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04/2018 • November/December/January 2018/2019

The German Voice of Premium Audio... a free online magazine



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Sound experiment on August 23rd, 2017: Jazz guitarist Christy Doran, a pioneer of the loop delay technique, can be heard with a solo improvisation in the natural panorama of the Swiss Glattalp. At an altitude of 1850 metres, he plays over two guitar amplifiers controlled in parallel - one is located half a kilometre away and can therefore be heard with a "natural" sound delay of around 1.4 seconds. —>

1925

1950

1975

1936 1st electric guitar with separate amplifier: Gibson ES-150

1949 Christy Doran is born in Ireland

1957 1st Hallplatte EMT 140 conquers the recording studios





audioquest®

Carsten Barnbeck



DEAR READERS,

What category does it actually belong in? We've been having to ask ourselves this question more and more often lately when we run our equipment tests. In this issue we've taken a close look at a fascinating product that illustrates our problem: On the surface, Lyravox's Karl is a standard loudspeaker. An active one, of course. But if you dig a little deeper, it becomes clear it's really a complete hi-fi system. A D/A converter, analog inputs, and an integrated versatile streamer that even retrieves music from subscription services such as Tidal and Qobuz are all on board. What the heck is it? An active loudspeaker? A hi-fi system?

And Karl is just one of many examples. Manufacturers are folding more and more functions into their devices. It is already common for a DAC to also be used as a digital pre-amplifier. And everyone knows about integrated amplifiers with Bluetooth. Then there's the range of CD players with streamers, streamers with recording function for analogue audio, and so on — everything is possible, nothing is

unthinkable. It seems we urgently need to revise the product categories.

On the other hand, it raises the question of whether the ongoing analogue boom is somehow connected to this growing complexity. Don't misunderstand us: Products like Karl are exciting and we marvel at their possibilities. But sometimes you just want to put the needle on the vinyl to see what happens during music reproduction — analogue pleasure as a temporary escape from an increasingly complicated world. Playing with these opposing poles and the different perspectives on this hobby "hi-fi" are, however, two things that excite us the most about these current trends.

Best regards,
Carsten Barnbeck

The Next Generation

ADVERT



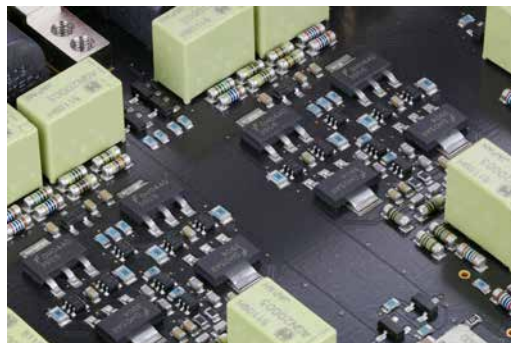
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Neo

Digital. Active. Speaker.

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DAC 502: Integrated Amplifier with DAC



WHENEVER WORLD-RENOWNED AUDIO
EXPERT DANIEL WEISS RELEASES A NEW
CONVERTER, SOUND CONNOISSEURS ARE
GUARANTEED A REAL TREAT. HIS DAC 502
IS SETTING YET ANOTHER BENCHMARK
FOR A NEW CLASS OF DEVICES.





The LCD touchscreen display is high-contrast and sharp. This, together with the high-quality push/rotary encoder knob, forms a formidable duo on the operating panel.



Weiss DAC 502

THE WEISS IS RIGHT

By Harald Wittig. Photography: Harald Wittig, Ingo Schulz





The DAC 502 is quite clean. The main control elements are the push/rotary encoder knob on the right-hand side of the front panel and the LCD touchscreen display.





◀ In the “Main Settings” menu, basic configurations can be set such as choosing between four (analog) output levels.



▶ The built-in DSP currently features the following plug-ins: Vinyl Emulation, Creative EQ, Crosstalk Cancelling, and Room EQ. More plug-ins will be added in the future.



◀ Vinyl Emulation simulates vinyl playback and achieves astonishingly near-natural results.



▶ Crosstalk Cancelling manages quite convincingly to make dummy head recordings OK to listen to on loudspeakers.



◀ The Room EQ plug-in improves the listening environment by suppressing room modes to improve bass reproduction.



▶ Five inputs are available. Thanks to the network capability (UPnP) and integrated USB interface (USB), the DAC 502 can also be used as a streamer or USB-DAC.



_____Daniel Weiss, one of the real heavyweights in the audio scene, has been developing groundbreaking products for his company Weiss Engineering Ltd, and with a characteristically Swiss flair for engineering, for a solid 30 years now. The company, based in the canton of Zürich, makes both professional-level devices as well as top-quality products for hi-fi enthusiasts. Weiss converters above all are held in exceptionally high esteem by mastering engineers and high-end fans with excellent ears. In recent years, the Swiss have forged ahead with the development of hi-fi devices in particular, and in large part to keep up with the digitalization trend. As such, the current shining star of their product range and today's test device, the DAC 502, is a real state-of-the-art converter. Daniel Weiss says: "The current trend is for simpler audio systems: a typical modern configuration consists of a streamer and active speakers. The DAC 502 can stream via UPnP and hence assume the role of streamer and pre-amplifier." Such a minimalist set-up means the streamer must also be able to handle tasks like tone control and adjusting to the listening room using Room EQ. This is why the DAC 502 has a built-in D(igital)S(ignal)P(rocessor) which, thanks to sophisticated algorithms, makes the DAC 502 a remarkably flexible bit of kit. In fact, this Swiss device is an interactive converter capable of an awful lot more than just transforming digital audio signals into analog audio signals with absolute precision, as if that weren't enough. But let's not get ahead of ourselves—we'll come back to all this in much more detail later. First, let's talk models and prices.

There are two models: the DAC 502 is more than twice as wide as its fraternal twin, the DAC 501, and features a four-pin balanced headphone output on its back. The only other thing that sets the converters apart is their price: the DAC 501 lands around EUR 8,900, whereas the DAC 502 costs just shy of EUR 10,000. Given those prices, both devices are of course "Swiss made" and exceed the highest standards.

The housing chassis is made of stainless steel and the incredibly clean front panel is made of aluminum. The main control element is the push/rotary encoder knob located on the right-hand side, which this reviewer's fingers discovered is a masterpiece of precision mechanics. Beside the control dial is a truly eye-catching and easy-to-read touchscreen. Together the pair form a formidable operating panel that makes adjusting the device's processes simple and straightforward. Anyone familiar with similar devices won't even need a manual to configure the basic settings, while newcomers will find the enclosed English-language Quick Start Guide helpful.

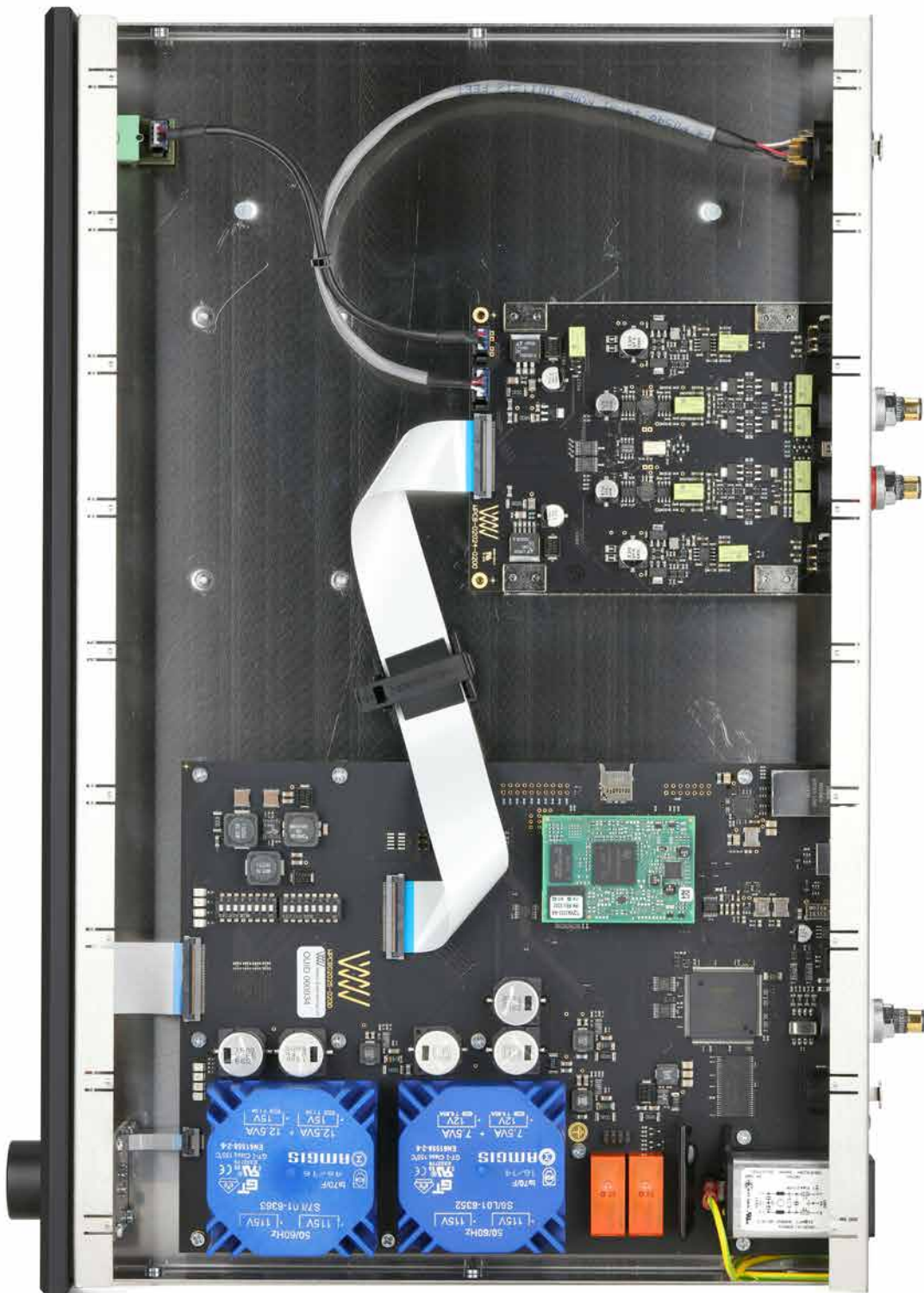
As for connections, the front simply features the jack for the headphone output, while the back contains a much more lavish range: the analog line outputs sit next to the balanced headphone output mentioned earlier. The DAC 502 comes with balanced and unbalanced outputs, befitting its high-quality status. All analog output stages (headphones and line outputs) are discreetly organized. In each case the selected output is active: for example, if the "headphones" output has been

selected, then the line outs will automatically be deactivated. Thanks to the DSP, the various settings can be customized for the outputs which, as we will see later, makes sense with regard to dedicated algorithms.

After a decent-sized gap you find the Ethernet connector for integrating the DAC 502 into your home network, and directly next to that is the USB socket for connecting the converter to a computer. This allows the device to be used not only as a stand-alone DAC, but also as a USB-DAC. To take advantage of this, Mac users simply need a USB cable, whereas anyone operating Windows will have to download and install the Weiss driver by visiting <https://www.weiss.ch/download>. Otherwise the Weiss works perfectly on both operating systems.

If you use the DAC 502 as a streamer to receive data from a network-attached storage (NAS) device or via streaming services such as Tidal, then it can also be controlled by a tablet. Compatible apps are mconnect and Creation 5 for iPad, and BubbleUPnP for Android devices.

Of course the Weiss can also be fed digital information directly from a source device, for example the outstanding T+A MP 8 multisource player. The professional AES/EBU format and S/PDIF can be used, and corresponding connections are available, whereby, in the case of S/PDIF, both coaxial and optical connections are included. The maximum resolution here is 24 bit/192 kHz, and via USB the sampling rates 352.8 and 384 kHz as well as ►



High-quality, discretely organized analog outputs, two 32-bit converter chips per channel and a powerful DSP from Analog Devices as well as a high-quality power supply form part of this high-end kit. The housing chassis is made of stainless steel.



DSD64 and DSD128 are also supported. The Ethernet port currently can't support 384 kHz, though as soon as this sampling rate is supported by RJ45 the device can be updated.

Daniel Weiss has equipped the DAC 502 with two 32-bit ESS converter chips, which have two channels each in order to improve the signal-to-noise ratio. Interestingly, Daniel Weiss says the following with regard to resolution: "A converter needs the highest resolution and linearity possible. The figure of 32 bit is irrelevant. Anything above 24 bit these days is marketing bits." In fact, exceptional converters achieved just shy of 24 bit in certain technical parameters. Anyway, the chip is never solely responsible, which is why Daniel Weiss emphasizes that a superb output stage, effective output drivers, a dependable power supply, and other components are essential to constructing a decent converter and are ultimately what determine the price.

As you would expect, a converter of this caliber features an in-house developed, high-precision, and low-jitter clock generator which, rather uniquely, works with a sampling rate of 195 kHz. The input signals are always converted to this sampling rate as it produces optimum and jitter-free signals. The DAC 502 also features a quartz oscillator which functions as a clock so long as the signals are received via USB or Ethernet. If they enter via the

AES or the S/PDIF inputs, the converter synchronizes to these input signals.

Weiss choices

Before we can delve into the DSP and its algorithms, we need to take a brief look at Daniel Weiss's procedure for controlling output volume. In the DAC 502 he utilizes combined volume control: four different analog output levels can be selected via the relay in order to adjust the converter to the subsequent amplifier, which can also be the power amplifier of an active loudspeaker. However, this means fine control is purely digital. Daniel's expert opinion on this constant point of tension is as follows: "If you dither the quantization properly in accordance with the volume control, then it can give high-quality analog volume control a run for its money." All of this comes down to converter linearity: the better it is, the better the resulting digital level control with dithering will be.

Now let's take a look at the DSP. The arithmetic logic unit is dedicated to the ADSP-21488 DSP from Analog Devices, a 32-bit/40-bit floating-point processor with remarkable computing power. Such a strong processor is necessary for handling the power-hungry algorithms already being implemented and those expected in the near future. As well, the DAC 502's DSP plug-ins are designed to help minimize any issues with the listener's system and listening room, and in turn should

help hi-fi fans get even more pleasure from listening their listening experience. These featured plug-ins can come to the rescue in a variety of situations:

Room Equalizer/Room EQ—this actively suppresses room modes. However, it is no replacement for a dedicated and highly elaborate room optimizer like those from Trinnov.

Creative Equalizer/Creative EQ—a three-frequency-band parametric equalizer which, by providing highly-efficient and flexible tone control, is designed to revitalize less-than-perfect recordings or flagging playback chains.

Vinyl Emulation—elaborate simulation of vinyl playback including adjustable properties such as crosstalk, static, and distortion.

Crosstalk Cancelling (XTC)—a plug-in that enables the playback of dummy head recordings via speakers and also gives back a sense of spatial authenticity to conventional live recordings, resulting in a three-dimensional representation of the sound for the listener.

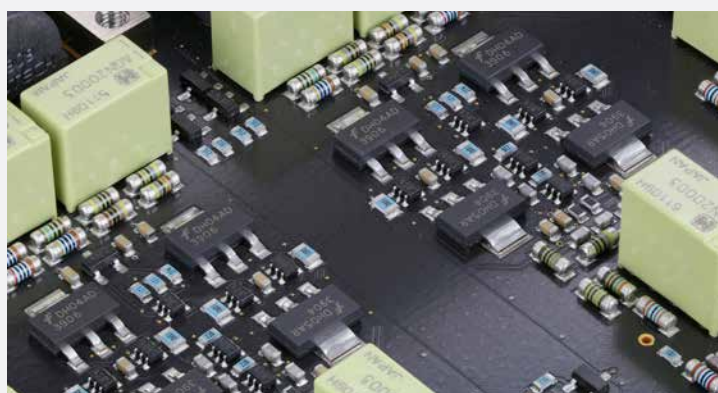
At the time of this review, De-Essing, Constant Volume, M/S Matrix, a Loudness function, and a Headphone Equalizer were still in the preparation stages. Anyone who's fairly *au fait* with recording technology will notice that Weiss Engineering uses its own pro-audio experience and utilizes standards originating from professional studio technology for the ►

THE REAR CONNECTOR PANEL PROVES THAT THE DAC 502 IS A CONNECTION-FRIENDLY CONVERTER: THE ETHERNET CONNECTION, USB PORT, AND DIGITAL AES AND S/PDIF INPUTS ARE ALL CLEARLY ARRANGED NEXT TO THE ANALOG OUTPUTS.



Special digital feature of the Weiss DAC 502

VINYL EMULATION



Back in the day, everything was analog—from vinyls to FM radio and tape recorders. In the pre-digital era, amplifiers (radiograms and those radios with push buttons that look like an under bite) had tone balances, treble and bass controls, static and rumble filters, and then loudness buttons later on for playing around with the sound. Those older amplifiers were equipped with all kinds of fussy bits and bobs designed to help every listener achieve the exact sound they desired. That is unless the "good-natured" tubes had already realized it despite the limitations inherent in their systems. No one recalls experiencing "cold" or "frigid" sound (though certainly bumpy and muddled sound at times—let's not sugarcoat it).

With the advent of high-end audio, all the sound personalization options, bold filters, and fun flavor enhancers flew out the window. Suddenly "less" (fuss) meant "more" (sound quality). Personalized sound was out, or at least only achievable behind closed doors and with dubious cables. The 1980s were all about coolness and killing distortion; they heralded all-encompassing digitalis and—as

analog romantics would say—a certain coldness, hardness, and a hefty dose of cattiness.

After a scary moment (which lasted around a decade), the original sound gurus attempted to add a touch of warmth to the ice age which had since set in. "Analog sound" was suddenly popular again. Companies producing CD players, DAT recorders, and other digital machines became desperate to infuse their formerly "perfect technology" with "analog warmth" in an effort to produce the perfect hybrid. And so the first devices featuring these extras hit the market; you need only to think of the "Analogizer" from Phonosophie or, more recently, the Micro iTube2 from iFi Audio, which has a few more tricks up its sleeve than "just" a harmonic distortion add-on.

Professional recording studios have very different and creative ways of emulating that "good old vinyl sound." For example, a plug-in program called "Waves Abbey Road Vinyl" enables you to seamlessly add the distortion and humming of mediocre phono equalizers to any digitally

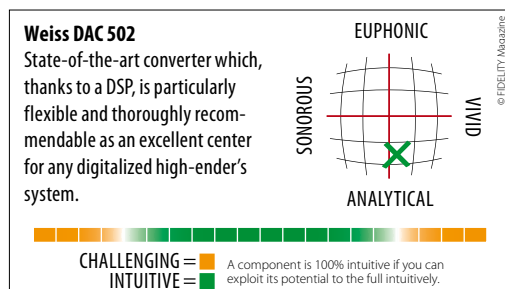
supplied signal(!), as well as crackles, pops, wow and flutter effects, phase distortion, and other augmentations, which immediately exasperate every high-end analog devotee and proud owner of a well-kept turntable. While these emulations can be quite fun for creative musicians and pop producers, they're the polar opposite of what high-end analog fans are after. After all, there's hardly anyone out there who could raise an objection to the subtle touch of real "analog" equipment.

And that's exactly what Weiss offers at the click of a button with the DAC 502. Their integrated Vinyl Emulation is, strictly speaking, also designed to distort and influence the sound, though not for creative applications, rather "recreative" ones. The effect strikingly and yet subtly imitates the tonal balance, homogeneous "density," and fundamental analog character of a superbly configured high-end turntable. And when such a feature manages to extend and intensify our enjoyment of the music, we think it can only be worthwhile. Absolute purists need not use it, though.

Cai Brockmann (t)







ACCOMPANYING EQUIPMENT

USB interface and DAC converters: Mutec MC-3+USB, Mytek Digital Stereo192-DSD DAC, Violectric V800 | **Computers:** MacBook Pro/Wortmann MultiBook | **Software players:** Audirvana Plus 2/ Foobar 2000 | **Active speakers:** ME Geithain RL 906, Nubert NuPro A200 | **Headphone amplifier:** Violectric HPA V200 | **Headphones:** AKG K 702 Studio | **Cables:** AudioQuest, Vovox

DAC 502. Yet, according to Daniel Weiss, there's still a lot more to come.

Updates and convenient operation via a GUI are best carried out with the “web interface” which requires the DAC 502 to have a network connection. The connection is thankfully easy to establish, and the focused clarity of the web interface's graphical design is quite appealing. However, the web interface is not mandatory for controlling the device, which can also be done using the touchscreen and rotary encoder in conjunction—either way, this high-tech Swiss device is refreshingly easy to use.

Exsultate, jubilate

Throughout the listening test, the DAC 502 proved itself time and again to be a Weiss converter of the highest quality, converting the signals with extreme precision and executing its transformation tasks with phenomenal signal fidelity. The Geithain monitors, connected snugly with Vovox Sonorus sound conductors, boomed out the 24-bit/192-kHz version of the still brilliant *Yes Album* with such dynamism and attention to detail that we nearly

literally jumped for joy. Initially a Mutec MC-3+USB and a T+A MP 8 were used in conjunction as players, with the Weiss receiving the data through its AES input. In direct comparison with the seasoned Mytek Stereo192-DSD, the Swiss outperformed the Pole, as comparably neutral alignment revealed the Weiss to be audibly more precise in terms of impulse response and transient reproduction. We were less surprised that it also surpassed the Mytek's impressive headphone output. However, we didn't expect it to play within range of the top-class headphone amplifier the Violectric V200—Respect! And even more respect was commanded from the DAC 502's performance as a USB converter: Weiss's jitter elimination system was really outstanding and not far off from the performance of the Mutec, which is, after all, a benchmark interface for clock accuracy.

The converter's sound was so smooth that we nearly forgot to try out its DSP plug-ins. But only nearly: XTC managed fairly convincingly to make a dummy head recording such as Ottmar Liebert's *Up Close* enjoyable through the monitors, even though the unique 3D dummy head sound must ultimately be reserved for

headphone listening. Vinyl Emulation, on the other hand, was a real joy. This plug-in managed to make the CD version of the delightfully funky Al Jarreau album *L is for Lover* (incidentally an early digital production) sound eerily similar to the LP edition put on for comparison. But not exactly the same—the individual hardware components got left out. Regardless, we're looking forward to future plug-ins. In the meantime, we'll let our ears continue to rejoice in the impressive performance features of this stunning (Edel)Weiss. ■

Weiss DAC 502 | Digital-to-analog converter with built-in DSP, USB interface, and network functionality

Digital inputs: 1 x AES/EBU, 1 x S/PDIF coaxial, 1 x S/PDIF optical | **Analog outputs:** 2 x balanced (XLR), 2 x unbalanced (RCA) | **Other connections:** LAN network, USB (cable connection, port for USB removable media) | **Maximum resolution:** 24 bit/192 kHz; 32 bit/384 kHz and DSD64x/128x, future formats such as MQA will be supported via software updates | **Other equipment and accessories:** Touchscreen, infrared remote control | **Finishes:** Black, silver | **Dimensions (W/H/D):** 45/7.4/30 cm | **Weight:** 6 kg | **Warranty period:** 2 years | **Price:** €9,990

www.weiss.ch



...and now for something completely different...

BROWSER

№ 01



KEF introduces LSX

KEF announces LSX, a compact two-speaker wireless music system with all the convenience and connectivity of the connected world, but with the emotion and detail of true high-resolution stereo. LSX is fully wireless both from source and between the speakers and will feature AirPlay 2 for multi-room streaming from Apple devices in January 2019. LSX can be set-up in minutes using the KEF's Control app which also manages feature updates via simple over-the-air downloads. Compact, effortless to operate, and with connectivity options to satisfy both music streaming and TV needs, LSX is a major step forward in the quest to deliver true and proper sound quality for connected consumers.

www.xyz.de

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BROWSER № 01

Devialet takes Expert Pro to the next level

Eight years after the launch of its first compact high-end amplifier in 2010, Devialet continues to enhance the Expert Pro line-up. In order to continue to deliver an unmatched high-end audio experience, Devialet is pushing the Expert Pro experience even further with three major evolutions: First of all there's AXD, which stands for Active Crossover Design, then there will be a new Expert Pro hardware platform with Core Infinity, that will be embedded—the third point—in a new Expert Pro line-up.

www.devialet.com

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BROWSER

№ 01

Metaxas: T-RX Portable Reel to Reel

After 35 years of serious recording work for Broadcast Television Artist/Designer/Recording Engineer Kostas Metaxas has finally designed what he hopes will be the ultimate machine to capture an unrivalled realism with Analogue Tape. When the Tape machine producers all ceased operations in the late 1980's, the manufacturers of precision motors were still in their infancy. Today, motors are an order of magnitude more refined simply because of the improvement in manufacturing techniques, technology and computer-aided software controls. Metaxas combines the absolute cutting-edge in Swiss motors and technology with the most inert chassis design to realize an order of magnitude improvement over past designs.

www.metaxas.com

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BROWSER

№ 01

McIntosh Announces XRT1.1K Loudspeaker

Following in the footsteps of the larger-than-life XRT2.1K is the equally impressive but more accessibly sized XRT1.1K Loudspeaker. Featuring a 1,200 Watt power rating, the full range XRT1.1K is an exceptional speaker in its own right. The ported, 4-way XRT1.1K uses our line array design to yield an even and wide sound field, producing exceptional stereo imaging in nearly all listening positions. The XRT1.1K uses a total of 70 individual drivers consisting of (4) 6.5" woofers, (2) 6.5" low frequency midranges, (24) 2" upper frequency midranges, and (40) ¾" tweeters. The woofer and low frequency midrange drivers that were first designed for the XRT2.1K have been incorporated into the XRT1.1K.

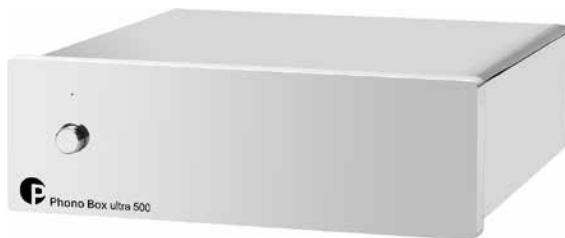
www.mcintoshlabs.com

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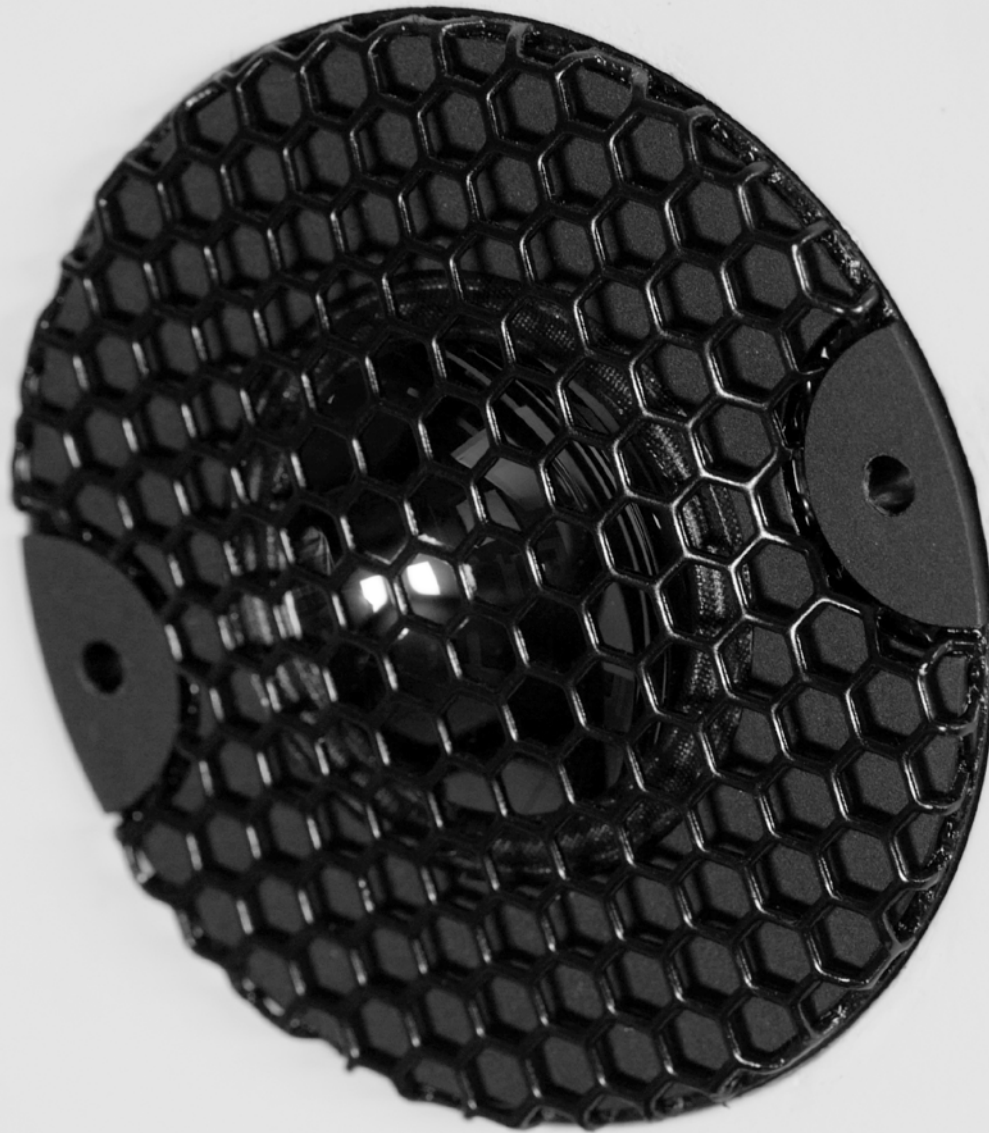


Pro-Ject releases Phono Box ultra 500

The „500“ in the name as well as the general availability, worldwide limited to 500 pieces, celebrate the 500,000th Phono Box that Pro-Ject shipped in early 2018. We took this milestone as an occasion to create a one-of-a-kind phono preamp: Phono Box ultra 500 is like no other phono preamplifier in its segment. The polished chrome surface outshines every competitor in this price segment and offers undeniable aesthetics. Underneath this surface we have used a copper body, which is known to have high qualities in protecting against high frequency interferences. The split RIAA equalization enables a pin-point accurate representation of the RIAA curve, a luxury many other phono preamps do not possess.

www.project-audio.com

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Lyravox Karl

MUSICAL SUPER CONDUCTOR

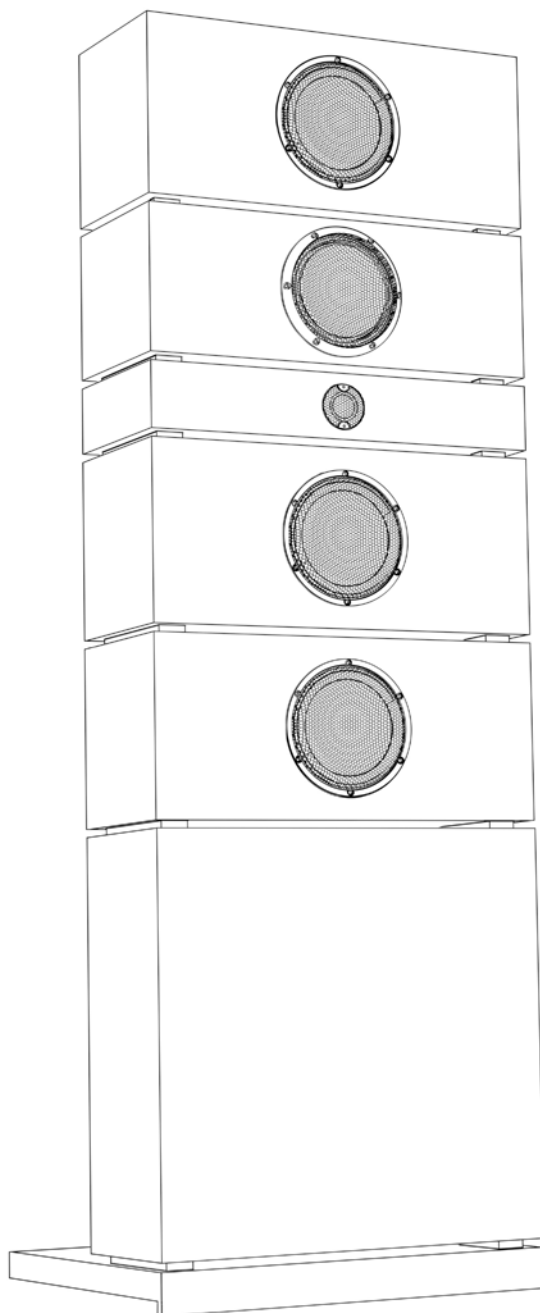
By Hans von Draminski. Photography: Ingo Schulz





This is no loudspeaker. This is much, much more. Anyone lucky enough to get one doesn't need anything else except space and an Internet connection.





_____In the old days, when everything audio was better (*ahem*), super speakers still had impressive names, like Concorde or Titan, and commanded your attention before any sound came out of them. But today? Standing before me in the listening room stood two white towers, wider than they were deep, and tilted backward ever so slightly. Each monolith had four ceramic chasses plus a diamond tweeter visible

from the front—a rather conventional loudspeaker design—and answered to the somewhat uninspiring name of Karl.

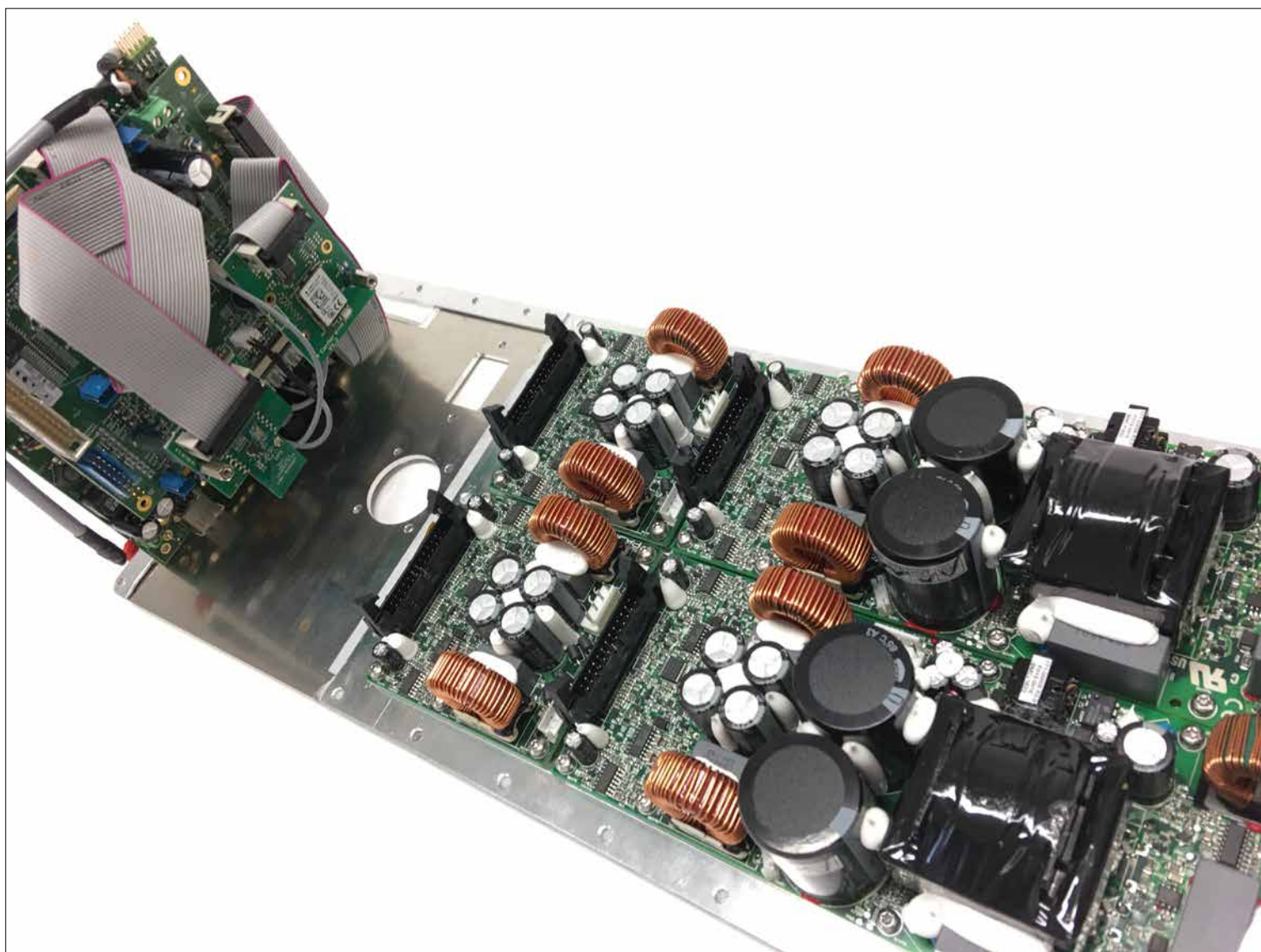
Upon closer inspection, however, I had to admit that my initial assessment had definitely been hasty. I could see through both Karls, which are actually one (more on that later) as each “tower” consists of six individual and

acoustically separate modules. Looking at the back, I noticed the rather fat bass driver built into each of the lowest sections. Two more rear-facing tweeters were also discreetly beaming “criss-cross” into the room.

“But hang on,” I thought to myself, “where’s the rest of the system hiding?” There were far fewer cables running into the two Karl towers than expected... ►



THE COMPLEX BUT VERY USER-FRIENDLY
ELECTRONIC COMPONENTS ARE SEAMLESSLY
INTEGRATED INTO THE KARL FROM LYRAVOX.



A glimpse at its backside reveals Karl is far more than just a loudspeaker. It not only features a massive subwoofer, but additional tweeters as well.





The reason for my confusion suddenly became clear: the lateral thinkers at Lyravox, who are all about unusual designs, hadn't provided our Editorial team with a pair of loudspeakers, but rather an exceptionally smart all-in-one system. A handsome singing and dancing all-rounder with the guarantee of exceptional sound quality. Thanks to an integrated connection to streaming services such as Qobuz and Tidal, any music lover lucky enough to call a Karl their own no longer has to fiddle with any of those silver or black disks. However, if they insist, and have some rare gems or bizarre specimens lurking in their collection, then there are high-level inputs ready and eager to welcome external sources, such as SACD players and phono pre-amplifiers, into the Karl universe.

It's a nice addition, but comparatively of little importance for relaxed listening enjoyment. And I say that as a true advocate of physical music media. You see, with Karl, Lyravox has managed to bring these worlds together: the actively driven loudspeaker section (see technical box) works at super speaker levels and can easily keep up with the world's best. But for a system price of around EUR 50,000 that's to be expected. The streaming section's almost self-explanatory operation is a joy, providing quick and easy access to your choice of music. And, if for some reason the Internet's music providers

don't have what you're looking for, then perhaps your hard drive has precisely the material to suit your mood.

Admittedly, when I was getting to know Karl, just this once I decided not to reach first for my reliable collection of well-known test tracks, but instead to embark on a journey of discovery. On Qobuz, for example, I made some selections from a section devoted to film soundtracks packed with brand-new releases, including the soundtrack to the recently released action-gangster flick *Oceans 8*, an excellent collection of hot soul tracks, subtle groovy jazz-bar numbers, and other atmospheric tunes. "How will Karl get on?" I wondered. The answer: with cinematic authority, a gripping sense of presence, and extreme clarity. Unfortunately I can't comment on its level stability, as my ears got overloaded long before the built-in power amplifiers did, having previously blow-dried my trouser legs with distortion-free disco-volume music.

However, Karl von Lyravox—as I've decided to call him—is the polar opposite of a simple party machine. In 2018 we like to indulge ourselves with high-resolution source material, rave about hi-res and DSD, etc., but we forget that quite a lot remains possible with the 44.1 kHz data rate of conventional CDs. Karl was a pleasure to listen to even without any fine-tuning (some truly unbelievable feats

could be achieved in the depths of an "expert menu," but I didn't dabble with that), demonstrating confident depth and breadth scaling, sounding as naturally three-dimensional as you would expect from compact speakers with coaxial drivers, and remaining quite homogeneous and coherent even while providing a wealth of detail. In particular, Karl also proved to be great at room volume, making it suitable for apartments. A truly high-end device should still sound amazing even if you're not listening at stadium-level volume, and Karl does.

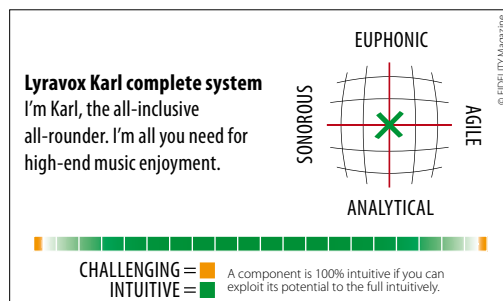
It's hard to imagine that any song could give you more goosebumps than "The Boy Who Wouldn't Hoe Corn" from Alison Krauss & Union Station: hobo bluegrass with new-country appeal, a banjo recorded with extreme presence, delicate harmonies, pure emotion, and profound lyrical content. It has it all, and listening to it through the Karl made the hairs on the back of my neck stand up. For example, in the contemplative up-tempo ballad "The Lucky One," Krauss's mature yet pixy-like voice came across so crisp and untainted via this finely-tuned work of art that the studio recording could have been mistaken for a live album.

Alison Krauss also enjoys singing with her peers, singer-songwriter Shawn Colvin for instance, whose album *Cover Girl* is an eloquent example of how cleverly covers of well-known pop ▶



Spectacular equipment: Along with the (relatively conventional) rear tweeter, special chassis from Thiel & Partner are at work in Karl. These include the conical ceramic driver and a diamond dome tweeter. The backside bass is a high-performance subwoofer.





and folk songs can be done. OK, it's no audiophile recording, especially with various takes from different concert venues compiled onto one disk, but it is an album which, with the help of Karl's superb set-up, kisses and caresses your ear canals. Now, apparently some people have comparatively little appreciation for the extremely neutral tendency of the Karl's Thiel ceramic drivers. However, when a powerful music machine expertly delivers an extremely unique tone such as that of Shawn Colvin's folk soprano, and so authentically that I can easily follow its subtlest nuances, then in my view it is nothing short of an impeccable sound production.

Gustav Mahler's *Symphony No. 8* unquestionably falls into this category as well—the other name by which it is known, the “Symphony of a Thousand,” stems from its premiere where almost a thousand people actually performed Mahler's tremendously dense score on stage. It embodies, through music, a quest for meaning and contemplation of the “Last Four Things”—the fundamental principles of existence. The first movement is a single major invocation, almost a cry for help: “Veni, Creator Spiritus,” Mahler pleads with fervor, along with dozens of powerful choir voices and soloists rising up to ensure that their call for enlightenment won't go unheard. Karl von Lyravox fanned out these masses of sound with the

confidence that only truly great high-end devices can deliver, gracefully conveying one of David Zinman's famous Mahler interpretations that was recorded with the Tonhalle Orchestra Zürich for RCA. Above all, it took a delightfully short amount of time to completely forget that I was listening to a digitally stored recording. Karl's priority is not exceptional technical data (the icing on the cake here) but instead fully serving the music at hand.

The great thing hiding beneath all of this is that operating Karl requires absolutely no advanced technical knowledge. The cabling, for example, can be sorted in mere minutes thanks to a sophisticated data-bus principle and unmistakable connection allocations. The bidirectional remote control (supplied as standard with a small but very legible display) makes navigation an absolute breeze. Accessing the relevant music portals is quick and intuitive, even without looking at the operating instructions: basic computer skills are all you need. And as soon as your tablet connects with Karl, operation becomes even more comprehensive, easier, and clearer—an exemplary Lyravox feature.

But Karl gets really exciting when you start exploring the unknown. I was looking for recordings on Qobuz from the American high-end label Reference Recordings, and came across a compilation entitled *Water Spa Meditations*.

Rather than chill-out music, this was extremely lifelike recorded impressions of noises such as heavy rainfall on a plastic roof, or a mountain stream rushing down a stony valley. They revealed a lot about Karl's impulse strength, response speed, and high resolution. Closing my eyes, I could easily believe that I was actually standing in the rainfall, and you would be hard pressed to find a deeper compliment for a sound reproduction device.

At some point I caught myself stopping the listening test to dig through the streaming catalogs like a truffle pig, hunting down interesting music I'd never heard before. The remarkable amount of fun I had while doing this was due in no small part to Karl's absolute lack of musical preferences, and how it reproduces anything completely unfazed. Richard Strauss's *Rosenkavalier* prelude? No problem—it was reproduced with all the comic notes and the bliss of the waltz. Aaron Copland's *Appalachian Spring*? Sure thing—it was replicated bursting with the idyllic joys of nature and physically tangible onomatopoeia.

How about the harder stuff? Cameo's classic “Word Up” boomed into the room with rock-hard, crystal-clear, and contoured bass bursts. If tracks don't immediately sound electrifying because, for example, horrid room modes are watering down the glory of the bass, then Karl's sound can be ▶

The high-quality craftsmanship of Lyravox products sets the very highest standards. If you take a very close look at what the speaker makers have produced and realize all that's behind even the most seemingly insignificant details, you'll understand that this kind of quality will never come cheaply.



subtly yet effectively adapted to the structural surroundings, ensuring an impressively high degree of three-dimensional reproduction, natural proportions, and tonal correctness.

I might as well have been sitting next to Tom Waits himself in a smoke-filled club as he began singing “Tom Traubert’s Blues,” or getting plunged deep into the wash of the Olympia hall in Paris as Ray Charles transformed it into a swinging jazz temple (on his birthday, no less) despite finding himself without his band due to a canceled flight. The fact that he’d been left practically on his own doesn’t ever come across; however, by stripping everything back to the bare minimum, *Live At The Olympia* retains a certain density and energy that’s unachievable with a studio recording. And Karl

managed to provide me the magical charm of that moment unfiltered, unaltered, and unchecked. This is true high-end; in the same sense as Antoine de Saint-Exupéry’s definition of perfection, which more or less states that once a machine has reached its final stage of development, it should be inconspicuous. Karl von Lyravox completely disappears behind the music, makes himself invisible in the best of ways, and acts as a medium with ideal transmission characteristics—a superconductor for music. In light of such prowess, I can even forgive his quite harmless-sounding name, as I began to grow fond of his all-round performance quite a while ago. I’ve said it before, and I’ll say it again: Karl is no loudspeaker, but much, much more. Karl embodies everything—quite simply everything—that I expect

from a top-tier audio system dressed in fancy get-up. He comes without any subservient sources standing around and gathering dust. Without any hefty bodyguards. Without an entourage. Just Karl. Karl the all-rounder. ■

Complete system | Lyravox Karl

Functional principle: fully active all-in-one system with built-in DSP and streamer as well as analog and digital inputs | **Supported formats:** MP3 up to 320 kBit/s, VBR/CBR, WAV, AIFF, PCM up to 24 bit/192 kHz, Int/32 bit Float, FLAC up to 24 bit/192 kHz, Ogg Vorbis, WMA, AAC/M4A, ALAC, gapless playback with WAV, AIFF, PCM, FLAC, MP3, ALAC, AAC (m4a) | **Recommended room size:** 40–120 m² | **Dimensions incl. base plate (W/H/D):** 52/160/46 cm | **Weight:** 88 kg | **Warranty period:** 3 years | **System price (pair):** €50,000

Lyravox Gerätemanufaktur | Hopfensack 14 | 20457 Hamburg | Germany | Telephone: +49 (0) 40 320897980 |

www.lyravox.com ►



Lyravox is a manufacturer that combines tried-and-true craftsmanship with cutting-edge audio technology while also showing it knows how to deliver a distinctive, compelling design. Following the unrivaled Stereomaster models, Karl (as part of a growing family) is now creating new waves with its singular, modular-based design.

WHO OR WHAT IS KARL EXACTLY?

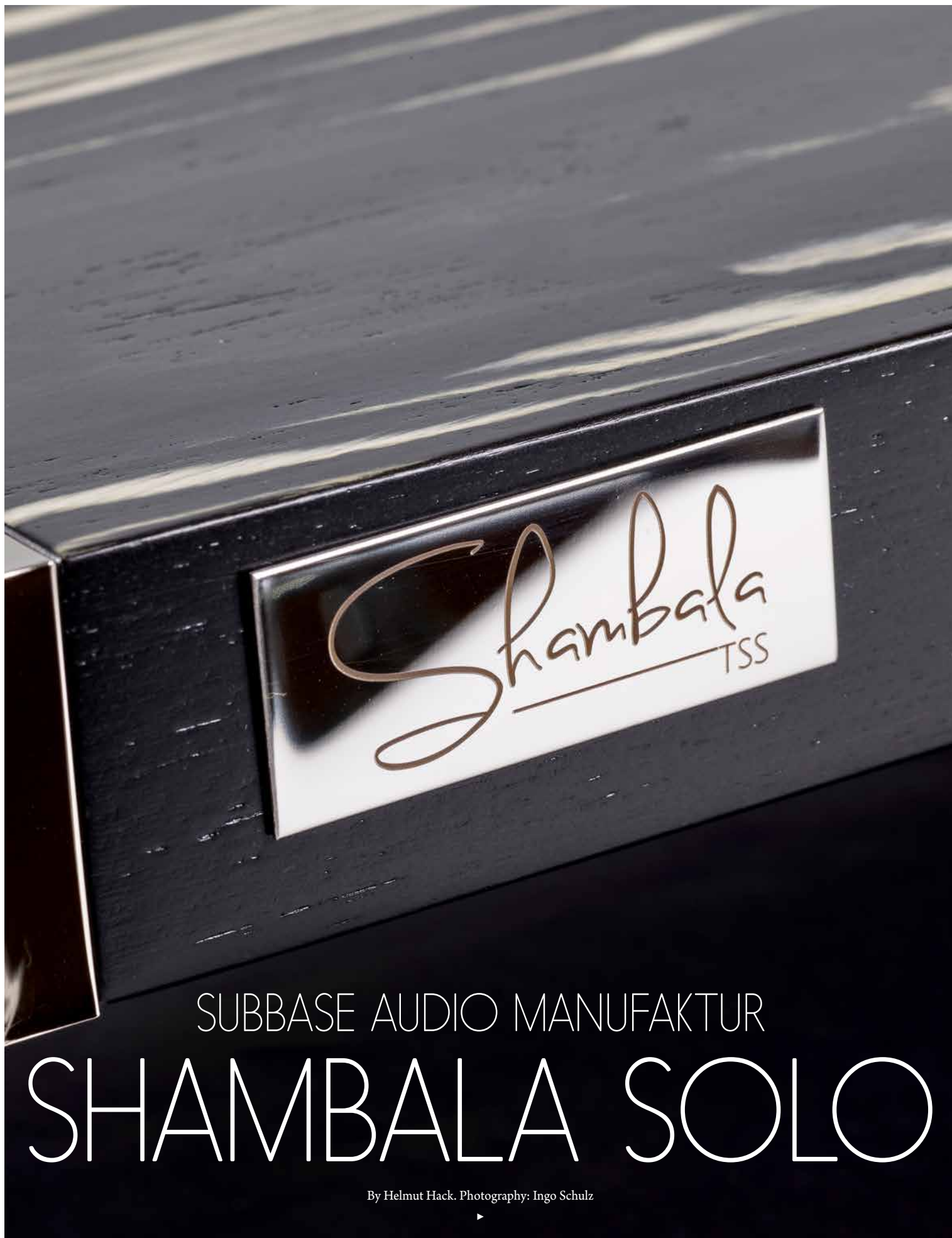
The small-scale manufacturer Lyravox has been dedicated to coming up with smart all-in-one audio solutions for some time now. The fact that Karl looks at first glance like two floor-standing loudspeakers is, more or less, a coincidence. Karl also has some brilliant sounding siblings in the Lyravox range, which look like progressive designer sideboards, or an elegant redefinition of the classic radiogram (Lyravox Stereomaster SM3-150 test available at www.fidelity-magazin.de). As it were, Karl embodies the acting head of a family whose basic talents are all very similar. At first glance, Karl is only a large floor-standing loudspeaker with five front-firing luxury chasses, two rear-firing tweeters, and a rear-firing subwoofer. Each chassis is driven by its own Pascal class-D power amplifier,

and, as with all Lyravox creations, perfect coordination is ensured by a DSP (Digital Sound Processor), which can even fine-tune the sound for different rooms and tastes. The company emphasizes that the sound's remarkable three-dimensionality and coherence is only possible because each chassis is driven separately by the digital power amplifiers, which were selected based on their sound criteria.

Lyravox does not shy away from confidently using the word "revolution" in conjunction with Karl due to its hi-res streamer, which is located in the housing and is what transforms Karl from an active super speaker into an all-in-one-system capable of complete independence from external sources. Karl simply needs an Internet connection with a decent data rate in order

to smoothly caress the listener's ears with extremely high-quality digital material. According to Lyravox, Karl and its smaller siblings are the first generation of "ultra fidelity audio systems." Its power also comes from the shape of the housing: Lyravox promises more dynamics and wide-ranging sound profiles on account of the wide yet flat design. And the system is separated into modular segments to bolster the sound-quality—in part by the active generation of a diffuse sound field behind the speakers via digital intervention, which is supposed to benefit reproduction precision, among other things. With consistent activation and digitalization, Lyravox avoids any of the inevitable mismatch issues in a conventionally constructed system. ■

Hans von Draminski



SUBBASE AUDIO MANUFAKTUR

SHAMBALA SOLO

By Helmut Hack. Photography: Ingo Schulz



THE LOAD-BEARING
SURFACES OF THE
SHAMBALA SOLO
COMPRISE MULTI-
PLEX BOARDS...



...HELD AT THE SIDES
BY A SANDWICH
OF ALUMINUM AND
BLACK ACRYLIC.





_____Seldom has an internal editorial discussion been wrapped up so quickly as when we had to choose the FIDELITY Award winner for best audio rack six months ago. Subbase Audio's Shambala (FIDELITY magazine № 23) has delivered the perfect combination of form and function, and there was simply no competition when it came to deciding on the award winner. But quite rightly you asked us: What will become of my weighty mono power amplifiers that are used to standing next to my loudspeakers? An issue that Thomas Schlipper, the mastermind behind Subbase Audio's creations, definitely had the foresight to identify. And this is why a similarly shaped Shambala is also available as a "solo" piece for individual devices—absolutely

perfect for power amplifiers. Schlipper confidently states that the maximum load-bearing capacity of a Shambala Solo rack is "actually not defined," which pretty much means: "It can also support a 120-kilo load without any problems." I didn't have any devices as heavy as that around. The Audia Flight Strumento No. 4 was the heaviest thing in the editorial listening room at the time, weighing in at 90 kilos. The Shambala Solo shouldered the weight of the Italian power amplifier with impressive ease, not emitting the slightest creak under the load. It truly inspired confidence.

The load-bearing surfaces of the Shambala Solo comprise multiplex boards held at the sides by a sandwich of aluminum and black acrylic. The underside features ►



threaded sockets for attaching fine-wood cones. From above you can marvel at the original veneer, which is separated by an inlay made of black anodized aluminum (as was the case with our test model) or polished stainless steel. The choice of materials (even when choosing each component for its specific properties) and the exquisite workmanship ensure that Subbase Audio's racks look fantastic while presumably also pushing up the price a little. Yet the key that unlocks the secret behind the acoustic merits of Schlipper's creations is not found there. In fact, the multiplex actually conceals it: The famous Subbase matrix lies embedded within the load-bearing components to ensure a harmonizing balance or, as Schlipper puts it, a "homogeneous resonance spectrum."

Instead of channeling resonance away or simply damping it, the matrix processes it into a balanced state.

This always results in an audible improvement, which is why we love Subbase Audio's hi-fi furniture so much. Comparatively inexpensive Cayin CS-845M tube monos also immediately came across as more structured and, particularly in the treble, more transparent. However, the Shambala Solo was even more astounding when its load-bearing capacity was really pushed to the max. Along with its power supply and amplifier section, Caneve Audio's La Scala (test FIDELITY Magazine № 40 p. 162) occupied both racks and sounded liberated, though admittedly it had already been playing out of its skin beforehand. Piano sections, sparkling and ▶



Shambala
music protection zone

full of life, emerged from the Piega Coax 511 loudspeakers, and John Coltrane's saxophone sent a pleasant shiver down my spine. It seemed as though the Shambala Solo could mysteriously respond to the specific characteristics of each and every device. While the Cayin monos actually sounded more open while also aligning themselves tonally, the La Scala demonstrated less of a specific and more of an all-around improvement. The stage reproduction was even more clearly arranged, the musical flow even more natural; and the unbelievable range of this power amplifier no longer seemed unimaginable but rather fully mapped. A very personal hi-fi highlight then transpired with the Audia Flight Strumento No. 4 stereo power amplifier, which had only recently arrived and at that point wasn't the least warmed up. Just placed on the floor, the 90-kilo heavyweight already sounded like it

was from another world. Power, elegance, emotion, and speed—the Audia Flight has it all and then some. But it would only truly reach its full potential on the Shambala Solo. The rack's intervention or, better put, the rack's protective effect was simultaneously subtle and extreme. The rack joined with the Strumento power amplifier like a complementary DNA strand and, to use some dramatic wording, brought it to life from just a mere existence. The greater the challenge, it seems, the more the Shambala Solo rises to meet it. ■

Device rack | Shambala Solo | Finishes: Edition gray Maser | **Edition:** Nero, Makassar, or Fineline black | **Dimensions:** customized | **Price:** from €2,000

Subbase Audio Manufaktur | Gut Vellbrüggen 7 | 41469 Neuss | Germany | Telephone +49 178 3410431 | Website: www.subbase-audio.de

MANGER
PRÄZISION IN SCHALL

SURFING THE BENDING WAVE

By Dieter Strecker.



Volume up or down?

A very quick interview with Daniela Manger, CEO, where we wanted her to respond as fast as possible.



Volume up or down? *Down.*

Analog or digital? *Digital.*

Tube or transistor? *Transistor.*

Vinyl or download? *Depends on the occasion and the mood I'm in.*

Cross-country run or gym?

Cross-country run.

Trends or tradition? *Tradition.*

Tea or coffee? *Tea.*

Salad or steak? *Sometimes steak, sometimes salad.*

Wine or beer? *Wine.*

Mountains or the sea?

The sea.

Book or screen? *Book.*

Jazz club or opera house?

Jazz club.

Bach or Beatles? *Depends on my mood.*

Wagner or Wacken? *Neither.*

Stand-by or plug out?

Pull the plug.



PROBABLY THE BEST-KNOWN SPEAKER
BASED ON A BENDING-WAVE TRANSDUCER
DESIGN, ITS NAME IS INDELIBLY
LINKED WITH THAT OF ITS CREATOR,
JOSEF W. MANGER (1929–2016).





—Known simply as the “Manger”, the loudspeaker is famous throughout the hi-fi world. Almost every enthusiast has seen one of these high-tech, wide-band devices somewhere around and wondered why it looks so very different to all other speaker chassis. They have presumably also asked themselves how such a contraption is able to produce all frequency ranges apart from the lowest bass.

Manger Audio, the company that makes this possible, will soon celebrate its 50th anniversary. Based in Mellrichstadt, the firm is a haven of skilled

craftsmanship. Each chassis produced by the six-man workforce is exclusively made up of hand-crafted components of German origin, making each product a modern paragon of the “Made in Germany” label.

“Manger—Precision in Sound” is the company’s motto, and this precision is even mirrored in the choice of its in-house font. Regarded as the Swiss watch of sans serif typefaces, “Frutiger” embodies the high standards the company expects of its own products, both in manufacturing precision and sound quality. From the very beginning, the

goal of Manger Audio’s development activities was authentic, natural sound reproduction, and this has become the company’s acoustic trademark. Over the years, the company has gained an excellent reputation among high-end fans and professional musicians, both in Germany and across the globe. And the high-end market will remain Manger Audio’s main focus in the years to come.

Josef Wilhelm Manger, father to the current owner, Daniela Manger, and who sadly passed away in 2016, began his acoustic research activities as ►



far back as 1968. He had observed that even the best loudspeakers of the time were unable to recreate anything resembling a live experience. Determined to find out why, Josef W. Manger began evaluating various speaker chassis using measurement tools and the human ear itself. Even though there were only small differences between the frequency responses of the tested systems, they all sounded completely different. Searching for the reason,

Manger discovered serious discrepancies between the step responses of the various drivers, i.e. differences in timing. The real problem seemed to be that the various frequencies emanating from a sound event were not radiating from the speakers at precisely the same time, which explained the differences perceived by listeners. There are evolutionary reasons why human hearing is particularly sensitive when it comes to identifying temporal

structures—in prehistoric times, locating a potential threat was vital to survival. Convinced that there had to be a solution, Josef W. Manger began to search for alternative approaches and materials, applying for his first patent as early as 1969. This is also the year in which Manger Audio, initially located in Arnstein, was established. A series of meticulous and time-consuming experiments finally revealed that the main barrier to authentic sound ►





reproduction was the fast movements of the tweeter rather than the slow movements at the bass end. Finally in 1974, the first “Manger” was born. In 1978, the “Manger Sound Transducer” and “Manger Sound System” were registered as trademarks in Germany. After a wide range of tiny, evolutionary changes, the Manger sound transducer entered small-scale series production

in 1990, at the company’s current headquarters in Mellrichstadt. The new chassis was used in the company’s own Zerobox line of speakers and also supplied as an OEM component (to Audio Physic and Audio Quasar). It proved to be a popular component in ambitious DIY speaker projects as well, but the company soon withdrew from this particular market. In 1991, Josef

W. Manger passed the company reins onto his daughter Daniela, a graduate in communications engineering. Although officially retired, the tireless inventor continued to devote his time to development work. Among other things, he created an innovative microphone technology, for which he was granted a patent in 2010. Managed by his daughter, the company refined ►

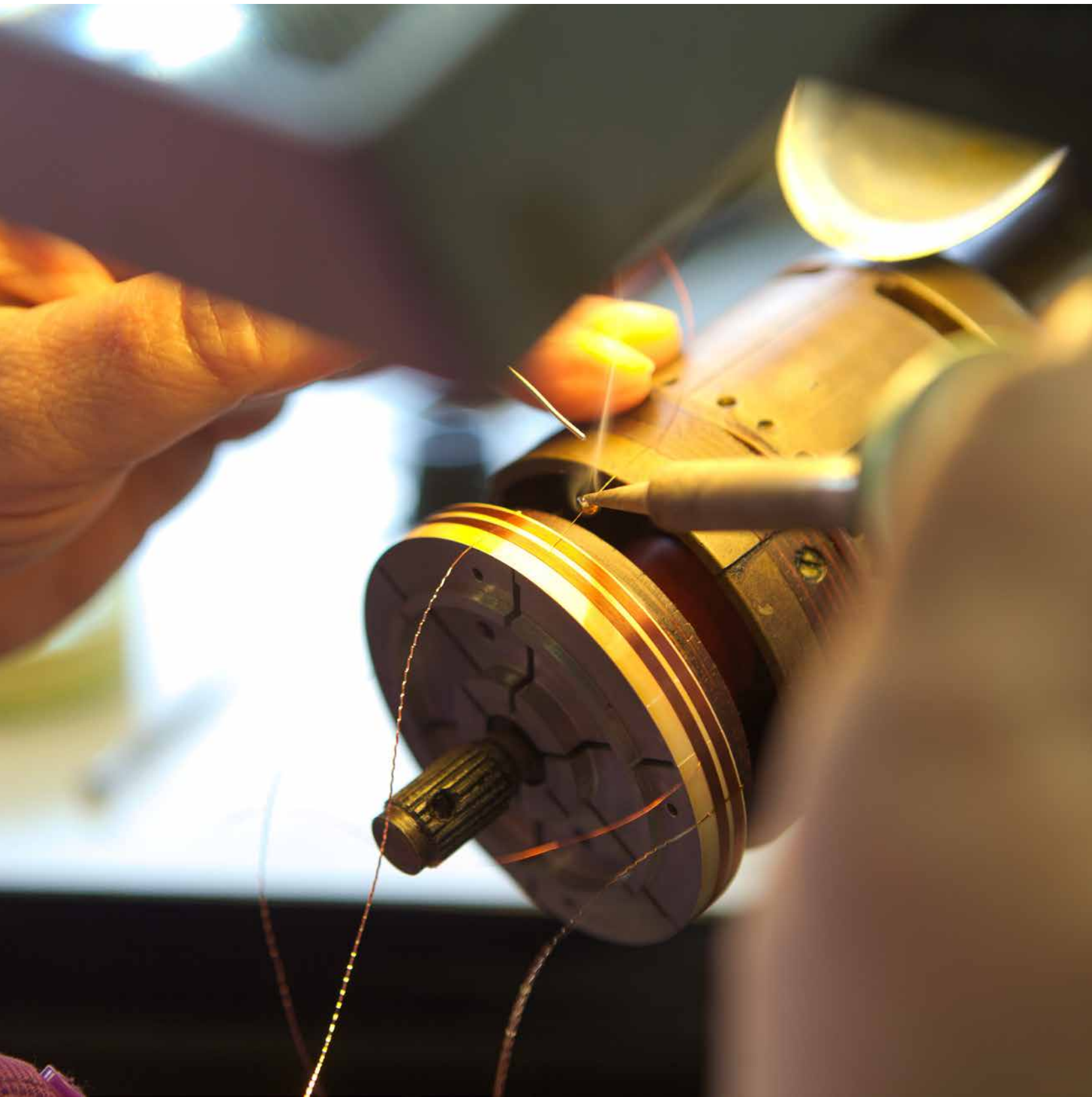


the original Manger sound transducer into that unique and renowned product that the audio world is familiar with today.

The Manger sound transducer is a bending wave transducer that works in a similar way to the basilar membrane in the human ear. Varying in terms of rigidity, the various areas of this membrane are stimulated by different frequencies, as is the case with the Manger sound transducer. High frequencies are replicated in the inner area of the

Manger membrane and low frequencies at the edge. Unlike conventional speaker chassis, the driver doesn't store any energy that can lead to timing errors that distort the sound. This complex construction results in a virtually perfect impulse behavior, with no transient errors whatsoever. Every Manger sound transducer has 8 hours of manual assembly behind it before reaching the final testing stage. The company archive contains the test report for every sound transducer it has manufactured since

1974. Only one speaker version is produced at any given stage of product maturity, with no individual modifications. This ensures that customers always receive the currently best-possible and most advanced product. The complexity of the manufacturing process means that the Manger sound transducer can never be a low-price product. Its outstanding quality is underscored by the elegant "form follows function" design of both the Manger chassis and the fully-assembled speakers. ►





Like any non-mainstream product, the Manger sound transducer polarizes opinions, with its fans claiming (quite rightly) that there's no real alternative on the market, and more skeptical voices complaining that it sounds very different to a conventional speaker (which is also correct). Among professional musicians, however, there is general agreement that the studio monitors made by Manger Audio are among the best of their breed. There are many anecdotes supporting the authenticity of their sound. While listening to a

performer whistling part of the melody, one reviewer reported that his cat arched it back and hissed at the loudspeaker, vainly attempting to locate the offender. On another occasion, the jazz trumpeter Wynton Marsalis was being played on the company's speakers at a Frankfurt trade fair when a man raced up to the Manger Audio stand in the firm belief that he would see the great man performing in person. There is still a good deal of development potential inherent in the Manger sound transducer principle, and we can

expect this renowned manufacturer from Mellrichstadt to enrich the market with additional exciting products. ■

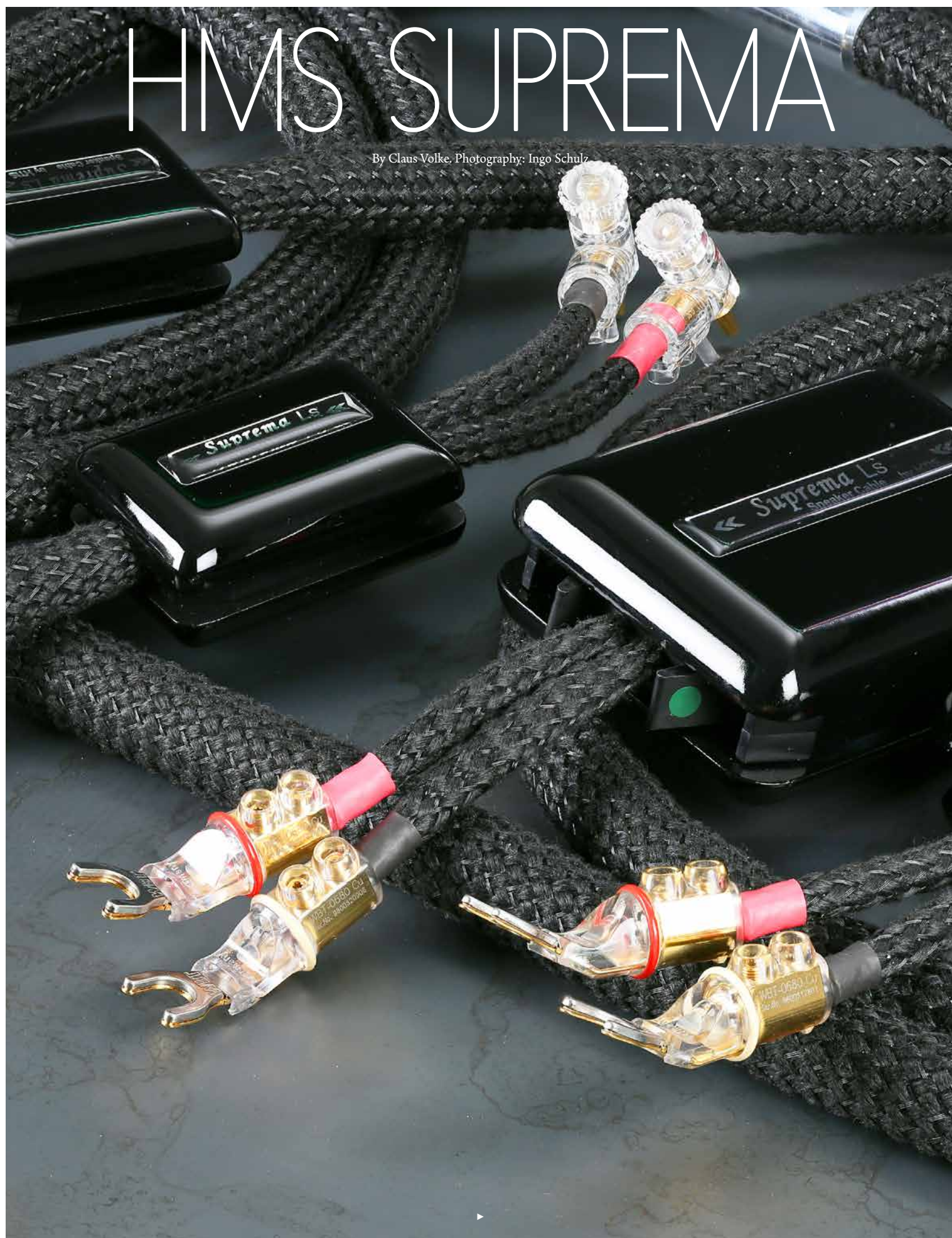
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9816**

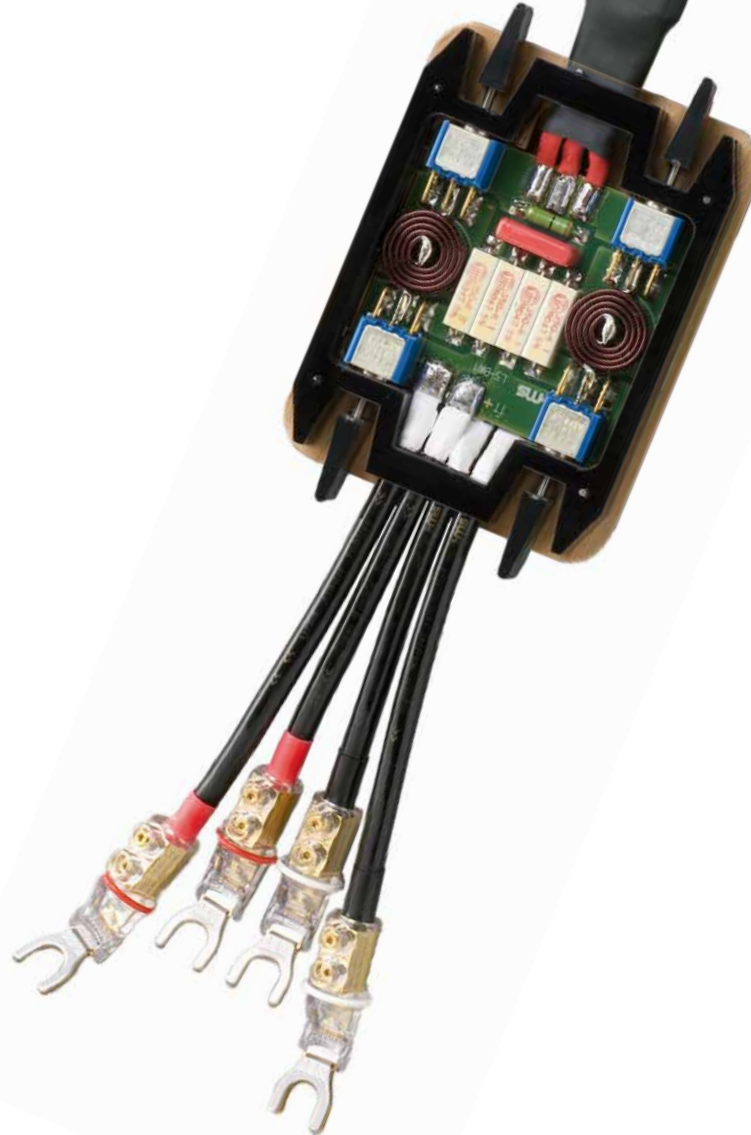
www.mangeraudio.com

This is a reprint from "WHO IS WHO IN HIGH FIDELITY"—Vol. 2, the compendium from FIDELITY MEDIA GMBH, to highlight the heavyweights as well as the little guys who still pack quite a punch, and to introduce you to the people behind, to bring some order to the ever-expanding high-end business. Ask for your copy.

HMS SUPREMA

By Claus Volke. Photography: Ingo Schulz





_____ In a bid to achieve musical perfection, HMS has completed its new benchmark-setting Suprema line. The first product in the new top-of-the-range line, the Energia Suprema SL network cable, has been on the market for quite a while now (see FIDELITY No. 23, issue 1/2016) and is so impressive that it was immediately put in charge of feeding all my components, including my Energia Definitiva. So you can imagine just how thrilled I was to find out I'd be the first person to test out the recently completed Suprema line. I'll begin here with the Suprema LS and will report on the new Suprema Interconnect signal cable in the next issue.

The man behind HMS, Hans M. Strassner, needs no introduction. I would, however, like to add a few words of praise by saying that I only know a handful of developers on the entire high-end scene who are like Strassner and not only seriously know what they're doing but are also exceptional individuals. Not a single customer inquiry goes unanswered by Strassner, who

dedicates proper care and attention to each and every request he receives. I just had to say that given how it now seems only the flashiest bombastic competitors who shout the loudest garner recognition.

HMS developed the new LS cable to outshine the company's previous number one cable, the Gran Finale Jubilee. And I think that shows a certain go-getter attitude as many music fans quite rightly see the Jubilee as the best loudspeaker cable out there. The company's "TOP Match technology" features here as well, of course: In the Energia Suprema SL, only the type of stranding has been changed to achieve even lower capacity, and improved ferrite configuration ultimately ensures even lower stray field losses. Faultless production quality and top-notch connector sets from WBT in various finishes are par for the course at HMS in any case.

HMS cables are sometimes accused of being so technically perfect that they make some ►



systems even sound “too perfect.” If you happen to be one of these critics, I can assure you that you should have no qualms about using the HMS Suprema LS. This loudspeaker cable has absolutely no limitations, has all the highly praised virtues of the Gran Finale Jubilee line, and yes, also has improved musicality. Just to clear up any possible misunderstandings: I think that in terms of musicality all the lines from this Leverkusen-based company already rank among the best in their price categories—even in higher price categories but am happy to admit that something really special has actually happened here.

The Suprema LS, which incidentally can be used equally well with tube and transistor amplifiers, enthralles the listener not only because of its ability to make everything audible, right down to the tiniest of details, but also immediately stands out due to its relaxed approach and tonal intensity, which allows you to enjoy stress-free music listening. Here’s something you may well have already experienced: All of a system’s devices and cables are considered “perfect” yet you find yourself suddenly turning the volume

down again. On the other hand, an old gramophone deeply moves us musically. The famous all-in-one solution must be able to do both—and HMS’s Suprema LS comes very close to this ideal. Extremely close in fact. It conveys both the sound in its entire spectrum of precision, dynamics, and energy as well as the musical intentions and structures with all nuances and tonal contrasts. Sound isn’t music. Music is simply expressed through sound. Sound alone is simply the medium through which the feelings and intentions of the music are conveyed. Only when both are present will the resulting output produce the moving and intense human feelings in us that only music can do. In short, the HMS Suprema loudspeaker cable is one of the three best loudspeaker cables I’ve ever had the pleasure of listening to and of these three, it’s the most widely usable and the cheapest. ■

HMS Suprema LS | Example prices by stereo meter
(preassembled): 2 x 1 m €2,900 / 2 x 3 m €5,780

HMS Elektronik | Am Arenzberg 42 | 51381 Leverkusen | Germany | Telephone: +49 (0) 2171 734006 |
www.hmselektronik.eu



...and now for something completely different...

Gato Audio DIA-250S

NEW SWING

By Boris Fust. Photography: Ingo Schulz



DO WE ALSO LISTEN WITH OUR EYES?
THE DIA-250S MIGHT MAKE YOU THINK
SO, WITH ITS BOLD, SWEEPING DAN-
ISH DESIGN THAT STANDS AS A STUN-
NING CONTRIBUTION TO AN OTHER-
WISE INCREASINGLY DREARY WORLD.





———“Digital is better,” sang a band from Hamburg once. Of course they weren’t suggesting an optimistic outlook on the future. Rather, the members of Tocotronic—donning retro sports jackets—were being cryptically ironic. Since then, and many years after the dawn of the digital age, one question has remained unanswered: is the digital world actually fun? The Internet and smartphones may very well be practical for buying train tickets and the like, but when it comes to things as innately human as sensuality, we tend to think more of romantic candlelit dates and cruising around in a classic Porsche 911 than surfing Tinder or taking an Uber home.

In the world of music playback, it’s no different. We have yet to see any concrete proof that new technology is not only innovative, space-saving, and conveniently free of wires, but also capable of actually delivering an emotionally engaging musical experience. However, the Danish firm Gato Audio has provided an indication that digital signal processing

doesn’t have to be so dry and anemic. A video on the company’s website shows drivers putting pedal to the metal in a couple of Porsches, but each time the camera cuts to their interiors the speedometer needles have been replaced by the displays of Gato Audio playback components .

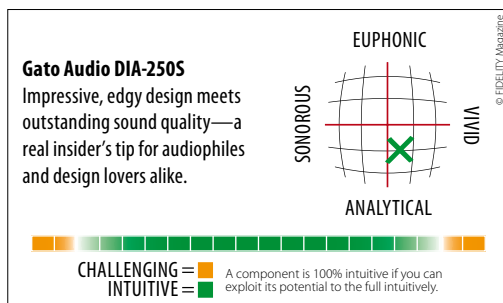
Although many audiophiles have come to terms with the fact that some parts of the chain are now and will always remain digital, quite a few still have serious reservations regarding amplifiers that contain a high proportion of digital technology: they are accused of being too cold, too slow, quickly overstretched by complex high-density sound profiles, and lacking in projection capacity. Can a class-D amplifier really have a soul? It’s unlikely.

Yet the DIA-250S immediately gives you the impression that this is something special: weighing just 10 kilos, the lightweight device doesn’t lead you to believe that it’s actually a powerful heavyweight ▶



Weighing just 10 kilos, the powerful and superbly crafted amp is no hefty audiophile block.





ACCOMPANYING EQUIPMENT

CD player: Creek Evo 2 | **Amplifier:** Creek Evo IA | **Loudspeakers:** Neat Momentum 4i, Bryston Mini A

amplifier. And, like its predecessor, the DIA-250, which didn't feature an aptX Bluetooth interface, the new S model cuts a very fine figure. This is a futuristically curved object, deeper than it is wide, with a brushed aluminum front plate, side extrusions, and a veneer cover available in either black, white, or (as in the case of the test model) walnut. The front is convex on the left and right edges and concave on its top and bottom. There are only two buttons: Standby and Input. However, a real eye-catcher is the generously sized infinite shuttle wheel in the center. Yet even this is upstaged by the opulent dot-matrix display for volume, sampling rate, source, and—where applicable—warning messages (in the event of overheating, for example). The bluish-white lights match beautifully with the matt metal faceplate, though the sheer size of the display may take some getting used to. Though anyone who loves listening to their favorite tunes in pitch-black darkness will enjoy the dimming function, which can be accessed via the remote control, supplied as standard.

The design is unusual and perhaps even polarizing—words you might use to describe a component of the Bugatti Veyron's engine, but not necessarily a device designed to serve music in all its glory. Skeptics should rest assured, though. With the DIA-250S, what you see is what you get: a strong and well-rounded personality.

The rear panel hosts a wealth of connection options: USB and S/PDIF optical and coaxial for digital sources, two pairs of RCA connectors, and an XLR input for analog all sit opposite to balanced and unbalanced outputs. Along with the Bluetooth antenna, it has everything that the control center for a modern fleet of devices could need. Loudspeakers are connected via banana plugs or clamped via bare-braid wires or cable lugs. Another aspect that is rather pleasing (and rare) is the delightfully concise and super-easy-to-understand user manual, which describes the set-up process with delightful British understatement and ends on a clear recommendation: "Enjoy!"

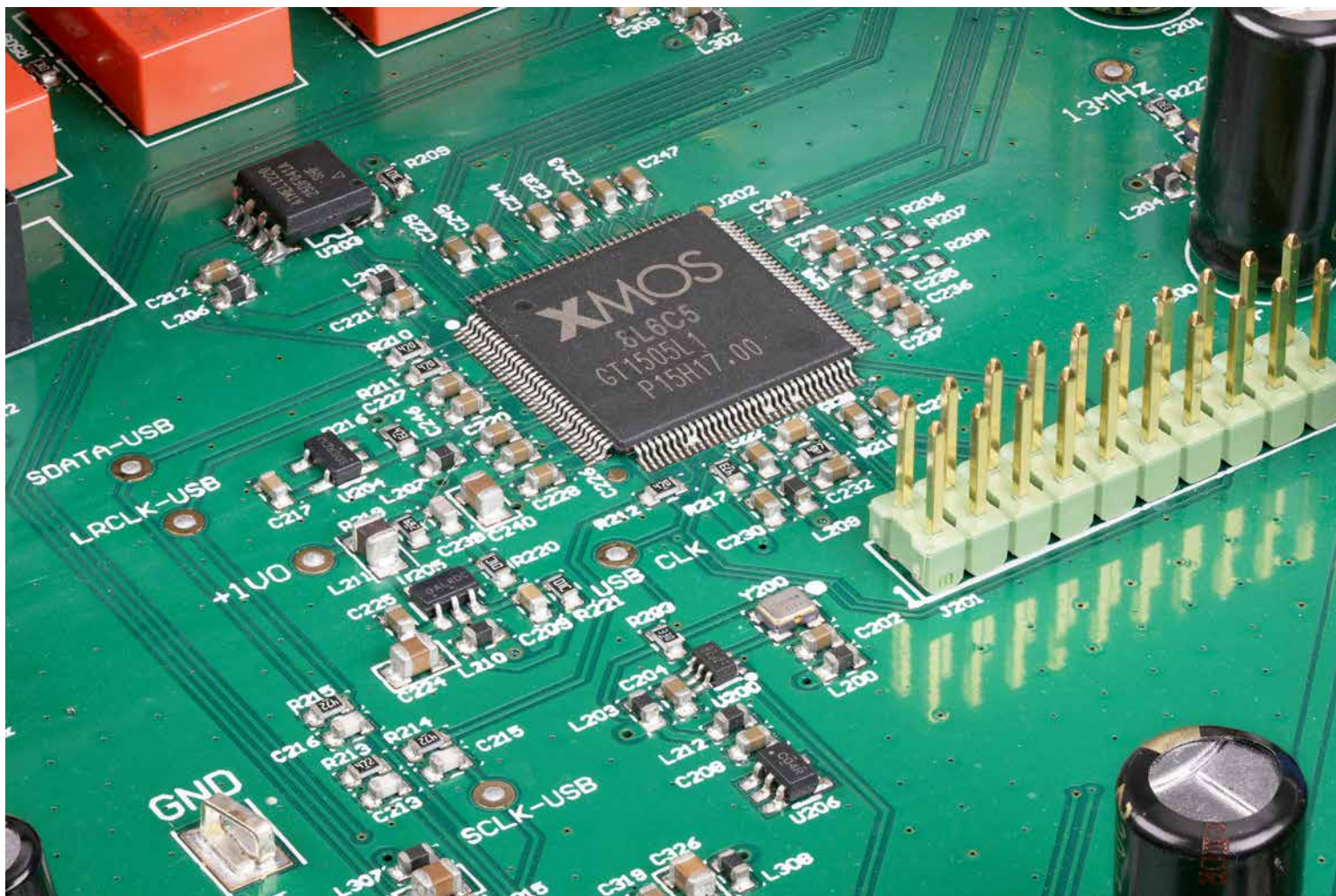
When Gato Audio first appeared on the scene a few years ago, it wasn't just the company's designs that attracted the attention of the international trade press (and the Danes know a thing or two about design). In the case of amplifiers like their top model, the AMP 150—which at just under EUR 7,000 is positioned only a short distance from the entry-level model being tested here—it was the circuitry that caught everyone's eye, based on a specific pairing of the MOSFETs. You see, unfortunately, even transistors with identical designs do not fundamentally behave in the same way, but in fact are subject to a certain amount of fluctuation. This becomes audible in minimal distortion, which is reflected by a sound profile that feels very strenuous after a while.

The DIA-250S also follows this principle, working with a pair of faster and lower-loss MOSFETs per channel in the output stage. Gato Audio uses components made by International Rectifier, a long-established American company specializing in circuitry, which is now part of the Infineon Group. And perhaps we're getting closer to the truth here, because "digital" is not always digital—class-D is a sequence of on-and-off switching states that cannot be expressed as bits and bytes. Contrary to the language commonly used, class-D is actually not digital at all: it is so-called pulse width modulation (PWM), which already existed before the digital revolution.

However, the DIA-250S is hardly an analog box from the supposed good-old-times. After all, it contains an integrated D/A converter based on a PCM-1794 converter from Burr-Brown. Incoming digital signals (e.g. those from a smartphone) are upsampled to 24 bit and 192 kHz in order to compute the word length and frequency internally. Installing the USB driver on a computer is definitely recommended, as this enables a feed via asynchronous USB with native 24/196 without requiring the DIA-250S's calculation skills in advance or the computer even having to undertake the timing itself. All of this aside, the fact that the driver software is supplied on CD-ROM does have a somewhat retro feel to it. ▶



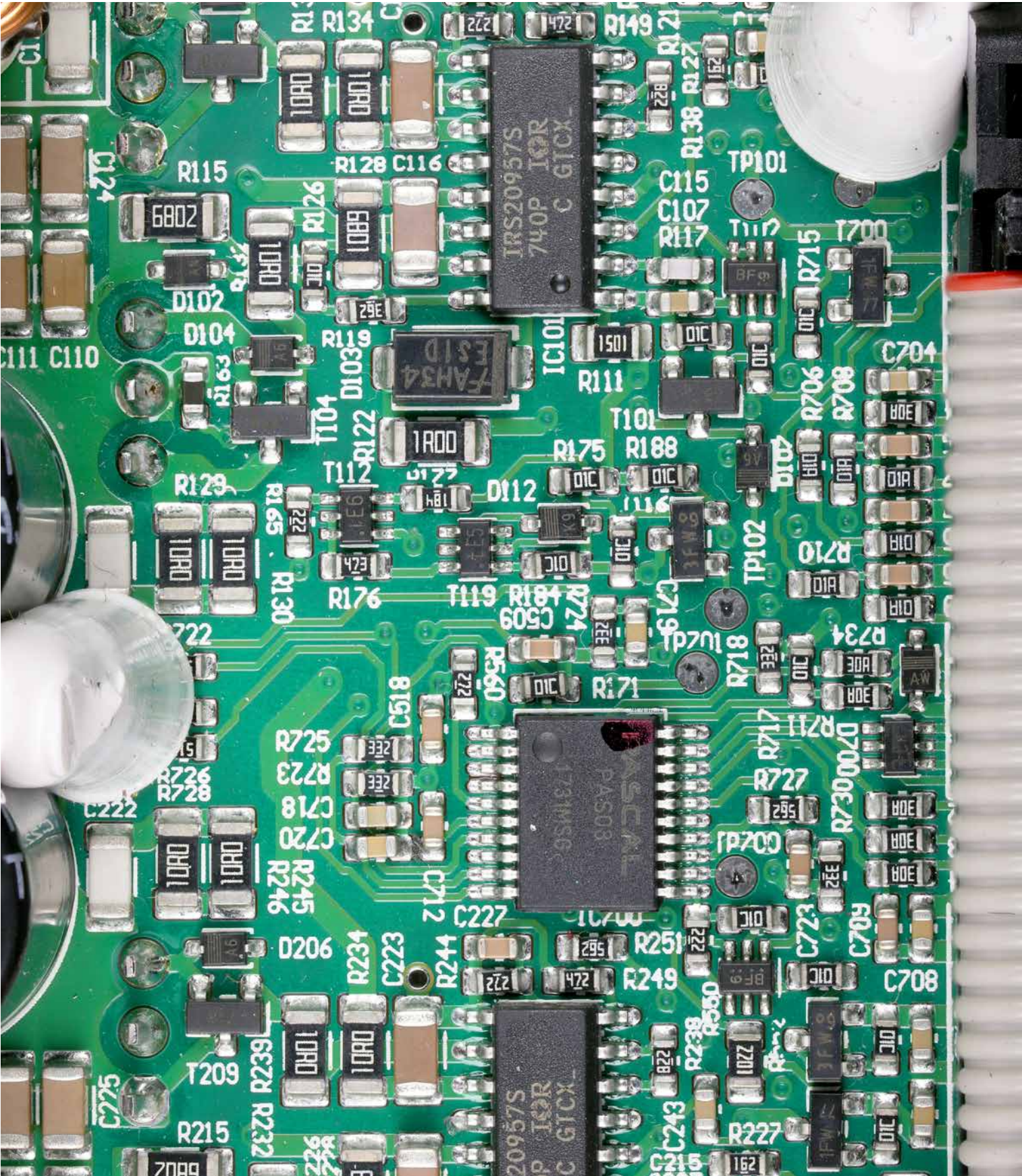
Beating heart: In addition to its job as a power booster, the integrated Gato also operates as an excellent DAC.



So what exactly happens when you power up the DIA-250S? In short, it's pretty astounding. Picking up the remote control, edged in black metal, and turning it on is of course where the story begins. Naturally, you want to find out how quickly it will take for your neighbor to come knocking once you've started hitting the volume + button. First, upping the volume changes the numbers on the dot display and gives the impression that they are gracefully floating and rotating. Yet while the numbers continue to climb, at some point the tens digit on the display changes, and your astonishment quickly turns to disbelief: why isn't it getting louder? In fact, rather than getting louder, you get the impression that the music is acquiring more presence and a greater sense of urgency (all rather impressively, I might add!). But mysteriously you don't feel like the level is increasing: the sound profile remains clear, its proportions retain their definition, and no components of the sound unduly overwhelm the ear. The bass doesn't rumble and grumble, nor

is the treble intrusive. Again, the music doesn't seem "louder," there simply seems to be "more" of it.

But let's leave this initial show of force for a moment and take a more detailed tour through the DIA-250S. In "Quasimodo," the opening track of the album, *One More Angel*, John Patitucci begins with a truly spirited and furious intro, which seems almost impossible to contain even when you swiftly reduce the volume. However, Paul Motian's lively playing of the ride cymbal comes through nice and clean, whether at room volume or slightly higher, entailing a precise identification of the sound of the cymbal in the background while it is under attack from his sticks. And this is no mean feat, as the cymbal is naturally very dry, but still Motian crashes it repeatedly, whereupon the attack recedes and gives way to an intense white noise. The listening experience created by the DIA-250S here delivers everything you could desire in terms of transparency and spatial arrangement. ▶



The top of the housing can be changed easily.



Actually, following the recent and sad passing of Mark E. Smith, no other music can be played at the moment than that of The Fall. The 3CD box set entitled *A-Sides 1978–2016* provides a cursory overview of the late great front man's broad range of work. A well-known playback issue with Mark E. Smith's singing is actually understanding the lyrics, as he used a pronounced Manchester dialect (Mancunian) with a lot of (sometimes drunken) mumbling thrown in. At the same time, the lexical requirements asked of non-mother-tongue speakers are huge. The integrated amplifier is put to work in conjunction with the Neat Momentum floor-standing speakers, which provide decent bass and excellent treble, but have some shortcomings when reproducing the human voice. However, the DIA-250S proves to be an essential component here, as it feels like Mark E. Smith is sitting on the next barstool over, which for a fan is both an unsettling and exhilarating experience.

It goes without saying that this Gato Audio amplifier is enormously fun when you're listening to riotous and raucous music. Whether it's Queens

of the Stone Age, Karajan, John Zorn, or System of a Down, the DIA-250S remains exceptionally unobtrusive and neutral, as you would expect from an amplifier. However, it truly has soul: it's a breath of fresh air compared to the seemingly infinite range of available amplifiers, which may be based on different concepts and boast different features but seem to sound more and more alike every day. The DIA-250S doesn't alter the color of the tones or paint its own pictures, yet thoroughly maintains its own distinct shade and personality. It is clearly set apart from the mainstream and, for under €4,000, creates an impressive listening experience that sounds considerably more expensive. ■

Integrated amplifier with DAC | Gato Audio DIA-250S

Functional principle: Class-D integrated amplifier | **Power output (8/4 Ω):** 2 x 250 W/2 x 500 W | **Analog inputs:** Line balanced (XLR), 2 x line unbalanced (RCA) | **Digital inputs:** USB, 2 x S/PDIF (Toslink, RCA), aptX Bluetooth 4.0 | **Outputs:** Balanced (XLR), unbalanced (RCA) | **Finishes:** Brushed aluminum with veneer available in black, white, or walnut | **Dimensions (W/H/D):** 32.5/10.5/42 cm | **Weight:** 10 kg | **Warranty period:** 2 years | **Price:** €3,790

Phonar Akustik GmbH | Industriestraße 8–10 | 24963 Tarp | Germany | Telephone +49 (0)4638 89240 | www.gato-audio.com ►

The integrated amplifier with DAC can, as of very recently, be upgraded with the streaming module NPM, almost making it a complete all-rounder.



NEW: NETWORK PLAYER MODULE (NPM)

Gato Audio now offers the Network Player Module (NPM) as an upgrade for various models. The NPM works as a Roon endpoint, but also supports Tidal, Qobuz, Deezer, and UPnP/DLNA as an app-controlled standalone device. For example, it can be integrated into the PRD-3S pre-amplifier (see FIDELITY Magazine № 34), as well as the DIA-250S integrated amplifier (our test candidate) and the DIA-400S integrated

amplifier. With the integrated network player, the DIA-250S presented here would, as a result, be referred to as a DIA-250S NPM and cost EUR 4,740. Subsequently upgrading an existing integrated amplifier or pre-amplifier with the NPM will set you back EUR 1,000. Gato Audio also emphasizes the fact that older models can be updated with the latest developments. ■



ONE OF THE COUNTRY'S PRE-EMINENT SINGER/SONGWRITERS, ROSANNE CASH HAS RELEASED 15 ALBUMS OF EXTRAORDINARY SONGS THAT HAVE EARNED FOUR GRAMMY AWARDS AND NOMINATIONS FOR 11 MORE. SHE IS ALSO AN AUTHOR WHOSE FOUR BOOKS INCLUDE THE BEST-SELLING MEMOIR COMPOSED, WHICH THE CHICAGO TRIBUNE CALLED "ONE OF THE BEST ACCOUNTS OF AN AMERICAN LIFE YOU'LL LIKELY EVER READ." HER ESSAYS HAVE APPEARED IN THE NEW YORK TIMES, ROLLING STONE, THE OXFORD-AMERICAN, THE NATION AND MANY MORE PUBLICATIONS. IN ADDITION TO CONTINUAL WORLDWIDE TOURING, CASH HAS PARTNERED IN PROGRAMMING OR SERVED AS ARTIST IN RESIDENCE AT CARNEGIE HALL, LINCOLN CENTER, SAN FRANCISCO JAZZ, THE MINNESOTA ORCHESTRA AND THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS. (WWW.ROSANNECASH.COM)...





21 TOP 40 COUNTRY SINGLES...



ON WORDS IN MUSIC

By Dan Schwartz.

FIDELITY cooperation with *Copper* magazine: <https://www.psaudio.com/copper-magazine/>
Read this article also in *Copper*: <https://www.psaudio.com/article/on-words-in-music-redux/>





_____I was trying to figure out when and where I first tried my hand at writing lyrics. The first time that I can still remember, they were written on the wall behind Stuart Marmelstein's parents store on a starlit evening in 7th grade. They weren't great, but you know, back then, it was a beginning. When I found out, upon his death, that David Bowie's lyric writing method was sort of haphazard, I kicked myself for giving up.

Bob Dylan has said people don't often give him credit for his music — it's all about his lyrics. Why not? He has so much to say that's worth hearing. (Though personally I rate his music even higher.) There are certain (a very few) lyricists I admire for their words as much as their music. John Lennon, Joni Mitchell — all the obvious ones. But generally, I think what Brian Eno told me about his lyric comprehension applies to me, too: Meaning

Myopia. If they sound right, my ears hear them as part of the music, and that's enough. Most opera falls into this category. Think about Philip Glass and Robert Wilson's words for "Einstein on the Beach":

One two three four

One two three four

One two three four five six

One two three four five six seven eight

And then it repeats. (Obviously — it IS Philip Glass, after all). It's not quite Mitchell's "Hejira", or the Fab's "Strawberry Fields Forever", but in the context, it works beautifully. But some lyrics are poetry as well as lyrical. Which brings me back to Rosanne Cash's album *Black Cadillac*; and in particular the song, "The World Unseen":



*I'm the sparrow on the roof
I'm the list of everyone I have to lose
I'm the rainbow in the dirt
I am who I was and how much I can hurt
So I will look for you
In stories of the kings
Westward leading, still proceeding
To the world unseen
I'm the mirror in the hall
From your empty room I can hear it fall
Now that we must live apart
I have a lock of hair and one-half of my heart
So I will look for you
Between the grooves of songs we sing
Westward leading, still proceeding
To the world unseen
There are no gifts that will be found
Wrapped in winter, laid beneath the ground
You must be somewhere in the stars
'Cause from a distance comes the sound of your guitar
And I will look for you in Memphis and the miles between
I will look for you in morphine and in dreams
I will look for you in the rhythm of my bloodstream
Westward leading, still proceeding
To the world unseen*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1ApV-LgfFw4>
or <https://youtu.be/F1eYfODS3g>





On the night we recorded the song, virtually as you hear it on the record, I got home near midnight and I awoke my wife to repeat the last chorus to her, I was so moved by what we had done. As with taste in music, who can say what makes something make sense to one person, yet the same words can be meaningless to another? I look back on the most lyric-intensive time of my life with only a few items, besides Rosanne's album, having made much difference to me. With most of the people we worked with in those years, while their lyrics may have great meaning to them, for me it was a case of my suffering from Meaning Myopia.

I've written about the bridge to "We Do What We Can" before. A few of Bill Bottrell's songs mattered to me — in particular one tune that no one heard called "If I May Be So Bold". For most people, David Baerwald's lyrics are what his music is about. For me, as long as he sang about what he talked about, I was good. It's the sound of the music that matters here — it's a very rare artist who writes lyrics that convey meaning while writing mediocre music; more common is the reverse.

But even more rare is someone like Rosanne, where it all comes together. ■

BROWSER

№ 02

Xavian introducing Perla Esclusiva

It may not appear on first sight that the Perla Esclusiva is a new model, but the important changes are inside. First change is that the corpus is now made of solid italian oak. Perla Esclusiva is still a very kind two-way loudspeakers with front bassreflex, now stiffer and that combined with the crossover newly equipped with the top class Mundorf capacitors allowed us to tune the speaker even a bit lower to achieve even fuller sound, absolutely incredible for a speaker of this size and price. Perla Esclusiva, that's a fascination by music and euphoria in listening.

www.xavian.cz

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BROWSER

№ 02

Wilson Audio: All-new Sasha DAW

The Sasha is the lineal descendant of the WATT/Puppy. When approaching the design of the original Sasha, Dave eschewed the modular, two speaker approach of the WATT/Puppy, and instead treated the loudspeaker as a single integrated design. When it came time to upgrade the Sasha, then in its Series-2 iteration, Daryl Wilson was mindful of what his father had accomplished. In the wake of Dave Wilson's recent passing, Daryl was all the more motivated to ensure the Sasha would honor his father's achievements, and yet look to the future for an even greater level of performance than was possible when Dave designed the original Sasha. In recognition for the man who started it all, the Wilson team felt it apropos to dedicate this most ambitious iteration of the Wilson compact loudspeaker in its history to the visionary who first imagined it thirty years ago. Introducing the Sasha DAW. DAW for David Andrew Wilson, an homage to the man who started it all. Most importantly, the latest Sasha provides a remarkably direct conduit to the numinous beauty of music.

www.wilsonaudio.com

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BROWSER № 02



Vincent Audio: The Best of Tube and Solid State Design

Vincent Audio offers a pair of advanced two-channel components that reflect the company's dedication to classic design and astonishing performance. The SP-332 hybrid vacuum tube and solid state power amp (\$1,995.95) and SA-32 hybrid stereo preamplifier (\$999.95), exemplify Vincent Audio's approach to adhering to the best aspects of traditional audio components while incorporating technologies that bring out the depth and subtle nuances of well-recorded music. Both the SP-332 hybrid amp and SA-32 hybrid stereo preamp feature robust performance with an expansive soundstage to fill a large room. As an upgrade to Vincent Audio's SP-331 hybrid amp, the new SP-332 features higher quality inputs, with both balanced XLR and single-ended RCA inputs that are selectable via a rear-panel switch. In addition, there are dual speaker outputs, each of which can be switched on and off, enabling the user to sample two different pairs of loudspeakers, or use the amp in a bi-amp configuration.

www.vincent-tac.de

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BROWSER

№ 02



New JBL L100 Classic

The new L100 Classic loudspeaker system features an attractive 1970's-style retro design, with vintage JBL styling including an iconic Quadrex foam grille in a choice of three colors—black, orange, or blue—all with a black and bronze JBL logo. The enclosures are finished in a genuine, satin walnut wood veneer with black front and rear panels. This passive, 3-way bookshelf loudspeaker measures approximately 25.5" H x 15.5" W x 13.75" D and can be oriented either vertically or horizontally. Optional black metal floor stands are available with included adjustable carpet spikes.

www.harmanaudio.com

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BROWSER № 02



Graveli: Concrete Sound

The custom-developed high-performance polymer concrete enclosure of the Graveli Virtuoso has no parasitic resonances and does not distort the true sound of speakers. Easy, with no compromise. Even a music non-geek can feel the difference. Everything is in the box and you're ready to play the music from your phone, computer or Apple TV.

www.audiograveli.com

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COAXIAL CORE COMPETENCY

By Cai Brockmann (+) and Hans von Draminski. Photography: Cai Brockmann (+)





Professional speakers, bass that reaches infernal depths,
and high-tech wizardry: Why Ascendo is so wickedly good.





——— “Please sign here.” Anyone who purchases Ascendo’s largest subwoofer will see this twice. First, in the sales agreement. And second, in the liability exclusion statement—operate at your own risk! Owners are liable for their own woofers!

This is not a joke: Ascendo’s largest subwoofer is so powerful and so heavy in the bass it could actually place the structural integrity of your building in jeopardy—unless, of course, you live in a bunker, a pyramid, or a similarly solid structure designed to last for all eternity. Please bear that in mind before ordering the 500-kilo hulk for your thin-walled student flophouse or your vacation cottage speed-built by a band of unskilled Egyptian workers.

In all fairness, we should briefly outline what the term “large subwoofer” actually means at Ascendo. And what this rather discreet, high-end, small-scale manufacturer offers in its product range. As well as who’s behind all this calculated yet lovable madness. Not to mention what “Immersive Audio” in the company name and *Galgenmühle* in the company address mean. Plus why the whole thing is so much damn fun! Even without a second signature.

And so one beautiful summer morning, we rolled up to Ascendo Immersive Audio GmbH’s courtyard in Ansbach located in west-central Franconia, a history-rich region of Germany. Here’s where all the production work takes place and where suppliers ►

make deliveries; the company's headquarters are actually located in Karlsruhe. The centuries-old central structure in Ansbach is actually the city's former courthouse, which was gradually extended into the shape of a "U," a plaque above the main entrance tells us. The basement still even houses the old detention cells. The *Galgen*, or gallows, in the company's mailing address, used to be located on a small hill at the courtyard entrance. These were dismantled many moons ago though, says co-boss Stefan Köpf, who ought to know seeing as his last name literally means "head." He leads us into the time-honored premises where not only professional-grade technology and manufacturing operations have been harmoniously

integrated but also a monster of a home movie theater for connoisseurs.

Stay calm, dear FIDELITY readers and stereo fans!

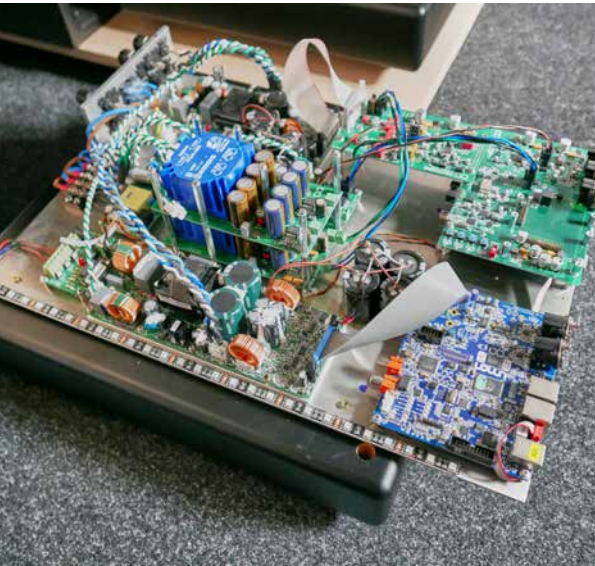
This article isn't going to be about impressive moving pictures, rather impressive moving sound. And this is something Ascendo fine-tunes in its in-house movie theater, among other places. With music. Okay, yes of course, with moving pictures, too, but by no means exclusively or all that often. The focus of any fine-tuning at Ascendo is and has always has been on the listening experience! And, of course, that also applies to movie-theater equipment and subwoofers.

This brings us nicely to the explanation of the first term: What exactly constitutes a large subwoofer? ▶



At first glance at Ascendo's production site in Ansbach, you wouldn't expect to see subwoofers with dimensions that throw all remaining reason out the window...

...“It’s a cute little thing, isn’t it?” Stefan Köpf (below right) seems to be saying; after all, his company’s product range also includes a 50-incher that comes with a disclaimer (see page 082).



I know some high-end fans who refer to any woofer with a diameter of at least 15 centimeters (6 inches) as “large.” However, these are also the kind of people whose best hi-fi experience has involved near-field studio monitors such as the LS3/5A and have since then fundamentally considered anything below 80 hertz to be low-bass interference. Or at least as an attack on the “crisp bass” of their beloved favorites (as Linn Kan and LS50 owners, we know our stuff).

But among grown-ups, 25 centimeters (10 inches) should constitute the absolute minimum for anything considered close to “large.” And 38 centimeters have to be reached before everyone finally agrees: 15 inches is the international standard measurement for impressive subwoofers. This size enables enough air to move properly and, with the right fine-tuning, the creation

of an acoustically super-solid base. In hi-fi settings, a properly driven 15-incher will confidently stride down into the officially recognized frequency crypts of 20 hertz—the realm of organ principal pipes—forge ahead with ease, and, it seems, add a whole ‘nother dimension to the enjoyment of great music. What many hi-fi friends (still) don’t seem to know is that a good subwoofer won’t roar or boom but will acoustically open and “illuminate” the room, making power tangible and ultra-low bass a physical experience.

Ascendo also believes this, by the way. This is why the loudspeaker experts sell three powerful subwoofers with perfectly proportioned 10-, 12-, and 15-inch drivers. What’s more, all of them feature built-in 1,000-watt amplifiers and in-house-developed super-flexible calibration electronics. ►



Cozy: The plush Ascendo listening room stands in stark contrast to the clinically sterile production department in the adjacent facilities. This laid-back setting is where intricate details are fine-tuned.





But that's not all that Ascendo IA has to offer—not by a long shot. The hip and innovative southern German engineers have another three subwoofers to boot, and they effortlessly manage to throw all remaining reason out the window. They feature 24-, 32-, and 50-inch drivers—as big as Ringo's bass drum, your average circular dining-room table, or your darling little kids' paddling pool, all upright and built into an extremely solid box. With an available 6,000 watts of power, they're extremely dangerous to your hearing and the building you live in!

Which brings us to addressing another few obvious questions. No, of course no one actually needs this. No, your neighbor in the villa opposite definitely won't have it. And yes, if required, this can even trigger seismic shifts or set demolition work in motion. So

listen up, supervillains, seaquake fans, and insatiable high-end lovers: Ascendo's 50-inch is currently the largest and most powerful subwoofer on the planet. When you stand next to this whopper, you somehow feel dwarfed by it, unless you're a two-meter-something basketball player from the NBA league in America. And when this demolition tool gets going, preferably with some hefty bass material, the world around you seems to crumble; the first cracks start to show in the room's walls; and, standing slap bang in the middle of Ascendo's listening room—which isn't exactly reminiscent of a club—you start to feel like you've been transported to the dance floor of Berlin's infamous "Tresor" nightclub. The pulsating bass massages not only your stomach but your entire body; your hormone levels rise to new peak levels, and you perceive music as a whole in a way the ►



consumer-grade speakers mentioned earlier could never have done for you to.

At this year's High End trade fair in Munich, event organizers limited the Ascendo team to demonstrating the 50-inch during precisely calculated times. Why? Because the low-bass thunderstorm created by this exceptional device contains so much penetrating high energy that the tonearms would jump, shoving their styluses out of the record groove when, for example, Hans Zimmer's Da Vinci Code soundtrack was played. On the other hand, the existence of such sound information (which should not be confused with mere subsonic interference) is an indication that even the very deepest frequency crypts are part of the music and therefore have an inherent right to be heard as part of proper playback.

The skill level and in-depth background knowledge on display in Ansbach are just as impressive as the spectacular performance of the flagship subwoofers. On the company's homepage, the manufacturer outlines the fundamental research it carries out in-house and

promises "pioneering developments in the areas of hi-fi, home theater, and pro audio." We need to expand on an important point here: Professional monitoring equipment, such as monitors used in recording studios, is not simply an important mainstay for Ascendo. Developments in this area actually also make their way directly into the line of home hi-fi products. Ascendo developer Jürgen Scheuring, who graduated from the University of Tübingen, has been dedicating himself for some time to coming up with (digital) methods of getting around the limitations of conventional speaker and amplifier concepts. When you talk shop with current managing directors Köpf, who holds a graduate degree in economics, and Scheuring, whose graduate degree is in physics, about speaker development, it doesn't take long for buzzwords like "time alignment" and "digital sound processing" (DSP) to crop up: Unavoidable shortcomings, whether in the material or the room, are so delicately rectified with in-house-developed digital equipment that the end result is a fully natural sound. A sound that no longer involves hearing the interference with the frequency range ►



or the delay corrections of the loudspeaker chassis. As the company's ambitious goals could never have been achieved with components brought in from outside, the level of in-house development at Ascendo has been and continues to be exceptionally impressive. The development of new room-processor concepts is even being financed with funds from the German government.

Even the workmanship that goes into their speakers, which are deliberately designed to be straightforward and unpretentious (the exterior should correspond to the listening experience), meets the highest standards; the company bosses deliberately set the bar very high.

The fact that in Ascendo's workshop you could also "eat off the floor" if one of the 50-inch subwoofers were to shake or blast a cake off its plate fits in neatly with an image of a high-tech manufacturer you'd probably expect to find in Japan than in the sedate city of Ansbach. And in the future, we'll probably see a lot more from them than just low-frequency rolling thunder. ■

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Production and freight deliveries and pick-ups | ASCENDO GmbH | Galgenmühle 5 | 91522 Ansbach | Germany | Telephone +49 981 48798718



...and now for something completely different...

Audio Note TT Three

BOOM—CLAP!

By Cai Brockmann (+). Photography: Ingo Schulz



THE DASHING TRIPLE- MOTOR DESIGN IS BACK.



POWERFUL MOTORS AND LOW MOVING MASSES...



...LIKE IN RACING AND
AERONAUTICS.





_____Picture a tranquil living room, with two relaxed guests sitting on the sofa. A third man, the host, carefully puts a vinyl on. The stylus descends into the empty space between two tracks. Silence, then subtle crackling and anticipation fill the air. The third man, who only looks relaxed on the outside, turns up the volume on the amplifier. The loudspeakers discreetly emit that typical “vinyl sound.” The guests on the sofa are curious which vinyl the third man has chosen, until the drums kick in—

Boom—clap! The bass drum resonates through the furniture, and one of the guests kicks the table, spilling coffee from the cups in a knee-jerk reaction. An audiophile’s state of shock. The third man shouts, “Wow!” But what

else would you expect him to shout at such an incredible moment? The “dynamics” are simply mind-blowing—nightclub volume at home.

Boom—clap! Boom—clap! Boom—clap! Boom—clap! The beat behind Michael Jackson’s “Billie Jean” is so simple that there’s almost nothing to say about it. Even the recording quality of *Thriller* isn’t much to write home about, technically speaking. Yet, right here, right now, everything seems different. Better. Bassier! Louder. More resonant. More real! After four beats, the bassline drops in and never stops. Shortly afterward come the famous strings, the vocal “hiccups” of the incredible King of Pop, double fingersnaps, and the funkier guitar on earth...

Five minutes of “Billie Jean” simply isn’t enough: *Thriller* is a seriously well produced album. Thanks for the production, Quincy Jones. And thanks for the reproduction, Audio Note UK. The third man allows the track to fade out and then turns his attention back to his guests, who are now electric with excitement.

All good things...

Yes, you’ve guessed it, dear readers: the third man is me, the reproduction machine is an Audio Note TT Three Reference MkII, and the whole scene is a little flashback to 2009. Back then, the King of Pop was still alive, and his album *Thriller* had been out for more than a quarter of a century. With the help of this vinyl golden oldie, ►



The external power supply for the TT Three of course has the series' look and feel and will also be available in the classic "black-gold" finish.

and countless others, Audio Note UK's biggest turntable regularly blew my socks off, as well as those of any inquisitive guests who happened to pop around. But wait a second: this article isn't meant to focus on the TT Three Reference MkII, but one of its little siblings. So why this preface?

Well, the design principles and character strengths that determine the signature sound of the (outrageously expensive, physically enormous, and technically complex) Reference MkII also feature in Audio Note's smaller turntables. Even their smallest drive, the TT One, benefits from the expert mechanical "energy management" of their largest device. While the visually

similar TT Two (which is equipped with two opposing AC motors) has proven to be a reliable music machine that sounds so good it should probably have entertainment tax slapped on it, and can give the big boys a real run for their money. There are even several versions of the larger model, the TT Three ("TurnTable Three"). In addition to the rather grandiose flagship model, the "Three Reference," there's also a streamlined "Three .5 Reference," referred to in-house as the "Half Reference." Though according to Audio Note expert, Alexander Voigt, the "Half Reference" is currently unavailable due to supply shortfalls. But this article isn't supposed to be about those turntables either.

No suffix

The model being presented here, the TT Three (without any suffixes), was only recently added to the TT-3 lineup. Audio Note UK has used this simple name before, though it was nearly 20 years ago. Therefore, the TT Three is a revenant of days gone by, made with modern materials and a lot of blood, sweat, and tears, as you would expect from the Brits. The first indications that AN UK was working on a "small" and more affordable TT Three came a while back; I got to experience a fully functional prototype more or less by chance and without any pomp or fuss while in Brighton two years ago. The TT Three prototype's







sound was already sublime back then, with beautiful tones, plenty of spirit, dynamic flow, and an enchanting “well-roundedness.” Yet Peter Qvortrup, the AN boss, was still unhappy with a few details, so the in-house TT team continued tinkering.

And, as is the case with any small-scale manufacturer prioritizing sound performance, not only were the visuals and a few design details scrutinized and “dealt with” for the series production, but also nearly every aspect of the turntable seems to have been redeveloped. Of course, that wasn’t the case, but when Alexander Voigt told me earlier this year that the TT 3 project was “in the home straight” and that he should be able to get his hands on a new TT Three “pretty soon,” my ears pricked up. I was, admittedly, more than a little excited. Lucky for me, “pretty soon” actually ended up meaning “at hifideluxe” (in May 2018) and that I got to get up close and personal with that specimen for this

report. While not actually a prototype, it was a close-to-production, well-honed, and optimally adjusted pre-production model.

Design

From a purely external perspective, the TT Three is vastly different from the more conventionally designed TT One and TT Two. In contrast to their frames and belt drives “hidden” under the platter, the TT Three has clearly been designed—true to its name and history—in keeping with the aesthetics of the Reference heavyweight. And the same is true of its technology: The TT Three features a subtly adjustable sub-chassis with three wings. The one located at the back-right forms the base for the tonearm, ideally an Audio Note UK model, such as the Arm 2 MkII. The other two wings, which have been perfectly balanced in line with the tonearm and are reminiscent of a miniature submarine, could theoretically be converted into bases

for more arms. But to be honest I can’t think of any turntable drive whose sound quality would benefit from mounting several tonearms. With this in mind I refrained from going through all that effort and focused my attention on the “simple” version.

Back to the turntable’s design: the rectangular base plate features remarkably large and powerful motors equilaterally mounted under Mu-metal shields, which maintain full control over a surprisingly light and extremely low-resonance platter on external rotor rubber belts. The motors are special models from Germany that (and herein lies one of the performance “secrets”) are fine-tuned with the utmost care, including in relation to each other, by Audio Note UK. Using three motors in parallel like this is absolutely essential in terms of sound quality. The Brits aren’t willing to give away any more details about the process, but they do hint that the meticulous fine-tuning is very time-consuming yet definitely ►





The unusually long platter axis is located in the “epicenter” of the three motors and reliably channels off any remaining vibrations into the piston-shaped suspended sub-chassis.







THE BACKGROUND TO THE TT THREE

What all TT Three models have in common are three powerful yet smooth motors which, arranged in the formation of an equilateral triangle, “control” a lightweight platter located in their center. In turn, the platter is part of a precisely balanced, low-resonance-frequency (< 3 Hz) piston-shaped suspended sub-chassis design. The miniscule and very low-resonance mass surrounding the vinyl platter should ensure that only the absolute minimum amount of unwanted energy is stored and/or reflected, and that

disruptive resonance is channeled off as quickly and efficiently as possible to “safer” regions of the turntable. Audio Note UK’s tonearms also pursue the same design idea by channeling away disruptive resonance energy from the cartridge.

Thanks to the equilateral positioning of the three motors, the “epicenter” of the entire drive is located in the center of the platter bearing. Unlike conventional drives, this means that meandering vibrations between a motor and the platter axis are prevented right from the

outset. What’s more, the three equilateral contact surfaces of the drive belt reduce any tendency for the platter axis to wobble in the bearing bushing, and thereby stabilize the platter. Naturally, the (very elaborate and expensive) triple-drive approach is anything but undisputed on the analog scene. However, as is always the case, the turntable’s performance “on the pitch” as the analog music source in the stereo system is what is crucial—and Audio Note UK’s TT Three has an awful lot to offer here.

worth it. Of course the TT Three also includes the power supply for driving the three motors as part of its basic setup. This comes in a separate and rather handsome looking AN UK standard housing which connects with the drive via a multi-pin cable. AN expert Alexander Voigt himself calls this a “digital power supply,” so I will adopt that term here, too. The cunning foxes among you will have deduced that soon there will also be an optional analog power supply for the TT Three which will be more technically sophisticated, appropriately pricier, and better for performance. OK, *even* better, is what I should predict, for the record. You see, what the TT Three already offers—in its “small” format and with the digital power supply—speaks volumes and demonstrates real character.

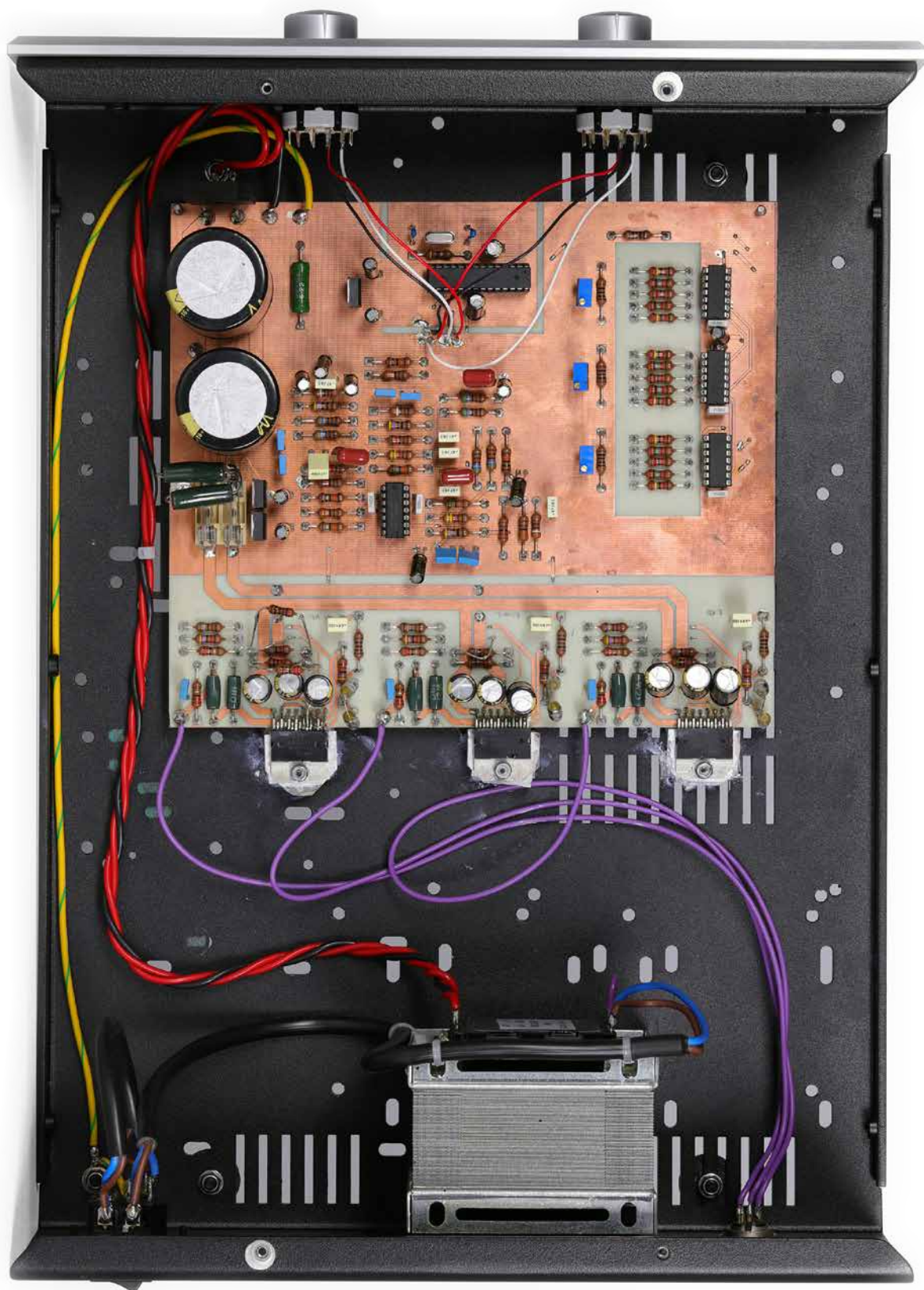
Teamwork

Yet you should never forget the full roster of teammates comprising this mostly analog turntable. The TT Three was mounted with one of Audio Note’s first-rate, in-house developed tonearms, which continues to flabbergast analog experts with its impressive performance and very reasonable price: the Arm 2 MkII. On its own, the MkII is available for a reasonable €1,680 and can also carry a doubly expensive IO 1 type MC system. During the testing, I also had access to Audio Note UK MC transformers and cabling whereby, even classic MM inputs could be driven by classic integrated amplifiers with first-class results. And I won’t hide the fact that I was very happy to see the fantastic Audio Note Meishu

again from FIDELITY No. 27 in conjunction with the TT Three. What an unbelievably thrilling and captivating combo the TT Three and the Meishu (plus “E-class” loudspeakers) made—anyone who is serious about extremely high-level vinyl playback quality should experience this at least once in their lives. The test was “the chain concept at its best,” a demonstration of Audio Note’s true abilities—pure music, and the polar opposite of a technology show. In fact, I had actually experienced this particular combo at hifideluxe in Munich...

There, the TT Three, which had incidentally been perfectly pre-adjusted by AN expert Voigt, delivered a top-notch performance even in “foreign” environments. The distinguished turntable ►

The little digital power supply is sure to get even bigger siblings in the foreseeable future. Nevertheless, the standard set-up should not be underestimated!



IDEAL CONFIGURATION: AUDIO NOTE UK'S
EXCEPTIONAL TONEARMS ARE THE
PERFECT MATCH FOR THE TT THREE.



Drive motors and sub-chassis wings in equilateral configuration.



seemed only too happy to support Tiefenbrun's infamous theory that you really have to ensure top quality right at the start, and it did so firmly and emphatically. The acoustic authority of the analog source, this absurdly musical TT Three, was clearly audible even with the tiny Brocksieper Phonomax, an ancient Creek integrated amplifier, and truly "impossible" loudspeakers. The TT Three didn't throw its weight around in the slightest, but simply delivered, punctually, crisply and without any mannerisms or self-generated (and usually totally overrated) "toe-tapping elements" which so many other candidates try to sell you. With the TT Three, the musical groove always comes from the vinyl's physical grooves, and nowhere else; the audio produces the music, not the turntable.

Poetry in motion

It was fascinating how easily I fell, or rather, was prepared by the turntable to fall, under the spell of any kind of music, even if it was only "good enough." The turntable gave me the thoroughly pleasant feeling that it was subtly leading me to the music

without making itself apparent. Many other turntables tend to keep a clinical distance from the vinyl they're playing, as if it could be dangerous to engage with previously unknown music. Such a technically distant approach makes any emotional involvement in the music difficult, and the performance comes across as somewhat inaccessible, cold, and, well, technical. Now, if that's your kind of thing, then by all means go for it. I, on the other hand, feel much more at home with the TT Three.

It is the complete opposite of a staunch audio guardian. Along with all of the precision that you would expect the TT Three to deliver, this new Audio Note turntable always demonstrates an eagerness to present the recorded music in the best way possible. The bottom line is that it does you good—dear vinyl lovers—to groove, dance, sing along with, and enjoy the music with your head, heart, and soul. Don't be scared, my young friends... rediscover your entire vinyl collection. I'm game! Exciting times await! After all, isn't that the very *raison d'être* of music, the only truly universal language? That it speaks to you, touches you deeply, and takes you on a journey?

Planet Vinyl

Whoops! I've just noticed that my notes seem to be relentlessly slip-sliding into some kind of embarrassingly kitsch fanboy book. That simply would not do justice to this remarkably technical instrument, which has clearly been given all the right musical faculties by Audio Note UK. Despite my enthusiasm, would you still like a little more emotionless and clinical talk? OK. So I'll spare you any closer inspection of the stack of LPs which had piled up and, in particular, my notes. Where I can still decipher them, they seem to focus on my infatuation and praise for the TT Three, peppered with exclamation marks, musical observations, and my desire to urgently experience live shows by this and that artist again. Conversely, I can also confidently provide some relevant information regarding mediocre productions, poor pressings, and tired copies as part of an audiophile's search for truth. A really good turntable clearly shows where the issues are with vinyls, but still knows how to extract the music from the grooves with maximum energy. This is exactly what the TT Three manages to accomplish more ►



THE HISTORY OF THE TT THREE

In the 1980s, Guy Adams unveiled a sub-chassis turntable with three motors called “The Voyd,” which was only manufactured in small numbers. Peter Qvortrup, Audio Note UK’s boss, was so impressed with the turntable’s performance that he acquired the rights to the design from Guy Adams in 1995 in order to manufacture it at his own company. As compared to the Audio Note TT Three’s acrylic platter, the TT Three Reference had a platter made from bullet-proof Lexan, a platter bearing with extremely low tolerances, three larger

Papst motors (originally developed for tape recorders), and a larger power supply. Once EBM-Papst was no longer able to supply the required motors, Audio Note UK ceased production of the TT Three models back in 1996.

In 2018, EBM-Papst began supplying “suitable” motors again, whereby the new drives are being heavily modified and synchronized at Audio Note UK. The TT Three presented here is the smallest of the three models in the current 3 series.





confidently and more emphatically than, say, the TT Two, itself well-known for being an excellent device. The TT Three resoundingly sets itself apart not only in terms of its price, but also its sound quality, which is quite close to the Reference flagship model.

There are turntables out there for the same price which look more impressive, weigh twice or even three times as much, and keep a platter weighing ten times as much perfectly under control with “just” one motor. There are turntables out there with an ever

increasingly polished finish that shine on the sideboard like a slick oil rig and look even more imposing. But I haven’t come across another turntable at this price which can convey a simple and essential “bumm-tack!” more impressively or directly into the heart of the listener. You didn’t think I would miss out on the “bumm-tack” fun with the TT Three, did you? Four-on-the-floor with the unpretentious TT Three! ■

Analog turntable | Audio Note UK TT Three
Functional principle: Sub-chassis turntable

with three motors and external rotor belt drive | **Speeds:** 33/45 rpm | **Special features:** External power supply, extremely light Lexan platter, maximum of three mountable tonearms | **Finish:** High-gloss black or white, power supply in acrylic black with gold buttons or natural aluminum | **Dimensions of turntable incl. tonearm (W/H/D):** 48/18/44 cm | **Dimensions of power unit (W/H/D):** 30/14.5/42 cm | **Weight of turntable:** 11 kg | **Weight of power supply:** 5 kg | **Warranty period:** 2 years | **Price for turntable (without arm):** from € 8500

www.audionote.co.uk/



The American Corner I

ROCKY MOUNTAIN AUDIOFEST 2018

By Danny Kaey

_____ Walking around Denver's yearly premier HiFi event, Rocky Mountain Audiofest, you'd be hard pressed to think that the industry is at some sort of perpetual crossroads. Since formally joining the HiFi circus as a reviewer some 17 years ago, this crossroads talk has been a consistent constant. Just the other day, participating at local HiFi dealer, Audio Element, Pasadena's genuine, bona fide salon la musique, the conversation of crossroads came up more than once; no, make that more than eighteen times. Such is life in this

boutique industry. You have players that are successful, you have those that aren't and you have those who talk. A ton. But back to Denver's Audiofest 2018. Seeing this as the finé outing of Marjorie Baumert's Rocky Mountain show at the Marriott, Denver Tech Center, you'd have expected there to be something sort of qualifying as a final hurrah. There wasn't. Instead, it's as if nothing major was changing, which in fact of course is precisely what's happening. The big, nay, major news of this year's show, is that as of 2019, ►



►
The new
Gaylord
resort,
future
home of
RMAF!



◀
The 3
amigos,
Marjorie,
Scott and
Rob





◀ Tape machines
... I saw more
and more.
A revival?



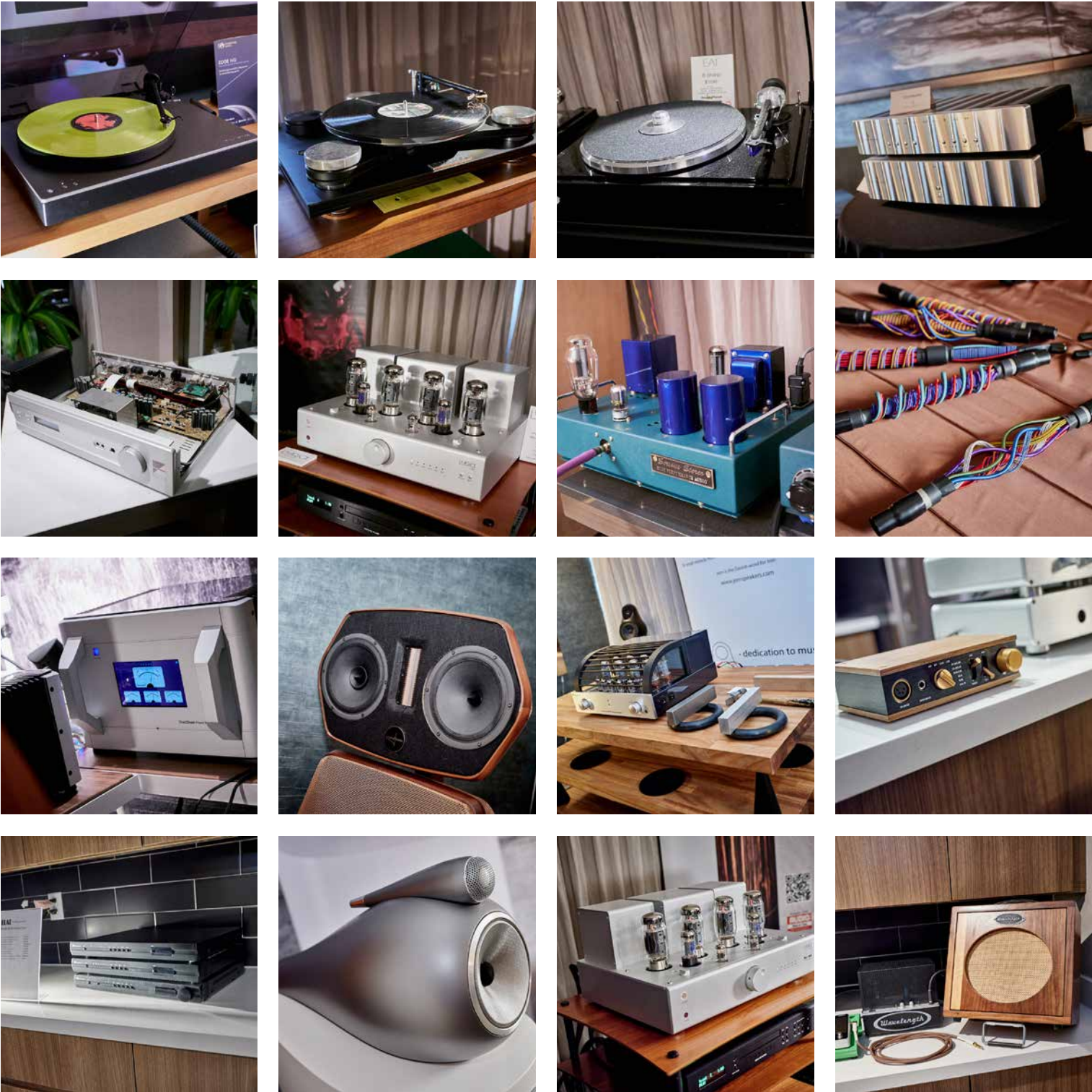
► Cheers all!



Marjorie and team will be pushing a full court press at the all new and all-encompassing Denver airport, Gaylord Rockies Resort and Convention Center.

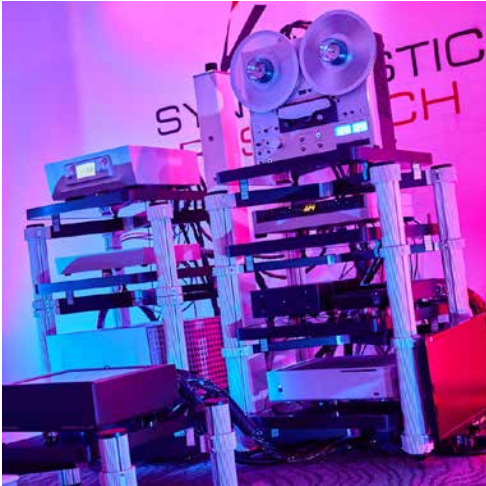
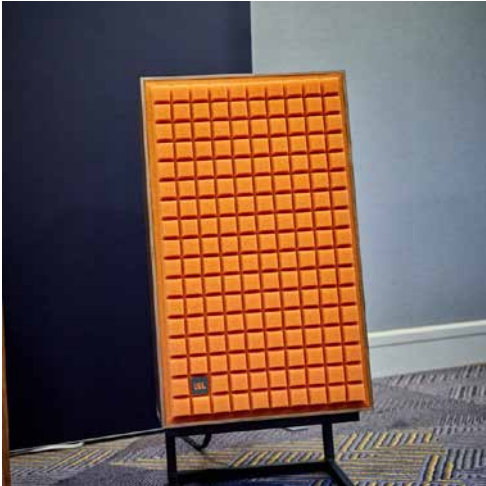
Indeed, Marriott's time has come and gone, game over, match, set and point. Fine by me, good riddance I say. You see, even as the Marriott prior to the practically complete down to the studs rehab of 2017, was home to the Audiofest since inception, the hotel and most importantly, the Audiofest, has significantly outgrown their first kicks. Combined with the goal of becoming the audio show in the US, Marjorie felt it necessary to go big; in fact, much bigger. Cue the Gaylord Resort. With a significantly larger capacity, far superior layout and proximity to the airport, altogether more

elaborate hospitality and likely friendliness, the Gaylord will set the tone for shows to come. Meanwhile back at the Marriott, it was fanfare of the same kind, redux. If anything, I noticed a drop in attendance, even as Marjorie countered with an overall greater industry presence and "sold out" status. From small to big, from wide to tall, Audiofest 2018, seemed just like any other regional HiFi show. Surprisingly, even CanJam, the show's quasi permanent headphone wearing guest, seemed far less hectic and full than in year's past. Sure, the usual suspects and head turners were all present: in fact, a company I have been keeping a very close eye on, Auris, seems to have grown from newcomer to startup to mainstay in record time. Fronted by my affable countryman, Miki Trosiĉ, Auris Audio had presence at the show's CanJam section and a ►



Above: Kabel Salat. No, really!

The big D'Agostino phono stage



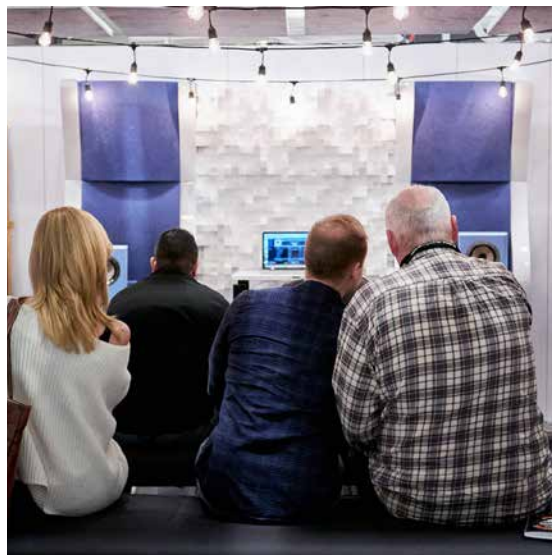
Paper cones, whizzer cones. Ice cream cones.
Above: Goldfinger. He loves only gold, only gold. . .

Magenta. Great sound!
Above: A new sponge. JBL speaker covers!

Above: Horns. Honk, Honk.



Auris Audio, watch out for these guys!



more than fantastic presence on the show's main HiFi floor. With a vertically integrated offering on hand, Auris is definitely a brand to watch for and most certainly audition if you are in the market for a tube based, exquisite, European flair'd HiFi brand.

Elsewhere at the show, the room most often spoken of was without doubt the massive Verity Audio room, fronted by their massive Monsalvat speaker and electronics system. The sound, in the handful of cuts I heard, was almost befitting the room's price tag: big, bold, with dynamic capabilities north of Canada. That the system also looked the part was an additional bonus. Another highlight was Brian Ackerman's must see and hear mix of Ypsilon and Wilson Benesch. The greek's powerful, yet musical electronics mated perfectly to Wilson Benesch's british roots: that Brian

sells and imports both brands isn't a surprise, though I admit that Wilson Benesch isn't necessarily my cup of British 5 o'clock tea for two.

Zu, as always, brought the Zoo and then some. Though I didn't have a chance to spend too much time in this room, I think the time has come to finally accept Zu as the neverending music party train that it is. Zu Druid VI where fronted by thirty watts of Pass Labs power, which on the outset seems outgunned; yet on closer inspection plays far more powerfully due to the crazy high efficiency of 101db, Druids have on tap. Boulder electronics coupled with Rockport speakers fronted by two of the best show masters, Rich and Steve, offered up effortless sonics with the right pedigree to match. MSB is MSB, which is to say always stellar. Is there more ►



Thales.
Swiss perfection.



on tap? You bet: case in point, Vinnie Rossie paired with Harbeth; or John DeVore with his new Über-double-speaker. No matter the music, Vinnie and John's room was frequented often and repetitively at that, which is usually a good indicator of who's who and what's what. Nicely done gents!

Other highlights, seen and heard at the show seemed to indicate no stopping whatsoever of a) vinyl, b), streaming and c) more cooks than fit the kitchen. That last comment in particular unfolds as such: "Hey Paul!" [whereby Paul is a generic someone with an idea, great or otherwise] "I think you should make your..." [Paul, deep in thought, followed by not so much critical or really any thinking at all, simply says] "hmmm... you know what, good idea!" Cue Audiofest 2019 and voila, Paul is now the owner of the next best thing in HiFi. In fact, I wouldn't be surprised if many a newcomer was founded on precisely such principals, given the seemingly insatiable visibility of said wares at this year's show. These sightings, inexplicable though they may be, make HiFi that much more challenging to quantify for the novice: household brands like Sony, Apple or HP are far and few between. On this

side of the fence there are precious few; even more precious are the ones that genuinely exist based on a sound business model. Therein lies the rub: newcomers beware.

Lastly, YG offered up a very interesting and promising hospitality suite. Partnering with Devialet, YG toured VIPs to their factory on Friday for an exclusive audition of Devialet's self contained, self powered Sonja 2.2 speaker system. The catch? Gone was Yoav Geva's intricate and passive crossover network, replaced by a fully active Devialet powered DSP version of the same. Is this the future? Hard to say given the requirements and obstacles in plain sight. Then again, perhaps it is one step closer to the adage of "all you need are two speakers and your iPhone". Noble attempts if the glue sticks.

Looking forward to 2019, it becomes crystal clear that Marjorie and team have an incredible opportunity of taking HiFi to the next level. With hotel limitations now a thing of the past, the future indeed looks bright. Cross-functional tie-ins, far more large suites on offer, the Gaylord could indeed be what we always wanted: the perfect HiFi show. 2019, here we come! ■



...and now for something completely different...

Xavier Y. from Z. (privately) and Tobian Soundsystems (officially)

ABOVE THE CLOUDS

By Cai Brockmann (+). Photography: Cai Brockmann (+)





A ROCK 'N' ROLL GENTLEMAN PLAYS WITH THE ELEMENTS



Look and outlook: If you should ever tire of looking at the vintage wooden interior décor or the perfectly matched Tobian 15 loudspeakers with their distinctive coaxial horn drivers, then there's always the enticing window facade to keep you entertained...



Günter Tobian has proved to be a door opener, and today he's even serving as a gate opener. You see, we've gone to central Switzerland to visit Xavier Y., who lives so high up on a mountain that a certain Cai B. from M. couldn't just speed up the side of the hill and shout *Grüezi miteinand!* (Swiss German for "Hi, guys!"). I'll just say this: Private switchback roads, a gate with an entry system, and an audiophile "Mount Olympus of rock 'n' roll." And Tobian plays a key role in all three: He's the driver with an adroit hand behind the wheel of the off-road vehicle, the porter who opens the gate, and, by special appointment, the preferred supplier to the domicile of Mr. Y.

One of us

Together with the boss of Tobian Soundsystems, I pass through the aforementioned gate. The secluded retreat of the owner, a gentleman of means, is not only located on a beautiful mountain but also directly on (or, better put, 500 meters above) a beautiful lake. I used to think you couldn't have it all, but, actually... Xavier Y. values his privacy above almost all else. Enjoying the prime of his life right now, this man has previously turned down all ("there must have been around a dozen") requests for any kind of article to be written about his home. Until today. Yours truly has now become the first journalist to be allowed access to this exceptional home to write an article: ►

...Set about 500 meters above the lake, it offers spectacular panoramic views. The scene at night from atop the “Mount Olympus of rock ‘n’ roll” in central Switzerland is no less impressive. Even if there’s a storm. You’ll always find your ears being lavished with sound every bit as spectacular as the visual treat from atop the mountain.



first, because I’m not interested in nosing around the whole chalet, rather just one single room—yes, it’s the music room of course; and second, because Mr. Y. had already met me on neutral territory and accepted me “as one of us.” By that he presumably meant that we shared a passion for music and great sound. Aside from the fact that we both have dedicated music rooms, we are truly worlds apart in every other respect. Instead of thrilling switchback roads, all I have to offer is a quiet cul-de-sac; “my” local mountain, forest, and stretch of water lie a good 70 kilometers away from my humble abode; and the sofa where I do all my listening offers a view of the multitude of vinyls and hi-fi equipment in the room but no daylight.

There’s just one small window to supply my basement studio with fresh air (and the neighborhood with fresh music).

Xavier Y.’s music room is not only twice as big, it’s the exact polar opposite: Atmospherically somewhere between a fireside lounge and a formal study, it seems to have been beamed here from another, earlier century. And instead of a small window, it has an enormous glass sliding door leading onto the terrace that features a breathtaking view of an unbelievably beautiful landscape. The panoramic scene is simply stunning; and when the skies are clear, you can even make out mountain ranges 120 kilometers away. I start imagining myself very close to the heavens—even ►

Reminiscent of a bygone era: Wooden walls, a wooden ceiling, and hardware have been “imported” from a venerable old château to grace the music room; they have a couple of centuries under their belts. The Tobian 15 loudspeakers bring old loudspeaker designs right up to the present, reinterpreting them and featuring clever modifications. . .



without Reinhard Mey’s “Über den Wolken” (“Over the Clouds”). A relaxed Mr. Y. takes a drag of his Dunhill, smiles, and nods: “This view even makes the music sound just that much better,” he says, although by music he’s referring to anything but Reinhard Mey as I would later see and hear.

With this panorama, it isn’t all that easy to focus squarely on the interior design of the music room. But it, too, is definitely worth a closer look: Amazingly, the comparatively modern Tobian 15 loudspeakers with special veneer fit in perfectly with the room’s interior design, which is dominated by vintage wood. The unavoidable loudspeaker cables are invisible, having been laid in a duct underneath the parquet flooring. The electronics are also, broadly speaking, invisible and lie at least outside one’s direct field of vision. Two imposing tube power amplifiers, also Tobian devices,

have made themselves comfortable in the right-hand corner behind the huge listening sofa. Along with the low-hanging chandelier directly above them, they form a gently glowing lighting ensemble. All other devices, including preamplifiers, have been installed on the other side of the wall. They sit in the rather impressively large “antechamber” that you have to pass through to reach the music room. This is where a few mundane items are also located alongside the premium high-end audio components: a monster of a desk, a sea of sofas, a home movie theater, and a Hannl vinyl cleaning machine featuring knotty-wood housing and gold hardware. At the computer monitor, the infamous Rolling Stones’ logo sticks its tongue out at me. Various miniature electric guitars stand rank and file on a small shelf, and a fully functional Les Paul (“from an earlier life as a keen hobby guitarist”) crowns the ►

... Apart from the loudspeakers and a pair of tube monos in a corner at the back, none of the hi-fi system is visible in the music room. The Revox tape deck is, like all the rest of the electronic equipment, housed in the large “antechamber.”





International meeting point: Professional-grade turntable from Australia.

crossbeam above the passageway. The rock 'n' roll memorabilia provides a clue as to Mr. Y's personal music preferences. It does, however, refrain from turning into a private Hard Rock Café though.

Out of hiding

Back to the audio electronics. They fill an entire stylish built-in cabinet and boast a wide range of formats: a new-old-stock Commonwealth turntable from the Australian Broadcasting Corporation with a Schick tonearm and a Nagaoka system, a Gryphon CD player, a tube preamplifier and tube DAC from Tobian Soundsystems, a MacMini, and a mint-condition Revox tape deck—the only thing I couldn't spot anywhere was a reel-to-reel tape recorder. “Yes, I said good-bye to my Revox A77 when I discovered how

easily I could access my entire music collection over a digital network,” the pragmatic gentleman of means says, adding: “And when Günter Tobian brought over a new, fantastic-sounding DAC for me to try out, it was clear what was going to keep me fully occupied over the entire winter.” Xavier Y. ripped his favorite disks onto a hard drive without losing anything (which must have been a lot of fun as he actually did it all himself). Since that winter, he's been able to manage around five terabytes of music data from the comfort of his sofa using his iPad. The turntable has been feeling rather neglected, but Mr. Y won't be bidding farewell to it just yet. Two tape decks are actually in use in this household: “I also have a second model from Revox in the guest house by the pool,” Mr. Y. explains, promising to take a little detour there with us before it got too dark. There's actually a second music system there... ►



The most important equipment lives in the custom-made cupboard “round the corner.”

Thunderbolt and lightning, very very frightening! We had a few enjoyable hours ahead of us until any of that would show up. It was now starting to rain over the lake, but so far away that the freak weather conditions didn’t pose much of a concern to us—it was more entertaining than anything else. A proper down-pour “all the way down and over there” is nearing an end after four or five long tracks. Simply amazing here above the clouds...

“Up here you sometimes get some really scary weather,” Mr. Y. tells us, adding reassuringly: “Right here, right now, though, it’s rather enjoyable.” And with those calming, confidence-bolstering words, we turn our attention back to the audio system and back to the music. Both have always belonged together for Xavier Y. In the 1970s—“the ultimate decade!”—he was really into rock, blues, funk, and fusion and quickly realized that better sound quality would help him have more fun with music. That marked the point when

he started to place increasing importance on having a “proper stereo system.” Over the decades, the very best of renowned high-end brands have graced his premises. The guitar enthusiast’s basic equipment has included audiophile beauties from the likes of Accuphase, ATC, B&W, Dynaudio, Gryphon, and Vivid to name but a few.

As I’m sure you’ve already guessed, Mr. Y. does not exactly have to give much thought to material things all the time. This affable gentleman represents the third generation of a respectable Swiss business nobility and can afford whatever he wants. Always. And with everything. He is the epitome of a real connoisseur. So what makes someone who doesn’t have to count his pennies ultimately decide to buy a Tobian sound system? The Swiss-made devices don’t exactly go for peanuts, but then again they aren’t any pricier than many of the top-class components Mr. Y. has previously installed. So it can’t really be the price. ►



Cleaning machine from Germany, tube preamplifier and tube DAC from Tobian from Switzerland.

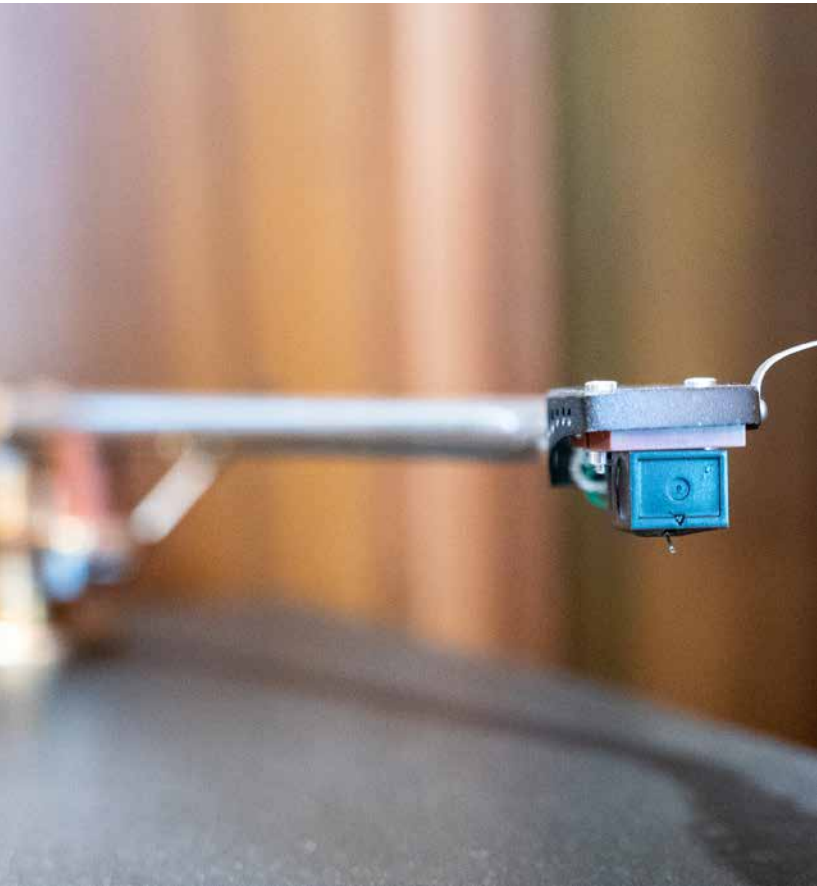


Fifteen-incher for fun

“All things considered, Tobian is hands down the best!” explains live-gig fan Xavier Y. He loves using his home system for delving into the recordings of his music heroes and letting himself get fully carried away with their energy and “all the emotions.” In the past, however, he’d get “a little bored” after a couple of hours of this kind of concert in his living room. Then, around 12 years ago, the first Tobian component found its way into the merry life of this personable bon vivant, and the T7 DAC seemed to permanently erase all traces of boredom. Curious as to whether the Swiss small-scale manufacturer’s other components could improve upon this already fantastic result, Mr. Y. decided to stock up. So, armed with the “15” series loudspeakers and other devices, Tobian then became the long-standing preferred supplier to this discerning customer. “With Tobian devices, I can finally listen to music for hours on end without ever getting bored. It’s as simple as that. And when I finally received a pair

of 15s with this veneer (Mr. Y. gestures to the Tobian 15s in the music room) to test out, there was no way I was going to let them leave my house!” In addition to appreciating the acoustic performance, he clearly also values the loudspeakers’ exceptionally dapper housing, which fits in perfectly with the existing interior décor. Let’s not forget that we listen with our eyes as well.

Mr. Y.’s Tobian 15 series loudspeakers have by this time already given us a few hours of top-class, emphatic, serious musical enjoyment, an all-around perfect mix of presence and power, attention to detail, and exceptional force. At this point, all the gentlemen present are in a great mood, having already stopped addressing each other formally and now taking turns playing an extremely broad range of guitar heroes (“What do you mean you don’t know this one?”). Yours truly isn’t the only one conscientiously taking notes right now. It all speaks for itself really, or perhaps for the Tobian 15 series loudspeakers, which are also meant to be the subject matter of this article. At some ►



Practically everything in Xavier Y.'s music room relates, in a broader sense, to listening to and making music.



MM system from Japan.
Tonearm, platter puck,
from Germany.





point, it dawns on me that we've so far played a lot of fusion and jazz tracks and even more blues and rock, but not yet even a single sonata, suite, or étude, not to mention a symphonic movement or a heroic aria. "Given the plush and, in the best sense of the word, conservative setting, wouldn't a classical intermezzo be just the thing?" I'm thinking to myself.

Classy rocker

Xavier Y. has an older brother who's been extensively involved in the classical music scene for ages. Mr. Y. himself has never really been able to come to grips with classical music, even to this day. Could I really see rock 'n' roll as a lifestyle choice for the well-to-do? Pensively, Xavier Y. states that he simply feels much more moved when someone skillfully plucks the strings of an electric guitar, perhaps even accompanied by a party-hearty spirit. "Frank Zappa is one of the

absolute greats!" and from our conversation it turns out that Joe Satriani is an old friend who occasionally enjoys Xavier Y.'s hospitality. And top-notch food, I correctly hazard to guess. "Yes, of course. Good food, fine wine, great hi-fi, and fantastic music make for a pretty cool combination," states the well-dressed rock connoisseur in his engaging Swiss dialect. He lights another Dunhill, sips some good red wine (correction: very good red wine), and casually adds another guitar track to the current playlist using his iPad.

We had long since made ourselves really comfortable in the music room in front of the Tobian 15 series loudspeakers. Naturally, the aforementioned Joe Satriani had played several times for us, but we had also listened to Jimi Hendrix, Stevie Ray Vaughan, and Ronnie Earl with a few less-known tracks from Swedish bass dervish Jonas Hellborg thrown in for good measure as well as some tracks from John Lane and his six string, a musician new to me. We had been ►

For a particularly relaxing experience, music can be enjoyed using the second system in the guest house. This could, of course, also be due to the adjacent pool and the equally spectacular view here, too.



enjoying lots—and I mean lots—of top-notch rock 'n' roll and raw talent, which is just the perfect match for the setting. But where had the sun gone?

Cool by the pool

The closest neighbor is a couple of hundred meters up the mountain, and Mr. Y.'s guest house is just a stone's throw away, with its flat roof docking almost immediately onto the main house on one side. The guest house enjoys the same spectacular panoramic view on the lake side as the main house—and it was proving to be a picture show I simply couldn't get enough of. To the rear, a massive sliding door leads directly out to a pool of Brobdingnagian proportions. Obviously the man of the house has ensured this area also has a fitting sound system suitable for outdoor use. Yet instead of tapping into the digital music network that's also available here, Xavier Y. conjures up a cool

mixtape from his denim-jacket pocket, feeds it into the aforementioned additional Revox deck, and fires up the other components of his "second system." I discover an old-school Sony ES series CD player, two suspiciously understated tube devices (that turn out to be DAC and preamplifier "early works" of a certain Günter Tobian), and two strapping Altec monos used in large movie theaters in an earlier life. In the guest house, the modified power amplifiers jolt two small professional-grade Martin speaker towers into action. In and around the pool and party area, the music-related focus isn't necessarily on high-level audiophile enjoyment with top stereo sound. No, level stability and splash resistance are top priorities here. That said, the sound achieved around the softly lit pale-blue pool is well rounded and decent and, of course, powerful enough to get the party started when required. Real three-dimensionality fanatics wouldn't give the stereophonic stage reproduction between the ►



With Günter Tobian in one of his studios: Here there's a Tobian 15 HC for comparison purposes as well as super-swish special edition models and historical memorabilia.

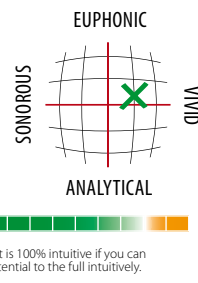


ACCOMPANYING EQUIPMENT

Turntable: Commonwealth 12 D | **Tonearm:** Schick 12 | **Cartridge:** Nagaoka (modified) | **CD player:** The Gryphon Adagio | **Network players:** Apple MacMini with iPad | **Tape deck:** Revox B-215 S | **Tube DAC:** Tobian DAC T9 | **Tube preamplifier:** Tobian SC-12 | **Tube mono power amplifier:** Tobian MA 70 Classic | **Cables:** Tobian Heptal, etc. | **Phono furniture:** Custom-made pieces | **Accessories:** Hannl vinyl cleaning machine

Tobian 15/15HC**floor-standing monitors**

Thrilling, joyous, and exceptionally versatile all-arounder in modest-looking housing. Extended music-session enjoyment guaranteed thanks to musical focus. Perfect for tube amplifiers.



pool and the chillout area top marks, but the lively, fun setup easily compensates for this with “real” space (right up to the starry sky) and upper bass and pleasure in droves. And I’m sure that as soon as the bubbly start flowing and the canapés start coming, even the most hardened hi-fi enthusiast would go weak at the knees. When outside in the fresh air, is it really that important for the digital music stream to sound any more transparent and neat than the analog tape deck? We treat ourselves to a good hour of fresh air by the pool and a very chilled mixtape of funk and soul and fat grooves. And then all of a sudden we notice that it’s grown dark.

A musical feast

Now back in the main house and back in the music room, an array of interesting things await us, for example the panoramic view that had completely changed: The now pitch-black glimmering lake is surrounded by flickering city lights whereas “all the way down and over there” a smallish, fast-moving storm provides some brisk supplemental entertainment. Then suddenly a tray of international delicacies appears on the large square-shaped “multifunctional table” in the music room. I have absolutely no idea how Xavier Y. manages to whip up so many tasty treats in next to no time or where he gets them from (the staff has the day off), but it’s all thoroughly delicious. While digging into some freshly baked bread and hard cheese, we all realize the sound being produced by the Tobian 15s has grown a little more focused and “larger” than three or four hours earlier. At the same time, the entire system continues, just as Xavier Y. had described, to thoroughly captivate us with its sound; it isn’t getting the slightest bit boring even after several hours. A huge achievement given the incredible nuance of sound and the by no means unrestrained volume not to mention the fact that we haven’t exactly been choosing tracks known for their audiophile qualities. I have this to say about the Tobian 15 loudspeakers: They are magnificent speakers

that totally focus on the music and surpass themselves when paired with choice, finely tuned electronic equipment and when placed in a unique environment. At the conclusion of a wonderful day full of top audio enjoyment, Mr. Y. has a very fitting audiophilosophical observation to make: “The hi-fi system is an instrument for listening to music. And when it transports you to the heart of the music, you know you’ve actually done everything right.” I couldn’t have said it better myself.

Gate, part two

My final written note from that wonderful day reads: John Lane, guitarist. My final mental note from that wonderful day reads: Günter Tobian is the world’s most original gate opener. I don’t want to (not may I) say anything more about our “organized retreat” in the middle of the night. The gods of that “Mount Olympus of rock ‘n’ roll” in central Switzerland may well have been having some fun. ■

An added note: The next day, I popped into Günter Tobian’s studio where the developer gave me a thorough demonstration of the “HC” version of the Tobian 15 series loudspeaker, which is different in terms of numerous details, as well as of many other models. Hot damn, this is all exciting stuff! I’m already all fired up to do a report on Tobian Audio Systems once the current expansion and merging of various parts of the company have been completed.

Tobian 15/15HC floor-standing monitors

Two-way coaxial horn loudspeakers, bass reflex or back-loaded bass horn (HC) | Equipment: 1.5-inch high/mid compression driver, 15-inch bass driver | **Efficiency:** approx. 99 dB | **Nominal impedance:** 8 Ω | **Finishes:** Bespoke according to customer’s wishes | **Dimensions (W/H/D):** 46/110/55 cm | **Weight:** approx. 46 kg | **Warranty:** 20 years (“lifetime”) | **Price for pair:** From €28,900 (HC from €34,500)

Tobian Soundsystems | Bergstr. 30 | CH-6052 Hergiswil, Switzerland | Telephone +41 41 3203725 | www.tobian-soundsystems.com

SPINX

DISTRIBUTOR POWER CABLE 1.5, POWER CABLE 1.5/2.7 AND SPEAKER CABLES 3.0

By Georg-Cölestin Jatta. Photography: Ingo Schulz



That shook the reindeer right off the sweater! SpinX from Finland magnetically coats the conductor!



“Technologies for a cleaner environment,” that’s how it’s written! Not in the Bible, but in the image brochure from Spindeco, a Scandinavian cable manufacturer with a delightfully whimsical approach. The Finnish company has made it a primary mission to optimize energy efficiency in large-scale industrial enterprises with power cables featuring a coating that enables the polarization of conduction electrons. At first glance, that would seem to have less to do with high fidelity and more with quantum physics. But at some point, a clever Finn came up with the idea to fashion these wonder cables with a standard household plug and then incorporate them into a stereo system. And that shook the reindeer right off his sweater! I’ve never heard the Leningrad Cowboys prance through the house with such crisp tones as with these energy-saving strips. Vautsi! (That’s Finnish for Wow!) This wasn’t going to be so easy since it takes the educational level of the geeks from *The Big Bang Theory* to understand exactly

how the Nordic wonder cables work. What we can say is this: Miniature magnets in the coating regulate the spin properties of the electrons, which reduces the dissipation of energy (or in this case, the very finest signal information) into the surrounding environment. For those who want the specifics: The Finnish company’s website and the archive of the UEF (University of Eastern Finland, Department of Applied Physics) provide more detailed information on this complex process. The contents of my newly delivered package containing cables from SpinX are less puzzling. Use of the connector strips as well as the power and speaker cables is self-explanatory; their look is pleasantly uncluttered. Black outer cover, functional plug suggesting a high quality that builds confidence—and everything put together by hand without a big fuss that drives up the price; obtaining special lengths can also be arranged. Only a bit of precious metal in the form of gold or rhodium on the ►



clip connectors of the speaker and the pins of the power-cable safety plug creates a subtle ornateness. One nice detail of the connector strip is the integrated child-protection feature that prevents access to open sockets by means of small spring plates. What an exceptionally good idea! What I like even better is what happens when I gradually exchange first the power strip, then the power supply for the Einstein amp, and then, finally, in a last step the speaker cable. It would be exciting to find out what a set of matching cinch cables would do. But to my great dismay, right now signal cables are only available as symmetric versions with XLR plugs. With every additional meter of the wonder cable, the very familiar bass line from the Aphrodite & Moloko remix of “The Flipside” seems to sound a bit more succinct. And that’s by no means everything! Since replacing my cables with the black strips from Finland, I’m no longer

desperately torn—I’m simply blown away. No one really wants to listen to the tired Eagles’ perennial “New York Minute” any more. That makes the piece all the better for checking out the impact of new components. In just a few notes, the difference is clear: The SpinX cables hone the edges of the strings to such a fine point they could (metaphorically) almost lacerate your finger. Please don’t take that the wrong way! It’s not about biting sharp in the sense of scathingly stinging, but in the sense of the delicate seasoned zestfulness of a good curry that lets the taste buds dance the Bhangra. It’s so good you just can’t stop, even when your brow breaks out in a sweat. ■

Power strip, power cable, and speaker cable | SpinX Distributor Power Cable 1.5, Power Cable 1.5/2.7 and Speaker Cables 3.0 | Prices: three-outlet filter strip is €450; power cable starts at €350, speaker cable at €390 (three meters) www.spinxcables.com



Burmester

Phase 3 Loftstyle

PHASE 3 is an extension to the traditional Burmester product lines, joining ultimate demands on sound quality with musical culture and modern lifestyle in a perfect blend. The designoriented concept incarnates both the timelessness of the Bauhaus style steel tube furniture and the industrial charm of modern lofts.

BLUE, SO BLUE

By Hans-Jürgen Schaal—Part I



Covering normally refers to songs being performed by other artists, but actual album covers attract their share of impersonators, too. The covered cover: Is it a witty reference, respectful homage or parody? Or is there a deeper meaning behind it?

Even at the tender age of 25 when he began recording his first albums, Kenny Burrell was a refined gentleman on the electric guitar. It's no wonder that Duke Ellington called him his "favorite guitar player." Burrell's roots were in the blue-collar city of Detroit where he also studied classical guitar, and his recordings combined a mixture of both earthy expressiveness and cool elegance. He said he was striving for "very close to the sound of the acoustic guitar, only louder... that warmth and midrange." It wasn't just the warming tone of his electric guitar that moved listeners but also his casual, laid-back phrasing. Burrell played as if his fingers were always needing to take a rest—he improvised the way people breathe. He was a highly talented man but not a show-off. His fans included B. B. King and George Benson; even Jimi Hendrix admired Burrell's signature sound. During the first 10 years of his career (1956–1966), "K.B." made 30 albums as a band leader and countless recordings as a sideman, including 18 alone for jazz organist Jimmy Smith. Burrell's best-known album is *Midnight Blue*. He found this one of the easiest albums to make as it was pure blues. "Blues is first and foremost a feeling," he once said. "I wanted to get a group together for this session that can feel the blues the way I do." *Midnight Blue*, released in 1963, is a

beautiful, emotional, and relaxed album. Sometimes very romantic, then engrossing and groovy, always a little melancholic, but never too onerous or tiring. The tracks (eight of the nine were written by the guitarist) take you on a journey across all styles of blues: sometimes slow, sometimes mid-tempo; here a Latin touch, there a soul feeling; now a waltz rhythm, later a hard-bop swing. Burrell's tone and phrasing convey a sense of airiness and spaciousness, and his playing grows patiently from chorus to chorus with no piano getting in his way. A bass, drums and congas fill all the supporting roles. Stanley Turrentine features on a handful of tracks, adding a few dry soul punches with his tenor saxophone.

The album is considered a classic. But: Is it really? Compared with the more experimental and adventurous 1960s jazz movements, *Midnight Blue* is quite low-key and unassuming. Either way, what definitely is a classic is the album cover, designed by Reid Miles. It features a tiny photo and huge letters with the word "blue" taking up three quarters of the front cover.

Elvis Costello also probably felt very "blue" or at least a little melancholic at the start of 1981. However, the British pop singer's new album ▶



BLUE, SO BLUE

Part II

didn't end up being a blues album or a jazz album and so he simply named it *Almost Blue*. (One year later he also wrote a hit single with the same title.) British graphic designer Barney Bubbles created the album cover, copying Miles' "blue" lettering but cleverly distorting it. The cover was also printed and available in various color combinations. You have to wonder: What would the pop and hip-hop graphic designers of the 1980s and 1990s have done without the inspiration provided by the old Blue Note covers?

At that time, Costello was inclined toward melancholy as his album *Trust*, which had been released in January 1981, turned out to be a bit of a flop with the public. He began to doubt his credentials as a songwriter and sought solace in well-known, successful jazz and blues hits. It seems he was really wallowing in despair: as in his anguish, an old love began to tug at his heart strings again: his penchant for country tear-jerkers. For this album, Costello delved into the depths of Southern sentimentality. The songs he retrieved from this descent belonged to the world of Hank Williams, Merle Haggard, and George Jones—not exactly the milieu of a big-city Brit. All the same, some of the 12 tracks are also rooted in blues, rockabilly, and country rock à la Gram Parsons. Planned at rather short notice, the album *Almost Blue* was produced in May 1981 in Nashville, the home of Southern country music. Costello's initial blues thread

shifted into what can only be described as country grousing. Almost not blue anymore.

And how did it go for the big-city high-end punk in the redneck scene of Nashville? Costello was well aware a clash of cultures would likely result. In a brilliantly ironic move, he had a sticker added to his album that read: "WARNING: This album contains country & western music and may cause offence to narrow minded listeners." In the recording studio in Tennessee, conversations apparently often turned to the subject of guns, causing a rather tense atmosphere. Costello has written he was glad a documentary film crew was present at such moments as it ensured issues never escalated further. Even musically, Costello came out of the whole affair pretty well. The former London pub singer showed a certain fragility in his voice that comes across as truly authentic. Despite a howling pedal steel guitar, he managed to incorporate some clever nuances into his vocals. In the more lively honky-tonk songs, he swings (with vocal reverb to boot) almost like an old rock 'n' roll crooner. After the disappointment of *Trust*, *Almost Blue* proved a defensive, slightly self-pitying cover album. And when all the tracks are covers, the cover sleeve can sure as heck be a "cover" too. ■

Kenny Burrell: *Midnight Blue* (Blue Note CDP 746399 2)

Elvis Costello: *Almost Blue* (Demon DPAM 7)

Photo: Stefan Gawlick



Professional musician Stefan Gawlick travels the world and knows almost every major concert hall around the globe. In this series, he reports on the acoustics and other characteristics of famous venues—both in the auditorium and on stage.

TEATRO OLIMPICO, VICENZA

_____. Strictly speaking, this hall shouldn't really feature in our series as hardly any recordings have been made here to immortalize it. Almost none of you will get to enjoy the very unique acoustics of this hall on your home systems, and yet I want to share my insights into this building which, in many ways, is rather unfathomable. Perhaps next time you're in Tuscany or Venice you'll have chance to stop off in Vicenza and rediscover what it means to be truly amazed...

In the mid-16th century, the Accademia Olimpica in Vicenza, an elite club that nurtured theater and the performing arts, decided it was high time to treat themselves to their own theater. A suitable plot of land in the center of the city was available, and, since rather conveniently one of the members of the academy went by the name of Andrea Palladio, the Accademia didn't have to waste much time looking for an architect. When the final decision to build was made in 1580, Palladio immediately got to work. He didn't, however, get

to fully complete the plans as he died in fall of that very same year. His son and his colleague Scamozzi completed the hall's construction and, on March 3, 1585, the Teatro Olimpico was finally inaugurated with a production of Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*. As you approach the theater from the city center, you'd be forgiven for going straight past it: Very typical for Italian cities, the building's facade is a slightly crumbling brick wall sporting just a few window openings. Behind a wrought-iron gate lies a garden lined with statues, but even that is nothing out of the ordinary in these parts. Once you've entered the building through a preposterously small and crooked wooden door, you're hit with the first astonishing sight: A wide, high-ceilinged marble hall featuring many renditions of the academy's coat of arms. If you then ignore the large portals that simply lead into the next adjoining room and instead turn right to go through a few small, unimposing little doors, you will reach the actual theater. I've honestly never met anyone who hasn't ►



Photo: Stefan Gawlick

been lost for words for at least five minutes after setting foot in this hall for the first time. After the shabby facade and puny doors, this theater looks that much more magnificent and splendid. The ancient Roman-theater-style *scaenae frons* back screen stretches across the stage with its remarkable *trompe l'oeil* street views, appearing to expand the stage both in terms of width and depth. In front, the semicircular seating area for the audience, does not, just as in ancient times, offer any comfortable seating. You simply sit on the steps. A curved ceiling painted to look like a slightly overcast sky gazes down at the whole ensemble. With the exception of ancient open-air stages, nothing quite like this hall has ever been seen before or after. It is truly an indescribably precious solitaire gem.

From an acoustical perspective, the Teatro Olimpico is very unique. As the 800 spectator seats are arranged in a semicircle, no one is really very far away from the action; and no matter where you sit, you almost always feel like you're only a few steps away from the stage.

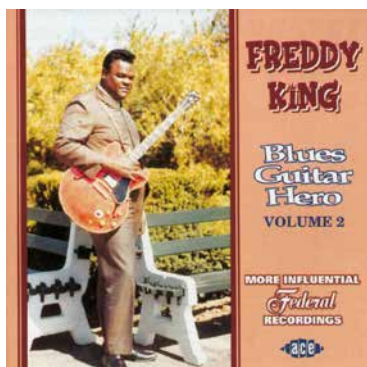
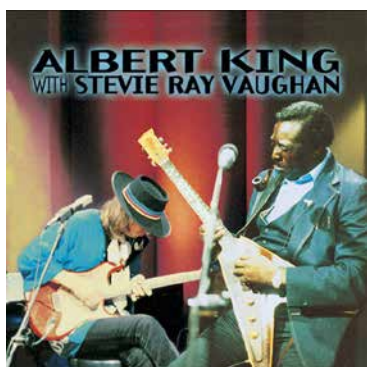
For the musicians, this also holds a special quality as every repertoire feels like chamber music here. The hall's particular ambiance, the proximity to the many audience members, and the immediate sound, which has the same quality almost everywhere in the hall, all contribute to a convergence of circumstances that elevate concerts above everyday musical performances. The Teatro Olimpico is, of course, no better than most other famous halls—it's too small, too impractical, climatically a disaster, and the lighting ... well, the less said about the lighting the better. And yet I wouldn't miss a concert here for the world and I can't emphasize enough how strongly I feel about you needing to take a little detour to Vicenza as soon as you possibly can. ■

<http://www.teatroimpicovicenza.it>

Music tips | Recordings with characteristic concert-hall sound: There are no noteworthy recorded productions from this hall available at this point, which makes coming for a visit all the more worthwhile.

THE THREE KINGS OF THE BLUES

When blues guitarists talk about their idols, at least one of these three names is sure to crop up:
Albert King, B.B. King, or Freddie King.



Albert King & Stevie Ray Vaughan
In Session
Label: Speakers Corner
Format: 2 LP (200 g, 45 rpm)

B.B. King
King Of The Blues
Label: in-akustik
Format: LP (180 g)

Freddie King
Blues Guitar Hero
Label: Ace/Soulfood
Format: CD

White rock 'n' roll and country guitarists have preferred the crisp-chirping Telecaster and Stratocaster models produced by electric guitar designer Leo Fender. The three African-Americans, later crowned “The Three Kings of the Electric Blues Guitar,” developed their own signature styles in the 1950s playing gutsy reverberating Gibson electric guitars.

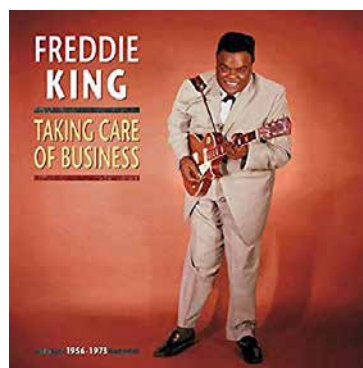
Albert King (1923–1992) earned himself the nickname “The Velvet Bulldozer” with his soulful, rich-sounding Gibson. His singing voice wasn’t all that versatile, so he preferred to let his strings do the talking. In his hands, the futuristic-looking Gibson Flying V transformed into a down-home, familiar-sounding talkin’ blues guitar. The 11 tracks on *Born Under a Bad Sign* portray this maturation process. The album was compiled in 1967 from hit singles that King had recorded for the soul music label Stax Records in Memphis, Tennessee. Booker T. & The M.G.’s and other Stax studio musicians accompanied him on this classic album, expressing their feelings for blues with an audible intensity. Kevin Gray remastered the original analog master tape in 2017 for Speakers Corner Records.

King’s “storytelling” guitar has never sounded as defined as it now does after having been remastered.

Stevie Ray Vaughan cultivated the bluesy art of telling a story on the slender sounding Stratocaster. In 1983, he duetted with King during a very intimate live show on Canadian television. The African-American and his white acolyte finally managed to blur the lines between black and white blues as part of this masterclass. Analogue Productions’ vinyl remastering (45 rpm) of *In Session* meticulously documents this meeting of minds between two top blues guitarists.

B.B. King (1925–2015) was the greatest call-and-response virtuoso out of the three Blues Kings. When asked about his dialogue with Lucille, a black lacquered Gibson, the singer and guitarist once said: “When I sing, I play in my mind; the minute I stop singing orally, I start to sing by playing Lucille.” B.B. and Lucille inspired many copycats with the release of the studio LP *King of the Blues* in 1960, especially in Great Britain. ►

B.B. King & Eric Clapton
Riding With The King
 Label: AFZ/Sieveking
 Format: Hybrid-SACD

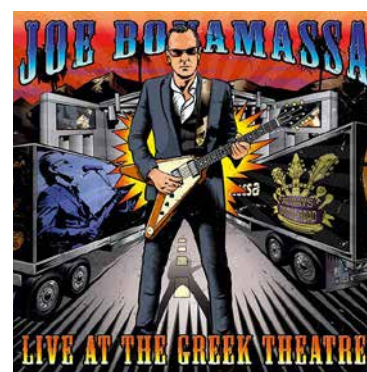
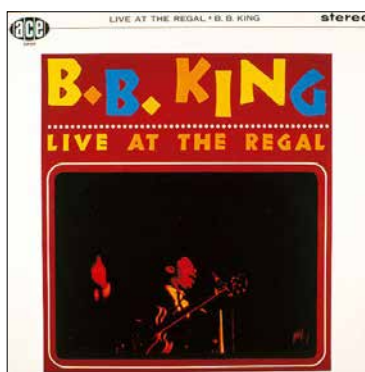


Freddie King
Taking Care Of Business
 Label: Bear Family
 Format: 7-CD-Box inkl. Buch

Albert King
Born Under A
Bad Sign
 Label: Speakers Corner
 Format: LP
 (180 g)



B.B. King
Live At The
Regal
 Label: Ace/
 Soulfood
 Format: LP



Joe Bonamassa
Live At The
Greek Theatre
 Label: Mascot
 Format: 2 CD
 oder 3 LP (180 g)

On November 21, 1964, King took the stage at the Regal Theater in Chicago, the birthplace of rhythm 'n' blues, and once again proved he reigned supreme. Despite even young African-Americans starting to see The Rolling Stones and The Beatles as the legitimate heirs to blues, if not its inventors, King had corrected this misconception with his exceptional, highly entertaining Regal gig. He would later say he had played much better at hundreds of other concerts than on that particular evening. Nonetheless, Mark Knopfler and other rock stars took inspiration from the dramaturgy of *Live at the Regal* when they planned their stage shows. King's most commercially successful album was recorded with straight-A student Eric Clapton: *Riding with the King*. Dynamically compressed for radio play, the CD sold more than 4 million copies worldwide and won the Grammy Award for Best Traditional Blues Album in 2001. It also offended the ears of every discerning blues fan under the sun until California mastering engineer Steve Hoffman finally brought the audiophile qualities of this once-in-a-lifetime project to life. The different blues-guitar philosophies of King and Clapton finally take full shape on the SACD version, complementing each other.

The cool rocking counterpart to Albert and B.B. was Freddie Christian King (1934–1976), whose aggressive plucking technique earned him the nickname “The Texas Cannonball.” His instrumental hit “Hide Away”

has become a standard for countless amateur blues-and-rock combo musicians performing today. When reissue labels release recordings of this guitarists' favorite guitarist, they often don't know whether he had originally recorded the music as Freddie King or Freddy King. On a CD of his earlier works, Ace Records presents the “Blues Guitar Hero” as “Freddy King;”

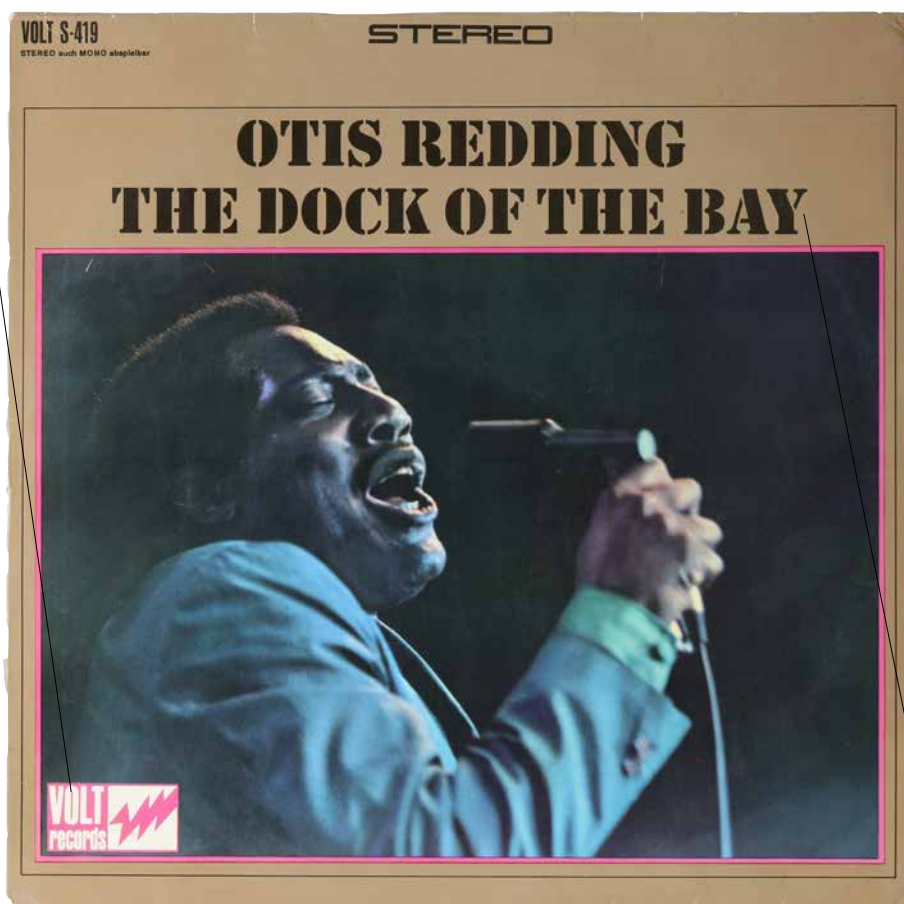
but on the cover photo of *Taking Care of Business*, his name is written as “Freddie King.” The seven-CD box set contains all the studio tracks he recorded between 1956 and 1973 for various labels. Like many other disk and book box sets from Bear Family Records, this seven-CD collection is now also considered an “official” source for people born after the artist's time who want to know which idols inspired today's blues-rock stars. Arguably the most famous artist to carry the torch for Albert, B.B., and Freddie King is Joe Bonamassa. In 2016 he paid tribute to the three Kings with *Live at the Greek Theatre*. It probably would have sounded more or less just like this if “The Three Kings of the Electric Blues Guitar” had ever played together. In his homage, Bonamassa also revealed a few artistic limitations, however. After all, the soulful personality of Albert King, the almost sophisticated jazzy phrasings of B.B. King, and the adrenalin-inducing qualities of Freddie King are all but impossible for just one person to conjure up. ■

Winfried Dulisch

Forever young—celebrating 50 years of classic albums

OTIS REDDING: THE DOCK OF THE BAY

Release date:
February 23, 1968
Label: Volt/Atco
Production: Steve Cropper
Number of tracks: 11
Length: 30:07 minutes



Classic rock albums have been around for roughly 50 years now. Despite their age, many of them are still definitely worth a listen. It's high time we created a bourgeois-intelligentsia canon.

Lineup:
Guitar: Steve Cropper
Vocals: Otis Redding
Piano: Booker T. Jones
Trumpet: Wayne Jackson
Tenor saxophone: Andrew Love
Bass: Donald Dunn
Drums: Al Jackson

_____Otis Redding was the rising superstar. Even Isaac Hayes and Marvin Gaye paled in comparison to the intense energy of his voice. With a legendary explosive performance, Redding had just taken a completely new, white audience by storm at the Monterey Pop Festival. “I got a new audience,” he excitedly told his wife, Zelma. But he needed to take some time out to recover from the exertion of touring and what better place to do that than on concert organizer Bill Graham’s houseboat anchored at Sausalito, California. This is where Redding would write the first version of the lyrics for “Dock of the Bay” (allegedly Steve Cropper relocated the scene of the action in the lyrics to “Frisco” Bay) before then undergoing a tonsillectomy.

Recovered and with a better voice than ever before, he called Cropper and said: “I’ve got a hit!” Together, the two of them composed an arrangement and finished writing the lyrics. They recorded three versions

of the song, but still didn’t get the final take. There were plans to use The Staple Singers as backup vocalists as the song seemed to still lack a certain something. “I’ll see you Monday,” Redding said as he left the studio. But his fate would take a different course:

On December 10, 1967, Redding died along with his tour band and successful Stax band The Bar-Kays in a tragic plane crash (trumpeter Ben Cauley was the only survivor; bassist James Alexander didn’t perish as he flew on another plane). Redding died too early to ever hear the finished track, complete with seagull and wave effects. At 26, he even died too early to make it into the legendary 27 Club. He also died too early to enjoy the success of his first No. 1 hit single in the Billboard Charts.

Let’s turn our attention briefly to Detroit and the headquarters of Motown where label boss Berry Gordy could be found repeatedly banging his head against the table in frustration. Ironically, the main goal of ►

The Rolling Stones and Redding held a deep admiration for one other. The Stones covered “That’s How Strong My Love Is” (originally recorded by O. V. Wright) and “Pain in My Heart,” and Redding reciprocated with an upbeat, sweat-inducing rendition of “Satisfaction,” which most likely did nothing for Mick Jagger’s ego.

Redding’s influence on rock music is also apparent in the use of his name: for example, by The Doors in “Runnin’ Blue” (“Poor Otis dead and gone...”) and Paul Young in “Otis Blue.”

Highlights: “(Sittin’ On) The Dock of the Bay,” “I Love You More Than Words Can Say,” and “Tramp”

Interestingly, the whistled coda at the end of “(Sittin’ On) The Dock of the Bay” may have, according to unconfirmed rumors, originally been a placeholder for some missing vocals. However, Stax’s Al Bell refutes that claim: “That was no placeholder, that was Otis—the very essence coming out of him.”

Quotes:

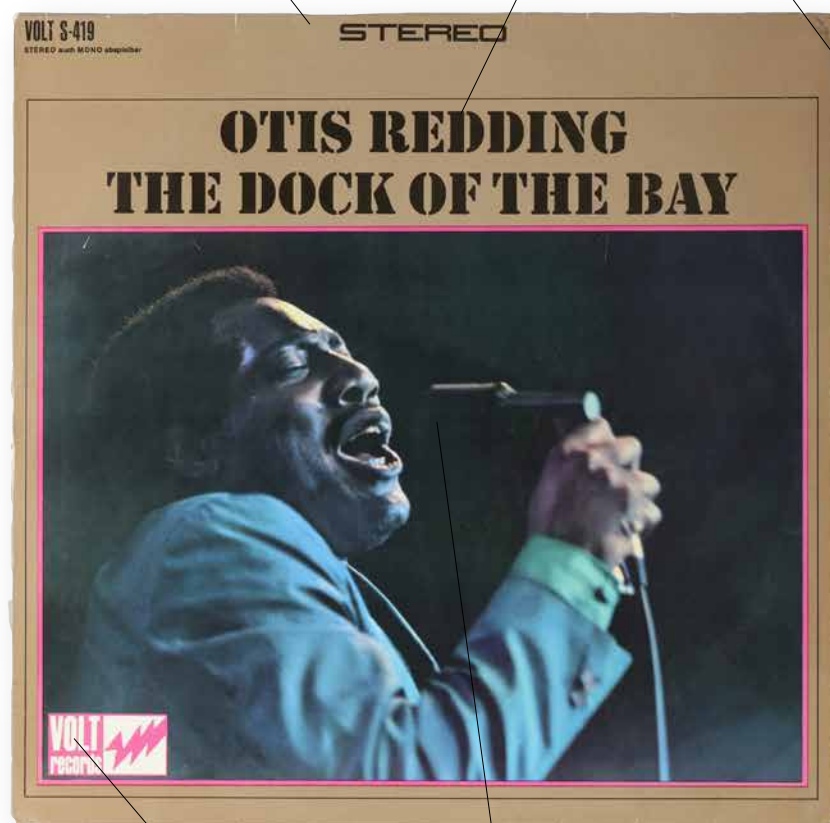
Steve Cropper about “(Sittin’ On) The Dock of the Bay”: “One of the hardest things I ever had to do was mix that song.”

“If he had come back that Monday, it would definitely have been different.”

“We didn’t put stuff down when we were writing, we just put it in our head.”

Stax boss Jim Stewart: “Otis was a hard worker and he grew as an artist with each record. Each time he came in he took more and more responsibility and more control of his sessions. The musicians respected him and loved him. He really lit up the studio when he was there.”

Zelma Redding: “Oh, God, you are changing.”



An extra bit of interesting info is that Volt and Atco were sublabels of the Stax-Atlantic cooperation. Volt was part of Stax, while Atco (“Atlantic Corporation”) was part of Atlantic.

In 1993, Booker T. Jones, Donald “Duck” Dunn, and Steve Cropper accompanied Neil Young on tour and closed every concert with “(Sittin’ On) The Dock of the Bay.”

Despite the casual, laid-back melody, “(Sittin’ On) The Dock of the Bay” is actually a critical take on social grievances and in terms of its content was very much removed from the usual themes found in pop and soul music at the time.

Cover versions: “(Sittin’ On) The Dock of the Bay” was covered several times as early as the year it was released, including by Glen Campbell and The Staple Singers; since then, hundreds of versions have been made. Just listing the best ones would take too long, but the most unnecessary one was without doubt the version by Michael Bolton in 1987. The version you really ought to listen to is the one Willie Nelson and Waylon Jennings made.

major rival Motown, which was to land hits in the white charts, was of no interest to Stax. Neither Stax boss Jim Stewart nor Redding’s wife, Zelma, particularly liked “Dock of the Bay;” they felt it lacked Memphis soul and had too much of a pop feel.

“(Sittin’ On) The Dock of the Bay” was set to launch a new phase in Redding’s career, one that involved a new way of writing and performing songs. The wildest of all the shouters, he was inspired by the creativity of

The Beatles and he admired Dylan and The Rolling Stones for their innovative approach to the blues. However, the story of the greatest-ever soul singer never reached its full conclusion. That’s why the album *The Dock of the Bay* ought to be in every respectable vinyl collection even though it’s only a collection of singles and B sides. It’s one of the most important musical legacies of America’s black heritage, representing the biggest-ever unfulfilled promise of soul music. ■

Helmut Hack



...and now for something completely different...



The American Corner II

BOULDER FACTORY VISIT

By Danny Kaey

_____The world of high-end audio is a strange one. I suppose any hobby at the extreme ends of the spectrum by definition jettison the status quo and aim for the moonshot. Ressence watches is one such company to use the audiophile approved and ever loved mechanical watch industry as a backdrop for a moment. Ressence can genuinely be described as the defacto disruptor of the high-end mechanical watch industry that genuinely took Switzerland by surprise if not outright shock. Jettisoning pretty much all of the existing design choices that everyone else has made, which in reality are nothing more than regurgitated—ad nauseum—reflexive

design choices of the last 50-60-ish years, Ressence took the white sheet approach and created what can only be described as a major disruptive design theme with their first release, aptly named Type 1. Visiting the Belgian company's headquarters or their Swiss manufacturing facility, I can only imagine the enterprising level of ingenuity that runs through their collective veins. Rightfully so, Ressence quickly rose to prominence in the horological world and is de facto a standard for ingenuity in an industry that's perhaps a bit stale and old school, certainly when compared to the latest tech-y lifestyle consumer goods we are consumed with. ►





Drill bit. \$\$\$



More drill bits, more \$\$\$



Gorgeous, CNC machining.

Meanwhile, Louisville, Colorado is home to perhaps one of the few truly highest of high-end audio manufacturers in the US. There are obviously a number of super high-end, super premium manufacturing houses in the US, but only a select few truly push the envelope when it comes to manufacturing standards, which is to say the fit and finish is Hermès like, Ressence like, Rolex like, Bugatti like, well, you get the drift. Naturally, this level of manufacturing competence comes at a price that's quite commensurate with the offering. Specialty tooling, specialty machinery and the latest state of the art CNC machines cost a bundle. Add environmental regulations, people (the most important element), and budgets quickly start to swell. Economies of scale do the rest. What you get

with Boulder is an electronics boutique quite unlike others, where, following my factory visit late August, I was left in awe of their operational excellence and expertise. The factory tour's front man was Rich Maez, himself a veteran twenty plus year head of sales at Boulder. Affable, a genuine high-end aficionado and consummate salesman, Rich offered up the usual "factory" talk on the shop floor as we walked each of the department head's sections and operations. Frankly, the tooling itself is a sight to be seen and reminds me of the array of tools at YG and Wilson. All premium, all super expensive—a cutting head for one of the CNC machines that Rich showed me has a replacement cost value of several thousand dollars alone—these tools are not merely part of the ►



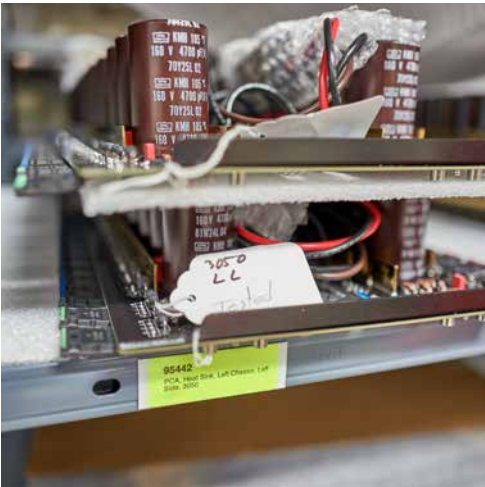


process, they are definitive must-have items without which none of the exquisite cutting of aluminum slabs simply wouldn't be possible.

Indeed, everything that you see, touch and feel on a Boulder amplifier is strictly made in house. Perhaps the only other company that offers similar levels of in house manufacturing obsession is YG, who merely a hop and skip down the street in Arvada, build some of the best loudspeakers in the world with the same devilish attention to detail as Boulder. That the two go hand-in-hand is a given and thus its no surprise that many Boulder and YG customers own each other's

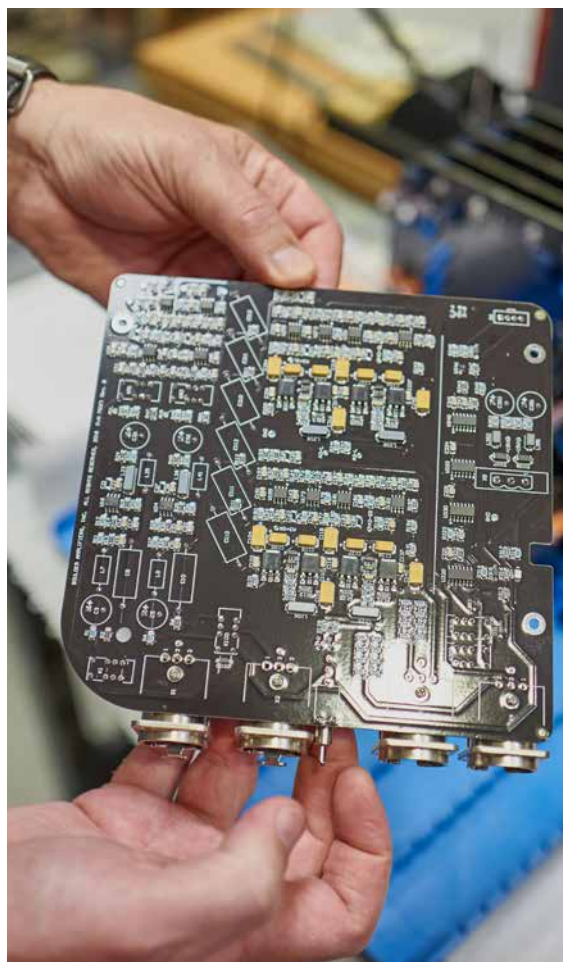
product ranges respectively. Back at Boulder, it is striking that each and every component is built fully in house using SMT—surface mount technology—which is the only way to offer the level of electrical qualities and integration Boulder aspires to. Thus, Boulder not only has their own P&P machine (Pick and Place, which is used to mount SMDs), they make their own PCB boards to boot. To say that Boulder is vertically integrated is an understatement, which is to say, Boulder truly builds everything they possibly can in house. Naturally, full control over the build process allows for certain integration to take place which other manufacturers simply cannot. Jeff Nelson, ►

Below: The new “little” 508 phono. Stunning.



Transformer.
Below: Kerry St. James YG and Steve Huntley of Boulder.





The 508 phono board. All built in house!

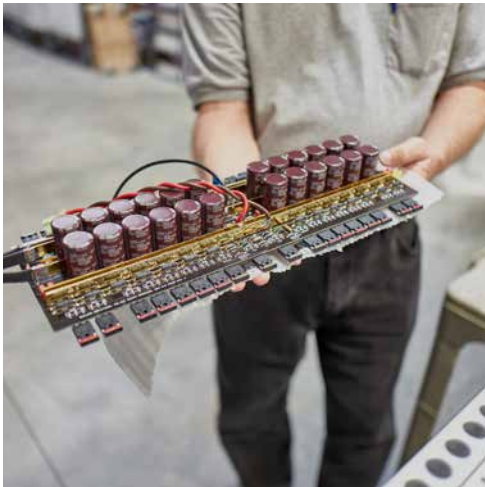
Boulder's founder and chief electronics engineer, likes it that way. Hearing his excitement and passion come through as he recites the early days of Boulder is infectious to say the least. Steve Huntley, a recent talent acquisition by the Boulder team, handling international sales, was himself awestruck of the who, the what, the why of Boulder. During a conversation with Steve I glanced that he long had admired Boulder and was merely waiting for the right time to join, so to speak. Apparently, timing is key to not only music but many successful moments in life, thusly, the Steve and Rich now share the bulk of global initiatives around the Boulder brand name.

Coming from Boulder's very first product in 1984, the model 500 amplifier, you'd know with some degree of certainty that Jeff Nelson was onto something special. Mostly going to studios (and still in service today!) and broadcast media where Nelson was a recognized name, it wasn't until the mid-nineties, 1995, to be precise and the launch of the all new state of the art 2000 series that things really began to shift for Boulder. Designed from the outset to be ne plus ultra components in the form of a stereo amp, mono block version thereof, a preamplifier and DAC, the 2000 series took high-end audio by surprise and frankly by storm. Indeed, it was Sturm und Drang all over ►

Service and support. Spot on!



Amplifier board... Amazing!



Boulder uses a fully rotating automobile engine stand to work on their amplifiers. WOW!



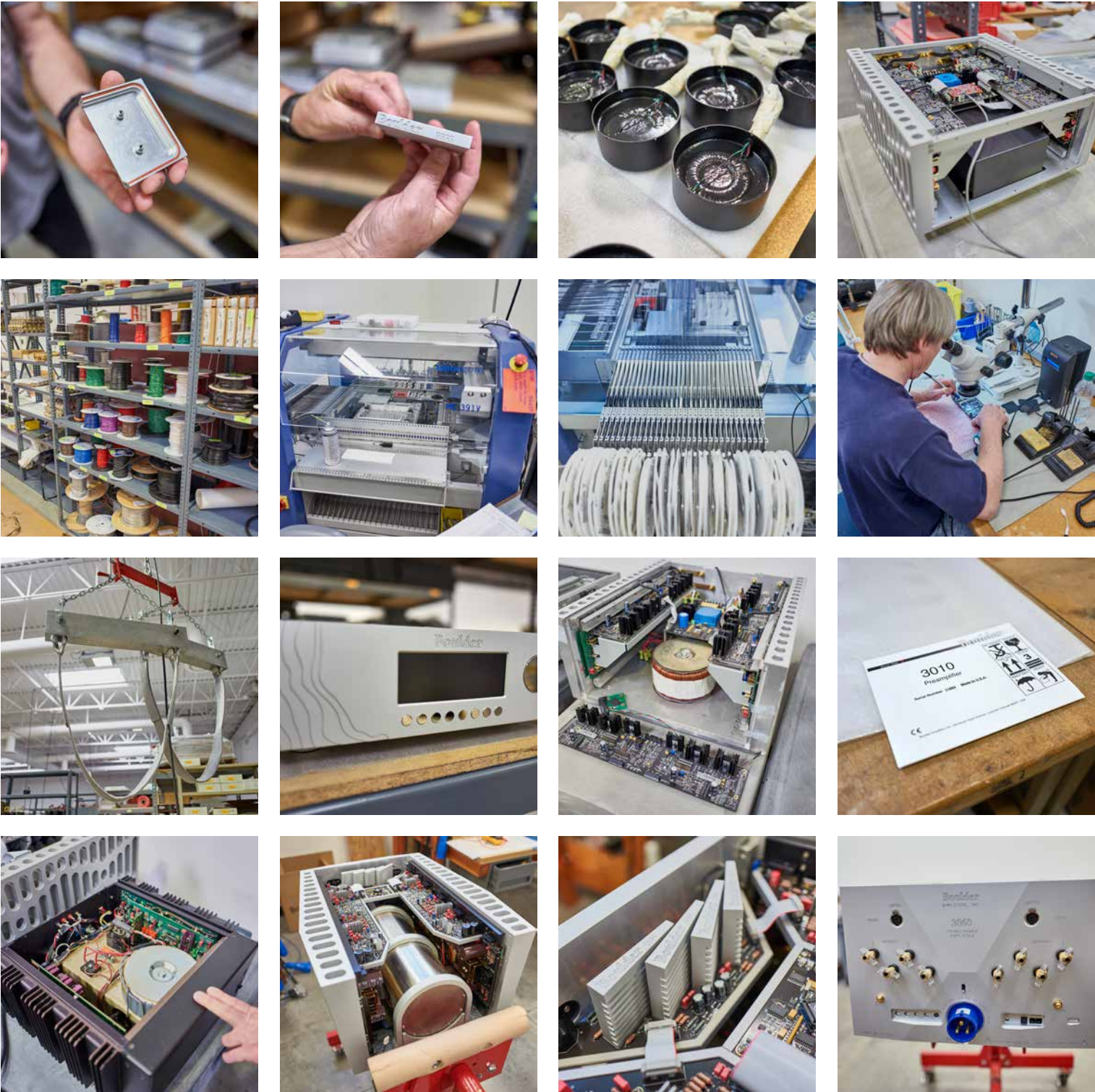


Mr. Boulder, aka. Jeff Nelson, founder of Boulder.

again, since sales skyrocketed and Boulder quickly became the “must have” super high-end component system on the market. In 1999 came the 1000 series which today enjoys quite the following and in its latest iteration is well within the percentile of performance even compared to the mighty 2000 series. But, customers demanded even more. Thus, in 2011, Jeff Nelson launched the ultimate series of components, the 3000 series. Because only more is more, this series

simply upended and usurped that which was seemingly possible. A statement product, in much the same way that Bugatti’s Chiron or Wilson Audio’s WAMM is the crown jewel of the brand.

My time at the factory was all too short and I could easily have spent more hours snooping around the various divisions, witnessing operational excellence at the HiFi level. The final straw was partaking ▶



Again: Simply stunning!



Referene 3000 series pre-amp.
Above: The control center. NASA-like.



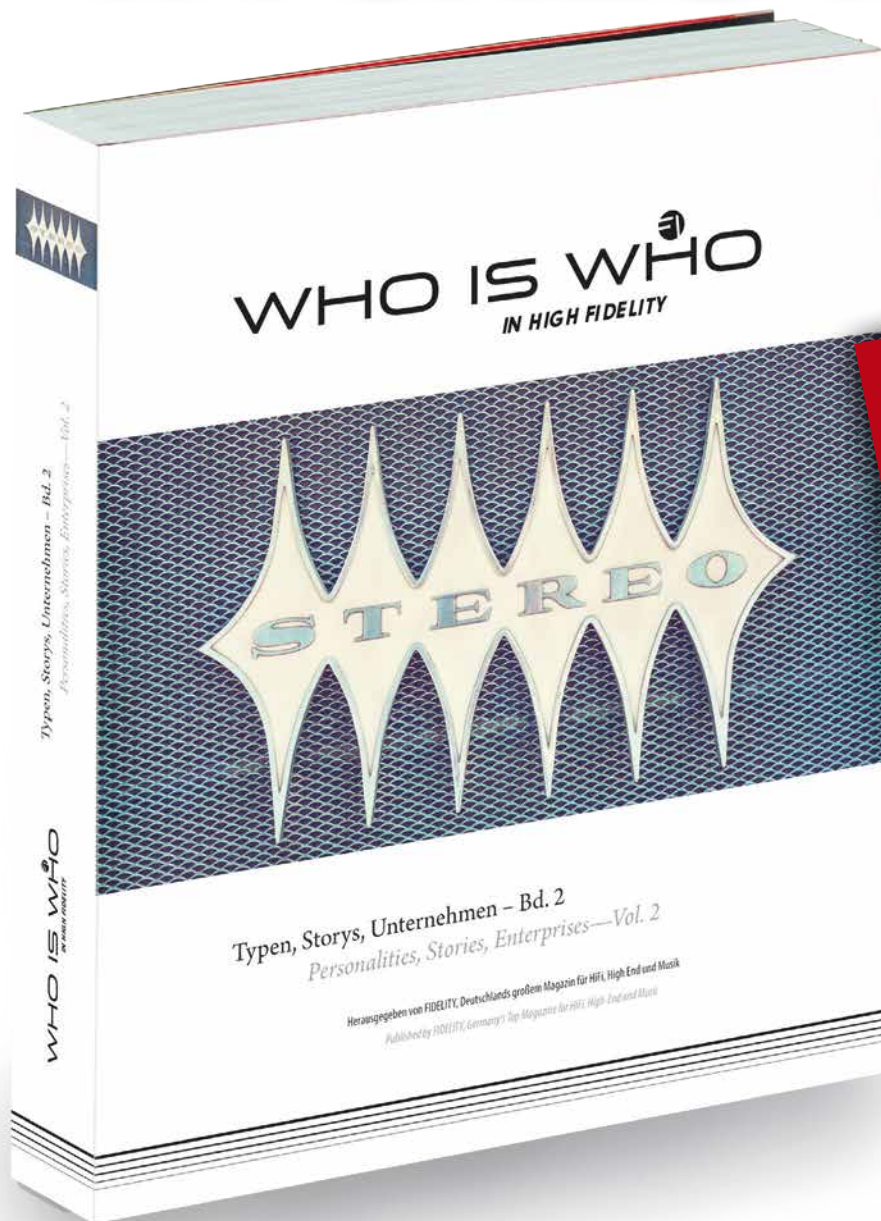
Reference music system.

in Boulder's customary coup d'etat, with a visit and listening session at their brand new, fully custom- and purpose-built listening studio. Completely detached—yes, you read that right—from the building's foundation, the listening studio really is a building within a building. From the outset, the Boulder team wanted to create with as much fanatical detail, a proper listening space that would reveal the most minute differences in their designs. Operated via the

aforementioned reference 3000 series, flanked by Focal's Grand Utopia speaker system, the acoustics and presentation offered up what can only be described as the ultimate experience in HiFi. No matter the track, the sound was simply awesome and monumental in ways that only a handful of systems manage to portray in this fashion. 'Nuff said. No doubt this writer's journey through Boulder has just begun... ■

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AUDIO REPLAS OPS-1S HR, OPS-1HR AND CNS-7000SZ

By Hans von Draminski. Photography: Ingo Schulz





When Danyel Rondthaler, boss of German high-end distributor SoReal Audio, arrived at the FIDELITY listening room a few months ago to set up the Austrian turntable Seismograph, he had also packed along a few accessories. Still practically unknown here in Germany, these stereo components can produce some very positive results when fine-tuning decent systems. The Japanese company Audio Replas, which was founded exactly 25 years ago in 1993, manufactures the accessories as well as makes and sells room-tuning devices.

This article will, however, first examine two little devices that can help enhance high-quality components. The whole point of Audio Replas' OPS-1HR vinyl weight, which tips the scales at 165 grams and has a diameter of 7 centimeters and a height of 2 centimeters, becomes readily apparent as soon as you use it: It's no secret these days that not only non-suspended turntables sound better if the vinyl is "stabilized" using a carefully balanced weight or possibly even a record clamp.

Over the years, we've seen all manner of designs for vinyl weights in our listening room—some so heavy that even the platter bearings of high-quality turntables would screech in protest while other designs would feature adventurous mixes of materials that incorporated wood, MDF, and metals of various pedigrees. But they all shared the same goal: to suppress stray resonance or even prevent it from occurring in the first place. The OPS-1HR, which will set you back €1,750, has also been designed with this noble cause in mind, but it adopts an altogether different approach to addressing the issue. Instead of ostensibly blocking resonance by sandwiching disparate materials, placing insurmountable barriers in the way before resonance can have any negative effects on a vinyl's sound quality, Audio Replas uses "audio-grade high-response silica glass." The physical characteristics of this material are quite different from conventional glass despite their shared name. The artificial silica glass of the vinyl weight has clearly defined vibrational properties, ►



which, according to the manufacturer, has a crystal structure similar to that of synthetic diamonds. This goes some way to explaining what, at least at first glance, seems to be a rather hefty-looking price tag for a vinyl weight. During our listening tests, including with the flagship turntables from Clearaudio, Transrotor, and Audio Note as well as with the Seismograph, the OPS-1HR behaved exactly as instructed, banished all jumpiness and confusion from the sound profile, and acted as the steady, authoritative hand of a conductor who understands how to neatly fan out even the most chaotic, busy, and densely packed orchestral piece and to integrate voices into the overall context without them losing any of their individuality. In contrast to many other vinyl weights, the Audio Replas OPS-1HR does not add a sense of sluggishness or heaviness.

Having said that, the 165-gram Audio Replas OPS-1HR could prove to be too heavy for some turntables. As a result, the SoReal portfolio also includes a smaller version of the neatly crafted silica glass circle: The OPS-1S HR (“S” stands for “small”) has a diameter of just 6 centimeters and a height of 1.2 centimeters; it weighs a mere 75 grams. This little magic circle could be yours for €890 and, depending on the configuration, can help even inexpensive turntables reach new sound-quality heights.

A few years ago, the influence of microphonics on sound quality was the subject of much debate and it grew clear that sound waves encountering a connection cable or power cable could seriously impair sound quality because they cause undesirable resonance and hence signal distortion. This rankled even those who, up to that point, had gone to the bother of making every tuning tweak possible. Since then, however, everyone has come to realize that “stabilizing” a system’s connection cables is also recommended. With this in mind, Audio Replas has developed the CNS-7000SZ cable noise stabilizer, a 15-centimeter-long, rather hefty metal housing for cables of varying thicknesses (two versions, depending on cable diameter, are available for €990 and €1,009) in a bid to actively damp resonance. Thanks to handy knurled screws and extremely solid workmanship, the device is very quick to open and close and can therefore be used in a matter of seconds. As with the vinyl weight, it’s worth trying out. Depending on the system configuration, the results can range from subtle to stunning. ■

Audio Replas OPS-1S HR (€890) and OPS-1HR (€1,750) vinyl weights and CNS-7000SZ cable noise stabilizer (from €990)

www.audio-replas.com/index.html

THE TOUCH OF SOUND

By Roland Schmenner. Photography: Ingo Schulz





_____WAY Cables' Champagne MkII USB cable not only looks stunning but delivers incredible sound quality, too

Music is at risk of disappearing altogether, at least in terms of its physical manifestation. It began with gatefold LPs, in all their tangible glory, meeting their demise when plastic CD cases entered the scene. Now the advent of streaming and downloads is sounding the death knell of physical materials playing any role in music playback. Disembodied data streams flit between our computer and the D/A converter, leaving only a tiny icon on the laptop or streamer's display to remind us of the human factor at the heart of the music we listen to. Realizing it's only tiny chips or ICs that convert our saved files into music just serves to reinforce this. But as audiophiles, we're well aware there's much more to enjoying music. The look, the feel: The high-end experience encompasses everything that wants to be celebrated. And in terms of sound quality, we also

know the promises of salvation made by Wi-Fi, Bluetooth and all wireless connections are nothing more than a pretense. And that's just where the connections from WAY Cables come in. They instantly transport you back to the good old days of audiophile bliss the moment you hold them in your hands, sense the exceptional workmanship that went into making them, and, most of all, experience the technical perfection and incredible sound quality they can produce. Behind WAY Cables is a Serbian team of specialists led by engineer Miroslav Popovic that handcrafts in Belgrade a wide range of real gems.

A unique combination of first-class materials

Whether intended for an analog or digital connection, all the cables in the top-notch series are instantly recognizable with their striking red cotton sheath, which can't fail to bring a smile ►



to your face when you pick up a cable to connect devices. This is a sensual experience and will remind you of the physical, material nature of music playback. But concealed within the cloth insulation lies a cutting-edge cable-technology concept yearning to be discovered. The design principle behind Popovic's cables, including the Champagne MkII, is anything but ordinary: Encased in a dielectric made of cotton, solid conductors comprise the cable's core. Its raw materials are UK-certified silver with 99.99% purity paired with oxygen-free high-conductivity (OFHC) copper. The copper used by WAY Cables has conductivity of 101.5% to 102.0%; the highest-purity silver it uses will, according to the company's website, achieve 106% conductivity. Usually, normal copper only achieves just over 99%. Let's take a closer look at the unusual cotton sheath: WAY Cables is keen to highlight that the cotton used in this special design has particularly good dielectric properties. This composition is apparently also exceptionally good at damping mechanical vibrations. What's more, the cotton sheath also leaves the cable wonderfully flexible and therefore also easy to manipulate.

Perfect results in every setup

Anyone who's spent some time tinkered around with connection cables knows it's not just the cable that impacts the quality of the connection; this depends just as much on nonstandardized electrical input and output variables of the connected devices. For that very reason, I tested the Champagne MkII in a variety of different configurations. First, I integrated the cable into my pure headphone system, where I had it connect a Linux laptop to the no-nonsense Schiit Bifrost DAC that would in turn send its signals to the Valhalla 2 tube headphone amplifier made by the same company. The sound produced by the Focal Utopia headset was completely free of any digital artifacts and interference. The high-res version of Keith Jarrett's early work *Facing You* came across as faultless and as if it were floating in the air—but always filled with a clear, pronounced bass and imbued with the richness and weightiness needed. When I in the past used a different connection cable to listen to this recording of Jarrett's performance, I found the music to be grainier. Top-of-the-range ►



headphones act as a kind of acoustic magnifying glass and can sometimes make even the slightest bit of unpleasant interference in digital playback very noticeable. This is not, however, the case when using the Champagne MkII.

“But what would happen if the WAY Cable were used to connect truly high-end devices?” I thought to myself. Luckily, I had Playback Designs’ ultimate MPS-8 DAC available to me. This time, my Mac mini acted as the sound source, using Audirvana+ to send the data to the Playback Designs device. The amazing thing about the MPS-8 is that it always upsamples the data rate of the files being played and can also be fed with all DSD variants. Regardless of the type of data the Mac sent out, the WAY cable would transmit everything with a stoic sense of calm and never experienced a single digital blackout to tarnish the whole affair. Even tumultuous and rhythmically tricky orchestral sections such as those found in the high-res recording of Stravinsky’s *Le Sacre du Printemps* (*The Rite of Spring*) from Reference Recording were conveyed with such an analog flow that, for

comparison purposes, I actually placed the 45-rpm LP of the same recording on the turntable platter to determine that the Champagne MkII was ignoring all the sharpness and edges of the digital version and only passing on the flow of the music. Digital reproductions really don’t get more natural and analog than this. The combination with Playback Designs’ MPS-8 is nothing short of a dream-team combo. And connecting your home DAC or streamer and your preamplifier or integrated amplifier with an XLR/RCA WAY cable will really boost everything to the next level and ensure constant, consistent high-end sound. ■

Digital audio USB cable, A-to-B plugs

Conductor: Certified soft solid-core 4N pure silver (min. 99.99% purity) | **Signal gauge:** 16.63 AWG/1.13 mm² | **Insulation:** pure cotton with 1.3 k dielectric constant | **Shielding:** Copper braid (min. 99.9% purity) | **Connectors:** High-performance copper alloy, gold-plated contacts, PBT housing, gold-plated metal shell | **Special feature:** exclusive wooden box with cable’s handwritten name and serial number | **Price:** €499 (1 meter)

WAY Cables | Music & Pleasure | Tel.: +381 64 1500 361 | www.waycables.com



The Bar-Kays were the founding fathers of Memphis soul. Long before Otis Redding signed them to Stax Records in 1967, they were touring the South in the US as The River Arrows and The Imperials. Once at Stax, they significantly contributed to defining the label's signature sound alongside Booker T. & the M.G.'s.

Dec. 15, 1944: Glenn Miller (supposedly shot down by friendly fire)

Feb. 3, 1959 : Buddy Holly, Ritchie Valens, and Jiles Perry Richardson aka "The Big Bopper" ("The Day the Music Died")

Sept. 20, 1973: Jim Croce (singer-songwriter, "Time in a Bottle")

1940

1950

1960

1970

1980

Time line of plane crashes

May 3, 1963: Patsy Cline (country music singer)

Dec. 10, 1967: Otis Redding and The Bar-Kays

Oct. 20, 1977: Ronnie Van Zant and Steve Gaines (Lynyrd Skynyrd)



They can be heard on countless recordings from Redding, Isaac Hayes, and Rufus Thomas, also producing a few hit singles ("Soul Finger" and "Son of Shaft") of their own. On December 10, 1967, the plane carrying the band as well as Redding crashed. Trumpeter Ben Cauley, who passed away in 2015, was the only survivor. Nevertheless, The Bar-Kays still exist to this day.

Aug. 27, 1990: Stevie Ray Vaughan (helicopter crash)

Nov. 24, 2001: Melanie Thornton (singer), María Serrano, and Nathalie van het Ende (Passion Fruit)

1980

1990

2000

2010

2020

March 19, 1982: Randy Rhoads (Ozzy Osbourne's guitarist)

Oct. 12, 1997: John Denver

Aug. 25, 2001: Aaliyah (singer)

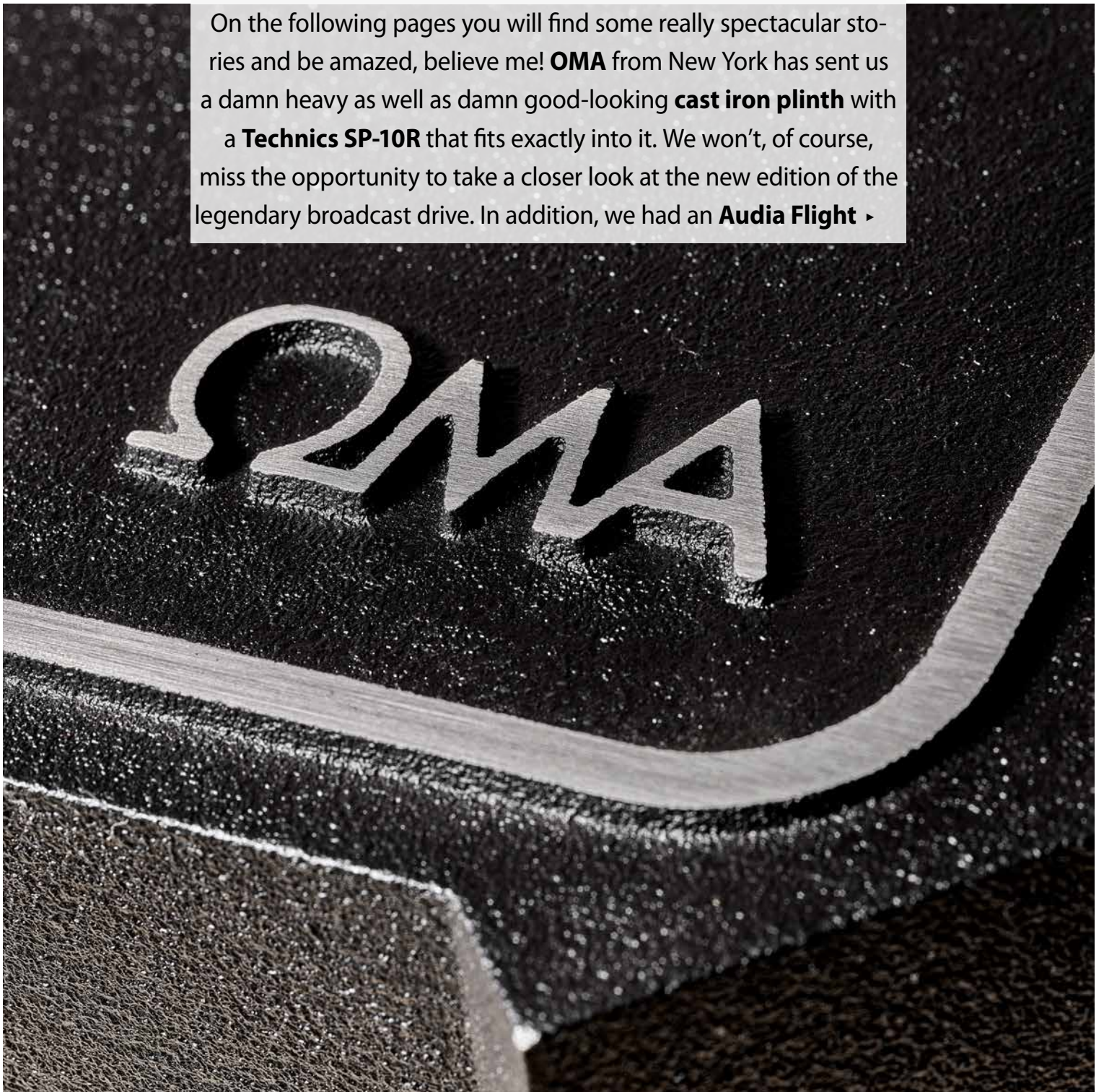
June 22, 2015: James Horner (film score composer)

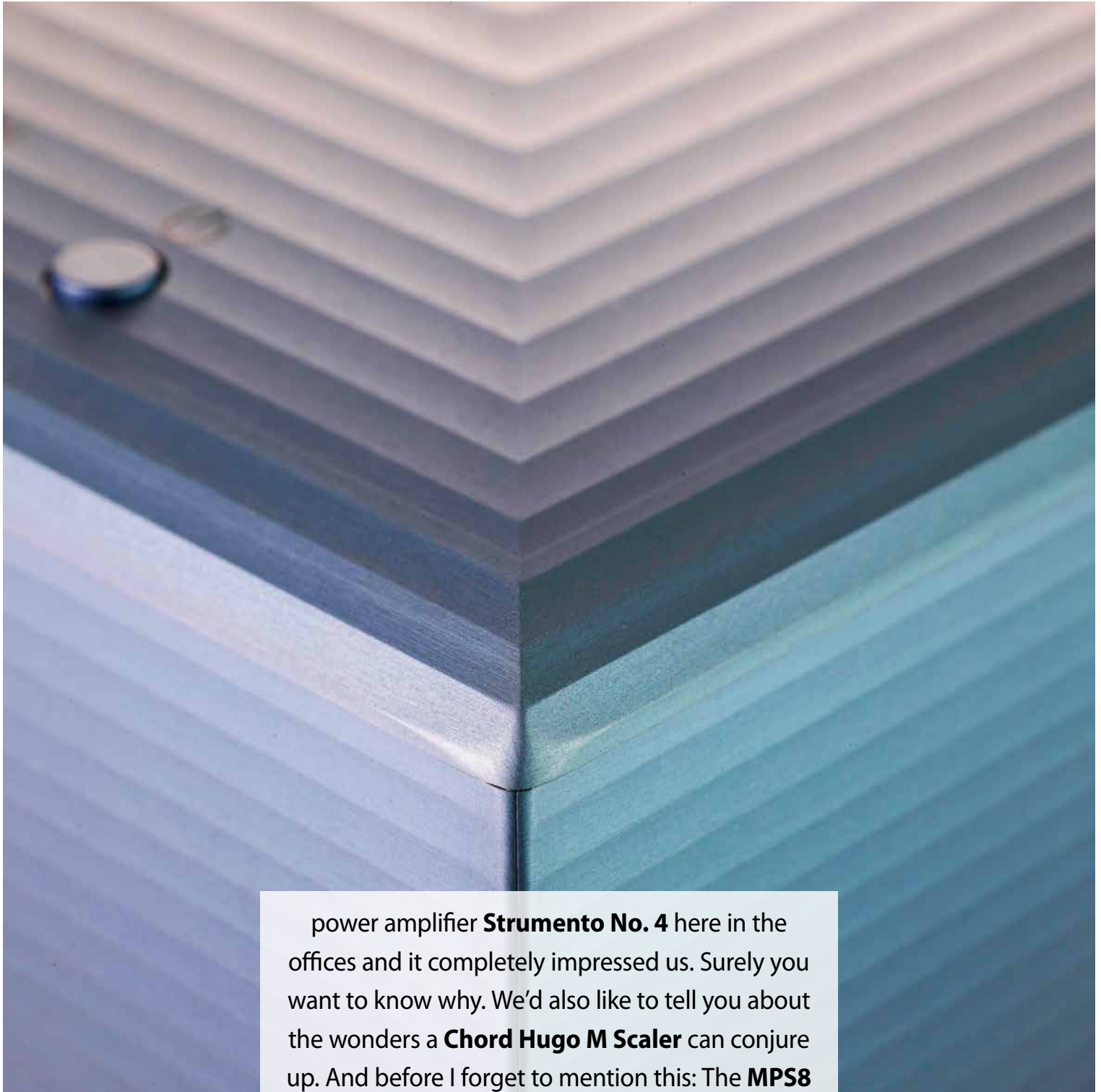
PREVIEW

FIDELITY international No. 12

Dear Readers,

On the following pages you will find some really spectacular stories and be amazed, believe me! **OMA** from New York has sent us a damn heavy as well as damn good-looking **cast iron plinth** with a **Technics SP-10R** that fits exactly into it. We won't, of course, miss the opportunity to take a closer look at the new edition of the legendary broadcast drive. In addition, we had an **Audia Flight** ▶





power amplifier **Strumento No. 4** here in the offices and it completely impressed us. Surely you want to know why. We'd also like to tell you about the wonders a **Chord Hugo M Scaler** can conjure up. And before I forget to mention this: The **MPS8 Dream Player** from **Playback Designs** has quite a fitting name.

FIDELITY international issue 12 will be available at the end of February 2019. Or whenever it's ready.



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