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autumn 1989



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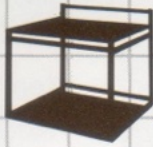
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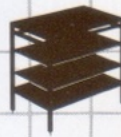
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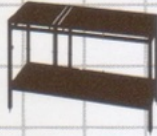
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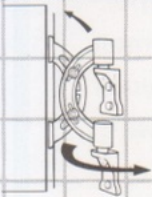
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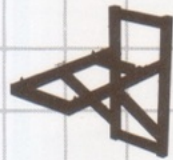
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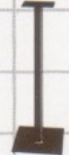
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HS 30



HJ43/2



HJ51/T



HJ61/T



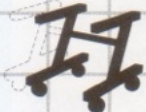
HJ51/2



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TAP 2



TAP 4



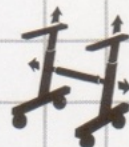
TAP 6



TAP 7



TAP 10



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Hi-Fi Heretic

The Means

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Gone, Not Forgotten

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A Mine Shaft Gap
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The End

**60 THE DIXIE DREGS:
Rock Virtuosos Who Will Leave You Speechless**

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Hot licks from the primordial soup.

INTRODUCTION

Someone once told me he thought *Hi-Fi Heretic* was the best audio magazine in America. I replied, "Well, that's a little like being the best hockey player in Guam, isn't it?" Not exactly an earthshaking achievement.

When I founded this magazine, I vowed I would never engage in the petty bickering and snottiness that characterize much of the specialist audio press. That said, I can't help but express my amazement at some of the truly goofy things that appear in "High End" publications.

One reviewer recommends buying a new pair of loudspeakers every three months. This will allow you to better enjoy your recordings, because each speaker will exhibit different sonic characteristics, and thus highlight different aspects of the musical performance.

Yeah, right.

Another reviewer suggests you consider cost per pound when shopping for an amplifier. Personally, I favor a more exacting criterion: "How many knobs for the dollar?"

Still another reviewer expresses surprise and shock at the \$17,500 price of the ridiculous Carver Silver Seven power amplifier/marketing ploy. "Can anything be worth this much?", the reviewer asks incredulously. Given that this reviewer routinely recommends \$50,000 loudspeakers and \$25,000 turntables, I found his naïveté somewhat unconvincing.

Much of the above silliness may be

due to the fact some of the "High End" magazines are making a play for broad commercial success. Vomiting out 200 pages every month *does* take its toll on editorial quality. Reviews of surround sound equipment, car stereo, and other detritus are on the rise. What's next, a hard-hitting look at clock radios?

Other evidence of creeping commercialism can be seen in the cover prices of specialist audio magazines. Market researchers tell us prices with a ".95" or a ".97" are most effective when it comes to separating you from your money. To me, "\$4.95" is simply a weasel's way of charging \$5.00. I noticed one "High End" magazine recently slashed its cover price from \$7.00 to \$6.95. This tells me a lot about the magazine's publishers, and the contempt they have for their readers.

What really puzzles me is that so many readers seem perfectly willing to accept this codswallop. There is a dangerous tendency for Americans to believe anything they read, to assume anything that appears in print must be true, and that those writing the articles are in fact qualified to do so.

It just ain't so.

If I could ask one thing of the specialist audio community, it would be to exercise your critical faculties more rigorously when reading "High End" magazines. I'm not referring to judgments offered on a given product's sound quality — there will always be differences of opinion in that regard, and I think that's fine. No, I would simply suggest you more carefully examine whether the writings of reviewers and columnists *make any sense*. I think you'll be amazed to find just how illogical and self-contradicting many of these writers truly are.

The special discount on subscriptions expires after this issue. If you wish to subscribe or extend your current subscription at the guaranteed lowest rates I will ever offer, please act now.

To those of you purchasing back issues: please note which issues are sold out when placing your orders. Orders which include requests for

issues no longer available are inevitably delayed.

I'm happy to report there will be a couple of new additions to the writing staff beginning next issue. As noted in last issue's introduction, one of my highest priorities is to vastly increase the amount of music coverage ("The End"), while still maintaining a solid foundation in equipment reviews ("The Means").

Audio magazines have always leaned towards classical music as their main focus, which is rather unfortunate for those of us who primarily listen to rock, jazz, or blues. *Hi-Fi Heretic* will endeavor to cover *all* types of music, with the emphasis always on the performance, not the sound. Yes, I do believe recording quality is significant, but it *never, ever* takes precedence over the music.

I would be most interested in hearing from you as regards what features you would like to see in *Hi-Fi Heretic*. If you prefer your correspondence not be considered for publication, that's fine — just write "not for publication" on your note.

The point of this magazine's existence is to provide you with useful information that will aid you in the enjoyment of music in the home. *Hi-Fi Heretic* has no interest in trying to "market" you — whether or not you invest in a high-quality audio system is *your* business. If you *do* decide to buy some hi-fi equipment, I think we can help you get more value for your money.

And maybe have some fun in the process.

— Kent S. Bransford

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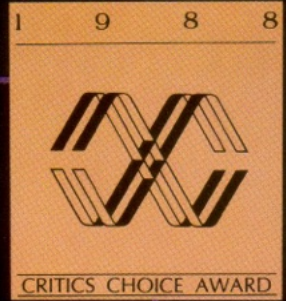
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Marketing weasels have always known that, when it comes to mass-produced consumer goods, *function* doesn't sell. The average consumer is more interested in *perceived* rather than *actual* quality. Chrome-plated plastic trumps machined aluminum every time. Automobiles, clothing, books, food, and yes, stereo components, are all designed with this principle in mind.

In the world of mass-marketing, morality is tied to dollars. A product that sells is "good", a product that doesn't is "bad". The intrinsic merit of the product itself is irrelevant — if it doesn't move on the sales floor, kill it. Thus we find consumer products are increasingly designed to *sell*, not to perform their supposed function. **Mass-marketers are far more interested in creating a want than meeting a need.** Indeed, it may be erroneous to say *products* are designed at all. In reality, it is the *marketing plan* that is designed, and the product merely spewed forth to implement that plan. In effect, the product is merely grist for the marketing mill.

If we take even a brief look at a typical mass-market amplifier, it is abundantly clear that a great deal of the production costs are tied up in cosmetics. Market researchers have found the public responds to elaborately designed and finished faceplates, and thus mass-market manufacturers spend a great deal of money to achieve an elegant, high-tech look in their products. To be sure, some receivers look like the control panel of a 747. Of course, the money spent on cosmetics leaves little in the budget for the actual electronic circuits, and indeed a look inside a typical mass-market amp reveals woefully poor build quality.

Does building such rubbish bother the mass-market manufacturer? Not at all. As long as it sells, he's happy. If the consumer gets a piece of audio equipment that does an execrable job of playing music, so what?

The product has served its only purpose — it sold.

Specialist audio is a different kettle of fish. Manufacturers here build products that offer enhanced function. *They are designed to do a better job of playing music.* As we can see from the above discussion, this immediately implies a couple of things. First, specialist audio products will never sell in great quantities, because the general public has little interest in such boring concepts as functionality, reliability, and build quality.

Second, the limited sales volume of specialist products means the manufacturers are unable to take advantage of economies of scale. Small production lots mean higher costs per unit, which are of course passed on to the consumer in the form of higher retail prices. Ultimately, this is simply the cost of bucking the crowd. If you desire products that hold no interest for the great unwashed, be prepared to pay extra. This is not opportunism on the part of specialist manufacturers, it is simply the natural consequence of expensive, low-volume production.

This explanation may appease cost accountants, but it doesn't cut much ice with audiophiles. In the end, what makes the higher prices of specialist audio equipment reasonable is the fundamental integrity of the goods. These are products designed not to *sell*, but to *perform*. Underlying the specialist industry is the belief that if you manufacture a superior product, you will have success in the marketplace. Specialist designers build products to suit their *own* sense of quality and functionality, and hope others will find their products equally attractive.

As specialist audio manufacturers become more successful, they are often tempted to "take the next step", and try to reach a broader audience with their products. On the face of it, this sounds like a good idea. Greater sales volume

EDITORIAL

would provide capital for investment in more efficient production tooling and distribution, which could ultimately lead to lower prices for the consumer. In practice, this is seldom how things work. To achieve those sales increases, the manufacturer often has to tailor his products to address a wide range of consumer tastes and desires. In the process, the manufacturer dilutes the essence and focus of his product. The result is a product too compromised to please the designer's sense of rightness, but not crassly commercial enough to lure the general public. In an effort to please everyone, the designer pleases no one.

As publisher of this magazine (and thus a small manufacturer myself), I can sympathize with the frustration some specialist builders feel. They produce equipment vastly better than the mass-market trash, but don't even begin to come close to the sales volume enjoyed by the Big Companies.

Of course, who said being true to one's own ideals was going to be easy?

All of the above brings to mind the distinction between *entertainers* and *artists*. Entertainers work to satisfy their audiences, while artists work to satisfy themselves. Entertainers may enjoy greater notoriety and financial success, but artists possess something no amount of money can buy:

Self-respect.

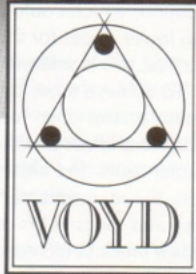
— Kent S. Bransford



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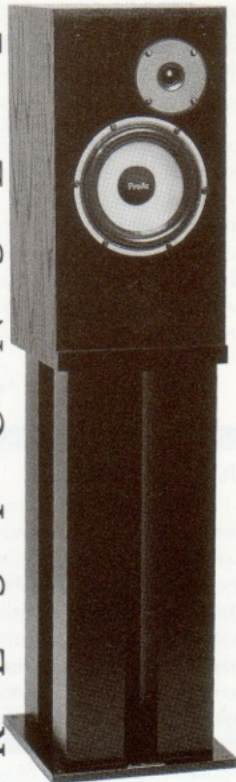
A. Bateman
Hi-Fi Answers
April '88



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LETTERS

TO THE EDITOR

Stirring Thrusts

Hi-Fi Heretic is better than ever — your intelligent reasoning and writing are so “on the ball”, and you really are able to *thrust through* what is average thinking to get to the heart of any subject you care to write on.

I admire your abilities, and just hope many more of your readers are “reading” what is so unique — I agree with all your *fresh* thinking — it’s so obviously correct and so very enlightening.

Awhile back you reviewed receivers in some measure of depth — the “others” won’t do it!! I don’t care for receivers, but your impartiality is stirring. Thanks a lot, Kent.

Monty Grant
Gardena, CA

Número Uno

Hi-Fi Heretic is Number One in my book! None of the other “so-called” audio magazines even comes close. You’ve got *Stereophile* beat by a country mile. Can’t wait for Issue Twelve, keep up the good work!

John P. Kady
South Hackensack, NJ

Graphic Description

A note about the mag: I have not seen previous issues, but by *any* magazine standards prose and graphics (artwork) are first rate! I personally would like to see a credit on the masthead, because even the deathless prose will not be read by most unless presented in a visually sensible and appealing way.

Kudos!!

Larry Wolken
Washington, D.C.

Backhand Volley

I spend 12 hours a day using my Mac, and I’ve got to tell you — I’ve never seen a better job of using it to create a cost-effective magazine.

And to do it solo! Keep up the great work. The magazine isn’t bad, either...

Seth Godin
Mount Vernon, NY

Thanks. I think. — Ed.

Even Better

I recently purchased Issue Eleven and was impressed by the reviews I read. This was primarily due to three factors: 1) The choice of products to review

was outstanding — the products were within a reasonable price range, and all had interesting features; 2) The reviews seemed accurate when compared with my subjective impressions of the products reviewed which I had heard; and, 3) The reviews had some insightful comments which were interesting to me.

My only two suggestions are to more prominently display the name of the reviewer (since over time certain reviewers will be more to my liking), and to more consistently name the associated equipment used. Added to the already outstanding reviews, these suggestions may make your magazine even better.

Todd Reznik
Sepulveda, CA

Just A Brief Note

I am writing (a first in my 12+ years of reading *The Absolute Sound*, *Stereophile* and *Hi-Fi Heretic*, etc.) to take the opportunity to compliment your staff for very down-to-earth reviews with unnecessary BS set aside. I particularly enjoy your use of musical terms to describe the performance of audio equipment. You also do a good job of describing construction quality, implied dependability of equipment, etc.

However, as a long-time reader of High End publications, I see a weakness with your publication as per other reviewers. This involves the problem of reviewing audio equipment that has been reviewed one or more times in the same year or so. For *Hi-Fi Heretic* this involves reviewing primarily budget components. In contrast, *The Absolute Sound*, *Stereophile*, etc., review primarily high cost equipment (i.e., Krell, ARC, CJ, Rowland, etc.). These publishers fall into a similar trap, namely over-reviewing very expensive and prestigious equipment while many new products go untested. I have seen a number of new products each year that are never reviewed (i.e., MFA Magus, Modjeski, New American Sound, British Fidelity, Sonus Faber, Audible Illusions power amps, etc.). I could compile a significant list of various products still waiting to be reviewed two years or more after their entry into the audio marketplace. A case in point is the fact that *Stereophile* had mentioned (in the "Audio Cheapskate" section) the MFA Magus preamp and the Sonus Faber preamp as something special for a "reasonable" amount of money. This equipment was supposed to be reviewed shortly after these articles. However, after two years these reviews have never been done.

I was pleasantly surprised to see that you did a review on the nice Belles amp, and are also planning to review the MFA Magus preamplifier, another nice product. The Belles has been shamefully overlooked for years, along with some nice budget equipment from Audire.

The major thing I find frustrating regarding audio publications of note is that there is a fairly insufficient number of actual reviews per items produced in the marketplace. Given the small size of your staff and low frequency of reviews (quarterly), it is hard to do justice to High End consumer needs as a whole. *Hi-Fi Heretic* at least wisely avoids the major problem I see *Stereophile* and *The Absolute Sound* locked into, namely,

using subscribers' money to discuss the state of the industry, technical treatises, record reviews, humor, etc. Though I and other readers enjoy some of this, I cannot see wasting valuable space and subscribers' money for such pursuits, when vital equipment reviews go wanting.

I see two very real problems looming constantly for the average High End audio consumer:

- 1) The huge number of products (growing larger each year), including not only new but model updates that swell the market and need reviewing by someone, but frequently get overlooked;
- 2) The physical unavailability of the vast majority of products to High End consumers, except those with dealers located primarily in major cities such as San Francisco, Los Angeles, New York, Chicago, etc. I hate to disillusion anyone, but many audiophiles do not live in these large cities. Though reviewers are fond of propounding the need for consumers to actually listen to equipment with their own ears before purchase, the sad truth is that for many if not most, this is damn near impossible. The logistics of distance, time, expense, and even stress make visiting distant dealers a formidable task.

Even if dealers can be found that carry more than a few franchise lines, a consumer can typically hear this equipment on one single reference system, perhaps two at most. Without trying each piece in your own system at home, one really doesn't know what it will truly sound like except in the dealer's system and acoustic environment. These results are very rudimentary, and can be misleading.

The chances of obtaining equipment from distant dealers for use on approval for home review are dismal. I think "double blind" audio listening experiments have shown the pitfalls of reviewing equipment in unfamiliar surroundings, let alone in unspecified reference systems. One has to really live with a piece of equipment as part of a familiar system to really know what effect it will produce on the music through that system.

Further, if many audio reviewers were more objective and less dogmatic, they would admit that many sonic differences in audio equipment at a certain price point are basically subtle, and not as dramatic as their biases lead us to believe. Each person needs to weigh the value of expending a large outlay of cash to obtain a slight increase in "air", "impact", etc., provided by state-of-the-art equipment. I for one favor the middle ground as an

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eventual goal; this is realistically affordable for most High End music lovers, especially if one looks at the used equipment market as an alternative.

Though all this information is nothing new, I think it illustrates the need for reviewers to focus heavily and carefully on system matching recommendations. Consumers need to know which components mate well with each other as a system. Obviously, there is more than one possible system into which a component can fit well. As reviewers are paid by subscribers to spend their time obtaining and living with equipment, and trying out different system matches, this should be their main focus. It is surprising, though, how frequently reviewers fail to give much information regarding system recommendations. At best, this usually involves the reviewer's own single, pet or hodge-podge listening system, which most consumers don't own or have no intention of buying.

From my perspective (and I think of many other High End consumers), the purpose of reviewers is to review as many viable audio products as feasible, mostly in the middle price range, and to talk about system matching.

Please do not misunderstand me, I truly admire your concern for the audiophile's dollar, especially to help new audiophiles get started in the right direction with the limited funds available to them. You do a great job of pointing out "Best Buys" for the buck (i.e., products like B & K, Adcom, Belles, Spica, Celestion, Vandersteen, ProAc, Thiel, etc.). You do a commendable job of sticking to musical basics, construction quality, and reliability of products, rather than their looks or the mystique surrounding them.

I agree with you that it is *somewhat* absurd to pay \$3000 or more for a piece of equipment, when one approximately 90% as good is available for a fraction of the cost. However, some people are willing to pay the price for additional quality, whether partially imagined or not. The middle ground of products (\$1000 to \$2500 or so) seems to be the most

neglected by reviewers in general. I would like to see someone, preferably *Hi-Fi Heretic*, fill a larger portion of the mid-priced gap, do more frequent reviews, and make many more system recommendations.

I think enlargement of your staff and reviewing process is inevitable for your survival in a very fickle industry. I fervently hope for your continued existence, since your honest reviews are vital to music lovers and consumers.

Please excuse the long-winded narration, the pot has been brewing for a long time! Thanks for your ear.

Larry Hocker
Fresno, CA

Cable Service

I'd like to tell you about a very pleasant discovery I made recently. It regards speaker cables: A friend mentioned to me that, after realizing there was something missing or wrong with the sound of his stereo, he removed one of the sets of Monster Cable 12 gauge from his biwired Snell Ci's, and there was a marked improvement in detail and air and dynamics. But, that's what biwiring is supposed to improve?! Well, I did the same thing to my Snell E II's and lo and behold, better music! As I was soon to realize the culprit was the cable, I referred to "Meaty Beaty Big and Bouncy" to see what might help: Naim NACA4 cable. My local dealer no longer carries Naim equipment, but they did have a cable from Linn that looks like how you describe the Naim cable. My dealer said he thought it was the same stuff, and yes, I could borrow a set for the weekend to try in my system. It sounded much better than the Monster cable, but at something like \$1.69/ft., the Linn cable cost twice as much and would run about \$120 to biwire with 15 ft. lengths.

So, curious to see if something could be had for less, I called a number of dealers, some of whom were very helpful and others who told me I had to spend at least \$4- \$8/ft. to get any improvement. One said I should try some interconnects first to improve things there, and I said, "Well, the Linn cable sounded pretty good at less than

\$2/ft." But the one cable that was recommended by two other dealers was AudioQuest F-14, which costs only \$0.69/ft. Besides having a name like a jet fighter and looking real wimpy (just four small solid copper wires in a flat ribbon about 1/2" wide), the stuff sounds simply **GREAT** in my system!! Better than the Linn wire did: more open, more ambience, crisper rhythms. Recordings where I had never heard the room in which the recordings were made now have *lots* of life. I thought my speakers rolled off somewhere in the low bass, but now they have pitch and texture as well as more even volume balance. One set gives my system about 90% of the improvement of biwiring, and this cost me about \$52! This wire is great and inexpensive, and from this reader comes *Strongly Recommended for Audition*.

For reference, my system now consists of: Linn Axis, Adcom XC-MR II, Straight Wire LSI to Audible Illusions Modulus 2C, B & K ST-140, AudioQuest F-14 (biwired) to Snell E II's (with home-made spikes and felt tweeter diffraction damping), and a Nakamichi 480 cassette deck. Now I just need to try DNM interconnects between the amps.

Neil Blanchard
Marlborough, MA

Sonata Synopsis

Based on your review of the B & K Sonata MC-101 in Issue Eleven, I bought one (with return privileges, of course). Despite the excellent review you gave the MC-101, I found your praise to be understated. But I am having difficulty finding a word more forceful than the one you used, namely, "superb". How about "exquisite", "magnificent", "marvelous", and "splendid"?

These terms, and your "superb", describe not only the MC-101, but also the way my records sound through my new preamp (using a low-output moving coil); my few CD's also sound better than they did before (but not better than my LP's). Every record I played sounds significantly better than before, in every way, and that includes old mono records which, while lacking width, can show notable depth.

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-Neil Levenson,
Fanfare Magazine.

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-Kent Bransford, Hi Fi Heretic.

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-Alvin Gold,
Stereophile.

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The quality of construction and parts is just as you described. How does B & K do it? I think it is easy, and most admirable — the company simply decided to charge a fair price and not gouge the consumer.

My only complaint is that with each major improvement to my system — and the MC-101 is a major one — my desire to do anything but listen to music decreases. I anticipate purchasing the B & K Sonata amplifier, therefore, with mixed emotions: On the one hand, I can't wait to hear how good the music will sound; but on the other hand, I may lose my job, my family, and my home. Does B & K make anything portable?

Marc Richman
Washington, D.C.

When Donkeys Fly

I've been reading *Hi-Fi Heretic* since Issue Six, and began subscribing after reading Kent Bransford's editorial on the ethics of audio component purchasing. Thank you for creating an audio magazine for those of us who cannot afford, or cannot ethically justify, a Maserati or a Ferrari, and are instead content with our Hondas or even our slant-six Dodges.

I am a graphic designer by trade and I must say that Issue Eleven has come a long way toward becoming an interesting yet visually accessible format. I would caution you against the overuse of the capabilities of PostScript computer programs. One specific observation is that the review intros did not lead easily into the actual reviews. I kept mistaking the intros for separate announcements or advertisements. Perhaps using consistent typefaces and only changing the sizes of the type would help this problem. Paragraph spacing in *HFH* is also a bit wide, and tends to interrupt the flow of reading.

As a music lover I have to thank you for turning us all on to the ProAc Studio Ones. They are certainly the most detailed speakers anywhere in that price range. However, I would like to complain about the lack of cartridge reviews in the last three issues. I have the new Sony 608ESD CD player, but I still think my modest analog system puts it to shame. You also seem to have a prejudice for turntables without suspensions. Those of us in creaky old buildings with trucks driving by at all hours depend on vibration absorption systems. There are very affordable and reliable turntables with suspensions available in the U.S. market. I use a Sonographe SG-3 with a Rega RB-300

arm and a Grado MCZ pickup, and really enjoy the results.

Once again, thanks for a great magazine. What's the possibility of you all increasing production to bimonthly?

Anthony Deen
New York, NY

The Staples Are Ugly, Too

In the cause of (hoping) to improve the magazine, I'm offering the following comments:

- 1) The new format is quite disappointing because there is way too much "white space";
- 2) Also, the table of contents should be called a table of *discontent*. If you'll refer to Issue Eight, for example, the equipment is listed vertically under major titles, and is very easy to read and to refer back to. The tables of contents in Issues Nine and Ten are an *abomination* — the equipment is listed sequentially and horizontally, and there are *no* separate headings listed for the various components. It's a *real mess*, and makes it incredibly hard to refer back to and to find a specific component.

As a man of 55, I must tell you that I have seen a disturbingly large number of (formerly) fine, *easily readable* magazines that the publisher/editor tried to "improve" by redoing the format with the "help" of a graphic artist or designer. Almost invariably the result is an "arty" mess that is murder to read! I hope you'll come back to your senses and "unimprove" *HFH* back to the simpler, easier-to-read style. [It seems to me that a magazine that is artistically attractive to look at (like a painting) is usually very unattractive and difficult to read. I am interested in your magazine for information (reading and reference), not for artistic merit. I can't prove I'm right, but *intuitively* I know I am!]

Goliaths Beware.

In a land ruled by giants, it takes exceptional skill to create a miniature loudspeaker capable of bringing them to their knees.

The ProAc Super Tablette and Studio One have become nearly legendary for musical accuracy, transparency, pinpoint imaging and dynamics that belie their compact dimensions.

But don't be fooled; all a falling giant can do is make a lot of noise.

ProAc

For information and reviews, contact:
MODERN AUDIO CONSULTANTS
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3) Please add equipment photos, even if you have to take them yourself;

4) The shiny/glossy paper in Issues Nine and Ten is a no-no, the dull paper as in Issue Eight is *much* better since it causes very little reflection or glare into the eyes — especially unpleasant for us “elders”;

5) I think it's most important for you not to duplicate the reviews in ...*Sounds Like*, which I also subscribe to. I cannot afford to pay for the same information *twice*.

Recently, *Stereophile's* publisher Larry Archibald wrote an editorial criticizing *HFH* for poor print style and quality. I want to tell you that his remarks, though well meant, were incredibly stupid — *Stereophile* has the worst print quality of any, with the print style and size so tiny it's a real chore to read, especially for those of us whose vision is diminishing.

I would feel much better about the *balance* of *HFH* if you would greatly diminish the number of reviews of integrated amplifiers by obscure companies who may go out of business momentarily. (I don't have a single audio acquaintance who owns an integrated amp.) I'd much prefer that you review (some) components by better-known manufacturers (as I get older, I'm getting more interested in good warranties and support as well as good sound).

I hope you will report your findings on the effects of altering the bias settings of the Superphon Revelation II preamp, as alluded to in Issue Nine, page 72.

Please continue your excellent reviews of power amps and preamps in a comparative sense, (price range), as well as in an absolute sense. I find your review methodology to be most helpful in determining the relative value (to me) of components in a given price range that I can afford.

I really appreciate your calm and mostly reasonable approach to your reviews, and the thoughtful conclusions you reach. All the sniping, vituperation, and immature mud-slinging among some of the “underground” magazines makes yours a real

oasis for music lovers. In many cases, I think their egomaniacal opinions and drastic remarks cause much harm to audio.

Les Horelica
Houston, TX

Gunfight At The D/A Corral

I just happened to pick up a copy of Issue Eleven in the classical section of Tower Records in Seattle, and I opened to the tenth page where my eyes fell upon the comments of a reader, J. Clinton Pittman, in a little piece dubbed “CD Associations”. In this Pittman wrote about CD, “I'm still in the ‘waiting-for-them-to-get-their-shit-together’ stage.” I bought the magazine an instant later. Not because this was a clever or novel idea, but mainly because you endorse analogue over digital, and only the week before in that crummy Tower Records store a clerk sneered, “The LP is dead!” as I bought a few cut-out LP's. Them's fightin' words to an analogue person!

Can you recommend a brief, clearly-written treatise on the faults/shortcomings of digital and why analogue sounds better? I can hear the superiority, but I have no technical background or expertise to explain it in a credible way to friends and colleagues. They all think I am nuts for selling my CD player (I couldn't take it anymore), and buying a used Thorens TD 316 (modified — I can use AudioQuest Quartz to my Modulus 1 now). I have encountered long-winded, highly-technical writing here and there, but isn't there a simple, clear way of explaining this digital/analog difference to people that will hold water? Yes, I know about the insufficient sampling rate, but there's more. What is “aliasing”, anyway? Help!

I should like to compliment you on a really good magazine.

Kirk Midtskog
Seattle, WA

Rhapsody In White

I could rhapsodize about how much I enjoy *Hi-Fi Heretic*, but suffice it to say it is the only magazine I subscribe to, and the only one I enjoy reading *all* the contents of.

I would like to see a good article on

doing the small things (type of interconnects, connectors, speaker placement, etc.) that can improve an existing system.

Mark White
Scottsville, NY

Eschew Pedantry?

Thanks for putting out the finest publication in audio. Keep up the improvements — I must say Issue Eleven is quite pretty — and keep up the fine writing, but do eschew pedantry.

Is it true Art Dudley no longer writes for *HFH*?

Rommel Navarrete
La Puente, CA

Yes. — Ed.

No Contest

The quality and quantity of articles continue to improve, with Issue Eleven hitting a new high of perfection. There is no contest. I did find the bold copy (price/company info) in the middle of the reviews to be distracting. You might want to place it at the end of the copy or, preferably, at the beginning.

I would like to see full reviews on the Meitner/Museatech line of products (they're a joy sonically, and within financial reach), as well as Mirage and Apogee speakers. How about additional CD and turntable tests, such as the Oracle and Well Tempered?

Thanks for keeping us informed with your excellent product.

E.R. Matias
Scarborough, Ontario



Address letters to:

Hi-Fi Heretic
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Yorba Linda, CA 92686

BANTAMS OF THE OPERA

I confess a love for compact loudspeakers. The goal of any hi-fi system is to make its presence virtually unknown, leaving only the music to capture the listener's attention. I don't know about you, but I find it rather difficult to ignore the presence of two 7 foot tall behemoths in my living room. Having Darth Vader and his twin brother Biff towering over me makes it difficult to relax and concentrate on the music.

Furthermore, large speakers with multiple drive units often have problems with driver integration when used in less-than-cavernous rooms. If the listener is not sitting far enough away from the speakers, it's all too easy to hear the sound emanating from each driver, rather than it blending into a cohesive whole.


Of course, the most obvious drawback of compact speakers is their limited bass power and ultimate loudness capability. Both are a function of how much air a driver moves, which in turn depends on the diaphragm's surface area and excursion limits. A 12" woofer doesn't have to move nearly as far as a 5" unit to push the same amount of air. The big driver doesn't have to work as hard, and theoretically offers lower distortion.

Unfortunately, *quality* low bass performance is difficult and expensive to achieve. Woofers must have sturdy baskets and huge magnets. Enclosures must be sufficiently large to yield deep bass, but in increasing the size of the cabinet walls you also lower their resonant frequencies, making them more likely to be excited by the woofer's output. Elaborate (and expensive) bracing is thus required to keep the cabinet relatively stiff. And of course the power demands placed on the driving amplifier are enormous...

I find compact speakers intelligent compromises simply because they place a priority on the midrange, where most music resides. I'm far more concerned with getting vocals right than with hearing every last detail of a 32-foot pipe organ note.

On test here are two of the best compact models in the world: the Celestion SL700, and a startlingly good newcomer, the ProAc Response Two.

— Kent Bransford



Celestion SL700

..Celestion are one of the world's leaders in compact loudspeaker manufacture, first becoming a major force with their innovative SL6. Featuring a 1.25" copper dome tweeter utilizing a one-piece dome/voice coil former assembly, as well as a 6.5" copolymer bass/midrange driver with integral dustcap and welded surround, the SL6 injected a strong dose of state-of-the-art technology into the premium minispeaker wars. Laser interferometry was used to essentially plot a three-dimensional graph of both drivers' movements, thus allowing Celestion to see the effects of different manufacturing techniques and materials. For example, Celestion found that glue joints at the dust cap and surround resulted in decoupling from the diaphragm, with resultant distortion. Celestion thus chose to mold the dustcap integrally with the diaphragm, eliminating a source of compliance and decoupling, as well as lowering the diaphragm's mass. Similarly, the surround was heat-welded to the diaphragm, rather than glued, again to eliminate decoupling and reduce mass. By producing the tweeter's dome and voice coil former as single unit, Celestion eliminated decoupling between the two assemblies, and were able to use the copper dome as an effective heat sink.

There were some drawbacks to the SL6's design, however, principally the inherent insensitivity of the rather massive copper dome, and a tendency towards cabinet boom with the SL6's lightweight particleboard enclosure. Celestion addressed these problems with the SL600, which substituted Aerolam (a low mass, honeycomb aluminum material used in aircraft construction) for the 6's particleboard. This resulted in a far more lightweight

and rigid cabinet, cleaning up the bass boom nicely, as well as offering benefits in midrange clarity as well. A special figure-eight brace stiffened the cabinet even further. The copper dome tweeter was carried over from the SL6.

The diminutive SL700 on test here (measuring a scant 14.5" H x 8" W x 9.5" D) is the current flagship of the Celestion line. While a sealed box design like its predecessors, and utilizing the same Aerolam cabinet as the SL600 (complete with substantial internal brace), the '700 adds a number of new features, the most obvious being its aluminum dome tweeter. Being significantly lower in mass than the '600's copper unit, this tweeter allows the SL700 to offer greater quickness and detail in the treble region, as well as greater sensitivity. Other refinements include an improved crossover design, which offers the option of biwiring or passive biamping, and a remarkably sophisticated stand specifically designed for the SL700.

The latter is truly a wonder to behold. A single pillar design, the stand features an extruded aluminum center column with rigid, cast aluminum top and bottom plates. Spikes with knurled adjustment knobs are fitted to the bottom plate, while the top carries three inverted cones which isolate the speaker cabinet from the stand. Small cups on the bottom of the speaker prevent the sharp cones from piercing the Aerolam cabinet. The stand's center column is designed to be filled with a mixture of lead shot and sand, generously provided by Celestion. Celestion even thought to include knurled retaining bolts which are inserted through the top plate's underside and threaded into the

cabinet, to prevent the lightweight speaker from being knocked off its stand. Very neat — I wish other manufacturers offered a similar arrangement. The SL700 stands are incredibly well-finished, easily the best-looking loudspeaker stands I have ever seen. Remember these stands are included in the SL700's retail price; on their own they would probably sell for at least \$500/pair. This makes the SL700's \$3000 asking price a little more palatable.

As noted above, Celestion have elected to use expensive Aerolam for the '700's cabinet construction, as well as pricey aluminum extrusions and castings in the SL700's stand. Why? Low mass is the key. Celestion could obtain comparable degrees of rigidity in the cabinet using a more common, less expensive material such as MDF, but at the cost of greatly increased mass. As any student of physics knows, mass stores energy (e.g., the flywheel in your car's engine; the massive platters favored by specialist turntable manufacturers, etc.). In a loudspeaker cabinet, this means the energy pumped into the cabinet structure by the bass/mid driver's movements is momentarily stored, and then later released through movement of the cabinet walls. This delayed sound emanating from the cabinet walls mixes with the direct output of the speaker's drivers, resulting in smeared sound. This is particularly noticeable in the bass region, where most of a loudspeaker's acoustic energy resides.

The SL700's Aerolam cabinet is extremely low in mass, and thus energy passes through it quickly. I was amazed to feel how quickly the SL700's cabinet stopped vibrating in the wake of powerful bass signals.

EQUIPMENT REPORTS

Most cabinets I've encountered can clearly be felt vibrating well *after* a heavy kick drum note has been reproduced. The Celestion's cabinet seems to stop almost immediately after the note has passed. (All the more remarkable, given that the SL700 is a sealed box design, and thus puts much

more energy into its enclosure than a bass reflex speaker, which vents some of the driver's energy out through the cabinet's port.)



Price: \$3000

Contact:

Celestion Industries, Inc.
89 Doug Brown Way
Holliston, MA 01746
(508) 429-6706

more energy into its enclosure than a bass reflex speaker, which vents some of the driver's energy out through the cabinet's port.)

Similarly, the SL700's stand uses lightweight aluminum pieces instead of more common steel tubing. Massive steel tubing stores energy, and re-radiates sound even when damped by lead shot and sand. That said, the *practical* advantages of aluminum in this application are still being debated. Suffice it to say the *theoretical* advantages are all but indisputable.

As noted earlier, the SL700 makes provisions for biwiring and passive biamping. Two sets of 4mm sockets are set into the rear of the cabinet (these accept banana plugs only), and jumper links are provided for use with a single set of speaker cables.

Build quality of the SL700 is extremely impressive, with the Celestion-built bass/mid driver constructed on a sturdy cast basket, and carrying a substantial magnet. The aluminum tweeter, also built by Celestion, features aluminum slats on its face to prevent damage to the delicate dome. Allen-head machine screws hold both drivers in place. The interior of the cabinet is heavily stuffed with acoustic foam. A glassfibre board carries the quality crossover compo-

nents; the board is not fastened to the cabinet, but held in place by the foam blocks, this presumably in the interest of minimizing microphonics. Overall construction quality is excellent, with the Aerolam cabinet particularly impressive.

I was a bit put off by the three cosmetic, cast aluminum plates fastened to the speaker's thick front baffle. The plate surrounding the bass/mid appears to be part of the driver's frame (as in the Epos ES14), but in fact is merely decorative. The plate beneath it is also strictly cosmetic, as is the third plate surrounding the tweeter. Not a big deal, but these appear to be expensive castings, and one imagines the money spent on them could have been put to better use elsewhere in the speaker. The entire cabinet is finished in grey Nextel paint (as are the stands), which offers a suede-like texture. In terms of appearance and finish, the SL700 is a stunner.

The SL700's sensitivity is rated at a very low 82dB/1 watt/1 meter, and nominal impedance is 8 ohms.

Recommended placement for the SL700 is roughly 1.5 to 2 feet out from the back wall, and at least two feet out from the side walls. I ended up with the speakers about 2.5 feet out from the rear wall, and roughly 3.5 feet from the side walls. The cabinets were angled in about 25 degrees towards my listening position.

As impressive as the Celestion's technical brief is, I'm afraid the SL700 wasn't particularly successful from a musical standpoint. Bear in mind that a

loudspeaker in this price range has to be more than merely "very good"; in my view, it must offer at least a glimmer of real magic, of profound insight into the musical performance. By any standard the SL700 is an excellent loudspeaker, but it fails the crucial test of letting the listener forget, however briefly, that he is listening to a stereo system and not a live musical performance. When listening to the SL700 I was always aware of its presence, always aware that it stood between me and the music.

The SL700's two greatest problems lie in the areas of low-level resolution and tonal balance. I was disappointed to find the SL700 sounded quite flat and lifeless unless driven at fairly high volume levels (using the beefy B & K M-200 and Belles 450 power amplifiers). At moderate listening levels, the acoustic guitars on both John Prine's *Bruised Orange* and *The Rod Stewart Album* came across with somewhat limited detail and immediacy, the subtle fingerings and note shapings of these performances diminished. I also noticed a tendency for the Celestion to quash fine dynamic shadings, with the volume levels of the individual notes glossed over. Furthermore, the SL700's rather forward tonal balance made the guitars sound a bit wiry and thin, the natural resonance of the instrument noticeably curtailed.

On the plus side, the SL700's bass performance was astoundingly good. Jack Bruce's quirky, unorthodox bass lines posed no problems for the Celestion, as it easily conveyed both the tempo and pitch of the instrument, never smearing or blurring the note attacks. That said, the bass definition of the SL700 was so tight and so well-controlled that it sometimes sounded a bit overdamped. The note attacks on Andy Fraser's bass guitar line in "Mr. Big" (from the *Fire And Water LP*) lacked some of the quickness they displayed when reproduced by the ProAc Response Two. Similarly, Mick Waller's drumming on Rod Stewart's marvelous cover of "(I Know) I'm Losing You" (on the *Every Picture Tells A Story LP*) didn't have quite as much sheer impact and jolt as I'm used to hearing.

Perhaps I'm being too picky — the

bass quality of the SL700 is exceptionally fine, and my minor quibbles shouldn't lead you to think otherwise. Certainly, I prefer the Celestion's tight, crisp bass to the overblown low frequency performance offered by far too many "High End" speakers.

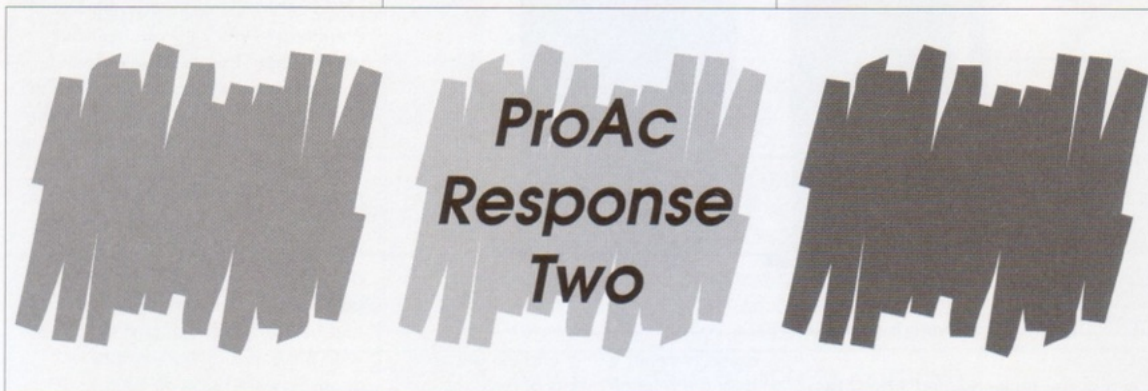
Vocals were handled reasonably well by the SL700, though again its forward treble balance made singers like Prine and Stewart sound raspier than usual. The LP *Rickie Lee Jones* is one I've used in auditioning for some time, its unusual instrumental arrangements and fine sound quality helping to offset Jones' rather annoying hipster posturing. ("Last Chance Texaco" makes a good case for invoking capital punishment for the commission of truly egregious extended metaphors.) Jones' vocals were crisp and present, but sounded a bit thin and hard, lacking body and warmth. Recording acoustic was slightly curtailed, and this made the performance sound somewhat remote. I again noted that the sound at low listening levels was lacking in detail and presence. As might be

expected, Willie Weeks' bass guitar opening on "Danny's All-Star Joint" was exceptionally crisp and tight, and this helped give the tune extra sass and spirit. Indeed, the SL700 excelled in terms of rhythmic progression and pace. Up-tempo tracks like Rockpile's "You Ain't Nothin' But Fine" and "Play That Fast Thing (One More Time)" came across with tremendous snap and gusto.

Holst's *The Planets* tested the SL700's ability to convey the sheer power and impact of an orchestra, and the compact Celestion did surprisingly well. Bass drum and tympani were rolled off in level, to be sure, but the SL700's exceptional bass definition made the instruments easier to follow and appreciate. Dynamics were very good indeed, all the more surprising given the Celestion's modest dimensions. Strings and brass were a bit hard and strident, though not grossly so. This stridency would have been less objectionable had it been accompanied by outstanding detailing and retrieval of recording acoustic, but this

was not the case. The SL700 was not *bad* in this regard, but it was not able to communicate the acoustics of the hall as well as the ProAc, for example, and this made the performance sound a bit dry and distant as a result.

Despite what the above may suggest, I quite like the SL700. It offers superb bass performance, fine rhythmic drive and pace, and impressive dynamics for a compact speaker. On the down side, it doesn't resolve low-level detail well, only truly coming alive at higher listening levels, and its forward tonal balance can get a bit wearing. There is a fundamental *naturalness* to music that the SL700 never quite managed to capture; I was always aware of the SL700 "working". As good as the SL700 is, it doesn't transcend the barrier between the listener and the music. As noted earlier, I believe a speaker in this price range must offer extraordinary insight into the music to rationalize its cost. Failing that criterion, the Celestion SL700 impresses me as a fine loudspeaker that doesn't quite justify its lofty price. ■



Nineteen years ago, when I was a sophomore in high school, my dad bought me a stereo system for Christmas. Built by Fisher (back in the days when Fisher was still an American manufacturer), the "115" was hardly a state-of-the-art unit. Essentially an 18 watt per channel AM/FM receiver with the obligatory Garrard changer mounted on top, it came complete with XP-44B "Little Giant" bookshelf speaker systems.

As I recall, the total purchase price was \$249.00 plus tax. Interestingly, Dad bought it at a well-known *music* store in Chicago, Lyon & Healy.

It would be almost impossible to exaggerate the thousands of hours of pleasure that little stereo gave me. Even now I can vividly remember how much fun I had listening both to records and the creative, free-form broadcasts that flourished in those halcyon days of FM rock.

Time marched on, and my little Fisher never missed a beat. Somewhere along the line in college, I decided it was time for an "upgrade". Long before the name "Ivor Tiefenbrun" blackened our lives, I chose to replace not the tiny speakers my dormmates disparaged, but the Garrard turntable. Armed with

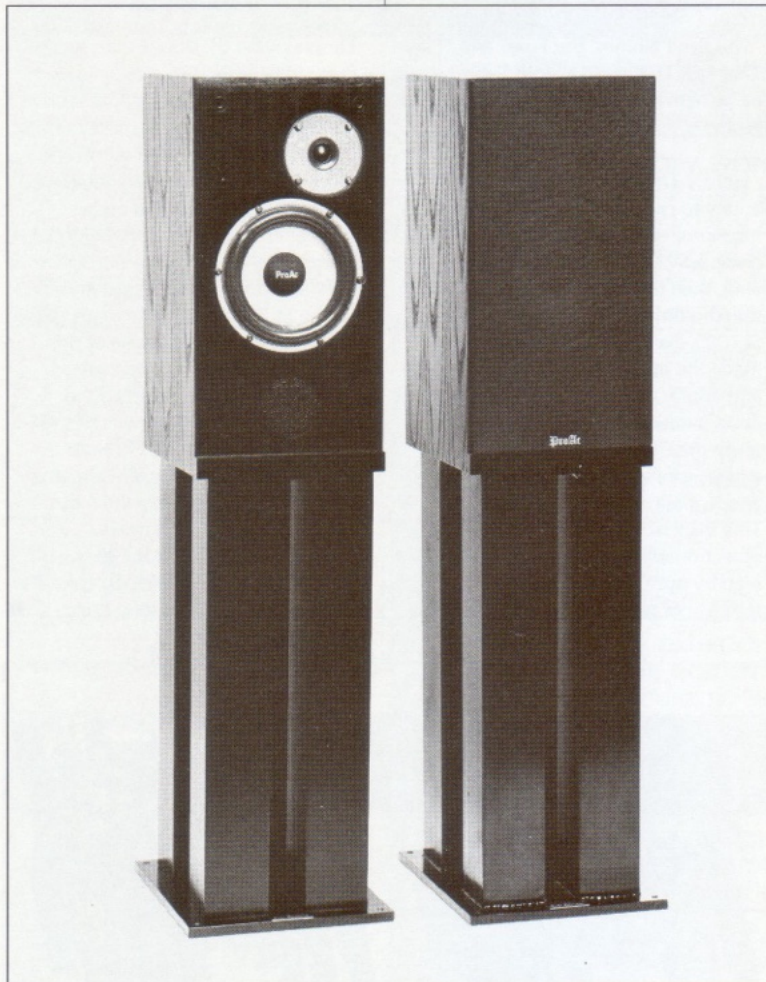
only a minimal knowledge of audio gear, I nevertheless had wisely decided on a Thorens table as my preferred choice. Unfortunately, I allowed the weasel at the mass-market dealer to instead talk me into a BIC deck. (And you think *you've* made stupid buying decisions.) In retrospect, I can now see this was the beginning of the decline.

Thereafter I became increasingly involved in (and neurotic about) audio equipment, each passing year seeing me invest more and more money in the latest and greatest hi-fi products. The Fisher was relegated to the closet shelf. Curiously, I found myself spending *less*

EQUIPMENT REPORTS

time listening to music. Oh, I continued to buy and appreciate records, but somehow the joy of it was diminished. I was listening to my audio system, not my music.

a high-tech titanium tweeter. In contrast, the Response Two on test here employs a fashionable polypropylene bass/mid unit in concert with an (apparently) unremarkable soft-



In a sense, I have waited almost two decades for the ProAc Response Two. For it is a loudspeaker so unassumingly brilliant, so disarmingly true to the performance that, for the first time in years, I feel a healthy dose of that old excitement when listening to music.

That ProAc's Stewart Tyler is one of the world's most talented loudspeaker designers is beyond question. His brilliance stems from an utter dedication to music, not hardware. Tyler is not married to a particular technology; rather, he will use whatever components yield the desired result. For example, the marvelous ProAc Studio One partners a seemingly archaic pulp bass/midrange driver with

dome tweeter. While endless debates over the relative merits of new materials and construction methods may be entertaining, it is the *implementation* of a technology, not its *theoretical* advantages, that is most relevant. Tyler's ability to wrest superb performance from a wide variety of driver, crossover, and cabinet designs is one of the keys to ProAc's success.

At 18" H x 9" W x 11" D, the Response Two is a diminutive piece. Driver complement, as noted above, consists of a 6.5" polypropylene bass/midrange with a .75" soft-dome tweeter, both units built by Scanspeak of Denmark. The bass/mid uses an unusual combination of foam surround with polypropylene diaphragm, in the

interest of minimizing moving mass. An exceptionally light dustcap is also employed. The chassis is a beautiful magnesium casting, covered with gray epoxy paint (to damp the basket, inhibit corrosion, or just look good — take your pick). This driver, designed in cooperation with Scanspeak, is a testament to Tyler's belief in transient quickness. The magnet and voice coil are huge for a driver this size, and this combines with the driver's low moving mass to yield tremendous control over the cone's movements. The Scanspeak tweeter, also used in the remarkable ProAc Studio Tower, employs ferrofluid to both cool and damp the honeycomb-wound voice coil.

The Response Two's crossover components are mounted on a glassfibre board, and are of superb quality. Internal wiring is via heavy multi-stand cable, and all connections are expertly soldered. The crossover allows biwired operation, with two sets of rhodium-plated Michell binding posts (beautiful pieces) included on the cabinet's back panel.

Said cabinet is a ported unit, but employing Tyler's clever "resistive port" design. Ported (bass reflex) speakers have often been accused of rather boomy, ill-defined bass. Trade-offs are inevitable in the design of any loudspeaker, and all too often the designers of ported speakers have chosen to maximize sensitivity and bass power, but at the expense of damping and control. Tyler's resistive port seeks to combine the efficiency and bass extension of ported cabinets with the damping and control of acoustic suspension designs.

Air is a progressive spring. For a given mass of air, if you halve its volume its pressure doubles. Consider a one-liter cylinder holding air at 50 pounds per square inch; if you reduce the internal volume of the cylinder to half a liter, the air contained within will now be at 100 psi. This is the principle that underlies the acoustic suspension loudspeaker. As the speaker's bass driver increases its cone excursion (i.e., plays louder), it compresses the air sealed in the cabinet more and more. The air's pressure rises proportionately, and thus the damping of the driver's movements (via the compressed air) increases rapidly with cone excursion.

Ported speakers, on the other hand, use the back wave of the bass driver to increase sensitivity and bass power. The air is not sealed in the cabinet; damping comes from controlling the rate at which air travels through the port. Alas, a port size that maximizes sensitivity and bass volume leads to underdamped cone excursions at high listening levels. Make the port smaller for better damping, and you lose sensitivity.

Tyler's solution is ingenious. He fills the port with straws (as in drinking straws)! This allows Tyler to use a relatively large port, and still maintain good damping. The straws do little to diminish the port's cross-sectional area, and thus at moderate listening levels the port offers little resistance to the air passing through it, enhancing sensitivity. As volume levels increase, and the quantity of air passing through the port increases, the straws come into play. When a large quantity of air tries to pass through the straws, their internal (lengthwise) surface area causes drag, which limits the amount of air passing through the port. The greater the cone excursion, the greater the quantity of air trying to exit through the port. The straws impede this movement of air by surface friction; this increases the air pressure within the enclosure, and thus affords damping of the bass driver proportional to diaphragm excursion (volume level).

The enclosure itself is built of *one-inch thick* MDF (medium density fibreboard); this combines with the compact (and thus inherently stiffer) cabinet walls to offer an enclosure of stunning rigidity and strength. The interior of the cabinet is lined with high-quality, acoustic grade foam. Overall parts and build quality of this loudspeaker are simply superb.

External fit and finish are every bit as impressive. Gorgeous wood veneer covers every surface save the back panel, which is painted black. My review pair was finished in a nice black ash veneer, but I bought a pair for myself in rosewood, and they are simply magnificent. Walnut and teak are other standard finishes, with custom veneers available on a special-order basis. Contact the importer for details. A black fabric grille built on a fibreboard frame is included, but the

Two sounds better without it, and the veneered front baffle makes this aesthetically preferable as well.

The Response Two is designed to be mounted on rigid, high mass stands 16" to 20" high. I used Target HJ20s, which are all-welded units with two hollow central pillars that can be filled with

listening levels, the performance of the musicians was always easy to follow and appreciate. In this respect the Response may well set new standards for dynamic speakers.

Don't think the ProAc achieves this clarity and detail at the expense of brightness or thinness — it doesn't.

Price: \$2700

Contact:

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112 Swanhill Court
Baltimore, MD 21208
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sand, lead shot, or both. Both the top and bottom plates on the HJ20 are fitted with adjustable spikes. This is an excellent stand, and highly recommended. Mounted on the HJ20s, I ended up with the speakers about three feet out from the back wall, roughly 4 feet out from the side walls, and toed in towards my listening position.

What can I say? The Response Twos are a massive improvement over the vast majority of loudspeakers I've heard at *any* price. This is not a difference in *degree*, but in *kind*. When I listened to "Man of Constant Sorrow" (from *The Rod Stewart Album*), I didn't say to myself, "Hmmm, the guitar sounds very clear and detailed." I thought, "Oh, there's Martin Quitten-ton playing the guitar over there." I have *never* heard a speaker reproduce acoustic guitars as convincingly as the Response. The fingering, the subtle changes in volume level, the million little details that make a performance sound real were all there.

Stewart's vocals were just as impressive. I could hear far beyond the gruffness to appreciate what a fine singer he truly is. A slight inflection, a pause, an air of resignation and self-mocking — all were clear to me. The Response's resolution of low-level detail is astounding. Even at very low

Tonal balance is just about perfect, neither warm nor bright, forward or laid back. It just sounds *right*. Strings and brass on the Shostakovich were marvelously compelling, with a superb combination of vividness and timbral body. The tympani and bass drum were slightly rolled off, but their exceptional dynamics and definition made them exciting nonetheless. Dynamic impact was simply amazing for such a small speaker. Imaging was also very impressive, with the soundstage broad and deep.

The ProAc's sense of pace and rhythmic progression is absolutely superb. Jack Bruce's bass on the quirky "Never Tell You're Mother She's Out Of Tune" came across with tremendous drive and snap, and fast rockers like Rockpile's "You Ain't Nothin' But Fine" ripped along at a ferocious pace.

I could prattle on, but what's the point? This is a milestone product, one that will scramble all your preconceived notions of what a small dynamic speaker can do. The little ProAc seems to disappear from the listening room, leaving only the music to enjoy. Not merely the best compact loudspeaker I've ever heard, the Response Two is quite probably one of the best speakers available, regardless of size or cost. Utterly amazing! ■

TUBULAR WAVE

While many tube lovers still bow in the direction of Minnesota, increasingly one finds brilliant vacuum tube products emanating from the Golden State. Counterpoint is probably the best-known of the California clan, but companies like Audible Illusions, Lazarus, Music Reference, Quicksilver, VTL, and others are making their mark.

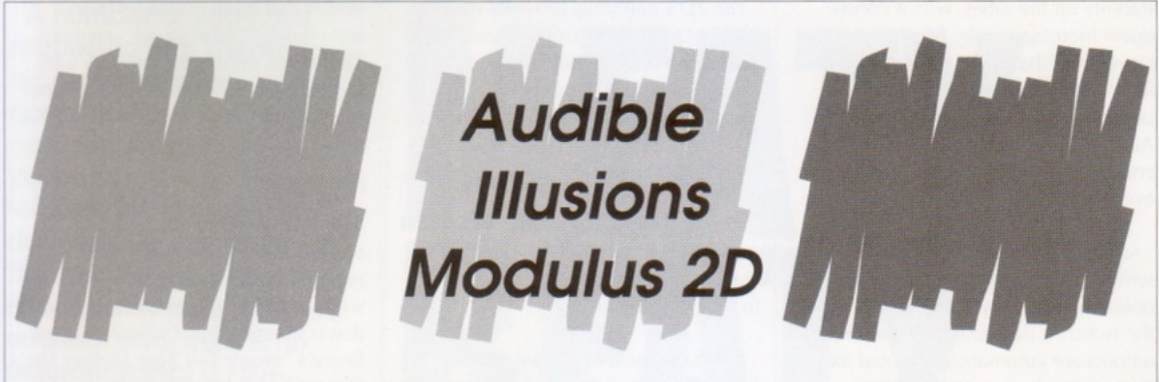
Ironically, this renewed interest and enthusiasm for vacuum tube gear comes at a time when sources for quality tubes are rapidly drying up. Many of the tubes now available are built using tooling that is either obsolete or just plain worn out. Consequently, the reject rate for tubes is frighteningly high, in some extreme cases over fifty percent.

Audio manufacturers, aware of this ever-worsening situation, are working to design circuits that will extend tube life. Tube preamps run substantially lower voltages than tube power amps, and thus don't normally eat tubes with great regularity.

Indeed, tube preamplifiers are especially attractive from a technical standpoint. The vacuum tube is essentially a high voltage, low current device, hence particularly well-suited to use in a preamp, which need only generate a modicum of current to drive interconnects and the inputs of power amps. Power amps, of course, are asked to deliver a great deal more current to drive loudspeakers. To accomplish this, either an output transformer or a plethora of tubes in parallel are used, with both approaches having considerable drawbacks.

Already on hand for Issue Thirteen are three more tube or tube/hybrid preamps: the Counterpoint SA-1000 and SA-3000, and the Conrad-Johnson PV8.

— Kent Bransford



Audible Illusions Modulus 2D

When all is said and done, there are only three questions that must be answered when shopping for an audio component:

- 1) Does it play music?
- 2) Is it well-built and reliable?
- 3) How much does it cost?

Over the years, the Audible Illusions Modulus preamplifier (in its various incarnations) has proven to be a resounding success on all three counts. For quite some time, the Modulus has been *the* premier vacuum tube preamp under \$1000. Moreover, it has often found itself partnered with equipment costing far more — it's not unusual to hear of owners using the Modulus to drive \$5000 power amplifiers. The latest version of the Modulus, the 2D, will undoubtedly continue this proud tradition.

How does the Modulus 2D manage to offer so much performance for the dollar? It follows that fundamental tenet of good engineering, "simpler is better". In terms of control functions, the 2D is a bare-bones design, offering separate volume pots for each channel, and input switching for a turntable, tuner, auxiliary source, and tape deck (with monitoring function). A power switch and a muting switch round out the 2D's front-panel controls. No frills, just the basic necessities. The rear panel carries two sets of main output jacks, as well as input jacks for the aforementioned source components. All of the RCA jacks are expensive, gold-plated Tiffany pieces.

So far, nothing remarkable save for the two volume controls. Art Ferris of

Audible Illusions has yet to find a balance control that doesn't cause audible phase anomalies, thus he continues on with the twin volume control configuration. This is really not as inconvenient in operation as one might think, as the mute switch allows the user to silence the preamp (to answer the telephone, for example) without disturbing the position of the volume controls. The latter are of extraordinary quality, by the way, being laser-trimmed, conductive-plastic pots similar in construction to the pricey Penny & Giles units favored by Mark Levinson Audio Systems and others.

Indeed, overall parts and build quality of the Modulus are staggeringly good. The preamp's chassis is built entirely of (non-magnetic) anodized aluminum, and sports a beautifully-finished anodized faceplate. Massive, machined-aluminum volume knobs complete the 2D's elegant, understated visual presentation. A small but significant indication of Audible Illusions' attention to detail: Not only are top-quality, allen-head cap screws used to fasten the chassis' top plate in place, but the appropriate allen key *and* a spare screw are provided.

Inside the preamp, the construction quality of the 2D continues to amaze. All of the unit's active circuitry is carried on a single glassfibre board, with the input and output jacks mounted on a smaller board bolted to the chassis' rear panel. Utilizing a total of only four 6DJ8 vacuum tubes (one per channel in both the phono stage and line stage), the Modulus impresses with its simple, direct layout. The board is beautifully built, with all circuit traces neatly routed. Of oxygen-

free copper composition, the traces are not tinned but covered in a blue Teflon solder mask to prevent oxidation (some designers believe tinning degrades sound quality). Expensive Resista 1% metal film resistors and Wonder Caps® are used throughout, as is silver solder. The dressing of the components' leads is stunningly good — the 2D's circuit board could be hung on a wall as a work of art. A custom-manufactured power transformer (double shielded) is also included. Quite simply, this is one of the best-built preamplifiers I've ever seen at *any* price.

Premature tube failure has long been the bane of vacuum tube electronics, and Audible Illusions have taken innovative steps to ameliorate this problem. Normally, when power is applied to a tube, the filaments quickly heat up, and when power is withdrawn the filaments rapidly cool down. Over time, this thermal cycling places a great deal of stress on the filaments, and they become more and more brittle until they fail altogether (the effect is very similar to work-hardening of metal).

In an effort to minimize this thermal shock, the 2D's filaments are always on (roughly 5.7 volts) when the 2D is in "stand-by" mode (i.e., connected to an AC outlet, but with the preamp's power switch off). However, this procedure can cause problems within the tube. Audible Illusions' Art Ferris theorizes that gases can build up inside the tube and "poison" the tube's plates. To prevent formation of these gases, a small trickle B+ voltage (roughly ten percent of normal operating voltage) is applied to the plates when the Modulus is in stand-by mode. The net effect is to provide long-term thermal

stability for the tubes, with a consequent increase in tube life. Simple, clever, and (based on reports from the field) highly effective. In the event problems do develop in a tube, Audible Illusions are thoughtful enough to include a spare tube with every Modulus.

As implied above, the 2D's power switch selects between stand-by operation and fully-active status. When the switch is depressed, the preamp's outputs are automatically muted for thirty seconds or so to allow the internal voltages to stabilize. A red LED (always lit when the unit is plugged in) turns green to indicate when normal operating voltages have been reached. Incidentally, this auto mute function also engages when the preamp is shut down, making it virtually impossible to send a system-crunching DC pulse to your power amp and speakers. An excellent feature, one other tube preamplifier manufacturers would do well to emulate. As noted earlier, a manual mute switch is also provided.

The 2D's phono stage offers 28 dB of gain, and is thus intended for use with

The 2D's line stage provides roughly 30dB of gain, and this combines with the phono stage's 28dB of gain to make use with unusually high-output cartridges a bit problematic. Robust listening levels are achieved with only a slight rotation of the volume controls, making fine adjustments somewhat difficult. Not a big problem, really, and Audible Illusions are considering making the line amp's gain adjustable to rectify the situation.

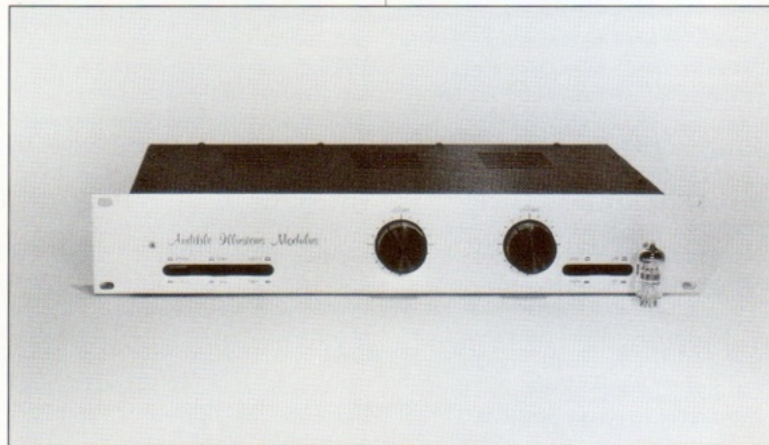
On to the most important issue at hand: How does the Modulus sound? In a word, marvelous. Before I elaborate, though, let me briefly make a few observations regarding vacuum tube audio components. I have never been a great fan of tube gear that attempts to offer the lush, warm, romantic sound (did someone say New York Audio Labs?) favored by some audiophiles. Such glamorized sound never struck me as having much relevance to *music*. True, such colorations can help mask harshness and stridency in the associated components or program material, but the net effect is to rob music of its vitality and presence. Not an accept-

simply that there no longer is an archetypical "tube sound" anymore. Those who expect the vacuum tube Modulus 2D to exhibit the traditional tube warmth and richness are in for a rude awakening.

Cutting to the chase, I consider the Modulus 2D one of the finest preamplifiers I have ever heard, regardless of price. It conveys music with a sense of immediacy and vivacity that is breathtaking. Listening to Jack Bruce's "Never Tell Your Mother She's Out Of Tune" (from *Jack Bruce/At His Best*, Polydor PD 3505, and undoubtedly deleted by now), I was astounded by the 2D's ability to follow Bruce's bass guitar. Bruce (known to many as a member of Cream) is unquestionably a virtuoso on his instrument, and he comes up with some truly amazing sounds. Sometimes his bass mimics a tuba, other times a bassoon, and still other times a chain saw. On "Never Tell..", the bass line is meaty, dynamic and frenetic. The 2D did an outstanding job of conveying both the tempo and pitch of the instrument — all too many audio components reduce the bass guitar on this track to an indistinct boom (given that tube electronics are hardly known for razor-sharp bass definition, the Modulus' performance here was all the more remarkable). This track has some interesting rhythmic quirks to it, and the Modulus kept up without even breathing hard. Dynamic impact and note attack were spot-on, the skittering snare drum and staccato horn parts never sounding blurred or flattened out.

Another track from this album, "hckhh blues", helped show off the 2D's ability to faithfully render instrumental timbres. The saxophone on this jazz-influenced tune had both immediacy and body, its "reach out and touch" quality achieved without any diminution of the instrument's warmth and resonance. Bruce's double bass again impressed with its crispness and rhythmic coherence. The Modulus was simply amazing in its capacity to present the music on this album with an utterly unforced clarity and dynamism.

Another album I've been listening to a lot lately is Rod Stewart's first solo LP, *The Rod Stewart Album*. Stewart's fondness for ballads is reflected in



medium- to high-output cartridges (input impedance is 47K ohms). A brief listen with an Audio-Technica AT-F5 (a low-output, moving coil cartridge) proved unsatisfactory, with too much hiss present (the inappropriate input impedance also disrupted tonal balance). Given the current proliferation of quality medium- and high-output cartridges, I suppose the absence of a dedicated MC input is not a major failing.

able trade-off in my view.

The Modulus 2D is part of the New Wave of vacuum tube equipment, a breed of components that strive to capture the detail and dynamics of live music. Tonally, these products are more forward and lively, hence lovers of "traditional" tube electronics may well disparage the New Wave gear as "bright" or "thin". Regardless of your allegiances in this matter, my point is

songs like "Man Of Constant Sorrow", "Handbags and Gladraggs", and "Dirty Old Town". "Man Of Constant Sorrow" is particularly compelling for its dramatic changes in mood and tone. The dynamic contrasts in this song are extremely important to conveying the emotion of the performance, and the Modulus performed brilliantly. Acoustic guitars were vivid and crisp, but the body and resonance of the instruments were never undercut. "Dirty Old Town" is a quiet, melancholy song (with a violent streak) that tests an audio component's ability to convey the subtleties and nuances of the guitarists' performances. The contrast between the folksy melody and the bitter lyrics was all the more apparent due to the 2D's clarity and low-level detail, the acoustic guitars coming through with tremendous feeling and emotion. Stewart's vocals sounded marvelous, his gruffness and rasp in perfect proportion, never becoming overbearing or harsh. Stewart is a superb vocalist, and the Modulus takes the listener beyond the obvious (the hoarseness) to reveal a singer of exceptional sensitivity and feeling.

Another singer whom I admire tremendously (and indeed one lauded by Stewart himself) is Paul Rodgers, lead vocalist of Free, Bad Company, and, more recently, The Firm (ugh). I firmly (sorry) believe Free's *Fire and Water* (A&M SP 3126) is one of the greatest rock albums ever made. Though I love all of the album's tracks, I'm particularly fond of a slow blues entitled "Oh I Wept". Free was one of the few rock bands to truly understand that, very often, *less is more*. Free's sense of understatement and subtlety went right by many rock listeners, unfortunately. "Oh I Wept" is a difficult test for audio components, in that each note in the song carries so much emotional weight. Audio gear that glosses over minor vocal inflections or subtle instrumental touches cannot possibly convey the power of the tune. The Modulus amazed with its ability to capture the mournful beauty of Rodgers' vocals, and the utterly exquisite guitar work of Paul Kossoff. Kossoff said more with one note than most guitarists could say with a hundred, and the 2D startled me by bringing new insight into instrumental lines I've heard innumerable times. The

attack, sustain, and decay of each note were simply laid out before me. So often preamps that excel in retrieving

hurt on preamps costing far more. Time will tell. I fear the 2D's moderate price will disqualify it from consideration by

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detail do so at the expense of a nagging, hectoring character, the information being thrown in the listener's face. The Modulus invited me into the performance, rather than ramming it down my throat.

I've used Shostakovich's *Symphony No. 11* (Bournemouth Symphony, conducted by Paavo Berglund; EMI SLS 5177) for some time, simply because it is so useful in determining a component's dynamics and ability to keep instrumental lines separate and distinct. The fourth movement ("Alarm") is particularly entertaining, with the bombast and power of the orchestra posing a real test for any audio component. The Modulus came through unscathed, doing an utterly superb job of keeping the sections of the orchestra from smearing together into one homogenized blob of sound. Strings had marvelous clarity and tone, while brass came across with fine bite and impact. Both image depth and width were amazing, this helping to convey the sheer size and impact of the orchestra. The martial cadence section of the fourth movement sounded taut and grim, the 2D excelling in rhythmic snap and drive. Dynamics were also exemplary, the thundering crescendoes of the orchestra coming through with ferocity.

The Modulus 2D is truly a landmark product. It is unquestionably the best preamplifier under \$1000 I have ever encountered (though the B&K MC101 and Superphon Revelation II put up a strong fight), and it may well put the

audio squids who just *know* a preamp can't be any good if it doesn't cost at least \$4000. No great loss, I suppose.

The Modulus combines finesse with power, detail with dynamics, in a way that is unfailing true to the music. Its tonal balance is exceptionally neutral, though as noted earlier the 2D may sound threadbare to fans of "traditional" tube warmth and glamor. The Modulus' construction quality is mind-bogglingly good, putting many more costly competitors to shame. In short, the Audible Illusions Modulus 2D is the promise of specialist audio fulfilled — musicality, construction quality, and affordability. It not only retains its status as one of "The Ten Best Buys in Audio", it makes a strong case for being the best value audio component in the world. An utter triumph. ■



Lazarus Cascade Deluxe

..Lazarus Electronics first gained notoriety for their affordable Cascade Basic preamplifier (see review in Issue Eight). More recently, Lazarus have introduced a number of new products — the Cascade Classic and Cascade Deluxe preamplifiers (available in both standard and balanced configurations), and the H-1A power amplifier, which can be run either as a 50 watt/channel stereo amp or as a 200 watt mono unit.

.. The Cascade Deluxe preamp on test here is a hybrid tube/solid state design, with the “hybridization” taking place in the phono stage. Designer Greg Miller utilizes FET transistors along with two 12AX7 tubes (one per channel) in order to provide sufficient gain for use with low-output moving-coil car-

into circuitry that some people consider superfluous, if not positively obsolete.

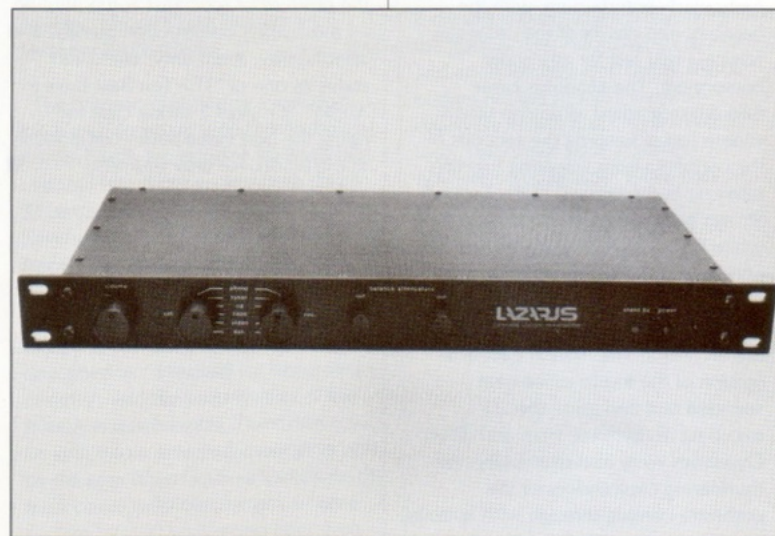
The Deluxe’s phono stage handles both MM and MC cartridges, with two banks of DIP switches (one per channel) allowing the user to tailor the input impedance to the characteristics of his or her specific cartridge. Available input impedances are the usual 47K ohms, as well as 8 values spanning the range from 220 ohms to 26 ohms. A 470 ohm setting for Linn cartridges would have been nice. The preamp’s high gain conspires with the volume control’s taper to make use with high-output cartridges (i.e., over 4 mV/5cm/sec) a bit challenging, as only a slight crack of the volume knob

medium-output moving coils or moderate-output moving-magnet cartridges anyway.

In terms of control functions, the Cascade Deluxe is definitely a minimalist design. The sleek anodized front panel carries a single volume control, two program selector knobs (one for “listen”, the other for “record”), two balance knobs, and stand-by and power switches. Each balance control attenuates the level in its respective channel, and when rotated fully counterclockwise is taken out of circuit completely; this is an excellent arrangement that minimizes breaks in the signal path. The Cascade’s power switch is intended to be engaged at all times (an auto mute circuit mutes the outputs if the AC line voltage drops too low, or in the event of power failure), with the user instead activating the stand-by switch (which mutes the outputs) when the preamp is not in use. Stand-by mode also cuts the voltage to the tubes, extending their operating life. A red LED on the front panel indicates stand-by status.

Inputs are provided for a turntable, CD player, tuner, one tape deck, a video source, and an auxiliary source. The Lazarus offers a single set of main outputs; these jacks, as well as the turntable and CD jacks, are gold-plated Tiffany pieces. The rest of the RCA jacks are standard nickel-plated units.

Build quality of the Cascade Deluxe is very good indeed, if not up to the lofty standards of the immaculate Modulus 2D. All of the Cascade’s front panel controls are mounted directly on the main circuit board (built of glassfibre). Three sub-boards are also carried on the main board. One,



tridges, without incurring an unacceptable degree of noise (a fault common to many tube preamps). In an age where CD is king, I admire Miller for his willingness to put time and money

produces high listening levels with power amps of average input sensitivity. Not a major problem, really, as indeed a \$1200 preamp is more likely to be used with quality low-

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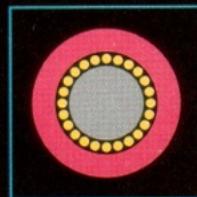
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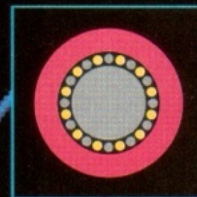
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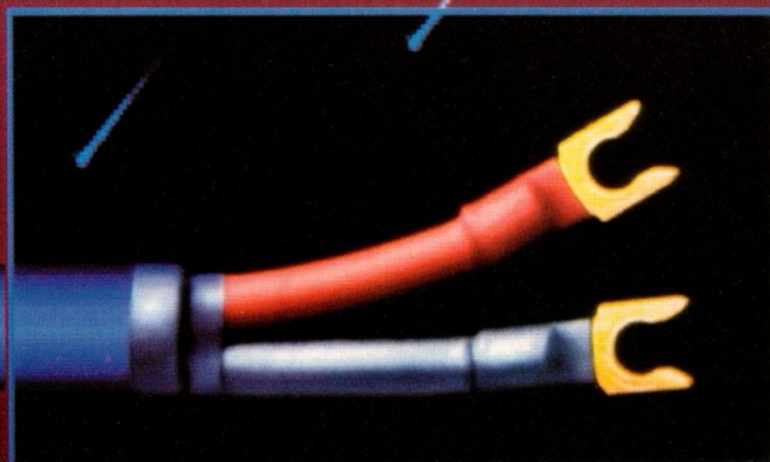
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mounted perpendicular to the main board, carries the Cascade's four 12AX7 tubes (one per channel for the phono and line amp stages) horizontally, thus facilitating the Cascade's low-slung, slim chassis. A second sub-board is also mounted vertically and well back on the main board, and bears the program selector switches (which connect to the front panel knobs via extension shafts); by locating the selector switches close to the input jacks, Miller keeps the signal paths as short as possible. The third sub-board sits atop the left rear of the main board, and carries the preamp's phono circuitry. The input and output jacks are mounted on yet another board fastened to the unit's rear panel. Expensive metal-film resistors and polypropylene caps are in abundance, and bespeak attention to quality. The preamp's Alps volume pot is nothing special, however. A good-sized power transformer occupies the right side of the chassis.

The Cascade Deluxe, by virtue of its laid-down tubes, offers perhaps the slickest and most attractive chassis of any tube preamp I've seen. Both the faceplate and chassis proper are built of gorgeous satin-finish, anodized aluminum, with a perforated top to allow adequate cooling. The Cascade's sleek, low-profile chassis makes many other tube preamps look decidedly frumpy by comparison.

While it's obvious considerable care has gone into the design and manufacture of the Cascade Deluxe, the results are somewhat mixed. As soon as I began listening to the Deluxe, I was immediately aware of an obvious problem in its bass performance, as kick drums and bass guitars took on a heavy, ponderous feel. The sinewy, supple bass guitar line on the Pretenders' "My City Was Gone" (from the *Learning to Crawl* LP) sounded a bit torpid through the Lazarus, its sense of danger undercut by the preamp's obvious overemphasis of bass notes. Jack Bruce's bass guitar on "Never Tell Your Mother She's Out of Tune" boomed a bit, it being difficult to discern the instrument's pitch at times.

Having read that Greg Miller deliberately "tailored" the phono stage's RIAA curve to provide a boost in the bass and treble regions, I

decided to see whether a similar bass problem existed in the line amp stage. Such was the case, as Andy Fraser's bass guitar on Free's CD *Fire and Water*, as well as the double bass on Elvis Costello's CD *King of America*,

technique easily heard through the Deluxe. I noted little tendency to slur or blur notes together. The instrument's timbre was somewhat thin, as the body and resonance of the guitar were undercut by the preamp's forward

Price: \$1200

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exhibited a tendency towards heaviness and mediocre definition.

To be sure, tube electronics are not generally known for superb bass performance, and in that respect the Cascade Deluxe may be no worse than many other tube preamps. Furthermore, I freely admit to being extremely demanding when it comes to bass quality. Some of you may find the Lazarus' bass reproduction perfectly acceptable. For me, the Deluxe's bass problems are sufficiently annoying to disqualify it from consideration.

Which is a bit of a shame, because the Lazarus does have its good points. The track "Indoor Fireworks" (from *King of America*) highlighted the Deluxe's outstanding detail and retrieval of recording acoustic, with Costello's vocals and the accompanying acoustic guitar sounding exceptionally clear and immediate. The Lazarus's tonal balance is a bit forward, and this tended to thin out Costello's voice somewhat, overemphasizing his throat relative to his diaphragm. Similarly, the Deluxe added an extra bit of edge to the already-raspy voices of John Prine and Rod Stewart.

Note attack and dynamics were other areas in which the Lazarus did quite well. Michael Newman's acoustic guitar performance of the Bach Chaconne had fine crispness and presence, the brilliance of Newman's

tonal balance. Henryk Szeryng's violin also sounded a bit hard, though his performance was equally affecting for its sense of clarity and presence.

Rickie Lee Jones' "Danny's All-Star Joint" came across with fine pace and swing, the Lazarus doing an excellent job of conveying this tune's energy and spirit. Jones' vocals were very clear and present, though lacking some of their usual warmth and body. Note attack and dynamics were again impressive, and the Lazarus also did a nice job of spreading the musicians across the soundstage.

The Cascade Deluxe frustrates me with its balance of strengths and weaknesses. While exhibiting problems in tonal balance and bass quality, it excels in its ability to convey the immediacy and vitality of music. To be sure, the Lazarus is a bit rough around the edges, but it captures the essential energy of music quite well. Having said that, it must be noted the Audible Illusions 2D outperforms the Lazarus across the board, and costs three hundred dollars less to boot.

The Lazarus Cascade Deluxe is certainly a *good* preamplifier, and its high-gain phono stage is a boon for those who favor low-output MC cartridges. (Those not needing this MC stage would do well to consider the otherwise-identical Cascade Classic at \$950.) A respectable product, but rather average value for the money. ■

CURRENT AFFAIRS

It's a hoary old audio analogy, but it does serve a purpose. Imagine your power amplifier is a water pump, and your loudspeaker a pipe through which the water flows. Water pressure (voltage) in the pipe is dependent on how much water (amperage) the pump can supply. For example, the pump may have to move fifty gallons of water per minute to achieve the desired pressure in the pipe. If the size (cross-sectional area) of the pipe were suddenly doubled, the pump would have to deliver twice as much water to maintain the same pressure in the pipe.

The ideal power amplifier would be a constant-voltage source. That is, regardless of the impedance into which it was working, the amp would always have enough current to deliver its rated voltage. Most of us know 2.83 volts into 8 ohms equals 1 watt. Consider that the same voltage into 4 ohms equals 2 watts. The wattage doubles because the current delivery doubles (watts = volts x amps). With each *halving* of the impedance seen by the amp, the current demands *double* to maintain the same voltage level.

Recent years have seen a sharp upswing in the number of loudspeakers that present extremely difficult loads to their driving amplifiers. Some of the more daunting models actually drop below one ohm at some frequencies! However, even speakers with mild impedance curves benefit from the control and authority of a high-current amp.

The B & K Sonata M-200 monoblocks and the Belles 450 stereo amplifier certainly fit the bill as far as current delivery goes. Both are capable of driving virtually any loudspeaker in the marketplace. The little (relatively speaking) Hafler XL-280 arrived too late to be included in last issue's survey of mid-priced power amps, and thus finds itself thrown in with the big bruisers.

— Kent Bransford



B & K Sonata M-200

Over the years, B & K Components, Ltd. have become one of America's leading manufacturers of affordable, high-quality audio electronics. B & K's John Beyer has done an admirable job of providing musical, reliable preamplifiers and power amplifiers within the budget of virtually any music lover. Beyer has accomplished this by doing something few competing specialist audio manufacturers have been willing (or able) to do — tooling up for high-volume production.

Many specialist audio companies tend to lead "hand to mouth" existences. That is, they lack the necessary funds to invest in long-term parts inventories and automated production equipment. For example, manufacturers on a tight budget maintain only enough parts inventory to satisfy their short-term production requirements. Per-unit parts costs vary tremendously with the quantity ordered; companies that place small orders may pay several times as much for the exact same part as a manufacturer that orders 10,000 pieces at a time. John Beyer tells me one of his competitors pays *three times as much* as B & K for the same Noble volume pot. These additional costs are passed on to the consumer in the form of higher retail prices. Of course, those small-volume manufacturers committed to meeting a specific price point may have to employ inferior-quality parts to stay within budget; their inability to make large parts purchases means they may actually pay *more* for parts inferior to those used by high-volume manufacturers like B & K, Vandersteen, etc.

Similarly, many specialist audio manufacturers lack the capital to

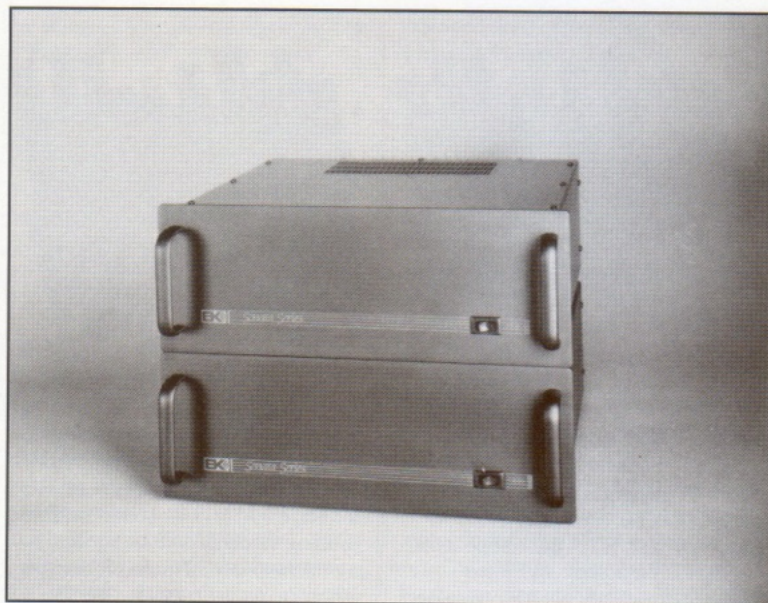
purchase labor-saving automated production machinery. Thus their products are largely hand-assembled, despite the fact automated board-stuffers (which place the components on the circuit boards) and wave-soldering machines (which can solder all of the components on a board in a single pass) are more efficient. The extra costs of this hand labor are passed on to the consumer. Sometimes this can be justified on the basis of higher-quality workmanship, other times (decidedly) not.

Of course, high-volume production demands high-volume sales to be economically feasible, and therein lies the rub. The specialist market is hardly known for fostering prodigious unit sales, and thus many specialist manufacturers opt instead to focus on the lucrative "High End" sector of the market, where modest unit sales of expensive, high-profit products can yield a handsome living. Naturally, the consumer picks up the tab for the manufacturing inefficiencies of such enterprises. John Beyer has undertaken the more daunting task of manufacturing and marketing affordable equipment in numbers sufficient to ensure a reasonable return on investment. B & K's profit per unit may be modest compared to that of the typical "High End" component, but Beyer has achieved unit sales (and consequent profits) that are quite astounding for a specialist manufacturer. Equally impressive is the fact that Beyer hasn't compromised his products' integrity to achieve commercial success. (The reader may wish to see this issue's Editorial for further thoughts on the topic of commercial viability vs. functional integrity.)

The above is a roundabout way of explaining the significance of B & K's new Sonata series. As noted earlier, B & K have traditionally concentrated on building moderately-priced gear, within the financial grasp of those on relatively modest budgets. Superb value products, to be sure, but not designed to stretch the limits of state-of-the-art technology. The Sonata series changes all that. Beyer has now committed B & K's manufacturing efficiency and economies of scale to producing audio components that challenge the best "High End" marques. The Sonata MC-101 preamplifier was the first of this new line of electronics to come my way (see review in Issue Eleven), and I was bowled over its combination of smoothness (a B & K hallmark) and detail. Music through the MC-101 has an immediacy and presence heretofore unknown in B & K products. Combined with an abundance (some might argue a plethora) of control and convenience features, this musicality makes the \$898 MC-101 the clear leader among affordable, full-function preamplifiers.

(By the way, I recently learned B & K will soon introduce a stripped-down version of the MC-101, maintaining the same superb sound quality, but deleting a number of the less vital control functions (i.e., tone controls, HF filter, etc.). The projected retail of this new model is a mere \$698; B & K's competitors have my sympathy.)

Impressed as I am by the MC-101, I find the Sonata M-200 monoblock power amplifiers on test here even more remarkable. The M-200 is John Beyer's effort to build a power amp that can drive virtually any loudspeaker



load in existence. Rated at 200 watts into 8 ohms and 400 watts into 4 ohms, the M-200 can drive loads as low as .75 ohms and still pump out its rated 200 watts! Unlike B & K's earlier power amplifiers, the M-200 (and its companion in the Sonata line, the stereo PRO-600) is DC coupled, suggesting solid bass performance. Rated peak current output of the M-200 is an incredible 150 amperes. This might come in handy should you need to jump-start your Peterbilt on a frosty morning.

Built into essentially the same compact chassis as some of B & K's less expensive amps, the M-200 imposed no stiff tooling costs for its metalwork, thus freeing John Beyer to splurge on top-quality electrical components without bumping the M-200's retail price out of sight. Furthermore, this allowed Beyer to pursue the theoretically preferable route of completely independent mono amplifiers [no interaction between channels, greater heat dissipation capability (thus obviating the need for noisy fans), and the ability to place the amps in close proximity to the loudspeakers, etc., etc.] without incurring a disproportionate increase in metalworking costs. The fact that the M-200 can be lifted without a visit to Trusses 'R' Us is an added bonus.

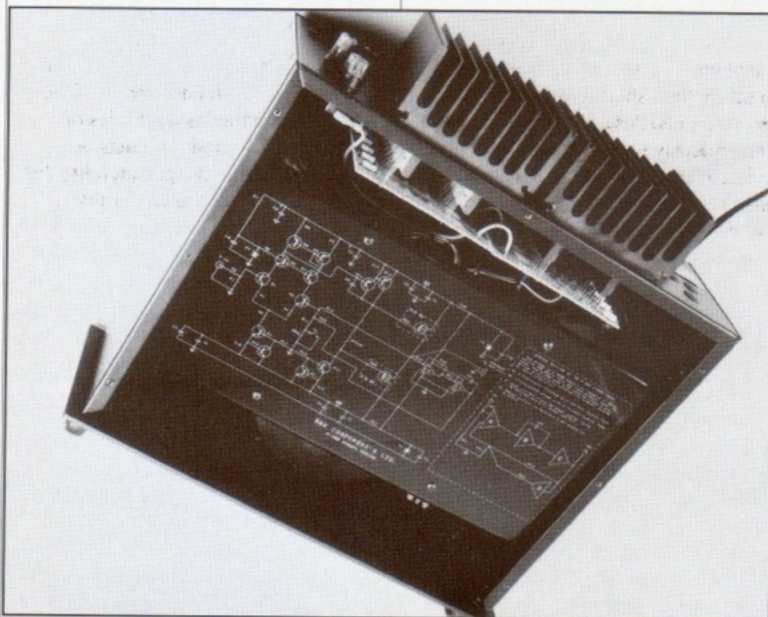
Internal construction is most impressive, with a massive, shielded

toroidal transformer centrally sited within the steel chassis. Four filter capacitors, each roughly the size of the oil filter on my Honda, combine to offer nearly 70,000 mfd of storage capacitance. The input and driver circuits are carried on a single glassfibre board that sits atop the power supply caps. A plastic panel bearing a

with the M-200's beefy design, no less than *twenty* of these devices are fastened to the amp's external heatsink. Quality (Corning or Dale) 1% metal film resistors and premium film caps are used throughout the active circuitry. A gold-plated Tiffany input jack is included, with gold-plated five-way binding posts handling speaker cable connection. The input jack is located directly below the amp's heatsink, in Beyer's patented "anti-reviewer" configuration. You can tell how many B & K power amps a reviewer has evaluated by counting the scars on his hands and wrists.

In terms of style, the M-200 is rather attractive in a minimalist way. The steel chassis is painted black, while the aluminum faceplate is painted a deep, pewter gray. Sonata series products sport a subtle red-and-blue logo that is quite becoming, certainly preferable to the fuzzy gold silkscreening on B & K's less expensive models. Smoothly-finished, black rack-mount handles complete the M-200's look. External fit and finish are very good, if not dazzling, for the price.

As with the MC-101 preamplifier, the M-200 can be supplied for use in



silkscreened schematic of the amp covers this board. As with B & K's other power amps, the M-200 utilizes MOSFET output transistors. In keeping

balanced mode. The balanced input (provided in addition to the normal, unbalanced input — selection between the two accomplished via a rocker

switch on the amp's rear panel) adds \$100 to the price of each amp (\$200 extra for a stereo pair). An XLR connector accepts the balanced input signals.

Regardless of the M-200's extraordinary design and construction quality, it don't mean a thing if it ain't got that swing, and that's something the B & K has in spades. When I played Jack Bruce tunes like "Never Tell Your Mother She's Out of Tune" and "Letter of Thanks", I was floored by the M-200's sense of pace and drive. No B & K amplifier I've ever heard has displayed this kind of rhythmic snap and crispness. Bruce's bass guitar came across with marvelous attack and drive, the M-200 never slurring or flattening the instrument's dynamic impact. Another good test of bass performance is the tune "Rude Mood", from Stevie Ray Vaughan and Double Trouble's *Texas Flood*. A good power amplifier will let you appreciate the rhythmic drive of Tommy Shannon's bass guitar, but it takes an outstanding amp to make the *pitch* of the instrument clear. The M-200 is such an amp.

Regular readers know John Prine's *Bruised Orange* is one of my favorite albums, and the B & K made it even more enjoyable than usual by dint of the M-200's marvelous combination of warmth and clarity. The acoustic guitars throughout this recording had remarkable resonance and body, yet this never came at the expense of dullness or torpor. Note attack and dynamics were exemplary, the guitars displaying a vivid, compelling presence that made the performances exceptionally convincing. Prine's gruff, raspy vocals were cleanly reproduced, managing to come across with fine immediacy without sounding harsh or spitty.

Holst's *The Planets* (EMI/Angel CDM 7 69045 2) is an interesting test for a power amplifier, the broad swings of mood and tone placing particular demands on an amp's ability to communicate both subtle and gross dynamic shadings. All too often extremely powerful amps excel on bombastic symphony works, but fall down when it comes to conveying the subtlety and nuance of "smaller" music. The M-200 proved to be a glorious exception. Yes, the massed

brass and great whomping bass drum shots in "Uranus, the Magician" were appropriately startling, but equally satisfying were the quiet flute and violin passages that weave through this performance. Delicate instrumental shadings and nuances that are so important in communicating the emotion of the music were never glossed over or homogenized. The M-

harsh, piercing character imparted it by lesser-quality amps.

Obviously, I was extremely impressed by the B & K M-200. While offering the tonal naturalness that characterizes all B & K products, the M-200 goes far beyond previous B & K amps in its outstanding bass quickness and definition, as well as its excellent retrieval of low-level detail and

Price: \$1796

Contact:

**B & K Components, Ltd.
1971 Abbott Road
Lackawanna, NY 14218
(800) 543-5252**

200 had that essential ability to draw me further and further into the music, rather than hurling it in my face. Retrieval of low-level detail and recording acoustic were superb, making the performance that much more real and affecting. Equally impressive was the M-200's soundstage width and depth, as the size and power of the orchestra were communicated to great effect.

While not a huge fan of Iggy Pop's post-Raw *Power* work, I'm very much enamored of the wonderful *New Values* (Arista AB 4237). Rather more subtle and thoughtful than his earlier efforts (and subsequent releases — Pop followed up with the execrable *Soldier*), *New Values* is almost (dare I say it) *commercial*. Side One of the LP is particularly strong, ending with the atmospheric "The Endless Sea". Anchored by a simple bass guitar/drum figure, the track draws its power and effectiveness from Pop's mesmerizing vocals and the haunting synthesizer that floats about the listening room. The M-200 was superb in its capacity to capture the (real and artificial) reverb on this track, helping to convincingly communicate the mood and tension of the composition. Pop's vocals were rich and resonant, while the synthesizer lacked the slightly

recording acoustic. There is a fundamental quickness and alacrity to the M-200 that makes music more immediate, more compelling. Rhythmic coherence and progression are marvelous; fast rock tracks rip along at a furious pace (try "You Ain't Nothin' But Fine" from Rockpile's superb *Seconds of Pleasure* LP). The M-200's broad, deep soundstage makes it easier to follow individual instrumental lines, as the musicians aren't in an amorphous clump centered between the speakers.

In short, a superb performance from B & K's most noteworthy product to date. The M-200 power amplifier is a smashing success by any standard, and an absolute steal at the price. ■



Dave Belles stubbornly refuses to place style above substance when designing his power amplifiers. His little 150 (favorably reviewed in Issue Eleven) bears a striking resemblance to a toaster oven, and the massive 450 on test here is more than a little reminiscent of a microwave oven. Belles is adamant about offering the best possible sound quality for the dollar, and thus forgoes the fancy anodized faceplates and chassis favored by other manufacturers. Such items are extremely costly — indeed, the metalwork is typically the single greatest expense in an amplifier.

Belles puts the money saved on metalwork into the circuitry itself, utilizing 1% metal film resistors and quality film capacitors throughout. As

mounted on the chassis' rear panel. The 450 utilizes bipolar input and driver stages (the latter run class A) in concert with MOSFET output transistors (eight per channel). Each pair of MOSFETs is carried on a beefy aluminum heatsink, which is fastened directly to the circuit board. Almost 20,000 mfd of storage capacitance is used for each channel, the caps being expensive computer-grade aluminum electrolytics. Five-way binding posts (which are mounted directly on the circuit board) handle speaker cable termination.

(Note: Dave Belles tells me current production 450's now use brass eyelets where the binding posts bolt to the circuit board. Without the eyelets, the board compresses from the torque of

electrical connection. My review sample did not have these eyelets, and Dave suggests this may explain some of my qualms regarding the 450's imaging.)

Pricy van den Hul silver monocrystal wire connects the gold-plated input jacks (which are mounted directly on the circuit board) to the 450's input stage. One change I would like to see Belles make is to reinforce the circuit board around the input jacks, as inserting and removing tight-fitting interconnect plugs causes an alarming degree of flex in the board.

The 450 carries an enormous 1500VA toroid mounted on its front panel (it looks more like a curling stone than a power transformer). As with the rest of the chassis, the front panel is made of aluminum, and thus helps dissipate some of the transformer's heat. Given its huge power supply, it should come as no surprise that the 450 is a very powerful amplifier. Rated output power of the Belles is 200 watts per channel into 8 ohms, and 400 watts per channel into 4 ohms. Perhaps more indicative of the 450's massive grunt is its eye-popping peak current rating, in excess of 100 amperes!

Just so you won't think Dave Belles is totally oblivious to styling and aesthetics, I should note a handsome pair of solid cherry end caps are featured on the 450.

Bruiser amps like the 450 always hold the promise of great bass control, and the Belles certainly didn't disappoint. Listening to the great thumping bass line on "Action Speaks Faster" from the LP *Difford & Tillbrook* (A & M SP 4985), I was immediately impressed



with the 150, all of the 450's circuitry is carried on a single glassfibre board

the fasteners. This loosens the join to the board, and thus degrades the

with the iron grip the 450 kept on my ProAc Response Twos' woofers. Bass power and depth were exemplary,

seemed slightly compressed, tending to bunch the musicians together between the speakers. This undercut the

good, if lacking a bit of the snap and drive displayed by the B & K. More obvious was a diminution of sound-stage width, with the result that the musicians were crowded together slightly, making it a bit more difficult to follow each player's line. Not a major failing by any means, though. Overall, the sound is quick, dynamic, and powerful.

Price: \$1595

Contact:

**Belles Research Corp.
1237 East Main Street
Rochester, NY 14609
(716) 482-8850**

At the heart of the 450's appeal is its modest price of \$1595. The Belles easily outperforms many power amps in this price range, and indeed offers the current drive and load insensitivity of much more expensive designs. I can't imagine the 450 would have much trouble driving *any* commercially-available loudspeaker, including Apogees, WATTs, and other notoriously difficult loads. Those in need of a power amplifier with exceptional output-current capability will find the 450 an excellent buy. Another fine value for the dollar from Belles. ■

betting the B & K M-200 by a hair. Recorded after Squeeze split up back in the early Eighties, *Difford & Tillbrook* leans more towards a funk/soul feel, and the 450 did an excellent job of communicating the album's energy and spunk. Glenn Tillbrook's vocals were clear and resonant, with no diminution of body or warmth. Mediocre amplifiers tend to make Tillbrook sound a bit nasal.

The 450 did an excellent job of preserving instrumental timbres, with Henryk Szeryng's violin (from Bach's *Six Sonatas and Partitas for Solo Violin*, Deutsche Grammophon 2709 028) conveyed with a fine combination of clarity and body. Szeryng plays with economy and grace, eschewing the histrionics favored by certain Big Name players. The 450 was able to communicate the subtlety and intelligence of the performance, with perhaps just a slight veiling of recording acoustic apparent. Note attack and dynamics were excellent, though the B & K M-200 was slightly preferable in this regard.

On Shostakovich's Symphony No. 11, the Belles' sense of power and control truly came into their own. Tympani and bass drum were extremely taut and powerful, this helping to convey the drive and ferocity of the orchestra. Strings sounded crisp and resonant, their clarity not coming at the expense of thinness or stridency. Brass sounded gutsy and full, with fine bite and attack. I did note some problems with imaging, as the width of the orchestra

performance's expansiveness and impact a bit. The martial cadence section in the fourth movement was handled well, the 450 communicating the urgency and tension of the music nicely.

Jack Bruce's "Never Tell Your Mother She's Out of Tune" is a good test for rhythmic coherence and pace, and the 450 did quite a good job here. Bruce's frenetic bass lines were easy to follow, though they didn't have quite the snap and bounce as through the B & K. The track "Cindy's Lament" (from Rod Stewart's *The Rod Stewart Album*) challenged the 450's ability to keep instrumental lines separate and distinct. A raucous tune, "Cindy's Lament" features a wicked slide guitar line surrounded by a swirling cloud of keyboards and acoustic and electric guitars. Mediocre amplifiers make it difficult to follow each musician's part, the instruments blurring together into an amorphous lump of sound. The Belles came through this test well, with only a mild degree of smearing evident. I sometimes found it difficult to follow some of the secondary guitar lines, but by and large the 450 did a fine job here.

Indeed, the Belles 450 turned out to be quite a stunner for the money. It has a tremendous sense of power and control, never seeming to work hard regardless of how demanding the program material. Its tonal balance is excellent, faithfully reproducing instrumental timbres. Rhythmic coherence and progression were very





The XL-280 represents Hafler's second generation of power amplifiers, succeeding the popular DH-200 and DH-220 models. As many of you know, the "XL" (standing for "Excelin-ear", i.e., it excels in linearity) is claimed by Hafler to set new standards in accuracy. I quote from the XL-280 owner's manual: "It is so close to perfection that for the first time you can make a meaningful comparison of this amplifier with the classic zero distortion reference: a straight wire."

Indeed, Hafler are thoughtful enough to offer a special switch box (the XL-10) to facilitate just such a comparison. Unfortunately, they didn't send *me* one, so I was unable to perform their SWDT (Straight Wire Differential Test) myself. No great loss, actually, as I still believe the most valid evaluation tools a music lover can use are attached to the sides of his head.

That said, I must say the *theoretical* arguments in favor of the SWDT are quite persuasive. In a nutshell, the test uses the "hot" output signal of a power amplifier to drive the input of a second power amp, the one being tested. The "hot" outputs of both amps are then connected to a monitoring loudspeaker. If the two signals are identical, there will be no voltage across the speaker's terminals, and hence no sound will be produced by the speaker. Any sound that does result will be the difference voltage between the two signals, and thus betray distortion of the input signal in the test amp's output.

A "perfect" amp would "null" completely, its output voltage matching that of the driving amp precisely. While not claiming absolute perfec-

tion, Hafler state the XL-280 can produce "up to 70dB of nulling in the midband and about 60dB over most of the rest of the audio spectrum." Thus at a listening level of 95dB (which is LOUD), the XL-280's distortion would be around 25-35dB, which is lower than the ambient noise level in most tombs, let alone most listening rooms. That doesn't necessarily *prove* the distortion would be inaudible, of course. As last issue's Editorial discussed, any distortion measurement is relevant only to the extent it correlates with perceived sound quality, and that correlation can only be determined by listening. Any test method that presumes to ignore the ear/brain mechanism is doomed to failure.

Bear in mind the above is a very brief, incomplete overview of the SWDT, and you are encouraged to contact Hafler directly for a more comprehensive explanation of the test, as well as

adjustment pots on the XL-280's circuit boards that allow you to fine-tune the XL to obtain the best performance with your particular loudspeakers. Again, contact Hafler for details.

In terms of construction, the XL-280 mirrors its predecessors in that it employs MOSFET output transistors (six per channel, in the interest of improved output current capability). The power supply consists of a beefy power transformer in concert with four large filter capacitors. Not surprisingly, rated output current is a solid 18 amps. Save for the common transformer, the XL-280's channels are completely independent. Each channel consists of a large external heat sink, which carries a glassfibre board bearing the J-FET input and output circuits. There's quite a bit of point-to-point wiring within the XL's chassis, the proper routing of which is important to obtaining the lowest possible noise levels. DC-coupled throughout, the XL-

Price: \$675

Contact:

**Rockford Corp.
613 South Rockford Drive
Tempe, AZ 85281
(602) 967-3565**

information regarding how you may conduct the test on your own power amplifier. By the way, note there are

280 dispenses with the usual input capacitor and output inductor (in the interests of reducing phase shift), while

still maintaining excellent stability.

Overall parts and build quality are quite good for the price, though clearly not up to the standards of the similarly-priced Belles 150. Expensive film caps and metal-film resistors are sprinkled throughout the circuitry, but a fair number of lesser-quality parts are also in evidence. Gold-plated input jacks are provided, with (rather crowded together) five-way binding posts handling loudspeaker cable termination.

External fit and finish are slightly disappointing, looking a bit rough and industrial. The top and bottom of the XL-280 are built of folded steel sheet, with the aluminum heat sinks forming the sides of the amp. Hafler offer a number of optional faceplates, both to facilitate rack-mounting and to spruce up the XL-280's cosmetic appeal. My review sample featured the XL-282 faceplate (sculptured 17" appearance panel without handles), but I'm afraid the amplifier still appears somewhat unfinished for a consumer product.

The Hafler XL-280 is rated at 145 watts per channel into 8 ohms, and 200 watts per channel into 4 ohms. The XL-280 features a bridging switch on its rear panel that enables the amp to be used in mono configuration, yielding output power of over 400 watts into 8 ohms.

Despite the obvious care that went into the design and construction of the XL-280, I'm afraid I was less than overwhelmed by its performance. Its most obvious problem lies in the bass frequencies, as bass guitars and kick drums displayed a rather heavy and thick character. Free's "The Stealer" (featured on the CD *Best Of Free*, as well as originally appearing on the LP *Highway*) opens with an utterly lascivious guitar line from Paul Kossoff, which is soon joined by the broad, swaggering bass riff of Andy Fraser. Through the Hafler, Fraser's bass didn't so much swagger as trundle, the instrument sounding a bit muddled and directionless. On the track "Give It Up" from Talk Talk's *The Colour of Spring*, the kick drum plays an integral part in setting the mood and tension of the song. Here again the XL-280 added a degree of thickness and ambiguity, the drum's attack and decay lacking

crispness and vitality. While certainly not resembling the proverbial salami beaten against a sofa cushion, the kick drum was rather ineffectual in communicating the tune's dramatic mood swings.

The Hafler was more impressive when it came to reproducing low-level detail and recording acoustic. Michael Newman's performance of the Bach Chaconne (Sheffield Lab 10) is impressive both for the performer's artistry, as well as the excellent recording quality. Here the XL-280 shone, as it captured the subtle instrumental shadings and recording ambience that make this performance especially affecting. Note attacks and decays of Newman's guitar were handled quite well, though fine dynamic changes were glossed over a bit. More troubling was the guitar's timbre, as it lacked a degree of warmth and resonance, with too much string and not enough body. That said, the performance was still rather enjoyable, the immediacy and detail of the Hafler adding to the music's intimate feel.

John Prine's "If You Don't Want My Love" (from the ubiquitous *Bruised Orange* LP) is one of my favorites, a simple and plaintive tune that communicates a wealth of emotion. Prine's vocals sounded a bit harsh and strident through the Hafler, over and above Prine's characteristic raspiness. Acoustic guitars sounded somewhat cold and flat, lacking some of the marvelous bloom and resonance captured on this recording by producer Steve Goodman. The simple kick drum figure that underpins this track came across rather soggy, and this diminished the drama and atmosphere of the song. The subtle and quiet strength of this track didn't come across well, the Hafler's thinnish tonal balance and undistinguished bass definition making the song sound a bit bland and flat.

In short, the Hafler turned in a mixed performance. Its greatest asset is its resolution of detail and recording acoustic, this helping to convey the immediacy and intimacy of the musical performance. Alas, this seems to have come at the expense of a slightly forward, thin tonal balance that renders music somewhat hard and cold-sounding. Vocalists sometimes seem to be singing only with their throats, with

their chest tones diminished. Actually, the greatest irritant to me was the Hafler's heavy, blurred bass performance. From Jack Bruce to Andy Fraser to John Entwistle, all of my favorite bass guitarists sounded a bit tired and uninspired. For me, this flaw alone would be enough to disqualify the Hafler from consideration, but other music lovers may well find the XL-280's bass quality rather less frustrating. Regardless, the XL-280 is handily outperformed by the Belles 150 (\$650, see review in Issue Eleven), and thus a recommendation is not possible. I do admire the effort Hafler have made with this amp, and hope future versions will address some of the problems noted above. ■

COMPACT DISCSURSE

Reviewing CD players is one of life's more onerous tasks. As soon as evaluation of a model is completed, it disappears from the market, to be replaced by yet another "new and improved" unit. To be sure, the quality of CD players *has* made vast strides in the last couple of years. Today's \$600 units blow away megabuck players from the not-so-distant past (which does just *wonderful* things for the latter's resale values — think "high-tech paper-weight").

"Linearity" is the current buzz-word among the audio cognoscenti. Unlike analog equipment, digital equipment's distortion *rises* as signal level *falls*. Frequency response aberrations are the result of poor low-level linearity in the digital-to-analog converter (DAC). CD player manufacturers are feverishly working to produce DACs that achieve the goal of virtually flat response to -90dB. It is felt this will ameliorate many of the objections audiophiles have regarding the Compact Disc's ability to retrieve recording ambience and low-level detail.

Of course, low-level nonlinearities have another unfortunate side effect. Consider that every musical note is, by definition, immediately preceded and succeeded by no sound, i.e. silence. One could say that every note begins and ends with silence. When a note makes the transition from silence to its full volume level, it passes, howsoever briefly, through every intermediate volume level. Just as a car accelerating from 0 to 60 miles per hour must briefly be travelling at 5 mph, 10 mph, 15 mph, etc., so too does a musical note pass through volume levels of -110dB, -100dB, -90dB, -80dB, etc., until it reaches its full volume (0 dB). And of course as the note ends, and drops back down to silence, it again passes through these intermediate volume levels. **This means that the beginning and ending of every note reproduced by a nonlinear CD player is bathed in distortion.** Not just the "quiet", low-level information is distorted — *every single note is affected.*

Guest reviewer **Eric Donaldson** takes a look at four of the leading mid-priced CD players now available: the CAL Icon, Denon DCD-1520, the Sony CDP-508ESD, and the Adcom GCD-575.

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...because
music
matters.



At \$695, the solid-state Icon is a change of pace for California Audio Labs. Until now, all of their products (save the solid-state Tercet) have been expensive (at least to my wallet!) tubed designs, and the Tempest II Special Edition certainly belongs in the "cost is no object" category. I'm not certain why CAL has chosen to enter the under-\$1000 CD player battle, but they obviously bring a lot of skill and knowledge to the endeavor.

The Icon has most of the standard convenience features offered by the other players auditioned, such as 20 track programming, indexing, remote

jack, though this is a minor omission. Physically, it has a handsome anodized faceplate and a simple, uncluttered design (I grew to appreciate this quality as I considered some of the other players' cluttered fascias), with easy-to-read graphics and an LED display that didn't remind me of Christmas. Handsome appearance aside, the drawer mechanism was rather noisy, and earned the nickname "R2D2". Don't be put off by this, however.

(Note: CAL inform me Icons with serial numbers over 300 don't have this noise problem. Earlier Icons can be retrofitted with a simple resistor swap

Technically speaking, the Icon is an 18 bit, eight-times oversampling machine. CAL claim exceptional resolution through the use of timing compensation on the incoming signal lines, and hand-trimming of the DAC's linearity. Featuring an aluminum (non-magnetic) chassis, the Icon boasts "the all-new CAL linear drive, glass optics laser drive" disc transport. No less than five separate regulated power supplies are employed. The Icon's analog section is a low-feedback design, and utilizes an FET input stage. CAL offer an optional, plug-in module that provides both optical and coaxial digital outputs. Overall construction quality of this player is exceptionally sophisticated given its modest price.

The Icon proved to be a delightful surprise. On *Famous Blue Raincoat*, Warnes' vocal had fine warmth and immediacy, an almost "reach out and touch me" kind of quality. Dynamics were very good, as the snare drum was quick and sharp, and bass was powerful. The Icon also exhibited excellent depth, easily the best of all the players I auditioned, and images were spread out well over the stage. While the Icon didn't strike me as having the kind of "airiness" of the GCD-575, it had a lot of air between the images. A more realistic reproduction of the music, in my mind. "Joan Of Arc" reinforced this concept, as I could easily detect echoes within the reproduced recording stage.

While listening to *Moscow Sessions*, I was further impressed with the Icon's ability to retrieve low-level detail. Imaging in this very busy piece was exceptionally tight and defined, as I could easily detect the presence of multiple performers. While I've heard



control, etc. Unlike the other players, the Icon has only fixed outputs, so it cannot be used to drive an amplifier directly. Also, it lacks a headphone

that drops the voltage to the drawer's motor, and thus quiets things down. CAL will perform this fix free of charge. Contact CAL for details.)

EQUIPMENT REPORTS

players that offer better resolution of imaging and detail, they also cost a lot more than \$695. All through *Moscow Sessions*, I enjoyed the warmth and

Celtic harp was delicate and airy, with very extended decay of notes struck. The violin (fiddle to you Irish buffs) had that warm, rosy sound that I became

Hands On. I'm really starting to sound hackneyed about the Icon, but I enjoyed myself, rather than just *listened*. The piano had fairly realistic tonal qualities, with good note decay that seemed to draw just enough attention to itself. Brushes were distinctive and clear, easily telling me the drummer was using brushes. Cymbals were rather crisp, though somewhat more recessed on the stage than I expected. Marc Johnson's double bass was a little heavy tonally, but then double basses are, and the notes were airy and distinctive. All in all, the entire presentation was relaxed, musical, and believable. Delightful.

As you can see for yourself, I was really impressed with the CAL Icon. Delighted, I should say. As should be obvious by now, the Icon was my favorite player of the five auditioned. Other than for blowing a power fuse when first plugged in (don't worry, Mr. Paymer, I replaced it with one of the same value), the Icon performed without a hitch and continues to impress me with its musical qualities. Within its price class, the Icon will be a tough act to follow! ■

Price: \$695

Contact:

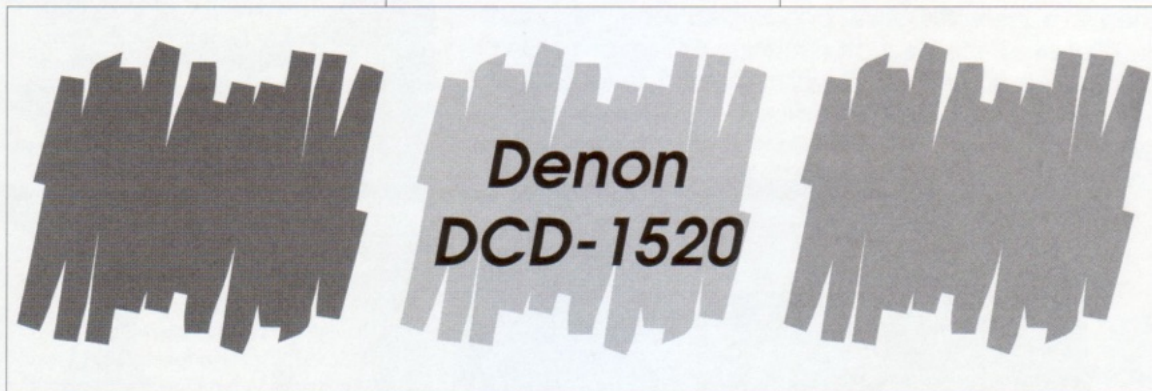
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Garden Grove, CA 92641
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ambience the Icon produced, and was struck by the player's ability to give a relaxed, musical presentation. No forcefulness or stridency here, just sweet musicality. Even with R2D2 clanking away on the disc changes.

Celtic Wedding was also a delightful (There's that word again, Kent! I think I've already encapsulated the review.) presentation, the transparency and low-level detail of the Icon reminding me just how good this disc is. The

so used to while rooming with a violinist in college. Monjarret's vocal came across more convincingly to me than with any other player, being very neutral and full-bodied, without the slightest trace of leanness. "Celtic Wedding", though, was what really confirmed the Icon's quality to me, as the organ came across with power and determination. Repent, ye sinners! Reminded me of being in church.

Finally, I put on "Prelude" from



As with the other Japanese players on test here, the DCD-1520 represents yet another generation in a line of players reaching back to the dawn of the Digital Age. Its immediate predecessor, the DCD-1500 II, was reviewed very favorably in Issue Nine, and the 1520 is an even more technologically advanced player.

The 1520 uses two 20-bit Super Linear DACs, "Super Linear" referring

to the process of using external resistors to correct any out-of-spec values of the LSB (Least Significant Bit) resistors in the ICs. An eight-times oversampling digital filter in concert with analog filtering completes the rest of the D-to-A chain. Construction quality is both rugged and excellent, and as expected from Denon, the appearance is slick. While not quite as large as the Onkyo DX-7500, the 1520 is nearly as heavy, giving the impres-

sion of solidity. Indeed, Denon utilize a dual-chassis design in an effort to minimize disturbances from external vibration. Operationally, the 1520 was smooth, quiet and very fast. You punch a button, and everything starts *right now*. As with the earlier 1500 II, the 1520 has fixed and variable analog outputs, as well as optical and coaxial digital outputs. All of the usual convenience and control functions are included, with the presence of a motor-

driven volume control (adjustable via the remote control) particularly welcome.

But on to the important stuff. Sound-wise, the 1520 was very good. On "Bird On A Wire", Warnes' voice is light and airy, if a tad bit lean, and had good focus. Saxes were about the same. Images spread out over a wide soundstage, just about wall to wall, and were a cinch to follow. The synthesized triangles on the opening of "Joan Of Arc" were almost sparkling. I was impressed with the way the 1520 reproduced an extended top end, a quality I really like. And detail was second to only the Icon, with all those lovely stage echoes coming through very plainly.

With "Appalachian Spring", the 1520's airiness gave a very delicate presentation of the opening passage, although the piccolo was a little on the bright side. Violins, too, lacked that rosiny glow which was reproduced well on the Icon, but image placement was excellent, as the violin section demonstrated to me. Again, "Appalachian Spring" presents a very busy stage, and I have never been able to discern precisely how many violinists are present. But the 1520 certainly lets you know there are several. I did notice there wasn't quite as much depth on this track as I had noted on *Famous Blue Raincoat*, and a second listen suggested to me the 1520 doesn't project depth quite as well as I originally thought.

Celtic Wedding was even more revealing of the 1520's strengths and weaknesses. On "Breton Carol", the Celtic harp was very delicate and detailed, with extended decay of plucked notes. Monjarret's vocal had a delicious sense of immediacy, as though I could almost walk over and

too forcefully), and the piano commanded the "Variations" portion of the piece. Cymbals and brushes were crisp and easily appreciated, as was each note Marc Johnson plucked on the double bass, with the notes decaying very slowly. Counterbalancing all this, nearly everything struck me

Price: \$750

Contact:

**Denon America, Inc.
222 New Road
Parsippany, NJ 07054
(201) 575-7810**

touch the performer, although it was occasionally forceful. Low-level detail retrieval was very good. On both "Dans-Tro Frisel" and "Celtic Wedding", the 1520's quickness gave vivacity and life to the lively passages, and both bombardes and organ had deep bass and excellent power. Hall echoes were again present, although they didn't strike me as being quite as lifelike as with the Icon.

Finally, "Prelude, Op. 28 No. 20 (F. Chopin) and Variations" was an enjoyable conclusion to the auditioning. The stodgy opening passage came through with a crash (if perhaps a bit

as being a bit short of the warmth that I am accustomed to.

Having heard the earlier 1500 II, the 1520 lodged itself in my mind as a definite improvement over the earlier player. Transparency, detail, and dynamics were all excellent, but some added tonal warmth and depth resolution would certainly be welcome. While I ultimately prefer the CAL Icon, I could live with a 1520 very easily, thank you. Before you make any buying decisions, take the time to audition the 1520 for yourself. I think you'll be impressed. ■



Sony, as we all know, were a pioneer in the CD player market, and have continually refined their players through a number of model genera-

tions. The 508ESD replaces the highly-regarded 507ESD, which a number of you probably own. I have heard several 507s, and while it isn't my

place to specifically comment upon that earlier model, suffice it to say the 508 is a definite change from its predecessor.

EQUIPMENT REPORTS

The 508ESD continues in Sony's tradition of handsome, elegantly-finished players. The black-anodized faceplate goes beyond mil-spec, if you know much about that, and sports easy-to-read graphics. The Sony has all the features you can usually expect from CD players these days, including track programming, indexing, scanning, fixed and variable outputs, full-function remote, etc. The 508's drawer mechanism is particularly quiet and smooth-operating — you get a real feeling of solidity when using the 508. On the down side, the white-and-lime-green LED display has a tendency to draw rather too much attention to itself. A minor quibble.

An eighteen-bit, eight-times oversampling machine, the Sony features an exceptionally solid chassis, in the interests of minimizing resonances. Sony are particularly proud of their "Digital Sync" IC, which is said to reduce digital jitter, and their "45-bit process" digital filter. The latter is claimed to offer improved high-frequency smoothness and detail. An optical digital output is provided, a nice feature.

was smooth, if somewhat lean tonally, with a slightly forward character. Piano sounded good tonally, but was a bit dull and smoothed-over, again bringing transparency into question. Similarly, on "Joan Of Arc", the opening synthesized triangles were so smooth they failed to sparkle, as I've heard them do on other players. Cohen's vocal also lacked the slight roughness which comes from too-close miking.

The 508's detail and wide soundstage were obvious on "Appalachian Spring", with the orchestra spread out nearly wall-to-wall. It became plain, however, that the 508 was not displaying great depth of field. To be sure, images began appearing several feet behind the speakers, but not within layers of depth, as with the Icon. Again, the entire presentation was extremely smooth and listenable, something that audiophiles have long been awaiting from CD players. That said, the 508 was a little *too* smooth. Triangles lacked crispness, as did brass, and the image of the solo flutist never seemed to stand out as well as through some of the other players auditioned. To its credit, the 508 did a respectable

however, Maloney's uilleann pipes were dull and lacking in immediacy. Only the slightest trace of rushing air from the pump could be heard, and sometimes became lost, while the CAL Icon handled this detail with aplomb. On "Celtic Wedding", the thumping mid-lower bass notes of the bombarde were deep and tight, although not especially powerful. The organ was conveyed with good power, but its image placement in the soundfield was distinctly forward when compared to nearly all the other players on test.

While I was enjoying the 508's smooth, musical presentation, I hoped that perhaps some of the sizzle and excitement of "Prelude" from *Hands On* would come through. Alas, it was not to be. The 508's slight veiling kept this vivid, lifelike recording from coming into its own. Certainly, a great deal of detail was presented, and the 508's overall warm sound made everything very pleasant. But cymbals and brushes lacked crispness, and the plucked notes of the double bass just weren't as convincing as through the other players.

In retrospect, it probably seems I think poorly of the Sony 508. This is surely not the case. The 508ESD is warm, smooth, and very listenable, a pleasant change from what some reviewers consider an inherently shrill and bright-sounding source component. For those of you who refuse to listen to CD, I strongly recommend you take the time to hear the 508. That said, I do feel the 508 has gone a little too far in the smoothness department, to the point of sounding somewhat veiled and remote.

While the Sony is clearly (pun intended) bested by the \$695 CAL Icon, the Sony nevertheless represents solid value. For only \$550, the 508ESD combines outstanding build quality and ergonomics with a sound quality that, if not of the very top rank, is consistently smooth and listenable. Well worth auditioning. ■

Price: \$550

Contact:

**Sony Corp. of America
Sony Drive
Park Ridge, NJ 07656
(201) 930-1000**

Starting with "Bird On A Wire" (from Jennifer Warnes' *Famous Blue Raincoat*), I was impressed with the 508's warmth and smooth delivery. Warnes' voice was easy to listen to, if lacking a degree of immediacy. It seemed as though there was something soft and filmy between me and the music. The guitar riffs were dynamic and crisp, but again lacking some immediacy and vivacity, and decay of cymbal and bell notes was obviously curtailed. On "Famous Blue Raincoat", Paul Ostermayer's opening tenor sax

job of conveying the attack and dynamics of the louder passages, as well as the spirit of this wonderful piece.

"Breton Carol" proved to be a more lively test for the 508, with the images spread about the stage, and some degree of depth layering was indeed apparent. The opening Celtic harp certainly had a reasonable degree of air around it, although note decay was short, and the tin whistle was conveyed without the slightest hint of brightness. On "Dans-Tro Fisel",



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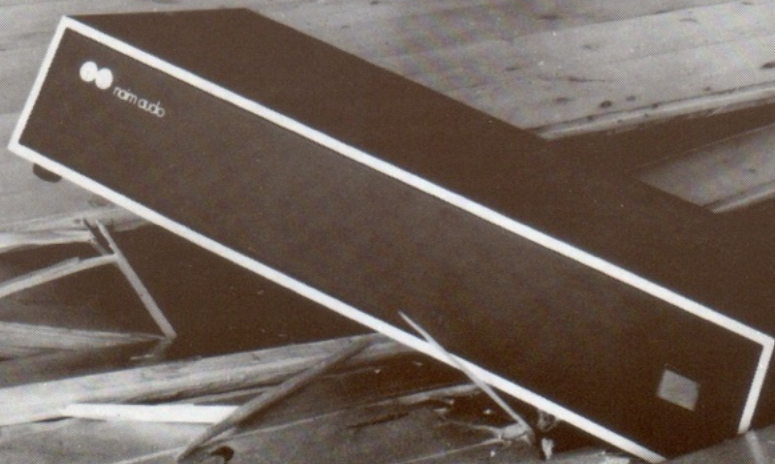
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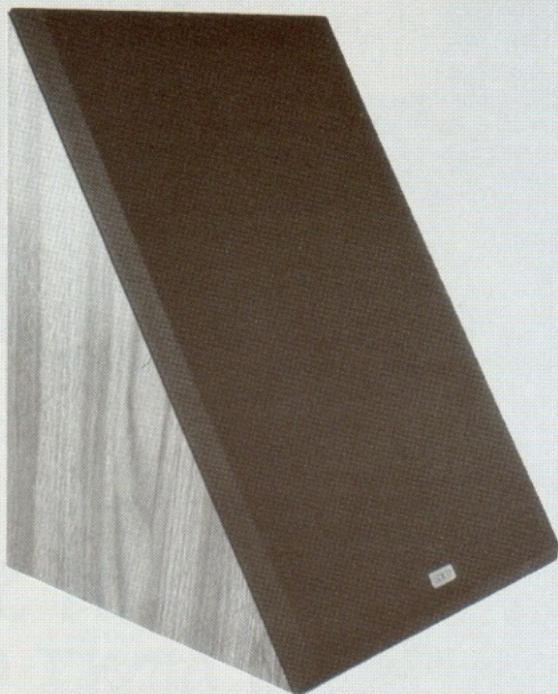
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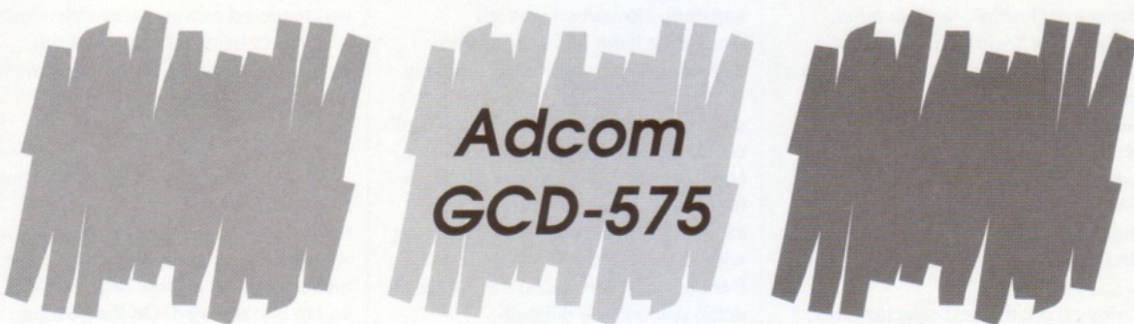
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Adcom GCD-575

The GCD-575 represents Adcom's first foray into the CD player market, augmenting their comprehensive line of audio electronics. As all of the other players reviewed here have a "developmental track record", I was curious to hear how this newcomer would stack up.

The 575 offers a comprehensive range of features, as indeed do all the players I auditioned. It programs up to 24 tracks in any sequence, has audible fast-forward and -reverse scans, random access of any disc track, indexes... in short, about everything we've come to expect in today's CD players. The Adcom also has one particularly nice feature I haven't seen on any other player — a polarity inversion button. Yes, even on a CD player. Adcom included this function to correct the playback of CDs in which absolute phase was inverted, and I must say on several discs I listened to, the polarity inversion made a noticeable improvement. Maybe other CD player manufacturers should look into this feature.

Another unusual inclusion is Adcom's AFPC (analog frequency/phase contour) circuit, which introduces a mild high-frequency roll-off and phase correction for use with CDs that have particularly aggressive treble balances.

The 575's analog stage is billed as Class A, which Adcom claims will provide "superior resolution by more clearly defining low-level information". In deference to Adcom, that may well be, but I have heard a lot of Class A amps and preamps, and have yet to find a common thread in the way in which they reproduce music. The 575's analog outputs (fixed and variable) feature low impedance (100

ohms), so the 575 can mate with just about any preamp or amplifier without any impedance matching problems. This should appeal to people who prefer to run a CD player directly into a power amp, or those who favor very long interconnects. The 575 also includes a coaxial digital output. Digital conversion is accomplished via a pair of 16 bit DACs, and four-times oversampling filters. Power is regulated through three separate power supplies, one each for the digital and analog stages, and one for the display circuitry.

Adcom also include their special "Isopoint" feet for the player's cabinet. On one side of the metal foot is a broad, flat surface for maximum contact area, while reversing the foot reveals a Tiptoe-like spike. The latter can be used in a three-point configuration to offer both stability and isolation from external vibration.

All that aside, the sound is what counts, and the GCD-575 proved to

(Cypres/A&M YD 0100/DX 3182), the 575 displayed a crisp and airy top end, reminiscent of the PS Audio 4.5 preamp. Warnes' vocal on "Bird On A Wire" was very airy, floating nicely in the center of the stage. Alas, it also came across as being somewhat lispy, and tonally lean. Dave Boruff's sax licks suffered a bit from this trait as well, and occasionally were almost piercing. I was impressed with the performance's transparency and imaging, as the 575 allowed me to follow all the musicians very easily, although the 575's lean tonal character was consistently apparent. On "Famous Blue Raincoat" and "Joan Of Arc", vocals, guitars, violins, and saxes all came across as airy, but lean.

My next disc was *Moscow Sessions* (Sheffield Records, CD 1000), my favorite selection being Copland's "Appalachian Spring". Again, the 575 reproduced an airy top end, with good presentation of depth. Oddly, though, soundstage never seemed to reach wall-to-wall proportions, but ended

Price: \$600

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East Brunswick, NJ 08816
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have a markedly different character from all the other players on test. Starting with *Famous Blue Raincoat*

about a foot to either side of the speakers. Imaging was also not as good as I expected, with the various parts of

the string sections almost blending into collective "lumps". Keep in mind, though, that "Appalachian Spring" presents a very busy soundstage with a great deal of information to be resolved, as do most classical recordings. The strings all sounded rather lean, tonally, as they did on *Famous Blue Raincoat*, but tympani and kettle drum had very good impact and energy. Bass was deep and tight.

Moving on, the next selection was *The Chieftains: Celtic Wedding* (RCA Red Seal, 6358-2-RC). This is an excellent disc for reference, as its transparency, detail and imaging qualities can tickle anyone's fancy. And you don't even have to like Celtic and Irish music! On "A Breton Carol", Nolwenn Monjarret's vocal came through very clearly, but was a bit on the forceful side. Occasionally, almost shrill. The 575's sense of air made a fine (if again somewhat lean) presentation of the Celtic harp, and the

extended decay time of the notes was apparent. However, I was left wondering if the 575 was actually delivering as much detail as I initially credited it with, and Paddy Maloney's uilleann pipe solo on "Dans-Tro-Frisel" confirmed that it wasn't. If you're not familiar with Irish pipes, the air bag is filled by a pump, and the soft hiss of air from the pump was entirely lacking with the 575. The CAL Icon and Denon 1520 reproduced this subtle detail without any difficulty.

Finally, I listened to "Prelude, Op. 28, No. 20 (F. Chopin) and Variations" on *Warren Bernhardt: Hands On* (DMP CD-457), as eminently listenable a cut as can be found. The 575 did a good job of conveying note attack in the opening passage, although the tonal lightness of the piano again highlighted the Adcom's somewhat lean midrange. Cymbals were very crisp, with good decay, but the delicacy of the brushes on the drums was rather muddled.

They just weren't convincing. Depth was rendered as well as possible (depth of field not being a hallmark of this recording), and soundstage width was about the same as encountered on *Moscow Sessions*.

As you can see, the GCD-575's tonal balance and detail retrieval troubled me throughout the auditioning. I do wish the 575 were a bit warmer in the midrange, even if some degree of air had to be sacrificed. On the positive side, the 575 displayed excellent bass delivery and dynamics, and had an essential spirit and vitality in its presentation of music that was quite entertaining. While the 575's tonal coolness may put off many listeners, I nevertheless recommend you take the time to audition it for yourself. Depending on the tonal qualities of your associated equipment, you may find the Adcom quite appealing. ■


INTEGRAL PARTS

There is an alarming trend taking hold in specialist audio, as manufacturers are inexorably moving upmarket with their latest product releases. \$5000 preamplifiers, \$10,000 power amplifiers, and sky's-the-limit loudspeakers are becoming commonplace. "High End" audiophiles casually refer to certain \$1800 preamplifiers as "budget" models. To say these people are out of touch with reality would be a gross understatement.

If specialist audio is to ever thrive, it must take its case to the general public. I can assure you, the average American will laugh in your face if you suggest a nice \$5000 set-up as a "starter system". A complete system in the \$1000-\$1500 range *might* be plausible to John or Jane Doe. Assembling a well-balanced, musical system for that kind of money virtually dictates the inclusion of a quality integrated amplifier, such as those routinely reviewed in *Hi-Fi Heretic*. Yes, I know integrated amps don't have the caché and snob appeal of separates. Tough. Budget shoppers aren't looking for status symbols, they want products that *work*. In terms of sound quality for the dollar, integrations are still the best deals around.

If specialist audio ever hopes to increase its "user base", it had damn well better reconsider its patronizing attitude towards the integrated amplifier.

Contributing Editor **Rob Doorack** takes a look at the updated Audiolab 8000A, as well as the all-new Creek 5050. Integrations scheduled for review include the Arcam Delta 60, Exposure X, Mission Cyrus One and Cyrus Two, QED A270, and others. →



Audiolab 8000A

The Audiolab 8000A is probably familiar to most audiophiles, having been around for a few years and earned favorable reviews here and elsewhere. It recently underwent a modest revision (the board layout was improved, many capacitors were upgraded in quality, and the protection circuitry was refined), so a fresh look is appropriate.

The 8000A lives in the low, wide enclosure typical of British integrated amplifiers. It presents a handsome appearance with a panzer-gray face, lighter gray sheetmetal cover, and lots of knobs. Just about every (useful) feature the buyer could expect at this price point is included: defeatable tone controls, low-output moving-coil cartridge input, separate selectors for "listen" and "record", headphone jack, and a switch to deactivate one of the two sets of loudspeaker outputs. Internal construction is of very high quality. The circuitry (all discrete save for one lonely IC) is carried on a single, large glassfibre board. A good-sized toroidal transformer is employed (sandwiched in between foam pads to damp its vibration), sited as far away from the low-level circuitry as possible to minimize electrical interference. The 8000A is rated at 50 watts/channel into 8 ohms, and Audiolab claim the unit can deliver up to 25 amps of peak current. Five-way binding posts are used for loudspeaker cable termination.

I do have two minor things to gripe about. Save for the volume control, all of the rotary controls (i.e. tone controls, program selectors) have elliptical knobs, the position of which can easily be seen from across the room. The round volume knob has but a tiny indentation on its face as an indicia,

and it is virtually invisible in anything but strong direct light. Surely Audiolab could spare a dollop of white paint (liberally used elsewhere on the fascia) to highlight this microscopic dimple? My second complaint concerns a faint hiss that could be heard with the phono input selected, even with the volume turned completely down. With the tuner input selected, the hiss was louder still. My desire for optimum sound quality dictated that I use the "direct" (unswitched) speaker outputs, and that I keep the amp switched on at all times (though this latter step may not in fact have been strictly necessary). As I didn't want the 8000A

other reviews of the Audiolab, perhaps peculiar to my review sample.

The first thing I noticed when I started to listen to the 8000A was its remarkable bass puissance. My Spicas seemed to have suddenly found an extra half-octave on the bottom. To be sure, no miracle had transmuted them into Entecs — the deepest the TC-50s can manage is lower mid-bass — but the 8000A certainly kept a death grip on the woofers as far down as the speakers cared to go. Bass notes never sounded muddy or out-of-tune, always being tight and detailed. Rhythms were easy to follow, and the bass never seemed



hissing at me in its idle moments, I was forced to disconnect the speaker cables after every listening session. Admittedly a minor inconvenience and, given that I haven't seen this problem noted in

to lag or lead the rest of the music. Large orchestral works sounded more believable with this solid foundation beneath them, though the lowest fundamentals were of course missing.

EQUIPMENT REPORTS

Equally impressive were bass impact and dynamics. Ben Johnston's "Duo for Flute and String Bass" from the album *American Contemporary Music from the University of Illinois* (CRI SD405)

records. Piano was particularly well-reproduced, with the 8000A doing an outstanding job of capturing the dynamics and percussive quality of the instrument. Heidi Lehwalder's harp on

width was excellent, and the images of the musicians were stable and solid. Depth of image was not as good, though, with records such as the Chesky Reiners sounding a bit two-dimensional. Hall ambience also seemed slightly diminished, which was rather surprising as in all other respects the 8000A's recovery of low-level detail was exemplary. Consequently, on good, natural recordings of classical music I was never quite able to lose the sensation of hearing a sort of diorama of an orchestra hanging between my speakers, rather than feeling as though I had been transported to another acoustic space.

These anomalies should not be overemphasized, as the 8000A does so much else right, and listening to it was always a compelling experience. My serious "stereo critic at work" sessions often ended much sooner than planned, because I wanted to stop listening so analytically and instead simply enjoy the music (switch sides of the brain?). The 8000A communicates much of the vitality and drive of music, it has an open character that makes nuances of a performance easy to hear, and it was unfailingly musical. Not a perfect amplifier, to be sure, but I do not value soundstaging above all else, and thus found its deficiencies in this regard relatively innocuous. Most importantly, the Audiolab never interfered with the *music*. I urge you to hear the 8000A. ■

Price: \$695

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**Artech Electronics
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Champlain, NY 12919
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was positively electrifying, with pizzicato notes that seemed to explode. Drum fans will love the 8000A — the drums on Metallica's "Master of Puppets" had a powerful wallop and vigor, giving this dramatic song real muscle.

No hi-fi I've ever heard has possessed the "quickness" of live music (despite whatever incredible slew rates and rise times *Stereo Review* may have measured), and the Audiolab proved no exception, but it was surprisingly lively. Note attack and dynamics were terrific — this thing will send audiophiles scrambling for their Dick Schory

her album of music by Carlos Salgado (Nonesuch 79049) sounded very good, the notes ringing out clearly and decaying nicely. That said, the upper ranges of the harp took on a somewhat brittle or glassy (but never metallic) quality. Despite its slightly hard treble character, the 8000A did not add any steeliness.

The Audiolab's imaging and soundstaging were a combination of strengths and weaknesses. The presentation of the stage was slightly forward, not "in your face", but the sonic perspective was that of a seat towards the front of the hall. Stage



Stereo equipment reviews, with few exceptions, follow a predictable format. First, there is the detailed delineation of what the device looks like, its controls and construction, perhaps some background on any unique principles or theories it

embodies. This is followed by a list of other components and the reference recordings used during the test. If the reviewer encountered any unusual difficulties setting up or using the subject (as opposed to the usual difficulties with High End audio), then

that comes next. Lastly, there is the important part, the description of the sound produced. I always skip ahead to the "how it sounds" section first, then go back and read from the start, and I suspect most audiophiles do the same (go for the instant gratification, in

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To those puzzled and annoyed readers who did not find what they anticipated at the end of this article, I apologize, but I cannot wait to share the news: the Creek 5050 is just astounding. It has made me excited about recorded music again. I think I had been suffering from a bit of hi-fi ennui, buying a lot of records, but spending little time listening to them. Now, I have become almost a melomaniac.

I am not being hyperbolic in stating I have rarely experienced the intensity of emotional experience to reproduced music that I received from the 5050. To give just one example, last evening I played Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, Bernstein and the Vienna Philharmonic, a typical Deutsche Grammophon pairing of a superior performance and an opaque recording. When the Fourth Movement thundered to an end, I discovered I had a lump in my throat and moist eyes, undone by the power and passion of the music.

When was the last time your stereo did that to you?

I cannot claim to have listened to more than a fraction of the components on the market, and that fraction was often heard under less than ideal circumstances (dealers' showrooms, hi-fi shows, and the like). It has been quite apparent, nevertheless, that almost all of the equipment didn't sound much like music. Too often what came out resembled a mounted butterfly: beautiful, impressive, and pleasing, yet utterly dead. The distinction of the 5050 lay in its ability to convey a tiny bit of the life in live music. I don't mean the 5050 was indistinguishable from live music; it just sounded a little less *unlike* live music than most components do. This speck of life made it far easier to become wholly engrossed in the performance, to enter the trance-like state of mind where the equipment and the room go away and the music overwhelms the listener.

One of my favorite records is *Rhapsody in Blue* in the original orchestration for Paul Whiteman's jazz band, and performed by the anonymous members of the "Columbia Jazz

Band" conducted by Michael Tilson Thomas (CBS M34205). Of particular note is the use of a reproducing grand piano, controlled by a roll cut by Gershwin himself. In places the tempo is fast enough to outrun the Ramones, and the musicians play with terrific energy. This was the first record I put on after the Creek finally warmed up. It took only a few seconds to know there was something special happening; the clarinet glissando that begins the piece sent a shiver flying through me. The languor I had come to expect as an inevitable part of hi-fi was gone, and this old familiar tune became mesmerizing and galvanizing again.

I am not entirely sure what to credit for the amplifier's gift. It is not merely "transparency". The 5050 certainly seems to pull back a scrim and step

from the flow of the rest of the music.

In orchestral music, for example, I can concentrate on only the flutes, or on how they are playing along with the strings, or I can just roll with the main melody. For the first time I understand how the piano and harpsichord in Kate Bush's "Oh England My Lionheart" are playing in counterpoint. I had always heard the two instruments, but not the relationship. In the Gershwin piece, the performance sounds tighter and more cohesive. I had thought the snare drum was poorly miked, as the initial impact of the stick seemed blurry; I now know that it is being struck with a brush. If I chose to focus on that drum, I could isolate the sound of the brush on top from the rattling of the snares on the bottom. I suspect that one of the causes of listening fatigue is the strain



aside (you won't catch me using any veil similes), but to paraphrase Hanns Johst, when I hear the word "transparency" I reach for my revolver. That cryptic quality is usually ascribed to components with supernatural imaging power by critics who haven't been inside a concert hall since the Carter administration. The price of this imaging is paid by the music. The listener's attention is unnaturally directed to a multitude of superficial details simultaneously, causing the music to frequently sound incoherent and tuneless.

The Creek's sound might best be described as organic. Detail is presented in a way that illuminates the music instead of distracting from it. Musicians sound as if they are working with a common purpose. Individual musical lines are easily distinguished, yet at no time do they sound separated

caused by mentally trying to hold the music together against the equipment's attempt to vivisect it. With the 5050, concentrating on a single detail did not risk unravelling the rest of the music. I never ended a listening session with the Creek because I was wearied by it.

Those audiophiles who place a high value on soundstaging and imaging will be very pleased with the Creek. The reproduction of depth is superb, the percussion instruments on my Strauss Waltzes record seem to come from the next county. The stage is very wide, and images are clearly focused. Assisted by my Spica TC-50s, the Creek can, if the record has the information, create a hall sound that engulfs the end of my room. This trick is performed without being obnoxious. It's as if the amp is saying, "Here's the music, and by the way, here's where it was recorded."

EQUIPMENT REPORTS

The Creek's qualities are only apparent once it has been thoroughly burned-in, and this takes a surprisingly long time. When I first sat down to audition the amp, it had been idling for four days. I thought it sounded awful, dark and hard, with a narrow and flat soundstage. This was not what I had expected from the builders of the 4140s2. For several reasons, I was not

halves. The Audiolab uses five-way binding posts for speaker cable connection, while the Creek uses the loathsome recessed banana jacks. These are soldered directly to the 5050's circuit board (like a Sony Walkman), and are not attached to the chassis in any way. As a result, every time a banana plug is inserted, the jack's solder joint must bear the stress.

Price: \$995

Contact:

**Music Hall
108 Station Road
Great Neck, NY 11023
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able to devote any time to serious listening for about ten days, so the Creek was used for nothing more than background music and catching the traffic and weather reports. When I finally returned to it, the 5050 had been completely transformed. During the next couple of weeks it continued to improve, the treble becoming a little sweeter. I hope Creek dealers are aware of this behavior.

The obvious question is: How does the Creek compare with the Audiolab 8000A? Both are rated at 50 watts per channel into 8 ohms, and both claim 25 amps peak current capability. They have similar features and near-identical front panel layouts. There are major differences in construction. The Audiolab is (almost) all discrete circuitry, while the Creek could be described as "a festival for integrated circuits", and the parts quality of the 8000A is much better. The Creek can be split into a preamp/power amp pair by the user (there's also a switch on the back panel to bridge the power amp section for 200 watt mono operation — Creek apparently have a companion, bridgeable power amp in the works, as well as an active crossover board for use with the Epos ES14. The board will fit inside the 5050). The Audiolab requires a minor internal modification by a dealer to separate its

I cannot imagine why Creek elected to use this design.

The Audiolab's two strong points are its bass jolt and dynamic flexibility. The Creek is a little (very little) inferior in both areas, more so in bass power. In every other subjective measure of sonic performance, the 5050 excels. As it should, since it costs \$300 more than the 8000A. The Audiolab is a fine amp, and an integrated amp buyer with a budget limited to \$695 should definitely hear it (the Creek 4140s2, too). The Creek 5050 is more, however; its character is not only its sound, but also its effect on the listener.

I'm buying it. ■

A number of you have requested that we make recommendations for complete systems. While I can certainly understand your enthusiasm for such an feature, the logistics are daunting, to say the least. The possible combinations of components are almost endless, and there is no assurance that a *HFH*-endorsed system would necessarily represent an optimum match. I also fear some readers might use a compendium of *suggested* combinations as an iron-clad list of the *only* set-ups worth considering. I'd like to read your thoughts on this matter.

The "Best Buy" check-rating system is quite simple. Two checks (✓✓) indicate the product was selected by *Hi-Fi Heretic* as one of "The Ten Best Buys In Audio" in Issue Ten. One check (✓) indicates the product provides an exceptionally good combination of performance and value, if not quite up to the level of those products on the "Ten Best" list. No attempt has been made to rank the products beyond these ratings. Compatibility with your own audio system and listening room will play a major part in determining which of these products is right for you.

New entries are denoted by a black arrow in the outside margin. These arrows may reflect new products added to the listings, or they may indi-

MEATY BEATY BIG AND BOUNCY

cate a price change of a product already listed. The most significant price change in this issue is the drastic cut in the cost of the Signet OC9. Now available for a moderate \$395, the OC9 looks to be one of the best buys around in low-output moving coil cartridges.

Please, use this feature only as a *guide* to deciding what components may bear further investigation and auditioning. Do not use it as a shopping list. *You* must decide which products provide the most satisfying musical performance. Don't be intimidated by the auditioning process — as I've said before, if

you're capable of appreciating music, you're capable of evaluating audio equipment.

Remember, all the hi-fi jargon in the world counts for not a whit when it comes down to the essential question of: Does this product sound like music? If you put all of the audio doubletalk out of your mind, and simply judge an audio component the same way you would judge a live musical performance, you'll have no trouble making an intelligent buying decision. You'll choose the products which best communicate the joy of music — which is, after all, the whole point.

TURNTABLES ● TONEARMS ● CARTRIDGES

Product	Price	Best Buy	Comments	Review
Dual CS-505-3	\$360		Least expensive turntable worth considering. Can sound a bit crude compared to more expensive decks.	NA
Revolver Rebel	\$389	✓	Standard Revolver with cheaper arm. Includes Bullet cartridge (modified AT-95E). Top value budget deck.	NA
Systemdek IIX	\$559	✓	Table superb, arm OK. Armless model (\$300) great with Rega RB300. Punchy, detailed sound. Bargain in either version.	#9
Rega Planar 2 Rega Planar 3	\$499 \$599	✓	The classic affordable table. Elegant design, marvelous sound. 3 is better buy. Tonearm on either is incredibly good.	#2
Linn Axis	\$795	✓	Sophisticated motor drive circuit, clever suspension design. Sound is crisp, dynamic. New Akito arm now standard.	#8
Linn Sondek LP12	\$1165	✓✓	Superbly musical table. Extremely well-built and reliable. The standard against which all others are judged. Great bargain.	NA
Roksan Xerxes	\$1800		Clever bearing and motor drive system. Sound is quick, dynamic and detailed. Mates well with Rega arm. Expensive.	#8
Linn LVX Plus	\$295		Solid value arm. Rigid, fixed-headshell design. Can be used with moving coils. New Akito may prove better buy.	NA
Rega RB300	\$299	✓✓	Sophisticated one-piece cast aluminum armtube. Superb bearings. May be the single best value in audio.	NA
Alphason HR100S	\$950		One-piece titanium armtube, tungsten carbide bearings. Smooth, sweet sound. Less expensive versions also offered.	NA
Eminent Technology Two	\$950	✓	Innovative air-bearing design. Exceptional detail and imaging. Set-up a bit involved. Remarkably sophisticated for the money.	NA
Linn Ittok LV II	\$1195		Exceptionally rigid design, with great bass performance. Tonal balance can sound a bit forward. Recently updated.	NA
Goldring Epic II	\$80		Smooth, laid back sound. Great match for strident budget components. Strong body to allow secure installation.	#4
Arcam E77Mg Arcam P77Mg	\$120 \$150	✓	Magnesium body improves resolution, allows solid mounting. P77 more detailed, open. Both models superb value.	#8
Goldring Eroica Goldring Eroica L	\$260 \$260	✓	Smooth, relaxed sound. Lack usual MC brightness. Low-output L slightly more detailed. Great buy for the price.	NA

TURNTABLES ● TONEARMS ● CARTRIDGES (cont.)

Product	Price	Best Buy	Comments	Review
Linn K9	\$275		Bright, lively tonal balance. Outstanding sense of pace and rhythmic progression. Metal body allows solid mounting.	#8
Audio-Technica AT-F5	\$325		Exceptionally open and detailed at the price. Can sound a bit bright and forward. Limited availability.	NA
Signet OC9	\$395	✓	Detailed, involving sound. Tonally just slightly forward. Recent price reduction makes it stunning value.	NA

INTEGRATED AMPLIFIERS

Arcam Alpha II	\$349	✓✓	Marvelous combination of detail and warmth. Optional MC input. Beautifully built for the price. Best integrated buy.	#11
Onix OA-20	\$389	✓	Lively, exciting presentation. Minimal facilities. Superb build quality, and utterly gorgeous styling. Fine value.	#11
Creek 4040 Creek 4140	\$450 \$550	✓	Perennial favorites. 4140 more powerful, has MC input. Sound on both is sweet, clear, dynamic. Excellent value.	#10
Audiolab 8000A	\$695		Lively, detailed sound. Powerful, crisp bass. Extensive control functions. Exceptional build quality for the price.	#12
Onix OA-21	\$750		Big, dynamic sound. Optional power supply pricey, but effective. Choice of MM or MC phono board. Stunning looks.	#4
QED A240SA II	\$750		Amazing clarity and presence. Tonal balance excellent. Superb phono stage. Minimal facilities. Cosmetics need work.	#11
Naim NAIT 2	\$795		Usual Naim strengths of superb pace and tempo. Smooth balance. Down on power, restricted bass dynamics.	#10
Sugden A48 III	\$875		Warm, full-bodied sound. <i>The</i> integrated for those seeking tube sound. Ugly little spud. Class A, runs hot. A bit pricey.	#10
Creek 5050	\$995		Effortless musicality, with trad Creek smoothness and listenability. Numerous control functions. Quite expensive, innit?	#12

PREAMPLIFIERS

Superphon CD Maxx	\$399	✓	Line-level preamp, no phono stage. Smooth, sweet sound flatters CD players. Line-amp bypass. Funky styling.	NA
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PREAMPLIFIERS (cont.)

Product	Price	Best Buy	Comments	Review
Superphon Revelation II	\$699 \$849	✓✓	Seductive blend of detail, imaging, and tonal warmth. Minimal facilities. Space Case version (\$849) better. Superb value.	#9
PS Audio 4.6	\$739	✓	Exceptional detail and clarity. Tonally a bit forward, needs care in system matching. Fine MC input. Line-amp bypass. Bargain.	#11
Audible Illusions Modulus 2D	\$895	✓✓	Timbral accuracy, stunning dynamics, and remarkable imaging. Incredibly well-built for the price.	#12
B&K Sonata MC-101	\$898	✓	Traditional B&K smoothness with added detail and clarity. Extensive facilities offer tremendous flexibility.	#11

POWER AMPLIFIERS

B&K ST-140	\$498	✓✓	The classic budget power amplifier. Smoothness a hallmark. Mates well with many preamps. Superb value.	#5
Belles 150	\$649	✓	Remarkable quickness and clarity. Very revealing, shows up brightness elsewhere in system. Excellent buy.	#11
Superphon DM220	\$899	✓	Sweetness, clarity, and imaging. Excellent pace and rhythmic progression. Bass a bit lightweight.	#9
Forté Model 3	\$1100		Deep, tight bass. Excellent power and dynamics. Tonal balance a bit laid back. Beautifully built.	#11
Belles 450	\$1595	✓	Extremely powerful stereo amplifier. Outstanding sense of detail and finesse for a big amp. Excellent bass.	#12
B & K Sonata M-200	\$1796	✓✓	Mono solid-state amps with amazing current capability. Brilliant blend of smoothness and detailing. Bargain.	#12
Quicksilver KT88	\$1850		Mono tube amps. Exceptionally detailed and quick. Bass a bit loose. Excellent build quality and reliability.	NA

LOUDSPEAKERS

Boston Acoustics A40	\$170	✓	The least expensive speaker available with pretensions to high fidelity. Crisp bass. Solid value.	NA
Celestion 3	\$250	✓	Best budget minispeaker around. Quick, detailed, dynamic. Superb treble for the price. Stunning value.	#11

LOUDSPEAKERS (cont.)				
Product	Price	Best Buy	Comments	Review
Heybrook Point Five	\$299		Big sound, excellent bass power for mini. Good clarity, separation of lines. Near wall siting impairs depth.	#10
JPW AP2	\$399		Lively, forward balance. Exceptional detail. Bass quick and tight, if a bit light. Superb construction and finish.	#4
Rogers LS2a	\$399	✓	Smooth, full-bodied sound. Outstanding timbral balance, good detail. Bass lacks some definition.	#11
Royd Coniston R	\$399		Punchy, exciting sound. Bass has great snap and drive. Imaging not a strong point. Slightly forward balance.	#4
Spica TC-50	\$549	✓✓	Amazing imaging and detail. Must use proper height stands for best results. Superb value.	#4
ProAc Super Tablette	\$700	✓	Exceptional clarity and presence, but can sound a bit bright in unsympathetic systems.	#3
Spica Angelus	\$1049	✓	Improves on the TC-50's strengths. Bass tight but a bit lightweight. Controversial appearance.	#9
Thiel CS1.2	\$1090	✓✓	Punchy, dynamic sound with tremendous imaging. Stunning build quality. One of the best values in audio.	#10
Vandersteen 2Ci	\$1195	✓	Big, smooth sound with outstanding bass power. Latest version said to offer greater clarity and detail. Superb value.	NA
ProAc Studio 1	\$1200	✓✓	Speed and clarity obvious assets. Sounds bright if not matched to system. Punchy, exciting performer.	#9
Rogers Studio 1a	\$1399	✓	Warm, full-bodied sound. Surprising bass power for its size. Great long-term listenability.	#9
Thiel CS3.5	\$2450		Exceptional combination of bass power, imaging, and clarity. Tonally a bit cool? Beautifully built.	#10
Naim SBL	\$2495		Tremendous bass power and drive. Near-wall siting saves space, but impairs depth. Innovative design.	#10
ProAc Response 2	\$2700		Stunning clarity and quickness. One of the best dynamic speakers available. Utterly true to the music.	#12
Quad ESL 63	\$3990		Superb electrostatic design. Fine detailing and imaging. Limited bass power and dynamics. Pricey.	NA



DIGITAL AUDIO

Product	Price	Best Buy	Comments	Review
Philips CD-50	\$329		Should be solid value among budget CD players. Sixteen bit, four-times oversampling. Remote included.	NA
Sony 508ESD	\$550		Exceptionally warm and smooth sound, solid bass performance. Lacks some detail. Fine build quality.	#12
Adcom GCD-575	\$600		Excellent bass definition and impact. Tonal balance a bit too forward. Phase inversion switch a nice touch.	#12
CAL Icon	\$695	✓	Marvelous combination of warmth, detail, and dynamics. Impressive imaging. Outstanding build quality.	#12
Denon DCD-1520	\$750		Nice detailing and airiness, if tonally a tad thin. Solid bass performance. Improves on earlier 1500 II.	#12
Arcam Delta Black Box	\$650	✓	External digital-to-analog converter. Exceptionally cost-effective upgrade for CD players with digital outputs.	#10
Theta DS Pro	\$3295		Megabuck external D/A converter. Remarkable combination of clarity and timbral accuracy. No digital stridency.	NA

MISCELLANEOUS

DNM Interconnect	\$3/ft.	✓	Spaced-conductor solid core design. Good combination of clarity and smoothness. Unshielded.	#9
Music Metre Interconnect	\$95/1m	✓	Twisted-pair solid core, with Teflon dielectric. Like DNM, offers detail and tonal warmth. Balanced, shielded.	NA
Linn K-20 Cable	\$7.50/meter	✓	Spaced-conductor stranded design. Good compatibility with wide variety of systems. Solid value.	NA
Sound Organisation Speaker Stands	\$85	✓	Least expensive high-quality stand around. Spikes top and bottom. Nicely built.	NA
Target HJ Series Speaker Stands	\$200		All-welded steel stands. Spikes on top and bottom. Hollow pillars can be filled with lead shot or sand.	NA
Sony Pro Walkman Cassette Recorder	\$400	✓✓	Outperforms many home decks costing far more. Portable design allows easy live recording, too.	NA
Nakamichi Dragon	\$2195		Tremendously sophisticated (and expensive) home cassette deck. Auto reverse, auto azimuth adjust.	NA



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THE DIXIE DREGS:

Rock Virtuosos Who Will Leave You Speechless

by C.J. Poulos

The concept of "instrumental" music — music without vocals — is certainly not a new idea: classical music and, more recently, jazz have built up a vast repertoire (and a large coterie of fans) of (mostly) instrumental music over the years. In the early days of rock n' roll and rhythm n' blues, this "tradition" was carried on by many artists such as Booker T. and the M.G.'s ("Green Onions"), the Ventures ("Telstar", "Walk Don't Run"), Santo and Johnny ("Sleepwalk"), and Link Wray ("Rumble"), all of whom had major hits with their snappy, hook-laden compositions.

In the mid-Seventies, however, record companies discovered that it was easier and more profitable to market music by playing up the image and sex appeal of the performers, rather than by touting the skill of the musicians and the merit of the music (if any). Progressive FM radio stations, too, went through major changes; instead of relying on the DJ's to largely determine what records got played, they began employing "consultants" and "programmers" to select the music, in hopes of getting a few more ratings points, and thus allow the stations to raise their advertising rates. The rampant commercialism of music that took place during this era further widened the gaps between the large numbers of fans of each musical genre. Fans of earlier jazz styles called themselves "purists", and disdained the new "fusion jazz"; "rock is dead", proclaimed the disco-goers; country music became increasingly slick and

overproduced, and country-rockers were forced to choose sides; the aging Baby Boom generation looked at the new crop of glitter-rockers and found them shallow and utterly without substance compared to the music of the Sixties (sowing the seeds for the current "classic rock" radio format); and all the while, classical music listeners looked down their noses in disgust at the whole mess.

Both musicians *and* fans had apparently forgotten that music *cannot exist* in a vacuum: for music to thrive and remain vital, there *must* be a constant exchange of new sounds and new ideas. Fortunately, the Dixie Dregs had not forgotten this basic principle, and while others were busy putting up fences, the Dregs were building bridges.

When asked to describe the music of the Dixie Dregs, composer/guitarist Steve Morse (who dislikes conventional "labels") is fond of ambiguous statements such as "we play the kind of music that *we ourselves* would like to hear when we go to concerts". When pressed further, he might mutter something about "electronic chamber music", and I guess that's about as good a description as any. Whatever you choose to call it, the Dregs had a unique mixture of rock, country, classical, and jazz fusion that could be brutally demanding one minute and incredibly childlike and gentle the next. The traditional rock n' roll line-up of guitar, bass, and drums was augmented by a series of different

violin and keyboard players, but the nucleus of the band remained the same: acclaimed guitarist Steve Morse, bassist Andy West, and drummer Rod Morgenstein.

Steve Morse was in his early teens when his family moved from Michigan to Atlanta, Georgia; Andy West's family moved there from Ohio at about the same time. Steve and Andy met in high school, where they had previously felt "like aliens", and soon after put together a band which became known as the Dixie Grits. When the band broke up, Morse said to West, "Well, I guess we're the dregs", and a new name was born. Morse was eventually expelled from high school for refusing to cut his very long blond hair — however, around this time Steve attended a performance by classical guitarist Juan Mercadel, and was so impressed that he followed Mercadel to the University of Miami, where the classical guitarist held a teaching job. Morse didn't have a high-school diploma, but he was able to pass an audition at the University and was admitted. As his music reading skills were not yet developed, Morse found himself registered as a jazz guitarist, even though his principal instrument was the classical guitar! Mercadel's teaching became a major inspiration for Morse, yet Steve also managed to found the school's first rock ensemble (the Dixie Dregs) after meeting drummer Rod Morgenstein in a jazz improvisation class.

U.M. was rapidly becoming a hotbed

of progressive musicianship: notable attendees at the time included Pat Metheny, Bruce Hornsby, Jaco Pastorius (teaching bass), Hiram Bullock, and Narada Michael Walden, as well as T. Lavitz, who would much later become a Dregs band member.

During Morse's final year at U.M., Andy West moved to Miami and rejoined the band. With the addition of Allen Sloan on violin, the now-quartet Dixie Dregs recorded a demo album, entitled *The Great Spectacular*, as a class project for extra credits, with the band members financing the LP's pressing (about 1500 copies) out of their own pockets. Even at this early stage, Morse was showing great promise as a composer. Though *The Great Spectacular* was never commercially released (and is a very rare recording), eight of Morse's ten compositions did later turn up on other Dregs records. One notable exception was the lovely, Leo Kottke-ish acoustic guitar instrumental "T.O. Witcher" (Juan Mercader's influence is also quite evident here). About this time the fledgling Dregs played their first commercial gig (a campus festival), for which they were paid *with a watermelon!* (This may be seen as a harbinger of the financial problems that were later to plague the band.)

Roughly a year later, after shopping *The Great Spectacular* around to several dozen record labels and being rejected by all of them, the Dixie Dregs played a club in Nashville. In the audience were two members of the Allman Brothers band, keyboardist Chuck Leavell and road manager Twiggs Lyndon, Jr. Impressed with what they heard, the two persuaded the president of their label, Capricorn Records, to come down and audition the Dregs. And that brings us to the first Dixie Dregs record, 1977's *Free Fall*. The band recalls being somewhat disappointed with the sound of the record: "The producer was going for more of a live jazz sound, while we were imagining more of a Mahavishnu (Orchestra) rock sound", says Morse. I couldn't disagree more strongly: I love the music, and the recording is relatively natural-sounding and free of studio gimmickry, particularly when compared to most current rock recordings.

Morse's compositions for the album borrow freely from many genres: there's the fast-paced bluegrass/country romp "Moe Down" (with Morse on five string banjo), the "Green Onions"-like jazz-rock of "Cruise Control", with frenetic keyboard work from new member Steve Davidowski, and the odd, off-time, funky "Wages of Weirdness", which borrows its ending from some TV western (I can't figure out which one, and its driving me nuts!). The highlight of the record is the shimmering acoustic guitar/violin duet "Northern Lights", with its strong classical/baroque feel. This set a precedent for the next five Dregs records, each of which would have a "classical" guitar or guitar/violin piece included, and all of them written by Mr. Morse.

By this time, Twiggs Lyndon, Jr. had become the band's road manager and, more importantly, their mentor. (If George Martin could be referred to as "the fifth Beatle", then Twiggs was certainly "the sixth Dreg-g".) Twiggs, according to Morse, was one of those guys who could build or fix anything, and he kept the band focused and disciplined. The cover of the *Free Fall* LP shows the band members bailing out of an airplane (without parachutes) while Twiggs times them with a stopwatch on the ground below. (While *Free Fall* is available on both LP and CD, the latter does not contain the photo of Twiggs.) This was to take on tragic overtones a few years later...

The band, including new keyboardist

Mark Parrish, was much happier with their 1978 LP, *What If*. New producer Ken Scott, who had worked with Jeff Beck, Mahavishnu, Queen, and Supertramp, had a hands-off approach to the music that allowed the musicians the freedom to find themselves in the music (though Rod Morgenstein admits Scott wisely intervened and corrected the drummer's tendency to overplay). The album contains some of Morse's finest and most intricate and complex compositions, such as the long classical-flavored closing opus "Night Meets Light", which starts out with a simple repeating three-note guitar pattern, segues into moody violin, and closes with blistering guitar work from Morse as the song ever-so-slowly fades out. Andy West's composition "Travel Tunes" features that most uncommon of keyboards — a (synthesized) calliope! "Little Kids" is an appropriately playful guitar/violin piece; "Take It Off the Top" (a tribute to booking agent's commissions) would bludgeon even a heavy metal fan into willing submission. "Gina Lola Breakdown" is a fast, tongue-in-cheek country-music parody with a funky break in the middle that has all manner of percussion and even a Jew's harp, while "Odyssey" is easily the most menacing thing the Dregs ever did, with blistering guitar and violin work in a call-and-response jazz vein, and slower middle passages of intense beauty. This record is not for the faint of heart — keep a tank of oxygen by your listening chair! The recording quality varies, from open and spacious



The Dregs

LICORICE PIZZAS AND CHROME DOUGHNUTS

on some songs, to a thick "wall of sound" on others where appropriate. *What If* is available on both LP and CD. This is my favorite album with which to shock myself awake in the morning!

By now, word of the Dregs' prowess as a live band was spreading, and local musicians would turn up in droves at every Dregs gig (I can personally attest to this, having seen many musician/friends in the audience at the Dregs performances I attended). This reputation led to the release in 1979 of a "half-and-half" album, *Night of the Living Dregs*, half of which was recorded in the studio and the other half live at the Montreaux Jazz Festival. Although I have to agree with drummer Morgenstein that "the live power of the Dregs was never really captured" on recordings, the live half of the record is still quite good, and the audience was wildly enthusiastic (this was to be the first of four consecutive Grammy nominations for "best instrumental album", but the Dregs were fated to remain always a bridesmaid, never a bride). The album's stand-out cut is a sped-up version of "The Wabash Cannonball", here simply titled "The Bash": Morse's incredible country-flavored "chickin'-pikin'" plays counterpoint to Allen Sloan's sweet-

toned violin, and the song succeeds simultaneously as both an homage and a parody — no mean feat. It's easy to see why Morse has been voted "Overall Best Guitarist" five years running in *Guitar Player Magazine's* Readers' Poll. Unlike many other pickers, he *does not* rely on flashy, one-handed guitar tricks like left-hand fretboard hammer-ons and pull-offs, preferring instead to pick every single note with his right hand simultaneously, for a very distinctive attack. Although Steve is quite capable of playing very fast, he never overplays and his solos always fit in perfectly with the feel of the song.

Other highlights of *Night of the Living Dregs* include the strongly Irish-flavored "Patchwork" (a much more successful cut than the bizarre "Leprechaun Promenade" which preceded it), and the title cut, both recorded live. (Actually, the record company reversed two song titles, the live "Punk Sandwich" composition becoming known as "Night of the Living Dregs", and vice versa.) The studio side of the album contains Steve's most difficult classical guitar piece, "The Riff Raff", and closes with the spritely "Long Slow Distance". Both the studio and live sides are very well recorded. *Night of the Living Dregs* is

also available on CD.

Dropped from Capricorn Records in 1979 because of modest record sales (though their live shows made money), the Dregs were quickly picked up by Arista Records, and former University of Miami classmate T. Lavitz came aboard to replace Mark Parrish, who had left. The band suffered a major personal loss when road manager Twiggs Lyndon, Jr. died in a skydiving accident while the band watched helplessly from the ground. The *Dregs Of the Earth* LP was dedicated to Twiggs' memory for all the love and encouragement he had given them. (The LP's liner sleeve originally contained a photo of Twiggs and the inscription "In Loving Memory"; this was later excluded from both the CD and LP.) The band's appreciation was reflected in the joyful, bouncy composition "Twiggs Approved" (one listen and you'll know he would have). The album also marked Steve Morse's first foray as producer, and his instincts were sound: "Steve's always had definite ideas when he hears music, and his vision is so unified we found it a lot easier to play his songs, because anything that anyone else wrote sounded really 'stuck in' — it didn't really fit in with the Dregs' sound", said Andy West. Morse was and

remains a hard taskmaster and a perfectionist, both in the studio and on stage ("I am crazy, obsessed and neurotic", laughs Morse), but he knew how to coax everybody into giving their best. Says T. Lavitz, "I've listened to my solos that Steve has produced and I go, 'That's me? That sounds better than me! But it is me!'" *Dregs of the Earth* also has very good sound quality, due to Morse's growing experience with AKG and Neumann mikes (at this time they were also using a Neve console and a Studer recorder). Other high points of the record were the Chick Corea-esque "I'm Freaking Out", and the aptly-named classical guitar piece "Old

MUSIC

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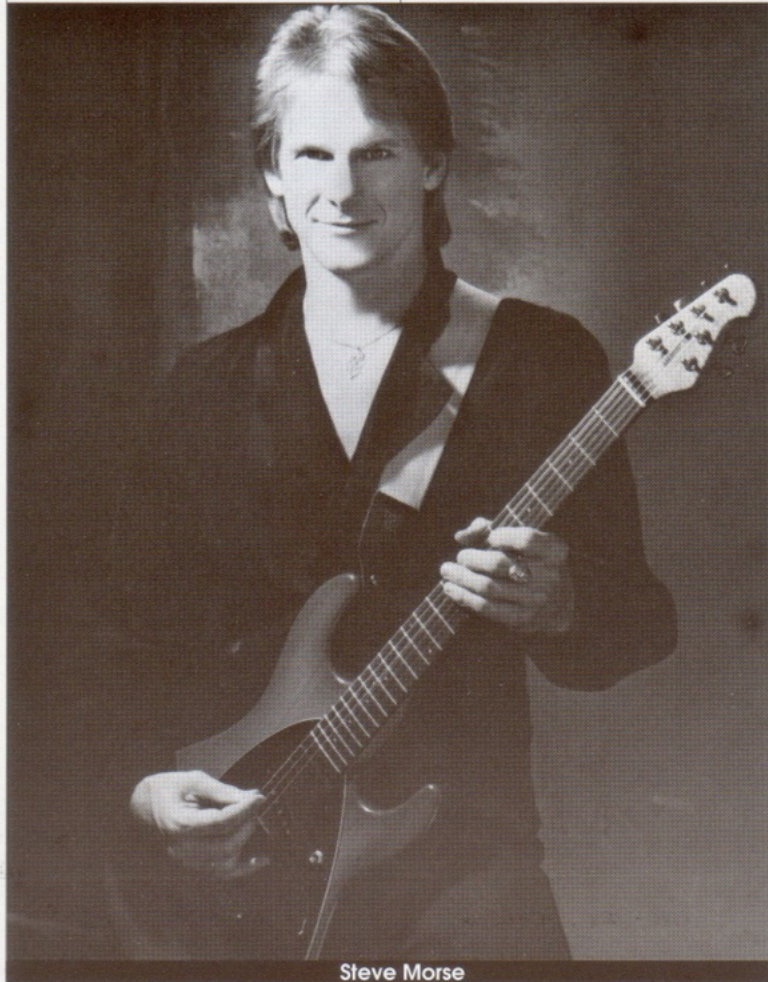
World". Strangely, *Dregs of the Earth* has been recently deleted from Arista's CD catalog, and is once again available only as an LP.

1980 saw the band's name officially shortened to "The Dregs"; the "Dixie" was dropped at the record company's insistence, in an effort to make the band more marketable in a time when Southern rock was falling out of favor (though the only thing "Southern" about the band was the fact they were headquartered on Steve Morse's farm in Georgia). On *Unsung Heroes*, the Dregs furthered their rock n' roll chops on straight-ahead rockers like "Rock n' Roll Park" and a tightly re-worked version of "Cruise Control", featuring the classic Hammond organ sound. "Divided We Stand" is anything but fragmented, with a nice Irish flavor and strong point/counterpoint ensemble playing. "Go For Baroque" adds keyboards to Morse's familiar (but still magical) guitar-violin duets. This is one of the Dreg's most accessible records. *Unsung Heroes* has been deleted from the CD catalog, but is still available on vinyl.

Unfortunately, like Capricorn before them, Arista never did much to promote the band. When *Industry Standard* was being recorded, Arista pushed the Dregs into reluctantly doing a couple of tunes with vocals, with Doobie Brothers' vocalist Patrick Simmons guesting on one cut, and Santana's Alex Ligertwood lending his pipes to the other. This capitulation to commercialization neither helped nor hindered the record, and *Industry Standard* didn't sell any better than previous Dregs recordings (sales averaged about 100,000 copies per record). Although the band was exhausted from constant touring, the energy level on *Industry Standard* was still very high (due in no small part to the addition of ace violinist/guitarist/multi-instrumentalist Mark O'Connor), and the record remains a band favorite. "Chips Ahoy" and "Where's Dixie?" showcase the Dregs' strong affinity for traditional Irish/country music, while "Up In The Air" features a classical guitar duet between Morse and Steve Howe of Yes. Unfortunately, the Dregs' last two promotional tours were riddled with problems, including the alleged embezzlement of large sums of money by several people ostensibly employed

by the band (the Dregs are legally restrained from discussing the matter). The band was also made to suffer the indignity of "lip synching" (actually, "finger synching" would be more appropriate) on such TV programs as

literally were not allowed to take even two weeks off for vacation. The Dregs were being treated worse than common laborers: "Even the guy on the assembly line gets two weeks off every year." The elusive carrot-on-a-



Steve Morse

American Bandstand and *Don Kirschner's Rock Concert*. On *The Uncle Floyd Show*, a hand puppet "sang" the vocal parts to "Crank It Up" while the band faked their performance. With *Industry Standard* boasting song titles like "Blood Sucking Leeches" and "Assembly Line", it's not hard to see what the band thought of the record business by then. Even the title of the album was a cynical in-joke among the band members — says Steve, "Every time someone came and took money away from the band, we'd look at each other and go 'Well, that's the *industry standard*'". Constant touring had also taken its toll, and had broken the spirit of the band — they

stick known as financial success seemed hopelessly out of reach, and without Twiggs to keep the band motivated, things started to fall apart. On New Year's Eve in 1982 the Dregs played their last show. Steve Morse, always the perfectionist, had three or four gigs in a row where he felt he hadn't (and couldn't) give 100 percent, and thus concluded, "What was the use of it if I didn't enjoy myself? I might as well work for a living."

Is there life after Dregs, you may wonder? Mark O'Connor has been doing well as a session player in Nashville, and is in great demand. Allen Sloan went back to school, and

is now a certified M.D. T. Lavitz has put out several nice, jazz-flavored solo records, and has toured and recorded with several former Little Feat/Bonnie Raitt bandmembers under the name "The Bluesbusters". Rod Morgenstein has been playing and touring with heavy-metal bands Sahara and Winger (a criminal waste of his talent). Andy West has a nine-to-five job in the computer industry, and has a new band named Zazen.

As for Steve Morse, after the Dregs disbanded he seriously considered quitting the music business altogether. Instead, in a bizarre turn of events, Morse ended up touring as a solo, playing acoustic guitar as the opening act for the acoustic jazz-guitar power trio of John McLaughlin, Al DiMeola, and Paco DeLucia. Morse participated in lengthy jam sessions on stage with the trio at the finale of each show (Morse nearly replaced DiMeola, who almost didn't make the tour due to scheduling conflicts). Morse subsequently toured Germany with English guitar wizard Richard Thompson and

multi-instrumentalist David Lindley (see profile in *Issue Ten - Ed.*). "They held up their end of the bargain amazingly well", said Steve.

These tours left Morse feeling elated, ready to jump back into full-time music-making. Enlisting the help of Rod "here we go again" Morgenstein and hot funk/jazz bassist Jerry Peek (an acquaintance from the Dregs days), the Steve Morse Band cut a very guitar-oriented album known simply as *The Introduction*. Recorded on a tight budget (directly out of Steve's pocket), the record's sound is murky, but the compositions are *killers*, and the ensemble playing is supercharged, particularly Morse's precisely nasty guitar work and Peek's nimble-fingered jazz bass work on "Cruise Missile" and "On The Pipe". The brilliant Albert Lee (of the EmmyLou Harris band) turns up to trade country-flavored guitar solos with Morse on "General Lee", and T. Lavitz plays gorgeous piano on the lilting "Mountain Waltz". Unfortunately, when it came time to a second Steve Morse Band album, Morse was

subjected to intense pressure by the record company (Elektra/Asylum) to add vocals to his music, and the resulting *Stand Up* LP was, for me, pretty much unlistenable. Morse left Elektra/Asylum soon after, citing "artistic differences".

After the critical and commercial flop of *Stand Up*, Morse went back out on tour solo, having perfected an incredible one-man-band show wherein he would perform a potpourri of acoustic and electric guitar music, ranging from Bach's "Jesu" to classic and classical Dregs tunes, such as "T.O. Witcher" and "Northern Lights", as well as amazing orchestral-sounding improvisations with the aid of a guitar synthesizer and sampler. These solo shows quite simply have to be heard to be believed. Morse also turned up on the last two Kansas LPs, which were consistently mediocre, with the exception of a considerably slowed-down version of Morse's acoustic guitar piece "T.O. Witcher" (previously unreleased). The Kansas live shows, however, were very enjoyable for

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Steve, and would alternate intense musical workouts such as "Carry On Wayward Son" with light-hearted parodies such as a rap version of "Dust In The Wind" that had the audience in stitches (until one night when a female member of the audience cried hysterically, after which the band refused to perform the song anymore). Nevertheless, the mercurial Morse, apparently dissatisfied with his career, abruptly quit Kansas and took a full-time job as a pilot for a commercial airline, gaining greater financial stability in his life. This move posed a difficult personal decision for Morse — one that is all too easy to make light of — as Steve had to cut his hair, the same long hair that gotten him expelled from high school many years earlier. For Steve, who had always been determined to control his own destiny and guide his own career, whatever the price, this was like an admission of personal failure.

Morse's self-imposed exile from music did not last long, however. 1988 saw him briefly join in a short-lived Dregs reunion, sponsored by a synthesizer manufacturer for whom the band recorded a two-song promo CD. This featured a nicely-reworked version of one of Morse's strangest compositions, "Leprechaun Promenade", as well as a heretically slowed-down remake of "Take It Off The Top" (which reminds me of the Sixties band Vanilla Fudge, who used to do this kind of thing regularly). The Dregs also toured briefly, with a new bass player (Dave LaRue) and minus a violin, but the old magic was still there (and I'm speaking here from personal experience). This year, with the release of a new Steve Morse Band album entitled *High-Tension Wires*, Morse is back on track, ably supported by a bevy of talented musicians, including several Dregs/Morse Band members (new drummer Van Romaine deserves special mention). The album is considerably subtler than his previous efforts, and

features a great deal of texturally-modified acoustic guitar sounds, though Morse also rocks out hard on several cuts, including the cheekily-titled "Tumeni Notes" ("An accusation I've heard all my life," laughs Morse, "but it became a popular phrase because of the movie *Amadeus*.").

At the risk of being branded a Dregs pusher, I implore you all to go out and buy their music. *Industry Standard*, unfortunately, has not been released on CD; however, Arista recently released a "Best of the Dregs" CD (alas, no LP) entitled *Divided We Stand*, which has a very good selection of songs from the Dregs' last three records. Release of *Divided We Stand* was held up while Arista scrambled to meet heavy demand for a "Best Of The Partridge Family" CD! I swear to God I'm not making this up...There is also a *Best Of The Dregs* CD and LP on Grand Slamm Records, featuring compositions from the Dreg's first three albums for Capricorn, but the song selection is unfortunately rather erratic. Morse's solo album *The Introduction* is also available on CD. Because of the complex rhythmic nature of their music, I'd give the edge to the LPs sonically — I feel the CDs homogenize the music and rob it of some of its vitality. But don't let that stop you if all

you can find are the CDs. The medium is *not* the message; when the music is this good, the medium *must* take a back seat to the music. With the demise of the Capricorn label (purchased by Polygram), and the continuing legal battles between the Dregs and Arista, it isn't certain whether the band will ever see any of the fruits of their labors., but I know that nothing would make them prouder than to have their music reach new ears and make new fans.

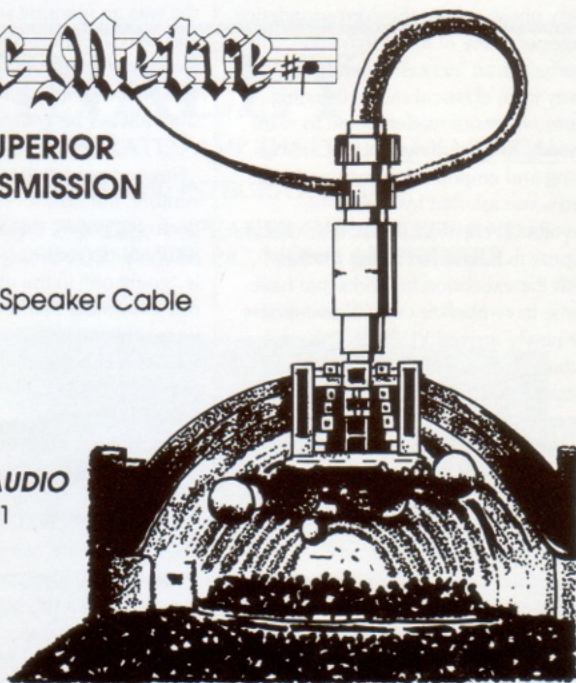
If, after reading this, you still aren't sure just what the music of the Dregs is like, I'd like to quote from no less an authority on music than the great Benny Goodman, who said, "The whole goddamn thing about jazz is emotional: if it doesn't come out as a wild endeavor — wild *with restraint* — then it just doesn't have it." The Dregs may not have qualified strictly as jazz, but the description still applies: wild, with restraint, and very emotional. Yeah, I like it. And you will too. ■

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More Music On Modest Money

By David Cooper

Dear Friends,

As promised in the last article, we are entering the area of what music historians term "The Modern Music". As we prepare to get into this, let me caution you that I am writing while on vacation via motor home with friends in Nova Scotia. My listening "source" consists of cassettes made from my LP's, played on a Sony auto-reverse Walkman "Outback". Album numbers are being taken from a 1979 Schwann Artists' Issue and may not be entirely accurate. The end result is that this installment will have to be a bit of an overview - which may have a hidden benefit.

One trend that I feel is becoming fairly obvious from the correspondence pages of many of the "High End" journals is an increasing tendency away from classical music listening. More and more readers seem to want reviews of equipment and recordings using and emphasizing rock and jazz; and some ask that less space be devoted to classical music. The classics appear to be a diminishing market, with the exception of works that have come to symbolize cultural awareness for newly-arrived YUPPIES (Young Urban Professionals), DINKS (Dual Income, No Kids), and SINKS (Single Income, No Kids). Musical education in many public schools has long been limited to what a music professor at my alma mater called "jock strap music" (marching band half time music). Our society generally gets its "serious music" from movie soundtracks like *Amadeus*, upscale-oriented television commercials, Public Broadcasting radio and TV, the C.B.C. if you live in or near Canada, and audio salon

demonstration recordings.

Now I don't intend to support the largely (and justifiably) dead or dying view that the classical is the only form of good or "serious" music. Remember that I have committed "More Music on Modest Money" (henceforth 4M) to reviewing used recordings of acoustic music ranging from A.D. 800 to the present, including classical, jazz, blues, and folk. To deny the worth of all music other than classical is, to me, pretentious snobbery and pompous ignorance.

Such snobbery was effectively challenged by Edward Kennedy "Duke" Ellington during an interview on WQXR, New York in the 60s. When asked by a condescending interviewer what he thought of music other than jazz, Ellington responded, "There are only two types of music: Good Music and Bad Music." When asked for his criteria for making this judgment, Ellington responded that regardless of form (jazz, classical, rock, popular, country, folk, etc.), Good Music is written to express something of lasting value. Bad Music is written solely to "turn a buck." He gave credit to rock artists such as the Beatles for some very good music and suggested he could give a lengthy list of supposed classics that were crassly commercial. I confess that until challenged by this interview I too was an ignorant snob (but, at least I was only 16 at the time!). Ellington forced me to reassess my values and sensitivities with regard to music, and I shall always be grateful.

Now, as we approach the 21st century, the classics suffer from declining public exposure, with a resultant decreasing awareness of what is "going on" in the music. This, in my not so humble opinion, is made all the worse by classical program commentators who either with arrogance presuppose a knowledge of the music on the listener's part, or affect a pedantic tone of reverence for the music and its composer. Their tone and style suggest that they imbibed in a formaldehyde cocktail, just prior to going on the air. Mind you I am no "expert", but, like many of you, I love the classics for the same reason I love a wide range of music: for its own sake. My toes, heart, and life beat to the strains of delight and pathos, solemn

joy and deep emotion, the whimsical and the sublime of every type of music, including the classics. If you are a knowledgeable lover of the classics, please bear with me while I take some space to share with those of you who have been put off by the "formaldehyde cocktail set", and for whom the classics remain a "closed book".

This will be brief, and therefore filled with sweeping generalizations. In Europe, prior to Beethoven, there were basically four types of music: the folk music of the common people, church music, music written on commission for a patron, and music written for learning the arts of composition and performance. Musicians were skilled members of the servant class who usually knew their own worth and that of their musical contemporaries far better than did their employers. Much music was written to attract the attention of prospective employers. This was largely the case for Vivaldi and Bach in the Baroque Period, 1600-1750, as it was for Haydn and Mozart in the Classical Period, 1750-1810. Of these four types of music all but the first were closely linked. Haydn and Mozart had to write music that was entertaining and popular. Both wrote almost exclusively on commission or for a specific event. Though technically "commercial", theirs was at the same time an "absolute music" written for its own sake. Prior to Beethoven, composition followed strict conventions and forms for thematic and harmonic development. Building on the traditional forms that preceded them, Haydn and Mozart expanded the form, structure and expressiveness of music, while further limiting themselves by developing single rather than multiple themes within any given movement. Yet these strict standards caused them little trouble in giving voice to their inspiration. In many ways Vivaldi, Bach, Haydn, and Mozart came as close as any composers to expressing the Mediaeval ideal of "the Music of the Spheres" (pure, transcendent, spiritual music expressive of the purity of creation).

Beethoven, who met both Mozart and Haydn, and studied under the latter, honored both but longed to express more directly the passions and longings of human emotion and experience. Concurrently came the rise of

romanticism, the idealization of nature, and socio-political tides that swept Europe from the French revolution through the Napoleonic Wars to the rise of European Nationalism. Beethoven is the parent of "Modern Music" because his genius and deep personal striving radically redefined the art and rules of composition, as surely as Napoleon's shadow stretched over the continent's liberal and reactionary social-political history for most of the 19th century. Beethoven also made music pay a living wage.

Curiously, Beethoven's works gave rise to two entirely divergent paths of composition. This monumental musical "trailblazer" concurrently followed traditional and conventional routes and explored uncharted musical territory. His symphonies give us the clearest illustration of his traditional and radical sides. A debatable, but useful, division may be put forward as follows: Symphonies Nos. 1, 2, 4, 7, and 8 are "Classical" in nature, following the traditional standards of the 18th century. Symphonies Nos. 3, 5, 6, and 9 are experimental, radical, and

romantic. Remember, these generalizations *are* sweeping.

Beethoven's traditional works follow the conventions laid down by the masters of earlier periods, with the influence of Haydn and Mozart predominating, and earlier standards from Bach and his contemporaries playing at least a formative role. Yet Beethoven, with his ever-worsening hearing and tempestuous personality, had a growing need for self-expression, experimentation, and the writing of music to fulfill a programmatic agenda set by personal experience and the growing influence of the arts and literature. Emotional outpourings of early triumph, of despair, of conditional victory, and at least partial resolution are possible characterizations of his Symphony No. 3, "The Eroica". Symphony No. 6, "The Pastoral", musically describes "a day of pure joy" spent in the countryside of the Viennese suburb of Heiligenstadt where, six years before in 1802, he wrote his famous "Heiligenstadt Testament", concerning his hearing loss. This testament included the

pathos-laden appeal, "O Providence, let for once a pure day of joy be mine, so long is true joy's inward resonance a stranger to me. O when, O when O God, can I feel it once again in this Temple of Humanity. Never! No - O that were too cruel." Yet six years later, without direct physical experience, he heard the calls of nightingales, quails and cuckoos by a stream. From within came the sound of a village band at a peasant festivity, the full force of a thunderstorm, and the evening hymn of a thankful shepherd boy! Symphony No. 8 also seeks an expression of ultimate meaning for a deaf musician and a world swept with imperial war. Each of its movements express various approaches to an elusive ideal, which is finally realized, to the exclusion of the previous three, in the choral theme developed around Schiller's poem, "An die Freude" (Ode to Joy).

Listeners who never get past the nine symphonies, which *are* each and all treasures, are depriving themselves of a rich and varied musical experience. The following list of recordings will offer you some areas to explore:

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The Nine Symphonies, complete, are available in boxed sets which are of great value. Please consider the monaural recordings by **Toscanini and the NBC Symphony Orchestra on RCA VIC 8000**. With all their "pre-stereo" limitations, these recordings are still definitive interpretations that give much joy and inspiration. The **Herbert von Karajan, Berlin Philharmonic boxed set (8-DGG 2721200)** is excellent and a worthy find that will give years of pleasure.

There are other boxed sets that are fully worthy of your attention:

Ernest Ansermet and the Orchestre de la Suisse Romande (London STS-BTH-S-1);

Leonard Bernstein and the Berlin Philharmonic (8-DGG 272100);

Otto Klemperer and the Philharmonia Orchestra (8-Angel SH-3619);

Josef Krips and the London Symphony (7-Everest 3162);

Eugene Ormandy and the Philadelphia Orchestra (7-Columbia D7S-745);

Hans Schmidt-Isserstedt and the Vienna Philharmonic [7-London CSP-1 (1 & 2): 6658; (3): 6483; (4 + Overture): 6512; (5 & 8): 6619; (6 + Overture): 6556; (7 + Overture): 6668; (9): 1159.

Also, do not overlook: **George Szell and the Cleveland Orchestra (7-Columbia M7X-30281); and Bruno Walter and the Columbia Symphony (7-Odyssey Y7-30051).**

Each of these recordings has great merit and widely divergent interpretations, which points out the maddening joy of having to make up one's own mind over what interpretations of any composer will suit your taste, rather than mine. If you are fortunate enough to find an affordable source of RCA Living Stereo ("Shaded Dogs"), do not allow yourself to miss **Fritz Reiner and the Chicago Symphony Orchestra's recordings of: Symphonies 1 and 9 on RCA LSC-3316 (a "Shaded Dog") or 2-RCA LSC-6096 [unfortunately not a "Shaded Dog" but a Dynaflex (Dynaflop) floppy disk]; Symphony No. 5 and the Schubert No. 8 on RCA**

LSC-3295; No. 6 on RCA LSC-2614; No. 7 on RCA LSC-1991; No. 9 on RCA LSC-3316. For my tastes, Reiner is due the cult following that has grown around his "Shaded Dog" recordings. His feel for the music, his (literal) command of every instrument in the ensemble (which yielded an orchestra filled with soloist quality musicians, and the amazing presence of the recordings made in a wonderful hall are very hard to match!

Also, under the heading of "Symphonic Music", not to be missed are: **Beethoven's five Piano Concerti done by Wilhelm Kempff with Ferdinand Leitner and the Berlin Philharmonic on 4-DGG 138774, 138775, 138776, and 138777; and Artur Rubinstejn with Eric Leinsdorf and the Boston Symphony on 4-RCA VCS-6417**. A recording triumph was achieved by **Jascha Heifetz with the Boston Symphony under Charles Munch of Beethoven's Violin Concerto in D major, opus 61 on RCA LSC-1992 ("Shaded Dog")**, and the still-of-value rerelease on **RCA LSC-3317** — this is a performance/recording achievement approaching perfection.

My last Beethoven selection for your consideration is the **Concerto for Piano, Violin, 'Cello and Orchestra in C major, opus 56 (The "Triple Concerto") performed by Géza Anda, piano; Wolfgang Schneiderhan, violin; Pierre Fournier, 'cello with the Radio Symphony Orchestra of Berlin under Ferenc Fricsay on DGG 136236**. At the close of the 18th and beginning of the 19th centuries there was considerable interest in the technical capabilities of individual instruments and the orchestra, which led to what were called "concertante symphonies", after the example of Mozart's symphonies concertante. Beethoven again pushed traditional conventions, and wrote of this work to his publishers, "that a concertante with these three solo parts is something new" (1804). (Liner Notes are a great source of information!) This rather technical and yet highly satisfying work is played with real brilliance and sensitivity by the soloists and ensemble, who manage to communicate among themselves and to us listeners the magic of a too-often ignored work.

Let us turn to those divergent paths of

traditional and radical expression to which Beethoven gave rise. Truly, the subsequent Romantic Period composers *had* to make choices as to which path they would follow; and this is most evident in their symphonies. There were, in effect, two schools of composers:

1) The Conservatives, who worked freely within the established forms of the classical symphony. For them there was no constraint to imagination, inventiveness, or spontaneity in this style. There is a deep and abiding respect, even a veneration, for the heritage of Haydn, Mozart, and the "classical" Beethoven.

2) The Radicals seem to have felt deeply constrained by the "trade" conventions of the professional, "write on demand" musician. Theirs was a music filled with a need for deep, personal, and freely unconstrained expression. Romantic Poets, such as Goethe, Schiller, Heine, Byron, Keats, and Shelley — all had their influence. Literature became one of the sources of inspiration for composers as diverse as Beethoven and Berlioz.

I shall deal with each group separately. Beethoven's most immediate "Conservative", younger contemporary who shows his influence is Franz Peter Schubert. Essentially classical and untroubled by personal conflicts, despite grinding poverty, Schubert wrote melodies that are of luminescent beauty, perhaps more akin to Mozart than to Beethoven. His sense of orchestral color and a felicity for warmth, humor, and directness were joined with an inner sense of the sublime. Schubert's music is marvelously humane and accessible. Though often less than demanding, here we find a music with far more depth than is often recognized. His highly regarded, and justifiably venerated, Symphonies Nos. 5 and 8 in B minor of 1822 (the "Unfinished"), and the great C major of 1828 are so ubiquitous that we are too easily led by the "formaldehyde cocktail set" to pass them off as over-played symphonic "War Horses", and to regard the earlier symphonies as being lightweight and therefore second-rate. Those earlier works were clearly influenced by Haydn and Mozart, and even bear indications of influence from the too-

easily denigrated Rossini and Cherubini. Like all truly great "Classicalists", Schubert was clearly pleased and influenced by the heritage of those masters who had blazed the musical trail to the road which he followed. Without the least blush I heartily recommend the following list of Schubert symphonic recordings, listed by conductor and orchestra (with the caution that the numbering of Schubert's symphonies is problematic, hence my inclusion of the Deutsch Work Listing Numbers):

Sir Thomas Beecham and the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra on Capitol SG7212, Symphonies No. 3 in D major, D. 200, and No. 5 in B flat major, D. 485. This recording displays the "Reineresque" control and sensitivity of this great British musical martinet, who tyrannized his orchestra to such great musical heights, as displayed on this recording.

Karl Böhm and the Berlin Philharmonic: Symphonies No. 1 in D major, D. 82 and No. 2 in B major, D. 125 on DGG 2530216; Symphonies No. 5 in B major, D. 485, and No. 8 in B minor, D. 759 ("Unfinished") on DGG 139 162; and now for number confusion! — Symphony No. 7 (9) in C major opus posthumous on DGG 138 877 is the very same work as Symphony No. 9 in C major, D. 944 ("The Great C Major") which Böhm recorded with Staatskapelle Dresden on DGG 2531 352! — and both are great performances revealing, as do the other recordings listed here, Böhm's wonderful empathy with all Classical and Classical-Romantic Transition Period composers. Böhm draws a warmth, a vibrancy, a level of expressiveness, drama, brilliance and balance from an orchestra that is a genuine marvel. When in doubt, buy anything Böhm recorded!

Carlo Maria Giulini and the Chicago Symphony Orchestra on DGG 2531 047, Symphonies No. 4 in C minor, D. 417 ("The Tragic"), and No. 8 in B minor, D. 759 (the "Unfinished"). Giulini deserves the highest marks for this entry. In fact, grumble if you like, I feel he comes very, very close to equaling Reiner's great achievements with Chicago, but without the tyranny. This recording is fitting witness to the quality of this great and under-

recognized conductor, and this fine orchestra.

Yehudi Menuhin and The Menuhin Orchestra on Angel-EMI S-36551, Symphonies No. 1 in D major, D. 82, and No. 3 in D major, D. 200; and Menuhin with the Bath Festival Orchestra on Angel-EMI S-36453, Symphonies No. 2 in B flat major, D. 125, and No. 6 in C major, D. 589 (the "Little C major"). In my view, few conductors or ensembles (the Bath Festival and the Menuhin being nearly interchangeable) have succeeded in embracing whomever they are performing with as much love and sensitivity as these fine artists. Any shortcomings in the recordings, which are few, are amply overcome by the quality and style of this great Anglo-American musical pedagogue and apologist, and his British colleagues.

Karl Münchinger and the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra on London/Decca CS 6378, Symphonies No. 4 in C minor, D. 417 ("The Tragic"), and No. 5 in B flat major, D. 485. Münchinger is perhaps best known for his landmark London recordings of the Bach Brandenburg concerti with the Stuttgart Chamber Orchestra. With the Vienna Philharmonic, he brings the same sparkling joy, expressiveness and precision found in his Bach recordings to Schubert. This is delightfully fine work.

The next "Classical Romantic" due greater attention is Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy, whose symphonic works show the wielding of a delicate musical brush from a vast and varied palette. He was a painter of broad, lush and joyous landscapes. Notable are **Symphonies No. 4 in A major, opus 90 ("Italian"), and No. 5 in D major, opus 107 ("Reformation"), performed by Charles Munch and the Boston Symphony on RCA LSC-2221 ("Shaded Dog"), and by Herbert von Karajan and the Berlin Philharmonic on DGG 2530 416; Symphony No. 3 in A minor, opus 56 ("Scotch"), done by Munch and Boston on RCA LSC-2520 ("Shaded Dog"), and by Anatol Dorati and the London Symphony Orchestra on Mercury MG 50123, which includes "Fingal's Cave Overture", opus 26, also known as "The Hebrides Overture". Be sure not to miss his Incidental Music for Shakespeare's, A**

Midsummer Night's Dream, done by Leinsdorf and Boston on RCA LSC-2673 ("Shaded Dog"), or the Violin Concerto in E minor, opus 64 done by Jascha Heifetz and Boston under Munch on RCA LSC-2314 ("Shaded Dog"). Mendelssohn wrote easily accessible music that was enjoyable, popular, and yet not "commercial" in Ellington's terms!

We are nearly out of space, but, with your kind permission, in the next issue we shall take a look at the Radical path that followed Beethoven's Romantic side. Before closing, I do apologize for the number of "Shaded Dogs", with their attendant collector's premium prices (as high as \$80.00 per LP for a Reiner or Heifetz recording!!!). Not all premium old vinyl goes for prices that high in my area. More Music on Modest Money sometimes means paying a premium price for a work you really love with the best possible sound — it also means finding compromises in performance and vinyl for the sake of having a wide variety of music. But take heart, just a month ago \$19.99 plus tax secured a 4-LP "Shaded Dog" **RCA LSC-6410 of Mozart's Don Giovanni** with Cesare Siepi, Birgit Nilsson, Leontyne Price, Cesare Valletti, Fernando Corena, Eugenia Ratti, the Vienna State Opera Chorus and the Vienna Philharmonic under Leinsdorf (a recording selected by the Metropolitan Opera for its sponsorship) at the Princeton Record Exchange, a place where \$80.00 Reiner "Shaded Dogs" also reside for the obsessive-compulsive collector. So take heart, and enjoy good searching and listening, until we rejoin our common quest for great music of all sorts.

P.S. You may be wondering about my "back-up" resources (bibliography) for music history and analysis, beyond my own amateur judgments. Beyond my "thirtysomething" years of listening and concert-going, I rely on record album liner notes and a book most musicians dislike intensely, since it was required reading in college. I refer you to this excellent text:

Donald J. Grout, **A History of Western Music**, Third Edition, with Claude V. Palisca, Yale University. W.W. Norton & Co., Inc., 1980. Library of Congress #ML160.G87 1980. ■

DISINTEGRATION THE CURE

By Glenn Hammett

"It's really perfect to have been able to go so long and not to have compromised or regretted anything we have done." — Robert Smith of the Cure

My first introduction to the Cure was through a friend suffering a recent breakup. His suicidal tendencies were compounded by listening to "Siamese Twins" (from 1982's *Pornography* LP). Over and over again.

Admittedly, I too have since used the Cure to paint a gloomy backdrop for my more oppressively dark moods. While *Disintegration* may not be quite as skull-numbing as its illustrious predecessor, in many ways I find it even more interesting and lugubrious.

With the release of this, their eleventh album thus far, the Cure have achieved on a single LP a total summation of all that has gone before. Not only have the compositions been polished and perfected, but the awkward musician-ship that characterized earlier efforts has been left behind. The songs are now more fully realized, with the group sounding more cohesive and integrated. In the old days ('77 to '84), one was always acutely aware of the music's simplicity, though this made the music no less effective.

Between *Pornography* and 1987's *Kiss Me, Kiss Me, Kiss Me*, the Cure's rock sensibilities had mellowed, giving way to a lighter side, but *Disintegration* finds the group once again composing tunes that beckon the listener into their web of despair and lament.

The LP's somber deliberations on the disintegration of self, love, and relationships provide a perfect introduction to the world of the Cure

— gray, rueful, cold and hopelessly forlorn. Only two tracks here break from the mold. The first, "Fascination Street", is a funky, dance-oriented tune which should find a devoted rock

audience (it's already been in heavy rotation on MTV); the second, "Lovesong", boasts some surprisingly upbeat lyrics, though lead vocalist Smith still manages to sound thoroughly despondent. The rest of the LP is true to form, with a heart-wrenching gloominess that would make even Chaplin sit up and take notice.

The bass guitar work here is much improved over past efforts, surpassing the already-fine playing previous to *Disintegration*. The trademark-spindly guitar is now flowing, concise and articulate, a far cry from the rather amateurish attempts of old. As a result, the music has a sense of direction and cohesiveness sorely missed in albums past. *(continued on page 71)*



Robert Smith

STEALTH SPEAKERS — They Disappear

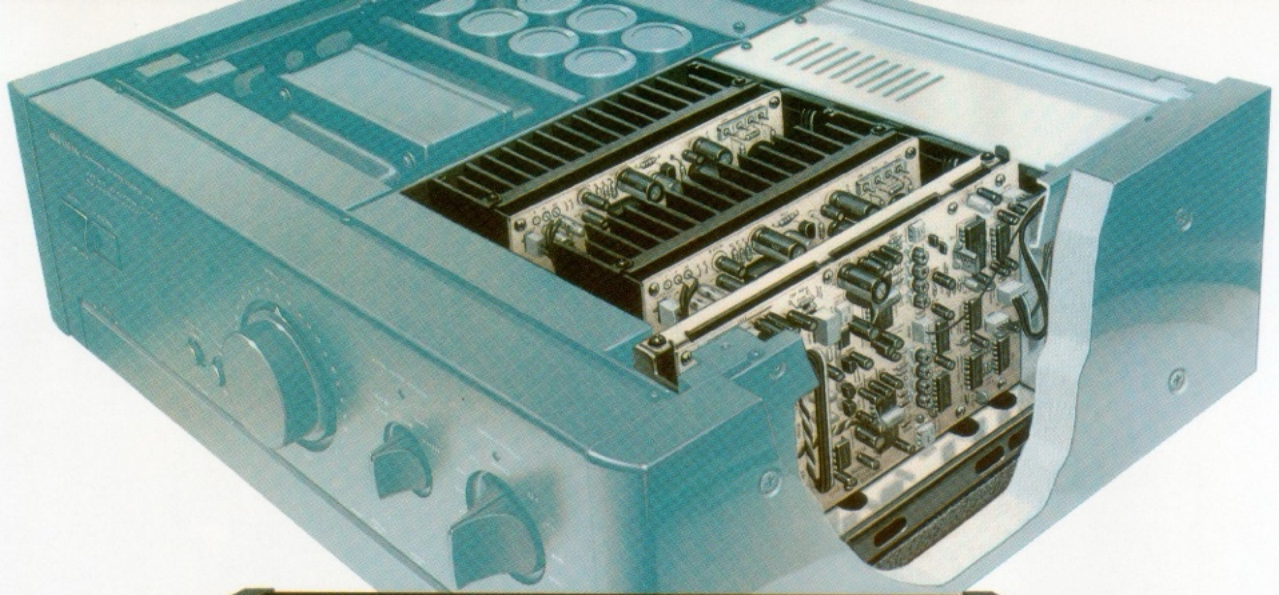


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The album's mix builds layer upon layer of lavish synthesizer, permeating the soundstage and creating a dense aural fog through which the compositions ebb and flow. Smith's tortured vocals — at times like that of an untrained schoolboy — were never more distinguished or effectively delivered. His lyrics have also taken a turn for the better, lacking some of the numbing repetitiveness of past efforts. Robert truly has a way with words, rivalled in this musical genre only by a select few who rode in on the New Wave of the Seventies.

Sonically, this LP is..., well, let's just say it's the only one in my collection where a direct comparison with the CD version doesn't yield a clear winner. To be sure, the LP gives slightly more air and ambience to the performances. On the other hand, the CD contains a few extra tracks not present on the LP. I'll call it a toss-up.

I've only found one other LP (Hassell's *Surgeon of the Night*) that has sound this murky and thick. As with that LP, the murky sound of



The Cure

Disintegration serves as an organic part of the performance; in a sense it is one of the instruments.

Though an avid Cure fan, I must admit that previous albums have always contained one or two feeble selections. Happily, the material here is uniformly strong, with even the weakest tracks surpassing 95% of the

rehashed "pop" junk available. I love this LP in its entirety, from its beautiful love songs to the deep and delirious "Prayers for Rain". For those wishing to get their first taste of the Cure, I can unhesitatingly recommend *Disintegration*. ■

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ARGYBARGY

BELLES

Thank you for reviewing the Belles 450 power amplifier in such a forthright manner. In designing and building the 450, we at Belles have worked to bring the same accuracy and value which our Belles 150 is noted for, but in a much more powerful package.

Power and control are indeed the most important characteristics of a high voltage, high current amplifier; characteristics which you noted the 450 possesses. In our own experience, we have yet to find a speaker load which the 450 cannot drive sufficiently.

The concerns which you noted surrounding soundstage and instrument separation have been eliminated through the addition of a special brass eyelet, introduced at the point of output. Through the addition of this component, the inherent capabilities of the 450 rise to the surface. The end result is the level of detail, accuracy and power for which Belles components are noted.

David E. Belles
President
Belles Research

AUDIOLAB

Thank you kindly for the favorable review on the Audiolab 8000A integrated amplifier. Since its introduction in 1983, the Audiolab has continually evolved into a very reliable, well-built, and musical piece of equipment of which we are very proud. Its recent popularity has increased, no doubt due to the many sonic improvements that have been implemented since its inception; and all without a price increase in over four years to boot. The philosophy behind the design was to give the customer audiophile sound quality combined with many useful features at a very affordable price. By your review and others, I would say the goal has been achieved.

I would like to take this opportunity to respond to your review. On the matter of audible hiss in the output at zero volume; this is certainly not a

normal condition and is not indicative of the performance of the 8000A, which is virtually silent at minimum volume setting. Certainly one should not be able to hear residual hiss across the room. I suspect there could be a noisy transistor in the line stage causing excessive hiss. Never having experienced this problem, we would have to check your review sample and report our findings to you.

Once again, thanks for auditioning our product. I think you best summed up the sound of the 8000A when you stated, "The Audiolab never interfered with the music." That, of course, is our goal.

Dave Lang
President
Artech Electronics, Ltd.

CELESTION

Thanks for spending the time to listen to and appraise our SL700 speaker. As you know, there is no such thing as the "perfect" system or speaker, the laws of physics, if not the costs, always governing aspects of performance in one way or another. Inevitably, the decisions of which roads to take during development can be difficult ones to make, not necessarily a compromise as such, just a judgment of performance aspects. I believe we have hit upon the "one man's meat is another man's poison" adage here (well, perhaps not quite that strongly, but it's the only relevant one that comes instantly to mind!) over the decisions made on the 700's performance characteristics. Certainly, while the 700, just as all other audio products, has its own signature if you like, it is always a question of which signature do you like best/object to least. Unfortunately, we didn't quite choose the right one for Kent Bransford's auditory system.

While Kent obviously appreciates the extraordinary engineering and build quality that goes into this product, a couple of other comments on specific items within the review are worthy of comment. Firstly, just to say that we have never been confronted with a problem of low-level detail, but it could be that this feature Kent was confronted with is linked to the second observation, in that the 700 can be

rather amplifier sensitive. Certainly we would recommend the use of top-quality electronics on this speaker; from our experience it can show up inadequacies in any system quite ruthlessly.

I guess at the end of the day, the customer is the ultimate judge. An open mind on the customer's part is all we can ask.

Barry D. Fox
Director of Sales and Marketing
Celestion Industries, Inc.

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