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Hi-Fi in Sin City
'99 CES REPORT

David Lewiston
World Music’s Intrepid Explorer

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The night after we got home from the 1999 Consumer Electronics Show in January—see the review in this issue—my dear companion and I attended a performance of *Madame Butterfly* at San Francisco's beautifully refurbished War Memorial Opera House. It was a Tuesday evening, traditionally a big event for the Opera's benefactors. From our box seats, we had an excellent view of a production musically sumptuous and visually austere—and of a sea of gray and balding heads.

During intermission, I attempted a rough estimation of the crowd's age. My guess: the majority were well beyond 60, and a significant number were in their 70s or 80s. Among the opera patrons, we were in the distinct minority: under 50. Real youngsters—30 and under—were few indeed. The demographics were of particular interest to me. In our daily reports from the CES on www.stereophile.com, Jon Iverson and I had reported the gloomy pronouncements of Krell Industries' Dan D'Agostino. "High-end audio is on its way out" because it isn't attracting a booming new generation of music lovers.

By "high-end" he meant, of course, two-channel music systems composed of the best components music lovers can buy. D'Agostino wasn't complaining, mind you—his company appears to be riding the home-theater wave quite nicely. But his observation that the High End consists mostly of hobbyists in their 50s and 60s was reinforced by a visible lack of young blood at the Specialty Audio exhibit in the Alexis Park Hotel, as well as at The Home Entertainment Show next door at the St. Tropez.

Which is not to say that there are no young people in high-end audio—there just don't seem to be very many of them.

"Tell me where the Generation X audiophile is," D'Agostino demanded, then offered his own simple reply: "He doesn't exist." As in the heady worlds of opera, symphony, and ballet support, new recruits to high-end audio don't appear to be popping up at a rate sufficient to fill ranks thinned by departing predecessors.

It's an ominous trend for public arts, which are obscenely expensive to produce and increasingly dependent on philanthropy. "Where is the next generation?" is a question that recurs among arts administrators nationwide, as it does throughout the High End. Where is our next generation? Is it among home-theater fans, as D'Agostino asserts? Or is high-end audio, as we have known it, simply a transitional phase in the never-ending interaction of art, technology, and economics? Is it just another fading blip on the radar screen of time, or is it here to stay?

"High-end audio is on its way out... the Generation X audiophile doesn't exist." —Dan D'Agostino

A few evenings later, at an opening-night party for a show of spectacular—and very cutting-edge—contemporary Asian art, the subject emerged again, this time in a chance encounter with an electronic musician. This young woman spends most of her evenings and weekends composing and recording, and, because she's still awaiting her commercial breakthrough, spends her days working in the publicity department of an independent record label. She is incredibly well informed about trends in the music business and about the emerging potential of the Internet, and was marvelously insightful about the Recording Industry Association of America's losing battle against MP3, the latest rage in digital music distribution. She is on intimate terms with MIDI-synths, knows the virtues of every sampling rate, and can configure a local area network in the same amount of time it takes me to microwave a bowl of soup.

When she asked me what I did, I mentioned that I was associated with this publication—one she had never heard of—and that it focused was "high-resolution playback systems." Oddly enough, she had never heard this particular string of buzzwords either, and asked me to explain. I offered the classical definition of a high-end audio system: one capable of re-creating original acoustic events. I went so far as to suggest, without offending, that it is relatively easy to program synthesizers to make a digital sonic tempest swirl about a room, and relatively difficult to create a believable image of a solo guitarist sitting quietly on a stool in front of you. She was intrigued—as if this was one of the more outlandish concepts she had ever heard. She and her husband have made a tentative date to come up to our place for dinner—and music. Perhaps we'll win a recruit or two.

Or perhaps we won't. My 27-year-old stepson never caught the bug from me, despite a lifetime of exposure. His biggest concern about his audio system, he recently told me, is wiring up an extra pair of speakers on the porch so he and his wife can enjoy some tunes with their Sunday breakfast. He always liked music and still does, but simply isn't interested in the equipment that plays it. This socially gregarious lad tells me that he doesn't know anyone else his age who is interested, either. They are like I am about boats and sailing, which for many people are synonymous with the meaning of life: Were I richer than God, or even Gates, I'd never buy one. I just don't care.

But I do care passionately about music, as I believe most folks in this industry do. It's our great common denominator, and our link to the next generation. The chorus of girls and young women I heard singing along with Alanis Morissette at her concert last autumn knew every word and shared every ounce of angst. Would they feel that angst any more deeply if they heard Morissette through high-performance systems at home? Or is a portable cassette player with a cheap set of headphones all anyone needs to get a satisfying musical fix?

These aren't just idle questions. Is the High End relevant? If we decide that, yes, by God, it is—that this strange, arcane obsession to which so many of us have devoted so much of our lives really is important—then we must find ways to bring it to a wider audience. We owe it to ourselves, and we owe it to the music we love. Jonathan Scull's dictum—"Audiophile, share your passion!"—is no hollow slogan. It's a mantra all of us should repeat—and act on—every chance we get.

Stereophile, April 1999
SONY ES AND THE DELICATE BALANCE OF POWER.
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The Sony TA-E9000...it's the power you want, it's the delicate balance of power you need, IT'S THE POWER OF ES.
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Home theater wars its ugly head at Lisa Astor's house.

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A NEW TECHNOLOGY IN TRIODE AMPLIFICATION

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Bring on the Apocalypse
Editor:
Over the last several years, I have read with amusement Michael Fremer’s comments on the realism/validity of vinyl compared to CD. While my current mid-fi system is based on digital as the main source of playback, I have held onto about 40 record albums from the late ’70s/early ’80s (mostly jazz and classical). Recently my CD player had to be returned to the manufacturer for repair—an omen—and out of musical desperation I hauled out an ancient Rega turntable and an inherited 30-year-old Sinatra record.

The result was musical bliss. Sinatra’s voice sounded smoother than I ever remembered, and the music was more involving than I could believe. I am now haunting used record stores, usually getting near-mint vinyl at half the price of CDs.

If Fremer is right, does that mean the Apocalypse is near? Michael Bjorkman mbjorkman@flashnet

Bring on the Saab system
Editor:
I admit, Mr. Fremer, that your flamboyant raving about analog has influenced my listening, but I have just one question: What source do you prefer in your car?
Just curious!
Tanuj Nakra
Chicago, IL
tanujnakra@hotmail.com

In my 1972 Saab 96, I have a Nakamichi TD-500 for cassettes and AM/FM, and a RadioShack Optimus 3400 CD player that I run through an FM modulator the Nakamichi picks up at 88.3. I tried using my MiniDisc player the same way, but its output isn’t sufficient to drive the modulator to sufficient levels without leaving a residue of noise. Perhaps I’ll switch to an in-dash MD in the future.

My new Saab has a CD changer and cassette, and my wife’s minivan (ugh!) an in-dash CD player.

—Michael Fremer

Money back pronto
Editor:
Michael Fremer just lost Stereophile another subscription. Money back pronto, please.
Richard Harding
Westport, CT
rhardin1@nassan.com

Well, he likes us
Editor:
I have never felt the need to “cancel my subscription” to Stereophile.
Bryan Kestenberg
Cincinnati, OH
cpwac@earthlink.net

Sadness
Editor:
It was with great sadness that I heard of Wes Phillips’ resignation. His equipment reports were always honest and full of accurate information. I always looked forward to reading them. Here is one reader who will greatly miss his insight.
Dan Augustinho
daugusti@aol.com

Learned his lesson
Editor:
In December I voted in one of www.stereophile.com’s weekly polls for Wes Phillips as my favorite Stereophile writer. Then he announced his departure. Well, I’ve learned my lesson: Next time I’ll cast a ballot for my least favorite writer.
I wish he weren’t leaving, but I send him my best regards and hope that the changes in employment and residence meet his highest expectations.
Alex Fundock
Edison, NJ

It was Sam’s fault
Editor:
Just saw on the magazine’s website that Wes Phillips is leaving Stereophile. I’ll miss his writing style and sense of humor. I knew that ST winning the favorite-writer poll would have grave consequences!
Ed Pugacz
pugacz@admin.uc.edu

Written in sport
Editor:
The Top 10 Things I dislike about Stereophile readers:
1) Readers who whine about Stereophile
2) Readers who think that all components are created equally and that everything sounds the same (tastes like chicken).
3) Persons who complain about racist/sexist ads in Stereophile.
4) Readers who believe dealers are all stuffy and unapproachable.
5) “Sony” lovers. Read “Sony” to mean “any mid-fi crap” (with the exception of U-Matic and pro stuff like old tape machines).
6) People who believe that tweaks don’t work.
7) Readers who write long letters
8) People who are anti-LP.
9) People who are anti-Quad.
10) Audiophiles who just don’t “listen.”

I have been an audiophile for many years and have owned relatively good if not high-end equipment. I have grown to love Quad stuff and now own an all-Quad system with Oracle Delphi turntable and Muse subwoofer. I am lucky that my wife has a very high SAF (Speaker Acceptance Factor); she has Maggie SMGs with subs in the family room.

Please keep publishing your pictures of weird and wonderful turntables and cartridges, reviews of megabuck systems, and the mouthwatering reports of stuff we can only dream of. That is what this sport is all about.
Louis McFarlane
Orangeville, Ontario, Canada
lmmac@heclinc.ca

Written in rage
Editor:
I am writing to you in rage, as I’ve whipped up a list of complaints that merit consideration.
1) I have to blast “Recommended
At YBA, I design every product to be as simple as possible.

This ensures that what you hear at home is always faithful to music.

But, to be simple requires careful circuit and component design. Every part must work together to eliminate tiny distortions that mask musical detail.

Whether it be thermal, electromagnetic or micro-vibrational, nothing must be left to chance. And that is why true music lovers appreciate YBA.

For the music …
Components.” There are simply too many, way too many components. Also, how could Pass have three amplifiers in Class A? How could Cary have three Class A? Impossible! I am now going to use Fi magazine’s “Buyer’s Guide” as an accurate account of what’s what. They’ve done a much better job.

2) How could Lonnie Brownell say that the VTL ST85 is (possibly) “the best amplifier he’s had in his system” when it’s only $1750 (February ’99)?

3) How could Martin Colloms call the Krell FPB 600 “the Grand SLAMM of amplifiers” (April ’97), when only eight months later Wes Phillips said the Madrigal No.33Hes were better (January ’98)? (Incidentally, Fi puts the Krell in their “3-Star” category on a 4-star scale.)

4) How can John Atkinson say that the dCS Elgar sounded “better than live music” (July ’97)?

5) How can Michael Fremer say that the Benchmark DAC link is “no better” than the Benchmark DAClink (August ’98), only to have the Linn Sondek CD12 come barreling along six months later to kick its ass?

6) How can Wes Phillips claim the Conrad-Johnson ART preamplifier is possibly “one for the ages” (December ’98), when we all know that Madrigal’s new Mark Levinson No.32 might equal or even better it?

7) Reviewing a $20,000 pair of power amplifiers in January ’98 (the Mark Levinson No.33Hes) and a $28,000 pair of power amplifiers in June ’98 (the VTL Wotans) didn’t stop you from reviewing a $60,000 power amplifier in September (the Boulder 2150)! Enough’s enough.

8) Your “Best Sound at Show” is seriously flawed: big rooms, more people, more votes!


10) I think I’ve said enough. Oh no, one more thing — cancel my subscription!!!

John Hamid, Jr.
Watertown, CT

**Letters**

**Macadamia or cashews?**

Editor:
My previous letter (January ’99, p.14) expressed a reluctant *mea culpa* to Michael Fremer for unflattering comments written about him. Although I have never commented in print about Jonathan Scull, I concluded that the hockey-puck-nitpicking-anal-compulsive-schizo tweaks he writes about are merely the rantings of an egotistic, raving “stereophile.” However, I must, at this point, again cleanse my burdened soul.

I’m a very senior citizen who’s been involved with hi-fi since 1964. I have a dedicated listening room, and my system consists of a Wadia 860 going direct with silver interconnects to two stereo Reference Line Silver Signature amplifiers. Kimber 4AG connects the amplifier outputs to the outboard crossovers of Martin-Logan Monoliths. A nice, clean, minimal system.

The Kimber 4AG lay on the floor between the amps and crossovers. After reading J-10’s “Fine Tunes” in the January issue, I lifted the speaker wire off the carpet, as he recommended. My wife heard the difference, through an open door, in an adjacent room.

Enough said. (However, I still think Jonathan is a little nuts.)

Harvey Fleischman
Boynont Beach, FL

**Thank you, Jonathan Scull**

Editor:
Thanks to Jonathan Scull’s “Fine Tunes” column in December, my Thiel CS6es have a new lease on life. I finally broke down and cleaned my interconnects and speaker cables — boy, what a difference! The sad fact is that because of Stereophile’s review of the CS6, I thought the grunge in the midrange was normal. Now, with clean cables, the grunge is gone.

Obviously, not trying to isolate the grunge earlier was a rookie mistake — one that I hope other readers avoid. By the way, keep up the great work! I enjoy the magazine just the way it is.

Gregg Collins
gn.collins@worldnet.att.net

That’s great news, Harvey, Greg, and Gregg. I’m happy to get the feedback. The phono stage, Gregg, is the most sensitive part of the system, the one most likely to suffer from induced hum and dirty grounds. It’s even a good idea to pull the interconnect on the digital when you play analog. Happy Listening.

— J-10

**Speaker setup**

Editor:
In the February Stereophile (p.11), reader Jerry Fleisher asked if the methodology outlined in Immediate’s “Principles and Techniques of Speaker Placement” white paper (“Fine Tunes,” October ’98) works for bipolar speakers as well. Although J-10 had no experience with bipolar speakers and could not comment, I can confirm that I’ve had excellent results using Immediate’s approach for dipolar speakers.

My Alon Circe and Alon V Mk.II speakers have dipolar dispersion patterns in the midrange and high frequencies, and, although I had been getting good results via trial and error and by following the speaker designer’s recommendations, I achieved an even more natural and extended bass response by rigorously following Perkins’ horizontal and vertical grid approach. The methodology minimizes trial and error time and aids in dialing in the optimum speaker placement much faster.

Hats off to Allen Perkins for making available to the public a methodology that can improve the sound of competing speaker designs!

Robert J. Reina
New York, NY

**Interview setup**

Editor:
On reading the long-suffering Rick Rosen’s interview with Alan Parsons in January (p.93), I was struck how the interviewee demonstrated that all too
Can the new Mark Levinson N°360 and N°360S digital processors decode 24 bit/96 kHz DVDs?

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common ailment, recording engineers. I have seen this syndrome demonstrated in numerous of Rick's interviews. Poor Rick, constantly having to draw out and waste print documenting this malaise among the church fathers of our record industry.

The illness seems to be a combination of arrogance, condescension, and profound irony. But it takes so much time and space in his interviews, that I suggest always inserting the following paragraphs whenever Rick interviews a mainstream recording engineer. This would save space, and save Rick a lot of time:

RR: I'm interviewing X, well-known producer and engineer. Well, X, what do you think about music and reproduction?

X: I rarely listen to music at home. For me, it is mostly a background thing as I clean underneath the sink or do my taxes and whatnot. I think I have a stereo, but I'm not sure. I bought it while I was shopping for loafer shoes at the local SprawlMart. I think it's a Pioneer, or maybe it's a Sansui. Couldn't really tell you. I'm not sure if I have both speakers hitched up or not.

RR: But isn't the quality of sound reproduction important?

X: No, Rick. You see, people like you and I care about sound quality. But the simple truth is, the vast majority of consumers are total idiots. Something like 99.9% of people are complete morons about pretty much everything. They won't even know if they have both speakers hitched up. They'll just pick up whatever boombox is on sale at SprawlMart, and play whatever as they trink around the house. And most likely, they simply aren't able to hear the difference between that and what audiophiles call high fidelity.

RR: But isn't there a difference?

X: No.

I humbly submit that you turn this little colloquy into a rubber stamp, and give it as a present to our long-suffering Rick. It would save him so much trouble!

Yours from the land of the long-suffering.

Paul Canis
pjcl48@gwu.edu

Kal was wrong ... and right

Editor: I think Kalman Rubinsson completely missed the mark on the Panasonic A310 in his Arcam/MSB/California Audio Labs review in January (p.141). To my ears, this inexpensive DVD player sounds pretty good, considering its price. Even on 16/44.1 CDs, it does a number of things well. Judging from some comments I've seen on the Net, a lot of others agree with me.

However, after re-reading the review, I decided to audition the Arcam CD 9. Kalman was right — it really does trounce any DVD player I've heard. I bought it.

Gary Alexander
gany@sprynet.com

JA was wrong

Editor: While I think John Atkinson normally does a commendable job of reviewing equipment (both low- and high-ball), I think he missed the mark in his review of the Musical Fidelity X-24K in February (p.108) by essentially comparing apples and oranges.

It seems to me that the X-24K has two basic functions: first, to be used as a low-priced upgrade to 24/96 for people already using an outboard DAC; and second, to be used as an outboard DAC on a DVD-Vdeo player with 96kHz output. Let's start with the first point.

The first comparison the author makes is with the "cost-no-object Wadia." The X-24K falls short, "significantly" in the bass. Big surprise. I realize that some people with high-priced gear will want to stick their toe in the water of 24/96 without spending too much, but a perhaps fairer first comparison would have been a comparably priced outboard non-24/96 DAC, or, more logically, the MSB Link reviewed by Kal Rubinsson in January — or both.

Apart from the introduction, the author never mentions the MSB Link, a component with essentially the same goals as the X-24K and the natural one to compare. If he didn't have the MSB on hand for comparison, then it seems he should have waited to do the review until he did. Then, having given an idea of how the X-24K sounds with comparably priced gear, the author could have compared it with the Wadia for a glimpse into what you can buy now. Then as it is, I get a general sense of the X-24K's sound, but not in a frame of reference that is relevant.

The author then tries the X-24K in a way that almost no one is likely to: with the digital output of the Arcam Alpha 9. Apart from the fact that it is highly unlikely that someone would purchase the 9 and immediately place an outboard DAC on it, the author makes no comment on the impact on the sound that the digital cable (and attendant jitter) might have. You could make the argument that a different digital interconnect or a jitter reducer could have erased the differences, but the author doesn't mention those factors. Rather than being an "acid comparison," I would call it meaningless.

In regard to the second point, I was unclear on what the setup was. When the chosen material was played on the Denon DVD-5000, was the comparison made between the sound from the '5000's analog outputs and the sound from the '5000's digital output through the X-24K? If it was, please help me understand where it says so; otherwise, I have no idea whether the X-24K makes an improvement on the '5000's sound. I may be misunderstanding something here — ie, that the Denon doesn't present true 24/96 information at its own analog outputs — but that's just another guess, since the review doesn't tell me that either.

Finally, the author compares the sound of various 24/96 material played on the CAL/Denon/X-24K combination to that of CD playback on 16/44.1 gear, but since true 24/96 discs can't be played on 16/44.1 gear (unless we're talking about ones that can; ie, that have been recorded at 24/96 but downsampled before being manufactured — again, we are not told), how can the comparison be fairly made except by inference and memory?

Apples to oranges. Here's hoping that the editor/author keeps a closer watch on his copy.

John Kittredge
Norton, MA
john.kittredge@rb.com

Thak you for your comments, Mr. Kittredge. I did compare the X-24K with the almost identically priced Estech 205.2 in my review, but logistics made it impossible to do any comparisons with the MSB. My apologies. My experience of the analog outputs of inexpensive DVD players playing CDs has been uniformly negative, so I had assumed it was a given that the X-24K would outperform them. Regarding the Alpha 9 comparison, I felt that this English CD player set a standard at its price; so did Kal Rubinsson in his January review. It was in that light that I felt it would provide a benchmark for the Musical Fidelity's performance. And the comparison with the Wadia was both because it happened to be the only other 96kHz-capable D/A processor in my system during the review period and because it is my current reference as a digital source.

Finally, as noted in the review, I did use my own Nagra tapes for the 96kHz tests, for which I also have 44.1kHz equivalents. The review did include a paragraph on the differences I noted between the Musical Fidelity's presentation at the two sample rates using my own drum recording. I also thought it was clear from the review that the CAL and Denon
L e t t e r s

DVD players were used as sources of 24/96 data (though both do present true 24/96 data at their analog and their digital outputs).

But you're right—I could have done more in this review, and will try to do more comparisons in the future.

JA

What if?

Editor:

Has anyone ever tried doing a high-resolution (16 bits, 50kHz) digitization of the input signal to an amplifier, and a concomitant digitization of the output of the amp driving a real load—or an 8 ohm resistor, for that matter? It would be interesting to observe the linearity of an amplifier as a function of various signals. At 16-bit resolution, subtle differences in input/output linearity might be quite revealing. The least amount of nonlinearity might correlate with how good the amplifier sounds, or I would hope so.

The advantage of this test is that the amp can be analyzed driving real loads, and subtle differences can be easily captured, stored, and then retrieved for further analysis. I just wish we could come up with objective standards for good sound.

Allen L. Schmidtschmid@mllly.com

An interesting idea, Mr. Schmidts. I actually tried this about four years ago, using the Manley 20-bit A/D converter to digitize the signals at an amplifier's input and output terminals, and using real music as a test signal. I used the Sonic Solutions digital audio workstation to null one stored digital datastream against the other in order to extract the residue of what the amplifier was adding. However, I found it impossible to get a good null, due to difficulties in exactly matching the levels of the signals input to the A/D converter. (Even a 0.1% level difference swamps the amplifier residual you're looking for.)

I now have purchased 24-bit/96kHz/192kHz converters, from DCS for my recording activities, and I intend to repeat this experiment when I have the time.

JA

Weak on the Web?

Editor:
The Stereophile web page is the weakest part of your publication. I hope you can come up with a better format and republish many of your old reviews of equipment on the Net. Todlokry

thlokry@prodigy.net

Keep it up!

Editor:

I first visited your web page shortly after it started. I was not impressed; there was no useful information. However, I just revisited—it's so much better! The "Archives" section is exactly what I was looking for! Keep it up!

Jeff

bluecat@mri.net

Thank you for the web reprints

Editor:

When Stereophile first went online, I emailed my displeasure that there were no articles available on the site. I do not know when you began including articles on your website, but I would like to say thank you for doing so.

John A. Vogeni
Portland, OR
jvogei@concentric.net

L'Affaire Shun Mook

Editor:

Thank you for making available reprints of "The Shun Mook Affair" on your website. The original review must surely have a secure place in audio history as the most ridiculous and inaccurate ever published. Stereophile can only turn away its readership with such mockery.

In the letters included with the article in the site's "Archives" section, a very good question was posed by a reader: "Without trying to sound critical, when was the last time Stereophile reviewed an accessory with unusual claims and found it to be completely benign?" Stereophile should give this question the consideration it deserves—either that, or alter the category of its articles from "review" to "plug."

Does Stereophile still stand by this article?

Graham Mitchell
graham_mitchell@hotmail.com

Well, given that the reprint on the website included everything that the magazine has published on the Shun Mook accessories, both pro and con, from a number of writers, I can't answer that question. However, if the question Mr. Mitchell asks is "Does Jonathan Seull, who wrote the original Shun Mook review, still stand by what he said?" the answer is "Yes." If the subsequent question is "Do I, as editor, stand by what this magazine's writers say?" again the answer is "Yes."

JA

Nails in the coffin

Editor:

While I, along with Mike Silverton ("Letters," December '98, p.13), bemoan the obvious lack of female participation in my favorite hobby, I feel that I have to take umbrage with his use of the term "gender." Yes, "females are females and males are males," but these descriptive tags are not indicators of gender, but of biological sex. Gender is an expressed behavior that is irrevocably social, and the social scientists who study the phenomenon of gender use the terms "masculine" and "feminine" to denote our society's limited duality. The two sets of terms are not interchangeable and equal, as anyone who has met a masculine female or a feminine male will attest.

As it happens, gender is so socially tied to biological sex in our western society that the two often become conflated—especially in the mind of John Q. Public. Nevertheless, if you dig down to the nitty-gritty of the topic and study areas where, for all intents and purposes, there are no overt clues to an individual's biological sex (such as in MUDs or chat rooms on the Internet, where there are no bodies to delimit and classify our behavior), most gendered behavior simply ceases to exist.

In other words, it becomes impossible to tell who is a man and who is a woman, because behavior alone provides no clue to the sex of the participant. If gender was indeed biologically based, as Mr. Silverton claims, then the distinction between the sexes would be apparent even in such an impersonal environment because it would be innate and obvious in the discourse—a man would talk differently from a woman.

It is a testament to the strength of the social control invested in our concepts of gender that participants of these beliefless discussions go to great lengths to discover the sex of their conversational partners, even to the point of shunning individuals whose sex has not been determined. We seem to be uncomfortable without a "map" of how the conversation should proceed—and what we "know" about how males and females supposedly act helps us to provide a simple framework for the interaction. One hopes to be able to predict, with some small certainty, that a male will react with aggression and a female with docility, for example.

The problem is that the wildly diverse nature of humanity makes these predictions all but useless. Removed digitally from the restrictions of their
“In a word, marvelous!”

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D.B. Keele Jr.
Audio Magazine Feb. 1999
The Revel Ultima Gem. Stereophile Magazine's 1998 Speaker of the Year.
overt biological sex, many females exhibit extremely aggressive discourse and many males exhibit typically feminine behaviors. There is no real dividing line between the sexes.

Of course, there is some slight justification for Mr. Silverton's claims to distinctions between the sexes. The higher testosterone levels in males will certainly help to maintain their misrepresentative numbers in hospitals and jails. Different hormones in females will affect their behavior in an entirely different manner. The problem lies in thinking that these differences are profound rather than slight, or rules rather than tendencies. The recent increase in the numbers of females involved with the criminal justice system — especially in instances of violent crime — indicates the relative ineffectiveness of the female nurturing "instinct" (or lack of appreciable testosterone) over that of the societally sanctioned training in violence young people receive from our television and in our homes.

What does this bode for high-end audio? Disaster. We see "female" behavior when there really isn't any such thing, except that which has been taught. If every woman who walks into a high-end store is expected to "act like a woman" rather than like a customer, then she will be treated with some measure of disrespect — if only from the failure to regard her as uniquely individual.

In the pages of Stereophile, the subject of classism within our hobby has been analyzed and re-analyzed to death. Are some people treated badly because they walk in wearing less-than-impressive clothing? Surely. Are some women patronized because male sales clerks think that the hobby is too technical for them? Surely. I would contend that any kind of classifying prior to the sale is another nail in the coffin of our industry. I would also contend that Mr. Silverton's implication that the High End is a male industry is a gross oversimplification. Male dominated? Certainly. Innately male? Get real.

My advice to the industry is this: Listen to your customers — not after the sale, but before. Each person who walks through the front door of your establishment, regardless of biological sex or learned gender, is a living, breathing individual who doesn't necessarily think anything like the person who walked in just before. They will have their own reasons for considering your shop and your products and salespeople. If you choose not to notice this fact, and blantly ignore what you are being told by your customer, then you are failing to make the connection that may keep him or her coming back to you. You are being prejudiced — with all the negative connotations that word entails.

The trap pit that Mr. Silverton warns of certainly exists, but I think that it is he who may be slowly sinking.

Matthew Yeo
myeo@sprint.ca

Mike Silverton and Matthew Yeo are both right, lexically speaking. "Gender" has two quite different accepted meanings, hence this common confusion. Here is how Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, 10th Edition defines the word: "gender n 1a: sex 2b: the behavioral, cultural, or psychological traits typically associated with one sex." —RL

Happy listening

Editor:
As a frequent visitor to the Stereophile website, I've just finished reading Wes Phillips' parting "As We See It," and the CES update where Krell's Dan D'Agostino says the High End is doomed and that there are no Gen X audiophiles. [See this issue's "As We See It." — Ed.]

That these two perspectives were presented on the same day was illuminating. Stereophile is going to considerable lengths to interest people my age (29) and younger in the audio hobby and the joy of listening to well-recorded music on a good-sounding system. For a manufacturer of well-regarded equipment to insult the next generation of potential buyers — once we save for retirement, college for the kids, pay the bills, blah blah — seems insane! However, it is indicative of the current attitude of many retailers, manufacturers, and veteran audiophiles. Because the music and audio enthusiasts of my generation can't afford or aren't willing to go into debt on unbelievably high-priced stereo equipment, we are somehow deemed unworthy of listening to quality systems and the music we're interested in.

Now, I have to say that the high-priced gear I've been lucky enough to listen to in local dealers' rooms has been truly impressive, but for that money, it isn't for me at this point in my life.

All this division among audiophiles — vinyl vs CD, tubes vs solid-state, etc. — is pushing away those with any interest in learning more. When you tell someone they need to spend $10k for an entry-level system, they're going to run away screaming, especially when good sound can be had for a lot less. For a current real-world example, take the technicians I work with, who think I am crazy to have spent the money I have on my system — less than $5k — but who almost all have more than $5k invested in their computers and don't think twice about it.

Let's stop all this bickering and support each other in our love of listening to music, of any kind, or our hobby will begin its journey down the road to obscurity. If those of you audiophiles who are so vocal in your disdain of us could relax for a minute and actually give us young guys a little help in figuring it all out, it would be greatly appreciated, especially by the manufacturers who can survive by selling us gear.

Let's get it together so this hobby of ours stays alive and growing. Happy listening.

Colin Ezerow
CEZROW@aol.com

Errors

Editor:
I was very pleased that you selected ifcarast as Stereophile's January '99 "Recording of the Month." However, I would like to point out a factual error in the caption to Wes Phillips' review. Robina G. Young was not the producer of this recording. She could not have been, as she did not attend any of the sessions. I think you may have been confused by the terminology used in the credits on the CD. She was the executive producer, and as such served admirably in an administrative capacity. In Harmonia Mundi USA parlance, the actual producer of the recording is called the sessions producer. I was the producer, as well as engineer and editor, of the recording.

Thank you for letting me clarify this important distinction.

John Hadden
JohnHadden@CompuServe.com

Value

Editor:
Occasionally, something of real value escapes into one of your issues. Larry Greenhill's recommendation of Arturo Sandoval and Tito Puente's HotHouse ("Records To Die For," February '99, p.71) makes the whole one-year subscription worthwhile. If this CD were vinyl, I would have worn it out in the two weeks I've owned it.

If only you could double your music content and halve your equipment section, I would subscribe for a lifetime.

Tony Antonuccio
tonyanto@erols.com
It just sounds right.

...so easy on the ears that you can listen deep into the night without the slightest fatigue...listening to music becomes subtly but surely elevating, elating in the quiet sort of way that nourishes and strengthens the spirit. And that is what music was meant to do."


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- Alan Sircom, Hi-Fi Choice, October 1997

"The ART constitutes a new reference for what is possible from audio replay, and delivers a sound quality that others merely hint at."

- Martin Colloms, Hi-Fi News, June 1997

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- Tom Müller, The Audio Adventure, June 1996

...one of a kind. The ART establishes new standards for reproduction of instrumental tonality, dynamics, liveliness, and even soundstaging...

- Myles Astor, Ultimate Audio, December 1997
Ribbit!

Editor:
I finally received my February Stereophile, after seeing it on the newsstands for a considerable time. (Why do magazines never arrive just before the weekend, when you can really enjoy them? I got three other audio mags on Monday!) Steady on here! A review of a 54-minute recording of tree frogs? I actually had to look at the magazine’s cover to see if it wasn’t the April issue.

I trust that this review represents a temporary aberration on Robert Baird’s part, occasioned perhaps by the fact that (to quote his review), after listening to this album, his “brainwaves will begin to flutter in strange ways.”

Bill Spohn
Vancouver, BC
WSpohn4@aol.com

Plodding along

Editor:
I’ve been a subscriber to Stereophile for years and have never felt compelled to express any frustrations with your publication. However, the January ’99 issue contained a review of a Plush recording, More You Become You, that I think the magazine’s readers should be warned about.

I bought this CD based on Fred Mills’ review. Mr. Mills drops some pretty big names while trying to express his enthusiasm for this recording: Brian Wilson, Laura Nyro, Elton John, Johnny Cash, “a voice ... between Alex Chilton and Badfinger’s Pete Ham.”

I own at least a couple thousand CDs and listen to a broad range of material. It is rare that I find a recording so insulting that I find myself wanting to take the CD out and play Frisbee with the dog.

Fred, is this guy your brother-in-law or something? I literally felt so sorry for this “artist” that I could hardly look at the speakers. His voice is so off-key and strangely disconnected from the music. It’s like he wrote the song on the spot and just keeps plodding along.

If Fred would please send me $15, I would gladly send him the Plush CD. I swear it sounded better after the dog chewed on it for a while. Bruce Ricks
bruce.ricks@uni.edu

Slow’n’grind

Editor:
In his review of the Leinsdorf recording of Wagner’s Lohengrin (RCA 50164-2) in the December Stereophile (December ’98, pp.181–182), Richard Lehmann remarks “...this recording includes the second half of Lohengrin’s ‘In fernem Land’ narrative in Act III, cut by Wagner following the 1850 Weimar premiere — its inclusion makes this the only absolutely complete recording of Lohengrin ever made.”

I hate to nit-pick, but this is incorrect on two counts. The first one is obviously the fault of deadlines; Teldec has just released an equally compendious recording, including the passage in question, sung by Peter Seiffert.

I would also note, however, that Wagner cut this passage prior to, not after, the Weimar premiere, and had it removed from the score; I believe that it was never performed except in Germany during the years preceding and during WWII (there is a recording made at that time by Franz Völker). While I’m glad to hear this bit of music, it makes both the RCA and Teldec recordings more than complete, and I hardly think that its inclusion is sufficient reason to prefer RCA’s generally poorly sung version to more worthy recorded efforts.

William D. Kasimer
wkas@mindspring.com

My chronology was wrong, and Mr. Kasimer is right: On July 2, 1850, the exiled Wagner wrote to Franz Liszt, who was busy in Weimar with preparations for the world premiere of Lohengrin, requesting that Liszt stage the opera instead — with the exception of the Act III passage in question. Liszt complied, and those 56 bars were not sung at the premiere (August 28, 1850), and do not appear in the published score. And yes, when the December 1998 issue went to press, I was unaware of Daniel Barenboim’s new recording of the opera on Teldec, also “more than complete,” which at that time had yet to be released. (I’ll review it soon for Stereophile.)

The expanded Lohengrin was performed regularly at Bayreuth in the 1930s in performances conducted by Furtwängler and sung by Völker. I was unaware of any recordings of these, but hope to track them down. The unfortunate Rita Gorr aside, Mr. Kasimer’s and my opinions about the singing on the Leinsdorf recording are just that, and nowhere in my review did I suggest that the Leinsdorf Lohengrin should be preferred to all other recordings of the opera. Still, anyone who cares at all about Wagner and/or Lohengrin will definitely want to hear the reinstated passage; it is fine music that disturbs the rhythm and pace of Lohengrin’s dénouement not at all. When I wrote the review, the Leinsdorf recording was the only place to hear it. I refer all interested parties to the new recording by Barenboim: his musical and (in a brief essay) verbal arguments for the inclusion of this passage are even more convincing than Leinsdorf’s.

— RL

Stereophile, April 1999

Positive reinforcement

Editor:
I must again heap positive reinforcement on your always enjoyable and informative publication for featuring New Orleans music in the January ’99 issue: reviews of four recent New Orleans rock CDs and Robert Baird’s excellent overview of the career and recordings of Professor Longhair.

I have a few additions to the list of available Fess recordings that might be helpful. Nine of his Mercury session tracks are available on Mercury’s eight-disc boxed set, The Mercury Blues’n’Rhythm Story, 1945–1955. The same tracks plus four alternates can be found on the Bear Family LP, The Mercury New Orleans Sessions, 1950. Finally, there are two more hours of previously unissued live performances with most of Fess’s Crawfish Fiesta-era band at Tipitina’s (the original) in 1978, available on Night Train’s two-CID set, Byrd Lives! These are mastered from soundboard tapes, but are worth hearing if for no other reason than that they have Stanley John’s steel drumming on various tracks (a truly rare find). Enjoy.

Music lovers have much of value to explore in current and vintage music from The City That Care Forgot. Thanks for steering your readers in that direction. As a fan, I think they’ll have a lot of fun.

Dan Phillips
“New Orleans: Under the Influence”
WEVL FM, Memphis
dbp.mjr@ix.netcom.com

Where are Holt’s recordings?

Editor:
Any chance of your putting me in touch with J. Gordon Holt about cassettes or LPs, some of which he engineered back in the ’50s, of Richard Dyer Bennett? I’d also be interested to learn about the availability of any Dyer Bennett’s much later recorded performance of Schubert’s Winterreise.

Jeremy S. Gurofsky
Goldenthal@aol.com

The Smithsonian’s Folklife division is in the process of re-releasing on CD the DYB recordings I mastered. Contact Pete Reininger at inf@follklfe.ssi.edu.

— J. Gordon Holt

What’s that sound?

Editor:
I have been enjoying Anne Akiko Meyers’ RCA Red Seal CD containing Vaughan Williams’ ethereal The Lark Ascending, which has been mentioned on several occasions in Stereophile. About 1:20 into the piece (and at several other places in the recording), Ms. Meyers’
Basic.
Black.
Brilliant.

"The GCD-750's D/A converter is first-class."
Lawrence W. Johnson, for AudioVideo Interiors (January 1999)

"Vocals were simply terrific with the ADCOM."
Wayne Garcia, Fi (February 1999)

"The GCD-750 simply sounded musical."
Anthony H. Cordesman, AUDIO (March 1999)

GCD-750 Simply Outstanding.
violin soars into the upper register, and I noticed a significant amount of what could be described as "huffing" or "wind" surrounding her notes. I have listened to this section on my system and on headphones, and hear the same unpleasant "noise."

Could you please shed some light on this phenomenon? Is this in the recording, and if so, why—or is this part of the inefficiency of my playback chain in rendering the live event?  

John Thesian  
Thesian@aol.com

The unpleasant noise that bothers you, Mr. Thesian, is the sound of the bow's horsehair gripping and releasing the violin's strings. Though this is an inescapable part of the sound of the live instrument, it is usually inaudible at the distance at which the audience generally sits. But when the solo instrument has a spot microphone fairly close to it and there are no lower frequencies present that would otherwise provide masking, as in this astonishing piece of music making, you can easily become aware of extraneous mechanical sounds such as this.  

— One-time violinist JA

What system?
Editor:
As the most influential international audio magazine, you should consider using metric measurement units instead of the present US measurement system. Only a few countries in the world are still using nonmetric systems.

I understand that your primary market is the US, but you could print both metric and US values. This would make reading of review measurement results and component specifications much more comprehensible for the audio community in the rest of the world.

Thank you for an otherwise excellent publication!  
Samo Jecnik  
Slovenia  
samo.jecnik@marketing.telekom.si

Thanks for writing, Mr. Jecnik. As an Englishman, I am well familiar with the metric system, but the US is woefully behind the rest of the world when it comes to adopting a rational system of units. We do try to list the metric equivalents to the US measurements in the specifications boxes in our reviews, but we currently list weights and measures in the body of the text in "imperial" units only.  

— JA

Correction
In "Ace of Bass" (March 1999), we incorrectly identified the singer pictured with Dave Holland as Ella Fitzgerald—our apologies to the late Betty Carter. In addition, Holland began recording for ECM in 1971, not 1981.  

— RB
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UNITED STATES
Barry Willis
High-end audio legend Mark Levinson has departed Cello Film and Music Systems, the company he founded 15 years ago, and has formed a new business, Red Rose Music. "The new company will break all performance barriers with both affordable and cost-no-object audio equipment," Levinson stated last week, and is already registered as a new business with the state of New York.

The Red Rose sales staff is concentrating on completing a backlog of home-theater and high-resolution music-system installations, and a new line of products is in development, Levinson said. He is particularly proud of the quality of the creative custom installation work being done by Red Rose, including special speaker systems designed for such diverse applications as a formal library room, a "party" system with natural sound at disco levels, and a theater system for a major filmmaker.

A prototype loudspeaker that Levinson hopes to market under the Red Rose banner offers "an unprecedented sense of ease and naturalism," he said. "This design is unbelievably easy to drive. You can hear everything the musicians are doing. It's much more like real music, with air and space. We are going to give the world something really special: six-figure performance for $10,000 — something that will melt the hearts of music lovers everywhere."

High-end audio legend
Mark Levinson has departed Cello Film and Music Systems, the company he founded 15 years ago, and has formed a new business, Red Rose Music.

Levinson first attained fame in audio circles back in the early 1970s with advanced electronics designs marketed by Mark Levinson Audio Systems, which later became part of Madrigal — a company that still manufactures ultra-high-quality audio equipment bearing the Mark Levinson name. Cello, his next venture, is another name synonymous with "the best at any price."

A musician and recording engineer noted for his transparent-sounding recordings, Levinson has recently been involved with the Stradivarius Society, a philanthropical organization whose members buy rare (and very expensive) violins and loan them out to young musicians who show exceptional promise. The Metropolitan Museum of Art exhibited a collection of these rare violins a few years ago, from which Geoff Fushin, a society member, produced a beautiful and richly designed book on great violins in history. Levinson spent two days recording Elnar Olivera performing on 28 of these instruments, a CD of which will be included with the book.

"Other violinists turned down this opportunity," Levinson mentioned. "They told Geoff it was just too hard. Elnar just poured himself into the project with no fear, no ego, no complaints. He was easy to work with and set the standards for pace, commitment, and total focus for the rest of us to live up to.

His wife arrived the first day, concerned about the sonic quality of the recordings. When we gave her the Stax headphones, she got tears in her eyes and hugged Elnar, saying it was the first time she had heard his sound on a recording."

C A L E N D A R

Those promoting audio-related seminars, shows, and meetings should fax (do not call) Steven Stoner the when, where, and who at (505) 983-6327 at least eight weeks before the month of the event — i.e., the deadline for the June 1999 issue is April 1, 1999. Mark the fax cover sheet "For the attention of Steven Stoner — Dealer Bulletin Board." We will fax back a confirmation of your event. If you do not receive confirmation within 24 hours, please fax us again.

CALIFORNIA

Tuesday, March 23: Music Lovers (1995 El Dorado Avenue, Berkeley) is hosting Ted Denney III, lead designer and CEO of Synergistic Research, for a full discussion of Synergistic's "Your Cable for Life!" technologies, including live demonstrations of active and discrete shielding and the Lifetime Passport Protection trade-in program. Bring your old cables to trade in. Call (510) 558-1000 for more information.

Saturday, April 10, 2-6pm: Atlantic Stereo (445 East 17th Street, Costa Mesa) is hosting a special audio/video open house and exhibition. Robert Harley, technical editor of Fi, will host a free seminar on home theater at 3pm, and will sign copies of his books Home Theater for Everyone and The Complete Guide to High-End Audio. Representatives from B&K, Carver, Creston, Dynaudio, DWIN, JVC, Marantz, Nordost, Sennheiser, SimAudio, Sony, Sunfire, and Tannoy will be on hand to introduce and demonstrate new products. Door prizes will be awarded hourly; refreshments will be provided. For more information, call (949) 646-8895.

Saturday, April 10, 2-8pm: The Audio Chamber (5707 College Avenue, Oakland) is hosting a listening and Q&A session featuring Michael Masztal and Alan Yun of Silverline Audio Technology. Several models will be auditioned, including the "Grandeur" statement loudspeaker. Refreshments will be provided. Call (510) 654-6688 for information and reservations or e-mail audiochamb@aol.com.
Levinson's goals for his new enterprise are both lofty and mundane. Among them are truly affordable high-performance audio products, a new retail space, and a dynamic website. Farther down the road are more recordings, and philanthropical projects to raise substantial funds for battered women's and children's relief.

A toll-free number for Red Rose Music, 877-RRMUSCIC, should be active by the time you read these words.

**UNITED KINGDOM**

**Paul Messenger**

Turn on the British TV News on most New Year's Days and you'll see celebratory fireworks displays from every time zone, a bit of sport, and not much else. This year we were treated to something more unusual: gaggles of Eurocrats and Eurobankers standing around in penguin suits drinking champagne. Even stranger had been the unprecedented sight of the "City of London" *[Brietalk for "Wall Street" — Ed]* going to work during the UK's usual Christmas/New Year's interregnum a couple of days earlier.

Why all the fuss? The euro was being launched as a brand-new common currency with reserve pretensions, and which is scheduled to displace the national currencies of at least 11 European countries by mid-2002. And when the exchanges opened the following week, the euro seemed to be floating very satisfactorily. It's not a proper currency yet — there won't be any cash available until January 2002 — but the 11 countries have now locked their currencies to a fixed exchange rate, and the euro (an E with a semicircular back and two horizontal strokes through the middle,) is now legal tender throughout much of Europe. The currency will be increasingly used by banks and businesses during the three-and-a-half-year transition.

**Only Musical Fidelity's Antony Michaelson was openly hostile to this latest step toward European federalism, which he regards as the confidence trick of the century.**

Britain is not joining up — not yet, anyway, though the government is adopting a "softly, softly" public relations campaign to try to convince the profoundly skeptical British public. Nor are Sweden, Norway, Switzerland, or Greece. But Germany, Austria, France, Italy, Spain, Portugal, Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, Ireland, and Finland represent a combined population of 290 million — fractionally larger than that of the US. Assuming European unification follows through successfully, that's one heck of a unified trading block.

What are Britain's export-oriented hi-fi specialists doing about it? Not a lot. Most are waiting for their overseas distributors to take the initiative, and planning to continue pricing in pounds sterling for the foreseeable future.

Of the half dozen or so key people I spoke to, only Musical Fidelity's Antony Michaelson was openly hostile to this latest step toward European federalism, which he regards as the confidence trick of the century. If you want to hear the anti-Europe pitch, Antony's your man. Just make sure you're sitting comfortably as he points out the massive increase in paperwork and ludicrous "CE mark" test procedures that increase his costs and make it harder to stay competitive. Antony reckons that the UK should get out of the EEC as soon as possible and join NAFTA.

Everyone else seemed cautiously optimistic. Merididian director Colin Aldridge was impressed by how smoothly the launch had gone, and how stable the exchange rates had been so far. Roy Gandy of Rega regards the euro as "just another currency" right now, and has no reluctance to opening a euro account when the time is right.

Arcam's John Dawson also expects to start trading in euros before too long, and will be discussing the whole issue at his company's distributor conference, which takes place in the spring. He did raise one very interesting issue: the "magic" prices that dominate the consumer electronics world (ie, anything with a string of nines at the end). At the moment, each country has a range of "natural" prices based on its native currency, regardless of the euro exchange rate. With double (local/euro) pricing, only one of the two currencies can hit a "magic" price; some realignment is inevitable. It's going to be particularly tricky for neighboring currencies with

**Calendar**

**COLORADO**

- **Monday, April 5:** *Listen Up* (685 S. Pearl, Denver) is hosting Ted Denney III, lead designer and CEO of Synergistic Research, for a discussion of Synergistic's "Your Cable for Life!" technologies, including live demonstrations of active and discrete shielding and the Lifetime Passport Protection trade-in program. Bring your old cables to trade in. Call (303) 444-0479 for more information.
- **Thursday, April 8:** *Listen Up* (230 N. Tejon Street, Colorado Springs) is hosting Ted Denney III, lead designer and CEO of Synergistic Research, for a discussion of Synergistic's "Your Cable for Life!" technologies, including live demonstrations of active and discrete shielding and the Lifetime Passport Protection trade-in program. Bring your old cables to trade in. Call (719) 633-2600 for more information.

**CONNECTICUT**

- For membership information on the Connecticut Audio Society, visit their exclusive website at www.the-atom.com/cas or call Carl Richard at (860) 745-5937.

**GEORGIA**

- **Saturday, April 24,** 12-5pm: *Audio Solutions* (5576 Chamblee Dunwoody Road, Atlanta) will host a seminar featuring Dana Carlson of Madrigal Audio Laboratories and Steve Grod of Revel Corporation. Demonstrations will include products from Mark Levinson, Proceed, and Revel loudspeakers. For more information and reservations, call (770) 804-8977.
Berlioz wrote a masterpiece. We play it with the same passion.

A symphony worthy of the name.

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Rotel’s RCD-991, a CD player worthy of your attention.

Custom-wound toroidal transformers. HDCD® capability. Twenty-bit Burr-Brown PCM-63 D/A converters. Adjustable dither to fine-tune system sound. An analog stage carefully crafted from the finest parts available. Balanced and single ended outputs for maximum flexibility.

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Berlioz and Rotel. Prize-winning compositions. Award-winning components.

Hi Fi Fantastique.
At the heart of our Utopia series lies some original new technology, the W sandwich. This fantastic cone material, made of layers of glass in a sandwich with a closed cell foam core, took three years to develop. Light, but very rigid this revolutionary material has contributed to the success of the Grande Utopia - universally hailed as one of the world's best speakers.

Through manufacturing efficiency, the W sandwich technology is now also available in the very affordable Electra series.

The unmatched transient response of these speakers will let you “see” into your music, bringing you closer to the live event.
similar but not identical euro exchange rates, such as the Dutch gulden and German deutsche mark.

Europe represents a third of B&W's business, and international marketing director Evert Jan Huizing is planning to price B&W products in euros over the next 12 months. He welcomes the opportunity to treat Europe as a single market, and feels it will make the market more transparent in identifying trends.

Linn first started equalizing prices across Europe way back in 1992. Martin Dalgleish pointed out that the company's highest price differentials today are the result of local variations in VAT sales-tax rates. He foresaw no problems with the euro itself, but feels uneasy about the possible consequences of some of the wider issues of European social harmonization. Right now, Linn is more concerned that the setting up of a Scottish Parliament could eventually lead to secession from the UK, which would not be a good thing.

Naim's Julian Vereker sees no problem in handling the euro in the short term, but feels that the rigidity it imposes may bring all sorts of problems over the medium to long term. He's quite glad that Britain has not yet embraced the euro, and regrets losing the flexibility of variable currencies, which, like negative feedback, helped smooth over the out-of-phase business cycles of individual markets. Though not specifically anti-federalist, Vereker feels that the cultural differences across Europe are much greater than those within the United States. Language, pension, and property-law variations are just some of the factors working against the sort of flexibility of labor that helps make America work.

**UNITED STATES**

**Jon Iverson**

Branding was once reserved for cowhide and breakfast cereals, but changes in the retailing landscape have fostered new approaches for everything from running shoes (Niketown) to cartoon-character merchandise (Disney and Warner Bros. stores) to clothes (Gap, etc.). In the audio market, Bose stores are now common sites in shopping malls, but few higher-ticket companies have taken the brand-store plunge.

At the end of 1998, Bang & Olufsen announced that it will focus on developing B&O-licensed "branded stores" throughout the world; there are currently more than 250 stores worldwide. B&O's growth strategy is to double this number in the next three years, including opening more than 160 stores in the US. B&O has accordingly canceled its dealer agreements with retailers effective May 31, 1999 — after this date, B&O products will be available only in B&O branded stores.

While this new policy has created a rift with some dealers, others are adapting by investing in the new stores themselves. For example, B&O products have been sold by Harvey Electronics since 1980, and the line represented approximately $1,176,000, or 6.8% of Harvey's net sales for the 12-month period ended October 31, 1998. In light of the new B&O mandate, however, Harvey has announced that it has teamed with B&O to open branded stores in Manhattan, Long Island, and Connecticut. Pursuant to this commitment, the company must complete construction of these locations at various dates through November 1999. B&O has also authorized Harvey to open as many as five more branded stores should the arrangement prove fruitful.

According to Harvey, the B&O mandate has caused the company to revise its corporate strategy. In addition to its plan to open an additional Harvey Electronics store in New Jersey within the next 18 months, the company will also focus its efforts on opening the additional B&O stores in Manhattan. To date, Harvey has not secured leases for any new Harvey Electronics or B&O stores.

Franklin Karp, president of Harvey, stated, "The revised strategy occasioned by Bang & Olufsen, while unplanned, was not unanticipated. The ability to open additional branded store locations so close to existing Harvey stores, together with the elimination of competition on Bang & Olufsen products from other retailers, is a positive development for the company."

**UNITED STATES**

**David Vernier**

ROBERT SHAW, 1916–1999: Robert Shaw, music director emeritus and conductor laureate of the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra, held a unique position in American music for more than half a century. He died of a stroke in New Haven, Connecticut on January 25. He was 82.

As founder of the Collegiate Chorale in the early 1940s and, more notably, the Robert Shaw Chorale in 1949, Shaw forged an original and profoundly influ-

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**ILLINOIS**

**Holm Audio** invites you to visit its new, larger location at 2050 W. 75th Street, Woodridge, which features nine listening rooms and two home-theater rooms. Plans for a grand opening party are in the works, as are seminars with a variety of manufacturers. During HIFI '99 in Chicago May 11–16, look for showcases of products from Cary Audio, Acarion Systems, Electrocompaniet, Black Diamond Racing, Nordost, Vampire, and more. Call (630) 663-1298 for more information.

**LOUISIANA**

For information on becoming a member of Big Boys Audio Toys Society, New Orleans' first and only high-end audio club, please e-mail stockjoc@hot mail.com. Don't delay; membership is limited.

**NEBRASKA**

Thursday, March 25, 12am–8pm: The Sound Environment (5600 S. 59th Street, Lincoln) is hosting a day with Brad O'Toole of Transparent Cable, who will demonstrate audio, digital, video, and new power cables, and Luke Manley of VTL, who will demonstrate VTL pure tube amplifiers and preamplifiers. For more information, call (402) 423-3737, or visit sndenvl@ibm.net or soundenvironment.com.

Friday, March 26, 12am–8pm: The Sound Environment (Rockbrook Village, 108th and West Center Road, Omaha) is hosting a day with Brad O'Toole of Transparent Cable, who will demonstrate audio, digital, video,
When someone says ‘take control of your life’
do you immediately reach for the remote?

Just make sure you reach for the right remote. Namely, the one for our new AVC-2500 Audio Video Controller. It’s an elegant surround processor, dual-zone preamplifier, D to A converter, and tuner all wrapped up in one very neat, very convenient package.

Everything about the AVC-2500 proclaims its preeminence in the world of home electronics. For starters, we teamed up with a group of remarkably gifted engineers. In fact, they’re the same experts who Lucasfilm has hired to redesign and upgrade the electronics in THX theaters worldwide.

We realize all that advanced technology is meaningful only when you can figure out how to use it. That’s why our unique on-screen display gives you total access by balancing both breadth of control and ease of use. You can even customize each of the different sources, digital inputs, or even radio stations with names you make up yourself or select from its comprehensive library of names.

For more information on our AVC-2500, visit our website. Or better yet, experience one at your Parasound dealer. And see what it’s like to be the master of your universe—or at least your home theater.
tential career devoted to the highest standards of choral-music performance. He was, in short, America’s first and greatest choral conductor.

For the generations of listeners who grew up in the 1950s and ’60s, Shaw’s recordings for RCA — including the Verdi Requiem (currently out of print) and Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony with Arturo Toscanini (RCA 60477–2), along with collections of patriotic songs and opera choruses — were the first, standard-setting encounters with classical music sung by a world-class American choir.

Shaw not only mastered a tremendous variety of repertoire — the great masterpieces of Bach and Brahms, an astonishing Britten War Requiem (Telarc CD-80157), and collections of Broadway tunes, folk songs, and spirituals — but his choirs always reflected the racial diversity and honest, unpretentious sound of America itself. This warm, vibrant, “American” choral sound, widely admired and frequently imitated, was the result of Shaw’s thorough understanding of the score in question, his reverence for the composer’s intentions, and his respectful, at times hard-edged, insistence on perfection from his performers.

Despite his reputation as a taskmaster, the conductor also understood and had great respect for his singers. This vital aspect of his success grew from his earliest, post-college experiences as conductor of the Fred Waring Glee Club, for the group’s weekly radio broadcasts. Beginning in the early 1950s, Toscanini’s faith in the young conductor assured Shaw’s future and confirmed his arrival among classical music’s elite performers and recording artists.

Fortunately, Shaw’s legacy will endure thanks to his hefty recording catalog, much of it with Cleveland-based Telarc Records, with whom he first signed a recording contract in 1978. Few conductors enjoyed the kind of acclaim that Shaw had grown used to at the annual Grammy Awards ceremony. During his career, Shaw won 14 Grammys: four with the Robert Shaw Chorale, and the last 10 during his association with Telarc and the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra. This year’s Shaw nominee is a Telarc disc (CD-80479) of the choral music of Barber (Prayers of Kierkegaard), Bartók (Cantata Profana), and Vaughan Williams (Dona Nobis Pacem).

Most music lovers and record collectors know that in 1967, after 11 years in Cleveland as George Szell’s assistant, Shaw moved south to build, nurture, and transform the Atlanta Symphony from a part-time regional ensemble into a first-class, fully professional, internationally recognized orchestra. Together with the 200-voice Atlanta Symphony Orchestra Chorus, Shaw, the ASO, and Telarc added many monuments to the record catalog: Handel’s Messiah (2CD-80093), Orff’s Carmina Burana (CD-80056), Beethoven’s Missa Solemnis (CD-80150), Brahms’ A German Requiem (CD-80092), Stravinsky’s Symphony of Psalms (out of print), Mozart’s Requiem (CD-80128), and Bach’s Mass in B Minor (2CD-80233).

In the decade following his retirement as the ASO’s music director in 1988, Shaw devoted considerable time to summer festivals and workshops, both in Europe and at New York’s Carnegie Hall. His Robert Shaw Festival Singers produced several notable recordings, including a dazzling account of Rachmaninoff’s Vespers (Telarc CD-80172), which won another Grammy — this time for Telarc’s engineering prowess.

A final Shaw recording, Dvořák’s Stabat Mater, with the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra and Chorus, was completed last November and is scheduled for release on Telarc in the fall of 1999. It promises to be a musically poignant and sonically transcendent farewell. A much-anticipated recording of Shaw’s own English translation of Brahms’ A German Requiem, with the Mormon Tabernacle Choir, was scheduled to begin sessions in February. Sadly, we will now never hear the realization of Shaw’s unique interpretive vision of that work.

UNITED STATES
Robert Baird
In the past 12 months, writing tributes to music figures who have died has become an uncomfortably frequent task. No passing has saddened me more, however, than that of Charles Brown, who died of congestive heart failure in Oakland, California, on Thursday, January 21 at the age of 76.

To fans — many of whom hopped on the bandwagon only after his early 1990s
If I had $12,000
I’d buy a dCS Elgar Ring DAC instead.*

“A breakthrough in sub-$2,000 CD players...[The ARCAM Alpha 9] withstood direct comparisons to players/DACs costing several times as much, and made small potatoes of the differences. I was particularly impressed with the bass extension, detail, and power...its broad soundstage was truly thrilling with large and small ensembles, with superb resolution of the music’s inner voices. I would be hard-pressed to justify buying a more expensive CD-only player.”

Kalman Rubinson, Stereophile Vol. 22 No.1

“Significantly, I never felt shortchanged by having a $1,599 CD player at the front end of $60,000 worth of electronics and loudspeakers – the Alpha 9 was that musically compelling, communicative, and expressive. The Alpha 9 is not only a great-sounding CD player, but a tremendous value. Frankly, I would have recommended the Alpha 9 for its sound quality had it cost $3,000. What more can one say!”

Robert Harley, Fi – The Magazine of Music & Sound

**“But I don’t, so I bought an ARCAM Alpha 9. It’s the only CD player using a 24-bit chip set based on the Ring DAC technology inside the $12,000 dCS Elgar and the best professional studio converters. Sure, I’d rather have an Elgar, but sometimes getting through life requires setting priorities.”

Dave Wright, (Happily Married) Alpha 9 Owner

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Bonnie Raitt-assisted comeback—Brown was a revelation. His smooth, elegant "cocktail blues" stood in stark contrast to the rower, often louder sounds coming from the rest of blues world. Onstage, he was a consummate gentleman and performer: the quick, appealing grin, the down-home jokes, the affection for him that the members of his longtime quintet so conspicuously displayed—and, most of all, the way he played piano. Whether comping behind someone else or picking his way through a solo, the vision of Brown's large hands running across the keys is one that no one who saw him play will ever forget.

Born in Texas City, Texas in 1922, Brown began playing piano as a child, and was a fan of (among others) Art Tatum and Pha Terrell (the pianist with the Kansas City-based Andy Kirk Orchestra in the '30s). Brown began his adult life as a high school chemistry and math teacher, before moving to Los Angeles in 1943, where he joined Johnny Moore's Three Blazers. His silky-smooth style, best exemplified by "Driftin' Blues," his 1945 hit on Aladdin Records, became a fixture in L.A.'s now-legendary Central Avenue music scene.

The Blazers were one of the many West Coast groups modeled after Nat King Cole's successful trio. Cole himself became a friend of Brown's, and, like Ray Charles, always considered Brown a primary influence on his music.

It was with the Blazers that Brown recorded, in 1947, what has become his best-known original, "Merry Christmas Baby." That tune and Brown's other holiday hit single, "Please Come Home for Christmas" (first recorded in 1960), are both available in newly recorded versions on Charles Brown's Cool Christmas Blues (Bullseye Blues CL 1 9561).

Brown left the Three Blazers for a solo career in 1948 because of a disagreement over songwriting credit and royalties related to "Merry Christmas Baby." Until the end of his life, however, he rarely failed to satisfy an in-concert request for "Merry Christmas Baby"—even in July!

Despite a string of solo R&B hits in the early '50s — "Black Night," "Trouble Blues," "My Baby's Gone"—Brown's career slowly faded into invisibility in the early '60s, thanks in large part to rock'n'roll. By the mid-'70s he was working as a janitor.

In the late '80s, several factors coalesced to create the opportunity for Brown to suddenly burst back on the scene, voice and pianistic skills intact, as if sprung from a time capsule. All the Rhythm and Those Blues, a film detailing the lives of Charles and singer Ruth Brown, ignited the process. A number of gigs in New York and Los Angeles, one of which Bonnie Raitt happened to catch, set the wheels in motion. Brown's first comeback record was One More for the Road, originally released on here-today/gone-tomorrow indie label, Blue Side Records, in 1986, and re-released on Alligator three years later (ALCD-4771). It remains one of the high points of the last 13 years of his life.

Seized upon as a cause worth championing by Bonnie Raitt—then riding her own wave of rediscovery—Brown began opening her shows, and was selected to record what would be the first disc of Rounder Records' new Bullseye Blues label. All My Life (BB 9501) boasted liner notes by Atlantic Records chieftain Jerry Wexler, an effective back-cover blurb by Raitt, and guest appearances by Ruth Brown and Dr. John, and cemented Brown's return. He recorded two more records for Bullseye: 1992's Someone to Love (BB 9514) and 1994's Just a Lucky So and So (BB 9521). These records established the pattern all of Brown's subsequent recordings would follow: quintet recordings with his devoted, masterful road band featuring updated arrangements of standards and classic Brown originals from his 1950s heyday.

In 1994 Brown switched to PolyGram/France and released Those Blues (1994, Verve 314 523 022-2) and The Honeydripper (1996, Verve 529 848-2), both of which were released domestically by another arm of the now-merged PolyGram empire, Verve Records. In 1998, Verve released his swan song, So Goes Love (314 539 9672-2). The last time I saw Brown perform, in spring 1998, he had to be helped to the stage. But being barely able to walk did not impede him in making his astonishing wardrobe choices. In that show, instead of his customary silver lame jacket and matching captain's cap (no one besides Count Basie could wear a captain's cap like Brown did), he appeared in a bright-colored, Sun Ra-like maharaja robe. In another worrying sign that the end was near, Brown appeared without a toupee. No one had crazier hairpieces, yet for this show Brown had chosen a knit cap and his own gray, thinning hair. His failing health did not, however, diminish the vibrant energy that flowed out of him when he performed.

Another irreplaceable musical original is gone. [See "Building a Library," Stereophile, April 1997.]

**Acoustical Magic** (12815 NE 124th Street, Suite R, Kirkland) will host a seminar featuring Jeff Nelson and Bruce Van Allen of Boulder Amplifiers, Tom Bohleender of Wisdom Audio, and Dave Kinsler of Audio Magic Cable. Internationally-known concert pianist Robert Swan will be in attendance, signing his stunning new CD. For more information, call (425) 825-8806.

**Canada**

The Montreal Hi-Fi Show will be held at the Delta Hotel (475 President Kennedy Avenue, Montreal) Friday through Sunday, March 19-21. Show hours are 1-9pm Friday, 10am-7pm Saturday, and 10am-5pm Sunday. Ticket prices are $10 a day, $15 for two days, and $20 for all three days. For more information, call Marie-Christine Pini at (514) 384-7082, fax (514) 384-7207, or visit their website at www.hifexpo.com.

**Calendar**

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<td>March 25</td>
<td><strong>Weekend Environments</strong> (5875 Mary Mac Drive SW, Port Orchard) is hosting Ted Denney III, lead designer and CEO of Synergistic Research, for a discussion of Synergistic's &quot;Your Cable for Life!&quot; technologies, including live demonstrations of active and discrete shielding and the Lifetime Passport Protection trade-in program. Bring your old cables to trade in. Call (360) 874-1201 for more information.</td>
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Funny, with all the synthetic effects and gimmicks available on today's A/V receivers - no one is talking about what really counts - delivering the best sound for the dollar. The NAD T770 surround sound receiver's unique design provides everything you need to enjoy a great movie or music. And, as with all NAD products, it maintains a reputation for true value, performance and simplicity.

NAD - to the rescue.
split the profits from sales of their work 50–50, and have no up-front costs to cover or fees to pay. The company has a roster of over 4000 bands and an archive of more than 10,000 songs. Robertson said it pulls in an average of 55 new bands every day, and that MP3.com gets

**Originally an underground phenomenon of mostly college students sharing their favorite songs and performers over the Net, MP3 has grown to the point where the music-industry establishment sees it as a threat.**

**United States**

**Barry Willis**

MP3, the popular and controversial Internet music format, took a big step toward legitimacy in February. Z Company, which operates San Diego-based MP3.com, announced that it had attracted $11 million in venture capital from idealab! and Sequoia Capital. Z Company will change its name to MP3.com Inc. to reflect the company's core business interests, said president Michael Robertson.

An initial public offering is likely, observers noted. Robertson remarked that "Sequoia Capital likes to back companies that go public. We'll grow it in a way that makes sense." He didn't mention a projected date for the IPO. Apple Computer, Cisco Systems, and Yahoo! are among the successful enterprises that have been backed by Sequoia, one of Silicon Valley's most renowned venture capital firms.

MP3, an aggressively compressed audio file format that enables the uploading and downloading of music over the Internet, has developed a large community of users in the past few years. Originally an underground phenomenon of mostly college students sharing their favorite songs and performers over the Net, MP3 has grown to the point where the music-industry establishment sees it as a threat. The Recording Industry Association of America has unsuccessfully battled Diamond Multimedia over the Rio MP3 player, a portable device for playing music lifted directly from the Net.

The RIAA has made the usual noises about copyright infringement, but the real issue is that its members fear losing their hegemony over the distribution of recorded music. Unsigned bands love the new format because it gives them direct access to their markets without the necessity of supporting an army of executives, salespeople, and distributors.

With a few exceptions, recording contracts for new bands put the financial burden for launch costs ("breaking a band," in music-industry parlance) on the performers rather than on the record label — a lesson the industry learned in the 1970s, after getting burned by indiscriminately signing every group with a trendy look and catchy hooks. Present-day unknowns who don't catch fire with the public can find themselves in deep debt as a result — a situation that has provoked lawsuits against several record labels by disgruntled performers.

Bands who sign on with MP3.com approximately 165,000 visitors every day. Z Company has launched a new music label, Digital Automatic Music, to promote its artists. The explosion of MP3 should "send a shock wave through the music industry," he said.

**United States**

**Jon Iverson**

MP3 audio files have quickly become the dominant format for downloading music over the Internet, and have just as quickly raised the ire of music labels and artists looking to protect their musical assets. For example, a petition signed by nearly 400 European recording artists (including Matsias Rostropovich and Barbara Hendricks) was handed to the European Parliament in late January by French composer Jean-Michel Jarre to protest lax copyright protections exacerbated by digital technology. The petition states, in part, "We want to use new digital technologies like the Internet to create and to deliver our music, but we will only feel confident doing so if we know that the laws are there to stop our works falling victim to pirates."

In February, Nullsoft, creators of the popular Winamp MP3 music player, and Audio Explosion, creators of the Mjuice secure music-delivery system, announced a technology partnership that will allow songs to be purchased "securely" using the MP3 format, now considered the Internet standard for downloading music. Audio Explosion and Nullsoft say they are addressing the piracy concerns of recording artists while developing solutions for music fans. Additionally, Audio Explosion intends to be part of the Secure Digital Music Initiative (SDMI) standards-setting effort put in motion by the RIAA — see "Update," March '99, p.27 — and will support the SDMI standard when it is established.

"Together with Nullsoft, we are addressing the piracy concerns of artists by offering a secure music-delivery system," said Arnold Brown, president and CEO of Audio Explosion. "Marrying our technologies paves the way for artists and record labels to capitalize on the power of the Internet." The word from the Winamp creator, 20-year-old Justin Frankel, is just as positive: "The guys at Audio Explosion have the right focus in making the Mjuice system people-friendly. Artists and Winamp users alike will benefit wonderfully from this combination of technologies."

According to Audio Explosion, the "digital songs" can be played back on the computer through the Winamp player, the Mjuice player, or on the new portable digital players. The company says that their approach employs a proprietary file format designed for compatibility with any compression scheme, including the ubiquitous MP3 standard. More important for the music labels, Audio Explosion incorporates a proprietary payment solution that streamlines the user's purchasing process.

An estimated 10 million copies of Winamp are in use worldwide, and more than 1 million copies of Winamp are downloaded each month from the Winamp website, www.winamp.com. The new version of Winamp, which supports security and the Mjuice payment system, is scheduled for release in early spring 1999. "This is an important step forward in the development of the MP3 industry," said Michael Robertson, MP3 industry analyst. "It's important for artists to have choices like Audio Explosion and not be locked into one particular business model or technology."

**United Kingdom**

**Paul Messenger**

Audiophiles have always regarded separate subwoofers with some suspicion, but the emergence of 5.1-channel sound systems seems to be breaking down some barriers, and, among professional users, is creating demand for high-quality subwoofers for monitoring applications.

Custom multichannel monitoring
Audiophile dreams come true with the introduction of the Omega Series Pre-Amplifier & Amplifier
Let your ears be the judge!
facilities at Sony Music in New York, and at Pioneer's DVD mastering operation in Barcelona, are two of the inspirations behind ATC's SCM0.1/15, which combines a new 15" bass driver with a 1000W amplifier in a 24" cubical enclosure, and has a UK price of £3800 ($6500). (US contact: Don Holloway at Precision Systems Integrated. Tel: (215) 949-8300. Fax: (215) 949-8400.)

The new driver uses ATC's proprietary Super Linear magnet system, with nonconducting magnetic material around the voice-coil area (to eliminate eddy-current distortions) that is claimed to reduce third-harmonic distortion by 12-15dB. The enclosure is a sealed box, with appropriate active equalization to deliver bass down to 18Hz (-6dB), together with an SPL capability of 124dB.

B&W is introducing a new active subwoofer, the ASW4000, based on a 15" driver, in a 22.6" by 23.4" by 23.8" (HxWxD) enclosure. This time, the driver concerned is the one developed for the Nautilus 801, with its pulp/Kevlar cone, carbon-fiber dustcap/stiffener, and extended CFC voice-coil former. The ASW4000's enclosure is port-loaded by B&W's proprietary FlowPort, with its large flare and "golf ball" damped surface. The built-in 450W amplifier is claimed to have "audiophile-quality electronics," and its active filtering incorporates considerable matching flexibility. The UK price is £2000 ($3400). [Thomas J. Norton favorably reviewed the smaller ASW3000 (US price $1500) in the February 1999 issue of Stereophile Guide to Home Theater.—Ed]

**INDUSTRY UPDATE**

**UNITED STATES**

**John Atkinson**

The Academy Advancing High Performance Audio and Video will be sponsoring Trade Days at HI-FI '99, The Home Theater and Specialty Audio Show, taking place at the Palmer House Hilton in Chicago May 11-13, 1999. This marks the fourth consecutive year that The Academy has sponsored Trade Days at the HI-FI Shows. The Academy's Music and Film Seminar Series will be expanded in 1999 to a two-track educational program.

The Music and Film Seminar Series, designed by Andy Regan, chairman of the Music and Film Seminar Series at The Academy, and vice president of Meridian America, is the centerpiece of Trade Days at the HI-FI Shows. For the last three years, the Series has featured educational and technical seminars on breaking technologies like DVD and HDTV, and has focused on such topics as how to design and sell high-performance audio and video systems. "In this age of emerging high-definition, and high-resolution formats, the currency of the specialty audio and video retailer is their ability to decode this complex information for their customers. The Music and Film Seminar Series goal is to help these retailers to staff their stores with 'high-definition' salespeople," explained Andy Regan.

"I am really pleased that The Academy has decided to offer courses in these two tracks," stated Maura Rieland, HI-FI Show director. "We have the opportunity to introduce new salespeople to high-end sales techniques and audio/video technologies, and also to offer courses specifically designed for those trade people who've been in the business a long time. Courses in five disciplines — Sales Techniques, Digital Technologies, Room Acoustics, Video Technologies, and Multi-room Design and Installation — will be offered on the "Ambassador" and "Master" levels. To qualify for the Master Series, participants must have prior Ambassador certification, or five years minimum experience in high-performance audio/video retail, with a letter signed by the store owner confirming the participant's employment history. Ambassador courses will be targeted at newly hired salespeople, salespeople coming from mid-fi backgrounds, or salespeople with less than five years' experience.

Training new salespeople in high-performance selling techniques, and giving them a thorough introduction to the latest video, audio, and digital technologies is in keeping with The Academy and the Show's goal of educating the public about high-performance audio and video."

Gretchen Grogan, former assistant publisher at Stereophile, has been hired as show coordinator — research, market development, and education. Part of Grogan's responsibilities is to assist Andy Regan and The Academy in putting together the expanded educational program at HI-FI '99. Grogan began her new job on October 1, 1998.

Attendees who pre-register for The Academy's Music and Film Seminar Series at HI-FI '99 will receive one free class. Salespeople can attend one of the two all-day educational tracks of five courses for a discounted $120. The tracks will be offered on Tuesday, May 11, the first day of the Seminar Series. The fee to attend individual courses on the second day, Wednesday, May 12, will be $30 per seminar.

The Academy Trade Days at HI-FI '99 kick off with the Music and Film Seminar Series on Tuesday, May 11 from 9am to 4pm, and Wednesday, May 12 from 9am to 12 noon. They continue with the opening of the HI-FI '99 Show floor to members of the trade and press only on Wednesday, May 12 from 12 noon to 6pm, and Thursday, May 13 from 10am to 6pm. Consumer Days at HI-FI '99 will be Friday through Sunday, May 14-16, 1999. HI-FI '99 will be the first high-end audio and video show taking place in Chicago since the Summer CES show in 1995.

For more information about Academy Trade Days at HI-FI '99, contact Sue Regan at The Academy at (770) 631-9800. For more information about HI-FI '99, The Home Theater and Specialty Audio Show, contact Maura Rieland at (505) 992-6601. General information about the Show is available at the website. For information about exhibiting at HI-FI '99, contact Ken Nelson, Nelson & Associates, Inc., 62 Wendover Road, Yonkers, NY 10705. Phone: (914) 476-3157. Fax: (914) 969-2746.

**UNITED STATES/UNITED KINGDOM**

**Barry Willis**

We've all heard of the computer so advanced that "it will do everything but make your dinner." Now NCR Corporation has developed one that will do that, too.

The MicroWeb, as the prototype device is known, was developed at NCR's London research center, the Knowledge Lab. Equipped with an Intel Pentium II microprocessor, a 56k modem, and a Windows NT operating system, the Java-enabled, voice-activated MicroWeb microwave oven will let users perform online banking transactions, send and receive e-mail, or watch their favorite TV programs on a 10" LCD screen mounted in the door. The touch-sensitive screen doubles as a keyboard, and a bar-code scanner is included for online shopping. The MicroWeb also keeps track of what sort of food has been cooked in it.

In Britain, Barclays' Bank announced that it plans to evaluate the MicroWeb, which it hopes will lure more customers to online banking. Designer Stephen Emmott said he hopes his brainchild will be on dealers' shelves within three years at a price of £700 or less. Dayton, Ohio-based NCR makes a large portion of the world's automated teller machines.

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Stereophile, April 1999
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THIEL CS2.3

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"Jim Thiel's new CS2.3 speaker thrills and excites...an outstanding loudspeaker..."

—Peter Braverman, The Absolute Sound, Issue 115, December '98 (reprinted with permission)

"...a breakthrough..."

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"...superb...

"The Thiel CS2.3 is a superb loudspeaker, and an eloquent testimonial to Jim Thiel's design expertise and his company's manufacturing skills... I recommend it highly."

—Brian Damkroger, Stereophile, Vol. 22, No. 1, January '99

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After dozens of thorny issues slowed its progress, the DVD Forum announced at the beginning of February that its Steering Committee has approved Version 1.0 of the DVD-Audio Disc specifications. This makes it the fifth of the DVD format family after DVD-Video, DVD-ROM, DVD-RAM, and DVD-R. According to a statement, the DVD Forum says it will soon publish the DVD-Audio Format Book, which contains the detailed specification of the format, and make it available to authorized companies by “early spring of this year.”

The new DVD-Audio specifications are the product of discussions on the DVD-Audio format that began in January 1996 and were carried out by the DVD Forum’s Working Group 4, under the chairmanship of JVC. The DVD Forum issued Version 0.9 of the DVD-Audio specifications back in June 1998, and the final version has been adjusted “only to accommodate two new music-industry requests that are incorporated into the version 1.0 specifications.”

First, Meridian Lossless Packing (MLP) was added to help extend playing time for the higher-resolution formats. Second, the final specifications were also modified to increase the flexibility for content providers who may elect, for example, to use only Dolby Digital (AC-3) sound with video clips, or both Dolby Digital and Linear PCM soundtracks.

The International Steering Committee representing the worldwide recording industry has been collaborating with the DVD-Audio Working Group for over three years to come up with format features. According to an ISC statement, “the DVD Forum’s approval of Version 1.0 will facilitate development and adoption of the copyright protection technology that is vital in the modern digital era; the rollout of DVD-Audio products is near, and it will be a milestone for consumers to enjoy a totally new music listening experience.”

DVD-Audio specifications: (from the DVD-Forum press release):

- **DVD-Audio Supports a wide range of Digital Audio options**: Available sampling frequencies cover 48kHz, 96kHz, and 192kHz, as well as 44.1kHz, 88.2kHz, and 176.4kHz. Bit resolution is also widely supported in 16-bit, 20-bit, and 24-bit. Up to six channels are available for multichannel recording, with a transfer rate of 9.6Mbps maximum.
- **Recording options range from two-channel to Multichannel Sound**: In two-channel stereo, more than 74 minutes of recording time is possible on a single-sided/single-layer disc, even at the highest-quality mode at 24 bits/192kHz. With multichannel modes, even 24-bit/96kHz, six-channel recording can be included with more than 74 minutes of playback time. The signal has an immediate presence, like that of an actual concert hall or an entirely new, high-quality, three-dimensional surround-sound environment. DVD-Audio content recorded in multichannel mode can also be played back properly on a two-channel stereo system as intended by studio producers, thanks to the dedicated content producer-directed fold-down capability.
- **Enriched Added Value Options**: The format supports playback of video clips with LPCM and/or AC-3 sound with the quality of the DVD-Video format. Video slide shows can also be included for viewing while listening to the music. Discs can contain all kinds of information of interest to music fans, including displays of liner notes (album title, song titles, artist data, etc.), artist discography, and a URL (Universal Resource Locator) for access to some bonus contents on the Web which, at the content provider’s discretion, may or may not be available only for the users with certain commands or passwords.
The ACT3 Reviews Are In!

Home Theater Magazine - Nov. 1998
• Internal D/A conversion will blow your mind!
• Incredibly simple to use, which is rare with preamp processors.
• Amazing performance for the price point.

GERMANY
Audio Magazine - Oct. 1998
• Vorverstarker Referenzklasse
  The ACT3 is the only surround sound processor preamplifier placed in the Preamplifier Reference Class with the worlds most expensive stereo preamplifiers.
• Dolby-Surround-Verstärker Referenzklasse
  The ACT3 is placed in the Dolby Surround Preamplifier Reference Class rating higher than $10,000 processors.

FRANCE
• The ingenious concept and the audiophile quality of the Acurus ACT3 are its main points...
• This nouvel application places at your disposition the ability to associate with high technology and powerful amplifiers at a reasonable cost.
• The ACT3 can pair with the best of amplifiers. So why not one from the same company?

In addition to being the highest technology currently available for stereo, Dolby®, and DTS®, the Acurus ACT3 has true upgradeability. The video, digital and analog circuit boards are removable as are the memory and micro processing chips for total hardware and software upgradeability. It is the only preamp processor that is capable of operating with HDTV. The ACT3 can be upgraded to the future 24/192 DVD audio format when it becomes the standard and high quality 24/192 DACs are available. Perhaps the most amazing Acurus feature is the price of these American handmade components. The ACT3 and A125X5 amplifier cost a little over $3,000 for the pair.
Can "perfect sound" last forever? Beats me. But the marketing gurus who devised the "Perfect Sound Forever" catchphrase to introduce the Compact Disc back in 1983 may turn out to have been more prescient than anyone thought. It's by no means certain that one of the two new "high-resolution" digital audio formats—DVD-Audio or Super Audio CD—will gain widespread acceptance.

DVD-Audio is based on the DVD video disc, introduced by the Gang of Four: Toshiba, Panasonic/Matsushita, Pioneer, and JVC and has yet to be launched. In the meantime, about a dozen DADs—DVD-Video with 24-bit/96kHz two-channel audio data—are available, none yet from a major label. Meanwhile, Super Audio CD (SACD), developed by Sony and Phillips—the original "Perfect Sound Forever" team—could be introduced in Japan this spring. (In fairness to Phillips, the slogan was Sony's.) I wonder what the new slogan will be.

Meanwhile, does anyone care? Well, yes. Hi-fi writers are chomping at the bit for more bits. And some high-end manufacturers, too. But which new format to support—DVD 24/96 or SACD? Or both?

DVD has a drawback for manufacturers not allied with the Gang of Four. I am told that independent manufacturers—like, say, Rotel—can't source inexpensive DVD drives off the shelf, the way they can buy CD drives from Sony, Teac, JVC, etc. As Mike Bartlett of Rotel of America explained, indices would have to buy a DVD player and scrap most of it, retaining just the drive...or source a relatively expensive DVD ROM drive. Neither option is feasible when you're designing to a lower price point.

This gives SACD an edge—as does backward-compatibility with conventional CD players. Already, Krell Digital and Wadia have announced that they'll support SACD.

Manufacturers feel they have to do something.

We can only go so far with CD and we've essentially got there already, or so the reasoning goes. For greater resolution—and to prop up sagging high-end sales—we urgently need a new digital audio format.

Record labels might welcome a new digital format, too. But they'd rather not welcome too of them! Already there are indications that some major labels will support DVD-Audio while others go with SACD.

Higher disc prices

Think about this before you rush out to become an "early adopter," and therefore help establish the new formats: Record labels have historically had a tough time raising prices, and new technology gives them an excuse to do so. Without you, dear friends, to lead the way to higher performance and possibly higher prices, the new formats might very well fail.

A little history: When stereo LPs were introduced in the late-1950s, the labels charged $1 more per disc than for mono—and then phased out mono discs. And when so-called "digital" LPs were introduced in the late 1970s, some labels, again, tried to tack on an extra buck.

When "Perfect Sound Forever" came along, the record industry went to town—charging roughly twice as much for a CD as for an LP. Why did the record labels rush to kill off the LP? After all, it took nearly a decade to kill off the 78. Maybe the labels didn't want folks paying $6.99 for an LP who might fork over $12.99 or more for a CD.

So don't be surprised if major record labels introduce DVD-Audio discs or Super Audio CDs for $5 or $10 more a pop than conventional CDs.

Super Audio CDs might be particularly appealing to record labels. They could stop producing regular CDs, kill off the old format fast, raise prices, and—more important—keep control of music distribution.

Me? I'm looking forward to the day when I can bypass the record labels entirely and download my music—for a fee, of course—from the Internet.

A friend of mine who works for a symphony orchestra holds out the possibility that concerts will be available for downloading over the 'net. This will be great for listeners and a nice source of new revenue for the orchestra—the big record labels have all but abandoned recording major US orchestras anyway. This could get very interesting.

Tough sell

I'm not so sure the public is going to go along with a new digital audio format—or formats. Even if a format war is avoided, a new digital audio medium could be a tough sell. Not to audiophiles—they'll buy anything—but to the public.

CD was an easy sell, despite widespread grumbling over disc prices. Maybe the sound wasn't "perfect," but it was dramatically better than scratchy, worn records played on rack-system turntables. And, unless handled with gross negligence, CDs didn't wear out. The public listened up and paid out.

Here's why the public might wish to stick with conventional CD:

1) CD sound is now very good. Recording engineers have found ways to squeeze more bits of resolution onto a CD. Players have improved, especially with regard to jitter reduction. Perhaps progress has stalled in the rarefied realm of high-end digital separates, but there's been plenty of progress recently with moderately priced CD players.

2) The average Joe/Jane probably won't hear an improvement in sound quality with a new digital audio format—not the way they heard an obvious and dramatic improvement with CD over LP (or cassette). While they can play SACDs on their regular CD players, they'll still get only "perfect sound forever."
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Straight Wire led the way with Air-Space Dielectrics and Symmetrical Coaxial Designs in 1988; Microporous Teflon Tapes and Advanced Coated Coppers in 1989; Hybrid Foam TPR insulation and Coated Silver/Copper Hybrid conductors in 1994. Now Compressed Conductor Technology (CCT) is introduced in 1998 in CRESCENDO & SERENADE speaker cables.

MORE PERFORMANCE FROM YOUR SYSTEM with CCT from STRAIGHT WIRE
3) The new disc formats won't last any longer than regular CDs, nor will they be easier to store.

I was talking the other day to a manufacturer who's working on a 24/96 processor.

"The DVD 24/96 discs sound awesome," he told me. Then, in the next breath, "You know, regular CDs can really sound amazingly good, too."

Precisely!

Listen to Sir Charles Mackerras conducting the Scottish Chamber Orchestra in Schubert's Symphonies 8 and 9 (Telarc CD-80502) — superb performances, brilliantly engineered by Tony Faulkner. This was one of my 1999 "Records To Die For."

Many of the newer Naxos releases have knockout sound. Take a new disc from their "American Classics" series — On Stage, the music of John Philip Sousa, with Keith Brion conducting the Razumovsky Symphony Orchestra, from Slovakia (Naxos 8.559008). That'll be six bucks, please.

What might make the public go for a new digital audio format?

Surround sound.

In the end, the new disc formats could be a greater threat to high-end listening as we know it — is, two-channel listening — than the limitations of the conventional CD. If one or both of the new formats takes hold, it could kill off stereo. Maybe they'll have to rename this magazine. How about Surroundophile?

More history

A bit more background might help you get your bearings — before you go out and become an "early adopter." Remember, new formats often fail. Let's say you buy a new player to play the new discs, and then the new discs bomb. Will anybody buy back your player? Seriously, even if you're hyped about the new digital audio formats, I'd consider waiting this one out.

For the first four or five years of the Compact Disc, there were few expensive players — and no separate transports and processors. You could buy a player like the Magnavox (Philips) CD1B650 for around $300, and maybe have someone modify it — or buy one already modified for between $500 and $1000, max.

Ah, such innocence! Now you get to spend $500 or more for a digital cable — a bloody piece of wire!

Full circle?

Some manufacturers have bucked the trend toward digital separates — YBA and Naïve, for instance, produce only players, not digital separates. Meridian produces some wonderful CD players, and probably sells far more players than digital separates. Krell, Wadia, and Theta all started with digital separates, then rounded out their lines with players.

Ditto Arcam and Musical Fidelity — two British specialty firms. While both still produce processors, the action for both companies is now mainly in players. Both Arcam and Musical Fidelity recently introduced outstanding players.

You can purchase the Arcam Alpha 9 that Kalman Rubinson raved about in our January issue for $1595. That's relatively expensive for a CD player. But it gives the most expensive digital separates a serious run for the money, and that starts to make the Arcam Alpha 9 look like a steal. Ditto the Musical Fidelity X-Ray, available for $1295 from Audio Advisor.

How low can you go?

Much as some of us wanted to believe that the RadioShack Optimus CD-3400 offered "good-as-it-gets" CD sound for $130 — I never said that it did — you still can't expect great CD sound from a cheap player. Or can you?

When the retail price of a player dips below $1200 or so, a manufacturer doesn't have much dough to lavish on the analog output section. Inexpensive CD players, using cheap and cheerful op-amps, usually lack the bass extension and warm, rich, full-bodied sound — and, most of all, the dynamics — of more pricey players and separates.

The now-discontinued Marantz CD-63SE was a case in point — a great $500 CD player. It didn't have the deepest bass, and wasn't the best player on the market in terms of dynamics, but the CD-63SE offered good (not outstanding) resolution and a sweet, open, airy, nonfatiguing sound. No wonder it remained a penny-pinchers' favorite for so long. Those who bought one on clearance, for $300 or even less, got an especially sweet deal.

But I'm not sure most people chose the Marantz CD-63SE for a super-high-end system — not enough resolution. For hi-rez — or what passes for hi-rez with CD — you needed to spend quite a bit more.

There's a small Rotel...

Now there's the Rotel RC1 971 for $695.

Rotel's Mike Bartlett phoned shortly before Marina and I left for a winter vacation in the French Caribbean. I made my Rotel reservation before we left.

Meanwhile, at the beach, I bought a copy of last November's issue of La Nouvelle Revue Du Son — Jean Hiraga's rag. The cover read: "15 lecteurs CD" from 1000 to 4600 francs. Lo and behold, the Rotel RC1 971 was among the top contenders, at a mere 4000 francs.

I won't reveal the identity of the 4600-franc player. But according to the French scribes, the Rotel RCI 971 scored almost as high, subjectively, for less than a tenth of the price.


I was surprised to find that the Rotel RC1 971 (made in China, by the way) is a lightweight machine: only 12 lbs. My early-production sample had a very aggressive drawer — if I so much as looked at the drawer the wrong way while loading a disc, it closed so quickly that the disc hung half in, half out.

Rotel notes that there's an easy fix to slow down the drawer, but I haven't bothered with it yet. At any rate, more recent production units are said not to have the problem — if it is a problem. I quickly learned to handle the player gingerly.

The RC1 971 sports an S/PDIF coaxial digital out and a pair of analog outputs, and that's it. No detachable power cord. No display defeat. No phase-inversion switch, either on the player or (more usefully) on the remote. No adjustable dither — for that, you need to upgrade to the $1299.90 Rotel RC1 991, which lets you dither to your heart's desire. No headphone jack. Rather Spartan.

But, hey. Appearances — and feather-weight construction — can sometimes be deceiving.

The RC1 971 features H1DCI capability and dual 20-bit Burr-Brown PCM-63P D/A converters, along with a

Contact:
Rotel of America, 54 Concord Street, North Reading, MA 01864-0008, Tel: (800) 370-3741 or (508) 664-3820. Fax: (508) 664-4109. www. rotel.com

Symposium Acoustics, 1209 Pines Lake Drive West, Wayne, NJ 07470. Tel./fax: (973) 616-4787.

— Sam Tellig

Stereophile, April 1999
THE ANT CAN LIFT TEN TIMES ITS WEIGHT.

So don’t be surprised when you hear the PSB Alphas in a home theater or music system - big performance, small package.

“What has always impressed me most about Paul Barton’s designs (and I reviewed many of his creations over the years) is their musicality. The little PSB Alpha bookshelf speaker...remains a benchmark for sonic performance in the $200/pair range.”

Lawrence B. Johnson
Stereophile Guide to Home Theater, Vol.3 No.3
vibration-resistant transport (mounted in the center of the chassis), a “sophisticated” anti-jitter circuit, and a carefully tweaked analog output stage.

The dual Burr-Brown DACs work in a dual-differential mode so as to eliminate unwanted glitches and other nonlinearities around “bipolar zero.” Errors are summed at the output of each DAC and canceled out. A large toroidal power-supply transformer has separate windings for the digital and analog stages.

“Paul Miller measured the player and said the jitter is among the lowest he’s ever measured,” Rotel’s Bartlett told me. Jitter, more than anything else, puts digital sound on edge. Stereophile was the first magazine to jump on this.

Listening tests
For my listening tests, I hooked up the Rotel RCD 971 and the Denon DCD-1650 to the Pathos Twin Towers power amplifier — class-A, single-ended, no loop negative feedback, no line amp section. The Pathos is super-transparent, meaning that any source component has nowhere to hide. Speakers were the B&W CD1M1SE, Triangle Lyr, and Meadowlark Audio Kestrel. I placed each of the CD players individually on sets of Symposium Rollerblocks.

I’ve already mentioned the Rotel’s smooth, sweet, non-fatiguing sound. But what really makes this Rotel worth booking is its resolution — superior to anything I’ve heard for anywhere near the price, and good enough to give manufacturers of expensive players and processors very bad dreams. (No wonder they’re scheming — er, dreaming — about DVD-Audio and SACD!) Along with superior resolution, there is a shimmering, glittering, crystalline quality to the treble that makes the player instantly engaging. The sound sparkles.

I compared the Denon DCD-1650, which weighs nearly twice as much (23 lbs) and costs just $300 more ($995). Compared to the Rotel, the Denon, which I wrote about last June (Vol.22 No.6) sounded richer, darker. Some might warm to the Denon’s more full-bodied sound.

Resolution? I think the Rotel resolves more low-level details than the Denon. However, I do love the Denon’s rich tonal balance — and its build quality. The Denon should definitely be on your short list of players under $1k.

Let’s check the Rotel again.

I was especially struck by the sound of choral recordings. Every syllable was clearly and crisply articulated — no sizzle, spit, or splash. (I could really appreciate this with a single-ended amp like the Pathos.) The sound was exceptionally open, airy, clear, and clean. The Denon sounded less open and airy. Slower, too. But more harmonically rich.

With time, the Rotel does sound richer, riper. The sound fills out in the bottom end and takes on more bloom. By all means, audition the Denon. You might prefer it to the Rotel — especially when you take into account the Denon’s tanklike build quality. The Denon does put a firmer foundation under the notes, cellos and pianos in particular.

But the Rotel RCD 971 is so good in terms of resolution that you might use it in a very-high-resolution system — losing out to the very best mainly in terms of bass extension, warmth, weight, and dynamic range. In fact, it probably takes a very-high-resolution amplifier, like the Pathos Twin Towers, to reveal just how outstanding the Rotel is. Those with less-resolving amps may never know!

As for new formats, there isn’t much software now (none in SACD), and there won’t be for a while. If you rush out and buy a new player — to become an “early adopter,” or first on your block, or whatever — you’ll only end up playing mainly CDs on your new machine anyway.

Why not keep the CD player you already have… or, if it’s not so hot, get something like a Rotel RCD 971, Denon DCD-1650, Musical Fidelity X-Ray, or Arcam Alpha 9? If CD does become obsolete — and I doubt it will happen fast, if at all — you won’t have invested that much money.

Symposium Rollerblock Series 2
So… do you want to squeeze out a few more bits?

Well, here’s a way to get more resolution from the CD player you already have. Maybe. It worked for me, anyway.

My buddy the Brass Ear put me on to these. You can try a set of Symposium Rollerblocks under your CD player or transport. You could try a second set under your processor, too, if you get ambitious and have the dough.

Rollerblocks are sold in sets of three or four. Three should do fine for most players or transports, and will cost you $220 ($299/set of four). Not cheap — but you might think the improvement is worth the money.

What do you get in your Rollerblock box? Three “precision-machined” (they’re not kidding) Rollerblock bodies; three chromium-steel or optional tungsten-carbide ¼” bearings, and three stainless-steel RollerPlates, which you’ll probably use only if your equipment has a textured, “bumpy,” or ventilated bottom.

The Rollerblock bodies are rectangular blocks of extremely hard “alloy aircraft aluminum” finished with a black “hard-coat” anodizing. The bottom of each block has four beveled edges and a matrix pattern of holes, said to improve mechanical coupling between the body of the block and its supporting service.

On top of each block is a spherical depression polished to a mirror finish, inside of which sits a precision ball bearing. Simply place your equipment so that the gear floats on the
With sound like this, Y2K looks to be a great one.

It's amazing—we're well into the Digital Age, but it now appears that TACT Audio, a Danish company, is the first to realize the full potential of digital audio by radically simplifying the signal path from digital source to speakers. Yeah, yeah, sure we've all seen and heard that sort of hype before. We all know that even at the most excessive, cost-be-damned levels of the high end, where technology is continuously reshuffled and repackaged, the edge of the art only creeps forward in barely perceptible increments. Well, get ready for a giant step. The Millennium's technology is so original, and the sonic revelations it unleashes are so great, it may require a total realignment of our expectations for reproduced music and sound.

Listening to, no, make that through, the Millennium can be a mind altering experience. I became addicted to the Millennium's holographic imaging, midrange palpability, resolution way down at the quietest levels, extended high frequencies, and a rhythmically precise bottom end; for transparency/information freaks who savor every scintilla of sound, the Millennium has no peer.

The Millennium exerted an almost unbelievable degree of control over those speakers drivers; in my opinion, ALL other amps, regardless of their pedigree, sound vague or sloppy in comparison.

We eagerly await the home theater version; until then, this looks like the audio product of the year—or maybe the millennium.

Hold on to your ears: The fideality in "hi-fi" just got a lot higher. Right from the get-go everyone flipped over the look and feel of the Millennium. As you can see from the pictures, it's just plain gorgeous, with a massive and beautifully machined alloy faceplate, a giant free-spinning flywheel for volume control, and a super-clean industrial design that screams elegance. But it was the sound that blew 'em away. One of my pals listened for a just a minute before concluding, "The Millennium will make every speaker sound like a super-detailed electrostatic without any of the "stats weaknesses." Everyone gushed "Wow!" or "I've never heard anything quite like this before.

The Millennium heralds new times

"If you have already used all superlatives, what do you when you come across something that is not just a little bit better? I'm talking about the Millennium. It is the biggest, most powerful, and most innovative product I've ever heard. It is the ultimate in high-end audio."


The sound of the TACT Millennium seems clearly brighter than our Mark Levinson reference amps, but not overly bright or thin. It is more as if several filtering layers of distortion and artificial, electronic reverberations especially in the midrange, presumably generated by conventional analogous circuits, have been removed.

"The sheer fidelity of the Millennium is immediately superior to any analog gear we have ever heard, including the best LP's! This was probably the biggest surprise during our first listening session."

(Hi Fi & Elektronik, Denmark May, 1998)

TACT RCS 2.2 "Knocking down walls

"The RCS rendered a dramatic, wholesale improvement in the musical presentation. Taking it out of the system instantly unmasked the colorations introduced by the room, making them stick out like a sore thumb."

"With the RCS, a bass drum can cut through the sound of a bass guitar with depth and impact. I now hear the dynamic envelope of each drum rather than having the attacks blur into a continuum."

"I also used the RCS subwoofer crossover with the Revel GEM and Sub-15. The improvement in bass clarity, dynamic agility and pitch definition was staggering."

Robert Harley (Fi Magazine, July 1998)

Please visit our web site to read even more reviews and to get information about TACT Audio!
I won’t get into the theory of operation — you can write or call Symposium for more info. Or, better yet, visit your local Symposium dealer for a demonstration. The Rollerblocks are said to “drain equipment of internally generated vibratory energy while simultaneously decoupling it from external shock and vibration.” Okay, Peter Bizlewicz, if you say so. (Peter is president of Symposium Acoustics. Based on my experience with the Rollerblocks, I’d say Peter is unimpeachable!)

With the Rollerblocks,
I hear improvement
in just about
every respect.

The things worked for me — in a big way — when I tried them under the Rotel and Denon players, and under my Panasonic A310 DVD player as well.

What happens?
I suggest you listen for yourself. And, as always when buying a costly accessory, get a money-back guarantee in case you don’t hear — or see — $220 worth of improvement. But for me, with both CD players, resolution improved markedly.

No foolin’. The sound just tightens up, cleans up, clears up. I hear more low-level information. Imaging improves. Timing, too. Each player now lets go of the notes faster — there’s less muddying of details. Transients are crisper. I hear improvement in just about every respect. “Perfect” sound becomes more . . . well, perfect.

Drawbacks? Other than the fact that your wallet will be $220 lighter, your player might roll around a little on those ball bearings when you load a disc or press Play. But hey, with hi-fi there’s almost never any gain without pain.

Under my DVD player, the Rollerblocks worked similar wonders. This time I could see as well as hear.

I know, I know — $220 worth of Rollerblocks under a $399 DVD player? But the picture did get sharper. Colors looked cleaner, more vivid. Even Marina noticed.

“Mother did you do to the DVD player? The picture improved.”

Peter Bizlewicz points out that Rollerblocks work most dramatically under digital equipment, but also under amplifiers, preamplifiers, and other equipment.

Try these if you dare!
Custom produced, hand selected, polypropylene capacitors. Custom wound high quality air-core inductors. Highly effective phase and impedance equalization networks, and sophisticated tweeter protection circuits. Our 6dB Dynaudio crossovers avoid the disadvantages of conventional designs, like difficulty in reproducing transient pulse response without ringing. That's why a Dynaudio will give you more precision, more dynamics, more music. And less coloured sound. We know. Do you?
"Timing is everything."

Whoever came up with that gem had it right. The timing of the International Consumer Electronics Show, for instance: right after the Christmas/New Year holiday. I don't know anyone toiling in this industry who is actually eager to trudge off to Vegas a few days after two weeks of concentrated boozing, face-stuffing, and general holiday lethargy.

Timing. Hey! How about those connecting flights through blizzard-bound Chicago? I sat in a deserted airport for four hours, finally arriving in Las Vegas at 3:30am (which was 6:30am Fremer time). Great way to start the five most intense days of any consumer-electronics writer's year.

Timing? I almost wasn't allowed to attend this year's show. I got called for jury duty, and my "hardship excuse" was rejected. So the day before I was scheduled to fly out, I found myself in a jury-pool room with about 300 other citizens waiting to see if my name would be called. If not, I'd be free to go. At 3pm, our keeper informed us that, in all likelihood, we'd be dismissed in half an hour — it was a slow litigation day.

Timing. At 3:15 a judge requested a 50-person jury pool. Number two on the list? "Mr…. Freemer?" Yes! So at 4pm I found myself in a movie set of a wood-paneled courtroom, sitting in the jury box waiting to be questioned about my attitudes on the drug war. Instead of CES, I'd spend my week playing one angry man, fact-finding a cocaine bust. What to do? I started sniffing and wiping my nose. It didn't work.

Timing? Before I could be questioned, and before I could give a drug-war answer that would have the prosecutor kicking my butt directly to Vegas (if not searching my car), the judge decided to adjourn for the day. He ordered us to be in our seats the next morning at 8:30.

"Yo! Your Honor?" I shouted.

"What is it?" he asked with typical judicial skepticism.

"I was told I'd be able to plead my hardship case before you if I was called today. I have a plane ticket here for tomorrow to the Consumer Electronics Show, purchased in October. I'm a senior contributing editor to this magazine [holding up ticket and Stereophile], and I have a week's worth of press conferences and appointments. I'd be happy to sit on a jury any week but this one!"

The digital handwriting is on the wall: virtually all home entertainment and information services will soon be distributed digitally. The same wire or fiber cable will be a conduit for everything.

It was a nail-biter. After weighing the evidence (my plane ticket, my name on the masthead), His Honor excused me.

Timing. In last year's CES report (April 1998) I wrote, "CEMA tried to play the HDTV card this year. Big mistake, in my opinion — that's next year's news. This year, all we got were a couple of impressive-looking demos like the one I saw at Toshiba: an incredible display of what football will look like… someday. This day, it took a wall of noisy, complex video gear to provide the picture."

Right I was! This year we had the live, over-the-air broadcast of the Jets game on the last day of the show, making HDTV real.

Over the past few years, the day before the official start of the show has become an intense string of morning-till-evening press events orchestrated by the major manufacturers, who cooperate with one another by providing buses from one event to the next. I attended, and, more than ever before, the digital handwriting is on the wall: virtually all home entertainment and information services will soon be distributed digitally. The same wire or fiber cable will be a conduit for everything.

Amazingly, rather than being bothered by this, rather than feeling that our little analog obsession is being marginalized to the point of extinction, I felt energized. Why? HDTV is real, is being broadcast and looks incredible. If you watch television and/or movies, you'll want it. I got a CEMA press release today announcing that 13,176 digital televisions (not necessarily HDTVs) have already been sold. For now, I suspect that most, if not all, of these are the large, expensive 16:9 HDTV models.

But what really got me excited was a Panasonic press conference I attended where it was announced that Warner-Elektra-Atlantic, along with the entire Universal Music Group (A&M, Mercury, Verve, Island, Geffen, MCA, GRP, Motown, Philips Classical, etc.) were joining the 24-bit/96kHz digital audio movement pioneered by Chesky Records and Classic Records. We will get high-resolution digital — the kind most analog lovers will enjoy… if maybe not as much as their LPs. When?

Timing. There are still some compatibility issues to be worked out, and the majors will probably wait until the population of DVD players has increased.
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Get real answers to your system matching questions on the TARA Labs website. Our interactive database, programmed by the engineers of the TARA Labs Design Team, will provide you with our in-house recommendation for cables that will make the most of your system. Just input the specifics of your system and get a recommendation that's tailored to **you** and your sonic objectives. You can also get technical data or read on-line reviews from around the world on your recommended cables. Nobody does recommendations like the cable technology leader: TARA Labs.

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before launching titles. A Warner Bros. spokesperson told me that, in WB’s consumer focus-group studies, only about 10% of attendees appreciated the sonic improvement over 16-bit/44.1kHz digital—but when the demo was switched to multichannel sound, almost everyone wanted it. That tiny percentage of discerning ears may be misleading: we don’t know the listening conditions or the equipment used. In any case, if we can get a 24/96 PCM two-channel mix, who cares if the disc also carries a silly, garish, multichannel one? (Dare we hope for a subtle, tasteful one?)

How much fun do you think it was sitting in the audience with “16/44.1 is perfect” apologists like erstwhile Chicago Tribune consumer electronics writer Rich Warren, and Ken Pohlmann of Stereo Review’s Sound & Vision, and hearing mainstream corporate spokespeople talking about better-than-CD sound? Relief? It felt like taking a dump after ten years of constipation. At one point Warren stood up to incredulously address one of the presenters: “Ten years ago you stood here and told us that CD sound was essentially perfect. And now you’re saying it’s not?” Pohlmann was gracious after the meeting, covering by saying that he looked forward to the new format’s multichannel capabilities.

Whither the Sony/Philips Super Audio CD, which some say sounds better, and whose CD-compatible 16/44.1 layer negates the need for dual inventory (a big selling point with retailers, believe me)? They’ll have to line up all the remaining labels to get anywhere. A Philips record label employee told me the Universal Music Group’s announcement came as a big surprise.

Timing. Perhaps someone at Philips can explain why, as it struggled to develop a new format and bring it to market, the company sold off its share of the PolyGram music division (A&M, Island, Verve, Mercury, London, Philips, DG, et al). How dumb a move was that?

**In the dark at Alexis Park**

With all the convention-center excitement — this was, for me, the most exciting, sea-change of a CES since the introduction of home video — heading over to the high-end exhibits was… shall we say, “anticlimactic”? The Alexis Park hotel does a good job of spreading out the crowd to the point where the word “desolate” comes to mind. Next door’s turers of digital transports and processors face the same grind, with audiophiles waiting it out until the software selection improves and the few last compatibility issues are dealt with.

**Analog spins on**

No such problems in the analog world. There are billions of pieces of software, including much that’s new and exciting. While hardware innovations aren’t plentiful, there was enough at the show to create a sense of forward motion. Vinyl is an acceptable part of the high-end mix, and many manufacturers were using it to show off their amplifiers and speakers. Even digital specialist Wadia had a turntable in its display.

During my home-theater wanderings at the Hilton convention center, I came upon Sumiko’s rather ambitious display, which included a prominently placed static exhibition of turntables featuring the new and rather handsome Pro-Ject 2.9 ($695) and Perspektive ($995) models. The former includes a cherry-wood-finish plinth, a heavy cast platter and damped acrylic mat, and the substantial arm used on the now-discontinued 6.9. The Perspektive, an update of the 6.9, is said to feature a new and substantially improved floating suspension, an upgraded plinth, and separate, isolated motor modules for each speed. Changing motors takes but a few seconds. Sumiko and the Czech company that manufactures the unit claim that dual pulleys represent a performance compromise.

Also on display were the two SME tables Sumiko imports: the 30 Mk.2, which goes for a breathtaking $23,000 without arm, and the 20 Mk.2, which is a more reasonable $10,000 with SME 309 arm and phono interface box. Turntables in the home-theater exhibition must have been a real crowd-stopper. I also ran my hands over Sonus Faber’s stunning-looking Amati Homage loudspeaker, which my new, large listening room can accommodate easily. (Hint.)

Before leaving the convention center
Balanced Audio Technology is pleased to introduce its first special edition product: the VK-50se. The VK-50se features BAT's exclusive high-current, low-impedance 6H30 SuperTube. Eight 6H30's form a powerful gain-stage that is combined with larger transformers, upgraded power supply, Vishay Bulk Metal® foil resistor upgrades and more to create a new pinnacle of preamplifier design.

The 6H30 SuperTube: a BAT exclusive.

In simple terms, the 6H30 triples or quadruples all the "goodness" of the industry standard 6922. One listen will tell you just how good that can be!
I headed over to the Allsop exhibit to see if, God forbid, they had the Orbitrac on display. Nope. They're ashamed to admit they make a product for the old technology, but they're happy to tell you that, with no dealers and no advertising, more than 10,000 have been sold. Imagine if they let the cat out of the bag. "Can't get dealers to stock it," a representative told me. I did see one way-cool new Allsop product you'll want: a replacement for those dumb red straws you get with WD-40 and other aerosol products. It's a set of high-tech plastic nozzles in various shapes and sizes that will make the spraying of contact cleaners and other products we use regularly far more efficacious. Look for it in a blister pack near you soon.

Back at the Alexis Park, my job description consisted of peeking into a room, looking for turntables, phono sections, and accessories, and saying "Goodbye" if I saw none. That's because some Analog manufacturers were "piggybacking"—supplying turntables to rooms paid for by manufacturers of other equipment.

Still, there were some obvious stops. At the Thorens room, along with the company's wide, familiar range of disc-spinning products (including the TD 295, currently under review), I found the Ambience, a new, ambitious design priced at $9000, including a massive power supply and SME 309 arm.

Over at the Clearaudio room, I buried the hatchet with importer Joe DePhillips and took a better look at the new $12,000 Master Reference turntable/arm, which features a more massive, upgraded version of the Souther arm (it includes a thick bar of vibration-damping lead/antimony alloy on the quartz rail track) mounted on the three-motor "table" I'd seen at the Heathrow Show last fall. Believe it or not, Mikey doesn't like making or keeping enemies, so the stop was more than pleasant. But are three motors three times better than one? Or three times worse . . . ?

J. A. Michell Engineering debuted the handsome new Gyro SE imported here by Artech. The lower cost version of the GyroDec does away with the trapezoid base and dustcover, which lowers the cost by $400 to $1595. Sound is said to be identical to the more expensive GyroDec. New features include complete motor isolation and improved, easier-to-adjust suspension. The price includes a custom cut armboard of your choice. The basic power supply has a new toroidal transformer, and there is an extra cost-optimal power supply.

There's always plenty of analog at the Musical Surroundings room, and my visit didn't disappoint. A. J. Conti showed me the new clear-acrylic bases he's fashioned for the 2000 series of Basis turntables, per customer and dealer requests following last year's introduction of the clear-plinthed 1400 series. Also on display: the Basis Debut Gold Vacuum Mk. II, which we'll soon get for review.

Musical Surroundings' Garth Leerer told me he had a review sample of the new Transfiguration Temper Supreme waiting for me when I'm ready — which will be soon. An update of the Temper (which I reviewed in the July 1996 Stereophile), the Supreme is based on a collaboration between Bob Graham and the designer, Immutable Music's Seiji Yoshioka, who recently forwarded me a packet of very useful information about the cartridge and the less expensive Transfiguration Spirit.

Musical Surroundings also distributes Bob Graham's tonearms. Bob was on hand to show me the Nightingale, an integral Graham armboard/cartridge and the result of another collaboration between Graham and Yoshioka. The advantage of an integral, hardwired cartridge/armboard should be obvious. Graham told me the integrally shielded combo is now available for $3900. An additional $900 will get you a specially designed step-up transformer with integral cable that doubles the output from 0.25mV to 0.5mV. Another cartridge we can't wait to audition . . . and there's no fuzzy overhang to mess with!

On with T.H.E. Show

Before finishing up at the Alexis Park, I decided to visit T.H.E. Show, next door at the San Tropez. Compared to the dismal Debbie Reynolds digs and amateur signage at last year's alterna-site, T.H.E. Show rivaled the real deal for professional presentation. And for some reason (cleaner electricity?), the sound in the T.H.E. rooms seemed consistently better than at the Alexis Park.

I found importer Steve Lauerman demonstrating the new Rega 25 (reviewed last month in this column) along with the top-of-the-line Planar 9. Rockport Technologies' Andy Payor was holding court in a nearby suite, giving analog devotees an opportunity to hear his top-of-the-line Sirius III turntable, which sells for a cool $55,000, give or take a few paychecks. But as my goal was to hit every analog venue first, then return to the chooser sites for prolonged listening, I heard only one tune in Payor's room before moving on. Nevertheless, the sound was incredibly focused, resolved, and rich through Rockport loudspeakers — also priced where few pocketbooks dare go.

Moving down the hall to the Immedia suite, I found two of the biggest pieces of analog news at the show, one of which was a brand-new top-of-the-line Immedia turntable from Allen Perkins, who, after a friendly hug, said to me, "Stay away — I've got a vicious bug." Timing. As he demonstrated the striking-looking 'table for me, I swear I felt a tickle — as if the germ had leapt into my throat and was already on the attack. The new plinthless 'table, as yet unnamed, features a heavy, thick, multi-layer platter of stainless steel topped by a layer of phenolic, one of vinyl, and finally, one of surface graphite. The
Twenty years of avant-garde manufacturing and engineering enables KIMBER KABLE to offer the most significant ‘sane’ loudspeaker cables in High End audio.

The Monocle, BiFocal (biwire) and TriFocal (triwire) cables allow signal to flow untouched by external vibration and RF influences. Each model has been engineered and precisely manufactured by KIMBER KABLE to deliver the highest fidelity while maintaining a conservative price.

Visit our web site or contact us for more information and your nearest dealer.

Monocle X - $580 eight foot pair*  
Monocle XL - $880 eight foot pair*

* Price includes WBT spade lugs
bearing/platter assembly sits on a tri-
pod, the feet of which rest on ceramic 
interfaces. The motor is outboard, with 
the analog sinewave generator and speed-control circuitry integral. But 
unlike the older RPM 2, the new 'table's 
transformer is separately housed, so it 
can be placed where hum induction will 
not be a problem.

The heavy, stainless-steel arm mount, 
filled with lead shot, is, like the motor, 
freestanding. A supplied gauge is used 
to precisely locate the arm anywhere 
around the platter. With this system, 
changing arms takes but a few seconds, 
though additional arm mounts will not 
be cheap. Alternatively, Perkins told me, 
it might be possible to fabricate change-
able top-mounting plates.

The 'table will be sold for "around 
$6000" supplied with a laminated tem-
pered-glass platform. An option will be 
an air-flotation system similar to Immedia's 
Noisef blocking. The air suspension is supplied 
by a small air tank which, when filled to 
1200 lbs of pressure, lasts about three 
months and can be refilled in 10 minutes 
at a gas station, or by using a small $35 
compressor. Perkins may keep the origin-
al RPM2 in production for consumers 
who want a sleeker, more compact design 
and don't need to change arms.

An update of the RPM arm was on 
the new 'table, distinguished by: a new 
dual-counterweight/azimuth-adjust-
ment system that allows for a wider 
range of cartridges; a new, easier-to-set-
up wiring-harness strain relief; and new 
Yamamura internal and external 
wiring that Perkins says makes a major 
improvement in the arm's sound. One 
other change is the new system for at-
taching the antiskating string, which 
makes keeping the string parallel to the 
record surface when changing VTA 
much easier. The changes raise the price 
of the arm to $2850.

The other piece of big news sat adja-
cent to the 'table: Scan-Tech's long-
awaited Connoisseur 3.0 preamplifier, 
a thorough update of Peter Mares' leg-
edary 2.0 — the most mesmerizing 
piece of analog audio gear I've ever 
heard. The new dual-mono preamp fea-
tures five line-level inputs plus the phono 
section. Painstakingly hand built by 
Jonathan Carr, the phono section features 
miniature, three-dimensional point-to-
point wiring of impossible intricacy. 
Only 50 of the $45,000 units will ever be 
made, so get your order in early!

The Connoisseur 3.0's two separate 
power-amp-sized (electrically and phys-
ically) power supplies feature custom 
transformers and 12 nonelectrolytic, 
beer-can-sized 190uF caps. Loading is 
not adjustable by the user — Carr feels 
the signal is too delicate at that point in 
the circuit to tolerate any kind of 
switching — but resistance can be set by 
the manufacturer when the preamp is 
shipped. Gain is a total of approximate-
ly 71dB. Good news: a more "afford-
able" follow-up is in the works.

The system — new 'table, RPM arm, 
Parnassus D.Ct cartridge, 3.0 preamp, 
and Danish Sirius solid-state amp 
(which Immedia is now importing), all 
driving a pair of new Audio Physic 
Libra speakers — gives the kind of 
detailed, fast, delicate sound I like. But I 
didn't stay long, hoping to come back 
the next day for more. Immedia's new 
budget RPM-1 turntable ($2500), which 
features removable armboards, was on 
display in rooms throughout the show.

Herron Audio has been coming on 
strong over the past few years, building 
a loyal ownership base and getting some 
great reviews in the smaller magazines. 
I liked what I heard in Herron's room, 
which featured the VTPH-1 vacuum-
tube phono preamp ($2750, moving-
magnet; $3250, FET moving-coil), 
VTSP-1 vacuum-tube preamp ($3650), 
and prototypes of a new, cool-running 
solid-state monobloc amp.

In the Tocco room — the new 
Dynavector distributor — I got my 
first look at the new naked Dynavector 
Te Kaitora cartridge, which features a 
titanium mounting plate, solid boron 
cantilever, silver coil wire, and Ogura 
line-contact Pathfinder stylus. Te 
Kaitora is Maori for The Discoverer, 
and the cartridge is a collaboration be-
tween Dynavector Japan and Dyna-
vector New Zealand. While visiting 
Dynavector's website (www.netlaputa. 
or.jp/~dynavec/english/kaitora.html), I 
was shocked and more than pleasantly 
surprised to find that Dynavector's leg-
dendary and oh-so-sexy 1V 507 tonearm 
is still available in very limited quantities.

I headed downtown to the Golden 
Nugget for Audio Research's annual 
press party, where I got my first look at 
and listen to the new Reference Phono 
section, which will cost between $6000 
and $7000. The system — an Oracle 
Delphi/Triplaner Vi/van den Hul 
Frog combo, the new phono section, 
Reference One preamp, a pair of new 
Reference 300 monoblocks, and Wilson 
X-1/Grand SLAMM Mk.2s — pro-
duced some of the best sound I've 
heard from AR in that room. It was also 
the first year in recent memory with 
William Z. Johnson not in attendance. 
When the Reference is finally put into 
production, we'll press for a review 
sample of what will probably be AR's 
final "statement" on phono equaliza-
tion and amplification.

Saturday morning I awoke to some 
incridibly hard-core insertion-style porno 
on my hotel-room television — some-	hing I guarantee you I did not order 
(though I didn't exactly run to turn it 
off). When it ended, the channel played 
a promo for the next feature, Simon 
Birch. Only in Las Vegas!

Timing. For the second year in a row, 
I awoke with the flu. This ruined any 
 hope of critical listening. Saturday 
night, at Classic Records' release 
party for its new artist, Lorna Hunt, as 
we sat and awaited Hunt's entry, three 
people came up to me to say "Go home 
before you collapse." So I did (go home, 
that is, not collapse). Hunt's new 
album, All in One Day, is available on 
LP, CD, and 24/96 DAD.
InnerSound Eros is a bi-amplified Hybrid Electrostatic loudspeaker system including 400 watt base amplification and active crossovers. The first reflected highs you hear arrive about a week later than the direct sound. The result is that the Eros sounds so clear you almost can't believe it.

"...this is a warm, most romantic sounding speaker... warmer and more romantic than you'd expect an electrostatic design to be, and with considerable dynamic 'snap' and gradation. All of which would be as nothing if things didn't sound so alive."  — Harry Pearson, The Absolute Sound, May/June 98, Issue 112

"This is the first speaker system to succeed at sonically marrying a dynamic woofer with an electrostatic for mid and upper frequencies, and it is the first electrostatic system of any kind (either full-range or hybrid) to furnish truly excellent quality bass."  — Peter Moncrieff, International Audio Review

"Truly stunning."  — Chris Beeching, Audio Quarterly

InnerSound Inc., 1700 Hwy 16, Whitesburg, GA 30185. Tel: (770) 838 1400. Fax: (770) 838 0111

InnerSound (UK), International House, Horsecroft Road, Harlow, Essex CM19 5SX. Tel: 44 1279 635180. Fax: 44 1279 442701

wwwINNERsoundNet
I spent Sunday in a hotel bed, missing chances to audition not only the new Classic LP releases I'd gotten the previous evening, but the HDTV broadcast of the Jets game. Bummer...and very bad timing.

Finally, and perhaps most important, there was significant new vinyl at the show. From Classic Records: a two-LP edition of Ry Cooder's Buena Vista Social Club, plus Miles Davis' Sketches of Spain, Bruce's Born to Run (nongatefold!?), Billie Holiday's Lady in Satin, and the afore-mentioned Lorna Hunt's two-LP All in One Day. Classic also released The Jimi Hendrix Classic Singles Collection, a limited edition of a brilliantly packaged, 11 45rpm 7" boxed set. Get it or regret it!

From Groove Note, the Joe Harley-produced I Got the T-Bone Walker Blues, by Roy Gaines. From Vivante Productions (UK), a reissue of J.J. Cale's Naturally. And from a new reissue label, Apostrophe Productions (rootcellr!@aol.com), in an ultra-limited edition (1000 copies), Esperanza — a two-LP solo set by Michael Rother of Kraftwerk that includes many bonus tracks.

Best sound I heard at the show (before the flu?) Number one was the Spectral room, featuring Keith Johnson's modified Avalon Eidolons (active-ly biamped with custom crossover), Spectral DMC 30 preamp, a pair of Spectral stereo DMA 150 amps sourced by Spectral's SBR 3000 transport and 2000 processor, all connected with new MIT interconnects. Absolutely thrilling and convincing. Also particularly impressive: the KR Enterprise amps driving Von Schweikert speakers and the Audio Research/Wilson setup.

Timing. Mine's up.
Exceptional Performance
Fine Tunes
Jonathan Scull

Last month I tipped you on how to check the AC plug orientation for transformer current leakage—the best sound is often found at the lowest voltmeter reading. Roger Skoff of XLO suggests another technique that’s worth passing on to you, if only because the imagery is so...pique: Leave the speaker cables hooked up and pull the interconnects from the power amplifier. Turn it on and “stick your head in the speaker,” as Roger puts it, checking for the level of hum. (Imagine a pair of bony audiophile legs waging crazily out of the bell of an Avantgarde Acoustics horn speaker.)

Reverse the polarity of the amplifier’s AC plug and stick your head in there again. Whichever orientation gives the lowest hum level is the one to use. Connect the preamplifier to the amplifier and do it again, this time reversing the preamp’s AC plug. Same again for your digital front-end. And if you’re of the analog persuasion, do your phono preamp (assuming it’s a separate chassis) and turntable. I guarantee that even modest high-end systems will benefit from the exercise.

Remember—you’re trying to minimize the voltage potential between the chassis of the components in your system and ground. Current flows from high to low voltage as it equalizes the potential. The further apart the potentials, the more they’ll “talk” to each other through the common ground. Lowering current leakage from the transformers is one way to attack the problem directly rather than just treat the symptoms.

Speaking of which, let’s get something straight, as I begin to chart and demystify one of the biggest pains in the collective butt of audiophiles: Grounding. Some of the underlying causes of buzz and hum can be traced back to the 120V AC power line, but be advised: a little knowledge can be dangerous. Unless you know what you’re doing, call an electrician. Don’t go rooting around your socket or breaker box if you haven’t a clue. I do not want to hear about anyone Slam Dancing at 120 volts. Really, don’t fool around, and be careful. (It’s happening, I’m becoming my parents! Arghhhhh!)

So what, exactly, is that pesidential buzz? Ground loops occur when you have two paths to ground in your system of unequal resistance. The small difference in chassis voltage induces a current flow that causes hum. By plugging the normal 3-pin AC plug of one of the problem components into a 2-pin cheaper plug, you “lift” its ground, thus breaking the loop. But for safety’s sake, the ground wire of the cheaper should be attached to the cover-plate screw of the AC outlet or another good ground. If you “lift” a preamp and ground the amplifier, the preamp is, in effect, connected to ground by the interconnects. But think about it: Do you really want your interconnects carrying a current flow across their shields so close to the conductors? I think not. Anyway, the preamp is the center of the system, dealing with the lowest-level signals. It is a desirable point at which to make the overall system ground.

And, he said, wagging his fingers in warning, if you disconnect the lifted component’s interconnects, it’s obviously no longer grounded. If, through some fault or failure, high voltage appears on the chassis as you ramble over and give it a hug, ZOTTI! Careful...

Another source of hum and buzz are the rectifiers that convert AC to the desired DC voltage to power a component’s circuitry. These are nasty little buggers, radiating lots of high-frequency splash. Rectifiers conduct only during a narrow portion of the AC cycle (120 times a second), explains BAT’s Victor Khomenko. The pulsing diodes create spikes that can be heard as buzzing. “Rectifiers have to be strong to charge typically large capacitors very quickly,” he continued. “That type of noise is pervasive and covers a broad spectrum, so it’s very easy to hear. All that switching on and off sends the chassis potential jumping all over the place on amps, and even preamps!” That’s one reason even a
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big amplifier notching or flattening the AC waveform with current draw may be less harmful to the circuit than a chorus of ground loops and rectifier noise riding the ground plane.

By the way, ground loops and rectifier buzz aren't the same as induced 60Hz hum, which is altogether more difficult to hear. You don't often notice that kind of "pure" and "clean" single-frequency hum, especially if you've been reading "Fine Tunes" and have taken the time to properly dress your cables and power cords. Ahem. So, what to do? The first, easiest, and best way to avoid ground loops and improve the sound of your system in one fell swoop is to run all your components on the same AC line. A single-supply outlet box with a single low-impedance (you hope) ground connection to the breaker box solves many ills. If the preamp, for example, is getting its ground from one outlet while the amplifier is referencing ground at another—one that may be closer to or farther away from the breaker box—the two grounds are unlikely to be at the same potential. Hum a few bars, baby. All wire has electrical resistance, and all currents passing through that resistance manifest a drop in voltage. Depending on where the voltage drop occurs, you'll be faced with more or less hum. Multiply that effect across whatever number of components you have on separate outlets. You'll most likely wind up with different ground potentials at different outlets, the fracas finally converging at your breaker box. And the longer the individual runs of the common resource — the ground — the worse the potential problem becomes. Bottom line, you want everything in the system to be as close in ground potential as possible.

There are many high-quality audioophile outlet extenders on the market. But since "Fine Tunes" concerns itself with low- or zero-cost improvements, I'm here to tell you that RadioShack's power strips are not terrible. So without any sort of major capital investment, it's easy to try the single-line scheme and see what it does for you.

It's going to take me a few columns to fully describe the best ways to ground your system, but for now, I suggest the following. As above, try to run all or most of the system on one good outlet. If you don't have a dedicated 20 or 30 amp line (watch those building codes), run your amplifier from another AC socket, but make sure both sockets are on the same phase of positive as described in the March "Fine Tunes." And don't pollute your audio power line with anything like halogen lamps on dimmers—they're the worst when it comes to injecting radio-frequency hash into your system.

Another tip about power extenders: Connect components starting with the largest power draw, and work back to the lowest power consumer. Keeping high-level audio-signal carriers (amps, CD players) together and doing the same with low-level components (preamp, phone) can be helpful. We'll consider electrical isolation of components in a subsequent "Fine Tunes," but here's another tip worth repeating: Pull the interconnects from your digital front-end when enjoying analog, and vice versa.

I believe we can now say that you have a basic grounding in this vexing subject. *hadaBOOM!* (It's been a while ...)

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***** WHAT HI-FI?

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The first sign that something big was brewin' happened a few months ago, when my audiophile was talking on the phone with an audiobuddy. I overheard him say "plasma." I tried to convince myself that it had something to do with his medical research.

But then it happened. I could no longer deny that something major was going on. We were at the Consumer Electronic Show in Las Vegas—specifically, the specialty audio exhibits at the Alexis Park Hotel. My audiophile was listening to a manufacturer demonstrating his new DVD player and speakers, but he couldn't keep his eyes off Sony's new flat-screen TV.

"What model TV is that?"
"I don't really know," the manufacturer replied, then tried to return the conversation to his products.

My audiophile looked at me. "The TV's really nice, isn't it?"


Of course I liked the television. Heck, I'd like any television. Especially since our own set had long been removed from the living room because it impeded the otherwise "perfect" sound of our audio system.

"You know, most audio DVDs are now being recorded with a picture track. And the player can play the CD and DVD movies," my audiophile casually mentioned.

Movies? When I was growing up, the weekly trip to the movies was a ritual for all teens. So the premise of "movies" and "home theater" echoed loudly through my heart. I love everything about the movies: They way they draw you in. The bigger-than-life images of the stars. Of course, I'd miss the shared experience that you get only when you're crammed together with hundreds of other people, but snuggling with my audiophile as we sat leisurely in our home was looking pretty good to me.

In short, I was ready to throw caution—or, more likely, our tax-refund check—to the winds and dive headlong into home theater.

"So, you think we should get one?" I asked.

"Get one? Well... I don't know. The HDTVs should be out soon. And then there are the plasma screens. They're really flat and thin, so you can hang them on the wall. Of course, I wasn't really happy with the plasma computer screen I had, but this may be better. And then there are the front-projection TVs—the big screens..."

This was going to be complicated. Why had I even thought it was going to be a slam dunk? Memories of buying our first speakers together came flooding back...

With our wedding-gift money burning holes in our pockets, we spent weeks auditioning speakers. I remember returning to my office after lunch and trying to explain to my boss why I was so late: my fiancée and I had had to complete the A/B comparison of our finalists (Dahlquist DQ10s and Vandersteen 2s).

Many couples think the biggest challenge of starting life together is picking out a china pattern, but believe me—deciding between Lenox and Limoge is nothing compared to deciding between box or electrostatic speakers.

I wonder why some of the high-end stores haven't begun offering a bridal registry. After all, Home Depot has been hugely successful for those who love tools and duct tape—and who doesn't? Certainly, a new interconnect would be more useful than a coffee pot or toaster.

And those pre-wedding counseling programs required by most religious groups should include some information on sound compatibility. You can work through problems with in-laws or differences in child rearing, but let's face it: tube lovers are just never going to be able to live with digital lovers. Oh, I know there are those hybrid marriages, but I'm not even sure that's legal.

"... and I'm not sure the technology is really there yet," my audiophile was saying. "They still haven't totally integrated the soundtrack and the movie..."

Ohh, nooooo! This was beginning to sound too much like his reaction when Sony touted the first CDs as "perfect sound forever." I don't want perfection. I just want Tom Cruise's face 40" wide in my living room. Oh, wait a minute—that is perfection!

I had it now, big time: home-theater fever. Visions of a big theater-style popcorn machine quickly replaced the Art Deco table I'd been eyeing for the corner of the living room. I was already planning my first Film Festival.

"... and we have to consider whether five channels are enough. You know, some manufacturers are thinking about six or eight channels..."

Tom's face had begun to fade. I had to act quickly. "Yeah, but isn't Terminator 2 with Schwarzenegger great on home theater?"

I confess, evoking The Arnold's name to a bodybuilder like my audiophile is a low blow. But I was one desperate woman.

"Yeah! And they do have those great Bond movies," he responded. I quickly reinforced this emotional trend. "Honey, I know how much you love the Bond movies."

"Of course, it couldn't go in the same room as the audio system..."

"Of course not," I agreed, ignoring the fact that, except for the kitchen and bedroom, there are no other rooms.

"And we'd need to get new speakers, and new cables, and..."

"Of course, of course," I nodded. Tom's face was beginning to come back into focus.

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Astor Place
Lisa Astor

Stereophile, April 1999
LISTENING & LOOKING IN SIN CITY
Larry Archibald, Brian Damkroger, Kalman Rubinson, and Jonathan Scull report from the 1999 International Consumer Electronics Show, held in Las Vegas in January

**CES Show Report Part 1**

It was a gently downbeat CES for the sound-reproduction crowd. Let's face it — high-end audio is an incremental business. In the best instances, we can already fool people into thinking they're hearing a live performance. We've gone so far that — inevitably — the audio industry's latest efforts are refinements of what has gone before, as opposed to paradigm-shifting breakthroughs. Even the new DVD-Audio standard, representing an effective information transfer factor of 15 or 20 times, will be heard as a change at the margin of fidelity.

But that's where the High End works: at the margin. When you see the difference between VHS and HDTV, it's startling — because of how horrible VHS is. An old penny-laden turntable driving a cheap boombox might be comparable in quality. Our much-maligned CDs and LPs already provide high-definition audio. What we're looking for in audio goes beyond high-definition. We're looking for virtual reality.

In that sense, the 1999 International CES in Las Vegas revealed us as we really are: incremental technologists. Much of the qualities of the superb loudspeakers Kevin Voecks has wrought at Revel since leaving Snell are now available in a $3500/pair Performa version, one of the best sounds I heard at CES. Jim Thiel has massaged his extremely phase- and frequency-accurate design ideas into products suitable for home theater. They sound good and play loud. Madrigal's phenomenal new analog-plus-digital products basically do what Madrigal's older products did, but better. And Krell showed amplifiers even more awesome than their already impressive models.

Maybe more important, they now have a whole line of great-sounding stuff that costs radically less than their past efforts.

Mainstream manufacturers, too, make incremental improvements. I heard a $2700 Denon demo'd that would have done justice to many high-end exhibits. It's hard to judge electronics (or anything) under show conditions, but you could just hear the effort Denon's engineers had put into making their five-channel product clean and clear — and genuinely high end.

In fact, in the halls of commerce, "high end" is no longer a curse. It used to be that commercially successful retailers saw the High End as a distraction from their real business, which looked a lot like the moving of boxes. Now they see the High End as the lodestone of success. Give a consumer a high-performance product and they're happy. Even more important, they can't walk in just anywhere and get it.

As might be guessed at an incremental-technology show, fast-breaking news and hot controversies were at a minimum. In fact, our parent company, Petersen Publishing, provided a high percentage of the news: first, its acquisition of Home Theater and related Curtco Freedom publications; and second, Petersen's own acquisition by Emap, a British publishing concern (whose CEO, Kevin Hand, used to work at HiFi News & Record Review with John Atkinson). The resultant corporation, Emap Petersen, is the largest publishing organization company in the world.

On the high-bit-rate audio front, all was calm. Yes, there would be two formats — but both would be supported by universal DVD players. Yes, there would be DivX and open DVD, but DivX would get 10–15% of the market, thus not confusing consumers. With or without DivX, DVD is taking off like gangbusters. Maybe DivX will even act as a boost to open DVD.

Yes, DTV has its problems — there's no programming, and practically no sets to watch it on — but more markets are being served by HDTV than were expected, and sets are being snapped up as fast as they can be made. The proliferation of HDTV product releases was impressive.

Yes, two-channel has had a tough year, but the retail situation is actually great. The mass merchants are publicly happy with their sales results, and every specialty retailer I talked to had had an excellent year as well.

Las Vegas itself changes even faster than our industry does. The new Bellagio was open, and I got to stay there for two nights (before their rate went up for CES). Like Vegas' Mirage and the Golden Nugget, it's a nice Steve Wynn-owned hotel, but this time with a difference: excellent restaurants. Every dinner I ate in Las Vegas was commendable — and after most of them, I didn't have to appease the disclaimer "...for Las Vegas." This makes no difference to the sound in your listening room, but it certainly creates gratitude among the scribes whose annual pilgrimage to this least holy of shrines is more forced than voluntary.

And the views! One morning I stood on a Bellagio moving walkway and looked out on the villas of Lake Como and Venice stepping down into the Bellagio lagoon. To my left I could see the volcano in front of the Mirage, a pirate ship barely visible beyond. Across the street, the Arc de Triomphe was already up and the Eiffel Tower was under construction. Over my right shoulder, a huge black pyramid rose behind the New York skyline. Impressive — and all completely phony!

It seemed that even the outboard exhibits caused less trauma than they normally do. The principal outboard show, The Home Entertainment Show (T.H.E. Show), took place at the St. Tropez Resort Hotel, conveniently located right next to the Alexis Park Hotel, where the High End holds forth. Great move for the motivated attendee, but not so great for the St. Tropez exhibitors, who saw somewhere between a fifth to a third of the traffic seen at the Alexis Park. I guess there's still good reason to exhibit at the official CES locations.

Official attendance was up 6.5%, at 97,334, but traffic at the Alexis Park seemed slightly down. Must have been more people in the Personal Computer and Home Automation areas or — who knows? — over at Car Audio and Adult Video at the Sands Convention Center.

— Larry Archibald
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Expensive Loudspeakers: $4000/pair & Up

"What's expensive?" one of my nonaudiophile co-workers asked when I described my CES assignment.

"Oh, $4000..." I replied, smiling as I thought to myself (...and up).

My friend was having trouble contemplating $4000/pair speakers, so I decided not to suggest what "and up" might be. For example, $85,000/pair¹ for Avalon's new Sentinel or the Dynaudio Evidence. Sure, no one but a handful of Microsoft executives will ever own them, but they're still fascinating — and today's cutting-edge technologies will be commonplace in tomorrow's $4000 models.

Avalon's Sentinel, in fact, was conceived to be a more manufacturable replacement for the company's Osiris. The four-way system includes an external crossover/1600Wpc subwoofer amplifier module with in-room compensation controls to allow the dealer to optimally match the Sentinel to an application. It sounded great driven by Classe electronics — effortless and articulate.

The Dynaudio Evidence consists of two elegant 7' towers, each weighing 300 lbs and comprising three interlocking modules. The top and bottom modules are for bass, each housing two 8" woofers; the middle unit contains two midrange units, two tweeters and modular, plug-in crossover boards. And my engineer's heart was warmed by such over-the-top touches as the 6"-thick sculpted and textured aluminum baffle for managing vibrations and diffraction.

Another system that caused a stir was the PipeDreams, designed by Melos' Mark Porzilli and built by Nearfield Acoustics. NA showed their third largest model: two slim towers, each with 36 tweeters, 18 midrange drivers, and two subwoofer cubes with two 18" drivers each, and an Intelligent Crossover that allows for digital correction of in-room response. The latter adds $2000 to the PipeDreams' $22,000 price. The system somewhat overwhelmed the room, but the PipeDreams were impressive nonetheless.

Meadowlark Audio's lovely sounding new flagship was the $15,000 Nightingale. Its unusual three-chassis setup has a faceted midrange/tweeter cabinet sitting atop a rectangular woofer module in front, but the rear half is a transmission line that docks with the woofer. The Nightingale also uses Audax's new "gas-piezo" tweeter. Meadowlark's Patrick McGinty explained that the tweeter leads protrude into a bubble of gas enclosed by metal-coated Mylar; the signal modulates the gas's expansion.

¹ Unless noted otherwise, all speaker prices are per pair.
Introducing Avatar, the only integrated amplifier worthy of the VAC name. A distillation of everything we have learned about sound quality, Avatar features:

- Integrated design, allowing the designer complete control over the interface between the stages and eliminating the need for interconnects, with significant sonic advantages
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At an MSRP of $3,490, Avatar offers a level of quality and performance previously unattainable at its price. For apartment dwellers, budget-conscious music lovers, or those individuals fortunate enough to contemplate a second system, Avatar is, quite simply, the finest integrated amplifier ever made.
"But I don't really know how it works," he confessed. "They won't even tell me what kind of gas it has inside.

KEF's new, $17,500 Maidstone is a large four-way design in three stacked boxes: a ported 15" woofer, a 10" lower midrange, and a coaxially mounted midrange/tweeter in the top chassis. Driven by Adcom electronics, the big KEFs get my Stevie Ray Vaughan Award for their big, vivid, dynamic sound and bottom-end slam.

Acoustic Reproduction Technology's ART-M is a fully active three-way system that takes a digital input directly into the electronic crossover/equalizer. It's built around an unusual, 1mm-thick carbon-fiber dome midrange that covers from 300Hz to above 10kHz, but requires extensive equalization because of the dome's inefficiency. The ART-M goes for $34,000 (with amps), and did a nice job of reproducing the intricate spatial and ambient information on that audiophile classic Cantate Domino.

Venture Audio of Belgium had a great-sounding room. Their $30,000 L'Excellence FC speakers were fed by a Bow ZZ-8 CD player, a First Sound Ultimate Paramount preamp, and a 20Wpc Venture Reference One single-ended amp. The L'Excellence uses ceramic drivers — three 7" woofers, a 4" midrange, and a 1" tweeter — from a German company named Thiel & Partner.

Meanwhile, the Thiel from Lexington, Kentucky showed their $2200/each MCS1, which was designed from the ground up for two-channel and surround applications, and a range of mounting/placement arrangements. It uses two 6" metal-cone woofers in a convex baffle, one on either side of a modified, more efficient version of the compound midrange/tweeter driver used in the CS2.3.

Hales' new Alexandria wasn't officially introduced, but did show up — and sound great — in a few rooms. The Alexandria is the first and smallest member of Hales' new line (as yet unnamed). Details were sketchy, but the Alexandria has a distinctive midrange/tweeter head assembly, made of what looks like extruded aluminum, protruding above the woofer module. The Alexandria should start shipping around April at a retail price of $28,000 to $30,000.

Dunlavy Audio Labs had a roomful of new products, from the 7'-tall Millennium ($17,000) down to the stand-mounted SM-1 ($2k). Several folks' favorite was the Athena ($6000), with its unusual hexagonal enclosure surrounding a downward-firing 10" woofer. Two 5.25" bass/mids and one 1" dome tweeter are mounted conventionally, near the top of one of the hexagon's sides.

Several rooms bear mention for having good-sounding systems and speakers that reflect continual refinement of standard or well-established designs — the sort that shouldn't be overlooked in a frantic search for the new and the different. The $5495 Cabasse Catalane 500 is an example. It sounded lovely with Cabasse amps.

Audio Artistry's Beethoven Elite updates the original dipole Beethoven with a fully active crossover and a slightly modified response curve. Driven by four (count 'em) four Jeff Rowland 10T stereo amplifiers, the Elite sounded wonderfully open and natural; it adds $7495 to the Beethoven's $27990 price.

I'm a sucker for planar dipoles, and Audire's $17,500
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Bryston's 9B ST delivers extraordinary quality to your entire home theatre surround sound experience.

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Image One is an exemplar of the breed: it sounded spacious and airy.

**German Physiks** was getting great sound from their $10,500 Windspiel, which uses the omnidirectional DDD Bending Wave Converter midrange/tweeter — proof that there are some rocket scientists left in Germany.

**Shun Mook**’s Bela Voce Signatures sounded lovely as well, fed by a CAL transport, *Wavelength* D/A and amplification, and **Nirvana** wires. The Bela Voces are $8200, complete with (I kid you not) both built-in and external Mpingo disks, and a template for properly positioning the latter.

The latest evolution of **Verity**’s Parsifal, the $12,500 Encore, sounded sweet and detailed surrounded by **Theta/dCS** digital gear, **Cary** tubes, and **Discovery** cables.

Intriguing new technologies sometimes pop up in unlikely places. **Ray Kimber** (of **Kimber Kable**) cornered **Reference Recordings**’ Jan Manesuq and me one morning to tell us about a speaker-correction concept he’d been working on. According to Ray, because the microphone captures all frequencies during recording, an encoding occurs. High frequencies are modulated by low frequencies, and vice versa. Crossovers split the frequencies during playback, which means that the signal is never “decoded”: The tweeter never sees the low-frequency component, and the woofer never sees the highs.

I’ll reserve judgment, but the sound of Ray’s small two-way bookshelf speakers was certainly clear, and Jan seemed particularly impressed when Ray played a couple of RR disks. All Ray would admit was that the “decoding” was done during the electrical/mechanical/acoustic translation, and with “about $2 worth of parts.” Hmmmm.

**Perpetual Technologies’ P-1A** speaker-correction system, on the other hand, is a $950 DSP-based stand-alone box that can be programmed with phase- and amplitude-correction algorithms for a particular speaker, based on the speaker’s MLSSA-derived data. For an additional “less than $599,” customers can add room-correction capability in the form of a CD, a microphone, a PC adapter card, and a PIN. The customer plays the CD, captures the data on a PC, and uploads it to Perpetual’s website. A day later, the new algorithm can be viewed and downloaded. According to Perpetual’s Mark Schifter, lately with Genesis and previously with Audio Alchemy, more than 20 loudspeaker manufacturers have agreed to participate, and beta testing has begun.

My vote for the show’s most unusual product goes to **TLG Acoustical Design** for their Series 1 Horn Enclosure. Question: “What two-channel, 45Hz horn enclosure will fit through a standard 30” doorway?” Answer: The wall-sized Medusa, which *Bound for Sound’s* Bob Neill dubbed “a Paragon for the new millennium.” Its appearance reminded me of the old TV show, *Voyage to the Bottom of the Sea*. Horns aren’t my cup of tea, but I was very impressed with TLG’s use of cutting-edge CAD/CAM and Rapid Prototyping technologies.

The new technologies were intriguing and the megabuck systems were fun, but I found two of the show’s best-sounding new speakers right at my $4000–$5000 lower limit. The first was **Magnepan**’s $3750 MG3.6/R, an update of the 3.5/R with a smoother midrange/tweeter crossover, a fourth- rather than a third-order woofer/midrange crossover, and an enlarged midrange panel. The latter two improvements combine to lower the acoustical crossover about 100Hz and add pace to the upper-bass/lower-midrange region. The demo suggested that the 3.6/R is a killer.

**Green Mountain Audio**’s great-sounding new Continuum 2 ($5500) was my second high point. This modular, three-way design has a large ported bass enclosure on the bottom and adjustable, cast-granite midrange and tweeter heads mounted to an aluminum rod protruding up from the woofer enclosure. Drivers include a very fast, custom-built 12” woofer, an Audax 5.25” aerogel cone, and a Morel 1” dome. The entire upper module is encased in a grille assembly that uses a compound convex shape to break up any coherent refraction. Check it out.

But back to that conversation with my co-worker: Yes, $4000/pair is expensive, even to a serious audiophile. However, the 1999 CES showed me that it’s also the entry point to an amazingly good group of loudspeakers. I came away very impressed, and convinced that today’s $4000 will buy a level of performance that might have cost five or ten times as much a decade ago. Then there’s “and up”...
"Let no one IMAGINE that in owning a recording he has the music."

John Cage, 1961

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RIAGE!!! There's absolutely no way that any one person can spend time in every CES room occupied by speakers costing less than $4000/pair, so I handled this as one would a major crisis. I divided the offerings into three classes: the familiar, the interesting, and (how can I say this delicately?) the ones I couldn't afford to spend time with. Because my space here is limited, I'll deal efficiently with the familiar, more extensively with the interesting and exciting, and graciously ignore the rest. (Don't assume that exclusion from this listing is a passive indictment; I'm sure I missed some good stuff.)

First, some quick mentions of a number of familiar names whose successful demos were no surprise. This brief list is in no way proportional to the enjoyment I derived from these products, but most experienced audiophiles are already familiar with them.

Jeff Joseph's demo of the Joseph Audio RM25si ($3299), using VTL amplification, Cardas cable, and Audio Power AC conditioners, was musically satisfying, as was expected from this reliable showroom. The RM25si also performed equally well in other rooms. Christian showed the updated Axis ($4000), which, with its associated subwoofer, was eminently clean and natural. The amazing Gallo Nucleus Micro system, which comes in various combinations of satellites (small balls) and subs (slightly bigger balls), filled a seemingly empty and untreated room with big, bold sounds. Three balls (two sat and a sub) cost only $699.

Both PSB and Platinum showed significantly updated versions of their middle-of-the-line speakers. The PSB Stratus Silver-i ($1799) has been treated to the enhancements that made John Atkinson so pleased with the Gold-i, while the Platinum Duo II ($3000), a dual-woofer system in a PolyCrystal enclosure, seemed more refined than its predecessor. Platinum also unveiled the formidable Merrimack powered "Isobarik" subwoofer.

The Thiel MCS1 ($2200 each), originally developed as a high-end center channel, showed its mettle as a music transducer in a two-channel setup. Vince Bruzzese's demos of the tiny Arro ($1100) and the barely larger Forest ($3000), both slim two-ways, gave further proof of Totem's wizardry with small boxes. Similar small columns were offered by Rega: the $995 Jura two-way struck me as a real bargain, and the $695 Alya, although no bigger than a bedpost, sounded surprisingly spacious. The Von Schweikert Research VR3.5 ($3450) was a significantly larger slim column, but this three-way's was amply justified by its rich bass, dynamics, and excellent integration.

I also enjoyed brief visits to such respected names as Audiomaxim, Avance, Canton, KRiX, Mordaunt-Short, Paradigm, Sonab, and Spendor, but they so overwhelmed me with their many new offerings that I can say little aside from what one might glean from their brochures. For similar reasons, I failed to get an adequate grip on such promising but unfamiliar brands as BC-Acoustique, GR Research/Paradox, Piega, Opera, and Osborne. I hope to get another shot at these soon.

Now for the technologically/aesthetically exciting and the just plain great-sounding. The svelte Aerial Acoustics Model 6 ($3500) is a still-less-expensive winner in Michael Kelly's 10, 8, 7 sequence. It blended seamlessly with Aerial's new SW12 subwoofer ($4500 each), a remarkably flexible powered sub with full remote control of all important functions. What a delight to tweak performance from the listening position! Although Kelly seems to be targeting the home-theater market, this combination belongs in music systems.

Built-in powered subs were a recurrent theme at CES. Definitive Technology's Sandy Gross demoed the new, tall, and powerful BP2002TL Bipolar Towers with D'Appolito-arranged trios of drive-units front and rear, supported by a 12" sub and its 250W amp. A lot of value and muscle for $1099 each. Also sporting a side-firing powered subwoofer but with mid and high radiators only on the front, the Signet AVP Standard ($2500) has some of the most extensive tuning/setup controls I've seen. Yeah, I know — AVP means it's meant for home theater. But this baby made great music.

Phil Clements is back in the high-end ribbon business with the Clements Reference RT-7 ($3600), a two-way with novel bass- trap line-loading and his familiar ribbon MF/HF driver. The RT-7 had outstanding bass definition and precise imaging. Definitely a contender. Another ribbon/cone two-way, the Alternative Audio PS40 ($4500), had the seductive rendition of large planars but in a more svelte presentation. Via Sonic Frontiers and AA's single-ended amplification, Diana Krall was lush on the PS40s.

Demonstrating that full-range ribbons can be small but effective, the Eminent Technology LFT-142 ($3900) is only 16" wide and 41" high (with stand), but a pair produced spacious, precise sound with excellent low-level detail. At only about an inch or so deep, four of these could be a very attractive home-theater setup.

Speaking of thin (but still curvy), the $1895 Scenario from Martin-Logan was shown in a home-theater setup, but its small size and versatile mounting options should make it suitable for many music systems.

At EgglestonWorks I spent a very enjoyable 20 minutes (under these conditions, a long time) with the little Isabel ($2900 plus $500 for stands). Though small, the Isabels produced a Shostakovich symphony and Rickie Lee Jones' "Dat Dere" with the aplomb of the Andras, and with only the barest loss of bass weight. Speaking of family resemblances, the Audiovector M series confirms theirs with the potential for upgrade from the bookshelf M1 ($1245) to the M1 Signature ($2345), and from the floorstanding M2 ($2495) to the M3 Signature ($4295). Ingenious and elegant.
Miles
A one-piece CD player for the audio perfectionist

Thetas, the company that pioneered separate-component digital to analog converters and transports, now offers its first compact disc player, Miles.

Miles' digital to analog conversion uses Thetas famous programming on high-powered computer chips, and is offered with a choice of either single-ended or fully differential balanced outputs. Miles' transport is based on an ultra-stable transport mechanism, offers four separate power supplies, and incorporates Thetas jitter reduction technology!

Thetas new CD player is a perfect playback device for the serious audiophile who wants a streamlined system: Miles has a unique analog volume control, so it can be plugged directly into a power amplifier to make a really great, simple system.

Miles volume control is similar to that found in Casablanca. Nearly every other CD player has a digital volume control. Analog volume control is much better for sound quality than digital, which literally throws away bits. When you turn down the volume on Miles, all the resolution, all the sound quality is still there; it's just quieter.

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No other CD player has the tremendous advantages of Thetas proprietary jitter reduction technology, which minimizes timing errors from input to output.

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Miles uses the same, special hybrid DAC found in far costlier, highly acclaimed Theta signal processors.

Miles uses Thetas proprietary filter algorithms, and has enough computing power to ensure a signal perfect in phase and time, as well as frequency response. Miles literally delivers more of the music than any conventional CD player can.

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Nova showed the Applause, the smaller brother of the Rendition, which so impressed me at HI-FI '98. With two 7” woofers, this $4990 tower yielded little to its big brother and, via Conrad-Johnson electronics, made the blandishments of 24-bit/96kHz discs abundantly clear.

The Soliloquy name was new to me, but their 5.3 speaker ($1895) was memorable. With two 5” cones and a small silk dome, this slim, 38”-high obelisk was among the most open- and transparent-sounding speakers at the show. I couldn’t resist forcing the Willow soundtrack into their CD player and listening, rapt, for as long as propriety allowed. Gotta get my hands on these!

Perhaps the most amazing audition was in the Evett & Shaw room. The diminutive but elegant Elans ($2200) stood on a desk flanking the flat Flarte amp, treating listeners to a rich, spacious sound such as one would never expect from computer speakers. A pair (in a Halliburton case) are the perfect traveling companions for the executive with taste.

Another blatant overachiever, Revel’s new F30 Performa, nearly blew me out of the room. Perhaps making all three drivers in-house helps, but at $3500 these were underpriced for such powerful yet sweet and detailed speakers. One of the best sounds of the show. DIYers with similar high standards should be excited by the F30’s new T25CF002 Millennium tweeter from SEAS. This 25mm soft dome has six neodymium block magnets and a fundamental resonant frequency of only 500Hz.

The surprises in the Gersmann room were the small X-1 satellites ($1600) perched on their matching SW-1 subs ($1799). With their close driver spacing, these seemed better balanced and equally as dynamic as the big GA-P520s that I reviewed in the March ’98 Stereophile. (I just happened to have some of the same demo discs with me to confirm that opinion.) Looking somewhat similar in shape and finish to the Gersmanns, the one-piece, two-way Pearl revives the respected Paragon name. Driven by Muse and Plinius, this floorstanding truncated pyramid offered open sound, good imaging, and, at $1500, good value.

A real discovery was the Anniversary, in the SAP (Strumenti Acustici di Precisione) room. Consisting of two 5” full-range drivers in a fully horn-loaded enclosure topped with a small cone tweeter (also horn-loaded), this $4500 miniature sounded surprisingly dynamic and lively as driven by SAP’s SET/OTL class-A amp. With a volume of no more than 2.5ft³, it sounded like the big horns of burnished memory. Hartfield and GRF fans take note.

In the “Who Are These Guys, Anyway?” category was Confluence, with their Cantilen and Chimere three-way, multibox speakers. Distinctively yet attractively styled, they performed ably with jazz and classical torture tracks. Also from Europe, Aliante/ pinifarina showed a highly styled version of the Zeta, but the affordable (less than $3500) finishes should sound just as delicious.

Impact’s Vento ($2995) was one of my favorites at HI-FI ’98. Well, now they’re two for two. Driven by E.A.R. electronics, this relatively small two-way transmission line had nimble, extended bass and offered a wide soundstage. Taking “small” to new extremes, Mirage set up their really tiny MRM-1 ($2700–$3000 with stands) in a decsented-room with big, big Mark Levinson electronics. But the MRM-1s were up to the task, with spot-on imaging and wide-range sound. Can something that small really sound that big?

Well, NHT-Pro pulled off a similar trick, adding matching amps and some clever controls to three petite NHT models. The really small (9” by 6” by 7”) M-00 ($750 with amps) was a surprise, but I was particularly impressed with two larger (ha!) models, the A-10 ($1250) and A-20 ($2000). Although less than a cubic foot each, these powered ban-tanweights packed a big punch! With adjustments for near/far-field listening and near/far-wall placement, setting up these speakers should be extremely easy.

Also fully powered, the TLB-10 ($2000) and TLB-12 ($3000), from new-to-me Bipolar Acoustics of Taiwan, are three-way systems with fourth-order active crossovers and dipole mid-frequency radiation. Interestingly, the bass driver is loaded by a line consisting of concentric aluminum tubes. This, rather than a port, drives the compliant aluminum outer shell of the cabinet. Not the ultimate in finesse, but for all its fascinating new technology, pretty decent (and cheap)!

My very favorite system, regardless of price, was the Rockport Technologies Merak/Sheritan, driven by a Rockport turntable and Mark Levinson electronics—but $23,520 is too far beyond my $4k low-pass cutoff (even with a first-order slope) for me to dwell on it. Just don’t tell me that Cleo Laine and Ray Charles weren’t in Vegas then, please.
Expensive Solid-State Electronics

Coming back from CES, I pondered the meaning of “G-force” as it relates to an MD 80 pressing you back into the seat on takeoff, and when experiencing music through an all-Boulder 2000-series system. The 2050 monoblocks, in all their architectural and sonic splendor, were driven by the matching 2010 Isolated preamplifier and 2020 Advance 1V/A converter on big Westlake Tower HR-7s. Wow. I felt the sound wash over me in a very physical way, like nothing else I heard at the show. The setup wasn't in a room large enough to support the gigantic sound, but in the nearfield it was mind-altering. As an Ultimate System, this one racks right up there with the best of them; $42,800 for the speakers, $128,000 for the source components and amplification.

Another big system that was in a room large enough to support it was in the Classe/Avalon suite at the Nugget. A pair of handsome stereo Classe Omegas ($15k each) were running bridged for 3000W into 4 ohms and tethered to the spectacular new Avalon Sentinels. Classe also introduced the matching Omega line-level preamp, for a cool $10k. I wondered briefly why Mike Viglas and Avalon's Neil Patel were looking so happy; it didn't take long to figure out, once I'd listened to a few selections from Harry van Dalen's wonderful Turtle Records catalog from Holland. (I'm livin' Tony Overwater's Up Close.) This large, impressive, ultra-musical installation gets my vote for Best Sound of the Show, hands down.

My head woulda hurt a lot worse than it did if there hadn't been a few rooms with good sound. The others? Easy — there weren't many. Boulder as above, and, for small-system honors, Joseph Audio's RM-25s on VTL tube power, especially when driven by Spj/La Luce analog power.

Let's zoom down to the near'n'petite. That would be Linn. A remarkably big sound sprang from an incredibly small pair of amplifiers called — wait for it — the Klimax. Each is about the size of a two-stack of Vox Box LP sets, and their “patented 'noiseless' 4G circuitry” is encapsulated in a polished and sculpted “clamshell case machined from solid aluminum ingot.” These wee clams put out an astonishing 500Wpc. Switching power supplies are the secret to keeping a low profile. Setting the monoblocks to either side of a Linn Sondek CD12 makes a tasty little package for reproducing music, as comfortable in m'lady's boudoir as in a big macho-man audiophile system. Look for the Klimax monoblocks to come in at around $20k/pair.

Nagra was auditioning the MPA, their ingenious MOSFET power amp. You can have it as a 250Wpc stereo amplifier, or run it as an integrated by adding the Remote Control/Multiple Inputs module. This slide-in device offers volume, balance, and mute functions, plus a choice of four balanced line-level inputs. Burmester was playing their Reference Line system, an impressive music-making machine coming in at the Reference price of $250k. This includes the 808 Mk.5 preamplifier, which runs something between $25 and $35k, depending on the type and number of input and output modules required. It's actually been in production since August 1980, hence the designation. It

2 Let's put this in perspective. This is an industry show, and more than a few I spoke to reported that it was a productive one at that. It's only by number and a miracle that anyone achieves decent sound at these places anyway.
PRODUCTS OF THE YEAR

Joint Loudspeakers of 1998:
Audio Artistry Beethoven ($28,000/system; reviewed by Shannon Dickson, Vol.20 No.11, November 1997), and Revel Ultima Gen ($7500–$9500/pair with stands but without subwoofer, depending on finish; reviewed by John Atkinson, Vol.21 No.10, October 1998).

Joint Amplification Components of 1998:

Joint Digital Source of 1998:

Analog Source of 1998:
Simon Yorke Designs Series 7 Analogue Disc Transcription System ($10,000, reviewed by Michael Fremer, Vol.21 No.6, June 1998).

Accessory of 1998:

Accessory of 1998: Sennheiser HD600 headphones, accepted by John C. Falcone.

Stereophile, April 1999
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drew a pair of the spectacular-looking 909 monoblocks, which ring the register at $73k/pair. Fortunately, Burmester is making available the less expensive Top and Basic lines in the US this year.

mbl, another perennial European contender, played their unique Radialstrahler omnidirectional speakers powered by a full line of their top-ring components, including the massive 9010C power amp and 6010C preamp.

Going further afield, we visited the always high-tech Accuphase installation. They were auditioning a prototype Sony DS13 transport playing directly into an Accuphase 1DC-300 digital preamp equipped with a DSD decoding module. Power was provided by a spiffy "little" class-A 50Wpc stereo amplifier called the A-50V, which goes out the door for $14,995. It features superb build quality and real-time digital power readouts on the front panel. Back in the US of A, Conrad-Johnson showed the first integrated amp to carry the Premier badge, the 150CA. Lew Johnson explained that the 150W control amplifier was designed to exploit the integrated format rather than just keep costs down. It's priced at $4995 and enters a robust market for quality integrated amps. Pass Labs was a beehive of activity, with further iterations of the new X-series amplifiers. The stereo X150 at $4k joins the stereo X350 and X600/X1000 monoblocks, which range in price from $9k to $24k/pair. Among other products, the X0 dual-mono, three-chassis line-level preamplifier made its debut at $8k.

Krell Industries was on hand with a finalized version of the MRA, the Master Reference Amplifier. These humongous monoblocks, each weighing more than 700 lbs, feature the latest in Krell power-transfer technology: CAST™, or Current Audio Signal Transmission. In nature, water doesn’t flow uphill; and using current-mode topology, low-impedance signals don’t have to push their way through high-impedance loads within the amp, or from component to component. The list of features built into the non-compromise MRA would be longer than this report — and, of course, you’ll have to pay dearly for them. Expect a pair of MRAs to set you back around $120k. They are awesome to regard.

Mark Levinson was busy showing horizons of exquisite journalists their new No.32 Reference preamplifier. Its modular design renders it largely future-proof, and Madrigal feels it will set a new standard for preamplifier design and implementation. The price of the two-chassis, dual-mono unit, without phono stage, will be around $15k. All the control and power supply circuitry is in the upper of the two chassis, the signal circuitry in the lower. They also had a brace of huge No.33 monoblocks with their top plates popped off to encourage journalist droolage at $35k/pair. And it was announced that they’ve revamped the entire 300 amplifier series — 125 to 350Wpc for between $5500 and $9500.

Chord Electronics had a visually and aurally pleasing installation featuring their CPA 3200E preamplifier and SPM 1200C third-generation switch-mode power supply amplifiers. Julius Siksnis of Audire was making waves with the Diffir 5 preamp and Parlando MOSFET power amp. He was also showing the New Monarch, a $25k dual-mono audio fashion statement that resembled a miniature tower from a castle! It features two 1.5kVA toroidal transformers, 216,000µF of storage bypassed with polypropylene caps, and a “dual complementary high-current” NEXUS power supply. The device is fully balanced from input to output, and makes use of 80 hand-matched, high-speed, wide-bandwidth (50MHz) bipolar output devices. The New Monarch in its stereo guise, with silver corner posts and faceplate, makes 200 class-A watts into 8 ohms.

But Siriusly, folks. Take my importer — please. (badaboom) Allen Perkins of Immedia has added the Sirius® [that’s how it’s spelled] line of Danish-made electronics to his stable. The $6k dual-mono D200 power amplifier features advanced modular construction and a special MOSFET output device powerful enough to churn out 200 watts per channel using a single pair per side!

Wadia was featuring one of the few amplifiers that is not an amplifier. Their 790 PowerDAC uses a “revolutionary patented process” to convert digital signals directly into high-power analog signals with which to drive the speakers directly. This drastically simplifies the entire signal path, replacing conventional preamps and power amps and keeping the signal in the digital domain until just before the speakers. Wadia describes the PowerDAC as a D/A converter with variable power. It uses the same basic architecture as their existing Decoding Computers, but adds the analog output circuitry to drive the speakers. The output section uses high-current MOSFETs and no global feedback. Large inductor-input power supplies provide huge power reserves, and twice as much rejection of AC line noise as conventional supplies. A stereo pair comprises 10 power transformers, 18 power inductors, over 600,000µF of storage capacitance, and 52 stages of regulation! Frankly, the PowerDAC was impressive as hell. The price is impressive too — somewhere in the $50k range.

In a similar vein, TacT Audio of Denmark was pleasing visitors with their Audio Millennium system. “The direct digital link from CD to loudspeaker, the world’s first true digital audio power amplifier.” The $9800 TacT employs a PWM amplification stage to amplify digital signals and couple them directly to the speaker without conversion into the analog domain. The TacT Millennium and RCS22 Digital Room Correction System are the result of a joint research project between Tocatta Technology, an independent Danish research team, and NAD Electronics. The TacT is based on what’s called PCM-to-PWM EQUIBIT™ technology. A unique digital-processor circuit directly controls the power-output devices with digital pulses. There’s no analog feedback or signal processing at any stage, and its output is roughly equivalent to 150Wpc. At the last show I found the presentation rather bright, but this time around I was officially Agape at the wonderful sound. TacT is going places.
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Kevin Halverson is the founder and guiding hand behind 10-year-old Muse Electronics, a company renowned for its affordable line of high-quality digital front-ends, solid-state amplifiers, preamps, and powered subwoofers. The 38-year-old Halverson has developed a well-deserved reputation as one of the leading engineers in high-end audio, and as one of the few equally adept at analog and digital design. For the past two years he has been a key figure in the technical development of disc authoring, as well as recording and playback hardware, for 24-bit/96kHz Advanced Audio Discs. Halverson also designed the original Universal PS interface, and has worked with fellow Digital Axiom Corp. principals Jeff Kalt and Mike Nadelhofer to refine this interface into a robust solution for two-box DVD-Audio communication. I caught up with him in early November '98.

Shannon Dickson: Just under a year ago, at the 1998 Consumer Electronics Show, the official launch of the Advanced Audio Disc Group caught audiophiles, high-end manufacturers, and mainstream audio companies by surprise. What factors inspired this small band of high-end entrepreneurs to take the lead in developing high-resolution software and hardware for a two-channel audio format based on DVD-Video?

Kevin Halverson: For me, the major inspiration was the very nature of DVD itself. I'd been following the developments of this technology since
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1995, I learned early on of the true versatility of this format, and was convinced that it could provide the perfect high-end playback medium.

In May 1997 I was approached by Michael Hobson and Mike Grantham of Classic Records about the viability of producing high-performance two-channel recordings using the video portion of the DVD specification. I was already in conversation with Chesky Records about a similar project, and told Classic I'd be more than happy to help with their efforts as well. In September '97 I approached Jeff Kalt of Resolution Audio to assist with the ever-increasing engineering burden. Jeff and I had worked together on a number of projects in the past, and I knew that the addition of his unique skills would be essential to completing the project in time for their CES launch. Though there were many other contributors whose work resulted in the Advanced Audio Disc format, I would be remiss if I didn't mention Charles Hansen of Ayre Acoustics and Michael Nadolny of Resolution Audio, both of whose contributions were essential to the outcome.

At the post-CES-'98 wrap-up meeting, it was decided that we would form a working group under CEMA [the Consumer Electronics Manufacturers' Association]. This became the Advanced Audio Disc Group. At this meeting I agreed to act as technical chairman of the group. Over the past year we've added a growing list of key members in addition to those I just mentioned, such as Meridian, Madrigal, Theta, Conrad-Johnson, Bel Canto, CAL, MSB, and Cardas, to name a few.

**Dickson:** Clearly, the major conglomerates laid the fundamental DVD groundworks. However, you folks have had to innovate on so many fronts simultaneously to make hi-rez audio a reality. Describe some of the milestones during the past year in the development of 24-bit/96kHz discs, and what issues led to the formation of Digital Axiom Corporation.

**Halverson:** One of the interesting aspects of DVD technology is the sheer number of companies involved. The original 10 core companies—Matsushita, Warner Bros., Toshiba, etc.—worked together to develop a new optical storage format to replace the aging CD. It's obvious that we all should acknowledge their work; without it, our Advanced Audio Disc effort could not have come about.

Just as with the DVD consortium, I realized that we would require a team effort. This led to my recruiting efforts resulting in the formation of our work group. Without a large number of both hardware and software manufacturers getting involved, we couldn't have reached the "critical mass" necessary to ensure the success of the Advanced Audio Disc format.

Over the course of time, a number of technical hurdles arose that required the creation of unique solutions. I needed to develop key pieces of hardware to accomplish our goal. We needed a new interface, a high-performance A/D converter, storage capacity capable of handling the high data rates we were using, along with many pieces of software to control the entire process. In a number of meetings during and after HI-FI '98, the need to form a new entity to facilitate these critical projects became apparent. This led to the creation of Digital Axiom Corporation, or D.A.C., founded by Michael Nadolny, Jeff Kalt, and myself.

D.A.C. is a solution provider specifically targeting DVD-based technologies required by high-end and mainstream companies. D.A.C. has a number of unique capabilities geared toward both the hardware and software aspects of DVD. For instance, we offer a 24-bit/96kHz, programmable DSP digital filter and the Universal PS interface system, all in the form of ready-made potted modules. In addition, substantial capital investment in equipment and technology, such as a fully equipped authoring facility, gave D.A.C. the unique opportunity to be involved at every step of the creative process.

With more than 50 software titles as of Christmas '98, and hardware products supplied to over a dozen high-end playback manufacturers to date, I feel that our efforts have really paid off. When you add the fact that all Advanced Audio Discs play in all the video DVD players manufactured by the mainstream electronic giants, there's a very substantial installed, and growing, base that can benefit from D.A.C. products.

**Dickson:** That brings up the question of the hour. There appears to be confusion in the industry about the compatibility between audio discs based on the DVD-Video format, future DVD-Audio discs conforming to the newly released version of the specification, existing CD libraries, and DVD movies. Where do your eight transport and 296 processor [see review elsewhere in this issue] and the new crop of comparable hardware from other high-end firms fit into this scenario?

**Halverson:** DVD, or Digital Versatile Disc, is just that: a versatile format. In its current form, known as the Video Specification, DVD already contains the provisions for a high-resolution audio-only format. All DVDs use a directory structure similar to that in a computer. At the root of the disc are two major branches: one for video, known as the video title set, and one for audio, the audio title set. The file structures under each share similar characteristics, with the major distinction being the allowed data rates.

The maximum sustained data rate for any DVD is 9.6Mbps. The video subdirectory, or title set, allows a maximum of 6.144Mbps for audio content. In the audio subdirectory, accessible only from discs conforming to the DVD-Audio spec, the entire 9.6Mbps can be allocated to audio content. The reason for this distinction in data rates is that the pure audio format has no video capabilities.

There are two major driving forces behind the audio-only format. First, by the elimination of any video capability, a lower-cost player (such as a portable) can be produced. The second incentive comes from the multichannel community.
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With the entire datastream available for audio content, more channels are possible. What’s important to understand here is that there is little distinction between DVD-Audio and DVD-Video discs. Data can be allocated and stored in discs conforming to either the audio or video formats in a manner that allows either type of player to play the disc. For instance, the 6.144Mbps data rate of the video file system alone is easily sufficient for either two channels of 24-bit/96kHz audio, or six channels of 20-bit/48kHz Linear PCM. I’ve had conversations with many individuals, consumers and industry people alike, who want to “wait for the specification” before making any long-term decisions. These same people have asked me if I felt that 24-bit/96kHz would be the format. This very question shows a basic misunderstanding: there is not, nor will there ever be, “the specification” for DVD. By its versatile nature, many different possibilities exist under the same, compatible DVD structure. Our use of the video spec for 24-bit/96kHz two-channel recordings and playback hardware is just one of many possible options. In the end, it’s the content providers who will decide how to use both the bandwidth and capacity of these discs.

Dickson: If the quantity and quality of DVD software we’re apt to see depends on how the content providers choose to use these possibilities, what are some of the key issues and likely scenarios you see for the immediate future of high-resolution audio?

Halverston: Considering that all DVD playback equipment sold to date is video-capable, content providers will optimize their software for these pieces of equipment as their first priority. Furthermore, the number of two-channel recordings available in record-company archives dwarfs the handful of multichannel material. I think it’s clear that it’ll be a number of years before the recording industry learns how to make proper multichannel recordings, and actually begins to build a substantial catalog of desirable titles. While I look forward to the added realism this should provide, I—like most audiophiles—have the bulk of my investment in two-channel playback hardware and software.

When audio-only DVD players start to appear near the end of 1999, the number of video-capable DVD playback devices sold will be between 6 and 8 million units. The same individuals who purchased these video players are the natural customer base for any audio-formatted DVDs. None of the major labels in the recording industry has gotten to the size they are by making bad decisions; everyone involved knows these statistics. So I expect them to include, as a bare minimum, a stereo version of the program material in the video title set of either a DVD-Audio disc or DVD-Video disc, so as not to orphan this large installed base of loyal DVD customers. It should also be noted that all DVD players will play CDs as well. For the first time, we have a format change that allows everyone to use their current investment in software.

Consider the recent DVD products introduced by the major consumer-electronics manufacturers. Nearly everyone proudly proclaims “24-bit/96kHz” audio capability on their front panels. That’s certainly not there for movie soundtracks!

A recent development by Meridian, called MLP [Meridian Lossless Packing], provides a number of new possibilities. MLP is a scheme that allows a substantial increase in usable bandwidth or data rate, and can be thought of as similar to the computer industry’s Zip/UnZip process. Data is compressed prior to being placed on the disc, and uncompressed just prior to playback. Since this is a lossless system, there’s no performance penalty.

Dickson: MLP is a much more powerful tool than many realize for getting the most from DVD-Audio, but what about its use with DVD-Video-based discs? Do you see any applications there?

Halverston: While MLP was originally intended for use within the audio subdirectory of a disc, its greatest advantage may be on the video side. The previous barrier of 6.144Mbps can be broken with concurrent video content! This leads to some exciting possibilities, many of which D.A.C. is exploring. Right now [early November ’98], we’re working on a music-video project that will provide a first test of MLP within the framework of the video format. We expect to demonstrate pronounced improvements to video quality that are possible with the use of MLP-encoded audio.

This involves “stealthing,” or hiding, MLP audio in a datastream originally intended for high-quality PCM audio, along with full-motion video. This will allow us to improve the video playback by increasing its effective data rate without compromising the 24-bit/96kHz audio quality on these high-resolution music videos.

Dickson: You mentioned earlier that Digital Axion developed a sophisticated A/D converter and authoring system for hi-rez DVD work. Share with us some of the challenges you’ve encountered while working with this new format.

Halverston: When I started to look at commercial products from the recording industry to handle our projects, I discovered that the very CD format that we were trying to replace was proving to be a barrier to my goals. The fundamental problem was that the limited resolution of the CD medium has led to associated recording and playback hardware that was “good enough for CD,” but proved insufficient for high-resolution audio.

In the end, it’s the content providers who will decide how to use both the bandwidth and capacity of DVDs.

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resolution DVD work. Clearly, we needed better tools for each step of this project. This caused me to reevaluate each piece in the recording chain, for we now had a playback medium that would not only justify, but demand, better performance upstream. A kind of renaissance in recording technology has occurred since then.

This has led to my renewed interest in the recording industry, and will likely result in a number of products to facilitate the growth of DVD technology. I started my career in professional audio back in 1978, then left that industry in the late '80s because of what I saw as a lack of concern for quality. Now, ironically, DVD has given me a reason to return to the pro world while continuing to serve our high-end base.

**Digital Axiom Corporation's Universal I²S Interface**

The Universal PS interface used as the primary link in the Muse Model Eight and 296 DVD/CD system is produced by Digital Axiom Corp. (D.A.C.). It may be the best hope the High End has of ensuring a two-box solution for high-resolution audio (i.e., up to 24-bit/192kHz) that simultaneously meets all of the practical, legal, and performance requirements for the robust transmission of stereo and multichannel audio. D.A.C. recently finished the interface specification for licensing, and is offering potted, ready-made transmitter and receiver modules to companies who prefer to not roll their own. The Universal PS interface, originally designed by Muse's Kevin Halverson to connect a CD transport to a processor with inherently low jitter, underwent extensive further development by fellow D.A.C. principals Jeff Kalt and Michael Nadolny to meet the needs of DVD-based audio.

An PS connection sends the critical system clocks and audio data between transport and processor via separate shielded wires, eliminating the jitter-prone bi-phase encoding and decoding required when an S/PDIF or AES/EBU signal is transmitted by serial cable. D.A.C.'s version of the PS connection uses a 13W3 video cable comprising three separate 75 ohm coax and five 110 ohm twisted-pair lines, all sheathed in a single cable jacket. They also offer a version using a smaller-footprint HDB15 (SVGA) connector for those products with less back-panel real estate.

The Universal PS protocol provides for two primary performance levels, the lower of which maintains the master clock in the transport and transmits it differentially to a slaved processor, while the highest, "master-mode" performance level relocates the master clock to the processor and slaves the transport, essentially eliminating interface jitter.

**Dickson:** The Universal PS interface is justifiably getting serious attention now that you've finished the final specification and worked out all the details [see sidebar]. Since D.A.C. now offers the interface via an attractive licensing agreement, or as completed modules for interested manufacturers, where do things now stand with the adoption of this interface as a high-end encryption/connection alternative to FireWire for two-box DVD-Audio?

**Halverson:** The future of FireWire [IEEE-1394] is dependent on concurrent developments on a number of technology fronts. Anyone who has investigated the requirements of FireWire inevitably comes away with the impression of a work in progress. We're a number of years away from a truly successful FireWire scheme. A second aspect of IEEE-1394,
which should be of interest to the audiophile community, is one of performance. It’s not at all clear that the low jitter requirements of 24-bit recordings can be met while allowing all the flexibility mandated by FireWire.

By contrast, the Universal PS interface is fully developed and ready for market. We have proven that all the legal, practical, and performance considerations for consumers, the recording industry, and hardware manufacturers have been met. With the inclusion of MLP and multichannel support, we see a likely adoption of Universal PS by the mass market, just as we’ve seen a major burst of interest lately in the high-end segment.

Dickson: The degree of refinement and design innovation in your Model Eight transport, and particularly in the 296 processor, herald a new era of music reproduction in the home, I feel. What are your product plans for the near future? Do you view 24-bit/192kHz consumer-level playback as a viable next step, or do you think continued development of other associated components, along with further refinements in 24-bit/96kHz systems, will likely satisfy even the most stringent audiophile demands?

Halverson: The entire process has been a reinvigorating one for me. We finally have a signal source that justifies development of genuinely better components. I’ve already begun incorporating much of what I’ve learned developing the 296 into an update of our Model Three preamplifier. I also expect that we’ll see both the recording and playback industries reconsider the quality of the products they’re offering. Everything from the microphone to the loudspeaker needs to be improved to take full advantage of 24/96 recordings.

We’re just now nearing completion of a single-box DVD solution that will incorporate many of the technologies found in our transport and converter. On the recording side, once the increased storage capacity is widely available, I anticipate most studios will eventually migrate to 192kHz as the preferred archiving sample rate. Furthermore, D.A.C. will be developing the downsampling technology necessary to preserve the performance of 192kHz recordings within the 96kHz footprint, since that will likely remain the practical level for high-resolution DVD releases. Again, I expect MLP will play a key role in this process.

Dickson: So you see 192kHz sampling primarily for recording and archiving, but not for encoding on discs in order to get the best playback results? I suppose music downsampling to 96kHz from 192kHz will sound about as good as it gets without wasting valuable space on DVDs. How about multichannel bandwidth allocations?

Halverson: Most definitely, much of the sonic benefits from recording at these higher sampling rates is due to minimizing the nonlinearities generated by steep anti-aliasing filters just prior to an A/D converter. Material encoded at 192kHz and then downsampled to 96kHz will preserve essentially all of the sonic benefits heard from 192kHz directly. Material encoded at 192kHz and then downsampled to 96kHz will preserve essentially all of the sonic benefits heard from 192kHz directly.

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

Each listing—in alphabetical order within classes—is followed by a brief description of the product's sonic characteristics and a code indicating the *Stereophile* Volume and Issue in which that product's report appeared. Relevant reviews that appeared in our companion *Stereophile Guide to Home Theater* are indicated by "SGHT No.1"; i.e., the component was reviewed in the *Stereophile Guide to Home Theater*, Volume 1 Number 1, which was published in December 1994. (Vol.1 No.2 of the Guide was published in September '95; Vol.2 Nos.1-4 in 1996, Vol.3 Nos.1-4 in 1997, Vol.4 Nos.1-10, Issues 11-20, in 1998, Issues 21 through 30 in 1999.) Please note that dedicated home-theater products are no longer included in this listing but are part of *Stereophile Guide to Home Theater's "Recommended Components,"* the most recent version of which was published in that magazine's March/April 1999 edition (Issue 23, Vol.5 No.3).

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

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

MENDED

How recommendations are determined

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

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

The prices indicated are those current at the time the listing was compiled (February 1999). We cannot guarantee that any of these prices will be the same by the time this issue of *Stereophile* appears in print.
In loudspeaker design, state-of-the-art is never static; it is inevitable that the best of tomorrow will surpass the best of today. In the deep bass, state-of-the-art is seldom realized; even in the best rooms, every placement is a compromise.

The VANDERSTEEN Model 5 is the only loudspeaker with adjustable, active multi-band low-frequency room compensation for perfect bass in every room. It is the only fully modular loudspeaker, completely upgradable in your home using just a phillips screwdriver and soldering pencil. The Model 5s are built to be the best today and engineered to be the best tomorrow.

Call, write, or visit us on the web for complete information and the name of your nearest carefully selected Model 5 dealer. www.vandersteen.com

No: It’s Physics.
(cited values of GOERTZ AG2)

Extreme Low Series Inductance. 0.020 microH/m
- eliminates high frequency roll-off.

Impedance Match. 2.5 ohms
- eliminates ringing and signal reflections.

Low Loop Resistance. 7.2 mohms/m
- for a powerful bass and mid-range.

Solid Ribbon Conductors. 0.010 x 0.75”
- eliminates strand interaction microphony.

Micro Thin Dielectric. 0.0012”
- minimizes stored charges.
- for a dead silent background and a fast burn-in.

The signal travels through GOERTZ cables at the same speed as in all other cables. No garden hoses. No fire hoses. No strange boxes. No Snake Oil.

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Where we have found a product to perform much better than might be expected from its price, we have drawn attention to it with a $ sign next to its listing. We also indicate, with a ©, products that have been on this list in one incarnation or another since the "Recommended Components" listing in Vol.19 No.4 (April 1996). Longevity in a hi-fi component is rare enough that we think it worth noting (although it can also indicate that the attention of design engineers has moved elsewhere).

A note on editorial style is in order. When a passage is quoted from the original review, the past tense is used. But when the comment is taken from a more recent private communication from a reviewer, the present tense is used. For example: "Sounded so good I had to cry," said JA of the original version of the Symphonic Bombast A-123 in his review. ST demurs, however, saying that the current Mk.VIa makes his reference speakers "sound like the woofers are disconnected!" We are not sympathetic to letter's complaining that the Symphonic Bombast A-123 that we recommended heartily two years ago, no longer makes it into "Recommended Components." Where deletions are made, we endeavor to give reasons (there are always reasons). But remember: Deletion of a component from this list does not invalidate a buying decision you have made.


**Turntables**

A
Forsell Air Force One Mk II: $30,000 ©
Stereophile's two-class, air-bearing Swedish "table with thread drive and parallel-tracking, air-bearing tonearm. JS enthused over its 3-D image solidity, tight, deep bass, super-plush midrange, and "enormous palpability factor." Yet similar Forsell Air Reference ($18,500) lacks the air-bearing Fleevholt drive system; it uses an internal motor and a sintered-iron belt. (Vol.17 No.7)

Immediacy RPM-2: $4995
"This table has a way with rhythm and pace that is impossible not to notice," observed WR. "Images are incredibly stable, which does indeed mean that the soundstage is huge — not to mention filled with detail. Bass was deep and dynamics were spectacular. As I listened I kept muttering, 'This is big, it's sooo big.' And it was. Turntable must be ordered for a specific tonearm. Price is with acrylic base; upgraded metallic base adds $1000. (Vol.20 No.9)"

Linn Sondek LP12 with Linger power supply: $3045-$3395 depending on finish. $555
Compared with the Valhalla model, the Linges-equipped version minimizes the LP12's propensity for a slightly fat midrange, subjectively extending the low frequencies by another octave. The Lingo upgrade also costs $140, and for $200 the Lingo adds the effect of the support. Carbins bearing/suspension, now fitted as standard, costs $595 including labor as an upgrade kit, and further extends and tightens the turntable's voice, leading to a Class A rating, according to JA, and LC (who loves the Carbins) adds "with MCJ. Though LC feels that the LP12/Carbins loses a certain something compared with the original version, he still concluded that "the LP12 ranks as one of the finest high-end audio products on the market today." A 'deep, more proficient bass,' enhances LP with the Carbins mount, adding that what stunned him was "the extent to which surface noise receded into insignificance." Superbly low measured rumble and excellent speed stability reinforce the feeling of maximum musical involvement offered by this classic belt-drive/mechanical good isolation from shock and vibrations. While the feels that does offer the greatest degree of vibration suppression within in the vinyl disc, what absorption it does offer is uniform with frequency. Despite vibrations with other decks, JA remains true to the basic design he has used now for more than 20 years. (Vol.14 No.1, Vol.16 No.12, Vol.17 No.5, Vol.19 No.9)

Naim Armageddon LP12 turntable power supply: $1250
A $3000 low-profile transformer designed to drive the Lingo LP12 basic turntable while isolating it from powerline noise. WR was enthusiastic, citing the improved pace and energetic presentation of the music over his Valhalla LP12. "The snap and surge of the rhythms that propel the song along seems better served. However, this cause at the cost of ultimate bass extension — a tradeoff that many would not undertake willingly (JA, for one). Highly recommended—MC, agrees with LP that the Armageddon LP12 is a Class A turntable — but auditions before committing your Lingo to surgery. (Vol.19 No.2)

Oracle Delphi Mk V: $3300 $55
"Superbly machined and finished," says MF. "An inviting and rich-sounding, with improved focus and fine resolution of low-level details." He also found "the table's high-frequency performance was smooth yet detailed, indicative of outstanding speed stability and effective energy transfer from the motor to the platter. Turbo power supply adds $550. (Vol.20 No.2)

Simon Yorke Designs Series 7 Precision Analog Disc Turntable System: $18,000
This built-to-order belt-drive, suspensionless turntable is MF's current reference — and that of the Library of Congress. MF: "The complete system ... is a formidable analog playback system, a masterful work of visual and sonic art that's hard to find. But as a breeze, it's a major, major success — it ability balanced some picture that combines deep, tightly focused bass ... with extended, detailed edge-and-etch-free high frequencies devoid of brightness or exaggeration. ... There's nothing "in-f' about the Yorke runner; it just sounds musically 'right' whether handed wind reel or Hedder. Stenfors's "Analogue Component of 1998." Package including Active Vibraplane: $11,500. (Vol.21 No.6)

Spohn's La Luce: $18,500 with Spöh tonearm
This 'table's elegant clear-lacquer and stainless-steel form will keep audiophiles "dead in their tracks," said JS, and provide "sparkling, plentiful, articulate sound." The Spöh tonearm allows precise adjustments of inner-gear, arm-length, and VTA. Both turntable and motor should be placed on their own solid platform; once set up there, "there's nothing to it... just add and go to use." (Vol.22 No.10)

VPI TNT Mk IV: $6400 with air suspension, flywheel, SDS, new bearing assembly
Modular design allows owners of older models to upgrade easily and inexpensively, or less the inspection wars with the TNT Jr. and upgrade to the same assemblies slightly on the warm side of neutrality, averaged MF, but "big, full, weighty, and rich." The massive 'table's speed, reliability, and ultra-low-noise floor "Boated the sound so far beyond the reality of a stereo in a garage, it liberated it from the mechanical world to the living, breathing real
The only choice

by Giovanni Mariani

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The Perfection... ORACLE

GO Turntable Continues!
The turntable of today comes dressed in a wide variety of materials, from classic wood to modern steel and composite materials. The choice of material can significantly affect the performance and aesthetics of the turntable.

**Phono Accessories**

- **Rega Planar 9**: $2975
  - Refined improvement rung upon the Planar 3. MF praised its lively, exciting presentation, finding it superior to the Planar 3 in terms of focus, bass extension, and neutrality. With a high-sensitivity suspension, the Rega 9 offers excellent low-bass definition and detail. The enclosed dustcover is an excellent feature.

- **Stereophile, No.10**: $2995
  - The Valhalla: a linear tracking arm designed for use with a variety of cartridges. It offers excellent stability and low noise output.

- **Ekos S**: $2995
  - A balanced turntable with an extremely low noise floor and excellent tracking accuracy.

**Turntables**

- **Clearglass/Souther Tri-Quartet Improved**: $2500
  - The Tri-Quartet is a high-performance turntable that offers excellent tracking and low noise output.

- **Clearglass/Souther Tri-Quartet**: $2500
  - The Tri-Quartet offers exceptional tracking and low noise output, making it ideal for high-resolution sources.

- **VPI TNT Jr.**: $3000
  - The TNT Jr. is a high-performance turntable that offers excellent tracking and low noise output.

- **VPI TNT Jr.**: $3000
  - The TNT Jr. offers excellent tracking and low noise output, making it ideal for high-resolution sources.

- **VPI JMW Memorial Tonearm**: $2300
  - A high-performance tonearm that offers exceptional tracking and low noise output.

- **VPI Classic 2**: $2250
  - The Classic 2 offers excellent tracking and low noise output, making it ideal for high-resolution sources.

- **VPI Classic 2**: $2250
  - The Classic 2 offers exceptional tracking and low noise output, making it ideal for high-resolution sources.

**Tonearms**

- **Ekos S**: $2995
  - A balanced turntable with an extremely low noise floor and excellent tracking accuracy.

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  - A balanced turntable with an extremely low noise floor and excellent tracking accuracy.

**Cables**

- **Clearglass/Souther Tri-Quartet**: $2500
  - The Tri-Quartet offers exceptional tracking and low noise output, making it ideal for high-resolution sources.

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midbass exaggeration that may be part of the spreading warmth above this range, and which gives this arm its moving midrange." WP admires the arm, and notes that the reference arm does not see its ultimate incarnation yet. HD says of the 12" version, "flavors the original's already low distortion. The background is blacker and the arm seems to blot an infinite well of inner and lower-detail levels. The total balance is more neutral, but combined with the TNT III or IV, it small and inviting." Another arm availability might be considered.

Koetsu Rosseau Signature Platinum: $5500

This handmade, "highly communicative" arm, used on a wide variety of arms, silver-clad six-micron copper voicing. In the words of JS, it is "a remarkable tonal signature, a reference arm that has that special voice to it." WP said it is "perfectly Beautifully" and "very much like what today's requirements for linearity, extension, air, focus, palpability, and openness." Very fine, if you can afford the "considerable" $2200. WP refurnished: $1800. Koetsu Uno: $4000

Another good-looking arm in the Koetsu line, with six-micron copper and a price that makes potential buyers stocked at least twice. But, as WP said, those who "value image solidity and three-dimensionality, harmonic richness, lucidity, and total opulence... will gravitate toward the Koetsu—Luis, yet reveling, luxuriously warm." WP refurnished: $1800. Koetsu Linn: $3950


delusions

Triplanar IV Ultrasone no longer manufactured.

Phono Cartridges

AudioQuest 7000 Feb 7:250 $750

This, more costly replacement — with boric cantilever and non-ceramic body — for the excellent-sounding 7000 is less dry-sounding and not quite as "razor-sharp" notes, WP. MF: He favored the reference low-end voicing, richness, and sonic luxury. "Big, generous, not transmitting, and possesses of an almost 1.0mV output, "while maintaining... resolution of inner detail." However, he cautions, "more midrange liquidness and sense of 'quiet' background [is available] from other (more expensive) cartridges." Correct Wang: "In the past, $1800 arms have overwhelmed the musical integrity," WP cautions. They could probably go on for hours. Now replaced by Graham Engineering; current Supreme version uses Graham's Special Silver Wire. Trade-up of old Tenor for $1600. (Vol.19 No.7) van den Hul Frog: $2500

"(More) expensive cartridges are going to hard their joint with this one," proclaims WP. The $2500/moving-coil arm, "a healthy one, not transmitted, or compromised," WP explains, "in any way... turns down my preamp substantially while maintaining high output levels, and crescendos and other climaxes gained considerable thrust. Lower the noise floor mean level I could hear further into the recordings as well." He estimates that 2500 hours use is enough to "tune up" the arm and that's it. He adds: "I've operated this for $500. (Vol.20 No.7) van den Hul Grasshopper IV: $5000 $3800

Now distributed in the US by StanLog Importers, the hard-built Grasshopper IV differs significantly from earlier 'hoppers and incorporates AJ van den Hul's latest thoughts on cartridge design. Changes significantly during break-in, after which it is not as analytical-sounding as the Sonopon Line 8G, but "balanced more toward the relaxed, Real, and musical," decried JS. He adds: "The arm forms a very wide and envelopingly deep soundstage." WP reviewed: $1800. (Vol.18 No.7) Wilson Benesch Anolog: $3800

"You deserve a vernal thrill for this kind of money," WP declares. JS. "You should find yourself exploring heretofore unknown nuances, even in the most familiar of recordings. That's the pleasure of analog, and that's the pleasure of the Analog..." Magic touch were to die for, the highs sweet and beckoning, but quick and sparkly too. The bass was altogether acoustic and "vibrant," JS concluded. "I have heard better at the price, and it significantly outperforms the $1500-2500 cartridges I've auditioned." (Vol.21 No.2) Wilson Benesch Carlton: $2800

Low-output moving-coil cartridge uses a carbon-fiber shell. MF found the Carbon "a fast, very detailed transductor..." and very well designed. The $2000 View and Sound: "Terrestrial vertebrate..." He added: ESL's "it offers tremendous performance at a fairly reasonable price..." Win Research SME-10 Super MC: $2500

Wilson Benesch 90: $2000

"This arm is a very special one," WP said. "It's very well designed..." Yet he wasn't comfortable with its "(perhaps overly) vivid tonal color or ultra-fast perspective..." He found it "easy to adjust to. A careful audition is recommended." (Vol.19 No.12) Wilson Research SME-10 Super MC: $2500

"It is a very special one," WP said. "It's very well designed..." Yet he wasn't comfortable with its "(perhaps overly) vivid tonal color or ultra-fast perspective..." He found it "easy to adjust to. A careful audition is recommended." (Vol.19 No.12) Wilson Research SME-10 Super MC: $2500

"It is a very special one," WP said. "It's very well designed..." Yet he wasn't comfortable with its "(perhaps overly) vivid tonal color or ultra-fast perspective..." He found it "easy to adjust to. A careful audition is recommended." (Vol.19 No.12) Goldring Excel VX: $955 $395

"I immediately liked the Excell's warm, relaxed, yet detailed sound," said MF. "It did an outstanding job of capturing the acoustic envelope — the spatial context surrounding instruments and voices on live recordings..." "Very engaging..." WP also commented. He said that "the Excell has a superb performance at any price, and a real bargain at $955." (Vol.20 No.4) Grado Reference: $1200 $600

"The finest fixed-coil cartridge I've ever heard, and one of the finest-sounding cartridges I've ever heard — especially in the midrange — regardless of design," said WP. But it has some quirks: it was hard to optimally adjust, and can be susceptible to motor noise. Not as detailed as refined as the better move-coils, but what it did in the middle was so pure and right, and what it did on the bottom so dynamic and note-perfect (if not the last word in bass extension), I found myself listening to record after record after I should have stopped..." Just misses Class A by not having the top-end resolution and air of the best MCs, but out-stands all of them and doesn't require a headamp," he adds. (Vol.21 No.3) Grado Reference Sonata: $500

"Represents a leap of performance beyond the Hammond, and in all ways at what an expensive MC can do." WP, and JR. "Improved detail, transient speed, and decay, and improved sound was very nice..." No cartridge reproduces a female voice better than this... It may be difficult to rationalize spending much more for a better cartridge..." He added: "It competes with all but the best of today's moving-coils." On some turntables, hum may be audible at the end of records — check before buying. (Vol.21 No.6) van den Hul MC-10 Special: $1200

"Immediately distinguished itself... in one area: high-frequency purity and resolution," said MF. "The MC-10 offered the purest, most refined and resolved high frequencies, absolutely free of grain and grit. It was somewhat reminiscent of the high cost, but it"... too polite for rock, outstanding for classical and jazz." (Vol.21 No.3) Benz-Micro Glider: $750 $50

The actual process: The Glider paints, "LB effaced, "are so good they really give you a glimpse into the original event. Citing the cartridge's presentation of detail, pinpoint imaging, and almost physical presence, he did claim that some may find the midrange on the soft side of acceptability." Powerful stuff," he said of one night's audition: "sounding great..." WP tempered: $400. Wonder Class B. (Vol.19 No.8) Benz-Micro MC Gold: $350 $50

"A real smoothie," WP proclaimed. A luxurious top end and a great sense of liquidity were compromised somewhat, he felt, by compromised dynamics. (Vol.19 No.12)
Grado Reference Platinum: $300 SS

“The new Grado ‘sound’ is more neutral than the old,” JRTJ said. “Overall, the sound balance was natural and uniform, sore for a slightly midrange tightness... An extra-ordinary point in favor of the little stylus/diaphragm. On some turntables, hum may be audible at the end of records - check before buying.” (Vol.21 No.6)

Orthofon MC-15 Super Mk.II: $225 SS

“A real sleeper,” according to MF. “Offering very low internal noise - down to 0.0005% - a considerable improvement over the older copper wire version. Also, the relatively expensive $100 styling aid for cartridges that also is, it claimed, ultrasonically cleans the stylus. The record features blank, impressed metal that facilitate anti-skating adjustments—or, for linear-tracking arms, level. MF found it effective, especially when considering its price. “Wouldn’t be without it” concludes JS. (Vol.18 No.12)

DH Systems DHP-10 protractor: $39.95

Fiddle but accurate guide for setting cartridge tangency. J&H’s preferred alignment protractor. (NR)

Decca, Hunt-EEDA, Goldring, or Stabibrush carbon-fibre record brushes

Used properly (held with the brushes at a low angle against the approaching grooves and slowly slide off the record), these are the most effective dry record-cleaning devices available. (JGH disagrees, feeling that they leave the dust on the record.) No substitute for an occasional wet wash. (Vol.10 No.8)

Discwasher record brush

If you don’t have a record-cleaning machine, the 12W system will do a adequate job on relatively clean records, but wouldn’t recommend it for heavy-duty use. (Vol.12 No.10)

If you begin to accumulate lots of dust on your styli after cleaning your record with an older 12W brush, the brushes will soon outlive their usefulness or buy a new one. A high-torque turntable is required. (NR)

Express Music FM record brush “The Lift”: $99.95 (chrome), $119.95 gold-plated

Pricey mechanical device that lifts minor contaminants to record’s end. “Once I had all of the parameters properly adjusted, it worked flawlessly and reliably,” MF reports. “Although occasionally its tip -- getting it properly adjusted may well provide some heart-stopping moments as your turntable goes flying through the air.” (Vol.20 No.5)

Hi-Fi News & Record Review Test LP: $25

Although MF was frustrated by the engraving instructions, he couldn’t find an essential tool for analog setup, available from Acoustic Sounds. (Vol.20 No.1)

K-A-B SpeedStrobe Digital Phonograph Speed Readout: $90.95

Easily-to-use strobe disc simplifies precision adjustment of turntable speeds from 33 1/2 to all of the variations on “PR: “It just fantastic,” offered JS. “It looks cool, and it’s a snap to perfectly set the speed.” (Vol.19 No.2)

Power LP Cleaner: $32.50/1-oz bottle

This small bottle of Preco-frees cleaner is enough to treat 5 LPs. It’s been found to be quite effective, drops sufficient to very dirty, dust, and grime from garage-sale records, though he discovered that a subsequent wash with his VPI HW-17 was still required to reduce grunge noise to acceptable levels. “A worthwhile companion to LAST's wonderful Record Cleaner,” MF enthuses. (Vol.19 No.3)

Record Preserve: $36.50/2-oz bottle

Significantly improves the sound of even new records, and is claimed to make them last longer. A 2-oz bottle contains 60 treatments. (Vol.5 No.3)

LAST STYLAST Stylus Treatment: $27/1/2-oz bottle

Stylus treatment designed to reduce friction between grooves and phonograph cartridge. Some manufacturers caution against it, claiming it mutes the cantilever and affects the sound quality of the armature. One reader suggests applying treatment to brush rather than stylus, which would reduce the possibility of overrunning. MF has found STYLAST effective, but expresses concern over possible cartridge damage. (Vol.18 No.12)

Lyle Cartridges alignment tool: $19.95 SS

Inexpensive and very handy, this clever device of mirror has alignment markings and a spindle cutout. Slip it into place on your platter and use the classic two-point grid system to make sure everything’s aligned. The mirror is the trick — it allows you to sight the cartridge’s position against the reference marks themselves. “An essential tool,” declares W/P. (NR)

Nitty Grity Mini Pro 2 record-cleaning machine: $839

Nitty Grity 2.5Fi record-cleaning machine: $599

The Mini Pro is a stanmatics machine that cleans both turntables simultaneously. The 1.5 is identical to the 2.5 but substitutes black vinyl woodgrain for the latter’s genuine oak side panels. Instead of a vacuuming “atmos” as on the professional Keith Munks machine, the NG cleaner uses a vented slot. Cleaning is efficient and as good. Nitty Grity’s Pro, at a significantly lower price, though it takes twice as long, cleaning each side of an LP in turn. While the vacuum-cleaning Nitty Grity does a nearly equivalent job on dusty albums as its similarly priced VPI HW-16.6C, GS felt that the VPI’s hand-rolled “brush” did better with really dirty LPs than did NG’s velvet one. He found the effect of both was to produce a less colored, more detailed midband sound from LPs, as well as provide the expected reduction in surface noise. (Mini Pro, Vol.6 No.1; 2.5Fi, Vol.7 No.3; Vol.8 No.1; 1.5, Vol.7 No.5)

Nitty Grity Model 1 record-cleaning machine: $269 SS

Audio Advisor Record Doctor II: $200 SS

Both of these machines (the latter is manufactured for Audio Advisor by Nitty Grity) are manual units that offer the least-expensive way to effectively clean LPs. Record Doctor II differs from the original in that it has a roller bearing to make turning the LP easier when the vacuum cleaner motor is not in use. The system is designed to be used with a rolling-cartridge accessory — available for $17 including a K-A-B Acoustics-Electro-Acoustics, PO. Box 2922, Walsall, NJ 07060-2922 — which fits beneath the existing platter. The Nitty Grity 1D is also available as a rolling accessory 2.0 for $209. (NR)

QR/DMN Drill Bit Morse Mk.II XLR turntable mat: $90

R13 found this paper/cork mat (available in three thicknesses) to both reduce groove noise and increase detail resolution when used on his Linn/D Linn. ST had some initial trouble with death degras, and decided to build a machine to fit the turntable. He ended up building a machine similar to the one described in the magazine, but with some improvements. (Vol.19 No.1)

Shun Mark record clamp: $1800

The best record weight JS has used on his Forsell turntable “Sure sound.” Ridiculously expensive, however. (Vol.17 No.2)

The Disc Doctor’s Miracle Record Cleaner: $19.95/pint plus $5 S&H

MF’s favorite LP-cleaning stuff, in combination with the Orthofon brush and the VPI HW-16.6C, has cost MF around $100 in fluid costs $30/95 plus $8 S&H; a half gallon costs $49.95/10.50 plus S&H. LP brush costs $34.95/pair. Replacement pads for brushes cost $9.95 each. (Vol.20 No.3)

Thor Audio The Phono-Burn: $350

An MF fave. “Stories in phonos stage: and cuttx system for those who can’t wait, and especially for re-values of analog gear.” Just plug it into a CD player and your phono section, set the player on “repeat” for either the MM or MC/CD track, and let it cycle for a day or so. If the phono section is connected to your amplifier, it can also be used just as an amplifier. (Vol.21 No.10)

Townshend Audio Elite align gauge: $55

Plastic cartridge-alignment gauge that frustrated MF as an initial setup gauge, but he writes, "as a final diagnost..."
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Kalman Rubinson
*Stereophile*, Vol. 21 No. 7

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from a digital product... Imaging within the soundfield was corporeal, highly palpable, and presented with lots of body and presence. The upper midrange through the treble was even more liquid, and toning—even transparent and incisive—all at the same time[... its] acoustic, high-quality bass goes down quite low enough, then slightly bulges out in the very stary depths[... although] it could have been a touch tighter, but only a touch.

Bow Technologies ZZ-Eight: $750
"You can't live at all for it.,” MF said. “But, I thought during my time with the ZZ-Eight, you can still have plenty[... images] were focused and leveled front system,” says MF. “But, this is expensive. Nothing you can attainable with good analog. Especially impressive were the boundaries between images and the surrounding air. All in all, a mighty impressive performance with both HDCD and non-HDCD discs. Class A all the way.”

California Audio Labs CL-20 DVD/CD player: $2495
"The CL-20’s price is simply justified by its audio performance alone,” enthused RA, who appreciated it “superb tonal balance, transparency, and imaging,” and pronounced it “deserving” with 24/96 discs. JA felt that the ability to play both CDs and DVDs, hadn’t "compromised the CL-20’s performance as a CD player” but “a tough call,” sums up RA. "The CL-20 has the same professional view to what a player should be.” Audible details differences between the sound of the CL-20 and the JCS Elga are almost trivial. With 24/96 DSDs, they evaporate. On the other hand, it’s our responsibility to discern and describe these small differences.” So Class A for a DVD player, and borderline Class B for CD playback.

Linn Sondek CD12: $20,000
"Somewhere, this CD player just seems to exude the music—its very finely tuned CD player I’ve had in my system the longest,” says MF. “But, this is expensive. Maybe, it’s a same point, but a player good enough to drive more you than a bit a crazy. Its measurements were "about as good as I’ve seen from a CD player," understated JA. (Vol.22 No.2)

Mark Levinson No.39: $5995
Versatile CD player offers digital inputs (both ToLink and S/PDIF on RCA) and output, digital switching, and high-quality variable output in the analog domain. WP said it "reproduces music on the most excited level." He also was impressed by its" music background at a level" that was heard by audiophiles. "What I noticed most was being drawn into performances— hearing passion where it had not previously revealed itself to me,...I just didn’t think our current standard [for] get much better than this." (Vol.21 No.10)

Meridian 508A: $3995
"Detail, more of a sense of musician’s palpable presence,” coupled with "crystalline clarity" and "harmonic richness," was how ST summed up the 20-bit version of this English player’s sound. A Crystal delta-sigma DAC was used, minimizing the DAC’s operation in differential-digital mode to offer true 20-bit resolution, and also boosts improved noise-shaping SF traced its rock-stable images and analoglike sense of scale—"everything sounding so natural... harmonically rich, totally rich." He was also impressed by its "extremely musical" appearance, especially when used in conjunction with a preamp, and in the chain. "I was surprised by the Meridian’s slam and deep-bass extension," said the big boy. A basic remote control is supplied. Meridian’s System Remote costs $110. (Vol.17 No.12; Vol.19 No.6; Vol.21 No.5)

Naim CD 3.5: $2150
A “great player,” WP said. "One with no real weaknesses and some very attractive strengths.” [It allowed me] to hear far into the soundstage, but was not hyperrealistic in the way digital/analogue assume we say that—the midrange was transparent, diaphragm-like and flat was perfect. And the number of each instrument was equally rendered, both individually and in ensemble. Addition of FlatCap power supply ($750) improved performance "in ways that had me thinking this is really a great player even greater." (Vol.21 No.7)

Sonic Frontiers Transport 3: $6999
Sonic Frontiers Processor 3: $6999
SID was "surprised by this combo’s ‘standard-setting performance,'" enthused RA, which he readily endorsed as the “highest example of the CD art” he had heard when they were connected by the IS slantlink. He didn’t recommend the Transport 3 as a stand-alone unit, however, because its expensive and isn’t upgradeable to 1920 kHz. WP adds: "Used together, a Class A CD player for sure. But it takes up an awful lot of real estate, and once you get over the gee-whiz-grain appeal of that disc cover, its mechanical niceties as it opens and closes is like fingernails on a blackboard every time you play a CD. Tone.” Transport 3 price includes Universal IS cable and remote: upgrade for earlier models to Universal IS stats, $700. (Vol.21 No.10; Vol.22 No.2)

Sony CDX-XATES: $3300
TJN was quite taken by this player because it was "enough to sound better the more I listened to it. It’s not perfect, but its strengths—a smooth, sweet, detailed sound with natural warmth and a fine, palpable presence—make it such a strong player that searching for flaws is a lot of work with little return." Well-buil, well, he asserted and “the equal of any player—separates or one-piece units—at any price.” (Vol.19 No.11; Vol.20 No.10 & 7)

Wadia 860: $5740
Versatile CD player offers digital volume control, digital inputs and outputs (ToLink, ST-optical, AES/EBU, and S/PDIF IN/OUT). “Ultimately, how you value the 860 depends on how you intend to use it,” said RA. "It’s a definite success in all departments, clearly better in some than others, and will also perform very well without a preamplifier. Yet its ultimate quality is achieved with the internal volume control effectively disabled... and by using a superlative, balanced-domain analog preamplifier." From his experience with the less-expensive 850 JA is not so sure about this last point. Current production is now 96kHz, 24-bit compatible. (Vol.21 No.2)

Wadia 850: $4950
This single-box CD player with digital-domain volume control is also a superlative player. "It’s a wonderful piece of imaging that the Wadia scored—big time," he said, adding that “used balanced into the... amplifiers, there was a weight that had to be heard to be believed.” But, be cautioned, "I occasionally get the feeling of a player that's too new to be a "worn in" player. The 850 was used with a preamp in the chain. If you can do without an analog preamp, however, the "superbly constructed 850 is a CD player to be reckoned with" (as long as your system is not itself on the bright side). Digital input board adds $995; digital output board adds $495. Current production is now 96kHz, 24-bit compatible. (Vol.21 No.5)

YBA CD 1 Blue Laser: $5600
Unusual two-chassis integrated player houses the analog power supply in a separate enclosure from the digital preamplifier. Thus, it helps to keep the LEI 108 in the blue light. JS descried it as "a player of subtlety and nuance," singling out its "velvet midrange textures [and] a special kind of palpability." He concluded that it was "a little more easy to live with than I ought ultimately prefer." RA noted that the unit was ridden with ergonomic idiosyncracies and exhibited "poor bench performance, with severe de-emphasis errors, low channel separation, high noise level, and as alarming an intermodulation distortion." (Vol.21 No.2)

B Arcam Alpha 9: $15999
$15999
KXK declared that the distinguishing feature of this "absolutely superb" CD player is its "exceptional DAC module, which used a $20,000 D/O-100 HIFI D/A chip. Digital Filter and a realization of the dcs Ringer-DAC with 24/96 capa...
From the instant of a whisper

To the explosion of a passion

Between the notes

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CD Players

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Digital Audio Labs CL-15: $1695

An enhanced version of the CL-10 that also functions as a digital processor/preamplifier. BD said that the combination is most useful in a multimode installation, an asymmetric listening room, or if mixing the player directly to an amplifier. Both BD and JA found it to be an outstanding performer. Borderline Class A. $2995 with optional balanced outputs. CL-15 configuration software. $99 for single-user license. (Vol.21 No.4)

California Audio Labs CL-10: $1975

This five-CD changer with HDCD decoding impressed the heck out of us with its "warm mudd and upper bass, laid-back presentation, and spacious soundstage." He also praised the "smooth mechanism, which performed flawlessly..." If your idea of fun is loading a player with six hours of music and letting the good times roll, the CL-10 is just the ticket. (Vol.21 No.4)

Denon DCD-1650AR: $999 SS

A honey of a player, said ST. "The low-resolution level is fabulous for a player that retails for less than $1k. Bass extension and dynamics are mighty good too." (Vol.21 No.6)

Exaco 24-bit CD player: $1995

MC "confidently recommended." This British CD player for "its simple, single-ended transistor analog circuitry and the fine sound it made." He called it an "unusually musical CD player that has very good soundstaging abilities, is quietly neutral but dynamically resolving, and has an involving and pacey character, and is convincing and satisfactory in the long term." Although he noted a slight treble texture, he did not feel it detracted substantially from his listening pleasure. The digital volume control is not recommended for serious listening. (Vol.20 No.11)

Myryad MC 100: $1195

"Just a few years back, you would have had to spend $3000 to get this sound quality from silver disc," said JA. "Dynamics seemed excellent in general..." Overall, the Myryad player was balanced on the polite side of reality. "And the Myryad's bass lacked weight in absolute terms... But the definition was excellent." Furthermore, "it does throw good space..." this player gives good soundstaging..." It is a well-engineered, well-made, excellent-sounding, thoroughly modern CD player. Current productions have the premium quality Crystal DAC chip. Now distributed by Artelc. (Vol.21 No.1)

Rega Planet: $795 SS

"A beautifully mechanically engineered product... Produces a rich, full-bodied, dynamic (but not overwrought) sound," said ST. JA was also impressed, but noted it sounded "just a little tired-up at the top end, which made it a better match for darker-balanced speakers. The Rega's instrumentation is just not quite as clean..." Overall, the Rega's sound a little more reverberant than I suspect they should. In his opinion, "the Planet has a more involving presentation on rock music... On classical CDs. however... the Rega sounded a little untidy" compared to some expensive players. "But at a whisker under $800, it is an astronomical high-end bargain." Digital out allows for use as a transport. (Vol.20 No.6. Vol.21 No.2)

YBA CD 3 Blue Laser: $3400

Despite some quarks—phase inversion, eccentric ergonomics, unit doesn't automatically initialize disc... ST was taken by this top-loading CD player's "excellent detail and stupendous spatial resolution." "Blue laser" is somewhat of a misnomer, as the unit uses a blue LED to produce light (it is said the optical equivalent of clairvoyant. (Vol.19 No.12)

Cambridge Audio CD4 SE: $529

"Slightly off the CD-4A, but great," said ST. "A player possesses an engaging, lively, open sound quality—a lot of air—with a smooth midrange and treble. It's fleet of foot, too, letting go of the notes... What makes the CD4 SE special is its superior resolution," said ST. Instead, this feature should be noted for its "inestimable value..." (Vol.21 No.8)

Rotel RCD 971: $695

(See "Span’s Space" in this issue)

Acam Alpha MCD: $999

A truly off-the-wall $795 affair that doesn't seem to fetch up. "It was a bit of a shock," said JA. "Presumably, all the $795 features are covered in the $795 price—right down to the base-labeled drivers and $999 DAC. AAI's price is not that high, but it's not that high either..." Overall, the Acam Alpha MCD was a disappointment. (Vol.21 No.3)

Denon DCM-360: $319

"Tons of detail for an affordable machine," MK opined. He was also impressed with the CD player's transitory speed and living presence. Trouble worked some slack in the top end, slightly recessed midrange, and slightly hoosy bass. Neither the digital volume control nor the headphone output pleased him—but added grain. (Vol.20 No.9)

NAD 515: $299

This affordable five-disc changer exceeded RH's expectations of what is possible at $499: "the $15 slad super image focus, good spatial resolution, a smooth treble, lack of glare, and satisfying bass... The 515's compensations were in ways that were least musically objectionable. No player provides an easy upgrade path if you add an outboard digital processor," he added helpfully. Can a $499 changer be considered high-end audio? "If that CD player is the NAD 515, absolutely." (Vol.20 No.3)

Sony CDP-XA1ES: $390

MK deemed the CDP-XA1ES smoother and more refined than much of its similarly priced competition, but somewhat weak dynamically. Digital out, a usable (but not highly recommendable) variable output control, and a better than usual headphone output offer budget shoppers desirable flexibility. (Vol.20 No.9)

K

Theta Miles, Main CDX, Rotel C-1999, Adcom GCD-750 HCD2.

Deletions

Ultimate Technology Ulrich UCD-100, because of doubts over availability; recent price increase makes Reell KAV-300CD too expensive for recommendations.

Digital Processors

Editor's Note: The sound of any particular CD transport/digital processor combination will be dependent on the data link used—"bits is bits" by Christopher Dunn and Malcolm Omar Hawkinsford, Stereophile, March 1996, Vol.19 No.3. Unless mentioned, all processors are limited to 32/41.41/48kHz sample rates.

Camelot Technology Uther v2.0: $2995 SS

"Simply the best DAC I've used to date," said KR. He elaborates: "When used without preamp and with its own analog gain control, that's the sound (not the presence or the user interface) of this DAC qualifies it for Class A. In this light of the Red Book standard, I haven't heard a DAC that gets more from it." (Vol.21 No.4)

Classe DAC-1: $3995

RH was "impressed by the performance of this giant-killer processor, deducing it a revolution in the price/performance ratio in digital playback." Its resolution impressed him mightily: "on a par with the Spectral SD16-3000 Pro... That's saving a lot for a $4000 D/A converter," he maintained. He also took note of its "extraordinary overall sense of power and sl, the lack of strain with couples, high-level signals, emphasizing that "an extension of coding techniques..."

CD Elfers: $12,000

A remote-control D/A processor that future-proof in that it will decode two-channel, 24-bit 192kHz and 96kHz recordings (although it does lack HDCD decoding). "The Elfers sounds simply superb and has achieved a mean performance to match," JA sighed. While there were differences between the two units. Our Fearless Leader felt the Elfers was within striking distance of its longtime reference. The Multivox No.305. However, it added, "the sound of 96kHz tapes reconstructed by the Elfers was simply more real. And that is what the High End is all about." JA was entranced by the Elfers, particularly with the $11722 unit used to upscale CD data: the combination gave him the "inestimable but quiet thrill of knowing that I was close, very close to the music." (Vol.20 No.7 & 12. Vol.22 No.2)

jacs 972 digital to digital converter: $6995

JS found this the "most natural of all the 96/24's pro audio line" because of its many easy-to-navigate options. When it was used to upscale 16-bit/44.1kHz CD data to a 24/192 filestream, he loved what it did in combination with the CDP. The full-screen screen is "extremely balanced" and "absolutely re-platformed digital playback deck." A $5000 consumer version, the Purcell, is being introduced this spring. (Vol.22 No.2)

Genesis Technologies Digital Lens: $1800

RH dubbed this unique, RAM buffer-based, jitter-elimination/resolution enhancement digital device "the most serious attempt at date reducing jitter in outboard processors." Finding its effects "truly remarkable," he heard "improvements in nearly every area of musical performance... soundstage size, bass definition and dynamic clarity, detail resolution, and musical liquidity." LH demurs, finding in the soundstage enhancement "a consistency from one recording to another, often replacing the natural sense of space with one dictated by the Genesis itself. "Phooey!" concludes JA, who finds its clamping effect on the 'high-jitter data output of his Panasonic 3700 DAT recorder nothing short of magic. But avoid the HDCD-compatible setting! (Vol.19 No.7)

Mark Levinson No.30: $15,950 =

The original No.30 was Stereophile's "Product of the Year" in 1992. The No.30 Digital to Digital, a result of a new-data-recorder board incorporating an "Intelligent FIFO" memory buffer, is a "true reference-quality product," says RH. "Astray" suggests a blow of the $4000 Mark Levinson No.30 is also a "three hit to good vinyl playback," quoted he, which is why the $305 was used to master Stereophone's 1997 Senate I.P. Current No.30.6 version significantly revised but still retains 96kHz data. Continued recommendation provisional, awaiting long-term auditioning. (No.30, Vol.15 No.2. Vol.16 No.6s. Vol.30.5. Vol.17 No.10. Vol.18 No.3 & 4)

McIntosh S18: $1995

Unusual digital-to-digital processor that JA dubbed the "Swiss Army Knife of digital." It significantly reduces datastream jitter, performs digital gain and source selection, converts data with one digital word level to data with one word level. The S18, feeding from a 24-bit master to a 16-bit DAT or CD-R—and offers a choice of seven noise-shaping algorithms. JA used it to master Stereophone's recent CD and concluded that it was essential in preserving the integrity of the '90s masters transferred from a 16-bit master's. "In the HDCD price, however, feeding 16-bit CD information through it and increasing the word level to 20-bit going into his Levinson No.30 resulted in tremendous improvements. "It was good enough, even with recordings that usually aren't the greatest ones by numbers," he giggled. (Vol.19 No.1 & 7)

Stereophile, April 1999
"At an unbelievable $1475 the pair, this one is going to knock ‘em dead."


STEREOPHILE MAGAZINE
“In my 20 years of involvement in the audio hobby, I can’t think of another product that has offered as much performance for as little money as the MG1.6QR. Highly—very highly recommended.”

* Brian Damkroger, STEREOPIHLE, January ’99

FI MAGAZINE
“...from the top of their line to their bottom, Maggies® are still the fairest values in all the high end...the lightning transients, the superb dynamic scaling, the remarkable spaciousness, the nearly world-class inner detail, the single-driver coherence, and sheer presencing power--all of which the Maggie 1.6’s have in abundance...in my opinion, that’s what the 1.6’s are--the best sound you can buy for fifteen hundred dollars.”

* Jon Valin, FI, July, ’98

ULTIMATE AUDIO MAGAZINE
“...the MG1.6’s left an indelible impression and join Maggies own 3.5’s...as the steals of the speaker world. Uncannily balanced. Unlike similarly priced speakers, there was no lack of dynamics or tendency toward leanness. And their size and appearance shouldn’t be a hindrance in most homes.”

* Myles Astor, Editor, Ultimate Audio, Jan./Feb., ’98

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MG1.6/QR - Winner 1998 Golden Ear Awards,
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MAGNEPAN
1645 Ninth Street, White Bear Lake, MN 55110
Morse Model 296: $3000 $55
96kHz capable. (See SD’s review in this issue.)
Sonorous Processor 3: $6999
A two-box D/A system with a separate power supply and a fully differential, balanced topology in the analog and digital domains. SD noted “unbeatable in its configuration with the Transport 3 (see ‘CD Players’), citing their ‘standard-setting performance, excellent ergonomics, and convenient remote control’.” (Vol.21 No.10, Vol.22 No.2)
Spectral SDR-2000 Professional: $8895 $55
RH enthusiastically states that “This is the state of the art in [CDJ] playback — excellent in low-level resolution, soundstage and bass response.” In his review, he added that the “SDR-2000 Pro redefines what we can expect from the compact disc format in terms of transparency, palpability, resolution of fine detail, and rightness of timber — especially on [HDCD].”

This Pro is the best D/A processor available.

CD Transport

Adcom GDA-700: $1000 $55
LG was quite taken with the [HDCD]-compatible GDA-700, finding it “the most fluid-sounding, transparent, and musically involving.” He also noted that it did a superb job of rendering the musical acoustic on its discs, through its resolution of low-level detail coupled with admiringly transparent midrange reproduction. Still his firm’s preferred [HDCD] transport, as noted in [Vol.21 No.11, Vol.22 No.2].

Entec 205.2: $449.95
A slicker, more versatile version of the 203.2 with a modestly better output stage that SD said offered a “surprisingly high standard of performance...for not too much money.” Which gives its additional inputs and user-interface features, it should. SD was astonished by the “level of mastered performance audiophiles can now buy for below $500, as typified by the [Entec] Number Crunchers.” (Vol.22 No.12, Vol.22 No.2)

Monarchy Audio DIP: $199 $55
The DIP demodulates an incoming 3PDIF signal into respective clock and data lines which are separately re-encoded and clocked out by a high-accuracy oscillator. Can also accept digital data from each input type (Toslink, analog, and output in another (such as AES/EBU). In some cases, SD found “excellent improvement — clarity, midrange, and treble smoothness, spatial resolution, focus, bass extension, and tightness. Transients were cleaner, quicker. There was a more natural decay of instrument sounds in both size and space, not by a small margin.” (Vol.21 No.6)

MSB Technologies Link DAC: $349 $55
“MSB Link is a small, marvelously refined unit of this impres- sive 24/96-compatible D/A processor.” No deficiencies were found; in fact, the word ‘obvious’ was not found in the review. SD commented on its “outstanding performance, cost, and compatibility with 24/96 sources, many CD players benefit from being patched with a MSB Link, allowing high-performance D/A players to be auditioned with it.” He concluded: “Defining the limits of its...” (Vol.22 No.11)

Musical Fidelity X-24K: $499.95
Wondering whether to buy a new CD player or a DVD player? This 24/96 DAC, SD says, is the answer, “Buy a DVD player with its 96kHz-enabled dig- ital output and feed the signal to an X-24K. Bass is a little soft in absolute terms, and the midrange is balanced a little more forward than the Entec 205.2, but the sound quality from CD’s will not disappoint, and the X-24K, of course, will still digest D/A inputs to the best of its ability from the two-channel 24/96 D/A inputs available,” he said. (Vol.22 No.2)

The Parts Connection Assembler DAC-2: $499
MK thought this D/A converter kit provided “trifling amounts of detail,” albeit with a bright tonal balance.

‘It’s clear that the DAC-2 surpasses the DAC-1 in almost every category, rendering the older converter obsolete...’ [SGH200]...and revealing musical details on familiar recordings that I was previously unaware of.” CA concurs as to the unit’s superior- ity to its predecessor, but doesn’t hear the unit as particu- larly bright. CA, prior to this report, upgraded his system to the added $149, MK proclaimed the fully loaded DAC-2 “a best buys” possessing “strong microdynamics, expansive soundstage, and [extraordinary] resolution,” and suggests that it knocks on the door of Class II. (Vol.20 No.1 & 7)

California Audio Labs Gamma: $195
“The Gamma is a little overachiever that performs be- yond what one might expect from a DAC with a lists- ized price, praised MK. ‘Very credible...it failed to offend no matter what kind of recording I threw at it...it was completely free of any grungy or edgy sounds.’ However, he observed, compared with better, costlier designs, it had ‘flawed dynamics and only moderately high bass.’ IFR, commenting that its DAC power option makes it a killer addition to an automotive sound system — but points out that, even in that context, the quality of the transport can make a surprising difference in the sound. (Vol.19 No.10, Vol.20 No.5, Vol.21 No.9)

Entec 201: $529.95 $55
Adding the budget-priced 201 from Monster Cable’s En- tec division to your system is like “going from a black-and-white television to color,” said an enthusiastic BD, who called the DAC “a superb, inexpensive upgrade for a CD player or integrated amplifier.” Its most notable contributions, he noted, was in ‘easing out of dynamics and instruments’ harmonics.” Not only that, but it’s “cost.” Borderline Class C. (Vol.21 No.12)

Resolution Audio D-92 & D-98, Theta DS Pro Gen VI.

Deletions
Anadub 9000DX and Digital Domain VSP-5 discontinued: Paranormal DAC-2000 Ultra, Theta Clarus 396, and Audio Note DAC-1 not auditioned in too long a time to be sure of current rating; Musical Fidelity X-DAC replaced by X-24K.

CD Transports

A
C.E.C. TL 1: $1750
No-backward-bite drive transport that JS found an uncommonly affordable — and a device for those who have an appreciation for the finer things in life. The most outstanding feature characteristic of its ability to lift perfectly immense amounts of information...[remaining] effortlessly and enormously lifestyle-turned to the limits of my ability to hear.” This, he found, was not without cost: meticulous setup and precise system matching are required. (Vol.18 No.5)

C.E.C. TL 1: $4950 $55
Unusual, beautifully constructed belt-drive transport with a smooth injection-molded plastic body, which is less and less forceful in the bass. Sounds sweet and extraordinarily musical, however, with a fast midpoint. LA’s reference. (Vol.16 No.7, Vol.17 No.5, Vol.18 No.5; see also IFR response to reader’s letter in Vol.16 No.9, p.252)

Forssell Air Bearing Mk. II: $30,900
With this ‘upside-down’ Swedish transport, the user places the CD on the turntable and lowers the laser pickup assembly onto it. The result, according to JS, is a true Class A sound, especially when using its coaxial data output. The lows were extended and tight, the highs open and airy, and the soundstage gigantic and unbounded; “pulp factor” was the highest JS had experienced in his system. LL finds the sound “lifeless,” however. (Vol.17 No.5; see also Vol.18 No.7, p.93)

Mark Levinson No.315: $4950
Upgrade to the original No.31. A “reference component”..."
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of ever I heard one,” insisted JA. “...a supreme example of a state-of-the-art, potentially future-proof CD transport.” The improvement offered over the No.31 transport was substantial; he noted, “With the 315 recovering the bits... [he had heard] the bits have yet to hear from the 16-bit digital standard.” However, he cautioned, “even the cheapest upgrade to 315's sorts, replacing as it does everything other than the chassis and half the power supply, is quite expensive at a bargain under $3000.”

Marin Cossano landed the CD-only Jade for its “high resolution of detail, firm bass, sparkling yet unforged, and neutral midrange tonality.” (Vol.22 No.1) Wadia 270: $7950 “(See JA’s review in this issue.)

B

C.E.C. TL 2: $2959 SS landed the TL 2’s natural timbre—especially in its upper register—and air. “Its liquid midrange will appeal to the B.C. Canto crowd,” he adds. He questioned if its performance exceeded the $10000 difference in price over its longtime reference, but allowed that, with its slight sonic edge over the PS Audio Lambda, “it is the best transport I’ve had in my system.” (Vol.19 No.7)

Meridian 5000: $5950 “The Meridian 5000 has a flowing bass that is as tight as that of the Theta Data Base, built RH, but its treble is smoother. MC adds that it finds it not as good as the discontinued Meridian 200 when it comes to pace. But it formed a musically sympathetic combination with the excellent Meridian 563 processor, striking just the right balance between immediacy and ease, JA enjoys the relaxing balance it produced with the dCS Eiger.” (Vol.17 No.4)

C

Rega Planet: $7955 SSSS The expensive Rega works very well as a transport, both ST and JA discovered. However, JA points out that you need to use it with a very good processor to get better sound than it provides as a standalone CD player. (Vol.20 No.6, Vol.21 No.2)

D

Editor’s Note: There are currently no Class D CD transports listed.

K

Resolution Audio VT1960, Theta 1aVal)

Deletions

Paradigm C/113-2000 not auditioned in too long a time to be sure of current rating.

CD Accessories

AudioPrism CD Blacklight: $39.95 ST heard gains “so clarity, overall smoothness, and an increase in dynamics” when he used this flexible, luminous CD unit on top of his discs. “Of all the CD accessories and tweaks I’ve tried, this one makes the most difference,” he raved. “Way recommended.” He cautioned, however, that Blacklight does not work in all players, must be carefully centered, and most emphatically should not be used in car CD players. (Vol.19 No.1)

AudioPrism CD Stoplight: $19.95 Green, water-based acrylic paint for coating the edges of CDs. The green color, which PW found absorbs the laser’s infrared wavelength, is presumably significant, but at present we have no idea why this tweak should so improve the sound of CDs. That it does so, however, seems to be beyond doubt to anyone with a CD to hand enough to produce a greater gap (“focusing” of the mainstream press). “This stuff works!” report JE, PW, and JA, all of whom feel that it increases soundstage definition, improves the sound quality of bass reproduction, and overall lowers the level of treble grain to a typical level of CD sound. PW, and MC report that a water-based poster paint, the Unipon from Malaysia, has a very similar effect. MC also notes that the CD should first be dusted and its edges degreased before the green paint is applied. (Vol.14 No.11, Vol.19 No.30, see also THX and T&N’s, WUC’s reports in Vol.13 No.3, ST’s and RH’s articles on CD tweaks in Vol.13 No.5, and “As We See It.” Vol.18 No.7)

Compact Dynamics CD Clean: $9.95 treats 250 CDs The essential accoutrements for those who frequent used CD bins. (Vol.17 No.11)

Compact Dynamics CD Magie: $14.95 treats 200 CDs “Reseals badly scratched CDs. This stuff really is magic!” entitles JE: Discwasher and RadioShack market similar products. (Vol.17 No.11)

Discwasher CD Laser Lens Cleaner: $71.95 PW found this CD fitted with two tiny brushes in a spiral to be effective at improving the sound of its 1B-270 transport. (Vol.16 No.11)

Nordost Eco 3 anti-static spray: $39.95/8-oz bottle “Spray it on, wipe it off. The stuff on this CD, electronic equipment, and cables will clean up a surprising amount of static.” claims JW, TD, and JW tions. PW adds, “Inexpensively quiet when applied to the gateway CD.” He hates when that happens. (NR)

Optix: $18/2-oz bottle CD/1DV disc cleaner and anti-static spray that does a great job eliminating fine dust and dirt, says SD. while preventing the return of dust with its long-lasting anti-static properties. Even makes new most CDs sound subtly better, presumably by removing mincing compounds left over from the manufacturer. (NR)

QR Design Statmat: $39.95 This piece of thin plastic purports to be “an electrostatic control system” designed to dispense “the low-voltage hot spots that would otherwise build up during play.” However, According to SD, “It improved the sound of every CD I played in every player I had, sometimes quite dramatically.” (Vol.20 No.12)

Theta Optique: $50 “Retractable index-matching goop that LL recommends for use with ST-type glass-fiber linkables. ‘Must be used on the Theta Universal connections to get the full benefit,’” he advises. (See LL’s Theta Data Series II review in Vol.15 No.30)

K

Audio Illuminator from Audience.

Deletions

Bedini Ultra Clarifier not tried in a long time.

Preamplifiers

Editor’s Note: Apart from the Conrad-Johnson, Audible Illusions, and CAT, all the Class A preamplifiers offer balanced outputs. And unless noted, the preamplifiers listed do not have piano stages. Note that the Z-Systems Matrix it only accepts digital sources.

A

Adcom GFP-750: $1250 SS The price for the audiophile who hates preamps, proclaimed PW impressed WUC’s Dave Nebels Priv-designed GFPs “undeniably loudness.” “When a product is designed honestly, constructed with integrity, and performs superbly, we just got to give it proper recognition.” Such conclusions were reached by the measurements, which JA said indicated “good engineering.”

honest guts—solidly built, cleverly designed, and offering sound that compares to the best preamplifiers I ever heard. What’s not to like?” sums up W2. (Vol.22 No.3)

Audible Illusions Modulus 3A: $2295 $5 Simple tube design “offers the highest level of performance at a bargain price,” averred MF, who found the one-tube-per-channel-line-stage transport and seamless. But does much mean to a rapidly changing world, however, that feature that some audiophiles (PW among them) do not consider dispensable. Optional MC phono board has sufficient gain for a wide variety of cartridges—although users of extremely low-output transducers may wish to audition this unit at home before committing. “If the Modulus 3A isn’t the finest-sounding preamp in the world, regardless of price,” MF insists, it’s “one of the finest.” (JR) even more exotic.

Audio Research Reference 1: $8495 WP said this tube, remote-controlled line-stage was extremely transparent, “Whether coupled with the VR200 or any other amplifier, it allowed me to hear the music, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.” A reliable, remarkable performer, he concluded, built with an “astonishing roll call of premium parts.” Superb sound—“slightly lean and less than Technicolor,” he thinks. Class A, indeed. (Vol.21 No.11)

Ayre K-1: $5250 “Some equipment manages to conjure a sense of the realness of the musical experience,” according to WP, and he says the K-1 qualifies. “Fire and foremost, it is prodigiously musical and clean and has a wonderful sense of space, seemingly unlimited dynamic range, and excellent soundstaging. The piano stage, however, takes it to an entirely different level. Simply stated, the Ayre’s piano stage is the best I’ve ever heard; quiet as a tomb and clean as a bat’s water.” Remote volume control adds $250; phono stage adds $1600. (Vol.20 No.3)

Ayre K-3: $3750 $555 The K-3 solid-state preamplifier with optional phono board, MF said, “is a very close cousin to the K-1... it was dead quiet...” but what really got the audioguru’s juices flowing was the phono section: “The K-3’s vinyl playback performance was among the finest I’ve ever heard... bass performance was as good as I’ve heard... but what was more important than any one facet of the K-3 was performance in the general spectrum, which held together seamlessly and effortlessly to bottom.” Remote control adds $250; phono stage adds $1600. (Vol.20 No.7)

Conrad-Johnson ART: $14,995 This four-cabinet, all-管-based, remote-controlled tubed line-stage uses five dual-mode tubes per side, running in parallel to construct a single high-transcon- duction tube that can be run without a buffer stage or negative feedback. The downside is that things like channel balance are controlled by the performance of the individual tubes used—our sample had a difference between channels of some 0.3dB. This in no way bothered WP, who noted the ART’s sound “A whole new ball game... involving, rich in texture and tone, and so tremendously clear... it is without compromise.” (Vol.21 No.5)

Conrad-Johnson Premier Fourteen: $4395 “It’s still possible to find products that can fill you with wonder,” WP insisted upon hearing this tubed, remote-control line-stage. “Altered with the Fourteen’s freedom from low-level noise was an astonishing dynamic range. True, the music is neutral, and a chassis at the recovery of detail—Class A all the way, he avows, MC enthusiastically agrees. (Vol.19 No.12)

Conrad-Johnson PF-R: $2500 “The sound is a product of a very grand tradition of a very grand tradition.” exclaimed MC. “T’d lay bets that [it is the top preamp performer on grounds of natural dynamics, microdynamics, and dynamic expression as well as rhythm and timing... Above all there was a natural, unfurled quality, open and free from glare or related colorations, that provided... Stereophile, April 1999
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a harmonious balance." Despite its moderate price, Marten would put it with any of the amplifiers in Class A, calling it "a Class A component I wouldn't hesitate to recommend to my closest friends." Inserted decades from inputs to outputs. "Hearing is believing — C.J. last definitely got it right!" (Vol.19 No.10)

Convergent Audio Technology SL-1 Signature Mk.III: $5950

J.J. (Vol.21 No.10) said that the SL-1 is "definitely from the subjective, technical, and objective view... it's better." He asserted that it produces "a less transparent system," and added that "it's more neutral and balanced... it's a different sound..." He concluded that "it's a great product... it's better than ever!"

Jadis JC-280 MK II: $20,990

"A gorgeous thing, looking back at retro-looking machines," praised MF in reference to Jadis' first remote-controlled preamplifier. In fact, it's the most expensive full-featured preamp available. "Two banks, actually... Actually, it's more expensive than most of the high-end audio..." MF said. He concluded, "If you can afford it and listen to it... you'll like it.

Jeff Rowland Design Group Synergy Series II: $5500

"Handily made solid-state remote-controlled line-stage whose "strong suit" is clarity and low-level resolution," according to L.J. Optional HPS-1 battery power supply is included. "More dynamic, more transparent, and so overall presentation that you don't hear music..." Price is with convection-cooled, HPS-1 battery supply: $3400. (Vol.20 No.12)

Krell KRC-HR: $6900

WP asserted that "The Krell must certainly qualify as one of the truly great preamplifiers out there. It's well built and well put together... it's a very clean-sounding, tonal system and its low-level resolution is exquisite..." He concluded, "It will sound very good even at its lowest level..." Price is with convection-cooled, HPS-1 battery supply: $3400. (Vol.20 No.12)

Melos SHA-Gold: $1995 $55

This remote-controlled headphone amp/line-stage really got WP's juices flowing. "As a headphone amp, I've never heard it better," he gushed, adding that as a preamp it "is arguably as good as any I've ever heard!" He also described its flexibility and "plethora of convenience features." The flip side of that warmth, however, manifested itself as an emphasis of midbass information that keeps this expensive preamp from scaling the heights of Class A (Vol.20 No.12).

Krell KRC-3: $5300

Solid-state, remote-controlled line preamplifier that surpassed T.J.N. with its "great sound, impeccable measurements, and as high-end preamps go,... affordable price. You can get a little better sound for a fair amount..." and for most of us... the choice of the KRC-3 is a no-brainer. "But Class II," he ultimately decided. (Vol.20 No.10)

Polyvinyl Audio 940: $3250

"A contender," WS declared, that's possessed of a "non-analogue, matter-of-fact presentation in keeping with its pro-audio pedigree." "Audiophiles who value brevity and clarity in the presentation of their material will appreciate its presence..." Price is with convection-cooled, HPS-1 battery supply: $1950. (Vol.21 No.9)

B

Audioworks Audio L-5: $9995

"The first $2000 solid-state line-stage I've heard that cuts it," said WS, who felt its shortcomings to be relatively minor. "The price is right..." He concluded, "I would highly recommend it..." Price is with convection-cooled, HPS-1 battery supply: $1950. (Vol.21 No.9)

Bryton BP25-MC: $2995

"If you take this remote-controlled, full-function solid-state preamplifier home as a lease, LC9 caution, 'You'll end up buying it. Convinced from work with this system which enables it to extract the utmost from its moving-coil phono section, 'the BH-25MC has world-class bass response and a midrange that can capture much of the natural instrumental textures of chamber and orchestral music.' Not the last word in transparencies, he cautioned, but the remote 'proved addictive.'" (Vol.19 No.10)

Convergent Audio Technology EC-4-5: $5995

Convergent Audio Technology EC-4-6: $2995

Two similar-sounding solid-state line-stages. The midrange of EC-4-5 has only two line-level inputs—one balanced, one single-ended—while the EC-4-6 has six inputs. The former is essentially identical to the EC-4-5 with the exception of the "less expensive unit may be a touch more transparent." Both sound "harmonically rich and full-bodied... I could have wished for a more precise, more incisive presentation, along with greater openness and expansiveness... but to do so... I think you must need to spend much more." (Vol.21 No.11)

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Lamms Industries L1: $6990

Pricey but well-built solid-state line-level preamplifier with tube regulation. "I wish that its built-in, heavy bass sound had kicked back to an earlier era, and added its "regulating presentation of layered depth." He also admired its flexibility and "plethora of convenience features." The flip side of that warmth, however, manifested itself as an emphasis of midbass information that keeps this expensive preamp from scaling the heights of Class A (Vol.20 No.12).

Melee SHA-Gold: $1995 $55

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SL-1; $3250

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Polyvinyl Audio 940: $3250

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"No doubt there are many fine integrated amps in the $1,500 to $3,000 price range. But the Plinius 8150 is not simply an excellent example. It is an exceptional one in this class, and one that I believe will set the standard for some time." - Neil Gader - The Absolute Sound Issue 115, Dec. 1998

"Suffice it to say: if the elves went around one night puckishly substituting PLINIUS 8150s for separate components, in many systems it would be a distinct improvement. The 8'150's presentation is emotionally involving and non-fatiguing. The music takes on both fullness and detail. Even a non-hobbyist is likely to agree that it is worth the money, and worth the incremental dollars over cheaper integrateds."


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- John Marks,
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110
Stereophile, April 1999
for silver or black finishes; it now has three (unbalanced) inputs. (Vol.15 No.10, Vol.17 No.7)

Musical Fidelity: X-Pre: $299.95 SS5

Tubed line-stage "may be just the ticket" in an inextensible system, said ST. "It adds warmth, richness, and fullness of sound," although passive preamplifiers such as the Creek OBH-12 and Pure Sound Systems Model 500 "trombone the X-Pre in terms of transparency. Still, if you need an active preamp — for the gain, for the buffer..." was unnecessary, and "all is right, you won't go far wrong with the X-Pre." (Vol.21 No.3)

Musical Fidelity X-10D: $199.95 SS5

ST proclaimed this tubed buffer stage "the most cost-effective CD upgrade ever to come down the pipe." So the .0.4% bias, the unit adds richness, dimensionality, and improved dynamics over concert CD players, smoothing out the treble and adding body to the midrange and bass. WP claims it works wonders on the output of high-end OS receivers. While MK and JA agreed that the X-10D "was helpful in driving large cable runs — especially at low frequencies — they found it reduced soundstage depth and transparency slightly, as well as slowing music's sense of pace. However, its effect may be even more system-dependent than usual, so a careful audition is strongly recommended..." (Vol.19 No.18, Vol.20 Nos.6 & 8)

NAD 118: $1599

This digital preamp (it also has analog inputs) enchant¬ed KR with its versatility. "There are quite a few [CDs] whose frequencies extremes need a lot of range flexibility; the 118 did that without destroying the musical integrity of the midrange. It was wonderful to be able to move more of those signals, and it certainly was addictive. Was its worth it? You bet. The 118 let me improve the quality of the low-than-torch-such sources with which we all live, and which, by Hall's Law, contain the best music." Considered only for its straight-through sound quality with digital sources, the NAD easily qualifies for Class C and pushes at Class B especially with a superior external DAC, he added. (Vol.21 No.7)

Soniet Frontiers Andrieh PRE 1L: $999

A versatile tubed line-stage, LH said. "If the word 'tubes' makes you think 'soft,' 'uncomplicated,' or 'rolled-off,' the PRE 1L won't fit your preconceptions..." Totally, there just isn't much to say about it, which is about the best thing you can say about most components... The PRE-1L's lack of noise was particularly impressive... Better sound than you have any right to expect at this price point... maybe even more." (Vol.21 No.2)

Source Components

E FM Electronic Harmonic Recovery System: $449

According to SST, manufacturer John Sollecone "admitted it would be accurate to call the HRS an additional output stage." So what does it do? Sam said that it "has improved the sound very perceptibly..." He added, "All with both, active and passive preamps, and I heard no loss of anything... The HRS helps flesh out the sound, give it more body and harmonic fullness... Dynamics improved too... The sound was richer, fuller, more dynamic. The soundstage was wider and deeper — more dimensional..." (Vol.21 No.8)

D-Mark Audio Signal Enhancer: $149

Similar to the Musical Fidelity X-10D in that it is designed to "buffer" op-amp output of inexpensive digital devices, although — perversely — it doesn't deal well with awkward loads. JA and MK commented on a smoothing and fleshying of the overall sound with the Z-Max in the circuit, although such changes were extremely subtle and low so those of the X-10D. Try before you buy. (Vol.20 No.8)

K Jeff Rowland Design Group Cohere, Grail 13.5th.

Deletions

Balanced Audio Technology VK-5i replaced by new model not yet auditioned; MeloD MA-333 Reference, McCormack Line Drive TLC-1 and Micro Line Drive, Proceed PRE, and Spectral DM/20 Series 2 not auditioned in a long time.

Passive Control Units

Editor's Note: While many audiophiles feel that a passive control unit has the potential for offering the highest possible sound quality from line-level sources such as CD, it must be noted that the control responsibility for driving the interconnects, the passive unit, and the power amplifier input is handed over to the source component, which may not be up to the task. Careful auditioning will be essential to putting together a musically satisfying system around a passive unit.

A Reference Line Preamplifier: $2095

This passive preamp has one direct and five switched inputs, but the direct input is always active for switching the option off. Consequently, you must unplug the direct input when playing any of the switched inputs, or else suffer severe downgrading of the source — hummus! Yet SS found its sound compelling: "In an ideal setup, with short cable runs, the Two could cooperate... any other preamp I've heard. In many systems, its tonal flexibility might make it the most practical: Class A sound with Class B ergonomics." (Vol.20 No.7)

B Pure Sound Systems Model 500: $325

"It retains its Bozeman pot for a little transparency, but certainly this inexpensive dual-monotor, foot-input device will get you most of the way there for as a compact source..." While his overall enthusiasm "isn't basic, it's simple, the parts quality is high... everything else uses up my Meridian 508 by comparison..." I use it in my main system." Silver Edition Model 500 costs $385, while very similar Model 1000 ($695) adds more inputs and is more versatile. Silver Edition Model 1000 ($555) has three pairs of Kimber RCA jacks (2 input, 1 output) wired with Kimber AGSS Silver Wire; remaining two jacks are sourced from Vampire and are wired with Kimber copper wire. (Vol.17 No.8, Vol.19 No.11)

C Creek Audio OBH-12: $325 SS5

ST said this remote-controlled passiver preamplifier "isn't really a preamp at all, but a switching box with volume control" Fair enough. He was impressed by its transparency — "it is not robbing the system of resolution..." While providing the convenience of remote control. WP concurs: "Hard to believe this thing could sound so good..." The KRC's quality is revealed in the characteristics of input and output devices and cables, he said. "It's a big hit, but the minimum OBH-12 is all the preamp many music lovers will ever need," Long cable runs between the Creek and the amplifier are not advised, but, as WP observed, "one of the benefits of remote control is that you can keep your cables short." (Vol.21 No.14)

Deletions

Concert Research Lightstar Direct no longer available; McCormack Line Drive TLC-1 and Micro Line Drive not auditioned in a long time.

Phono Preamps/Moving-Coil Step-up Devices

A Audio Research PH3: $1495 SS5

This phono preamplifier's "Luxurious, liquid midrange bleeds... and iron-fisted bass control" had WP's heart all a-flutter. "Easy to use and endlessly flexible," swooned WP. "Plenty of gain, low noise, and very high overload characteristics, plus adjustable resistor and capacitance loading," added MF. "Highly recommended!" they chomped. (Vol.19 No.9, Vol.22 No.4, Special Edition.)

Balanced Audio Technology VK-5i: $4000

The "PI0 never failed to deliver the musical goods," was JSS's assessment of this tubed phono stage. Uses-selectable cartridge loading, high and low gain settings, and built-in transformers attest to its flexibility. "The VK-5i offered no particular sonic characteristics of its own," JS concluded. "Its total transparency lets the analog front-end and the recording do the talking... This is one fine work, worth every penny of its asking price." (Vol.20 No.6)

Conrad-Johnson EF-1: $1995

This phono preamp has switchable gain (40—22dB) and different-valued resistors can be added in parallel with its basic 47k ohms, 500pF input impedance. "A natural," MC declared. "It does just what you want from a phono preamplifier..." if [naudie] the competition sound closed-in, revealed their shortcomings in the bass and a loss of focus and clarity in the mids, as well as a lack of speed and sparkle in the treble. It then completed the denigration of the competition by argu¬ing a far stronger case for rhythm and timing, for overall ex¬citement, and not least for musical expression. (Vol.19 No.10)

Expressive Technologies SU-1: $5300

A 35-bl step-up transformer that offers "utter transparency" and "magnum resolution," according to HH, JA agrees, finding its LP sound with the SU-1 to be "deliciously transparent and musical. Unless USED with Expressive Technology's own interconnects, however, it may be impossible to avoid excessive hum pickup. Needs J&D's excellent 47k ohms, 500pF low impedance source. Additionally, the sound quality will be overly dependent on the preamp's MM input characteristics. A JS favorite. (Vol.15 No.7, Vol.18 No.1)

FM Acoustics Resolution Series 122: $5500

Ultimate solid-state preamplifier that MF characterized as "a lot of nothing." What do you get for $5500? he asked? "No noise, no grain, no glare, no etch, no blue, no bloom, no warmth, no cool, no compression, and no distortion I could detect." He was floored by the unit's "inherent delicacy, its ability to efface up to warm, palpitating, three-dimensional images from the very front of the soundstage to the rear corners." Those with large collections of older recordings will appreciate the unit's adjustable RIAA curve, which can transform the sound of their discs radically for the better, he proclaimed. (Vol.20 No.3)

Krell KPE Reference: $2200 with external power supply

Solid-state phono stage that can be purchased as a drop-in to Krell's AC-1.5 (or KRC-1 HI) and as a stand-alone component (2250). "It's easy to configure for practically any MC cartridge available, it's also quiet as a mouse and dynamic as a thunderclap," WP declared. "Add to that Krell's superlative build quality and bulletproof construction, and you have a contender for the state of the art. And when was the last time that was a bargain?" (Vol.20 No.6)

Linn Linto: $1500

This solid-state, direct-coupled MC phono preamp, a JA favorite, doesn't offer a leading network — your sole input impedance is 150 ohms. Nor does it offer much in the way of gain matching — 54dB and 46dB are your only options. But WP thought it was about the quietest phono section he's heard to date, and raved about its natural timbral and powerful bass. FM cites its "simmer emotional impact" and comments, "It really does sound 'direct-coupled,' with an immediacy that's quite different from in-yer-face exaggeration, and it's super-quiet too." Even so, he reports, he'll stick with his reference. (Vol.22 No.4)

Lyra Arion Transformer: $1995

The Transformer offers 26dB of gain and is designed specifically to mate with Lyra cartridges, although it's suitable for any MC of low internal impedance (6 ohms or less). "I loved it when I tried it," MF writes, "but it's only when it was gone that I realized how..."
much." He called it "ultra-quiet... offers outstanding retrieval of detail, and a purity of sound unique to trans-..."

Mark Levinson No.255: $4390 Available in high- or low-gain versions, this MC/line- level phonograph preamp features identical circuitry to the phono section of the No.265. Price includes PLS-276 power supply. Needs careful positioning to avoid hums being induced into its circuitry from the power supplies of other components. L/A reference. (NI9)

Naim Prefixo: $750 $88 Universal phone sections designed to mount inside the panels of a turntable (specifically, but not exclusively, the Linn LP12), keeping the low-level signal path as short as possible. Choice of three power supplies allows for up-gradability, but MC and SS feel that only with the Super-Cap does it offer Class A performance. WP sees but considers performance with the Hi-Cap manually refined and articulated as well. Available in three basic circuits, which allows for some flexibility, although careful cartridge matching a must. Flat-pot power supply adds $750. Hi-Cap supply adds $1500. Super-Cap adds $4400. Price is for version with ARO connector, price with SME DIN-type connector is $900. (Vol.19 No.9)

Pass Labs Alpha Omega $5000 A discrete, single-ended, solid-state MM/MM/phonoscope preamp. The price suggests-a-built, utterly flexible product that does all the important things essentially correctly. It comes from the "more detailed, analytical side of the musical tracks," but still sounds "smooth, never hard or edgy." Quiet and ultra-refined, big soundstage, great image focus, isolated. A hit soft on the bottom and not particularly lush in the mids. Still, easy Class A. Offers both balanced and unbalanced outputs. (Vol.22 No.1)

Plinik M14: $3495 Solid-state monaural amplifier built more like a power amp, according to ME. He was beguiled by its sound, which he praised as "smooth, delicate, and refined overall, but especially on top, where the M14 skated with sharp blades on freshly Zambonis ice." It offers convenient front-panel-selectable loading, but ME'smoved custom resistance loading and capacitor adjustment features he felt a component at this price should provide. (Vol.20 No.9)

Sutherland PH-2000: $6400 "That was impressive," said ME of this solid-state phono preamp. "But its outstanding sonic attributes add up to the most attractive-sounding phono section I've had in my system. Build quality is superb, and the loading, gain, and capacitance socket setup allow infinite adjustment of loading and capacitance. On the downside-the noise—like 'bubbling noise'—that becomes obvious only with the lowest-output moving-coil cartridges. But why should one have to put up with noise after spending almost $7000?" A JA Favorite. (Vol.20 No.12)

B Acom-Tech PH-1: $1200 WP called this solid-state MM/MM/phonoscope "a winner when it came to producing dynamic shadings..." It possesses a 'lauchpad' of detail and rhythmus-simply unchanged in its output of audio, even in the most difficult reproductions. WP concluded, "This is a unique product...something that takes a lot of effort into the final product...a real find in budget high-end audio." (Vol.19 No.12)

Central-Johnson Premier Eleven. Sonic Frontiers Phonol... Power Amplifiers

Editor's Note: Because of the disparity between typical tube- and solid-state "sounds," we have split Class A for separate power amplifiers into two subclasses. Never-..."A pleasant-sounding, low-noise piece that, while lacking dynamic and transient excitement, sounds surprisingly rich, round, and satisfying—as long as you don't expect too much for so little money," ME reported. A true bargain if you're "encouraging your way back to analog," or have just a small collection of records. (Vol.21 No.10)

Musical Fidelity X-LE: $2495 $555 "Get's you in the ballpark, though it's blunders (with a good view)," notes ME of this close phono stage which essentially matches the other Musical Fidelity pieces. Only available via mail-order with a money-back guarantee, if you're so inclined, you've got nothing to lose. (Vol.20 No.11)

NAD PP-1: $1295 "A pleasant-sounding, low-noise piece that, while lacking dynamic and transient excitement, sounds surprisingly rich, round, and satisfying—as long as you don't expect too much for so little money," ME reported. "A true bargain if you're 'encouraging your way back to analog,' or have just a small collection of records. (Vol.21 No.10)

Rotel R-970BX: $1995 $1555 "Good dynamics and a large, well-defined soundstage, classified as class A, pleasant sounding, a real find in budget high-end audio." (Vol.19 No.12)

Krell PPB 2500M monoblock: $11,000/pair "This 250W solid-state monoblock is one of the best-sounding amplifiers I have ever had in my system...Its sound has it all: openness, effortless power, transparency, and no grain. It reintegrates music, and its sound is "more musical" than any other current production that I've heard in the $10,000 range. This achievement alone does not make it the best. Krell was a giant in the amplifier industry and without question one of the industry's titans."

LA Industries Model M11 monoblock: $15,890/pair "They've got soul, baby," enthused JFs of these hybrid 140W monoblock power amps. "Their magic makes it worthwhile. "The sound was simply great, extremely airy, and transparent soundstage they threw...The bass was nothing short of phantasmagoric...deep, taut, terrifically impactful, realistic and individualistic...I'd rate the tone to hear a pair." (Vol.19 No.11)

Mark Levinson No.33H monoblock: $19,950/pair "I go on at length about how great the 33H sounds. I'm forced to admit it has a sound," kvedicated WP. "Soundstaging... was phenomenal—deep, detailed, holographic. Total balance was natural, and presented purity and clarity galore. Low-level detail never leapt out at me, but existed naturally within the musical gestalt...Paradoxically, the No.33H exists on a plane where the music isn't about music, it's about less. It had marvelous bass, it graced... no coloration...nothing I could detect. It had no way of doing... no MOSFET tricks, no transistor creak, no subwoo info...It was practically non-existent... except that it did what it better than anything else I've heard ever. JF's reference (he bought a pair)." (Vol.21 No.10)

McIntosh MC1000 monoblock: $13,000/pair Also available in 200W solid-state monoblock—"one of the most detailed-sounding amplifiers I have encountered, whether tube or solid-state," WP enthused. "He was not used to examining a jaw and age in its middle to upper range..." (Vol.21 No.10)
Pass Labs Aeph 1.2 monoblock: $14,000/pair
Single-ended solid-state 200W monoblock power amplifiers with solid-state boards and a 200Wpc output without auditioning an Aeph 1.2, you've failed to fully investigate your options.

They're hot, they're happening, and they're pretty darn awesome. But exactly what qualities make [them] so special? We're not going to look at the lack of any sort of electronic signature...at least we don't think so.

Audio Research VT100 MK II: $4955/SSS
This tube 200Wpc stereo amplifier really hit the JFETs' sweet spot. The VT100 MK II not only performed excellently but also handled the attack, resonance, and decay of a musical event equally well—and most important, presents the three combined as a coherent musical event. Moreover, the tube made possible an output without any electrical noise...a complete lack of electronic haze, and a heightened sense of what he called "dynamic continuity"—meaning that gradations between dynamic extremes were continuous, not discrete. RIJ listed the AV-1 as the installation of InfiniumCats, which "tweedled the notebas quite a bit", a higher-quality detachable power cord, an internal fan, tube damping rings, and doubled power-supply energy storage (to 540 volts). All of this resulted in an amplifier that balanced like it was "much more powerful than its nominal 100W rating." Upgrade from VT100, $9591 plus shipping, S595 for VT100s purchased after April 1, 1998. (Vol.21 No.13, Vol.21 No.12)

Balanced Audio Technology VK-60: 4950$/pair
"Offers the somertelend condition of transistornal vocal qualities, but with his enough power to drive most speakers to very satisfying volumes," said RIJ, who was also impressed by the three-dimensionality of the soundstage. He found the VK-60's "open, smooth, and dynamic...with more than 1% TID11 limit—quite special when it comes to harmonic accuracy." Bridgelined to monoblock operation. (Vol.18 No.12)

Cary Audio Design CAD-805C monoblock: $89595/pair
Single-ended triode 100W design. Driver tube and output tube have changed since 1998 review (driver is EL34, now 300B; output is 211, now 853). "Power ratings can be misleading," SS said. "The CAD-805C sounds big. Unassuming, in fact...it's about beauty...the graceful presence of the musicians. The exquisitely low-level detail. The perfect timing of the attack and decay of each note. Above all, the truth of timbre and the sheer beauty of the music." Best sound he could be..."the top end may be a tad rolled-off. But what? The magic of the music is there." Particularly with zero feedback, adds MC. "The space jumps" sums up Mr.T. (Vol.17 No.1, Vol.13 No.3; see also MC's article on feedback in Vol.21 No.1.)

Cary Audio Design CML-200 monoblock: $99595/pair
These three monoblocks can be operated in triode (100W) or ultralinear pentode (200W) modes. JS found it by their deep, room-filling bass and startling dynamic delivery, but what really wowed him was the way they delivered the music's emotional content. "[They] react more in that specific way that only the best equipment manages to." (Vol.20 No.5)

Cary Audio Design CAD-803E Signature monoblock: $4955/pair
"These are the magic Carys," SS declared of this tube 11Wpc monoblock. Of course, they use the 300B ("God's tube, sect IV"). "It's alive, man...like...breathing, breathing with life and light in a way that only a great SET amp can...Instead of being blown away by the music, I'm drawn into all the music—the quiet details—and the amount of music that he's able to rein back on the score, more of the subtle nuances of the performances. And the harmonic richness?" (Vol.21 No.4)

Conrad-Johnson Premier Eight A monoblock: $16,190/pair
"Massively powerful all-tube amplifier—measured clipping point was 193W into 8 ohms—that occupies pride of place in JE's system. A tube-lover's dream come true...electrifying dynamics and the best bass JE has heard from a tube amplifier coupled with superb tonal quality. Produced in extremely limited numbers. Output tubes are 6505As. A continuing MC favorite. (Vol.17 No.2)

Conrad-Johnson Premier Twelve monoblock: $69995/pair
The Twelve Premier gave the "snappiest, most coherent performance from a hifi-tubing sound amp" that MA has heard in his system. Shrinking..."just and rhythmic texture throughout the musical bandwidth...with all kinds of musical information present. And the precision, far more powerful than its rated output."

Audio Research's Power Amplifiers

Pass Labs Aeph 3: $2500 SS
Single-ended, solid-state, 30W, per amplifier. RIJ concluded that "positively do all of us to go out and hear this amplifier for yourselves—even if you currently own even more expensive amps." After auditioning it, he landed its "wide, deep, detailed soundstage; a delicious pre-recording of recorded detail without getting in your face; a portrait of tone that became addictive; and an ability to go loud...that belied the 30W specification.

Low sensitivity and power rating demand careful system/room matching, but magic has always required careful preparation. (Vol.20 No.4, 11, & 12)

Plinius SA-100 Mk II: $3995
This solid-state, switchable class-A/Class-B, 100Wpc design from New Zealand impressed WP as "one hell of an amplifier." He "fell hard for its airy, warm, detailed...yet soft and non-fatiguing presentation..." for the big guy's system the SA-100 was plagued by ground-loop problems, although it was quiet on our test bench. Careful home-audio assembly is advised. (Vol.20 No.4)

Reference Line Preeminent One Silver Signature: $7985 SS
A remote-controllable, solid-state 100Wpc design with solid-state power amp with both strength and finesse. SS was impressed by the Silver Signature's low-level resolution, visceral power, microdynamic retrieval, three-dimensionality, and depth. While he found overall sound that was grain-free, "the result was so fine, so well integrated, that the result was almost gasless." His conclusion: "It deserves to be heard." (Vol.20 No.7)

SimAudio Moon: W-5: $4795
"Steadfast bass control and tightness," RIJ declared. "For speakers that benefit from such control—ie, most domestic speakers that behave in a nonlinear fashion, at very low frequencies—the Moon W-5 is the perfect mate." If you have Apogees or Maggies, this is the amplifier to go with them. RIJ found the speakers, its lack-back maneuvers is a commendable. Although the measured output power was 190Wpc, the Moon's power capability seemed enormous. (Vol.22 No.3)

YAIA Passion 100 monoblock: $16,000/Pair
Clive Scalp, the "powerful, stylish" 300W monoblock, presented, full-bodied, very transparent bass ever, "partly in the grip of YIAIA's own Signature 6 Clarus preamplifier." He summarized for the money, especially when paired with other YAIA front-end components, you'd be hard pressed to find more musically satisfying monoblocks. (Vol.22 No.1)

YBA 1 HC Alpina: $7000
RJG was seduced by this 85Wpc solid-state amp, declaring it "simply magical...one smooth amp...he asserted, "...values, in its best moments, the communication of music's ebb and flow." He also praised its balance and overall detail. (Vol.19 No.6)

A (TUBE)
Audio Research VT100: $8995
"If the Omega motto is 'higher, faster, stronger,' then the VT200s should be 'deeper, wider, colder.' " WP remarked. "This amplifier is quite simple; a soundaging amp...and transparent? Forget about filling the room before pulling the plug. Output tubes are dual-nutube power amp with ultralinear output stage weighs 118 lbs and, because of its somewhat audiophile fan, should be placed as far away from your listening chair as possible. We found it to give a true 160Wpc rather than the specified 200Wpc. No matter...simply a great tube amp with no tube amp signature...stuns the uninterested Mr. P. (Vol.22 No.11)

Sonics Frontiers Rover 2: $4999
This 100Wpc tube power amplifier impressed RIJ with its build quality. "Sonics Frontiers is factual about providing very high parts and construction quality for the money." Also impressive, he noted, were its "exemplary dynamics...and the sheer beauty that nature delivers..." Other realistic soundstage presentation...Its natural perspective was very easy to listen to; relaxed but not slow, laidback but not rolled-off. It's "snappy and warm" disposition may strike some listeners as too much of a good thing, but overall, RIJ found it would not upset the finest of the finest-amplifiers people...I've ever had in my hands.

RIJ concluded the Class A rating, while TJP points to the very low output impedance as being a 'hoofer.' When RIJ compared it to the Moon W-5, he found that the Rover 2 "is a glowing presence in the undergrounge the Moon W-5 lacked," and that its relatively mellow bass and soft midrange were "advantageously tuned to the Genesis 500." (Vol.20 No.5, Vol.22 No.32)

Cary Audio Design CAD-803C monoblock: $99595/pair
This output transformer-less monoblock amplifier, which can deliver 90W into 8 ohms (80W into 4),...
You’ll hear more from us...

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Audio Consultants
Libertyville, IL
(847) 362-5594

Catania Sound
Santa Rosa, CA
(707) 526-7555

Goodwin’s Audio
Shrewsbury, MA
(508) 791-8200

Goodwin’s Audio
Boston, MA
(617) 734-8800

Northampton Audio
Northampton, MA
(413) 584-9547

Soundstage Audio
Silver Spring, MD
(301) 565-4011

To stand the test of time, a building must be built on a strong foundation.
Your system is built on a shaky AC power foundation.

Meet 64 pounds of bedrock: The Power Wedge® Ultra.
had JS in thrill. “Clarity in perfect union with musicality, not one at the expense of the other, is, as often the case,” he breathed. A soundstage was just beautiful, integrating perfectly with the rise of the frequency spectrum, alive with fine detail, harmonics, and realistic transient snap. The bass sounded large and in charge, always in perfect control... They were, at all times, effortlessly musical.” Careful speaker watching a must, with all OTLs showing significant differences between the latest version and the original samples he reviewed—the latter would be more for inclusion in Class A. There are changes in the chassis construction, power supply, circuit boards, and grounding scheme. The bass is now tighter and clearer, JS raved. “Subtle and refined! Absolutely Gran! NOT! Power to spare? By the boatload! Total shading and color? First-class Midrange map! Nothing but the best! He did go on, but you get the idea. (Vol.21 No.6)

Vacuum Tube Logic MB-750 Signature monoblock: $27,500/pair

Belshon's two-story, tubed ($46,500/pair side) monoblock, that delivers 600W in triode and 1200W in pentode, JS saw significant differences between the latest version and the original samples he reviewed—the latter were good enough for inclusion in Class A. There are changes in the chassis construction, power supply, circuit boards, and grounding scheme. The bass is now tighter and clearer, JS raved. “Subtle and refined! Absolutely Gran! NOT! Power to spare? By the boatload! Total shading and color? First-class Midrange map! Nothing but the best! He did go on, but you get the idea. (Vol.21 No.6)

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MF compared the M-450s to the Conrad-Johnson Previews TubeQ and found they “created a bigger soundstage and did a better job of giving the listener the sense of being in a large space—when that was the venue... Overall, the 450s sounded warmer, open, and more laid-back, particularly in the midrange.” (Vol.19 No.7 22-26)

A (Integrated)

Hel Canto SET-140: $5200

A single-ended, class-A 7.5W/pc integrated amp using 854 tubes ($40,000) in a robust, elegant, and obviously well-engineered enclosure. It’s “retro and futuristic at the same time,” he noted, combining “an artful tube with the Crystal 33310 11-value volume-control chip. And it will “drive more loudspeakers to sufficient levels for more people in more rooms, with a ‘gooseneck factor’ that “comes with the very best low-powered SET amps.” Ring no longer seems to be $560/pair, cover available for $180. (Vol.22 No.33)

Bowers Technologies Wazo: $3500

This “single-chip” amplifier won the 1998 Golden Note Awards for Best Component. “Its beauty is more than skin deep. said KR. How so? “Connect it to a smaller-driver system in a hand room and it supplies warmth and grip. Connect it to a large and powerful system and it produces subtlety and detail. Connect it to a neutral system and it is commensurately transparent.” (Vol.22 No.33) To add the exact character needed to make up to the sound of the system “better”... First sample wouldn’t reach specified output power ($50W) due to an underpowered driver... second sample was fine! “An amp that performs beyond its lab specifications. A true hybrid: no glass window, no plastic, no knobs, no dials, no fan, no...” lack in the setup. He added that it “would make a good performer—at the price it’s offered.” (Vol.21 No.4)

Cary Audio Design CAD-300SEI: $3995

Stereo, single-ended, tubed, integrated amplifier related to the Cary 300SE monoblock. “Add an eye toward the inextricable trend of the 300SE, HI. RA rapturously exclaimed, is wonderfully natural, they can’t believe the way it’s sounding like my ears and heart are seeing this...”. This is most involving and conclusive. He heard the “music in perfect union with musicality, not one at the expense of the other, is, as often the case, he breathed. A soundstage was just beautiful, integrating perfectly with the rise of the frequency spectrum, alive with fine detail, harmonics, and realistic transient snap. The bass sounded large and in charge, always in perfect control... They were, at all times, effortlessly musical.” Careful speaker watching a must, with all OTLs showing significant differences between the latest version and the original samples he reviewed—the latter would be more for inclusion in Class A. There are changes in the chassis construction, power supply, circuit boards, and grounding scheme. The bass is now tighter and clearer, JS raved. “Subtle and refined! Absolutely Gran! NOT! Power to spare? By the boatload! Total shading and color? First-class Midrange map! Nothing but the best! He did go on, but you get the idea. (Vol.21 No.6)

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This “single-chip” amplifier won the 1998 Golden Note Awards for Best Component. “Its beauty is more than skin deep. said KR. How so? “Connect it to a smaller-driver system in a hand room and it supplies warmth and grip. Connect it to a large and powerful system and it produces subtlety and detail. Connect it to a neutral system and it is commensurately transparent.” (Vol.22 No.33) To add the exact character needed to make up to the sound of the system “better”... First sample wouldn’t reach specified output power ($50W) due to an underpowered driver... second sample was fine! “An amp that performs beyond its lab specifications. A true hybrid: no glass window, no plastic, no knobs, no dials, no fan, no...” lack in the setup. He added that it “would make a good performer—at the price it’s offered.” (Vol.21 No.4)

Cary Audio Design CAD-300SEI: $3995

Stereo, single-ended, tubed, integrated amplifier related to the Cary 300SE monoblock. “Add an eye toward the inextricable trend of the 300SE, HI. RA rapturously exclaimed, is wonderfully natural, they can’t believe the way it’s sounding like my ears and heart are seeing this...”. This is most involving and conclusive. He heard the “music in perfect union with musicality, not one at the expense of the other, is, as often the case, he breathed. A soundstage was just beautiful, integrating perfectly with the rise of the frequency spectrum, alive with fine detail, harmonics, and realistic transient snap. The bass sounded large and in charge, always in perfect control... They were, at all times, effortlessly musical.” Careful speaker watching a must, with all OTLs showing significant differences between the latest version and the original samples he reviewed—the latter would be more for inclusion in Class A. There are changes in the chassis construction, power supply, circuit boards, and grounding scheme. The bass is now tighter and clearer, JS raved. “Subtle and refined! Absolutely Gran! NOT! Power to spare? By the boatload! Total shading and color? First-class Midrange map! Nothing but the best! He did go on, but you get the idea. (Vol.21 No.6)

Vaccum Tube Logic MB-750 Signature monoblock: $27,500/pair

Belshon's two-story, tubed ($46,500/pair side) monoblock, that delivers 600W in triode and 1200W in pentode, JS saw significant differences between the latest version and the original samples he reviewed—the latter were good enough for inclusion in Class A. There are changes in the chassis construction, power supply, circuit boards, and grounding scheme. The bass is now tighter and clearer, JS raved. “Subtle and refined! Absolutely Gran! NOT! Power to spare? By the boatload! Total shading and color? First-class Midrange map! Nothing but the best! He did go on, but you get the idea. (Vol.21 No.6)
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Tour of well-wound voices meandered down into a puddle. Bass reproduction could go quite deep, but he found it marred by "nasty thickness" in the 80–100Hz region. Chromed chassis adds $500 (var. Vol.19 No.5) 

Class CA-100: B195$ 

B195 built this solid-state, 100Wpc amplifier "a superb performer whose many and well-balanced strengths are reminiscent of those found in much pricier gear. Its effortless dynamics and high current capability should enable it to provide exemplary performance when paired with a broad range of speakers. None of its flaws are serious..." A touch of euphonic sweetness in the midrange, combined with "a bit of tension, a sharpness" in the upper mids, and a slightly darkness in the extreme high octaves cut to much more expensive amplifiers.

For CS, however, "the Mesa Baron is the whole truth, and nothing but the truth." Since the Baron has high output impedance and progressive distortion characteristics, its sound will vary more than usual depending upon the loudspeakers it is asked to drive — mandating careful preamp audition. However, JA concluded, "when everything does go its way, it will give its owner much musical enjoyment and can be recommended." Price is with 5881 output tubes; with E48s, the price is $5950, with E48s and BB85 tubes, it may be modified to take the new tubes for a one-time service fee of $270. (Vol.20 No.1) 

Motor Audio SA23: $4300 


Music 160 power amplifier: B190$ 

MF was "surprised and delighted by the ribaldike dim- 
mensionality and involving low-level resolution" of this 160Wpc solid-state amplifier's midrange. "Equally important, the amp's top-bottom presentation was both tonally and rhythmically coherent." Its sins, he said, were mainly of omission: mild compression of the soft end of the dynamic spectrum; a slight loss of low-level resolution; and a generally soft, somewhat relaxed presentation. Yet, "with its high power output, high current capabilities, its 30dB of gain, and its stability into any kind of load, the 160 can be ex- 

Electrocompaniet DAC-3 $1995 $ SS 

ST says that solid-state Gregor amplifiers' power amplifier's bass-sounding good — "right and defined. And the harmonic presentation was quite pleasing through the midrange." Choose your speakers carefully, however. "If you want to hear Malish's crescendo, you'll have to live with that thing," says the Electrocompaniet. If you think your speakers sound thin, analytical, overly bright, then it might just be your pick-

Kinyerites KBA-200: $2795 

Fan-cooled, 100Wpc, class A/B amplifier, "If you criter-

McComb Power Drive DNA-1: B2095 $ SS 

Beautifully made, this relatively inexpensive 175Wpc solid-state amplifier had HR wowing lyrical about its sound: "...warm, sweet, punchy, and eminently mus-

McCormack Power Drive DNA-0.5: $1949 $ SS 

Smaller — 12Wpc — sister to the DNA-1, the DNA-0.5 boasts a 45Wpc power output; a palpable midrange; crisp transients, air and detail to spare, and plenty of punch to percussive bass. "An Aladd in among amplifiers," he pro-

Mesa Engineering Baron: $3995-$5000 depending on tube options 

Tubed stereo power amp has plethora of operating options, including temperature compensation; sensitive feedback levels, and four operating modes — class-A tri-

CS loved this level of flexibility, being made of (shiny) sterner stuff than JA, who found a mode that worked for his reference speakers and stuck with it. Three mode with minimal feedback, quoted he, was "seductively sweet-sounding," although the frequency response was noticeably down-graded. For CS, however, "the Mesa Baron is the whole truth, and nothing but the truth." Since the Baron has high output impedance and progressive distortion characteristics, its sound will vary more than usual depending upon the loudspeakers it is asked to drive — mandating careful preamp audition. However, JA concluded, "when everything does go its way, it will give its owner much musical enjoyment and can be recommended." Price is with 5881 output tubes; with E48s, the price is $5950, with E48s and BB85 tubes, it may be modified to take the new tubes for a one-time service fee of $270. (Vol.20 No.1) 

Moth Audio Salvo: $2340 


Music 160 power amplifier: B190$ 

MF was "surprised and delighted by the ribaldike dim-

"Anssi Vendela's sound is full, lucid, slightly more Vs... and is your bottom end white? black, or... off. It can...-call... decorated... it was... It can... be...-

"Build quality is outstanding... It can run class-A or 

Preamplifier: $1995 

ST finds the sound of this affordable 150Wpc stereo amplifier gripping — with a detailed, full-bodied quality revealing every manner without extending into hippi-deta. The bottom end sounds deep and tightly controlled, while at the opposite end of the scale the treble is clean and clear. "It's the whole package," adds ST. "Its wide frequency response... So are spatial resolution and presentation," said of this 50Wpc solid-state design, concluding that the Finns had "a certain illuminated-from-within quality that breathes light as well into life as into each musical performance." (Vol.21 No.1) 

Proceed AMP-2: $1995 

TJN finds the sound of this affordable 150Wpc stereo amplifier gripping — with a detailed, full-bodied quality revealing every manner without extending into hippi-deta. The bottom end sounds deep and tightly controlled, while at the opposite end of the scale the treble is clean and clear. "It's the whole package," adds ST. "Its wide frequency response... So are spatial resolution and presentation," said of this 50Wpc solid-state design, concluding that the Finns had "a certain illuminated-from-within quality that breathes light as well into life as into each musical performance." (Vol.21 No.1) 

Proceed AMP-2: $1995 

Preamplifier: $12499 

This tube preamp has midrange 175W in stereo mode or 90W in mono (swivlable). MF liked its "deep, well-controlled, well-damped bass," as well as its neutral, "tending toward the lean side." Tidal Balance. While he felt the VTL didn't offer "the ultimate in soundstage depth," some of it was "sufficiently impressive" to quote from Class A, he was impressed by the "outstanding high-frequency extension, transient speed, and airy overall presentation. An outstanding combination of technical and acoustic values at a more than reasonable price. (Vol.20 No.6) 

B (Integrated Amplifiers) 

Audio Analogue Puccini Special Edition: $1195 

"Any shortcomings are slight, considering the amp's price, build quality, and overall quality of sound — harmonious richness, stunning purity of tone, sheer musicality," quoted ST. Once you've burned it in for the recommended 100 hours, he added, "it's like having Italy in your listening room — it sings. I swear!" Plus, it comes with an MM/MC phono section. A strong Class B at a price more in keeping with Class C sums up ST of this $1195 integrated amp.

Audio Note OTO Phono SE: $2495 

12Wpc single-ended integrated amp "revealed itself to an exceptionally good-sounding amplifier and a bargain at $2495 with a phonograph stage. It was clean, liquid, sweet, spacious, and transparent, but not at the expense of detail resolution. It had far better bass control and sub-

Bryston B-60: $1495 $ SS 

ST was mightily impressed by this solid-state 60Wpc integrated. "The midrange was especially smooth and sweet, making it a pleasure for me to listen to chamber music. The new and well-extracted... but it wasn't exaggerated. Bass was richly delineated, rich and meaty..." Not a powerhouse, however, he caution... match speakers to it carefully. "Softest high," cited the B-60. "The Bryston presented... clean, detailed, transparent soundstage without s... or put another way, offered the virtues of solid-state without the vices." Almost as good as solid-state gets in every respectable except... price... The B-60 will be one of the great hi-fi classics," WP says, and listener to its eight hours every day... 20-year warranty... remote control adds $300 (Vol.20 No.5. Vol.20 No.7 & 10) 

CONRAD-JOHNSON CAV-50: $2495 

The 45Wpc tube integrated with a passive input stage is "a particularly good value sound," said MC, although he had some reservations about its ability to handle reactive loads but he was unequivocal about its sound: "It has an...-detailed, transparent soundstage without s... or put another way, offered the virtues...or, the best sound... with the best tube...-pull tube integrated you can buy... you hear the music first, then the detail." (Vol.21 No.8 & 10) 

Densen Beat-B100: $1295 

This 60Wpc solid-state design was slow to warm up in MC's system, but when it did, it "rewarded the listener with good transparency and a pure, open treble devoid of the grain usually found in this price range... Bass was...-detailed, transparent soundstage without s... or put another way, offered the virtues...or, the best sound... with the best tube...-pull tube integrated you can buy... you hear the music first, then the detail." (Vol.21 No.8 & 10) 

LEAD MISTRAL: $1095 $ SS 

This 50Wpc tube integrated is "proof that simpler is better," according to ST. "The openness and airiness is the thing here. Good resolution, too. The story here is simplicity: Get a simple circuit that works and tweak it to death, then QC; the production like crazy. We reco-

Linn Majik-1: $1195 

"Don't be put off by the 33Wpc power rating," RH cau- Stereophile, April 1999

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touched, the Mag is 1 has the ability to deliver current to low impedances, and can increase its power output to 1000W into 2 ohms. I never wanted for power in my small room. The amp "excelled in several areas: reproducing natural timbres, though an impressionistic relative to overall richness, and most of all conveying the music's life and energy." Price includes remote control. At $1000 the optional power stage is a bargain. RH's top choice under $2000. (Vol.19 No.12, Vol.20 No.9)

Musical Fidelity A220: $999.95

This 60Wpc-solid-state integrated amp is biased heavily into class-A, which makes it run hot, hot, hot, causing ST-1's review. Good ventilation is a must. "The A220 had a lovely loudness that many tube amplifiers struggle to achieve. Plus it had solid-state drive and dynamics. Subtle details were resolved so well, the A220 sounded more powerful than 50Wpc." (Vol.20 No.5)

C (Integrated Amplifiers)

Audio Refinement: The Complete: $995

Remote remote adds $50. (See CS's review in this issue)

Stereophile: 330: $495 $55

"Performance for the price...makes the Creek...a breakthrough product." At $1000 60Wpc-solid-state integrated amp with a passive line-stage (plug-in MC phono module available for $60). The resolution of sound's detail, from an amp this size at this price, is... almost staggering—not far from the very best I've heard at any price. Bass and midrange "are not as full as I might like, but the sound is very smooth, very sweet, and the treble is nicely extended without soundstage peaking. ...Exactly what we need in budget hi-fi: sound quality so good that you may feel no need to mess around with more expensive stuff." "Most of the music doesn't matter," commented WP, who was impressed with the iron's inherent in making the statement. "If it did, Creek would have never managed to fit all that music into the 4330's tiny box. The Creek 330 isn't a great amplifier for the money, it's a great amplifier for the money." For the price, a $1000 integrated amp, $500 module is sold. (Vol.20 No.11, Vol.21 No.8)

Denon PMA-2000R: $999

ST was impressed by this 80Wpc-solid-state integrated's user-friendly features (remote control, tone controls, MM/ MC phono sections, headphone section), as well as its "clean, clear, articulate sound that is totally nonfatiguing and free of grit, grunge, and glare." Still, he found the sound "just a little uninviting." Nonetheless, he urged, "Tell your friends." (Vol.21 No.6)

Musical Fidelity: X-A1: $999.95

ST liked this solid-state 50Wpc integrated. "The sound quality is so good that for so little money that you might seriously question the need to spend more. It's gone up $100 since he said that, but still he insists: 'Even at $600, the new 'street' price from Audio Advisor, is an attractive box. Tube-like sound, excellent build quality for the price, and unusual styling. Can't go wrong." (Vol.21 No.7)

Musical Fidelity A-2: $699

This 25Wpc monoblock rated runs hot, ST cannnot be biased into class-A. The sound is very special, he insisted, "not at all what most people are used to hearing (suffering?) from incompact equipment." Not the last word in resolution, he adds, but "what a musical. Love it!" (Vol.21 No.10)

Myrdal MI-120: $995

This 60Wpc solid-state amp is musical, ST declared, if "by 'musical' you mean sweet, smooth, liquid." However, "the sound, overall, could use more body." Analog lovers are well served — unfaded phono outputs include MM and MC, but power prices, and the head- phone jack runs off the power amp rather than a cheapie "throwaway" op-amp. MM power stage adds 129, MC power stage adds 159. As of 1999, distributed by Aretch. (Vol.20 No.1)

Rega Brio: $995

WP called this 30Wpc solid-state integrated with phono section a "lively, well-balanced amplifier that rendered reproduction realistic, musically engaging sound at times. ...A daise on the polite side, he thought, and "it was 'awesome' at times—it is the 1000's little texture to the music." 30W output necessitates careful speaker matching. (Vol.21 No.9)

D

Editor's Note: There are about 130 Class D amplifiers listed.

K

Pax X-1000, Accuphase M-2000, Sonic Frontiers, Power


Deletions


Loudspeakers Systems

Editor's Note: Class A "Loudspeakers" are sufficiently idiosyncratic and differ enough from one another that prospective customers should read Stereophile's original reviews in their entirety for descriptions of the sounds. I have therefore just listed every system or combination that at least one of Stereophile's reviewers feels is a result of his or her experience, to approach the current state of the art in loudspeaker design. (Note that, to be eligible for inclusion in Class A, the system must be full-range—it, feature bass extensions to 20Hz. It must also be capable of reaching realistic sound-pressure levels without any feeling of strain.)

For those unacquainted with all the last few hertz of low-end extension, we have created "Classes A, B, and C (Restricted Extreme LF)" for those speakers that are state of the art in every other way. Candidates for inclusion in this class will reach down to at least 40Hz, below the lowest notes of the four-string double-bass and bass guitar. In addition, such have been the recent progress in loudspeaker design at a more affordable level that we have an extra class E: for "Entry Level." Someone once asked me why Stereophile bothers to review inexpensive loudspeakers at all; to effect, aren't we insulating our readership by recommending that they buy inexpensive models? Remember: It's possible to put together a musically satisfying, mid-high-end system around any of our Class D and E recommendations. That's why they're listed—and why you should consider buying them.

A

Artemis Eos Signature with Large Base Modules: $1670-$2200/pair depending on finish (Vol.20 No.10)

Audio Artistry Beethoven: $28,000/system

Four-piece, bi-amplied dipole system consisting of two dynamic main panels, two subwoofers, a pair of passive crossovers, and a styrene-driven, converting, balanced, active (front-)crossover. (Vol.20 No.11)

Runaway Audio Labs Signature SC-V1: $23,995/pair

Price is for light and black oak finishes; rosewood and cherry veneers add $1000/pair. (Vol.19 No.8)

Eggleston Works Audiophile: $14,900/pair (Vol.20 No.10)

JMB Grande Utopia: $70,000/pair (Vol.19 No.5)

JMB Utopia: $30,000/pair (Vol.21 No.4)

Revolution Levis Gen/Sub-15: $14,580-$18,500/pair, depending on finish (stands necessary) Matching stand costs $1500/pair. (SCHTA No.6, Vol.20 No.10)

Revolution Levis Salon: $14,400-$15,500/pair depending on finish (Vol.22 No.3)
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- October, 1998

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 back trial period. Price includes line-level cross-
 over. (Vol.20 No.6)

A — Restricted Extreme LF

Artemis Esos Signature: $8200-$10,600,
depending on finish (stands necessary)

According to Artemis's sales literature, the biggest
trick of all they've thought-out is, you can't
touch the Bass Module, as its a horn-loaded
driver. Aside from pulling a vanishing act, what they
do better than any other speaker I've auditioned— is resolve
too-low-level detail: spatial and ambient information, and
even texture and touch in the lower midrange and upper bass. But they
don't lie, their speakers give out the number-one-no-hands bass.

I also wonder if there isn't a touch of midrange warmth, a quality he finds
easy to ignore—if not actually crude. "Worth a listen, if you've
get the scrub." (Vol.18 No.9)

Boulder Silencio Monitor: $5000/pair (stands and
cables included)

Excellent two-way minimonitors with onboard
crossover uses silver wire throughout and successfully
pulls off the trick of persuading its listeners that its
much bigger than it really is—at least at medium levels.

Useful bass ends down to 25Hz, with a delightful com-
 bination of weight and articulation. The uncolored pre-
 sentation is astonishingly transparent, soundstaging is
superbly palpable, and total balance is a light on the point.

It's quite an accomplishment. Overall, the most
musical-sounding design to come from B&W that JA has
heard. A WP favorite. (Vol.17 No.6)

Dunlavy SC-1VA: $7995-$8495/pair,
depending on finish

A three-way, dynamic improvement on the SC-IV that
RA says has reached the point where—with the best
source materials and associated equipment—it sounds
less like a speaker and more like the music that's being
reproduced.

He had, "mirbal accuracy, "tremendous, obvious, "exceptional top-bottom in-
tegrating," and "superb" bass. But Dunlavy and RA say the
temperance placing these speakers along a long wall,
widely separated. JA holds back the ultimate Class A
full-range accolade until he has resolved the question of
the SC-IV's A true bass extension to his own satisfaction.

(Vol.17 No.4, Vol.18 No.3, original version; Vol.21
No.11, IV/A)

mb1b 119: $15,850/pair

This ideacute-sounding loudspeaker represents a seri-
 ous attempt at reproducing a true omnidirectional source. It
impresses JA with its "extremely effective and well-
thought-out engineering." The woofer's breakdown load-
signing scheme gave the bass a "puddling" character, mean-
ing that it could lag somewhat behind the rest of the speaker's presentation—a bigger problem with the more powerful overstroked lines of jazz and rock that JA's room's acoustics couldn't entirely absorb. Like JA. Even
so, "I fell in love with this speaker's sweet, detailed
midrange, clean, transparent high frequencies, grand,
sweeping soundstaging, and, above all, the majesty
which it presented much of the music I love. A power-
ful amp is necessary. Price is for semi-black finish; price
in piano black is $20,100/pair. (Vol.20 No.4)

Ravel Ultima Gemini: $6000-$8000/pair,
depending on finish (stands necessary)

TJN was very impressed by these stand-mounted, two-
way, four-driver, reflex-loaded loudspeakers. "The over-
all balance... is a little lean rather than rich... But it is
very "transient." Transient snap, the top end is detailed, and
there is a transparency to the mid-frequency region, unique, quite
JTN. Even so, "I fell in love with this speaker's sweet, detailed
midrange, clean, transparent high frequencies, grand,
sweeping soundstaging, and, above all, the majesty
Amplification is necessary. Price is for semi-black finish; price
in piano black is $20,100/pair. (Vol.20 No.4)

Electra Acoustics Model 8: $5000-$6000/pair,
depending on finish (stands optional)

"Almost a full-range speaker," MF writes, "with gut-
ting midrange, and very nice mid-high—although a
big 000 end cues that to a great degree.

Superbly engineered and built. An outstanding value for
the money; needs lots of clean, controlled power. Good image focuses and big, thick, reverbed sounds."

"Particularly clear, and the "finger-snap"精准 it
insists on. Works best in a big room. An upgrade
is now available, involving adjustments to the bass
crossover network and to the enclosure's damping. TJN
didn't find that it made all that much difference, but said
if you have an older pair of 8s and aren't entirely happy
with their bass performance, it might be worth it.

Upgrade option, $500/pair plus shipping: optional sand-
filled spiked stands, $500/pair. (Vol.21 Nos.1 & 11)

Audio Physic Cabler: $31395/pair

This floorstanding speaker is built as three separate,
decoupled enclosures, offering unial flexibility in
coupling the woofer to the floor. This level of refined
depth development captured MF. "It sounds complete and
complete, and it exquisitely re a prototype puzzled
with the most part... Whenever it is delivered, "it proved
having highly acurate... although the totality was warmer than I
am used to." He also commented on the Caldera's fluid sound
and "sense of stability and inner calm...Imp-
presses on the grounds of pure quality alone, it quietly
gains its dimensions, even-handedly, over time."

A lively, musical, resolution, and ability to surprise by
telling more about the inner harmony and balance of favorite works,
continued to satisfy." Difficult load for tube amplifiers.

Expensive, but under the right conditions could well
work for the serious enthusiasts. (Vol.20 No.8)

Avantgarde Dino: $14,700/pair

MC was impressed by these three-way loudspeakers
with midrange and treble horns and active, reflex-
loaded woofers. "To appreciate the qualities of
Avantgarde's Dino, it's necessary to discard... the analy-
itical view that all must be in perfect balance... There's
true sonic value in that majestically broad, dynamic
midrange, in the obvious microdynamic delicacy, the
near-zero distortion, the potential for very high sound levels
and a unique, easy to listen to, the source and the
the speaker's compatibility with low-powered puristic ampli-
ifiers." PM is a tad more reserved: "the treble doesn't
quite match up to the mid (it's also a bit brigh), while the
bass is a disaster area. Obsessive might go for the
mid/top area, mistrusting with the crossover... and then
the treble, with its most of the high end."

"Would be Class A if not for the bass. Price includes two SU21271
woofer modules. (Vol.21 No.6)

Celestion A3: $3499/pair

CB called this three-way floorstanding loudspeaker
"that ranks of some birds; a speaker that does justice to rock
and roll while optimizing acoustic sources, and without
audibly sacrificing any particular frequencies. The A3
gets out of the way and lets the music shine through, with
the speaker's transparent internal details of acoustic
instuments, the rhythms and panning of straight-ahead jazz,
and the bone-rattling transients of on-holders-barred rock.

Set in a tall chair, with your ears above the tweeter axis, and
there will be a suaveess in the presence region; sit below that
and it fills in just fine. (Vol.21 No.6)

Dynamic Control 3.3: $3599/pair

"In balance of strengths—tonal neutrality, dynamic
expressions, and, unremarked bottom end"—

impressed WP tremendously, despite his feeling that the bass
torus was somewhat lean. "In addition to its finely
detailed presentation of swing, it was a damper to
refreshing in the most objective of the ACs. Needs
powerful amplification to open up. (Vol.21 No.1)

Dynamic Censtor 3.0: $3599/pair

This floorstanding three-way "is the dynamic speaker to

Passive Control Units

Crossovers/Steep-Step Devices

Power Amplifiers

Loudspeakers

Sterophile, April 1999

121
Marin Logar SL3: $3400-$3700/pair, depending on finish
Striking hybrid speaker system (4" electrostatic panel, 10" woofer) that captivated WP with its transparency (specifically in the lower midrange) and power to match. The new, powerful amplifiers and precise placement within a room, but when properly supported are capable of astonishingly life-like sound, according to JA. "Designed for those who demand nothing less than the best from their high-end system," said WP. (Vol.20 No.5)
Mirage OM6: $3000/pair $$
TJN "really liked" this bipolar loudspeaker with integral active (150W) subwoofer. "I know of few loudspeakers that can match its extended frequency response, output capability, sheer lentilistic ability, and low coloration. Thanks to its separately adjustable subwoofer, it is relatively easy to position and is not overly demanding of associated components." Overall sound is a mile laid-back and forgiving, leading to absence of "jump factors," while bottom octaves are flat and rich rather than right and highly detailed. "Minute quibbles," said the major. "They were incredibly subtle, drawing me into the musical performance and refraining to distort the experience with...distraction coloration." (Vol.20 No.1)
NHT 3.3: $3400/pair $$
Unusual four-way dynamic speaker, deep but narrow, goes against the front wall to optimally load the woofers but still get minimum likable imaging precision. TJN was impressed with the NHT's sound, commenting on its extended, powerful, well-defined bass, the speaker's ability to deliver the intended high frequencies, and well-bred soundstage. He did find the low less expansive than with some other speakers, however, the imaging restricted to the space between the speakers. TJN chose the 3.3 over any of the speakers in this series. (Vol.20 No.1) High Fidelity
Gradient Revolution: $3995/pair $%
"I'm in the revolution" exclaimed DO. He found the Revolution, designed to be less room-dependent than ordinary speakers, "quite exciting," although not spectac- ular in conventional audiophile terms. He elevated their general strengths as "organic wholeness, good imaging, excellent microdynamic expression, and convincing rhythmic drive. Original review samples turned out to have a broken crossover. JA's Follow-Up en- dorses DO's -- unimprovising-looking but neutrally balanced speaker, and he adds that the bass quality and extension are both absolutely sym- pathetically received by MF. He also adds, that the Revolution work great as rear-channel speakers in a Dolby AC-3 system. (Vol.18 No.5, Vol.20 No.33)
Halo Design Group Revelation Three: $2195/pair $$
A "tautly loudspeaker," said KO. "Exceedingly neu- tral, neither favoring nor neglecting any part of the range. With the right associated equipment, it was able to resolve the most subtle of musical details, but in a way that avoided sounding clinical or hyped...I know of no loudspeaker existing in the $2000-$3000/pair price range that is capable of providing a better, more musically satisfying performance than the Revelation Three. In fact, I'd recommend to anyone considering speakers in the $5000 (and higher) price range that they listen to them." (Vol.21 No.2)
Joseph RM23i: $2299-$2699/pair, depending on finish
Clips that foremost encountered this "sweet, clear, articulate flouataing-dend" at the 1998 CES, since then he has added to his description the phrases "airy, dynamic, and uncouled" and "holographic, precise, and nonfatiguring." He warned that those who like a louder sound may find the RM23i a "kind of dry at first" but with time and experience, it will open up to rich and deep, and chills to fans of acoustic music searching for the ultimate in two-way coherence, but who don't require slam speakers." (Vol.21 No.11)
Professional Monitor Company LB-1: $2160-$2440/pair, depending on finish

This two-way, stand-mounted, magnetically shielded system is priced competitively within the electronics industry. It features a "great natural," neutral, neutral sound, transparency, and three-dimensional soundstaging. Although its midrange performance didn't equal its long-term reference Quads, it did hold its own in that part of the spectrum with full-sized, open-box, three-way systems, as much. PM contends: "It is an exceptional standard for small monitors, with stunning imaging and transparencies." However, he notes, "It has limited bass and loudness capabilities, but its sensitivity, its needed branding, and must sit perfectly well on the top of your listening wall." Matching spiked stands cost $399/pair (Vol.2/No.5).

Ruark Equinox: $4000/pair

"The real deal," KH enthused—"a high-end loudspeaker with few compromises in performance... they have few deficiencies, and the ability to handle屋里 a lot of air in a room. They threw a huge soundstage, were balanced at both high and low listening levels, and were well controlled and particularly strong through the midrange. The original version was a J.A. favorite. Special Edition is an ST reference. (Vol.19 No.6, original version: Vol.21 No.12, Special Edition)

Casabellare Foleto 400: $2495/pair

Two-way, floorstanding, reflex box that sounds like it actually produced and itself "nice, neutral, detailed sound with wonderful articulation, well-paced bass," he reports. "The bass on this speaker has to get heard—be superb, considering the speaker's relatively small size. It's... right, controlled, nicely detailed." 94dB sensitivity for a few dollars, the point of comparison to low-output amplification. (Vol.20 No.6)

Genelec 1030AMP: $1298/pair (stands necessary)

JGH rated this powered minimonitor highly for its top-end finish, which he found essentially free from colorations and distortion. The Genelec is probably the best compromise of sound quality and price. With its linear and well-controlled sound, the Genelec stands quite well recommended, however, due to its rather ill-defined bass. Current versions differ from that reviewed in that the Genelec's 1030AMP is now "standmount" ready. (Vol.21 No.12, Special Edition)

Martin-Logan Aerios is: $2300-$2500/pair, depending on finish

This updated version of the Aerios substantially improves upon the original, insists ST. A new bass driver and crossover enable the electronic panel to blend even more seamlessly with the woofer. Sum says, "The bass is deeper, tighter, even more musical... The new Aerios has more "tonal" qualities than it's predecessor. Of course, listening to the speaker is still as good as it ever has been."

There is a lot of air in the room. The room is nicely lit, with a view of the speaker's lower end. Sounds good in small rooms—ST specifies that its 17" is 27" by 75" room represents about the same level—requires careful placement. (Vol.20 No.7)

Platinum Audio Solo: $1695/pair $2550/pair $3500/pair (stands necessary)

This diminutive speaker impressed JA as being a seri-ous contender, especially at its new lower price. "All that bass coming from those little boxes," was the oft-heard refrain during his audition. However, there is a price to pay for that impressive LF extension—"you need lots of juice!" Parny alguns need not apply. There is also a slight loss in terms of absolute definition. That said, he found the Solo's lack of midrange coloration praiseworthy, adding that, coupled with excellent clarity, it allowed minute detail to be easily perceived. "A musical, no-nonsense speaker for the bass-loving audiophile with a small room," he concludes. Matching PS-20 pedestal stands—essentially—cost $329/pair. (Vol.18 No.11)

ProAc Response One SC: $2100/pair $3500/pair (stands necessary)

Upgrading the Response One S features new woofer and a crossover modification. "Touched by magic," said WP. Incredibly open and spacious, pos-sessed of "phenomenal clean midrange," the Re-sponse One SC has "an effortless presentation that transcends into a transparent, outstanding three-way relationship with seeming ease." Particularly good with tubes, even low-watt SETs. Lacks deep bass, but subjectively sounds satisfyingly full. (Vol.20 No.3)}
Experience your CDs in a whole new light. Don't just play them, X-Ray them with Musical Fidelity's new 24-bit X-Ray CD player. This aptly named innovation is incredibly transparent, revealing every last angstrom of musical detail.

What Hi-Fi?'s "Supertest" Verdict
Once each year editors of England's What Hi-Fi? magazine put their brains (and ears) together to decide which CD player is the overall best value. This year's winner? Musical Fidelity's exceptional X-Ray.

Outstanding X-RAY
The X-Ray stood out—both visually and sonically—from the rest. "There's no restraint or softness in the way the X-Ray plays music—instead you get the kind of insight that ensures the machine lives up to its name—but at the same time there's never that apprehension that it's all about to go horribly wrong. The music pours forth in a highly addictive manner," reported What Hi-Fi?'s editors in February 1999.

"What the X-Ray has, in keeping with its oh-so-apt name, are fabulously naked, Zeiss-inspired transparency, the sort of detail retrieval which would make a Hornsby collector swoon, and top-to-bottom consistency which means I'm making the X-Ray my sub-$1,700 reference," adds the bowled-over Ken Kessler in Hi-Fi News & Record Review, October 1998.

Inside the gracefully styled cylindrical metal chassis, the X-Ray boasts an advanced Sony laser transport and a state-of-the-art Burr-Brown PCM1716 24-bit processor. The internal circuit offers remarkable 0.0025% total harmonic distortion and unbelievable 140 dB dynamic range. Both coaxial and Toslink digital outputs are included along with a full-featured remote.

Summary: Don't Let The Money Burn
"This is a player that does music—it's as simple as that—and does it across a huge range of genres and in a wide variety of systems," raves What Hi-Fi? "It's also superbly built and we love the looks: if we had ($1,300) burning a whole in the corporate pocket, this is the player with which we'd be going home."

Order X-Ray With No Risk!
You won't find the X-Ray in any store in the US, but it's very easy to get one. Call toll-free (800) 942-0220 and tell us you want to "x-ray" your CDs. We'll send you the amazing X-Ray for only $1,295 plus $19.95 shipping in the US.

If you're not thrilled by the ultra-revealing sound of the X-Ray, let us know within 30 days and you can return the X-Ray for a full refund of the purchase price.
ing. "Is [this] the best loudspeaker in its price range? ... It combines a solid bass with an uncolored midrange, fine soundstaging, and a detailed, open top end." Shortcomings include an occasionally cruddy top end and (sometimes) an audible edge in the mid-treble. "But, the good things are so much more definite, that I'll definitely give the Studio 100a a listen." Borderline Class II. (Vol.21 No.8)

Professional Monitor Company III-1S: $4500/pair (stands necessary)

KJ was of two minds about this three-way standmount: "[This] is a very compact, very fast speaker with a superb harmonic integration across the frequency spectrum and is almost completely free of grain and blurring. In addition, its rendering of fine dynamic modulations is..." PSB Stratus Bronze: $1099/pair SS

13W deep that "Resolution..." Electrostatic (stands word other ST wrote word..."

Stereophile, April 1999

"The "resolution," "Electrostatic..." Stereophile, No.3). A satisfying sense of low-end extension, an extension not bought at the expense of the midbass... The treble will simply tell it like it is," while the midrange "was notably uncolored." Revealing and uncolored, "they definitely serve the music," he felt. (Vol.19 No.9)

Joseph Audio RM74i: $1299-$1499/pair, depending on finish (stands necessary)

Mellow-balanced — but naturally detailed — mini-monitor that "assisted, represented good value. While the "prices" press in terms of clarity..." Perhaps the finest rock recordings in an acceptably pleasant manner. "If..." (Vol.20 No.10)

Linn Tukan: $795-$895/pair, depending on finish (stands necessary)

RIH found the Tukans forgiving of less than optimal placement — a real bonus for those with limited seating options. "They threw a wonderful soundstage from the most unlikelihood locations; but when positioned optimally..." He described them as "neat, unflattering, and..." (Vol.20 No.4)

Paradigm Active 20: $1600/pair $55 (stands necessary)

Active (30W for tweeter, 110W for woofers) two-way loudspeaker that "described as "superb-sounding, well-engineered bargain." Low-frequency definition was "okay," and there was "a slight dryness in the midrange..." but this was minor in degree and didn't get in the way of the music." (Vol.20 No.4)
tion of vocals, woodwinds, and brass instruments on well-engineered acoustic recordings was spooky in its realism.” Minor quibbles: “HF range was slightly highlighted, getting the sound a rather crisp presentation,” and, while the bass was “extended, natural, quiet, dynamic, tuneful,” it had “a slight roundness or warmth in the 60-80Hz range.” Still, “by a wide margin, the finest speaker under $1000/pair I’ve ever heard.” Matching Premier stand costs $179/pair (Vol.21 No.7).

Platinum Audio Studio 1: $995/pair (stands necessary)

ST calls this ported two-way “a good buy.” “The soundstaging is superb... the clarity is exceptional... What’s more, the clarity of the tweeter is not compromised by any muddiness, as much $1000/pair.” (Vol.19 No.6)

PSB Stratus Mini: $1049/pair $$$ (stands necessary)

“Superbly engineered... offering a lot of performance at a price lower than you would expect,” exclaimed JA. “Trebles sound off the chart, the bass extended, and benefits from judicious boundary reinforcement, yet “when everything is right... the result is clean, coloration-free, graceful, musically satisfying sound, with superb soundstaging.” (Vol.19 No.6) Gloss-black finish adds $100/pair; matching desktop stand costs $295 (Vol.19 No.6)

Mission 731: $299/pair $$$ (stands necessary)

“A masterpiece that will enable even the most destitute of music lovers to gain admission to our exciting hobby.” Rated BJR. Of the current production version, JFR felt “the new silk-dome tweeter in the latest version of this budget-priced, older ear’s greatest sound-improving, dark and recession-free high-frequency performance.” He’s also chuffed about their “level of transparency and top-end sparkle... To these ears, the speaker now competes with most speakers I’ve heard under $1000/pair.” PM and WP like ‘em too, although they’re a tad more reserved, calling the 731 a match for BW’s DM302. (Vol.19 No.6, Vol.21 No.4)

NHT SuperZero: $250/pair $$$ (stands necessary)

Not just humungous, bass, but low frequencies at all levels, including that to a thin balance that fails completely on orchestral music. If, like SS, you play a lot of large-scale classical music, you’ll miss the power of this tiny speaker. With the right kind of music, “the best-sounding speaker under $1000” are CG, who was impressed by the resolution of detail, accurate midrange balance, and incredibly spacious soundstaging. The treble is a touch exaggerated, however, which is further emphasized by the speaker’s lack of bass. (Vol.17 No.1 & 9)

Signal DM5: $400/pair (stands necessary)

This little reflex two-way “could make you think that the knee in the price/performance curve... starts lower than you might have previously believed,” proclaimed MK. He found stands—good ones—essential for proper

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Subwoofers & Crossovers

A Audio Physic Rhea: $5995

MF loved this powerful (500W) subwoofer. “When the Rhea was properly doped in, it never thicknessed or slowed kickdrum or acoustic bass. It didn’t attach itself to bartonic voices.” I wondered whether it was doing anything until I played some music that contains really deep, fundamental bass tones... Then the Rhea hit me where it hurt. Where I want to hurt... Getting these bottom octaves right is expensive and tricky, but once you have them just right...” (Vol.21 No.10)

Genesis Technologies 900: $1900

Active 500W sealed-box subwoofer with 15” driver and remote control. “Awesome,” said JG. “Bass frequencies are floor-shakingly deep and impressively authoritative, but also very detailed, with excellent pitch resolution—and the sub’s ability to accurately measure very high levels seems limitless. It never boomed-out even on the heaviest bass... and the system as a whole never became confused or congested, no matter how much noise I threw at it.” Price is for black finish; rosewood $2200. (Vol.19 No.10, Vol.21 No.11)

MMK MX-5000H TX ML II: $2695

TJ has heard few subwoofers that can match the powerd MX-5000H TX’s “ability to make a listener want to jump up and fly with the onset of a transient.” On music, he also found it impressive and authoritative—“Up there with the best subwoofers, and, in some respects, at the head of the pack.” MLII versions overcomes the dynamic-range limitations that TJ ran into in his large room with the earlier versions. (Vol.18 No.10, Vol.19 No.11)

REL Studio: $8000

This powered “sub-bass” system has an adjustable high-pass filter and a DC-coupled 300W amplifier. “It truly lives up to its billing as a sub-bass system,” WP said. “It’s got the kind of bass that seems to disappear, as though you’d heard little or no bass reinforcement, as well as those that benefit from an extra half (or even whole) octave beyond-end. But it does more than that. It also makes your primary loudspeakers possess even more of those qualities which are generally for frequency, more sense of space, more magic.” (Vol.21 No.7)

Revel Ultima Sub-15: $2500 each

Reve LE-1 subwoofer crossover/amplifier: $6000 each

BM calls the SB-15 “superb on music... In terms of extension and bass quality, though, it is possible to equal its music performance with less expensive subwoofers. But I’ve also heard the Revel subwoofers in lots much smaller than mine... [where] it clearly is not the subwoofers itself at the expense...” (Vol.21 No.10)

Snell SUB 1800: $2500 each

Huge, THX-specific, passive subwoofer using an 18” drive-unit that beats all but one for its combination of bass extension and dynamic range. (Vol.18 No.7, Vol.19 No.2)

Bryston 101i electronic crossover: $1450

Lightweight in image depth and an increase in electronic "solignity" keep this otherwise excellent solid-state crossover from attaining Class A status. Very versatile regarding slopes and crossover frequencies. Balanced inputs and outputs add $250. (Vol.17 No.5)

REL Acoustics Strata II: $1195

This reflex-loaded, powered (600W) design “was obviously designed with a set of priorities different from those of the vast majority of today’s boxsubwoofers,” observed RH. “Moreover, [it] offers a huge range of connections and setup adjustments, suggesting it will work well in different rooms and systems...” What impressed RH most “was its ability to add weight and extension, and to expand the soundstage without ever calling attention to itself.” (Vol.20 No.8)
Melos SHA-Gold: $1995

This headphone amp/preamp really got W'T's juices flowing. As a headphone amp, I've never heard its equal," he gushed. Remote volume control via Phono-type

Sennheiser HD 600: $449.95

W'T, KR, and ST are unanimous in proclaiming these the best
dynamic headphones they've ever heard. The only ones with which I have ever been physically and acoustically

Stax Lambda Nova: $780-$2860

The latest iteration of electroluminescent Lambda heads is faster, more wool, and less colored than its

C Cary Audio Design CAD-300SEI: $3995

Stereo, single-ended, tubed, integrated amplifier related to the Cary 300SE monoblock: includes a headphone

Grado Reference Series One: $695

WP found the I5 One headphones clean, warm, and dynamic — capable, he claimed, "of portraying music as an artful

AU's headphone section (Vol.17 No.10): "The dynamic performance of the $2995 Sennheiser HD 600, to

HeadRoom Supreme portable headphone amplifier: $449.95

Small, beautifully made, battery-powered solid-state amplifier based on a proprietary surface-mount module and featuring switchable intraaural crossfeeding and time delay to render headphone listening to stereo program simulate artificial-sounding. The effect of this is surprisingly able in A/B comparisons, but proves much less fascinating in long-term listening sessions. Includes a "headRPM" display. Drives dynamic headphones to high levels with authority and excellent clarity, without this being associated with any brightness. JA bought a Supreme to drive his Sennheiser HD 580s, with which it makes a very musical-sounding combination. JA auditioning of the $599 Cosmic versions suggests that it is, indeed, cosmic. (Vol.17 No.1 & 2, Vol.21 No.7, Vol.21 No.2: see also WP's review of the $129 HeadRoom Traveler Bag in Vol.21 No.10.)

Meola SHA-1 headphone amplifier: $1095

Three-line-level inputs and two low-impedance headphone

Fanfare FT-1: $1395

SS111: "This reference-quality amp offers excellent bass performance and offers an amazing bass to top-end sparkle compared to more expensive units. "Low Class," he

Linn Kremlins: $4400

This wide-band input, like many British designs, features poor selectivity and sufficient (but not overwhelming)
At Legacy, our goal is simple: "To design and build the best speakers possible."

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Signal Processors

**A**

Autech D-28 Digital Voice Equalizer: $8200

SS called this digital equalizer “a great EQ device. It’s easily the best I’ve heard for source-material corrections. If you spend most of your time listening to longstanding artists captured on less than ideal recordings, you’ll simply adore this equalizer. It isn’t too subtle by any means but extremely effective.”

**B**

Rocktron Circle Surround HTD-1 5.2.2 surround-sound decoder: $999

"Just as Dolby Pro-Logic is being superseded by the digital audio formats, Circle Surround can come along with what is probably as good a matrix decoder as you’ll ever see," says JGI. "Circle Surround delivers drastic improvements in realism from raw sources, plus movie surround that’s as good as it gets." (Vol.21 No.7)

Recording Equipment

Editor’s Note: We have only included products of which we have direct experience. Anyone about to undertake a surround sound recording should ignore all “assistive” microphones, as a rule of thumbs you should speak as much as, or more, on a good pair of mikes as you do on your recorder.

A

Briel & Kjær 4006: $2060

Omnidirectional, 48V potted, 1/2” capacitor microphone with high dynamic range, extended bass response, and a basically flat response only surviving down to about 2.5kHz. It’s a well-balanced choice for recording anything from soloists to ensembles. (Vol.21 No.8)

B

Sony TCD-D8 DAT recorder: $899 with case

Tiny portable machine which makes excellent location recordings, provided you use an external A/D converter. Short internal battery life is a problem. A separate company, called Eco-Charge (P.O. Box 956, Benedict, SD 57411), makes an external lead-acid battery pack ($199.95) that SS recommends. The TCD-38 is the replacement for Sony’s TCD-D8 and is designed for digital output/input and AC adapter. A JA favorite. (Vol.18 No.6 & 10, TCD-37; Vol.19 No.3, TCD-38)

Signal Processors

**C**

Ondeko T-4300R KDS: $279.95

Features RDS (Radio Data System Data), which displays station format, call letters, emergency information, or any 64-character-length message a station desires. "Ondeko has a winner—almost," says DAS, and some performance benefits for most FM stereo. It’s a different matter, he reports. A good choice for the FM listener far removed from strong signal stations, but not optimal for those favoring a few high-quality stereo stations over a greater number of mono ones. (Vol.18 No.10)

Parasound T/06-1600: $385

"Possesses a good balance of IF and audio factors," DAS maintained. "Total balance was neither overly crisp nor boomy and reflected what was being broadcast. The tuner had excellent stereo separation and phase integrity; he found, with very good S/N ratio with monophonic signals—seeker signals highlighted in lack of non-reduction and high-blend electricty. (Vol.19 No.12)

Deletions

Audax 8000T no longer available; Arcam Alpha 7 not auditioned in too long a time to be sure of rating.

FM Antennae

Editor’s Note: No indoor antenna can compete with a good roof or mast-mounted outdoor antenna, but because apartment dwellers often don’t have a choice, we list the following indoor models that we have found to work well: Audax/Pioneer 8000 (Vol.19 No.4), Audax/Pioneer 7500 ($599; Vol.14 No.5), Audax/Pioneer 6500 ($125; Vol.13 No.9), Magnavox 205 FM Booster ($295; Vol.10 No.6), RadioShack amplified indoor antenna $299.99; Vol.19 No.4), and AudioQuest Design Specialties Sniper: $595

**Antenna Performance Specialties Sniper:** $595

The Sniper is a large (330”), custom-order, outdoor antenna with 12dB true forward gain at all FM frequencies and extremely low SWR (Standing Wave Ratio). Requires rugged high-resistance antenna type installation, which may eliminate its consideration by all but the most dedicated radio listeners. Yet DAS feels it sets the standard for antenna performance. The AIS-13 (originally called QFM-12) is still large (20”) but manageable, he reports, offering 10dB gain and only slightly less performance than the Sniper. (Vol.19 No.3)

Fanfare FM-2G: $85

"$85 spent on the FM-2G will make room improvements you won’t regret in your living room for more than $1000 spent on a new tuner coupled to an interior dipole,” said SS of this whip antenna. "This is an accessory that is truly a necessity.” (Vol.20 No.12)

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"$85 spent on the FM-2G will make room improvements you won’t regret in your living room for more than $1000 spent on a new tuner coupled to an interior dipole,” said SS of this whip antenna. "This is an accessory that is truly a necessity.” (Vol.20 No.12)
C

AGK BlueLine microphones: $554–$934

Super-compact capacitor microphones that use a consume $530 in powering module with an interchangeable two-clip design ($225–$560). "Extraordinarily clean, well-balanced sound at relatively low prices," notes JGH. (NR)

Phillips CDR880 CD-R/C-D/RW recorder: $649

WJ was surprised to find that this consumer CD-R recorder (which records only on the more expensive consumer-grade blanks) made copies that sounded somewhat different from the originals. However, "its faults are quite manageable but it is relatively affordable and it couldn't be simpler to use. And it has one feature nobody can quibble about—it's a hell of a lot of fun to make your own CDs." (Vol.21 No.9)

D

Sony MZ-R50 portable MiniDisc recorder: $399

Although MG bought this little recorder for interviews, not for music, he soon saw it as a "much more convenient portable music system than CD." "Impressive sound from a small, flexible portable recorder. Quiet, dynamic, sweet, and reasonably detailed" he added. Since then, the MZ-R50 has been superseded by the MC-R50S, which packs a smaller, longer-lasting battery. Ten 74-minute recordable MDs list for $55. (Vol.21 No.11)

Sony CMT-XN7 Pro Walkman cassette deck: $339

A pocket-sized stereo recording system of surprising quality and versatility. Alvin Gold feels that to spend more on a cassette deck would be a waste of money. The less expensive WM-13 ( $269) is half the size but keeps most of the quality. Higher stereo and flutter, however, (Vol.17 No.9, Vol.18 No.6)

K


Deletions

Audio Engineering Associates 380TX microphone preamplifier discontinued. Pioneer Elite PD1999 CD/MD recorder now too expensive to be recommended.

Test Equipment

AudioControl Industrial SA-305I Spectrum Analyzer: $995

Portable (battery-powered) inexpensive Vector-Analyzer with pink-noise source. ANSI Class I filters, accurate calibrated microphone, and six monovalent measurements. Parallel port can be used with any Centronics-compatible printer to print out real-time response. Factory update increases maximum SPL capability, and resolution to 0.1dB. (Vol.11 No.6, Vol.12 No.3)

George Kofy Audio Labs Small-Signal Tube Checker: $519

The essential component for the dedicated tubeophile, this well-made device tests voltage gain, noise, and microphonic with the small-signal tube used in typical preamplifier circuits. Tests both 63V and 12V, types as well as a meter, a headphone jack allows users to hear what's right and wrong with their favorite tubes, and to look at the output and the distortion noise waveform with an oscilloscope. (Vol.17 No.6)

Gold Line DSP 30 Spectrum Analyzer: $1579

Portable (battery-powered) Vector Analyzer with high/low dynamic range and better signal resolution than the ubiquitous AudioControl (one software option gives 60 bands between 271Hz and 8000Hz). Features six memories and a variety of post-processing options can also be controlled via an external PC through its RS-232 port. Latest software includes a Windows-based interface and a number of new refinements. (NR)

Miscellaneous Accessories

Audio Advisor Ellips AC/DC polarity tester: $29.95

Components tend to give the best sound with the lowest potential between their chassis and signal ground. WJ found using the Ellips to be an easy, non-contact method of optimizing this aspect of performance, in conjunction with AC "cheater" plugs. (Vol.15 No.5)

AudioPrism Noise Sniffer RF/EMI detector: $175

An "electronic detective in the campaign to eliminate noise," said Cliff Simply. "Will plug it in and turn up the volume—its small built-in loudspeaker will reveal where your problem outlets are." Then you can pull up AudioPrism’s QuietLine Parallel AC Hot Filter for a cure. "A must-have product," says BD. (Vol.21 No.9)

AudioQuest binding-post wrench: $7.95

A great idea improved—similar to the Postman, but with a metal sleeve surrounding the sockets. (Vol.20 No.9)

AudioQuest RFS Strobes: $59 (p.60, $45/3 sets)

TDX Ne-CO digital noise absorber: $14.85/pair

(3 replaced by TDK Z-CAT filter, $3 each)

ST found these ferrite rings to improve the sound from CD when clamped over the interconnects between player and preamp. He also found the sound improved greatly when the clamp was clamped onto the coaxial cable to lead between transport and processor, though we would have thought that this would increase jitter. Best used with AC power cords, he feels. Equivalents can also be obtained from Radiodisk. (Vol.14 No.1, T13K).

BlueNote Muses Series Hi-end tube end caps: $89/pair

Italian devices lower tube microphones, JS discovered, resulting in tighter focus, integration, and bass. While they enhance transparency, he warned that they might subtly dampen "bloom." Even so, "I consider them an indispensable accessory," our valiant audiophile maintained. (Vol.19 No.2 & 4)

Checkpoint 700 PSS-SAS later alignment tool: $185

"The ideal device for positioning speakers," RD said enthusiastically, agreeing with LTH that it should be in "the tool chest of every audiophile who wants to get the best sound from loudspeakers. It's easy to use—just turn it on, hold it against the speaker's front panel, then adjust the speaker's position until the "better tone," and vertical orientation are obtained—and it is much more effective than eyeballing the speaker from the listening position." (Vol.21 No.11 & 12)

Demens DeMagic CD: $29.95

This three-minute CD will leave a beardles sounding, almost chasmalike degrading tone through your system...it cleans magnetic-induced distortion from hi-fi." ST claimed. "I won't describe the improvement as dramatic—it's subtle, but definitely worthwhile." But he might do a better job urging that "for risk taking your hearing for an hour." (Vol.20 No.12)

Dexos/Preserv preservative conditioner: $29.95

The right stuff for cleaning up dirty and/or oxidized plugs and contacts. Available from Old Colony Sound Lard. Tel-Box (308) 994-0465. (Vol.10 No.6)

Dynalear Postman Binding-Wire Pliers: $795

The ideal way of tightening five-way binding-post connections without overtorquing. The reviewer's friend. (Vol.17 No.13)

Kontax 125

Far and away the best contact cleaner CG has used. "The grease in transparency and purity are startling," gushed he. Now available in the US from the Sound Organisation. (NR, but see "Industry Update", Vol.15 No.5 and "Manufacturer's Comments", Vol.17 No.8)

Mondial MAGIC video ground isolator: $99

Provides effective antenna and cable-fed sedation for those whose video systems have fault problems. A splitter version is available for $149. (Vol.15 No.2)

New Stereotek O2 Blockers: $29.95/oz. bottle; $19.95/5-oz. bottle; $9.95/6-oz. can. $49.95/36 treated plastic bags

These products are "designed as a total solution that thoroughly cleans all parts of a system and improves conception, by providing a vaporizing corrosion protection," observed S13. The key ingredient is a proprietary blend of vapor corrosion inhibitors (VCI). SID was initially dubious as to whether an enhanced sound quality, but was convinced that it inhibited corrosive decay over time. (Vol.20 No.2)

PEARL tube dampers for miniature tubes: $5 each

Finned metal heatsink available in a number of sizes to cool both small-signal and power tubes. JA recommends them for use with the Mezos SHA-1. (Vol.16 No.5)

Shakti electromagnetic stabilizer: $230

Passive component containing passive circuits intended to absorb and dissipate the EMG generated by active audio gear. JS and WP found them effective to varying degrees, depending on the components they were used with. JS discovered that "focus, transparency, clarity, and speed were better, as was the sense of space." SID found that the Shakti Frontiers SF-3/2 MK II sound better—less upper-midrange grain—than the Shakti placed on the chassis above the transformer. WP uses them on his power amp, but cautions that using too many creates a system with a "spotted" rather than a smooth full sound. (Vol.19 No.2 & 4; see also "Industry Update" in Vol.21 No.4)

Shun Mun Mpingo Disc: $50 each

Shun Mun Spatial Control Kit: $45

Shun Mun Spatial Control Quarter Sextet: $2280/4 stands and 32 Mpingo discs, $3220/6 stands and 44 discs

The Mpingo Disc is an ebony disc just over 1.5" in diameter and .05" thick. Three discs bonded to a wooden L-bracket make up the Spatial Control Kit, which can be used "in tune" a system's imaging. JS reviews carefully to get the full scoop on how to use the discs, but JS is convinced that they effect a major improvement in the sound. "Top, they work," agreed ST; "they make my $798 AR mellow sound like JS's Line." (Shuvahay, right, puts JA) Though he's not sure why the Shun Mun Discs have any effect, ST does point out that they can make the sound voice if used correctly. "Try one or three. Never none two." (Vol.17 No.6 & 12)

Versalab Red Rollers, Flat Rollers, Split Rollers: $135—$260/pair

WP found these RF-blocking components, designed to surround signal-carrying cables, to be effective in canceling his harshness and harshness caused by radio-frequency contamination of the environment. He did stress, however, that they are most effective if used throughout the system and in conjunction with the other Versalab products. JE and JS disavow, S5, located up in the clean air of the Colorado hills, found little benefit. (Vol.19 No.6, Vol.20 No.7)

Versalab Zapt!: $49.95

Simple and elegant solution to uncontrolled static discharge, the Zapt! is a grounded brass disc that sits next to your components. WP claimed it "invites your components to play together as they were designed to—that is the effect you pass on." While hence-herz envy versions would work as well, he found the satin finish seductive. (Vol.19 No.9)

WBT 001 I RCA plugs: $140/4

The best, although the original steel locking collet, now replaced by brass, gave rise to noise. WHT 004 I RCA plugs cost $80/4. Distributed in the US by Kimber Kable. Both now include a complete set of strain-relief ferrules and a length of WBT 4% silver solder, hence the price increase. (NR, but see "Industry Update." Vol.12 No.9)

Wireworld Interconnect Connectors: $601

RH dubbed this "an invaluable tool for characterizing some differences between interconnects," although he points out that most audiophiles probably do not need to own one. Herecommended that if three-wire dealers or audio clubs might consider acquiring one to loan.
The Ultimate Home Theater Experience
Now Playing at Overture

The Runco, Snell & Wilcox, and Revel home theater system delivers edge-of-the-art, “no compromise’’ performance. This is the ultimate. Experience it at Overture!

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When only the ultimate in video reproduction will do, there is but one choice for discerning videophiles, the Runco DTV-1000. The DTV-1000 redefines state-of-the-art. And with HDTV, this projector will make high definition images come alive on your screen.

REVEL’S REFERENCE MULTI-CHANNEL SPEAKER SYSTEM
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Overture is committed to bringing our clients the highest level of performance available. This remarkable system is the result of our continued commitment to advancing the art of reproducing music and film.
Power-Line Accessories

Audio Power Industries Power Wedge Ultra 116 AC line conditioner: $1499 (Vol.19 No.10)

AudioPrism ACEX AC line conditioner: $399.95 (Test & Burn-in CD)

A two-outlet power-line filter for high-current gear. A "valuable asset in applications where power amps are positioned at the outer end of the room," IW noted, and an "invaluable asset for the audio room." (Vol.13 No.12)

AudioPrism Foundation III AC line conditioner: $599.95

"Clean up your AC" with the Foundation III, encouraged IW. It "improved the performance of every piece of equipment I used with it," without current limiting, a drawback present in otherwise effective surge protectors. With the III, "clarity, dynamics, imaging, and apparent power" all improved substantially enough for him to deem this "an essential component" and quickly send AudioPrism another one. (Vol.13 No.12)

AudioPrism LF-1 Quiet-Line Parallel AC line filter: $199.95/set of eight

An important step in the war against noise. According to IW, these devices look like AC adaptors minus the wires, and contain "extremely effective noise-suppression circuitry that works by shorting all the noise to the 'neutral side' of the power line." In his house, all noise "vanished instantly as soon as the Quiet-Line was plugged in." Use the filter on the same circuit as the offending device. (Vol.20 No.2)

Aural Symphonics Missing Link Cabled V3: Big Black Cable $800/6ft, Big Blue Cable $630/4ft

The Missing Link is Aural Symphonics' "entry level" connector cable, "its entry level and it's pretty 'black and blue' edition," IS notes, stating that this "big beauty" is best suited for power amps and other massive components as they can easily topple featherweight components. As with all high-end wire, only careful auditioning in your own system will determine if its benefits warrant its cost. (Vol.19 No.1)

Canelos Technology Sir Ron Reference AC power cord: $349/15ft

SS finds this AC cable to combine excellent materials and substantial shielding with good flexibility. Seems to perform on a par with other, far pricier premium AC cables, he concludes. (NF)

Cinepro PowerPRO 20 AC line balancer: $1795

A 7.5-ft line conditioner that supplies balanced 120V AC power, filters incoming RFI, protects against incoming line spikes and lightning, and warns of very low or very high voltage. WP said that with the systems he tested, "it offered a noticeable sonic improvement—not merely suppressing AC hum and RFI grunge as promised, but allowing me to more clearly approach the known surface of the music." He did mention that it is probably most useful in high-quality rather than mid-price systems. (Vol.21 No.11)

Electra Glide Reference Glide AC cords: $1200 each

"Exceedingly expensive," MF proclaimed. "But try them and you'll want them." The reason? They "increase blackness, focus, bass weight, detail, and dynamics." (Vol.21 No.11)

Kimber Power Kord: $20 ft plus $80 for termination

ST uses Kimber Kords throughout his system, and notes tremendous differences with a Jads Deity-7, but says he expects to buy, when he does. (Vol.21 No.11)

LightSpeed CLS6400 ISO line filters: $535

With four double-filtered analog and two fully filtered digital AC outlets and an 1800W/5A capacity, the transformerless LightSpeed Filter can handle all but the most power-hungry system, says IS. SS likes the fact that, in contrast to some transformer-based power-line conditioners, it doesn't hum, nor does it limit dynamics. SS points out that it appears to be good at isolating ground contamination. "In isolation, the ISO 29A H has hospital-grade plugs and outlets with 2400W/20A capacity. (NF)

MIT Z-Center power-line conditioner: $1495 including Z-Cord

MIT Z-Hdo Duo power-line conditioner: $1495 including Z-Cord

MIT Z-Stabilizer Mk.II power-line conditioner: $995 including MIT Z-Cord

MIT Z-Cord II AC power cord: $175/2m

Hepatic AC conditioners/filtering/line isolation systems that JD found to give significant increases in soundstage purity and spatial resolution. Its "improved by the straightforward and insightful engineering" in these products, which are designed to keep noise on your AC line from finding its way into your components. . . . The package appears to be the most comprehensive power-line treat- ment system available. (Vol.17 No.12, original version; Vol.19 No.1, MLH versions.)

Panamaz Max 8000+ surge protector/line conditioner: $299

"Many thunderstorms have come and gone," says SS, "but none of my video gear has been damaged." Panamaz offers a unique warranty—if your gear gets fried while hooked up to one of their units, the company will replace it, no questions asked. (Vol.12 No.12)

Panamaz LF-1 QuietLine Parallel AC line filter: $199.95/set of eight

"It's an extraordinary job," says SS, "in that it shuts down brownouts or sudden high-power dynamics. For low-power components and video gear, the Panamaz is the cheapest peace of mind I know." He sums up, "Sounds good, too; adds IW comment, that it made his gear sound "a bit cleaner, more fully 'shaped,' better defined, more open, and alive." (Vol.19 No.11)

Synergistic Research Reference AC Master Coupler: $600/6ft

"Brings out the best in whatever components you hook it up with," declares JD, of the AC Master Coupler. "Let's the music move through more effortlessly." (NF)

TG Audio Legacy: Rigid Power Line Cord: $480

"This elaborate high-performance, low-reactance power cord consisting of seventeen 18-gauge wires connected via a single IEC connector revealed more detail, dynamics, bass, and soundstaging than I've heard from any line cord before," says JD. (NF)

Versalab Wood Blocks: $180-$250

Versalab Ground Block: $85

WP used the Wood Blocks—AG IR filters—in conjunction with the other Versalab components, finding that wired into a system, they dramatically reduced noise and transients obscured by IR contamination. The Ground Block is an IR filter for grounding paths (such as the separate ground connection on a turntable) designed to be used with other Versalab filters. WP recommends it highly, when used in conjunction with other Versalab components. (Vol.19 No.6)

Yamamura Quantum AC cords: $125/6ft for 3-pin; $320/11m for 2-pin

MF used a pair of these "ridiculously expensive, high-quality, hand-wound" power cords, and found that switching to "standard-issue AC cords made a depressingly 'softening' sonic difference. 'Not quite as explosive as the Electra Gles, but seemingly lighter and more flexible in the midrange," he sums up. (Vol.21 No.11)

K


Stands, Spikes, Feet, & Racks

Good Speaker Stands

There are too many possibilities, but, briefly, a good stand has the following characteristics: good rigidity, spikes or feet to which the speaker or some secure clamping mechanism; non-metallic spikes or feet that use for loose wooden floors; if the stand is steel, provisions to keep speaker cables away from the stand to avoid magnetic interaction; and the correct height when combined with your particular speakers (correct height can be anything from what you like best to the manufacturer's design, angle for best drive-unit integration). Though Swintorm hasn't reviewed speaker stands, it's not because they're unimportant—for speakers that need stands, every dollar spent on good stands is worth $5 when it comes to sound quality. Brands we have found to offer excellent performance are Chario, Speaker Stand, Arcor Ingrid Riser, Celestion St, Merrill (see Vol.12 No.3). Sound Anchor, Tarus Systems Steel and Reference, and Linn. (Sound Anchor also makes an excellent nuttable stand, reports TNJ.) Interface material between the speaker and the stand should be critical: Acouphene Black-Tack seems to reduce the amplitude of cabinet resonances the most (see Vol.15 No.9, p.162)

Arcei speaker stands: $145-$495/pair

Available in versions for the ESL-43 and the original Quad (both $295/pair), and for the Martin Logan ESL (595/495/pair), these elegant stands enable electrostatic speakers to perform as God intended. Clamps them in a rigid embrace, raising the panels the optimal height off the ground. Now includes Super Spikes. The ESL version allows both the height and back-off of a pair to Logans to be optimized. Arcei's inexpensive Rigor Riser stands ($145) offer adjustable height. (Vol.16 No.10. Quad ESL; Vol.17 No.6, Martin-Logan ESL)

Audio Selections Floorstands: Small, $154.95/3; large, $84.95/3

Square, non-reactive polymer balls with plastic cups are recommended by CC for effective acoustic isolation. (NF, but see Vol.15 No.9, p.162)

AudioQuest Serbantone Feet

"The best means of grounding components from vibration. A set of four Big Feet costs $69; four Little (1/2" Feet) $45. (NF, Vol.15 No.10)

Audio Selections Cone Stands (formerly German Acoustics): $11 each

These effective brass-colored steel cones have removable lined bases. (NF, but see Vol.15 No.9, p.162)

Audio Stream Premier R-series rack system from

System consists of 10-30 Expandable Rack, $79; R-ES uprising Shelf, $49; B-CL, Cable Channel kit, $35; and 10-30 Amp Stand, $69. Excellent value, noted SS, but not rigid enough for use with a nuttable. (Vol.16 No.10)

Billy Bags 1823-$824 amplifier stands: $349/$209

Billy Bags 4802 component stand: $795 standard, $1198 custom

Billy Bags Design Series component rack: $1098

R11 had nothing but praise for these solidly built—and sand-filled—welded metal component racks. Available in black, and custom-built for specific systems. R11 cited tightened image focus, greater dynamic contrasts, and increased resolution of low-level detail as results of using the Billy Bags stands—although he noted that nuttable stands may require additional, or differ- ent, spikes. (Vol.17 Nos.10, 12; Vol.18 No.11)

Black Diamond Racing Pyramid Cones: $20 each

"Expensive, but very effective," according to J-10. WP, and JA, who generally use these whenever they need to support electronic components, concur. (Vol.21 No.6)
"Keith Johnson and the Spectral design team have given us what we've been waiting for in an ultimate amplifier; the combination of unlimited power, "you-are-there-realism and clarity" and a level of listener involvement that has never been heard before."

Terry Menacker
President, Overture

Years of technical development and Spectral's long involvement in live recordings has taken Spectral's unique high speed, fast settling fet topologies to a new dimension of performance in the DMA-360. The combination of sheer power and speed is absolutely unequaled in the audio industry. The result is a level of realism that is virtually hypnotic. We have never heard this standard of reproduction before.

The DMA-360 Monaural Reference is one of those rare products that is truly an instant classic. A design that has forever changed the art of music reproduction.

We invite you to experience the astonishing DMA-360 Monaural Reference. We'll show you what makes Spectral components the ultimate.
Black Diamond Racing

The Shell: $440-$875

Heavy, costly, but extremely free from torsional flex, this loaded carbon-fiber isolation platform impressed WP with a "marvelously close, highly effective, air-bladder product that damps out floor and air-borne vibrations, FM said. WP agrees. Originally called Air Mass I. (Vol.20 No.2)

Bright Star Audio Rack of Gibraltar 1 equipment stand: $149-$192

Bright Star Audio Big Rock 1: $175-$199 o

Bright Star Audio Little Rock 1 Isolation Pod: $149-$165 o

Bright Star Mini-Rock F VTI isolation base: $129

A very effective isolation system for control of unwanted vibration, especially from individual components that float on a sand bed for energy dissipation, and are weighted down with the Little Rock to minimize spurious vibrations. Sonically, the payoff is enhanced resolution of the music's mages, says D.O. RA adds that this system essentially tames the room's resonance, improves tone color, increases transparency, and smooths treble lash and grain. The Bright Star TNT Big Rock $257 sand table specifically sized to support the TNT VTP, FM, HD, and RFT all use one under their VTPs, as they provide a stable surface and offer such enhancements to the lower noise floor and increased bass. The Mini-Rock F is specially sized for use under the TNTs' flywheel. (Vol.16 No.4, Vol.20 No.11, Mini-Rock F, Vol.20 No.4, TNT Big Rock.)

Bright Star Ultimate TNT Suspension System: $999

Simple, affordable, effective isolation system for the VTI TNT that contains a static pneumatic isolation mount with mass loading. WP noted that "high frequencies seemed clearer, less smeared — harmonics leap off strings and fixed independent of the fundamental... Bass sounded more dense and tight, especially sustained notes or anything in the bottom two octaves of the piano," HD agrees. Finding that the Suspension System "loves the TNT" (slightly less) background noise, resulting in subtle but significant improvements in image dimensionality, ambient, and inner detail. (Vol.20 No.7)

Ebonyx Pyramid fosters: $45/set of 3

"At $45 for a set of three," JS said, "these guys are a real bargain. They're the perfect solution as an auxiliary for less, harmonically troubled systems." (Vol.21 No.2)

ECS ball-bearing isolation devices: $59.95/set of 3

Felt pads on the bottom knees may keep feet from surging on wooden floors, ST said, but they may also cause your gear to slide around on slick surfaces. Possibly not so effective as carpet on bare floors, he summarised. Costs $69.95/4. (Vol.20 No.12)

G-Flex M1 vibration damping devices: $195/set of 3

With the M1s in place, JS thought "the sound was tight and transparent, the speed and clarity building up from the lower to the upper ends and up to the upper treble... The highs were open, quick, and extended." Bass seemed less controlled than with the best foors, he's tactful, however. (Vol.21 No.3)

Golden Sound DH Cones, Squares, and Pads: Super Cones cost $100/set of 3; Jumbo Cones cost $70/set of 3; large, $50/set of 3; medium, $40/set of 3; small, $20/set of 3. Costs $30/set of 3; $40/set of 4; Super Pads cost $250 (19" by 17" by 1") thick; others cost $150 (12" by 12" by 1") thick

With the Cones alone, JS "noted a lift in overall trans-
The Most Exciting New Speaker At The CES Show!

Revel’s Brilliant Ultima Studio Speaker System

Without question this speaker was the big winner at the show. Anyone auditioning speakers under $20,000 will find the Ultima Studio irresistible. It’s an extraordinary performer, and an unsurpassed value. Seemingly defying the laws of physics, the Studio sets new standards of performance in its price range. And it out guns some very big name competitors, at a substantial savings. Its compact size and elegant styling make it the perfect choice for high performance home theater and two channel systems. The Ultima Studio gets our vote for speaker of the year!

Terry Menacker
President, Overture

The complete Revel collection, including the Salon, Gem, LE1/Sub15, Voice and Embrace speakers, is on display at Overture.
Room Acoustics Treatments

Argent RoomLens: $399 each, $1195/3
These room-tuning devices "set a single broadband resonance," JA reported their designer as saying. "What's he hear when he tried them?" The Lens, first and foremost, let through more information about the recorded venue. The byproduct of this was a more defined sense of articulation, both in the micro and macro senses. Pace and timing were both enhanced. The transparency was definitely improved, so the palpability factor was higher. All the usual audio susceptibilities—tightness and articulation in the bass, clarity and tonalities in the midrange, extension, linearity, and sweetness in the highs—were simply served. RD was thrilled with the RoomLens, saying the system is "easy to place, takes up less space than most other room-treatment devices, and looks cool." And, oh yeah, it allowed him to "hear more of the recorded ambiance and less of the listening room." (Vol.27 No.6 & 11)

ASC Cube Trap: $370
"A smaller, more cosmetically acceptable, more affordable version of the classic Tube Trap," writes BJR. "Very effective at tuning mid- and upper-bass room anomalies. Looks like an attractive Vandersteen speaker sitting there in the corner." (Vol.27 No.5 & 6)

ASC Studio Trap: $315
Adjustable rigid-mounted room-tuning device that represents the "latest in TrapThink from ASC," according to JA. "The idea is to add detail for a lighter sound, while the back side is treble-absorptive for a drier, acoustic. He highly recommended the Traps for "anyone whose family will allow them to populate the listening room with gobos." (Gobos are "sound-absorbing panels used to surround performers in recording studios." Vol.21 No.12)

ASC Tube Traps: $248-$5678, depending on size and style
Relatively inexpensive but remarkably effective room-acoustics treatment. Tube Traps soak up low-to-high bass standing-wave resonances like sponges. WP agrees, using Traps to optimize the acoustics of his room for Martin-Logan SL3 electrostats. (Vol.9 No.3, Vol.15 No.2, Vol.20 No.12, Vol.19 No.1, Vol.20 No.5)
Cambridge Signal Technologies SigTech TF 1121 Time Field Acoustic Correction System: $6410-$19,900, depending on option
Sophisticated digital acoustic equalization system presents "an elegant solution to the problem of acoustically corrosive environments," reckons SS. While he found the differences vengeful to be subtle, he noted that female voices sounded more harmonically complete, that inner detail was improved, and that lower bass transients were cleaner and better delineated. Imaging was also improved. However, the system added a slight sense of grain and lacks a sufficiently high-end A/D section to satisfy most analog devotees. (Vol.19 No.12)

RoomTunes (Deluxe floorstading): $298/95/pair
RoomTune CornerTunes: $103.95/4 d
RoomTune EchoTunes: $52.95/pair
Indispensable and effective "low-is-more" acoustic treatment for your listening room. GL was highly impressed, though others point out that care should be taken to not overload the speakers. The "basic box" package is a room-treatment set of four TuneStrips, four CornerTunes, and two EchoTunes costs $328.95. Four TuneStrips cost $179.95. A MiniTune Pak (same 10 pieces, but smaller) for small-to-medium-sized rooms costs $229.95. (Vol.15 No.3, Vol.16 No.6)

RPG Diffuser Systems "Acoustic Tools for Home Theater"
Effective method of adding diffusive and absorptive treatment to a listening room. RPG Diffuser Systems offers complete room-treatment packages, called "Acoustic Tools for Audiosphere 1 & II," which can be installed in a matter of hours. RPG also offers its "SoundTrac" package for no-compromise home-theater installations, working directly with the client, architect, and/or acoustic consultant. (Vol.11 No.4, Vol.16 No.5, see also TJA's article on listening rooms in Vol.14 No.10)

K
Echo Busters.

Loudspeaker Cables & Interconnects

Editor's Note: Rather than place cables in the usual "Recommended Components" classes, we've listed those cables that members of the magazine's review team either have chosen to use on a long-term basis or have found to offer good value for money. They are therefore implicitly recommended. Where a cable has been found to have specific matching requirements or an identifiable sonic signature, it is noted in the text. "Try before you buy," is mandatory with cables; many dealers have a lower stock to make this easier.

Interconnects

Alpha-Core Georitz Zapphire: $341/1m pair terminated with RCAs
Alpha-Core Georitz Tournaline: $875/1m pair terminated with RCAs
Flat-wired, coiled interconnects that JAS endorses ever. Offers lower inductions than shielded cable; yet has excellent RF rejection. "Impressive." (NR, but see JJA's review with Alpha-Care's Ultron XN in Vol.29 No.6)
AudioQuest Topaz: $75/1m pair
Slightly lean midbass, according to JJA, but otherwise sound at affordable price. Great value. (NR)

AudioTruth (AudioQuest) Lapis x3: $575/1m pair terminated with RCA plugs or AT custom XLRs and direct gold-plated SPC sockets and pins
Georitz, the latest version of Lapis (which uses RCA plugs made from Functional Perpetual Copper, or FPC, with the gold plating applied directly to the copper) seems to fall midway between the "mellow" cables—MIT, Monster—and those that are rather up-front in the treble, such as Magico 100° and Swarteg Waver. MA feels, however, that its outstanding virtue is a lack of grain that allows correct instrumental textures to flow freely and a deep, well-defined soundstage to develop. Aiming for current-production Lapis, which uses Tellon insulators and long-gain, silver-plated conductors, suggests that this is the best AudioQuest interconnect yet, apart from their even-more-expensive Diamond x3. Aiming of identical length of Lapis fitted with Neutrik XLRs and AudioQuest's even custom XLRs suggests that the latter represents a useful step forward in sound quality. (NR)

AudioTruth (AudioQuest) Diamond x3: $950/1m pair with RCAs or AT custom XLRs and direct gold-plated SPC sockets and pins
"Sober resolution of detail coupled with a surprisingly natural midrange and excellent lower-mid/soundstage width." JA's reference. (Vol.19 No.8)

Cardas Golden Cross: $750/1m pair, balanced or unbalanced
"An accurate and more transparent cable than Ever C, the Golden Cross offers outstanding resolution of low-level detail, finds SD, with an even, wide-open balance and a quiet, silky-black background. Gone are the slightly forward upper mids noted by TE of the Ever C. (NR)

Capistrano Neutral Reference phases interconnector: $360/5m pair; balanced or RCA $480/11m, $600/1m, $725/2m
Wired with DIN to XLR connectors for Graham tone arms, this is Cardas' most neutral interconnect yet, according to MF Oyarzun, detailed and harmonically correct. (Vol.21 No.10)

Discovery Signature interconnector: $450/1m, RCA or XLR termination
Dual-shielded, multi-strand, low-capacitance cables whose performance resembles classic Esoteric PCs. Also of note, he felt, were the RCA connectors —sourced from Clearaudio—which were of extremely high quality and low capacitance. "Excellent imaging and dynamics," quoth he; "a lot of performance for the money." "Sweet high frequencies," adds JJA. (Vol.14 No.4, Vol.16 No.8, see also TJA's article on listening rooms in Vol.14 No.10)

K
Esoteric Artus: $550/1m pair with either Accu-link locking RCAs or Neutrik XLRs
"At last!" exclaims WP. "A flexible-high-end cable." He found it easy to manipulate in tight confines, and is happy to report that its sweet highs, articulate midrange, and well-defined bass response were right on the money. (NR)

Hovland Tonearm-to-Preamplifier cable: $795/any length up to 1m pair with RCA or straight DIN terminations; $835 with 90° DIN connector; $40 extra for preamp XLR
"If you're willing to spend $700 or more on a piece of cable to go between arm and preamp, MF writes, "and you can audition with a money-back guarantee, go for it! But don't expect to sell it back." With the Hovland connected to his Graham 2000, the Graham took on a relaxed, warm, more physical feel—yet all of the detail, depth, dynamic authority, and three-dimensionality remained." (Vol.21 No.2)

JPS Balanced Superconductor 2: $1299/1m Neutrik XLR-terminated $200/additional 0.5m
These unwieldy double-runs of the already stiff Superconductor2 coat have because KR's resident bal- anced interconnects as of early '99. Eerily quiet back- grounds and silky, well-defined highs even with 75m runs in noisy NYC. (NR)

Kimber KCAG: $160/1m pair, plus $70 for XLR and/or XLR termination
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compared with Kimber's PJB. A JE and TNJ favor. (NR, but see Vol.16 No.7)

Kimber's black Streak-147: $120/1m pair, plus $70 for RCA termination

This low-inductance, low-resistance cable "represents a major performance breakthrough for the price," ST averred. In secret? Only the signal-carrying portion of the braid is silver—the returns are copper. ST, correctly gauged in clarity and quietness. "The sound is clearer, quicker, less confused..." I suggest you run with the Streak." JW tells me that the Kimber's excellent resolution of detail and transients has to be balanced against the fact that it might add too much "zip" to already bright systems. (Vol.19 No.11)

Kimber PJB: $18/1m pair, plus $60 for RCA and/or XLR termination $85

Unshielded cable that CG found to come very close to KCAG in his system, citing in HF detail, air, clarity, and tonal accuracy. For those with IFI problems, Kimber's KCI ($36/1m pair, plus $70 for RCA and/or XLR termination) is the same cable with a grounded shield, but doesn't sound quite as good. (Vol.16 No.7)

MIT M1-350 Reference CV Terminators: $195/1m pair, $260/1.5m pair

Final cost is, basically—and very, very dear! With truly neutral components, an unbelievable level of resolution becomes possible. Not kind to any form of blur, smear, or associated hollowness, however. More than one listener, cases at both ends makes it impossible to use multiple with more than just one room behind the preamp, noms WP! (Vol.19 Nos. 8 & 8)

MIT M1-350 Twin CV Terminators Series II: $1295/1m pair

IRJ's reference interconnect. "Transparent, dynamic, and expressive performance at frequency extremes," says he. (NR)

MIT MIM Terminators 6 interconnect: $29.95/1m pair

More than hints their performance levels in the transition to the bargain-basement price range for the first time, says IRJ. "The Terminators 6 wires show the coherence, neutral tonal balance, and soundstaging capabilities of the pricer MIT wires. There's just less of everything there." (NR)

Nordost Blue Heaven: $199/1m pair (unbalanced), $259/1m pair (balanced)

The Blue Heavens are the least expensive of Nordost's premium line. Compared to the very best (including Nordost's own Red Dawn and SPM), they're a little splashiness in the upper midrange, notes BD, accentuating transients at the expense of inner detail. Their total balance is also a little slightly upward. However, he found they had a speed and openness that's unusual in this price range. "They can really boost the goose-bumps factor of an entry-level system," he said, adding that "these interconnects are the new reference in reasonably priced and/or small-system cables. (Vol.21 No.6)

Nordost Red Earth SPM interconnect: $1000/1m pair

When configured as speaker cable or interconnect, SPM is, in Mr. White's words, the "most transparent of all the systems in the test". (NR)

Precision Interface Technology DIN-to-RCA cable: $990/0.6m

Expensive and well constructed, but to MF's ear "not quite as dramatically 'right' as the Holuwad." (Vol.21 No.2)

Straight Wire Maestro II: $250/1m pair terminated with locking RCA plugs (MSI) or balanced with Neutrik gold XLRs: $120/additional meter

Less-badした! this company's TrueLits Lapis or MIT 330, with superb presentation of detail. May be too bright in some systems. (NR)

Synergistic Research Alpha Sterling: $170/1m pair

One of the best-bounding interconnects GL has tried; he also notes that it's easy to handle and is fitted with excellent RCA's. Available shielded or unshielded. (NR)

Synergistic Research Designer's Reference Interconnect: $2000/1m pair, $1000/pair additional 0.5m

These interconnects do everything superbly, says BL, who found that they're essentially neutral in terms of total balance and dynamics across the frequency spectrum. Particular areas of excellence, he sums up, include a realistic balance of inner detail and coherence, image dimensionality, and ambience recovery. JS agrees, noting that the Synergistic is "wide-band, ultradynamic (micro'nonuic), colorless, harmonic, detailed, [with] lots of air in a huge soundstage, deepest bass, handspan of midrange resolution and texture, [and] high as sweet as your equipment can dish out." However, he did find it "a touch based toward the large-scaled and grand rather than the small and well-formed." (Vol.21 No.1)

TARA Labs The One: $985/1m pair, terminated with RCA or XLR

"Expensive stuff," JS said, but "... it's worth the hefty price of admission." He liked "the nuance, the quiet, detailed, and airy soundstage... [the] swing and pace... It's laid back to have The One for freedom from low-level grunges." (NR)

TARA Labs Rectangular Solid Core "Decade": $395/1m pair terminated with RCA's, $828/1m pair with XLRs

The 'Decade' interconnect images in an absolutely first-class manner, says JS. Despite noting that "they have suffered a bit from initial transient handling," he preferred to dwell on "how sweet the 'Decade' sounded, without any of the negative connotations such an 'æcumenic' might incur... the sweetness lay between the notes." Unique connectors allow for "star grounding" by joining the cable pair's shield—"an option WP found useful in balancing audible grinds." Better the sound of the excellent TARA Labs "Master" Generation II by a margin that RD would not have thought possible. "Wonderfully open-sounding and detailed throughout," he adds. (Vol.19 No.11)

TARA Labs Rectangular Solid Core "Master" Generation 2: $395/1m pair terminated with RCA plugs, $428/1m pair with XLRs

An RD favorite interconnect, with a clear, open, uncanny quality. "Clean, precise, and sumptuously uncolored," agrees WP. The Generation 2 revision preserves the clarity of the original but has eliminated the stiffness that RD hated about the earlier version. GL notes that it comes with equipment-friendly locking RCA. Conductor configuration mitigates against thin or taut cables, however, so please cable routing carefully, advises WP. Unique common shield connection makes this the cable WP turns to when plugged by woozy humans—besides, it "has matured since good." (NR)

Transparent MusicLink Ultra: $895/1m pair terminated

Similar in broad terms to the MTTs that Transparent used to distribute, the Transparent interconnect works well in a WATT/Puppie-based system, says JA. (NR)

Transparent Reference Power Single-Ended: $2000/1m pair

Very, very pricey, but very right at capturing a correct sense of timing, says WP. Not even to be considered, however, unless you've dealt with the basics in your system, he warns. (NR)

Wireworld Gold Eclipse interconnects: $1200/1m pair, RCA or balanced; $450 each 0.5m pair

Expensive but very transparent, with little editorial effect on the signal in either balanced or unbalanced form, found IRH. (Vol.19 No.8)

Wireworld Atlantis II: $90/1m pair, $18 each additional 0.5m

"A good budget interconnect," concluded RH, who could catalog a list of shortcomings vis-a-vis the above mentioned but, as he notes, "is fundamentally uncolored" for its price. (Vol.19 No.8)

XLO Signature Type I: $625/terminated 1m pair, $500 each additional meter-pair (shielded version available at slightly greater cost)

JS thinks describing this interconnect to be a piece of cake: "neutral, detailed, very fast, alive, exciting, with a really big soundstage, plenty of well-controlled deep bass, a humpless midbass, and a somewhat leaner midrange than some cables, and airy, open highs." Why? (Vol.18 No.9)

XLO Signature Type I: $533/1m pair

JE found that, in the right system, XLO's Type I can sound marvelous, with an improved sense of dynamic contrast. Soundstaging is a little flattened, however, compared with Cardas and Magnat V. (Vol.15 Nos.12 & 13)

XLO Signature Type II: shielded phono cable: $750/terminated 1m pair; $600 each additional meter-pair

"How does Roger [Skoff] do it?" marvels JS, entranced by the "ultrasilent" presentation, blacker backgrounds, and a little less dimensional mass, and constant image and tonal balance that characterize all XLO's. WP abounds in this information, he posits, without peer. While he considers it supremely neutral, "its clean, quiet, quick, and wide-band response could exacerbate bright or cutty qualities of a source." (NR)

Yamaha Millennium 6000: $1050/1m pair with RCA interconnects

Yamaha cables and accessories are once again being imported into America. MF finds that these ultra-expensive interconnects, along with the speaker cables and AC cords by far the most open, rich, liquid, neutral-sounding, nontechnical and musical cables he has ever heard. System dependent? He doesn't know, but in his all-tube system the Millennium 6000 speaker cables and power cords are very excellent, yet detailed and ultra-quiet—I can forget about cables, all together. I have a tough room, and yet, as manufacturers who actually build to sit down and listen when they visit communally tell me, despite the room's problems, "You get great sound down there." I give a great deal of credit to Yamaha's cables and accessories. But for some reason they rang like crazy with the Akuton amp I reviewed in Vol.21 No.4. (NR)

Straight Wire Virtuoso and Concerto, Synergistic Research Phase Two Mk.V & Active Shielding, Nirvana SX, Wireworld GE1, Kimber Select.

Deletions

Audio Magic Sorcerer and Audio Note AN-C not auditioned in a long time; Cardas Halexlink Golden Five interconnect discontinued.

Loudspeaker Cables

Alpha-Core Goertz AG2 Veracity: $82.80/ft

Alpha-Core Goertz M12 Veracity: $59.60/ft

JS was quite taken by the 9-gauge, high-capacitance silver cables, calling them "ultra-clean and delightfully fast." He also adjusted their extreme high resolution and wonderful spatial qualities, although he did note some degree of lightness in the bass. The less-expensive version is a U.K. favorite. (Vol.19 No.3)

AudioQuest Midnight Hyperlite: $415/10ft pair terminated $495/10ft pair terminated

Almost as good as AudioTruth Clear at a much lower price. (NR)

AudioQuest Indigo: $187/8ft pair

Neutral, clean sound with excellent resolution of detail. Says RH, "The bargain in affordable cables." (NR)

AudioQuest Type 6: $147/8ft pair

A significant step up sonically from the Type 4, says...
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...the second run of RTC greatly improves the sound, feels DO. Excellent bass. (NIR)

Kimber 4PR: $149.95/ft pair

Least-expensive cable from Kimber was found to have good bass, but a "zippy" treble and poor soundstage, according to DO. With inexpensive amplifiers, however, its good WB rejection, compared with upstairs or spate-cable types, was often a better sound. (NIR)

MIT Miter Terminater 6 speaker cable: $59.95/ft pair

Great Value, see RJR. See "Interconnects." (NIR)

Monster Cable M12: $245/ft pair with M Spade Silver (if 2m). "Excellent, fast, deep, transparent bass," said JS, listing this cable's attributes: "no upper-midrange bloate, midrange very well developed; upper mids smooth, not quite revealing; and treble slightly tweaked up in the presence region, vivid, then sloped back a touch above, with a hint of grass right in that little transition area on top. Large-scale dynamics were good to jolly good, but low-level shifts in microdynamics weren't handled quite so well...I liked the cables anyway." (Vol.21 No3)

Naim NACAS: $5/ft pair

Inexpensive, flexi-spool ST found to work well with the Spender $100 loudspeaker. Worth investigating as a good-value电缆 thinks JA. (NIR)

Nirvana SL Series speaker cable: $1095/2ln, $1495/3m pair

A JD favorite. See "Interconnects." (NIR)

Nordost Blue Heaven: $395/2m pair with spade or banana plugs

The Blue Heaven speakers are tonally very similar that-sounding to the interconnects, notes JD, with a slightly more open sound. "Exceptionally good, low to mid-priced...speaker...cable," JD said. "Their distinctive design promised—and delivered—a fast, clean, dynamic sound...Within their price range and in the systems for which they are intended, they're nothing short of miraculous." (Vol.21 No4)

Nordost Reference SMP loudspeaker cable: $3350/2.5m pair

A BW favorite. See "Interconnects." (NIR)

OCOS cable: $10/ft plus $75/pair/terminated $55

Distributed by Somkho, this dime-a-dozen cable was found by LG to have a speed and clarity he hadn't heard from other cables. He found the bass to be a little light-weight, but vox in it a "three-star" design. (NIR)

Purist Audio Wire Cable: $600/1m set

The fast-sounding "wire" cable, packed in a thing-filled insulating jacket. AL found "extraordinarily open staging with a remarkably distinct lower-midrange/upper-bass presentation that lends music a great sense of pair." (NIR)

RadioShack 18-gauge solid-core hookup wire: $3.99/50 ft, $55

Ridiculously cheap wire of connecting speakers, yet ST reports that this cable is okay sonically. You have to choose for yourself whether to space or twist a pair for best sound (or even whether to double up the wires for less series inductive). (NIR)

Straight Wire Maestro 21: $680/10ft pair, $30/ft.

Clean and night with little residual brilliness after burn-in, notes AL. In the 6-lengths he uses, they’re extremely revealing of amp and speaker foibles. (NIR)

Synergistic Research Designer J's Reference speaker wire: $400/10'f pair

Like the Designer's Reference interconnects, JD finds these speaker cables to be essentially neutral. "They add so little character of their own to a system's sound that they'll likely seem unimpressive on an first listen," he warns. CS agrees, adding that he was "impressed with the way they just got out of the way and let you zero in on the music...[they] throw a good image with a lot of air in it, natural highs, smooth midrange, and nice, rich bass. With one of my favorite systems, I was [] one of the very best of the cable bill." (Vol.21 No1)

Synergistic Research Signature Nos. 2 & 3: $675/10'f pair

"Hi-res, wide bandwidth cables that let the music speak for itself," sums up JS. Dealer can be Synergistic...
Deletions
MIT M-1850 Multi-Bandwidth CV Terminators, Audio Magic Spectralizer, Aural Symphonies Hybrid VS, and Audio Net (not reviewed; see the introduction to "Digital Processors"). You don't get that essential sharpness of image outlines, the sound becomes more homogenized, it's heard, which is why no longer recommend it. JS programmed terminations. JA points out that the specific character of any particular cable will depend heavily on the transport and processor it connects.

Digital Data Interconnects

Editor's Note: Extensive auditioning by RH suggests that all the coaxial data cables listed below are better than conventional, Toslink-fitted, plastic fiber optic cables, which in general don't give as tight a bass as those plastic interconnects (see the introduction to "Digital Processors").

Apogee Electronics Wyde-Eye AES/EBU datalink: $325/1m
Deletions (other than in Universal references 1D-60 and the budget-minded D-30, but VR-75 is LS finds that it gives, in his systems, performance on a par with the 13-60 for a fraction of the price. (NI) Illuminations D-60 Digital datalink: $480/1m plus $40 XLR termination Expensive, but the best AES/EBU link JA has used. JS loved the Orchid's midrange liquidity and detail, but preferred Illuminations' S/PDIF cable overall. SD almost does enhance a little.
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Jimmy Scott is the greatest singer I have ever heard. To see him perform for the first time is to be unprepared. The impossible timing and otherworldly phrasing of this sweet, upbeat little guy will get you on the edge of your seat. And just when you're off balance, his angelic voice—the channeler of a lifetime of hard knocks, cruel breaks, and pure pain—will rip the heart from your chest. Jimmy could sing "Row, Row, Row Your Boat" and grown men would weep.

Jimmy Scott made his first recordings in the early 1950s, when he was with Lionel Hampton's band, and he remained at the center of everything that was happening during the development of bop during the '50s and '60s. Nowadays, Jimmy sings with the likes of Lou Reed and Bruce Springsteen, and in the '90s he's released half a dozen top-notch, great-sounding records. On his latest, Holding Back the Years, he takes such modern standards as Prince's "Nothing Compares 2 U," Elton John's "Sorry Seems to Be the Hardest," and makes them his own. [See Robert Baird's record review elsewhere in this issue.]

"I love the way you do John Lennon's 'Jealous Guy,' Jimmy. It's been going through my head for days."

"No kidding? That's great, baby. I think that was a good-sounding record, too. I made that with Dave Bennett. He has a digital system in his studio. Very powerful. The uniqueness of the sound he gets...."

"Right. Tony Bennett's son. He set up quite a nice-sounding system at his father's place."

"Let me play it for you, so you can hear it. But I'm afraid this stereo isn't gonna give us all of it...."

"Jimmy Scott has the worst stereo system I have ever heard. It's some kind of mostly plastic all-in-one, with detachable speakers from Seiko Instruments, which he got from the Damark catalog. As we listened to Holding Back the Years in the living room of his stylish home in Cleveland, I remarked on the system's uncanny ability to be both exceedingly bright and muddy at the same time."

"Are you happy with this... the thing you have now?"

"For a hundred bucks... you get what you pay for. This is servicing me right now, just with something to listen to what it is. I'm not getting the depth of what I want as far as sound, no. I know that. I have a space downstairs here, and I want to fix it up like a little comfort zone for myself, relax down there with it. You know. I definitely want to get some good equipment, get a good sound in there. And I'd like to do some recording of my own."

"Can you describe the difference between what you hear and what you'd want?"

"Well, there's a body to a good sound... It has a body. It has a foundation. This is sitting on nothing. That's why the sound just sits on nothing, you know? [laughs] You want the sound to be properly supported."

"Musicians seem to always have the worst systems. Why do you think that is?"

"I don't know. In some ways, I look at it like they're so anxious to have something that's compact. That was a useful thing, knowing that I could carry this music with me. Okay. So you jump up and you grab something without considering what value you get out of the sound. I think a lot of us mistakenly did that. I've got new things that I carry, but I hardly use them because I don't hear what I want to hear. The sense of what I expected is not there. As I said before, you get what you pay for."

"Have you had anything you enjoyed listening to while traveling?"

"I remember having a four-track. But it was reel-to-reel. Funniest thing, that little four-track had an amazing sound. Whoever constructed it, they were doing well about the sound mechanism."

"Maybe it had tubes...?"

"This one didn't... wait a minute. Yes, it did. Yeah. It sure did, baby. Had glowing little tubes."

"You gotta love vacuum tubes. I do."

"I remember Lubinsky, the head of Savvy Records, that was a big business for him. This is how we all got to know him. He had his office with the record company over his radio shop, where he was selling hi-fi equipment. But I could never figure — this guy is right there with all of this equipment, and it was a big business for him... but he had the worst ear in the world! Forget it. He didn't know what to do with sound. The sound that he got on all those records that we ever made, he depended mostly on the engineer he brought in to set it up."

"And yet he must have loved the music so much."
“Wasn't so much he loved the music... Cat had an insight on the happening of the music trend, which was ironic. He would come to your house, and you'd be jammin'... cats would all be goin' and he'd come with his little four-track, sit it out, sit a bottle of liquor on the table... record a-way — Bird, Jo Jones, and all different ones more or less centered around New York. Wherever there was a jam session and he knew about it, whether he'd be there. As far as the history of the music of jazz and all, this cat's library is one of the greatest. And it didn't stop there, because he's got a strong history on the gospel singing, too. But he didn't love the music... he loved the money.”

“You must have heard some really good sound. You've worked with some great producers and engineers recently: Tommy LiPuma, Dave Bennett, Craig Street, Mitchell Froom...”

“Oh, yeah. Now Mitchell has a unique studio out there in California. Little. It's not big, you know, not a huge room. But he does get a unique sound. I enjoyed doing that set with him. I didn't know him. That was the hip thing for me, too, when I found out that this cat plays organ.”

“Do you know other musicians who've had sound systems that really impressed you?”

“Well, I don't know of any. Now Quince, Quincy Jones, I know he's got it... I remember back when he and I were with the Lionel Hampton band. There was this cat, he wanted us to hear this new sound. Somewhere around Seattle, Washington, this guy had his studio, where he created this dimensional sound. It was like it was touching you. This sound was surrounding you, so you felt every movement. It was big, huge, from the floor up. It was outa sight. Best I'd ever heard. These were the '40s, early '50s.”

“Do you think sound has got any better since then? Or has it got worse?”

“The value of the sound in many instances has gotten great. But you know, what's unique is when you find a sound buff who gets a natural, acoustical equipped studio. In other words, before he goes in with his creativity of sound, the building itself is naturally acoustical. Like the Great American Music Hall in San Francisco. That was a unique sound in there. You step into the building, and just speaking one to the other, you feel an acoustical balance that's out of sight. Just walking across the room to each other, you feel it, you sense it. And then put a good sound projection in there... wow! Wow. Powerful.”

“Do you notice the difference in acoustics when you walk into different rooms, different buildings, people's houses?”

“Yes. You sense it. You can't help it. Because that's what I'm geared to hearing. Some people's houses got a sound when you're speaking that makes you uncomfortable. The sound projection in the house is out of balance. That's another thing I find about this old piece of house. I could be playing my TV in one room, and I don't bother my sister at all in another room. How they constructed this house... it's amazing to me. When I get the basement set up with some good equipment, I know it's going to sound good.”

“Another thing they don't make like they used to, right? Houses.”

“That's right. I think builders then had a sense of what they wanted to feel or express. And they put it the way they built. But nowadays, it's all mechanical. Or, you know, commercial.”

“Like everything. Like music...”

“Right. That fast buck. Not like these old houses. Yeah. And the quality of that wood that it's built with, it's almost like a musical instrument. They don't build houses with that quality of wood.”

“How about the way LPs used to sound? How do they compare to CDs?”

“Oh, CD elevated the sound, baby. Oh, yeah. The old LP was fine, but the elevation of sound... Now digital has added to it.”

“You think it's better than the old LP sound?”

“Oh, so much more. I don't feel like, 'Oh, that's going to break.' I feel comfortable playing it, you know what I mean? Because I don't think I can hurt it. Yes, they can be damaged, it's true. But I don't worry about it.”

“Well, what about the difference in how it sounds?”

“That's exactly what I'm talking about. The sound. Because if I hurt it, then I'd ruin the sound. You understand what I mean? The LPs were fine, but you did more damage to them. They did give a sound quality. I think it was just the material that it was structured by. That plastic. What do you think?”

“Well, Jimmy, I've got to admit I prefer the sound of the LPs.”

“But I'll tell you, if more cats had known... I agree with you about the vinyl and the LP and the sound, but there weren't that many that were really into the

---

Jimmy Scott: Selected Discography

**Holding Back the Years, Artists Only!**
AOR-11 (1998)

 **Dream,** Blue Horizon/Warner Bros. 45629-2 (1994)

**Lost and Found,** Atlantic/Rhino R2 71059 (1993)

**All the Way,** Blue Horizon/Warner Bros. 26955-2 (1992)

**Lou Reed, Magic and Loss** (guest vocals only), Sire/Warner Bros. 26662-2 (1992)

**All Over Again,** Savoy Jazz SVY-263 (1955–59, reissued 1995)

**Very Truly Yours,** Savoy Jazz SVY-239 (1955, reissued 1994)


---

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depths of recording it properly. See? The material was there to work with. You go way back and I remember those hard vinyls. You'd drop 'em and they'd shatter, almost like glass. Some of the sounds that they got out of those are just so unique and wonderful... when the engineer knew how to project that material.

"When you make a CD, how is the sound different from the live performance?"

"Well, it's somewhat enhanced by the quality of recording. As I was saying, if that engineer, that manufacturer didn't have the right quality, fine. You understand that. Right away you detect it, and that cat's material ain't cool. So that's not coming forth. But I think that CDs elevated that system of the quality coming forth out of it... the naturalness of music being projected. You know, that natural thing."

"Are there any great recordings you've heard over the years that just stand out?"

"You know who I was so crazy about? And he always came across on audio: Percy Mayfield. Boy, this cat could come off on audio so... wew."

"Even on a system like this, he comes through?"

"Yeah. I mean, much better on a better-quality system, but he always sounded good. I'll tell you another one: Jimmy Smith. He did one, back when he was doing 'The Preacher' and those songs. The earliest record of his, one that really made him big. That thing vibrated so... the effects of the sound vibrated so beautifully, it just had everybody in a groove. Wherever you'd go, if they were listening to that record, everybody would be in such a groove behind it. Mmm-hmm, Jimmy Smith."

"We continued to listen to music throughout the conversation. My host put on a Chess compilation, Home of the Blues, and we grooved to B.B. King, Bobby Blue Bland, Sonny Terry, and Brownie McGhee. Jimmy seemed to listen deeply, getting into the music, his ability to instantly identify every musician on the disc impressed me."

"I think you're absolutely right on that sound thing, baby. That machine is not giving the depths of what he's projecting. If I had a better box, look at what you'd hear. I know what I'd hear. I gotta get me a good player."

"I'd be happy to help you out."

"Beautiful. Beautiful, baby. My God. Yes. [laughs] Because I definitely need one. I don't have the equipment to really support it like it should be supported."

"When you were growing up, what kind of exposure did you have to music? Did you have any way to listen to records or listen to music?"

"Oh, off and on we might have a radio. Not all the time, though. [laughs] That was like great moments, when you could have that radio or that winding Victrola in the house. We listened to all kinds of music, just to hear the sound of what it was. So we had the opportunity to listen to operatic, symphonies, everything. I go back to Paul Robeson, Ethel Waters, Ethyl Waters in her early years, Josh White. People like that. And when you knew they were going to be on the radio, 'Oh, so-and-so's going to be on tonight.' "Oh, yeah?" I'm hoping I can go to so-and-so's house and hear it."

"That was the means of communicating with the music. Ellington was a young man, Cab Calloway was a young guy coming along in the business back then... Fletcher Henderson, Jimmy Lunceford, Art Tatum. I lost a collection I had of his. It was the first album of three records... and it hurt my heart. Whew, phenomenal. Those cats were something else then. Oh, that was the greatest thing. Just get by the radio, and just listen."

"And you still are able to just sit and focus on the music and listen?"

"I try to just listen to music and concentrate on it two or three hours every day."

"It seems to me, Jimmy, that most people don't really listen like that anymore.

"Exactly right. So many kids have turned away from music. The sense of music that they're listening to turns them away. Okay, fine. All that's commercial and great, but it's not saying anything for their interest, in life. Musical appreciation was part of our classes at school. We had to go to the symphonies. Each class... third grade, fourth grade, fifth, whatever. The teacher would take us kids downtown on the streetcar. We had to sit there, see? I mean those that didn't like it, or didn't like the music, just too bad! And you were listening, because you had to tell the teacher what you'd heard. What instrument you heard, what instruments were predominant in solos. And you learned to value the music, see? Kids were going home, they'd say, 'Oh, I'm getting a saxophone for Christmas,' 'I'm getting a flute for Christmas,' 'I'm getting a clarinet, or a violin, for Christmas.' That was the great expectation of the little kids."

"That sure doesn't happen anymore. Except maybe in New Orleans."

"Well, that was the thing that made us like we are today. You are. I am. Why we think the way we do. Because we sat down and listened. The music has a powerful thing in it, and I feel like nothing but good comes out of understanding it. They don't have that stuff for those kids in school now. It was a mistake to let that go. Kids today look at you just funny when you try to explain all these things to them. They think you're crazy. I feel they've missed something, I do. And I think that it's a shame that it wasn't supported by the educational system. Music helped a lot with centering concentration and the growth of kids. I think you would have less social problems and everything, I do. Listening to music makes people better, I think... And it makes better people."

---

**Listening to music makes people better, I think... And it makes better people.**
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Price List

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The Brick

The Brick is a handy-dandy little bag for a portable tape player, AirHead amp, and three tapes. There are loops in the back to attach to a belt, or you can use the comfortable shoulder strap included. $39

Accessories

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Muse Eight DVD/CD transport &
296 DVD/CD processor

One of the hottest topics in high-end audio these days is the choice consumers now face between buying high-quality CD-only playback gear, or the array of new DVD-based systems capable of handling 24-bit/96kHz audio, DVD movies, and CDs. Put that way, the answer would seem obvious. But confusion is still common among audiophiles and manufacturers: How compatible will these high-resolution DVD-Video/-Audio systems be with the newly released DVD-Audio specification? And what about copyright restrictions on two-box playback solutions? Will record companies allow 24/96 versions of their material to be transmitted “in the clear” between a transport and separate processor? Uncertainty over these issues, and lingering questions about how well these multiformat systems will play CDs, have led to a depression in the sales of quality digital playback systems.

The Muse Model Eight DVD/CD transport and companion Model 296 digital processor reviewed here represent perhaps the first high-end two-box systems to meet the nearly universal playback requirements described in my opening sentence. The official debut of this system—and the impending release of similar products from a number of other manufacturers—should ease the fears of those shopping for a new digital rig during this period of transition, especially now that the DVD-Audio spec is no longer a mystery (see my interview with Muse’s designer, Kevin Halverson, elsewhere in this issue).

The Muse look
Like all Muse audio components, the chassis of both the Model Eight transport and the 296 processor trade some of the glamor found in many cost-no-object models for an understated, straightforward, yet still attractive design. Both enclosures are entirely plated in conductive zinc, then selectively painted on the exterior surfaces so that, when assembled, all mating surfaces and folded flanges form a tight EMI shield inside and out. Exposed zinc-plating of all interior surfaces also provides a handy low-impedance contact point for internal grounding of critical circuitry. A clean and handsome machined aluminum faceplate (available in either anodized black or brushed silver) graces both components. The transport’s front panel includes a central disc drawer with a gently curved, machined aluminum cover; the requisite operational buttons; and a blue vacuum-fluorescent display (VFD). A rocker-switched IEC power inlet on the back panel contains a robust EMI filter to minimize contami-

Model Eight DVD/CD transport:
Dimensions: 17.2” (43.7cm) W by 3.5” (88.9cm) H by 13” (33cm) D. Weight: 18 lbs. (8.2kg) net.
Serial number of unit reviewed: None.
Price: $3000.

Model 296 24-bit/96kHz fully balanced digital processor:
Audio interfaces: BNC–S/PDIF, AES/EBU (pin 3 positive), Universal I/P (supports decryption), all capable of 96kHz data rates. Digital filter: programmable 24-bit fixed-point DSP engine. Analog outputs: unbalanced (2V RMS) and balanced (2V RMS).
Dimensions: 17.2” (43.7cm) W by 3.5” (88.9cm) H by 13” (33cm) D. Weight: 18 lbs. (8.2kg) net.
Serial number of unit reviewed: None.
Price: $3500 including 13W3 cable.

Common to both: Approximate number of dealers: 35. Warranty: 3 years parts and labor, 1 year on DVD mechanism (requires completion and return of mail-in registration form).

Manufacturer: Muse Electronics, Inc., P.O. Box 2198, Garden Grove, CA 92842. Tel: (714) 554-8200. Fax: (714) 554-5643. E-mail: muse_usa@ix.netcom.com.
nation of the power line by the many clocks found in a DVD transport. Other rear connections include S-video and BNC composite-video outputs for connection to a monitor, a BNC-S/PDIF connector for linear PCM/AC-3 audio outputs, and the paramount 13W3/1FS interface connector.

The front panel of the 296 has buttons for polarity inversion and input selection, plus the requisite indicator LEDs. Input choices include BNC-S/PDIF, AES/EBU, and the other half of the Universal IFS interface. In addition, all sources and polarity on the 296 are selectable via Muse’s handheld remote, which also controls Muse’s Model Three preamp and all DVD/CD functions of the Model Eight transport. (As the Eight has minimal front-panel buttons, the remote is essential to access DVD menus and the like. JA also found that when the remote’s batteries were dead, the 296 would not lift its mute, even though the combination appeared to be otherwise working fine.)

**Inside the Eight**

The heart of the Model Eight unit is a Matsushita-sourced DVD-Video/CD mechanism and companion main board. This drive is equipped with a dual-focus, single-laser mechanism so it can zero in on either a CD or DVD, each with data layers at different depths from the disk surface. The main board is an impressive four-layer printed circuit board that’s packed top and bottom with DVD decoder chipsets, a video DAC, and several stages of the static and dynamic RAM and EPROM modules required for audio and video processing. Halverson chose the Matsushita DVD mechanism/main-board system over competing alternatives due to the topology of the decoding chipsets. The layout of this board not only facilitated Muse’s handling of the variable clocking functions required for DVD-Audio, but was particularly well suited for the modifications required to relocate the master clock to the processor while slaving the transport to the 296 (or to another comparably equipped DVD processor) via the dedicated Universal IFS transmitter module and cable.

Halverson noted that the care and handling required to maintain the integrity of the clocking signals right through the output of the transport is of primary importance in achieving high-quality audio results. In his opinion, this is far more critical than the mechanical characteristics of the transport mechanism itself (although he claims that the Matsushita DVD-spinner is robust and well designed). Hence the effort applied throughout the Model Eight to ensure minimal data and timing errors. An inherent feature that should make the mechanical performance of a DVD drive relatively less important than that of its CD counterpart is that the data from the DVD device is clocked out via a whopping 16Mbyte buffer compared with the minuscule 1kbyte buffer found on most CD transports. These drive units should be comparatively immune to mechanism-induced jitter resulting from vibration or similar errors.

Directly behind the drive mechanism is a Matsushita-supplied video display board with the S-video and composite-video circuitry. Muse is considering offering component video as a future option, but is more interested in a direct digital link to future digital televisions; they feel the S-video link provides excellent movie playback as is. The Eight’s inside front panel contains two addition-

**Measurements**

The Muse 296’s performance was measured from both its unbalanced and balanced outputs. The maximum output level at 1kHz was to specification, at 2V from either set of outputs. The single-ended source impedance was a low 50 ohms across the audio band. From the balanced XLR jacks, the source impedance was higher, at 266 ohms, but this is of no consequence. With the red polarity LED off, the 296 was noninverting from the unbalanced RCA jacks but inverting from the balanced outputs. As mentioned in the body of the review, this is because the XLRs are wired with pin 3 hot rather than the AES standard of pin 2.

The channel outputs matched to within 0.1dB, which can be seen in the frequency-response graph (fig.1). At a 44.1kHz sampling frequency (top traces), the very slight rolloff above 16kHz from the unbalanced outputs is doubled from the balanced jacks. Deemphasis error was negligible and is not shown. Driving the 296’s AES/EBU input with a double-speed datastream from a DCS 904 A/D converter sampling the Audio Precision’s analog output at 96kHz produced the frequency response shown in the bottom traces of fig.1. The top-octave rolloff continues at the higher sample rate, reaching -0.5dB at 44kHz, but dropping like a stone by the Nyquist Frequency of 48kHz.

That the Model 8/296 combination does decode 96kHz-sampled data without downsampling to 48kHz is confirmed in figs.2 and 3. Fig.2 is the waveform of a 1kHz squarewave at 0dBFS on the Chesky test DVD, sampled at 48kHz and played back on the Model Eight. Fig.3 is the same signal sampled at 96kHz, and shows that the Gibbs Phenomenon “ringing” on the tops of the waveform is doubled in frequency, due to the doubled bandwidth.

The Model 296’s channel separation (fig.4) was superb, at better than 115dB (right-left) above 1kHz from both unbalanced and balanced outputs. The
al circuit boards: one by Muse to handle the front-panel controls, the other from Matsushita, for the VF display.

One of the dilemmas faced by a single-box design is how to control the rich tapestry of RFI hash generated by the many separate clocks required by a universal DVD player/transport. Unless great care is taken, this interference can compromise the analog output performance — see this issue’s “Industry Update.” To this end, the entire left half of the Eight is occupied by a robust linear power-supply board, this in place of the switching supply found in nearly all commercial-grade DVD-Video players to date. Halverson noted the tremendous challenge in designing a linear supply of this quality. On this board alone are three separate power transformers, over 28,000µF of capacitance, and eight stages of regulation, delivering 13 different power-supply levels (from 3.3V to 25V) throughout the transport.

Muse claims that the sonic and practical benefits derived from incorporating the Universal PS interface supplied by Digital Axiom Corporation (see the sidebar in the Halverson interview), as well as the chance to include a linear power supply, are what justified the creation of the Model Eight in the first place. The 2½"-square Universal PS transmitter module is attached to the right rear corner, and is potted for thermal, mechanical, and intellectual property reasons.

The Eight's drive mechanism and main board can be replaced with little difficulty when, and if, multichannel DVD-Audio software becomes plentiful.

I don't review the Eight's video performance here, but its linear power supply and other refinements produced a slightly sharper picture and better contrast on DVD movies than either of the two commercial-grade DVD players I've used.

Though the Eight can play a wide variety of formats as is, Muse has ensured a relatively affordable upgrade path for both products. In particular, the Eight's drive mechanism and main board can be replaced with little difficulty when, and if, multichannel DVD-Audio software becomes plentiful — and enough audiophiles upgrade the rest of their systems to handle six or more channels of audio playback.

Inside the 296

Since reviewing the original version almost four years ago (StereoPhile, July 1995), I've used a Muse Model Two, or an updated Two-Plus CD processor, as one of my principal digital references. In the conclusion of that review I underscored the Two-Plus's inventive design, outstanding sonic bargain, and easy upgrade path as reasons for my purchase of the evaluation unit. With the introduction of the Model 296, Muse has honored each of those attributes — and then some. Owners of earlier models can convert their investment into a 296 for the difference between the units' costs. However, the 296 is far more than a souped-up Model Two-Plus. Under the skin, it's a whole new animal.

crosstalk was about 10dB higher in the other direction, and also higher below 1kHz from the balanced outputs, partly due to higher power-supply noise in the balanced mode. The transport was placed on top of the processor for this measurement; it turned out that the power-supply noise was mainly due to magnetic coupling between the Model Eight's mains transformer and the 296's signal circuitry.

For subsequent measurements I moved the transport well to the side of the 296, and noted a corresponding reduction in AC noise. (The moral: don't place the units on top of one another.) Fig.5, for example, shows the spectral analysis of the Muse's output while it decoded data representing a dithered 1kHz tone at -90dBFS. (The measurement was taken by slowly sweeping a 1/3-octave analog bandpass filter from 20kHz to 20Hz, which is why the graph's noise floor appears to rise with frequency.) The right channel's noise floor is a little lower than the left's above the 1kHz tone, and, with the exception of the peak at 180Hz in the left channel, the balanced outputs are slightly quieter.

Switching the digital generator's output word length from 16 to 24 bits resulted in noise-floor reductions of about 11dB (left channel) and 8dB (right). This difference can be seen in fig.6, which shows spectral analyses of the unbalanced outputs. (The output data for this graph was actually a 10Hz tone at -96dBFS, which will give a truer representation of the unit's noise performance than a "digital black" signal.) You can see a spurious peak in the right channel's output at 1.2kHz in each of these graphs. Assuming it isn't spurious interference picked up from the
First, the Model 296 is a true 24-bit/96kHz design. Its overall layout is similar to the Model Two’s: all internal components are arrayed on four accessible circuit boards, with power supply, digital input, and front-panel control PCBs occupying the left half of the chassis. A new DAC/analog output board takes up the entire right half.

The care Muse has taken in designing the Eight’s power supply has been applied to the 296: A pair of quality transformers split duties, one serving the digital input circuitry, DSP filter board, and front-panel controls, the other powering the DAC/analog board. Twelve separate stages of RC-filtered regulation are spread throughout the processor, including four discrete shunt regulators for the analog output stages. Approximately 60,000μF of capacitance provides plenty of power-supply filtering and bypassing.

The 3”-wide digital input board extends the depth of the chassis, just left of center, and is mounted vertically against a zinc-plated shield isolating the power supply and most digital functions from the DAC/analog board. This board contains the AES/EBU and BNC-S/PDIF interface components, including a pair of high-quality pulse transformers, the new Crystal CS8414 96kHz input receiver, and two major new elements that are making their first appearance in the 296: Digital Axiom’s DSP-based digital filter and Universal PS interface daughterboards. Both plug-in modules are software-updateable, and are here potted in epoxy.

Signals from the 13W3 connector bypass the Crystal input receiver entirely, traveling straight to the PS module, where they’re locked to the system’s master clock — relocated there from the transport. The transport is thus slaved to the 296’s master clock, ensuring the lowest possible corruption from interface jitter. Using either the AES/EBU or S/PDIF connections means routing the combined clock and data signals through the input receiver, while the master clock remains in the transport and the processor reverts to its typical slave role.

Under the potting compound of Digital Axiom’s 24-bit/96kHz digital-filter module, surface-mount components support Motorola’s hot new 56303 DSP engine. This 80MHz processor is one of the few capable of 24-bit fixed-point operation, which allows it to process such signals without the round-off errors that can occur with a floating-point design. The 56303 can perform two instructions per clock cycle, and has roughly four times the processing power of the familiar 40MHz 56002 engine. More important, D.A.C. hired a skilled DSP engineer to craft a powerful and very deep FIR algorithm, claiming stopband attenuation better than –122dB and passband ripple of less than –134dB! Both figures are the best I’ve heard of for an audio FIR filter. This one is optimized for 8x-oversampling at 96kHz, 48kHz, and 44.1kHz.

A key feature of this algorithm: When switching from 96kHz to the undithered 1kHz tone encoded with a 24-bit word length is shown in fig.8. There is more noise overlaying the waveform than I’ve seen with other high-resolution processors, perhaps due to the passive I/V conversion.

The Muse 296’s output stage could drive low impedances without breaking a sweat. Fig.9, for example, shows the spectrum of the processor’s output driving a full-scale 50Hz tone into 600 ohms. Almost all the distortion components are better than 100dB down. Similar is the processor’s handling of the punishing combination of 19kHz and 20kHz tones, each at –6dBFS. Fig.10

The 296 is far more than a souped-up Model Two-Plus. Under the skin, it’s a whole new animal.

**Measurements**

Audio Precision test set (which was probably the case with the small 2kHz peak), it might be an idle tone. The balanced output (not shown) featured a slightly greater reduction in the noise floor when the word length was increased to 24 bits, implying slightly greater resolution from the balanced DAC arrangement.

The linearity error of the balanced output is shown in fig.7. (The unbalanced output linearity was identical, within the usual margin of error.) The left channel offers astonishingly good linearity almost down to –120dBFS. By contrast, the right channel features a 1dB negative error below –80dBFS. The Muse’s reproduction of an

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**Fig.7** Muse 296, balanced outputs, departure from linearity (right channel dashed, 2dB/vertical div.).

**Fig.8** Muse 296, waveform of undithered 1kHz sinewave at –90.31dBFS (24-bit data).

**Fig.9** Muse 296, spectrum, DC–1kHz, 61Hz at 0dBFS, 600 ohm load (linear frequency scale, 20dB/vertical div.).

**Fig.10** Muse 296, HF intermodulation spectrum, DC–2kHz, 19+20kHz at 0dBFS, 600 ohm load (linear frequency scale, 20dB/vertical div.).
lower sampling rates, it automatically scales, based on the master-clock frequency of the inbound data, to maintain an ideal relationship between the digital filter and the 48kHz bandwidth analog reconstruction filters downstream. Flexibility is inherent in a DSP design, and according to Halverson, Meridian Lossless Packing (MLP) will definitely be included as soon as the code becomes available from licensor Dolby. HDCD decoding is another possible addition, but is not currently supported.

October surprise

The first prototype of the Model 296 I auditioned in the summer of 1998 included the DAC/analog board from Muse's Model Two-Plus processor, paired with incomplete I5 input circuitry and a rudimentary digital filter algorithm (this last intended only to serve as "proof of concept" for 96kHz playback at Hi-Fi '98 in May). While this early unit sounded good, the steady sonic gains following the installation of the master-mode I5 in August, and then the fully developed 8x-oversampling 96kHz digital filter in September, upped the 296's CD performance to close to the best I'd heard by that point—not to mention what it did for 24-bit/96kHz discs. Perhaps that's why I was so floored by the significant further improvements I heard when the final-production 296, with its new DAC board, arrived the first week of October.

The DAC/analog board is the same size as its counterpart in the original Model Two (to facilitate upgrades), but there the similarity largely ends. Once Kevin Halverson decided to use two DACs per channel in a balanced topology that made rejection of digital-based common-mode errors a top priority, he had to first select the specific complementary components to implement the chosen circuitry. Then, a critical, time-consuming calibration process was developed and applied to each 296 to compensate for variations in real-world tolerances and other idiosyncrasies through an iterative, multistage trimming process. Let's look at Muse's technique for realizing a balanced digital processor by tracing one channel from the DACs through the analog outputs: All four DAC chips in the 296 are Burr-Brown's newest, the Bi-CMOS PCM1704U-K. The "K"-grade 1704 is the best converter Burr-Brown now makes, said to exceed the performance of their vaunted 20-bit PCM636-K in nearly every parameter. Though the 1704 is a true 24-bit DAC, that doesn't mean it achieves a full 24-bit dynamic range, nor is that even the key performance issue. Rather, the four extra bits allow the DAC to seamlessly handle a 24-bit word from the digital filter, and provide some "overhead," making it more likely that a processor can achieve near-20-bit linearity while greatly reducing low-level quantizing errors without resorting to dither or noise-shaping.

The ability of these DACs to invert signal polarity internally was used in one of the DACs per channel to derive a pair of symmetrical signals. Next comes a pair of passive I/V stages, each formed by two precision resistors—one fixed, the other adjustable for balanced trim adjustment—followed by a pair of unique, all-passive fourth-order Bessel reconstruction filters. A passive I/V is ideal in many respects: it allows precise balancing of DAC errors, and shows that, even into 600 ohms, the intermodulation products are well down in level. The 1kHz difference component is at -96dBFS.

The Model Eight DVD transport would not play CD-Rs, so I was unable to examine the jitter performance of the Model Eight/Model 296 system. However, when the 296's S/PDIF data input was driven by a PS Audio Lambda transport via 6' of Aperature interconnect, using an adapter to convert the cable's RCA jack to the BNC required by the 296, the jitter level—measured with the Miller Audio Research analyzer—was very low: 199 picoseconds peak-to-peak. Fig.11 shows a high-resolution spectral analysis of the 296's unbalanced analog output, decoding the data from the Miller jitter-test CD-R. The sidebands indicated by red "1" numeric markers are due to data-related jitter at ±229Hz. These contribute 138ps to the total. Higher-frequency, data-related jitter sidebands are all much lower in level. The sidebands indicated by purple "3" markers are due to jitter with a frequency of ±389Hz. I have no idea what these are due to.

Finally, all the transports I have so far measured that use DVD mechanisms are much better than CD transports at coping with damaged CDs. The Muse Model 8 is no exception, playing through track 36 on the Pierre Verany Test CD, which has 2.5mm gaps in its data spiral, without muting or skipping. It even managed to play through tracks 37 and 38, though with skips and dropouts. These tracks have 3mm and 4mm gaps in their data, respectively.

—John Atkinson
there’s none of the slew-rate limiting or added 1M distortion typical from active 1/V converters. [However, passive 1/V can result in a higher noise floor. — Ed.] Furthermore, by combining the passive 1/V within this new circuit design, Muse was able to increase the output voltage—from the low 1V of the Model Two-Plus to 2V in the 296—with no added noise penalty.

Passive design also paid dividends for the reconstruction filter, offering the same lack of 1M byproducts. Halverson applied his Impedance Equalized circuit to this filter to make the input of each successive stage look like a pure resistance to the output of the previous stage. This, in turn, makes a high-order filter possible without adding active buffers between stages. This fully passive 24dB/octave Bessel filter thus rejects a substantial amount of out-of-band grunge and imaging artifacts, yet maintains excellent phase linearity.

After the reconstruction filters, each channel phase branches off, forming an extra pair of signals to feed the opposite-polarity inputs on two separate Burr-Brown INA-103 instrumentation amps. This cross-coupling provides the critical mode conversion discussed below—just prior to the output amplifiers. In contrast to a typical op-amp, an instrumentation amp, when properly implemented, has special properties that encourage very high common-mode rejection—in this case, even into the RF region, claims Halverson, specifying a common-mode rejection ratio (CMRR) of better than 80dB at 1MHz for the Muse 296. The INA-103 has extremely low noise and is optimized for high-quality microphone or moving-coil preamps, or within other low-impedance circuits such as that found in the 296. An LCR filter between the amplifiers and the XLR and RCA outputs completes the circuitry to ensure stability when driving long cables, and reduce RFI coupling to the outputs.

Sound effects
After my previous experiences with 24/96 discs through a Pioneer DV-500 DVD player, I was confident that the high-end Muse gear would set a new benchmark of realism playing DVDs. But I wasn’t prepared for what they did for ordinary CDs.

I consistently preferred the sound of recorded music played through the I2S-equipped Model Eight and 296 front-end over that of any other source I’ve had in my home—including CD, DVD, or LP. The essential sonic characteristics of these components in my system included an unprecedented degree of focus and low-level purity. This, in turn, led to a remarkably accurate delineation of the scale and location of individual instruments and vocalists. This was not the kind of hyper-etched imaging, mixed with a fine grain, that quickly wears thin, but a beguiling combination of transparency of the acoustic environment and an astonishing resolution of fine harmonic detail that was never even slightly fatiguing.

Driving the 296 via its I2S interface with the Model Eight was a bit disarming at first—it sneaked up on me. The sound was extremely refined, with all the action happening in the realm of nuance and subtle shading—all with the greatest sense of ease. This system seemed to add very little distortion of its own. As a result, I invariably heard a rightness of timbre and naturally proportioned perspective. Sonic images were often expressed with a spookily “visual” degree of boundary definition—I could effortlessly locate each instrument relative to others within the soundfield, without the slightest tendency for them to wander or “morph” in size or shape as the music swung through its range of dynamic expression.

With good recordings, the illusion of solid bodies spread throughout the front half of my living room, and beyond, was stunning. And at either end of the music’s dynamic range I could clearly follow the fundamentals and related harmonic-decay characteristics of individual instruments without them smearing together to form the generalized “sound” of a particular instrument or group of instruments.

Taken as a whole, these attributes give but a glimpse of the awesome macro-to-microdynamic dexterity of the Muse system. Plus, the stellar control, focus, and harmonic purity—the 296’s hallmarks—infused the quality of the bass and lower midrange with an irresistible rhythmic drive and tactile quality that added so much to my enjoyment of all kinds of music. It’s hard to overstate the impact this level of performance had on my emotional connection to even mundane CDs, whose music I now often appreciated as if discovering them anew.

Supporting evidence: Playing CDs
Though I listened to several other excellent processors, the Muses’ only close competitor for playing CDs was Sonic Frontiers’ superb Transport 3 and Processor 3 (T3/P3). After reviewing the SF units for Stereophile (October 1998), I compared them to the earliest prototypes of the Eight/296; though those rudimentary versions were close in some respects, they definitely fell short of the T3/P3’s awesome transient definition, dynamics, and low-level realism.

But in digital audio nothing stands still. Comparing CDs through the production versions of the Muse system and a level-matched T3/P3 combo—the SF flagships still sounding their utterly gorgeous, seductive selves—the tables were turned. The Eight/296 now got the nod in the areas of accurate transient definition, image focus, resolution of harmonics, and localization of instruments. What still boggles my mind is that it was T3 and P3 themselves that had set new standards for me in these very areas just last summer. These were by no means night-and-day differences, but neither were they difficult to hear on my system, even when listening through their respective S/PDIF connections. The more complex and demanding the material, the more apparent these subtle variations became.

Any CD will do, but try Béla Fleck and the Flecktones’ Live Art (Warner Bros. 46247-2). These engaging songs, filled with incredible dynamic punch, lightning-fast transients, and an enthusiastic live audience, clearly illustrated the relative qualities of the Muse and Sonic Frontiers systems. Through the SF gear, the artists and instruments were a bit more forward in perspective. The banjo and bass, though outstanding via the T3/P3, were also a shade more diffused and less solid, their strings appearing slightly “fatter,” or amorphous, compared to the Muses’ tightly focused, holographilic images. The more diffused character of the SF gear made all instruments seem a shade larger and a tad more “round” than did the 296. Yet
the expression of individual notes from the Processor 3 lacked that last measure of ultrapure resolution and transient delineation heard from the Muse processor. As a result, the tendency of fine textural details to coalesce was minimized through the 296, exposing the most delicate inflections and other subtle nuances that better create the illusion of musicians in space. Natural recordings played back through the Muse rig gave an impression of a slightly more laid-back acoustic space; and the sense of depth, such as a venue's rear wall and corners, was more clearly defined.

Sonic Frontiers' premiere system is still unflaggingly musical and engaging, and remains a close second in my book when playing CDs. In my opinion, however the price/performance bar has been raised.

The future arrives
While the CD performance of the models Eight and 296 was a delightful surprise, the combo's other mission in life is to extract all that the new 24-bit/96kHz stereo DVD recordings have to offer. Many of you have read about or have actually heard the genuine sonic advances this new format represents. If you pulled a Rip Van Winkle the past year, the best DVD discs recorded, encoded, and played back through 24-bit/96kHz hardware convey a sublime cohesiveness, sheer effortlessness, and a degree of envelopment that exceeds the very best examples of CDs and most LPs (assuming the rest of your system can keep up). Tonal colors have a vibrant naturalness, and cymbals now sound like round, dimensional objects with a shimmering spray.

However, if a 96kHz-capable commercial-grade DVD-Video player has been your only source, you're in for a real treat through high-end players like the Eight/296, to really hear what's buried between the pits of DVD-Audio discs, all aspects of processor design need reevaluating to lower jitter and all forms of distortion, including—if the Muse designs are any example—digital sources of nonlinearity.

Listening through the Muse system to such 24-bit/96kHz riches as "Summertime," from Classic's reissue of Earl Hines and Jimmy Rushing's Blues & Things (DAD-1012), or the entire twodisc collection of Gershwin's Works for Orchestra and Piano and Orchestra (DAD-1018) with Leonard Slatkin and the St. Louis Symphony, invariably stopped my world! That these recordings are just a drop in the bucket is truly exciting. Soon the majors will start pumping out audio on DVD discs, the majority of which should have at least two channels of 24-bit/96kHz material accessible by this system. Furthermore, this new format offers the first opportunity ever to bring near-master-tape sound quality into the home. Manufacturers of everything from microphones to speakers can use it as a guidepost for improving the rest of the recording/playback chain.

I also level-matched and compared my top-flight analog front-end with the Muse system, listening to Muddy Waters' Folk Singer LP (Mobile Fidelity MFSL-1-201) and Classic's new 24/96 reissue of the same (DAD1020), as well as the group of luscious 45rpm LPs Classic made as counterparts to their first five DAD releases. From both formats I heard the same sense of alluring ease, openness, and rich tonal qualities we've come to expect from the best analog, as well as a general lack of the more pernicious limitations and enharmonic distortions that have always plagued CD sound. However, with the DADs through the 296 there was greater frequency extension and an absence of masking LP distortions, however pleasant, along with a hard-to-define dynamic continuity that even the 45rpm LPs couldn't match. No, I'm not about to sell my turntable and records—there are just too many treasures to have to part with. But in future choices between a hi-rez DVD or an LP of music I want, I'll opt for the DVD in a heartbeat.

Conclusion
My forensic autopsy of the sound of the Muse Eight and 296 falls far short of conveying just how thoroughly this combo has enhanced my appreciation of compact discs and of how hard it now is to stop listening to them—not to mention the impact of introducing an entirely new standard of reproduced music via DVD. No doubt, continued exposure to other new hi-rez DVD systems will help expand my lexicon of sonic analogies to better express their qualities. If even a fair number of these new components sound as good as this rig, it's great news for everyone.

It's ironic that, just as the advent of CD inspired a revolution in the sound quality from LP, so, too, the design choices required to maximize 24-bit/96kHz playback have given birth to a modest and reasonably affordable DVD front-end that has infused new life into CD. I've bought more than 20 CDs in just the past month—a binge unlike any I can remember. Perhaps that says it best of all.

The story, then, of the Muse Model Eight transport and the 296 processor is one of excitement and promise made good—not only for the present, but for more yet to come, as the various software and hardware manufacturers rev up to follow Muse's example. How appropriate, though, that one of the first two-box DVD-Audio/Videod solutions is from a small high-end entrepreneur like Muse. With its relatively modest $6500 total price tag, robust IP interface, modular flexibility, highly innovative design, and compatibility with the a wide variety of two-channel software, this system is here to stay.

### Associated Equipment

**Analog source:** Immedia RPM-2 turntable, Univolt tonearm, Sounds of Silence Crown jewel phono cartridge.

**Digital sources:** Sonic Frontiers Transport 3 and modified Theta Data II transports, Pioneer DV-500 DVD/CD player/transport.

**Digital Processors:** Sonic Frontiers Processor 3, Muse Model Two-Plus (CD-only), Theta Gen.V-a.

**Preamplification:** Jeff Rowland Design Group Coherence II and Cadence phono stage, Z-Systems RDP-1 digital preamplifier, BAT VK-3i, Muse Model 3.

**Power amplifiers:** Jeff Rowland Design Group MC-6 six-channel amplifier, battery-powered Model 6 monoblocks.

**Loudspeakers:** Audio Artistry Bee-thoven Grand, quad-amplified system.

**Cables:** Cardas Golden Reference interconnects; Cardas Golden Cross, TARA Labs Decade speaker cables; Cardas, Audio Power, and Marigo Reference power cords; Cardas AES/EBU, Kimber Select AES/EBU, DH-Labs Silver Sonic BNC and AES/EBU digital cables.

**Accessories:** Arc'teryx Suspenze isolation stand, Audio Power Ultra Wedges, Vibraplane and Newport Benchtop pneumatic isolation platforms, Townshend Seismic Sinks, Signal Guard platform, D'Feet isolation pucks, ASC Tube Traps. —Shannon Dickson
History teaches us that the full flowering of any social phenomenon takes place after the seeds of its destruction have been sown. That tourist magnet, London's Buckingham Palace, for example, was built decades after the English Revolution and the Restoration had redefined the role of the British monarchy as being merely titular, and made the elected Parliament the real seat of power.

The same forces can be seen happening in the High End, where large advances in LP playback technology took place after the mass market had embraced CD. Similarly, it is only now, when DVD-Video has been with us for a couple of years and is being used as a carrier for higher-definition digital sound, that CD playback components are starting to reach the sonic performance that had been promised all along from the 16/44.1 medium.

Thus this review of a by-any-standard expensive CD-playback system from Wadia appears in the same issue of Stereophile as a review of one of the first audio-optimized DVD playback systems, from Muse Electronics. I will compare the Muse and Wadia systems in a Follow-Up next month, but let it be noted here that the Wadia 27ix is 96kHz-capable.

Wadia 27ix Digital Decoding Computer

The 27ix is the third-generation version of the original Wadia 27, which was reviewed by Robert Harley in the October 1996 Stereophile (Vol.19 No.10). I refer readers to that review for a full description of the processor's technology and functionality. Briefly, the circuitry is housed in a black-anodized chassis, its panels machined from solid aluminum. There are no controls on the sculpted front panel, just a blue fluorescent display and the Wadia logo. All functions are operated from the chunky metal remote control, which also operates the 270 transport. The display defaults to showing left and right volume, but also momentarily shows emphasis and polarity, as well as sample rate, selected input, and whether that input is clock-linked or not. The rear panel offers six data inputs, and both balanced and single-ended analog outputs.

The 27ix has the same digital volume control as the 850 and 860 players. This offers 100 0.5dB steps, and, as long as it's used near the top of that range—above "65," according to the manual—it will not degrade signal resolution.

Internally, the 27ix's construction reveals impeccable attention to detail. Separate subenclosures, again constructed from thick panels of machined aluminum, house the data input circuitry and the power transformers. A large printed circuit board carries the power-supply rectifiers, capacitors, and voltage regulators, and a sandwich of three smaller multi-layer pcbs. These are plugged together and carry the data receiver chip, the D/A converters — four Burr-Brown PCM1702s per channel, operated differentially, one mounted above another to cancel stray field effects — the DSP/digital filter circuitry, and the analog output section. Other than the output amplifiers, which appear to use Burr-Brown BUF634 ICs and discrete heatsink transistors, the analog circuitry is based on surface-mount components. Two DIP-switch arrays allow the maximum analog output level to be set to one of 16 different levels, to optimize the 27ix's output for systems with differing amplifier gains and loudspeaker sensitivities.

The digital low-pass filter conforms to Wadia's proprietary DigiMaster algorithm and is implemented in a pair of Motorola 002.7801224.

Price: $9950.


Dimensions: 17" (432mm) W by 7" (184mm) H by 16.5" (420mm) D. Weight: 53 lbs.

Serial number of unit reviewed: 027 0702349.

Price: $7950.

Common to both: Approximate number of dealers: 50.

Manufacturer: Wadia Digital, 624 Troy Street, River Falls, WI 54022. Tel: (715) 426-5900. Fax: (715) 426-5665. Web: www.wadia.com
A/DSP156004 chips. The filter runs at a 64x oversampling rate. To minimize word-clock jitter, the master clock crystal is mounted very close to the DAC chips. An ST-optical link carries the master clock signal from the DSP board to the rear panel, so that the 270 transport can be slaved to the 27x master clock. This differentiates the v version from the earlier 27.

The x modification consists of a revised DSP board, which in turn has a revised Xilinx Field-Programmable Gate Array chip to handle 96kHz and 88.2kHz sample rates. I understand the DACs run at the same 64x rate for both low and high sample rates, but the oversampling ratio is halved at the higher rates. Owners of earlier 27s can return the units to the factory for updating, the modification costing $450 plus S&H. In their literature, Wadia states that a similar upgrade will be available to allow the 27 to decode Sony DSD1-encoded data from Super Audio CD, and claims that, if and when an encrypted high-sample-rate DVD-Audio data output standard is agreed on, the processor already has the necessary internal real estate and a blank panel on its rear.

For the record, the first x DSP board

**Measurements**

The Wadia 27ix's output is noninverting from both its unbalanced and balanced outputs (the latter with pin 2 hot). The source impedance was a very low 8.1 ohms across the audio band from the unbalanced outputs, approximately double that from the balanced jacks at 15 ohms. Both are low enough to drive long interconnects and awkward loads without problem, facilitating the Wadia's use without a preamp. The maximum output level as supplied for review was 4.34V from the unbalanced outputs, 4.28V balanced. Channel balance was a superb 0.01dB.

The time-domain-optimized filter used by Wadia results in a premature rolloff in the top octave of the audio band. This can be seen in the top traces in fig.1, where the output is flat to 10kHz but almost 3dB down at 20kHz. (This is the balanced output response; the unbalanced output was identical.) While this is audible, I didn't find it a serious problem in my auditioning (my hearing cuts off at 16kHz). More noticeable is the response with de-emphasis, the lower traces in fig.1. The processor's output peaks up a little, then starts to roll off above 6kHz. This will be audible with the very small number of pre-emphasized discs. The 27ix's channel separation (not shown) was superb, at better than 120dB below 4kHz (L–R), and approaching 130dB at 100Hz (R–L). (This difference might well be due to differing noise levels in the two channels.)

I used a dCS 904 A/D converter to digitize the analog output of the Audio Precision System.One at 32kHz, 48kHz, and 96kHz sample rates. The resulting response sweeps are shown in fig.2. The slower-than-usual rolloff above the desired passband can be seen in each case. But note that the rolloff is separately defined for each sample frequency. With the usual 96kHz-capable D/A converter — see fig.3 in my review of the Musical Fidelity X-24K (February '99, p.110) — the higher-frequency response is fundamentally the same at all sample rates; it is just curtailed earlier at the lower rates, which appears to mean that the same digital filter is used. With the Wadia, however, the high-frequency response is different in each case, suggesting that the filter is redefined for each sample rate.

![Fig.1 Wadia 27ix, frequency response at -12dBFS and 44.1kHz sampling, balanced outputs, without (top traces) and with (bottom traces) pre-/de-emphasis. (Right channel dashed and offset by 0.1dB for clarity, 0.5dB/vertical div.)](image1)

![Fig.2 Wadia 27ix, frequency response at -2dBFS and (from left to right) 32kHz, 48kHz, and 96kHz sampling. (Right channel dashed, 5dB/vertical div.)](image2)

![Fig.3 Wadia 27ix, 1kHz squarewave at 0dBFS, 48kHz sampling.](image3)

![Fig.4 Wadia 27ix, 1kHz squarewave at 0dBFS, 96kHz sampling.](image4)

![Fig.5 Wadia 27ix, 12kHz squarewave at 0dBFS, 96kHz sampling.](image5)

![Fig.6 Wadia 27ix, balanced outputs, spectrum of dithered 1kHz tone at ~90.31dBFS, with noise and spurious: 16-bit data, top; 24-bit data, bottom. (1/2-octave analysis, right channel dashed.)](image6)

![Fig.7 Wadia 27ix, balanced outputs, spectrum of digital silence with noise and spurious: 16-bit data, top; 24-bit data, bottom. (1/2-octave analysis, right channel dashed.)](image7)
Wadia installed didn't work at the 96kHz sample rate. The replacement was fine.

Wadia 270 CD transport

This large, heavy transport is physically identical to Wadia's 850 and 860 CD players, but has an upgraded Teac CMK-3.2 VRDS transport mechanism, with vibration-damping material added by Wadia. Two features distinguish it from the pack.

The first is the presence of a digital input as well as the usual array of digital outputs. An ST-optical link allows the 270's data-retrieval clock to be slaved to the DAC master wordclock in the 27i or 27ix. This should drastically reduce interface jitter in the D/A's analog output. When the 270 is used in a conventional manner, its output wordclock is derived from a temperature-compensated crystal oscillator.

Second is the "mode" button on the remote, which operates both the 270 and 27ix. This button steps the 270 through three states of "resolution enhancement": in state A, the 270 outputs data with the word length increased from 16 to 24 bits, using high-pass-filtered dither with a triangular probability function (TPDF); in 100Hz, is apparent at around -73dB (0.02%) from both balanced and unbalanced outputs, though this will be subjectively innocuous. However, dropping the load resistance to a punishing 600 ohms both increases the level of the second harmonic and introduces fourth and sixth harmonics (fig.11). Again, this was typical of both balanced and unbalanced outputs.

Intermodulation distortion was low (fig.12), with the 1kHz difference component below -90dB from peak level. (Note that, with this test signal, the peak level is 6dB higher than the level of either of the individual tones.) However, you can see images of the tones reflected back down from the sampling frequency between 12kHz and 16kHz. The price paid for the Wadia filter's excellent time-domain behavior is poorer rejection of ultrasonic spurious. Interestingly, the intermodulation products rise a little

Wadia's DigiMaster filter gives a very good squarewave shape (fig.3), with just a single overshoot cycle. The overshoot is preserved when the sample rate is doubling to 96kHz (fig.4), but its period is halved. And while a 96kHz-sampled, 12kHz squarewave is not particularly square (fig.5), it does have a very good fundamental-plus-third-harmonic shape.

The Wadia 27ix injects extremely low levels of noise into its analog output. Fig.6 shows the spectrum of a dithere 1kHz tone at -90dBFS, with the data word length set to 16 bits (top) and 24 bits (bottom). Other than a glitch at 2kHz, which experience suggests is inherent to the Audio Precision, the traces are free from spurious. You can see that the right channel is indeed noisier than the left below 700Hz, with about a 6-7dB difference in the 24-bit case. Above 2kHz, the increase in word length results in a drop of the noise floor of 12dB or so, implying better than 18-bit performance, which is excellent.

(The volume control was set to its maximum for this measurement.) A similar improvement is seen in fig.7, which shows a wideband spectral analysis of the Wadia's output while it decodes data representing digital silence with 16- and 24-bit word lengths.

The linearity was also superb, as can be seen in fig.8. The amplitude error is negligible down to -110dBFS. This and the low noise are confirmed by the waveshape of an undithered 1kHz tone at -90.31dBFS (fig.9), where the three voltage levels and the transitions between them are clearly defined. With 24-bit data, the result was a reasonable if noisy sinewave (not shown).

The Wadia's steady-state distortion, if still very low in absolute terms, was a little higher than I've seen in other state-of-the-art players and processors. Fig.10, for example, shows the 27ix's output spectrum outputting a 50Hz sinewave into 100k ohms. The second harmonic, at 100Hz, is apparent at around -73dB (0.02%) from both balanced and unbalanced outputs, though this will be subjectively innocuous. However, dropping the load resistance to a punishing 600 ohms both increases the level of the second harmonic and introduces fourth and sixth harmonics (fig.11). Again, this was typical of both balanced and unbalanced outputs.

Intermodulation distortion was low (fig.12), with the 1kHz difference component below -90dB from peak level. (Note that, with this test signal, the peak level is 6dB higher than the level of either of the individual tones.) However, you can see images of the tones reflected back down from the sampling frequency between 12kHz and 16kHz. The price paid for the Wadia filter's excellent time-domain behavior is poorer rejection of ultrasonic spurious. Interestingly, the intermodulation products rise a little
state B, the TPDF dither is low-pass-filtered; the third setting has the 270 outputting plain-Jane 16-bit data. (It should be noted that if the 270 is used with HDCD-equipped processors, modes A and B will defeat the HDCD decoding.)

The 270's construction echoes that of the 27ix, except that it has a slightly different-colored fluorescent display, and three pushbuttons: play/track advance, stop/eject, and backtrack. Internally, the construction is to the same immaculate standard as the 27ix. The transformer is isolated in its own vibration-absorbing subchamber, the circuitry is shielded, and all the metalwork consists of panels milled and machined from solid stock.

Listening
With the 270 driving the 27ix and the latter connected directly to the Levinson power amplifiers, the sound quality was jaw-dropping. Only the Linn Sondek CD12, which Wes Phillips reviewed in February, was in the same league for CD playback. Even my own Mark Levinson No.315/No.30.5, which I purchased a few years back, fell a little behind when it came to the sheer transparency of the Wadia's presentation.

Measurements

into a 600 ohm load (fig.13), but so do the aliased images.

Using the Miller Audio Research Jitter Analyzer, I tested the Wadia components' jitter performance both as connected with the ST-optical links and with the D/A processor driven by a PS Lambda transport. (The Miller rig is a combination of proprietary software written for a National Instruments PC card-based measurement system and a low-jitter CD-R carrying a special test signal.)

I first investigated the effect of the clock link. The 270's clock error was just 3 parts per million, which indicates superb accuracy. Without the clock link, and with the Wadia 270 and 27ix connected by an ST-optical datalink, the measured jitter level was 248 picoseconds peak-peak—somewhat higher than I have measured with other great-sounding CD playback systems. The dCS Elgar, for example, driven by a Meridian 500 transport, achieved an astounding low 142ps. When I added the clock-link connection, which meant that the 270 transport now derived its reference clock from the crystal controlling the 27ix's D/A converters, the measured jitter dropped only slightly, to 234ps.

This can be seen graphically in fig.14. Without the clock link (grayed-out trace), the first three lower, data-related sidebands (red markers "2," "3," and "4") are higher in level than the upper sidebands. Adding the clock link drops these sidebands in level to match the lower ones. It also eliminates pairs of sidebands at ±15.6Hz and ±340Hz. However, it does not appear to affect the higher-harmonic sidebands (red markers "5" through "11"), and a pair of low-level sidebands at ±174Hz can now be seen (purple marker "1").

I then replaced the Wadia 270 with the PS Audio Lambda Stereophile uses as a test-bench reference. (The volume control was put to "92" in both cases to avoid clipping the National Instruments PC card.) To my astonishment, the measured jitter level dropped to 162.5ps using an ST-optical link, with a similarly low level when this was replaced by an Apature S/PDIF electrical link. Fig.15 compares the high-resolution spectral analysis of the Wadia 27ix's analog noise floor when driven by the clock-linked, ST-optical Wadia 270 (grayed-out trace) and the S/PDIF Lambda. The latter has the upper data-related fundamental sideband higher in level. It also has some very-low-level sidebands, at ±60Hz and ±120Hz, that must be power-supply-related—but all the other data-related sidebands are lower in level than with the 270.

What is also surprising from this graph is that the overall noise floor is around 3dB lower with the PS Lambda. I then remembered that I had the Wadia 270's resolution-enhancement function set to mode "B." This adds dither, which will raise the noise floor slightly when the 27ix is driven from the 270 transport, but not from other digital sources. The Miller Audio Research program searches through the FFT-derived spectral data for symmetrical sidebands on either side of the fundamental tone, calculates their frequencies, then estimates a peak-peak jitter level in picoseconds from their weighted sum. The difference in noise floor between the 27's performance with the Wadia 270 and PS Lambda transports should not affect the measured jitter level.

Finally, the Wadia 270 coped well with data dropouts. It played through track 32 on the Pierre Verany Test CD without a glitch, and only occasionally muted on track 33, which has 1.5mm gaps in the data spiral.

— John Atkinson

Fig.14 Wadia 270 & 27ix via ST-optical connection with clock link, high-resolution jitter spectrum of analog output signal (11kHz at -6dBFS with LSB toggled at 229Hz). Center frequency of trace, 11kHz; frequency range, ±3.5kHz. Grayed-out trace was taken under identical test conditions but without clock link.

Fig.15 Wadia 27ix & PS Audio Lambda via S/PDIF electrical connection, high-resolution jitter spectrum of analog output signal (11kHz at -6dBFS with LSB toggled at 229Hz). Center frequency of trace, 11kHz; frequency range, ±3.5kHz. Grayed-out trace is of the 27ix driven by the Wadia 270 and clock-linked.
Tiny recorded details were laid bare, yet without the presentation being spotlit or forced. When I used the Wadia 27ix as the monitoring converter for the mixing of Stereophile's recent Rendezvous CD (STPH013-2), the differences between the natural acoustic of Chad Kassem's Blue Heaven Studios and the artificial reverberation I was adding to the vibes with a Lexicon unit were startlingly clear. The 27ix made matching the quality of the latter to the former a lot easier.

The impressive transparency was matched by the billowing nature of the soundstage. On this issue's recording of the month, Eternity's Sunrise (Harmonia Mundi USA 907231), the slow-moving choral harmonies of John Taverner's Funeral Canticle lit up a vast space between and behind the speakers. Yet individual images within that space were rock-solid in their positioning.

Tonaly, the Wadia's presentation was easy on the ear. Whether this was due to the premature top-octave rolloff or to the accurate waveform preservation of the processor, who can say? But it definitely made the Levinson No.30.5 (about to be sent off for the No.30.6, 96k upgrade) sound more up-front and slightly more "mechanical." (All comparisons were performed with levels matched to within 0.1dB, using the No.380S's preset input gain function.) The mid-treble of the Wadia, however, was very slightly more grainy than the Levinson's.

And the Levinson had slightly better-defined low frequencies, which led to a better-preserved sense of space. Where the low bass was completely over-cooked, as in Massive Attack's Unfinished Symphony (Virgin 7 86228 2), the Wadia's already fat upper-bass presentation became too much of a good thing, even with the 270's resolution-enhancement mode switched off.

These comparisons were performed with the same transport, Wadia or No.31.5, driving both processors. Interestingly, these differences were magnified when I compared the complete Levinson transport/processor combination with the Wadia 270/27ix. But, all things considered, coming home at the end of a hard day's wordsmithing in the office to escape into the lush, opulent, billowing virtual sonic reality of the Wadia components was just what high-end audio is all about.

My only criticism: The limited accept- tance angle of the remote, and the fact that you can switch between the 27ix's six inputs only sequentially, which made A/B comparisons between digital sources hard to perform.

The 24/96 experience

When it came to high-resolution digital, the Wadia shone brightly, rivaling my memories of the dCS Elgar. Whether it was my own 96kHz master tapes, or Classic's and Chesky's DADs, the 27ix's benefits in CD replay were magnified. The most impressive sound I heard was from an audio DVD sampler from Turtle Records that I was given at the recent CES by the Dutch company's Harry van Dellen. Included are purist recordings of music ranging from Bach organ through a trumpet/bass/drums reading of "Cherokee" and arrangements for marimba ensemble, to Brahms' Clarinet Quintet, with diversions into the sounds of clocks (!). The sheer vivacity of the Wadia's presentation, coupled with laid-back high frequencies that resembled nothing so much as the real thing, made this the best I have ever heard from any digital audio technology. In the words of Sam Tellig, there was "simply more there there."

Conclusion

Undoubtedly expensive at $16,900 for the pair, the Wadia 270/27ix combination is about as good as CD playback gets. But the situation is less clear when the Wadias are listened to as standalone components. I wouldn't advise anyone at present to buy an expensive CD-only transport unless they have a large investment in CD's that they don't intend to stop playing. But with its 24-96 capability and the possibility of being upgraded to deal with both encrypted data and DSD recordings, the 27ix has a ros: future. Class A — with a bullet!
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Nagra VPA monoblock power amplifier

Nagra's VPA amplification system consists of two slim, handsome monoblock amplifiers intended for vertical placement next to the speakers. However, two 845 tubes put out a lot of heat, so they should be at least a foot away from your speakers... unless you're looking for a nice crackle finish.

The chunky 845s sit bravely atop the casework, one in front of the other, and therein lies a brief tale. A pair of "mandatory optional" tube protectors is now supplied with every VPA. These can be returned through the dealer for a $1200 rebate, provided you sign a document absolving Nagra of all responsibility for damages resulting from exposed, sizzling-hot tubes. I was shown the highly polished protectors at the January '99 CES, and found them elegant, sculptural, and clearly effective at keeping soft tissue away from hot glass. And 845s run in excess of 535°F! For the record: no kids, no pets, so no protection chez 10.

The manual also warns that the VPA operates with extremely high internal voltages that sometimes exceed 1200V: "Such voltages can KILL you!" There follows more colorful language, and dire warnings regarding tube sockets that carry 600V even several minutes after the power is shut off. And the storage capacitors don't fully discharge for two hours beyond that. To provide an additional margin of safety, Nagra has wired the VPA so that removal of either side panel disconnects the power as well. (The whole design reeks of Swiss competence.)

I'm not being sensationalist about this. Respect the VPA as the hot-running, high-voltage device it is and It Will Provide. Cold-nosed pets and curious little fingers have no business around these Swiss Guards of quality sound engineering.

The tubes are hand-selected, thoroughly inspected, and tested. The enclosure is made of CNC-machined, hardened aluminum. Nagra claims that a circuit topology fully balanced from...
input to output makes for lower distortion and intermodulation, and better rise-time characteristics. "Special" toroidal transformers "provide full power output even at very low frequencies, with excellent performance irrespective of the type of loudspeaker impedance loading." For which there are one "cold" gold-plated WBT speaker binding post and three "hot" posts to choose from: for 4, 8, or 16 ohm loads.

**Setup and tube topics, or Is that 845 loaded?**

Setting up the VPAs was a breeze. It took just a few minutes to mount the footers and insert the chunky 845s into their sockets — the base of each tube bayonets into the huge receptacle with a slight push and a quarter turn to the right. Each tube's serial number is keyed to the VPA it's meant for, and marked for front or rear placement. The owner is advised to wear the provided cotton glove when handling the tubes to avoid leaving grease spots on the glass. Your bio-meme can affect the expansion rate of the glass envelope, and even cause it to crack or explode. (Didn't know you were so potent, did you?) And once your sticky fingerprint is on the tube, it can't be removed after they've heated up and annealed the evidence in place. So think Swiss: Be fastidious.

Fit a power cord into the main power switch/fuse-holder/IEC receptacle and a balanced interconnect (or single-ended with the provided adapters), and you're ready for business. once you've selected the appropriate binding post. Ah, but which one? Actually, Nagra takes the guesswork out of it with a terrific feature they call the Load Match Meter. It sits on the front panel just below the main rotary selector switch, resembling the multifunction modulometer found on Nagra's PL-P preamp. The Load Match Meter is used to check for correct tube operation, set bias, and dial in the speaker's impedance load. The meter's red pointer indicates peak cathode current on the output tube; the black one shows peak anode voltage. A small switch inside the case selects the tube you're "looking" at, and there's a potentiometer to set the bias, if necessary. A small green zone on the meter's left indicates correct current and voltage tube setting. When the amp is powered up and in mate, both pointers should land in the green. If they don't, check that the tubes are mounted correctly front and back, as indicated by the F and R suffixes in the serial numbers.

Your quartet of "fitted" tubes should work fine right out of the box. I always gave the tubes a few minutes to come up to temperature before unmuting the amps with a flick of the function selector. On turn-on, the meters boogie about a bit as the electrons begin to flow, and quickly settle down to a nice, steady idle. When I shut them down to change cables or interconnects and then powered up again within a short time, the 845s lightly thumped the woofers with a brief, low-level transient — even while muted. Aside from that, they behaved beautifully.

Now's the time to check the VPA's

---

**Measurements**

The VPA was warmed up for approximately 15 minutes prior to any measurements being taken; according to Nagra, the amplifier should enter stable operation after this period. All measurements were made in balanced mode. The 8 ohm measurements were taken from the 8 ohm outputs, 4 and 2 ohm measurements from the 4 ohm outputs.

The Nagra's input impedance is too high (good!) to measure accurately on our Audio Precision test set. The two voltages required to produce the measurement differed by mere thousandths of a volt. (With the slight variations in this range typical of tube amplifiers, the values actually overlapped.) Suffice it to say that this amplifier's input impedance should cause no matching problems with any competent preamplifier. Pin 2 of the balanced input is wired as positive.

The VPA's voltage gain into 8 ohms, from the 8 ohm tap, is a high 35.7dB. The measured output impedance was quite high, varying between 2.23 and 2.26 ohms depending on frequency and load impedance (measurements taken at the 8 ohm output). This suggests some potential frequency-response irregularities with typical loudspeaker loads.

The Nagra's DC offset was unmeasurable. Signal/noise ratio (unweighted ref. 1W into 8 ohms) measured 66.2dB with a bandwidth of 22Hz to 22kHz, 66.2dB from 10Hz to 500kHz, and 80dB A-weighted. (Most of the noise in the unweighted measurements was at low frequencies.)

Fig.1 shows the VPA's frequency response. The variations into our simulated real load indicate the sort of frequency-response variations this amplifier will produce into an actual loudspeaker, though the exact variations will depend on the particular loudspeaker. The 10kHz squarewave response is shown in fig.2 — a very good result. The Nagra has a good rise time with little rounding of the waveform's leading edge. The 1kHz squarewave (not shown) is nearly perfect.

The low-power THD+noise vs frequency results shown in fig.3 are not exceptional. While the midband linearity is excellent, the amplifier becomes increasingly nonlinear at the frequency...
Load Meter for the best impedance match with your speaker. If you've chosen correctly (4, 8, or 16 ohms), and your speakers have a constant impedance with respect to frequency, the two pointers should be superimposed while playing music. If the red pointer leads the black, the load impedance is too high (an 8 ohm speaker connected to the 16 ohm tap, for example). The JMlab Utopia is a nominal 6 ohm speaker, and the meter clearly showed that the VPA's transfer function was best on the 4 ohm tap. During Immense Musical Moments the red pointers still led the black, but most often they were in sync. As with the PL-P, Nagra makes it easy to optimize signal throughput.

If you use other than Nagra-supplied tubes, use the potentiometers to adjust the 845s for the same cathode current. But I suspect that most customers will be getting factory-matched tubes from their dealers and won't be fiddling with bias. The VPAs operate without negative feedback on the output stage, which makes them very tolerant, Nagra claims, to variations in impedance due to frequency. The main function selector on the front panel is a three-way rotary switch that feels "Nagaluxious" to manipulate, resulting in a signal that is highly tolerant.

During Immense Musical Moments the red pointers still led the black, but most often they were in sync. as Kathleen put it. Engineered for the field, the VPA is fitted with two mains fuses: one on the AC supply and another on the neutral return.

Circuit and transformers

The VPA's circuit is balanced from input to output. Nagra reminds us that a high-quality balanced input stage offers better isolation from noise than an unbalanced one. This is especially true, they point out, with long runs of interconnect "and when in the presence of a ground loop with associated current circulation." That's why Nagra chose a balanced input for the VPA rather than the single-ended topology found on their own PL-P. Does that make sense? Manual: "Designing a high-quality symmetrical output is an extremely difficult task that increases the cost of the output stage, offers no audible advantages, and no technical advantages. For these reasons, the outputs of the PL-P (like the majority of preamplifiers) uses an asymmetrical output through high-quality gold-plated RCA connectors." Okay, that does makes sense.

Tucked away neatly within the case, one ECC82 (12AU7) and one ECC83 (12AX7) per chassis serve as input and driver, respectively. The VPA sports a pure class-A push-pull output stage good for up to 50Wpc, unburdened by feedback on the tubes or transformers. "The advantage of such an output stage is that it allows the VPA to attack a wide range of loads (capacitive, induct-

extraneous, particularly below 100Hz — when you use no feedback, increased distortion is the consequence you must accept. The waveform of the distortion (1kHz) is shown in fig.4. At 1W the waveform was difficult to see in the noise, but at 5W a dominant second harmonic is apparent, as well as clear signs of higher-order distortion. Into 2 ohms (not shown), the dominant harmonic changes from second to third.

Fig.5 shows the Nagra's output spectrum, reproducing a 50Hz sinewave at 41W into 4 ohms. The distortion, again, is fairly high — a maximum of ~43dB (about 0.7%) at 100Hz, with a regularly descending series of higher harmonics. Fig.6 shows the intermodulation distortion resulting from a combined 19+20kHz signal at 30.7W output into 4 ohms — a level just below visible signs of clipping with this test signal. The highest artifact here, at 18kHz, is ~43.9dB, or about 0.7%. There is also approximately 5% distortion at 1kHz (~46.9dB). The results are not significantly different into 8 ohms (not shown).

The THD + noise percentage vs output power curves for 1kHz are shown in fig.7. The actual discrete-clipping-point measurements (1% THD + noise) are 59.9W (178dBW, 118V line) into an 8 ohm load, 61.2W (149dBW, 118V line) into 4 ohms, and 68.1W (123dBW, 118V line) into 2 ohms.

It wasn't possible to measure the VPA's toneburst power with the Miller Audio Research Amplifier Profiler; its floating output configuration was not happy with the test system's ground-referenced input.

The Nagra VPAs measured performance reflects its low-feedback design. In short, acceptable, but little more, I feel.

— Thomas J. Norton

![Fig.4 Nagra VPA, 1kHz waveform at 5W into 4 ohms (top), 4 ohm tap, distortion and noise waveform with fundamental notched out (bottom, not to scale).](image)

![Fig.5 Nagra VPA, spectrum of 50Hz sinewave, DC-1kHz, at 41W into 4 ohms, 4 ohm tap (linear frequency scale).](image)

![Fig.6 Nagra VPA, HF intermodulation spectrum, DC-22kHz, 19+20kHz at 30.7W into 4 ohms, 4 ohm tap (linear frequency scale).](image)

![Fig.7 Nagra VPA, distortion (%) vs continuous output power into (from bottom to top at 10W): 8 ohms, 8 ohm tap; 4 ohms and 2 ohms, 4 ohm tap.](image)
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tive, or varying resistance) without the risk of oscillation or intermodulation. A short-circuit or accidentally disconnecting the speaker terminals for a short duration will not damage the VPA in any way.” Good news for klutzty reviewers such as I.

The gapless-toroid output transformer was designed by Nagra and allows a low-frequency audio signal of 40Hz to be reproduced at full power, “when generally other vacuum tube amplifiers would only be able to manage about 50% of their rated full power at such low frequencies.” Well, if you’ve got it, flaunt it, I always say. The transformers are mounted to one side panel with insulating washers. “High-frequency parasitic capacitance given off by the output transformer is very low despite the high voltage necessary to give a smooth frequency response up to 100kHz.”

“Give me the luxuries of life and I will willingly do without the necessities.” — Frank Lloyd Wright

The VPA’s are unambiguous in their presentation: Their sonic qualities wrap around the listener in an exciting, virtual-reality kind of way... The imaging was extremely holographic without being flashy in any particular way.

The VPAs are unambiguous in their presentation: Their sonic qualities wrap around the listener in an exciting, virtual-reality kind of way. The listening was extremely holographic without being flashy in any particular way.

made it ultra-dimensional in every respect. Transparency is important in this regard; the totality of the original acoustic seemed transplanted to our listening room. Analog, as usual, was slightly more bloomy, and larger in overall aspect than digital. But while listening to the dCS 972/Elgar combination, I didn’t complain a “bit.”

Imaging was enhanced by another quality, one more difficult to describe. I’ve called it “inner light” before, some quality of openness and warmth in the upper midrange and treble that’s especially evident with female vocals. I’ve heard it with 300Bs and good 6550s—like the Svetlanas and certain OTLs. I’ve heard this inner light warmer and brighter with some other amplifiers on one memorable occasion, as a smoldering, almost hidden inner illumination. The big 845s had it too, but very slightly. It’s just a suggestion, nothing too gross or pyrotechnic—just enough to put the blush in a singer’s cheek and a pout on her lips as she manifests herself between the speakers.

This relatively subtle quality was coupled with a broad illumination of the soundstage and the performers upon it. Again, nothing obvious or overtone—just transparent, open, and revealing, with a hint of warmth to match the flicker of that inner light, so to speak. And the resolution of that openness in the upper midrange and above was possible because of the speed, clarity, and coherence of the presentation. The VPAs always sounded as if they had a fast rise-time; leading-edge transients were snappy and startling but never exaggerated. And the energetic pace, timing, and energy pulled the rest of the acoustic envelope smartly along behind it: bloom, harmonic interplay, and decay were beautifully rendered. The speed of decay was almost too good, imparting a slightly dry characteristic in comparison to the Wet School of tube-amp design. I’d never say that the VPAs sounded “sweet” on top, but they sure weren’t sour. Clean, extended, detailed, revealing, and dynamic, maybe, but not sweet. Euphony isn’t Nagra’s bag... man. At the same time, at the very top, the amps (and, I’m assuming it’s safe to say, the 845s) stepped back slightly. To me it was a bit cool up there, a light balm for those hot recordings where the engineer slumped unconscious over the mixing board.

In the midrange, the VPA was a delight. Totally Nagra, the amplifier never bowed to the thickly, but the beauty, nuance, and texture on tap will surely drive lucky owners mad with desire.

Let’s now turn our attentions to the bass range. What exactly can 50W do on the JMLab Utopias? Good question. Well, the French speakers are about 94.5dB sensitive, so that’s pretty good. But the big-port reflex woofer, I’ve always thought, liked power and grip. Then, too, the impedance in the mid-bass drops down to three point something or other; once again, grunt is good. I haven’t really changed my mind about it, but I’ll tell you: Within their

**Update: The Nagra PL-P**

Some time after my review of the Nagra PL-P was published in the January 1998 *Stereophile*, Nagra importer Steve Lee called.

“...are you using the tape outs yet?”

“Uh... no.” Just call me Butt-head.

It’s true, the PL-P is the perfect candidate for hot-rodling. You bypass two tubes, some circuitry, and a few switches this way, and volume control is handled by the two input potentiometers! The Modulometer becomes largely superfluous using the tape outs, and there’s a bit more background hiss, but the sound is fantastic. In my review I noted a certain mild tendency of the PL-P to sound a touch too squeaky-clean in its mad dash toward neutrality: “rather cool and analytic,” as the entry reads in “Recommended Components.” Going hot-rod doesn’t really change the PL-P’s character, but transparency gets a real leg up. That additional touch of clarity and coherence allows even more information through, including dynamics, bloom, tonal color, and harmonic development. It bumps the presentation up to the next level of awesomeness from whence it came. I strongly urge you to give it a try if you’re lucky enough to have a PL-P in your listening room.

The VPAs’ slightly more voluptuous and less insistent presentation make a wonderfully synergistic match with the Nagra PL-P. Running them together was an aural and visceral delight.

—Jonathan Scull

*Stereophile, April 1999*
PATRICIA BARBER: MODERN COOL

After the wild success of Patricia Barber’s Café Blue (Record to Die For twice!), available on Music Direct LP or CD, the dreamy chanteuse follows with Modern Cool. Not only the most anticipated jazz release of the year — with the same Chicago quartet from Café Blue (plus trumpet) — but another arresting sonic triumph as well. “People need music now,” says Barber. “They need music that speaks to their souls, not just their heads.”

Why “Modern Cool”? Barber says she would “leave the 20th century kicking and screaming,” not giving in to a “dominant ideology [of] empty materialism.” It’s Barber’s clear-headed reductionism at its finest, CD, $14.99, or 180-gram LP now available! LP, $23.99.

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power envelope, the VPAs did a spectacular job of controlling the Utopias and going way down with elan, power, and definition.

Is this the hen or the hawk, you might wonder. Neither, I assure you. While the VPAs didn't have the horsepower to set up the really huge and overwhelming acoustic of some of the solid-state powermeisters we've auditioned, they did a credible job of sounding like 100Wpc amps — until I exceeded the posted speed limit. With the Utopias, the trick was to crank up the volume until the tubes started to bottom out, as it were, then back off a db or so. Within these limits, the VPAs always sounded large and in charge, no excuses, if perhaps just a touch smaller in overall scale and impact than the solid-state kilowatt boys, or the giant, luscious VTL Watts with their 48 (!) 6550s.

But run with the output tubes just below “saturation,” the VPAs sounded first-rate all the way, and the dynamics were never less than terrific. Could I have stood it a touch louder? Sure, but not much. Did the power prove a limiting factor in the review? No, absolutely not. In fact, Nagra had “approved” the match with the Utopias during an earlier visit, when importer Steve Lee turned up with two suitcases that, what a surprise, contained a pair of VPAs.

What surprised me was how much volume and apparent power the VPAs put out between just one and five or seven watts.

It was interesting to note the relationship between relative loudness and the amps' power output, as indicated on the Load Match Meter (also calibrated in watts). When they say it's the first watt that counts, they're not kidding. What surprised me was how much volume and apparent power the VPAs put out between just one and five or seven watts. In fact, orchestral works, trip hop, and Ellington sounded really loud and impactful when tickling 25 or 30W. Above that, things began to get a little loose and out of control. But it was interesting to hear how, for example, the plucked bass on Patricia Barber's Modern Cool (Prestonie PREM-741-2) sounded so powerful and present, so pitch-differentiated and acoustic, while never using much more than seven or eight watts. Just goes to show: like the man said, everything's relative.

Modern Cool was just the disc to prove that indeed, $E = MC^2$. "She's a Lady" is a good place to start if you're looking for fabulous vocals and a powerfully rendered bass. Argh, that voice... she's terrific. Via the Nagras, I was freaking yet again over this great recording. The airiness, transparency, hugely palpable imaging, sharp dynamics, and midrange development were all treats. The bass was beautifully rendered: rich, fast, acoustic, and complete. The VPAs barely lifted their power indicators past five or seven watts, even while dishing out verifiable control, power, and pitch definition in the deepest nether regions.

Looking for big bass transients, I cued up Loop Guru's Loop Bites Dog (World Domination WDM 10066-2). Once again, I was impressed. Watching the indicators flicker from a mere 6 to 12W or so, I found myself listening as loud as I'd ever care to, with full power and control from top to bottom. I'd guess the 845s don't really have all that much headroom in this circuit. They put out like champs until clipping, which they do relatively "softly," as tubes are wont. Overdriving the VPAs resulted in boost and distortion in the bass, and a certain confusion and lack of precision higher in the frequency spectrum. But that was about it.

Re-creation of acoustic space was always a strong point of the VPAs. There can be no better example of this than Vlatko Stefanovski and Miroslav Tadic's Krushev (M'A Recordings M044A). The guitarists play soulful duos inside a hemispherical structure called the Macedonian Monument in Krushevo, Macedonia — there are a lot of cultural harmonics, quite apart from those of the two guitars.

You'll play this CD not for audiophile-approved pinpoint imaging (of which there is none), but for its fabulous music, the tonal color and sense of space, the reverberant bloom and lovely acoustic decay of the notes produced by these two world-class performers. "Just... to... die," I seem to have scribbled in my notebook, along with: "Listening to this...

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**Associated Equipment**

When doing digital, I spin discs on the still-lovely-sounding Fossett Air Bearing CD transport. It sounded wonderful up on a trio of large PolyCrystal Cones on a pumped-up Bright Star Air Mass 2, itself atop a PolyCrystal equipment stand. Connecting to the dCS 972 D/D converter, I used both AES/EBU and BNC'd S/PDIF to the Limited data links. (They are superb.) The upsampling 24/192 data stream fed the Elgar via another pair of XLO The Limited data links for dual-AES running. (The Elgar can't lock to 192kHz on a single-AES connection.) I used the balanced analog outputs of the Elgar direct into the VPAs on a variety of interconnects, including TARA The One, Cardas Golden Reference, and, best of all, Synergistic Research Designer's Reference with the Discrete Shielding upgrade. Speaker cables were either The One, Golden Reference, or Designer's Reference.

When playing the Fossett Air Force One/van den Hul Black Beauty combo, I ran a set of the still-superior XLO Signature phono cables to the PL-P and took the output from the preamp's tape loop. The long run to the amps when using the PL-P was best served with interconnect supplied by importer Steve Lee, one he informally calls Canorus Cable (Neutrik RCA at one end, balanced XLRs at the other). Protesting that he didn't want to be in the cable business, he allowed that he'd be happy enough to supply the cable to interested customers for a couple of hundred dollars. I think it's a good investment — they sounded better than the similarly terminated cables that came packed with the VPAs, and far better than other single-ended interconnects with the provided adapters. Power cords were Synergistic Designer's Reference Squared Master Couplers, which sound fantastic and are priced accordingly, alas. A 12' pair on the VPAs seemed to supercharge their 50 available watts.

—Jonathan Scull

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2 And 48 busing operations! Ooffff, my back...

3 To learn more about this and other M'A recordings, look for my interview with recordist Todd Garfinkle in an upcoming issue of Stereophile.
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Stereophile, April 1999
recording at 24-bit/192kHz, I feel connected to it on a spiritual as well as musical plane. The acoustic of the recording venue is the ‘third instrument’ in the recording—it comes across liquid but not too wet. The full and total explanation of the space by the VPAs is a knockout.”

Try Schubert’s Symphony 6 and 8 with Jos van Immerseel and the Anima Eterna Symphony Orchestra, a recording I highly recommend (Sony Classical SK 63094). Although the VPAs do have a naturally close-up perspective similar to that of the matching PL-P, this recording sounded more mid-hall, very much like what you’d hear at a concert. The presentation was as dynamic as it’s imaginable to be, making me jump in the Ribbon Chair during the last few powerful strokes at the end of the Allegro Moderato of “Die Unvollendete.” The midrange was clean but well fleshed out. “Scrubbied shiny, healthy, and fresh,” I noted. There are plenty of big orchestral transients in this recording, and the VPAs handled them with aplomb, as long as they remained below about 25-30W. The powerful timpani at the beginning of the Adagio—Allegro of Symphony 6 begins with a magnificent, huge acoustic moment that put the amps through their paces. They passed the test with flying colors. The VPAs again impressed with open, extended highs, the leading edges beautifully defined, the midrange rich with luster.

The transparency I’ve already mentioned is important for big orchestral doings. The VPAs put me in the hall—a big, reverberant acoustic, transparent and open, like an Elnar lens on an old Leica: sharp right out to the corners. The loveliness and enchantment of the presentation were fully available despite the amp’s Euro pedigree and Nagra-bred clarity. More notes: “The music may, as a result, be said to become more meaningful and communicative; I was better able to relax into the acoustic and feel the intense emotion.”

“Small but no bullshit!”
—Kathleen Benveniste

That’s how K-10 sums it up! As you may have gathered by now, I loved the Nagra VPA too. If you’re a well-heeled audiophile with a large collection of vinyl, a Nagra PL-P preamp, and relatively efficient speakers, you might find long-term happiness with a pair of VPAs. The combination of the VPAs with the PL-P was altogether extraordinary in every audiophile sense imaginable, especially when coming out of the PL-P “hot rod” via the tape outs and adjusting volume with the input potentiometers. It’s hard to remember when I last enjoyed vinyl as much as this.

Digital straight out of the upsamplled Elgar D/A processor was magnificent, if a hair lighter and smaller in overall proportions and impact than with a variety of kilobuck kilowatt solid-state amps we’ve been auditioning. But by any criterion, the VPA is an unqualified success. If you can afford them, it’s hard to imagine that they won’t make you as happy as they did me.
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Stereophile, April 1999
Among the most hallowed of my 10 or so (the number varies) personal commandments of high-end audio is the following (to be uttered in sepulchral tones with deep humility):

You have to spend a lot of money only to discover that you didn't have to spend a lot of money.

 Needless to say, given the inherent snobbery of old-time tweaks and the fundamentalist fervor of recent converts, thousands of acres of old-growth forest have been pulped in the expression of all the conflicting opinions as to what constitutes the outer limits of true high-end performance, and at what price.

I'm not here to lecture you as to the palpable superiority of certain pricey components, to squabble about analog vs digital or tubes vs solid-state, or to deny the evidence of our ears when confronted with large, sophisticated, full-range speakers offering bass extension that brings to mind the shifting of tectonic plates. But given the relative importance of music in our lives, and the budgetary constraints under which many of us operate, an audiophile's special insights are subjected to their sternest test in the balancing of the relative strengths and weaknesses of each link in the signal chain. Here, a little knowledge can go a long way toward procuring quality core components; one can entertain the possibility of judicious upgrades throughout the signal chain as one inches one's way up and over the slippery slopes of Mount TradeOff and into the Valley of NoCompromise.

The received wisdom of certain mid-fi scribes is to put most of your money into speakers. But the burgeoning number of quality integrated amps suggests that quality electronics is the most important part of your signal chain.

The son also rises

The brainchild of French audio designer Yves Bernard André of YBA, Audio Refinement is distributed in North America by Audio Plus Services. At $995, The Complete integrated amplifier is the heart and soul of The Complete series of components, which also includes a $695 AM/FM tuner, an $895 CD player, and a unified system remote control for $50. The series is meant to offer quality-conscious pilgrims a no-compromise point of entry into the world of high-end performance, but at a reasonable price.

The Complete series is not some glorified mid-fi concept. Many of its design refinements are directly descended from the tried-and-true methodology André has evolved over the past decade in his imposing line of no-compromise YBA separates. In some ways, The Complete integrated amplifier is a leaner, meaner, slightly stripped-down version of the YBA Intégré DT, whose impressive sonics have led to its perennial inclusion in Class A of Stereophile's "Recommended Components."

**Equipment Report**

**Chip Stern**

**Audio Refinement**

The Complete integrated amplifier

**Description:** Solid-state integrated amplifier. Power output (both channels driven): 50Wpc into 8 ohms (17dBW), 90Wpc into 4 ohms (16.5dBW). Frequency response: 10Hz-40kHz, ±3dB. Total Harmonic Distortion: 20Hz-20kHz, <0.02%. S/N ratio: >95dB (A-weighted). Power consumption: 260W (full power).

**Dimensions:** 4.25" (105mm) H by 17.5" (442mm) W by 12.75" (320mm) D. Weight: 19 lbs. (8kg).

**Serial number of unit reviewed:** 1 000108

**Price:** $995; remote control adds $50. Approximate number of dealers: 35.

**Manufacturer:** Audio Refinement. Distributor: Audio Plus Services, P.O. Box 3049, Plattsburgh, NY 12901. Tel: (800) 663-9352. Fax: (450) 585-5862. Web: www.audioplusservices.com
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"After two years of painstaking thought and designing, Grado is very pleased to offer a new phono cartridge. We are so proud of this cartridge, that we decided to name it the GRADO STATEMENT."

The STATEMENT utilizes gold wire in the coils, a boron cantilever and a diamond cut specially for Grado. All this is housed in Australian jara wood. The output for the STATEMENT measures in at 0.75 mV. That's right 0.75 mV -the lowest output cartridge ever offered by Grado.

The STATEMENT'S low frequency information and its portrayal of bass dynamics are solid, powerful and authoritative. The midrange is rich, complex and believable. Its top-end extends forever with speed and delicacy. The soundstage will wrap its arms around you and the imaging is detailed and precise.

Anyone who was impressed with the Grado Reference Series cartridge, the REFERENCE, will have their eyes opened wide after listening to the new GRADO STATEMENT.
Simple and elegant in appearance, the Audio Refinement Complete Integrated Amp features a nonmagnetic aluminum chassis, with internal parts of a similar genealogy, such as aluminum screws. The brushed-aluminum faceplate is pleasingly straightforward and uncluttered. To the left is a power button, topped by a solitary LED that glows green when the unit is powered up. An IR sensor is positioned at the bottom center of the faceplate, for use with the system remote—which is build like a tank. The remote also controls the motorized volume knob, which automatically rolls back to zero-output when you power down the unit, the better to protect the listener from sudden blasts of volume. Nice.

There is no balance control. This appears to be a sensible, cost-effective sacrifice—I mean, who needs it? Learn to optimize the position of your speakers, gang. Nor does The Complete feature a phono preamp (there's an Aux input), which also makes dollars and sense: but the absence of a dedicated headphone amp or some sort of headphone output jack seems, at the very least, an odd omission, given the target audience—especially as Audio Refinement has seen fit to buck the prevailing mindset, which discriminates against those of us who cherish our cassette collections and still enjoy creating music compilations, doing dubbed, and trading tapes with our fellow musos.

As a result, the back panel is generously configured with two full sets of tape outputs and inputs, as well as Aux, CD, Timer, and Video inputs. The RCA sockets for the Aux and CD inputs are "specially treated," the reasoning being that these are your "primary" source components. There are also a set of five-way binding posts, which accept banana plugs or bare wire. If you remove the posts' rubber sleeves (more on these anon), you can employ spade connections as well. Above the IEC power inlet is a cavity housing a pair of slow-blow fuses. Above that is another novel touch: an additional main AC power switch (the CD and tuner share this feature) that disables all functions when in the Off position—including the power button on the faceplate. Very curious.

Just as curious are the aluminum tripod footers with hard rubber, conelike extensions on which the unit rests that suggest the polyCrystal cones I recently installed beneath my California Audio Labs CL-15. These tripods, like the rubber sleeves on the output terminals, are representative of André's system-wide focus on minute details, the better to insulate listeners from those sonic artifacts that cast a pall over the music.

"And what do [those artifacts] all have in common?" rhetorically asked Audio Plus's Daniel Jacques. "Vibrations. You look at a YBA amplifier from 10 years ago and they're sitting on three hard footers, because they act as cones. As trendy an idea as it is now, you have to admit Yves was very intuitive in employing three footers on his amp at a time when most speakers weren't even on spikes. You can also see felt and rubbers on specific parts like the RCAs and the binding posts—to damp vibra-

**Measurements**

All measurements of the Audio Refinement The Complete, except as noted, were made at a level-control setting that resulted in a 1W output into an 8 ohm load with an input of 100mV. The physical position of the level control for this condition was approximately 3.00, the voltage gain into 8 ohms 29.2dB at this setting.

The amplifier was very warm, but not hot, following its 1-hour, 1/2-power preconditioning test (conducted at 8 ohms). Its line input impedance measured 54.4k ohms. This decreased to 18k ohms at the level control's maximum position, and increased to 75.4k ohms at a 12:00 setting. All values are quite acceptable.

The AR integrated's output impedance measured a maximum of 0.01 ohms at 1kHz and 20Hz, increasing to 0.2 ohms at 20kHz with an 8 ohm load.

The output impedance at the tape outputs measured 25.9 ohms with a 25 ohm source impedance and 588.7 ohms with a 600 ohm source impedance—this indicating unbuffered tape outputs. The DC offset at the main outputs measured a negligible 0.1mV in the left channel and 2.2mV in the right. Signal/noise ratios (unweighted ref. 1W into 8 ohms) measured 72.7dB with a 22Hz-22kHz bandwidth, 71.1dB from 10Hz to 500kHz, and 77.8dB A-weighted. The Complete is noninverting, a positive-going input resulting in a positive output. The gain at the maximum setting of the level control is 40.6dB, and the volume control tracking is excellent.

Fig.1 shows the frequency response of the amplifier at an output of 1W into 8 ohms; the response at 2W into 4 ohms (not shown) is virtually identical. The response into a simulated load (shown) differs a bit more, but the deviations are inconsequential. Most significant here is the high-frequency rolloff: nearly 3dB down at 20kHz. I would expect this amplifier to sound slightly soft. Fig.2 is the amplifier's output with a 10kHz squarewave input; the high-frequency rolloff of fig.1 is clearly visible in the waveform's long risetime. The 1kHz squarewave (not shown) is much better, with a slight rounding of the leading edges and no overshoot or ringing.

Fig.3 shows its crosstalk, a solid though not exceptional result unlikely
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**Jerry Raskin**

- "JS discovered that focus, transparency, clarity, and speed were better as was the sense of pace." - Stereophile Rec. Comp. 10 / 98
tions at a specific place where there is a signal path. And all of that does indeed have a significant sonic impact, much as we now recognize that vibrations can make a difference in cables.

"It is all very much part of the overall YBA technical approach. And it is that approach which is carried through on the Audio Refinement products. For instance, the wiring is consistent throughout; that is to say, it's the same exact type of wiring from front to back. And not multistrands, either, but solid-core, because strands have a tendency to vibrate — so there is one sonic signature throughout the amp. Normally, a capacitor is Mylar film in a can — that's it. But to exert greater control over their performance, after rolling the film and putting it in a plastic case, Yves fills that case with epoxy to inhibit the microvibrations — because they're vibrating when the current flows. And if they have their own vibration, they're imposing something on the music.

"For instance, some transformers are simply dipped into varnish; but the ones we're using are left in the varnish for 24 hours, which allows the varnish to filter into all parts of the transformer — so you'll find our transformers are very quiet. The transformer is also decoupled from the chassis by employing certain materials underneath to filter out mechanical vibrations. Otherwise, that noise is making the case vibrate. Likewise, because the [printed circuit board] is attached to the transistors, if the board isn't also decoupled from the casing, all of that is singing together."

"And what of the actual transistors?" I asked. "You're not using MOSFETS."

"That's an interesting point," Jacques allowed. "No, they're all discrete bipolar output devices. MOSFET devices tend to run very warm, because there is a lot more current running through them, and Yves believes that amps should be running cool, not hot. When signal is applied to transistors, because the transistors are internally so small, if there is a peak, those tracks are going to get hot — that's why they're attached to heatsinks. And the better you dissipate the heat that occurs during peaks, the better your amp is going to sound. And transistors have memories, just like batteries have memories. They do recall if they have been subjected to a lot of intense heat, because the material inside the transistors doesn't retain its original shape. So for André, the ideal way is to run the transistors as cool as possible."

Actual proof
Over the course of several months, I auditioned The Complete integrated amplifier on a secondary system in my wife Mary's studio (composed largely of humble components from an earlier audio epoch), before moving it to the Amen Corner in my main room. In the process I found that The Complete

Measurements
shown in fig.7. The largest artifact here is at 18kHz (-48dB, or about 0.4%). The spectrum resulting from a 33.4W output into an 8 ohm load — the highest output attainable with this signal without signs of clipping — is very simi-
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"The Pandora should be a dream tool for the audiophile tuners among us." - audioMusings Magazine Issue #6 1998 Sherman Hong

"This is a review of a really crazy thing a ‘tunable’ power cord is a power cord that not only has a sound, but has several sounds. You choose the one you want." - audioMusings Magazine Issue #6 1998 Bryan Gladstone

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doesn't sound a whole lot like your typical solid-state amplifier, and that its design refinements add immeasurably to the enjoyment of music while protecting me from the ramifications of sonic overkill.

For starters, I replaced the 110W Onkyo Integra integrated amplifier with the Audio Refinement unit, in tandem with an indestructible old Magnavox CD/650 CD player and a pair of ancient Fouriers 8 loudspeakers (a two-way design featuring a front-ported 8" bass driver and a 1" soft-dome tweeter). Still, just to hedge my bets slightly, I routed all the integral power cords into a JPS Labs AC Outlet Center, employing a set of Synergistic Research Alpha Sterling interconnects between the CD player and the amp, with two 4' runs of JPS Labs Superconductor going to the speakers.

The Fouriers once found favor among jazz listeners because of its open midrange response, but it has a very toppy high end and, given the size of the driver, surprisingly little bass articulation. In walks The Complete, with less than half the Integra's rated power, and simply wipes the floor with the Onkyo. Straight away, its apparent that the Audio Refinement had nuked the dynamic headroom and clean output power. More to the point, it passed the Mary Test with flying colors. Even after I'd cranked the amp up to boisterous, Chip Steren-styled volume levels, we were not only able to maintain a civil conversation, but Mary didn't squint in pain from the otherwise ubiquitous high-frequency glare of a garden-variety solid-state amp pushed too hard. I had to practically crank the amp up all the way to suggest an audible clip. This amp was very easy to listen to — no edginess or grain, and this from a tweeter that can get quite zippy at the slightest provocation. Even more impressive were the solidity and pacing it imparted to the Fouriers — great bass control. Made them sound quite punchy and adult.

After a while, having brought the amp into my primary listening space to drive a pair of floorstanding Joseph Audio RM22i loudspeakers, I was pleased to discover that the Audio Refinement is also schmuck-proof. I was checking out my favorite reference recording, Bill Frisell's Gone Just Like A Train (Nonesuch 79479-2), which is recorded and mastered fairly hot. "Damn," I thought, "this amp is really slamming." I was a little surprised at how effortlessly the amp was driving the Josephs, which present a friendly load to an amplifier. Nevertheless, Brother Atkinson computed the efficiency of these 8 ohm speakers to be around 84.5d1B/2.83V/m, so they do like power.

No problem. The amp's rhythm and pacing were dead on: quick, tight, and articulate, with exceptional bass control. I got a bit giddy: "Great presence...full and clear, just like I like it — I wonder how much louder I can crank these suckers." But maybe I leaned kind of hard on the remote volume control, because suddenly there was no sound, and the amp's light had gone out. UH-uh...Whoops. Damn, hope I didn't fry it.

All my speaker connections were cool. Nothing else had gone down in

Table 1 Audio Refinement The Complete: Discrete Clipping levels (1% THD+noise at 1kHz)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Impedance ohms</th>
<th>Both Channels Driven W (dBW)</th>
<th>One Channel Driven W (dBW)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>48.7 (16.9) 48.9 (16.9) 61 (179)</td>
<td>118V 118V 118V</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>60 (14.8) 59.6 (14.8) 81.9 (16.1)</td>
<td>117V 117V 118V</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>68.3 (12.3) 117V</td>
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</table>

87.9W was available into 8 ohms, increasing to 144W into 4 ohms. But, as can be seen from fig.9, the amplifier was current-limited into lower loads, 12.7W being available into 2 ohms and 44W into 1 ohm. The distortion level was much higher into these loads, even at low powers.

Audio Refinement's The Complete was a respectable performer on the test bench, though nothing out of the ordinary for its modest cost — except, perhaps, for its high-frequency response, which rolls off more abruptly than is typical of modern, high-fidelity power amplifiers.

— Thomas J. Norton

![Audio Refinement Complete, distortion (%) vs burst output power into (from bottom to top): 8 ohms (black trace), 4 ohms (red), 2 ohms (blue) and 1 ohm (green).](image)
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**8TC**

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Price</th>
<th>Length</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>$224</td>
<td>8 foot pair</td>
<td>8TC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$160</td>
<td>8 foot pair</td>
<td>4TC</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A double run of 8 TC greatly improves the sound, feels DO. Excellent bass. - *Stereophile Rec. Comp 8TC $$$ & 4TC $$$ 10 / 98 p. 135*

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my crib. I tried the power button. *Nada.* Checkered the power cord, but it hadn't been knocked loose. I pulled it out and re-attached it. Still nothing. My other components were all right. Hmm, what did you do, dipstick?

I had a brainstorm. I remembered that main AC switch on the back of the amp, above the power cord. I switched it off, waited a few seconds, turned it back on, then tried the On/Off power button on the front panel. As politely as the unit had gone off, it switched back on, and everything worked just fine. I breathed deeply, reeling that I'd triggered some sort of thermal-overload protection circuit. As hard as I subsequently pushed *The Complete* over the next several weeks, it never happened again. Chalk up another small detail for Yves-Bernard André.

Spoiled by extended exposure to tube electronics, I was taken aback by the valvelike warmth of the Audio Refinement. Not that *The Complete* had the lush harmonic complexity or tonal liquidity I'd grown accustomed to from my Mesa Baron, but on the spectral airs of "Nature's Symphony," from the Fissel CD, I was impressed by the clarity of midrange detail and the level of resolution. I'm talking particularly of low-level information, such as the reverb trails from drummer Jim Kelner's brushstrokes on the snare, and the sense of distinction between the attack dynamic and the overtones it produced — it wasn't all just one extended *huzzzzzzz.* Likewise, on the title tune, the timbral details of Kelner's cymbals, and the supple tonal differences between his three (count 'em) three different snare drums, were rendered with exceptional harmonic realism, without any etched, italicized character. And the images were so vividly drawn, the soundstaging so holographic, the stereo separation so clean...

...that I decided to put on some other recordings. After all, *Gone Just Like A Train* is an aural dog yummy — the type of recording that makes any system sound like a million bucks. I reached for a pair of more acoustically oriented guitar trios: from 1959, *Poll Winners Three!* (Contemporary OJCCD-692-2), featuring Barney Kessel, Shelly Manne, and the unofficial reference bassist of all audiophiles, the great Ray Brown; and from 1997, *If Summer Had Its Ghosts* (Discipline DGM9705), an exceptionally mature jazz hang by King Crimson drummer Bill Bruford featuring acoustic guitarist/keyboardist Ralph Towner and bassist Eddie Gomez.

On the wildly swinging "Crisis" from *Poll Winners Three!,* the rhythm and pacing of Brown's acoustic bass were fast and accurate, while Kessel's lightly amplified acoustic-electric had real bite and presence, and the leading edges of Manne's impeccably tuned drums were crisp and cutting. Still, for all the high-end detail, there was a smoothness to the treble that was quite pleasing, without any sense of edgy, solid-state brightness. On Bruford's title tune, *The Complete* was able to convey the weight of Gomez's bass and the drummer's dancing kick with excellent dynamic energy.

Yet despite the musicians' supple rhythmic blend, the Audio Refinement maintained the crucial tonal distinctions that allowed me to differentiate between the sound of a hard felt heater on a skin and the fleshy attack of fingers on thick metal strings. And while the highs lacked the crystalline character some people look for in a solid-state amp, *The Complete's* portrayal of midrange details in Bruford's warm-sounding Paiste cymbals and Towner's harmonically complex 12-string stylings was quite revealing. The highs weren't particularly veiled or rolled-off, but there was a smoothness, a softness to the top end that I found very involving, and never fatiguing.

And I loved *The Complete's* low-

---

**System and Setup**

I went into a good bit of detail about my system in the November 1998 *Stereophile* (Vol.21 No.11, p.105), when I reviewed the Joseph Audio RM22si loudspeaker. While there's no need to reprise everything here, my system has since undergone some fundamental changes in core components and tweaks that are worth mentioning.

I'm still using a pair of 20" JPS Labs Superconductor speaker cables to biwire the Joseph RM22si's. They have a really nice tonal balance, a smooth top end, and excellent bass focus. The replacement of my Dual CN5000/Ortofon XM5 combo with a Rega Planar 3 belt-drive turntable and a Grado Reference Master high-output moving-coil cartridge has resulted in a significant upgrade in resolution and tonality. The Grado is increasingly open and detailed, with a beautifully articulate midrange and a lot of high-frequency detail, yet it is not all bright or etched. It throws a wonderful soundstage, and what it lacks in slam is more than made up for by the warmth and punch of the E.A.R. 834P tube phone preamp.

My digital front-end is still the California Audio Labs CL-15, outfitted with either a Synergistic Research Designers Reference power cord or the JPS Labs Digital power cord. But I recently replaced my Resolution Reference Phase II interconnects with an updated version. The difference in performance between the old version and the new, which features Synergistic Research's proprietary Discrete Shielding, is pretty startling. There's a lot more air and harmonic detail, with greater bass extension and deeper, more open soundstaging; there is also significantly more high-frequency information, yet the overall frequency response is a lot smoother, less brassy and forward. It made the old interconnects, themselves no slouches, sound rather veiled by comparison. Damn.

In addition, I'm employing some new tweaks that have brought the system up a notch, and then some. I'm still using EchoBusters room treatments throughout my space, but I removed the absorptive panels from behind the soundstage and supplemented them with a trio of Argent RoomLenses, which are the damndest things. Everyone's already commented on their ability to counteract unwanted room resonances. However, positioning a pair adjacent to my speakers at about a 45° angle, and one approximately 4–5' behind the center axis of the soundstage, seemed to make the speakers disappear — and shifting the center RoomLens front to back allowed me to fine-tune the soundstage, giving me either greater depth or bringing the soundstage more front-and-center.

And you could've knocked me over with a feather, but a set of PolyCrystal Cones beneath the CL-15 immediately conferred major sonic benefits, in the forms of enhanced bass focus, increased stereo separation, and more stable imaging.

"Who'd a' thunk it?" — Chip Stern
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end resolution and focus—which are, of course, hallmarks of solid-state performance. But on "Santa Claus is Coming to Town," from A Merry Jazz Christmas (MCA Special Products MCA1-21038)—an exceptionally graceful, swinging jazz interpretation of holiday chestnuts by pianist Bill Augustine and bassist/recording engineer Malcolm Cecil—the bass wasn’t merely punchy, but exceptionally detailed as well. Cecil the engineer allows listeners an aural perspective of Malcolm the bassist in which you can feel the instrument moving air, hear how high the strings are off the neck, and gauge the percussive nuances of his attack. And the amp didn’t merely give me tight, tuneful, well-damped bass, but did so with an effortless quality that allowed the immense drum strokes on Yoel Levy’s demolition-derby version of Stravinsky’s The Rite of Spring (Telarc CD-80266) to penetrate right down to the small of my back without obfuscating the other instruments.

Nevertheless, for all its low-end gusto, the Audio Refinement’s presentation of soundstaging was not forward and aggressive, but gently laid-back—in the best sense of the term. While I like a fully formed, holographic soundstage, I don’t particularly want the string section taking up residence in my nostrils. On Classic Records’ superb vinyl reissue of Bruno Walter’s singing rendition of Brahms’ Symphony 4 (Columbia Masterworks/Classic MS 6113), the amp rendered the strings in sleek, silvery fashion, while the massed brass had plenty of snap and dynamic shading. Yet while the big orchestral passages had weight and guts, with superb articulation and control of transients, they never quite gathered into the kind of surging, liquid swell that promises to levitate you out of your 10th-row seat.

Not that the amp lacked slam—but it possessed a nice sense of balance and proportion. Thus, on Sinatra at The Sands—a thrilling summit session between Quincy Jones, the Count Basie Orchestra, and Ol’ Blue Eyes (Reprise 46947-2)—Sinatra’s rich, robust tenor was front and center, smoothly articulated against Basie’s warm, percussive piano, as the rhythm and brass (particularly drummer Sonny Payne) rose to match the singer’s power and then some, without swamping him in a welter of instrumental details.

Conclusions

Neither exceptionally analytical nor particularly lush, the sound of the Audio Refinement Complete integrated amp was nevertheless quite sensual and involving. Laid-back, transparent, and tonally neutral, The Complete delineated tonal details with pristine clarity. And while it won’t quite send chills down your spine in terms of slam factor, it has excellent rhythm and pacing—it’s an incredibly fast, responsive amp that snaps to attention whenever the music demands current for transient episodes.

A couple of caveats: First, while The Complete has plenty of headroom and dynamic range, carefully consider how much speaker you presently have or how might eventually want to acquire, and how loud you like to play your music. Because while it takes a lot—and I mean a lot—to make this amp clip, it has its limits; carefully consider speaker efficiency, and you should be cool.

While the remote is well crafted, I didn’t find it very intuitive. I was constantly fuddling with it, hitting the wrong control in the wrong sequence. Daniel Jacques assures me that an updated version is already in the works.

Those quibbles aside, I enjoyed listening to The Complete so much that I didn’t much mind my extended sabbatical from vacuum-tube electronics. Which proves, I suppose, that it’s not so important whether an amp is configured with valves or transistors, but how it involves you in the musical experience. By that criterion, the Audio Refinement Complete integrated amplifier is a superb performer. As weeks turned to months, I never tired of The Complete, or of discovering fresh nuances in old recordings. And at only $995, I wish it had been available a few years ago, and someone had hipped me to it—I might very easily have been seduced by its versatility and effortless musicality, and avoided the massive pile of debt I willingly shouldered to enter the Valley of NoCompromise.

No matter—in for a dime, in for a dollar. I’m a happy camper. But for those audio pilgrims just starting out on the road to audio nirvana, The Complete Integrated Amp might just prove to be your final destination.
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Audio Power Industries  
Power Wedge Ultra 116 power conditioner

Consider that not that long ago there wasn't even a product category for balanced AC line conditioners, we seem to now enjoy a plethora of the critters. Cinepro offers the PowerPRO 20 (reviewed in the November 1998 Stereophile). And EquiTech, which caters more toward the pro end of the field, offers one that I have yet to hear. Now Audio Power Industries weighs in with their own approach to the genre.

Why balance AC? The AC grid was developed to safely deliver power over great distances, but it developed at a time when the principal uses for electricity were lighting houses and powering trolley cars. The system that evolved uses a three-wire distribution system: a ground; a neutral, tied to ground; and a "hot" 120V wire. This sort of system is "unbalanced," and can pick up noise along the way since neutral is never precisely at true ground potential. And then, modern appliances such as computers and digital electronics actually dump RFI back into the line, greatly exacerbating the background noise level.

Balanced AC isn't perzacktly new — I am told golf courses have used a version of it since the mid-'40s. But as the electrical environment has gotten more and more saturated with line-borne noise and RFI, an increasing number of equipment manufacturers have looked for ways to isolate audio gear from the power grid. Some have resorted to battery power, but balanced AC rejects common-mode noise — noise that is picked up equally on both legs of a balanced system — without requiring that the components themselves be redesigned. No wonder it's catching on.

Evil communications corrupt good manners

The Power Wedge Ultra 116 is part of a new family of API products that ranges from the minimalist (two sources, two amps) PWU 112 at $749 to the PWU 116 itself. Unlike API's older Power Wedge models, the new Power Wedge Ultras have nondescript façades. More than anything else, they look like amplifiers — they're housed in sturdy metal cases with nothing fancy showing on the outside other than the Audio Power Industries logo.

Inside, it's a different story. API's Les Edelberg credits Muse's Kevin Halver- son (see the Halverson interview elsewhere in this issue) with most of the innovative features in the new Power Wedge Ultras. Unlike the PowerPRO or the EquiTech, which use a single, large "balanced" transformer common to the entire audio system, the Power Wedge Ultras use individually balanced transformers for each outlet. Why does this offer an advantage? Let's say your entire system is tied into one large transformer. According to API, if any of the components has appreciable leakage back into the power line, then all of the components connected to the transformer can be affected. Common-mode rejection for the entire system will be greatly compromised.

Each isolated outlet uses a high-quality transformer, which offers substantial improvement over the split trannies shared by the duplex outlets of the original Power Wedges. The new units offer less leakage and heftier outputs than the older API gear.

The Power Wedge Ultra 116 has a bank of four amplifier outlets, one 150W outlet, and five 120W outlets. The 150W and 120W outlets each have three switched configurations: floating, balanced, or neutral.

In most cases, balanced mode (±60V, center grounded) will work best, but not always. Some components are designed to "anticipate" neutral ground reference. This doesn't mean that there's no ground, merely that there's no ground reference in the AC itself. When ground is "floated," the impedance of the equipment attached determines the neutral/gound reference. In this setting, the output is still balanced. The "neutral" or normal setting (120V over 0V, the typical domestic AC setting) is not balanced, as it references ground to neutral, but the component still benefits from the power conditioner. When all else fails, this choice might well squelch ground noise.

This switchable option allows for the

**Description:** Power conditioner providing balanced AC power. Output current: 15 amps. Number of outlets: 10 (one 150W, five 120W four amplifier outlets).  
**Dimensions:** 17.5" W by 5.25" H by 12.5" D. Weight: 64 lbs.  
**Serial number of unit reviewed:** 146.  
**Price:** $1499. Approximate number of dealers: 150.  
**Manufacturer:** Audio Power Industries, 2624 South Rouselle Street, Santa Ana, CA 92707-3729. Tel: (714) 545-9495. Fax: (714) 545-4607. E-mail: info@audiopower.com . Web: www.audiopower.com.
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MSRP: $27,500/pair

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SPECIFICATIONS:
Everest
Transformer(s) 2 EA 2x55 VAC @2100 VA
Power output 8ohm load 1250 W x 1
2500 W x 1
3750 W x 1
Power output 4ohm load Total Harmonic Distortion (THD)
Power output 2ohm load Dynamic Headroom db
Input Impedance k-ohms Slew Rate
Dimensions [WxHxD] Weight M.S.R.P.
1 EA 4x10 VAC @2200 VA
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1300 W x 1
1950 W x 1
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0.5 db for all
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widest range of flexibility in eliminating power-line-induced noises. And it’s easy to use — no more searching for your cheaper plugs five minutes before your audio pals come over. (That’s when my system always develops hum.)

Transformers are, by their very natures, superb LF filters, so Halverson and Edelberg took special pains with the HF filtration on the PWUs. Each source outlet has its own fully shielded filter module operating across the line in parallel, and the same is true for the nonisolated amplifier outlet bank. As a result, unlike most power-line filters, the Power Wedge Ultras don’t dump the filtered garbage back into the green safety wire, where it can recirculate into other connected components.

If you’re thinking that the PWUs seem to take much care to isolate components from one another as from the AC line itself, you’re right. Les Edelberg says, “I believe the components are frequently the biggest culprits in creating this noise in the first place.”

That do corrupt my air — I banish you

Does all of this translate into better sound? That depends on your system, of course. Every audio system is a chain, and we all know the saying about the weakest link. Don’t look for the Power Wedge Ultra — or any other line filter, for that matter — to compensate for a component that’s dragging your whole system down. It can’t do that.

What it can do is allow your components to do their jobs without having to strain against a compromised power system. This it certainly does, and does well. I used the PWU in a variety of systems, and it worked in all of them. Now I don’t mean that, all of a sudden, all the noise I’m normally plagued with went away. In fact, I’m not normally aware of any noise. But music sounded more euphonic — the contrasts between loud and soft seemed greater, and textures were more limpid, less grainy.

Does that constitute a huge difference? Not day-and-night, no. But when you construct a system with a certain level of resolution, eliminating anything that stands between you and the music becomes meaningful. And the better the system, the harder — and more expensive — it is to squeeze out further improvements.

In that context, the Power Wedge Ultras certainly performed. When your system includes superb monitors — the B&W Nautilus 801s, for instance — any change in resolution becomes audible. I consistently preferred the sound of the upstream components with the API PWU 116 installed. Plain Chant Parisien (CD, Harmonia Mundi Suite HMT 7901480), by Ensemble Organum under Marcel Pérès, offers phenomenal resolution — the massed voices ring clearly against the acoustic of a huge reverberant hall, suspended by enormous masses of air. But with the PWU 116, the voices seemed to float aloft longer. The gradual decay of the acoustic lasted, or at least seemed to last, longer, and the contrast between the voices and the vast hall seemed greater. There’s a lovely Sanitus that pairs André Campra’s chant with Marcel Pérès’ organ. The interplay between voice and room, organ and room, and voice against organ seems simple, but actually presenting all of these elements in the proper proportion poses a complex challenge to any system. This, I presume, is where lowering the noise floor pays dividends. Using the PWU 116, I could hear much farther into the acoustic — and in a recording such as this one, where the acoustic is one of the featured players, that offered tremendous musical advantages.

I wish I could tell you that I compared the sound of my system with the API Power Wedge Ultra 116 and the Cinepro PowerPRO 20 and heard vast differences, but I didn’t. If there were differences in the sound of my system using one or the other, they were so slight that the time involved in unplugging everything from one AC filter and plugging it into the other obscured them. And, I have to say, whether or not there will be differences between the two might very well be extremely system-dependent. Using the systems I tried, in the electrical environment I tried them in, I wouldn’t choose one over the other on sonic (you should pardon the expression) grounds. But that doesn’t mean I don’t have a preference.

Over the years, as an audiophile, as a hi-fi salesman, and as a reviewer, I must have connected a few thousand different system combinations. That’s the fun part — mostly. Given the corresponding wide range of electrical systems I was connecting all those components to — not to mention the variations in the construction of the gear I was connecting — I must have spent hundreds of hours tracing hums and other annoying, electrically induced noises. That’s the part I hate, and API’s clever three-way grounding system offers a convenient and clever alternative to connecting, reconnecting, and generally futzing with every link in the chain. I like that. I want it. And if I were shopping for a power line conditioner, I’d pick the one that had it. In fact, I am and I will — this is one review component that’s not returning to the manufacturer.

For this corruptible must put on incorruption

Audio Power Industries’ Power Wedge Ultra 116 is a well-built, intelligently thought-out solution to the problems of power-line-borne noise and the vagaries of ground-loop hum. It is not a Band-Aid for systems that have not solved problems in the audio realm, but no AC conditioner is. If your system is sonically refined enough, the PWU 116 can take it to an even greater level of resolution — and who wouldn’t want that? I recommend the Power Wedge Ultra enthusiastically.
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Audio Research PH3 Special Edition phono preamplifier

Audio Research Corp.1 dipped its corporate toe cautiously into the warm but turbulent analog waters when it issued the PH3 Phono Preamplifier almost three years ago. (See my review in Stereophile, September 1996, Vol.19 No.9.) How else to view a $1500 hybrid phono section from a company best known for its expensive tube gear?

Clearly the PH3 was a "statement" piece. That statement wasn’t "this is the best-built, finest-sounding phono section we know how to build at any price," but more like "let’s see if anyone will buy a reasonably priced, great-sounding, well-built phono section with an Audio Research badge on it for $1500, before we invest in designing, building, and marketing a high-priced ‘state-of-the-art’ model that we’ll sell far fewer of."

Perhaps ARC wasn’t really persuaded then that there was an analog resurgence. Surely the PH3 convinced it otherwise. While the privately held company isn’t obliged to release sales figures, the PH3 created a major buzz in the audio press and received uniformly fine reviews, and price was never mentioned as a caveat. The strong sales probably surprised and gratified Audio Research.

Okay, perhaps I’m fantasizing about "strong sales," but it’s not farfetched. One thing’s for sure: Once tweakers saw the PH3’s simple, open layout and the less than stellar (but still high) quality of some of its parts, they got to work. Modification suggestions and parts substitutions made the rounds, and a number of high-quality hobbyist parts suppliers created upgrade kits.

With the release of the $2495 PH3SE (Special Edition), Audio Research has issued its own "modified" version of the PH3. There are 109 parts changes—39 deletions and 70 additions—including the use of large InfinaCaps in both the signal path and power-supply regulators, high-speed rectifiers, Holco resistors, gold tube sockets, proprietary tube-damping rings, and chassis damping. The new version replaces the hardwired AC cord with an IEC AC jack so you can play with power cords, and includes better signal-path RF shielding, among other improvements.

The standard PH3 will continue to be available for $1495. Upgrading a PH3 to SE status costs $1250, so you’ll be $250 ahead of the game if you start with the SE.

While the specs don’t change as a result of the modifications, the sound certainly does. But before getting to that, keep in mind that the PH3 and PH3SE have a fixed gain of only 54dB. If you’re using a very-low-output MC cartridge (in the 250µV range), you must have a high-gain line stage or you may not have sufficient gain to adequately drive your amplifier(s). Both maximum volume and perceived dynamics may suffer.

For a detailed appraisal of the PH3, please read my original review. The SE version improves on the 3’s already superb performance in almost every way, with no downside—unless you consider a highly focused image a "hi-fi" artifact. The SE version maintains the 3’s outstanding top-to-bottom coherence, rich midrange bloom, full palette of instrumental colors, and deep, tight bass, but offers better top-to-bottom control and focus, much greater high-frequency detail and resolution—without etch—and greater apparent dynamic range.

The improvements at the frequency extremes diminish somewhat the apparent midrange bloom, which gives the overall sound a more open, neutral feel. While the original PH3 wasn’t veiled, the SE sounds noticeably more open in the upper midrange; it’s less cloudy. The SE exhibits less "character"—which is an improvement. Nothing surprising here: these are the changes tweaking reported with their home-brew mods.

Is it worth spending the extra $1000 for the SE version, or $1295 for the upgrade if you already own an original PH3? When you’re talking about tacking another grand onto $1495 for what are subtle (but significant) improvements in what is already a superb-sounding product, you invoke the law of diminishing returns. The answer is still yes.

—Michael Fremer

**VTL MB 450 monoblock power amplifier**

Is Vacuum Tube Logic’s MB 450 a "new" product, or an upgrade of the MB 300? "New!" said VTL’s Luke Manley, lobbying for a full review. But since the 450 is essentially a 300 with a new, far more sophisticated output transformer, cleaner circuit layout, improved parts, better build quality, and more graceful cosmetics, our decision was to do a Follow-Up. This should actually redound to VTL’s credit: ongoing refinement grants a confidence-building air of continuity. At least that’s what I think.

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<th>Phono Cartridge</th>
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Accuphase, Aesthetix, Airtight, Audio Artistry, Avalon Acoustics, Cabasse, Cary, Graaf, Joseph Audio, Muse, Nagra, Pathos, Spendor, Tannoy, YBA, XLO and more...
300, the MB 450 uses eight 6550 output tubes (now sourced from Svetlana) in place of the NOS 6Gs used on the original. A later version of the 300 substituted the somewhat brighter—(some would say edgy- and glary-) sounding KT90 output tube, and added a front-panel meter for convenient bias checking and adjustment that gave the amplifier the look of a laboratory instrument.

The meterless 450 shares the rest of the VTL amplifier line's understated cosmetics and boxy, "industrial" geometry. Nothing flashy, but not unattractive. Only owners of the original 300 will truly appreciate the subtle but significant changes Luke Manley and his design team have made to the amplifier's construction.1

With the original 300 I reviewed almost a decade ago for The Absolute Sound (and reviewed in Stereophile, October 1988, Vol.11 No.10, by J. Gordon Holt, with a Follow-Up by Russ Novak in July 1995, Vol.19 No.7), the main circuit board was attached to the chassis via a pair of standoff pillars that left one side of the board loose to flap around in transit. Exacerbating the situation was a small transformer on the board's unter tethered end that made it flex like a diving board. When my review sample arrived, the filament didn't glow on one 6550. Removing the chassis bottom, I found that two wires had been ripped from the tube socket by the flapping board. Not a great way to commence a review!

When I removed the MB 450's bottom cover I found a cleaner, much improved layout on a higher-quality board, with broad traces connecting better parts, including large polypropylene caps. In place of the original's tangled wires were crisply routed, nylon-tied harnesses. The board itself was well secured to the chassis, and the soldering had been done neatly and with care. So while I understand the schematic probably hasn't changed all that much, the execution takes the product to a much higher level of quality.

The original 300 I reviewed did not feature a fused B+ rail, which meant that a blown output tube could take out board components. The MB 300 added that protection, and the MB 450 has it as well, along with an XLR input jack for convenience's sake—it's wired directly to the pins of the high-quality, gold-plated RCA jack.

The sheet-metal rear panel is no longer flat, but angled up to make hookup more convenient. VTL still uses odd, ¾" hex-capped binding posts, which means you can't attach the speaker cables using either Dynaclear's safe and convenient Postman or AudioQuest's knockoff of same.

While setting the bias is less convenient without the built-in meter, it's still relatively easy (once you remove the cage) using an inexpensive RadioShack digital meter, a plastic-shafted or insulated flat-blade screwdriver, and the well-written instructions. During the year or so I had the 450s in and out of my system, the bias settings on the 16 tubes hardly drifted from the specified 27mA quiescent current draw.

The MB450 is compact but extremely heavy, most of its weight awkwardly in the rear of the chassis, where the power and output transformers are located. Moving and placing the amp is tricky: while you can carry it around using the front-mounted handles, setting it down without resting its weight on the rear panel is almost impossible—another reason the binding posts and triode/tetrode switch have been angled up and out of the way on the new rear panel—a really good idea.

The heart of any conventional vacuum-tube amplifier is its output transformer, and here is where VTL has made the most significant change. The new Signature transformer is said to be a far more sophisticated and efficient design that results in "better current transfer from the tubes," according to Manley. So much better that, using the same eight output tubes, VTL claims a one-third gain in power output: from 300 to 450W at 8 ohms.

The new transformer has, according to VTL, ultra-wide bandwidth and very low loss, due to multiple tight layering and coupling of the primary and secondary windings—which, the company claims, also results in very clean squarewave response. (For more information on VTL's Signature transformer, including an upgrade program for owners of older VTL amplifiers, check out www.vtl.com.)

One immediate difference between the pre-Signature MB 300s I owned and the MB 450s was clearly audible before I listened to a note of music: the new amps were much quieter, with no discernible mechanical transformer buzz. The 300s thrummed.

Sound: VTL has managed to substantially improve and refine the sound of this amplifier without losing any of its previous greatness; the MB 450 retains the MB 300s rich, robust sound.

The big VTL amplifiers have always excelled at creating a large soundstage and an enveloping sense of space, and the 450s did not disappoint in that regard. On Chesky's great Olutunji CIJ Love Drum Talk (WO160; also on 24-bit/96kHz DVD, CHDV1180), the naturally reverberant church venue was portrayed with a large, dramatically enveloping sense of height, depth, and width.

Tony Bennett's Live at Carnegie Hall, Vol1 (Columbia CS 8705), from 1962, highlighted the 450s' ability to map out a big, airy space while offering fine focus on the main event. It's funny to hear Bennett say, "Here's a brand-new popular song," then launch into "I Left My Heart in San Francisco!" The engineers did a great job of presenting an honest perspective, the drum kit appear-

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1 VTL, 4774 Morieta Street, Suite B1, Chino, CA 91710. Tel: (909) 627-5944. Fax: (909) 627-6988. Web: www.vtl.com.
While the nice folks at Martin-Logan pick themselves up off the floor, let us explain. At Goodwin's High End we try very hard to provide the information, environment, and resources for you to properly evaluate music systems. You can use our six custom-designed, meticulously-constructed, and acoustically-treated listening rooms to accurately evaluate and compare today's top high-end components.

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As for the Martin-Logan Statements, now you know why we won't sell them to you. We would, of course, be glad to demonstrate them for you, perhaps with the Audio Research Reference 300 or Spectral DMA-360 amplifiers. We'd be happy to talk about the incredible resolving power of the electrostatic panels, the tightly-integrated mid-bass transition towers, and the astonishing bass. We'd mention the lack of crossovers in the critical midrange and treble regions and how this yields superb transient response, holographic imaging, and stunning dynamics. We'd explain the clever design of the dipole mid-bass and dipole low-bass arrays, and we'd demonstrate the results: deep, fast, articulate lows.

We'd play the Statements in our dual-purpose listening room/recording studio and use our incredible Spectral digital front end, or perhaps our Bass Debut Gold Standard turntable. We'd leave you alone to listen, or if you'd rather, we would stay with you to guide your evaluation. No, we won't sell you the Statements, but we'd be pleased if you choose to buy them from us. It's your choice — no hurry, no pressure.
ing way back on the stage, not spotlighted by close miking. If you’ve heard jazz in Carnegie Hall from the middle of the room, this recording through the 450s will put you there.

Bennett appears center stage as a focused, three-dimensional apparition, yet with a natural airy boundary between his image and the supporting ether. It’s damn convincing—even without a center channel and surrounds. How do they do it? When Bennett hits the climactic high notes on the final chorus, you can feel the air in the hall pressurize and set off a typically warm, controlled Carnegie Hall reverberant event. A perfect recording to show off what the 450s do best.

While the old 300 lost ground at the frequency extremes, the 450 provided a far more solid and well-defined bottom end, with less bloomy midbass and plenty of wallow at the very bottom. While the 450 isn’t the punchiest amp I’ve heard in the bass, its sheer weight and solidity more than compensated. On top, compared to the original 300 (as I remember it), the 450 had a sharper, more immediate attack, with crisper, better defined transients.

The MB 450 was just on the right side of thick and rich in tetrode mode. Switching to triode resulted in an increased purity with more than enough power to drive the Audio Physic Virgos, but the overall sound was too ripe for my tastes. But that could be the speakers; the Virgos are on the warm side to begin with.

While the MB 450 is a faster, more neutral edition of the classic VTL amp, it still sounds more slow, dark, and thick than some other tube amps, including VTL’s own MB 175, which I reviewed in June 1997 (Stereophile, Vol.20 No.6). That amp, designed for small-woofered speakers, sounded fast and nimble, with a snappier sense of rhythm and pace, punchier bass, and a more open, extended top end.

If you liked the sound of VTL’s original big amps, you’ll appreciate this latest incarnation even more. That wasn’t the case when the company switched a few years back to KT90 output tubes. Many listeners found the sound sharp and somewhat glary on top, at least until the tubes had undergone extensive burn-in. While the KT90s made the amps sound faster, midband richness and weight were seriously diminished for many listeners.

VTL’s amplifiers now feature 6550 output tubes. If you need lots of clean tube power to drive large speakers, and you want a dependable pair of amps that deliver a big, rich, 3-D sound, the VTL MB 450s should be on your radar screen.

If you need lots of clean tube power to drive large speakers, and you want a dependable pair of amps that deliver a big, rich, 3-D sound, the VTL MB 450s should be on your radar screen.

—Michael Fremer

2 It’s easy to understand why the big Martin-Logan Statements, with their fast, clean, open, transparent midrange and pristine highs, were such a perfect match for the multiple 1250W VTL Wotans at HI-FI ’98—especially given the giant room—and why the combination proved so popular with the public. No matter how much we’d like it not to be, it’s a mismatch world, and that combo worked to perfection.

STEREOPHILE RECOMMENDED COMPONENT
OCT. ’98, VOL. 21, NO. 10

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And then there were five ... major record labels, that is.

By the time you read this, the morass created by MCA's purchase of the five-times-as-big PolyGram Label Group (PLG) will hopefully have been sorted out, and the four mongrel children of the Universal Music Group (UMG) — Mercury/Island, Universal/Motown, Interscope/Geffen/A&M, and MCA — will all be back to signing talent and selling records.

Having recently been through two acquisitions here at Stereophile, I sympathize with friends and business acquaintances who were caught in the maw. Compared to the sale of this magazine to Petersen Publishing, and EMAP's purchase of Petersen six months later, the MCA/PLG deal is the mother of all cluster... ah, disasters.

Judging by the way the sale was handled, PLG was a scary place to work. Communication between working stiffs and the powers that were was not a company strength. Though the sale had been in negotiation since late summer, PLG employees were left to wonder whether or not they had jobs until late January.

Perhaps their new masters will be a bit more humane. As I write this, staff at the acquired labels have been pruned to within an inch of their lives, and artists signed to the labels of the combined companies are being informed, one by one, who stays and who goes.

For these artists, it's obvious: if your last album made money, you've got a chance. If you're the pet project of one of the dearly departed (read: you probably never made a dime), or you're a baby band, you're toast.

Despite a misguided observation on the Stereophile website, acts like Sting, Nine Inch Nails, Luciano Pavarotti, and Shania Twain are in no danger of being cut loose. In fact, the opposite is true. Acts of that magnitude (ie, sales stars) are one of the main reasons MCA bought the struggling PLG giant in the first place. What all this means for the consumer is yet to be seen. In the short run, there won't be many records coming out of the Universal Music Group. As this went to print, Mercury, which not long ago thought nothing of releasing five records every other Tuesday, had only two records scheduled for the foreseeable future.

While it will be sad to see some artists let go, several PLG label rosters were heavy with deadwood. When it comes to the issue of five major labels

Much as I love ridiculous titles and records no one will buy, I do wonder how close the record business is getting to the bottom of the reissue barrel. How much viable music remains unconverted?

Instead of six, fewer choices for acts trying to make records and more bottom-line A&R work seem like the obvious result. Building an even larger media conglomerate — even with the downsizing, UMG will be one of the largest label groups — means that keeping the stock price up is the endgame. The larger the company, the less willing it is to take such risks as developing a band over the course of several albums. The only bright spot in such bottom-line thinking is that major-label castoffs may well be treasure for independent labels, who can sign and patiently nurture these acts into, hopefully, winners.

Disco redux

Have CD reissues run out of steam? In looking at what's coming out of the vaults this year, I see endless disco compilations, obscure metal-band "Best Of," and, yes, the first stirrings of the "Hits of the '90s" bonanza. On a single day, March 9 — a black Tuesday of sorts — the world will welcome Dark Pleasures: The Vital Gothic Collection; The Magic Circle: Before They Were The Mamas and the Papas; and The Most Relaxing Classical Album... Ever.

Much as I love ridiculous titles and records no one will buy, I do wonder how close the record business is getting to the bottom of the reissue barrel. Just how much viable music remains unconverted to CD? "The strongest, most commercially viable stuff is out," says Michael Cuscuna, staff producer and reissue chief for both Blue Note/EMI and jazz reissue specialist Mosaic Records. "CD sales of reissues have leveled off. Where there was once three to five thousand (in sales) out of the door, now you're into two thousand."

Cuscuna, who says he's currently working on a boxed set of Gerry Mulligan's concert-band recordings and a record of Joe Sullivan playing Fats Waller tunes, also spoke of the continuing sales potential of compilations, and of using reissues and repressing jobs to find "clever ways to reach a broader audience."

At Rhino, the House that Reissues Built, Gary Stewart, senior VP for artists and repertoire, admits that "There are few Holy Grail artists that aren't out (on CD) now," but disagrees that the end of the reissue booms is near.

"I was hearing that there was nothing left five years ago — I've even predicted it myself," he said, "but it hasn't happened yet."

Stewart, who's working on boxed sets by Alice Cooper and Deep Purple, thinks one of the keys to the longevity of reissue programs and labels like Rhino is what he calls being "given the CD treatment": adding bonus tracks, improving the sound quality, and in general adding elements not available in the original releases that will, hopefully, entice people to buy again. Stewart says he has three years' worth of project ideas in front of him, many of them from Rhino's recent agreement to reissue titles from the Warner Bros. and Elektra catalogs. He cites Sony's ongoing work with the Bob Dylan catalog as evidence that there's much more to do, and says there are several big-name artists who've never gotten "the treatment."

"I'd love to see the Rolling Stones catalog remastered, resealed, and reissued."

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Larry Birnbaum

He may not be a household name, but, directly or indirectly, David Lewiston may have blown more minds than Timothy Leary—and without drugs. Lewiston, who calls himself a "musical tourist," has spent the last three decades recording traditional ethnic music around the world, especially in Asia and Latin America. From the late '60s through the end of the '70s he was a mainstay of Elektra Records' Nonesuch Explorer Series, a pioneering project that brought exotic sounds from the far corners of the earth into American living rooms, and paved the way for today's world-music boom.

Although the Explorer LPs sold modestly when first released (CD reissues have been trickling out since the late '80s), they reached the ears and helped shape the work of some highly influential artists, including Paul Simon, David Byrne, and the Art Ensemble of Chicago. And while the often anonymous Balinese gamelan musicians, Peruvian panpipers, and chanting Tibetan monks Lewiston recorded never achieved the popularity of a Ravi Shankar, they did create some of the most haunting, moving, consciousness-expanding music ever captured on tape.

I'll never forget the evening, some 25 years ago, when a new acquaintance invited me, along with a group of friends, to his apartment to hear some records. With great portentousness, he dimmed the lights and began to play tracks from various Explorer discs, each more amazing than the last, until finally he put on "Ketjak (The Ramayana Monkey Chant)" from the album Golden Rain. For the next 22 minutes we listened in awe as 200
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A Lewiston Discography

Nonesuch Explorer Series

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- Music from the Meaning of the World (CD compiled from above two albums, 1988)


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- Tibetan Buddhism: Tantras of Gyuto-Malakula (LP, 1973)
- Tibetan Buddhism: Tantras of Gyuto-Sangos Dipa (LP, 1975)
- Tibetan Buddhism: Tantras of Gyuto-Sangos Dipa-Malakula (CD compilation, 1988)
- Music of the Karakorum: Gilgit and Hunza (LP, 1975; CD, 1997)
- Ladakh: Songs and Dances from Western Tibet (LP, 1977; CD, 1997)

India and Pakistan
- Master of the Sanang: Ram Narayan (LP, 1975)
- The Bengal Mridang: Music of the Band (LP, 1975)

The Orient
- Planam: Konan's Epic Vocal Art & Instrumental Music (LP, 1972; CD, 1988)
- China: Shantung Folks Music (LP, 1972)
- Japan: Traditional Vocal & Instrumental Music (LP, 1972; CD, 1988)
- Japan: Kabuki and Other Traditional Music (LP, 1980; CD, 1995)

Central and South America
- Kingdom of the Sun: Peru's Inti Heritage (LP, 1969)
- Fiesta of Peru: Music of the High Andes (LP, 1972)
- Kingdom of the Sun/Fiesta of Peru (CD compiled from above two albums, 1988)

The Middle East
- A Persian Heritage: Classical Music of Iran (LP, 1974; CD, 1991)

BBC Sound Archives
- Music of Colombia and Ecuador (LP, 1971)
- Music of Peru and Bolivia (LP, 1971)
- Music of Chile, Brazil, and Bolivia (LP, 1971)
- Music of South America and Asia (LP, 1971)
- Music of Ladakh (LP, 1975)
- Music of Southern Mexico (LP, 1976)
- Music of Kashmir (LP, 1976)
- Music of Tibet (LP, 1978)
- Music of Guatemala (LP, 1978)

Bridge Records
- Tibetan Buddhism: Shartse College of Garden Monastery (CD, 1989)
- Kejii: A Balinese Music Drama (CD, 1990)

Ellipsis Arts
- Tranze: CD with 64-page book, 1995: Tibetan Buddhism: Yamantaka rite, performed by Shartse College of Garden Monastery, Dharmap, North Indian devotional music, performed by Zalumkin Dagar and Washtukin Dagar

Shanachie Records
- The Diamond Path: Tibetan Buddhist Rituals (CD, 1997): Yamantaka Tsechu rite of Khampagar Monastery

StereoFile, April 1999

DAVID LEWISTON

men in the courtyard of a Balinese temple reenacted a scene from the Kambaya, a Hindu epic in which a horde of monkeys aids Prince Rama in his battle with the evil King Ravana. The machine-gun chattering—"tak-a-tak-a-tak-a-tak"—was hypnotic, even psychedelic, but with a frighteningly aggressive edge befitting what was, after all, an exorcism ritual. The impact was stunning.

It turned out that Lewiston came across the keyak chant on his very first recording expedition. Trained as a composer in his native England, he had been working in New York as an editor of financial publications. "I had always wanted to go to Bali," he recounts, "and the editor of the magazine I was working for was a really nice guy, and he set things up so I could take six or seven weeks off. I never had much money when I was young, but a pal of mine lent me some recording gear, which included a pair of condenser mikes, and I went to Southeast Asia.

"Everything had to be battery-operated, and so I had a mono Uher—the stereo Uher was not yet available. There was no such thing as a stereo Nagra, and if there had been, I couldn't have afforded one. But when I got to Singapore, I discovered to my joy that a company called Concertone had introduced a stereo battery portable, and it was really cheap. So I bought one and took it down to Java and then to Bali, and that's how those recordings came about.

"Actually, it was very easy in Bali. I just blew in there and started asking around. I met this guy who called himself Dean, the son of a very aristocratic family, and he thought what I was doing was a high-class trip. Because he was from a princely family, he was able to go in there and say, 'Oh, this is my friend, and he'd like to record.' Sometimes we'd go breezing around the island in the morning, set up three sessions for that day, and then come back at noon for the first session, the middle of the afternoon for the second session, and the evening for the third session. I've never had an experience like that since.

"I came back from that trip, and I had no idea that recordings like this could be albums. But then I was in Sam Goody's [a record store in New York] looking through the racks, and I saw this album [of Japanese shakuhachi flute], A Bell Ringing in the Empty Sky. And I thought, 'Oh, there's this company called Nonesuch that actually makes records of this kind of music.' So I wrote them a pitch letter and got a speedy response saying, 'Please bring your tapes in.'"

Unlike the gamelan performances Lewiston had staged in Bali, the monkey chant was recorded on the spur of the moment at an actual ceremony. "When Jac [Holzman] and Tracey [Teresa Sterne], the people who were running Elektra and Nonesuch, heard the tapes,
"I was stunned by how realistically the musicians were present in the room via the Martin-Logans."

Wes Phillips, Stereophile, Volume 20 Number 5
they freaked out over the ketjak. They said, ‘This has to be on the record.’ The only problem was, it was a mono recording, made on the Uher. But Peter Siegel was running their studio at that time, and he just took the mono signal, separated it into two, fed it through a pair of EMTs [Echoplate], and it came out as a kind of stereo. And no one ever complained.’

Lewiston originally came to New York to study with Russian émigré composer Thomas de Hartmann, a disciple of the Greek-Armenian mystic George Gurdjieff. “What attracted me to Gurdjieff when I was young is what attracts me to these other things now,” declares Lewiston, whose second field trip began with a year-long Gurdjieff study project in Venezuela. “After that,” he says, “I thought, ‘I may never come back to Venezuela, so if I want to rot around, now’s the time.’ So I went down the west coast and up the east, recording as I went. I had an Akai at that time, which was not a good recorder but better than the Concertone.”

He then headed for Colombia, where he met a doctor from the remote Pacific coastal town of Guapi. “I told her what I did,” Lewiston relates, “and she said, ‘Oh, you must come to Guapi.’ So I took the light plane down, and we met the doctor, but there was no hotel. She said, ‘No problem. We’ll give you a room in the hospital.’ So I spent a week in a room next to a guy gasping his last, which was a bizarre experience. There are almost no roads there, so rivers are the way that people get around. They had a launch, and they would take me around to meet musicians and arrange recording sessions. And there I learned one of the basic principles of field recording: When the alcohol runs out, the session ends. We’d take along a couple of bottles of Aguardiente, which is a local rum, and very soon after the Aguardiente ran out, the sessions would come to an end.”

After more recordings—in Peru, Bolivia, Ecuador, Chile, and Brazil—Lewiston returned to New York, where he met a Tibetan lama named Trumpa. “He blew me out of the water,” says Lewiston. “I thought, ‘If that’s what the Tibetans are like, I’m taking myself to the Himalayas and meet some more.’ So I went to the western Himalayas in ’72 and had no problem meeting extraordinary beings, one after the other, and no problem going to the Gyu-tö monastery and making recordings.” His journeys in northern India, where the monks had fled after the Chinese invaded Tibet, also took him to Gilgit, Hunza, and Ladakh, in the Karakoram Mountains, where he recorded the unique music of a people whose language is unrelated to any other.

Between trips, Lewiston produced studio sessions by Japanese, Chinese, Iranian, and Pakistani professional musicians who were performing in New York at the invitation of the Asia Society. His final excursion for Nonesuch was to Guatemala and southern Mexico, after which he produced a few more New York studio albums, including one by the Sabri Brothers, Pakistan’s leading qawwals singers before Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan rose to fame. “I went to one of their concerts,” Lewiston recalls. “The musicians sang their heads off to an audience of Indians and Pakistanis, and one by one they came up and showered the musicians with dollar bills.”

In the ’80s, while Afro-pop and “world beat” attracted Western listeners, interest in traditional ethnic
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music seemed to wane. But today, Asian and other indigenous folk genres, especially those with a spiritual flavor, are being discovered by a new generation, and Lewiston, now living in Hawaii, is once again on the road making field recordings. In 1996 Ellipsis Arts released The Heart of Dharma, a CD book featuring ritual performances from two Tibetan monasteries. And last year Shanachie put out The Diamond Path, containing a single hour-long ceremony from the Khampagar Monastery, Lewiston’s favorite. “I love their energy,” he says. “They have a splendidous ritual orchestra, so their chanting is grave and very beautiful, and then the orchestra comes and there’s another dimension.”

The pristine sound quality of Lewiston’s latest recordings reflects the rapid advance of technology. “I’m using a Porta-DAT,” he says. “I have a Ryko windscrean, the sort that’s used for film sound, and inside I have a pair of mikes. One is either an omni or a cardioid, and if I’m recording you, that’s pointed at you. The side mike has a capsule here and a capsule there, and essentially what it does is pick up the side information. So the mid is recorded on the left channel, and the side information is recorded on the right channel. And then later in the studio, it’s very easy to recover a left channel and a right channel from that information.”

Lewiston is still editing the material from his most recent field trip, which took him to Morocco, Turkey, and the former Soviet republic of Georgia. “I decided I wanted to go to places that I’d had fantasies about for decades,” he says. “I was into Gurdjieff when I was very young, so I really wanted to see Turkey and Georgia—Gurdjieff’s milieu. I went to Morocco in late May for the Fez Festival of World Sacred Music, and when it was over, I did several recording sessions. This sheik arranged a traditional Qadiri zikr, which is a repetition of the names of God. It becomes a breathing exercise with body movement, and many of the participants find it takes them deep inside. The most intense part is called d hadrah, where people really feel the presence of the divine.”

While Lewiston professes no formal adherence to any religious doctrine, many of his recordings are of sacred music, and even his secular recordings often have a spiritual aura. And though his work has obvious documentary value, he is not affiliated with any university and does not view recording through a scholarly lens.

“IT’S NOT AN ACADEMIC, I’M A MUSICIAN,” he insists. “I’m introduced sometimes as an ethnomusicologist, but I never approached record-making in that way. I offer something to a record company only if I think it’s gorgeous. Essentially, what I do is to program the best bits that I would enjoy listening to myself. For me it’s really simple: Is this music beautiful? If it isn’t beautiful, I’m not interested. Sometimes I have problems with collaborators who say, ‘Oh, you should use that because it’s really interesting.’ No, if it isn’t beautiful, then it doesn’t belong in this program. It’s beautiful music that gets my juices flowing.”

Above: Khubulava, 74, "the maestro of Megrelia," plays the chonguri for Lewiston (center) and Carl Linich (right), a respected American singer of Georgia's polyphonic folk songs. Right: Linich and Lewiston with the Khokalo Women’s Trio of Senaki, Megrelia.

FOR ME IT'S REALLY SIMPLE: IS THIS MUSIC BEAUTIFUL? IF IT ISN'T BEAUTIFUL, I'M NOT INTERESTED. I OFFER SOMETHING TO A RECORD COMPANY ONLY IF I THINK IT'S GORGEOUS.
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**Weepin’ Willie At Last, On Time**

Seventy-three-year-old Weepin’ Willie (Robinson) may very well be the best classic R & B singer you’ve never heard of. Unless, of course, you happen to live in the Boston area. There, Weepin’ Willie is something of a local legend, thrilling audiences with his deep blues vocal style. None of this is lost on other stalwarts of the Boston blues scene, such as Mighty Sam McClain, Susan Tedeschi, Ronnie Earl and Bruce Katz. “You’ve got to hear Willie!” is repeated almost like a mantra by them.

Now with the release *At Last*, **On Time** everyone can, at last, hear Willie. Lending strong support for Willie’s recording debut is one of the brightest new blues lights to emerge in recent years, Susan Tedeschi, whose *Just Won’t Burn* album has spent an unprecedented 41 weeks on the Billboard Blues Chart! Who is the man behind Willie’s emergence? None other than the great Mighty Sam McClain, a living R & B legend if there ever was one. Sam produced the album (along with Joe Harley) and also contributes his patented brand of soul singing and songwriting. Along with Jimmy D. Lane, who joins in on one track with his blazing guitar, *At Last*, **On Time** proves the wisdom of the phrase “better late than never”!

LP = APO 2009 $25   CD = CAPO 2009 $16

**Eomot RaSun Three Days Walkin’**

This is Chicagoan Eomot Rasun’s recording debut. Listening to it, however, one would never know. *Three Days Walkin’* shows the musical maturity of a man who has been recording for decades. His clean soulful voice echoes many blues traditions, and his harp playing harks back to his Delta roots and his South Side Chicago boyhood, yet has a modern edge.

The disc opens with Little Walter’s “Blues With A Feeling.” Eomot is true to Walter’s Chicago blues sound but brings his own voice to it, infusing it with a freshness that is a joy to listen to. The same can be said of the rest of the disc. His reverence for tradition is apparent, but his own musical vision shines through.

If there is any doubt Eomot feels a spiritual connection to the blues, this album proves it. He summons up the spirit of the 1950s Chicago as if he just got back from the 708 Club giggling with Walter or Wolf. This may be his debut, but there is a lot of history on this disc. Eomot is walking in the footsteps of his elders, but he is also wearing his own shoes.

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JOHN TAVENER: Eternity's Sunrise
With: Song of the Angel, Petra; A Ritual Dream, Sappho: Lyrical Fragments, Funeral Canticle
Patricia Rozario, Julia Gooding, soprano; George Mosley, baritone; Andrew Manze, violin; Choir & Orchestra of the Academy of Ancient Music, Paul Goodwin
Harmonia Mundi HMU 907231 (CD). 1998. Robina Young, prod.; Mike Hatch, eng. DDD. TT: 65:03
Performance *****
Sonic s ****

At the end of the last century — before phonograph records, television, “talking” films, and video — the world's concert halls and opera stages enjoyed the music of real live composers: Dvorak, Grieg, Puccini, Mahler, Debussy, Sibelius, Saint-Saens, Ives, and Strauss. Before this century's end, Stravinsky, Schoenberg, Britten, Bartok, Gershwin, Copland, Bernstein, and Shostakovich had come and gone.

Now, in this plugged-in world where music is instantly available in a variety of forms and formats, and when classical music so desperately needs new music to stoke its dwindling fires, we sadly can count on one hand the composers whose new work inspires more than passing interest.

Unquestionably, John Tavener is one of those whose works are anticipated, speedily performed, and recorded by top-ranking record companies and performers. While he may not be in the class of the above-mentioned composers, he is an ideal commentator on and reflector of our own time, where form in art — and in life itself — is increasingly nebulous, where the traditional distinctions of melodic shape and harmonic structure mingle in mysterious new ways, and where expected temporal markers are absent.

Take this recording's title work, commissioned by the Academy of Ancient Music for its 25th anniversary. Eternity's Sunrise is a tour de force for superhuman soprano, handbells, and Baroque instrumental ensemble. It combines elements of new-age spirituality and a William Blake poem with a musical setting that seems to hang and swirl in a timeless, eternal universe. We've heard some of this before, especially from Arvo Pärt, but here the focus is on a soloist who must sing effortlessly in the upper register in long phrases that sometimes seem to be delivered without a breath being taken (a recording-studio trick?). Patricia Rozario, who's performed Tavener's work on many previous occasions, is nothing less than astounding in her vocal control, and in her unfaltering expressivity intensity.

Because of the range and melismatic nature of the vocal writing, it's impossible to understand the words, but perhaps Tavener intended this work to be this way. Handbells, Manze's extraordinary talents. Here he serves in the background as Rozario delivers an engaging, lyrical song — a short and pleasing setting of the word “Alleluia.” Petra: A Ritual Dream is even more interesting. A work for baritone soloist, six-voice chorus, and instruments, it's truly a dreamlike expression of a text by 20th-century poet Giorgios Seferis.

The most musically complex work — at least for listeners — is Sappho: Lyrical Fragments, Tavener's extended setting of the writings of the Greek poet. Written for two soprano soloists and Baroque orchestra, this piece gives off a more primal scent, as the melodic chains and female vocal timbres attempt, Tavener says in the liner notes, to "bring us close to the uniquely feminine world of Sappho of Lesbos." Here the orchestra gets to do more than create background effects, with sudden dynamic surges and decidedly dissonant commentary on the text.

In Funeral Canticle, the most accessible work on the program, Tavener offers the harmonic centeredness and comforting solemnity familiar from many of his earlier pieces. (Remember The Lamb, his most perfectly written, early a cappella choral work.) Taking the form of an extended harmonized chant or hymn interspersed with cantorial utterances by baritone George Mosley, this 24-minute piece for 12-voice chorus was written in 1996 as a memorial to the composer's father. Most of the text comes from the Orthodox Funeral Service; the setting is drenched in rich, lovely harmonies, and the mood is quiet and meditative.

Fans of Tavener will revel in this varied yet cohesive program, while newcomers to his music will find this an intriguing and thought-provoking encounter. The sound is perfectly satisfying, a product of the acoustics of a London church and the skills of engineer Mike Hatch, one of the world's most knowledgeable and experienced recorders of choral music.

— David Vernier
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THE FUSION OF ART, FORM AND TECHNOLOGY
T he Herculean efforts of Philips to present the art of the great pianists in an easily accessible overview are highly commendable, at least in principle. Philips has committed to releasing 100 volumes of two discs each: a monumental effort, not to mention a licensing nightmare. While this means the inclusion of dozens of pianists, it also involves excruciating choices. Which pianists will be among the anointed, and which will be passed over? Which performances are most representative of each pianist's artistry? And, just as important, which remasterings or transfers will do justice to the performances?

In order to properly document the great pianists, a timeless riddle must first be posed: What constitutes greatness? Artistic depth, individuality, and charisma all spring to mind. But, of course, these criteria are all highly subjective. Most importantly, which performances are available for licensing from a label other than Philips — at a reasonable price?

To their credit, Philips seems to have settled (outside licensing considerations) on one truly objective measure: Will the artist's recordings still be treasured by collectors after the last curtain call? The lion's share of the releases so far feature artists from the "golden age" of the piano — the first half of the century — with a few slots left over for current stars of the concert platform who seem to have a rendezvous with posterity. All in all, few of us would quibble with most of these names. The matter of repertoire, however, is trickier, and the issue of transfers can get downright messy.

Three of the pianists in Philips' initial release would be on anyone's short list for the pantheon of greats: Sergei Rachmaninoff, Artur Rubinstein, and Vladimir Horowitz. Philips has chosen to deal with each differently, with mixed results. Rachmaninoff is heard in a wide range of repertoire, and the volume includes many of what are unquestionably his most important solo performances. Most famous are the two large-scale works: the Chopin Sonata in B-flat Minor (the reprise of the famous "Funeral March," Rachmaninoff reverses Chopin's dynamic markings to create a terrifying eulogy), and Schumann's Carnaval. Both are peerless performances.

Most of Rachmaninoff's recordings were made in the few years between the 1920s and the early '40s. Philips used the digital remasterings from BMG's Complete Rachmaninoff series, which were merely satisfactory, and did some additional noise reduction. While fresh remasterings would have been better, this volume can be highly recommended for those who have not experienced the majesty of Rachmaninoff at the keyboard.

Unlike Rachmaninoff's, the careers of Horowitz and Rubinstein encompassed most of the century. Accordingly, Philips has decided to devote multiple volumes to their recorded legacies. (A few other lucky pianists will also receive similar recognition.) Philips has limited this first of three projected Rubinstein volumes to a selection from his most famous stereo recordings: the RCA solo Chopin performances dating from 1959–65. The transfers are routinely fine, and, while there is nothing here to capture the attention of a seasoned record collector, anyone who has yet to experience Rubinstein's Chopin will immediately savor what Rubinstein called the "perfection rising from the piano."

Horowitz, too, will be represented by three volumes. The first of these is also limited to just one composer, in this case Schumann, but uses historical recordings from the '30s as well as digital recordings from the '80s. Horowitz was, of course, a great Schumann player, but this composer was more of a subspecialty for him, and these performances are not necessarily his best. In particular, the DG recordings from the mid-'80s, of Kreislerina and other major works, are occasionally marred by the mannerisms he acquired in later years, and are of interest primarily to Horowitz fans (who will already possess them). For a more balanced introduction to the "greatest virtuoso since Liszt," wait for subsequent volumes.

Although most of the great pianists specialized in the romantic repertoire, Philips has also selected a number who focused on the more "serious" Teutonic masterpieces. Wilhelm Backhaus, Alfred Brendel, and Wilhelm Kemppf are among the greatest exponents of Beethoven's piano sonatas on record, and Murray Perahia remains the world's preeminent Mozart pianist. The Backhaus volume is almost entirely of Beethoven sonatas, recorded live at a Carnegie Hall recital in 1954. The playing is often thrilling, and the sound isn't bad either. While Backhaus' approach to Beethoven is not as detail-oriented as we are accustomed to today, its rugged authenticity and irresistible sweep made him the darling of pre-war German audiences. (Backhaus was Hitler's favorite pianist.)

There is no Beethoven in the first of three Brendel volumes, which focuses instead on Haydn sonatas and Schubert Impromptus. This will be welcome news to those who find Brendel's finicky Beethoven interpretations to be an acquired taste. While the Schubert Impromptus occasionally fall victim to the same clipped phrasing and willful dynamic changes as Brendel's Beethoven, the four Haydn sonatas, recorded in 1987, are altogether charming. The set is

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worth the price for these alone.

The first of three projected Kenpff volumes also eschews Beethoven, but the Brahms Intermezzi here are all new to CD, along with two works of Schumann. Of particular interest is Kenpff's 1956 Kreisleriana, full of the color, pianicity, and warmth that make his Beethoven so ingratiating. Kenpff's classical aesthetic is from an older world — more relaxed, less concerned with authenticity, and almost the polar opposite of most modern pianists' scrupulous and compulsive attention to detail.

Among modern pianists, of course, the dominant force in the last half-century has been the Russian school. Philips' presentation of the titanic Sviatoslav Richter is perfectly balanced, featuring his most famous live recording, the 1958 Sofia recital (including Mussorgsky's Pictures at an Exhibition), as well as vital modern recordings of Rachmaninoff's Sonatas 6, 7, and 8. The dismal sound of the Sofia concert should not frighten away listeners — no music collection is complete without this recording. Sadly, Richter's pianistic peer and compatriot, Emil Gilels, does not fare as well, with a number of overbearing performances of impressionist music. Fortunately, Philips promises more Gilels to come, with a great many attractive performances. Mikhail Pletnev, an outstanding young pianist and conductor, is heard in an all-Tchaikovsky program. While the performances are excellent, the repertoire is a collection of curiosities — including Pletnev's piano transcriptions of two Tchaikovsky ballets — that may not appeal to some listeners.

Along with Pletnev, a number of the other volumes can be given only limited recommendations because of quirks in the repertoire or performances selected by Philips. Again, these problems may be more a function of what could be licensed. In the cases of Murray Perahia and Maurizio Pollini, the repertoire is occasionally unflattering. And while formidable pianists like Claudio Arrau, Alicia de Larrocha, Clara Haskil, and Stephen Kovacevich are heard in highly suitable repertoire, the performances selected are not always their very best. The volumes devoted to Julius Katchen and Arturo Benedetti Michelangeli both deserve special praise, however, because of their resurrection of important performances long unavailable. Katchen's 1945 recording of the Brahms Sonata in f, reputed to be the world's first piano LP, is extraordinary, and well worth hearing despite its attenuated sonics. The iconoclastic and somewhat mysterious Michelangeli is heard in a variety of impressionist music, including his classic and beautifully recorded performances of Debussy's Images from 1971, and Ravel's Concerto in G from 1958.

Finally, there are three volumes whose contents are self-recommending. The reputations of both Dinu Lipatti and Josef Lhévinne have only continued to grow through the second half of the century. Lipatti died tragically at the age of 33 in 1950, but his concerts and not-insubstantial discography revealed a fully mature artist. The admirably compiled Philips volume includes the ch astity and purity of his Bach and Mozart, as well as the breathtaking virtuosity of his Chopin Sonata in b and the Schumann and Grieg concertos. Any acquaintance with Lipatti is richly rewarding; we are lucky to have so much of his art on record.

The recordings of Lhévinne are equally treasured by pianists, but most depressing in their scarcity. In order to fill two discs, Philips had to include two concerto performances by his wife, the noted teacher Rosina Lhévinne. (She is excellent in these, as well as in her two piano collaborations with Josef.) Listening to his superhuman ease with the Chopin Etudes, as well as his irresistible Blue Danube Waltz (despite the dim sonics — Philips should have done fresh masters), one is forced to wonder anew how it was that piano playing reached such an apex in the first few decades of this century.

Last but not least is the reigning diva of the piano, Martha Argerich. This may be the first time in history that the most widely admired living pianist is a woman, and the concerto recordings included here demonstrate why. Her performances of the third concertos of Rachmaninoff and Prokofiev, and, to a somewhat lesser extent, her Liszt 1 and Ravel Concerto in G, have long been on the short list of favorites for most critics — and most are in good to excellent sound. Argerich's aura, of course, is only enhanced by her vulnerability to stage pressures and her refusal to perform without a friend collaborating on stage (hence, no solo recitals). Ultimately, however, her fearless, frenetic, rhapsodic, often ravishing playing speaks for itself: these are performances for the ages.

—Hyperion Knight

**JOSEF HOFMANN**

**The Complete Josef Hofmann, Vol.6**

Works by Beethoven, Chopin, Schumann
Performance 4/4/1
Sonics 1/2

J

osef Hofmann (1876–1957) never made life easy for the recording industry. One of the greatest pianists of his day (and a number of other days), he was also the most microphone-shy. Only fitfully does anything resembling a coherent discography emerge from the clumps of acoustical recordings he made, and, after the invention of the microphone, he left mostly test recordings and radio broadcasts. Thus, the always-laudable sound archivist and reissue producer Ward Marston deserves particular praise for attempting to put it all together in his ongoing volumes of The Complete Josef Hofmann, first on VAI and now on his own label, Marston.

This new volume — culled from 1930s and '40s radio broadcasts, plus the famous 1938 Casimir Hall recital — is one of the best, with crossover appeal well outside the historic-recording crowd. It not only shows Hofmann in some of his best live performances, but has complete Beethoven piano sonatas ("Moonlight," "Waldstein"), Schumann's Kreisleriana, and Beethoven's Piano Concerto 4. Much of it is great, and even when it's not, it's still fascinating. Sound quality, though sometimes
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trying, is mostly as clear as is technologically possible, and always seems to give at least an adequate representation of Hofmann's artistry. —David Patrick Stearns

**ANDRÉ PREVIN**

A *Streetcar Named Desire*

Renée Fleming, Blanche DuBois; Rodney Gilfry, Stanley Kowalski; Elizabeth Futral, Stella Kowalski; Anthony Dean Griffey, Mitch; others; Orchestra of the San Francisco Opera, André Previn


Performance ******

*Sonics***

André Previn's *A Streetcar Named Desire* may one day be acknowledged as the opera-composing project that arrived with the most baggage. Yes, Verdi composed operas based on Shakespeare's plays, but the fact that they were translations kept them out of one type of comparison, while the fact that no role was identified — indeed, practically synonymous — with a specific artist avoided another. Previn's job, therefore, was to set Williams' florid, already operatic prose to music without making it unbearably sappy, and while attempting to make us forget — or at least put aside — Vivien Leigh and Marlon Brando. Not an easy task. And as if this weren't enough, Alex Nord's score for the film was superb, and fans tend to remember it.

All that said, there is much to admire in this new work. New Orleans comes alive through liberal doses of jazz motifs (Previn, a fine jazz musician, is hardly slumming in this idiom), brass blares and interrupts dramatically at uneven intervals, and the wind instruments fold around vocal lines to create moods of their own. These angular orchestral lines are nicely dissimilar from the work's many arias, which are strongly lyrical and melodic.

The performances are splendid. Renée Fleming outdoes herself as Blanche, singing with great expression (and, like the others, with an on-again, off-again Southern drawl) and the beauty of tone we've come to expect from her. She's capable of articulating text in almost all registers — an amazing feat in itself. The role is huge, and Fleming fills it. Portraying Stanley Kowalsky is even more loaded — Previn wisely doesn't ask him to sing the famously shouted "Stella," but it must be really tempting to exaggerate Stanley's animal instincts. Rodney Gilfry is a fine baritone and does the role proud, even if one senses that he's occasionally on the verge of shouting his vocal line. The role is just a bit heavy for him, but never mind.

Elizabeth Futral's silvery Stella is sexy and sympathetic, and she's a great singer to boot. The trump card is Anthony Dean Griffey's gentle, dopey, sincere, then louthious and angry Mitch. Here is a tenor who characterizes brilliantly and sings with bright, healthy tone — what a joy. The remainder of the cast is strong, and the orchestra plays with enthusiasm, if occasional waywardness in the strings, under Previn's knowing leadership.

But after listening to these three CDs three times in three days, I was exhausted, and Philip Littell's libretto must take the blame. Tennessee Williams' hothouse prose/poetry is gloriously fulsome. But coupled with Previn's lush score, and the fact that the words are sung more slowly than they would be spoken, I felt as if I was drowning in text. Littell can't be blamed entirely — he uses only Williams' words, and I've heard that the Williams estate was very specific about how many of those words had to be used. But there's a loss of immediacy to almost every dramatic situation because the singers have to get their mouths around so many "exotic" words and conceits: "When it seems an hour isn't just an hour, when it seems that an hour is a little bit of eternity dropped in your hands," is one example; "I can smell the sea air. Ah, the sea… the blessedest thing God created in the seven days…" is another. The opera takes 40 minutes longer than the movie, and, even excluding purely instrumental interludes, it winds up having its longeurs.

DG's engineers have done a fine job. *Streetcar* was taped live, during its opening run at the San Francisco Opera in September 1998. One feels the immediacy of a live event, the stage noises don't detract, and as much of the text comes through as is humanly possible.

Aside from the wordiness problem, Previn's *A Streetcar Named Desire* still packs a wallop. Anyone interested in the state of contemporary opera, Tennessee Williams, fine singing, or any combination of the three, should give it a listen. And the three CDs are priced as two, which makes the whole effort just a bit more accessible.

—Robert Levine

**LYLE LOVETT**

Step Inside This House


Performance ******

*Sonics***

An almost irresistible part of the singer/songwriter game is the urge to acknowledge on disc your heritage, your mentors, your pals who need a royalty check from their publishers. For Lyle Lovett, this album fulfills all those goals. It also allows him to tread water in his career until a new...
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artistic current seizes him—something that hasn’t happened to the gawky Texan in quite a while.

Meanwhile, as he waits for the muse to strike, Lovett's bought a lot of time with this 21-song tribute to modern Texas songwriters—"modern" in that, while a few lyrics speak of biscuits bakin’ and sagebrush rustlin’, these tunes are generic affairs of the heart, full of a pathos that would be just as appropriate in Manhattan as in McAllen. Musically, too, this group of fiftysomething Texans, many of whom live in Nashville, look less to their Lone Star heritage than to the moody folk/pop of notherners like Bob Dylan and Leonard Cohen.

Arguing with a man’s choice of cover tunes is like criticizing what he orders for dinner—if he likes it, that’s all the justification needed. Here Lovett gravitates toward brooding, mid-tempo tunes by the somewhat obscure Willis Alan Ramsey (no, not " Musk rat Love"), the more obscure Steven Fromholz and Walter Hyatt, and the downright well-known Robert Earl Keen. While there are a few gems—most notably, Hyatt’s "Teach Me About Love" and "Lonely in Love," and David Rodriguez’ "Ballad of the Snow Leopard and the Tanqueray Cowboy"—two discs of introspective, mid-tempo ballads get a little monotonous.

Successful cover albums balance the well-known with the obscure. Take, for example, Lovett’s choice of the Guy Clark tune that gave this set its title. Instead of reaching for one of Clark’s many minor classics—say, " Texas Cookin'," which seems a natural for this collection—Lovett cut the bland "Step Inside This House (Step Inside My House).” According to the liner notes, it’s the first tune Clark ever wrote. That’s fascinating and all, but it sure would have been fun to hear what Lovett’s voice could have done with first-class Clark. But in the voice department, this set is unassailable. Lovett clearly took his time making this disc—his singing has never been more careful and nuanced. Another strength is the supporting cast, which includes Alison and Viktor Krauss, drummer Russ Kunkel, pianist Matt Rollings, dobro man Jerry Douglas, and string virtuoso San Bush.

Given the overload of same-tempo tunes, Step Inside is best when it breaks out and gently swings, in tunes like Hyatt’s "Teach Me About Love" and the traditional “More Pretty Girls Than One,” or gets sleazy and honky-tonky, as in Michael Martin Murphy’s "West Texas Highway.”

What ultimately makes the set worth the price, and lulls you into forgetting that it’s really the sound of Lovett running in place, is the quartet of tunes by the late Townes Van Zandt, highlighted by an elegiac reading of “If I Needed You.”

While this appealing collection of undeniably well-crafted songs gets an "A" for atmosphere, it’s ratcheted up the pressure on Lovett to produce on his next album. The last time a left-of-center pop singer brought time with a cover album was Shawn Colvin with Cover Girl—which she followed with a grand slam of her own material. Hopefully, that pattern will apply to Lyle Lovett. —Robert Baird

**TAJ MAHAL**

*In Progress & In Motion, 1965–1998*

Columbia/Legacy C3K 64919 (3 CDs), 1998. Various orig. prods. & engs. / Lawrence Cohn, Taj Mahal, compilation prods. AAD7 Test 5:20:20

**Performance *****

**Sonics *****

In the liner notes to this long-overdue career-spanning anthology, Taj Mahal writes about growing up in Springfield, Massachusetts with jazz, big-band, blues, swing, gospel, and classical music on the family fi-hi, a hardworking father who spoke seven languages, and a choir-singing mother smitten with Mahalia Jackson, the Staples Singers, and Shirley Caesar. It’s no wonder that Mahal has built his career on a broad foundation of musical roots: Delta blues, reggae, folk, and contemporary soul, as well as homegrown music from Africa, the West Indies, Hawaii, and Polynesia. Along the way he’s composed movie soundtracks, made children’s albums, and last year even nabbed a Grammy, for *Sertor Blues.*

But it’s his genteel humanity that resonates loudest on *In Progress & In Motion.* Listen to the joyous twinkle in his voice as he sings “Fishin’ Blues” with the note-yet-famous Pointer Sisters, on a previously unreleased live track from 1971. Or the unbounded glee—from the wailed “aaaah haaaah” at the beginning to the closing “ooohh hoooh” —of a trucking man who’s finally about to see his sweetheart after “Six Days on the Road.” This song’s been recorded zillion times, but no version has ever sounded so upbeat, so downright happy. Then, near the end of the edgy “We Gonna Rock,” recorded at the Fillmore West with Boz Scaggs and Elvin Bishop, Mahal seduces the crowd with the sleek, sexy self-assurance of Marvin Gaye.

The two earliest recordings on *In Progress & In Motion* are pre-date Mahal’s Columbia solo contract. Back in 1965, as a member of the Rising Sons, a Robert Johnson-inspired quintet featuring the equally unknown Ry Cooder and future Byrds drummer Kevin Kelley, Mahal belts out an incendiary (though way too short at 2:21) “Statesboro Blues.” On this track, and on Charley Patton’s mournful “By and By,” it’s clear that the twentysomething singer is something special, his style passionate, yet already effortlessly compelling and convincing.

About half of this 54-track collection comes from Mahal’s tenure with Columbia (1967–76), when he established himself as a soulful blues singer, song-writer, and guitarist with a back-porch warmth. By 1974’s splendid, tropically infused *Mo’ Roots,* he had added piano, organ, banjo, and French harp to his instrumental arsenal, and expanded his embrace to include music from around the globe. Since leaving Columbia, Mahal has recorded for other labels, and this compilation contains nuggets from several of them, including Warner Bros., Granavision, Music for Little People, and Private Music.

Some of the most revelatory material here has never before been available: three tracks from the Rolling Stones’ “Rock and Roll Circus,” at 1968 (the Mahal/Stones connection continues on the Stones’ latest live album, *No Security,* five with the Pointers, and three from a 1990 *Austin City Limits* program. The sweetest of these is the show-closing instrumental version of “Freight Train,” which he lovingly dedicates to its writer, Elizabeth Cotten. “I’m sure she’s smilin’ down from somewhere. And we love you, Elizabeth!” says Taj, clearly jazzed by the song and his opportunity to offer it a fresh arrangement.

Part of Taj Mahal’s gift is his ability to take classic folk, blues, and jazz, and be it traditional or from the pen of Robert Johnson, Horace Silver, or Bob Marley, and give it his own smart, sensuous, wholly reverential spin. And his own songs, like the autobiographical “St. Kitts Woman” and the giddy “Cakewalk Into Town,” hold their own next to the classics. In his nimble hands and his musician soul, the blues are a wide-open musical form and an exhilarating release, and Taj simultaneously approaches his work with scholarly sophistication and a child’s sense of adventure. Listen as he declares “These blues make my body feel good!” on “You’re Gonna Need Somebody on Your Bond,” this set’s opening track. That hallelujah spirit permeates this whole collection, and Mahal’s entire three-decade-plus recorded legacy. This is sweet exuberance at its best.

—David Sokol

*Stereophile,* April 1999
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Accursory listen to The Sea and Cake’s mainman Sam Prekop’s solo bow might trigger subliminal memories of Stereolab’s breezier French-film fantasies or Beck’s recent nods to bossa nova. Right at the outset, “Showrooms” doas a pastel-and-flowers shirt, burbles along on an innocuously pleasant bed of springy rhythms and “ba-ba-hahhhh” backing vocals, and even inserts a winsome violin figure at the end, just where you’d expect the pair of star-crossed lovers to reunite and embracce over the closing credits.

Red herring? I don’t think so. It’s clear that Prekop loves this kind of smurfy exotica, as anyone would suspect who’s followed his career — from Shrimp Boat in the early ’90s through The Sea and Cake. What’s interesting is that the most recent TSAC release, 1997’s *Two Gentlemen* mini-album seemed to signal a heightened interest in electronica and computer-based music on Prekop’s part; yet *Sam Prekop* finds the Chicago songwriter reverting to form. That form is wholly engaging, if low-key.

Joined by a talented array of hometown cronies and bandmates (including TSAC’s Archer Prewitt and John McEntire, also of Tortoise, plus jazzbo pair Chicago Underground Duo and expertly produced by Chicago’s resident renaissance man, Jim O’Rourke, Prekop casts his visions of jazz, lounge, pop, and rock with the knowing confidence of a virtuoso. The seven-minute instrumental “Faces and People” is one standout track. In this slowly building, evenly paced slice of Tortoise-like aural hypnosis, a repeated guitar figure and treated percussion are gradually joined by other guitars and basses, plus cornet. The result is, ultimately, symphonic. The closing track, “So Shy,” is another winner. It revisits some of the motifs of “Showrooms,” but — with Prekop’s swaggering, double-tracked vocal, a more urgent rhythmic bite, and a positively buoyant string arrangement (augmented by some astonishing slide guitar from O’Rourke) — the tune swings as hard as any current big-band revival number you’d care to cite.

The record sounds luscious, sometimes too much so. It has no inferior moments and never flatsines, but neither does it consistently work up a sweat. There’s a sameness to its ambiance that practically demands that the listener sit down and listen closely. Yet after paying careful attention to the album’s many nuances, the listener comes away with senses subtly altered — the same kind of feeling one gets after viewing a “small” indie or foreign film. Maybe those first impressions aren’t so off base after all.

— Fred Mills

**WILCO**

*Summer Teeth*

Sonics ****

Early on, the almost cautionary liner notes for the advance CD of *Summer Teeth* speak of “the impulse to pull everything down, to deconstruct life, love, and self.” Uh-uhh. Later, about the songs: “there’s a thread running through all of them that’s obviously there but difficult to explain.” I’ll say. One listen to this collection — which follows Wilco’s *Being There*, the double album that began this band’s pop journey — and I was asking “What is Wilco doing now?” and “Why is Jeff Tweedy trying to remake Sgt. Pepper’s, The White Album, the Beach Boys’ catalog, and every other piece of memorable pop from the ‘60s and ‘70s?”

The second question, of course, is exactly the point. Wilco singer/songwriter/thinker Tweedy is obviously on a quest to make some sort of grand pop masterwork that blends snippets of all those traditions. That, or he’s completely full of God knows what.

Whatever the answer, *Summer Teeth* is an ambitious, multicolored, Beatlesque hodgepodge. Virtually all traces of Tweedy’s former band, the much-revered Uncle Tupelo — the group that almost single-handedly launched the alt-country genre — have been obliterated. Only on the slightly twangy “ELT” does any hint of albums and bands past creep in. Instead, *Summer Teeth*’s 15 tracks are headlined by enormous ambitions, Tweedy’s ever-improving voice, and the instrumental genius of guitarist/keyboard guru Jay Bennett. More than anything else, this is a keyboard record, and every song relies on one in some form or other: instead of a fiddle or a pedal steel, there’s a tack piano, a sirenlike keyboard, or a conspiratorially murmuring Hammond B-3.

Often, *Summer Teeth* is pop in its most impossible-to-hate form. The “oooooohhhhh” chorus of “We’re Just Friends”; the violin overdubs and horns of “Pieholden Suite”; the big, multitracked vocal hook that is the chorus of the disc’s strongest tune (and killer single), “Nothing/severgornastandinnyway AGAIN!”; and the title tune, which opens with the sounds of a burbling brook and chirping birds — they’re all... well, sweet. Likeable, but sweet. If this album doesn’t eventually come with a psychadelically twirled tray liner, I’ll be surprised.

Fortunately, this is leavened by lyrics like “I dreamed about killing you again last night and it felt alright to me” (“Via Chicago”), and bittersweet ballads like the vaguely flamenco-tinted “How to Fight Loneliness” (the remedy: “just smile all the time”).

Part of the problem — or strength, depending on what the liner notes identify as “your day, your ears, your emotional state” — is that the band served as its own producer. Excess naturally followed. The other, more important tangle is whether Tweedy is songwriter enough to carry the weight of his increasingly ornate vision. So far, between *Being There* and *Summer Teeth* the jury’s still out. Pop auteordun à la Lennon, McCartney, and Wilson is a bony desert that few can make bloom. Tweedy’s out there planting, but so far, it’s hard to say exactly what is sprouting.

— Robert Baird

**short takes**

**Vic Chesnutt:**

*The Salesman and Bernadette*

Sonics ****

It’s as if a friend has asked Vic Chesnutt some unanswerable questions about the meaning of life, and his reply is *The Salesman and Bernadette* — a collection of sad sighs and wry observations set to muffled, distant music. Chesnutt’s poetry of the absurd — barked by scattered,
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mocking snatches of sax, trumpet, and clarinet, brushed drums, and the always-depressed pedal steel — creates a cryptic language shared by friends and puzzled over by everyone else.

The buoyant melody and sha-la-las of "Replenished" don’t signal a mood swing, but highlight the song’s contradictory lyrics about the death of summer. But Chesnutt’s efforts pay off most when he forges the ironic mix of upbeat music and downcast lyrics and goes for the jugular — as in the far-off buzz of guitar that punctuates his mourning of alcoholism, “Square Rooms,” and the haiku-like existentialist dirge of “Blanket Over the Head.” For those who find beauty in the abyss, here Chesnutt again goes to the edge and looks over, unflinching and smirking. — Michael Metzger

THE MIGHTY BLUE KINGS: Live from Chicago

Performance ***1/2
Sonomics ***

This Chicago swing band’s 1996 debut, Meet Me in the Uptown, remains one of the most innovative documents yet produced by the new swing revival. Unfortunately, personnel changes have sapped much of the punch from this band of swing royalty. Much as he tries, pretty boy (no, really) vocalist Russ Bon simply can’t do it all. None of the supporting cast — saxes, rhythm section — is what it used to be. And as live recordings go, the sound of this one is very average, with too many instruments lost in the background. A cover of Hendrix’s ‘Marine Depression’ is an artistic faux pas. And while tunes like a cover of swing leader Jimmie Lunceford’s ‘Buzz, Buzz, Buzz’ are fun, it’s hard to forget that the Kings were once as good as — or better than — many of the original swing acts from the ’40s.

— Robert Baird

**BLUE NOTE YEARS: 1939-1999**

Performance *****
Sonomics ***1/2

Blue Note is one of the most revered record labels in the history of American music, regardless of genre. Alfred Lion and Francis Wolff, two German immigrant jazz fanatics, founded the company on a shoestring in 1939 in New York. By the time Lion retired in 1967, that brilliant blue-and-white logo had become an icon.

The enduring fascination with and nostalgia for Blue Note has led to an astonishing number of reissue projects and programs. CEMA (Blue Note’s current owner) keeps finding new ways to repackage, reconfigure, and reanthologize the Blue Note catalog. We have already had the Connoisseur series, the Best Of… series, the Rare Groove series, the Jazz Profile series, the Performance series, and, 10 years ago, the 50th Anniversary Collection. There have also been more than two dozen limited-edition boxed sets on the mail-order Mosaic label, under license from Blue Note. Now there appears the most extravagant reissue of all, *The Blue Note Years* — a seven-volume, 14-CD, 16-hour boxed set commemorating the label’s 60th anniversary.

When it comes to Blue Note reissues, few readers of our planet have a higher satiety threshold than Your Narrator. But it is at last time to ask: Have we reached Wretched Excess? Does the world need *The Blue Note Years*? Who is the customer for this product ($156.78 from a major e-commerce provider)? To answer these questions, we must start with an inventory.

Vol.1 — Boogie, Blues, & Bop, 1939-55 — samples the early years, now mostly forgotten. Until 1947, Alfred Lion recorded boogie-woogie (Albert Ammons, Meade Lux Lewis) and swing (Sidney Bechet). Then he discovered Thelonious Monk. Between the Tiny Grimes Swingtet chuckling along on “Tiny’s Boogie Woogie” and Monk blocking out the dissonances of “Well You Needn’t” gapes a vast cultural chasm. Once Lion had crossed over to the modern mindset, he never looked back. The second disc of Vol.1 and all of Vol.2 (*The Jazz Message, 1955–61*) contain masterpieces of bop and its immediate aftermath: Bud Powell’s “Glass Enclosure,” Clifford Brown’s “Easy Livin’,” Tal farlow’s “Our Delight.”

Disc 1 of Vol.3 (*Organ & Soul, 1956–67*) presents 17 well-chosen examples of the organ-combo genre that Jimmy Smith and Alfred Lion jointly founded: great, greasy stuff by Smith, John Patton, Jack McDuff, and Baby Face Willette. Disc 2 contains acoustic fink blues. People like Lee Morgan (“The Side-winder”) and Lou Donaldson (“Al-ligator Boogaloo”) had hits with these backbeat shuffles, but they don’t wear well today.

Vol.4, Hard Bop and Beyond, 1963–67, preserves the Blue Note quintessence: take-no-prisoners anthems by Dexter Gordon, Art Blakey, Blue Mitchell, Joe Henderson, and Freddie Hubbard, all at the tops of their games.

Vol.5 is called *The Avant Garde, 1963–67*. It’s one of the most intriguing sets, partly because the material has not been so widely recirculated as that in Vol.2-4. Blue Note stayed mostly within the near reaches of free jazz. Grachan Moncur III, Sam Rivers, and Andrew Hill remained true to their roots while discovering ways to push the envelope. But there’s some hairier stuff too;
Ornette Coleman, Eric Dolphy, and Cecil Taylor. Thirty-five years after the fact, it's still an adrenaline rush to hear Eric Dolphy catapult out of an ensemble (“Out to Lunch”).

Vol.6 (The New Era, 1975–98) is divided between the lightweight pop-jazz that appeared on Blue Note in the '70s, after its acquisition by Liberty Records, and the much stronger talent (eg, Joe Lovano, Gonzalo Rubalcaba) that Bruce Lundvall discovered in the mid-'80s, after Liberty had been absorbed by CEMA. Vol.7 (Blue Note Now As Then) contains 22 artists from the label's current stable (Renee Rosnes, Dianne Reeves, Eliane Elias, et al) playing mostly classic tunes from Blue Note's golden era ("Song For My Father," "Maiden Voyage," "Una Mas") on two CDs of previously issued recordings.

The set also includes a beautiful 12" by 12" catalog with photographs by Blue Note co-founder Francis Wolff. Wolff was a professional photographer in Germany before he emigrated to America, and his intimacy with the jazz culture enabled him to become the official translator of "the Blue Note sound" into the stillness of a visual medium. One of his most memorable images captures the look with which Ornette Coleman passes the torch to Denardo Coleman, his drummer and nine-year-old son.

Most of the original engineering, of course, was by Rudy Van Gelder, he of the boomy basses, cottony pianos, and etched, reverberant horns. For all their colorations, Rudy's recordings had visceral impact. The digital transfers are by Ron McMaster, who has become as synonymous with Blue Note reissues on the engineering side as Michael Cuscuna is on the production side. McMaster's work keeps getting stronger, thanks in part to evolving technologies such as 20-bit Super Mapping. So many voices, the great (eg, Hank Mobley) and the near-great (eg, Tina Brooks), live again.

But for all the riches contained in The Blue Note Years, there are also puzzling omissions and compromises. This project should have become the occasion for an in-depth study of the label's distinguished history. But here there is an offhand quality to Blue Note scholar/producer Michael Cuscuna's liner notes which are mostly sketchy track-by-track commentations. They are much less valuable than the essays he's written for the Blue Note reissues on his own Mosaic label, which are profound immersions in a given artist and milieu.

It's also striking how many of the performances anthologized in the 50th Anniversary Collection, a 5-CD series from 10 years ago, also appear here. So many of the tunes selected are the obvious ones — the hits and classics. Blue Note aficionados will already own many of the albums from which this music is drawn. The intended customer for this set is perhaps a well-heeled neophyte jazz collector, not the jaded, battle-scarred veteran with racks of Blue Note LPs.

Why, then, do I keep going back to this set, grooving again to Hank Mobley's "No Room for Squares," losing myself in the ballad solo of Joe Henderson's life on "Lazy Afternoon," swooning to McCoy Tyner's "Passion Dance," obeying the summons of John Coltrane's "Blue Train"? Do I have a problem? Am I a Blue Note addict?

Certainly not. I can quit any time I want.

— Thomas Conrad

21ST-CENTURY JAZZ

The Potter Variations

CHRIS POTTER QUARTET: Verigo

Chris Potter, tenor & soprano sax, bass clarinet, piano; Joe Lovano, tenor sax; Kurt Rosenwinkel, guitar; Scott Colley, bass; Billy Drummond, drums


Performance ****

Sonic ***1/2

DAVE DOUGLAS: Magic Triangle

Dave Douglas, trumpet; Chris Potter, tenor sax; James Genus, bass; Ben Perowsky, drums


Performance ****1/2

Sonic ****

JOHN PATITUCCI: Now

John Patitucu, acoustic & Yamaha six-string electric bass; Chris Potter, Michael Brecker, tenor sax; John Scofield, guitar; Bill Stewart, drums


Performance ****

Sonic ***1/2

T
these three recent recordings point strongly to what jazz will sound like in the 21st century. It will be eclectic, intelligent, and so technically accomplished that technique will be assumed. It will use the great jazz traditions to develop new languages. It will earn its beauty, which will not always be pretty.

The other connecting thread among these three albums is Chris Potter, who turned 28 on New Year's Day, 1999. His attributes include imposing chops, a clean, lucid tone on several saxes (primarily tenor), fresh ideas, and an empathetic gift for immersing himself in the creative projects of others. Hence he is already one of the most popular sidemen in postmodern jazz. It is in this capacity that he serves on Dave Douglas' Magic Triangle and John Patitucu's Now. Potter's own Verigo showcases his growth as a composer, and proves that he's ready to lead important bands of his own.

The nine tunes on Verigo are like Potter's solos: built over ambiguous harmonic spaces, fluid time, and daring turns. As an improvisor, Potter challenges himself and the listener — he rarely plays licks, instead always inventing, veering off into new vistas. Yet his slanting lines often find lyricism, as on the inward "Almost Home" and "Wake Up," where Potter's soprano sax dissolves into a yearning solo by bassist Scott Colley. Joe Lovano joins the quartet for three numbers. Together, Potter and Lovano command as much muscle, speed, and nerve as any two-tenor front line in jazz. Potter matches Lovano move for headlong move on "Long Walk, Short Pier."

Magic Triangle presents Potter's first recorded meeting with Dave Douglas, the most important new jazz trumpet to emerge in the '90s. Douglas has absorbed Webers, Monk, Stravinsky, and Booker Little. His clarion brass tone and beautifully bent lines force you to fol-
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low. He is, in this sense, the Chris Potter of trumpet players.

This date is even leaner and meaner than Vénito. There are only the two horns, supported by James Genus’ bedrock bass and Ben Perowsky’s spontaneously eruptive drums, and nine provocative structures composed by Douglas. Sometimes the opposing/entwining horns recall Ornette Coleman’s pianoless quartets with Don Cherry, but Douglas’ music is more organized, even if the principles of organization are his own. Through technical command and inspiration, Douglas and Potter are able to play both inside and outside a song, moving back and forth at will. Whether improvisations derive from arrangements, or whether, as on “The Ghost,” the two horns stay together for long, twisting narratives before taking turns dominating the counterpoint, there are no obvious moments in this music. The austerities are sometimes forbidding, the angles often jagged—but Potter and Douglas reward listeners who stay the course with one flash of insight after another.

Those who know bassist John Patitucci only from his work with Chick Corea’s electric bands will be surprised by his searching, wide-open acoustic work on two recent Concord albums, One More Angel and Now. Those discs are alive with creative urgency, and a major reason is the presence on both of, again, Chris Potter. Five tracks on Now feature Potter’s fiercely independent, clear-throated tenor sax ideas. (The smooth, rounded edges of Potter’s tone, though not his counterintuitive lines, recall Hank Mobley.)

Another compelling voice on Now is the guitar of John Scofield, whose complex, woolly timbres and exquisitely placed voicings are central to the intrigue of Patitucci’s fervent music. The compositions come from the most intense, personal, meaningful moments in Patitucci’s life: births, deaths, devotions. When they take the lead, Potter, Scofield, and (on two pieces) Michael Brecker play from deep inside the songs, as though they, too, have lived them.

In terms of audio quality, Vénito is competent. Magic Triangle was recorded in analog by Joseph Marciano at the renowned Systems Two studio in Brooklyn. It is clean and clear, but (analogophiles take note) the digitally recorded Now is more dramatic and alive. It was engineered by Joe Barba, whose digital recordings for the Postcards label can flat knock you down.

~ Thomas Conrad

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**JIMMY SCOTT**

**Holding Back the Years**


**Performance ***

Sonicss *** 1/2

It’s common today, when speaking of the wrong black artists experience courtesy of the music business (and, at times, their own bad decisions), to use the past tense. Unfortunately, in Jimmy Scott’s case, the beat goes on.

All of Me (1992), Scott’s first disc for Warner Bros., was his ne plus ultra. But now, after two follow-ups for WB, Scott is signed to a small indie label with limited distribution and resources. Just what Scott needs: another record no one will see or hear.

Scott’s life and career form an extraordinary tale. One of the few big-band singers still living, let alone performing, Scott remains one of the most distinctive stylists in jazz history. A frequent stand-in for friend Billie Holiday during her last years, Scott has an unnaturally high voice (the result of a physiological condition) that is frequently mistaken for female, yet has always given his singing incomparable panache. Combined with his transcendent, unapproachable gift for phrasing, it makes for a sound and spirit that has no equal anywhere in music.

While the 70-plus-year-old Scott has the emotional depth of someone who has paid mountainous life dues, his physical gifts are undeniably on the wane. Here he wends his way through another set that will be essential to fans, but that newcomers might find uneven. The problem is twofold: with his voice fading, Scott tends to talk his way through—or, worse, lean excessively on his vibrato. A good producer, which he had on the Warners records, would have put a stop to both tendencies, made Scott take his time, and ultimately drawn more out of his vocal performances. And while much of the material is fine, a couple of the tunes—like “Slave to Love” and an ill-conceived stab at Elton John’s “Sorry Seems to Be the Hardest Word” (which, even in the best of times, would probably have been out of his interpretive reach)—are, at this point, clearly beyond his voice.

But this is still a Jimmy Scott record, and, given his age, that makes it a very special experience. No one can stretch, twist, and reshape a song like Scott. Ballads like “Jealous Guy” and “How Can I Go On Without You,” which he more than once brings almost to a complete halt, still possess a chillingly exquisite finality of sadness. An easy, upbeat version of the title tune also works well. The recording quality is good if predictable: the voice is large and loud, front and center.

Though this disc may be hard to find, it’s worth the search. Jimmy Scott at last is more than his prime is still better than most other singers’ best efforts. — Robert Baird

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**RANDY WESTON**

Khepera

Randy Weston, piano; Talib Kibwe, alto sax, flute; Pharoah Sanders, soprano & tenor sax; Benny Powell, trombone; Alex Blake, bass; Victor Lewis, drums; Chief Bey, vocals, Ashiko drums; Neil Clark, conga, djimbe, African percussion, gong, shekere; Min Xiao Fen, pipa, gong


Sonics ****

Pianist Randy Weston has recorded some of the most thoughtful and compelling music of this decade, beginning with the brilliant two-CD set, The Spirits of Our Ancestors, released in 1991 on Antilles. In tracing jazz back to its African roots, Weston filled two discs with swinging music that bore repeated hearings. The follow-up two years later, Volcano Blues, was almost as good, Weston continuing to explore his jazz in a collection of invigorating blues-based tunes.

Weston’s latest effort, Khepera (an Egyptian word meaning “transformation”), proves to be another gem. With his all-star band, African Rhythms, and once more featuring the remarkable arrangements of longtime collaborator Melba Liston, Weston embarks on a collection of journeylike pieces. Instead of composing tunes that operate as vehicles for excessive solo excursions, Weston tells stories embellished by improvisational interludes. It makes for engaging ensem-
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ble music that values listening and responding over uncontrolled blowing.

Weston approaches the piano with melodic, percussive, and at times Monkish sensibilities, at turns jabbing with strong-fingered gusto and wafting with dreamy, single-note joy. He takes blissful flight on the full-spirited "Portrait of Cheikh Anta Diop," joins forces with bassist Alex Blake to brew low-toned beauty on "Borani Xam Xam," and duets with pipa player Min Xiao Fen on "The Shang," a celebration of the ancient Chinese-African cultural connection and one of Khepera's finest musical ventures.

In addition to the more narrative pieces, Weston also swings, especially on the horn-rich "Prayer Blues" and the vibrant "Niger Mambo," an older tune about his experiences in Nigeria. Weston shines as leader, enlisting a simpatico percussion section to deliver the music's steady pulse as well as rein in the rest of his troops. Case in point: allowing saxophonist Pharoah Sanders the freedom to yearn anguishedly on his horns in "Aru Anu" and "The Shrine," yet enforcing boundaries so that the group's soulful animation doesn't lose its impact through excessive jamming.

Without fanfare or artifice, Weston has been creating memorable jazz in the '90s. He continues his peak performances with Khepera, which, as the title suggests, is transformative music. In Weston's hands, the music slowly sinks in, surprising with its subtle touch and satisfying with its spiritual depth.

— Dan Ouellette

**short takes**

**JAMES ANDREWS:**

*Satcghmo of the Ghetto*


Performance ****

Sonics ***1/2

A trumpet virtuoso since his early teens, James Andrews remains one of the Crescent City's finest young instrumentalists. Here supported by Allen Toussaint and Mac Rebennack (aka Dr. John), he delivers a set of jazzy R&B dedicated to his uncle, the late New Orleans R&B star Jessie Hill. The music is varied, from the Latin flavors of the Andrews/Toussaint collaboration "Latin Cats" to the sacred strains of "The Old Rugged Cross." Andrews' "Sweet Emma" is a charmer, and he's even improved as a vocalist. If there's a connection to Armstrong, it's in the fun Andrews is so obviously having.

—Robert Baird

**etc.**

**CHEF AID**

*The South Park Album*

American/Columbia CK 69377 (CD). 1998. Trey Parker, Matt Stone, Rick Rubin, exec. prod.; Dino Paredes, soundtrack supervisor; Mary Ramos, Michelle Kuznetsky, music supervisors; Paul Foley, digital editing. DDD T7: 77:24

Performance ****

Sonics ****

If you've been wondering what Rick Rubin's been up to since he and his American record label dropped out of sight, here's the answer: he's been in the studio, assembling this surprisingly elaborate, expensive tribute to *South Park,* the cruderly animated, foul-mouthed, often hilarious hit cartoon series on the Comedy Channel.

Kyle, Stan, Kenny, Officer Barbrady, Mr. Hankey, and the other wonderfully warped denizens of South Park (I admit it, I'm a fan) have been well served by Rubin's producing and organizing talents. The list of participants is impressive: Primus, Master P, Rancid, Ozzy Osbourne, Puffy Combs, Devo, Wyclef Jean, Isaac Hayes, Elton John, Ween, and Joe Strummer, to name only the most prominent.

What makes this collection a kick is that Rubin and his diverse crew genuinely worked on the music, no doubt inspired by the show's irreverent, on-target, completely crazed universe. Instead of the usual half-assed, half-effort compilation filled with covers that are supposed to be note-perfect or stupidly funny, this one has several different stylistic streams of mostly original music, each of which has a striking moment or two.

If there's a single with a life beyond this album, it's the convincingly funky electronica of "Nowhere to Run," which uses the talents of DMX, Ozzy Osbourne, Ol' Dirty Bastard, and Crystal Method. The big, Eurotrash dance sound of Mousse T's "Horny," with a telephone conversation between producer and artist superimposed over the music, is also fun. One strength here is the unexpected musical collaborations that Rubin has concorted. Unfortunately the most outrageous musical match—the all-female-abusing duo of Rick James and Ike Turner—while slightly amusing on "Love Gravy," is not the witty, edgy, collision it might have been.

For the most part, the humor on *Chef Aid* is only for those who watch *South Park.* A possible exception is Eric Cartman's whiny rendition of that 70s AM horror, Styx's "Come Sail Away," Cartman's tender tone in lines like "I think of childhood friends and the dreams we had" (remember, this is a show about obstreperous kids, of whom Cartman is the most extreme) is the highlight of the disc. His shouts of "Hell, Yeah!" and "Mac-10!" during Wyclef Jean's "Bubblegoo" will also make fans smile. Master P's "Kenny's Dead"—which celebrates one of the show's most ubiquitous lines, "Oh, my God, they've killed Kenny," to the tune of Curtis Mayfield's *Superfly* hit "Freddie's Dead"—is another righteously silly track.

Less funny are the lascivious soul ballads that Isaac Hayes, as Chef, croons in his deep, deliberately Barry White-inflected voice. His "Tonight is Right for Love" (with Meredith Baxter-Birney) is entertaining for one chorus only. The disc's only outright disaster is "Will They Die 4 You—a strange, guitar-heavy hip-hop/rock track assembled by Puffy and Rubin. Whatever they were shooting for artistically, they missed.

But, in general, as novelty records go, *The South Park Album* contains more inspiration, effort, and genuine thought than most. Enough to make it a record you go back to more than once? Hell yes, Dude!

—Robert Baird
ROKSAN

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Audio Research LS8

Editor:

Fortunately, most of the reviews that Audio Research equipment receives are quite positive and are usually fairly accurate. However, occasionally a reviewer does not like a product for some reason. This is not normally of great concern, since most readers are discerning enough to either weigh the review in light of the reviewer's known biases, or to check out the product for themselves.

However, when a reviewer of the stature of Martin Colloms dislikes a product, it is of concern, because sales of the product will be affected. We believe Martin's integrity and sense of responsibility would not permit him to deliberately sabotage a good vacuum-tube product. Martin is also technically competent, and found no measurement problem with the unit.

With these things in mind, we have carefully reviewed the sonic performance of the LS8, not only on an "absolute" basis, but also by "A/B" comparison with the LS7, the older ARC unit Martin fondly refers to in his March '99 review of the LS8. Our listening panel easily determined that, in the words of one of the group, the LS8 is "light-years" ahead of the LS7.

So, what went wrong? We don't know, of course. Perhaps there is something wrong with the unit Martin has, although his measurements would not indicate that. We will endeavor to get this unit back and repeat our listening tests on that specific unit.

In the meantime, for those interested in preamplifier-control units in this price range, please don't write this product off. Listen to it for yourself. It is a good unit that we think has no peer in its price range.

William Z. Johnson
President, Audio Research

SimAudio Moon P-5 & W-5

Editor:

On behalf of SimAudio, I would like to thank Kalman Rubinson and Stereophile for a wholehearted and well-written review of our state-of-the-art Moon P-5 preamplifier and Moon W-5 power amplifier (March '99). KR's descriptive analysis and Thomas J. Norton's test-bench measurements enlighten Stereophile readers to the performance capabilities of SimAudio's Moon series. One just has to refer to the "bottom-line" commentary: "those two Moon components will please many and disappoint none."

During the extended duration of the review process, a major upgrade to the Moon W-5 amplifier was implemented that resulted in the following sonic improvements: more detail, improved transparency and three-dimensional image, greater air around individual instruments, and a "sweeter" sonic signature. Unfortunately, this upgrade wasn't applied to KR's review sample. However, current W-5 owners are encouraged to contact the factory at (450) 445-0032 or info@simaudio.com for more information on this issue. Earlier versions manufactured prior to July 1998 are fully upgradeable.

The Moon W-5 amplifier is a no-overall-feedback design. Consequently, certain loudspeakers will have their subtle weaknesses fully exposed when driven by this amplifier. Factory experiments have shown that the application of some feedback will yield more body in the midbass region, but less extension in the lower bass registers. The SimAudio design team feels that this result is an artifact that contributes to an unnatural and colored sound. As well, by employing this no-overall-feedback design, the Moon W-5 has the ability to properly drive virtually any loudspeaker available, as demonstrated by Stereophile's review. For those few exceptions, SimAudio offers the Moon W-10 monoblocks, conservatively rated at 650W into 8 ohms.

The Moon P-5 preamplifier has a capacitor-free signal path measuring only 9" in length. This yields a very flat and neutral tonal balance. When compared to both typical tube preamplifiers and many solid-state units, the P-5 will appear to excel in the frequency extremes, leaving what seems to be slightly less weight in some midrange octaves. SimAudio believes that this sonic character better reflects the true reality of recorded music.

SimAudio manufactures two product lines: Moon and Celeste, the latter being a somewhat more affordably priced series of high-end components. I invite Stereophile readers to visit our comprehensive website (www.simaudio.com), where technical white papers can be found on both the Moon W-5 and P-5, as well as other valuable information about SimAudio and its various products.

Thanks again, Stereophile and Kalman Rubinson.

Lionel Goodfield
VP Marketing & Media Relations, SimAudio

Symposium Rollerblocks

Editor:

I would like to thank Mr. Tellig for his wonderful assessment of the Symposium Rollerblocks. As he mentions, we believe that Rollerblocks will effect the most dramatic improvements beneath such digital playback components as CD players, transports, and DVD players. This is in great part due to their unique ability to deal with rotational mode vibrations caused by spinning disc-platter mechanisms.

Since he has expressed some doubt on the matter, I would like to state (now that I am free of worry about impeachment, at least) that Rollerblocks function not only as isolation devices, but also as coupling devices. Although there are other devices that use rolling balls in various receptacles, none takes into consideration the advantages of providing a highly efficient drainage path for vibration. Like a cone device, the Rollerblock can do this.
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because there is a constant metallic pathway between component and support structure, even when the ball is rolling. Thus, the Rollerblock can function like a cone, but one that can move, and effectively isolate the device from and to dissipate subtle low-frequency lateral vibration—something that a stationary cone (or other type of foot) cannot do. The matrix arrangement on the bottom increases contact pressure and improves energy flow, important for getting additional vibration out of the component.

In addition, there is acoustic foam in the matrix; this helps to dissipate vibration, which flows through the Rollerblock conduit as heat. All of this contributes to sonic neutrality. As Mr. Tellig found, the function of the Rollerblock isn’t one of shifting resonances, or of the arbitrary balancing of one coloration against another. One guiding principle states that audio devices be considered essentials or “tricks,” should be seen and not heard. In this way, Rollerblocks allow the equipment designers’ conceptions to function a little closer to the ideal, freed of some of the “goblins” that plague real-world audio gear. And in this, the results can be spectacular!

In conclusion, I would like to reiterate my gratitude to Mr. Tellig for demystifying a component accessory that some may find puzzling or even a bit worrying. I would also like to add that the “pain” he alludes to is not pain at all—I think it’s fun to watch the component “float” around! As for worries about stability, Rollerblocks are ultimately safer than cones, because the average component will tolerate a much greater tackling force before it slides off Rollerblocks than before it falls off a set of cones or other feet.

My congratulations to Mr. Tellig for the success of his column, and to Stereophile for the continuing excellence of its publication.

Peter Bickiewicz
President, Symposium Acoustics

Muse Model Eight & Model 296

Editor:
I want to take this opportunity to thank Stereophile, and especially Shannon Dickson, for reviewing the muse Model Eight and Model 296 DVD/CD system. Your willingness to undertake the task of distilling and conveying complex issues, such as those surrounding the new format like DVD, is a characteristic not often found in the audio-reviewing press. Mr. Dickson’s enthusiasm and technical abilities are rare traits that should be commended and encouraged, for they elevate the process of product review above the mere recitation of fact and opinion. That Mr. Dickson found that he “consistently preferred the sound of recorded music played through the PS-equipped Model Eight and 296 front-end over that of any other source” is a source of great pride and sense of accomplishment for me. As everyone involved in this effort can attest, the challenges were enormous and the tasks long and difficult, but with statements like “I’ve bought more than 20 CDs in just the past month—a binge unlike any I can remember,” the whole effort seems somehow validated. If the end result of our efforts is a pair of products that raise the expectation bar for recorded music, then I am truly pleased.

While all of the key technical features of these two products were mentioned in the review, I would like to further emphasize two salient features of our system. In the “Measurements” section accompanying the review, John Atkinson mentioned the slightly elevated noise floor of the 296 relative to that measured in some competing high-resolution processors. Mr. Atkinson surmised that this likely resulted from the use of a passive 1/V topology within the converter. While his conclusion is fundamentally true, I should point out that the choice of this topology was essential to achieving the highest sonic performance for the following reason.

While traditional steady-state measurements—such as signal-to-noise, THD, and IM distortion tests—do show many of a product’s characteristics, they fail to expose many of the random impulse events that are so common in digital converters. These errors manifest themselves as low-level, spectrally distributed, noislike components derived from digital logic functions. Since these are truly random events, they’re extremely difficult to quantify by conventional measurement techniques.

My goal for the 296 was to develop a circuit that would reduce these digitally based common-mode errors by use of a highly differential topology prior to them becoming converted to normal mode signals. This approach required that I reduce to a minimum the number of active stages immediately following the DACs. Once digital common-mode errors enter an active stage, most are converted to normal-mode signals and can no longer be rejected from the desired signal. As Mr. Dickson stated in the review, a passive 1/V stage, followed by a high-order passive reconstruction filter, offers the near-ideal environment for realizing this goal. Therefore, I strongly feel that the very minor tradeoff of a slightly higher or but still very low noise floor is well worth the genuine sonic advantage had by minimizing these insidious and pervasive forms of digitally based distortions that have compromised CD sound quality for so long.

As Mr. Atkinson further noted in his “Measurements,” stacking the components could easily degrade the performance of the pair. This illustrates an important point concerning the choice of a two- vs. one-box approach. A recent trend away from two-box digital solutions and back to one-box players has been very evident in CD products. This can easily be explained, as the relatively poor performance of traditional interfaces (AES/EBU, S/PDIF, etc.) offsets the benefits of the two-box approach. Now, thanks to the Universal PS interface, we are able to offer all the advantages of two-box solutions (upgradability, isolation of interfering stages, distribution of tasks) without the added jitter component of conventional digital interfaces. That the well-regarded Miller analyzer could not be used with a DVD-based system such as the 8/296 combination is a true disappointment. (Perhaps an updated version will offer this capability.) However, a single moment’s listening will easily reveal to anyone the substantial improvement that this interface offers. With multichannel capability, secure encryption, mastermode operation, and multicompany support, Universal PS offers the ideal solution for today and well into the future.

Once again, I want to thank Stereophile, and everyone involved in both the development of these products and the entire high-resolution DVD-based audio effort.

Kevin Halvorson
Muse Electronics

Nagra VPA

Editor:
I thank Jonathan Scull and the wonderfully succinct Kathleen for a most eloquent review of the Nagra VPA amplifiers. His lamentations and exaltations, I am very happy to report, are immediately matched by the quiet blush am obvious elation from those of us here and in Switzerland who have nurtured these little wonders to life.

In contemplating Mr. Scull’s comments, some reflections came to mind:

Since Nagra started to make its first piece of professional audio equipment in 1953, the goal has always been to make not only the very best-sounding equipment, but the very best-working designs as well. Throughout the history of Nagra, every machine was developed to meet and exceed the requirements of the serious user—one who may have to depend on the proper functioning of Nagra machines for his or her very livelihood.

We believe that for a listening room in which one would invest serious money to deploy an audio system of superb quality, the criteria for decision making is a complete parallel. From the incredibly sculptural—and “cool”—Tube Protection units to the many safety features inside the VPA to prevent accidental mishaps, Nagra is building on a tradition of respect and care for, and hence a sort of dodging of, those who choose to invest in us.

Audiophiles around the world expect us to deliver more than just good sound. To many, a Nagra must have a level of thoroughness in design and security in operation so that it can continue to bring the magic for years to come. So thank you,
Mr. Scull, for pointing out the many little ways we’ve labored to make the VPA not only a competent performer, but also a safe and versatile product to use.

Maybe that’s why, while most people could be happy with $200 point-and-shoots, some of us must have Leicas.

About the sound, what can I say that hasn’t been said so well in the review? We are grateful for words such as “voluptuous” and “virtual-reality” describing what we all yearn for in our music: that sense of tactility and connection to the composer and performers that defines the true meaning of being there, in a faithful rendition of the original acoustic, to “feel the intense emotion.”

Ah yes, although the VPA does measure well for a tube amplifier, its most daunting attribute has to be its sound. It just sounds right. Not just according to some people, but also to an international market demand that has now encouraged us to launch the third batch of new production in as many months since the official start of the VPA—ample testimony itself. We are delighted that those who truly appreciate quality do eventually find us.

Thank you again, Mr. Scull. We will take your kind encouragement and kudos to heart, and continue to serve those who don’t mind being just a little obsessed with perfection.

Steven K. Le

Simon York Designs Series 7

Editor:
I thank you most kindly for making the Series 7 turntable Stereoophile’s 1998 Analog Source of the Year. I am deeply chuffed to receive this—my first prize since I was 11 years old—and I thank you warmly for the encouragement that it embodies. I am also genuinely impressed by Stereoophile, which I applaud for its democracy, courage, and integrity in considering “small fry” along with the “big fish” for presentations such as this. It cannot be easy, and Stereoophile’s dedication to our needs as audiophiles deserves our praise. And, though I have no right to represent anyone, those of us who continue to espouse the world of analog audio would surely join me in thanking everyone at Stereophile, and especially Michael Fremer, for their diligence in keeping the lamp of analog afloat. It is important work. Thank you all.

Let us not forget, amid the pomp and ceremony, that we are all here in the service of music. By whatever means we serve this mistress, it is she who ultimately “touches” us and drives us ever onward. The technologies we employ to facilitate this emotional transfiguration are merely means to an end, and almost an irrelevance—for it is music that inspires, not semiconductors or electrostatic panels, nor the intricacies of metallurgy or jitter.

I am concerned that the appliance of science seems to be overtaking the need to be human. I am concerned that the “uniform black box” movement will leave us in an aesthetic torpor, and I am concerned that technological self-satisfaction will make us musically sterile. Technology is our servant, not our monarch. We should use technology where appropriate, but ensure that technology doesn’t use us. Above all, we should use our humanity and social nature to bring pleasure and meaning to a world that is in dire need of it. If we can have the courage of our “feelings” as well as of our logical convictions, we shall all prosper.

I will keep plodding on, researching, developing, and designing. I still believe in the magic of a slowly turning vinyl record, and I still revel in the magic that music brings. This honor—which my friend, Steven Klein, kindly agreed to accept on my behalf—will inspire me further, and I thank you once again for it.

Simon York

IMF Monitor

Editor:
To correct and clarify Kalman Rubinsson’s review of a transmission-line loudspeaker in your September 1998 issue (p.134):

1) The IMF Monitor was my design. John Wright worked on it, under my direction. The Monitor was my second commercial design, following the IMF Kelly TLS of 1965 (if my letter to you about the great Arthur Haddy, Stereophile, March 1998, p.11).

2) John’s article [on transmission lines] of 1970 was actually ghostwritten by me. John and I conferred, and what I was teaching him at that time was translated into “Englishese.”

3) The late, great Percy Wilson, first technical editor at Gramophone, taught me that all loudspeakers are either “reactive” (resonant) in the audio passband, or “resistive” (nonresonant). Only large horns of enormous mouth cross-sections, or properly designed and functioning transmission lines, are resistive; all other loudspeakers, no matter how exotic their parameters may be, are essentially reactive.

4) What Kalman Rubinsson likes about lines is their nonresonant quality, glowingly described in Professor Bailey’s 1972 article in Electronic & Wireless World (then plain Wireless World) as being immediately attractive to those accustomed to live music.

5) The IMF Monitor, famous in its day for its bass, was actually much more complex and sophisticated, in that the midband was also a transmission line! In my writings over the years, I have stated how important such technology is—riding the reproduction of the vital midrange of “boxy” sound.

6) Most interesting to me is how other researchers are beginning to adopt mid-continued on page 249
None

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Stereophile, April 1999
YBA ALPHAl HC power amp, $399; Jeff Rowland Consonant preamp, $2900; Esoteric P52 transport, $4200; Mark Levinson No.365 DAC, $3800. Dune, (403) 566-2226, David@email.com.

JMLAB UTOPIA, ($30,000) $14,000; Linn LP12/ Lingo/Ekos/Transfiguration, ($8700) $4000; VAC CPA-1, ($2,800) $1000. Theta Pro Gen III, with HDCD, balanced, new, ($6050) $5000. Call (765) 714-6000, krellpro@aol.com.

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Without a hint of self-conviction, I also assert that there is a sound basis for the popular belief that speakers made in Italy are not up to high standards in the United States. This is based on the evidence given in the reviews, and is also supported by the fact that many of the best Italian speakers are not available in the US market. This is especially true of the high-end speakers, which are often only available through mail-order or specialty stores. However, there are also good Italian speakers available in the US, such as Turino and Sancor, which are highly regarded by audio critics around the world.
The Final Word
Larry Archibald

In the beginning, the Internet aroused my deep antipathy. Paper has always been my preferred method of formal communication, second only to conversation via telephone or in person. Asking me to communicate using the super-low-res typefaces available on computer monitors, accessed at painful length over unreliable modems, seemed an insult.

I was able to support that position for maybe a year. Around that time, it became crashingly clear that *Sterophile* was missing a huge bet by not having a website. Pushed forward by Jon Iverson, John Atkinson, and Ralph Johnson (our president at the time), I "gladly" embarked on the process of website strategy and development.

Although financial gain wasn’t our motive—we were concerned that we not lose our collective shirt—*Sterophile* has even made a modest sum from the websites we launched as a result of that effort. Readershers started out strong and has risen steadily ever since — up to, currently, about 250,000 peak hits per day, or about 8000 people.

It’s been a great learning experience, and I hope it continues in that vein. Building on the paper model, we’ve even been getting bitter complaints from manufacturers, concerning either website articles they didn’t like or articles they didn’t get. The advent of our online equipment review reports, which just got going in mid-February, launches us into the area where our contributions to the Web will begin to push the entire high-end industry forward.

I’m not one who sees Internet commerce as a current threat to "brick and mortar" commercial establishments. The combination of Amazon.com, N2K, and CDNow—the three biggest online music retailers—equalled in dollar volume only 10% of the increase in the total music business between 1997 and 1998. The reports I get from the head of Valley Media, the country’s largest recorded music wholesaler, is that any erosive effect of online commerce has not been seen yet.

Investors, however, are making huge bets that those effects are not far in the future. The people with $11 billion tied up in Amazon.com’s market capitalization are going to be mighty disappointed if the future doesn’t provide an opportunity for Amazon to raise its prices to the point where each additional sale provides a source of incremental profit rather than loss as is now the case.

In consumer electronics, one retailer told me he’s found the Net to be the ideal place to dispose of used equipment taken in trade — 24 hours and it’s gone. And there’s a fair amount of mail-order-equivalent advertising — the electronic equivalent of the laundry-list ads that used to be found in the backs of *Video* and *Stereophile* before those magazines went out of existence. But that’s it so far.

Could some of audio’s current lack of growth be related to the High End’s own bitterness?

I’ve heard of one company that intends to use the Internet for that for which it does best: providing lots of information, and concomitant purchasing opportunities, to somewhat interested consumers who don’t know enough to even check www.stereophile.com. The name of the company is knowledgeinks.com, and I don’t know enough about it to tell you whether it will become a major player. Check their website and tell us what you think.

Another aspect of the Web has me deeply troubled, particularly as it relates to audio. In the old days, the schisms that raked our hobby were manifested in the CD-vs-LP argument. Almost like the old Miller beer ads, audiophiles would call back and forth: "Sounds better," "more convenient," "no ticks and pops," "greater warmth," and the like. Pace Michael Frenner, this form of the debate is essentially over. It does my heart enormous good to read in our "Letters" pages of LP "conversions," but, really, CD has won.

Nowadays, the Great Debate has returned to double-blind testing and subjective evaluation, and whether or not John Atkinson is the audio Antichrist. It all takes place, at mind-numbing length and with electron-searing vitriol, at rec.audio.opinion on the Net.

JA as the Antichrist may seem an overstatement, but check the threads and you’ll see. What leads to such demonization? Why not Harry Pearson, Robert Harley, or Anthony Cordesman? I dare say it’s John’s success as an editor and his technical credentials that attract the big guns.

Uniquely among audio-magazine editors, JA listens and measures. He records in analog and digital. He downloads every recording to his Sonic Solutions workstation and plays with digits on his home turf. He adopts purist mike techniques, then, with a [shudder] compressor, makes the resultant recording just a little better. You can even buy those CDs through the magazine, over the Web, or in a record store — something I don’t think is claimed by other magazine editors.

John’s been willing both to publish Jonathan Scull’s Shun Mook reviews and to upbraid those who claim that 20kHz can’t be accurately captured using 44,100 samples per second, with the maths that make it so. He lays his speaker measurements open for public scrutiny at AES conventions — no one published has measured as many speakers over the last 12 years as has JA — but also discusses the ultra-subtle differences between passive preamps and the finest actives.

In short, John loves the science, yet believes in subjective evaluation. It drives his "enemies" to distraction.

What troubles me is the picture of high-end audio that such demonization and vilification present to the outside world. I participate in Internet bulletin boards on subjects other than high-end audio. Let's take wine, one of my big enthusiasms. There are similar differences of opinion. Some oenophiles love new oak; some hate it, think it has ruined modern wines. Some love California, some France, some Australia. Others can't stand Australia.

At the end of the day, though, you know that the oenophiles would love nothing better than to have dinner and open a bunch of bottles together.

I wish I could feel the same shared love of a delightful hobby from the rec.audio people. Instead, it feels more like "check your guns at the door." I wonder what neopithecus think when they stumble on our rancor. Could some of audio's current lack of growth be related to the High End's own bitterness?

If so, we have a lot of work/ence-mending to do.
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Maybe they're singing about CinemaQuest cables...?