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Comparing the PS Audio P10/P20 PowerPlants
I didn’t become an audiophile on purpose, nor was I even aware it was happening. I was just into movies. One of my fondest memories as a kid was the weekend that my dad brought home a Betamax that he’d rented from Errol’s. I think this might have been 1979. I have no idea what conversations happened between him and Mom. No idea if there were concerns about what “it might do to our family.”

At 10 years of age, I was oblivious to all that. TV was a treat and movies were all that. My first hi-fi system was not a hi-fi fan ever since. It was a home theatre system – it was a home theatre system – it was a home theatre system – it was a home theatre system – it was a home theatre system – it was a home theatre system. I remember “accidentally” discovering that the volume control, which started with negative numbers, actually rolled over into positive numbers. And how loud that was. I was watching the movie Pitch Black, and the crash scene was so loud it shook the walls and carved a grin into my face that the Joker would have been proud of.

But my friend Martin was the one who flipped that over into hi-fi. Martin was a gifted financial planner. He bought this beautiful home near Lake Needwood and kitted out the living room with some great big Totem loudspeakers and even bigger Plinius amplifiers. I’d visit; he’d crank it up. And up. And up. Then, he’d turn his head to me – so slowly – with only a hint of a grin, as if to say “what do you think” and it was only when I responded that I realized that the music was so loud I could not hear myself shouting. In fact, the sound was so effortless, so clear that I hadn’t noticed it was even loud. It was astonishing.

I think all of us have stories like this. Stories of a friend or a loved one that one moment when I literally couldn’t speak. My friend Martin died several years ago. In his will, he gifted that stereo he started me with. But that system is completely different from the system he started me with. And then I started wondering about all the other gifts I’ve been given, both knowingly and inadvertently. I started wondering if that’s really all that I am, all that any of us are, just a collection of such gifts. And I wondered at all the gifts we all, each of us, might be giving to others. What gifts that we might yet give? My friend Martin died several years ago. In his will, he gifted that stereo to me. I used it and loved it for years. As such things go for an audiophile, I upgraded each piece, and now my system is completely different from the system he started me with. But the gift, the seed for my system, for my exploration, for my hobby, for the website, for this magazine, for my livelihood, all of it came from that man, from that one day, from that one moment when I literally couldn’t speak.

How odd. How rare. How magical. How he opened the door for her into the weird little world of the audiophile. Whether or not she spends time exploring that world isn’t exactly the point either, though that would be great. What I was struck by was this sense of “gift” that this represented. It made me think of my father. It made me think of my friend. And then I started wondering about all the other gifts I’ve been given, both knowingly and inadvertently. I started wondering if that’s really all that I am, all that any of us are, just a collection of such gifts. And I wondered at all the gifts we all, each of us, might be giving to others. What gifts that we might yet give? My friend Martin died several years ago. In his will, he gifted that stereo to me. I used it and loved it for years. As such things go for an audiophile, I upgraded each piece, and now my system is completely different from the system he started me with. But the gift, the seed for my system, for my exploration, for my hobby, for the website, for this magazine, for my livelihood, all of it came from that man, from that one day, from that one moment when I literally couldn’t speak.

How odd. How rare. How magical. Of course, each of you, reading this, has that kind of magical power too. My hope is that you use it and use it well.

—Scot Hull

Auditorium 23
Elektro-Mess Technik
Step-up transformer

Step-up transformers (SUT) are not as well known as they should be by many audiophiles. Utilizing passive transformer windings rather than active gain stages, a SUT builds up the delicate electro-acoustic signal of low-output moving-coil (LOMC) cartridges to line level so they may be passed on to a preamplifier or amplifier. Keith Aschenbrenner of Auditorium 23—a bespoke audio company based in Germany—has dedicated his formidable engineering skills to making improvements in passive-transformer windings in particular for Denon, EMT, and Ortofon cartridges. When compared to standard active-stage phono preamplifiers, I personally find that unless you are spending considerable sums of money, a decent valve-based phono preamplifier and a SUT delivers the most lifelike, emotional and transparent reproduction available—without sacrificing warmth for accuracy.

www.auditorium23.de

—Rafe Arnott
Totaldac has created its own loudspeaker to develop & demo DACs in Totaldac auditorium. These speakers are the result of 20 years of experimentation to give a realistic and natural sound. Now these speakers are also offered to Totaldac customers.

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and many more...
sink down into...

words and photography by Jan Zeschky
It’s time to get down. Not in a funky sense — we’d need a good Brettanomyces-inoculated wild ale for that — but in the sense of a descent into a deep, dark place.

There’s something about the void that holds a morbid fascination. A sense of infinite nothingness, of dissipation into an eternal blankness.

But nothing, except perhaps a black hole, is truly empty. There is always shape, colour, sensual stimuli, no matter how muted.

And, as Nietzsche hinted at, the more we glean from what we sense there, the more we can learn about ourselves. I’m not saying drinking a beer can be an exercise in self-psychoanalysis. Where the hell is the fun in that? Just that subjectivity is important. Your sensory detection says a lot about you. Vive la difference and all that.

Which is why it’s so much fun tackling a powerhouse beer with friends and seeing what flavours and aromas different people pick out. And make no mistake, beers like The Abyss are ones for sharing.

The blackest beers often fascinate the most. From surprisingly refreshing dark lagers to silky, nutty oatmeal stouts, a black beer — given colour by roasted specialty malts — gives away nothing in appearance, but reveals all in the savouring.

That’s particularly true of inky, high-strength imperial stouts that can throw off an enormous range of aromas and flavours.

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The multi-award-winning Abyss, first brewed by Deschutes in Bend, Oregon in 2006, is one of the finest examples of this style, seducing drinkers with the lure of sinking into its depths.

The descent begins with the beer’s very concept. We’re already in way deeper than a simple dry Irish stout. As well as malted barley, roasted barley and wheat, blackstrap molasses, licorice, vanilla beans and cherry bark all contribute to this beer’s immensity.

Time is another vital ingredient. Half of the beer is aged for a year before release, with most finding a home in bourbon and wine barrels, while a smaller portion sits in new oak. The results are carefully married to a fresh batch of The Abyss, making the finished bottled product as much about blending as it is about brewing.

Before beginning the dive proper, make all preparations: score off the bottle’s protective wax seal, savour the release of CO2 from the cap opening, and pour slowly into a large brandy glass.

Give everything a once-over: the pitch blackness of the liquid, with a dull glow of scorched golden ochre at its extremities; the generous espresso-crema head, which has impressive retaining power for a beer this strength (11.4% ABV); the glass-coating foam that peels slowly down the walls, leaving beads of bubbles.

Now dive in, nose first.

Sink slowly into the deep, complex roasted malt profile that features tar, molasses, muscovado sugar, vanilla-laced fudge, dark fruit and hints of cocoa powder and coffee grounds. Latch on to a current of sweet, lightly peppery alcohol, which, combined with the blackened malt profile, delivers the effect of charred sweet chillies. Finally, take note of the savoury character, with a hint of soy sauce derived from the aging process.

The blackness awaits. Succumb.

Taking a sip, an initial brightness comes through in a rich and slightly tart cherry sweetness at the fore. This is supported by profiles of port, melted baker’s chocolate and fudge as the brightness begins to fade. Together with a vinous seam through the middle, these flavours develop into an engulfinf malt profile and a growing, silent roar of robust bitterness and astrinergy-laced alcohol heat.

Relax. It feels good being this deep.

Comfortable? Now you can start exploring. Chase a chunk of aged gouda with a sip of Abyss for a blissful sweet and savoury hit; or pair with Black Forest gateau for a symphony of chocolate and cherry flavours. Cap it off with a few languorous pulls on a maduro cigar.

Want to go even deeper?

Stash a bottle or two of The Abyss away in a dark, cool place – ideally about 8-10 °C (46-50 °F), if you can manage. Deschutes assistant brewmaster Ben Kehs, who heads up barrel-aging operations in Bend, says that for him, the beer hits its peak after around two or three years in the cellar.

Thanks to the slow invasion of oxygen, time smooths out the beer’s edges, meshes flavours, introduces more savoury notes and sweetens up the malt, allowing you to sink even further into bliss.

“I love fresh Abyss, just for some of the brightness, but as the product gets a couple of years on it the alcohol softens a little bit … and all those fine points you can pick out in the fresh product meld into something that’s greater than the sum of its parts,” Kehs says.

If you want to fully embrace The Abyss, line up a vertical of different vintages, pick out differences between them, choose your favourite.

You might find out something new about yourself.
Priceless, ultra-rare LP pressings, vintage Quad ESL-57 electrostatic speakers, and Garrard turntables mixed with intrigue, murder, gun-toting molls, black humour and a fantastic plot are just a few of the hallmarks of Andrew Cartmel’s initial foray into the shadowy underworld inhabited by The Vinyl Detective.

Written in Dead Wax is the first of three in a series (followed by The Run-Out Groove and Victory Disc) that the author has been penning since 2016. If you love digging into a great mystery novel, like to laugh out loud while reading, and have a bent for the more esoteric (nerdy) aspects of being an audiophile and record collector then this the series you’ve been waiting for.

I had to constantly force myself to put these books down while revving through them because I didn’t want the joy of their unfolding storylines to end too soon. www.titanbooks.com

– Rafe Arnott
I was checking my email recently when I noticed a breathless announcement from Best Buy that "AUDIOFEST IS HERE," with "Incredible Savings on Amazing Sound."

OK, worth a look, I thought as I clicked on the message. Many Best Buy stores include a Magnolia outfit, which routinely stocks high-end brands such as MartinLogan, Sonus Faber, McIntosh, Sennheiser and AudioQuest.

As I scrolled down, though, the first item promoed (with a photo) was a TV sound bar. The second was a Bose Wave radio and then a Sonos wireless speaker. Farther down was a Google Home Max voice-response speaker. Almost lost amongst all these "lifestyle" gadgets was a small photo of an inexpensive Denon receiver next to a budget Audio-Technica turntable. Still, they were the closest thing to traditional audio in the ad. The high-end names I mentioned above might have been included in AudioFest had you walked into the store looking for them, but Best Buy wasn’t expending any space in this particular ad to promote them.

To be fair, Magnolia did follow up with its own ad. The first item? A Pioneer Elite "smart speaker" with Alexa.

It struck me that this is the stark reality of hi-fi as a mainstream hobby in 2018. The electronics most people think of for playing music — if they are not using cheap earbuds or even their phone’s minuscule speaker — are, at most, monophonic wi-fi boxes or the dreaded sound bars.

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It seems that proudly installing in your home a system made up of a separate amp/preamp or receiver and a pair of traditional speakers has faded into the past with other quaint pastimes such as raking your shag carpet and developing film.

At every audio show I’ve attended in the past decade, at least a couple of people will bring up the same question as they scan the sea of grey hair: “How do we get more young people into our hobby?”

With a few exceptions, hi-fi today remains rooted in the component-system strategy of decades past. When I was a teenager in the 1970s, this was alluring because such rigs were everywhere. There were the “stereo shops” where you could ogle the good stuff like Marantz electronics, Thorens turntables and KLH speakers. Everywhere else, though – department stores, appliance outlets and even furniture retailers – you would see some type of two-channel (or, for a fleeting couple of years, four-channel) setup for sale. Typically, these were cheap Japanese brands with a lot of flashing lights but poor sound quality.

Still, for kids like me even the most sketchy systems became the primary goal of income from a paper route or summer of mowing lawns. After buying a stereo, earnings and weekly allowances went toward one album a week, after a long search through the record store, studying covers and listening to what the weird guy behind the counter was playing. At some point, you discovered that some stereos sounded better than others – a lot better. For me, it was when a friend of my parents bought a pair of huge Bozak speakers. I reclined on the carpet in front of them all evening, mesmerized. “Can we get those?” I asked my mother. “No,” she replied. “Why not?” I pushed, with her explaining they were much too expensive. “But he works at the same company dad does,” I continued, even then not wanting to lose a disagreement. “Yes, but he’s a bachelor,” my mom countered, firmly shutting down my hi-fi dreams for the moment.

Today, many of us AARP audiophiles with similar childhoods wonder aloud why there’s not a likeminded fervor among the current younger generation about better sound. The thing that occupied many of our waking hours seems to have been usurped in part by time spent on social media and gaming, with music listening primarily taking place through ear buds and single Bluetooth speakers. “If these kids could just hear good two-channel – even the entry level,” we say.

Therein lies the challenge, though. Stereos no longer are everywhere. Smart boxes are. Even veteran audiophiles have to expend considerable effort these days to find and audition the newest gear. What chance does a newbie have? Many of the traditional access ramps into the hobby closed quite a while ago. “Wait a minute,” we say. “Isn’t this younger age group buying vinyl – our format?”

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After living with the PS Audio Power Plant P10 for more than a year now, I can say it's a key piece of my reference system, that I don't do a review without it, and that it has absolutely corrupted me for anything else (except the new DirectStream Power Plant 20, more on that later).

Apologies to Lord John Dalberg-Acton whose phrase I co-opted. I know there is a division in opinions on AC-power conditioning, filtering, and aftermarket power cables among audiophiles. This isn't news, and I'm sure there will be different camps for time in memoriam. I'm not here to belabour those divisions.

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If stock power cables work for you, and you’ve never been curious about upgrading your cables, or addressing the incoming AC power to your home, then I envy you in a way. I say that because I was instantly curious about both after reading various reviews, and online forum discussions on the subject when I was first wading into this hobby several years ago. This curiosity led me to start demoing power cables from a local hi-fi shop. I’d critically listen to a few tracks with the stock cables in place, then power down, swap in a new cable, and repeat the cycle. Not only did I hear distinct changes to the sound I was getting out of my modest system at the time, I noticed they weren’t always improvements.

From this experimentation I learned some important lessons: Most of the AC current our systems receive through wall sockets is unstable, and fluctuates constantly. Changing AC cables isn’t necessarily a good thing if all it’s doing is colouring your output. Over time I found the cables that allowed me to hear deeper into the recording by lowering the noise floor, or helping to eliminate RF-related grunge – without affecting tone, or timbre, or artificially goosing upper or lower registers – were adding to my enjoyment of what artists had committed to tape. A significant discovery for me.

Through the ensuing years I continued with my personal, and professional research (as a reviewer) into power cables, power conditioning, and finally power regeneration as funds allowed. It was through this experimentation I came to home audition the PS Audio Dectet AC Power Conditioner, and AC5 Power Cables. These impressed me enough with their ability to allow more of the recording to come through – without colouration – that I purchased them. Next came the PS Audio Power Port AC receptacle which reduced background hash further. I continued to experiment with numerous manufacturers AC cables, only now trying them first in the wall, and then through the Dectet, which proved to allow clearer insights into what each cable was contributing (or not) to the sonic signature of components.

Now, before this starts to sound like a PS Audio love-in, I’m explaining this to you so you’ll understand that when I had the opportunity for a long-term review of the P10, it made sense for me to continue with PS Audio because I had a solid baseline to measure what – if any – improvements I was to encounter by adding the P10 into my system based on previous experience with their products already.

Experience listening with, and without the P10 has revealed that my incoming AC power is saturated with RF noise, contamination, and current fluctuations (using the P10’s bright front LED control panel allows me to see exactly what’s coming into my home from the grid – which appears to vacillate anywhere from 113–122 volts). Due in no small part to the varying load demands being placed on the power grid at different times of day, and noise/interference from the crazy myriad of electrical devices that are connected to said grid – computers, refrigerators, televisions, radios, stoves, microwaves, hair dryers, washing machines, fluorescent lights – you get the picture – I’ve consistently noted a haze/hash over the musical reproduction occurring in my sound system when I do not have some sort of filtering in place.

Now, there are many different ways to approach what I think is a fundamental problem with modern AC coming into the bulk of urban homes: You can have an electrician install a dedicated 20, or 15-Amp line (or lines) into your home, you can get your own dedicated, audiophile-grade power pole installed to channel current into your home (both of which, while somewhat effective, are still channeling crappy power IMO). You can move to an area with no neighbours so you don’t share the grid, you can go off-grid with solar power, or you can purchase a device that separates your delicate audio component circuitry completely from incoming power.

Given my current living situations, and finances, the latter was the most prudent choice.

So, what exactly does the PS Audio Power Plant P10 do? In a nutshell it generates a completely new, artefact-free stream of AC power from the incoming current that your home receives from transformers on the greater grid.

“Most of the AC current our systems receive through wall sockets is unstable...”

RAFE ARNOTT

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drops in hard followed a heartbeat later by Albert "Tootie" Heath’s sticks smacking the rack toms. Playing this through the totaldac d-1 integral, and a Soulution 330 integrated amplifier plugged into a standard wall socket yields a historical sonic portrait of this, her only Bethlehem Records session, without focus on any particular slice of the frequency spectrum: a beautifully rendered, and musical balance is clearly achieved. Her voice coming across cool, collected, and the double bass of Jimmy Bond thumping deep in the mix alongside Heath’s metronomic percussion.

Swapping the d-1, and 330 into the P10, and queuing up the track again in Tidal Hi-Fi, the background blackens considerably. There is more air around Simone’s voice – which now possesses projection more from the chest rather than just her mouth – the bloom off her piano notes, and the decay off Heath’s now more palpable drum skins conveys a more spatially-evocative landscape. Simone’s playing jumps further forward on the sound stage, and Bond’s bass notes seem to drop another octave, and become more clearly defined, and separated from Heath’s stick work in the recording. Bronski Beat dropped their debut album The Age Of Consent in the fall of 1984. I remember it clearly because I was touched by the sad, poignant video of the first single released off it – “Smalltown Boy” – and because it featured the soaring falsetto of Jimmy Somerville over the hypnotic synth beats, staccato percussion, and goosebump keyboarding of band members Steve Bronski, and Larry Steinbachek. Not only was the track a heartfelt political anthem on homophobia, it was a riotous dance number which always got the living-room floor packed when the 12-inch single got spun at house parties in my youth. The explosive force that Bronski’s drumming unleashes about 30 seconds into the track over Somerville’s aching voice is like machine-gun fire with the speed of attack on every strike of the sticks standing clearly apart, never bleeding into one another, and rocking your head back. Without the P10 in the mix, the big dynamic swings of the original Canadian pressing I own through the EMT IDSD VM cartridge, Auditorium 23 step-up transformer, and the all-valve single-ended Soro integrated with built-in phono stage is big, bouncy, and organic with its rubber-band bass lines, slick synthesizer noodling, and polyphonic rhythms. Plugging the amp into the Power Plant reveals a wealth of previously glazed-over electronic micro dynamics which had been concealed under a haze of noise floor. The black background helps free a number of keyboard textures from anonymity, and allows for further percussive heft to be physically felt in the lowest bass notes. It’s not night-and-day between the two, but in a system of reasonably revealing capabilities, which possesses a transparency to source, the gain in accuracy, and fidelity to the recorded event is welcomed, all the more so because it doesn’t come at the expense of warmth. Having had the P10 for some time, and having run a healthy number of integrated amps, power amps, preamps, CD players, streamers, DACs, phono stages and turntables through it, I can safely say I have a very clear set of indicators of what I know the unit delivers to the sonic landscape of my home.

So, when PS Audio recently asked me if I could compare the new DirectStream Power Plant 20 to my P10, and add that to my P10 review, I was curious, and agreed to hold the P20 to my P10, and add that to my P10 review so I could add in thoughts on the P20. continued on page 34
First off, the P20 is larger (96 pounds, 17x14x11 inches) than the already massive P10 (73 pounds, 17x14x8.5 inches), so make sure you run it either on the ground, or a very sturdy rack system or table. The P20 delivers 3,600VA peak output (compared to the P10’s 1,500VA peak), can accommodate both 20, and 15-amp power cables, is equipped with 16 power receptacles (compared to 10 on the P10) in five zones – two zones of which are high-current – features an all-new FPGA-based DSD sine wave generator, and has three times lower impedance than any previous Power Plant.

The P20 features a new, larger, more detailed seven-inch LED screen (4.5-inches on the P10), and comes with the standard PS Audio remote control.

In direct-comparison tests between the P10, and P20 (power-down component, swap cable, power-up), with the kit I currently have on my racks (Solution 330 integrated amplifier, totaldac d-1 integral DAC/streamer, Audio Note CD 4.1x, Audio Note Soro Phono SE Signature – Thales TTT-Slim II doesn’t count because it’s battery-driven), the P20 brought out more of everything – in varying degrees depending on recordings – that the P10 was already revealing, with the biggest difference between the two being the sense of grunt behind the music that the P20 delivered over the P10.

The P10 opens up the bottom end on recordings, it allows the lowest notes to come through unimpeded, with authority, with power, and mostly with a real sense of solidity. The P20 does all of that, but with it’s improved headroom, there is a more palpable, tactile sense of unrestricted flow to the musicality. A feeling of composure through even the most raucous tracks. “Figure 8” off Tahliah Debrett Barnett’s (FKA twigs) 2015 album M3LL155X has the ability to peel the skin off listeners, and tear apart loudspeakers at volume in the wrong system.

Through the d-1, and the Soro being fed from the P10 “Figure 8” is the electronic equivalent of a high-speed car crash involving a dump truck, and a Lamborghini Huracan: gut-wrenching bass impact like ceramic, and asphalt rending welded steel from itself while being ground across concrete at 80 miles per hour.

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It’s a driving sonic maelstrom. The track rumbles the window panes in my home, and the electronically-enhanced bottom end is there in all it’s thunderous glory. The almost physical wall of keyboards, synths, computer-programming effects, and vocal arrangements that I’ve heard smear together in an auricular haze on some systems is here articulate, musical, and most of all alive with human presence. Swapping in the P20 noticeably widens/deepens the already cavernous sound stage, further lowers the noise floor, and allows a deeper emotional connection to be made with the conviction that Barnett brings to her snarling, hyper-vocal singing.

George Harrison’s 1970 triple-LP All Things Must Pass was his first solo effort following the breakup of The Beatles earlier that year. Co-produced by engineering legend Phil Spector, it features his Wall of Sound of production technique, and was referred to in Rolling Stone as “… the music of mountain tops, and vast horizons.” Recorded mostly at Abbey Road Studios, the album is awash in overdubs, and star power with a huge amount of artists contributing to the sonic flavour, not the least of which were Eric Clapton, and Ringo Starr. The LP’s possess a huge amount of air, and space around both Harrison’s vocals, and those of the many back-up singers employed, with a deep sound stage populated by myriad instruments that could be daunting to separate from the mix, but with the P10 firmly in control of the amplifier’s power diet, never stray or overlap into each other. Tone, and timbre of instruments are spot-on, with wood-bodied ones in particular in possession of the proper scale, weight, and resonance that I associate with real acoustic guitars. Organ, and piano notes are mel- lifluous, and the slide guitar, and horn arrangements have a burnished, brassy flavour.

Opting in to the P20, the already big, hip-shaking bottom end seems to swell in size, and weight, with a deeper tonal shading now coming through. Vocals take on a sweeping, more expansive quality to the air volume surrounding the physical arrangement of singers, and a more chesty composition to the character of the oral discourse. This was a scenario that continued to play out every time I listened to a track off Tidal, closed the lid on a CD, or dropped the needle on an LP: everything that was pulling me deeper into the listening experience, into the meaning of the artists intent through the recorded medium – be it digital or analog – was enhanced through the P20. If the P10 was helping sink me into the depths of the song, the P20 was like throwing an anchor, and chain around my legs as I sank down. It seems that with this latest (and largest) edition to the company’s regenerator line (a new DirectStream Power Plant 15, and 12 have been unveiled since I received the P20), PS Audio has taken everything I’ve come to expect, and appreciate from the P10, and improved upon it wholesale. T/O
At Pass Labs we have one goal — to create products that invite you to listen. We want you to enjoy the experience so much that you go through your entire music collection — again and again. Each time a joyous discovery of something new. We want music lovers for the long haul.
DIAL 911 for AUDIOPHILE

WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY RAFe ARNOtt
There’s something that clicks within my psychic alignment about the sound of a stylus first touching down into the run-in groove of an LP, just the same way there’s something about the exhaust note of a high-performance, or vintage automobile. The two, while mutually exclusive in many aspects, seem to contain a shared resonance, or metaphysical frequency that makes me feel as if all is right in the world – even if it’s just for a moment – and I can let the smile stay on my face.

So when I found out that Robb Niemann, the CEO of Burmester North America – who I know as a music lover, and dedicated audiophile – had a serious bent for fast cars (as well fine wines, and whisky) I couldn’t resist the urge to get a hold of him. Turns out Niemann was able to meld high fidelity with German automotive engineering in the form of a Burmester soundsystem-equipped Porsche Carrera S. We decided to meet, and spend a day together in the 911 driving around our hometown of Vancouver, British Columbia. We hit the road, and then hit a local distillery to talk about fast cars, music, turntables, watches, wines, whiskies, and the future of high fidelity. Here’s an excerpt of our chat, I hope you enjoy it.

—Rafe Arnott
A few years later, as the old adage states, nothing else I had ever heard Burmester sound filled my soul like the sound of a great system and I was smitten by it. The journey started with me trying to purchase Burmester as a customer. This began with me trying to purchase a Burmester speaker and considering that Hi-Fi is not something that many high fidelity manufacturers seem to have in their product lifestyle value when compared to items like cars, watches or wine. Why do you think that is?

RA: You've often talked about the lifestyle crossover that music, and hi-fi occupy for some audiophiles, and what a key niche it fills as part of the appreciation of the finer things in life for you. Cars, watches, art, boats, whisky, wine, furniture – collectables of any type – also have a major crossover with lifestyle in my opinion. Yet we often see the difficulty that many high fidelity manufacturers seem to have in capitalizing on their products lifestyle value when compared to items like cars, watches or wine. Why do you think that is?

RN: The hi-fi industry as a whole is still very small and fragmented compared to other lifestyle-based industries. We have a very long way to go to get to the size and scale of the likes of Mercedes or the international following of a first growth Bordeaux. Burmester is celebrating its 40th year this year and that is still rather young when you consider some of the respected wine houses of the world. I have great faith that audio as we know it will grow over time, it simply takes an experience involving it, and for that we have to be ambassadors sharing these wonderful products wherever we go. I recently met a billionaire who travels the world and we talked about cars, art, whisky, watches, and hi-fi. He is a great wines, watches, whisky, hifi, gear, art – never mind your passion for growing organic food – and travel, but you've been bitten hard by the hi-fi bug. Hi-fi will become a passion and a hobby no doubt, it simply took an experience of their favourite music on a great system to educate them. There are far too few places in North America to really experience exceptional hi-fi in a professional manner where someone feels comfortable from the moment they walk into the store. I'm talking about the people they are greeting, the way they sit on, the artwork on the walls, the magazines on the tables, the coffee or sparkling water they are served, etc. How many hi-fi stores are you aware of that have the fit and finish of a Rolex store, the same level of professionalism as a Rolls-Royce dealership, or the passion of an art gallery owner for the artists they represent? It is all too easy for someone to call themselves a dealer these days. It is an expensive proposition to have a dealership and do it right. With the cost of equipment and property these days, I feel that most retailers stop at hanging a sign and expect the brands to carry people in the doors. I am a proponent of relationship building and in this we must go into the world and meet people where they are at. I am often told by dealers they need to connect more to those that can afford these products but when I ask them if they go to restaurants or golf clubs or events where “those people” hang out, I am most often met with a dull stare. Last week I was at a Scotch-tasting event where I showed a national sales director of said Scotch house an article that you had written on a turntable paired with a Scotch, and he got incredibly excited. Every single rep they have is a vinyl lover and posts daily about their Scotch and listening experiences. Now we are going to work together to try and bring the two areas together nationally by pairing great scotch with vinyl listening nights at unique venues.

RA: Not only are you smitten with great wines, watches, whisky, hifi, gear, art – never mind your passion for growing organic food – and travel, but you've been bitten hard by the automotive, and what do you think is it that it does for you on a personal level, and how do you share that passion with others?

RN: Automotive for a man of my age culturally has been part of life. Ever since I was a kid I have been a passionate automotive enthusiast and specifically a Porsche 911 lover. I simply enjoyed every aspect of my Porsche journey from my first drive in a 930 Turbo back in the '80s to more recent events like driving a 356 from the museum in Stuttgart at Pebble Beach, and now taking my kids on “dates with dad” in the Porsche. My oldest son and I have had great bonding times attending Porsche events locally and we look forward to many more.

RA: What do you enjoy most about owning an exotic automobile? What is it that it does for you on a personal level, and how do you share that passion with others?

RN: I have a 2013 Porsche Carrera S that was a custom configuration by a good friend of mine – Volker Krebs in Vancouver. This car has all the right options including Burmester of course. When Krebs took European delivery of the car in Stuttgart at the Porsche factory, August Auchliner, the chief designer of the 911 program, came out to sign the car, as it was one of the nicest configurations he had seen in a long time. I have a photo of Mr. Auchliner signing the car along with a few special mementos from Auchliner, and the Porsche facility in Stuttgart. Krebs recently upgraded to a new GT3 and thankfully he needed to make room in his garage and I am the beneficiary of this very well loved and cared for machine.
I enjoy every spare moment I have where I can share the experience with others. Car culture is a wonderful one and it’s the people and their passion that is captivating. Passion for the automobile seems to cross over into so many other areas; food, wine and music, it is natural and you meet some of the nicest people along the way. Everyone has a story when it comes to cars. I remember meeting a couple at Pebble Beach and we ended up drinking wine late into the evening sharing stories of travel and family, only the following day I found out he is one of the largest collectors in the world of Porsches.

RA: Getting back to music, what are some of your favourite LPs? Do you have anything rare in your collection? Are you a digital, or analog enthusiast first? Does it matter to you if the sound quality is there?

RN: For me it is always about quality in every facet of life. Quality in audio is like a performance sport, trying to maximize the reproduction to the best it can possibly be. I do have a number of unique albums, most of the ones I treasure the most are gifts. I have received albums from wonderful individuals in this industry and from a few artists whom I have met along the way. I travelled to Stockholm a few years ago on behalf of the late Winston Ma to pick up the original tapes of Jazz in the Pawnshop. When I returned Ma produced a new and improved three-disc version of which I have a number of the test pressings and a few early pressings. We did an event years ago in New York where I had a copy of Swedish House Mafia singles release sent over from Europe the day it came out. Only a few weeks later they disbanded.

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“Car culture is a wonderful one and it’s the people and their passion that is captivating.”

ROBB NIEMANN
RA: We’ve seen numbers from various reporting agencies around the planet regarding the continued growth of vinyl sales, the decline of CD sales, and the juggernaut of market share that is streaming audio. What’s your opinion on these various formats, and do you think the future of true high fidelity will be non-physical formats like FLAC, or MQA that are remotely stored, and accessed via the cloud?

RN: I have the pleasure of owning one of the best CD players in the world, a Burmester 069 as well as a number of high-end turntables and a few exceptional streaming units. I enjoy all formats but there is something tactile about hunting for an album then removing it from the sleeve and setting it up to play. It is much like a great wine in my opinion, there is a process that takes time and in that time there are subtle nuances and textures involved which add to the overall enjoyment.

I do believe that vinyl will be here to stay because of that tactile experience but streaming is doing well and with new improved quality for streaming like MQA it can only add to the overall positive experience. As long as there is an effort to improve the quality I will appreciate that effort and keep listening to music no matter the format.
The din of the party had faded into the background much like the voices of parents, or teachers on Peanuts cartoons emanating from a TV on low volume. My query to the host’s young daughter had elicited nothing more than a questionable look tempered with subtle enthusiasm.

“I got soul but I’m not a soldier” I repeated. “You’ve never heard it?” I asked querulously.

Intrigued and without skipping a beat the little five-year-old girl yells across the room a request for the Killer’s “All These Things That I’ve Done” without mentioning the proper name of the track and obediently a plastic hockey puck of a speaker retrieves the song post haste.

This is the futuristic dark corner that music playback has found its way into. This call-to-play narrative is just a short neural pathway from a Genie-wish fulfillment of musical reproduction and a long distance from either your collection of LPs or the symbiotic curation of radio play. Sure, we still have radio in some of its forms, but album playback is all but a fleeting memory that was never even formed in the minds of the upcoming generation of music listeners.

The planet has turned so far into streaming cloud-based files that the well-documented vinyl resurgence almost appears to borrow a counter-culture feel to the mainstream need for right here, right now.

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Still the joy on that five-year-old girl’s face was genuine, and the track played endlessly all night from the kitchen. Having been involved in this lovely hobby for many years now (from the media side), its grown apparent to me that I do love to contemplate the tent-pole discussions that swirl amongst all who have ever considered a large ticket purchase in the name of the audio gods. I prefer to mull over questions and not engage the combative banter of forum/comment sections. Through those insights, it’s clear that the path through analog – in its many forms – is a more challenging but ultimately rewarding labor of love for its constituents. That is to say, the convenience factor is lower across the board for both vinyl and (when it comes to hardware) tubes, but the preverbal juice is worth the squeeze to those who engage in the practice. After all, reward is ever sweeter when you have put 20 hours against the task. 40 hours? How about hundreds? You get it. Sky-high price tags aside, the turntable as a playback device requires a manual pound of flesh, no matter how much you money you throw at it. Records should be cleaned before initial play, regardless of how close a relation to the master it might be.

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The reward on the other side, untethered in its relationship to other more concrete benchmarks, is real enough for the hero who emerges victorious from this melee. That's not to say the digital boys don't have their cake and spin it too, but the playback is often times immediate, and, in the case of streaming, requires little more than a flick of a finger to engage. What happens then when we get what we want, exactly when we want it – forever? Ask any former Betty Ford resident from ample means and the answer may become clearer. Love without labor can become labor without love. Shortcuts to happiness have an unfortunate way of chipping away at any experience as a whole and taken too far, leave the sharpened pencil with nothing but a nub and eraser. Some of our joy is firmly planted in the pain it takes to get to the finish line. On the digital end, much of this same cyclical game can be recreated in the battle for a “trueness to source,” but when the sleeve art is gone, the immersion into the vision of the album becomes further diminished. Its hard not to discuss the impact of the iPodization to the listening sphere of high fidelity, where it’s easier to get more for less (fidelity, that is). Single-serving bits for two ears only. The portable mid-step between the playback-wish fulfillment is constrained now only by the strength of the wireless infrastructure in any given city. Has the increased portability of audio become a greater metaphor for the micro-transaction, siloed social-media-packed reality we now live in? Or will the idea merely become the tale of another generation of humans waxing about the simper times from days long gone? More importantly, how long will it take for old technologies to fade away completely from the public consciousness? There really isn’t a solid measuring stick to follow given the short overall timeline we’ve been on, digitally speaking, but one thing appears to be changing: local storage of any type of information continues to go the way of the 8-track.

The video game industry has managed to hold on to the second-hand disc market for another generation of consoles but the writing is certainly on the wall. We own less but have access to more. But has this unfettered access to everything we want brought us closer to personal nirvana or further from it? As with most all things balance is needed for a healthy execution of any form of entertainment. If you can still hear the emotion from both your reference hifi rig AND a passing car stereo then there is still hope to transcend the trappings of the numerous audiophile distractions available. Hopefully your love for listening is a combination of both personal and shared experiences, analog and digital, and is both inspired and emotionally rewarding. Love the music, love the tech. Harness and hone the passion, contribute positively to the community and most importantly, don’t forget to listen like a five-year-old stuck at a parents party.

The portable mid-step between the playback-wish fulfillment is constrained now only by the strength of the wireless infrastructure in any given city.

—Brian Hunter
Point to Point

Clarus Cables
Crimson-level
AC, RCA, Digital, Speaker

Constructed from multi-gauge (heavy, flat and spiral configurations) and individually-insulated pure copper Ohno continuous cast wire that features three uniquely-shaped conductor types, Clarus Cables patented Crimson line features more science than fiction in their design. While there are still many who question not only the ability to accurately measure the integrity of signal degradation in cables, never mind the sonic differences audible to listeners, Clarus's president Joseph C. Perfito told me that I'd be impressed with the transparency in some of the designs his company builds in the United States. I for one believe that cabling can make or break a system, and look forward to hearing what the Crimson line is capable of.

www.claruscable.com

–Rafe Arnott
What do you do when you've owned a number of turntables over the years but always found one aspect of each design you've entertained to be wanting? You design and build your own deck and start up a company to produce and bring them to market. This is exactly what John Stratton of Vancouver, British Columbia, did when he decided he wanted a 'table that could deliver the sound he loved from high-price turntable designs but at a cost grounded more in reality.

The result was two decks: the Encore and the Eclipse, which both retail for roughly $4,500 USD depending on the exact specifications at the time of ordering. The Encore features a traditional-style plinth and the Eclipse a modern take on shape.

Both feature 50mm Ultra MDF cores, CNC machining, precision bronze bearings, a 12-volt AC-synchronous motor and an outboard speed-controller with a separate linear power supply.

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When Stratton first reached out to me to see if I would be interested in reviewing one of his designs, I couldn’t say no after checking his website and realizing he was located about 15 minutes from my home. The unit he brought over was finished in beautiful matte Santos Rosewood (Stratton said that a high-gloss finish could be available as an option), and equipped with a package deal that included the Maestro outboard motor controller and a TA-1000 tonearm. He had kindly outfitted the deck with a Benz Micro Wood SL low-output moving-coil cartridge for me as well. Getting the 'table into my system took a matter of minutes, and after making sure the deck was levelled, I ran unbalanced cables into an Audio Note S2 step-up transformer and from there into an Audio Note Soro Phono SE Signature integrated amplifier and out to my Audio Note AN-E/Spe HE loudspeakers.

I fed the Eclipse a steady diet of vinyl for several days to familiarize myself with its sonic abilities before I got down to taking a serious look at what made up the deck and how it sounded.

Taking off the large 36mm-thick Delrin platter and examining the bearing shaft, tonearm mount, dual-pulley driven polished-aluminum subplatter and fit and finish of the unit I came away with a deep respect for what Stratton and his crew had accomplished. QC was outstanding and the 'table would not have been embarrassed by other designs I'm familiar with at double the price point. The platter and sub-platter fit was truly precise and spun so true and flat that I often forgot I'd left it running because you had to be only a few inches away to see if it was actually spinning. Something I've not seen accomplished on a few turntables pushing $20k at trade shows. Operation of the TA-1000 tonearm was fluid, well-damped and concise. This isn't an 'arm that flops around or feels flimsy: just the opposite. It has a feeling of such high-quality machining and fluidity to use that I often smiled whenever I queued-up a track and dropped the needle in the groove. Getting familiar with the sound took a while, but one of the first things I noticed was how rock-steady the pitch was. Stratton's attention to detail in the motor-control assemblies obviously paid off as did his use of a heavy, damped plinth because I've heard the Benz SL on other decks and the bass that was being produced with this combination was contributing more bottom-end definition and speed to the lowest notes than I'd ever heard previously from Benz Wood or Glider.
The treble signature was always open, airy and extended and never strayed into dryness or etching. A real feat on some of the LPs I spun which I’d heard go sour up top on other rigs. Midrange was well balanced with tonal accuracy and transparency without sacrificing details like massed strings, or multiple guitar and horns. Piano qualities in playback were smooth, well-rounded with beautiful rendering of timbre, ditto for cellos and violins which both had excellent weight and body.

"Running Up That Hill" off the same side had Radelet’s ghostly musings sparking goosebumps up my spine...

RAFE ARNOTT

I can remember, but I’ve never heard it with this authoritative of a bottom end. Once again the Eclipse seems to allowing the cartridge and tonearm to mine the depths of these grooves in a way that other ‘tables I’ve played it on haven’t been able to. Ware’s finger fret work has organic texture with every brush of the strings during “Striver’s Row,” and Jones’ skins have a papery-dry presence to every strike that comes through with clarity and speed on “Softly As In a Morning Sunrise.” Rollins’ sax blows hard and has real meaty punch with brassy hues apparent through every breath on “Old Devil Moon.”

Switching things up I pulled out Talk Talk’s last effort, their 1991 post-rock LP Laughing Stock, which features a large ensemble of session musicians backing up what was left of the group core in Mark Hollis and Lee Harris after Paul Webb’s departure. More eerie-atmospherics exploiting the recorded space and about a specified environment that the listener is placed into, the LP is heavily punctuated with disparate instrumentation that bristles melodically all over the sound stage and has led lesser cartridge/tonearm/turtable combos astray into smearing of the many micro dynamics at play in every track. Here the Eclipse did not put a foot wrong and carved out a clear space in the presentation for every instrument and Hollis’ aching vocal tracks. Not uber high-end, and not necessarily budget-conscious, the Pure Fidelity Eclipse turntable walks a line between the promise of big-money sound and what’s practical from a materials and engineering standpoint at the sub-$5K level. If I was forced to describe/compare the sound of the Eclipse I’d say it combines the PRAT (pace, rhythm and timing) of an RP8, the dynamics and resolution of a Clearaudio Ovation and a bottom end I’d more closely associate with something like a Dr. Feickert Analogue Woodpecker deck. The Eclipse is a deck that Stratton wanted to incorporate those facets of turntable design he values highest into what he described as “the ultimate hybrid,” I’d say he achieved his goals and then some.
An interview with John Stratton of Pure Fidelity

Rafe Arnott: John, you’re coming into the high-fidelity manufacturing marketplace later in your life, what was the drive to tackle something as complex as a turntable design after being an audiophile for many years? Do you have professional experience with audio engineering, or was it simply dissatisfaction with what you saw available at a certain price point?

John Stratton: I have no previous experience in audio engineering, but I have owned an/or listened to a countless number of decks over the years. When I first started this venture it was, and still is, critically important to be able to distinguish between marketing hype and sound engineering. There are some lower and mid priced decks out in the marketplace that perform well, but there will always be that buyer that wants more because they have heard what more can sound like. I am one of those buyers and I was disillusioned by the asking prices. That is Pure Fidelity in a nutshell.

High-end tables at real-world pricing.

RA: Your current turntable designs seem to incorporate a number of key technical features seen on several other high-end brands, which is a great way to build a solid foundation to expand upon in my opinion. Did you draw inspiration from particular design aspects already in production, or did you have an initial concept for Pure Fidelity already in your mind’s eye?

JS: I would love to claim that our tables feature brand new engineering concepts and exotic materials, but our designs do borrow elements from other successful high-mass, low-mass and suspended decks. By identifying the strengths and more importantly the weaknesses of these different design approaches, we were able to come up with what we feel is the ultimate hybrid. I don’t believe there is an “absolute best method” in turntable design. People don’t like the word compromise, but in reality all the different methods of analog playback will have some areas that could be improved. It is a balancing act. Our designs adhere to a holistic approach, where all parts matter and no detail is too small. However, the key element is our two-inch thick Ultra MDF core. Ultra MDF is a special make up. It is virtually resonance-free and completely neutral in sound. The bass response is strong and detailed without the sleepy nature you can get with some high-mass decks. The highs are nicely detailed without being bright – a common problem with most low-mass ‘tables. To my ears tonal accuracy is absolutely a must and I think these designs nail it.

RA: In your opinion, what are the most critical factors in turntable design to achieve the maximum ability of a tonearm to extract recorded information from a vinyl record’s grooves?

JS: To me the turntable’s job is clearly defined. This is taken right off our site: “A turntable’s job is to rotate at a precise and consistent speed. It needs to accomplish this without allowing any internal or external vibrations from entering into the chain. Our designs accomplish this with sound engineering, precision machining and carefully selected materials.” In other words, the deck needs to get out of the way and let the tone-arm and cartridge deliver the magic.

RA: Your turntables are beautiful to look at, and experience, as well as to use, how did you decide on what chassis shapes, and finishes you would use for the final prototypes? How important are aesthetics to you when it comes to making your decks? Is it really just form following function, or is there more to the process?

JS: Thank you, I think our tables are beautiful too. I have always admired simple and elegant designs. Bling is not my thing. Using MDF as the core has allowed us to produce both wood and painted options. All our veneers are hand selected and our coloured plinths use automotive paint. Although the automotive paint is extremely expensive the end result is stunning. Both our wood and paint finishes go through an extensive multi-layered finishing process. The Encore is a more traditional “old school” shape and our Eclipse has a more modern shape. Aesthetics are very important to us. Our goal is to make decks that look and sound beautiful.
Photographer Eilon Paz took his passion for capturing images, covering unique subject matter and record collecting, threw them all in a cocktail of world travelers, entertainment personalities, diehard vinyl lovers and came up with DUST & GROOVES, Adventures in Record Collecting. Full of gorgeous imagery, detailed compelling interviews with diverse crate diggers and collectors spanning the globe, and personal insights into lives lived, Paz weaves a tapestry as rich in vision and scope as it is in the cultural context of those dedicated to preserving a piece of curated music history.

www.dustandgrooves.com

–Rafe Arnott
The only sound which registered on my consciousness was the dim roar of surf pounding the shore which extended infinitely to my left and right. A thin veil of mist clung to parts of the beach despite a stiff breeze off the ocean along this stretch of coastline east of Banzai Pipeline on Oahu's North Shore. My daughter, who was walking ahead of me, paused for just a moment as she waded into the water and I brought the camera quickly up to my eye to compose my shot and press the shutter.

“Ker-chunk.”

The flawless mechanical operation of the well-worn black rangefinder brought a slow smile to my lips as it dropped from my face and was slung across my shoulder by its strap. The camera is the Leica M8 and it is without a doubt the single greatest piece of photographic equipment I've owned in my 25-year career as a professional photographer. But, I almost didn’t buy one you see. I’m a sad Irish/Scottish mix with German thrown in and a bit of Italian for colour, which is to say I’m cheap but look good with a tan.

I don’t like spending money unless it’s a priority. Kids are a priority, food is a priority. Wine is a … you get the point.

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"It’s too expensive," I’d say. "It’s not a necessity, I have a DSLR," I’d assert. "What’s the point of two different camera systems," I’d argue. My girlfriend looked at me levelly and asked "Yes, but would you use it?"
"Of course," I replied. "Would it bring you joy every day?"
"Oh god, would it," I sighed.
With a shrug, "So why not get something that would make you happy? You deserve it," she said. So I did.

A little history first though. The M8 was the German camera manufacturer’s first digital version of their legendary M line of rangefinder cameras which dates back to the original M3 35mm-film body introduced in 1954. The M8 – which like previous M models features a magnesium-alloy body with bottom and top plates cut from brass billets – came out in 2006 amid some controversy. Many users complained that the APS-H 10.3 megapixel Kodak KAF-10500 CCD-image sensor suffered from over-sensitivity to infrared light which caused colour-shift in the blacks of images. It was found that IR screw-on lens filters fixed this problem and the subsequent M9 model featured a new 18.5 megapixel CCD specifically developed for the camera by Kodak. So why even use the M8 if the M9 features an improved CCD? For one, price. Remember my lineage?

An M8 goes for significantly less than an M9 and two, there’s something about the M8’s sensor that the M9 lacks in my estimation. Images straight out of an M8 look absolutely gorgeous: sharp, tonally rich, lush. Far more like slide film than any other digital camera I’ve ever used (and I’ve used a lot). When shooting with the Leica I treat it like a camera loaded with either Kodak Tri-X 400 black & white, or Fuji Velvia 100 colour transparency film. Why would I do that?

So I did. A little history first though. The M8 was the German camera manufacturer’s first digital version of their legendary M line of rangefinder cameras which dates back to the original M3 35mm-film body introduced in 1954. The M8 – which like previous M models features a magnesium-alloy body with bottom and top plates cut from brass billets – came out in 2006 amid some controversy. Many users complained that the APS-H 10.3 megapixel Kodak KAF-10500 CCD-image sensor suffered from over-sensitivity to infrared light which caused colour-shift in the blacks of images. It was found that IR screw-on lens filters fixed this problem and the subsequent M9 model featured a new 18.5 megapixel CCD specifically developed for the camera by Kodak. So why even use the M8 if the M9 features an improved CCD? For one, price. Remember my lineage?

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Same for the Leica Summarit-M f2.4/35mm Aspherical lens I bought to go with it. This was because of work priorities, but a trip to Hawaii offered me the opportunity I'd been waiting for to really see what the camera and lens were capable of and how the camera would change my visual connection to this mortal expanse I inhabit.

One of the first things I noticed was how portable the M8 is. While solid and chunky in its construction, it weighs far less than any DSLR I'd ever toted along on holiday. Getting used to shooting quickly with a rangefinder is a bit of a tricky proposition at first, but once you get the hang of focus zones, and frame lines in the purely mechanical lens operation of the M-system there really is no going back to a DSLR or autofocus.

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There's a *rightness* to the way you use the camera and its operation that makes the M8 feel far more like an extension of your mind and eye than any DSLR ever could.

A DSLR feels like something requiring advanced manipulation coming between me and my subject. The M8 feels like a window connecting me to my subject. The ability to lens your surroundings in a fresh context thanks to the camera’s ability to interface so fluidly with photographic intention resulted in a feeling of deep-seated satisfaction in every shooting situation I found myself in.

Whether you take pictures as a working professional, an aspiring pro, a weekend warrior or someone who just wants a camera that’s better than their phone, a used Leica M8 and Leica lens (or Leica M-mount compatible) will not only change the way you make pictures, see the world and even think, it will put a smile on your face every time you use it the way only the most finely crafted precision objects available can.
a hot foot

**FERN & ROBY ISOLATION FOOT SET**

Built out of metal alloy and visco-elastic sorbothane dampening material, these isolation feet by Fern & Roby are designed to keep your components cut off from unwanted vibration. Originally specified for turntable isolation, the company found that the feet worked wonders on everything they placed them under. Whether it was source components, preamplifiers, amps or speakers, the feet did what they were designed to do: help maintain the purity of a component's sonic signature. After more than a year in use on dozens of components in my own home, I'd agree.

- Rafe Arnott

www.fernandroby.com
sniffing out the finest g&t

words and photography by Brian Hunter
Summer drinks, they invariably fall under a different category than the fine liquors we digest in the dim corners of the world after nightfall. Dark liquor for dark bars; but day drinking on the patio or poolside, that is a totally different matter.

Sure some knuckle-draggers prefer the taste of a light beer with a cozy husk (I'm as guilty of this as any other day walker), but some occasions call for a little more than the standard trappings of a college student. Enter the gin & tonic.

It's light, it's fun and the tone of the mix is right where you want to be on sunny weekend afternoon.

Contrary to the calorie count of its more slender cousin the vodka soda, G&Ts do carry a bit more heft on the sugar side. As fair warning to those attempting to shed the dad bod for a more summer-friendly silhouette, tonic water often carries the same amount of sugar as regular cola, so unless you want to make it up on the treadmill the next day – all in moderation.

Bar standards call for gin & tonics to be housed in a tall, narrow, chilled glass. Cubes are stacked to the top before portions are distributed. Hardcore fans will often even freeze tonic water in ice cube trays as to not “dilute” the experience even further, but you might catch me poolside with one on the rocks in a pinch as well.

Tall and narrow doesn’t often jive well with hand-to-eye coordination after a few and you really don’t want to be the guy at a party who breaks his glass.

The G&T is a fairly simple, straightforward drink, which makes it perfect for a quick make without too much pomp and circumstance.

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The all important ratio of liquor-to-mix actually varies from 1:1 to 1:3, depending on the tastes of the intended recipient. Don’t be afraid to hit the 1:1 mark with better booze if you drink your whiskey neat, but lesser distillers might benefit slightly from a bit more bubbly.

The only other ingredient is lime juice, which is best served as fresh as possible. One tablespoon or the juice from half a lime will do just fine. Garnish is usually a complementary lime slice but you might want to try to “Sprite” it up for a little extra flavour (lemon + lime).

As for the key ingredients I recommend either Fever Tree Premium Indian Tonic or Fentimans’s Tonic Water, with the former having a bit more of that easy-drinking light feel of muted soda and the latter shuffling-in additional lemon hues and complexity. Both came in far above the average of the five other tonics that we sampled for the purposes of this comparison.

Fever Tree makes a fairly large cross section of variants in this category, but the Elderflower proved to be too much botanical when combined with gin, resulting in a cacophony of sweetness.

Another brand, Spectacular Tonic proved to be less than its namesake. The front label offers up the penance of less sweet, but unfortunately some of the fullness of the tonic flavourings followed suit.

Having a bit more experience with gins overall, a recommendation for California-brewed St. George Botanivore comes easy.

Delicately culled from the steam of more than 19 forms of botanicals, this bright but balanced gin is perhaps truly destined to stand on its own in martini applications, but things really get humming when its placed as a key ingredient in a G&T.

The Botanivore stands out from the pack of mid-to-entry level house bar brands with a much more rounded floral presentation and less of the dreaded pine needle effect that successfully rebuffs so many from partaking in the celebration.

On the nose the clear liquor shakes your nostril hairs with more perfume and less burn. Compared to Bombay Sapphire, the bouquet was much less intense than the Sapphire’s almost eye-watering combination of hard alcohol and gas station fumes.

Luckily the aqua blue bottle is a little lighter on the palate, with an almost sweet sensation followed by a gruff exit down to your internals.

Going back to the St. George, the botanical notes are comparatively pushed to the max (in a good way) with obvious hints of lavender and purple-coloured candy, if that candy was void of any heavy corn-based sugar flavours and artificial unnecessaries.

There are textures and flavours that resemble a healthy dose of syrup that sticks to the roof of your mouth, but the main takeaway is an additional complexity and smoother transition from lip to throat.

The finish is also more polished and less bull-in-a-china-shop upon exit.

Sampled without lime for the sake of transparency, tasting notes from the actual mix of St. George with Fever Tree India highlight honey and lemon, with a very stable and cohesive working relationship to each other.

St. George + Fentiman’s leaned harder towards both lemon and lime overtones achieving a delightful balance between the two liquids with a bit more sweet upfront.

You really can’t go wrong with either option, and if you are mixing at home, smaller samples of either tonic can be found online or any upscale alcohol grocer.

So there you have it, a summer drink alternative to enjoy outdoors, in the sun and anywhere one might find the welcoming and relaxing embrace of warm weather.

Cheers. T/O
Yes, some younger listeners do like wax, but that doesn’t mean all of them are going full-on VPI. Many of these hipsters are using portable, speaker-included players that sell for as low as $39.99 at Target, while others just admire the album art and use a download code to put the music on their phone as low-rez MP3s.

So, does all of this portend a bleak future for hi-fi, especially as baby boomers age out? Not necessarily. A lot of people who make their living in the industry remain optimistic. And some are particularly focused on attracting tomorrow’s music lovers. It can be done, they say.

One is Paul McGowan, who co-founded Boulder, Colorado-based PS Audio in 1973. The company makes hi-fi staples such as amplifiers, preamps, digital converters, power products and cables, along with embracing newer technologies such as streaming players and music-management software.

First off, he strongly rejects the theory that younger people don’t care about good sound. “I’ve been hearing this same concern for 45 years,” McGowan told me in a telephone interview. “It’s nothing new. I didn’t believe it then and I don’t believe it now.”

Today’s listeners have access to more music than ever before, he said, with streaming services such as Spotify, satellite and Internet radio, download stores such as iTunes and web locations including YouTube, as well as traditional physical media like CDs and LPs. Eventually, they’ll want to hear their favourite songs in higher fidelity, he argued.

“Music still is a big part of people’s lives. When they get to age 25 to 35 and beyond concerns about food and rent, they’ll look for something better in what they consider necessities – cars, houses and stereos,” McGowan said.

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While PS Audio offers some equipment with price tags that can go into five figures, McGowan and his team realize a first-time buyer likely will start more modestly.

To address that, six years ago McGowan put his son, Scott, in charge of developing an entry-level component. After 24 months of work, Scott delivered the Sprout, a $500 integrated amp that features an exterior of polished aluminum and walnut and an interior containing high-quality parts. To befit the youth-oriented nature of the Sprout, it was marketed with a Kickstarter campaign. The unit recently was upgraded to the Sprout 100, with the price rising to a still-economical $600.

The company has taken current trends into account with other equipment as well. For instance, when developing its recent Bridge II DAC upgrade, McGowan decided to include Spotify Connect so listeners could easily use the popular – but somewhat lower-rez – streaming service.

McGowan said he uses Spotify himself, mainly for background music or to discover new tunes. He decided it had a place in a high-end component after overhearing an audiophile society member quietly admit a love of the service.

“That was an aha! moment for me. Most of us are focused listeners at times, but much of our listening is more casual than critical. And this is where the beauty of a streaming service like Spotify comes in.”

Aside from that effort, PS Audio also has embraced social media, with the elder McGowan offering a blog, podcast and YouTube videos. The company’s website also is designed for easy ordering.

While manufacturers are evolving with the times, retailers are making changes as well. Much has been written about the decline of brick-and-mortar audio shops, but, truth be told, the entire retail industry has been disrupted by Internet commerce.

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Some audio sellers, though, may have hastened their woes by jumping into the home-theatre business – where margins were tight – and cutting back on two-channel lines and service.

Many of the stereo retailers still operating today are smarter about appealing to their niche. That includes attracting younger listeners. One shop that seems to be succeeding with such a focus is Audio Element in Pasadena, California.

Audio Element is owned by Brian Berdan, himself still a young person in his 30s. He began his hi-fi sales career working for his father Brooks Berdan at a shop in Monrovia carrying that name. After his father died, Brian left the store and went out on his own. Rather than opt for cheaper space off the beaten path, as some retailers have done, he chose a thriving entertainment district in Pasadena on Union Street, where there’s plenty of foot traffic and eyeballs looking through the window.

Passers-by glancing in see a half-dozen turntables positioned in the front room. The youth-friendly eye candy is intentional, as are some of the selections that might be playing. The day I visited, it was AC/DC’s “Back in Black.” There’s no audiophile snobbery at Berdan’s shop.

“The turntables help create the atmosphere we want,” Berdan said. “They definitely pull people into the store. There’s a nostalgia factor for physical objects.”

At the same time, he is keenly aware that many of his clients access music in different ways. Berdan said his job is to show them how to make it sound better. The store owner uses social media to promote his business, and also does things like hold listening parties where guests can bring their own records. In addition, he aggressively pursues Yelp consumer-recommendation ratings. “That’s the way a lot of 20- and 30-somethings find out where to go,” he said.

Berdan caters to veteran hobbyists just as intensely. He is a frequent audio show exhibitor, often outfitting his room with such upscale brands as Wilson Audio loudspeakers and VTL electronics, which he also demos in a custom-designed space in his store.

While Berdan is luring new listeners with turntables, an upstart Boston-area company is finding success by making them. U-Turn Audio launched its Orbit turntable through a Kickstarter campaign in 2012. The business quickly has carved a place in the manufacturing of sturdy plug-and-play models, with most selling for $179 to $459, including cartridge.

Today, U-Turn has sold 50,000 Orbits, primarily by appealing to young buyers.

“For a lot of the folks we sell to, the Orbit is their first experience with vinyl and their introduction to two-channel stereo,” said Ben Carter, the company’s co-founder. “Our niche is to offer well-built turntables that get all the fundamentals of good playback right. Along with people new to vinyl, we attract those who bought a cheap discount-store player and now want something better.”

Carter and his partners may have an edge in understanding today’s youth market, since they all are in their 20s themselves. He acknowledges young people like digital sources, but contends they are attracted to physical media as well.

“A lot of them grew up with component stereo in the house, so they know what they are,” he said.

“There’s a nostalgia factor.”

Many young people are becoming serious record collectors, he said. “They like the limited editions, the colored vinyl, imports,” Carter said. “We have customers who tell us they started buying albums even before they got their first turntable.”

Carter said the company embraces digital media such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter to market its products. Its website also contains a lot of easy-to-read tips about spinning vinyl and putting together a two-channel system.

“Component systems can be intimidating,” Carter said. “A lot of our buyers, for example, don’t know what a phono preamp is or why they need one. It’s things like that, I think, that can scare new people off from the audiophile world. As an industry, all of us can do a better job educating people and making things easier for the user.”

U-Turn keeps things simple by offering a limited number of options. It also sells Audioengine self-powered speakers on its website, so with a few clicks a buyer can have everything he or she needs to play music for as little as $500.

“A lot of people who make their living in the industry remain optimistic.”

JOHN STANCAVAGE

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Carter said he is optimistic the vinyl trend hasn't peaked, and believes younger people will continue to discover the pleasures of hi-fi sound. "Vinyl sales still are growing," he observed. "Album prices are starting to come down a bit as more pressing plants open, which should help."

U-Turn is a frequent exhibitor at audio shows, where organizers have stepped up efforts in recent years to draw in the hi-fi curious. Along with setting up entry-level rooms, one of the fast-growing segments at shows is the headphone area. That's where the youngest crowd usually can be found, trying out the alternatives to mass-market "cans."

Bill Kanner, a public relations executive who has spent decades in the high-end industry, said it is critical for shows to highlight more than the $100K systems. At the 2017 Los Angeles Audio Show, Kanner helped promote an "audio for the rest of us" room, which featured entry-level gear. The times I visited, lines were backed up outside into the hallway. The show also partnered with a local radio station and gave out tickets to area college music students. Other stereo shows, such as the recent Audio Expo North America in Chicago, offer similar budget rooms and youth discounts.

"For the audio industry to thrive, we have to reach out beyond audiophiles," Kanner told me. "I'm 74 years old and I want this hobby to go on beyond my generation. Music makes life beautiful." So, while the hi-fi world has faced some serious disruption in recent years, its future does not appear as cloudy as some observers frequently worry.

Perhaps one of the biggest drivers may be that listening to albums on a good stereo encourages social interaction, which especially appeals to a younger generation that spends a lot of time on their mobile devices.

"It they are on the go, yes, they are going to be listening to their phones, but if they are hanging out together they will want to play albums," U-Turn's Carter said. "They can pass the jackets around, look at them and talk about the music. It's more fun."

I first came across aftermarket tonearm lifters a couple years ago, but gave them little thought because I was a trained phonograph monkey who jumped up at the end of every record side. I’d been doing this my whole life (except for a few occasions where I was with someone who had an older turntable which incorporated a lift mechanism) so why change now? Enter the Little Fwend Automatic Tonearm Lifter at AXPONA this year. After examining the beautifully machined, and precision-damped device I was intrigued and took delivery of two (a low and high version) to try out. I installed one on the Thales TTT Slim-II turntable I’m using and have been deeply impressed at its consistent and smooth operation.

Part-Time Audiophile contributing editor John Stancavage writes about music and equipment from the top of one of the few hills in northeast Oklahoma. His first component stereo cost $129 and was made by a sewing machine company.

www.littlefwend.com
–Rafe Arnott
Words from Damon Von Schweikert of Von Schweikert Audio

Looking Inside

Von Schweikert Audio is a family company and when it comes to my background and my involvement, it really depends on how far back you want to go. To be frank, I can barely remember a time in my life that didn’t involve high-end audio and specifically, speakers.

I started helping my dad build speaker cabinets at around six or seven years of age. At that time I helped wrangle the 4 x 8-foot sheets on the table saw when we worked out of our garage in Whittier, California during the mid-70s. I was also his switch box when he did ABX testing; I sat behind the two speakers jumping from one set of input terminals to the next. I learned a lot about analyzing sound and voicing speakers, even back then—sitting behind the speakers.

My initial experiences with high-end came with our personal system from which I would often receive hand-me-downs. My first turntable was a Garrard at age six. That’s when I started collecting records and I think it was this love of music at an early age that best explains why I have such a wide appreciation of various musical genres now.

It was also at this time that I began tagging along with my father when he visited all the local high-end stores. The first shop I remember going to was The Sound Cellar in Brea, California.

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When I was 10 or 11 years old I began helping my farther with crossover assembly on his first production model: the Vortex Screen. I don’t know how many people are aware of this, but Robert Harley purchased one of those pairs of speakers for his system. In fact, it was his review of the Vortex Screen for Stereophile that earned him a permanent position as a staff writer. By the age of 12, I took over all speaker production allowing my father to focus exclusively on design and establishing his business. As things progressed, I hired, trained and supervised staff as well as material procurement and quality control.

Over the next 13 years, we went through a couple of iterations of our business (Vortex Acoustics, Forcefield Acoustics and Von Schweikert Research) as my father developed the necessary entrepreneurial skills that are wholly separate from loudspeaker engineering. My father even developed a line of stereo and home theatre speakers for Counterpoint Electronics during this time.

It was at Von Schweikert Research (during my early 20s) when I moved from the design and manufacturing side of the business into sales and marketing. So I’ve worked in the development and production of high-end loudspeakers nearly all of my life and I’m 48 years old now. But working for a family business has its ups and downs and once I became exposed to the external side of the business, I developed strong opinions about our direction. So I sought out opportunities where I could develop my business management skills independently from the family business. This led to a career in retail, which allowed me to develop an understanding of that side of the distribution chain which was completely foreign to my manufacturing upbringing.

A work history going back to such a young age, coupled with the scope of that experience, granted me an affinity for operations which landed me a position working with the VP of Stores for Levi’s & Dockers Outlet. It was this experience that most sharpened my business acumen as well as established my appreciation for brand development which prepared me for the role of CEO at Von Schweikert Audio.

One of the first things I initiated when I took over the position in 2015 was the acquisition of Endeavor Audio and the subsequent partnership with Leif Swanson as our VP of Sales and Marketing. One of the first things I initiated when I took over the position in 2015 was the acquisition of Endeavor Audio and the subsequent partnership with Leif Swanson as our VP of Sales and Marketing. One of the first things I initiated when I took over the position in 2015 was the acquisition of Endeavor Audio and the subsequent partnership with Leif Swanson as our VP of Sales and Marketing. One of the first things I initiated when I took over the position in 2015 was the acquisition of Endeavor Audio and the subsequent partnership with Leif Swanson as our VP of Sales and Marketing. One of the first things I initiated when I took over the position in 2015 was the acquisition of Endeavor Audio and the subsequent partnership with Leif Swanson as our VP of Sales and Marketing. One of the first things I initiated when I took over the position in 2015 was the acquisition of Endeavor Audio and the subsequent partnership with Leif Swanson as our VP of Sales and Marketing. One of the first things I initiated when I took over the position in 2015 was the acquisition of Endeavor Audio and the subsequent partnership with Leif Swanson as our VP of Sales and Marketing. One of the first things I initiated when I took over the position in 2015 was the acquisition of Endeavor Audio and the subsequent partnership with Leif Swanson as our VP of Sales and Marketing. One of the first things I initiated when I took over the position in 2015 was the acquisition of Endeavor Audio and the subsequent partnership with Leif Swanson as our VP of Sales and Marketing. One of the first things I initiated when I took over the position in 2015 was the acquisition of Endeavor Audio and the subsequent partnership with Leif Swanson as our VP of Sales and Marketing.

Part of that was incorporating Leif as a member of our design team of which he is now Lead Engineer.

To me, this was the most critical initiative as it secured necessary talent to ensure our transition into the second generation of leadership at VSA which was ultimately responsible for the highly successful launch of our the ULTRA 11s. Looking to the horizon, Leif and I look forward to demonstrating the ULTRA 9s very soon (probably at RMAF 2018) along with our newest design: the Endeavor SE.

Another important initiative of my transition to CEO was securing the global-distribution rights for MasterBuilt Audio cables. This allows us to leverage our existing distribution network to bring this product to market as quickly as possible. It’s important to understand that Leif and I are committed to treat MB Audio as a wholly independent product from VSA. This cable is amazing and we’re confident it will show its virtues when paired with any quality high-end speakers – not just VSA speakers – a belief proven by our wide range of customers.

It’s important that consumers know we’re focused on creating (with VSA) and representing (in the case of MBA), neutral products that will integrate into established systems while improving performance and we’re eager to demonstrate that.

“... I’ve worked in the development and production of high-end loudspeakers nearly all of my life....”

DAMON VON SCHWEIKERT
The day I came home and heard the deep, rolling bass lines of '80s new wave making the walls of my house throb, was the day I knew I'd finally succeeded.

To understand what I'm talking about you have to know the story of the DAC that came to stay for a long time. You see, this is the third, final and long-awaited instalment (mostly by totaldac main man Vincent Brient) of my series on going from an all-analog house to a digital-hybrid home.

You can read parts one and two at your leisure, because they get into all the gritty detail of why I wanted computer-based audio in my home and the how of why I use Roon and Tidal HiFi to play it.

This piece is about how the totaldac d-1 integral streaming DAC sounds and how it ushered in a new era of listening to music for me and my family.

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There were several parts to the experiment of bringing digital audio into my life, not the least of which was seeing just how good it could sound compared to a quality turntable, tonearm and cartridge, but also to get my family involved in listening to their music through the hifi and not just their phones or the television.

Which is why when I came home that day and I heard the Talking Heads playing loud enough to pop the living room windows from their seals that I realized that I’d finally achieved one of my digital-audio goals: To have my children play their music through the main hifi rig without prodding.

I walked through the door triumphantly and let the wall of drums, bass, guitar and keyboards wash over me, my son looking at me apprehensively because I’m sure he thought he’d been busted for cranking the tunes.

Just the opposite.

I smiled broadly at him and said “Sounds great, I love this album!”

A few nights later we proceeded to have a ’70s ’80s, and ’90s game of music tennis, with each of us queuing up one song after the other in an aural rally that saw us belting out the lyrics to every song, jamming with our air guitars and dancing in place to bands like Sigue-Sigue Sputnik, Flock of Seagulls, Kraftwerk and Joy Division while we cooked dinner.

My son prefers using his own music library via AirPlay through the totaldac, because he doesn’t like the search function in either Room or Tidal, which I have to admit, can take some getting used to if you’re digging for a particular track sometimes.

Regardless of the how, the point of this is to assert that unlike playing LPs, or even using the CD player, it was computer-based audio that finally got my kids to start using dad’s monolith of a sound system.

While it did take many months for this change to occur, one change which occurred overnight was how much the d-1 integral got used instead of my turntable. When you go from having access to around 500 LPs, to several million albums, it’s a full-throttle rush. Sudden I was surfing music genres, new releases, playlists and searching out artists and titles like I was a man gulping in oxygen after being starved for air.

Taking deep breaths is an apt metaphor because there was a euphoria involved much like hyperventilating: Where to start?

Like vinyl when you get a new ‘table or cartridge and suddenly you’re hearing things for the first time and you find yourself pulling LP, after LP off the shelves as your need to hear them anew supersedes all.

I spent dozens of hours listening to music within the first two days of having the totaldac in my system. I don’t think I’d been so obsessed with accessing songs online since I heard Napster was shutting down.

Which leads me to my next point: The sound.

While the totaldac d-1 I have for review retails for $8,200 USD, it does have the DSD64 over DoP option ($350 USD) the optional USB GIGAFILTER cable ($2,050 USD), and the totaldac Ethernet Cable/Filter ($420 USD) which pushes the MSRP up to $11,020 USD based on current Euro exchange pricing.
Certainly not cheap, but considering the d-1 has a separate power supply, and a hand-built ladder DAC comprised of 100 individually selected and matched 0.01% Vishay Nude Foil resistors (the 1% tolerance versions retail for $15 USD each) as its beating heart, it seems a bargain. Add in that it also streams over WiFi, handles DSD files, can accommodate 24/192 asynchronous Xmos USB, has optical, RCA and AES-EBU digital inputs, plus a beautiful sounding 3.0Vrms 32~600 Ohm headphone amplifier built in, and I feel you’re getting a lot of bang for the buck in a one-box solution.

I normally don’t talk price, but here I wanted to mention it because in comparing the d-1 to my Audio Note CD 4.1x transport/DAC ($12,000 USD), and to a number of vinyl front ends in the $10,000 to $25,000 USD range, the totaldac never sounded outclassed. On the contrary, it sounded superb and was always in the mix as a source regardless of what I had in for review. If I had to use one word word to describe the sound, I’d have to say human. It reproduces the electronic signal in an organic, tactile, and musical way that I often shook my head at in how similar it was to vinyl. It doesn’t sound like analog, it just sounds analog, albeit different.

Take for example my current turntable, the Thales TTT Slim-II, Simplicity tonearm and EMT JSD VR low-output moving-coil cartridge. Swapping back-and-forth between the two sources was more akin to changing the mat on the platter than going from an LP to a Tidal HiFi track, and I have to say that blacks were far more inky in their blackness than any of the analog rigs I had on hand for comparison during my time with the unit. Going between the d-1 and a turntable was more a difference of subtle variances to the sound and body of a cello or guitar, or sound stage presentation than analog vs digital. Listening to Oliver Nelson’s 1961 composition The Blues And The Abstract Truth through the d-1, the CD4.1x and the Thales revealed more about the subtle shadings in the plucking of Paul Chamber’s bass playing between the three recordings than it did any differences over resolution, transparency or tonal qualities. Timbre on trumpets, saxophones, piano and wood-bodied instruments like stand-up bass is spot-on and envelops you in a cloak of familiarity on cuts like “Stolen Moments.” Nelson’s sax work keens plaintively and has beautiful brassy sheen, but it’s when Freddie Hubbard comes in from the back of the recording stage and blows so long and hard down the middle that I felt as if I’d fall off my chair following the notes spiral down.

The bloom off Bill Evans piano notes had weight and sinew to the key and pedal movements, Roy Haynes hypnotic syncopation on the drums reverberated with just the right touch of stick on the taught skins and pound on the kick drum. Shimmer off cymbals sparkled and faded with real-world air and space. While jazz and simple instrumental, or acoustic sets benefitted from the subtle extraction that Brient’s R2R DAC design and circuit implementation is able to wrest from the digitized ether, it excels at dance, electronic, and complex classical works too.

Take the 1975 studio album Rubycon by seminal German electronic music pioneers Tangerine Dream. This is an incredibly dense, layered and spectral work that convincingly transports you to another time and space with its haunting mellotron, synthesizer, Moog, organ, guitar and vocal entreaties. Capable of eliciting goosebumps on my vinyl rig, through the d-1 there is a further sense of fluidity to the two tracks that make up the album (Rubycon, Part One and Two) and a wider stage presentation to the recording – pushing the boundaries of the music another couple feet to either side of my Audio Note AN-E/SpHE loudspeakers.
The huge rolling Moog keyboard work of Christopher Franke that dominates "Rubycon, Part One" as it boils over at the seven-minute mark never overpowers Peter Baumann’s staccato organ playing or Edgar Froese’s hypnotic mellotron noodling in the background. No small feat considering the amount of tonal overlap going on and a credit to just how much resolution the d-1 is capable of putting on display without ever sacrificing warmth, or timbral accuracy.

More about delivering emotional impact with cerebral nuance (along with a deft hand at both micro and macro dynamics) from your digital music collection and the sum of many well thought out parts and ingenious circuit design than the specs alone can communicate, the totaldac d-1 integral is an aural communication device of the highest order. T/O
An interview with Vincent Brient of totaldac:

Rafe Arnott: Vincent, you grew up, and live in France. Your factory is near the famous Mont Saint-Michel, and from what I’ve been able to gather, your interest in electronic design started at a young age with an eye to improving hi-fi equipment. Is it safe to say you have a passion for music reproduction?

Vincent Brient: Yes, I have obviously a passion for music reproduction, a passion for music and a passion for electronics. How did you have exposure to this unique, and very niche, market?

VB: I started with a simple DAC for DIY. Some people from the high performance DIY world tested it and bought it, but also some people with high-end systems tested it too and wanted it as a finished product. So I did, with more and more features and upgrades. Then people with very high-end systems, $100k+ tested it and wanted it. This all grew years after years and now some totaldac DACs, especially the d1-twelve models, are used in cost-no-object systems. I didn’t target to make a very expensive DAC but the market led me to that because they wanted the best quality rather than a good quality/price ratio from me. Recently I also tried to make a very good DAC at more affordable price, the DAC is called the d1-core and is already used as reference by several cable manufacturers.

RA: Can you explain the thought process behind your totaldac models, and how you see them fitting into someone’s existing system? What sets totaldac apart in a market crowded with high-end DACs? What were you hoping to achieve with your circuit designs?

VB: All parts are quite special and many are not often used in audio. Yes the Vishay Foil is very special, yes at 9 dollars each, but this retail price is for 1% tolerance, and I use 0.01% version. The d1-twelve uses about 300 pieces per channel, so a total of about 600 pieces. I tested many types of resistors and these gave the best sound, so I am using these, even for the entry-level DAC d1-core, although these resistances are roughly 10 times more expensive than high-precision metal-film resistors. They give some magic to the sound.

RA: You have a number of different models, and they scale-up dramatically in the number of resistors used in the R2R DAC each implements. Why is the R2R DAC at the heart of, and so very critical to, your designs instead of the multi-bit delta sigma chips used by so many?

VB: The discrete Vishay Foil R2R ladder is the heart of conversion, with digital on one side of the ladder and analog on the other side, so yes this is extremely important for the sound. DAC chips are much easier to use because they are made to be ready-to-use. They are also much cheaper.

RA: There’s been much discussion in digital audio about the importance of the digital clock used in circuit design. Is eliminating jitter, and accurate timing the most important aspect to DAC design?

VB: Clock is important yes, it can create jitter, but not only the clock can create jitter. A DAC using a high end clock can also produce a lot of jitter for other reasons in the rest of the digital path. A high-end clock doesn’t guarantee a low jitter at all. totaldac DACs use their custom internal clock and this clock has been selected for its sound quality, not for telecom-marketing numbers. About distortion people have understood that the number is not linked to the sound quality. Many people have not yet understood that it is the same for clock accuracy and jitter, the numbers do not say much about the sound.

RA: Can you talk about some of the most crucial parts used in the construction of totaldac? Vishay made resistors are quite expensive to utilize for example – $15 USD per, I believe – and the base models have 100 of them. The d1-twelve (three-box unit) has 300 per channel, correct? How did you end up utilizing such an expensive part? There are many cheaper alternatives, are there not?

VB: The discrete Vishay Foil R2R ladder, processing (custom FPGA), custom clock, output stage, mechanical damping... this gives a different sound, many reviewers have written about that. The first totaldac DACs also arrived on the market before the numerous new DACs appeared, most of them with a more conventional technology and made by manufacturer non specialist in digital audio.

RA: You have a number of different models, and they scale-up dramatically in the number of resistors used in the R2R DAC each implements. Why is the R2R DAC at the heart of the DACs you produce? Is it safe to say you have a passion for music reproduction?

VB: In your opinion is streaming the future, or will a local digital music library of high-resolution music still trump streaming regardless of available bandwidth to consumers moving forward? What about CD, and SACD?

RA: In your opinion is streaming the future, or will a local digital music library of high-resolution music still trump streaming regardless of available bandwidth to consumers moving forward? What about CD and SACD? I think that local music and internet streaming will live together and not everybody will go to internet streaming. CD can also be connected to a totaldac DAC, there are also customers buying a totaldac DAC to connect it only to their CD transport because they want the totaldac sound. That’s a digital-to-analog converter, it is as useful for a CD transport as it is for internet streaming.

VB: I’ve asked you previously about MQA compatibility for totaldac. Can you explain to me your thoughts on MQA, and how MQA implementation would look for totaldac? Would existing owners of totaldac products be able to upgrade their units if/when you make hardware MQA compatible?

RA: What does the future hold for totaldac? I know you have just announced a rather impressive loudspeaker called croSD of the totaldac server. MQA is first a compression and authentication for internet streaming. A software like Roon for example, can manage the MQA streaming from the Internet and send the audio output in DSD or PCM to the DAC, via Roon-Ready protocol or directly via a USB link. So Roon users have just to accept to install the latest version of Roon on their computer. The RoonReady receiver in the totaldac server doesn’t need to change.

Other players like Logitel Media Server could become MQA compatible for internet streaming, in this case the user would have just to upgrade the software on the microSD of the totaldac server.

VB: I designed the d1.50 speakers because I needed it for me, to design DACs and demo DACs. Now I can also sell this speaker, but the main focus is still the digital source and everything around it.
With a sleek, exceptionally well-built alloy chassis and a human-friendly remote control, the Soulution 330 Integrated has the visual design chops to go toe-to-toe with Devialet any day of the week. The Swiss manufacturer has focused on isolating the dual-mono audio-signal stages from the six separate power supplies utilized in the 330’s internal layout to maximize shielding from interference. With 120 watts of high Class-A power into eight ohms, and a signal-to-noise ratio of 120 dB, the 330 comes off as smooth and powerful with staggeringly black backgrounds in its sonic presentation. Sounding much more like a valve-based amp than any solid-state integrated has a right to, the Soulution walks the line between delicacy and grunt with grace, poise and supreme control of any music genre I threw at it.

www.soulutionaudio.com

—Rafe Arnott
“Put your feet up and let your ears roam free.”

There. That’s as much pressure as you’ll ever feel at Old Forge Studio in Mystic, CT. I started Old Forge Studio because I wanted to share the deeply involving, emotional sounds I enjoy via Shindo Labs, Auditorium 23, Devore Fidelity, Rethm, Innuos, Aqua Acoustic Quality, J.C. Verdier, EMT, Leben HiFi, Sugden Audio, Falcon Acoustics, Well Tempered Laboratory, Dynavector and more.

If you’d like to make your ears extremely happy, please get in touch at:

Positive Feedback is a community, composed of writers and creative persons from around the world. Positive Feedback is an ongoing “work in progress,” chronicling the efforts of audiophile listeners, reviewers, designers, manufacturers, distributors, and humorists to explore the possibilities of high end audio to the utmost.
www.positive-feedback.com
How did we get here so fast?
I mean, not only in the sense of three editions already under our belts, but to me leaving The Occasional behind and moving to other publications?
It seems like only yesterday that I was covering my first trade show in California for Part-Time Audiophile.
It was an experience I’ll never forget and that I look back at fondly.
PTA alumni Malachi Kenney took immediate pity on me and proceeded to show me the ropes in Irvine from a perch at the hotel bar.
We ended up having more belly laughs than just about any other weekend I can remember.
It was the start of many other shows across North America and around the world that saw me introduced to the motley, but lovable crew that became my family when I was working away from family.
One thing led to another and before I knew it the time slipped by and suddenly this magazine was conceived.
I thought I’d be helming it for years to come, but things change and as much as these pages are a physical part of me, I must separate myself from the column inches and leave them in the capable hands of Scot Hull & Co.
Since none of this would have happened without Hull taking a chance on some audio-forum unknown a few years ago, I have to take the time to thank him here for seeing something in me that I didn’t see myself.
An audiophile.
Along the way we forged a friendship and a working bond that saw us dedicate ever more of our time and energies to the little website that hosts this magazine and works hard at being not only informative, relevant and engaging, but irreverent, ridiculous and weird.
I’m going to miss the madness that surrounded me helping to spread the word of our many writers and contributors and I’ll miss the FaceTime meetings over a bottle of wine with Hull as we set out to change the world of audiophile journalism one story idea at a time.
But most of all I’ll miss the readers who always let me know right where I stood.
Alongside them.
– Rafe Arnott

this is the end
Setting the record straight since 1978. 40 years of American craftsmanship from our family to yours!