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ISSN 0847-1851
Canadian Publication Sales Product,
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ISSUE No. 67



Cover story: The largest of Thiel's centre speakers, the MCS1. It is one of half a dozen centre speakers reviewed in this issue. The backdrop is the private garden of UHF's Château Hi-Fi.

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PHOTOGRAPHY: Albert Simon

ADVERTISING SALES:

Québec: Reine Lessard (450) 651-5720
Alberta & BC: Derek Coates (604) 522-6168
Other: Gerard Rejskind (450) 651-5720

NATIONAL NEWSSTAND DISTRIBUTION:

Stonehouse Publications
85 Chambers Drive, Unit 2, AJAX, Ont. L1Z 1E2
Tel.: (905) 428-7541 or (800) 461-1640

SINGLE COPY PRICE: \$4.99 in Canada, \$4.99 (US) in the United States, \$7.50 (CAN) elsewhere (plus \$1.10 per issue for air mail if desired)

SUBSCRIPTION RATES:

CANADA:	\$25 for 6 issues*
USA:	US\$25 for 6 issues
ELSEWHERE (surface mail):	CAN\$40 for 6 issues
	*Applicable taxes extra

Air mail outside Canada/US: an extra \$1.10 per issue

PRE-PRESS SERVICES: Multi-Média

PRINTING: Interglobe-Beauce

FILED WITH The National Library of Canada and
La Bibliothèque Nationale du Québec.
ISSN 0847-1851
Canadian Publications Mail Sales Product No. 0611387

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EDITORIAL

Home theatre versus two-channel stereo

For quite a while now, I've been hearing industry people telling me that two-channel stereo is dead, that you have to cater to home theatre or die. True? Can you imagine Steinway saying that pianos are dead, that piano makers have to offer Caribbean vacations or perish?

All right, perhaps it's not *quite* that far-fetched. Movies and music are both home entertainment. Still, life is not an either-or situation. Music and movies are not a zero sum game.

It's true that a speaker manufacturer can sell five or six speakers to a home theatre enthusiast instead of only two. The bad news is that many of these consumers want to pay *the same price* for six speakers as they would pay for only two. That's not something you can base a commercial coup on.

Things are more complex than they look. The majority of consumers who have a DVD player and a large-screen TV are using *only two speakers*. And they don't plan *ever* to get more, because they don't have the space, and there's nowhere to run the wires. At the same time, a number of audiophiles want to hear their surround sound recordings as the producers meant them to be heard.

The world is changing, that much is true. Companies struggling to adapt can easily make really big mistakes. Read this issue, and you'll find lots of evidence.

The war winds down

No, I'm not referring to that little skirmish in Iraq. I'm talking serious hostilities: DVD-Audio versus SACD. A year ago it looked like the Mother of All Battles. Today? The troops of Sony and Philips are occupying the terrain. It's all over but the reconstruction.

What happened? Didn't DVD-Audio have a natural advantage, with some 160 companies behind it, versus only two for SACD? What about the claim that, within a year, all DVD video players would also read DVD-Audio? But it never happened. It seems that if you have 160 parents, none of them would take responsibility for feeding you.

Until now, we had been cautioning readers against investing money in what could turn out to be the sonic equivalent of Betamax. The question is now clear: DVD-A is Betamax, and SACD is VHS. The war is over.

UHF returns to Canada

Yes, of course we've been in Canada ever since the very first issue, back in 1982. But it is a not very well-known fact that our Web site (www.uhfmag.com) had been in the US since 1998. From the point of view of visitors, of course, the site could be in Tierra del Fuego for all it matters. We had moved because Canada's Internet infrastructure was then still in its infancy. We found what we wanted with a supplier in Virginia...who later moved to New York State.

But a lot has happened since 1998...to the Internet and to us. We needed even better facilities, and our long-time host didn't have them. We found what we needed at Planet Velocity in Toronto.

With added capacity, we can now envisage new services, which we will announce over the next months.



AVOID THE DOG-EARED COPIES

A surprising number of UHF readers hesitate to subscribe, because they tell us they want to get their magazines in perfect condition, not dog-eared and torn.

But you know what? Wouldn't it be funny if a dog-eared copy was awaiting them at the local newsstand!

But it makes sense if you think about it. Where do copies sit around unprotected? On the newsstand. Where do other people leaf through them before you arrive? At the newsstand. Where do they stick on little labels that don't come off? The answer may surprise you.

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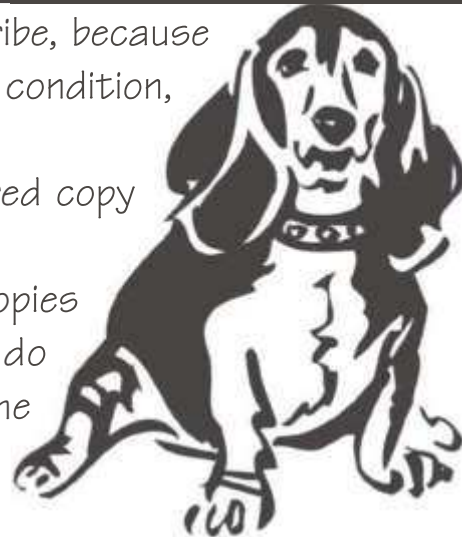
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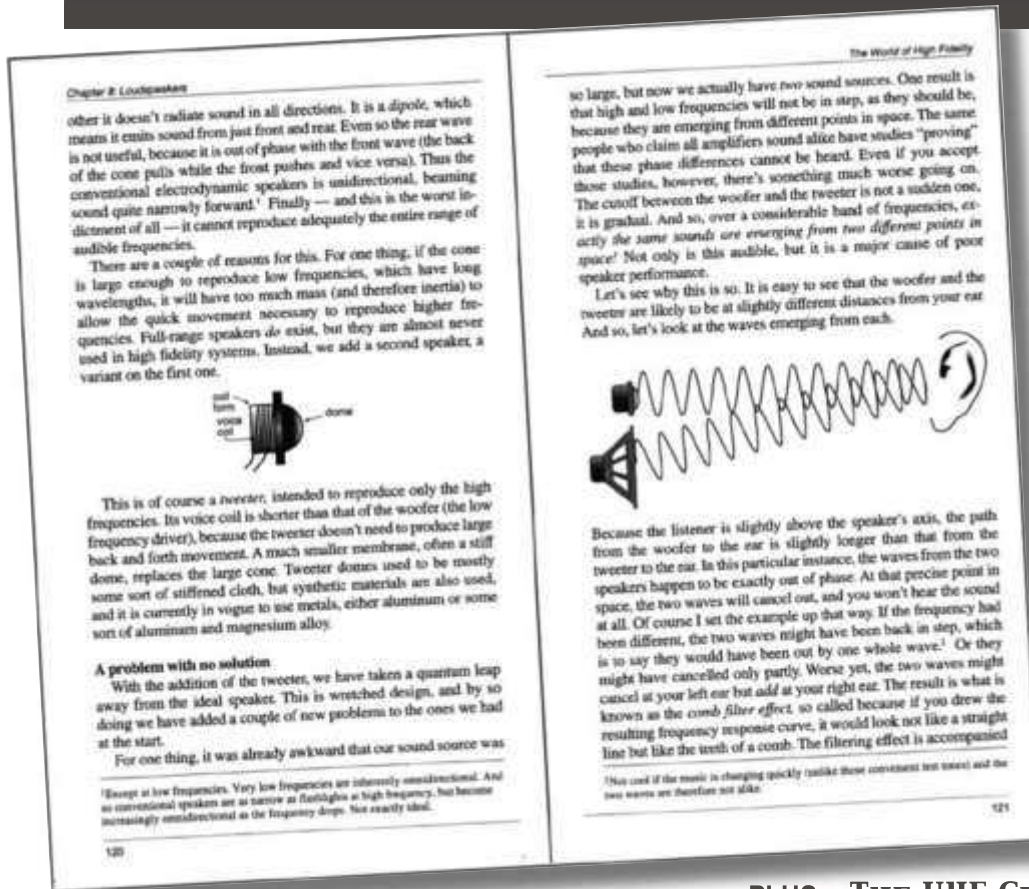
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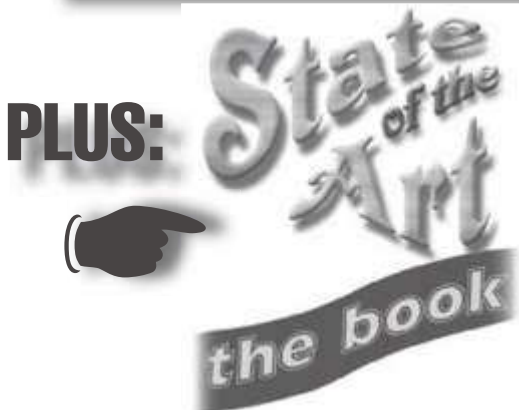
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FEEDBACK

**Box 65085, Place Longueuil
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I really enjoy your magazine. I kept buying single issues until it dawned on me that the only hi-fi magazine that stayed around on the reading table was yours, so I became a subscriber. It has the ring of truth and the love of music around it, so stay on course, you've got a winning formula.

Eric Nadelberg
NEW CITY, NY

I just received issue No. 66 and noted the bit about Mt. Everest and Hillary. However, I believe it was Mallory, not Hillary, who made the famous reply, "because it's there."

Aside from that, I'd like to say that having been a subscriber since issue No. 28 and a reader for much longer. I have always appreciated your publication. This is the longest magazine subscription I've ever had, and I expect I'll still be reading you when I have my first pair of bifocals.

Nicolas Baltazar
KUUIJUAQ, QC

Having spent the last few years and not an inconsiderable amount of investigation, time and money working on developing a media room, I'm delighted to see the addition of the Kappa room to your mix, and look forward to reviews that include home theatre oriented products.

While I can appreciate your philosophy and dedication to reviewing separates, I think the one-box solution has come a long way in recent years. Recent reviews of the Denon 5803 have equated its performance to all but the highest end separates. I am respectfully requesting that *UHF* review some of the "flagship" AV receivers that some of us are choosing as an option.

Peter M. Wilson
ETOBICOKE, ON

I would love to be there (at the Montreal *Festival du Son*). I've never been to a show like that. Maybe when the kids are older, my wife and myself will attend.

I will certainly be checking the daily updates from the show (the coverage from Las Vegas was great). So keep up the take no prisoners/suffer no fools policy for audio and video and I will continue to be a loyal subscriber.

John Reid
VICTORIA, BC

It was interesting to read in your day-by-day review of the Montreal hi-fi show that a female audiophile found that the show was full of lift (elevator) music. I took my wife to the show, telling her that even if the equipment isn't interesting then we would surely find some new and interesting music. This visit to the Montreal show was my first North-American show — I'm from England and have been to the big London show many times — and if I have to listen to one more jangly twangy lift music jazz recording I'll never attend another show on this continent!

It was a relief to hear some Pink Floyd being played, but on entering the room it stopped. My ears perked up again as I hear another few bars of Pink Floyd from down the corridor, but on entering that room I found that the quality of musical reproduction was awful. The jazz music we heard was generally very well reproduced, it's just that we don't like that kind of music.

There was a great selection of equipment and lots of Canadian brands that I'd not seen before to examine and listen to, but way too much British stuff for my liking! Remembering which products were in which rooms was tricky because almost all the rooms were put on by the distributors, not the manufacturers, so

trying to find somewhere on the plan was sometimes tricky, not helped by the poor signage and maps in the show guide.

One of the funniest moments was walking into a darkened home cinema area where they were playing the recent Star Wars movie — with the voices about half a second out of sync with the picture. That kind of setup is hardly fitting for a high end show.

So I returned to Ottawa, happy that I had picked up many magazines to read and seen interesting equipment to give me ideas when building my own, and we listened to 80s pop music in the car — relief at last.

Graeme Nattress
OTTAWA, ON

In the *Free Advice* section of issue No. 66, David Chirko requested advice on system upgrades. His preamp is a Bryston BP 25P and in your reply you seem to suggest that he may want to upgrade that preamp.

I was curious about your comment. I have a Bryston 14B SST amp, Oracle Delphi Mark III turntable with RB600 arm and Goldring Elite cartridge, Cambridge DiscMagic transport and Cambridge ISOMagic DAC, Totem Tabu speakers and mostly Cardas wiring. I have an older preamp and am saving to replace it. I was thinking about replacing it with the Bryston BP 25P. I don't think it is the first time I have seen you suggest alternatives besides Bryston.

Do you not have a very good opinion of Bryston? How would you compare the Bryston to say the Copland CTA-301 MkII (I know it is your reference), YBA 2 or VTL 5.5? Would you have any other suggestions in the \$3,000 to \$4,000 range?

Randy Fowlie
WATERLOO, ON

We like all three of these brands, Randy, and of course we especially like the Copland as you know. We believe it is difficult to match at anything close to its price. But we do like Bryston products as well, and we're sorry if we gave you a contrary impression.

Very simply, David Chirko's system was quite well balanced, and for that reason we suggested that the natural upgrade sequence would follow the front-to-back rule: start



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more often. Only then will people begin to appreciate music again. There was such a movement in England that had a number of famous artists signing on. Maybe we should start such a movement in Canada.

Estes Moustacalis
OAKVILLE, ON

When I got my issue of *UHF* today, I immediately wanted to write and tell you how good it was. On this occasion I choose, among many things that excited and pleased me, the one which at a first quick reading has touched me the most: Mr. Simon's piece on listening to music.

He related an incident whose like I have so often experienced. I play a piece for a dear friend and am dismayed to see it fails to touch him or her. He acts just as he would if he were listening to his own mid-fi setup, and picks up a book or launches into conversation. I know he is no swine, so can it be the pearl is in my eyes only? Or is it just my nerdy timing, and we are not yet at the point of intimacy where silence is not empty but full of potential?

Mr. Simon suggests that the art of listening may never have been discovered by the majority of folks, and goodness knows Mr. Schubert would have been of the same view.

One of these dear and inexplicable friends let drop a small revelation the other day. He said, "You know, Toby, it took me a month or two before I listened to that last CD you gave me. It's the kind of music I can't listen to in the background. I have to sit down and devote all my attention to it."

Here's to all the arts, and the minds and hearts to love them.

Toby Earp
MONTREAL, QC

Albert Simon replies: Friends are friends for their own sake and though some of them may discover eventually how to listen to music, some may never be able even to know what it means. You can only help them by being who you are, and by being there when they are ready.

Here's a link to a review of a product I would have thought would be ubiquitous

by now: a laser-based turntable. If the makers got the physics right, it should be a remarkable product. (The reviewer seems to like it.)

www.stereotimes.com/turn030300.shtm

It's such an obvious technological improvement over MM and MC. What say you?

David Featherstone
OTTAWA, ON

We note that the reviewer actually purchased the turntable, which may be the only way to review one. Some years back we asked for a review sample, and got offered a discount if we bought one.

Reports we have heard from other sources suggest that the problem of dust in the grooves is not as trivial as the Stereo Times review makes it sound. We have also heard from some who have tried the ELP that it appears to slice off higher frequencies because the laser can't see fine details.

By the way, we were not offered the option of having a factory representative trudge over to our office to conduct a demo for \$500. If this is for real, we think the importer could use a basic course in marketing.

I am the seller of the Blue Circle equipment posted in the *UHF* Classifieds. I was almost a victim of a scam run from Nigeria. I am e-mailing you the details so that hopefully no one gets burned.

It will take form in probably a similar fashion. You will receive an e-mail asking if the purchase price is negotiable. When you respond they will offer you a fair to better-than-fair price, ask for your address and FedEx a cashier's cheque drawn on a US bank account. They will then contact you after the check has been sent with some sort of excuse, that they can only purchase one piece of equipment and could you please wire them back the difference.

The cheque looks real it fooled two bank tellers and the manager. The check is a fraud, and when the bank finds out they will debit your account. What tipped me off was it quickly became about the money and not the equipment.

Glenn Ellis
OTTAWA, ON



with the source, then the preamp, then the amp, and finally the speakers. If one of the components in the chain had been toxic, we would of course have suggested a different upgrade order.

After reading one of your articles I changed my Tesla KT88 tubes, which I had always used, for a set of Svetlana EL34's. The difference in midrange was incredible to say the least. My Jadis JA-80's virtually sing.

Clare Sopoty
ST. CATHARINES, ON

I read Albert Simon's article in the current issue of *UHF* (*Listening to Music*, issue No. 66). Your experience at the party is similar to mine. I often try to turn off the music at parties once the conversation is going, because no one is listening and I hate competing with the noise.

I think the real issue is that "music" is everywhere now. No elevator or grocery store is safe from "The 101 Strings Play the Rolling Stones." Music has become sonic wallpaper. We need to have silence

FREE ADVICE

**Box 65085, Place Longueuil
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I find the on-line sample articles from your magazine at least, if not more, interesting and useful to me than what I've been getting from my subscriptions to Stereophile, Absolute Sound and their multimedia counterparts. There appears to a minimum of technical jargon in these magazine articles and what's there seems to be clearly explained.

For many years my primary focus was on the loudspeakers, and the upstream components were an afterthought. I was never happy with the resulting sound quality. Over the past couple of years I decided to "bite the bullet" and have spent, for me, a substantial sum of money incrementally over the past several years upgrading my interconnects (Audioquest Viper), speaker cables (Audioquest Volcano), controller/amplifier (B&K Ref 30 and 7270), four Vienna Acoustics Waltz surrounds (ceiling mounted), and a Sony CD/DVD/SACD player. I've added a HTPS 7000 5 way power conditioner, a REL Stadium 3) subwoofer and power cords to both the amp and controller. I was prompted by the unsatisfactory sound I was getting from my Vienna Acoustics Mozart speakers. They are gorgeous as furniture but were not delivering the sound quality I was expecting to hear in my small 14' by 15' listening room (7.5' ceiling). Instead of blaming my disappointment on the speakers I figured it was garbage in, garbage out.

These speakers had sounded far better in the showroom than they did in my listening room. No doubt I have made some dumb choices and squandered a lot of hard-earned money. I watch very little TV except for DVD's and spend most of my available time at home actually listening to music. I'd be willing to give up almost everything but my wife, eating and sleeping before I'd give up music.

Given the dimensions of my room, my musical tastes, and my requirement for 7-channel surround sound for movies, what do

you believe would be an optimal bi-fi system for under \$20,000 US? My sound level seldom exceeds 75 dB except momentarily when either listening to music or movies.

I wish I'd heard of your magazine several years ago before I started my upgrades.

*Keith Birdwell
BELLEVUE, WA*

Keith, there are elements of your system that are familiar to us, and others that are not. The ones that are not, quite specifically, are your controller and speakers. Oh, and your player, since you don't specify the model.

And perhaps that's where we should begin. The source, as you already know, is of great importance, since the amplifier and speakers can do no more than reproduce with (perhaps appalling) clarity anything that the source gets wrong. Early DVD players were dreadful as CD players, and we were warning people off them. That has changed somewhat with the appearance of SACD, and specifically the first Sony DVD players. Sony's conventional CD players were not what we would recommend to our friends, or even casual acquaintances. It was a big jump from that to the excellent players the company has made in the past three years. But all manufacturers are running into the laws of economics, which means that as players get cheaper, the price competition will also makes them worse (that is, "nearly as good," and then "nearly as good as that," and then...).

To see what your player really sounds like, take it with you when you go listening. See whether it can charm you using the best gear your dealer can demonstrate. That will tell you whether you should supplement it with a stand-alone CD player. Your budget can buy something pretty good. We would look for a first class preamp controller, some-

thing like Simaudio, EAD or Lexicon for instance. We would get a good CD player, if your exploration indicates that this is necessary. We would add a pair of multi-channel amplifiers (a quadruple plus a triple, say) from someone who also makes high quality two-channel audiophile amplifiers. Since your room is small and your listening levels are modest, we would look for a very high quality small speaker. The Totem Model One Signature we reviewed in UHF No. 65 comes to mind, but several other manufacturers are worth looking at too. Your existing subwoofer is probably all right.

Last but not least, we would lay a bit of cash aside for good cables. Are we up to \$20,000? Probably. All we can add is that, if you take the time to listen carefully, and you take coherent notes on what you hear, you'll probably find a system that gives you the visceral satisfaction you've been missing so far.

Lately I have been compiling my own audio CDs on my computer. I take music from vinyl LPs and CDs and edit the waveforms using Sound Forge Studio software. With CDs, I extract the audio data directly using any one of three CD "strippers" available to me, and with some CDs I get surprising results.

When I load the WAV file into the audio editor, I see that the amplitude peaks are clipped — sometimes quite severely. I have seen some that are more than 10 milliseconds long. Why are they producing CDs like that, and what does it do to our equipment to play them? After all, have we not all been warned repeatedly about amplifiers clipping signals? Is this the same thing, or does my amplifier just "see" it as a very flat 0 dB waveform? Is it damaging in any way?

*Lloyd Marshall
EDSON AB*

If it's real clipping, then definitely, Lloyd. It's unlikely that they're letting CDs out the door with pronounced and repeated clipping, but we've seen some egregious sonic crimes perpetrated by desperado producers, so who knows?

But if the clipping were real you would definitely hear it, because it sounds really ugly, with jagged white noise that accompanies each note. What's possible is that the waveform-rendering algorithms in



the audio editors are faulty. If the music coming out isn't peeling the paint off passing cars, then that's probably the case.

My husband and I had the distinct pleasure of meeting you at the 1993 Toronto hi-fi show. At the time we, were in the search for a musical system for our home. When we had asked you about the Totem One speaker playing in a different room, you had waxed enthusiastically about them. A short while later, we purchased a pair and have enjoyed them ever since. Thank you also for the recommendation of Linn Intek integrated amplifier — it works well with the Totem speakers, and fit nicely into our budget.

Now, after 10 years, we are plunging into the realm of home theatre, and are again seeking your advice. I notice that you will be reviewing the Totem Signature One Center speaker in the upcoming issue of UHF. Although I certainly plan to read the full review, I have the opportunity right now to buy this speaker, and ask if it would be as pleasing, musically, as the Totem Ones have been.

*Tina Morgan
WINDSOR, ON*

As we write this, Tina, we have completed the preliminary listening tests on the Model One Center, though we have yet to do the group evaluation and the instrument tests. Preliminary conclu-

sion: it doesn't actually sound identical to the Model One, for reasons that are clearly visible: it has a second woofer, it has a different size cabinet, and it lies on its side instead of being upright.

The same can of course be said of other central speakers. The badge doesn't guarantee that it will sound like the main speakers sharing that badge. That said, our preliminary listening session, which was quite long, indicates that the speaker works very well, and it is certainly the one that is likely to blend best with your Model Ones. We'd recommend getting it.

This may be a dumb question, but here it is. I currently use a Panamax bar to protect against power interruptions. I live in the country and we lose our power during the thunderstorm season, plus severe winter conditions. Does this Gutwire Stingray power bar do the same thing, or will I still require the Panamax?

*David J. Gilchrist
ROCKWOOD, ON*

Who was it who once said that that a dumb question is the one you don't ask? No, the Gutwire Stingray does not provide surge protection, and we don't know of any way to provide it without taking a major performance hit. Living where we do, where century-old trees tower over the building like large natural lightning

rods, we don't worry much about surges. Makers of protection devices such as the Panamax have an obvious reason to overstate the importance of protection.

But then again you don't live where we do, so you'll need to evaluate the odds of having Mother Nature take a fatal swipe at your investment. Two questions, then. First, since we presume you don't use a protected power bar on everything in the house, when was the last time you lost an electrical product to a lightning storm? Second question: does your householder policy cover this sort of damage?

I am looking for a good amp for upgrading my system. I browsed through most of your past issues. I became a subscriber in the early 90's. I found your review of the McIntosh MC7150 (issue No. 37) and I admire your candid comments. It's 10 years now and the Mac MA6900 has received good reviews in the US and other places. Will you be doing a review of this model in the near future? If not, have you heard of it and what is your general opinion.

I almost bought the Jadis Orchestra Reference but then I read your review about the short supply of the KT90 and I had second thought. According to an ad in Stereophile, the 2003 model of this amp in the US market uses EL34's. Again, will you do a review of it in the near future and if not, can I have some general comments?

I am a retiree of 66 years old, so the amp I am looking for may be the last one in my life and I have to be careful. My present amp is a tiny Italian integrated with two EL34's, and is quite musical. Its latest model, Unison Research S2K (KT88 instead of EL34) got a class B grading by Stereophile.

*Anthony Tang
HONG KONG*

Not many years after this magazine was founded, some 21 years ago, we commented on a letter by saying that if we agreed with what the other magazines write, we wouldn't bother producing this one. To that we would add a second observation: there is no audio product so awful that it hasn't received a good review from someone, somewhere.

Our comments on the MC7150 don't necessarily carry over to all other models of the marque, of course, though the

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design choices McIntosh makes (check the output connections as an example) would place them some distance from the top of our shopping list. We have, however, heard some recent McIntosh tube amplifiers that sounded more than decent.

Your Unison is probably a good choice, on the assumption that your speakers have reasonable efficiency. By the way, though the KT90 tube was indeed difficult to obtain in the wake of the NATO bombings of Belgrade, that is no longer the case.

I have a relatively small room with Infinity Prelude speakers, YBA CD1, YBA Pre2, YBA Amp2 HC DT, and Wireworld copper Eclipse cables. The sound is fine but if I want improvement what would your suggestion be? I have a YBA Line Filter but wonder if better AC supply is a factor. Otherwise maybe a better preamp?

Peter Burns
VANCOUVER, BC

That sounds like the right plan, Peter. We have to admit to a knee-jerk reaction to the name Infinity, since that name badge has in the past been placed



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on some of the most annoyingly bombastic speakers ever made. The company has long been in the hands of Harman International, however, and Harman has sacked Floyd Toole (of National Research Council of Canada fame) on them as head of engineering. That means recent upscale Infinity models, such as the Prelude, don't sound anything like the old ones. They don't use the dread EMIT tweeter for one thing, and that's only the start of the good news.

So yes, the preamp is the next piece to upgrade, now that your CD player is at the top of the food chain. However you may want to look for better filtering than the YBA unit can provide. Foundation Research is one company making competent filters, as is Chang Lightspeed. We are just evaluating another, to see whether it should join our recommended list.

In issue No. 7, which is the Belle auditioned? By chance, the DMM (Chronology would suggest this.

I've accumulated equipment with funds by buying antiques, with the same money is thus more wise than on mass-market current. After some research, I suspect your review may be the only source of information on the above unit.

If I may sneak in a request for Advice, (you expected as much care to reach back to recesses to comment on the sound-character "back-line," whether it's bias warm, well-rounded and can for a cold, analytical source, let there's balance of quality, etc. I Robertson 4010 power amp, the Belles DMM preamp and B&W DM4 speakers.

Gosh, each and all of this stuff must be as old as your magazine! Congratulations on the longevity of both your publication and your intentions/philosophy.

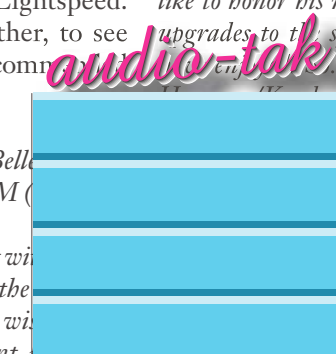
*James Tay
TORONTO, ON*

Issue No. 7 did indeed include a review of the Belles DMM preamplifier, as well as the Belles II amplifier. We don't want to dissuade you from ordering this ancient issue, but we may as well warn you that neither one got anything like a warm reception.

The Robertson 4010, on the other hand, was an excellent amplifier back in 1984, and gradually became even more of a bargain as inflation pushed prices up, yet the Robertson's price didn't follow. It is of course a little old at this point, enough that parts may fail within the next while. The company still exists, however, and the amplifier can be repaired.

I recently inherited a stereo system/work-in-progress from my brother Dan (who considered UHF to be his favorite magazine). I have a question about upgrading it.

I love good music and good sounding music, but am not as devoted as my brother was. I loved him dearly, though, and would like to honor his memory by completing the upgrades to the system in a way he would have wanted. The system consists of a PA2200, a B.A.T. VK-Logan Aerius speakers. I and names for the cables appropriate for this system. I would like to know what the CD player should be. I would like to make an upgrade of \$600-800 per year or so by my wife. I would like to know if I don't necessarily need) a 300-disc changer. It was my brother's desire to have an all tube system.



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Well, perhaps not a million we've discovered yet, but we always keep some of this wonderful stuff on hand. We fasten speakers to stands with it. We keep cables in place, and we use it to tame vibrations. Oh yes...it comes with instructions!

range which wouldn't be a description. If it not, is it more beneficial to buy a \$600-\$700 CD player or a \$600-\$700 amplifier and make do with the Pioneer for a few years?

I would like to spend as little money as possible on this.

*David Heylen
SEATTLE, WA*

We found your letter touching, David, because it occurs to us that your late brother may possibly, just possibly, have left you much more than just a stack of electronic equipment. He loved music enough to want a quality system that would bring home to him the emo-

tional charge of live music. You already love music, and if he can, posthumously, pass this passion on to you, the legacy will be beyond price.

Once you're ready to make your own his desire for tubes, let us know and we can no doubt help. In the meantime, we can probably assume that the CD player is the piece that really needs to be changed, but be careful about this. The Martin-Logan speakers are devastatingly revealing, able to reproduce with exceptional clarity not only fine musical nuances, but also finely-crafted engineering errors in the source component. Disc changers are not designed for such speakers, or indeed such systems. Their forte is capacity. It is like the difference between a crystal wine glass and a swill barrel.

Oh all right, we're exaggerating. We do recommend picking up a single disc player from an upscale manufacturer. The Cambridge D500 is the moderately-priced player we are used to recommending. Somewhat above its price are players from Rotel and Rega. We believe you'll then understand what brought joy to your brother.

The CD storage question is a non-issue, and here's why. If you stick 300 of your 350 CD collection (which we assume will still be in good condition) in a CD case, you'll have a CD case that will stay any es in the nice for ow-way just about even.

I have a Rega system including a Planar 25 turntable with a Rega Elys cartridge and RB-600 tone arm, a Planet CD player, a Rega Radio, Mira amp and Alya speakers.

I like my system, but the performance of my speakers in the bass and medium frequencies is not as I want. I would like deeper and warmer bass with an more open medium. My speaker have two qualities that I want to preserve: compatibility with analog and digital sources, and clear but not aggressive treble. I'm looking at the Rega Jura and the Paradigm Studio 20, 40 and 60. What is

your opinion with these possibilities?

Gino Lavoie
LONGUEUIL, QC

We have some preference for the Rega, Gino, but note something. Unlike most speaker manufacturers, Rega (like Linn) designs its speakers to be placed close to a wall. If your Alyas are not, you should re-evaluate them that way. And of course if you buy any other Rega model it too will be happier with wall placement.

We know some readers wonder why some speakers need wall placement while most do not. Think of the junction between wall and floor (or even among two walls the and the floor) to be a horn...like the horn you make with your hands when you're trying to call out to someone at a distance. This natural horn increases efficiency and therefore acoustic transmission, but it works best at lower frequencies. So placement close to a wall emphasizes the lower midrange and the bass. A good thing? Well, if the designer has assumed such placement, then yes of course. If not, the speaker's spectral balance will be tipped toward the basement.

By the way, we often warn against small equipment upgrades, because any upgrade is bound to be costly, and you may as well make it as meaningful as possible. The Jura is just one model up from your Alya. Unless your room is small, you may want to consider the Naos, whose transmission line design is particularly well-suited to analog.

I bought my first stereo in '87. it was a Kenwood system, to which I added Paradigm 5se speakers. In 90 I added a CD player, also a Kenwood. In 92 it was stolen (and uninsured — I was young) but they left the speakers. I replaced it with a Pioneer receiver and a Yamaha CD player.

I am in the process of upgrading my whole system and in talking to people a co-worker lent me a couple of UHF issues. Thank goodness it was before I spent any money!

Here is where I need the advice. I am currently looking at upgrading one piece at a time, starting with the amp. I have been looking at Cambridge, Roksan, Rotel, Creek, and Cyrus (in that order), but I have also been looking at used equipment in the hope

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of upgrading a little faster. The used models I have looked at are a Sima PW-3000 and a Adcom GFA-535. The trouble is in finding info other than the bare specs on older equipment.

I like a huge range of music, but if I am going to turn the volume up, it will be on heavy music. Will an amp with 50-70 watts a channel leave me wanting to upgrade in a hurry or not? I really like what I've read about the Sima, I just don't want to be disappointed when I occasionally turn it up. On the other hand the Roksan Kandy looks great, but I will be upgrading slower.

Aaron McCullagh
VANCOUVER, BC

We're glad you dropped by too, Aaron. And we're going to re-steer you just a bit, toward (our regular readers will chant this in unison with us), the source.

Though your Paradigm speakers may be thought of as entry level, they were by far the best part of your original system, and they should be the very last part to be upgraded (the thieves, clearly, were not UHF readers). The Pioneer receiver? Well, of course it's not in the category of products we recommend for music systems, and you will later want to change it for one of the brands you mention, but it has enough transparency to let you tell the difference between your Yamaha CD player and a...

And a what?

As a first step we suggest getting the best CD player you can swing, new or (not too) used. The Cambridge D500 remains our favorite low-cost player, but further up the price list you can find Rotels and Regas. Of course we're assuming that your (unnamed) Pioneer model doesn't struggle along at 7 watts per channel. But even if it does, we'd be reluctant to spend much money just to hear a Yamaha CD deck play louder.

Would you guys please do a review of the Philips DVD963SA? If not, and if you've heard it, can you comment on its abilities in Red Book and SACD playback?

Oliver Hoehn
MONTREAL, QC

We've had a chance to hear several low-cost SACD players, Oliver, and we've had better experiences. We're of two minds about the Philips. Perhaps we can explain why.

We probably wouldn't recommend a Philips player in this price range even if it were CD-only. Yes, economy players are far better than they once were, but then again the players that "once were" used to give us headaches. Because amplifiers and speakers can do no more than reproduce what the source component provides, we put a lot of importance on what the source can resolve.

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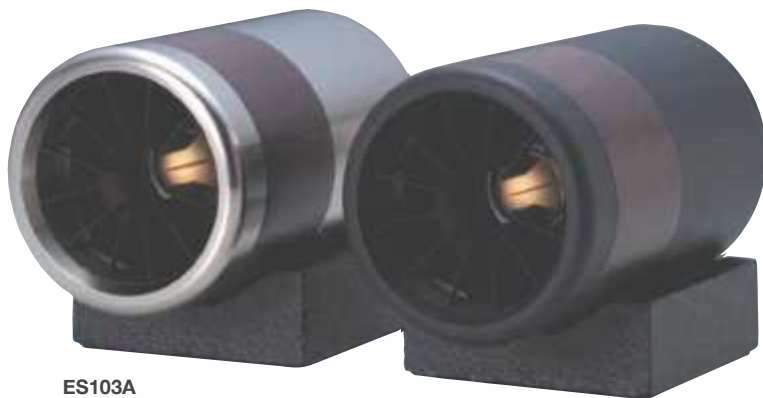
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Let's talk strategy.

Let us assume that for the moment you don't have the funds for a top drawer player (otherwise you wouldn't have asked about the Philips), but that within a certain period of time you want to have a much better system than you have now (otherwise you wouldn't have written to us). It now appears that SACD has won the war against DVD-Audio, so you're right to be looking at that format. Looking to the future, you'll probably want to buy SACD versions of your new discs, if you can get them, instead of Red Book CD versions. In the meantime, you can listen to the Red Book layer via any existing CD player.

But then again you can also get the Philips and listen to the SACD layer instead. If you have a quality CD player, then, we recommend keeping it for the moment and putting money away for an SACD (or universal) player that is built to the standards of your present player. If you don't, the Philips starts to look most interesting. It won't give you all of the advantages of SACD (or any other medium when it comes to that), but it will have better dynamics than standard CD does. It will also play your CDs and

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I currently have two sets of speakers, Linn Kans and Dalquist QX5's, that are powered by a Sugden A28 integrated amp and an NAD C730 receiver respectively.

The NAD/Dalquist combination does not sound very good and I am wondering about connecting the Sugden to both sets of speakers through a speaker switch. My question is whether this is a good idea, what type/brand of speaker switch I should consider, and whether I need to be concerned about overloading the amplifier (it is rated at 45W).

Steve Mennill
OTTAWA, ON

Yes, or even blowing it out, Steve, because the Dahlquist is rated at 6 ohms, and the combination of the two speakers will be one the Sugden engineers never dreamed anyone would try. Just to add to the fun, adding a speaker switch will make even the Sugden sound more like the NAD receiver...at least unless and

until you smell smoke.

Both speakers are potentially all right, and the Sugden itself is a rather

old but pleasant little amplifier. We would look for a buyer for the NAD, and get a better amp. Perhaps someone

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My current CD and tuner-based system is: Theta Pearl CD transport, MSB LinkIII DAC, Magnum-Dynalab MD-90 FM tuner, with homegrown silver interconnects to a bi-amp system consisting of the Moon I-5 (high frequencies) and Coda (low frequencies) into a PS Audio subwoofer and Magnaplanar speakers through Cardas speaker cables. The music this system produces — and reveals the quality of recording.

I am thinking of changing the preamp. I am trying to achieve better resolution by beefing up the preamp. The relatively inefficient (86 dB) Moon I-5 gives me a number of the usual, tradeoffs between cost and performance abound. I am looking at:

- 1) Pair a Moon W preamp, either biamped or mono, with gain matching between the Moon I-5 and the bi-amp system may present more than my current setup.
- 2) Replace the 4070 and an ADCOM GE.
- 3) Replace the 4 HCA-2 with the I-5, if possible, but gain matching is a problem.
- 4) Replace the 4 HCA-2 and an ADCOM.

I usually purchase equipment and use it for a long time. The cost from +\$4500 for Option 4. I will replace the HCA-2 and use it with my amplifier. I am able to audition the equipment.

Would the level resolution be using an I-5 and a waste of watts?

Continuing to use the Moon I-5 is not so much of a waste of watts as a waste of perfectly good resale value, Russell. Since you are in the habit of buying used gear, you know what we're talking about: this is a perfectly good integrated amp that some audiophiles would be thrilled to buy. Selling it means being able to buy

an excellent preamp (used, we presume), and using twin amplifiers will make matching of gain and phase much less of a chore.

What we've just said about the I-5 also goes for your 4070 amplifier, which is a lot older but has a legendary

reputation. By far the best 4070-3 can be an hard to find on the market. Of course a pair of 4070-3 is a killer combo, but it can beat two lesser amplifiers. I recommend passing up the 4070-3. You can always add a 4070-3 later.

My current CD and tuner-based system is: Marantz CD-17 transport, Restek Consensus preamp, Restek Correct 53 Freedom. Cables are Cardas (RCA), QED Silver 1 Audioquest Bedrock interconnects with Audioquest Slate as

am having problems getting a good sound and make the loudspeakers completely as point sources of sound. How do I adjust the speaker placement? The stereo image always tends to be blurry when I face the system from the side.

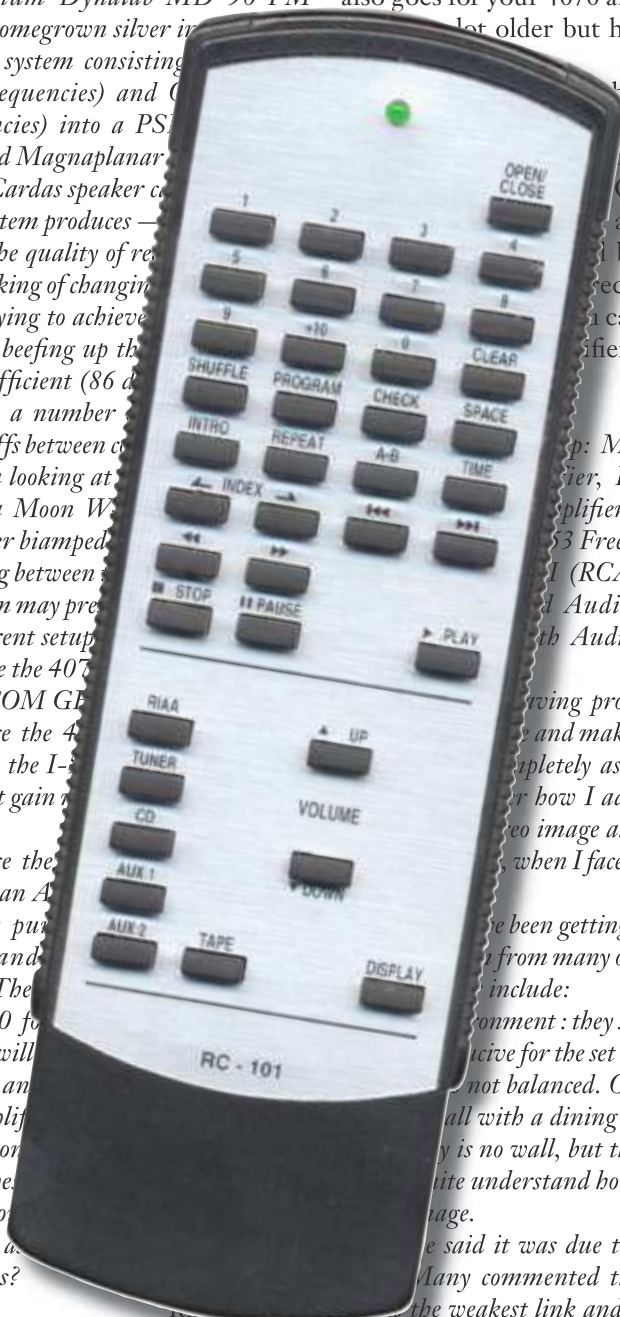
I have been getting many feedbacks from many of my hi-fi gangs. The feedbacks include:

1) Environment: they said the environment for the set up as the left and right speakers are not balanced. On the left, there is a dining table and on the right, there is no wall, but there is a sofa set. I can't quite understand how this affects the soundstage.

2) Equipment: they said it was due to the equipment. Many commented that the Mission 770 is the weakest link and I should change the speaker. They said the speaker does not match the amp. Some also commented about my speaker cable as well as interconnect.

I intend to try biamping. However, my Restek preamp has only one set of pre-outs. How do I accomplish biamping here? Must I use the exact power amp and speaker cable for biamping?

*Michael Hor
KUALA LUMPUR, Malaysia*



Actually, Michael, the people in your discussion groups could all be right, though that doesn't mean you can attack the problems in random order.

Start with the room. Acoustics matter a lot, and with the speakers close to a long wall, you're getting the sort of early reflections which confuse a stereo image beyond all recognition. The Mission speakers are quite decent, but are not known for projecting a stereo image that can thrive even under adverse conditions. We can't comment on your electronics, which are unknown to us, but the CD player has the usual problems of entry-level source components. Including an image that can be discerned only thanks to a massive suspension of disbelief.

We've glanced over the photos you sent along, and we can see a basis for perhaps more experimentation than you've done so far.

The space in the centre of the room (between the sofa and the system) is quite large. Try bringing the speakers out into the room a little — not so much that people need to turn sideways to pass, but perhaps enough to avoid very early reflections. Try varying the distance between them, and see whether toeing them in (or not toeing them in, perhaps) makes a difference.

We think your cables are adequate for the moment, and we wouldn't suggest biampifying until you have a better source.

I plan to live and work in Canada for at least a year in the near future. I'd love to bring my stereo over for the stay. It's a mid-range system costing £4000. All the components are British-manufactured, and currently work with a mains supply of 240v. One interesting piece of info I've picked up is that in Britain your stereo sounds better if you plug it into the left hand side of a dual socket (it's to do with the earthing apparently).

What mains voltage/amplitude does Canada use, what equipment would you recommend to provide a decent mains supply to plug my power supply into, and are there any other mains-related tips you have for a visitor to get the best out of a visit?

Alex Buller
MANCHESTER, UK

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Canada uses 120 volt mains at 60 Hz, Alex. It's quite easy to find transformers to adapt your gear, but the performance hit may be more than you want to accept.

We suggest calling the respective manufacturers of your equipment. If your move to Canada should turn out to be long-term, it may be best to install the 120 volt power transformers that would be used in the North American version of your gear. In some cases, the 120 volt tap is already on the transformer, and adapting to your new country will be a quick soldering job. You will of course need new power cords, but if your equipment has the usual detachable IEC cord, you can buy the appropriate ones when you get here. If you have a captive cord, or an expensive one, you can simply change the plug.

By the way, one of our former staff members has just crossed the Atlantic the other way, to southern France. He took his YBA system with him. A local YBA dealer just changed the transformer tap for the higher voltage.

I'm having some difficulty choosing a CD player. The two manufacturers I've narrowed it down to, are Krell and Creek. The CD player would be complemented by TACT Amplification and Totem Mani-2 speakers.

My biggest concern would be the survival

of the two companies and the reliability of their products.

Ron Stanley

Krell is better known for large amplifiers than for CD players, actu-

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ally. However both Krell and Creek are well-established companies, likely to be able to repair anything that could go wrong with their products. You can safely choose by ear.

Your article in issue No. 59 on recording LPs onto CD via a personal computer was very informative. However I find myself with a nagging question. In your opinion, would a standalone CD recorder of comparable cost to a high-quality PC soundcard create superior CD recordings of LPs than would a PC?

That is, would a standalone CD recorder costing, let's say, \$800, produce higher quality recordings than a good Pentium PC equipped with something like the US\$399 Digital Audio Labs CardDeluxe? My gut feeling is that it would, considering all the digital noise swirling around inside a PC.

Also, is there any inherent quality advantage to using "audio" CD-R disks rather than the cheaper "computer" CD-Rs? If so, I would certainly spring for the audio discs.

Jerry Cash
TORONTO, ON

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There is only one advantage, Jerry. Standalone CD recorders (as opposed to computer CD burners) are deliberately crippled so that they cannot record on ordinary blank CDs. They can use only special music CDs, whose extra cost goes not to better materials but to a fund that supposedly compensates copyright-holders for the music you plan to copy. In most countries, by the way, standard blank CDs also have an extra levy for the same purpose, but it's smaller. Don't get us started!

You're right that there is plenty of noise inside a computer, though CD recorders don't exactly maintain radio silence either. Our experience suggests that audible noise in PC recordings is more likely to be caused by ground loops than by airborne noise. Connect a complex stereo system to an equally complex setup of computer and peripherals, and the results can be dismaying.

On the other hand, some of the CDs in your collection may have been made on a computer. Check the share values of large recording studio shares in the financial pages, and you'll see that they've been heading for the basement

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for a while now. There's a reason.

The best sound can be had from professional-level I/O cards, which cost considerably more than the CardDeluxe. However the CardDeluxe will sound better than most of the sound cards you'll see in PC stores, and it can even record in 24 bits and 96 kHz sampling rate. Shut down all unneeded peripherals, disconnect from the Internet, and record onto a high speed hard disc that has been freshly reformatted.

I am building a new music/family room. The music system has 10 plugs, including tape decks and spotlight.

Should I have the electrician set up five of your hospital grade connectors in tandem on one circuit, or is this overkill? Would one or two (for the power amp/ preamp/ CD / turntable) suffice with the balance of equipment on regular connectors?

*Ron Kennedy
DEUX-MONTAGNES, QC*

Ron, if your electrician puts in that many plugs, he will daisy-chain them and from the third outlet onwards the quality will deteriorate.

A better choice, though, would be a more complicated one: use a power bar put in *two* lines (the label is for one than the wire), and use a Hubbell on each Hubbell on the other line. Add a Gutmann bar (4 outlets) and you have seven good connections. In the Hubbell power line come from the amplifier and the

Naim is giving a warranty when they tell their customers will "blow" if you connect it to any other power source.

Have you done this before? Any risk? I am now worried about damage my new Copland turntable. If you were trying to scare me, they would have said so.

*David
DALLAS*

We're not sure why they do this, David. Spectral also does something like this: their warranty is void if you don't use their cables, or the ones from MIT. There's no danger of damaging

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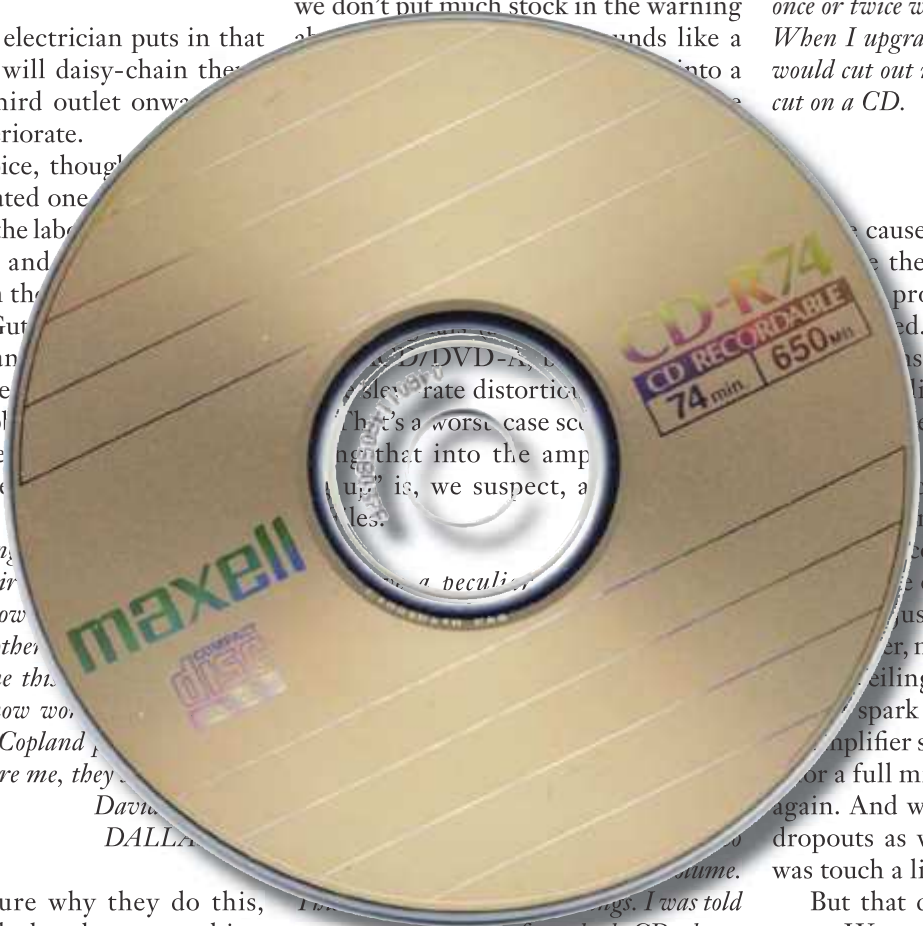
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the Copland, and (although our lawyers wouldn't want us to get too categorical) we don't put much stock in the warning about daisy-chaining. It sounds like a

This problem has existed before I upgraded to the S-700, but would occur once or twice when listening through a CD. When I upgraded to the S-700, the sound would cut out maybe two to three times per cut on a CD.

*Roland Auffrey
CAMPBELLTON, NB*



of the CD player into a power source. The likely cause seems evident, Roland: it's the transport, not the DAC, that the problem existed before the upgrade. All sorts of problems can occur when the transport goes off stride, but the fact that the problem was reduced the problem is the likely cause: static electricity. Static electricity is a worst case scenario that into the amplifier. If the power line is, we suspect, a problem.

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Static electricity is a worst case scenario that into the amplifier. If the power line is, we suspect, a problem. Static electricity is a worst case scenario that into the amplifier. If the power line is, we suspect, a problem. Static electricity is a worst case scenario that into the amplifier. If the power line is, we suspect, a problem.

to run ground wires from both CD player components to the amplifier ground post. It now happens much less frequently, but nevertheless it still does.

But that doesn't happen to us anymore. We are regular users of antistatic fluid. We don't buy the commercial version for \$8 a litre, but a home-made substitute: fabric softener diluted 4:1

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ers. That may sound like the we are fond of using to make t in this case you should take If you had heard your RCA ough those WATT Puppies, 't have been so impressed. ith the source, CD or (this good economy suggestion) asy on speakers. Do select a ufacturer, one whose better wish you could afford, and oser to the bottom of the t a small integrated ampli-meone who also makes an our wish list. If possible, ll amount for cables that the ones mass market y pay you to take home yperbole). ever lose track of the ough a modest system, ach out to your emo- l have given you the ou were starting with ocket.

ists of ProAc Response assé electronics. I am bass out of my system. e would money be best roofer or changing to e speaker?

Kelly Steranka
CALGARY, AB

Kelly, we would our ProAc's in for ly looking a little Response series. e coherent sound ding a sub, and it ear out-of-phase nd of a concert subwoofer can't

o for absolutes. larger ProAc's change. A well- you more bass

We wiring which v (no com nonstand pression in thunde mance hit by trees t Century, v

The H an isolated by the outl isolated gro that can be s in case of an c is intended to mission critic be connected lated ground is eral for audio gear, the reason is not known to us.

aying that a good source playing through a boombox will be musically more satisfying than a poor source through the world's best amplifier

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THE HIGH END IN POWER?

Kathy Gornik has been around CEA (the Consumer Electronics Association), the huge trade organizations to which the majority of electronics manufacturers and distributors belong) for years. By high end standards, the company she heads up — Thiel Audio — is a major player. But Thiel's annual revenue wouldn't pay the Christmas bonus of the sort of person who typically serves as chair of the CEA board of directors. So what does her appointment mean? We caught up with her at CES (the show CEA organizes) in January.

UHF: *Thiel has grown a lot over the years, which means that as president of Thiel you've had a lot on your plate. How did you get involved in CEA, giving yourself even more work?*

Gornik: I got involved in CEA because I wanted to see if I could influence the lot of high end audio companies at CES. So, on the fourth morning of every CES, I would attend the meeting of what was then known as the CES Advisory Committee. There would be all these folks from the exhibits, giving feedback to CES on such things as security, food, registration, electricity...whatever. And when that portion of the meeting was over they'd ask for new business. I always raised my hand, and talk about how things were going for the high end group. I did this so persistently for so long that they finally asked me to serve on their big board, the CES board.

UHF: *Did you hesitate?*

Gornik: Yes, I was nervous about it, and I didn't know whether I could do it. It turned out to be an absolutely wonderful experience, because people were so terrific.

UHF: *How long ago was that?*

Gornik: It's more than 10 years, and it could be as long as 15 years ago. At some point they asked whether I would be chairman of the audio division — we have seven product divisions within CEA. Chairing a division means get-



ting a seat on the *executive* board. This is a much smaller group, which has the day-to-day responsibilities for the organization. It's quite an honor to be a member of that elite group.

UHF: *That's the executive board of the whole organization, not just CES.*

Gornik: Yes. CEA owns and operates the Consumer Electronics Show, CES. My term was two years, and when that ended they gave me an "at-large" seat. Apparently, I hung out there for so long that I got the opportunity to become the chair. And I accepted.

UHF: *It's obvious to anyone who gets a look at the show coverage that high end is a small minority within CES, and therefore within CEA as a whole. What kind of response were you getting when you were raising your hand and talking about high end audio?*

Gornik: In the early days it was more

difficult to get attention. There was a completely different management group there at the time. But I have to say that my experience for the most part has been extremely positive. CEA's mission is to serve the industry, and it really doesn't matter how "minority" the group is. They've been extremely responsive. Relative to the size of the companies, and the *number* of companies in the high end, we get an enormous share of attention and support from CEA and CES.

UHF: *But you're no doubt aware that some high end manufacturers have complained of exactly the opposite. A number of them say that CEA does not pay enough attention to them.*

Gornik: That position is based on lack of information and awareness. It's easy to take potshots at large bureaucratic organizations. They appear to have a face that is different from what is behind the organization. I know for a fact that any small company that has interacted with this group of people found them to be nothing short of responsive, inclusive and welcoming.

UHF: *Over the years there have been a number of groups setting up alternative shows in competition with CES. The adult video section actually won a complete victory, and split off. There is an alternative high end show this year, T.H.E. Expo. How seriously does CEA take that sort of challenge?*

Gornik: Well, the challenge is more to the members, and to the exhibitors at CES, not CEA as such. Members of our community have a great deal of difficulty with colleagues who are *not* participating. This is *our* show. We pay a lot of money to be here. We organize ourselves, we work with CEA and CES to make the best show we can, and to draw to Las Vegas the people we need to see. It is not for the community for another group to come along and siphon off the attendees we need to see. It's great that they want to have a show, but they should come here another week.

UHF: You mean, not while CES is on?

Gornik: Yes. They should come next week, after we close. It seems unfair to me that they take advantage of this big effort that we all invest in to make CES very exciting and productive.

UHF: That leads to a natural question. Has there been any discussion with the organizers of T.H.E. Expo about a possible agreement?

Gornik: We have met with them on a number of occasions, very productively I had thought, but there doesn't seem to be any grounds for agreement. We've really tried. We've extended a diplomatic hand to them, because we would like to see this community under one roof. We think it would benefit all of us.

UHF: Everyone is surely aware that the electronics industry, including high end audio, is very masculine-oriented — which is a shame, because music inherently is not. Can we say that it is a particular coup to have a woman chairing the CEA board for the first time?

Gornik: I think it's a terrific thing to have a woman, finally, at the head of CEA. It is a male-dominated industry, but there are opportunities we're missing by not appealing to the woman buyer. In fact, CEA recently did market research which shows that women are responsible for the majority of consumer electronics purchases. And certainly they are hugely influential. To ignore women is to ignore a huge opportunity for additional sales.

And that's not to mention the contribution we can make to *their* lives by bringing our products to them. The adage says that diamonds are a girl's best friend. Well, our market research indicates that this is no longer true

UHF: Diamonds are dead?

Gornik: When our researchers asked, "Would you prefer a diamond ring or a high-definition television?" 42% chose the ring, and 58% said they would rather have the TV. I think retailers ought to listen up, here, and figure out the possibilities they're missing by the way they approach women on the sales floor.

UHF: So how does CEA do its part?

Gornik: In fact we're beginning to do that. We have a new media relations



campaign called *Technology is a girl's best friend*. At CES 2003 we had a panel discussion, and invited the editor of *Cosmo Girl*, and a woman from the Ogilvy ad agency, and also a woman responsible for store layout at Circuit City. And of course myself, and Karen Chupka, who is vice-president of CES. We had a very interesting, well-attended discussion on how we can talk to women more effectively.

UHF: The other unusual element is that your company is relatively small — your predecessor came from Pioneer. That's another coup.

Gornik: I think it's terrific to put a face on small business. Did you know that 77% of CEA's members have less than \$10 million gross revenues each year? So I think it's great to have a person those small companies can relate to. One of the initiatives our board recently approved, a suggestion of mine, is to put together a small business council. Part of its mission is to be an incubator for small businesses, to help them with licensing, copyright, channel development for instance. Even with existing businesses, there is a host of services we can provide: developing good accounting, solving human resource problems and manufacturing problems — whatever these small companies might need.

UHF: We'd like to touch upon the subject of intellectual property. The content providers — film studios and record companies — are solidly against the initiatives

of the hardware manufacturers, because they believe new hardware are designed to help consumers steal their property. But your members include both content providers and hardware manufacturers. That must cause quite a debate within CEA.

Gornik: That would be an understatement!

UHF: Can you get away with saying more than that?

Gornik: Well, it is difficult, because we want to have successful resolution of these issues. It's an ongoing process, it's very difficult, and we're throwing everything we've got at it to see if we can make it work.

UHF: You were on the board of directors back when there was also a Summer CES, the one in Chicago. People still talk about why that was no longer possible. It is of course easy to say, "exhibitors stopped coming." But what made it impossible to have two shows?

Gornik: Attendance had dropped, and the big box retailers needed to have a product introduction cycle that no longer fit the summer show. We may be seeing that change again, because product introductions have increased in frequency once again. I hear talk about introducing a summer show once again.

UHF: But CEDIA (the Custom Electronic Design and Installation Association) is here now, in early September.

Gornik: CEDIA is here, but it addresses a narrower range of our industry than CES does. I believe that CES will continue to fulfill the industry's needs, based on the scope it represents, and the issue of a summer show continues to rear its head.

UHF: There have been several initiatives by CEA to have international CES shows, but with uncertain success. Did they come too soon?

Gornik: Shows in other countries? In fact we have an initiative going in Shanghai. We are partnering with CEBit (the German-based international trade fair for information technology, telecommunications, software and services) to have a consumer electronics show there. I'm not sure whether it would be annual or every two years. We have high hopes

THE UHF REFERENCE SYSTEMS

UHF now maintains no fewer than three reference systems. All equipment reviews are done on at least one of these systems, which are selected to be working tools. Their elements are changed only after long consideration, because a system that changes is not a reference.

The Alpha system

This is the original reference, installed in a room with extraordinary acoustics (it was originally designed to be a recording studio). The acoustics allow us to hear what we couldn't hear elsewhere, but the Alpha system has a down side. Not only is the room too small for large speakers, for example, but it is also at the top of a particularly unaccommodating stairwell.

CD Transport: Parasound C/BD2000 (belt-driven transport designed by CEC).

Digital-to-analog converter: Counterpoint DA-10A, with HDCD card.

Turntable: Audiomeca J-4

Tone arm: Audiomeca SL-5

Step-up transformer: Bryston TF-1

Pickup: Goldring Excel

Preamplifier: Copland CTA-305 tube preamp

Power amplifier: YBA One HC

Loudspeakers: 3a MS-5

Interconnects: Pierre Gabriel ML-1, Wireworld Equinox/WBT

Loudspeaker cables: Wireworld Eclipse II with WBT bananas

Power cords: Gutwire, Wireworld Stratus

AC filters: Foundation Research LC-2

(for the power amp), Inouye (for CD player and preamp)

The Omega system

We gradually built up this system into a full-fledged reference so that it could serve for reviews of gear that cannot easily fit into the Alpha system, with its small room. Unlike some other magazines, we didn't set out to make an "A" (best system) and a "B" (economy) system, and we didn't want to imply that one of the two systems is somehow better than the other. Hence the names, which don't invite comparisons. Unless you're Greek of course.

CD player: shared with the Alpha system

Turntable: Alphason Sonata

Tone arm: Alphason HR-100S MCS

Step-up transformer: Bryston TF-1

Pickup: Goldring Excel

Preamplifier: Copland CTA-301 MkII tube preamp

Power amplifier: Simaudio Moon W-5

Loudspeakers: Reference 3a Suprema II

Interconnects: Pierre Gabriel ML-1, Wireworld Equinox

Loudspeaker cables: Pierre Gabriel ML-1 (formerly L3), for most of the range, Wireworld Polaris for the twin subwoofers.

Power cords: Wireworld Aurora

AC filters: Foundation Research LC-1

The Kappa system

This is our home theatre system. After

"Alpha" and "Omega" we weren't sure what to call it, and we held an online contest for the name...which is also a Greek letter.

As with the Alpha system, we had limited space for the Kappa system, and that pretty much ruled out huge projectors and two-meter screens. We did, however, finally come up with a system whose performance gladdens both eye and ear, and which has the needed resolution to serve for reviews.

HDTV monitor: Hitachi 43UWX10B CRT-based rear projector

DVD player: Simaudio Moon Stellar with Faroudja Stingray video processor

Preamplifier/processor: Simaudio Moon Attraction, 5.1 channel version

Power amplifiers: Simaudio Moon W-3 (main speakers), Celeste 4070se (centre speaker), Robertson 4010 (rear)

Main speakers: Energy Reference Connoisseur

Centre speaker: Thiel MCS1, on UHF's own TV-top platform

Rear speakers: Elipson 1400

Subwoofer: 3a Design Acoustics sub

Cables: Wireworld Equinox and Atlantis, Wireworld Starlight video cables

Power cables and line filters: Experiments with various models are ongoing, and will be the subject of future magazine reviews

All three of the systems now have their own dedicated power lines, with Hubbell hospital grade outlets. All extensions and power bars used are also equipped with hospital-grade connectors.

that our partnership with CEBit will produce a very successful show for us. (Editor's note: the Shanghai show has been put off until next year because of the SARS epidemic in China.)

UHF: But the one in Latin America a few years back was less successful.

Gornik: Yes. I don't think it was premature from a consumer standpoint, but it was certainly premature from a political

standpoint. We need to have currencies you can rely on!

UHF: You have long had a high profile in CEA, but can it be said that high end audio companies in general play a full role in CEA? Are you an exception?

Gornik: I'm sorry to say that I may well be an exception. There is a handful of other people who are active. Gary Warzin from Audiophile Systems, Lew

Johnson from Conrad-Johnson, and Richard Schram from Parasound are the primary folks who go to the meetings and make a concerted effort to participate. I'm hoping that over time, and especially with my chairmanship, high end members will see CEA as being a much more accessible organization than they have perhaps perceived it to be in the past.



THE ELEMENTS OF ACOUSTICS

by Paul Bergman

If I may paraphrase Mark Twain, who is surely, with Shakespeare, the most paraphrased author in English literature, everyone talks about acoustics but no one does anything about it. I would go a little further. When most people *do* talk about acoustics, they get rather a worried expression, as though they dread running out of conversation just a few words out.

My goal in this article is not to tell you all about acoustics. I did so quite a few years ago in a series of articles (*UHF* No. 30-36 inclusively). There are, what is more, some very good books on acoustics, though some of them are, it must be admitted, written for graduates of schools of architecture. It may, nonetheless, be useful to speak of the basic questions of acoustics, if only to make further reading less of a slog.

I must begin by saying that acoustics is the study of sound as it affects human hearing. This is the way that an architect, or an experimental psychologist, would understand the word. To audiophiles, however, acoustics has a more restricted sense: it is the behavior of the environment (i.e. the room) as it affects reproduced sound. I shall of course use this second definition.

I shall also warn you that you are not likely to find, in this rather brief article, definitive answers to all questions about even this limited aspect of acoustics. If I am able to evoke the right *questions*, I shall perhaps have placed you on the path toward some answers.

Finally, I shall assume that anyone reading this publication needs no explanation of such concepts as frequencies, or why they are measured in Hertz.

The anechoic environment

Many audiophiles know this term from the phrase “anechoic chamber.” Such a chamber is a working tool for acousticians, and it is, quite obviously, a

room with no echoes. Even so, I should caution you that both the term and the concept are inexact.

Better than the word *echo* is the word *reverberation*. Both echoes and reverberation are the result of sounds that are reflected from structural surfaces. However, an echo is a reverberation that arrives long enough after the original sound that it is perceived by the human brain as a separate sound. This happens in cathedrals, but not in homes, even if the room is very large.

A normal-sized room can never be totally anechoic. One can reduce reverberation a great deal by lining the room with elaborate wideband sound traps, and by making a floating floor of a material that resembles fishnet. The intention is that there should be no reflective surfaces close to either the device under test (a loudspeaker, say) or the test microphone. From this description it is easy to see that an anechoic chamber cannot be made small. For that reason, it cannot be inexpensive to build, and indeed it is outside the reach of all but specialized university faculties, government laboratories, and a *very* few equipment manufacturers. To the best of my knowledge, no audio magazine has yet joined that select list.

For those left off the list, there does exist an environment that is nearly anechoic: the outdoors. There are of course no walls or ceiling to reflect sound outside. The ground is reflective, certainly, but some are less reflective than others. A ploughed field is probably

Acoustics is the science of... Yes, of what? Let us introduce you to the basic concepts.

as good as you can get, unless you are a parachutist.

There is of course the question of *why* you would want to have access to an anechoic chamber. It almost certainly wouldn't be to listen to music, which would seem thin, distant and unnatural, compared to what we are used to hearing indoors. An anechoic chamber is of use mainly for technical measurements. Only in such a chamber can we measure what is coming from a loudspeaker, and exclude effects contributed by the room. If a conventional room is large, one can actually use a measurement method known as FFT (Fast Fourier Transform), which can do its work before the first reflected sound has time to arrive at the microphone. For reasons that are probably clear, this is classed among “quasi-anechoic,” methods, which do not, however, work in small rooms. I stress this last point for the benefit of certain audio magazines (I am not referring to *UHF*) which attempt to use FFT in standard living rooms.

One could well ask whether anechoic measurements are actually useful. They can certainly allow you to predict how a loudspeaker would behave if the room acoustics were removed from the equation. Removing the room is not possible, however, nor (as you may have deduced) would it be desirable. You want a “good” acoustical environment, whatever that may be, rather than *no* acoustical environment.

Reverberation

In a true anechoic environment, there would be no reverberation at all. Sound would travel out from the source and continue out, never returning. As an observer in that situation, you would hear only the sound that is aimed directly at your ears. All other sounds would be lost.

In an actual room, sound bounces off boundary surfaces (walls, floor, ceiling) and remains in the room. You would expect that a sound source in a room would sound louder than it would in anechoic chamber or out of doors. That is certainly the case, though it is important to understand the characteristics of the reflected sound. It is well known that, in audio design, one avoids materials

that will “store” energy and re-release it with a delay. This delayed energy, it is usually said, will smear the sound. However, a room also stores sound, which bounces around from surface to surface for a certain (usually short) period of time. It also smears sound, or at least confuses it.

It also changes the spectral balance of sound, for two reasons. First, room surfaces do not treat

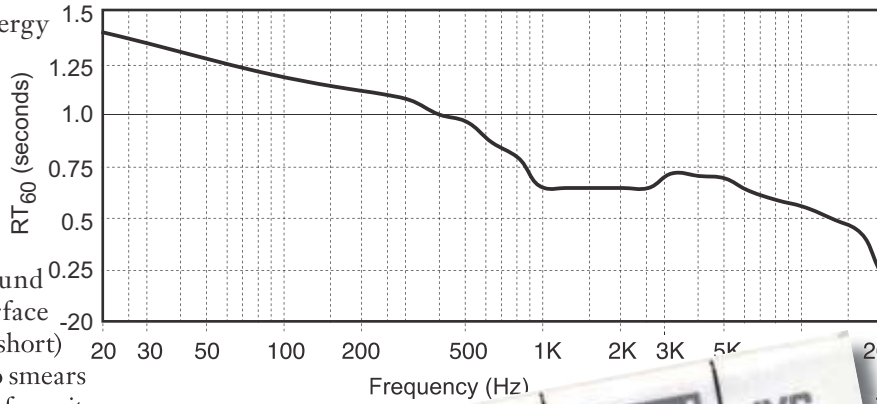
circles differently. First, a note that there is of course a transition from reverberation long. For several sound energy

1) *Transmission* are not open amount of through the frequency of in this fashion hear a neighbor a wall, you hear

2) *Diaphragms* are infinitely under the pressure is especially true. Some of that energy sound — walls and for example — probably turn into heat

3) *Scattering*. As sound vibrations air molecules, and will turn in You might think that this would a factor in a small room, but reverberation will allow a sound wave to rooms many times, thus traveling considerable distance. High frequencies are most affected by scattering, why distant sounds seem to be late

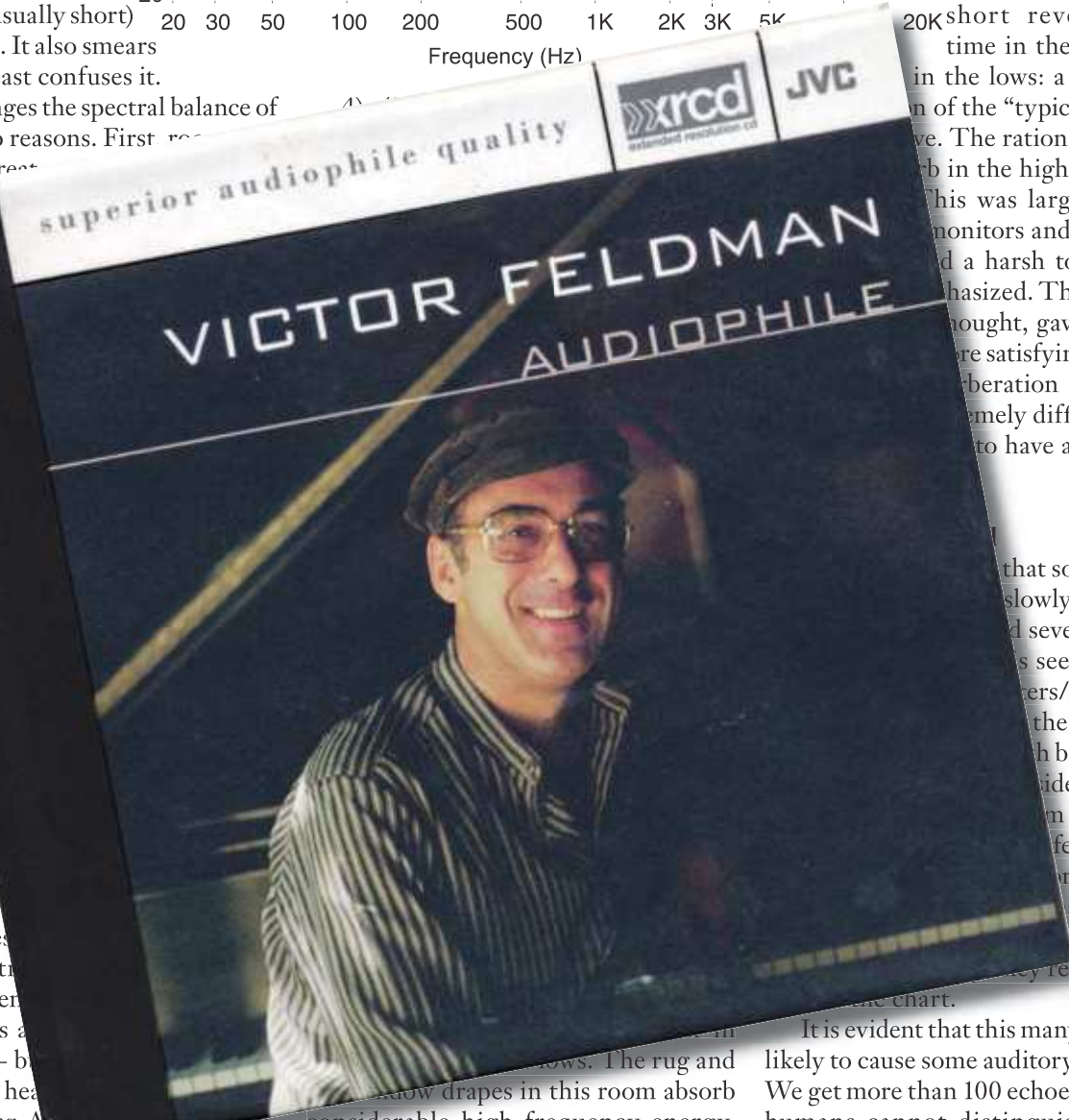
highs.



and regularizing reverberation time is seldom practiced in homes, even for purpose-built listening rooms. It is, however, universally used in recording studios. For many years it was considered orthodox to design for a very

short reverberation time in the highs, and in the lows: a kinder and more of the “typical room” in the lows. The rationale was that a rise in the highs was easier to control. This was largely true in recording studios and monitors and even many in homes had a harsh top end that was emphasized. The rise at the top, though, gave a “fuller” sound, more satisfying. In actual practice, reverberation at very low frequencies is extremely difficult, and it is not to have a reason not

that sound travels slowly; that is the reason it takes several seconds to travel across a room. In fact it takes about 11 meters/second (the speed of sound) the barometric pressure changes with both weather and altitude. Consider what this means: a sound wave that has a length of 10 meters (33 feet), a sound wave that travels north between two points that are 86 times the distance of the 120 times the distance of the reverberation time.



THE RETURN OF A FAMOUS RECORDING

It was called *Secret of the Andes* when it was a Nautilus LP, and we’ve used it for speaker tests for years. Now JVC has an xrcd version, which also contains another *entire* Victor Feldman LP, beautifully transferred.

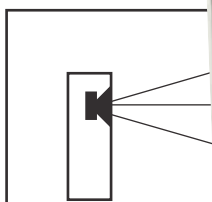
Room treatment aimed at lowering

Still, it is necessary for a small room

to have a shorter reverberation time than a large one. A concert hall can have an average RT_{60} between two and three seconds, and it will sound fine. However the sound can bounce perhaps a dozen times during that period. To obtain the same number of bounces in a smaller listening room would require a reverberation time perhaps a quarter of that, which is extremely difficult to achieve, especially at low frequencies.

How sound travels

You may have seen diagrams showing sound waves traveling in straight lines, like the way



It seems evident that sound actually travels the way light does, in a directional fashion. When we hear sound from nearby surfaces we do assume that sound travels in that fashion.

However you may have seen diagrams which show sound waves traveling in a different fashion, rather than in a straight line:



It is evident that the behavior of sound cannot be the same in both cases, since clearly it now spreads in all directions, no longer traveling in a straight ray of light would. Which is correct?

The surprising answer is that *both* are. High frequency sound travels in straight lines, not ripples. Lower frequencies act

like the ripples in water, which are more omnidirectional in nature. To be sure, there is no sudden transition between one behavior mode and the other. Medium frequencies can be thought of as behaving a little like both the straight line and the ripple. The question is not

which model is "right," but which one is more useful in predicting the way sound will behave.

This change in transmission mode is important in the understanding of listening rooms.

a comb filter effect, because the resulting frequency response, instead of being a flat line, resembles the teeth of a comb.



that the bounced sound can easily be confused with the direct sound.

Such a reflected sound is likely to be quite loud, losing little energy from its first bounce. Because the wavelength is short, the two waves (direct and reflected)

avoidance of early reflections (by making the end with the speakers as absorbent as possible) with a highly reflective surface behind the listener. The research of Heyser and his colleagues confirmed that we don't notice reflections from behind us unless they come far later

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your right ear. To make things worse, the two waves may cancel at one frequency, but add at another frequency.

It is easy to imagine the result. Frequency response is ragged, rising and falling with position and frequency. This ragged response is often referred to as

Standing waves

In contrast to early reflections, which affect mainly higher frequencies, standing waves affect lower frequencies, say from 300 Hz down, and higher than that in smaller rooms.

At low frequencies, you may recall,

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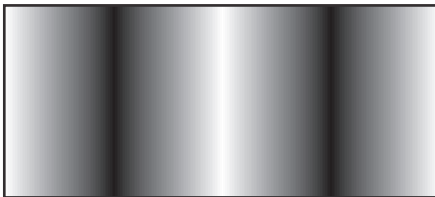
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to 100 mS). walls are not

sound waves behave like ripples in a pond, with alternating crests and troughs. In the case of water, if you looked at a cross-section of the water surface it would look like this:



Waves move continuously, of course, at the speed I mentioned earlier, some 345 m/second. However, imagine that the wavelength of the wave (that is, the distance between one crest and the next one) is equal to one of the room's dimensions, or is a simple submultiple of one of the room's dimensions. In this illustration, the wavelength is exactly half the length of the room:



It's easy to visualize what happens. As the wave bounces back and forth between the opposing walls, the crests are *always* at the same spot, and the troughs are *also* at the same spot. The result is frequency response that is only

a caricature of the frequency response that would be set up by two parallel modes.

By the way, if the dimensions are other (for example, 3 meters by 2 meter corners) standing waves for even damage.

In smaller rooms, as the walls get closer together, the standing wave problem gets worse.

Diffraction

Unlike standing waves, diffraction is a problem only at medium to high frequencies, where it can do an excellent imitation of an early reflection. As a wave travels past a sharp edge, it will diffract, radiating out as though the edge were a new source of sound. The resulting set



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of waves would look like this:

of a table for example.

Diffusion

Since we have established that standing waves require a pair of parallel opposing surfaces, it may have occurred to you that not *having* parallel walls can be a good thing. And that is indeed true. If you are calling in an architect to build your room, you can make it flare

out from the end where the speakers are,

ceiling also rising toward the ceiling. That will scatter the room sound across the spectrum.

However that is not the only way to prevent the formation of standing waves. Anything that will allow sound to bounce in varied directions will prevent standing waves. In homes, bookshelves with hard surfaces are very useful. In professional studios, such as studios, there are special diffusers, such as those designed by J.P.G. Diffusing is a major topic, but best left for another time.

Vertical side

A living room is of course not a recording studio, and the requirements of decor preclude the use of acoustical measures that a studio designer would not hesitate to use. However, some notions of acoustics can make the difference between a room that makes music listening pleasant and one that makes you regret you didn't take up some other hobby.



by Gerard Rejskind

DESTINATION: MONTREAL

It's always fun to talk to foreign visitors to Montreal's annual *Festival du Son et de l'Image*. People such as Parasound's Richard Schram, who was here for the first time. Or Jadis' Patrick Calmettes, shown above with his JD IMkII CD transport. Or Cyrus's Peter Bartlett. They're used to attending (ho hum!) local shows, and they clearly weren't expecting what this has become: a world class venue, one of the world's top audio and video shows.

We were there, as usual, with elements of our reference systems, plus a pair of borrowed speakers, the Living Voice Avatars reviewed elsewhere in this issue. We were kept busy through the show — check out the lineup for tickets on the next page!

Still, I *did* get to see and hear at least a fraction of gear in the many dozens of rooms. Including the Jadis transport, gorgeously finished in what I took to be exotic wood. It is actually a synthetic material hand-painted by artists. There are of course no two alike. The Jadis room in general sounded very nice.

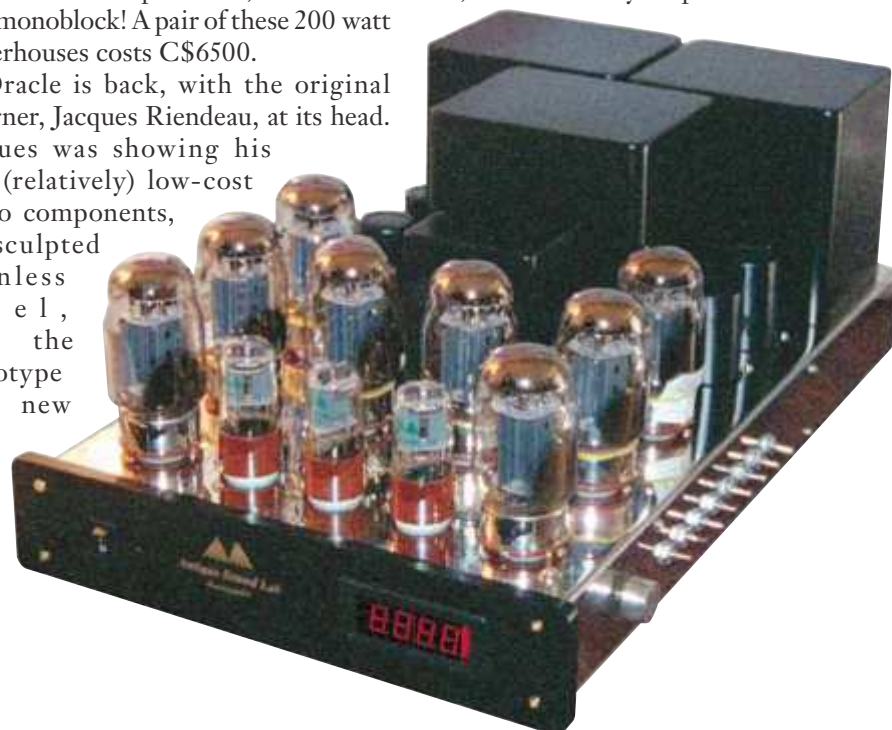
And check out who was greeting visitors: above right. Jadis was represented by Pierre Gabriel, and Gabriel is of course an archangel, so...

I saw but didn't get to hear the Hurricane amplifier shown below. It sure has a lot of KT88 output tubes, and even so it's a monoblock! A pair of these 200 watt powerhouses costs C\$6500.

Oracle is back, with the original designer, Jacques Riendeau, at its head. Jacques was showing his new (relatively) low-cost Stello components, in sculpted stainless steel, plus the prototype of a new

speaker he hopes to bring to market soon.

Though some very good rooms offered low-key intimate sound, the monk-like Cabasse Kara (next page) projected an image that was larger than life, and certainly impressive. These





large speakers were driven by McIntosh tube amplifiers that had little difficulty filling the big room with music of gratifying clarity.

Not far away, another amplifier was turning out impressive sound, the new Hovland Radia. This 150 watt/channel amp is solid state, unlike the very good tube preamp. Of course it had great stuff both upstream and downstream: a ClearAudio turntable and the wonderful Acapella Violin speaker, with its astonishing ionic tweeter.

I saw two “universal” players. One was the Lexicon RT-10 (C\$5000), which was being used for music videos at the ProAc room. Much more expensive, at about C\$16K, was the Linn Unidisk, which I had heard in Vegas. It was actually being used to do comparisons among formats. On Miles Davis’s *Sketches of Spain*, the sound from SACD was quite superior to that of the Red Book CD.



The most unusual room was that of Aurum, a small company from Newfoundland. The Aurum system, which is shown on the next page, is triamplified, and comes with its own amplifiers, which contain the appropriate crossovers. Because the speakers are so efficient (99 dB), the tweeter and midrange are driven by small single-ended tube amplifiers. A more powerful solid state amplifier handles the woofer. The cost for the complete system will be somewhere between C\$20K and \$30K. The Aurum is not yet fully developed, and seems to suffer from a crossover phase problem, but the clean sound made me hope that it will actually come to market. Aurum seems to be on to something.

Toronto’s Fab Audio was showing the production version of its large speakers. And this time there was an add-on: MuRata supertweeters, which don’t go to work until the sound hits 18 kHz.

As always there were lots of video demos, though we thought there seemed to be fewer than usual. Easily the most unusual was in the Niro room (the company was set up by Niro Nakamichi, also the founder of...). It was demonstrating surround sound with just two speakers, but not the way you think. There was just one speaker at the front, and a second one at the rear. The setup did seem to work, as nearly as I could tell despite the huge crowds the demo was drawing every time I went by.

More conventional but first rate was a home theatre setup using Parasound electronics and player, and a large number of JMLab speakers. Madonna’s *Drowned World Tour* had much of the impact and excitement of a live rock concert.

Of course I put sound (and image) above the look, but I enjoy components that *look* good as well as *sounding* good. I’d award top prize for design to Chord, whose rack components look like nothing I’ve ever seen. The one at lower right is a phono stage, believe it or not. Like the other components of the line, it is tilted forward so that you can see the top...which includes a magnifying port-hole atop the circuitry. It’s an intriguing mix of geek chic and elegance. Oh, and

it sounds good too.

Also gorgeous are the Cyrus components, shown at left. Cyrus was once part of Mission, but is now independent. Cyrus was also showing its Icon speaker, which looks like an electrostatic but actually uses an NXT flat panel. It was hard to judge its sound from the home theatre demo that was running, but the design is most interesting.

Linar was back at the Festival for the first time in several years, with redesigned amplifiers and preamplifier. I didn’t run across Victor Sima, founder of Linar and also of Simaudio.

Speaking of Simaudio, its excellent room was using a pair of W-6 monoblocks, each about the size of a W-3 stereo amp. They put out 425 watts each, and it’s rare to hear such powerful amps sound this good.

Among other gems: the huge Rogue Zeus tube amplifier (225 watts a side) making beautiful music along with Meadowlark Blue Heron speakers...and the very transparent (and extra efficient) LammPipe speakers driven effortlessly by Tenor 15WE monoblocks.

For more show coverage, see our site (www.uhfmag.com), where you’ll see a link for our daily on-line reports. And turn the page for Albert Simon’s own impressions of the show.





by
Albert
Simon

At left: the Aurum triamped system. Below left: the Clearaudio Superbe turntable. Below right: Braun's born-again Quad ESL-57 speaker.

Trio on *Hamadryade*, one of the latest Fidelio label SuperAudio recordings, played through StudioLab Reference Revelation speakers. But the real revelation for me was how wonderfully the much smaller StudioLab Reference One speakers recreated the voice and music of *Bob Walsh (Live 1998)* with the help of an Audio Aero player and amplifier. The rich piano sound of Ivo Pogorelich playing *Mozart* came out of Italian-made Superpavarotti Version 2 speakers, made by a company called (what else) Opera. It allowed me to appreciate the qualities of Unison Research Class A electronics and hybrid CD player.

Next door I was treated to the open and powerful sound of Magellan speakers, hovering at an impressive height of 7 feet, bringing the wry humour of *Roger Waters (It's a Miracle)* through Cairn Fog 2 (24 bit/192 kHz) CD player and Cairn amplifiers.

The music of Brahms (*Symphony No. 2*, Carlos Kleiber conducting) was in stark contrast to that, as interpreted by a Copland player and integrated hybrid amplifier through the Reference 3A MM De Capo-i speakers on Phenolic stands. And, next, premiering in Montreal, the V6 line stage and the single-ended-triode V5 phono stage from Foundation Research were matched to Orpheus 3 monoblocks to play Lyle Lovett and his large band. The source? The Wilson Benesch Circle turntable with 0.5 arm and Benz H₂O cartridge. The voice?



LE FESTIVAL 2003

“I like music to be fast, true and direct,” said Gerry, a long time *UHF* reader, “not the sweet coloured sound I hear sometimes”. He then added, almost apologetically, “Well, it’s a matter of taste.”

And, frankly, when you hear such differences of sound from room to room, you would be tempted to agree that it *must* be a matter of taste. Well, is it? The story of high fidelity is a story of compromises to achieve a semblance of live music and some of us would rather

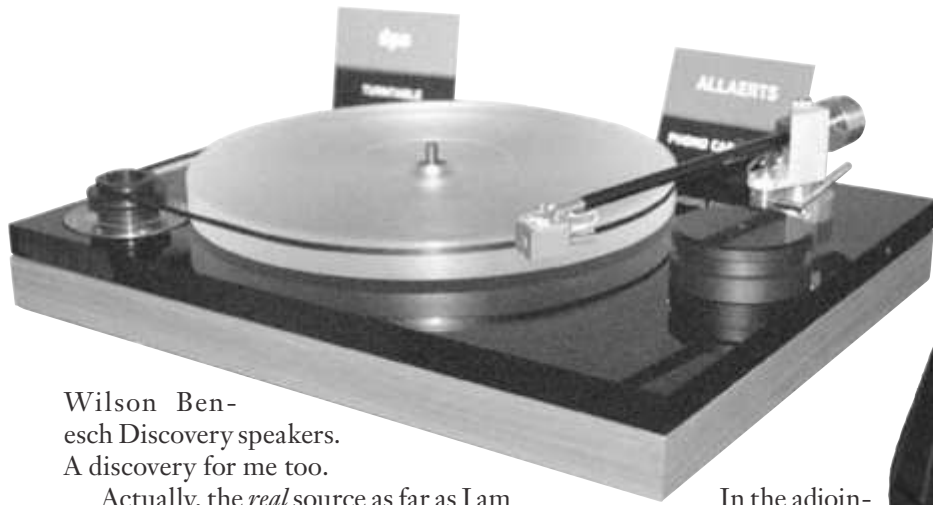
compromise on certain aspects more than on others. If anything *that’s* a matter of taste. Or preference, let’s say.

Merlin speakers were in the land of vinyl this year, with a DPS turntable, a Schroeder arm and an Allaerts cartridge, and we all sat listening to a very lively and energetic J.R. Montrose on sax, an original Blue Note, late 50’s mono recording (yes, mono), reissued by *Classics* a few months ago. What incredible presence, energy and rhythm. Every piece of gear

was resting proudly on Stillpoints too. I also heard the Antal Dorati version of Stravinsky’s *Firebird*, a Mercury Living presence original LP that sent ripples through audiophiles socks.

A different, much quieter, atmosphere altogether with the music of the Marc Vallée





Wilson Benesch Discovery speakers. A discovery for me too.

Actually, the *real* source as far as I am concerned remains the original recording, and I witnessed that with the superb Fidelio audiophile recordings. Playing through the jewel-like Nagra PL-L preamp and MPA amp and streaming through a pair of Verity Audio Parsifal



speakers, the percussion recording was superb, as remastered through Ed Meitner's DSD process, as was later *Hamadryade*, their remarkable SACD recording of the Marc Vallée Trio.

Sonus Faber Cremona speakers from Italy were matched to a quiet and powerful Stadium 3 subwoofer (by Subbass Systems, England) and Christian McBride (*Getting to It*) appeared in the room, right there, with the help of all-Classé components, CDP-10 player, CP 47.5 preamp and CA-101 amp.

In the adjoining room, I was struck by the music as I walked in. The score of *The Red Violin* was starting, the tension of the music and the playing of Joshua Bell's violin filling the air through JMLab AltoUtopia speakers, AudioResearch tube VT100 amp and LS 25 preamp, the CD handled by an interesting combination of an Acoustic Arts CD Player 1 transport and Nagra DAC. Waiting its turn, a silent and beautifully designed Gyro SE turntable by J.A. Michell.

Québec-made Verity Audio offered me a rare experience, with a special arrangement of the music of the Beatles as sung by the King's Singers accompanied by Erich Kunzel's Cincinnati Pops on an SACD multichannel recording. The polished piano black Tamino X2 speakers, Tamino C2 centre and back speakers and Rocco subwoofer were recreating the event around me through a Classé integrated amp and the Lexicon multiformat CD player which also plays the DVD Audio format.

Speaking of multiformat, I was quite impressed by Linn's demonstration of the new Unidisk player, producing amazing sound and images through an SACD version of Miles Davis' *Sketches of Spain*, or a DVD-Audio live concert

by David Gilmour on guitar at the Royal Festival Hall in London.

In a totally different setting, I enjoyed the refinement of the new Québec-made LammPipe



super efficient speakers, each fed by a Tenor 15Wi integrated tube amp (volume bypassed for the occasion), and an Audio Aero CD player. Eva Cassidy's voice was sweet and her image appeared perfectly clear in the wide open space.

Another local success was the Pierre Gabriel Acoustics Series A speakers, recreating the warm, natural voice

Clockwise from upper left: the DPS turntable with Allaerts pickup; Oracle's Jacques Riendeau with a speaker prototype; Oracle's CDA200 player; the Roksan Radius 5 turntable; the Lexicon RT-10 universal player and MC-8 preamplifier-processor.





At left: Festival organizer Marie-Christine Prin...and Kyriane, possibly the organizer of Montréal 2030. Below: the RogueZeus and Unison Superpavarotti amplifiers; the colorful AND CD players and amplifier.

this year into the Braun LE 1 version of the legendary electrostatic, and it created the same magic in the quiet room with Audio Aero tube electronics and front end. And in another room, Quad created magic with their recent 21L dynamic speakers matched superbly to their CD and preamp (24/192) and their 909 power amplifier. *Salamander Pie* (Jay Leonhart) was simply...natural. How hard it seems to be to be simply natural. But how easy it seemed to be here.

Oracle featured the Stello CDA 200 CD player and the AI 300 integrated amp, with Stevie Ray Vaughn's *Tin Pan Alley* a (steady image and great depth), while in another room Newfoundland's Aurum speakers (active, triamplified) showed their amazing speed and well-



Nova Utopia speakers danced to the silky and detailed sound of the Charlie Hayden trio (recorded by the CBC at the Montreal Jazz Festival) produced by all-YBA electronics, the CD-1 player (with two power supplies) and the Passion preamp and stereo amp.

Again, this year, I had the pleasure of listening to music produced by those modern sculptures, the Acapella Audio Arts speakers, handmade in Germany. The smooth, natural, well-balanced sound of Norway's Siri's Svale Band (*Blackbird*) on LP was produced by a stunning-looking Clearaudio turntable.

The Quad ESL 57 speakers turned

controlled bass, playing *Destination* by Hart Rouge.

SimAudio featured hefty W-6 monoblocks, P-5 preamp and Eclipse player, communicating through Cardas cables to Dynaudio Special 25 speakers. *Where's the subwoofer?* was the standard opening line by visitors. I couldn't help wondering about that myself as I listened to *Marching On* by the Ballistic Brothers. Super fast, with fantastic power and bass.

If I had to describe it further, I'd probably say it was fast, true *and direct*, the very words Gerry used. And, no, it's *not* a matter of taste. That's how this music should be.

And that's probably a hint of how it was, live.

of Norah Jones through the amazing Jadis integrated DA-30 and Jadis JD3 Drive.

More turntables this year. The crowd was focusing on the Rega P9, playing *St-Germain Tourist* on Blue Note, with contributions by a Cursa 3 preamp and Maia 3 power amp. The music was light on its feet, the rhythm unstoppable.

In another room, the huge JMLab





CHOOSING A CENTRE SPEAKER

There is a widespread suspicion among (possibly) paranoid consumers that surround sound was, all along, a plot to sell more speakers. And there has been plenty of resistance. DVD players can feed a two-channel system, after all, with or without a subwoofer. And even in full Pro Logic surround systems, you could do without the centre channel, by simply selecting “ghost” centre. In many cases, Pro Logic actually sounded better that way.

Some 5.1 channel systems can also run a phantom centre, but in most cases you’ll be missing something. A centre speaker now looks pretty much unavoidable. How important is it? Try unplugging it on a 5.1 channel system, and you’ll probably notice that no one is saying a word. Important? It may be the most important speaker of the five.

And don’t be misled by the fact that its main role seems to be to reproduce voices. The fact that cassette tapes are often classified as “voice” or “music” quality has always suggested that reproducing the human voice must be

a piece of cake. It isn’t. Not only does the human voice have an astonishingly wide range, as opera fans know, but of all the musical “instruments,” it is the one most familiar to us. We may hear live bassoons, double basses and guitars only now and then, but we hear live voices many times a day.

Two more questions before we move on to the tests themselves.

Must the centre speaker be of the same brand as the two other front speakers? Ideally sure, why not? Is it essential? Well, the central channel, as noted, carries mainly voices, which is why it is often referred to as the “dialog” speaker. Most modern film sound tracks are mixed with nearly all of the dialog in the centre, with

only a few “off screen” voices sent to the left and right front channels, or of course to the rear. Insofar as the centre speaker is handling material different from that handled by the others, exact matching is not important. Still, some filmmakers will pan the dialog across what is expected to be the width of the screen. That means a voice may be reproduced by both the centre speaker and one of the other front speakers. And some older films contain actual stereo dialog. Ah, the good old days!

But a speaker of the same brand, or even the same model designation, is not necessarily a speaker that sounds the same. The main channel speakers are designed to be tall and narrow, to place the tweeter at approximate ear height, and to afford optimum stereo imaging. Centre speakers, on the contrary, are made wide and low, so that they don’t hide the screen. In many cases the two are of radically different design. Even in cases where the centre speaker is simply the main speaker turned on its side, the acoustical placement will pretty much guarantee that it won’t

**Got home theatre?
Got SACD surround?
One of your speakers
will be front and**

quite sound the same. Getting a seamless blend — already a challenge in a two-channel system — requires much more than just buying all your speakers from the same manufacturer.

Where do you *put* that centre speaker? If you're using a front projection system, or even a plasma screen, there's probably lots of space under the screen. With a rear projection TV it's not as easy, because the TV almost certainly goes all the way down to the floor. And with a cathode ray tube, it's even tougher. The magnetic field about the woofer(s) can cause significant color shifts in the picture. This is true even of speakers that are advertised as shielded, since shielding is never absolute.

Most systems have centre speakers that are placed close to the floor, and tilted up. But in a small or medium-sized room, that means placing the speaker in front of the TV, and therefore much closer to you than the other speakers. In many cases the speaker will be firing into a sofa or an upholstered chair. Don't be surprised if the timbre of a sound changes as it is panned across the sound stage.

A better place for the speaker is atop the TV, probably angled ever so slightly down. This is not easy to pull off, since modern TVs don't have flat tops. And how good an idea is it to put a loudspeaker right on a highly resonant plastic box? Elsewhere in this issue you'll find our own solution to this problem: a stabilized, acoustically-isolated platform. We used such a platform for all of the speakers in this set of reviews, including the largest and heaviest, the 30 kg Thiel MCS1.

But before we actually inserted these centre speakers into our Kappa (home theatre) system, we put them through a brutal test in the refined acoustical environment of our Alpha system.

How well could these speakers reproduce the human voice? We decided to find out. The three usual reviewers recorded their own voices, reading a favorite bit of text, with a high quality condenser microphone. That would allow us to do something we normally cannot do: compare a reproduced sound with the live original. We anticipated that not all the speakers would neces-

sarily do well on this test. A speaker that flunked it would never get to see our Kappa system.

That test would be carried on in our Alpha listening room, with its remarkable acoustics. Also in the Alpha room, we listened to a mono recording, Linn's excellent pressing of Beethoven's Fifth, with Carlos Kleiber conducting the Concertgebouw Orchestra. And we added one more selection, *Bird on a Wire* from Jennifer Warnes' *Famous Blue Raincoat*.

With that evaluation done, we moved each of the speakers into our Kappa room, to give each of them a shot at reproducing the dialog and other central material from three films:

a) Chapters 9 and 10 of the director's cut version of *Amadeus*, which includes a segment of *Abduction from the Seraglio* and the scene in which the Emperor complains that there are "too many notes."

b) Chapter 5 of the second *Harry Potter* film, in which Harry travels by "flue powder" and runs into Hagrid and Hermione.

c) Chapter 26 of *The Fifth Element*, featuring the aria by the Diva Plavalaguna and the simultaneous one-sided battle between Leeloo and the piglike Mangalores.

Not all of the speakers have equal efficiency, needless to say, but our Moon Attraction processor can compensate for this automatically. As we brought in each centre speaker, we plugged an omnidirectional microphone into the Attraction, placed at viewing position, and pushed the *Auto Setup* button. It put bursts of pink noise into each speaker, one after the other, and adjusted each speaker for equal volume. With a series of clicks, the Attraction checked that all of the speakers were in phase (they were). Last but not least, it adjusted the delay on the surround speakers so that sounds from all five speakers reached us at the same time.

An option on many surround sound processors, including our Moon Attraction, is to roll off the low-frequency response to any given speaker and send the bass information to the subwoofer instead. In our Kappa system we have done that only with the surround speak-

ers, which are quite small. We did *not* do it with any of these six centre speakers. If any of them got into trouble on difficult passages...well, so be it. A similar feature exists on other processors, and with half the speakers we reviewed it should be used.

We hoped to position all the speakers the same way in our Kappa system, but we were initially not certain this could be done. The ideal place, we determined, would be atop our Hitachi rear projection TV. To put the speakers there, we designed our own isolating platform (you can read how to build your own platform — see *Placing the Centre Speaker* in this issue). Two of the speakers, however, were so large and heavy that we expected to position them in front of the TV, just below the screen. Indeed one of them, the Thiel MCS1, came with its own optional, very heavy steel bolt-on stand. We were happy to discover that our platform was so effective it could take the largest speakers without compromising stability or performance.

If you've read the extensive report in *UHF* No. 65 on the construction of our Kappa system, you'll know that we had not yet chosen a centre speaker. Our intent was to adopt one of the test speakers, assuming at least one of them would turn out to be of reference quality. The one we would acquire would not necessarily be the "winner" of the comparison. The chosen speaker would have to do outstandingly well on the tests to be sure, but it would also need to blend well with our main speakers, the Energy Reference Connoisseur (which we have owned since 1984). Failure to do so would of course not be considered a shortcoming.

Incidentally, we invited Energy to submit one of its centre speakers for this series. The company declined, as did its other division, Mirage.

We would have loved to have included a dozen or more speakers in this series, but we quickly saw that this was way beyond our technical means, to say nothing of the space in either our headquarters or the magazine. Consider this to be the first installment of what will turn out to be an ongoing tournament.

And let the jousts begin!





CASTLE BASTION

We're still fresh from our sessions with the Castle Stirling speakers (see *UHF* No. 66), and it struck us that this handsome, compact centre speaker could be just right to use with the Stirlings. The finish is a perfect match (both are available in a broad variety of veneers), and the twin 13 cm carbon fibre woofers appear to be the same ones as those used in the Stirling.

Of course, this is also one of the least expensive of the speakers tested, and we didn't have our hopes up that it was going to compete with expensive super speakers. On the other hand we've heard this British company do some amazing things in the past, so...

Like some other Castle speakers, this one has binding posts that attempt to fasten down the cables with plastic caps. Of course, it doesn't succeed. Fortunately, our WBT locking bananas had no problem making and maintaining a tight bond. Spade lugs would be a poor choice with this speaker.

We began the session with the first generation recording of our own voices, reading three brief poems of our choice. Albert was impressed. "Even compared to the reference speakers it sounds quite good," he said. "I like the fact that there's no buildup of the bottom end, no 'chestiness' on our voices." At the other end of the spectrum, we noticed that "S" sounds were rather prominent, and inevitably that showed up especially on Reine's voice. Still, the sibilance was

not distorted. That's quite acceptable performance from what is a relatively inexpensive speaker.

The prominent top end didn't do justice to the Beethoven recording. There was plenty of energy in its rendition, but the strings were downright zingy. Still, the Bastion showed us that it could play loud without covering the music with a veil of invented harmonics. That augured well for the movie test, in which it would have its plate piled high with sound.

The Castle did somewhat better with *Bird on a Wire*. The lower register of Jennifer Warnes' voice was rich and pleasing. We liked the detail that the Castle dug out too, though we also noted a touch of graininess.

We moved the Bastion to the Kappa system, and let our processor balance the system for the new arrival. The pink noise bursts used for alignment

SUMMING IT UP...

Brand/model: Castle Bastion
Price: C\$945 (about US\$680)
Dimensions: 48.5 x 19.5 x 24 cm
Impedance: 8 ohms
Claimed sensitivity: 88 dB
Most liked: Good dynamics, low distortion
Least liked: Somewhat elevated top end, occasional graininess
Verdict: Aims for a moderate success, gets a bull's eye

were themselves instructive, because they can show up differences in the character of two speakers. The Castle sounded very different from our main Energy speaker (no surprise there), but also from the Elipson speakers at the rear.

On the movie test, we took few notes, simply because this was the first speaker we were listening to. Unlike in most of the tests we do at *UHF*, we had no reference to compare to. We had been using the Kappa system with four of the test speakers, one after the other, as we broke them in (the Castle and Vandersteen speakers were run in with our Alpha system). We couldn't reasonably expect the Bastion to compete with the more expensive and larger speakers we had been using, and of course it didn't.

But nor did it disgrace itself.

The *Amadeus* sequence was quite good, with commendable clarity. The orchestra in *The Abduction from the Seraglio* was excellent, since it was mostly handled by the left and right speakers, but the choir was dead centre, and it was a touch too forward. Voices didn't have the liveliness we would get with upscale speakers, but nor did they turn to incomprehensible mush.

We had no difficulty following the dialog in the *Harry Potter* sequence, and it was adequately smooth. The feeling of space was rather reduced, however, with the image not quite coming together.

In *The Fifth Element* the battle sequence was solid, with of course our large subwoofer doing most of the heavy lifting. However the Bastion was almost alone in reproducing the Diva's voice. It didn't do badly, but nor did it sound natural. Gerard thought it made the Diva sound as unearthly as she looks.

The Bastion is not, by the way, the lowest-priced of Castle's centre speakers — the Keep is more than C\$200 cheaper — but by serious home theatre standards it is almost an impulse buy item. Like other smaller Castles, it aims for value. And it succeeds.

Turn the page and you'll see that we didn't agree on the performance of the next speaker in the lineup. But we didn't get into an argument about this one. Castle has succeeded in what it set out to do.





VANDERSTEEN VCC-1

Richard Vandersteen has always gone against the tide, and a glance at the smaller of his centre speakers reveals that once again this is no me-too product. No twin woofers on either side of a tweeter. No elongated shape. And no binding posts, either...we'll get to

in a moment. Historically, nearly all Vandersteen speakers have looked like more or larger versions of this one: wood on top and bottom, and a body hidden by a wraparound grille cloth that can be removed only with the optical scissors. Appearance aside, Richard has always insisted on two aspects of sounds: A speaker had to keep sounds of all frequencies in step, and what came out must not ever, ever, be either shrill or boomy. A designer could pick worse goals.

There are two Vandersteen centre speakers. The VCC-5 is clearly destined for big rooms and front projectors. *This* one looks (and, as we shall see, *sounds*) as though it will be at home in a room a real estate agent would call "intimate."

The VCC-1 could even take its place in a system where your nose might smudge the screen of your TV set, and to that end it has a "proximity

compensation" switch. The speaker's low-frequency response is already deliberately restricted (to 80 Hz according to the spec sheet), and the switch rolls it off further for cases when the speaker is placed near a wall or other boundary

our WBT banana plugs.

On the human voice test, the Vandersteen sounded mostly plausible. "It sounds rather flat," said Albert, "but I mean that in the good sense. It doesn't seek to impress." Reine also liked the rendition, except for a slight gloss to the sibilance on her own voice. Gerard was less pleased, finding the voices thin, and the "S" sounds too prominent.

On the two recordings — the Beethoven and the Jennifer Warnes — the sound was thinner than it had been with the Castle, but the top end pleased both Reine and Albert. Both recordings remained somewhat bright and grainy, but the dynamics and the emotion came through reasonably well. Even Gerard, who had not liked the speaker on the voice test, expressed surprise.

We moved the VCC-1 to our Kappa system, and listened to the pink noise as our processor was going through the auto-alignment. The lack of bottom-end solidity was evident, of course. But how would it do on actual films?

On *Amadeus*, everything coming from the middle was thinner, giving the opera scene a flatter aspect. "Still, there's no resonance, no boominess," said Albert. "I like that. And if you read the literature, that's exactly what Richard Vandersteen was trying for."

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SUMMING IT UP...

Brand/model: Vandersteen VCC-1
Price: C\$915 US \$549
Dimensions: 11 1/2" x 11 1/2" x 11 1/2"
Impedance: 8 ohms
Claimed sensitivity: 85 dB/W/m
Most liked: Transient response without adding distortion
Least liked: Some what thin enough body
Verdict: With a little help from the right subwoofer, could be a contender



The other two panelists disagreed with him, and for that matter with each other. Reine found the voices changed, but not clearer, while Gerard found them clear,

Oh yes...and with proper binding posts installed. We're surprised barrier strips are even available.





TOTEM MODEL ONE CENTRE

With this small but gorgeous speaker, we were convinced that we were in familiar territory. The Model One is a known quantity. We reviewed the original one when it came out in the 80's, and we did the Signature version in *UHF* No.65. Both times, we loved it. It is one of the world's great speaker designs. The Model One's very strong imaging power makes it a natural for a surround sound system...but only with an accompanying centre speaker.

And this speaker sure looks like a member of the family. Think of a pair of Model Ones glued back to back, but sharing a single tweeter, like Siamese Twins. The enclosure includes two separate spaces for the two 14 cm Dynaudio woofers, each with its own reflex port at the rear. There are, as usual with this series, two pairs of the wonderful WBT binding posts at the rear. The mahogany finish on ours was...let's just say you could buy the speaker for that alone.

The Totem is small compared to the competition, but that could be just one more reason to choose it. At least it would if it turned out to be as terrific as the other speakers in the series. Like other small Totems, this one has relatively low sensitivity, at least by the standard of the current fashion. You can't make a speaker this size with this ability to dig out extreme lows without

it showing up somewhere.

Though the speaker is no larger than the first two tested, it projected an image of solidity you don't expect from something its size. The two male voices in the first live vs recorded test had good body, without ever becoming artificially chesty. We were surprised by the higher frequencies, though, which were slightly elevated. We expected to hear sibilance on Reine's voice, but Albert's esses were a touch prominent as well. This is, as we've noted before, a brutal test, because a first-generation recording of our own voices gets us as close as we can get to an absolute standard.

The Model One did much better than the other two compact speakers on the two recordings, as we expected.

SUMMING IT UP...

Brand/model: Totem Model One Center
Price: C\$1595/US\$1400 as tested, slightly more in some finishes
Dimensions: 63.5 x 16.5 x 24 cm
Impedance: 4 ohms
Claimed sensitivity: 86 dB
Most liked: Surprising body, plenty of dynamics
Least liked: A somewhat elevated top end, occasional coloration
Verdict: Add four more Totem speakers, plus a sub, and stir

The strings on the 1948 Beethoven recording can be shrill to the point of brittleness, but the Totem pulled down the highs to a much more tolerable level. "I can still hear something odd in the high midrange," said Gerard, "but this is a lot better, isn't it?" So was the Jennifer Warnes recording. The tight but ample bottom end gave her voice a richness that neither of the other two speakers had been able to deliver. The percussion was detailed, with body but no tendency to boom. "This is a good speaker," said Albert.

But how would it do on movies? We listened to the pink noise during the alignment phase, and noted how unlike our Energy speakers this Totem was. This is not a black mark by any means, though it reduced the chances that we might be able to get by with such a pleasingly small speaker in our Kappa system.

Gerard noted with relief that the level of distortion, which had cast a greyish veil on dialog with the previous two speakers, had largely lifted. Reine liked the greater depth that the three front speakers were now managing, and she took interest in the proceedings once again. The choral voices on *The Abduction From the Seraglio* in *Amadeus* were better detached, and more lifelike, and even the applause was better rendered.

Were we unanimous? Not this time. Albert found the voices more colored, and rather too homogeneous. "Even Katarina's voice sounds like the others," he complained.

With the other two speakers Reine had complained of not being to follow the text, which is of course delivered with British accents. She found the dialog clearer this time. "I could have written it down," she said. Gerard also liked the rendition of the scene, despite the speaker's tonal balance, which didn't quite blend with our speakers.

As for Albert, his doubts were growing. "I don't like that coloration," he said. "I can live with other forms of distortion, but not that one. The sibilance is too prominent, and there's gauze wrapped around everything." The other two panelists looked at him quizzically. It looked as though unanimity was out of reach.

We moved on to the scene from *The Fifth Element*, starting shortly before the Diva's concert. There's a lot of low-frequency action in this scene, and it would have been easy enough to switch away the very low-pitched stuff to our massive subwoofer. Still, that wouldn't have told us what this speaker was capable of all by itself. In fact, it did rather well. There was considerable punch where it was needed, and the voices — including that of the Diva — were gorgeous. A

definite 3-D effect was emerging. There was a bit of a tonal shift as sounds moved across the front stage, though of course that probably wouldn't be the case if the Model One were matched to other Totem speakers. The overall effect was enjoyable, and we were unanimous once more.

We should add that, despite the fact that we were running the Totem (and the other speakers in this test series) full range, the subwoofer was helping

anyway, simply because the producers of many films put extra bass in the LFE (low frequency effect) track, the "point one" channel.

If you are already using Totem Model Ones as the front speakers in your system (and they are an excellent choice, in our view), this speaker is the logical match. Can it match other, bigger speakers, especially in large rooms? We weren't unanimous. Reluctantly, we answer with a definite *perhaps*.



JMLAB CC 900

It had been years since we had had a JMLab speaker in our reference room, and it was about time. We were reminded of that at the Montreal show in March, when we sat in on a home theatre demo done entirely with JMLab speakers. Good sounding? You bet. But come to think of it our last encounter with JMLab had not been exactly a chore either. You can read all about it in *UHF* No. 48.

This grey and black speaker, neatly styled to blend in with most TV sets (other finishes are available too), is part of the Electra series. JMLab is of course a division of Focal, known for high technology woofers and tweeters, which means that it has access to Focal speakers at what we assume is a favorable price. The CC 900 has two 16.5 cm woofers, focused slightly inward, as is common

in the JMLab line. The speckled grey cones are made of two layers of glass with foam between them. The tweeter is an inverted dome made of what the company calls "Tioxid" (but don't bother looking it up in your table of elements). The crossover point is at 2.5 kHz. This is a reflex speaker, with a front port filled with open-celled foam.

There are four binding posts, allowing biwiring...or biamplification, which is what we did. They are quite large, allowing a good finger grip, but with an hexagonal rear section, allowing us to use our Postman wrench. Once

Using first-class components pays off. No surprise.

tightened, they stayed tight. The holes for bananas are plugged up with plastic inserts, as in all European speakers, but they are easy to remove.

We began with the recording of our own voices, played back at a level as close as possible to that of our actual voices. What we heard pleased us a great deal. The naturalness of the inflections was striking. The bottom end was palpably present, but without exaggeration. The natural sibilance was certainly present, but it was neither highlighted nor distorted. Indeed, both Reine and Albert judged that there was a certain attenuation of the top end. "I think they did it on purpose," said Albert, "but I like it." All of us commented on the neutrality of the sound, despite that slight softness.

On the Beethoven recording, the JMLab did much better than the previous three speakers. "The strings aren't really silky, but they're getting closer," said Gerard, "and I like the brass." Reine and Albert also noticed that the bottom end, and especially the lower strings, were clearly audible for the first time, adding body to the orchestra. Reine also mentioned the sensation of depth, quite audible despite the mono sound.

The JMLab also did well on the Jennifer Warnes recording. Once again the augmented bottom end did good things for both her voice and the string bass, though without exaggeration, and especially without boominess.

We moved the speaker into the Kappa system, and noted approvingly how it seemed to blend in visually with our Hitachi monitor. But it didn't really blend sonically with our other speakers, as we noted from the pink noise bursts used for the setup. That of course doesn't

mean the JMLab is other speakers...just

How would the actual movie? We we had expected. T *Abduction From the S* were no longer hom seemed to emerge f into the room with u the other crowd sou ably improved too. I lowed, the ambient s creaking of the floor “Even the voice of C better,” said Albert. “ and then comes clo should.”

We are of cours soundtracks of films not captured by mi site of filming, but a post-synchronizat good audio producer sound field that is sto and the right equipm plain.



age, the dy. “And Gerard. he other ce itself, discover onsider- urs from aterial is speakers, een less and that ment we r. atacular, ve were lm run, ad. But, npetent orise, to y better ference his test firma-



Two 16.5 cm woofers with polypropylene loaded cones flank a soft-dome tweeter. No rounded edges, no sculpting. At the rear, however, are two sets of J.A. Michell’s “Big Mother” binding posts, finished in rhodium. Their size makes them easy to tighten, and they stay tight too.

The ProAc is large, almost exactly the same size as the Thiel, and only slightly lighter. From that, and from previous experience with ProAc speakers, we were optimistic. And we were right. This would turn out to be the kind of speaker you dream, of finding.

We began the test in the Alpha room, using the recording of our own voices. We mostly liked what we heard.

PROAC RESPONSE CC-2

There has always been something special about ProAc large speakers, and especially the ones in the Response series. This is not the result of careful placement of microphones in anechoic chambers. Rather, designer Steve Tyler, like Totem’s Vince Bruzzese, has a sense of what real music should be like. We’ve heard stories of Tyler hooking up new drivers to a pocket radio and listening right there on his workbench.

THE VOICE THAT WILL ASTONISH YOU

Soprano Karina Gauvin sings these Handel opera arias (and indeed most music) better than anyone else we know. Check out her Analekta recordings, at <http://www.uhfmag.com/Analekta.com>.

Ours was matte black, though ash and cherry finishes are also available. The driver layout is not revolutionary.

those up the he sort Albert of the ome of on ducing those troublesome strings quite plausibly. The bottom end had good weight, with a palpable sense of both rhythm

LISTENING ROOM



and impact. The highs were perhaps a little crisp, said Reine, but they were well-controlled. The CC-Two also did well on the Jennifer Warnes recording, though Gerard complained of a bottom end that was too restrained.

At this point you've gathered that we liked the ProAc, but with some reservations. On the basis of that first session, we expected it to rate a distant third against stiff competition. In fact, after we listened to it in our Kappa system, we came within an eyelash of actually buying it.

Our enthusiasm began to grow when our Moon Attraction processor was feeding pink noise to each of the speakers in order to go through the automatic balancing routine. The pink noise emerging from the ProAc sounded almost exactly the way it did coming from our existing speakers. This one would be a match, no doubt about it.

And the first film scene we viewed, the sequence from *Amadeus*, confirmed

SUMMING IT UP...

Brand/model: ProAc CC-Two
Price: C\$3000 (equivalent US\$2160)
Dimensions: 71 x 25 x 30 cm
Impedance: 8 ohms
Sensitivity: 88 dB
Most liked: Extraordinary performance on actual movies

sound seemed once again seamless, maintaining the same character even if it moves across the sound stage. "There's nothing that stands out particularly," said Albert, and that's the way it should be, because there shouldn't be one element that overpowers anything else." Added Reine, "It has everything it needs to please the ear and to draw you in." This one would be a match, no doubt about it.

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that followed the presence of the actors in a real space was startling.

On the *Harry Potter* sequence, the

then the VCC-Two should be fitted with a pith helmet. We wish it were prettier, but when it comes to the sound we wouldn't change a thing.





This is by far the heaviest of the speakers tested, at close to 30 kg. Indeed, we were dismayed when we unpacked it. Thiel

is in the habit of booking large rooms at shows, and we had in fact never seen a Thiel in a normal-sized room. They sure make them big, don't they? Actually, so does ProAc: the CC-Two is actually almost exactly the same size, but it doesn't look it.

Thiel also sent along a metal stand, which is a US\$400 option for the MCS1 (a stand for vertical mounting also exists). We took the picture that way, and we were resigned to testing it that way too, since surely a speaker like this would crush our TV monitor to dust. Wouldn't it?

No, in fact. Our platform turned out to be so stable that we had no problem using it with the Thiel (though putting it up there was a four-hand job). That was just as well, since the stand is what we liked least about the MCS1. Though its styling is elegant enough, a close look reveals visible welds, something not acceptable in a luxury product. Worse, the stand's rear crossbeam, to which the speaker is bolted, rings like a bell. Even tapping the speaker produced an audible

ring from the stand. After the photo session we returned it to its box.

The speaker itself is gorgeous, looking good with or without its concave curved grille. The sculpted front baffle is MDF. The sides of ours were veneered with a spectacular reddish wood called morado (sometimes wrongly called Bolivian rosewood), though there are many other finishes available. The workmanship is nonetheless not without flaw. During the photo session the studio lights showed up what seemed to be dust at the mouth of one of the Thiel's twin

THIEL MCS1

SUMMING IT UP...

Brand/model: Thiel MCS1

Price: US\$2200, about C\$3055

Dimensions: 71 x 30.5 x 25.5 cm

Impedance: 4 ohms, 3 ohms min.

Sensitivity: 90 dB

Most liked: Spectacularly natural sound

Least liked: Mediocre stand, minor assembly blemishes

Verdict: The looks may seduce you, but it's the sound that will finish the job

ports. We were horrified to discover that it was actually putty, used to cover up a rough spot! When we rubbed it the black paint came right off.

The two 16.5 cm aluminum cones have a satin glow that makes you want to leave off the grille. We usually deplore visible screw heads, but the brass screws on the Thiel look rather luxurious. As in other recent Thiel speakers, the woofers have a shallow voice coil, which can move a long way without ever wandering near the edges of the deep magnetic field. The woofers are in individual enclosures, each with its own port.

The tweeter is unusual too. It is essentially a miniature cone speaker, which can go down to 100 Hz, with a metal dome riding on it to reproduce highs. Thiel doesn't specify the crossover frequency, but we assume it's low enough to give the woofers lots of breathing room.

Like all Thiel speakers, the MCS1 has a crossover network crammed with capacitors (polystyrene and polypropylene) and air-core coils. Jim Thiel believes in using the crossover to correct errors in both phase and amplitude, and not merely to divide up highs and lows. The crossover cannot be split, and so there is only one pair of binding posts at the rear. Their quality is adequate for use with bananas, but we would be reluctant to use spade lugs with them.

We began with our human voices test...
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 g. "I thought it sounded...
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...remained very natural, with clear words and...
 an excellent reproduction of the choir. I was...
 surprised even by the fine details of ambient...
 sounds. This is a speaker that deserves seri-...
 ous consideration.

Central speakers are for voice, of course,
 but also for details, those wonderful tokens
 of reality that complete the illusion.

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 you find yourself

Magic worked...
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 every scene, and w...
 to reveal real space and even silence.

That's the sign of things to come in that
 not too distant future.

—Albert Simon

The voice test was so revealing that I
 wasn't surprised when it turned out to be
 an excellent predictor of how each speaker
 would perform on an actual movie. Three
 of the six are exceptional. With any of those
 three, watching a film is not a waste of time

Our voices seemed natural...
THIRD IN NUMBER, NOT IN QUALITY
 Bia (pronounced Bee-yah) was born in Brazil, lives in France, records in
 Canada. She's the sort of singer whose records sell on first hearing. This is her
 third recording (after *Sources* and *La mémoire du vent*). Our recommendation?
 Buy any one of them...after which we're sure you'll order the other two.

The Thiel more than delighted me
 from the start. On both voice and music,
 it was even clearer, with even more subtle
 detail. Sounds are well separated, rhythm is
 flawless, strings and brass shine but without
 shrillness, the human voice is exquisite in its
 modulations, the string bass is solid, percus-
 sion is at once substantial and detailed...in
 short, lyricism and emotion are present and
 accounted for, and nothing gets hidden.

But it is before the screen that it showed
 off the qualities indispensable to making a

even for our (increasingly) expensive Kappa
 system. After all, I know how good the other
 Model Ones sound, so why not...?

And it turned out to be reasonably good,
 a logical choice for the Model Ones if you
 use them as your main speakers
 (leaving the other two as a spare
 idea by the way). Our system

of the six speakers were
 in our Kappa system, I got
 to advance listen to them. For
 as convinced the JMLab
 was our final choice. Indeed, if
 the main speakers better, it
 well might have been. Then I fell in love with
 the ProAc. I wish it were better looking, but
 oh what a speaker!

That said, I have to stress that I agreed
 with my colleagues that the Thiel was the
 one to get. I was ready to reject it, because it
 was so large and heavy that we would prob-
 ably have to leave it parked on the floor,
 attached to that ill-conceived stand. When I
 discovered that our in-house platform would
 let us place even this large speaker on top of
 the TV, the choice was an easy one.

—Gerard Rejskind

phrase in the dialog. There's so much dynamic contrast you can hear everything. And there's an aura of background silence that wasn't there before."

The second scene, in which the Emperor comes on stage to congratulate Mozart after the opera (but also to complain that it has "too many notes"), took on an added dimension. The richness of subtle sounds gave the old theatre, with its creaks and echoes, a depth and a spaciousness that had merely been hinted at before.

In the *Harry Potter* scene, we were startled by the clarity of the delightful voice of Molly Weasley (Julie Walters). We were all but knocked out of our chairs by the air displaced when Ron and then Harry go up the chimney with a pinch of flue powder.

But even more impressive was the scene in which Harry gets sidetracked in the worrisome Knockturn Alley. We could hear for the first time the many layers of John Williams' remarkable musical score, some of them actually *behind* the ambient sound field, all peeled back where we could follow them. "Hagrid's voice is more natural too," said Albert. Music, voices, sounds and image just clicked. The scene was so awesome we opted to watch it a second time.

The Fifth Element was similarly impressive, and we actually let the disc roll well into the next chapter. We left our notebooks nearly blank, scrawling down only single words, such as "superb" and "magnificent." What to add?

Well yes, there *was* something to add. We still needed a reference centre for our Kappa system, didn't we? We had been freeloading long enough with borrowed speakers. Time to lay out the cash.

But for which one? The first three were not suitable for a system of this caliber. The second three were definite candidates. Would we choose the magical JMLab? Would we opt instead for the superb ProAc, with its nearly perfect match with our existing Energy and Elipson speakers? Or...

It turned out to be "or." In what turned out to be a near dead heat, we made our choice, and we are giving the Thiel MCS1 what we think will be a good home. If you are tempted to do the same, we understand fully.



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REFERENCE 3A MM DE CAPO-I

The “i” in this new version’s name stands for “improved.” The speaker is still made in Canada, though not at the same factory. The woofer is still substantially the same, with its familiar knitted carbon fibre cone, but the tweeter is a new one. The crossover remains mini-

malist, with direct connection of the woofer and only a pair of capacitors to keep the lows from blowing the tweeter. Internal wiring is from Cardas. So are the binding posts and the jumpers, the latter looking like those stars Kung Fu warriors throw at each other.

Our speakers were beautifully fin-

ished in red cherry, and came with a pair of adjustable wood stands, as shown in the picture. The stands’ unusual design horrified some observers, who thought they looked knock-kneed. Reine liked them, however, which could indicate that their WAF (Wife Acceptance Factor) is high. We performed the actual test with the much more massive Foundation stands from Focus Audio.

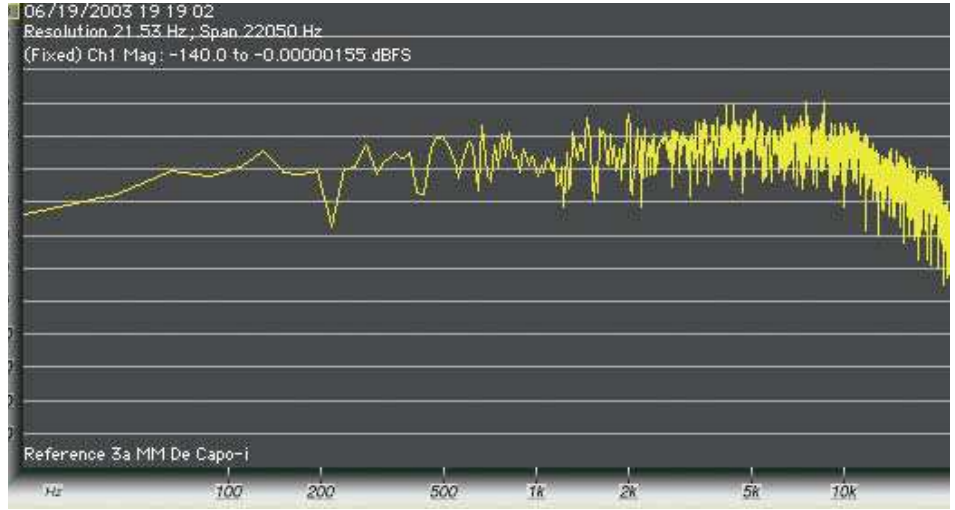
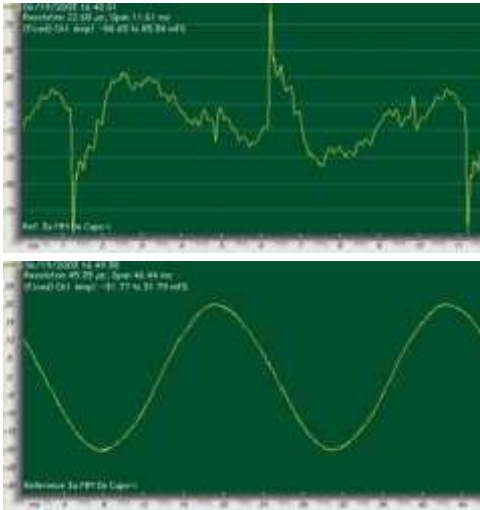
We did our listening entirely with LPs, because...well, it’s always fun to return to vinyl. Most of the selections came from audiophile recordings, though the one exception turned out to be the most revealing, as we shall see.

The first of them was a long discontinued Wilson Audio recording called *Center Stage*. The first track, the fanfare for the 1984 Olympics, is notable for the palpable impact of the tympani. Our Alpha reference speakers, with their push-pull woofers, can let you hear both the sound of sticks against membrane, and the huge impact that results. Could these speakers accomplish the same feat?

Well, no, and we suspect no tuned-port loudspeaker can. The piece sounded impressive nonetheless, with bright and brash brass that emerged with none of the grainy texture some speakers add to this sort of music. Reference 3a speakers have long been known for the ability to play as loud as you want without having blood pouring from your ears. This one still can.

We then sat through one of our favorite test discs, William Walton’s *Façade* (Reference Recordings RR-16, also available on CD, RR-2102). There are lots of passages to delight the listener...and plenty of traps too. Like most speakers, this one fell into an early trap, the soaring piccolo solo. We know that it doesn’t *have* to sound shrill, though in fact it often does. And it did here. Even the cymbal was a bit “hi-fi” during loud clashes, though it sounded superb when the percussionist was barely touching them together.

But what all three of us noted was the beauty of the instrumental timbres. Pretty much each member of the Chicago Pro Musica gets a solo, and we have heard some speakers homogenize their sound so that members of the



same instrumental family were hard to tell apart. The clarinet and the other woodwinds were gorgeous, with the bassoon especially delightful. The staccato passage on the cello was quick and dynamic, truly a hallmark of these loudspeakers. The castanets don't play loud, but we could hear all the way to the back of the hall, and we noted how "right" they seemed. The sound was deep and spacious, the rhythm impeccable.

"But the top end is a bit too sharp," said Albert, who favors a sound that is more mellow.

There was some grumbling after the next recording, Amanda McBroom's *Gossamer* from the *West of Oz* recording. Reine and Albert found McBroom's voice rougher and cooler, with esses that were much too pronounced. They liked the percussion effects, but found the harmonica greatly altered.

Gerard wasn't so sure. "Her voice sounds rather ethereal now, but it's attractive, and it could even be accurate." He found the sibilance acceptable, except for the leading "S" on "Summer's coming and I'm still here." He praised the piano and the guitar.

The de Capos did very much better on what should have been a more challenging recording, the *Requiem Aeternam* from John Rutter's *Requiem* (Reference Recordings RR-57). The surprisingly clear sound communicated the strong emotional tension at the start of the section. The plentiful top end was well balanced by the solid bottom end. The organ didn't quite have the sheer weight rendered with the push-pull woofers of our older 3a speakers, but it maintained

good amplitude. "When the organ rose in volume I felt chills," confessed Reine.

The male voices were especially limpid, never running together. The women sounded clear as well. We could hear the text clearly, as we struggled to recall our Latin.

These Reference 3a speakers sounded superb on our direct-cut Chopin piano piece (the *Scherzo No. 2* on RCA RDCE-7). The microphones were placed quite close to Edward Auer's Steinway, and the leading edges of the louder notes can give a speaker serious trouble. They didn't. The trade-off between transient response and dynamics has been well handled in this speaker.

Large woofers can play louder than small ones, of course, but they also have more moving mass and therefore more inertia. The carbon woofers of these speakers are at once large and light, following the transients with a surprising lightness of foot. The detail was awesome in its richness. The reverberation was easy to follow at the end of the each phrase.

Indeed, we heard perhaps more than Auer would have liked us to. "The chromatics are superb," said Reine, herself a pianist, "but when he muffs a note you really notice that too." Indeed, we could hear for the first time that the piano could have used a session with a Steinway mechanic.

The de Capos breezed through *Secret of the Andes* (from a discontinued Nautilus recording, also available on JVC's *Audiophile*). The Andean harp at the start and end was delightful. The complex percussion came out just as it should with impact and strong rhythm. "The instruments have a palpable presence," said Albert. "This goes beyond mere detail." The piano was gorgeous, and the kick drum was powerful.

We also noticed what we believe is a corrugated gourd that is scraped just once in the opening percussion sequence. It's the sort of sound that can make you jump even if you're expecting it. Its impact was another clear indication of the energy with which the Reference 3a goes about its work. Of course, a "slow" speaker could have spoiled the effect.

We ended with a remarkable recording which made waves when it was released exactly 30 years ago, Pink Floyd's *Dark Side of the Moon* (Harvest



SMAS 11163). The famous “heartbeat” in *Time* was slightly softer than with our reference speakers, but its solidity was impressive. The clock chime in *On the K* perhaps

perhaps much can overlaid Capos rendition, so that to ever more was so rendered three of us “It’s a difference after it was

We took a one-on-one microphone test (top left page) looks the funny itself. However wave are straight quickness and errors. The of artifacts. S The frequency

SUMMING IT UP...

the previous page shows a 35 Hz tone at our full test level, and it looks virtually

something we don’t see 100 Hertz below that part, of course, but an awesome exploit

built around complex. What is amazing seems to have been conflicting criteria.

and more bottom you can usually get. Yet the quickness

ally the province significant as well. I thought Daniel of magician.

he quickness are the speaker’s list of sounds playing able finesse when y we could hear ver vanish into

er affordable is,



There are lots of speakers that I love (and I need hardly add). But I’ve always had a particularly soft spot for Daniel Dehay’s speakers. The first time I heard them, perhaps a dozen years ago, I knew instantly there was something special about them.

And there still is, even if Dehay’s original design is now made by people who are lively dynamite. The bottom end is reasonable exact quick, and with new delights.

Is this “?” original MM my notes, I see that I found the top end of the original (UHF No. 60) not as refined as I would have liked. This is a considerable improvement. The bottom end seems better too. Of course the upper midrange is more prominent than I would have liked, but perhaps in the acoustics of an ordinary

AWESOME! IT’S THE RIGHT WORD

That overused word means producing awe in an observer. And it’s what happens when you hear this remarkable disc of a saxophone and organ in a vast church. A justly famous recording on Proprius, also available on gold HDCD from First Impressions Music.

voices particularly. But somehow I was more amazed by what I was discovering in the music.

I still think this speaker is something special.

Very intriguing speakers. How would you qualify speakers that reveal so many

Depth and space were particularly convincing. And *speed*. Talk about lightning fast speakers! They handled high-flying percussion rhythms and tons of cascading piano notes with razor sharp precision. No

blur, no mush. Great stability, great clarity.

Over and above a remarkable stereo image, exceptional depth, and a generous and pleasant spaciousness, these speakers reproduce music with a refinement that

every corner of the spectrum. are harmonically rich. Wood-geous, warm and velvety. The solid, giving the music a certain piano offers superb chromat-

sists are remarkably quick. to the guitar. Choral voices e, with mixed voices that are and. The bottom end is ample and solid, even if it can’t quite match that of our reference speakers. Everything hangs together.

But for a minor reservation concerning the top of the spectrum, which can get just slightly shrill now and then, I can say I liked these speakers a lot.

—Reine Lessard

Back Issues

THE ANNIVERSARY COLLECTION:

Issues No.7-19 (except 11, 15, 17 and 18, out of print): nine issues available for the price of five (see below). A piece of audio history. Available separately at the regular price.

No.66: Reviews: the Jadis DA-30 amplifier, the Copland 305 tube preamp and 520 solid state amp. Plus: the amazing Shanling CD player, Castle Stirling speakers, and a remote control that tells you what to watch. Also: Bergman on biwiring and biampification, singer Janis Ian's alternative take on music downloading, and a chat with Opus 3's Jan-Eric Persson.

No.65: Back to Vinyl: setting up an analog system, reviews of Rega P9 turntable, and phono preamps from Rega, Musical Fidelity and Lehmann. The Kappa reference system for home theatre: how we selected our HDTV monitor, plus a review of the Moon Stellar DVD player. Anti-vibration: Atacama, Symposium, Golden Sound, Solid-Tech, Audioprism, Tenderfeet. Plus an interview with Rega's turntable designer, and a look back at what UHF was like 20 years ago.

No.64: Speakers: Totem M1 Signature and Hawk, Visonik E352. YBA Passion Intégré amplifier Cambridge IsoMagic (followup), better batteries for audio-to-go. Plus: the truth about upsampling, an improvement to our LP cleaning machine, an interview with Ray Kimber.

No.63: Tube amps: ASL Leyla & Passion A11. Vecteur Espace speakers, 2 interconnects (Harmonic Technology Eichmann), 5 speaker cables (Pierre Gabriel, vdH, Harmonic Technology, Eichmann), 4 power cords (Wireworld, Harmonic Technology, Eichmann, ESP). Plus: Paul Bergman on soundproofing, how to compare components in the store, big-screen TV's to stay away from, a look back at the Beatles revolution.

No.62: Amplifiers: Vecteur I-4, Musical Fidelity Nu-Vista M3, Antique Sound Lab MG-S11DT. Passive preamps from Creek and Antique Sound Lab. Vecteur L-4 CD player. Interconnects: vdH Integration and Wireworld Solstice. Plus: the right to copy music, and how it may be vanishing. Choosing a DVD player by features. And all about music for the movies.

No.61: Digital: Audiomat Tempo and Cambridge Isomagic DACs, Vecteur D-2 transport. Speakers: Osborn Mini Tower and Mirage OM-9. Soundcare Superspikes. Also: the Battle of the Super Discs, new surround sound formats, de-zoning DVD players.

No.60: Speakers: Monitor Audio Silver 9, Reference 3a MM De Capo, Klipsch RB-5, Coincident Triumph Signature. Plus: a Mirage subwoofer and the Audiomat Solfège amp. Paul Bergman on reproducing extreme lows.

No.59: CD players: Moon Eclipse, Linn Ikemi and Genki, Rega Jupiter/lo, Cambridge D500. Plus: Oskar Kithara speaker, with Heil tweeter. And: transferring LP to CD, the truth on digital radio, digital cinema vs MaxiVision 48.

No.58: Amplifiers: ASL AQ1003, Passion I10 & I11, Rogue 88, Jadis Orchestra Reference, Linar 250. Headphone amps: Creek, Antique Sound Lab, NVA, Audio Valve. Plus: Foundation Research LC-2 line filter, Gutwire power cord, Pierre Gabriel ML-1 2000 cable. And: building your own machine to clean LP's.

No.57: Speakers: Dynaudio Contour 1.3, Gershman X-1/SW-1, Coincident Super Triumph Signature, Castle Inversion 15,

Oskar Aulos. PLUS: KR 18 tube amp. Music Revolution: the next 5 years. Give your Hi-Fi a Fall Tune-Up.

No.56: Integrated amps: Simaudio I-3, Roksan Caspian, Myrrad M120, Vecteur Club 10, NVA AP10 Also: Cambridge T500 tuner, Totem Forest. Phono stages: Creek, Lehmann, Audiomat. Interconnects: Actinote, Van den Hul, Pierre Gabriel. Plus: Paul Bergman on power and current...why you need both

No.55: CD players: Linn Sondek CD12, Copland CDA-289, Roksan Caspian, AMC CD8a. Other reviews: Enigma Oremus speaker, Magenta ADE-24 black box. Plus: the DSD challenge for the next audio disc, pirate music on the Net, the explosion of off-air video choices.

No.54: Electronics: Creek A52se, Simaudio W-3 and W-5 amps. Copland CSA-303, Sima P-400 and F.T. Audio preamps (the latter two passive). Musical Fidelity X-DAC revisited, Ergo AMT phones, 4 line filters, 2 interconnects. Plus: Making your own CD's.

No.53: Loudspeakers: Reference 3a Intégrale, Energy Veritas v2.8, Epos ES30, Totem Shaman, Mirage 390is, Castle Eden. Plus: Paul Bergman on understanding biamping, biwiring, balanced lines, and more.

No.52: CD players: Alchemist Nexus, Cambridge CD6, YBA Intégré, Musical Fidelity X-DAC, Assemblage DAC-2. Subwoofers: Energy ES-8 and NHT PS-8. Plus: Paul Bergman on reproducing deep bass, Vegas report, and the story behind digital television.

No.51: Integrated amps: YBA Intégré DT, Alchemist Forseti, Primare A-20, NVA AP50 Cambridge A1. CD players: Adcom GCD-750, Rega Planet. An economy system to recommend to friends, ATI 1505 5-channel amp, Bergman on impedance, why connectors matter, making your own power bars.

No.50: CD: Cambridge DiscMagic/DACMagic, Primare D-20, Dynaco CDV Pro. Analog: Rega Planar 9, the Linn LP12 after 25 years. Also: Moon preamp, Linn Linto phono stage, Ergo and Grado headphones. Speaker cables: Linn K-400, Sheffield, MIT 750 Also: a look back at 15 years of UHF.

No.49: Power amps: Simaudio Moon, Bryston 3B ST, N.E.W. DCA-33, plus the Alchemist Forseti amp and preamp, and the McCormack Micro components. Also: our new Reference 3a Suprema II reference speakers, and a follow-up on the Copland 277 CD player. Plus: how HDCD really works.

No.48: Loudspeakers: JMLabs Daline 3.1, Vandersteen 3a, Totem Tabà, Royd Minstrel. CD: Cambridge CD4, Copland CDA-277. Also: An interview with the founder of a Canadian audiophile record label.

No.47: FM tuners: Magnum Dynalab MD-108, Audiolab 8000T, Fanfare FT-1. Speaker cables: QED Qudos, Wireworld Equinox and Eclipse, MIT MH-750. Parasound C/BD-2000 transport and D/A-C-2000 converter. And: Upgrading your system for next to nothing.

No.46: Electronics: Simaudio 4070SE amp & P-4002 preamp, Copland CTA-301 & CTA-505, N.E.W. P-3 preamp. Digital cables: Wireworld, Audiostream, MIT, XLO, Audioprism, and Wireworld's box for comparing interconnects. Also: YBA CD-1 and Spécial CD players. Yves-Bernard André talks about his blue diode CD improvement.

No.45: Integrated amps: Copland CTA-401, Simaudio 4070i, Sugden Optima 140. CD: Adcom GDA-700 HDCD DAC, Sonic Frontiers SFD-1 MkII. Interconnects: Straight Wire Maestro, 3 versions of Wireworld Equinox. Plus: Yamamura Q15 CD oil, and "Hi-Fi for the Financially Challenged".

No.44: CD players: Rotel RCD970BX, Counterpoint DA-10A DAC. Speakers: Apogee Ribbon Monitor, Totem Mite, more on the Gershman Avant Garde. Also: Laser-Link cable, "The Solution" CD treatment, AudioQuest sorbothane feet, Tenderfeet, Isobearings. Plus: Inside Subwoofers, and the castrati, the singers who gave their all for music.

No.43: The first HDCD converter: the EAD DSP-1000 MkII. Speakers: Gershman Avant Garde, Totem Mani-2 and Rokk, Quad ESL-63 with Gradient subwoofer. Plus: Keith O. Johnson explains the road to HDCD, and our editor joins those of other magazines to discuss what's hot in audio.

No.42: Electronics: Spectral DMC-12 and Celeste P-4001 preamplifiers, amps and preamps from Duson. Also: Sonic Frontiers SFD-1 converter, power line filters from Audioprism, Chang, and YBA. Plus: Inside the preamplifier, and how the tango became the first "dirty" dance.

No.41: Digital: Roksan DA-2, EAD DSP-7000, McCormack DAC-1, QED Ref. Digit. Cables: Straight Wire LSI Encore & Virtuoso, Wireworld Equinox, van den Hul The 2nd & Revelation, Cardas Cross & Hexlink Golden, Transparent Music-Link Super & Music-Wave Super. Plus: Bergman on recording stereo.

No.40: Integrated amps: YBA Intégré, Rotel 960, Sugden A-25B, Sima PW-3000, Linn Majik, Naim NAIT 3, AMC CVT3030, Duson PA-75. Stereo: what it is, how it works, why it's disappearing from records.

No. 39: Speakers: KEF Q50, Martin-GDV Aeriis, Castle Howard, NEAR 40M, Klipsch Kg4.2. Plus: QED passive preamps, followup on the Linn Mimik CD player.

No. 38: CD players: Roksan Attesa, Naim CDS, Linn Mimik, Quad 67, Rotel 945, Micromega Model "T". Plus: How the record industry will wipe out hi-fi, and why women have been erased from music history.

No.37: Electronics: Celeste 4070 and McIntosh 7150 amps, Linn Kairn and Klout. Plus: RoomTunes acoustic treatment, why all amps don't sound alike, and how Pro Logic really works.

No.36: CD players: YBA CD-2, Linn Karik/Numerik, Sugden SDT-1, Mission DAD5 and DAC5, Audiolab 8000DAC, QED Digit, Nitty Gritty LP cleaner, Plus: an interview with Linn's Ivor Tiefenbrun, and part 7 of Bergman on acoustics: building your own acoustical panels.

No.35: Speakers: Castle Chester, Mirage M-7si, Totem Model 1, Tannoy 6.1, NHT 2.3, 3a Micro Monitor, Rogers LS2a/2. Plus: Tests of high end video recorders, hi-fi stereo recordings of piano performances of 75 years ago. Acoustics part 6: Conceiving the room.

No.34: Cables: MIT ZapChord & PC2, Monster PowerLine 2+, M1, M2 Sigma, Reference 2, Interlink 400 & MSK2, Straight Wire Maestro, Isoda HA-08-PSR, Audioquest Ruby &

Emerald, AudioStream Twinax, FMS Gold & Black, NBS Mini Serpent. Acoustics 5: Diffusing sound. "The Plot to Kill Hi-Fi," the much-reprinted article on audio retailing.

No.33: CD players: Spectral SDR-1000SL, Esoteric P-2/D-2, Micromega Duo.BS, Proceed PDT2/PDP2 and PCD2, MSB Silver, Esoteric CD-Z5000, Carver SD/A-490T. The future of audio, according to Linn's Ivor Tiefenbrun. Acoustics part 4: Absorbing low frequencies.

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No.28: Integrated amps: Linn Intek, Naim NAIT 2, Arcam Alpha II, Audio Innovations 500 II, Mission Cyrus Two, Creek 4141, Sugden A-21. Plus: an Aiwa cassette deck, and a guide to distortion.

No.27: Cables: Prisma SC-9 and Cable 10, MIT MH-750, MH-750 CVT MI-330SG, and MI-330SG CVT, Supershield. Cassettes: We compare Maxell, Fuji, Sony, etc.. The Esoteric V9000 cassette deck. Choosing a VCR.

No.26: CD players: Spectral SDR-1000, Kinergetics KCD-40, Micromega CDF 1, Arcam Delta 70 and Black Box, Mission PCM II, Quad 66. A panel compares CD and LP, and Keith Johnson talks about rethinking audio.

No.25: Preamps: YBA One, Sima 3001, Dolan PM1, Sugden C28. Amps: YBA One and Sugden P28 (guess which we bought!). Paul Bergman on amplifier design.

No.24: Speakers: 3a MM and MS5, Snell Type Q, Elipson Colonne Design, Linn Kaber, Vandersteen 2ci, Camber 3.0 and 5.0, Opus 3 Chaconne and Credo, ProAc Response 2.

No.23: Turntables: Revolver, Audiomeca J-1 and Roma, Opus 3 Continuo, Well Tempered Wtrp. Are power conditioners useful? Getting the most from LP and CD.

No.22: Power line filters: Inouye and Adcom. Better speakers: Quad ESL-63, Vandersteen 2W, Bryston crossover, Velodyne ULD15. Is biampification better?

No.21: Tape decks: H/K TD262 & CD491, Nakamichi CR4 & CR-1A. Cassettes: TDK, Maxell, Sony, BASF, Scotch, Denon. Cables: Straight Wire, Isoda, Prisma, Space & Time.

No.20: CD: Adcom GCD-575, Mod Squad Prism, Micromega Optic, Arcam Delta 70 and Black Box. Tuners: QED T260, FT11, Quad FM4, Rotel RT870, Adcom GFT-555, Magnum Dynalab FT101A.

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LIVING VOICE AVATAR OBX-R

Looking for an affordable entry-level speaker? Despite appearances, this isn't it. A million speakers look just like it. Few sound anything like it. Or — and this is unfortunate — *cost* like it. Were it otherwise we would be announcing a miracle.

So perhaps it's not a miracle, but finding a speaker like this is an event. We first discovered it at a show in the US, and we came away wondering how they could make a speaker that keeps its package of virtues such a secret. The configuration is quite conventional. What you see is (mostly) what you get: two 15 cm doped paper woofers plus the famous Scanspeak Revelator soft dome tweeter in a rectangular box that doesn't even have rounded corners.

Not that it is entirely conventional. It is different from pretty much all its lookalikes in a number of ways.

Pick one up and you'll see the first way. Most speakers are heavy, with a shell made, typically, of thick MDF, and sometimes even heavier exotic materials. The Avatar's exoskeleton is pressboard, which is much lighter. The idea is that less mass means shorter energy storage. Of course, a cabinet that light requires a lot of bracing, and this one has it.

If you're not careful, picking this speaker up can reveal another difference in a rather painful way. The black bottom part is not actually an integral part of the speaker. It is a hollow frame, with neither top nor bottom, also made of light material. And it can easily drop right onto your foot, because it is held on only by four (supplied) wads of Blu-Tack.

The final difference is that the crossover network is not inside the enclosure, but in a separate external box, which you can see on the page across. The black and red binding posts are the input (Living Voice assumes you will be biwiring), and the other posts are color-matched to the four binding posts at the rear of the speaker. Each speaker has its own crossover box, fitted with large cones. You will, of course, need a second set of high quality speaker cables to go between outboard crossover (the "OBX-R" of the model name), but when you've spent this sort of money for a speaker you can prob-

ably manage the extras too.

The crossover box is rather large (and implicitly pricey), and as you would expect, Living Voice has spent a bundle on better than average parts. Hovland Musicaps can be found on the inside, as can Clarostat non-inductive wirewound resistors. The inductors are made without metal cores. This does have a downside, because an air-core coil requires a lot more wire than a solid core inductor. However air cores don't saturate, which means the crossover can be driven much harder without bizarre things happening.

Because Living Voice was new to us (and to most North Americans), we initially assumed that the company began life making speakers for Mama Bear...neither too big nor too small. Not so. Company founder and designer Kevin Scott actually began with a model called the Air Partner, a horn speaker that could dwarf a Klipschorn. Like the Klipsch, it couldn't find a corner (literally) in very many homes. The Auditorium series followed. Says Scott, "Anyone with broad musical taste will be happier with system that does all things to an 80% standard rather than one that does 80% of things to a 100% standard." Something to ponder.

We asked for our review speakers extra early, so that we could use them in our room at the Montreal show (see our complete report elsewhere in this issue). Our experience at the show revealed one important aspect of this speaker. It is highly sensitive to room placement, and it can easily turn nasty if you're not paying attention. When we first set them up we were highly disappointed at how shrill and constipated it seemed to be. Only after three moves were we finally happy. We weren't surprised to find that these speakers needed the same sort of attention when we set them up in our Alpha room.

But after that, we were in for a wild ride.

As with the other speaker reviewed in this issue, we used a set of favorite LPs, starting with the *Olympic Fanfare* from *Center Stage* (on Wilson Audio, but long discontinued). The first thing we noticed was the great sense of spaciousness. The room walls seemed to have been



pushed back.

We admired the timbre of the brass instruments: the trumpets, and — lower down the scale — the trombones. "They're not as brash as with our reference," said Reine, but I found them a little shrill before." Albert agreed, noting approvingly that the color of the music was more neutral. He especially liked the cymbals, which few speakers can reproduce really well.

But how did the Avatar do at the bottom end? We had selected this recording deliberately, because the rendition of the tympani is particularly excellent. You can hear the baton striking the drum membrane most satisfyingly.

At least you can with our reference speakers, whose push-pull woofers can maintain control down to Richter scale frequencies. Though the Avatar has two woofers, the cabinet has a reflex port at the rear. Ported speakers have reduced control of cone movement below the system's resonant frequency. That gives low-pitched sounds a certain "bloom" that can hide detail. Of course the majority of speakers in all price ranges have the same problem...and it's a problem that

won't show up on many recordings.

The Avatar did outstandingly well with one of our favorite recordings, Walton's *Façade* (Reference Recordings RR-16 or RR-2102CD). The infamous piccolo in the opening tableau, which can take your ears off with the wrong speaker, was still quite sharp, but rather more natural than with our own speakers. The other instruments were also better rendered. The trumpet and the clarinet were especially attractive. The snare drum seemed more distant, but its clarity certainly didn't suffer. Fine details, including the castanets and the reverberation, were startlingly limpid. "The midrange and the highs are more refined than with our reference speaker," said Albert. Reine expressed an initial reservation, wondering whether all of the energy in this remarkable recording was being transmitted. A second listen convinced her that it was.

The Living Voice did spectacularly well on a difficult recording, an audiophile classic, Amanda McBroom singing *Gossamer*. Though it is found on the Sheffield *Amanda Gold* CD, we listened to the original direct-cut LP. Interesting!

But interesting for all the right reasons. McBroom's voice was extraordinarily natural, with even those difficult essences tamed. The words were of course easy to follow. We all commented on the piano as well, because it sounded so...well, *real*. The guitar was easier to follow. The rather subtle percussive effects used behind the voice and piano were considerably clearer. More than that, some previously inaudible instruments emerged from their hiding place.

SUMMING IT UP...

Brand/model: Living Voice Avatar OBX-R

Price: C\$10,975/US\$7295. Surcharge for rosewood: C\$300/US\$200.

Dimensions: 102 cm x 21.5 x 27 cm
Outboard crossover: 42 x 26 x 12 cm

Sensitivity: 94 dB

Impedance: 6 ohms

Most liked: Extraordinary competence with all categories of music

Least liked: Easy to tip over

Verdict: A reference-quality speaker in plainclothes

REFERENCE QUALITY?

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"It's all there The ne Requiem, Ref was a challe includes a sy the excerpt w nam, mostly p reproduce as y and an organ. about as close expect. The e remarkable mu singers joined t

By the time the crescendo with organ arrived, we had goosebumps. This isn't the sort of thing you want to analyze too closely.

Oh well, perhaps you do. Once again the tone was warm, though we tempted to suppose that an artificial oration was added to the music was of course none of the great added to the sound by too many ears. Depth was excellent. By were considering whether this might be the new reference for our system. "With a reference I'd compromise," said Albert, but if I have to compromise, this is the compromise I'd choose."

The Living Voice sounded quite different from our reference on the Chopin Scherzo No. 2 (RCA RDCE-7), with a richer, warmer sound to Auer's Steinway. The impact of the powerful chords in the opening of each section was not as

was played that scherzo). We weren't surprised, because this was a direct-cut LP, with no splicing-in of retakes possible. "There's something else I can hear," said Gerard. "You know what? They should have called in the Steinway

word "Wow!" on his notepad. The percussion sequence was not even the most impressive

Feldman's piano was was the electric bass. s solid, with plenty of the finesse of detail ed by any blunting of ing.

h its slim enclosure, esis of the rock'n'roll ed to have little dif- tages, so perhaps it oo. We mean real multilayered stuff onic music for com- riginal Pink Floyd

to this celebrated erence speakers. It embered it. No, it dn't own anything ference system 30 was made to be ou could imagine he Living Voice

hat we hadn't ne out sounding eording. The highs were nging clocks in reathe and Time

were astonishing in their effortless clarity. The lows? That very deep percussive "heartbeat" in Time, which could vanish entirely with lesser speakers, was very much there. Nothing missing at the extremes, even when we put the pedal to the metal. But...

that the aker, and he middle ded quite before. In are layers believe it er, albeit With the

Avatar those layers separate, letting you hear "through" one layer clear through to all the others. We no longer had to strain to make out the distant voices that can be found throughout the disc. They moved to the foreground, or just back of it. The space around the speakers had opened up and made room for much more music.

MOZART AS HE SHOULD BE

Klavier continues to push the envelope on CD sound quality. Lowell Graham pushes the musical envelope too. These wonderful Mozart pieces just glow. Drop by <http://www.uhfmag.com/Klavier.html>.

America. Because the percussion instruments in particular have such diverse timbres, they easily show up a speaker whose internal resonances make them all sound similar.

Of course the Avatar had no such problem, but it gave us more than we had expected. "I thought it sounded great before," said Reine. Albert had written the

There were other changes too. The guitars had changed timbre, giving the entire musical structure a different tone, one that was detailed and coherent, but never shrill. Awesome!

How did Living Voice pull off this trick? Would our instruments reveal their secrets?

The Avatar's frequency response, shown in the top photo (measured at 100 dB at 1 meter, on line with the tweeter, using pink noise) is very good. There is a slight rolloff at the top end, and a dip around 1.8 kHz. The roughness below 500 Hz has more to do with the room (our Alpha room in fact). Response remains

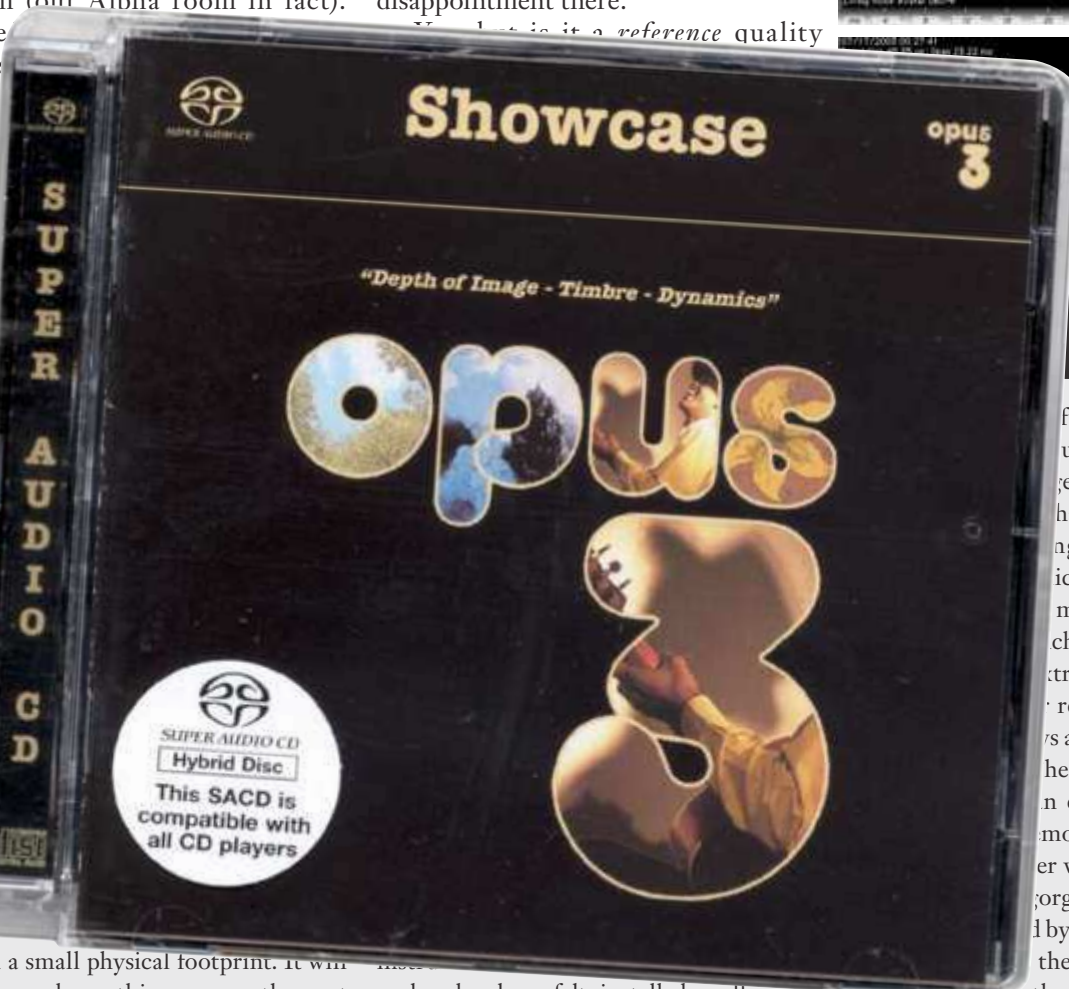
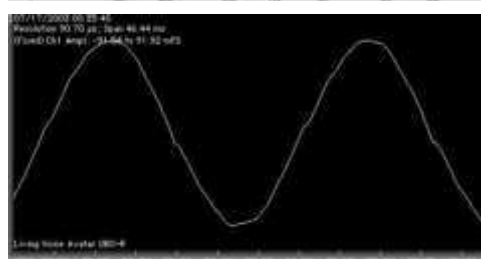
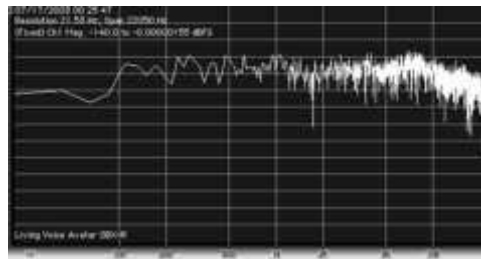
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The

bottom photo) was not bad, though not quite as terrific as we had supposed from the speaker's performance on music. The wave is somewhat misshapen, with a very large dip in the horizontal part, and with a notch in the riser that suggests a small phase error. This is a pretty good square wave all the same.

What conclusions to draw?

We had expected the Avatar to do very well, and it certainly didn't disappoint us. Notwithstanding its unassuming look, it is an extraordinarily competent speaker, and listening to good music through it is nothing less than an experience. No disappointment there.

What is it a reference quality



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Some speakers, have such a small physical footprint. It will reproduce nearly anything you can throw at it with grace and respect for musical virtues. And I say "nearly" from elementary caution, not because I've witnessed any exceptions.

True, it requires proper care and feeding. But then I've been told Ferraris won't run on regular gas, either.

—Gerard Rejskind

Some speakers make a strong statement

replaced and new felts installed on all pianos. Singers got over their colds and drums were tightened to a snap.

And every time a piece ended — always too soon, it seemed — I was left with a smile on my face, and I was a step closer to live.

—Albert Simon

Decidedly, it was a terrific day spent listening to great sound. These speakers have

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d by the sound of the brass,
the tympani, and by the
effectiveness of other percussive effects. In
one piece with organ, the tutti was powerful
and even thrilling.

These speakers don't hide a thing, though, and they don't forgive the smallest errors in musicianship. The highs can become downright unpleasant if the recording job was botched. Musicians and sound engineers be warned!

—Reine Lessard



VECTEUR AV-6 MULTICHANNEL AMP

Sure, you can set up a home theatre (or audio surround) system by buying the best amplifiers and stacking them up to the ceiling. And perhaps they'll even survive the heat buildup. Then again, it's much easier to buy a single chassis with all the power amplification you'll ever need. Too bad multichannel amps are such lousy compromises.

But they don't have to be.

The AV-6 is large and heavy, though it is neither one if you consider that it contains no fewer than six channels. And they're not channels that are intended for listening at a whisper, either. The advertised power is 120 watts per channel, enough to feed a substantial home theatre system in a large room. Of course, with the advent of music surround systems, such as that of SACD, an amplifier like this has non-video uses as well. It may even be an interesting choice for two-channel use, a possibility we'll get to shortly.

As you'd expect, there's not much to the front panel: just the on-standby button and a small pilot light. The rear

is all business as well, with a good quality jack and proper binding posts for each of the six channels. The removable power cord is billed as audiophile quality, though it appears to be the usual molded cord with a better quality AC plug. Well, that's better than nothing.

The AV-6 has two power supplies, each with its own massive toroidal transformer, as you'll see from the picture on the next page. The configuration explains the unusual choice of six channels — with two power supplies, the good balance can be maintained only if the number of channels is even divisible by two. Each power supply, then, handles three channels. Unlike some multichannel amps, the AV-6 is not modular, and

Six channels on a very heavy chassis. Is it as good as the other amps of the marque?

you can't add or subtract sections, nor are other versions available.

The top, which also covers the sides of the amplifier, is heavily coated on both sides by what appears to be a bituminous material, with the result that you can't make it ring no matter how hard you hit it. Though we often see covers with damping pads glued to the inside, we don't recall ever seeing quite this level of damping before. Does it matter? Well, if you believe that any electrical circuit can act like a microphone (and we do, for reasons you'll understand in a moment), this is a nice thing to see.

We believe that an AV amplifier is competent only if it can hold its own in a music system. For that reason, we held our listening session in the Alpha room, using just two of the Vecteur's six channels. We selected channels 3 and 4, because those two are fed by different power supplies. We broke out a set of favorite LPs, and challenged the Vecteur AV-6 to show us what it could do.

It showed us right from the first notes on the first recording, *Façade* (Reference Recordings RR-16 or RR-2102CD). Our

initial impression was that it sounded much like the reference amplifier, which is of course much more expensive and packs four fewer channels. None of the recording's exquisite detail got lost. The timbres of the many solo instruments used in this orchestral suite were not only plausible, but gorgeous (which may or may not come to the same thing). The bassoon was especially nice, and made us all smile. There are a lot of softer instruments playing in the background in sections of the suite, and so good is the amplifier's transparency that none was ever hidden. The tiny clues that reveal the reverberation were of course present. The rhythm was flawless, and William Walton's clever counterpoints emerged intact. Really, there's not much more we could have asked for.

Nor did the AV-6 disappoint us on the Rutter *Requiem* (RR-57). The opening of the *Requiem Aeternam* is soft, with the tympany marking the rhythm, and a solo cello adding strong emotional tension. This was a promising beginning, and we could hear to the back of the hall. Would the voices of the singers sound as they would at a live concert? Pretty much, yes. The counterpoint involving a solo harp and the male and female choirs was strikingly beautiful. Sibillancy was audible, as it is in real life, but without exaggeration. The flute solo near the end was clear and beautiful. Both Reine and Albert used the word "majestic" to describe the sound of the orchestra and chorale.

Once again we were struck by the similarity of tone between our reference amplifier and this one. "It doesn't have a different coloration, either warmer or cooler," said Albert. "It has the same personality as our reference, and I mean that in the best sense."

Clearly this Vecteur has a talent for rendering subtle detail, and we were certain that would stand it in good stead on our harp recording: Marcel Tournier's *Vers la source dans le bois* (from the Reference Recordings *Sound Show* LP, and also found on a Klavier CD, *Caprice*). Certainly nothing was missing. This astonishing piece alternates between gossamer-soft notes that could easily vanish into the haze and powerful chromatic chords you may not be used



to hearing from the harp. This amplifier handled both extremes with ease, following the melody through all of its myriad transformations. The rhythm was rendered with sureness. The sonic virtues of this famous recording were all there too, including the eerie sense of great depth. Reine labelled the performance perfect, and Albert wondered whether possibly the AV-6 might be outperforming our reference amplifier.

We knew by then that we weren't in for any unpleasant surprises.

Of course the Vecteur didn't disappoint us on the legendary *Jazz at the Pawnshop* recording. We selected the old Gershwin standard, *Lady Be Good*, and enjoyed every second. The legendary depth and ambience of this live pub recording were well reproduced. The percussion was excellent, neither too light nor unduly emphasized. The overall sound was light (in the good sense, not because the bass is weak) but with superb impact on the drums. The

cymbal, which is often troublesome, was entirely natural.

So was the piano, the heart of this piece (appropriately enough for a Gershwin song). The string bass, which can all but vanish on some systems, was easy to follow, but without the stodginess that can weigh down the music. Arne Domnérus's saxophone was clear and sensuous, without a hint of shrillness in the higher registers.

As sometimes happens with this recording, the voices of the pub's more sobriety challenged patrons were all too clear. At the same time, they did seem to be farther away than usual, and indeed we could easily gauge the distance between ourselves and each of the instruments.

We know from experience that some very refined amplifiers begin to sound gritty when they are called upon to do heavy lifting. We looked for a recording with challenging dynamics. For two speaker reviews in this issue we had used Pink Floyd's classic *Dark Side of the Moon*. We put it on. Would the Vecteur run out of breath if we got ambitious with the volume control?

Well, no, and we hadn't really expected it to. The sheer impact of the two selections (*Breath* and *Time*) was impressive. The nearly buried voices underneath the layers of music and sounds were nicely projected in space. The famous clock sequence was crystalline without getting shrill or annoying. "I could have counted the clocks," said Reine. Added Albert, "It was a fireworks display. It sounded at least as good as with our reference."

SUMMING IT UP...

Brand/model: Vecteur AV-6

Price: C\$4790/US\$3590

Dimensions: 43 x 46 x 11.5 cm

Rated power: 6 x 120 watts into 8 ohms

Most liked: Warm, detailed, delightful sound

Least liked: One channel too few, or is it one too many?

Verdict: Audiophiles turned off by the "AV" label won't know what they're missing

We're expecting mail from the flat-earthers, those who believe that all amplifiers with adequate power will, in the absence of a truly egregious engineering blunder, sound alike. We reviewed *two* multichannel power amps in this issue. And if you think they must both sound the same...

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LISTENING ROOM

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—Albert Simon

...waiting for vecteur to get a product really, really wrong. It doesn't look as though it will be this year. The AV-6 is ... that it's tempting to talk about

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—Reine Lessard

space and reveal the size of the hall? is valuable for its own sake. In many ways the character of this amp

—Gerard Rejskind

In the next issue of



A surround sound tube preamp from Copland, two amazing CD players, an astonishing high-powered integrated amp, a terrific new phono stage

And that's only the start!



COPLAND CVA-535

This remarkable Danish company has produced not only some of the world's best-sounding products (we know...we own two of them), but also some of the audio world's top bargains. Of late Copland has been moving into surround sound. In our next issue we'll be reviewing the CVA-306 six-chan-

nel tube preamp. How does it sound? Superb (you heard it here first). So we were optimistic that this five-channel solid state power amplifier would also break new ground.

It's a neat package. You can see the inside on the next page. The power supply is gigantic. The five channels are arranged in individual modules,

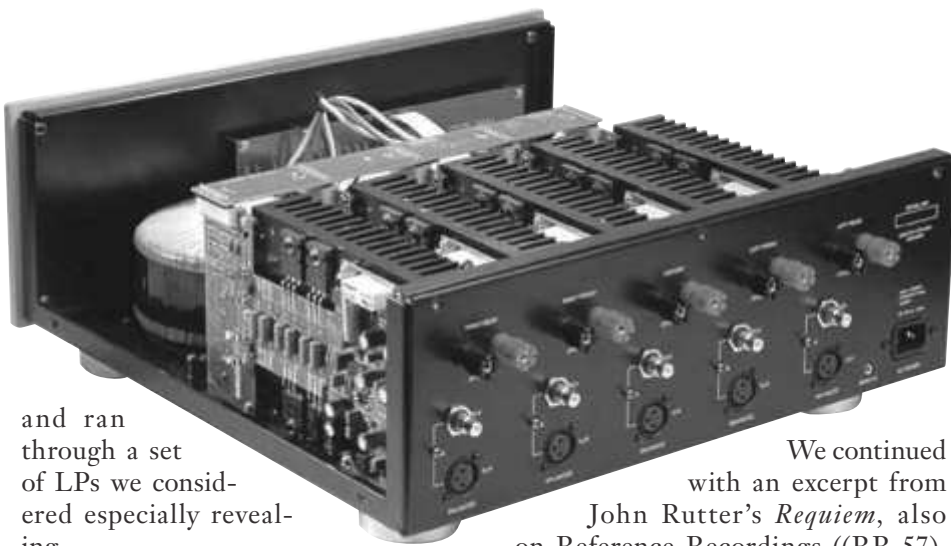
though they are not removable as they are in some amps. For each input you have a choice of a pretty good RCA jack or (for balanced lines) an XLR jack. The output posts work well.

We gave it a few extra hours of break-in, and then gave it a fairly tough test: we took it into our Alpha room so that it could pretend to be a two-channel stereo amp. The CVA-535 will mostly see duty as a movie amplifier, of course, but we figure that if it doesn't have the moxie and the finesse to do justice to music, it will lose a lot of what's in a movie as well.

The 535 looks as though it should be a first cousin of the CTA-520 amplifier we gave a warm review to in our last issue. Could this multichannel amp be just the CTA-520 with extra channels? *That* would be nice.

But if it were, wouldn't it have to be two and a half times bigger? It isn't...not quite. Perhaps more significantly, it costs only about 35% more. That could mean it's a bargain. Or perhaps something else.

We performed the test in our Alpha system, using two of its five channels,



the singer's voices rather grainy, though Reine thought the amplifier treated the chorale better than it treated the orchestra. This was not turning into a lot of fun.

Nor did the fun pick up with our harp recording, Tournier's *Vers la source dans le bois*. None of us wrote much, because there wasn't much to say. Once again, the sound was light, slicing off the harp's delightful lower registers. "It's bland," said Albert.

With sinking hearts we slipped on *Lady Be Good* from *Jazz at the Pawnshop*. Once again we had the impression that we needed more volume, but turning the

volume knob didn't help. The saxophone was fine, but was an octave higher than it should have been. The piano was played louder than it should have been. The bass was gone. The drums were flat. It was not its custom-made sound, but as well buy a cheap one.

It was not intended. We had the impression it didn't deserve the heart to

and probably because of pressure. I believe that there is a theatre. Their music is your guess. How many of the world's manufacturers came



was spectacularly. It isn't just wrong, it's Copland's other side. I expect mediocrity. Nothing.

—Gerard Rejskind

The products of this company have amazed me enormously, and I must be saddened at the necessity of trash. It throws a bit of a shadow on me, I think.

To explain this? Oh, it is not without reason. I found it increasingly difficult to rate on the test. My mind was elsewhere, somewhere more pleasant.

—Reine Lessard

and ran through a set of LPs we considered especially revealing.

The first is one of the most beautiful a lot but never gets to the heart of the matter. William Walton's *Façades* is a masterpiece. The recordings RR-16 or RR-17 are subtle musical details, and we were in a suite, and we were that we didn't see. Were we playing Reine and Gerard? It would be the case, and the volume and listening better.

What was happening seemed to be substantial. Even though it seemed somehow recording's celebration and uncertain. Reine and Gerard said so before the end.

We continued with an excerpt from John Rutter's *Requiem*, also on Reference Recordings (RR-57). Well, it was all there, or was it? "It's all



LISTENING ROOM

I won't say much. I started to wonder why I heard so much depth.

I thought it was... Of what? We just started, the music is great. Well, it was...

And then I was looking for more music. I wanted to find more occasional brashness.

I know some real

do things by halves. When it gets a product right, as it has a number of times, it likes to

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PLACING THE CENTRE SPEAKER

If you're using a front screen, or even a plasma, placing the centre speaker is a pain in the neck. With any other speaker, it's simple. In a television set, it gets difficult. In a plasma, the speaker is positioned behind the TV. At best that's too far from the TV. It is almost certainly too far from the TV that was initially where we placed the centre speaker of our K... There didn't appear to be a problem.

If the speaker's not too large, you can put it on top of the TV set, but there are three obvious problems.

First, even a shielded speaker placed right on a TV with a cathode ray tube, will cause the TV to go psychedelic. Second, they stopped making flat-panel speakers decades ago, the speaker is not as flat as you'd like if you so much as breathe on it. Third, putting a potent vibrator on top of a TV is like a loudspeaker atop 75 lbs. is...well, inadvisable.

You can, of course, order a custom piece of furniture, with a shelf for the TV to tuck into, and an upturned shelf for the central speaker. Experience

term "multiple inventory." Fortunately, the platform isn't difficult to build by anyone who owns a power drill, and perhaps a protractor.

Here's the assignment we gave ourselves. The platform had to accept the six very different centre speakers we had rounded up for our very first test series. It had to be unconditionally stable even if someone brushed up against it (or if the cat...but we don't want to go there). And — this is the tough part — it had to be decoupled mechanically from the TV. Any

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NOT TO BE MISSED

The world's greatest harpist, plus an exceptional flutist. Original recording by Keith Johnson, masterfully brought to CD by Bruce Leek.



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CINEMA

Diagram of the front (at left) are four SSK

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MILTY

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QUEEN OF COUNTRY

The original Queen, never dethroned, is Loretta Lynn. But then came Dolly, to claim her own crown.

A derivation of Western music — an original and totally American style whose rhythms suggested horseback travel and whose lyrics evoked campfires under the stars — country music became popular in the 50's and has never ceased to grow. It has moved from the prairie to the clubs and concert halls, and the horse has given way to the pickup truck, and to the luxurious buses that ferry country stars, their crews and instruments. Far from the lights of the cities, those campfire evenings have lost none of their appeal. You have to attend a country music festival to understand it. Such colorful spectacles bring together for a few days singers, musicians and fans, in a celebration of music, friendship and joy of living.

Dolly Parton

One of the most delicious voices

capable of carrying a country lyric from the page to our hearts, fresh as a mountain stream, with a hint of lightness that reveals its overflowing tenderness...such is the voice of Dolly Rebecca Parton.

It was in 1946, in a valley at the foot of Tennessee's Smoky Mountains, that was born the fourth of eventually 12 children. Irish and Scottish by her father, she was one-eighth Cherokee on her mother's side.

It's easy to imagine that her childhood was not one of ease, yet she received life's greatest treasure, love. Her father knew hard work, and her extraordinarily devoted mother used her ingenuity to moderate her children's feelings of poverty. Of course all that devotion couldn't save her from exhaustion when she had

a child in her womb and another in her arms, busy with housework, cooking and sewing. When she fell seriously ill, as happened several times, the father was off at his job and the children were left to themselves.

The Partons have the essentials of life, but certainly not all of the modern comforts. No electricity, no radio other than one whose battery is perpetually dead, without TV of course, without books other than school texts, with a single toilet for all. Bathing means going down to the river, at least in summer. In winter life is more difficult, though somehow they all manage to keep clean. Mother Parton makes the soap. The children must trek long miles through all kinds of weather to attend the one-room country school with one teacher for some 20 pupils.

It is only by hearsay that they learn of the century's conflicts and catastrophes, and in the same fashion they learn of the existence of such important persons as film stars. Mountain life in Tennessee at the time little favors personal development. Dolly is the only one of her family, and perhaps of her village, to finish high school. It's not that she likes school, as she will later admit, but that her intuition tells her she will need certain basic

by Reine Lessard

AN ICON: KITTY WELLS

Early country music was a male preserve, and even female singers sang songs that described the world through men's eyes. And then everything changed, thanks to a strong young woman with pluck and a lot of singing talent.

She is born Muriel Ellen Deason in 1919 in Nashville. Her father, an amateur country singer and guitarist, plays local dances. Kitty learns the guitar from him, and begins to sing. She leaves school at 15, and joins her sisters in an act named, of course, The Deason Sisters. In 1937 she marries country music legend Johnny Wright, with whom she will enjoy a successful career. In 1943 she adopts her stage name of Kitty Wells.

Though attractive enough, Kitty is hardly a glamour girl. Her talent will overcome her lack of vocal artifice, for she sings with every fibre of her being. It is wartime, and soldiers love her songs, but she becomes known mainly through jukeboxes and in Honky Tonks, those poorly-lit places of ill repute in which country fans get to hear her songs, some from her own pen.

She records the first Country Gospel song to find its way onto a major label, *Gathering Flowers for the Master's Bouquet*, on RCA Victor. That might mark the finale of her career, but for an astonishing event.

The number one country star of the time, Hank Thompson, has a hit song by Carter and Warren titled *The Wild Side of Life*:

*I didn't know God made honky tonk angels
I might have known you'd never make a wife*

Provoked, Kitty writes a reply, which she records in 1952: *It Wasn't God Who Made Honky Tonk Angels*.

*It's a shame that all the blame is on us women
It's not true that only you men feel the same
From the start most every heart that's ever broken
Was because there always was a man to blame.*

To Kitty's surprise the song is a runaway hit, climbing to first place on the country charts and even making the Top 30 hit parade. It is the first country song to let a woman's voice be heard. For the next 14 consecutive years, Kitty Wells will be named number one country female artist. There is no more talk of retirement. Decca offers her a lifetime contract, the first for a female country singer. She records 35 Top 20 country hits, and two dozen of them make the Top 10, including *Paying for That Back Street Affair*, *Hey Joe*, and *I'll Always Be Your Fraulein*. She sings across North America and around the world, solo and in duets with such country stars as Red Foley and Webb Pierce. She also sings with her husband and her children. Their final concert is on New Year's Eve 2000, in Nashville. She is 81.

Kitty Wells breached the all-male domain of country music, paving the way for a multitude of women who would bring their own spirituality, their hearts, their emotions, and their way of speaking to the world of country music.

"What's a union?" she asks candidly.

Anyone else would have slunk off in disappointment. But Dolly is already what she will always be: tenacious, conscious of her own talent, sure of herself, and never one to back away from a challenge. She insists...she wants to sing one song, just one. The director of the Opry won't hear of it. Dolly buttonholes Jimmy C. Newman just before he steps on stage. Newman talks to Johnny Cash, and the way is cleared for Dolly.

It's not her voice that grabs the attention. Her timbre is on the light side, though with a natural vibrato that lends itself to all sorts of inflections and a broad range of emotions. What amazes the spectators is that here is a child not yet in her teens playing *her own songs*. Now *there's* something you don't see every day!

She is an instant hit, with calls for several encores. By the time she leaves the stage she is offered a contract: \$20 a week to be a regular on the Opry (the amount will of course rise in the years ahead). She accepts it as a summer job, for she is already mature enough to know she needs to complete her studies.

Nashville

In 1964 she is 18 years old. Ready for a new life she moves from her home town to Nashville. The very first day she is at the laundromat where she meets Carl Dean, who will become her first and only husband. When Dean proposes, Dolly poses one condition: that he will never interfere with her career. In 1966 they are married, and Carl keeps his promise.

Carl is as opposite to his young wife as he can be. She is outgoing, while he is reserved. She loves the spotlight, while he prefers to be far from the madding crowd. She is (necessarily) nomadic, while he is sedentary, preferring to take care of the farm work on their vast domain. They are, in short, two opposites who live much of their lives apart. The arrangement seems to suit them, for they are happy in their very different occupations, and delighted to find each other again.

Her first hit single recording will be an autobiographical song titled *Coat of*

knowledge if she is to succeed in life. For her, life seems already all planned out.

How does one explain it? How is it that, in a home with no books other than catalogs, and no music other than that heard in the rare time when the radio's battery is fresh, such a young girl spends her leisure time writing texts and setting them to music? Truly, classical music has no monopoly on child prodigies. By the age of seven she has things to say, and she

says them in lyrics for which she composes tunes on the crudest of guitars. Ideas flow from listening to ordinary people speak.

By the age of 10 she is singing in Knoxville on the Cas Walker radio and TV show. She is only two years older when she first appears on the stage of Nashville's fabled Grand Ole Opry. "You can't be on the Opry because you ain't in the union," she is told.

Many Colors, destined to become her theme song. The lyrics are moving. The coat of the title, sewn by her mother from diverse scraps of material, had resulted in much teasing by her schoolmates. Mrs. Parton would console her daughter, telling her that her coat was like that of Joseph in the Bible:

*But they didn't understand it
And I tried to make them see
That one is only poor
Only if they choose to be
Now I know we had no money
But I was rich as I could be
In my coat of many colors
My momma made for me*

In 1967, another of Dolly's songs, *Dumb Blonde*, impresses superstar and producer Porter Wagoner, who hires her to sing with him. The song is a riposte to those who judge others by their appearance:

*You flew too high up off the ground
It's stormy weather an' had to come back
down*

*But I've found new thread for my old spool
Just because I'm blonde
Don't think I'm dumb*

Cause this dumb blonde ain't nobody's fool

The following year leads into a long period punctuated by nominations and awards. But by 1972, after her No. 1 chart hit *Joshua* confirms her as a country star, she can see that the success of the duet is due more to her than to Wagoner. She strikes out on her own, but not before writing *I Will Always Love You*, a country chart hit that year, and again in 1982 and 1995. The song reveals the full measure of her talent as a singer, and it is heard around the world. It will remain a country classic.

In the years since, Dolly Parton would become a prolific songwriter, creating songs that are tender, often amusing, and deep in meaning. She is an excellent guitarist, one of the best in country music; she plays the banjo and the autoharp as well. Even today she cannot read music, but that hasn't slowed her a bit.

Hollywood

In 1980 filmgoers are astonished to see her costarring with Lily Tomlin and Jane Fonda in the hit success *9 to 5*. She even wrote and sang the title tune, which

PATSY CLINE

Virginia Patterson Hensley is born in 1932 in the Appalachians in a home in which music has a choice place. Her parents buy her a piano when she turns seven, and she learns to play by ear. She is exposed mainly to popular and semi-classical music, yet surprisingly she falls in love with country music. She often tells her surprised family that one day she will sing at the Grand Ole Opry, and she will become a star. She works to realize her vow, though like many others she has to do a lot of other things before being able to live from her art.

When she is 14 she approaches Jim McCoy of WINC, who invites her to sing on his country radio show. She becomes a regular on local radio and at dances. While waiting for her big break she marries twice, first to Gerald Cline, whose last name she adopts, and then to Charlie Dick. In 1957 she appears on the Arthur Godfrey Talent Show, where she clinches first place with *Walkin' After Midnight*.



*I walk for miles
Along the highway
Well, that's just my way
Of sayin' I love you
I'm always walkin'
After midnight,
Searchin' for you*

Her voice is a natural for ballads, and she is urged to move to popular music. She refuses, for she is a country girl at heart. By singing ballads the way she hears them in her head, she blazes the way for female country singers to follow.

One of her first songs, written after a 1961 car accident that lands her in hospital, will become a million seller.

*Crazy, crazy for feeling so lonely
I'm crazy, crazy for feeling so blue
I knew you'd love me as long as you wanted
And then someday, you'd leave me for somebody new*

During her hospital stay, Patsy hears one of her own songs, *I Fall to Pieces*, sung by a young singer named Loretta Lynn. She summons Loretta to her bedside, and the two will become fast friends.

*You want me to act like we've never kissed
You want to forget; pretend we've never met
And I've tried and I've tried, but I haven't yet...
You walk by, and I fall to pieces*

Emotions show through Patsy's voice. Listen to the final syllable of her song *Faded Love*, and you'll hear that she is crying.

Patsy Cline is too soon lost. On March 5, 1963, at the age of 31, she dies in a plane crash. One of her fans has written that "She was a flesh and blood human being with real substance whose time on this earth was far too short." She received many posthumous honors, including a film on her life bearing the title of one of her songs, *Sweet Dreams*.

Dolly Parton on a parade float, ©Duane Gordon, www.dollymania.net, used with permission



picks up an Oscar nomination.

*Nine to five, yeah, they got you
where they want you
There's a better life
And you dream about it don't you?
It's a rich man's game
No matter what they call it
And you spend your life
Putting money in his pocket
Nine to Five*

Her innate acting talent is quickly recognized, and two years later she co-stars with Burt Reynolds in a musical, *The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas*. Snubbed by the purists, the film will nonetheless be one of the greatest musical hits of all time. She is superb in her role as a Madam. Among the songs are Carol Hall's title song, and Dolly's own *I Will Always Love You*, which she sings with Reynolds. She is nominated at the Golden Globes for Best Actress.

Dolly Parton and Kenny Rogers... what a great duo they make, and what terrific talent they have. The TV specials, recordings and live concerts they do together will nearly all turn into hits. Their album *Once Upon a Christmas* sells nearly four million copies. It includes a memorable song penned by Parton:

*We loved and laughed and played and
joked*

*Sang Christmas songs and talked to folks
Sleighed the fields and skied the slopes
Then to the lodge for dinner
But now it's time for us to go
As our hearts melt like chimney snow
There's just one thing I want to know
Can we do this next winter?*

Oh! What a Christmas to remember

One of Kenny Rogers' compositions, *Sweet Music Man*, is surely as moving as it is because Dolly sings it (it can be found on her album *Here You Come Again*). I've always been convinced he wrote it with her in mind.

In 1983, the top-selling album was Dolly's *Islands in the Stream*.

*Islands in the stream
That is where we are
No one in-between
How can we be wrong*

Sail away with me to another world

In 1984 she sings with Sylvester Stallone in the film *Rhinestone*. Dolly gets a Grammy nomination for *Tennessee Homesick Blues*.



Loretta Lynn, photo courtesy Rick Cornett

SOFTWARE

*I wish I had my old fishin' pole
And was sitting on the banks
of the fishing hole
Eating green apples and
waiting for the fish to bite
Life ain't as simple as it used to be
Since the Big Apple took a bite out of me
And Lord, I'm so Tennessee homesick
that I could die*

And Dolly gets good notices right in the Big Apple, at the New York Times in fact, both for her acting and for her singing and songwriting.

In 1989 we see her alongside Julia Roberts, Sally Field and Shirley McLaine in the immensely popular film *Steel Magnolias*. She plays with panache a role in a made-for-TV thriller, *Wild Texas Wind*, with Ray Benson. In 1992 she stars in *Straight Talk* (recently released on DVD) and the following year *Hillbillies*.

When she was the *Playboy Interview* subject (and also the cover feature) in October 1978, she said she had then never seen a Broadway show, nor any other live stage play. She is a natural actress, moving across a sound stage as though she had always been there. No awkwardness. Everything she gives comes from inside, without outside influences, and without copying.

She told *Playboy* something else of great significance. If she had to choose between singing and writing, she would opt for writing. She believes that setting words on paper lets one put things into perspective, and can help heal the author first of all. She also believes that those who read her words, if they are suffering morally or physically, can be touched, and can find there some comfort.

Behind the image

The statistics are overwhelming. Dolly Parton has written more than 5000 songs. There hasn't been a year since 1968 when her songs haven't picked up at least one nomination or award. She has been named numerous times Best Female Vocalist or Best Country Singer, or been nominated for the Best Country Performance. Grammys and Oscars are no stranger to her either.

At one point she made an ill-advised leap into the world of mainstream popular music. It was a mistake that nearly cost her the devotion of her fans, and it

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Stereo Magazine (Germany)
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i-Audio Magazine (Singapore)
Vol 2 No.8

didn't last long. She returned to country with an album titled *Hungry Again*:

*Bring back the passion we had back then
The time has gone by,
now we've grown too content
Lets love like we're hungry again,
now and then
Lets love like we're hungry again*

Her writing includes an autobiography, *My Life and Other Unfinished Business*, and a children's book bearing the title of her first song, *Coat of Many Colors*.

This curvy woman with the extraordinary charisma, already a songwriter, singer, musician and actress, had more tricks up her sleeve, including a strong business sense. It is she who runs the Dolly Parton Enterprises empire. In 1986 she founded the Dollywood theme park, to celebrate her Smoky Mountain upbringing in Tennessee. Two years later she set up the non-profit Dollywood Foundation, to develop and run education programs for Tennessee children. Since then the Foundation has

LYNN ANDERSON



Another of the great ladies of country was born in North Dakota and grew up in California. Unlike many other country singers, she had a childhood of ease. She inherited her musical talent from her singer-songwriter parents, and her striking beauty from her mother. She had several hits penned for her by her mother, including *Ride, Ride, Ride*, *If I Kiss You Will You Go Away?* and *That's a No No No*.

She is a phenomenon. A crack horsewoman, she has won enough championships to be considered a real cowgirl. *I Was Country When Country Wasn't Cool*, she sings. She

has sung for five US presidents and for royalty, and appeared on many TV shows. Her biggest hit, the one that catapulted her to stardom, was Joe South's *I Never Promised You a Rose Garden*. The American Rose Society honored her by naming a rose after her.

spread to other states.

Her exceptional talent and her undisputed human qualities ultimately overcame the superficial judgments of the small-minded. Producers, music lovers and filmgoers have seen the exceptional person behind the well-modeled cheekbones, the flamboyant store-bought hair, the five-inch heels, the provocative bust accentuated by tight and low-cut clothes, the flashy jewelry and the spectacular flounces. They have had to admit that, beyond her immense talent as a country artist, actress and businesswoman, she has a natural goodness and generosity that no gossip can tarnish.

The years have not diminished her love of country music, which she has helped popularize worldwide. She is an exceptionally affecting person, and a megastar.

SHANIA TWAIN



Who is behind this pseudo-Native name inspired by her Ojibway stepfather? A woman that no one can ignore, since she and her songs have traveled around the world.

She is born Eileen Regina Edwards in 1965 in Windsor, Ontario. Her childhood and adolescence are anything but usual. From the time she is eight she writes and composes until her fingers cramp up. Her parents often awaken her late in the evening to go and sing in a local club, before noisy but appreciative crowds.

She is 21 when a car accident claim her parents, leaving her responsible for her three younger siblings. She gets a good paying job, all the while studying theatre. With her siblings grown up, she heads for Nashville with a demo cassette in hand.

The rest is history.

Tall and exceptionally beautiful, she has large green eyes that contrast with her striking brown hair, and she shines on disc, on stage or on TV. Today she lives in Switzerland with her producer and husband Robert John Lange, who has written some of her hit songs.

At last April's Juno Awards ceremony in Ottawa, she picked up the country music prize (for *I'm Gonna Getcha Good*), and the Artist of the Year award. Oh yes...and she hosted the gala!

The road is wide open before Shania Twain. She is proof that country music is not about to disappear.

The gossip

The questions are not new. What are her measurements? Was her impressive chest the creation of plastic surgery? What about her hair, which seems to change often? What about sex?

The Dolly Parton who first arrived on stage was just five feet high (152.4 cm), with a flat tummy, an impossibly slim waist, and a spectacular chest that attracted vulgar comments. She is still the same height, with a slim waist and flat tummy. However she says that, in 1986, she had plastic surgery to correct problems caused by too rapid a weight loss. She has also had peelings and collagen implants to erase wrinkles. She has never been embarrassed to admit that her hair is not her own.

Dolly is not reticent to admit that, yes, she likes sex. She is fortunate to be one of those who have had only good luck with the opposite sex, and she says she had never had a bad sexual experience.

LORETTA LYNN

Her life is different from a fairy tale in only one way: it wasn't a magic wand that brought her success. Rather it is thanks to her immense talent, her courage, her determination, and the admiration of a young man who believes in her, that she is propelled to the summit of country

music. She will never lose the sacred fire.

Born in 1934 in the Kentucky mining village of Butcher Holler, she helps her mother keep the house and care for her brothers and sisters. Her father Ted works in the mine, where coal dust will kill him at the age of 41.

Married at 13, Loretta has her first child at 14 and is the mother of four by the time she is 18. She sings to soothe her babies, as she had done at home. Her husband, Doolittle Lynn, nicknamed Doo or Mooney, is spellbound. He brings home a guitar, and tells his wife she has the talent to compete with the best.

She turns the pages of a magazine called *Country Song Roundup*, and gets the urge to start writing herself. She has a knack for it, writing songs without ever having learned to read music. While she works as a waitress in Custer, Washington, Mooney is convinced she can do better than anyone on the radio. In 1960 she begins singing at the Delta Grange Dance Hall in Lynden, and she records a first song on her own label.

*So turn that jukebox way up high,
And fill my glass up while I cry.
I've lost everything in this world,
And now I'm a honky tonk girl.*

Mooney sends the record to radio stations across the US, and hits the road to visit them, on the smallest possible budget. *Honky Tonk Girl* hits No. 14 on the Billboard chart, and Loretta signs with Decca. Her first hit for Decca is titled, appropriately, *Success*, and gets to No. 6. She is soon a regular on the Grand Ole Opry and the Wilburn Brothers Show. From then through 1979, Loretta's recordings are often on the Billboard Country Top 10.

She must have been something to see, a frail little woman, barely more than an adolescent, advancing to the microphone, all shy and timid until the first words of her song emerge from her lips. Only then does she recover her confidence and delight her audience. Her pure voice, tracking each note with accuracy, has the natural break that gives country music its charm.

Fist City is about a woman making eyes at Loretta's man:

*But the man I love when he picks up trash
he puts it in a garbage can,*

*"Anybody can sell you a stereo.....
.....that's your first problem!"*

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and that's what you look like to me...

Another song in the same vein, *You Ain't Woman Enough to Take My Man:*

Women like you, they're a dime a dozen

You can buy them anywhere

For you to have him, I'd have to move over

And I'm gonna stand right here

With words that emerge from her heart and her soul, she can express candidly, with a few broad strokes, the joys and pain of love, and the details of everyday life. She is bold enough to sing about hot topics like feminism and birth control. Of course, that doesn't delight

everyone, for it's unusual for a woman to talk so freely. But we might as well note this: the authentic voice of women in song was born with country music.

But all I've seen of this old world

Is a bed and a doctor bill

I'm tearin' down your brooder house

'Cause now I've got the pill.

From now on Loretta Lynn is a force to be reckoned with. Her rise is rapid. Her best-selling autobiography, *Coal Miner's Daughter*, becomes a hit film of the same title, with Sissy Spacek in the lead role. Her records sell in the millions,

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she packs the halls, and she is a frequent guest on the most-watched TV shows of the day. Her concerts with Conway Twitty and Patsy Cline are hits. She sings for presidents and crowned heads, and is voted most admired woman by a prominent magazine. The university of her home state bestows an honorary degree on her. Hard times are far behind her, and still she pushes herself to contribute still more. 'I ain't ever gone stop,' she says, "and when I do it's gonna

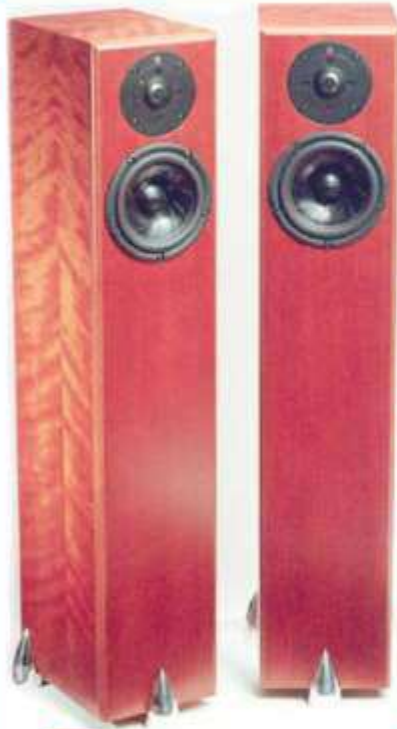
be right on stage. That'll be it."

She still hasn't stopped. A second volume of her autobiography, *Still Woman Enough*, is now out. In 1999 she scored three new hits, *Christmas Without Daddy, I'll Just Call You Darlin'*, and *From Seven Till Ten*. The following year she recorded a new album, *Still Country*, with long-time friend Randy Scruggs.

Loretta Lynn succeeded in her personal life too, bringing up six children — she now has 29 grandchildren.

And the First Lady of Country is a formidable businesswoman as well. She set up the 18 thousand square foot *Coal Miner's Daughter Museum* in Hurricane Mills, and continues to run the farm that she and her late husband set up.

Much as she enriched the cultural heritage of her country, Loretta Lynn hasn't let show business make her anything but what she is. "It's hard enough to be yourself," she once said, "without trying to be someone else."



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RECORD REVIEWS

Brahms Sonatas for Cello and Piano

Dyachkov/Saulnier

Analekta FL 2 3167

Lessard: Brahms wrote very few cello sonatas — just six by my count — but all of them deserve our admiration. You'll find three of them on this disc, masterpieces that unveil the composer's tender romantic side, played here by two talented artists: cellist Yegor Dyachkov and pianist Jean Saulnier.

The sound is so good that the timbres of both the cello and the piano are perfectly reproduced, and you discover with delight the very close rapport between these two musicians. Saulnier plays with precision and fluidity, and is always expressive. The velvet smoothness of Dyachkov's cello, due in equal parts to technical skill and expressiveness, is remarkable. An hour of pure delight!

Add this CD to your collection, and I think you'll agree. The more often you listen, the more it will win you over.

Premiere Evening

Lowell Graham & American Promenade Orch.

Klavier KCD 11053

Lessard: On this disc are composers and works filled with elements that promise the greatest auditory pleasure. It opens with an unfinished piece by Carl Maria von Weber, completed many years later by no less a luminary than Mahler. It is titled *Die Drei Pintos* (The Three Pintos), and this is its premiere recording. Its melodic lines, of great beauty, are interpreted masterfully under Graham's baton.

Much better known is the overture to Otto Nicolai's *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, which is absolutely charming, full of life and irresistible. It begins in promising fashion, with a breathtaking melody played by rich, silken strings. But then the perfect moment is shattered by the arrival of the tympani, played with no discernment, and bordering on rage. It continues in that fashion, and even becomes worse in the celebrated waltz halfway through the overture. Is it the

conductor's fault? Is the percussion simply exaggerated by the recording? I know only that the result is disastrous.

On the other hand, Édouard Lalo's *Arlequin, Musique de Carnaval*, another premiere recording, will enchant you. The strings are joined by an intriguing and mischievous flute that will draw you right in. There's a lovely waltz in there too, but then it's all over, a scant three minutes later.

The CD ends with Giovanni Battista Viotti's *Violin Concerto No. 22*, in which the orchestra is joined by soloist Fiorella Sommer-Link. She has a good violin, the Kreutzer, the product of Stradivari's best period, but once again something has gone wrong. The violin sounds thin and shrill, with the orchestra overpowering it in the tutti.

I played this CD several times, I can't tell you how many times, but my conclusion remained the same. In most of the pieces this normally excellent conductor has too heavy a hand. I'm not happy about this, my first negative review of a Klavier recording. Of course, reviewing is always a subjective enterprise, and perhaps you'll like it better than I did.

Carmin

Bia

Audiogram ADCD10163

Rejskind: When I mention this new recording from the wonderful Brazilian-French singer, I'm asked the same question: "Is it as good as the previous two?"

By and large the answer is yes, and it may be even better, but expect it to be different. The first impression is that there was more money available this time. The lush graphics and the photos, showing a barefooted and bare-legged Bia lounging on a red overstuffed chair on a hilltop, reflect the available budget. So do the complex musical arrangements. Is the recording quality better? It is less intimate, certainly, and

**by Reine Lessard
and Gerard Rejskind**

Bia's textured voice is less forward, with more natural sibilance. Yet she is not so far back that we have to strain to make out what she is singing. Pretty good. Yet the accompaniment is solid, with a bottom end that reaches to bedrock when it needs to.

But mere recording quality is not enough to justify a recommendation. What about the music itself?

I found one disappointment, and only one. The previous recordings (titled respectively *La mémoire du vent* and *Sources*) feature wonderful guitar work by Bia herself. This time she has more musicians, and she lets them do their work, concentrating on her singing. I'm glad to report that the singing is as mesmerizing as ever. Her voice is strong but effortless, with plenty of texture but no roughness. The rhythms are catching to the point of obsession. The songs, many of them composed by Bia herself, are often superb.

The one that gets the most radio play is *Lobo*, which has one of those gorgeous melodies that sticks in the mind (it's in Portuguese, with a French version on an unannounced track at the end). The CD's qualities don't end there, however. Try to sit still during *Mariana*, with its rapid Bossa Nova rhythm. A number of the songs are sambas. An example is *Je n'aime pas*, worth listening to for the words (in French) as well as the music...but don't miss the final line of the text. In the more languorous *Helena* she is accompanied by the rich and sonorous cello of Emmanuel Joussemet. There's a lot of flute on this album, played by Bia's longtime accompanist Dominique Bouzon. On *Dans mon cœur* Bouzon plays a gigantic flute called an octobasse, which goes down to where your speakers may or may not choose to follow.

There's really not a dull song on the disc, but there are two I can't avoid singling out. One is *Eu Vi* (I saw), a Portuguese translation by Bia of a fine old song by French Caribbean *chansonnier* Henri Salvador. The other, which closes the album, is titled *Inti*. It is a very old

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traditional song in the ancient Aymara language of the Indians of the Andes, and it is at once majestic and moving.

Well before this third recording came out, I heard Bia sing it in concert. Which leads me to my final recommendation. If she's singing anywhere near you, go by dog sled if you must, but...just go.

Soular Energy

Ray Brown Trio/Gene Harris

Pure Audiophile PA-002

Rejskind: It was maybe a dozen years ago. Ray Brown was in a Montreal church for a solo concert — how often have you seen a bassist doing a couple of hours of solo music? He recalled the first time he had played Montreal, in 1948. After his gig, he had gone to a late night bar to listen to a phenomenal young pianist. Impressed, he asked the young man to come touring with him. “Sure,” said the young pianist.

“Great. I’m Ray Brown. What’s your name?”

“Oscar. Oscar Peterson.”

Peterson would, of course, turn out to be one of the greatest jazz pianists of his era, and the the most famous of Canada’s jazz musicians. The tour stretched across an incredible five years.

Brown must have been 73 when I last saw him, not long before his death. He was playing as well as ever, and it was clear that he was still having the time of his life. Was he the greatest bass player of the jazz age? I’d be tempted to say so, though my impression of him is altered by the fact that he played with the best musicians of the jazz world: Peterson of course, but also drummer Shelly Manne, guitarist Laurindo Almeida, and the LA4 (of which Manne and Almeida were members as well).

I wasn’t familiar with Gene Harris, who plays piano on this 1984 recording, but Brown said he was one of the great ones, and that’s good enough for me. Besides, the proof is right here in these grooves.

And they’re some grooves! The Concord Jazz label over the years did some of the finest jazz recordings in the world...finest for the sound, and not only for the (admittedly fabulous) artists. Stan Ricker did the half-speed mastering of this double LP, and clearly

got everything just right. The pressing is done on transparent blue 180 gram vinyl, and it is as close to perfect as vinyl can get. Even the lead-in grooves are quiet, perhaps because the disc doesn’t have that stupid raised “GruvGard” edge, originally conceived to keep stacks of records apart on a changer.

Fortunately, the music deserves star treatment. Brown, Harris and drummer Gerryck King have a fine rapport together. Indeed, according to the original jacket notes, none of it is the result of rehearsal. This is an improvised album, though that may not be evident from the quality of the playing and the sheer togetherness of the trio. When more than one take was recorded, it came out quite differently the second time. That gave the producers of this double disc the opportunity to include alternative takes that are more than repetitions of the main ones. *Cry Me a River*, which is both the second track on Side A and the first track on Side D, is quite different the second time, but it is a tribute to the excellence of these musicians that neither sounds more “right” than the others. You’ll recognize several of the pieces without looking at the jacket: *Take the A Train*, *Teach Me Tonight* and *Sweet Georgia Brown* among others. What Ray Brown and his friends do with them is downright thrilling.

Soular Energy

Ray Brown Trio/Gene Harris

Hi-Res HRM2011

Rejskind: It’s a happy coincidence that, only three weeks after I received that excellent double LP, in came this DVD version from Hi-Res. It is nothing less than fabulous. Which will bring up the inevitable question: does digital finally beat analog?

The answer is that, if this doesn’t, nothing will. Like the superb LP, this 24 bit 96 kHz digital recording sounds amazingly coherent at the bottom end, which is good because that’s where Ray Brown does his work. The other extreme of the spectrum is perhaps even better than that of the LP. It is so clear and at the same time so natural that you don’t even *think* about whether the speakers are doing their job right. And the dynamics, as with other Hi-Res recordings, make



Red Book CDs sound like distant echoes. So, of course, does the excellent LP.

You lose something, you gain something. The digital disc doesn’t have the bonus tracks of the double LP. On the other hand, it does have a second side, containing a 192 kHz DVD-Audio version (the 24/96 side can be played on any DVD player).

By the way, the box carries the HDCD logo, which suggests that there must also be a Red Book layer for CD players. There isn’t, but the digital mastering from the original analog tape was done in HDCD, to improve the definition even more. Certainly the result is as good as one could possibly wish.

Amadeus (Director’s Cut) DVD

Abraham/Hulce/Jones

Étiquette numéro

Rejskind: Why are films about classical composers so wretched? Why are they so stupidly scripted, so poorly cast, so incompetently directed? Across the decades, films about Liszt, Chopin, Tchaikovsky, Grieg and a host of others have contributed mightily to convincing

those ignorant of serious music that they couldn't possibly be missing much.

The exception has long been *Amadeus*, Milos Forman's awesome masterpiece about Mozart and his contemporary composer, Antonio Salieri.

In a way, of truly about Mo Salieri and Go brilliant play, wh screen, Salieri is ful vocation for a bargain: if the a musician, he w his piety, his ex his chastity. God Salieri doesn't d bargain. God's ve denies Salieri the his creative urge, Mozart, a vulgar to recommend h that he sets notes were taking dictat himself. God's ult Salieri just enough ize how much bet than his own, and a his own music forg is praised — appro the skies.

I have watched countless times, fir on the original DV more to discover, is the music. Whe out this director's 20 minutes of mate The editing of Ama than brilliant. Woul that editing by picki make it a better fil I feared the latter. S says that the film or ally the cut he wan that producer Saul him that people wo a three hour film al musicians.

I'm not certain Za then again I'm not sur either. Of course, anyone who has seen a film dozens of time will resist change, but some of the new scenes disturbed me.

Consider the scene when Katerina Cavalieri, the pretty blonde soprano

Salieri relishes, plays her role in Mozart's *Abduction from the Seraglio*. Immediately after, when it is revealed that Mozart is engaged to marry Constanze, Katerina smashes her bouquet across Mozart's face, thus revealing to a horrified Salieri

slightly lengthened is the stupendous scene showing the dying Mozart composing the *Confutatis* from his *Requiem Mass* while Salieri takes dictation.

Best of all is the enhancement of both The colors are better The film is slightly self boosting the the full picture's with some scenes nes actually look ar superior to the soundtrack, with o effect.

word about the track on this ver- most dubbed films ing on Amadeus F. Murray Abra- as the original obbed it himself), (Constanze) nced New York l version the dub is much poorer, ng that afflicts s.

second disc with th the cost all by fortunate choice Constanze: the n, Meg Tilley, er game the day begin. It details ng in what was st society. And ous anecdotes. sited Prague's Giovanni was Don Giovanni Forman and ad lost Peter r found him in

about the extra been put in an h scenes often there were an h and without sibility that is within the reach of DVD technology.

When Mozart runs into opposition on his opera *The Marriage of Figaro*, he tells Salieri, "It is perfect as it is. I can't rewrite something that is perfect." I wish Forman had taken that line to heart.



The scene is very funny, but it is played as farce, and none of the rest of the film is. It properly belongs in some other movie.

Some of the additions are happier. Several opera segments are lengthened, and I'm not about to complain. Also



GOSSIP&NEWS

DLP REAR PROJECTION WOOF!

DLP stands for Digital Light Processor. Invented by Texas Instruments, it's a tiny digitally-controlled mirror which throw light on a screen. Of course you need thousands of them to make up a high resolution video image. The DLP first turned up in those light but potent front projectors, such as the ones from DreamVision.

Now the DLP is popping up in rear-projection HDTV monitors. We were surprised to find these new sets from Samsung, because Samsung's

rear projection TV's (using cathode ray tubes) had disappointed us when we were selecting our own reference monitor. They were built for brightness and punch, to run in what some critics call "torch mode."

The new DLP sets are something else again. At the demonstration we had, the range of colors and tones was impressive indeed. Reds did not drift toward orange. Indeed, on the larger of the two sets it had occasional flashes of hot pink. What is perhaps more impressive is that yellows actually come out yellow. That's our favorite benchmark

We looked especially closely at the blacks, since that is reputed to be the weak spot of the DLP. No problem here. Not only are they dark, but the sets dig out a lot of detail from the shadows.

The smallest of the three (109 cm) will cost C\$5000 (about US\$3650), less than double the price of a CRT-based rear projection set. Perhaps more significant is that you don't have to mortgage your home to replace the lamp that lights up the screen. A new one costs just C\$375.



GOODBYE RECOTON

Was it the victim of its own over-confidence? Recoton became known for audio and video accessories, from cables to universal remotes. But it also had an appetite for big-name loudspeakers, and swallowed such famous brands as NHT, Jensen, Advent and AR.

As the wheels began falling off last year Recoton sold NHT (to Rockford) to pick up some badly-needed cash. But

this year the axles fell off too, and the company was put on the auction block by a bankruptcy trustee.

The winner of the auction (for US\$40 million, plus \$5 million accumulated debt) is German car radio and budget electronics maker Audiovox. Audiovox is especially interested in Jensen's car products, but says it will continue marketing the home speaker brands.

You think making a subwoofer is tough? You need good designers. Oh yeah, and you need good lawyers too.

That's what Canadian company Audio Products International (Mirage, Energy) discovered when it was working on some new small subwoofers. It got sued by Carver, maker of the best-known very small subwoofer. Carver said other small subs infringed on its patents, and API would have to pay Carver a licensing fee. As some companies already did.

Or it would have to go to court. Which API did. In the United States... before a jury...just when US media were bad-mouthing Canada over some little war somewhere.

The result? Although the fine points of subwoofer design may seem a little esoteric for nontechnical jurors, API won. The jury agreed with the defence that API's designs predated the 1999 Carver patent.

THE "MOON" TURNS 30

Perhaps the best-produced rock recording in history was Pink Floyd's *Dark Side of the Moon*. Produced in 1973 on a mere 16 tracks, it spent the next 15 years on the Billboard chart.

For its 30th anniversary, EMI has re-released it as a hybrid SACD. The 5.1 channel surround was supervised by the original engineer, James Guthrie, working with the original multitrack tape. Mastering was by Doug Sax, well known for his work at Sheffield. The famous prism artwork has been redone too, with a purple-toned painting replacing the original black background.

EMI has also re-released it on vinyl. That especially grabbed our attention, since — by pure happenstance — we used the original 1973 LP for two of the reviews in this issue.

IS 99¢ BETTER THAN FREE?



uncompressed music to it if you want. Apple's store is using Advanced Audio Codec, based on a Dolby standard. Though the downloads are compressed in the extreme (128 kbps, compared to about 1,120 kbps for CD), AAC supposedly does a better job than MP3. Indeed, Steve Jobs claims that AAC can actually sound *better* than CD, because the downloads come from original master tapes, not the commercial CDs.

We found that a touch hard to swallow, truth to tell. As we write this the store is not available in Canada, where we are, so we had to be content to listen to some of those 30 second samples. Apple says they have the same resolution as the full downloads. If that's true, it's bad news. We sampled some current pop and country songs, and also wandered over to the rather sparse classical catalog. What we heard was a long way from CD quality.

But we're aware how undemanding many consumers are. The complaints:

If the record industry's not seem to be on the battle for resolution music (SACD and DVD-A) because its execs figure that more money to be won — and more low-resolution music: the download.

Trouble is, most downloaders aren't paying anything for the music. Is there a way for EMI, Sony, or Universal to make a buck from downloadable music? Absolutely. Have they succeeded? Nope.

So Apple Computer had a lot of attention when it launched its iTunes Store in late April. Of course Steve Jobs is not just CEO of Apple, he is also CEO of Pixar, co-producer of *Toys*, *Bug's Life* and *Monsters, Inc.* If you want to call an entertainment biz maven, his phone number is already in his bio book.

Here's how it works. You can download Apple's iTunes program (shown here, available for Mac OS X only, comes on Windows around Christmas.



NEW DIGS FOR PIERRE GABRIEL



set up quarters next to Créabec, manufacturer of fancy kitchen and office furniture...and also the manufacturer of PG's speaker cabinets.

Pierre Raymond is shown at left, next to the bench where cables are assembled, tested and burned in. Behind him but not shown is a row of speakers in various stages of assembly. Below is one of Pierre Gabriel's two listening rooms...featuring PG speakers and cables, and (of course) Jadis electronics.

Pierre Gabriel Acoustics has long been known for upscale audio cables, some of which we use ourselves, and which can be found at our *Audiophile Store*. The company has been known even longer for upscale loudspeakers that you couldn't find in stores. And it is now known as the Canadian distributor of Jadis products.

That last part in particular meant getting a little more space. Or a lot more. Pierre Raymond, designer and CEO,



MICROSOFT AND HDCD

Microsoft of course owns the technology behind High Definition Compatible Digital. And we liked HDCD ever since it came out, because it was the best way to do a (badly-needed) end run around the limitations of Red Book CDs. But is it dead now?

Well, no. We *still* like it better than straight CD. And although it is a transitional technology, meant to keep us happy until the SACD catalog gets built up (or the DVD-A catalog if you still have the faith), there are now thousands of encoded recordings, and many dozens of players too.

But this is only the start for HDCD. Microsoft has been hinting that it wants

to get into the downloadable music business, like Apple. Will it use MP3? Or AAC? No, not when it has Windows Media.

HDCD almost certainly figures in Microsoft's plans. The system was designed to sneak extra information past the CD's 16 bit resolution limit, by using what would otherwise be "unused" bits. But Windows Media has even more severe limits. As with CD, its limits are especially severe for low-level detail. And that's exactly where HDCD can help.

Of course, Bill Gates is rich enough to buy a technology and throw it away. We don't think that's his plan.

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STATE OF THE ART

by Gerard Rejskind

It doesn't happen very often anymore, but the other day we actually had a power outage. During a good hour and a half, nothing electrical worked, other than the (now essential) flashlight. And you know what I noticed?

The *silence*.

Understand, this is a quiet neighborhood. The busy streets are within an easy walk, but the sound of tires and motors pretty much dies out before it makes it over. At night it can get downright eerie, if only because in this modern age we aren't used to quiet. Still, quiet is only relative, as I rediscovered during that period without power. Suddenly it was *really* quiet.

Background noise creeps up on you. In any household, the refrigerator is a major noisemaker, rumbling when it's running, emitting soft little creaks and groans when it's not. In winter, even "quiet" heating, such a baseboard heater, emits noise. And if you ever let them install a high-efficiency burner on your oil furnace, you'll discover that the efficiency is not the only thing that's high. As for summertime, if you have air conditioning...

But there's more. Around here, the sound system is always on, but even if it weren't it would never *really* be off. Electronic devices don't switch off anymore, they go into "standby" mode. Television sets have done that for years; if the TV were *really* switched off, it wouldn't respond when you hit the power button on the remote. Computers also get left on 24/7 by many users. And for a growing number of people, the computer *is* the sound system.

The result is a soft, diffused background field of 60 Hz (our power line frequency), radiated by ubiquitous power transformers. Often, it isn't even that soft.

I've always found that 60 Hz sound field disturbing, and it's a relief when I can get away from it. The 50 Hz frequency used in much of the world is scarcely better, and it is just as audible. Some countries once had 25 Hz current



(parts of Toronto had it until the 1950's), but the low frequency required transformers with fearsome amounts of iron. We could go the other way and adopt a very *high* frequency that is outside the range of human hearing, but then the signal would get into everything. You might as well be living inside a radio transmitter.

The gradual buildup of electronic noise is not trivial, either. Consider this. When the loudness decibel scale was set up, in a quieter age, zero decibels was defined as the loudness of the softest sound that the human ear can reliably distinguish (a noise half that loud would be at -3 dB). It would be nice, then, if we could keep a nice quiet background level of, say, -1 dB.

Am I dreaming? You bet. Use a sensitive sound pressure level meter, and you'll discover that the actual quiescent loudness, when the fridge and the heating are at rest, and if you don't live next to a freeway interchange or a fire station, is more like 40 dB. How loud is that? It may seem quiet by modern standards,

but it is in fact *ten thousand times* louder than the threshold of hearing! But of course, that ambient noise is constant, so we don't hear it. Not until the power shuts down.

For music listeners, this noise level presents an obvious problem. Let us say that the loudest sound you will hear at an acoustic concert (no amplification, no microphones, but expensive tickets) is 105 dB. The difference between that and the ambient noise in your "quiet" home is 65 dB. That's not bad, but it's easy to see that it is quite a lot less than the 90 dB or so of dynamic range of a Compact Disc, and much less than the noise level of SACD or DVD-Audio. Indeed, it is less than the dynamic range you can attain with a turntable.

Even so, I'm using extreme figures here. A lot of people, even those with good systems, listen at a maximum level closer to 95 dB. And lots of homes have ambient noise that is over 50 dB. The available dynamic range is then just 45 dB. This means that if you set the volume so that the peaks are comfortable, you'll actually miss entire passages, because they can be as much as 20 dB (one hundred times!) below the noise.

It's not surprising that we get frequent mail asking for tips on soundproofing: for keeping out the sounds of the fridge, the furnace, the lawn mowers and leaf blowers, the traffic, and of course the neighbors. If you are building a room whose main purpose is music listening, you will certainly want to do all you can to keep noise out.

But you need to be aware that among today's noisemakers are the very components you will be installing in that room: amplifiers, CD players, television sets, and more. They produce music, yes, but they also produce the noise that masks their own music.

It's ironic that many of us use cones and other isolation devices to keep vibrations from affecting our audio equipment. In many cases, the equipment itself is the major vibration source. The more of it you have, the more your music will blend into a grey sonic fog.



STATE OF THE ART: THE BOOK

Get the 258-page book containing the **State of the Art** columns from the first 60 issues of UHF, with all-new introductions.

See page 4.

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