Audible Illusions, Pass Labs, Carver

TRANSPARENT PREAMPS

1996 RECORDS TO DIE FOR

Wes Phillips Explores CAR AUDIO

Rick Visits DR. JOHN

REVIEWS: Epos, Joseph, Totem Speakers
          Sonic Frontiers CD Transport
          Naim ARO Tonearm
The king is dead. Long live the king!

After eight years the Aragon 4004, the most successful amplifier in the history of high end audio, is no longer in production. Its reign has not ended, but been handed to the next generation of Aragon amplifiers...the 8008. With additional features such as 300% more heat sink area and DC servo control, this heir to the throne possesses far greater refinement and control. Because of these additional features it also possesses far greater value.

In the service of music, Aragon's 8008. Long live the king!
Rounding Up the Usual suspects

When J. Gordon Holt founded Stereophile in 1962, it was very much the outsider. Compared with the mass-market magazine of which he had been Technical Editor, High Fidelity, Gordon's Stereophile was the very model of an "underground" publication, with a publication schedule as irregular as its production values were inconsistent. Its writing was from the heart, however.

A third of an audio century later, High Fidelity is long gone and, much to the surprise of those of us who work on it, Stereophile appears to be regarded by some as the new Establishment in audio publishing.1 With a regular publication schedule, an average issue size of 276 large pages compared with the average of 40 small pages when Larry Archibald purchased the magazine in 1982, and, I believe, consistently excellent standards of writing and presentation, this magazine's circulation has grown from 3000 in 1982 to 80,000 today.

I don't see any virtue in remaining small and exclusive. To the contrary, I believe any magazine's fundamental goal is to spread what it believes in to as wide an audience as possible. While it may have come in from the cold, Stereophile has remained true to the tenets on which it was founded: we put our readers' interests first; and we judge audio components on how they sound.

But if you read the new generation of underground magazines that have been drawn into existence both by our growth and by the diminution and demise of other titles, you would think Stereophile has somehow betrayed the high-end faith. "Masters of the Universe," grumbles one.2 "Rigorously scientific rationalists in Santa Fe," complains another.3 Such criticisms may be sincere, but their authors forget that, ultimately, readers don't read your magazine to find out what you think about what other magazines do; they buy it to read about what you are doing. To define your editorial identity in terms of what another magazine does is a losing strategy.

The one item that appears to unite our audio-journalist brethren is their distaste for Stereophile's inclusion of standardized measurements in its equipment reports. Those who subscribe to this horror for "graphs," however, miss the point. The integration of measurements into Stereophile's reviews is not to describe or replace the listening experience — that is, and probably will always be, impossible. Without listening, there is no way, for example, of measuring something as universally perceptible as the quality of a stereo soundstage.

In fact, the performance of any audio component is a multidimensional entity. Just about every subjective performance parameter is affected by more than one technical aspect of a component's design. To be feasible, however, any specific measurement must be reduced to two or, at best, three dimensions — as in Stereophile's loudspeaker waterfall plots, where amplitude is plotted against time and frequency or direction and frequency.

This pragmatic process of reduction makes it very easy, therefore, for a measurement regime to amount to nothing more than a roundup of the usual technical suspects. As Chris Sommerville, the designer of the excellent Illuminati digital datalinks, wrote some time ago on The Audiophile Network,4 "The fundamental incongruity in using objectively-obtained data to determine the value of a particular component lies in the fact that, although the data may be objectively obtained, the 'determination and evaluation' are most certainly subjective. The assumption that objectively-obtained data can be interpreted objectively is a deadly fallacy."

The concept of 'value' or "quality" must always be a subjective phenomenon. But to imply that objectivism has no place in the assessment of equipment intended to reproduce music is as untenable a position as that of the engineer who insists that all relevant parameters of performance are known. A complete review needs to combine both subjective and objective assessments: one to indicate what is happening; the other to give a measure of its relevance and its worth.

The measurements in Stereophile's reviews support the reviewers' observations on the components' sound quality with possible or probable explanations. A secondary role is to provide specific information about a component's needs regarding use and potential matching. Decent measurements also validate a design and, by implication, its designer's competence. As Robert Harley wrote last March (p.63), "the better-measuring products won't always sound better, but a good-sounding, well-engineered component inspires more confidence than one that performs poorly on the bench."

Stereophile is also slowly building up a database of what measurements good-sounding products have in common. In the long term, patterns indicating a causal connection between what is heard and what is measured will emerge from that mountain of data. We may be a long way from that enlightening goal — although I believe it has already started to happen with loudspeakers — but if we don't measure at all, we will remain in the dark.

—John Atkinson

1 See Tom Harris's "The High End at the Razor's Edge," The Absolute Sound, Issue 184, p.52.
4 Tel: (318) 988-0452, B11, 2400-28,800 baud.

Personnel notes
Sadly, the January issue of Stereophile was the last to be produced by our capable Managing Editor, Polly Summar. Polly has moved up to become Editor of Sag, the Albuquerque Journal's monthly women's magazine. Best of luck with your own title, Polly!

—John Atkinson
Here's a reason for the use of our patented Kevlar® cones is reason enough to choose the new B&W 600 Series.

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bullet-proof argument
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Car Tunes
In the first installment of a new quarterly column, Wes Phillips explores 12V Land and gets The Great White Rhino outfitted with killer components from Audio Alchemy, MB Quart, Nakamichi, and McIntosh.

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WELCOME BACK!
Editor:
Sami Tellig — welcome back!
WILLIAM R. HITCHINS
Mountain View, CA

TREASURE TROVE
Editor:
Full of expression, wit, insight, and grace, Dr. Elizabeth Cohen’s tribute to the music of the Grateful Dead in December ’95 (p.116), properly footnoted, was an unexpected treasure trove hidden ’twixt the articles of your usually highbrow publication. It provided significant variety rarely found among the technical battles typically waged on your pages.

As both an avid fan of the band and yet another critical Stereophile subscriber, I was certainly not surprised that the December cover omitted any and all references to this extensive article. I was equally astounded to count seven full pages of “deadicated” text.

Unfortunately, it was the death of Mr. Garcia that provided the impetus for the group to be celebrated by you in this grand manner. I applaud the coverage, however, and endorse Dr. Cohen for a monthly column.

STEVEN A. TRITSCH
Livingston, NJ

INSIGHTFUL
Editor:
As both a Deadhead and audiophile, I wanted to thank you and Elizabeth Cohen for the excellent article about the Dead in the December ’95 Stereophile. This insightful and succinct article is one of the best pieces about the Dead’s music I’ve ever read. That it appears in a “mainstream” publication is particularly nice, since most of what is written about the Dead in the “square” press misses the point entirely. (And how often do you read about the music, which is what it’s all about?)

I commend this article for anyone wanting to get into the Dead’s music...

Live Dead is one of the great live albums of all time and one of my desert island discs. Redonning is another great live album of a beautiful acoustic show and a wonderful place for audiophiles to start. Make sure and track down the vinyl—it’s not that hard to find, and includes a few songs missing on the CD. Great music and sonics to match.

Of course, the Dead’s officially released music is only the starting point—the real treasure is the vast recorded legacy lovingly captured by amateur tapers throughout the Dead’s amazing career. I think a lot of audiophiles would be amazed at the musical magic and fidelity captured on a well-recorded, low-generation bootleg, be it an audience tape or a soundboard, or even better, one of Dan Healy’s audience/soundboard mixes. Cassettes are analog too!

Stereophile’s “Building a Library” series is consistently excellent. Congratulations on a job well done, and keep up the good work!

C. CRAIG SCHILLING
c.craig.schilling@tanet.com

INTERCONNECTS,
INTERMEZZO, & THE BEEF
Editor:
I enjoy reading Stereophile because there’s always something to learn about audio that one did not know before, as in the November ’95 issue (p.127) when Robert Harley wrote about Encore’s pyramid-shaped processor clearly separating [the images of] stringed instruments in orchestral renditions. Writing like this often excites me as much as owning the component itself.

In light of this knowledge, I started to talk about this condition with designers of my audio gear to help me satisfy what I thought was missing in my system. In the last six months, my Krell DSP Mk.I CD player was upgraded to a Mk.II. After I let it warm up for two weeks, critical listening began. My first impression was: Where is the beef? On the phone soon after, Krell informed me that I should have balanced cables running from the CD player to the preamplifier. I didn’t, so I purchased the entry-level ones from Transparent Cable.

Okay, I got those stringed instruments separated to a satisfactory degree, and even the soundstage opened up to hear more individual instruments hidden before. So the cables let me hear the upgrade of the CD player, but where is the beef?

Then I played your Intermezzo CD that I just received. My first impression is: Here Is The Beef! The sound came not only from the hummed strings of the piano, but from the piano itself. The wood reflected a sound that, yes, beefed it up like a real piano.

So who cares what people say about Stereophile when your Intermezzo CD has the beef?

ANTHONY J. DENTE
Mt. Vernon, NY

DOING IT RIGHT?
Editor:
Intermezzo is a wonderful recording! Congratulations Robert Silverman and Stereophile.

TOM SWEETNAM
Eureka, CA

Intermezzo, featuring piano works by Brahms and recorded in analog by Kari Alexander, is available on both LP and CD. See the ad elsewhere in this issue for ordering details. And Robert
a sound philosophy

unlock the mystery.

Bring your key to HIFI '96 at the Waldorf Astoria, N.Y. in May 1996 for a chance to win the centerpiece of the EIGER sound system.
DOING IT WRONG?
Editor:
I have been a member of the audiophile "cult" for four years now. To most of the readers of Stereophile, this is insignificant. However, I should point out that I'm only 16 years old.

In the course of those four years, I've witnessed both the best and worst of the High End. I have experienced systems that have virtually transported me to the original venue. I have also been harassed by pompous salesmen telling me that they didn't have anything I could afford and that I should go to Circuit City.

Undoubtedly, anyone near my age has had this happen to them. This problem is what I believe to be the greatest flaw of the High End. A common complaint that I find in audio journals is that there aren't any young audiophiles. Salesmen see our age and they laugh. They laugh even though their stores are closing because of slow sales. The San Francisco Bay area has lost three high-end stores in the last two years. This may not seem like many, but if there were only around 10 to start with, this is a big loss.

True, my system my not be the greatest, but it is fairly impressive for a high-school student. The $10,000 it cost was money well spent, and it has brought me many hours of enjoyment. I have gotten past the ignorance of salesmen, but I'm afraid there are countless others like me out there who can't.

G. Jimenez
Gjmenez@odowd.pvt.k12.ca.us

HI-FI SNOBBERY
Editor:
You've recently published several readers' letters about "Hi-Fi Snobbery." It wasn't until recently that I was initiated into the elite high-end club. In my quest to audition the Sonic Frontiers SFL-2 preamplifier for a final purchase decision, I contacted a dealer that advertises in Stereophile. The salesperson extolled the virtues of the SFL-11 but belittled my current Conrad-Johnson PV-12L. Nonetheless, the following morning, with directions in hand, along with a friend, I made the anxious two-hour journey.

Upon arrival, I contacted the salesperson, who led us to one of the "reference rooms." Once there, he realized that the demo SFL-2 power supply had been sent back to Sonic Frontiers for "upgrades." This had obviously slipped his mind when we'd talked, at length, the previous night. I'm almost in the Club now!

At this point I would have been acting well within the rules of audiophile etiquette if I blew my cool. I refrained from such behavior, as I had not yet gotten my High-End Snob Club membership card. I told the salesperson that all was not lost, as at least I'd get a chance to audition one of their reference systems. The salesperson then stated that a deposit normally required to listen to the reference systems. However, because of the inconvenience I'd been subjected to, the salesperson stated that he would talk with the manager to see if the deposit could be waived. I was getting really excited now because I'd almost got my club card.

The manager then coolly approached us and inquired as to what the problem might be. I was nervous now; this must be the guy with the club cards! After some discussion about the previous events, he said he would grant us permission to listen to the reference system as a consolation prize. At this point I may have violated audiophile etiquette rules by saying, "Thanks, but no thanks." I apologized to the manager and the salesperson for entering their store on a Saturday afternoon and requesting to listen to their reference systems. I'm in the Club now!

One thing struck me as we were leaving (being escorted from) the store. Out of the 12 showrooms, there was no music playing anywhere. There were people milling around, but none listening to music…

SHELTON L. HUDSON
New Castle, DE

DOG-EARED?
Editor:
As an example of the extremes to which Stereophile readers will go, this winter my wife and I spent four months backpacking in the South Pacific. Now, there is no way I can go that long without reading a Stereophile, so I bought the issue in the photo just before we left Canada and brought it with me. One particular day on the island of Luzon in the Philippines, we had an eight-hour hike ahead of us, six hours of it uphill, then two hours down the other side, the whole way with full packs! Considering the steepness of the climb, we explored every means of reducing our weight. I looked at the magazine — but I was right in the middle of the article on the Genesis loudspeakers, so I had to take it with me. In the village at the end of the hike, I spent the rest of that afternoon and the next two days finishing the issue and drinking in the spectacular scenery. The hike to this remote village high in the mountains was hard, but as usual, the visual and cultural rewards were worth the effort 10 times over.

Today, that issue of Stereophile is on my bookshelf at home beside all the other issues, but it's easy to spot; it's the one that's all dog-eared and dirty.

JIM BRYANT
New Westminster, BC, Canada

GOLDEN-EARED?
Editor:
I am moved to write in response to the
We racked our brains to find a way to tell you how good the Totem Mani-2 really is. And then a Mani-2 owner did it better than we could!

We have had the Totems in our home for roughly three months. The Totem Mani-2s are the finest loudspeakers I have listened to regardless of price and I have listened long and hard to the likes of of Audio Labs, Martin Logans (all models but the Statement), Vandersteens, Paradigms, Magnepanars, Apogees, etc. etc. The Mani-2s create a larger and far more detailed sound stage than any of the above. The highs are fluid, detailed and spacious, without any edginess. The lows are fast, deep, full and defined. And the midrange... the midrange is warm, musical and expansive. Your speakers have returned the word "presence" to my audio-vocabulary. I could go on and on. The bottom line is that for the first time in years I find myself lost in the MUSIC rather than listening to my system.

I want to thank you all at Totem for bringing quality, accountability and value back to high end audio. I also want to tell you how helpful, informative and enthusiastic

Listen and believe

This is an excerpt from an actual letter addressed to May Audio by the (obviously happy) owner of a pair of Totem Mani-2 loudspeakers.

(Of course, he didn’t mention the double box with lock miter cabinet joints, the push-pull twin woofers that maintain control below 20 Hz, the space-age borosilicate damping, or the twin WBT binding posts. But he told you the essential...they sound wonderful!)
Stereophile review of the Audio Research CD-1 CD player in December 1995 (p.13).

What was the point of publishing the measurements? Wes Phillips said the CD-1 sounded great and was an excellent value. Why send everybody into anxiety attacks over the measured performance? Maybe Audio Research wanted to build it the way it is...It's the music that counts, right? MIKE CLARK
Baltimore, MD

HANGING?
Editor:
Wes Phillips's Audio Research CD-1 review in December '95 left me hanging. Wes put in a nice teaser that he "used the CD-1 as a transport utilizing the McCormack SST-1, Micromega DAC, and Theta Pro Basic III D/A converters," but he never reported the results.

Thorough and professional reviews of CD players usually seem to report whether or not a CD player is a good candidate for being used as a CD transport with an external D/A converter, in case the owner wants to upgrade later. I certainly am interested in finding out about the CD-1. Is there a set of editorial standards that Stereophile applies to their writers so we can always get a complete story?

MARK MAHAN
Mark.Mahan@majiq.com

We do try to publish complete stories, so I'm confused at the assertion that I "left the reader hanging" for the results of my audition of the ARC CD-1 as a transport. I state emphatically in the fourth paragraph of the review that I "never achieved equivalent sound quality when using the CD-1 as a transport feeding separate D/Acs, even when cascading a Sonic Frontiers UltraJitterbug into an Audio Alchemy DTI-Pro 32 to clean up the signal!" Coming on the heels of the third paragraph's discussion of the theoretical advantages offered by the inherent elimination of jitter in single-chassis units, I had assumed that I was being clear and unequivocal. —WP

LIVING STEREO MANIA!
Editor:
I noticed a comment in the latest Stereophile about nominating Perez Prado's Big Hits by Prado as a reissue for Classic Records' RCA Living Stereo series.

Having grown up listening to some of the old RCA artists, I feel that Classic Records, or even RCA, could stand to pay even more attention to the popular side of their catalog (the LSP series). I have a healthy collection of vintage Mancini albums on vinyl, and whatever Perez Prado titles I can find. I've found certain Mancini titles to be common, and others quite rare; in good condition, they can fetch between $10 and $50 per title! (I recently passed up a copy of Mancini's Experiment in Terror, for which the seller was asking $75)

RCA International has reissued several classic Living Stereo albums in their "RCA Tropical Series" program. Although some are mono, they've all been remastered from the original RCA master tapes. The titles I have so far (which I reviewed for CompuServe's Music/Arts forum) sound quite good. Among the artists in this series are Perez Prado, Tito Puente, Shorty Rogers, and Eddie Cano.

Among my collection, I'd nominate the following from the RCA Living Stereo catalog for reissue:

- The Stanley Wilson Orchestra: Music From M Squad. A rare find on vinyl, this is soundtrack music from an old TV series starring Lee Marvin. The (uncredited) big band is mostly made up of crack session musicians including Benny Carter, Frank Rosolino, Pete Candoli, etc. Most tracks are composed by Carter and bandleader Wilson, and the title track is by Count Basie. An excellent swingin' session — and the sound isn't bad either!

- Henry Mancini & His Orchestra: Mr. Lucky Goes Latin. Arguably one of Mancini's best recordings from a musical and sonical standpoint, and one of my all-time favorites. The music is basically Latin-flavored M.O.R. with a touch of jazz, fueled by lush strings, Latin-oriented percussion and instruments (the lyjon and the timpanola), and the occasional saxophone licks. My vinyl copy is awesomely quiet, and reveals an astonishing soundstage with excellent dynamics.

- Henry Mancini & His Orchestra: Our Man In Hollywood. While this album leans more towards movie music than my favored jazz recordings, the sound on this album is nearly as good as Mr. Lucky. What makes this album stand out is the use of different instrumentation and the clarity with which they are reproduced.

- Henry Mancini & His Orchestra: Combo! I have yet to find a clean used copy of this LP! Nonetheless, it's a favorite of mine, featuring a pared-down version of the big band that made the Peter Gunn LPs. Mancini always had a knack for using unusual instruments in his recordings, and this is no exception:

you've never heard a jazz harpsichord until you've heard it in Combo!

- Perez Prado & His Orchestra: Prez. Although I have yet to hear Big Hits by Prado, Prez is probably the best-sounding Perez Prado LP I've ever heard. Musically, side one is a mix of fine Latin music and mambos, while side two adds the Prado touch to jazz standards like "Lullaby of Birdband," "Leo's Special," and a dizzying "Flight of the Bumblebee." The instruments come through this old recording with astonishing clarity, both in timbre and in soundstage.

My CD copy is better than my LP copy, mainly because the LP sounds as though it was pressed using a worn Stamper.

- Tito Puente & His Orchestra: Dance Mania Vol.1. I'm unsure if this was even an actual LP (there's a Volume 2 available also — the Tropical Series reissues sometimes alter the original album names), but the CD features some excellent music by the master timbalerio. The sound is somewhat soft in the high end, but has a spacious "feel" to it.

- Shorty Rogers: Mantea — Afro-Cuban Influence. This set features Shorty Rogers and a cast of Cuban percussionists in a good set of Latin swing. The sound, unfortunately, needs a little help. The bass leans heavily toward the "warm," and there's an awful lot of tape hiss on the CD version. But, it still has that same type of clarity that many of these other recordings share. Maybe a bit of Classic Records' magic would restore this swingin' set.

And don't get me started on Verve — I still can't understand why they've neglected practically the entire Cal Tjader catalog. Classic Records, take note!

For what it's worth, those are some of my top picks for the "Classic Records" treatment. Too bad they can't do 'em all!

NEIL RUDISH
71211.3370@compuserve.com

SUGAR CHAPMAN MANIA
Editor:
You surpassed yourselves in November '95—not one, but two of my favorite "great unknown" recording artists reviewed, both favorably!

First, Big Sugar. I caught them at a Toronto Blues Festival after rain cut short an Albert Collins outside performance (serious disappointment). Forced inside, I came across this thin, suit-clad guitarist with white shirt and narrow tie (Hugo Boss drapes, no doubt), with his guitar near his knees, leading a trio play-
"Some of the sweetest valve amps in the world come from VAC..."

"In this age of 10-watters masquerading as real amps, the PA80/80 is something of an aminal, rugged enough to wear 2 ohm taps as well as 4 and 8... the fit and construction are superb... the PA80/80 looks expensive and, well, classy.

"Sonically the VAC is simply a dream... The bass is so well controlled that KT88 devotees will buy it just to flip the bird to 300B users... Imaging? It could teach the PC cretins a thing or two about virtual reality. Speed? Up there with some serious solid-staters. Composure? This baby could have been through Eton.

"This stuff is too nice to ignore."

Ken Kessler, HiFi News & Record Review, September 1995

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Valve Amplification Company
Post Office Box 4609 • Sarasota, Florida 34230 • USA
Telephone (941) 377-7884 • Fax (941) 925-1220
Again, of which, Provogue Sugar, releases, difficulty, your ing Margaritaville remark! can a good sustainable trying releases didn't even try well-played it. I'm ordering at least four (one spare for me, two to give as gifts!) unheard (it's not necessary), as well as trying to track down the four Epic releases (alluded to in the review) that I didn't even know about... where's my credit card?! My compliments to Beth Jacques; her review of It's About Time (Island/ Margaritaville 162-532, November '95, p.263) precisely expressed my own opinion of this under-appreciated artist. I hope the review prompts those of your readers who enjoy well-constructed, well-played slabs of rock 'n roll with a taste of country and a pinch of blues to try this disc. I'm sure they won't regret it.

Me? I'm ordering at least four (one spare for me, two to give as gifts!) unheard (it's not necessary), as well as trying to track down the four Epic releases (alluded to in the review) that I didn't even know about... where's my credit card?! I appreciate Mr. Colebank's filling me in on the details of this extraordinary recording JA has also now had the opportunity to listen to the new CD and enthusiastically endorses it. Sheffield used the single-microphone version; the correct SPARS code is AAD.

TOLERANCE?
Editor: Because I am an extremely tolerant individual, no baby boomer (not Bill Clinton, not even Sam Tellig) has ever tested my patience enough to provoke a “Letter to the Editor”; Mr. Michael Fremer (“Analog Corner,” November '95, p.51) has achieved that dubious distinction.

I do not know whether his assertion that “the classical music world is perpetually bent out of shape because the audience are so old” is simply a diatribe against the AARP, or he has become a member of Ken Kessler’s “I Hate Lovers of Classical Music Club.” Regardless of his bias against age and/or musical culture, he should be made aware that in his aforementioned column he has taken hypocrisy, sophism, and paradox to new rhetorical heights.

It is hypocritical to attend a cultural event, especially at Tanglewood, for the purpose of gorging on jumbo shrimp while poking fun at his host’s (TDK) admirable gesture of providing young children and adolescents with exposure to musical greatness (Mahler's Symphony 2).

It's even more hypocritical to boast that his '72 Saab is a "road warrior" when he has juiced it up with oversized pistons, a two-barrel Weber carburetor, etc. This is the moral equivalent of getting a Kenwood receiver, substituting the circuitry of a toposnotch British integrated amplifier, and making listeners believe that the Kenwood is an electronic marvel.

Where Mr. Fremer made his opinionated column more of a joke than ever before was with his detailed description of his visit at Rockport Technologies. To salivate while contemplating an 800-pound turntable (which he hasn't even heard — I wonder about his “subjectivity”) that is supposed to improve the performance of the $30,000 Sirius 2 (!), and was manufactured only for the purpose of "digitizing" the Sony acetate archives, is a symptom of ultimate analog lunacy.

By the way, it may not have occurred to Mr. Fremer that Sony may be thinking of preserving for posterity performances by Igor Stravinsky, Bruno Walter, Dimitri Mitropoulos, and other great performers of serious music, in addition to — or preferably instead of - the good old pop junk that seems to be favored by his decadent generation (with honorable exceptions, as is always the case).

I don't wish to make predictions on the inevitable demise of vinyl, because there are thousands of happy collectors of rare old shellac 78s. But I can assure your distinguished columnist that one hundred years from today hordes of cultured people will still make the pilgrimage to Bayreuth and Salzburg — perhaps to Tanglewood. His generation's icons — Woodstock, Mick, Kurt, and Jerry — may perhaps be mentioned en passant in sociological essays on the moral and cultural fall of the American nation.

EDUARDO A. BENET
Key Biscayne, FL

TANGLED UP
Editor: In your November issue, Michael Fremer writes about his visit to Tanglewood. From the emphasis Fremer placed on the free food he scarfed, one could get the impression that Tanglewood is a restaurant. It is, in fact, the summer home of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, set in the Berkshire mountains of Western Massachusetts.

Fremer's disjointed report doesn't give your readers even a hint of how great a setting Tanglewood is for music. As many as 15,000 people enjoy the BSO on a summer's day. About 5000 sit inside the Music Shed, which is open on three sides. The rest stretch out on the spacious lawn, picnicking, sipping beer and wine. In addition to missing the whole point of Tanglewood — hint: music — Fremer misspells the name of the Koussevitsky estate, calling it Serina, which he then spells backward for no obvious reason. The estate is called Seranak, named for SERge And NATalie Koussevitsky. Spelled back-
In an industry where consensus is rare, the editors of eleven European audio journals elected to give the N°36 the European High End Audio of the Year Award. The N°36 is the third Mark Levinson component in the last four years to have been so honored.

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uses a five part-per-
jewel-like precision wrought by hand-
million custom clock to
craftsmanship makes every touch a
reduce jitter to
pleasure of its own. Experience
unprecedented levels.
the difference quality makes.
ward, it still isn't funny. I'm sure your needledisk columnist missed the correct spelling on the signs, the printed literature, etc., at the estate. I guess they should have printed it on the shrimp.

Fremmer's flippant, uninformed writing supports the stereotype that audiophiles are hobby-boys who love equipment, not music. Remember, there will be new audiences for classical music concerts, but there won't be future generations of needledisk fans. Needledisks are an historical medium; a needledisk column ought to center around musical treasures available on vinyl alone, and only occasionally on the hardware that plays it.

Bob Comiskey
Natick, MA

I thought it obvious that MF was exaggerating to make the point, as he did later say in his November column. But my apologies for the "Semicircle/Semiank" typo. And as for "needledisk," we prefer "LP." The disk usage we reserve for computer disks and diskettes.

—JA

CABLE STANDARDS
Editor:
Thank you for publishing a scientific study of cable performance using in-circuit measurements ("What a Difference a Wire Makes," December '95, p.95). Author Ben Duncan suggests that low inductance correlates with good measured results. The obvious deficiency is that he did not provide inductance (L), capacitance (C), and resistance (R) measurements for the eight cables he studied in the article. Would it be possible to ask him to supply such measurements? I also wish Stereophile would start measuring speaker wire and interconnects. Martin Colloms published measured results for a number of cables in the July 1990 issue of Hi-Fi News & Record Review.

Note that another important effect of cables is their frequency response. High L values tend to roll-off the high frequencies, while the long "settling times" Ben Duncan measured may audibly show as loss of transparency and low-level detail. Given at least the two measurable effects (frequency response and settling times), I'm not surprised that some people report hearing differences among cables. Of course it remains, for another article, to correlate the long settling times with sonic attributes, in a well-controlled blind listening experiment.

From the very little data I was able to obtain on only four speaker cables from two manufacturers, I found inductance variation by a factor of 25 and capacitance variation by a factor of 86! How much variation would I have found had I looked at 50 cables?

The FDA requires extensive testing and evaluation of drugs before approval. Makers of bottled and canned foods and drinks are required to report calorie and nutrient contents in a specific way. Tobacco companies are required to publish in their ads nicotine and tar contents in their cigarettes. Amplifier makers are required by the FTC to report power ratings in a very specific way. Car makers have to report tens, possibly hundreds, of measurements on their cars. Is it too much to require cable and interconnect manufacturers to publish inductance, capacitance, and resistance specifications in their ads? Maybe it's time for Stereophile to lead in this direction.

Finally, Mr. Duncan's "Further Reading" list (p.105) was very short. Max Kelso has recently posted a list of 36 references on the topic on the rec.audio.high.end (R.A.H.E.) internet newsgroup.

Baha F. Qaqish
Chapel Hill, NC

I will ask Ben Duncan for a list of measured R, L, and C, and agree that for cable manufacturers to specify these parameters is a good idea. Certainly we should start publishing this information in our cable reviews. Mr. Duncan's further reading list was only intended to be a starting point. If the interest exists, we'll publish a complete list of references. Incidentally, an important earlier article that revealed measured speaker cable differences was written by Ken Covan, the co-founder of Kinetics. It appeared in Stereophile in January 1990 (Vol.13 No.1, p.103). Back issues are available — see the ad elsewhere in this issue.

—JA

CABLE ERRORS
Editor:
There appears to be an error in Malcom Omar Hawksford's October '95 article, "The Essex Echo" (Vol.18 No.10). On p.54, the caption to fig.1 read in part: "The sinusoidally varying magnetic field (E) ..." I'm wondering, shouldn't that read electric field (E)?

Or perhaps I just don't understand it.

Nevertheless, I look forward to every issue of Stereophile.

Robert Rutske
Rochester, MN

Good catch, Mr. Rutske. The figure shown represents an electromagnetic wave propagating in a dielectric as alternating electric and magnetic fields. Somewhere in the October issue's production process, I got my magnets and electrets mixed up.

—JA

CABLE PHYSICS
Editor:
It was delightful to see the publication of some basic cable physics. Any article that makes it clear that one must go beyond the "ordinary" electrical engineering equations to Maxwell's equations, as Malcolm Omar Hawksford's did in the October '95 issue of Stereophile, is greatly appreciated.

It appears that the audio engineering community is totally unaware of the amount of cable physics that is already well understood. As a simple example, let us consider the coaxial cable. Because of the symmetry involved, it's relatively easy to show that a simplified transmission-line equation is accurate enough to reveal the three largest distortion mechanisms: variable resistance, inductance, and capacitance. (Most cable designs suffer from these relatively large distortions while their designers attempt to reduce enormously smaller distortion mechanisms.)

Articles that model the coax as a simplified transmission line go a bit of the way toward explaining the difference between cables. Even going from the transmission-line equation to treating the cable as one or perhaps a few L, R, C circuits is acceptable for determining the greatest sources of distortion. What's not acceptable is using the "standard" engineering text expressions for L(u), R(u), and C(u). These must be obtained from Maxwell's equations!

What virtually all audio engineers use for L(u) and R(u) are high-frequency expressions only crudely approximating the true values in the upper audio band. At lower frequencies they are even worse approximations, and the rules of thumb used to decide when to stop using them and resort to L(u)=constant and R(u)=constant are similarly crude.

Before continuing with this analysis we should explain how such a mix-up could occur. First, it does not occur in Physics literature. Even without doing an extensive literature search, one finds that a classic electrodynamics text such as Arnold Sommerfeld's Electrodynamics (Academic Press, 1964) gives the familiar high-frequency results for L(u) and R(u) as well as the correct low-frequency results. (The transition between these occurs essentially in the audio range; and so in our own work, we derive expressions that are valid at all frequencies. For the mathematically inclined, these involve infinitely many terms; essentially pieces from the series expansion of a Bessel function of com-
Sure, it's nice to be hailed as a "benchmark." But what, exactly, does that mean? Well, let's read the quote in context:

"While the HCA-2200" has virtually unlimited brute power, it has enough finesse to let the music come through largely unscathed. Over the last six months it has proven, with a variety of speakers in both my listening rooms, that it's a benchmark product against which other amplifiers can be measured. If an amp of equal or greater price isn't at least as good as the HCA-2200, it doesn't cut it."

It's clear that Mr. Stone has discovered the virtues of our amplifier. And while we're pleased he found the process so enjoyable, we aren't surprised. It's all part of our design philosophy, whose essence he captures nicely when he says, "...a middle-class audiophile like myself no longer has to take out a second mortgage on his house to afford a musically satisfying amplifier."

"...A Benchmark Product Against Which Other Amplifiers Can Be Measured."

-- Steven Stone, Stereophile, Vol. 17 No. 3, March 1994

But what did surprise us, as well as flatter us, was being thrown into the ring with $12,000 monoblock behemoths. The result of this apparently absurd comparison? Not carnage, but rather: "...the Parasound HCA-2200" gives them all a run for the money, and even beats 'em in flexibility and price." He continues, "...a pair of HCA-2200's performed with Apogee full-ranges on a par with a pair of Boulder 250 AEs and four VTL Deluxe 300 amps. Dynamic impact and attack were excellent...Compared to the VTL 300, the HCA-2200 had a greater sense of extension..."

Enough quotes. It's time to experience one yourself. Just visit your local Parasound dealer and learn that "benchmark" is the expert's way of saying you don't have to break the bank to get the best. And you can quote us on that.

"...prodigious bass output and sense of unlimited power and effortlessness," says Stereophile. And no wonder. It delivers over 90 amps of peak current per channel.
plex argument.)

It should be noted that if one uses the generally accepted skin-depth expression \( \delta = \sqrt{2/\mu \omega} \), one obtains only the high-frequency results for \( R(\omega) \) and \( L(\omega) \)! How can this be? After all, it is a simple matter to show that a plane-wave solution in a conducting medium dies exponentially with the characteristic skin depth given above.

The answer is that for an object that's infinitely large in all three dimensions, only one plane wave is necessary to satisfy Maxwell's equations. This, of course, dies with the characteristic skin depth given above; hence, quantities derived from it are valid at all frequencies.

Now, if our slab of metal is infinitely long and wide, but only of finite thickness, two plane waves are required. This is not surprising since a wave is reflected off the back wall. One wave dies while the other rises exponentially, each with a different frequency-dependent amplitude. The net effect is that the total field now no longer dies off exponentially.

Now, although the above is true, it still only involves frequency-dependent amplitudes and a dying and rising exponential in the "skin depth" \( \delta = \sqrt{2/\mu \omega} \) that many cling to. Skin depth is now in quotes since the more general definition, that distance over which the field is reduced to \( 1/e \) of its initial value, no longer occurs over a distance \( \delta = \sqrt{2/\mu \omega} \) at lower frequencies, because of the rising exponential.

Finally, if our metal object is infinite in only one dimension (that is, wire-like), infinitely many plane waves are required to satisfy Maxwell's equations because there are infinitely many reflections. Now, not only does the \( \delta = \sqrt{2/\mu \omega} \) equation no longer satisfy the general definition of a skin depth, but with infinitely many waves the final results for quantities of interest do not even reveal that \( \delta = \sqrt{2/\mu \omega} \) is an interesting quantity at low frequencies.

Before returning to the coax, we should note that at a low, but fixed, frequency, large-enough wires "look" infinite in cross-section; and there, the skin depth applies. The frequency and size regime under which this occurs can be found by a now-detailed treatment of a particular cross-sectional shape.

It's important to emphasize that while rough calculations can help guide one, detailed solutions with a knowledge of the accuracy of the solution are critical. For example, a calculation of the distortion due to a coax (used as a speaker cable or interconnect) is severely underestimated when one adheres to the erroneous expression for \( L(\omega) \), \( R(\omega) \), and \( C(\omega) \). This in turn causes many to seek an explanation for cable differences elsewhere, to no avail.

We should also note that part of this underestimation of distortion is due to a near-total lack of concern for phase distortion. This is a shame, since for any wave phenomenon involving more than a single frequency (for example, music is a single-tone hearing test), phase shifts produce distortion to a similar degree as amplitude attenuation. It may surprise the reader to learn that a 100Hz squarewave (with harmonics up to 20kHz), when passed through our simulated running example of the coax, arrives at the other end with a 20kHz "chirp" added to it.

This distortion comes mainly from the phase shift associated with the correct frequency-dependent inductance. Although this may seem strange at first, it can be explained as follows: Each harmonic of the low-frequency squarish waveform shares common zero points where the squarish wave itself is zero. Since each of the harmonics is then shifted by different small amounts as it passes through the cable, there's a small region around each mode of the squarish wave that becomes most strongly distorted, and hence, a narrow (ie, high-frequency) waveform or "chirp" develops.

Clearly, it's crucial even in this simple example of a coaxial cable to use the correct expressions for \( R(\omega) \), \( L(\omega) \), and \( C(\omega) \). Besides leading to distortions that are much larger than predicted by the rules of thumb used by most, the net effect on a complex waveform (such as our low-frequency squarish wave) is to produce a high-frequency "chirp" (ringing), making it even more audible.

It is beyond the scope of this letter to go into greater detail or to speak to the subject of multistrand cables, various cross-sectional shapes, higher-order modes of propagation, etc. Suffice it to say that similar misunderstandings exist with respect to these cases as to our simple running example.

James Joseph Popiel, Ph.D.
Senior Theoretical Physicist
Daniels Audio
S. Gregoire Daniels, M.S.
Senior Experimental Physicist
Daniels Audio

CABLES & CUCKOO CLOCKS

Editor:
It gives me great pleasure to inform you that Stereophile is the winner of my third annual Cuckoo Clock award. This highly coveted award is given for "The article which best exemplifies progress in metaphysics, confirmation of magical audio properties, realizing the unimportance of measurements, correlating high-priced with superior, not letting any trace of humor diffuse the essence of the article, and blowing smoke." My congratulations!

The winning article appeared in the October '95 issue of Stereophile and was titled "The Essex Echo." One hardly knows where to start the praise for this scholarly article, written by a scholarly individual (Professor Malcolm Omar Hawksford of the University of Essex, England) who has impeccable technical credentials, including a Ph.D. in Electrical Engineering. Since I'm the guy giving the award, I'll start the praise with comments on the preface to the article, written by none other than Little Johnny Atkinson.

As with all of your writings, Johnny, there's an obvious (but not the real) reason for a not-so-obvious, real reason. In this case the obvious was your statement: "The matter of whether — and if so, how — speaker cables and interconnects can affect the sound of an audio system has vexed the audiophile community since Jean Hiraga, Robert Fulton, and others first made us aware of the subject in the mid-70s."

Here's Little Johnny, so arrogant as to make the (implied) statement that he is speaking for the audiophile community. I am a member of that community and I am not vexed; nor do I want you speaking for me. The only ones vexed, Johnny, are those individuals who believe they are vexed because they believe what they read in Stereophile. They worship you, they glorify you, they spread your Gospel. And you love it. But with an ego like yours, you also want to impress the world with your technical prowess.

You can't bestow technical credibility on the cable myth because your technical credentials are sorely lacking. No matter how hard you try, no one takes you seriously when it comes to technical matters. And the more you try to impress, the funnier it gets. Your numerous asterisks and editorial insertions in technical reviews (including the mini-thesis of Dr. Hawksford) cover everything from number theory, quantum physics, and why beating a copper wire with a rubber mallet will change the structure of the copper atom's nucleus. When someone knows so much about everything, one becomes suspicious about this "genius."
You be the judge!

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Case in point: You say in the preface of Dr. Hawksford's article: "The essential math may look intimidating, but it's not as hard to grasp as it looks ..." Hey, no problem for you, huh, John, now wearing the hat of a mathematician. Question: If the math is so simple, why didn't you write the article?

You bring in a Ph.D. to substantiate the simple and obvious fact (10 pages of fact) that signals propagated along a cable will be affected by the cable construction and the materials used in the construction of the cable. One doesn't need a Ph.D. to explain something that requires (at most) high school physics. Hell, even Little Tommy Norton, your technical editor, could have told you that; although Tommy has hearing problems—like not being able to distinguish between a trumpet and a flute when doing a review of an expensive amplifier. (So much for the Golden Ear bullshit.)

The real reasons for the article: first, to bestow credibility on the myth that insanely expensive cables and interconnects are superior to those used by lesser mortals. Second, you achieve a degree of technical respectability by associating with a scholar in the Electrical Engineering arena. The article feeds your ego, and the cable manufacturers feed the coffers of Stereophile by way of paid advertisements. These are the real reasons.

The expert (Dr. Hawksford) is used in the hopes that the average Stereophile reader will see this as proof (implied) that expensive cables and interconnects are now being justified by the scientific community. What's next? A 20-page thesis on string theory by a renowned Cosmologist, giving credibility (by association, implication, and the awe achieved by such a scholar) to the tweak myth that an LP is superior to a CD because the LP achieves infinite resolution? (Huh?) Blowing smoke ... you got it.

Dr. Hawksford deserves a portion of this award for his less-than-noble cause (we might call his abuse of Scientific Method—using his credentials to obliquely give credibility to a cult belief—as mercenary). Dr. Hawksford knows damn well (as you do, Johnny) that the question is not are there differences between cables, but are these differences audible. The disciplines necessary to answer this question are Psychology and Statistical Analysis. Psychology warns us that people see and hear things that don't exist; it also has a lot to say about why people do and say things; and Psychology deives means (tests) to monitor the existence, or non-existence, of our perception differences. To check on the degree of confidence to place in these tests, Psychology borrows from the discipline of Statistical Analysis. Use these two scientific disciplines, with a little help from the Electrical Engineering discipline in the way of an ABX box, and the only people vexed are those who choose to be vexed.

I can't leave Dr. Hawksford's article without commenting on his referencing Maxwell's equations as part of the ridiculous "out-of-context" justification for expensive cables. Imagine, if you will, some enterprising audio cultist who starts a belief that the light from a specially treated (only he has the secret to the special treatment) 75W light bulb enhances the sound of an audio system. He buys the light bulb for 50 cents and sells it for $4500. To justify the price he follows your example and hires a mercenary with a Ph.D. in Astrophysics to write a 10-page dissertation to explain (again, I ephasize, obliquely) the reason the light from this bulb enhances the sound of an audio system. As part of the technical thesis the Astrophysicist includes the equations from Einstein's Special and General Theories of Relativity! Wow! What an idea! E=Mc^2 has the ultimate (general public) recognition factor. If you had used it rather than Maxwell's equations, your followers would not be wondering what the number of coffee scoops used has to do with justifying the cable/interconnect myth. (Think about it, John.)

This is fun, and I could go on for 10 more pages, but why bother? Again, my congratulations to you for winning the Cuckoo Clock Award. As soon as you get back to me with an address, a Cuckoo Clock will be on its way. Please be patient, as the clock will be coming from Germany. And every half-hour and hour the clock will remind you of this award and the reason for it.

JOSEPH M. CIERNIAK
Editor and Publisher, Sound Off

I am sorry my writings vex you so sorely, Mr. Cierniak, but I'm glad to hear the clock's in the mail and I'm equally glad you read the "Essex Echo" article so carefully. The primary reason I published Dr. Hawksford's article was out there in the open in that same preface from which you quoted: Many non-audiophiles are fond of dismissive blanket statements such as "The Laws of Physics predict that there should be no differences between cables at audio frequencies." Yet as Malcolm Oman Hawksford showed, a strict reading of the "Laws of Physics" indicates the exact oppo-

site. That is the point I wanted to make by publishing the article.

Mr. Cierniak has a point in stating that the next question to ask is whether there are audible effects that can be associated with such theoretical and measurable differences. However, that cable differences can be audible has, indeed, been our experience—as it has been found audible differences between amplifiers, between CD players and digital processors, and even between passive components such as capacitors. Sometimes these differences are large; sometimes they are small, even non-existent. But please don't ask us to pretend that these differences don't exist.

Oh, and there's that weasel word "ABX," referring to a specific blind-testing regime. Well, here's something for you to chew on, Mr. Cierniak: back in 1988 I participated in a blind comparison of cables run under the auspices of the Audio Engineering Society. Most of the participants in the test scored no better than chance. For example, I selected five out of seven, a result that, if I were tossing coins, could have been achieved about 23 times in 100 tries. But when you combined my score with that of Michael Fremer, our joint score appeared to confirm that the two cables could be identified by ear alone, at least as far as we were concerned. (The details of this test were published in Stereophile, January 1989, Vol.12 No.1, p.63.) In a subsequent test run by the San Francisco chapter of the AES (see Stereophile, July 1991, Vol.14 No.7, p.41), listeners scored six out of seven identifications. I was also told by one of the participants in an associated blind test, Susik's John Hunter, that he and his girlfriend actually scored 14 out of 14 identifications but that the moderator disregarded their results.

Oh, and "worship"? As if! My experience has been that Stereophile readers believe what they believe because it ties in with their experience. And, like Mr. Cierniak, they have no problem telling me when they think I'm blowing smoke.

—JA

TOO MUCH JITTER?

Editor: I find one of the current Sonic Frontiers advertisements—see the August '95 Stereophile, Vol.18 No.8, pp.92-93—to be most amusing. For those who might not have that issue on hand for ready reference, the left page of the spread pictures a mechanical metronome; the right page pictures the Sonic Frontiers SFT-1 Transport. The moral of the combination is "keeping time and pace" through "clock jitter control."

For anyone who has auditioned the mechanical metronome, it's a horrible time-keeping device, as the mechanical spring tension affects the pace of the ticks. Basically, the thing slows down from the fully-wound spring tension onward. Not a linear timepiece at all. Even the electronic metronome will
Breeding Tells

The heritage of the new Sonographe products is readily apparent. Consider these characteristic traits:

**Exceptional Musicality**
Sonographe components are engineered and manufactured by conrad-johnson design, a company consistently acclaimed for the most musically satisfying audio components made.

**Timeless Styling**
Accented by elegant champagne gold finished panels, these Sonographe products are readily distinguished from ordinary hi-fi components.

**Outstanding Value**
Built to conrad-johnson's unmatched standards in parts quality, yet surprisingly affordable - just $795 for the SC25 line-stage preamplifier (phono-stage optional for $200), and $995 for the SA250 power amplifier.

For further information, contact:

conrad-johnson design, inc.
2733 Merrilee Dr.
Fairfax, VA 22031
phone: 703-698-8581
fax: 703-560-5360
lose pace as the battery voltage falls, but clearly offers a much longer period of well-paced ticks. I hope the SFT-1's jitter control isn't anything like the metronome.

I continue to enjoy Stereophile; good magazine; good ads, even amusing at times.

DAVID WONG
Nepean, Ontario, Canada, wong@bnr.ca

See RH's review of the Sonic Frontiers "metronome" elsewhere in this issue. —JA

That Cello ad...
Editor:
I am writing in response to a comment made in December '95 (pp.11-12) by Stereophile reader Chris Osanna in his letter about the Cello ad. I would like to point out a flaw in his assertion that "large expanses of young female epidermis cannot but rivet the attention of any male not hormonally deprived."

I am a 27-year-old male, and far from hormonally deprived, as my boyfriend can attest. When I saw the large expanse of female buttocks in question, I hardly hesitated before turning the page without even noticing the product being advertised.

While I'm not offended by Mr. Osanna's comment, I believe my point is clear: what appears to one man to be an all-encompassing statement is never so. That was another mistake made by the advertising agency. They thought this ad would appeal to their whole audience.

I wholeheartedly agree with Mr. Osanna's comments on the lack of marketing savvy demonstrated with this ad, but I am also pleased to see the ad running again in the December issue. The answer to this predicament is not censorship, as suggested by another writer, S.P. Mumme, who was "surprised to see a naked woman in a Stereophile advertisement." On the contrary, isn't it funny to watch everyone involved with that ad making fools of themselves and alienating much of the audience they're supposed to be wooing?

GEOFFREY V. CESTARO
Atlanta, GA
Gvc@msn.com

They got your attention
Editor:
To all of you who were offended by the infamous Cello advertisement (see December '95, p.210): I wasn't offended by the ad and I'm not "hormonally deprived." The ad did what it was supposed to do: catch attention. And that's exactly what all of you did: stopped, looked at it, and obviously didn't just go on and forget it. Advertising is advertising. The ad company sure did their job. They got your attention.

CHRISTOPHER KOLP
West Palm Beach, FL

Who they gonna call?
Editor:
I enjoy Stereophile as an audiophile reference and wouldn't be without it.

I thought the Cello "naked woman" advertisement was conceptually appealing, graphically well-designed, skillfully photographed, and insightfully provocative. Kudos to the advertising agency. The naked simplicity of its counterpart and the implied loss of aural innocence was effectively communicated by the image of the apple. I have no objection to a naked woman in my house.

What does bother me are the negative, neurotic, fixated whiners who demand resignations or cancel their magazine subscriptions for petty grievances. And come next month, when they really feel the need, who they gonna call?

Stereophile is the goose that lays the golden eggs. Why not address the possibilities, have fun with it, and not take any of it too seriously?

JOHN C. PUTVIN
Salt Lake City, UT

And the point is...
Editor:
I don't mean to beat a dead horse (that's a figure of speech, in case there are some activist groups out there), but I can't understand all the hype that the Cello ad created in December's "Letters." Correct me if I'm wrong, but the purpose of an advertisement is to implant the name of your product in the minds of your target audience. I have to assume that research found the target audience in this case to be 90% men.

I admit that the rear view of a naked lady caught my eye, but I couldn't have told you the name of the advertiser or the product if I'd tried. That is, until I read my favorite feature in Stereophile, the "Letters" column, in December. The complaints from the women, the letters of cancellation, and the one that just "missed the point" forced me to dig out the October issue and check out p.226 again.

Now you tell me, if all this free attention isn't good advertising...what is? Next time I'm in the market for loudspeakers, I think I'll take the time to hear the Cello.

And the point is...sex sells merchandise...one way or the other.

D. CENESKIE
Raleigh, NC

Serious growing up required?
Editor:
Truly, some of the people who write in to voice complaints about either your journal in general or some of its contents need to do some serious growing up. For starters, the photo of the nude woman in the Energy speaker advertisement. Ann C. Simonds of Moreno Valley, CA ("Letters," December '95) finds the ad offensive because it is degrading to women. Of Ms. Simonds I ask: where, when, and how exactly is this woman being degraded? By merely appearing in the ad? I seriously doubt that the woman in the ad was forced, coerced, or otherwise engaged against her will or under false pretense to appear in it. I am being confrontational with Ms. Simonds because she makes statements in her letter that border on the ridiculous. Examples:

1) "Is the only good picture of a woman a nude picture?" (Of course not.)
2) "I don't think that having a nude picture of a woman will make Energy's product sound better..." (Nowhere in the ad does Energy make such a claim.)
3) "...although [having a picture of a nude woman] will help them sell it." (Maybe, but I doubt this particular ad will have people standing in line outside Energy's doors waiting to buy their speakers.)
4) "As a woman, I find the ad tasteless." (What exactly is tasteless about it? You don't see this woman doing or participating in anything of a sexual nature by herself or with anyone/anything else. That would be tasteless. Also, it is not as though her entire anatomy is exposed for the world to see. The areas that should not be exposed are not exposed! To say Ms. Simonds is overreacting is an understatement. Examining the ad over and over again, I came to the same conclusion every time: I saw nothing more than a nude woman listening to music—period. No testosterone rush, no lewd thoughts, no schwinging. Besides, you want tasteless, see the letter in the same issue from Maron Horonzak of Stoutsville, MO regarding the Cello ad.)
5) "You are objectifying and exploiting women by having this ad in your magazine." (Again—exactly where, when, and how is this occurring?)
6) "...stereophiles are a bunch of..."
The world is changing—an all-digital age is in our future. Yet much software remains analog. Is it possible to have the best of both worlds when the world itself is changing? Absolutely.

**Multichannel Sound: Today & Tomorrow**

The PAV has won praise from around the world for its quality. It is simply the finest way to reproduce today's audio formats. Still, there has been a lot of talk about coming digital surround formats. How does one retain the advantages of the PAV while adding new capabilities?

A companion digital surround adaptor for the PAV is being designed to complement its formidable abilities. The DSA will dock with the PAV while being housed in a separate chassis and enjoying its own dedicated power supply. The DSA will transparently add digital surround capabilities to the PAV while maintaining the isolation between analog and digital signals so essential for uncompromised performance.

**High Fidelity Video**

Uniquely, the PAV has always employed broadcast-quality video switching. In fact, the Proceed PAV is the first audio/video product ever certified by Joe Kane’s Imaging Science Foundation™ as being utterly faithful to the video signal it passes. As such, it is the only choice for anyone who cares about picture quality as well as sound.

* A donation to support AIDS research will be made for every name added to our mailing list. Mark Levinson® and Proceed® products are designed and manufactured by MADCIGAL AUDIO LABORATORIES, P.O. Box 781, Middletown, CT 06457. FAX (203) 346-1540. H A Harman International Company. THX is a registered trademark of Lucasfilm Ltd. Dolby, Pro Logic, and the double-D Symbol are trademarks of Dolby Laboratories Licensing Corporation. ISF and Imaging Science Foundation are trademarks owned by Imaging Science Foundation, Inc.

**Finally...**

You can have it all. Discover the difference outstanding design and advanced engineering can make at your local Proceed dealer. If you would like to add your name to our mailing list, please write or fax us at the address at right.

Visit us on the Internet at http://www.madrigal.com/madrigal
perverted chauvinists." (C'mon, lady—get real.)

Ms. Simonds, most of us (and some are women) who actually read and enjoy Stereophile for what it truly is are not the barbarians you make us out to be!

There is absolutely nothing in the ad to support any of the comments made in her letter. And what of the Energy ad with the nude man that has appeared in Stereophile? I have not seen a flood of letters in your column from women (or men) saying the ad is offensive. Was Ms. Simonds just as offended by this new ad? Was she offended at all? I also cannot help but wonder if she is even a subscriber—or just another blowhard PC lunatic looking for something to whine and complain about just because she didn’t like it. Your magazine has been, is, and always will be about HIGH-END AUDIO and not political correctness. Ms. Simonds was so completely out of line, I had to say something. You guys really need to keep that kind of mentality out of the pages of your magazine—freedom of speech or not.

On another matter: JA, granted, you may be correct in your comment that advertising should make a point. However, as long as a person or entity is paying for the ad space, why would it matter to you or anyone else whether or not a point is made? What an ad will or will not contain is the decision of the person/entity paying for the ad space. The journal does reserve the right to preview the ad copy and then accept or decline payment, but once it has accepted payment, doesn’t have much say.

Also, to S.P. Munnie of Little Rock, AR: While I can understand your unwillingness to have “that [nude woman ad] in your house,” don’t trash the entire magazine because of it. It is perfectly all right for you to take the page containing the ad, tear it out, and throw it away. It is like that little label on your mattress—it’s okay if you remove it after you buy it—no one will come bursting into your home and place you under arrest. S.G. Cruz

New Orleans, LA

Tests & Good Taste

Editor:

I must join other readers in expressing my initial surprise and dismay at the lack of taste Cello has displayed with their ad that features (in the order that I noticed them) a naked lady, a red apple, some old fart, and their product. What is wrong with this guy? He is obviously not interested in the woman or in eating the apple, and he certainly was not in the best listening position.

Why would they print such a stupid ad? To annoy us with a sexist objectification of women? Certainly not to stimulate sales, although this was an outside possibility. One letter writer in December stated that the ad must be meant to improve sales because it could not be that a nude woman would make the product sound any better. I wanted to agree with this letter but hesitated before leaping to that conclusion. Although I generally don’t think much of tweaks, I’m not so quick to dismiss them out of hand.

As I continued to ponder Cello’s reasoning, I noticed Branford Marsalis sitting on top of his ReVoX speaker (p.109) looking like a human Mpingo disc. Was this another hint? Did Branford know something about acoustics that he was not sharing aloud? Suddenly, I realized what the ad was afraid to say and had to ask myself:

Do naked women make this system sound better? I wasted no time in beginning tests. My setup is basic mid-fi: old Dual turntable, Rotel player, Adcom amp and preamp, PSB Silvers, and cheap Kimber and XLO stringing it together. I sat down on the left speaker and then the right, dressed à la Branford in T-shirt and shorts. My listening position was approximately 36” above each speaker, facing out to my listening room. I noticed an immediate improvement in soundstage and bass impact. It was a promising start. The image was somewhat unbalanced from this position, however, and I was worried about the sound-absorption qualities of my shorts, socks, and shoes. I proceeded directly to the au naturel testing.

“You Give Me Reason To Live, You Give Me Reason To Live, You Give Me Reason To Live.” I started with two naked women, placing one atop each speaker. I dropped Randy Newman’s Sail Away onto the turntable (the LP kicks major butt compared with the tinny-sounding CD) and cued up “You Can Leave Your Hat On.” My jaw dropped. This was one of the most revealing systems I had ever encountered. It was as if layers had been completely stripped away. There was Randy singing at the piano, there was the guitar and bass, there was the horn section and drummer, and there was . . . well, I know what love is, and this was it. I found my best results with a slight toed-in position (or “toes-in,” as it were). I let the rest of the album side play out and sat transfixed for several minutes after it had stopped playing. That’s how incredible this newly improved system was.

Next I listened to a CD of ZZ Top’s Tush on the Rotel and felt myself more connected to the raw immediacy of Dusty Hill’s singing than I ever had before. I was right there with him, ready to head off to La Grange with the boys. Later, as Chris Whitley sang “I’m lyin’ on top of that woman . . .” on “I Forget You Every Day” (a terrific cut from his debut CD—is there an LP of this anyone can sell me?), I could practically feel the steam rising. Even Paul McCartney seemed 100% honest on “Why Don’t We Do It In The Road,” from The Beatles LP. All I can say is, “Go Dog, Go!” Conclusion: Sell your stock in Mpingo now!

Room Tuning: I was not done yet. I next turned to the sound-absorbing qualities of naked women. One placed equidistant between the speakers made for the most incredible imaging I have experienced. Presence was palpable, to say the least. Strangely enough, placing one in each of the room’s back corners actually worsened the focus. The music was no longer holding my attention; I felt distracted and preoccupied. Miles Davis’s horn and Coltrane’s sax seemed to be discomodulated squawks on Sony’s SBM gold disc of Kind Of Blue. I kept looking around trying to place them. All the classical music I listened to had the same lack of coherency. What did this mean? Had the greatest tweak ever gone bust so fast?

Acting on gut instinct, I moved the women in the back corners nearer to me. Better. I moved them even closer. Better still. Finally I sat them right next to me in the sweet spot. Bingo!! The focus I had lost immediately jumped to attention. Images were even more sharply defined than they had previously been! I did the rest of my listening like this and have to let you know that this is better than any surround system I have yet heard.

Too Much Of A Great Thing? I found little improvement to be had using any more than five naked women. Those of you with He-Man rigs may be able to handle more, for better absorption of unwanted reflections, etc. Also, as those golden ears tend to go with age, older audiophiles may find three to be plenty. Note to JA: I need your help to confirm my observations, so get your butt over here for measurements, pronto. I would also be
Can you handle E minor?

Destinies were formed with the strike of the bow. Joy or sorrow were transmitted by the war drum or great music. Through the PSB Stratus Series of loudspeakers, with full range capability and brute dynamic power you will be able to relive the destiny of those who have chosen to speak through sound. Especially through E minor.

Get a seatbelt before you add a TV, a subwoofer and a center channel to your home-theater!

For your nearest PSB dealer call Toll Free 1-800-263-4641.
willing to test out these tweaks on some of Stereophile's more expensive equipment if you would care to send me some. You have the address.

**Conclusion:** It made no difference what type of music I listened to, whether the source was LP or CD, or whether I replaced my solid-state gear with all tubed equipment. The improvement was clearly visible, and yes, it may even be detectable in a blind test. Did I mention the even more remarkable results when used with budget bedroom systems? Let me tell you, naked ladies make every system sound better and improve every listening experience!!! Friends with better, more expensive systems would now rather listen to my tweaked system than their own. They are becoming a nuisance. Overall, though, this is by far the most satisfying system I have ever had, and I could live happily with it for a long time.

**Cover-Up:** Why the cover-up by Cello and Stereophile? Do you just not get it? Is the 'Truth' simply too politically incorrect and "sexist" to state in print? Come on! This is the '90s, damn it, the beginning of a brave new era. We must have guts and an open mind to face the Truth. If I'm wrong about any of the foregoing, Cello should immediately drop its ad and issue an apology for its stupidity. But if I'm correct, then Stereophile is continuing to be an accomplice to a cover-up and must cease immediately. I believe that your readers need to know of this breakthrough and that they have the courage to face it. The only question is whether you have the guts to print this letter. Well, do you? BOB SCHULTZ
Long Beach, CA

After three issues' worth of anguished letters, this subject should really be put to rest. As Mark Levinson of Cello started the whole shebang, I will allow him to have the last word. —JA

A number of Stereophile readers have written letters to the magazine and called us with regard to our advertisement based on a photograph featuring a nude man, a Cello Stradivari Premiere speaker, and a man in a suit (me). The photograph was commissioned by the Frankfurter Allgemeine newspaper of Germany for its own use. This newspaper is the German equivalent of the New York Times; its Sunday issue includes a magazine similar to the New York Times Sunday Magazine. The photograph used in the ad—a photograph taken by internationally acclaimed photographer Abe Frajndlich of New York City—was the entire front cover of the Frankfurter Allgemeine Magazine about a year ago.

My associates and I used imagery to attempt to express what Cello is about. The speaker represents technology, the apple represents knowledge, the woman represents "anima" or "beauty and soul," and the man in a suit represents business and the entrepreneurial spirit.

My thanks to all who took the time to express their views!
MARK LEVINSON
Cello Music & Film Systems
New York, NY

**Simple Single**

Editor:

After reading JA's response to the letters commenting on his negative comments about the Cary '300SEI ('Letters,' December '95), I believe he misunderstood the respondents, not the other way around. To put it plain and simple: JA felt he must exclude a recommendation because he felt that the amplifier only sounded good because of measurable, audible problems. That fact may be fascinating to an engineer, but it ain't to me. I only care that it sounds good. BOB GASH
Flower Mound, TX

See my Totem review elsewhere in this issue for more on the Cary debate. —JA
The MIT Z-Series
Powerline Treatment System

MIT's updated Z-Series™ is the ultimate foundation for your system. Setting the clean, absolutely quiet background needed as a foundation for the holographic image created by the 2C3D System. MIT's building block approach lets you to assemble an AC treatment configuration for the specific power requirements of your audio system. The Z-Series will supply the clean power your system needs to reproduce the details that allow you to suspend disbelief.

"I'm convinced that no matter the stature of your front end, the Z treatment will open your ears to its sonic potential. I can't imagine ever listening again to a digital source without this caliber of AC-line conditioning."
Dick Olsher, Stereophile,
December 1994

More Than Just Cable!
The Interface That Transports the Hologram—
The 2C3D System

MH-850™ Multi-Bandwidth CVTerminator™

The arteries of the 2C3D System—providing true linear response. The MH-850™ Multi-Bandwidth speaker interface utilizes MIT's Stable Image Technology™ incorporating Jitter Free Analog™ to achieve rock-solid imaging. These technologies, coupled with the noise free background provided by the MIT Z-Series powerline treatment, enable the holographic image, created by the 2C3D system, to appear. —So real you can almost see the music.
A little voice tells you to buy NHT.

Gun shots and screeching tires don’t tell a story, they’re just the punctuation. Movies are mostly dialog. So before you buy your home theater speakers, audition NHT. Our critically acclaimed systems deliver the whole story, from spoken word to subtle sound effect. And when the script calls for a nuclear blast, you’ll think you’re sitting at ground zero. NHT home theater — you really should hear what people are saying.
US: Wes Phillips

Dealers promoting manufacturer and designer seminars should fax (do not call) Wes Phillips the when, where, and who at (505) 983-6327 at least eight weeks before the month of the event — ie, if you’re putting on something in May 1996, you should get the information to Wes no later than March 1, 1996. Mark the fax cover sheet “For the attention of Wes Phillips — Dealer Bulletin Board.” Promoters of hi-fi shows and audio societies promoting manufacturer visits should also fax Wes the details as soon as possible.

California: Ambrosia Audio & Video (2337 Roscomare Rd. Route 6, Bel Air) invites you to the grand opening of their new showroom, featuring the Dunlavy SC-VI speakers and the new $28,000 Jeff Rowland Model Group Model 9T power amplifiers. On Friday January 19 and Saturday January 20, John Dunlavy and Jeff Rowland will be on hand to discuss their products and answer questions. Call (310) 440-5522 for details.

Florida: Stereo Shoppe’s new Boca Raton store (279 N. Federal Highway) will hold a seminar at 7pm on Tuesday January 23, wherein Transparent Audio’s Doug Blackwell will discuss audio and Home Theater cables. A/B comparisons of Transparent’s cables — both with and without networks — will be held. Limited seating; call (407) 391-0552 for reservations.

The South Florida Audio Society will host an evening with Reference Line Audio’s Ralph Catino on Sunday February 25 at 7:30pm at Max’s International Restaurant (113 South 20th Avenue, Hollywood). Call Michael Breiter at (954) 438-5866 for details.

Georgia: On Wednesday January 24, Transparent Audio’s peripatetic Doug Blackwell will appear at Audio Forest (6806 Peachtree Industrial Blvd.). Cabling for audio video systems will be the subject of the seminar, with an emphasis on digital cables, Home-Theater cables, and powerline conditioning. The evening will also feature an A/B demonstration of Transparent’s cables with and without their integral networks.

Illinois: On January 21, the Chicago Audio Society will feature a demonstration of Marigo Audio Labs products and Audio Matière electronics by Ron Hedrick, as well as von Schweikert loudspeakers. Interested audiophiles should call (708) 382-8433 or (708) 582-3913, or e-mail sysop@nybble.com for more information.

New York: Select Sound (6314 Northern Blvd. Route 25A, East Norwich, Long Island) continues its winter series of manufacturers’ seminars this month on Thursdays, 2pm—9pm. Products introduced at the Winter Consumer Electronics Show will be premiered at the store. Representatives and designers from ADA, B&W, Krell, Meridian, Naim, Pioneer Elite, Rotel, Solid, Totem Acoustics, WireWorld, and others will be on hand to answer questions. Call (516) 624-2124 for scheduled times and company appearances.

On Thursday February 1 at 7:30pm, Stereo Exchange (627 Broadway, NYC) will host John Hagelin of Enlightened Audio Designs, who will demonstrate EAD’s TheaterMaster/TheaterVision AC-3 components. Call (212) 505-1111 for more details.

Ohio: Paragon Sound (5450 Monroe St., Toledo) will sponsor a seminar featuring Dave Gordon of Thiel Audio on Tuesday January 30, 6—9pm. Dave will discuss the newest speakers from Jim Thiel. On Tuesday February 20, 6:30—9pm, the good people from Audio Research will be on hand to answer questions about their highly revered equipment, as well as on the state of the High End in general. Come help them celebrate 25 years of great ARC products. Space is limited; call (800) 873-6873 to reserve space for either event or for information on future events.

Virginia/Washington, DC: On Thursday January 25, Gifted Listener (5720 Pickwick Road, Centreville) will host a musical evening with Linn Hi Fi’s Jan Donaldson and Alex Montenegro — who will present Linn’s newest offerings for 1996, including new speakers and the latest additions to the Knecht full-house system. On Thursday February 1, Bill Peugh and Karl Schuster of Metaphor Acoustic Designs will visit to talk to gifted listeners about the Metaphor 2 and to show off their newest (and most affordable) loudspeaker. On Wednesday February 7, Dana Carlson of Madrigal Audio Laboratories will present and discuss the series 30 Mark Levinson offerings, including the No.36 HDAC® converter and the new No.37 CD transport. For all events: doors open at 7pm for refreshments, and presentations begin at 7:45. Reservations required. Call (703) 818-8000 to reserve a place or for more information.

US: John Atkinson

For as long as I can remember, with the exception of a few years in the late ’80s, the aging Sahara Hotel at the northern end of the Las Vegas Strip has been the primary site for specialty audio manufacturers at the Winter Consumer Electronics Show, cramming them into the tiny rooms in its “bi-level” chalet complex. The Sahara has been sold, however, and following last month’s WCES, the new owners intend to demolish parts of the hotel and gear
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their business away from conventions and toward families. CEMA, the part of the Electronic Industries Association that promotes CES, polled exhibitors in December about possible replacement sites for the 1997 Show. The choices were the Alexis Park and Chaparral Hotels, both a little farther away from the Las Vegas Convention center than the Sahara. As we went to press, it was my understanding that the upscale Alexis Park—which, unusually for Vegas, lacks a casino—will be the venue for specialty audio next January.

Germany: Markus Sauer

“Everything stays different” is the motto for the 1996 Frankfurt High-End Show. The Show will keep its location in the Gravenburch Kempinski Hotel in Frankfurt, and the Show’s concept will remain unaltered, but the timing will be changed. For the past 13 years, the Show has been held in August: 1996 sees a move to May. The Show’s organizers claim a high demand from the trade for an earlier show; the August date was too late to allow the Show to be used as an ordering venue, the hot Christmas sales season being too close for manufacturers to react to unforeseen success at the Show. It also fell during a time when many Europeans are on holiday. Show organizers apparently shared the belief widely held among exhibitors that attendance would be higher if these two factors could be avoided.

The new dates are May 2–5, 1996. The entrance fee will remain at DM20, with a discount for students. The catalog, which serves as a compendium of the German high-end scene and contains mostly useful articles on music appreciation as well as high-end systems and the art of setting them up, plus some gentele propaganda, will be available in April 1996 at a price of DM15. Further inquiries should be made to the organizer, the High End Society Marketing GmbH, Hatzfelder Str. 161–163, D-42281 Wuppertal, Germany, tel. 0202-702220, fax 0202-703700.

Japan: Peter W. Mitchell

The engineering groups that for nearly two months have been attempting to hammer out the differences between the incompatible SD and MMCD proposals for the digital videodisc (DVD) announced that their negotiations are substantially complete, and they’ve agreed upon specifications for what will come to be known in the Japanese market as the Domestic Video Disc. (Evidently, the people in charge of selecting names for the local market felt that stressing the DVD’s future as the dominant home entertainment medium was more important than emphasizing its digital basis. Elsewhere in the world the initials DVD have already become so well known that officially they will stand for nothing in particular.)

“Numbers Grumblers” are Always Pushing for More Bits and Higher Sampling Frequencies.

As predicted previously in this space, Dolby AC-3 was adopted as the multichannel standard for NTSC markets, while Philips MPEG/Surround will be the standard for PAL/SECAM markets.

Meanwhile, according to industry newsletter Audio Week, American record companies finally are beginning to take seriously the prospects for a Super CD based on DVD technology. The Engineering Committee of the RIAA is launching a task force to explore applications of high-density music discs, such as 24-bit, 96kHz audio and perhaps multichannel (surround) sound. The idea is to coordinate this work with international standards organizations such as the London-based IFPI (International Federation of Phonographic Industries). The IFPI director told Audio Week that the plan is to draft a laundry list of the features that record companies want in the new disc—and things they want to avoid, such as new copy-protection systems.

On the topic of setting priorities, the newsletter quoted Tony Griffiths (former Decca Records exec and a leading member of the Acoustic Renaissance for Audio) to the effect that “numbers grumblers” are always pushing for more bits and higher sampling frequencies, while failing to focus on the real lack of realism in stereo. He has compiled a demo tape showing what a dramatic difference discrete 5-channel surround-sound can make.
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will use only one-sided, single-layer discs. The available 4.7Gb capacity in this configuration will allow a playing time of 133 minutes, sufficient for most films. Since longer films will likely extend to the second side, it's unclear whether the few films having this requirement will be enough to justify two-sided, auto-turn players. I would expect that the first generation of players (fall '96 is the targeted market date) will be single-sided play only, for this reason.

The video signal on a DVD will be recorded in component form (RGB and sync). Toshiba indicated that the as-recorded pixel count will be 720x480. Specifying video performance in pixels may make computer users comfortable — remember that the DVD will also be used in multimedia applications — but pixels are not commonly used to describe video resolution. Other sources, however, indicate that there will be 625 lines of information recorded on the disc (in progressive scan), to allow for worldwide compatibility with other television formats (PAL/SECAM). For use with conventional NTSC sets, however, the player would have to selectively discard 100 lines, in addition to converting the progressive scan to the interlace scan required for NTSC. This will waste significant potential resolution.

Users with multi-sync, data-grade video projectors should be able to make use of the higher-quality signal inherent on the disc — 625 lines, progressive scanning, and component RGB and sync video — if players are produced with the appropriate outputs. And I suspect that they will be: a number of high-end hardware companies are likely to enter the DVD arena if the format takes off. There is some question, however, as to the potential compatibility of the signal on the disc with currently available line doubters — which are designed to accept 525-line, interlaced-scan images (most of them do have RGB and sync inputs). I understand that the most ambitious demonstrations of DVD at the Winter Consumer Electronics Show were due to use a composite player output, possibly for this reason.

At the software producer's option, the video signal on the disc may be recorded in a pre-squeezed, anamorphic format. Such a disc may be played back one of three ways. On standard sets, the signal is unsqueezed in the player, then sent to the television either in 4x3, pan-and-scan form, with codes present on the disc directing the player which portion of the picture to display, scene by scene; or as a letterbox image of the sort found on most current laserdiscs. Alternately, for use on wide-screen sets, the squeezed picture is sent directly to the set, which unsqueezes it prior to display. Since the anamorphically squeezed signal on the disc makes use of the full complement of horizontal scanning lines available (with a letterbox transfer, a good percentage of those lines are wasted reproducing black bars), the unsqueezed wide-screen image should be significantly improved over a standard blown-up letterbox display, everything else being equal.

**Japan: Jonathan Scull**

"Twenty-four ninety-six, twenty-four ninety-six..." That's all I keep hearing lately — and mostly from recording people. I didn't even understand the phrase the first time I heard it. As it happens, it's recording-biz argot for 24 bits, 96kHz sampling rate. Sounds like a good idea to me: Fix the root of the problem and forget the Band-Aids. With a higher sampling rate and a full 24-bit word, we just might be in a position to contemplate the glory days of digital to come.

Amusingly — typically — the technology that will make it happen seems to be storage-driven. The back-end is *drinink zub bote* (with apologies to Albert Einstein). The ability to (cheaply) write huge amounts of data to optical disc is what will make a full 24-bit word and a higher sampling rate possible. The plot thickened recently when it was announced that the format war was over; Toshiba/Warner/Matsushita settled with opposing Sony/Philips. As a result, both audio and video applications will be stored on a single high-density 4.75" disc format.

So it was with some interest that I scanned a faxed press release announcing a Toshiba Technical Press Seminar, Demonstration, and Luncheon, hosted by Toshiba American Consumer Products. (Keep your eye on the magic word, "luncheon.") It was billed thus: "SD Digital Video Disc — An Overview and Technical Capabilities Presentation." The usual drill: lunch, introductions, presentation, slides, questions (inaugurating and otherwise), Maalox. I resolved to bite the bullet and attend in order to find out more about what this finally-settled-upon format might mean for audiophiles. (Did you keep your eye on the magic word, "luncheon")?

In fact, the food wasn't bad — a brisk and crunchy salad, followed by grilled chicken or poached salmon. I had the salmon — it's a waistline thing. Coffee and a little shortcake disappeared while I traded quips with JE, MF, and LBJ (Hah! That's Lawrence B. Johnson from the Stereophile Guide to Home Theater and the New York Times). At some point Tony Ciarella joined the table at Michael Fremer's right, along with a quick-eating Frank Doris — who has left The Absolute Sound and now labors for the public relations firm that does Toshiba — on MF's left. "Hey, Michael... just like old times!"

There's something to be said for feeding the Savage Beast that is The Press before an event. Pursuant, we filed into the presentation room and took our seats. As other scribes and luncheon seminar types filed in past us, they sent the empty water glasses in front of us spinning crazily. Journalists have, in general, fairly large fannies from all these press functions. I thought of Corey Greenberg (who suddenly entered the room) and his (in)famous Meet The Editors table-dancing routine at the Miami Stereophile Show that had sent several water pitchers spinning to the floor.

I suspected something was up almost immediately. During opening remarks, it was announced that five of the press kits we found in front of us were tagged with gold stars on the last page, and the five random winners would each receive a DVD (Digital Video Disc) player from the first production run — said to be in "spring '96 [subsequent events make the fall more likely — Ed.]. As did we all, MF checked his press binder, and sure enough — he was one of the winners! He quickly stammered that he'd had no idea whatsoever. But in the interest of truth in reporting, I have to say that as we filed into the row, he'd offered me the chair next to JE and moved one down. The fickle finger of fate!

In the event, the lights dimmed and the slides flashed. Toshiba's SD (Super Density Disc) is quite clever — in fact, almost elegant. They can be configured
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to store as much as 8.5 gigabytes of data by employing two-per-side half-thickness information-carrying layers bonded together. The laser focuses on the appropriate layer in order to pick up the data. Of course, the big guys have their eye on the home entertainment market to amortize the development cost of the technology. And it looks like AC-3's going to get the nod for the audio portion of the MPEG-2 digital video, in spite of its lossy storage algorithms.

Bummer.

Much was made of SD's backward compatibility — your collection of precious CDs should play perfectly well in an SD player. The video ballyhoo included features such as 5.1 discrete surround channels, multiple aspect ratios on the same disc (4:3 pan-and-scan, 4:3 letterbox, 16:9, and 2:1), and interactivity — you can program different endings (via a parental lockout feature) based on a movie's ratings, for example. The player can be programmed to skip past scenes containing sex and violence. At this news, after a low cackle, JE whispered to me, “Will the inverse be true?” We can but hope...

The enormous data storage also means access to a minimum of three spoken languages and four subtitle ones. CD-ROM is going to be another big user of the new technology — it'll hold up to seven times more data than is possible now. It's a pretty nice idea: slip the CD into your audio system and listen to music. Jam it into the CD-ROM and pull up MPEG-2 video and gigabytes of data. Slide the bugger into your Home Theater rig, and watch again as a T. Rex makes an hors d'oeuvre out of the family attorney.

Finally, buried in the middle of the presentation was a slide I found interesting: SD holds the promise of Super Audio Discs — higher sampling rates (96kHz), higher bit-rates (20- and 24-bit). Not much time at the Toshiba event was “wasted” on audio-only applications, however.

Post-seminar, I grabbed my hat and coat and made for the door. Thinking about what I'd heard, I made some phone calls. I rang Chesky's Steve Guttenberg, Digital Domain's Bob Katz, and Jeremy Kipnis at Epiphany Recordings. I thought these guys on the leading edge of audiophile recording might have a thing or two to say about DVD besides “I want it now!” In general, they all seemed to feel that 1½-2 years might represent a reasonable guesstimate for the debut of a 24/96 standard, or at least 20-bit with a 96kHz sampling rate.

As enthusiastic as Bob Katz was, he still pointed out a possible concern. “Hey, Jonathan, you know... what about bugs? I'm looking forward to recording direct to hard disk, and with the Sonic Solutions system as it exists today, we're experiencing crashes at 44.1kHz. What's gonna happen when we up the word length and more than double the speed?” Nice talking to you too, Bob!

So — there's hope that high-end audio will benefit. Hang tight, enjoy what you have now, look forward to next year, and repeat Steve Guttenberg's catchy aphorism to whoever will listen: “24 in '96!”

Japan: Robert Harley

There's been a surprising turn of events in the discussions over the format of the next-generation high-quality digital audio disc. A Japanese group called Advanced Digital Audio (ADA) is developing their own set of standards for the “super CD” independently of existing proposals. The ADA is made up of Japanese audio equipment manufacturers, members of the Japanese Audio Society, AES Japan, the Recording Industry Association of Japan, and audio journalists.

At a meeting last November, the consensus of ADA members was that the high-quality audio disc should have two channels and no more. According to a source close to the discussions, the electronics giants are in nearly unanimous agreement that the future of consumer digital audio playback will be stereo, not multichannel sound.

This development flies in the face of the momentum of consumer acceptance of multichannel playback, which has been fostered by the popularity of Home Theater. Moreover, the ADA position appears to ignore the well-thought-out Acoustic Renaissance for Audio (ARA) proposal for a flexible-format disc that would encompass a wide range of channel configurations and resolutions. In fact, a member of the Japanese ADA said the British ARA proposal is “generally recognized” in Japan as being “not practical” and had no chance of adoption.

Although the ADA won't release its final proposal until March 1996, a representative of the Toshiba contingent went on record to say that the “Super CD” format would be two channels of 96kHsampled data with 24-bit resolution [see JS's story above—Ed.]. Pioneer has endorsed this proposal within the ADA meetings, but had no public comment on the Toshiba announcement. Other ADA members objected to Toshiba's premature statement, saying the group had not finalized the technical specifications. Indeed, Sony has proposed their new Direct Stream Digital (DSD) format for the high-quality CD. (See "Industry Update" in December '95, p.37, for an exclusive report on DSD.)

Whatever the sampling rate, word length, or data structure chosen, it appears that two channels, not multichannel, might well be a fait accompli for the next generation of the compact disc.

Japan: Don Scott

NEC has announced development of a prototype handheld video player, referred to as "Silicon View." The unit has no moving parts and uses a credit-card-sized memory pack to store video and audio information. Present playing time is 4½ minutes, but NEC expects to have extended it to 60 minutes by the end of the century when it is planned for mass production. Perfect still-frame and instant access are highlights of the storage process. Other applications of this technology are endless and will revolutionize the way video is stored.

US: John Atkinson

New audio-related sites are springing up in cyberspace like weeds:

• Amplifier and Home Theater component manufacturer Counterpoint can be found at www.counter-point.com/~cpoint.

• A regular of The Audiophile Net-

See the August 1995 issue of Stereophile, p.53, for the full text of the original ARA proposal, which included multichannel formats including Ambisonics.
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work, Doug Schneider, has started his own web page dedicated to audio, called “Soundstage!” According to his e-mail, “We’re doing it strictly for fun where we talk about equipment, music, and anything else we can come up with. This is not a commercial endeavor, rather, just a fun extension of our hobby. We are keeping it light-hearted and entertaining and hope to appeal to a wide cross-section of audio web-surfers who happen upon us. In addition I am compiling, within my page, what I hope in time will be the most comprehensive ‘link’ list for other audio pages.” You can find Doug’s page at http://www.magi.com/~das/ststage.html.

• Long-time Stereophile reader Arnold Bates has started a page called “Audio Trader,” which specializes in selling audio equipment, as well as including links to other audio-related sites. Audio Trader can be found at http://www.teleport.com/~ahuil/adtrader.

**US: Wes Phillips**

*Stereophile* Contributing Editor Robert J. Reina and his wife, Ellen Fricault, have been delivered of an 8-lb, 3-oz baby boy, Jordan Christopher Reina, born at 9:11am November 30, 1995. Mother and child are thriving, and Bob is proud to the point of insufferability—which in our opinion is not only understandable, but rather laudable, daddy behavior. Jordan Christopher’s first CD experience was with Chesky’s new Oregon CD, Beyond Words, which was played in the car during his trip home from the hospital. He has no comment for the press at this time regarding the experience.

**US: Jonathan Scull**

Wilmington, Delaware, didn’t seem to me like the most glamorous of spots to host an official unveiling of a new speaker product (whatever the cost) until I spotted the legend “No Sales Tax” in the not-so-fine print at the bottom of Overture Audio’s invitation. Ah-ha, yes…Delaware — no sales tax. Imagine.

And Wilmington is near Neil Patel’s East Coast digs. Neil’s the President of Avalon Acoustics, and it was he who was debuting Avalon’s cost-no-object Osiris Reference Transducers, $72,000 the pair. No less incredibly, I’m slated to review the behemoths at some time in the not-too-distant future.

Kathleen and I weren’t able to make it to the Friday press function, so we went to the Thursday night do featuring hors d’oeuvres rather than lunch. Hey…

**THE AVALON OSIRIS SPEAKERS THREW THE BIGGEST, HUGEST, MOST ENORMOUS AND AIRY SOUNDSTAGE I’VE EVER EXPERIENCED.**

I’m on a diet. Overture turned out to be a nice-looking and welcoming kind of place with a friendly staff and a full wall of TVs (telling me something I’d rather not hear) discreetly turned off for the evening’s festivities. While the focus of the evening was certainly on the speakers, the Osiris, like the smaller Avalon Radian HCs, are presented as a system with Spectral electronics and MIT cables. In fact, the three manufacturers have dubbed the resultant system 2C3D — “Two-Channel Three-Dimensional Certified…conceived to produce a three-axis hologram out of two speakers.” The press release continued: “Overture is one of only three retailers in the US certified for the 2C3D System, and the first with the ‘Full Scale’ version with the Osiris Reference Transducers.”

The listening room was off-limits for the first part of the evening except for Authorized Personnel, thus forcing the assembled audio multitudes to ningle. Kathleen and I had a chance to catch up with Lucien Pichette of Avalon, Bruce and Kathy Brisson of MIT, Chris Klein of Acoustic Sciences Corporation (who comprehensively treated the listening room with Tube Traps), and finally to meet Neil’s paramour, Mary-Beth. Around 7:30pm (give or take a canape or two), amiable Overture chief batonist Terry Menacker threw open the doors to the inner burial chamber — ah, the listening room — where the Osiri rested. Their physical presence was simply overwhelming — they’re huge — and in some amusing way they do resemble an Egyptian sarcophagus straight out of a Boris Karloff set. Paging Ed Wood!

If you think I’m exaggerating, let me bring you a few details of their construction. First, one staggering fact you can’t get away from: the entire system weighs a horrendous 2200 pounds, crated and ready to go. The separate crossovers weigh almost 500 lbs alone. Overall height is 74.6", width 17", and depth 48". The driver complement: 1" piezo-polymer/gold supertweeter, 1" titanium-dome tweeter, 2" aluminum/magnesium-dome midrange, 9" Nomex-Kevlar–composite cone woofer, two 13" Poly-Kevlar–composite cone subwoofers. Sensitivity at 2.83V, 1 meter is given as 88dB, with a 4 ohm nominal (3.6 ohms minimum) impedance. The system resonance Q is given as 0.5. There are five sets of gold/rhodium input binding posts to allow for bi- to penta-wiring.

Avalon claims application of new cabinet design resulting in 19 separate aperiodically damped internal chambers in the three speaker cabinets per side for resonance control. The “Features” section in the Avalon literature lists innovations far too many to detail here. However, among the many advanced features noted I found one that raised my audio cackles, I mean hackles: “Constrained-mode damping in golden-section laminations to absorb cabinet vibrations.” Hmmm. This one caught my eye as well: “Exceptionally low-noise, highly reactive induction technology reduces inter-driver jitter, resulting in state-of-the-art microdynamics.”

Kathleen encouraged Neil to hug his speaker for a quick photo op while I 20/20’d the listening room (when I could tear my eyes away from the curiously faceted Osiris). The 2C3D-approved Spectral system consisted of the SDR-2000 HDCI Converter, a DMC-20 Series II preamp, and a pair of DMA-180 power amps.

Analog was “Certified” as well, I suppose — there was a full-bore flywheel-equipped TNT 3, with a Graham 1.5c sporting a Spectral MCR Signature IIB cartridge (of course), resting on a Townshend Seismic Sink.

MIT’s cable contributions consisted of the MI-350 Reference CVTerminator interconnects, MH-850 Multi-Bandwidth CVTerminator (dedicated Avalon Osiris version) speaker cables — or Speaker Interface, as they call it — and a run of Digital Reference coax RCA datalink. More MIT goodies included the Z-Stabilizer Mk.II power-line conditioner, the Z-Iso Duo for digital/preamplifier isolation, and Z-Cord II power cords. As mentioned, the room was heatedly treated with Tube Trap products.

Kathleen and I were graciously shown to front’n’center seats for a short presentation by Bruce Brisson on cable matters, and by Neil Patel on the how and wherefore of the Osiris Reference Transducers. Afterwards, the lights dimmed, Neil and Terry worked the
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front-end, while MITman Joe Abrams called the tunes in a lusty baritone. I took my glasses off and closed my eyes to listen.

Whew . . . Let me tell you one thing: whatever else they manage, these speakers threw the biggest, hugest, most enormous and airy soundstage I've ever experienced. And we're quite used to big soundstages, thank you very much. I also noticed a well-developed sense of height information that somehow seemed very natural in comparison with most other speaker systems. Of course, the Osirises are giants, so one would have to expect they'd sound big. And that they do. It's a big sound. Did I say it was BIG? Well, it is. B I G.

And transparent, of course. Not to mention super-hyperdynamic, both in the macro (certainly) and the micro senses. And the bass was just amazing — powerful, visceral, and beautifully pitch-differentiated. Although the system didn't create a super-plush mid-range like single-ended triodes can, the middle registers were still rendered quite beautifully. The highs sounded very extended and detailed . . . and a bit thin, to our taste. Interestingly, for the first time that I can remember, I preferred CD to analog. That's saying something, whatever it is. (A cartridge issue, I think.)

In spite of these opening-night giggles (I'm so picky . . . !), Kathleen and I came away with a sense of a very natural-sounding, enormously huge, holographic-like acoustic accompanied by tremendous slam and pace. The Osiris Reference Transducers sounded faster than fast, and extremely detailed in a very musical way. I simply cannot imagine that speakers such as these, especially when purchased as a system with the 2C3D-approved components, cannot be made to sound perfectly glorious in any (perforce) well-heeled audiophile's home.

Frankly, I can't wait to hear them in our system . . . that is, if they'll fit through the front door!

US: Wes Phillips

Genesis Technologies, Inc. has announced that Jim McCullough has joined the Colorado-based speaker company as Vice President of Marketing and Sales. McCullough has been prominent in high-end audio for the last decade: as Director of US Sales at Madrigal Audio Laboratories, he was instrumental in developing that firm's American distribution network. From there, he moved on to Wadia Digital Corporation where, as Vice President of Marketing and Sales, he established an international distribution network for their products. Arnie Nudell, President of Genesis Technologies, stated that "the addition of Jim McCullough to our team brings us a step closer to achieving our goal of . . . developing a wide range of products which explore the boundaries of what technology and human imagination will allow." Phew!

US: John Atkinson

British amplifier manufacturer Exposure has announced that it has a new US distributor: Music For Others, 7714 Big Bend Blvd., St. Louis, MO 63119. Tel: (314) 645-1711. Fax: (314) 645-6434. E-mail: Mus4plesr@aol.com. Pricing and dealers will remain the same. Prospective dealers and customers should contact Music For Others for sales and service.

US: Steven Stone

Gold Aero's Frank Morris is probably still recovering from putting together the new, hot-off-the-presses The Tube Complement and Substitution Guide 1950–1995, Volume 1. This 430-page tome, retailing for $49.95, lists the tube complements for 775 models of tube gear from 111 different manufacturers. It also gives recommended tube substitutions for each model, manufacturing dates, original retail prices, and reviews (if any). Besides supplying important information on all significant tube gear made in the last 45 years, this guide devotes sections to receiving tube replacements, foreign tube substitutions, biasing diagrams for every tube known to man, and a directory of sources for additional tube and tube-gear-related information. The guide comes in a binder-ready, three-hole-punched format, allowing each owner to add updates, notes, and additional info.

And an update is already in the works. Scheduled to become available around January 30, 1996, it runs between 150 and 180 pages and costs $29.99. The first update will address some of the inevitable holes in the first volume — for example, products from Jadis, Counterpoint, and some Audio Research models were not included in Vol.1. Morris plans to produce yearly updates following closely after each Winter Consumer Electronics Show, so this guide will continue to be the most complete and up-to-date single reference source available on tube equipment.

The first volume is impressive in its scope and attention to detail. Occasionally Morris found that his reference sources were contradictory. Often changes made in a product's tube complement during its production life span were inadequately documented. In these cases, the final and determining reference was always the hardware itself. Some components, like the Atma-Sphere MP-1 preamp, have five different revisions listed, each with a slightly different tube complement. One can only marvel at the diligence required to compile all the information contained in this book.

For anyone who uses and collects tube components, this guide is simply a must-have. Nowhere else can so much useful information be found in one easy-to-access source. If you have a penchant for old tube electronics, the Tube Complement and Replacement Guide should pay for itself in a fortnight — no more wrong guesses when tube-swapping. It's available from Blue Book Enterprises, Cool Sounds Press, P.O. Box 110695, Campbell, CA 95011-0695. Tel: (408) 377-9050. Fax: (409) 377-1282. Perhaps you should get two, one for each channel.

US: Wes Phillips

Van den Hul cartridges have acquired a new US distributor, namely George Stanwicke, whose advocacy of vinyl and vinyl playback earned him the sobriquet "Analog George" while a NYC hi-fi salesman. Inquiries can be addressed to: Stanalog Audio Imports, P.O. Box 671, Hagaman, NY 12086. Tel./Fax (518) 843-3070.

Lithuania: Richard Lehner

On December 16, in the capital city of Vilnius, the Frank Zappa Fan Club of Lithuania unveiled a 6'-tall bust of the late composer (1941–1993) in celebration of Zappa's December 21 birthday; the statue was sculpted by Konstantinas Bagdonas. The club has established a Frank Zappa Library (also in Vilnius) that will collect material on Zappa and maintain a full collection of his recorded work.

Though Zappa's music was appreciated throughout the world, he himself was perhaps accorded the most respect from behind the former Iron Curtain, this for his consistent outspokenness.
LISTEN TO THE UNEXPECTED.

Regardless of where we stood, the presentation of voices and instruments remained stable and the tonal balance correct... with the SS-M7ES, Sony has achieved an unqualified success...

Artur Willis, Stereophile
Vol. 17, No. 8, Aug. 1984
US: Peter W. Mitchell
A few years ago I spent a very revealing afternoon in the computer lab at Northwestern University, located in a suburb of Chicago. The outer room was filled with networked Sun work-station computers. The inner room appeared to contain nothing but sound-absorbing wedges on the walls and a handful of speakers. As it turned out, the inner room was devoted to the creation of aural illusions.

Optical illusions are remarkably commonplace and widespread; they’re encountered with special frequency by drivers on level roads. Despite this evidence of the fallibility of the senses, audiophiles have an oddly persistent faith in the reliability of their aural perceptions. Many hi-fi enthusiasts, despite qualifying themselves as skilled listeners able to hear small amounts of distortion and tiny imperfections in audio equipment, fall into the trap of believing that their ears provide an exact, literal representation of the audio waveforms arriving from the world around them.

In some ways, the hearing system is indeed amazingly precise: for instance, as the brain coordinates arrival-time information from the two ears to judge what direction a sound is coming from, its temporal resolution is an amazing ten millionths of a second! If a source begins directly in front of you, and it shifts slightly to the right so as to offset the time of arrival at the late ear, a 10μs timing offset is clearly audible.

The next demonstration seemed at first to be an impossible trick. As I sat in the center of the room, facing a stereo pair of speakers, I heard a sound source begin to my extreme left. So far, so good. Then the surprises began. While remaining to my left, the source began climbing a metal stairway, with the echoes of the stairwell reverberating realistically over my head. I was convinced that this was a very effective demonstration of the realism of surround-sound recording. As the demo continued, the source rose toward the zenith, continuing to reverberate in the stairwell, until it finally stopped directly overhead.

The real shock came when I turned on the lights. There was no surround sound, no overhead speakers, just a basic stereo pair in front of me.

There was trickery going on here. It simply required a knowledge of how we perceive height in real life. In principle, two ears mounted at the same height above the ground cannot perceive height angles directly; neither can speakers at the same elevation reproduce height differences. But the ear is not a simple organ; it is surrounded by a convoluted flap of skin and cartilage called the pinna. While part of any sound enters the ear canal directly, other sound waves reflect off the pinnae and enter the ear canal slightly late, having traveled a slightly longer path (by an inch or two).

When they arrive at the eardrum, the pinna reflections are in-phase with direct sounds at low frequencies, but they go alternately in and out of phase at high frequencies, producing cancellations (deep notches in the frequency spectrum) between 6 and 14kHz. These have been measured by placing tiny microphones in the ear canals of many listeners. The notch frequencies depend on the vertical and horizontal angles of the arriving sound, and the ear/brain system associates this notch pattern with the direction of the sound source.

This notch pattern is called the Head-Related Transfer Function (HRTF). Of course every individual has a slightly different HRTF, due to small differences in the reflection pattern within the individual pinna. I suspect that the remarkable success of the Northwestern demonstration might have been due to an operator quickly selecting a differently optimized HRTF based on quick observation of my pinna shape.

For several years engineers have been trying to turn this knowledge into practical use. The topic is called “auralization,” producing the illusion that a listener is somewhere else. For instance, an acoustic modeling program from Bose allows an architect to try out halls of various sizes and shapes and determine what sounds good.

At this year’s Winter Consumer Electronics Show, HRTFs were to be the basis of a remarkable new product costing about $350. The company name: Virtual Listening Systems, Inc., which evidently is a spinoff from the University of Florida. The first product, called “Auri,” does several things. First it does Dolby Pro Logic decoding to produce five semi-discrete channels of sound around the listener. Then it applies a second process, called Toltec processing, to combine the five channels into a two-channel signal suitable for conventional headphones. The “ears” function of the Toltec circuit will allow the user to select the HRTFs that best preserve the spaciousness of the sound.

Whether all this processing will produce a persuasive result remains to be seen. The company’s second product, in a few months, promises to be really interesting: the Pro Logic decoder will be replaced by a Dolby AC-3 decoder. The much greater spaciousness of AC-3, compared to Pro Logic, could be exciting when combined with a play-back system based on HRTFs.

UK: Thomas J. Norton
In late October I joined a number of other members of the US audio press on a whirlwind tour of four British hi-fi manufacturers: KEF, Celestion, Meridian, and NAD. I had visited the last three about five years ago, and was interested in seeing what had changed.

A great deal, as it turned out. KEF and Celestion have changed ownership since my 1990 visit, and now are both subsidiaries of KH Industries (UK) Ltd., the British branch of a Hong Kong–based conglomerate. Both lines are distributed in the US by KH America. Despite the common ownership, however, operations are autonomous; don’t expect to see jointly designed KEF/Celestion loudspeakers anytime soon.

Monday, our first full, non–jet-lagged day, found us in Maidstone, Kent, KEF Audio’s headquarters since it started building loudspeakers in 1961. KEF’s
facilities are as impressive as I remembered them: lines of cabinets waiting to be stuffed with drivers and other parts, racks of drivers ready for testing and sorting, and the assembly area where—at least for the Reference series—each loudspeaker is built by an individual rather than rolling down an automotive-style assembly line.

Their technical facilities are also as up-to-date as ever. KEF were one of the first companies to use extensive computer analysis in the design of loudspeakers, back in the mid-70s, and some of that original equipment is still around KEF’s facility. It’s been supplemented, of course, by the most current CAD equipment available. By now nearly everyone uses computers to speed and improve the design process, but KEF is still a pacesetter. Among their new applications for CAD: analyzing a design’s magnetic-field radiation to optimize shielding for video applications.

We spent much of the day in KEF’s on-site listening room (extensively redesigned and improved since my last visit) auditioning two new in-production KEF products plus a prototype. We began with their new, small Home Theater package, which for about $1560 includes the 80C center, 60S front/surrounds, and 30B powered subwoofer. The sound, though no match for that of larger, more high-end Home Theater setups, was effective and enjoyable.

Next up was a prototype of a pair of small nearfield monitors that will fill in the gap left in the KEF line by the discontinued Reference 101 and 102. It was a very impressive debut; hopefully the finished design will soon make it to market. And finally, we gave a listen to the new Reference 4. There’s a pair of these in my listening room even as I write; the review will appear next month.

All of these designs use a new generation of KEF’s proprietary Uni-Q coaxial drivers. While a number of OEM suppliers make similar drive-units, KEF indicated that they intend to get tough in enforcing their patents on the design, which is increasingly prominent in their product line.

If today’s Tuesday, this must be Ipswich. That’s the Celestion location, where we found ourselves on the second full day of our visit.

Celestion’s physical plant appeared about the same as it had five years ago—an impressively large, somewhat aircraft-hangar-like facility that houses Celestion’s domestic and professional loudspeaker production facilities. Not many American audiophiles know that Celestion is something of a British JBL when it comes to the pro market; PA and musical-instrument driver manufacture makes up about 13% of their business. Our hosts even scheduled a visit to a recently opened local club to see and hear a major sound installation using Celestion loudspeakers.

But the main item on the agenda was home audio; we spent most of the day getting an overview of Celestion’s current and future plans. One of these was a new $1200 Home Theater array that Celestion calls “Home Theater in a
Box." It wasn't yet available for audition, but we did get to hear three models of the new Impact line. Designed to replace several outgoing models, including the popular 3 and 5, the new loudspeakers have been designed for higher sensitivity and a “punchier” sound. That they indeed offered, though the speakers' more up-front character may not be to everyone’s taste.

We also heard an early prototype of a high-end, multi-driver, floorstanding loudspeaker making use of new drivers. Similar driver technology may eventually find its way into replacements for the still-current SL600a and SL700. But the capper was a listen to the marvelous new $4000/pair two-way Kingston. Everyone seemed to agree that this substantial design—the cabinet and stand are cast of a rock-like material Celestion calls AlphaCrystal—was a highlight of the visit, perhaps of the entire trip. Stereophile should have a review pair on hand by the time you read this.

Time limitations prevented a full Celestion factory tour, though we did get a brief look at their impressive research facilities, including laser-based computer analysis of cabinet vibrations. The latter was used extensively in designing the Kingston.

Wednesday we visited Meridian in Cambridge. Unfortunately, company head Bob Stuart couldn't join us; he was called to Japan at the last minute to promote audio applications for the new DVD format. Certainly more important than entertaining a bunch of journalists! Our time at Meridian was, in any event, scheduled to be brief. Much of it was occupied with discussions about the market implications of the very same DVD. Not surprising, as engineering-based Meridian considers multichannel sound to be the future of audio.

We also toured Meridian's new factory, which they recently occupied and are already enlarging. It's a major step up from their old plant—Meridian now markets a much wider range of products than they did four years ago. The new plant is in something of a hi-fi neighborhood: competitor Mission Electronics is right across the street, while Tim de Paravicini's EAR operation is just around the corner.

Next we drove into London. Electronics manufacturer NAD, viewed in the UK as a British hi-fi company, is multinational in scope—design work is done at NAD headquarters in London by engineers from a number of countries. Most production is done in the Far East, though at least one product—the 208 amplifier—is made in the UK.

We didn't visit the NAD offices directly; they had recently moved, and we'd already seen enough office space and CAD stations for one week. Instead, we gathered in a meeting room in our hotel and got a rundown on the latest from NAD. This included the new 218 power amplifier, rated at 225 Wpc into 8 ohms. It will be much less expensive than the big 208, though with less dynamic headroom. The 208 will remain in the line.

The most interesting new NAD product was the 118 two-channel digital preamplifier. Expected to sell for around $1500, it features an on-board 20-bit DAC, 18-bit ADC, digital volume, balance, and polarity controls, and Digital Signal Processing. The latter provides phase-linear bass, mid, and treble tone controls, infrasonic filter, stereo width control, dynamic range compression/expansion, and remote control. Processor limitations mean that not all DSP functions can be used simultaneously. The DSP is based on the Motorola DSP-56004 chip, which operates internally with 24-bit words.
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But that’s not all we did. To achieve the lowest levels of noise and distortion, our GCD-700’s analog section features the same Class A amplifiers we use in our top-of-the-line GFP-565 preamplifier.

The GCD-700 also boasts a superior power supply with two transformers. One for the analog section and one for the digital section, each housed on separate circuit board assemblies to eliminate EMI and RF interference.

By now you’re probably asking yourself, “How good does it really sound?” Let your ears be the judge. Visit your Adcom dealer for a demonstration of this remarkable new player. You’ll discover that the new GCD-700 sounds exceptional and is sensibly priced. What else would you expect from a component that is every bit pure Adcom?
A highlight of the NAD visit was a trip (arranged by NAD) to the Barbican, one of London’s main concert venues, for a concert by the London Symphony Orchestra (Colin Davis conducting). Mozart’s Piano Concerto 27 (Alfred Brendel, piano) and Dvorak’s Symphony 8. Best sound of the week, to nobody’s surprise.

Two free days in London gave me just enough time to exhaust myself. Fortunately, I know my way around the center of the city pretty well. (The city, not The City. In London, The City is only part of the city. Never mind.) Tottenham Court Road used to be something of a hi-fi mass-market Mecca. Like New York’s old Cortlandt Street — nothing like Tokyo’s Akihabara.

Computers now dominate Tottenham Court Road. Pitiful. But Foyles bookshop is still just a few short blocks south in Charing Cross Road, an easy place to blow a whole afternoon if you’re not careful. And London still has some of the world’s best museums (I checked out the Museum of the Moving Image), shopping (Harrods has Stereophile in their bookshop), and legitimate (West End) theater. I saw the new, disappointing production of Oliver! and the long-running Sunset Boulevard, a knock-out with sensational Elaine Page now in the lead, taking over from last summer’s featured Petula Clark (?)!

Perhaps surprisingly, London also has some of the world’s best movie houses (I saw Apollo 13 again, at the Empire Leicester Square, one of the best theaters anywhere). But though London’s West End theater seats are still about 30% cheaper than Broadway’s top, first-run movie theaters are expensive — try £9, or about $14, a seat. Makes movies in New York and Los Angeles seem like a bargain.

How did I manage to do all that in two free days and nights? I have no idea. But it was a great trip. Thanks to the manufacturers who sponsored it, the fellow journalists who helped to make it fun, and to J.B. Stanton and Associates (the US public relations arm for all four companies) for coordinating the whole trip and keeping it on track.

UK: John Atkinson
For the second year running, Professor Malcolm Omar Hawksford’s Centre for Audio Research and Engineering department at the UK’s Essex University is running an M.Sc (Master of Science) postgraduate degree course in “Audio Systems Engineering.” The course will commence in October 1996.

A glance through the prospectus was exciting in that students taking the course will be exposed to pretty much everything they would need to know to embark on a career in high-end audio. Students, who have to have a sound knowledge both of the English language and of mathematics, undertake a specific hardware project, such as designing an amplifier, as part of the course, and also have to prepare a full technical lecture on a topic of their choice, such as loudspeaker crossover network theory. As well as the University staff, course instructors include Meridian’s Bob Stuart and Stereophile Senior Contributing Editor Martin Colloms, while Canon’s Hiro Negishi, the designer of the S-35 loudspeaker I reviewed last June and a leading light in the Acoustic Renaissance for Audio, is a Visiting Professor.

If you have a suitable first degree in electrical engineering, acoustics, or a related subject and are thinking about preparing for a career in audio, contact the Postgraduate Courses Admissions Secretary, Department of Electronic Systems Engineering, University of Essex, Colchester CO4 3SQ, England. Fax: (44) 1206 872900. E-mail: esem-sc@essex.ac.uk. World Wide Web: http://www.essex.ac.uk/.

US: Jonathan Scull
Finding myself importuned by a pesky, persistent publicity person on behalf of Quintessential Sound, a New York–based digital mastering facility, I’d agreed to look in on a promised-to-be-newsworthy recording session in progress at St. Peter’s Church, just a few minutes’ brisk walk from our loft. It’s a popular venue; the Brothers Chesky record there, and Kathleen and I have attended concerts at the church from time to time.

The newsworthy tidbit revolved around the recorder — a new high-tech UK-sourced 24-bit machine. News release: “Pushing the sonic envelope of audiophile recording four bits into the future, Quintessential Sound, Inc. will be the first facility in the United States to use the new Genex GX2000 24-bit magneto-optical disk recorder.”

We made our way to St. Peter’s and followed a circuitous route through the back to avoid disturbing any recording that might be in progress. After creeping around like church mice, we came upon the control room (the Sacristy, actually), crammed to the rafters with recording equipment. After appropriate introductions, I flipped on my recorder and asked recording engineer Gabe Wiener what was going on:

Gabe Wiener: Well, we’re in the midst of making a 24-bit master tape for a project coming out in the spring of ’96 on our PGM Recordings label. The working title is La Voce Virtuosa: Lute and the Saxon Vocal Tradition.

Jonathan Scull: Before we delve into the technology — we don’t want anyone accusing us of worshipping too much at the equipment altar, especially here — why don’t you
Quintessential Sound, Inc. will be the first facility in the United States to use the new Genex GX2000 24-bit magne-to-optical disk recorder.

Scull: And the present recording?
Weiner: We’re doing music of Dresden in the 18th century, and this particular piece for soprano and contralto is called Canto Diviti Affetti. It was written by Restori and was actually presumed lost in the bombing of Dresden during World War II. It was recently discovered misfiled in a library, and we commissioned this edition from the manuscript—it’s the only currently existing score of the piece. We’re doing the first recording of it, and afterwards we’ll publish the score. There’s also music of Heinichen, Fux, Lotti, Gebel, and Weiss.

Jennifer Lane, mezzo-soprano: It’s a big deal!
Weiner: Yeah, a big deal. [laughs]
Scull: Where do you see Quintessential Sound relative to the other specialty recording houses?
Weiner: Well, we do all sorts of things. We did the mastering for the John Marks recording of Nathaniel Rosen playing the Bach Cello Suites, which came out quite well. [It was Stereophile’s Recording of the Month back in November ’94. —Ed.] We do a fair number of projects with small, esoteric companies. In fact, this recording is actually the fourth we’ve done for our label—we have five other projects in preproduction.

Actually, we’re a service company; for example, as well as mastering, we do software restorations—we’re working on the Cab Calloway estate right now. And we’re about to begin work on a reissue of Glenn Gould’s Goldberg Variations that was found on acetates strewn around his apartment after he died. Previously it was thought there were only two Gould performances of the Goldberg on record—the ’55, and a later digital one. Well, what people don’t know is there was also a ’54. Anyway, we’ll just keep turning out interesting projects like that.
Scull: Okay, Gabe, let’s move on to the equipment. To begin…?
Weiner: The recording chain starts in front of the stage with a Schoeps Sphere, the KFM-6 stereo microphone. It’s an unusual mike based on the work of Günther Theile. It uses two omnidirectional capsules mounted at the sides of a spherical baffle. This shouldn’t be confused with a binaural array, which is entirely different. Binaural recordings are designed only for headphone playback, while the Sphere is primarily for use with loudspeakers. I think it gives you the best of both worlds—the warmth of spaced omnis and the sharpness of imaging you get with an ORTF pair. The traditional problem with ORTF is that it’s extremely accurate when it comes to localizing instruments, but lacks the warmth in the bottom end. Spaced omnis have a wonderful spaciousness and warmth, but you can’t ever find anything in the soundstage.

Scull: I notice you’re using FM Acoustics microphone preamps on the Sphere.
Weiner: Yes—the M-1s. They’re pure class-A discrete devices, and we’ve found in our listening tests that they produce signals that sound remarkably natural, full, and uncolored.
Scull: Okay, and now to the 24-bit recording technology—the Prism A/D and D/A converter modules and the Genex GX2000 recorder, both from the United Kingdom.
Weiner: This session represents the first use of the Genex recorder here in the US. The signal goes to the Prism AD-1 24-bit converter, and feeds both the 24-bit Nagra-D and the Genex magneto-optical 24-bit disc recorder, using a laptop for the timecode. Then the signal goes to the Prism DA-1 24-bit D/A converter feeding a Grado HPA-1 headphone amp and a pair of Sennheiser HD 580s. We also drive a pair of Ariel 5s with a 50-watt Sonosax FD-A100 location amplifier.
Scull: I see the Ariels are strategically placed atop piles of books!
Weiner: Yes, Bibles and hymnals!
Scull: You don’t have to be Jewish, as the ad used to say…magneto-optical, Gabe?
Weiner: Yes. It’s same idea as a computer drive—lossless packing of data, like a zip file on a computer. And they’re writable up to 600 times.
Scull: And I see you have a split feed to a Meridian processor?
Weiner: A Meridian 618—we use it to reether 24 bits down to 16, and make a backup recording on an HHB PDR-1000 DAT machine.
Scull: HHB? I’m not familiar with that make.

Performers in session for La Voce Virtuosa (PGM 106). From left: Jürg-Michael Schwarz and Karen Marmer (violins); Loretta O’Sullivan (cello); Eric Minas (harpischord); Tamara Matthews (soprano); Jennifer Lane (mezzo-soprano); Timothy Burris (baroque lute).
The digital dilemma answered at last.

Digital separates really do provide superlative sound. The only problem is that most of them begin by separating you from the contents of your wallet. That’s hardly an enticing prospect for those of us who constantly balance our quest for musical excellence with minor annoyances like rent and the IRS.

Fortunately, Rotel has the answer. Our new RDD-980 Compact Disc Transport and RDP-980 Digital Processor combine exceptional sound, unique convenience, and affordability. How affordable? Let’s just say that you’ll have enough money left over for some wonderful concert tickets...or that CD buying binge you’ve been putting off!

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The RDD-980 CD Transport and RDP-980 Digital Processor boast circuit sophistication and sound quality far beyond their modest prices. They’re a perfect match. But, they’ll also work spectacularly on their own in your music or audio/video system.

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RDP-980 Digital Processor

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That’s not the end of the RDP-980’s capabilities. It switches up to 5 digital sources using coaxial or optical links. It handles sampling frequencies of 32kHz, 44.1kHz, and 48kHz for compatibility with any digital source. And, it features full remote input selection, phase inversion, and output muting.

The RDP-980’s high isolation power supply includes two shielded transformers, one for the digital stages and one for the analog circuitry, and 17 individual local voltage regulator/filter capacitor arrays. The glass epoxy circuit board isolates signal traces and ground planes on separate sides for minimal interference.

Jitter? The RDP-980’s specially selected optical input modules and high speed, wide bandwidth coaxial amplifiers minimize it. Additional circuit stages precisely synchronize all digital inputs and outputs to the RDP-980’s master clock to effectively eliminate it.

Delta/Sigma modulation with 64x oversampling and fifth order noise shaping follows a high resolution 8x digital filter. A voltage-reference switched-capacitor D/A then converts the high density data stream to a constant voltage analog signal.

The analog stage features high precision metal film resistors throughout. Close tolerance polypropylene foil and epoxy-dipped ceramic capacitors complement the FET-based operational amplifiers.

The result? A spacious, detailed, and totally non-fatiguing presentation of all your digital sources.

RDD-980 CD Transport

Rotel’s RDD-980 CD Transport begins with Philips’ highly regarded CDM-9 laser mechanism, long respected by critical audiophiles for precise tracking and immunity from external vibrations.

We didn’t stop there. We suspended the mechanism in the center of the RDD-980’s substantial chassis for even better damping of resonances that could cloud delicate musical information. We thoroughly isolated the motors, tracking servos, digital circuitry, and the information display with a multi-segment, dual transformer power supply. We minimized minute internal supply variations with precise voltage regulators, oversized heat sinks, and high grade capacitors. We included both coaxial and optical digital outputs, full remote control capabilities, and housed it all in well-shielded heavy gauge all-metal chassis.

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Weiner: It’s also British-made.

Gabe then showed me a promotional brochure with a photo of his studio, and I have to say, it looked impressive. Dominating the room is a control panel George Jetson would have envied, with a Sonic Solutions workstation close against some Krell gear, and backed by a looming pair of Wilson X-1 Grand SLAMM “monitors” lurking stage rear. Soft lighting on red-lit panels flank inset white acoustic treatments behind the monster monitors, with a nice-looking Old New York wooden floor finishing up the image. Control panels, oscilloscopes, a Nagra-D on the left with insouciance on one side...you get the drift. Looks good on paper!

Scull: That’s quite a setup, Gabe.

Weiner: Thanks. On the audiophile front, we modify a fair amount of the hardware. For instance, the stock Sonic Solutions system uses TosLink...

Scull: That’s bad.

Weiner: I hate TosLink — we use special custom-cut quartz cables to reduce jitter, we’ve tweaked the receivers, and everything is reclocked with a dual PLL. From there, the signal goes to the Sony CDW900E, an optical cutter, which also has a reclocking buffer and a crystal-locked oscillator to further attenuate the jitter right as the laser strikes the pits. Then it’s out to our pressing plant, and eventually we get them back! [Holds up copy of The Buxtedhude Project, Vol. 1: Sacred Cantatas, PGM 102.] Have you listened to this one?

Scull: Yes, thanks — I love the enclosed booklet showing an angel with Grado ‘phones and a Radio Shack 3400. I thought that was pretty funny — I think I even scanned the image. Speaking of the 3400, let me ask you what you think about analog.

Weiner: I love analog — it’s wonderful to listen to. I have three turntables, actually. The best is a Roksan TMS with a Graham 1.5 arm and van den Hul One. But I will say that if I listen to the live feed and what we’re getting with the 24-bit Prism converter and Genex recorder, it’s hard to tell the difference between them. As an engineer, I appreciate that — it’s really what I want my equipment to be doing.

If I’m strictly a listener — let’s say I don’t know what the original sounded like — then I can enjoy both analog and digital. Although, as an engineer trying to capture a performance, I feel that 24 bits on the Nagra-D or the Genex Prism will do the job for me quite well.

People should pay attention to understanding the distinction between accuracy in reproduction, and what you simply enjoy listening to. Is it a matter of musicality or just preference? They’re not always the same thing. There are people who like analog and say that it’s more musical, and others who feel digital is more accurate. Well, accuracy is not really a debatable issue.

Weiner: If you compare an analog and a digital recorder and level-match them, you’re able to tell the analog recording from the original and you can tell you’re listening to an analog copy. Now it’s true, on bad digital you’d also be able to tell, but with high-quality digital, or maybe even high-quality analog, quite often what’s pleasing to hear is not always accurate.

The point of the exercise is capturing the musical performance, a transcription of the musical event. And the way to do that is to re-create what’s out there in here [gestures at the equipment]. I’m just a scribe.

Scull: A scribe, Gabe? Then what are all those compressors and limiters doing here? [laughter]

Weiner: Yeah, I’ve got a big rack of equalizers hidden under the stairs.

Scull: Something I always ask... where’s digital going?

Weiner: I think we’re going to be moving to higher sampling rates, but staying at 24 bits for a while. I think the next mainstream audiophile standard will be 24/96 — 24 bits, 96kHZ. The newly adopted DVD standard will allow us to support all sorts of different formats, including two-channel 24/96.

Scull: Your CDs are 20-bit now?

Weiner: Right, 24-bit dithered to 16, with an effective resolution of 20 bits.

Scull: And HDCD?

Weiner: Well, I’m not sold on it. I’m not convinced it will do a better job of capturing what’s coming in from the live feed than 24 bits, or even 24 bits at a higher sampling rate.

Scull: I see... and finally, what’s your reference setup at home?

Weiner: I use WATT Puppys and Eggleston Alters. The preamp is a Krell KRC HR — that’s the unit with the volume pot replaced with step resistors — powered by a Krell KAS-2. We use the Audio Standards in the studio.

Scull: A dedicated Krell man...

Weiner: Yes, I like Krell — it does a good job of unveiling things. I also use the DT-10 transport along with a Prism D/A converter like this one.

Scull: Okay, Gabe... I’ll look for the CD in the spring.
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O
f course, I rushed into print last month with my initial write-up on the Jadis SE300B — I wanted Stereophile readers to get the scoop. Next month, in this very rag, Monsieur Scull will give you the full poop on this fabulous amplificateur français. Meanwhile, I’ve had four more weeks to live with the pair.

“Any tube trouble?” Frank Garbie, the importer, wanted to know.

“No yet,” I answered, and yumped to call Yon-o-Ton.1

“Yes, tube turris all right. One of the Esti 4300 BLX tubes failed on me, and the other tube it was paralleled with was glowing red-hot. It even singed the top of the tube cage. I’ve replaced them with other 300Bs.”

Sure enough, I removed the tube cages over the 4300BLXs on my pair of amplifiers and noticed that on the left-channel amplifier, one tube had gone dark and the other 4300BLX was glowing super bright and running extra hot trying to compensate. It’s sort of like Siamese twins, Chang and Eng—one dies, takes out the other. I switched off the amplifiers and replaced the Esti 4300 BLXs with two pairs of Golden Dragon 4300Bs.

All right, I told myself, these things happen, especially with a new model. And a new tube. Still, Jadis should have known about the apparently high failure rate with the 4300BLX tube.2 At least Jadis should have let the amplifiers run in for 80–100 hours with all tubes in place. Maybe they did.

So, with new tubes installed, how does the amplifier sound?

Still glorious. I hear all the harmonic beauty that’s typically associated with a 300B amplifier running in single-ended mode with a degree of transparency that’s at once quite startling and seriously addictive. Warning: Listen to these amplifiers and you may find it tough to listen to other amps, despite the drawbacks.

Drawbacks?

You didn’t tell us about these last month, Sam.

It’s true. I was in such awe of the sound — experiencing such ecstasy, as my pal Harvey Rosenberg would say — that I couldn’t hear any drawbacks, or bring myself to admit there are any. But in common with other 300B-based amplifiers I’ve encountered, especially the single-ended type, the Jadis SE 300B is — well, a little lacking both in dynamics and weight in the upper bass and lower midrange. At least, that’s the way it seems with the amplifiers on the Infinity Composition Prelude P-FR speakers — the 96dB-sensitive speakers that Bob Harley raved about last September (Vol.18 No.9).

INFINITIES

“You’re listening to the Jadis amplifiers with the Infinity Composition speakers?” a certain Stereophile reviewer asked, with a touch of disapproval in his voice.

“Yeah, why not? Very efficient. Recommended for use with amplifiers with as little as 10 watts of power. What’s more, the Jadis amplifiers and the Infinity speakers look very elegant together.”

“Well, I don’t know. But those Jadis amplifiers are very soigné, shall we say, and they would seem to demand equally refined speakers.”

“The Infinities are soigné!” I explained. “Bien sûr,” I added for emphasis.

You see the thanks a manufacturer gets for selling speakers at a bargain price.

I received the Infinity Composition Prelude P-FRs — the two stereo speak-

1 In Russian, Jonathan is “You-o-Ton,” my wife, Marina, points out.

2 Alema UK, manufacturers of the Audion amplifiers, knew about the problem and stopped using this tube. When I saw the Jadis SE300B fitted with this tube, I assumed that Jadis knew and the problem had been sorted out.
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ers, not the complete Home Theater system, which includes a center speaker and two surrounds — and immediately set them up in the living room, where I had recently installed the Jadis SE 300Bs.

Wow! Was Harley right about the aesthetics of these speakers! They are gorgeous. With their curved Art Deco lines, they remind me of the furniture you might see in a Fred Astaire/Ginger Rogers movie from the 1930s. Talk about tasteful!

Like most speakers, the Infinitys take a while to break-in. I used the McCormack DNA 0.5 amplifier to give them a good 80 hours of run-in with various noise tracks, including track 20 of Stereophile's Test CD 3. Then I switched back to the Jadis SE300Bs.

Soigné? Mais oui!

As Bob Harley heard, these speakers throw a very convincing soundstage. In fact, they're soundstage champs — more like small box speakers than big floorstanders. With the right material — especially with analog — the soundstage can stretch far beyond the width of the two speakers. The soundstage even stretched beyond the width of my room — 13' by 26' (I have the speakers about 4' out from a narrow wall). This is the kind of soundstage that audiophiles pay big, big bucks for.

As Bob described in his review, each speaker uses four 5.25" lower-midrange drivers, two 4" upper-midrange drivers, one 1" soft-dome tweeter in the middle of the column, and a single 12" powered, side-firing (toward the wall) subwoofer built into the base. What surprises me is how seamlessly these drivers integrate, even when listening up close — say, 4' from the speakers. An even bigger surprise is how smoothly the powered woofers integrate into the total sound.

The temptation for the manufacturer — this is Home Théâtre, after all — would be to make the bass boomy and overbearing. What Infinity did is just the opposite. They made the bass tight, tuneful, and restrained — so as not to muddy up the overall sound. If you have any doubts about whether these speakers are suitable for serious music listening, just banish them right now.

Just as the bass is restrained, so, too, is the treble. This isn't one of these audiophile speakers with a treble that can bite your ears off and (for me) make chamber music, especially on CD, unlistenable. String quartets can sound immediate and alive through these speakers — sweet, refined, detailed.

And jazz? Because there's no bass overhang, because there is, indeed, a remarkable lack of boxy coloration with these speakers, jazz sounds crisp, clear, rhythmically alive. And harmonics, especially with the Jadis SE300B? Don't ask. Like I said before, if you listen to the Jadis SE300B, you run the serious risk of having happen to you what seems to have befallen the normally well, soigné scribes of Haute Fidélité. You may go stark raving mad, too.

Ordinarily I listen to these speakers from a distance of about 15' — more than is optimal, but this is my living room, after all. From this distance, the soundstage is dramatic, convincing, palpable — but, well, distant. If Marina's not home to disapprove, I sometimes move the chair to 6' or even 4' from the speakers. This gives me much more apparent soundstage depth than the more distant listening. The point I am trying to make is that these speakers do the soundstage thing for both distant and nearfield listening. The seamless integration of the drivers holds up even when you move far forward.

What's more, in my living room, the speakers present a soundstage that stretches from floor to ceiling — not like some speakers, including the Thiel CS.5, where the soundstage hovers rather closely to the floor, giving you the feeling that you're listening from the balcony.

Is there a downside to the Infinitys, aside from the fact that they may not cost enough to impress your audiophile friends?

At $3000 a pair, it seems downright churlish to criticize them, let alone complain, because these speakers do so many things so right. But, as Harley noted, the sound is a little lean in the upper bass/lower midrange. This means that the sound can lack dynamic weight or drive — especially when used on a single-ended triode tube amplifier like the Jadis SE300B.

Bigger amps, both tube and solid-state, give more weight. I got spectacular results using the Infinity Compositions with the Quicksilver M135 monoblocks — these big tube amplifiers fleshed out the sound down below in a way that the Jadis SE300Bs couldn't manage, though with some loss of overall delicacy and transparency.

But is this leanness really a drawback?

In combination with low-powered, single-ended triode tube amps, perhaps. Like I just said, you can certainly mitigate and perhaps even overcome this leanness by using a well-chosen, more powerful amplifier.

But I wouldn't have Infinity change this speaker — not that they would, anyway. So far as I'm concerned, it's far better to have bass that tends toward leanness than flat, flabby, out-of-control bass.

I'll bet, too, that these speakers don't sound so lean when they're used in the typical Home Theater installation — with a center channel and surround speakers. I used to have a four-channel...
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system, way back when quadraphonic sound was the thing. Even when you add small, bass-shy surround speakers to a pair of front-channel speakers, you increase the apparent bass response and the dynamics of a system. I'll bet the full Infinity system sounds plenty dynamic. Most Home Theater buffs use A/V receivers, so they can always goose the bass via the tone control.

Can you do better than a pair of Infinity Compositions? Overall, at the price, maybe not. I have, however, heard speakers that give more apparent treble detail—usually speakers using a metal-dome tweeter. Along with that detail, though, there often comes a hint of hardness and possible treble fatigue...or even a case of metal-dome tweeteritis. I'm not so sure that a good soft-dome tweeter, as used here, isn't better.

I think the resolution of these speakers approaches the resolution of the very best, but it doesn't quite get there. And maybe speakers, as a rule, shouldn't quite get there. Perhaps the cost of super resolution, in speakers, is such that it's not worth paying the penalty in terms of listening fatigue. I can listen to the Infinity Compositions for hours with very "difficult" treble material—string quartets and the like. Go for more resolution at your own risk.

I also feel that the Infinity Compositions are surpassed, although not by much, in their soundstaging ability—and particularly by small minimonitors such as the ProAc Tablette 50 Signature, which is currently running in my main listening room. But the ProAcs can't seem to lift the soundstage and fill the room with sound the way the Compositions can.

So, as you see, I quite agree with Bob Harley that these speakers are a find—more than that, they're a steal at the price. The only disagreement I might have with Bob is his tying the speakers so closely with small, single-ended, triode tube amps. I think they can be used successfully with other amplifiers as well, both tube and solid-state.

I can't forget how well these speakers combined with the 135Wpc Quicksilver M-135 monoblocks—rich, full, dynamic, a truly spectacular soundstage. These speakers would probably match extraordinarily well with such moderately powered, conventional push-pull tube amplifiers as the Conrad-Johnson Premier 11a or the Audiopirism Debut—I would guess that with these you'd have all the power you need, and without the leanness. The new Pass Laboratories Aleph 3 30Wpc single-ended solid-state stereo amplifier might be an excellent choice, too.

**Manleys**

As it happens, I still had the pair of Manley SE/PP 300B amplifiers on hand, and, as soon as I could tear myself away from the Jadis SE300B, I tried those with the Compositions. Even more than the Thiel CS.5s, the Compositions revealed the much greater delicacy and resolution of the Jadis amplifiers. Still, especially considering their price of $3500/pair, the Manley amplifiers were excellent too. Some resolution, some transparency was gone—but still I heard much midrange magic.

Now, of course, the Manleys have more power on demand—a claimed 36Wpc instead of 18W in single-ended mode—when you switch into push-pull. So I pulled on the Manleys (you push to get out of push-pull) and tried them in the more muscular mode. Dynamics improved greatly, the lean sound was no longer so lean, the resolution was almost as good as it had been in single-ended mode, but some of the palpability was lost, the soundstage was flatter, and there was less air there (whew!). Of course, this is the neat thing about the Manleys—you can use them any way you want, single-ended or push-pull, without or with varying amounts of feedback.

**Drawbacks**

But if the Infinities reveal the Jadis's glories, they also reveal its drawbacks. (I hate to use the word "flaws.") Unlike, perhaps, you get them on a pair of super-efficient horn speakers, as J-10
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has, the Jadis amplifiers are not the most dynamic performers, and — well — in absolute terms — they just can’t get it up in terms of bass and lower midrange drive. Are you surprised? I’m not. I’ve heard more or less the same thing from other low-powered single-ended triode tube amplifiers in other circumstances — although the switchable SE/PP Manley amplifiers seem to get it up more than most, even in SE mode.

When all is said and done, though, I can easily live with the combination of Jadis and Infinity, and love it. The Jadis amplifiers have harmonic delicacy that you just have to hear. What’s more, the Jadis amplifiers have a way of opening up — I know of no other way to express this — that’s extraordinary even according to the standards set by other Jadis amplifiers. The Jadis SE300B breathe — and I do mean breathe — such life into the music that the effect, despite diminished dynamics, is as close to live as I’ve ever heard from reproduced sound.

This, generally speaking, is what 300B-based amplifiers do so well: they breathe life into the music. But the Jadis amplifiers breathe more than life into the music; they impart light as well. This is how I would define ultimate transparency — light and light, not just bags of resolution and detail. With light, you get more than palpable presence — an amplifier can sound “dark,” yet still conjure up very convincing audio images, and also sound harmonically correct. “Light” is something else. I can’t use any other word. I turn on the Jadis amps, and as with no others in my experience, the music is illuminated from within.

I just mentioned this to Yon-o-Fun, who’s finishing up his own review — coming next month. It seems that we’ve independently reached the same conclusion about this light-from-within business. Like I said, this phenomenon is especially dramatic with the Jadis SE300B amplifier. Turn on the amps, let them play music for a while (better to let them warm up at least a half hour; an hour is better), and the room is filled with sunshine.

You really do listen to these amplifiers at your own risk. When I substitute other amplifiers, the light goes out, the clouds roll in, and the joy begins to dissipate.

Another drawback — if you can call it that — is that analog appears to outshine digital through the Jadis. It’s not that the Jadis makes digital worse — far from it. It’s just that analog, even not-so-far-above-average analog, sounds richer,

For the most part, I’ve been using a very modest analog setup through the Jadis: a Goldring 1042 cartridge, retailing for $275, in a Rega Planar 3 turntable (with RB 300 arm), a long-discontinued NYAL Moscode SuperIt, and a Purest Sound Systems Model 500 passive preamplifier.

The lack of dynamic drive? I’ll tell you: it’s less of a problem with my analog than it is with whatever digital I’ve dropped into the system so far. Oh well, you can’t have everything. If I want orchestral music, balls out, I’ll take our seats at Carnegie. Meanwhile, back at the ranch, I’ll look for ways to compensate. Cables, different CD players and processors. More LPS!!! I’d love to hear what the Jadis amplifiers do in my system with a good pair of horn speakers. If I fall in love with a pair of horns — my wife, Marina, said I have a pair of horns already—my course of action regarding the Infinity Compositions is simple.

I’ll use them in my Home Theater setup.

**NAXOS**

The February Stereophile is, of course, the Records To Die For issue.

Before you invest in more full-price discs, there’s a classical record label you should know about, if you don’t already. It’s Naxos. No, the company is not based in the Aegean isle of the same name, where Theseus ditched Ariadne and Dionysus once ruled. It’s based in Hong Kong. But the company is really international. Most of the new discs sold in this country are made in the US.

Naxos was founded in 1987 by Klaus Heymann “on the premise of all the music without the trimmings,” according to Naxos of America Marketing and Promotions Manager Charles Weigel. Sister labels include Naxos Jazz, Marco Polo, and White Cloud. There are about 1000 Naxos classical releases currently available in the US, and about 5000 releases on Marco Polo, a full-price label specializing in offbeat classical repertory. Printed catalogs are available free from Naxos of America, based in Cherry Hill, New Jersey, by calling (800) 75-NAXOS. Do it. Get a catalog. Call them now.

Years ago, long before the digital age, there were a number of good budget classical labels — Nonesuch, Vox, Vox Turnabout, EMI’s Seraphim, London Stereo Treasury — whose LPs you could buy on sale for two bucks or less. Many of these releases were original recordings—not reissues—and the re-
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leases included a lot of chamber music as well as baroque and rococo orchestral music that probably wouldn't sell well at full price.

Today, Nonesuch is mostly a full-priced label. Vox is issuing retreats. Sony, BMG, EMI, and PolyGram (DG, Philips, and London) mostly recycle stuff, too, on their budget CD lines, and not always the most interesting material. I find the entire budget classical CD area depressing. Except for Naxos.

Naxos is to CDs today what Nonesuch, Vox, and other labels were to LPs 20 and 30 years ago. For the most part, Naxos records entirely new performances. And they offer good recordings cheap. How cheap? About $6 a disc if you pay the suggested list price — $5 a disc or so when you find them on sale. At sale price, you could buy the entire available Naxos catalog for under $500. Think about it. For less than you might throw on a set of speaker cables, you can have a decent recording of virtually every significant work in the classical music repertory.

How good are the performances? Based on what I've sampled so far (about half the catalog), the performances range from good (ie, competent) to excellent. The recordings range from good to excellent, too — many being state-of-the-art.

You can see the opportunities for building up your collection of classical CDs. You can buy better than two, sometimes better than three Naxos discs for the price of one full-price London, DG, EMI, etc.

Unlike the major classical labels, which seem intent on largely ignoring anything beyond a core repertory of symphonic “war horses,” Naxos issues recordings drawn from the broadest range of repertory.

You want Grieg's complete piano music — seven volumes? (That ought to be Grieg geng) Max Reger's orchestral works? The complete Vivaldi cello concertos? All of Haydn's string quartets (almost all, I think)? You got 'em. At $6 or even $5/disc, you can start with whatever you fish out from the bin. At such prices, I've never purchased a Naxos disc I was sorry I bought. Still, there are some Naxos discs I'm especially happy I bought, and these, in particular, I recommend to you, before you waste far more money elsewhere:

**Orchestral:** The symphonic repertory, so far, is where Naxos is the weakest. To put it charitably, some of the orchestras aren't the greatest; and for this reason, I would probably confine most of my Naxos bingeing — my Dionysian orgy — to chamber music and recital discs. Nevertheless…

**Try the Sibelius cycle with the Slovak Philharmonic conducted by Adrian Leaper. The discs are sold separately or as a boxed set. Symphonies 1 and 6 are on Naxos 8.550197; 2 and 7 are on 8.550198; 3 and 4 are on 8.550199; and some orchestral fillers are on 8.550200. Best of the bunch, if you want to sample just one? Go for 3 and 4. The performances are some of the finest on record, although the Third Symphony is let down by a somewhat opaque recording. The recording of Symphony 4 is a knockout — sonically and, well, interpretationally.

The Slovak Philharmonic, based in Bratislava, Slovakia, is a very fine orchestra, even if they're not in the same showoff league as the Berlin or the Vienna Philharmonic. Let's say they're about even with the Prague-based Czech Philharmonic. Anyway, the Vienna Philharmonic isn't going to play for five bucks.

**Worthwhile, too, is the Slovak Philharmonic's Dvorak Symphony Cycle, five discs, sold separately or loosely boxed, with catalog numbers 8.550266-270. If you don't want to go whole hog for the entire set, get 8.550268, with Symphonies 3 and 6, and 8.550270, with Symphonies 5 and 7. Symphonies 5 and 6 are my personal favorites. These are not quite performances in the league of Sir Colin Davis (who really should give us a complete Dvorak symphony cycle), or of the late Istvan Kertesz on London. The recordings, too, are somewhat opaque. But the spirit of the music is there.

Two Tchaikovsky discs are must-haves — the Suites for Orchestra with the National Symphony Orchestra of Ireland conducted by Stefan Sanderling, son of the great conductor Kurt Sanderling. Suites 1 and 2 are on 8.550644. Even more not to be missed are Suites 3 and 4 (“Mozartiana”) on 8.550728.

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Check out the New Zealand Symphony Orchestra under Franz-Paul Decker—in particular the Mozart and Hiller Variations by Max Reger on 8.553079.

The Hungarians have always had a special love for Italian opera—Verdi, in particular. So Naxos (how do they always know where to go?) went to the Italian Institute in Budapest to record two discs of Verdi overtures with the Hungarian State Opera Orchestra, conducted by Pier Giorgio Morandi. (Funny. He doesn't sound Hungarian.)

Now you may pass on some of these other discs, although I do hope you take the Tchaikovskys. But the Verdi overture discs—8.553018 and 8.553089—are musical and sonic spectacles. These are performances to lift you out of your seat. It's amazing that Naxos knows exactly where to get these types of performances—overall, performers are superbly matched to repertory.

Such recordings on Naxos are so good for so little money it's almost scandalous. You almost feel guilty for paying so little, as if you're stealing the disc. Such a "steal-rie" disc is Elgar's Symphony 2 with the BBC Philharmonic conducted by Edward Downes, Naxos 8.550635. This has been acclaimed, justifiably, as one of the finest Elgar Seconds ever recorded.

If you go for baroque and rococo, you'll find lots of music on Naxos—the very type of works that Nonesuch and Vox Turnabout used to offer on their budget LPs 20 or so years ago. Lots of Haydn, Telemann. If you're big on Vivaldi, be sure to get the four volumes of Cello Concertos, 8.550907 through 8.550910, featuring the City of London Sinfonia; Nicholas Kraemer, director and harpsichord; with Raphael Wallfisch, cello. Wallfisch is a superb cellist, and the City of London Sinfonia, founded by conductor Richard Hickox, is one of Britain's finest chamber orchestras. All told, you get almost four hours of glorious music for a few dollars more than you might pay for one hour of Vivaldi on a full-price label. I recommend all four volumes, but if you want to try just one for starters, make it Volume 2, 8.550908.

**Piano:** Naxos has two pianists in particular whom they have recorded very extensively—Jenö Jandó, a Hungarian, and Idil Biret, a Turkish-born pianist, who performs mainly throughout Europe.

Check out Jandó in works of Schubert and Schumann. The complete Impromptus of Schubert, 8.550260; and, also by Schubert, the *Moments Musicaux*, 8.550259. I also enjoy Jandó immensely in two discs of piano solo works by Schumann—8.550783, which includes *Kreisleriana*, Op.16 and 8.550784, with a warm, highly engaging performance of the *Kinderszenen*, Op.15. Don't look for piano pyrotechnics here—instead, expect very sensitive phrasing and fine piano technique. You'll find more fire with Idil Biret—an entirely different temperament. Whereas Jandó is lyrical, reflective, perhaps at his best in less tempestuous passages, Biret is altogether more a blaze. It would be Idil to complain about these performances, at $5 or $6/disc—but the truth is, they would stand up at full price.

Two Brahms discs with Biret are particular favorites of mine: Piano Sonatas 1 and 2 on 8.550351 and Hungarian Dances plus Waltzes, Op.39 on 8.550355. Get the latter disc for sure—the performance and the recording quality are astonishing.

Biret is quite at home with Chopin, too. So you might add Piano Concertos 1 and 2, on 8.550368 and 8.550369, respectively. Biret plays with what was then (in 1990 and 1991) the Czechoslovak State Philharmonic Orchestra. If you have to choose, take 8.550369 with the Second Piano Concerto and Chopin's Variations on "La ci darem la mano," Op.2. The theme is from Mozart's *Don Giovanni* and the work runs over 18 minutes—it's worth buying the disc for this little gem alone.

You were not about to run out and buy Gabriel Fauré's complete Nocturnes, were you? Not at full price, anyway. But you can have superbly played and recorded performances by the French pianist Jean Martin, on 8.550794 and 8.550795, with some other Fauré piano works thrown in. These have become two of my favorite piano discs.

**Chamber:** Jenö Jandó, I think, is heard at his best in the Beethoven Violin Sonatas, teamed up with Takako Nishizaki, violin, who happens to be the wife of Naxos founder and owner Klaus Heymann. The four discs, 8.550283-8.550286, are sold separately. While these are not performances to put alongside the fever-pitch performances of Martha Argerich and Gidon Kremer on DG at full price, they make for very acceptable listening.

Another disc not to be missed is *Works for Oboe and Piano* by Schumann, featuring Józef Kiss, oboe, and Jenö Jandó, piano, 8.550599. One hour of the most glorious music, superbly recorded and exquisitely played. It's one of my very favorite chamber music discs—if not a "record to die for," certainly one to live for. The performances are so beautiful I almost want to kiss Józef. (Sorry.) Put this recording at the top of your Naxos list.

I recommend Jandó with the Kódis Quartet in the Piano Quintets, Op.44 and Op.34, respectively, by Schumann and Brahms, 8.550406. Nearly 67 minutes of music. (Naxos doesn't go in for skinypiefe times, even at these low prices.) And since Jandó is Hungarian, after all, it's perhaps not surprising that he adds some paprika to his performances of Bartók. Get the Violin Sonatas 1 and 2, featuring Jandó with Hungarian violinist György Pauk, 8.550749. Naxos would have shortchanged you, otherwise, if they'd included only the two violin sonatas, so they add Bartók's *Contrasts*, featuring clarinetist Kalman Berkes, to give you a 75-minute disc. While you're at it, pick up Piano Concertos 1, 2, and 3 with Jandó, all on a single 77-minute disc, 8.550771, featuring the Budapest Symphony Orchestra conducted by András Ligeti.

As Beavis and Butt-head say, "Check it out." Check out the Stuttgart Piano Trio—especially their recordings of the Beethoven and Schubert piano trios. The Beethoven are in four volumes, sold separately 8.550946-8.550949. The Stuttgart Piano Trio have been playing together since 1968. It sounds like it. Pianist Monika Leonard studied with Alfred Brendel and Arturo Benedetti Michelangeli. The Schubert Piano Trios, 8.550131 and 8.550132, are superb too.

Ever heard of pianist Voka Ashkenazy? Invite him to dinner! (This disc is great to play during a candlelit meal.) The notes don't say if he's related to the Ashkenazy, aka Vladimir. If Voka is the great pianist's son, he would be Vladimir Vladimirovich.

Whoever Voka is, he performs superbly along with Richard Stamper, violin, and Christine Jackson, cello, to bring the requisite touch of Slavic soul to Tchaikovsky's Piano Trio, Op.50, and Arensky's Piano Trio, Op.32, together on 8.550467. Seventy-nine minutes of music, folks—enough to last the whole dinner! That's about 75¢/minute, if you pay the full six bucks for the disc. By contrast, let's say you buy a 55-minute disc, as often happens with major labels, for $15. That's over 27¢/minute. (You see how I love to rub this in. You're nuts if you don't load up on these.)

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One problem with Naxos discs is distribution. Even at some Tower Records stores, the number of titles available at any one time seems somewhat limited—a mere fraction of the +900 title total catalog. Many record stores can’t be bothered with Naxos—hey, why sell you a disc for $5 when they could sell you one for $15?

Beware, too, of stores, like one near me, which put Naxos “on sale” for $5.99 a disc. That’s suggested list. At that price, it’s not on sale, it’s for sale. But when you see Naxos really on sale for around five bucks a disc or even less, and the selection is good, then pounce, because you may not see some of the discs again for a while. Pig out! Go whole hog. Call me The Classical Cheapskate!

Oink...oink, oink. Or, as pigs say in Russian, k-chroo...k-chroo, k-chroo.

**Mischief**

I was in a local record store the other Saturday—you know, a typical record store that doesn’t sell records, only tapes and CDs. And I asked, rather loudly, if they had any vinyl.

The clerk uttered something routine and fatuous about there being no demand for it...whereupon four other customers pounced on him and said, almost in unison, “We want vinyl, too!”

It was wonderful—almost beyond belief. Together, we joined in berating the clerk and the store for giving up on vinyl. We started trading favorite sources of vinyl—I found out about one secondhand record store nearby that I hadn’t known about. The whole store, which had been as dead as the music on most of the CDs, came to life. Even the clerk said that it was the store management that had given up on vinyl and that he personally agreed that records rule.

It seems to me that, with +80,000 subscribers, we Stereophile readers are in a great position to stir things up. There’s still a lot of vinyl available throughout Europe; why not here? Whenever you go into a record store and there’s no vinyl, you might want to kick up a fuss, especially if there are other customers around. Try to engage customers in discussions, if you can. It may be that only through such noisy tactics at the cash register will we get vinyl back in the bins.

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_Stereophile, February 1996_
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Reverend Brown trembled with anticipation as dark cellos entered the room.
"You know," my friend Frank Berube used to say, "you can live in your car, but you can't drive your living room." The two of us, for a couple of years after college, never seemed to possess apartments at the same time. One of us was inevitably sacked out on the sofa of the other.

This leads to a sense of your car as refuge; which, come to think of it, is how I've always felt about having my own car—going back to my very first one, a Studebaker Lark. Teenagers, at least in the sort of middle-American town I grew up in, tend to use their cars as their fortress of solitude. Feeling put upon by adults? Motorvate. Need to have a heart-to-heart without worrying about being disturbed? Cruise up the road a piece. Need to be your own man—or woman? Hey Jennie, take a ride. So it's no wonder that the car has become the most mythologized archetype of 20th-century American culture. It's not just transportation—it's freedom, privacy, and destiny all rolled up into one.

Powerful stuff, that—nearly elemental. Like music, its own self—but put the two together and then you're dealing with a force that could rend the fabric of time and space. The lonesome highway's whine seems to demand... car tunes.

During my New York years, I tended to forget all that. Bolstered by a working public transportation system, I would think to myself that only an idiot would own a car in the city, smugly glancing down upon the shattered safety glass that lined my old block—evidence that to park in that part of Brooklyn was to enrich the borough's glaziers, not to mention the packs of roving boosters. Nonetheless, I have to confess that on trips back to Virginia to visit my parents, I always experienced a frisson of excitement upon sliding my mump into a rental-car seat. Well, I'm running down the road...
Life is stressful. You could spend a few thousand dollars rushing to a weekend getaway at a rejuvenating retreat. You could mortgage your home for one of those "quiet as a recording studio" motor cars you've seen on television. Or you can keep the family fortune and relax in the sanctity of your own home with a pair of Sennheiser headphones.

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I reentered mainstream American culture last summer when I accepted a full-time job at Stereophile and prepared to move to New Mexico—I bought a car. We drove out West listening to a system that was Velcro’d to the dash and hidden behind the seat: Optimus 3400, HeadRoom portable preamplifier, Cambridge SoundWorks powered sub/satellite system. This kluged-together rig was a real pain in the butt to use, but the factory-installed cassette-based system was a sonic joke.

Hunkering down in Santa Fe, I began an earnest search for the Wesmobile, coding the Nissan to my wife. I wanted a truck, I wanted four-wheel drive, I wanted to fit it. I lucked into a 1984 Jeep Grand Wagoneer, now dubbed the “Great White Rhino.” The body, like that of all New Mexican vehicles, is untouched by rust or chemical corrosion; it has cargo space that allows me to tote around review equipment (even large speakers); and it’s built to a scale commensurate with my own—headroom, legroom, and liproom galore! But it had a 10-year-old stereo with speakers that looked like they’d been marinated in Dr. Pepper—and sounded it, too.

**Get your motor runnin’**

“I got the ride,” I was moaning to Audio Alchemy’s Mark Schifter, “but the tunes blow chunks. I wish I could install a real hi-fi in there, not just some boomer crap... Hey! All your stuff runs off 12V; could I modify it to run 12V?”

“Funny you should ask—we make an automotive power supply for some of our employees and feed some of our stuff to eye-ass-car competitors.”

“Eye-ass-car?”

“You know, the International Automotive Sound-off Competition Association. Those are the guys who are really serious about great sound—the kind you like.” This was news to me. Folks into high-end-type automotive sound? This I had to see—cr, hear!

So off I went to the 1995 IASCA finals in Dallas. And as I reported in January’s “Industry Update” (Vol.19 No.1, p.53), there are some righteously fine sounds possible in the confines of car and truck cabins. Impressed, I left Dallas feeling that someone in the High End should investigate this wonderful intersection between America’s great love affair with its cars and the High End’s...
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—Tom Miiller, The Audio Adventure

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relentless search for musical enjoyment. Hey, I thought to myself, I've got a car, and I'm into the High End. Why not me? And thus, I selflessly volunteered for the task. From now on, my reports from 12V Land will appear in Stereophile every third issue.

HEAD OUT ON THE HIGHWAY

I called Mark back and asked him to recommend a guide for my new project. "Our head of Customer Service, Dusty Vawter, used to compete in the 12V circuit. He'd be a good place to start." Indeed, Dusty—as many of our readers have commented, after dealing with him in his day job—turned out to be effusive, creative, enthusiastic, and phenomenally knowledgeable. He had a million ideas—starting with the choice of equipment:

"Since Alchemy stuff is already known to audiophiles, because it's used in home systems, why not put together a system featuring other names known to high-enders?" Brill!

We immediately thought of Nakamichi for the Model 1000d head-unit ($2800) and Model 1000mb Music Bank CD changer ($2200). Audio Alchemy supplied the preamp (a DLC, a full-function line-stage that includes remote control — $495 buys it with either the Power Station One or a 12V power supply!) and the digital processing, through a unit called the UltraDAC—essentially a DAC-in-the-Box and a 1711 v2.0 sharing a double-width faceplate ($499, whether for home or car). And once I saw it, complete with its classic backlit blue-tinted meters, I couldn't imagine not using the McIntosh MC431M 4-channel power amplifier ($600, rated at 100Wpc). MB Quart has a huge presence in the competition circuit and, God knows, I was certainly familiar with their home products—so that was an easy choice for speakers.

What high-end system worth its salt could ignore cable? Not mine, that's for sure! We ordered up a bunch of Straight Wire, too.2 Straight Wire's car-sound product is formulated for the hostile automotive environment (oil, gas, and EMI-resistant), yet remains flexible and is easily concealed. The cables used included Quartet speaker cable ($3/ft.), PWR-4 dual-shield power cable ($3.59/ft), Symphony Interconnect—specially shielded to dump electrical garbage away from the signal path ($50/m pair)—and Silver-Link ($49/m) as a digital interconnect.

LOOKIN' FOR ADVENTURE

Then Dusty made the best suggestion of the bunch: "If you're not a mechanic, a cabinetmaker, and an upholsterer to boot, you'd be best off finding a competent installation shop and having them actually do the work." This information, by the way, is worth its weight in gold—the systems I saw at IASCA were, for the most part, put together by professionals, or at the very least, folks who had put in a lot of time learning the ropes at an install shop.

I'm sure most readers could replace a stock head-unit with an up-market model or replace the drivers with better speakers—heck, even I can do that. But cars have gotten increasingly complex and have less spare space to hidge around with; if you're contemplating a major upgrade in sound, find a good shop and listen to their advice. Trust me, they've earned their knowledge with skinned knuckles, sweat, and late nights. If you choose to disregard this advice, you may still have to take your ride to a good shop, just to complete the installation you've botched. Better to go in the first place.

I was fortunate to find Sound/FX (10300 Menaul NE, Albuquerque, NM 87112. Tel: (505) 299-3944), a small shop run by Rob Young. Rob is a tireless bundle of energy who seems to have mastered most of the mechanical and building trades. He specializes in custom installation of alarms and car stereos, as well as custom home audio/video work. The minute I met him and looked around his shop, I knew we'd come to the right man.

How can you tell if a shop does good work? First, look around—if it's well-lit (so that people can see what they're working on) and reasonably neat (there will always be tools out during a job, but you shouldn't see every tool the shop owns on the floor) and seems to have all of the tools you can think of—plus

1 Audio Alchemy now offers many of their products with either a 12V DC power supply or a Power Station One for the same price. Ask your dealer about it.

2 High-end cable is the fastest-growing sector of the car audio market, although some people just use home audio stuff—Michael Jackson's Rolls sports Kimber Kable.

12V Land will appear in Stereophile every third issue.

Audio Alchemy DLC remote-control preamplifier
control, which—for safety—we cham-
fered into the console permanently. The
Nak faces the rear seats, and has a door that drops down to reveal its seven disc
trails. Changing discs isn't an operation I
feel comfortable with while driving
(although it's possible), but Gex-Louise,
with seven hours of music to listen to,
you ought to be able to hold out until
you stop to rest or refuel.
The Nak unit, which dropped neatly into
to the dashboard's standard DIN space,
controls the changer, as well as serving
as a radio and cassette deck. True to
Nakamichi's heritage, the cassette
deck offers azimuth control in addition to
Dolby-B and —also true to Nak's
heritage, it does not offer auto reverse. It's
certainly the best-sounding car cassette
player I've ever heard, and I've been
rediscovering my 20-year-old cassette
collection. As a radio, its FM reception
ranks as merely adequate—although, in
fairness, I should point out that I haven't
experimented with a better antenna than
the stock Jeep model. In radio, as in the
rest of hi-fi, the source dictates the quali-
ity. I'll get back to you on this.
Below the head-unit, we mounted the
MB Quart crossovers (QM200.72
Musicomp $120/pair) for the speak-
ernmt in the Wagoner's glove com-
partnent. “Competitor” grade, they're
cosmetically spiffy with lots of gold
terminals and red-plastic backing—I like
to open the glove box and show off these
little jewels glinting under the light—
sort of silly, but my friends tend to
indulge me in this kind of display. But
most folks aren't indulging me when they
goah and oha over the system and installa-
tion; they've never seen anything like it.

**Born to be wild**

Truth to tell, until recently, neither had I.
Compared to the systems I saw in com-
petition in Dallas, of course, this one is
modest. We did achieve some successes in
our installation that are nothing to
sneeze at, however. To start with, we did
n't compromise the car's operation to
 gain audio advantages. I've seen cars
where speaker placement prevents their
owners from adjusting the seats. Cars
that have totally sacrificed cargo capabi-
ties are common in mobile audio, as are
 systems that necessitate the removal of
the spare—not an option in my book,
even if cellular phones can summon
AAA. While we did raise the cargo
compartment floor and build out woofer
cabinets from the rear walls, this does not
prevent me from hearing around speak-
ers and such. In fact, I've gained a tool
chest in the conversion.

There are also systems that are unsafe
to use. I guess everybody's seen some
bozo swerving all over the road while
listening to his radio, but when CD changers,
EQs, or head-units are placed in out-of
the-way locations, it can be really dan-
gerous. Granted, we had to put the
Nak Music Bank in a slightly awkward place
but, as I've already said, with seven hours
of music on hand—as well as tape and
radio capabilities—I don't see that as a
major problem. The preamplifier's
remote, permanently attached within
easy arm-reach of the driver, is safe and
simple to use. The Mute function, not
that common in car audio, also comes in
handy if you need to focus your atten-
tion on the road. And the hi-fi matches
the spirit of the Great White Rhino—
it's a little funky, in that classic American
“get the job done” vein.

**AHHH!**

Did we achieve high-end sound in an
'84 Wagoner? Well, not yet—but we
aren't far from our goal. First, we did
equip it with a variable white (alternatorinduced, most likely) that we have not,
as of this deadline, had time to trace
although Rob and I pulled an all-nighter
making the attempt. I thought it his
finest hour: sleep-deprived and aching
from a flu shot, as he worked to silence
the car, he cycled through probable, less-
than-probable, and finally a couple of
downright silly options. I'm not making
light of him when I say he tried some
silly solutions—that's what's left when
you've exhausted the logical ones. We're
 going back in next Tuesday and, rest
assured, we'll solve it this time. In fact, I
think I figured out the problem this
afternoon, with the help of Dusty and
Audio Alchemy's Peter Madnick. (But I
ain't saying what it is, in order to pre-
serve some illusion of omnipotence for
next time—just in case we're wrong)

Second, we haven't had time to fine-
tune this system yet—it's still new. But
my wife Joan and I are driving out to
Vegas for the Winter Consumer Elec-
tronics Show in March. Yes! A road trip,
that's the ticket! That's when we'll really
see what the system can do. If we pass the
12-hour journey discovering new music
and grooving to old favorites, then
the system works. If not, we'll keep strug-
gling. Full report in the May Stereophile.

And last, we've put together a system
that violates many car-audio tenets.
Only our woofers are in the rear; we
mounted the tweeters and mids angled
forward in the doors, trying to achieve
a solid center image—which we mostly
did. But so far we haven't employed any
equalization. This results in some dis-
continuities in the system's frequency
balance, as well as sound-localization on
deepest notes. As part of the tune-in
process, I'm going to try some amounts
of parametric EQ—the meters on the
Mac pop out, allowing me to drop in an
equalizer module. In theory this pains
me, but, like many theories, this one is
being abused by the hard light of reality,
and I want this system to work.

**Time** in next time and see how close
I've gotten.

**Sources**

Audio Alchemy, Inc., 31133 Via
Colinas #111, Westlake Village, CA 91362.
Tel: (818) 707-8504.
Fax: (818) 707-2610.
Dynamic Control (Dynamat), 3042
Symmes Rd., Hamilton, OH 45015.
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You're Mac Rebennack, aka Dr. John, aka The Night Tripper. You grew up in New Orleans, the most musical city in the world and the birthplace of jazz. Sometimes I think you've played on every session for every record ever recorded. More important than all that, Mac, are you an audiophile?

"Well I don't know about that, but I've always had something I dug listening to since I was a little bitty kid. Being my father repaired radios and televisions and stuff, if one of his customers passed away before my father could deliver, he'd bring the speakers or whatever, tear it down, and make something for me out of the stuff. I was very blessed from when I was young; we had pretty good—for those days it was phenomenal—stereo shit. Then of course mono stuff was killer, but by the time there was stereo stuff available, my father was way ahead of the rest. I don't know what brand anything was. I'm still like that in some way of not knowing who made this, what the hell that is. It makes me feel a little closer to some zone of reality, not getting hooked in. What kind is it? I don't know. It's cool, it works, it feels good."

"Do you listen on varied equipment?"

"All the time. I listen on a boogie box, I listen on a good system, I listen on several systems just to hear what it sounds like. A good system should be a true system, that's the basic for everything. I gotta hear it first flat and soft and true. I cannot listen to stuff on big speakers too much. You get earwash; you listen to stuff too loud, too much. I hate it when they have big speakers in the recording studios. If we listen to it on the big speakers all the time, we got no idea what the hell we done and I just get flusterated. Listening flat on the little speakers, that's the real deal. Then when they add some-"
We Get Letters...

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To Whom It May Concern:

I recently purchased a 4-meter run of your Reference Series Type 2 interconnect cable. Without even breaking them in, they have to be the finest cables that I have never heard. (Sounds like a new slogan—"The finest cable you have never heard".) It seems as though every other cable that I have tried invariably shines in one or two areas as one runs down the usual audiophile checklist (i.e. sound staging, tonal balance, focus, etc...), but somehow always leaves one thinking that something is missing or that there is too much of something. I always thought that I had assembled a reasonably good system, but it wasn’t until I inserted the Type 2 that I realized I have never heard it the way it should sound. At times, I can actually sit back and listen to real musicians playing in real space.

I think my next move is to slowly replace all of the cable and wire in my system with XLO. The wire tangle presently includes Monster Cable, Straightwire, MIT, and OCOS. Anyway, kudos, hosannas, yippee, and thanks for making “The Best In The World.”

Sincerely,

Mike Kanai

P.S.: Present system, F.Y.I.

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Genesis 2000
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Audio Research LS-2
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Music’s All Over the Place. It’s Timeless, But the Recording Principles of Technology Don’t Have Nothing to Do with the Timelessness.

The working musician’s system: Yamaha NS10-M minimonitors flank Panasonic and Tascam source components.

thing, we notice it. At least we know.”

“Have you always had more than one playback system?”

“When I was 12 or 13 I had one little sound thing in the back where I could hook my guitar up to it and play along with records in my room. I had my own thing that was separate from the one my family used in the front of the pad, and I kinda brought that into my life at all levels ever since then. Just to have some little thing, and it’s kinda for me to crack back to and meditate on. Listening is always an event for me in some way or another, even if it’s something I don’t like. Today, where I work in my music room, other than mixing some stuff, it’s like a little spot for me to mess with something and I can get into it. You wanna hear some music?”

“You bet.”

I was treated to some demos in Mac’s home studio, where he does most of his listening. The source was a Panasonic ‘3700 DAT recorder or Tascam 238 cassette deck, going through a Tascam 202 Mk-II mixer and a Hafler Pro 2400 power amp feeding those ubiquitous studio speakers, Yamaha NS-10Ms. We listened to one song written for Etta James, and one for a record Don Was is working on for The Band. “Flat and true” is the way I would describe it myself. I appreciated the simplicity and immediacy of the sound. All easy observations to make considering my reference was directly before me. The real treat was the soulful groove sung by Mac’s ladyfriend, Avila. When he handed me the AKG 414 headphones, I realized how much bass information I hadn’t been hearing. Dr. John feels these “cans” are a reference that belong in every self-respecting studio.

“What’s the difference to you between what you listened to growing up and what you have now?”

“Well, when I was a kid there was only two knobs. You could add bass, treble, and volume. Now we have little mini things that we can adjust the bottom end to the max, the top end, the midrange, do all kind of things with equipment today that wasn’t even thought of. I enjoy something about older things in one way, when I had a good quality record to listen to back then, it was usually mixed as well as it could be and it sounded good no matter what I did with it. You do that today, you’re gonna find if you start putting up too much midrange, too much highs, too much lows on some-
FLATLINE BLUE HEAVEN CABLE is designed to be incredibly transparent and detailed. It is so revealing that its price and sound quality make it the ideal choice for any well-balanced high-end system. If you want to get closer to the music, Blue Heaven will take you there. In fact, Audiophile had the following to say in its June 1994 issue: “With Blue Heaven massed violins sounded deliciously mellow, yet also sharp, with a sweet woody quality I judged to be highly realistic. More than that, there was a degree of extra cohesiveness, a feeling of greater integration. Blue Heaven brought out the rhythmic qualities of the playing far more tellingly, adding richness and warmth in the process.”
I REMEMBER CUTTING OUR LATEST RECORD AND SOMEBODY SAID

‘WHOA, RAY BROWN’S STRINGS ARE RATTLING ON THE THING’

BUT THAT’S RAY BROWN. THAT’S WHAT MAKES THIS GUY
PLAY SO POWERFUL.

monitor speakers coming back. All of the
cats today, it’s not just one or two guys,
they’re spoiled to playing with monitors
and it does us some injustices a lot of the
time. I hate hearing drums and percus-
sion coming through some jive little
monitor speakers. It’s all untrue. Upright
bass going through monitors it becomes
I can’t even hear the pitch on certain
notes. The vibration is not the same. The
overtones ring false.”

“Is your listening taste affected by
being a musician as opposed to a regular
Joe?”

“It just falls in the pattern of certain
procedures that my brain cells don’t
know how to not do, Rick. I would like
to be able for the first time one time just
to sit and listen to something without
breaking it down.

“Okay, occasionally that does happen. I
heard something with Art Tatum and
Ben Webster, it was just them two and a
bass, and it was like really I kind of just
fell into that zone, just listenin’ to it and diggin’ it. But then
that’s real special cats, too. They’re on some other zone that
hits some kind of intimidating thing. Maybe those things
work…I don’t know. I ain’t gonna try to be Sigmund Freud
here.”

“What the way you split things up make you more critical
of records?”

“I’m real sensitive if stuff just lays funny, y’know? There’s
a cut on Prince’s record where he’s got a lot of overdubbed
stuff, and it’s an effect that’s nice, but he’s overdoin’ it on the
one tune in a way that makes it like a little gimmick thing, I
just like the rest of the stuff he did so much, it’s like…ehhh,
that track didn’t work for me. Little things like that, it’s hard
for me to listen past. It’s like a hole on the record that don’t
hold up like the rest of the whole holds up.”

“Do people lose sight of the music when working in the
studio?”

“It happens. I heard something one night in a cab, and it
was some good players and was well wrote and produced,
but the track didn’t hold up because it was so compressed.
But those things they do today…I mean, how many en-
gineers in any studio in the universe does like Tommy
Dowd or Al Schmitt and goes listening to horns and sees
what they really sound like in a room, and then goes back in
the control booth to see what it sounds like there? To really
go from the real deal to what we talk about. Guys today,
right off they start Well, we’re gonna add some phaze…, and all
that shit that makes it even worse.”

“Does the technology help to make records worse?”

“Well, we use all kind of gizmos today. They got more
kinds of echoes and things, none of which is natural. When

they first started putting so much echo on in the ‘40s and the
‘50s, guys didn’t know what they were doing. Some of the guys
were hip, like Jimmy Forrest’s Night Train, the original record.
I don’t think that would have been such a standout record if
it didn’t have that strange over-echo on Jimmy Forrest. That
was on one guy. The band’s real dry and he’s real wet, he’s
almost drowning in echo, but it made that record hip.”

“The sound of records certainly has changed a hell of a lot.”

“It’s like two or three different planets since those days.
Once you step over certain corners in life, the methods be-
come more important than the principles of the music, and
then it’s backways and you can’t reverse that. Music’s all over
the place. It’s timeless but the recording principles of tech-
nology don’t have nothing to do with the timelessness. It can
make some things seem more timeless, and some just
locked in a time zone.”

“So, Mac, would you agree that older and simpler rec-
CORDINGS are often better?”

“Oh yeah. I listen to records from the old days and every-
body played everything at once, and it’s just what it is. It’s
always gonna be in a realer zone consistently. Newer records,
we get into this situation where somebody will overdub, and
it’s slick an’ hip an’ cool and all o’ that, but sometimes it just
don’t quite work.”

“How does that relate to the way you make records
today?”

“It’s one reason I try hard for myself to make records in
that old way still. The feeling is different, even mistakes, that’s
real too. I remember cutting our latest record and somebody
said Whoa, Ray Brown’s strings are rattling on the thing…But
that’s Ray Brown. That’s what makes this guy play so power-

“We use all kinds of gizmos today.”
ful. That whole neck is vibrating and where them strings is poppin', that is the deal. That is why he is a one of a kind.

"And what's embarrassing is now guys have stuff on machines to duplicate those things. [laughs] And they don't even duplicate 'em in a true way. Why even bother? It's offensive. It's some kind of a keyboard playing a guitar part and they'll program in the guy making finger slide noises. What are they, kiddin'? This is ridiculous!"

"Can you even make records today with that live feel?"

"It's very difficult to capture unless you're making a live recording, because it's partly like how they was workin' the house. A lot of what we call live recordings has been doctorated. But just there's something that certain special people can give to each other that takes it out of that studiouness. When you hear those old records, that's why a lot of that quality... I don't care if it's Bing Crosby and the Mills Brothers, there was some kind of contact between them, and that's a reality base. If you listen to some of the old, old records like Louis Armstrong or King Oliver, the recording quality might be miserable, but the interplay between them cats is that little thing. What's phenomenal to me is then old recordings were done direct to disc, so considering that these guys were out of their regular realm to begin with, and still were able to capture those moments that make something really special, that's real... not just important... but it's real magic. It's uplifting."

"You must've been exposed to that magic from what you listened to as a kid, right?"

"I was very blessed that when my father used to service all these hotels changing records, he'd get these groups of 78s. I would inherit them. We're talking about when I was four or five years old. But usually the A side was so scratchy I couldn't hardly hear it, so I got into listening to the B sides 'cause the quality was so better. I remember getting a copy of "Four" by Miles Davis, and I couldn't even hear "Four," but "That Old Devil Moon" just had this... I listened to it over and over. I got into this thing about listening to the other sides of records early on just because the ones I got, the popular side was ruined. I used to get off listening to those 78s."

"Does it feeling carry over from vinyl to CD for you?"

"Vinyl has a different quality about it that's [more] drastic than a CD. Listening to the CD and then to some old 45s, it amazes me. There's a level of some balls in the old vinyl; I don't know how to say it other than the word 'balls'. Some things made for CD are right like they is. Some things that have been transferred are hard for me to accept. I believe that a lot of the guys who do the transfers are not coming from the place, and they're probably just too young to know whereof the original music came. It's a missing link. There's missing links all over the place in music today. That disturbs me a little bit. It's why I would prefer listening to some old vinyl, even if it's scratchy, of some of them old things.

"Hey, let's face it, man. The music is that direct thing. It ain't always something you can talk about easily. It's not meant to go into words, it's feelings. Undescribable feelings when they get changed a little bit can be real unnatural."

"You know, Mac, I think that's what makes the struggle of the audiophile so difficult. There's so much nuance in music, it's damn hard to get it right with technology."

"That's the beauty of music, Rick. One of the things that I love about being a part of the musical art form, it's made to just go out in the air and that's that. Next time you do it, you ain't gonna do what you did that time, and that's something real sacred and spiritual, y'know?"

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RECORDS

TO DIE

FOR

Records To Die For creates one of two problems for the Stereophile writer: either she can't come up with the names of two (or, in the case of new writers, five) recordings of world-class music in world-class stereo sound, or he comes up with so many his hard-drive crashes trying to narrow down the choices.

Do they complain to me about this? Do they whine, squawk, sneer? Do they drag their heels, turning in copy a month late? Do they refuse the task altogether, naming out-of-print mono LPs by the cutout-bin load, and their favorite badly recorded rock albums from their drug-drenched days of countercultural glory?

You bet. Am I sympathetic? Do I gently suggest alternatives, guiding quaking neophytes, seasoned but nervous veterans, and curmudgeonly elder audio statesmen alike through the bewildering wilderness of choice, steering them down the narrow passage between the narrows of mere good taste and the chaos of unbridled self-expression?

Of course I do.

"Not my problem, fella," I purr with all the intellectual grace of Bill Clinton, the sensitivity of Rush Limbaugh, the gravitas of Ross Perot. "Get with the program. Don't tell me you can't think of a measly two records of killer music in killer stereo from the hundreds of thousands released in the last 40 years. I mean, what do you listen to all day—Abba? It is to laugh." And I laugh. Oh, how I laugh.

They have had their revenge. I present to you, The Reader, in all its steaming unlawfulness and in reverse alphabetical order (don't ask), the 1996 edition of Stereophile's "Records To Die For." Read it, love it, hate it, write us nasty letters (as if you weren't already), tear these very pages from the mag—there's something here guaranteed to offend or titillate (or both) the musical and sonic sensibilities of every one of our tens of thousands of fanatic readers.

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(Note: If a recording listed here has previously been reviewed in Stereophile, the volume and number of the pertinent issue appear in parentheses at the end of the review. For example: A listing of "XXVII-10" means that a review appeared in Vol.18 No.10 (October 1995). These citations include full reviews and the shorter R2D4 and "Quarter Notes" capsules. Fanatics, completists, and the just plain interested can always order our Record-Review Index, which includes citations and cross-references to every recording reviewed in Stereophile from Vol.10 No.1 (January 1987) through the issue you hold in your hands. We update this Index monthly; see the ad on the first page of "Audio Mart" in the back of this issue for ordering details. — R.L.)

Barry Willis

SCOTT HAMILTON QUARTET: In Concert
Scott Hamilton, tenor sax; Chris Florby, guitar; John Bunch, piano; Phil Flanagan, bass; Chuck Riggs, drums; Eiji Kitamura, clarinet
Concord Jazz CJ-3423 (CD only), Carl F. Jefferson, prod. Taneo Kawada, Isao Inob, Phil Edwar, engs. TT: 52:52

Scott Hamilton and crew pump joyous life into nine great old Swing Era standards in this June '83 live recording made in Tokyo's Yamaha Hall. Only 28 at the time, Hamilton was wonderful out of sync with his contemporaries in mining the rich veins of the past; we are much the richer for his efforts. Lovely arrangements, tremendous ensemble playing, and soaring solos, punctuated by polite, enthusiastic applause in a dry but lively acoustic.

METALLICA: Metallica
Elektra 61113-2 (CD), Bob Rock, James Hetfield, Lars Ulrich, prod.; Randy Shady, Mike Taco, engs. TT: 62:39


Michael Ullman

RAY CHARLES: Genius + Soul = Jazz
DCD: Compact Classics DCC-2150 (CD), Creed Taylor, prod.; Steve Hoffman, Terry Howard, digital remastering. ADD. TT: 45:21

Arranged by Quincy Jones and Ralph Burns, this Ray Charles session is special. For one thing, it mostly features Charles as an organism, this time in front of a band consisting mostly of Count Basie's group. The original LP had a full, natural sound with tremendous impact, even if it placed Charles farther back in the group than most vocal albums would. The music is soulful, of course, but also bright and brash in arrangements of "Mounatin" and "Birth of the Blues." My favorites include "One Mint Julep" and the vocal blues: Charles's "I've Got News For You" and his remake of the classic "I'm Gonna Move to the Outskirts of Town." Fund the LP (Impulse AS-2) if you can. If not, try this remastering, which captures most of the aura.

ORNETTE COLEMAN: The Shape of Jazz to Come
Ornette Coleman, alto sax; Don Cherry, cornet; Charlie Haden, bass; Billy Higgins, drums
Atlantic 13772-C (CD), Nyushl Etregun, prod.; Bones I Have, eng. ADD. TT: 38:16

I recommend the Atlantic LP over the CD of this groundbreaking, and to some earth-shattering, session. Recorded in 1959, it introduced the Ornette Coleman Quartet to many listeners, some of whom thought he was the future of the music and others who found him a fraud or a joker. What's striking about this and his other Atlantic records is how much better and denser they sound, how good-humored—one of the great tunes here is "Congenital." Even the dirge, "Lonely Woman," is in its highly individual way tender. As was common in the late '50s, the engineer has seen fit to radically separate the two horns; Coleman on the left, Don Cherry on the right. Bass and drums are in the far middle, which creates an adequate sense of space. The recording is clear and revealing.

Sam Tellig

PROKOFIEV: Romeo and Juliet
Excerpts from Suites 1, 2, & 3
Myung-Whun Chung, Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra
DG 439 872-2 (CD only), Leonard Dehun, prod.; Wolfgang Mätzke, Tonmeister; Reinhard Lagemann, eng. ADD. TT: 63:22

Since the mid-'80s, Myung-Whun Chung has conducted mainly opera. The experience shows. This performance/recording has everything: delicacy, subtlety, a wonderful way of bringing out details in the score—and, most of all, drama. What it avoids is bombast—the entire performance is very well thought out, with a real sense of the story unfolding—not just a striving for effect. The recording is remarkable. The Concertgebouw is one of the world's great concert halls and recording venues, which no doubt helps the recording. But DG's engineers can take credit for the natural, detailed, airy recording, and its natural soundstaging. Don't set your level too high when you play the first track; the dynamic range will be a shock.

SHOSTAKOVICH: Symphony 15
Kurt Sanderling, Cleveland Orchestra
Erato 45815-2 (CD only), Friedemann Engelbrecht, prod.; Erhehard Sengpiel, Everest Portr, eng. ADD. TT: 50:38

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Stereophile, February 1996
This is a superb performance and a state-of-the-art recording—audiophiles will especially dig the soundstaging. The symphony, Shostakovitch's last, may evoke the cycle of human existence from childhood through maturity adulthood. I'm reminded of Mahler's Ninth Symphony — a much different work, of course (the Shostakovitch is much more sparingly scored, for one thing) — but also one with intimations of morbidity crowned by a certain acceptance and serenity. Heavy borrowing from Wagner in the finale's Adagio. Sandlering was 80 when he recorded this — his years are in the performance. Get this before it's deleted. (XVI-12)

SHOSTAKOVICH: Symphony 15
With incidental music to The Godfather.
Maxim Shostakovitch, London Symphony Collins Classics 12062 (C3 only). Andrew Kenner, prod.; Simon Rinnert, eng. 110:33. TT: 80:54

Candor compels me to point out that the disc recommended above is a bit short on playing time. This Columbia recording does present you The Godfather, perhaps Shostakovitch's most successful film score. The score's moments of bombast are offset by its moments of great lyrical beauty — especially the "Romanza," with Peter Thomas's violin solo. Some recordings of both Godfather and Symphony 15, but the latter doesn't cast the same spell as the Sandlering version. Still, an indispensable disc for all lovers of Shostakovitch. The Godfather's great dynamic range will test the limits of your system.

Steve Stoner

GENE KRUPA/BUDDY RICH: Krupa and Rich
Verse 314 521 643-2 (C3 only). Norman Grant, prod.; Gary Myers, mastering. AAAI. TT: 72:31

Originally recorded in November 1955, this long-out-of-print recording pairs two of the most popular drummers of all time in the studio. It makes it a monumental hit historically significant: not only do we get Krupa and Rich in the same studio working together instead of against each other. (Krupa and Rich were friendly rivals during the heyday of the big-band era; during the '50s and '60s both toured together with the Jazz at the Philharmonic concerts, the highlight being the famous "drum battle."). We also get jazz heavyweights Dizzy Gillespie, Roy Eldridge, and Oscar Peterson as sidemen. Keller! The original album cover says "a Panoramic True Hi-Fi Recording." It sounds like music of its time, and very best, "questionable" stereo. Check it out anyway; even if you're not a drum-head like me, you won't be disappointed.

THE WHO: Live at Leeds

This is the second time Who's has made it to R21:4. Corey Greenberg recommended the original back in February '92. The new, improved version picks up where the original left off: eight more songs of the same caliber, high energy, and volume (sounds like only one in this historical volume has their volume knobs to "11" and broke 'em off ... you'll) of the original six found on the 1970 issue, a better mix ("Crackling Noises Have Been Corrected!") and some great quips from the usually silent (vocally, anyway) Keith. The Who made us all the excitement of an original (before Moon's demise) Who concert was about, look no further than this disc. (XV-2, XVIII-5)

MARTI JONES: Any Kind of Lie
ING 2040-2, R.O. Dixon, prod., eng.; Mark Williams, TT: 39:37

Get past the cheesecake cover photo that would embarrass Liza Minnelli and you'll discover an album of practically perfect pop. While Jones and producer/husband Don Dixon aren't known as first-rate songwriters, Any Kind of Lie tackles the hard work of staying together with style and wit: "All the trash and the flies on the beaches of Cleveland / Know they couldn't stop me if I knew you were mine." But it's Dixon's production that's truly to die for. Every instrument, every flourish is there for a reason. And his audiophile tendencies show through with a soundstage as broad as intro to Western Civ., yet as focused as a Zeiss lens. Multinuclear rock doesn't get any better than this.

Susannah WERNER: Last of the Good Straight Girls
Private Music, RS 20962 (C3 only). Fernando Saunders, prod.; Ian Gribby, eng. TT: 48:30

Susannah Werner's songs are emotionally honest, just like her unaffected alto voice and direct green-eyed gaze. Her music is intimate without being maudlin or exhibitionist. A cover of Paul Simon's "Something So Right" is so perfectly realized that it makes all other versions, including Simon's own, superfluous. Fernando Saunders (ex-Lois Reed bass player) delivers a superb production job with sympathetic arrangements and judicious choices in sidemen. Marshall Crenshaw, Mitchell Froom, and Greg Leisz also grace this disc. Choice lyrical tidbits include "Gone are the days of the cardboard jumpers and your very first string of pearls. It's key in the hand and gum in the pocket for the last of the good straight girls."

Allen St. John

LYLE LOVETT: I Love Everybody
Carib/MCA MCA1-10088 (C3). Lyle Lovett, Billy Williams, prod.; Nathaniel Kочel, Gil Morales, eng. AAAI. TT: 53:04

The all-acoustic arrangements may be as lovely as Julie Roberts’ smile, but don’t be fooled. The songs on I Love Everybody are as disturbing as Lyle Lovett’s hair. Stop humming along to “Creeps Like Me” long enough to really listen to the lyrics. If your skin doesn’t crawl just a little, you’ll never baby-sit your dog. Lovett’s novella set to music is populated with sleazy pick-up artists, jealous lovers, and blow-blow-white weirdos, each one only a twist of the DNA away from posing a danger to himself or others. Scary? Yes. Compelling? Definitely. The absolutely impeccable sound is befitting this timeless America’s favorite son’s sizzling engine a system so crappy it’d make this one sound bad. (XVII-12)

Jonathan Scull

SIRI’S SVALE BAND: Blackbird
Siri Besite Gellen, vocals; John Pal Inderberg, alto & baritone sax, vocals; Bjorn Aarhauge, acoustic & electric bass; Odd Norge Grindseth, acoustic & electric bass; Carl Haakon Waadeland, drums, percussion
Senior SON (C) 2001 (C3). Siri’s Svaie Band, prod.; Roger Vasbek, ed.; TT: 55:21

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"Blackbird" carries a double meaning in Norwegian: "swallow," as in the bird, and "cool," as in jazz. The group does a mix of old favorites and less familiar works, but it’s track 2 that puts me away — Cole Porter’s "Love For Sale" — a unique and wonderful take on this old warhorse. The band features a unique instrumentation: two bass players reinforce and complement each other rhythmically and unisonally (there are no traditional chordal or harmonica instruments), and acoustic and electronic percussion are blended together with melodic improvisation on sax. Siri’s terrific vocals tie it all together. Totally swell, if you ask me! The disc is spectacularly recorded, and “Love" is a real wooly workout.

FRANK SINATRA & DUKE ELLINGTON: Francis A. & Edward K.
Frank Sinatra, vocals; The Ellington Orchestra; Harry Carney, Russell Procope, Johnny Hodges, Jimmy Hamilton, Paul Gonsalves, Sonny Stitt, Sam Woodyard, strings; Rev; Cooke Williams, "Grew" trumpet; Cat Anderson, "High" trumpet; Jimmy Hamilton, clarinet; Johnny Hodges, solo alto; Paul Gonsalves, tenor "soprillo" Lawrence Brown, trombone
Reprise FS 1024 (LP). 1024-2 (C3). Sonny Burke, prod.; Lee Herschberg, eng. TT: 35

From Stan Corno’s liner notes describing the last day of the session: "Duke...strolling through the door, six feet plus, dressed as very urbanity...Sinatra, wearing a vest, green and gold paisley tie, tie at 90 msp...At the piano, Duke’s eyes...sad, but wisely sad...They hear back their music. Sinatra’s eyes, when his song is happening, they also happen. And Duke...during playback, strutting. Playback finished, they turn to one another: ‘Elegant record, Francis.’ Always glad to hear that kind of carrying on, Edward." Unauthorized recorded acoustic, an illuminated, palpable and confident Sinatra, restrained yet energetic Billy May arrangements — truly a record to die for. Find it — it’s out there. I promise you a little bit of analog heaven.
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Richard Schneider

FRITZ REINER: Vienna
Fritz Reiner, Chicago Symphony
RCA 68690-2 (CD only). Richard Mohr, prod.; Lewis Layton, eng. AIIO. TT: 77:20
STRAUSS WALTZES
Includes the above asterisked title, plus Johann Strauss, Jr.: The Light of Love and Laughter. Fritz Reiner, Chicago Symphony

Between RCA's Living Stereo CD and Classic Records' vinyl revival, we have all of the Strauss waltzes recorded by Fritz Reiner and the Chicago Symphony. (Artist's Life and My Life is Love and Laughter will turn up on a later RCA C13) This is the last word on Viennese waltz style — only Carlos Kleiber can gaze into the eye of Fritz and live. Classic's vinyl reveals the bass drum in Thunder and Lightening to be stage right with the low brass and the bases, not stage left with the timpani, cymbals, and other percussion as assumed from conventional deployment. Although apparent on the CD as well, it seems more startlingly obvious on the new vinyl. Classic relays the original to a sentimental curio, though it no doubt remains a sound investment. The CD may not be the original oil in the gallery; but it is a reproduction of the highest quality for which no apology is necessary.

PROKOFIEV: Piano Concerto 3

SCHUMANN: Piano Concerto
Van Cliburn; Fritz Reiner, Walter Hendi,* Chicago Symphony
RCA 62690-2 (CD only). Richard Mohr, prod.; Lewis Layton, eng. AIIO. TT: 60:40

Although the Schumann is all well and good, this CD is the 1960 Prokofiev recording, a performance that marks a high point in Van Cliburn's career. The size and placement of the piano in relation to the orchestra, the size and placement of the entire performing group on the stage and in the hall, the seemingly unrestricted dynamic range, and the clarity and beauty of the sound all combine to make this one of the greatest piano concerto recordings ever made. Then there's the considerable contribution of Walter Hendi; a Reiner protegé, a major talent who slipped through the cracks on his way to fame and glory. It's no small matter that Prokofiev had composed Concerto 3 for the CSO 30 years earlier; they play it as if they own it.

Markus Sauer

HENRI TEXIER "AZUR" QUARTET: An Indian's Week
Henri Texier, bass; percussion; Glenn Ferris, trombone; Tony Rubensohn, drums; Bojan Zulfiqarovic, piano; Fender-Rhodes; Michel Portal, bassoon; Louis Scarna, clarinet, soprano sax
Amarcord/Live! JLJC 6558.1MB8 (C3). Michel Ouzèn, prod.; Hinson Meuny, eng. DIIO. TT: 74:57

One of the joys of living in Europe is the number of cultures open for inspection and enjoyment. In the US, it's relatively rare to find reviews of albums from non-English-speaking countries. You don't know what you're missing.

This multinational but French-dominated outfit, led by bassist Henri Texier (usually a sideman of Louis Sclavis, today's most important clarinetist), makes wonderful music. Rhythmically and melodically inventive, the album's mood is relaxed, joyful, and at times contemplative. Tight ensemble playing lays a secure background for loose soloing, with Henri Teixier's bass prominently featured both as a rhythm instrument and as a melodic lead — which makes for some joyful surprises. The sound is excellent digital, superbly transparent in the bass, with just a touch of congestion on peaks.

PORTISHEAD: Dummy
Geoff Barrow, Feeder Rhodes, Clive Deamer, drums; Beth Gibbons, vocals; Adrian Utley, bass; Neil Squire, organ; Richard Newell, drum programming; Dave McWilliam, nose flute; Andy Hugon, trumpet
Go! Discs 902 522-4 (LP). Portishead, A. Udey, prod. AAA.

RL makes us list the artists and the instruments; the credits of this album even includes the samples woven into Portishead's soundscapes. Time to append the reviewer's criticisms?

Starting with Soul II Soul and Massive Attack, there has been a movement to slow down the frenetic beats behind much modern music. Portishead is slow, with lots of deep bass and weird sounds providing an eerie background for Beth Gibbons' melancholy vocals. The strange thing is that it works: if the term "hypnotic" hadn't been abused beyond belief, Portishead's slow... This record has been a surprise hit in most of Europe; for once the mass market got it right.

Michael Ross

ROSEANNE CASH: King's Record Shop

In 1987 Rosanne Cash shared a marriage, some children, and a record label with her then husband Rodney Crowell. More important, they shared a great band and a great engineer. On KRS the band got cut loose on materialless material by the likes of John Hart, father Johnny, Rodney and Rosanne herself. As producer, Crowell was in peak form — cooing, cooing the tunes. Except for a minor nod to the cutting 80s drum sound (much less offensive on the LP), which sounds better overall, KRS is a must for lovers of great songs expressively sung and expertly played.

RODNEY CROWELL: Diamond & Dirt
Columbia/Capitol 44706 (LP/CD). Tony Brown, Rodney Crowell, prod.; Steve Marcantonio, eng. TT: 34:34

Rodney took the lessons learned working on Roseanne's King's Record Shop, and the following year fashioned a record that knocked Nashville on its butt. The same musicians (who wonder who got custody) blasted Crowell's country shuffles — "Crazy Baby" "4 Cool 4 Leave You" "I Tried." "She's Crazy For Lonesome" — into the top of the charts with a sound that combined the spirit of classic honky-tonk music and the best sound that modern technology can offer. (Same sound caveats as above apply.)

Crowell hasn't reached these peaks since, but for a moment he was party to two of the best records country music has ever produced.

Richard J. Rosen

BEACH BOYS: Pet Sounds
Capitol T 2458 (LP). Brian Wilson, prod.; Chuck Britz, engineer. TT: 35:37


If ever a record could set the example for Full 180 Degree Sound and Living Mono, this is it. The "soundstage" won't extend beyond the speakers, but that's in between is rich and deep, exquisitely realized. Besides, DCC Compact Classics has just released a bona fide audiophile version, so I feel vindicated. "Pet Sounds could be the official theme record of male adolescence, as so many who first heard it at around 16 will identify with. It still holds up, too. The original pressing sounds warm, full, and, well... record.) The 1975 +180gm LP sounds more like a master tape, with deeper detail and a little extra hiss. My hat's off to those guys. My pal Il Brone concurs, preferring the original by a small margin. I'd be happy with either, and I'm ecstatic to have both. My early-digital Capitol sounds thin and laughably toy-like in comparison. The real shocker came when I played DCC's gold CD. It sounds incredibly close to their LP from an analog retentive, that's a rave, (XVIII-12)

CHARLES MINGUS: Mingus Mingus Mingus Mingus Mingus
Eddie Modelon, Richard Williams, Bob Eisner, mmpets; Heid; Woodman, Quentin Jackson, trombone; John Buttendorf, tuba; Jemeis Richardson, soprano & baritone sax, flute; Dick Halter, tenor sax, clarinet, flute; Booker Ervin, tenor sax; Eric Dolphy, alto sax, flute; Jackie Byard, piano; Jay Berliner, guitar; Charles Mingus, bass, piano; Walter Perkins, Dannie Richmond, drums


As jazz records go, it would be difficult to limit myself to 40 in the M's alone. Mingus covers every base (at it were). In places this record's beautiful, in others it swings hard. There's inspired solo work — by Charles himself, Booker Ervin, and Eric Dolphy (who never fails to knock me out) — and superb ensemble playing throughout, at the same time tightly controlled and improvisational. As with all Mingus's work, this is rooted in tradition while still sounding cutting-edge, accessible yet challenging enough new never to be relegated to the "dinner music" pile as tastes become more sophisticated.

Many Impulse titles tend to have superior stereo mixes for the time, especially when there's a lot going on musically. My mono has more "edge," but the stereo has good spread and clearer detail in some areas. If the new GRF heavy vinyl reissue is still available when you read this, buy it.

GIL EVANS: Out of the Cool
Gil Evans, piano; Jimmy Knepper, C. Keenan Johnson, trombone; Tony Studd, bass, trombone; Bill Barber, tuba; Charlie Persyn, Elvin Jones, percussion; John Coli, Phil Sunkel, trombone; Ray Bechet, Lucie -, Eddie Cairn, alto sax, flute, piccolo; Bold Johnson, tenor & soprano sax; Bob Trecario, bassoon, flute, piccolo; Ray Crawford, guitar; Larry Carter, bass

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with Cecil Taylor, the most innovative jazz pianist alive today, is not the most accessible jazz artist. As he approaches the instrument more like 88 tuned, tuned instruments, I’ve generally found his most captivating work to be his solo recordings; his quartets and larger groups tend to the cacophonous. This 11-CD set is Cecil at his best. In 1988, Taylor had signed with European publisher and crusty genius Derek Bailey.

King CRIMSON: Thunk
Virgin 8 40332 2 (C1). King Crimson, David H Office, prod., engs, T.E: 56:29

Angular, dense, obscene guitarist and songwriter Robert Fripp has created this, his most captivating and advanced King Crimson yet. This two-guitar, two-bass/Chapman stick, two-pedalsteel line-up looks and sounds like a rock band, but the compositions are delicately crafted ensemble pieces more akin to what you’d find written for a classical sextet.

There are few solos on this live recording, as most songs (half an hour in total) are written, composed, and minimalistic line woven into a dense tapestry with the other musicians. On a captivating system, this recording transports me back to the concert. (XVIII-8)

SONIC YOUTH: Washing Machine
Geffen 136C-24825 (LP). Sonic Youth, John Ziker, engs, prod. 6:525

In the late ’70s, guitarist Thurston Moore and Lee Ranaldo, after performing some Glenn Branca’s early works in just intonation for electric guitar, got the idea of transforming the rock to a rock band. Sonic Youth was born.

When applied to guitars cranked through Marshall amps, the pre-baroque natural tunings produce a moiré, resonant wall of sound not unlike being caught in a church bell tower at noon. On this, their musical and sonic best yet (and it’s on vinyl), the band blends delicate minimalist gui
tar-counterpoint with dramatic surges as a varied backdrop to Kim Gordon’s breathy vocals on what are basically catchy pop tunes. This is the one Sonic Youth to buy. I play it daily. (XIX-2)

JANIS IAN: Breaking Silence

Although with this release Janis Ian runs the risk of joining Amanda McBroom and Jennifer Warnes in the audio-geek wendtism vocal hall of fame, I’m glad to help celebrate the return (and emergence of the closet) of one of our most innovative and underestimated songwriters.

Ian has always been ahead of her time. (Imagine, in 1965, being the engineer on “Society’s Child” and being told by this 15-year-old kid: “I want a Hammond B-2, and a harmonica on this.”) These songs are typically Moody, introspective, and dark, but the sound is extraordinary. I want to thank Chad Kassem for re-releasing this treasure on vinyl. I also want to wring his neck for omitting my favorite cut: “Why Have You Had to Be There.” (XVII-1; XVIII-3)

David Prince

ORNELLE COLEMAN: Beauty is a Rare Thing: The Columbia Atlantic Recordings
Columbia/Affinity 1072-82410 (6 CD). Nelski Ertegun, prod.; Yves Beaufos, reissue prod. AIDJ: T.J. 7:39:16

O.C. is among the most historically significant musicians the jazz idiom has produced; the man who (along with Cecil Taylor and, later, John Coltrane) forced the music from its purely technical constraints, thereby ushering in the first—and, some maintain, only—major advance since bebop. This sonically stunning set comprises Coleman’s entire still-extant output from May 1959 to March 1961. These performances are some of the best of their own or any other era. Coleman’s intensely intuitive, heartfelt music truly did “outlive the shape of jazz to come.” The greatest revelation awaiting those who may have previously shielded away from this material is how joyful and organic it all sounds today. Added to this is the early Coleman disc, I’d opt for Tiriis in its British vinyl edition. K40278. [XVII-3]

CAPTAIN BEESWAX & HIS MAGIC BAND: Trout Mask Replica
Reprise 20277 (CD only). Frank Zappa, prod.; New, eng. AAD: T.79:06

This is the digitally remastered incarnation of one of the thorniest “rock” recordings of all time, an album so lyrically uncompromising and instrumentally far-sighted it’s still a daunting listen, even by today’s post-punk standards. The CD is far more detailed than the vinyl pressings on Straight—you can “hear the room” in which the np-sounding “China Pig” was recorded. Musically, it’s unparalleled. Don Van Vliet (The Captain) took the loose feel of rural American blues and folk settings, filtered them through free-jazz angularity, and adorned them with fiercely poetic, wildly humorous imagery. The result is a unique experience far too influential not to be included in a list such as R2D4.

LOVE: Low Story

Over the years I’ve brought two different LP pressings of Feaver Changes home with me, suffered through Elektra’s first excruciating CD, and even laid it on 8-track back in ‘88. They all sounded muffled. This, a career-retrospective compilation that contains an excellent-sounding version of the entire Forever Changes, the group’s crowning achievement, is without question the edition that best serves the music’s gorgeous, dreamy flow. You can hear every delicious instrumental layer, clearly. Led by resident visionary Arthur Lee, Love struck a deep, rich vein of inspiration on these 11 tracks of delicate, resilient psychedelic pop. They’ve stood the test of time. The remainder of the material varies in quality, though it’s generally rather high.

TOM WAITS: Franks Wild Years
Island 90572-2 (C1). Tom Waits, prod.; Danny Leake, 18f Flaves, eng. AADJ: T.E: 56:46

Tom Waits’ entire 1980s output, beginning with “On the Nickel” from Hometalk and 1 lue and continuing with the wonderful “Train Song” from the live Big Time, is amazing, but this is his most consistently mature and satisfying output. Some can’t tolerate his vocalics, his narrative skills are abundant. He’s apt to make you cry as often as he causes you to guffaw. Franks completes the loosely structured trilogy begun with Swordfishebench and Rain Dogs, and features Waits’ most adventurously band in the service of a strong, diverse selection of psychologically resonant

Robert J. Reina

With all these wonderful new releases, note to nuetion fairly recent releases and undiscovered golden oldies from my 8000+ vinyl and CD collection, where do I begin? What criteria should I use for my new picks? HIG FINE? Do I cover only eclectic stuff, do I go for a balanced blend, SHOULD I MAKE A STATEMENT? I shall use one very simple criterion.

These five recordings are those which have received the most plays on my system over the past six months. For whatever reasons, they’ve got me hooked.

STRAVINSKY: Les Noces, The Rite of Spring
Eric Kagarzsky, Redwood Symphony, Oakland Symphony Chors. Cluny CD: 005 (C1). TT: 59:47

Ever since I saw a remarkable performance of Les Noces 15 years ago, I’ve been hooked by this bostonian and energetic depiction of a Russian peasant wedding. Maybe it’s because I’m a pianist and fan of percussion recordings: this work is scored for four pianos, four percussionists, and chorus. Although this performance is captivating and the sound is up Cluny’s usual high standards, I’m particularly touched that this is the only English-lang

AGE work on record that I’m aware of. And, for you Zappettina fans, I believe that much of the more obscure music (and choreography) from FZ’s 200 Mole was lifted directly from this work.

CECIL TAYLOR: Cecil Taylor in Berlin ’88
Cecil Taylor, piano; others
FMP LC-65071 (11 C1). Jos Gebers, prod. TT: 12:04:01

Stereophile, February 1996

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vignettes. I've played this album for hardcore Bartok fanatics, country-western nuts, and people with no particular musical interests, and they're all knocked out by it, with good reason. (XI-1)


Paul Simon is one of the great popular songwriters of this or any generation, but, unlike Burt Bacharach or Marvin Hamlene, he can carry a tune. Though Graceland may have made more intense emotional impact, with repeated listenings, I've come to regard Rhythm as his shining moment: a coherent statement full of intricately subtle playing and singing. To get the most out of these tunes, try sequencing them the way Simon intended before the boos in Warners' front office insisted the "last single." (The Obvious Child," the record's least interesting track) be given pride of place: 3:6-4-7-8-1-2-9-5-10. See if you don't agree. (XIV-2)

Wes Phillips

PAUL ROBESON: The Odyssey of Paul Robeson Paul Robeson, vocals; Alan Booth, Lawrence Brown, piano; Sonny Terry, harmonica; Brownie McGhee, guitar; Omega Classics. OCG 3007 (CJ). symmetric Sehler, Paul Robeson, Jr, prod.; David Baker, digital eng. AA(IID); TT: 72:40

Performances from 1952-58 (some are mono, see me), taken from the private collection of Robeson's son, are presented here with warmth, intimate sound. Robeson's voice was such a powerful instrument, and he communicated so directly, that listening to this disc I always feel his presence—full of warmth, compulsion, and, above all, nobility. It's hard to pick one highlight: "No More Auction Block" is too powerful for words, but many others, including "Motherless Child" and "Old Man River," are hardly less so. Forced to choose, I'd pick "Danny Boy," usually a tired cliché, here transformed by a transcendent reading.

CHARLES MINGUS: Thirteen Pictures

Charles Mingus, bass, piano; Duke Ellington, piano; Jackie McLean, tenor; John Coltrane, tenor; Wayne Shorter, sax; Jimmy Knepper, trombone; Dannil Ramirez, Max Roach, drums; others.

Rhino Jazz Gallery, 112 7th Ave. (2 CDs); Joel Dorn, 111 Wilcox, prod.; Gene Paul, reassuring, AA(IID). TT: 2:09:59

As impressive as it is to describe as immense a talent as Mingus's in a scant two hours, Rhino has succeeded admirably. This may be only the beginning, but it's a great beginning. Mingus ranks among the greatest jazz composers, instrumentalists, and band leaders—this disc pulls together superb examples of each of those strengths. First among equals here are "Cumbia & Jazz Fusion," a 27-minute suite in which he builds a world as compelling and complex as the one we inhabit; and "At Lillian Fight Song," a mesmerizing example of Mingus's instrumental prowess, swing, and acerbic intensity.

Russ Novak


LAO SCHIRFEN: New Fantasy Lalo Schirrfin, arranger, conductor, piano; The Lalo Schiriffin Orchestra Victory V/6 8601-1 (LP, nla). Cred Taylor, prod.; Rudy Van Gelder, eng. AA(IID); TT: 33:43

The Schiriff is out of print, so I don't feel bad about clutching to list two of the greatest big-band jazz albums. These guys know how to modulate the dynamics of a big band and avoid the trap of boring, non-stop wailing. Both rhythm sections are incredible, building tension released only through the poignancy of the soloists; listen to "La Nevada" (Evans) and "The Peanut Vendor" (Schirrfin). Sound is multi-miked but natural; both will tax your system to reproduce full dynamic bloom and pulse, not simply loudness.

I challenge audiophile labels to do state-of-the-art remasterings of these. The massed brass and percussion on "Peanut Vendor" should give an ulcer to the engineer attempting to capture it clearly.

MICHEL LEGRAND: Legrand Jazz Michel Legrand, arranger, conductor, mixed ensembles including; Miles Davis, trumpet; John Coltrane, tenor; Webster, tenor sax; Art Farmer, Donald Byrd, trumpet; Bill Evans, piano; Classic Records/Columbia CS 8079 (LP). Impuls 830 074-2 (CJ). AA(AAD); AA(AAD); TT: 44:47

Bright, easily singing jazz whose complexity and musical value belie the breezy feel. French master arranger Michel Legrand (Unmissia de Chorreg) and The Thomas Crown Affair) used three small big-band ensembles on separate 1958 recording dates to keep the sound and feeling unique and stimulating from track to track. The quality of the arrangements transcends the period. Sound is natural and transparent, and finally back in print on vinyl; the CD ain't bad either.

Thomas J. Norton

TURTLE CREEK CHORALE: Postcards Timothy Seelig, Turtle Creek Chorale Reference: Recordings RR-61. (LP, RR-61CD (H12CD)). J. Tandy, Henderson, Jr, prod.; Keith O. Johnson, eng; Michel "Maht" Plasseur. H12CD eng. AA(AAD); TT: 60:00

Reference Recordings has made a number of recordings of the Turtle Creek Chorale, all of them worth recommending, but none is more accessible than this collection of short works from around the world, some familiar, others delightfuliy new. The performances are excellent across the board, though many may perhaps excel in my mind simply because the pieces are so new to me that I have no basis for comparison. They will have to be definitive until someone else challenges them.

Smoking quality sound is no surprise from Reference Recordings. The CD is HDCD-encoded, but I consider it reference quality even without HDCD decoding. Smooth, sweet, and natural-sounding, with a dramatic sense of depth and space, it's a first-class effort all around. (XVIII-6)


It's a bit late for a Christmas recording, but R2D4 comes at the wrong time of year. That's no reason to overlook a group producing such as mixture of instrumental and vocal works from the British Isles, Germany, and Appalachia. (This is the second Baltimore Consort recording on Dorian I've recommended. The other, every bit as good, is a Hands of the Heavenly). The performances are perfect, and Dorian's sound—recorded in the superb acoustics of the Troy Savings Bank Music Hall—could hardly be bettered. Many of these Christmas songs will be new to you, so buy it now and play it next Christmas. Better yet, buy it now and play it all year long. (XVIII-3)

Peter W. Mitchell


Schumann's symphonies are infamous for their thick, targed orchestras. Solos are rare, usually doubled by other instruments and backed up by strings. Though recent recordings of Schumann have tried to offset with a sparse Mozartean orchestra, Telarc's orchestral recordings have tend- toward an overtire bass balance, the opposite of what's needed to clarify Schumann's thick textures.

This disc came as a delightful surprise: Telarc has caught the magic of Baltimore's new Meyerhoff Hall with sound that is appropriately large-scaled and weighty, yet remarkably clear and well-focused. The orchestra spans the full soundstage from speaker to speaker, but the imaging of the woodwinds in the center is not at all vague. Best of all, Zinnman seems to shape the music with springs in his shoes: individual phrases consistently acquire lively momentum through slight alessandri, rubati, and ritards, while crescendi give phrases an amazing variety of expression. Bottom line: satisfying, lively performances in gorgeous orchestral sound—including brass chorales that bring tears to my eyes.

JAN GARBEK/HILLIARD ENSEMBLE: Officium

Jan Garbarek, saxophones; Hilliard Ensemble, voices ECM New. Series 1525 (78118-21525-2, C3 only). Manfred Eicher, prod.; Peter Laenger, tenorist. 1911; TT: 77:41

These 15 Gregorian plainchants and Renaissance motets are performed "straight" by the Hilliard Ensemble (four male voices), though the spacious acoustic of the large church often makes it seem as if several more voices were singing. They're accompanied by Garbarek's saxophone—sometimes in an appropriate, sometimes out of place, with a counter-melody. His contribution is basically jazz-like, though not in the sense of producing bebop rhythms and "blue" notes; Garbarek makes up his own melodic line as he goes along. On a couple of occasions he guesses wrong, producing a melody that sounds inappropriately modern. But most of the time he fits right in with the essentially spiritual nature of the music. If you haven't heard it, you're in for a surprise. (XVII-10)
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Lewis Lipnick

WILLIAM WALTON: Symphony I, Cello Concerto
Robert Cohen, cello; Andrew Litton, Bournemouth Symphony
London 443 450-2 (C3 only) Chris Hazell, prod.; Simon Eadon, Philip Sneyd, engs. D1/D2. TT: 75:37

Although Robert Cohen's performance of this undeservedly obscure cello concerto is superb, the real jewel here is Andrew Litton's electrifying interpretation of Walton's First Symphony. While there certainly are many other fine recordings of this masterpiece, none that I've heard has the refinement and energy created by Litton and the Bournemouth SO. This complex, thickly orchestrated work is too often presented as a puzzle of musical mind. In Litton's hands all of the instrumental lines and voice leadings are clearly evident, giving us a performance that finally does justice to this underplayed composer's musical genius.

WEBER: Bassoon Concerto in F; Andante e Rondo Ungaresco for Bassoon & Orchestra
HUMMEL: Bassoon Concerto in F
Klaus Thumenitz, bassoon; Sir Neville Marriner, English Chamber Orchestra
Philips 432 081-2 (C2). D1/D2. TT: 49:57

In the hands of Klaus Thumenitz, the lowly bassoon, so often referred to as the clown of the orchestra, is elevated to the solo status more often enjoyed by the other woodwinds. Weber's Rondo Ungaresco is more often heard as a solo for violin and orchestra, but (I bassoonists) find this version to be more musically appropriate. Thumenitz's superior technical control and gorgeous, resonant tone set a new standard for bassoon playing. Every time I hear this recording, I feel like giving up, throwing my bassoons into the fireplace, and selling mid-fi audio for a living.

Robert Levine

HANDEL: Messiah
Jennifer Vyvyan, soprano; Monica Sinclair, mezzo; Jon Vickers, tenor; Coro Gruppo, Royal Philharmonic Orchestra and Chorus; Sir Thomas Beecham

Equally revised and adored, Messiah as orchestrated by Sir Eugene Goossens and led by Beecham (actually, it has recently come to light that Beecham threw out Goossens' work and orchestrated it himself) is an amazing aural spectacle, and a superb performance as well. The orchestra is huge, with piccolos, harps, extra brass, and enough cymbals for the 1922 Olympic games. The mood is one of dramatic awe, the singers and players are excellent. Definitely not for the McGegan/Hogwood/Gardiner crowd, but what a great experience!

MONTEVERDI: Vespro della Beata Vergine
Soliors, La Chappelle Royale Orchestre & Chorus, Collegiats Vocal, Les Sabrecheaux de Toulouse: Philippe Herreweghe
Harmonia Mundi M91274748 (2 CDs only). Pete Cassilleras, eng. D1/D2. TT: 89:31

I own ten recordings of this great work, and this is the one to which I most frequently return. It's not the most dramatic (those are Corboz or Gardiner) or the least or most aggressive (that's Pickett), or the most transparent (that's Parrot). It's but the most beautiful, reverential, and, in a way, deeply felt by them all, and the soloists, choirs, and instrumentalists: take back scats to none. The recording has a matre finale that adds to the picay; it's smooth as silk and balances are not tanpered with. And Herreweghe's arrangement choices seem just right. Gorgeous!

Richard Lehnert

CALAMUS: The Splendour of Al-Andalus
Abd-Abdullaoui Ahmed of the 12th to the 15th centuries
Caretto, tabla, pandeiro, castanyed, harps, voice; Luis Delgado, oud, citola, guaita, doira, gir, handclaps, voice; Begdotha Olavide, voice, quannim, salterio, carabas, tl, cymbals, voice; Dario Pataiagua, cymbals; Carlos Paniagua, darbuka, tabl, pandeiro, campanillas, voice
M-AY: recordings M6263 (CD only). Todd Garfinkle, prod., eng. D1/D2. TT: 60:10

To order, fax M-AY Recordings: (818) 783-4938.

This disc has everything: terrific playing and singing, timelessly evocative compositions eight centuries old, and some of the most lush, wet, fully rounded, you-are-there sound ever recorded, with a soundstage that goes on forever. This was a Recording of the Month back in May '95 (Vol.18 No.5), but wasn't enough — it's a genuine Record To Die For. When Begdotha Olavide's rich, plummy voice enters to sing the introduction of Mosadda's "Ya Muslimin," filling the expansive acoustic of the Monasterio de la Santa Espina in Valladolid, Spain, you'll whisper "Amen" to the 13th-century words she sings, "Dios guarde al cantor" ("God, watch over the singer"), as you learn new meanings of the phrase "reverberant decay." This single-point recording is all the argument and justification minimalist mixing will ever need. (XVIII-5)

WAGNER: Tristan und Isolde
Segfried Jerusalem, Tristan; Waltraud Meier, Isolde; Matt Salminen, King Mark; Falk Struckmann, Kurwenal; Marjane Lipovsek, Brangäne; Johan Botha, Melo; others; Berlin State Opera Chorus, Berlin Philharmonic, Daniel Barenboim

It's the best kind of shock when a conductor can take a score one thought one knew intimately and reinvent it before one's very ears. Daniel Barenboim does just that here. No bar is taken for granted or left unexamined, (so note left unexplored) for maximum expressive content. Meier is slightly out of her depth here vocally, but you'll never hear a bettered Isolde. And Jerusalem proves once and for all that Act III can actually be sung. This set is truly a revelation for this all-but-impossible work, and final proof (if any was needed after his triumphant Bayreuth Ring recordings) that Barenboim is the preeminent Wagner conductor of the age. With sound that's effortlessly rich, full, and vivid, a no-brainer. buy it.

When Charles Mackerras conducted a Marriage of Figaro at the Sadler's Wells in 1966 to great critical acclaim and interest because of such stylistic vocal additions as ornaments and cadenzas, I regretted that no company thus sought to capture his interpretation — he was far ahead of most conductors interested in late-18th-century performance prac- tice. Telarc's new version, imbued with those same intriguing adornments (hardly what we've used to hearing), is a splendid document, and is even supplemented with alternate versions of arias and embellishments. If the cast is good rather than superb (as in many other recordings, from the historic Busch and Erich Kleiber on down), Mackerras himself provides a vivid, scintillatingly paced performance.

RACHMANINOFF: Piano Concerto 3
TCHAIKOVSKY: Piano Concerto 1
Muller, Argerich, piano; Barenboim Ospiti, Berlin RSNO (Rachmaninoff); Kiril Kondrashin, Bavarian RSNO (Tchaikovsky); Philips 444 657-2 (3 CDs only). A1/D1. TT: 78:12

Of these live radio performances, the electrifying 1980 Tchaikovsky had only been available previously on LP! The equally astounding 1982 Rachmaninoff being a first in any commercial form. Argerich, a pianistic hurricane, does not entirely efface one's recall of Horowitz, but it's a close enough call to warrant an A2. But4 measures, especially if you need an adrenaline lift. The sounds, however, are generally superior (though the Berlin-made Rachmaninoff is cloudy and less well defined than the earlier, more transparent Tchaikovsky from Munich). For elemental excitement, it would be hard to match either of her performances. Kondrashin, too, is excellent.

Muse Kastanovich

None of my recommendations could be said to have state-of-the-art sound. They all sound pretty great by Rock music standards, but that roughly corresponds to pretty crummy by purist-minded audiophile standards. Still, the sound of one of these admittedly flawed rock tracks through a high-end system is better than the sound of the same group in concert. Besides, how many of you would rather listen to the Beatles through the "speakers" in the supermarket ceiling than Paula Abdul through the Cello system? Exactly.

Recording quality is often irrelevant in rock — there's usually only one version of a particular song or album available. If you like the music, that's the recording you have to live with. I made my choices here because of their incredible musical content. Concerns over recording quality was less important, although it did help narrow down the possibilities.

STEVE REICH: Music for 18 Musicians

18 is a magic number. Magickly this avant-garde composer brought Western classical music, African drumming, and many musical ideas together into one concert hall back in the mid-70s. It was a high point — the other end of this period, of course, the sense of the human universe expanding, may never be equaled. Though a complex theoretical and mathematical construct, this music lives and breathes in a most organic way.

1 Long a favorite of mine, this high-dynamic-range recording was briefly released in Europe in the early 80s as a very short CD (Philips 611 057-2. TT: 32:33), cited Hommage to Karl Kondrashin — JA
"Every reviewer who writes about wire should have a Wireworld Interconnect Comparator, so should every retailer who sells cables... I've never experienced an easier, less stressful way to audition cables. And the findings are terrifying... especially if you feed the output into a headphone amp for even more vivid results... My worst fears were confirmed about certain over-hyped wires, while I was relieved to find that some of my faves did survive the tests with dignity intact."

Ken Kessler, Hi-Fi NEWS & RECORD REVIEW, Oct. 1995

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Bebo Moroni, SUONO, Italy, Sept. 1995

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Robert Harley, STEREOPHILE, Vol. 18, #11, Nov. 1995

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Makoto Akikawa, AUDIO ACCESSORY, Japan, Summer 1995
Every song the Police ever wrote is a greatest hit — you'll want them all. Even the B-sides and rarities in this boxed set are absolutely wonderful. The whole shebang was remastered in 1993 and sounds a little clearer than the original CDs. Though Sting, Stewart Copeland, and Andy Summers have all done some cool stuff since they broke up, none of it can quite compare to what they produced together. Definitely a case of the whole being greater than the sum of the parts. Will anyone be listening to rock'n'roll in 100 years? Right.

This bunch of wild Australians is one of my all-time favorite groups, and their fourth studio album is their best. They've had a sickeningly good, long string of albums, any of which I would heartily recommend. Alas, Rush Limbaugh fans will not approve of their biting social commentary, for it contains too much truth about the real problems of the world. Despite my great respect for MO's insightful lyrics, I'm more impressed by the quality and inventiveness of their music. Simple Minds normally play gigantic stadiums in Europe, where their concerts sell out. Here in the States they play . . . smaller venues, like Denver's Ogden Theatre. (Have you played the Ogden, and is your band to Simple Minds as the NHT Super Zero is to Wilson Audio's X-V/Grand SLAMM?) You owe it to yourself to have better taste than the American public at large. This album has great sound, and marks a transition in their repertory. (Actually, all their albums are transition albums.) [You should also check out the 1990 multi-volume Themes CD collection of Simple Minds' 12 singles on Virgin. — Ed.]

The first song on this album is about slam dancing and swimming on top of the crowd. From there Fishbone goes on to provide a funky variety of music, and they play all of it well. Imagine an alternative rock band with beautiful, melodic singing, screaming heavy-metal guitars, and a heaping scoop of soul thrown in. Yes, it is that good. They have one hell of a rhythm thing going on! The sound is better than most heavy-duty music, so you won't need a muffled hi-fi system to bring the treble down to levels that humans can actually tolerate.

Barbara Jahn

**APOLO SAXOPHONE QUARTET: First & Foremost**

Argo 443 903-2 (CD only), Christopher Pope, John Harle, prod.: Neil Hutchinson, John Harle, eng.: D193. TT: 52:19

This wonderful disc features an ensemble the like of which I haven't heard in a long time. Their virtuosity is second to none, their immediate co-ordination, versatility, and incredible range of tone color are stunning . . . and then there's their infections enthusiasm. With the exception of their excellent arrangement of Chick Corea's Children's Songs, all the pieces here — by Michael Nyman, David Bedford, Will Gregory, and Roy Powell — have been written especially for saxophones with or without percussion. If this sounds limiting, give it a try — then you'll have sleepless nights thinking that you might have missed it.

**HAROLD BUDD: She is a Phantom, In Deliria Sleep**

Harold Budd, piano, voice; Zeitgeist

New Alliance NA066CD (CD only), Russ Honig, eng.: D193. TT: 47:37

I'm bowled over by this disc every time I play it. It's beautiful, mysterious, haunting, and introspective. Its 17 short sections have the most provocative titles: "Tiny hands, big ideas; Handsome. The spinach little prick was handsome?" And then there's Harold Bud's sensual voice occasionally reciting above the percussive performance of the Zeitgeist Quartet, for whom the piece was written. With the warmth of the recording acoustic further enhancing the intimate, hypnotic aura of the work, I defy you not to be taken in by its spell. (XVIII-18)

**Saint-Saëns: Piano Concerto 2**

**Francg: Symphonic Variations**

Artur Rubinstein, piano; Alfred Wallenstein, Symphony of the Air

Classic Records/RCA Living Stereo LSC-2234 (LP only).

AAA. TT: 46:22

Recorded here at the height of his career, Rubinstein plays with the spontaneity and clair of a live performance. All that's missing is the applause.

Despite its early-1960s vintage, this is one of the best-sounding of the superb Classic Records' Living Stereo reissues, with deep, solid bass, open, silky highs, and more dynamic range than I thought possible to get on tape without noise reduction. (XVI-6)

**The Royal Ballet: Gala Performances**

Suites from The Nutcracker, La Bourrache, Capriccio, Giselle, Swan Lake, Camarad, Sleeping Beauty, Les Sylphides

Ernest Ansermet, Royal Opera House Orchestra, Covent Garden

Classic Records/RCA Living Stereo L115-6065 (2 LPs).

AAA. TT: 89:23

What makes this two-record set of suites from eight of the most popular ballet scores so special is the stunning sound, and the fineness and "rightness" of the performances. Mastered by English Decca, which was already experimenting with their multi-microphone "tree," the recording is suaver than RCA's three-mike Living Stereo recordings, but because the tape was left on during the breaks between numbers, the small sounds of turning pages and squeaking chairs give these a sense of immersing you in the RCAs.

This is light listening of the best kind, and both these LPs are sorry reminders of what two major recording companies could do before they hired marketers. (XVIII-16)

Beth Jacques

**THE KINKS: Everybody's in Showbiz**

Rhino LP 70935 (CD), Ray Davies, prod.: Mike Holak (audio tracks). A103. TT: 71:20

Whether the impetus has been alcohol, schizophrenia, or English mysticism, the Kinks' Ray Davies has always functioned as a one-man British answer to the Sierra Club, flushing on the carefully observed time and place of the (sort of) everyday. For this go perfectly realized bookend pair and get a studio LP, which details how a working rock act prepares for one more working day, then get caught up in the act — maybe booze-soaked, maybe perfectly performed. (Yes up, David Lee Roth, who learned it all from "Baby Face"). Re-experience, too, the most radiant track in all contemporary pop, "Celluloid Heroes." Originally a two-LP set, Rhino's single-CD reissue is digitally remastered and remixed. Points for that.

**Conjunto Cespedes: Una sola Cansa**

Green Light GCD-4007 (CD). John Santos, prod; Rob Holland, eng.: John Santos, Rob Holland, Guillermo Cespedes, mix: TT: 52:39

Masters of the Afro-Cuban form "son," the expanded Cespedes family (originally a trio, now a 12-piece, including an Angulo lady trombonist from Chicago) turns the Bay Area's long-jealously-guarded local dance party into a national living treasure: a fusion of marvelously shake-your-butt music, fiery polyrhythms, enthusiastic emphasis, and "Yoruba" secular folklore. "Discovered" and commissioned four years ago by the Redwood Cultural Won: and The Rockefeller Foundation to set the poetry of legendary Cuban poet Nicholas Fuenin to music, today Conjunto Cespedes' release has cropped nearly every Latin music award going. No wonder: musical co-director and Afro-Cuban Lucumí priestess Gladys (Bobbi) Cespedes is the Kathleen Ferrier of Akpom, and the breadth, generosity and precision on this album, and the compassion of the writing make Conjunto Cespedes citizens of the world. El sige es la mas sublime para el alma divirti.

Robert Hesson

**Debussy: String Quartet in G**

Ravel: String Quartet in F

Quartetto Italiano

Philips R55 361 4Y (LP). AAA. TT: 68:33

When I first heard these works played by the Quartetto Italiano, it was a revelation. Some may claim that the interpretations are over-romanticized, but you're unlikely to hear performances that are more poignant. These players reveal a spiritual depth to the works that is simply unprecedented in my experience, and the recording quality achieves similar excellence. Both the performances and the sound are vibrantly alive and deeply affecting. This recording is also available on a Philips 2 Scuttlebutt has it that Classic Records' symphonie range have very heavy, loose low end. This is a bass canard! If you experience this, it's not the recording's fault, it's your system. Because of their wide dynamic range, average recorded levels on these discs are lower than usual, and raising the volume to correct for it can uncover acoustic feedback problems you never thought you had. That's what screws up the bass. Solution: Improve your loudspeaker/tuntable isolation.

Stereo, February 1998
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Silver Line CD (420 8942-2), but I have not heard it.

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Catalogue 262-752 (C1 only). Charles Gerhardt, Andrew Kardan, prod.;
DDD. TT: 69:28

Manic, compulsive, and enigmatic, these compositions by Mexican composer Silvestre Revueltas (1899-1940) are at times frightening in their intensity. A veteran of the Spanish Civil War, mental hospitals, and alcoholism, Revueltas lived life full-till and composed music the same way. From his hypnotic orchestration to its rhythmic orgies, this music is sure to command your attention and win your heart. We’re fortunate to have it presented in such spirited performances and rich sound quality. The four works listed above, produced by Charles Gerhardt, are especially impressive for their realistic tone colors and 3-D soundstage.

Robert Harley

STEPS AHEAD: Steps Ahead
Michael Brecker, tenor sax; Eliseo, piano; Eddie Gomez, bass; Mike Mainieri, vibes, synthesizer; Peter Erkine, drums.
Elektra 60168-1/2 (LP, CLP). Steps Ahead, prod.; James Farber, eng. AAA. AAAD. TT: 47:07

Since its 1983 release, Steps Ahead’s eponymous first record hasn’t been far from my turntable, CD transport, or car stereo. This group of extraordinarily talented players brings a modern touch to straight-ahead acoustic jazz that carries the music forward from where they found it. Steps Ahead played live together for four years before making this record; it shows. The musicians support and inspire each other to achieve some of their best recorded work. Bassist Eddie Gomez and drummer Peter Erkine, two of my favorite players, make strong contributions individually and in support of the extended and expressive solo work by Brecker, Mainieri, and Eliseo. The record’s seven original compositions also showcase these players’ ability to create wonderfully lyrical and innovative melodies.

The sound is excellent (particularly on LP), with an open transparency, wide dynamics, and smooth tonal balance.

MIKE GARSON: The Oxnard Sessions, Volume Two
Mike Garson, piano; Eric Marienthal, alto & soprano sax; Brian Brumberg, acoustic bass; Ralph Humphrey, drums; Billy Minto, drums (one track).

The Oxnard Sessions, Volume Two is a jazz-loving audiophile’s dream: great musicians, inspired playing, and jaw-dropping sound quality. Garson is an amazingly talented pianist and composer ("Waltz for Hill") who always puts his prodigious technique at the service of the music. The stunning recording quality accurately captures every nuance of the music. Garson is an inspiring musician, and this recording is a brilliant demonstration of his artistry and musicianship.

Larry Greenhill

THE EAGLES: Hell Freezes Over
Geffen GF112-74275 (CD). Eagles, prod.; Elliot Scheiner, eng., mix (five tracks). AAAD. TT: 74:10

Although they didn’t include my favorite, "Laying Me Down," there’s enough of it on the Eagle’s new CD to make me feel 20 years younger than the first few notes of "Desperado" or "Life in the Fast Lane." Tim has thickened Glenn Frey’s and Don Henley’s voices slightly and slowed the tempos on some cuts, but "Hotel California’s" new concert opening and closing work much better than the original studio version. Henley’s voice sounds better for not being buried in studio reverber, and is enhanced here by added dynamic range; subterranean drums, bass lines that doesn’t quite, superb air and soundstaging, and pinpoint placement of the acoustic guitar and keyboards. Best is the moment of recognition when the crowd finally realizes which song is being played and goes wild. Play this cut on the biggest, baddest audio system you can afford.

JOHN RUTTER: Requiem, Five Anthems
Turtle Creek Choral, The Women’s Chorus of Dallas; Nancy Keith, soprano; Joel Martinson, organ; David Williams, bass; whose Adagios, cellos; Dennis Brickman, oboe; Michael Burton, timpani; Michael Pfeiffer, percussion; Ross Powell, clarinet; Michael Sullivan, Les Weaver; flute; Timothy Seelig, conductor.

Reference Recordings’ Keith Johnson has authored other favorite albums with state-of-the-art sound, but not until Requiem did the music meet the second R2D4 requirement for me: state-of-the-art music/performance. Rutter’s music, dedicated to the memory of his father, was inspired by Faure’s Requiem. This CD is my favorite for performance of the male chorals and the instruments, and the well-defined soundstaging of the two choirs and instruments—helped, no doubt, by the HDCD encoding process. I return again and again to hear the thunderous, subterranean sustained organ pedal notes on "Lord, Make Me an Instrument," the blend of male tenor voices, organ, and clarinet on "The Lord is My Light and My Salvation," and the gorgeous soprano voice of Nancy Keith on "Lux Aeterna." Totally enthralling, emotionally uplifting choral music.

Michael Frechette

No CD! is worth "dizing" for, but I’d crawl under a moving 10-wheeler to retrieve a British Track Records pressing of Axe Bold As Love. That’s another story…

JANIS IAN: Breaking Silence
Analogique Productions AAPP027 (LP). Janis Ian, prod.; Jeff Balding, eng.; Doug Sax, mastering. AAA. TT: 44:44

Janis Ian has been one of our finer singer/songwriters for decades; this heartfelt collection, one of the most honest recordings I’ve ever heard of any genre of music, proves it. Now that this exquisite all-analog production is available on vinyl, the original CD, good as it was, sounds unorthodox and indifferent. (Eat your digital heart out, Al Kooper) Sonically natural, convincing, and overwhelming, Gold CD available for the analog-challenged.

MEL TORME: Mel Tormé and Friends
Records Live at Marty’s, New York City.
Fine Line W2X 33484 (2 LP). Norman Schwartz, prod.; Dale Ashby, "Big John" Labedene, engs. AAA. TT: 85:00

Any artist who can make a hilly songjacket get my nod—the "Velvet Fog" version of "New York State of Mind," sung before an adoring 1981 NYC club crowd, is only one highlight on this two-LP set (side), which also includes Torme’s brilliant vocal improvising with Gerry Mulligan and a duet with Janis Ian (a coincidence re, the above). Torme’s vocal downstream, and his ability to bring a lyric to life, will have you gasping, as well the breathtakingly honest recording turn the lights out, close your eyes, and you’re at Marty’s!

PETER TOWNSHEND/RONNIE LANE: Rough Mix
British Polydor Deluxe, 2442 147 (LP). MCA 2295 (LP), n/a Olen Johns, prod.; Doug Sachs (sic), mastering. AAA. TT: 37:00

Anco 90/372 (C1). (If you insist, but all sonic bets are off)

The original "unplugged" session, recorded 1976/77, features Eric Clapton, Charlie Watts, and others on selected tracks. An intimate, accomplished acoustic set (some well-placed electric guitar added) of mostly original tunes. Townshend and Lane mesh like a couple blokes, bringing an air of informality to what is actually a very carefully arranged program. Sonically, it puts Clapton’s Unplugged to shame; gorgeous, liquid vocals and acoustic guitars, convincing bass and drums. The string section on "Street in the City" is redolent with wood. The finale, "Till the Rivers All Run Dry" (dedicated to Meher Baba), is one of Townshend’s most heartfelt performances.

JOHN PAHEY & HIS ORCHESTRA: After the Ball
Reprise MS 2145 (LP). Denby Krueger, John Fahey, prod.; Doug Decker, eng. AAA. TT: 28:00

Bill Johnson came running when I played this in Audio Research’s CES room. I found him a copy but he never sent me a $10,000 Audio Research amp to play with. Where’s the justice?

This is a short, sweet set of nostalgia from the magnificent picker, accompanied on some tracks by an extraordinary traditional junko. This 1973 issue (sdl) was recorded at Western Recorders and United Studios in Los Angeles. If these mean nothing to you, where ya been?

Fahey’s idea was to capture the feeling of a simpler time, long gone: the sound is spacious and transparent, with a distant perspective. I’ll take you there. A trifle, but fun.

HANK GARLAND: Jazz Winds from a New Direction
Columbia CS 8372 ("ax-eye") LP, AAA. TT: 32:00

Look, I’m not giving you stuff you can pop over to your local Tower and buy. These Are Records To Die For, right? You’ll have to eat some dust or pay big bucks for this one, also out of print. An odd 1960 jazz collection featuring Naresh Simon, Hank Garland and trombonist Joe Morello, along with filter and nebulous saxist Joe Bonsall, and two-17-year-old v-b player from Boston named Gary (I look like a geek now, but give me a few years) Bone. It swings like crazy and offers sonic to swoon from. The Nashville audio is not up to New York’s 30th Street, but what is?
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Following is a sampling of Larry's works:
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p.o. box 707, lawrence, ks 66044, tel (913) 749-0133, fax (913) 749-5320
I have never heard anything like this 1953 broadcast performance of this symphony — not in the concert hall, on record, or even in any of Toscanini’s other NBC broadcasts. In this, his last performance of the work, he took what is considered a second-rate exercise in Victorian propriety and transformed it into a major masterpiece, lending the first movement an unmatched ferocity, the second an uncommon lightness, and the finale — in its imposing breadth and emotionally shattering coda — an overwhelming grandeur and grandeur.

The mone

philosophic engineering, if narrow in focus and flat in its close perspective, is more naturally balanced than many stereo productions and offers an excellent replica of the lean, brassy, detailed sonority that Toscanini favored. A 1954 Toscanini broadcast of Mendelssohn’s “Italian Symphony” included on this CD is also magnificent, but cannot, like that of the “Reformation,” command the tag “Unique.”

Recorded in 1971 and 72 but not issued Stateside until last year, these miraculous readings seem right in every way: technically proficient without immature attacks, pinpoint intonation, and perfectly gauged balances. The Suske Quartet (which disbanded in the late ’70s) conveys the many marvels of this music — its harmonizing daring, melodic richness, contrapuntal density, and dramatic tension — without violating its elegant surface and Classical poise. Utterly free of maistersinn and benefiting from natural string tone and sharply focused stereo imaging that assigns a specific place to each musician, this set, at mid-price, is especially attractive.

Shannon Dickson

John Coltrane/Johnny Hartman: John Coltrane & Johnny Hartman

John Coltrane, tenor sax; McCoy Tyner, piano; Jimmy Garrison, bass; Elvin Jones, drums; Johnny Hartman, vocals


1995 saw a fitting revival of interest in John Coltrane’s abbreviated but unforgettable career. Though perhaps best known for complex and intensely powerful improvisations, this album, along with “Ballads” — another recent MCA reissue from the same 1962-63 period — marks a more disciplined but no less brilliant phase in Coltrane’s maturation. The interplay of Coltrane’s direct and wonderfully melodic phrasing with the elixir-like richness and clarity of Hartman’s voice is so seamless that, at times, you hardly notice when one takes over for the other. Music-making of the highest order, and the perfect way to unwind after a week of hard work. While a mint copy of the original is still a gem, the new 1980m MCA/Impulse reissue sounds great.

The ROYAL BANDE: Gala Performances

Suites from The Nutcracker, La Boutique, Carmen, Giacomo, Swan Lake, Carmen, Sleeping Beauty, Les Sylphides, Ernest Ansermet, Royal Opera House Orchestra, Covent Garden


By the time you read this, Classic Records will have announced the release of a number of their RCA Living Stereo and Verve jazz reissues as 45pm limited-edition boxsets! It took only one listen to a selection of these albums, all of which are truly Records To Die For even at normal speed, to convince me I could easily fill my R2D4 quota — and then some — by randomly selecting any five of the bunch. However, these excerpts from some of the all-time favorite dance scores, elicited from The Royal Ballet by Ansermet at London’s Kingsway Hall in 1957, stand out as one of the true highlights of recorded music history. If you think this music is glorious at 33rpm, wait ‘til you hear it translated at 45rpm: major increases in dynamics, richness, timbre and clarity. (XVIII-6)

BILLIE HOLIDAY: Songs for Distinquished Lovers

Harry “Sweets” Edison, trumpet; Ben Webster, tenor sax; Jimmy Rowles, piano; Harry Kessel, guitar; Red Mitchell, Alvin Stoller, bass; Joe Morello, drums

Classic Records/Revere MGV-6021 (LP, 45rpm version preferred). Norman Grantz, prod. AAA:

One of the few recordings of Billie Holiday captured in the early days of stereo (early 1957), this session was recorded directly to two-track at Capital studios in Hollywood. The original issue was cut using 3/80 filters at 55Hz and around 12.5kHz, resulting in a midrange emphasis that sacrificed much of the dynamics and harmonic detail, regardless of how pretty it sounded. While revealing early stereo recording techniques, Classic’s reissue is rich, full, and, well, I’d have no problems selecting this as an R2D4 at 33s, both for its musical and historical qualities, but at 45rpm in a slant-dump! Holiday and her able cohorts simply manifest in your living room on such beauties as “Stars Fell on Alabama.” If the new high-rez CD format currently in the works has an impact on digital playback roughly proportional to that of a properly cut 45rpm compared with normal LP, we’ll all be happy campers. (XVIII-9)

MADELEINE DRING: Shades of Dying

Music by Madeleine Dring, arranged by Leonie Nihaus and performed by Leigh Kaplan, piano; Ray Brown, bass; Shelly Manne, drums; Bud Shank, Bill Perkins, flute & guitar.

Cantu recordings C-RS181 (LP, Earl & Leigh Ann Kaplan, Lancer Bowling, prod.; Rick Riccio, eng. AAA: TT: 51:52

Each track on Shades of Dying is aptly named for a color that English composer Madeleine Dring associated with a specific pitch — a quality she possessed perfectly (pitch, that is). The albums are full of exquisite counterpoint and rhythm, and wonderfully lyrical interpretations of the suits — try “Saxy Blue” and you’ll see why I dig this album so much. The recording is direct to two-track, 30ps, with muted-on-the-spot immediacy. Unopened copies of this 1981 release are still available from record dealers.

ZZ TOP: Texas Houndz

Billy Gibbons, guitar, vocals; Dusty Hill, bass, vocals; Frank “Poncho” Beard, drums

Lone Star XPS 631 (LP, Bill Hans, prod.; Terry Manning, Robin Brian, eng. AAA: TT: 33:24

“In the Fine Texas Tradition,” Texas Houndz displays a quintessential American rock band at full steam. Every cut is a knockout-of-hard-drivin’ yet intelligible rhythm underpinning Gibbons’ virtuosic guitar, and with lyrics guaranteed to make you grin (or “La Cucaracha”). In any event, this album, Texas Houndz is very well recorded with a clean, up-front, minimally processed sound. While good used copies can readily be found, here’s hoping someone will do a killer reissue.

Robert Deutsch

Clark Terry/Frank Weiss: Big Band Basics

Clark Terry, Frank Weiss, Bob Larkin, DePauw University Jazz Ensemble


Although I’m not really a big-band fan, Big Band Basics has become the thing I use for hardware reviews; moreover, I often find myself playing it even when I’m not in Equipment Evaluation mode. This is a stunning recording, one that captures the timbre of brass instruments and the sheer power of a big band jazz with a realism that I haven’t heard equalled. The music is jazz, exciting, with seasoned pros Clark Terry and Frank Weiss joining a university jazz ensemble that sounds anything but academic. (XVIII-9)

KETELBLY: Music of Ketelbly


Laurence Dale, tenor; Michael Reeser, piano; Ambrosian Chorus; London Promenade Orchestra, Alexander Farrell Physics 400 012 (CD only). TD: TT: 55:11

Mortimer H. Frank

MENDELSSOHN: Symphony 5 ("Reformation")

Arthur Toscanini, NBC Symphony


While I have never heard anything like this 1953 broadcast performance of this symphony — not in the concert hall, on record, or even in any of Toscanini’s other NBC broadcasts. In this, his last performance of the work, he took what is considered a second-rate exercise in Victorian propriety and transformed it into a major masterpiece, lending the first movement an unmatched ferocity, the second an uncommon lightness, and the finale — in its imposing breadth and emotionally shattering coda — an overwhelming grandeur and grandeur.
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Mark my words: any day now, there’s going to be a huge revival of interest in the music of Albert W. Ketelbey. The English composer—who changed his name from the less exotic-sounding William Aston—wrote richly melodic music, with masterly use of a wide palette of orchestral colors. Some consider it dated, and they could be right, but it’s utterly charming and capable of eliciting profound feelings. It’s places and times that pre-exist never existed. The recording is very good for early digital, but could benefit from a remastering. How about it, Phillips?

Thomas Conrad

MILES DAVIS: Kind of Blue
Miles Davis, trumpet; John Coltrane, tenor sax; Julian "Cannonball" Adderley, alto sax; Bill Evans or Wynton Kelly, piano; Jimmy Cobb, drums; Columbia/Legacy Mastermound Limited Edition CK Signature Series, prod.; Amy Vorst, exec. prod.; Fred Plaut, Robert Waller, engs. A/D/F: TT: 45:38

For 35 years, Kind of Blue has been part of America’s counter-cultural consciousness. Yet Columbia’s production was a spectacle both. At one of the two recording sessions the tape machine was running slow and the first side of the album was about a quarter-tone off. The jacket and label copy listed tunes out of order, and the liner notes transposed track-by-track descriptions. For this limited-edition 24K gold CD, a long-lost back-up master tape was found to fix the speed problem. Now remarkably restored through Sony’s Super Bit Mapping it is, more than ever, the definitive 24k jazz album. Miles probes that existant space between day and sleep where all muths are relative. (XV-2)

KEITH JARRETT: At the Blue Note: The Complete Recordings
Keith Jarrett, piano; Gary Peacock, bass; Jack DeJohnette, drums;
ECM 1578-80 (7818-21575-2, 6 CDs only). Manfred Eicher, prod.; Jan Erik Kongshaug, engs. D/D/F: TT: 7:30:49

This recent release contains six CDs with Keith Jarrett’s entire June ‘94 sold-out engagement at the Blue Note in Greenwich Village: three nights, two sets per night; one CD per set. It is the great Jan Erik Kongshaug’s only live recording of Jarrett’s "Small Trio," in a small acoustic space, and uses it to us in a relationship with three insitumens which is shockingly intimate. To lose yourself for an evening in Jarrett’s meditations on the American popular song repertoire —what he calls "our tribal language—something beautiful that is not ours"—is a spiritual experience. (XVIII-12)

PATRICIA BARBER: Café Blue
Patricia Barber, vocals; John McLean, guitar; Michael Arropol, bass; Mark Walker, drums, percussion, body part.

Café Blue has seduced everyone for whom I have ever played it—jazz people, rock people, Medicare people, even computer people. Some call from record stores, sounding slightly desperate: "That album you played this morning—what was her name again?" If you have a voice that’s a dark pure whisper straight up from the soul, and if you’ve lived it yourself, you can sing to people of their innermost anxieties and they will not only love it, they will need it. (XVIII-10)

CHARLES LLOYD: The Call
Charles Lloyd, tenor sax; Bobo Stenson, piano; Anders Jormin, bass; Billy Hart, drums; ECM 1552 (7816-21502-2, 1 CD only). Manfred Eicher, prod.; Jan Erik Kongshaug, engs. D/D/F: TT: 7:66:52

It’s difficult to choose among the four albums Charles Lloyd has made for ECM since his return to active music in the ’90s. All are "Records To Die For," but The Call is the most whole. Stetson, Jormin, and Hart create an updraft of inspiration on which Lloyd’s tenor sax ascends to an intensity centered in stillness. The surface of this music feels cool, yet burns like an underground fire. The Call has that ECM sound from Oslo’s Rainbow Studio, a alchemy of warmth and intricate detail in which each instrument glows. (XVII-11)

DUKE ELLINGTON: All Star Band
Duke Ellington, piano; "Skully" Baker, Willie Cook, Clark Terry, trumpet; Ray Nance, cornet; vocal: Quentin Jackson, Britt Woodman, John Sanders, tromboner; Johnny Hodges, alto sax; Baby Newsome, alto sax, clarinet; Paul Gonsalves, tenor sax, clarinet; Jimmy Hamilton, tenor sax, clarinet; Harry Carney, baritone sax, bass clarinet; Joe Benjamin, bass; Sam Woodyard, drums

A dance upon a June night in 1957 in Carmelvllle, Pennsylvania—one of the unforgettable nights in which Ellington archivist Jack Tanners was there. The incomparable ensemble, in Tower’s astonishingly intimate early evening, sings with a deepened sound, large and alive. So is the noisy, sweaty crowd. One by one, like ghosts who tread the earth again, they come down to the mike: Paul Gonsalves, Harry Carney, Clark Terry, Johnny Hodges, he of the crooked sublime upper register. Duke, bantering and urbane, chides the crowd not to forget that “the bar close at one.” To be taken back like this is a real card and eerie as a dream.

Martin Colloms

SIBELIUS: Symphonies 2 & 6
Sir Colin Davis, London Symphony;
HCA 60126-2 (CD only). Michael Brenner, prod.; Tony Faulkner, engs. TT: 7:25:3

Here’s a right-up-to-date production of two Sibelius symphonies played by the highly professional LSO conducted by Sir Colin Davis. Sir Colin has had much experience in the music of this composer, and it definitely shows here, where the dynamic range of this high-resolution, 20-bit, Faulkner-engineered recording is fully exploited. These characteristic Sibelian climaxes so generously scored in the brass ring out with effortless clarity but without false hardness or stridency. The string tone is also excellent—silky, and much nearer a concert-hall sound than is generally achieved.
The Blackheath Concert Hall venue is not huge but has a sumptuous, spacious acoustic, nicely captured in this recording. Clarity is retained at low and high volumes, the latter unexpectedly so. Careful transfer from the 20-bit master to CD via an effective noise-shaping technique has made a significant contribution, and the musical sound of those big, classic Neumann tube microphones can be clearly heard through the digital encode/decode mechanisms.

I much like the performance; the LSO plays superbly, fully revealed in this naturally balanced recording.

SEAL: Seal
ZZT 9026-2 (CD). Trevor Horn, prod.; Tim Weidner, Carmen Rizzo, Steve Fitzmaurice, Greg Jackman, Bob Bartley, Paul Wright, Sean Cleary, engs. TT: 50:33

Don’t be confused, this Seal record is the 1994 production, not his first (and still good) 1991 debut, also eponymously titled. I still use the ‘91 disc for testing, not just for its great musicianship but also its clean, driving bass lines.

Seal sings well—he can reach for a note and make a direct hit, in contrast to so many other performers who can give a good first impression (especially when backed by superb recording quality), but are ultimately unsatisfying. Best of all, Seal has found his music is its own world. Seal ’94 is both complex and thematic. With the first few playings it sounds heavily textured and apparently lacks the refreshing variation of Seal ’91. But when you get to know it better, the complex thematic nature doesn’t dominate after all. Seal ’94 can sound muddled with poor systems, but as system quality improves the high production quality becomes apparent. This ambitious record was not designed to generate a quick thrill for ’90s CD, better physical performance endures. Seal sounds about good sound; he runs a top-flight audio system himself.

Peter Catalano

HANDEL: Ginestra
Michael Chance, countertenor; Dorotha Röschmann, soprano; Davo Kotokon, altos; Freiburger Barock-Orchester; Michaela Melichar, harmonium; Harmonia Mundi 9073063 (3 CDs only). Robina Young, prod.; Hild Michel, engs. D/D/F: TT: 2:53:24

There’s probably no more experienced Handel conductor anywhere in the world than Nicholas McGegan, and Ginestra may rank among McGegan’s best efforts in this repertoire—it’s pure pleasure. The Freiburger Barock Orchester plays with the confidence of the Berlin Philarmonic: rhythmically crisp and colorful. The singers are exceptionally fine, led by Michael Chance in the title role. Chance’s countertenor sets standards for richness and improved-sounding variations at the repises of his arias. Though Act I is a bit generic, III is unalloyed gold, each aria more riveting than the one before. A real winner.

JAMES MacMILLAN: Seven Last Words from the Cross, Cantos Sagrados

All the languorous mystic stanz coming from Europe these days may be a bit overdone, but Britisher James MacMillan’s passionate, hard-edged curta—based on Christ’s utterances from the Cross—can be as overwhelming as any of Bach’s Passionss. “Winnan, Behold thy Son” will shatter the heart of even the harshest agnostic, irregularly blaring the same four words over a desperate, often chaotic instrumental line. “Verily, I say unto thee;” with a bunting violin solo, keeps up the emotional tension that’s concluded with a long elegiac instrumental closing in “Father, in Thy Hands I commend my spirit.” New music doesn’t get better than this.

LUTOSLAWSKI: Symphonies 3 & 4
with Les Epaves de Sevres
John Shirley-Quirk, bass; Los Angeles Philharmonic, Es- pelika Salonen

Stereophile, February 1996

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CARL BAUGHER

TOM RAPP: Stardancer
Blue Throat BTT-44 (LP only). Thomas D. Rapp, prod.; Gene Enche/Erber, eng. AAA. TT: 36:45

An all but forgotten masterpiece, Stardancer was the next-to-last release from the man behind Pearls Before Swine. Yet to be reissued in any format, this album appeared briefly in 1972 and immediately went out of print. Pure, because it contains the finest, most chilling anti-Vietnam War song ever written, the shattering “Fourth Day of July.” Rapp’s writing peaked with lines like, “A line of ghastly children upon the White House lawn / Covered men did nude” and “/ To see the burning child running to the White House door.” The title track and “The Baptiste” are almost as good. Stardancer is a resilient and enduring slice of masterful singer-songwriter art. Sonics are superb—the record emanated from Nashville with a cast of top-notch session players. Unforgettable.

ROBBIE ROBERTSON/RED ROAD ENSEMBLE: Music for The Native Americans
Capitol C 391 # 8 28295 2 (C1 only). Robbie Robertson, prod.; Patrick McHugh, eng. TT: 53:30

Despite being somewhat under-valued by fans and critics alike, Robertson’s solo albums represent an excellent body of work. This music, composed for the PBS television documentary The Native Americans, is an unprecedented marriage of Native American roots music and modern electric instrumental configurations. While Robertson often relaxes into the role of guitarist/producer, this album is, like his best work, a collaborative effort. His vocals and moving lyrics on songs like “Ghost Dance” and “It’s A Good Day To Die” are among the highlights of a stunning album. Bass and soundstaging, in particular, are of reference quality. Deep and essential music.

JOHN ATKINSON

“So many recordings; so little time?” runs the shortened version of the Original Stereophile Oath mentioned by Richard Lehnert in his introduction. And the truth underlying this simple statement is always brought home to me when RL asks me why I’ve always been the last Stereophile writer to give him my R2124 text. I try to grab a couple of extra days by asking him to run the list in reverse alphabetical order—Oh, the joy of having a name beginning with “A”—but the real problem is that it’s always an all-but-impossible task to narrow the list of candidates down to just two. Here are my nominees, but there could have been many, many more.

GINGER BAKER TRIO: Going Back Home
Ginger Baker, drums; Bill Frisell, electric guitar; Charlie Haden, bass. Atlantic 82632 (C1 only). Chip Sotelo, prod.; Ginger Baker, Yves Beausite, co-prods; Malcolm Cecil, Steve Holsted, engs. AA3. TT: 45:10

Recommended to me first by Wes Phillips, then by Lonnie Browell, this 1994 album spent a lot of time spinning in the Levinson 31 in 95. The minute you hear that bighorned, loose-limbed drumming bursting from your speakers, you know a performer/pseudo-musician/guitarist has arrived. But unlike a drum machine, every time Ginger’s sticks touch the heads of his Ludwig kit, nugatory music is made. As Michael Ross noted in his Stereophile review, the players leave plenty of space for ideas to develop. Add the large, rich, round sound of Charlie Haden’s double bass, the acid-edged tone of Bill Frisell’s stereo Mesa Boogie-amplified guitar, mix in some originals from each member of the trio and some standards like Thelonious Monk’s “Straight No Cigarettes” and you’ve got a machine Ginger ain’t. But if the dual drum machine, every time Ginger’s sticks touch the heads of his Ludwig kit, nugatory music is made. As Michael Ross noted in his Stereophile review, the players leave plenty of space for ideas to develop. Add the large, rich, round sound of

LARRY ARCHIBALD

MISSA LUBA: An African Mass
Monash Gospel Chorale, Kenyza, Boniface Mgango, conductor
Phillips 425 366-2 (C1 only). Job Maarten, prod.; Peter Boe, Martin Hübberklau, engs. AA3. TT: 49:54

Miss Luba, An African Mass, does in an African context what Missa Criolla did with a South American accent. My first recording of this work, also on Philips, dates from the ’80s—but I can’t find my copy. It’s a definite buy if you see it as a used LP; in spite of not-very-nice sound.

Despite the Kenyan origin of this new version, it has an energy strongly reminiscent of the masses I attended in Nigeria when I lived there (1969-70). The sound is excellent, though not of the same demo-disc quality that the modern Missa Criolla achieves. (As some of you might remember, I strongly recommend the old version of Missa Criolla, Philips PCC 619, over the modern version; the energy level and sense of authenticity are much higher, and you don’t have to put up with an opera singer as the lead tenor.)

While recommending African records, I can’t resist mentioning Henry on the Highlight! on the Original Music label (OMC 1002). The sound is only adequate, but the energy is super. It perfectly captures Nigerian night-time music from the time I was there—and, for all I know, the present as well.

SONNY STITT: Sooner Stitt Blows the Blues
Sonny Stitt, also sax; Louis Levy, piano; Leroy Vinnegar, bass; Mel Lewis, drums
Classic Records/Verte M: VS 6149 (LP only). AAA.

You can write your theoretical and historical knowledge of jazz on the head of a pin and still have rooms for the US Congress. Still, you’d have to be deaf and ignorant to miss the genius in this album, originally released in 1960. The title could just as well be Sooner Stitt Sings the Blues—a title so zany that it plengetra be vocal. There’s real joy in these blues, particularly “Hymn Blues” and “Frankie and Johnny.”

Sound quality is sensational in terms of accurately capturing the voices of the instruments, particularly Stitt’s horn. Dynamic range is remarkable, ranging from soft to loud on drums in the right speaker, piano in the left, but there’s a great sense of space around Stitt himself (I feel like a philistine even mentioning sound). I can’t imagine the person who won’t get a kick out of this LP.

Speaking of Verve records, George Mulligan’s and Paul Desmond’s Blues in Time is another fabulous release, on Mobile Fidelity vinyl (MFSL 1-24): More relaxed, just as cool.

PAUL ALTHOUSE

BRUCKNER: Symphony 9
Gennady Rozhdestvensky, Czech Philharmonic
Canyon Classics EC 36902-1 (C1 only). Tomoyoshi Ezaki, prod. DHJ. TT: 64:50

I have to ever feel all the great Bruckner conductors were dead! In the Ninth Furtwängler is essential despite ye oldie sounds; while the “modern” era has been dominated by Walter’s recording—a great culmination of sensibility and musicianship marred only by a sluggish scherzo. Here, though, we have a recent recording I am enthusiastic about. Albrecht and the Czech Phil may not be names associated with Bruckner, but this one gets it right with convincing tempos and great sonics, particularly in the always critical brass/orchestral balances. This is my No.1 choice: a no-brainer.

PURCELL & BLOW: Songs & Instrumental Music
Christine Brandis, soprano; Mary Springfels, gambist; Nicholas McGegan, Arcadian Academy
Harmonia Mundi MHD 30762 (C1 only). Robin Young, prod.; Paul F. Witt, eng. DHJ. TT: 75:55

I found more competition for the second spot, but one re-listening to “Fly Swift, Ye Harps” sealed the decision. As I pointed out in last September’s issue, Brandis is simply wonderful in this repertory. Her clear instrument includes a great trill and all the agility required, but more important is her ability to characterize convincingly. The recital is nicely broken up by instrumental selections: two sonatas and a pavan, all by Purcell. Balances favor the singer, but not objectionably so. Sonics are bright and clear without sounding dry or too close.

STEREOPHILE, FEBRUARY 1996 119
this album finds Janis’ voice in its purest, most vital form ever. The tracks were recorded as live as possible without sounding retro. This 1992 “all-analogue” recording, praised as much for the artist’s too infrequently heard talents as for its recovered dynamics, is now available on the medium that is a natural: 180g vinyl! Also available on an equally meticulous transfer to gold-plated CD. Both audiophile LP and CD versions reflect what the two top bibles of high-end audio decree as an impeccable production that has come to be regarded as a high-fidelity reference. Matched with Ian’s very personal songs, delivered in a voice that draws you in close in confidence,

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What a thankless task! No, not reviewing audio equipment (though the case could be made). I'm talking about preamplification in the digital age: who needs it? The EAD DSP 9000 Mk.3 digital processor I'm using includes an ingenious full-resolution digital-domain volume control accessible by remote control.

Run a set of interconnects from the EAD's analog outputs to an amplifier and you're rocking. Who needs a preamplifier, with its noise-inducing circuitry and analog-domain potentiometers? Anyone with other analog sources like tape decks, tuners or... turntables. That's who. That's me. Hopefully you.

While digital products from PS Audio (the Reference Link), Wadia (the Model 17), and Meridian (the 607) contain A/D converters which enable them to input analog signals, "digital vinyl" is to my mind and ears an oxymoron, the impassioned arguments of the Wadia folks notwithstanding. I've auditioned the PS Audio product and found it less than transparent in A/D mode, and subject to overload. Wadia claims transparency for its converter. Dare I believe? No.

Meanwhile, back in the real world
Fact is, folks who spin the black circle want analog analog, and that means a conventional preamplifier — either one with a built-in phono section or line-stage/phono-stage separates. Speaking of thankless tasks, look at what a line-stage is supposed to do: nothing. Anytime a reviewer ascribes a "sound" to a line-stage, it must be a distortion, since the job is to pass what it's fed unaltered, but amplified in volume. With a properly designed amplifier driving-source available, such as the EAD, one can assess the damage done by comparing the results straight out, and through the preamplifier.

When I got started in the reviewing business, I owned a heavily modified Hafler DH-101 preamp that I'd upgraded after reading Walt Jung and Richard Marsh's groundbreaking capacitor article published in Audio some 15 years ago.

I replaced and "bypassed" every capacitor in the box with polystyrene and Teflon versions — some of the size of small sausages. I replaced the hookup wire with what AudioQuest was making at the time, and the input and output jacks
with gold-plated Teflon-dielectric Tiffany connectors that were mounted to the preamplifier’s top cover — the only place they’d fit. The chassis literally groaned under the weight of all the caps I’d wedged in there.

The improvement in sound was amazing, but to me there’s nothing more annoying than reading a product review in which a “home-brew” component is part of the reviewing chain. I needed a preamplifier readers could relate to, and besides, the Hafler couldn’t take a low-output moving-coil cartridge straight in, so out it went.

The next logical step up for me and my budget was PS Audio. I owned a succession of their preamplifiers — 4.5, 5.0, 5.5 — all of which had many fine qualities like low-noise moving-coil sections, outstanding soundstaging, impressive image specificity, but some serious shortcomings, such as threadbare midrange, chilliness on top, and a fondness for amplifying RF. Neutral-sounding, you say?

No way. Colorations? Clearly. Colorations I had to work around in reviewing other components. Still, the PS Audios were nice pieces for the money.

Eventually I moved on to Rowland’s two-box Coherence One. This solid-state preamplifier was far more fleshed out in the midband, but somewhat closed-in on top and a bit fat on the bottom. It also cost twice as much as the most expensive PS product — reflected in its build quality — but I still wasn’t satisfied, especially once the EAD 9000 arrived and I could compare the sound of CDs directly out and through the preamplifier.

The last preamplifier I had in-house before leaving The Absolute Sound last year was Jadis’ “budget-line” DPL line-stage/DPMC phono preamplifier combo — a mere trifle at $8600/pair. The all-tubed units looked and felt sumptuous, with sound to match. The line-stage was ultrasonic, and, with its simple, elegant circuitry, close to neutral when referenced to the EAD straight out. But for the slightest compression on dynamic peaks, a mild sensation of tube “glow” and a bit of added liquidity, the Jadis was neutral. What it added was more than pleasant, and didn’t mask vital musical information.

The all-tube phono stage was another story: while it sounded detailed and sweet and could handle very-low-output moving-coil cartridges, it was noisy with the Clavis, the Dynavector XX-1L, and other low outputers. When the music wasn’t loud, the tube rumble was, despite the importer’s insistence that the unit was sufficiently quiet. When I left TAS, the Jadis left my house, review unpublished. But I was impressed.

No preamplifier, no cry. Short a preamplifier, I drove the VTL 300s with the EAD straight out for CDs, while for analog I resurrected a Dynaco PAS-2 I’d picked up at a garage sale for $5 (along with a Stereo 70 fitted with Ampex “Bugle Boy” EL34s and a mint Scott 350 stereo tuner thrown in). All four gold-pinned Telefunken 12AX7s in the Dyna passed Tube Testing 101, and the unit wasn’t spitting any DC nasties, so I cautiously inserted it into the system, replacing the Clavis with a $125 Grado Signature Jr. cartridge (nicely!). Hello, vinyl, bye-bye neutrality. But for five bucks, what the hey? It’s no mystery why Dynaco sold about 100,000 PAS-2/PAS-3/PAS-3x preamplifiers. They were cheap and they were damn good.

But not good enough for my needs in 1995. What to do? I borrowed a friend’s Audio Research SP-11 Mk.2 for a spell, but finally decided what I needed to do was buy an Audible Illusions Modulus 3. Seeing as how I’d recommended it without reservation in TAS based upon hearing it in other people’s systems, and given its very reasonable price (then about $2000 with moving-coil phono board), it made sense.

I give you a short history because this is my first electronics review in Stereophile, and I hope the added perspective will lend more gravity to what you’re about to read.

No more history. While Audible Illusions hasn’t sold as many preamps as Dynaco did in its David Hafler heyday, more than 15,000 Modulus preamps have flown from the factory — well, dribbled is more like it — over the past 12 years. That is an impressive number for any high-end product, especially an all-tubed one.

As my friend Tony Chiarella pointed out in his Modulus 3 review in TAS a few years ago, Art Ferris, the man behind Audible Illusions, began his audio life as a dealer in precious antiquities: vintage McIntosh and Marantz gear that he exported to Japan in great quantities. So blame him if you can’t find or afford the stuff.

When the supply began to dry up in the early ’80s, Ferris, trained as a graphic designer, began marketing Audible Illusions’ original Modulus preamplifier overseas, hoping to whet the Asian market’s appetite for American tube gear. Eventually Ferris took control of the company in an effort to improve production, quality control, and the budget-priced product itself, which had already garnered a series of favorable reviews worldwide (including JGH’s footnote comment in Stereophile in October 1984, Vol.7 No.6, p.51, that “the Modulus is a steal at its modest price”) and a loyal following in the then “audio underground.”

Ferris’s electronic tinkering gave way to serious design chores, cheered on by the likes of Saul Marantz, the mysterious John Iverson, John Curl, and others. Over the last decade, the Modulus evolved into the Modulus 2, which underwent biannual revisions until 1992. Then it was replaced by the Modulus 3, which sold for $1495 complete with an all-tubed MM/high-output—MC phono stage. Add $500 for the optional John Curl—designed solid-state low-output MC Gold Phono Board.

Modulus 3 arrives: the 3A waits in the wings. The Modulus “simpler is better” design philosophy is reflected in both the circuitry and physical layout. The compact, two-piece 3 arrived last winter, giving me my first opportunity to carefully examine its build quality. Looking at and touching the solidly constructed anodized aluminum (Ferris insists on nonferrous) main chassis, you’d never suspect the Modulus 3 was a “budget” preamplifier.

The faceplate is a substantial, 1/8″-thick, finely finished metal slab; the four meaty control knobs are beautifully machined from aluminum. The top cover is secured with nicely finished hex-headed screws. Connector layout on the back is spacious; it’s easy to access the first-rate Teflon-dielectric, machined RCA jacks that are bolted to the chassis and wired to one of three circuit boards inside. The rear complement includes two sets of main outputs for easy bi-amping.

Front-panel layout is simple, too: source selector (a generous six inputs), tape monitor, and dual volume controls. Two pushbutton switches flank the knobs: low-frequency filter and Stereo/Mono switch on one side, Mute and On/Off on the other. A nondetachable umbilical cord connects the main chassis to the hefty power supply, which is housed in a 5" W by 3½" H by 10" D chassis.

While the unit is simple, there’s nothing “budget” about the Mod 3 outside or inside, where you’ll find an extremely high-quality, oxygen-free copper, double-sided, “star-grounded” main board loaded with high-quality mil-spec parts including high-grade 1% resistors and custom-designed polysytrene and polypropylene capacitors (more small sausages) in the signal path. Of course, the only Mod 3 inside you’ll see from now.
on will be that of a used Mod 3, since it has now been superseded by the 3A.

Construction quality, especially the soldering, is superb. Each solder joint is a virtually perfect, round little mirror. Vertically mounted boards, front and rear, connect inputs, outputs, and controls to the main circuit card, which also holds the four 6J8/6922 tubes—two for the phono section, two for the line-stage. My original Mod 3 came equipped with the Curl-designed gold phono board. More about the circuit design and sundry adjustments later — when we get to the new 3A.

Since there's a new model, why am I obsessing on the old one? Read on!

**Finally, I plugged the 3 in!**

After many hours of break-in, I started listening with a serious ear. (Remember, the last preamplifier in my system, the Jadis 1PF/1DPMC, cost $8600.) Okay, the 3 sounded great: the simple signal path yielded a musical purity that was at least as good as the Jadis's, which meant it was as good as anything I'd heard at home. In either line or phono stage, the unit was totally free of grain and of audibly visible veiling. I felt nothing coming between me and pure musical pleasure — especially in the midrange, which was positively glorious.

The Modulus 3 sounded neither "tubey" nor solid-state "zingy." No matter what I pushed it with, I never detected strain, congestion, or compression. The 3's ability to portray wide dynamic swings and the smaller ones that make music sound real was absolutely superb, as good as anything I've heard — and even at the lowest levels of music-making, the background was as velvety quiet as that of the best solid-state preamps.

Except for the deepest bass control, a bit of bass dynamic compression, and a lack of sparkle and resolution at the very top, the 3 beat the SP-11 by a considerable margin — especially in terms of transparency — and despite the few areas where it fell short, I'd pick the Modulus 3 over the older (and much more expensive) Audio Research unit in a New Jersey minute.

Images were sharply drawn and focused yet totally free of artificial edge; and separation, soundstage width, depth, and height were limited only by the recording. You're waiting for the other shoe to drop?

**Kaboom!**

And yet there was definitely something missing: on reference discs like Belgrade at Carnegie Hall (RCA LSO-6006-2-R before the Classic reissue), the air in the hall wasn't there, top-end extension lacked detail, ambient trails seemed to dry up prematurely. On Bang Backroom and Harp (RCA LSP 1866) the metallic quality to the percussion — the shimmer seemed muted and mellow. Pleasant listening, but lacking in brassy bite.

Good as what was there was, what was missing left me an unhappy camper. I worried that the combination of the 15' cable run from preamplifier to amplifier and the lack of an output buffer (no cathode follower; more on that later) was rolling-off the high frequencies. I pulled the unit and set it up a foot from the amps. No change, so it wasn't that.

Look, the original 3 was and is a terrific product, clearly one of the best preamplifiers on the market irrespective of price. But I was using it with very revealing and very expensive associated gear, and my very high expectations weren't being met at the extreme top and bottom, where, despite outstanding extension, there was a lack of ultimate authority and timbral and textural nuance. Since I knew the rest of my system could deliver the goods, the 3 was the weak link in the chain.

**When in doubt: tweak!**

There was only one thing to do: dot that sucker! With so many 3s in service and so many obsessive-compulsive audiophiles owning them, the tweaks were plentiful: leave the top cover off (keep nosy fingers away from the lethal voltages), stand the unit on some kind of vibration-control device, and stud its innards with Marigo dots: inexpensive little black, green, and white vibration-control stick-ons.

So I did. I ordered a pile of dots from Marigo Audio Labs in Skokie, Illinois, and placed them as instructed on top of electrolytic caps, transistors, and ICs (power-supply regulation), on the power transformer, on the chassis, on circuit boards at strategic locations, and on my forehead before listening to Ravi Shankar. And based on conversations with a number of Mod 3 aficionados, I substituted a Marigo power cord for the factory job.

I placed the 3 on a Bright Star Big Rock 3, mass-loaded with a Bright Star Little Rock, which sat on three inverted cones to allow adequate chassis ventilation. Obviously I chose that option over leaving the top cover off.

The results of my tweaks? Significant improvement in bass focus and transient snap, but still not enough to satisfy. I'm not an easy customer.

**Modulus 3A:**

A totally new preamplifier

More than another update or modification, the new Modulus 3A is a complete redesign: only the chassis and front panel remain unchanged, though the latter now features cool, green, backlit control knobs, making-in-the-dark use much easier. The innards are all new.

When Audible Illusions offered to gut my unit and turn it into a 3A, I was more than happy to oblige — after removing all of those Marigo dots and saving them on a sheet of waxed paper.

What I got back a few weeks later looked the same on the outside, but not on the inside, where the new main board is densely packed with even more high-quality parts than the old one. While the basic circuit design remains unchanged — in tube amplifier design, Art Ferris claims, there's really nothing new except for better parts and power-supply designs — there are major differences between the 3 and 3A, not the least of which is the price: the 3A without the M3 Gold MC board now costs $1895! This is still a bargain for what you get physically and sonically.

There are now seven separate regulated power supplies — each section of the preamplifier now has its own dedicated
Relay switching is now used to cut down signal-path length and to provide true monophonic blend when the Stereo/Mono switch is utilized. The 3's Stereo/Mono switch narrowed separation but didn't fold down completely—an important feature when you play mono recordings. The 3A features a much larger main power supply, the transformer of which is now manufactured by Audible Illusions instead of being sourced from the outside.

There are other differences between the 3 and 3A, but more significantly, there are bigger differences between either Audible Illusions preamplifier and most others. Take the one-tube/channel line-stage: each 6DJ8 is a dual triode, which in the 3A is operated with the two halves paralleled in high-current class-A mode with no feedback—"balls to the wall," as Ferris likes to call it.

Another commonly used tube circuit, the "cathode follower" that serves as an impedance transformer and output buffer, is absent in Modulus preamps. Followers do lower impedance and allow a preamplifier to drive long lengths of interconnect, but according to Ferris again, the extra circuitry adds noise, veils the signal, and can cause phase shift.

Without an output cathode-follower circuit, a preamp can suffer from high-frequency rolloff with long or high-capacitance interconnects. To minimize the possibility of this happening, the Modulus uses a combination of unique circuit techniques and special parts to up the current drive and lower impedance. Because the tube is run in parallel, the 6DJ8's normal 3.2k impedance is cut in half to 1600 ohms—which, though closer to ideal (most tube preamplifiers have about a 600 ohm output impedance), is still high in absolute terms.

Other circuit innovations enhance the preamp's drive capabilities. Specially designed conductive-plastic potentiometers minimize the capacitive loading effects of conventional pots. The result is a low enough source impedance (12k ohms) and high enough current capability for the Modulus 3A to drive long lengths of cable into even low-impedance (10k ohms) amplifier inputs without instability or high frequency rolloff.

Because the line-stage flips phase, the main output of the Modulus 3 and 3A is absolute-phase—inverted. To restore correct polarity, you simply reverse your speaker cables: hot to ground and ground to hot on both channels. The Curl-designed solid-state tape-output buffer circuit doesn't invert phase.

The Modulus's one-tube/channel phono stage obviously doesn't use the commonly implemented "cascode section" for voltage gain (two tubes run in series) because again, Ferris feels this method induces an unacceptable amount of phase shift. Yet the Modulus offers almost 60dB of overall gain (28dB phono at 1kHz/30dB line), low distortion, and outstanding S/N ratio using active RIAA equalization in combination with very low overall negative feedback.

For low-output coil cartridge fanciers, the John Curl—designed M3 solid-state gold board (circuit traces and ground plane etched in gold) adds $500 to the 3A, bringing the total cost to $2395. The gold board, with factory-adjustable gain between 22 and 30dB, is essentially a somewhat simplified version of Curl's famed Vendetta Research phono section (single FET vs the Vendetta's dual FETs, which results in somewhat higher noise, though noise, even with the lowest-output coil cartridges, is not a problem with the 3A).

More than simply a head amplifier placed in front of the phono section, the gold board is integrated into the RIAA section of the tubed phono stage, which then has to be custom-trimmed to meet RIAA specs.

All of this circuitry is driven by a sophisticated low-impedance power supply capable of wide voltage swings: the 3A is said to reproduce a perfect 10kHz squarewave, and is almost perfect at 20kHz.

**THE MODULUS 3A SOUNDS OFF**

So what does this new circuitry give you sonically? Well, after about a week's break-in, my quibbles with the 3's performance have gone up in smoke. If the Modulus 3A isn't the finestounding (or -non-sounding) preamplifier in the world, regardless of price, it is one of the finest. Given its price, the words of our founder J. Gordon Holt are as true today as they were in 1984: "A steal for the money."

Using a series of very demanding orchestral CDs—-including a number of Shawn Murphy—engineered soundtracks, all of which are recorded using a Kenneth Wilkinson—style "Decca tree" mike setup—I compared them to the EAD direct out and through the Mod 3A.

The Murphy recordings, including *Dances With Wolves* (Epic ZK 66817 gold CI), *Casper* (MCA MCAD-11240), *Mordida* (Epic UK 52985), and *Batman Returns* (Warner Bros. 26972-2), feature stupendous bass, gigantic soundstaging width and depth, rich string tone, outstanding portrayal of inner detail, and thunderous dynamic range—none of which will come as any surprise to "Willie" aficionados. Any of these, and virtually all Shawn Murphy soundtrack recordings, are audiophile-quality demo discs.

Bottom line is, I was hard pressed to hear any significant differences between the EAD direct out and through the Mod 3A. I concentrated on bass—drum impact and focus, string tone and texture, ambience, soundstaging—you name it. If I noted any consistent difference, it would be an ever-so-slight overall darkening of sound. But so slight that I noted bigger differences when changing the interconnects between the EAD's analog outs and the Mod 3A's inputs, so we're talking very minor. The one-tube/channel line-stage of the Mod 3A is virtually transparent and ultraquiet.

As for the phono input, where there can be no "direct reference," with the low-output Clavis D.C. or the new AudioQuest 7000 Fe5, I can tell you, there's more than enough gain for them to perform on a bed of utter silence. What's more, whatever bass sluggishness I'd noted with the 3 was gone. The midrange was as glorious as before, and the top was extended and detailed without etchiness or glare.

Large-scale dynamics were explosive top to bottom, and well-controlled, as were the small dynamic gestures that create inner detail and a sense of living, breathing music. Everything was right with the 3A referenced to my experience listening to live music—not that my stereo sounds like live music; no one's does.

For those into playing with impedance loading, the gold phono board is factory preset at 47k ohms, but that can easily be changed by inserting the desired-value resistor into gold-plated pins on each board.

**FRONTIERS**

Is the Modulus 3A the finest preamplifier in the world? I don't know. I *can* say this: when I raved about what I was hearing to Stereoophile headquarters in Santa Fe, I was drop-shipped a Class A recommended preamplifier for comparison: the Sonic Frontiers SFL-2 line-stage and SFP-1 Signature phono stage which are also based on 6DJ8 tube technology. Total cost: close to $5000.

The Sonic SFL-2 offers features the Modulus doesn't—balanced inputs and outputs, for example—and its performance and construction are clearly Class A, certainly in the same league as the Modulus, though I think the Modulus is even more transparent and liquid-sounding.

In my opinion, though, the SFP-1 phono...
stage doesn't perform well with low-output coil cartridges: its relatively high noise floor and only moderate gain cast a grayish veil over the soundstage and impart a sluggish rhythmic quality to music.

I can't square what I hear with the comments in Stereophile's "Recommended Components" listing for the SFP-1. If it is "marginal Class A," then the Modulus's phono performance is Class A+. And the SFP-1's lack of a mono switch is a serious shortcoming for those of us who want to listen to the many outstanding monophonic records available, without putting up with superfluous vertical-groove modulation.

**The Modulus 3A: Not for Everyone**

That said, I have to tell you that the Modulus 3A is not for everyone. If you want balanced ins and outs, you're out of luck. If you want to play with both MM and MC cartridges, forget it: once you've had the gold board installed, MM cartridges will overload the input. If you don't want to hassle with dual volume controls, forget it—although I've found them easy to use and no problem at all, especially because they're dead accurate. You can set them physically and the sound will match.

If you want to be able to listen to one source while recording another, you won't find that option on the Modulus 3A. In addition, because the 3A's design values "hot-roddeed" simplicity over convenience, if you opt for the gold board, you're warned that "Tube preamplifiers have high DC voltage surges. Although the Modulus was carefully designed to incorporate a safety relay circuit that protects your system, internal circuitry could conceivably be damaged due to DC voltages being amplified by the additional 30dB of gain from the Gold Phono Board during turn-on cycle. Though safety diodes are built in to shunt these voltages to ground, we strongly recommend that you develop the habit of turning the selector switch to one of the line inputs, (ie, CD), prior to turning the unit on rather than leaving the selector on 'Phono.'"

You're warned elsewhere that if you accidently transpose your "tape in" with your "tape out," you can seriously damage the tape buffer.

I mention these caveats because high performance is only one piece of the product pie. The above is certainly a consideration when choosing a product. On the other hand, a high-performance automobile is more likely to spin out of control than a family sedan. It all depends on what you want and what you need. Keep in mind that the Modulus's reliability in the field is extremely high, so don't let those warnings scare you away. You just need to exercise some common sense.

Another caveat: Despite selling over 15,000 Modulus preamps, Audible Illusions is still a small, somewhat quirky company. I've heard complaints about availability of product, and about long downtime when repairs are needed. Make sure you buy from an established dealer; don't pay in advance for a unit to be shipped; and work out your own terms if your unit does need repair. I raised some of these issues with the company, and was told new procedures and manufacturing improvements should make these problems a thing of the past.

— Michael Fremer

**Measurements from TNN**

Line-level measurements of the Audible Illusions were taken from the CD inputs to the main outputs; the phono measurements were taken at the tape outputs.

The Modulus 3A's output impedance at its line output measured 1775 ohms (L) and 1802 ohms (R) with the level controls at maximum; lower settings of the main level control changed this measurement by only a few ohms. The input impedance at the CD input was just over 48k ohms and wasn't significantly affected by the main level control's setting. The output impedance at the tape output was 248 ohms regardless of the source impedance feeding the preamp — confirming the presence of buffered tape outputs.

The DC offset at the Modulus 3A's outputs measured a maximum of 29mV in the left channel and 37.6mV in the right, though the values fluctuated considerably. The preamp is inverting from line input to output, but its phono stage (phono in to tape out) is non-inverting; the polarity of all inputs will therefore be inverted at the main output. Maximum line-stage gain measured 28.4dB, phono gain 53.9dB. The line-stage S/N ratio (ref. 1V, unweighted) measured 83.3dB from 22Hz-22kHz, 71dB from 10Hz-50kHz, and 83dB, A-weighted. Phono-stage S/N measured 81dB, 72dB, and 87.6dB, under the same conditions, respectively. The latter are very good figures for a moving-coil phono stage.

The Modulus 3A's line- and phono-stage frequency responses into a 100k load are shown in fig.1. Note that measurements were taken with the volume controls physically matched; despite MF's experience, I found tracking to be up to 0.5dB off under those conditions. While the RIAA error (top curve) meets AI's specifications, I would expect the response rise in the bass to be audible as a slight warming of the sound. The rise above 10kHz might also be just audible and is due to the RIAA topology used, where the phono-stage gain doesn't continue to drop with increasing frequency but levels out at unity gain. —Ed]

The 3A's crosstalk is shown in fig.2. While the separation is not as good as the best we've measured for line-stages, nevertheless these are audibly inconsequential amounts of crosstalk. The high-frequency increases are typically the result of capacitive coupling between channels.

The manner in which THD+noise varies with frequency for the Modulus 3A is shown in fig.3. These are good results. The spikes visible in the phono result are intermittent artifacts apparently due to fluctuating noise levels; they appeared at different points when the measurements were redone several times.

The change in THD+noise with output level using a 1kHz signal is shown in fig.4. Both the phono (top) and line-stage (bottom) performances are shown. The distortion and crosstalk measurements of figs.2 and 3 for the line-stage were taken at an input of 100mV, which results in a distortion just slightly above the minimum shown in this figure. The same measurements for the phono stage were taken at an input of 4mV, which resulted in an output very close to the minimum on the phono-stage curve in fig.4 and minimized the

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Stereophile, February 1996
effects of noise on the measurements.

The Audible Illusions phono stage would accept an (unequalized) input of 13.4mV at 1kHz, 141mV at 20kHz, and 0.48mV at 20Hz at a THD+noise level of 1%—very respectable figures for a moving-coil stage. The variations with frequency are simply the result of the phono equalization characteristics (RIAA); there’s considerably less bass energy engraved in the grooves than high-frequency energy.

Finally, fig.5 shows the stage’s output spectrum reproducing a line-level 50Hz input at a high output of 5V into 100k ohms. The largest artifact is the second harmonic, at -51.7dB or about 0.25%. At a more typical output of 1.5V (not shown), the second harmonic decreases to -62.2dB (about 0.08%) and the remaining artifacts drop below -90dB (0.003%).

Our measurements of the Modulus 3A don’t agree down the line with the measurements Al included with our sample (for logistical reasons, this was not the same sample auditioned by MF). Nevertheless, the only notable discrepancy involves the line-level frequency response, which we measured as rolling off above 10kHz but which Audible Illusions shows as only 0.7dB down at 100kHz.

In my experience, the latter would be excellent performance for any preamp, and very unusual for a tube design. Our results aren’t at all unusual for a well-designed tube preamp—this is exactly what the Modulus 3A appears to be. Only the slightly high output impedance suggests that some care should be taken in matching it with a power amplifier, for which I would recommend a minimum of 20k ohms input impedance. —Thomas J. Norton

MF concludes
I own my Modulus 3A and am absolutely thrilled with its performance out of the box. While I may experiment with Marigo Labs dots later, for this review I’ve run the product as the factory packs it (except for the Marigo power cord). I don’t feel I’m missing anything, nor do I feel a need to coax more from the design.

Because of the circuit’s simplicity, tube quality has a greater-than-usual effect on the sound. I’ve been told by Modulus aficionados that certain brands of NOS (new old stock) tubes improve the sonic performance. Perhaps I’ll have a chance to experiment later, but for now I’ll stick with supplied tubes, which should last for many years and are inexpensive to replace (about $60 to retube the entire preamp).

The Modulus 3A offers the highest level of performance at a bargain price. It even allows you to switch out the line section’s bypass caps for even purer sound (that’s how my unit was run for this review), and there’s a carefully implemented 3dB line-section gain-limiting switch if your digital source has very high output, thus allowing a wider range of volume-pot control. If you don’t need a phono section (poor you), Audible Illusions’ L1 line-stage offers the same performance, plus a neat headphone amplifier, for $1495.

All of this adds up to what is clearly one of the finest-sounding, best-built full-function preamplifiers in the world—and reviews from around the world reflect that.

The best? With Audio Research’s PH-3 phono section waiting in the wings, I’m hesitant to say, but looking at the cost of the associated equipment used in this evaluation, when I tell you that the Modulus 3A is in the same league and costs just $2395, you ought to listen. —Michael Fremer
The Carver Research Lightstar Direct preamplifier bears a strong family resemblance to the Lightstar Reference power amplifier that RD reviewed last May (Vol.18 No.5, p.94), with its matching black anodized finish and similar accents. While this product looks nothing like classic Carver products of yore, most people, especially non-audiophiles, will find the changes to be aesthetic improvements. Carver Research has substituted understated simplicity for macho metallic bravado.

The Lightstar preamplifier's front panel has no switches, knobs, buttons, or controls of any kind. All functions are located on the best-designed remote control I've ever seen: a hefty 5 1/2" by 1 3/4" box, artfully arranged with a top row of six soft rubber input buttons nestled over the switches for Mono/Stereo, Phase Invert, Mute, and On/Standby. A large, centrally located, horizontally placed balance control sits atop the large vertical volume control. Each button is a different shape or size on this refreshingly logical layout—at first a few minutes, you'll find it easy to locate all the functions even during a blackout.

The angle of acceptance of the infrared signal is fantastic: the main unit readily accepted the remote's commands at angles greater than 30° off-axis. The front panel even has a centrally located button that blinks blue to confirm that it has received a command from the remote. No more guessing. Even from more than 25' across the room, every command was received and executed without glitches. All remote-controlled preamplifiers should work this well.1

1 The Carver Corporation's founder, Bob Carver, is no longer associated with the company that bears his name.

The front panel—-not merely a blank slate for receiving remote commands—contains visual information on the preamplifier's current status and functions. At a glance you can tell which input is active, whether the signal is muted, and the attenuation level, power status, polarity inversion, and right/left balance. The only thing not present on the front panel: a Dick Clark rating for the quality of the music.

My wife was a bit miffed that the front panel doesn't have a mute switch—hunting around for the remote while rushing for the telephone isn't her idea of musical pleasure. Occasionally I've misplaced the remote during listening sessions; I feel pretty silly as I nose around like a bird dog trying to locate the blasted thing. A mute on the front panel would be nice.

The Lightstar Direct is really two preamplifiers in one chassis. The first is a totally passive, balanced differential design with little besides connectors, wire, relay switches, and a resistor-based attenuator in the circuit. The second is an unbalanced active amplifier with an Analog Devices "butler" amplifier at the input, a Burr-Brown INA 103 instrumentation amplifier at the output, and a Linear Technology LT 1097 op-amp used as a DC servo to eliminate DC offset.

When an unbalanced signal source is used, it's converted into a balanced signal by the Analog Devices OP 285 input amplifier and then treated as a balanced signal throughout the rest of its travels. Both balanced and unbalanced signals must be converted into unbalanced output signals by passing through the Burr-Brown instrumentation amplifier before going to the unbalanced outputs. Balanced signals sent to a balanced output have the least processing; unbalanced signals sent to an unbalanced output have the most.

Although an internal switch allows you to defeat the 20dB of gain supplied by the Burr-Brown instrumentation amp, the unbalanced-output signal must pass through this amplifier even when it's supplying no gain.

The internal and external fit'n'finish of the Lightstar Direct preamplifier are excellent. I was most impressed with the internal topological layout. Judging by
the schematic sent me by principal designer Brian Aase, a great deal of time and effort was expended to maximize the sonic benefits of the simple balanced differential signal paths. Even though there are no active components in the passive balanced part of the preamplifier, a break-in period is still required for the Lightstar to sound its best. I used the Purist Audio Designs break-in disc to hasten the process. Twenty-four hours running at full tilt seemed to do the job nicely.

**System**

Analog sources were a VPI TNT Jr. turntable with upgrade and outboard flywheel, sitting on a Bright Star base and Townshend Seismic sink. Tonearms mounted on the table were the Graham 1.5 TC, and Clearaudio/Souther TQ-1. In my small room is a VPI HW-19 Mk.IV with SAMA mounted with a Clearaudio/Souther TQ-1 and sitting on a Bright Star J-7 base. Cartridges included the van den Hul MC-1 Super, Dynavector XX-11 low-output MC, Fidelity Research/van den Hul FR-1, Denon 103/Van den Hul, and a Denon DL-S1. Digital front-ends were PS Audio Lambda and C.E.C. TL 2 CD transports, and a Sony TCID-17 portable DAT recorder connected via coaxial, AES/EBU, TosLink, and AT&T optical connectors to EAD DSP-7000 III or DSP-9000 III D/A processors.

Other preamplifiers in-house were the Audio Research LS-5 Mk.II, Threshold T-2, Pass Aleph P, and Boulder L5-AE line-level units, with Vendetta SCP-2C, Naim Prefix, and Gold Aero dB-45 outboard phono units. Power amplifiers used were the Boulder 500 AE, Rowland Model 6, Manley Reference 240, and Pass Aleph 0. Loudspeakers were the Dunlavy Signature SC-VIs in my large room, and the Avalon Eclipses in my small room.

Interconnects included Straight Wire Virtuo, Audio Magic Sorcerer, Synergistic Research Kaleidoscope (balanced termination), and WireWorld "Eclipse" (both balanced and single-ended). Speaker cables were Dunlavy Labs DAL-82, Audio Magic Sorcerer, and AudioTruth Argent Hyperlitz (with the Dunlavys); and Synergistic Research Signature 2 and 3 (with the Avalons), in 8’ lengths. Digital cables used were Mod Squad Wonder Link 1 coaxial, Audio Magic Sorcerer coaxial, TARA Labs RSC Master AES/EBU, AudioQuest, Parasound, and Sony fiber optic cables.

Other accessories included Room-Tunes Corner Tunes, EchoTunes, and Ceiling Clouds, Acoustic Sciences Tube Traps and Shadow Casters (in small room), Arcisci Levitation stand (in large room), RoomTunes Just-a-Rack, Arcisci Superstructure II, Soundstyle X503, and Billy Bags amplifier stands, with all major components on Bright Star Audio Big Rock bases and Little Rock top-plates (in small room), Shakti Stones, Fluxbuster, PAID break-in disc, Music and Sound ferrite beads, AudioQuest ferrite clamps, NoiseTrapper power strip, Synergistic Research power cords, TARA Labs RSC Master power cords (with Pass Aleph 0), Coherent Systems EAU-1 Electroclear AC line conditioner, AudioQuest record brush, Gryphon "Exorcist" conditioning tool, Nitty Gritty record-cleaning machine, Radio Shack Sound Pressure Meter, Kleenmaster Brillianize CD cleaner, and Sam Adams Scotch Ale.

**Sound**

I’ve recently rediscovered the old audio truism that the very best-sounding preamplifier is no preamplifier at all. The agent of my reawakening has been the Enlightened Audio Designs DSP-9000 III D/A,2 which has its own digital volume control that allows the user to adjust the output voltage from the remote. With Mute and 0.5V, 1V, 2V, and 4V maximum outputs available, the EAD can directly drive any power amplifier. The results are car-opening. By comparison, every line-level preamplifier I’ve used is colored. The EAD provides the ultimate preamplifier bypass test—far more revealing than putting a preamplifier under test into another preamplifier’s tape loop. Preamplifier manufacturers, beware—now your product can be directly compared to the sound of one hand clapping.

Used in its balanced mode, the Carver Lightstar Direct was among the least colored preamplifiers I’ve ever heard. For $1995, or any price, that’s superb preamplifier performance. In comparison with no preamplifier at all,3 the Carver’s shortcomings were a slight loss of resolution coupled with a wee bit of very fine grain introduced into the sonic texture, as if the Carver had introduced a very thin veil between the listener and the sound.

On Patty Larkin’s new Stranger World (High Street 10335-2), for example, the

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2 Reviewed by RH in August '95, Vol.18 No.8, p.146.
3 For all my bypass comparison tests, the Carver Lightstar volume control was at maximum level, with no attenuation. Volume levels were controlled by the EAD DSP-9000 III.
level. Also, unlike many single-ended passive units, the Lightstar didn’t exhibit a trace of harmonic anemia or dynamic reticence. Even with the 25’ cable run I use between pre- and power amplifiers in my large-room system, there were no shifts or droops in frequency response regardless of output level. Driving long lines is what balanced connections are all about, after all. Carver Research’s realization is so elegant that I’m surprised other manufacturers haven’t arrived at a similar solution.

COMPARISONS

Compared to other preamplifiers I’ve used recently, the Lightstar acquired itself very well. The Carver had less personality than the Threshold T-2, lacking that robust midbass “slam” and ever-so-slight bit of top-end grain. The Carver also had somewhat better low-level detail, and a more neutral overall harmonic balance. Both preamplifiers were emotionally involving, and both did an excellent job of conveying the music’s feeling. The Threshold reminded me of the Wheaton Triplanar Ultimate tonearm with a more dynamic, even Rabel-Asian presentation. The Carver was more like a Clearaudio/Souther arm, with better low-level detail and more precise imaging, but less dynamic bravado.

Compared to the Audio Research LS5 Mk.II, the Carver had a slightly smaller soundstage coupled with a somewhat less holographic rendition of dimensionality. The Audio Research sounds a bit larger than life, and has a warmer, richer harmonic balance, especially in the lower midrange. The high-gain Audio Research has a much higher noise floor than did the Carver, which was silent as a grave. But the Audio Research’s amazing dimensionality, liquid midrange, and explosive dynamic abilities give it an unforgettable sonic signature that may not be entirely neutral (as I discovered in my bypass tests), but is so musically satisfying that one is inclined to overlook its quirks while reveling in its sonic glories.

In some systems, the Audio Research’s 33dB of maximum gain will make it indispensable. Anyone who is scared away from the LS5 II because of its lack of single-ended inputs should know that I’ve used it with a wide variety of single-ended sources via Neutrik and Boulder RCA/XLR adapters, with excellent results. It’s still my favorite active preamplifier despite its low-level noise, lack of balance control, primitive remote, and excessive gain. Gorgeous sound has to count for something.

ACTIVE SOUND

Some might be tempted to use the Lightstar Direct preamplifier in its active single-ended mode. Don’t bother. As an active preamplifier, the Carver Lightstar was undistinguished—grainy, slightly harsh-sounding, two-dimensional, homogenized, dynamically compressed, and emotionally uninvolving. In its balanced passive mode, the Carver presented Jill Sobule’s “Houdini’s Box” (from her eponymous CD, Lava/Atlantic 82741-2) with a larger soundstage, with far more audible low-level information. Background vocals were much more distinct, and the mix had a real sense of depth. Even recording errors—like the slight amplifier buzz near the end of the song—and tape hiss from the analog original were easy to hear in balanced passive mode. On aggressive mixes like that on Peter Hammelmann’s Floinn the Acid World CD (Epic 52588), the difference between passive and active modes was the difference between enjoyable listening and pushing the disc-eject button. With the Carver Lightstar, balanced definitely ruled.

Since I’m somewhat of a masochist, I even compared the Carver’s single-ended inputs to the balanced inputs converted with high-quality RCA/XLR adapters. I was curious to find out if there was any audible degradation caused by the Analog Devices OP285 amplifiers used to change the single-ended input to a balanced signal. First I listened to a vinyl copy of Julid Fordham’s 1989 release, Porcelain (Virgin America 91325-1). “Genius” begins with a myriad of animal sounds. Happily, both inputs were identical in their rendition of low-level detail, dynamics, space, liquidity, harmonic balance, and small-animal utterances. After about an hour of back-and-forth with a wide variety of material, I concluded that the Analog Devices OP285 amplifier does nothing to degrade the sound of single-ended inputs. Since there are very few balanced-output phono preamplifiers (only the Audio Research PH-2 and FM Acoustics models come to mind), it’s nice to know that single-ended analog sources aren’t shortchanged by the Lightstar.

MEASUREMENTS FROM TJN

The Lightstar’s balanced output impedance at its line output measured 875 ohms at the maximum setting of the level control, increasing to just under 300 ohms at low settings. In unbalanced mode the output impedance was 584 ohms. The line input impedance measured 695 ohms balanced and 161k ohms unbalanced. The output impedance at the tape output was just under 600 ohms regardless of the input source impedance—indicating a buffered tape output.

The DC offset at the Lightstar’s outputs was too low to measure. The preamp is noninverting from its inputs to its main outputs, and in the balanced mode pin 2 is wired as positive, pin 3 negative (the AES standard). With the preamp in its balanced mode, I measured a loss of 1.4dB from the balanced inputs to the balanced outputs. Maximum Gain measured 19.9dB in the unbalanced configuration. The signal/noise ratio in the balanced mode was essentially the residual noise of our Audio Precision test set, with an insignificant amount of additional noise due to the power line and interconnects. In unbalanced mode, S/N measured 101.5dB from 22Hz to 22kHz unweighted (referred to 1V), 104dB A-weighted, and 81.3dB unweighted from 10Hz to 500kHz.

Fig.1 shows the Lightstar’s frequency response. The balanced frequency response, as you would expect from the zero-gain balanced configuration, is virtually perfect; the unbalanced response is also difficult to criticize. Note the superb channel matching. The crosstalk is shown in fig.2. Aside from a slight dissimilarity between the channels, this is a
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very good result. The crosstalk in either mode would appear to be due almost completely to capacitive coupling (typically evidenced by an increase in crosstalk at higher frequencies).

The Lightstar's THD+noise performance in its unbalanced mode plotted against frequency is shown in fig.3. The distortion is very low across the full range. Figs.4 and 5 show the Lightstar's distortion spectrum with a 50Hz input at a relatively high output level—5V with a 100k ohm load, 4.35V with a 600 ohm load. (With the 600 ohm load, visible clipping occurred above 4.35V output.) While more distortion occurs with the lower impedance load, the artifacts are still low—under ~90dB (0.003%) for the most part.

Finally, fig.6 shows how the 1kHz THD+noise level in the unbalanced active mode varies with output voltage into both 100k ohm and 600 ohm loads. While the preamp puts out less voltage into a 600 ohm load, the output is still sufficient to drive most power amplifiers to full output.

Other than its apparent unwillingness to drive high voltages into low impedances, the measured performance of the Carver Lightstar Direct preamplifier is solid across the board. However, with the very low input impedance in its balanced passive mode, care should be taken in selecting a source component.

STONE SUMS UP
There once was a girl who had a little curl / right in the middle of her forehead. / And when she was good, she was very, very good, / but when she was bad, she was horrid.

The Carver Research Lightstar Direct preamplifier is the audio equivalent of that literary lass. The Lightstar Direct in its balanced mode is simply the best preamplifier I've ever heard for under $2000. The caveats are that you must have source components with sufficient output level and that are not bothered by driving a very low impedance, sufficient gain from your amplifier, and reasonably sensitive speakers to ensure satisfying volume levels. But don't use the Carver Lightstar as an active single-ended preamplifier unless you really have no other option.

If you have a completely balanced system, you owe it to yourself to investigate the Lightstar preamplifier. The only thing I've found that's more neutral and revealing is no preamplifier at all.

—Thomas J. Norton

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—Steven Stone
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What is black, has four knobs, and could be dropped off a second-story window without sustaining any major damage? If you say the Pass Aleph P preamplifier, you've been reading the boldface type at the top of the page instead of jumping immediately to the summary section. How gratifying. Nelson Pass, never content to sit on, stand on, or do whatever he does with his laurels, has produced a preamplifier to go along with his Aleph series of amplifiers. This component shares more than just the name Aleph with its beefier brethren; it even uses the same output devices. But that's the sort of technical detail reserved for another section of this review. To whet your appetite for further semiliterate exploration, I'll just state that this is a preamplifier worthy of the Aleph moniker. Doesn't this Pass feller ever quit?

**Design & Ergonomics**

The Pass Aleph P design philosophy can be summed up in one word: simplicity. Its exterior styling is positively austere. Only the words "Pass Aleph P," "Source," "Right," "Left," and "Volume," deeply engraved in heavy block lettering, grace its front panel. The rotary selector on the left side has just four dots to delineate each of the four possible input selections. The master gain control knob on the right has only a slat for a setting mark. The front-panel center is populated by a glowing blue light and a pair of knobs to control the gain of each channel. That's all there is. A bale of hay has more visual interest.

The rear panel is equally minimalist: four inputs, each featuring single-ended RCA and XLR connections. To choose single-ended inputs, you insert a gold U-shaped shorting plug into the corresponding XLR input. Find a nice, safe resting place for the connectors; my cats think they're the best play-toys this side of a catnip mouse. There are two RCA outputs, one with fixed gain for supplying a tape deck and one with variable gain to connect to an amplifier. Two XLR outputs provide the same functions for balanced devices. The final item on the rear panel is an EIC connector for the power cord. To eliminate nasty feedback howls, input 4 is intended to be used as a tape input, so a relay shuts off the tape outputs on the back of the preamplifier when it is engaged. Safety is a wonderful thing.

"The Aleph P chassis is constructed of 1/2"-thick solid pieces of machined aluminum on the front and sides, and 1/4"-thick pieces on the back, top, and bottom. Don't drop this baby on your foot, or you'll be hopping all the way to your nearest health-care facility."

The instruction book is an informative "good read." It contains everything a normal person needs to know about the Aleph P and Nelson Pass's design philosophy, including his estimate of the sun's longevity.

The test sample was a manual unit, sans remote control. By the time you read this review, the Aleph will be available with a remote control for a paltry $500 more. All older preamplifiers without remotes will be retrofittable; just a short visit to the Pass Laboratories' sumptuous corporate facility will be required. No firm price has been announced, but I have it from the horse's mouth that the modification will probably cost slightly less than $500.

**Passing Inside**

The Aleph circuit is as simple as its exterior. Each input line is amplified by a single International Rectifier power MOSFET operated in single-ended class-A mode with zero feedback. With a maximum power rating of 125W and peak current capability of over 50A, this MOSFET is the same device used in the Aleph 0 amplifier. In the Aleph P circuit, they're on semipermanent vacation.

Upon entering the Aleph P, an input signal is patched almost directly to the gate of the MOSFET. Only the source selector relays, one 200 ohm resistor (to prevent parasitic oscillations), and one MOSFET have three pins — the gate or input pin; the source or ground pin; and the drain or output pin. The source pin corresponds to the emitter pin on a bipolar transistor or the grid pin on a tube.
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"I find myself almost totally taken with the Ruark Jupiters. In the end, they strike me as the perfect final speaker for a true lover of music." — Paul A. Cervantes, The Audio Obsessory Vol. 3, #6

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STEREOPHILE, February 1996
metalized film capacitor (to block DC) are in the path in front of the MOSFET. Input sources aren't directly coupled, since the MOSFET uses a DC-biasing arrangement that could pass DC back to an input source if not blocked.

Once the signal reaches the gate of the MOSFET, the circuit design specified in US Patent No. 5,376,899, "Amplifier with gain-stage coupled for differential error correction," goes into effect. The output from the source connector of the first MOSFET—let's call it A—is routed through a variable resistor before going to the source of a second MOSFET, which we'll call B. The resistance between these two sources helps to set the intrinsic gain of the circuit. MOSFET B also receives the negative-polarity signal from the balanced input at its gate. When a single-ended source is used, the little U-shaped shorting plugs ground the MOSFET B's gate.

The elegance of this circuit is that the variable resistor that controls AC voltage from MOSFET A's source pin to MOSFET B's source pin also passes any distortion created by MOSFET A to MOSFET B, where it is canceled out by identical inverse-polarity distortion at MOSFET B's drain. This same mechanism occurs with distortion from MOSFET B that is transferred through the resistor to MOSFET A. This is the patented differential error correction. A further bit of cleverness is that differential distortion-cancellation occurs whether you use a balanced or a single-ended input or output.

The master volume control for the four outputs (one positive-polarity and one negative-polarity per channel) is done via four-pole double-throw relays controlling precision Dale metal-films resistors placed just before the output. The front-panel volume knob actually supplies a DC voltage to an analog/digital 6-bit converter with 64 levels. Let me emphasize that the audio signal is not transposed into the digital domain. The A/D is a fairly accurate way to make a volume control—even the most expensive off-the-shelf four-way potentiometers have a much higher tracking error. With anything other than a digital controller, the preamplifer's CMRR (common mode rejection ratio) would be far less than optimal.

Through careful matching of resistor values, this master volume arrangement makes it possible to achieve CMRR of at least 60dB. Since the Pass Aleph operates without feedback and is buffered by the master volume attenuator, severe loading shouldn't produce distortion.

The Aleph P will drive any impedance load demanding less than at least 20mΩ peak current (equivalent to +20dB into 600 ohms).

The Aleph P's power supply uses a toroidal power transformer that delivers 85V. This unregulated power is then filtered before it reaches active discrete regulator circuits, which employ both passive and active systems. The regulated power is then sent to each channel through a double set of passive filters. Using one active and six passive filters reduces power-supply noise to a level of about 5mV. When the Aleph P's balanced outputs are used, even this small amount of noise is differentially rejected.

SYSTEM

The following equipment was used for this review:

Analog sources were a VPI TNT Jr. turntable with cost-effective upgrading and outboard flywheel on a Bright Star base and Townshend Seismic Sink. Tonearms mounted on the table were the Graham 1.5 TC and Clearaudio/ Souther TQ-1. My room size has a VPI HW-19 Mk.IV with SAMA sitting on a Bright Star J-7 base mounted with a Clearaudio/Souther TQ-1. Cartridges included the van den Hul MC-1 Super, Dynavector XX-11 low-output MC, Fidelity Research/ von den Hul FR-1, Denon 103/van den Hul, and a Denon DL-SI. Digital front-ends were a Philips Lambda and C.E.C. TL 2 CD transports, and a Sony D-7 portable DAT recorder connected via coaxial, AES/EBU, TosLink, and AT&T optical connectors to EAD D5P-7000 Mk.3 or D5P-9000 Mk.3 D/A processors.

Other preamplifiers in-house were the Threshold T-2 and Carver Research Lightstar line-level units, with Vendetta SCP-2C, Audio Research PH-2, and Gold Acro dB-45 outboard phono units. Power amplifiers used were the Rowland Model 6, Manley Reference 240, and Pass Aleph 0. Speakers were the Dunlavy Signature Vs in my large room, and the Avalon Eclipse speakers in my small room.

Interconnects included Audio Magic Sorcerer, Synergistic Research Kaledioscope, and WireWorld "Eclipse." Only balanced lines were employed.

Speaker cables used were Dunlavy Labs DAL-8Z, Audio Magic Sorcerer (with the Dunlavy's), and Synergistic Research Signature 2 and 3 (with the Avalons), in 8' lengths. Digital cables used were Mod Squad Wonder Link 1 coaxial, Audio Magic Sorcerer coaxial, TARA Labs RSC Master AES/EBU, AudioQuest, Sony, and Parasound optical cables.

Other accessories included Room Tunes CornerTunes, EchoTunes, and Ceiling Clouds, Acoustic Sciences Tribe Traps and Shadow Casters (in small room), Arcie Levitation stand (in large room), Room Tunes Just-a-Rack, Arcie Superstructure II, Soundstyle X503, and Billy Bags amplifier stands, with all major components on Bright Star Audio Big Rock bases and Little Rock top-plates (in small room), Shakti Stones, Fluxistributor, PAD break-in disc, Music and Sound ferrite beads, AudioQuest ferrite clamps, Noise Trapper Power Strip, Synergistic Research power cords, TARA Labs RSC Master power cords (with Pass Aleph 0), Coherent Systems EAU-1 Electroacoustic AC line conditioner, AudioQuest record brush, Gryphon "Exorcist" conditioning tool, Nitty Gritty record-cleaning machine, Radio Shack Sound Pressure Meter, Kleenmaster Brilliantize CD cleaner, and a 1946 Gibson Southern Jumbo guitar.

SOUND

The Pass Aleph P is easily the best solid-state line-stage preamplifier I've ever had in my clutches.

Is it perfect? Is it the fabled Holy Grail of a straight wire with gain? No. Who do you think Nelson Pass is—God? It's still an active preamplifier possessing some of the small subtractive colorations and variations from absolute neutrality that seem to plague all active devices. I'm still waiting (and listening) for the preamplifier that's as good as no preamplifier at all. So far, no luck, but I'm young (relatively) and incredibly patient.

The differences between the Aleph P and no preamplifier at all2 were quite noticeable. On Susan Werner's cover of the Paul Simon song "Something So Right," from her Last of the Good Straight Girls (Private Music 82126-2), low bass was tighter, there was greater dimensionality and less grain on Susan's voice, a slightly wider soundstage, better low-level detail, more sizzle and air on the ride cymbals, and much better delineation.

2 In my review of the Carver Lightstar preamplifier elsewhere in this issue, I explain my methodology for the ultimate preamplifier bypass test. Just get an EAD D5P-9000 Mk.3 D/A processor and drive your amplifiers directly from its balanced outputs. Since the Carver review, I've managed to get an analog source that can also directly drive balanced amplifiers. The Audio Research P11-Z, with its absolutely necessary Metz switch—even tried taking a needle on and off a record at high listening levels without a mistake—and balanced inputs and outputs works beautifully as an analog source for bypass tests. The trick is finding a phono cartridge with just the right output level.
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cation of decays without the Pass preamplifier in the circuit. Even though the Pass is easily the fastest active preamplifier I've heard, it still slightly smeared decays.

Without any preamplifier, the delineation between the presence and absence of music was more distinct, so sound faded away in a more natural and realistic way. On Joan Osborne's song "Spiderweb" from Relish (Mercury/Blue Gorilla 314 526 699-2), the Pass was less fast on the transients. With this dense mix of percussion instruments and guitars, individual parts weren't as easily individualized as in bypass mode. Again, there was a noticeable increase in air and top-end extension when the preamplifier wasn't in the circuit. Cymbals have an airiness that evaporates through the Pass. Microdynamics were also ever so slightly compressed by the Aleph, resulting in a loss of vibrancy and rhythm.

I know this all sounds pretty grim for Nelson's new baby, but every active preamplifier I've ever heard produces sonic anomalies. The Aleph P is the lest colored of the bunch. Not to denigrate any of my fellow reviewers or audiophiles, but I'm amazed that they can argue and obsess over the minutiae of tubes, Tiptoes, and wires when so much sonic degradation is caused by their active preamps.3 It's like worrying about whether your underwear is clean just before you're hung by the neck until dead.

**ANALOG LISTENING COMPARISONS**

So that no one confuses me with "Digital Lad," it's time to use up some ink on the Pass Aleph P's performance with analog sources. I just received Classic Records' new release of Mahler's Symphony 4 performed by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra directed by Fritz Reiner (Classic Records LSC-2364). One of the most treasured records in my +4500 LP collection is a "White Dog" copy of RCA's original release given me by Harry Pearson of The Absolute Sound over 10 years ago. Even through a Dixie cup and a string you could hear the differences between these two records. The Classic Records reissue has far greater low bass information, with more distinct timpani and double-bass parts. The Classic reissue also has a plethora of top-end air — lacking on the original — on flutes, violins, and triangle. Inner detail and low-level information are superior on the reissue; you can even hear Maestro Reiner stamping during a few passages on side one.

While in most ways the reissue is superior to the original pressing, it's not a hands-down, grind-its-face-into-the-dust winner. Despite its fidelity to the 45-year-old master tape, the Classic release doesn't have as true an overall gestalt of the flesh-and-blood performance as the original release. The main problem is that you don't have a feeling for the forest because of the trees; the blend of the original is sacrificed for the finer details in the re-release. While the original gives you a wonderful feeling of the whole orchestra as a unit on stage, the reissue separates the orchestra into its individual parts.

This effect reminds me of the difference between the sound of my 1946 Gibson Southern Jumbo and a 1995 Gibson Advanced Jumbo. The old guitar has a wonderful resonance and homogenization to its harmonic character that's lacking on the new guitar. The 1995 guitar sounds tighter, with a clearer, more distinct differentiation between the strings, but is less harmonically cohesive. You're more aware of the individual notes, but less wrapped up in the music.

The Classic Records re-release is just like this. The parts are clearer, but the harmonic blend isn't fully realized, so your feeling for the music is diminished. Too little center-fill on the reissue could be the problem. While there isn't a real hole in the middle of the soundstage, sound does recede slightly in the middle. Reflected sound from the rear walls is lost, while reflected sound from the side-wall seems exaggerated. This increase in sidewall reflection also makes the stage seem wider, but not as deep as on the original. It sounds as if some giant grabbed the soundstage and pulled on either side, stretching it like Silly Putty from a ball into an egg shape.

Compared to the Audio Research PH-2 running straight into power amps, the Pass Aleph P sounded a wee bit "smoky." That old phrase "veiled" sprang to mind. Transient information wasn't quite as fast-sounding. Through the Pass, both the top-end air and low bass energy were slightly truncated. Obvious differences still exist between the two Mahler releases, but resolution was reduced so that low-frequency information like the foot-stomping on Side One was less obvious. Though the Pass's differences in depth, center-fill information, and other sonic subtleties were still quite noticeable, a bit of clarity was lost. Something more was added between the listener and the music.

**UP AGAINST THE CARVER LIGHTSTAR**

Compared to the remarkable Carver Research Lightstar Direct preamplifier used in its passive balanced-output mode (see review elsewhere in this issue), the Pass Aleph ran a very close second. On Sara K's cover of the Allman Brothers Band's blues chestnut "Whipping Post" from Tell Me I'm Not Dreaming (Chessky JD 133), the Pass was slightly darker harmonically, losing some of the "plastic pick sound" from Bruce Dunlap's exceptional guitar and some of the brilliance from Sara's s's. Microdynamics seemed slightly compressed on the Pass, with some of the subtle vocal shadings on Sara's voice reduced. Depth was somewhat truncated by the Pass, as was the dimensionality of the reverberant field in St. Peter's church.

On a spatially precise system you'll notice that Sara's voice moves around the soundstage during the song. Preventing emotional singers from putting some body English into their work is impossible. With the crossed-figure-8 mike arrangement used on this disc, every move seems like a hike across town. On the plus side, the Pass is was silent as the Carver, and added only the very slightest amount of grain to the sound. On Terrell's song "Just Give Me Some Time" from Angry Southern Gentlemen (Pointblank 40099 2), the Carver was a bit faster-sounding, with better transient rendition, especially on the big, boomy stand-up bass and acoustic dobro. The Carver delivered more of the double-basses' low-frequency impact without sounding bloated, fat, or slow. The Pass's bass resolution was good, but lacked a snideness of the impact delivered by the Carver.

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Strangers World (High Street Records 10335-2), the song “Johnny was a Pyro” features exceptional drumming by Shawn Pelton. The near-rinshots sounded more like real rinshots through the Carver. With the Pass they were duller, with an excess of thud and less leading-edge twang. The dense guitar textures created by Patti and her producer, guitarist-extraordinaire Jon Leventhal, came through the passive Carver with less homogenization.

Again, the difference in low-level detail between the passive Carver and the active Pass made the music easier to decipher through the Carver. Fortunately, the Aleph P’s harmonic balance is remarkably close to that of the Carver, lacking only a speck of top-end air on cymbals and low-end resolution on synthesizer, percussion, and bass guitar parts.

However, when the Aleph P was compared to the Carver’s active single-ended output, the results weren’t even close ... the Aleph clearly outclassed the Lightstar. There wasn’t a single sonic parameter where the Pass wasn’t vastly superior — dimensionality, grain, transient response, transparency, bass extension, top-end air, basic noise level, low-level detail — you name it, the Pass ruled.

UP AGAINST THE THRESHOLD T-2
For a final mano a mano I moved the Pass Aleph P into my small room, where I pitted it against the Threshold T-2 preamplifier. At last, a fair fight. On the song “Bate-coxa” from Badi Assad’s new Rhythms CIJ (Chesky JD137), the Pass produced a more natural timbre on Assad’s classical guitar. The Pass also did a better job of preserving the three-dimensionality of the recording. This added dimensional fidelity is especially noticeable on percussion instruments.

The natural acoustics of St. Peter’s Episcopal Church in NYC were more convincingly rendered by the Pass; its faster rendition of transient information made the reverberant field of the recording venue more palpable and real. The Threshold and Pass have very similar harmonic signatures except for the slightly brighter upper midrange and warmer upper bass on the Threshold.

On “No Curb Service,” performed by Liz Meyer on her Womanly Arts (Strictly Country Records SCR-37), the dobro sounded less metallic and more natural through the Pass preamplifier. Through the Threshold T-2, the Dobro’s timbre sounded different from that of the acoustic guitar, but not as different as through the Pass, or in real life. Low-level detail was also better through the Pass, with more precise individualization of each instrument. Even when everybody is really wailing during the last verse, each part could be followed through the Pass with greater ease than with the Threshold.

In my review of the Threshold T-2 last July (Vol.18 No.5, p.112), I noted that it was an exceptionally quiet preamplifier, with only the slightest amount of white noise at the listening position when supplying +5dB of gain. The Pass is even quieter. With every gain control maxed-out (+20dB of gain) I heard absolutely no noise from the Avalon Ellipses at my listening position. The Pass Aleph P is simply the quietest active preamplifier I’ve ever reviewed.

Listening to a version of Shawn Colvin’s “Cry Like an Angel” from a live EDTown performance on DAT, I was aware of the Pass’s slightly larger soundstage, especially during the applause at the end of the song. The Pass also did a better job of layering the different parts of the music — Shawn’s voice is in the foreground, with her Lowden guitar behind, followed by Bruce Hornsby’s background vocals, and finally Hornsby’s piano along the back of the soundstage. Let me emphasize that while the Pass did better the Threshold in most sonic parameters, it didn’t make the T-2 any less enjoyable.

Even after these extensive A/B sessions, listening to music through the T-2 is an enjoyable, involving experience. Considering the T-2’s far more extensive features, it’s remarkable that its sonic performance is even close to the Aleph P’s.

— Steven Stone

MEASUREMENTS FROM TJN
The balanced output impedance of the Pass Aleph P at its line output measured 1497 ohms (slightly less in the left channel); the unbalanced output impedance measured 744 ohms. Both measurements were at the maximum setting of the main, left, and right level controls; as the main level control was reduced, the output impedance also decreased significantly — to 324 ohms at 3:00, 121 ohms at unity gain — about 12:00 — and 79.8 ohms at a 9:00 setting, all balanced readings).

This may create minor matching problems at playback levels near the main level control’s maximum setting, with power amps having low input impedances; ironically, Pass’s own Aleph 0 has an input impedance of just over 7k ohms (balanced). However, the relatively high gain of the Aleph 0 (22.3dB balanced and 15.8dB unbalanced) should minimize this problem in a system with an otherwise typical gain structure, as the volume control will be used in a position where the Aleph’s source impedance is respectably low.

The Aleph P’s input impedance measured 27k ohms balanced and 12.8k ohms unbalanced, and was unaffected by the setting of the main level control. The output impedance at the tape output (balanced) was 50.5 ohms with a 50 ohm source impedance and 583 ohms with a 600 ohm source impedance, indicating unbuffered tape outputs.

The DC offset at the Aleph P’s outputs measured under 1.3mV either channel, balanced or unbalanced. The preamp is noninverting from its inputs to its main outputs, and in the balanced mode pin 2 is positive, pin 3 negative. S/N ratio (unweighted, ref. 1V out) measured 82dB over a 22Hz–22kHz range, 84.6dB over 10Hz–500kHz, and 89.3dB A-weighted.

The Aleph P’s frequency response is shown in fig.1. Note that as the level control is reduced, the small rolloff at the high end flattens out. The Aleph P’s channel separation is shown in fig.2 (100mV input, full gain on all controls). Though there’s a dissimilarity between

**Fig.1** Pass Labs Aleph P, frequency response in balanced mode with volume control set to unity gain (top), in unbalanced mode with volume control full (middle), and in balanced mode with volume control full (bottom) (right channel dashed, 0.5dB/vertical div.).

**Fig.2** Pass Labs Aleph P, crosstalk (from top to bottom at 10kHz): L–R, R–L, unbalanced mode: R–L, L–R, balanced mode (10dB/vertical div.).
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Thomas J. Norton  
Sterophile, February 1995  
Vol. 18, No. 2

Mr. Norton's other comments:
- "...my first reaction was 'Marvelous!'"
- "...portrayal of a convincing soundstage was first-rate"
- "...superb throughout the midrange"
- "...bass was powerful, deep and well-defined"
- "...it did virtually everything right"

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the channels — and one balanced channel is notably better than the others — the result here is an inconsequential level of crosstalk at any measured frequency. As is typical, capacitive coupling between channels causes the crosstalk to increase at higher frequencies.

The Aleph P's variation of THD+noise against frequency is shown in fig.3 (again, 100mV input, full gain on all controls). Distortion is very low across the full range, even with the commonly encountered slight rise at higher frequencies.

Fig.4 shows how the THD+noise percentage varies with output voltage into 100k ohms. (The test frequency was 1kHz.) The rise at lower output levels is due, as usual, to noise. The 1% "clipping" point is reached at a massive 20V output!

Finally, the distortion spectrum of a 50Hz input at a high output level of 5V is shown in fig.5. The third harmonic predominates, but at -69dB (about 0.035%) is still quite low. At a more typical output of 1.3V (not shown), all artifacts remain under -80dB (0.01%). With the exception of the moderately high output impedance at maximum settings of the level controls, the measured performance of the Aleph P is first-class.

—Thomas J. Norton

CONCLUSION FROM SS

The Pass Aleph P is a very well-built preamplifier, with a neat, well-laid-out interior architecture and a high level of fit'n'finish. Even its deepest interior recesses show pride of workmanship and attention to detail.

Ergonomically, the Pass Aleph is simple yet quite functional. A polarity-inversion switch, a mono switch, and a real tape loop would be useful additions, but this preamplifier is designed to be an enthusiast's product, not a full-featured soup-to-nuts device. It is an exercise in minimalism: How much can be eliminated to ensure maximum fidelity?

I realize I've been very hard on the Pass in this review, detailing its shortcomings against no preamplifier at all, and the Carver Lighstar preamplifier used in passive balanced mode. Sorry, but that's my job. Anything less than absolute and utter sonic neutrality is a reduction in fidelity, and ultimate fidelity is what the High End is all about. Gear that is euphonic, musical, involving, and musically satisfying may be good enough for audiophiles and reviewers who listen only for their own personal pleasure, but ultimate fidelity is not about "good enough," or even about personal preferences. Complete transparency must be the ultimate goal of any piece of high-fidelity equipment, especially a preamplifier.

For many audiophiles, using a passive balanced preamplifier or no preamplifier at all is impossible. This is unfortunate. For everyone who must use an active line-level preamplifier with 20dB of gain, the Pass Aleph P is a great way to go. It's the least expensive solid-state preamplifier on the market that will deliver Class A sound. Its sonic performance is a tribute to the philosophy that simpler is, indeed, better.

The Aleph P is an exceptional-sounding unit. It is quiet as death, with only a bit of subtractive coloration separating it from absolute neutrality. I believe the P to be sonically competitive with any active preamplifier on the market, regardless of price. While it's too soon to call the Pass Aleph P a classic component, and prognosticating is best left to gurus and idiots savants, still I feel sure that time will prove the Aleph P to be a breakthrough product. Need I say more?

—Steven Stone

7 Too bad I don't have a few more Class A preamplifiers in house to prove this point unequivocally. Perhaps JA will take some time to put the Aleph P up against his Levinson No.385 while he has it in Santa Fe for testing.
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that works, stuff that holds up / The kind of stuff you don't hang
on the wall / Stuff that's real, stuff you feel / The kind of stuff you reach for when
you fail.

Guy Clark’s paean to dependability, “Stuff That Works,” almost always makes me take a mental inventory of
my own most favorite things: my wife and helpmeet, one or two friendships,
my best pocketknife, and my Linn Sondek LP12. You may laugh at how
short the list is or at how skewed my priorities seem, but don't you dare laugh
at any of my choices — over the years, time after time, they've proven them-
selves. They've stood by me; I'll, by God, stand by them.

I hear you snicker, you put your
wife and your turntable on the same list
— you're a dead man. Hey, I'm not absolute-
ly stupid, I never said I cherished them
equally. But I do think of the LP12 as an
old and reliable friend — and in the
fickle world of high-end audio, its
longevity in my system borders on
miraculous. I find it reassuring that,
after 20 years on the market, Old
Reliable still stands among the best out
there. But as with an old friend, I'm not
blind to the LP12's faults; I wouldn't
mind if it were even better.

Linn obviously feels that way too;
one reason the 'table is still a contender
is that the company has continually
offered improvements and upgrades
that have kept its customers loyal.
Indeed, when Linn offered the Cirkus
bearing upgrade, I thought of the LP12
as the proverbial “grandfather's knife,”
as in: "This is my grandfather's knife —
my father replaced its handle and I
replaced the blade, but it's still the knife
my grandfather owned." My venerable
LP12/Ittok, however, has remained

Naim ARO: Unipivot tonearm. Overall length: 11.42" (290mm). Effective
length: 9.055" (230mm). Pivot center to platter center: 8.27" (212.5mm).
Overhang: 0.75" (18mm). Effective mass: 11gm. Optimal cartridge weight:
5.5–12gm (using standard counterweights; others available). Cartridge
mounting height: 1.6–2.2" (40–56mm). Price: $2000 (extra arm tops are
$1100).

Naim Armageddon: High-current AC power supply (430VA)
for the Linn
LP12 turntable. Designed for use with Basik (not Valhalla'd model), it can be
fitted to the more expensive turntable if the motor is changed to a 60Hz
synchronous motor, available from Linn as the Basil motor kit ($60).
Dimensions: 8.5" W by 3.5" H by 13" D. Serial number of unit tested:

Approximate number of retailers: 32. Manufacturer: Naim Audio Ltd.,
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Naim Armageddon LP12 power supply

pretty much stock — no Ekos, no Lingo, no Cirkus, no Trampolin, although I
have listened to all of those versions
extensively. And enjoyed them (although
my initial enthusiasm for the Cirkus has
tempered somewhat).

But I'm an audiophile, and curious by
nature to boot. What about someone else's
vision of the perfect Linn? What about
Naim's power supply, the Armaged-
don? And just to make it even more
interesting, what about upgrading the
tonearm to Naim's ARO? To sweeten
the pot, it occurred to me that a state-
of-the-art LP12 was sitting in JA's listening
room and that a comparison between
the two differently configured 'tables
would offer an opportunity to get

FASCINATING BITS
& CLUNKY PIECES
Naim's Armageddon offers a very dif-
ferent approach to powering the LP12
from Linn's own Lingo (see JA's Lingo
review in Vol.14 No.1). The Lingo util-
izes a low-jitter crystal oscillator to
create a pure, low-noise, low-jitter 50 Hz
sinewave that is then amplified to 120V
and fed to the motor. The Armageddon,
on the other hand, resembles nothing
so much as Naim's Hi-Cap power supply
for their preamplifiers and amplifiers
— except without the IEC regulation. A
430VA transformer directly powers the
motor, effectively isolating it from AC-
line-derived noise and contamination. I
asked Naim Audio North America's
Chris West why they employed such a
massive power supply to drive a dinky
little 60Hz synchronous motor. "The
problem with synthesizing sinewaves is
that, while clean, they tend to be rather
gutless," he explained. "They do not
exert the same amount of control over
the motor — it is rather like the differ-
ence between a wimpy amp and a pow-
erful amp controlling a speaker coil. We
use a 430VA transformer powering

StereoFile, February 1996  145
"I can't think of a single electronic high-end component available today that provides more value for money than the Creek 4240SE."

"bass was clean, tight and natural...revealed details I hadn't noticed before...vocals were particularly captivating" — Robert J. Reina

Stereophile Vol. 18 No. 12
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up the motor — that's a serious low-impedance supply, and you can't get that sort of control from a silicon chip creating a sinewave.

"The fact is, there's a certain amount of noise in the 120V power lines that gets passed through to the motor, which creates mechanical jitter, unless you use an isolation transformer. If one uses an isolation transformer, which is essentially what the Armageddon is, you benefit from filtering out the high-frequency changes in the incoming waveform.

"Synthesized sinewaves look pretty on a scope and allow you to easily change speed from 33 1/3 to 45rpm, but they just cannot control the motor as well. By using synthesis, you have to utilize oscillators — which then introduce their own filter problems — and we just feel simpler is better."

The conversion from a Baski Linn is quite simple — although best left to a dealer. In my case it was more complex, as I had the Valhalla power supply already installed, complete with its 50Hz synchronous motor. The first step was to replace the motor with the Baski's 60Hz model. I put the turntable up on a set-up jig and examined its guts, then read the replacement instructions. When, this was going to be tough, I know when I'm licked all over — I called Casey McKee, Linn set-up maven supreme, and invited him to fly over from Austin to attend my birthday/housewarming party. "And, uh, Casey? You might want to bring along your tool kit for a little project I'm working on."

You shouldn't have to trick anyone into setting yours up, but I don't live in a town with a Naim dealer and I assumed that Linn would not be enthusiastic about sending over one of their technicians to set up another company's modification to their product. Another advantage to enticing Casey to Santa Fe is that, as an ARO owner, he knew all the set-up tricks for that product as well.

Markus Sauer's June 1993 review of the ARO (Stereophile, Vol.16 No.6, p.161) thoroughly described this wonderful arm. He doesn't leave much to be said on the subject, and he and Martin Colloms have campaigned vigorously for its inclusion in Class A in "Recommended Components" — they'll receive no argument from me on that point. However, when the ARO was introduced, unpivot bearing was fairly unusual — had practically been abandoned, you might say. These days, it seems as if the design is flourishing: Graham, Wilson-Benesch, and VPI all offer highly respected variations on the theme.

If you're used to knife-edge bearings, a unipivot will feel fiddly — not to mention rattly — when you cue it up. The first time I used the ARO, I was taken aback. It felt wrong. There are times it still startles me; I've grown so used to the seeming rigidity of other bearing designs that the ARO seems to yaw all around the place in my grip. But in the groove of a record, it tracks as well as any tonearm I've used — seeming unfazed by warps or heavily modulated passages.

One aspect of the ARO’s design that still sets it apart from other unpivots is its inversion of the conventional bearing structure: the ARO’s armtop carries the spike; the cup in which it rests caps the pillar that supports it. The sapphire bearing cup is fixed to a pillar that is housed in its own bearing — an exercise in decoupling. Beneath the pillar is a ball bearing and silicone fluid to keep the pillar from chattering. As is becoming the norm, the ARO is dynamically balanced — its counterweight sits well below the level of the armtube — which gives it a lower center of gravity, increasing stability at the point of the stylus. Oscillation resolves itself quickly, even without silicone-damping, which can introduces its own problems. "We feel silicone damping to be a Band-Aid approach to a problem that can be more elegantly solved through better engineering," claims West. "The ARO's natural oscillation occurs outside of normal audio frequencies — well below them, obviously. We were inspired, somewhat, by the early Decca tonearm, which employed magnetic damping, but that has its own set of tradeoffs. We feel we eliminated a lot of the bulky bits which kept it from working better."

Not that the ARO is without its own chunky bits. To start with, there's no easy way to adjust overhang. The ARO was designed around Linn's own cartridges (the Troika, actually, although it also works well with the Klyde and Arkiv and that's that). If you wish, you can drill blank armboards based on the cartridge of your choice, but Naim doesn't offer them as options. Fortunately, the Sumiko SHO (or the Transfiguration, for the better-heeled), which I had on hand, closely matches the geometry of the Linn cartridges and offered satisfactory results with the standard armboard.

Another rather funky adjustment: azimuth. A diminutive outrigger weight on the side of the ARO can be adjusted outward to alter azimuth. Obviously, this works only in one direction, pulling outwardly skewed cartridges into alignment toward the center of the disc. What if you need to roll the cartridge body toward the edge of the disc? Nothing.
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Nada. Zippo. Well there is a way to do it, but surely this couldn't be the officially sanctioned maneuver — could it? What you do is use the rather long fingernail on the outside of the headshell as a counterbalance: by bending in deeper or shallower curves, you can affect the balance of the stylus in the groove. It works, but feels immoral — in the sense that using a knife as a screwdriver feels wrong. Was this really the adjustment tool they had in mind?

HOME IS WHERE MY 'TABLE IS

Properly speaking, I introduced the changes in my system too precipitously — I should have changed only one element and become acquainted with it before passing on to the next change. I wish I'd had that luxury in time and setup capabilities. But I was flying an old comrade two hours from home as it was, and I couldn't really ask him to do that twice. And, as I said, I know the Linn sound well in most of its configurations, so I think I can cut myself a little slack here.

I did convince Laura Atkinson to loan me her Valhalla'd Linn LP12/Ittok rig for comparison, to which I mounted a second SHO. For the LP12/Valhalla/Ittok/SHO vs LP12/Ar-mageddon/ARO/SHO comparisons, I set the 'tables up side by side on The Shelf by Black Diamond Racing (see sidebar), supported by German Physics cones, and feeding Gold Aero's DB phono section, which in turn supplied signal to Stax's SRM-T15 — the tube amplifier/driver for their superb Omega headphones, which I also used. Later, I took the LP12/Ar-mageddon/ARO/SHO rig over to JA's, where we compared it to his LP12/Lingo/Cirkus/Trampolin/Ekos/Arkiv front-end. Both 'tables fed into VAC-in-the-Boxes, which in turn fed into his Mark Levinson No.38S/AudioQuest Lapis x2/Levinson No.333/Cardas Cross/Totem Mani-2 system. We matched gain on the two sources to within 0.1dB at 1kHz.

ONE FROM COLUMN A, ONE FROM COLUMN B...

I must assert vigorously that comparing the Naim-modded LP12 to a stock Valhalla'd one only reinforced my profound respect for the basic design. Many evenings were spent switching back and forth between the two units as I struggled to chart meaningful differences between the two. Finding differences was not difficult; for one thing, the Armageddon consistently sounded livelier, with more detail and extension in the upper frequencies. Surely, I would think, this has to be the best I've ever heard this disc sound. Then I'd play the same disc on the stock Linn and find that, although the Linn's pace seemed slower and more deliberate, it afforded a harmonic richness, not to say lushest, to the midrange that was also quite appealing. Did the brushwork on cymbals and snare drums on my favorite jazz discs sound more vivid and alive through the Armageddon/ARO-equipped Linn? Well then, the stock model's articulation and unforced precision in the very middle also snapped my bungee cord.

As I continued to listen and compare, however, I found that I consistently preferred the Armageddon/ARO combo for the involving pacing and sense of extension — and air (and how!) — that it brought to the party. This was not a relentlessly up sensation that, like certain animated acquaintances, began to pall as the novelty wore off. The differences in pace and rhythm that distinguish one musician so definitively from another were thrown into sharpest contrast through the Naimed deck.

Low-level details — such as ambience or massed air of the recording venue — came through with greater variety when using the Armageddon and the ARO. The Valhalla/Ittok combo is no slouch when it comes to this either, but I heard the defining details more frequently with the modded rig. I commented to Chris West that I had, in a sense, fallen in love all over again with the standard LP12 while comparing the two models. "Oh, certainly," he enthused. "Making these products is essentially an act of love toward the original LP12 — everyone at Naim uses them. These are refinements — they do not turn the LP12 into a totally different animal."

If I'd gone no further, I would have bought both products without a hesitation. But why should that surprise me? Good as the LP12 was, I knew there was room for improvement — heck, Linn themselves have admitted as much by offering their own improved power supply and tonearm. What would comparing the Naim products to JA's Class A full-blown Linn rig reveal?

WES & JOHN'S BIG ADVENTURE

As it turned out, I transported Casey from Texas more easily than I obtained an evening appointment with JA for the comparison. The man's always working, and finding a time for us to work on this review took a back seat to the daily press of deadlines, et al. Finally, after four cancellations, the turntable and I gained access to John's sanctum sanctorum. I'm not sure what he expected to hear, but I was certainly shocked by the outcome. The two 'tables could not have sounded more different from one another!

The first track we listened to was Sarah Vaughan's "When Your Lover Is Gone" from How Long Has This Been Going On (Pablo PACD 2310-821-2). The track, a conversation between Sassy and drummer Louis Bellson, is Vaughan at her most expressive — she's singing fairly low in her register, bending notes, eliding beats, scatting over the head — and Bellson is right with her for the whole ride, matching her nuance for nuance with exuberantly communicative brushwork. We listened first through the Armageddon/ARO rig. Bellson played with snap and sizzle — the piece fairly crackled with energy and high feelings.

Switching over to the full-blown Linn, we listened to about 32 bars before staring at each other in disbelief: there was much less detail and sparkle on the top, and the pace didn't brim as much with vim, but the Linn had, perhaps, an extra octave of bass! We switched back to the Naim unit to check. Yep, it really rocked more, and...
The Black Diamond Racing Shelf

At the 1994 Summer CES, I was sitting in ProAc's room listening to Vangelis's Blade Runner score, when a couple of guys walked in carrying a shiny black board. "This is pretty interesting stuff," one of them said. "Want to hear it?"

Oh, why the hell not? I thought, jaded and tired from new-product overload. One of them hit pause on the Audio Research CD-1 and lifted it off its shelf, while the other substituted his board for the one on the rack. Setting the CD player back down, the first chap hit Play.

Everyone in the room sat bolt upright in disbelief.

"Do that again!"

They did. We still boggled. Every person in the room — not some, not most, but everyone — heard a qualitative difference when the new platform was introduced into the system. Speaking for myself, I have grown quite used to hearing differences in such things as the quantity of bass or the spatial presentation in imaging. I'm not blasé exactly, just not surprised when such changes occur. But this, it seemed to me, was quite different. Not only was there greater silence between the notes and space between the players, but the inner mechanism of the music was thrown much more sharply into relief. When we switched to jazz, the players were playing together, not just at the same time. Astounding stuff, even to a roomful of audio pros.

"What is that?"

"It's a new shelf I've developed. I'm D.J. Casser and I build furniture using carbon fiber — somebody suggested that I make some hi-fi supports. I didn't know what I was getting into, so I just built a shelf. But when I started taking it around and listening to it with audiophiles, I got an education in a hurry. You wouldn't believe how much development and listening went into this version."

Maybe I would at that — that big a difference couldn't have happened by chance. I begged, pleaded, and implored for samples, and several months later, they showed up.¹

Carbon fiber is an interesting material: strong, light and extremely rigid. Its tensile strength is five times greater than that of steel. It's utilized in the Stealth Bomber, Formula One racing cars, America's Cup boat hulls, and a variety of high-tech sporting applications such as skis, sailboards, and mountain bikes. One property of carbon fiber that makes it ideal for audio applications is that it actually inhibits parasitic resonant energy. Many manufacturers have embraced the material: Wilson-Benesch utilizes it in turntables, tonearms, and, most recently, cartridges; Semlin has begun incorporating it into headphones, as in the HD-580 Jubilee; and the Well Tempered Reference Tonearm sports a carbon-fiber arm-tube.

What stunned me when I received The Shelf by Black Diamond Racing ($450) was its mass. It's heavy — nearly 11 lbs for an 18" by 14" platform. Since one of the raisons d'être for carbon fiber is its lightness, this seemed horribly wrong. The carbon-fiber shelf must be surrounding something extraordinarily dense to achieve such a weight in a shelf that size. I'd be curious as to: a) the substrate material and b) the rationale for this construction. D.J. Casser prefers to remain silent on the construction details, however.

Shelf design has relied heavily upon the assumption that mass is to be avoided. While The Shelf flies in the face of this design brief, I can't deny that it works well in practice. The day I received it, I substituted it for the platform on my wall-mounted Archidee turntable stand. When I sat back down to listen to the same disc I had been listening to before the change, my wife yelled from another room, "What did you do to the system?" Yes, it was that radical. As I'd heard before, there was a marked increase in perceived silence. Blacker black, if you will. The low-level cues that define the air surrounding instruments or that illuminate the spaces in which the recordings were made became much more prominent. But what my wife heard — all the way down the hall and in another room — was the way that the performers suddenly inhabited my room. Audiophiles frequently speak of their systems as a window that looks onto the original performance, but I've always been somewhat uncomfortable with this analogy. If that's what our system is, then what is it that we accomplish when we make improvements: apply Win- dex? The Shelf kicked that analogy's glass — we moved a lot closer to the musicians; or, if you prefer, brought 'em home with us.

Since then, I've played around with a lot of equipment support shelves, such as Townshend's Seismic Sinks, Bright Star Bases, Symposium Sound Foundations — all of which also afford many similar advantages to The Shelf. It's hard to rate them on an absolute scale, since none are unflawed, but I keep returning to the carbon-fiber The Shelf — although at $450 each, it doesn't come cheap. I suspect that there's still work to be done in refining the design philosophy of any equipment support, including this one. But for the moment, when I want to really hear what a component is doing — as free as possible from the effects of its environment — it ends up on The Shelf.

— Wes Phillips

¹ D.J. Casser Enterprises, Inc., 2625 South Greeley Street, Milwaukee, WI 53207. Tel: (414) 747-8733. Fax: (414) 747-8734.
there sure was a lot more overtone information. What about the bass? It was tuneful, well differentiated, tight, and quite punchy — nothing to complain about. We switched back to the Linn. No doubt about it, it had tons more bass extension. The opulence of Vaughan's voice, as deep in places as any tenor's, also came through in a richer, more convincing way.

Which was more accurate? I find it hard to say. The snap and surge of the rhythms that propel the song along were, I think, better served by the Armageddoned Linn. Yet Vaughan's voice, all honey and smoke, sounds more as it really does on the Linn.

We switched to McCoy Tyner's Song of the New World (Milestone MSP-9049), and I cued up "Afro Blue" — I've always liked Tyner's large ensembles best of all his work as a leader, and this tune, with 15 musicians committed to creating the world itself, stands out as a favorite. We listened to the Linn first, and the massed brasses (three trumpets, two trombones, three French horns, euphonium, and tuba) had a huge, warm presence and an unfocused presentation. Switching over to the Naim rig, we were first struck by the percussion — this was a world whose heartbeat had primacy as Alphonse Mouzon and Sonny Morgan drove the ensemble. When the brasses entered it was their punch and blat that we noticed. Captivated, we listened through the two rigs again. Again, we enjoyed both and, again, we were stunned at the differences in presentation.

We listened all evening, each of us pulling out old favorites, both of us marveling at the differences revealed. I won't speak for John; since he gets final edit on this, he's perfectly capable of adding anything he feels I've left unsaid. But I consistently found the pace and energetic presentation of the Armageddon/ARO-equipped LP12 beguiling. I was drawn into the music through the ebullient rhythmic underpinning. I also preferred the amount of detail and life that came through this rig — especially in the upper frequencies. In comparison, the Linn system seemed to keep the music at a further remove. On the other hand, the Naim system did lack the Linn's mellower — and, I (and JA) think, more true-to-life — presentation of the midrange. There was a hardness, as in the hardness of the consonant cluster "ek," to the Nain in the vocal region. Truly expressive singers, such as Sarah Vaughan and Ian Tyson, communicated more directly when their discs were played back by the Linn.

Then there was the matter of bottom-end extension. The Linn just had a lot more of it — a lot more. This didn't mean that the Armageddon/ARO combo sounded deficient down below. It didn't; it sounded punchy and focused, with the bass integrated organically with the rest of the music. But play the same disc on the Linn and it was undeniable: the deepest bass was far more present through the Linn.

John was reminded of a story he'd heard about the development of bass guitar amplification in the '60s. It seems that the amp makers kept trying to improve bass response and integration by extending the bottommost response of their speakers, but they kept getting ill-defined mush rather than deep, articulate tones. Finally, it occurred to someone that the key was to limit low-frequency response rather than extend it, thus beginning an era of punchy, articulate, but bandwidth-limited bass amplification. I suspect he's right — that Naim has chosen control over extension.

So?
Which is better? I'm going to waffle here. I'd like a unit offering the Linn's midrange ease and low-end extension coupled with the swinging pace and upper-end air of the Naim. Or, as John wistfully put it toward the end of our listening session, "Wouldn't it be great to own both? That way you could get two hits off of every LP!"

I can't really justify that approach, so I think — for the moment — that I'll content myself with the Naim rig. I really am quite chuffed with its presentation of the rhythmic core of music. That's important to me in a way that the Linn's bass extension is, ultimately, not. Immediacy is another trait I value in musical reproduction, and the Naim products have that in spades — another big plus. I suspect that JA — and many other audiophiles — would choose otherwise. 'Sokay, both are at the top of the heap, in my opinion, despite vast differences in presentation. Everybody's a winner with choices like these.

I'd love to conclude by telling anyone interested in high-end analog reproduction to run out and try the comparison themselves, but these days I doubt there are even three stores in the country that could offer such a comparison — so I don't know what to say. Other than that both the Naim Armageddon and the ARO have increased my appreciation of my favorite discs, and if that sounds like a good thing to you, you should definitely hear what yours sound like through them.
An often-overlooked aspect of choosing a CD transport is how well the transport matches to your digital processor. I'm not talking just about matching components sonically, but about the unique electrical interaction that occurs at the interface between a CD transport and digital processor. The transport, digital interconnect, and digital processor form a complex, interactive transmission system that works—and sounds—its best only when all three components are well-matched electrically.

In theory, a given transport should work equally well with every digital processor. In practice, a transport's fundamental sound quality can change depending upon what processor it drives. Similarly, digital processors can sound very different when driven by different transports. The changes have nothing to do with the transport's intrinsic sound.

Although a set of technical standards exists for engineering S/PDIF (Sony/ Philips Digital Interface Format) transmitters and receivers, it is apparent that many manufacturers don't follow them. Some don't appear to think input and output impedances, voltage levels, and connector characteristic impedances are important. Others just design by ear without regard for technical performance. Consequently, how the transport's transmitter interacts with the cable and the digital processor's receiver becomes a significant variable in the music playback chain.

Sonic Frontiers has attempted to avoid this situation by designing their new SFT-1 transport in strict accordance with the S/PDIF specification. Moreover, the SFT-1's output stage uses a sophisticated reclocking circuit that reportedly has less than two picoseconds of jitter on its internal clock, and less than 10ps of jitter in the S/PDIF output. Indeed, the company claims the SFT-1 is the lowest-jitter transport on the market.

As always, however, the proof of any claimed performance is in the listening.

**Technology**

Sonic Frontiers' first transport is designed to visually and electrically complement the company's SFD-1 and SFD-2 digital processors. Its machined-aluminum faceplate is partially covered by a black- or gold-finished panel. Although the SFT-1 uses a Philips transport mechanism, the custom-made remote control is nicer than that found on the standard Philips-issue unit. It has curved edges and a larger, more easily accessed control surface.

The unit's layout is remarkably similar to that of the PS Audio Lambda and Theta Data Basic transports. A row of small round buttons beneath the display controls the transport, with the drawer Open/Close button offset next to the front-loading disc drawer. The rear panel holds the SFT-1's four digital outputs—AES/EBU, RCA coaxial, BNC coaxial, and ST-Type optical.

The SFT-1's power supply is unusually large and elaborate for a CD transport. Incoming AC at the rear-panel IEC jack is filtered before reaching the two custom, potted toroidal transformers. The larger transformer has dual secondary windings, one of which supplies the spindle motor, laser sled, and the regulated 5V stage that powers the front-panel logic and display circuits.

This transformer's other secondary winding supplies two +5V regulation stages that feed the output crystal oscillator and relocking circuit, respectively. The smaller transformer provides power to the fluorescent display. The SFT-1 uses a total of six separately regulated supplies.

The transport is a Philips CDM 12.4, a new and fairly inexpensive mechanism that's starting to appear in place of the discontinued CDM 9 Pro (the CDM 9 Pro is used in the Theta Data Basic and PS Audio Lambda). The CDM 12.4 reportedly benefits from the increased performance and reliability available in recently designed mechanisms as a result of the explosion in demand for CD-ROM drives.

The transport control, decoding, and error-correction electronics are incorporated in the latest-generation Philips chip set. Rather than buying the servo control and decoding board from Philips, Sonic Frontiers buys only the chips. This allows them to implement the chips their own way for better performance. For example, the SAA7345 demodulator/EFM decoder/serial interface chip on the transport servo board is driven by a clock powered from its own regulated supply. This technique prevents noise on the chip's power and ground lines from contaminating the system's master clock and power supply.
One theory of CD transport design holds that the mechanism's sonic influence can be virtually eliminated if the output stage is designed correctly. An ideal output-clocking circuit, the argument goes, produces a virtually jitter-free output regardless of the jitter produced by the transport mechanism. Sonic Frontiers seemed to follow this approach; the SFT-1 uses a moderately priced mechanism coupled to a very sophisticated output clocking circuit with extensive power-supply isolation.

The output stage consists of a buffer, flip-flop, and crystal oscillator. The oscillator provides the clock signal to the flip-flop and buffer, which relock the output signal. The clock and output buffer/flip-flop are supplied from separate voltage-regulation stages for greater isolation and lower jitter. A pair of custom-designed Scientific Conversions pulse transformers follow the buffer output.

It is common practice for a designer to put a 75 ohm resistor in series with the transport's output to create an output impedance of "75 ohms." According to the SFT-1's designers, this technique doesn't achieve a precisely controlled 75 ohm output impedance over a wide-enough bandwidth. In the SFT-1, a network of 10 passive components is used after the pulse transformer to condition the signal. This passive RLC network not only provides the correct output impedance, but is claimed to ensure a wide bandwidth, fast risetime, and minimum overshoot and ringing in the output signal.

This output stage was designed in an unusual way: the work-in-progress SFT-1 prototype was connected by a digital interconnect to a digital processor whose internal word-clock jitter at its DAC was measured and monitored. Design changes in the transport were evaluated by measuring the recovered clock jitter in the digital processor driven by the SFT-1. A sophisticated new jitter analyzer, recently developed by Rémy Fourré at UltraAnalog, was used to perform the jitter measurements. This new analyzer reportedly has a noise floor of less than 1 ps, making it extremely sensitive to small jitter variations. The design team discovered some interesting aspects of transport design using this approach, including the fact that the logic family in the transport's output stage has a measurable effect on jitter in the digital processor's recovered clock.

Every aspect of the output stage's design, layout, and power supply were evaluated with this measurement technique, in conjunction with listening tests. The designers found a strong correlation between the waveshape at the SFT-1's output and the word-clock jitter measured in the digital processor - the point at which jitter degrades digital-audio sound quality.

**SYSTEM**

I've been using the SFT-1 transport on and off for the past few months, alternating it in my system with the $8495 Mark Levinson No.31 Reference CD Transport. The No.31 continues to live up to its name as the reference against which other transports are judged. When the SFT-1 first arrived, I made some listening comparisons with the $1750 Theta Data Basic, which was sent back for updating to Data Basic Two status, and with the No.31. The SFT-1 drove, at one time or another, the Spectral SDR-2000 Pro, Mark Levinson No.30.5, Classe DAC-I, Sonic Frontiers SFD-2 Mk.II, and PS Audio UltraLink Two processors.

Digital interconnects included an AudioQuest Diamond X3 AES/EBU, Illuminati's true 75 ohm coaxial cable, an MIT Digital Reference (coaxial), and a generic ST-type optical cable. The transports and processors under audition sat on a Billy Bags 5500-series equipment rack or a Merrill Stable Table.

These digital front-ends fed a Spectral DMC-20 Series 2 preamplifier and Spectral DMA-180 power amplifier via MIT MI-350 Reference interconnect. The Spectral amp drove Avalon Radian HD loudspeakers, connected with MIT MH-850 tri-wired loudspeaker cable. AC to the system was conditioned by MIT's Z-Center, Z-Iso-Duo, Z-Stabilizer, and Z-Cord II AC cords. I auditioned the SFT-1 with its stock AC cord and also with the MIT Z-Cord II. (The MIT/Avalon/Spectral "2C3D" system was reviewed in the January '95 Stereophile, Vol.19 No.1, p.163.)

I also had experience with the SFT-1 in my usual reference system of the Sonic Frontiers SFL-2 preamp, Audio Research VT150 power amplifiers, and Genesis II.5 loudspeakers. Interconnects in this system were AudioQuest Diamond X3 and Lapis, and loudspeaker cables were AudioQuest Dragon II.

**LISTENING**

My first impression of the SFT-1 in a comparison with the Theta Data Basic and Mark Levinson No.31 was that the Sonic Frontiers transport was a significant step up from the Theta, and nearly equaled the No.31 in some respects. Further listening confirmed these impressions, placing the SFT-1 between these two highly regarded transports.

The SFT-1's overall sound was big, dynamic, and slightly more forward than that of the No.31. Where the No.31 was smooth and laid-back, with a tremendous sense of ease, the SFT-1 was a little more aggressive, both in perspective and tonal balance. Instruments were pushed slightly in front of the loudspeakers with the SFT-1, giving the sound a more immediate and incisive perspective.

Similarly, the SFT-1 had a somewhat brighter and less liquid treble than the No.31. I heard a slight edge on instrumental textures through the SFT-1, in contrast with the No.31's velvety-smooth portrayal. Cymbals took on a trace of hardness not heard through the No.31. The woodwinds on the new Oregon disc Beyond Words (Chesky JD130) sounded less smooth and liquid with the SFT-1, in particular in the higher registers and during loud passages. The result of the more forward perspective and brighter sound was less impression of refinement and ease from the SFT-1 compared to the No.31. In relation to the Theta Data Basic, the SFT-1 was just a tad brighter than the smooth-sounding Data Basic.

On the plus side, the SFT-1 had excellent dynamics and a big, full bottom end. Victor Wooten's bass playing on the Béla Fleck records had a wonderful solidity, power, and control. The full presentation was coupled with good articulation and wide dynamics. Consequently, the SFT-1 had a robust, weighty, and upbeat quality that made the No.31 sound polite by comparison. The SFT-1's punchy bottom end gave the music a powerful rhythmic quality I greatly enjoyed.

The SFT-1 was also highly resolving of recorded detail. The presentation was infused with a wealth of detail that was captivating. I heard fine nuances in the music that better conveyed what went
on during the recording session. Zappa’s orchestral *The Yellow Shark* (Barking Pumpkin R271600) is extremely challenging music for any playback system; there’s so much going on musically that many components simply don’t convey. The SFT-1 did a great job at unraveling the layers of dense orchestration and presenting sounds as separate instruments. In fact, the SFT-1’s resolution was just a notch below the No.31’s resolving power, which is one of the Levinson transport’s greatest qualities. The No.31 had a greater ability to keep individual instrumental lines separate from each other, both tonally and spatially. Moreover, the No.31 had a more refined and subtle presentation of detail, a quality that added to the Levinson’s greater sense of case.

The SFT-1 was stunning in its ability to portray space and air. The soundstage was open, transparent, and spacious, and threw a wonderful halo of air around the soundstage edges on naturally miked recordings. Moreover, the SFT-1 revealed a tangible bloom around individual instrumental images. The fabulous new Dorian recording *Baroque Inventions* (Dorian DOR-90209), featuring music of Bach, Handel, and Scarlatti performed by two classical guitarists, highlighted the SFT-1’s remarkable ability to resolve the finest spatial detail. The SFT-1 beautifully conveyed the gorgeous acoustic enveloping the guitarists, as well as the bloom around each instrument. The HDCD®-encoded *Requiem* (Reference Recordings RR-57CD) by John Rutter and *From the Age of Swing* (Reference Recordings RR-59CD) were stunning in their spaciousness and air. The SFT-1 in no way constricted the vast spatial expanse that the Spectral/Avalon/MIT system is capable of revealing. In this regard, the SFT-1 was the No.31’s equal.

**Conclusion**

The Sonic Frontiers SFT-1’s combination of superb dynamics, a weighty and powerful bass presentation, a huge soundstage, a wonderful ability to reveal fine spatial detail, and reasonable price make it an excellent value in affordable CD transports. Only in comparison with the $8495 Mark Levinson No.31 did the SFT-1’s main shortcoming—a slightly bright and less-than-pristine treble—become apparent. In relation to the less-expensive Theta Data Basic, the SFT-1 was the better-sounding transport overall, with greater resolution, wider dynamics, and a bigger and more open soundstage.

Moreover, my listening confirmed that with its carefully engineered output stage, the SFT-1 offers more consistent results with a wide range of digital processors than is usually the case.

Overall, I was surprised by how good the SFT-1 sounded for its price. The SFT-1 is both a good alternative to the higher-priced transports and a must-audition component.
While reviewers can be believed, the diminutive, $995/pair Epos ES11 loudspeaker has been a phenomenal success worldwide since its 1990 introduction. Stereophile added its voice to this hallelujah chorus in Vol.14 No.7, when the '11 kicked butt in a blind-listening-panel evaluation of inexpensive small speakers. While the ES11 did plenty of things extremely well, it was inevitable that it was limited in terms of ultimate sound-pressure levels (spls), deep-bass extension, and dynamic persuasiveness. While the ES11 was an unqualified success given its modest size and price, one couldn't help but wonder what Epos might be capable of in a larger model. (While a larger Epos model already existed in the $1695/pair ES14, it predated the technology of the ES11 by four years.)

Apparently, Epos also wondered how they might improve upon the performance of the remarkable little '11. The key change had to be additional deep-bass extension. Deep bass would require more internal volume—a bigger box. In all likelihood this would also provide the necessary vehicle for added spls.

Since the midrange and treble performance of the '11 had been universally accepted, it appeared that Epos had decided to leave well enough alone while building upon the essence of the smaller speaker: the new ES25 uses a 6.5" polypropylene-coned midrange driver that is described as "a development of the successfully established ES11 bass/mid driver." Like the '11's drive-unit, the '25's has a wet-wound voice-coil, a phase plug instead of a dustcap, and a center pole-piece that extends beyond the top plate. Where the 6.5" unit was reported to reach down to 60Hz (-3dB) in the '11, it is crossed over at a higher frequency in the '25. By taking the burden of producing the deep bass off this drive-unit, it should be capable of outperforming the ES11 in the ever-critical midrange.

My supposition was buttressed by the '25's 1" tweeter. Like the '11's, it has an aluminum-alloy dome, polyamide suspension, a separate rear-loading chamber, vents in the coil former, and magnetic fluid in the magnet gap.

So, if not identical, the mid and treble drivers still bear an unusually close similarity to those used in the '11. That was to be expected, since Epos makes all of their own drive-units. One of the critical factors in the design of the ES11 was the use of a "minimalist" crossover topology. The underlying supposition was that the fewer components in the signal path, the better. This philosophy has been carried over to the ES25, but not without some measure of compromise. Since the design, development, and production of the drive-units were all under Epos's control, they were made within strict tolerances. For example, the tweeter, like the '11's, needs only a single audiophile-grade capacitor in its signal path to produce a first-order, 6dB/octave slope. In addition, the rear of each cabinet has separate connections for each drive-unit for tri-wiring. Music Hall supplies jumpers for single wiring: if these are used, Epos/Music Hall suggests direct connection to the tweeter instead of to the midrange (the expected choice). The connectors are brass female Deltron types that can accept banana plugs. This is one area where I was disappointed; I feel that for the US market, five-way binding posts should have been included.

To give deeper bass, higher output, and more dynamic presentation, the '25 had to have a bigger box as well as an additional driver. The all-new woofer is an 8" (the same size as the bass/mid driver in the ES14), long-throw, vacuum-formed Cobex cone with an internal dustcap. It is housed in a separate, reflex-loaded sub-enclosure with a rear-firing 2.75" port located near the floor. The mid and tweeter drivers are housed in their own sealed box. A second-order, 12dB/octave low-pass filter is used to roll out the upper range of the bass driver's output. The -3dB down point for the bass driver is specified as 25Hz.

The net result of these evolutionary changes to the well-developed ES11 is a three-way, three-driver, floorstanding loudspeaker—all pretty radical features from a company whose well-deserved reputation has been based upon minimonitors. The cabinet is lovely, and appreciably superior to the fit and finish of the smaller, more industrial-looking ES11. The front baffle was smooth with no rough edges, open holes, or other visual distractions. The edges were nicely rounded, and the wood veneers were arresting.

The speaker is unobtrusive at about 35° high and less than 10° wide. Given the speaker's light weight and small size, it was easy to place and move about once in the listening room—even after...
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Because the floor spikes (four for each cabinet) were in place. All things considered, it was about as flexible as any floor-standing loudspeaker could be. While grillecloths were included, these were not much more than afterthoughts and I left them off for my auditioning.

THE ENVELOPE, PLEASE...

Because prior Epos speakers have been so wonderful and their product introductions so rare, I was eager to audition the ES25. My initial impressions were very favorable: the '25s were able to create a huge, expansive sound with orchestral recordings, generally placing the performers behind the cabinets, but in or just beyond the rear wall. The open-sounding presentation was positioned above the smallish floorstanders.

Initially, the tweeter's clarity stood out from a slightly recessed midrange and muddier, woollier bass (something I often experience with ported boxes). The sound was musical overall, with no distracting anamorphic elements added. It tended to be a bit warm, if anything, and did get slightly muddled when pushed. Of course, this was all before any appreciable break-in.

As I let the speakers break-in, I spent many evenings with my Magnum Etude tuner, searching for new music, new artists, and impressive new performances of familiar works. At low-volume listening levels late, late at night, I was gradually seduced by the '25s. They simply got out of the way and let me concentrate exclusively on the music.

During this time I tried numerous amps and cables with the Eposes. When I changed other pieces of equipment, it was relatively easy to hear different soundstage presentations, tonal balances, levels of detail resolution, and any number of other things. (It was during this period that I became particularly pleased with the NBS Master cables, which became a staple in my system for the rest of the review.)

While the bass performance of the '25s did reach deeper and tighten up during break-in, it nonetheless remained mildly loose. The midrange, while always musical, remained polite-sounding. In part, the brilliant clarity of the tweeter threw the bass looseness and midrange polite into relief. Even great tube amplification (eg, the Conrad-Johnson Premier Eight monoblocks) did little to alleviate these nagging, albeit mild, problems. But good solid-state amplification provided a much more synergistic match. With a single Classé One Thousand, the bass was noticeably tighter and midrange presence was improved. As a result, I did the majority of my listening using solid-state amps, usually the very satisfying Classé.

SETTLED IN

Once everything settled in, the '25s generally had the ability to disappear, allowing better recordings to fill my listening room with music. Soundstages typically developed just behind the plane of the speakers, with very good width and depth. In addition, the sound was open and spacious. A good example was the Musical Heritage Society disc of Vivaldi's Mandolin Concertos (MHS 1100). Gone were earlier problems of excessive warmth and slight loss of detail. The plucked strings were clear and rich, with very good delineation and precise control.

Even on essentially horrible recordings, such as The Young Rascals' "Mickey's Monkey/Love Lights," on Collections (Atlantic 8134), the sound was tight, quick, and fast, with driving rhythmic integrity. The bass, in particular, continued to improve, as evidenced by my longtime favorite, "Comin' Home Baby" (Herbie Mann at the Village Gate, Atlantic 1380). Once again, the dual-bass-driven rhythms were clean, strong, and propulsive, with very good resolution and transient character. Low-level dynamic contrasts were good, adding further life to recorded performances.

Clarity was much improved through the mids and consistently excellent in the treble, as evidenced by the guitar work on Blues Traveler's "Just Wait" (Four, A&M 31454 0265-2). Vocals were well-articulated, with fine resolution and clarity contributing to the overall cleanliness of the presentation. Equally important, the well-broken-in speaker maintained much better composure when pushed to rock levels. The tonal balance was just that—balanced, with good extension at both extremes. Unlike the '11, the '25's bottom end had weight and authority, with nothing sacrificed up top.

While the mids were musical and smooth, they were still a touch recessed. A good example was Anita Baker's Rapture (Elektra 60444). She sounded lusciously smooth, with rich harmonic body and good resolution, but still pushed a bit farther back than I would have preferred (and had grown accustomed to with a number of other outstanding speakers).

An even better example was Muddy Waters' Folk Singer LP (Mobile Fidelity MFSL 1-201). With some speakers, this disc almost sounds as if the recording mike had been implanted in Muddy's throat. The '25s added a bit of space between Muddy and the technology.

My impressions at this stage of the review crystallized listening to Bartók's Concerto for Orchestra, with Pierre Boulez and the Chicago Symphony (Deutsche Grammophon, BMG pressing D103116). Resolution of detail was first-rate, allowing me to almost count the individual artists in the various sections of the orchestra. Soundstaging was very good, the boxes generally getting out of the way. Width and depth were expansive and continuous, allowing the orchestra to be located in a realistically sized space with adequate room for everyone. Dynamos were good but not breathtaking. The '25s had deep bass extension, but there were traces of unevenness as the relatively smallish boxes grappled with their limitations in the very deepest bass region. The speakers may have had limitations, but these were carefully nurturing the music.

USING A HIGHER STANDARD

To be successful at its $3500/pair price, the ES25 has to be a lot more than an improved ES11. Michael Jackson's HIStory (Epic E2K 59000) proved to be a more rigorous test. The most telling was the talk-back/flight-back "Scream." With the '25s, the opening lacked adequate deep-bass wallop or grab-you-in-your-seat dynamic contrasts. More critically, the tonal detail of the various distorted tones lacked much of their true complexity. If I hadn't driven the '25s with both the Conrad-Johnson Premier Eights and Classé One Thousand, I'd have guessed there wasn't adequate amplification. In my room, the '25s did not sound as if they were reaching anywhere near the stated 25Hz, -3dB point. Other, admittedly higher-priced, speakers were far more impressive in the bottom registers with similar specifications. While my room is problematic in the deep bass, the '25s failed to match the performance of other designs. No amount of fiddling with room placement was able to correct this shortcoming.

Jackson's "Beat It" made it abundantly clear that midbass performance was uneven. Certain notes jumped up significantly in level. In addition to being louder, these particular notes were also less well-defined, which made them all the more obvious in contrast to the '25s overall clarity. It sounded like either a
"Simply Stunning"
— Don Miller,
The Audio Adventure, July, 1995

"That the Petite can reach
the summit of small loudspeakers
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like that of a medium sized speaker
than that of a mini."
— T.K. Chan,
Audiophile Magazine, June, 1995

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resonance problem, or the excitation of something in my listening room that had heretofore gone unnoticed. So, yes, the '25 clearly bettcred the '11 in deep-bass reach, ability to play loudly, and dynamic punch. But being “better” didn’t strike me as good enough at this price point.

Making things worse was a pervasive midrange recession. Stated favorably, the speaker was smoothish, roundish, polite, and non-offensive, adding no noxious colorations. Stated unfavorably, something was always missing—an immediacy, presence, or energy. A typical example was the Original Broadway Cast recording of Annie (Columbia CK 34712). Eleven-year-old Andrea McArdle (Annie) became too sophisticated and distant. I wanted that brash youngster back in my listening room with me.

—Jack English

**Measurements from JA**

I calculated the ES25’s sensitivity to be a little lower than specified, at 86.5dB/2.83V/1m (B-weighted). Its impedance (fig.1) is also moderately demanding, dropping to 5 ohms throughout the midrange, with a relatively severe electrical phase angle in the upper bass. The tuning of the large port is revealed by the impedance “saddle” at 33Hz, while the wrinkle in the fig.1 traces between 600Hz and 700Hz indicates some kind of resonant behavior. Indeed, the cabinet did prove to be very lively in this region, but it appears to be high enough in frequency to not have too much deleterious effect on music.

Fig.2 shows the individual response of the three drive-units and the port. The tweeter has the expected ultrasonic and inaudible peak at 26kHz, but also has a peak in the middle of its passband. It crosses over to the midrange unit at a highish 5.5kHz. The midrange unit is smoothly balanced in its passband, but suffers a large overlap with the woofer. The woofer itself appears to be more sensitive than it need be and hands over to the port below 60Hz or so.

The overall response on the tweeter axis, together with the complex sum of the midrange, woofer, and port nearfield responses (taking the physical distance between the acoustic sources into account), is shown in fig.3. Though there’s a slight lack of energy at the top of the midrange unit’s operating range, which might correlate with JE finding the speaker “polite,” the ES25’s treble response is quite flat overall. But in the midrange, the overlap between the two drive-units leads to a seriously shelved-down output between 100Hz and 800Hz. This no doubt correlates with JE noting a “recessed” midrange.

I noticed this “hollow”-sounding character in my own auditioning of the ES25. It was particularly bothersome on classical orchestral music, which lost much of its essential lower-midrange power as a result. And the lack of midrange energy meant that the bass region sounded distinctly disconnected. I wondered if this was a deliberate design choice because the speaker was intended to be used up against the wall behind it, but my specification sheet made it clear that the ES25 is intended to be used in free space, well away from room boundaries.

However, the fact that the inputs to all three drive-units are accessible on the rear panel meant that it was trivial to fix this problem by reversing the electrical polarity of just the woofer. The result can be seen in fig.4, which shows the Epos’s spatially averaged, ⅔-octave response in my listening room, taken with the woofer connected...
with both electrical polarities. With the "correct" woofer connection, the entire midrange region is sucked out by up to 6\, \text{dB}. With the woofer electrically inverted, the midrange is now pretty flat in-room. The result on music was equally impressive: orchestral music sounded warm and powerful, and the ES25's bass was now well-integrated with the lower midrange (if still a little lumpysounding).

Note the excellent low-bass extension in fig.4: with a judicious amount of LF boundary reinforcement, the ES25 puts out strong in-room bass down to the 32\, \text{Hz} 5\text{-octave band and is just 3\, \text{dB} down from the 1kHz reference level at 25\, \text{Hz}.}

Even with the woofer connected the "wrong" way, I still found the ES25 to be polite-sounding, its balance lacking sparkle in the treble. Partly, this is due to the on-axis suckout in the mid-treble, which can also be seen in fig.4. But fig.5, which shows the ES25's horizontal dispersion pattern—not that only the changes in response are shown—reveals the low treble to roll off quite rapidly to the speaker's sides compared with the regions above and below. This, I feel, will exacerbate the polite-sounding on-axis balance. Vertically (fig.6), the mid-treble suckout deepens if the listener sits much above or below the 33\, \text{Hz}-high tweeter axis.

In the time domain, the step response (fig.7) indicates that all three drive-units are connected with positive acoustic polarity. However, the broad overlap between the woofer and midrange unit and the time delay due to the physical distance between the drivers gives rise to destructive interference with this connection. It can just be seen from fig.7 that the slow-risetime output from the woofer arrives at the measuring microphone just as the decay of the midrange unit's output becomes negative-going.

Finally, the cumulative spectral-decay or waterfall plot (fig.8) is generally clean but marred by three slight resonant modes, these coincident with the peaks in the ES25's on-axis response. As JE didn't remark on any treble emphasis and I didn't notice any sibilant problems in my own auditioning, I must assume that these modes are relatively benign. I have to say that, following my very favorable impressions of Epos's ES11 and ES14, I was disappointed by the ES25. I suspect that there is a better speaker.
possible using the same basic ingredients.

—John Atkinson

JE CONCLUDES
The ES11 has proven to be a world-class speaker with well-defined limitations. To Epos's credit, the ES25 has addressed those limitations directly and effectively. The '25 extends deeper into the bass, can play appreciably louder, and is more dynamic. Musical weight has also been significantly improved.

Like the smaller speaker, the '25 has no offensive additive colorations to get in the way of the music. On the other hand, its polite/recessed midrange, limited true deep bass, and uneven midbass are tough pills to swallow for almost $3500/pair.

Given these pluses and minuses, it would have been easy to withhold a recommendation of the ES25s. But what didn't come through in all of the micro-level analysis was the many pleasurable hours I spent with these speakers. I truly hated to see them leave. While they could play all day and never get in the way, the Eposes could just as easily provide me with a joyous window into the fantastic world of recorded music.

Whenever I wanted to listen, the '25s let me—for as long as I wanted, with no hint of fatigue or hi-fi artifact. Having been offended by the sounds of so many pieces of audio gear over the years, I may overvalue the general character of the '25s. On the other hand, you too may have had the same experiences.

When all is said and done, however, the Epos ES25 is just too expensive to merit recommendation. [For not that much more money, the Thiel CS3.6, Totem Mani-2, and NHT 3-3, and the $1000-cheaper Snell C/V and Thiel CS2 2, provide overwhelming competition.—Ed] But Epos recently announced a slightly smaller floorstander for a lot less money. That may indeed be the one to hear.

—Jack English

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The Art of the Well-Tempered Two-Way

John Atkinson reviews minimonitors from Joseph Audio and Totem Acoustic


Following my review of two high-performance minimonitors last November, I received a letter asking why I recommended a stand-mounted speaker at all when it was possible to buy a floorstanding design with more bass for the same amount of money. Furthermore, the correspondent went on, when you consider that the minimonitor sitting on its stand occupies as much floorspace as the floorstander, it's hard to see why a market for minimonitors exists at all.

Strong arguments, perhaps convincing to some. But floorstanding speakers have their drawbacks, too. It's much harder to control the vibrations of the large wooden panels involved, meaning that lower-midrange coloration can be a persistent problem. With its typically wide front baffle, a floorstander's imaging precision cannot be as good as that of a narrow-profile miniaturé. And while a floorstander can have extended bass compared with a stand-mounted speaker, this isn't always the case.

In fact, the floorstanding vs stand-mounted debate is only really of concern to designers. What matters to audiophiles is performance. If the combination of a minimonitor and a good speaker stand floats your boat, then that's what's important.

This month, to continue my quest for minimonitor perfection, I review two small stand-mounted speakers, the Joseph Audio RM7si and the Totem Mani-2. Both are reflex-loaded two-ways finished in rosewood veneer, but there the similarity ends. One is affordable, the other expensive. One uses a conventional crossover but a compound woofer; the other uses conventional drive-units but a unique crossover.

Joseph Audio RM7si: $1299–$1499/pair
Joseph Audio is a relatively new New York-based company making loudspeakers designed by Richard Modaferri, who for a long time was one of the engineering lights at McIntosh. All the Joseph models feature Modaferri's patented "Infinite Slope" crossover topology, wherein a modest network (in terms of number of components used) produces high- and low-pass filter slopes in excess of 100dB/octave. The RM7si is the smallest model in the Joseph line; I first heard it at HI-FI '95. Stereophile's high-end show held last April in Los Angeles. In a tiny room, these minimonitors, driven by Audio Research electronics and an analog front-end, provided a consistently musical sound. Many Showgoers agreed with me, voting the Joseph room into the middle of the Best Sound at the Show list (see August '95, p.127). I subsequently heard the '7sis at the CES Specialty Audio and Home Theater in Chicago last June. Again the speakers pulled off the musicality trick, the Joseph room proving to be an island of musical tranquility to which I returned when I just needed to hear some tunes.

1 Platinum Solo and Acoustic Energy AE2 Signature, Vol.18 No.11, p.108.
Producing a good sound at hi-fi shows, as commendable as it may be, is not the real test of a component. What counts is whether it can provide long-term listening pleasure in the more critical environment of your own home.

The first samples of the RM7si I received, a couple of months before HI-FI '95, combined a 1" soft-dome tweeter with a 6.5" plastic-cone woofer. Before I had a chance to do any serious listening to them, other than to note a somewhat bright balance, Joseph Audio's Jeff Joseph e-mailed me to say he was revising the RM7si, replacing the woofer with a unit with a fibreglass cone. It was this version of the speaker that was to impress me in Los Angeles and Chicago, and which would be representative of RM7si production. I subsequently received a second pair of review samples.

The front-plate of the RM7si's Danish Vifa silk-dome tweeter has a slight horn flare; this increases sensitivity a little at the expense of narrowing the unit's dispersion at the top of its passband. Mounted beneath the tweeter is the Norwegian woofer, this constructed on a diecast chassis. The surround for the bright yellow cone is an inverted rubber half-roll, and rather than a conventional dustcap, this unit has a stationary, bullet-shaped "phase plug" mounted on the end of its magnet pole-piece. A flared port, 1.75" in internal diameter and 3" deep, reflex-loads the woofer and is mounted on the front baffle immediately beneath it.

The MDF enclosure is filled with pink fiber and is veneered on all six sides. (The first review samples were finished in oak; the second pair in rosewood, a $200/pair option.) The Infinite Slope crossover is hardwired and mounted on the cabinet sidewall. It utilizes polypropylene- and polystyrene-dielectric capacitors with high-value caps bypassed with low-value ones. The important matched Infinite Slope inductors have laminated steel cores. Electrical connection is via twin sets of gold-plated binding posts, to allow for bi-wiring/bi-amping; and internal wiring is Cardas cable.

Satellites Are Out Tonight: Whereas the first pair of Joseph RM7s had sounded a little bright, the revised speakers were mellow-balanced—not rolled-off, as such, but mellow nonetheless. While fizzy rock recordings like Annie Lennox's new Medusa CD (Arista 25717-2) were rendered acceptably pleasing, instruments with a lot of energy in the high treble, like the backing triangle on Tracy Chapman's "Mountains of Things" (from her eponymous first album, Elektra 60774-2), sounded dull, less vital. This improved when I switched from the solid-state Levinson to the single-ended Cary CAD-300SEI, but the tradeoff was a more forward low-treble presentation that sounded magic on some recordings, too aggressive on others. The volume setting was also very critical with the tubed Cary. Sounding just right at one level, it only took an increase of a dB or three to have me reaching for the volume control.

The RM7's treble balance was something I got used to, however, because it didn't lessen the speaker's preservation of detail. All the electronics shadings and granularities around the edges of Laurie Anderson's vocal tracks on her first album (Big Science, Warner Bros. 3674-2) were audible, as were the low-level treble noises accompanying the tape-looped "Uh uhh uhh" backing to her seminal "O Superman" track.

In the midrange, the RM7si was a little more idiosyncratic. While most rock recordings sounded fine, naturally balanced classical albums sounded occasionally rather nasal. Oboe, for example, took on some of the character of the English horn. While classical piano generally sounded character-free, some upper-midrange notes were thrust forward out of the soundstage at the listener. This was a sometime thing, however, and generally didn't get in the way of my enjoyment of the music, like the complete Mitsuko Uchida set of Mozart Piano Concertos, with Jeffrey Tate conducting the English Chamber Orchestra (Philips 438 207-2) that I'm currently working my way through (not that that's work).

In the bass, the little Joseph was geniously balanced. If it didn't have the extension of the three-times-the-price Totem Mani-2 or twice-as-expensive Platform Solo, it did have a satisfying combination of weight and control. The deep bass guitar sounds on "Fast Car" and "Mountains of Things" from Tracy Chapman didn't suffer from unsual midbass boom, and the instruments were well-balanced across their ranges—no notes sticking out more than others.

Dynamics were good, though some midrange confusion set in with such over-the-top mixes as the Red Hot Chili Peppers' One Hot Minute (Warner Bros. 45733-2), which is generally compressed to hell. (With an average level approaching the peak level, this is the loudest CD I've ever heard.) The big "hold the line" climaxes on Peter Gabriels "San Jacinto" (Peter Gabriel, Charisma PG 4, English LP) came over with an open, easy quality.

Stereo imaging wasn't as precise as I've come to expect, with central images broadened slightly via the RM7s. Image depth was also good rather than excellent, though the delineation of image depth planes improved when I changed from the Levinson to the Cary. Putting the Blue Nile's superbly well-crafted 1983 debut album (A Walk Across the Rooftops, Linn/Virgin CD5087) on the Levinson '31, I was pleasantly surprised to hear how well the Josephs preserved the fine-grain sonic seasonings Paul Buchanan and Robert Bell had used to point their production.

Big Science: The RM7si is not very sensitive, 2.83V raising just 83.5dB (B-weighted) at 1m.2 While this is below the specified figure, it appears that the designer has traded-off sensitivity to obtain good bass extension. (Cabinet size, sensitivity, and bass extension are all related variables.) In addition, the Joseph's impedance magnitude (fig.1) is relatively high, with minimum values around 7 ohms in the midrange and 7.5 ohms in the high treble. Other than in the upper bass, the Joseph's electrical phase angle is mild, which, together with the highish magnitude, makes the speaker an easy load for an amplifier to drive.

The port tuning is indicated by the "saddle" in the impedance trace at 48Hz. A slight wrinkle in the fig.1 traces between 300Hz and 400Hz is probably due to a cabinet resonance of some kind.

For reference, fig.2 shows the individual drive-unit responses of the first RM7 sample. Note the very steep crossover slopes, with the tweeter's rolloff overlaid with a notch, and the raggedness at the top of the woofer's passband.2 Because the altitude at Santa Fe reduces the sensitivity of all loudspeakers, I calculate sensitivity by comparing the measured, B-weighted level at 50' for a given voltage input, using a noise signal, with that obtained for a sample Rogers LS3/5A that I've measured both in Santa Fe and at sea level.

![Fig.1 Joseph RM7si, electrical impedance (solid) and phase (dashed) (2 ohms/vertical div.).](image-url)
This peakiness between 700Hz and 1800Hz could also be seen on the first sample's overall response (not shown) and, I am sure, correlates with the slightly bright balance I observed. (As J. Gordon Holt pointed out two decades ago, brightness per se is not associated with a tiled-up top-octave response but with problems lower down in frequency.)

Fig. 3 shows the acoustic crossover for the second RM7si sample. While the crossover point and steep filter slopes are identical, you can see that the new woofer is better-behaved just below crossover. The tweeter is flat overall within its passband, with the small peaks offset by small dips, but set a little lower in absolute level than in fig.2. The port output is the bandpass centered on 48Hz, though the woofer's minimum-motion point is lower in frequency.

The RM7si's overall response, averaged across a 30° horizontal window, is shown in fig.4. Impressively smooth and even, it is broken only by a small excess of energy in the midrange and a slightly shelved-down treble. The former occasionally made its presence known as a very slightly nasal character, while the latter contributed to the speaker's mellow tonal balance. The overall bass response is well-tuned, and extends down to a quite low 39Hz (−6dB), this the frequency of the note E-flat just over an octave below the bass staff.

The speaker's dispersion pattern in the horizontal plane (fig.5—just the changes in response are shown) quickly narrows at high frequencies, as expected from the tweeter's physical layout. In all but very lively rooms, this will add to the mellow perceived tonal balance. The woofer's output also falls more rapidly to the RM7's sides in the octave below the crossover frequency than the tweeter's in the octave above crossover (shown by the cursor position). In lively rooms, this might make the little Joseph sound rather bright, in contrast to the lack of top-octave energy in the room. It shouldn't be a factor in rooms with their usual share of absorptive material.

In the vertical plane (fig.6), the RM7si is relatively tolerant of listening axis, due to the lack of frequency overlap between the drive-units. As long as the listener sits within a wide ±15° angle of the tweeter axis, he or she will hear a basically flat response. Beyond those limits, a deep suckout develops in the crossover region—as always, don't listen to these speakers while standing.

In-room, the spatially averaged response of the pair (fig.7) is a little rolled-off at the frequency extremes, but otherwise very flat and even. It meets superb ±125dB limits over a wide range, from 315Hz to 10kHz.

In the time domain, the step response (fig.8) reveals that both drive-units are connected with positive polarity, though the tweeter's output leads the woofer's by about 0.6ms. The cumulative spectral-decay or waterfall plot (fig.9) indi-
cates a clean decay through the treble, but some energy hangover in the crossover region, presumably due to the Infinite Slope topology. This is mild in degree, however, and I didn’t notice anything amiss in this region during my auditioning.

Finally, remember that wrinkle in the impedance plot just above 300Hz. The cabinet resonated quite strongly on both its back and side panels at 375Hz, which can be seen in fig.10, a waterfall plot calculated from the output of a PVDF accelerometer fastened to the center of one of the RM7’s side panels.

They’re American planes. Made in America: Although I initially found the RM7si’s mellow tonal balance a little offputting compared with my reference B&Ws Silver Signatures, I quickly accommodated to its character and came to appreciate the speaker’s smooth, detailed presentation and its excellent bass balance. I actually preferred it to the early version of the Joseph RM20ti that we reviewed a couple of years back. 4 As I say else-

Fig.7 Joseph RM7si, spatially averaged, 1/2-octave response in JA’s room.

Fig.8 Joseph RM7si, step response on tweeter axis at 50” (5ms time window, 30kHz bandwidth).

Fig.9 Joseph RM7si, cumulative spectral-decay plot at 50” (0.15ms risetime).

Fig.10 Joseph RM7si, cumulative spectral-decay plot of accelerometer output fastened to side of enclosure (MLS driving voltage to speaker, 7.55V; measurement bandwidth, 2kHz).

3 For my in-room spectral analyses I averaged six measurements at each of 10 separate microphone positions for left and right speakers individually, giving a total of 120 original spectra. These are then averaged to give a curve that, in my room, has proved to give a good correlation with a loudspeaker’s perceived balance. I use an Audio Control Industrial SA-3050A spectrum analyzer with its own microphone, which acts as a check on the MLSA measurements made with the BKK mike. I also used the Goldline DSP-30 automated spectrum analyzer (currently under review).

4 August 1994, p.103; and June 1995, p.165.

5 $1595/pair. Favorably reviewed by Larry Greenhill in April 1994, p.225.

TOTEM MANI-2: $3995/pair

Canadian speaker manufacturer Totem Acoustic burst onto the high-end scene at the 1989 Toronto Show with their excellent-sounding Model 1 mini-monitor. 5 Named after Manito or Manitou, the magical life force that the Algonquin People believed was contained in every object or being, Mani-2 is Totem’s second model, hence the punning “2” designation.

“Mani-2 was designed as a statement in pure musicality,” writes designer Vincent Bruzzeze, adding that “A speaker should exhibit true liveliness, a spaciousness of sound with all the qualities which make live music truly ‘soul moving.’” Dynamics, transients, decay, harmonics, timbre, and rhythm have to be realistically portrayed… [Totem] designs are all small-driver, dynamic, two-way; the only plausible design scheme for the coherence and musicality we seek.”

Superficially, with its metal-dome tweeter and Dynaudio woofers, the Mani-2 looks like a slightly larger Totem 1. However, it costs more than twice as much. The justification for the price lies under the skin — and ultimately in its sound quality.

The Mani-2’s tweeter is a version of the 1” SEAS unit. Whereas the Model 1 used a single Dynaudio woofer, the Mani-2 uses two woofers, each the Dynaudio 17W 75XL with its 3” voice-coil and its distinctive convex dustcap, which actually has as much radiating area as the cone proper. The second woofer is mounted behind the one facing the outside world, mounted magnet to magnet, with a volume of air trapped between the two cones.

In effect, this is a version of the compound “Isobarik” topology, patented in the UK by Linn Products back in the ’70s. For a given bass extension, the compound configuration allows a significant reduction in enclosure size. The price paid, however, is increased enclosure complexity, the cost of a second drive-unit, and a doubled current demand on the partnering amplifier. And while the sensitivity is essentially the
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same as that of a single unit — just over twice the moving mass is driven by twice as much motor — the maximum power handling remains that of the single unit.\(^6\)

With the two woofers mounted in push-pull, however, the low-frequency linearity of the combination should be better than that of each unit on its own.

The Mani-2’s cabinet, veneered on all six surfaces, is also complex. All cabinet joints are lock-mitered; full-plane cross-braces provide rigidity, to push resonant modes as high in frequency as possible; the internal surfaces are both veneered and covered with multiple layers of borosilicate damping material; and the rear baffle is secured with 12 hexhead bolts. As a result, the Mani-2 feels like a solid rock when you tap it.

The crossover is constructed from high-quality parts and electrical connection is via two pairs of gold-plated WBT binding posts. Overall, the Mani-2’s construction appears to be first-rate.

**Paranormal Tonbandstimmen:** “Bass. A lot of it,” say my listening notes. In fact, the modest-sized Totem produces an astonishing amount of low frequencies. “Digging in the Dirt” on the Peter Gabriel *Live Secret World* album (Geffen GEF12-24722) has some thunder-fingering from bassist Tony Levin, plummeting from a low E-flat (39Hz fundamental) to a stygian C (321Hz) in the chorus. Okay, so my room does offer a little bit of extra kick in the 30Hz region, but the Totems were giving out full measure on these low notes. In addition, when I played the low-frequency warble tones from the third Stereophile Test CD), the fundamentals played cleanly down to the 321Hz band, without any obvious “doubling.”

This is the most extended bass I’ve ever heard from a small speaker, beating out for low-frequency extension even the Platinum Solo that I reviewed last November. More important, the Mani-2 didn’t achieve its awesome bass at the expense of definition. The speaker went deep, but it went deep **dead**! There was no puddying loss of definition, no boom to drive you crazy. (Talking about boom, check out the laserdisc of *Live Secret World*, Real World 14381-3051-6. What did the producers do, wind up the midbass to make Home Theater owners think their inexpensive powered subwoofers had suddenly acquired another 6dB headroom? More loud is always more, right?)

This impressive bass hadn’t been obtained at the expense of upper-bass clarity. The tonal differences between the three bass guitars Timothy B. Schmitt uses on the Eagles’ live reunion album (*Hell Freezes Over*, Geffen GEF1-24725, CD; Geffen Home Video 14381-3061-6, laserdisc) — a big-assed Fender Jazz, a more evenly balanced active Carvin 4-string, and a prowling Carvin fretless — were well-differentiated.

However, the Mani-2’s generous bass prowess made it fussy about setup. Its owners should expect to have to tiddle rather more than usual with exact positioning to get the room to work with the speaker rather than against it.

Moving higher in frequency, the Totem’s midrange was uncolored and grain-free. Paula Cole’s sympathetic answering vocal on Peter Gabriel’s “Don’t

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**Review Context**

My relatively small room measures around 19' by 16.5' by 9'. Each of the loudspeakers was positioned for the best sound (with only one pair of loudspeakers in the listening room at a time), generally some 3' from the rear wall (which is faced with books and LPs) and approximately 5' from the sidewalls (which also have bookshelves covering some of their surfaces). Each pair of speakers sat on 24" Celestion Si stands, these filled with lead shot and spiked to the concrete floor beneath the rug/pad.

Amplifiers used were a Mark Levinson No.333 dual-mono (review under way) and a Cary Audio Design CA1-300SEi integrated. The preamplifier was the remote-controlled Mark Levinson No.385, with either a Mod Squad Phono Drive EPS or an Audio Alchemy VAC-in-the-Box used to amplify LP signals from a Linn Sondek/Cirrus/Trampolin/Lingo/Ekos/Arkiv setup on an Archi-Dectable table. Digital sources were Mark Levinson No.305 HD/CD\(^*\) and Parts Connection Assemblage D/A processors driven by a Mark Levinson No.31 transport, via Madrigal and Illuminati AES/EBU cables via a Meridian 518 jitter-reduction unit (No.31) or Sonic Frontiers UltraJitterbug (Assemblage). Laserdiscs were played on a Panasonic FX-1000, the digital signal taken from its TosLink output.

Interconnects used were AudioQuest’s AudioTruth Lapis x3 alternating with XLO 1.1 Signature; speaker cable was a bi-wired set of Cardas Cross. All source components and preamps used in my listening room were plugged-in to a Power Wedge 116 Mk.II, itself plugged-in to a dedicated AC circuit and fitted with the Power Enhancer option. The amplifiers were plugged-in to a Power Wedge 110, again fitted with the Power Enhancer.

Each pair of speakers was broken-in before audition by being placed face-to-face and driven with out-of-phase, high-level pink noise for 36 hours, followed by the Burn-in Noise track on Stereophile’s Test CD 3\(^1\) for another 12 hours.

Other than impedance, all acoustic measurements were made with the DRA Labs MLSSA system and a calibrated Br&K 4006 microphone. To minimize reflections from the test setup, the measuring microphone is flush-mounted inside the end of a long tube. Reflections of the speaker’s sound from the nuke stand and its hardware will be sufficiently delayed not to affect the measurement.

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Give Up," for example, sounded natural, with all the little inflections of pitch that give a voice its humanity preserved intact. And when I dragged out a recording I hadn’t played in 10 years, Paul Young’s No Parlez (English LP CBS 25521), Pino Palladino’s chortled fretless Music Man StingRay bass on the remake of Marvin Gaye’s “Wherever I Lay My Hat” sounded simply wonderful. There were no midrange speaker artifacts to get in the way of the musical communication.

The speaker’s highs were also superbly transparent. While analog hiss was a bit more apparent than with the B&W Silver Signatures, there was no sense of steeliness or metallic edge, no brightness, no feeling of exaggerated clarity. In the version used by Totem, this metal-dome SEAS is obviously a great tweeter.

Despite an obviously low sensitivity, the Mani-2 appeared to have good dynamics. Jerry Marotta’s thunderclap tom-tom on “Wallflower” from Peter Gabrielse’s 1982 album (Charisma PG 4, English LP) came over without apparent compression. Stereo imaging was of the “disappearing speaker” type, with no audible clues to the speakers’ positions. The result was a wide, deep soundstage which, if it didn’t have quite the image palpability of the revised Thiel CS7 samples that WP reviewed last month, was still excellent. Image precision was stable and pinpoint where necessary, unlike the Josephs, which tended to broaden everything by comparison.

Sun’s Coming Up Like A Big Bald Head: I had misgivings about trying the Mani-2 with the Cary CA10-300SEI tube amplifier; that compound woofer configuration demands to suck amps from the amplifier, and those are in short supply with a singled-ended design. Yet if my 20 years working on audio magazines have taught me anything, it’s to expect the unexpected. What works on paper can produce horrendous sound in practice. And what theoretically can’t work can sometimes produce a truly moving musical experience.

Such proved to be the case with the Totem Mani-2s driven by the little Cary. As expected, the tonal balance changed, becoming rather tilted-up in the treble. The maximum volume was also quite limited compared with the mighty Mark Levinson ‘333. But listening to the master CD-R of Stereophile’s new Festival orchestral recording (see the ad on p.122) was a magical experience. When I engineered this recording, high
on my list of goals was to try to capture the essential fragility of live sound, that feeling that if you dared even breathe, the music’s edge would be dulled. This sense itself seems very fragile, easily destroyed by poor playback. With the Cary-driven Totems, however, I found myself sitting on the edge of my seat. The images of the individual string instruments at the start of Aaron Copland’s *Appalachian Spring* as they joined in the depiction of the musical dawn were palpably real, floating between and behind the speaker positions, yet without the unreal sense of artificial spotlighting that you get from high-end systems optimized for such hi-fi attributes as “detail” or “transparency” rather than the whole musical experience.

Even though I’d heard every measure of this recording literally hundreds of times during the rehearsals, recording, editing, and mastering, I found myself entranced and listened to the entire disc in its entirety. Magic.

**Let X = X:** The use of paralleled bass units means that the Mani-2’s impedance (fig.11) falls to a very low value below the midrange, reaching a current-hungry 3 ohms at 200Hz, which will be exacerbated in the octave below that frequency by highish electrical phase angle. The port tuning is revealed by the saddle in the impedance magnitude trace at 36Hz, implying good bass extension. Note the rise in impedance with frequency: taken together with the high source impedance of the single-ended Cary amplifier, this will give a tilted-up frequency response, as indeed I found in my auditioning. There are no wrinkles in the impedance traces below 1kHz, implying a freedom from strong cabinet resonances.

I calculated the Mani-2’s B-weighted sensitivity as a very low 80.7dB/2.83V/m. No wonder it didn’t go very loud with the low-powered Cary amplifier, as delightful as the sound was. The design obviously gives up sensitivity to achieve its excellent low-bass performance. (For a given box size, a loudspeaker’s sensitivity and bass extension are inversely related.)

The responses of the individual drive-units and the port can be seen in fig.12. The woofer’s output is relatively evenly balanced between 100Hz and the acoustic crossover point of 3kHz — this a little lower than the specified 4kHz — though it shows a little bit of peakiness in its top octave and a half. The tweeter is also basically flat within its passband before it climbs up to a huge ultrasonic peak at 26kHz due to its “oil-can” resonance. Though it looks alarming, this peak will be inaudible to everyone other than bats and very young children. And it will, of course, not be excited to anything like its full extent with digital sources, which have no energy above 22kHz.

In the bass, the compound woofer rolls off smoothly below 80Hz or so to reach its minimum-motion point at a low 34Hz, the same frequency as the maximum port output. But note the very sharp peaks in the port’s response at 305Hz, 550Hz, 640Hz, 1440Hz, and 2140Hz. These are due to pipe resonances and could be heard as a distinct whistle overlaying the port’s output on pink noise. Fortunately, the Mani-2’s port faces away from the listener, significantly reducing the effect these problems might have on the speaker’s perceived sound quality.

The Mani-2’s overall response on its tweeter axis, averaged across a 30° horizontal window, is shown in fig.13. The overall balance is impressively flat, broken only by some small peaks and dips in the low- and mid-treble regions. The very sharp notch at 300Hz is due to the resonant port energy being out-of-phase with the woofer’s output at this frequency. The notch is so narrow that its subjective effect is likely to be inconsequential. The Mani-2’s bass extends down to a very low 27Hz, —6dB, with then a sharp 24dB/octave rolloff due to
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FOUR TWEAKS AND A FREEBIE

Jonathan Scull

I've oft been characterized as the very original demon tweak. I plead guilty, if that accusation speaks to careful system setup, maniacal attention to detail, and the careful use of my cars. I'm amused to note that among the rec.audio crowd on the internet, my tweaking is regarded as mystical in nature. Despite Russian-Rumanian grandparents, and a tendency toward emotionalism (and a certain taste for fish eggs and vodka?), I don't regard my wife Kathlene or myself as much in the way of mystical.

She's Parisian-pragmatic more than not, and what I'd say is we're both open-minded and have, over time, well educated our ears. We have faith in our "hearing mechanisms" (thank you, LAMM's Vladmir One) and our system. We balance it for neutrality, transparency, dynamics, and most important of all, musicality. We therefore as a matter of course hear deeply into the fabric of reproduced music so as to make our evaluations and judgments. But these observations are based on what we hear, not upon any mystical incantations or pagan-like rituals involving Mpingo discs or Harmonix dots. I tell you again: Use your ears and decide for yourself whether a particular change or tweak works for you. That said, let's cut loose and have some fun.

THE BEDINI ULTRA™ CLARIFIER

I always wanted to play with a Bedini Clarifier. But I never managed to get it high enough on the priorities list to make the necessary calls. I'd seen them stacked up on goodie-laden shelves at Robert Stein's Cable Co. slash Ultra Systems HQ—a big barn on a pleasant street in Point Pleasant, N.J. Being a good guest, I kept my hands to myself. I tried, with some success, to treat my CD's with my trusty old ZeroStat, which serves so well in the analog domain during dry and steam-heated winter listening sessions. When I bothered, I attempted to come up with a good spraying technique—back and forth, up and down, in a triangle, you name it. I recall some slight but noticeable improvement from these efforts. (The aluminum substrate of a typical CD is not magnetic, but the polycarbonate may become charged with static electricity.)

So it was with a sense of long preparation paying off that I received a call from Equipment Kommissar Wez Phillips. He explained how he and JA thought I'd be the perfect guy to report on the Ultra edition of the Bedini Clarifier—the desktop model. I thought Wez wuz makin' a lot of sense, and I was happy to hear that he'd be sending it right along.

This latest-model CD Clarifier from Bedini Electronics comprises a square black plastic pedestal measuring 6.75" W by 3" H by 7" L, weighing in at something over 1 lb. It's powered with an 12VDC wall-watt power pack.

Bedini's manual claims the device provides a method for treating a CD and eliminating noise distortion and interference: "Its beam penetration is 2x better than its hand-held predecessor. In addition to the sonic improvement, this self-contained unit has mass shielding in its side walls for better containment and distribution throughout the entire compact disc...The unit contains magnetic material and should be kept a minimum of 3" away from computer disks, all tapes, and other magnetic sensitive materials or permanent damage may occur."

Stereophile, February 1996 177
For many years many audiophiles have marvelled at the sheer palpability of music played through tube electronics. That is why **conrad-johnson** has for nearly twenty years designed and fabricated the best tube preamplifiers and power amplifiers in the business. From the new MV55 and PV10A ($1995 and $995, respectively) through the PV12 and Premier 11A and Premier 12 ($2395, $3295, and $6590), **conrad-johnson** components have defined the "tube sound" for almost a generation.

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What the hell does that mean? Well, I usually noticed more air; a greater refinement in the sense of nuance in a particular performance based on my improved ability to see and hear into a more transparent soundstage. That was aided by an overall quieter, blacker sonic curtain upon which the re-creation of music took place. Images seemed more 3-D and palpable, and highs sounded more refined and sweet. The bass definitely improved—it was deeper and tighter, with better pitch-differentiation, leading to a heightened sense of the actual volume and size of a drum, for example.

This one is an easy-to-hear, fun-to-work, absolutely-no-downside tweak. Fun for the entire family! Imagine the amused glances your mate will cast your way as you stand captured by the blur of a high-reving CD being degaussed. (Imagine how they'll try and figure out a way to de-gauss you!) Seriously, I highly recommend the Bedini Ultra Clarifier to all. And try not to say, "Gee..." in such an awed voice when the disc is spinning away at max revs.

**MIDAS SERIES HI-FI TUBE DAMPERS**

Well, well, well... what have we here? A pair of devices made by Blue Note SAS in Florence, Italy. Ah, Firenze, home of Michelangelo’s David, home of the entire Renaissance, it might be said. Was that a trill of Mediterranean trumpets I heard as I pulled the wooden cap off the nicely turned wooden container, revealing this most charmingly conceived tube-damping tweak I’ve ever encountered? In fact, it seemed so utterly whimsical and bizarre that I didn’t even use it right away, content to just think about it! And perhaps a touch afraid it wouldn’t work, if truth be told.

Instructions: “The hydraulic-mechanical engineering of Midas Series Hi-End Tube Dampers is the only one of its kind among anti-vibrational systems that drastically reduces microvibrations by hydraulic means, combined with the resonance control and tuning quality of the Ebony/Brass/Harmonic Steel design.” It goes on, “Computer controlled technology and accurate manual assembly using ‘first class’ materials such as Gabon high quality Black Ebony, selected brass and Harmonic Steel springs create a finely finished damper that really works!”

You’re advised not to leave these dampers in direct sunlight, and to handle them with “extreme care.” I eyed the precious Italianate Rubio Golbergero device with some trepidation, especially the coiled springs of “Harmonic Steel,” two of which are stretched around each tube, wrapping it in the damper’s tight embrace. The beautifully finished Ebony cap has a brass ring around its circumference; four small, fine screws are set into it and form the anchoring points for the springs. In use, the cap stands off a little way from the tube due to the small brass cone that’s fitted between the side of the tube and the Ebony damper—the flat side of the cone against the glass envelope, of course, and its pointy little head nestled into the sprung Ebony cap.

As it happens, my CAT preamp is surrounded by four Shun Mook Ultra Diamond Resonators and snuggled into a Michael Green Signature Clamp-Rack. Getting the top off to play with its tubes is only slightly less appetizing than getting on my Nordic Track. Besides, the CAT is a massive brute and contains damping material inside its chassis—it didn’t seem a likely candidate for the dampers. While the Jadis JP80MC stands its tubes out in the open, I’d left the tube cages on with the intention of clamping the unit sooner or later. And I had this lingering worry that the springs would un-spring and wreak havoc between Italian and French relations. (They never did.)

And so they sat until Gordon Rankin’s Wavelength Cardinal XS single-ended monoblocks showed up. Now, let’s have a look at those perfectly-sized input tubes, I thought to myself. In fact, the quality of the inputs and power tubes on single-ended triode amps is super-critical to their sound. I realized that this was indeed the place to hear whether the dampers worked or not. Springing them around the 6188s was easy enough after a try or two, but I’d recommend doing it with the amp off. 6SL7s and 300Bs can get pretty hot, and if you turn ham-fisted and blow it, a SPROING followed by the lilting tinkle of glass may follow.

The overall effect of the Midas dampers was as you might expect from a device that lowered microphonics. Subtle, but clearly... more clear. Every sonic parameter had just that much more definition and focus with the dampers in place. The bass was tighter, more focused, and more finely pitch-differentiated. The upper midbass and midrange were more tightly integrated and detailed. The highs sounded a touch more pellicid and extended.

While enhancing transparency, the Tube Dampers seemed to lessen ever so slightly the sense of bloom, but that’s a characteristic so highly developed as a matter of course by single-ended triodes that I didn’t miss it so much. And anyway, I want to hear the bloom of music as encoded on the source, not an artificial bloom created by a chattering tube!

I had equal success with the Midas Tube Dampers on the inputs of the Jadis 300B amplifiers, and consider them an indispensable accessory for this type of playback. I’m sure they’d make worthi-
It's no secret that Underground Sound is Memphis' leading Audio/Home Theater Specialist... has been for years. And for years, we've been one of America's top Spectral dealers. Now, with the addition of Avalon Acoustics Speakers and MIT's Reference Series interfaces, we can proudly announce the certification of our 2C3D showroom.

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Musical truth, that is. "In all of my years as both an audio retailer and manufacturer, I have never heard another system that gave the listener anywhere near the sense of musical rightness and the gut feeling of 'you are there' that this Avalon, MIT, Spectral system delivers every day. It is the first system ever to be certified 2C3D (two channel-three dimensional hologram). The secret is that the top engineers of the three manufacturers worked together to create reference-level components that are synergistically matched to each other. You are invited to hear it for yourself. Call me at (901) 272-1275 for an appointment." – George Merrill

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MIT's Reference Series Interfaces and Z-Series™ AC conditioners are what ultimately make the astounding results of this 2C3D system possible. The coherency, power efficiency and quietness of these interfaces allow the signal to be passed throughout the system without the degradation, phase scrambling and noise pollution of conventional cables. Bruce Brisson designed the MH-850® Tri-wire (Avalon version) speaker interfaces—with individual Terminator networks for bass, mid and high frequencies—specifically for this system. When combined with the MIT-350™ Reference interconnects, the true potential of MIT's newest technologies—JFA™ and SIT™—can be realized. JFA (Jitter Free Analog) contributes to the system by removing noise jitter resulting from the phase nonlinearities found in normal cable. SIT (Stable Image Technology) further adds to the system by allowing the interfaces to dynamically respond to great power demands while keeping the musical image locked precisely in 3D space. Together, these technologies synergistically result in a low noise, high energy, low distortion combination that makes the MIT CV Terminator interfaces a vital component of the 2C3D system. Beneath all is the clean virtually noise-free foundation provided by the MIT Z-Series powerline treatment system allowing the holographic image to appear, free of powerline interference. The result: an image worthy of 2C3D status.

The Avalon Radian HC loudspeakers are capable of projecting a holographic soundfield and disappearing inside it, casting a field of energy far outside of themselves. Capable of tremendous dynamics, they are among the rare speakers that don't sound congested as the music gets louder and more complex, yet retain the most subtle nuances as the music fades to a whisper.

Avalon's Neil Patel designed the Radian HC expressly for this system, perfectly matched to the speed and high current capability of the Spectral electronics. And also perfectly matched to the linear, coherent energy coming through the tri-wired MIT interfaces.
while improvements in the phono-stage inputs of most preamps as well. Altogether, a subtle but important tweak for getting the best out of high-resolution systems of every stripe.

**SHAKTI ELECTROMAGNETIC STABILIZER**

In spite of what some of you might think, Kathleen and I don't automatically rubber-stamp any Happytime Audio Tweak that happens to fall our way. Tweakage has to work, and work well, before I'll spill any ink on it. And, of course, working well means we're repeatedly able to hear their effects, corroborated by measurements or not. I don't especially want to pry open a can of Best Buy Audio Worms here, but let me say once again for the record: measurements are interesting, occasionally illuminating, but mean nothing compared to what my ears tell me. Can you measure love? Do you think it doesn't exist?

Given that, the Shakti Stone (as it's known) was a tough one. I tried them here and there in our system, and I'll tell you what: I didn't like 'em. They undoubtedly had an effect, just not one that I found musically consonant. This had been on mostly solid-state amps, by the way—the Forstell Statement and the Symphonic Line Kraft 400s—where it had been difficult to place them properly on the transformers. If I were going to arrogate any particular qualities to the Shaktis, I would say that in addition to tightening up the focus, they also unfortunately seemed to harden up the highs. And I heard nothing remarkable when I placed one next to the power supply of my CAT SL1 Signature, not having the room to place it on top.

I laid them aside, and thought to try them with tubed gear later on. In the meantime, I did have some success with a Shakti on the top of the Forstell transport's laser box, which definitely improved the sound. It seemed to sharpen up the focus and quiet the background, heightening the sense of imaging. Transients also snapped out more quickly. Happily, atop the Forssel, there was no concomitant problem with hardening of the highs.

Enter once again the Wavelength Cardinal XS monoblocks. Sensitive and minimalist, these small and ultra-musical amps would reveal the quiddities of the Shakti Stone if any could. And so they did. I began with Shaktis on the output transformers, where their cohering and focusing qualities were an asset. Gordon Rankin thought they'd work even better on the power transformers, where the greater number of turns (as in most tube amps) creates a stronger magnetic field with which to interact. And he even suggested that the orientation of the Stone as it sat on the transformer would make a difference. Right again, Gordo!

The Shakti Stones' influence was subtle but quite noticeable. (In fact, I enjoyed whipping them on and off for visitors—both audiophiles and otherwise—carefully noting their reactions for posterity.) It was almost as if the Shaktis were removing the microphonics or jitter from the magnetic field, yielding the same-quality improvements as the Midas Tube Dampers. Focus, transparency, clarity, and speed were better, as was the sense of space and pace. There was a certain purity of presentation not quite attainable untried. It's not that the Shakti improved the amps so much as, like the Tube Dampers, they allowed them to perform to their fullest. In this way, these two tweaks are of a similar nature; they allowed development to fullest effect of what already existed.

The Stones worked a similarly magic on the glamorous Jadis 300Bs, even though they marred the elegance of their looks. I plan to try them as well on the transformers of the Audio Note Kasai coming up for review. Pigied finally by my success at getting the freakin' things to perform, I persuaded the new Preliminary White Paper faxed to me by Shakti's designer, Ben Piazza. If you're curious, I encourage you to contact him and ask for a complete copy for the full scoop. I'll cut'n'paste enough of the White Paper here to give you a working idea of what's up. Remember, the following are the words of the designer.

"Shakti is an East Indian word that means 'energy.' A more detailed definition is 'creative intelligence, power and beauty.' This trinity of energy comprises the very essence of music...

"Neither an accessory nor a resonance tuning device, Shakti enhances resolution for each component it's used with. This greater clarity is realized by addressing the problem of electromagnetic interference (EMI). By interacting with the EMI field that all active components radiate, audible benefits across a wide musical bandwidth are obtained. These EMI emanations are caused by the interplay of fields generated from individual devices and stages throughout circuit topology. They're known to distort musical signals, resulting in a loss of dynamic contrasts and inner detail. Many engineers have experienced the phenomenon whereby two identical circuits that differ only slightly in layout can result in one sounding (though not necessarily measuring) far more musical. EMI appears to be the culprit here...

"One obvious but impractical solution would be an enormous 5'-wide chassis to increase distances between internal devices. Other attempts to address EMI have included extensive shielding in and around the circuits and transformers, and totally passive exter-

![Shakti Electromagnetic Stabilizer](image-url)
nal boxes that produce some benefits.

“Shakti differs from these past efforts in that it draws energy from the very field it is attempting to smooth out. Once set in motion, it becomes an active transducer by changing a portion of this field into mechanical energy and then dissipating it as heat. To accomplish this, Shakti utilizes proprietary ferrous and nonferrous material and quartz crystal oscillators in combination with a low-level magnetic field. These components are oriented within geometric shapes both internal and external, and then housed in a poured-stone concrete material.

“The outer case that encapsulates the internal circuits is not resistive to the host components’ EMF. This allows the parasitic fields to easily penetrate through to the absorptive devices, and provides an excellent and safe medium to release the electrical energy that has been converted to heat. Integral pigmentation throughout the stone material is accomplished by using a proprietary compound that has natural antistatic properties.

“Shakti is a passive audio component that has three internal circuit stages to absorb and dissipate some of the unwanted or parasitic oscillation effects in the electromagnetic field (EMF), generated by active audio components. These components would include (but not be restricted to) pre- and power amplifiers, CD players, transports, associated DAC and auxiliary interface devices, turntables, and audio tape recorders. No electrical hookup or in-line connection to the host component is required. Any active component that could self-generate or act as an antenna for RF, microwave, electric and magnetic spurious fields, could benefit from placement of Shakti in proximity to, or on, its chassis. A general term describing these fields’ negative interaction with the transfer function of active signal path circuitry, is electromagnetic interference (EMI).

“These spurious fields radiate from several millimeters to several feet around the host component chassis. Left unattenuated, some undesirable portions of this EMF can transgress back into circuits, generating noise artifacts that get amplified along with the music waveform. The result is a noisier, grainier background during moments of intertransient silence, and a reduction in dynamic contrasts as signal levels change.”

[End cut\'n\'paste]

There follows a section on the origin and causes of EMI, and an intelligent
discussion of conventional approaches to reduce it centering around ferrite devices. Then we reach another area where it's time again to make use of the Windows Clipboard:

[Begin cut'n'paste again]

"Shakti's Unique Filter Designs: The mechanism that activates the absorption and dissipation circuits in Shakti has an electrical equivalent that's analogous to an RF transformer effect. This occurs when a tuned secondary coil (passive) is placed in proximity to an active primary coil. An absorption of energy will take place at predetermined frequencies, as long as the passive unit is properly resistively loaded or damped. The host component represents the active coil, and Shakti parallels the secondary transformer or coil. The potential drainage of the host transformer is negligible in this application because Shakti's circuit design is tuned to absorb the ultra-high frequencies of the spurious unwanted fields within the EMF.

"Shakti differs from past EMI-reduction efforts in several distinct ways. First, there are three specific filter stages to cover a broader source of potential unwanted emanations. Second, new and unique types of absorption components are incorporated, which, even if used with other filter designs (or ferrite types), will complement rather than duplicate the action, thus producing additional benefits. Shakti allows for flexible placement near internal circuit stages that are most prone to self-generated EMI, as well as providing additional noise reduction from external sources. And finally, each stage has not only the inherent hysteresis effect that produces some dissipation, but also a specifically incorporated additional resistive element to enhance the filters' effectiveness.”

[End cut'n'paste]

Ben Piazza goes on to discuss the first filter stage for microwaves, a second-stage quartz-based RFI filter, and a third-stage electric and magnetic field filter. That's followed by a section covering test procedures conducted to date.

I found it interesting reading. Used intelligently and in the right places, the Shakti offers a worthwhile and cost-effective boost in sound quality. In fact, Ben faxed me a diagram showing how one of his customers integrates the Shakti Stones with Mpingo Discs on a

---

2 Wes Phillips recommends the Shakti Stone be tried on power amplifiers rather than preamplifiers, adding that having too many in the system can be counter-productive. —JA

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Forsell Air Force One. "It'll make improvements to the sound of your cartridge and any other item that reacts to eddy currents," he told me. "In fact, they work great under most power-line conditioners as well!" I'll give it a try on the Forsell and report later.

**K-A-B SPEEDSTROBE™ DIGITAL TURNTABLE SPEED READOUT**

I don't know how you analog types feel about it, but checking the speed on my turntable is a gigantic pain in the ass. I still use my old Ariston strobe disc that came along with the RI90 Superior I used to run with a Zeta arm. Even Dr. Forsell uses exactly the same disc, but I noted with some amusement that he blacked out the now-defunct Scottish firm's name on it.

Of course, the disc is only half of it—you still need a proper light source. And therein lies a saga unto itself. I went through two or three fairly expensive [expensive deleted] light-bulb-sized fluorescents—the coiled-tube types—but none of them worked! I just couldn't figure it out. When I explained my frustration to a skilled clerk at Just Bulbs, he told me that what I needed was a mechanical ballast model— electronic ballast doesn't cut the analog mustard, for some reason. Another thirty-five bucks! I finally wound up with a Panasonic BFT15LE-T-C 15W 120V 60Hz Warm Color Light Capsule that worked. It was big and heavy, and required a lampholder fitting with an electric cord to operate.

Almost as soon as I screwed it into the lampholder, the Push/Push actuator on the cheap fitting started to act up—it became difficult to turn on and off. And each time I managed to get it on or off, it thumped the system in an alarming way. I finally resorted to screwing the "light capsule" in and out to actuate it, thus bypassing the switch. And as I held it over the spinning platter, I always had to be careful that the electrical cord didn't foul the dental-floss belt of the Forsell! Gimme a break already!

And then... how do you spell analog relief? K-A-B SpeedStrobe! Yessss!

Manual: "The K-A-B SpeedStrobe™ makes checking and setting turntable speed easy. Features a large 10" digital readout disc and quartz-locked strobe light. In use, the turntable speed is read directly from the disc, glowing bright red against a black background. Battery-operated, the SpeedStrobe™ works anywhere in the world! Verifies speed accuracy to 0.03% or better. 1 year warran-

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**K-A-B SpeedStrobe Digital Phonograph Speed Readout**

"Hoo-hah! I love it!"

The precision 10" disc shows all standard speeds as well as incremental steps between 70 and 900rpm for vintage collectors. When the speed readout is stationary, the turntable is 100% accurate. "Basic accuracy can be checked by timing the drift movement over 1 minute. Broadcast accuracy is 0.3% and is met if less than 10 numbers pass the illuminated spot in 60 seconds. Less than 3 numbers is 0.1% and less than 1 number is 0.03%." It's just fantastic. You bring your 'table up to speed with the disc on the platter, and aim the small control unit at the disc. When you press the button, the red-lit speed numbers jump out at you in a super-easy-to-read fashion. It looks cool, and it's a snap to perfectly set the speed.

K-A-B caters to the record collector and offers a (free) catalog filled with analog goodies. Give 'em a call and order yours today. "A great gift for your analog crazy!" says Kathleen.

And last:

**J-10’S BEST ZERO-COST TWEAK FOR ALL TIME**

Do you wear glasses while listening? Well take 'em off! I'm not kidding. Depending on their size and shape, they may be reflecting a bit of the sound right in front of your ears! I don't really know whether it's the soft-focus of nearsightedness, or indeed a slight reduction in reflected sound waves that does it, but I enjoy listening with my glasses off much more than with glasses on! And I think you will too. Hey, it costs nothing to try!

Enjoy, you all.

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COINCIDENT SPEAKER TECHNOLOGY TROUBADOR LOUDSPEAKER

Wes Phillips was unimpressed with the sound of this good-looking, $1495/pair, two-way loudspeaker in January '96 (p.223). He found its tonal balance colored and the integration between its drive-units—a silk-dome tweeter mounted within a plastic-cone woofer—severely flawed. Subsequent measurements revealed that the woofer and tweeter were connected with opposite acoustic polarities—which, once the phase shift due to the crossover and the time delay between the units was taken into account, resulted in almost complete cancellation of the speaker's output in the crossover region. The tweeter output also showed narrow suckouts at higher frequencies due to the symmetrical environment offered by the woofer cone, and overall the HF unit's output averaged between 5dB and 10dB too high in level.

Designer Israel Blume cried "Foul!" In his "Manufacturer's Comment" letter (January '96, p.335), he explained that the review samples that had been sent to Stereophile—serial numbers 015L & R—were not representative of how the Troubador performed but were instead a one-off pair that had been designed to sound the way they sounded at the wish of an overseas customer. With the tweeter connected with the correct polarity, the Troubador's use of a first-order crossover would give the intended flat response in the crossover region. Accordingly, we requested a second pair of Troubadors from Coincident Speaker Technology\(^1\) for Follow-Up coverage. These speakers—serial numbers 118R-6 and 118L-6—arrived with a cover letter stating that the drive-units were now "virtually perfectly" time-aligned and that the response measured by an independent measurements lab was "within 3dB from 50Hz to 18kHz." The speakers were painted in a very attractive gray-flecked acrylic finish.

WP being heavily involved in the research for his first "Car Tunes" column—see p.73—I set the Troubadors up in my listening room. The speakers sat on 24" lead-shot-filled Celestion Si stands and were driven by a Mark Levinson No.385 preamplifier and No.333 power amplifier. Digital front-end was a Mark Levinson No.31/No.30.5/Meridian 518 combination connected by Madrigal AES/EBU cable; speaker cables were a bi-wired set of Cardas Cross; interconnects were AudioTruth Lapis x2.

The good news is that the new Troubador samples sounded very much better than the first ones. They were much more evenly balanced overall, and the boosted high treble that had bothered both Wes and me was gone. They threw a well-defined, spacious-sounding stereo image with good apparent depth. It was obvious from standing up, sitting down, and walking around the listening room that the speaker's dispersion in both horizontal and vertical planes was wide and even. This will make setting up a pair of Troubadors in a room a much easier process.

The bass didn't extend that low—the output was audibly dropping by the 40Hz 1/2-octave Walpole tone from Stereophile's Test CD 3—but what low frequencies there were sounded quite generously balanced, at the expense of ultimate bass definition.

However, a degree of hollow-sounding coloration was still present. This was particularly noticeable with pink noise and with orchestral recordings. In addition, the speaker's sound lacked vitality and immediacy. While this somewhat laid-back presentation was kind to bright recordings, I kept feeling that I wanted to turn up the volume. Expecting a low-treble suckout, I inverted the tweeter polarity. (This pair of speakers was fitted with dual sets of terminals, a $100/pair option, which made this possible.) That wasn't the solution. Wired in this manner, the Troubadors acquired a "shoutiness" in the low treble that was very unpleasant to bright-balanced CDs and made human voice sound like the singer was using a megaphone. I went back to using the speaker as the designer intended.

One problem that kept returning during the auditioning was a strong buzz in the 250Hz region on one of the speakers (L-6). This could be temporarily eliminated by loosening or tightening the hex-head bolts that held the concentric drive-unit in place, but it never went away for good.

I ended my listening sessions disappointed with the Troubador. While it does some things right, I still found it a little too colored and too uninvolving-sounding for long-term satisfaction.

Measurements: Compared with the earlier sample (fig.1), the new Troubador's step response (fig.2) reveals that the tweeter and woofer are now connected with the same positive acoustic polarity. The tweeter output does lead that of the woofer by a fraction of a millisecond, however, meaning that the step response doesn't quite conform with the desired triangle shape that

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\(^{1}\) Coincident Speaker Technology, 51 Miriam Crescent, Richmond Hill, Ontario L4E 2P8, Canada. Tel: (905) 886-6728, Fax: (905) 886-2627.
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— Thomas J. Norton

SWANS BATON LOUDSPEAKER

When Muse Kastanovich reviewed the Baton ($2075/pair—$2705/pair) last November (Vol.18 No.11, p.153), he found this mellow-sounding, floor-standing, two-way design to be too lifeless in the highs for his tastes. (The serial numbers of his review samples were A4.159 and A4.160.) My measurements showed that while the Baton’s overall response was relatively smooth and evenly balanced, a combination of shelved-down top-octave energy and restricted dispersion in the same region was probably part of the reason MK had not liked the Baton as much as he had hoped. This was ironic in that the first samples of the Baton that we had received for review—serial numbers 4-111 and 4-112—had had, if anything, too lively a treble.

When he submitted his “Manufacturer’s Comment” response after receiving the preprint of the review, Swans’ Frank Hale informed us that by the time the review appeared in print, a redesign of the Baton would have addressed this criticism.1 Accordingly, I asked for a third pair to be sent for a Follow-Up. (This pair was numbered 402.282A and B.) Whereas MK’s review pair were the most expensive of the Baton options ($2705/pair), finished in rosewood veneer ($500/pair) and featuring bi-wire—ready dual terminals ($130/pair), my speakers were wrapped in black cloth, with wooden top-caps and a vertical styling strip on the baffle. Without the bi-wire option, these cost $2075/pair. These Batons were also fitted with a 7.5” plinth ($185/pair) to raise the tweeter about 40” from the floor. (Muse had found that sitting below the tweeter axis was optimal.)

I had auditioned the original Batons both in MK’s listening room and in Stereophile’s dedicated room. In the bass, the new samples sounded similar to the originals in that while the extension seemed good—the in-room bass was strong down to the 32Hz 5'-octave band, with the 25Hz band still weakly audible—the low frequencies were not particularly generous.

This was something that MK had noted in his review, commenting that the midbass seemed a little recessed. With recordings that had plenty of low bass—the synths lines on Stevie Wonder’s Music of My Mind LP (English pressing, Tamla/Motown STMA 8002), the kick drum on The Eagles’ live “Hotel California” cut (Hall Freezes Over, Geffen KFE1-24725)—the speakers sounded satisfyingly rich. But on average recordings, I kept getting the impression that the speaker just didn’t want to “give” in the bass, this tight control being allied to a rather boxy-sounding lower midrange.

At the other end of the spectrum, the Baton still sounded rather lifeless in the extreme highs. (This 1” soft-dome tweeter does have limited dispersion above 10kHz, and there’s not a lot a designer can do about that other than slightly tilting up the on-axis response in the same region to compensate.) This HF rolloff, by itself, did not disturb me—the good-sounding Joseph RM7si reviewed elsewhere in this issue has a similar high-treble balance—but it was thrown into sharp relief by both a rather opaque midrange and a narrow band of brightness in the speaker’s mid-treble. When I played the Batons loud enough to bring the low and high frequencies to life, I found this brightness very unforgiving on bright rock recordings. It also made recorded applause, such as that on Stereophile’s new Festival CD, sound hard. And some of the high notes on the half-step frequency sweep on our Test CD 3 jumped forward at the listener in a quite disconcerting way.

All of these impressions were gained using the all-Mark Levinson system mentioned elsewhere in this issue. One thing that did strike me, however, was the Baton’s highish sensitivity. It didn’t seem to take many watts for the speaker to play at a satisfyingly loud level. So I reached for the Cary CAD-300SEI single-ended integrated amplifier, hooking it up to the Batons with the same Cardas Cross bi-wired cables I’d used with the Levinson No.333.

Now that was more like it! The lower mids acquired a tad more bloom, the bass became a bit more generous, but more importantly, the rather lifeless presentation the Batons had had with the solid-state amplifier became more dimensional, more palpable. The midrange remained somewhat opaque-sounding, however, and the band of brightness was still apparent. As the maximum loudness was limited with the tube amplifier, however, I couldn’t play the Batons at levels where this became the limiting factor.

Unfortunately, these improvements in the Batons’ tonal quality and imaging ability were achieved at the expense of the sense of musical pace. “Sign In Stranger,” for example, from the new Steely Dan CD Alive in America, Giant 24634-2, sounded quite lethargic.

Measurements: Fig.1 shows the electrical impedance magnitude and phase for the earlier Baton; fig.2 shows the impedance of the latest version of the design. While the graphs are very similar in the midrange and below, the new speaker has a much smaller rise in the crossover region and a lower magnitude through the treble. While it will be harder to drive, the relative change in magnitude is smaller, making it more suitable for use with low-powered tube amplifiers (provided a high-current output transformer tap is used). Its mea-

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sured, B-weighted sensitivity was around 90dB/2.83V/m. This is 4dB higher than my calculated figure for the earlier sample and meets Swans’ specification. (I suspect that either I made an error in my earlier measurement or the measured figure was reduced by the old sample’s lack of presence-region energy.)

Fig.3 shows the individual responses of the new Baton’s port, woofer, and tweeter. The port and woofer outputs are basically similar to those of the earlier version (see Nov. ’95, p.159). However, there’s now a greater overlap between the tweeter and woofer and the tweeter’s overall level is a little higher.

Figs.4 and 5 show the response of the tweeter axis, averaged across a 30° horizontal window, of the old (Fig.4) and new (Fig.5) versions. Where the earlier Baton had a slight suckout in the crossover region, the current Baton has more energy between 1kHz and 3kHz. Other than that, the graphs are fundamentally similar.

In-room, the Batons produced a commendably flat and even spatially averaged response (Fig.6). The bass region can be seen to be somewhat shelved down, however. There’s also a slight excess of energy in the mid-treble, which may correlate with the brightness I noticed in my auditioning, and the top audio octave is rolled-off early, contributing to the perceived lack of air.

Summing Up: Despite the changes Swans has made to the Baton since Muse Kastanovich’s review appeared in Stereophile, it remains overall a rather dull-sounding speaker with a “boxy” character and somewhat recessed low frequencies. The new sample is definitely brighter-balanced in the mid-treble, however. Its high sensitivity will make it a contender for use with lower-powered tube amplifiers, which, as I found, will also usefully flesh-out its midrange and bass. In my system and with my tastes, I felt the Baton’s sound quality fell a little short of what I would expect from a loudspeaker in its price category. But if you desire a loudspeaker to use with your new single-ended tube amplifier, the Baton might be what you’re looking for.

—John Atkinson

MIT MH-850 MULTI-BANDWIDTH CUTOVER TERMINATOR LOUDSPEAKER CABLE

Due to an editorial mixup, the graphs illustrating the measured performance of MIT speaker cable in Robert Harley’s review of the Avalon/Spectral/MIT “2G3D” system in January (Vol.19 No.1, p.174) were confused. The correct graphs are reprinted here, along with R.H.’s original text.

“Curiosity about MIT’s terminating networks prompted me to measure the impedance magnitude and phase angle of the bench resistor we use as a load when testing power amplifiers. Fig.1 shows how the resistor’s impedance changes with frequency when connected to the Audio Precision by a short piece of banana-plug-terminated coaxial cable. Because the resistor is almost a pure resistive impedance, with no capacitive or inductive reactance, its phase angle is 0° up to about 10kHz. The positive phase angle above 20kHz is due to a slight inductance.

“For contrast, Fig.2 is the same measurement, but with a run of MIT MH-850. This cable has a higher inductance, seen as the positive phase angle at high frequencies. Whereas the coaxial cable introduced a phase angle of +19.6° at 20kHz, the MIT cable produced a phase shift of +27.5°. The MIT cable’s inductance also affects the overall impedance, seen as the slight rise in the impedance magnitude above 150kHz. This doesn’t tell us much about what’s happening inside the MIT terminator networks, probably because we aren’t looking at the phase angle over a wide enough bandwidth.”

—Robert Harley

Fig.1 Power resistor, electrical impedance (solid) and phase (dashed) when connected by conventional coaxial cable (2 ohms/vertical div.).

Fig.2 Power resistor, electrical impedance (solid) and phase (dashed) when connected by MIT MH-850 speaker cable (2 ohms/vertical div.).
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When future phonographic chroniclers come to terms with the last decade of this century, they may well tag it the Age of the Edition. Certainly the past few years have seen an unprecedented attention to surveys of the work of individual performers, the most impressive, perhaps — at least in terms of completeness — being RCA's all-inclusive Toscanini and Heifetz packages. Now from Sony comes what is termed Bruno Walter: The Edition.

For a few reasons, the use of the definite article in this title is misleading. Unlike Toscanini and Heifetz, whose recording careers were confined (with very few exceptions) exclusively to RCA, Walter's work appeared on many labels. His earliest (acoustic) efforts were produced for Polydor (now Deutsche Grammophon), and for most of the 78rpm era he recorded with European ensembles either for English Columbia or His Master's Voice. During that period, for example, he left two accounts of Schumann's Fourth Symphony, a work central to his repertory but one he never recorded again.

The advent of World War II prompted Walter's moving to the United States. In 1941, he signed a contract with American Columbia, an association that continued until his death 20 years later. During those years he recorded the staples of his repertory, often more than once, producing three accounts of Beethoven's "Eroica" and Mozart's "Jupiter" Symphonies, two each of Schubert's "Unfinished" and "Great" C-Major Symphonies, and two cycles of the Beethoven and Brahms symphonies.
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Worth noting, however, is the excellence of the monophonic Mahler Symphonies 4 and 5. Both were once (if briefly) available in Columbia's Masterworks Portrait series, but each sounds better here, 5 in particular, coming from engineer Dennis Rooney having gone back to the original 33 1/3" acetates from which older 78s, LPs, and CDs were dubbed.

What, then, of the performances themselves? Walter's stereophonic Beethoven cycle, like its mono predecessor, has virtues and defects. The latter center on unstable rhythms that occasionally undermine pulse and line; misjudged tempos, the transformation of the Andante con moto of Symphony 5 into a sentimentalized adagio being a prime case in point; omission of all exposition repeats save that in the finale of Symphony 1; and the failure of this roughly 60-piece West Coast ensemble to play with the cohesion and fullness produced by the New York Philharmonic and Philadelphia Orchestra in Walter's earlier cycle.

On the other hand, there is the light geniality of Symphonies 1 and 2, the latter less mannered here than in the earlier account; the wit of 8; the sharp delineation of the dactylic profile of the first movement of 7; and the careful rhythmic shaping of the motifs in the second movement of 4. But I have always felt that the bass-heavy, blended thickness of this "Pastoral" makes it one of Walter's most over-rated recordings, his earlier Philadelphia version being far more stylish. So, too, his tauter, more demonic NYP 9.

Because he was a disciple of Mahler, Walter's performances of the composer's music have often been termed "authentic." This is nonsense, if for no other reason than great art always defies a single "authentic" viewpoint. And as Leonard Bernstein, among others, has shown, there was a dark, tortured, almost hysterical side to Mahler that Walter's conceptions barely hinted at. Rather, in underplaying the music's angst, they convey a Mahler who (at least in part) clung to a Schubertian lyricism and moribund symphonic tradition that were, ironically, collapsing in the very music in which he tried to echo them.

**The Walter/Milstein Mendelssohn Violin Concerto Occupied Both Sides of Columbia ML 4001 — The Very First Commercial LP, and One of This Edition's Prizes.**

One might say, then, that Walter's approach to these symphonies, if without the hyper-intensity of others, has an inherent musicality and staying power that make it well-suited to repeated hearings. This Das Lied, incidentally, is the third of the conductor's three recordings of the work. Each has virtues absent from the other, those of this one being the committed playing and (for 1960) superb reproduction of the New York Philharmonic, which gave of itself more fully than for most other conductors. In fact, I wish Sony had included Walter's 1954 mono NYP Mahler 1 instead of this better-sounding but less vital West Coast stereo version.

The Wagner set (all stereo) is a mixed affair — sometimes beautifully phrased and sung, but other times (as in the Meistersinger Prelude) bland and flaccid. And fine as this recording — Walter's sixth — of the Siegfried Idyll is, his monaural 1952 account with the NYP has greater tactues and discipline without any sacrifice of the tender lyricism of this stereo version.

Common to the Beethoven, Mahler, and Wagner reissues is the first appearance on CD of Walter's rehearsals with the West Coast orchestra. They are valuable for revealing the discipline, intelligence, and gentle firmness he displayed. Also fascinating is an interview that exposes the occasionally sentimental, even mystical side of the conductor's personality.

The single disc devoted to two Mozart Violin concertos and that little exercise in perfection, Eine kleine Nachtmusik, hardly makes a case for Walter as an eminent Mozartian. The concertos (for all of Francescatti's fine solo work) sound ponderous and bass-heavy, and this monophonic Nachtmusik (from 1954), if a bit livelier than Walter's stereo version, still lacks the crispness the work demands.

A final word about the Walter sonority. He favored rich, robust brass supported by a weighty but well-defined bass. This was often made to sound lumpy and muddy by the engineering of his day. Thus, what often seems blurred and flabby on disc had (as my own concert experience attests) potent impact in the hall. Such a sonic shortcoming aside, this Edition features more than respectable sound considering the age of the recordings. As it unfolds, I hope Sony will give some attention to Walter's older mono efforts: aside from some already cited, the Schumann "Rhenish" Symphony and the NYP Mozart "Haffner," Schubert Ninth, and Brahms First Symphonies, among other items. Were some of these now-unfamiliar performances reissued, the conductor's profile would be greatly enhanced and Sony's project might better deserve the definitive article that defines this Edition.

**Postscript**

As the above was about to go to press, Vol.III of Sony's Walter Edition arrived. Comprising eight single CDs and a two-disc set, it is, in many respects, the most interesting release in the project, mainly because it includes many mono items that have been out of print for three decades — nearly all of them devoted to Mozart. Indeed, were it not that the above comments remained unpublished at the time of this writing, I might well have thought that someone at Sony had heeded my request for the reissue of older Walter material.

The most significant aspect of these Mozart reissues, recorded between 1953 and '56, is their revelation of a conductor who was considerably more vital than the octogenarian who re-recorded Symphonies 35–41 stereophonically.
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Moreover, the New York Philharmonic heard in many of these reissues was highly responsive to Walter; and a more cohesive ensemble than the *ad hoc* West Coast Columbia Symphony assembled for his two-channel projects. And equally important, in restoring Walter’s only recordings of Symphonies 25, 28, and 29 to the catalog, Vol. III fills a major gap in his discography. These three scores, along with 36, though nominally featuring the East Coast Columbia Symphony, also benefit from what I believe, was a good number of Philharmonic members.

It would be irresponsible not to acknowledge that Walter’s Mozart suffers from features that now seem unattractive: almost no exposition repeats, thick textures, unstable rhythm, weighty bass, awkward breath-pauses, and an occasional arbitrary manipulation of dynamics. And from someone deemed one of the most eminent Mozarteans of his day, this plodding, spineless 1956 recording of the *Requiem* is a major disappointment. In addition, there are a few instances where Walter seems insensitive to Mozart’s harmonic daring.

Balancing these flaws, however, are the frequent animation and joy in these older performances—traits that should surprise those who know Walter’s Mozart only from his stereo efforts. Melodies soar as well as sing, and movements dance with a swagger that is refreshing and apt. Listen, for example, to the festive buoyance of the opening movement of 35, the crisp, incisive bite of the finale of 36, the heroic thrust of the first movement of 39, and the lilting animation of the outer movements of 29. Note, too, how, for the second subject of the finale of 28, Walter generates a cantabile grace that seems more ingratiating than the tenser, machine-like treatment given such a passage by Szell. And, perhaps aware of the mood swings typical of adolescence, Walter favors modifications of tempo in 25 that seem thoroughly suitable to a work composed by a 17-year-old.

A few comments about production:

The annotations for the disc containing 38 state that the recording was previously released. It was not; this issue marks its first appearance. It also comprises the only work in the group that is heard to better advantage in Walter’s stereo remake, where the broader pace of the first movement generates greater drama, clearer detail, and more sharply delineated shape. Still, this Philharmonic account comprises an important document, and Sony intends to correct its annotative error. Having all these Mozart recordings in their original LP format, I can say that transfer producers Arthur Fiero and Dennis Rooney have preserved the generally good sound of the originals while enhancing it with the considerably greater presence that a silent background permits. And in the case of 29, what was an unbearably shrill recording has now become eminently listenable.

Among the other monophonic resurrection, the prize is a 1949 Triple Concerto of Beethoven. In its blend of lyricism, vitality, and cohesion it synthesizes Walter’s best attributes. The soloists—all associated with the New York Philharmonic, the string players as first-desk men, the pianist as an assistant conductor—are more than adequate.

Admirable, too, is the Bruckner Te Deum, recorded in 1952; weighty, stamped by a few pointed rhythmic adjustments, and benefiting from the dark-toned homogeneity of the Westminster Choir, it, like the Beethoven claimed he was re-recording his repertory in stereo to undo “the sins of his past.” If meant partly tongue-in-cheek, this comment has more than a kernel of truth. These Brahms Symphonies 2 and 4 are far more secure rhythmically, more shapeful, and in the finale of 2 less frenetic than the conductor’s earlier NYP efforts. And this *Academic Festival Overture* is not only the best of his three recordings of the work, it is one of the finest ever recorded by anyone. Even this Brahms 3 seems to breathe more naturally than Walter’s NYP account. Conversely, this Brahms 1, if often convincing, lacks the compelling, craggy harshness of his earlier New York version, and this stereo Schubert 9, although rhythmically tauter than the New York account, is without its thrust and vibrance. As in the previous releases in this Sony Edition, the sound of these stereo discs differs minimally, if at all, from their CD predecessors.

One more release will complete this project. Aside from offering such familiar stereo items as Bruckner’s Symphonies 4, 7, and 9, Schubert’s 5 and 8, and Dvorak’s 8 and 9, it will also include long-out-of-print mono fare: Haydn’s Symphonies 96 and 102; Beethoven’s *Egmont* Overture, *Leonore* Overture No.3, and “Emperor” Concerto (with Rudolf Serkin); and Schumann’s “Khenish” Symphony. And some of Walter’s finest monophonic recordings that are excluded from this Edition are now being considered for reissue in a new Sony historical series tentatively titled *Masterworks Heritage.* With the appearance of such material, today’s audience should gain a far better (if still incomplete) understanding of why Bruno Walter was so widely admired.
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These performances are drawn from the Tokyo's splendid Beethoven cycle of recent vintage, and make an excellent introduction to it. Those of 4 (Op.18 No.4) and 11 (Op.95) are as good as one is likely to hear, capturing the stormy intensity of both works without losing sight of their tenderness and lyricism.

At the root of such mastery is the Tokyo's spit-and-polish precision, pinpoint intonation, sharply defined dynamic contrasts, and careful attention to balances. Reviewing the group's set of the "late" Beethoven quartets in the June 1993 Stereophile (Vol.16 No.6), I noted that its 16 (Op.135) was stamped with a few awkward breath-pauses and tempo modifications. But, as I noted then, the distinction of the playing elsewhere, particularly its smooth rectitude, makes the freedom applied to Op.135 seem more extreme than it really is. With its generally fine sound, this disc is well worth owning for those who want but a sampling of the Tokyo's Beethoven. And its purchase helps to support AIDIS research — reason enough to make the investment.

— Mortimer H. Frank

This imposing account of the Brahms B-flat Concerto makes a fine complement to Kovacevich's equally admirable performance of the composer's D-minor Concerto of recent EMI vintage. As in that release, Sawallisch provides fine support for the pianist, their overall conception blending power and grace in conveying the wide emotional range of what is, perhaps, the most musically and technically demanding of all 19th-century concertos.

In its solidity of tone, tasteful rhythmic elasticity, and secure grasp of structure, Kovacevich's playing conveys the music's rich melodic flow, stormy outbursts (so redolent of the sea that Brahms loved), and playfulness. The finale, which in lesser hands can sound anticlimactic, is especially impressive. Here, both pianist and conductor manage to project its prevalent whimsical lightness while underscoring its echoes of the work's tempestuous moments. Impressive, too, is the slow movement, beautifully sustained without sounding sentimental or distended, and benefiting from the fine solo cello of Robert Truman.

A slight harshness of orchestral tone is more attributable, I suspect, to the acoustics of London's Royal Festival Hall than to any shortcomings in the admirable engineering. A generous bonus — Ann Murray's richly expressive yet firmly controlled singing of the Five Songs, Op.105 — adds to the virtues of this distinguished release.

— Mortimer H. Frank

The immediate impact of this performance of the String Quartet No.10 is in the mellow, blended tone that the Panocho Quartet makes, and the warmly reverberant acoustic it has been recorded in. This sets the pattern for the whole work, the Quartet seducing the ear with a gentle performance of neat rhythmic control and sensitive phrasing. Their characterization of the "Dumka" second movement and the Finale, with their constant changes of mood, is delightfully, instinctive changes of tempo and dynamic aiding their easy flow. The coupling, Cypress, a group of 12 of Dvorak's songs transcribed for quartet, is equally satisfying. A mixture of melancholic and happy, meditative and carefree, the melodies of these are put across with easy empathy, the lead instrument "singing" the aria to delicately unobtrusive accompaniment. Try this disc.

The piano quintet is a disappointment, particularly from such an excellent ensemble as the Emerson with their "Beaux Arts'" regular pianist, Menahem Pressler. First, I dislike their treble-bright sound and its attendant harsh, screechy timbres. The opening cello statement is also very slow and studied, prefacing a movement that never seems to settle happily into any regular tempo. The "Dumka" second movement is better, its second section relaxed and laid-back. The spirited Finale scherzo is wonderfully light on its toes, the finale echoing its rhythmic precision. I marginally prefer the Piano Quartet Op.87 performance; it makes a more coherent whole, but there's a horribly out-of-tune chord around nine minutes into the "Levito", the anticipation of which I could never learn to live with.

— Barbara John

The EMI is not a new release, but it arrived too late to be included in my recent Mahler 1 survey (January 1995). Mackerras' interpretation resembles Levine's (RCA RCD1-0894) in its drama, color, and vitality, but it's more scrupulously detailed and infectiously exuberant.

The Liverpool winds and brass exude the high quality of British orchestral playing; the strings are less impressive, but they contribute impassioned outpourings of tone to the Finale; and Mackerras's left-right division of the violins enriches the textures by clarifying the part-writing.

Vagaries of mixdown mar the generally vivid recording; the bassoon steps front and center for the first-movement exposition, for example, but retreats to its usual location for the recap; and some of the brass in the Finale is unexpectedly backward. Overall, this would rank high among the surveyed recordings, probably above Tennstedt's analog (EMI ZDMD 64471), and some will prefer its enthusiasm to the more sober readings of Haitink (Philips 434 728) and Masur (Teldec 74868); at mid-price, it's definitely one of the best.

Naxos hereby enulates the majors by going into competition with itself — they already offer a First conducted by Zdenek Kosler (8.550120). Fortunately, the capable Polish Radio forces distinct-
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STEREOPHILE, FEBRUARY 1996
ly improve on the Slovak Philharmonic’s erratically balanced, technically subpar reading on the earlier disc. The strings play their propulsive figurations in the Scherzo and Finale with ample energy and tone, while the lyrical passages are beautifully “sung,” benefiting from soulful solo recit contributions (the plaintive oboe at 42 in the Finale will tear your heart out). The discarded Blas- nine movement is a nice make-over.

Despite its strengths, this doesn’t quite reach the level of the previously released Fourth by the same orchestra under Antóni Wit (Naxos 8.550527). The sound, although originating from the same venue (the Concert Hall of the Polish Radio), is roomier and more hazily reverberant. Detail is clear enough, but the horns, who play solidly, seem unduly recessed in tutti (less bothersome under headphones), and the clarity gained by dividing the violins is somewhat vitiated. (Oddly, the more lightly scored Blasnine — well-played except for the violins’ grainy final high A — also sounds more closely miked, with results more similar to the Fourth’s glowing acoustic.)

Only a few details keep Halasz’s persuasive interpretation out of the top rank. The horn canon in the first-move- ment introduction begins almost inaudibly — a shame, as the supporting low strings hold tempo more steadily than do many of their counterparts in more renowned ensembles. At the exposition’s leisurely tempo the cellos intone the theme richly, but the mood becomes overly bucolic from the lan- guishing, and the unmarked acceleration that this later necessitates produces some slurry ensemble. In the Scherzo, the horn phrases leading into and out of the sweetly phrased Trio are deadpan, without signaling the shifts of mood. And Halasz mistakenly underplays the arrival of the Finale’s false climax — where the brasses blaze forth triumphantly in the “wrong” key — as if to tip us off that it isn’t the real thing.

These reservations notwithstanding, the Naxos release represents high-qual- ity music-making that, in its price range, easily beats out the alternatives of Butt (IMP Classics PCD 941) and Kubelik (DG Musikfestival 429 157, apparently OP anyhow). The Vox Box (CDX2-5508) coupling Jascha Horenstein’s mono recordings of the First and the Bruckner Ninth is very special, but of course it doesn’t compete sonically with the stereo editions. — Stephen Francis Vasta

MOZART: Don Giovanni
Rodney Gilfry, Don Giovanni; Luba Orgonasova, Donna Anna; Christopher Prégardien, Don Ottavio; Charlotte Marggonio, Donna Elvira; Iñaki de Aracangel, Leporello; Andrea Silvestrelli, Il Com- mendatore; Julian Clarkes, Masetta; Eirian James, Zerlina; The Monteverdi Choir, The English Baroque Soloists, John Eliot Gardiner

I’m going to go out on a limb here: This is my Desert Island Don. I had come close to pledging allegiance to Roger Norrington’s period-instrument version, and might have remained faithful had this powerhouse not come along, but boy, this is special.

A word about editions: Norrington offered both the Vienna and Prague versions, with capabilities to program either into your playback (albeit with very few cueing points). Gardiner uses the Vienna score straight through and offers the Prague additions as an appen- dix after the opera’s finale on the third CD. I don’t know anyone who prefers one over the other; admirers of Ot- tavio’s “Il mio tesoro,” missing from the Vienna score, can find it here, so there’s no problem.

One of the things I like so much about this live recording is the ferocity of all the emotions: The attempted rape is really hairy, Leporello’s sarcasm and “attitude” are deep-rooted and deeply expressed, Ottavio’s love for Anna is palatable and realistic (his “Lascia, o cara” in the first-act duet is warm and warming, highlighting Anna’s lack of interest in him except as protector); Elvira’s ravings are the real thing, and her tragedy is indisputable; Masetta’s and Zerlina’s predicament is nothing to scoff at; and the Don’s voyage from rueful to damned, going from strength, without regret, is a knockout. I dare say you’ve never heard the penultimate scene so powerfully performed, with brass and percussion blazing and rumbling, and participants yelling to beat the band.

Gilfrey and Orgonasova are spectacu- lar, singing beautifully, fearlessly, and with youthful urgency. L’Arcangelo is a great find as Leporello—he manages arrogance and groveling with equal flash. Prégardien’s Ottavio is very light but deeply felt and prettily sung, just as it should be. Clarkson and James are fine as the peasant couple, but they don’t stand out. Margonino’s Donna Elvira is not as well sung as some, but it is extraordinarily performed. Silves- trelli’s Commendatore is a real charac- ter—this guy doesn’t just stand for something, he’s a victim who gets his revenge.

Gardiner’s tempi are just right, with the exception of Elvira’s “Mi tradi,” which is too deliberate; it does help us relate to her better, though, and this must be what he had in mind. The recitatives throughout have the natural rhythm of speech and never sound operatically phony; this is honest-to-goodness music theater and simply must be heard. Chorus and orchestra are superb, especially considering that this is taken from live performances. Stage noises are not a bother, and the engineers have captured Mozart’s highs, lows, and inner voices (also, thanks to Gardiner’s incredibly clear outlook) to perfection. I said Desert Island and I mean it: This is breathtaking.

—Robert Levine

MOZART: Requiem
(completed by Robert Levin)
Ruth Ziesak, soprano; Nancy Maulsby, mezzo; Richard Croft, tenor; David Arnold, baritone; Martin Pearlman, Boston Baroque

After Mozart died, leaving the Requiem unfinished, his widow Constanze had the work completed by Franz Xavier Süssmayer so as not to lose the hand- some commission promised by Count Franz von Walsegg. Mozart had completed (including orchestration) only the very beginning, but fairly clear sketches up to bar 8 of the “Lacrimosa” survived in the composer’s hand. He may well have given verbal instructions about the concluding movements to Süssmayer, but we don’t know how ex- tensive they might have been. Süssmayer completed the Requiem in what became the standard performing version. His work, though, has been criticized for its thick orchestration and compositional errors, and a number of scholars—Richard Maun der, H.C. Robbins Landon, and now Robert Levin—have
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sought to improve on Stissmayer. The gentlest of the editors is Robbins Landon, who replaced some Stissmayer with somewhat thinner orchestrations by Joseph Eybler, another of Mozart's pupils. Elsewhere he kept Stissmayer, warts and all, because he regards it "an arrogance to correct small dubious textual matters." Robbins Landon's edition can be heard on Goodman's recording (Nimbus N1 5241), which unfortunately sounds like little more than a blood-and-thunder Baroque thriller. Far more radical is Richard Mauneder's edition, which basically tries to purge the Requiem of Stissmayer. This version, represented by Hogwood's chippier performance (L'Oiseau-Lyre 411 712-2), is almost a new piece, certainly arrogant by Robbins Landon's standards.

Levin's new version falls in between. He makes many alterations, but still with great respect for the 200-year-old original. His most obvious changes are an "Amen" fugue to replace the plagal cadence at the end of "Lacrimosa," and a lengthier fugue for "Osanna." Levin notes that Stissmayer recapitulated the second "Osanna" in a different key. This Levin "corrects" because, he says, no 18th-century composer did this. Well, I can tell you one who did: Stissmayer! In addition, Levin makes several small changes in the second half of the piece. Those in the "Sanctus," "Benedictus," and "Agnus dei" seem, even on first acquaintance, to be improvements.

How advisable is this? Robert Levin probably knows as much about Mozart's compositional style as anyone, and he's had years to do what Stissmayer did in a few weeks. By an objective standard, Levin is better. Stissmayer, though, whatever his shortcomings, was a competent 18th-century musician, armed with some degree of instruction from Mozart and steeped in the milieu of Viennese musical life. What, we could ask, is the point in trying to update this work?

The issue of the performance itself is separate, and here I'm tempted to follow my colleagues on the equipment side of the masthead by invoking the "goosebump" indicator. Does Pearlman's version thrill, excite, or move me? To start, everything is fast, very fast, such that if you entertain any Romantic notions about the Requiem actually dealing with a deceased person, you'll forget them here. The "Kyrie"/"Cum sanctis" fugue is without majesty — a race in which, by the way, not everyone always keeps up. Movements like "Recordare" and "Domine Jesu" are quick and effici-{

ent, but not touching. In many versions the "Lacrimosa"' sighing motets can bring tears (or at least damp eyes), but not here. And, of course, the sprightly "Amen" fugue further suggests that my sentiments in this movement have been misplaced. Only in the vigorous pieces like "Dies Irae" or "Confutatis" does the performance seem to have much to do with the text.

The four soloists, who sing mainly in quartet, all do well (as you would expect in a piece of this non-difficulty). The chorus of 21, though, sounds a bit small, and individual voices can occasionally be heard. Telarc's sonics are okay if you like a small hall/studio ambience. For me, though, the reverberant acoustic of a medium-sized church would be more appropriate.

Before choosing a Requiem to buy, you should decide what you want from the piece. Some conductors use large choruses and orchestras to strike a predominantly devotional tone. Often, as in the old Böhm (DG 413 553) or the latest Giulini (Sony SK 45577), the music becomes too self-consciously religious for me, but among large-scale versions I do like the 1987 Karajan (DG 431 288) and the older Giulini (Angel, deleted). Among smaller-scale performances (but still with modern instruments) I would consider Schreier's (Philips 411 420), Barenboim's old recording (Angel CDHZ 62892), or Colin Davis's (Philips 420 353). For period instruments, try John Eliot Gardiner (Philips 420 197) or Hogwood if you want to sample the Mauder edition. Which one am I listening to right now? Colin Davis's — the sentiments of the text are beautifully conveyed, and the sonics (Philips vinyl) bring on goosebumps.

— Paul L. Althouse

STRAUSS: Salome
Catherine Malfitano, Salome; Ilyn Terfel, Jokana; Kenneth Riegel, Herod; Hanna Schwarz, Herodiade; others; Vienna Philharmonic, Christoph von Dohnányi
London 444 178-1 (2 CDs only). Michael Woodcock, Christopher Pope, prod. 12/93. TT: 100:04

Well, it may not be as peculiarly off as the Jessye Norman/Seiji Ozawa performance (recorded in 1990 and released last year on Philips), which gave the impression of a conductor leaning back listening to a navel-gazing soprano, but this set is hardly more effective.

There's much good news: Dohnányi's leadership manages to bring all of Strauss' voluputous scoring into focus, tension is kept high (Norman/Ozawa are actually relaxed half the time), and the music sounds beautiful; Terfel's Jokana is amazingly nuanced and exquisitely sung, from whisper to roar and back again; Kenneth Riegel and Hanna Schwarz actually sing, rather than muti- late and twist, their parts; all supporting roles are well taken; the Vienna Philharmonic sounds great; and the recording captures every luscious moment.

When it comes to the Salome, the news is bad: Malfitano, one of the world's most intelligent and musical sopranos, never really had a Salome voice. She is essentially a lyric with the focus to sing some spinto roles like Tosca and Butterfly, but Puccini ain't Strauss (not even in Turandot, where Malfitano sang Liu), and she's simply the wrong flavor for this part. Add to that some serious vocal decline — a vibrato far too wide to be either appealing or healthy, and an inability to stay precisely on pitch — and for all of her insights and word-painting and caressing the text, we're left with a hole in the middle of the opera. Because she's such a riveting performer, Malfitano's Salome works when seen (a video is commercially available), but an audio recording opens her up to the type of scrutiny she can't stand up to. Strauss isn't well-served, and we hear the strain.

Stick to Nilsson/Solti (London) for unbridled power, Behrens/Karajan (EMI) for some exotic insights, Caballé/Leinsdorf (RCA) for vocal glory which will amaze, and Studer/Sinopoli (DG) for the best all-around reading (which also features Terfel).

— Robert Levine

TCHAIKOVSKY: Piano Trio, Op.50
ARENSKY: Piano Trio
Yefim Bronman, piano; Cho-Liang Lin, violin; Gary Hoffman, cello
Sony SK 53269 (CD only). Charles Harbutt, eng.; Gary Schultz, prod. 12/93. TT: 76:13
TCHAIKOVSKY: Piano Trio, Op.50
Faunus Schindl, piano; Stephan Shih, violin; Peter Tredler, cello
Antes HM-CD 319034 (CD only). 12/93. TT: 44:04

Stereophile, February 1996

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Tchaikovsky's Trio is a delightful if demanding piece. Its two-movement structure, the first a formally ambiguous Pezzo elegiaco, the second a set of variations, requires skill and musical sensitivity to give it poise and balance. Both sets of soloists on these two recordings achieve just that, but their approaches are very different.

Cho-Liang Lin has a sweeter sound than his German counterpart, but I very much enjoyed the mellow tone of the latter ensemble and the generally warmer recording. The Germans play with great gusto and sound like a youthful ensemble thanks to their vitality, and even though less flexible with tempo, they bring off the first movement with great aplomb. The Sony ensemble, by contrast, play more as soloists in dialogue, bending a phrase here to be answered equally expressively by another phrase there. Their sound is brighter but less homogenous to my ears, and I feel the piano is unnecessarily recessed when pitted against such strong string players. I can't say the recorded sound is much to my taste either—it has been closely focused, probably to combat the lively acoustic of an empty Medinah Hall, the Chicago recording venue. However, this is an exceptional performance, and the second-movement Variations are characterful and technically superb. While Emma Schmidt is an admirably strong pianist, she struggles just a little with the third variation in the German Trio version.

So, a difficult choice—sample and select for yourself; I'd say, but the Sony artists do offer an attractive filler with the Arensky Trio, and this may determine your decision. This is a delightful work by the man who was Rachmaninoff's theory teacher and a great admirer of Tchaikovsky. His Trio also opens with a dirge-like theme, and has an intense but beautiful Elegia third movement, but the Scherzo and Finale provide exciting contrast, and these performers are mindful of every changing sentiment. A delightful disc of excellent value.

— Barbara Jahn

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Prokofiev: PH 5027 (C3 only). ADD: TT: 71:21

PROKOFIEV PLAYS PROKOFIEV


Sergei Prokofiev, piano rolls

LaserLight 14 203 (CD only). ADD: TT: 42:06

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Boléro, Pavane pour une infante défunte, Le Tombeau des cloches, Tombeau de Couperin: Toccata, Gazetteer de la nuit, Le Gibet; Minuet: Équinox tresses

Maurice Ravel, piano rolls

LaserLight 14 201 (CD only). ADD: TT: 41:45

Recordings of piano rolls, appearing in LP format and, in recent years, on CD, have never quite received the uncritical imprimatur that producers of these discs have espoused. All too often, the rolls themselves, no matter how well reproduced in modern technology, have sometimes been suspect. Ravel and Debussy are cases in point. Though the former in particular was never considered to be a spectacular keyboard virtuoso, was his playing really as rhythmically lumpy as one hears here?

Dynamics in general, depending on the sophistication of the roll company (Ampico was probably the best, Welte-Mignon the worst), tended to equalize the two hands, an accomplishment often sounding undifferentiated and as loud as the main tune. The speed at which the rolls were intended to be played was not always correct. Occasionally little clickers would emerge, not the fault of the player but of an extra aperture in the paper roll. Still, where a flat-disc recording did not exist, a piano roll would have been the only way to hear certain performers, and just once in a while one comes across a roll on LP or CD that really can sound convincing—as, for example, one or two on the International label or the Argo BBC series on LP, the latter still not transferred to CD.

The Phonographe compilation, featuring Welte-Mignon recordings made between 1905 and 1914, is an interesting one: the composers play their own compositions, Saint-Saëns and Debussy each playing two of their works. A number of the non-composer pianists studied with Liszt (Vianna da Motta, Stavenhagen, d'Albert), always producing a worthwhile listening experience, and there is even the unlikely but quite charming Landowska performance of Berlioz's "Dance of the Sylphs" in Liszt's arrangement. There is a considerable element of curiosity that will justifiably attract a collector here, but Phonographe's insufficient documentation simply gives the titles and year of the recordings, not more. The CD reproduction is very-high-level and not always entirely clean. Furthermore, what I assume to be mono sound appears to be taken from previous LP incarnations, there being a decided surface swish on the Landowska cut. There is also some background hiss, and an ongoing noise that may be a residual of the mechanism.

If Phonographe's information is minimal, LaserLight's is nonexistent and represents almost a nadir in presentation. Nowhere are the words "piano roll" mentioned; there are no dates. The playing, really quite good in Prokofiev (note especially the quite romantic style of the Scheherazade suite), is recorded very close-up in stereo with no feeling of room ambience. The piano bass (usually the reproducing instrument was a piano smaller than a concert grand) has a somewhat barroom quality, but the Duo-Art rolls, in spite of the defects and the occasional rhythmical inaccuracy (especially in the Ravel Pavanne), have a not unattractive quality to them.

The Ravel CD1, however, poses some problems that would seem to hinge on fraud: the disc promises "Ravel Plays Ravel" and commences with an orchestral version of Boléro. Now Ravel did in fact make one recording of the work, conducting the Lamoureux Orchestra in Paris for Polydor in 1930, a performance that has been reissued a number of times on CD in recent years (Pearl GEMM CD 9927, Music & Arts CD-703). That Ravel-led recording times to 16:11, a remarkable performance that stuns by its very slowness. LaserLight's obviously faster version times to 15:30, is clearly in stereo, has an ambience that is quite different from Ravel's own, and
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is a quite acceptable performance in its own right if not quite on the level of the most electrifying versions. But, whatever the origin, this anonymous performance, sounding as though it derives from around the late '60s or early '70s, is not Ravel's own.

—Igor Kipnis

### JAZZ & BLUES

**TONY BENNETT: Here's to the Ladies**

Tony Bennett, vocals; Ralph Sharon, piano; Douglas Richeson, bass; Clayton Cameron, drums; orchestral charts written & conducted by Jorge Calandrelli; big-band charts written and conducted by Bill Holman; Lew Soloff, trumpet, solos

Columbia CK 67349 (CD only). David Kahne, prod.; Joel Moss, eng. 1996. TT: 67:17

Only the most hard-hearted of grinches could hear this album without smiling. Most 70-year-olds would have known the real sense of cleanness to finesse their last range and vocal control, or become pure nostalgia trips when even cleerness can not save them (like Frank Sinatra).

Tony Bennett will be 70 in 1996, but he's still a singer for whom no allowances are needed. That voice like warm flannel, with its suave confidence and impeccable phrasing, provides the best of both worlds: the wisdom and acceptance of age, and the strength of youth. An affirmation that life is worth living is implicit in Bennett's evident satisfaction in what he's doing.

The "ladies" in the title are 17 of the female vocal artists who have mattered the most to him. Because Bennett is not so much a jazz singer as a pop singer admired by jazz musicians, his list includes Barbra Streisand, Liza Minnelli, and Doris Day in addition to the Ellas, Sarahs, Billies, and Carmens. Given the fact that jazz-inflected singing is an art form dominated by women, it's a bold decision for a male vocalist to take on songs like Streisand's "People" and Judy Garland's "Somewhere Over the Rainbow."

Bennett just lets it flow; *Here's to the Ladies* sounds effortless and natural. Some of these lovely songs are now rarely heard, such as "Daybreak," the Dinah Washington tribute. Bennett floats over it lightly, making it as much a part of himself as his own breathing. Another is "My Love Went to London" (Blossom Dearie sang it), with its unusual story and melody lines. On "I'm in Love Again," by Peggy Lee and Cy Coleman, Bennett's articulation of the opening title line crystallizes a world of meaning in four words. There are also some very golden oldies like "My Ideal" and "Moonlight in Vermont" (both for Margaret Whiting); Bennett makes them real again.

Producer David Kahne provides three very different settings for these 18 songs: Ralph Sharon's piano trio, a 51-piece orchestra with strings, and an 18-piece big band with charts whose suppleness and sheen could only have come from Bill Holman. Columbia has made a major event of *Here's to the Ladies*, even using the album as the basis for a television special on CBS that aired in December. Audiophiles might wish that Columbia had lavished more of its large budget on the sonic quality of the recording. There are production teams that could have achieved another level of likefess vividness for this project — Akira Taguchi and Allen Sides of JVC, or Ralph Simon and Joe Barbara of Postcards. Still, Columbia's audio is sufficiently clean and uncolored, if slightly veiled, to allow Bennett's voice to work its magic.

It gives you hope for the human race that Tony Bennett has sold 30 million records for Columbia alone.

—Thomas Conrad

**DEEDEE BRIDGEWATER: Love and Peace**

Dee Dee Bridgewater, vocals; Stephanie Belmondo, trumpet; Lionel Belmondo, tenor sax; Theryry Eliez, Horace Silver, piano; Jimmy Smith, organ; Hein Van De Geyn, bass, arranger; Andre Ceccarelli, drums


This vocal tribute to pianist-composer Horace Silver has not only his blessing, but his participation: Silver, who wrote all the lyrics as well as the tunes recorded on this scintillating disc, plays on "Nica's Dream" and "Song for My Father." (The other guests, organist Jimmy Smith, rips through the overly funky "Filthy McNasty" and "The Jody Grind.")

Dee Dee Bridgewater is of course the star here, but she has the taste and jazz sense to make herself a jamming member of her top notch band as well. She trades fours with the horns, then sings her part of a wild collective improvisation on "Blowin' the Blues Away." She uses her voice as another instrument during the riffs of "The Jody Grind," where she also sings a couple of jazz choruses in unison with the horns. She scats brightly, and is also a mistress of the lyrics on such slow songs as "Lonely Woman."

It's remarkable how good those lyrics are. In the past, Silver has occasionally used his music to propagate pleasantly for his social beliefs, which might be summed up as "love and peace." Those lyrics can be heavy in every sense of the word. Not here — he has found the right tone, and the hippest, most infectious, and yet unaffected rhymes, for tunes such as "Doodlin'" and "You Happened My Way." There's one surprise: "St. Vitus Dance" turns out to be a celebration of Sammy Davis Jr. Not every line shines: "Song for My Father" finds Bridgewater singing "We're very proud to be / In his biography." But mostly these songs are successes lyrically as well as musically.

Bridgewater, who in my mind has just come into her own in the last few years, swings buoyantly throughout the uptempo pieces: you couldn't enunciate any more quickly than she does on "Blowin' the Blues Away." She's appropriately wistful on "Lonely Woman," a slow ballad she renders convincingly, without resorting to exaggerated pathos or mannerisms. The recorded sound is excellent: engineer Pierre Jacquot has skillfully balanced Bridgewater's voice with the band, which sounds compact and clear. Bridgewater specifically thanks Jacquot in her notes. The band of Europeans is topnotch. (The Belmondo brothers have a fine disc of their own, *For All Friends*, Challenge CHR 70016.) Clearly one of the most musical jazz singers alive, Bridgewater reminds us of the range and infectious power of Horace Silver's compositions.

—Michael Ullman

**THE BRONX HORN: Catch the Feeling**

Mitch Frohman, leader, tenor sax; Bobby Porcelli, alto sax; Ray Vega, trumpet; Oscar Hernandez, piano; Johnny Torres, bass; Jimmy Delgado, tambours; George Delgado, congas; Johnny Rodriguez, bongo

Top Ten TTH2002 (CD). Mitch Frohman, prod.; Horatio Malvicino, Mikael Jersven, engs. 15183 TT: 45:02

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tions, such as the Memphis Horns, who are best known for their backup work. All these players are veterans of the most exciting Latin jazz bands around, including Machito, Tito Puente, Eddie Palmieri, Ray Barretto, and Mongo Santamaria. Their disc comes with an endorsement from Tito Puente, who calls them "the future of Latin jazz." They're not averse to commenting on the past. One of the numbers here is a straight rendition, arranged for sax choir, of James Moody's famous bebop solo, "Moody's Mood," processed by gunner guest trumpeter Spanky Davis that follows.

Catch the Feeling has some of the expected high-energy dance tunes, such as Bobby Porcelli's "Get Back In." It also features an expressive ballad, "Terriaki," named after Mitch Frohman's daughter, the funky title track, and a vehicle for the right rhythm section: "King Jacob." The intriguing arrangements feature the horns in frequent unison passages as well as in solos.

The sound is undistinguished: The percussionists are heard close up on the extreme sides, and the horns are recessed perhaps too far in the middle. But the solos and upbeat cheer and competence of the playing make up for the lack of audibility appeal.

—Michael Ullman

DAVE DOUGLAS: Constellations
Dave Douglas, trumpet; Brad Schoepach, guitar; Jim Black, drums
hat AIT C1 6173 (CD only). Dave Douglas, Fla & Werner X. Eiherling, prod.; Peter Pfister, eng. 1993. TT: 36:55

Light-hearted and spirited, Constellations is the second disc by trumpeter-leader Dave Douglas's so-called Tiny Bell Trio. I'm not sure where the name came from—but drummer Jim Black does strike a bell once in a while, that but hardly defines the sound of this group, which plays (mostly) Douglas's compositions and solos collectively or singly with remarkable empathy and zest. The trio has been working together for three years, and it shows in the way they shift moods, improvise, or follow Douglas's lines while sounding both loose and together, independent and part of a whole. They play with power and whimsy. Their humor can be almost bawdy, as on "Unhooking the Safety Net," which starts with a high note and then a rumbling upward gliss on trumpet; after some more solo hijinks, the tune turns out to have a broadly romantic main theme that is played frantically. It's the kind of thing one expects in a Fellini movie. But there's a second theme that accelerates until the band breaks down into some quiet dips and hops and random sounds which lead (inevitably) back to the theme. Finally Schoepach takes a solo over a tango rhythm which breaks down again. One realizes that the return to the main theme and its Latin rhythm is planned—but so are the sections of free play, to use a nursery-school term.

Douglas plays with a broad tone that he squeezes and manipulates like a wildly updated Dizzy Gillespie. He also has a simpler, more lyrical style, as we hear on parts of "Hope Ring True." His writing is fascinating: one of the striking things about this trio is that its sound seems different with each piece, free here and swinging with rock-like intensity there (as on "Maquiladora").

Douglas has chosen three pieces by other other composers, including the waltz "Les Croquants" by Georges Brassens: drummer and guitarist shine here in accompaniment, sounding perfectly at ease with their mildly sardonic role. Herbice Nichols' "The Gig" is a bebop piece that seems to want to break into "Strike Up the Band.

The last piece on Constellations is Robert Schumann's goofy first number from his Five Folk Pieces, Op.102, a collection for cello and piano that may have been Schumann's sole descent into the music of the folk. It's not clear which folk—the original sounds a bit exotic, and the Tiny Bell Trio's version sounds positively middle-eastern.

The disc is clearly recorded, with Douglas and Schoepach in the middle of the stage surrounded a bit unrealistically by Black's drums. The session has remarkable presence otherwise, and the playing is grand. Constellations has been on my system, and in my head, for days.

—Michael Ullman

SONNY FORTUNE: A Better Understanding
Sonny Fortune, saxes, flute; Jerry Gonzalez, trumpet, flugelhorn, conga; Robbin Eubanks, trombone; Kenny Barron, piano; Wayne Dockery, bass; Ronnie Burgher, Billy Hart, drums; Steve Berrios, percussion Blue Note CDP 32799 2 (CD). Sonny Fortune, Marty Khan, prod.; Rudy Van Gelder, eng. 1993. TT: 57:16

In the early '70s, when I first heard him as a sideman in one of McCoy Tyner's best bands, Sonny Fortune frequently had a tense, strongly committed sound that fit the times—and perhaps his youth. His own records for Horizon showed he had a romantic side as well. It's that lyricism that we hear on this beautifully relaxed session recorded by Rudy Van Gelder. Fortune got that better understanding, he tells us in the notes, from a variety of musical experiences, including his work with Miles Davis, whose band he left full of "comfort, confidence, and enlightenment on many levels.

"Comfort" is the odd word there. One rarely expects jazz to be both comfortable and interesting, yet A Better Understanding shows the good side of ease and professionalism. Fortune tells us that he's known his accompanying musicians a long time—the newcomer to his world is Robin Eubanks, whom he met only 14 years ago. Fortune's work with the rhythm section of Barron, Dockery, and Hart goes back at least to 1975, when they recorded Awakening (Horizon SP 704). The band has re-recorded that LP's title number here. Even to my ears, so accustomed to vinyl, this new recording sounds better: clearer, less veiled, and with more precise imaging. The band sounds more accomplished as well, and this time Fortune doesn't fool with the wah-wah pedals that date the earlier venture.

Two of the Fortune compositions here are specifically dedicated to earlier musicians, and a third, "A Swing Touch," is reminiscent of an era. This leaping mid-tempo piece includes a buoyant solo by Kenny Barron and exposes Wayne Dockery's warm, prominently recorded bass. "It's a Bird" is a hard-edged bebop number dedicated, of course, to Charlie Parker. With its clearly defined pop phrases and call bridge, it could have been written by him. The sweetly sad "Tribute to
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Holiday” is dedicated to Billie, who seems to inspire such wistfulness in even the most exuberant musicians. “Long Before Our Mothers Died” brings out this exuberance — with its full rhythm section, including Gonzalez’s congas, and Berrios’s percussion, this number has a broader soundstage than the other numbers: Van Gelder captures all the activity beautifully. Here’s a piece that could be an audiophile’s test track.

Fortune speaks of the greater clarity of presentation he feels he has achieved in recent years: his intentions are better realized in his playing. With its expert and intriguing improvisatory devices, such as the different rhythmic patterns he imposes on ensuing choruses of “Tribute to a Holiday,” A Better Understanding shows that Fortune, one of the most intriguing alto players in contemporary jazz, has grown in mastery and control. He’s a surer, if less edgy, performer in 1995 than he was 20 years ago.

— Michael Ullman

OREGON: Trioka
Ralph Towner; classical & 12-string guitars, piano, synthesizer; Paul McCandless, oboe, English horn; Glen Moore, bass.
OREGON: Beyond Words
Ralph Towner; classical & 12-string guitars, piano, synthesizers; Paul McCandless, oboe, English horn, bass clarinet, soprano & soprano sax, pennywhistle; Glen Moore, bass.

The importance of variety in life is well documented, but the special pleasures of sameness have been insufficiently praised. There is a unique joy upon returning to a known excellence: the familiarity of the wind on your face when your bicycle drops down the first hill on your regular route, or the first bite of your favorite dish at your favorite restaurant.

Oregon is like that. From the first notes — the resonant hovering filigrees of Ralph Towner’s guitar, the gently probing needle of Paul McCandless’s oboe, Glen Moore’s deep intelligent patterns, or, more likely, an interweaving of all three — you know you are enfolded in their welcoming atmosphere once again.

Trioka and Beyond Words are the first unveiling on record of Oregon the trio. The fourth member of the group has always been a percussionist: first Colin Walcott, then Trilok Gurtu. In recent years, when Gurtu has been unavailable, the three original members have played concerts as a trio. What is most striking about these two recordings is that nothing is missing.

Towner, who became known 20 years ago for his guitar virtuosity, is now equally interested in keyboards. He is the dominant composer in the band, and his yearning themes are both intricate and open-ended. “Marietta” and “Celest,” from Trioka, are defined by his floating, luminous, pensive piano, while his Korg synthesizer makes shafts of sunlight behind the spaces left open for the forays of Moore and McCandless. The oboe is a rarely heard solo instrument in contemporary music, but in McCandless’s hands it becomes a cry of aching purity and a ballet of airy grace. McCandless is a high-pitched poet of sublime revelation, and one of the unsung heroes of jazz.

There’s some question, of course, as to whether McCandless belongs in “jazz” at all. The unclassifiability of Oregon has always been a problem for critics, if not for the group’s fans. But whatever they are, such as Trioka compositions as “Charlotte’s Tangle” and “Gekko” are quintessentially Oregon: oboe laced with bright guitar while Moore’s dark bass quakes beneath, a ceremony made from sections seamlessly shifting from written to improvised, the feeling exhilarating in its freedom yet formal as a minuet.

It is appropriate that Oregon has usually recorded for labels that are careful about audio quality, like Vanguard and ECM. The ensemble, after all, is about the exploration of proprietary tonal chemistries. The experience of Oregon needs to be an immersion in instrumental nuance and detail. Intuition taped Trioka in three different studios and one college chapel over the course of 11 months in 1993. The recordings provide a very competent rendering of Oregon’s heady ensemble elixir. But in terms of audio quality, Beyond Words is going to get all the attention. The Chesky recording methodology — direct to two-track using minimalist miking, a 128x-oversampling UltraAnalog A/D converter, and vacuum tube equipment built by George Kaye — is especially well suited to small drumless acoustic ensembles. Chesky engineer Bob Katz recorded Beyond Words in St. Peter’s Episcopal Church in New York, with the trio positioned as in a concert setting: Towner stage left, Moore center, McCandless stage right. The sound is startling because, while not flawless, its problems are those we experience in a live performance: the sometimes unpredictable interaction of intense and complex instrumental blendings in a reverberant space; the elusiveness of perfect instrument-to-instrument balance; the shuddering boom when the bass hits its lowest octave; the huge swings in dynamics between near-inaudibility and uncomfortable crescendos. But the immediate, believable, palpable reality of three musicians is powerful here. You don’t have to go out and get this music; it washes over you and sweeps you up in the elevated creative process that is Oregon.

Whether it comes from the deeply involving sonic quality or from collective inspiration, Oregon is lit up with incandescence on Beyond Words. “The Silence of a Candle” is an elegant, stately Towner tone poem, etched with focused intensity by each player in turn (Towner on Yamaha Concert Grand, McCandless on English horn). Even “Green and Golden,” a Towner classical guitar pastoral, has a special urgency. Jim Pepper’s “Witchi-Tai-To” has been in Oregon’s book for at least 20 years; here they set it to dancing with seven of their instruments, including Paul McCandless’s pennywhistle.

Oregon albums, always the same and always different, are among the things in this life of which there cannot be too many.

— Thomas Conrad

JHON SCOFIELD: Groove Elation
John Scofield, guitar; Larry Goldberg, organ, piano; Dennis Lewis, bass; Fredrik Mahnsham, drums. Blue Note CD 8 32801 2 (CJ only). Lee Townsend, prod.; James Farber, eng. D10/ADD. TT: 60:24
JIM HALL: Dialogues
Jim Hall, guitar; Scott Colley, bass; Andy Watson, drums; with Bill Frisell, Gil Goldstein, Tom Harrell, Joe Lovano, Mike Stern. Telarc Jazz CJ 83369 (CJ only). John Snyder, Jane Hall, prods.; Jack Renner, Michael Bishop, engs. 13010. TT: 56:56

Being an artist is one thing; building a career and a body of work is quite another. John Scofield early on developed a distinct, personal voice on his instrument. From there, it was only a question of where he would take it.
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Having wrung all he could out of jazz/rock in his group with funk/fusion master Dennis Chambers, Scofield has returned to the more straight-ahead sound of his early trio records, but this time as a quartet with Joe Lovano. A couple of outings with guitarist friends Frisell and Metheny, and Sco was ready to explore his bluesier side.

While last year's Hand jive, with Eddie Harris, was as greasy as a platter of ribs, Groove Elation delves even deeper into the fat, or at least the fatback. The key player here is Muhammad, who replaces Bill Stewart with a more muscular but no less swinging groove. Muhammad's second-line influence is felt on the Meters-style "Kool." On the Dirty Dozen Brass Band attitude of "Peculiar" he is ably aided by Howard Johnson's tuba.

Sco's arranging for Johnson and cornrows Steve Turre, Billy Drewes, and Randy Brecker alternates New Orleans r&b inflections with a '50s cool that's as much Henry Manicini as Gil Evans (a compliment). One is reminded that many of Manicini's themes were as much about groove as melody ("Pink Panther," "Baby Elephant Walk").

The sound is mostly warm and friendly. Only the organ sounds a little anemic, but then so does the player. Goldings' sensitivity, so appropriate in his work with Jim Hall, is of an asset here, where some more fire would have been welcome.

For an artist to maintain his identity inside the formalism of blues/funk, it must be strong indeed. Scofield not only achieves this, but also manages to make the clichés of the idiom sound fresh — no mean feat.

Sco makes no bones about his debt to Jim Hall as a guitar influence. But Hall has no doubt also served as a shining example of how to have a career full of challenge, growth, and integrity. As he enters his eighth decade, Hall shows no sign of slacking off. Last year he released his first album of solo guitar, he's writing more original material than ever, and a couple of years ago he picked up a pedal that allows him to add more notes to his already dense, advanced harmonic concept. Compare this to the so-called young bloods who already sound like tired old men with nowhere to go.

For Dialogues Hall sought out not young, saleable names, but kindred musical spirits. On "Calypso Joe," Lovano's strong, sprightly tenor sax evokes your-know-who in Dialogues' only nod to the past. Constantly seeking new contexts, Hall duets with Gil Goldstein's haunt-

ing bass accordion on "Snowbound," and the free excursion of the title tune. And, of course, the record leads off with two tunes featuring Bill Frisell — Hall's spiritual son. Jim brings out Bill's lyricism, and Bill encourages Jim's zany side. Anyone keeping these two from doing a full record together should be shot.

"Dream Steps" is a conversation between Tom Harrell's trumpet and Hall's guitar over Watson's high-lut. Context is important to the guitarist, as the briefest look at his career will attest. From Chico Hamilton's quintets with cello to Jimmy Giuffre's rhythm-section-less trios, Hall has always been open to new methods of presentation.

Telaré's 20-bit sound is as warm and intimate as it is accurate, making this an excellent introduction to the ever-evolving world of a master musician and inspiration.

— Michael Ross

**POPULAR**

**ALICE IN CHAINS: Alice in Chains**

Colombia CK 62486 (CD). Toby Wright, Alice in Chains, prod.; Toby Wright, Tom Nellen, rec.; Toby Wright, mix. TT: 54:55

The nights are long and damp in the Pacific Northwest, and all the young men have to do, I suppose, is alter their minds, look at those nice 19th-centuryetchings from Alice in Wonderland—from—Hell, and wish they were Megadeth. Or maybe the name spins off some weird take on Alice Cooper; who knows?

Suffice it to say that if most of the heavy-heavy metallers were either literate or musically sophisticated, they'd write and play like Alice. Not that it's pleasant — oh no, it's really loud and tooth-grinding and works off some chord and rhythm changes like throwing an old Dodge transmission into second from reverse (fortunately, Detroit built 'em sold). Lyric are Nine Inch Nails without all the self-conscious gore except for animal mutilation, and they're even a touch transcendent in the High Romantic Adolescent school: "Dear God, How you been then? I'm not fine, fuck pretending..." which explores the ever-popular concept of bad things happening to good people. Clearly, someone in Alice waded through that staple of accelerated high school English, _J.B._, and good for them, because it would be a sad old world alright if all the youth in America wouldn't stop to help someone in a train wreck. Even if they put the brick on the track in the first place. "God Am."

Which goes to say, Alice in Chains got rhymes. They got character. They're the other guys in music class, the ones Springsteen was smarter than, and they need all that to open for Van Halen and Ozzie Osbourne (and, to my mind, mop the floor with them). Eddie Van Halen bought the boys Doc Martens and grunge shirts because he couldn't stand the competition. Best track: "Again."

— Beth Jacques

THE BEATLES: Anthology 1

Capitol 28444 2 32 (CDs). George Martin, prod.; Geoff Emerick, eng. AAL. TT: 210:54

What do you call two discs of early Beatles outtakes, wisecracks, and live performances? The pop culture event of the year? Maybe. The biggest-selling double-CD set in history? You got it. If John Lennon had lived to see what he and his mates had considered dross at the time turned into gold, he might never have retracted his "Beatles are bigger than Jesus" remark.

Lennon must be having a chuckle over "Free as a Bird," the first "new" Beatles track in 25 years. All the hoopla — positive and negative — sidesteps the fact that if Lennon had created a song that stood up to his best material, he would have finished it himself and released it, either in 1977 or on 1980's _Double Fantasy_. The demo that Yoko Ono bequeathed to the surviving Beatles was nothing more than a song fragment.

Still, the end result is remarkable in its own way, the audio equivalent of _Forest Gump_ with Paul, George, and Ringo communing with Lennon in the
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same way Tom Hanks got up-close and personal with JFK. Overdubbing the basic tracks with the help of the World's Biggest Beatles Fan, Jeff Lynne, the Lads have created what sounds like a good Traveling Wilburys song, with Abbey Road harmonies thrown in for good measure. Lennon's wispy voice sounds oh so far away, adding an undeniable poignancy (not to mention a healthy dose of irony). "Strawberry Fields" it ain't, but it's better than anything ELO ever did.

The meat of the collection is stuff that will be of real interest mostly to hardcore Beatlemaniacs. We get historical curios like 1958 Quarry Men versions of "That'll Be The Day" and the McCartney/Harrison (!) composition "In Spite of All The Danger," recorded off scratch 78s from the Beatles' private collections; live performances at the height of British Beatlemania (including an excerpt from the November 4, 1963 Royal Command Performance that includes Lennon's infamous "rattle your jewelry" remark); and unreleased songs and studio outtakes.

The last, by far, is the most worthwhile part of Anthology 1. Much of Abbey Road Studios' mother lode has already been mined by bootleggers, but George Martin and Geoff Emerick have reixed these songs with varying degrees of success. Most of the cuts have been cleaned up but not sanitized, but early versions of "Hallelujah, I Love Her So" and "You'll Be Mine" may be some of the best commercially released recordings of all time. They sound as though they were recorded in the loo of the Yellow Submarine.

Whether it be the extremely early takes of "One After 909," recorded nearly six years before the live Apple rooftop version, or take 2 of "I'll Be Back" recorded in, of all things, waltz tempo, surprises abound here. Eavesdroppers who delighted in hearing George Harrison's count-in to "Taxman" and Lennon's off-the-cuff pronouncements on Let It Be will find plenty to titter over here. Lennon and McCartney chew each other out after blowing successive takes of "One After 909," for example, and Paul's intentional flubbing of a line on "No Reply" has his partner falling about with laughter. There are also short sound bites from John, Paul, and Brian Epstein that lend a little narrative flow for the generationally impaired.

Perhaps Anthology 1's most remarkable track is McCartney's early workout of "And I Love Her." This arrangement, featuring a faster tempo and a conventional guitars/bass/drums lineup rather than the flamenco guitar/bongo/claves etched into our memories, brings to mind "Things We Said Today." It's exciting to hear simply because it's so damn different from the album version of the song.

But once you've heard these outtakes a couple of times, and get over the shock of hearing "Eight Days A Week" with a cheesy vocal intro instead of the guitar fade-in, you realize that they were outtakes for good reasons. If there was any doubt, this set proves beyond a shadow of a doubt that Martin and the Beatles were good editors. The stuff they released is without exception better than what they left in the can. And yet that doesn't seem to matter.

Like its companion documentary, Anthology 1 relies too heavily on concert tapes. The Beatles were simply not a great live band; Lennon himself acknowledged that the group's stage performances declined precipitously after peaking in Hamburg, long before the noptobs became household names. After all, if we hardcore fans wanted to hear sloppy, scream-infested versions of "She Loves You" and "Twist and Shout," we would have attended Beatlesmania on Broadway. And the other zillion-and-a-half people didn't buy Anthology 1 to play, they shelled out their 25 bucks to possess — and put it on the shelf next to the documentation for Windows 95 and the limited-edition laserdisc of Forest Gump.

— Allen St. John & Joe Basile

TIM BUCKLEY: Honey Man

This late live radio broadcast, recorded in New York (WLIR, 11/27/73) before a tiny studio audience less than two years before he died, turns out to be one of the best-played, most satisfyingly balanced albums of the latter half of Tim Buckley's recorded career. This is the same quintet—Buckley, guitarist Joe Falsa, keyboardist Mark Tierman, bassist Bernie Myers, drummer Buddy Helm—that backed Buckley on his penultimate studio album, Sfionia. But while they sounded like no more than a suspiciously slick L.A. studio pickup group on that water-treading record, here, just a few months later, they sound and play like a band. For once Buckley has backing that can follow him anywhere his improvisational whim takes him, and on Honey Man that whim is one of musical steel.

There's no trace on this disc of the sensitive folk troubador Buckley started out as; that had long since been replaced by avant-garde jazz stylings, r&b shouts and honks, and exotic tribal ululations. And though Buckley always sounded vocally confident to the point of arrogance, even narcissism, here every whoop, swoop, holler, bent note, and melisma has its place in an overall musical vision. Songs like the downright horny revision of the traditional "Sally Go Round The Roses" build inevitably, and the extended scatting-over-percussion of "Devil Eyes" sounds as if it's happening because Buckley has something to say, and not just three choruses and five minutes of air time to fill.

One reason Honey Man works so well as an album; it covers Buckley's entire career, from the folk psychedelia of "Pleasant Street" (from Hello Goodbye, 1967) to a warm, relaxed, solid "Buzzin' Fly" (Happy Sad, 1968) and beyond. Still, most of these tracks are updated versions of hypersexed songs from Buckley's late funk period of Welcome to L.A. and Sfionia, though minus those records' overproduction and forced attitude. And Buckley throws in a baritone version of Fred Neil's "Dolphins," which he'd been singing in concert since his teens.

Sound is compressed, hard, and thin, but honest, and not at all bad for this vintage of rock air-check; Randy Boo-kasta's liner notes are well-written and informative, and the photos and booklet design strike a perfect balance between the dated, the nostalgic, the contemporary, and the tasteful. A class act, a must-buy for Buckley fans, and much better than last year's Live at the Troubadour 1969. Newcomers, however, should start with Hello Goodbye, Blue Afternoon, The Peel...
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Ingenue was a triumph of style over substance. Its slight songs of love and desire were fleshed out by the luxurious longings of Lang's lush vocals, and Ben Mink's brilliant arranging and production. But only "Constant Craving" was a truly great tune. In fact, it was such a perfect pop artifact that it raised the level of the entire project.

All You Can Eat contains no tunes of such magnitude. Only "Maybe" even comes close, with a chorus that takes off into the release that the rest of the record craves. With all due respect to Lang's PETA involvement, most of All You Can Eat plays out like a shiny skin of arrangements and production tricks in search of flesh and bone.

But what great arrangements and production tricks they are. Mink and Lang have honed their sound into a marvel of low-tech texture. Like Brian Ferry, they've created an intensely personal, unique sonic world. It's a warmer world than Ferry's, one of acoustic stringed instruments (violin, viola, cello, harp, acoustic guitar) and low-tech keyboards (cheesy organ, Fender Rhodes piano) instead of processed electric guitars and synthesizers.

Layered Beatles-esque vocals ("Get Some") bump up against sampled fax machines and slide guitar ("Acquiesce"), all immaculately recorded. The LP (orange vinyl) skipped on the first cut, and in general was far from an audiophile pressing, but the CD is like dessert at a five-star restaurant: layers of gosamer flavor flawlessly blended in a creamy sauce with those perfectly drawn swirls. A lovely confection, if not very nutritious.

Weak songs aside, what's most missing is Lang the singer. Her voice here is used as just one more color in the palette—fine for vocalists like Brian Ferry or Grace Jones, but criminal in the case of one with Lang's expressive gifts. Less time recording and more time writing on the next one—okay, K.D.

—Michael Ross

MAURA O'CONNELL: Stories
Hannah HNC2 13899 (CD) only. Jerry Douglass, prod.; Bil (W) Vornick, eng. TT: 41:37

Craft is a thing that has fallen out of favor and fashion, replaced by pure passion, a desperate crying to be heard above the din of the contemporary information overload. Oh, it works all right. Like a baby crying for its bottle, it's impossible to ignore and hard to endure. But that's okay, because these days 15 minutes is all you get; no one has to endure it for long.

Craft is more insidious. It seduces rather than assault, and holds up under greater and longer scrutiny. The beautiful hand-built house seems to improve with age.

Maura O'Connell is a connoisseur of craft: specifically, songcraft. As one of that near-extinct breed of pop singers who do not write their own material, she has to be. Possessed of a lovely voice, she nevertheless is not one of those singers who can sing the Yellow Pages and make you weep. It is her involvement and, yes, passion for the songs she sings that make her special.

For my money, A Real Life Story offered the highest percentage of songs that perfectly matched her style. Her version of Shawn Colvin's "I Don't Know Why" surpassed Colvin's own, and her rescue from obscurity of Cock Robin's "When Your Heart Is Weak" was brilliant.

Stories' version of Colvin's "Shotgun Down the Avalanche" is a high point, even if this version merely equals the original. John Gorka's "Blue Chalk," and Tom Kinnel's and Buddy Mondlock's "Poetic Justice" tell just the kind of tales of love's complications and pain that O'Connell's slightly gruff approach enhances.

But even her obvious feeling for it can't save "Ordinary Day"'s slice of diner life from falling on the wrong side of preciousness. Nor can her unquestioned sincerity save us from the slightness of "Rainmaker." And surely there are more interesting Beatles tunes to lend her talents to than "If I Fell."

It must be a daunting task to choose material from the wealth available. O'Connell in the past has shown herself up to it. She's said that a well-crafted song is like a modern-day prayer. But important as it is, craft is only the vessel. As a singer, Maura O'Connell's talent goes well beyond craft into inspiration; would that more of the material on Stories did the same.

—Michael Ross

THE RENTALS: Return of the Rentals
Maverick/Reprise 460902-2 (CD). Matt Sharp, Tom Guiney, prod., arr., mix; Tom Guiney, eng. TT: 37:02

Return of the Rentals, the debut album from Weezer member Matt "This Is Not My Little Side Project" Sharp, is a find. Recorded, produced, and arranged entirely independently (at Poop Alley, LA) by Sharp and cohort Tom Guiney, who engineered and programmed honest-to-God Moog synthesizers, the nice people at Madonna's hand-made record label Maverick "got a hold of a tape" (I'll bet), and the rest is history. The new band even plans to record again.

Combining the sensibilities of Borskley-era bands like The Rubinoos with a monstrously heavy hand on Moog synth even Rod Argent couldn't better, in sensibility Return of the Rentals calls to mind nothing so much as Jonathan Richman fronting ELO produced by Ric Ocasek (who did not produce). Classy touches like layers of violin and female backup vocal harmonies keep the top of the sandwich tasty as the bottom.

What you should know about The Rentals is that Sharp has met Madonna, she seems like a decent person, and they did not talk about sex; no, Weezer did not break up, they're closer than ever before, just on hiatus; the eponymous "P" (as in "...anyone who's Friends of P is down with me") is whoever or whatever you want "P" to be; Grimm
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Stereofile, February 1996
The songs of Denver band 16 Horsepower seem to spring directly from the Spaghetti-Western West, that mythic land where High Plains Drifter meets Oxydol Rex: distant mountains and vast desert plains filled with hard choices made by soulless loners and existential gunslingers in apocalyptic moral dramas played out before a God more interested in justice than compassion. 16HP's Sadeloth'n'Axes—the very title sets the tone of unrelished grief—is a sobering evocation of the joyless intolerance of moral ambiguity that's rooted deep in the American soul. This is the album a modern Billy the Kid might have made had he given up killing people long enough to try to make sense of his wretched life.

David Eugene Edwards writes and sings the words (the music is credited to 16HP). Consider the grim, futile defiance of "Horse Head": "Come to my house an' I'll pick bones /their hands outside ready with stones / Come to my yard—I got whiskey an' chairs / We'll sit on the porch as the good men stare." Or the last desolate line of this verse from "Heel on the Shovel": "I'm diggin' you a shallow grave / An' on your rotten bones I'll raise / Yellow daisies for my true love's hair... / O Lord where is the fear in me." It's the voice of a man who has done the best he could and feels himself simultaneously damned and abandoned by a jealous and vengeful God. "Despair" would not be too strong a word.

The music is as influenced by Spaghetti-Western film composer Ennio Morricone as it is by rock, bluegrass, country, and cowboy ballads of the authentic and Hollywood varieties. I could call 16HP a banjo/accordion power trio, but you'd get entirely the wrong idea. Edwards has a remarkable ear for Haunted Voicings on his banjo, slide guitar, and especially on a 100-year-old bandoneon. Keven Soll plays a flat-top bass he built himself (he repairs instruments on the side). But the real powerhouse is classically trained French drummer Jean-Yves Tola, who manages to find some arresting new riff for every one of these 13 tracks, each more urgent and driving than the one before. I haven't heard rock drumming this vital since the first PJ Harvey trio.

There are drawbacks: Edwards's high, hard drawl is relentless in its anguished hillbilly keening. (He sounds like Echo and the Bunnymen's Ian McCulloch, even on the few tracks—like "Red Neck Reel"—in which 16HP is actually trying to have a good time.) And the sound is harsh to the point of pain at the volume levels this driving music seems to demand. Other than that, the recording—it sounds live in the studio—is honest and straightforward, particularly the drum sound.

However it sounds, Sadeloth'n'Axes is an important record; its mixture of harsh beauty, acts of cruelty restrained only by a desperate force of will, make it one of the most relentlessly authentic (if infinitly darker) American albums since The Band. 16HP fulfills the promise that groups like Grant Lee Buffalo, Son Volt, and the Jayhawks could not.

Sadeloth will be released later this month. In the meantime, pick up 16HP's eponymous EP for an inexpensive intro. Though none of the EP's six tracks are duplicated on Sadeloth, each is at least as good as anything on the full-length album—especially the instant-classic choruses of "Straight-Mouth Stomp" and "Coal Black Horses"—and there's arguably even greater variety in less than half the playing time. Remember the name—you'll be hearing about 16 Horsepower. They stomp.

—Richard Lehner

16 Horsepower is one powerful new band. From left: Jean-Yves Tola, David Eugene Edwards, Keven Soll.

SMASHING PUMPKINS: Mellon Collie and the Infinite Sadness
Virgin 8 48861 2 (2 CDS). Flood, Alan Moulder, Billy Corgan, prod. TT: 201:50

No matter how hard Smashing Pumpkins tries on their two-CD concept set, Mellon Collie and the Infinite Sadness is ultimately a case of too much of a mediocre thing and a terrible play on words. The album's overriding theme is the tug-of-war between hope and despair, ballad and bombast, a lyric game of "I love you, I love you not" that the latter clearly wins: they know what they want but don't know how to go about getting it, so life sucks. That's a shame, actually, because resident autocrat Billy Corgan is capable of building lavish Spectorian walls of sound, given sufficient time and effort.

The Pumpkins' opulent Siamese Dream (1993) still stands as a testament to Corgan's talent, though here it's a stretch to find even a single disc's worth of solid material lurking about. Without Dream's gorgeous array of overdubbed Corgan guitar lines to hide behind (here, his solos smack too heavily of Black Sabbath), the rest of the group's undeniable shortcomings become painfully clear. Second guitarist James Iha is all salty attitude and no chops, drummer Jimmy Chamberlain bangs away with no regard for tonal shading, and bassist D'Arcy is a complete cipher. The finishing touch is Corgan's existential whine, which quickly turns intolerable.

But maybe that's the point—you're supposed to feel as bitchy listening to this as Corgan and his underlings seem playing it. If so, hey—it's a masterpiece.

—David Prince
BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: The Ghost of Tom Joad

“Well, sir, I guess there’s just a meaness in this world.” That’s how Bruce Springsteen’s Charlie Starkweather explains himself on death row in the title track to his 1982 classic Nebraska. Then it was half a joke.

But on The Ghost of Tom Joad, Springsteen’s most uncompromising album yet, it’s not a one-liner anymore. Whereas Nebraska, for all its bleakness, is a record about hope — as is the rest of the Springsteen canon — Tom Joad peers into the darkness on the edge of town and sees nothing but more darkness.

Call it evil. In its most basic Biblical definition, this solo, mostly acoustic album is brimming with it. Nebraska was a record about hard choices — with the implication that there was a right choice, even if Starkweather, Jolynn 99, and the protagonist of “Atlantic City” may not have found them. This time, Springsteen offers us no such solace.

The World According to Joad is populated by characters with both feet over the line, and doing the right thing just never seems to be an option. In “Straight Time,” an ex-con plays with his kids and then goes back to his old ways simply because he can. In “Highway 25,” a shoe salesman follows a flirty customer all the way to a bloody bank holdup, but deep down he knows he wasn’t lured. “I told myself it was something in her / But as we drove I knew, it was something in me.”

And while in Nebraska the protagonists were pulled across the line by circumstances, by debts no honest man could pay, on Joad Springsteen faces the harder truth that society doesn’t suck, people do. The cycle of racism, murder, and vengeance on “Galveston Bay” may be a metaphor about the hidden dregs of America’s melting pot, but it’s clear that these are the deliberate acts of men with free will. On the title track, Springsteen is still singing about “the promised land,” but now he’s using it ironically, and in the verse he takes the central metaphor of his work and deconstructs it: “The highway is alive tonight / Nobody’s kid- ding nobody about where it goes.”

There are no Twinkie defenses and no second chances in this new world order. Canus would have understood.

At the album’s center is a trilogy of tales set on the Mexican border. “Sinaloa Cowboys,” a gentle, almost cloying ballad, tells the story of two Mexican teens who turn their backs on the hard-work/no-pay world of migrant farm labor for the big money of running a methamphetamine lab. Inevitably, the lab blows up and young Luis Morales dies in the desert. And that’s where the Springsteen of 1982 would have left it. But in the last verse, Miguel drives Luis’s body into the desert, digs up the $10,000 they’d saved, and lays his brother’s body in the same hole. It’s the ultimate act of cynicism, and the most disturbing part is that it rings true.

“The Line” is Joad’s answer song to Nebraska’s “Highway Patrolman.” In the earlier song Joe Roberts watches his fugitive brother escape over the Canadian border. “A man that turns his back on his family / He just ain’t no good,” Joe says to himself.

This time, good and bad don’t enter into it. Here a border patrolman falls in lust with a beautiful detainee. He agrees to help her get across the border, and when he discovers that her brother is smuggling drugs, his purpose remains unshaken. When his partner stops him, our hero’s ready to blow him away without thinking twice. His partner’s no fool and they just stand there and both watch her run away.

It’s almost comical how fast everyone here heads for the low road. Whereas once Springsteen channeled Satchers- era John Ford, this one could be filmed by Quentin Tarantino.

The set piece about ends with “Bal- boa Park,” the saga of Spider, a border boy who smuggles cocaine in his stomach. Like virtually all the stories on this record, Spider’s ends in death, but not the way you’d expect. It’s not a broken condom but a speeding car that gets him. Spider never sees what hits him, and Bruce tells us with a sigh that ultimately it doesn’t matter. Life’s just dangerous on the borderline.

Formally, Joad is a radical departure as well. Fully conscious that the last time he waded this deep into social commentary, on Born in the USA, his message was swept away in a flood of fist-pumping rock’n’roll and presidential propaganda, Springsteen presents a batch of anti-songs. There’s a deliberate lack of craft at work here. Almost none of the songs has a conventional verse/chorus structure, and they’re riddled with bad rhymes and semi-tortured syntax. Stacking a 10-syllable line with a 20-syllable line, Bruce lays a path that’s hard to hum along with, but that’s the whole point. If this album touches you, it’ll be because of the strength of the message, not the catchiness of the tune.

Fortunately, the sound, too, is a departure for Bruce. Known as probably the worst offender in the great music/lousy sound club, he’s done a stunning about-face here. Joad isn’t laden with detail like some acoustic albums; it’d be just one more distraction from the songs, the story. But for the first time since Nebraska (or, if you’re inclined to dismiss an album that started out as demo tapes, since The Wild, the Innocent and the E-Street Shuffle) there are the sounds of a human being singing and playing on a Springsteen album.

My LP of Joad was very warped, but still trackable, yet its sound was better than the CJ3’s by a significant margin. The vinyl preserved more low-level detail; that, combined with a slightly deeper, less forward soundstage, made this intimate album seem even more so.

In case I haven’t made myself clear, I think The Ghost of Tom Joad is a great album, one that stretches the boundaries of what’s possible in contemporary popular music. Springsteen is the only artist who could have made this record, and certainly the only one who could have gotten one this subtle and disquieting released to a mass audience. Having put his days as Rock and Roll’s Future behind him, Springsteen’s now tapping into something a lot older. After the navel-gazing Lucky Town and Human Touch, I’m stunned that he was able to turn his gaze outward and reach down for a set of songs as powerful as these. Tom Joad is Springsteen’s bravest album, and it might just be his best. If you believe that popular music should be about more than just a girl, a car, and a Saturday night, it’s an absolute must-hear.

— Allen St. John
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As much of a fan as I am of both of these very different musicians, I expected little from Orange Crate Art. Brian Wilson seemed to have pretty much scraped it down to the rind years ago; and in the 27 years following the 1968 release of Song Cycle, Van Dyke Parks has made only five albums (including this one), none of them half as good as that remarkable debut.

Still, Parks did write the very un-Beach Boys–like lyric to “Heroes and Villains,” “Surf’s Up,” and other selections from the most famous album never released: the Beach Boys’ Smile. And Parks was also perhaps the only musician to ever out-California Brian Wilson, on such surreal and little-known extravaganzas as Discover America and Song Cycle itself.

Like so many of the classic Beach Boys singles, almost every track on Orange Crate Art evokes a sunny, simple-minded, good-hearted California that never existed, but was too important for too many of us to believe in for far too long. But these days such sentiments sound more like an elegy for such California dreamin’ than a paean to it.

The album is an art-pop Pictures at an Exhibition: Parks wrote and arranged 10 of the dozen songs (the last track is a gorgeous arrangement of Gershwin’s little-known “Lullaby”), the lyrics of all but one of which are based on paintings by various artists of different scenes from California’s past. Musically, Parks claims that Orange Crate Art is a deliberately updated re-creation of pop music as it might have evolved had Elvis never stopped driving a truck. Wilson is more succinct: “This isn’t a rock’n’roll album.”

In short, expect no passion here other than the rarified passion of a veteran pop arranger/producer (Parks).

Nonetheless, Orange Crate Art sounds more like a Beach Boys record from 1968–72 than anything the Boys themselves have come up with in the last 20 years, with or without Brian Wilson, and that’s very good. Here are all those unexpected chord changes, richly layered background vocals, and quirky counterhythms we’ve always taken for granted as Brian Wilson trademarks. They’ve also always been Van Dyke Parks trademarks, which makes this collaboration ideal, and explains why we should be grateful that the two have resuscitated a partnership and friendship that lay dormant for the more than 20 years following Smile. Parks does here what he’s always been able to do well, and what Wilson can’t quite manage anymore — write and arrange. Wilson restricts himself to what he still excels at (and what Parks, with his mouse-on-helmet voice, could never do): sing in one of the richest, most evocative, and widest-ranging voices ever to grace an AM radio. In fact, the album is a tour de force for Wilson, who sings all of the lead and what sound like most of the backup vocals as well, all in Parks’s pop-baroque arrangements.

Orange Crate Art is a sonic throwback to the early ’70s as well: compressed, limited, ersatz to the core, maximum overdubs with plastic headroom. Which suits just fine a pop confection every bit as delightful, improbable, nutritious, eclectic, anachronistic, and wistfully grotesque as a replica of San Simeon built entirely of whipped cream and marzipan, and having about as much link to anything that might pass for reality east or north of Burbank. If the phrase “authentically Californian” does not strike you as oxymoronic, you just might like such an exercise in wilful, deliberate artifice. In its own sadly cloying way, it’s a total delight.

And a lot more enjoyable than I Just Wasn’t Made For These Times, which is what will have to serve these days as a Brian Wilson solo album. If the title sounds like an apology, it is — this soundtrack to the Don Was–produced documentary on Wilson contains but one new song: Wilson’s 1976 demo of the previously unreleased “Still I Dream of It.” The song is harmonically sophisticated, and strikingly confessional for a Beach Boy in its mixture of adolescent longing and the innocent narcissism of teen theology: “A little while ago my mother told me Jesus loved the world / And if that’s true then why hasn’t he helped me to find a girl / and find my world? /’Til then I’m just a dreamer… /” (Wilson was in his 30s when he wrote this song.) Still, all I could think of while listening through the sheets of tape this to his solo piano and voice was how much this song begs for a full-blown Brian Wilson (or Van Dyke Parks) production. What a missed opportunity.

Especially in light of the other 10 tracks. Despite Don Was’s note that these are “brilliant reinterpretations of Wilson’s old songs,” they’re little more than note-for-note re-creations of the original arrangements and performances of such classic Wilson compositions as “Caroline, No,” “Wonderful,” “Til I Die,” “This Whole World,” “Do It Again,” etc. For all the talk (and evidence) of Wilson’s mental and physical decline, he doesn’t embarrass himself a bit, but you’ve got to ask yourself: Other than money, what was the point of making a Brian Wilson album that Todd Rundgren could have made just as easily? It’s good to hear Wilson singing with some halfway decent (if a bit foxy, Was-wise) production values, but this disc is little more than a souvenir. But the tunes are great...

—Richard Lehnert
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Jadis 300B
Editor:
Sam Tellig was the first person in this country to hear the Jadis 300B amplifier. In fact, all initial units imported by Northstar were destined for reviewers and dealer showrooms upon their arrival. I personally did not hear any of these units until much later.

Northstar foresaw a demand for this amplifier. Jadis was pressured to accommodate this demand, and, as they rushed into production, selected the ESTI 4300 BLX tubes. We quickly learned that these tubes were not up to par. However, Northstar immediately found a suitable replacement in the Golden Dragon 300bs. I’d like to thank Kevin Hayes of VAC personally for recommending and supplying these tubes to us. Subsequent research has shown that the classic Western Electric 300B will soon be available from Westrix Corporation, located in the good ol’ US of A. Historically, Western Electric has been noted for producing tubes of great reliability and wonderful sonics. Other tubes are available from foreign shores; however, we caution our consumers to first wait and see if the reliability of these tubes and their sound quality stand the test of time.

At our Northstar studios in Durango, Colorado we have set up a comparison between single-ended and push-pull amplifiers using our super-efficient Jadis Eurythmien 11 speaker. The differences between the push-pull JA 200 and Defy-7, for example, and the single-ended 300B, are easily discernible. Differences do exist among these three designs, and the twain shall never meet. The laws of physics do not allow it. But if a choice were to be made, I, well, I, et, uh, I don’t know what I’d do myself!!!

Frank Garbie
Director of Sales & Marketing
Northstar Leading The Way

Audible Illusions
Modulus 3A
Editor:
On behalf of the many Modulus owners and our dealers who have faithfully supported our preamplifiers over the years, your comprehensive product review of our Modulus 3A is most welcome.

Mr. Fremer’s “passion” regarding his knowledge of music and high-end audio is most obvious. We are honored that he has become a Modulus owner and has devoted such effort to writing his report.

Over the years much has been written about the good sound of our products, and I seldom comment on subjective reviews. What most pleases me about this review is MF’s recognition of our construction quality and reliability. Our company has long suffered the learning process to successfully manufacture a cost-effective high-end tube preamp. Believe me when I say there are people in our factory who, with respect for perfection, easily match Mr. Fremer’s passion. These are American workers at their finest. They love the preamp, and their craftsmanship shows!

Our company also welcomes the opportunity to respond to MF’s caveat concerning product repair downtime. I assume he refers to our amplifier, as statistics for our Modulus preamps show only a 0.04% problem rate for the M2 C-D series and approximately 2–3% for the M3 series. We seldom see a Modulus in for repair, and typical in-house warranty repair rarely exceeds one week. Any Audible Illusions dealer will confirm that the Modulus is the most trouble-free tube product they sell. The few S120 amplifiers we made were reliable, but some suffered from customer mis-use. The difficulty we’ve experienced is that several S120 parts were single-sourced and are no longer made. Subsequently, we’ve had to discontinue S120 production until our redesign has been proven.

Product availability is also a serious concern to us. We feel our customers are entitled to visit their dealer, pay for a preamp, and receive it within a reasonable time. We’ve now decided that some of our dealers who do not carry adequate back-up stock must be replaced. We also have installed a hotline to handle customer questions: (510) 463-2381.

Your technical measurements differ somewhat from ours, but that can be expected as test equipment and methods differ. One notable exception we have is your method of measuring line-stage frequency response. We prefer to measure this stage tape-in through main output as this is a more straightforward path. Retesting, using your 100k load, we measure –0.25dB at 50kHz, volume controls set at 9:00 and at open. Through the CD input we measured –0.75dB at 50kHz, volume controls at 9:00 and –1.5dB volume controls at 12:00. Please note both digital inputs of the M3A have resistor dividing networks to cut the input gain of many hot-output CD and DAT players. We feel it’s also beneficial that these resistors do in fact impart a very slight high-frequency rolloff which tends to attenuate much non-musical digital “garbage” above 20kHz and does improve the sound of the cheaper CD players. For better-quality players the option always remains to use the auxiliary input with no rolloff or to modify these resistors. Other features incorporated into the M3A design allow the preamp to be voiced/adjusted to a particular system or listener’s taste. These features are discussed in the owner’s manual.

Incidentally, the intermittent noise spikes seen in the fig.3 THD phono measurements are the result of circuit components not completely broken-in, particularly our large film and foil polypropylene caps. Please note, in order to meet Stereophile’s deadline, we rushed to take a unit off the line and FedEx it to Santa Fe. The preamp only had minimum burn-in time. For proper break-in we recommend a minimum of one month’s continuous use before the unit completely settles in and the sound opens up to reveal the M3A’s outstanding imaging qualities.

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spirits through many dark hours. Truly, this preamp is a labor of love; it's nice to be appreciated. Thank you, Stereophile.

Art Ferris
Audible Illusions

CARVER RESEARCH LIGHTSTAR DIRECT

Editor:
Many thanks to Steven Stone for his very favorable review of our Lightstar Direct preamplifier.

Evaluating a "straight wire without gain" device such as the Lightstar Direct can be very difficult, since you are down to evaluating the subtleties of a very-high-quality resistor and relay contact compared to either an active preamplifier (for which it is virtually impossible to be more neutral than a properly terminiated passive device), or, ideally, to compare it to no circuitry at all—a true straight wire without gain. To Stone's credit, he tried both approaches. The result with the active preamplifiers used for comparison clearly showed what they were bringing to the party in terms of their sonic signatures. Any qualities, whether interpreted in the context of the program material as better or worse, were induced colorations from the active circuits. More space and richer sound can be fun when added to one recording, and a detriment to another. If we want those types of enhancements to the sound we can build a processor to achieve it, but with the Lightstar Direct we have the option to turn it off and hear a truly neutral presentation of a musically correct recording. As Stone experienced, this neutrality is unavailable on the active preamps.

Now, the trickier part of the evaluation: When attempting to compare a passive device such as the Lightstar Direct to nothing at all, as Mr. Stone did using the EAD preamp/processor, it becomes very important to isolate any remaining variables that could influence the comparison. During our development of the Direct we used bypass tests as a tool in evaluating the performance since total neutrality of the signal path was our goal, and the only reliable reference is no signal path at all. Near the completion of the Lightstar Direct development, while doing bypass tests in direct balanced mode, we were getting almost identical results to those of Mr. Stone. When switching-in the Direct we could still hear a slight difference compared to bypassing it. This difference was experienced as a slight veiling, and a noticeable compression of soundfield size. The cause, we found, was not in the preamp, but was due to a slight insertion loss of between 0.1 and 0.5dB that occurred when the Lightstar Direct was installed in the signal path. It is always a surprise to find that this small of a level shift rarely sounds like a level difference (quantity), but instead manifests itself as a tonal and spatial difference (quality). Because of this it is easy to believe that the levels are matched, and that one is hearing the true quality difference between two units under test. Only upon correction of this level mismatch to less than 0.1dB (by turning up the volume or rematching impedances) when comparing the Lightstar Direct to any other device (or "non-device") will the last slight veil disappear (by comparison) and the true neutrality of the Direct be revealed. Due to the Direct's accuracy, it is even more sensitive to this kind of control in comparison to a straight wire since it adds virtually nothing to the sound. With other active units, their inherent sonic colorations can swamp out the subtle effects of level matching.

I am looking forward to the reviewers at Stereophile getting a chance to do further listening to the Lightstar Direct combined with the Lightstar Reference power amp. With its high-gain balanced input, the Reference is the ideal complement to the Direct. With preamp coloration now eliminated, we would enjoy seeing the pair compared to Stereophile's favorite Class A preamp/power amp combinations.

Thank you again for your fine review. We hope you enjoy your ongoing use of the Lightstar Direct preamplifier.

Jim Croft
Vice President
Research & Development
Carver Corp.

Naim ARO & Armageddon

Editor:
Thanks, Wes, for taking the time and the trouble to delve into the "Naimed" version of the venerable Linn Sondek LP12. The Armageddon was developed about 10 years ago for use mainly in-house. The unbalanced voltage source signal allowed development of the NAC 52 preamp to proceed, with the expectation that others would eventually make similar turntable improvements. However, enough people outside of Naim enjoyed the Armageddon/LP12 to warrant its release in the world market. In most of the world, a motor change isn't necessary (although it's sometimes wise) because 50Hz operation is the standard frequency of AC power. The US standard, however, is 60Hz, so a motor with a smaller pulley diameter is required to do the deed. This has prevented the Naim supply from being tried and auditioned so readily, except of course by persons such as yourself.

The Armageddon was brought into the US starting in 1991, the same time as our CDS C17 player, which somewhat overshadowed its introduction. It has been through some extra refinements (grounding paths and lower noise improvements, for example) that bring the Armageddon to its current position as the definitive LP12 power supply. We are glad that you enjoyed its musical attributes.

As for the ARO, there is so much thought and design engineering that has gone into this product—that does not (readily) meet the eye—that I would like to take this opportunity to impart a few more tidbits of information. Take, for example, the machined lower surface of the arm base and circular mounting nut. These are details that you may have missed since Casey McKee (Thanks, Casey) set up the LP12 for you. Guy, the ARO designer, told me that it is better to have two rings of contact area where the armbase meets armboard or plinth. This, he said, allows the designer to know more exactly the surface area of contact, independent of the armboard's "smoothness." The surface area of contact affects the way in which energy couples through that mechanical union. A machined, circular nut also allows more predictable mating and torquing of the arm base. It is circular to reduce the mass of the overall arm, and thus detract less from the turntable's performance. Special wrenches are supplied with the ARO for setting up.

If this level of thought went into the outwardly simple task of mounting the armbase, imagine the care and attention paid to every mechanical connection in the complete arm. The ARO was undoubtedly a long labor of love in the service of music, and it has not been necessary to modify or upgrade its original design; not in six years of production. By the way, the ARO is built entirely in Salisbury, England—by dedicated "specialists" within Naim's work force.

It is important to remember that before any azimuth adjustments are made, the turntable must be level on its support stand. A tip in terms of balance in the horizontal plane: A certain amount of adjustment is possible by dressing the cartridge connection wires appropriately. Not exactly cute...but effective.

The Armageddon, ARO, and Prefix (turntable-mounted phono MC preamp), are Naim's definitive analog front-end products. As long as demand for precision turntable componentry exists, these designs will remain in production. As we steadily expand our dealer base and attend to more dealer training, we hope that people in America will have the same opportunity to hear the "Naimed" LP12 (among other things) for themselves. After all, the proof is in the pudding.

Chris West
Technical Manager
Naim Audio North America

Stereophile, February 1996

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The development of The Shelf has incorporated technology from aerospace, racing, and other fields. What has made the program unique and difficult is the use of carbon with high-density substrate materials. With a resistance to resonance "Q" of 25 times that of 8° of granite as measured on the center of the board, and over 100 times the Q of 8° of granite as measured on the corners of the panel, The Shelf exhibits extremely high rigidity along with four times the damping rate of 2" of MDF, a material commonly used in audio. It is this unusual combination of characteristics that gives The Shelf its extraordinary performance. We have found it necessary for rigidity and high damping rates to be combined for effective component isolation. As it is frequently perceived that The Shelf doubles the performance level of a component, it is a cost-effective way to significantly improve the quality of one's sound system.

The Shelf was conceived as a basic component of a system of isolation structures. That system has been refined to include the Pyramid Cones, which also employ the same high-rigidity and high-damping-rate characteristics and are extremely effective used alone or in combination with The Shelf. What we have learned is that different types of components prefer different types of isolation. As an example, many turntables seem to perform best using a damped isolation system such as The Shelf in combination with damped feet or visco-elastic materials between the Pyramid Cones and The Shelf. In contrast, other components such as transports, DACs, preamps, and amplifiers are almost always optimized using a rigid coupling system such as the Pyramid Cones, used alone or in combination with The Shelf. Double Coupling (using cones between The Shelf and the original rack or cabinet structure, as well as cones between The Shelf and the component), with the cones offset so they are not directly opposed, allows the maximum interaction of the materials and their benefits into the isolation system.

We feel the technology utilized in The Shelf has the capability of revolutionizing the field of electronics; not just in audio, but also in the medical, scientific, aerospace, etc. fields. Effective isolation can be built into the component via chassis or circuit boards. The potential applications are endless, with armboards, turntables, speaker plinths, and baffles being just a few audio examples.

No effort has been spared to make The Shelf and the Cones as neutral as possible. The products have been tested and evaluated by some of the best system's ears and ears in the world. We have in many ways been limited by the level of sophistication currently exhibited in electronic components, as few manufacturers deal effectively, if at all, with vibration issues. For example, we are introducing The Shelf for the Source, a stiffer version of The Shelf intended for source components such as turntables and transports. We have not generally found the Source panel to be effective under non-source components, however. It is our assessment that designers have unwittingly designed brighter-sounding circuitry as compensation for a resonant chassis. Neutral? No. Offsetting imbalances in an attempt to get to neutral, with information lost every step of the way.

In summary, we have concluded that the effects of microphonic vibration are far more significant than most people realize. Proper component isolation with consideration of rack or cabinet structure, room acoustics, etc., can raise the performance level of an existing system far higher than most would expect, as it allows the component to perform far more efficiently. It appears that the first component in a system is not the component at all, but the Shelf on which it sits.

May All Your Dreams Come True,
D.J. Casser
President, D.J. Casser Enterprises

SONIC FRONTIERS SFT-1
Editor:
Once again, we must extend our thanks to Stereophile, and more specifically Robert Harley, for the kind words published regarding our SFT-1 Transport —Sonic Frontiers' first offering in this unique product category.
From the development of our earliest high-end audio components through the design of recent products such as the SFT, Sonic Frontiers has pursued a consistent strategy of offering reference-caliber products at a considerably lower price than previously available. We have always made our product concept/product definition design decisions to emphasize sonic performance while avoiding the excessive costs associated with many competing products. As an example, our SFD-2 digital processor received the Stereophile award for "Digital Component of the Year" in 1994. As most readers are already aware, the SFD-2 Mk.II was priced at about one-third the price of the competitive products when introduced, and even today remains approximately 40% lower than any other Stereophile Class A-rated Digital Processor. Clearly, the SFD-2 Mk.II is strong evidence that Sonic Frontiers is achieving its design strategy.

We are very pleased when a highly respected reviewer such as Robert Harley directly compares our products to the most expensive reference products. In the review of our SFT-1 transport, Robert goes to great lengths to compare the SFT-1 (quite favorably, I might add) to the Mark Levinson No.31, a product whose retail price is 3.7 times higher. Again, our design strategy with the SFT-1 was to achieve the best possible sonic performance at a considerably lower price than previously available. To this end, we selected a very reliable CD mechanism (manufactured by Philips for high-volume CD-ROM applications), and then focused our attention on the issue of jitter performance.

Our investigations have shown that the sound quality of CD transports, like any product exclusive to the digital domain (and unlike any products which include analog circuitry), is totally dependent on the technical jitter performance—including jitter spectrum, amplitude, and sensitivity to the signal-induced digital data. From Robert's favorable comments: "...superb dynamics, a weighty and powerful bass presentation, a huge soundstage, a wonderful ability to reveal fine spatial detail, and reasonable price..." Sonic Frontiers has once again achieved its goals.

We encourage prospective customers to compare the SFT-1 to transports at any price—we are confident that its sonic performance and overall quality will shine through its relatively modest price. Ideally, prospective customers should evaluate the SFT-1 in conjunction with the digital processor used throughout its development—namely the Sonic Frontiers SFID-2 Mk.II. We are confident you will find the combination of these two components is better than the sum of its parts. This is due in large measure to the fact that the digital interfaces for Sonic Frontiers' products are engineered to fully comply with the standards prescribed for the S/PDIF and AES/EBU digital interfaces. By carefully controlling the impedances, digital signal amplitudes,
And you thought they all came to New Hampshire for the primary.

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bandwidths, and other technical criteria, the effects of jitter in the digital interface can be minimized. The SFJ-2 MKII and SFT-1 used together (with a proper digital interconnect) will likely have less jitter than systems that do not fully comply with the standards. Lower jitter (as many experts are aware) will undoubtedly result in improved sonic performance.

Lastly, I think it's important to differentiate the design goal/strategy/philosophy of Sonic Frontiers (as outlined above) from that of our new "entry-level" product line, Anthem, and our upcoming SFI Reference product line. With Anthem, our mandate will be to lower the price threshold of affordable tube electronic products while maintaining a high standard in the areas of sonic performance, industrial design, and build and parts quality — our attempt at introducing tube-based products to a broader audience, allowing for a more reasonable upgrade path from low-fi mass-market electronics. Two Anthem products have already been released to date, with two more in the first half of 1996.

At the other end of the spectrum, SFI Reference products will be a limited-production, cost-no-object attempt at pushing the performance envelope technically, sonically, and aesthetically, without self-imposed restriction. The first SFI Reference products will have three distinct brand images, representing the full range of audiophile tastes, budgets, and sensibilities. It is our hope they will be as well-received as our "core" Sonic Frontiers products have been to date, by both the critical press and, most important, the audiophile consumer — to whom we owe our greatest thanks.

**Chris Johnson & Company! Sonic Frontiers**

**EPOS ES25**

**Editor:**
Thanks for the chance to comment on an interesting review. While I realize the pressures of publishing, it really is not reasonable to give manufacturers two working days to reply — anyway, here goes. I apologize for the short notice; this was due to the pressures of the publishing schedule.

— Ed.

First, the one technical inaccuracy: the 4mm connectors are not purchased "off the shelf." They are machined to Epos's design for us.

I agree that the ES25 "cabinet is lovely" and "the wood veneers are arresting" — this is a good start. I agree that "prior Epos speakers have been so wonderful" — not bad so far.

I agree that "they simply get out of the way and let [one] concentrate exclusively on the music."

I agree that "good solid-state amplification [provides] a much more synergistic match."

I agree that they need a very significant break-in period.

I agree that "the speakers may have had limitations, but these were carefully nurturing the music."

I don't agree that the tweeter has "a peak in the middle of its passband." Not in any of our measurements — we would be glad to discuss this with JA.

I agree with "hollow-sounding character." But only if used nearfield. All our listening and measurements indicate a flat response in-room. I listen at about 15'.

I don't agree about reversing the woofer's polarity — yes, it increases the first impression, but it significantly reduces the long-term musical enjoyment.

I agree with "Note the excellent low-bass extension..."

I don't agree about "its polite/receded midrange" and "limited true deep bass."

I do agree with "I truly hated to see them leave" — I don't like moving mine out to listen to other things. "While they could play all day and never get in the way, the Epos could just as easily provide me with a joyous window into the fantastic world of recorded music. Whenever I wanted to listen, the '25s let me — for as long as I wanted, with no hint of fatigue or hi-fi artifact."

I believe that we have produced a speaker that appeals over the long term, not the quick listen.

Finally — a couple of hints. The ES25s work best with great amps; we like Exposure and Naim. They should be sized roughly free-field to taste, and toed in just a few degrees.

Finally, if you're really serious, the tweeter grilles can be removed. But be careful; Roy at Music Hall can advise here.

Thanks again for the opportunity to reply.

**Steve Harris**

**EPOS ES25**

**Editor:**

...I was gradually seduced by the '25s. They simply got out of the way and let me concentrate exclusively on the music."

Jack English got it right. The Epos ES25 was designed to play music, and they do that beautifully.

I think that some of the criticisms of the bass were caused more by the amps and wire used than by the speaker itself. I have found that good British equipment like Naim, Linn, Exposure, and monoblock Creek amps make the ES25s truly soar and play a beautifully deep bass — not the pelvis-vibrating stuff that too many people think is bass, but a solid, articulated, and deep, clean sound.

As for speaker wires: Good multi-strand copper wire like Cable Talk or Naim, or a solid-core wire like Nordost Flatline, seem to work best.

Like Jack, I have spent many pleasurable hours with the ES25s. I have two pairs: one in my main system and the other in my surround-sound system using the bass drivers as my subwoofer and a single Epos ES11 as the center channel. (If anyone is interested in this, they can call me at (516) 487-3663.)

I disagree with John Atkinson's final comments. I think the basic ingredients for the ES25 are just right; it is he who has got the recipe wrong. Roy Hall

**Music Hall**

**K-A-B Electro-Acoustics SpeedStrobe**

**Editor:**
First, a big thank you to *Hi-Fi News & Record Review* for publishing our press release on the K-A-B SpeedStrobe.4

Second, a big thank you to Jonathan Scull for reading about the K-A-B SpeedStrobe in *HFN/RR.* "Why not *Stereophile?" he asked. "That's what I'd like to know," I said, "since I'm certain I sent one along with the requisite $8x10." Question: Just who is the "New Products Editor" for *Stereophile?* We don't have one, but all press releases end up on Wes Phillips's desk. — Ed.

Since the review reflects the fun and satisfaction everyone experiences when they use the K-A-B SpeedStrobe, I thought I'd use this opportunity to share the interesting way in which this product was developed.

In November '93, I was approached by a customer as dismayed as Jonathan was by the lack of a good light source for strobing. This customer is technically adept in electronics, so I encouraged him to develop the idea. The first solution was a high-brightness LED triggered by the AC line current. I bounced this idea off my professional customers. They like the bright pin-spot light, they don't like the power cord! They want portability and convenience.

Okay, Well, a battery-operated strobe is a good idea because it could be very accurate via quartz crystal, would work anywhere, and something else — all strobe discs to date are based on 120Hz illumination. With a quartz reference, we could use 60Hz and reduce the number of marks on the disc by half, thus making the disc very easy to read. In fact, with the additional space we could replace those hypnotic bars with actual speed numbers. Now that would truly be something special.

Okay. Now let's find a graphic artist skilled in the computer art to do it. Luck prevails and the product is complete one year later — October '94. Incidentally, the K-A-B SpeedStrobe disc is pro-

**Stereophile, February 1996**
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Kevin A. Barrett
President, K-A-B Electro-Acoustics

SHAKTI STONES
Editor:
A heartfelt thanks to Jonathan Scull and
your magazine for the review of the
Shakti Stones. I especially appreciate
Jonathan's ongoing experimentation that
resulted in a demonstration of Shakti's
full potential. His generous use of direct
passages from my pre-plant patent white paper
will help to clear up some "alchemical"
misconceptions regarding Shakti and
myself. Like Jonathan, I derive a portion
of my ancestry from Russia, and do admit
to having read and quoted the mystic
Ouspensky's Tertium Organum at 17. In
actuality, the only "wizard" Shakti owes
some measure of its origin to is Don
Herbert's 1950s educational television
show, Mr. Wizard, which awakened my
generation's curiosity for all things
scientific.
Although Shakti is considered unusual
by many, the same held true in 1977
when Robert Fulton was the first to state
that he had engineered cables that could
improve the sound of our systems. Today,
high-end cables hang in Home Depot,
and University of Essex Professor
Malcolm Omar Hawksford has pre-
sented scientific explanations that show
why cables affect audio fidelity (Stereo-
phile, October '95).
I agree with Wes Phillips in that a
good starting point for evaluating Shakti's
effects is the power amplifier. One reason
for this was alluded to in the review
when Gordon Rankin suggested to
Jonathan that he move the Stone from
the output transformer to the power
transformer. Whenever you have a larger
magnetic field, as in a power amp com-
pared to a preamp, the degree of EMI
increases, hence the more dramatic the
benefits when these interfaces are dealt
with. That isn't to say varying degrees of
improvements won't be realized else-
where in the audio chain. In fact, once
the untreated spurious fields in an up-
line component (g, preamp or CD
player) become integrated with the
music waveform, it's very difficult to
remove them downtown at the power
amp. As to the possible overuse of Shakti,
we have found that several inches'
distance should be maintained between
them, particularly in the horizontal
plane, and usually only one per com-
ponent is required. User response has
even verified discernible benefits when the
stone is placed on the tops of some loudspeaker cabinets. Evidence of this
was seen and heard at Stereophile's 1995
Hi-Fi Show. Speakers, with their voice-
coils and long runs of wire, can often
minic antennas, picking up ultra-high-
frequency external fields that color the
sound. Shakti acts as a magnetic sink of
sorts, attracting and then shunting away
a portion of these fields before they can
transgress into speaker drivers. The
most-often-heard comment from users
of the Shakti Stones has been that
placement on a variety of system com-
ponents reduces, to varying degrees, an
artificiality that becomes readily apparent
as soon as the Stone is removed.
In closing, I wish to echo Jonathan's
mention of how Shakti "allowed [the
amps] to perform to their fullest." A lot
of fine and useful products are available
that can "change or tune" the sound of
your system and room. What distinc-
tuishes Shakti is its ability to reduce
non-musical waveforms at the electro-
magnetic level and, by so doing, bring us
closer to the joy and beauty of the original musical event.

Benjamin Piazza
Designer, Shakti Audio Innovations

SHAKTI STONES
Editor:
I am very pleased to have this
opportunity to address Stereophile's readers
and Jonathan Scull's positive comments on
Shakti; also, to announce Musical Surroundings' association with Ben Piazza and
his unique components.
I must thank Jonathan and Stereophile
for the most important aspect of this
review; namely, that it was published.
Asute Stereophile readers must have noticed that Shakti Stones are used and
mentioned by reviewers in many Stero-
phile articles. For instance, in December
Stone, and Jonathan himself used Shaktis,
and they were even mentioned by the
designers of the Balanced Audio Tech-
nology equipment in their interview.
Now that we have the official dec-
laration, more music lovers can discover
the unique power of Shaktis to make a
good audio system even better.
I first met Ben a few years back
through Brooks Berdan's store in LA.
After I'd re-tipped Ben's Koetsu Onyx
and then upgraded him to a Benz
Reference, he told me about his new
device. I was skeptical (who wouldn't
be?), but was impressed by his sincerity
and obvious listening skills.
After first experiencing and enjoying
Shaktis in my system last spring, I used
them in my room at Stereophile's HI-FI
'95 Show. Interestingly, the top three
vote-getters for Best Sound at that Show
all had Shaktis in their rooms. Possibly,
my final confirmation of the Shaktis' desirability was at my exhibit at the
Chicago CES this past June (see Stero-
phile, September 1995, Vol.18 No.9,
p.75). The Shaktis were stolen from my
system!
My working with Monster Cable in the
late 1970s allowed me to witness the
birth of that audio phenomenon. Now, in
1996, I am very excited to be involved
with a breakthrough such as Shakti.
Stereophile's part-time correspondent Clark
Johnsen put it succinctly: "The im-
pressive result, unachievable by any other
known means..." Lately, the audio
industry has seen some pretty interesting
"accessories." Shakti is more than a
"tweak." It addresses your components'
self-generating interference and distor-
tions. Ben currently has a patent pending
for Shakti's technology; licensing may
also follow.
One of the joys of a good audio system
is that of discovery: discovering new
music, different performances, and a
greater appreciation for the music and
the sound. Discover Shakti. Dealers who
carry the Shakti Stones are more than
willing to give you a demonstration, and
even let you try them in your own
system. I look forward to hearing your
comments.
Garth Leifer
Musical Surroundings

Sennheiser HDC 451
Editor:
While we always welcome news of how
our products perform in the field, we are
disappointed to read of Mr. Norton's
recent experiences with our HDC 451
Active noise-canceling portable head-
phone system. Providing relief from
high-noise environments such as air-
planes while enjoying music is a prime
design goal for this series of headphones.
As are most things in the audio
business, our design goals are tempered
by balancing the real-world issues of cost
vs performance against the backdrop of a
target market. We have already manu-
factured active noise-canceling systems
capable of far better sound and far more
noise reduction. Sennheiser manu-
factures the quietest aviation headphones
in the world, intended for pilots and
offering a full 40dB ANSI-rated atten-
tuation. The problem is that the
average consumer refuses to wear
aviation ear-defender-style headphones,
nor are they willing to spend $1500 on
portable headphones.
Considering the rest of the competition
fielding ANC products today, we are
proud of our HDC 451, and feel it offers
far greater listening pleasure and noise
attenuation in noisy environments than
any other product commercially available.

Stereophile, February 1996

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Like any company worth their salt, Sennheiser begins working on our next-generation products the day the first ones are offered for sale. We hope to provide you with a new active noise-cancellation system that meets with your more positive evaluation in the future.

JOHN BEVIER
Manager, Consumer Group
Sennheiser Electronic Corporation

COINCIDENT SPEAKER TECHNOLOGY

Editor:
Thank you for your Follow-Up review of the Coincident Speaker Technology Troubadour speakers. This follow-up raises some very serious questions which I would now like to address.

It has always been my impression that before a review appears in print in your magazine, that many weeks of auditioning will be undertaken. After all, a reviewer must meticulously set up the new speakers, taking into account all the vagaries of room interaction, component matching, break-in period, etc. This is a time-consuming and onerous task. That, however, does not describe the procedure that was followed with respect to the Troubadour Follow-Up. These speakers were received by your office on December 6, 1995. The copy of the review was faxed to me on December 18. That would leave only one week, or ten days at most, to measure and fully evaluate this loudspeaker. The Troubadours need at least 50 hours of break-in before serious auditioning is fruitful. As well, only one system was used in conjunction with the speakers; moreover, the Levinson No.333 amplifier, rated at 300Wpc at 8 ohms and 600Wpc into 4 ohms, was chosen to power speakers (Troubadours) that can be driven by single-ended triode tube amps. This just does not resemble meticulous component-matching to say the least.

The perfunctory nature of the Troubadour listening sessions must, by its very nature, raise questions about how committed WP and JA were in truly unraveling all that could be gleaned from the Troubadours. There appears to have been very little effort expended on these speakers.

What is of even greater significance is how your measurements are used (or misused). Let us examine the graphs published for the Troubadour with loudspeakers reviewed in the November 1995 Stereophile. The main criticism of the sound of the Troubadors dealt with its laid-back presentation, which JA correlated to its low-treble suckout. In fact, in most respects the Troubadour measured in exemplary fashion. Fig.3 illustrates that the crossover region between the woofers and tweeter at 2100Hz is down only 2dB. As well, fig.5 shows a spatially averaged in-room response (which is where most humans listen to their loudspeakers) that is (with the exception of a small area between 1800Hz and 2800Hz that is down less than 4dB) one of the flattest you have ever presented in your magazine. Fig.2, for all intents and purposes, reveals that the Troubadors are more time-coherent than virtually every other speaker you have measured.

Let us now examine the graphs published for the WATTs, Platinum Solos, and Acoustic Energy AE2 Signatures. The aforementioned speakers all received glowing reviews, and range in price from $2497/pair to $9000/pair. First, the spatially averaged responses for the Solos (p.117) reveal a variation in response of 6dB from 60Hz to 3500Hz with an almost 4dB depression between 2200Hz and 3500Hz. This anomaly in the crossover region seems to be much more easily tolerated in a $2500 pair of speakers, as JA states: “...slight lack of energy in both the lower mids and in the crossover region. The latter will make the speaker sound a little polite...” With regards to the time domain, fig.16 reveals a woofer that is 0.4ms slower in arrival time than the tweeter. In JA's conclusion he mentions other problems (excess midbass bloat, low sensitivity), but the Troubadour line is nevertheless “Recommended ... a great start for a new speaker company.”

In the Acoustic Energy review, fig.3 (p.111) shows a spatially averaged in-room response that is down 18dB at 3800Hz! The response does not recover until almost 10kHz. Further, fig.8 shows the tweeter and woofer to be out of phase, and the impulse response to be “overlaid with ultrasonic ringing.” In fig.9 it can clearly be seen that "hash [is] developing in the mid-treble..." Does all this matter much in a speaker costing $5495? Apparently not, since JA sums up by stating that it is "superb-sounding."

The measurements of the WATT 5 tells a similar tale as those presented above. The [quasi-anechoic] response (fig.4, p.106) shows that the WATT [by itself] is down 10dB at 50Hz, and between 200-400Hz it is depressed by almost 6dB; and again at 3kHz, it is down 4dB, falling again at 7kHz to -5dB. In the step-response graph (fig.9, p.107), it is clearly revealed that the WATT is not a time-coherent speaker by any means. Conclusion? You guessed it. JA proclaims, "This is excellent performance, correlating with the System 5's grain-free and smooth — but detailed — presentation."

The best has been saved for last. I will direct our attention to the December 1994 issue of Stereophile and the review of the $67,500 Wilson X-1/Grand SLAMM, which was awarded the prestigious honor of being named the 1995 Component of the Year by Stereophile. A perusal of fig.9 (p.125) clearly illustrates the more than 2dB frequency deviation in the upper frequencies. Fig.13 clearly shows that the drivers are not time-aligned, and that the phase response is not linear in the treble (p.126). Perhaps these flaws are not as relevant in the under-$70,000 price point, since the competition is not so intense in this price category.

JA's measurement methodology must also be called into question. Our measurements of the Troubadour do not exhibit the degree of suckout as represented by fig.4. Our measurement shows that the response is down 3dB. Moreover, JA reports that his measurements [indicate that the] crossover is a symmetrical 18dB/octave. If this is so, then I must surely be granted a patent forthwith on this design, since I would be the only human capable of fashioning a third-order crossover using only one series capacitor with no components in parallel.

In summing up his feelings about the Troubadour, JA states that "Competition in the $1500/pair price region is intense. For a new loudspeaker from a new company to stand any kind of chance, therefore, it needs to be almost without flaw." I must have missed something in my more than 20 years in audio, because I am not aware of any component at any price, let alone $1500, that is without flaw. It may be inferred from the review of the above noted loudspeakers that flaws are much more easily ignored in speakers costing twice to six times the $1500 asking price of the Troubadors. With reviews as unfair and hastily prepared as the one given the Troubadour, it is of little wonder that new speakers from new companies devoid of very much influence or financial clout will never be beneficiaries of the same latitude afforded established firms that are somehow more prone to be given a sympatric ear.

I still have faith in those in the know, including dozens of audiophiles who have purchased our Troubadors, with and without the companion Troubass subwoofers, who believe that these speakers not only represent the best value in high-end audio, but in many performance parameters advance the audio art. I believe your review of the Troubadour reveals more about your magazine than it does about my speaker.

ISRAEL BLUME
Coincident Speaker Technology

I usually do not respond to manufacturers; this is their space to say what they feel is necessary. Unfortunately, however, I must point out that Mr. Blume misrepresents my measurements of the other loudspeakers, which can be seen by
looking at the graphs published in the November 1995 issue of Stereophile. He also misrepresents my comments about the measurements. For example, my favorable remarks about the WATT that he quotes were made in connection with the Wilson speaker’s very clean waterfall plot, not the step response.

Regarding my measurements of the Troubadour, I check my methodology by measuring reference loudspeakers, such as the Rogers LS3/5A, on a regular basis, as well as comparing my measured responses with those supplied me by manufacturers. I stand by my measurements of the Troubadour’s performance, particularly as they correlated so well with my auditioning. And, of course, how a product sounds is what matters.

Finally, regarding the quick turnaround of the review process, Mr. Blume’s original request was that we audition the revised samples of the Troubadour in time to get this Follow-Up into the January ’95 issue along with WPs original review. As that didn’t prove to be possible, I assumed that publishing the Follow-Up in the next possible issue would be the next best thing. The speakers were broken-in overnight before I performed any serious auditioning and did seem to have reached a consistent sound quality.

—JA

Bag End ELF

Editor:
First of all, on behalf of our client, Bag End Loudspeaker Systems, we are extremely pleased that Stereophile saw fit to select the Bag End ELF subwoofer system among its Class A recommended components in the October 1995 issue.

The real reason for this letter, however, is to take the pressure off a poor man who has been getting inundated with telephone calls for Bag End. In your June issue (p.239), when you printed Bag End President Jim Wischmeyer’s reply to the ELF review, somehow a misprint occurred in the telephone number. Bag End’s correct telephone number is (708) 382-4550. The number was correct in the letter.

We would have written sooner, but we were not aware of the misprint until the poor man who was getting all the calls finally figured out Bag End’s correct number and called recently, waving the white flag.

We were happy to learn that he was receiving so many calls for Bag End (obviously, your readers respond), but for the poor man’s sanity, perhaps you can print Bag End’s correct number so he can get back to his own business.

Charles A. Shriver
Shriver Communications, Ltd.

Sorry about the misprint. Bag End: (708) 382-4550.

—JA
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PIA C-337 PROCEED PFP 3 11AC, $1250; Edison tone, $900; MIT 330 interconnects, 13’ balanced, $125; 15’ RCA, $40. (312) 506-2711.

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CARY 100W TUBE MONO AMPS, 100W class-A/B, ¥55 class-A, recent retests, paid $4000, sell $2600 firm; Meridian 206t CD player, paid $2600, sell $1200 firm; Vandersteen 2Ci speakers, with dedicated stands, paid $1400, sell $800 firm. (609) 646-2924.

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Stereo Times, February 1996
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WANTED: CLASS 2-700 MONOBLOCKS, serial number before M7101025 (made before March '92). Call (520) 760-0742.
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As I read over the January issue’s coverage of high-end shows in Singapore, London, and Frankfurt, and prepare to head off to Las Vegas to attend the industry’s biggest and most important show—Winter CES—I am prompted to contemplate the importance of shows in the field of audio.

I can’t believe it’s the same in every industry or hobby. Are camera shows the most important events of the year for photography enthusiasts? How about surfboard shows? I know that wine enthusiasts get most excited when they or their friends put on special tastings, but these aren’t international events attended by thousands.

In high-end sound reproduction, though, the shows are it, and always have been. Just look at what’s happening in the UK, as three different organizations—read: sets of beliefs—try to figure out the best approach for reaching the trade and the public. And, as MC reported in January, there’s something wrong with every solution. The Hi-Fi Show, sponsored by HFN/RR magazine, has small rooms and its audience tends to be limited strictly to hobbyists (and appropriate trade visitors). The series of Live Shows successfully appeals to a much larger audience, but in a mediocre venue for sound demonstration—a BIG problem. The smaller Sound and Vision London found promising digs in the Cumberland Hotel, but suffered from lack of critical mass.

The one thing not missing is a fervent desire to find a better solution. Here in the US, we’re blessed with one undeniable important event for the trade (WCES) and one event of increasingly undeniable importance for consumers (Hi-Fi ’96 and its predecessors). WCES as an important event needs little explanation, as our voluminous annual coverage testifies. If someone makes high-end product, and they want the country or the world to know about it, they’re in Las Vegas in January.

Many high-enders think back fondly to the days when Chicago reigned supreme. After all, Chicago’s a great city. Vegas, though, is better still: it’s the only game in town. If you don’t make Vegas you don’t get to make a big impression for a whole year.

Everyone does their best for Vegas. Manufacturers announce products that they don’t even know how to make, like DVD, whose final standards were announced only weeks before the Show. Working DVD will be at WCES. Vegas is bigger than Chicago ever was, and you don’t have to think about whether to go; you just go.

We’re not without our conflict, though. I wrote back in September about my happiness that The Academy for the Advancement of High End Audio would be sponsoring two trade days at HI-FI ’96, which is put on by Stereophile. Unfortunately, that decision sparked large amounts of controversy within the organization, with one faction—who disagreed with the decision and the way in which it was reached—publishing a public disavowal of Academy support.

In fact, the issue of Academy trade-day sponsorship generated more controversy in the world of high-end trade organizations than anyone can remember. Several other high-end magazines have written scathing denunciations of The Academy’s having any link-up with any magazine, though the practice is pretty common both in this country and abroad. Another trade organization mounted a thinly veiled attack on Stereophile’s ethics. And people who once were friends now rarely talk.

Ironically, this has all happened because The Academy finally decided to do something. Only months after its birth in 1990, The Academy was involved in a partnership with the EIA (Electrical Industries Association) in an all-out successful fight to prevent the now-almost-defunct luxury tax from being exacted on expensive electronic equipment. Since then, The Academy has worked hard to increase the communication between the EIA and high-end audio companies, it’s mounted biannual Golden Note awards banquets, and it’s handed out awards; that’s about all. Many Academy members saw trade-day sponsorship in New York as a potential coup and decided to go for it—with the result that the organization’s very existence has been threatened.

I’m happy to report that this threat will almost certainly be averted. One of the major issues for the group of public Academy unsuppliers has been the organization’s governing structure. The original Academy Steering Committee, appointed by Harry Pearson of The Absolute Sound back in 1988, had chosen to install the Governors—who make all Academy decisions other than who gets the Golden Note awards—for 20-year terms, to ensure stability. Twenty years is a helluva lot of stability, as the current Academy leadership has discovered. Among other things, who wants to do it that long? I was one of the original Academy Governors, but the presence of a press Governor proved too controversial and I resigned early on. Two other original Governors resigned a few years ago, and one recently-elected one as well.

My Academy sources tell me that the current Governors have nearly finished working out a change in the organization’s structure to provide for regular Governor elections; this change should be in place by the time you read this. And it’s reasonable to hope that this change will begin the healing process for The Academy. Although no one involved would have wished for the negative feelings and harsh words that have come about, the issue of trade-day sponsorship has clarified just how intensely many Academy members feel about that subject and about their participation in the organization. An ideal outcome to this painful period of conflict would be much greater involvement in The Academy by its members, to accompany the more democratic structure of Governorship.

I, however, will be less close to it all. Since my resignation as a Governor I’ve worked on The Academy’s Executive Committee and Advisory Council. My position as director of HI-FI ’96, though, puts me in a position of possible conflict with my role as an Academy executive, so I’ve elected to resign from the latter position. I won’t stop wishing The Academy all the best as it works to promote a greater awareness of the wonderful endeavor we’re all involved in. It has the potential to be a truly important international organization.
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