

# FIDELITY

international



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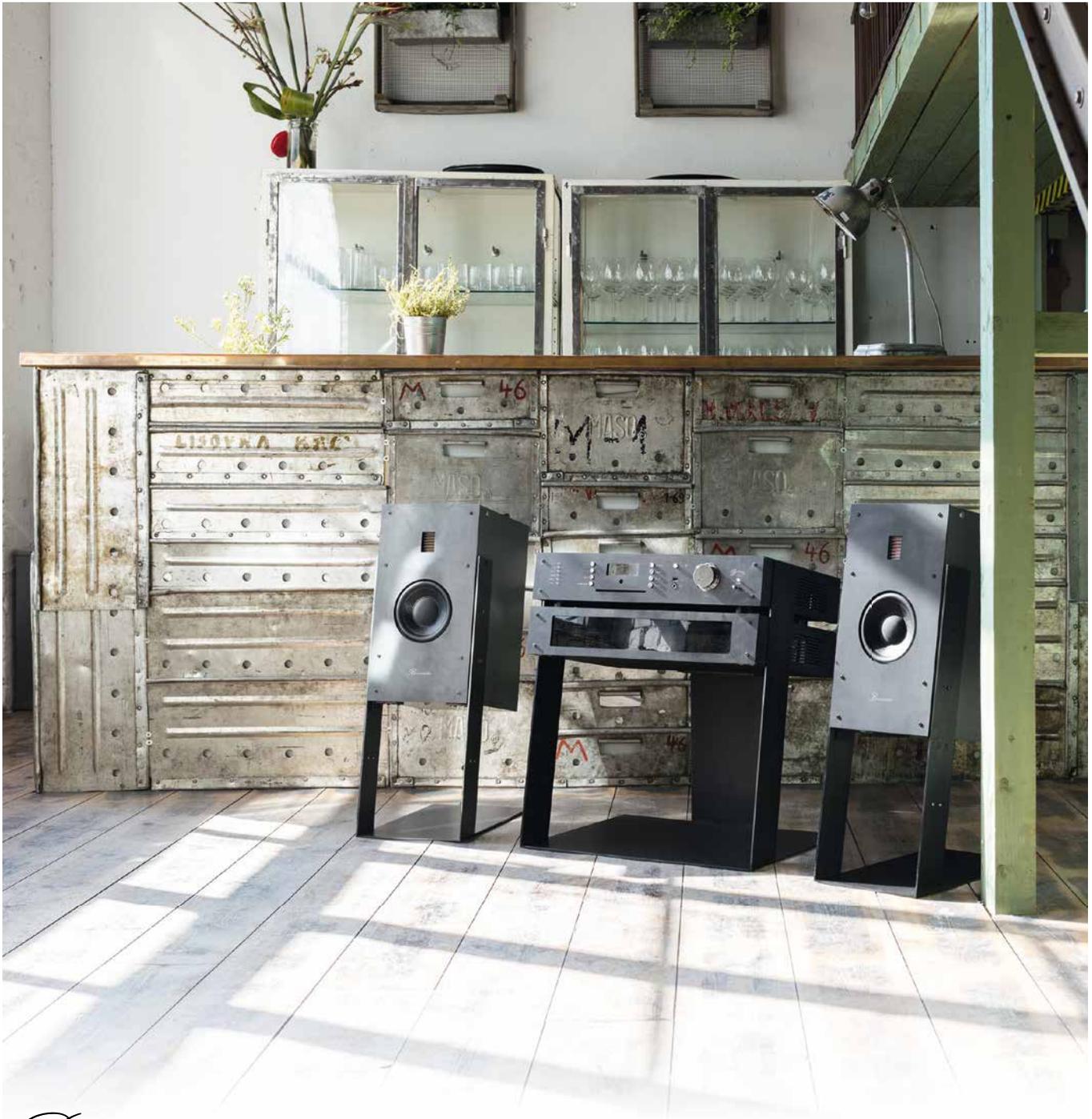
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14

03/2019 • Winter 2019

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



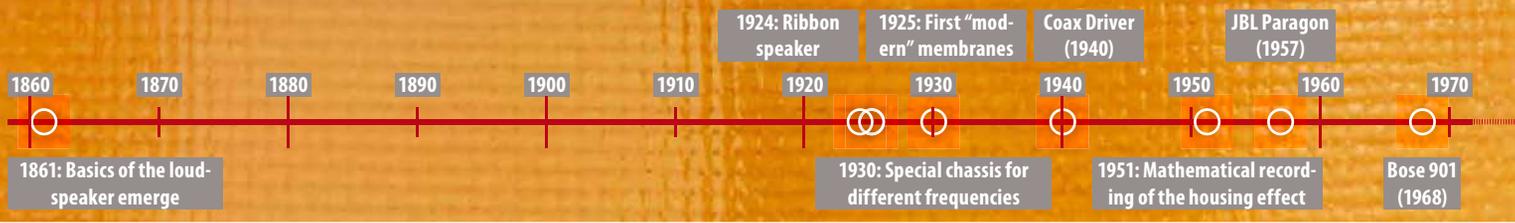
*Burmester*

## 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 design-oriented concept incarnates both the timelessness of the Bauhaus style steel tube furniture and the industrial charm of modern lofts.*

Photography: Dynaudio A/S | Denmark | www.dynaudio.com

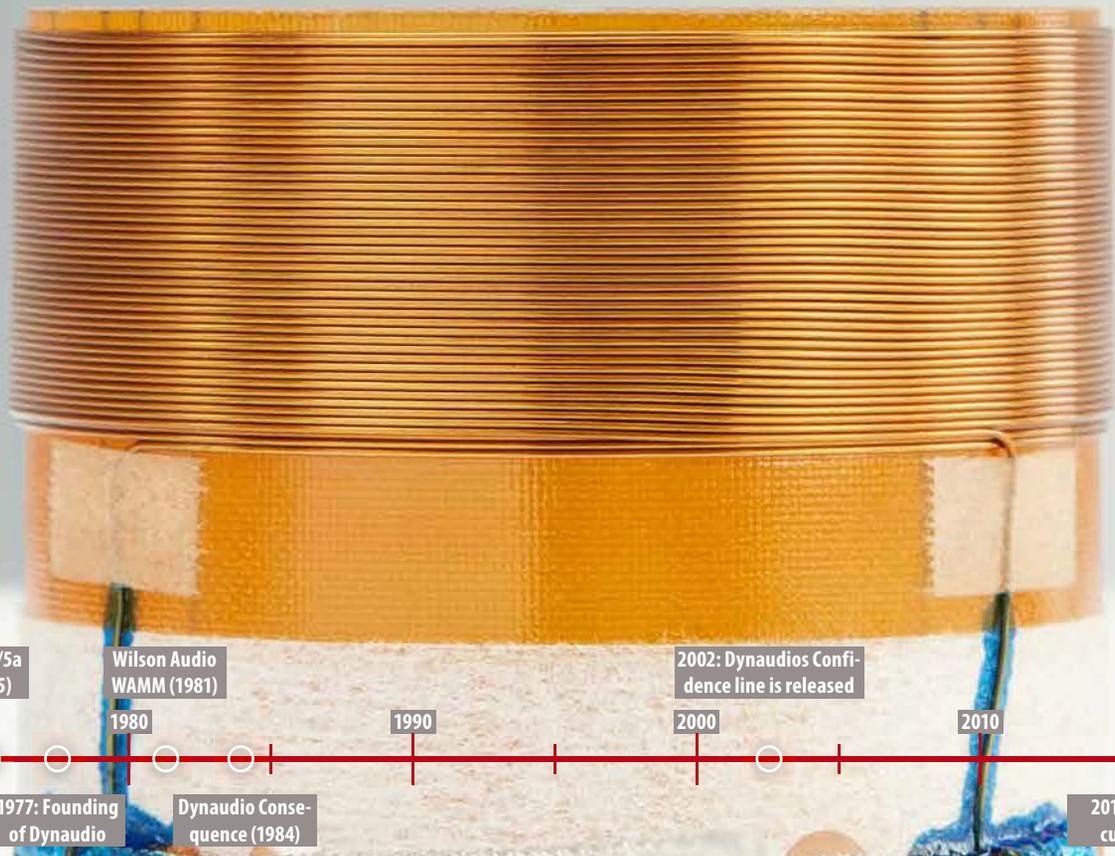
The copper wires nestle together, running in rows and limbs. Clean and flawless. Our magnification shows a coil, which explains itself, namely the swing ingelar coil of a loudspeaker. This, too, must have caught the attention of most readers. What does it belong to? ▶



Photography: Dynaudio A/S | Denmark | www.dynaudio.com

To Dynaudios Confidence 20, whose test you can find in issue 46 of the printed magazine. A small detail that at first glance would not be thought of as a feature makes the drive of the woat midway man smart: The coil carrier is made of plastic and not—as is so often the case—of light metal.

This is not an austerity measure, but a concession to physics. Metals and current are involved in electromagnetic interactions that affect the loudspeaker’s magnetic field. The impact may be minimal, but Dynaudio knows how to do it better: no metal, no interaction. It’s that simple!



# Formula xHD

- Proprietary Optologic DAC
- Pure FPGA-based R2R Ladder
- Fully-floating (isolating) D/A converter system
- Hybrid USB xCore 200 (dual core) in Bit Perfect up to 768 kHz PCM and DSD 512
- Filterless Non-oversampling digital architecture




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## Unconventional DNA

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La Voce S3 dac



La Scala Optologic dac



Formula xHD dac



La Diva cd transport

# DEAR READERS,



Carsten Barnbeck,  
Editor in Chief

A respected colleague recently pointed out a problem that he's not been able to shake off since the beginning of his journalistic career. Whenever he sits in front of his hi-fi system attempting to "just enjoy music", this mechanism activates: As soon as he finished one or two songs, he notices a minor issue: An subliminal annoying frequency, a soft noise or an inconsistency in the three-dimensionality of reproduction. And there he goes: moving speakers, checking cables, checking the current phase... or should he try another set of cables? Relaxed listening is no further question.

Poor guy, was my first thought. But then, just a few days later, I realized it's the same with me. As soon as I linger in front of my system, I ponder

about improvements, micro-tuning or argue with myself which models to replace my speakers with. Ironically it seems, I only enjoy listening in places that are far away from my "serious" system. With the small USB boxes in my study, for example, or in my car. It seems to be some kind of mystical hi-fi curse: Once you got the high quality components you always wished to own, it's hard to enjoy. Our intention for the new year is therefore: Just relax and enjoy listening to music. Let's see if it works.

Carsten Barnbeck



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03/2019  
Winter

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- 023 ..... Music Server  
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- 062 ..... Loudspeakers  
Wilson Audio Sasha DAW
- 085 ..... Preamplifier/Power Amplifier Combo  
Audio Note M6 and Tomei Kensei



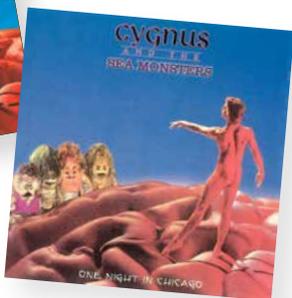
**Please note:** All items are listed with German retail prices (including sales tax) at the time of equipment evaluation.

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**Please note:** All items are listed with German retail prices (including sales tax) at the time of equipment evaluation.



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FinkTeam's Borg

# BECAUSE





# WE CAN!

By Stefan Gawlick. Photography: Ingo Schulz.



Building a loudspeaker always involves compromise. But in a case like the Fink-Team's Borg, an auspicious combination of 30 years' experience, passion, and cutting-edge technology has redefined the two-way concept itself.



\_\_\_\_\_ Surely someone out there has inventoried all the loudspeakers that Karl-Heinz Fink has played a role in developing. And without a doubt, the list they've come up with is incredibly long. That lets us draw a number of conclusions: Fink knows his stuff and has figured out where all the leverage points are located for exploiting a speaker's technical performance and achieving the desired sound. Although this applies to a lot of other loudspeaker

developers as well, Fink has a decisive advantage over them: He's a freelance developer. This means he has worked for a wide range of customers and never been forced to conform to a particular product or strategy template. He's had to bring fresh ideas to every project he's taken on, giving him a broadness of approach uncommon in the hi-fi scene. When you walk into the vast majority of showrooms, you're told that the approach used by the particular system

being sold is the only game in town. And in the next store you visit, you'll hear something quite similar about the completely different equipment being showcased there.

But when you talk with Fink, you won't hear him issue such categorical statements. Taking a pragmatic approach, he'll describe his measurements and experiments, go on to tell you about the conclusions he drew, and then ►



Two-way magic. Speakers in this price range frequently outdo themselves in terms of superlatives. The Borg refuses to indulge in this sort of behavior: It excels through the precision of its two (only two!) chassis, but these are truly outstanding.



explain how he successfully implemented the findings—one step leads to the next. FinkTeam crafts its own prototypes, allowing it to swiftly to put its theories to the test. This gives it an important advantage over other development groups at companies. Fink also provides a pragmatic answer to the question of why they would chose to build such a huge and expensive two-way speaker in the first place: While admitting it's an unusual step and conceding that many customers expect a few more chassis, Fink points out there's a lively market for highly refined concepts, particularly in Asia. And besides, he acknowledges (a satisfied expression spreading across his face), the FinkTeam built the Borg for another reason: "Because we can!" This claim might seem a bit audacious, but Fink's impressive background forces me to admit: He's one of the few people capable of backing up an assertion like that.

The specifications for the Borg included crucial features that took a lot of time and effort to implement. For one thing, the speaker needed to have a substantial bass. It also needed to avoid extraneous emissions bundling, which made a relatively low cross-over frequency necessary. Then the connected amplifiers shouldn't be confronted with an overly complex load so regular tube amps could be used. And lastly, the ongoing subject of undesirable loudspeaker resonance ought to be reexamined from ground up: An existing concept would not drive the development approach for the Borg here; no, the developers intended to wipe the slate clean and question everything that had gone before. For the housing, they used a multi-layered sandwich design comprising medium-density fiberboard (MDF) and insulating material that absorbs vibrations and converts them to heat. The limited number of parallel walls

reduces standing waves, and the numerous bevels lend additional stability to the already robust design. Toward the end of the development process, laser interferometry was employed to detect any remaining vibrations in the construction while the speaker was being driven. Detected weaknesses were alleviated by partially altering the construction in order to restrict distortion of the useful signal to the greatest extent possible. Fink and his colleagues have been particularly keen on eliminating peaks in vibration, regarded as especially harmful. Incidentally, this was a view shared long ago by the BBC's development engineers. They therefore designed partially stiffened soft housing so vibrations were disseminated as broadly as possible, perhaps permitting a light coloration in the music, but preventing any peaks at all.

Fink and his team put a lot of work into the design of the bass reflex ▶



The Borg's fine-tuning options include a delicate balancing of the upper mid-range presence. This can lend a subtle brilliance to voices and instruments without curbing their forcefulness.

tube. Part of the Helmholtz resonator, it's meant to exploit the sound enclosed in the housing. But because it tends to take on the frequency of its own length, it can develop a life of its own and intrude into the higher midrange rather than remain at the desired bass level. Fink's solution is as simple and it is ingenious: He splits the tube into two segments with different lengths and uses insulating material to fill the small gap between them. This doesn't interfere with the low frequencies because they "ignore" the interruption in the tube. The mid-range, however, "stumbles" into it and separates into two considerably higher resonance frequencies that both lie outside the problematic area and are much easier to combat.

The drivers were also specially designed for the speaker, and the tweeter is based on an Air Motion Transformer (AMT) supplied by Mundorf. Over the course of their long collaboration, Rainer Mundorf and Fink have become good friends, and Mundorf delivers AMT components for the Borg.

The FinkTeam then modifies them so the driver can deal with the targeted crossover frequency of 1600 hertz with as little distortion as possible. The bass-midrange driver has, however, been designed entirely in-house with specified components manufactured externally and final assembly taking place at the FinkTeam facility. Fink's favorite ingredients — such as a light as well as stiff membrane, an extremely robust basket, and a particularly large-diameter voice coil—are supplemented in this driver by an unusual feature the developers in Essen hold in very high regard: a slightly oversized magnet, which FinkTeam has compensated for by using a series-connected resistor to curb the drive. After conducting exhaustive listening tests, the developers concluded that a large, curbed magnet would always produce a better sound than a correctly dimensioned but unadapted magnet.

The crossover, a sophisticated Linkwitz-Riley fourth-order unit, is similarly complex. It features a slight time delay to slow down the fast Air Motion

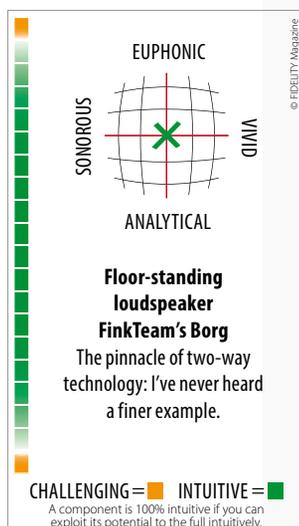
Transformer so it is in line with the naturally slower bass-midrange unit. The speaker offers a number of fine-tuning options above the terminals so listeners can also enjoy the Borg when conditions are less than ideal: The control labeled Damping adds small amounts of resistance to help amplifiers with low damping factors. Owners of powerful transistor amps can leave the knob at zero for no adaption. The control dubbed Mid operates within the range of 500 and 2,000 hertz. Maximum adjustments of plus or minus 0.5 decibel enables listeners to position the virtual stage closer to or farther away, to satisfy their individual preferences and expectations. The Borg's Presence control function lets users adapt for the characteristics of connected devices. The range of between 1 and 5 kilohertz, is ideal for making a system sound softer or brighter. Overdamped or underdamped rooms can be corrected with a shelving filter above 3 kilo hertz.

This extensive, complex description naturally begs the question of ▶



KARL-HEINZ FINK IS AN ABSOLUTE MASTER OF HIS CRAFT. HE'S BEEN DEVELOPING LOUDSPEAKERS AND ELECTRONIC COMPONENTS FOR SEVERAL DECADES NOW, WORKING FOR FAMOUS BRANDS SUCH AS NAIM, YAMAHA, MONITOR AUDIO, DENON, AND THORENS. THE BORG CAN BE REGARDED AS THE DISTILLED ESSENCE OF EVERYTHING HE'S LEARNED OVER THE COURSE OF HIS EXTENSIVE CAREER.





whether it's all worthwhile. Is the Borg really as outstanding as it might seem? The short answer is "yes." I have seldom experienced a speaker that makes such an astonishing impression. My ears had become so accustomed to the Borg's natural, laid-back sound that I couldn't get it out of my head even after my time with the speaker had come to an end.

Actually describing the sound produced by the FinkTeam's Borg is difficult. In fact, it's easier to say what you can't hear: interference. You're probably familiar with quality two-way speakers that are as good as any massive multiway model in their ability to perform naturally and unpretentiously and to provide music that sounds authentic and unadulterated by technology. This is the fascinating quality of every good BBC derivative. Combine these positive attributes with the wealth of detail, low resonance, and deep three-dimensionality of an excellent three-way speaker in your mind's eye and you will have some idea of what the Borg is capable of.

Carsten Barnbeck and I sat down together in the magazine's listening room for our first test session, an exciting moment full of expectation. We started off with Beethoven's *Grande Sonate Pathétique* (András Schiff, ECM). Because of its fast, almost glissando-like runs through the crossover frequencies, this wonderful sonata is a real test for any speaker. But before I could start to assess these particular aspects, Carsten and I began to talk about the acoustics in the concert hall where it was recorded (Zürich's Tonhalle), the apparent microphone positions, Schiff's pedal technique, and similar types of music. And this exemplifies one of the Borg's most outstanding characteristics: The speaker is able to retreat entirely into the background, placing the focus on the recording itself—with all its strengths and weaknesses. We heard a lot of both, particularly when we got to Ferenc Fricsay's legendary recording of *The Magic Flute* (DGG). All problem areas were clearly distinguishable, ensuring the Borgs would become a firm

favorite among professional sound engineers. At the same time, the music was projected into the room in such an authentic two-way manner that it was hard to escape its magical effect. Am I singing the Borg's praises too loudly? No, not loudly enough! And I've already started saving my shekels. ■

#### Floor-standing loudspeaker | FinkTeam's Borg

**Functional principle:** Two2-way bass reflex loudspeaker with AMT tweeter | **Impedance:** 10 Ω | **Crossover frequency:** 1,600 Hz | **Bass unit:** coated 26-cm paper membrane | **Tweeter:** Air Motion Transformer from Mundorf (64.64 cm²) | **Dimensions (H/W/D):** 30/105/40 cm | **Housing:** sandwich design, choice of several standard finishes | **Weight:** 52 kg | **Warranty period:** four years | **Price:** about €24,900  
[www.finkteam.de](http://www.finkteam.de)

#### ACCOMPANYING EQUIPMENT

**Turntable:** Transrotor Apollon TMD with SME 5, SME 3012 among others | **CD player:** Mark Levinson No. 390s | **DAC:** Merging Technologies | **Integrated amplifier:** Lavardin IT | **Preamplifier:** Crane Song Avocet | **Power amplifiers:** digital power amp based on ICEpower, Accuphase P-4200 | **Loudspeakers:** Spondor Classic 3/5, Wilson Audio Sasha DAW, Sky Audio 2.2 system | **Cables:** Vovox, AudioQuest, Audio Note



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.

# THE ROYAL ALBERT HALL, LONDON

After many great and beautiful concert halls, we now move on to one beyond compare. The Royal Albert Hall has the size, sound, atmosphere, and tradition to make it a truly remarkable experience for any touring musician still to this day. Built in the late 1860s and ultimately opened in 1871, the Royal Albert Hall is part of a memorial Queen Victoria had built in dedication to her beloved husband Prince Albert of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha who died at a relatively young age. It has achieved international renown for the BBC Proms, a series of summer concerts held every year since 1941 and surely the most famous concert series anywhere in the world.

Located right in the heart of the city, the Royal Albert Hall is just a stone's throw away from the two London Underground stations South Kensington and Knightsbridge. Anyone planning to visit London absolutely must take one of the various guided tours of the venue. The many cafés and boutiques dotting the area around South Kensington are also fun, though not for your wallet.

This concert hall holds a special place in musicians' hearts for various reasons. First, it's famous. If the Royal Albert Hall features on your tour schedule, you get the same feeling as with Carnegie Hall, the Musikverein or the Berliner Philharmonie. But in

contrast to these other wonderful concert halls, a somewhat less serious atmosphere permeates the Royal Albert Hall. After all, this is not an established temple dedicated to the worship of classical music but a place of entertainment—in the best sense of the expression. Quality is a must, but the genre is less important as long as everyone has a great evening. As a musician, you notice that the audience is simply more relaxed than when they're seated in one of the bastions of classical music. And that's a good thing; as here, on the stage, musicians are confronted with a very large audience: 7,000 seats and standing room for 2,500 people make the Royal Albert Hall the world's largest concert hall for ▶

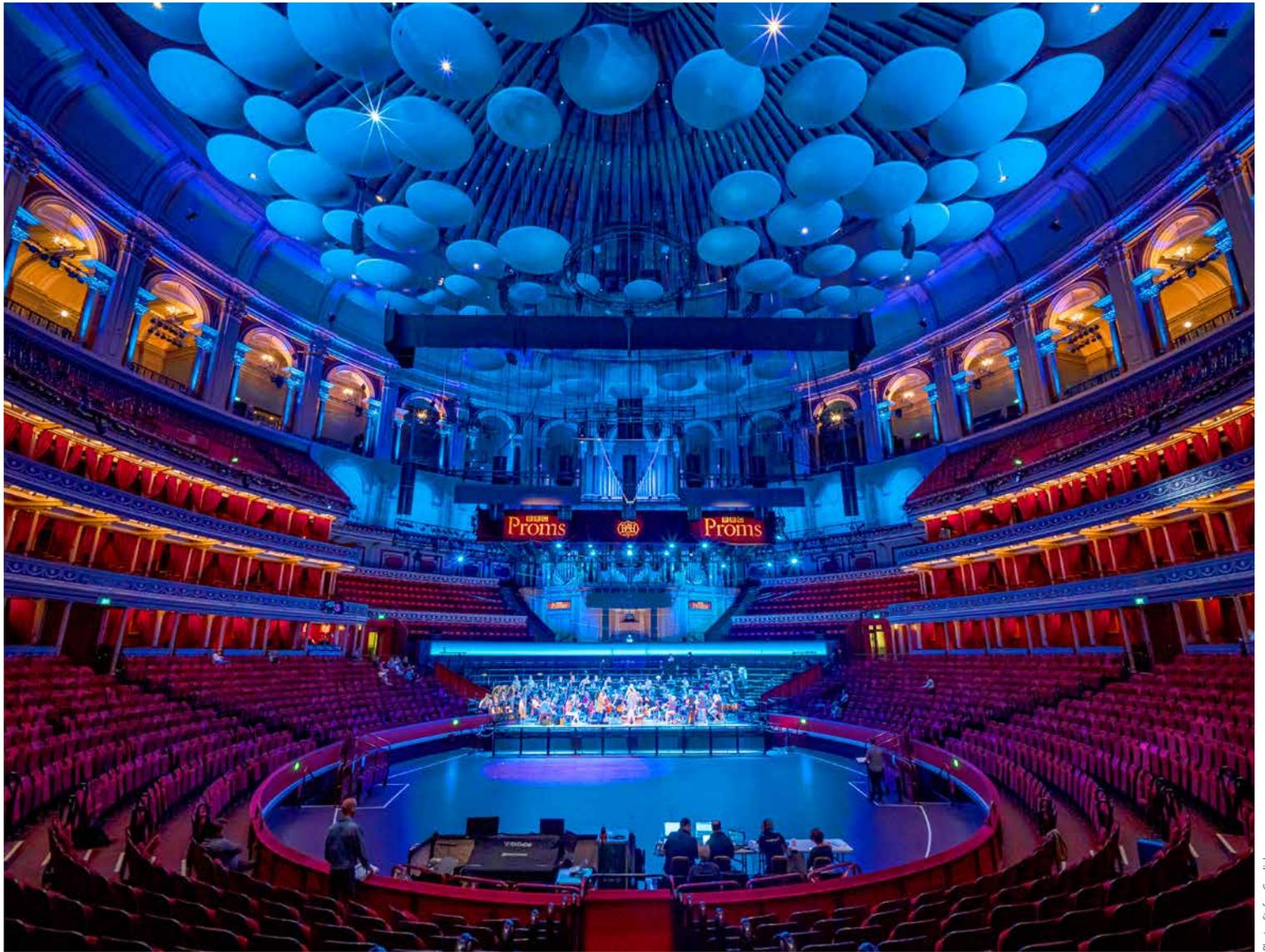


Photo: Stefan Gawlick

classical music. But admittedly if you've had a rehearsal in the afternoon when the majority of the dimly lit concert hall wasn't visible, you do get quite a shock when you later go on stage for the concert itself. I haven't come across any other concert hall that provides such an intense "arena feeling," especially once you're seated on stage with one of the famous London orchestras and you feel the electricity coursing through the audience even before the first note has been played. And then when the concert turns out to be really great the unsuspecting

musicians are engulfed in an inferno that's probably unparalleled anywhere in the world.

The sound. After all, sound is one of the main focal points of this series of articles. The sound in the Royal Albert Hall is, however, of secondary importance at best. On the stage you feel quite abandoned as you get the impression that every note is immediately swallowed by the depths of the concert hall. This leads to many musicians appearing there for the very first time play everything slightly too loudly. But that's

not really necessary at all as the domed hall works incredibly well. What's also fascinating about the venue is that the sound comes across quite differently in many parts of the auditorium. But ultimately that isn't that important. Not here anyway. Just listen to a few BBC broadcasts of the Proms and you'll start to understand why this concert hall is so unique. And no summer in London is complete without the Proms. ■

**Music tips—recordings with characteristic concert-hall sound:** BBC broadcasts of the Proms.



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

FOR MUSIC TO BE IN HARMONY WITH HEGEL'S CONCEPT OF THE UNFOLDING OF TRUTH, IT NEEDS TO BE PURE AND UNCOMPROMISING. AND THIS IS PRECISELY WHAT MELCO'S OUTSTANDING N10 TWO-BOX STREAMER PROVIDES.





Melco N10

THE  
UN-  
FOLD-  
ING  
OF  
TRUTH

By Roland Schmenner. Photography: Ingo Schulz.





\_\_\_\_\_The digital music revolution aroused so many expectations. A simple push of a button would be enough to unleash thousands of music files to assail a listener's ears. But each time we refuse to be satisfied with the mediocre and instead seek the exceptional and remarkable, we are reminded that little of this original promise remains. What we are searching for, of course, is the ultimate listening experience, a purity of music divorced of all disturbing influences. And this is when we come to realize the extent to which the dreams of digital simplicity have evaporated. Confronted by a jungle of sampling rates, converters, players, and storage devices, we're forced to recognize that the devil is still in the detail, and a simple push of a button has transformed into a major construction site. That's why we're delighted by any attempt to clear the debris cluttering up a simple path to musical enjoyment—and this is where Melco's products come in.

## From analog to digital

Melco was founded by Makoto Maki in Japan in 1975. An enthusiastic audiophile, Maki established the company so he could implement his own ideas and expectations about good sound. The company's four-part turntable systems are the stuff of legend—the combination of platter, mat, base, and motor unit weighing a hefty 110 kilograms. Building on these beginnings, Melco widened its product portfolio

to become a major manufacturer of computer peripherals. Buffalo Inc., a famous name in hard disks, Ethernet data switches, and storage devices such as NAS drives, is now a Melco subsidiary. The route from its nonsuspended turntables to its current streaming devices was therefore clear and logical for the Japanese company. And while traversing this path, it has continued to pass down Maki's firm belief from the original analog days that the music source is the most crucial component in a hi-fi system. The latest N10 product development consists of two units: the separate, imposing linear power supply unit that ensures the head unit receives stable, interference-free power and the head unit itself, which is responsible for processing input files and which also boasts a large storage capacity of its own. Extremely robust construction makes certain no vibrations influence the units' inner workings. Melco's N10 carries no supplementary device designation because it's not exclusively a streamer or a network player: Depending on the configuration, the N10 can assume different roles within a hi-fi system—as a UPnP server via the streamer or as a DAC player connected over the USB.

## Cleaning up communication signals

But what exactly is so special about Melco's approach? Alan Ainslie, a celebrated veteran of the digital music scene, has been working for

Melco for the past four years. In our interview with him (see below), he continuously stressed that the Melco devices were not audio devices in the precise sense of the term. No, their primary purposes are to process, arrange, and synchronize data packets before they are sent to the DAC—that is, before the digital signal is converted to analog audio signals. Most conventional IT-based music servers establish a connection between the home network and the music equipment over the router. This also means, however, that interactions occur between the audio files and all other communication signals within the network, which causes inconsistencies in the real-time data flow. To prevent this, one of the N10's two Ethernet ports is connected to the network to receive this chaotic and polluted data traffic. After having been filtered and, more importantly, reclocked, clean traffic is passed on to the actual network player over the second Ethernet port. This not only benefits NAS files, but also in particular streaming packets originating from popular platforms such as Tidal or Qobuz. It's also possible, of course, to do without an additional network player and use the N10 as a player connected directly to a DAC. Another possibility is to take the direct route and import the music onto the N10's internal hard drive. And here's where the benefits of having essentially in-house components come in: Melco has been able to equip the N10 with carefully selected vibration-free Buffalo HDDs. ▶



## No computer skills required

The N10 is operated from a tablet computer using a dedicated app while also offering audiophiles with limited computer skills the option to easily control operation of the device using the buttons on the head unit. A hi-res display permits users to navigate confidently through the menus. A highlight is the specially

developed Melco Intelligent Music Library, where the latest firmware facilitates particularly user-friendly operation. Classic fans will appreciate the special formatting that streamlines access to information such as opus, composer, and performer. It's superior to conventional library systems with their frequent tagging problems. And connecting to Roon is possible as well. It goes without saying that the

N10 is also able to access Tidal, Qobuz, and internet radio.

After a comprehensive introduction to the device from Ainslie and Mika Dauphin from the German distributor Drei H, I started my sound experiment with the N10. As Melco has chosen to omit Wi-Fi support due to the potential interference problems and has opted instead ▶



for direct Ethernet and USB connections, I decided to also take a more direct approach by storing about a dozen album files on the N10's internal hard drive. At this point, I decided to use my Schiit Bifrost as a DAC. I also connected the M 903 studio converter from Grace Design to my Mac mini so I can later compare the N10's player capabilities with those of a Mac-DAC combination that uses a Wi-Fi link to my Fritz!Box. Attempting to identify the possible negative influence of communication signals within the network, I listened to my chosen files not only from the internal hard drive, but also from my NAS and streamed from Qobuz.

## Limitless sound

Experience has taught me that sound variations among different models of modern high-quality DACs are considerably more limited than, for example, the differences found among cartridges of a similar quality. The Schiit, for instance, sounds minimally more euphonic than the analytical and neutral device from Grace Design. So with the signal passing through the Melco device, I listened intently and found myself surprised to discover the differences between the two converters were greater than I remembered them to be: The original situation had

practically reversed. Up to that point, the Mac mini with Audirvana had to have been hiding its true qualities as a player. When making comparisons of this kind, I like to use "Turkey Trot" from Leonard Bernstein's *Divertimento for Orchestra*. It's a piece of music I've not only employed hundreds of times to compare devices, but also one with which I have modest experience playing myself—in the woodwind section of the university orchestra. The piece boasts wonderful depth gradation between massive percussion equipment and well-mannered clarinets and oboes with repeated interruptions by strident brass instruments. ▶

TWO-BOX SOLUTION. TO ENSURE THEIR DIFFERENT FUNCTIONALITIES EXERT NO NEGATIVE EFFECTS ON EACH OTHER, THE PSU (BELOW) AND THE HEAD UNIT (ABOVE) ARE HOUSED IN SEPARATE UNITS.

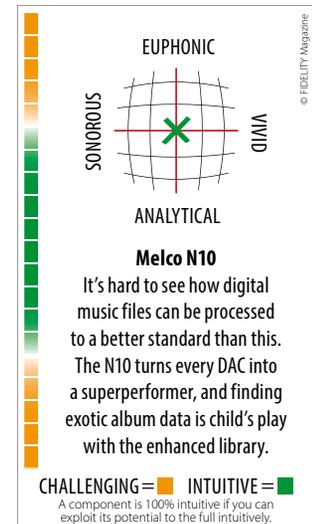


Listening to the N10's data converted by the Schiit, the instrument gradation appeared almost like a holographic projection: The room grew three-dimensional, and the depths of sound plumbed by the trombones and tuba felt like low blows to my stomach. When I converted using the Mac-DAC combination, the data packages also delivered a lively orchestral display, but with less of a spatial quality, not as precise in terms of depth gradation, and somewhat more restrained overall. The Schiit device suddenly outplayed the Grace Design unit in

terms of precision and spatial reproduction. This also proved true when streaming from Qobuz: I could hear no difference between this stream and the internal hard drive file. The first conclusion I could draw from this listening session was that we had something of a luxury problem: If we used the N10's radiantly clear data stream, we would also need to carefully choose the DAC we employed. Any small differences among the devices would become immediately apparent. Users should therefore put some time and effort into finding their

optimum DAC partner for the N10. By this point in my listening experiment, I got a bit curious about how the Melco would sound with a relatively simple DAC. A few weeks before investigating the N10, the small SDAC from Grace Design, which stems from a collaboration with Massdrop, came into my possession. Without its own power supply unit and only capable of decoding files up to 24/96, it appeared to be a typical example of those \$99 converters that have now become popular and can be easily plugged into a laptop at the office. But ►

Melco's mass storage units operate as both server and router. Streamers connected directly to the Ethernet "player" port enjoy an uninterrupted flow of data.



even when put to the test in regular operation, this unassuming, pint-sized device has shown it stems from a professional studio environment and is far more than just a simple toy. So when the SDAC was fed with the clean, precisely clocked data from the N10, the little black box became a thing of wonder. It performed as if it'd been waiting all its life for such a wonderfully synchronized data stream, suddenly producing a sound of totally unexpected quality. I decided to switch to some good-mood music, streaming fusion legend George Duke from Qobuz

to a T+A DAC 8. In contrast to the sound I'm familiar with when streaming via the Mac mini, the hi-res files from *The Aura Will Prevail* appeared a touch lighter and freer. The pristine data from the Melco device underscored the rhythmic skills and nuances of the drummer, stealthily causing the otherwise straight funky beats to falter momentarily. It did this with such a degree of precision that I had to ask myself why I've been forced to endure such timing distortions with this album stream in the past. It must be said that each of the DACs I tested, regardless of whether it cost €100 or €3,000, benefited from having the N10 as the player. Which brings us back to the old adage that the source of any musical reproduction is the factor that defines its overall quality.

## A refusal to compromise pays off

Melco's N10 is definitely an uncompromising device aimed at uncompromising users. It targets high-end enthusiasts who are in search

of a purity of sound but have no wish to give up the convenience of a user-friendly, innovative music library. Any audiophile opting for the N10 will experience the essence of music—"art for art's sake" on an auditory plane. So we've actually come around to understanding Hegel's maxim: Music is an unfolding of truth. And all you need to grasp this truth is a Melco N10. ■

### Music server Melco N10

**Storage capacity:** 3 TB HDD (selected) | **Separate Ethernet ports:** LAN/player | **Casing:** metal housing with aluminum front panel | **Power supply:** separate linear PSU | **File formats (server):** DSF, DFF, FLAC, WAV, ALAC, AIFF, AAC, MP3, WMA, OGG, LPCM | **File formats (player):** DSF, DFF, FLAC, WAV, ALAC, AIFF, AAC | **Sampling rates (server):** 44.1 KHz, 48 KHz, 88.2 KHz, 96 KHz, 176 KHz, 192 KHz, 384 KHz (PCM) 2.8 MHz, 5.6 MHz, 11.2 MHz (DSD) | **Sampling rates (player):** 44.1 KHz, 48 KHz, 88.2 KHz, 96 KHz, 176 KHz, 192 KHz, 384 KHz (PCM) 2.8 MHz, 5.6 MHz (DSD), 11.3 MHz | **Bit rates:** 16–32 bit (PCM); 1 bit (DSD) | **Media server:** Twonky Media Server optimized for Melco | **Dimensions (W/H/D):** 22/6/27 cm | **Warranty period:** two years | **Price:** approx. €7,500

<https://www.melco-audio.com/> ▶

### ACCOMPANYING EQUIPMENT

**SACD player:** Denon DCD 2000AE | **Turntable:** Technics 1210 MK II (modified) | **Tonearm:** SME 309 | **Cartridge:** Clearaudio Concept MC | **Phono preamplifiers:** Audionet PAM, ifi Phono | **Streaming:** Mac mini with Audirvana Plus | **DAC/headphone amplifier/preamplifier:** Grace Design M 903 | **DAC:** Schiit Bifrost, T+A DAC 8, Grace Design SDAC | **Headphone amplifier:** Schiit Valhalla | **Power amplifier:** Yamaha P2500S, Luxman M03 | **Integrated amplifier:** Cyrus Straight Line | **Passive loudspeakers:** Magnepan 1.6, Dynaudio Confidence 20 | **Active loudspeaker:** Neumann KH 80 | **Headphones:** Focal Utopia, HIFIMAN HE-400i | **Cables:** Van den Hul, Voxox, Sommer, Guerilla Audio | **Accessories:** Oyaide, Oehlback

Exclusive Interview with Hi-Fi Industry Veteran Alan Ainslie

# IT'S THE DATA THAT MATTERS

On hi-fi's long march from analog to digital, Alan Ainslie has been continually at the forefront. At Technics in the UK, he was responsible for the massive success of the legendary 1200/10 (and has many wonderful stories to tell about this period). Taking an increasing interest in the nascent digitalization of music reproduction, he became a member of the committee that defined the Red Book standard for CDs. After spending some time developing network solutions for Naim, he moved on to become general manager of the Japanese company Melco about five years ago. Our author Roland Schmenner was able to meet up with Ainslie in Berlin this July. They spoke about what the digital future will bring to the high-end sector.

**FIDELITY:** You were once involved in defining the Red Book standard. As a veteran of digital hi-fi, can you please explain why you believe Melco isn't really an audio company.

**Alan Ainslie:** You have to remember that although digital audio existed before the CD, computer devices were always an indispensable element of the process. The advent of the CD changed this to an audio device—that is, the CD player. But the moment we switch from scanning a physical medium to streaming data packages, we're back to requiring IT equipment again. The devices from Melco supply optimized data, and, strictly speaking, have nothing to do with audio. We're data engineers who see it as our mission to solve specific problems having to do with computer-based music reproduction. Even if this sounds somewhat contradictory, Melco is a hi-fi company that actually doesn't do audio. We enable DACs and streamers to operate more efficiently and make their work easier to a certain degree. This is, however, a purely IT-based process, even though it does improve the sound later on in the process.

**Does this mean you regard analog and digital audio as separate worlds?**

Not at all. At least not for proponents of the "source first" philosophy. In the world of hi-res and digital, source first means that digital engineers are necessary at the outset to ensure the downstream DAC engineers receive the accurate, clocked data they need to produce correct analog signals. Once a digital data stream has been polluted, no DAC in the world can remedy the situation.



Alan Ainslie at the 2019 Süddeutschen HiFi Agent (Southern Germany Hi-Fi Day) in Stuttgart

**It would seem that streaming platforms like Tidal and Qobuz are also going to be the future for the discerning music fan. Which particular sound quality problems do you see here?**

For one thing, the situation is fundamentally the same as for network-based music playback. If you use a PC or something similar to listen to music, you're creating a bottleneck that really restricts what you can finally achieve. With a conventional NAS, and all the more so with Tidal or Qobuz, you have no control over the data flow. The data packages from Tidal pass through countless servers on several continents before you get them—servers chosen purely for their cost-effectiveness. Although the data streams

are in a chaotic state when they arrive, most network players or PCs are able to restore them to an adequate level, but not a perfect one. A device like the N10, however, rebuilds the data in the original sequence and reclocks it if necessary before passing it on to a network streamer or player or a USB-DAC. This brings a significant improvement in sound quality.

**I remember a conversation I had with Qobuz's country manager in Germany when they were just starting out.**

**We mainly discussed how to find particular classical works and the incomplete metadata that causes problems in the assignment of opus to performer. I encounter exactly the same difficulty when I'm looking for a specific recording of Wagner's Rheingold on my NAS. Do you see any solutions to this in the near future?**

When you're looking for a particular CD or LP, you search through a collection on your shelves that you organized according to your own individual classification system. But searching through a digital library is much more problematic than looking for a CD at home. Three main issues are involved: The metadata (equivalent to the information on the spine of

the LP or CD), the UPnP server (equivalent to your shelf layout), and the control app you're using for the search. The basic problem now is that the metadata is often incomplete and imprecise, causing the UPnP server to have no concrete idea of how to manage the metadata. In light of the complexity and quantity of information provided with an album of classical music, total confusion ensues for both the control app and the user. Classic can't really be forced into the old CD template of "performer, title, track list." After all, nobody told Mozart that he had to write his music so it would fit perfectly onto a 74-minute CD: We sometimes find two of his piano concertos on one CD. So there can be several works on a single album or a single work, such as an opera, spread over several CDs. Optimized software is the only possible answer to this problem. At Melco, we've been able to combine the efforts of two excellent software providers: SongKong, which is responsible for resorting the metadata, and MinimServer, which make a special UPnP server software that interprets the metadata with a high degree of precision. Users can specify whether they're searching for rock and pop, jazz, or classical music, with the browser completely different in each of these cases. There's also the option of creating user-defined browser trees—for electronic music, for example. We believe this approach has optimized the search function significantly.

**Before we finish, could you give us a brief glimpse into the future of music-enjoyment for the discerning listener? Can we expect any significant improvements?**

What will be important moving forward is collaboration between the hi-fi industry and the record industry AND data engineers. We've already managed to reach an extremely high level, and even a CD in 16/44 format can now deliver excellent sound. But improvements can still be achieved when all three of the above work closely together. •



# A VISIT TO COMMON WAVE HIFI AND EXCEL AUDIO

By Danny Kaey. Photography: Danny Kaey



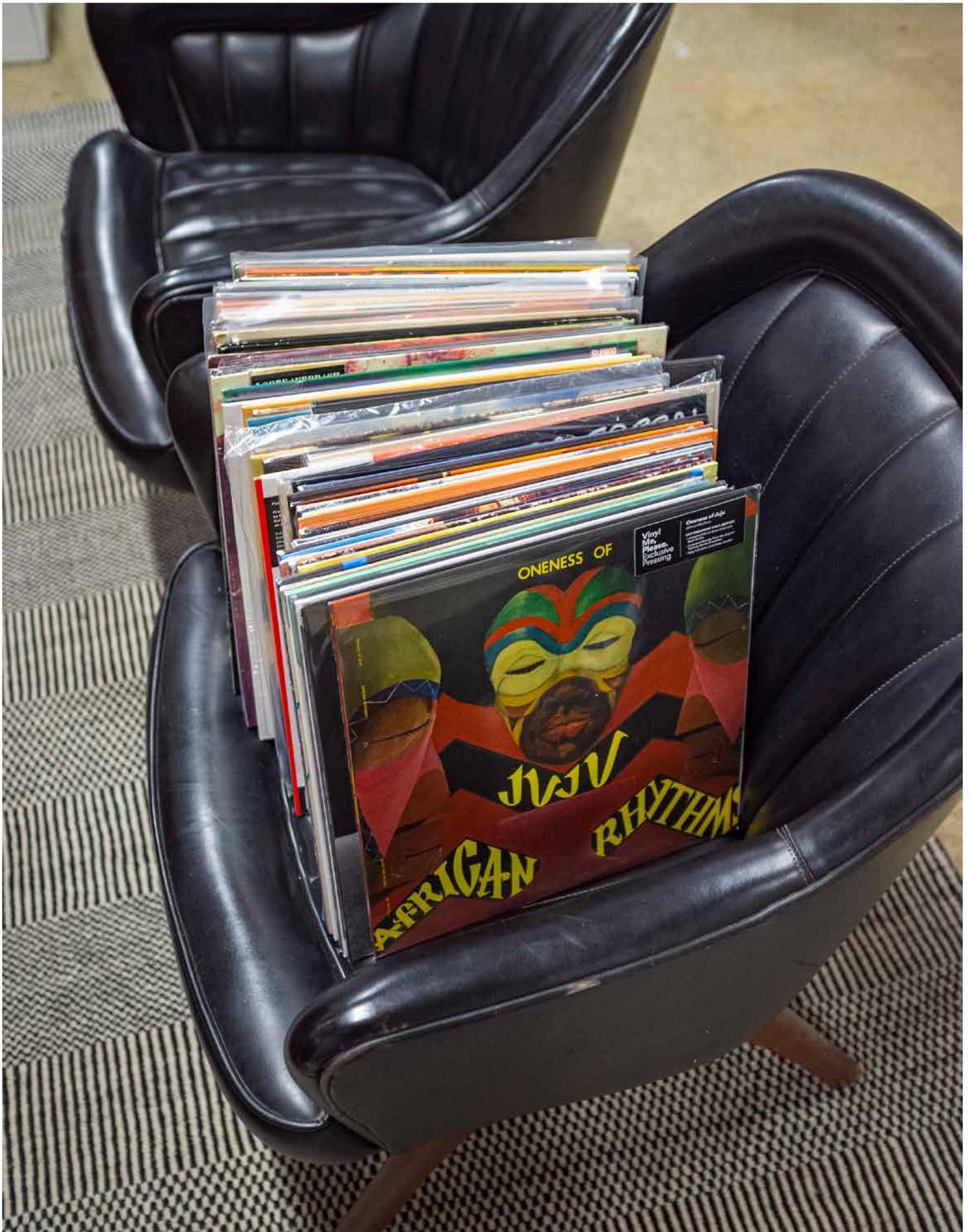


Dan Meinwald (EAR Distributor USA),

Exiting one of the downtown off-ramps on the north bound 101 freeway, a Southern California institution, you enter another old LA institution, namely the new-old industrial zone. There, on East 4<sup>th</sup> street, in one of the classic brick and mortar buildings, you will find an almost non-descript gated entrance to what really is one of LA's finest audio salons, Common Wave HiFi. Wesley Katzir, the store's proprietor, has been around the industry for some time and felt that LA needs an old school, nay, classic HiFi shop. Entering the store, you immediately see the vision Wesley was after: creating a warm, friendly, inviting, real-world living room style environment where clients feel welcome and familiar. A few record bins and head-fi stations round out the entrance, followed by several sectioned off living room environments, Wesley and team have created. Comfy sofas and warm lighting abound, creating a very music friendly atmosphere.

Carrying various high-end brands like Kuzma, DeVore, Marten, Nagra, EAR, Shunyata, I would peg Common Wave's approach as the prime destination for someone looking for something special, exclusive and most of all bespoke, memorable. Think Saville row suit maker vs. Barneys; Singer 911 vs. Porsche GT3.

By appointment only, which really is just a way of making sure that Wesley has prepared a personalized, exclusive music session, today's visit was indeed special and rather exclusive indeed. Culminating years of research and development, John DeVore, of DeVore Fidelity, was ready to formally unveil his latest project, the double box reference loudspeaker design known as Orangutan Reference, or O/Reference in short. A remarkable statement piece, the O/Reference takes John's loudspeaker design to its logical conclusion by focusing development of the O/ series to lots ▶





and lots of detail work. Here, splitting the bass cabinet from the main, midrange and tweeter section, whilst adding built in power for the twin woofers, makes a lot of sense, essentially freeing up each speaker box to perform the duties best suited to it. Having already shown the O/Reference at Axpona earlier this year, I was already impressed. DeVore speakers have always spoken to me with their real-world design and authentic sound. By that I mean, sound that was musical, punchy and dynamic, putting value where it matters most. Spin up your favorite record or CD or *stream* and you will instantly feel “at home”.

For the demo and Los Angeles premier, Wesley chose to pair DeVore’s big pups with a Pear Audio analog front end, Nagra pre-amp and digital section and pairing it to—unusual, though by no means strange—EAR’s 509 100w mono block amplifiers. During my visit towards the end of

“setup” day, I felt an immediate familiarity with the O/Refs, bringing me back to my notes from Axpona: big, bold; gutsy, yet far more refined than any O/ series speaker I’ve heard before.

Having taken up the long side of the largest open space at the salon, I was immediately impressed with the visceral punch you felt during Stravinsky’s opening to Rite of Spring, expertly conducted by Valery Gergiev on Philips [digital]. The O/Refs twin powered subs definitely made an impact; the singularly designed mid-range / tweeter unit handling the rest of the audio spectrum. Extended, clear highs, with a tonally correct, rich mid-range rounded out the sound. René LaFlamme’s 2xHD’s record of memorable analog recordings like the Pink Panther Mancini theme, produced a rather fantastic, delightful sound. Intimate, yet full of rich detail, Mancini’s theme had me tapping my toes within seconds of hearing the first note. ▶

René LaFlamme (Nagra)



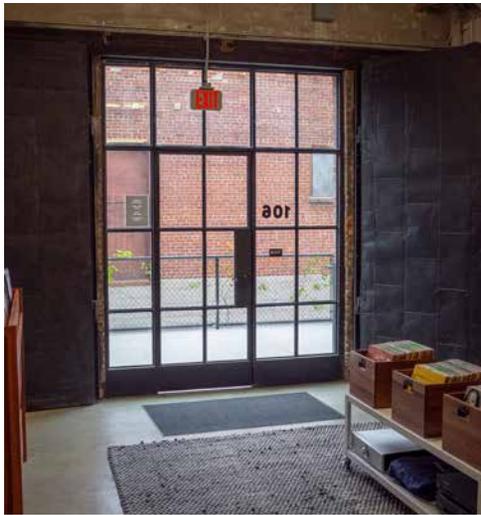
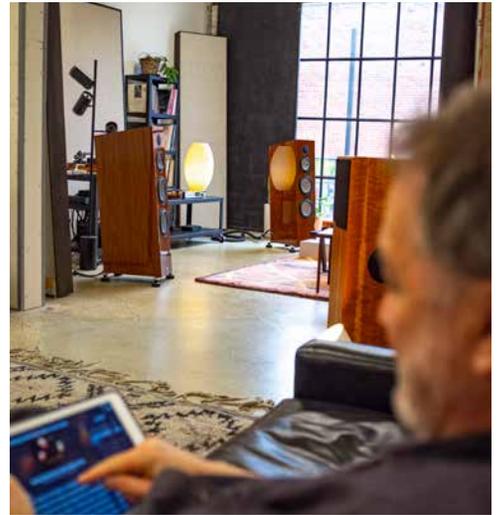
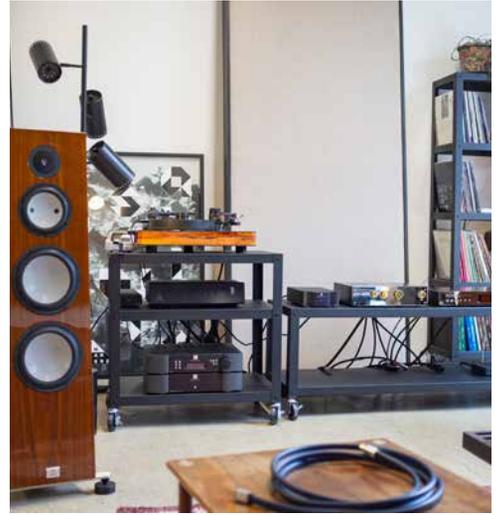


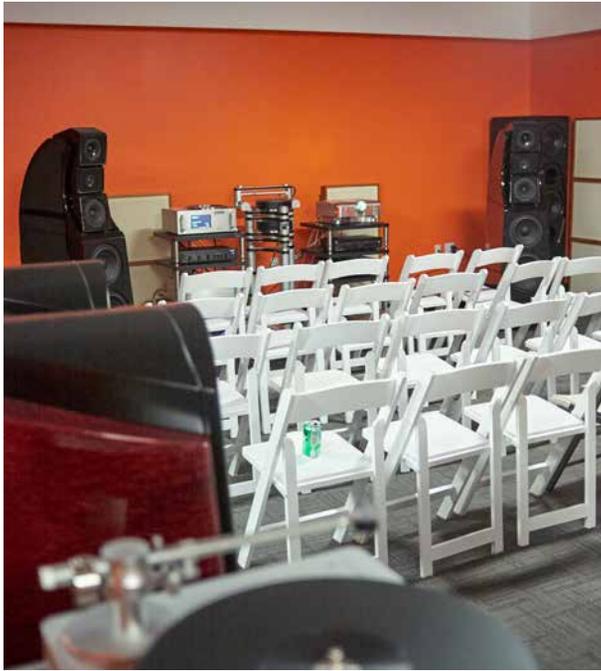
from right to left: René LaFlamme (Nagra), Dan Meinwald (EAR Distributor USA), John Devore (Devore Fidelity Lautsprecher)

Speaking of René, I can't think of any other so actively involved company representative, brand ambassador, who is always present whenever Nagra has any demos or press junkets. Always willing and able to demo whatever music I pleased, René is a genuinely unique member of this industry who not only has the chops to setup a system, but has firsthand knowledge of what a recording is actually supposed to sound like.

Cue my calendar to early August and yet another invitation sprung into my inbox: "Hi Danny, it's Philip [O'Hanlon]. Care to join me at an exclusive Graham Audio event I am co-hosting with Wes?" Graham Audio is of course On A Higher Note's latest product and distributorship acquisition. Made in the UK, Graham Audio fancies itself to be among the handful of BBC licensees who manufacture or, should I say, re-manufacture, classic BBC loudspeakers for a modern generation. A delightful presentation, most similar perhaps to the Zu sound, Graham makes some rather fine loudspeakers for the real-world home HiFi setup. Best of all, their price points are real-world too, so you can easily start enjoying classic British HiFi for as little as a few thousand dollars. Their top of the line speaker retails for a balmy \$15k, a far cry from the über-expensive delux-Fi that's become quite so common these days.

Walking into the salon, I was immediately struck by the fact that I was greeted by several couples, man-wife, boyfriend-girlfriend, significant other, that sort of thing. For a split second, I almost thought I was at the wrong party, so unusual was this sighting of real-world couples seeking to fill their life with HiFi. A typical suspender party this clearly was not. Further, Wes and Phil spun up real-world music, not your traditional audiophilia nonsense I so often come to hear and expect. No, this time you heard a good dose of Marvin Gaye, Bob James, Thom Yorke and Traffic. As with the previous event, the sound was rich, detailed with tone and color that felt immediately musical, immediately welcome and immediately great. I must have counted a half dozen Graham speakers setup, with total systems ranging in price from perhaps the \$5k mark to tens of thousands of dollars. Fine. Nothing wrong with that I say. The key was that "normal" people attended this event, albeit, with a good dose of musical tastes. What Wes is doing is really fantastic, I have to say. He manages to create an environment that caters to a far larger audience, whilst still providing that special super-high-end offer audiophile purists seek. That we need more of this and less of that, really shouldn't have to be spelled out, so clear is Common Wave's line of sight to this message and theme. ▶





Down south, on the other side of LA, approximately 50 or so miles away, I visited yet another HiFi shop, this time, a newcomer to Orange County by the name of Excel Audio and it's proprietor, Michael Rose. Following similar steps to success as Common Wave, Excel Audio also features a large vinyl bar, stacked with the latest reissues, new issues and many other vinyl treasures. Smart. Equally smart, if not cunning, was Michael's decision to find a location

that can only be described as ultra-premium. Nestled no more than a mile south of John Wayne Airport's very busy office park district, immediately adjacent to a very popular Starbucks, you'll have a very easy time finding Excel Audio. A genuine retail front, you simply can't miss the show and line-up of a dozen record players, followed by racks and racks of record bins. In conversation with Michael, he quipped that he was lucky indeed to find this location, a former AT&T wireless retail store. Continuing, he said "you know, I wanted to

capitalize on the hipster vinyl boom. Every day the parking lot is full of Teslas, Porsches, Audis and Mercs. That many chose to come by whilst grabbing a \$9 cup of half-caf, decaf, extra fizzle, iced, temperature controlled cup of joe from the Starbucks next door, is almost a given. I can't tell you how many of these customers became bonafide customers of mine, most of whom never set foot in a HiFi shop." Nice. Hey Mike, genius move, man! Indeed, with Mike's affable and warm demeanor, I am not surprised in the least. ▶



Today's event was billed as a Wilson Audio Specialties seminar, featuring representatives from Wilson Audio, D'Agostino, Astell & Kern, Luxman, Musical Surroundings and Impex records. Speaking of honored guests and dignitaries, it was an incredible honor and genuine pleasure to meet Nick Getz, youngest son of none other than jazz giant, Stan Getz. A guest of Abey Fonn's, Impex Records high-heeled front lady, I spent time enjoying wonderful conversation with Nick. That he had stories to tell shouldn't come as a surprise; that the stories he shared were so full of historic consequence, humility and at times fun factor ten, was a welcome surprise indeed. Needless to say, I cued up several of my favorite Getz tracks the minute I walked into my home. More on that and other incredibly exciting developments for Getz fans in due time.

Showcasing Wilson's mighty Alexx, it was none other than Wilson's US front man Bill Peugh who was manning the helm. The system consisted of a big, bold and heavy Clearaudio analog front-end expertly setup by Garth Leerer; amplification was by D'Agostino, who sent their fabulous new representative, Adrienne Wild to graciously co-host the event. The D'Agostino'd Wilsons have now become a defacto classic match which has accrued multiple accolades over the past half decade or more. To further enhance this setup's dynamics, mid-range clarity and form, a pair of Wilson Audio Subsonic woofer towers complemented the system. Cueing up familiar tracks to showcase the richness of this excellent HiFi, the audience was at once fully in tune with the sound and judging from some of the attendee's reaction, genuinely mesmerized at times. ▶



Nick Getz (Stan Getz' son)



Garth Leerer (Musical Surroundings Distribution, owner) and Abey Fonn (IMPEX records)



Owen Kwon (Astell & Kern sales)

Across the room, setup on the other side, Wilson Audio featured their smallest to date floorstander, Sabrina, which, leashed to a Luxman setup, complete with Luxman turntable, produced remarkable music. Intimately familiar with Sabrina, it can't be overemphasized just how great a loudspeaker Sabrina is, never mind that it is Wilson's least expensive floorstander at \$17,900. For that sum, you get genuine Wilson performance and I would challenge anyone to prove me otherwise. Really, a no brainer for anyone looking to get into serious HiFi for relatively modest up-front cost.

Electing to partner this event with Impex Records, likewise proved a raving success. Abey Fonn, Impex Record's formidable female founder, was on hand spinning up the latest Impex has to offer. A follow-up to the mega successful Jennifer Warnes Famous Blue Raincoat reissue, Abey played cuts from Jennifer's latest, Another Time, Another Place release. Delightful sounds, delightfully impacting the crowds, Impex, under new ownership of Elusive Disc, is quite literally on fire these days. From the utterly exquisite 45rpm version of Legrand Jazz—you want it!—to many of the projects coming up over the next year or so, Abey has been ▶



Bill Peugh (Wilson Audio America sales), Adrienne Wilde (D'Agostino VP of Sales)

able to secure very interesting contracts for reissues that are not part of the usual merry-go-round so typical on the reissue circuit. Stay tuned for much more from Impex.

As the loop's circle closes, I yet again feel the need to revisit my notion that it is precisely these types of events that will yield more retail bang for buck than costly, large scale and far-away HiFi shows. The common theme across these three events—and frankly, each one of these I have reported on over the past few years—is the incredible experience they



Mike Rose (Excel Audio owner) with Adrienne Wilde

provided. I suppose the flipside of the coin would be for HiFi shows to become more intuitive, natural providers of exclusive experiences, not supermarket style picking spots for a little HiFi here or there, cue the next overstuffed hotel room.

To conclude otherwise would be foolish, given the overall retail market's move to experiential selling. This, perhaps, is the biggest opportunity for the two largest US audio shows coming up in the years ahead. Time to dig in—it's all about the experience, isn't it? ■



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

# BROWSER

## № 01



Seperatly we work better

Keces expands its Supreme Line with the Sphono (Fig.) and the Spower. The separation of linear power supply and phono preamplifier avoids interferences in the sensitive circuits. A special feature is that the four inputs of the Sphono can be individually adjusted. MM and MC are offered with different capacities and impedances as well as IEC and RIAA characteristics - the purest phono workstation.

<http://kecesaudio.com/>

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# BROWSER

## N° 01



### Priority: High!

Due to restrictive standby management commercial routers are not the best solution for audio networks. Melco was one of the first manufacturers to give their music servers proprietary LAN ports. It's logical that the manufacturer now brings a hi-fi optimized switch. The S100 offers connections for up to eight devices as well as an optical data interface. The first four inputs are prioritized for streamers, the remaining four are compatible with servers.

<https://www.melco-audio.com>

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## Beethoven and Baby-Beethoven

After a long run time, Vienna Acoustics has given its Grand series an update with new chassis technology. Both the large Beethoven Concert Grand Reference and the smaller Beethoven Baby Grand Reference (Fig.) have been equipped with a set of new polymer flat diaphragms that provide even more tightness and precision in the bass and mids. The complex cabinet reinforcement has also been redesigned. As usual with the Viennese, all loudspeakers of the families are available in high-quality veneers and piano finishes.

[www.vienna-acoustics.com](http://www.vienna-acoustics.com)

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BROWSER  
№ 01

# BROWSER N° 01



Hey, I'm talking to you!

Cyrus expands its successful One family with the smart audio system "One Cast". What the integrated amplifier can do? That reveals its name: A streaming board (WLAN only) funnels airplay and Bluetooth into the handy amp in addition to Google Cast. In addition it obeys the language assistants of Google, Amazon and Apple. However, Cyrus gives its users the choice, because there is no built-in microphone. The amplification is 100 watts, the DAC has a maximum resolution of 32 bits and 192 kilohertz.

[www.cyrusaudio.com](http://www.cyrusaudio.com)

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



Company profile Tidal and Vimberg

# UNCON- DITIONALLY THOROUGH

By Carsten Barnbeck. Photography: Ingo Schulz

Jörn Janczak makes no compromises for the sound, design and craftsmanship of his extraordinary hi-fi creations. After visiting his exceptional company Tidal, we came away with deep insights into his philosophy.

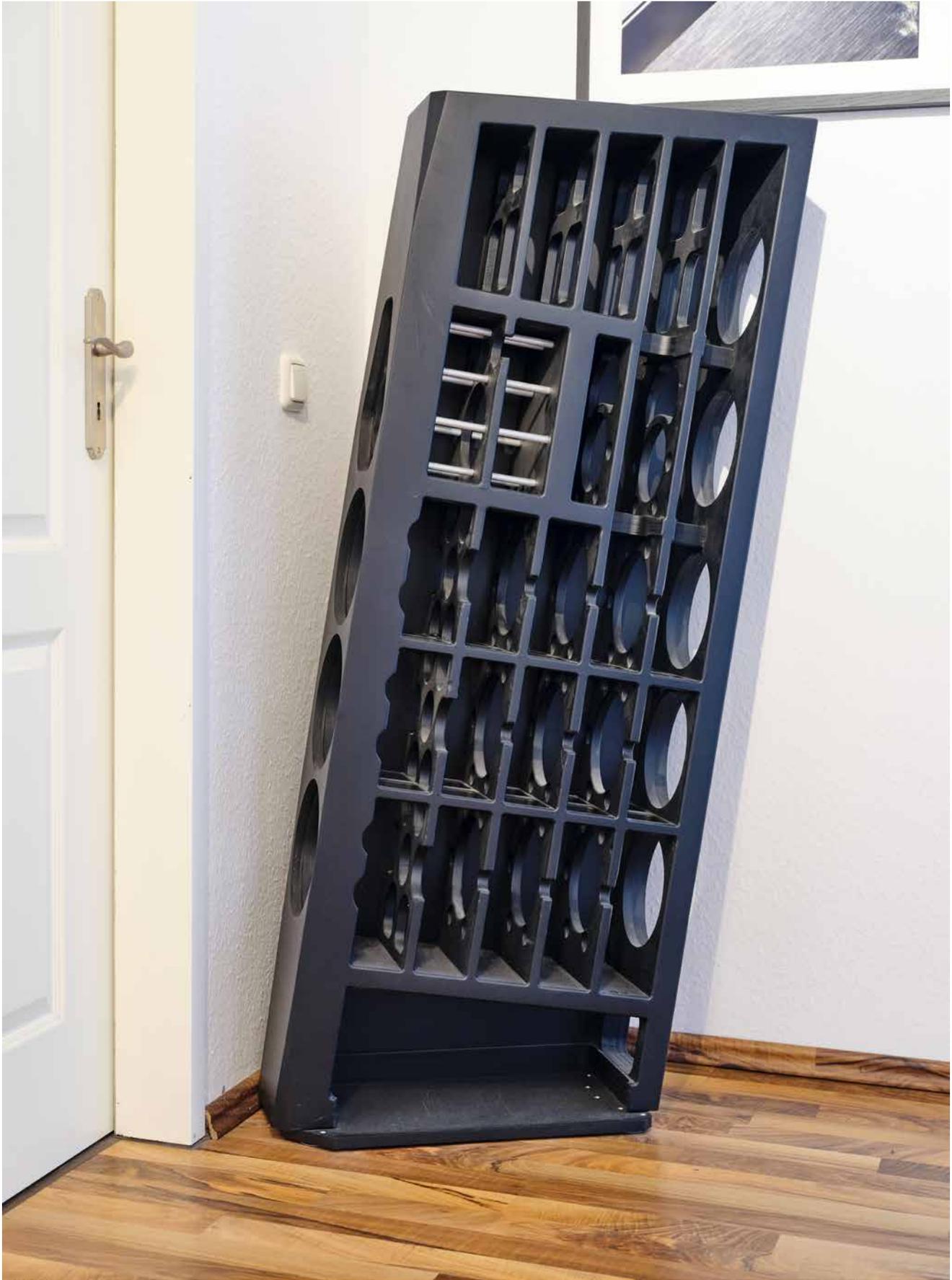




**F**or aficionados of premium audio equipment, the term “high-end” is associated with an exclusive band of devices: chrome units from Berlin, champagne-colored machines from Japan and stunning black boxes from North America, just to name a few. But Hürth doesn’t bring much to mind, does it? Yet that’s exactly where a trailblazing manufacturer of high-end audio equipment set up shop, surrounded by TV studios and production companies. But the founder, owner and mastermind behind Tidal and Vimberg, Jörn Janczak, prefers a more understated approach. Rather than beat his drum loudly, declaring the magnificence of his hi-fi systems for some media coverage, Janczak lets them speak for themselves—that is if you’re lucky enough to experience it. On a beautiful spring day near Cologne, we met to do just that.

## Separated from time and space

And here I am—in a huge, and yet subtly optimized listening room. While the sound modules aren’t hidden, a double take’s required to realize the purpose of the cleverly placed decorative elements. The utter silence of the room conveys its exquisite quality. A wall of speakers stands proud before me. The noble Akira is present, framed by La Assoluta mono power amps, the Presencio preamp, a D/A converter and a few skilfully laid cables. In my hand rests a large tablet that gives me access to an almost endless number of songs. “Have some fun, turn it up,” said Jörn Janczak before he left the room. “I have to take care of a few phone calls upstairs, it will take a minute.” You don’t have to tell me twice. But ▶





where to begin? Classic, folk, jazz, the audiophile standards? Akira is staring at me with her ten black eyes, and I can almost imagine her thinking: “What’s taking you so long?”

So, I’m alone with a hi-fi chain that many high-end fans would give their right arm to test, and I can’t decide on the music? After nine, ten swipes of the screen, my eyes rest on the familiar cover of Feist’s *Metals* album. “The Bad in Each Other,” that always works. One moment later and the crisp electric guitar is ringing around the room, soon followed by Leslie Feist’s gentle voice that holds a slightly nasal, nearly metallic allure. Perhaps the tonal impact intentionally underscores the album title? But that’s not my thought in the moment. Rather, I am captivated from the very first note: Akira lets me feel the Plektron gliding across the strings of the guitar, none of the intricate strokes escape me. Without warning, the wall behind the chest-high speakers becomes as nonexistent as the five

meters between me and the diaphragm surfaces—hardly twenty seconds have passed, and I am already part of the music.

My hesitation has been snuffed out. Next, comes the light-blue cover of Dead Can Dance’s *Dionysus*. Compared to Feist’s excellent *Metals*, this album is produced to audiophile standards—despite the slightly less than subtle use of compressors. Though they are a creative stylistic device: The intro, “Sea Borne,” celebrates a waltzing rhythm, evolves over six minutes and finally unfolds into a kind of hypnosis. But the groove doesn’t just come from the percussion. Immense compression harmonizes instruments, drums, a choir, various samples and synth textures into a unified wall of sound that floods the listening room while holding incredible depth. Akira pumps the frequencies to my position with perceptible force—and I am hardly even listening that loudly. Enormous bass ▶



Even a master has to start small: The first Piano from the company, still called WBE at that time, doesn't meet today's standards—though its internal bracing is a main component of current models.

billows casually through the room with incredible ease, while each note from Lisa Gerrad's "Yangqin," a Chinese version of the zither, pierces the sonic tapestry like pinpricks, lending an illusion of dynamics to the compressed recording.

Jumping from album to album, title to title, my selections unintentionally grow more obscure. After a brief intermezzo with Liszt's *Hungarian Rhapsodies*, I indulge in Prodigy's big beat hymn "Smack My Bitch Up," then detour through Chelsea Wolfe's "We Will Hit The Wall," before landing on an electronic number from Boards of Canada. I'm lost in Jamie XX's strangely fascinating bass revelry "Gosh" when my colleague Schulz pops his head through the door and asks me blankly what I'm

listening to. I had to pull myself together for a moment before I could truthfully answer: "Uh . . . music?"

My "five minutes" easily became a more than one-hour parkour of listening. And I listened to every song, and I mean every song, in its entirety, which is more than unusual for these kinds of situations. My colleague was taking pictures on the floor above me and became an involuntary witness to my escapades as I steadily increased the volume.

Right behind him, this unique system's creator entered the room, and I could tell by his grin that I'm far from the first person to completely ▶



lose track of time, space and, ultimately, themselves, while enjoying the system.

## Precision Engineering

“Several years ago, I saw a documentary about the production of luxury Swiss watches,” Jörn Janzcak had told us earlier in the day. “It showed how the craftsmen filed and polished the drilled holes that stay hidden deep inside the watch. Totally crazy, no one will see them.” We discussed the high-quality craftsmanship of his products, which have become true obsessions over the years. He recognized himself in this documentary, because his own products are also thoroughly crafted down to the last detail. But it was a long road to achieve such perfection. “In the beginning,”

he says, “we just tried to make good speakers.” In the small room next to us, packed with photography equipment, stands a direct impression of the early stages of his work—his first Piano model. He eventually turned it into an open cutting pattern, and while this hip-height draft is impressive enough, it can barely be compared to the precise craftsmanship of today’s models.

The skilled toolmaker established the company in 1999 together with his childhood friend Swen Wasserrab. “WBE – We build emotions“ was their business’ planned name, still visible on the nameplate of the half-open Piano. But they decided the phrase was too soft. Janzcak suggested “Tidal” and used the original name as a conceptual sub-line. He was inspired by Fiona Apple’s album by the same name, which remains one of his favorites to this day. ▶







As can be seen in the milling of the company logo, Tidal swaddles its speakers in a four to five millimeter layer of polyester lacquer. This creates a finish as smooth as liquid glass. Together with the double veneer, it provides an unparalleled perception of depth that practically sets the wood grain dancing when your vantage point changes.

“Our first speakers were already quite sophisticated and fully sufficient to convince the lenders. But we lacked a meaningful concept,” Janczak recalls. His partner eventually left Tidal, though they still maintain a friendship, and so he planned for his next steps: Along with an excellent sound, his speakers would have a timeless design and, above all, second-to-none craftsmanship.

We all know that looks are a matter of taste. But anyone eyeing Janczak’s masterpiece La Assoluta would agree that a speaker could hardly look more beautiful. Composed of three pieces, and almost two-and-a-half meters tall, the speaker is definitely bulky, but its well-balanced proportions and sloped edges soften any concerns that might arise with other sound sculptures in this weight and size category. This virtue is also shared in the smaller models such as the Akira and Agoria. Of course, such a sophisticated design doesn’t happen by chance. Janczak brings us to an unassuming computer running CAD software, wherein we can see the housing design of a bass shaker for the car hi-fi segment. It’s a

glimpse into Tidal’s past—the founding duo got their start sound tuning car systems, but “. . . just making it louder, louder and even louder was not our goal,” recalls Janczak. Together, they developed a fondness for uncompromising sound quality and started correcting delays in retrofitted chasses. The Tidal speaker models also originate on the computer: “This way, I can plan and modify, position in artificial space, tailor their proportions to the surroundings and work out details without wasting a bit of wood.”

An hour later, we discover his near obsession with perfect workmanship. But to find it we drove a short way through Hürth, away from the TV studios, over to a small industrial park and into an unassuming courtyard where we found ourselves before the door of a medium-sized, modern hall. Once inside, the atmosphere was notably relaxed. Employees of Jörn Janczak – only three of them here today—are working on upcoming orders, cleaning work surfaces, counting parts and manufacturing smaller assemblies with chaotic braids of tiny wires. One of the ▶



workers warned us of the hall's "terrible beast" lurking in the corner. This turned out to be a curious little red-haired dachshund. "All of the steps involved in assembling our speakers take place in these two rooms." And standing in the middle of the room, not to be overlooked, are a pair of freshly minted La Assolutas, waiting patiently to be expertly packaged. Meanwhile, the work areas are producing crossovers equipped with the finest components imaginable; individual parts and a collection of old prototypes sit on the surrounding shelves.

In a separate room, a worker is polishing the final coating of a Vimberg Tonda. Tidal's perceives the recent off-shoot as something like the more-affordable alternative to the established portfolio. These are speakers priced too low and produced in quantities too large to belong to the manufacturer's exclusive brand of products. "Volume production was never our goal," says Janczak. His primary focus are the customized, one-off productions and craftsmanship. Though, naturally the Vimbergs are also absolute dream crossovers that carry a good deal of Tidal DNA: "The actual housing of the Tonda is made of several layers of material," explains the unit's proud creator. "The lacquer plays an important role

with my speakers. We use it almost like an armor, a dampening insulation." The Tonda receives an impressive 35 kilos of polyester lacquer in three application steps. And even after drying and sanding, the lacquer still accounts for a substantial share of the "little" speaker's 100 kilograms. As for the immense La Assoluta, an astounding 90 kilograms are applied three times to each speaker.

Utterly fascinated, we inspect the satin finish. The waiting Assoluta's dual real wood veneers shimmer through crystal clear lacquer, creating a striking perception of depth. By changing your vantage point, the fine wood grains beneath the insulating layer seem to dance like flames. "It is difficult enough to make a speaker like the Tonda in this quality. And it gets even more tricky to maintain this craftsmanship for the next 40 units." In an earlier interview, Janczak discussed how he had once planned to give a La Assoluta to anyone who could show him a better lacquer finish. That statement might seem arrogant, but after looking at the production, we now understand his justifiable pride—and, as far as we know, he hasn't had to make good on his promise. ▶

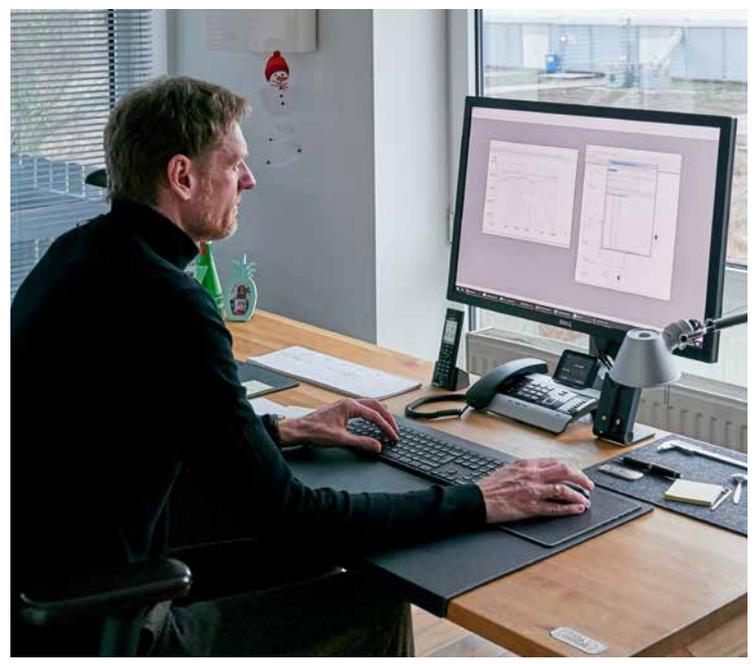


## Sound that can be planned

On one side of the production tables lay several chassis, all Accuton models. “They have a reputation for being the best drivers available,” explains Janczak. “For me, they are simply components that will be incorporated into a more complex context.” Later on, at company headquarters again, he shows us measurements of the precious basses, diamond mid-ranges and tweeters. Suddenly we understand what he means: For the combined price of all eleven chassis fitted into one La Assoluta, you could buy three pairs of the smaller Contriva. That’s as exclusive as it gets. And, gauging by that, the frequency responses at first seem sobering. “That’s pretty good . . . you should see other drivers.” Without hesitation, Janczak lets us watch while he fine tunes the system—all of his sound concepts are composed on the computer. For a moment, the tinkerer and inventor shine through in Janczak, a man so naturally neat and focused: “This is how it would look with these filter components, and like this with the others . . . and you could

also tune them like this. I really shouldn’t show you this yet, but it’s incredibly exciting.” We follow along on the big screen, our eyes growing wider as we watch frequency responses light up, measurements and sketches of crossovers and material studies and the plans for the different prototypes and future projects. “You need to keep your cool for optimal sound tuning. Frequency response and timing behave like fire and water—it is difficult to get them to cooperate. Finding a speaker’s configuration through trial and error is like a game of chance.”

On my way home, I wonder how such a rational and objective developer can create such vibrant and emotionally encompassing systems. After my previous day’s sound journey through the sophisticated Tidal system, I’m sure it will be a while before I can take my own system seriously again. And Jörn Janczak’s holistic approach might be to blame. Tidal has long been free of its sometimes difficult early days as purely a speaker producer. Today, along with the incomparable speakers, his company makes a full line of electronics and cables. Every screw fitting, detail of his ▶



preamp and power amp is planned by Janczak with exactly the same meticulous attention he uses to build his dream crossover. And just before I left, he showed me how carefully even the tiniest wires are laid between the assemblies in an open Assoluta monoblock—I could only think of the Swiss watchmaker. The level control of the associated preamp is produced with soundless network switching, which takes an astounding four circuit boards. “We took an immense step forward with the electronics,” he explained. “This means that details such as cables become calculable parameters whose behavior can be predicted, just like the behavior of

the crossover assemblies.” In a field that practically breathes by adorning itself with terms like “emotion” and vivid “goosebumps,” his approach seems surprisingly matter-of-fact, if not downright rational. But it is precisely this concentrated planning that becomes the final product and, as far more than the sum of its parts, mesmerizes the listener within mere moments, spiriting them away on a sonic journey. ■

[www.tidal-audio.com](http://www.tidal-audio.com)

[www.vimberg.de](http://www.vimberg.de)



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

Wilson Audio Sasha DAW

# A SPEAKER FOR THE WORLD

By Hans von Draminski. Photography: Ingo Schulz





THE  
LONG  
WAIT IS  
FINALLY  
OVER.





\_\_\_\_\_My penchant for equipment from the US has been the subject of many stimulating interactions with interesting individuals. “I can’t believe you use that American stuff” is a comment of the more innocuous variety, one imparted with the typical incredulity my fondness seems to induce in otherwise easygoing people. I’ve almost given up pointing out the absurdity of such sweeping statements about consumer electronics Made in America or indeed similar generalizations about equipment developed in Europe or Japan.

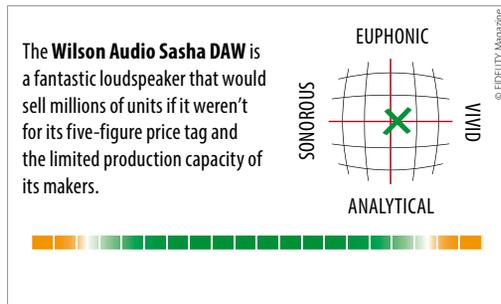
There may, of course, be products that are “typical” of their country of origin, but the Wilson Audio Sasha DAW is definitely not one of them! In actual fact, the only thing that stops me from awarding this perfectly crafted piece of audio equipment the honorary title of “speaker for the world” is its five-figure price tag. Its compatibility, flexibility,

unpretentiousness, and breadth of appeal remind me of a certain squat-looking vehicle that emerged from Germany and continues to run and run for so many folks who live in my neck of the woods decades after the manufacturer stopped producing it.

But I hear the protests already: “How on earth can he compare a VW Beetle with speakers that cost €45,000 a pair? That’s as much as a midsize sedan.” Well, it’s all a question of perspective. Besides, I know several high-end fans whose vehicles are, shall we say, rather modest, and yet they they proudly own audio equipment worth upward of six-figures. Those who treat themselves to a product from Wilson Audio have definitely made the A list and never need to worry about buying different speakers again. ▶

“Here’s looking at you, kid!” Or maybe the WATT/Puppy should say “I’m your father, Sasha”? We’ll never know. What this photo does reveal, however, is how much larger the Wilson Audio Sasha DAW (right) has grown during the course of its evolution from the WATT/Puppy (left).





## ACCOMPANYING EQUIPMENT

**CD players:** Audio Note Zero, Mark Levinson 390s | **SACD players:** Marantz SA14 V1, Sony SCD 333 ES, Pioneer D6 | **Turntables:** Clearaudio Innovation Compact, SoReal Audio Seismograph, Dr. Feickert Volare | **Cartridges:** Clearaudio Da Vinci and Jubilee MC, Denon DL-103R | **Phono stage:** Musical Fidelity M-VNYL, Clearaudio Basic | **Integrated amplifiers:** Audio Note iZero, Marantz HD-AMP1 | **Preamplifiers:** Mark Levinson No. 38S, Trigon SnowWhite, Marantz SC-22 | **Power amplifiers:** Mark Levinson No. 27, Marantz MA-22, John Curl JC3, Trigon Dwarf II | **Loudspeakers:** KEF R900, Infinity Kappa 7.2 Series II, MuSiCa NoVa Plethora

Does that sound too absolute and unequivocal? Have I not left enough room for personal taste? Bear with me for a moment. There's room for some individuality (and a certain experimental urge that even high-enders experience, but don't admit to) in the choice of the electronic companions that supply the music to sound sculptures like the Sasha (or its little sister Yvette). Here at FIDELITY, the Yvette was in use for many years as a reliable monitor for testing new amplifiers and source devices ranging from turntables to streamers because it possesses a particular quality totally at odds with all the clichés about US equipment: absolute neutrality.

It took me some time to understand the importance of this. Popular wisdom tells us that completely neutral loudspeakers quickly become boring. Because they lack an “acoustic fingerprint” of their own. No euphonic subjectivity. No “sounding”—whatever that means! No eagerness to pervert reality by putting their own stamp on things. In other words, nothing that prevents them from being used as monitor loudspeakers in a recording studio. Some of the most prestigious studios in the world use speakers from Wilson Audio as part of their final testing process before master tapes are released and the CDs, vinyls, or hi-res files reach the critical ears of the public.

The Wilson Audio Sasha DAW is the most recent in a long line of internationally acclaimed “super speakers.” As the first new development to be released onto the market since the passing of company founder and mastermind David A. Wilson, it's also a watershed. Yes, you heard me right: It's been re-engineered. Although the Sasha DAW shares its basic sound philosophy and technical DNA with previous models, particularly its immediate predecessor Sasha 2 (see info box), this speaker is oriented much more toward the future than the past.

As I hinted above, I was a rather wary of the Yvette in the initial aftermath of its arrival at our FIDELITY listening studios in Ismaning. Although I have had and still have US hi-fi equipment at home, these are vintage devices that help me ensure the “survival” of that special sound from the '90s. These pieces are a world apart from Wilson Audio's integrative approach toward amps and speakers.

The Sasha DAW embodies, in perfection, the approach of building a high-quality chassis into a low-resonance housing and then carefully aligned it to achieve accuracy within the time domain. This is what Wilson Audio, based in Provo, Utah, has always stood for, and the youngest member of the family is no exception. And yet the Sasha, despite being a

distant descendant both visually and technically of the legendary WATT/Puppy, is much more than simply an advanced version of the same product.

It was Peter McGrath who introduced me to the qualities of Sasha's little sister, Yvette. Besides being a tireless champion for Wilson Audio, he is one of the most respected and sought-after sound engineers on the planet, particularly when it comes to classical music. A true living legend, he normally showcases Wilson Audio loudspeakers using his own recordings—recordings that aren't exactly available at any old retail outlet or through regular music portals. McGrath is an absolute connoisseur of classical sound. His high-resolution recordings, usually achieved with very restrained microphone setups, have a perfect interior consistency but place massive demands on any playback device. I clearly remember a baroque aria sung by a male soprano whose amazing treble levels drive most conventional tweeters to distraction. The little Wilson Audio Yvette, however, easily copes with even extreme listening material like this. Everything remains clearly audible and coherent.

The Sasha DAW can do all this, too—and a whole lot better. I slip the *Sonos Sings* disk into my CD player (I'm very old school in this regard, only partly due to my huge CD collection). Wilson Audio likes to use this album to demonstrate the outstanding properties of its flagship product, the WAMM Master Chronosonic. Few loudspeakers, regardless of their price, are able to offer this level of vocal presence and three-dimensionality or this degree of authenticity. Although this a cappella vocal collective flirts with electronic effects, it also creates voice-only sounds that would normally be associated with artificial aids. That's what makes this dynamic recording, with its exceptionally broad range of frequencies, so very special. I dare anyone to say “typically American”! This is world music for a speaker created for the world.

But maybe you're into more than just smoochy pop sung by a small-scale choir. Same here! Because I feed my stereo devices wildly different kinds of music, they have a pretty hard time at my place. One day it's complex late-19th-century symphonies from the likes of Gustav Mahler and Anton Bruckner, the next day it's intricate baroque music played by a small ensemble. Or modern jazz with any of its myriad spin-offs. Or hard blues-rock that people tend to mail me in my capacity as festival reporter and adviser. Or any other material my streamer or internet radio retrieves for me from the farthest reaches of the globe—including ▶





Peter McGrath and Bill Peugh (in lower right photo) from Wilson Audio took great pains to set up the Sasha DAW for our listening room after it was delivered.

extravagantly produced plays and features that take me back to my days at the radio station.

The Sasha DAW delivers all this in a lively, energetic fashion without hiding the fact that not every piece of music is a listening revelation in its own right. But unlike various other elaborate, colorfully touted constructions I've come across over the last few years, it doesn't demand absolutely top-quality recordings or need a digital signal processor (DSP) on its crossover circuitry to iron out any imperfections in my listening room (or in the weaknesses of its own design). All a Wilson Audio Sasha DAW craves is an adequate amount of care and attention during setup. Due to the adjustment options this modular sound-producing sculpture offers, setup is not quite as trivial as it may sound. For example, the angle of the midrange-tweeter module (separate from the woofer baffle with its pair of 20.3-centimeter bass drivers) can be adjusted using a mechanical

“ladder” in order to ideally align the four drivers to the layout of the room and the individual preference of the listener. For the Wilson Audio team (including McGrath), this involved hours of intensive work in the FIDELITY listening room—but the result more than justifies the effort involved.

After all, what meets the ears after this initial configuration work is incredibly perfect and precise. So much that any improvement would probably involve a considerably greater investment and major changes to the listening environment. It goes without saying that a colossus like the WAMM Master Chronosonic is better than the Sasha (and not only the Sasha) in a number of respects. But anyone without a living room the size of a concert hall will be happy (and have far fewer problems) with the smaller model. ▶



And that goes for almost any type of music. In addition to a number of transistor amplifiers, I also connected the Sashas to a tube amp from Audio Note that was a great match in terms of tone and power. In every case, the Sasha retained its natural, realistic sound and sonorous timbre. When you listen to Nria Rial and Valer Sabadus singing spiritual duets from the baroque period (*Sacred Duets*, Sony Music), you're not hearing artists who've just been lumped together to satisfy popular taste. No, you're being treated to a pair of motivated, inspired singers who combine philological aspiration with sensuality of tone. The old one-point recordings (Denon) of the Frankfurt Radio Symphony Orchestra conducted by Eliahu Inbal playing Mahler's symphonies have never boasted such an outstanding expansiveness and spatial quality as they do when heard over the Wilson Audio Sasha. The "Hey Now" track on London Grammar's debut album is notorious for its incredibly deep computer bass and has been known to "terminate" speakers and amps. Played over the Sasha, it manages to cause the listening room's multilayered soundproof windows to vibrate, but without making the slightest impression on the speaker itself.

The Sasha did make an unquestionably great impression on me though. It goes without saying that €45,000 is no bargain in any sense of the word. But after experiencing the Wilson Audio Sasha DAW, I doubt you'll find anything that represents a better value for the money in terms of sound quality. ■

#### Floor-standing loudspeaker | Wilson Audio Sasha DAW

**Functional principle:** Three-way passive loudspeaker, bass reflex | **Design of top module:** X- and S-material cabinet with rear slot-vented midrange section | **Design of woofer module:** X-material cabinet with rear opening | **Drivers:** 2.5-cm Wilson Convergent Synergy Mark V tweeter, 17.8-cm Wilson midrange driver, two 20.3-cm Wilson bass drivers | **Sensitivity:** 91 dB | **Impedance:** 4 Ω | **Frequency response:** 20 Hz to 30 kHz (±3 dB) | **Recommended power:** > 25 W | **Casing:** Obsidian Black, Galaxy Gray, Titanium Brown, Desert Silver, Argento Silver, Cobalt Blue, Mariposa Silver, Sandlewood, Lavender | **Dimensions (W/H/D):** 37/114/58 cm | **Weight:** 107 kg | **Warranty period:** 10 years | **Price for pair:** €45,000

<https://www.wilsonaudio.com/>



## The History and Technology of the Wilson Audio Sasha DAW

## IMPRESSIVE ANCESTRY



Daryl Wilson



David A. Wilson

An outstanding loudspeaker like the Sasha doesn't just appear from nowhere. Sasha's distant ancestor is the WATT/Puppy, constructed over 30 years ago by company founder David A. Wilson. This was the speaker the constructor made his name with—at a time when high-end was very much a niche topic and high-quality hi-fi equipment was not yet seen as a particularly relevant or desirable commodity (at least in Germany anyway). Wilson was one of the first high-end developers to identify not only undesirable resonances in the housing but also run-time differences between the various drivers in a multi-way loudspeaker as the reason for poor sound. In the WATT/Puppy, the faceted housing banished standing waves, resonances were controlled by implementing various measures, and the individual drivers were aligned to achieve accuracy within the time domain.

FIDELITY's managing director, Ingo Schulz, was one of the audiophiles lucky enough to acquire a WATT/Puppy in the late 1980s, and he can attest to the perfection of its engineering. After a few years of listening to this speaker, however, Schulz, who has a very clear idea of the sound he likes, decided it was time for a change. In the pursuit of "something new," he purchased the top model offered by a "well-known Italian loudspeaker manufacturer." But, despite its obvious qualities, this speaker couldn't equal the more direct and exciting performance of the WATT/Puppy. And, despite the Italian speaker's larger

volume, it wasn't able to achieve the same fullness of sound. The consequences were inevitable: The Italian had to go. A few months later, a new WATT/Puppy moved into the Schulz household, where it's still performing to this very day. Robustness and a long service life were also on the list of specifications for the Sasha DAW. In memory of the great David A. Wilson, it carries his initials in its product name. This can be seen as both a tribute and a pledge of continuing commitment to his ideals. The founder's son Daryl Wilson has retained all the positive attributes of the WATT/Puppy and its successors, such as the multiple enclosures that, among other things, prevent the woofer section and midrange tweeter from adversely affecting each other through acoustic bridges. The internal volume of the Sasha DAW is slightly greater than that of its Sasha 2 predecessor. At 114 centimeters high, 58.3 centimeters deep, and 27 centimeters wide, the Sasha is a sturdy floor-standing box in which the clever antiresonance measures have contributed to its hefty weight of 107 kilograms. As well as boasting a wonderfully offbeat design, the speakers are available in a wide range of colors; our test model was cobalt blue.

Wilson doesn't provide any exact details about what the enclosures are made of, except to point to the company's proprietary composites known as "x-material" and "s-material." The practical "knock test," however, results in a dull thud, indicating a practically vibration-free construction.

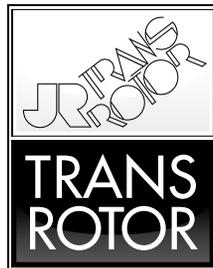
When it comes to speaker chassis, Wilson Audio has traditionally relied on its in-house developments. In the Sasha DAW, the drivers are state of the art. Bass power is provided by two 20.3-centimeter drivers (with a reflex port at the rear). The midfrequency range, eminently important for vocals, is taken care of by a 17.8-centimeter driver, and the familiar 2.5-centimeter "Wilson Convergent Synergy tweeter" (in the fifth-generation version) handles the rest. The binding posts for the speakers (in the midrange-tweeter cabinet) are of the heavy-duty variety, making them also suitable for thicker cables, and offer a banana plug option.

At four ohms, the nominal impedance is more than adequate; and the sensitivity, an impressive 91 decibels, offers an efficiency level that also makes it possible to use less powerful amplifiers. Although Wilson Audio recommends a minimum of 25 watts, the Sasha DAW performed well in our tests with the 8 watts our small Zero integrated amp from Audio Note is able to produce, delivering that firework of tones that is so typical of tube amplifiers.

The Sacha DAW is not a compact speaker in any sense of the word. Ideally, it's best to place the speakers at an adequate distance from the rear and side walls. But they produce a homogeneous and coherent tone in smaller rooms as well, assuming they're combined with great-sounding devices, of course (that don't necessarily need to be all that powerful). ■



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



Transrotor / Jochen und Dirk Räge

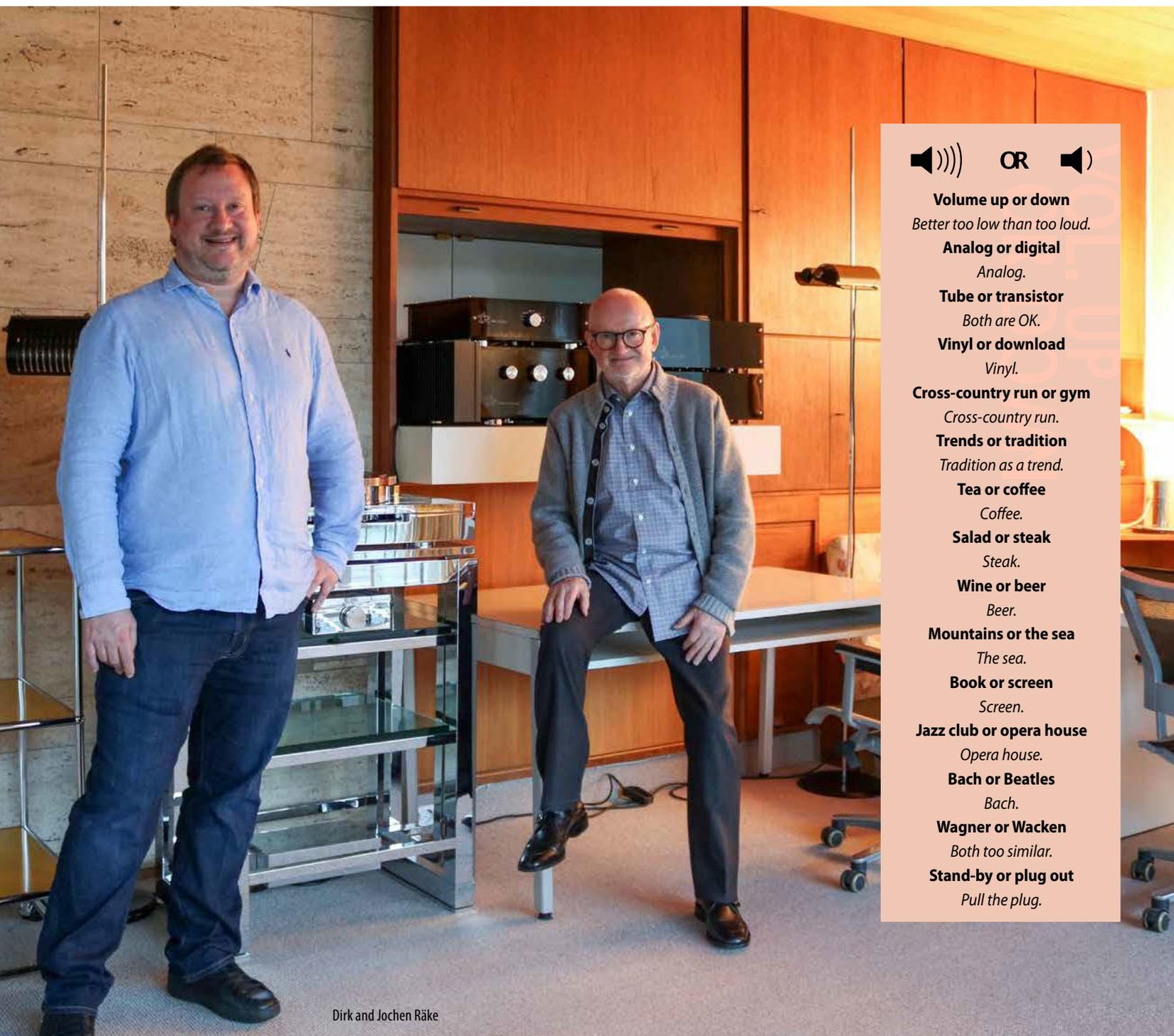
# KINGS OF SPIN

By Roland Schmenner. Photography: manufacturer, Carsten Barnbeck





Volume up or down?  
A very quick interview with Dirk Räge (left hand side), where we wanted them to respond as fast as possible.



Dirk and Jochen Räge

**Volume up or down***Better too low than too loud.***Analog or digital***Analog.***Tube or transistor***Both are OK.***Vinyl or download***Vinyl.***Cross-country run or gym***Cross-country run.***Trends or tradition***Tradition as a trend.***Tea or coffee***Coffee.***Salad or steak***Steak.***Wine or beer***Beer.***Mountains or the sea***The sea.***Book or screen***Screen.***Jazz club or opera house***Opera house.***Bach or Beatles***Bach.***Wagner or Wacken***Both too similar.***Stand-by or plug out***Pull the plug.*

# JOCHEN AND DIRK RÄKE— TWO GENERATIONS OF "MADE IN GERMANY".

Although they've become a rare breed, it's still possible to find small, family businesses that punch well above their weight on the global market. One of the primary reasons for their continued existence is the tradition and lasting value their workmanship represents to audiophiles everywhere. Among German companies, few characterize the essence of this principle better than Transrotor. The breadth of skills at Transrotor's disposal is evident from the proportion of steps carried out in-house during production of their products. All technical development activities as well as the entire finishing work take place internally. There's not even a hint of cheap outsourcing—all suppliers are located within the immediate area of the Transrotor facility. There are many cases in which "Made in Germany" really stands for "developed in Germany and then put together in a third-world country." This is definitely not the

case at Transrotor. With a 15-strong workforce, the company's entire production takes place locally. Regular customers sing the praises of Transrotor's after-sales service. Any queries or minor problems are dealt with swiftly, and frequently by the company boss himself.

## From the British Isles to the "Bergisches Land"

Although Transrotor is now run by Dirk Räge, any profile of this turntable producer must start with his father Jochen Räge, the man who founded the company in the 1970s. And it's a rather curious story. At this time, the turntable market in Germany was dominated by domestic and Swiss manufacturers. Although products from the UK had a few devotees, they were generally regarded as too delicate, idiosyncratic and lacking in the precision and

attention to detail found in German devices. But because these quintessentially un-German eccentricities were exactly what Jochen Räge found so endearing about British turntables, he worked together with the renowned English developer David Gammon to import such legendary examples as the Transcriptor Hydraulic Reference. Keenly aware, however, that his countrymen preferred precision products, Räge carried out his own modifications to the imported devices before selling them, enriching British individualism with a quantum of German dependability. From then on, it was only a short journey from the optimized Transcriptor devices to the Transrotor brand of turntables designed by Räge himself. And even though the company was given a fabricated name, it unmistakably harks back to the Transcriptor tradition. Old-timers of the hi-fi scene love to relate the story of the ▶





company's first appearance at the International Consumer Electronics Fair (IFA) in Berlin in 1971. Receiving the unexpected offer of a stand at that year's IFA event, Räge decided his only option was to make a virtue of necessity. With only around a dozen finished turntables at the company's disposal, he came up with a brilliant idea on how to present them: nine turntables were arranged on a platform draped in black cloth, each illuminated by a single spotlight. This surreal, minimalist presentation struck a real chord with that year's IFA visitors, many of whom were familiar with the Transcriptor from Stanley Kubrick's film masterpiece *A Clockwork Orange*. This IFA appearance secured Jochen Räge's reputation as a maker of turntables for non-mainstream audiophiles looking for something a little different.

## Giving customers what they want

As the company's reputation grew, this desire for something different meant customers frequently came up with ideas for customized

versions of products. Having studied mechanical engineering, Räge welcomed these challenges, and often incorporated modifications in subsequent series devices. He created a turntable made completely of glass for the actor Raimund Harmstorf, and the spectacular Gravita drive that was specially commissioned by the chocolate magnate Giovanni Ferrero. Celebrated for its gimbal suspension and self-leveling pendulum, the Gravita still exists today in several development variants. Thanks to such idiosyncratic constructions, Transrotor has also made a name for itself with Asian audiophiles—fans with an obvious love of quirky technology and seemingly bottomless pockets. An example: The Metropolis turntable is made completely of brass and weighs around 300 kg. Also available on request in gold-plated or silver-plated versions, and costing a modest 185,000 euros, several devices were purchased directly from the stand shortly after the HIGH END 2016 had opened its doors. Key to Transrotor's success is Jochen and Dirk Räge's great eye for product design as well as a passion for quality engineering. They also

know precisely what the customers in specific markets are looking for. This enables them to cater to a range of tastes—from the aesthetic Bauhaus-influenced German customer to the Russian or German fan who couldn't care less about "form follows function" and is looking for considerably more opulence. Nevertheless, such exceptional turntables, which take at least six weeks to manufacture, are only the icing on the cake for Transrotor. The vast majority of the around 1,000 turntables sold each year are more reasonably priced models, including classics such as Fat Bob S or the ZET 1–3 variants. These turntables are bought by high-end fans who admire sophisticated technology and outstanding design, but don't have a six-figure budget at their disposal. All customers acquire handmade devices assembled from over 150 individual components. Every finished turntable is subject to a 14-hour "break-in" time, after which the bearings are scrutinized for inaccuracies using a stethoscope. Even though aluminum is currently the preferred material for turntables, acryl and plastics like Delrin are also used. In some older ▶





models, slate or wood was also employed as the main manufacturing material. Although the Râkes are not dogmatic in their choice of individual materials, they make no compromises when it comes to processing and combining them—each particular mix has to work. At the end of the day, of course, the sound itself is the decisive factor.

## It pays to strive for perfection

As mentioned before, Jochen Râke soon stopped being a pure importer and started manufacturing his own turntables. 1976 saw the unveiling of the legendary Transrotor AC—still unquestionably rooted in the British turntable tradition. But the passion for British hi-fi still lives on at Transrotor: Old Transrotor turntables are still serviced there and the company is the importer for SME tonearms, used as

standard equipment on its top models. The company's own cartridges are based on models made by the British firm Goldring, modified according to Transrotor's specifications. The one exception to this is the current top-of-the-range Tamino, manufactured in collaboration with MY Sonic Lab from Japan. The company obviously prizes the composed and unruffled nature of the cartridges from Goldring and the tonearms from SME, and these are characteristics also demonstrated by Jochen and Dirk Râke themselves. Despite their impressive business success over the last few years, they continue to devote their time to their company in Bergisch Gladbach in a peaceful and unassuming manner. This is why they also have a relaxed attitude to the upcoming Brexit process—their business and personal connections with the UK are too close for any feelings of panic. Patience and perseverance have always paid off for the Râkes, even in turbulent times. During the slump that followed the CD boom of the mid-1980s,

their faithful following allowed them to emerge relatively unscathed. Since the late 1990s, there has been rapid growth in all market segments. Customers are now well aware of the production quality they can expect from the Transrotor name. They know they are purchasing a long-lasting product that is more or less plug & play, whatever the price class, and can be expected to give them a lifetime of enjoyable and high-quality listening. Completely in line with the company philosophy: Take as long as you need and pay attention to the details! ■

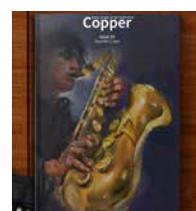
<http://www.transrotor.de/>

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.



# HAYDN AND THE THEATRE

By Lawrence Schenbeck | Text and pictures from Copper Magazine Issue 99



FIDELITY cooperation with *Copper* magazine: <https://www.psaudio.com/copper-magazine/>  
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\_\_\_\_\_ Today we most often encounter Joseph Haydn (1732–1809) as the celebrated “father” of the string quartet and composer of over a hundred symphonies. But for much of his lifetime, Haydn’s day-to-day was bound up with music for the stage: *opera seria* and *buffa*, romantic farce, *Singspiele* and German plays. Between 1766 and his death in 1790, Haydn’s patron Prince Nikolaus “the Magnificent” Esterházy made opera his chief pursuit; the elaborate opera house he built on the grounds of his country palace, [Eszterháza](#), saw the production of up to 150 stage works a year. As the Prince’s *Kapellmeister*, Haydn supervised entire seasons, hiring (and sometimes training) singers, scheduling performances, rehearsing the casts, even writing a few of the operas himself. An eyewitness in 1784 was understandably gob smacked at what was on offer:

*Every day there is [a show,] which the Prince always attends, and which usually begins at six o’clock in the evening. It is indescribable how eye and ear are entranced. The soul is melted by the music when the whole orchestra sounds, sometimes by its touching delicacy and sometimes by the most violent power—for the great composer, Her[r] haiden [sic] . . . conducts it: but also by the*

*excellent lighting, by the lifelike decorations, when clouds with gods are slowly lowered, or are raised from below and disappear in an instant, or when everything is transformed into a lovely garden, a magic wood, a magnificent hall.—Next to this opera house is a well-appointed coffee house. [Beschreibung, 1784]*

So: everything you could ask for in an evening’s entertainment, even though CGI had yet to be devised. As his international fame began to take off, Haydn realized that *instrumental* music—more portable, less expensive to put on—offered a better way to spread his name around. After the 1770s, he composed more symphonies and quartets than operas.

Yet even before then, Haydn knew how to mend, patch, recycle. A significant amount of his theatrical music ended up in the symphonies he cranked out between 1766 and ’75. We often label this experimental-sounding music [Sturm und Drang](#) (“storm and stress”), after a pre-Romantic German literary trend. But its obvious link is to the theatre. We know for sure that Haydn’s music for Regnard’s *Le distrait* (“the absent-minded man”) has survived as Symphony No. 60, “Il

distratto.” We know this because, as H. C. Robbins Landon (hereafter HCRL) put it, “[Haydn] is always listed in the Gotha Theater-Kalender as a kind of ‘house composer’ for the Carl Wahr Troupe,” and because the *Pressburger Zeitung* for July 6, 1774, specifically reported the following: *Eszterház, 30 June. High-ranking dignitaries from abroad are expected today, namely the Ambassador of Modena . . . Although His Princely Highness is absent, the most pleasant arrangements have been made to entertain the visitors. This evening there is a German comedy . . . Tomorrow they will view the magnificent castle and garden, the grand new ballroom and the new marionette theatre. That evening there will be the Italian opera L’infedeltà delusa. The music is by Herr Kapellmeister Joseph Haydn. This admirable composer also recent wrote, for Herr Wahr’s company, original music to Der Zerstreute [Le distrait], a score which connoisseurs consider to be a masterpiece. One notices, this time in music intended for a comedy, the same spirit that elevates all of Haydn’s work . . . He falls from the most affected pomposity directly into vulgarity, and so Haydn and Regnard contend with one another in capricious absent-mindedness . . . From act to act the music realizes the play’s intention more closely. ▶*



That's a live performance of Symphony No. 60 from conductor Giovanni Antonini and Il Giardino Armonico;

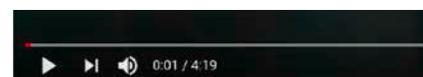
its studio counterpart is included in volume 4 of Alpha's priceless Haydn2032 series. If you migrate to its YouTube page, you'll find a useful set of jump-to-track links.

Now another installment has arrived. With *No. 7 — Gli Impresari*, featuring Antonini's other band, the Basel CO, we get two more big "theatre" works plus the early Symphony No. 9 and Mozart's incidental music to *Thamos, König in Egypten*

K345. As ever, the performances are passionate, precise, and easy on the ears. A bonus comes in the form of musicologist Christian Moritz-Bauer's concise but helpful essays putting each album's music in context.

A CD and downloads were released in March; more recently a [deluxe limited package](#) with two 180g LPs appeared (it includes a CD and download coupon). Alpha has released vinyl in this series before. Some volumes are still available: here's a [convenient link](#) (Naxos online may also have a few earlier copies). When I compared CD, 24-bit streaming, and LP, I got a shock. The vinyl offered more density in the sound, better timbral distinctions, gorgeously "natural" stereo

separation, and surprising dynamic responsiveness. (I realize this makes me just a bit late to the party.) My favorite spot featured not this album's admittedly thrilling natural horns, but rather a solo wooden flute with strings:



00:00 / 01:07

Symphony No. 65 cues: Andante (second movement) at 8:15; Menuetto-Trio at 14:05; Presto at 16:53



## Here's Antonini and the Basel CO doing Symphony No. 65:

Symphony No. 65 was long suspected of being “theatrical” in origin. Now we know for sure. Moritz-Bauer has located a printed copy of Cornelius von Ayrenhoff’s play, *Der Postzug*, which premiered in Vienna in September 1769 and was mounted at Eszterháza later that year. In his liner notes, he tells us he’s reserving “enumeration of all the compositional peculiarities” that give No. 65 what HCRL called (forty years ago!) “a whiff of the stage”:

*Nevertheless, the esteemed audience will easily be able to infer, for instance, the point in the Andante at which Major von*

*Rheinberg says he “would rather hear a hundred words” from his sweetheart, Fräulein Leonore, than “just one” from Count Reitbahn, whom the bride’s mother intends her to marry.*

HCRL once called this Andante a “piece of almost lunatic irrationality . . . with its curious repeated notes and theatrical fanfares.” What, “lunatic”? It certainly does drive one of Mozart’s favorite rhetorical devices, the masculine-versus-feminine exchange of motives, straight into the ground. Or not quite—here’s a witty developmental treatment of those opposing motives:



00:00 / 01:52

For what it’s worth, HCRL was just as taken by the Menuetto-Trio, in which he heard “Gypsy influences (those curious grace notes and same slightly unsettling quality [present] whenever Haydn turns to the language of the Balkans).”

My own takeaway was more obvious yet also “slightly unsettling”: lots of triple-as-duple, i.e., a minuet that often becomes a march. (Moritz-Bauer links that to the antics of the play’s Baroness, who “goes into raptures” over the way her tavern musicians deliver “Styrian dances.”) The *presto* Finale, HCRL noted, “is a hunting piece . . . with difficult parts for the horns.” True that.

Symphony No. 67 cues: Adagio at 8:40; Menuet-Trio at 20:00; and Allegro di molto at 23:44



## And finally, we get Symphony No. 67,

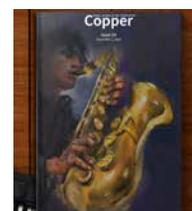
“one of the most boldly original symphonies of this period.” (HCRL) It begins right off the bat with a hunting motive, which makes sense if you know it originated as incidental music for Charles Colles’ play *La Partie de chasse de Henri IV*, Germanized and given at Eszterháza on July 12, 1772 for the visiting French ambassador. In the performance below, we also get spoken excerpts from the play (alas, no subtitles).

In the piquant Trio, two solo violinists, both muted, one re-tuned to provide a

drone accompaniment, enter “almost like the wandering Gypsies in *Háry János*” (HCRL). The Finale also features a major surprise.

Moritz-Bauer gives plot summaries of the plays mentioned above, as well as background details about Mozart’s charming music for *Thamos*. As in every volume, a set of photographs by a noted Magnum photographer—in this case, an American, Peter van Agtmael—is bound with the essays and recordings. The photos tend to make subtle comments relative to the overall theme of the album. (For vol. 7, see the [booklet](#), pp. 10 and following).

Now try to imagine what those photos look like at nearly three times the size of the CD booklet. Or just get the LP set. *All quotations attributed here to HCRL are taken from H. C. Robbins Landon, Haydn: Chronicle and Works, Vol. II Haydn at Eszterháza 1766–1790 (Indiana University Press, 1978).* ■



Special thanks to  
Copper magazine

Audio Note Tomei Kensei and M6

# MUSIC YOU CAN ACTUALLY WALK THROUGH

By Stefan Gawlick. Photography: Ingo Schulz



YOU'RE GUARANTEED TO RUB  
SOMEONE THE WRONG WAY  
WHEN IT COMES TO AUDIO  
NOTE. BUT THAT ONLY MAKES  
LISTENING TO THE LEVEL 6  
PREAMPLIFIER AND THE TOMEI  
KENSEI POWER AMPLIFIER  
EVEN MORE EXCITING.

\_\_\_\_\_As either a writer who enjoys music, or a music fan who enjoys writing, as soon as you mention Audio Note you may as well give up before you've even typed the first few letters. You see, you'll never please everybody. For instance, if you mention the fantastic sound quality, then some tech-savvy high-end fans are bound to claim that an extensive hearing range is not accounted for, presuming that the upper hearing threshold is 10 kilohertz at best. If you criticize aspects of technical playback, all the rest will accuse you of clearly not understanding the whole concept of the music and suggest that you take your three test CDs and go lock yourself away in a windowless basement—and maybe stay there forever. If you're enthusiastic about the devices themselves, their hefty price tags will lead to accusations of a biased critique on the grounds that you're enslaved to the industry. But then if you criticize the pricing, you get criticized for being petty and jealous because you clearly couldn't afford these devices (which is actually true!), and therefore simply want to bad-mouth them.

So there! I have set out the basic conditions for my article. I'm bound to be told that I've got it all wrong, so I'm giving myself *carte*

*blanche* and just enjoying the freedom of putting whatever I want. Splendid!

I've had experienced the pleasure of Audio Note devices on a few occasions. The first time was a small Level 1 system which thoroughly impressed me. The next time, I listened through different levels of the reasonably priced AN-E loudspeakers performing at quite a close level to their much more expensive siblings, which got me in some really hot water. My third experience was an afternoon listening to the company's own four-part super CD player in a fitting Audio Note setting which, for me, from an emotional perspective, remains a CD playback highlight that stands head and shoulders above the rest (something that also vexed a fair few people).

But I still hadn't gotten to test expensive components in detail. So I was thrilled when a real-life Level 6 preamplifier (Level 6 Balanced Phono) and a heavyweight power amplifier (the outrageously expensive Tomei Kensei) were announced. Both devices, which are assuredly far beyond my price range, at best fall somewhere in the middle of Audio Note's price list. ▶





I asked myself: How can I structure this encounter to ensure that it is objective, is fair to the devices and their manufacturer, and provides you—my dear readers—with as comprehensive a picture as possible? Given the situation, I proceeded as follows: I spoke at length with the German dealer Stefan Wörmer, went over a few questions with the company owner Peter Qvortrup, and finally decided, despite how nice both men clearly are, that they wouldn't necessarily have any bearing on the rest of my life (as I don't make a living as a writer!). Therefore, I would write honestly about my experience listening to the devices in two different rooms and with three different types of loudspeakers. I decided that it wouldn't matter if the manufacturer, dealer, editorial team or any readers decided to stop talking to me afterward. If I gave myself *carte blanche*, and the freedom to write whatever I wanted, then I would be doing the right thing.

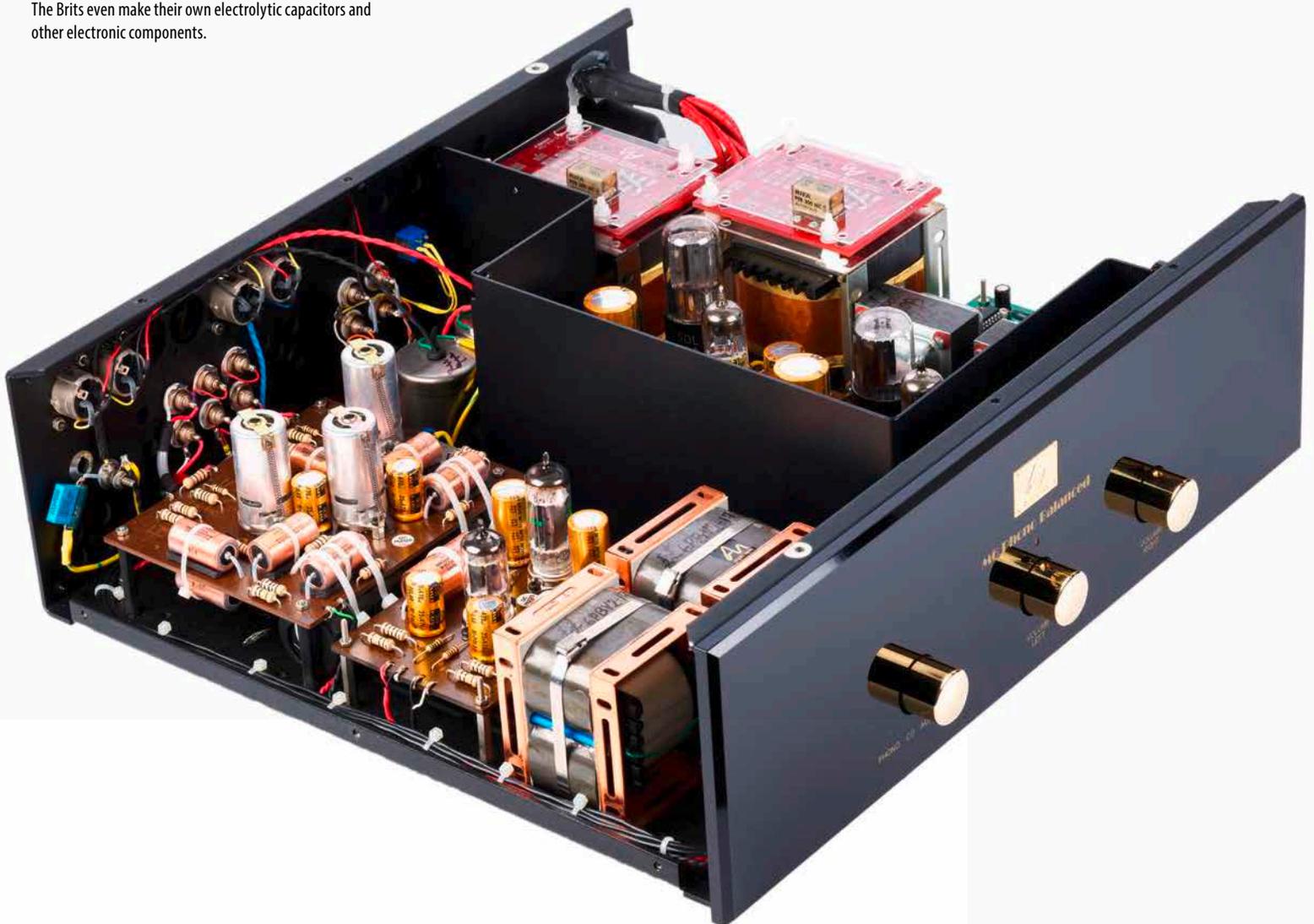
Both pieces of kit left a lasting first impression when I unpacked them: the power amplifier alone was heavy enough that my back and hands gave me grief for a few days afterward. However, this is

not a criticism, simply a fact, given that if you buy such a system it will be installed for you.

Both amplifiers were interconnected in my music room via an enclosed symmetrical Audio Note cable, with my trusty Mark Levinson No. 390s working upstream in the chain and my Sky-Audio Verdade loudspeakers plugged in to begin with. But first, a little warning: if you ever want to test these amplifiers, make sure that they're properly warmed up. They perform far better a good 30 minutes later than when they've just been switched on. I'm not certain why exactly that is the case, but in my 20 years writing about all things hi-fi, I've never encountered amplifiers that respond so sensitively to this. Both amplifiers need to be worked in for a while before they can really show their worth.

First off, the Panocha Quartet played early string quartets composed by Antonín Dvořák. And what I heard refused to fit into any of my usual evaluation matrices. All I can tell you is that at that particular point in time the sound events' spatial definition seemed somewhat diffuse, the cello could have been snappier ▶

Not a single part is off the shelf: as per usual, Audio Note uses in-house components for its outstanding M6 preamplifier. The Brits even make their own electrolytic capacitors and other electronic components.





in the lowest ranges and the whole performance seemed highly nuanced tonally, yet extremely intense. On we go; however, the two amplifiers weren't making it easy for me to skip forward, as the music was simply too interesting. My usually swift checking-off of the critical points (listening, forming an opinion then skipping to the next track) didn't take hold, and I stayed where I was: listening. I just couldn't put my finger on exactly what I found so fascinating, and breaking down the playback into individual disciplines seemed unproductive. So I carried on, and ended up listening to Beethoven's quartets performed by the Takács Quartet, Beethoven's piano concertos performed by Arturo Benedetti Michelangeli, Mozart's operas conducted by René Jacobs, Strauss's *Salome* conducted by Zubin Mehta, and finally *Parsifal* conducted by Thielemann. Needless to say, it was a very long night.

You're surely sharing my excitement at this, but my "description" isn't exactly useful. So I'll try to break down this typically inaccessible account into individual points, even if picking it to pieces misses the very point of the whole thing.

Listening from a "technical" point of view, several points stood out. First, this system seemed to make the music immensely present in the room. It was impossible to escape. I got the distinct impression that easy listening sessions wouldn't really be an option. That's because the music was spatially reproduced very far forward. Voices and musicians came right up to me; there was no sound engineer's

safe distance. Individual sound events were reproduced on a larger scale, not with razor-sharp definition, but surrounded by a kind of "energetically pulsating aura." I know—that choice of words is extremely strange—but I think you understand exactly what I mean by it. I wasn't simply made aware of the existence and qualities of tones, rather they seemed to actually be alive.

What's more, and this is a special point, every sound was three-dimensional—each had an almost physical body, a spatial depth that was just as well defined toward the back. As such, a nice recording of a string quartet felt less like the usual glimpse into a studio, and more like a private living room performance, with sound sources that I could literally run around and examine from all angles. The more complex the music, the more spectacular this new reality became. With *Parsifal*, I was wandering through a musical garden where I could rediscover the music by walking through it.

Then there was the amazing flow that these amplifiers achieve, the energetically gripping, and in no way tubular plush tonality – you now have a strong idea of what these amplifiers can accomplish at home.

Yet for Peter Qvortrup, this richness results from a very linear, clear and efficient concept, implemented with the best and, even more importantly, the right ingredients. Essential here is the 211 triode's use in all of his top-end amplifiers, which lets him build an amplifier with a minimum number of stages and correction loops as well as acceptable output power. A 300B would apparently deliver ▶



Detours are out of the question for Audio Note! In the Tomei Kensei, signals undergo amplification via the shortest possible paths. The trade-off for this specificity is that the input must have an unusual position: on the front left-hand side of the housing. This is the blue component in the bottom left of the image.





less power, while a stronger 845 would provide more power but would require another signal processing stage, which would complicate and de-purify the circuitry. And apparently this conceptual simplicity is precisely what's required to generate such direct and crystalline sound quality.

Another crucial part of this alliance, and the perfect partner, is the Level 6 preamplifier. Just like the Tomei Kensei (Level 4), the M6 is also a Level 4 product. However, since China is one of Audio Note's major markets, and the number 4 is unlucky there, they simply relabeled it. If you think *that's* confusing, you should take a look at the full, 184 page Audio Note price list!

The Audio Note devices continued to work as described above when connected to other loudspeakers. Even with the small Splendor S3/SSEs, quite a mismatch, they still managed to make the two loudspeakers completely “disappear,” delivering a performance that sounded far beyond the capacity of the little closed-box two-way speakers. These small BBC monitor speakers had only ever sounded comparably “large” and “invisible” with a Gryphon Antileon and a large Pass stereo power amplifier. This experiment also pretty much answered the question of whether 20 watts per channel are

sufficient. From a purely arithmetical perspective, you need more to get these little watt annihilators really going. But in practice, both volume controls dedicated to each channel never went past the 12 o'clock.

As you can see, I'm a bit all over the place. That's because, on the one hand, given their purchase price, these two amplifiers have some properties that are worth trying: sound-related properties deviating far from the neutral central ground, separate volume controls dedicated to each channel, which are actually rasterized but would definitely be easier to use with a scale on the front panel, and an unprotected set of open tubes which could pose a problem if you have children or pets.

Yet on the other hand, this combo delivers a musical experience that you simply can't get anywhere else, either for love or money— If you're a fan of this emotional approach to music, and couldn't be bothered to know how many centimeters the second viola stand is behind the first one. If all you care about is the music experience, the magic, the goosebumps, being left speechless and being convinced immediately to scrap the TV, then I can't think of a single alternative. ■ ▶



**Audio Note M6 Balanced and Tomei Kensei**  
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#### Preamplifier | M6 Balanced

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#### Power amplifier | Tomei Kensei

**Functional principle:** SET design with 211 triodes | **Output power:** 2 x 20 W | **Input:** Balanced (XLR) | **Output:** 1 pair of binding posts | **Equipment:** 2 x 5R4WGB, 2 x 211, 2 x 6V6 | **Weight:** 38 kg | **Dimensions (W/H/D):** 305/305/640 mm | **Warranty period:** 2 years | **Price:** €52,000

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# BROWSER

## Nº 02



# BROWSER Nº 02

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# BROWSER

## Nº 02



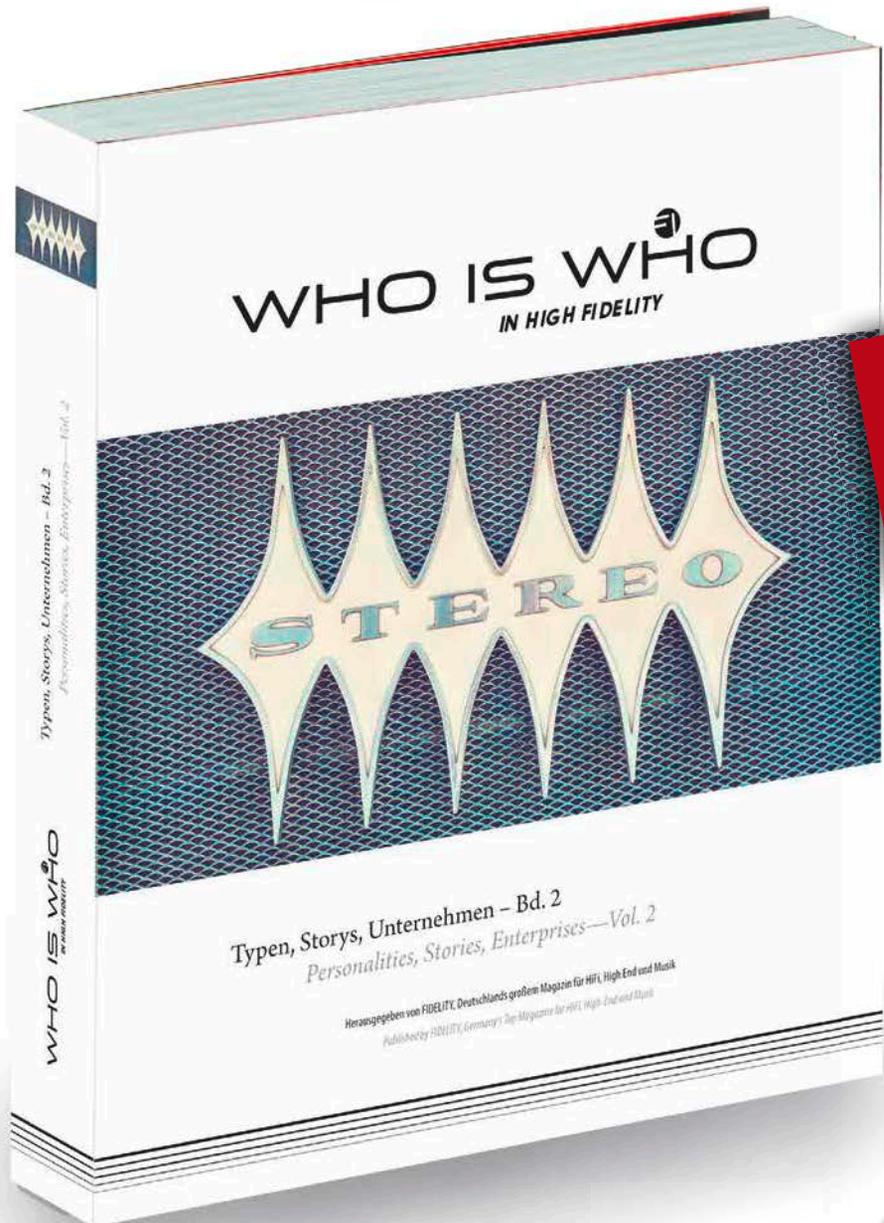
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# HEART AND MIND

Part I



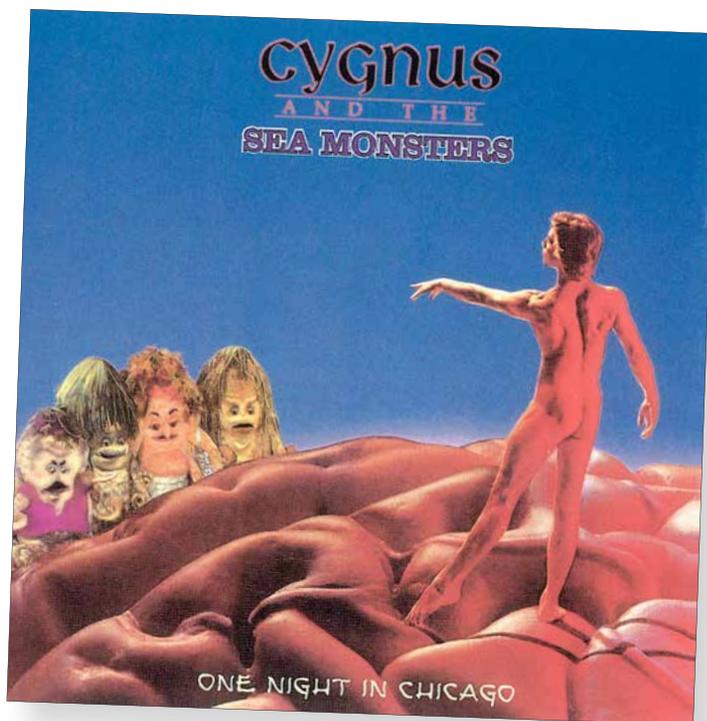
Covering normally refers to songs being performed by other artists, but actual album covers attract their share of impersonators, too. The covered cover: Is it a witty reference, respectful homage or parody? Or is there a deeper meaning behind it?

\_\_\_\_\_In Canada, where all the members of Rush were born, the prog rock band had numerous platinum (and even multiplatinum) selling albums over period covering about two decades. In the neighboring, more populous US, many of Rush's albums also went platinum, even up until the beginning of the 1990s! British prog rock bands such as ELP, King Crimson, and Genesis (in their progressive era) could only dream of achieving that kind of success in the US. Though Rush only ever operated as a trio, they earned the respect of countless rock fans and many of their peers by displaying their sheer skills as musicians and sharing their crude science fiction fantasies. To give their skills as musicians and the utopian content of their music plenty of room to shine, the band wrote an extended, multipart, suite-like epic song telling one long, continuous story for almost every album. Rush's fifth studio album, *A Farewell To Kings* (1977), ends with the four-part track titled "Cygnus X-1 Book I: The Voyage." The lyrics tell the story of an explorer aboard the spaceship Rocinante who journeys toward a black hole known as Cygnus X-1 before finally being drawn into it.

"Cygnus X-1 Book II: Hemispheres" is the continuation of that story and the opening track on the follow-up album; it also provided the inspiration for the album title: *Hemispheres*. This is yet another suite-like epic

song, but this time actually occupies an entire side of the vinyl album. The story reintroduces the space explorer from Book I who has flown through the black hole and oddly enough now finds himself in the midst of Greek mythology. Apollo, the God of Light and Logic, and Dionysus, the God of Intoxication and Emotion, are locked in a struggle — very Friedrich Nietzsche. The use of the word "Hemispheres" in the track's title is therefore an allusion to the two halves (hemispheres) of the human brain, which (broadly speaking) are responsible for logic (left) and emotion (right). Our space explorer is recognized as the God of Balance and given the name Cygnus, whereby the fifth part of the epic song is called "Cygnus: Bringer of Balance." A second epic song on the album, the 12-part, almost 10-minute-long instrumental track titled "La Villa Strangiato," is even more impressive from a musical perspective. The band didn't develop this "suite" until they were in the studio and wanted to record it in a single take but struggled to complete the technical twists and turns around 40 times. In the end, they pieced together the recording from various takes.

Before the music for the album had been fully written, Hugh Syme started on the artwork for it. For a long time, Syme was the go-to cover designer for many rock and metal bands, such as Aerosmith, ▶



# HEART AND MIND

Part II

Def Leppard, Megadeth, Queensrÿche, Survivor, and Whitesnake—to name but a few. As inspiration for the cover of *Hemispheres*, he had simply been given drummer Neil Peart’s lyrics: “Beautiful handwritten pages, which I still have to this day,” as Syme once revealed. “The band often didn’t start to write any music until Neil’s lyrics were ready.” The idea for the album cover emerged after discussions with Peart about the functions of the left- and right-hand hemispheres of the human brain. The two figures therefore symbolize logic (Apollo) and emotion (Dionysus). They are standing on an oversized brain and you can see the border between them separating the two hemispheres. Syme stated that they used actual human models for both figures. He even had a model for the brain — provided on loan from an institute of anatomy. The album cover was produced using an airbrush, a paintbrush, and a camera; computer graphics were not yet the norm in 1978.

It is clear to see that progressive style “classics” are simply beautiful études for instrumental virtuosos of the new prog rock scene. The American super-technicians Dream Theater, for example, released several concert recordings between 2004 and 2007 in which they covered famous rock albums, such as *Master Of Puppets* (Metallica) and *Made In Japan* (Deep Purple). In 2006, Dream Theater’s cofounder and long-time drummer, Mike Portnoy, also initiated a live homage to Rush — not with

his Dream Theater band members but as part of a project named “Cygnus And The Sea Monsters.” The tribute performance titled “One Night In Chicago” was part of a larger concert event held to celebrate the 20th anniversary of a famous large drum store. What could be better than one of the current drumming legends (Portnoy) honoring one of the drumming legends from the past (Peart)? Of course this was no mean feat for Portnoy’s all-star quartet. They covered three legendary epic songs from Rush, namely “2112” and both “Cygnus X-1” suites. They also performed “YYZ,” an instrumental track off Rush’s *Moving Pictures* album, which Peart regularly used for an extended drum solo during the band’s live performances. Portnoy reproduced this approach himself. A certain Scotty Hansen reworked Hugh Syme’s artwork for the concert tribute album by caricaturing Portnoy and his band members as four sea monsters. (You presumably have to reinterpret the Dionysus figure as Cygnus.) The booklet and inlay contain further artwork allusions and the original artist (Hugh Syme) is even mentioned. It’s no surprise really, as Mike Portnoy wouldn’t want to blow his chances of working with the renowned artist. Since 2005, Syme has also designed many album covers for Portnoy’s longstanding band Dream Theater. ■

Hans-Jürgen Schaal

**Rush:** *Hemispheres* (Mercury 534 629-2)

**Cygnus And The Sea Monsters:** *One Night In Chicago* (MP4 Productions, o. Nr.)



# ROCKY MOUNTAIN AUDIOFEST, 2019

By Danny Kaey. Photography: Danny Kaey

My upgrade to 1<sup>st</sup> didn't work this time. Bummer, I thought. Then again, it's really only a 2h flight from sunny SoCal to Denver, for my 12<sup>th</sup>-ish trek to the annual Rocky Mountain Audiofest. Marjorie Baumert, the show's Director and owner, was in for something altogether new, newer and most new. Ditching the show's first home, the Denver Marriott Tech Center for the newly built monstrosity of a "hotel", Rocky Mountain's Gaylord resort and ~~casino~~ convention center, a short 15-ish minute ride from the airport, we all were in for something genuinely new. Billed as a billion dollar (!) resort with 1501 rooms, miles and miles of open spaces, 8 restaurants, amenities second only to some fancy Las Vegas resort, this is the new home of the Audiofest, at least for the next few years. What will change—what the hotel simply couldn't accommodate this

time around—is that the show in 2020, will in fact move back to its original showing in early October. A good way to start a new decade I suppose.

Naturally, anytime a big, nay, major move like this happens, expectations run rampant, especially considering that the hotel hosting the venue is essentially brand new, only having opened for guests and full-time operations earlier this year in January. In many ways the show and hotel didn't really disappoint, though quibbles and typical organizational stuff aside, the main theme circling my head simply wouldn't leave. Are these shows really necessary for the beginning of the third decade in this new millennium? At least the way they are organized in their current form, followers of my ▶





writing surely recognize this ear worm, since I have been eluding to it three or four years running. But, back to the Audiofest. Judging from the tremendous presence of the press, show reports galore went spinning up the interwebs practically on the hour, by the hour. Video crews and Vloggers—I must have counted a dozen (!) at least—added yet another element to the multi-media-ish spectacle this year. While I had originally intended to cover the show as Spielberg style videographer myself, technical quibbles with my gear ultimate prevented me from doing so with the exception of a few stationary interviews you can catch on YouTube elsewhere. Fine, I thought. Less stress, less this and that, I thought. Surely, while I was stress free for all three days at the show, I must have racked up more miles traversing the hallways each day than at any show before, save for the occasional CES outing of year's past.

The resort's show was essentially split into two separate sections: the East and West wing, or the convention center and hotel rooms, floors 3-11. While I was expecting more in the way of showrooms or traffic for that matter, the rooms I did visit proved full, vibrant and generally good sounding. Other than my quick in-n-out visits just to say hello, the show really started at 1PM sharp, courtesy of an invitation to Wilson Audio's suite on the 11<sup>th</sup> floor. All hands-on deck, Daryl Wilson, Wilson Audio's bona fide, smart and genuinely

warm and welcoming CEO, offered up his company's latest announcements. First and foremost, the newest flagship loudspeaker, the XVX, as well as the company's stereo sub crossover controller for single or twin sub configurations. Though I was privileged to see (and hear!) XVX first-hand during a brief visit to Salt Lake City the week before, the press announcement served as the de facto formal worldwide launch for this new flagship speaker system. More than two years in the making, XVX is Daryl Wilson and team's full on assault at the state of the art, the best of the best, the crème de la crème. And a statement it truly is. Borrowing heavily from design cues first seen with his father's Mangum Opus, the WAMM of 2017, the family resemblance is instantly recognized. Dare I say that this is Wilson Audio's new design theme, which no doubt will be carried forward for products in years to come. Bold, magnetic, spectacular, XVX is nothing short of a genuine statement product. Think Bugatti Chiron, McLaren P-1, Rolls-Royce Wraith. Offering up and retaining WAMM's twin Master Chronosonic Micrometer adjustment system, the all new superstructure atop of the twin woofer'd bass cabinet, contains the MTMM upper driver array, including an all new Alnico magnet driven mid-range driver. From the execution of the form, notice the aligned curves of the superstructure, to the latest generation Wilson materials, to a genuinely brilliantly integrated lighting system, XVX, especially dressed ▶





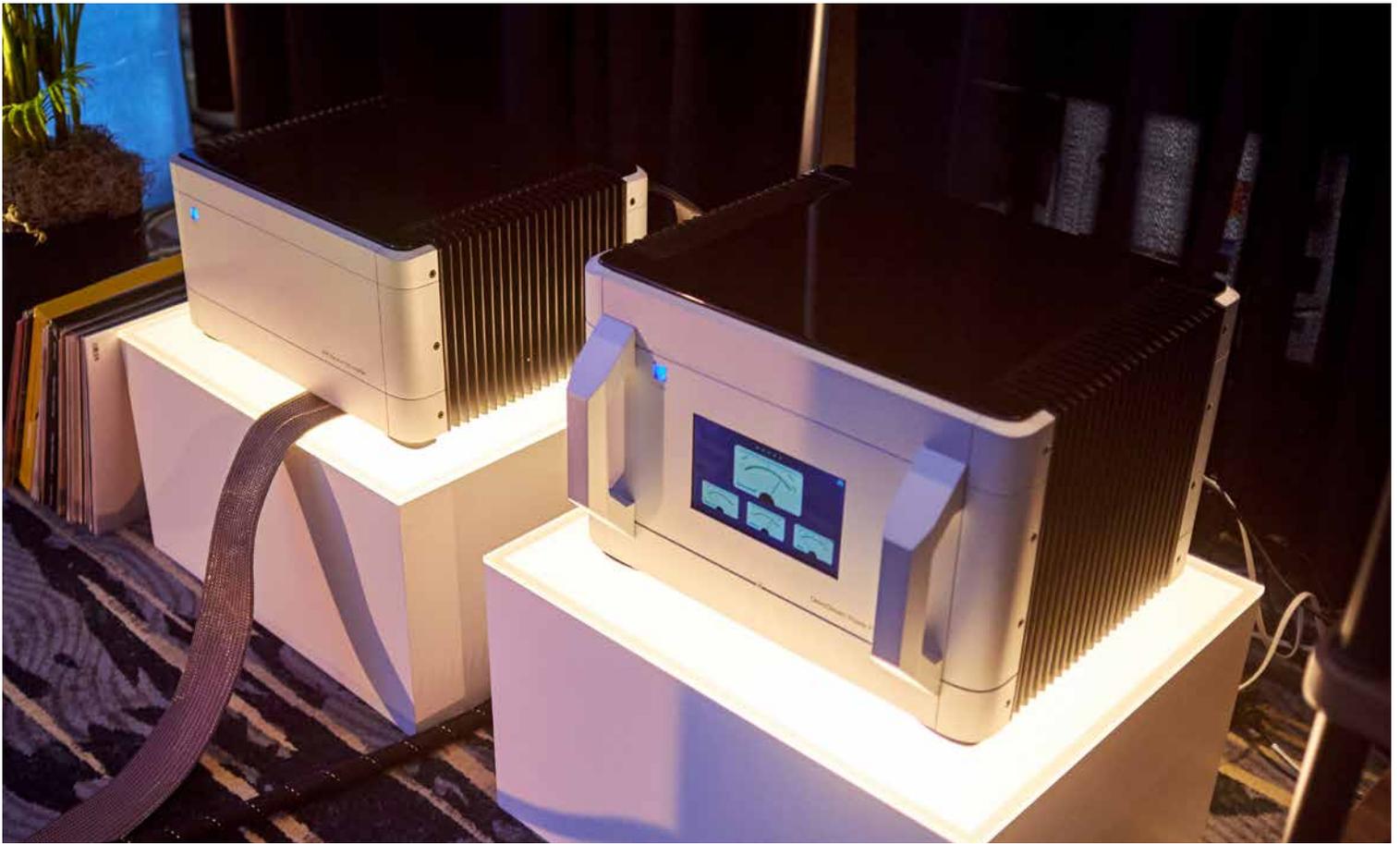
in the latest WilsonGloss Premium Pearl Saffron color, is truly breathtaking.

Though we didn't get to hear XVX—it was a static display model only—I can confirm from personal experience with a late pre-production model mono channel XVX I heard side-by-side with a mono channel XLF Series 2, that XVX plays in an altogether different league compared to Wilson's previous flagship. Far more presence, depth (yes, easily heard in mono) and resolution ought to completely surpass everything Wilson had on offer before, with the exception of the limited production run WAMM system. Clocking in at \$329k, XVX is a marked jump in price compared to XLF Series 2; then again, it is less than half the cost of WAMM. Further, where WAMM with the addition of one extra driver in its superstructure, is just a smidgen too tall for certain Asian markets, XVX standing right at 6'4" (coincidentally, Daryl Wilson's height) should fit in just about any willing and able household. Definitely

the talk of the show every single day, from elevator talk to hallway talk to "pro" talk amongst the exhibitors.

The other announcement was active however, that being Wilson's custom in house built all new stereo subwoofer crossover controller, ActivXO. Leashed to a complement of VTL top end gear and a dCS Vivaldi One, Daryl's other hit, DAW, was on display with two gorgeously matched matt blue twin WATCH Dogs. Expertly setup by the one and only—the incomparable—Peter McGrath, DAW avec WATCH Dogs proved to be the other talk of town. Playing Peter's own recordings as well as typical show favorites courtesy of Peter's vast playlist, the sound in this room was the best of all hotel rooms, bar none. Tight, expansive, dynamic; resolved and open, this speaker system was something I would easily take home and never feel the need to swap for anything else, even as further improvements would easily manifest themselves given a larger room and more air to breathe. Sunday morning as I was leaving, ►





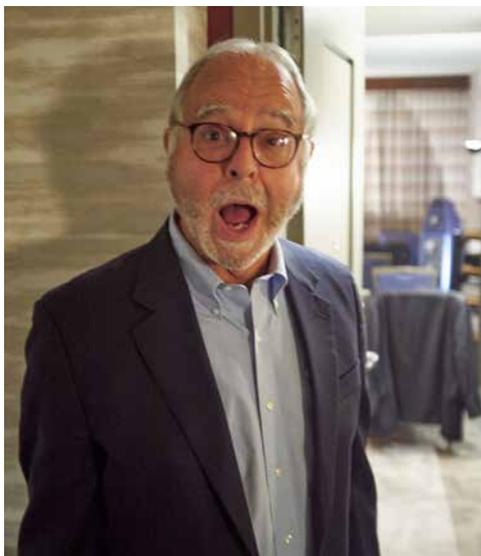
I briefly ran into a fellow colleague who said that the Wilson room was essentially standing room only Friday and Saturday. Not surprised in the least.

Elsewhere on the room side of the show you easily found all other players, movers and shakers. Ed Meitner, long time digital honcho and genuine leader of digital developments over the last 40 odd years, used Audiofest to announce his return to analog with a phono preamp made exclusively under license from DS Audio for their optical range of phono cartridges. Mated to an SME 15 deck, the pre-production proto-box sounded rather magical indeed. Leashed to a full complement of emmLabs power and pre-amp combo via Focal floor standers, I can easily see, nay, hear the benefits of this optical cartridge system: bold, dynamic, wide open, the sound was distinctly attractive and memorable. No doubt something to look out for early next year when this exclusive phono preamp is supposed to launch. Walter Swanbon, proprietor of FidelisAV, partnered with CH Precision to show off Stenheim's Alumine S, which he had previously used to great acclaim during the Axpona show with EINSTEIN in toe. Compared to that setup, the CH/Stenheim combo seems more analytical sounding, with a distinct solid-state sort sound that definitely drew crowds throughout Friday and Saturday.

Dashing across the entirety of the Gaylord, you found more exhibitors in the larger ball-room type setups. On the far-end left

was the now famous market place, where Acoustic Sounds, Elusive Disc, to name a few of the larger retailers, setup shop. In between the records—both pre-owned and new, CDs, SACDs and other nick-knacks, where two-odd dozen smaller mom-pop shops selling record cleaning machines, turntables, reel-to-reel machines and all sorts of other audio accessories. Immediately next door was Audiofest's new headphone hall, which featured just about every headphone and headphone amplifier manufacturer you could shake a stick at. Visiting these cousins of HiFi is always a hoot, for you will find everything from truly bespoke to everything in between. This was my first time listening to Meze's highly acclaimed Empyrean headphones which boggled my mind. Exquisitely crafted from the finest materials, these cans truly sounded spectacular and will no doubt warrant further, more detailed, examination by yours truly in the coming months at chez K.

Moving across some of the larger exhibit rooms, I ran into familiar faces Kerry St. James of YG and the seemingly always present Luke Manley of VTL. This year, YG and VTL partnered exclusively with Nordost to demo an all Nordost leashed system consisting of internally Nordost cable'd YG Sonja 2.3s. (currently in the house for review sans the Nordost internal cabling), a full fanfare of VTL components fronted by a DCS digital and VPI analog playback chain. The room was very, very large, and from Kerry's accounts, took more than a day (and night!) to fine-tune and setup. That said, this was the best sounding of all the large ball-room type ▶





exhibits by far with scale, image, definition and sheer believability that was second to none. Chad Kassem, Acoustic Sounds, brought along a test pressing of an upcoming new release, a Tennessee Ernie Ford album, that was so incredibly goosebumps inducing life-like, that every single person in the room practically gave a standing ovation at the end of track 1. A truly memorable experience at Audiofest 2019.

Cueing up a few hallways over, in a room slightly less large than the YG/VTL/Nordost combo, you found Sean Casey and Gerrit Koer of Zu Audio, with their now legendary setup of a Druid VI, Pass Labs and Mobile Fidelity / Technics deck'd HiFi rig. Playing music that you really only hear at Zu, the sound was at once involving, dramatic and Zu like. With the all-new Druid VI, Sean really ratcheted up development of the house-sound. Far more detailed, far more resolved than any previous generation Druid, model VI is really an entirely new platform full of intricate design details and solutions that simply weren't possible with any prior model. Judging by the ever-increasing press coverage and accolades Zu is getting from the high-end press, I'd wager that many an audiophile previously unfamiliar with Zu is now well versed on

Sean Casey's designs. Definitely a stand-out room on that side of the Gaylord!

Departing Sunday morning, I left the show enthused, yet somewhat perplexed at the same time. Overall, the show did what a HiFi show does: draw attention to a largely bespoke, niche industry in need of mass-market appeal. Add an all new—unfamiliar—venue and exhibitor attendance prices that have gone by at least double compared to year's prior and you have the makings of a perfect storm. Audiofest has now defacto grown-up and is no longer that small startup it once was.

With that come expectations that are increasingly more challenging to meet or even exceed in this demanding market place we call HiFi. As I have said so many times before, I admire Marjorie and team greatly for the resolve, resilience and never ending, nay, limitless enthusiasm they bring to the show each and every year. Likewise, I'd also wager that there is yet more room to grow and if not reinvent the wheel, perhaps add more layers to it with a twist, so to speak. Stay tuned for Audiofest 2020, which, back in its old timeslot, October, will undoubtedly be bigger, better, badder than this year's show. ■



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

The 25 best tips for better listening—Part II

# HAVE A LISTEN TO THIS!

By Jochen Reinecke

# RELAX!

## OR: GETTING ALONG WITH THE NEIGHBORS.

Of course, anyone who knows a thing or two will immediately ask: Why 25 tips? Why not 100, 1000 or some other number that looks much cooler than this arbitrary 25? Why not 1001?

It goes without saying, that for a true high-ender, when it comes to getting a better sound from a hi-fi system, no expense is too high, no explanation is too abstruse, and no wallet is too thick. It is easy to get lost among all the temptations.

Now and then, it's simply time to approach this incredibly cool hi-fi-system thing "from scratch" (once again). But perhaps you also want to introduce a brand-new hi-fi acquaintance to the basics of your hobby without immediately scaring them off with crazy sums or bizarre rituals. That comes later. Maybe. Hopefully.

This 25-part quick guide for better listening is intended as a brazen, entertaining (re-) introduction to the topic. Here, even those

who think they already know it all are given fresh food for thought, things to discuss, and suggestions. Of course, we are aware that as you get deeper into this topic, each new experience also raises new questions and demonstrates new aspects. Eventually you reach a point where not even 1000 tips are anywhere near enough.

On that note, have fun! And welcome to the second-most important topic in the world. Here is part two: tips 3 and 4. ▶

**№1 NA HÖREN SIE MAL!**  
DIE 25 BESTEN TIPPS FÜR BESSERES HÖREN

Die 25 besten Tipps für besseres Hören

Have a listen to this!  
The 25 best tips for better listening

**NA HÖREN SIE MAL!**

Technics

EDITION FIDELITY

Tip 7 Size Matters

Laufsprecher

**7 Size Matters**

**KOMPAKT-ODER STANDBOX?**

Angenommen, eine gute Fee kommt vorbei, drückt Ihnen 2000 Euro in die Hand und fordert Sie auf, sich speziellen Gegenwert zu entscheiden, Was nehmen Sie: Die Standbox, oder? – Reingefallen.

Viele Menschen glauben, dass große Lautsprecher mit vielen Treibern besser klingen als kleine. Oft genug ist es im gleichen Preissegment – exakt andersherum. Je größer ein Gehäuse, desto schwieriger und teurer ist es, dieses frei von ungewünschten Vibrationen zu halten. Je größer das Gehäuse, desto teurer ist es in der Herstellung – und desto weniger Geld bleibt übrig, um den Rest (Treiber, Frequenzweichen, Innenverkabelung, Dämmung) zu finanzieren. Und wenn Sie vier statt zwei Treiber mit dem gleichen Budget einkaufen müssen, dann leidet logischerweise die Qualität der Treiber.

Dies ist kein Generallösungsgriff auf Standlautsprecher, sondern ein Plädoyer dafür, auch Kompaktlautsprecher eine Chance zu geben. Das kann nämlich sehr lohnend sein. Bei Kompaktlautsprechern erleben wir – zusätzlich zu den oben genannten Vorzügen – auch häufig eine kohärentere Mischung, desto geringer sind die Laufzeitunterschiede, werden Phasenschieber zwischen den einzelnen Treibern. Standlautsprecher haben selbstverständlich auch eine Hörleistungsstärke können sie im Tiefbass schlicht und einfach oft den Raum gleichmäßiger und flächiger mit Klang füllen. Und wenn Sie Kinder haben: Nicht zuletzt reagieren sie etwas stoischer auf das Anprallen eines Bobbys als ein Kompaktdesign auf einem fragilen Ständer. Der Ständer, das wollen wir gerne zugeben, müssen Sie natürlich auch in Ihr persönliches Gesamtbudget mit aufrechnen, wenn es denn eine Kompaktdesign sein soll.

Fazit: Gehen Sie unvoreingenommen an die Boxenfrage heran und legen Sie sich nicht schon zuvor auf Stand- oder Kompaktdesign fest. Das sollten Sie erst tun, wenn Sie ausgeübte Probe gehört haben – und zwar beide Varianten.

Size Matters.  
Compact or tower speakers?  
Let's assume for a moment that Lady Bountiful stops by and hands you 2000 euros and challenges you to decide, between tower and compact speakers priced at that level. Which do you go for? The tower, right? – Fooled you.

A lot of people believe that large, multi-driver loudspeakers deliver a better sound than small ones. Often enough exactly the opposite applies – in the same segment. The bigger a cabinet, the harder and more expensive it is to keep it free of unwanted vibrations. The bigger the cabinet, the more expensive it is to produce – and the less money there is left over to fund And if you have to purchase four drivers instead of two with the same budget at your disposal, then obviously the quality of the drivers will be compromised.

This is no all-out attack on tower speakers, but rather a plea to give compact loudspeakers a chance too, because they can be very much worth your while. In our experience compact loudspeakers also frequently provide a more coherent sense of spatial expression – in addition to the above-mentioned benefits. The fewer the number of drivers that need to be "coordinated", the lower the run-time differences and phase shifts between the individual drivers.

Of course tower speakers also feature a range of benefits: Starting at a certain size and listening volume, compact loudspeakers. They can also often fill a room with a more uniform and extensive sound. And if you have children, just but not least they can take the impact of a Bobblyar more to their stride than compact speakers on fragile pedestals. Admittedly you still have to factor the pedestals into your total budget, if compact speakers are what you want.

Conclusion: Approach the matter in an unbiased way and don't decide on tower or compact speakers before you even get started. You should only do that once you have conducted an extensive number of listening tests – and indeed on both versions.

Die 25 besten Tipps für besseres Hören – 013



## 3

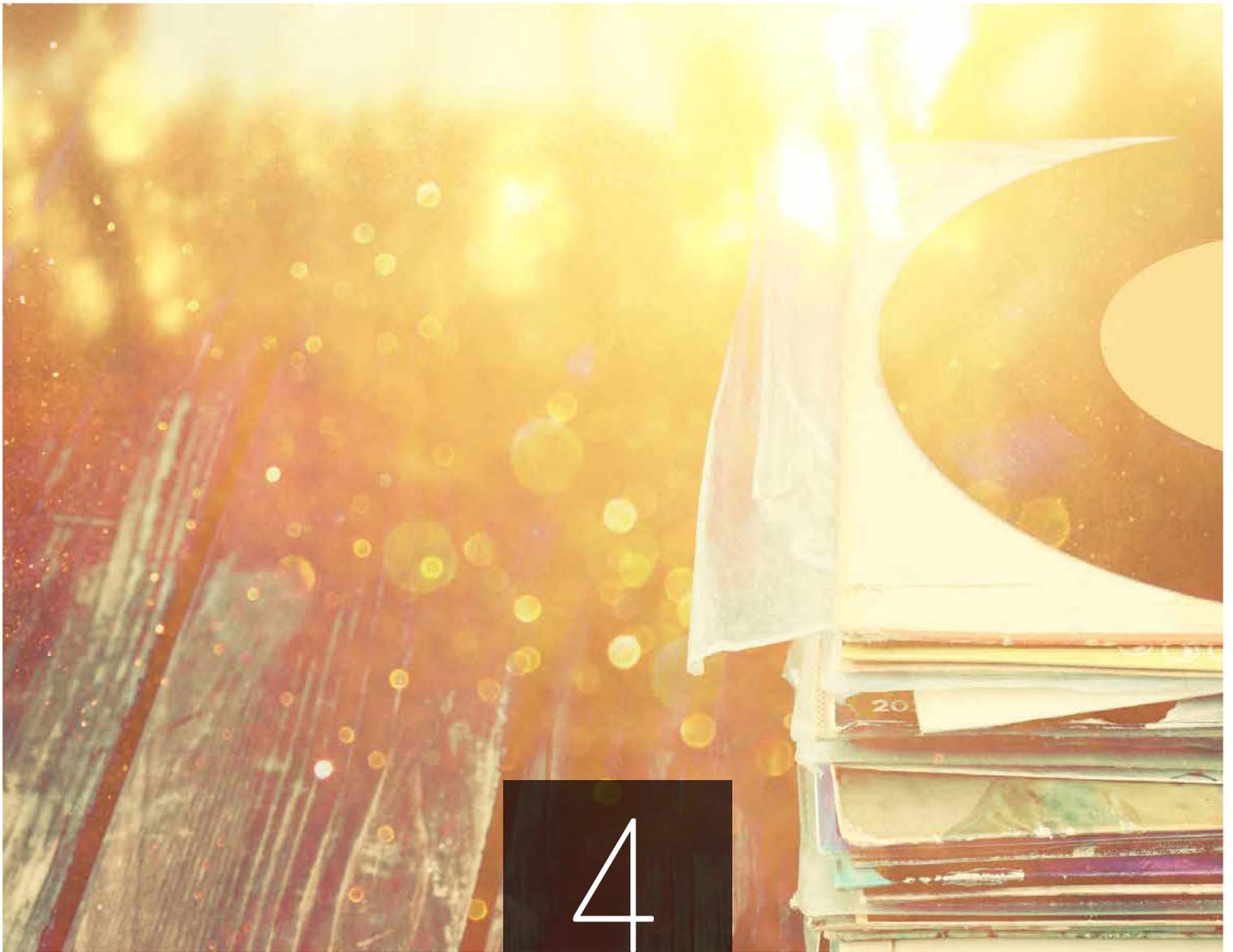
# "THE FAITHFUL OLD HEIRLOOM." SHOULD YOU RETAIN OR REPLACE EX- ISTING COMPONENTS?

**In contrast to catching the flu bug, being infected by the hi-fi bug usually happens over the course of time and not suddenly. It is extremely rare that you suddenly get the urge overnight to put a completely new system together. Many hi-fi enthusiasts still have an old Thorens or Dual record-player sitting in the attic, cellar or store-room somewhere—or a well-used Luxman integrated amplifier.**

That raises the question as to whether you should buy new components to complement existing ones or really push the boat out and buy a completely new system. The answer is comparatively straightforward: In the past ten years a lot has happened in hi-fi technology. Especially as far as loudspeakers and amplifiers are concerned, it is normally no longer worthwhile keeping those old “gems”. If you can’t exactly call genuine

“vintage equipment” your own—which can also be of interest in terms of resale value—you are much better off making a clean break and investing your money in new equipment.

Nowadays many companies make premium-sound-quality loudspeakers at surprisingly inexpensive prices. It’s a similar story with amplifiers. Even if your humdinger of an amp, which you bought 20 years ago at considerable expense, still cuts quite a visual dash—it’s highly likely that a modern amplifier priced in the hundreds will outperform it soundwise. Therefore our advice is: you don’t have to get rid of it straightaway. Treat your existing hi-fi components to a few socially acceptable twilight years in your bedroom or dining room. And start to a certain extent from scratch in your actual listening space... ▶



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# "I'M NOT THAT STUPID. OR AM I?" SPECIALIST RETAILER VERSUS WHOLESALER.

**After a laborious search for the integrated amplifier you want, it's obviously tempting to buy it mail-order or from a "pile 'em high and sell 'em cheap" merchant at 150 Euros (170 US dollars) less. Yet the question is whether that is the right course of action.**

Specialist retailers namely offer several major advantages compared with the other sale channels.

Specialist retailers know their stuff: in this channel you usually find passionate and profoundly knowledgeable hi-fi professionals. They know what features and qualities the equipment they are selling has and can provide specific advice.

Listen before you buy: If you arrange an appointment, specialist retailers will take the time to look after you and offer you a listening session, during which you can get a really good idea of what the hi-fi components you aim to purchase can do. You can also often arrange—for example when deciding on what loudspeakers to buy—to bring your amplifier

with you. Or the other way around: The specialist retailer will lend you a particular hi-fi component and you can test-listen to it under real conditions at home.

Service: A specialist retailer does not abandon you once he has sold you a product. If a piece of equipment gets broken, he takes care of complaint processing. Some specialist retailers also have their own workshops and perform repairs themselves.

Once hi-fi, always hi-fi. The specialist retailer can in time start acting as a kind of "primary care physician". He knows your hi-fi "medical history", knows what your preferences and dislikes are, can on occasion recommend a new piece of equipment or make you aware of an exciting new product or innovation.

Under these circumstances you might like to reconsider whether saving 150 Euros really is the bargain you initially thought it was. ■

Photo Credit: © 18.5.2019, Valdas Mikšins von Pixabay/https://pixabay.com/photos/beethoven-bonn-art-sculpture-4212434/



Beethoven: Revolutionary and grumbler. Misanthrope and utopian. Where Goethe buckled in front of the nobility, Beethoven only mockingly warped his face. ▶

1770: Baptism of Beethoven on 17 December in Bonn

1789: Beginning of the French Revolution

1770

1775

1780

1785

1790

1795

1800

1786: First print of Schiller's "Ode to Joy"

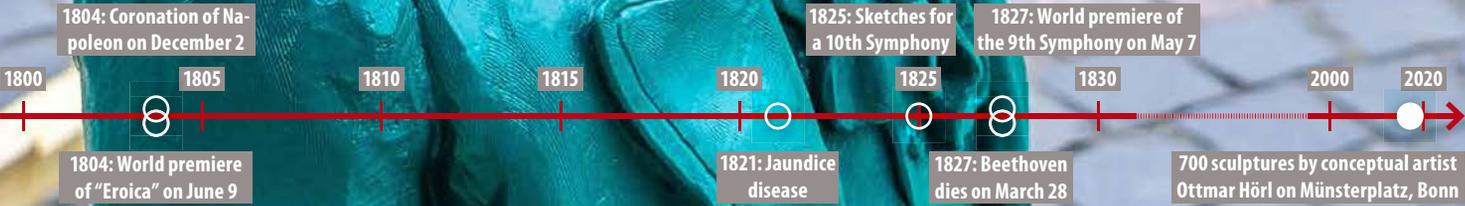
1792: Beethoven moves to Vienna

1798: First signs of hearing loss

Photo Credit: © 18.5.2019, Valdas Miskinis von Pixabay <https://pixabay.com/photos/beethoven-bonn-art-sculpture-4212434/>



A musical cosmos of infinite expanses – and remained primarily the kitsch of the European anthem. We hope for a new discovery for the 250th birthday 2020.



# PREVIEW

FIDELITY international No. 15

Dear readers,

For the next issue we picked a real highlight. With its phenomenal **Three**, **Kii Audio** climbs the next level of speaker technology. The compact active loudspeaker with its digital and analogue inputs is prepared for all aspects of contemporary entertainment electronics and has an integrated preamplifier. ▶





The special arrangement of its drivers also means that it plays completely independently of the room acoustics. We had the chance to try out the exceptional loudspeaker together with the **Bass Extender BXT**. FIDELITY international issue 15 will be available at the end of April 2020. Or whenever it is ready.



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**Please note:** All items are listed with German retail prices (including sales tax) at the time of equipment evaluation.



# THE END

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