on the bearing consumed another eight or nine seconds of my life. And it took less than five minutes more to install the motors into place, plug them into the power supply, and gently stretch the six belts around the platter rim and pulleys.

Installing my Rega RB300 tonearm required a bit more work, but even that was notably easier than usual: The T-30’s Rega armboard incorporated a fine-pitched height-adjustment mechanism, with twin setscrews for holding the arm pillar neatly and securely in place. (I guessed that a real vinylphile had had a hand in the T-30’s design once I saw that they were 2mm setscrews, requiring the same size of hex key that most of us keep on hand for installing phono cartridges.) As delivered, my review sample had the SME armboard in the right-hand position, with the Rega-style armboard off to the back. Swapping them around was the most time-consuming chore presented by the T-30—loosening and

**ONE SIGN OF A GOOD COMPANY IS GOOD PACKING—AND THE T-30 HAD VERY GOOD PACKING.**

The floor in my listening room is ¼”-thick tongue-and-groove Brazilian cherry over plywood, supported by 2” by 10” joists: I know because I installed the flooring myself. And even though I did the right thing by starting in the middle of the room and working my way out in both directions—done properly, that helps to allow the boards to expand and contract with the seasons—the floor still tends to buckle and bounce a bit in summer.

So I was doubly surprised that the Hanss T-30, which I used during the latter half of summer 2009, was supremely immune to footfalls. Normal foot travel never—and I mean *never*—displaced the stylus, or created even an untoward noise. Jumping up and down on the floor next to the rack made itself known as only a small and temporary variation
in speed: a bit of warble, for want of a better word. The only way I could get the needle away from the groove was to lift the tonearm. Read into that what you will. I was impressed.

Happily, the Hanss T-30 played music well, too, with a consistently big sound: good scale and exceptional bass weight. Better still, it performed acceptably well at will. I was impressed.

in speed: a bit of warble, for want of a momentum With the Hanss T-30, recorded good scale and exceptional bass weight lift the tonearm. Read into that what you might as well listen to CDs.

Large-scale classical music fared best with the Hanss. The opening of Beethoven's Symphony 4, performed by Pierre Monteux and the London Symphony Orchestra (LP, Victrola/Classic VICS 1102), had the right amount of tension, with richly good colors and textures in all instrumental sections. Only during the early bars of the third movement did the Hanss's bass and low-midrange weight seem to confound the notes themselves: The rhythm there was slightly less apparent—tonally, less clear—than it was with my Thorens TD-124 Mk.II.

Dynamically, the Hanss was at least the equal of my reference. That and the T-30's weighty presentation made piano music a delight, in stereo and mono alike. (With regard to the latter, try any of Gieseking's Beethoven recordings on Angel to hear what I mean.) Certain pop LPs sounded equally dramatic, especially good live recordings, such as Neil Young's Time Fades Away (LP, Reprise MS 2151) and Fairport Convention's House Full: Live at the LA Troubadour (LP, Hannibal HNB1 1319). The instrumental break following Dave Swarbrick's dryly sung "Grant me one small relief," in House Full's "Banks of the Sweet Primroses," was appropriately louder and more forceful than the preceding line: a nice touch missed by so many source components.

But listening to other pop LPs, even more than with the above-mentioned Beethoven recording, I missed my Thorens's greater clarity of timing. "Minor Swing," from David Grisman's Hot Dawn (LP, Horizon SP 731), sounded present and good, but it was less nuanced than I'm used to hearing. The Hanss, in a word, didn't swing. There was also just a bit too much thickness and sustain in the sound of Eddie Gomez's string bass; on the Thorens, it was just as deep but a lot faster.

On the plus side, instrumental images had excellent body and presence with the Hanss: On the Grisman LP, Stéphane Grappelli's fiddle was there, front and center. And all the instruments on Fairport's House Full were delightfully more substantial than usual. Dave Mattacks' wonderful ride-cymbal work was especially enjoyable on "Sir Patrick Spens," and both guitars had fine physical attack—especially the one played by Fairport stalwart Simon Nicol, who, I believe, was firmly in the heavy-string camp back then.

A final and perhaps inconsequential note: During use, one or more of the T-30's six belts could often be seen skittering up and down the massive platter's rim, howsoever slightly, apparently coaxed into vertical motion by the minute grooves left behind by the machining process. I listened closely, to try to detect any audible consequence of this—flutter, lack of pitch stability, whatever—and heard none.

Conclusions
Most American men will never spend $100 on a bottle of Cognac or $1000 on a suit. That doesn't mean that Maison Suprême single-vintage XO or an undated J. Press "Presidential" aren't bargains: They are, clearly and honestly.

Assuming that perfectionist audio is your luxury of choice, here's something else for the list: the Hanss T-30, which offers the buyer two tonearm mounts, two motors, a massive platter, magnetic isolation, exotic styling, and an inarguably fine level of manufacturing quality, all for $4600. Yes, that's wildly more money than most people would consider spending on a record player; and, yes, that's good value.

There's a lot of very good competition at or near this price: Upmarket models from Linn, Roksan, Well Tempered, VPI, Clearaudio, and Rega can be had for under $5000, all with different presentations and system compatibilities. For the adventurous, the same amount could buy a classic Thorens or Garrard in excellent original or restored condition. Still, the user-friendly Hanss T-30 is a distinctive choice with a combination of sonic and musical qualities that may well suit your system—and your music: Not quite a sho-in, but very much worth a close look and listen.
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World Radio History
Pro-Ject Debut III

RECORD PLAYER

ROBERT J. REINA

Turntable with prefitted arm and cartridge.

Lid open: 16.2" (415mm) W by 14.2" (365mm) H by 15.8" (405mm) D. Lid closed: 16.2" (415mm) W by 4.8" (118mm) H by 12.5" (320mm) D. Weight: 12.1 lbs (5.5kg). Platter weight/diameter: 2.7 lbs/10.9" (1.3kg/280mm).

Flat black; custom colors, add $30.

In the January 2010 issue of Stereophile I gushed effusively about the $450 Marantz PM5003 integrated amplifier. Not only was I impressed with the sound, build quality, and features of this very affordable component, but, intrigued by how it might be combined with other gear to build a complete entry-level system for about a thousand bucks, I began to ponder other entry-level components that might nicely complement it. My goal here, of course, is to inspire a new generation of young audiophiles. I felt a turntable would be a good place to start.

Even Michael Fremer is surprised at how hip it now is to play vinyl again, especially among the younger set. I was thinking about this when I listened to the new solo recording by Chris Jones, the bassist in my jazz quartet, Attention Screen. To my surprise, his Overcast Radio release in the Dubstep/Grime genre, "Midnight Sun/Vendetta" (45rpm single, Surface Tension STNSN002), is available on vinyl and as an MP3 download, but not on CD. I was recently discussing the surge in vinyl demand among our youths with Josh Bizar, founder of audio and music retailer Music Direct, who sees the potential for future revenue in this development. In his words, "Young people are buying entry-level turntables, and someday they may actually have jobs."

So I decided to review Pro-Ject's Debut III turntable ($349), to see how it would fare not only in a revealing reference system, but also when matched with other entry-level components.
The Debut III is a complete "plug'n'play" record player that includes a Pro-Ject 8.6 tonearm and an Ortofon OM 5E moving-magnet cartridge. The cartridge comes already installed and aligned; all you need do is install the counterweight, set the tracking and antiskating forces, unlock the motor transport screw, and you're ready to go. The instructions are clearly written; any mechanically challenged person who has never seen a turntable before should be able to set up a Debut III in 20 minutes.

I've had a lot of experience with turntables, having owned rugged, well-designed decks from VPI, Rega, Goldmund, Linn, and Thorens; the Pro-Ject fits nicely into this company. As I unpacked and set up the Debut III, I noted how well-thought-out and simple the design is, and how rugged and stable it seems. As I examined the Debut III, the phrase "cost-cutting to a price point" never entered my mind. The turntable is available in flat black ($349) or any of several custom colors (add $30): piano-gloss black, silver, glossy white, red, yellow, blue, and green. The paint on my attractive red sample reminded me of Porsche's "Arrest Me Red" hue.

The Pro-Ject's AC motor has a two-step metal pulley, for 33 and 45rpm (78rpm is available as an option), which drives the hub and platter via a flat-ground belt. To reduce the transmission of vibrations, the motor is decoupled from the fiberglass plinth, which sits on four shock-absorbing feet. The steel sheet platter is fitted with a felt mat and sits on a hub with a spindle of chrome-plated stainless steel runs on a polished ball bearing in a brass housing. The 'table's power supply is separately housed. The headshell and undamped arm tube are cut from a single piece of aluminum. The inverted horizontal bearings consist of two hardened stainless-steel points, but the arm's vertical tracking angle (VTA) is not adjustable. The phono cable terminates in gold-plated plugs. The Ortofon cartridge outputs 4mV, tracks at 1.75gm, and is recommended to be loaded with 47k ohms. Finally, the Debut III has an attractive plastic dust cover.

I fired up my Creek Destiny integrated amplifier and alternate between the Epos M5 and Monitor Audio RS6 Silver speakers. Finally, I connected the turntable and set the platter rotating. I could hear a very faint low-level hum from the motor to tell me it was on. However, when listening to music at loud levels, this motor noise wasn't noticeable.

When I played complex and difficult music, two things struck me. First, I would have expected a turntable fitted with such an inexpensive cartridge (the Ortofon OM 5E lists for $55) to produce some smeared with torture-test records, or at least a hint of mistracking distortion. But there was no trace of either with the Debut III, even in comparison with my ClearAudio Virtuoso Wood cartridge, one of the best-tracking cartridges I've ever heard. Second, I expected an entry-level turntable with a starter cartridge to have some minor irregularities of tonal balance. After several months of listening to a broad range of recordings, I can conclude that, tonally, this record player was fairly close to dead neutral.

But it wasn't the Pro-Ject's tonal balance that most impressed me; it was the 'table's delicate rendition of transients. On "Melting," from guitarist Bill Connors' Of Mist and Melting (LP, ECM 1120), there's a fairly busy syncopated drum passage by Jack DeJohnette in which he gets an incredibly broad range of colors from his cymbals and snare. Every timbral detail, and his dynamic envelope, even when he strikes the cymbals and snare, was clear through the Pro-Ject. Pianist Eva Nordwall's rapid-fire upper-register passages in György Ligeti's Continuum (LP, Bis LP-53) were clear, consistent, and uncoagulated. And the electronic bleeps, bangs, and blurbles in "Reflections in the Plastic Pulse," from Stereolab's Dots and Loops (LP, Drag City DC-140), zipped and zagged with a forceful tonal fullness that made listening to this uptempo rock waltz involving.

Linn toe-tappers should find the Debut III's pacing satisfying, especially with electric music. The interplay of bassist Marcus Miller and drummer Al Foster in "Back Seat Betty," from Miles Davis' The Man with the Horn (Dutch LP, CBS H4708), was chuggin', slammint', groovin', with no trace of overhang or disintegration between the musicians. The Pro-Ject also let me groove on Alvin Lee's...
raunchy, dirty guitar solo on Willie Dixon's "Spooful," from Ten Years After (LP, Deram DES 18009), which I find much more interesting than any of Cream's versions of this tune.

The dynamic envelope of well-recorded jazz was also convincing through the Debut III. Jackie McLean's wailing alto sax on Charles Mingus's Pithecanthropus Erectus (LP, Atlantic 1237) was linear and natural. This same recording highlighted the Pro-Ject's natural bass reproduction. Although I thought Mingus's bass was at times just a tad woolly, overall his instrument sounded woody and natural, and locked in perfectly with the rhythm section, with no overhang.

Jazz recordings also spotlight the Debut III's open, natural midrange. Eric Dolphy's bass-clarinet solo on "God Bless the Child," from Eric Dolphy Vol. I (LP, Prestige 7304), emerged from between the speakers in holographic, breathy, timbrally perfect splendor. Voices, too, shone through the Pro-Ject—the three-part harmony on "Born to Rock," from Buck Dharma's Flat Out (LP, Portrait, BL 38124), had a silkily angelic quality that I never hear when Dharma sings with Blue Oyster Cult. High frequencies were also natural and extended. An acid test for string tone are the massed strings on André Cluytens and the Orchestra de la Société des Concerts du Conservatoire Paris's reading of Ravel's Daphnis et Chloé (LP, EMI Testament Volumina (LP, Candide CE 31009) tests the extreme frequency and dynamic range of a solo pipe organ, and I wasn't as involved in listening to this disc as I've been with other turntables; it left me just a touch cold. Finally, there was a tendency for very densely modulated passages to coagulate and smear a bit through the Debut III, as I heard during the cacophonous tutti passages of "A Jackson in Your House," from the Art Ensemble of Chicago's Great Black Music (LP, Actuel GET 368), and in the hairier passages of pianist Chick Corea's solos on ARC, his collaboration with Dave Holland and Barry Altschul (LP, ECM 1009).

But I'm nitpicking. The album that put this turntable's sound all together for me was Count Basie's 88 Basie Street (LP, Pablo 2310-901). On "Bluesville," the lower-register brass and woodwinds emerged from near blackness in silky bloom, as I noticed that Cleveland Estes' walking bass line was woody and deep without a trace of overhang or coloration. From my notes: "I didn't realize how great this album is."

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The Debut III exhibited plenty of air with most recordings, unraveling quite a bit of detail. It was particularly adept at distinguishing among different instruments in dense recordings, whether it was Francis Poulenc and Jacques Février's pianos on the former's Concerto for Two Pianos (LP, EMI ASD 517), or the middle passage of "The Inexhaustible Quest for the Cosmic Cabbages," from my favorite rock album, the Amboy Dukes' Marriage on the Rocks/ Rock Bottom (LP, Polydor 24-4012), in which Ted Nugent overdrives 12 electric and acoustic guitars, each playing a different line; with the Pro-Ject, I could easily follow each.

The Debut III wasn't perfect. With other turntables, I've heard more ambience and hall sound from one of my favorite contemporary classical works (and the first record composer John Harbison ever played for me), Lukas Foss's Baroque Variations, with the Buffalo Philharmonic conducted by the composer (LP, Novesuch 71202). Gerd Zacher's recording of Ligeti's Voluntaria (LP, Candide CE 31009) tests the extreme frequency and dynamic range of a solo pipe organ, and I wasn't as involved in listening to this disc as I've been with other turntables; it left me just a touch cold. Finally, there was a tendency for very densely modulated passages to coagulate and smear a bit through the Debut III, as I heard during the cacophonous tutti passages of "A Jackson in Your House," from the Art Ensemble of Chicago's Great Black Music (LP, Actuel GET 368), and in the hairier passages of pianist Chick Corea's solos on ARC, his collaboration with Dave Holland and Barry Altschul (LP, ECM 1009).

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ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

ANALOG SOURCE

Rega Planar 3 turntable, Syringa PU-3 tonearm, Clearaudio Virtuoso Wood cartridge.

DIGITAL SOURCE

Creek Destiny CD player.

INTEGRATED AMPLIFIERS

Creek Destiny, Marantz PM 5003.

LOUDSPEAKERS

Monitor Audio Silver RS6, Epos M5, Paradigm Atom v.5.

CABLES


ACCESSORIES

Various by ASC, Bright Star, Celestion, Echo Busters, Salamander Designs, Simply Physics, Sound Anchor, VPI.

—Robert J. Reina

Comparisons

Using the same recordings, I compared the Pro-Ject Debut III with my Rega Planar 3 turntable, fitted with a Syrinx PU-3 tonearm and Clearaudio Virtuoso Wood cartridge, whose collective retail value (based on the last available prices) I estimate to be a bit over $2000. The Pro-Ject's bass definition was almost as clean as that of my reference rig, if maybe just a touch plummy in the midbass, but the Debut III didn't seem to extend as deeply in the low bass. The 'tables' sibilants and

THE PERFORMANCE OF THE PRO JECT DEBUT III STARTLED ME WITH THE LEVEL OF MUSICAL REALISM POSSIBLE AT THIS PRICE.
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Playback Designs MPS-5

SACD/CD PLAYER

MICHAEL FREMER

EQUIPMENT REPORT


DIMENSIONS: 17.1" (435mm) W by 3.5" (98mm) H by 16.7" (423mm) D. Weight: 29 lbs (13kg).

SERIAL NUMBER OF UNIT REVIEWED: 5038.

PRICE: $15,000. Approximate number of dealers: 8.

MANUFACTURER: Playback Designs, 4160 SW Greenleaf Drive, Portland, OR 97221. Tel: (503) 221-0465. Web: www.playbackdesigns.com.


Playback Designs was founded less than three years ago. However, with the release in 2008 of its MPS-5 Music Playback System—a slim, full-featured SACD/CD player and DAC that costs $15,000 and is built in the US—the company has since established itself as a significant player in high-performance digital audio.

It's probably a prejudice, but in audio, we tend to associate individual design achievement with analog equipment (phono cartridges, loudspeakers), and anonymous group effort with digital gear. How many enthusiasts of SACD are familiar with Playback Designs' Andreas Koch?

Koch's pedigree in the field of digital audio is long and impressive: working for Studer ReVox in 1982, he designed and built the world's first fully asynchronous digital audio sample-rate converter. He then designed one of the first digital audio filter banks—512 paralleled filters were employed to reduce, in the digital domain, noise in vintage recordings.

Koch then worked for Dolby Labs, where, in 1985, he built the encoder/decoder DSP system used in Dolby's first professional digital audio product, the AC-1 encoder and decoder used for TV audio transmission. In 1986 he built the hardware for the first version of what would become Dolby Digital compressed audio (originally AC-3), the default sound format of both DVD-Video and DVD-Audio formats.

Back at Studer in 1987, Koch oversaw there the development of a 48-track, 1/2" digital tape-recording format and, later, a PC-based hard-disk digital recorder. Back in the US but still working for Studer, Koch managed an engineering team that developed and launched, in 1992, Dyaxis—the hard-disk-based digital audio editing system.

In 1997, now working for Sony, Koch managed an engineering team that developed Sonoma, the world's first eight-channel system for recording, mixing, and editing in DSD, and now used in the production and postproduction of most SACD releases. Koch designed the digital components in the A/D and D/A converters used in the
Sonoma, then expanded them to a single-PC, 32-channel DSD system.

Koch became an independent contract engineer in 2003, and spent the next four years designing the digital componentry, algorithms, and architecture for EMM Labs’ highly regarded digital audio products, both professional and consumer. In that capacity, he invented new algorithms for sample-rate conversion, a discrete D/A converter, and new digital clock-management architecture.

On ending his relationship with EMM, Koch established Playback Designs with Blue Light Audio’s Jonathan Timm, who, aside from distributing various high-performance audio lines, was EMM’s vice-president of global sales and marketing. Blue Light distributes Playback gear in the US.

A full-featured, future-proof design

The MPS-5’s digital input/output section is carried in the chassis’s upper, silver-finished section; the lower, black half carries a modified TEAC Esoteric SACD/CD transport at the front and the D/A and analog output circuitry at the back. The DAC has AES/EBU, S/PDIF, and TosLink inputs capable of receiving stereo linear PCM signals with resolutions/sample rates up to 24-bit/96kHz, as well as a direct USB connection for Windows-based computers, though the latter accepts sample rates up to only 48kHz with 16-bit word lengths. Playback Designs’ proprietary optical link, called Playlink, connects to other Playback gear such as the MPD-5 DAC and supports multiple audio formats as well as multichannel configurations.

The MPS-5’s Auxiliary input permits unspecified “future expansion”; a second USB port supports software-based DAC updates; and an RS-232 port offers PC-based remote control. The analog outputs are balanced XLR and unbalanced RCA and BNC (50 ohm), for use with the darTZeel NHB-18NS preamplifier from Switzerland, which Blue Light Audio also distributes.

The MPS-5 is handsome, extremely well constructed, and ergonomically efficient. Its low profile—it’s only 3.5” high—makes it able to fit into relatively tight spaces. The transport controls, smartly located along the top plate’s front edge, are easily accessed regardless of where you place the unit.

The upper one of the MPS-5’s two well-lit, generously sized front-panel screens displays the sample-rate and input status; with CD playback, the right channel (fig.1, gray trace) was 0.2dB below the left (green). Playing back the "provisional" Sony test SACD, the player’s output was down by the same 0.5dB at 20kHz, but the ultrasonic response rolled off at the same rate it had done with 96kHz PCM, reaching -3dB at 32kHz and -13.4dB at 50kHz (fig.2). Playing back a pre-em...
the lower displays the disc track and time information. However, neither displays the track text information that is included on SACDs. The backlit remote control of milled aluminum is equally ergonomic. From it you can select among the various inputs, eject a disc, mute the output, invert absolute phase, dim the displays, switch between a hybrid disc’s SACD and CD layers (after first pressing Stop), switch from two- to multichannel output, change the transports time-function front-panel readouts, repeat a track or the entire disc, and directly select individual tracks.

Multichannel SACD playback is easily accomplished by adding the MPD-5 DAC, which is physically identical other than lacking the transport mechanism. In four-channel mode, the MPS-5 mixes the decoded center channel of a five-channel disc into the L/R analog front-channel outputs; the surround tracks exit digitally via the Playlink optical jack to the MPD-5. The MPS-5 can process up to six channels by outputting up to four additional channels of digital information via the Playlink.

While fitted with a clock output, the MPS-5 lacks a clock input—according to the instruction manual, the MPS-5 has an “elaborate and sophisticated” clock generator that doesn’t need to be locked to an external source. Incoming digital data are completely shielded from the internal clock circuitry through various buffer stages and unique control algorithms that “remove any incoming jitter.” Playback claims its DAC “performs equally well with jittery sources as with higher quality ones.”

Inside
Given Andreas Koch’s long and varied background in digital design, you’d imagine that few off-the-shelf parts would be found in the MPS-5, and you’d be correct. Field-Programmable Gate Arrays (FPGAs) programmed with proprietary algorithms replace the more commonly used OEM DSP chips and DACs. Instead of op-amp chips (not that there’s anything necessarily wrong with op-amps), the MPS-5 has discrete analog output components and ceramic circuit boards. According to Playback, the MPS-5 doesn’t rely on “3rd party vendors for any solutions.”

All digital input data are converted to double SACD’s sampling rate of 5.6448MHz. More significant is the claim that another Koch-developed measurements, continued

phasized CD, the MPS-5’s response was the same as with normal data (not shown), suggesting negligible deemphasis error. Channel separation was excellent, at >110dB below 1kHz, decreasing to a still-good 85dB at 50kHz (not shown).

As usual, for reasons of consistency with Stereophile’s library of digital-product measurements, which now goes back more than 20 years, my first test for resolution is to analyze the spectrum of the output signal of the device under test while it plays data representing a dithered 1kHz tone at -90dBFS, using a swept 1/4-octave bandpass filter. The result with 16-bit CD data is shown as the top pair of traces in fig.3. Usually, other than the peak at 1kHz touching the -90dB line, these traces show only the recorded dither noise. The Playback player, however, did appear to be contributing some noise, and to a greater extent in the left channel (solid trace) than in the right (dashed). There was also a trace of 120Hz hum apparent in the left channel, though at -113dB, this will not be audible.

Increasing the bit depth to 24 or playing back DSD data usually drops the noise floor low enough to reveal the player’s or processor’s own noise floor. (For an example of superb performance with this test, see the measurements accompanying the review of the Bryston BDA-1 processor elsewhere in this issue.) But to my surprise, given the Playback Designs player’s pedigree, both 24-bit PCM and DSD data gave a noise floor that was only 3dB lower than with CD data (fig.3, bottom two pairs of traces). And again, the left channel was noisier than the right—so much so that the
technology, Playback Designs Frequency Arrival System (PDFAS), “completely eliminates” jitter by removing it altogether from the audio signal. PDFAS is claimed to permit the elimination of traditional jitter-minimizing phase-locked loops (PLLs) because, regardless of source—MP3 player, PC music server, whatever—Playback says that PDFAS results in jitter-free connection.

The goal, of course, is to produce a signal that’s as close as possible to analog—and we like analog.

Use
Unlike the far more complex, more expensive, multi-component dCS Scarlatti SACD player I reviewed in August 2009, using the MPS-5 was so simple that even a turntable geek can do it without consulting the manual. The third letter in the MPS-5’s name could well stand for simplicity.

Select Disc on the remote control and the MPS-5’s lower screen lights up and its transport awakes. You can remotely open the disc tray to insert a disc, or use the transport controls on the top plate. The upsampling to twice DSD resolution is automatic, regardless of the input data rate. But don’t lose that remote—without it, you have no way of selecting among inputs.

The Esoteric transport was fast and responsive, quickly and silently executing track-jump commands. The ease with which its digital inputs can be selected makes switching among them trouble-free, especially compared to the dCS Scarlatti’s more complicated protocol. Switch from the transport to one of the digital inputs and it powers down and its screen goes dark—a nice touch that may enhance the MPS-5’s audible performance.

The SACD/CD transport plus the multiple DAC inputs allowed the MPS-5 to function as a convenient, pushbutton digital hub for my system’s full array of digital sources. It also freed up a few analog preamp inputs. The digital sources I used for this review included a Sooloos music server (coax), a Alesis Masterlink hard-disk recorder (AES/EBU), and a MacBook Pro laptop (TosLink via the Mac’s combination optical-digital/analog headphone mini-jack output).

The only disappointment was the Playback’s USB port, which is limited to 44.1kHz and 48kHz, 16-bit data.

measurements, continued
Left channel with DSD and 24-bit data was noisier than the right channel with CD data. Repeating the spectral analysis using an FFT technique confirmed the MPS-5’s disappointing performance (fig.4), with the noise almost high enough in level to obscure a dithered tone at -120dBFS. In addition, the noise floor for SACD playback was disturbed by some low-level enharmonic spikes (not shown).

Was the analysis being corrupted by ultrasonic noise being folded back into the audioband? Apparently not, as playing a CD track with a -1LSB DC signal gave the ½-octave spectral analysis shown in fig.5. Again, the left channel is noisier than the right, and while the ultrasonic noise from the DSD encoder’s noiseshaping gives a noise floor that rises above the audioband, this is not extreme (fig.5; note that the rise in noise is exaggerated by higher-frequency components leaking past the bandpass filter’s skirts). Looking at the output signal on an oscilloscope seemed to reveal both steady-state high-frequency noise and random bursts of higher-frequency noise. So while checking linearity error with spot tones gave excellent results down to -105dBFS or so, the result of my usual continuous sweep, which takes about 20 seconds to complete, was spoiled by bursts of noise (not shown).

The high-frequency noise obscures the shape of an undithered 16-bit PCM sinewave at -90.31dBFS (fig.6). You can hardly make out the three DC levels that you can see in the measurements sidebar for the Bryston BDA-1. And, as suggested by figs. 3 and 4, the picture is only a little better with DSD data (fig.7).
In every respect, the MPS-5 was a pleasure to use. Switching among files sourced from "Red Book" CDs and 24-bit/96kHz downloads stored on the Sooloos was seamless, the MPS-5 displaying the source signal's sampling rate and bit depth on its upper screen. (When I reviewed the dCS Scarlatti, the Sooloos was compatible only with 16/44.1 CD. Now it accepts 24/96 files—see Jon Iverson's Follow-Up review in October 2009.)

**Breaking in**

The dCS Scarlatti's flexibility allows the user to choose a preferred upconversion of sample rate or none at all. For the Scarlatti at least, 16-bit/44.1kHz converted to 24/176.4 seemed to produce the greatest transparency and apparent improvement in resolution, while DSD resulted in a sound somewhat lusher but cloudier, and less detailed and three-dimensional.

Between the departure of the dCS and the arrival of the Playback Designs, I paired the Sooloos with the DAC section of the Musical Fidelity DM25 CD player. Not surprisingly, given the Scarlatti's stellar sound, this was a big disappointment. The sound was warmed-over, smooth, and somewhat distant: inoffensive, but bland and uninvolving.

The MPS-5 doesn't let you choose the upsampling rate: You're locked into double DSD. Would that produce an even more lush, less detailed sound than the dCS at DSD resolution? That was what I expected, and, right out of the box, that was generally how the MPS-5 sounded—not at all "cold" or crisp, as electronics that haven't had a chance to break in usually sound. Instead, the top octaves were warm, stuffy, and closed-in. A recessed, edgy midrange and a lack of transparency produced an exaggerated attack that made well-recorded pianos sound simultaneously muffled and clangy. Voices were robbed of fleshy textures, and the bottom, though deep and powerful, was uncertain.

But that makes the MPS-5's out-of-the-box performance sound worse than it actually was; many fine qualities were also immediately audible. The sound had a pleasing immediacy, a physical grip, and a dimensional coherence that seemed to be blocked just behind an occluded sonic front. This wasn't all that enticing at first, but the sound was free of grain and other artifacts once

The MPS-5 had low levels of harmonic distortion, even into the demanding 600 ohm load (fig.8), and on the only subjectively benign second and third harmonics rise significantly above the level of background noise. (This graph was plotted using 24-bit PCM data; again the level of background noise is closer to 16-bit performance. DSD data didn't give a result that was appreciably better.) Intermodulation distortion was also very low, with all the distortion and aliasing products resulting from an equal mix of 19 and 20kHz tones at or below −94dB, or 0.002% (fig.9).

Finally, playing the Miller-Dunn diagnostic jitter test tone from a CD, the MPS-5 gave a very low level of word-clock jitter, the Miller Analyzer indicating just 123 picoseconds peak−peak, which is actually at the analyzer's resolution limit. When I fed the MPS-5 external 16-bit data from my PC via 15' of TosLink—very much a worst-case situation—the jitter rose to a still quite low 457ps, primarily due to a pair of sidebands at the data-related frequencies of ±229Hz. With the MPS-5 fed the same data via USB, the measured jitter level was unmeasurable with the Miller Analyzer. Though data-related sidebands can be seen in the right channel (fig.10), these are at the residual level of the squarewave harmonics in the test signal.

Early on in the testing of the Playback Designs MPS-5, worried that there was something wrong with our review sample, I took the cover off to check that all the ribbon cables were seated properly (they were) and that there was nothing obviously adrift (there wasn't). So while I was impressed by the player's standard of construction, I can't say the same about its technical performance. The relatively high level of background noise limits the MPS-5's resolution with SACD and external 24-bit data to not much better than 16-bit CD. I am puzzled, therefore, why Michael Fremer liked the sound of this player so much. Perhaps his description of its sound being "analog-like" is a clue—for reasons that are not fully understood, a signal with very-low-level random noise added is sometimes preferred, on that it is more intelligible, to the same signal without such noise.¹ But I feel that the MPS-5's measured performance precludes an unreserved recommendation. —John Atkinson

labeled “digititis,” and which many listeners chose to ignore, so in love were they with the absence of the artifacts of vinyl playback.

As the MPS-5 continued to break in over the next few months, I kept returning to, among other benchmarks, Piano Music in a Church, Endre Hegedus’s collection of works for solo piano by Chopin and Debussy—an “Almost Analog Digital” recording made in an Irish church (Tone-Pearls TPRCD1; www.tonepearls.com). During that time the recording went from sounding somewhat muffled and spatially confused, with the piano’s lower registers blending with the reverberation, to thin and brittle in the midrange (which accentuated the reverb), to finally opening up in the mids and becoming far better organized on bottom. The sense of space grew in confidence and filled out, almost like a balloon finally being inflated with enough air to take shape.

Curious friends who knew I had the MPS-5 in for review kept asking how it sounded. I’m not supposed to talk about products during the review process, but I’m also not supposed to be an asshole. So, to my friends, I would drop the occasional hint: the MPS-5 sounded “closed-in but promising,” or “disorganized but promising,” or “brittle and thin but promising.”

“Would you make up your mind?” one finally burst out. “Is it closed-in, or brittle and thin?”

“It’s both!”

The point is, if you get a chance to listen to the MPS-5, to avoid getting the wrong impression, be sure to find out how many hours it’s logged playing music.

While it’s impossible to know for sure, I think the MPS-5’s SACD playback is even more transparent and spacious than the Scarlatti’s. Kenneth E. Wilkinson’s recording of Artur Rubinstein, Stanislaw Skrowaczewski, and the New Symphony Orchestra performing Chopin’s Piano Concertos 1 and 2 (SACD/CD, RCA Red Seal 67902-2; originally LP, RCA Living Stereo LSC-2575) sounded more spacious, and the piano seemed more solid and better focused than I remembered. The image of the piano projected farther forward in space in front of the orchestra through both the Vandersteen 7 (currently under review) and my Wilson Audio MAXX 3 speakers.

After I’d turned in my review of the dCS Scarlatti, Reference Recordings sent along a new SACD transfer of one of its sonic spectacles, Eiji Oue and the Minnesota Orchestra’s Exotic Dances from the Open (RR-71 SACD), transferred from the original analog tapes. This one should be issued on vinyl for sure, but for now the SACD will have to do. It was easy to compare the original CD with the SACD, as well as with the 24/96 file (downloaded from HDTracks.com). Debate may rage between the partisans of PCM and SACD, but assuming engineer Keith O. Johnson accomplished all three transfers with the same playback deck and electronics and without messing with equalization, the clear winner—at least through the Playback Designs MPS-5—was the SACD. Its transparency, harmonic resolution, image specificity and delicacy, bass extension—every parameter you can think of—were superior to either PCM format, but especially compared to the CD, where the strings took

**ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT**

**ANALOG SOURCES** Continuum Audio Labs Caliburn turntable, Continuum Cobra tonearm, Castellon stand; Graham Phantom II tonearm; Oracle Delphi Mk.VI turntable, Oracle/SME tonearm; Lyra Titan i, Transfiguration Orpheus, Ortofon A90 cartridges.

**DIGITAL SOURCES** Camelot Round Table DVD player with Anagram Technologies D/A converter section, BPT-modified Alesis Masterlink hard-disk recorder, Sooloos music server, MacBook Pro laptop computer.

**PREAMPLIFICATION** Manley Steelhead, Einstein Turntable’s Choice, Sutherland The Hubble, Silicon Arts Design Concert Fidelity SPA-4B phono preamplifiers; daftTzeel NHB-1BNS preamplifier.

**POWER AMPLIFIER** Musical Fidelity Titan.

**LOUDSPEAKERS** Wilson Audio Specialties MAXX 3, Vandersteen 7.

**CABLES** Phono: Chris Sommovigo Design (proprietary for Continuum Audio Labs components), Hoivand MG2 Music Groove, Esoteric BN. Interconnect: TARA Labs Zero, Kubala-Sosna Emotion. Speaker: TARA Labs Omega Gold. AC: TARA Labs The One Cobalt, Shunyata Research King Cobra Helix CX.

**ACCESSORIES** Fine Elemente Pagode, HRS SXR equipment stands; Symposium Rollerbloc; Audiodharma Cable Cooker; Shunyata Research V-Ray II Reference, TARA Labs Power Screen power conditioners; Furutech DeMag & deStat LP treatments; Oyaide AC wall box & receptacles; ASC Tube Traps, RPG BAD & Abfusor panels; VPI HW-17F, Loricraft PRC4 Deluxe, Spin Clean record-cleaning machines.

—Michael Fremer
Digital I/O along the top; analog outputs along the bottom.

The better a CD sounded, the better it sounded 'straight up'[ie, no upsampling]—though I ended up preferring 24/176 upsampling, which combined excellent image focus and spatiality with the sensation of hearing more information. The hard-edged, disc's sound, the better it sounded upsampled to DSD.

The Playback Designs offers no "custom tailoring" with filters, but its upsampling to twice DSD didn't soften the sound at all. Instead, it produced a sound very similar, as I remember it, to the dCS Scarlatti set to upsample to 24/192 PCM circuitry,’ produced bass that was somewhat softer than and not as taut as the MPS-5’s, but the additional texture created by a more generous sustain did, to some degree, make up for it. Still, when you hear the Playback Designs rip through a complex rhythmic passage and lay it out with an iron-fisted grip, you'll be impressed.

Conclusions
I'm not suggesting that a $15,000 SACD player is inexpensive, but compared to some far more costly products that have passed this way, including the $80,000 dCS Scarlatti and the $28,150 Naim CD555, the compact, well-constructed Playback Designs MPS-5 offers impressive sound and build quality, and, with its multiple inputs, great versatility that includes upgradeability to multichannel. And its software-driven DSP means that performance upgrades are only a download away. You can even start with the DAC and upgrade it with the transport mechanism later, should you choose. The one disappointment was the USB input’s limitations of a maximum sample rate of 48kHz.

If you have a large collection of SACDs, you'll find the MPS-5 among the best-sounding players available today, combining great transparency, impressive delicacy and resolution of low-level detail, and, when called for, authoritative dynamic slam and depth—like bass.

The MPS-5 is also an equally compelling-sounding CD player. I suggest you listen to your favorite CDs and hi-rez PCM files and make up your own mind. I found the Playback Dac's high-frequency cleanliness, silent backdrops, and organizational skills impressive, and its overall sound rock-solid and very well controlled—and for sure better than the dCS Scarlatti’s upsampling of PCM to DSD.

So analog-like was the MPS-5’s decoding of SACDs and hi-rez PCM files that it has joined the very short list of players that make me want to sit down, undistracted by other activities, and actually listen to digital recordings—as long as I don’t go back to the turntable!
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n February 2009, I reviewed Bryston Ltd.'s first CD player, the $2695 BCD-1, and was very impressed by what I heard. The BDA-1 ($1995) is the Canadian company's first standalone DAC. It's slim, only 2.75" high, with the engraved company name, model number, and infrared sensor grouped at the extreme left of a front panel of polished aluminum. Farther to the right are two columns of four LEDs each that comprise the sample-rate indicator, which identifies the selected input's signal frequency and whether the BDA-1 has locked to it. Closer to the center is the Upsample control, which governs the conversion of the incoming digital signal synchronously to 192kHz or 176.4kHz. The Upsample LED turns green for 192kHz, red for 176.4kHz. Digital sources are selected by pressing one of eight pushbuttons just right of center: two TosLink, four S/PDIF (coaxial), one AES/EBU XLR, and one USB 1.1, the last accepting only signals with sample rates at or below 48kHz. An LED above each pushbutton lights
green for incoming PCM datastreams and red for other types, including multichannel Dolby Digital streams.

All of these functions, and the BDA-1's output level, are accessible from Bryston's BR-2 remote control (a $350 option). The BR-2 also can control Bryston's BCD-1 CD player, BP26 preamplifier, and B100 SST integrated amplifier. The remote automatically lights up when you pick it up in a dimly lit room.

On the rear panel, starting from the left, are: balanced and single-ended pairs of analog audio outputs; a single S/PDIF output; a single USB input; an AES/EBU XLR input; four S/PDIF inputs; two optical TosLink optical inputs; a two-pin trigger input to facilitate remote hardwired on/off control; an RS-232 port for uploading firmware; and an IEC 320-C14 power inlet to mate with an IEC-320-C13 AC mains cord.

**Internal Details**

Just behind the rear panel is the full-width, multilayered printed circuit board that carries the D/A and analog stages. I wasn't able to get inside the chassis because I didn't have a driver that matched its Torx #8 screws; however, the BDA-1's brochure includes a clearly labeled view of the BDA-1's innards. Most of the interior is empty space, with a single ribbon cable joining the circuit board to another behind the front panel.

Starting at the left of the main board are separate toroidal power transformers for the analog and digital power supplies. Nearby are multistage voltage regulation and filtering components, including electrolytic capacitors and a row of heatsunk voltage regulators. Each stage (input receiver, sample-rate converter, DAC) is independently regulated to prevent interaction and to minimize jitter. Careful trace routing is used to reduce the risk of capacitive coupling to achieve greater reduction of noise and distortion, especially for the low-voltage analog signal leaving the DAC. In the center is a Burr-Brown SRC4392 sample-rate converter chip, to the right of which is a pair of DAC chips, these 128x-oversampling 24-bit delta-sigma Cirrus CS4398s, the same as used in the BCD-1, though only one chip is used in the CD player. Finally,
on the far right are four rows of components that comprise the discrete analog amplifier's output stages.

Bryston describes the PCB as being constructed of double-sided epoxy glass with clearly printed component markings. All the components are surface-mount types, and high-quality, 0.1%-tolerance metal-film resistors and polystyrene capacitors are used. Soldered and other gas-tight mechanical connections are used for the signal circuits. Bryston's warranty is five years for the digital circuits, including parts and labor, and 20 years for the analog circuits.

**Design Considerations**

One of Bryston's primary goals for the BDA-1 was to reduce clock jitter, i.e., mistsinnings of the digital datastream presented to the DAC. Unlike the company's BCD-1 CD player, a one-box transport and DAC, the standalone BDA-1 must relock all signals fed to its data inputs. To maintain timing accuracy, the Bryston engineers used three different methods of maintaining accuracy and keeping jitter to a minimum: impedance-matching transformers to provide the best interface possible, re-clocking the signal, and synchronously up-sampling the signal.

The BDA-1's Burr-Brown SRC4392 sample-rate converter provides synchronous up-sampling: 32, 48, and 96kHz data are upsampled to 192kHz, while 44.1 and 88.2kHz data are upsampled to 176.4kHz. The Compact Disc's 16-bit depth can be increased to 24 bits, the additional 8 bits filled with placeholder information. While this adds no new information, the conversions of the sample rate and bit depth transform the digital signal into a format that can be optimally converted into an analog signal by the DAC, says Bryston. The D/A conversion is done by a pair of Crystal CS4398 integrated-circuit chips, which feed discrete-component, class-A output amplifiers.

**Set-up**

Knowing that the BDA-1's USB 1.1 input is limited to sample rates of 48kHz or lower, I used a Bel Canto USB Link 24/96 adapter (see John Atkinson's review in the May 2009 Stereophile, (top traces), the performance is dominated by the recorded dither noise. Increasing the word length to 24 bits reveals that the BDA-1's true noise floor is 20dB lower in the midrange and treble, implying a resolution of almost 20 bits, which is close to state-of-the-art. No power-supply-related spuriae are visible, and the Bryston readily resolves a tone at −120dBFS (bottom traces at 1kHz). Repeating the spectral analysis with an FFT technique (fig.4) unmasks some very-low-level harmonics with 24-bit data, as well as some odd noise modulation between 1.5 and 3.5kHz. This graph was taken with 44.1kHz data without oversampling engaged; switching in the oversampling raised the levels of the harmonics by up to 10dB (although the highest in level, the fourth and fifth harmonics, still lay at a low −126dB), but the low-treble noise modulation was not affected.

The plot of the BDA-1's linearity error with 16-bit data (not shown) revealed only the effect of the recorded dither. However, with its very low noise floor and superb resolution, the Bryston's reproduction of an undithered tone at exactly −90.31dBFS (fig.5) was superb, with the three DC voltage levels well resolved, the waveform perfectly symmetrical about the time axis, and the Gibbs' Phenomenon "ringing" on the waveform tops clearly evident. With undithered 24-bit data (fig.6), the BDA-1 gives a good approximation of a sinewave, despite the low signal level. (For poorer results on this test, see the review of the Playback Designs MPS-5 elsewhere in this issue.)

The harmonic distortion in the BDA-1's discrete output stage was very low, even into the punishing 600 ohm load.
Vol.32 No.5) to connect my Lenovo X61 laptop’s USB feed to one of the Bryston’s S/PDIF inputs with audio data up to 96kHz sample rates. The BDA-1 is small enough that I could place it atop my BCD-1 CD player. I connected the BCD-1’s S/PDIF output to the BDA-1’s S/PDIF input via a single Wireworld Starlight coaxial cable. I ran both single-ended and balanced Bryston XLR interconnect cables from the BDA-1’s output jacks to my Bryston BP26 preamplifier. I left in place the single-ended interconnects that ran from the BCD-1’s analog output to the Bryston BP26, whose front-panel input switch could then switch between the BCD-1’s analog output, the BDA-1’s analog output via single-ended interconnects, and the BDA-1’s analog output over balanced XLR interconnect, all sourced from the BCD-1’s CD transport.

The BDA-1 functioned flawlessly while I had it in my system. Digital signals were decoded instantly when an input was selected. As on Bryston’s BCD-1 CD player, the BDA-1’s status light goes dark when the unit is turned on; in standby mode, it glows red.

Listening
The first hi-rez digital music tracks I played on my laptop was a 24-bit/88.2kHz WAV file from a Naim recording of the Chamber Soloists of the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra playing Mozart’s Eine kleine Nachtmusik (from Naim Classical HD126). I also downloaded two files from HDtracks.com: a 24/88.2 file of Beethoven’s Symphony 3, “Eroica,” performed by Andrew Manze and the Helsingborg Symphony (from Harmonia Mundi HMU 807470); and all eleven 24/96 tracks of Chesky’s Ultimate Demon-
BRYSTON BDA-1

Soundstages were also wider and deeper when I played CDs. There was an enhanced sense of three-dimensionality, with more precise images of the instruments in space, as heard during the percussion solo in "Nardis," from Patricia Barber's Café Blue (CD, Premonition/Blue Note 21810 2). The cymbal appeared at extreme right, the double bass was centered behind the drum kit, the piano was on the right, and Barber's voice floated three-dimensionally between my Quad ESL-989s. Similarly, Mary Gauthier's voice was stunningly real as she sang "Long Way to Fall," from her Filth and Fire (CD, Signature Sound SIG 1273).

For the deepest bass notes, I supplemented the Quads with a pair of JL Audio Fathom f212 subwoofers (review forthcoming) and Bryston's 10B SUB external crossover. The BDA-1's recovery of microdynamic details was then unexpected result, given the success of this topology in such products as the Benchmark DAC1. Fed data via USB, the jitter dropped to just 98ps p-p (fig.12), though a couple of sidebands at the power-supply-related frequencies of ±120Hz are now evident.

Overall, and assuming the problem with 176.4kHz data was sample-specific, the Bryston BDA-1 measured very well. Still, I was puzzled by the noise modulation in the low treble, and the less-good performance with oversampling was not what I expected.—John Atkinson

www.Stereophile.com, February 2010

The resulting soundstage was the most realistic, palpable, and three-dimensional I'd ever heard in my room. Singers were enveloped in a 360° space that extended well behind them, as heard with the performance of Jimi Hendrix's "Little Wing," from the Chesky sampler. The first movement of the "Eroica" was spellbinding—I could hear subtle ambience cues I'd previously heard only at concerts.

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most evident, sharpening the leading edge of deep-bass transients and giving the combination of Quads and JLA suba a light, fast quality. The bass notes were integrated in time and space with the rest of the music. Powerful synthesizer bass notes were captured with dead-on pitch definition, adding pace, energy, and emotional weight to film soundtracks. The deeper synthesizer grows and pulses literally shook the room in the tortuous mix of percussion, chimes, gongs, and snare drums that is “Attempt on the Royals,” from James Horner’s soundtrack score for Patriot Games (CD, RCA 66051-2). The bass remained clean, solid, pitch-perfect, with no spurious noises. I could easily discern subtle changes of pitch in timpani notes in Eji Ose and the Minnesota Symphony’s recording of Stravinsky’s The Rite of Spring (CD, Reference RR-70CD).

The BDA-1’s midrange reproduction was effortless and clean, with excellent tonality and instrumental timbres. I was strongly impressed with the rightness of the timbres of guitar and saxophone on L.A. Four’s Going Home (CD, Ai Music 3 2JD-10043). Male singers benefited from the BDA-1’s tonal accuracy. Willie Nelson’s cover of T.S. Brunton’s “Getting Over You,” from Across the Borderline (CD, Columbia CK 52752), was particularly natural and clean, and entirely free of honk or hollowness. I heard the same rich but totally natural timbre in Buddy Miller’s mandolin-guitar accompaniment in his “Prayer in Open D” from Emmylou Harris’s Spyboy (CD, Eminent EM-25001-2). I heard layers of resonant, pulsing, raspy bass didgeridoo in “Rainforest Wonders,” from his Didgeridoo Spirit (CD, Indigenous Australia IA2003 D). Best, perhaps, was Tito Puente’s solo on “Tito,” on Arturo Sandoval’s Hothouse the Bryston conveyed an image of his timbres spread across the soundstage, Puente moving back and forth among the three bales spread across the soundstage, Puente moving back and forth among the three drums, each clean drumstroke producing a sudden snap of drumhead, rim, and stick wood, mixed with trumpet blasts and more rim shots—all without compression. And I delighted again in hearing the sledgehammer-like thudding of the bass synthesizer in “Assault on Ryan’s House,” from Patriot Games, and a segment of Stravinsky’s Le Sacre du Printemps, from the recording by Elsa-Pekka Salonen and the Los Angeles Philharmonic (SACD/CD, Deutsche Grammaphon 02899 477 5198-2), in which wind instruments are mixed with the thunderous stomping of strings in a pulsing tempo and surging energy that build through the Adoration of the Earth, then erupt into the explosive Dance of the Earth.

Conclusions

The Bryston BDA-1 let me enjoy the best-sounding digital playback I’ve ever heard in my listening room, outshining even Bryston’s own BCD-1 CD player. This might be related to the fact that the BDA-1 has two Crystal CS4398s vs the BCD-1’s single chip.

The Bryston BDA-1 has become an essential part of my listening experience. Mated to my Quad ESL-989 loudspeakers and used with Bel Canto’s USB Link 24/96, the BDA-1 let me enjoy hi-rez files downloaded from the Internet, producing open highs, detailed imaging, deep soundstaging, and well-defined and authoritative bass that connected me to those crucial elements of music: pace, rhythm, and emotion. And, yes, the BDA-1 also let me enjoy a higher level of musical dimensionality and realism. As Bob Reina did when he added the Audio Research Reference 110 amplifier to his reference system, at the end of my listening sessions for the BDA-1, I put down my notebook and picked up my checkbook. I give the BDA-1 my heartfelt recommendation for the highest rating in Stereophile’s “Recommended Components.”
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The beginning, I had a room adjacent to my office—a room filled with bicycles, hi-fi gear, and assorted crap I'd never gotten around unpacking since our last move. Feeling ambitious, I thought I might turn it into a guest room, and emptied it. It wasn't a large room (15' L by 9' W by 7' H), and, looking at it empty, I realized that by the time I'd installed a queen bed in there, there wouldn't be tons of space left for any other function—and besides, how often did guests sleep over? So I did what any audiophile would do: I decided to turn it into a dedicated if economy-size listening room.

It was a basement room: two walls were foundation block, covered by lath and Sheetrock, with the remaining two walls and ceiling comprising Sheetrock over geranium antique 2x4s. The floor was ceramic tile over concrete. This "spare" room was the only room in the house that wasn't jammed full of bookcases; minimally furnished, it sounded hideous—clattery and shrill, with lumpy, ill-defined bass.

I added a thin llama-wool rug and a thick carpet pad of crushed foam, which helped reduce clutter a tad—partial treatment of the first floor reflection, perhaps? The shoutiness and lumpiness persisted, so I hung additional rugs on the rear and sidewalls. This had little effect on the room's most serious frequency aberrations, but it did reduce HF clang, if not necessarily in a good way.
Sometimes you Trap yourself

Since I’d already worked out a way of hanging rugs without putting holes in them, I reasoned that I could roll my own room treatments by building frames of 1" by 4" furring strips and hardware cloth, then loosely stuffing them with Mountain Mist Polyester Fiberfill, manufactured by Stearns Technical and left over from an aborted loudspeaker project. (I knew it would come in handy one day.) I then hid the completed panels behind the wall hangings and sat down to listen to some music and bask in my genius.

Even behind the hangings, my panels were butt-ugly. Worse, the room sounded really bad—maybe not as bad as when completely untreated (though even this is arguable), but still clattery, now extremely bass-heavy, and somewhat muffled in the highs. There was no air, no imaging, and damned little pleasure in listening to music there.

My first thought was to relegate the room to burn-in duties, pre-cooking electronics and running-in speakers using the tried-and-true method of wiring ‘em out of phase and facing ’em toward each other. But I couldn’t let go of the idea of turning the room into a reviewing tool. I read some more about DIY room treatments and decided that I just didn’t have the space or the tools to make serious bass traps, or even-frequency absorption panels. So I did what audiophiles so often do: I looked for someone else to solve my problem.

That person turned out to be Ethan Winer, co-founder and co-owner, with Doug Ferrara, of RealTraps, LLC. I sent Winer measurements and photographs of my room, and he came up with a multi-part room-treatment plan. Part 1 was to tame the LF lumpiness caused by my room boundaries, for which he recommended hanging four RealTraps MondoTraps (57" H by 24" W by 42.5" D, reviewed by Jim Austin in August 2007, see www.stereophile.com/roomtreatments/807real) across the room’s corners, leaving open space behind them. The MondoTrap ($299.99) marries a loose membrane to a rigid fiberglass core that dissipates “trapped” sound as heat and, according to Winer, works best when sound can “enter” it from front and rear. Technically, a MondoTrap doesn’t have to go in a corner, but anywhere else they took up too much space than I was willing to give them. Besides, when I mounted low-wattage CFL bulbs behind them, I had me some mood lighting for listening sessions.

Sometimes you get Trapped

Adding the four MondoTraps completely transformed my room’s bass response—suddenly, I could hear the wonderfully fat bass licks in “Crystal Blue Persuasion,” from The Best of Tommy James and the Shondells (CD, Bellaphon 28607004), which had previously gone missing in action. The punchy bass line in “Third Uncle,” from Doug Hilsinger and Carolene Beaty’s Brian Eno’s Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy (CD, DBK Works 111), became, well, punchy, and began to coalesce between the speakers—at least, more than it had before.

Winer then suggested that I add two MiniTraps—essentially, small Mondo-Traps measuring 48" W by 24" H by 3.25" D—one on the front wall, between the speakers, and one in the middle of my rear wall, about 3' behind my listening chair. The MiniTrap ($199.99) offers bass absorption down to about 80Hz, and perhaps even lower if you “float” them on spacers to leave air space behind them. The MiniTraps’ immediate effect in my room was to even out the mid-to-low-HF response; I now had no room clutter, and instruments had bodies and, yes, even air. Better, my speakers now threw a coherent, near-holographic image right smack dab in the center between the speakers. On “Third Uncle,” the bass line bounced from speaker to speaker and seemed to swirl around the room, while Hilsinger’s primal drumming had presence and physical heft. Massed voices, such as those of the Estonian Chamber Choir in Arvo Pärt’s Kanon Pokajanen (CD, ECM New Series 1654/55), possessed a solidity and that wonderful weighty-but-weightless quality that voices can have in a good acoustic. Before I added the MondoTraps and MiniTraps, my listening room had masked that quality.

One problem remained: the room is small. Only 9' wide, it limited the amount of space I could leave between the speakers, which meant I had to listen in the quasi-nearfield, the speakers toed-in in an attempt to ameliorate the first wall reflections. Winer had a solution for that, too: two of RealTraps’ RFZ Panels. (RFZ stands for Reflection Free Zone.)

Each RFZ Panel ($249.99) measures 42" H by 32" W by 22.5" D and has a beveled frame, so it almost disappears when mounted on a sidewall—preferably at around that wall’s first-reflection point. The RFZ Panel also absorbs bass—a bit less than a MondoTrap, a bit more than a MiniTrap—but its principal mission is broadband absorption to reduce Ethan Winer’s chief bugbear: comb filtering, which results when two identical sounds arrive at the listening positions at different times. Winer claims that comb filtering, if not the only problem worth tackling, is room acoustics’ Public Enemy No.1.

What mounting an RFZ Panel on each sidewall most noticeably did in my room was to allow me to move my speakers closer to the walls without deleterious audible effects—and that allowed me to
move my listening position out of the nearfield and farther back into the room.

Completely Trapped
With four MondoTraps, two MiniTraps, and two RFZ Panels—$2099.92 worth of RealTraps room treatment, or less than the cost of my power conditioner—I had turned a room that was essentially an acoustic write-off into one that, in some ways, became my preferred listening site. My multi-use room, where I audition larger components, lacks the top-to-bottom coherence, and especially the bottom-end linearity, that my RealTraps-treated "small" room now had.

Why does this matter? For one thing, when you hear less of the room, you hear more of the recording. One of my favorite musicians, David Russell, plays a nylon-stringed guitar in a fairly large hall for his Telarc recordings. In my treated room, I heard deeper into that acoustic space—perhaps not quite all the way to the walls, as a certain reviewer has suggested, but deeper. That made recordings such as his lovely Music of Moreno Torroba (CD, Telarc CD-80451) a lot more like being there. Being there is good.

Would I like to take the room treatment further? I’m not sure. I’ve visited Ethan Winer’s main listening room and studio, and my suspicion is that both are overdamped—his living room, which serves as a demonstration venue for every product RealTraps makes, more so than his studio. Maybe it’s just me, but in Winer’s living room, I wondered if I could detect differences between components, so powerfully was I aware of the acoustic environment. Or perhaps it was the two hours I’d spent on the MTN’s New Haven Line getting there that had left me aurally incapacitated.

Even in my listening room, I was (maybe) able to take things a bridge too far. Because of a closet built into the room, a 2'-wide partial wall faces the speakers; I covered this wall with a MiniTrap. And because I had been shipped pairs of MiniTraps, I added the other one to the adjacent door. I remove the MiniTraps from time to time and use them in my larger room—which needs a lot more bass treatment than they provide. After a while, I bring ‘em back downstairs, where I’m still trying to decide if the tradeoffs even out.

Honey Trap
What I’m not uncertain about is that the RealTraps provided a real solution to my poorer listening room; now it’s my better listening room. And I discovered that the wheat-colored RealTraps perfectly match Benjamin Moore’s Linen wall paint, and so virtually disappear against the walls. Add my DIY mood lighting behind the corner MondoTraps and a few choice textiles pinned to the RFZ Panels and MiniTraps, and most visitors (okay, so I bought an air mattress—it’s also our guest room) to my treated listening room aren’t even aware that it’s full of acoustic panels. I’ve even gotten compliments on my "archival" presentation.

While some of the worst-sounding rooms I’ve ever listened to music in were overdamped and dead, I’ve also been in a few where the room acoustic overwhelmed any differences among audio components, even loudspeakers. RealTraps offers a middle path of products that are exquisitely constructed—and, by acoustic-treatment standards, reasonably priced.
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Music Hall dac25.2 D/A processor

I don't routinely measure the products written about by Stereophile's columnists—Sam Tellig, Michael Fremer, Art Dudley, Kalman Rubinson, John Marks—but when something comes along that catches their and my fancy, I do get it up on the test bench. Such was the case with the Chinese-made Music Hall dac25.2 D/A processor, which Sam Tellig wrote about in the August 2009 issue, as it offered a lot of both features and sound quality for just $599. It even uses a tube—a single 6922 dual-triode—to give it the required degree of audiophile coolness.\(^1\)

"The dac25.2 made me over for the fine way it handled Internet radio via USB,” wrote Mr. T., adding that he liked its combination of features, the way it placed a tube in the signal path, and its “sweet, full-bodied, nonfatiguing sound... The dac25.2 might be an excellent choice for your office and all the hi-fi you may need,” he summed up. “You can bypass your computer's soundcard, run a USB cable to the dac25.2, and listen with powered loudspeakers... or headphones.” However, when he compared it with the Cambridge DacMagic ($449; see www.stereophile.com/digitalprocessors/cambridge_audio_azur_dacmagic_da_converter), he felt that whereas the DacMagic presented transients with crystalline clarity, the dac25.2 seemed slightly smeared and slower. The Cambridge lacks a dedicated headphone output, however, and is solid-state—not a tube in sight.

Looking inside the dac25.2, its circuitry is carried on a single, large printed-circuit board behind the rear panel, and the power transformer is located between this board and the front panel. A Crystal CS8416 chip is used for the S/PDIF and AES/EBU inputs, allowing the Music Hall to handle data with sample rates up to 96kHz and bit depths up to 24. A Texas Instruments SRC4192 provides user-selectable sample-rate conversion to 96 or 192kHz, while the DAC is a 24-bit/192kHz Burr-Brown PCM1696 chip, which also performs the digital filtering. As well as the 6922 tube, the analog circuitry features high-performance op-amps in the forms of Burr-Brown OPA2084 and OPA2134 chips.

I looked at the measured behavior of the Music Hall dac25.2 using the Audio Precision SYS2722 system (see www.ap.com and "As We See It" in the January 2008 issue, www.stereophile.com/awsee/108awsi), as well as, for some tests, my Audio Precision System One Dual Domain and the Miller Audio Research Jitter Analyzer. To examine the performance of the Music Hall's USB input, I drove it with my battery-powered MacBook running OS10.4.11 and playing WAV files using Bias Peak 6.2. The dac25.2 identified itself to the computer as "USB Audio DAC," and the AudioMidi setup program reported that the DAC was limited to 16-bit data and sample rates at or below 48kHz—indeed feel that the V-Cans got a grip on the bottom end that the dac25.2 couldn't manage. The Music Hall headphone output lacked “balls, if you will”—what I would expect from its rise in output impedance at low frequencies.

The dac25.2's frequency response with 96kHz data (fig.1, blue and red traces) gently rolled off in the top octave, dropping by 0.7dB at 20kHz and reaching -3dB at 40kHz. The response with CD data (fig.1, cyan and magenta traces) followed the same rolloff, but of course dropped like a stone at 20kHz. These responses were taken into the high 100k ohms load; into 600 ohms, the balanced output actually didn't roll off quite as quickly, the output at 20kHz lying at -0.35dB instead of -0.7dB. Balanced channel separation (not shown) was superb; at >120dB in both directions below 3kHz, and still 110dB at 20kHz.

Spectral analysis, using a swept 1/8-octave...
tave bandpass filter, of the Music Hall’s output reproducing a dithered 1kHz tone from S/PDIF-sourced data revealed a noise floor that was free of power-supply or harmonic spuriae with both 16-bit data (fig.2, top pair of traces) and 24-bit data (bottom traces). The drop in the noise floor of around 14dB with the increase in bit depth indicates a resolution of around 18.5 bits, confirmed by FFT-based analysis of the same signals (fig.3). The USB input would handle only 16-bit data, of course, 24-bit data being truncated, with the consequent introduction of quantizing distortion.

Plotting the linearity error with 16-bit data gave a trace that was dominated by the recorded dither noise, so I haven’t shown it. With 24-bit data, any level error was negligible down to 120dBFS. The dac25.2’s reproduction of an undithered tone at exactly 90.31dBFS was essentially perfect, unambiguously presenting a symmetrical waveform and the three DC voltage levels (fig.4; see the Playback Designs review elsewhere in this issue for considerably worse performance on this test). Increasing the incoming word length to 24 bits gave an excellent facsimile of a sinewave (fig.5).

Even with the high output impedance from its balanced jacks, the Music Hall dac25.2 offered very low harmonic distortion. It behaved similarly into both 100k and 600 ohms (fig.6), with the harmonics predominantly the innocuous second and third and lying at or below -109dB (0.0003%, fig.6). This graph was taken with the oversampling switched off; oversampling, whether to 96 or 192kHz, did increase the distortion, with a regular series now evident above the noise floor (fig.7), but even the harmonic highest in level, the second, was still very low, at -94dB (0.002%). I doubt that this difference in behavior would explain why ST preferred the 192kHz setting “for the most airy, open, relaxed sound,” or Roy Hall’s preference for no upsampling at all. Conversely, the dac252 gave lower levels of intermodulation distortion with oversampling switched on (fig.8), though again, the levels involved are very low.

With its oversampling switched...
off, the Music Hall dac25.2 offered only modest rejection of word-clock jitter. In the worst case, with the processor fed a 16-bit version of the Miller-Dunn diagnostic data from my PC via 15' of plastic TosLink, I measured 624 picoseconds peak-to-peak of jitter-related sidebands in the left channel and 629ps p-p in the right, primarily at the data-related frequency of 229Hz. Feeding the data from my MacBook via USB dropped the jitter to 496ps left, 504ps right, but the spectrum was relatively dirty (fig.9), and there was some spectral spreading of the central spike representing the 11.025kHz tone. This is to be expected, given that the PCM2704 chip operates in what is called “isochronous” mode, which hands off the clocking of the data to the host PC. Switching on the oversampling eliminated the data-related sidebands (not shown) and dropped the measured jitter below the resolution limit of the Miller Analyzer with both S/PDIF and USB data.

The Music Hall dac25.2 offers generally excellent measured performance for a very competitive price. Though I would like to have seen a lower output impedance from its headphone jack, that feature does distinguish it from its similarly priced competition in the forms of the Cambridge DacMagic and the Musical Fidelity V-DAC.

—John Atkinson

Denon SC-CX303 loudspeaker

John Marks raved about the Chinese-manufactured Denon SC-CX303 loudspeaker ($1200/pair) in his December 2009 “The Fifth Element” column.2 The SC-CX303 is a great little speaker,” he wrote of this stand-mounted, ported, two-way design, which has a 1" soft-dome tweeter and a 5" carbon-fiber-cone woofer. "I respected the PSB Imagine B, which I wrote about in February, but I just loved the Denon. I’ll

2 Denon Electronics, Corporate Drive, Mahwah, NJ 07430-2041. Tel: (201) 762-6500. Fax: (201) 762-6670. Web: www.usa.denon.com.
be very interested in seeing a comparison of the speakers' measurements."

John's wish was my command. I measured the Denon SC-CX303 primarily using DRA Labs' MLSSA system and a calibrated DPA 4006 microphone. The SC-CX303's claimed voltage sensitivity is 86.0dB/2.83V/m; my estimate of this was 85.6dB(B)/2.83V/m, which is within experimental error of the specification. The Denon's impedance is specified at 6 ohms. In fact, the speaker's impedance (fig.1) dipped slightly below 6 ohms in the lower-midrange and midbass regions, and remained above 10 ohms in the low treble; it's really an 8 ohm load that will not make serious current demands on the partnering amplifier, which makes it a good choice for use with inexpensive receivers. Fig.1 was taken with the reflex port on the rear of the cabinet open. Though a supplied foam plug reduces the height of the lower-bass peak in this graph, the plug is not substantial enough to turn the speaker into a true sealed-box design.

The traces in the impedance graph are free from glitches in the midrange, and the sturdy cabinet is indeed free from panel resonances. The only mode I could find was at 109Hz, and though it was present on all surfaces, it was at a low level (fig.2).

The saddle between 50 and 60Hz in the impedance-magnitude curve suggests that the port's tuning frequency lies in this region; the minimum-motion notch in the woofer's nearfield output does indeed occur at 56Hz (fig.3, red trace), and the port's response (fig.3, blue) covers the bandpass between 30 and 120Hz. The port is generally well behaved, though a couple of high-frequency modes are present in its output; one of these, at just below 1kHz, coincides with a small suckout in the woofer's farfield response. The woofer peaks a little in the low treble before crossing over to the tweeter at 3kHz. The tweeter itself appears to be balanced 3–4dB too hot on axis.

Fig.4 shows how these individual outputs sum in the farfield, averaged across a 30° horizontal angle centered on the tweeter axis. The Denon's low-frequency

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**Fig.1** Denon SC-CX303, electrical impedance (solid) and phase (dashed). (5 ohms/vertical div.)

**Fig.2** Denon SC-CX303, cumulative spectral-decay plot calculated from output of accelerometer fastened to center of side panel (MLS driving voltage to speaker, 7.55V; measurement bandwidth, 2kHz).

**Fig.3** Denon SC-CX303, acoustic crossover on tweeter axis at 50°, corrected for microphone response, with nearfield responses of woofer (red) and port (blue) plotted below 350Hz and 1kHz, respectively.

**Fig.4** Denon SC-CX303, anechoic response on tweeter axis at 50°, averaged across 30° horizontal window and corrected for microphone response, with complex sum of nearfield responses plotted below 500Hz with port open (blue) and closed (red).

**Fig.5** Denon SC-CX303, lateral response family at 50°, normalized to response on tweeter axis, from back to front: differences in response 90–5° off axis, reference response, differences in response 5–90° off axis.

**Fig.6** Denon SC-CX303, vertical response family at 50°, normalized to response on tweeter axis, from back to front: differences in response 45–5° off axis, reference response, differences in response 5–45° below axis.
Fig. 8 Denon SC-CX303, cumulative spectral-decay plot on tweeter axis at 50° (0.15ms risetime).

The high treble in fig.4 is exaggerated, but as the plot of the Denon's lateral dispersion shows (fig.5), this will be balanced in-room by the rapid drop of the tweeter's top-octave output to the speaker's sides. The CX303's owner can therefore experiment with toe-in to get the most neutral high-treble balance. In the vertical plane (fig.6), a deep suckout develops in the crossover region almost immediately above the tweeter axis, suggesting that the stands used are high enough to place the listener's ears on or just below the tweeter axis.

The Denon's step response on the tweeter axis (fig.7) tells us that both drive-units are connected with positive acoustic polarity. Though the tweeter's output leads that of the woofer by 250μs or so, the overshoot of its step smoothly blends with the rise of the woofer's step, which correlates with the good frequency-domain integration of their outputs on this axis. However, some ringing can be seen overlaying the decay of the woofer's step, and the cumulative spectral-decay plot (fig.8) confirms that there is some delayed energy associated with the upper-midrange peak in the CX303's on-axis response. This is relatively mild in degree; overall, this waterfall plot is very clean.

Its measurements indicate that Denon's SC-CX303 is a well-engineered loudspeaker. It is also beautifully finished, as I have come to expect of Chinese-made speakers, and is competitively priced for the performance offered.

—John Atkinson

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World Radio History
As silly as it sounds now, there was a time not so long ago when musicians were certain that the drum machine was the big bad wolf. Musicians everywhere wrung their hands at how it was the beginning of the end of live music; how hordes of unemployed drummers would soon be wandering the streets; how it was only a matter of time until acoustic instruments in general were on the way out, to be replaced by computer-generated sounds and cold, heartless, codehead technogeeks who knew more about MIDI, IBM, and CPUs than they did about W.A. Mozart, John Coltrane, or Chuck Berry.

Like all feeding frenzies, particularly those inspired by artists, whose value to society is too often questioned, these fears turned out to be groundless when the limits of computer-driven instruments were exposed. That eternal rule of computerdom—that machines are only as good as those who program and run them—revealed that machines could aid and accent, but could not replace musicians or create music of their own. The scare did, however, inspire quite a few instrumentalists, drummers in particular, to fear for their performing lives. Thereafter ensued, however briefly, a welcome burst of dedicated rehearsing, regular bathing, and showing up at gigs on time.

In a bio written for this project, Pat Metheny—whose last record was a trio project, Day Trip (2008), with Christian McBride and Antonio Sanchez—speaks of his grandparents' player piano as having ignited his fascination with machine-made music. He then moved on to study orchestrions: groups of instruments—mini-orchestras, if you like—mechanically triggered and played, most of them piggybacked onto the workings of a player piano. This album, titled after those antique contraptions, was inspired when the guitarist asked himself, "What might happen if the potentials of these instruments were looked at now—particularly informed by the harmonic and melodic advances in jazz of the past 70 or 80 years? Could I make some kind of personal statement using instruments like these?"

The answer, of course—we’re talking about one of the most talented jazz player-composers to ever use a 12-string electric guitar—is absolutely. Metheny has worked with inventors and technicians around the country to "construct a large palette of acoustic sound-producing devices that I can organize as a new kind of orchestrion." For this album, and a tour of the US this coming summer, Metheny's orchestrion will consist of "several pianos, a drum kit, marimbas, 'guitar-bots,' dozens of percussion instruments and even cabinets of carefully tuned bottles," all of which are "struck, plucked, and otherwise played via the technology of solenoid switches and pneumatics."

What's come of this experiment in soloism is a pleasant, expansive album of instrumental jazz that has an entire forest of percussion—that's right, those dreaded drum machines and their jittery brass-hat cousins back for another stab at Armageddon—shimmering away behind Metheny's characteristically deft technique, thoughtful and elongated lyricism, blazingly fast runs, and fertile head for ideas. On some cuts, it sounds familiar, like a tighter version of the Pat Metheny Band.

The orchestrations on Orchestrion are impressive if predictable. With a recording catalog that’s nearing 50 albums, Metheny’s preferences in composing, arranging, and performing aren’t hard to name: he likes broad, flush orchestrations; another instrument often doubling his guitar lines; compositions that are more often than not upbeat, with a whiff of his closest model, Wes Montgomery, and a tendency to rise to climaxes before gently drifting down so that his guitar can quietly and inventively begin the process all over again.

After a number of listens, the five tracks of Orchestrion do have an unusually audible quality of man meshing with machines. Nowhere is that more apparent than on the final track, "Spirit in the Air," where the steady rhythms, and the insistent rise and fall of a host of percussion instruments—chimes, a wide variety of cymbals, drums, the aforementioned bottles—while sounding like an orchestra, do have a precision and integration that may be a little too exact to have been made by man. Sonically, Metheny’s modern calliope has a lively snap and a wide soundstage, the percussion instruments getting an inordinate amount of attention in the mix.

If there's a flaw here, it's that a certain sameness of tempo pervades the album. A horn—any horn—might have broken things up and added a much-needed flavor. The mood of each tune, always a crucial factor when talking about Metheny's expressive and instantly recognizable tone, varies from musing and reflective (the slower-paced "Entry Point") to lustrous and blossoming (the first and last tracks). In between, in "Expansion," a "guitar-bot" that sounds like a slide cello makes an appearance; and a beautiful, delicate piano part, triggered by a computer program written by Metheny, opens "Soul Search," which has several melodic turns reminiscent of the old Blackburn-Suessdorf chestnut "Moonlight in Vermont."

This is a solo avenue worth exploring. Metheny's man-meets-and-makes-use-of-machine experiment is not going to doom acoustic music or make drummers obsolete any time soon, but Orchestrion does show what useful tools computers and music-making machinery have become.

—Robert Baird
Diminution is a shortening or lessening; in the Renaissance, when referring to music, it meant embellishing a vocal melody by playing it faster and with ornaments, or by superimposing another melody atop a catchy chord progression, always bearing in mind and not obscuring the original melody. Lutenists in particular favored diminution, as it allowed them to produce an illusion of legato and carrying the melody while at the same time showing off; through dynamics and emphases, they could thus compete with the human voice. In other words, diminution is all about improvisation—or, to be more timely, riffing until you're the star.

And it's not just lutenist Rolf Lislevand, who leads this band and has arranged the music, who riffs. Like the head of any superb rock band or jazz ensemble, he encourages solos and riffs from the other musicians. All of the instruments here are plucked, save for the organ, percussion, and two voices (two of the three women who make up the Trio Mediaeval). Some might call this anti-authentic-instrument practice, but it's nothing of the kind. The whole point is to reimagine these 16th-century chansons and dances in ways that wholly respect the originals, and that's just what takes place here. Occasionally the group goes wild, as in the final piece, Tournion, but Lislevand acknowledges in his liner note that here they’ve taken a simple French drinking song and purposefully filled its four minutes with uncomfortable modulations and folk sounds at odds with the true practice of diminution. It's great fun.
soprano Linn Andrea intones the lute part as the players thrum under her; the two dances that follow, never losing their impetus or catchy tunes, are given a bass line to play off. Track 4, Petit Jacquet, is based on a 16th-century song whose text has been lost. First it's played on lutes and harp with plenty of ornamentation, and then, at 3:15, organ and colascione (a dark, warm-toned lute) suddenly pop in with a weird, syncopated rhythm further enhanced by the sopranos playfully singing the words “Petit Jacquet est perdu”—to a melody by Diego Ortiz! At 5:47, the tune is taken up by the instruments, the singers riff and so on, all of it ending, at almost 10 minutes, with a soft percussion solo. It's like a night out on the town.

La perra mora is a study in syncopated rhythms until 35 seconds in; then a lengthy colascione solo takes over, the organ piping along above; later, the triple harp gets a chance to diminish in wacky counterpoint, followed by a lute solo. The whole thing is less than five minutes long; heard live, it would bring an audience to its feet. There's more and more—one bathes in the polyphony while at the same time being able to make out every strand. Some of the tunes will be familiar to fans of Renaissance music, but I dare-say they've never heard them treated like this. It's a party you'd wish you'd been invited to.

I can't praise enough the playing, imagination, creativity, and what seems the utter spontaneity evident on this CD; I regret only my inability to give it a name that might make people buy it. The title Diminuito certainly doesn't help; “Hot Day Plucking” or “Renaissance Hoedown” might be closer to a marketing approach, but they detract from the seriousness of the endeavor.

Perhaps I should add how beautiful this music is. It's like an old-time Christmas without the trappings of religion; there's something celebratory about it. It's also gentle—these are not loud instruments—and ECM's spacious recording catches the unique timbre of each instrument, and lightly integrates the women's voices into the mix. Some of the sounds are vaguely new-age, but I've tried not to let that get in my way, and neither should you. This is a stunning, entertaining, elegant program.

—Robert Levine

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his virtuosity for the solo passages and cadenzas, he never overmatches the strings. Maisky, who sometimes sounds a bit distant, contributes a strong foundation and much dramatic tension.

Though performed without the customary cuts, the Tchaikovsky does not seem long because the playing is full of variety; even the bombastic Fugue is clear and compelling. The work has been called a “concerto for three instruments,” but these players’ soloistic brilliance is always at the service of the music. They respond to its romanticism with unrestrained ardor, freedom, and abandon, without succumbing to sentimentality or excess. Most remarkably, they never forget that chamber music is essentially “a civilized discourse between friends.” In both works, their ensemble is impeccable; the unanimous phrasing, seamless dynamic builds, and melodic takeovers give it a conversational quality. Far from trying to upstage one another, they discreetly and skillfully underplay the accompanying passages, projecting mutual respect and support. This is a truly special, thrilling recording.

—Edith Eisler
lyrics are almost quaint. She may not have been near the top for long, but Davis (née Mabry) made the most of her time in New York City and the music business. The second wife of Miles Davis—he divorced her after a year of marriage, partially because he suspected she was having an affair—she was also linked with Jimi Hendrix, Eric Clapton, and Robert Palmer. After two records on Just Sunshine Records, the former model signed with Island in 1974 and made Nasty Gal. It was clear from her earthy growls on the opening title cut—and such lines as “I said you said I was a bitch now / didn’t ya, didn’t ya / You said I was a witch now . . . / you used to love it oh to ride my broom huun-ney”—that Davis was sexy and sexual in the extreme. While Davis’s shock lyrics, middle-finger-up attitude, and over-the-top delivery are fun, and certainly qualify her as fearless and iconoclastic, it’s the music on these records that really holds up: deep funk, nimble and keyboard-driven, with Davis’s libertine vocal abandon lowering the boom on cut after cut. More talking and raw exhortation than actual singing, these vocal performances reveal a woman clearly committed to a singular confessional vision that, at least musically, occasionally sounds like a nastier version of what the Ohio Players were doing at the same time. Not surprisingly, Rick James was a fan. Unlike a lot of muddy 1970s funk albums, the sound is warm but crisp and detailed, the keyboards’ spidery patterns spun clearly over phat bass lines.

With the exception of the jarringly soft ballad “You and I,” cowritten with Miles and arranged by Gil Evans, Davis uses music as a platform for her very pointed screeds. In “Dedicated to the Press” she answers her critics, saying that she’s “telling you the only way I know how,” but admits she “just can’t seem to keep my tongue in my mouth.” By the final verse she’s fully into her best guttural Exorcist roar, a feat she repeats in “Shut Off the Light.” In “F.U.N.K...” she namechecks everyone from Anne Peebles to Hendrix. And on the final track, a slower, smoother sexualized growl titled “The Lone Ranger,” the sound of a horse riding away at tune’s end is a classic way to end an album.

Overall, Nasty Gal is one nasty record—may be too much so. When it failed to connect with an audience, Island began to try to smooth out the performer’s rough edges—to Davis, a declaration of war that ultimately resulted in her being dropped from the label in 1976, even though she had a new album, recorded in Louisiana, already in the can. That record, once called Crashin’ from Passion, (a title later used for a reissue of an unreleased 1979 session) has now been released for the first time, retitled Is It Love or Desire. In “It’s So Good,” a clip-

dop beat provides a foundation for Carlos Morales’s rock guitar, which is a prominent part of the entire album. Louisiana guitarist Clarence Gatemouth Brown adds violin to “For My Man.” “Stars Starve, You Know” is one of the more vehement indictments of show business in the history of recorded sound; that and the quiet “When Romance Says Goodbye,” on which Davis almost sings, and her superb, Sly-like anti-disco rant, “Bottom of the Barrel,” are all career highlights. Much to her credit, Davis ignored frequent urgings—they were understandable, given her interests and performing style—to become a disco queen à la Donna Summer. Instead, after the aforementioned 1979 recording session, she dropped out of music entirely.

But while the band on this lost set brims with confidence, sounding tighter than on Nasty Gal, the material is less tuneful, and Davis is repeating herself; after three records, her sexualized growl had become a novelty. Still, when she and her band were in the pocket, the funk cup did convincingly runneth over. In an era filled with prodigious musical talents and larger-than-life performers, Betty Davis, for a time, was a risqué rebel.

—Robert Baird
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Recordings was launched to support Threadgill's projects (the superb Everybody's Mouth's a Book and Up Popped the Two Lips), the avant-leaning maestro of the flute and alto sax opted for patience in returning to the studio with his Zooid quintet. It's been worth the wait; here, Threadgill's longtime collaborators—guitarist-producer Liberty Ellman, trombonist/tubaist Jose Davila, electric bassist Stomu Takeishi, and drummer Elliot Humberto Kave—support him for the brief but brilliantly eccentric This Brings Us To, Volume 1.

Throughout, the disc brims with intriguing musical conversations among the bandmembers; eg, in the exhilarating "To Undertake My Corners Open," Threadgill's high-pitched flute in oblique dialogue with Davila's bass trombone tones and Ellman's soft-toned, staccato guitar lines. The first track, "White Wednesday Off the Wall," opens with a sparse, eerie soundscape of improvisation, before flowing with off-kilter rhythms that create circular swirls of intertwined notes.

As a composer, Threadgill is a poet: part celebratory Walt Whitman, with his long-line rhythmic drive, and part e. e. cummings (also a Guggenheim winner, in 1933 and 1951), with his wit for idiosyncratic syntax and odd titles; eg, "Mirror Mirror the Verb," a short, geometric study in restrained exuberance. The most jarring episode in this intrepid journey is the urgent "Sap," in which the leader gusts on alto sax as Davila co-anchors the proceedings on tuba. "Sap" is also the setting for Ellman's boldest—and best—solo on the entire album.

The album was taped at Brooklyn Recording by engineer Andy Taub and producer Liberty Ellman. In "White Wednesday Off the Wall," the instruments are recorded with quiet subtlety, from Ellman's muted guitar notes and harmonics to Threadgill's ghostly flute whispers to Kave's gentle flicks of his cymbals. In the denser tracks, with all instrumentalists interacting, the even mixes create a rich, multilayered effect that accentuates each player's responsive contributions. Threadgill's flute is fully captured at both its extremes, from knife-like piercing to feather-like floating.

This Brings Us To is subtitled Volume 1; perhaps a second disc of Zooid music is just around the corner.

—Dan Ouellette

www.Stereophile.com, February 2010
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Editor: Concert Fidelity SPA-4B
Michael has identified our product as a listen to our product and write a review. First of all, we would like to thank Michael Fremer for his spending the time to engage with higher-gain modules. It was unfortunate that we could not make that happen. In that respect, the SPA-4B does not only wildly dissimilar in price, but in construction as well. [Art confirmed that he has auditioned the Rega arm on the Thorens TD-124 Mk.II, he used the Rega RB-300 tonearm with the T-30, while employing his reference EMT 997 “banana” tonearm exclusively with the Thorens. While he used the same Miyabi 47 cartridge with both arms, the reader nevertheless should recognize that the review offers a comparison of one turntable outfitted with a $400 arm with another turntable with a $4000 arm—two tonearms that are not only wildly dissimilar in price, but in construction as well. Art mentioned that he has auditioned the Rega arm on the Thorens TD-124, but not in the specific comparisons mentioned in this review. —Ed.] It is worth mentioning that we have found the T-30 to be highly transparent to the mounted tonearm.

Art mentioned that the magnetic opposition to the platter’s weight is used to “relieve some but not all of the contact pressure between parts” in order to achieve proper mechanical grounding. In fact, it is required to ensure that the ceramic shaft comes in positive contact with only the thrust ball, so that nearly all the weight of the platter is carried by the magnets.

Although the review stated that the T-30 is made mostly in Hong Kong, al-though to a somewhat more international makeup, we would add that the ceramic bearing is sourced from Germany and the AC motors from the Czech Republic. We appreciate Art’s calling attention to the “inarguably fine level of manufacturing quality,” but unless one sees this turntable up close, it’s a bit difficult to appreciate its truly precision-made look and feel. We sincerely believe that the T-30, along with the other turntables in the Hanss product line, sets a new benchmark for value in high-end components. We witnessed many double takes when people saw the retail price tag ($6200) on the Hanss T-60 turntable we demonstrated at the 2009 Rocky Mountain Audio Fest. Some thought we’d made an error by leaving a zero off the end of the price.

Neil Levy & Joe Cohen
The Lotus Group, US distributor of Hanss Acoustics

Manufacturers’ Comments

Concert Fidelity SPA-4B
Editor: First of all, we would like to thank Michael Fremer for his spending the time to listen to our product and write a review. We were also glad to learn that Michael has identified our product as a result of the editing work that goes into providing less: shorter circuit paths, and fewer components that accomplish all that more complex designs can—and perhaps more,” since it accurately describes what our founder-designer, Masataka Tsuda, has striven to achieve. In fact, following is the design philosophy of Tsuda: “Concert Fidelity’s amps and preamps are often said to be excellent-sounding, but I feel that this description is inappropriate. It would be more appropriate to describe our amps as having almost zero loss, or as adding almost nothing to the original signal. There is no way that an audio circuit can improve upon an incoming signal in the course of amplification. The signal can only be degraded, and the less the degradation, the better the circuit. Whenever a good part is discovered, and a good sonic result is produced, my next goal is to figure out how that part might be eliminated, which will, without fail, make the sound even better! Concert Fidelity’s philosophy is to add absolutely nothing superfluous to the circuit; to transmit neither more nor less than the original recorded signal.”

Furthermore, we appreciate the fact that Michael has spent the time to experience the numerous sonic virtues of the SPA-4B, which he describes in much detail, and summarizes as “the SPA-4B’s magic.” We are glad that those virtues are recognized, despite the distractions from the noise that Michael was experiencing.

As Michael mentioned in the article, even the noise issue might have been eliminated had our CF-080 Hybrid Line Stage Preamp been used in conjunction with higher-gain modules. It was unfortunate that we could not make that happen. In that respect, the SPA-4B does require its fair share of system matching to achieve its full potential, and may not be for everyone, as Michael points out.

Although we will continue to make the SPA-4B available for those who can accommodate its nature, we also have plans for the type of products that Michael has kindly referred to. Please keep your eyes (and ears) open for us! Nori Sanoagui, COO Concert Fidelity U.S.

Sutherland Engineering
The Hubble
Editor: The Hubble is an expression of the “less is more” design philosophy. For instance, the battery power: Obviously, going to battery power is the ultimate distance you can put between your phono preamplifier and noisy AC power lines. Speaking of less, you can plan on spending less than $40 to reload The Hubble. Closer to $20. Consider that an annual maintenance expense and change the batteries every year.

Michael [Fremer] did a great job of describing The Hubble’s ability to deliver music. It has the qualities that make vinyl so seductive: rich, lush, generous. Reviews are generally about what a product can do. Pride of ownership is an even higher ambition. Please check out www.sutherlandengineering.com for the owner’s manual, more pictures, and information about how The Hubble is built.

Ron Sutherland
Sutherland Engineering

Spin-Clean Record Washer System
Editor: We would like to thank Michael Fremer for his excellent review of the Spin-Clean Record Washer System. For the last 40 years Spin-Clean has provided one of the most cost-economical solutions for vinyl enthusiasts to clean and preserve their collections. We would also like to thank Michael for his continuing efforts to fuel the enthusiasm for analog vinyl and vinyl of the customers we all depend on. Michael hit the nail on the head in the opening of the second paragraph: “There’s nothing set-and-forget about the Spin-Clean, but it’s cheap and it really works.”

I would like to note that the encapsulating mechanism that is built into the cleaning solution does not suspend the dirt in the solution, but in fact sinks it to the bottom of the unit so that it is not redeposited on your record; and that the “cheesecloth-like” drying cloths that come with the unit are in fact lint-free cotton cloths. We also find the most efficient way to clean your records with the Spin-Clean is to sit down and have a session. When you’re done, rinse out the unit and the brushes, and leave them out on top of the unit to air-dry for your next session.

Mark Mawhinney
Spin-Clean Record Washer

Hanss Acoustics T-30
Editor: Thank you for a thoughtful and well-reasoned review of the Hanss Acoustics T-30 turntable. A few comments are in order. First, only one minor error needs addressing: In Art Dudley’s excellent description of the T-30, where he notes the progressively increasing number of design elements that accompany “successively dearer models,” he is correct, except with regard to the tonearm mounts. All models, regardless of price, share the same basic two-armboard layout: one for an SME-compatible mount, and one for a Rega-compatible mount.

With regard to Art’s listening remarks, we understand that in comparing the T-30 with his reference Thorens TD-124 Mk.II, he used the Rega RB-300 tonearm with the T-30, while employing his reference EMT 997 “banana” tonearm exclusively with the Thorens. While he used the same Miyabi 47 cartridge with both arms, the reader nevertheless should recognize that the review offers a comparison of one turntable outfitted with a $400 arm with another turntable with a $4000 arm—two tonearms that are not only wildly dissimilar in price, but in construction as well. [Art confirmed that he has auditioned the Rega arm on the Thorens TD-124, but not in the specific comparisons mentioned in this review. —Ed.] It is worth mentioning that we have found the T-30 to be highly transparent to the mounted tonearm.

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Neil Levy & Joe Cohen
The Lotus Group, US distributor of Hanss Acoustics

www.Stereophile.com, February 2010 131
RealTraps MondoTrap, MiniTrap, RFZ Panel
Editor:
I really appreciate the great praise Wes Phillips gave our bass traps and RFZ Panel. There’s no doubt that room treatments have a more profound effect on sound quality than any electronic component, except perhaps loudspeakers. What makes this review so compelling, in my view, is that Wes had lived with his RealTraps for more than three years before writing about them. Sometimes people are surprised and a bit overwhelmed when they hear a very-well-treated room for the first time. In this case, Wes added the treatments over time, so he could first hear the increased bass clarity, then the reduction in comb filtering that improves the quality of the mid- and high frequencies. As for my personal living-room setup, I now have 54 bass traps, diffusers, and other panels! Perhaps it’s my recording-engineer background, but it does not sound too dead to my ears—just very clear and neutral, with every note from every voice and instrument precisely articulated. Thanks, Wes!

Ethan Winer
RealTraps

Playback Designs MPS-5
Editor:
We would like to thank both Michael Fremer and John Atkinson for the time and work they put into reviewing and testing our Playback Designs MPS-5 SACD/CD player. We were very pleased that an analog lover like Michael would enjoy our digital player.

Most of the measurement results are generally to be expected from the way they were measured. What differentiates the D/A converter inside the MPS-5 from other, more conventional converters is that it uses all custom algorithms and discrete components that were not designed following classic theories and practices. A large percentage of your charts show the behavior of the MPS-5 in the frequency domain, and only two charts show the time domain, although with rigid sinewaves as test inputs. While this would be totally adequate in most cases, it isn’t for the MPS-5. For instance, most of the filter algorithms inside the MPS-5 cannot be described or even defined by feeding them periodic test tones such as sinewaves and looking at frequency charts. They were designed for real music signals, and therefore “listen” to the input signal and vary accordingly, to take advantage of how our ear perceives music, which never even resembles periodic test signals. It is common knowledge that such psychoacoustic criteria hardly ever lead to ideal measurements based on steady-state test signals.

Right from the beginning, the design goals for the MPS-5 were to reach new heights in sonic performance with real music signals rather than optimum test-signal measurements. The result is that the algorithms may not perform optimally from a measurement point of view when they have to process test signals, but, as your review also confirms, they do their assigned job quite well when processing real music signals. As we are always researching new ideas, the next-generation algorithms may very well make these kind of measurements even worse—but we can assure you that it will be for the benefit of sonic performance. Isn’t that what we are all after?

Again, thank you for the wonderful review!

Jonathan Tin, Andreas Koch
Playback Designs

Although it is not mentioned in the review’s “Measurements” section, I did check the MPS-5’s impulse response, and it does appear to be free from both the pre- and post-ringing typical of conventional digital filters.

—John Atkinson

"Where is the rest of the speaker?"

John Atkinson | Editor, Stereophile Magazine, RMAF 2009 Show Report

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Brevity was never a part of Fela’s repertoire. But listening to his records—or, even better, being drenched in sweat, grooving for hours in the audience at one of his absolutely extraordinary live shows—you never seemed to notice. In fact, all you could think of as he paraded around half naked, smiling, draped in chains, belting out political dogma as massive rhythms surged from his band, its baritone saxophones squalling and electric guitars riding a tingling High Life groove, was making the music go on.

Sadly, the monster funk jams stopped in 1997, when Fela Ransome Anikulapo Kuti, the only “world music” personage who could have given Bob Marley a run for his money in terms of universal appeal, died of AIDS in his home near Lagos, Nigeria, at the age of 58. Unfortunately for many, the man’s many wives, his egomaniacal political beliefs, and his death from an epidemic that has since cast an ever-larger shadow over Africa, have all combined to obscure the massive, marvelous body of recorded work he left behind.

Originally recorded in a variety of locations for a plethora of small labels, most of the singer/multi-instrumentalist’s, massive catalog, some of which has been hard to find, has never been out of print. In the past 20 years, MCA, Celluloid, and Shanachie have all mounted significant reissue programs. Now, however, much of Fela’s recorded legacy, freshly mastered for release on both CD and LP, is being re-released by Knitting Factory Records. Despite numerous ups and downs, the label, loosely associated with the clumps of the same name, has an interesting catalog that’s studded with worthy records by John Zorn, Jeff Buckley, and Moby. Funk fans rejoice! In tandem with this new reissue program highlights a true labor of love. It was a disparate catalog, eclipsed only by the fertility of his recording career. The official count of full-length Fela albums stands at 45, but that would seem a soft figure that leaves out singles, EPs, lost LPs, and what are reckoned to be miles of unmixed tape. The first six CDs to be released by Knitting Factory include two fabled albums, The ‘69 Los Angeles Sessions (1969) paired with Fela Ransome Kuti Koola Lobitos (1964–68), as well as his encounter with ex-Cream drummer and ex-pat Brit, Live with Ginger Baker (1971). The other titles include London Scene/Shakara (1971/1972), Roforofo Fight plus two singles (1972), Open & Close/Afrodisiac (1971/1972–73), and Gentlemen/Confusion (1973/1974). In what has become standard operating procedure with reissue programs these days, there was at press time no firm date for the release of the LPs. There’s also talk of boxed sets curated by celebrity musical guests, but again, no firm dates have been announced. Happily, all the remastering has been done, a project that took Stein and a team of engineers a decade to complete.

“It was a long, arduous, painstaking labor of love. It was a disparate catalog, and some of it was recorded under pretty funky conditions. We worked from every damned source possible. A lot of the master tapes were destroyed. Sometimes we were working from vinyl, and sometimes 1/4” tape. Occasionally we had the luxury of working from multitracks, but not very often. And we weren’t into remixing. We were going with whatever Fela put together.

“If you listen to these recordings, I’m pretty damned proud of them. They sound fresh and clean, and like they could have been recorded yesterday in a 48-track digital studio.”

As good as the records are, it was that animated, perspiration-soaked, live experience—glimpsed in The Best of the Black President, a DVD documentary accompanying the first Knitting Factory release—that revealed Fela’s almost mystical authority as he stalked the stage, condemning corruption and injustice with sure rhythms, satirical lyrics, and a wide, gap-toothed grin.
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