SPECIAL ISSUE
The Best of the Best: 500 Recommended Components

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OCTOBER 2010

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Welcome to The Family!

Both a newborn and a proven Olympic athlete:

USB Audio joins reel-to-reel tape, the LP and DSD as having legitimate claim to being the quality end of the audio frontier.

Once upon a time, the shift to dot-matrix printers meant new-found versatility, but lousy looking type, then came laser and inkjet. Once upon a time, the shift to digital music files meant new-found opportunities, but ...

Now the digital sun has come out. Possibly the best quality consumer audio ever available, on planet Earth anyway, has finally appeared in the form of 24/96 and 24/192 audio files, transferred through USB to a new generation of superb DAC's (Digital Audio Converters), whether built into today’s best receivers and amps, or stand alone components.

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Whether you’re playing 128K files, or lossless 44.1 (CD quality), or 24/96 ... it’s a bright and wonderful day in the audio world!
The ultimate goal of the hi-fi enthusiast is the enjoyment of pre-recorded music in the home. But, strange as it may seem, hi-fi hobbyists embroil themselves in endless debate over the finer points of this enjoyment: Do cables matter? Do all amplifiers sound the same? Do LPs better than CDs? There are hundreds more—just read any Internet forum. Further, that ideal original recording is flawed from the get-go; the reproduction is flawed from the get-go; the packaging of "adult" mail-order products.

The pinnacle of achievement is thus one of illusion: a reproduction that sounds so like the original event that it makes us suspend disbelief and imagine that we're listening to the event right there in our listening room—with, necessarily, our common sense also suspended, and our eyes closed.

Of course, any form of audio reproduction is flawed from the get-go; the closest you can come to an original event is the event itself. But even though it is doomed to fail, we seem to have latched on to this idea of a convincing illusion as looking at an apple. To start with, you can't eat the former, and the latter isn't flat. Similarly, the experience of a live acoustic event is not the same kind of experience as listening to a recording of such an event at home. Why then should we use the first to judge the quality of the second?

In other words, since listening to music on a hi-fi isn't the same kind of experience as listening to live music, criticizing hi-fi's inability to create a convincing illusion of a full orchestra or stadium-scale rock concert in my home makes as much sense as complaining about live music's inability to let me hear Jimi Hendrix open for John Coltrane tonight.

Listening to music on a hi-fi is an event in and of itself, and its success or failure lies in its ability to engage us over time—or, more simply, it lies in the listening. But wait—haven't I just thrown out all objective criteria? Doesn't that leave us adrift in a sea of sonic anarchy, with people simply buying whatever they like to listen to, with no way of determining who has the good, the better, or the best hi-fi? How can we justify how much to spend? How can we compete with each other? How can we decide?

Objective criteria are meaningless in determining personal enjoyment. If the point of listening to music on a hi-fi is enjoyment (and if it isn't, you and I have nothing to discuss), and if music is art, the more meaningful experience comes about through our increased knowledge and enjoyment of music, not our increased knowledge of and fascination with hi-fi's ability to fool the ear. "Trompe l'oreille?"

Which brings us to the audiophile—the lover of hearing. Audiophiles put the high in high fidelity. We're not only interested in a faithful reproduction of the recorded event; it also must be an objectively more faithful reproduction than any other. Here's where most of our arguing is rooted, and it's where I think we've gone astray. If our ultimate purpose in buying a hi-fi is the appreciation of art, the process of selection becomes one of finding which hi-fi components we most like to listen to. Just as it's silly to walk through an art museum with the sole objective of finding the painting that looks most like an apple because we're hungry, when auditioning hi-fi gear, rather than search for the next best thing to being there, we need to look for the experience that feeds our love of listening to music. Besides, with painting and hi-fi we're already there.

Let's redefine high fidelity as being faithful to the passion for and discovery of music. This means that the best hi-fi is the one that perpetually fans the flame of this passion. Listening to music on a hi-fi is one of the most luxurious uses of time there is. It's completely and totally unproductive—unless we want to count enjoyment as a factor of the Gross Domestic Product. I think some audiophiles want to believe—perhaps even need to believe—that hi-fi has an objective, measurable value in order to alleviate their guilt over the fact that we're feeding what begins and ends as a sensual pleasure. Hi-fi's value is not its ability to create a convincing, objective and measurable illusion; its value is the ability to let us listen to whatever we want, whenever we choose, and as often as we like. Whenever I hear an audiophile utter the phrase critical listening, I'm reminded of the discreet packaging of "adult" mail-order products.

Listen more
When it comes to your appreciation of art, don't listen to anyone who suggests that something he or she knows means more than your own experience. You may end up enjoying art that deviates so far from the illusion of an apple that you're left hungry for more. It's okay. People have been doing it forever. If you want a convincing illusion, bend over forward and look through your legs at the rising moon. But listening to music on a hi-fi is something I prefer to do with all my senses and imagination wide open, so that I can better revel in the passion that music demands.

"Stanley, see this? This is this. This ain't something else. This is this."
—Michael, in The Deer Hunter
FEATURES

55 Recommended Components
Copied but never equaled. Stereophile's reviewers and editors rate the best-sounding audio components.

111 Reissues Redux
Old-fashioned? On their last legs? No longer relevant? In this age of downloads, tracks instead of albums, and, of course, outright piracy, a number of high-quality producers of old-fashioned CDs and LPs continue to prosper, says Robert Baird.

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As We See It
Why music matters most. Michael Lavorgna nails his audiophile colors to the mast.

Letters
Readers get grumpy over our apparent advocacy for cigar smoking and small speakers, but like our reviews of affordable products.


Industry Update
High-end audio news, including the dealer-sponsored events taking place in September and October, the launch of Sonus Faber's ultimate speaker, the Fenice, Chord's new Chordette range of micro components, and why the British Broadcasting Corporation operates two seconds in the future.

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

Sam's Space
Sam Tellig continues his exploration of affordable audio with the Crescendo integrated amplifier and CD player from Italian manufacturer Audio Analogue.

Analog Corner
Rubin Goldberg's latest creation or a superb example of lateral thinking? Michael Fretner tries out HiFiction's Thales AV tonearm.

Listening
Art Dudley enthuses about Shindo's Vosne-Romanee tube preamplifier.

The Fifth Element
The Vivid Audio V1.5 loudspeaker gets a thumbs-up from the normally unexcitable John Marks, who also raves about Cardas cables.

Record Reviews
For October's "Recording of the Month," we've proudly chosen Grinderman 2, the triumphant second album from the unhinged, Nick Cave-led quartet of the same name. Osvaldo Golijov's Las Pasion Segun San Marcos gets an enthusiastic thumbs-up in classical music, while the Crocodiles, Richard Thompson, and Widespread Panic get a listen in rock/pop. Steven Schoenberg's album of improvisational piano works are a welcome addition in jazz.

Manufacturers' Comments
Abingdon Music Research, Einstein, Atapella, Miyajima, and Harbeth comment on our reviews of their products.

Aural Robert
Having just released his third album, Harlem River Blues, the very talented singer/songwriter, Justin Townes Earle, has built an artistic identity separate from that of his famous father. By Robert Baird.

INFORMATION

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www.Stereophile.com, October 2010
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Rationale
Editor: To John Atkinson’s beautifully stated rationale for magazines vs the Internet (“Pad Daze,” June 2010, p.3), I would just like to add that the primary argument for the magazine is that it’s an indispensable part of having a free press. Print media is at the heart of informed choice, no reasoned analysis, nor any depth to all the different forms of authoritative investigative journalism—including Stereophile’s reviews, measurements, reporting, etc.—that society absolutely requires. No other media comes close to having similar numbers of journalists, let alone depth of quality.

—John Peinturn

Irrational
Editor: Stereophile is usually so well written that I can follow your logic even when I disagree with your conclusions. But Art Dudley’s reference to cigar smoking (in the caption on p.43 of the August issue) as “that most civilized of late-night rituals” is truly confounding.

What part of cigar smoking does Art think is so civilized? Is it the stench that permeates clothes and furnishings? The risk of burning holes in fine clothing? Is there something about the health hazards— including lung, bladder, pancreatic, and cervical cancers, emphysema, COPD, and erectile dysfunction—that you consider “civilized”? Please explain. Or were you just blowing smoke?

—Curtis Leeds
cleeds123@yahoo.com

Each to his own sin, Mr. Leeds.
—John Atkinson

Leinsdorf? Or Steinberg?
Editor: In the August issue, John Marks (“The Fifth Element,” p.50) cites “Erich Leinsdorf and the BSO’s phenomenal reading of Holst’s The Planets (Deutsche Grammophon)” as among his favorites. I have never heard of this recording. Was John perhaps thinking of the justly acclaimed William Steinberg/BSO recording on the same label?

—Jeff Rainier
White Plains, NY
jrpiano@yahoo.com

Right now, it’s the climactic scene from The Crying Game around here: “Noooooo—vooooooooooo!!!!” And, I had the CD right in front of me, and even looked it up on Amazon.com to make sure it was available. Aggh. Thanks, Jeff, I needed that. The fan mail was going to my head.
—John Marks

Schlock?
Editor: It’s time for me to pay bills this month, including the small cost of renewing my Stereophile subscription. As I had the day off, I picked up the August issue and read John Atkinson’s review of the Harbeth P3ESR loudspeaker (p.70). What schlock! If you can’t find a speaker costing over two grand with a frequency range better than 75Hz-20kHz that does not work correctly in the first place, and that is highly recommended by the editor in chief, you should read another rag.

In the review’s conclusion, the combined total of upper-crust hi-fi components driving this 12”-high, no-low bass performer was—let me get my pencil out—$50,000 sans cost of cables. The reviewer said the Harbeth’s P3ESR did not sound outclassed in this system, merely constricted in loudness and low-frequency extension.

Good Lord! I think a dinged-up pair of Dynaco A25XLs for a hundred bucks on eBay could smoke the Harbeths in a blind test. If anyone reading that review had any inclination about purchasing the Harbeths, send ‘em over to me; I’ll sell them Windsor Castle and Central Park for 20 bucks.

I am going to resubscribe to Stereophile, though, as it’s giving me more laughs than National Lampoon and Mad Magazine collectively.

—Mark Korda
mark.korda@myfairpoint.net

Thank you for resubscribing, Mr. Korda, but the fact remains that, within the limitations imposed by their size, the Harbeths are superb speakers that would show a clean pair of heels to a pair of Dynaco A25XLs even if the latter weren’t dinged up. (See my Follow-Up elsewhere in this issue.) The debate between those who insist that a loudspeaker must be full-range to be recommended and those, such as I, who are prepared to sacrifice bass extension to maximize midrange imaging quality, has been going on for decades—see “Who Stole the Bass?”, a 1987 exchange between Antony H. Cordesman and Martin Colloms, at www.stereophile.com/features/44.

—John Atkinson

My wallet thanks you
Editor: I’m writing to thank you for the broad coverage Stereophile gives to affordable gear. I recently concluded that my dedicated listening room should again become the dining room it was designed to be. So I had to sell my 10-year-old system, built around a pair of Eros Mk.II electrostatic speakers, and put together a system that would both minimally intrude on my den and provide two-channel sound enhancement for TV viewing. And finances required that I spend less than I could sell the existing system for.

So tonight I’m sitting in said den, listening to Joe Henderson’s Lush Life (purchased because of your glowing review). A cheap universal Blu-ray player is optically feeding a PS Audio Digital Link III DAC, which is hooked up to a PrimaLuna integrated amp driving a pair of Era monitors, while a small REL subwoofer mostly idles in the corner. When I pull the speakers out into their magic spots in the middle of the room, Lord, the sound is fantastic. More important, the components sound the way you guys described them.

I bought one gently used item via Audiogon.com, the rest from online or bricks-and-mortar shops, at a total cost (sans cables) of $3600.

Stereophile is very good at what it does. I thank you. My wife thanks you. My den thanks you. My wallet thanks you. Gotta go; “A-Train” just started.

—Chuck Jones
Atlanta, GA
cjones@npastategies.org

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Those promoting audio-related seminars, shows, and meetings should e-mail the when, where, and who to stephen.mejias@sorc.com at least eight weeks before the month of the event. The deadline for the December 2010 issue is September 30, 2010. We will reply with a confirmation. If you do not receive confirmation within 24 hours, please e-mail us again. If you prefer to communicate through fax, the number is (212) 915-4167.

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

ARIZONA

Wednesday, October 27, 7–9:30pm: The Arizona Audio Video Club will hold its monthly meeting, this one featuring NuVision. A raffle is planned and refreshments will be served. Guests and new members are invited. For more info, call Adam Goldfine at (602) 524-3974, or visit the club’s new website at www.azaclub.org.

CALIFORNIA

Sunday, September 26, 12–4pm: The Los Angeles and Orange County Audio Society will host the Fourth Annual Software Swap Meet in the Grand Ballroom of the Buena Park Holiday Inn (7000 Beach Boulevard). Collectors and vendors are invited to sell and swap their software and any other merchandise. There is no table charge. Setup begins at 11am and tables will be allocated on a first-come, first-served basis. Guests, visitors, and new members are invited, and parking is free. For more info, visit www.laocas.com or call Bob Levi at (714) 281-5850.

Sunday, October 24, 1–4pm: Eastwind Import will present an audio event for the Los Angeles and Orange County Audio Society in the Penthouse Suite at the Buena Park Holiday Inn (7000 Beach Boulevard). The show will feature two systems flown in straight from the Rocky Mountain Audio Fest. The big system will include Concert Fidelity’s DAC-040 DAC and CF-080LSX preamplifier, and Silicon Arts Design’s ZL-200 amplifiers. The small system will feature Silicon Arts Design’s Micro Integration components.

UK: EAST FARLEIGH

Paul Messenger

The one constant factor defining all forms of electronics in recent decades is the steady and dramatic shrinking of the sizes of both components and circuitry.

For obvious reasons, this miniaturization has had the greatest impact on the portable sector. In 1979, when Sony kick-started the “personal/portable” sector by launching the Walkman, who would have thought that a little company called Apple, then only two years old and virtually unknown, would, 22 years later, claim huge slices of the music hardware and software markets by developing the iPod—something even smaller than a Walkman, that can store and play an entire music collection? And six years after that, in 2007, came the iPhone, which not only stores vast quantities of music but can also take photographs, provide two-way video, telephone the world, and communicate via the Internet.

Home hi-fi has had little need for compactness. It grew up when all electronics comprised bulky tubes and transformers, and those early components established conventions of shape and size that remain dominant today.

Which is not to say that there haven’t been plenty of examples of compact hi-fi, dating right back to the introduction of solid-state equipment in the 1960s. That ultracompact hi-fi electronics can be manufactured has long been a fact on the ground; the problem for the specialist hi-fi company has more to do with establishing the credibility of such products, which all too often are considered merely cute little accessories.

Two of the most interesting companies currently making ultracompact but genuinely hi-fi components are South Korea’s Firestone Audio and the Austro–Czech Pro-Ject Audio Systems. Both have achieved significant success with extensive ranges of components, but neither has won the full high-end credibility that the UK’s Chord Electronics is hoping to achieve with its new Chordette range. Over the past 20 years Chord has built an impressive reputation, first on its exceedingly beautiful full-size components, and then with the smaller but equally attractive Choral models. Gorgeous styling and finish have undoubtedly helped make the brand successful, but advanced technologies such as high-frequency power supplies, and DACs with pioneering multipole Watts Transient Aligned (WTA) digital filters, have also played their parts.

Having thus firmly established its high-end credibility, Chord 18 months ago surprised everyone by launching a cute little model called the Chordette...
and mhi Evidence loudspeakers. **Eastwind Import** will offer its entire inventory of audiophile software for purchase. A raffle is planned and lunch will be served. Guests, visitors, and new members are invited, and parking is free. For more info, visit www.laocas.com or call Bob Levi at (714) 281-5850.

**Sunday, November 14, 1-5pm:** The **Los Angeles and Orange County Audio Society** will hold its monthly meeting at Sunny's Home Video and Music Systems (1370 E. Cypress Street, Suite D, Covina). Demonstrations will feature components and representatives from Wilson Audio Specialties, Ayre Acoustics, Boulder, T+A, Rega, Dynaudio, Spiral Groove, and Transparent Cables. A raffle including 20 LPs is being planned and lunch will be served. Guests, visitors, and new members are invited, and parking is free. For more info, visit www.laocas.com or call Bob Levi at (714) 281-5850.

**COLORADO**

**Friday— Sunday, October 15-17:** Audio Alternative (1849 Michael Gem (see "Industry Update," January 2009, Vol.32 No.1). It's a DAC, but not like those we know; though it does have a regular USB input for hardwired connection, the real unique selling point is an alternative cordless means of transferring APT-X—coded A2DP Bluetooth digital data (ie, music) from PCs, PDAs, and smartphones.

The little Gem currently sells for £412 ($660), and is available in a wide range of colors for an extra £50. It was so successful—"We sold thousands," says Chord's John Franks—that Chord has developed an entire collection of rather more costly Chordette models. A number of these were shown at the Munich High End show in May, and a brief mention and a photo appeared in the August 2010 "Industry Update.”

Eight new Chordette models were introduced to the UK press in July, for August or September availability. Each is potentially as colorful as the original Gem, and encased to match; and they're small enough that a complete audio system can be mounted in a tiny dedicated tabletop rack. Together they offer a wide variety of capabilities that seem particularly well suited to modern lifestyles that seem more or less based on smartphones and PC audio.

The Chordette Peach expands the Gem concept in terms of connection flexibility and convenience. Instead of just two digital inputs, it has four: cordless Bluetooth, USB, optical (TosLink), and electrical (coaxial) S/PDIF. These can be selected by a switch on the unit itself, or by remote control if used with Chord's Prima preamplifier.

The Chordette Dual is a head amp for low-output moving-coil cartridges. However, it not only amplifies and equalizes tiny cartridge signals for feeding to a preamplifier's line input, it also has a built-in analog-to-digital converter and a USB output to facilitate digitizing and archiving LPs on a computer.

The Chordette Toucan, for the serious headphone user, can be fed with analog (phono or XLR) or digital (USB) signals, and incorporates a cross-fading algorithm based on psychoacoustics to mitigate the in-the-head effect. The Toucan Blue variation replaces the analog inputs with Bluetooth connectivity, for cordless operation from appropriate devices.
Lane, Fort Collins) and Richard and Eneke Vandersteen will demonstrate the new Model Seven loudspeaker at the Rocky Mountain Audio Fest. For more info, call Rick at (970) 221-1496.

**GEORGIA**

Thursday, September 30, 7pm: Audio Alternative (895 Indian Trail Road, Suite 15, Lilburn) will host an evening seminar with Richard and Eneke Vandersteen to introduce the new Model Seven loudspeaker. RSVP: (770) 931-0606.

**ILLINOIS**

Friday—Saturday, October 1–2, 12–8pm: Musical Artisans (8335 N. Keeler Avenue, Skokie) will host the Chicago premiere of the Magic° Q5 loudspeaker. In attendance will be Magico’s director of sales, Irv Gross. Also featured will be the latest component-isolation systems and turntable products from Grand Prix Audio, all wired with Argento Audio FMR signal and power cables. RSVP: (847) 983-0217 or rreyes@musicalartisans.com.

**DIGITAL SOURCES**

The Chordette line also includes ultracompact pre- and power amplifiers. Chord’s Prima preamp can be operated remotely or hands-on, and has four analog inputs alongside a bidirectional USB; digital record monitoring via TosLink is also available. The Scamp and Max stereo power amps are both rated at 50Wpc, can be bridged to deliver 80W in mono, and have hands-on volume controls, external power supplies, and USB digital inputs. But while the Scamp is fed via a pair of analog inputs, the more costly Max has Bluetooth connectivity.

Finally, and far too complex to describe in detail here, the Chordette Mogul is an exceedingly tiny micro-PC with a 320GB hard drive; it runs Windows 7 and is controlled from a wireless keyboard. This ultimate solution incorporates Internet access, has six USB inputs to connect with the other Chordettes, wired and wireless network capability, and VGA and HDMI outputs for external displays.

Chord Electronics is not the first serious hi-fi company to make ultracompact components, but its Chordette range is different. Rather than being aimed primarily at the budget sector, the various Chordette models seem to have the potential of serious performance, and provide niche-filling features that seek to bridge the gap between traditional analog stereo hi-fi and the newer worlds of PC/PDA/phone-based digital audio.

**ITALY: VENICE**

Michael Fremer

In highly dramatic fashion on the evening of June 26, 2010, at Palazzo Grassi, the premier museum of modern art in Venice, Italy, Sonus Faber introduced its impressive new statement loudspeaker, the Fenice (Phoenix). The prestigious loudspeaker maker, based in nearby Ariccia, Rome, was acquired in 2007 by Quadric, the holding company that also purchased Audio Research Corporation the same year. The new owners sought to demonstrate, to a large gathering of invited international distributors and journalists, that the transition to a fresh management and design team would not dilute but enhance the repu...
MINNESOTA

Tuesday, September 21, 7–9pm: The Audio Society of Minnesota will hold its kickoff meeting for the 2010–2011 season at the Pavek Museum of Broadcasting (3517 Raleigh Avenue, St. Louis Park). Refreshments will be served. Guests, visitors, and new members are invited. For more info, visit http://sites.google.com/site/audiosocietyofminnesota.

Tuesday, October 19, 7–9pm: The Audio Society of Minnesota will hold its monthly meeting at the Pavek Museum of Broadcasting (3517 Raleigh Avenue, St. Louis Park). John Wolff, president of Classic Audio Loudspeakers, will be on hand to discuss his product line, offer insights into loudspeaker design, and demonstrate his new T-3.4 speaker. Refreshments will be served. Guests, visitors, and new members are invited. For more info, visit http://sites.google.com/site/audiosocietyofminnesota.

NEW JERSEY

Saturday, October 2, 1 or 5pm: Audio Connection (615 Bloomfield Avenue, Verona) will host a seminar with Richard and Eneke Vandersteen to demonstrate the new Model Seven loudspeaker. For availability and to RSVP, call (973) 239-1799.

NEW YORK

Wednesday, October 6, 6–9pm: Innovative Audio will host an evening with Lamm Industries and Wilson Audio Specialties. Lamm’s Vladimir Lamm and Wilson’s Peter McGrath will present the Lamm Model LP2 phono preamp, Model L2 Reference line-level hybrid preamplifier, and Model ML3 Signature amplifiers, with Wilson’s Alexandria 2 loudspeakers. In a second room, Wilson Sasha W/P loudspeakers will be driven by the Lamm Model LL2.1 line-level tube preamp and Model M1.2 Reference hybrid power amps. For more info, visit www.innovativeaudiovideo.com. RSVP: (212) 634-4444 or info@iavny.com.

WISCONSIN

Thursday, October 7, 6pm: Ultra Fidelis (740 N. James Lovell Street, Milwaukee) will host an evening seminar with Richard and Eneke Vandersteen to introduce the new Model Seven loudspeaker. RSVP: (414) 221-0200.

INDUSTRY UPDATE

The consensus among the veteran audio journalists was that few, if any, introductions of new products in the past few decades have managed the drama of this one. The new speakers, veiled in red cloth, flanked the stage as a short, skillfully produced video recounted Sonus Faber’s origins, history, and current status, though founder Franco Serblin’s name was conspicuously if understandably absent.

One could not have chosen a better setting for introducing a limited-edition, hideously expensive (ca $180,000/pair) loudspeaker that was more attractive than much of the art and will surely produce greater long-term pleasure.

The group then assembled on the main floor, itself an installation by Piotr Uklanski, consisting of a wall of lacquered photos of hundreds of famous actors playing Nazis in the movies and on TV, as well as the tiled floor itself, which lit up in colors like the disco in Saturday Night Fever. The installation’s meaning had something to do with what contemporary artists are doing to what wealthy patrons.

The massive new Fenice, a 3.5-way, ported design, is described by Sonus Faber as a “vibration cancellation optimized, sound field shaper, variable geometry radiation stealth reflex loudspeaker system.” It leverages Sonus Faber’s woodworking skills with new techniques. The complex, lyre-shaped design of thin, curved, layers of pressed, double-thickness, cross-grained plywood is capped top and bottom by massive end pieces of machined aluminum connected by an internal steel truss rod similar to those found in super-tall skyscrapers and Formula 1 cars, tuned to cancel out audioband resonances. The speaker’s development resulted in three patents, including the Sound Field Shaper, a physically and electrically adjustable two-way speaker mounted on the Fenice’s rear, and a new floor-mount system incorporating a mass damper that Sonus claims produces complete decoupling from both speaker-created and floor-borne vibrations.
THE NEW EDGE UNDERSTANDS 10,000 VOICE COMMANDS.
The Fénice features a 15" side-firing subwoofer with a 4" voice-coil and a sandwich cone of two layers of nanocarbon separated by a core of syntactic foam. There are two sandwich-cone wofiners with cellulose-pulp skins and foam cores, while the decoupled midrange unit combines a 6.5" cone formed from cellulose pulp, paper, and other natural fibers, with a basket CNC-machined from a solid billet of Avional and gunmetal. The tweeter is a 1" hybrid ring radiator with a neodymium/samarium-cobalt magnet, visco-elastically decoupled from the enclosure and fitted with a mechanical antiresonance chamber comprising an acoustic labyrinth of natural wood. The progressive-slope crossover uses the highest-quality components, including Mundorf silver/gold/oil capacitors and Jantzen cross-coil inductors.

The Fénice has a specified frequency response of 20Hz-35kHz. It’s big—67" high by 29" wide by 31" deep—and, at 672 pounds, heavy. Its appearance and construction combine traditional Sonus Faber ideas with new ones to produce a large loudspeaker that is thoroughly modern and visually aggressive, yet traditionally beautiful.

After yet another video showing some of the techniques of working wood and aluminum used in building the Fénice, two pairs of Sonus Faber executives dramatically lifted the red drapes. So effectively, had the little drama been staged that the crowd rushed forward and began furiously snapping pictures, as if Lady Gaga, Beyoncé, or Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi himself had materialized, and not merely a new loudspeaker.

Once the buzz had died down, guests were invited upstairs, to listen to the Fenices in a decidedly audiophile-unfriendly space. Yet despite the room's hard surfaces, the obtrusive noise of the air-conditioning system, and a rare miscue of a musical source by Sumiko's usually reliable John Hunter, the Fénice’s formidable powers were clear, particularly its prodigious and clean low frequencies and the silence between the notes, the latter one of the design team’s key goals.

I doubt that there will be any formal reviews of the Sonus Faber Fénice; only 30 pairs will be produced, and according to CEO Mauro Grange, all 30 pairs have already been spoken for by Sonus Faber distributors.

So why all the hoopla? Why go to such expense to introduce a speaker whose entire production run is already sold out? Well, for one thing, you can be sure the technology developed for the Fénice will be trickled down to smaller, less expensive Sonus Faber models based on the Fénice.

While buyouts such as the one Sonus Faber has experienced, in which the founder and original designer leaves, often lead to a company losing its way, it’s apparent that, like its stabledmate Audio Research, Sonus Faber will prosper under new and clearly enlightened management.

**UK: LONDON**

**Paul Messenger**

The trouble with digital technology is that it plays footloose and fancy free with the time domain. Much of the time this doesn't matter, but there are occasions—far too many for my liking—when the inherent delay or “latency” becomes a serious pain in the posterior.

For example, 20 or 30 years ago, when the world was still substantially analog, the BBC would simulcast the occasional Promenade Concert on one of its two TV stations and in FM on Radio 3, its classical station. This was great for the serious hi-fi enthusiast, who could watch the orchestra playing in perfect synchronization with best-quality—and largely uncompressed—stereo sound.

All that seems to have gone by the boards, thanks to the malignant side of digital technology, which even managed to sabotage for me the opening night of this year’s series of Proms concerts: Mahler’s Symphony 8. Although this performance was broadcast in analog on both TV and radio stations, I still couldn’t get proper sync; my recently acquired flat-screen plasma TV introduces its own picture processing delay, so the pictures lagged behind the sound. (Similar problems afflict sports commentary, but I suspect the BBC’s legendary “ball by ball” radio coverage of cricket matches are of limited relevance to Stereophile readers.)

I can still achieve synced Proms sound and pictures, but only by forgoing the superior FM sound in favor of one of several less satisfactory options of TV sound. There are several ways to extract the stereo sound signal from a TV signal and feed it to a proper hi-fi system, and I decided to use optical (TosLink) connections in order to keep my A/V gear electrically isolated from my hi-fi.

The easy way to do this was to send the optical digital output from my Pioneer plasma TV to the hi-fi via a DAC. While this certainly preserved sync, the sound quality was obviously inferior to that obtained by directly feeding the DAC the optical output from a satellite TV receiver. However, the latter route had sync problems because of the delay introduced by the plasma’s processing. To get the best sound and good sync, I’ve had to include a digital delay—a neat little box called a Felston DD740—between the satellite receiver and the DAC.

These days, a similar digital Tower of Babel has been erected for radio signals. During the day, I like to listen to talk radio while doing chores and moving from room to room. This is simply accomplished by having several analog radios in various rooms, all tuned to the same station. (It’s more convenient than carrying around a portable!) However, this has become more difficult with DAB radio transmissions. Not only are these invariably delayed with respect to the analog transmission, for various technical reasons that are logical enough, but I actually have access to no fewer than five different digital radio platforms: two terrestrial transmissions (DAB, Freeview TV), two satellite TV transmissions (Sky, Freesat), and the Internet. All are delayed compared to old-fashioned analog broadcasting, and all, as far as I can determine, have different degrees of delay, so mixing them up in different rooms doesn’t work.

Some decades ago, when I first tried DAB digital radio, I contacted the BBC’s engineering information service to inquire about the delay—which, for example, renders the historically accurate time-signature “pips” broadcast by the BBC virtually meaningless. The spokesman, tongue firmly in cheek, told me they’d decided to move Broadcasting House two seconds into the future.
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ms. congeniality

Dave Wilson said his design objective in creating the original Sophia was to make a congenial speaker.

What that meant to him was a loudspeaker that would allow the listener to escape the demands of that addictive disorder known as "audiophilia" and just relax into pure enjoyment of the music.

That meant that Sophia needed to sound beguiling even with modest electronics, and needed to work well in a wide range of listening rooms. All without sacrificing its high-performing DNA as part of the Wilson Audio family.


We're convinced that, without risking the congeniality title, we've made a loudspeaker that will tempt even the most addicted audiophiles to assay its limits with the most exotic and revealing electronics.

And, we'll hope you'd agree that Sophia Series 3 has a good chance at the beauty portion of the crown as well.

Sophia Series 3

Watch the mini-documentary on Sophia's creation at www.wilsonaudio.com
Click on Sophia 3 in the Product menu.

Wilson Audio
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I met Brian Wansink, PhD, on NBC Nightly News. I didn’t actually meet him; rather, I caught up with this food psychologist’s findings. Here’s what Dr. Wansink dished out to NBC’s Brian Williams:

The larger your dinner plate, the more you eat.

Dr. Wansink holds the John Dyson Endowed Chair in the Applied Economics and Management Department of Cornell University. According to him, the standard-size dinner plate in North America has gone from 12" today to 10" in diameter 50 years ago.

When you downsize from a 12" to a 10" dinner plate, you can expect to eat 22% less, says the Endowed Chair and his colleagues at Cornell’s Food and Brand Lab, which Dr. Wansink founded. Wansink is the author of Mindless Eating: Why We Eat More Than We Think (New York: Bantam Books, 2006). I borrowed the book from the library. (Why indulge in mindless spending?)

I measured our Villeroy & Boch dinner plates: 10.5". Not so bad, but these were made in Luxembourg. Next, I took the ruler to my mother-in-law’s dinner plates, from Russia: 9.5".

When you downsize from a 12" to a 10" dinner plate, you can expect to eat 22% less, says the Endowed Chair and his colleagues at Cornell’s Food and Brand Lab, which Dr. Wansink founded. Wansink is the author of Mindless Eating: Why We Eat More Than We Think (New York: Bantam Books, 2006). I borrowed the book from the library. (Why indulge in mindless spending?)

The book, all about gluttony and how to combat it, contains some useful morsels, such as:

“Simply thinking that a meal will taste good can lead you to eat more” (p.19).

Well, simply thinking that a piece of hi-fi gear will sound good can lead you to pay more for it—especially for interconnects and cables. (I made that up; I lack the research to back it up.)

“We’re all tricked by our environment” (p.25). High-end hi-fi dealers know this well. So do manufacturers. Consider the inventive names of the most expensive speaker cables.

Smaller European plates lead to smaller portions. Another reason Europeans (and Asians) eat less than we do is that they have smaller kitchens, with less space to stash food from Costco that you may or may not eat. The smaller your kitchen, the less food you’re likely to buy.

A light bulb flashed in my dim, flea-watt brain: If you reduce the size of your listening room—or keep it small—you can keep your system small, too.

“The best diet is the one you don’t know you’re on” (Mindless Eating, p.13). The best hi-fi system is the one whose individual components you’re unaware of. If you can analyze a system, if you’re too conscious of its component parts, it’s no good. I must share this idea with Dr. Wansink to see if it floats.

Dr. Wansink tells us that fast music in restaurants makes us eat faster. Fast food and fast music go together. On the other hand, if you’re a restaurateur and want your customers to order more from the bar, slower music does the trick.

All of this makes me want to return to Italy with my wife, Marina, for some slow eating. One of our favorite spots there is the island of Ischia, in the Gulf of Naples. Guests at hotel spas usually take three meals a day, along with mud baths, massages, steam therapy, thermal waters, and other delights of European decrepitude and decadence. For both lunch and dinner, you are served a primo—a first course, usually pasta—followed by a secondo, which is often local seafood. Marina and I weigh ourselves before and after each trip. We usually shed 5 lbs or so. Maybe it’s because the spada—swordfish—is sliced half as thick as the slithery slabs US fishmongers proffer. And it’s twice as tasty.

Back in the land of foods and brands, I ruminated over lunch with my cronies Roy Hall, aka Music Hall. What the hell does Hall know about food? Plenty. The scruffy Scot is a culinary expert, proud papa of Ilan Hall, winner of the second season of Bravo’s Top Chef and proprietor of The Gorbals, an upscale restaurant (named for a downscale district of Glasgow) in the Alexandria Hotel, in downtown Los Angeles. I call Ilan “Dining Hall.” He’s CIA: Culinary Institute of America.

Roy thinks that the size of their plates isn’t the only reason Europeans eat smaller portions. The food is fresher, so less satisfies more. I think there’s a lesson for audiophiles here as well.

In Great Neck, Long Island, where Roy lives, you can have strawberries year-round. Not in Italy. Food in Europe—Southern Europe, especially—is almost always local, and always fresh.

If a vegetable or fruit isn’t in season, they don’t have it. But fragole (strawberries) in season are fantastically flavorful, while most strawberries sold here are just . . . chewy.

Remember the movie The Fly (1986)? Too much US food tastes as if it’s gone through Seth Brundle’s teleportation pods. Our French friends get a kick out of an American product called I Can’t Believe It’s Not Butter!

Back to Roy’s strawberries. They’re picked, put in plastic containers, trucked...
across the continent in a refrigerated truck, and distributed to your grocery store—as much as 10 days after picking. Two days later, you buy them. Two days after that, you eat them: Brundleberries. Because little flavor—and probably less nutrition—can survive such a journey, you crave more. As Dining Hall says, “If it tastes good, it is good.”

Dr. Winsink credits himself with helping to create the Small Plate Movement. Meanwhile, I have a cause myself: the Small Hi-Fi Movement. Make everything smaller but better: your amp, speakers, listening room—your kitchen, for that matter. Too bad I can't get any funding.

European hi-fi manufacturers can help you; they tend to serve up smaller hi-fi along with their smaller plates and food portions. One of these manufacturers is located in one of the great culinary regions of Italy.

A terme in Tuscany
Audio Analogue is located in Monsummano Terme, about five miles from the city and spa town of Montecatini Terme. Terme means hot spring—as in Saratoga or Arkansas.

A certain elegance prevails in Tuscany that's notable even for Italy. Tuscans tend to have style and taste. They're arrogant, too. But I've never encountered arrogance with the Blanda family—down-to-earth people, originally from Sicily, who know Tuscan arrogance (and discrimination) all too well. Fine people. Hearty eaters.

Giuseppe Blanda—some call him Papa Blanda—is the founder and general manager of Audio Analogue; his son Stefano is the managing director. (I think Stefano eats from 12" plates.) Luca Podesta is the chief electronics engineer, and Claudio Bertini is chief designer and a part owner. Claudio's hi-fi shop, Oasi Audio—one of the finest in Italy—is in nearby San Giuliano Terme, a place so out of the way even some Tuscans have trouble finding it.

Audio Analogue Crescendo
The Crescendo integrated amplifier and CD player ($995 each) are Audio Analogue's entry-level components. There's a matching Crescendo tuner that includes a USB DAC. The amp and CD player each measure 17.5" (445mm) wide by 3.2" (81mm) high by 13.7" (350mm) deep. The faceplates are astonishingly thin: ¼". Obviously, some cost was shaved there. The amp weighs 23.1 lbs (10.5kg), the CD player 15 lbs (6.8kg).

Assembly and testing of the components are done in Monsummano Terme, as is the design. About half the parts are said to come from Italy. Even the printed circuit boards are “stuffed” in Italy (as am I). The appearance of the Crescendo models, while not extravagant, is elegant, tastefully Tuscan. The Crescendi are available in silver or black.

The CD player works the way you'd expect it to. The integrated amplifier has an unusual and welcome elegance and simplicity. This amp isn't just Italian; it's Tuscan. Note, in the photo, the single large knob on the center of the faceplate. It controls the volume, of course (you'll usually use the remote control). Push it in to select the source.

Gain is controlled by an integrated resistor network with no buffer. There are four different volume-scale settings.
The Crescendo integrated is free of clutter and frivolous features. Tastefully Tuscan, says Sam.

with different volume steps, so you can match the amp to your speakers' sensitivity and your listening preferences. You can also adjust channel balance.

The Crescendo integrated has five line-level RCA inputs on the back, along with a record out. There is no onboard phono stage. The front panel has a ¼" input for an iPod, along with a ¼" headphone jack. You can configure the Crescendo to work in home-theater bypass mode. The amp is no powerhouse; it's claimed to deliver 50Wpc into 8 ohms or 80Wpc into 4 ohms. But this is like food; if it tastes good, smaller portions will satisfy. Take it from an unendowed chair: me.

If you look inside, you'll see a lot of empty space, always a good sign—the engineer hasn't screwed it up with too many parts, like adding too many ingredients to a dish. You'll also see what appear to be two oversize output transistors, each with 11 pins. They aren't. They are two National Semiconductor LM3886 integrated circuits—sometimes called chip amps. Audio Analogue has been using these for years. As well as input and driver circuitry, each LM3886 houses two bipolar npn output transistors working in class-A/B mode. Most of the Crescendo’s gain, by the way, comes from its output stage.

Some audiophiles (who haven’t heard this stuff) might turn up their noses. They should lend their ears first. The sound of the Crescendo reminds me of the original Audio Analogue Puccini integrated amplifier, introduced in 1996. “Italy in a box,” I said when I reviewed it in this column in Decem-
The Crescendo CD player is tweaked and tuned for CDs. Don't let the modest appearance fool you; this is one of the best-sounding players ever made, says Sam.

Perhaps you need an easy load for the Crescendo; as I said, it's no powerhouse. It's not just a matter of sensitivity. The Harbeth's claimed sensitivity is 86dB/W/m, but its nominal impedance is given as 6 ohms, meaning that the speaker doesn't drain the amp for all the current it can get. Ditto the Dynaudio: again, a claimed sensitivity of 86dB (but this time a nominal impedance of 4 ohms).

PERHAPS YOU NEED AN EASY LOAD FOR THE CRESCENDO; AS I SAID, IT'S NO POWERHOUSE.

I'm writing this column on Mahler's 150th birthday. I turned to a newly released recording of his Symphony 2, "Resurrection," by the late Klaus Tennstedt, from a 1989 concert performance with the London Philharmonic Orchestra (CD, LPO-0044). The Crescendo seems to have a special magic with so-called "live" performances (as opposed to dead ones), where the audience adds an element of electricity, along with an ambiance: a feeling of being present at an event. I don't know why, but the Crescendo does this particularly well. There was a certain electricity about Tennstedt's concert performances that many of his studio recordings lacked; now that he's dead, these "live" recordings should be treasured all the more. (I wish the New York Philharmonic would issue his Mahler Ninth. There were four performances: the ailing conductor's farewell to the NYP.)

I tried this recording with three CD players: the matching Audio Analogue Crescendo, the Musical Fidelity X-Ray V8, and my vintage Sony Discman D25S (which I like because it does so little processing of the signal). A larger, more powerful amplifier might have given me a more dramatic, more dynamic sound with the Harbeths.

Then again, maybe not. There are limits to the re-creation of Mahler's music in my living room—I expect diminishments in drama, dynamics, scale. Mahler is said to have driven orchestra players—even timpanists—to play louder, louder.

The combination of Crescendo integrated and Harbeth Compact 7ES-3 was outstanding—one of those combos that clicks. It didn't seem to matter...
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The CD transport is a TEAC CD5010A, the same drive that Audio Analogue uses in all its current CD players. According to Luca Podestà, Audio Analogue worked closely with TEAC to develop and test the drive, which was developed specifically for audio applications: "The CD-5010A is based on a CD-ROM mechanism which decreases the rotation speed and improves the reading process. This has the particular advantage of cutting down the jitter output level. We use a low-jitter recovered clock receiver, so we don't lose the definition available from the CD-5010A drive."

Digital-to-analog conversion is handled by a low-jitter 24-bit/192kHz clock, Burr-Brown receiver, and 24/192 Delta Sigma DAC. I asked, innocently, about upsampling or oversampling. I'm still trying to sort it out, but here's part of what Luca wrote in reply: "We can refer to a digital audio chain as 24-bit/192kHz when all the components in the chain can accept this format. It's a 'qualify certification,' so to speak.

"The incoming digital signal from a CD, 16-bit/44.1kHz, is transformed to 24-bit/192kHz before it goes to the digital/analog converters. In this case, a special component in the audio chain is required to increase the sample-rate frequency of the signal to 192kHz and to increase the number of bits that represent the information."

I lopped some bits off what Luca wrote.

"Starting from 16 bits, we want to have 24 bits, so we have to 'invent' a part of the signal." This operation—interpolation, prestidigitation, whatever—can produce a signal that's different from the original recorded analog signal. So you have those eight extra bits, which I sometimes call bogus bits. Is this the same as upsampling—the magic bullet? I am somewhat befuddled. Luca wrote..."
that the Crescendo CD player “doesn’t perform an ‘oversampling’ technique.” My eyes glaze over.

I think the take-away is that the Crescendo is tuned and tweaked for playing CDs. What do you want for $995—a player that slices bread, too?

Luca said that he and his team worked especially hard on the power supplies: “All the ‘digital’ parts have dedicated voltage regulators. The conversion circuit has been designed on the board to specifically avoid any high-frequency interference with the audio signal.”

He said that Audio Analogue has taken a “new approach” to the analog output stage: “We realized that a fourth-order active output filter, together with the inner filter inside the DAC, forms a fifth-order output filter. which it makes an ideal partner, the Crescendo CD player excels at tonality. Recordings of chamber music can often turn too edgy or shrill; the treble can go over the top. Not here. I didn’t need another recording of some of the Haydn Piano Trios, but now I have it: Piano Trios, Vol.1, by the Florestan Trio (CD, Hyperion CDA67719). I was captivated, especially by the Trio in G Major, “Gypsy Rondo” (Hob XV:25). (Hob is for the Haydn scholar A. van Hoboken, not the city in New Jersey.) All three musicians are superb. The Crescendo CD and amplifier rendered Antony Marwood's violin with an ineffable sweetness— quite extraordinary for any gear, especially solid-state.

I keep rediscovering recordings in my collection—this time, the series of albums, all splendid, that the late Bobby Short made for Telarc toward the end of his 35-year gig at New York City's Cafe Carlyle. Short said his favorite songwriters were Duke Ellington, Harold Arlen, and Jerome Kern, but I'm especially big on his Cole Porter disc, recorded in 1999 and his last for Telarc: You're The Top: Love Songs of Cole Porter (CD, Telarc CD-83463).

For me, the highlight of the disc is "Can Can," but the track that blew me away this time was "You're the Top." Receive the kick of Klaus Suonsaari's drums, the clearly articulated splash of his cymbals. These recordings are far too fine to download as MP3 files and play on an iPod, though that's what Telarc seems to be about these days. "We Shall Never Be Younger," a lesser-known Porter song, is almost heartbreaking ... and it's uptempo. Amazon.com had this album in stock when I checked, for $18.98. Used copies are available for as little as $2. That's called selling Bobby short. (Sorry. Listening to Cole Porter lyrics can do that.)

Don't sell the Crescendo gear short, either. Gotta get my suit pressed. I have a date tonight with Marina at the Cafe Carlyle. (Not really: a candlelit dinner at home.)
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World Radio History
Ideally, LPs should be played with the pickup stylus remaining tangential (i.e., at a 90° angle) to the groove—just as the lacquer from which the LP was ultimately stamped was cut in the first place. Over the years, many attempts have been made to accomplish this. Back in 1877, Thomas A. Edison’s original machines tangentially tracked his cylinders, but Emil Berliner’s invention of the flat disc put an end to cylinders altogether. In the 1950s, a number of companies marketed so-called “tangential” trackers that used dual arms, based on conventional pivoting arrangements, to change the angle at which the headshell was mounted as it moved across the LP side. In 1963, Marantz introduced the SLT-12, which used a plastic pantograph to move the stylus across the record surface. Garrard’s Zero 100 pivoting arm controlled its independently pivoting headshell with a bar that extended from the main bearing of the tonearm.

There were also tonearms that were moved in their entirety tangentially across the record surface. One used a multiple-ball bearing trolley reminiscent of what Clearaudio uses today. Some, like those made by Rabco in the 1960s, had bead chains and, later, rubber belts that moved the tonearm assembly via motors activated by microswitches. Goldmund, B&O, and many Japanese companies used tiny, servo-controlled motors to nudge the tonearm along a rail, the motors activated by any loss of the stylus’s tangency to the groove, as measured by a photoelectric cell or other light-sensing device.

At the dawn of the CD age, Mitsubishi, Technics, and other Japanese manufacturers, as well as ReVox, also produced so-called “parallel” or “linear” trackers. In 1982, Lou Souther patented a purely mechanical linear tracker in which the cartridge was held by an ultra-low-mass tonearm attached to a low-friction bearing trolley riding on glass rods. Clearaudio bought Souther’s patent and further developed the technology in a number of models, including the top-of-the-line Master Reference turntable.

All of these devices were fussy to set up and maintain, and few actually maintained tangency to the groove. Most grabbed their way across the record surface, either because of how the motors were actuated (loss of tangency) or because of “yaw” play inherent in the design.

In addition, there is the issue of the large discrepancy between the tonearm’s effective mass in the vertical plane, which is small, and in the horizontal plane mass, which is large, due to the fact that the entire arm assembly is being moved. The resonant frequencies of the arm mass/cartridge suspension compliance in the horizontal and vertical planes are thus very different.

Air Bearings

In the late 1970s and early ‘80s, Maplenoll introduced an air-bearing–based arm designed by Bruce Thigpen. In this design, a long rail with an armtube attached to one end slid, virtually without friction, along a cylindrical bearing of pressurized air. (Because the air bearing is housed between two concentric cylinders, it is referred to as a “captured” bearing.) Thigpen marketed an improved version of this design as the Eminent Technology 1 (ET1), and later, with the help of his friend Edison Price, as the much-improved, ergonomically friendlier ET2, which remains popular today (although, to the best of my knowledge, it’s no longer in production).

I bought an ET1 as soon as I saw it back in the early 1980s, figuring its frictionless tracking was perfection. At the time I knew nothing about vertical and horizontal resonant frequencies, nor did I consider the system’s large horizontal effective mass or the stiffness of the air bearing, or the problems of resonance and turbulence created at the annular gap at either ends of the cylindrical bearing as the highly pressurized air quickly returns to ambient air pressure.

An assortment of other air-bearing tonearms also appeared in the early 1980s from companies such as Airtan-
The Thales AV tonearm uses a second arm to rotate the headshell as it moves across the LP.

The Thales AV tonearm uses a second arm to rotate the headshell as it moves across the LP. The arm and headshell of the Thales AV are made of aluminum alloyed with magnesium and silica. (The AV stands for "Aluminum Version.") The Thales Original arm ($13,360) is made of pure magnesium while the bearing parts are plated with gold. The parts are not "cold-formed" but cut from large cast blocks that, because the material is not mechanically stressed, is said to produce a more uniform pathway for the dissipation of vibrational energy.

### Setup and Adjustments

While the Thales AV's baseplate is fairly standard, the downward travel of the vertical arm means that only turntables with sufficient rear/side clearance can be used.\(^2\) Large-plinthed 'tables will require a clearance hole to be cut in the plinth to accommodate the low-hanging rear cardanic bearing and the antiskating adjustment knob.

The Thales AV provides every adjustment function found on a conventional tonearm, including vertical tracking angle (VTA) and azimuth. The counterweight can be rotated—not to adjust azimuth, as on some unpivots, but to adjust for differences in vertical tracking force (VTF) that can occur with this design as the tonearm travels from the outer to the inner groove areas. You can adjust it for uniform VTF across the entire LP side, or have it automatically slightly increase from the outer to the inner groove areas. You can adjust it for uniform VTF across the entire LP side, or have it automatically slightly increase the tracking force for the more-difficult-to-track inner grooves.

Setting up and using the Thales AV requires some new skills; while learning them, it's best to proceed with caution. HiFiction provides an overhang template similar to those used with conventional pivoted arms. The sliding

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1. Thales of Milea, 625–547 B.C., was a Greek philosopher. The semicircle over the hypotenuse of a right triangle is sometimes called "Thales circle." See also www.walter-fendt.de/m14e/thalescircle.html. — Ed.

2. Mounting profiles are available for turntables from Audiostone Pythagoras, Brinkmann, Platine-Verdict, Thorens TD 124, Montego Lusso, Oracle (custom mounts available).
“The Synchrony One offers surprisingly deep bass for a relatively small speaker; a neutral, uncolored midrange; smooth, grain-free highs; and superbly stable and accurate stereo imaging. It is also superbly finished and looks beautiful. Highly recommended. And when you consider the price, very highly recommended.”

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counterweight makes precise adjustment of VTF less than convenient: a slight nudge can produce a big change in tracking force. You're instructed to adjust the grub screw so that the counterweight can only just be slid, but won't be moved by accident.

That grub screw's location, in a recess near the bottom of the counterweight, on the platter side, makes setting VTF even more difficult. Too tight, and the counterweight won't move; too loose, and it won't stay put. I can't understand why, in what is otherwise a work of precision art, Huber left unaddressed this not overly challenging problem. Once you've set the VTF, you should check it at both the start and end of an LP side. Discrepancies can be adjusted by rotating the counterweight as described in the manual.

A pair of tiny setscrews on the main cardanic bearing's outer ring provides some adjustability of azimuth. While VTA is easily adjusted on the fly by turning a small knurled knob in the tonearm's base (after loosening a setscrew), its location requires you to exercise extreme caution—you can easily bump the horizontal arm, thus setting off potential stylus-destroying movements of the entire assembly.

If you set your stylus rake angle (SRA) to 92° using an LP of medium thickness (150gm), that setting should suffice for all thicknesses of vinyl, given how much movement would be required at the rear end of the arm to produce a change in SRA of even 1°. If you set it by ear, just be careful, and tighten the grub screw when you're done.

Setting the antiskating force requires you to turn a disc on a threaded rod under the rear cardanic bearing. Here, again, you must exercise extreme caution. Without a test LP such as Telearc's out-of-print Omnidisc, setting antiskating on the Thales AV is next to impossible. It comes preset, but when I used the Omnidisc test track, I found the Thales undercompensated; I ended up rotating the Thales AV's antiskating wheel outward until mistracking occurred simultaneously in both channels. (I wish someone would duplicate this track on a new test LP.)

Use
Because the Thales AV's cueing platform and an edge of its cardanic bearing protrude over the platter, you must slide LPs under the cueing platform before lowering them onto the spindle. The maneuver isn't difficult, but it must be done with care. If the fit of spindle to hole is tight, removing the record can be a hassle and—if the LP suddenly comes loose and bangs into the arm, which can't be locked in place—a potential stylus destroyer.
The cueing mechanism is smooth but undamped; again, proceed cautiously. Also, the placement of the horizontally swiveling cueing lever requires you to reach under the horizontal arm, which you must be careful not to bang into. If you do, you can knock the bearings out of their cups and collapse the entire mechanism. If that happens, the horizontal arm falls down, the vertical arm falls forward, and at first you’ll think you’ve broken everything. But don’t panic—just use your cartridge’s stylus guard, carefully reattach the bearings, and you’re good to go. I don’t recommend using a cartridge that doesn’t come with an easily attached stylus guard—at least, not until you’re secure and comfortable with the HiFiction’s operation.

Once I’d familiarized myself with its operation, the Thales AV was as easy to use as any pivoted tonearm, and easier to set up and use than most linear-tracking arms. What’s more, when I lowered the stylus into a groove, there was none of the wobbling and settling exhibited by many conventional linear trackers. The Thales AV’s rock-solid stability was instantaneous.

**Sounds linear, too!** Because of the Thales AV’s low back end, it couldn’t be mounted on my reference turntable, the Continuum Audio Labs Caliburn. Instead, I listened to it as mounted on the unfamiliar Audio-Technica Pythagoras turntable (see “Analog Corner” in the September issue). Yes, this means I changed two variables at once, and had the experience proved unpleasant, I wouldn’t know where to lay the blame, but since this new combination provided the first real competition for Continuum’s Caliburn ‘table and Cobra arm since they were installed here five years ago, I’m certain that the sound of the HiFiction, like its qualities of construction and finish, is everything one should expect and demand for $89,500.

Micha Huber set up the Lyra Titan i cartridge in the Thales AV, and it remained on the arm for well over a month. Within minutes of beginning my listening, my concerns about the arm’s ability to dissipate resonant energy, due to those bearings at the rear of the headshell, had vanished. The HiFiction’s low-frequency performance was as clean, deep, well textured, and well controlled as the Cobra’s, based on a comparison of CD-R recordings I’d made when the Titan i was last on the Cobra and the Boulder Amplifiers 2008 phono preamp (currently on loan) was last in my system. In fact, I heard slightly more bass weight—but it was impossible to figure in any contributions the Audiostone Pythagoras might have been making.

Bottom line: As far as I could hear, in terms of energy transfer, no penalty was paid for any of the Thales AV’s additional pivot points. Using the Hi-Fi News & Record Review Test Record (LP, HFN 001), both horizontal and vertical resonant frequencies were at 10Hz, within the desirable range of 8–12Hz. No tangential tracker in my experience has produced that result in both planes.

The advantages of true tangential tracking were obvious from the outset. Transient and sibilant cleanliness were consistent across the record surface.
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John Atkinson, Stereophile, March 2010

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Doug Schneider, GoodSound!, July 2009

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What Hi-Fi?, February 2010

Relive music.
even with the most demanding LPs. While tracking-error distortion isn't bothersome or even readily noticeable with a conventional pivoted arm that's been properly set up, its complete absence can be detected in direct A/B comparisons. I swapped out cartridges, putting the Titan i on the Cobra and an Ortofon A90 on the Thales, and got the same results playing a series of sibilant-rich recordings of male and female voices. The differences weren't profound—I was comparing two state-of-the-art tonearms, each costing more than $12,000—but the superiority of the Thales AV was occasionally noticeable, as was its tonearm's unvaryingly stable imaging and soundstaging.

Along with the HiFiction's superb general tracking abilities, its tonal balance (compared with an unknown turntable) produced no obvious colorations, though the overall balances of the Cobra-Caliburn and Thales-Pythagoras were somewhat different. Unfortunately, under these circumstances it's impossible to know whether the arm, the 'table, or both accounted for the minor differences, so I see no point in going into them in detail.

That said, the Thales AV was as open and resolving and well detailed as any tonearm I've heard. Its upper-octave performance was as airy and open as the best I've heard, and its bottom end was equally fine. Were the Rega RB300 the only tonearm you'd ever heard, you might faint the first time the Thales played you your favorite reference LP. And the Thales did the zero-tracking-error trick with no tradeoffs that I could hear or measure or conceive of, based on my understanding of tonearm design.

While it looks delicate and the whole thing collapses if the horizontal arm is jarred, unlike Humpty Dumpty, it's easily put back together again. After all, it's built like a Swiss watch by an actual Swiss watchmaker who, given this magazine's demographics, is likely to outlive us all. With reasonable care, the Thales AV should prove robust, reliable, and long-lived.

**Conclusions**

The HiFiction Thales AV made it possible for both the Lyra Titan i and the Ortofon A90 cartridges to reach their full sonic potentials in my system. The arm tracked as well as any pivoted tonearm I've used. If Micha Huber's geometry is correct, and his engineering as accurate as it appears to the naked eye, then the final product actually did perform with zero tracking error, which I heard as ultraclean transient and sibilant performance, and solid, stable, consistent imaging across the entire record surface. No, it couldn't track Tchaikovsky's cannonade in 1812 Overture, but what arm can? And who cares?

The Thales AV and the Thales Original arm are expensive. They are also genuine breakthrough products that at least realize, with no discernible downside, audiophiles' long-held dream of tracking LPs in the same way the lacquers from which they were pressed were originally cut.
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The Shindo Vosne-Romanee preamplifier

Art Dudley

If you’ve followed their story here and elsewhere, you probably know that Tokyo’s Shindo Laboratory has a reputation for defying the two most monolithic of all high-end audio commandments.

First, designer and builder Ken Shindo isn’t willing to tailor his amps, preamps, loudspeakers, and other playback gear to produce only those sounds that might be heard from a single, mythically perfect concert-hall seat, or to highlight spatial effects for the entertainment of those who know much about sound but little or nothing about music. (Some day, listeners who respond to the sound of Shindo gear may help reclaim the art of critical listening from the ninnies who think it has something to do with locating images in space.)

Second, and more subversive, there isn’t much of a cheaper-equals-lesser dictum in Shindo’s product line. Ken Shindo, who’s also a noted collector of new-old-stock vacuum tubes and other vintage parts, works to exploit the musical strengths of the many different tubes of which he has chapter-and-verse knowledge; he doesn’t appear to regard any one amp in his line as “better” than another, preferring instead to think of each design as being suited to a different set of parts, a different sort of playback system, and a different mood. (In Shindo’s current amplifier line there are, for example, two 10Wpc models, two 20Wpc models, two models that use EL34 output tubes, and two that use 300B output tubes; of the ones I’ve heard, each has a different voice, yet all of them sing.) Far more than anyone else with whom I’m familiar, Shindo approaches audio design as an art; if for no other reason, there could never be a best Shindo amplifier, any more than there could be a best recording of Purcell’s Dido and Aeneas, a best Bordeaux, a best guitar solo, or a best woman.

Yet for all that, Shindo’s preamplifier line is less in keeping with the company’s blessed defiance of that Second Commandment: Whereas Shindo’s line of power amplifiers flatters the proletarian image I like to keep of myself—their least expensive power amp, the Montille ($3995 when reviewed in 2007), is still among my favorites—I think that, as their prices rise, the different Shindo preamps sound more and more beautiful.

Recent experience with some of the dearer Shindo preamp models has provided a more focused explanation: It may be that I’m just more responsive to the sonic flavors conferred by certain vintage parts, the use of which is a Shindo hallmark. Think of it this way: The amplifier shopper who enjoys the distinctively warm yet muscular sound of a push-pull amp built around the EL84 tube—a power pentode that’s relatively plentiful and cheap, and that doesn’t require an exotic power supply or output transformer—is in luck. The preamp shopper who falls in love with the organic textures and deep, black internote silences that come from designing a product around a rare, hand-wound, 70-year-old output transformer, is not.

Pretty and sweet

The Shindo Vosne-Romanee preamplifier speaks to the world through a pair of such transformers, which surely take some of the blame for its motorbike-like price: $17,900. Other such factors are the Vosne-Romanee’s custom-wound Lundahl moving-coil step-up transformers; its Telefunken EF800, Siemens C3m, General Electric 6072, and Philips 6189 and 6X4 vacuum tubes; its many vintage capacitors (Sprague Black Cats, Sprague Vitamin Qs, a pair of extremely large Sprague oil capacitors); and, of course, its gorgeous metalwork and fully hand-wired circuitry.

At 15.6" (400mm) wide by 6.4" (165mm) high by 10.5" (270mm) deep and weighing 23.1 lbs (10.5kg), the V-R is wider, taller, and significantly heavier than my own Shindo Masseto preamp ($12,000), if similarly styled. Its steel chassis—which, according to Shindo, sounds better than an aluminum chassis, with or without the industry-standard stupid-thick faceplate—is no simple box, but rather has a number of integral partitions for shielding and structural integrity. The steel top is fastened to the outer box and to each of those partitions, requiring a total of 26 machine bolts for one chassis surface—and all of the bolt openings are tapped with the appropriate threads. Unlike the products from some of perfectionist audio’s best-known makers of tube amps, Shindo’s enclosures can actually be put back together the same way they came apart.

There are also different levels of steel platforms, for various different parts. Most of those surfaces are ventilated, and all of them—every partition, every...
platform, even the straps that hold the Lundahl transformers in place— are beautifully finished on all sides in Shindo’s trademark metallic-green paint. The rear panel contains several pairs of Switchcraft low-mass RCA input jacks— Shindo’s favorite— and a pair of XLR output jacks. A 0.2”-thick acrylic panel, silkscreened from the back, adorns the front. (The front panels of Shindo’s pre-amplifiers used to be made of glass, but frequent breakage during shipping has discouraged that practice.)

Inside, the Vosne-Romanee’s power supply is build around a larger-than-average Denki mains transformer, custom-made for Shindo. As in the Masseto preamp, the power supply’s main rail is full-wave rectified by a series pair of 6X4 full wave rectifiers, but the V-R has much greater storage capacitance than that model, and double the number of silencing chokes (a Raymond Chandlerism if ever there was one).

At the other end of the chassis, short pieces of Shindo’s own silver interconnect take the signal from a 250k ohm Cosmos volume pot to the signal grid of a Telefunken EF800: an industrial-grade pentode tube that’s operated here as a triode, with its secondary and tertiary grids bridged to the plate. The Vosne-Romanee uses just one EF800 per channel, both tubes mounted in spring-loaded sockets to help resist vibrations.

The output of that Telefunken tube is capacitively coupled— through a Sprague Vitamin Q cap— to a Siemens C3m pentode. The C3m is a metal-can tube designed for the German telephone utility, and intended for long life while producing very low noise. (According to Jac van de Walle’s excellent website, http://jacmusic.com, it was first made by Siemens for use in underwater repeater amplifiers; Telefunken, Philips, and other European companies subsequently made and sold C3ms of their own.) The C3m is also capable of very high gain, but Ken Shindo puts it to a different sort of use: In the Vosne-Romanee, the Siemens tube functions as a resistance-coupled phase inverter, the output of which appears across the anode and the cathode.

The now-balanced signals for the left and right channels are directed to that pair of vintage output transformers, with DC blocking along the way by those large, lovely, and similarly ancient Sprague oil caps. Absent any technical information about those transformers,
LISTENING

I don’t know what connection possibilities they offer the designer. (The only relevant spec I can offer is the Vosne-Romanee’s output impedance, stated on the Shindo Laboratory website: 600 ohms.) That said, it seems possible to get a true balanced output from this preamplifier’s XLR output jacks.

Like most of its companions in the Shindo line, the Vosne-Romanee is a full-featured preamplifier: It has separate, switch-selectable input pairs for moving-magnet and moving-coil cartridges, the latter of which addresses those green-strapped Lundahl trannies. As I’ve come to expect, Ken Shindo dislikes doing things the same way twice, lacking a good enough reason to the contrary; consequently, the V-R’s phono gain and EQ circuits are quite different from those of both the Masseto and Au-riges. In this upscale model, phono signals go first to a General Electric 6072 dual-triode, itself an even lower-noise version of the more common 12AY7. (Both 6072s are covered with metal cans for noise rejection; in light of the fact that even used 6072s can cost more than $100 apiece these days, not to mention that NOS samples are virtually impossible to find, I came to see those cans as an effort in investment protection as well.) The second and final phono tube per channel is the more common Philips 6189, which speaks to the rest of the preamp through a delightful Sprague Black Beauty capacitor.

With carefree style
One Shindo characteristic isn’t obvious during a casual walk-through: As I mentioned earlier, Ken Shindo tends to more or less perpetually rethink his product designs. As with other designers, that often coaxes a completely new model into being, but with Shindo it can also result in running changes from one production batch to the next—or even within the same batch. My own Corton-Charlemagne monoblock amplifiers (serial nos. 009 and 010) are good examples of the latter: Silkscreened legends identify the tube types on most Shindo amps, but on my Corton-Charlemagnes, the 12AY7 input triodes are identified with adhesive labels (printed, amazingly, in gold type on metallic green tape); beneath those labels are the silkscreened tube descriptions, identifying the original input tubes as EF183 pentodes. Shindo Laboratory is a brand where the phrase “Specifications are subject to change without notice” has deeper-than-average meaning.

For those and other reasons, when a friend offered to help perform some measurements on the Vosne-Romanee—in truth, he did the vast majority of the work while I assisted, mostly by staying the hell out of the way—we kept our hurdles low. First we set a Krohn-Hite signal generator for 1kHz at 2V output and fed it to the Vosne-Romanee’s CD input jacks. Then we connected the preamp to a Heathkit audio analyzer, set for a 50k ohm load, and a Hewlett-Packard dual-trace oscilloscope. We brought up the volume just to the point of clipping and noted an output of approximately 5.5V RMS (which translates to just under 8V peak, possibly explaining the output level spec provided for the V-R on the Shindo site). The wave clipped asymmetrically, flattening at the bottom before the top—a quirk often associated with single-ended outputs, but really not conclusive evidence of anything.
Driving both channels of the Vosne-Romanee, we used the H-P's vertical position control to superimpose one channel's waveform over that of the other, then moved the volume control slowly through its range in an effort to see how the left and right portions of the control tracked each other. The answer: nearly perfectly. Then we plotted the V-R's frequency response, noting 3dB-down points at 21Hz and 26kHz. Incidentally, we saw nothing that looked like transformer saturation: an unscientific observation, of course, on a par with "I didn't see anything in this ultrasound that looked like a gallstone." There are more advanced ways of doing both, I guess.

Speaking of which: With the input shorted and the volume set for full output voltage as above (with a 2V RMS signal), we observed about 5mV of noise. We lacked the means to easily isolate noise bandwidth, but it appeared to be very high-frequency stuff. (Hum, for its part, was practically unmeasurable.) Not bad at all—and since all of the test equipment is almost as old as Barbara Walters, it's safe to assume that not all of that noise had its origins in the device under test.

Have you outgrown your doctor?
Speaking of noise, when I first installed the Shindo Vosne-Romanee preamplifier in my system—alongside my Thorens TD-124 turntable, EMT 997 tonearm, various EMT and Ortofon pickup heads, Shindo Corton-Charlemagne amplifiers, and Audio Note AN-E/Spie H/E loudspeakers—the most remarkable thing I heard was: nothing. I nonetheless left the volume control turned up about a quarter of the way, and went ahead and put a record on the Thorens. When I lowered the needle to the groove, the sound it made startled the hell out of me. I put the tonearm back in its resting position and cranked the volume to about two-thirds of full: still no noise. I rotated the source-selector switch through all of its positions and back again, and noted that the Vosne-Romanee is the first preamp of my experience with which I could not depend on the noise level to tell me if it was set to Line or Phono. Throughout all of the volume control's normal range and quite a ways beyond, there was no audible noise, and no audible difference between the two input types.

I did, of course, progress to music—and it sounded wonderful. The sound of the Vosne-Romanee was lush and...
richly colored, just as my experience with certain vintage tubes, transformers, and other components has led me to expect. But the V-R played records in a manner that was much more explicit than I expected: musically explicit, with certain vintage tubes, transforming perceptions, and certainly no more intelligent, than the average audio hobbyist, I reflexively assumed that the Vosne-Romanee’s greater detailing than my own Shindo Masseto meant that it must surely sound brighter than its less expensive stablemate. But when I swapped the Masseto back into the system, I realized that it was actually the brighter-sounding of the two, however slightly. The V-R in fact sounded darker overall, with richer and more saturated colors, and with textures deeper than I’d heard before from my system, the relief of which (for want of a better word) was defined more by shade than by sun. The Vosne-Romanee was ver- nal in content, autumnal in style.

Here is perhaps the feyest thing I’ve ever written (don’t expect me to make a habit of it): If music were a collection of paintings and sculptures, the Vosne-Romanee would be a gallery darker than the average, but with much clearer, stronger lighting trained on each individual work. Lacking that degree of resolution and sophistication, the Masseto really was the brighter and counterintuitively less detailed preamp— as was pretty much everything else.

I’ll return to Earth with four specific observations. First, as with the Masseto, I continued to prefer the Hommage T1 step-up transformers to the ones built into the Shindo, although the latter sounded quite fine, and the former, like all outboard units, required me to dress their cables and angle their housings just so, to avoid spoiling the Vosne-Romanee’s otherwise perfect humlessness.

Second, also like the Masseto, the Vosne-Romanee is a thoroughly pleasant-to-use preamplifier—captivating, intoxicatingly beautiful, and musically insightful, emotionally engaging. But the Vosne-Romanee’s volume control seemed much more gradual than the Masseto’s in the lowest part of its range: an unambiguous improvement, in my opinion. (As it turns out, both preamps use the same potentiometer type, so the difference must be accounted for by different impedance characteristics in the surrounding circuitry.)

Fourth: On this sample of the Vosne-Romanee (serial no.034), which I believe is from the model’s second or third production run, the acrylic front panel is cosmetically different from that of its predecessors. This panel has a filigree of art deco-ish gold lines around the proscenium arch of its tube window, yet lacks the expected gold band at its perimeter.

Shindo electronics have been, for me, nothing short of revelatory. That isn’t because I find them to be useful tools, and certainly not because they appeal to my otherwise thrifty nature as a consumer—Not hardly, as we say in upstate New York—but because they simply delight me. Without meaning to condescend: When you’ve had enough of spending thousands of dollars on the kind of sound that the gurus say you ought to like, and you’re ready to please yourself by spending your money on gear that you stand a chance of loving and keeping and handing down to your descendants, you can do no better than this brand. These are the Western Electric 93s, the Leak Stereo 20s, the Marantz Model Seven of the future. Obviously. For the here and now, the Shindo Vosne-Romanee is simply the most musically insightful, emotionally captivating, intoxicatingly beautiful, and thoroughly pleasant-to-use preamplifier I’ve had in my home. It isn’t just expensive, it’s valuable. I’ll be a sorry sack of sadness when it has to go back.

3 This, I imagine, is why Ken Shindo recently changed his preamp labeling scheme to move the selection for TV (I) next to that for Phonos on the rotary switch: I can think of no source more sacrificeable than a television.
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Our mission is to give you a chance to audition YG Acoustics speakers and experience for yourself how they compare. Not through the opinions of reviewers or others, helpful as they may be. Instead, your own ears are the only judge.

Designed by Yoav Geva (Gonczarowski)

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Which speakers are compared?

The comparative-listening events feature only competitors that are highly regarded, well-reviewed, and cost significantly more than the specific YG Acoustics speaker. For instance, on the current tour, the YG Acoustics Carmel (MSRP $18,000) faces a competitor with significant press attention and rave reviews, with an MSRP of $27,000.

How is the comparison conducted?

The discerning audiophiles who attend YG Acoustics events expect a balanced comparison. To that end we strictly adhere to the following rules:

- Both speakers use the exact same system in the same room.
- Both speakers are moved in and out of the same exact position, which is clearly marked.
- The same program material is used for both speakers.
- The volume level is precisely matched.
- The competitor is measured before the events at the state-of-the-art YG Acoustics lab, to ensure that it is functioning properly and that its graphs match those in its magazine reviews.
- The competitor is allowed to attend and verify that their speaker is adequately represented.
- At the end of the event, participants fill out an anonymous survey, with their vote and ideas for improvement.

Schedule of Events

- **20-Feb-2010**, conducted by Audio Limits at the YG Acoustics showroom in Arvada, CO. Completed – vote tally: 15 for YG Acoustics Carmel, 0 for competitor, 1 tied.
- **13-Mar-2010**, at GTT Audio in Long Valley, NJ. Completed – vote tally: 15 for YG Acoustics Carmel, 0 for competitor, 0 tied.
- **2-Apr-2010**, at HiFi Live in Alpine, UT. Completed – vote tally: 7 for YG Acoustics Carmel, 0 for competitor, 0 tied.
- **22-May-2010**, at Advanced Home Theater in Plano, TX. By the time of publication, this event will have been completed. Please see www.yg-acoustics.com for the vote results.
- **11-Jun-10 through 13-Jun-10**, during the Capital Audiofest in Washington, DC. You are invited!
- For updates and additional future events please see www.yg-acoustics.com.

Summary

So, are we conducting these events to claim that the competition makes bad speakers? No—we only select high-quality competitors, otherwise the comparison would be meaningless. We are, however, conducting these events to prove to you, using your own ears, that YG Acoustics indeed manufactures the best loudspeaker on Earth.
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By John Marks

Vivid speakers change the game!

But first a great piano recording: Tributes: Reflections on Tommy Flanagan (CD, IPO IPOC1004), from the late Sir Roland Hanna (his title was an honorary knighthood granted by Liberia). I missed this wonderfully crafted solo-piano recording when it first came out in 2003, and still would not have known about it today except that a publicist sent me an e-mail saying that he was cleaning out his shelves of leftover promotional copies. I quickly sent back a request, in large part because one of my Desert Island recordings is Jim Hall's Concierto, originally released in 1975 on the CTI label, and on which Hanna had played. Concierto has since been reissued in digital form many times, most successfully, as far as I can tell, by Mobile Fidelity Sound Lab on an SACD (UDSACD 2012) that includes new tracks, as well as alternate takes of tunes on the original release.

I do wish, however, that remastering producers and engineers would show a little more respect for the artistic integrity of the original release by leaving a long silence between the end of the original program and the start of the extras. On the MoFi SACD there's a gap of only about a second between the end of the heart of the album, Don Sebesky's arrangement of the slow movement of Rodrigo's Guitar Concerto, and the uptempo Duke Ellington tune ("Rock Skippin") that is the first additional track. It seems no one remembers sitting breathlessly by the turntable in the 1970s as the music died out, and then—silence.

This reissue is not the only offender. The extra material on the digital reissues of Miles Davis' Kind of Blue also crowds in on the original tracks, especially as that is a take recorded earlier than the one chosen for the original release; the extra material is, in a way, a step back, in chronology if not in quality. It should occupy more of a space of its own.

A counter-example: When Bob Ludwig mastered my recording of Arturo Delmoni and Yuri Funahashi performing violin and piano sonatas by Brahms and Amy Beach (CD, John Marks JMR 2), Arturo and I could not agree on the playing order. I thought that his and Yuri's performance of the end of Brahms' Sonata I was so poetic that nothing should follow it. Arturo, however, thought that the better-known piece should go first. I came up with the idea of adding dead air to the end of the final movement of the Brahms—if I recall correctly, at least 16 and perhaps as many as 20 seconds, except that I was timing by musical beats, not the clock. We tried it, it worked.

One of the highlights—and the actual musical climax—of Concierto is Roland Hanna's piano solo, wherein the climactic modulation really sounds like an emotional breakthrough. Concierto is the pick of the CTI litter, and you really should have it. The regular CD costs $6.99 from Amazon.com, and there are many copies on the used market, including regular and 180gm LPs.

Back to Tributes. I was favorably disposed to the album even before I received it, owing to its connection to Concierto. I was even more favorably disposed when I began to play it. The album was recorded at the Performing Arts Center of SUNY Purchase, New York, a noted classical venue where one of my own recordings, cellist Nathaniel Rosen's Reverie, was also taped. Tributaries' engineer was Tim Martyn, a noted classical recordist who has worked with the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra, the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra, and the London Mozart Players. The sound is first-rate, although this is not a recording with the usual distant "classical" perspective. The sound is crisp and clear, with powerful bass, but no intrusive action sounds.

As its subtitle makes clear, Tributaries is Hanna's tribute to Tommy Flanagan, who had been his friend since boyhood in Detroit, which in the 1940s and '50s was a much more important jazz town than it is now. Of the 11 pieces on the recording, only two, "Sea Changes" and "Delarina," were written by Flanagan, though the rest—ranging from Thad Jones' "A Child Is Born" to Green and Heyman's "Body and Soul" to the Gershwin's "Soon" (a standout performance)—are all strongly associated with the late pianist (1930–2001).

Though somewhat of a late bloomer, Flanagan did play on John Coltrane's Giant Steps and Sonny Rollins' Saxophone Colossus. He later was Ella Fitzgerald's music director, and did two stints as her pianist. Fitzgerald later said, "He really started getting me singing what I heard inside and what I wanted to get out." It was only in 1978 that Flanagan first formed a trio of his own, the format he stayed with for the rest of his career. Flanagan's playing was often "classical" in both conception and technique, as was Hanna's. Both sought elegant clarity rather than propulsive power or smoldering intensity. Indeed, the recording for which Flanagan is doubt-

1 My extremely brief personal association with Tommy Flanagan was entirely serendipitous. To promote new releases on my label, John Marks Records, at Stereophile's 1996 High-End Hi-Fi Show, at the Waldorf-Astoria in Manhattan, I arranged with loudspeaker manufacturer ESP to hold in their exhibit rooms a "Music Minus One" live demonstration and press reception. The plan was to present the demonstration for invited members of the press, then drink some champagne and decompress. Stereophile writer Lonnie Brownell asked me whether he could bring a couple of non-journalist friends. I imagine my eyes grew quite a bit larger when Lonnie's friends turned out to be Tommy Flanagan and drummer Max Roach. They arrived early, and charmingly ignored my tongue-tied-ness. After the music was over, I told them to stay seated. I zipped into the adjoining room, grabbed two glasses of champagne off a waiter's tray, then handed them to Flanagan and Roach. A priceless memory.
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less most famous, his haunting performance of Horace Silver’s “Peace,” from his 1978 album Something Borrowed, Something Blue (CD, Original Jazz Classics OJCCD-473-2), is also perhaps the best example of his classical influences. What’s important to note is that Flanagan’s “classical” style was fluid, à la Chopin and Debussy, and not monumental, à la Beethoven and Brahms. FM-radio listeners throughout New England had Flanagan’s rendition of “Peace” engraved on their hearts because for many years it was the opening theme of Eric in the Evening, Eric Jackson’s evening jazz program on WGBH-FM.

For whatever reason, Roland Hanna wasn’t blessed with the major career Tommy Flanagan had, though their playing was quite similar. Perhaps Hanna’s “classical” touch was a bit more incisive or muscular, but it never was too heavy. Indeed, whereas Flanagan began as a clarinet player, Hanna studied classical piano as a boy, and went on to study at both Juilliard and the Eastman School. Just listen to the poignant rubato toward the end of “A Child Is Born,” and then the way Hanna brings out Impressionist harmonies in Evans and Livingston’s “Never Let Me Go.” I have babbled on too long and will now change the subject. But this is a solo-piano disc to check out. And treasure. (And don’t be put off by the stupid cover, which looks like an ad for CSI: Miami.)

**Vivid Audio V1.5 loudspeaker**

I consider Wes Phillips’ review of Vivid’s top loudspeaker, the G1Giya (in the July issue, www.stereophile.com/floorloudspeakers/vivid_audio_g1giya_loudspeaker), to be required reading for a better understanding of what I’m about to say, especially because there is a substantial commonality of parts and design between the two speakers—despite the yawning gap between the G1’s price of $65,000/pair and the V1.5’s of $7650/pair.

What particularly impresses me is that the V1.5, a two-way design with an integral stand, uses the same tweeter as the G1Giya (modified only because it sits in a recess, for directivity control), and that its woofers appear to be identical to the G1’s lower-midrange unit. Those alone tell me that Vivid is a company the cut of whose jib I like. Vivid’s products aren’t cheap, but the fact that the drivers in their least expensive floorstander, the V1.5, are pretty much identical to the drivers in their $65,000 statement model speaks volumes.

That I was so smitten was a bit of a surprise. For quite some time I held off from borrowing loudspeakers made by Vivid for two reasons. First, even Vivid’s most conservative designs look a bit weird. The V1.5 looks a little like the aliens in Close Encounters of the Third Kind, or the principal subjects of Edvard Munch’s The Scream or John Hughes and Chris Columbus’ Home Alone. It’s that mouthlike port—which, I’m sure, is shaped that way for good and sufficient reasons. I can say I never heard a hint of a chuff, and never got the sense that any mid-range energy was making its way into the room through the port.

Second, and more to the point, Vivid makes its own all-metal drivers, going to the extent of using the same magnesium-aluminum alloy in their tweeter, midrange, and woofer diaphragms—all in the interest of coherence, designer Laurence Dickie told me in an exchange of e-mails. However, what I’d previously heard from other metal-cone drivers (as distinct from tweeters)—heard briefly, but long enough to let me know that I was unimpressed—had run the gamut from cold to brittle to harsh. Gobs of detail but not much body, and usually something wrong in the harmonic structure. Theoretically, metal drivers are supposed to provide pistonic operation within their assigned bandwidth; any nonpistonic behavior is either outside that bandwidth, or up where people can’t hear it—the last being an assertion I completely disagree with.

Just about the time Stephen Mejias’ blog entries were going live with his stories of replacing drivers in Wes Phillips’ review pair of G1Giyas, and of John Atkinson’s travails in measuring them (see http://blog.stereophile.com/stephenmejias/a_fun_day_of_work/), a pair of V1.5s finished in what Vivid calls Oyster (a metallic, dark gray-bronze) arrived at my house in wooden crates. These turned out to be a well-traveled review pair, evidenced by some repaired dents on the dustcap of the left speaker’s woofer (the V1.5s are not mirror-imaged; I assigned the speaker with the lower serial number to the left), and the fact that no grilles or jumper wires were included. The V1.5s were accompanied by a pair of work gloves covered with rubber dots. These inspired confidence; I imagine that plain cotton gloves might slip on the speakers’ gloss automotive clear coat. The owner’s manual is available online under the heading “the support” (www.vividaudio.com/VividAudioUser-Manual_all_models.pdf).

I listened to each V1.5 individually using mono tracks. Hearing no difference between them, I declined distributor Philip O’Hanlon’s offer of a replacement drive-unit; time was short, and I didn’t want to add a break-in period.

In recent years I have grown increasingly frustrated by audio manufacturers who can’t (or won’t) explain what makes their equipment different from all other contenders in the general onslaught. Back in the day, Irving M. “Bud” Fried used to say of competing loudspeakers that they were “a piece of paper in a box,” by which he meant that most of his competitors sold wood-pulp drivers in rectilinear enclosures. At least Fried, with his “line tunnel woofer loading” had a (non-unique) “selling proposition.” Most companies don’t. Especially in today’s tough times, audio companies need to justify their existences to consumers by clearly explaining their products’ features, functions, and benefits, and not by spouting self-congratulatory generalities.

So I’m always well disposed toward a company that seems to have a sense of its own identity and mission, and that takes the time and trouble to tell
its own story without relying on the audio press to do its educating for it. I found this to be the case both with Vivid's own website and that of its US importer, On a Higher Note (www.onahighernote.com).

Vivid builds on designer Laurence Dickie's previous experience in designing B&W's Matrix system and that company's legendary statement loudspeaker, the Nautilus, most particularly in the areas of:

- minimizing cabinet resonances through hi-tech materials and non-linear shapes
- minimizing diffraction effects through 3D modeling and design of the driver mountings and surrounding areas
- using proprietary alloys and designs to approach the theoretical ideal of pistonic driver behavior

Initial setup brought to light some quirks. One, the speaker terminals are set up for biwiring, so jumpers are required. Although the terminals are sourced from WBT, there's not enough clearance between the terminals' plastic hex nuts and the overhanging lip of the back of the integral stand's base to allow use of a standard speaker-lug wrench. So the nuts were never really tight. If I were buying these speakers, I'd get speaker cables terminated with banana plugs at the loudspeaker end, and use the lug nuts for the biwire jumper.

Another factor is that, obviously, a monitor speaker with an integral stand has a very small range of height adjustment, provided only by its spikes, whereas the buyer of, say, Harbeth's Grands he'd heard years before at my place, and which, ever since, had been tuned—more mighty oaks will fall in due course. I later put an acoustical baffle in front of the fireplace flanked by the speakers, which not only helped center the focus but also, to my surprise, increased the image height. I was glad that there was no muting of highs. The final step, which resulted in very satisfactory image height, was, in consultation with Laurence Dickie, to get a couple of 12"-square paving blocks from a garden center and put the speakers on those, thus raising them by almost 3.5". Bingo.

Other than that, setup was fuss-free. I grew to like the look of the V1.5. The response of most visitors was "Ehh," but Steve Martorella, Minister of Music at the First Baptist Church in America, loved the look. Steve, by the way, was so knocked out by the differences between JA's electric bass on the in-and-out-of-phase test (track 2) of Stereophile's Test CD 2 that he asked what kind of loudspeaker was behind the fabric screen in the middle. He was flabbergasted to learn that he was hearing an auditory illusion of sound coming from a place where the speakers were not. I was chagrined. I have never played that test for him before, and he never seemed to "get" it, let alone be fooled into thinking there was a center-channel speaker. Just goes to show.

Steve offered the opinion that the Vivid V1.5s had more resolving power and coherence than the ESP Concert Grands he'd heard years before at my place, and which, ever since, had been his ideal of great home audio. Stay tuned—more mighty oaks will fall in due course.

The initial setup consisted of a borrowed Einstein tube hybrid integrated amplifier and a Wadia 861 SE CD player, both of which I was familiar with. Interconnects and speaker cables started out as MITs with Cardas Clear interconnects ($1840/m terminated with RCA pair) and Cardas Clear speaker cables ($6600/12' pair terminated in spades). With break-in, the top became noticeably more open, but the biggest changes were even more bass—about two or three more bass notes from pipe organs, it seemed—a much lower noise floor, and spooky resolution.

The resolving power went into warp drive when, a few weeks later, the companion Cardas Clear interconnects arrived ($1840/m terminated with RCAs). There was no additional bass, but the timbral coherence snapped into place. Space limitations mean that I can't go through the litany of construction features of the Clear, which may be a blessing in disguise. I think that neither I nor any other audio writer really can say whether the Clear sounds as good as it does because of—or
“The Imagine Ts provided excellent imaging and a broad, deep soundstage... The Imagine T, available in black ash or dark cherry, is a stunner. Fit and finish are exquisite—more on the level of $5k than $2k speakers.”

— Kalman Rubinson, Stereophile

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speakers instead of headphones I could make out most of the quiet conversation between Evans and bassist Scott LaFaro. LaFaro asks what they’re going to play (!), and Evans answers, “Let’s start with your tune—the one we were just playing.”

Where does the Vivid V1.5 stack up in JM’s album of old love letters sent to previous speaker faves? Well, the V1.5 had decisively more resolving power than the Harbeth P3ESR (as it should, at more than three times the price). Wilson Benesch’s ACT, or Peak Consult’s Empress Reference. The V1.5 also seemed to have a lower noise floor, but I think a lot of the credit for that goes to the Cardas Clear cables. In resolving power, the V1.5 was up there with the new Wilson Audio Sasha, which I heard with Cardas CLEARS and Ayre Acoustics electronics at a dealer event at Fidelis AV in Derry, New Hampshire.

The Vivid V1.5 excelled at coherence—right up there with the Quad ESL-2905. Distortion was very low. Dynamics were fast. With the right recordings, the speakers seemed to disappear.

Timbral accuracy is often in a tug-of-war with timbral beauty. In this regard the Vivid V1.5 was right up there with ASA’s Pro Monitor, but offered a cleaner, more neutral sound that was as beautiful.

For a 6” bass driver, the V1.5’s bass was astonishing, but then, the cabinet is twice the size of that of the usual 6” two-way, about 22 vs 11 liters.

The ESP Concert Grands could play louder and scale large works better, but were a step behind the Vivids in resolving power.

Now that I’ve heard the V1.5, I can readily believe that Vivid’s G1Giya is the best loudspeaker Wes Phillips has ever heard. In my system as described, the V1.5 is the best two-way speaker I have heard, as well as the best speaker under $10,000/pair. Rather than concentrate on its limitations in scale, loudness, and bass, just think of the V1.5 as the BBC LS3/SA concept raised to the nth power. With real bass.

I’m not ready to go all Herbert von Karajan on you and claim that, after the Vivid V1.5, “all else is gaslight,” as HK1 said of digital sound the first time he heard it. But the game has been changed, perhaps even more by the $7650/pair V1.5 than by the $65,000/pair G1Giya.

Comments: sletters@sorc.com

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Components listed here have been formally reviewed in Stereophile and have been found to be among the best available in each of four or five quality classes. Whether a component is listed in Class A or Class E, we highly recommend its purchase.

Each listing—in alphabetical order within classes—is followed by a brief description of the product’s sonic characteristics and a code indicating the Stereophile Volume and Issue in which that product's report appeared. Thus the September 2010 issue is indicated as “Vol.33 No.9.”

Some products listed have not yet been reported on; these are marked (NR), for “Not Reviewed.” We recommend that you read any product’s entire review before seriously contemplating a purchase (products without reviews should therefore be treated with more caution)—many salient characteristics, peculiarities, and caveats appear in the reviews, but not here. To obtain back issues of the magazine, visit our website: www.stereophile.com. We regret that we cannot supply photocopies or e-mail copies of individual reviews. All full reviews are reprinted in our website “Archives” Section: these are marked “WWW.” More are added each week, so check the on-line listing.

In general, components do not remain listed for more than three years unless at least one of the magazine’s writers and editors has had continued experience with them. Discontinuation of a model also precludes its appearance. In addition, though professional components—recorders, amplifiers, monitor speaker systems—can be obtained secondhand and can sometimes offer performance that would otherwise guarantee inclusion, we do not generally do so. Stereophile’s “Recommended Components” listing is almost exclusively concerned with products currently available in the US through the usual hi-fi retail outlets.

How editors’ recommendations are determined

The ratings given components included in this listing are based entirely on performance—accuracy of reproduction—and are biased to an extent by our feeling that things added to reproduced sound (eg, flutter, distortion, colorations of various kinds) are of more concern to the musically oriented listener than are things subtracted from the sound (eg, deep bass or extreme treble). On the other hand, components markedly deficient in one or more respects are downrated to the extent that their deficiencies interfere with the full realization of the program material.

We try to include in “Recommended Components” every product that we have found to be truly excellent or that we feel represents good value for money. Bear in mind that many different tastes are represented. The listing is compiled after consultation with Stereophile’s reviewing staff and editors, and takes into account continued experience of a product after the formal review has been published. In particular, we take account of unreliability and defects that show up after extended auditioning. The fact that a product received a favorable review cannot therefore be regarded as a guarantee that it will continue to appear in this listing.

The prices indicated are those current at the time the listing was compiled (July 2010). We cannot guarantee that any of these prices will be the same by the time this issue of Stereophile appears in print.

There is a near-universal consensus that at some point in the upward climb of component prices, severely diminishing returns (performance versus price) set in. However, there is no agreement as to the exact price level at which that takes place. Where we have found a product to perform much better than might be expected from its price, we have drawn attention to it with a $$$ next to its listing. We also indicate, with a *, products that have been on this list in one incarnation or another since the “Recommended Components” listing in Vol.30 No.10 (October 2007). Longevity in a hi-fi component is rare enough that we think it worth noting (although it can also indicate that the attention of design engineers has moved elsewhere).

We are not sympathetic toward letters complaining that the Symphonic Bombast A-123 that we recommended heartily two years ago no longer makes it into “Recommended Components.” Where deletions are made, we endeavor to give reasons (there are always reasons). But remember: Deletion of a component from this list does not invalidate a buying decision you have made.

TURNABLES

A+ Continuum Audio Labs Caliburn: $149,995 with tonearm and stand

“Part New Jersey diner, part Wurlitzer jukebox,” the 160 lb Caliburn is the brainchild of Mark Doehman, whose clever, purposeful design is based on rigorous scientific methodology using finite-element analysis computer programs. While the only serious competition for the Caliburn is the Rockport System III Sirius, MF decided, “The Caliburn beat the Rockport’s overall performance by a considerable margin,” adding an “emotional majesty” that made the Rockport seem analytical. “Better than sex?” cried Mikey’s wife. The ultralight Castellon stand, made of chromed, aircraft-grade aluminum, costs $25k on its own (piece works). Stereophile’s 2006 “Analog Source Component” and “Overall Product of the Year.”

A+ Audiostone Pythagoras: $77,140, without tonearm

Designed to be incorporated into Audiostone’s granite-sheathed Aperion stand, the Pythagoras has a thick planer of granite driven by a three-plate, synchronous motor, and includes touch-sensitive speed controls and an integrated calibration system. The system’s shelf is allowed to vibrate at its fundamental frequency, while the other components of the Aperion stand are tuned to vibrate inharmoniously, thus, in theory, canceling inherent noise. With its complementary tangential-tracking HiFiction Thales AV tonearm, the Pythagoras offered extremely solid bottom-end extension and clean, precise instrumental attacks, but lacked the top-to-bottom seamlessness of the Continuum Audio Labs Caliburn, said Mikey. (Vol.33 No.9)

Bauer Audio dps: $9250

In Willi Bauer’s handsome dps, an aluminum plinth houses three shallow PVC cups, filled with elastomer buttons, that act as supporting springs for the rest of the turntable. The body is a laminate of six separate sheets: two layers of lossy damping material, and four separate sheets: two layers of lossy damping material, sandwiched by three sheets of Baltic birch plywood. The tonearm tower is made of anodized aluminum and acrylic, two 15.4-lb brass motor assemblies, and a 30.8-lb, height-adjustable brass tonearm. Because it has no suspension, the Stabi XL requires an especially stable, perfectly flat, and level platform in order to deliver its rock-solid, open, clean, and effervescent sound. Tended toward an overaggressive attack and munted sustain, but nevertheless proved to be among the best turntables currently available, said MF. Price is for fixed VTA tower, adjustable VTA tower version costs $22,300. (Vol.30 No.4)

Merrill-Sciolia Research MS21: $14,400

Though boxy and plain, the spring-mounted, belt-driven MS21 is cleverly designed and expertly built, with a one-piece subchassis and a proprietary 24-pole, high-torque, synchronous AC motor. Its “soaring sense of musical flow” was complemented by “a smooth, satisfying, essentially neutral tonality that just slightly on the warm side.” Though it lacked the bass attack and bottom-end extension of the Grand Prix Monaco, the MS21 offered superior texture and greater overall suppleness, said MF. (Vol.30 No.11)

Oracle Delphi Mk.V: $13,300, as reviewed

“Among the best-looking turntables ever made,” the latest incarnation of the Oracle Delphi exhibits flawless fit and finish, and includes Oracle’s Turbo power supply and a dedicated power cord. The Delphi’s aluminum subchassis has been made thicker
"I was shocked by the Ai500's authority and dynamics."

Robert Harley,
The Absolute Sound, April/May 2010

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and heavier for improved resonance control, and its spindle-bearing screws have been improved for greater accuracy and tighter tolerances. In addition, the Delphi now employs a Micro Vibration spring-supported subchassis said to offer any lateral and/or vertical motion without isolating the turntable from footfalls. Matched with the Lyra Helikon SL piano chassis, the Delphi produced fast transients, a supple midrange, and deep, focused bass. A "formidable contender in and well beyond its price bracket," it earned a rating of No.3.

S.P. Tempo: $11,500

The Tempo's microstep motor is intended to produce torque to overcome style drag and other causes of friction, thus eliminating speed errors. The Tempo's microstep motor is intended to produce turntable from footfalls. Matched with the Lyra suspended subchassis said to offset any lateral and/or vertical motion without isolating the motor and plinth, as well as between the motor and platter. The Tempo traded detail retrieval and transient sparkle for "stable images, excellent three-dimensionality, and an overall warm and pleasing sound," said MF. Price does not include tonearm. SAP recommends 12" tonearms. Mikey's sample was fitted with the Ortofon A30S12 12" arm. (Vol.31 No.6)

SME 20/12: $28,000

"Among the best-built turntables in the world," the SME 20/12 is a prototype whose dimensions weighing more than 75 lb. It has an oversized 14.3 lb platter, and a 176 lb aluminum-alloy subchassis secured by ten O-rings for each of four suspension towers and will take 12" arms. In three-phase, eight-pole motor employs an electronic controller to achieve precise speeds of 33.3, 45, and 78rpm. Though it lacked the bottom-end weight and macrodynamic range of even more expensive turntables, and had a slightly dry, analytical sound, the SME offered a very low noise floor and stable image characteristics. (Vol.31 No.5 WW/W)

VPI HR-X: $12,000, with tonearm $16,000

Harry Weisfeld's efforts to produce the ultimate TNT turntable include a plinth of acrylic-aluminum-epoxy laminate, an inverted bearing assembly, the addition of a perimeter clamping ring, and replacement of the outbreak motor and flywheel with a single unit. Simpler, smaller, more luxurious appointed, and better built than the TNT, the HR-X also has a more dynamic, less-laborious feel. The HR-X conceptually and technically to act as a sink for unwanted vibrational energy; the Harms T-30 is a two-speed, belt-driven turntable with two AC synchronous motors, a lightweight platter with a 20" arm, and aovable plinth. Mikey noted "great detail, a stable, dramatic timing, authoritative midrange, and superb stability reinforce the feeling of maximum musical involvement." (Vol.31 No.11, Vol.30 No.1 WWW)

Spiral Groove S2G: $15,000

Well built, simple to set up, and bulletproof in its operation, the S2G is designed by Allen Perkins and represents an evolution of design and production capabilities from his RPM turntables. Though similar in appearance to the RPM series, the S2G Spiral Groove uses a five-layer chassis—two thin layers of damping material separated by three aluminum plates—and a thick, anti-vibration platter comprising layers of aluminum, an insregnated phenolic, vinyl, and graphite. The balance of the T-30 is less precise than the T-30, and the S2G's "[recording became a performance]," enthused. (Vol.33 No.6 WW/W)

VPi HR-X: $12,000, with tonearm $16,000

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VPI Super Scoutmaster Reference Rim Drive: $8200

The Super Scoutmaster Reference Rim Drive combines a VPI Super Platter with the Super Scoutmaster's Mini-TNT Stabilizer feet, and uses a rim-drive motor system based on the HR-X's dual-motor/flywheel module. It comes equipped with a JMW-10Si Memorial tonearm fitted with Nordot Valtalla wire. The sound was "fantastic," with impressive bottom-octave depth and slightly warm high frequencies. "The Super Scoutmaster Reference Rim Drive is one of the best values of the true high-end turntables now available," said MF. (Vol.32 No.2)

Artefacts Labs SA-1: $7800

Designed in Germany by Frank Schneider and made in the US, the Artefacts Labs SA-1 is built around a dense, compact plinth comprising a layer of epoxy sandwiched between two layers of laminate. It has a 15-lb plating, a24-carat gold-leaf alloy and an"outboard motor controller designed to compensate for load changes due to varying LP modulations. Though it lacked the forceful attack and tightly focused images of other comparably priced turntables, the SA-1 was "among the least congested, and their open-sounding, airy, tuneful turntables I've ever reviewed—at any price," said MF. (Vol.32 No.10)

Hanns Acoustics T-30: $5200

Made in Hong Kong, the Hanns T-30 is a two-speed, belt-driven turntable with two AC synchronous motors, two tonearm mounts, an outboard power supply, and a massive platter. To dissipate unwanted vibrations, the Hanns plinth is a sandwich of thin aluminum plates and thick acrylic sheets supported by three sturdy support modules, each incorporating an assembly of four suspension towers and a rounded metal feet. "Supremely immune to footfalls," the T-30 produced a "consistently big sound" with "exceptional bass weight" and a good sense of momentum, but lacked the clarity and timing of AD's reference turntable, the T-30. "Not quite a show- in, but very much worth a close look and listen," decided Arr. (Vol.33 No.2 WW/W)

Kuznia Stabi SD: $6315, as reviewed

The latest Stabi SD table provides the added convenience of being able to accommodate two Kuznia Stabi 3 tonearms. "The sound of this little pipe bomb is spatially rock solid," praised MF. (Vol.31 No.7)

Linn Sondek LP12, with Lingo power supply: $4620+, depending on finish and options

Compared with Linn's Villatalla, the Lingo-equipped Sondek minimizes the LP12's propensity toward a slightly fat midbass, subjectively extending the low frequencies by another octave. The Lingo upgrade alone costs $1350. The Trampolin suspension reduces the effect of the support. Circinus bearing/subchassis, fitted as an option, labor as a $1000, is placed between the LP12's platter and its bearing housing and magnetic antiskating mechanism. (Vol.31 No.5 WW/W)

Simon Yorke Series 9: $8250

"The Simon Yorke Series 9 record player is a highly individualistic, almost idiosyncratic turntable, both concept and execution," said MF. In its compact, belt-driven, non-suspended design includes a unipivot tonearm and a DC motor. Adapting its tonarm was tricky but once the player was properly set up, the system was simple to use. Though it lacked the resolution of the Simon Yorke 7T, the LP9 produced a "rich, generous, and enveloping sound," enthused. (Vol.32 No.11, Vol.31 No.1 WWW)

Well Tempered Record Player: $2950 $55

The WTR's holistic approach to turntable design has resulted in a completely redesigned suspension system. Its plinth is made of a wood/epoxy composite, and adds a phenolic-resin laminate for increased rigidity. Rega's R600 tonearm uses the secure, three-point mount found in the RH700 and flagship RH1000 arms, as well as the improved vertical alignment gauge. The WTR's tonearm is not used in the RH700. The TT PSU outboard power supply produces a stable voltage to drive the motor more precisely, and permits convenient pushbutton selection of the P5-24's two speeds. With a warm, warm tonal balance, the P5-24 produced "big, solid

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images on a soundstage of exuberant size," said Mikey. "Rega's new P3-24 represents an evolutionary step in a monocoque design. Though the two arms share the same geometric specs, the Competition-Copperhead combo sounded "slightly faster, leaner, and brawnier" than the Caliburn-Cobra, it lacked the lagrange system and complexity. (Vol.33 No.3 E)

EKT 997: $5295

The banana-shaped EKT 997 tonearm employs a fixed-pivot, high-mass design and has a detachable headshell. Its effective length of 307mm (12") works to minimize tracking-angle error and distortion. Though it sacrificed timbral neutrality, imparting a mid-bass bump and dips, the 997 impressed Art with its ability to convey the inherent tension of recorded music. "It's a slightly dusty, impulse-y tonearm I've ever heard," he said. If willing to invest the time and effort necessary for proper setup and installation, the user will be rewarded with "an almost indescribably great deal of pleasure," AD added. (Vol.31 Nos.7 & 9 E WW)

Graham Engineering Phantom II B-44: $4900

Designed to be a drop-in replacement for the Graham 1.5 and its successors, the original Phantom used much of the original tonearm's technology and design, but did so in a vastly more refined and grounded fashion. The Mk.11 Phantom has a titanium tonearm and, compared to the original B-44, offers greater adjustment versatility of vertical tracking angle and compatibility with a wider variety of cartridges, and has improved internal wiring, as well as an upgraded Magneplough system for lower arm mass and increased stability. The results: "major improvements in speed, air, high-frequency extension, and detail," said MF. Price is for 9" version; 10" version (not yet auditioned) costs $5150. Gold trim adds $300. (Vol.16 No.6, Vol.19 No.2 E WW)

SME 312S: $3995

The 312S is a 12" tonearm with a tapered armmade made of pressure die-cast magnesium for strength, rigidity, and low mass. With balancing weights to match its performance, the 312S includes a secure sliding-track overhang-adjustment mechanism, a spring-loaded VTA post, and a silicone-filled damping block with adjustable pummel. SME has produced "a tonearm that has all of the 12" arm's technical advantages and none of its disadvantages," said MF. (Vol.31 No.8 E WW)

Spiral Groove Centauri: $6000

The Centaur is a fluid-damped unipivot design that gives the user fine adjustment of all relevant parameters. It was extremely quiet, with stunning resolution and clarity, and had an uncanny ability to reproduce the tonal and dynamic elements of deep bass notes. "The Centaur tonearm may be the best tonearm I've heard. It is not leaving my listening room," declared BD. (Vol.33 No.6 E WW)

Brinkmann 10.5: $6300

A Beersie-like gimbaled-bearing design that features an articulating arm shaft described by the designer as "a high-speed bearing system with concentrated ceramic-ceramic self-damping transmission device," J J uses a Brinkmann arm on his Oracle with great success. (Vol.28 No.5)

Continuum Audio Labs Cobra: $16,995

The Caliburn-Cobra arm seemed to have a slightly more romantic and airy upper midrange, but not quite the same bottom-end heft and weight. Works best with more "forgiving" phono cartridges, MF feels, who also that when it was partnered with the ultra-revealing Kuzma Stabi S, the Schick 12" tonearm is intended to combine the greater-than-average length and mass of certain vintage models with the high-quality bearings of modern arms. It offers superb fit and finish to match its high regard for overall performance, and includes a solid pickup-head socket. While its bearings matched the quality of those found in the EKT 997, the Schick lacked the EMT's spring-actuated downforce and positive tracking force. When the Schick was fastened to AD's Thorens TD-324, its performance was marred by a lack of stability and focus, and the armboard securely fastened to a wooden table next to Art's turntable stand, the Schick produced a big, substantial sound with an especially colorful bottom
The newest and shortest of Harry Weisfeld's JMW tonearms is the JMW-9. This venerable tonearm maker has a new owner (see "Analog," March 2001). The Mk VI Ultimate builds on earlier versions, with a larger-diameter headshell tube, a larger damping block, and more rigid support of the headshell. Standard JMW features include a tungsten-carbide pivot and a machined and hardened-steel set-screw for a cup. A quick-connect plug makes easy changes and allows easy cartridge swapping, but as with all Harry Weisfeld designs, there is no antiskating mechanism. Marantz introduced the 9th version of the JMW tonearm with VPI's Scoutmaster turntable. Unlike the original JMW Memorial, the 9's arm's main bearing is directly grounded to the plinth and the stabilizing ring surrounding the arm's bearing housing is fixed. The lack of a damping well results in a "Parkinson's-like trembling" of the JMW when you use the fingers to lower the arm via the evening mechanism," which MF said it observed. Nevertheless, the arm appeared to be extremely stable; "The taut, focused, remarkably coherent performance of this table/arm combination is taxonomically, well-grounded....A system that deals effectively with energy created at the stylus/groove interface." Some disagreement between AD and MF over the overall rating, but Class B seems appropriate. *(Vol.26 No.2, Vol.27 No.9 WW/W)*

**Editor's Note:** There are currently no Class C tonearms listed.

### Deletions

SME M2 not auditioned in too long a time to be sure of rating.

### PHONO CARTRIDGES

#### A

**Benz- Micro LP S: $5000**

Weighing a relatively heavy 16.4gm, and with an open-coil magnetic cartridge, it needed some care to play. The 12.5" JMW tonearm produced an output of 0.1mV. The LP's moving-coil cartridge is ideal for use in tonearms of medium to high mass. Its generating system includes a 0.28mm-diameter cantilever of solid boron, a nude, mirror-polished, line-contact stylus, and a 4N-C diamond tip on a steel ruby. The LP's offered smooth, subtle, and with a slightly midbass exaggeration that may be part of the fact that it is a "way too wide." Still, "the Tri-Planar was one of the best I've heard, but part of that might be the result of its somewhat too high frequency balance. Inner detail was outstanding," he added, however, of the added tip. MF says it is an "exquisite" among others. MF, however, of the added tip. MF says it is an "exquisite" among others. MF, however, of the added tip. MF says it is an "exquisite" among others. MF, however, of the added tip. 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phono section isn't up to the job." With the Helikon, Scan-Tech has come up with its most cleverly balanced cartridge yet. Not the ultimate, but for most analog lovers, and with most associated equipment, ultimate reference is achieved (Vol.23 No.8 11, Vol.24 No.6 11, Vol.28 No.6, Vol.30 No.3 WWW)

Miyajima's 47 Lab: $2800

The Mono uses the same aluminum-alloy cantilever and line-contact stylus of the Miyajima 47, but provides higher output and DC resistance, and has a cantilever suspension designed exclusively for mono playback. Though it was "more easily perturbed by surface noise" than the Lyra Helikon Mono, the Miyajima outpaced the Lyra in conveying the substance and scale of great mono recordings. While it lacked the intensity of color brought out by the EMT OPD 25, the Miyaji matched that cartridge's facility. "It may be considered both an upgradeable product and a wise audio investment," concluded AD. (Vol.31 No.2 WWW)

Miyajima Shilage: $2800

The Shilage is a low-output (0.23mV), low-compliance design with an unusually high recommended tracking force of 2.5-3.2gm. The Shilage is attached to a large-diameter, old-fashioned-looking cantilever. Like Miyajima's Premium Mono, the Shilage uses a patented "cross-ring" construction that centers the generator's fulcrum within the coil. Though it lacked the soundstaging and imaging of the Shun Mook Signature, the Shilage had a sound that was "full-bodied, deep, and extremely well-defined," and offered "superbly coherent transient and harmonic presentation from top to bottom," said MF. (Vol.32 No.9, Vol.33 No.10)

Miyajima Premium Mono: $980

The Premium Mono monaural cartridge employs Noriyuki Miyajima's "cross-ring" method, whereby the cantilever's fulcrum is centered precisely within the former on which the coil is wound. Recommended downforce is 3.5gm. In addition to its "near-total rejection of surface noise," the Premium Mono provided a forceful sound with "fine impact" and an "excellent sense of scale," said AD. "A staggering good value, but for special systems only." (Vol.32 No.8 WWW)

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My Sonic Lab Eminent EX: $6900

The Eminent EX is equipped with an ultra-low internal impedance of 1 ohm and a relatively high output of 0.4mV. It weighs 9.5gm, with a semi-line-contact stylus, and is designed to track at a vertical tracking force of 1.9-2.2gm. The Eminem EX sacrificed resolution and made up for it in terms of a more "groove-friendly, real-world performance," said Mikey. "It combined deep, powerful bass with rich mids and refined highs that, while lacking air and sparkle, made bright recordings sound ideal." Among the final top-of-the-line balanced cartridges I've heard," concluded MF. (Vol.33 No.6)

Ortofon MC A90: $4200

Ortofon's "revolutionary" MC A90 moving-coil cartridge is built up of layer on layer of laser-fused microparticles, in a process called Selective LaserMelting. This process of laser-fusing and cooling layer by layer by layer provides a nonresonant structure. Like Ortofon's Windell, the MC A90 uses the Wide Range Damping system, said to produce ideal damping throughout and beyond the audioband. The Windell's extremely low-mass stylus, a vertical-contact Replicate Stylus 100, is shaped like a cutting needle and a major component of the gap to the pickup. Ortofon's MC A90 is "aggressive and emphasizes high frequencies," said AD. "It has a clean-tilt sound with "unassayed rhythmic swagger, dynamic exuberance, transparency, and three-dimensionality." Not a cartridge for those looking for a "lush" sound, Mikey warned: "It's very literal." (Vol.32 No.11)

Ortofon Windell: $3750

Ortofon's top-of-the-line moving-coil cartridge for 2008 uses Per Windell's patented Wide Range Damping system, said to produce ideal damping throughout and beyond the audioband. The Windell's extremely low-mass stylus, a vertical-contact Replicate Stylus 100, is shaped like a cutting needle and a major component of the gap to the pickup. Ortofon's MC A90 is "aggressive and emphasizes high frequencies," said AD. "It has a clean-tilt sound with "unassayed rhythmic swagger, dynamic exuberance, transparency, and three-dimensionality." Not a cartridge for those looking for a "lush" sound, Mikey warned: "It's very literal." (Vol.32 No.11)

Ortofon SPU Synergy A: $1850

The Synergy A represents the final run of Ortofon's A-style pickup leads. It has an elliptical stylus tip and a body made from Ortofon's recently developed wood-and-resin matrix material. "Weighs in at 1.9-2.1gm, and output is rated at 0.5mV," compared to Ortofon's SPU Classic A, the Synergy A was more extended in the bass and treble, with a better sense of scale. "$1850 for any cartridge that good would be reasonable; for the last of a historic brand, the Ortofon SPU Synergy A is a bargain," said Art, but notes that this pickup lead is "for special uses only." (Vol.32 No.2 WWW)

Shun Mook Signature: $4800

With an unusual body of Mygano ebony handmaked by Shun Mook's Bill Ying, the limited-edition Signature is a low-output (0.23mV), midrange-cartridge. Moving-coil design with a Micro-Ridge stylus of solid diamond and a recommended tracking force of 1.9-2.1gm. The horizontal wooden tube attached to the cartridge's front surface made setup and installation particularly straightforward. Although all parameters are perfectly set, however, the Signature proved "an all-around great cartridge capable of reproducing fast, subtle variations in midrange, and delivering excellent low-level resolution and decay," said MF. (Vol.32 No.9)

Soundsmith: The Voice: $1999.95

The top of the Soundsmith line, hand-built by Peter Ledermann, is available in a mount of acrylic ($1899.95) or ebony ($1999.95). Like Soundsmith's SMMC1, The Voice has a nude Optimized Contour line-contact stylus, but lowers the mass of the moving-iron structure for faster response. Compared to the SMMC1, The Voice was "cleaner, smoother, more transparent, and seemingly free of peaks and valleys in the frequency response," said Mikey. "For reference, go with the Soundsmiths. In honesty, consider the Soundsmiths." (Vol.32 No.11)

Soundsmith SMMC1: $849.99 $$$

The SMMC1 is a low-output moving-iron cartridge compatible with MM inputs, with a one-piece nude cantilever and a diamond stylus. While the SMMC1 couldn't match the detail retrieval of higher-priced MC cartridges, its "big, vibrant, well-formed images" and exceptional rejection of surface noise resulted in an overall sound that was "smooth yet bold, rhythmically nimble, and free of edge and etch without being limp or soft," said Mikey. The SMMC1 demands careful setup, and its high compliance requires special attention to tonearm matching. Available in medium- and high-compliance versions, also in true dual-coil mono version. Aida version in micrixlynamics, and delivering excellent low-level resolution. Its smoothness and midrange naturalness, extended treble and bass definition, and dynamics, but adds an additional layer of detail resolution, sweetness, and subtle low level articulation, BJR decided that the Voice was not affordable cartridge for lovers of jazz, classical, or rock music. "A vision fulfilled," said Peter Ledermann, is available in a mount of acrylic ($1899.95) or ebony ($1999.95). Like Soundsmith's SMMC1, The Voice has a nude Optimized Contour line-contact stylus, but lowers the mass of the moving-iron structure for faster response. Compared to the SMMC1, The Voice was "cleaner, smoother, more transparent, and seemingly free of peaks and valleys in the frequency response," said Mikey. "For reference, go with the Soundsmiths. In honesty, consider the Soundsmiths." (Vol.32 No.11)

Koetsu Black: $1800 $$

Koetsu's entry-level model and best-known cartridge is an impressively built, aluminum-bodied oblong block painted black with red and integral, unthreaded holes for the mounting bolts. The Black has a low output (0.3mV), deep bass, and ability to handle most analog systems. Though it wanted the Miyajima 47's ability to make sense of poorly recorded material, the Black nevertheless proved "a lovely, musical product," concluded AR. (Vol.30 No.7 & 10 WWW)

Lyra Delos: $1500

The Delos, machined from a solid billet of aluminum, has a Napoli Micronite-encased line-contact stylus and a solid-boron cantilever. Like other Lyras, the Delos uses a yokelike, neodymium-direct-magnet system, and its generator is integral to its body for better mechanical grounding and energy transfer. The Delos managed the attack and detail of Lyra's Helikon while adding a richer, meatier sustain,
Deletions

Ortofon SPU 90th: Anniversary no longer available; Air Tight FC-1, Allart MC2 Finish Gold, Lyra Skala, Clearaudio Maestro, EMT Jubilee Series JSD 5, all not auditioned in too long a time to be sure of rating.

PHONO PREAMPS/MOVING-COIL STEEL-TIP DEVICES

A-12 Boulder 2008: $34,000

Despite everything else he had ever heard or reviewed, MF could never have been prepared for what the 2008 offered. He was taken to a higher level: “What the 2008 delivered was the music’s meaning. . . . It was the analog in a way that was almost surprisingly heft and slam.” Because its Shibata Ortofon 2M Black produced a bright, open sound detail retrieval. “Very strongly recommended,” a Japanese Urushi lacquer. While it lacked a bit of transparency and a forgiving top end, but was capable of producing large, authoritative sonic pictures. MF. “There is no doubt that the Seta Model L has been superbly engineered,” praised JA. Internal RIAA equalization curves in addition to RIAA, eight gain settings, and 32 loading options each for MM and MC cartridges. Also included is a 24-bit/96kHz A/D converter, accessible via a rear-panel USB port. Though it lacked the dynamic expression of the Boulder 1008, the PH-77 was “a sweet, usually well-balanced, quiet performer that produced a large, authoritative sonic picture packed with honest detail,” said MF (Vol.33 No.9 & 7 WWW).

A-8

Asbington Music Research PH-77 Reference: $11,995

The AMR PH-77 Reference Phonon Class Equaliser is a true dual-mono design with unprecedent, microprocessor-controlled features and seemingly limitless fine-tuning options with XIR curves for LPs released before 1954, and EMI curves for LPs released before 1954, and DIP switches mounted on the Boulder’s personality cards select between MM and MC cartridges. It had a slightly soft overall sound, with a bloomy midrange and a forgiving top end, but was capable of producing dynamic, sweeping dynamic swings, said MF. “Superb measured performance” and “a standard of construction that is to die for,” praised JA. (Vol.33 No.7 WWW).

Boulder Amplifiers 1008: $12,000

The impressively built 1008 is a fully balanced, dual-mono power amplifier with a variety of inputs and outputs. In addition to RIAA, the 1008 includes the Decca, Columbia, and EMI curves for LPs released before 1954, and DIP switches mounted on the Boulder’s personality cards select between MM and MC cartridges. It had a slightly soft overall sound, with a bloomy midrange and a forgiving top end, but was capable of producing dynamic, sweeping dynamic swings, said MF. “Superb measured performance” and “a standard of construction that is to die for,” praised JA. (Vol.33 No.7 WWW).

Channel D Seta Model L: $3795

Designed to take full advantage of Pure Vinyl’s digital RIAA correction, the beautifully built Seta Model L includes balanced and single-ended inputs, balanced, unbalanced outputs, variable gain, and a built-in, rechargeable battery power supply. Recordings made using the Seta Model L’s equalized outputs were “models of clarity, definition, tonal accuracy, detail resolution, and spatial coherence,” said MF. “There is no doubt that the Seta Model L has been superbly engineered,” praised JA. Internal RIAA equalization curves for LPs released before 1954, and DIP switches mounted on the Boulder’s personality cards select between MM and MC cartridges. It had a slightly soft overall sound, with a bloomy midrange and a forgiving top end, but was capable of producing dynamic, sweeping dynamic swings, said MF. “Superb measured performance” and “a standard of construction that is to die for,” praised JA. (Vol.33 No.7 WWW).

CD AudioValve Sumida: $5199

The mated Sumida offers two independently configurable single-ended inputs selectable for MM or MC and adjustable for resistive and capacitive loading. The dual-mono circuit uses pairs of 6922 and 12AX7 tubes in a three-stage configuration: high-quality parts are used throughout and EMI curves for LPs released before 1954, and DIP switches mounted on the Boulder’s personality cards select between MM and MC cartridges. It had a slightly soft overall sound, with a bloomy midrange and a forgiving top end, but was capable of producing dynamic, sweeping dynamic swings, said MF. “Superb measured performance” and “a standard of construction that is to die for,” praised JA. (Vol.33 No.7 WWW).

Mute, and On/Off. With a somewhat rich, dark overall sound, the 1008 produced “vivid, articulate, three-dimensional apparitions” and “enormous dynamic swings,” while its horizontal-end extension was “robust,” the PH7 could sound “somewhat loose and overly voluptuous,” said MF (Vol.32 No.8).

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If it’s in there, Clear will find it.
while on a pair with the Boulder and notably superior to the Connoisseur. Subtle string textures, reeds, and female voices were positively thrilling, and the size and weight of the entire picture was particularly impressive. Much-backbone firmness and authoritative decay, and the Lammt became one of a handful of the finest phono sections I’ve ever heard.” Compared to the phono section of A/1’s Shindo Masseto, the Lammt LP Deluxe had a “more natural” sound, “with instrumental and vocal transients sounding clean and right—yet not mechanical or overly dry.”

Manley Steelhead: $7500

The transformer-coupled Steelhead’s multiplicity of gain, loading, and other options prompted MF to develop a highly information-packed Review Sample. He’d ever encountered. While it’s almost impossible to categorize the specific sound of the Steelhead, MF noted a few constants: “unusually low noise, spectacular transient speed, rhythmic certainty, clarity of musical line, breathing transparency, and passyway dynamics and authoritative decay.” Though its flexibility is perhaps its most striking feature, it might also be the Steelhead’s astonishing dynamics. Though its flexibility is perhaps its most striking feature, it might also be the Steelhead’s astonishing dynamics.

Bel Canto e.One Phonos: $1795

The MM-MC Phonos comes housed in an impressively sturdy, half-width chassis to match the rest of Bel Canto’s One line. Its bold and exuberant overall presentation was sometimes offset by a “trace of brightness and smear to sibilants,” said MF. Though it couldn’t quite match the smoothness and finesse of the Vacuum State JLT Catphono, the Bel Canto offered superior dynamics and soundstaging precision.

Bob’s Devices CineMag: $395 $$$

Designed and made by Bob Sattin in North Carolina, the CineMag step-up transformer is built into a rugged little custom box, with a toggle switch for gain selection and another for grounding. It uses a pair of 300b and 400a tubes, switchable between low- and high-gain settings. Build quality was excellent, with all electrical joints made using an American Beauty reservoir soldering station. Compared to the built-in step-up in A/1’s Shindo Masseto preamplifier, the CineMag was more colorful and punchy, with better timbral distinctions between instruments, approaching the performance of the much more expensive Audionight 23 Hommage T1. “Nothing less than wonderful,” Art said. (Vol.33 No.6 WW/W)

Bel Canto e.One: $1695 economy model; $2295 deluxe

Tim de Paravicino—designer, three-mono (22AX7) MM stage that also offers, for MC use, a pair of step-up transformers (3-50 ohms). “The 834’s sound was absolutely gorgeous in the midband, with a touch of golden glow, and an especially smooth and fluid transparency, musical wholeness . . . . The 834P’s bottom-end delivery was well extended through a bit of loose, if only slightly so. . . . Its high-frequency extension and transient performance perfectly balanced its bottom: not sharp and reticent but not overly full either.” A slightly sharp, fast-sounding cartridge should really get this thing singing.” Compared to the GSP Audio Era Gold Mk.V, BJR found that the EAR 834P exhibited more detail, air, delicacy, and body in the midrange, with more detailed and extended highs, but with mounded, slower bass performance. ST is a long-time owner of the 834 and loves it. Add $600 for chrome Deluxe version. (Vol.20 No.7, Vol.26 No.8, Vol.28 No.1 WW/W)

Lehmannaudio Black Cube Decade: $2399

The Black Cube Decade is an MM/ MC design with monoblock MC and step-up transformers, a second switch, and a selectable gain. It improved on the Vacuum State JLT Phono5’s excellent detail retrieval while retaining the Bel Canto e.One Phonos’s dynamic thrust. In addition, it matched the Bel Canto’s bass dynamics, but added a great deal of controlled midrange and detail in the full midrange. The Lelusie’s overall sound was slightly warm, with overly smooth vocalists, but microdynamics and low-level detail retrieval were superb, said MF. (Vol.31 No.12)

Ortofon Verto: $949 $$

The Ortofon Verto transformer has a heavily chased front plate and is enclosed in a neat black box. Like the Koetsu transformer, the Verto has only one pair of input and output jacks, but it provide two primaries, rated at 300h and 240h of gain. “Melodies flowed out incredibly well, and the overall colors and textures were very good,” said Art. The Verto lacked the scale of the Auditorium 23 Hommage, however, and couldn’t match the impact of the Auditorium 23 Standard. (Vol.31 No.9 WW/W)

Simaudio Moons L.P. 5-3: $1700 $$

The LP 5.3 moving-magnet/coil phono preamp has single-ended RCA inputs, both single-ended and true balanced-differential outputs, and offers a wide range of adjustments for gain and resistive and capacitive loading. Whether used with a moving-coil transformer and the Ortofon Verto transformer, the sound was “dramatic without being harsh, and consistently full-bodied and colorful,” said AD. The Audionout was “slightly coarser” than the Audio Note AN-S8, lacking some sweetness and color, but “a bargain” nevertheless, AD sums up. (Vol.30 No.10 WW/W)

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The hand-crafted dual chassis 40th Anniversary Reference Preamplifier. Prepare to be astounded.

Recarpet the listening room. Your jaw will need something soft to land on.

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The hand-crafted dual chassis 40th Anniversary Reference Preamplifier. Prepare to be astounded.
The diminutive, Swiss-made JLII PhonoPre offers impedances. Though it had a somewhat reticent top sonic performance throughout the life of a set of batteries; Sutherland claims that one set of batteries was a rogue. (Vol.30 Nos3, 10, & 11 WWW)
**Recommended Components**

**Editors' Top Picks for the Industry's Best Products**

- **Krell Evolution 505:** $10,000
- **Ayre CX-AMP:** $3500
- **Luixman DU-50:** $5000

The massive Evolution 505 SACD player weighs 29 lbs and measures 123" W by 6" H by 123" D. Its aircraft-grade aluminum chassis is available in silver or black, and has rounded edges and slotted sides for a graceful appearance. Like the other components in the Evolution series, the 505 incorporates Krell's proprietary CAST (Continuous Audio Stream Technology) technology. It was wider, but to Ayre, its depth was deeper, imaging was sharper—but, unlike some gear that excels at all these audioophile virtues, the Krell 505 sacrificed nothing in mass Murdoch. Through its balanced outputs, however, the 505 lacked some detail and air, but Ayre noted "excellent measured performance" from its conventional, voltage-mode outputs. (Vol.31 No.9 W.W)

**Muse Polyphymnia:** $7500, as reviewed

Kevin Halsen's six-generation take on DVD uses 24-bit/96kHz conversion and adds a USB input. The "sixth generation" took the "easy-to-use" approach heard in the compact format's success, resulting in a sound that was "more like live music and less like recorded music." (Vol.31 Nos.4, 6, 8, & 10, Vol.33 No.2 WWW)

**Playback Designs MPS-5 Reference:** $15,000

Designed by Sony and Snider alumn Andrea Koch and made in the US, the MPS-5 is a single, box-fused, output model SACD/CD player, upgradeable to multi-channel by adding Playback Designs' new Remote-1 controller, available as a $375 option. Price is as reviewed, with optional multi-channel module and A/V output module; Standard stereo model costs $6500. (Vol.30 No.10 W.W)

**Esoteric SACD/CD transport and the player's analog outputs.** (Vol.31 No.9 WWW)

**Playback Designs' Frequency Arrival System,** said to completely eliminate jitter from the audio signal. Once broken in, the MPS-5 produced a "masterfully neutral top-bottom tonal balance" with well-extended bass and top end, said MF. Compared to the DCS Scarlatti, the MPS-5 sounded "more relaxed, more detailed sound," said MF. Compared to the ESOTERIC SA-60 universal player. Though it demonstrated "good measured resolution on SACD closer to that typical of CD. It was wider, but to Ayre, its depth was deeper, imaging was sharper—but, unlike some gear that excels at all these audioophile virtues, the Krell 505 sacrificed nothing in mass Murdoch. Through its balanced outputs, however, the 505 lacked some detail and air, but Ayre noted "excellent measured performance" from its conventional, voltage-mode outputs. (Vol.31 No.9 W.W)

**Music and Hi-Fi magazine**

- **October 2010**

WWW: World Wide Web
Marantz SA-1152 Reference: $3600
The SA-1152 Reference SACD player boasts a copper-plated chassis with a double-layered bottom, a vibration-resistant top plate, and an attractively sculpted front panel. It offers three playback Filter settings, in addition to a switchable 1/8" filter and Noise Stapper, and features a clock reference at 10.5, 44.1, 88.2, or 176.4 kHz. In both SACD and CD modes, the Marantz produced a "consistently warm, reasonably detailed sound," with "single, filled-out, well-textured images on a relatively compact stage." Its "slightly soft attack, warm sustain, and slightly truncated decay" benefited overly bright recordings, said MF. JA found "tubed audio engineering." (Vol.32 No.2 WWW)

Naim CD555: $28,600
Naim's new statement CD player is encased in a dense, sharp-edged block of black, brushed aluminium. It uses a Pacific Microsystems PD2000 digital filtering chip, a low-jitter clock circuit with its own multistage power supply, and Cambridge's own DacMagic, the 650A, which accommodates both balanced XLR and RCA analog connections. Though Nagra feels the single-ended outputs are the better-sounding, WP heard little difference between the two. The CD's wide, forward-sounding stage and dynamic range produced "a tightly focused, phenomenally detailed musical image." Switching the output gain from 3.5V to 1V produced more spatial detail in WP's smaller musical image. "Switching the output gain from 3.5V to 1V produces more spatial detail in WP's smaller image." Switching the output gain from 3.5V to 1V produces more spatial detail in WP's smaller image. (Vol.30 Nos. 7 & 8 WWW)

Oppo BDP-83SE: $899
For this Special Edition version of their BDP-83 Blu-ray player, Oppo employs boutique capacitors, an upgraded power supply, gold-plated RCA jacks, a reworked analog output stage, and high-quality S&B DACs from ESS Technology. With stereo recordings, the BDP-83SE produced greater presence, balance, and resolution for a more natural overall sound. Improvements through its multichannel inputs were similar but less striking. "If you're already using a multichannel analog preamp, the BDP-83SE is a remarkably effective and satisfying improvement over the BDP-63," said FK. (Vol.33 No.3 & 6 WWW)
Established 1979

Kimber Kable 30th Anniversary

Speaker Cables

- Kimber Kable Bifocal-X $1988 8ft pair
- Kimber Kable Monocle-X $1140 8ft pair

Audio Interconnects

- Kimber Kable Hero WBT-144 $262 meter pair
- Kimber Kable Hero Ultraplate $200 meter pair
- Kimber Kable Timbre $138 meter pair
- Kimber Kable PBJ $108 meter pair
- Kimber Kable Tonik $74 meter pair

Pod Cables

- Kimber Kable HD-29 $277 meter
- Kimber Kable HD-19 $139 meter
- Kimber Kable HD-9 $79 meter

HDMI Cables

- Kimber Kable Cadence Ultraplate $90 meter
  WBT-0144 $129 meter
  WBT-0102Cu $175 meter

Tonearm Cables

- Kimber Kable TC Bare-Bare $566 8ft pair
- Kimber Kable 8TC Bare-Bare $360 8ft pair
- Kimber Kable 4TC Bare-Bare $206 8ft pair

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the Bel Canto e.One DAC's levels of articulation, clarity, or frequency extension, and ultimately failed to emotionally involve WP in his music. JA was similarly disapponted by the Mac's measured performance. “To take advantage of its superb features and high-speed I²S input, it must be used to its digital output to feed an A/V receiver or separate DA processor.” Recommended only for its superb user interface and use as a transport with an external DAC. (Vol.31 No.1 WWW)

Oppo BDP-83 Blu-ray player: $ 599 $$$
The BDP-83 universal Blu-ray player is housed in a larger, sturdier, more attractive case than Oppo's earlier players, and its user interfaces, both onscreen and on the remote control, are more elegant. While the BDP-83 comes with no dedicated DAC and is conﬁned to the space occupied by the Sony SC-AXA510ES SACD player, it nonetheless had a full, balanced sound, with excellent clarity in the high frequencies. Via its analog outputs, the Oppo approached the performance of the more expensive Denon DVD-3800BDCi Blu-ray player. KH: “That I can alternate this new player with dedicated players costing three to seven times as much makes the Oppo almost self-recommending.” He adds that “used through the HDMI output, as a transport, it pops up to A+ and is the most complete and truly “universal” player I have tried.” (Vol.32 No.7, Vol.33 No.3 WWW)

Pioneer BDP-51FD Blu-ray player: $ 599 $$$
Like the Denon DVD-3800BDCi, this Pioneer Blu-ray player offers the enthusiast and PCM-converted audio output via HDMI and plays DVD-5 and CD, but not SACD or SACD-A. It has an HDMI 1.3a output for video and audio, and includes both dedicated stereo RCA connectors and a full 7-channel array of RCA output. The Pioneer’s “delightfully detailed, balanced, and spacious” sound is comparable to that of the much more expensive Denon, said Kal. Class C for CD playback; Class B for hi-rez media. (Vol.32 No.3 WWW)

Pioneer DV-58AV: $ 499
This sleek, sturdy DV-58AV universal player will output any audio format in stereo or multichannel via HDMI and plays DVD-5 and CD, but not SACD or SACD-A. It has an HDMI 1.3a output for video and audio, and includes both dedicated stereo RCA connectors and a full 7-channel array of RCA output. The Pioneer’s “delightfully detailed, balanced, and spacious” sound is comparable to that of the much more expensive Denon, said Kal. Class C for CD playback; Class B for hi-rez media. (Vol.32 No.3 WWW)

Rega Apollo: $ 995 $$$
Built into the same casework as the earlier Rega Planet, the Apollo CD player’s transport holds discs with a three-point ball chuck rather than a magnetic pickup and sports a lid that is a single Exmoor of smoked Plexiglas. A new chipset, incorporating more than 20MB of memory and true 32-bit processing power, reads each disc’s subcode, analyzes it, and selects the most appropriate of four levels of error correction. The Apollo’s most striking characteristic was the cleanliness of its sound: electrical glitches are stripped away from the spaces between notes, allowing musical meaning and texture to shine through while removing the stress of listening. “Very strongly recommended,” said AD, “squeaking into Class B.” “Smothers players to a time to be sure of rating.” (Vol.31 No.7, Vol.32 No.9 WWW)

K Sinamundo Moon 750D.

Deletions
Meridian 806.2b replaced by new model not yet available: Sinamundo Moon Evolution SuperNova discontinued; Cambridge Audio Azur 740C, Cary Audio Design Concept CDP 1, Cayin CDT-23, Rega Saturn, Classe cd-202, all not auditioned in too long a time to be sure of rating.
Benchmarks of the various DAC3 DAC's is the best-measuring digital component I have encountered." Compared to the McIntosh MS750's analog output, the Bel Canto offered a much more convincing midrange through treble, said JD. The DAC3's tonal balance was commendably natural, with a bigger soundstage, better solidity and separation than the Benchmark. Though it maintained the tonal balance of earlier models, it offered a more forward, natural, precise sound, said JD. DACI WD202, the Benchmark via USB had a slightly lower harmonic content than the Benchmark's, but it was more extended in the treble than the Benchmark's -70dBFS while preserving the Benchmark's "superbly transparent soundstage, clean high frequencies, and clean detail," said JD. Compared to the YBA W1320, the Benchmark's DAC1 USB offered a "very appealing" sound, with smoother highs and less grain than the original DAC1. Problems arose with the original sample, however, when using the Benchmark to play back 16-bit files from either a PC or a Mac with a USB connection. A recent modification of the DAC1 USB's firmware has eliminated dropouts of 16-bit audio data below ~70dBFS while preserving the Benchmark's "superbly transparent soundstage, clean, high frequencies, and clean detail." Compared to the YBA W1320, the Benchmark's DAC1 USB offered a more forward, natural, precise sound, said JD. DACI PRE adds a pair of unbalanced analog RCA inputs. It offered a sound that was "slightly toward the lean side," said JD. In terms of dynamic shadings, tonal color, and control flexibility, the Benchmark's performance was "remarkably close" to that of the benchmark DAC1 line-stage preamps. JD agreed: "As an analog preamp, the DACI PRE is about as good as it gets, measurement-wise." The DACI HDR offers slightly better control than the DACI PRE. JD agreed: "As a DAC, it offers all the control of a DAC, but with a bigger soundstage, better solidity and separation of instruments in the stereo image, and better treble resolution, said EL. (DACL, Vol.26 No.7, Vol.27 No.5, Vol.29 No.4, WWW, DACI USB, Vol.31 Nos.1, 7, & 10, Vol.33 NOS.6 & 9 WWW) Bryston BD-1: $3150 Bryston's first standalone DAC is a slim, rugged component with a simple, brushed-aluminum faceplate and eight digital inputs: two S/PDIF optical, four S/PDIF electrical, one AES/EBU XLR, and one USB 1.1 accepti
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Reference Series
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Vincent Audio SA-31 MK
Tube Stereo Preamplifier with Remote Control

Vincent Audio SP-331 MK
High Power Stereo Amplifier with Class A Operation
controlled sound similar to that of the Benchmark DAC1 USB, but lacked the resolution and nuance clarity of the Ayre Acoustics QX-9. "The W31202 deserves to be heard," said JI. JA noted "excellent digital audio engineering". Class B as a DAC but Class C as a headphone amp, decided JI. (Vol.33 No.6 WW)

Digital Audio Labs CardDeluxe: $399 $99 New

to $40 each. JI rated CardDeluxe's performance for the money (especially at the new lower price). "Me WD202 controlled sound similar to that of the Benchmark V-6xe, Ayre Acoustics' only multi-channel and stereo duties. "It does it all, and it serves up the least expensive means of extracting true high-end sound from a PC."

Apple AirPort Express: $99 $59 Sale

While the Airport Express works only with iTunes, it is still a good deal (running on both PCs and Macs). It is limited to 16-bit data, and functions only at a 44.1kHz sample rate, the combination of iTunes and the Airport Express offered an easy way to pipe CD-quality music around the entire home. "The beauty of this is that it requires no special hardware."
The latest version adds an HDMI 1.3 port. (Vol.31 Nos.9 & 11 WW)

Anthem Statement D2v: $8499

The Anthem Statement D2v is a 2-channel, Class AB amplifier that can be used in a single-channel or stereo configuration. It uses three independent power supplies. It uses an Audio Research MPI: $7495 $3999

Audio Research MPI's zero-feedback, fully balanced circuits with 16 high-pass filters to achieve a great assortment of inputs and outputs, including: four S/PDIF digital outputs, two optical, and three R/L analog audio outputs. "The V-6xe exhibited a generally superb measured sound from a PC."

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"A beautifully shaped piece of audio art," the 200Wpc CA-3200 amplifier is cloaked in satin silver, and its gently curved front panel is effectively reminiscent of the company's current line of disc players. The neatly arranged rear panel offers an outlined area for each of the amp's three channels. The CA-3200 sounded very similar to Classe's more expensive, more powerful Omega Omron. Clarity and openness was excellent, paired by a sweet, extended midrange and just-right bass. "I find it impossible to suggest a better three-channel power amplifier," said KR, feeling the CA-3200 was "a perfect match" with his B&W 802Ds. The ever-fussy JA was a little concerned by the amp's increase in high-order THD at high current levels, but found excellent measured performance overall. (Vol.30 No.2 W/W)

Krell Evolution 707: $30,000

The breitly, impressively built Evolution 707 reference receiver is nearly 7' high and 21" deep. It includes Krell's Automatic Setup/EQ and provides single-ended, balanced, and CAST connectors for 2 output channels, including seven main channels, four subwoofers, and an additional center-channel. It had a forward, dramatic, and detailed sound with "decadestrainingly big and tight bass," said KR. "It's great as a sound-driving digital processor as it is an analog preamp," he concluded. (Vol.33 No.9 W/W)

McIntosh MC503: $10,000

The MC503's massive PCMCIA amplifier measures 17" wide by 12.4" high by 22" deep and weighs 155 lbs. Its large front panel is home to three blue power-level meters, two gold-rimmed knobs for meter illumination and power, and two substantial black buttons. Driving KR's B&W 8021 loudspeakers, the McIntosh had "the telltale blackness and transparency of master tapes." There was a smoothness that extended throughout the frequency spectrum and seemed to erase the 802D's crossover transitions. The Mac couldn't quite match the firm bass of the 802D, but it managed the "objectionable" central and transparent bass of master tapes. There was a smoothness that extended throughout the frequency spectrum and seemed to erase the 802D's crossover transitions. The Mac couldn't quite match the firm bass of the 802D, but it managed the "objectionable" central and transparent bass of master tapes. There was a smoothness that extended throughout the frequency spectrum and seemed to erase the 802D's crossover transitions. The Mac couldn't quite match the firm bass of the 802D, but it managed the "objectionable" central and transparent bass of master tapes. There was a smoothness that extended throughout the frequency spectrum and seemed to erase the 802D's crossover transitions. The Mac couldn't quite match the firm bass of the 802D, but it managed the "objectionable" central and transparent bass of master tapes. There was a smoothness that extended throughout the frequency spectrum and seemed to erase the 802D's crossover transitions. The Mac couldn't quite match the firm bass of the 802D, but it managed the "objectionable" central and transparent bass of master tapes. There was a smoothness that extended throughout the frequency spectrum and seemed to erase the 802D's crossover transitions. The Mac couldn't quite match the firm bass of the 802D, but it managed the "objectionable" central and transparent bass of master tapes. There was a smoothness that extended throughout the frequency spectrum and seemed to erase the 802D's crossover transitions. The Mac couldn't quite match the firm bass of the 802D, but it managed the "objectionable" central and transparent bass of master tapes. There was a smoothness that extended throughout the frequency spectrum and seemed to erase the 802D's crossover transitions. The Mac couldn't quite match the firm bass of the 802D, but it managed the "objectionable" central and transparent bass of master tapes. There was a smoothness that extended throughout the frequency spectrum and seemed to erase the 802D's crossover transitions. The Mac couldn't quite match the firm bass of the 802D, but it managed the "objectionable" central and transparent bass of master tapes. There was a smoothness that extended throughout the frequency spectrum and seemed to erase the 802D's crossover transitions. The Mac couldn't quite match the firm bass of the 802D, but it managed the "objectionable" central and transparent bass of master tapes. There was a smoothness that extended throughout the frequency spectrum and seemed to erase the 802D's crossover transitions. The Mac couldn't quite match the firm bass of the 802D, but it managed the "objectionable" central and transparent bass of master tapes. There was a smoothness that extended throughout the frequency spectrum and seemed to erase the 802D's crossover transitions. The Mac couldn't quite match the firm bass of the 802D, but it managed the "objectionable" central and transparent bass of master tapes. There was a smoothness that extended throughout the frequency spectrum and seemed to erase the 802D's crossover transitions. The Mac couldn't quite match the firm bass of the 802D, but it managed the "objectionable" central and transparent bass of master tapes.
controlled line preamp with two pairs of user-selectable current-source tubes. BAT provides five XLR inputs and two main XLR outs, along with excellent, full-featured ergonomics. Set to its 6H34 position, the Rex was "rich, warm, 'milky', somewhat soft overall, slammier and thicker in the bass," thought MF. Set to its 6C45 position, however, the sound was "fast, properly stiff, taut, and responsive," with a wide soundstage and solid images. "Utterly quiet" and "soulful," the Remote-controlled preamplifier with all-balanced inputs and outputs, built on and honed in a chassis of anodized, puritan-grade aluminum. Designed with an emphasis on keeping noise to a dead minimum, the 810 uses short signal paths, surface-mounted circuits, shielded power supplies, four-layer damped feet, and two separate toroidal transformers: one for the audio signal, one for the display's digital logic control. It offered a very neutral sound with "only a slight softening in the bass and an even slimmer rolloff in the upper octaves," said FJ. "The CT5 wasn't wimpy, it wasn't delicate, it wasn't bombastic— it was just a distortion signature that will never be found anywhere."

Convenient Audio Technology S1L Renaissance: $7995

The latest iteration of the heralded S1L boasts a new circuit-board layout and improved power supply. It also includes an A/V bypass, user-selectable gain, and an easy-to-read, easy-to-control transformer for the phone stage. Compared to the S1L Ultimate, the Renaissance offered greater transparency, resolution, and dynamics, said RD. JA noted "superb measured performance" and an equivalently superior circuit topology. "The 810's ability to respond to a signal, amplify it with great faithfulness, then get the hell out of the way"— it gave music "more body, more feel, and especially more movement." It seemed as if performances were actually taking place to the listening room rather than simply being re-told. AD: "Judged for its musicality, the quality of its parts and construction, and its sheer design ingenuity, the LumI's L2 is worth every penny it costs, well above its price of $8600, and JA found "superb measured performance.... An excellent, more effective, more fun to use, and, consequently, more recommendable." JA was impressed by the 3S's extreme linearity. (Vol.31 No.11 WWW)

DNM 3D 65X: $13,995

The 3D 65X measures 10.65" W by 5" H by 7" D but weighs only 3.5 lbs. Like other DNM products, it uses nonmetallic cawaework and parts, low-mass conductors, true star grounding, and input and output signal paths free from feedback, and it radiates "practically impossible to criticize the PL- Cs sound. The amplifier having an input impedance of at least 20k ohms, advised JA. (Vol.33 Nos.5 & 10 WWW)

Einstein: "The Tube Mk.II: $18,400"

Jossa... The 77b 6010 D is an impressive-looking, superbly finished preamp with a black-lacquered façade, gold-plated volume and input knobs, and top-mounted level input-trim pots and tape-monitoring buttons. The MBL sounded "very quiet, transparent, and dynam- ic," with a slightly lean bottom end and "slightly more movement." It seemed as if performances were actually taking place to the listening room rather than simply being re-told. AD: "Judged for its musicality, the quality of its parts and construction, and its shear design ingenuity, the LumI's L2 is worth every penny it costs, well above its price of $8600, and JA found "superb measured performance.... An excellent, more effective, more fun to use, and, consequently, more recommendable." JA was impressed by the 3S's extreme linearity. (Vol.31 No.11 WWW)

Evolution P-7, the JC 2 sacrificed body for leading-edge definition, felt JA. One of Stereophile's "Joint Amplification Components" for 2008. (Vol.33 No.12, Vol.33 No.3 & 11, Vol.32 No.3 WWW)

Focal: "Erasme II: $25,000"

MBL 6010 D: $24,750

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Shindo Masseto: $11,995
Like the less-expensive Aurieges, the Masseto is a dual-mono power amp, and enough drama to keep me happy indefinitely,” he said. (Vo132 No.7, Vo133 No.6, WV/W)

Simaudio Moon Evolution P-8: $15,000
This dual-mono, two-chassis preamp is as imposing and impressive as Sim’s W-8 and power amp. While the Preamp chassis contains all the audio circuitry, the Controller chassis includes a power supply capable of driving the preamp. It is designed to be used as a monoblock or as a part of a stereo system.

Sims W-8: $11,995
For best results, the Eclipse should be used with a power amp having an input impedance of at least 30k ohms, he cautioned. (Vo130 No.8, Vo131 No.6, Vo132 No.7, Vo133 No.8 WV/W)

Ayre K-Sxe*: $3500
Like all of Ayre’s K-series products, the K-Sxe uses a combination of black-anodized and natural aluminum surfaces seen in all Moon Evolution components. The P-7 produced a slightly forward, slightly robust overall sound with full, detailed soundstage. JA found measured performance of the K-Sxe’s balanced XLR inputs and outputs, but offers no balance or tone controls.

VTL TL-7.5: $18,500
For best results, the Eclipse should be used with a power amp having an input impedance of at least 30k ohms, he cautioned. (Vo130 No.8, Vo131 No.6, Vo132 No.7, Vo133 No.8 WV/W)

Conrad-Johnson Classic: $1850 $550
The C-7 is a hybrid preamp with a solid-state output buffer and transistor, balanced XLR inputs, and a headphone amplification section. It is designed to be used as a monoblock or as a part of a stereo system.

AudioValve Eclipse: $5699
The Eclipse’s clear acrylic top plate is machined to include two rounded ventilation slots for its four 6550s and a neutral overall balance, clear and forward sound, and wide dynamic range created a musical presentation that matched drama with good sense of size and scale. It lacked, however, the Shindo Masseto’s ability to closely follow the music, tonal color, and dimensionality. "If you can understand why every tube-loving audiophile doesn’t understand why every tube-loving audiophile doesn’t understand why every tube-loving audiophile doesn’t understand why every tube-loving audiophile doesn’t understand why every tube-loving audiophile doesn’t,” concluded AD. BJR agrees, describing Eclipse as "a delight to test"; it displayed "virtually bombproof reliability, tunefulness, and expressiveness." The overall sound was cleanest, fastest, and most detailed with the Eclipse.

Published in Stereophile.com, October 2010
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signals, it lacked body, bloom, dynamics, and dimensionality, said ST. (Vol.32 No.7/WWW)

Parasound Halo P 7: $2000

Full-featured analog stereo preamp with six stereo inputs, balanced and unbalanced outputs, front-panel headphone and MP3 jacks, and an MM/MC phonostage—See “Multichannel Components.” Delightful sound but “falls symptomatically short of the delicacy of the Nagra and Simaudio preamps I have used,” says KH. (Vol.32 No.1/WWW)

PrimaLuna ProLogue Three: $1599

Built by hand with point-to-point wiring, the beautiful ProLogue Three has a fully vented chassis of heavy-gauge steel with five coats of hand-rubbed finish, and a removable metal cap that fits over the tube compartment. Typically tubish, the Three was smooth, open, transparent, and easy on the ears, but lacked some presence in the upper midrange and treble. Pairing it with the ProLogue Seven power amp, however, provided a more optimal combination of accuracy and musicality. “Outstanding value,” said RD. JA advised: “The Three’s decreasing linearity at low frequencies means that it should not be used with power amplifiers whose input impedance demands less than 50k ohms.” The matching ProLogue Seven’s 7k ohm inputs will be the best bet. (Vol.32 No.9/WWW)

Shindo Aurieges: $4955

The handmade, limited-edition Aurieges is built into a steel enclosure and beautifully finished in metallic-green lacquer. It uses four NOS tubes in the preamp section and a 6X4 rectifier tube in its external power supply. With an extremely low noise floor and excellent harmonic content marking its sound, the Aurieges offered a sound that was “wonderful and engaging.” Above all, it emphasized “the ideal of making music—and in doing so came closer to re-creating great art than anything else,” said AD, though he cautioned that its high output impedance mandates care in system matching. List-only version: $2995. (Vol.30 No.6/WWW)

Editor’s Note: There are currently no Class C or D preamplifiers listed.

K NHT PVC

Deletions

Ayre Acoustics K-xse discontinued; Cary Audio SLP 05, Krell Evolution 202, McIntosh C1000, Primusitone Audio TVC, all not auditioned in too long a time to be sure of anything.

TWO-CHANNEL POWER AMPLIFIERS

Editor’s Note: Because of the disparity between tubed and solid-state “sounds,” we have split Class A for separate power amplifiers into two subclasses. Nevertheless, even within each subclass, Class A amplifiers differ sufficiently in character that each will shine in an appropriate system. Careful auditioning with your own loudspeakers is therefore essential. Except where stated, output powers are not the specified powers but rather those we measured into an 8 ohm resistive load. All amplifiers are stereo models unless stated otherwise.

A (Solid-State)

Aesthetic Atlas: $8000

Offering 200Wpc (318Wpc at clipping), the Atlas has a tubed input stage, a solid-state output stage, and a second pair of inputs with a 6lB/octave high-pass crossover that can be set to 16 different corner frequencies from 40 to 200Hz. Build quality is top-notch and rugged, with the amp’s body wrapped in an aluminum enclosure that surrounds the circuits and heatlamps in a captive-case configuration. The Atlas was clearly built with a cup of sense, and dynamic command that allowed music to jump to life, said WP. Compared to the Parasound Halo JC 1, the Atlas offered a cleaner midrange, but lacked a little top-end extension and bottom-end body. (Vol.33 No.1/WWW)

Ayre Acoustics MX-R monoblock: $18,500/ pair

Relatively small (11” W by 18.75” D by 3.75” H) for 1 kW into 8 ohms will be fine, he notes. (Vol.129 No.12/WWW)

Bel Canto Ref1000 MK.II monoblock: $5990/ pair

Omnidirectionally identical to the original Ref1000, the 500Wpc MK.II uses an updated version of B&O’s ICpower module, a more complex input board, and a new power-supply board. The new Bel Canto was “dead silent” and sounded “clean, powerful, and neutral,” with a heftier bottom end and a more natural midrange. No longer marked by the shortcomings of other digital amps, the Bel Canto “can be compared with the cream of the other amps I’ve had in my system,” enthused KA. JA’s measurements revealed the REF1000 MK.II to be very powerful, delivering 600W into 8 ohms. It will work best with higher-lower input stages, however, and at lower frequencies. (Vol.32 No.3, Vol.33 No.7/WWW)

Boulder 860: $8500

Like the 810 preamplifier, the 150Wpc 860 is built into an anodized, aircraft-grade aluminum chassis, stands on four solid feet, and has the same emphasis on short signal paths, low noise, and isolation of components. Though the 860 proved superb at capturing harmonic overtones and at placing images precisely on an illuminated soundstage, FK noted its “open and airy, and sweet,” said ST. “What more do you want?” (Vol.29 No.5)

Cayin A-20: $7500

The compact, beautifully built V-5xe delivers 150Wpc into 8 ohms and features single-ended and balanced inputs and speaker-wire terminals made by Cardas. Though it lacked some power in the bass and “produced a “thud like a monster amp,” the V-5xe offered a highly resolving, dynamic, harmonically rich sound that was never fatiguing. “Open, airy, and sweet,” said ST. “What more do you want?” (Vol.29 No.5)

Conrad-Johnson ET250S: $8000

An all-tube C-J amplifier, the ET250S combined a discrete design with a dual-transformer power supply whose custom-made transistors are built to fit the MX-R’s unique shape—a shape that provoked WP’s audio lust: “A hunka hunka shiny, anodized audio presence,” he described it. “It’s too physical to look cute and incredibly pleasing sound that was never fatiguing.” (Vol.131 No.4/WWW)

D Marantz SM-11SI: $4500

Relatively small (11” W by 18.75” D by 3.75” H) for 1 kW into 8 ohms, and with higher-lower input stages, however, and at lower frequencies. (Vol.32 No.3, Vol.33 No.7/WWW)

ET250S

Unlike most of the other amps we’ve seen, this one didn’t require break-in to reach maximum performance, though it did take extra time to reach its full performance. “Second to none,” said Wes. Comparing the MX-R with the Krell Evolution 600s, the sonic differences between the amplifiers were “extremely subtle,” said WP. However, while the Krell drew Wes’s attention, especially with superbly recorded material, the Ayres inspired him to deeply immerse himself into its entire music collection. (Vol.33 No.4/WWW)

ET250S

The Marantz’s bass was “deep, well-textured, and rhythmically assured.” The Marantz’s bass was “deep, well-textured, and rhythmically assured.” While it lacked the iron-fisted control of more powerful amplifiers, the Marantz’s bass was “deep, well-textured, and rhythmically assured.” He concluded, “The SM-11SI is one of those ‘get it while you can’ products that comes along too too infrequently.” JA was similarly impressed: “It was a pleasure to measure.” (Vol.33 No.5/WWW)

F MBL’s Direct Push/Pull circuitry design and Isolated Gain Cell technology, and its gleaming black exterior is decorated by a large, gold mbh logo. Sacrificing bloom and suppleness for crystalline transparency and offering tightly focused imaging, the 9000 produces high, and well-damped bass, the 9007 was one of the most exciting and engaging amplifiers in MF’s experience. His recommendation only concerns the 9007 used as monoblock pairs, however. JA was similarly impressed with the 9007’s superb measured performance. (Vol.29 No.9/WWW)

Musical Fidelity Titan: $30,000

The fully balanced, dual-mono, two-chassis Titan is rated to deliver 1kwpc into 8 ohms. Though only slightly more than 7” high, each box is 19” wide and
POWER AMPLIFIERS

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more than 2" deep. The 150-lb power supply houses two 3kV toroidal mains transformers and a pair of toroidal chokes, while the 100-lb amplifier section contains 40 pounds of high-quality audio materials, such as 21-gauge OFHC copper, solid-core aluminium, and a variety of high-quality insulation materials. The new XS2 120W power supply delivers 1000W of power to the amplifiers and can be used with high-quality audio components. The design is a high-quality audio component that produces a clean, transparent, and detailed sound. The new XS2 120W power supply is available at a competitive price, and it is a great addition to any high-quality audio system.

The MB-450 Series II Signature delivers 350W into 8 ohms, with a low distortion of 0.006% at 1% THD. The MB-450 Series II Signature is a high-performance power amplifier that is designed to deliver powerful sound with low distortion. The MB-450 Series II Signature is available in a range of power levels, from 200W to 1000W, and it is suitable for a variety of high-quality audio systems. The MB-450 Series II Signature is a great addition to any high-quality audio system and is available at a competitive price.

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Power Trip...
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As any seasoned traveler will tell you, it's not just about arriving - the journey matters too. The path your AC takes from the wall socket to your system might seem short, but you'd be surprised the musical toll it can take.

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M14-450 have been replaced by an elegant brushed-aluminium faceplate. The Series II incorporates VTL's auto-biasing circuitry, and uses eight 6500C output tubes, and one each 12AT7 and 120747 tube for the input stages. The 4B- SST uses a dual-mono circuit in Tetrode mode, it was impressed by the amp's "surprisingly deep, rich, robust bass performance in Tetrode mode."

Bryton 7B SST monoblock: $5900/pair

The superbly built 7B SST offers 600W in fully balanced, class-A/B operation into 8 ohms, and features a dual-mono bridged circuitry in which the two amplifier modules in each monoblock chassis are wired in series and driven by opposite-polarity signals. Changes from the original 7B SST include a new heatsink, improved crossover, and maintaining a variety of duties, such as high-voltage, low-output, new output devices, increased power-supply capacitance, a new low-noise power transformer, new computer-modeled heatsinks, more direct connections with less point-to-point wiring, and new cosmetics. Though the 7B SST is "essentially complete and fully extended," it lacked spatial depth and image specificity. When equipped with a new type of transformer trickled down from Bryton's flagship 28B SST (serial number 00862 onward), the 7B SST produced richer, punchier, crisper transients, and improved bass definition. Nevertheless, when compared to the Class A Parasound Halo JC I, the Bryton lacked bass control, low-level resolution, and microdynamic delicacy, said MF. (Vol.33 No.1 WWW)

Bryton 4B-SST: $4550

The 4B-SST has remained in the company's product lineup for over 30 years. LG found the ST update of the venerable 4B a marked improvement. Sell a "four-bass marvel," it also delivered "llow, majestic, and grand piano," but... When equipped with a new type of transformer trickled down from Bryton's flagship 28B SST (serial number 00856 onward), the 7B SST produced richer, punchier, crisper transients, and improved bass definition. Nevertheless, when compared to the Class A Parasound Halo JC I, the Bryton lacked bass control, low-level resolution, and microdynamic delicacy, said MF. (Vol.33 No.1 WWW)

Halcro Logic MC20: $5490

"A magnificent-sounding amplifier," said AD of the 400Wpc (into 4 ohms) MC20, which offers balanced and unbalanced inputs, a proprietary switched power supply, and current-summing and thermal-protection circuits, in addition to Halcro's Reliability Assurance Service. Soundling "immediately and significantly different" from most other amps in JA's experience, the MC20 had "an enormous sense of clarity and coherence" and was "exceptionally musical in tone, colored and uncolored by noise or textures that didn't belong." It combined poised and forcefulness with the ability to capture sonic subtleties, resulting in "an emotional or even physical response." Proved just a bit mechanical-sounding compared to AD's reference Lineare ML1.2 mono-blocks, Jim Austin noted a pleasing "touch of darkness" to the Halcro's sound, and found it "always easy to listen to, never fatiguing." (Vol.30 No.4, Vol.32 No.6 WWW)

Hyperion HT-88 monoblock: $2800/pair

The 18Wpc HT-88 is built and sold in mirror-imaged pairs and uses two 524 half-wave rectifiers, two 12AU7 dual-triodes, and two KT88 output pentodes. Though their abundance of texture sometimes worked against them, the Hypertons offered "an excellent balance between deep, bass-rich sound with impressionistic musical speed, and performed admirably with AD's Quad ESL loudspeakers. The FT88 measured "quite well!" for a single-ended design, said JA. One of the first reviews produced an unbeatable 600Wpc 6000Wpc replacement flawlessly. (Vol.31 No.1 WWW)

Moscode 402Aa: $6495

Like its predecessor, the 40111, George Kaye's newest design is a tribute to the late Harvey Rosenburg. It carries a tube driver stage to a MOSET power output and comes with pairs of 6H30P and 6GUL dual-triode tubes, although many other small triodes can be used. Tubes are inserted into clearly labeled sockets behind a flip-down door of elegantly finished, adeptly sounding blue Moscode logo. Circuit-board traces are gold-plated, and the audio signal path is hand-wired with Cardas cable. The 402Aa combined nuance with power, and was "superb at throwing its weight around." Compared to the 40111, the 402Aa "had deeper bass, more power and control, and a greater sense of width in the signal," said WJ. "It wasn't just good. It was fine." Must not be used with speakers having an impedance less than 4 ohms. (Vol.32 No.9 WWW)

PrimaLuna DiaLogue Seven monoblock: $5495/pair

Offering 40W in triode mode (70W in ultralinear), the wildly built DiaLogue Seven boasts point-to-point wiring and PrimaLuna's Adaptive AutoBias, the latter said to keep the output tubes operating within their best parameter states, for reductions in both distortion and tube wear. While the PrimaLuna's sound in ultralinear mode was "stunningly dramatic," "intensely involving," and "enormously moving," AD ultimately preferred listening in triode for its "less mechanical" sound. It delivered "an apparent, obviously wonderful-sounding amp that offers higher-than-average value." Very strongly recommended. (Vol.32 No.12 WWW)

PrimaLuna ProLogue Seven monoblock: $3310/pair

The 70W Prologue Seven, PrimaLuna's top-of-the-line amplifier, uses Adaptive AutoBias, which allows its four stock KT88 power tubes to be swapped with a variety of other tubes. With KT88s in place, however, AD noted a greater sense of depth, more extended highs, and improved bass definition. Nevertheless, when driving power-hungry loudspeakers. (Vol.15 No.5, 41; Vol.22 No.10; ST, Vol.30 No.4, 3 ST, WWW)

Chord DSM 560: $3555

High-tech, compact, and lightweight, the 330Wc DSM 560 is a single-ended, Class-A power amplifier capable of driving a wide variety of loads and input tubes. ST: "The LP66S is Conrad-Johnson's best-selling, small, relatively inexpensive stereo tube amp—ever." It delivered full-bodied and low-level detail, while never sounding overly soft or sweet, for a naturally blending sound. (Vol.32 No.3 WWW)

Quad II Classic monoblock: $3000/pair $$

With the new VETT, Quad didn't set out to improve on or update the original Quad II, but to remanufacture it the way it had originally been made 50 years before. The circuit remains unchanged, and details of its construction have been modified only where law or case conditions of certain types of parts are extinct. Exhibiting timbral beauty, spatial honesty, and deep emotional involvement, the II Classic had AD feeling nostalgic. "There isn't a sweeter amplifier on earth... It's beautiful, it's true to the original, and it has more than a little soul." Its lack of speed and focus in the bass region made it less than optimal with rock music but perfect for small-scale classical. While JA also found it "difficult to resist nostalgia," he was pleased to note that, "Despite its design vintage, the Quad II Classic offers quite respectable measured performance."

Loads below 8 ohms are to be avoided. (Vol.28 No.8 WWW)

QuickSilver SET Mono monoblock: $2800/pair

This single-ended-triode design is rated to deliver 9Wpc into 8 ohms. While, $2800/pair. As such, for use with off-the-shelf 8 ohm tube, a 6140 driver tube, and a 5A4 rectifier tube. While it exhibited the clarity, purity, and immediacy commonly associated with SETs, it proved leaner, more incisive, and less romantic than those using a similar 300B output circuit. "Very high source impedance, less than optimal with rock music but perfect for small-scale classical. While JA also found it "difficult to resist nostalgia," he was pleased to note that, "Despite its design vintage, the Quad II Classic offers quite respectable measured performance."

Loads below 8 ohms are to be avoided. (Vol.28 No.8 WWW)

Shindo Monolite: $4695 $$

The 15Wc push pull Monolite offers retro styling in a "determined-looking" steel chassis. Under its cover, AD found "superb craftsmanship" characterized by painted and polished surfaces, neat point-to-point wiring, and vintage American parts, including Allen-Bradley carbon-composition resistors and Sprague Orange Drop capacitors. With a "muscular but silky-smooth presentation" and an expert grasp of pitch relationships, the Monolite followed music with "crazy acrid," said AD. "Judged for its superior musicality, engaging sound, superb build quality, and the indescribable cool factor of a handmade, limited-edition amp, the Shindo Monolite may be the most satisfied with the "V-shaped Class B." (Vol.30 No.7 WWW)

C Rogue Audio Atlas: $1495 $$

Steak and streamlined, with slightly rounded, elegantly, the 55Wpc Atlas is a two-channel, vacuum-tube, push-pull amplifier. While it excelled at handling dynamic contrasts and conveying textual details, the Atlas suffered from lightweight bass and rolled-off high frequencies. In light of its very affordable price, JA forgave the Atlas' power limitation into high frequencies. Similarly, FK concluded, "The Rogue Audio Atlas is a spectacular success—lively, enjoyable, an ideal entry to the High End for someone on a budget." (Vol.30 No.3 WWW)

Deletions

Krell Evolution 600, Musical Fidelity 750K Superlacher & Superlacher 550K all no longer available; Bel Canto e.One S300, Jolie Elecra VZN-80, Hailotee III, Luminote Audio KST-150, Portal Audio D-A, and Shindo LAGrange are among the change. No new updates among the list.

K Music Reference RM10 ML2, Shindo Corten-Charnage and Shindo LaGrange monoblocks, Shindo Haut-Brion.

www.Stereophile.com, October 2010
Audio Research VSi60: $3995

ATC's beefy (44 lbs) SIA2 delivers a claimed 150Wpc as well as four pairs of voltmeter test points. Though its minimalist design emphasizes simple circuits and microprocessor- controlled, optically activated volume control, and separate power supplies for the analog and microprocessor circuits. The 865 combined a glorious midrange with near-SET levels of presence and a fine sound from its predecessor, the 5350SE ($1695). Optional MM or MC phono-preamp card adds $219.

Leben CS600: $5795

The 70Wpc NCSE is an upgraded version of the earlier version's single-stage regulators. It uses separate circuits and toroidal transformers for its preamp and power sections, which are upset by the Cary's CAST technology. The FBI shared the 300cx's "tight deep bass, thunderous dynamics, and snappy transients," but added "greater detail, even delicacy, in the timbres and textures of instruments," said FIC. Krell's 3010S in Vol.32 No.6 ($3500) is a "push-pull topology and can use EL34 or 6L6GC triodes per channel, for a stated output of 20Wpc into 8 ohms. Its minimalist design emphasizes simple circuits and well-behaved even into low impedances, it is a paradigm of what an integrated amplifier needs to do." The cast inputs get the best sound quality from the FBI, concluded Fred. ST advised. The LFD "has a direct, hands-on feel, simple, linear, and confident," he sums up. No remote, if that matters to you. Phono section adds $600. (Vol.31 No.2, Vol.32 No.8)

Luxman L-505u: $3700 $$$

LFD's Integrated Zero Mk.II LE ($3950) includes a "basic, almost inevitable sweetness about it, and a beguiling presentation of inner detail that made me overlook its limitations in dynamism and authority," said ST. He sums up. No remote. Phono section adds $600. (Vol.31 No.2, Vol.32 No.8)
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in addition to an MM/MC switchable phono input and headphone output. Large, blocky power meters and convenient tone controls mark its retro styling. The simple, clean, and coherent soundstage, with wide soundstaging and image specificity for an additive overall sound. In direct comparison with the Grace m902, the Loaum's headphone performance lacked body and spatial resolution. JM: “Loaum’s L-505u is my new default recommendation in integrated amplifiers.”

Marantz PM-KI-Pearl: $3599

Like the Pearl SACD player, the PM-KI-Pearl celebrates design Ken Ishiwata’s 30 years of service with Marantz. A full-featured integrated, the PM-KI-Pearl is easy to drive with real Hi-Fi speakers, includes two pairs of E34Ls, and features a subwoofer, a pair of variable preamp outputs; there is no phono stage or phono option and no headphone amp. Though it lacked some bass control, the Marantz showcased a “rich, full-bodied, sweet, harmonically pure” sound that worked to ameliorate the less than perfect, especially digital recordings or remasters, said ST, but points out that the MP’s owner is paying for the upgraded design. (Vol.33 No2 WWW)

Musical Fidelity AMS-355SE

The AMS-355SE (Vol.33 No.4 WWW) is a dual-mono version of the AMS-355i that is rated to deliver 35Wpc into 8, 4, or 2 ohms. Large and heavy with dangerously sharp bezants, the AMS-355i has one pair of balanced line-level XLR inputs, four pairs of fixed-level RCA tape outputs, and, for bumping or adding a subwoofer to the speaker setup, there is no phono stage or phono option and no headphone amp. Though it lacked some bass control, the AMS-355i had a “rich, full-bodied, sweet, harmonically pure” sound that worked to ameliorate the less than perfect, especially digital recordings or remasters, said ST, but points out that the MP’s owner is paying for the upgraded design. (Vol.33 No3 WWW)

NAD Masters Series M2 Direct Digital: $5999

Though it’s convenient to think of it as an integrated amplifier, the solidly constructed M2 is actually a full-featured integrated, the PM-KI-Pearl that can deliver up to 300Wpc into 8 ohms. For legacy amplifiers, the solidly constructed M2 is rated to deliver 55Wpc into 8 ohms. Though it lacked some bass control, the I2A3’s large and heavy (17” W by 8” H by 19” D, 80 lbs) gets the drag to soundstage and alak high-frequency air and ultimate detail, overall the PM-KI-Pearl had a warm, inviting sound marked by midrange richness, treble importance, and superb soundstaging, said MF. JA noted “excellent rated performance.”

Naim Supernait: $4400

The Naim Supernait is a drop-dead gorgeous 30Wpc integrated amplifier reminiscent of the classic Dynaco ST-70, with a 6922 double-triode input tube stage, two JAN5814-A double triodes, and two pairs of 35Ss. However, the Filarmonia departs from Dynaco’s design in several important ways: The input is screened and transformer-coupled, the circuit design is not ultralinear, global feedback is a low 6dB, and it operates in class-A for most of its 30Wpc output. (Vol.33 No.7 WWW)

Bel Canto e.One S300USB/USB 24/96: $1995 $55

Built into a simple but attractive half-width chassis, the e.One S300USB is a 150Wpc integrated amplifier with two anodized aluminum cases, a tape loop, line output, and a USB digital input. The 300USB occasionally exhibited a “bleached” midrange, the e.One300USB impressed WP with its top-to-bottom coherence and “taut, explosive” bass. With its high jitter level, however, VA found the 300USB’s USB output to be a little more than a “convenience feature,” though the audiophile performed well in low levels and midrange frequencies, JA was disappointed by its behavior at high frequencies in low impedances. (Vol.31 No.6 WWW)

Bryston B100-DATA SST: $5490

The rugged and reliable B100-DATA SST combines a 120Wpc power amplifier based on Bryston’s 2B-SST with a high-quality DAC for convenient partnership to a CD player or network music player. The B100-DATA shared the 300W 4B-SST’s bass definition, wide soundstaging, and open highs, but lacked some deep-bass punch and dynamics, thought LG. Provided impressively broad functionality at no cost to performance, said JA. Basic B-100DA: $3895. Optional DAC: $1200. Optional MM phono board: $550. (Vol.33 No.WWWW)

Cayin H-80A: $3295

The large and heavy (17” W by 8” H by 19” D, 80 lbs) H-80A sports retro styling with twin backlit VU meters, and offers exquisite fit and finish. In hybrid mode, the two I2A3s aimed at NPN MOSFET transistors per channel in the output stage. The H-80A’s sound combined the best of tube designs with the best of solid-state, producing smooth and extended treble and an overall “plump, tender, and juicy” presentation, said ST. The Cayin H-80A lacked the brashness of poorer ones. “While the M2 is relatively immediate and well-balanced across the spectrum, the Cayin presented a “richly holographic soundstage and an uncolored midrange” while combining pure, extended highs with “lightweight-fast” transients. BJF was most surprised, however, by the Cayin’s ability to sustain a “tightly focused, dynamic and expansive sound with a relaxed, romantic color.” said ST. “It’s a $3000 integrated amplifier, this kind of performance is phenomenal.” Put in Class A, ST demanded, but perhaps Class B as this amp’s natural home, at least until a “Follow-Up” review can be organized. (Vol.30 No.8 WWW)

Manley Labs Stingray iTube: $3400

Manley Labs Stingray II: $3000

Direct descendant of the acclaimed Stingray (reviewed by CS in December 1999, the rugged- looking, gorgeously constructed Stingray iTube is built around eight EL84 output tubes, rated to deliver 32Wpc in ultralinear mode and 18Wpc in triode mode. It offers three single-ended inputs, a certificated IRF, a subwoofer output, and a phono input stage. The S9 exhibited a “grainless, extended treble and an overall sound that was "tight, immediate, and well-balanced across the spectrum," said ST. "It’s a $3000 integrated amplifier, this kind of performance is phenomenal." Put in Class A, ST demanded, but perhaps Class B as this amp’s natural home, at least until a “Follow-Up” review can be organized. (Vol.30 No.8 WWW)

Mastersound 300 B 5E: $6095

The 50Wpc Mastersound has an angle-ended, Class-A output stage and four line-level inputs. With an unusually wide bandwidth for a single-ended design, the Mastersound produced “an enjoyably open sound, with a better-than-average degree of realistic detail and texture.” Though it lacked some body and color, and sometimes struggled at high volumes, the Mastersound had a “satisfying” sense of flow and was “surprisingly uncolored overall.” However, the 300 B 5E’s measured performance couldn’t escape its single-ended provenance. “Both its response variations and its level of distortion are large enough to have audible consequences,” concluded JA. (Vol.31 No.WWWW)

Melody I2A3: $3529

The playful McRostie I2A3 uses two Sennheiser 2A3 tubes in push-pull configuration to deliver 18Wpc into 8 or 4 ohms. Offers no remote, but offers a remote amp section control, though its finger tips were impressive, with high-quality components and “mystique” looks. Though it lacked some bass control, the I2A3’s sound was “warm, rich, harmonically right, extended in the highs but never over the top,” said ST. “No other amplifier I’ve seen surpasses its beauty, and it
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The 150Wpc C 375BEE offers five line-level outputs, power sent to the speakers. Though its headphone two sets of preamp outputs, a front-panel minijack just keeps it from Class A. (Vol.32 No.2 WWW)

Primare Systems DVD110: $2495

The Nova USB combines an 80Wpc class-A/B power amplifier, a high-quality internal USB DAC/ converter, and a 12-bit AD/DA converter, all in a sleek, solid case. (Vol.30 No.6 WWW)

Shanling MC-3000: $2500

Big brother to the Shanling MC-30, the MC-3000 combines a CD player, AM/FM tuner, and iPod dock with a 60Wpc hybrid integrated amplifier. It includes three line-level inputs, a pair of preamp outputs, an RCA digital output, and a video output. Fin's finish were superb. With its outstanding harmonic presentation and free-flowing musicality, the MC-3000 "delivered true high-end sound," enthused ST. Its excellent headphone amp made it an even greater bargain. "For all the MC3000's features," Sam concluded, "its value is phenomenal....Yes, you can have it all in one package." (Vol.31 No.11)

Integra DSR-4.8: $600

This SACD/CD receiver offers outstanding build quality and boasts an elegant all-metal chassis with a brushed-champagne finish. It has switchable MM/ MC phono inputs and an optical digital output, but no coaxial output. Compared to the Peacock Nova, the Demon provided greater resolution and was "more musically intimate," said JM. Compared to the Carat 157, the Demon's treble was "a touch warmer," he added. (Vol.32 No.9 WWW)

Outlaw Audio RR2150: $569: $555

The tidy little Brio 3 is rated to deliver 49Wpc, uses a single pair of Sanken output transistors per channel, and comes equipped with a moving-magnet phono stage. It lacked low-level detail retrieval but proved harmonically rich, providing full-bodied bass, smooth midrange, and sweet treble. When driven hard with large-scale material, the small Brio ran out of power, as expected. "The Rega Brio 3 offers excellent build quality and exceptional value for the money," said ST. "I know of nothing better at anything near the price." (Vol.30 No.3)
fun," said ST. An optional, onboard Headphone Adaptor is available for $99. (Vol.33 No.8)

Music Hall Trios: $1190

The 3.3 Trios include a CD player, AM/FM tuner, and 50Wpc integrated amplifier in one tidy box. Though it sounds in quite "smooth," it lacked low-level resolution and deep bass, and AM reception was poor. "The Trios try to do everything and manages to do it reasonably well," added ST. "Just don't expect the superb performance of good separates." "A valid choice for a second system," said JM, who decided that a more detailed and more involving experience could be found elsewhere. (Vol.33 No.8, Vol.33 No.10 WWW)

NuForce Icon: $249

The 12Wpc Icon measures just 6" by 4.5" by 1" and includes a USB digital input as well as the usual analog inputs, and external 15V DC power supply. It uses RJ45 terminals for the speaker connections and 3.5mm stereo jacks for line input, the pre-out, and the front-panel headphone jack. Its extruded aluminum cabinet is available in silver, red, black, or blue. The Icon's USB-input DAC did a reasonable job of sorting instrumental textures, but lacked the depth and air of the Musical Fidelity XM DC.

Cambridge Audio Azur 740A, NAD Masters Series 1020, Peachtree iDecco, Marantz PM5003, Magnum Adaptor is available for $99. (Vol.33 No.8)

Preamplifiers

That they buy inexpensive models? Remember: It's someone once asked us why Stereophile bothers to review preamps and line stages, and proved "somewhat noisy" with highly sensitive monitors. It couldn't drive the demanding Usher Be-718s, but lacked the depth and air of the Musical Fidelity XM DC. In small rooms, a tube amplifier, however, resulted in better integration; driving the Acapellas with an in-room amplification adds $25,000. (Vol.33 No.6)

The beautifully finished and massive three-way, reflex-loaded, floorstanding Reference 32 is "clear, clean, transparent view into the musical event," producing an enormous, wall-to-wall soundstage with vivid images, and continuously provided a "clear, clean, transparent view into the musical event," said MF. Though the Silverback offered excellent bass extension and an even response in-room throughout the midrange and treble, JA was disappointed by the speaker's low-frequency performance. Nevertheless, "Glass A," say WP and MF. (Vol.33 No.9 WWW)

DeVore Fidelity Silverback Reference $16,800/pair

This three-way floorstander resembles an Audio Physic Virgo III on steroids and uses a 0.75" silk- dome tweeter, a 5" midrange, and two 8" woofers. The Silversbacks "pulsed with musical life," producing an enormous, wall-to-wall soundstage with vivid images, and continuously provided a "clear, clean, transparent view into the musical event," said MF. Though the Silverback offered excellent bass extension and an even response in-room throughout the midrange and treble, JA was disappointed by the speaker's low-frequency performance. Nevertheless, "Glass A," say WP and MF. (Vol.33 No.9 WWW)

DeVore Fidelity Gibbon 3XLL: $3700/pair $$$ (stands necessary)

Hand-built in Brooklyn, New York, the Gibbon 3XL has a beautifully finished cabinet made mostly of solid bamboo, and uses an unusual 0.75" tweeter and a 5" midrange/woofer custom-designed for DeVore by SEAS. The speaker has a claimed sensitivity of 90dB and a nominal impedance of 8 ohms, never dropping below 74 ohms. While the comparably priced Harbeth Compact 7 E3 offered a slightly richer, fuller sound, the Gibbon 3XLL produced superior imaging, and continuously provided a "clear, clean, transparent view into the musical event," said MF. Though the Silversback offered excellent bass extension and an even response in-room throughout the midrange and treble, JA was disappointed by the speaker's low-frequency performance. Nevertheless, "Glass A," said WP and MF. (Vol.33 No.12 WWW)

Orpheus III

A Strikingly beautiful in construction and finish, this three-way, reflex-loaded, floorstanding Reference 32 is built using monocoque construction: each of its five layers of high-density fiberglass is carefully preformed, then bonded to the other layers to maximize rigidity and stiffness. It has a 1" metal-dome tweeter with an overhanging voice-coil in a flared waveguide, a 7" aluminum-cone midrange driver, and two 9" aluminum-cone woofers. The speaker's substantial grille panels allowed a retrace in theupper midrange and revealed an expansive soundstage, well-extended and detailed bass, and sparkling treble. "The Canton Reference 32 DC deserves the highest accolades," decided KR. (Vol.33 No.6 WWW)

Dinamico: $15,000/pair

Dinamico's 30th-anniversary model is an intriguing-looking, beautifully finished floorstander with a faceted enclosure that flares slightly wider at the top. Dinamico's fabled Eostra tweeter is mounted above a 5.25" midrange unit and two 8" woofers. JA noted "big-hearted sound, an uncolored midrange, and clean, grain-free highs." Some recordings demanded the Sapphire's grilles be kept in place to keep the speakers from sounding too bright, however. Production is limited to 1000 pairs. (Vol.33 No.1 WWW)

Physic Virgo III

A two-way, reflex-loaded, floorstanding Physic Virgo III on steroids and uses a 0.75" silk-dome tweeter, a 5" midrange, and two 8" woofers. JA noted "big-hearted sound, an uncolored midrange, and clean, grain-free highs." Some recordings demanded the Physic's grilles be kept in place to keep the speakers from sounding too bright, however. Production is limited to 1000 pairs. (Vol.33 No.1 WWW)

A 12Wpc, class-D Icon measures just 6" by 4.5" by 1" and includes a USB digital input as well as the usual analog inputs, and external 15V DC power supply. It uses RJ45 terminals for the speaker connections and 3.5mm stereo jacks for line input, the pre-out, and the front-panel headphone jack. Its extruded aluminum cabinet is available in silver, red, black, or blue. The Icon's USB-input DAC did a reasonable job of sorting instrumental textures, but lacked the depth and air of the Musical Fidelity XM DC. In small rooms, a tube amplifier, however, resulted in better integration; driving the Acapellas with an in-room amplification adds $25,000. (Vol.33 No.6)

The beautifully finished and massive three-way, reflex-loaded, floorstanding Reference 32 is "clear, clean, transparent view into the musical event," producing an enormous, wall-to-wall soundstage with vivid images, and continuously provided a "clear, clean, transparent view into the musical event," said MF. Though the Silversback offered excellent bass extension and an even response in-room throughout the midrange and treble, JA was disappointed by the speaker's low-frequency performance. Nevertheless, "Glass A," say WP and MF. (Vol.33 No.9 WWW)

DeVore Fidelity Silverback Reference $16,800/pair

This three-way floorstander resembles an Audio Physic Virgo III on steroids and uses a 0.75" silk-dome tweeter, a 5" midrange, and two 8" woofers. The Silversbacks "pulsed with musical life," producing an enormous, wall-to-wall soundstage with vivid images, and continuously provided a "clear, clean, transparent view into the musical event," said MF. Though the Silversback offered excellent bass extension and an even response in-room throughout the midrange and treble, JA was disappointed by the speaker's low-frequency performance. Nevertheless, "Glass A," say WP and MF. (Vol.33 No.9 WWW)

DeVore Fidelity Gibbon 3XLL: $3700/pair $$$ (stands necessary)

Hand-built in Brooklyn, New York, the Gibbon 3XL has a beautifully finished cabinet made mostly of solid bamboo, and uses an unusual 0.75" tweeter and a 5" midrange/woofer custom-designed for DeVore by SEAS. The speaker has a claimed sensitivity of 90dB and a nominal impedance of 8 ohms, never dropping below 74 ohms. While the comparably priced Harbeth Compact 7 E3 offered a slightly richer, fuller sound, the Gibbon 3XLL produced superior imaging, and continuously provided a "clear, clean, transparent view into the musical event," said MF. Though the Silversback offered excellent bass extension and an even response in-room throughout the midrange and treble, JA was disappointed by the speaker's low-frequency performance. Nevertheless, "Glass A," said WP and MF. (Vol.33 No.12 WWW)

Orpheus III

A Strikingly beautiful in construction and finish, this three-way, reflex-loaded, floorstanding Reference 32 is built using monocoque construction: each of its five layers of high-density fiberglass is carefully preformed, then bonded to the other layers to maximize rigidity and stiffness. It has a 1" metal-dome tweeter with an overhanging voice-coil in a flared waveguide, a 7" aluminum-cone midrange driver, and two 9" aluminum-cone woofers. The speaker's substantial grille panels allowed a retrace in the upper midrange and revealed an expansive soundstage, well-extended and detailed bass, and sparkling treble. "The Canton Reference 32 DC deserves the highest accolades," decided KR. (Vol.33 No.6 WWW)

Dinamico: $15,000/pair

Dinamico's 30th-anniversary model is an intriguing-looking, beautifully finished floorstander with a faceted enclosure that flares slightly wider at the top. Dinamico's fabled Eostra tweeter is mounted above a 5.25" midrange unit and two 8" woofers. JA noted "big-hearted sound, an uncolored midrange, and clean, grain-free highs." Some recordings demanded the Sapphire's grilles be kept in place to keep the speakers from sounding too bright, however. Production is limited to 1000 pairs. (Vol.33 No.1 WWW)

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Esoteric MG-20: $8200/pair (stands included)

The reflex-loaded Esoteric MG-20 is a slim, elegant tower standing only 12" tall. Its front baffle is 30mm thick, while the rest of the trapezoidal cabinet is constructed from 15mm-thick birch ply veneered on all surfaces with American cherrywood. Its two 6.5" magnesium-diatramph woofers are placed above and below a 1" magnesium-diatramph tweeter. "The MG-20 is a light and transparent device with a consistently trouble-free balance, and its low frequencies speak with one voice, offering superb definition and clarity," praised JA. Though he was also impressed by the speaker's measured performance, he noted that its balance sacrificed warmth and richness for clarity and detail. Careful matching with room and system are therefore advised. 3DI-MG20 base plates now included in price. (Vol.31 No.8 WWW)

Focal Maestro Utopia: $49,995/pair

Although the Maestro Utopia stands almost 58" tall and weighs 256 lbs, the Maestro Utopia has an elegant, imposing appearance with a beautifully finished, gracefully curved, dark-gloss body comprising three subclosures: one for the 6.5" midrange unit, one for the 20" woofers, and a large bass cabinet for the two 11" woofers. Though the Maestro Utopia could sound a little reserved with its warm upper bass and mellow top octave, it proved to be "an intensely musical-sounding loudspeaker," with uncorked mulls, controlled lows, well-defined soundstaging, and superb dynamic-range capability, said JA. Due to its demanding load impedance in the upper bass, the Focal should be used with a powerful amplifier, such as the 600W Classe CTM-600 monoblock, to reach its full dynamic capabilities. (Vol.33 No.7 WWW)

Hanscom Audio The Prince V2: $39,000/pair

The large and heavy (42" H by 14" W by 20" D, 205 lbs) Prince V2 is a three-way, front-ported loudspeaker. Its cabinet, hand-molded from three layers of Hansen Composite Mactra, houses a 1" soft-dome tweeter, a 5.4" radial midrange unit, and a 106" laminated-cedar woofer. The V2's superb rendering of instruments in space, along with their ability to reach "music's white-hot emotional truth," resulted in a sound that was dramatic and moving, felt WP. Though the Prince V2's tuning is more good-natured performance, JA was puzzled by the low 10Hz crossover frequency from the woofer to the midrange unit. Though it lacked bass weight in Mikey's room, leading to its reclassifications, MF agreed with WP that the Prince V2 delivered "spectacular three-dimensional imaging" and "immense soundstage spacing," adding "electrostatic-like speed and resolution" to his description. (Vol.31 No.4, Vol.32 No.3 WWW)

Harbeth M40.1: $11,995/pair

To keep energy storage reasonably low and to minimize the size of the speaker's feet, Harbeth's flagship M40.1 uses a deliberately thin-walled MDF cabinet with minimal bracing and damping. Drive-units are a 1" fabric-dome tweeter, an 8" radial midrange unit, and a 12" polypolymer-cone woofer. The M40.1 impresses AD with its satisfying stereo imaging, exceptional bass performance, outstanding low-level resolution, and overall masculinity. JA, however, was eventually irritated by the Harbeth's "hummy, excess bass," and recommended they be used in as large a room as possible. ST agrees about the need for a room."A superbly musical world-class listening experience, he heard numerous Capricorn speakers," he adds. Matching stands add $550/pair. (Vol.31 No.10 & 11 WWW)

JBL Synthesis 1400 Array BG: $11,500/pair

The 1400 Array BG is a three-way, 115-lb speaker that stands 46" tall, 15" wide, and 19" deep. Each of its three drivers—a 1" titanium-diatramph compression tweeter and 3" Aquaplas-coated dome midrange, both mounted in constant-directivity biarid horn, and a 14" longstroke radial subwoofer—is a development of the "port" was developed in-house and is manufactured by JBL. Build quality was top-notch. Though it lacked the soundstage depth and resolution of LG's Quad ESL-999, the JBL produced room-staking low bass, a natural midrange, and a well-extending high frequency. "An astrophile bargain," concluded LG. JA was delighted by the speaker's remarkably flat and even in-room response. (Vol.33 No.5 WWW)

KEF Reference 201/2: $60000/pair (stands necessary)

The "drop-dead gorgeous" KEF Reference 201/2 is a large (16") H x 9" W x 15.9" D, three-way monitor with a Uni-Q coincident 1" titanium-dome tweeter and 6.5" polypropylene copolymer-cone midrange unit. Three gold-plated switches situated above the 201/2's VFBP terminals provided an array of EQ options. The KEF's taut, solid bass and sparkling transients worked to impart great physicality and scale to instruments, musicians, and recording venues. WP's only caveat was that the 201/2 needed a lot of power to throw a truly deep soundstage, the P-17B provided. (Vol.32 No.3 WWW) JA, however, was "simply outstanding," offering neutral tonality, great transparency, and a planar-like ability to throw music into the room. Its only flaw was a "slightly puddling reproduction of bass drum and low electric bass," KR noted. "A lot of excellent bass engineer working at a very competitive price," said JA. (Vol.30 No.3 WWW)

Merlin Music Systems VSM-MXe: $11,500/pair

"Strip away its exotic accoutrements," suggested MF, "like the automotive clear-coat finish and the metal inlay strips, and the VSM is your basic two-way vented box-a floorstanding minimonitor." Outboard BAM bass equalizer, available in both single-ended and balanced configurations, did wonders for the VSM's response. A cabinet at the bottom of the cabinet is filled at the factory with 23 lbs of sand, and, unusually, an outboard Zobel network consisting of a series Holman capacitor and a resistor is placed across the speaker terminals. Sound? MF: "What drew me in first was the VSM's smooth, airy, great top end, delicate yet detailed. It sounded downright luxurious without being syrupy or unctuous." The VSM's retrieval of microdetails "was among the best I've ever heard from any speaker at any price." And with no glare or congestion. Dynamics? MF: "It conveyed plenty of macrodynamic punch, though it didn't pack a really big wallop," decided MF. MF's auditioning of 2006 production samples continues the recommendation. The MX edition boasts improved floor coupling and stability, a revised port said to improve bass, and a pair of additional vents for lower distortion and a cleaner, more organic sound. The speaker's Super BAM bass-enhancement module has also been upgraded to draw 20% more current from the battery pack. MF noted an added weight that gave the VSM-MX a greater sense of authority than earlier versions. (Vol.24 No.9, Vol.30 No.1 WWW)

Monitor Audio Platinum PL200: $8500/pair

The PL200 is a three-way, reflex-loaded floorstanding loudspeaker using a 2.25"-long magnesium ribbon tweeter, 4" metal-coated-cone midrange driver, and two 6.5" metal-coated-woofer cones. Boasting a gracefully curved cabinet made of multiple layers of bonded MDF and an arsensite front baffle clamped in Stratshepp plywood, the PL200 represents outstanding build quality. Though it tended toward the boxier form, the PL200 delivers a "consistent all-around balanced performance from top to bottom," with superb soundstaging and high levels of transparency and resolution, said RD. "This is an impressively engineered, beautiful-looking loudspeaker," JA concluded. (Vol.33 No.4, Vol.34 No.6 WWW)

Meridian & Rendell Integrated & Reference Loudspeaker Systems

Pre-amplifiers

The three-way, reflex-loaded Synthesis One is the flagship of a line of seven models from Cambridge manufacturer PSB. Manufactured in China, the speaker boasts "world-class" finishings; its gracefully curved sideboards are laminate from seven layers of MDF and seamlessly fitted to the speaker's extruded-aluminum baffles. "A timeless design for the world's best sound," the Magico "understated elegance," JA noted "surprisingly deep bass for a relatively small speaker, a neutral, uncorked midrange; smooth, grain-free highs; and superbly stable and accurate stereo imaging." Compared to the Avalon NP Evolution 2.0, the PSB provided more...
Everyone is talking about today’s current “Vinyl Resurgence.” At Music Direct, vinyl and all things analog have been our top priority for the last two decades. Our analog experts know more about turntables, cartridges, phono preamps, record care, and vinyl records for one simple reason: We never stopped listening! We’ll make your music listening experience more fun—guaranteed. After all, isn’t that what we all want?

The VPI Classic:
Our Bestselling Turntable of 2010
and Two-time TAS Golden Ear Award Winner

Marantz TT-15

AVID Diva II

Clearaudio Concept

Rega P-3 24

We’ve heard more cartridges than anyone.
The Quad ESL-989: $88,900/pair

The Quad ESL-989 adds two bass panels to the 988, which is the current version of the classic ESL-63, and is said to have higher power handling. Nonetheless, LG found that music that exceeded peaks of 94dB triggered the speaker’s protection circuit. Still, the Quad ESL-989’s low frequencies are rich and full powered, with powerful, dynamic bass, and a midrange that is more natural than the 988’s. The Quad ESL-989’s mid-range is slightly more mellow than the 988’s, which has a “warmish” midbass region. Nonetheless, LG found that music that exceeded peaks of 94dB triggered the speaker’s protection circuit. Still, the Quad ESL-989’s low frequencies are rich and full powered, with powerful, dynamic bass, and a midrange that is more natural than the 988’s. The Quad ESL-989’s mid-range is slightly more mellow than the 988’s, which has a “warmish” midbass region.

The Vienna Acoustics Klimt The Kiss: $15,000/pair (stands included)

The Vienna Acoustics Klimt The Kiss is a three-way loudspeaker with an integral stand and two separate subwoofers. It is designed to reproduce music efficiently, with high output, long-term stability, and resistance to voice-coil forces. The Klimt The Kiss was “exquisitely capable of revealing the emotional core” of the music. It was described as “a small, well-shaped nacelle meant to reinforce the speakers’ ‘warmish’ midrange region.”

The Thiel CS3.7: $812,900/pair (in Piano Black or Sapele, The Kiss is a three-way floorstanding, bass-reflex loudspeaker with a 1” dome tweeter, a 1” silk-dome tweeter, and two new 6.5” woofers. When used with powerful amps, the Thiel CS3.7 “was astonishingly good.” Unlike LG, AI noted that his room is smaller. JA was impressed by how well the Thiel CS3.7 performs at extremely loud volumes. Though it is fair to point out that the Thiel CS3.7’s imaging “wasn’t quite as good as that of the WATT/Puppy.”

The Definitive Technology Mythos STS SuperTower: $2998/pair

The Definitive Technology Mythos STS SuperTower is a three-way, bass-reflex loudspeaker with a 1” dome tweeter, a 1” silk-dome tweeter, and two new 6.5” wood-fiber/gold-coated woofers. Its graceful cabinet and upgraded real-wood veneer suggest those of a more expensive speaker. Through the 400 Mk.2’s cabinet was “lacked some body and solidity, they offered an ‘aimless spatial presentation that works at every length.’” The speaker’s “slightly hot” overall balance sacrificed harmonic richness for transient attack. The “Helicon 400 Mk.2’s balance will require careful matching with system and room to get the best from it,” concluded JA.

The Wilson Audio Specials Sasha W/P: $26,900/pair

Through outwardly similar to the WATT/Puppy 8, the three-way Sasha W/P is very slightly larger overall, for increased bass extension and freedom from upper-bass congestion. All four drivers are proprietary Wilson designs, including a 1” inverted titanium-dome tweeter. Though its cabinet had some audible resonance and resistance to voice-coil forces. The Wilson Audio Specials Sasha W/P was “exquisitely capable of revealing the emotional core” of the music. It was described as “a small, well-shaped nacelle meant to reinforce the speakers’ ‘warmish’ midrange region.”

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The Flagship of triangle's New Ex series employs a 6.3" midrange driver, two 6.3" bass units, and a 1" horn-loaded titanium-dome tweeter. Sam found it to be "one of the most tube- and SET-friendly speakers on the planet," providing a seamless overall sound with impressive resolution of inner detail and a deep, wide soundstage. "The best affordable loudspeaker yet produced by one of my favorite loudspeaker manufacturers," concluded ST. (Vol.31 No.7 W)
The entry-level speaker of Dynaudio's Excite series, the X12, has an airy treble, rich midrange, and a low-end resonance that is not overwhelming. In attractive, book-matched cabinets. Though the M16i is a little less sensitive and has a smaller footprint, the M16i remains an extraordinary detailer, delicate, and involving loudspeaker, and a great value to boot, decided BJR. The treble remained rolled-off and congested in the lower midrange and the lack of the densest bass was relatively minor flaws in light of the speaker's superbly clean upper midrange, delicate treble, and solid stereo imaging. "The Reference Silver-1 costs less than you'd expect for a speaker of this sonic quality and appearance," said JA. The company is known as the Harbeth Compact 7ES-3: $3450/pair (stands necessary). The two-way, sealed-cabinet P3ESR stands just 12" tall and partners a 0.75" tweeter with a 5" woofer, the latter using Harbeth's proprietary, patented Radiala2 material for improved clarity and low-level resolution. Though restricted in loudness and bass extension, the P3ESR had a slightly warm overall balance characterized by smooth highs, an uncloaked midrange, and stable and accurate stereo imaging. "The Harbeth P3ESR is the sweetest, most musical loudspeaker of the BIC-L5/SA5 monitor concept," concluded JA. The little Harbeth gets the strongest recommendation from JM. Rosewood, Maple, and Eucalyptus finish adds $200/pair (Vol.33 Nos.8 & 10 WWW).

The compact, biwirable, transmission-line loudspeaker with a 1.5" Sonosonic-dome tweeter and a 5.5" cone woofer of doped paper. It measures just 11.4" H by 6.1" W by 9.2" D and weighs 9.9 lbs, but its smooth response belied its small size. Though Mikey noted a presence-region loofer that "distracted delicate glissandi," the PMC DB1i's treble was otherwise "clean, fast, and delicately expressed"; and while the speaker could sound "strained and uncomfortable" when played too loud, it offered "satisfying bass," a "subjectively smooth midrange," and a "coherent, three-dimensional picture with transparency and depth." MF: "The PMC DB1i is a classy designed, musically satisfying monitor." BJR appreciated the DB1i's uncloaked midrange bloom and its life-like bass reproduction, but felt it couldn't match the frequency extension or inner detail of the Dynaudio Excite X12. (Vol.32 No.12, Vol.33 No.4 WWW)
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What do we do here at Kimber Kable?

The same thing we've been doing for over 30 years. We've been making some of the finest audio and video cables by hand in Ogden Utah. We make cables for the neophyte who wants to hear their music more naturally, the college student who finally has a Hi-fi system of their own, the guy who delights in finding the best bang for the buck, and the discerning buyer who wants the very best. We have all traveled through these categories at some point and Kimber Kable makes something for everyone.

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and stable, well-defined imaging, but felt that the speaker's high frequencies were sometimes a bit too mellow. (Vol.16 No.4 Model 1; Vol.21 No.1 Vol.26 No.4; Vol.31 No.10 Signature Model 1 WWW)

C-Full-Range

Aurum Cantus V2M: $189/pair (stands necessary)

Using technology trickled down from PSB's Synchrony and Imagine lines, the Image T6 is a compact three-way floorstanding loudspeaker measuring 16.94" H by 9.8" W by 12.4" D. Cabernet is finished in a black lacquer finish or walnut, and has a claimed voltage sensitivity of 95dB/d/m, and uses a 2.65"-diameter full-range driver, a 1" TNV aluminum-magnesium, inverted-dome tweeter and a 5" carbon-fiber cone woofer. It has a silver internal wiring, high-quality connectors, and a birch, 12dB/octave, low-frequency crossover. While it offered clean, extended highs and superb bass performance, the Genesis 100's greatest strengths were its "voluptuous, uncolored, extremely detailed midrange." At high volumes however, BJR felt that the Genesis 100 "sounded bright." JA's measurements revealed a smooth step response and clean cumulative spectral-decay plot; he was impressed by the ASW's "exceptional engineering," (Vol.33 No.8 WWW)

C-Restricted LF

PSB Imagine B: $1000/pair $55 (stands necessary)

The small cabinet, this limited-edition, two-way loudspeaker is made entirely of wood salvaged from Sontury's whisky barrels. It has a 4" woven-fiber mid-woofer and a 0.75" soft-dome tweeter, while bass loading is via a small port set near ear level, advised JA. (Vol.31 No.5 WWW)

Paradigm Reference Studio/20: $1299/pair (stands necessary)

The two-way, reflex-mediated loudspeaker uses its "midrange neutrality and superb detail resolution," the Studio/20 was an ideal choice for voice and piano and string. Though it lacked some top-octave air, its overall treble performance was "coherent and clean, and its bass performance was impressively deep and forceful." Though BJR "never heard much subjective bottom-end sock" from a bookshelf speaker, the Studio/20 is "very impressive," and deciding that this latest iteration of the Studio/20 is the best yet. These speakers should be used with their grilles on and placed on stands that raise their tweeters to ear level, advised JA. (Vol.31 No.5 WWW)

Pioneer S-445TP-PM Pure Malt Speaker: $598/ pair

The cabinet of this small, limited-edition, two-way loudspeaker is made entirely of wood salvaged from Sontury's whisky barrels. It has a 4" woven-fiber mid-woofer and a 0.75" soft-dome tweeter, while bass loading is via a small port set near ear level, advised JA. (Vol.31 No.5 WWW)

PSB Imagine B: $1000/pair $55 (stands necessary)

It's interesting how the PSB Imagine B two-way bookshelf model uses a 1" titanium-dome tweeter and a 5.25" polypropylene cone mid-woofer. With its real-cherrywood veneer and beautifully curved cabinet, the Imagine B offers "a most transparent and engaging sound," and produced "very pleasant, engaging sounds" with pop, rock, and jazz. It lacked the bass extension required to adequately reproduce classical music, decided JM. (Vol.30 No.12 WWW)

Denon SC-CX303: $1200/pair (stands necessary)

The companion speakers to Denon's RCD-CK1 SACD/CD receiver use a 1" soft-dome tweeter and a 5" carbon-fiber-cone woofer in a ported two-way design. The SC-CX303 and RCD-CK1 proved "an unusually synergistic combination" with impressive dynamics and an "almost pure" imaging on and soundstaging. Compared to the PSB Imagine B, the SC-CX303 sounded "a bit fuller and warmer in the midrange," said JM. "Its measurements indicate that Denon's SC-CX303 is a well-engineered speaker," added JA. (Vol.32 No.12, Vol.33 No.2 WWW)

Andersson Technology LFT-16: $1950/pair $55 (stands necessary)

This "idiodynatmically charming" three-way design combines a 6.5" paper-cone woofer with a large front-baffle panel containing planar dipole midrange and treble units. Compared with the Renaissance MLP-403, the LFT-16 had more clarity in the midrange and treble, and produced a brighter, faster, lighter sound overall, said JM. The ET's measured performance indicated a smooth crossover response, without the bass extension required to adequately reproduce classical music, decided JM. (Vol.32 No.12, Vol.33 No.2 WWW)

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Sound - Innovation - Reliability - Service

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JA. Compared to the Spendor SA1, the PSB had a more colorful, less natural midrange, but offered more top-end extension and low-bass extension. Though the Imagine B had low-frequency extension and upper-bass clarity, it lacked low bass and could sound compressed during complex passages of large-scale orchestral works, the B6 produced a revealing and colorless midrange, fairly detailed highs, and fast, forceful transients. The Imagine B6 "performs at a level well beyond its price," said ST. "Buy a pair just for fun," he recommended, adding that he "love that soft-dome tweeter!" (Vol.30 No.8)

Paradigm Atom v.5: $358/pair ($ stands necessary)
The Atom v.5 is the latest version of Paradigm's bargain-basement, two-way, bass-reflex bookshelf speaker. It uses a 1.1" fabric-dome tweeter and a 5.25" composite woofer and a 1" soft fabric dome tweeter. Rated sensitivity is 88 dB, and it has a 70Hz-20kHz frequency response. The speaker's full-bodied overall balance compensated for its lack of bass slam, WS felt. According to JA's主观 measurements, the Atom 'already measures up to the more expensive Paradigm Carina 2.' The system matching to offer its slightly treble and slightly loose upper bass. The v.5 outclassed the v.3 in every sonic parameter, promoting the Atom into competition with designs in the $300-500/pair range, said BJII. (Vol.30 No.9, Vol.31 No.2 WWW)

Polk RTiA1: $350/pair ($ stands necessary)
The two-way, front-ported RTiA1 is biwirable and magnetically shielded. It has a 1" silk/polymer-composite dome tweeter and a 5.25" polymer/mineral-composite woofer and is designed using Polk's proprietary Dynamic Balance technology. The elegant cabinet comes in Natural Cherry or Black Oak real-wood veneers and is curved and tapered to minimize panel resonances. With a subtle highlighting of the high frequencies and a slight bump in the mid to upper range, the RTiA1 is a "tremendously smooth" speaker, marveled WP. While not as detailed as the Epos ELS 3, the Polk offered greater high-level slam. JA didn't like its very lively cabinet, but concluded, "The Polk RTiA1 offers a lot of speaker engineering at a very affordable price." (Vol.30 No.9, WWW)

PSB Alpha B1: $279/pair ($ stands necessary)
The Frenchmade B1, the latest version of PSB's best-selling Alpha speaker, has molded plastic front and rear baffles connected by an MDF sleeve, and rear baffles connected by an MDF sleeve. The B1 combines a 1" polypropylene-dome woofer with a 1/2" ferrofluid-cooled, aluminum-dome tweeter, both sourced from India. Low-bass extension was limited, and the speaker's otherwise clean, clear bass tone became muddied at very high volumes. Though high frequencies were slightly veiled, the B1's midrange was superb. JA was most impressed by the Alpha's talent for orchestral music: "If you are a classical-music lover with a small room and money is no object, a pair of PSB's Alpha B1 is just what you need. . . . Extraordinary value."

After testing the B1s in a "very dramatic environment," they couldn't quite match the Paradigm Atom v.5's treble performance, felt WP. JA feels the PSB's treble to be "more out in the room," rather than "in your face," unlike the Atom's long-term references. (Vol.30 No.5 & 9 WWW)

Magico Q5, Vivid V15, Epos Encore 50, Meridian DSP7200, Focal Chorus 826/6 30th Limited Edition

Deletions
Avantgarde Uni Nano, Amphion Helium1, Onyx Reference 1 MK.II, all discontinued; Audior Technology 9e-718 replaced by version with new tweeter, but no Audior; Wilson Audio Specialties Sophia 2 replaced by Sophia 3; 111AL Ikon 2 replaced by MK.II; Snell Illusion because of doubts about current availability; Era Design 4, Monitor Audio GS-10, Revel Concerta F12, Silverline Audio Technology Prelude, Stirling LS5-3s 5v2, all not reviewed in too long a time to be sure of rating.

SUBWOOFERS

JL Audio Fathom F1: $1260

The ruggedly built Fathom F12 is a powered, sealed-box sub with two 12" cone woofers. It measures 32" H by 15" W by 20" D, weighs 220 lbs, and has an effective cabinet volume of 746 cubic inches. Like the smaller F113, the F12 provides an automatic internal room optimizer for single-band adjustments, but lacks a high-pass filter. With its clean, well-defined low bass and outstanding three-dimensionality and soundstaging performance, the F12 delivered the full intensity and emotional impact of music, said LG. "The Fathom F12 has raised the performance quality of my audio system, and my enjoyment of it, much higher levels," he concluded. (Vol.33 No.4 WWW)

JL Audio Fathom F113: $3600

The F113 is a small, sealed cube featuring a 13" drive-unit with a prominent OverRoll surround driver. It measures 25" H by 22" W by 11" D, and weighs 200 lbs. The cabinet contains a 20mm silk-dome tweeter and a 1" silk/polymer-composite dome tweeter, with a diecast chassis. WP was most impressed by the Fathom's level of engineering and the quality of its fit'n'finish. (Vol.31 No.12 WWW)

Epos ELS 3, the Polk offered greater high-level slam. Price is $3200 but time than LG had anticipated, the improvements in soundstaging and deep-bass reproduction were worth the extra expense, "more than my entire system achieved its best performance to date," he said, also noting that the JL Audio's Automatic Room Optimization circuit enabled him to tune out an annoying 50Hz mode in his room acoustics.Price is for Gloss Black finish. Black Satin costs $3200. (Vol.29 No.11, Vol.30 No.5 & 9 WWW)

Paradigm Reference SUB 15: $1299

The SUB 15 has a 15" drive-unit with a 76mm-diameter voice-coil, and is rated for bass extension down to 12Hz. Considerably more attractive than the old-fashioned reference Servo-15, the SUB 15 has outrigger feet, gracefully tapered side panels, and weighs 114 lbs. It accepts balanced and unbalanced RCA input signals, and offers a trigger input, adjustable low-pass filter, phase adjustment, and a USB port for control of its equalizer. Compared to

www.Stereophile.com, October 2010
The DD-18 has a built-in spectrum analyzer and also digital equalizer, which allow the sub's performance to be optimized for its owner's listening room, and is one of the most expensive subwoofers on the market. LG's system gained tight, solid, bass reinforcement with "jaw-dropping increases in definition and note." The subwoofer also gained width and depth, while spatial perspective was enhanced. LG: "The combination of its computer installation program and its first-rate servo-controlled drive-unit make it a true breakthrough for aftermarket subwoofers." (Vol.27 No.6 WW)

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**Hetronics Energy Research ER-4S:** $299 tr

Compared to Etymotic's newer H2/HS, the ER-4S sounded "a tad less bright, while also extracting the slightest bit more microdynamic detail," said WP. His long-term reference in-ear monitors. (Vol.27 No.7 Vol.33 No.8 WW/W)

The HD 650s are an evolution of Sony's very successful HD 600 electrostatic headphones, designed to provide superior results due to hand-selected parts with closer tolerances and the use of a specifically designed acoustic seal for the driver diaphragms. Compared to the Grado SR225s, the Sony HD 650s were said to "produce a more accurate and transparent sound," while the Grado's "sound more like headphones." (Vol.27 No.6 Vol.31 No.9 WW/W)

**Sennheiser HD 800:** $1400

The HD 800's large earpads are made from a combination of absorbing composites and functional nital metal accords, and though the 'phones' weight is 15.5 oz. without cables, their drivers' longevity is made comfortable for extended listening. The HD800's Y-cable harness uses braided, Kevlar-made it comfortable for extended listening. The HD800's 4-pin XLR connector is made comfortable to wear. "Worth every penny!" JM said. "The '70s exhibited clarity and detail in abundance, as well as bass that was powerful and well defined." A bit forward-sounding," warns MF. However, while the AKG matched the Sennheiser's spatial outstaging or nuanced dynamics. ST loves them however. The K 701s require several hundred hours of break-in time before sounding their best, cautioned ST. Driven by the Musical Fidelity M6G and LDG, they exhibited an extraordinary resolution, exquisite high frequencies, and authoritative bass, he concluded. Stereophile's 2006 "Joint Accessory," (Vol.29 No.8 Vol.30 No.12, Vol.31 Nos.6 & 9, Vol.32 No.7 WW/W)

"More for the music lover than the audio nerd." (Vol.27 No.9 WW/W)

**Stax SRM-701:** $4220

"Highly recommended," summed up JM. (Vol.27 No.5, Vol.29 No.10 WW/W)

**Ultimate Ears 11 Pro:** $1150

"Pretty miraculous," said WP, who also compared the HD 800's to his "firmly, but ever so lightly," making the HD 800's "armature transducers and a passive, three-way crossover. The rated sensitivity is 115dB/Wm, the specified impedance 18 ohms at 1kHz. The 11's size and 26dB reduction in environmental noise made them WP's favorite traveling headphones. Compared to Ultimate Ears' 10s, the 11s offered greater bass extension and a warmer, more open soundstage. For optimal performance, the 11s should be used with a headphone amp optimized for driving lower impedances, advised JA. Price does not include custom earmold fee. (Vol.30 No.5 WW/W)

**Ultimate Ears 10 Pro:** $900

"Excellent tone, especially to the midrange, thought JM. In JA's experience more akin to listening with loudspeakers. WP: "The AKG matched the Sennheiser's ability to project scale, to reveal dynamic nuance, to present tireless with realism." (Vol.32 No.7 WW/W)

**Sennheiser HD 650:** $650 + $50

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**Grace Design m902:** $1695 cr

"More for the music lover than the audio nerd." (Vol.27 No.9 WW/W)

**J-10 in July 2002.** (Vol.21 No.2 WW/W)

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**Bang & Olufsen BeoSound 8000:** $7000

"The combination of.." (Vol.31 No.6 WW/W)

**Benchmark DAC1 USB:** $595

"The combination of.." (Vol.31 No.6 WW/W)

**Grace Design m902:** $1695 cr

"More for the music lover than the audio nerd." (Vol.27 No.9 WW/W)

**Sennheiser HD 600:** $520 tr

"Of a specially developed acoustic silk for the driver diaphragms. The ATH-AD700s have a honeycomb aluminum casing, a magnesium frame, and 53mm neodymium drivers. Two wing-flaps self-adjust to the listener's head, while being "firmly, but ever so lightly," making the ATH-AD700s "the tightest, anxious mood necessary to build suspense," said W. "I heartily recommend it for its relatively low price, rugged construction, versatile controls, and sturdy drive-unit." Price is for oak, rosenut, and textured black finishes; piano gloss black adds $100. (Vol.31 No.8 WW/W)

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**EDITORS TOP PICKS FOR THE INDUSTRY'S BEST PRODUCTS**

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**RECOMMENDED COMPONENTS**
Good, better... LAMM

The Lamm LL1 Signature monaural preamplifier

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their "natural, ungimmicky" presentation of voices. The 10 had deeper bass than the much less expensive Eyrmonic h2, but was similar to the Eyrmonic in top-end extension, said WP. Their high sensitivity makes them compatible with typical portable players. However, at low volumes, they may produce leaning/leaning sound with earlier iPods, warned JA. Price does not include custom ear-mold fee. Stereophile's 2006 "Joint Accessory of the Year." (Vol.29 No.10, Vol.33 No.8 WWW)

**B**

Cayin HA-1A: $785

While first and foremost a headphone amplifier, the HA-1A can also serve as a line-stage preamp with a single pair of inputs, or as a flex-watt integrated tube amp offering 5 watts at 8 ohms or single-ended mode at 2.2W in ultralinear operation. The Cayin provided the SET experience, sounding immediate, intimate, and full, while adding the sonority to flagship that listener seeks. The HA-1A may be the best thing that ever happened to headphones, said ST, though he finally decides that high Class H is a place where the Cayin rightfully belongs. WP compared the HA-1A to HeadRoom's Desktop/Home. While the Cayin provided a tube three-dimensionality that the HeadRoom lacked, it couldn't match the HeadRoom's bottom-end authority. Compared with the Vincent KHP-1v, the Cayin offered greater warmth and three-dimensionality, said WP. (Vol.29 No.6 & 11, Vol.33 No.11 WWW)

**CEntrance DACport: $399.95 $55**

Bushy Hill's passively-powered DACport is a small, well-finished, tubular device 4.5" long, with a 1/4" headphone jack and a USB port. Although the USB interface operates in adaptive isochronous mode, CEntrance employs their proprietary, two-stage JitterGuard clock-management system. The DACport's D/A section will decode 24-bit data at sample rates up to 96kHz, and its direct-coupled output stage is claimed to run in class-A. Setup was simple; no driver is required, and the DACport is compatible with Mac, Windows, and Linux operating systems. Though it lacked the bass extension and control of the Benchmark DAC1, the DACport offered a clean, grain-free sound, with airy highs and solid if somewhat emphasized bass, and a midrange that is 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. (Vol.33 No.2 WWW)

**Eyrmonic Research h2: $179**

**Eyrmonic Research h5: $149**

Dynamic, diffuse-field—response, in-ear headphones with integral microphone for use with Apple's iPhone (h2) or (h5). Each model has a single dynamic-driver, a non-rechargeable 9V battery, uses high-quality capacitors and resistors, and offers a mini-plug line-level input and mini-plug headphone output. The Hornet was "a joy to use," and proved superior to the headphone output of the Apple iPod. While the Vinet had excellent measured performance, said WP. JA noted " excellent measured performance; plenty of headroom. The added flexibility of the, provided a standard " headphone output, proving adept at conveying power and light as well as nuance and grace. Was most impressed by the Vincent's "textural fortitude," noting that the amp drove both his sets of reference headphones with plenty of headroom. The added flexibility of the Redline line-outputs "makes it a keeper," said WP. JA noted "excellent measured performance." (Vol.31 No.11 WWW)

**Audio-Technica ATH-M50: $99**

The ATH-M50s is a rugged, closed-back headphone design with articulate earcup yokes that allow the earcup to be levered up into the nicely padded headband. Though not in the same class as the much more expensive Sennheiser HD-800 or Denon 7001, the ATH-M50 retains a remarkably good sound. "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." (Vol.33 No.2 WWW)
The Westone 3 is a three-driver in-ear monitor with a rated sensitivity of 107dB and a specified impedance of 30 ohms. The package includes a removable inline volume control, a leather pouch, an ear wax lasso, and two carbon fiber-steel ear tips in three different sizes. The sound was "clear, clean, and open, but with a lot of treble energy— a lot," said Jim Austin. Though the 3 had "the kind of weight you might expect from a top-end circumaural," Jim noted "a substantial midbass hump that obscured the sound of some music."

The PS 200 in-ear headphone uses two balanced-armature drive-units with a passive crossover network. Rated sensitivity is 95dB, specified impedance is 39 ohms. It comes with a padded travel case, an adapter for airplane-seat outlets, and three pairs of silicone impressions taken by an audiologist. When Jim Austin used the UM56s with his Shure E4s, he noted strong bass response and excellent sound isolation. A positive, secure fit requires an open-jaw ear impression. Initial moldings, formed from a relaxed-jaw impression, resulted in poor isolation and a loose fit. "Highly recommended—but open wide," said Jim. (Vol.30 No.5 WW/W)

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The HeadRoom-modified AKGs "sounded warmer and punchier, with extra detail throughout," the Sennheisers benefited from increased clarity and top-end sparkle, mounted WP. (Vol.31 No.11, Vol.32 No.7 WW/W)

Westone UM56 custom earmolds: $120/pair • Westone's earmolds are made from silicone material impressions taken by an audiologist. When Jim Austin used the UM56s with his Shure E4s, he noted strong bass response and excellent sound isolation. A positive, secure fit requires an open-jaw ear impression. Initial moldings, formed from a relaxed-jaw impression, resulted in poor isolation and a loose fit. "Highly recommended—but open wide," said Jim. (Vol.30 No.5 WW/W)

Shure SE310. (Vol.32 No.9 WW/W)

Deletions

No Class Distinction

HeadRoom/Cardas headphone cable modifications for Sennheiser HD 650, and HD 450: starting at $222, cable modifications for AKG-701: starting at $490

Four-conductor Cardas cables replace the stock cable and are terminated with a hefty Cardas plug designed for airplane-seat outlets, and three pairs of silicone impressions taken by an audiologist. When Jim Austin used the UM56s with his Shure E4s, he noted strong bass response and excellent sound isolation. A positive, secure fit requires an open-jaw ear impression. Initial moldings, formed from a relaxed-jaw impression, resulted in poor isolation and a loose fit. "Highly recommended—but open wide," said Jim. (Vol.30 No.5 WW/W)

Sony MDR-7506, and Denon AH-D7000 headphones.

Deletions

Complete Audio Systems

Meridian F80: $3000

More than just a very expensive clock-radio, the Meridian F80 is a compact home-entertainment system with two 3" alloy-cone full-range drivers, a rear-firing fiber-diffused woofer, and a CD/1/DVD drive. Its rigid monocoque chassis is made of a barton-loaded composite material and finished in any of Ferrari's famous colors. In addition to composite and 5-video output jacks, the F80 offers a 3.5mm stereo jack, digital optical in, optical digital out/headphone jack, and two antenna inputs. Its combination of attention-grabbing looks and enveloping sound had Wes wondering if it was "the best table radio ever. "Looking at it made me happy. Listening to it put me in paradise," he said. "Nothing like it," agrees KR, though he feels Class B would be a more appropriate rating. JM agreed that the F80 delivered "an emotionally engaging, even engrossing musical experience," but decided there are better ways to spend $3000 on one's sole serious stereo. (Vol.31 No.4 & 10 WW/W)

AUX Classic: $399-$1599, depending on finish

This handsome, Italian-made satellite-subwoofer computer speaker system features four 100W digital amplifiers in its sub; two for the single-driver bass-reflex satellites and two for the sub itself. The sub (14" by 8" by 11") can be placed under a desk, and the satellites (each 8" by 4") on the desk, or the three pieces can be fitted together and carried in the optional "boombox supreme" leather bag. The subwoofer sounded very clean and went quite low, while the tweeterless satellites managed to sparkle sufficiently well above 15kHz. "A lovely-sounding, near-full-range desktop system," said MF, "but don't push it, or it gets nasty and compressed." Available from www.auxout.com. (Vol.33 No.8)

Audio Research Tube Damping Rings: $3.90 each • Damping rings for all AR products are now available.
to the public at large. They’re made of a proprietary polymer material that converts kinetic energy to heat, and their improvements are not subtle, exclains Björn, tighter, cleaner, deeper, more dynamic bass, more coherent transient attacks, crisper, more extended highs, and pre-dominant midrange detail while sounding "surprisingly" okay. The AV1's sonic proclivities were much more noticeable when it was used for the surround and/or bass channels. (Vol.31 No.9 WWW)

AudioPrism Noise Sniffer RF1/E1 detector: $250

An electronic detective in the campaign to eliminate noise," said Chief Barry Willis. "Simply plug it in and turn up the volume—in small built-in loudspeaker will reveal where your problem outlets are." Then you can turn to AudioPrism's QuietLine Parallel AC line filter for a cure: "A must-have product, period," said BD. "ID.4-0," adds J-10. (Vol.21 No.12 WWW)

AudioQuest binding-post wrench: $10.00

A great idea improved—similar to the original Postman, but with a metal sleeve reinforcing the socket. (Vol.31 No.9 WWW)

CAIG DecDT Gold Wipes: $19.95/25ct $37.95/50ct


ETI Bullet Plugs: $69 in copper (set of 4), $155 in silver (set of 4)

Originally called the Eichmann Bullet, this RCA connector uses a clever design in which the hot signal is conducted by a hollow rather than a solid pin, and where a small, solid narrow pin at the connector's periphery takes the place of an unnecessarily massive silver plug. AE heard "a more open and explicit sound" with a "deeper, more open, and more involving" soundfield. Silver Bullet Plugs made the difference: "Better, quicker, simpler, and even smoother." (Vol.27 No.12 WWW)

Quantum Resonant Technology Qx4: $2499.99

Roughly the size of a cigar box, this surprisingly heavy aluminum block has a pair of AC outlets and an on/off switch. Quantum IQ describes the Qx4 as a "scalar field generator" that's supposed to emit an energy wave, the beat of which is calculated to react in specific ways with stray electromagnetic radiation. So they say. Though BD was dismayed by the technological explanation for the Qx4's effects, he did not deny the positive influence it had on his system. With a Qx4 placed atop each of his Audio Note AN-E speakers, Art's system sounded richer, more dramatic, and more involving. A Qx4 placed between preamp and power strip, however, had no observable impact, either good or bad. (Vol.32 No.12, Vol.33 No.1 WWW)

Sound Alignment Systems by American Recorder Technologies, SAS-1335, P-770 Pro laser alignment tool: $300

"The ideal device for positioning speakers," RD said enthusiastically, adding with BD that it should be "in the tool chest of every audiophile who wants to get the best sound from loudspeakers." It's easy to use—just turn it on, hold it against the speaker's front panel, then adjust the speaker's position until the "appropriate toe-in and vertical orientations are obtained"—and it's much more effective than eyeballing the speaker from the listening position. (Vol.21 Nos.1 & 11, Vol.24 No.8 WWW)

Stadler Audio Aluminata: $55/5ml bottle, with 5ml concentrate, 15ml mixing bottle, applicator, microbrush

Used to increase the reliability of contacts, available from www.posthorn.com. JM: "An initially non-conductive complex polymer liquid that, under the influence of electricity, becomes conductive. Furthermore, it does not cross-link to form sludge. Pretty nifty!" (Vol.25 No.12 WWW)

WBT nextgen Signature WBT-010Ao phono plugs: $800 Bare $955 ET4/4 (NH, but see "The Fifth Element in Vol.33 No.6 WWW)

Kubala-Sonnex Fascination: $950/1m pair; $300/ additional meter

Kubala-Sonnex claims that their Optimiz technology "results in a lower characteristic impedance and a higher ratio of capacitive reactance to inductive resistance of other cables. Each cable consists of 1/6th pair of conductors twisted around each other, sheathed with a knitted cover, and solidly terminated in spade lugs. The current versions have thinned out the conductor to make them easy to snake and arrange. With the K-S cables in his system, KR noted a decrease in overall residual hiss and softer, but more precise highs. "I can't say that the change is substantial, but it is definable." Further auditioning with his multi-channel system completely wired with K-S cables led him to describe these cables as among the quietest and most transparent cables he has encountered: "Overall, they seem to get out of the way of everything else and let the system do its thing." (Vol.28 No.3, Vol.29 No.7 WWW)

MIT CVT Terminator 2: $999/8ft pair

Compared with earlier MIT cable designs, the CVT Terminator 2 has additional "pole networks" for wider bandwidth, and adds the CVT Coupler input module to maximize energy reflection. It offered "clear, crisp, clean highs" and outstanding dynamic articulation, but had "a touch of warmth" in the low end, said BD. Biwire version costs $1298/8ft pair. (Vol.31 No.10)

Naim NACAS: $10/5 $55

Inexpensive spaced, twin cable that BD found to work well for his Spendor S100 loudspeakers. Unchanged in Naim's product line since 1986, the NACAS is made of two chubby strands of stranded heavy-gauge wire twisted into a very tight bundle and molded into a thick sheath of Teflon. "Softer than Sphere/DN9, Worth investigating as a good-value cable, thinks JA. (Vol.28 No.8 WWW)

Nirvana Audio S-X LTD: $2780/2.5m pair

"A dynamite speaker cable," the S-X LTD was tonally neutral and produced well-defined images, powerful and fast transients, and incredible transparence. The speaker cables used in the BD's system was a pick, a slight compression of all music, but no overt impression, and great sound at the back. "A big jump in performance from the company's SL." Add $50/pair for biwire configuration. (Vol.28 No.10 WWW)

Nordost Valhalla Speaker Cable: $5199.99/m pair, with banana-plug or spade termination (Vol.26 No.10 WWW)

The Valhalla contains 40 silver-plated copper micro-monofilament conductors, each polished and wrapped with a monofilament spacer prior to encapsulation in the Teflon ribbon. Similar to the Nordost Flatline, the DNMS solid-core cable was "stunningly refined", and had "no small amount of smoothness", making it a "great value" compared to other models. (Vol.33 No.10 WWW)

"The ideal device for positioning speakers," RD said enthusiastically, adding with BD that it should be "in the tool chest of every audiophile who wants to get the best sound from loudspeakers." It's easy to use—just turn it on, hold it against the speaker's front panel, then adjust the speaker's position until the "appropriate toe-in and vertical orientations are obtained"—and it's much more effective than eyeballing the speaker from the listening position. (Vol.21 Nos.1 & 11, Vol.24 No.8 WWW)

Stadler Audio Aluminata: $55/5ml bottle, with 5ml concentrate, 15ml mixing bottle, applicator, microbrush

Used to increase the reliability of contacts, available from www.posthorn.com. JM: "An initially non-conductive complex polymer liquid that, under the influence of electricity, becomes conductive. Furthermore, it does not cross-link to form sludge. Pretty nifty!" (Vol.25 No.12 WWW)

WBT nextgen Signature WBT-010Ao phono plugs: $800 Bare $955 ET4/4 (NH, but see "The Fifth Element in Vol.33 No.6 WWW)

Kubala-Sonnex Fascination: $950/1m pair; $300/ additional meter

Kubala-Sonnex claims that their Optimiz technology "results in a lower characteristic impedance and a higher ratio of capacitive reactance to inductive resistance of other cables. Each cable consists of 1/6th pair of conductors twisted around each other, sheathed with a knitted cover, and solidly terminated in spade lugs. The current versions have thinned out the conductor to make them easy to snake and arrange. With the K-S cables in his system, KR noted a decrease in overall residual hiss and softer, but more precise highs. "I can't say that the change is substantial, but it is definable." Further auditioning with his multi-channel system completely wired with K-S cables led him to describe these cables as among the quietest and most transparent cables he has encountered: "Overall, they seem to get out of the way of everything else and let the system do its thing." (Vol.28 No.3, Vol.29 No.7 WWW)

MIT CVT Terminator 2: $999/8ft pair

Compared with earlier MIT cable designs, the CVT Terminator 2 has additional "pole networks" for wider bandwidth, and adds the CVT Coupler input module to maximize energy reflection. It offered "clear, crisp, clean highs" and outstanding dynamic articulation, but had "a touch of warmth" in the low end, said BD. Biwire version costs $1298/8ft pair. (Vol.31 No.10)

Naim NACAS: $10/5 $55

Inexpensive spaced, twin cable that BD found to work well for his Spendor S100 loudspeakers. Unchanged in Naim's product line since 1986, the NACAS is made of two chubby strands of stranded heavy-gauge wire twisted into a very tight bundle and molded into a thick sheath of Teflon. "Softer than Sphere/DN9, Worth investigating as a good-value cable, thinks JA. (Vol.28 No.8 WWW)

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THINK INSIDE THE BOX

MAGICOQ.NET

World Radio History
almost holographic... [They] sounded almost relaxed— but still clean and precise—and their images were dense, detailed, and dimensional." An AD favorite. (Vol.24 No.11 WWW)

Nordost Tyre: $4299.99/1m pair (+$550/0.5m pair)

Prepugulis, forceful, and clear. (Vol.32 No.12 WW)

Nordost Heimdall: $1259.99/1m pair (+$195/0.5m pair)

The Heimdall incorporates the same micro-Moofullainment technology found in the much more expensive Valhalla, but contains only 24 air-insulated conductors compared to the Valhalla's 40. The Heimdall exhibited all of the Valhalla's good sonic traits, allowing A/D's system to breathe freely and naturally, but added the slightest hint of artificial texture. (Vol.29 No.10 WWW)

Pure Silver Connection (PSC) R50: $2705/3m pair

Features biwiring via silver-plated, solid-core spacers in tandem with gold-plated banana plugs. Optimized speaker response in LG's system. "They're solid-silver ribbons, incorporating 'Coileitor 1' ribbon for the highs and R10 ribbon for the lows." (His own results were "close to ideal," especially considering my age and usual haunts.) (Vol.26 No.5 WWW)

AudioQuest Oyaide OOM: $1509/3m

Used with a microphone preamp or non-RIAA phono preamp, Channel D's Pure Vinyl digitizes vinyl LPs at 24-bit/192kHz resolution and applies the IIAA or other EQ curves in the digital domain, where there's no interchannel phase shift, capacitor distortion, additional noise, or component variability. Record your test sound file to tape and load the disc image of that file being played, disabling CoreAudio's real-time sample-rate converter. It includes optional high-quality sample-rate upconversion in real time to resolutions up to 24-bit/192kHz, as well as a host of additional features, including the ability to play files from memory rather than a hard drive. Using a USB connection to a DAC's clock and Preamplifier D/A processor, JA found that Pure Music's Memory playback gave consistently better sound than playing from hard drive. "For $129, Pure Mouse is a bargain," he said. Included with Channel D's Pure Vinyl Version 3.0. (Vol.33 No.9 WWW)

Channel D Pure Vinyl LP ripping software:

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RPG Diffuser Systems Room Optimizer Software:

When MF moved to a new home with bare, reflective walls, he was faced with the problem of where to place the speakers. RPG Diffuser Systems' Home Theater Software—available from, among others, Audio Advisor—to the rescue. Plug in the room's dimensions (they must be rectangular) and the program will output the location where the modal response is flatter and the speaker-boundary interference is minimized. “I'll also tell you where to sit,” he wrote (Vol.22 No.11)

XTZ Room Analyzer: $5256

Includes a USB-connected microphone, a heavy microphone base with a USB-powered signal generator, Windows-compatible software (available from, among others, Audio Advisor) to the rescue. Plug in the room's dimensions (they must be rectangular) and the program will output the location where the modal response is flatter and the speaker-boundary interference is minimized. “I'll also tell you where to sit,” he wrote (Vol.22 No.11)

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World Radio History
IT’S (STILL) ALIVE!

DERIDED AS PASSÉ,
HIGH-QUALITY PHYSICAL MEDIA THRIVES

he Pod People are here! Take the 6 train up and down Manhattan or stroll around any college campus and, as far as the eye can see, it’s nothing but little white wires hanging from people’s ears. Today, in the age of the iPod, everyone is attached to their digital-media storage device packed with untold thousands of songs. There’s more music out there than ever before. Now, instead of favored artists or great records, conversations about music often begin with a proud declaration: “Before I sold all my CDs, I loaded them onto my computer.” Among a hefty portion of the population, centered in those under 40, owning physical media is decidedly uncool.

No one but a few determined Luddites dispute that downloads have changed the world or that iPods are mighty convenient, but, as the recent resurgence of the LP has proven: Tactility lives! There’s no telling for how long exactly, but to paraphrase Mark Twain, reports of physical media’s death seem to have been greatly exaggerated.

To those who never left them or are new to their pleasures, physical media have a unique allure. They are tangible, palpable. You can touch them. Smell the glue. Examine the cover art. Read the lyrics or liner notes. Give in to the packrat gene, put them on shelves, and build a collection.

In the face of the undisputed waning of physical formats, there are strange signs coming from a number of high quality reissue labels of both CDs and LPs that the end is not yet nigh. For those passionately interested in sound, the number of small, privately owned, companies specializing mostly in premium-priced 180 gm LPs and/or Gold CDs or SACDs continues to grow. By catering to those who still want higher quality sound and classy packaging, these music enterprises are proving, at least for the moment, that there’s still money to be made under the shadow of downloads for physical formats done right. Even major labels, who are now riding hard to kill the CD, have re-entered the game and are once again selling LPs—the last format they tried to destroy. In a supremely ironic twist, majors are selling their new LP reissues to wholesale and retail outlets using the same no-return policies that they once effectively employed to kill the LP in the late 1980s.

While new artists and an ever-growing number of the most attuned and vital independent labels—eg, Anti-, Merge, and Matador—press and sell limited quantities of 180gm vinyl along with their standard CDs of new acts, it’s the expressly higher quality, more audiophile leaning reissue market that this survey is primarily concerned with. Given space considerations, this is a representative rather than comprehensive survey of high quality reissue labels.

by Robert Baird
The health of the market in audiophile reissues, particularly LPs, has surprised many, and given diehards like Stereophile’s analog avenger, Michael Fremer, the vision of fortunetellers and the satisfaction of finally being able to say, “I told you so!” While the sales numbers for new and reissued albums on vinyl may still be relatively small, LPs have indeed made a much-ballyhooed comeback. This has at least added, if not revitalized, considerable opportunities for older players in the audiophile reissue game (eg, Mobile Fidelity, Sundazed, Analogue Productions), and inspired quite a few newer explorers (Light in the Attic, Four Men with Beards, Numero Group) to get into the market with their own particular bent.

Speaking of getting bent, the record business has long been infamous for its cast of eccentric characters, none more unforgettable than the founder of Acoustic Sounds, Chad Kassem. A Louisianaan by birth, Kassem is an inimitable scramble of drawling good ol’ boy and shrewd Yankee businessman, and his analysis of the health of the high quality physical-format business is characteristically earthy and on target.

“What’s happening, man, is that people are separating further and further. Like they say, the rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer. Those who don’t care about quality care less and get poorer quality, while the guy that cares is getting better quality and he cares more than ever. The people I deal with, man, they ain’t about no download. In fact, the more of that quality and he cares more than ever. The people I deal with, man, they ain’t about no download. In fact, the more of that happens, the more quality they want to achieve.”

A blues nut and longtime record collector who in 1984 turned his hobby into a business, Kassem has since built an empire in the unlikely location of Salina, Kansas. Using the name Acoustic Sounds as an umbrella term, he now owns and runs the Acoustic Sounds retail mail-order website, Blue Heaven Studios (a former church turned recording studio), the multi-genre/multi-format reissue label Analogue Productions, the blues label APO Records, Acoustech Electronics (a manufacturer of consumer audio electronics), and Acoustech Mastering Labs. With 90% of his overall sales in physical media—CDs and LPs as opposed to turntables and cartridges—Kassem estimates the split between his analog and digital sales to be 65% LPs and 35% CDs. He says that 30% of his mail-order music sales are now overseas, and that, overall, he sells three LPs, in both $33 1/2 and 45 RPM, for every CD. Because of the breath of labels sold by Acoustic Sounds, not to mention his own labels and even used records, prices at Acoustic Sounds vary, with most of Kassem’s own new or reissue projects retailing for between $20 and $100.

In fact, Kassem is so bullish about the future of his 180gm LPs, 45 RPM LPs, and hybrid SACDs that he’s recently pursued the assets of a competitor, Classic Records. Included in the deal were the Classic Records name, all existing inventory, and the four Southern Machine Tool (SMT) presses that Classics founder Mike Hobson had purchased to set up his own pressing plant. Under Kassem, that plant will now become a reality in a 21,000-square-foot building that’s part of a three-building complex Kassem recently purchased in Salina that will give Acoustic Sounds over 70,000 square feet of working space. He expects the presses to begin their rhythmic motions before the end of 2010.

Kassem has also bought four Alpha Toolex presses from a seller in the UK. To rebuild all eight machines and then oversee their set up he’s hired Mark Huggett, who formerly ran the storied Sidney J. Wakefield Custom Record Pressing plant in Phoenix, Arizona. Kassem says that once the presses are operational, he plans to begin pressing flat-profile 200gm LPs. Having his own plant will also give him control over the pressing of his own APO and Analogue Productions LPs, which until now have been pressed elsewhere, such as at industry leader Record Technology Incorporated (RTI), in Camarillo, California.

“The places that pressed our records were so busy, there was a mad rush for a while,” he says with his usual rising intensity. “We got behind some of the major labels and we were way down the list. It started to be months instead of weeks. Now it’s kinda cooling down because other presses are opening up, but we got scared and we needed to have records like we were used to having. I thought if ever some presses come along for a reasonable price, I’m gonna buy ‘em for some insurance. Then, of course, once we had ‘em, we’re like, ‘We got these, let’s set ‘em up.’”

While Kassem has grown by buying a competitor, the most storied name in the annals of audiophile labels, Mobile Fidelity Sound Lab, revived in 2002 by another mail-order and Internet retailer, Music Direct, has also seen its fortunes rise, thanks in large measure to bad-sounding major-label product and the return of the LP. Jim Davis, owner of Music Direct, bought the mastering equipment and MoFi trademarks out of bankruptcy in 2001. In its original incarnation, MoFi had released some 500 titles. Davis says that since the reactivation he’s reissued nearly 100 new titles on some combination of 24K Gold CDs, Gold mono, stereo, or multichannel SACD and/or 180gm vinyl with extra heavy cardboard jackets. Prices range from $24.99 to $49.99. He’s thankful, though not surprised, by LP’s resurgence.

“You can’t collect a download. There’s no physical attachment to a download; the sense of ownership is less clear. Vinyl has the large cover, the whole ritual of playing LPs, the warm sound, and they’ve all contributed to the resurgence and interest in vinyl from younger consumers. Surprisingly, our digital sales [SACDs] are doing just as well as our vinyl sales right now. Music Direct can hardly sell regular CDs at all—the customers just don’t want regular CDs anymore. And I would have expected MoFi’s SACDs to drop off accordingly, but they haven’t. So as long as there is a plant mak-
"Have you ever made a ‘rational decision,’ and later wished that you had gone with your heart?"

Dear Music Lover,
Admit it. We’ve all got memories of when we wish we had ‘gone for it.’

People don’t buy performance cars, or fine watches, or art, or — dare I say it — high-end audio systems, because they are making rational decisions. No, these are all emotional decisions.

The trouble begins
A few months ago, some friends in the audio industry kept calling and e-mailing, saying that I absolutely had to hear a new amplifier.

When I heard how much it cost, and I found out how much power it had, I made a rational decision to ignore their requests. But they simply would not leave me alone. They were actually urging me to become the US distributor!

When the manufacturer called me from Sweden, I agreed to listen to a sample that would be sent in. But I was just being polite.

Emotion takes over
The amps arrived and I burned them in for a few days. That was when the problem started.

Have you ever been confronted with a sound that was so special that you just HAD to tell someone? I went running downstairs to ask my wife Pam to drop everything and get up to my listening room. After just ONE tune, she looked at me with a smile on her face and said, HOW DID YOU DO THAT?

I’ve never much cared how an amp looked. But I had to admit, these elegant amplifiers reminded me of beautiful musical instruments.

These two designers — Lars & Timo Engström — had messed with my mind and my heart. And that was how it happened that I ended up going to Sweden to visit Engström & Engström AB.

More than skin deep
I’ve never much cared how an amp looked. But I had to admit, these elegant amplifiers reminded me of beautiful musical instruments.

These two designers — Lars & Timo Engström — had messed with my mind and my heart. And that was how it happened that I ended up going to Sweden to visit Engström & Engström AB.

The real deal
Once I met Lars, Timo, and the outstanding Engström & Engström team, there was no turning back. Rational decision or not, I returned from Sweden as their US distributor.

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AUTON
MOTORIZED SYSTEMS
Transform your world
ing SACDs, I think we will continue to put them out.”

When it comes to the crucial questions of whether physical media will survive and for how long, Davis, who does not sell downloads and so has a vested interest in physical formats, feels bullish. “As long as no major component in the chain, from the mastering to the actual pressing of the records, goes away, then I think vinyl will exist for a long time. As far as digital goes, I don’t think CDs are going to go away as soon as some people have predicted; they probably have another 20 years. There was a huge resurgence in CDs with the Beatles’ [mono and stereo] boxed sets last year, but sales of regular CDs have plummeted. They are probably 10% of what they were eight years ago. I don’t think there’s going to be a big resurgence in physical media on the digital side like vinyl today.”

MoFi’s continued success rests primarily on a single, much-maligned musical genre. “Classic rock are by far the best-selling titles that Mobile Fidelity puts out. Jazz does okay. We did some surround-sound classical SACDs and those did okay, but overall, the stuff that people want is the classic rock, and it’s kind of my preference as well.”

The marriage of classic rock and high-end physical formats extends far beyond MoFi. The success of the most prominent audiophile reissue labels lies with new editions, sometimes freshly remastered, of albums by such bands as the Cars, Yes, and the Doobie Brothers—i.e., the Old Testament of classic rock. While labels like MoFi and its classic-rock competitors Audio Fidelity and Friday Music all do things a little differently from each other, primarily because of the availability of licenses to reissue content owned by the major labels, their focus on and success with classic rock validates an increasingly relevant suspicion about audiophiles as 2010: The earlier generation of audiophiles who listened primarily to classical and jazz has faded, giving way to a new breed who appreciate improved sound but were raised on rock. The Beatles are their Beethoven.

Classic rock’s resilience and marketability are also what keep the lights on at Marshall Blonstein’s label, Audio Fidelity, based in southern California. After working for ABC, Epic, Ode, and Island, among other major labels, Blonstein struck out in 1986 on his own as one of the founders of DCC Compact Classics, an audiophile reissue label that used a proprietary playback and mastering process administered by engineer Steve Hoffman and released the results on 24K gold CDs. When DCC closed in 2001, Blonstein founded Audio Fidelity. Famous, like MoFi and DCC, for its gold CDs, Audio Fidelity has recently entered the LP market.

“If you think of a business as a balloon, and you squeeze the middle, the outer edges grow; those things become niche markets,” Blonstein says from his office in Los Angeles. “Certain people are always looking, and those are the people that want to buy the collectibles and the audiophile reissues, and that’s the marketplace that is thriving.”

In taking the name Audio Fidelity, Blonstein has revived the handle of an audiophile label of the 1950s, whose LPs, he says, bore the motto “For those who can hear the difference.” His DCC label had its own tagline: “Your old friends are back in Town.”

Audio Fidelity’s small but steadily growing catalog ($24.99-$39.99) is filled with reissues of Styx, Asia, and Grand Funk Railroad, as well as slightly more, ahem, restrained artists like Rod Stewart, Kate Bush, and Randy Newman. AF also focuses on packaging, going so far as to emboss the Braille that was on the front and back covers of the original gatefold LP of Stevie Wonder’s Talking Book onto their reissue CD booklet. The label’s gold HDCDs are still being remastered by a pair of knowing ears: Steve Hoffman is still aboard, this time as an independent contractor. Audio Fidelity is also releasing 180gm LPs of some of its titles dependent on the vagaries of licensing. Blonstein has yet to venture into downloads for several reasons, including the initial investment costs and a difference in philosophy.

“Download is not about sound quality, it’s about being mobile. Mobility is what’s important to people 10 to 35 years old. You can carry it with you, you can run, you can jog. When you become 45 years and above, that’s when you might start thinking about sound quality. Being an audiophile, it’s a sitting-down-and-listening experience, not a jogging experience.”

Another high-end CD/LP reissue label that’s found its bread and butter in classic rock is Friday Music. Owned by Philadelphia native Joe Reagoso, whose résumé includes stints at MCA, RCA, and Atlantic, Reagoso launched Friday Music in 2003 with a 180gm vinyl reissue of the Doobie Brothers’ controversial 1978 masterpiece, the more-soul/fewer-guitars Minute by Minute. Now his catalog lists 30 LPs and 200 CDs ($12.98-$19.95); he says that while the bulk of his business is CDs, the LP component, which he also packages in extra heavy cardboard jackets, is growing. Friday Music’s angle on classic-rock reissues has been to go prog rock.

“After seeing a couple Yes shows, it dawned on me: progressive rock is where it’s at,” Reagoso says from his home on the New Jersey shore. “Young guys are into this stuff, and I thought about some records that hadn’t been in print for a while. I thought about Flash—it sounded like Yes, it had Tony Kaye and Peter Banks. They had three albums, and I put two out on one CD. And then I remembered this German group, Triumvirat, that I really dug, and an album called Spartacus (1975). Then we got the Manfred Mann catalog, Procol Harum and Renaissance.”

Like most owners of audiophile reissue labels, Reagoso is actively involved in remastering some of the titles he licenses. "If it sounds like doo-doo, I go back and make moves only because I can’t put it out if it sounds bad. Then I go back and let the artists and/or original labels hear it, and if they approve, then we put it out. A lot are direct transfers, however. Who’s gonna improve on George Martin? Or [Jeff Beck’s] Wired?"

Reagoso has also released, Live Bootleg Series, by blues guitarist Johnny Winter that is now up to six volumes. While the first is available on both CD and 180gm LP, all subsequent entries have been on CD only. Reagoso is aware that the words “bootleg” and “audiophile” rarely belong in the same sentence. “They vary in quality, because some are ste-
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with Matt Sullivan and Josh Wright, of the Seattle-based

Recently, somebody told me about a show he did of all Hendrix covers. Where's that tape? I want to put it out.”

The recent robust health of high-end reissue labels has even inspired record collectors with some semblance of business acumen to start labels of their own. That's the case with Matt Sullivan and Josh Wright, of the Seattle-based Light in the Attic Records, who began making their own LPs and CDs in 2002 and now have a catalog of over 40 reissues by a diverse crew of cultish artists, including funk singer (and Miles Davis ex) Betty Davis, NYC folkie Karen Dalton, psychedelic troubadour Sixto Rodriguez, and French pop legend Serge Gainsbourg. Prices tend to be reasonable: $12/CD and $15 for LPs. “There’s no question it’s a market that’s going to last,” Sullivan says forcefully. “Every year for us gets better. For major labels, it’s a shrinking market. When I go meet them and talk about licensing mate-
sus by a diverse crew of cultish artists, including funk singer

We look at each release as a coffee-table book, as a collection piece, as something that will last through the ages and be passed around and not forgotten.”

Although Wright and Sullivan are in their mid-30s, both are record collectors who use their network of fellow fanatics to suggest ideas and to help them research and locate copies to remaster when master tapes are not available. In some ways, both are also fans of classic rock, although of a more rarified variety than that released by Audio Fidelity and Friday Music. “Most of the records we do are from that golden age, the late ’60s, early ’70s period, and those records have lasted 40 years. I’m 34, and that’s longer than my entire life.”

After packaging and advanced record geekery, the Light in the Attic partners specialize in patience. “The things we’re doing tend to take three or four years,” Sullivan says. “It’s almost like cultural anthropology. And dealing with people...it’s like, how much pain can you take? How many times can you hear ‘No’ and still push forward? It’s a lot of perseverance. But there’s something within a record that hits us. There’s something in the grooves that is priceless.”

The pair have a release project slated for release this fall, U.F.O., by Jim Sullivan, a nearly unknown folk singer and songwriter, that may well be their most obscure and intriguing release yet. Admitting that they’ve spent an “insane amount of time” remastering this super-obscure record, Matt Sullivan (no relation), who says that in the packaging of LITA releases he likes to tell an artist’s story, is clearly enthused about Jim Sullivan’s cryptic yarn. A Nebraska native who had a small part in the film Easy Rider, Jim Sullivan made U.F.O. in Los Angeles in 1970 with members of the famous Wrecking Crew, including keyboardist Don Randi, bassist Max Bennett, and drummer Earl Palmer. After witnessing the record’s immediate descent into obscurity (it was released without shrink-wrap by Monnie Records), Jim Sullivan began driving from L.A. to Nashville with the idea of becoming a session musician. During a stop at a motel in Santa Rosa, New Mexico, he vanished. U.F.O. stands as his final expression.

“He’s truck wasn’t found at the motel. It was found 20 miles from the motel, outside the owners of the motel’s house. And they said they knew nothing about it. There was definitely something weird going on. The motel owners ended up leaving town soon after he disappeared. The sheriff of the town retired. It’s pretty eerie.”

Still strange but not quite as weird as that saga, the new players and burgeoning health of the high-end reissue business is no huge surprise to an old hand like Bob Irwin, owner of Sundazed Music. With a catalog of between 700 and 800 titles, Irwin, who says he struggles to keep his costs down so he can sell records to younger consumers, has a more Zen view of the future of physical media in the face of downloads. He keeps his prices around $18.98 for LPs and between $13.98 and $16.98 for CDs. “The whole legal downloading world dovetails just fine into what we’re doing, because there are a lot of people that are buying both configurations or are looking for both, and so they have what they consider to be the best of both worlds.”

Irwin says that even when LP sales were at their worst, in the mid-1990s, certain titles reissued on LP, if chosen wisely, could still be dependent on to sell 3000-4000 copies on his Beat Rocket subsidiary. In Irwin’s mind, his core business has always been vinyl. “I’m about 80% vinyl right now. And while I don’t want to declare compact-disc Armageddon yet, we are as selective about compact-disc releases right now as we were about vinyl in 1992. The format is not by any means dead, because we certainly had wonderful success stories in the past year with compact-disc releases—more sales than I had envisioned. But the days of licensing and issuing an artist’s entire back catalog as a group of midline compact discs, that ship has sailed. I can’t go and take every single Elvin Bishop release and put it on CD anymore.”

When asked if CDs might someday experience the same sort of resurgence vinyl is now enjoying, Irwin, who has seen vinyl fade and come roaring back, doesn’t hesitate. “I don’t doubt it at all. Something like that would be jump-started by a price-sensitivity issue. Who doesn’t want to plow through a big box of dollar CDs in the way people loved going through a box of dollar LPs, when you stood the chance of finding true gems in there? Outside of the deejay and hip-hop community, I think that’s what rekindles the fire in the LP world, that’s what brought in new listeners.”

Having just finished a Velvet Underground boxed set and an LP reissue of Phonography (1976), the R. Stevie Moore classic, Irwin is sagaciously practical about the future of his company and high-quality physical media. “Doom prophets get all the media attention. But I remain very optimistic about the future of all of this. I think the secret is just being quick on your feet, and being lean and mean, and loving what you’re doing.”
Logitech Squeezebox Touch

When it comes to ripping CDs and downloading music, I've been sitting on the sidelines feeling more than a bit of envy. Stereophile's reviews of various media servers have whetted my appetite, but not so much as to overcome my timidity about getting into a new realm of technology in which I would be a beginner all over again. Still, I've sneaked a few peeks.

First, I tried the Meridian Sooloos system (www.stereophile.com/mediaservers/908sooloos/) and loved it. But at that time the Sooloos didn't play nicely with sources other than ripped CDs. I then borrowed a Sonos WiFi Music System (www.stereophile.com/mediaservers/1006sonos/), which worked well enough for streaming audio from the Internet, but I had no personal music libraries back then. Finally, I installed in my office an HRT Music Streamer+ USB D/A converter (www.stereophile.com/digitalprocessors/hrt_music_streamer_usb_da_converter), and became addicted to streaming Internet radio stations on my PC as an antidote to the limitations and mediocrity of local FM broadcasts.

So when I read about Logitech's new Squeezebox Touch ($299.99), I was really primed: It could play 24-bit/96kHz files, and could access both Internet radio and stored music files. It sounded simple enough to operate that I wouldn't be frustrated or need to call on others for help. It was small. It was cheap. I was just ready to order it when John Atkinson offered to send me one to review. A good omen.

Love at first sight

The small box contains the sleek Squeezebox Touch, a wall-watt power supply, a remote control, and the sparsest of user manuals (though it proved entirely sufficient). I connected the Touch to the Meridian F80 in my office via TosLink, inserted batteries in the remote control, powered up the Touch, and was greeted with a simple setup screen. After I'd selected English as my language, it advised me to select a wireless or Ethernet network; I chose the latter to start with, as the F80 is less than 6' from my router. I then downloaded and installed the Squeezebox Server software from www.mysqueezebox.com, the fount of all information and support for the Touch.

All that done, I navigated intuitively to Internet radio and, like nothing, was streaming lovely music from Radio Bartók in Budapest! I also played a few high-definition downloads from flash drives, which I plugged into the Touch's USB port. I know that the Touch will do a lot more (see later), but the delight and satisfaction such immediate gratification gave me made me hunger for more, and made it easier to drum up the patience I needed to resolve some minor problems that cropped up later.
End Of The Day
Beck • Sea Change (Mofi)
In Stereophile July 2010, Michael Fremer shared his time spent with the NEW Vitus MP-P201 Phono Preamp:

"The first late evening I spent with it had me yelling, loudly and often, to no one in particular, “Are you f---ing kidding me?”

"The MP-P201’s dynamic presentation at both ends of the scale was nothing short of ridiculous. Its bass extension, control and weight were granitic.

"The Vitus MP-P201’s speed, transparency, three-dimensionality, frequency extension, rhythmic ability, musical grip, and any other parameter you could name - with the exception of what only tubes can do - took the overall sound to a new, exalted level.

"If you can look yourself in the eye and spend $60,000 on a phono preamp you need to hear the Vitus Audio’s MP-P201. You need to hear it even if you haven’t got the $60k - just so you know what awaits you, should you strike it rich.

Every music lover deserves to own a Masterpiece so why not pay a visit to your nearest specialist dealer and audition the MP Series from Vitus Audio today.
Of course, I could have streamed Radio Bartók from my PC to the F80 with the HRT Music Streamer+, but the Touch gave me a platform to start setting up my listening. This included setting up a Pandora account, downloading dozens of albums with resolutions of from 16-bits/44.1kHz to 24/192, and sifting through many pages of stations and musical genres to establish a list of favorite Internet radio sites. This was made easier by the use of Logitech's Squeezebox Server program, which I accessed via FireFox on my PC. The application lets you perform most tasks permitted by the Touch’s 4.3” display, as well as many others, but it’s easier to do when sitting comfortably in front of a 22” PC screen.

I downloaded standard-resolution music from iTunes, Passionato, and PlayMPE (Universal’s music service for reviewers), and hi-def files from HDtracks, Linn Records, 21., and others. I placed all of these files in a single directory on my hard disk, and created a playlist with Squeezebox Server through which I could access them by title, album, artist, genre, and date of release. The creation of custom playlists is also supported. Note that downloads from each source can be filed in separate subdirectories (including iTunes) and be in different formats, but Squeezebox Server has no problem accessing and organizing all of them.

I was now prepared to set the Squeezebox Touch to task. In the main room I moved the Squeezebox Touch to my main listening room, and connected it to the Meridian Reference 861 pre/pro by digital coax. With little pause, it found my home network, connected to the Squeezebox Server running on the computer, and provided access to all services. I selected a downloaded, 24/88.2 kHz FLAC file of Jerry Junkin and the Dallas Wind Symphony’s recording of Grainger's Lincolnshire Posy, which I had always enjoyed on CD (Reference Recordings/HDtracks RR-117). Immediately, the 861’s display indicated a sample rate of 88.2kHz, and truly magnificent two-channel sound poured forth from my B&W 802Ds. The low-level detail, wide and balanced frequency response, and seemingly unbridled dynamics that are characteristic of high-quality play-

### Measurements

To measure Logitech’s Squeezebox Touch, I used Stereophile’s loaner Audio Precision SYS2722 system. (See www.ap.com and “As We See It” in the January 2008 issue, www.stereophile.com/asweseeit/108awsi.) For some tests I also used my Audio Precision System One Dual Domain and the Miller Jitter Analyzer. I used audio files fed to the Touch both over my WiFi network from my iTunes library and on a solid-state USB drive plugged into the Squeezebox. (For the latter condition, a version of the Squeezebox Server program runs on the Touch itself.) The WiFi performance was a lot more robust than my old Squeezebox 3, using the same antique Apple Airport router. Before doing any testing, I updated both the Touch’s Squeezebox Server program and the version running on my Mac mini.

The Squeezebox Touch correctly decoded files with sample rates of 32, 44.1, 48, 88.2, and 96kHz, and was compatible with the WAV, Apple Lossless, FLAC, MP3, and AAC file formats with which I tried it. However, when it came to bit depth, its compatibility with data formats depended on whether the data was being read from a USB drive or from the host PC. With the files sourced from the PC, the Touch correctly decoded 24-bit and 32-bit AIFF, Apple Lossless, and WAV files, but with the same files sourced from a USB drive, the 32-bit files played back with distortion and a 48dB positive level error.

The TosLink output correctly followed the sample rate and bit depth of the input file data, with the exception of 32kHz-sampled material, which appeared to be upsamples to 96kHz. Files stored on a USB drive and sampled at

![Fig.1 Logitech Squeezebox Touch, frequency response at -12dBFS into 100k ohms with 44.1kHz data (left channel blue, right red) and 96kHz data (left cyan, right magenta, 0.25dB/vertical div.).](image1)

![Fig.2 Logitech Squeezebox Touch, 1/8 octave spectrum with noise and spuriae of dithered 1kHz tone at -90dBFS with (from top to bottom): 16-bit data, 24-bit data, dithered 1kHz tone at -120dBFS (right channel dashed).](image2)
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Total system design.

A holistic approach, with no compromises.

These advanced new drivers only need first order crossovers, maximising fluency and transparency, and KEF's legendary attention to detail extends from innovations for easier bi-wiring to environment-friendly finishes.
LOGITECH SQUEEZEBOX TOUCH

back systems were all being mediated by an inexpensive little plastic box!

Day after day, I continued to be impressed with the sound quality of the system as it played these HD downloads, finding them as satisfying as any two-channel discs. I even ripped a few CDs, to compare the sound of the original disc as played by the Oppo BDP-83SE via HDMI into the 861, with the streamed file from the Squeezebox Touch via S/PDIF into the 861. The treble from the disc was a bit smoother, but even that difference disappeared when I turned off the Meridian HD621 HDMI audio processor's upsampling and apodizing filter. Now it was Even Steven, but this comparison did tell me that neither the CD nor the Touch has yet attained perfection.

The sound of streaming Internet radio varied considerably in quality, depending on the source material and the data rate. A rate of 128kbps was listenable, but stations with higher data rates sounded better, often by quite noticeable increments. Surprisingly, some sites streamed at the same bit rate sounded vastly different from each other. On the other hand, few even approached the quality audible from typical CDs, and those that did often varied in quality over time. However, considering the generally sorry state of FM broadcasting in the US, I was very happy with the sound of Internet radio, especially considering the almost infinite number of sources to choose from.

In addition to direct connection to these sources, the Touch supports a wide variety of apps from Slacker, Rhapsody, and Sirius to Facebook and Flickr (yeah, I had to look up some of them). The only one I used was Pandora, which provides some very nice and customizable musical wallpaper. Their free service was marginally acceptable, but their inexpensive ($36/year) "premium" subscription runs at 128kbps and now provides the background to my workday. It's not spectacular, but good enough that when a selection does grab my attention, I can enjoy it without serious sonic distractions.

**Elsewhere**

I took the Squeezebox Touch back and forth with me to our weekend place in Connecticut, where I connected it by coax digital and stereo analog cables to a Classe CT-SSP preamplifier-processor.

**DAY AFTER DAY, I CONTINUED TO BE IMPRESSED WITH THE SOUND QUALITY OF THE SYSTEM AS IT PLAYED THESE HD DOWNLOADS.**

The Touch readily recognized the wireless network there, and picked up right where it had left off in Manhattan. Because all the music files managed by Squeezebox Server resided on my PC in New York, the Touch didn't bring along any music or favorites with it, and I had to set up my Connecticut PC with these—a trivial task that needed to be done just once.

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**measurements, continued**

176.4kHz and 192kHz were identified as having an "unsupported sample rate" and wouldn't play. However, when the same files were played back from the host computer, they were downsampled to 88.2kHz and 96kHz, respectively. It looks as if the Squeezebox Server program running on the Touch has less flexibility than the version on the host PC.

Measured at its RCA output jacks, the Squeezebox Touch's maximum output level at 1kHz was 2.06V, which meets the CD standard. The output preserved absolute polarity (ie, was non-inverting), and was sourced from an impedance of 599 ohms at high and midrange frequencies. This impedance increased inconsequentially, to 878 ohms, at 20Hz. The Touch's frequency response was flat within the audioband for both 44.1 and 96kHz data (fig.1), with a slight passband ripple in the top octave for 44.1kHz data (blue and red traces), and a slight droop above the audioband for 96kHz data (cyan, magenta). Channel separation (not shown) was superb, at >112dB in both directions below 3kHz, and still 100dB at the top of the audioband.

The headphone output on the rear panel also preserved absolute polarity, and offered a maximum output level of 975mV at 1kHz. The output impedance was a suitably low 2 ohms over most of the audioband, rising to a still low 5.5 ohms in the low bass.

For consistency with the digital tests I have performed for Stereophile since 1989, I first examine a digital Demodulation
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Wavelink HS

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NEW Crimson 32/192K
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Wolfson 24/192 Numerator
NOS 16/44.1 Module
USB High Speed DAC
Copper or Silver transformers
6H30 Balanced version available
shown with optional volume control

Cosecant Modular USB DAC
Streamlength NOS 16
Streamlength 24/96
Copper or Silver
Output Transformers
Stereophile Class A
NEW HS VERSION 24/192

NEW Brick 24/96
Full 2Vrms output
12AU7A/ECC82
Reactor Follower
Tube output stage

Proton Liion USB DAC
Headphone and line
24/96 Stereo output
Analog PC Controlled
Volume Control

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products, OCT 15-17
Suite 9007

wavelengthaudio.com USBDACs.com
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My enjoyment of the Touch in Connecticut was just as great as it had been in Manhattan, but in New England I had time to do some more comparisons. I compared the multichannel SACD, stereo SACD, and "Red Book" tracks on hybrid SACDs with HD downloads of the same recordings via the Touch. The silver discs were played on the Sony XA-5400ES deck, connected to the Classe pre-pro by HDMI. For this, I used two Linn recordings: J.S. Bach's Mass in B Minor, with John Butt and the Dunedin Consort (Linn CKD 354); and music of Bartók and Kodály with the Scottish Chamber Orchestra conducted by the late Sir Charles Mackerras (Linn CKD 234).

The two-channel SACD tracks offered a more relaxed and spacious sound than even the hi-rez downloads, but the difference wasn’t huge. What was most striking, and perhaps not surprising, was that the 24/88.2 downloads (and 24/176.4 downloads downsampled to 24/88.2 by Squeezebox Server on the host PC) were consistently superior to the original CD. In fact, every time I compared a CD or the “Red Book” track from a hybrid SACD with an HD download, I preferred the download. Moreover, in some cases the silver discs weren’t even as good as a 16/44.1 FLAC download. My guests and I were aghast that the download of Britten’s Illuminations, with tenor Toby Spence and Clio Gould conducting the Scottish Ensemble (Linn CKD 226), was so much more clarion-clear than the CD—though it had no good reason to be so.

Using the Touch’s analog outputs (and, therefore, DACs) was another story. The sound was clearly inferior to what I heard via the processing and D/A in the Classe and Meridian processors, but good enough that I could distinguish matted low-bit-rate streaming from the better stuff, and even an HD download from a 16/44.1 download. It was just that the quality levels of all recordings were shifted down a notch or two by the Touch’s analog outputs. The Touch’s analog output stage was comfortable driving low impedances. Even with a full-scale signal into 600 ohms, all the distortion products lay at or below 97dB (0.0014%), with the subjectively benign second and third harmonics the product’s resolution by playing a dithered 1kHz tone at -90dBFS while sweeping the center frequency of a 1/4-octave bandpass filter from 20kHz to 20Hz. The result of that test with the Squeezebox Touch is shown in fig.2: with both 16- and 24-bit data, the traces peak at exactly -90dBFS, suggesting excellent DAC linearity, and no harmonic spurious are visible. A spectral bump in both channels at 60Hz is presumably related to the power supply, but at -112dBFS, this is negligible. The increase in bit depth drops the noise floor by 7–8dB, implying a resolution of just over 17 bits, which is not bad for such an inexpensive product. However, this is not enough to resolve a dithered tone at -120dBFS (bottom traces in fig.2). Fig.3 repeats the spectral analysis using an FFT technique; the same increase in resolution with increasing bit depth can be seen.

Linearity error with 16-bit data (not shown) was negligible to well below -100dBFS, and the Squeezebox Touch easily resolved the three DC voltage levels of an undithered 16-bit tone at exactly -90.31dBFS (fig.4), though with a little more noise than do the best digital players. Increasing the word length to 24 bits gave a good if noisy sinewave (fig.5).

The Touch’s analog output stage was comfortable driving low impedances. Even with a full-scale signal into 600 ohms, all the distortion products lay at or below 97dB (0.0014%), with the subjectively benign second and third harmonics...
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puts were still eminently listenable, if not fully revealing of the source materials, and comparable to listening via the analog outputs of the Oppo BDP-83.

Complications and discoveries

Because most of the brains and all control of communications are taken care of by the Squeezebox Server program installed on your host computer, the link between it and the Touch is critical. Using an Ethernet cable will ensure the best and most reliable performance. But heck—if I were willing or able to run a wire from my PC to the stereo, why would I need the Touch? It could be replaced with some sort of remote control.

Our Connecticut house is of wood-frame construction and far from any major source of RF and EMI contamination, so it was no surprise that our long-resident Belkin F5D8233-4 wireless router did just fine. In Manhattan, however, we live in a steel-and-concrete building, and in a soup of electrical signals so rich it pains me to think about it. Here it was necessary to upgrade to Belkin's latest wireless router, the PlayMax N+ N300, which provided clear, glitch-free play of HD files via the Touch in almost all situations. In more remote rooms of our apartment, intermittently reliable, and functionally as fast as a direct wire connection.

Mods, apps, and tweaks

There is a growing groundswell of enthusiasm for the Squeezebox Touch and new tweaks and apps are already available. Speaking of apps, with iPeng (http://penguinlovesmusic.de), an iPod Touch or iPhone can replace the Touch's remote control, to permit control and monitoring from a comfortable position. However, running iPeng on the iPad also supplants the Touch's 4.3" screen with the iPad's 9.7" display, which shows more information, and bigger and better graphics.

Other mods and tweaks have also appeared, some more invasive of the operation of the Touch than others. For example, because the Touch's AC supply would greatly improve the output while it decoded WiFi data. What harmonics of the low-frequency squarewave can be seen above the noise floor lie at the residual level, though the central tone is widened at the base due to random low-frequency jitter.

Like the Centrance DACport, which I reviewed in June, Logitech's Squeezebox Touch offers excellent audio engineering with no sign that it has been compromised to reach its low price point. This is especially commendable when you consider that, in addition to its audio circuitry, the Touch includes a Linux-based server complete with touchscreen display. I am amazed that all this can be done for $299.99.

—John Atkinson

There is a growing groundswell of enthusiasm for the Squeezebox Touch and new tweaks and apps are already available.

highest in level (fig.6). The Touch performed equally well on the demanding high-frequency intermodulation test, with the 1kHz difference tone resulting from an equal mix of 19 and 20kHz tones lying below 100dB, and the higher-order products at —110dB (0.0003%, fig.7). This graph was taken into 100k ohms; dropping the test load to 600 ohms increased the level of the higher-order spuriae by 6dB, but the spectrum remained otherwise clean (not shown).

Finally, the Squeezebox Touch's jitter performance remained unchanged, whether it was playing the 16-bit diagnostic Miller-Dunn tone via WiFi or stored on a USB-connected drive. Fig.8 shows a narrowband spectrum analysis of the Touch's output while it decoded WiFi data. What harmonics of the low-frequency squarewave can be seen above the noise floor lie at the residual level, though the central tone is widened at the base due to random low-frequency jitter.

Like the Centrance DACport, which I reviewed in June, Logitech's Squeezebox Touch offers excellent audio engineering with no sign that it has been compromised to reach its low price point. This is especially commendable when you consider that, in addition to its audio circuitry, the Touch includes a Linux-based server complete with touchscreen display. I am amazed that all this can be done for $299.99.

—John Atkinson

Fig.7 Logitech Squeezebox Touch, HF intermodulation spectrum, 19+20kHz at 0dBFS peak into 100k ohms, 24-bit data (left channel blue, right red; linear frequency scale).

Fig.8 Logitech Squeezebox Touch, high-resolution jitter spectrum of analog output signal, 11.025kHz at —6dBFS, sampled at 44.1kHz with LSB toggled at 229Hz, 16-bit data via WiFi. Center frequency of trace, 11.025kHz; frequency range, ±3.5kHz (left channel blue, right red).
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ply is a switching wall wart, which are well known to be electrically noisy, several companies now offer linear power supplies to replace it. I couldn’t discern any significant change in the Touch’s performance with such a supply that I had built some years before, but I felt happier without another switching module in close proximity to the rest of my audio equipment.

There are many ways to make the workload easier for the little Touch processor; for example, by having the Squeezebox Server on the host convert FLAC to PCM, disabling the analog outputs if you’re using the digital (or vice versa), shutting down extraneous functions, and using Ethernet rather than WiFi where possible. The first three require unofficial firmware patches; the last, of course, increases the data load on the transmission, which might be an issue for some WLANs, particularly if you have many other WiFi networks active in your environment. I tried only the first and the last, but both made incremental improvements in clarity and detail. Needless to say, the computer-audio community is already teeming with ideas for adding features to the Touch; you’ll find lots of comments, advice, and links at www.computeraudiofile.com.

In fact, it was there that I learned that John Swenson, also a contributor to both the Audio Asylum (see www.audioasylum.com/forums/pcaudio/messages/5/59877.html) and the Logitech Squeezebox forum (see http://forums.slimdevices.com/showthread.php?t=68346), had modified the Touch to allow its USB port, nominally only an input, to an audio output. This greatly intrigued me; I had just taken delivery of Ayre Acoustics’ new DX-5 universal player, which has DACs and an asynchronous USB input similar to their QB-9 USB DAC, which thrilled Wes Phillips (see www.stereophile.com/digitalprocessors/ayre_acoustics_qb-9_usb_dac/) and was Stereophile's 2009 Product of the Year. After tracking down Swenson, I asked him to send me a copy of the instructions for altering changing the Touch’s configuration file, which he did, along with a few caveats, warnings, and denials. The tweak is unofficial, and not quite ready for prime time: It defeats all of the Touch’s other outputs and recognizes only the specific USB source for which you’ve configured it. Fortunately, it’s reversible by repatching or with a reset of the Touch to factory condition (easily performed with a rear-panel rest button). I forged ahead because well, heck, it was a review sample.

In my opinion, this is the killer app for audiophiles. I’ll have more to say about the Ayre DX-5 in a future issue (as will Michael Fremer), but this is relevant to Logitech Squeezebox Touch: it can be part of a state-of-the-art music system. With downloaded hi-def files sent from my PC via the network to the Squeezebox Touch, then to the Ayre DX-5’s USB input, I enjoyed two-channel sound that, in my experience, was unsurpassed. It is rumored that the Touch’s hardware might even be able to stream 24/176.4 and 24/192 files via USB without downsampling. Although that’s a pipe dream, it suggests that the Touch has yet to reveal its full potential. Dare I dream of multichannel?

**Conclusion**

By now you’ll little doubt of my enthusiasm for the Logitech Squeezebox Touch. Streaming music from the Internet is great for an unlimited supply of background music, but high-definition downloads can be brought to your stereo system by the Touch with ease and excellent sound. How you connect the Touch is up to you—its analog outputs are more than serviceable, even for HD, and its digital outputs into your choice of DAC or processor are better than CD ever was. The Touch’s USB output was a surprise, and offered remarkable performance. And a rising tide of modifications offers the promise of further improvements.

The Touch has transformed my listening habits; I cannot see living without it. Take to heart the words of John Marks in his “As We See It” in the August 2010 issue and accept that downloads are the future of high-definition music distribution. But don’t stop there—take to heart as well this advice: Get a Squeezebox Touch right now. You’ll never look back.

2 Another source for Squeezebox Touch modifications can be found at http://soundcheck-audio.blogspot.com/p/squeezebox-touch-great-base-for-network.html—Ed.
Wirelessly connect your Micromega Airstream WM10 to your iTunes library and deliver high-end quality sound to the farthest reaches of your home.

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World Radio History
Einstein Audio
The Tube Mk.II
LINE PREAMPLIFIER

DESCRIPTION Tubed, two-channel line preamplifier. Tube complement: (18) E88CC/6922, (1) ECC82/12AU7. Frequency range: 2Hz–300kHz. Maximum output: N/A. Output impedance: 50 ohms. Input impedance: not given. Distortion: <0.05% at 1kHz, 1.5V output; <0.1% at 1kHz, 1.5V output, 100 ohm load. Signal/noise: >95dB (no reference level quoted). Input sensitivity for full output: not given. Overload margin: 7V. Channel separation: not given.

DIMENSIONS 16.8" (431mm) W by 6.2" (158mm) H by 15.3" (393mm) D. Weight: 33 lbs (15kg).

FINISH Black and chrome.

SERIAL NUMBER OF UNIT REVIEWED B102249.

PRICE $18,400. The Remote control, $930. Approximate number of dealers: 10. Warranty: 3 years parts & labor, 6 months tubes.

MANUFACTURER Einstein Audio Components GmbH, Prinz Regent Strasse 50-60, 44795 Bochum, Germany. Tel: (49) (0)234-9731512. Fax: (49) (0)234-9731511. Web: www.einstein-audio.de. US distributor: Audio Imports, 4871 Raintree Drive, Parker, CO 80134. Tel: (720) 851-2525. Fax: (720) 851-7575. Web: www.audioimports.com.

Einstein Audio Components The Tube Mk.II line preamplifier

It doesn't take a genius to appreciate the audacity of naming a company after Albert Einstein, the iconic science and math whiz. Clearly, company founder and owner Volker Bohlmeier knew what he was doing—this German brand of boutique electronics has enjoyed worldwide critical and marketplace success since its founding more than 20 years ago.

In fact, Bohlmeier has done far better than Albert Einstein's father. In the late 19th century, when Hermann Einstein opened an electronics company in Munich, he bet on direct current. Fourteen years later, by which time alternating current became the dominant way to distribute electricity, he was forced to close his business.

From their beginnings until today, Einstein Audio Components' products have been built to an heirloom standard set many years ago by McIntosh, and impeccably finished in a distinctive visual motif of chrome and black lacquer. The packaging (wooden crates) and overall presentation are equally impressive, and foster in the buyer a pride of ownership befitting an expensive, limited-edition product. It may not be essential, but it's a nice touch.

Einstein Audio's initial offering in 1990, a solid-state amplifier called simply The Amp, was an immediate critical and commercial hit that remained in the company's product line for six years. They followed with a series of equally well-reviewed and commercially successful tubed and solid-state products with similarly generic names, including, in 1998, the original The Tube line-stage preamplifier.
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The Tube Mk.II

The Tube Mk.II is handsome, looks essentially identical to The Tube, and sells for $18,400. The fully balanced, true dual-differential, pure class-A design features point-to-point wiring and a shunt-to-ground volume control that’s outside the short signal path. Its true dual-mono topology is indicated by the two large, chrome-plated power-transformer enclosures protruding from the chromed chassis.

The volume level and the five choices of source can be selected via a plastic remote control unbefitting so costly a product. Another $930 gets you a curvaceous, beautifully finished model called—what else?—The Remote, which also controls Einstein’s CD player, The Source. If you can afford The Tube, you’ll want The Remote.

The Tube Mk.II incorporates eighteen E88CC/6922 dual-triode tubes and one ECC82/12AU7 dual-triode. Ten of the E88CC/6922 tubes function as input pairs and are lined up along the chassis rear, inserted in sockets affixed to a spring-suspended subchassis that’s one of the modifications made for the Mk.II. The remaining nine tubes handle primary line-stage gain and buffer functionality.

Einstein claims a high-current output stage, an ultralow output impedance of 50 ohms, greater than 98dB channel separation, a signal/noise ratio in excess of 95dB, and an unusually high (but unspecified) bandwidth. The total harmonic distortion at 1.5V RMS is claimed to be less than 0.05%. Although less than complete, this is an impressive set of specs for a tube preamplifier. The Tube runs hot. You might be able to fry two eggs sunny-side up atop those chromed transformer enclosures. A fluorescent display, and there’s neither a mono switch nor a balance control.

Because The Tube’s narrow rear panel already contains five sets of inputs (three balanced on XLRs, two single-ended on RCAs), a single set of balanced outputs (The Tube can be ordered with single-ended outs), and two pairs of single-ended tape outputs, the IEC power socket and On/Off switch are on the chassis’s underside. Although the resonance-absorbing design is direct-coupled. However, there was a 0.25dB channel imbalance at all settings of the volume control.

Channel separation (not shown) was better than 100dB in both directions below 2kHz, but rose above that frequency to a still-good 80dB at 30kHz. The Tube Mk.II was superbly quiet: With the balanced input shorted but the volume control at its maximum, the unweighted wideband signal/noise ratio (ref. 1V) was 83.5dB. Restricting the measurement bandwidth to the audioband improved this figure to 88dB, while switching an A-weighting filter into circuit gave 90.75dB!

Even with so little noise, the Einstein’s THD remained buried under the noise floor for output levels below a few hundred millivolts, as revealed by the downward slope of the traces at the left of fig.2—a fixed amount of noise becomes an increasingly smaller percentage of the signal level as the signal increases. Actual distortion starts to rise

Fig.1 Einstein The Tube Mk.II, frequency response at 1V into 100k ohms (left channel blue, right red) and 600 ohms (left cyan, right magenta) with volume control at maximum, and at 1V into 100k ohms (left green, right gray) with volume control at unity gain (11:00). (0.25dB/vertical div.)
level signals don’t pass through a switch, it probably prolongs tube life—it also means that when you change inputs, there’s a minute-long “crossfade” as the previously chosen input dies out and the newly chosen one comes to life. If you don’t think you can live with such a delay, make sure you never hear The Tube Mk.II—you might become seriously conflicted!

**Sound Basics**

How should a preamplifier sound? Ideally, like nothing. It should offer a linear transfer of the signal with gain. It shouldn’t add noise or distortion. It should neither gin up nor diminish harmonics. It should pass along the soundstage produced by the source component. It should reveal a recording’s genuine details, not produce false details of its own, and it should reproduce the source’s natural dynamic range, moving nimbly between the extremes of that range. It shouldn’t smear, coarsen, or soften transients, or fatten the bass. It shouldn’t add or remove richness and warmth. The sonic signatures of different-sounding sources should survive the journey from input to output without being indelibly stamped with the preamp’s own character. If your source has fixed and variable outputs, a fixed output sent through the preamp shouldn’t sound all that different from a variable output sent directly to your power amp; one shouldn’t sound veiled, dynamically diminished, distant, and flat while the other sounds transparent, explosive, immediate, and holographic.

That’s the ideal, but every preamplifier I’ve heard gives the sound some kind of flavor or enhancement or subtraction or veil—something that changes the overall personality of the source’s signal. This is sometimes for the better, in terms of listening pleasure, if not in the interest of greater accuracy. But it’s difficult to be sure what any source actually sounds like: Its variable output must go through a built-in volume control; and who knows what that does to the sound? When I used to compare the Manley Labs Steelhead preamp’s built-in volume above 1V into 100k ohms and above 500mV into 600 ohms, but is still low in absolute terms by 4V, which is about the maximum the preamp will be asked to deliver in real-world systems. The Tube Mk.II clips (defined as 1% THD) at a high 22V into 100k ohms and manages a high 15V into 600 ohms. This preamp offers an unusually high dynamic range. Distortion is higher for an unbalanced input signal (not shown), reaching 0.1% at 1.1V into 100k ohms.

Fig.2 was taken from the left channel, but the right channel was actually more linear, as can be seen in fig.3, which plots the THD+noise percentage against frequency at 2V into 100k and 600 ohms. Into 600 ohms, the right channel (magenta trace) didn’t offer much more distortion than the left channel did driving 100k ohms (blue). I suspect that both the channel gain and the ultimate linearity will depend on the specific tubes used.

In fully balanced mode, the Einstein’s distortion signature was predominantly the subjectively innocuous second and third harmonics (fig.4), with a greater degree of second harmonic in the left channel (blue trace) indicating that the tubes used in the hot and cold signal phases were not as well matched in that channel as they were in the right channel (red). Dropping the load to 600 ohms increased the levels of these harmonics by about 10dB but preserved their relationship to one another (not shown). However, driving the preamp with an unbalanced signal for the same output level raised the second harmonic to ~6dB (0.1%) left and ~64dB (0.07%) right (fig.5). This will not be audible, but suggests that the preamplifier’s design is optimized for fully balanced operation. Note, by the way, that while the right channel’s noise floor in these two graphs (red traces) is generally clean, the left channel (blue traces) has...
potentiometer to an outboard preamp I was reviewing, I almost always preferred the outboard preamp, even though I could identify its contribution. Why? I'm not sure. Maybe it was the sound of the Manley's potentiometer.

In other words, I'm not a "purist" because there's no such thing as purity. That said, the damage done to the signal should be infinitesimal, and any tint on the glasses should be blush, not burgundy. In my opinion.

Last year, when I was reviewing the dCS Scarlatti SACD stack, its volume-controlled output sounded only marginally more dynamic and transparent than its fixed output did through the darTZeel NHB-18NS preamp—and I doubt I could tell one from the other without looking, which is as it should be with a $29,000 preamplifier! On the other hand, a friend who owns a highly regarded tube preamp was dismayed by the results of a similar comparison I conducted with his gear. I shouldn't have to tell you which routing sounded better—it was with the dCS driving the power amps directly.

**The sound . . . or lack thereof**
The Einstein Tube Mk.II came as close to adding and subtracting nothing from the signal as any tube preamp I've heard. If silence is golden, The Tube was 24K pure gold. It was dead quiet even when cranked to the max, proving that tube preamplification need not add noise. Overall, regardless of technology, it was among the most transparent preamplifiers I've heard—but particularly so for an all-tube design.

**THE EINSTEIN TUBE MK.II WAS DEAD QUIET EVEN WHEN CRANKED TO THE MAX, PROVING THAT TUBE PREAMPLIFICATION NEED NOT ADD NOISE.**

to the max, proving that tube preamplification need not add noise. Overall, regardless of technology, it was among the most transparent preamplifiers I've heard—but particularly so for an all-tube design.

In that transparency and in many other ways, The Tube reminded me of the open-sounding, gratifyingly linear Musical Fidelity Primo that I reviewed in May 2010, which also made use of multiple tubes. However, the Einstein produced a more refined picture overall, particularly in its tidier soundstaging and compactness of image sizes. Its remote-controlled motorized volume potentiometer was more user-friendly than the Primo's, in terms of both the gradualness of the taper and its ability to follow commands.

Describing The Tube Mk.II's sonic personality was made somewhat more difficult because the NOS Telefunken tubes I was using in the line-level "Phono" input produced a sound very different from that of the other inputs fitted with the stock tubes. It's impossible to describe the preamp's "sound" independent of the input tubes chosen.

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low-level spurious present at the 60Hz AC power-line frequency and its harmonics. Again, this will have no audible consequences, but it does suggest that the left channel's circuit-board layout is not as optimal as the right's.

Finally, fig.6 shows the spectrum of the Einstein's output while it drove a high-level mix of 19 and 20kHz tones into the demanding 600 ohm load. The 1kHz difference product lies at —72dB in the left channel (0.028%) and at —76dB in the right (0.015%), which implies good high-frequency linearity even with the output stage having to deliver significant current.

This may use tubes, but Einstein Audio's The Tube Mk.II is an impressively well-engineered preamplifier that offers a wide bandwidth, high dynamic range, and low levels of noise and distortion. It will also drive low impedances with aplomb.

—John Atkinson
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The profound sonic differences produced by the NOS tubes weren't really about tonal balance; both inputs were essentially neutral in that regard, and free of bottom-end boat, excessive midband richness, and rolled-off or softened high frequencies. Both sounded remarkably linear and well extended at the frequency extremes. The differences had more to do with the NOS tubes' almost supernaturally blacker backgrounds, freedom from grain, and more vivid harmonics, all of which might have been masked had the rest of The Tube's presentation been noisy and/or severely colored.

A spectacular new three-disc reissue of Elvis Presley's 24 Karat Hit! (45rpm LPs, RCA Victor Living Stereo/Analogue Productions AAPP 2040) was made for the Telefunken tubes. Although Elvis, backup singers the Jordanaires, and guitarist Scotty Moore, et al, sounded eerily quiet, I thought the intensification of instrumental textures and physical touch were the pleasing artifacts of even-order harmonic distortion than a greater level of transparency. While switching back to the input with the stock tubes reduced the harmonic intensity and image palpability, it also tightened up the transients and added some time-keeping snap.

I ended up preferring the stock tubes, even though they sounded a bit thin and bleached in comparison to the Telefunken's. I thought the stock tubes sounded more honest, but a few visitors said, "Well then, you have to live with 'clangy.'" I couldn't disagree. After all, it's all recorded music—in the end, you have to mix and match to come up with a sound that satisfies you. One man's clang is another man's clarity. One man's natural richness is another's oil slick.

THE TUBE MK.II'S REPRODUCTION OF MICRODYNAMICS WAS AS GOOD AS IT GETS IN MY EXPERIENCE, REGARDLESS OF TECHNOLOGY.

In direct comparison, The Tube Mk.II could be heard to add a uniform, super-thin veneer of honey that some listeners will no doubt prefer. But I found it subtle and even-handed enough that, once accustomed to it, I didn't notice it. A system and/or source component that sounds somewhat thin will surely benefit from The Tube Mk.II's character, but not one that's bright. As much as I love Einstein's The Turntable's Choice, which I purchased to use as a reference solid-state phono preamp, its sound can be a bit thin, analytical, and harmonically not fully fleshed out. But through The Tube Mk.II, not surprisingly, it sounded like the ideal choice.

When, at a recent luncheon, I expressed to a group of writers on high-performance audio my preference for solid-state because I objected to the endless warmth of tubes, and one tube fan said, "Well then, you have to live with 'clangy.'" I couldn't disagree. After all, it's all recorded music—in the end, you have to mix and match to come up with a sound that satisfies you. One man's clang is another man's clarity. One man's natural richness is another's oil slick.

The best tube or solid-state products minimize and balance the negatives while emphasizing the positives, which

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Michael Fremer
Sweet Spot or SweetSpace?

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Listen to Gil Scott-Heron's stupendously moving and powerful I'm New Here (LP/CD, XL Recordings XLLP 471) through the Einstein and you'll hear how full, rich, yet well-controlled it is in reproducing the singer-poet's powerful lower register, and how smooth and continuous his voice sounds. Listening to this album through the darTZeel didn't produce a completely different experience, just one that somewhat changed the perspective. There was more air on top, greater transient speed, more precision in and emphasis of reverb tails, and slightly more bass extension though a bit less bass weight, and a less continuous transition from the lower midbass up through the midrange. Kick drums had more skin through the Einstein, a faster "pop" through the darTZeel.

The sound of the Einstein's top end through the stock tubes was slightly forward, though it still lacked the darTZeel's air and resolution; if your system is already bright, don't expect The Tube to complement it. It might even make the sound worse, though in that case, replacing some tubes might be the solution.

Against the MF Primo
The Tube Mk.II reminded me most of the Musical Fidelity Primo. It costs $6400 more, not including The Remote, but for that money you get another level of sonic refinement: a step up in transparency, and a more appropriately compact, solid, and densely populated soundstage. The Einstein and Musical Fidelity are two of the most neutral-sounding tube preamps I've heard, although, based on the sketchy specs provided by Einstein Audio, I'm not sure The Tube Mk.II will match the Primo's excellent measured performance.

Like the Musical Fidelity Primo, Einstein's The Tube Mk.II came at me somewhat, pushing the soundstage forward. However, it did so less forcefully than the Primo, and the images it produced were more compact and more precisely rendered. In my review of the Primo in the May 2010 issue, I said that:

1 You'll love what Scott-Heron writes on this album's inner sleeve: "Listen to it for the first time under optimum conditions. Not in your car or on a portable player through a headset. Take it home. Get rid of all distractions (even her or him) . . . Turn off everything that rings or beeps or rattles or whistles. Make yourself comfortable. Play your LP . . . Listen all the way through. Think about what you get. You'll get your money's worth from I'm New Here even if you play it only once (you'll play it more), but particularly if you listen to it as Scott-Heron suggests. It's sad that people even need such instructions, but they do. (Not you, of course.) But even if all you've got is a boombox, listen to this album.

to adequately express itself, it needed a bigger room than mine. The Einstein didn't crowd my room, but filled it most pleasantly. Having The Tube Mk.II in my system was never less than fully pleasurable or musically convincing.

Conclusions
While the textural and harmonic aspects of the Einstein's sound could be dramatically changed by replacing its input tubes, The Tube Mk.II's overall performance was consistent in the ways that count most. The Tube Mk.II was among a handful of the quietest preamplifiers I've heard, tubed or solid-state. The backgrounds were velvet-black.

The Tube Mk.II was subjectively linear, with an ultrawide bandwidth, and perhaps a slight lower-midbass push that fleshed out standup bass, kick drums, timpani, and male voices—but so modestly that I could never identify it as an obvious coloration or noticeable thickness or congestion in that region.

Though the Einstein's top end sounded fully extended, some solid-state preamps might offer more air and resolution, which detractors of transistors would no doubt call brightness and/or clang. At the same time, The Tube Mk.II's top end was somewhat forward in the narrow band where cymbals and sibilants reside, particularly with its stock tubes—but it was never hard or harsh or grainy. That forwardness was there regardless of volume, but if the rest of your system sounds smooth, you'll probably become quickly addicted to it—or you can try some mellower tubes.

If as I think it is, a preamp's job is to pass along the signal without adding to or subtracting from it anything at all, then Einstein's The Tube Mk.II comes as close to that ideal as any tube preamp I've heard—although, like every other audio component designed and built by mortals, it has a personality. If The Tube Mk.II adds anything, it's that bit of narrowband midbass emphasis, and perhaps the slightly forward but smooth and grain-free top-end, which I hesitate to call brightness. If it subtracts anything, it's some extension at the very bottom—something only a full-range speaker will reveal—and the last bit of macrodynamic explosiveness.

Those criticisms leveled, The Tube Mk.II's overall sound was so smooth, svelte, and even-handed that I never felt anything was missing. It wasn't dark or congealed, like some tube preamps, or overly pretty (except with the NOS Telefunken tubes), and the bottom end was anything but bloated, weak, or indistinct. So while The Tube Mk.II subtracted nothing critical from the sources feeding it that I could hear over a long audition period, it did add one thing I noticed: an extraordinarily high level of listening pleasure.

I enjoyed every listening session with The Tube Mk.II regardless of musical genre, though it was particularly effective reproducing classical music and jazz. I still prefer the darTZeel N11B-IRNS, which costs about $10,000 more, but I'm sure many listeners will prefer having The Tube Mk.II (less "clang"), and leaving that 10 grand in the bank.
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**EQUIPMENT REPORT**

**McIntosh MC275 POWER AMPLIFIER**

**DESCRIPTION**

Two-channel, tubed stereo (switchable to parallel mono operation) power amplifier. Tube complement: four KT88, three 12AX7A, four 12A7T. Inputs: 1 pair single-ended (RCA), 1 pair balanced (XLR). Loudspeaker outputs: separate gold-plated, 5-way binding posts for 4, 8, and 16 ohms. Preamp output: 1 pair single-ended (RCA). Preamp inputs: 1 pair balanced (XLR), 3 pairs single-ended (RCA), 1 pair tape (RCA). Output power: 75Wpc (18.8dBW) into 4, 8, or 16 ohms (stereo), 150W into (21.8dBW) 2, 4, or 8 ohms (mono). Frequency response: 20Hz-20kHz, +0/-0.5dB; 10Hz-70kHz, +0/-3dB. Signal/noise ratio: 100dB, A-weighted (no reference level given). THD: 0.05% at any power level from 250mW to rated power output. Input sensitivity: 1.2V unbalanced, 2.5V balanced. Input impedance: 90k ohms unbalanced, 180k ohms balanced. Damping factor: >14 (wideband). Power consumption: 170W (idle), 360W (full power).

**DIMENSIONS**

16.5" (420mm) W by 8.25" (210mm) H by 12" (305mm) D. Weight: 67 lbs (30.5kg) net, 75 lbs (34.1kg) shipping.

**SERIAL NUMBER OF UNIT REVIEWED**

WV3092.

**PRICE**

$4500. Approximate number of dealers: Over 200. Warranty: 3 years parts & labor, 90 days tubes.

**MANUFACTURER**

 McIntosh Laboratory, 2 Chambers Street, Binghamton, NY 13903-2699.
Tel: (800) 538-6576, (607) 723-3512.
Fax: (607) 724-0549.

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It's been a while since I've had a classic amplifier in my system, and McIntosh Laboratory's MC275 is as classic as they come. Introduced in 1961 as the "powerhouse" of that era's newfangled stereo tube amps (two 75W amplifiers in one chassis!), the MC275 retained its position as the amplifier to own—challenged only, perhaps, by Marantz and a few others—until 1970, when it fell prey to the widespread wisdom that transistors were king and tubes were dead, and the model was discontinued. The MC275 briefly returned in 1993, in a limited "Commemorative" edition to honor the late Gordon Gow, longtime president and chief designer of McIntosh Labs. To everyone's surprise, that edition sold well, and McIntosh, gingerly at first, crept back into the tube business.

The present version of the MC275 is its fifth incarnation, though it looks strikingly (and, for retro-cool's sake, deliberately) similar. Looks, of course, can be deceiving or revealing; in this case, they're a bit of both.

**Description and Design**

Like the MC275 of yore, the current model is rated at 75Wpc (though McIntosh Labs' tech man, Chuck Hinton, says it can actually pump out 90Wpc), and it weighs the same 67 lbs. Much of that heft comes from the two output transformers, which are, with the exception of one quality, identical to the original's, even to the point of being wound on the same equipment at McIntosh's production facility in Binghamton, New York (see http://forum.stereophile.com/photopost/showphoto.php/photo/1035). The wire in the old transformers was made of lacquered copper, which tended to harden and become brittle. The new wiring is still copper, but it's insulated with a far more durable synthetic material.

The MC275's transformers utilize the same "unity-coupled circuit" that McIntosh invented in 1947. The two primary strands—one connected through the power supply to the plate and cathode of one of the output tubes, the other connected in the
same manner to the other tube—are tightly wound together, turn for turn, for complete magnetic coupling. This creates almost instantaneous local feedback, which is said to reduce distortion. In the original and all subsequent versions of the MC275, including this one, a third winding is connected to the plates of the cathode follower driver; this was said to extend the ultra-low distortion over a much greater bandwidth, especially into the high frequencies.

Also like the original, the new MC275 uses four KT88 power-output tubes, three 12AX7A input and phase-inverter tubes, and four 12AT7 voltage-amplifier and driver tubes. All else, though, is different from the original, to varying degrees. The chassis, once chrome-plated steel bent to shape (and thus prone to cracks and rust), is now highly polished stainless steel. The tube cage, formerly of fine mesh with solid ends, now has larger perforations and slotted ends, to allow more even ventilation. (When listening, I removed the cage, in part because I liked watching the tubes glow, and in part because, in my experience, cages of this sort usually vibrate. First, however, I received assurances from McIntosh that the cage was entirely for safety purposes, and that removing it wouldn't harm the sound.) The plating on the tube pins, once nickel, is now gold, and the ceramic output-tube sockets have heat chimneys that let cool air flow more freely from under the chassis, thus prolonging the life of the tubes—a McIntosh innovation that began with the MC275's fourth incarnation.

The new model also uses 1% precision resistors and polypropylene capacitors, for lower noise; the specified signal/noise ratio is 100dB, or 10dB higher than previous models.

To perform the measurements on the McIntosh MC275, I mostly used Stereophile's loan sample of the top-of-the-line Audio Precision SYS2722 system (see the January 2008 "As We See It" and www.ap.com), for some tests, I also used my vintage Audio Precision System One Dual Domain. The MC275 has four output terminals for each channel, one labeled "Common," the others "4," "8," and "16." I performed a complete set of measurements from each output transformer tap using the balanced inputs, and repeated some of the tests using the unbalanced input jacks.

With balanced drive, the voltage gain into 8 ohms was on the low side, at 17.2dB from the 4 ohm tap, 20.5dB from the 8 ohm tap, and 22.7dB from the 16 ohm tap. The unbalanced gains, unusually, were all exactly 6dB higher than the balanced, presumably because of the extra tube stage in this mode. Both balanced and unbalanced inputs preserved absolute polarity (ie, were non-inverting) from all three output taps. (The XLRs are wired with pin 2 hot.) The input impedance at the RCA jacks was a high 86k ohms at low and middle frequencies, dropping slightly and inconsequentially to 62k ohms at 20kHz. The balanced input impedances were all twice these figures, as specified.

The McIntosh's output impedances were on the low side for a transformer-coupled tube design, at 0.33 ohm from the 4 ohm tap, 0.57 ohm from the 8 ohm tap, and 0.87 ohm from the 16 ohm tap. These figures applied at low and midrange frequencies; the impedance at 20kHz was a little higher, at 0.38 ohm (4 ohm tap), 0.7 ohm (8 ohm tap), and 1.1 ohms (16 ohm tap). Even so, the modification of the McIntosh's frequency response due to the interaction between this source impedance and the impedance modulus of the loudspeaker was relatively mild. The gray trace in fig.1, for example, shows the response with the MC275's 8 ohm tap driving our standard simulated loudspeaker (see www.stereophile.com/reference/60). The variations remain within ±0.5dB limits. The limits were ±0.25dB from the 4 ohm tap and ±0.7dB from the 16 ohm tap (not shown). Note the slight, 0.12dB channel imbalance in this graph, which persisted from all taps into all loads. The McIntosh has wide bandwidth, its
the original's. Balanced inputs have been added; a rear-panel switch lets you choose that option, and if you do, the first 12AX7 tube is bypassed for a more direct connection, though this results in lower gain. The original MC275 had several circuit boards, with all component parts wired point to point. The new version has just one military-grade board, on which the components and tube sockets are directly mounted. Hinton maintains that this results in less induced noise and crosstalk.

A rear-panel switch allows the amp to be converted into a monoblock, with the two channels driven in parallel to cope more efficiently with low-impedance speakers. Finally, the new model has a detachable power cord and an On/Off switch (though, as it's placed under the terminal panel, it's a bit awkward to get at). More welcome still, the old-fashioned terminal strips for speaker cables have been replaced by gold-plated, five-way binding posts. This is the only significant change since the version that Sam Tellig reviewed—very positively—in the July 2004 Stereophile.

Although my doctorate is in political science, and my training in physics and engineering is at best scanty, these design changes, all told, didn't strike me as quite transformational. As I watched those 11 tubes begin to glow, I wondered: Would this new MC275 sound like a just-slightly-revved-up version of a half-century-old tube amp, oozing midrange magic but rolled off at the top and bottom—or like a warm but zippy modern music-making machine?

Setup
I did all my listening through Revel's Ultima Studio2 speakers. The digital source was a Krell Evolution 505 SACD/CD player; for analog, I used VPI's Classic turntable and JMlab Memorial tonearm, Lyra Delos moving-coil cartridge, and a battery-powered Nagra BPS phono preamp. For a line stage, I used the preamp section of the Krell FBI, a fully balanced integrated amp. (The FBI is essentially Krell's FPB-300cx power amp and KCT preamp on a single chassis, internally connected by Krell's proprietary CAST circuitry.)

For a brief time, however, I disconnected the Krell and substituted the McIntosh C2300 tube preamp ($6000), also on loan from McIntosh. I did this for two reasons: first, to hear what the MC275 would sound like in an all-tube system, and especially when joined to a product made by the same company (Hinton told me that the two models are often sold together); and second, to use the MC275's balanced inputs. (The

- Fig.3 McIntosh MC275, 4 ohm output tap, small-signal 10kHz squarewave into 8 ohms.
- Fig.4 McIntosh MC275, 4 ohm output tap, distortion (%) vs 1kHz continuous output power into (from bottom to top): 16, 8, 4, 2 ohms.
- Fig.5 McIntosh MC275, 8 ohm output tap, distortion (%) vs 1kHz continuous output power into (from bottom to top): 16, 8, 4, 2 ohms.
Krell FBI has just one pair of preamp-output jacks, and they're single-ended.

Finally, I mainly used the MC275's 4-ohm taps, although, for comparison, I listened for a while with speaker cables hooked up to the 8-ohm taps (more on this below). Cables throughout were by Nirvana, except for Nordost CAST interconnects between the Krell SACD player and FBI. When I switched to the McIntosh C2300 preamp, I connected it to the Krell Evolution 505 with a pair of balanced Nirvas.

Sound
So, did the McIntosh MC275 sound like a burnished antique, or like a 21st-century high-end audio component? I went into my listening expecting the former. Nothing wrong with that, I said to myself working up an appetite for the sonic equivalent of a sweet crêpe suzette or a creamy devil's-food cake. Imagine my surprise when I was presented with a five-course meal boasting the tastes and textures of all the major food groups.

Listening to Chasin' the Gypsy, saxophonist James Carter's tribute to Django Reinhardt (CD, Atlantic ATL 83304-2), I could hear all the attacks and rhythms of the bells, snappers, cymbal swishes, and guitar strums, as well as the difference between the guitar with steel strings and the one with strings of nylon. In the horns were brassy, and the violins' bowing exuded the texture of resin. In Miles Davis' take on "My Funny Valentine," from Cookin' (SACD and 45rpm LP, Prestige/Analogue Productions CAPJ 7094 SA and 7094), the trumpet's bell was golden, the mouthpiece full of air. With Count Basie's 88 Basie Street...
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(XRCD, JVC JVCXRX-0021-2), I could clearly hear the blooming overtones sent up by Basie’s one-note piano jabs; the sense of ambience in the recording hall was palpable.

Playing a vinyl reissue of Eric Dolphy’s masterpiece, Out to Lunch (45rpm LP, Blue Note/Music Matters Jazz MMBST 81463), I could clearly hear—I could practically feel—the keypads of Dolphy’s bass clarinet, and Tony Williams’ work on snare and cymbals, with sticks or brushes, came through in all its dynamic detail. The very high frequencies on Dave Douglas’s Charms of the Night Sky (CD, Winter & Winter 910 015-2) were a bit veiled, but I could still distinguish between Douglass’s trumpet and Mark Feldman’s violin when they played simultaneously—a testament to the MC275’s ability to reproduce a coherent structure between tones and overtones. And when Lorraine Hunt Lieberson sang “Ich habe genug,” from her Bach Cantatas album with Craig Smith and the Emmanuel Music Orchestra (CD, Nonesuch 79692-2), her voice soared so gorgeously, swelling in volume and bursting with pathos while remaining meltingly warm. The MC275 could rock, too. At the start of Radiohead’s In Rainbows (CD, TBR 88088-21622-2), those crunches crunched crisply and loudly, Johnny Greenwood’s guitar strums were tight and liquid, each piece of Phil Selway’s drum kit was distinct, and Thom Yorke’s voice beamed through the mix.

After spending the last several years with solid-state amps, I’d forgotten about the spacious soundstage a good tube amp can toss up. The MC275’s soundstage wasn’t anything special from left to right—though don’t get me wrong, it was fine—but it was stunning from front to back. Those horns in Mahler’s Ninth were way back there. And in all dimensions, the silences between the instruments, as well as between the notes each instrument plays, were spookily silent—as if I could still see the players, or the space they occupied, even when they weren’t making any sounds.

The MC275 was not without weaknesses. In general, very low frequencies tended to sound a little more like bass tones than like notes played on an instrument. The big bass drum at the beginning of “Nuages,” on the James Carter CD, didn’t have quite the oomph in the attack, or quite the persistence in the decay, that it should. On 88 Basie Street, the notes from Cleveland Eaton’s bass were distinct, but the plucking was too soft. Similarly, on Dolphy’s Out to Lunch, Richard Davis’ bass, though once again its notes were very clear, lacked the wood that this album, and especially this reissue, very much conveys. When musical passages got dense, whether on the Ra-

In the midrange, the predominant distortion present in the amplifier’s output is the second harmonic (fig.9), which is subjectively benign even at much higher levels than offered by the MC275. At low frequencies and higher powers, the third harmonic is equal to the second in strength in the right channel (fig.10, red trace), and a regular series of higher harmonics can be seen. Finally, the MC275’s reduced top-octave linearity seen in figs.7 and 8 results in a regular series of intermodulation products appearing when the amplifier is asked to drive an equal mix of 19 and 20kHz tones at a moderately high power level (fig.11). Even so, the second-order or difference product at 1kHz, the highest-level spurious tone, lay at —64dB (0.06%), which is still fairly low in absolute terms.

As I said, it is difficult to believe from its measured performance that the McIntosh MC275 was designed almost half a century ago (by a team led by company cofounder Sidney Corderman1). Good audio engineering is timeless.

—John Atkinson

1 I have had the privilege of meeting Mr. Corderman a few times, most recently at the 2007 Consumer Electronics Show, where he was lured out of retirement for the launch of Ken Kessler’s book McIntosh: “… for the love of music …”; see http://blog.stereophile.com/ces2007/01130/mcintosh and www.stereophile.com/features/207mc.

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diolead album or in Górecki's Symphony 3, in the recording by David Zinman and the London Sinfonietta (CD, Elektra None-such 79282-2), the double basses got a bit muddy, though only a bit—the tones did still come through, something that can't be said for many amps in this price range. At the climaxes of the crescendos in the Mahler and Górecki discs, the MC275 didn't open up with the full dynamics that a more powerful amp might have unleashed. But it did open up part of the way—the sound got not just louder but bigger, and more so than I would have expected from a 75Wpc amp—but at no point did the soundstage collapse or the horns sound more than just a teeny bit strained. The MC275 dealt with its limitations gracefully, which is the best way to do it.

Here, though, I should stress that some of the amp's shortcomings in the deepest bass octave may have stemmed, in part, from my system. The Revel Ultima Studio2 is nominally a 6 ohm speaker, which raised the same question it would with any tube amp: Should I hook up the Studio2s to the amp's 4- or 8-ohm taps? I opted initially for 4 ohms because John Atkinson's measurements of these speakers, accompanying Kal Rubinson's review of them in the March 2008 Stereophile, noted an impedance dip in the midrange. Because the MC275, like most tube amps, was likely to perform at its best in the midrange, I figured I should aim for the closest impedance match in that region. And, as I've noted, the MC275's midrange, along with much else, sounded wonderful. When I switched to the 8-ohm taps, the soundstage wasn't quite so deep, violins and voices weren't quite so warm, orchestras weren't quite so dynamically coherent—but the bass was a bit tighter. All the bass problems mentioned in the paragraph above were still there, but not so prominently; things were a bit tighter, a bit woodier, a bit pluckier, a bit omnipresent.

I hooked the Revels back up to the 4-ohm taps and left them there for most of my listening, but your preferences may dictate a different choice. More to the point, if your speakers are rated at 4 or 8 ohms—not just nominally, but consistently across the audioband—you may be able to enjoy the best of what the MC275 has to offer in the highs, mids, and lows, all at once.

But even then, I think, the MC275's performance would fall short of the best. I didn't fully appreciate this until I switched back to the Krell FBI integrated—which is, until I removed the McIntosh from the system and resumed using the Krell in its full operating mode, as both preamp and power amp. Suddenly, I heard not only tighter and deeper bass, but also more extended highs, more musical detail, more subtle gradations in dynamics—more of a sense that people were playing the instruments and singing. On John Scofield's Quiet (CD, Verve 314 533185-2), his fingerwork on acoustic guitar was more intricate, practically visible. On the Maria Schneider Jazz Orchestra's Sky Blue (CD, ArtistShare AS0065), I could better hear the bloom of overtones and the texture of each instrument: the breath of the flute, the brass of a horn, the hammering on the piano.

Two things are worth noting about this comparison. First, the MC275 costs $4500, while the Krell FPB-300cx (the circuitry of which is incorporated into the power-amp section of the FBI integrated amp) retailed at $8500 when it came out a few years ago. It's not surprising, then, that the Krell might have a few things the McIntosh doesn't. Second, even so, I had to A/B the units directly to hear the Krell's advantages. The differences, for the most part, were not enormous, and a few were quite subtle; the McIntosh fared a bit better in terms of soundstage depth and intertransient silence.

Finally, just to make sure that the MC275's shortcomings weren't the result of some sort of mismatch with the Krell, I plugged the MC275 back into my system, this time connecting it to McIntosh's C2300 tube preamp. I didn't listen long enough to formulate a review, or even a very deep sense, of the C2300. Suffice it to say here that what I heard didn't alter my assessment of the MC275's strengths and weaknesses. With the C2300 driving the MC275, the sound was a bit too plummy—a bit too close, for my taste, to the "old tube sound" that the MC275-Krell combo transcended.

Conclusion

Carefully set up and matched with other components, the McIntosh MC275 is a very good, very well-balanced amp that goes higher, lower, louder, and softer, with more texture and detail, than you might expect from a "modified classic"—or, for that matter, from any tube amp costing less than $5000. It certainly did more of all that than I was expecting. By any standard, it made listening to all kinds of music a pleasure. I could happily live with it.

**ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT**

**ANALOG SOURCE**
- VPI Classic turntable & JMWW Memorial tonearm, Lyra Delos cartridge.

**DIGITAL SOURCE**
- Krell Evolution 505 SACD/CD player.
- Nagra BPS (battery-powered).

**PHONO PREAMPLIFIER**
- Krell FBI (mainly used as line stage).

**INTEGRATED AMP**
- Revel Ultima Studio2.

**LOUDSPEAKERS**
- Revel Ultima Studio2.

**INTERCONNECTS**
- Nirvana interconnects & speaker cables, Nordost CAST interconnect (between Krell components).

**POWER PURIFIER**
- Bybee Technologies Signature Model Power Purifier (not power amp), Black Diamond Mk.4 Racing Cones, Mapleshade pucks, VPI HW-19 record-cleaning machine.

—Fred Kaplan
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Even Mikey Fremer is surprised at vinyl's current popularity. Some pundits postulate that eventually CDs will die out, and we'll be faced with the choice of LPs or downloads. (I hope not. I'm just getting used to CDs.) With abundant sources of new pop releases and a wide range of reissues on vinyl, and a variety of used LPs, every audiophile should own a turntable. And with the availability of affordable turntables such as the Pro-Ject Debut III, which I reviewed in the February 2010 Stereophile, the cost of entry to VinylLand is not very dear. The problem is that so few entry-level integrated amplifiers and receivers available today include phono stages. (The Marantz PM5003, which I reviewed in the January 2010 issue, is a notable exception.)

NAD has solved this problem by offering the PP 3 moving-magnet/moving-coil phono stage ($199). The PP 3 has circuitry identical to that of the PP 2 phono stage ($129), but adds a line input and a 16-bit analog-to-digital converter with USB interface, to permit the conversion of LPs to a digital format via a Mac or PC computer. The PP 3 has both MC and MM inputs, as well as a USB output (a USB cable is supplied). NAD also includes the VinylStudio Lite software, to facilitate converting the analog signal to a computer file.

NAD's Greg Stidsen told me that, in order for the PP 3 to perform to the "NAD standards" of ultralow noise, wide dynamic range, high overload margins, accurate RIAA equalization, and low distortion across the entire audioband, NAD included high-quality, audio-specific transistors and capacitors. Moreover, the PP 3's A/D converter is powered by the USB bus, effectively creating separate analog and digital power supplies.

I tested the PP 3 via its MM input using my Rega Planar 3 turntable with Syntex PU-3 tonearm and Clearaudio Virtuoso Wood cartridge, driving a Creek Destiny integrated amplifier and Epos M5i speakers. (A Follow-Up review of the Epos M5i is in the works.)

Sound
I entered this reviewing process with some expectations of what I'd hear from the PP 3. I've enjoyed listening to a wide range of NAD gear over the years, begin-
ning with the 7020 receiver I bought for my wife when we began dating, in the mid-1980s. At the time, I thought NAD electronics had a unique sonic signature: a rich, lush midrange, a slightly warm midbass, and slightly sweetened highs, but not enough HF extension or top-end air. The 218 THX power amplifier I reviewed in the August 1999 Stereophile (www.stereophile.com/solidpoweramps/899nad), although a much more modern design than the earlier products derived from the original 3020 integrated amp, had the same NAD house sound.

So I was surprised to discover that, over a wide range of LPs, the PP 3, used as a regular phono preamp, was a more neutral performer than any other NAD component I’d heard, with extended frequency extremes and quite a bit of air. The midrange exhibited a rich, vibrant, holographic character that made me want to listen to a broad palette of vocalists. Dionne Warwick’s voice in Hal David and Burt Bacharach’s “Wishin’ and Hopin’,” from her Golden Hits Part One (LP, Scepter SPM 565), was bathed in a golden ambient glow, and the trumpet counterpoint had a silky metallic sheen. I’ve always felt the Doors’ Jim Morrison was underrated as a ballad singer, and in “The Unknown Soldier,” from Waiting for the Sun (LP, Elektra LPZ 2049), the NAD revealed his sultry baritone with all his subtle dynamic inflections intact. Exploring further up the vocal range brought me to Jack Bruce’s original recording of his “Theme for an Imaginary Western,” from Songs for a Tailor (LP, Atco SD 33-306). His exploration of his upper register in the song’s boisterous bridge was forceful yet silky through the NAD, with no trace of hardness. But the NAD didn’t gloss over Tom Waits’ guttural growl in his “Big in Japan,” from Mule Variations (LP, Anti-/Epitaph 86547-1); all of his dynamic phrasing and pitch inflections were as clear as I’ve heard them through more expensive phono stages.

The NAD’s overall neutrality, delicacy, and resolution of detail made it a good match for well-recorded jazz. In “Gloria’s Step,” from Bill Evans’ Live at...
the Village Vanguard (LP, Verve 9378), the middle range of his delicate piano playing was reproduced without coloration, and with all his subtle phrasing intact. Moreover, it was very easy to follow all the subtleties of Paul Motian's delicate background drumming in this track, even at low volumes. On "Goodbye Pork Pie Hat," from Mingus Ah Um (LP, Columbia KC 65512), Charles Mingus's melodic bass lines were woody, deep, and airy, with no overhang or coloration.

What most floored me about the PP 3's performance was its ability to render lightning-fast transients with a good sense of dynamic slam. Bill Summers' percussion interlude on the bridge of "Palm Grease," from Herbie Hancock's Thrust (LP, Columbia KC 32965), covers a broad range of syncopated percussion textures; with the NAD, the instruments seemed to jump out of the speakers in the front of the stage, giving the tune a lifelike quality. At the delicate end of the transient spectrum, the rapid-fire passages in Artur Rubinstein's readings of Chopin's Scherzos (LP, RCA Living Stereo LSC-2368) retained all their delicacy and speed without a trace of smearing, especially in the more-difficult-to-reproduce upper-register passages.

Finally, with cranked-up rock tunes, the PP 3 exhibited a strong sense of coherence, pacing, and rhythmic consistency, whether reproducing such simple arrangements as Ten Years After's "Love Like a Man," from Greatest Hits (LP, London LC 50008), or more elaborate, densely packed tracks such as Genesis' "Dance on a Volcano," from A Trick of the Tail (LP, ATCO S1)-36-129. Listening to either of these tunes, I found it hard to sit still—I itched to twitch, grab a partner, and dance around the room. But my wife wasn't home, and neither of the dogs was interested.

**Comparisons**

I compared the NAD PP 3 with the phono stage included in the Marantz PM5003 integrated amplifier via the Creek Destiny's Aux input, as well as with the Destiny's MM phono board (a $500 option). The Marantz and the NAD resolved similar amounts of detail, but the former

**THE NAD'S MIDRANGE EXHIBITED A RICH, VIBRANT, HOLOGRAPHIC CHARACTER THAT MADE ME WANT TO LISTEN TO A BROAD PALETTE OF VOCALISTS.**

Increasing the load to 100k ohms dropped the second harmonic to -124dB (!) but didn't affect the odd-order harmonics. Looking in more detail at the low-frequency part of the spectrum shown in fig.1 reveals a complete absence of power-supply-related spuriae (fig.2).

Reducing the input level to 2V RMS, which is typical of CD-player outputs, gave a spectrum with the second harmonic the highest in level, at -124dB (fig.3), which is close to the generator's residual limit. However, the USB bus-powered A/D converter is not as clean as the NAD's analog circuitry; fig.4 shows the spectrum of data output via USB at the same input level of 2V, analyzed in the digital domain. The 1kHz tone lies at -4dBFS, with the third harmonic at -80dBFS—ie, at -76dB ref. the fundamental (0.015%)—and many other harmonics visible at lower levels, as well as some other resonant components above 16kHz. The sample rate was set to 44.1kHz with VinylStudio, and I recorded the PP 3's output as AIF files with 24-bit resolution. However, the fact that the noise-floor components in this graph lie at around -120dBFS suggests that the A/D converter chip used has an effective resolution of a little less than 15 bits. Unless you are planning to do a lot of equalization or other digital signal processing, you might well rip your LPs as 16-bit files. The NAD PP 3 doesn't have a level control, but whatever source you use to feed its line-level input, I recommend using its level control so that the data output by the A/D converter peak at -3dBFS ("70" on VinylStudio's level-check meter), as input levels higher than that give rise to significant levels of distortion.

Turning to the PP 3's phono inputs, the moving-magnet input offers 35dB of gain, the moving-coil input 57dB, both figures as specified (taking into account the interaction between the input impedance and the source impedance of the Audio Precision generator), but a little lower than the...
had a silkier midrange. The Marantz's high frequencies were somewhat less refined than the NAD's, but I felt its dynamics were slightly better. The Creek phono stage, however, was in an entirely different league. The Destiny's more detailed midrange was more holographic and rich than that of either of the two other phono stages, with a much greater sense of purity in the highs. The Creek also exhibited more subtle gradations of low-level dynamic articulation and a more natural sense of bloom.

Computer
I looked forward to the USB portion of the testing for a number of reasons. First, I've been looking for an easier way to transfer some of my 12,000 LPs to my wife's iPod. Up till now, the only way I could do it was to transfer the albums to CD using my Marantz professional CD recorder, which means playing the entire album, and manually advancing each track during the track breaks in real time. This process is so tedious that I've taken the lazy way out, buying a copy on CD and loading that into iTunes.

But I'm a Luddite who has little patience with computer programs I don't know; in short, everything except Microsoft Word, Microsoft Outlook, and Make Music's superb music-composition software, Finale. Even iTunes intimidates me. I lack the patience to read manuals; basically, software has to teach me how to use it as I go along, with no glitches or confusion. In that regard, the VinylStudio Lite software, which NAD includes with the PP 3, was a dream to use. (The full version, which offers a greater choice of file types and other options, is downloadable from www.alpinesoft.co.uk; it costs $29.95 and is available in both PC and Mac versions.)

After I'd connected the PP 3 to my teenage son's very basic IBM/Lenovo T61 laptop, the software walked me through the steps. First, I checked the levels to make sure I wasn't overdriving the input of the A/D converter. Then I set the Needle Down input level control (which recognizes the track's minimum signal level) and the Needle Up delay time (how long the program keeps recording when the music ends), and proceeded to record the title track of Steely Dan's Aja (LP, ABC AA 1006). The idea is that, once you hit the Record button and go to play the LP, the software knows when to begin and end the recording.

measurements, continued

Both inputs preserved absolute polarity; their input impedances were 100 ohms (MC) and 45k ohms (MM) at all frequencies, though the MM input dropped, slightly but inconsequentially, to 38k ohms at 20kHz.

The NAD's RIAA equalization was relatively accurate (fig.5), but with a slight depression in the midbass and a 0.25dB channel mismatch above 1kHz. Not bad for so inexpensive a product. Channel separation (not shown) was excellent, at >80dB in both directions below 5kHz. The PP 3's noise floor was relatively low in level, the wideband, unweighted signal/noise ratio (ref. 1kHz at 5mV) for the MM input equal to 70.5dB in the left channel and 69.8dB in the right, these figures improving to 92.1 and 81.7dB when A-weighted.

The MC input was a little noisier, as expected from the higher gain on offer.
immediately, the software scolded me for two mistakes I'd made. It had noticed that the zero signal level was higher than it should have been, and correctly deduced that there was hum in the system. It turned out that the combination of lighting up my workstation with a halogen lamp and the tonearm's ground wire accidentally slipping off the Creek's ground post was the problem. I fixed it. Thanks, VinylStudio Lite.

The software then noticed that my son's computer was set to record in low-resolution mono. I got an error message that said, in effect, "Don't you really want a stereo 44.1kHz WAV file?" (MP3 is also an option.) Well, now I really want a stereo 44.1kHz WAV file?

Assessed at the PP 3's line-level outputs, the phono-overload margins were superb, at 25–26dB at all frequencies for both MM and MC inputs, and distortion was very low. I had to raise the level at the MM input to 20mV to bring any distortion harmonics out of the noise floor, and even then, only traces of the second and third harmonics were visible (fig.6). However, this level came close to overloading the PP 3's A/D converter, as can be seen by the digital-domain analysis of the USB data (fig.7). The 1kHz fundamental lies at –1dBFS and the third harmonic at –33dBFS (2%), with a regular series of higher odd-order harmonics visible. Backing off the level of the 1kHz tone by 12dB, to 5mV, gave the digital-domain spectrum shown in fig.8; the fundamental now lies at –13dBFS, as expected, and all the harmonics lie at or below –110dBFS; ie, –98dB re. the signal level or 0.0012%.

Finally, all the NAD's inputs produced very little intermodulation distortion. Fig.9, for example, shows the spectrum of the MM input via USB at a signal level of –4dBFS. The 1kHz difference component is conspicuous by its absence (it's buried beneath the noise floor), and the higher-order spuriae are very low in level. The line input produced even lower levels of intermodulation distortion (not shown).

The NAD PP 3's measured performance shows very little evidence of its costing only $199. Used as a stand-alone phono preamplifier, it is a superb value, with low distortion and high overload margins. The USB output is very useful for digitizing LPs, and the VinylStudio Lite program supplied with the PP 3 is intuitive to use. However, the relatively limited overload margin of the PP 3's A/D converter and the lack of any level control suggests that it should not be used with "hot" cartridges. As long as the cartridge has a specified output close to or below the standard 5mV for a recorded signal of 1kHz at 5cm/s, all should be fine.

— John Atkinson
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dCS Puccini SACD/CD player with v1.20 firmware upgrade

Since I reviewed this $17,999 SACD/CD player1 and the matching $4999 U-Clock for the November 2009 issue (www.stereophile.com/hirezplayers/dcs_puccini_sacd_playback_system), it has been my workhorse for both reviewing duties and listening pleasure. The U-Clock’s ability to accept USB data in an asynchronous manner has allowed playback of computer files via iTunes, using the Pure Music front-end app, to equal the sound of optical discs in my system. High-resolution downloads—such as John Butt and the Dunedin Consort’s new recording of J.S. Bach’s B Minor Mass (24-bit/88.2kHz FLAC, Linn Records), and the 2007 recording of Stanford’s Songs of the Sea by Richard Hickox conducting the BBC National Orchestra of Wales, with solo baritone Gerald Finley (24-bit/88.2kHz FLAC, Chandos/HDtracks)—have filled my listening room with high-end sound and my heart with high-end music.

But with regular CD playback, a small voice at the back of my mind kept reminiscing about the sound of the Meridian 808i Signature CD player, which I’d reviewed in April 2009. The Meridian had featured Peter Craven’s so-called “apodizing filter,” which replaces the usual time-symmetric, linear-phase, low-pass digital reconstruction filter, with its pre- and post-ringing on transients, with a minimum-phase low-pass filter whose first null is at the original Nyquist frequency. This kills all the ringing from the original A/D converter, replacing the preresponse ringing with postresponse ringing from the new filter. As this new ringing is both natural (in that it occurs after the event) and takes place entirely within the human auditory system’s masking time interval, the data would be audibly cleaner. I had had the Meridian in my listening room for about a week after I received the review sample of the Puccini, and even though I didn’t feel its bass had quite the tautness of the dCS’s, there was something very right about how the Meridian 808i reproduced recorded soundstages.

Once someone does something of benefit, it’s never very long before others do likewise. In spring 2009, Ayre Acoustics introduced what they called the “MP” upgrade for their C-5xe universal and C-7xe CD players. This offered both a minimum-phase filter similar to Meridian’s, as well as one with a slower rolloff that Wes Phillips felt sounded better (see www.stereophile.com/hirezplayers/dcs_puccini_sacd_playback_system/index6.html), and that is also available in Ayre’s QB-9 USB-input D/A processor. When I visited dCS in summer 2009 to get background on my then-forthcoming review, digital engineer Andy McHarg told me that he was investigating different digital filters, some of which would be incorporated in a firmware upgrade for the dCS players.

When I reviewed the Puccini, it was running v1.12 of the firmware. Last April I received an early version of the v1.2 firmware, in the form of a Zipped WAV file.2 The firmware upgrade is performed by burning the unpacked WAV file to CD-R, then playing it in the Puccini. The process is pretty much automatic, though it does take about 30 minutes.

The v1.2 upgrade eliminates the very low-level, low-frequency idle tone I had found with SACD playback in my review (see fig.5 at www.stereophile.com/hirezplayers/dcs_puccini_sacd_playback_system/index6.html), and also fixes a couple of operational issues. But what I was most interested in were the new low-pass filters available for CD playback and external 44.1kHz-sampled data. (A decade ago, audio writer David Rich predicted that, eventually, reviewers would be listening only to different digital filters!) Three new filters are available; the Filter option in the Settings menu now has a menu allowing the user to choose between the four DSD filters already available and the three new DSP filters.

Pressing Filter on the remote control shows on the Puccini’s display which filter is being used; subsequent button presses cycle through the different filters.

The first of the new filters, Classic, has the same linear-phase characteristic as the earlier filters. Fig.1 shows its measured impulse response: ignore the oscilloscope’s LSB toggling; the pre- and postringing actually show the coefficient values of the Finite Impulse Response (FIR) filter. The second filter, Long, is said to have better anti-aliasing performance than Classic. Its impulse response (fig.2) reveals that it, too, is a symmetrical FIR type, and it doesn’t look much different from Classic on the scale this graph was taken. The final filter, Asym, is free from pre- and postringing (fig.3) but has a larger degree of postringing. Its impulse response looks very similar to those of the Meridian and Ayre filters.

---

1 dCS (Data Conversion Systems), Ltd., Mull House, Great Chesterford Court, Great Chesterford, Saffron Walden CB10 1PF, England, UK. Web: www.dcsld.co.uk. US distributor: dCS America, PO Box 544, 3057 Nutley Street, Fairfax, VA 22031. Tel: (617) 314-9296. Fax: (703) 940-2442.

2 This was actually the beta release of the v1.20 firmware, termed by dCS v1x20. The formal release will be available by the time you read these words.
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What surprised me even more was that there was a difference between the left and right channels. The right channel (red, magenta, and gray traces) started to smoothly roll off above 8kHz, reaching -0.05dB at 19.5kHz. By contrast, the left channel (blue, cyan, green) was flat to 20kHz, but with small ripples evident. I checked the impulse responses for both channels with all three filters and they were all correct, so I'm not sure what is causing this difference. No audible problems should result from this interchannel difference.

And what matters, of course, is how these filters sound. To cut a long story short, I could hear no substantive difference between Classic and Long. In either A/B comparisons or over extended periods of listening, the Puccini's sound remained pretty much as described in my original review: superb midrange clarity and definition, and a spacious, well-defined soundstage, though the latter didn't bloom quite as fully as it did with CD data upsampled to DSD and played back with DSD Filter 1.

But with the Asym filter, the picture changed. While I still couldn't hear any difference in direct A/B comparisons, longer-term listening revealed that the Asym filter was close to what I remembered of the Meridian 808i Signature player's sound. Individual acoustic objects were that bit better modeled and less like theatrical flats on the soundstage, and there was a greater ease to the sound.

While writing this Follow-Up I was mixing my recording of Attention Screen's April 2010 concerts at the Yamaha Artists Services Salon, and the rendered 16-bit/44.1kHz versions of the mixes sounded, in terms of the spatial relationships between the instruments, a little closer to the original 24-bit/88.2kHz files when played on the Puccini with the Asym filter. I suppose you could say that the music flowed more easily, or even made more sense, though I am loath to ascribe musical values to sound quality (pace Michael Lavorgna).

The v1.20 firmware update takes the dCS Puccini's performance even further into Class A+ territory. It continues to offer the best digital playback I have heard in my system. —John Atkinson

**CEntrance DACport**

The package arrived, marked with a familiar scrawl and Brooklyn return address. I sat down on my couch, poked a hole in the new arrival, and, trying my best to avoid a nasty paper cut, opened the padded envelope. Into my lap dropped a small, black velvet pouch cinched shut with two drawstrings. My wife looked over at me from the dining-room table.

"What is that?" she asked casually.

"I don't know. John Atkinson sent it to me."

I loosened the pouch's drawstrings and pulled out a handsome cylinder of metal. The device was about 5" long, slightly tapered at one end, with a small control knob that rotated between settings marked Min and Max.

"What... is... that?" my wife asked again.

I looked closer. "Oh. It's the CEntrance DACport. You plug it into your computer and it powers your headphones. John really liked it, and wants me to try it out on my big stereo. It has a volume control, so you can also run it straight into your amps."

"Good," she said, looking strangely relieved. She mumbled something and, with one cleansing exhalation, went back to her work, leaving me to play with my new toy.

The arrival of the CEntrance DACport at my house could not have been better timed. In late February, water began mysteriously appearing in my listening room. After some detective work we figured out that snowmelt backed up behind an ice dam on our neighbor's roof (we live in a townhouse) was leaking into the subfloor of our second story and dripping into the house's lower level. From February through June, my listening room and much of our home was offline as contractors removed damaged walls, ceilings, and floors, then rebuilt a good chunk of our house.

During those months, the DACport and my Sennheiser HD600 headphones were, together, virtually my only link to music. Like JA, I, too, fell in love with the DACport's size, ease of use, sound quality, and price ($399). Through my Sennheisers, the DACport offered a lovely, wide soundstage, a laid-back, grain-free, very sweet treble, and a tube-like midrange. The DACport didn't drive low bass through my HD600s with the utmost authority or slam, but it lent musicality to every sort of recording I listened to. I also was impressed with the DACport's ability to drive my 'phones in such a musical way with only USB power. For use with headphones, the DACport's size and price make it a no-brainer for a portable DAC and amplifier. It's too bad you can't hook it up to an iPod or iPad. That would be a killer combo.

For the past six years I have eschewed using a preamplifier, instead running my Benchmark DAC1 straight into my amplifiers. Because I listen only to CDs, and use outboard devices by MAudio to listen to files from my laptop computer, this simple setup has worked well for

---

3 The CEntrance DACport was reviewed in the June 2010 issue; see www.stereophile.com/headphones/centrance_dacport_usb_headphone_amplifier. CEntrance, 8817 Mango Avenue, Morton Grove, IL 60053. Tel: (847) 581-0500. Fax: (847) 581-0901. Web: www.1centrance.com.

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The preamp section of the Benchmark DAC has been able to drive every amp I've used, even the low-gain Pass Labs Aleph Three that has lived here for a while. However, like many people, I have recently turned more and more to my laptop as a digital source. During my recent stint with the Benchmark DAC1 HDR (see my Follow-Up in the September issue), I very much enjoyed being able to play all of my laptop's audio programs through the Benchmark via USB. Once my listening room had been rebuilt and my big rig reassembled, I was ready to find out if the Centrence DACport could be used in a similar fashion to provide a bridge of high quality and even lower cost between computer and amp.

Using a cheapo RadioShack Y-cord to convert the DACport's 1/4" output to two female RCA jacks, I connected the DACport directly to a pair of Rogue M180 monoblock amps. After giving the class-A biased DACport some time to warm up (and it does run warm), I booted up iTunes and played a special playlist of wav files I'd created especially for the DACport.

First came "Hidden Place," from Björk's delicate Vespertine (ripped from CD, Elektra 62653-2). The DACport offered up this music in a big, easy way. The images of the electronic effects, choir, and Björk's own voice were large, round, and supple. The DACport brought out this track's sensual sweep in a way that left no aspect of the music highlighted or emphasized. For pop music, the DACport had plenty of gain to power my Rogues: the DACport's tiny volume control didn't need to go much beyond the 10 o'clock position to give me a reasonably loud listening level.

Next I wanted to hear how the DACport might handle classical recordings mastered at much lower levels. I recently acquired (also via JA) Sure on This Shining Night, a new CD from the vocal group Vooce of works by Morten Lauridsen (ripped from CD, Vooce). As the sopranos hesitate a moment in singing "C'est ton intérieur / qui sans cesse se caresse" in Lauridsen's setting of Dirait-on, the DACport beautifully captured that moment's slight trepidation, as well as the wet acoustic in which this performance was recorded. Turning to Arleen Augér singing Richard Strauss's 'Ständchen' on her Love Songs (ripped from CD, Delos 3029), the DACport sounded much the same as it did through headphones, presenting a large soundstage, a slightly rolled-off but grain-free treble, and a blossoming midrange. Through speakers, the DACport tended to slightly blend individual instruments and images together, reducing the soundstage's front-to-back layering and the delineation of each sound. However, the overall effect was always musical, and in some ways more like what a person might hear sitting farther back in a concert hall. One area where the DACport fell down a bit was in handling the large dynamic swings of classical music. At realistically loud concert levels, the DACport limited Auger's outpourings in Frank Bridge's 'Love Went A-Riding.' Though this dynamic limiting was always polite done, when the DACport ran out of steam, I could hear the sounds of piano and voice being smooched together, timbrally and spatially.

Because the Benchmark DAC1 HDR uses USB receiver code written by CEntrance, I thought a shootout between the two might be interesting, if possibly unfair—you can buy almost five DACports for the cost of one Benchmark DAC1 HDR ($1895).

Playing Cyndi Lauper's "She Bop," from She's So Unusual (ripped from CD, Epic/Legacy EK 62169), the Benchmark offered better weight and drive in the bass, as well as more crystalline bite to the analog synthesizer solo in the song's bridge. The DACport's sound was pleasant, with an even tonal balance and no digitsits, but it lacked the Benchmark's more engaging sound. Lady Gaga's "So Happy I Could Die," from The Fame Monster (ripped from CD, Interscope B0013355-72), came through the DACport like a big, wonderful wall of sound. The Benchmark HDR threw up that same wall, but also let me see each individual brick in it, and even the texture of the mortar.

Wondering if the Benchmark's ability to throw an extremely well-delineated soundstage was the major difference between the two DACs, I compared them using recordings in glorious mono. Listening to the Beach Boys' "Good Vibrations," from Smiley Smile/Wild Honey (ripped from CD, Capitol B00005ABX0), I was again taken with how similar the DACs' tonal balances were. However, even in mono, the Benchmark was able to deliver more information than the CEntrance. Through the Benchmark, I could more easily hear the theremin when it's near the back of the mix, as well as Mike Love's vocal bass line in the chorus. Both DACs made nice music with this track, but the Benchmark was clearly more resolving and engaging—unsurprising, at almost five times the DACport's price.

From the moment it arrived at my home until the time I pulled it out of my big rig, the CEntrance DACport gave me a lot of pleasure. Its sleek design, portable size, and ability to be powered by USB make it a sure thing for anyone on the go. The DACport was not only able to power the hungriest cans with great finesse and a gentle touch, it also proved a satisfying tool when strapped into a big system. Though not the last word in resolution, the DACport consistently put out musical, balanced sound that stood up to gear costing three to five times its modest price. I highly recommend it to any young lady or man looking to have a good time with a high-quality, low-cost USB DAC.

Harbeth P3ESR loudspeaker
When I reviewed the latest iteration of Harbeth's P3 minimonitor, the P3ESR ($2195/pair), for the August issue, I found that this pocket-size speaker punched above its weight. Other than its necessarily limited low frequencies and lack of power handling, the P3ESR was not out of place in an expensive high-end system, particularly for those with a small room. However, I had a problem with the samples sent for review (serial nos. 0472L and R): Toward the end of the review period, I was giving the speaker a workout with some high-level rock when the soundstage lurched to the right and the balance became bright and brassy. At continuous levels below about 7V RMS (equivalent to 8W into the Harbeth's 6 ohm impedance), the responses of both speakers were the same. But at higher sustained levels, serial no.0472R developed a severe peak in its low-treble region. This peak disappeared when I backed off the level.

This didn't affect my review findings, but it turned out that this pair of speakers had done quite a lot of traveling around retailers and other reviewers before coming to me. It's possible, therefore, that a crossover component had been overstressed during that time and was now prone to intermittent failure.

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Walter Swanbon, of Harbeth’s US distributor, Fidelis, sent me a second pair of P3ESRs (serial nos. 0672L and R). Before listening to these, I measured them using DRA Labs’ MLSSA system and a calibrated DPA 4006 microphone. First, the impedances of the two speakers, measured with an Audio Precision System One, are shown in fig.1. The two speakers match very closely, with a single peak at 70Hz indicating the tuning of the sealed enclosure. The impedances are basically identical to those of the original samples, with a value that drops below 8 ohms only in the lower midrange. This speaker will be easy for the partnering amplifier to drive.

Turning to the frequency domain, the new samples (fig.2, blue and red traces) are superbly well matched, the two traces overlapping at almost all frequencies. The response of 0472L, taken under identical circumstances, is shown as the green trace in fig.2, reduced by 3dB for clarity. Above 1kHz, its response is almost identical to that of the newer samples: All are superbly flat. Below 1kHz, however, there is a little more energy in the middle of the midrange, and the peak in the upper bass is about 1dB lower in level. It’s possible that this difference is due to the older samples having had a lot of use before I measured them.

Finally, I didn’t have room to publish the P3ESR’s step response in the August issue. Assessed on the tweeter axis at 50°, all four samples were identical to fig.3. Both drive-units are connected with the same positive acoustic polarity. Though the tweeter’s output leads that of the woofer by a couple of hundred microseconds, no discontinuities are apparent.

I set up the new samples of the P3ESR on massive single-pillar Celestion stands, using the same system I’d used for most of my auditioning of the earlier samples: dCS Puccini SACD player, Simaudio Moon Evolution P-8 preamplifier, and Classe CTM-600 monoblocks, all connected with AudioQuest Wild interconnects and speaker cables. The new Harbeths were as good as I remembered the old ones sounding, with an uncolored midrange, smooth highs, and well-defined if somewhat lightweight lows. The upper bass offered good bloom and didn’t sound any different, and I could drive this new pair to high levels without the sound changing character or anything failing.

The problem encountered with sample 0472R must, therefore, have been a one-off event, and I can reaffirm my strong recommendation for this immaculate-sounding minimonitor.

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**Acapella High Violoncello II loudspeaker**

I reviewed this $80,000/pair, three-way horn loudspeaker in the September 2010 issue (p.71), and for the bulk of my auditioning I had the level controls of the iconic tweeters set to their minimum positions. However, the tweeters were still a little “hot” in my room (26’ by 15’ by 7’ 10”) when the speakers were driven by the solid-state Classe CTM-600 monoblocks, and I mentioned in the review’s “Measurements” sidebar that it might be worth reducing the tweeter sensitivity with a series resistor inserted in the line-level drive-unit feed. (The tweeter has its own class-A amplifier with a nominal 600 ohm input impedance, so a series resistor doesn’t detune the crossover.) I didn’t have time to do any serious listening with series resistors for the tweeters before the deadline for that review, but I did do so after the September issue had gone to press and before the Acapellas were shipped back to the distributor.

The blue trace in fig.1 shows the spatially averaged response of the High Violoncello IIIs in my listening room, as set up by importer Brian Ackerman and driven by the Classe amplifiers. (You can find a photo of the speakers in my room at http://forum.stereophile.com/photo.php?photo=2275.) The region covered by the tweeter is around 4dB too high in level, which projected transients and sibilance a little forward in the soundstage, and emphasized analog tape hiss on older recordings. The green trace shows the effect of inserting a 600 ohm resistor in each tweeter feed. This reduces the level above 10kHz by 4dB, but leaves the mid-treble a little too high in level.

I ended up using 680 ohm resistors with the Classés, which really did properly integrate the speakers’ top two octaves in my room. I listened to John Butt and the Dunedin Consort’s new, one-singer-to-a-part recording of J.S. Bach’s *B Minor Mass* in a download from Linn Records: 24-bit/88.2kHz FLAC, converted to Apple Lossless with Soundbooth’s Max program (http://sbooth.org/max), so that I could play it with Pure Music and iTunes via USB through the dCS Puccini SACD player (see above). The choral sound was rich and natural, and I never felt that the top two octaves were being pushed forward in the soundstage. The duet of sopranos Susan Hamilton and Cecilia Osmond in the *Christe Eleison* was to die for through the Acapellas.

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with natural tonalities and precise stereo imaging.

So if you have a room about the size of mine or smaller, particularly if its acoustics are on the bright or lively side, and you wish to use solid-state amplification with the High Violoncello IIs, it would be worth experimenting with series resistors in the tweeter feeds. However, this would not be necessary in large rooms, where the horn-loaded tweeter's limited directivity will give a flatter high-frequency response.

I also commented in the review on how the Acapellas took to being driven by tubes. The speaker's sealed-box, isobaric woofer alignment—the two 11" doped-papercone woofers you can see on the High Violoncello IIs front baffle are internally loaded by a third 11" unit—is tuned for clarity and definition rather than ultimate bass weight. The Audio Research VSi60 integrated amplifier (also reviewed in the September issue) I used toward the end of the review period fleshed out the low frequencies, better balancing the speaker's top octaves, which is why I didn't feel the need to experiment with resistors in the tweeter feed with this tubed amplifier. The red trace below 200Hz in fig.1 shows the spatially averaged response of the Acapellas in my room as driven by the ARC. While the upper-bass region is identical with the two amplifiers, the solid-state Classé monoblocks (blue trace) did indeed produce less mid- and low bass than the tubed VSi60. This is due to the ARC having a much higher output impedance than the Classé, even from the ARC's 4 ohm tap: 1.6 ohms from 20Hz to 1kHz.

The solid trace in fig.2 shows the High Violoncello's impedance. It features a minimum magnitude of 4.6 ohms at 134Hz, with a peak of 12 ohms at 38.5Hz and a rising value in the midrange reaching 10.35 ohms at 1kHz. Taking the amplifier's output at 134Hz as the baseline, the resistive-divider interaction between the amplifier's source impedance and the speaker impedance gives predicted boosts of 1.5dB at 38.5Hz and 1.34dB at 1kHz. Fig.3 shows the response of one of the Acapella's woofers, measured in the nearfield, with the speaker driven by the Audio Research VSi60 (red) and a Classé CTM-600 (blue). The differences in levels are indeed similar to those calculated.

Why should a relatively small change in level of bass quantity produce a significant improvement in bass quality? First, there is the fact that the "contour lines" in the graph of human sensitivity lie relatively close together below 100Hz; I conjecture, therefore, that it takes a smaller difference in level to produce a noticeable change in this frequency region than it does in the low treble. Second, the tube amplifier's damping factor is very much lower than in the solid-state designs, so it will exert less control over the woofers. In theory, this might be thought a bad thing, but it results in a better perceived balance with the Acapella speaker and its overly sensitive tweeter.

I felt it worth taking the time to explore in more detail these two areas of the High Violoncello II's performance because this admittedly expensive German speaker really is one of the finest-sounding speakers I have had the pleasure of using. It doesn't have quite enough low-bass energy in-room to be included in "Class A (Full-Range)" in
"Is Vivid Audio's G1 Giya the best loudspeaker I have ever heard? Yes."
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Jason Kennedy, HiFi+ issue 70 (UK)

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their issue’s “Recommended Components,” but it is definitely in the “Class A (Restricted Extreme LF)” category—with a bullet!

—John Atkinson

Miyajima Shilabe phono cartridge

It’s like this at the beginning of every movement: You shift to a different technology, but then the penny drops. Your old mono cartridge can’t play your new stereo LPs. Your old tube amp can’t drive your new acoustic-suspension loudspeakers. Your old $10,000 FM tuner can’t honor your new XM subscription. Eventually, your high-compliance cartridge can’t play your newly reissued mono LPs.

Now you’ve made the switch to a vintage idler-wheel turntable and a proper 12” tonearm, and you wonder: What the hell can I use for a phono cartridge, other than a small handful of Ortofons and EMTs?

Good question. Answers include the trusty Denon DL-103 ($229), along with Zu Audio’s version of same, the Zu DL-103 ($439). The Miyabi 47 ($4400) remains a fine all-rounder, as do various vintage models by Supex and Fidelity Research.

But that was all we had until 2005 or so, when word trickled out about a new brand called Miyajima, Or Edison, Or Otono. Nobody knew for sure.

The name turned out to be Miyajima, after its inventor. And the US distributor turned out to be Robin Wyatt, a man with notoriously good taste in playback gear. A little over a year ago Wyatt loaned me a sample of the Miyajima Premium Mono cartridge ($980), and I wrote about it in my “Listening” column in August 2009. I liked it a lot. Michael Fremer borrowed a sample of the Miyajima Shilabe stereo cartridge ($2800) and wrote about it in his “Analog Corner” column in September 2009. I daresay Mikey liked it a lot, and suggested the Shilabe be ranked Class A in our “Recommended Components” list, as I did for the Premium Mono.

Mikey was right: I’ve now spent a few weeks with a borrowed Miyajima Shilabe, and I can recommend it, heartily and confidently, to any music lover who wants to hear from his stereo records the sort of body and presence that I and a few other mono nuts have been nattering on about, and yet who isn’t willing to give up anything in
the way of spatial competence, timbral neutrality, or groove noiselessness.

Noriyuki Miyajima’s calling card is his cross-ring motor, which differs from other designs in four significant ways. First, the fulcrum of the cantilever’s movement is at the precise center of the coil former. Thus, every deflection of the cantilever creates a precise and instantaneous signal induction. (In almost every other moving-coil motor design, the fulcrum is fore or aft of the coils, a mechanical compromise that results in an electrical nonlinearity.) Second, the left- and right-channel coils are wound in a pattern of overlapping ellipses not unlike the crossing rings in a gyroscope (which is why, I guess, it’s called a cross-ring motor). Third, the former on which those coils are wound is nonmetallic. Fourth, the coil former is snugged into place from behind, with a sort of pointed axle, rather than being pulled into place from behind with a taut— and notoriously resonant—bit of steel wire.

Examining my sample of the Miyajima Shilabe, it also seemed to me that the motor’s rubber suspension damper is stiffer than most such things; it’s also sufficiently large that one end of it abuts the whole of the front of the coil former. That may help explain the Shilabe’s decidedly low compliance and consequently high recommended downforce: 10cu (10 cm/dyne) and 3gm, respectively. Other pertinent specs include the Shilabe’s 16 ohm impedance and 0.23mV output, the former being higher than I would have expected, given the latter.

No matter: Noriyuki Miyajima recommends using this low-output cartridge with a step-up transformer, as opposed to an active gain stage; I heartily agree, and happily obliged. Although there are no specific tonearm recommendations on the otherwise thorough if fancifully translated Miyajima website, it seemed reasonable for me to use the Shilabe in my high-mass, transcription-length EMT 997 tonearm. That was, after all, the whole idea.

Speaking of which, I have pretty good news. Using the cartridge/arm resonance tests included on Hi-Fi News & Record Review’s Test Record (LP, HFN 001), I observed a 15Hz resonance in the lateral plane and a very well-damped 16Hz resonance in the vertical plane with the Miyajima Shilabe mounted in a light, wooden Yamamoto HS-1A headshell. Both of those resonance figures are on the high side of acceptable, indicating that the match between the Miyajima cartridge and the EMT tonearm is okay.

The listening was even better than the measuring: The Miyajima Shilabe was consistently present, colorful, and downright chunky—that last adjective, I see, being the one that appears most frequently in my listening notes on the subject. All in all, my Shilabe experience was, by far, the closest I’ve heard a “normal” phono cartridge come to sounding like an Ortofon SPU or an EMT OFD.

Again excepting the audio world’s very few remaining pickup heads, it was also the closest I’ve heard a stereo cartridge come to delivering the meat, the force, the sheer solidity of mono.

Mikey noted that the Shilabe’s macrodynamics were exceeded by those of other cartridges. So it was in my system, where the Ortofon SPU 90th Anniversary pickup head ($1899) squeezed a few more drops of drama from orchestral records than did the Miyajima. That SPU and the A-style Shindo SPU (a reworked new-old stock Ortofon) also sounded flat-out saner when reproducing the orchestral drums on some of my best-recorded favorites, although the Miyajima wasn’t at all far behind. (If the Miyajima were a 20-minute ride in an uninspected Lada with a blind pillhead at the wheel, the SPU would be the same experience in a Piper Cub.)

Obviously, I remain fond of those pickup heads of old, the mass and compliance of which were designed for high-mass pickup arms; I prefer that approach, and the musical performance I reap from it. But the Miyajima Shilabe represents an easier approach to those same sorts of musical and sonic strengths.

If you’ve assembled a playback system around one or more vintage components, hoping for at least some of those same qualities that I enjoy, the vast majority of modern phono cartridges will sound fraudulent. You’ll get the same old zizzy, airy, silvery sound you had before: monochromatic outlines with nothing colored in. You’ll have wasted your money and some of your time on Earth, just to find yourself going back to high-end hell through a different door—one with an antique knob.

In the context of my system and my tastes, the Miyajima Shilabe is the next best thing to a dedicated pickup head, and is miles above anything else I’ve heard. It’s that simple. —Art Dudley

7 We use the term “pickup head” for the Ortofon and EMT units to indicate that the cartridge is integrated with the headshell.—Ed.
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O h, how the menacing have mellowed. At 52, songwriter, playwright, fashionista, rehabbed junkie, and all-around scary-lookin' dude Nick Cave is submitting to mundane record-business drudgery like a full day of interviews with Grinderman drummer Jim Sclavunos, in support of their new album, *Grinderman 2*.

An hour later than scheduled, as I'm being escorted into Cave's inner sanctum at the Soho House, in New York's still weirdly chic meatpacking district, out pops an indie-rock website staffer, complete with glasses, plaid shirt, and the air of someone who knows how to write a confused, overlong music review for free. He's spent the last hour—my hour—sucking every last bit of life out of Cave and Sclavunos.

I walk in to find both men gulping energy drinks, gazing hopelessly at their watches, and looking desperately in need of a pint. The smell of baked brain cells is in the air.

**RB:** Are there echoes of the Birthday Party on the new Grinderman record?

**NC:** No. I don't hear that at all.

**RB:** What makes an idea appropriate for Grinderman and not a Nick Cave solo record, or vice versa?

**NC:** I don't know. I don't think there's any difference.

**RB:** Is Grinderman a way to get raw, rock out, explore the underground writing down song lyrics in his own blood, tell a story, and how to turn what that old-school kind of chaos, I don't hear it very much these days. What was considered noise maybe 30 years ago is now meat and potatoes of your typical hip-hop track—what was cutting-edge in the '70s is now just part and parcel. The bar has been raised for what's considered to be challenging noise.

—Robert Baird
Stunning New Cremona M at CSA

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

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Walk into any old church in Mexico, Central America, South America, the Hispanic islands, or Hispanic USA, and you'll see a merging of worlds in which faith becomes personal, and the cultural iconography of that faith takes on decidedly regional attributes. In the islands, it might take the form of santos (saints) substituting for African Gods; or, in Mexico, as depictions of Christian iconography with a decidedly indigenous bent in a church built atop the site of a Mayan temple. Old and new fuse to become something distinct, local, and real.

This is what Argentine composer Osvaldo Golijov has accomplished in his La Pasión Según San Marcos—a telling of the traditional Easter story of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus through a pan-Latin American musical language. The result is a work that is lush, vibrant, and meaningful in ways that few sacred pieces of the modern era have been.

The things that make La Pasión so successful are Golijov's complete idiomatic grasp of the whole of Latin American music, and his ability to convincingly weave elements of samba, tango, Afro-Cuban jazz, fado, and more into a musical score that theatrically merges the classical, vernacular, and liturgical worlds. Operatic singers and nasal Afro-Cuban vocalists work side by side, as do all manner of Latin percussionists and classical string players, Afro-Cuban brass players, and choral elements from both worlds. The chorus snarls and taunts, creates otherworldly sounds, and fills traditional roles. Similarly, the vocal soloists sing in classically traditional aria styles or in gripping, soulful, almost possessed expressions of regional song over a strong rhythmic base, fading down as the chorus alternates with the chorus. Without question, the final movement, Kaddish, is the most powerful, with waves of percussion building a powerful rhythmic base, fading down as the chorus alternates exotic murmurs before joining the whole instrumental ensemble and soloists in creating a beautiful resolution with a timeless quality. It is clear from the music that something profound and holy has happened. Brass, percussion, chorus, and the entire ensemble build to what appears to be a thrilling climax, then all drop to a soft level, letting the soloist make the final lyrical case; a choral Amen caps the work.

The recording engineers have rendered every corner of this complex score with pristine clarity and an attention to nuance rare even in this era of high recorded art. The set also includes a DVD of a different, equally exquisite performance, staged in the Netherlands in 2008 with considerable originality. We see not only the instruments and the ways in which they make the score's more exotic blends of sound, but also the costumes and the true theater of the overall presentation: the dances, the sneering of the chorus, the stylized brutality of Jesus' death.

La Pasión Según San Marcos is one of the most important works of the first decade of the 21st century, and this recording is its perfect sonic vessel. Like Mahler's Symphony 2, "Resurrection," this work leaves the listener awestruck, profoundly moved, and anxious to hear it again. —Daniel Buckley

WAGNER
Overtures, Preludes, Wesendonck Lieder


Franz Welser-Möst, Cleveland Orchestra; Measha Brueggergosman, soprano (Wesendonck)
Performance ****½
Sonics ****½

This odd program is an ear-opener. The Cleveland players need no enthusiastic introduction from me, but those who are used to their huge, rich sound will be, I think, at first put off, then amazed by how conduc-

Examples of this melding of worlds abound throughout the score. Por qué (Why?), for example, builds on an exuberant Afro-Cuban jazz vamp for chorus and percussion-fortified band. A soloist elaborates and alternates with the chorus as vauling brass solos rise from the churning rhythms, followed by a call-and-response vocal section leading to careening brass.

On its heels comes Oração Lucumi (Aria con Grillos) [Lucumi Prayer (Aria with Crickets)], a profoundly meditative section in which a traditional Latin American guitar, heavily choured and reverber'd, carries the melody over skittering string harmonics. The strings evolve into a chamber-music-like discourse with the guitar, doubling its tones softly at the close.

This leads to El Primer Día (The First Day), a short but moving section for female soloist, her voice lyrically harmonized by cellos, a low hand drum rustling and rhythmically thumping in the background.

Without question, the final movement, Kaddish, is the most powerful, with waves of percussion building a powerful rhythmic base, fading down as the chorus alternates exotic murmurs before joining the whole instrumental ensemble and soloists in creating a beautiful resolution with a timeless quality. It is clear from the music that something profound and holy has happened. Brass, percussion, chorus, and the entire ensemble build to what appears to be a thrilling climax, then all drop to a soft level, letting the soloist make the final lyrical case; a choral Amen caps the work.

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WAGNER
Overtures, Preludes, Wesendonck Lieder
tor Franz Welser-Möst has transformed them. His Wagner and, hint of bombast. It's Wagner without 100 years of bag-
gage; we can hear the music anew. Most peculiar, and abso-
lutely ravishing, are the Prelude and Liebestod from Tristan und
Isolde. The elegance and delicacy with which they're played—
Welser-Möst obeys the composer's dynamic markings and
Isolde. The elegance and delicacy with which they're played—
liebestod is given in its orchestral guise—there's a soprano on the pro-
gram. But the sounds we hear are Impressionism at their
youngest; Debussy is in the house.

Similarly, the Rienzi overture, an unwieldy piece, is scaled
back to something more of its era. In fact, it sounds like
"Meyerbeer's best opera," as Hans von Bülow put it; there's
nothing sappy to be waded through. Oddly, the Act III Lo-
engrin prelude is played before the Act I prelude, and it's a
joyous reading; the Act I is luscious, and properly spacey and
ethe ebb and flow perfectly judged. Strange that the Liebestod
never allows the orchestra to go above fortissimo— is hypnotic,
absolutely ravishing, are the Prelude and Liebestod from Tristan und
Isolde. The elegance and delicacy with which they're played—
Welser-Möst obeys the composer's dynamic markings and
Isolde. The elegance and delicacy with which they're played—
liebestod is given in its orchestral guise—there's a soprano on the pro-
gram. But the sounds we hear are Impressionism at their
youngest; Debussy is in the house.

The recording, made in Severance Hall in February 2010,
is strange. To begin with, you must crank up the volume in
order to hear anything at all, but once that's done there's no
problem until Brueggergosman enters, midway through the
program. Then we have a close-up of her voice with the orchestra as accompaniment. You may not mind; I found it irritating. Applause comes only at the end of the disc, so
I presume it was assembled from both live and other takes.
I've heard no other treatment of Wagner quite like this, and
it's enlightening.

Robert Levine
RECORD REVIEWS

expands to a quintet—and commenced plundering the facility's impressive stash of vintage gear. The sessions yielded one of the more impressive platters of 2010: a cranium-uncorking mélange of pristine pop turned delightfully grimy, with a primal, hard-chogling edge few students of rock's rich history will be able to resist.

—Fred Mills

RICHARD THOMPSON
Dream Attic


For mere mortal musicians, the idea of making a live album of all new material has the ring of a suicide pact, particularly when you have the kind of proud catalog of songs that Richard Thompson does. Yet a little danger leavened with the promise of new energies—"lose choices but gain immediacy," Thompson calls it—is why he decided to trot out an all-new pack of tunes before a live audience in the sympathetic and sonically agreeable setting of San Francisco's Great American Music Hall. What makes the result such a brilliant success, and what gave Thompson courage in the endeavor, is knowing that it's one of his strongest collections of tunes since Rumor and Sigh (1991).

Add to the energy of an enthralled audience (here wisely mixed far in the background) numbers like the rocking opener, "The Money Shuffle" (which goes straight for Wall Street's jugular) or the jaunty, tuneful "Haul Me Up"—a distant cousin of "Valerie" that, like many tunes here, benefits from Joel Zifkin's deft fills on electric fiddle and features Thompson cutting loose on electric guitar—and you can hear the tempos rising, and the band growing more unified. It's also wonderful how, over the years, Thompson has learned how to incorporate his folky Fairport Convention past into tunes like "Demons in Her Dancing Shoes."

As is so often the case in Thompson's work, two songs stand out as near-perfect fits of solid tune to very pointed lyrics. In a murder ballad, "Sidney Wells," with a soprano sax screaming like the victim in the background, Thompson sings "He tried to burn her body / he didn't do it well / Upon a pile of tires / it was an awful smell." The title of the hilarious "Here Comes Geordie," a swipe at airhead celebrities who dabble in world politics, seems to suggest (despite RT's denials) that he's thinking most of one Gordon Matthew Sumner. The album closes with a loud, fast, inventive solo electric-guitar extravaganza by Thompson: "If Love Whispers Your Name," whose title belies the fact that Thompson has not spoken this clearly in years.

—Robert Baird

WIDESPREAD PANIC
Dirty Side Down


It's been a tough road for Widespread Panic since the band's main instrumental voice, guitarist Michael Houser, died in 2002 after a quick, devastating bout with pancreatic cancer. The band, along with its crew and tens of thousands of fans, were part of a massive cultural movement in Athens, Georgia. When Houser passed, it was as if the beating heart of that scene had been ripped from its body. The only comparable loss in rock history was that of Jerry Garcia. The Grateful Dead never really tried to recover from Garcia's passing, but Widespread Panic soldiered on bravely, with John Bell and Jojo Hermann filling the void with great songwriting.

But Widespread Panic needed a lead guitarist who could carry a band on his back. Fortunately, one was available in Jimmy Herring, whose only generational
peer is Warren Haynes—it’s no coincidence that both have found themselves in Garcia’s chair in post-Dead lineups, or briefly playing together in a glorious edition of the Allman Brothers Band. Herring’s guitar playing is as distinctive as it gets: harmonically rich, with a wonderful gift for melodic flourishes and an improvisational sense that leans toward the music of India. And unlike most jam-band guitarists, Herring never overplays—each note is allowed to burst out of itself like ripened fruit. The majesty of his sound is fully revealed in “North,” which soars like the iconic “Beck’s Bolero”; in “St. Louis,” an instrumental that recalls some of Garcia’s more adventurous forays into The Zone; and in the glorious solo passage in “Shut Up and Drive,” which is pure Herring, and an instant Widespread Panic classic.

Adding Herring to this band was no simple skin graft; it was more like a heart transplant. It wasn’t enough that Herring play brilliant solos in the right places—he had to be a living, interacting part of the band’s identity. Here we have definitive proof that that body has not rejected its new heart: On this record, Herring has become part of Widespread Panic’s core identity. It’s hardly surprising that Dirty Side Down is the band’s highest-charting album out of the box.

The prolific John Bell has added another brace of honest tunes to his catalog. The mood of Bell’s writing here...
RECORD REVIEWS

runs the gamut from sorrow to elation, but each melody lifts its song's sentiment to an extraordinary level that matches Herring's soaring improvisational flights. JoJo Hermann sounds pissed off on his contributions, a welcome extraversion that pushes Herring to kick ass with supple, muscular guitar riffs.

"Something here doesn't seem like it did yesterday," the band harmonizes on "Clinic Cynic." Fortunately for Widespread Panic and their loyal fans, the band can finally leave that yesterday behind.

—John Swenson

jazz

STEVEN SCHOENBERG
Live: An Improvisational Journey

Quabbin QBR 1003 (CD). 2010. Steven Schoenberg, David Sokol, prods.; Norman Blain, eng. DDD. TT:
Performance ***
Sonics ***½

H e dodges. He weaves. He’s playful. He’s dissonant. He evokes a range of American piano music and pianists, from Fess to Fats. He plays stride. He plays blues. He never allows his ideas to trap him in corners that he can’t think and/or play his way out of. Refined, graceful, charming—all describe what Massachusetts-based composer-pianist Steven Schoenberg evokes on this impressive live set. Recorded in 2006 at Smith College’s gloriously resonant Sweeney Concert Hall, the sound is crisp and transparent. (In the spirit of full disclosure: Stereophile contributing editor David Sokol coproduced this project.)

A clever, deft player who’s as skilled at showy glissandos as he is at caressing out near lullabies—or in, “Father and Son,” at reaching inside the piano to pluck and strum the strings—Schoenberg also proves himself adept at balancing the lyrical with the bombastic, and serious playing against flurries of crowd-pleasing runs and forceful pounding. And despite many gorgeous, lyrical moments (as in the first track, “Night and Day”), Schoenberg’s extended improvisational ruminations here—many, like “After Dark,” informed by ragtime and good old-fashioned barroom pianoisms—have a distinct sense of humor about themselves. This is key; pianists who make albums of extended solo improvisation can grow overprecious, impressed with their own supposed insights, their records often sinking under the weight of their own fatiguing seriousness.

Which brings us to this album’s only hitch, a problem with all solo-piano improv records: the long shadow cast by the man who dumbed down the form, George Winston. Schoenberg’s playing only occasionally ventures into echoes of Winston, yet the obvious similarities, even on paper—titles like “Purple Sky,” “A Time for Peace”—may be enough to send some screaming into the streets. Those unfortunate similarities aside, the quality of the playing and thinking here are exemplary.

—Robert Baird

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MANUFACTURERS' COMMENTS

Abbingdon Music Research PH-77 Reference Class
Editor: We would like to thank Mr. Fremer for his exhaustive and most emotive audition of the AMR Reference PH-77 Reference Class Phono Equaliser [July 2010].

The subject of record equalization is certainly a trying one. Many years ago, our interest in record equalization was piqued by several encounters with the late Peter Copeland, Head of Sound Conservation at the British National Sound Archive. His very comprehensive book, Manual of Analogue Sound Restoration Techniques (340 pages), including details on various equalization curves, may be found here: www.bl.uk/reselp/findhelpstyle/sound/anaudio/aloguesoundrestoration.pdf.

At AMR we have always held the belief that a manufacturer should not decide for the listener. Rather, the listener should have the freedom to choose without compromise to the quality of playback. In this instance, one need only cycle through and select the equalization curve that produces the most real and natural sound.

Should your readers wish, they may access the PH-77’s online FAQ page, which offers an overview of the various equalization curves and the history surrounding them: www.amr-audio.co.uk/html/faq_ph.html. Abbingdon Music Research

Einstein Audio Components The Tube Mk.II
Editor: Mr. Fremer did a great job in reviewing our Einstein The Tube Mk.II, or he put a lot of effort into this review to be fair to the product, or yes, he is just right. I think Mr. Fremer is still living his profession as a whole, as well as all other manufacturers, can be happy that these kinds of guys are still there. We need them, to show the public that there is something else besides the big boys. Something else: that is worth to have in mind and to listen to.

Referring to the review, there is not much to say, other than that Mr. Fremer has good ears. When it comes to the comparison of the stock tubes (which are NOS JAN Philips) to the NOS Telefunken, I have the same opinion. I think the stock ones sound more honest, but the Telefunken has this honeyed sound. But as Mr. Fremer mentioned, you can easily have both set up in The Tube Mk.II, and choose the one that will perfectly match your system, depending on the source material. But please take care; otherwise, you can damage the performance of our amp. The tubes are selected carefully.

Thank you, Mr. Fremer. See you in another gym on this planet. [smile]

Measuring Tests: Yes, we agree with nearly all the measuring results you got, Mr. Atkinson. Very detailed and professional.

Referring to the layout design, and the minimal distortion difference between the left and right channels, I would like to explain that the layout design of both channels is absolutely identical but mirror-symmetrical. The only difference is the wiring of the volume control, because the volume control is placed at the right side of our preamp. So the wiring of the left side of the volume control is a little bit longer and slightly more affected by the power supply (transformer).

Also, in production we select the tubes to exceed our specification to get the best performance possible for a long time. Even with this effort, it is nearly impossible to get absolutely identical distortion levels.

Concerning the unbalanced inputs, we have the same input-circuit design as the balanced ones. The shielding of the unbalanced inputs is connected to ground via a 2 ohm resistor, and connected to the inverting input of the differential input amplifier. The distortion levels are a little bit higher compared to the balanced inputs, because the common-mode rejection of the input amplifier is not perfect. But the typical distortion levels are at -70dB. That is our criterion to release The Tube Mk.II for delivery.

Völker Bohlmeier Einstein Audio Components

Acapella High Violoncello II
Editor: Thanks to John Atkinson for a fine, perceptive review [September 2010] of the High Violoncello II and his subsequent Follow-Up comments, in which, however, he notes that the speaker’s low-bass energy is not quite enough for a “Class A (Full Range)” rating. While low-frequency response partly depends, of course, on the quality of the amplifier being used, I find it hard to imagine the High Violoncello II failing short of anyone’s expectations. Its bass is incredibly dynamic, and powerful enough to flex a room’s walls.

The comment may relate to the size of the room in which the speaker was auditioned. The review recommended a large room to hear this speaker at its best and, indeed, it performs admirably in large, expansive rooms. For smaller spaces, we might recommend the Violon M.K.V or High Violon M.K.V.

All three Acappellas use the exact same horn and tweeter. However, the Violon M.K.V uses one 11” woofer, the High Violon M.K.V adds a second 11” woofer, and the High Violoncello II uses three. The speakers also shift from employing copper wire internally in the M.K.V to proprietary ceramite-silver wiring, more internal bracing, and an upgraded crossover in the latter two models. The series adapts elegantly to every acoustic environment, and fully justifies the reviewer’s conclusion that the High Violoncello II “is one of the finest-sounding speakers I have had the pleasure of using.”

Brian Ackerman, President Audio Imports

Miyajima Shilabe
Editor: As importer of the Miyajima range of products in North America, I thank Stereophile for such a fine magazine catering to us audiophiles. I also thank Art Dudley for his usual insightful and candid delivery of the facts. I have very little to add, except that the Miyajima ETR800 is a natural match when it comes to a step-up transformer. It also includes a rare circuit that allows the Shilabe to be demagnetized just by playing the record! I have found 2.6-3.1 gm, depending on tonearm and preferences, to be the correct VTF I personally use 3.1 gm. Most important, though, I offer the Miyajimas with a seven-day full money-back guarantee. Art forgot to mention that I think audiophiles spending that much money on a “needle” should have the chance to try before they buy! Again, thank you.

Robin Wyatt info@robyattaudio.com

Harbeth P3ESR
Editor: Thank you for the P3ESR review. John Atkinson’s comment [in his review in August 2010] that the Harbeth P3ESR is the best successor to the BBC LS3/5A confirms my design brief, which was to replace the 20-year-old P3/ES and provide the ultimate upgrade for fans of the legendary LS3/5A.

A project of this complexity needs time—four years, to be precise, making it our most carefully researched speaker ever. With the legacy of the P3 and the LS3/5A in mind, I signed off on the speaker only when it was perfect. Much of our effort went into the unique 5” injection-molded driver with its unique cone material; we make this driver ourselves, and it is exclusive to Harbeth.

Above all, we sought to distill and fully understand the unique combination of sonic attributes that made the classic “BBC shoe box” sing. The new P3ESR builds on this foundation and upholds the tradition. Sales of the P3ESR prove that we got it right.

Alan Shaw, Managing Director Harbeth Audio

www.Stereophile.com, October 2010
New technology usually starts out at astronomical prices then comes down years later. Beyerdynamic skips that step with their T5op headphone, an affordable on-ear portable design that incorporates the audio engineering innovations of their $1,300 Tesla T1. Expect intensely liquid musical performance with a rich, smooth tone and precise detail resolution never before heard in a lightweight mobile-use headphone.

The T5op offers cutting-edge styling with machined aluminum construction, rotating leather-padded earcups, and flexible 12-step adjustable headband. Efficient 32 Ohm impedance and closed design is perfect for 'Pods, Pads, or any other high-tech player of the day.

If innovation is truly the path to the future, beyerdynamic leads the way with their proprietary Tesla technology. Give our expert HeadRoom team a call and we’ll be glad to break down the latest beyerdynamic headphones to help you get it right between your ears.
Please visit our showroom in Orange County, CA for an audition

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While rock 'n' roll can be a blood sport, it's the life-style that'll really kill ya. On a sunny summer weekday afternoon, Justin Townes Earle slips into the dark, disinfectant-smelling environs of the 11th Street Bar, in New York City's East Village, with bandages on the middle three fingers of his right, strumming hand. Under wraps are 19 stitches from a mishap with a female and a broken bowl.

"Man, they treat you like shit in hospitals here in the middle of the night," he says, shaking his head, and allowing that being "a little drunk" might have played a role in the episode. He says the ER doctors told him that, other than a little numbness in his middle finger, his hand should be fine. Then he briefly excuses himself, to dart out of the bar in search of lost keys, left at a girlfriend's house the night before.

The son of Steve Earle and the namesake of the original hardcore troubadour, Townes Van Zandt—justin knows from crazy—Justin's career is at that magical point where he's breaking big and riding an upward arc, thanks to his last name, a gregarious persona, boyish good looks, and three solid records filled with his country-folk-rock originals, the most recent of which, Harlem River Blues, was released on Chicago's Bloodshot Records in September.

Despite—or, more likely, because of—the rock 'n' roll meshugas of cut fingers and lost keys, when Justin Townes Earle walks into a room and opens his mouth, it's clear into a room and opens his mouth, it's clear... he has the makings of a star. His personality and demeanor have inexplicable rapport that screams entertainer and whispers star. In Earle's case, its essence lies somewhere among the attributes of easy onstage confidence, fearlessly autobiographical songwriting, faith in his own gifts, and the unshakable inner conviction that he has that magical it—the thing that separates headliners from bar bands, songwriters from people who write songs, and an artist whose name generates a buzz from one whose career evokes a shrug.

As Earle settles his skinny, 6'5" frame into a chair at a table in the bar's back room, the keening tone of Miles Davis' trumpet floats out of the bar's sound system, and he sips an orange-hued drink with lots of ice that suddenly appeared on the bar the moment he walked in. Earle is dressed in blue boat shoes, khakis, and a light brown cowboy shirt woven with sparkly threads; his face is defined by the oversize, owl-lensed glasses that have become something of a JTE trademark.

Like his father before him, Earle has packed an enormous amount of hard living into his 28 years. Also like his unreserved father, he easily shares that he first shot heroin at age 12. He has gone through rehabilitation five times, and among his friends and business associates there is always the fear that Justin might someday permanently slip off into the dark side, thereby stunning what all agree is a brilliant career only just beginning to unfold. With admirable aplomb, he swats away the inevitable questions about Dad.

"Of course I knew my father's music, but I didn't really know him all that well. He likes to keep the roots [influences in his music], but advance way forward with it... the records with the deepjays and shit on it. But where he takes two steps forward, I take one step forward and two steps back. I prefer my music a lot more traditional than he does.

"Anything he's done—I've never been scared of it. I've never been intimidated by it. People ask me about him and Townes all the time, and it's like... I know where the bodies are buried. I've seen both of them lying in a pool of their own blood and vomit. They're not legends to me. They're just regular people with really serious fucking character flaws."

Rather than try to follow his father's path of country-rock outlaw turned political songwriter, Justin Earle's habit of making more purely roots-oriented records is a direction different enough from Dad's to make direct comparisons less relevant.

"I never want to make the same record again, and this record is another part of the progression. I think it all began with Woody Guthrie. So I made my Woody Guthrie record, which is Yuma [a six-song EP released in 2007]. And then I made my honky-tonk record, which is The Good Life [2008]. And then I kind of went for a more astral, Muscle Shoals-ish approach on Midnight at the Movies [2009]. On this [new] one, we kinda went straight for Memphis."

"We" are Earle and Jason Isbell, the former Drive-By Trucker who plays electric guitar on the new album and who now fronts his own band, the 400 Unit. The songs on Harlem River Blues vary from the gospel-inflected title track to the straight-up folk of "One More Night in Brooklyn" to Earle's brilliant update of the traditional train song with a chugga-chugga beat, "Working for the MTA," whose main character is a NYC subway motorman, and whose title is a nod to Lynyrd Skynyrd's "Workin' for MCA." In "Wanderin'," and especially "Slippin' and slidin'," Earle, who's become a more expressive singer with each new album, dives deep into his foibles for lyrics while melodically treading a road familiar to the first two "great" songwriters on his list: Bob Dylan and John Prine. If he can tame his dark sides, this Earle, who best of all has a big heart, is far ahead of most musicians his age.

"The only thing that saves me is the fact that I have no... I have no... I don't lie to myself. And I'm not going to lie to my fans or anybody else."

"I kinda like the way Gram Parsons approached songwriter, in the fact that there wasn't a whole lot of poetry to it. It rhymed, but it's like, if it hurt, say it hurt, and say why it hurt, and what happened as a result—instead of trying to wisp it up with a bunch of cloudy rainbow bullshit."

"I think that, in order to write really good songs, you've got to be able to cry. And that's something that most people don't know how to do, really."
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