



NO.119

Double Shot:

**Analog
and
digital
excellence
from
Mola Mola**



Jim Macnie on Jazz

PrimaLuna's EVO Phono

A really nice rack from Finite Elemente

The YG Acoustics Haley 3 speakers

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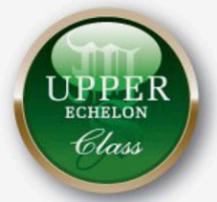


Gotta give these one last listen before they head back to Canada. Staffer Shanon McKellar is an even bigger Rush fan than I am, so they need to head back home...

TONE.119.003



— Formula xHD rev. 2 —



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Lab: Paul Miller

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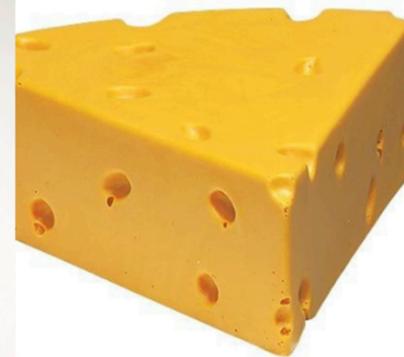
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"The new statement wire from Audience proved worthy of its name. Led by a full-throated midrange, highly focused imaging, and a 'you are there' transparency, frontRow summoned up the electric excitement of the live concert experience like few cables Neil Gader has experienced. Dimensionality, always a strength with Audience cabling, was even more well defined. Audience's top-notch wire, although not inexpensive, seemed boundless in its responsiveness, speed, and musicality. Highly recommended for systems of superior resolution."

Neil Gader
The Absolute Sound Magazine, Issue 325
reviewing the **Audience frontRow cables**.



audience

audience-av.com

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The reviews are in.



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ELYSIAN



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Focal has some new Bathys headphones, but more exciting, they've found a way to tailor your personal sound to your hearing profile...



IN THE PRESENCE OF TRUE BEAUTY



Discover the Enleum AMP-23R, a reference compact amplifier that has earned recognition among audiophiles since its debut.

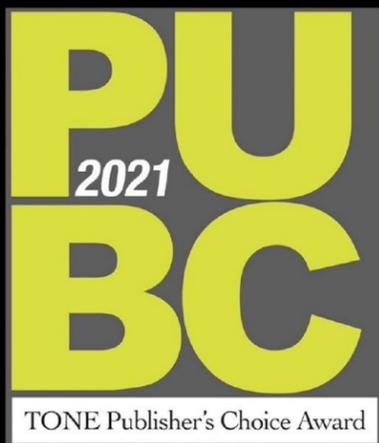
Designed to power flagship headphones and loudspeakers, it offers impressive performance courtesy of cutting-edge Ensence and JET2 Bias technologies.

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Harbeth XD

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Jeff Dorgay *Tone Audio* on the C7 XD



"...Alan Shaw's Masterpiece"

Tone Audio
on the 40.3 XD



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WINNER | 2021
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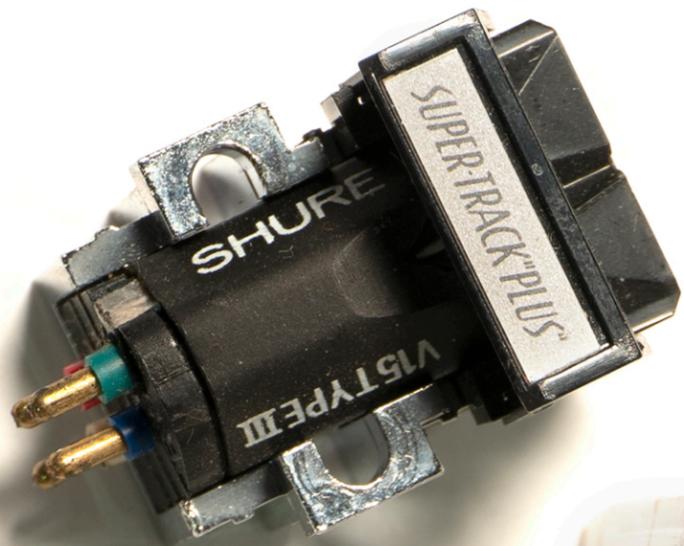


C7ES-3 XD



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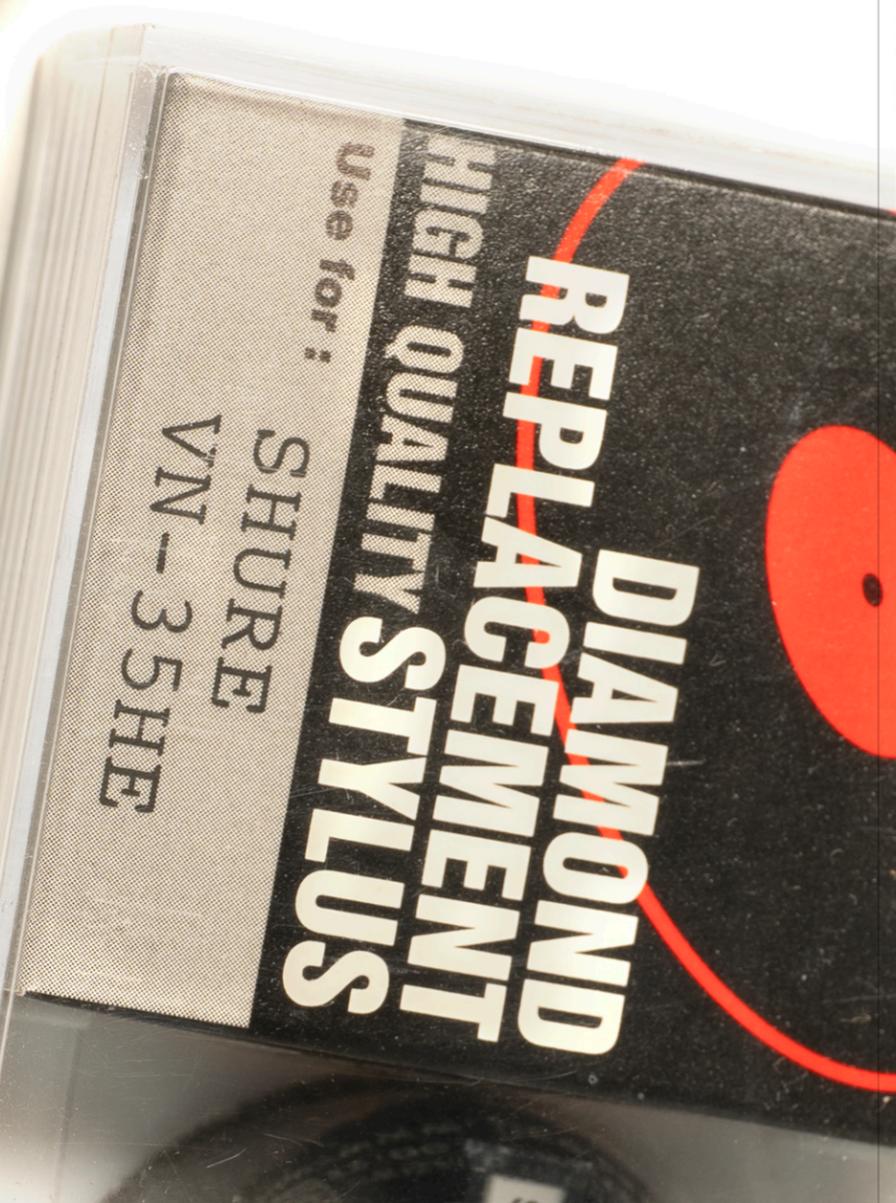




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Cartridge Dude

We take a look way back to a classic cartridge, updated with modern stylus assembly from JICO.



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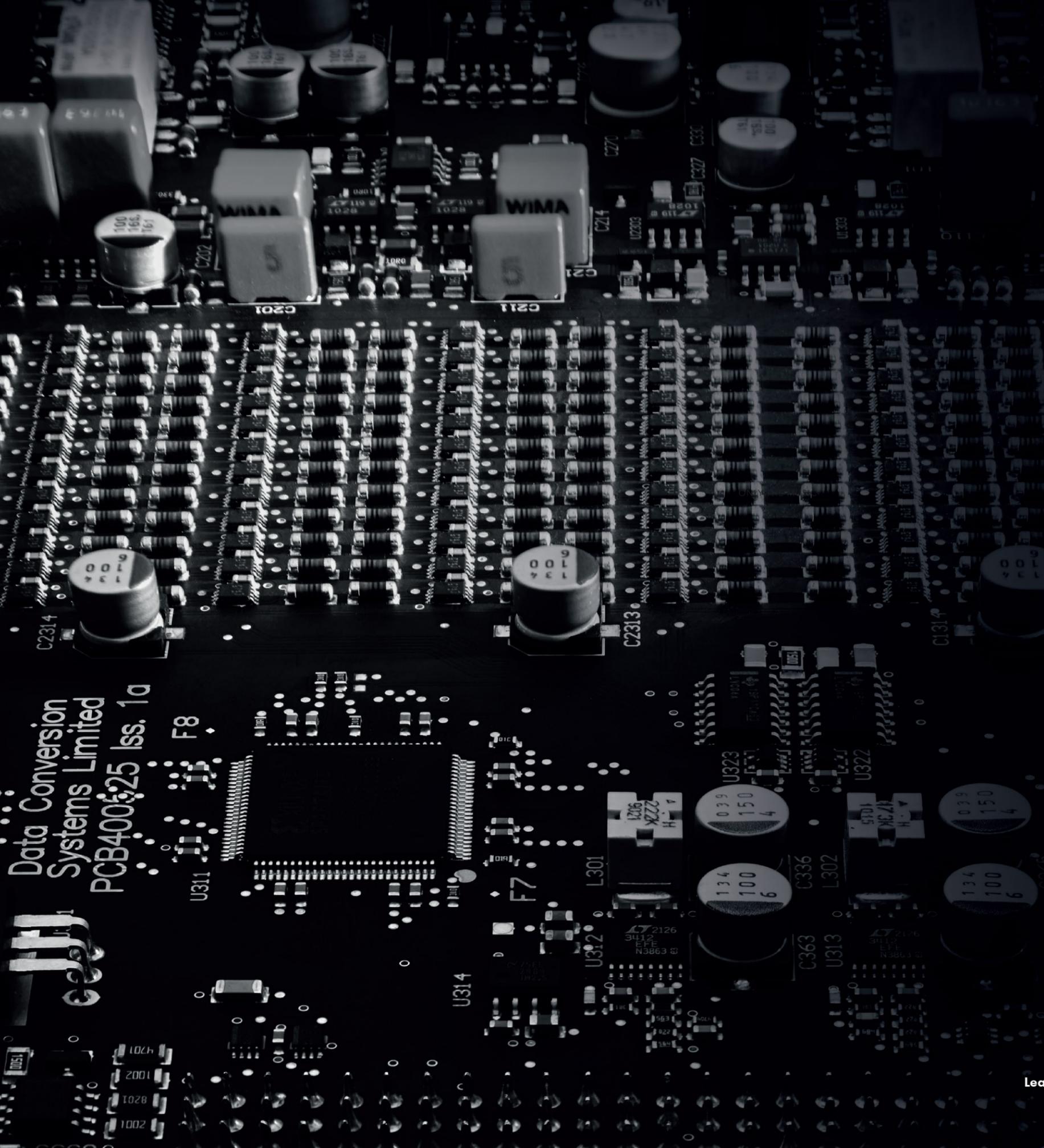
The Ring DAC APEX is our most ambitious hardware design yet. It redefines the performance of our renowned Rossini and Vivaldi digital-to-analog converters, resulting in an even more emotionally involving, transparent, and detailed musical experience. Existing models are fully upgradable via our upgrade-exchange program. Partnered with dCS's range of proprietary technologies, the Apex Ring DAC delivers the most evocative, involving, revealing musical experience available today.

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59 **MONOTONE**

Our new feature, that is part review, part design study. We kick it off with the Pagode Signature Equipment rack from **Finite Elemente**.



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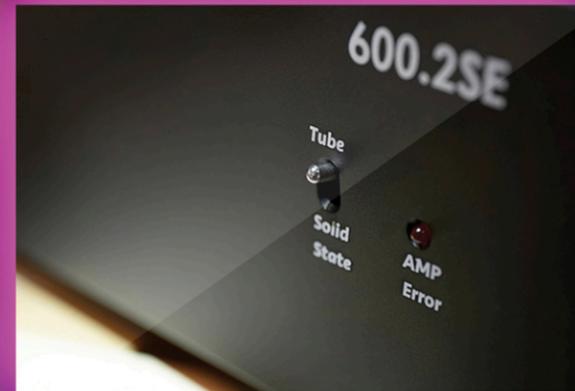
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NEW Arrivals

Andrey Medina joins us to share his love of music and the world's greatest collection of concert T-shirts for our Merch Table column.

Some of us mark our lives by the records we bought along the way, but the same can be said for concert t's. I'm guessing we all have a few that tell some of our story. Here's to hoping these bring back some good memories.





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TONEToon

If you are of a certain age, you probably remember the original Flintstones and how they made fun of modern technology.

You may remember the one as Fred puts the needle (in this case, beak) down, the bird says, "I hate this job." But in this January, 1961 episode of "Fred and Barney Make A Record," the bird is used as a cutting head.

Lorie will be back next issue!



© Hanna-Barbera/WB, 1961



Cover Shot:

Bathed in blue, Mola-Mola's Lupe phono and Tambaqui DAC succeed at taking on the world's finest in their respective categories, and look smashing doing so!

A big thanks to Chris Harr for putting his Tambaqui in the mix and lining up the review with Bill Parish at GTT Audio and Video.

Shot with Nikon D800, 55mm f.1.2 lens at f8, ISO 100.



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no.119

P u b l i s h e r ' s L e t t e r

Want to make your hifi system sound way better without spending a dime, or moving heavy speakers? Shut it off for a couple of days and go do something else.

I'm not kidding. I was talking to someone at the Rocky Mountain Audio Fest years ago and nice, but jumpy fellow said/asked/proclaimed: "Dude I have \$100 to tweak my system with, what should I get?" Being my typical Bart Simpson self, I said, "buy a good bottle of whisky" But I really wasn't being a smart ass. John Quick, from Dynaudio USA is a smart guy, and has an MBA. Once when we were chatting about something, I asked him what do do about a specific business related problem from a biz-school perspective. "Reframe the problem" was his reply.

This is excellent advice that I've used often, and I think it applies to when you get to stereo burnout. Or, even if you aren't at that point in the relationship with your hifi system. Turn it off, and do something else for a few days. If you've been reading TONE for any length of time, you know I'm a pretty big car enthusiast, and for the last two years have the wiley English Bull Terriers you see above.

There's just nothing like frolicking with the doggos, getting out the polisher, or just going for a long walk, along with some other activities for a few days and just shut all the electronics off. You'll be surprised at how much better your system sounds. If you've ever taken the time to de-ox all the jacks and cables in your system, it's kind of like doing that for your brain.

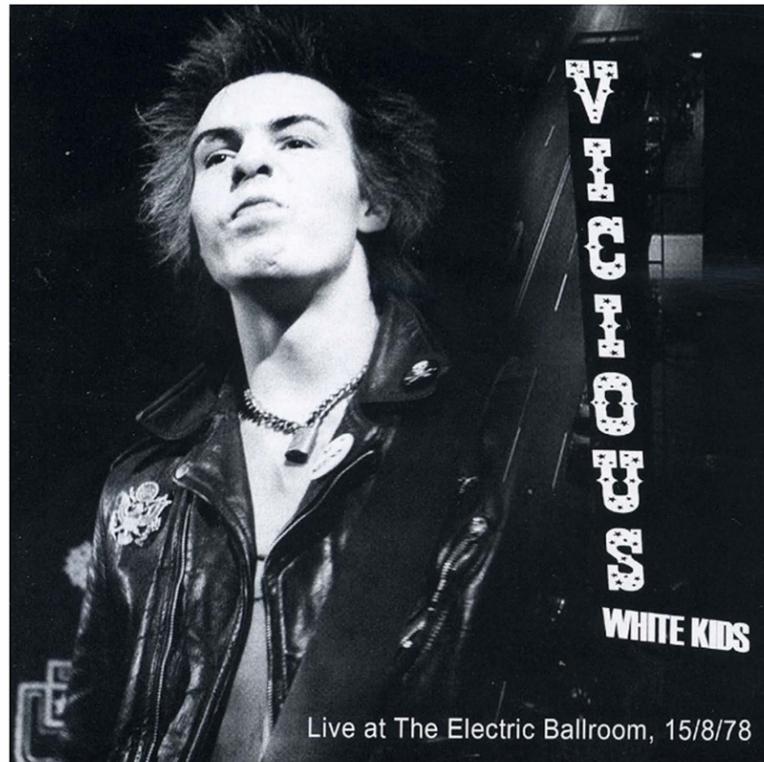
I do the same thing when cars get on my nerves. I just walk away from the garage door for a few days, stretch out on the couch and listen to some great music (without switching into evaluation mode), leaving it all behind. It's amazing how that problem that was driving you to madness can vanish by reframing.

This may be counterproductive to the companies that advertise with us, but maybe you don't need new speakers right now, maybe you just need a good long walk in the middle of nowhere. Who knows, when you return, you might need new speakers with even more conviction?

Either way, take a break if you can.



Sometimes, it's interesting to investigate a song's roots, and see what other artists have interpreted. Here's a tune you might think you know well. And perhaps, it goes back further than you think. While some of us associate "My Way" with Frank Sinatra, and others with Sid Vicious, almost 200 people have covered this famous tune.



Frank Sinatra Version - 1969 (orig.)

Glen Campbell Version - 1970

Tom Jones Version - 1971

Elvis Presley Version - 1971

Nina Hagen Version - 1980

The Vicious White Kids Version - 1994

Dread Zeppelin Version - 1995

John Cleese Version - 1997

Opium Jukebox Version - 2002

Aretha Franklin Version - 2006

Seth MacFarlane Version - 2016

Willie Nelson Version - 2018

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Revox A77

I've fallen down the hole again.

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My 86' Porsche 944 is what car collectors like to call a 25-foot car. It looks pretty good from far away, but the closer you get the more flaws you see, though it is sound mechanically. With reel-to-reel tape decks starting to outpace air-cooled 911s in terms of appreciation, I wanted the same thing in a tape deck. The one really on my radar was a TEAC 3300S, as that was sitting on the rack back in the 80s when my 944 was brand new.

Ah, those six-hour mix tapes at 3 ¾ i.p.s. sounded pretty good at chill time, and it kept unqualified hands away from the turntable. It's tough to beat those big reels spinning around in subdued light, with an adult beverage in hand.



Enjoy the Experience



One afternoon, perusing the reverb.com site, a clean-ish Revox A77 is available in Vancouver, BC (the other Vancouver) for \$999 and I'm intrigued. If you've been following Ebay and the like lately, POS A77s regularly trade for twice this, if not more. The devil and the angel pop up on my shoulder, just as they did in bad 80s movies – one saying “you know you want it,” while the the voice of reason says, “you always get burned on this kind of thing.”

Further investigation reveals the deck is being sold by Reel to Reel Tech. and the proprietor, Curt Palme always has quite a few decks in stock, as well as offering service. The listing mentions that the deck has been serviced, so what the hell, eh? With Vancouver, BC being about five hours from Vancouver, Washington, it's just far enough to give pause. I'm not the pup I used to be when it comes to driving 500-600 miles in a day. Add in the super crabby border agents, and the \$200 to ship sounds

reasonable. So with pause – only because reel to reel decks are a delicate thing, I push the buy button and hope for the best.

Mr. Palme is incredibly nice, sending pictures of the deck as he's packing it. Clearly he's done this a lot, so the stress level goes down. About a week later it arrives, but on opening the (indeed well packed) box, much rattling is going on. Ugh. An email to Palme is returned almost instantly, and while he is assuring that he'll do whatever it takes to make it right, he's quick to mention that the three relays inside the A77 often come loose in transport, and they should be checked before panic ensues.

Sure enough, that's all it is. Four phillips screws later, and we're back in business. A quick tape is threaded up and everything works properly. Ken Kessler has written extensively about the Revox decks for us, it's worth mentioning how quiet the A77 is mechanically.

PASS

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Where the older TEAC and SONY decks make various swooshing, scraping, and fan noises while playing, the Revox is silent.

So, if you're looking for a great deck at a fair price, drop Curt a line at www.reeltoreeltech.com. He's got tape and offers service as well. Tell him we sent you.

Even though this is a driver level deck from a cosmetic stand point, all of the mechanics work perfectly and after making a few mix tapes, electronically as well. There's just something wonderful about these old, German decks. And that means it's time to get back in that old Porsche and grab a coffee. Curt even supplies a mug with his orders!

I can pretty much guarantee I'm never going to get hooked by big dollar reel-to-reel. Not that I think it isn't awesome, and not that I don't think you should get hooked by it, but it's not my game. I admire it from afar and bow to its supreme musicality. However, watching those reels spin at the end of the day with a long mix tape, carefully crafted by hand is big fun. We'll be featuring this on our upcoming YouTube channel, so stay tuned.

And, as fate would have it, staffer Sean Zloch sends me a picture of a 3300S, saying, "should I get this?" Aaaaaah. Now where's that wired Revox remote I lost about ten years ago? Time to clean the storage units again.



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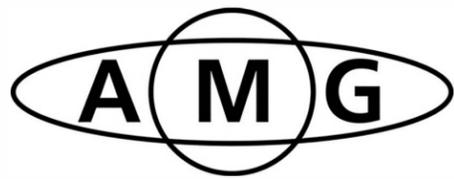
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Some of you may remember Mark Schifter for all the fun products he came up with during his tenure at Audio Alchemy. They made incredible products that had cutting edge performance, in tiny enclosures, with tiny price tags to match. Many an audiophile started their journey with one or more Audio Alchemy components. Well, you can't take the fun out of the boy, and his latest product, the Vera-Link is a 50 watt-per-channel class D amplifier and streamer, built into a box about the size of a deck of playing cards. This may not sound super "audiophile-y," because you can only get so much for 200 bucks, but the Vera-Link sounds pretty damn good for what it is. Certainly, better than a \$300-\$500 vintage 70s receiver that needs to have all the caps refreshed, that still needs a streamer. And, you can control up to five zones from your phone, so put those surplus speakers to work!

Substitute the word audiophile for fun

Now you've got it. I'll bet you've got a great pair of older vintage speakers lying about that you'd love to press into service, or perhaps make more mobile – i.e. take em' out on the porch/patio when you're grilling, maybe even throw in the back of your truck for a trip to your favorite camping spot. But how to power them? If you've got any kind of inverter, you can run the Vera-Links that way. To try a mobile battery solution I used the two supplied wall warts with a 1400W Yeti battery supply with excellent results. All that's left is to pair the amps with your Bluetooth streaming device. Vera-Fi even provides the Velcro to attach these babies to the back of your speakers. The Yeti went from 100% capacity to 96%, after the better part of an afternoon, so their current drain is minimal.



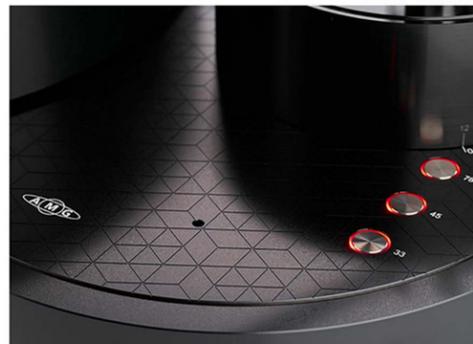


FORTE TURBO

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Hand made in Germany by master machinist Julian Lorenzi, the Forte Turbo is AMG's reference-level flagship turntable. The Forte is machined from a solid aluminum billet and incorporates AMG's celebrated oil-damped bearing, decoupled spindle, 24v DC brushless motor, upgraded linear power supply, and reflex clamp.



FORTE POWER SUPPLY

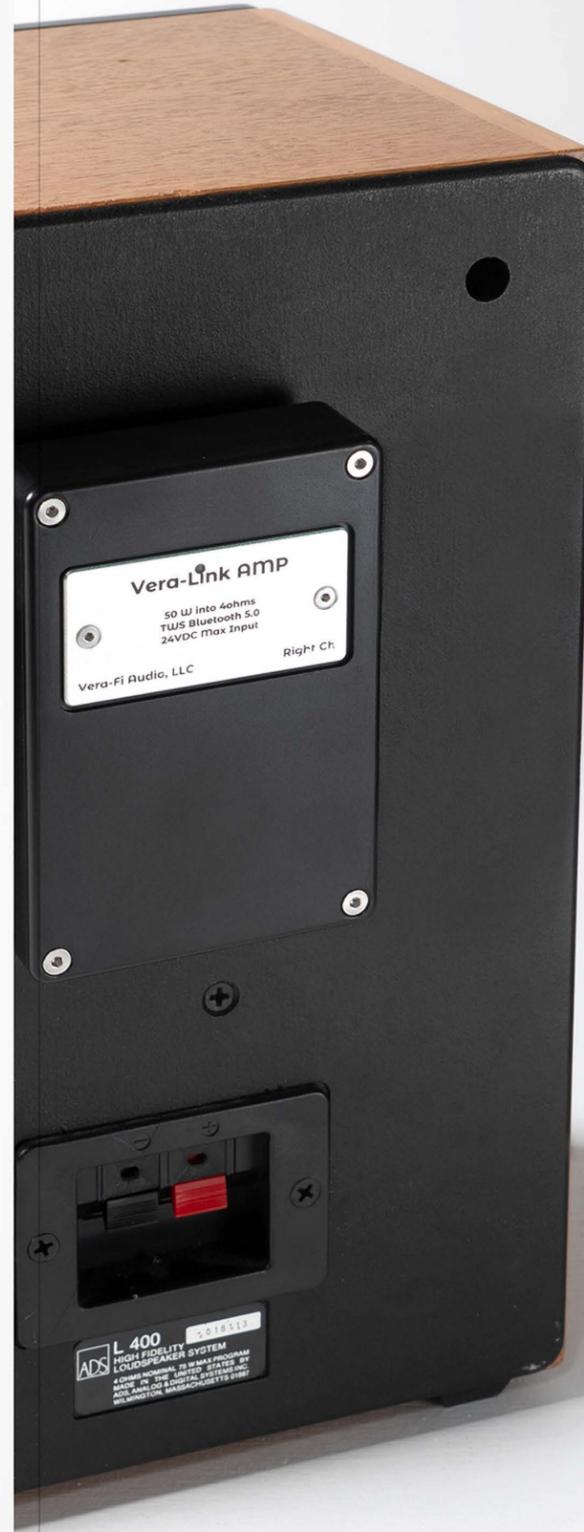
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Listening

Trying the Vera-Link with a couple of speakers that are way more expensive than what you'd choose to pair them with, it does reveal the engineering prowess at work. I even connected the Vera-fi's to the Eggleston Nicos that were featured on the cover of issue 102,

Listening to the strings at work with Al DiMeola, Jean-Luc Ponty, and Stanley Clarke's *Live at Montreux 1994*, is highly enjoyable. No, it's not a pair of Pass Class-A monoblocks enjoyable, but it's way better than my neighbor's crappy \$800 Alexa speaker.

To make things more equitable for the little amplifiers, the next choice is a pair of vintage A/D/S L400 speakers. Thanks to the magic of Velcro, an older pair of Cerwin-Vega speakers are brought into play along with an ainct pair of Dynaco speakers. (Remember those?) Think thrift store fun here. Upping the budget a bit, the XSA Vikings were also brought out for a test drive with excellent results making for a great portable system as well.

However, I'm so enamored with the simplicity and low-budget ethos of the Vera-Link, I like the lower priced speakers. An iPhone 14 was used as a source, and files streamed to the Vera-Link with Roon (16/44) and Spotify (320kb/sec). NOTE: the Vera-Fi is not a ROON Ready device, but you can work around this just using it with the ROON app on your phone, outputting to Bluetooth.

TONE119.022-1095



The Vera-Link certainly has enough resolution to hear the difference between CD quality and 320kb files, but it's not enough to discourage you from using your favorite \$100-\$200 pair of speakers and not being able to enjoy music. Perhaps the most amazing aspect of these tiny, non-distinct amplifiers is how far Class-D amplification has come. The A/D/S are my favorite budget/vintage speaker, with great midrange and smooth highs. They make a wonderful match with the Vera-Fi's. And while we don't do measurements, they certainly can play loud with these amplifiers, easily as loud as my vintage Marantz 2275.

When listening to heavier rock selections, as well as some of my favorite fusion tracks (lots of Stanley Clarke and Herbie Hancock) the Vera-Link's ability to play complex music really shines through. Go back to that Montreux album and listen to Stanley Clarke's bass solo. Yow. These amplifiers deliver robust bass extension, and good bass control.

Short and sweet

These amplifiers are very musical, play loud without distortion, and have much less grunge than you would ever expect from a \$200 pair of monoblocks (albeit Barbie Dream House sized mono blocks) there's not much more to tell. They sound great, are unobtrusive, and offer no-fuss, no muss setup. If the audiophile bug still won't let you go, plug the Vera-Fi's into a linear power supply for even better sound – but you lose some of the portability.

Seriously, I'm buying a pair for my tool box. Why wouldn't I? You never know when that vintage receiver is going to take a dump, or a friend in need has the same problem. They are going to go right next to my battery jump box. These would make great stocking stuffers, or even a great way to get your favorite budding audiophile one step further down the path. As I mentioned earlier, these are also a great way to have portable high-end sound anywhere. This is such a cool product, I think everyone should have a pair of these.

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rel.net

REL has achieved a well deserved reputation for making some of (if not *the*) world's highest performing subwoofers. Whether you have a single, pair or a six-pack, you can count on REL subs to deliver solid, defined bass with prodigious output, that mates invisibly with the main speakers.

Considering how much speakers have evolved over the years, few can even make this claim, yet deliver the performance to back it up. Bass response is like any other aspect of audio - we all have our preferences. Whether you want to mate a sub with a more vintage pair of speakers, or just prefer your sub to deliver a bit more tonal saturation in the upper mid bass, the fastest, most transparent subwoofer may not make for the combination you desire with some speakers - especially older ones.

Putting a set of Michelin Cup 2's on your vintage sports car will yield the same results - that much grip is not always the best thing. Enter the Classic 98. With its downfiring 10-inch woofer in the tradition of earlier REL subs and walnut finish, it is the perfect sonic as well as aesthetic partner for your favorite classic speakers, British mini monitors, or even a set of high-sensitivity single (or coaxial) driver speakers. I know - I tried all three with excellent results. And a big thanks to Kevin Deal of Upscale Audio for sending a PrimaLuna EVO 100 integrated amp and a pair of Tannoys to round out the picture.



REL's John Hunter shares my love of slightly vintage/current classic audio, and we both have way too much of this gear in our respective collections, which have only grown over the last few years of semi-confinement. However, when it comes to older speakers like his KEF Ref 101s or original Wilson Watts, my L-100s and original Acoustats, the fast, tight bass of a modern subwoofer doesn't quite integrate as it should. Enter the Classic 98.

Tasteful modifications and improvements

While high performance rubber may upset the balance of your semi vintage car or motorcycle, there is always a level of tasteful, subtle modifications that can yield a vehicle outperforming the original enough to be more engaging, yet does not defy the character of the initial design brief, or upset the balance so much that you spend a ton of money and lose your way. Ask me how I know this.

Hunter tells me that they laid down the initial priorities to build a "new old stock REL of his dreams, that is just vintage enough in sound and styling – a little softer and more romantic (but still with the room filling bass you expect from REL) than current models." Though he still has a REL Strata III on hand for reference, it didn't quite keep pace with his memories. When placed into a semi vintage system, the Strata III was a bit *too* warm and slow.

REL has adapted the look of their first subwoofers, with a luxurious satin walnut finish to a contemporary size. If you recall, the original Stratas were big boxes. The Classic 98 uses a hot pressed paper coned, 10-inch driver with a cotton center cap. It looks very vintage when you flip the Classic 98 over, but Hunter is quick to mention, "We know a lot more about paper than we did 25 years ago. The result is purer and more refined, retaining some of the rounder, gentler qualities of that era, yet steers clear of being dark and muddy."

As you unpack the Classic 98, its build quality is instantly apparent. The cabinets are finished in a lovely matte finish and compliment the Tannoy's perfectly. Good as all the combinations were, these tiny Tannoys and the Classic 98 are as good as it gets together. 40 watts per channel of tube power is all you need to enjoy this system.

When you find the optimum position for your Classic 98 and have the initial settings where you want them, have a friend dial the level control all the way down, play your favorite bass heavy track, and slowly bring the level up. Go back and forth, over and under the sweet spot until you have it where the subwoofer is no longer feeling like a separate speaker element. Experiment with the crossover frequency set slightly lower than you might think, with the gain slightly higher, and repeat the process to perfection. Then sit back and rock on.

When it's right, you get more low frequency energy, but the sub calls no attention to itself. Try the opening of Rickie Lee Jones' "Easy Money," (from her self-titled album) and the opening of Bachman Turner Overdrive's "Not Fragile" (from Not Fragile). I'm sure you have your favorites.



The players

Five speakers were auditioned with the Classic 98, all with fantastic results. The Heretic A612, Tannoy Prestige Autograph Minis and Harbeth Compact 7 were excellent modern speakers with a more vintage feel. A pair of original JBL L-100s, Acoustat 2+2s were the vintage contingent. All five of these speakers have a slightly soft, warm bottom end. More like the sound of a Dynaco Stereo 70 instead of an ARC REF 80S. Inviting and pleasant, even if not the last word in resolution.

Power was provided by the PrimaLuna EVO 100 integrated amplifier (40 wpc/EL-34 tubes) for most of the listening, with the First Watt SIT-3 (20 wpc/solid-state) an alternate choice. The dCS Vivaldi ONE provided music to the test setup, with the Pass Labs XS PRE driving the First Watt as it is a power amplifier only. All cable for this system was the latest Studio ONE from Audience.

To stay in the period groove, I didn't listen to any of the usual techno or hip hop tracks I usually listen to when evaluating modern subwoofers. It was 60s, 70s and early 80s rock all the way.



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The completely groovy bass line in the Cowsills “The Rain, The Park, And Other Things” takes on a new dimension, filling in with the extra weight that the vintage speakers always needed. Next up, Dark Side of The Moon. Smiley face EQ-d MoFi vinyl no less. Get over it, it is fantastic.

All of the speakers in the test lineup required different settings, easily adjusted. Like all RELs, the Classic 98 has rear mounted controls for level, crossover, and LFE (should you have them in a surround setup but ignored here) connected by a speakon connector to your amplifiers speaker outputs. Of course, you can use line-level preamp outputs, but the results will not be quite as good, especially in terms of subwoofer to main speaker integration.

With a pair of vintage, or vintage-ish speakers as mains, adding the Classic 98 gives them the extra grunt they all need, without calling any attention to itself. I took Hunters’ advice, poured a bit of whisky, leaned back in the Eames Lounge, and played records all night. Even though my main speakers were right there, dormant with the REL six pack they are connected to, I never really had the urge to fire up the big system. This combination made for a great evening, and the total system cost was well below \$10k. Even with more current music. With the Classic 98, you can create a magical, musically engaging system that’s so much fun, you might even forgo something more resolving. This is audio comfort food at its absolute best.



You didn’t know you need it but you do

The REL Classic 98 might just be the ultimate audiophile guilty pleasure. At \$1,398 it embodies the same high level of quality that every other REL I’ve owned or used is famous for. Much as I’d like to tell you I bought the review sample, I couldn’t – they don’t have inventory yet! However, by the time this review is live you and I should be able to put our hands on one of these. Run don’t walk. I often suggest getting a pair of RELs (or a six pack), and the same applies here, but you can certainly have fun with a single Classic 98 to start. The downward facing driver makes for a bit more omnidirectional delivery, less critical of placement, and fits in with the tasteful presentation.

Aside from this being a product that completely hits the mark, I really enjoy that this was a labor of love project for John Hunter. It’s perfectly executed, yet affordable and approachable. This is something the high end needs more of. Hunter closes our conversation stating, “The Classic 98 is a chance to revisit REL’s rich heritage. We strove to remain true to Richard Lord’s basic principles and styling. We restrained ourselves from simply building a modern REL in a walnut cabinet.”

They have succeeded – to perfection.



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Late Night Garage Playlist
-Jeff Dorgay

As my garage listening usually leans more towards classic rock and hair metal, Pam reminded me of those “slower” tunes at the concert, where you held up your lighter and hugged the one you were with. So here’s to that memory...



Scorpions - “Still Loving You”

Bon Jovi - “I’d Die For You”

Motley Crue - “Home Sweet Home”

Poison - “Talk Dirty To Me”

Pat Travers - “Magnolia”

Def Leppard - “Too Late For Love”

Guns N’ Roses - “November Rain”

Whitesnake - “Is This Love”

Led Zeppelin - “The Rain Song”

Kiss - “Beth”

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Tannoy Autograph Mini Speakers

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These tiny Tannoys are two of the coolest little speakers I've ever heard. They arrived at our doorstep unexpectedly as part of a review for the REL Classic 98 subwoofer (featured in this issue's Audiophile Apartment column), feature in a system including the PrimaLuna EVO100 Integrated amplifier. All of these goodies kindly provided by our bud Kevin Deal at Upscale Audio.

Every now and then the planets line up to create a system delivering so much more sound than you'd expect for the price. This is one of those systems, and speakers. For years now, the KEF LS50 has been the industry darling because of its Blade derived concentric driver. I know, I own a pair, and they are good, but (and it's a BIG but) they need a lot of power to make them come alive in a way that they prove impressive. The LS50 is a completely different speaker powered by a Burmester 911 than it is a PrimaLuna EVO 100. The true magic of the Tannoy Minis is the level of performance they will deliver with modest, (high quality) low-power, or vintage components.



The Tannoy Mini Autograph you see here, though approximately the same size, looks as if it's from another century altogether, with its walnut cabinet and sharp edges, and vintage looking grille cloth. Until you fire em' up. Woo hoo, are these good. Now I see why no one selling KEF sells Tannoy.

The tradeoffs

The tradeoffs here are minimal. A 4-inch concentric driver can only move so much air, so you won't be able to reach the sound pressure levels that an \$850,000 pair of Wilson's will. But I'll bet a pint of your favorite beer, that at moderate levels, you might just prefer the little Tannoys. I do, and I'm not kidding. These speakers have a natural feel that I have only heard with the legendary Quad 57s.

Like my favorite Quads, there isn't a ton of bottom end, but there's a great solution for you at the end of the review, so stick around. Again, small driver, small cabinet. They aren't gonna play down to 25 Hz. But neither do the equally legendary LS3/5a monitors. And here's the big diff - where the LS3/5a's have a bit of a mid bass bump to feel a bit bigger than they are, the Mini Autographs forgo the hump for smooth, clean mids, and the ability to paint an enormous sonic landscape like no small speaker I've ever heard. Tannoy claims 88dB/1-watt sensitivity, and 106Hz is the 3 db down point, with a maximum power handling capacity of 200 Watts. Not that we wanted to destroy the review pair, but when connected to the 200 Watt-per-channel Pass XA200.8s in our publisher's system, these tiny speakers play very loud without any cone breakup or distortion. But that's not what the Mini Autographs are about. These speakers are about delicacy.



"Tellurium Q's Ultra Black II's can be seen as one of the best loudspeaker cables on the market at their price"

- Jon Myles, Hifi World

"The differences were stunning.....What I can state is that the Ultra Black II cables are currently the best I have heard in my system."

- Ian Ringstead, Hifipig.com

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Both our publisher and I have a pair of the recently reviewed Heretic speakers, featuring a concentric driver, but sporting larger drivers and much larger cabinet. When I popped buy to pick the baby Tannoys, they were sitting on top of the Heretic A612s. What I didn't know immediately, was that they were the speakers playing: Anja Garbarek's *Smiling and Waving* was on at low volume, and the speakers were powered by the BAT VK-80t power amplifier that is in for review. That I was freaked out by how nice these speakers sound is the understatement of a lifetime.

So many audiophile cliches come to mind every time the Minis are playing, so we don't have to go there, Suffice to say experiencing the Minis in a second system might just have you spending more time in the small room.

I should have done this a long time ago

Audio legends Kevin Deal and EveAnna Manley have been telling us for years how good Tannoys are. For a while they were a bit tough to get your hands on, and well, hours in the day. Now I'm on a mission, I'll be pestering the hell out of the powers that be to get more Tannoy speakers in for review, and I think a pilgrimage to Upscale to hear the big ones is in order.

Back at my place, driven with a Pass Labs INT-25, in a 10 x 12 foot room, the Minis redefine lovely, but they still need a little more giddyup on the low end. Extreme corner loading helps, but it does distract from the incredible midrange clarity that is the crown jewel of these speakers. Bringing the Quad 57s upstairs just to make sure I wasn't dreaming, the 57s definitely go down to around 55Hz without fear, but that midrange! Those of you that have a pair know, the Quads aren't terribly forgiving of turning the volume up too far.

Switching up the program material to tracks more friendly to a limited LF presentation makes for an out of this world presentation. Even though the Minis lack the bass drive of a top pair of headphones, the soundstage is so big and deep, it's tough to get excited about listening to headphones, if you have a small room to put a pair of these baby Tannoys.



Two ways to play it

I suggest two ways to use the Minis – either on a desktop (the ISO-Acoustics work fab, about \$179 a pair), and get the speakers a few inches off the desktop at a slight angle, or on some 24 – 30 inch stands, depending on the height of your listening position. The Minis have wide horizontal and vertical dispersion, so these are not incredibly difficult to set up. On a side note, they also work well in a smallish room in a nearfield configuration too.

The biggest surprise is how well these small speakers can fill a large room with a bit of bass augmentation. RELs new Classic 98 sub is an outstanding match, but at \$1,398 may be more than you want to spend. Further auditioning with the \$899 SVS Micro 3000 and the \$449 REL T-Zero also provide excellent results, but provide slightly less room filling dynamics.



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– Ralph Waldo Emerson



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- Titanium SLM Housing



Paired with your favorite moderately priced integrated or power amplifier and a good source, these speakers will deliver a disproportionately large serving of audio nirvana. I must be honest, I spent more time listening to the Mini's with sub than without and could seriously walk away from high end audio with a PrimaLuna EVO 100, REL Classic 98 and a pair of Minis, with some records, an SL1200 and a streaming DAC.

Whether listening to vocals, acoustic selections, or heavy rock, the Minis deliver such great tonality, dynamics, and an enormous soundstage, you might just be spoiled for way less money than you ever thought it would take to get a sonic experience this good. Not only do I nominate the Tannoy Minis for one of our Product of the Year awards (you'll see if I succeed next issue), but a top ten favorite.

“I can't suggest getting your hands on a pair of these just to have the experience. They will change your perspective on audio.”



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The temptation to exhaust my adjective gland with the usual audiophile cliches is higher than normal here. However, I do think that Focal adopting Mimi sound measurement technology into the new Bathy wireless/USB DAC/noise cancelling headphones via the Naim/Focal app will allow you to enjoy your Bathys more than you ever have before. If you are new to the Bathys phones, Focal now has two color schemes: the existing Black/Silver and the new Dune finish, which revolves around a light beige color palette and is very ooh-la-la. Chic as it is, they will be harder to keep looking pristine than the standard finish. But who doesn't suffer for fashion just a little bit?

All that is required is to either download the Naim/Focal app (and make sure it is the current version), or if you already have it, upgrade to the current 1.5.4 firmware – so you need to update the app and the firmware. Kudos to Focal for not making a subtle change to the Dune model, so that current Black/Silver customers need to trade up. You can read my full review of the original Bathys here, so I won't concentrate as much on the Bathys as the integration with Mimi.



Big Bathys love

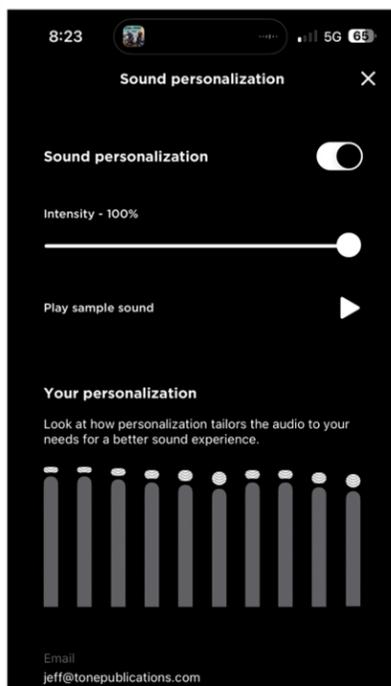
Over the years, I've always mentioned that I'm not a massive headphone enthusiast, but that's now a thing of the past. I've taken great measure to protect my hearing since I was a nerdy teenager, wearing ear protection when mowing the lawn and going to concerts, but we all have declining hearing as we age. (Big thanks to friend, and occasional contributor Todd Sageser, who's been my friend since age 9, and started his sound engineering career in college. He was always telling me about the importance of protecting my hearing, and I'm glad I did.)

Regardless of whether you have any hearing loss yet, audiologists make a point of emphasizing we all hear a bit different. Hypothetically, if my auditory system has a 1dB dip at 10kHz and yours has a 1dB peak in the same spot, or vice-versa, we will hear things dramatically different. It's one of the toughest parts of this job, to accurately describe things well enough in the hope that you will hear what I hear, and it will help you decide whether to audition something or not. Taking this further, hearing aid specialists have commented that when setting up new digital hearing aids, they have a prescription, just like glasses or contacts, and during the process, even errors as miniscule as a few tenths of a dB is easily discerned by the intended user.

Staying relevant with current tech

Though guilty of being primarily a 2-channel audio purist, I still make it a point to investigate as much new technology as I can. Class D amplifiers sound great these days. Though not a huge fan of DSP room correction, it works well in troublesome acoustic environments where the speakers just can't be the focal point of the room. Do you want to love your music or be pedantic? Getting closer to the music is always my choice..Once you've installed or updated the app, it only takes seconds to find your Bathys and you'll see a screen like the one on the left.

Next, the app will lead you to a hearing test that takes about five minutes, measuring each ear individually. It uses a beep and measures how quickly said beep dissolves into the background where you can no longer discern it from the background noise. Make sure to have absolute quiet when doing this to achieve the best results. When finished, this screen will come up, showing an overview of your hearing response. It also gives you the opportunity to adjust the intensity of Sound Personalization from 0-100%. You can read more about Mimi here: <https://mimi.io/>



The further from ruler flat your hearing is, the more adjustment will be made and the according response curve – which shows how much has been boosted or cut. In my case, it was a gentle roll off at the highest frequencies. Because I only have a modest bit of rolloff, the effect of the Mimi software wasn't huge, but still makes headphone listening much more enjoyable.

Bring on the test subjects

Trying the Bathys/Mimi combination with a few of my favorite 20-somethings at the local coffee shop, revealed a few of them to have way more hearing loss than I suspected. When one of them said, “Dude, I like to go to concerts and get as close to the speakers as possible,” scared me more than a bit. This crew noticed a major difference with the help of Mimi, though they seemed to have more midrange loss. The opposite end of the age scale revealed a much more exaggerated result than mine, with a pretty steep hf rolloff, though two had substantial midrange drops as well.

When it comes to high end audio, sometimes it's only a few dB keeping you from sonic bliss, or putting you in hell. My wife Pam has a modest hearing loss from flying for 30 years. The ear closest to the engines rolls off a bit more. She was truly amazed at how much difference Mimi provides, allowing her to hear a lot more music. Should any of you have this issue, it will bring a lot more enjoyment to your listening. Thanks to the app, now two people with even modestly different hearing function can enjoy one set of phones to the fullest. I'd love to see this incorporated everywhere.

Revisiting the Bathys

For those unfamiliar with the Bathys, (Focal says to pronounce it “bat ees – do not pronounce the H.” Mon dieu. That being said, these \$699 phones are one of the biggest values going, and definitely my favorite. They feature Automatic Noise Cancelling, and a built-in DAC capable of playing back high-resolution digital files, via USB. They can also be used as cabled phones, if you have a high performance headphone amplifier.

The same factory that produces the \$5,000 Utopia 2022 phones brings their expertise to bear on the Bathys. Instead of a pure beryllium driver like the Utopias, Bathys use an aluminum/magnesium M-Dome driver. The magnesium frame and leather covered headset and earpads give the Bathys a much more luxurious feel than their price suggests.



Comparing them side by side with the Utopias and Clear Mgs, there's no drop off in feel. And the backlit Focal logo on the earcups is completely bitchin.

Using the Bathys cabled, with the Naim, dCS, and GoldNote DAC/amps is sublime, but many of you will buy these phones to be used portably or at least wirelessly. Good as the Bathys are with high-res files, powered by a Naim Uniti, they still deliver sonic bliss streaming your Spotify files. Even more so, when you tune them to your ears.

Thanks to a fairly light weight (.77lb/350g) you should be able to leave the Bathys on your head for extended periods of time without physical or musical fatigue. Their highly dynamic presentation allows engaging listening at low to modest levels – contributing further to saving your hearing!

A wide frequency response and a smooth, yet extended high end make the Bathys at home with any type of music. Listening to the Sting/Tricky collab from a few years ago – 44/876 is lovely, with the huge, three-dimensional landscape unfolding between your ears in a way that is never overblown or fake. Just as some speakers produce an exaggerated soundstage, so do some headphones. Again, the expertise from a company with major engineering chops, building speakers for the home and recording studio environments comes through. There's a naturalness to the music that is a serious helping of what the Utopias offer.

Make mine Mimi

Until everyone adapts this technology for their headphones, you'll have to buy a pair of Bathys. I'm sure that will make the Focal people very happy. It makes me so happy that I'm going to let the secret slip. In next month's awards issue, we're awarding the Bathys/Mimi combination our Product of the Year in the headphone category. Whether you use Mimi as triage or fine tuning, I suggest it will dramatically improve your personal listening.

As an added bonus, being that Mimi is adjusting the sound output via the Bluetooth connection, I was delighted to see the same correction was made to the music in my car via Bluetooth and Spotify. My Mini has a naff system to begin with and this really helped.

I hate that B-word (best) and though I still refuse to use it wherever possible, the Focal Bathys with Mimi are a true triumph of engineering and manufacturing excellence, at a price that is incredibly approachable. For what it's worth, I love my pair. #toneaudioapproved.



Shure V-15 Type III With Jico Stylus

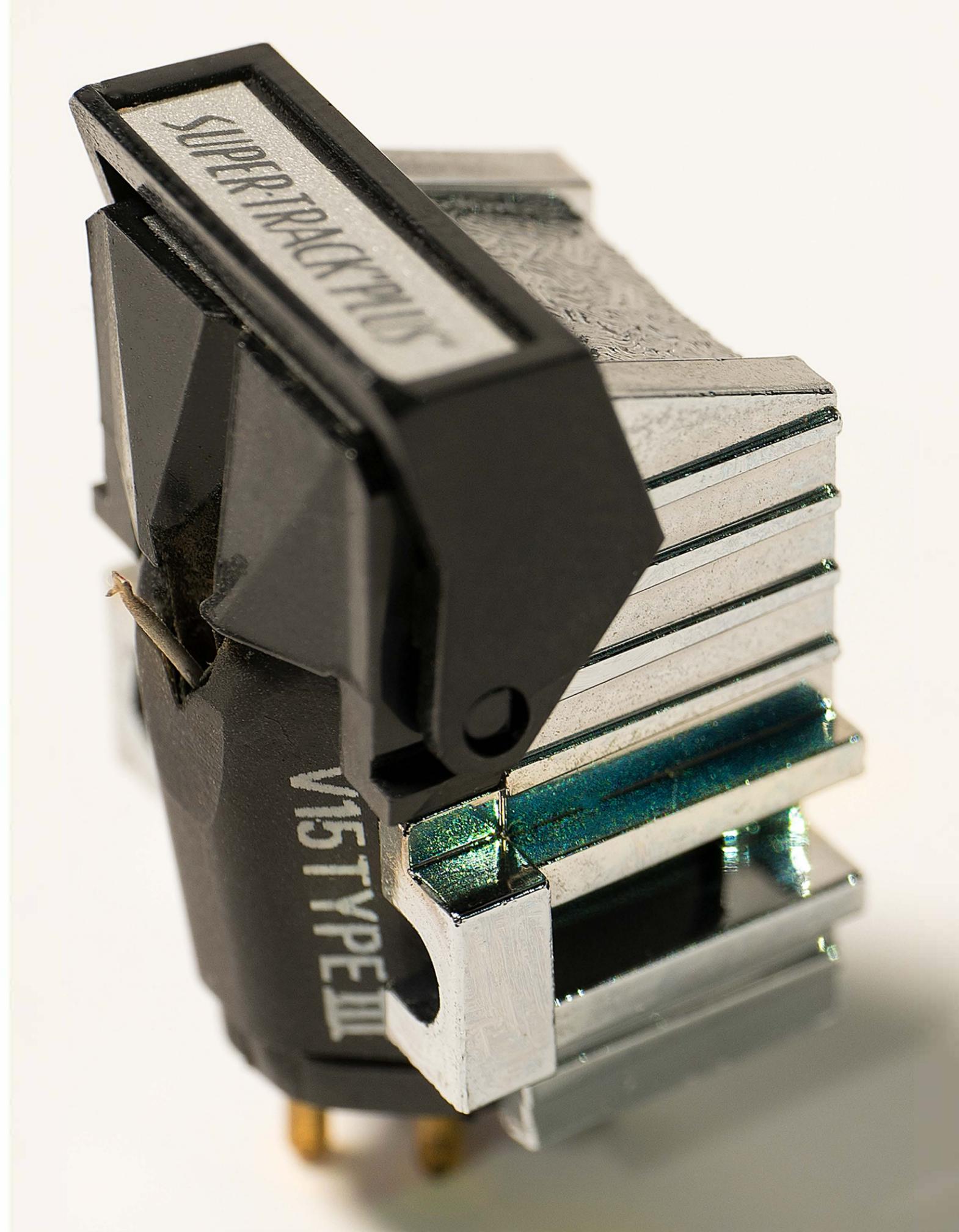
Going way back:

Cart: about \$100 - EBay
Stylus: \$120-\$480

dacapoaudio.com

With premium cartridges costing more than used 3-series BMWs these days, it's fun to take a look back at what used to be state of the art. About 40 years ago, a lot of hifi shops were selling the Shure V-15 cartridges new for about 50-75 bucks mounted on your table of choice and they weren't bad. Their incredible tracking ability and high compliance probably saved a lot of the used classic rock and jazz records you're picking up in the used bins today. It's frightening to think that so many people have been duped into buying Crosley tables and such, destroying their "vinyls" in the process. And it's not about snobbery. Even buying a U-Turn table with an Ortofon 2M red is going to go easy on your albums if set up properly.

As I've been working on putting a vintage Technics SL-1100 direct drive back together with an SME 3009 arm (perfect for high compliance cartridges and a low tracking force of about a gram) what better cartridge to pair it up with than a Shure V15? A while back, a clean V15 Type III was acquired on Ebay for about \$100, with the intent of mounting an aftermarket Jico stylus.



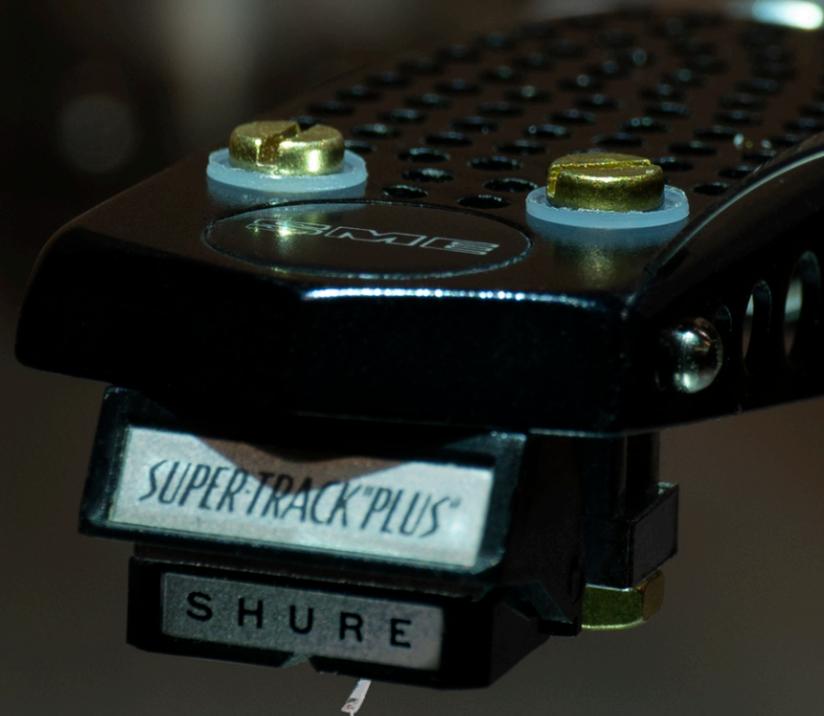
Many of the Many of the vintage enthusiasts swear by this combination, so it seemed like a fun place to start, and a good excuse to get the Technics put back together, but alas my inner airhead misplaced a few tiny bits, so that will have to be a follow up. Instead, Luxman's new PD-191A and a Technics SL-1200G are used for listening comparisons.

A return to EBay shows V15 type IIIs going for more than when I purchased this one, but still not crazy money. (That would be the V15vmXR) Jico now makes 13 different stylus assemblies for the Type III, grouped into Elliptical, Hyper Elliptical, Micro Ridge and 78 RPM conical styli. The Hyper Elliptical styli range from about \$250 to about \$500, with a few budget models closer to \$120 - \$150 . These offer the best performance, but in the spirit of being reasonable, went with the VN35HE at \$175.

Setup

Jico suggests a 1 – 1.5 gram tracking force range, with a suggested optimum of 1.25. A measured force of 1.23 proves just right here, so they are on the money, and this is the best place to start your journey. You should only need slight, if any VTF tweaking from here. Staying with the old school vibe, The MoFi Geo Disc is used to set the Shure up initially. Even that is a little modern, as back in the late 70s this tool wasn't even available.

Later, going on to fine tune adjustment further with the AnalogMajik tools, more performance is available. It's worth mentioning the GeoDisc and your ears will get you surprisingly close with a little patience. This is not a fussy cartridge to set up.



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So, how does it sound?

This modest combination provides a tremendous amount of musical pleasure. True to its nature, the Shure/Jico combination tracks difficult, dynamic passages a lot better than some four-figure premium MC cartridges I've used. Not kidding.

Digging out the Shure Audio Obstacle Course test record, (the famous TTR100) this cartridge tracks every single band. In practice with real music, going back to the Sheffield Labs direct disc of Dave Grusin's *Discovered Again!* has some brutal dynamics that trouble many modern cartridges, but the V15 III sails right through. Ditto for some Joni Mitchell records that are recorded a bit on the hot side, and even the first, self-titled Fleet Foxes record.

As with all Shure V15's the sound is definitely "just the facts," and does not embellish in any way. To some this will be boring, to others perfection. It's up to you.

If you have a relatively low mass arm to work with a higher compliance cartridge like the V-15 III, this could be an excellent match for your setup on a very reasonable budget. And for those still having the last V15vxmr, Jico makes a stylus assembly for that too.



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What's been happening!

So much happens every day, and it's always a welcome escape to the listening space. There's has been a lot happening in the Zen Den, so here's an overall review of what has been going on and a conversation about what is coming up next is in order!

First, let's talk headphones.

There is a great intimacy and connection to the music with headphone listening. Recently, i acquired a Manley Absolute headphone amp. This acquisition allows seamless comparison with the onboard headphone amp in the McIntosh MA252. For open-backed headphone listening, i've been comparing my tried and true Focal Elears to a great pair of Hifiman Edition XS. Of course, the stellar Focal Stellias have come in handy for the Absolute, but first, a comparison of the Elears and Hifimans.



SCULPTURE A



A.4 Silver

A.3

A.4 Copper



made by Ana Mighty Sound

A.3 & A.4 SCULPTURE A PHONO CARTRIDGES

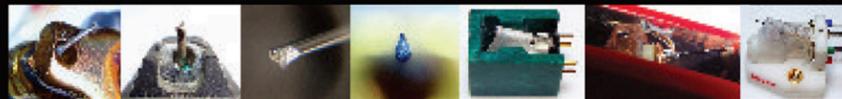
Already awarded by French press with a « Remarquable » award, the A.3 and A.4 phono cartridges display a minimum tracking of 90 micron @300Hz lateral that will allow you to get the full definition of your records. For this we have developed a specific damper and use only boron cantilevers with dedicated geometry diamond tips.

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The A.3 is a fixed characteristic design, the A.4 is a tailor made cartridge up to your requests.



retip

Our insights on cartridge "repairs"

What if each cartridge was restored as unique artefact ? We do not believe that glueing a cantilever and diamond tip is enough. Aging has an effect on your cartridge as well as usage wear, dust, hygrometry and UV.

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Fine-repair : we are able to completely rebuild Neumann DST (or Lumière), Clément cartridges and most MC cartridges available. Open coils ? Stiff damper ? Broken cantilever ? We know how to deal with these issues and will do our best to get your cartridge as close to its original status, even though we can certainly alter your cartridge up to your requests.

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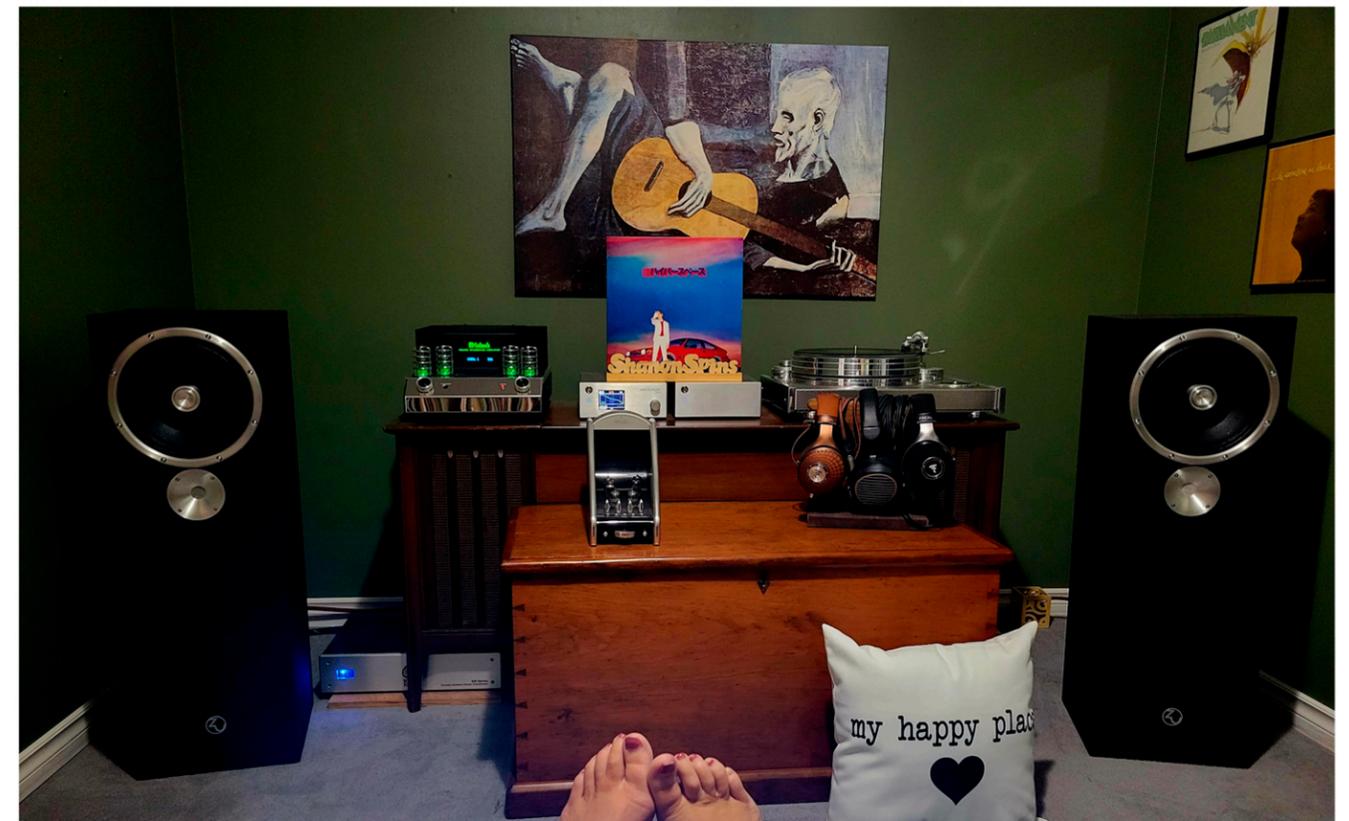
Ana

MIGHTY SOUND



The magnetic planar Edition XS phones are quite a bit larger than the Elears and the lack of an adjustable headband had this smallish headed listener resorting to wearing a baseball cap in order for them to fit correctly. It does take a bit of fiddling to get them fitting just right, but when that balance is achieved, they are quite stable and comfortable. The supplied cable is great for sitting close to the gear, however augmenting it with a 10 foot Pighog cable in order to reach the listening chair is necessary. Setting up some great vinyl choices, including Grant Green's *The Latin Bit*, Tool's *Fear Inoculum*, The Tragically Hip's *Road Apples* and R.E.M.'s *Murmur*.

The Hifiman phones weigh in at 405g with an impedance of 18 ohms, sensitivity of 92 dB and frequency response of 8Hz-50kHz. Comparing this to the Elears, at 450g, impedance 80 ohms, sensitivity 104 dB and a frequency response of 5Hz-23kHz.



One of the first things I notice when running both phones via a splitter into the MA252, is the difference in volume. Swapping back and forth between the phones requires bumping up the volume to bring the Hifimans equal to the Elear's punch. The Hifimans require a bit more drive, which is remedied using the push-pull function on the Absolute. The sound quality, especially in jazz, blues and softer pieces, shines with the Hifiman phones. The neutral separated soundstage pays off during Tico Tico, Long Time Running and Perfect Circle, bringing subtle background details out front and connecting the listener with emotional lyrics. I do prefer the Elears for Pnuema and Little Bones finding detailed drumming and guitar has more kick than with the Hifimans. Vocals are crisp and clean with both phones, however i do prefer the more robust forward vocals with the Elears. For comfort and wearability, the Elears disappear on my head quicker, perhaps this is because of the difference in size of the earpieces. Both phones have comfy padded earpieces which provide noise cancelling and allow the listener to embrace an immersive listening experience.



Next, let's talk about this cartridge

A while back, an audio buddy sent me a Dynavector DV-20X2. It did a little tweaking, but with some patience, this straightforward 0.3mV low output MC really sings! After an uneventful install, the set up includes a conservative tracking force at 1.85, RIAA enhanced curve on the Gold Note PH10/PSU10, 470 Ohms, and 3+ gain after about 30-40 hours of break in. This versatile cartridge offers beautiful vocals and highs, while delivering clean bass and forward mids. In all honesty, I have been running this cart for a while now, due to it consistent sound quality. In those moments in which my brain says 'hey I should swap that cart out', my ears say 'hell no'.

So, what's playing these days?

Let's talk about what else has been playing, other than my fav Canadian and classic rock staples. Upon recommendation from another audio buddy, I picked up Thelonious Monk's *Live at Palo Alto*. To be fair, it is the incredible backstory about the recording of this masterpiece that is the most intriguing. After the first listen, this album is now my favorite live recording of the jazz giant. I am equally obsessed with *Antibalas*, self-titled album from 2012. I had heard and forgotten this band until I saw a social media post from the one and only, Kat Ourlian. Since revisiting the fun afrobeat tracks, especially "Dirty Money," it is hard to not keep this one close to the turntable. Through headphones, the fun percussion and horn details are really appreciated. Jon Batiste's Grammy winning album *We Are* offers some excellent engineering, great funky tracks with crisp clean vocals and exquisite piano details.

Looking toward the future

After quite a long time running my Focal 826s, it is with great pleasure that I receive a lovely pair of Zu Audio Dirty Weekend 6 Superfly speakers for an upcoming review. (insert excited face here) Three years ago, I had enquired about getting a pair of Zu speakers for a review, but of course, the pandemic got in the way. A chance meeting with Sean Casey at Axpona finally brought this dream of mine to reality. There is some other stuff in the works including some exciting pieces from the good folks at Cambridge Audio. For now, this vinyl enthusiast is laser focused on getting to know the DW 6's better and digging through the vinyl collection in an effort to put these speakers through their paces. First impressions are important, and the DW 6's are making a great one, right out of the box!

It's always my goal to offer a true listener's perspective. I love music and it's important how it sounds. And I know that you feel the same. No matter what is going on around us, the listening room is always a safe space in which the music always matters. The gear gets us to the heart of the music.

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TV Show Playlist - Cheesy Version

With music linked to television, how about a few theme songs from TV Shows?



The Partridge Family - Come On, Get Happy

Danny Elfman - The Simpsons Title Theme

The Ventures - Hawaii Five-O Theme song

Alexander Courage and Gene Roddenberry -
Star Trek (original) Theme Song

Cyndi Lauper - Pee Wee's Playhouse Theme Song

Jan Hammer - Miami Vice Theme Song

Seth Mc Farland - Family Guy Theme Song

Frank Sinatra Jr. - Gumby Theme Song

The Monkees - The Monkees Theme Song

Schoolly D - Aqua Teen Hunger Force Theme Song

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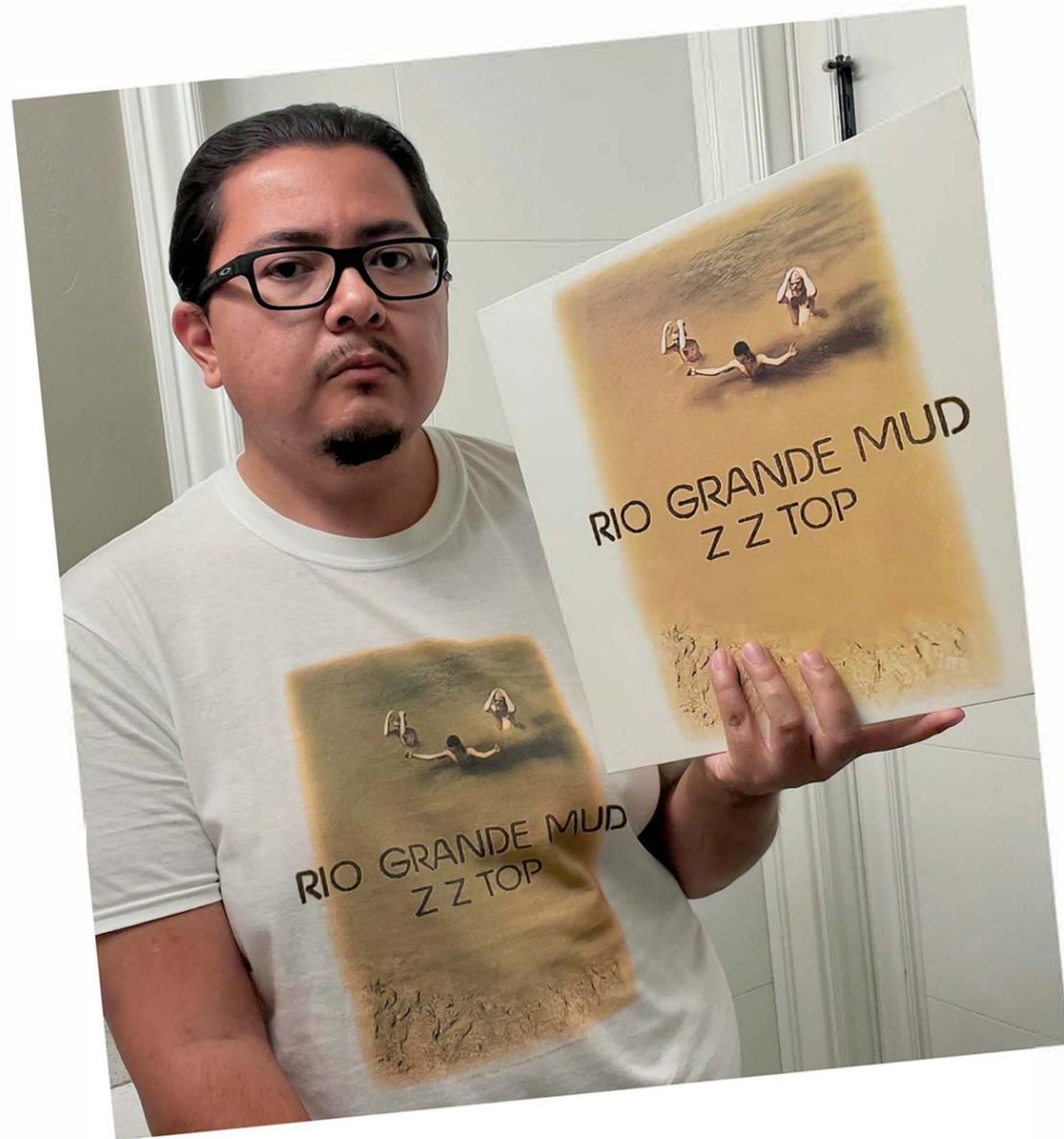
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ZZ TOP

Rio Grande Mud



Andrey Medina is from El Paso, Texas. I've been following him on Facebook for years now, and in addition to his incredibly good taste in music, animation, and Mexican cuisine, he has the best rock T-shirt collection I've ever seen. One day I asked him if he would share some of his collection with us and bam.

This issue, it's ZZ Top's 2nd album. How can you be from Texas and not be into ZZ Top, right? Skip to track 2 - "Just Got Paid" and crank it up! Aw.

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Black Ravioli Record Ground

It's not a weight...

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Unfortunately, listening to the title track from Slayer's *Show No Mercy* album, I couldn't hear much difference from having the Black Ravioli Record Ground in place or not. If you happen to play nothing but metal nothing but loud (not that that's a bad thing) you probably don't need one.

For the rest of you, this is a very worthwhile turntable upgrade, even though nearly a thousand dollars might sound like a lot for a record weight – however, the BR Record Ground is not a record weight. It is a device to siphon energy from the actual record surface, and it does its job very well. The BR Record Ground is one of those subtle things that brings you closer to an absolute analog, non-mechanical, non-electronic way that once you experience it, you can't go back. I've had excellent results with their isolation pucks for years, and the Record Ground is equally good. I need to mention that according to the BR's designer, Derrick Ethel, the Record Ground needs to spend a day at room temperature before using for maximum effect.

Being the manual reading, direction following person I am, I just stared at the BR Record Ground for a whole day before using it.



Listening begins with Rene LaFlamme's excellent pressing (on the 2XHD label) of Bill Evans *Some Other Time*, and the BR makes it easier to really get into the record, which is perfectly produced. Mr. LaFlamme has been making some incredible remasters on SACD, high res download and 45r.p.m. vinyl. If you've seen Nagra gear at any of the hifi shows in the last 5 years or so, he is the man behind the incredible setup that Nagra brings.

Switching the program from Slayer to acoustic jazz with a lot of space and air, the difference the BR Record Ground makes is subtle, yet immediate. As my reference SME 20 uses a screw down clamp, I did not enlist the SME for test listening but did use a Technics SL-1200GR with the latest Luxman MC cartridge (and Cardas Clear tonearm cable), a Rega P9 with Apheta 2, and the Linn LP-12 Basik with Linn Adikt cartridge. All about \$3k-\$6k setups. The main reason for trying this instead of the new Luxman PD-171 that has just arrived was wanting to confirm the Record Ground makes a positive difference on a reasonable analog setup. It's even better on the Luxman, btw.

Subtle, unmistakable, but fantastic

When listening to rock records without a lot of real instruments for reference, or selections on the techno/electronic side of the fence, the Record Ground is still very worthwhile. The overall effect reminds me a lot of what I hear with the Furutech DE-Mag. Everything is quieter overall, with the top end being smoother. I won't bore you with countless selections of different albums, as you have your own favorites. I do suggest trying your favorite selections in your collection that are of the highest quality – these will show more difference immediately, yet as I listened to the BR Record Ground on the SL1200GR and P9 I certainly prefer it in place than not.

When I say smoother, I don't mean sharp edges rounded off the corners of details and transient edges, but more gradations and shadowing of tones. The whole presentation is more analog, organic, and realistic. After about an hour of listening, when going back to no Record Ground, the effect is instantly recognizable. Yet this is not quite the same effect as swapping out better interconnects, or going up a grade in cartridge from what you are using now. In the past my go to record weight was the Furutech. The BR outperforms the Furutech on every level. The Furutech makes things a little quieter, but a little duller in comparison to the BR, which makes everything a bit livelier.

It's a system

Let's say for a minute you have a turntable/arm/cartridge combination in the \$2k-\$10k range, and you'd like to extract more musical information from your current setup. If you agree that analog is all about resolving musical detail, as your system improves, the hope is that most of the changes you make to your analog front end will either reveal more music, make a more pleasing tonal change, or in some cases, both.

Over the last 40 years, I've swapped more than my share of cables, cartridges, tubes, and power line conditioners, as well as various forms of vibration control. Nothing does what the Black Ravioli Record Ground does. I'll even go as far as suggest that using a BR Record Ground will make it easier to hear other changes you might make in your analog front end going forward.

Again, at almost \$1,000 the BR is not inexpensive, but it provides an improvement you won't get elsewhere. Highly recommended.



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Mola-Mola Tambaqui and Lupe DAC and Phono

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Going back and forth between the heavy bass lines in Kruder & Dorfmeisters *The K&D Sessions* on vinyl and via ROON, it's exciting to hear the similarities between these two pieces. About two years ago the Mola Mola Tambaqui DAC got a lot of praise in the audiophile press, and with good reason. It sounds fantastic, looks fantastic, and offers up incredible functionality. The new Lupe phonostage is the same, sharing the same stylish casework, and level of performance. It's really amazing how similar they sound, which is very interesting because there are so few companies/designers that strive this hard to achieve a parity in both domains.

That these two pieces offer such a big slice of "the best of the best" performance in their respective domains is what makes them so incredible. They be destination products for nearly everyone. This has been a trend we've been seeing in a lot of great gear lately, and it's refreshing. This might sound crazy, but the difference between the choices a person putting together a system on a \$50k - \$100k budget is completely different than the person with unlimited fundage assembling their system.

However, if you put the two together over a coffee, you'd be surprised at how similar their goals are. It's always a lot more work when you have to justify every dollar spent, and good as both of these Mola Mola pieces are, I suspect that even if they were the anchors of a carefully assembled \$100k system, and your fortune improved tremendously, they'd still be the last two pieces you'd ever replace.





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There is a fairly steep upward curve in diminishing returns between the world's finest \$10k-\$15k DACs (and phono stages) and those with six figure price tags. While the person seeking the ultimate in performance with the checkbook to back it up will still want those products, and they still deliver more. A Porsche GT4RS still outperforms a Cayman GTS 4.0, even though the specs say they are very close in measured performance. Driving back and forth to work, taking the occasional spirited drive you may not notice all that much difference. Certainly not enough to spend twice the money. But the minute you get some clean air and can really crank it up, you know why it

costs what it does. This is the beauty of the Mola Mola gear – it's so damn good you may never want to go any further. And even in the context of a couple of fairly high quality, high dollar systems, these components deliver dazzling performance.

Between the two of us, we've got a handful of outstanding DACs from dCS, Nagra, and T+A, along with some great to excellent phono stages from BAT, VAC, Backert Labs, Pass Labs, and Nagra. Close in the rear-view mirror have been products from Boulder, Naim, and Audio Research, so fortunately, there are some good data points on the map. While several internet pundits claim the Molas to be "the best," we prefer to say fantastic, but with their own voices and functionality. The level of performance that these two boxes deliver is top shelf indeed. Will they be the best for you? That remains to be seen.



Features and most features

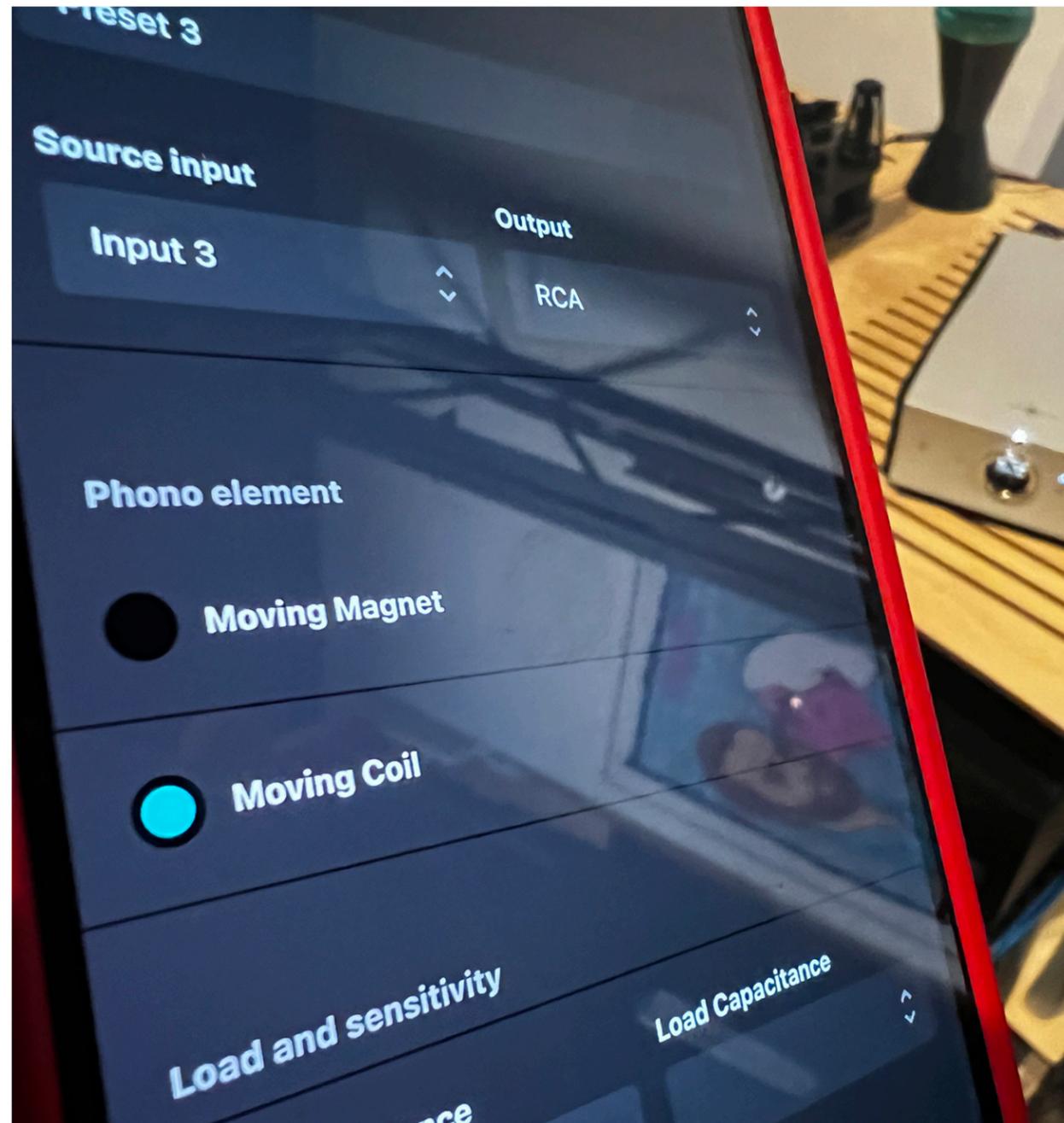
Music lovers can't live on midrange alone, otherwise we'd all still have our PV-2s. Listening to the opening verse of XTC's "Dear God" takes on an entirely new dimension for a track that I've heard thousands of times before. The eight-year-old girl recruited by Todd Rundgren during the recording of the track, sounds much more like a young person singing the lines than before, if that makes sense.

Another exciting aspect of the Lupe and the Tambaqui is how user friendly they are. Thanks to Mola Mola's app, you can control all aspects of them from the comfort of your listening chair. Both products are clearly designed with a 21st century user in mind. A quick trip to the App Store will have you sporting the Mola app in no time, and it connects via Bluetooth, so ultimate purists that have no wifi in their listening rooms will not be at a disadvantage. Every aspect of the DAC and phono can be adjusted via the app, or if you need to get some extra steps, the front panel – it is a nice touch that Mola Mola does let you do it from the front panel if you are app adverse.

Starting with the Lupe, the most exciting thing going on here from a functionality standpoint is that there are four phono inputs, with one of them balanced. If you've never tried a balanced phono connection, I highly suggest it, as it is usually slightly quieter. If your turntable happens to have a very low output cartridge, this will make the overall sonic picture more dynamic. The other three inputs are standard RCA, but again, important to notice the small details. Mola Mola offers a separate grounding lug for each input. Almost no one takes the extra care to do this and it really comes in handy with multiple turntables/tonearms.

If you click here (<https://www.mola-mola.nl/lupe.php>) to visit the Mola Mola site, you can see all the combinations at your disposal for gain, loading, capacitance and EQ. With the various EQ curves and a maximum gain of 87dB, no cartridge or recording is out of your realm. For anyone having a large collection of older discs, this will prove to be invaluable. It's not a major difference, however, once you hear those old Columbia's, or early Rolling Stones Monos with the correct EQ, you'll never go back.

The lowest output MCs we had between us are a vintage Helikon SL (.22mV) and the Denon 103-r (.25mV), so the maximum (82dB and 87dB) weren't really necessary, but if you happen to have a Kondo or one of those super low output MC's that only have four turns of wire on each coil, you won't be left out in the cold with the Lupe.



Digital as good as analog

That's the tagline for the Tambaqui, and when listening to both it and the Lupe, they are remarkably close in voice. Mola-Mola takes the approach of upsampling all incoming data to 3.125MHz/32 bits and converts to noise-shaped PWM. The upsampling police always claim that this doesn't work, but audio is more often about implementation than approach. The dCS DACs offer the option to upsample, and quite honestly I prefer it.

We've mentioned it before, the difference between "really good for digital," and just plain really good sound is a combination of resolution, tonal accuracy, dynamic range, and most importantly, a non-electronic sound that only the world's finest DACs possess. The Tambaqui definitely belongs in this group, and considering it's just below fourteen grand, an incredible bargain. There is a delicacy to the music presented with this DAC that will keep you in the listening chair.

Rather than bore you with endless comparisons, the Tambaqui presents all of the aforementioned virtues with a tonal balance that is very similar to dCS and Boulder – neither adding or subtracting, just delivering the goods. Where my Aqua, with its tube output stage embellishes with more tonal saturation (which I love) that might not be the perfect fit for you, and if you can keep your sources as natural/neutral as possible, fine tuning the end result to your version of perfection can be easily done with amplification, speakers, and cable. Plus, should your taste in amplification change at some point, the Mola Molas will still be excellent source components.

Chris and I both notice how much low-frequency power and control the Tambaqui possesses. Whether listening to synth bass or kettle drums, there is a complete lack of overhang in the lower registers. The bass hits hard and fast, offering a tremendous sense of pace, always anchoring the tracks you choose.



And vice versa

The Lupe leaves a bit on the table in terms of tubey, midrange magic when compared to our VAC, Nagra, and Backert Labs tube phonestages, but the Lupe leaves our tubed favorites in the dust when it comes to low frequency resolution, dynamic range and low noise floor. Which of these characteristics push your buttons the most? Much fun as tubes are, you'll have to replace them at some point. Will you get the same sound you had? Who knows. Or as they say on social media, "ask me how I know." While the lure of vacuum tubes will always be there, solid-state phono stages are lovely because they never change their sound characteristics. This is wonderful as a reviewing tool, and if you are someone who likes to change combinations often. You aren't hitting a moving target as tubes age when you go solid-state.

Remember, there's four inputs. A four input phono stage is like a heated steering wheel. At first glance, you think that's silly, but it came as part of a package when you ordered the car. You think, "I'll never use that." Even though you won't admit it, the first time you tried it, you never went back. Four phono inputs is off the chart analog fun, and once you get hooked on multiple turntable/tonerarm combinations, you can't go back. The bigger your record collection, the more this makes good sense. This aspect of the Lupe makes it one of the most versatile phono stages going. Other than an Allnic phono we auditioned years ago with five inputs; I truly can't recall another phono stage of this quality with this many inputs.



However, it's not so much about analog sounding better or worse than digital, it's about them sounding different. If you've ever noticed how the finest all digital recordings still have a different feel texturally than the finest all analog recordings, the two Mola Molas are so good, that if the recording in question delivers more music in digital, that's where it will sound best, as it is with analog.

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Headphone Guru

Just as the Tambaqui has a sonic elegance about it, the Lupe is the same – in terms of the way it renders the finest of textures and sonic contrasts. Cymbals not only sound correct in terms of tone and timbre, but in the way they decay into nothingness in an extremely natural and linear way. If you have a friend that plays drums, ask them to let you (lightly) tap a high hat cymbal and feel the way that decay lingers in the room. Ditto for the piano. The Lupe excels at this stuff.

I suspect it won't take long for you to listen to the Lupe to realize how special it is. Between the two of us, we tried a wide range of turntable/phono cartridge combinations; MM, MI, and MC, so we feel very confident telling you that there should be no compatibility issues with this phonostage.

Don't forget the phones

The Tambaqui also features a first-rate head-phone amplifier, however the ¼ inch stereo and 4-pin balanced outputs are on the rear panel. Depending on how you have your system physically configured, this may or may not be convenient. However, it does make for keeping the front panel scratch and fingerprint free. Depending on how long the cables are on your phones, you may either need to get a longer cable, or sit really close.

That aside, the Tambaqui delivers big headphone sound, with incredible imaging. Zipping through a playlist of favored headphone tracks, with a lot of bouncy stereo effects and big imaging, is a blast. If you already have a pair of good phones, you'll be thrilled – yet the Tambaqui is a good enough headphone amp, you might consider an upgrade in that department. Even using my reference Focal Utopia 2022s, the Tambaqui leaves nothing on the table. Think of it as a free headphone amp, pair of cables and power cord – even if you never use a pair of phones, the Tambaqui is more than worth the asking price as a DAC alone.

Great on paper, better in person

Both of the Mola Molas certainly deliver amazing specifications, but in the real world they reveal a lot of music. This level of depth and transparency is what makes recorded music fool you into thinking it's real.



I suspect that just like Chris's experience, if you happen to purchase either the Lupe or the Tambaqui, you'll be extremely tempted to buy the other shortly after to achieve a seamlessness in sound, as well as being able to control it all from your phone.

While we shy away from the B-word around here, both of these pieces from Mola-Mola are excellent in every way. These are not components that after you live with them for a while will think, "I wish it did this, I wish it didn't do that." There is still more performance to be had from both platforms, but it's going to cost you dearly. To that effect, we are happy to award both the Lupe and the Tambaqui our Exceptional Value Awards for 2023. And because Chris has purchased both, the #toneaudioapproved awards as well.

Very enthusiastically recommended.



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If you happen to be an audio enthusiast that is only impressed with large racks of gear, and convinced this is the only way to go, skip this review. You won't want the Enleum AMP-23R. It's small. Tiny, actually. Like 9 inches square and a little over 3 inches tall with super cool feet attached. I've seen bigger apple pies than this. In all seriousness, it has about the same footprint as a Nagra Classic component and is half the height. Listening to the Chemical Brothers "Live Again," the amount of bass at my command is staggering, controlled, and well defined – as listening to the Chemical Brothers should be. The rest of the frequency spectrum is equally well rendered.

For the rest of you, this amplifier is so special, there's no real cliché to describe it. Often, as you go up the range of the world's finest components, they reveal more music – more resolution, less noise, more dynamics, more of their core voice. What if you could have a modest helping (i.e. 25 watts worth) of "as good as it gets" sound for \$6,250? That's the Enleum AMP-23R. After a lot of listening comparisons, it stacks up with the finest gear available.

I'd like to thank Rob Fritz of Audio Art Cable (www.audioartcable.com) for telling me about this jewel. If this review has piqued your interest, please give him a call to put one in your listening room.





ENLEUM AMP-23R

At first, the thought of adding another great, low-powered amplifier to work with some of the high sensitivity speakers we've been reviewing, to keep the hours low on my 300Bs was appealing. The minute the AMP-23R began driving the Peak Consult Sinfonias (\$55k/pair) in place of the C-J ART88/PS Audio BHK600 monos that had been powering them for some initial run in, the AMP-23R is non-stop excitement. Running through track after track of music that's been our review staples for 20 years, the AMP-23R turns in an incredible performance.

So intrigued with this, moving the AMP-23R over to the YG Hailey 3s (\$67,000/pair) with a similar sensitivity, but different tonality than the Peaks, and even slightly more resolving, this little amplifier delivers an equally engaging performance. In both instances the source component is the dCS Vivaldi ONE, so the AMP-23R is in great company without compromise.

This is the point in the review, where excuses are made that the review component, only a fraction of the cost of the mega gear in said reference system really doesn't measure up. Nope. Not here. Of course, the Enleum amplifier will not drive the Peaks or the Haileys to the same level as the big Pass or big PS monoblocks, but the sheer quality of musical experience delivered by the AMP-23R at modest volumes is as good as it gets. The only reason I mention the cost of the first two speakers used with the AMP-23R is to illustrate the level of resolution it is capable of – and that this amplifier does not sound out of context in a 200k system. Hiding it in the rack when a few friends visited made for a lot of fun playing tricks with them. No one could believe this small amplifier was delivering such an exciting performance!

Fantastic with high efficiency speakers

However, swapping to a pair of efficient speakers is an even more amazing experience. If you've always liked horns, or other high sensitivity speakers, but still have a bit of trepidation about SET amplifiers, the AMP-23R will surprise you in a great way.

The relatively high impedance of most SET amplifiers makes them slightly more speaker sensitive than other amplifiers, and it's usually the bass response that takes a hit, combined with their low damping factor, there aren't many SETs with true bass grip. (Though we have had excellent results with Nagra, ampsandsound, and WAVAC, but these are all much more expensive than the Enleum)

Swapping speakers for the Heretic AD612s (98dB/1-watt), and the new Zu Audio DWXs (95dB/1-watt) both make the AMP-23Rs 25 watts per channel into 8 ohms (45 watts into 4 ohms) seem like way more power than you'd ever need. Even with the higher impedance Zu and Heretics, the AMP-23R never runs out of power.

More listening

Every bit of music selected was a wonderful experience through the AMP-23R. No matter what you enjoy, I think you will be fulfilled. The amplifier possesses a prodigious level of pace and timing. When listening to the usual Blue Note favorites, every player is locked down and does not waver. Tracking through Herbie Hancock's Main Title theme to *Blow Up*, the drums are planted at the rear of the soundstage, as Freddie Hubbard's horn comes in over Hancock's piano.

Female vocal lovers just might think they are listening to an SET, because of the sheer delicacy this amplifier portrays reproducing the human voice. Whether I was listening to Chrissie Hynde, Christine Mc Vie, or Christina Aguilera, every subtle nuance of their voices came through with spectacular feel.

Transient response is also excellent, with no sense of fog, cloudiness, or overhang. Drum heavy music (take your pick) is refreshingly open and punchy. This contributes heavily to a complete lack of fatigue when listening for hours on end. Finally, the sound field created is immense in all three directions, yet the AMP-23R allows music to scale up and down with ease, and it sounds fantastic at very low volume levels as well. Zero complaints here.

A few comparisons

With a couple of great single ended and low powered tube amplifiers on hand to drive the Zu and Heretic speakers, it made sense to undertake some A/B comparisons. To be fair, the \$24k pair of ampsoundsound Bryce mono blocks deliver slightly more midrange magic and a bit larger overall soundstage. The Pass First Watt SIT-3 offers a bit more organic, warmer presentation, and the Pass INT-25 even warmer still. The Coincident Frankenstein amplifier with WE 300Bs also gives a bit more bloom, but it is in a fun, saturated way.

Except for the INT-25, all of these are more expensive, power amplifiers only, and delivered the performance they did with the \$38,000 Pass XS Preamplifier driving them. And tubes are tubes. Sometimes more glorious, but always needing replacement. The Pass INT-25 is more expensive, much larger, and much heavier, with a different tonality. The point here is not to show any disrespect for the other players, but to underline just how good the AMP-23R is.

The Enleum difference

There have been a handful of great phono preamplifiers that operate in current mode, providing a tremendously transparent view of the music.

The AMP-23R works this way as well, and the volume control varies the amplifier's gain, instead of merely attenuating the input. Peeking inside, reveals a pair of Ensense gain modules and a single pair of output transistors bolted to the chassis as a heat sink. Please note, the Ensense modules use all discrete transistors, and no negative feedback. Taking the circuit further, Enleum's JET2 Bias circuit works in real time to constantly monitor (and correct as needed) each pair of EXICON MOSFETS that make up the output stage.

The stark, yet highly fashionable casework takes the same approach as the circuit design. Ergonomics are top notch, and the machining quality is both tasteful and superb. Even the carefully designed trio of vibration controlling feet work with the mechanical design to keep a minimum of mechanical noise from entering the circuit board.



Around back is a pair of analog RCA inputs marked "Voltage." These are traditional analog inputs, and the pair of BNC inputs in between them are marked "Enlink," which are reserved for future Enleum products to work in current mode. (hopefully, a phono stage and matching DAC?) Finally, a small but efficient remote takes care of controlling things from your listening position.

A winning combination

The AMP-23R does everything right. No make that perfectly. In the couple of months that it's been here, it's literally a freak out every time we use it. And it's been so much fun to have audiophile buddies visit with the AMP-23R playing on top of a rack full of massive gear and walk up to turn the level up on this tiny box. Surprise all around, and that's a great thing.



I'd suggest a 90db/1-watt pair of speakers if you really need serious volume levels, but with the level of musical information that the Enleum AMP-23R reveals, there isn't a set of speakers under \$100k a pair I wouldn't connect it to. And it's a killer headphone amplifier too. A quick email to Enleum reveals that the headphone jack is connected directly to the output stage, taking full advantage of the main circuit, unlike so many integrated amplifiers that tack on a simple op-amp circuit as an afterthought.

Using the Focal Utopia 2022 phones for reference, listening again shows off just how musical and resolving the AMP-23R is. Theoretically, you could buy this amplifier for headphone use only and still feel like you got a good deal.

Conclusion

They say that a true master knows where to pound the nail. I submit the founder of Enleum, Soo In Chae, is in the league of the true masters. The final measure of a top-quality product is the way every aspect of said product is realized. In addition to class A+ sound, this amplifier is wonderfully crafted, and finished to perfection. It is as much a joy to physically interact with and use as it is to listen to.

This amplifier more than deserves to sit on the same shelf with the world's finest gear. I've purchased the review sample, and it will be doing just that here for years to come. I anxiously await what Enleum will bring to market next.

Naim CD5Si

Don't count the CD out just yet.

\$1,995
focalnaimamerica.com

Enjoying the Japanese CD pressing of Genesis' *Trick of the Tail*, I'm reminded just how much I still love this format, and how convenient it is listening to both sides of an album without leaving the listening chair. Not because I've become sloth-like, mind you, it's just that sometimes you get so into the music, you don't want to stop the flow. This has always been one of the most enjoyable things about CDs.

Those still sniping about the lifeless sound of the compact disc and digital in general have been spoiling the party for years now. Digital keeps improving, and in the case of the Naim CD player here, I suggest it is certainly the musical equal of any \$2,000 analog front end. Before you fire up the laptop to set me straight, consider this – “analog front end” means table, arm, cartridge, and phonostage. Sorry, I can't think of anything in analog world for \$2,000 that bests the Naim. For that matter I can't think of anything costing significantly more that does – but that's not the point. Naim's CD5Si is so musically rewarding, you'll be engaged enough in the music that you won't be saying, “this sounds pretty good for digital.”



Naim Audio in Salisbury, UK has always made some of the world's finest CD players and follow a different path than most other manufacturers. Rather than incorporating the latest chipset, or filter scheme, Naim's players have always had the refinement of an Aston Martin – taking existing technology and implementing it in the most efficient way possible. Perhaps the best proof of this concept is the way they make their CD transport. This level of fanatic finesse always delivers brilliant results. I used the Naim CD555/PS555 as a reference component for years and have used a number of their other digital components with excellent result.

The only sad news here is that Naim has cut their disc player offerings to the CD5si, basically their entry level player. Though some consider spinning CDs passe, others feel that the shiny disc is enjoying somewhat of a renaissance of its own. With so much attention on vinyl, it's easy to walk into a record store and score some real gold with \$50 in your pocket when sifting through the used CD shelves.



In context

It would be easy to compare this \$2,000 Naim player to my reference DCS Vivaldi, but that's not fair. To keep this realistic, the Oppo 205 (which used to retail for about \$2,000) was brought in for a direct comparison. Granted, the Oppo does have DAC, streaming, and high-resolution digital playback capabilities, but some might argue the Oppo has an advanced chipset compared to the Naim. In the end, when comparing CD playback, the Naim sounds more natural and relaxed when compared to the still excellent Oppo.

Ditto for comparing playback to a handful of budget DACs on hand from Rega, iFi, Benchmark, and a few others. The one player that does sound as musical is the long out of production Proceed PDP. But again, another unfair comparison. The CD5si performs the unique balancing act of not sacrificing smoothness in the upper mids

to high-frequency range for resolution. There's a lot of detail available when playing musically complex pieces through the CD5si. Harold Budd's *Avalon Sutra* is filled with ambient, spatial textures and bits of piano. While this flattens out substantially through the Oppo, it truly comes to life with the Naim.

Sampling several other electronic/ambient pieces from Brian Eno and Jean-Michel Jarre reveal the same thing – a liveliness that is tough to achieve with lesser components. Acoustic instruments are equally exciting. In addition to significant dynamic capability, this player creates a large soundscape in all three dimensions.

One of the best tests of any digital component is tonal accuracy, and the ability to play congested recordings. Failure to perform these two duties is often what gives digital playback a negative connotation.

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Even though it is somewhat “audiophile-y,” the standard CD of Shelby Lynne’s *Just a Little Lovin’* quickly shows off the Naim’s ability to deliver wide dynamic swings, incredible low-level detail, and spot on tonality. Of course, you have your favorite tracks in this vein, and I trust you will not be disappointed. An earlier version of Yes’ *Close to the Edge* and The Monkees’ *Headquarters* discs both demonstrate excellent performance with compressed material. No matter what I put in the swing out tray, the CD5si always delivers great sound.

Singular greatness

No digital output, means you can’t use it as a transport, and no digital input, so you can’t use it as a DAC. Naim followed this philosophy with their earliest players because they felt that adding this functionality was a compromise at worst, or added unnecessary complexity at best. There is still some wisdom to this logic, especially at this price.

Unboxing the CD5si, you instantly feel the heft in Naim’s die-cast aluminum case – the same construction used in all their Classic series gear. No corners are cut anywhere.

Inside the enclosure is a slightly less expensive version of the Burr Brown PCM1793 DAC chips in their past flagship streamer, the NDX. Comparing the sound of the CD5si to a friend’s NDX instantly reveals the family resemblance.

Around back, there is only a main power switch, a Naim/DIN output, for those in an all Naim environment with all Naim cables, and a pair of RCA analog outputs for the rest of us. Only a touch over 3 inches tall and 17 inches wide, the CD5si integrates with your gear on a standard shelf just as easily as it does with past and present Naim gear. It also still sports the classic Naim lime green logo, display and backlit buttons. Thanks to this, there is practically no setup. However if you do not use Naim cables, the player comes from the factory set only to output signal to the Naim/DIN outputs. You’ll need to hold down the display button on the remote to choose which outputs to use, or both if you prefer.

After unboxing, be careful not to miss the magnetic puck that clamps the CD down to the player mechanism, and to remove the transit screw on the underside, locking the transport door in place. Be sure to save this screw, should the need arise to ship the player at some point.

Even if you happen to move the player across town, out of the box, the transit screw **MUST** be in place. I suggest a Ziplock bag and place it back in the original box. Then, plug the power cord in and your choice of interconnect from the CD5is and your amplifier.

Open the drawer, drop in your CD and affix the puck. Seriously, do not lose that puck, and be sure not to find a way to drop it in the player. Now I’ve probably jinxed you, but do be careful. I managed to not do either in years of owning the CD 555 but I always had a bit of anxiety about it. The CD5si will not play discs without it.

Simply incredible

Few products in the world of audio are as accomplished at their task as the Naim CD5si. If you still value your CD collection and are thinking about another player in this price range, I can’t suggest this one highly enough. I am finding it very hard to resist purchasing the review sample. An Exceptional Value Award winner to be sure!



INHouse
The soundtrack
of the issue.



Sometimes, a bit of self-indulgent prog is just what is required to keep the ship moving forward, mid-issue. This is about as indulgent as it gets! Ha.

EVERY COMPONENT OF THIS
**AUDIOPHILE-WORTHY HIGH-FIDELITY
STEREO SOUND SYSTEM**
IS ON DISPLAY IN THIS PHOTO



THE PEARL
\$3499 EACH



THE PEARL AKOYA
(PICTURED) \$1899 EACH

MAXIMUM SOUND LEVEL
118 DB MONO, 124 DB STEREO

BANDWIDTH
14 – 27,000 HZ

DESIGN
3 DRIVERS, 3 AMPS

POWER
1600 W RMS / 3200 W PEAK

DIMENSIONS / WEIGHT
12.6" DIAMETER / 40 LBS EACH

MAXIMUM SOUND LEVEL
115 DB MONO, 121 DB STEREO

BANDWIDTH
30 – 27,000 HZ

DESIGN
3 DRIVERS, 3 AMPS

POWER
1050 W RMS / 2100 W PEAK

DIMENSIONS / WEIGHT
8.7" DIAMETER / 18 LBS EACH



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TONE.119.058

Finite Elemente Master Pagode Reference II Modular Rack System

The intersection of science and style.

about \$15,000 as shown here, price varies with shelf number and material.

mofidistribution.com (US Distribution)
finite-elemente.eu/en/ (Factory)

We produced an all black and white issue years ago, and it was a fantastic success. Rather than waiting to assemble a group of components that will all work together as monochrome images, I've decided to produce one review every issue, where the images are all black and white.

The last time, all of the images were produced with the Leica M Monochrom camera, but that was on loan from a friend who's orbit no longer intersects with mine, so these images were all shot with the Sony A7iii, and a variety of lenses in color. The final images were then converted to monochrome in the latest version of Adobe Photoshop.

The stark curves and angles, contrasting with the precise combination of wood and metalworking with the Finite Elemente rack presented here just seemed the natural place to start. (full size image, courtesy of Finite Elemente)

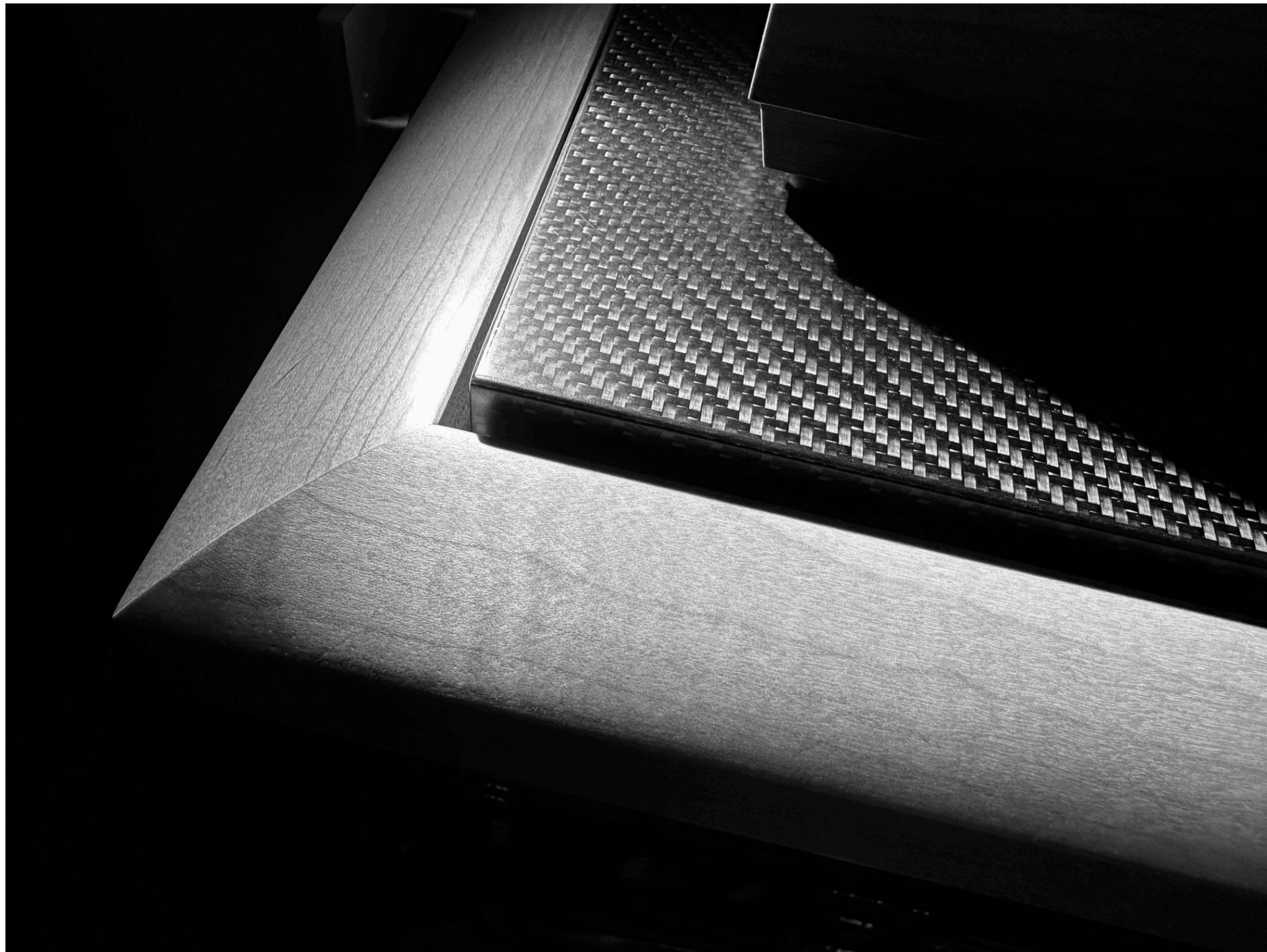


Have you ever spent a fair amount of money to frame a photograph or lithograph poster that you really loved? Chances are you probably paid \$400-\$600 to frame a cherished concert poster that maybe cost you \$50 at the merch table. Yet, when you brought your treasure home from the frame shop, it looked fantastic, and perhaps you said to yourself, “hey, there’s something to this.”

That’s how I’d like to present the Finite Elemente Master Reference Pagode II rack system. Years ago, I had a pair of the originals, but moved to some components that were too big for the shelves. Instead of gently packing them up and putting them back in storage, I sold them to a friend. Do I regret that move. And there’s that mint ARC D-79. Oh well. The good news is the current “II” series has a greater capacity, just over 250 pounds on the bottom shelf, and 132 pounds on the rest.

Top tech

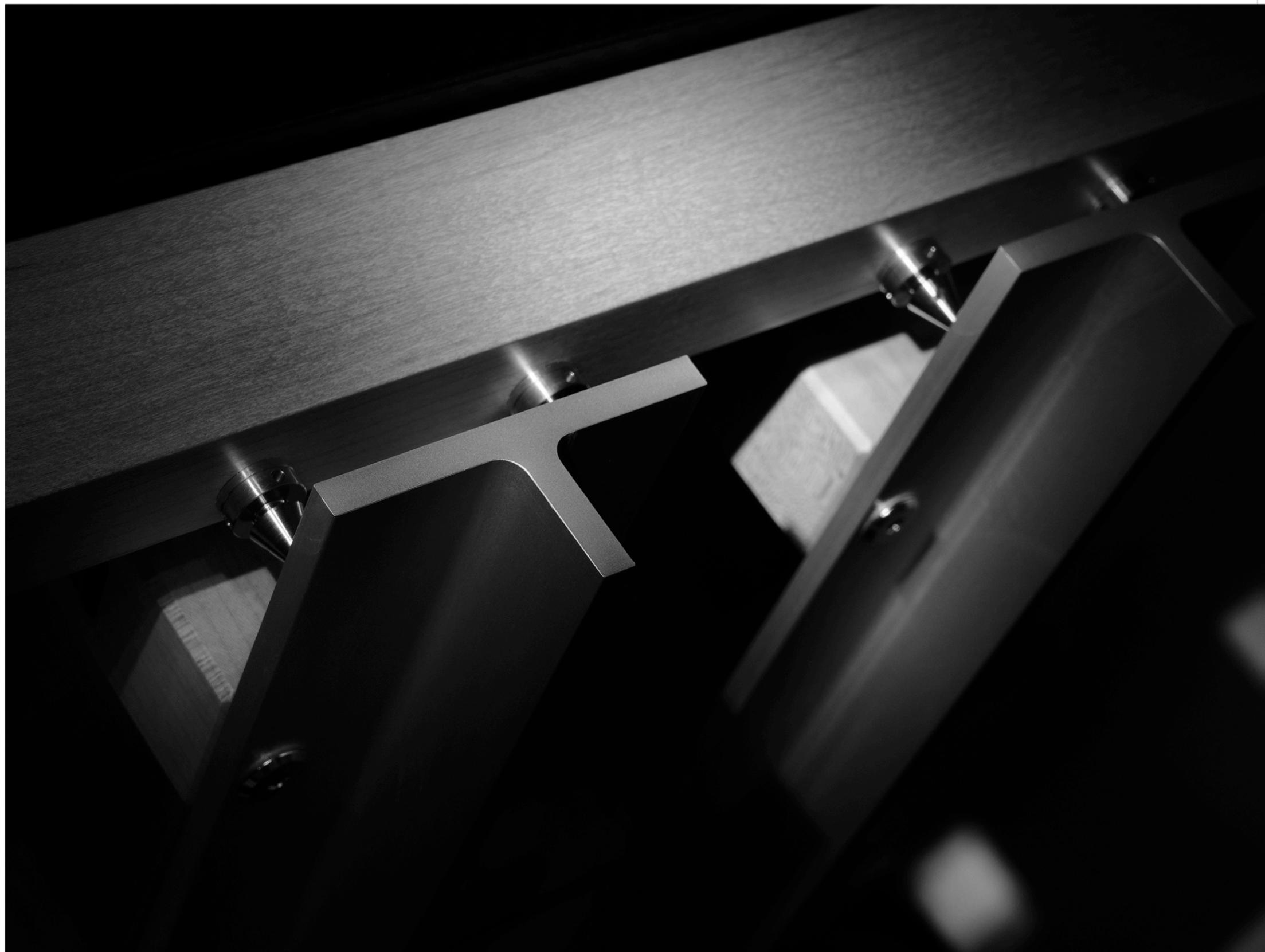
Thanks to some sophisticated vibration control methods, your gear will perform better on a Master Pagode Reference II rack – especially tube gear. As we already had the VK-80 preamplifier and matching VK-80 amplifier in from BAT (which is also distributed by MoFi Distribution) this all made for a great display of gear that would work well on this rack. Chances are, you’ve already got a great system and you’re looking for the icing on the cake.



Like Porsche and Leica, well-engineered, fanatically implemented products from Germany are not inexpensive. However the Master Pagode II rack system is not in the stratospheric price category of some equipment storage solutions. It's also worth mentioning that unlike some high performance racks, the Pagode II does not rely on elastomers between the shelves that will degrade with time and need regular replacement. The rack we have here is \$11,000-ish, so this is not a beginning or maybe even journeyman audiophile purchase.

Clicking here will take you to the Finite website for an expanded explanation with illustrations, of just how they achieve their isolationist goals (this sounds like a news headline, eh?) with their shelves, spikes, and ceramic ball couplers.

This isn't an exclusionary thing – if you've got a \$5k-\$30k system, you will get a larger improvement in system sonic quality with an \$11k investment elsewhere. One thing our test sample does have is a carbon fiber top shelf, which is a bit more than the standard \$2,000 shelves. As a huge fan of the material, it's tough not to suggest getting at least one of these for the top shelf you put your turntable!



Assembly and setup

The three and four shelf Pagode II arrives in a fairly large box with top and bottom shelves attached. Everything is well packed, requiring only installing the middle shelves. While this can be accomplished as a solo effort, it will go quicker if you have a little help. First, figure where you will be placing your rack, and level the bottom shelf with the adjustable feet and accompanying pucks.

You'll notice the finely machined holes in the spiked, side shelf supports with locking nuts. A quick assembly tip from doing this a few times is to tighten them all down to a similar torque value. Proceed slowly, a bit at a time, tighten everything in a cross pattern (like torquing down a cylinder head) so the columns will expand at a similar rate. Otherwise, you may find a corner or side being loose, and then... As they say on social media, "ask me how I know this."

Listening and comparisons

Much like testing cable, what do you compare a rack that claims to reduce vibration and increase the sonic purity of your system? Two other things were tried for a comparison, and to keep the equipment simple, an Octave V 110 SE integrated amplifier (with 8 tubes), a Naim CD5-Si CD player and a Technics SL-1200G turntable were placed on a Target rack that is about 35 years old and has no vibration control whatsoever, and a four shelf Quadraspire Q4 EVO (an excellent performer for about 1/5th the cost of the Pagode II). The YG Hailey 3 speakers here for review were used because of their highly resolving nature.

However, the increase in resolution is very pronounced when going all the way to the Finite setup, even more, when all three components are on the Finite rack.



Along with the soundstage increasing in all three dimensions, the noise floor drops substantially, to the point where it was very noticeable to even the non-audiophile friends in my circle. Making no mention of what any of this stuff costs, honest feedback was petitioned, and these are guys that always question my audiophile flights of fancy, so they are a tough audience.

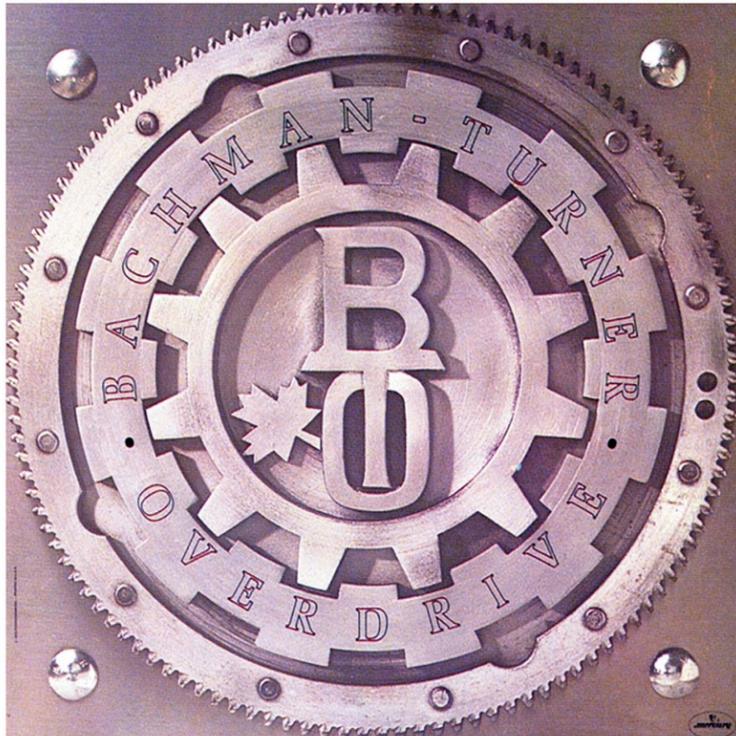
The main response from the uninitiated was, “how can a shelf make that much of a difference?” So I rest my case. In addition to the lower noise floor and larger sonic landscape, your system’s ability to resolve fine detail will increase as well. Please make note that the Naim CD player and the Technics table used for initial listening are sub-\$2,000 components. Even the Octave amplifier was substituted for a \$2,500 PrimaLuna EVO 100 integrated with similar results. On the other end of the spectrum, substituting the digital front end for the T+A 2500 DAC/Streamer, and a Rega P9 delivered an even wider delta. Bottom line – this is not merely a cosmetic upgrade. While there was not as much of a difference in resolution going to the carbon fiber shelf with the Technics table, the difference with the Rega was more pronounced, and these are both non suspended tables. Will you get the carbon fiber shelf/shelves for the functionality factor or the coolness factor? Hmmmm. Remember I like to spend your money.

Start your own audio gallery

Just like a fine sports car or motorbike, it’s always a system. While the Finite Elemente Master Pagode rack system offers distinct sonic benefits, the elegance that it lends to an audio system is unmistakable. Personally, I’d buy them for that alone, but it is nice to know that you are getting a significant performance improvement along with a visual makeover for your gear. Finite systems are highly modular, so you can build them like Legos as you go. And seriously, doesn’t that concert poster look way better framed? Same thing. Highly recommended.



Being a loyal Canadian, and a real rocker at heart, I asked Shanon McKellar for her 10 favorite BTO tracks. She was all too happy to oblige. We're passing most of the obvious hits for some deep tracks. Rock on.



Blue Collar

Sledgehammer

Not Fragile

Free Wheelin'

Looking Out For No. 1

Let it Ride

Mississippi Queen

Flat Broke Love

Rock is my Life (and this is my song)

Hold Back The Water

**THEY EVEN
Paint 'em
to Match
Your
Car...**



Totem Solution Subwoofer

Quite the solution, indeed

\$2,200
totemacoustic.com

One of the most common roadblocks to adding a subwoofer to your system is usually where to put the damn thing. This is more common if you share your space with another person, who might be gear adverse. In addition to being sleek and stylish, Thanks to its sealed enclosure, Totem's Tribe Solution sub can be placed horizontally or vertically, but most important of all can be set up on it's back, firing upward – effectively rendering all “not in my house” comments ineffective. If you're feeling really sneaky, just buy one, set it up under your favorite piece of furniture and if that gear adverse being makes a comment about more bass, just plead the fifth. Be sure to look convincingly innocent when doing so.

For those of you living in a world of full disclosure, the Solution Sub is as easy as it gets to add more low frequency output to your system, Totem main speakers or not. Remember, Totem's the company that gets killer bass out of small speakers, so it's no surprise that their subwoofers are equally compact yet extremely powerful.

Please click [here](#) to visit the Totem site for full specs, the product manual (in case you're the read ahead type) and to view the Solution with the grilles on and off.



Setup and placement

Slightly under 40 pounds, and only 24 x 13 x 4.5 inches tall, unpacking and setting up this sub is a one-person operation. Connecting via line level outputs from your preamplifier, receiver, or integrated, but if long interconnects don't make sense, or you don't feel like spending the extra cents, opt for Totem's LINK wireless transmitter. At \$150, this is way less than even a mediocre set of long interconnects, so it makes a lot of sense. The LINK also works with Totem's Kin Play speakers. We did not test this, but will be doing a follow up in the future as we have a large and small pair of Kin Play's here at TONE.

After connecting your Solution to AC power, and the inputs of your choice, turn the three controls on the back panel fully counterclockwise before powering up. Next, set the crossover frequency dial at about 80Hz to start. Bring up slowly until you hear the subwoofer the overall sound. Choose a handful of your tracks to make this easier. The lower you extend, the lower you can set the crossover Solution. If possible, try and set the crossover lower than feels intuitive, and the level higher. This will be affected significantly by place your Solution in the room. The closer corner, or if you place it on the floor firing get major room gain, as the entire floor is baffle. This is really kick ass with movie



the volume level contributing to favorite bass heavy main speakers frequency on the frequency slightly control a touch where you have to to the wall, room up, you're going to acting like a speaker sound!

(from 0-180 degrees), (in phase with your please experiment the output of your wrong, things will

Totem gives you a variable phase control but for most speakers the magic will be at 0 (main speakers) or 180 (out of phase) but with fine tuning. The position reinforcing main speakers is the right setting. When it's sound like the subwoofer is fighting your main speakers, calling attention to itself. When When you have it set correctly, it just sounds like your system has more low frequency output and the subwoofer disappears.

If you are new to using a subwoofer, this may take a few days or weekends worth of trial and error to get the balance of bass extension, and upper bass boom out of the equation, so try not to get frustrated with it all. Plus, your listening tastes may change as you live with the Solution for a while, preferring more or less extension to more or less mid bass "boom." There's no wrong solution. Ha.

Finally, how you use your system will also affect subwoofer setup. If your system is more movie bass oriented than music, you may prefer a little more low frequency push than the other way around, or if you listen to a lot of hip hop and techno/electronica, you may also prefer more grunt in the lower registers. Again Totem makes your life easy, with that small switch on the rear panel marked "Natural" and "High Impact." I have to admit when using the Solution underneath the bed for movie viewing, the extra push over the cliff makes for a more visceral experience. Again, experiment to taste.

Perfectly Balanced.



Announcing The New VK80i Integrated.

The warm glow of the quartet of 6C33 tubes distinguishes the VK80i as a pure Balanced Audio Technology design. Inside the stunning all-aluminum chassis is innovative technology and uncompromising audio quality. It's perfectly balanced for the discerning music lover.

BAT's proprietary *intelligent auto-bias and fuseless protection circuits* make this a tube amp that is easy to own and operate. You will always have optimal sound and total peace of mind. The balanced amplifier generates 55 watts-per-channel of *high current triode* power. This amplifier drives speakers with vigor due to the exceptional wide-bandwidth output transformers. With the VK80i, all you need to do is listen.

A Truly Balanced Approach.

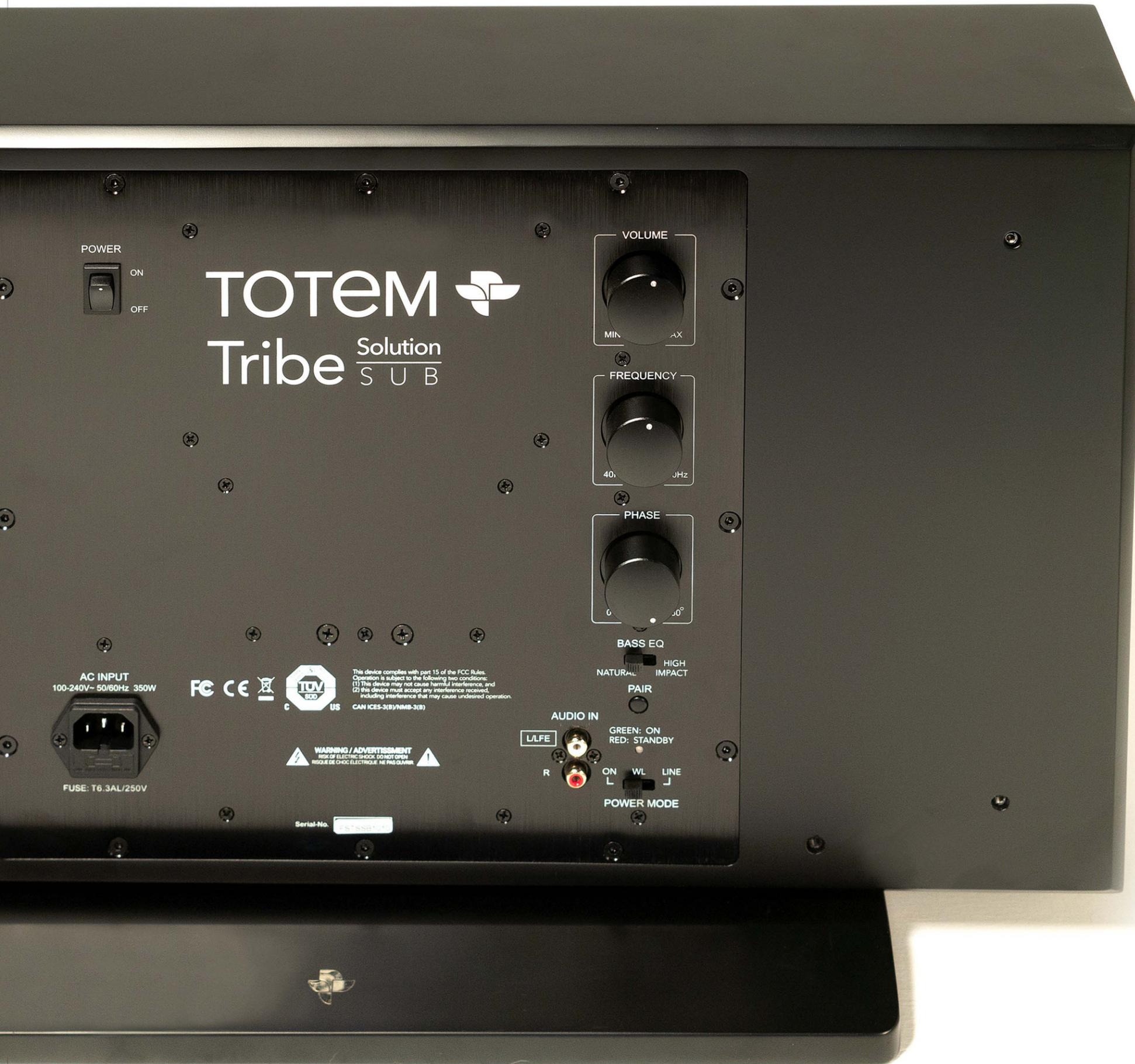
For over 25 years, Victor Khomenko and the BAT team have been on a mission to build components that recreate music's natural beauty. When we started the company, we found that many products use complex designs to achieve unnatural perfection. There had to be a better balance.

BAT believes in the benefits of fully-balanced circuits to maintain the purity of the original signal. We use the fewest number of gain stages possible for the shortest signal path, and we go to great lengths to custom manufacture high-quality parts that meet our sound quality and reliability standards. Whether you choose one of our solid-state or tube designs, BAT components will give your system a "breath of life" that you've never heard before!

BAT

Contact your nearest BAT specialty retailer to audition this American-made powerhouse.

For more info visit Balanced.com
sales@balanced.com | 302-999-8855



Further listening

Of course, the Solution is a perfect fit with the four pairs of Totem speakers we just happen to have here. The large and small Kin Play's are mine, we just finished a review of the Element Fire V2, and are working on the new Bison monitors. It's nice that the planets lined up on that one! However, we love small speakers, so giving the Solution a try in the main listening room, forward facing as a traditional subwoofer also provided excellent results. The Solution's crossover and level controls makes integration easy.

In addition to the Totem speakers, a pair of Dynaudio Confidence 20s (\$13k/pair), Team Fink Kim (\$11k/pair), Eggleston Nico 2 (\$6,000/pair) and the high sensitivity Heretic AD614 (\$8,500/pair) all turned in stellar performances. Thanks to the speed of those twin 8-inch woofers, the Solution also matches well with my vintage Acoustat 2+2 ESLs. So, I'm confident they should work well with anything you might have in your system. \$2,200 is not crazy money for a subwoofer, especially one as well executed as the Solution.

Totem claims a low frequency limit of 26Hz, but no mention of how far down it is at this frequency. A very cursory check with some test tones reveals solid output at 30Hz, but a fair amount of falloff at 25Hz. Again no shame for a sub of this size and price. What truly matters here is the quality of the bass delivered. This is where the Solution shines. Those twin 8s might not move as much air as a larger driver, but the amount of bass definition, speed and accuracy separates this subwoofer from some larger, boomier competitors.

Sampling a fair amount of Jaco Pastorius and Stanley Clarke tracks (always my go to's for bass accuracy, as I've heard both of these artists live) instantly confirms how fast the Solution is. Yet working my way through De La Soul's classic, *3 Feet High and Rising* is equally pleasing. I confess to preferring High Impact mode for Aphex Twin's *Syro*, and most of the Electronica that tends to be in constant play around here. On an audiophile level, that's probably so wrong, but it's a lot of fun. Somehow that music is always more engaging with the extra punch.

So in the end, what's not to love? White or black satin finishes mean the Solution will easily blend into your environment. It sounds great, and Totem (Now 36 years old) enjoys a great reputation for high performance, high quality, and a worldwide dealer network. As someone who owns a few of their speakers, this is a brand you can purchase with confidence. Just don't tell your life partner I told you to sneak one in the house.

YG Acoustics Floor Standing Loudspeakers Hailey 3

Striking in every way

\$68,000/pair
yg-acoustics.com

One of the most compelling things about the world's finest products, be it speakers, watches, cameras, you name it – is the ease of enjoying them in a fashion that you no longer think about the object in use. There's no more longing for additional performance, or an aspect of use that annoys you. A Rolex Submariner, a Leica M6 (if you're a film person) or M10 (if you aren't), the Eames Lounge Chair (a real one), or a late 80s 3.2 Porsche Carrera. I'm sure you have your own list, but this is where I place the Haileys. The level of performance they deliver is something I doubt you will ever tire of.

This was a more difficult review to write than most, only because the Haileys deliver such an immersive experience that hours pass between paragraphs. Some high-performance loudspeakers make for dynamic demos, and that's great for the 30 seconds you catch of Nils Lofgren's plucky guitar opening to "Keith Don't Go," but then lose their luster during extended listening. The Haileys sail through all the prerequisite audiophile test tracks, but at the end of the day they are incredibly musical in a way that you do not want to leave the listening chair for anything more than to change the record.



Thanks to all the new technology implemented at YG over the last few years, much of this effortlessness comes from the low distortion and careful attention to maximizing phase coherence in the recent models. YG claims no more than +/- 5 degrees of phase shift, which is tight indeed. Many studies backup the idea that the human ear is more sensitive to phase anomalies than anything else. Again, this is a major contributor to the effortless presentation these speakers deliver.

Even though the new speakers look very similar to the originals from an aesthetic perspective, every aspect has been re-examined, reconfigured, and redesigned. Even the printed circuit board used for the crossover network is CNC machined in the YG factory. The new models use 3.1mm-thick electrically non-reactive sheets of a secret material mated to pure copper – twice as much copper as in previous YG crossovers and four times the industry standard – and they machine out the copper they don't use.

No one pays this close attention to fine detail. YG's Duncan Taylor smiles as he says "that's our biggest marketing challenge, to let potential customers know how much of an improvement the new speakers truly are." Yet if you are familiar with the original YG speakers, you'll hear it immediately.

Top of the list

Listening to Trey Gunn and Tu-ners newest release T-1 Contact Information is a prog excursion full of atmospheric sounds, blazing riffs, and of course killer bass lines. The YG Hailey 3s do an amazing job creating a massive soundfield with incredible coherence feeling more like a great surround setup, or perhaps the enormous 9-foot-tall Sound Labs ESLs. (But with way more transient ability) One of the Hailey's main strengths is the integration of the drivers feeling like one big full range speaker. That's only part of the story.

Taylor explains to me that this speaker is one of the latest models that is filled with "new tech and engineering, with few remnants of the original YG products." Where the initial YG speakers were incredibly resolving, they required perfection in room treatment and music quality, and to some they brought a fatigue with them that made for short listening sessions. Today at YG, those traits are a thing of the past. Forget everything you think you know about these speakers – though they have similar physical shapes these all new models are a pinnacle of loudspeaker design.

If you are looking for a pair of speakers offering high resolution and low distortion (make that extremely low distortion) without ever feeling harsh, and you value tonal accuracy – YG should be at the top of your list.

The 200 pound (each) Hailey 3 speakers are a three-way passive speaker, taking up a small footprint, relatively speaking, at 13 inches wide and 21 inches deep at the bottom, gently tapering up to 8 inches wide and 16 inches deep at the top. The standard finishes are silver and black anodized aluminum, but customization is something YG has been testing and planning to eventually offer. While visiting the YG factory earlier this year, there were some custom-finish speakers on their way to a client that were absolutely stunning.

The surface of a YG speaker surpasses even what I've seen in the world's finest automobiles. Yep, they are that good. These speakers define understated elegance, and more than one friend that has always been "metal speaker" adverse, loved the look, feel, and finish of the Hailey 3s. They will look at home in any décor.

The precision metalwork doesn't end there. YG painstakingly machines the rigid, well-damped cones of their drivers in their facility too.

"It's one thing to see the YGs being made, and it's quite the other to run your hands across the surface of a YG speaker. As a crazed car guy I have a major appreciation for things built like this."



YG uses a soft-dome tweeter, placing a structure underneath the dome that they call the “Lattice,” which is machined from solid aluminum just like the cones of the midrange and woofers. Duncan tells me that nearly 99% of the solid block that the driver cones are made from is machined away to produce them. Those of you that are concerned about the environmental aspect of this process, fear not. Every speck of unwanted material is recycled at the YG factory. These cones are a work of art.

Simple setup

For speakers weighing over 200 pounds each, the Hailey’s can actually be set up by one person.

While the review pair arrived in road cases, YG sends their speakers in a bespoke crate, so you can bring the container to your listening room, tip it up, and slide the Hailey’s out. These are the easiest to unpack large speakers I’ve encountered, underlining the thought process behind every aspect of the YG’s design. The spiked feet come with stainless spike cups, so you can adapt them to any flooring situation.

Even with random placement in the 24 x 36-foot listening room (on the short wall) about 12 feet apart and about five feet from the rear wall, the Haileys paint an enormous soundstage. Fortunately, Duncan was kind enough to stop by for the day and fine-tune them to perfection. For those who see this as the manufacturer stacking the deck in their favor, I always prefer this. Especially with a speaker that I have precious little experience with. It’s always helpful to the review process when a manufacturer can either tweak the final setup or reassure you that all is well. That way the evaluation can start on an easy note. 30 minutes later, the Haileys are placed to perfection by moving them a bit wider apart, placing

The highly revealing nature of the Hailey 3s is further emphasized during the setup process, when it was time to attach the jumpers between the three sets of binding posts on the rear of the speakers. (As a side note, my demo pair was tri-amp-capable, something YG now offers in addition to the standard single binding post arrangement, though they suspect most customers will use the single.) For this review, the folks at Cardas Audio made up a custom set of jumpers from Cardas Clear cable, because I use Clear in my main system. I suggest this with any speaker that you choose to use jumpers with – I have always achieved the best results combining jumpers made from the same cable as the main speaker cables. Taylor tells me that internally, YGs are wired with the exact same Cardas wire, so this makes perfect sense. I’ve never heard a speaker affected by six inches of wire as much as I did with the Hailey 3s.

The speakers arrived a day before the jumpers, so during the initial listening, some zip cord was pressed into use. Not good. At first, it was suspected that the speakers needed more run in time, but the following day when the Cardas jumpers arrived, this became a completely different movie indeed.

Articulate bass

Being used to a six-pack of REL subwoofers makes it easy to become spoiled for low-frequency response that is accurate, powerful, and defined. There are many large speakers that can reproduce tones down to 30 or even 25Hz, but the level of low-frequency resolution they actually deliver (as with a number of subwoofers, too) is questionable. Moving air is one dimension, but being able to hear Jaco Pastorius’ fingers pluck the strings, with the resulting harmonic structure intact is quite another.



Even though the Haileys can't move as much air as a six pack of REL's they do achieve a level of low-frequency resolution and detail that is on the same level and this is indeed rare. We all have different goals concerning low frequency response. My personal bias here is resolution over sheer weight, yours may be different. In addition the YGs bring a wide dynamic range to the listening experience and the ability to deliver high resolution at low listening levels. This is a true display of high performance.

Swapping the Pass XA200.8 monoblocks, for the 15 watt per channel ampsoundsound Bryce mono blocks is equally enticing. Even at a one-watt level, these speakers deliver deep, rich, and detailed low frequencies. It's worth mentioning the Bryce amplifiers have tremendous bass response, but that's a subject of another review. The way these speakers capture leading and trailing transients on drums and bass guitar is so realistic, you might be shocked hearing it for the first time. In a good way of course.

At least eight or nine different amplifiers from the 3 watt Coincident SETs to the 600 watt per channel PS Audio BHK 600 Monos (tube and solid-state) were used while evaluating the Hailey 3s. The common thread here is quality. Because of the resolving nature of the YGs, they reveal every source component, cable, and vibration control device in your system – though notmercilessly. To get the most these speakers can deliver, I suggest the best cables andcomponents that you can pair them with. I can't imagine the YGs ever being the weak link in your system.

Seamless

Too many high-performance speakers, especially those with the ability to play very loud, don't always integrate the low, mid, and high frequencies, feeling natural and convincing. Precious few of the world's top speakers are able to do this, andnearly all the ones I've heard are considerably more expensive than the Haileys.

This is a truly balanced speaker. YG prides themselves on their extensive research in the area of design depth and computer modeling to implement their crossovers. They even build their own printed circuit boards from scratch, with no 90-degree corners in the PC board traces.

They are CNC machined in-house from raw board blanks, made specifically for YG. Components are selected and tolerances meticulously matched before extensive listening tests verify what's been done on the design table.

The crossover is one part of the equation, yet having custom drivers that work in as close to perfect harmony as possible is the other part of the equation. Some manufacturers take a different approach, employing more complex crossover networks to achieve their goals. Taking the latter approach does not always make for the ultimate in a smooth transition between drivers, and that last bit of clarity that only the finest loudspeakers can deliver. The YG Haileys more than deserve to be in this exclusive realm.

That seamless clarity the Haileys deliver offers a musical experience that is not only realistic, but non fatiguing. These are speakers that you can listen to all day at any volume leveland never tire of. That's the highest compliment I can pay them.

The rest of the range

Great as everything else is, these speakers are equally smooth throughout the frequency spectrum. Those of you that enjoy this aspect of single driver or panel speakers will appreciate how well the three drivers in the Hailey's work together. No matter how loud or soft the Haleys are played, they deliver the electrical impulses presented to them with one voice.

If you really want to blast the system, you will need more than 15 watts per channel, and while the Haileys reveal a lot at low volume, they are glorious when being played loud.Whether you're listening to Deep Purple's *Made in Japan*, *The 1812 Overture*, or grooving on some Slowdive, these speakers take you anywhere you want to go.

Ironically when YG hit the market years ago under their original ownership, they claimed to be the "world's greatest loudspeaker." While I can't make that claim about any one loudspeaker, I'd certainly say that today YG is in that small top tier of the world's finest speakers without hesitation.



JAZZ

By Jim Macnie

Tyshawn Sorey Trio *Continuing*

The first splash of sound heard on Sorey's second trio album of overt jazz tunes is dominant enough to forecast the entire program's rather dramatic tone. It doesn't explode exactly - the drummer's group is so concerned with calibration that this kick-off is much more nuanced than a true outburst. It's just three musicians grabbing you by the collar and letting you know that it's ignition time. The tune is Wayne Shorter's "Reincarnation Blues," and the work of Sorey's squad, bassist Matt Brewer and pianist Aaron Diehl (the same outfit behind last year's *Mesmerism*), echoes the song title: the action is built on continuously morphing ideas.

A sense of suspense marks the band's approach. Brewer brings a 'Tell-Tale Heart' vibe to the eerie start of Ahmad Jamal's "Selritus." At nearly 16 minutes, it's the longest performance on the album, and its theatrical denouement is prefaced by a parade of inspired increments, including grand flourishes by Diehl and tom-tom wallops by the leader.

The process generates its own mysteries. Improvisation is the trio's driving force, but many moves are marked by a collective consideration that partly owes its architectural savvy to the modern classical compositions Sorey has become known for in the last decade. Choosing to address 946's "Angel Eyes" at a crawl hints at the noirish tint some of this music gives off. Here Brewer is the drummer and Sorey the colorist. Each note the pianist delivers has a bluesy impact, as if it stepped out of the shadows to reveal its truly forlorn nature.

While all three musicians guide this enterprise, *Continuing* puts a sweet spotlight on Diehl's expertise. Sneaking up on melodies, acting just as rambunctious as the drummer, blending Ellington's abstract side with Jamal's cagey maneuvers - his ploys are many, and all are compelling. Whether delivering a rapturous rainstorm of notes towards the end of Shorter's opus (first heard on Art Blakey's 1964 *Buhaina's Delight*) or riding a swinging groove with funk inflections on Harold Mabern's "In What Direction Are You Headed," he fans the flames generated by his mates. The carte blanche attitude Sorey hands down to his crew emboldens every phrase of *Continuing's* quite individual adventure.



What does Marshall Wood, bassist for Tony Bennett, think of his Backert Labs?

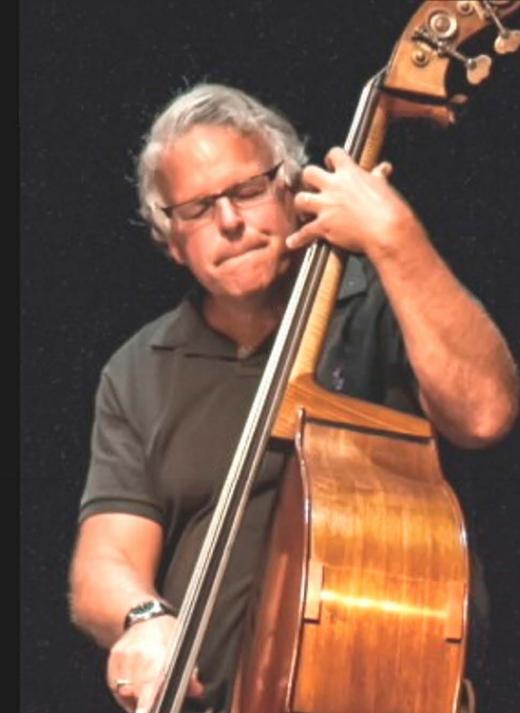


Photo courtesy of Provincetown Jazz Festival

"With the Rhumba Extreme preamp, my listening experience immediately became much more satisfying."



"This was a very big step forward in listening enjoyment, feeling more like what I experience when I'm playing bass in a group. It's like I'm right there in the room, hearing every detail of the instruments. The rhythm and pace are delivered with greater palpability than I have ever heard, and the result for me is pure nirvana." – Marshall Wood

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Bass player for Tony Bennett beginning in 2009, Mr. Wood has also played with Monty Alexander, Randy Brecker, Dizzy Gillespie, Scott Hamilton, Anita O'Day, Marian McPartland, Joe Pass, Nelson Riddle, Clark Terry, Phil Woods and many other jazz greats. He is featured on Bennett's double-platinum Grammy award-winning album *Duets II*, *Tony Bennett at 90*, and in concert appearances around the world. There was no expectation of an endorsement in this purchase and Mr. Wood paid for his Rhumba Extreme in full.

JAZZ

By Jim Macnie

Jamie Branch *fly or die fly or die fly or die ((world war))*

Last year's sudden loss of the 39-year-old band leader gave the jazz world a shock. Boom. Talent and vitality can be erased overnight. But along with wit, volition, and a yen for joyous experimentation, it's talent and vitality that most deeply mark this posthumous release. branch (who requested her name and song titles to be rendered in lower case - nothing too proper for this people-centric rabble rouser) was a trumpeter with a knack at making clarion statements. Broad shrieks that leapt from the heart, fierce blasts that pushed audiences deeper into the music - she's often spoken of in heroic terms because both her personality and horn lines were intrepid. When the fly or die ensemble is really cooking, and they certainly are on this third and final work, there's a churning groove to ride, and branch commandeered it to all sorts of destinations.

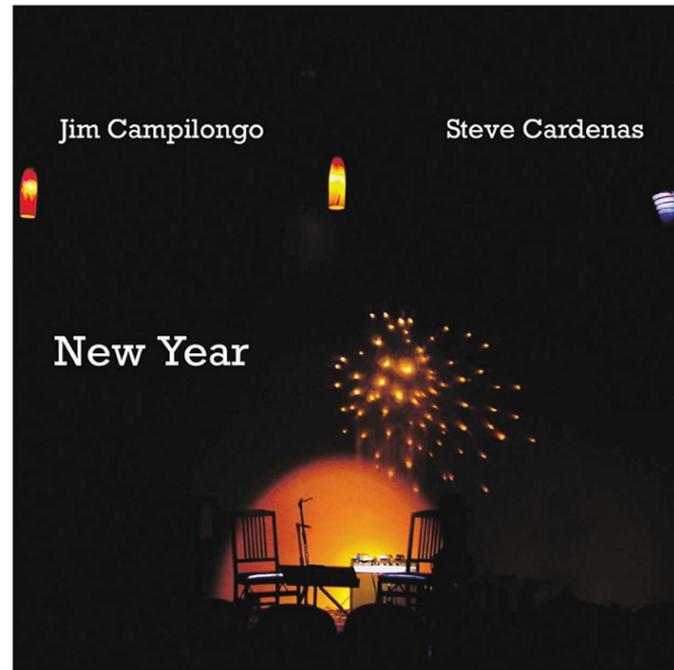
The steady gallop of "borealis dancing" finds Middle Eastern inflections blending with funkish back beats. Drummer Chad Taylor, cellist Lester St. Louis, and bassist Jason Ajemian know exactly how to milk this approach. With the addition of a droning keyb, the swirl of sound is tight yet discursive. (Hints of Miles Davis and Teo Macero's studio editing gambits waft through the air as well.) When Nick Broste's trombone drops into "baba louie," the music shifts towards a celebratory South African vibe. In conversation, branch spoke of imbuing her work with the rhythmic advantages of the African diaspora, and Caribbean influences also bubble up on ((world war three)). As does a sense of protest. "Don't forget to fight, don't forget to fight!, the future lives inside of us," she shouts in "burning gray." It's a voice reminiscent of Patti Smith's powerhouse exhortations, and it reminds us that branch was just as interested in fighting the power as she was raising the roof.



Jim Campilongo & Steve Cardenas *New Year*

There's the newly-streaming *Maid With The Flaxen Hair* by Mary Halvorson and Bill Frisell. There's Frisell's pairing with Jim Hall, *Hemispheres*. There's Hall's self-titled 1999 exchange with Pat Metheny. There's Julian Lage and Nels Cline's ultra sympatico *ROOM*. There's a prog-grass date by John Carlini and Tony Rice called *River Suite*. There's - okay, okay enough history. We're here to address this new strings-only duo disc by two of modern improv's most impressive guitarists, which is a pip; you can sort out all those historical forebears yourself.

First thing to know: this is a record centered on the notion of poise. Lots of goosebumps have been generated in the name of expressionism when it comes to guitar-centric programs, and both ideas-wise and chops-wise, Campilongo and Cardenas are deeply adept when it comes to waxing explosive with aggressive solos. But for the most part, these two are devotees of diplomacy. Each uses their instrument to form an accord with his partner. Each knows how to make a simple statement sound elegant.



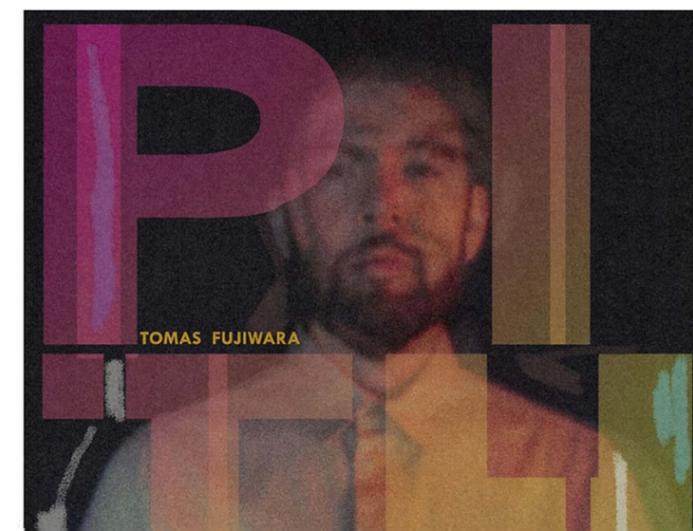
Through war horses such as "Cherokee" and "Caravan," through sentimental nuggets such as "What'll I Do" and "Home On The Range," and through the record's most fetching items, a handful of refined originals, an attractive nonchalance receives its day in the sun.

Rapport feeds this tender vibe. Campilongo and Cardenas are longtime pals and musical partners who have intermittently played with each other for years. *New Year* is their first recorded date (though they previously shared a bit of sweetness on Campilongo's must-hear *Orange*), and their well-honed unity has its own sense of dynamics, giving breathing room to phrases that deserve it, and organizing their lines to assure that the melodies truly sing. The head of "Cherokee" is played with well-measured notes plucked simultaneously, giving the piece a music box effect. The lilting strums of "Miss Venezuela" provide a feathery liftoff go a gorgeous melody. The chiming strings of "Campin' In" ping off each other, goosing their breezy consonance. Some tracks are electric, some are acoustic. There's a tactile Fahey bluesiness to the way they pick their way through Cardenas' "Blue Language" (head back to his *Blue Has a Range* for the original). By the time you get to the pithy and glimmering title cut, you realize the level of coordination it takes to truly wax poignant.

Tomas Fujiwara *Pith*

Got the chance to see this outfit, which Fujiwara calls his 7 Poets Trio, a couple times. Each visit reminded me that there's tremendous communication between the drummer/bandleader, cellist Tomeka Reid, and vibraphonist Patricia Brennan; moving as one is an act they've nailed down tight. That victory boosts the music's impact, of course. When the slightest accents and the wooliest exclamations are delivered by inspired allies, performances take on an extra dose of authority. Last spring, the group hit New York's Jazz Gallery for a handful of shows before recording *Pith* at New Haven's Firehouse 12 studio a couple days later. Seems the give and take of the bandstand action paid off. An exemplar of accord, 7 Poets is a fist in a velvet glove.

That said about the fruits of teamwork, Brennan's instrument has a way of guiding the music's personality. In her hands, the vibraphone can be eerie, radiant, or antagonistic, depending upon her attack and choices of settings. Her own albums as a leader, *More Touch* and *Maquishti*, are good examples of how broad her palette is. Here, on "Resolve," she brings a spectral atmosphere to the fore, her mates generating provocative drones with cello overtones and etched cymbals. Fujiwara's six pieces are wonderfully discrete; the program changes moods with graceful twists. Balancing the ambience of "Resolve," "Swelter" lives up to its title with a militant pulse that tilts toward punk-rock minimalism. "Josho" is the album's most swinging affair. The drummers groove and the cellist's bounce lift Brennan's lines high in the air. With *Pith*, Fujiwara blends punch and poetry to take a big step forward.



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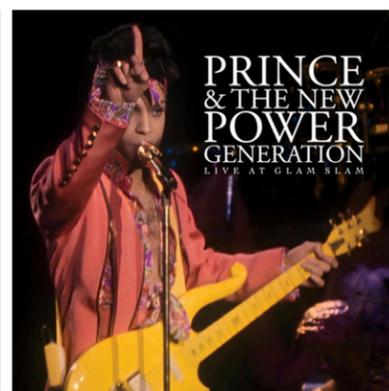


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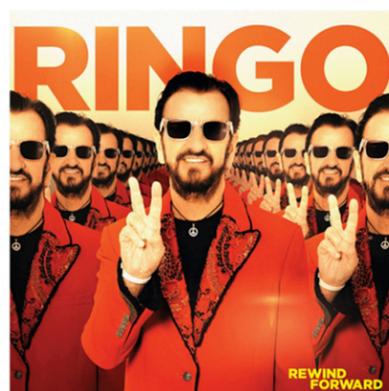
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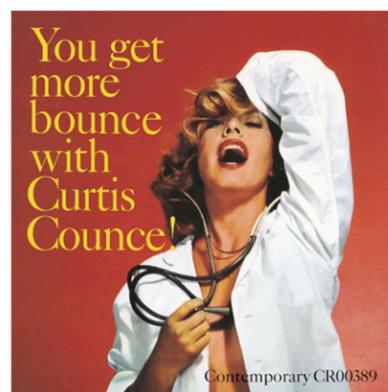
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Last year as I was blindly scrolling through social media, I noticed the window to enter the lottery for Sammy Hagar's Birthday Bash was now open. For those of you unfamiliar with the Red Rocker, Sammy celebrates his birthday with a monster concert and party at his club, The Cabo Wabo Cantina, which he founded in 1990 along with the Eddie, Alex, and Mikey version of Van Halen. The bar isn't a big venue, maybe 200 people; tickets are pretty much unobtainium (hence the lottery). My wife shares the same birthday as Sammy, and being the mega fans we are, we've talked about how cool it would be to celebrate her birthday with Sammy for at least the past 30 years. Channeling my best Clint Eastwood and asking myself "Ya feel lucky, punk?" I fill out the application, immediately forgetting it.

A few months later, I'm in bed checking the scores on my phone when an email notification floats across my screen. An image of a concert ticket with "Welcome to Sammy's Birthday Bash!" blazes across the top. Holy shit! To say I was excited would be an understatement, but now the only question was whether I should wake up my wife, sound asleep beside me? What would you do?

Me, too! So after she rolled over I said, "Well, since you're awake, you might want to see this." Let me tell ya, if she was half asleep before, she was wide awake now! You know those bucket list items you stow away in your head, usually with a "someday" attached to them? This was that, except someday was now - October 13th and it came with airline tickets, a resort, and two geeked out fans. Oh, and tequila. Lots of tequila.

Though Hagar has moved on to rum (you almost always see the Red Rocker wearing a Sammy's Beach Bar Rum t-shirt) his spirits empire started with tequila. The current owners, Gruppo Campari purchased 80% of the company for \$80 million USD back in 2007, so he still has a stake in - Cabo Wabo Tequila. As much of a Mas Tequila kinda guy that Hagar is, he takes his alcohol seriously so this isn't merely slapping a boutique label on an existing product to leverage someone's fame.



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Legal Stuff: While we all enjoy consuming adult beverages, (if you're of legal age, of course) TONE and Cardas Audio ask you to be responsible...

This is a premium tequila that should be sipped more than slammed, but what exactly makes it premium? For starters, it's 100% pure blue agave with no added sugars, flavors, or additives. All the alcohol is derived strictly from the fermentation and distillation of the agave plant. How long they age the spirit and the barrel's composition determines if it will be Anejo, Reposado, or in the case of today's glass, Blanco.

Cabo Wabo Blanco tequila is the most neutral of the three, with a variety of ways to enjoy it. Unlike Hagar's famous song, there's not only one way to rock this spirit. Whether neat, on ice, or mixed in a cocktail, its neutral flavor compliments whatever you pair it with. There's a hint of floral scent as you bring the glass to your lips followed by a touch of vanilla and a slice of citrus and pepper as it warms its way down your throat. The finish is so clean, I never use the ubiquitous salt and lime... unless the salt is on my wife's neck, but this is a family publication so let's move on. At \$50 a bottle, this isn't something you're going to want to throw in a blender with a cheap margarita mix. I mean, you could and if that's your play; knock yourself out. In fact, you probably will, but I'd save that for the ta-kill-ya brands you drank in college while trying to go blind. Remember, this is the good stuff, so take your time, throw on some Heavy Metal, and enjoy!



MINE
it should be **YOURS**

Welcome to MINE:

We're not just crazy about music and hi-fi here at TONE. While we can put many labels on our ethos, claiming to be music lovers, audiophiles, or perhaps even qualityphiles, that doesn't even cover it. Having met so many of our readers from all over the globe, our readers are playful and inquisitive to say the least.

You've told us you like automobiles, motorcycles, fine art, bicycles, toys, cameras...Well, you get the picture. Lumping this all under a banner labeled "Style" seems too limiting. Let's face it, we're all a little selfish when it comes to our stuff.

Let's call it what it is - MINE!

We'll be sharing more of our favorites as we go. NOTE: These are not "affiliate program" objects. (Even the Amazon stuff) We all share a wide range of interests and among our respective groups of friends, we are always finding cool stuff. Think of the MINE section as a bit of a "palette cleanser" mid issue, to take your mind away from hifi for a bit.



Who doesn't need this?

\$199
[amazon.com/](https://www.amazon.com/)

They say it works wonders on sore muscles.

If you buy one, please let us know! Hahahah.

TONE119.082

THE COMPONENTS OF EXCELLENCE: LASTING VALUE

Before you buy a new audio component, consider why some people would rather own a used McIntosh than a new anything else.



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Jim Hannon, VP/Group Publisher & Senior Writer, *The Absolute Sound*

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MINE
it should be **YOURS**

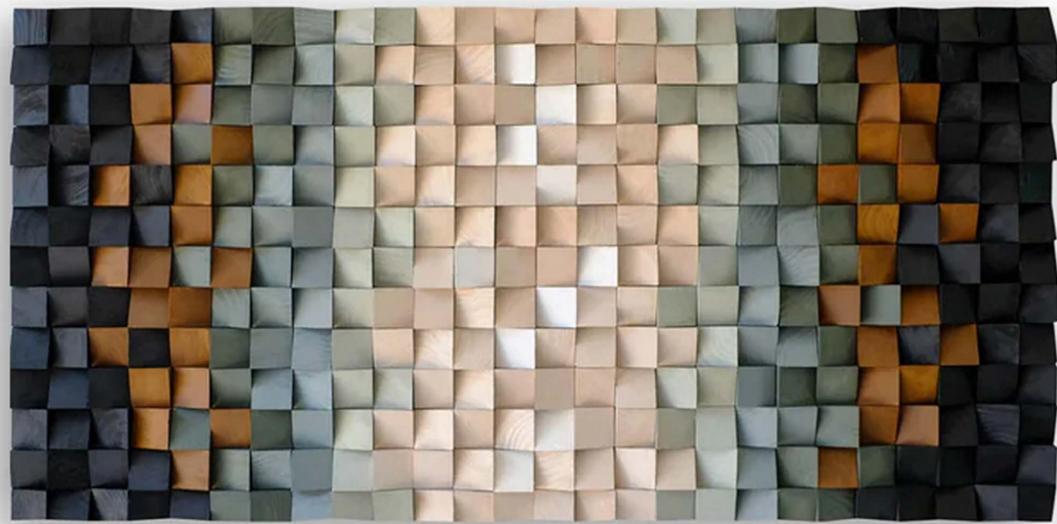
Beautiful Diffusors...

\$599 and up (size dependant)
artdesigna.com

There are a lot of different approaches to tuning your listening area for maximum resolution, but most agree that some selective diffusion, especially on the walls behind your speakers is usually a good thing.

While this isn't marketed as an audiophile product, the ArtDesigna products all have a nice look and feel to them, plus come in a variety of finishes.

Worth investigating!



TONE119.083

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peak-consult.dk



MINE YOURS
it should be

Mini Remastered
By David Brown Automotive

\$100,000 - ish
davidbrownautomotive.com

Most of our Porsche-driving friends, and enthusiasts of the marque know about Singer Automotive.

Imagine the Singer attention to detail applied to an original Mini Cooper? Watch the movie here:

<https://www.davidbrownautomotive.com/mini-remastered/>

Sure, \$100k is a lot of dough, but compared to \$4M for a Singer, this is more attainable, and more useable.

Groovy Baby!



TONE119.084

LAB 12

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PUBC

2021

TONE Publisher's Choice Award

melto2 Remote Controlled
Tube Phono Preamp

The country that brought us Democracy and
The Olympics now brings us award-winning
electronics from Lab12.

The experts agree.



MINE
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Mobile luxury

\$475
labodet.com

Encase your iPhone in luxurious alligator leather, lined with Alcantara. Ooh-la-la! Sized for most of the recent iPhone models, in multiple colors. Another great reason not to have an Android phone.

And, they make some great Rolex straps too.

Pick up from French style for the end of summer.



TONE119.085

Excellence Remastered



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The premium compact wireless speaker your music deserves.



naimaudio.com



naimaudio.com | focalnaimamerica.com | Distributed by Focal Naim America | For more information : 1 800.663.9352 / info@focal-naim.com  

MINE
it should be **YOURS**

And you thought oil changes were spendy...

\$357.72
shop.porsche.com

Of course, it is made from a genuine Porsche oil filter, and having seen one at the dealer the quality is way better than something from IKEA.

So, like all things Porsche, how bad do you want one?



TONE119.086

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Young.

We Are
Fun.

We Are
KINPlay



TOTEM

Discover yours

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Bluetooth Qualcomm aptX HD

Meet the wicked sounding Totem KIN Play all-in-one music system. Stream tunes from your phone, kick it old school with a turntable, connect your gaming console and a whole lot more!

MINE
YOURS

it should be



Who DOESN'T need one of these?

\$72.99 (on sale!!)
morepinterest.com

Even though Halloween is right around the corner, there's never a time like the present to buy a swamp monster.

For less than the cost of a Patricia Barber record, you can have a piece of movie history... GRRRRRRR.

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OTHER
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Style Connector



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But you can't have it...



Fiat is bringing back their legendary microcar, the Topolino as an EV. Rumored price is to be under 10,000 Euros in a plethora of retro colors. Definitely a “city car” to be sure.

The bad news, they will only be available in Europe, with rumors that it may also be available in Tokyo. Stay away from Godzilla.

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info@aquahifi.com

DTMB

Dealers That Mean Business

We've had this section at the back of TONE for some time now, and actually before we got hit with COVID, and it was easier to just pop in your favorite hifi store for a cursory visit, I was planning on an extended road trip to seek out great audio salons. I'm sorry to say that quest has been on hold for a while.

A few years later, times have changed, the landscape has changed somewhat, but the best dealers have adapted and are still thriving. Innovate or perish, as the saying goes. Most have gone to an appointments only model, which hasn't been all that much of a stretch, because many hifi shops had adopted this model, or at least a semi-appointment model before the current situation. Of course, stricter anti-cooties protocols have been engaged, and for the most part, customers have stayed in the retail game.

We've swapped a few people out here, but most of the dealers we were featuring are still doing well – we are truly glad for this. As it becomes easier and easier to travel again, I'll be back on the road seeking out more great dealers and attending events.

In the issues to come, we're also going to be featuring commentary from these dealers, telling their stories on how they've adjusted, and what, if anything they've learned and changed.

As we move into the year 2022 (which still feels weird saying) I still firmly believe the support from a great hifi dealer is essential to help you wade through the ever increasing complexity of audio, whether it be two channel, theater, or something in-between.

To recap what I've said here before: Nearly every audio system that has failed to achieve the greatness expected of it can be traced back to poor component choice and setup. I've heard a lot of systems all over the world, and it always falls back to these two factors.

The top retailers need our support now more than ever.

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Dealers That Mean Business - Listings

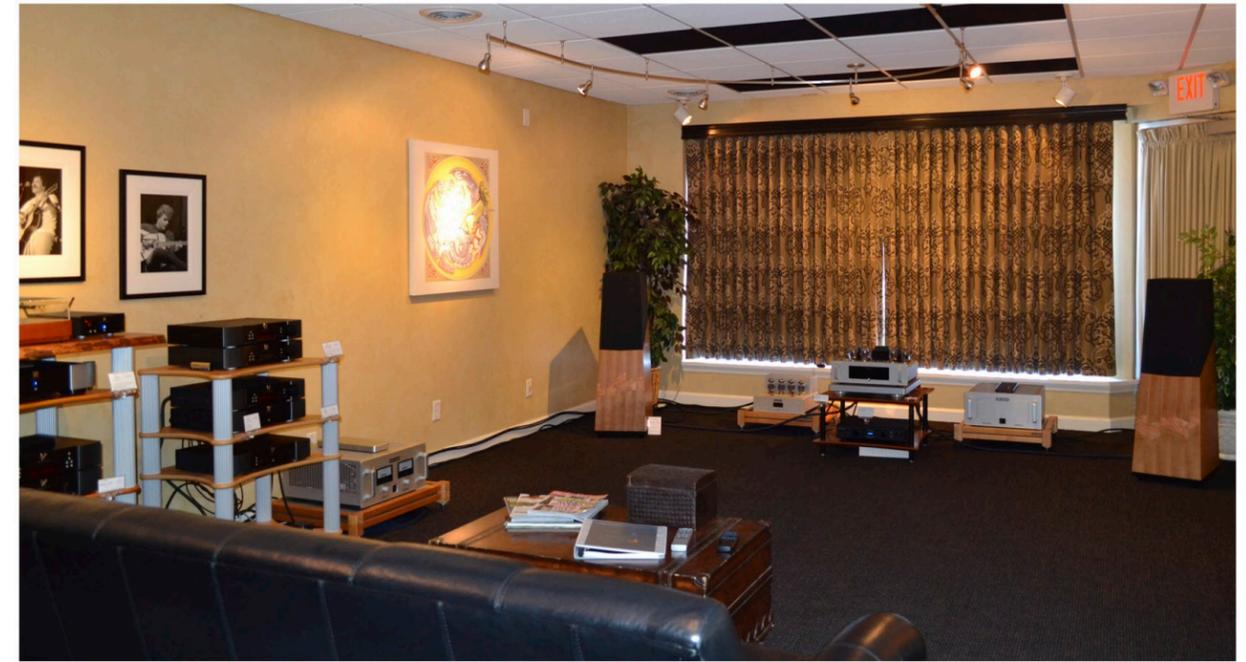
Wauwatosa, Wisconsin - Ultra Fidelis

www.ultrafidelis.com

7125 West North Avenue

Milwaukee, Wisconsin 53213

414.221.0200



Portland, Oregon - Echo Audio

www.echohifi.com

5904 SW Beaverton-Hillsdale Hwy

Portland, Oregon 97221

888.248.3246



Dealers That Mean Business - Listings

Vancouver, Canada - HiFi Centre

www.hificentre.com

433 Carrall Street

Vancouver, BC V6B 6E3

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146 South Park Square NE
Marietta, Georgia 30060
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San Diego, California - Deja VU Audio West
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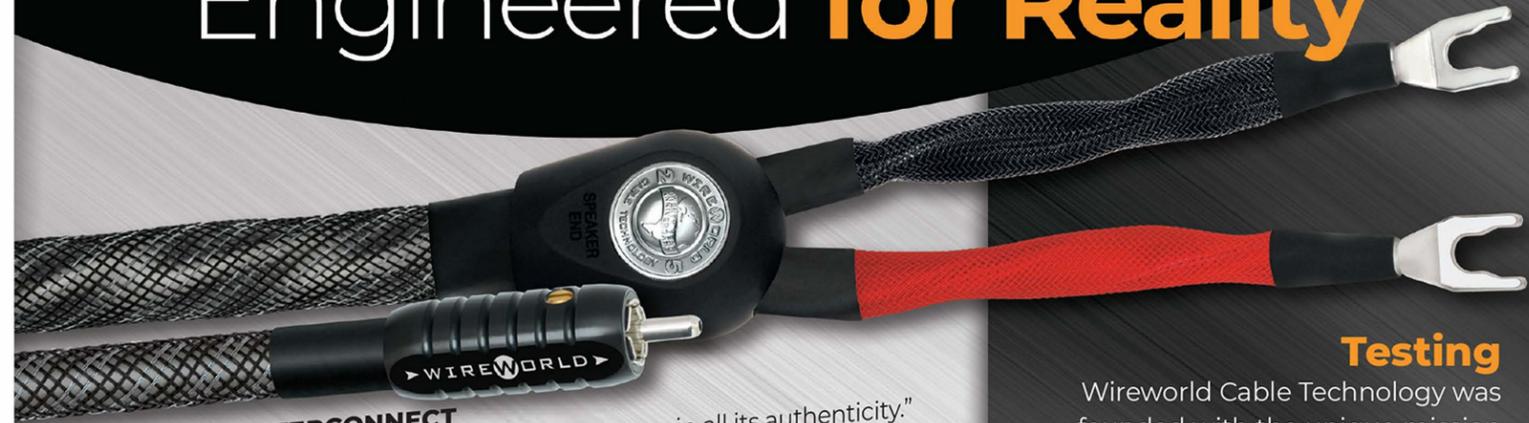
La Verne, California - Upscale Audio
 upscaleaudio.com
 2058 Wright Avenue
 La Verne, California 91750 **909.931.9686**



Vestal, New York - Audio Classics
 audioclassics.com
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Testing

Wireworld Cable Technology was founded with the unique mission of perfecting audio cables through objective listening tests. Far more revealing than normal cable comparisons, these tests compare cables to virtually perfect direct connections between components. Robert Harley, editor of The Absolute Sound, described this "Cable Polygraph" as, "illuminating insight into exactly how each cable affects the sound."

Technology

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quintessenceaudio.com
5701 W. Dempster Street
Morton Grove, Illinois 60053 **847.966.4434**



Scottsdale, Arizona - LMC Home Entertainment
lmche.com
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Sarasota, Florida 34240

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www.gestalthifi.com

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Austin, Texas - Whetstone Audio

www.whetstoneaudio.com

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Club Mix compilation expert, Scott Tetzlaff's theme for this playlist is Get Movin' A wide variety of styles to get up and moving around. Lots of new and new-ish cuts...and a retro classic close out. There are two from Bill Brewster's recent *After Dark*. A great disc to listen to the whole thing.



Night Panda - Run

LTJ X-perience - You Will Know

David Walters - Bow Down

Jura Soundsystem - Udaberri Blues

Bill Brewster, Dan Wainwright - Come Home

Bill Brewster, Jeb Loy Nichols - Don't Drop Me (Hotel Motel remix)

Parov Stelar, Mani Hoffman - Black Bird

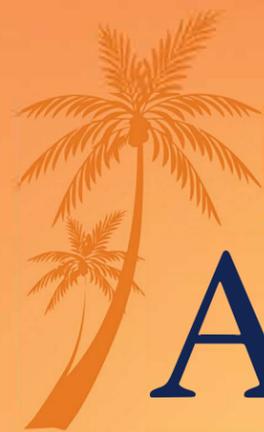
Walker and Royce, Mindchatter - Same Way Down

Bonobo, Jacques greene - Fold

Mr. Ho - 000 baby

Tigerbalm, Joy Tyson, Mang Dynasty - Kete (Mang Dynasty remix)

Tom Tom Club - Genius Of Love



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- Jeremy Bryan, MBL North America



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nordost
octave
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primaluna
pro-ject
puritan
quad
quadraspire
rega
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sonos
soundsmith
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vinnie rossi
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Get The Gear: Where to find what you've seen in this issue.

Acora Acoustics	acoraacoustics.com	conrad-johnson	conradjohnson.com
AMG/Benz Micro	sierrasound.com	dCS	dcsaudio.com
AmpsandSound	ampsandsound.com	Dynaudio	dynaudio.com
Ana Mighty Sound	anamightysound.com	Echo Audio	echohifi.com
Anthem	anthemav.com	Egglestonworks	egglestonworks.com
Aqua Audio	aquahifi.com	Enleum	enleum.com
Audience	audience-av.com	EPOS	epos-loudspeakers.com
Audio Art Cable	audioartcable.com	Florida Audio Expo	floridaaudioexpo.com
Audio Classics	audioclassics.com	Focal	focalnaimamerica.com
AudioVision SF	audiovisionsf.com	Harbeth	fidelisav.com
Backert Labs	backertlabs.com	Heretic Loudspeakers	thehereticspeaker.com
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Capture Cassettes	splicit.com	Java Hifi	javahifi.com
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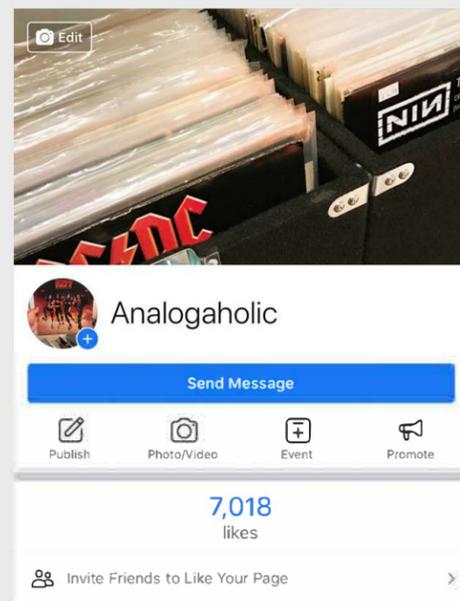
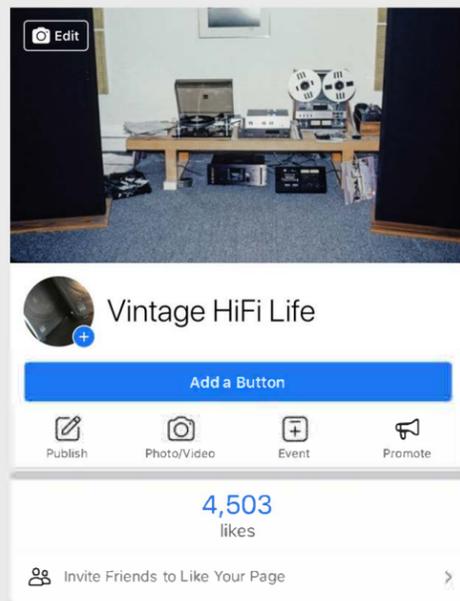
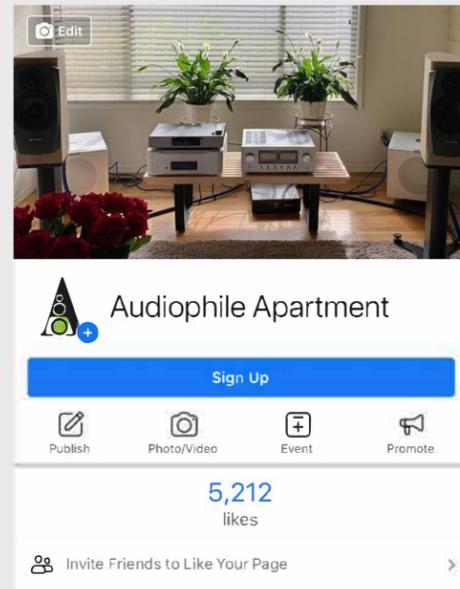
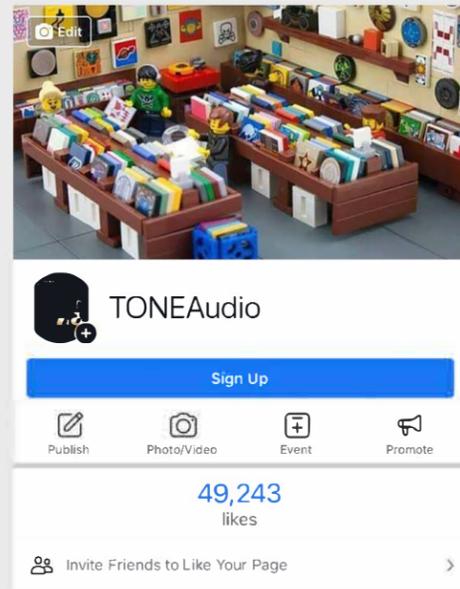
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Manley	manley.com
MartinLogan	martinlogan.com
Matterhorn Audio	matterhornaudio.com
MoFi Distribution	mofidistribution.com
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Paradigm	paradigm.com
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Pass Labs	passlabs.com
Peak Consult	peak-consult.dk
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REL	rel.net
Rega	soundorg.com
Sierra Sound	sierrasound.com
Suncoast Audio	suncoastaudio.com
SVS	svsound.com
T+A	ta-hifi.de
Tannoy	upscaledistribution.com
Tellurium Q	telluriumq.com
TONE Imports	toneimports.com
Totem	totemacoustic.com
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Vanguard Speakers	xsa-labs.com
Vera-fi	verafiaudiolle.com
Wireworld	wireworldcable.com
YG Acoustics	yg-acoustics.com



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Here they are with links. Just click on the page that interests you most. We look forward to hearing from you when you have a spare moment.



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Stereophile July, 2023 authored by Tom Fine

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CALL OR EMAIL TO ORDER

Next issue, **120:**

Next issue... Awards!

This one is always tough because we truly feel that everything we choose to review is award worthy - or at least worthy of us being willing to write a check for said gear. We hope you like our choices, there has been so much great gear this year.

A little bit about what we're trying to accomplish on YouTube as well. We hope you'll tune in - we'll keep it short and to the point.

As always, drop on by our Facebook and Instagram pages and let us know how you are...



TONE