**New Flagship Integrated Amplifier**

**L-509x**

"The L-509X is one of the most intimate-sounding, dynamic, texturally nuanced, truthful purveyors of music of my experience." Ken Micallef

Luxman L-509x—Stereophile, May 2018

"A bang up to date design, in both engineering and sound... simply special"

Luxman L-509x—Hi-Fi News, January 2018

www.luxman-global.com

---

I don’t approach reviews like most people do. I’ve been criticized time after time, by editors and readers and manufacturers and peers, for bringing too much of myself into a review. It’s been suggested once or twice that I must love talking about myself. That’s not it—I’m quite an introvert. That’s not it at all.

I’ll tell you a secret, though. It’s been a long time since I’ve really read a review, other than the ones for products I’ve represented over the last few years because that was my job. Why? Because after spending as much time in this hobby as I have, all the reviews start to sound the same. They start off with a little history, or perhaps a short tale about how they received the assignment from their editor, they talk about designs and specs, they go on and on about the cool recordings they used to evaluate the product, and they come up with a conclusion.

There’s nothing wrong with that, of course. That’s the job. But that’s not the way YOU, the reader/potential end user/hobbyist, approach a new component. There’s a story involved, of why you chose this specific thingamajig to put into your system, of what you hoped to achieve by making this purchase. That story continues after you plug everything in. What was your experience with this addition? Was it easy to install, or did you have a few glitches along the way? What changes did you notice? How did this product impact your life?

That’s the real story of evaluating a new product. We should bring ourselves into it because you need to know who we are and why we like what we like. Too often we read reviews like they’re written by computer programs, and not human beings with foibles and flaws and subjectively silly reasons for doing what we do. We make a lot of mistakes. This I know.

---

I think of my favorite high-end audio reviewers over the years, people like Art Dudley and Corey Greenberg and John Danks and Michael Lavorgna and Sam Tellig and yes, even Scot Hull. (He’s why I’m here, by the way.) We at The Occasional aspire to review as well as they do, to show how experiencing music reproduction is, ultimately, a human endeavor.

Enough about me. This is the first issue of The Occasional that I’ve helmed, aside from the Buyers’ Guide we released for the holidays. We’ve come up with sort of a mission statement for the 2.0 version of the magazine. “Not another audiophile magazine, but a magazine for audiophiles and the things they love.” That’s why we go beyond the usual product reviews and music features and talk about the hobbies and passions that overlap audio.

That’s why you’ll see features such as John DeVore (yes, that John DeVore, the guy who makes those exquisite loudspeakers for DeVore Fidelity) discussing the origins of the fully-automatic chronograph watch, or Brian Hunter talking about selvage denim, or Dr. Panagiotis Karavitis sharing a photo essay of New York City and its relationship to music, or Nina Rosenblatt Sventitsky continuing her wonderful wine column, The Reluctant Sommelier, in these pages.

We hope you enjoy the Spring 2019 issue of The Occasional!

Thanks,

Marc Phillips

---

Marc Phillips
I’m not saying those tubes were made by aliens. But it was totally aliens!

— Giorgio Tsoukalos, Expert Alien Audiophile Reviewer

Table of Contents

6 - In with the New—the Trenner & Friedl ART Monitors
14 - The Reluctant Sommelier—Revolution in Rioja
22 - Angels of Sound—Sonus Faber Serafino Tradition
36 - Pressing Matters—A Tour of the Furnace Record Pressing Plant
40 - The Parasound Halo Hint 6 Integrated Amplifier
48 - In the Raw—The World of Selvedge Denim
54 - Moon by Simaudio 390 Network Streamer
60 - The Grand Finale—The Race for the First Automatic-Winding Chronograph
66 - The Deep End—Eric Dolphy Musical Prophet
76 - Musical Spring in New York
86 - Happy Together: Dragon Inspire IHA-1 Headphone Amplifier, Silver Dragon Headphone Cables and Focal Clear Headphones
If you know me through Facebook, you know that my biggest pet peeve is being added to groups without my permission. I think it’s the dumbest thing Facebook does, although they do seem to be addressing this issue. For eight years I represented several high-end audio manufacturers, and yet I kept getting added to groups that celebrated the competition. If you added me to a group without my permission, you usually got defriended unless I really, really liked you.

I remember the first time I made an exception, and that’s when I was added to a group called “Friends Who Love Trenner & Friedl ARTs.” (Later it was changed to just “Friends Who Love Trenner & Friedl,” but that’s still okay with me.) I already knew almost every person in that group—we ART owners are a close-knit clan and we constantly send emails to each other saying things such as “What amp are you using?” and “How far do you have yours from the back wall?” and “OH MY GOD! OH MY GOD! OH MY GOD!” Even though I represented many speaker brands over the years and stood behind their excellent products, when I went home at night I listened to music on the tiny ART monitors.

By Marc Phillips
WHY? AS WE ART OWNERS LOVE TO SAY,
“THEY MAY BE SMALL, BUT THEY HAVE THE HEART OF A LION.”

My Trenner & Friedl ARTs are special to me because they came at a certain point in my life where I became rather uninterested in high-end audio. I had just ended my first gig as an audio reviewer, and I sold off much of my system to help finance a new business venture. My new digs in Texas lacked a decent place to set up even a modest system. After enduring a rather spartan lifestyle for a couple of dusty, violently hot years outside of Austin, the audio industry started coyly poking at me to see if I was still mad. In response, I started my blog. I started talking about audio again. Old friends asked where I had been, new friends asked me who I was and where I had come from.

Manufacturers started sending me gear again. One of them, a woman named Colleen Cardas, sent me a bevy of cables to try out in my still modest system. When I spotted a pair of 2-way monitors called the Trenner & Friedl ARTs in an audio magazine, I noticed that they were internally wired with Cardas Audio cable. I loved the size and shape of the ARTs, the way the front baffles were so compact, around the size of an LS3/5a. But the cabinets were deep, uniquely so. (The cabinet design, like Cardas Audio cables, is based on the Golden Ratio.) I asked Colleen if she had listened to the ARTs, and she told me yes, they were fantastic, and that she was good friends with Andreas Friedl and Peter Trenner, the Austrian men who made them, as well as Bob Clarke of Profundo, the US distributor.

Within a couple of weeks, I had a pair of ARTs on hand to test to my heart’s content. I set them up in a small spare bedroom, almost a perfect 8’ cube of a room, and they still sounded wonderful—heart of a lion, indeed. I’ve never heard a small speaker sound so full, so balanced, so full of inner detail. In a room that should have sounded anything but good, the ARTs single-handedly renewed my love of this hobby. Andreas and Peter and Bob became good friends of mine, and Colleen—well, let’s just say that the ARTs brought us together. The three of us (or four, really) have been together ever since.

Neu und Verbessert?
Not too long ago Trenner & Friedl announced that they were going to update the ART. “How do you improve perfection?” I thought, even though I knew the answer to that lovestruck and obviously silly question. The ARTs aren’t perfect—no speaker is—but they do speak to me in a way that few products in audio do. As a tiny two-way monitor, the ARTs are limited in bass output—they go down to about 44 Hz (plus or minus 6 dB, which is a very loose spec). But the magic part of the ART, as I discovered in that first small bedroom, is the scale and the power of these monitors and how that can be increased through careful positioning in the room, especially in small ones. In fact, I can think of no other speaker that is as friendly to small rooms as the ART. You might not miss the lowest bass frequencies at all, especially if you manage to successfully couple the speakers to the room.

The new ART was inspired by the work that T&F accomplished when they came out with the Stone ART a few years ago. This was a limited edition ART with a baffle made from stone as well as new drivers and a few internal tweaks. The new ART is closer to the Stone ART than the old ART in both design and appearance. The new ART has a baffle that is made from bamboo, not stone, but it still looks very different from the old ARTs and their shiny Corian baffles.
The front of new ART is somewhat less flashy in appearance than the older model. The 5” aluminum/magnesium alloy woofer has been replaced, again, with one that is black—it’s as if the ART has grown up and now prefers a more serious look when going out and hitting the town. These new woofers have a lacquered fiber composite cone made for T&F by ScanSpeak. The only departure from this black motif is the center of the ring radiator tweeter, also made by ScanSpeak, which is shiny and silver. There are other finishes available, however—you can choose from natural, blazed or amaranth walnut for the cabinet and ebony eco or “bamboo massive,” a lighter veneer, for the baffle. You can also order special finishes by request.

**COMPARISONS**

I’m not big on comparisons or shootouts, because there are far too many variables such as the synergy between components. I do feel that it’s important to compare the old ART to the new ART simply because I have both on hand—I’m one of the few people in the world who can probably say that aside of Mr. Trenner and Mr. Friedl.

When I first took this role at *The Occasional*, I ran into Bob Clarke at an audio show and the first thing I said to him was something along the lines of “Are there any other reviewers who could talk about the ARTs like I could?”

Bob is cautious when it comes to submitting products for reviews, so thank goodness he agreed so readily.

The second reason I needed to compare the two is because it seems like every ART owner in the world asked me if I had checked out the new version. Ever since I received the new pair, I’ve received emails, Facebook messages, texts and phone calls asking me what I think. How are they? Are they better than the originals? Are you going to trade your old ones in, because I’ll buy them!

**So here are the ANSWERS**

Yes, the new ART offers better performance than the originals. It should, and for a couple or reasons. First, the old ARTs retailed for $4250/pair. The new ones come in at the same MSRP as the Stone ARTs at $6000/pair. Second, why would you try to improve one of the most intriguing and satisfying two-way monitors of the last decade if you weren’t going to up the ante?

Primarily the new ARTs sound bigger than the old ones. Both speakers throw up a soundstage that is mind-boggling in its depth and its layers, but the new version stretches those parameters in every direction. In addition, the older ARTs provided tight and substantial low frequencies, which was perhaps an illusion due to the size of that soundstage. The new ones hit 50 Hz at plus or minus 3 dB, not 6 dB, which is in the same ballpark, but I think’s a more honest feel to the bass, a more genuine reach into the foundations of the music.

Bob Clarke also told me that the new ARTs are a tad pickier than the older version when it comes to tube amplification, and “a bit thin with some lesser amps that have lower current capabilities, or less load tolerance, since the impedance on the new ones dips a bit more as frequency drops and rises a bit more in upper-mids.” If a tube amplifier rolls off a lot with lower impedances, in other words, the ARTs will sound a little thin and the bass won’t be “as stellar.”

While the older model is still as compelling as ever, the newer version is more convincing when it comes to sounding like a much bigger speaker. I’m not talking about just any big speaker, but one that possesses an exceptional sound quality independent of its size—and cost.
LISTENING
I treated the ARTs to nothing but the finest recordings since I knew they were up to the task. I also used the best amps I could get my hands on, since I know that my original ARTs kept revealing more depth every time I moved up the amplification ladder. (The ARTs have an efficiency of 85 dB at 8 Ohms, and I’ve pushed them with as little as 22 watts per channel and was still happy.) I chose my reference PureAudio Duo 2 power amplifier and PureAudio Control preamplifier because over the years that’s always been my favorite combo with the originals. I also used amplifiers from Parasound, Moon and Unison Research, but the PureAudio amps had the edge in pure sound quality.

That’s another thing ART owners will tell you—don’t be shy about using amps that are far more expensive, since the ARTs just keep getting better and better as you move up the ladder. My favorite reference recording over the last year has been the Analogue Productions’ 45rpm reissue of Nina Simone’s Little Girl Blue. I think it’s a nearly perfect recording, with just the slightest problem with center fill thanks to the age of the recording. (She’s physically too far away from the piano she’s playing.) With the new ARTs, that gap in the center of the stage was less pronounced because the entire soundstage was more fleshed out, with far more layering and detail. That allowed the presence of the musicians and the space between them to fill up with textures that come from those presences—the bodies of the musicians, the size of the instruments, the physical materials of the stage.

On 2L Recordings’ excellent new choral recording Ljos, performed by the Fauna Vokalkvintett, the new ARTs did a much finer job of providing an accurate rendering of the inside of the old Norwegian church where it was recorded than the older ARTs. Each singer could be heard individually—you can almost imagine their speaking voices and what they sound like, an amazing thing to realize while listening to a massed voice recording.

The ARTs were utterly mesmerizing with intimate jazz and small orchestras. Usually that’s a euphemism for “don’t play Tool or System of a Down on these speakers,” but I’ve had many late-night rockfests with my ARTs, and I was always pleased with their ability to step up and deliver an accurate albeit slightly downsized version of all that fire and thunder. But if you like your music intimate and soothing, the ARTs will compete with any giant monolith out there.

CONCLUSION
My time with these new ARTs was bittersweet and left me perplexed about my feelings and allegiances. Could they ever replace my beloved originals? I’m not sure, since the emotional ties to my ARTs run deep, but there is no doubt that the new version is more fully realized in almost every parameter. The deep bass is richer and more three-dimensional, and the soundstage is much larger.

I thought about all the analogies I could use to describe how I felt. Was the original ART the woman I fell in love with until I met her more attractive and compatible sister? No, that’s not it. Here’s the most accurate way to convey my dilemma—both ARTs are the same person, separated only by a few years of experience. The new version is more mature and wiser and therefore has more stories to tell, even though all those spectacular memories still belong to the older version. (I hope this doesn’t sound sexist—it’s just that both speakers have captured my heart in a way that can only be described as romantic.)

At their core, both speakers are identical in spirit, in the way they can adapt to almost any room, the way the midrange provides an incredible amount of inner detail without sounding edgy or busy. Both speakers have the heart of a lion, which means they sound just like big, expensive speakers with just a little shaved off the bottom. As I’ve said, much of that can be ameliorated in less demanding rooms.

If I could make a clean break with the originals, give them to someone who will love them as much as I did, perhaps I could make the switch without feeling too guilty. (Maybe I’d have to arrange for visits on the weekends and every other Christmas.) But the current ARTs are spectacular in every way, a new benchmark for small monitors that sound big, the only one in this crowded field with this much soul, this much magic and this much love in its big lion-heart.

"Was the original ART the woman I fell in love with until I met her more attractive and compatible sister?"
While you and I were going about our lives for the past decade, a slow and steady drumbeat of change has been taking place in Rioja, Spain’s best-known wine region. In the wine world, big change is often a response to the market—the need to push exports, increase production/revenue, build awareness. In Rioja, market-driven updates were done over a decade ago through an ambitious strategy of expanded trade beyond the EU. Shiny new branding campaigns, money spent in the US, Mexico, and China and other markets promoted Rioja wines, including a new label color scheme aimed at helping people of all languages understand the region’s system based on oak aging (the Crianza system) and the wine names that correspond to this heritage wine style.

The revolution of the terruño winemakers should keep the region competitively positioned for the global market.

At this point Rioja’s classic wine style, and the system guarding it, is experiencing a revolution of sorts, driven by Rioja’s grower producers who feel restrained by the region’s classification system and the traditional style for which Rioja is known. They want, and the wine world demands, a focus on the provenance of the grapes and an identity that reflects the diversity of Rioja’s terroir.

What Has Been

Briefly, Rioja became known for wines that were aged for a long time in oak, mainly American, starting in the mid-1800s. Previously, Rioja wine was usually consumed within the first year of production. Often wines were ‘rustic’ and consistent quality was not achieved. A couple of visionaries—soon to be known as the Marqués de Riscal and the Marqués de Murrieta—learned about the French method of preserving wine through exposure to oak barrels by visiting the Bordeaux region of France. These men began aging wines in Rioja using oak barrels, which controlled the amount of oxygen exposure and created an aroma profile of brulée, dried cherries, strawberries, plums and tobacco/leather/cigar box for older wines. Long oak aging (decades!) was made possible with American oak, which has a unique compound that slows the aging of wine by further limiting the amount of oxygen transfer in and out of the barrel.

This method of extended oak aging was eventually adopted by many in the region as the favored production method. Tiers of aging were then adopted and made official (Crianza system = nursery or breeding system) with minimum and maximum oak and bottle aging methods named on the wine labels - Crianza (moderate oak exposure), Reserva (longer oak and bottle aging before release) and Gran Reserva (longest aging category, normally made in very good vintages.) American oak was more easily obtained and more affordable than French, so this system of aging in American oak created the style.

As oak aging became Rioja’s identity, so too was the location of the vineyard/grape source. Barrels were expensive, so smaller growers around the region stopped making their own wine and sold their grapes to established producers. This business model resulted in a region-wide commitment to...
keep the appellation named Rioja, and not push for nor allow smaller village labeling prevalent in France, for instance. (Think Burgundy and Puligny-Montrachet, a sub-appellation of Burgundy, or Napa Valley and Oakville, a sub-AVA of Napa Valley.) The model and style dictated a blending of different grape varieties - Tempranillo, Garnacha (Grenache), Mazuelo and Graciano, or any combination of these grapes.

For almost a century this 70 mile-long, 30 mile-wide region has been known officially as one region, DOCa Rioja, with a reputation for a singular style. Within the region, though, changes were steadily taking place, evolving gently in some ways, and more forcefully in others. Outside demands helped put pressure on the region to take the leap, and internally young winemakers were traveling to other regions to learn their ways. In 2014, a group of wineries in the Alavesa sub-region (Basque portion of Rioja) attempted to break away from the region to force the governing body; in the end only one winery separated from the pack, and it no longer labels as Rioja. But it created quite a stir and supported the rallying cry to ‘get with the program’. What began as a very successful way to protect the Rioja brand and region became a hindrance in setting the region up for a different market and new century.

**What Will Be**

This revolution in Rioja wine styles has been happening for the past 20 years or so. Specifically, bodegas are moving from extended oak aging to less aging, using French oak instead of or in addition to American oak, and using grapes solely from the estate, or specific locations. Growing reliance on locations means many more single variety wines (not blends) due to the different climates and soils of the region from tip to tip, north to south. Tempranillo has one set of expressions if it’s grown in chalk and limestone - dark ruby red, savory, with smoothness. Grown in ferrous soils with exposure to cold Atlantic winds, the noble grape of Spain results in wines of high acid, lighter color and more floral and bright cherry aromas. These newer methods are often put in the category of Modern Rioja, which may generally mean the wines are more reflective of terroir.

The paradox of Rioja is that while the region has promoted a unity and a style, there are many macro- and micro-climates, changes in vineyard aspect and topography, rivers and mountain ranges all resulting in a wealth of different terroir; it was there all along, and the growers and winemakers understand their terruño intimately. Now they will be able to express it right on the bottle so there will be fewer guessing games for us as consumers.
In 2017, the ruling body of the Rioja region approved a ground-breaking new set of rules that will incorporate the focus of Rioja from the oak barrel to the place where the wine is grown, with a new wine style approved as well. Notable are:

**Viños de Pueblos** - naming of villages directly on the label as the provenance of the grapes (versus the bodega where the wine is made).

**Viñedos Singulares** - single vineyard wines. This category has strict rules (petition for it, vines 35 years or older, vineyard traceability.)

**Espumosos de Calidad de Rioja** - sparkling wine made in the traditional method (like Champagne) will be in white and rose.

You don’t have to wait for new labeling to taste the terroir wines in Rioja. I recommend that you start with tasting the sub-regions of Rioja Alta, Rioja Alavesa, Rioja Baja (now called Rioja Oriental) in the following wines, which I have selected based on specific vineyard sourcing for the region and varietal blends typical of each area.

**Rioja Alta** - westernmost region, coldest climate. Mix of ferrous, alluvial and limestone soils. Wines (esp. aged) should be bright, with good acid, just ripe or dried sour cherry aromas, some ‘iron’ minerality/blood-like aromas. Most Rioja vineyards located here.

La Rioja Alta Viña Arana Reserva ($26) Tempranillo + Mazuelo, Rodezno area. One of the first ‘centenary’ bodegas. You can’t go wrong with any La Rioja Alta wines.

Remelluri Lindes de Remelluri Labastida or San Vicente ($29) - Tempranillo + Garnacha + Graciano. Telmo Rodríguez passionately advocates for the taste of a specific place. His is amazing, with vineyards abutting an ancient abbey directly at the foot of the Cantabrian mountain escarpment.

**Rioja Alavesa** - middle of region, limestone soils. Wines should have density, darker fruit, and be smoother than Rioja Alta wines. Basque country.

Contino Reserva ($25) Tempranillo + Graciano + Mazuelo + Garnacha. Historic vineyard in Laguardia. Vines planted and wines made by the father, now beautifully tended by the son, the Madrazo family. Absolutely stunning expression of a place.

Remelluri Lindes de Remelluri Labastida or San Vicente ($29) - Tempranillo + Garnacha + Graciano. Telmo Rodríguez passionately advocates for the taste of a specific place. His is amazing, with vineyards abutting an ancient abbey directly at the foot of the Cantabrian mountain escarpment.

**Rioja Baja (Oriental)** - largest and easternmost region, influence of Mediterranean Sea in warm breezes over much of the region. Soils of iron clay and large stones. Higher alcohol, juicier fruit, a lot of garnacha is grown here and blends will reflect its presence. Blood-like quality often in the wines.

Palacios Remondo La Montesa Crianza ($20) Garnacha + Tempranillo. Álvaro Palacios is Spain’s most passionate garnacha ambassador.

Bodegas Ontanon Crianza (15) Tempranillo + Graciano. Also grown on vineyard land near La Montesa.

The long-awaited recognition of terroir in Rioja is real. The internal evolution of Rioja wine styles and the revolution of the terruño winemakers should keep the region competitively positioned for the global market. This is definitely a benefit for drinkers of Rioja, whether you prefer the old school style or go for expressions of the fruit, and the land.
Beyond Digital
Innovative 8-linear power supply
USB and Ethernet OCXO reclocking
EMI-Optimised Custom Motherboard

STATEMENT
MUSIC SERVER

“I know great music when I hear it.
I know great prose when I read it.
I know great fun when I have it.”
— Ruth Bader Ginsberg, Supreme Court Justice, 1993-2019

“tough act to beat in today’s music server world”

5 stars to Statement for its excellent openness and transparency
Server of the Year

www.innuos.com
@innuos

www.borderpatrol.net | 301-705-7460

www.borderpatrol.net | 301-705-7460
Angels of Sound

Sonus Faber Serafino Tradition by Scot Hull
With the Sonus Faber Serafino Tradition in your room, chances are high you will tend to let irrelevancies slide. Like food, water, and personal hygiene. Because you will have more important things to attend to. Like how unbelievably pretty these speakers are. That really is the first and last word – these loudspeakers are the best-looking that I have ever had the pleasure of seeing in my home. They’re embarrassingly well-made. Every aspect is attended to, and the whole is so over-the-top lux that they made the rest of my home look shabby.

The speakers are large – they take up some space, both visually and physically. But when the iconic string-grills in place, it’s the subtle visual cues from the cabinets take precedence over the drivers, and the eye is drawn to the brushed aluminum that appears inset, separating out luscious wedges of Wenge wood veneer that practically glow with reflected light. Every angle reveals another visual delight. The soft curves, the gentle grain, the fluted vents, even the machining of the thread on the footers – every detail has been thought about, dressed up, and refined.

To be honest, they’re almost pretty enough that you won’t feel you’ll need to play them to justify their presence in your most formal of formal rooms, parties, or guests. You and your guests can just stare at them, and that will be enough. In fact, it may be fair – reasonable even – to simply end the review right here. If you can afford these, do, because they’re art.

Side note for those paying attention, this beauty is hardly out of place on a loudspeaker named after “The Burning Ones”, or, as we might say in English, the Seraphim. In the Book of Isaiah (6:1-8), we find these six-winged beings flying around the Throne of God crying “holly, holly, holly”.

I’ve talked about the pleasures of owning and driving a BMW before. Elegance, power, control. But this Sonus Faber is pure Maserati. Elegance, class, and chic, wrapping up a fully immersive sonic treat.
HISTORICAL NODS

Chances are, you’ve heard the story of the Amati Tradition. I’m not going to recap all of that here as pretty much every reviewer that ever accepts products from Sonus Faber has already retold it. But what I will add to that “tradition” is to note that history is every bit as important to the company as the look-and-feel of the products. It is, in a very real sense, woven right into the brand.

If that sounds cliché, let me assure you that it is different in today’s high-end. Unlike some of today’s hi-fi darlings, Sonus Faber isn’t really selling product—they’re selling lifestyle. But even that is too modest—what Sonus Faber is trying to do is offer a vision of what your life could be: sexy as hell. This is the first thing I noted about the brand, honestly, and it’s something that very few brands pull off successfully.

My humble opinion? Hi-Fi could use a lot more of this.

THE SPEAKERS

Around the back, you’ll note the porting. It’s not round or square, but rather a vertical slot. The flanges flanking create what is called a “wave effect”, but also sets up the vertical binding posts, which adds a nice visual touch.

Note that these speakers also deviate from the traditional SF “rake”. With a straight up-and-down presentation, the overall footprint is decreased, and those of us with limited space can rejoice. But even without the tilt backwards, the phase correction that would normally found in a raked design is still there — it’s just now handled in the crossover.

The cross-section of the speaker is also different, and much closer to the “traditional” (if it can be called that) “boat-tail” design, that would probably be described as “lute-shaped” because this is Sonus Faber and all of these speakers are named after luthiers.

Under the covers, the Sonus Faber drivers have seen some evolutionary strides. The current woofer tech is “voiced for coherence”; and the drivers are treated pulp (paper) sandwiched around “syntactic foam”. The tweeter is a “trickle down” from the Lilium, and when I was in Manhattan, Mr. Tezzon provided a graph for the on-axis and off-axis frequency response. A soft-dome tweeter (like that used in the Minimal) gives truly excellent off-axis response, which is critical to a speaker’s “disappearing act”, he said, but cannot provide a smooth and linear high-frequency response to 20kHz without losing steam. A hard-dome tweeter (like that used in the Stradivari) can get the excellent extension, but loses the off-axis response. Their approach with their new tweeter, developed and leveraged in the Lilium, successfully blends the two for excellent off-axis response and smooth linearity up past 20kHz.

More details, plus specs, are included at: www.sonusfaber.com/en/products/serafino-tradition/

These speakers are ready to share your love of music—an admirable goal I wished more designers would work toward.
THE SETUP

The Sonus Faber Serafino Tradition are rear-ported and physically large, so my recommendation is either lots of space or some good room treatments in order to really let them rip – and truth be told, they deserve a healthy stage to perform on. As I found out with my old Tidal Contriva Diacera SE loudspeakers, my “regular” listening room (14’ front wall) isn’t really large enough for speakers like this; I ended up with Serafinos in my living room (Better light, but worse acoustics).

At 4Ω and 90dB, the Serafinos don’t need a lot of power, but what power you provide ought to be able to work with a moderate-to-tough load. Most of my listening was done with a Pass Labs INT-60, which provided more than enough grunt to light up the speakers as if they were Towers of Power at a KISS concert. I also had brilliant luck with a Bakoon AMP-41, which not only provided sufficient grunt to activate the bass nodes in my living room, but also brought a nice delicacy to the top-end.

THE SOUND

What I heard was this: the good amount of detail, wrapped in lovely timbre, presented with a sense of intimacy. Vocals, especially, practically glow through these loudspeakers; someone clearly spent a great deal of time listening to them during their voicing, someone with the mandate of ensuring that the human voice would be presented in all its raspy, guttural, breathy, round, clarion glory. “Hair-raising” was something I wrote in my notes. Overall, the speakers had a warm, robust, and forgiving presentation that I have come to call the Sonus Faber “house sound”.

My kids required some Imagine Dragons, so they cycled through Roon until they found the overwrought, angsty, and wickedly compressed track “Demons” one afternoon and promptly Let The Wild Rumpus Start, quickly cycling in Flora Cash (“You’re Somebody Else” from You’re Somebody Else) and Portugal The Man (“Feel It Still” from Woodstock). Being the eclectic little collectors they are, this also included a tour through The Greatest Showman soundtrack. I’m not much for musicals, but the opening track has great, driving vocals, courtesy of The Wolverine (actor Hugh Jackman), and the changeups from quiet-and-intimate to giant-ensemble are fantastic.

I experimented a bit with the toe-in. I started with “straight out” and found the image cleanly centered. Vertical dispersion was pretty good, too, which meant that “cavorting” was well-supported. Some modest toe-in seemed to bring the overall quality up a hair or two with a bit more natural feel to the overall presentation, but I don’t think I’d swear to it; feel free to experiment here.

This “feature” played exceptionally well during a few events – queueing playlists through Roon to a Sonore ultrarendu, or sliding CDs into a Bel Canto CD3i – brought music to a crowd of a couple-dozen adults (and an equal number of non-adults, we were in something less than man-to-man coverage at that point), and as the mayhem level rose, so did the music. Bass performance was excellent, and as I mentioned, a bit of an over-performer for a non-damped room. When I was able to sneak room treatments into the room, I was also able to turn the volume all the way over, causing full-blown canine panic three doors down. The upshot – the Serafinos will take all that you can give and then some.
THE CONCLUSION

I feel like I’m repeating myself by saying that the Sonus Faber Serafino Tradition are wonderful. I already did that during the First Listen back in 2017. More so, we named them an Editor’s Choice in The Occasional 2018 Buyer’s Guide. In short, we think they’re amazing.

But what really stands out is the astonishing build-quality. It really is hard to overstate how striking these loudspeakers are in person. The Red finish is brilliant, but the Wengè just blew me away. If you’re looking for a pair of loudspeakers that have to live in shared spaces and look damn impressive while playing or just sitting there looking regal when silent, I cannot think of a better purchase. Well, other than the slightly larger Amati Tradition, that is.

$21,900/pair is expensive. No question and no argument. You could buy a Kia for that. But owning the Serafinos - heck, owning anything from this speaker line, from the Amati to Serafino to the stand-mounted Guarneri - is decidedly not like owning a Kia. I mentioned “Maserati” above, and I’m sticking to that analogy. Owning this speaker is like owning a Maserati. Better - it’s like being able to drive one, every day.
I now have a new favorite saying about why we’re still listening to vinyl in the 21st century. Up until recently, it was tenor saxophonist Daniel Louis White’s quote about why young performers like him are insisting on releasing music on LPs: “All the cool kids have turntables.”

My favorite saying now belongs to Eric Astor at Furnace Records, who explained why he still feels that pressing vinyl is important in 2019. “You go to your favorite restaurant and you have a wonderful meal. It’s not perfect because no meal is perfect, but you can taste the love. That’s how it is with vinyl.”

Eric founded Furnace Records back in 1996. He has that relaxed vibe of a musician who was sidetracked one day toward another nook in the industry, yet the economy of his ideas sounds like they’ve been carefully honed from decades in business. Both are accurate. Furnace Records is a tight ship, run by people with vision and dedication and, most of all, a love for music that can’t be faked.

My visit to Furnace Records’ new 26,000 square foot pressing plant in Alexandria, Virginia was fortuitous, serendipitous or downright coincidental—it all started with Kaytea McIntosh, head of XO Publicity. I’ve been working with Kaytea for more than a dozen years, and she’s supplied me with a steady stream of indie music ever since I lived outside of Portland. Back then, it was all about new PNW bands with miniscule budgets hoping to get their big break. Over the years XO has been expanding its reach, and Kaytea’s the one who finally hooked me up with Light in the Attic Records and ORG Music.

ORG’s catalog has been a real gift to me as a reviewer. They have great taste in music, especially the reissues, and all of their LP pressings are exceptionally quiet thanks to the work of the Pallas Group in Germany. They might be doing some of the best vinyl work in the world right now—at least until Furnace expanded their facilities last year. Furnace and Pallas aren’t competitors, however—they work together to supply a big chunk of the world’s LPs. “We own five of their presses,” Eric informed me.
At Furnace, you’ll find a plethora of turntables in just about every room. It seems that everyone with an office has a surprisingly decent way to listen to records while they work.

Puttin’ It Together

The work is split up in different ways. A significant chunk of the operations at Furnace involves assembly. That means taking the LPs and putting them in their sleeves, putting the sleeves in the covers, inserting the lyrics sheets, artwork and those little slips with the digital download codes, shrink-wrapping and finally applying all those little stickers that inform you why this particular version of the album is so special.

That sounded counter-intuitive to me at first. Why wouldn’t Pallas do everything in Germany and then ship it over? Wasn’t it more expensive to split the labor this way? Evidently not, since Eric is a strict adherent to lean manufacturing practices. That’s why you see everyone at Furnace navigating the large factory floor via Razor scooters. The entire balance of labor between Virginia and Germany has been meticulously calculated for maximum cost-efficiency—and that type of thinking was responsible for the increased production at Furnace.

Let’s go back a minute to serendipity and coincidence. There isn’t a huge gap between Kaytea’s indie bands from 2006 and what’s going on at Furnace. What’s amazing, what brings everything full circle, is this: Eric is an audiophile. Both of us were wandering the halls at the Capital Audiofest, unbeknownst to each other. We know a lot of the same people, most notably Mat Weisfeld—that’s why you’ll find so many VPI turntables floating around Furnace. I’ve been to pressing plants before, and usually you have a cutting lathe equipped with some sort of playback equipment. You might have a stray turntable setup, usually quite modest, so someone can spot check the product as it comes off the line.

At Furnace, you’ll find a plethora of turntables in just about every room. It seems that everyone with an office has a surprisingly decent way to listen to records while they work. Out in the main lobby there are cubicles with vinyl setups, such as all-in-one VPI Players or Shinola Runwells, so that potential clients can come in and listen to the impressive work that Furnace does.

Record Pressing and Audiophilia

Eric and I spoke for quite some time—he’s an audiophile, after all, and that’s what we do—and I asked him a lot of questions about the vinyl market in general. When I brought up the resurgence of interest in reel-to-reel, he was hip to the idea of it but not worried about its impact on LP sales—something I agree with since, in his words, “it’s a rich man’s game.” But you don’t have to tell a guy who works with masters every day about the fun of listening to them.

What did surprise me, however, was Eric’s response when I asked him about new and evolving technologies when it comes to pressing LPs. There aren’t many—even the so-called hi-rez vinyl format that’s supposedly just around the corner is still more theoretical than practical. “It’s all pretty old school,” he responded. “Where we can make improvements is in being as green as possible, reducing waste and continuing to be as efficient as possible.” That did make perfect sense to me. Eric’s comments suggest, again, that vinyl’s pretty special as it is, which is why we love it so much.

It’s the spirit of that audiophile mind that I see hiding in every nook and cranny of the factory floor. It’s not surprising when you visit a record label and everyone talks about how much they love music even though, deep down, it’s obviously a business and everyone is paying attention to the bottom line. Furnace is almost the opposite of that—it’s a machine that’s humming along quietly and everyone moves with purpose. But when you stop the people there and talk to them for a minute, it becomes quite obvious that there’s something much deeper involved, the understanding that vinyl might not be perfect, but it’s full of love, and every little detail makes you fall in love just a little bit more.
The PARA SOUN D
HALO HINT 6
Integrated Amplifier

By Marc Phillips
I've reviewed many integrated amplifiers over the years. I like them for a number of solid reasons—first, one less interconnect cable puts some money back in the bank...

Wait a minute. Wait right there. I'll tell you a secret. On my very first review of an integrated amplifier for an audio publication more than a dozen years ago, I started off talking about how I liked not having to buy one more interconnect. Then, a couple of years later, I reviewed another integrated amplifier for another publication and I started out the same exact way, talking about all the records you could buy when you didn't have to buy one more expensive interconnect.

That's pretty sloppy, I know. I think it's embarrassing. But here's the thing—I did it one more time, and it wasn't even for a third publication. I wrote pretty much the same opening paragraph twice for the same publication, in addition to the other one. From now on if you see me starting another review about an integrated amplifier with some reference to "one less interconnect" argument, you have permission to slap me in the face.

Besides, that argument is no longer as compelling as it was ten or fifteen years ago. There are more than a handful of integrated amplifiers out there that provide start-of-the-art sound, but usually at an appropriately high cost. (Think of the VAC Statement 450i IQ.) Things have changed, and a 20th century integrated amplifier was usually a simpler, more minimalist design with modest power and perhaps little to no flexibility when it came to features. That's the sort of integrated amplifier I've always championed, as long as it boasted decent sound quality above all else. I never needed tone controls or a remote control or a headphone jack or a home-theater bypass or any of that—just a volume control and an input selector and maybe a power button on the back.

THE HALO EFFECT

Things are very different in 2019, mostly since most contemporary integrated amps are much more sophisticated designs. You no longer have to choose between features and sound quality—you can have both thanks to various advances in technology. The Parasound Halo HINT 6 integrated amplifier is the perfect example of this—it sounds as close to neutral as I've heard in recent years, and it has a ton of useful features such as a built-in DAC, a headphone jack and a pretty nifty phono stage.

Most importantly, it retails for $3000. No, that's not the most important thing about the HINT 6. It's just that $3000 is sort of an interesting price point for integrated amps—twenty years ago, $3000 bought you something that probably "only bettered by the separates, but we have a generous trade-in policy within one year of purchase." (I've taken advantage of that deal once or twice in my life.) When I first met the guys at Parasound at the Rocky Mountain Audio Fest last year, I hadn't planned on taking copious notes while hanging out for a significant amount of time. But I did. I'm trying to say, in a nice way, that I have had very little experience with Parasound products in the past and therefore I was open to absorbing a favorable first impression. My first sort-of experience with a Parasound product was indirect—I once had brief access to one of the original of John Curl's Vendetta Research SCP-2 phono stages and I thought it was sensational. That wasn't a Parasound product, of course, but most audiophiles are aware that Curl has done a significant amount of design work for the company since the groundbreaking Vendetta redefined phono preamplifier performance.

My second experience was just as impressive. Three years ago, I visited audio scribe Edgar Kramer in Australia and heard his wonderful Wilson Audio-based system that was powered by Parasound Halo monoblocks. I don't want to say that I was surprised by the combination, but I just hadn't thought of it before. I expected something more exotic and slightly out of my reach, but he was extremely happy with his amplifier choice and I trust his ears. That system delivered one of the most impressive home-based listening sessions I've experienced. I gained a lot of respect for this American manufacturer that day, and I had to travel halfway around the world to do it.

"IT’S ALIVE!"

My favorite thing about the Parasound Halo HINT6, once I unpacked it and placed it in my system, is that it worked. No, that isn't damning with faint praise—again, I'm not saying that the best thing about this integrated amplifier is that I plugged it in, and all the lights came on and it eventually played music. I'm saying that everything about the HINT6 is user-friendly, and that it does everything it's supposed to do without glitches, and without needing to retreat to the owner's manual while mumbling the digital audio mantra (“Hmmm… I'm not sure why this isn't working”). Here's an example. The first time I plugged my laptop into the HINT6's USB port so that I could stream from Qobuz, that's exactly what happened. I didn't have to download the drivers from the Parasound website—everything synced up
on its own. I didn’t even have to reset the configuration on Qobuz or Roon or Tidal. I was shocked when I pressed the play button and within a few seconds I was listening to music.

Amazing! Same thing happened with the phono stage. I plugged into the phono inputs, chose MC and set the loading and BAM! We’re listening to vinyl, and it sounds pretty darned good. My entire time with the HINT6 went that smoothly, with every function realized in a thoughtful and intuitive manner.

LISTENING SESSIONS
I used the HINT6 with three different speakers—both my original Trenner & Friedl ARTs and the brand-new version, reviewed elsewhere in this issue, and my reference Brigadiers Audio BA-2 monitors. All three speakers are two-way bookshelf designs with relatively low efficiencies. All three speakers really come alive with great amplification with plenty of power. The BA-2s are also capable of extremely accurate, almost full-range performance in medium rooms thanks to complex birch-ply cabinets that use constrained layer damping to reduce resonances. They are mighty and can rattle windows when asked to do so.

The HINT6 has 160 watts per channel into 8 ohms and 240 watts per channel into 4 ohms, which is probably more power than those three pairs of loudspeakers have ever seen. Still, my first impression of the sound with the HINT6 was that of finesse and delicacy rather than brute strength. The Parasound was in place while I reviewed the latest batch of new vinyl reissues from ORG Music, everything from Shirley Horn’s moody and quiet 1988 masterpiece Presenting the Ad Libs and the brilliant and clean mono recordings of Les Paul and His Trio’s After You’ve Gone. Not once did that reserve of juice make anything sound larger than it was—those windows of time were delivered in a realistic scale and with incredible detail.

Whenever I get my hands on a big amp, I love to trot out various releases from 2L Recordings. These Norwegian titles are usually recorded in gigantic Norwegian churches made from lots of Norwegian wood. You should be able to hear those room boundaries clearly, and with astounding amounts of bloom and decay. Choral recordings from 2L are particularly informative, and those layers of distinct human voices should also create an energy that comes together as a distinct and slightly separate whole. I’ve heard those individual voices more fleshed out and easy to follow with other amps, but they’re many times the cost of the HINT6. What the Parasound accomplished was that sense of scale, of the unfolding of the sound as it traveled from the mouths of the singers out into the church, and then on the way back to the listener via the rafters.

As a solid-state, affordable integrated amplifier with plenty of power, the HINT6 is able to expand and contract with the recording with an ease and lack of grain that sometimes eludes other amplifiers at its price point.

CONCLUSION
What am I trying to say about integrated amplifiers this time? Well, it’s something far more compelling than the old “extra interconnect” argument. Twenty years ago, when I was fully devoted to the idea of integrated amplifiers in my own system, $3000 bought you a pretty decent product. For $3000, you could buy an A/V receiver with a multitude of features for both two-channel systems and multi-channel home theater installations. (The HINT6 is billed as a “2.1” amp due to its sub out.) The sound quality wouldn’t be state-of-the-art, but you’d have the ability to take your home entertainment any direction you wanted to go. For that price, you’d also get plenty of power.

$3000 also bought you a purist integrated amplifier, one that weighed less than 25 pounds and had no more than two knobs on the front panel. Yes, it sounded wonderful and there was absolutely nothing wrong with it—unless you wanted to do more than listen to music at reasonable levels in a fairly small room or use a wide variety of source components.

What makes the Parasound Halo HINT6 so impressive is that it does both—it includes a phono stage, a headphone amplifier and a DAC, it has tons of features so that you can expand your reach when it comes to new hardware. It also sounds great to my ears, and I’m a guy who’s spent the last decade fondling low-powered tube amps.

Most importantly, it accomplished all this for, again, just $3000. In 2019. Inflation be damned—that’s pretty amazing.

Photos courtesy of Parasound and Marc Phillips
Use the Power of Visual Marketing

AMP IT UP!

BRANDING that tells your STORY, DESIGN that gets you NOTICED
Print – Digital – Mobile – Social – Web

www.dvision1.com | 215.704.1411
IN THE RAW: THE WORLD OF SELVEDGE DENIM

By Brian Hunter
Part of paying more for something is the expectation that it will perform better, look better or hopefully provide more value to your life than something of lesser cost.

What I think I appreciate most about the high-fidelity hobby (and other niche ways to spend disposable income) is the artisanal quality of a finely tuned craft, occasionally surrounded by a higher price point. There are many ways that this can manifest itself, but things like clever design and durability, benchmarks adding to the user experience, don’t always flare up as one often might expect. Scattered among the luxury goods landscape lies some interesting peaks where there is celebration to the idea of beauty in decay. Granted, this type of decay will almost always look better than a moldy piece of bread, but closer look at the patina that forms on a well-worn belt or bag and one begins to see how the lived-in look has undeniably a small place in this new-cellphone-each-year world.

To illustrate, I once asked a department store salesman what the difference between two product lines for a particular fashion designer was. His simple reply was to point out that one line had been shown on the catwalk of fashion week that year, and the other had not. My queries into elevated quality or uniqueness were met with a blank stare.

**The Most Premium Pair of Jeans on the Planet**

Attached to well-made canvas bags and leather goods of all sorts lies a small community that tosses aside much of the pageantry of fashion for a journey to the most premium pair of jeans on the planet. Raw denim is usually found without any sort of pre-fabricated fading or distress to the material. The idea is that the user imparts their own unique personal touch into the fabric, and other preinstalled fades are simply a lie by comparison. There is a severe emphasis on the denim itself, which can range from light weight (11 oz/yard) to very heavy options (25+ oz/yard). The act of toughing it out until the wear shows through creates a sense of pride in ownership and a deeper connection to the article of clothing.

One subset of raw denim is lovingly referred to as “selvedge” denim. Not all raw denim is selvedge, but almost all selvedge is raw. Selvedge denim gets its name from the nature of weave that helps create a “self-edging” piece of denim, as opposed to one that needs to be cut and then covered with a cleaning stitch to hold in all the loose ends and keep them from unraveling. The look is cleaner, and many jean aficionados will roll the bottom of their pants up to show off the look and different selvedge ID threads.

Identifying threads have been used for a long time to identify where the raw material originated, and indeed the entire hobby harkens back to a deep history with manufacturing in the US (and now Japan). Raw denim was originally

**Hardcore enthusiasts will often go** for long periods of time without washing their jeans.
considered work wear in the mid-1800s and continued to be used as such all the way through WWII. The material was not pre-washed first (a process called sanforization) and was a bit tough to break in out of the box. The fashion of jeans progressed into popular culture in the '70s and '80s, and pre-washed fades and more comfortable options became the norm.

A Return to the Pants of the Past

It was around this same time that some small boutique companies in Japan started producing denim fabrics in the old American style of production, including self-fading, and created new vintage style that became the thrust of the movement that still exists today. The modern raw denim enthusiast is usually accompanied by a severe demand for durability and well-crafted longevity. To make the long haul with personalized wear marks, the fabric tends to require a higher benchmark against time, which aggregates the demand for thicker, heavier options. Some flash can be found in the reinforcement rivets or internal printing, but for the most part the benefits to the higher spends these jeans demand remain hidden to the untrained eye.

As such, manufacturers tend to put their best foot forward in as many ways as they can. Innovations with construction, and the always-important material use tend to push an interesting value proposition to the top in a world that can put too much weight in brand equity. What is perhaps an ironic twist to the story is that now many US-based brands have picked up the torch stateside, but utilize denim still created in Japan. Cone Mills, the single remaining selvage denim maker in the US, closed their North Carolina-based plant at the end of 2017 for options in China and Mexico. To serve this small niche of collectors, many online retailers have popped up, as have a few direct-to-consumer moves from prominent brands. There is a surprising amount of pre-order/funding options to reduce the manufacturers’ risk on small batches of product as well. While some big cities offer a few retail options, cities as large as Chicago only have one or two. Anything further away from a metropolitan area is restricted to an online connection and relies more on community feedback and shipped sales with decent return policies. The collective online society of raw denim enthusiasts is limping along somewhat.

Keeping Selvedge Alive

There is perhaps only a single independent review/news blog for the hobby that is still regularly maintained. A once heavily-used forum now lays dormant and network platform threads see only occasional daily use, even when compared to the typical HiFi presence in the same social media pool. Still, like high fidelity audio, the lovers of the hobby are passionate about their products and are usually supportive of each other in their endeavors. A few negative vibes about specific brands do work their way around the comment sections, but for the most part online chatter manages to avoid some of the shortcomings of your standard audiophile arguments.

There is a slight macho demeanor to the mostly male community, as “fades” can require some time and commitment to render. Hardcore enthusiasts will often go for long periods of time without washing their jeans, as this is considered one of the main techniques for setting a high contrast pattern. More extreme measures on this front call for special washing techniques. One of the more entertaining options is an ocean wash procedure where participants scrub their pants with sand and then join the waves of their chosen body of water with said jeans firmly attached to their body.

The same idea is extrapolated to either clothed shower or baths, where already tight fits can avoid further reduction in size by stretching with the body during soaking. Still some claim that freezing their jeans is all that is needed to kill dirty bacteria, but this myth appears widely unaccepted as fair substitute for proper washing.

For all the extreme measures that fans of raw denim go through, the underlying theme is always artisanal quality and craft, even within this tiny sliver of consumerism. With a hard-earned visual signature in each personalized creation, it’s easy to see how one can form a connection with the ownership as a badge of honor. Someone worked hard to produce the item, then someone worked hard to bring it to the next stage in its life, a small shrine to beauty in slow decay, nestled lovingly between cotton and indigo.

Photos courtesy of Brian Hunter
Just a couple of years ago I wouldn’t have been that excited about a product like the Moon 390 network streamer/preamplifier/DAC/headphone amp/phono stage. I was pretty committed to spending the rest of my life with my LP and CD collection. Every time someone sent me a download code or a URL to review their new album I said, hold on a minute, bub—physical formats only. I want something I could hold in my hand.

What’s changed in the last couple of years? First, I got sucked into Tidal, a digital streaming service that could finally satisfy my need to play DJ for myself, one of my favorite audiophile activities. But instead of being limited to my LP and CD collection, I could go into the cloud and listen to tens of millions of titles. The sound quality was usually CD quality at the least, so I no longer had to wrinkle my nose at MP3s. I was hooked.

From there my digital addiction grew—Roon, then Qobuz, then MQA files. Then I needed a permanent DAC, since I always seemed to be borrowing one. I started off easy with an Audioquest Dragonfly and a pair of earbuds for my laptop when I was on the road. Now I have three DACs at my disposal, and I’m doing all sorts of near 21st century things like running a dedicated headphone rig off my laptop while listening to FLAC files from new bands on my main system.

Once the Moon 390 arrived on my doorstep, I finally had that feeling. You know that feeling too, where you can do anything you want. You have all the pieces, and they always fit together. You can do that now. And that. And even that.

**I CAN DO THIS NOW. AND THIS. AND EVEN THIS.**

I’m glad you asked. The 390 is “Roon Ready,” which means it integrates with your Roon software once the network set-up is completed. That means you can control the 390 via the Roon controls. The 390 is also equipped with MQA, which got me all hot and bothered because I’ve been waiting to play around with MQA at home—instead of listening to it at controlled demos at high-end audio shows.

On the back panel you’ll find plenty of connection options—RCA, XLR, variable outputs, fixed outputs, IR (for repeater devices), Toslink, SP/DIF, AES-EBU, USB, Bluetooth, the proprietary MiND network interface (via ethernet or Wi-Fi) and four (!) HDMI connections. A fellow reviewer asked me to find out why there are four HDMI jacks—especially since the 390 is not a multi-channel product—but you might have Blu-ray players, video game systems and more. That doesn’t describe me or my pal, but it might be important to you.

You also get Simlink, which allows you to connect the 390 to other Moon components for automatic source selection and grouped stand-by mode.

From there my digital addiction grew—Roon, then Qobuz, then MQA files. Then I needed a permanent DAC, since I always seemed to be borrowing one. I started off easy with an Audioquest Dragonfly and a pair of earbuds for my laptop when I was on the road. Now I have three DACs at my disposal, and I’m doing all sorts of near 21st century things like running a dedicated headphone rig off my laptop while listening to FLAC files from new bands on my main system.

Once the Moon 390 arrived on my doorstep, I finally had that feeling. You know that feeling too, where you can do anything you want. You have all the pieces, and they always fit together. You can do that now. And that. And even that.

**WHAT DO YOU MEAN BY “THAT”?**

I’m glad you asked. The 390 is “Roon Ready,” which means it integrates with your Roon software once the network set-up is completed. That means you can control the 390 via the Roon controls. The 390 is also equipped with MQA, which got me all hot and bothered because I’ve been waiting to play around with MQA at home—instead of listening to it at controlled demos at high-end audio shows.

On the back panel you’ll find plenty of connection options—RCA, XLR, variable outputs, fixed outputs, IR (for repeater devices), Toslink, SP/DIF, AES-EBU, USB, Bluetooth, the proprietary MiND network interface (via ethernet or Wi-Fi) and four (!) HDMI connections. A fellow reviewer asked me to find out why there are four HDMI jacks—especially since the 390 is not a multi-channel product—but you might have Blu-ray players, video game systems and more. That doesn’t describe me or my pal, but it might be important to you.

You also get Simlink, which allows you to connect the 390 to other Moon components for automatic source selection and grouped stand-by mode.
Going from the Control to the 390 was a big adjustment—the former is a minimalist preamp with incredible parts quality and short signal paths. There’s only one knob on the front panel, and it’s the attenuator. The 390, on the other hand, does so many things—even though the front panel is relatively clean and uncluttered. Both were designed for sound quality, but the 390 was also designed for incredible flexibility. I’m usually the type of audiophile who gravitates toward simplicity—I don’t even get upset when there’s no remote control available. I can still get up and turn a knob, even in 2019.

I had only one glitch with the 390, and it happened at the very beginning of set-up and it was my fault. The attenuator for the 390 has a fairly long way to go before you get decent SPLs, and I found myself hitting buttons, turning knobs and getting nothing. Finally, I double-checked the owner’s manual, played with the attenuator a little more and—wait, what was that? Did you hear something? Is that music? I slowly turned up the volume and somewhere past the number 50 I started to hear real music at realistic volume levels. There’s just a lot of empty space at the lower end, which undoubtedly varies with the input.

Once I had music, I was off to the races. From that point, every hook up was straightforward and worked out the first time.

First, I tested out the easiest functions—to me, of course—and I hooked up the MM/MC phono stage to my turntable and started playing records. Through the remote control you can access the programming functions and set the loading for your cartridge. I was using a simple stock Denon DL103 at the time, and merely setting the phono stage at the MC default sounded like a perfect match. Still, the 390 lets you manually set the gain, the input capacitance and the EQ curve—all via the remote control.

Through the break-in process the 390’s phono preamplifier was detailed and full, with just a slight amount of leanness through the midrange. By the time I put a couple of hundred hours on the 390, that leanness was mostly gone. While the phono stage didn’t quite match the 3-D soundstage and inner detail of my reference phono pre, which costs nearly as much as the entire Moon 390, this phono stage performed extremely well for an inboard unit. The fact that it’s so flexible and easy to use—I’m always a sucker for cartridge loading via remote—I feel that I will satisfy all but the most obsessive of vinylphiles.

The second function I could test in this configuration was the headphone amplifier. Using the Focal Clear headphones I had in for review, I garnered the same impression as I did with the phono stage—a little lean but still detailed and relaxed. I usually prefer tubed headphone amplifiers because they are less fatiguing for long listening sessions, but again, I could certainly live with this inboard unit. It had a fluid, open sound that never came off as fatiguing or aggressive.

From there I started integrating the 390 further into the system, using it solely as a preamp for the main system, then configuring everything into my WiFi network, then streaming Tidal and Qobuz through all types of speakers including both the old and new versions of the Trenner & Friedl ARTs and my reference Brigadiers Audio BA2 monitors. The overall sound was clean, quiet and detailed—everything about the sound of the system with the 390 as the control center had an openness that was not only satisfying but comforting.

Next, I moved the 390 into my office so that I could integrate it into my music review/headphone rig. This system was extremely simple—I used the power amplifier section of the Moon Dragon Inspire headphone amp, the Focal Clears and Cardas Audio Clear Light cabling and power cords, all hooked up to my laptop.

Here’s when I realized I was onto something special in the digital realm. I was lucky enough to get an early version of Qobuz before it was rolled out in the US, but I failed to take advantage of this early sampling of this amazing streaming service since I’ve been on the road so much. When I finally had time to get everything set-up, just before the holidays, the first thing I listened to was the newly remastered digital version of The White Album. I’m not the most obsessive of record collectors, but I do own several versions of this album—the original LP I bought as a kid, the first CD version (which sounds dreadful and bass- shy) and a rare Japanese LP pressing [my favorite]. I know the album backwards and forwards.
Listening to the new version with the Moon 390 at the helm, I arrived at a number of audiophile cliché conclusions:

• I heard several things I’ve never heard before, whether it was an odd snippet of a keyboard or someone’s voice in the background.
• This was the smoothest, most satisfying version I’ve ever heard—it reminded me of analog!
• This was the first time I’ve really heard The White Album. Those other 2,000 times no longer count.

There’s one more cliché to invoke. Through this one album, this single listening session, I felt convinced that digital audio was finally at a point where I could live happily ever without needing a physical format to hold in my hands.

CONCLUSION

There’s only one thing to say about the Moon 390’s retail price of $5300—it’s an incredible bargain from almost every angle. Think about all of the technology offered, not to mention the myriad of features in this compact, beautifully-made all-in-one product—a high-quality preamplifier, a solid headphone amplifier, an easy-to-set MM/MC phono stage, an extraordinary DAC and a network streamer. It’s Roon ready, it can decode both DSD and MQA and can otherwise handle up to 32-bits/384 kHz sampling rates. I don’t have to remind audiophiles that they can spend a lot more than $5300 on each one of those functions, with mixed results. Or, think about this—you can simply add a pair of active speakers to the Moon 390 and have a compact, out-of-the-way system that will do everything you want to do.

BUT WAIT, THERE’S MORE!

The Moon 390, like most products from SimAudio, sounds gorgeous especially when you have the digital gas pedal down to the floorboards and you’re streaming from a hi-rez source like QoBuz. That ESS DAC PRO, in my opinion, is a killer. I’ve heard it in other digital players, and I’ve always been impressed with its ability to preserve harmonic structures and additional textures you don’t always hear from hi-rez digital.

I’ve had seat time with two other SimAudio products, well over a dozen years ago. I reviewed the UP 5.3 phono stage and felt it was unequalled at its modest $1400 cost. I should have bought it. I also used the I-7 integrated for a few months—I didn’t review it, but I loved the way it worked with all sorts of loudspeakers and all sorts of system configurations.

“This is all I need for reviewing,” I told myself at the time.

The Moon 390 has taken this flexibility, versatility and sonic excellence to a new level. There are plenty of one-box solutions out there, but the 390 stands out from the crowd by offering just a little more than everybody else—right now, at least. Will it be surpassed by other products in the future? Of course it will. But for right now, the 390 is all I could ever want to keep pace with the constantly evolving world of digital audio.
A Seiko pile. An assortment of Caliber 6139 chronographs representing all the early case shapes, but not even close to all the dial variants. The big, beautiful golden-dialed one in the center is a 6139-6002 “Pogue” and the black-dialed watch just right of that is a 6139-6010 “Proof-Proof”.

I’ve been fascinated by the complexity, ingenuity, and beauty of chronograph watches since I was a kid. As I got older, the focus of my interest became a particular moment in horological history, 50 years ago—1969, the grand finale of the golden age of watches.

50 years later, with globally synchronized clocks integrated into every cell phone, it’s difficult to imagine a world that relied on the mechanical wristwatch for most time-keeping tasks. Throughout the first half of the 20th century, however, watch brands built their reputations on the reliability and accuracy of their tool watches. They were essential for everything from keeping time at sporting events to naval and aerospace navigation, and on July 20, 1969, the Omega Speedmaster Professional was crowned “King of the Tool Watch” when it landed on the moon, elevating the “Speedy” to the chronograph by which all others shall be judged.
A Serious Technological Challenge

Another achievement stood beside Omega’s around the same time, an achievement shared by a small handful of watch manufacturers. Zenith, Seiko, and a team led by Heuer (that included Hamilton and Breitling) all crossed the finish line of a race, one that began years before, to build the world’s first automatic-winding chronograph.

By the late 1950s, chronograph sales were in steady decline due to the popularity of diving watches and ever slimmer time-only dress models, both of which were increasingly made with automatic-winding movements. Led by the development of diver’s watches and their bold, high-legibility dials, tool watch design was coming into its own and chronographs were breaking out of the subdued, dressier style of the ’50s with both size and color. It was clear, however, that the automatic chronograph was an important next step and it presented a serious technological challenge.

On January 10, 1969, Zenith showed working prototypes of their automatic chronographs, dubbed “El Primero,” to a press gathering, but the company didn’t have them available to the public until October of that year. In March, the Heuer team showed their “Chronomatic” prototypes at lavish press events in New York and Geneva, but they weren’t able to ship production watches until August. Meanwhile, with little or no apparent fanfare, Seiko was selling its new “Speedtimer” watches in Japan at least by May, and possibly as early as March of ’69.

The resulting spectacular watches, and the three distinct approaches to produce them, are more interesting to me than the order in which each team crossed the finish line. The underlying movements that power these watches speak to the differences in the companies that spawned them.

The Seiko Caliber 6139 “Speedtimer”

The Seiko Caliber 6139 “Speedtimer” was a basic but robust watch, integrated, with column-wheel actuated movement with a full-size central rotor that efficiently wound the mainspring in either direction. It has a single subdial at 6 o’clock for totaling minutes, and quick-set day and date windows at 3. The watches that were produced with this movement are wonderfully colorful and diverse.

Because they were inexpensive, there are many examples out there on the used market. While few of them were perfectly maintained, they are quite reliable and can often be found in decent condition for little money with only one model ever commanding prices close to $1000: the 6139-6002. It was known as the “Pogue” after US astronaut Colonel William Pogue, who wore it to Skylab in 1973 making it the first automatic chronograph in space.

Heuer, Hamilton and Breitling

The watches of the Chronomatic group are also quite varied, as should be expected coming from three different companies. The weirdest are from Hamilton, particularly the wide-body Fontainebleau and the mad three-crown, two-pusher “Count-Down” GMT. These tend to be the least expensive of the Chronomatics. The Breitlings are more conservative, keeping with the brand’s previous chronographs and featuring their “navigation computer” slide rules and busy, information-dense dials. The Heuers are the most iconic of the group and fetch the most money on the vintage market by far. This was the era of Jack Heuer and the watches he designed had great style, from the Carrera and Autavia to the quintessential Monaco, seen on the wrist of none other than Steve McQueen in his 1971 movie Le Mans.
But Heuer, Hamilton and Brietling were not “true manufacturers.” They didn’t design and manufacture their own movements, instead relying on third-party solutions. They ended up bolting a chronograph module to an existing slim dress watch movement. In order to keep the resulting mechanism as small as possible, they flipped the movement so it faced the opposite direction from the chronograph module, giving the Chronomatics their odd lefty winding crown. With considerable reliability issues, it’s not a stretch to suggest these watches were rushed across the finish line a bit prematurely.

The Zenith El Primero

The Zenith El Primero watches were not as varied initially, with just two cases and three dial choices (though many new designs followed in the early 70’s). They are very elegant designs and could wear either sporty or dressy. These first El Primeros command quite a high price—with the most iconic variant, the A386 “Tri-Color”, fetching as much or more than the Heuer Monaco.

What really set the Zenith watches apart from the others is the fully integrated Caliber 3019PHC El Primero movement. While the Seiko Speedtimers had only one subdial and the Chronomatics two, the El Primero had three subdials which gave them a running second hand as well as minute and hour totalizers. It had a date window that changed instantaneously at midnight, column wheel actuation, and a full-sized rotor that wound a mainspring with a 50-hour power reserve. (All this and it’s more compact than the others.)

Development of the ambitious movement took far longer and cost far more than the development of their competitors’ movements, but in the end it paid off. While the caliber 6139 was produced through most of the 1970’s, and the Caliber 12 (the fixed update to the Cal. 11) lasted into the early 80’s, the El Primero is still in production today, 50 years after its introduction. Because of its superior design, the El Primero has been used in great watches from many other brands—most famously the Rolex Daytona, but also watches from companies like Panerai, Bulgari, Hublot, Ulysse Nardin, Boucheron, Parmigiani, and, ironically, Heuer, as their Cal. 36, used in none other than the Monaco 24.

Certainly all of this is quite grand, but why finale? What makes this the end of the golden age of watchmaking? On Christmas of 1969 Seiko released the Astron, the first large-scale production quartz watch, and everything changed.

[For a more in-depth look at the history of these watches, you can read John DeVore’s accompanying article in Part-Time Audiophile.]
Let me start off with my Eric Dolphy story.

My jazz journey started back in college, when several of my music-loving buddies—the same ones who had been by my side all through our '70s rock and roll education—declared that we all needed to start listening to Miles Davis, John Coltrane, Charles Mingus and Thelonious Monk. I resisted at first, because I still hadn't found that special connection, that first door that I needed to walk through in order to call myself a true fan of jazz.

One Friday night, my buddy Dan and I were driving around the OC and listening to music on the local jazz station, at his request. For the most part the music was enjoyable, but in a slightly opaque way that was still beyond my reach. Then we heard one tune that really cast a spell on both of us. Maybe it was because we were a little toasty—this was Southern California in the '70s, after all—but there was something about this song, the way it gently developed over time, the way it sounded so good on my car stereo (back in college I always prided myself on my bitchin' car rig), and we both waited forever for the DJ to tell us what we had just heard. It took a while, but we were finally informed that it was Eric Dolphy, and the song was called “The Bridge.”

We immediately headed to Tower Records, the one over by Knott’s Berry Farm in Buena Park, and went straight to the jazz section and started looking at the track listings on all the Eric Dolphy records. We couldn’t find “The Bridge” anywhere. I purchased two or three Eric Dolphy albums that night, hoping I’d find the rest of his music was as transcendent and special as that one enigmatic song. I’ve been an Eric Dolphy fan since that fateful night, but I’ve never been able to find that track, the one that ultimately served as that elusive Door Number 1.

This was thirty-five years ago or so, long before the internet would make these mysteries so easily resolved, and I never heard that song again. There’s a song called “The Bridge” made famous by Sonny Rollins, one of my favorite jazz musicians of all time, but Eric Dolphy did not play on it, and that song was not the song that Dan and I heard that night.

To this day, I wonder—did the DJ misidentify the song, or were we simply too incoherent at the time?
When I received the new triple-CD set from Resonance Records, Eric Dolphy’s Musical Prophet, I secretly hoped it would finally solve this mystery. It not only contains remastered versions of two Eric Dolphy masterpieces from 1963, Conversations and Iron Man, but a third CD that contains 85 minutes of previously unissued studio recordings from this wonderful tenor sax/flute/bass clarinet player. This set contains most of the material he recorded at Music Maker’s Studio in New York in July of that year, just before he recorded Out to Lunch!

These are the rare mono versions, recorded right off the master tapes. Only the stereo masters were used for the original releases, and that’s why this collection is so spectacular—it’s the first time these have been made available commercially. In addition, the sound is so incredibly clear and pure that you might not notice how everything emerges from that narrow space between your speakers until you’re at least a few minutes in.

These three CDs capture Dolphy’s imagination, his daring and his willingness to color outside the lines with his instruments, as well as his arrangements. He also managed to coax the same level of performances from Clifford Jordan, Woody Shaw, Bobby Hutcherson, Eddie Khan, Richard Davis, J.C. Moses and everyone else who walked into Music Maker’s in early July of ’63 and decided to play.

Alas, I immediately scanned the track listing for “The Bridge,” but it wasn’t there. Would it be hiding out somewhere else, disguised under a different name? Hope springs eternal.

CONVERSATIONS

Here’s something slightly funny—when I first put on Conversations, I realized it was one of the albums I had purchased at Tower Records on that night so many years ago. I knew it from the first seconds of “Jitterbug Waltz.” The reason it took me so long to figure it out was because it was re-released by VJ Records as The Eric Dolphy Memorial Album. I immediately went over to my record racks and found my old copy, still in good shape, probably not played in many years.
Listen to your music... not the cables.

Speak Cables
XLR Interconnects
Soniquil Cables
Starting at $119
RCA Interconnects • Speaker Cables
Power Cables • XLR Interconnects
45 Day Risk Free In-Home Trial

The Voice That Is
www.thevoicethatis.com
610.359.0189

TIDAL Akira
“... The Akiras are the best-looking, best-built, best-sounding speakers I have had in my listening room...”
— John Atkinson • Stereophile / November 2018

The DNA of the award winning Akira is present in every model in the TIDAL line — all of which have received their own awards over the last 20 years. Isn’t it time to hear what you’ve been missing?

Also representing these fine brands: Antipodes, Aurender, Bel Canto, Bricasti, Dynamic Design, H.A.S, Sistrum, Tyve Acoustic, Zesto & more!
Dolphy didn't release a lot of albums as a leader during his career, mostly because he passed away in 1964 just a few days after he turned 36. The story of his death is quite sad, even by jazz standards—he slipped into a diabetic coma, the result of an undiagnosed condition, and the doctors assumed that he must have had a substance abuse problem since he was a jazz musician. They hoped the drugs would exit his system and, of course, they didn’t.

Conversations is a somber, beautiful album with minimal instrumentation, and it seems to amplify that the feeling was Dolphy was short on time. There’s a poignancy that arises while listening to these carefully delivered and fully realized notes, the way each one is round and full and ripe with tactile surfaces. But there’s also a looseness to Conversations, especially in songs like “Jitterbug Waltz” that have an impromptu air and a delightful capriciousness. These sessions sound both measured and yet caught on the fly—if that makes any sense. That’s why it’s such a classic.

In addition to the original four tracks, this version includes two separate takes on “Muses for Richard Davis,” which features extended improvisations from the bass legend.

IRON MAN

Despite the fact that this album was recorded at around the same time, Iron Man is wildly different from Conversations. This is Dolphy delving into free jazz in a way that almost suggests two very different sides of his personality. Yet Dolphy’s ideas concerning free jazz were more contained than later explorations, with stronger foundations and easily identifiable structures. Iron Man avoids the catharsis that comes from sustained cacophony and relies more heavily on the scales and modes that were being explored at the time.

This is where Dolphy’s cohorts pitch in and add their own unique energy. Bobby Hutcherson’s vibraphone is particularly rhythmic on songs such as “Burning Spear,” acting as an anchor to the unanchored sound of the brass. I often feel the need to offer caveats when discussing free jazz, because I know it tends to appeal to a very narrow base of jazz lovers, but Eric Dolphy’s work in this genre was ground-breaking, and Iron Man, underappreciated at the time, is a fantastic tutorial for this type of composition.

This version also ends with the bonus track “A Personal Statement,” which was recorded some months later in Ann Arbor, Michigan. It features a different line-up—pianist Bob James, bassist Ron Brooks, drummer Robert Pozar and singer David Schwartz.

PREVIOUSLY UNISSUED STUDIO RECORDINGS

This disc includes mostly alternate takes of songs from Conversations and Iron Man such as “Music Matador,” “Love Me,” and “Jitterbug Waltz,” but nothing here is second rate, sloppy or unfinished. I’m not a fan of box sets with endless outtakes that were ultimately botched just so we could listen to the performers working out the kinks. As I often think while listening to these sets, “I can see why they left this out of the final release.”

This isn’t the case here—each one of these takes could have appeared on any number of albums. Dolphy’s improvisations were just that unique, and nothing happened the same way twice. That becomes obvious when you listen to his live albums. It’s a shame that it took more than 55 years for these recordings to see the light of day.

Nothing here is “lesser.” It’s just different. The entire set is worth it just for this revelatory disc.

...AND WHAT ABOUT THE MYSTERY TRACK?

Unfortunately, I did not find it here. What I did find was a renewed interest in this exceptional jazz musician, which may lead me to a renewed search for that lost performance.

In this day and age, it might be easier than ever to solve the mystery. Between Tidal, Roon, Qobuz and the internet in general, all I need to do is focus and listen to a lot of music, which should be easy. The only thing stopping me is the vague feeling that too much time has passed, and that I wouldn’t know the song if I heard it. That doesn’t mean I won’t give it a shot.

Eric Dolphy Musical Prophet is currently available in both CD and 180-gram LP formats. Both versions include a 100-page color booklet full of photos from the sessions and interviews and essays from Dolphy’s contemporaries. Strongly recommended.
We chose New York and it was a long “art” week. The Met Opera, Blue Note and Smalls Jazz Club but there was more, there was music in the streets. I tried to capture some of those vibes in black and white, I even thought of a soundtrack for the pics that I would like to share with you. While reading try listening to the Spring from the Four Seasons of Manhattan by Alexey Shor, with David Aaron Carpenter on the viola (Warner Music). After all it was spring.

Photos by Panagiotis Karavitis

MUSICAL SPRING IN NEW YORK

Union Square
By Sara Teasdale

With the man I love who loves me not,
I walked in the street-lamps’ flare;
We watched the world go home that night
In a flood through Union Square.
I leaned to catch the words he said
That were light as a snowflake falling;
Ah well that he never leaned to hear
The words my heart was calling.
And on we walked and on we walked
Past the fiery lights of the picture shows
Where the girls with thirsty eyes go by
On the errand each man knows.
And on we walked and on we walked,
At the door at last we said good-bye;
I knew by his smile he had not heard
My heart's unuttered cry.
With the man I love who loves me not
I walked in the street-lamps’ flare
But oh, the girls who can ask for love
In the lights of Union Square.
HAPPY TOGETHER

Dragon Inspire IHA-1
Headphone Amplifier, Silver
Dragon Headphone Cables
and Focal Clear Headphones
A couple of years ago I was confronted with a choice between two headphone amplifiers. Both Amp A and Amp B were around the same price, $1800, and both were driven with tubes and included a decent DAC. So far, so good.

One was built for sound, with a minimum of features and connectivity options. Usually that minimalist kind of product is my cup of tea. The other one had plenty of flexibility, along with a pre-out that allowed me to integrate it into my main system, but the sound quality, while good, didn’t speak to me like Amp A did. I wound up taking the Goldilocks route, ultimately saying no to both while waiting for something that combined the best of both worlds. Two years later, I’m still looking.

That’s when I heard from Drew Baird of Moon Audio. I’ve known him for a few years—he was one of my dealers during my past life as an importer/distributor. He approached us about a new headphone amplifier that he designed with Dennis Had which is called the Dragon Inspire IHA-1. While it doesn’t have a DAC—which is okay, since DACs are ubiquitous these days—it does have plenty of other features that make it a compelling choice, the headphone rig for me that is just right for me.

**Building the Perfect Dragon**

The $1699 Inspire is available with plenty of intriguing options. You can choose between output tubes (6NS7 or 6BL7), rectifier tubes (5Y3, 5U4, 274B) and transformers. You can even choose RCA NOS tubes, for both output and rectifier, for an extra $100 each. Drew sent me a wide variety of tubes to play with, and that resulted in me spending way too much time having fun with all of the possibilities. If you’re a tube roller, the Dragon Inspire is a dream come true.

A new standard feature for the IHA-1 is a pre-amp out, an option I’ve grown to appreciate in recent years. Drew and Dennis have used the IHA-1 with the other current Dragon Inspire product, the $3995/pair QMB-25 monoblock amplifiers, and they were “blown away” by the combo. That inspired the addition of the preamp out, as well as a mute switch for the power section of the IHA-1.

Everything about the IHA-1 approach is geared toward ultimate sound quality such as short signal paths, pro audio outputs, DACT stepped attenuators and dual filter chokes. What’s notable about the IHA-1 is what it doesn’t have: capacitors, resistors or any other passive components in the circuit. There is neither a gain stage nor preamplifier circuit— the DACT attenuator “acts as the preamplifier.” The output power of the IHA-1 is more than a watt per channel, offering plenty of juice at the low end of the range.

The IHA-1 also happens to be gorgeous in appearance. It resembles some of the beautiful Cary Audio tube amplifiers of the past, but smaller. The top of the chassis is finished with a dual powder coat process finish, topped off with a striking clear-coated copper. It’s compact enough to hide away, but you won’t want to.

**Silver Dragon Headphone Cables**

Drew also sent his Silver Dragon headphone cables, now in a Mk. 3 edition, for use with the Clear and the IHA-1. The Silver Dragon is the top-of-the line cable from Moon Audio, yet it costs a very reasonable $295. For that price, you get silver—or more specifically, 4 x 99.99998% UP-OCC Stranded Silver 24 AWG Teflon insulated stranded conductors.

In comparison to the other headphone cables I had on hand, the Silver Dragon cable really impressed me with its ability to dig even deeper when it came to extracting details, and it added just enough air to the presentation to convince me to keep it in place for the review process.

If you’re a tube roller, the Dragon Inspire is a Dream come true.
Drew chose to send me a pair of the new $1499 Focal Clear Headphones to evaluate the IHA-1, so I presume this is considered a perfect match with the review amp’s menu of options. These open-back cans feature an aluminum magnesium cone that houses the copper voice coils for linear response, resulting in deep, tactile bass and effortless highs. There’s a lot of technology in these well-made, gorgeous headphones, but one thing stood out above all others—man, these things are comfortable.

How comfortable? While listening at my desk in my office I kept getting up to walk away, forgetting that I was still attached to the IHA-1. Fortunately, I never yanked too hard on the ‘phones, cables or amplifier, but I had to constantly remind myself that the Clear were on my head. Focal achieves this stunning level of comfort through both a lightweight design and a unique 20mm memory foam padding that is covered with a perforated microfiber cloth. I’ve been listening to headphones for a good forty years now, and it’s not hyperbole for me to say that these are the most comfortable headphones I’ve ever used. Kudos to Focal for getting this part right—I’ve always said that headphone comfort is just as important as sound quality. You can have the best-sounding cans in the world, but you aren’t going to wanna listen if they feel like a C-clamp on your noggin.

Focal Clear Headphones

Finally, the Focal Clear come outfitted with plenty of accessories beyond the usual fancy carrying case and jack adaptors. You get three separate sets of cables to use with the Clears: 4-pin balanced, XLR 6.35mm stereo jack, and the 3.5mm jack. I went with the 4-pin connector for use with the IHA-1.

Riding the Inspire Dragon

While I didn’t use the Inspire Dragon with the Clear exclusively—I had other headphones to use with the IHA-1 and I enjoyed using the Focals with my laptop as well as some integrated amps I had with inboard headphone amps—it was obvious from the first few minutes that these two components were made for each other. When it comes to headphone sound quality, I look for two things: warmth and openness. I suppose this has something to do with being mildly claustrophobic, and the wrong headphone can make me feel like my head has been snatched from my body and stuffed into a box. (That’s why I’m not a huge fan of earbuds, although I own two pairs that I happen to like.)

That’s why I want openness from my headphone rig. I want warmth because of the fatigue factor. A warm, open sound is essential for those long listening sessions. I want to zone out and have the music put a spell on me. I want to forget about the world and just focus on the music. That is my litmus test for a great headphone rig—its ability to vanquish every other thought in my head.

The Dragon Inspire/Focal combo was extremely warm and open. On any given evening this past winter you could have stood outside in the freezing cold on the other side of my office window and witnessed me slumped at my desk, gazing at the ceiling with a big goofy smile on my slack-jawed, drool-covered face. Whenever I get together with people my age, born at the very end of the Boomer Era, the conversation always turns to our experiences with alleviating stress, of staring at the ceiling for hours dealing with what comedian Doug Stanhope calls the “circus” that’s always running through your head at three in the morning. This is what you need, your favorite music delivered with a beautiful, natural openness that seems to defy the boundaries of the space between your ears. One hour of this per night and you’ll sleep like a baby.

I want to be clear. It’s not about a sound that is boring or uninteresting. I’m talking about a meditative state, one that is achieved through peace and beauty. At the same time, I also desire an almost unlimited and deep view into the recording when I’m listening to headphones. I expect oodles of detail. I want to hear things in familiar recordings I’ve never heard before. The Dragon Inspire/Focal also passed this test with flying
colors. These two products were an ideal companion to Qobuz. I could listen to all these amazing new remasters and constantly experience the joy of listening to my favorites—especially the hi-rez versions of The White Album and Beggar’s Banquet, among others—with the same sense of discovery as I did when I first heard them as a youngster. (For the record, I did about half of my listening with my Unison Research CDE CD player plugged into the IHA-1’s RCA input, and that became my preferred music review rig for at least a few months.)

These times were so special that I often spun around in my chair and looked at my racks of LPs and CDs and other physical media and thought, “If I had to get rid of it all and just survive with this amp, this pair of cans, a tiny USB DAC and Qobuz on my laptop, I could do it without much regret.” I couldn’t imagine thinking that just a couple of years ago, back when I was trying to choose between Amp A and Amp B.

**Conclusion**

I know that $1500 headphones and $1700+ headphone amplifiers aren’t affordable for most music lovers. That’s not the way to consider these two wonderful components. First, there are plenty of headphones and headphone amps that cost way more than that. These are almost the middle of the spectrum in 2019.

The real test of the desirability and value of the Dragon Inspire IHA-1 and the Focal Clear is captured in those aforementioned moments I had where I pondered what life would be like if this headphone rig was my only source for music. That vision, of course, was more than enough to put a smile on my face, especially when I considered the freedom of such a high-quality yet fairly portable rig. (I don’t mean portable in the usual sense—it’s just that I’ve moved a lot in my life and my music systems and LP/CD collections were always the toughest part.)

The truth is, this is a satisfying music system that costs, with a small DAC and a laptop, just a few thousand dollars, and the sound quality is good enough, great even, for someone as jaded about hi-fi as I am. It was a genuine pleasure living with these components and idly contemplating my future as an audiophile.