Not another Audiophile Magazine, but a magazine for Audiophiles and the Things They Love

EgglestonWorks - Technics - Munich
Fern & Roby - Wine - GoldenEar
Barcelona - Galaxy’s Edge
Charney Audio - Barbirolli - Luxman
$100 Cigars - AudioQuest - The Cap

SUMMER 2019
Now that I’ve settled into my comfy new corner office at Part-Time Audiophile headquarters, I’ve noticed some big changes in high-end audio. Since the Spring issue of The Occasional came out in early April, I’ve been traveling all over the world—first Honolulu and then Chicago and then Munich and then Southern California, with about a half dozen smaller road trips in between. I’ve listened to a bunch of new gear, much of it from brands I didn’t know existed until the last year or so. During my eight years as an importer and distributor, I was focused on my eight brands of high-end audio gear, so I was isolated from the bigger picture. Now that I’m free to explore the rest of the audio landscape, I’ve discovered so many new brands—new to me of course. My love of this hobby has been renewed through these amazing products, especially since this signifies that a new generation of manufacturers are taking the helm and bringing us gear that reach higher levels of performance than ever—and in most cases at a far lower cost than before.

I have to start with Fern and Roby. Eric Franklin Shook and I visited Christopher Hildebrand and his impressive Tektonic Design Group factory in Richmond, Virginia, which you’ll find chronicled in these pages. From his stunning line of turntables to the unique Raven single-driver speakers, Christopher is bringing a bespoke level to high-end audio that is both personal and incredibly musical. I have a pair of his Raven loudspeakers in for review as I write this, and you should see the review in the upcoming Fall issue.

That makes me think of all the exciting new manufacturers out there, previously unknown to me, that deliver incredible music-making machines—Linear Tube Audio, Border Patrol, Volti Audio, Tidal Audio, Bricasti Designs, Dr. Feickert Analogue. Then there are the brands I’ve known about for a long time, such as EgglestonWorks. Their new Emma EVO loudspeakers, also reviewed in this issue, deliver a new level of performance for just $5500/pair. I fell in love with both the Emma EVOs and the Luxman LX-380 integrated amplifier I also reviewed—these two products were so beautifully paired that I’d happily buy both of them and live happily with the sound for the rest of my life. I’ve even purchased a cartridge from ZYX primarily through the guidance of our two analog kings, Richard H. Maki and Panagiotis Karavitas. (That review should appear in the fall as well.)

Plus we’re bringing you more from the big, wonderful world where audiophiles and music lovers reside, lifestyle articles that continually enforce the idea that there’s more to our lives than hi-fi.

The audio landscape is changing. There are new sheriffs in town, and they all offer an intriguing mix of gear that you should definitely hear and touch and see. If you’re one of those audiophiles who sticks with the usual suspects, the kind of audiophile who walks into a dealer with an audio mag sticking out of your back pocket, the kind of audiophile who has to read a half dozen reviews before pulling the trigger on something new, then you’re missing out on all this excitement.

Thanks,

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Back in my days as a high-end audio importer and distributor, I represented many floorstanding 2.5 way loudspeakers priced between $4000 and $6000 per pair. Some of our best-selling products fit into this profile—usually these models combined value, performance and a luxuriant appearance that impressed audiophiles and non-audiophiles alike. They were what we called “an easy sell” because they occupied the sweet spot in their respective lines.

That’s what I thought of when I first unpacked the $5500/pair EgglestonWorks Emma EVO loudspeakers and noticed the incredible fit and finish of these gorgeous monoliths. That impression of incredible value was compounded when I first plugged them into my reference system—they had already been broken in—especially when I noticed their ability to extract the “inner light” from recordings, a high priority for me. That means, of course, that I was treated to a sound that defied expectations, one that captured a natural and life-like countenance that’s usually reserved for pricey, state of the art components.

The fit and finish of the Emma EVOs immediately aroused my suspicions. How was this Memphis-based manufacturer able to produce such a fine product for such a reasonable price? My first guess was outsourcing, that maybe the EVOs were assembled somewhere else for a lot cheaper. I’ve seen this happen with a number of speakers from otherwise lofty brands, and that’s how this type of product remains so competitive in today’s marketplace.

Boy, was I wrong.
Anthony Chiarella, the national sales manager for EgglestonWorks, set me straight right away. No, the EVOs were assembled in Memphis and received the same care and attention that the company’s other more expensive products, some sporting six-figure price tags, enjoyed. “I’ve never seen a pair of loudspeakers at this price point that involves so much hand time,” he explained, referring to the number of hours devoted to the building of these speakers.

First of all, EgglestonWorks has built their own painting facilities in Memphis. You want attention to detail, involving several hand-rubbed layers of finish? You got it. The EVOs are available in three standard colors—gloss black, gloss white and gloss silver—but if you can supply the factory with a paint sample, they can offer any color of the rainbow you desire for just $500 per pair. (The metallic plates on the baffles also come in both silver or black—I love the silver, personally!) My sample arrived in Imola Red, a BMW paint finish that is deep red and mesmerizing up close. When I first took photos of the EVOs and posted them on social media, I joked that the red clashed with our unusual color schemes in the listening room (orange and green, which made more sense in our home in Texas than our current digs in New York), but I’d be more willing to buy new furniture than request a different color for the Emmas. They were simply beautiful to look at. Maybe I’d choose a nice dark blue, cobalt or midnight, for my pair.

The EVOs, of course, are more than just a pretty face. The drivers—a pair of 6” woofers and a 1” silk dome tweeter—are the only components not sourced from Memphis; they are custom built by Morel. Anthony informed me that these were built just for the EVOs, and it’s safe to say that no other loudspeaker in the world right now uses these drivers.

In addition to these newly-designed drivers, the crossovers of the EVOs are also brand-new, developed from the designs of their far more expensive models such as the Viginti Limited Edition. You also get improvements to the internal bracing and a unique slot-porting design, as well as copper binding posts from Cardas Audio.

Or, as EgglestonWorks puts it, “Our goal is to make every speaker we produce the absolute best performer that it can POSSIBLY be for any given price level.”
Amplification

I was able to test the Emma EVOs with several amps, everything from solid-state Pure Class A separates that cost five times the EVOs to a high-powered hybrid amplifier with 220wpc to a tubed integrated that barely mustered 20wpc. Surprisingly I chose the latter amp, the Luxman LX-380 integrated amplifier, despite the EVO’s relative middle-of-the-road 88dB efficiency and 6 ohm impedance.

With the Luxman, the EVOs provided a sweet and relaxed sound with a huge soundstage that seemed set back a bit in the distance, allowing plenty of space to explore. My room isn’t huge and I don’t necessarily listen at loud levels, so you may have to take that into consideration, but not once did I feel that the EgglestonWorks needed more juice to really fill out the space. I would therefore consider the EVOs as a loudspeaker that’s easy to drive.

When it came to shortcomings of this combo, there was only one minor reservation, one that could be fixed. With the Luxman in the driver’s seat, I sensed soft deep bass that might have required a little more definition compared to what I’d get with far more expensive loudspeakers—which I have on hand. With the more powerful amps at my disposal, the deep bass really bloomed and became full and fleshed-out (frequency response for the EVOs is 34 Hz to 24 Khz), but I also missed some of those complex textures the Luxman provided. What I was hearing was fairly typical of modest tube amplifiers, but those reservation were easily dismissed when I sat down and listened to my favorite recordings in depth.

The fix, of course, could be found in the Luxman’s tone controls and loudness switch—strange, since I haven’t touched a tone control in decades. A very small boost in the lowest frequencies delivered what I was missing. This had nothing to do with the EVO’s low frequency response, of course, but if you do happen to try this sweet, beautiful-sounding combo you’ll know what to do.

Vinyl Hoe-down!

My time with the EVOs coincided with my time with the superb Dr. Feickert Firebird turntable, equipped with both a 12” Origin Live Illustrious tonearm/Koetsu Rosewood Signature Platinum cartridge and a 12” Jelco 850 tonearm/Miyajima Madake cartridge. In other words, I had a vinyl party that I never wanted to end.

One particular recording that served me well was the Berliner Meisterschallplaten direct-to-disc recording of Ruth Palmer playing various Bach pieces for solo violin. The sound of this lone violinist playing exquisite music in a very large room was revelatory in the way it portrayed the physical characteristics of the instrument and how it was projected into the space. The EVOs accurately presented both the violinist and the room she occupied with a strong sense of separate forces coming together as a vibrant whole.

I then indulged in all my favorite reference LPs, everything from Nine Simone’s Little Girl Blue remaster from Analogue Productions, my favorite recording from the last year or two, to my usual reference LPs from MFSL, Classic Records and Decca. On the digital side, I used the EVOs to evaluate the three extraordinary releases from 2L Recordings for early 2019: Ujamaa, Ljos and Lux. The EVOs were instrumental in carving out all those exquisite layers of sound. I could see and hear every exposed wooden beam in the ceilings of those Norwegian churches where the recordings took place.
Going back to my eight-year stint as an importer/distributor, I found that most of my products fell into one of two groups, as dictated by attendees at the high-end audio shows when they asked that all-important question—how much? The first group yielded that familiar sense of high-end sticker shock, that the attendee simply couldn’t believe how expensive our hobby had become. The second group was the desired one, where they’d ask how much and you’d tell them and a huge smile would spread across their face, signaling a feeling of “That’s it?” I don’t have to tell you how satisfying that reaction could be from a business point of view.

The Eggleston Emma EVOs are certainly in that latter group, so much so that I found myself wishing that I had repped a product this amazing. I’m sure that most EgglestonWorks dealers feel the same way.

Let me put it another way. If I was an audiophile and I went to the local EgglestonWorks dealer with $5500 in my pocket, I would have left with a pair in the back of my SUV. These are loudspeakers, however, perhaps the most subjective of all audio choices, so I won’t say that everyone will have the exact same response. But I also hate qualifying a product like this, saying it’s really good for the money, because this pair of loudspeakers transcends those parameters and stand alone in their excellence.

Yes, I’d buy them, and I wouldn’t have to read reviews or badger the manufacturers and sales reps and dealers about potential alternatives. There’s a point where you just have to stop worrying if there’s something out there that will make you regret your buying decision. I’d get the EVOs and take them home and enjoy the hell out of them for many, many years.

That’s what I’d do. Give them a listen, and you might do the same.
It seems that everything I needed to know about Christopher Hildebrand’s design philosophy for Fern & Roby was gleaned before we set foot on his factory floor. Eric drove up to Richmond VA from the south and I came down from the north, and since I arrived first I met Christopher at his house for bagels and coffee.

Christopher lives in an older part of Richmond in a house that he restored himself, the kind of house where you live the rest of your life in it because it is an extension of you. He showed me the before photos and I was amazed at the transformation—he kept the original dimensions while creating something both modern and faithful to the original structure. It was clear that Christopher has respect for things in their natural state, which explains why his audio designs for Fern & Roby are classic while adhering to the highest standards of precision machining. His line of turntables, for instance, are conjured from an aesthetic of natural patinas and grains while offering high levels of performance.
Christopher’s philosophy, however, is much more than that. As we discussed the day’s tour through Tektonics Design Group, the “parent” operation that includes Fern & Roby, Christopher played music on his home system that included a Linear Tube Audio amp mated to his first speaker design, The Cube. That model, of course, is named for a reason, but I was curious about the placement which was high up on a bookshelf, about six feet off the ground—very atypical for the modern audiophile.

As I sat in what appeared to be the normal listening position, as normal as I could manage, I was impressed by The Cubes’ ability to maintain a full, balanced sound that still provided those audiophile necessities such as imaging and soundstaging and decent low frequencies. As I moved across the living room and into the kitchen to retrieve a bagel with black olive cream cheese, that full, satisfying sound followed me.

Christopher Hildebrand’s designs are intended for modern life, not the solitary and meticulously focused rituals that are often considered the cornerstones of our hobby. You live with Fern & Roby gear. You develop a long-term relationship that lasts and lasts for years. It becomes family.
Tektonics Design Group

Christopher is adamant about maintaining a separation between Fern & Roby and Tektonics Design. He’s an audiophile, sure, but first he is a precision machinist, master carpenter and designer. Eric, once he arrived at Tektonic, kicked into full hardware store geek mode—he lives and breathes this world and was impressed by the scope of the operation.

“Do you have an anvil?” Eric asked. “Let me see the anvil.” Christopher showed him that he indeed possessed an anvil and the two talked about it for what seemed like half an hour.

The team at Tektonics Design creates and manufactures a lot of products outside the audio realm, including everything from precision parts to furniture. Within the audio world, Christopher is involved with so much more than Fern & Roby. For example, he showed us the newly designed brass baskets for the woofers in John DeVore’s stunning new Orangutan Reference loudspeaker system. Christopher’s philosophy extends toward a “rising tide lifts all boats” approach to what would normally be his competition—he’s proud that he can help his fellow manufacturers achieve their vision.

I’ll Take That To Go

At the end of a full day, Christopher crated up a pair of his Raven loudspeakers and we put them in the back of my Chevy SUV. (The review will appear in the Fall Issue of The Occasional.) He even arranged for the new Z10 integrated amplifier from Linear Tube Audio to be sent to my house. While I have plenty of amps on hand that would sound terrific with the beautifully made, high-efficiency single-driver Ravens, a cursory listen at both Tektonics Design and, before that, various high-end audio shows, reveals that this is a match made in heaven.

But I’m getting ahead of myself. Fern & Roby is very different from most high-end audio manufacturers, and not just because of the bespoke, artisan motif that surrounds each of its products. Christopher intends to act as a dealer of sorts, someone who can recommend an entire system that includes products from other companies. He’s very fond of Linear Tube Audio, as am I, and he also champions the phono stages from Dan Wright at ModWright Instruments. He’s even building a factory showroom at Tektonics—it was still in its early stages when Eric and I visited, but the Fern & Roby Facebook page has been showing remarkably quick progress since.

Fern & Roby is indeed different from everyone else. It’s not a high-end audio brand for the common, garden-variety audiophile. These products are for that special music lover who needs heart and soul before specifications. Does that describe you? It certainly describes me.
GOLDENEAR TRITON REFERENCE

MONSTROUS sound and ASTONISHING value

By Scot Hull
They’re big. That’s the first impression one gets sitting in front of the GoldenEar Triton Reference loudspeakers. Physicality, writ large. Turning them on (and up) only reinforces that impression. The disconnect comes immediately. “Wait, how much did you say these things cost?!”

Modern marketing tells us, repeatedly and relentlessly, that “the more expensive a thing is, the better that thing is”. At this point, consumers have completely accepted this – so much so that we are invariably drawn by any claim to upend the Standard Value Equation. The most common line used by a salesperson in today’s high-end? Probably goes something like this: “[Product X] is as good as/even better than competitors priced x-times as much!”

The temptation to this particular hyperbole is something many high-end reviewers are vulnerable to, too – I’ve “sinned” this way, repeatedly. Over my Part-Time Audiophile “sinned” this way, repeatedly. Over my time at Part-Time Audiophile, I’ve had the peculiar pleasure to review loudspeakers that cost absurd amounts of money. “Absurd”, of course, being a relative term. Given that the average American has next-to-no savings and less than $5,000/month in disposable income, the line between “affordable” and “laughable” tends be drawn in uncomfortable places. Yes, reviewing such lofty and aspirational products is my job, but even so, I simply cannot afford the upper-end loudspeakers from most of the brands I see at the regional audio shows. I mean, I certainly wish I could, and that’s why I play Powerball. Truth be told, I would make an excellent rich person. So, while I’m waiting for a call from the Lotto Fairy, I continue the hunt for the ever-elusive and ever-alluring “bargain”. That is, I am particularly vulnerable attempts to solve the “Standard Value Equation” for personal affordability.

What I’m looking for in a pair of “reference” loudspeakers is pretty simple – I want an experience. Yes, I want great imaging. Yes, I want great bass. But perhaps more importantly, I also want something that makes me want to use the system. That last bit is worth mentioning because the compulsive pursuit of “the best” tends to do something really weird to high-end lovers – we love the idea of the hobby more than we love the experience that the hobby promises. That is, we’re in it for the gear and not the music. And no, for the record, fetishism is not necessarily a bad thing. It’s just something that I, personally, am trying to overcome. Anyway, the point – I want my gear to make me want to use it, and more specifically, to make sound I want to hear. I don’t necessarily want high-resolution. I don’t necessarily want freak-of-nature frequency extension. I don’t want a spec sheet. I want an experience.

I like to think Sandy Gross of GoldenEar Technology agrees. His products are known for a couple of things. The first is “imaging”. For Sandy, imaging is the holy grail of the hobby. Sandy wants to invoke, in his listening room, the original experience, and imaging is the key to do that. The second is value. For Sandy, it’s not enough to make a great product if no one can afford it – it’s not a “product” at that point, it’s something else. Vanity, maybe? Anyway, if Sandy is all about value, then the Triton Reference is his monument because this speaker is bananas. For $9,000/pair, what you get is fully on par with the very best loudspeakers available at 5x the price. See? I just can’t help myself. Anyway, the point is that this speaker succeeds on both counts.

I had GoldenEar Triton Reference in my “big room” for the summer, bracketing the fireplace. The speakers are big, almost 5’ tall, 9” wide and double that in depth. And very black. Very. I think some alternative color options would have been nice. Maybe a veneer for an extra cost? Sure, the piano black is a classic, and straight out of the Henry Ford model T school of design (“You can have any color you like, as long as it’s black”), and I get the cost-effectiveness of the limited choice, but still, that finish in that makes me think of the opening scene in the movie 2001: A Space Odyssey. All of which is to say that Tritons may be totally okay with your décor – I have a massive TV credenza that’s painted in black, for example, and it matches the Triton Reference reasonably well. But it’s something to keep in mind because there is absolutely nothing that you’re going to be able to do to hide speakers this massive, and yes, they do better when given a bit of room to breathe. Unlike rear-ported speakers (which tend to be finicky about it), I had luck with the Tritons in a variety of placements – but my preferred setup was 6’ off the back wall, some modest toe-in, and over 8’ between the speakers.

The Triton Reference have a powered bass cabinet, which has upsides and downsides. On the “plus” side, the speaker is 93.5dB, so you can hang a tiny amp off of it and still get great results. The Tritons
spent their time here hooked to a Pass Labs INT-60 integrated amplifier, not quite fleawatt, but no certainly no Big Iron Schwarzenegger, and I had zero issues with “strain” on the amp. My guess is that I probably only ever asked a total of 10 watts out of that amp, tops, and got stunning returns. The “downside” of that powered-bass capability, of course, is having to dial it in. The temptation is to go “too loud”, which muddles the presentation; my recommendation is to start “modest” and work up to “awesome”. Oh, and don’t forget that you’re going to need outlets and/or power distribution run to where the speakers will end up living. Again, just something to keep in mind.

The Triton Reference, from first turn-up, impressed wildly. The size of the speakers translated directly into the size of the soundfield, which in my room was just enormous. I like to joke about 2 D vs 3 D presentations, but this was ridiculous. The Triton Reference didn’t so much recreate a concert hall in my living room as transported me to a concert hall. That was a much recreate a concert hall in my living room was ridiculous. The Triton Reference, from first turn-up, is perhaps the best I’ve heard in this regard. Of course, those tweeters alone are more expensive than the entire speaker from GoldenEar. But the comparison here is still in scope and fairly apt – because the performance of the Triton Reference is uniquely exceptional. The size of the speakers is exceptionally friendly to the human voice, and overall, I found the voicing of the Tritons to be very balanced and linear-sounding.

I started with some intimate stuff with the lovely Canadian trio, the Wailin’ Jennys. “One Voice” is an exercise in harmony, and as each voice entered, creating more layers into the music, the hairs on my neck tried to escape my skin. Errie, and haunting. Moving to the Good Harvest cover of the Joni Mitchell song, “Woodstock”, the duos harmony-crescendos was like being trapped in the eye of a golden tornado. Party speakers? Yes, with a bang. “House-filling” is not a common high-end audio-review designator, but in this case, it was still true – planted in my living room, there was really nowhere in the house to escape the sound. My birthday party mix of 1990’s “Flannel bands” (Nirvana, Mudhoney, Dinosaur Junior, Pearl Jam, Screaming Trees) was a huge hit. My dog howled. My kids howled. I howled. The guests fled. It was marvelous.

Assuming that the simple GoldenEar aesthetic will work, and that the buyer has the suitable space to leverage them, the Triton Reference are easily the best-value in reference caliber loudspeakers that I know of. Sure, the $9K/pair price is beyond the reach of the average American – I got that. But. Seriously, the experience that these speakers can effortlessly create in your home has historically been the reserve of the very, very rare and the very, very expensive. Said another way, the Triton Reference offers Porsche driving for Mazda pricing. In my book, that’s the very definition of “good value”, and like their much-more-expensive peers, these speakers are just as capable of doing utterly unhealthy things to your free time, to your familial relationships, and to your local sound ordinances.

The Triton Reference play loud, they play majestic, and they play for keeps. This is an end-of-the-upgrade-road loudspeaker, and the challenge they represent to the market to your wallet is crystal-clear: if you can do better for less, do it. And good luck with that. (Saying that, I should mention that the new GoldenEar Triton One R, at $5,998/pair, do promise to come close.) In the meantime, my recommendation is to save yourself some time and money and go check out Sandy Gross and his magnificent GoldenEar Triton Reference. They knocked my socks clean off, and that’s only one reason why they won an Editors’ Choice award.

For more information: www.goldenear.com/products/triton-series
Eating Crow: Life with the Technics SL1200G Turntable
By Marc Phillips
My history with the original Technics SL-1200 is, as many of you already know, checkered. I’ve been criticizing this popular and legendary turntable—and direct-drive turntable designs in general—for more than twenty years. I’m taking those criticisms off the table now, and not because I’ve changed my mind about the old 1200. It’s because this new version, the SL-1200G, has me in a swoon.

It’s been three-and-a-half years since I first heard the G, actually the limited-edition and almost identical GAE, debut at CES. From the minute I walked into that room and sat down I knew that this was an entirely different animal. Placed at the front of an all-Technics system, the 1200GAE was making music in an incredibly meaningful way. The old 1200’s sound, which I often characterized as dark, closed-in and without air and light, was gone. I was now listening to a sound that was “high-end analog” in every conceivable way. That experience has gnawed at me ever since, and I even started to consider the GAE, which was limited to just 1200 units—as one of the turntables I considered for that “last turntable I wanted to buy before jumping off the audio merry-go-round.”

I’ve spent a few months with the Technics SL-1200G now, and my instincts were correct. I love this thing for a variety of unusual but compelling reasons, and I don’t want it to leave any time soon.

The Good Stuff

Why am I so smitten with this new Technics? In a nutshell, I love how it makes the ritual of listening to vinyl so easy and so foolproof. I’ve spent the last few years playing with all types of turntable designs. I’ve had to mount many cartridges on several arms on a variety of analog platforms, and after a while I’ve become downright fatigued by the fact you often need to come up with a lot of mechanical strategies to make all these components blend into a unified whole.

The 1200G, however, is a precision machine that was meant to be user-friendly in a way few other turntables are—even many of turnkey designs that have been coming down the pike in an effort to appeal to vinyl newbies. It is the least fiddly and fragile and precarious ‘table I’ve used. Everything is borne from the idea of precision, and how everything is designed to work effortlessly and as advertised.

The cueing lever, for instance, has a solid and predictable action to it that takes the “oops” factor out of playing records. The swiftness of the motor and its ability to start and stop on a dime makes both cueing and flipping records as easy as getting up from your listening chair and then sitting back down. I even enjoy having a platter with a built-in strobe after many decades without this feature—I know the speed is always going to be spot on as long as those little dots float motionless in space. Even that little light that focuses on where the stylus lands is a thoughtful and useful feature that I now deem essential when it comes to extending the life of the stylus.
I’ve also missed the idea of a detachable headshell. Lots of tonearms have this feature, I know, but the Technics SL-1200G made it so much easier to swap cartridges—I felt like all of the adjustments such as VTA and tracking force and azimuth were incredibly easy to dial in. I decided to use the amazing swing headshell from Nasotech, and while I was a little nervous with the lateral wiggle during cueing, I got used to it. It’s still a more predictable movement than, say, using a unipivot arm.

Scot Hull said it best when I first listened to this Technics in his reference system more than a year ago. “You know,” he said, “I don’t think you really need much more than this.”

Shades of the Old 1200

The Technics SL-1200G, as good as it is, still has a couple of very minor issues that preclude it from being celebrated, at least in my opinion, as “the best turntable in the world.” These two criticisms, however, are so small that I quickly forgot about them over time.

First, I have to go back to the reason why I never liked the original 1200—its dark tone and somewhat limited ability to project a limitless soundstage. There are times when I’m listening to the 1200G and I can still hear that basic character rearing its head from time to time. It’s far away, in the distance, but I can still see it lurking about in the shadows. The 1200G is such a complete reworking of the original direct-drive design that I can’t blame this tonal characteristic as something that needs to be addressed. I feel that Technics voiced this new 1200 with a certain trademark sound in mind because that’s what they wanted. If I had never heard the original 1200 and identified and objected to this easily detected sound, I might not have even noticed it in the G. It’s that negligible.

But I placed the Technics in my system immediately after reviewing the Dr. Feickert Firebird turntable, and that was perhaps the most accomplished vinyl rig I’ve ever evaluated. Compared to that turntable, which cost over $30K with its two arms and cartridges, I longed for that incredible sense of air and space that the G still misses by a hair.

The other issue is a cosmetic one. If you stand more than five feet away from the 1200G, it looks almost identical to the original 1200. Inside, everything is different, but Technics has paid homage to the original with pretty much the same overall look. When you stand close to the G, you can easily recognize the better fit and finish—especially in the tonearm. When you pick up the G, you immediately notice the substantial increase
in weight. You know the inside is filled with stuff that makes it sound so much better than the original. But the appearance of the 1200G isn’t as sublime and impressive as something like the awesome new Technics SL1000R, which looks like it might be the one to vie for that “best turntable” crown. But that machine is $18,000, and the G is just $4000, with arm.

The Sound

I’ve treated the 1200G well, matching it with all sorts of upstream goodies. I started with the Nasotech headshell and Scot’s rich and seductive Miyajima Labs Madake cartridge, along with the Miyajima ETR-KSW step-up transformer. I used both the excellent inboard phono stage from the Luxman LX-380 integrated transformer.

The Cap aluminum body modification, also reviewed elsewhere in this issue. I returned the Miyajima gear to an anxiously awaiting Mr. Hull and tried a couple of the step-up transformers from Bob’s Devices. Finally, I took the advice of my Part-Time Audiophile cohorts Richard K. Mak and Panagiotis Karavitis and bought a ZYX Bloom III cartridge.

Over the course of that time I noticed the strengths of the original 1200, and I do readily admit those exist. I’m talking about speed stability, of course, the reason why most Technics fans love the 1200. Also, the original 1200 was always a master when it came to deep, solid low frequencies. With the 1200G, however, those strengths became part of a larger package, a highly musical presentation that’s detailed and, again, effortless in the way it lays out the recording in an organized, logical manner.

Back to the precise way the SL-1200G operates, I felt that the finest recordings were kissed ever so gently by the way the system locates the groove and retrieves an incredible amount of information out of it. The G has an air about it that says stand back, I’ve got this. It does what many of the more expensive turntables do—it presents all of the information in those grooves accurately, confidently and with an honest and direct manner that always made me feel that every parameter, from VTA to tracking force to anti-skating to azimuth, was set perfectly.

I stopped thinking about constantly making further adjustments, wondering that if I moved this here and that there, I’d get better sound. I was able to relax and enjoy from the get-go.

Conclusion

Here’s the conclusion in a single sentence: I’m sorry I said all those bad things about Technics turntables.

All of the elements of the new design—the coreless direct drive motor, the high-precision speed control, the three-layered platter, the thorough balancing of the moving parts, the much-improved magnesium tonearm, the increased control of vibrations through the much heavier plinth and the new quality terminations (which allowed me to use very high-quality interconnects from the likes of Cardas Audio and Furutech)—have pretty much erased most of the sonic complaints I had about the original design.

As I mentioned, I’ve always imagined that my dream turntable would be something gorgeous with a massive high-mass plinth with an exotic wood veneer, a huge 30-pound platter and some exotic tonearm that costs at least as much as the 1200G in its complete form. People would see it from afar and say, “Wow, what is that!!!”

When it comes to the performance of the Technics SL-1200G, however, I have to agree with Scot. I really don’t need much more than this.
I came up with Project 103 late last year to rectify my precarious cartridge situation. My Transfiguration Axia needed a re-tip, but that company’s future was in limbo when Seiji Yoshioka passed away and no one was able to take over. (I’ve heard rumblings that a solution might be near.) Over the last couple of years I’ve been using my back-up cartridge, a stock Denon 103, and I’ve become quite a fan—does any other low-output do this much at this price? Especially one that first appeared in 1962?

Despite the excellence and outstanding value of the 103, it’s not quite a lateral substitute for the Axia. When I listen to the 103 on a high-quality analog rig, I hear its limitations. Compared to more expensive cartridges, the 103 can sound a little unfocused and it can’t quite dig out all the inner detail I hear from the Transfiguration. (That’s not a surprise, since the Axia is ten times the cost of the 103.) That’s when I considered investigating some of the modifications to the body of the 103 that can propel this classic cartridge to new heights of performance. Project 103 was born.
Chapter One — The Cap

Just a few weeks after I first mentioned Project 103, I received an email from Steve Bedard—he noticed an article I wrote for Perfect Sound Forever about the Denon. Steve loves the 103 and has played around with many of the body modifications over the years and has enjoyed the obvious boost in performance. The biggest flaw of the Denon 103 is its plastic body and its somewhat outdated mounting configuration. I love the 103, but I hate mounting and aligning it—it’s one of those cartridges where you wish you had three hands. Adding a more robust body and a more secure hardware arrangement usually results in a more solid and focused sound.

Anyways, Steve told me that when his favorite 103 mods were no longer available, he decided to come up with his own mod—which he calls The Cap. This is simply a thin, square shell with mounting holes that’s machined from aluminum. You don’t have to remove the Denon’s plastic body in order to install it—it fits snugly over the top of the 103 and obviously stays put once you screw the entire assembly to your headshell. It’s a simple, elegant solution.

The Cap costs $85. Like the white upgrade belt for Rega turntables, you can look at this two ways. When you hold this small piece of aluminum in your hand, you may ask yourself why it costs $85—just like you might hold up the Rega belt and call it a $60 rubber band. Once you install The Cap and listen to the gains in performance, you’ll probably change your tune and say, “This is the best $85 I’ve ever spent on my audio system.”

There’s a lot of precision machining that goes into The Cap—that little aluminum shell needs to have an even thickness at every point in order to remain balanced, and the tolerances need to be close for The Cap to fit as well as it does. That kind of machining isn’t cheap. Steve told me that he tried to keep the walls of The Cap as thin as possible so that it wouldn’t alter the weight and the dimensions of the cartridge by too much. But you can also create a shell that’s too thin, and then you have a problem with rigidity again. The Cap adds just 3.5 grams to the weight of the already light Denon 103, so you’ll have to adjust tracking force a bit. It will also increase the height of the 103, so you’ll have to adjust VTA. That’s not a big deal, obviously.

I mounted The Cap on my 103 and attached it to my reference tonearm, The Wand Master Series from New Zealand, which was then attached to my Unison Research Giro turntable. I’m also currently using The Cap/103 on the Technics SL-1200G I’m reviewing. Everything snapped into place as advertised and mounting the 103 to the arm suddenly became a breeze—especially with the Technics and its removable headshell. I only had one minor reservation—once you attach The Cap to your 103, the stylus guard no longer fits. If you’re adamant about using it, you might have re-think this mod. I don’t really have a problem since I don’t have kids or cats or ambitious housekeepers.

Once The Cap was in place, I immediately heard a difference. (Since The Cap is so easy to remove and replace, A/B comparisons are fairly easy to conduct.) That loss of focus I’ve always noticed pretty much vanished with The Cap in place. Imaging became more precise, closer to the Axia than the stock 103. Much has already been written about The Cap and how it improves low bass performance thanks to the more secure mounting arrangement. I heard those improvements as well, but the increased focus within the soundstage is the bigger news. Tell me another way to achieve this with just $85.

Project 103 Complete?

The Cap is such an effective solution for the Denon that Project 103 might just be put on the back burner. I just purchased a new cartridge, and I may have a way to get the Axia rebuilt, so I’m not as consumed with trying all the Denon mods as I was a few months ago. I’m also not in love with the idea of taking a razor blade and removing the plastic body of the 103 on my own. (I have enough stitches in my hands, thank you.) The Cap seems to be the perfect solution for me—it works, it’s easy and my 103 has never sounded better.

Highly recommended.

www.denonaluminumbody.com
THE SMOKING JACKET
The $100 Cigar Smoker
By Marc Phillips
What kind of person smokes $100 cigars?

To the uninitiated, that person might resemble the Monopoly Man, the one with the monocle and top hat. To audiophiles, a person who smokes $100 cigars every day probably owns a Continuum Caliburn turntable with an Etsuro Gold cartridge, a pair of Dan D’Agostino Relentless monoblocks and a pair of Von Schweikert Ultra 11s. And that’s in the “bedroom” system.

To Brothers and Sisters of the Leaf, we know that’s not necessarily true. A truly expensive cigar isn’t something rich people light with $100 bills as they play through at Pebble Beach. A $100 cigar, and there are many, is saved for a special occasion. Two $100 cigars are shared between good friends who haven’t seen each other for a very long time. It’s what you get to celebrate a long-due promotion, or when a grandchild is born, or at your daughter’s wedding. It’s not something you smoke every day. To do so would diminish the care and labor that went into making such a fine luxury item. A $100 cigar is meant to be enjoyed slowly. It should be remembered for a long, long time.

Until now, I’ve never smoked a $100 cigar. I think my record is about $50, and I remember that cigar vividly. It was a Padron Family Reserve No. 85, and I smoked it on my 50th birthday. I sat on a wall overlooking San Francisco Bay and I remember exactly how it tasted. There’s still a photo somewhere on my Facebook page of me smoking it.

How in the world can a cigar cost so much? In most cases it’s a matter of time or labor. I know plenty of well-heeled cigar smokers who love to buy stogies that have been aged for years, decades or even centuries. These cigars may have been rolled before the Cuban embargo in 1961. I have a source who will sell you a box of cigars that were rolled around the time of the Civil War, and you’ll pay a lot more than $100 per stick.

For the two $100 cigars I’ve chosen, labor was the reason for the high price. Tobacco plants were given the same amount of attention as a Japanese cow that will one day be a Wagyu steak. Only a certain leaf might be chosen, one that’s in a particular spot on the plantation and only at a specific location on each plant. The grower might remove all the leaves at the bottom of the plant so that the top leaves will get more nutrients from the soil. Some torcedors might roll 100 cigars before coming up with one that qualifies as perfect.

Both of these cigars, the Padron 50th Anniversary and the Muestra de Saka Unicorn, were smoked at my old cigar hangout, Tisnant Cigar Lounge in Brewerton, New York. The date was July 2, 2019. My herf started at 11am and ended at 2pm. There was only one other person in the lounge at the time, and he sat on the other side and smoked a very nice Davidoff. I didn’t want anyone to bother me the whole time.

**Padron 50th Anniversary**

This incredible cigar wasn’t always $100—I’ve seen some sources list it as low as $40 per stick when you buy it by the box. (It’s relatively hard to find a place where you can buy a single stick like I did.) But this is a limited edition Padron, and as the supply dwindles the price goes up. You might pay more or less for the 50th, depending on the tobacco taxes in your state—not to mention how knowledgeable your cigar store is when it comes to fluctuations in the market. But right now you’ll probably pay at least $75, and perhaps more than $100.
This is a Nicaraguan puro—the wrapper, filler and binder are all sourced from the Padron fields in Esteli. Padron considers this tobacco to be some of the finest ever grown, and they waited until the Golden Anniversary of the brand to release these cigars. The size is a toro extra, which translates to 6.5” long and a ring size of 52. It’s available in maduro or natural wrappers—I chose the maduro.

I’ve smoked many of these special edition Padrons in the past—the No. 85, the Family Reserve No. 45 (which was Cigar Aficionado’s Cigar of the Year back in 2009) and the fairly recent No. 90. Each one has been a complex, memorable smoke with many different notes. I can’t accurately compare this 50th Anniversary Padron with those—you should know all about attempting an A/B comparison while relying on a distant memory—but I will say the 50th was smoother and creamier than any of those other Padrons. What’s strange about this is the maduro wrapper on the Padron 1926 series can be an overwhelming mofo at times—I much prefer the balance of the natural wrappers from Esteli, but the 50th Anniversary was just beautiful from beginning to end.

This smooth yet powerful balance is typical of aged tobacco. The 50th Anniversary uses leaves that have been aged as much as ten years, which also harkens back to the time-is-money argument. Is it worth $100? I’m not sure, but I loved it.

Muestra de Saka Unicorn

Steve Saka of Dunbarton Tobacco and Trust, maker of such fine cigar lines as Mi Querida, Sobremesa, Todos Las Dias and Sin Compromiso, once said that he isn’t sure that his flagship, the Muestra de Saka Unicorn, is worth $100. That’s an unusual sales approach for the founder of one of the most beloved cigar brands in the world. But that because Steve is down-to-earth and practical and honest. He isn’t trying to gouge those wealthy cigar smokers with a product that has an inflated price. No, it costs a lot of money to produce a cigar as nearly perfect as the Unicorn, and he wished he could charge less for it.

This 6.25” by 60 ring dialed is a type of figurado, is expensive to make. Saka has been working for years on making the best possible cigar he can, using the finest tobacco he can buy and then only using 2% of it for the Unicorn. He searched for the oiliest broadleaf wrappers he could find, cured them for years, and used just one torcedor—the best guy Steve knows in Nicaragua—to make each and every one.

As a result, the Unicorn is about as flawless as a cigar can get. The draw is exquisite—a very light puff creates gigantic clouds of smoke. The flavor is full, but completely free of smoke and ash. You’re tasting this unique blend of seven distinct tobaccos, all from Nicaragua like the Padron, and it’s as pure of a tobacco taste that you can find. The best Cubans have this lack of harshness as well, but they’re milder in flavor. This is a full-strength maduro, but you won’t tire of it or feel overwhelmed when you’re done. I felt a little sad when it was over, the same sad you feel when you’ve just finished a really good book.

After the release of the Unicorn, Saka lamented the fact that no one was talking about the smoking experience. That’s because Saka was scooped up by serious cigar aficionados and stored indefinitely for that special occasion. Saka started challenging people to go ahead and smoke them so they could let him know what they thought. He called this “Slaying the Unicorn.”

I can now say that I’ve slayed one, and it’s an experience I won’t soon forget. $100 is a lot of money for something that’s gone in an hour, although you can say that about a $100 bottle of wine as well. I could never afford to make either of these cigars a regular thing, but when I have something truly special to celebrate, I’ll know what to do.
I think the only word that really sums up the High End show in Munich is “spectacle.” Part carnival, part expo, part menagerie, this show is itself what high-end audio is – joyous, gritty, unexpected, human, excessive. There, you can meet the legends of audio design. You’ll also meet the army of people that it takes to bring those legendary products to the rest of the world. You’ll have the opportunity to be trampled by consumers from all over the world. You’ll jostle the press. You’ll see families and little kids. You’ll ogle at actual teenagers out on dates. You’ll have an infinite number of chances to sample crispy pork knuckle and the local beer, and you’ll spend the rest of the year wondering why you can’t get either outside of Bavaria. And, of course, you’ll see and touch and hear the latest and greatest offerings from the world’s oldest and newest audio manufacturers. There really is nothing else like it.
One of the joys of being in Bavaria is actually seeing Bavaria. After hours of vying with several thousands of audiophiles at the M.O.C., a short cab or train ride can take you to the Marienplatz. Dozens of local restaurants offering amazing food and tasty adult beverages are shuffled in with the local shops, while musicians and street performers dot the famous plaza. Make sure to pay your respects to the Mariensäule while you’re there.

Photo by Scot Hull
Going big is the high end way. The latest TechDAS turntable takes a team of four in order to get it installed and the wallet of one quite rich audiophile to get it in the first place. Analog in the hundreds of thousands our way to audiophile nirvana.

Photo by Panagiotis Karavitis
Sometimes it’s not just the sheer size, it has more to do with the proportions, the curves, the finish and why not, the sound. Estelon’s gorgeous looking and sounding designs left visitors breathless. On the antipodes, a field-coil super-tweeter back from the 1930s, still sounding as fresh and vivid as it did back in the days.

Ortofon 2M Black hovering above a Swarovski encrusted turntable by MagLev Audio. When science meets luxury, what a stark contrast, the hovering platter of a turntable against black bling.

Photo by Panagiotis Karavitis
KEF took a large room off an atrium to show off their full range of loudspeakers. Here was a particularly eye-catching LS50.

Living Voice UK is known for their incredible Vox Olympian and Vox Palladian loudspeaker systems, shown here with ultra-fi gear from Kondo electronics. New this year was their entry-level R25 loudspeaker from the Avatar product line.

Photo by Scot Hull
Ortofon celebrated 100 years with an anniversary moving coil cartridge that showcased the developments in terms of new materials and construction techniques. Mounted in the front of a carbon composite tonearm from SAT, nothing left to chance.

And if it is design we are talking about, just check what Hartmut Esslinger of Apple fame penned for Audionet. Industrial design at its best here, sublime sound comes as a nice extra.
Going fast is apparently the high end way as well. And if carbon is a must in the modern audio industry just look at the pinnacle of automotive excellence, the Bugatti Chiron, entirely built from carbon composites. More and more exclusive audio systems find their way into luxury sports cars though the sound of that glorious sixteen cylinder engine needs no soundtrack apart from its own exhaust pipes.

Photo by Panagiota Karavitis
Totem Acoustics’ Switzerland distributors, High End AG, brought an elegant and surprising display to High End this year: a tricked-out Indian. Definitely hit the most-wanted list for a great many attendees. #totembikeswitzerland.

Photo by Scot Hull
STREAMING IT SIMPLE

THE AUDIOQUEST DRAGONFLY RED

AUDIOQUEST NIGHTOWL CARBON HEADPHONES

By Marc Phillips
I’ve probably mentioned this a hundred times by now, but I came late to the digital streaming party. It’s only been about three years since I first got hooked on Tidal, and that’s when I first got to play with a Naim Mu-So. For me, it’s always been about simplicity when it comes to digital audio—if I can’t figure it out within a couple of tries, I move on. That’s why I never spent more than a few hours playing with the streaming service du jour until now.

Once I got hopelessly hooked on the user-friendly interface for Tidal, I started thinking about a more portable way to listen—both at the office and at home. (Now, both are the same thing.) It occurred to me that all I needed was one of those little thumb-drive headphone amp/DAC thingies—the one with a headphone jack on one end and a USB jack on the other. Was it really this simple? I plug this thingie into the USB port on the side of my laptop, plug in the headphones of my choice (I’ve always had plenty of those sitting around), log onto Tidal and that’s it?

Yup, that’s it! That’s why I bought an AudioQuest DragonFly Black. The Black was only $99 so I figured it wouldn’t be a big deal if I tired of it a few months down the road, just like every other so-called digital streaming solution. But I didn’t tire of it. Soon I added Roon and, more recently, Qobuz. At times I’ve had expensive headphones, at times I’ve had expensive headphone amps/DACs, and sometimes I’ve used both at the same time. But I also wanted something that I could take on the road with me and enjoy. I wanted something affordable so that if something happened, I wouldn’t be too upset. I found the answer with the AudioQuest DragonFly Red headphone amplifier/DAC and NightOwl Carbon headphones.

AudioQuest to the Rescue

More than a year ago I had a chance encounter with Bill Low of AudioQuest—in Syracuse, of all places—and I mentioned to him that I was using a DragonFly Black for digital streaming off my laptop, and he said oh, you should really try the DragonFly Red. The Red has a more sophisticated DAC than the Black, and Bill thought I would really appreciate the difference.

A few weeks later I received an email from Stephen Mejias and he asked me which AudioQuest products I’d like to try. I immediately mentioned Bill Low’s recommendation to compare the two DragonFlies. Stephen said no problem. Then I realized that as long as Stephen was taking my order, so to speak, I’ve always liked the AudioQuest headphone line and I wouldn’t mind testing the Red with the latest AudioQuest headphones, whatever those were.

A box from AudioQuest arrived about a week later, and I now had a pair of the new NightOwl Carbon headphones ($400) and a DragonFly Red ($200) to try out.

NightOwl Carbon

I’ve always said that $300 to $400 is an interesting price point for quality headphones. That’s the point where you depart from the more commercial offerings out there, the cans you’d find at one of the giant electronics stores, and venture into high-end audio. It’s the point where you ask, “Why would you buy a pair of Beats when you can have this at roughly the same price?” There’s usually only one shortcut at this price point, in my experience—while affordable headphones can occasionally sound phenomenal, many of them lack that ultimate sense of supreme comfort. I’m not saying all $100 to $400 cans are uncomfortable, but they seldom feel as invisible as something in the four-figure range.

The NightOwl Carbons, however, are very comfortable—at least for me. (That’s an important distinction when you’re talking about something as personalized as headphone fit.) As you put them on your head, you’ll notice an amazing feature. They simply adjust to your noggin without the need to slide the earpieces back and forth. It’s a perfect fit every...
time thanks to the way the head straps simply slide along the outer sleeve, partially propelled by gravity. They’re also incredibly light, which means you stop noticing they’re on your head after a few minutes. That’s another feature you usually don’t see with less expensive headphone designs.

Because the Carbons are so light, and because the color scheme is black on black, you might be tricked into thinking it’s made from inexpensive materials—i.e. the black plastic you might find in other “audiophile” entry level cans. You’d be wrong. The earcups of the Carbons are made from the same Liquid Wood material featured in their more expensive headphones—this is wood that’s been mixed with plant fiber, heated and processed until it can be injection-molded. This results in “superior acoustical properties” as well as the ability to shape the cups so that they are more comfortable to wear.

In fact, AudioQuest is devoted to using as little plastic as possible in these designs—the manufacturing of the Carbons has very little impact on the environment. Even the straps are made from “protein leather,” a synthetic material derived from eggshells. The 50mm dynamic driver used in the NightOwl Carbon has a diaphragm made from biocellulose. This is an interesting new environmentally-friendly direction for headphone design.

AudioQuest DragonFly Red

The DragonFly Red was introduced around the same time as the Carbons but there have been refinements made to the DragonFly line in the last couple of years, mostly in the way these tiny amp/DACs interact with MQA files. The differences between the current DragonFly Black and the Red are mostly three-fold: the output increases (1.2 vs. 2.1 volts), the ESS Sabre chip used for the DAC is different (9010 vs. 9016) and the volume control, which is analog on the Black and bit-perfect digital on the Red.

When you compare the two DragonFlies, you’ll find the differences in sound are not subtle despite the fact that only $100 separates the two products. (You can look at it the other way by saying one is twice as expensive as the other, I suppose.) The Red is simply more resolving than the Black, much quieter and with a sweeter treble response usually associated with higher sampling rates. It simply sounds like you’ve updated the DAC in your system with a newer-generation chip that’s capable of processing more data than ever before, which is exactly what it is.

As a result, I’ve divided up the streaming chores between the DragonFlies: the Black is used with my iPhone and one of my pairs of earbuds (Cardas Audio, ADL) while I’m out and about, mostly when I’m hitting the gym, and the AudioQuest rig is reserved for streaming hi-rez files from Qobuz at home.
The Sound

When I first used the NightOwl and the Red, I felt that there was a modest loss in resolution compared to some of the more expensive rigs I’ve tested recently—most notably the Moon Audio Dragon Inspire and the Focal Clear headphones I reviewed in the Spring Issue of The Occasional. That shouldn’t be a big surprise since we’re talking about a nearly $4000 rig compared to one that’s just $600 complete. After a few weeks, however, the AudioQuest set-up started to smooth out and open up and sound far more musical.

Over time, I stopped noticing any profound compromises in overall sound quality. While the bass response of the NightOwl often sounded a little bit lightweight, there was a coherent and well-balanced presentation that was intriguing and, more importantly, thoroughly relaxing. I’ve been on a bit of a New Order and Smiths kick over the last year, and while I enjoy discovering some titles in those catalogs that were missed the first time around, I couldn’t help but notice that glassy, overly-digital sound that plagued alternative rock and dance music from that era—even with the remastered versions of great and unexplored albums such as Get Ready and Strangeways, Here We Come—sounded much better than before.

With the Red and the NightOwl in play, I noticed a more modern patina to the sound, something that prompted longer listening sessions. Though these remasters still lounged around 16-bit, 44.1 kHz sampling rates, I didn’t care. When I indulged in the modern stuff, MQA-encoded or otherwise hi-rez files, the AudioQuest combo really strutted its stuff. I was treated to an expansive, quiet and sweet balance that was thoroughly satisfying.

After a while, I asked myself the all-important question: do I need to spend more than $600 to really get a kick out of Qobuz and Tidal?

Conclusion

The answer, of course, is no. Not really. Deep down, I’m not quite at the point where I need to spend thousands and thousands of dollars to sit at my desk and have a great time listening to whatever strikes my fancy at any given moment—especially when my reference system is just in the next room.

That satisfaction is amplified once I pack up my laptop and head out on the road. The NightOwl Carbon and the DragonFly Red are fantastic travel companions, good enough for me to sit down anywhere and enjoy high-end sound from a modest and portable rig. I have no qualms about letting someone else try it—I know by the expressions on their faces that I’m onto something quite amazing for a reasonable outlay.

There’s only one more chapter to this story. The word is that there’s a new DragonFly coming down the pike, one positioned above the Red called the Cobalt, and I’ve told both Bill Low and Stephen Mejias that I want to be among the first to try it. There’s always room for improvement when it comes to headphone listening, and I’m eager to hear it when that day comes. Until then, the NightOwl Carbon and the DragonFly Red have my highest recommendation. I can’t think of a better way to experience this level of sound at this price.
I’m sure you’ve noticed that the tariffs asked—and apparently received—for the stuff needed to satisfy our audio cravings have been on an upward path that’s been accelerating to the point that I just read a review of a $6K phono cartridge that described this disc scraper as “mid-priced.” What’s troubling to me is that I’d call that description reasonably accurate. However, there’s one essential of our hobby that hasn’t generally taken off into the stratosphere: software. Whatever format you’re invested in and whatever musical genre you listen to, you can usually find reasonably priced LPs, CDs, SACDs, and downloads—many of them sonically spectacular. And, if your musical taste runs to vinyl, we’re in a vinyl renaissance: new LPs, reissued LPs, and, of course, those used discs to be found on the internet, your local vinyl emporium, at the side of the road, your aunt Florence’s attic, or in a dumpster.
A performance I’ve been trying to add to my collection for quite a while is John Barbirolli and Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra’s take on Mahler’s 9th symphony (EMI ASD 596-97). Now if you’ve been searching for this recording or are just looking for a wonderful performance of Mahler’s 9th on vinyl, how would you like to learn of a potential bargain? I mention bargain because, well, these discs in their original form are not exactly blue-plate specials and certainly not something you’re likely to find in the $2 bin.

Barbirolli’s Mahler 9th, the very recording I’ve been looking for, qualifies. I confess I’m a big fan of “Glorious John,” as Ralph Vaughan Williams dubbed him, but there was always that pesky impediment that plagued my acquisition of these desirable and apparently heavenly discs: an ungodly price, at least for the earliest pressings. For the “dog-in-semicircle” first label we’re talking anywhere starting at over $200—an apparent bargain back in 2014—going up to $885, according to a quick check of the Popsike website.

The Original

As you’ve surely surmised from the prices, interest in these EMI LPs is intense, which coupled with the set’s rarity in its original format has made Barbirolli’s Mahler 9th somewhat of a holy grail item. What could be better than a contemporary reissue, using all the vinyl technoknow-how that’s currently available? Enter the Electric Recording Company, who decided back a few years ago that a scrupulously produced reissue was in order. Since I haven’t heard the ERC reissue,

Given my hankering for this performance, you would think that I would have leapt for my credit card and dialed in the ERC website, right? And I would have if the price hadn’t been ludicrously high: about $840 at the time of its release ($450 for the first record in the set and $390 for the second, single-sided disc).

Even if I had succumbed to the temptation, there were only 300 copies pressed and it was long sold out by the time I decided to take a surreptitious peak at the ERC website. So, what’s a fellow to do?

Luckily, I’m not much of an original label fetishist, and if you’re not, there are other possibilities of the black biscuit variety. One is the “colored postage stamp” second edition that, according to a very cursory price check, can be had for around $80. I’ve had good luck with these pressings and, assuming you can find a set, you’ve already saved yourself a couple of hundred bucks (at least) versus the original label and over $750 versus the ERC—that’s if it was still available.

More than a few of the German EMI pressings I have (including Barbirolli’s famous Mahler 5th) are certainly competitive with my equivalent English pressings, if not quite equal in terms of sound quality. Another option that you might want to check out is the U.S. Angel reissue (SB-3652) that goes for around $30-$40; however, be advised that U.S. Angel pressings are typically—but not always—for inferior to British pressings.

Then there’s the U.K. reissue that I scarfed up on EMI’s Classics-for-Pleasure label (CPF 4226). I happened to spot this version of Barbirolli’s Mahler 9th listed on a reliable used vinyl website I frequent, at the within-the-Lindberg-budget-realm price of £30 ($40 at the time; you might find a copy for even less).

For the budget conscious(!), ERC had a plan whereby the two records could be purchased separately, so you could belly up for the first $450 disc and spring for the second, single-sided disc ($390) when you received your tax refund or brown-bagged it for a few weeks. I assume that subscribing to the set guaranteed the availability of the second record; otherwise, you’d be out $450 and still only have half of the performance.
The Inside Scoop

A quick word about Classics-for-Pleasure—like RCA’s Victrola releases, Classics-for-Pleasure was one of EMI’s “budget labels” and used to reissue some of its famous ASD and SAX (a.k.a. “British Columbia”) recordings. In addition, CFP issued original discs, many of which are worth searching out for both performance and sonics (e.g., Vernon Handley’s Elgar symphonies).

CFP engaged righteous engineers for some of these original LPs—Christopher Parker, Mike Clements (a.k.a. “Mr. Bear”), et al.—so you’re unlikely to be disappointed from a sound standpoint. And, even though the pressings vary from excellent to so-so, direct comparisons with the originals indicate that CFP reissues are generally darn good approximations of the original LPs, at least in my admittedly limited experience.

Black Vinyl Gold!

In the case of the CFP pressing of Barbirolli’s Mahler 9th, I can only say that I was gob-smacked by the performance and the sound. I’m surely not an expert, but I think that Mahler’s music requires the conductor and the orchestra to be totally and intensely committed; otherwise, his work can seem glib or even vulgar. It’s evident from the first note that both Barbirolli and the BPO were in the “zone” for this recording.

The jacket notes tell us that Barbirolli performed the work with the Berlin Philharmonic in January of 1963 and was so successful that the orchestra unanimously asked him to come back and record it with them the following year. The recording was made over five three-hour sessions in Jesus-Christus Kirche, located in the Berlin suburb of Dahlem. And a good part of the quality of this performance is likely attributable to the fact that each movement was rehearsed and recorded in its entirety, “thereby the flow and essence of the work was retained,” according to the notes, as well as my own listening experience.

From a sonic perspective standpoint, it played on my system as a bit closer than mid-hall—close enough that you can hear Barbirolli’s occasional grunts and exhortations to the orchestra—and pleasantly reverberant, but not overly so.

All I can say is that the sound quality of my CFP Mahler 9 is outstanding, if not quite in the demonstration class. But with a performance like this, I’m not disappointed! By the way, like the CFP reissue the Angel release spreads the symphony over four sides of two discs; of course, the usual U.S. Angel pressing caveats apply.

Conclusion

So, there you have it: magnificent music, exceptionally well-performed, and exceptionally well-recorded. I ask you: what more could you want? The bottom line is that there are cost-effective vinyl routes of finding out for yourself what all the Barbirolli/Mahler 9th fuss is about without devastating your own bottom line, having to resort to a cat food diet, or putting your children in the workhouse.

I have no way to compare the original EMI or the ERC reissue to the Classics-for-Pleasure reissue; in fact, I’d be curious to learn if anyone out there in reader land has made the comparison. In the meantime, the CFP discs are more than likely to be the only Barbirolli-conducted Mahler 9th I’ll ever hear and I’m going to keep them spinning.
The Occasional Magazine | Summer 2019

We’ve all used high-end audio products that we consider great “all-arounders.” It might be a solid-state power amplifier that has sounded great in all types of systems over the years. It might be a pair of speakers that are unusually forgiving when it comes to room placement. It might be a cartridge with a stylus that has an unusually long life expectancy and a reasonable re-tip fee. These are the components we trust, the ones we depend on to do the job, a known variable in most situations.

When I first received the Luxman LX-380 for review, I thought it was a very specialized product with narrow applications, an integrated amplifier that would only appeal to a certain kind of audiophile. Since it has tone controls, switches for a subsonic filter and loudness, and a selector for two pairs of speakers—just like most ’70s receivers—it probably wouldn’t appeal to purists. Since it has styling cues such as a wooden cabinet and toggle switches, it wouldn’t appeal to those who eschew vintage equipment and would prefer something a little more modern. Because it’s a tube integrated with only 14-20 watts per channel, depending on load impedance, it wouldn’t appeal to audiophiles who need more power. I can think of many reasons why you wouldn’t call the LX-380 an all-rounder.

That’s what I thought, anyway. After a few months of steady reviewing, however, I’ve noticed something strange. I have plenty of integrated amplifiers on hand, everything from a

The Luxman LX-380 Integrated Amplifier

By Marc Phillips

THE UNIQUE ALL-AROUNDER

The Luxman LX-380 Integrated Amplifier

By Marc Phillips
14wpc single-ended parallel to a 25wpc pure Class A solid-state to a 220wpc hybrid to a high-current model that puts out more than 500 watts per channel (albeit into 2 ohms). I have an amp for every type of speaker that passes through my listening room, and there have been quite a few loudspeakers in my listening room since last fall.

Yet the LX-380, miraculously, has stayed in place. I don’t feel like taking it out of the system unless I have to, and I haven’t had to yet. I’ve had speakers in here with sensitivity ratings between 84 dB and 93 dB, and impedances between 4 and 8 ohms, and the LX-380 has made sweet, passionate nookie with each and every one of them. It has quietly become the most interesting all-rounder I’ve ever encountered in the world of high-end audio.

A New Old Luxman?

Luxman describes the LX-380 as “a new era in golden ‘38’ series vacuum series integrated amplifiers.” The 38s started appearing a few years ago with styling cues borrowed from the old “28” series. You’re basically talking about a look that’s straight from an integrated amplifier from the ‘60s and ‘70s, with a full complement of switches, knobs and buttons crowding the faceplate. It’s basically a ‘70s receiver without the big tuning dial dominating the top third.

This re-introduction of that retro look was a big hit for Luxman, but this new generation of 38s are quietly implementing modern technologies such as the computer-controlled Luxman Electronically Controlled Ultimate Attenuator (LECUA), which is said to enhance the “dynamism of each performance.” The main circuit of the LX-380 has also been redesigned to maximize the performance of the 6L6GC output tubes. A Mullard-type driver stage is linked to a push-pull final stage, which “adopts a fixed bias type to maintain constant grid voltage.” This also helps to increase the life expectancy of the four 6L6GCs as well as the three ECC82 tubes. Much of this circuit redesign is borrowed from the excellent LS90AX integrated amplifier.

The Luxman LX-380 is jam-packed with all kinds of features—some that I need, and others that are still cool even if I don’t. There’s an inboard MM/MC phono stage, also borrowed from the LS90AX, that comes with both a mono switch and the aforementioned subsonic filter. It’s a semi-conductor design, but it has such a warm and sweet tone that I used it throughout the review period (albeit with step-up transformers from Miyajima Labs and Bob’s Devices since I was using some very low output MCs at the time).

The LX-380 also comes with a built-in headphone amp that, again, was decent enough to use while reviewing such headphones as the Focal Clears and the AudioQuest NightHawk Carbons. This amp didn’t quite replace some of the awesome standalone tube amps I’ve had over the last few months such as the Moon Audio Inspire Dragon, but the convenience of having it all in one relatively compact chassis is compelling enough to forget that last little bit of detail—there’s still plenty of warmth to go around.

The tone control set-up is also unique and flexible, almost to the point where it might be called an equalizer. The treble control can be set to switch over three different frequency ranges (1.5 kHz, 3 kHz and 6 kHz) and the bass control can be set to 150, 300 or 600...
The Occasional Magazine  |  Summer 2019

Hz. I only played around with these controls sporadically, as I’m not really a tone control guy, but once or twice I enjoyed a slight boost in bass when using smaller 2-way loudspeaker designs with relatively low sensitivity ratings.

The Sound
As I’ve mentioned, I’ve used the LX-380 with a wide variety of loudspeakers over the last few months—even when logic dictated a need for something more powerful. My preferred pairing was with the splendid EgglestonWorks Emma EVOs, which are also reviewed in this issue—this was an amp/speaker match I could live with for a very long time, noteworthy for a combo that retails for just $14K. I also used the LX-380 with my reference Brigadier Audio BA-2 monitors and the Tenner & Friedl ART monitors; neither are what you would call high-efficiency designs. I did conclude the review period with something that was easier to drive, the 93 dB Fern & Roby Ravens. This was also a magical pairing, but I only spent a couple of very quick weeks with this combination.

The LX-380’s basic signature came through with each pair of loudspeakers—very relaxed, open and seductive. While the Luxman’s styling cues are meant to evoke the past, this was not an overall sound that was too warm, too romantic and too lush. I was always treated to a tremendous amount of detail when the LX-380 in the system, but it was delivered in an easy, thoroughly charming way. The structure of the soundstage was a bit distant overall, but wide open and mesmerizing like a huge panoramic window that reveals a lovely landscape each and every time.

Even the low bass was substantial and tight enough for me to be quite satisfying, a rare occurrence with a tube amp without a lot of juice. With warm, natural recordings such as MA Recordings’ 45rpm pressing of Sera una Noche, the thumping of the percussion bloom and expanded and energized the room in a very realistic manner. I could hear the deep sounds created by the room, the floorboards and the walls, and how each boundary resonated at a slightly different frequency. That’s not easy to do.

Conclusion
It’s clear that Luxman wanted to blend the old with the new in its design of the LX-380, and there were times I could feel those considerations deep in my bones. On the other hand, there’s something about the basic sound of this amp that I find so welcoming and friendly, a tone that relaxes you and makes you content—which hopefully is the reason why you’ve entered this hobby.

I’ve been faced with this conundrum before: do I want a purist amp that offers very little in the way of conveniences and features in the service of ultimate sound quality, or do I want all the bells and whistles in a single box in a product that isn’t quite the head of the class when it comes to fidelity and realism? I spent a lot of time with the LX380, and after a while it became clear that I had absolutely no qualms with the sound quality. The Luxman became a great friend, a close confidant, something that I trusted to tell me the truth and always be on my side. It’s one of the best examples of an all-rounder I’ve found, but it also has a distinct personality that’s charismatic and engaging.

You get a lot for $7500, even if some of you might balk at the low power ratings. Those are quality watts, and I couldn’t find a load that prompted the LX380 to struggle. I’m really going to be sad when this amp goes away. Highly recommended.

Akira
“... The Akiras got the scale of recorded instruments right.... ...the picture painted by the Tidals was extraordinarily true to my memory of the performance... The Akiras are the best-looking, best-built, best-sounding speakers I have had in my listening room...”
- John Atkinson
Stereophile / November Issue 2018

Contriva
“...As I heard the two legends chatting quietly during the number, as well as the reverberation of their instruments in the studio, I wrote in my notes, “It’s almost like sitting on the end of Ellington’s piano stool.”
- John Stacavage (R.I.P.)
Parttimeaudiophile / July 2017

Piano
“I’ve noticed the Pianos are highly transparent with what seems to be zero background noise or distortion. ...What this equates to for me is a more strain free relaxing listening experience. These beauties can play loudly and maintain the scale of music as you’d expect at this price point. However, I also am able to listen at lower volumes and still really feel the vibe of the music. I’m very happy with them.”
- Jason R. (new owner) - Lenexa, KS Nov. 2018

The Voice That Is
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?
SHELL-SHOCKED IN DISNEYLAND: THE GALAXY’S EDGE

By Brian Hunter
My Red Bull days are reserved for only the most sacred of vacation outings. The public outcry toward a pantry full of those glorious shiny metallic and sky-blue cans was more burden than social norms could bear, so now consumption is held for special occasions only, exhumed quickly in dark corners and not without a small chaser of guilt.

Opening weekend for the new Galaxy’s Edge Star Wars section of Disneyland was one such event of historical significance to trump the constant health warnings and proved a worthy companion by days end.

The new park was said to be “experiential.” This single word was one that I silently mulled over in my mind as we packed the car for the 1.5 hour ride down to Anaheim, CA. How can you experience anything without it being experiential? Another silly bit of wordplay used to fill the space in between headline and advertisement in website editorial with more click than stick. Still, the reservation system for booking a single 4-hour time slot in the new area filled up quickly, even though only one of the projected two rides was available at launch.

There were rumors of VIP tours weeks prior, but the open masses had seen little other than a few landscapes or prop close ups of the park. I was also wondering how they intended to kick us out after the four hours, but given the limited real estate and reserved entry, I was none too worried.

The usual parking scenario was much lighter than expected, and upon entry to the park we were greeted by a finely thinned herd of attendees for a Saturday. After obtaining our wrist bands, we were directed to a far section of Adventureland where the newly constructed road would lead us to a nondescript entry to the remote planet of Batuu in the outer rim of the Star Wars universe. This nearly undetectable passage into the fantasy of make-believe is perhaps the best metaphor for what experiential really feels like in this execution. Unlike the rest of Disneyland, there are no glaring direction signs, no cartoony illustrations or even outlandish mascots to have your picture taken with. No, as things progress into the park, buildings take a somewhat darker turn—in a way.

Signs of subtle calamity and a wartorn city slowly come into focus. While I certainly glorified the tie fighters of the Star Wars universe in my eight-year-old mind, in this environment they are now a pinpoint representation of machines of war. The massively marred buildings and textured walls are perhaps a little too detailed, it’s hard to find a section of wall or railing that hasn’t been touched up in some way. At least one part of the multifaceted experience is clear, something that is also unique to the rest of D-Land—the fantasy Black Spire Outpost was recently touched by violence.

As you round the first corner a town square of sorts appears with fascist-like banners of the First Order hung over the tall walls flanking either side of an imperial fighter. Later in the day, Kylo Ren himself appears with two stormtroopers to give an aggressive speech to the crowds. The stormtroopers interact with park goers in a fun fashion the rest of the day. Standing in line for the cantina, I can hear ships fly overhead in a convincing fashion. The source of the sound travels overhead across the park from at least two points, maybe more.
Perhaps it was just the long wait to get in, but sitting there in a bombed out village with planes flying close overhead felt a little less like fantasy and more like an all too real scenario for some individuals on this planet. But looking at the faces of the rest of people in line I could tell this was far from the minds of most park-goers.

Other more politically motivated publications have gone as far as to say that the park itself is a living, moving warning for what could happen to any country if the wrong people make it power. Still others have said it is a cautionary tale for the US, specifically in our current state of affairs, but I would find any direct intent to isolate more than half the US population would have a huge effect on the park’s profitability, and given that custom light sabers in the park cost $200 there is quite a bit to be lost by dragging politics into a fantasy world.

As in the real world, there was some solace and escape to be found in the bar. Oga’s Cantina lightened the mood significantly with a remarkably intricate DJ robot spinning tunes on the far end. Be prepared to fund a rather hefty tab if you decide to take part in alcoholic festivities, however. One drink with a commemorative cup costs nearly $45, while another commemorative beer flight costs $75. Thankfully there are several pre-mixed drink concoctions that hit the $15-20 mark, unfortunately standard fare for any high-end saloon in the Los Angeles area.

Since the drinks were premade for the most part, this brought a few benefits to the table. One, service was very quick for your usual bar-going experience. Two, the drinks never broke character. They were actually dispensed from tall futuristic containers one would assume were just props at first glance. The other thing that never broke character was the bar staff. Like most actors in Disneyland, the hosts of Oga’s Cantina are encouraged to play characters and treat patrons like they are visitors from another planet. Some sources even hint that the bartenders are asked to create elaborate backstories for their facade, even going so far as to choose a side between support for the empire or rebel force located on the planet.

In reality our fresh-faced bartender appeared to struggle with the game a bit, but eventually found her footing along the way. It was opening weekend after all and given her service skills she was clearly a bartender first and an actor second. The real upside to the whole experience was both the drinks and food nibbles available. While pricy, it’s relatively easy to say that everything I had that day was easily the best tasting pre-made food and drink I have ever had. I sampled almost everything on the menu and each drink was prepared with unique twist or, at minimum, a solid theme. Foam that makes your
mouth tingle, exceptional complexities in taste, mouthfeel, etc. There was a lot to unpack across the board. It did seem clear that a masterstroke of artistry had at least touched every element that could be consumed.

It would be an understatement to say that bar patrons were in high spirits that day. A 45-minute curfew was communicated to us as we entered the bar, but no one came in to get us after our time eclipsed that deadline. There is a sacred joy that can be found in any of the drinking establishments sprinkled across the Disney theme parks in California, a sense that the kids are in bed—or perhaps just the conclusion of a long-awaited vacation has been successfully executed brings along with it a powerful positive energy around 10:00pm. The same goes for day drinking in a colorful Star Wars bar on a Saturday afternoon of opening weekend.

Smuggler’s Run, the Millennium Falcon ride, had little wait for us that day, but surely as reservations open up to the general public that will change. The line takes you into a very convincing mock-up of the famed ship, decked out with the same holographic gaming table seen throughout the movies. The ride itself plays out much like a 6-man raid in a video game. Each person is assigned a specific role to play, and a fairly realistic flight sequence begins with decent storytelling along the way.

If you ever wished you could sit in the cockpit of the Millennium Falcon, this is about as close as you will ever get. Once again, no detail was spared in recreating the environment and it’s not hard to say there was some small part of my child psyche that was deeply satisfied by sitting in the pilot seat. If you still bang around in ‘80s nostalgia on a regular basis, this could very well be your kind, warm safe space in the world.

The experiential part of Galaxy’s Edge may not be for everyone. If you have a friend or family member that suffers from PTSD, it may be over-stimulating on some level. If you are a huge Star Wars fan, especially for the new movies, the scene is one taken out from a movie with a decent amount of accuracy. The bar is not to be missed, even if the line is long. The current ride leans a bit hard on its fan-love compared to innovative rides like Avatar Flight of Passage at Disneyworld, but overall the area is a good stop for something new, different and immersive.

It’s also a great excuse to drink some Red Bull.
Have it all.

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THE RELUCTANT SOMMELIER

NO RELUCTANCE FOR OREGON WINE

For a large state Oregon produces a tiny amount of America’s wine, but what it makes is of high quality. My appreciation of wines from this area builds over the years, through travel and research. I have deepened my love of Pinot Noir—my favorite of the international varieties (since you asked), and I’ve found white wines that are stunners. Following are notes from visits and tastings over the years that came together in my research for this article, I focus on the western AVAs of the state, since this represents most of the production.

With no snobbery intended, I hew to these wines because they are usually a taste of Europe in that terroir plays a very important role. I hope this piece encourages more reflection and appreciation for what goes into each glass the next time you drink Oregon.

Perspective

My lovely and large California produces 90% of the wine America drinks. We have had 50 years of practice to show the world what we do with over 100 grape varieties, which we grow where we choose because our climate is amenable. We’ve been very successful at producing market-driven wines. We are the definition of New World wine.

Oregon produces 1% of the country’s wine—not simply due to its size, but because of topography. 72 varieties are grown, but one difficult red grape variety dominates Vineyard land is less plentiful, so every acre counts. Most wines are a bit too expensive to meet the needs of the quaffing wine drinker so it is rare to find mass value wines here. In this way, Oregon stands out as closely aligned with Europe. Here, it has always been about working with the terroir, being less market-driven and pursuing expression. 70% of Oregon producers make less than 5,000 cases each annually. It has only been 25 years since the industry took off (early 1990s) in global recognition, expansion of vineyards and wineries, and in growing areas.
Facts

Where: Historically, the most important area for production and recognition is oriented from north to south in the western part of the state, between the Coastal Range and the Cascade Mountains. Willamette Valley in the north reigns with the most vineyards and the most wineries.

Terroir: Pacific Ocean influence. 2 more hours of sunlight daily during growing season vs. California. For cool climate wines, longer daily exposure to sun at temperatures above 50°F assists in full phenolic development. Soils and geologic history in the state are also a major factor in the character of the wines.

What is grown: Pinot Noir represents 58% of wine production, a huge commitment to one variety that cannot be mass-produced well. Following Pinot Noir is Pinot Gris (aka Pinot Grigio), then Chardonnay, the future of premium white wine in Oregon. Riesling is a small slice of Gris (aka Pinot Grigio), then Chardonnay, the future of premium white wine in Oregon. Riesling is a small slice of production, but it is a variety that shows the terroir well, and Pinot Noir is the most popular variety that is grown in Willamette Valley in the west, and Columbia Gorge on the border of Oregon and Washington state. Pinot Gris is still produced in greater volume than Chardonnay, but this will change soon.

Ovum Wines—All Whites, All the Time

John and Ksenija House produce only white wines, using the same winemaking methods for each wine and allowing as much of the fruit and terroir to shine as possible. Most of their wines sit on the lees (spent yeasts) for 8+ months before bottling. This adds texture and a long finish. Riesling, Muscat and Gewurztraminer are their specialties, sourced from vineyards around the state; all of their wines are able to age for 3-4+ years beyond release. Ovum was recently featured in Wine Enthusiast Magazine’s Cutting Edge Winemakers; Ovum 2016 Since I Fell for You Gewürztraminer was named by Wine & Spirits Magazine as a Top 100 wine. Most wines are priced at around $27 SRP.

http://ovumwines.com/

Willamette Valley—Crown Jewel of Oregon

70% of all planted vineyards in Oregon, this large AVA stretches from the suburbs of Portland, south through Salem. Seven sub-AVAs are determined by soils, topography and orientation/exposure to the Pacific Ocean. This is cool-climate growing, with warm dry summers.

The soils are a crucial factor in flavor and body in WV. Concentrations of marinesedimentary soils from the uplift of the sea floor several hundred million years ago are the oldest soils. Basalt deposits from lava flows form the next oldest, followed by a thin layer of glacial dust (loess soils). The youngest soils are on the valley floor, up to 300 feet of the hills. This layer of nutrient rich soil does not produce well-structured wines, so the best sites for premium grape growing in Willamette are the slopes of the hills, from about 300 to 800 feet. A few AVAs have a mix of marine and basalt soils, a few are all one or the other. In this regard, where you plant is for both sun exposure and soil.

In general Willamette Valley Pinot Noir wines are going to taste more savory than fruit-rich counterparts in Sonoma’s Russian River Valley, or Santa Barbara. Levels of cherry ripeness and some rhubarb are common fruit aromas in the Pinot Noir, with fir tree and “winter forest”. Dark fruits and firmer tannins are a hallmark of the marine sedimentary soils, and lighter colored bright wines with cherry and delicate floral aromas are typical of the basalt-based soils.

There are so many different winemaking styles going on in Willamette that it is unfair to try to typify the wines available; suffice to say that if there is a style, a trend, a fermentation or aging container being used anywhere around the world for Pinot Noir, Chardonnay, Pinot Gris and Riesling - you’ll find it here.

Domaine Serene, Dundee Hills AVA (Willamette Valley)

From the beginning, Ken and Grace Evenstad established old-world methods for Domaine Serene that captivated them in Burgundy - dry farming, small yields, vinifying different lots of wine separately, blending these lots to create special cuvées. A few years ago, the Evenstads created a trust for the winery and vineyards that protects it from being bought by any corporation or sold by future generations. The name and place will be protected for at least the next 200 years. Domaine Serene Evenstad Reserve is $72 SRP.

https://www.domaineserene.com/

J.K. Carriere, Willamette Valley

I first knew Jim Prosser’s Pinot Noir wines when I sold them back in 2009. The hallmark of Jim’s higher priced wines is his sourcing of fruit from five vineyards (including his own in the Chehalem Mountains AVA). The philosophy here is to showcase the fruit and acid levels; along with tannins, these wines are age-worthy. Last year I tasted the J.K. Carriere Vespidae 2014 Pinot Noir and got a savory wine with dried and wet “garrigue” (the Mediterranean wild herb mix.) Very well-balanced. $42 SRP https://jkcarriere.com/
Vidon, Willamette Valley

Don Hagge is a physicist by career (working on the Apollo 6-13 missions) but grew up on a farm in North Dakota. These sensibilities come through in the wines, which I found to be very balanced and expressive.

My notes: 2016 Vidon Estate Chardonnay lemony with lime zest, spiced apple. Rich on palate without being cloying. $30 SRP. 2014 Vidon Pinot Noir Barrel Select had savory spice and sandlewood, incense, fir and dried cherry on the nose. $60 SRP. And yes, there is a Space Exploration Series of wines.

https://vidonvineyard.com/

Central Oregon Umpqua Valley

The Umpqua Valley was the first to be planted in the state’s modern wine History—in the 1960s. Is it warmer here than in Willamette, so Pinot Noir is outshined by Mediterranean and other European varieties such as Tempranillo, Syrah, and Cabernet Sauvignon.

Reustle-Prayer Rock Vineyards

Alex (Sventitsky) and I met Stephen and Gloria Reustle at a notorious French Laundry dinner in Napa Valley in 2001; they had just planted their vineyard in Umpqua. They stand out with two wines: Syrah and Grüner Veltliner, a lovely white from Austria that has lower alcohol, with hints of cucumber and celery. I tasted the Syrah Masada 2014 which showed the classic aromas of Syrah, meaty with blueberries and violets.

About $42 SRP https://www.reustlevineyards.com/

Southern Oregon Rogue Valley

The Rogue includes a series of three North/South oriented small valleys at higher altitudes of 1200 feet in the Siskiyou Mountains—Illinois, Applegate and Bear Creek Valleys.

Foris Vineyards

Planted in Illinois Valley by Ted Gerber in 1971, this winery produces its own wines and sells grapes to wineries up north. The Pinot Noir is an Alpine-influenced wine with dried sour cherry, cranberry, white and black pepper on the nose, light-bodied and lean. It is with the white varieties that Foris does well—Gewürztraminer, Pinot Blanc, Pinot Gris, and Muscat. Seek these out; they are boutique in nature, reasonable and a taste of terroir.

https://www.foriswine.com/

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“The inaugural year of the FAE was a great success; the show was well organized, attendees were plentiful and interesting, with many new faces we don’t see at the other shows. We will be back!”
— Jeremy Bryan, MBL North America

“We took a chance on the first Florida Audio Expo and we’re so glad we did! Great vibe, nice venue, and enthusiastic attendees. And hey - Florida in February isn’t bad either! Can’t wait for 2020!”
— Angela Cardas Meredith, Cardas Audio
JOHN RICHARDSON VISITS CHARNEY AUDIO

By John Richardson

“"You will never LEAD if you continue to FOLLOW others.”

This was advice offered to a younger Brian Charney by a veteran motorcycle racer and mentor when Brian realized he was spending too much time viewing the backsides of his competitors during races.
Brian took this advice to heart and has, ever since, looked for different and better ways of achieving his goals. He has spent countless hours designing and building motorcycle suspensions, model boat engines, and high-end audiophile speakers in order to “build a better birdhouse,” as he puts it. Whatever the case, one realizes within minutes of meeting the man that he is an outside-the-box kind of thinker who trusts his instincts and usually comes out on top.

I first met Mr. Charney in 2017 at Capital Audiofest. It was the third and final day of the show, which I had been covering for Part-Time Audiophile. I was tired, and I thought I’d heard everything worth hearing—in other words, all the highly touted big-name rooms. I randomly stumbled into the room where Brian was showing his wares, and I stopped dead in my tracks. I don’t recall what tunes were playing, but I hadn’t heard recorded music presented this way before at any show. I was blown away— the music played was so real, visceral, and immediate that I vowed to learn more about the strange looking pair of speakers that stared me down like some sort of cyclops-like Egyptian gods.

What Brian was showing was a pair of his Companion horn-loaded single-driver speakers. I was stunned by the sheer depth and impact of the bass being generated by what appeared to be a single six-inch driver housed in each modestly sized cabinet. I wanted to know where the subwoofer was. When I asked about the bass, Brian only smiled and nodded, as if inviting me as far down the rabbit hole as I dared to travel.

Fast forward to May of 2019. I’d met up with Brian again at Capital Audiofest 2018 and had spent a lot more time in his room trying to figure out these wonderful speakers. When we realized that Brian’s home and workshop were only a three-hour drive from my place, we planned for me to pay him a visit as soon as time opened up for both of us. By May, the planets aligned, and the visit became a reality.
I was truly excited when I hopped into my car early in the morning with local audio buddy Mitchel Smith riding shotgun. Mitch had also spent time in the Charney room at the Fest and was equally intrigued by what these speakers could do. We both wanted to get to the bottom of Charney’s audio tomfoolery and get the dirt, as investigative writers like to say.

Brian’s listening venue is in his home, and consists of a well-proportioned room with heavy drapes covering windows and doors, as well as a few simple corner treatments. On either end of the room was a stereo system; each of these employed a pair of Charney speakers, as well as Brian’s own hand-built amplification components. The attention to detail and beauty of these components was especially noteworthy; it’s immediately apparent that Brian Charney takes great pride in his creations.

The first system we heard consisted of Charney’s Companion Moderno speakers powered by his own hand-built preamplifier and 300B single-ended triode stereo amp. The source was a compact disc player by Sparkler Audio of Japan. This was the same setup I had heard at Capital Audio Fest 2018.

As with all of Charney’s speaker designs, the Moderno one utilizes one single-driver transducer per cabinet. Here, an eight-inch unit from Voxativ in Germany was employed. This driver was in turn mounted into a horn-loaded cabinet of Brian’s own careful design. High quality transducer units are important, Brian tells me, but it’s the cabinets that really make the speaker sing.

There are three primary design points that Brian won’t compromise on when it comes to cabinet design. First, cabinets have to be made of wood. Second, the horn must fire from the rear of the cabinet, away from the listening position. Lastly, the horn itself has to be designed and constructed according to strict Tractrix theory.

Tractrix theory? That was a new term to me, so I asked Brian to explain. Unlike most horn-loaded cabinets, which use flat-panel folded horns or transmission line systems to enhance bass output, tractrix horns have a constantly changing rate of flare, just like the horn associated with an instrument such as a saxophone or trumpet. The problem with tractrix horns is that they are difficult to design correctly and even harder to reproducibly build. In short, they’re expensive, so pretty much all cabinet manufacturers choose to avoid them.

Of course, in Brian Charney’s world, there’s no excuse not to do something if he’s absolutely convinced that it’s the right thing to do. Designing the cabinets took an especially long time, with lots of modeling, trial and error, and extensive listening tests. Everything matters, from how the driver interfaces with the throat of the horn, to the throat size, the final horn-end size, the rate of flare, and of course, the total horn length. Building the things is another matter altogether. To this end, Brian went to what I would call heroic lengths. He designed and built, from the ground up, his own custom computer-controlled CNC machine to make every required cut such that each cabinet would be identical to its predecessor once constructed. Color me super impressed for Brian going the extra, well, hundred miles to achieve near perfection.

Hearing the Companion speakers is a revelation of sorts, especially for those of us used to simple box speakers. The notes literally jump out of that single driver unit with a coherence and immediacy that I could only dream about. These things are electrostatic-fast, if that makes sense. Moreover, I didn’t hear any of the typical colorations that have turned me off from single-driver and horn-loaded setups before.

The sound was entirely natural, but crazy exciting. For many listeners, these speakers might initially sound a bit overwhelming, or “in your face,” as Mitch and I described it, and may take some getting used to. The detail was amazing, both in terms of tonal color
and low-level resolution. I was hearing things in familiar recordings that I'm sure I hadn't heard before. The last characteristic that grabbed me, as I've mentioned before, is the bass response Brian can get from a single small driver. There's no boomy one-note bass here; extension is crazy low (Brian cites the Companion as flat to 32 Hz).

There's also tremendous harmonic texture to the low notes with the bass sounding like a real extension of the midrange rather than a disjointed entity.

On the opposing side of the room was Charney's higher-end speaker, the Concerto, again driven with his own amplifier designs. These things were positively huge and more sophisticated in both design and implementation compared to the more budget-minded Companion. The sense of scale produced by these speakers was breathtaking, but both Mitch and myself felt that they overpowered Brian's listening environment, especially at the volume at which he was demonstrating them. We both concluded that the Concertos would be other-worldly awesome in a larger venue.

At the end of a very enjoyable and informative day, Mitch and I were left with much to discuss. Brian Charney is definitely onto something here with his speaker designs, and I applaud him for taking the road less traveled and also not shying away from doing something extremely difficult when he is fully convinced that it is the correct approach to sound reproduction.

As of now, Brian and I are planning a longer-term loan of a pair of his Companion speakers so that I can better evaluate them in my own listening environment according to my own tastes. Let's just say that I fully expect to be impressed...very impressed indeed.

Pricing Information:
Charney Audio Companion: $5400 - $12,200 based on choice of driver
Charney Audio Concerto: $22,000 - $28,000 based on choice of driver

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One of the many fresh markets throughout the city literally featuring soup to nuts – fresh bread and Jamón cuts.

While Celeste, and our good friend Jeanine, went shopping, I ventured off on my own with camera in hand. Barcelona has a sense of style that was easy to see everywhere you looked. Boutique shops sprinkled the passageways with interesting crafts and leather goods. I always try to find a representative gift for Celeste on each of our trips abroad. This time I was fortunate to find Iris Design. This very talented and friendly local designer proudly showed his array of colorful, extremely highly crafted leather handbags. Celeste was happily surprised.

At the end of a day of exploring, we found a great restaurant, A Pluma. A true feast of chicken, roasted corn on the cob, and the best damn tomato salad we’ve ever had. These three know what they’re doing!

Just as nice even when you’ve done it twice. Beautiful Barcelona!

Turn any corner and within 50 meters you can find a place to eat. Sitting or standing, delicious treats or savory eats, we could enjoy the special of the day and a cold cerveza.
Fresh fish, oysters on the shell, meats, cheeses, vegetables, breads, Spanish ham, paella, wine and anything you think you could want all under one roof at the marketplace. Literally a community meeting place.

Eggs poached in a sauce of tomatoes, chili peppers, manchego cheese, garlic and spices. Originally known as a middle eastern dish, now served Spanish style in Barcelona.

Shakshuka – Eggs poached in a sauce of tomatoes, chili peppers, manchego cheese, garlic and spices. Originally known as a middle eastern dish, now served Spanish style in Barcelona.

Easy living! This scene was typical in our neighborhood. Outside seating to enjoy the day sipping Sangria and chatting with friends.

[above] Beautiful stonework and flowers everywhere. Adult beverages just in case you get thirsty... [right]

Upon recommendation, we trekked to Bodega 1900 and sampled their famous liquid olives. An explosive treat and not what you’d think...
The Cathedral of the Holy Cross and Saint Eulalia was flanked by The Gaudi Exhibition center. I learned so much about the man and his talents here.

Walking through the village of Pals in Girona where scenes from Game of Thrones were filmed was an unexpected experience.

Girona is a beautiful city in Spain’s northeastern Catalonia region, beside the River Onyar.

The main reason for our return to Barcelona was to experience the inside of La Sagrata Familia (right) and witness the lights and stained glass windows. An amazing structure and an absolute must see.

Nearly every day there was a morning walk from our hotel to the Barcelona cruise port which sits close to the heart of Barcelona city centre.
We left the city behind for a day to see the scenic Costa Brava including the city of Girona and Catalonian town of Pals and the coastal village Calella de Palafrugell.
In many a public square, music can be heard during the day.

I looked up and saw myself in sign language. How did they know?

Sweeping ocean views offered from a scenic lighthouse with nearby paths & a bar with a patio.

I couldn’t resist going vinyl diving in a local music store. It was easy to lose track of time sifting through hundreds of albums looking for a special piece of music I didn’t know existed.

Catalonia is an affluent region of Spain. Luxury items are easy to find here.

Knitted spheres hanging from a ceiling. How was that made?

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