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

by Part-Time Audiophile

VOLUME 6

McIntosh • Cohiba Behike • Acoustical Systems
Rat Tale • Pass Labs • Vivaldi • Sumiko • Omega
CryOAudio • Living Voice • Fern & Roby
Vino Nobile • ZYX • Fern & Roby • VAC
During my too-long career in management, I was often transferred to new locations with new teams. I had my own strategy when it came to change and announcing there was a new sheriff in town. I would immediately make one significant change on Day One, one that everyone would see, but also one that wouldn’t interrupt the flow. In this case I usually rearranged my office—furniture, computers, whatever. I took down old photos on the walls and I would put up new ones. Everyone who came into my office would immediately notice those changes. But my next step was usually this: I wouldn’t make changes to operations for 30 days unless absolutely necessary. I would spend that month watching and listening. Then, once everyone was used to the new boss and his eccentricities, I’d start making the big changes to operations. For the most part this strategy worked well.

I’m a year into this new gig as Managing Editor of The Occasional, and while I’ve made a few small changes here and there—usually with the cooperation of publisher Scot Hull—I’m making a big change to The Occasional that won’t interrupt that flow. Instead of labeling each new magazine—Spring Issue, Summer Issue, etc.—we’ll be numbering the issues. I know, that seems like I’m just moving furniture. But there’s a good reason behind it.

As Scot told me a while ago, we named this magazine The Occasional because it was meant to be something we put out…oh, what’s the word I’m looking for…occasionally. By labeling each issue according to the seasons, that puts an unnecessary restriction on the timing of each issue. We want to put out The Occasional when we’re ready to put it out.

Another change you might notice down the road is that each issue might have a specific theme. One issue might focus on lifestyle articles, while others—like this one—will be heavy on gear and audio. (We’ve been busy beavers when it comes to getting high-end audio gear for review, and this issue will be a chance to catch up!)

We’re also getting new writers to contribute on a more regular basis. In this issue you’ll notice that John DeVore of DeVore Fidelity will make his ongoing fascination with timepieces a regular column called WATCH by John DeVore. Nan Pincus, our newest writer at Part-Time Audiophile, will be providing her takes on the music industry and discovering the crazy world of the audiophile. Nan is a DJ and curator for a classical radio station, and she has plenty of insights for fellow music lovers. Finally, PTA’s long-time columnist for The Far Corners, Modest I. Predlozheniye, has been informed that he has a permanent home at The Occasional.

So welcome, everyone, to The Occasional #6!

Thanks,
Marc Phillips
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“I’m not saying those tubes were made by aliens. But it was totally aliens!”
—Giorgio Tsoukalos, Expert Alien Audiophile Reviewer

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For years I’ve been hearing stories about the “McIntosh sound.” For some audiophiles, it’s the be-all, end-all sound, the end of the destination. For others, the sound can be “dark” or “warm” or about a half-dozen other adjectives. I’ve always declared myself neutral on the matter, mostly because I haven’t lived with Mac gear over an extended amount of time. I did have seat time with a couple of McIntosh products many years ago. First was the McIntosh C2300 preamp. I was mightily impressed with the incredible list of features, which included one of my favorites of all time—the ability to load a cartridge via remote control. I didn’t get a chance to write a review because I was deemed too much of a novice reviewer and I had to send it on to someone more experienced with McIntosh Labs. I was, shall we say, disappointed AF.

The second product was the venerable MC275 power amplifier, then in one of those anniversary editions. I wasn’t supposed to review it—I was looking for a reference amplifier for reviews, and it was one of my choices. I loved how the 275 made almost every recording at least listenable, and it gave me one of my first tastes of classic tube sound. Why didn’t I pull the trigger? I don’t remember, but in retrospect it was a dumb move.

I have a few more McIntosh stories to tell, such as really, really wanting one of those gigantic integrated amplifiers like the MA7000 or even the tubed MA2275, but I think they were just above my means at the time. Instead I spent many years with modest integrated amplifiers, minimalist in design, usually from the UK. Loved the sound, but I still thought about all those features you get with a McIntosh product.

Now I have the new MC2152 power amplifier from McIntosh, and now I feel like I can comment responsibly on the McIntosh sound without being thrown under the bus by hardcore fans. Maybe.

The MC2152 isn’t just heavy. It’s big. It wouldn’t fit on a rack, which is okay, but it wouldn’t even fit on my trusty amp stand. I felt nervous about keeping a $15,000 amplifier on the floor, but that’s what I had to do. If I owned an amp like this, I would certainly find something massive enough to support it. Something beautiful, too, since the MC2152 is such a gorgeous piece of gear and it deserves to be properly displayed under the subtle glow of appropriate mood lighting.

That reminds me of my days as an importer and distributor—I know, what doesn’t remind me of that these days?—and working with a famous audio reviewer who was well into his seventies. He had a weight limit on what he’d review. I totally get it now.

Beauty and Beast — the McIntosh MC2152 power amplifier

By Marc Phillips

For years I’ve been hearing stories about the “McIntosh sound.” For some audiophiles, it’s the be-all, end-all sound, the end of the destination. For others, the sound can be “dark” or “warm” or about a half-dozen other adjectives. I’ve always declared myself neutral on the matter, mostly because I haven’t lived with Mac gear over an extended amount of time. I did have seat time with a couple of McIntosh products many years ago. First was the McIntosh C2300 preamp. I was mightily impressed with the incredible list of features, which included one of my favorites of all time—the ability to load a cartridge via remote control. I didn’t get a chance to write a review because I was deemed too much of a novice reviewer and I had to send it on to someone more experienced with McIntosh Labs. I was, shall we say, disappointed AF.

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McIntosh MC2152

I didn’t know what I was getting into with the MC2152 until it was too late. The shipping weight on this beast is 138 pounds. The UPS driver was mildly annoyed with me when he dropped off the box on my front porch. (Are you supposed to tip these guys when they break a sweat?) It took every ounce of strength for me to get it off the porch, unpack it and look it up in my system.

That reminds me of my days as an importer and distributor—I know, what doesn’t remind me of that these days?—and working with a famous audio reviewer who was well into his seventies. He had a weight limit on what he’d review. I totally get it now.

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Living with a Beautiful Beast

Once the McIntosh MC2152 was properly hooked up and turned on, it was a source of constant pleasure. I don’t know if I mentioned this, but the 2152 is gorgeous to behold. It marks sort of a turning point for McIntosh labs designs—it lacks the square profile and the Famous Blue Meters (apologies to Jennifer Warnes). The chassis is sleek and streamlined, and the side panels are made from carbon fiber. It’s a new look for Mac, so new that many people who looked at my photos didn’t recognize it was a Mac while the power was off.

You’re rewarded when you turn it on, however—eight KT88s and four 12AT7s and four 12AX7s light up, and all the tube sockets are lit up in a rather dramatic fashion. Oh, and there’s one more fun feature—you can make those lights either blue or green via a knob on the front panel. You might choose blue to match the lit McIntosh logo on the front, or you could choose green, like I did, to make an even bigger visual splash. Imagine this spectacle during the holidays—it’s the ultimate Christmas amplifier.

The MC2152 features both balanced and unbalanced connections, activated by a switch on the back. I experimented with both, but I was able to use the Cardas Audio Clear Beyond XLRs ($6950 for a 3-meter pair) because I really wanted to treat the McIntosh right. Sonically, there was no contest—the Clear Beyonds were miles ahead when it came to lowering the noise floor and increasing overall dynamics.

I used two pairs of speakers with the MC2152—my reference Brigadier Audio BA2 monitors ($12,000/pair), and the Von Schweikert Audio ESE loudspeakers I currently have in for review ($25,000/pair). The Brigadiers, with their 85 dB sensitivity and 5 ohm impedance, loved the Mac. The ESEs are 91 dB efficient at 4 ohms, but if you talk to Leif Swanson of VSA, he’ll tell you to go as big as possible in order to extract that last bit of dynamic range from his designs. I wound up sticking with this latter combo for most of the review period.

Sound

Warm? Dark? Whatever, dude. With the ESE/MC2152/Clear Beyond combo, I felt as if I had hit the PowerBall jackpot. I started this gig at The Occasional thinking I could offer plenty of experience with mid-priced gear—well, mid-priced for audiophiles—but that exquisite intersection where both solid state and tubes start to sound the same because they’re approaching a more faithful reproduction of the signal.

I brought out the big guns for the MC2152, most notably the Analogue Productions’ 45RPM remastering of Dean Martin’s Dream with Dean and the Classic Records’ 9-LP, 45RPM box set of The Royal Ballet Gala.
Performances, among others. Here's the thing with Dean—it's always remarkable how close he is, and how he creates an unusually intimate performance that's right in your face. With the MC2152, Dean took a half-step back and let the rest of the studio make an appearance as well, resulting in a more believable and realistic scale to the other sounds in the room. I've never heard Dean sound more present in my listening room, and that's really saying something.

Conclusion

This is the part of the review where I say I hated to send the MC2152 back to Binghamton, but if I say that you'll think it's because I don't have the muscle to pack it back up and put it in my car. (On a side note, I watched one of the shipping guys at the McIntosh Labs headquarters pick up the box containing the MC2152 like it was nothing, which is probably a prerequisite for working there. I won't send them my resume just yet.)

What the McIntosh MC2152 power amplifier did accomplish was this: I no longer have to worry about the McIntosh sound, and whether or not it's right for me. If the MC2152 does mark a change in direction for that trademark sound, count me in. I loved every minute I had with it.
At the 2018 Capital Audiofest, there was a huge buzz about the new $150,000 Statement 450iQ integrated amplifier from Valve Amplification Company, and rightly so. It’s an enormous and visually stunning product that looks to redefine the category. However, I was more excited to see and hear the new $14,000 Sigma 170i integrated that was being shown at the same time. Why? The combination of real-world size and real-world price while offering 85w/ch of pure tube goodness. Here was a product the dedicated audiophile can afford and is still worthy of building a system around.

The technical details are as follows:

- 85w/ch into 4, 8 or 16 ohms
- 4 line level inputs with an option for one to be an MM/MC phono input
- Speaker Taps for 4, 8 and 16 ohms
- 1 X 12AX7, 5 X 12AU7 and 4 KT88 tubes

Valve Amplification Company
Sigma 170i Integrated Amplifier

By Lee Shelly

Disclaimer: I’m a photographer by profession and I have many clients in the high end audioindustry. I have shot for VAC in the past. My impressions and conclusions in the following review are unaffected by this, but I felt you should know.
A Brief Preview

The first time I listened to the Sigma 170i was in my photography studio while I was shooting the photos for this very review. I happened to have the excellent Eggleston Works Emma EVolution speakers on hand and grabbed a few minutes between shoots to listen to the combination.

Streaming Norah Jones’ latest release from Qobuz in this hastily set up environment was magical. She was hovering comfortably between the bright red speakers with an almost palpable presence. It wasn’t all wine and roses though. Switching over to Foo Fighters, I found that the harder driving riffs and baselines in “Learn to Fly” were lacking. It felt slow and a bit fat. I chalked this up to the room (2,700 sq ft with lots of hard surfaces) and lack of time dialing in a proper setup, but it put me on notice that proper setup was going to need to be a focus when I put it into the system at home.

Listening Impressions

The first listening session was all vinyl. I opened with side one of the very well recorded 1989 eponymous release by Lyle Lovett and his Large Band. All of the magic I heard from the Norah Jones was back in spades. My notes include comments like “great image” and “palpable.” Typically a bit on the bright side, this recording showed no signs of the strident edge I’ve heard on some solid state systems. The track “Here I Am” was a particular stunner. The spoken portions never hinted at the throaty undertones I’ve heard in the past and the dynamics of the snare were punchy and crisp.

After this, I moved on to a mainstay of rock for me…Stevie Ray Vaughn’s Couldn’t Stand the Weather. I dropped the needle on “Tin Pan Alley” and right away I noticed an issue. Right from the first drumroll and subsequent bass riff, something seemed off. This recording is notorious for being bassy and needs a tight grip to keep it from sounding bloated. Moving the speakers even further from the wall helped the cause, but the bass control never felt vice-like. I tried adjusting the cartridge loading, but never felt I could get the bass quite right.

Sticking with the same artist, I moved to the outstanding MoFi One-Step pressing of Texas Flood and went straight to my all time fav SRV track, “Lenny.” Here again the VAC showed its strengths. Waves of liquid music washed over me. I had to try more.

Next was the Analogue Productions pressing of SRV’s posthumous release of his homage to Hendrix’s “Little Wing”. With the lights off and a whiskey in hand, I swear I could smell the tubes on Stevie’s amp burning. I actually got up to see if it was the tubes in the VAC! (It wasn’t.)

My next listening session shifted to digital as the source. I used Roon to access both my local library and Qobuz. I went straight to the HiRes version of “Tin Pan Alley” to see if the issues were the same. Somewhat to my surprise, they were significantly lessened. Again, I never felt like the bass was quite as tight as the best solid state amps I’ve owned, but neither was it as loose as it had been on the vinyl version. This was so much the case, that I returned the Perspectives to their initial position where I felt they imaged better.

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While not as large as the Statement 450iQ, the Sigma 170i is no lightweight. Weighing in at 70+ pounds, it was a two-person job getting it into my room and set up in my system. With dimensions of 18”W x 17.5”D and 8”T, it didn’t fit comfortably into my rack and necessitated putting it onto an amp stand in front of the rack. This is more an indictment of my stand than it is the product, but it’s something to keep in mind when you plan for placement.

I connected the VPI Avenger (Ortofon Cadenza Bronze) to the phono input and Schiit Yggdrasil DAC to input 2. I connected my Joseph Audio Perspective2 Graphene speakers and powered up the amp to let it warm up for an hour before settling into the chair for a first listen.

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Next I went for something completely different; the Chesky release of Macy Gray's album Stripped. This is a series of covers, including of herself, that is exceptionally well recorded and all acoustic. Through the Sigma 170i, the soundstage was amazing. Both the width and depth were expansive and seemed to make the room seem much larger than it is. The stand-up bass was clearly well outside the confines of the speakers and the space around her voice and each instrument was very clear.

Blues Traveler's debut album provided the next test. The track "Alone" is a staple for me because it demonstrates great dynamic range, from barely a whisper to full on blow-your-hair-back rocking. The snare punch will reveal the weaknesses of a lesser speaker/amp combination. Happy to report that the VAC was up to the task. The volume was uncomfortably loud well before I could get any sense of distortion. This is another gritty recording that can sound harsh on some systems, but the warmth of the Gold Lions on the 170i tamed even John Popper’s gravelly vocals and harmonica.

Additional listening over the next few weeks generated the following notes:

- Springsteen, Born to Run, vinyl: "Punchy and dynamic. Title track literally giving me goosebumps. 'Jungleland' is epic. Sounds great."
- Bill Evans, At the Montreux Jazz Festival, vinyl: "This is what this amp was born to play. Crazy detail. Piano is liquid. Great soundstage depth."
- The Doors, The Doors, HiRes digital: "Keyboards are magical! Brings out the best in Morrison's voice. "The End" is immersive."
- Pink Floyd, Wish You Were Here, HiRes digital: ""Shine On" has me drifting and then snaps back with the vocals. Really nice. WYWH vocals are really crystal. Bass lines in 'Have a Cigar' are just right."
- Dvorak Cello Concerto, vinyl: "Nice soundstage. Deep. Every note is distinct, no blurring. Cellos are uber-warm as they should be."
- Talk Talk, Laughing Stock, digital: "Ethereal. Dream-Like. Gear gets out of the way and I feel like I’m floating on the music."
- The Police, Synchronicity, vinyl: "Toes literally tapping. Sting’s bass is great. Drums are punchy."
- Yo Yo Ma, Six Evolutions, vinyl: "Ultra Rich. The textures are amazing. Very nuanced. The simple staging is clear and apparent. Best I’ve heard this sound."

Conclusion

If you’re looking for the “tube magic,” this amp has it and then some. Vocals are warm and rich and highs are extended but never strident. The bass is rich and can be a little loose, but that’s the price you pay for that liquid midrange. Careful setup and speaker matching will need to be considered. Outside of that, this amp is a true performer in the world of tube electronics.

In my listening space, I never wanted for more power than those 85w could deliver, even when listening to very dynamic music. While the speaker taps are listed for 4, 8 &amp; 16 ohms, the fairly flat 6ohm impedance curve of the Joseph Perspective2s never seemed to present an issue (I used the Bohm taps). In the end, I can say that I enjoyed my time with the VAC Sigma 170i very much.

—Photos in article by Lee Shelly
I had dark hair and she had blonde. She stayed out all night watching movies in the city and I woke up early to run trails in the woods. She was in high school a decade before I was born. And of course, she was entirely fictional.

But Bentley Saunders Harrison Matthew, called Rat by her friends and foes alike, was my closest pal, my wisest mentor, and the first time I really saw myself in literature. Even if she had the kind of technical know-how, nonchalance, and independence that it seemed unlikely I could ever achieve. She also was the one who introduced me to Hi-Fi.

In 1982, Daniel Pinkwater, a radio humorist, published a young adult novel. This book, tastefully titled The Snarkout Boys and the Avocado of Death, was seemingly about two boys and their adventures trying to outwit a mad scientist. But for me, it was a book about the girl named Rat who taunted the boys. Where they had passing interests, she had interesting passions that she pursued with diligence and verve.

One of the two boys narrates the novel and through his straight man lens we see Rat as a source of knowledge on sex, cars, movies, and Hi-Fi. Their first impression of her is pure intimidation.

“Rat was pretty outspoke. She had a lot of things to say about James Dean and the things she would have been willing to do with him, and no one else, if only he had not died. Winston and I got the impression that Rat knew a lot more about sex than we did, so we kept off the subject so as to not appear ignorant.”

The boys also stay quiet when they visit her family home, and the subject switches to Hi-Fi. Rat is in full command, eager to show off her system.

“Keep quiet,” said Rat, “everybody’s still asleep. We’ll go to my soundproof room.” I admit to having been a little bit scared.

However, Rat is really a gracious host and teacher.
"This is my hi-fi," Rat said, "I'll bet you guys have never seen anything like this. My Uncle Flipping put this together about thirty years ago. In those days, they really knew something about sound. My father helped me fix up this soundproof room when Uncle Flipping gave me all the equipment. Behind the drapes, there's twelve inches of fiberglass batting, and the walls and floor are floating on rubber mountings. There's an electric fan that goes on with the lights to change the air, or it would get plenty stuffy in here."

Rat doesn't just have a hi-found system. She has a vacuum tube system with mono speakers. Naturally, we wanted to hear Rat's hi-fi. She flipped a bunch of switches on the amplifier. It was basically a big, black metal box about the size of an air conditioner, with gigantic blackened tubes sticking out of the top. Various red lights came on when Rat flipped the switches, and there was a low, buzzing humming sound in the room. "You give the tubes a minute to warm up," Rat said.

Along with some more exotic additions… "That is the Klugwallah 850 ohm Sound Reproducing System," Rat said, "and this is a custom-built amplifier. Don't stand too near it when I turn it on; it can electrocute you at a distance of a foot on a humid night. This, here," Rat said, indicating another giant piece of wooden furniture, "is a free-standing Fluchtzbesser turntable. Inside that wooden cabinet is an eleven-hundred-pound piece of granite. Yes, this here is about the finest hi-fi ever assembled in the city of Baconburg.

Once it's playing, Rat is the type of joyous audiophile we all want to be. Through all this Rat was hopping around, snapping her fingers, slapping her knees. At one point, she put her mouth close to my ear and shouted something. I couldn't make out what she was saying. I think it was something like, "Great midrange tones, huh?"
The soundproof room was as much as a metaphor as a setting for Rat. It showed how impenetrable she was to societal bullshit. She was well-aware of her appearance, habits, and total devotion to her hobbies, but she created a space for herself to exist authenticly in the soundproof room. In her cushion-walled basement, she listens and dances to music at a bone-shaking volume. Though it appears to be an image of solitude, really Rat made the room with her uncle, and when she does meet someone she trusts, like the two boys, she's eager to include them.

Rat wasn't a perfect role model. Her brand of feminism doesn't foster much in the way of female friendship, or as she says, the other girls fear her because she's a liberated woman. But Rat's flaws only added to her corporeality and realness in my mind.

Rat made me comfortable with my interest in audio and Hi-Fi encouraged me to pursue it further. When I got my first job brewing coffee, I saved up my money for a turntable with a carbon fiber tonearm and acrylic platter. When I wanted to become a ham radio operator, I ignored the fact that I didn't know anyone who did it, and thought of Rat, who went to the movies alone multiple nights a week. When I started radio d耶иing and got callers that offered external voice to the self-doubts that I heard inside, that my taste was too weird or my voice was too high, I did what Rat would do, and treated the control room as a soundproof room where I could drop the needle wherever I wanted, crank the volume, and hop around.

— Photos in article by Eric Shook
Do you remember the first time you saw a naked cartridge?

I do. It was the Sumiko Blue Point Special, which was basically a Sumiko Blue Point cartridge that had the plastic body removed, exposing all the innards. I was able to compare the two cartridges at a local dealer and discovered that removing the plastic body really opened up the sound of the cartridge, providing much more detail. I was intrigued by the original Blue Point, which offered a lot of performance for a modest price, but I wasn’t quite sold on the rather lean balance. The sound of the Blue Point Special, however, was much more to my liking—but at a substantially increased cost.

Since then, many cartridge makers adopted a “naked” approach to cartridges, with many models eschewing a lovely, decorative body in favor of that increase in performance. As a vinyl lover who had munched a few cantilevers in his day, I was reluctant to purchase a cartridge that was so vulnerable to accidents. With most nude-bodied cartridges—okay, “open architecture” cartridges—the cantilever and stylus stick way out from the rest of the cartridge assembly. I knew that if I succumbed to the promise of the naked pickup, I’d be changing my tune the minute I had an “accident.”
The Starling and the Songbird differ from the rest of Sumiko’s open architecture models with their milled aluminum body—in this case, the “body” is merely a solid interface between the headshell and the motor. This controls resonances to a far greater degree than Sumiko’s previous designs. In addition, the Starling features a bone convector, a Micro-ridge diamond stylus and pure copper coils. This moving coil cartridge offers a healthy 0.5 mV output, making it an easy match for most MC phono stages.

Set-Up
I used the Sumiko Starling primarily with my Technics SL-1200G, and I used the Nasotec “swing” headshell. The Starling also spent a brief period mounted on the Palmer 2.5 turntable with the Audio Origami P77 tonearm that I just got in for review.

Despite the fact that a nude cartridge demands a bit more attention and care with setup, everything went smoothly for me. Just be wary with things like mounting screws and screwdriver tips around those exposed magnets. The recommended tracking force is 1.8 to 2.2 grams, so I split the difference at 2.0g, the “ideal” setting according to Sugano-san himself. Different materials for the body—rosewood, lacquer, jade, onyx, corialstone—all change the sonic signature in a very desirable way. We can also look at the current trend of modifying Denon 103 bodies to improve the solidity of the cartridge/headshell interface. As a result, I’ve never owned a nude cartridge. I’ve never even reviewed one, until now.

Sumiko Starling
The Sumiko Starling is an evolution of that original Blue Point Special, taken to the 11th degree. Sumiko has never abandoned the idea of a nude cartridge—even the Blue Point Special is still available for a now-reasonable price of $549, as is the once flagship Blackbird. The new Starling, priced at $1899, sits at the top of the open architecture line, which also includes the new Songbird ($1199).

Sound
My first impression with the Starling mounted on the Technics was that I was hearing plenty of inner detail compared to the other cartridges I’ve used with the 1200G, such as the Denon DL103 with The Cap body modification, the Hana ML and the ZYX Bloom 3. In addition, I was extremely pleased with the deep and solid low frequencies. The ZYX was a little warmer, and a little more balanced from top to bottom, but the Starling, at almost twice the price, was more informative overall. This is where the price of the Starling comes into play. With the ZYX and the Hana, I was constantly amazed at the performance I could get for $1000-$1200. For many audiophiles, that price point can be the most these analog lovers are willing to spend.

Once you go beyond that, there’s a big gap in the market. You reach the point where you’re willing to spend $3000-5000 or more, much more, to get that ultimate analog performance. $1899 is in the middle, and I know from my experiences in the business side of the industry that so-called mid-priced gear is the hardest to sell. Audiophiles are usually either looking for a giant-killer or the best you can buy—no in-between.

That said, high-end audio is filled with cartridges I’ve used. But that price point can offer plenty of excitement if you choose wisely. I’m not into making comparisons, though, and the audiophile who has budgeted $2000 for a cartridge is still looking for a solid performer with extraordinary value. That said, the Sumiko Starling was providing a rare level of performance at its price point, with very few limitations. I continued to marvel at the level of inner detail I heard with many of my favorite LPs such as my RCA Shaded Dog Clair de Lune and the Analogue Productions 45rpm reissue of Dean Martin’s Dream with Dean.

Dino sounded incredibly present, as he always does with this amazing recording, but I felt I was hearing a little more than usual with the Starling. Some cartridges place Dean away from his intimate trio, as if they recorded at completely different times (which may be the case—I don’t know), but the Sumiko/Technics combo provided a more balanced presentation, more aural cues that the singer was interacting live with his ensemble, in real time, and that they shared a common space that sounded extremely natural and open.

Conclusion
If I could buy any cartridge, regardless of price, I might lean toward a more colored sound, something a little warmer and more romantic. But that cartridge would cost a lot more than $1899. For me, this price point is a viable one, and I might easily tell a dealer that I was looking for a great cartridge for less than two grand if I was presently in the market. [That seems like a properly budgeted cartridge for a $4000 table/arm combo like the Technics SL1200G, which was a great match.] In other words, the Sumiko Starling is a splendid cartridge, one I would choose to buy if I was looking for a new flavor for my Technics, or another ‘table in that range. The bass response is extraordinary, the detail is generous, and the overall balance is surprisingly neutral.

Best of all, it’s nakkid.
—Photos in article by Marc Phillips
In my last article, I followed the participants in a race to build the world’s first automatic winding chronograph watch. By the end of 1969 three of these types of watches had made it to market, those using the Cal. 6139 [footnote 1] from Seiko, the Cal. 111 from the Chronomatic Group, and the Cal. 3019 PCH “El Primero” from Zenith. Omega and Rolex, two of the most prominent makers of tool-watches in Switzerland at the time, didn’t even participate in that race.

Rolex, a very conservative manufacturer, was not interested in such a race-to-market. As I mentioned in that previous article it took Rolex two more decades to update their Daytona chronograph with an automatic movement and they used the Zenith “El Primero” to do it.

Omega was working to capitalize on what would be a tremendous marketing opportunity when Buzz Aldrin stepped foot on the moon wearing the only chronograph watch to be certified by NASA for spaceflight, the Omega Speedmaster professional.
Omega Steps In

Rather than spending resources in a race to market the first automatic chronograph, Omega was preparing their classic manual-wind Speedmaster for an enormous increase in popularity. Towards the end of 1968 they revised the “Speedy” with a new dial and movement. The stepped dial with its applied logo was changed to a flat one with a printed logo, and the Cal. 321 movement was replaced by the less-expensive and easier to produce Cal. 861, allowing the company to increase production and keep costs down while those earlier watches were literally rocketing to history.

For most of the 20th century Omega was closely associated with renown movement manufacturer Lemania [footnote 2] which produced the mechanisms for most of their iconic chronographs. This includes the legendary Cal. CH27—better known as the Cal. 321 used in that Omega Speedy that went to the moon. Created by Lemania’s star designer Albert Piguet in 1942, the CH27 was a very compact caliber, which came in handy when five years later he developed it into the CH27-c12-A by adding an automatic-winding “bumper” rotor [footnote 3] around the periphery. Piguet was clearly aware of the momentous achievement as the rotor is engraved in French with “The First Self-Winding Chronograph” and dated 28th October 1947.

But Lemania’s primary customer for such a caliber, Omega, was not interested. It is commonly reported that company head Paul-Emile Brandt considered an automatic chronograph superfluous, that there would be little market for such a watch.

Fast forward nearly a quarter century to 1969 and all the fuss over the “revolutionary” self-winding chronograph surely registered with the marketing department at Omega. An automatic chronograph project was quickly begun and overseen by Albert Piguet. The safest and simplest thing would have been for Piguet to replicate what he’d done with CH27-c12-A on the newer Cal. 861. While an automatic Cal. 861 could have been an excellent movement—its traditional three-subdial layout would be quite similar to Zenith’s new Cal. 3019 PHC. Perhaps a creative mind like Piguet’s wanted to look forward rather than backward.

Cal. 1340 and Cal. 1040

Whatever the reason, Piguet innovated instead of rehearsing an old design. The resulting Cal. 1340 (and its Omega variant the Cal. 1040) had its central winding rotor mounted on precision ball bearings to increase efficiency and reliability, but the real innovation was a simple yet radical rethink of how to best read a chronograph, and it was unlike anything that came before it. Generally common to analog chronographs is a central seconds hand, activated by a pusher, for timing events up to one minute in duration (the time it takes for the hand to make one full sweep of the dial). To time longer events tiny subdials were added, one for tracking minutes, another for tracking hours, and even a third for a running seconds hand since the center spot is occupied by the chronograph seconds counter [footnote 4]. Piguet’s innovation was to move the minute-counting hand, activated by a pusher, for timing center and flag it, most often with little wings, to make it easily distinguished from the second-counting hand. This innovation improves readability enormously: checking elapsed seconds and minutes could now be done at a glance with no need to decipher a tiny subdial.

The unique configuration of the Cal. 1340-derived movements make watches powered by these engines easy to spot. Aside from the twin chronograph hands mounted at center, there are two subdials: an hour totalizer at 6 o’clock and running seconds at 9. Most also had date displayed at 3. Omega had its own proprietary variant, the Cal. 1040, which added an additional 24 hour indication layer beneath the running seconds at 9. Early models from the Omega Seamaster line, and a very small handful of other manufacturers allowed access to the Cal. 1340, including BWC and Carl F. Bucherer, came in traditional cases but had some striking color combinations on their
modern, asymmetrical dials. In 1972, when Omega introduced the Cal. 1040 in a top-line Speedmaster with the Mark III model, cases had transformed into funkier, chunkier 70’s shapes with hidden lugs and crisp radial brushing. These were quite a departure from the very traditional, elegant, twisted lug cases of the Moonwatch Speedmasters [footnote 5]. Meanwhile Lemania released the Cal. 1341, a simplified and dejeweled (from 22 to 17) version of the 1340 available to a broader market that included Tissot, Walkmann, Hamilton, Sinn, and others.

In 1973, to celebrate its 125th anniversary Omega further refined the Cal. 1040 into the Cal. 1041, a simplified and dejeweled (from 22 to 17) version of the 1340 available to a broader market that included Tissot, Walkmann, Hamilton, Sinn, and others.

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Footnotes

footnote 1: Cal. is short for caliber, which is the tiny engine inside a watch or clock that powers the hands and keeps time. Also known as the movement.

footnote 2: In 1932 Lemania joined the Société Suisse pour l’Industrie Horlogère SA (SSIH). SSIH was formed two years prior by Omega and Tissot in the grim economic aftermath of World War One. By the late 60’s SSIH had absorbed a number of other companies and was Switzerland’s top producer of finished watches.

footnote 3: The rotor is a weighted element that rotates on a bearing to convert the movements of a watch on a wrist into energy stored in the mainspring. This is what makes a watch automatic, as it will wind the mainspring automatically as you wear it. A bumper rotor is an early version of this where the weighted rotor can’t spin all the way around, instead hitting a spring stop to be sent back around the other way to hit another spring stop etc. These little impacts can be felt when wearing the watch.

footnote 4: The three competing automatic chronographs from 1969 were examples of one subdial (Seiko Cal. 6139), two subdial (Chronomatic Group Cal. 11), and three subdial (Zenith El Primero) layouts.

footnote 5: It has been suggested this was a result of case ideas cooked up in the joint Omega/NASA “Alaska Project” search for the ultimate rugged and readable chronograph.

footnote 6: A chronometer is a clock or watch that has passed a number of fairly rigorous accuracy tests and been certified by the Contrôle Officiel Suisse des Chronomètres (COSC).

footnote 7: The Lemania Cal. 1340 movement died in the mid 70’s, with only the 1041 powered Speedmaster 125 holding on through 1978, but due to the regrouping and consolidation of the Swiss watch industry through the 80’s and 90’s, it has been resurrected as the Breguet Cal. 1350, found in the Type XXI.

—Photos in article by John Deloce
In my June 2018 music article for PTA, Chasing and Finding the Dragon in Venice, I happened to attend one of the Interpreti Veneziani concerts that Mike Valentine was recording for his “Chasing the Dragon” label. That recording, Symphonic Dances Symphonic Dances, has been released, and in no less than four formats: vinyl, CD, reel-to-reel, and digital download.

I just received my vinyl version, a 2 LP set, as part of a recent order from the folks at The Elusive Disc and from the moment the stylus dug into the grooves I was rapt. Whether you’re a long-time baroque hound or have only a passing interest in baroque music (or even none), it’s a recording that’s worth seeking out.

Tonight’s programme

Let’s start with the music. First, a spoiler alert: this recording is comprised mostly of works by Vivaldi, but the pieces that make up the program cover a diverse range of the Red Priest’s output. There’s the Violin Concerto in B minor, the Violin and Cello concerto in A, the Bassoon Concerto in E minor, the Cello Concerto in A, and the “La Folia” Trio Sonata. Rounding out the program are two Tartini violin pieces and a bit of Corelli’s Concerto Grosso in D.

The music itself has all the charming tunefulness and dynamic energy you’d expect from these baroque maestros. Do I have the expertise to tell you whether these performances are the ne plus ultra of execution or interpretation? In a word, no.

The fact is that I’m just like 99.9% of any concert audience in that I’m not a critic, musicologist, or professional musician; I’m just a guy who geeks out on the music. However, what I can tell you is that IV plays each of these works with great élan and the soloists clearly have the chops to cover the concertos.

Something else I can tell you is that each and every one of the IV concerts Catherine and I attended that spring was as remarkably engaging and enjoyable as the electrical impulses committed to these discs. To top it off, the sound captured on the LPs is a realistic and vivid replication of what I heard. In my book, the quintessence of a great audio experience is captured by the phrase “just like being there.” Well, to my ears these LPs do about as good a job of creating the illusion of being there as is possible through our current technology.

And hey, I was there!

By Darryl Lindberg

“I’m not a critic, musicologist or professional music; I’m just a guy who geeks out on music.”
More specifically, I was sitting in the first-row center, about two-and-a-half feet from the microphone stand. So, when I say that these records have the verisimilitude of the real thing, I know that of which I speak—and it’s sure not often I can report that I was physically present during the recording of a disc.

Just like being there...

The sound is close-up, but still captures the amazing ambience of the San Vidal church. Interpreti Veneziani is a small ensemble (just check out the photo) and that’s the sonic picture you get, spread between and beyond the outer edges of the speakers (at least on my setup).

In addition, the perspective—strings arranged in an arc, the harpsichord behind, and the soloist[s] in the center—is realistically captured by the minimalist microphone treatment. And the “playability factor” of the LPs was excellent: the heavy vinyl pressings were dead quiet and flat.

I’ve always thought that a well-engineered recording allows me to magically participate in a moment that’s past, yet still in existence thanks to the wonders of technology. And whether that moment is a slice of yesterday or sixty years ago, whether the artist is still in the land of the living or singing with the angels (hopefully), whether the venue is still in use or razed to make room for luxury condos and a mall, a recording—especially a good recording—allows me to experience that moment in time in a way my sometimes faulty memory can never quite conjure up by itself.

CTD’s Vivaldi in Venice discs brilliantly preserve and recreate Interpreti Veneziani’s captivating performance, the ambience of an historic church, and a lovely spring evening in Venice. Highly recommended.
We were discussing how my review of the Pass Labs XP12 preamplifier ($5800) and the XP17 phono preamplifier ($4300) was going, which Scot usually encapsulates by asking “Whaddya think?” I expressed some concern that I couldn’t come up with the words to describe what I was hearing. I wondered aloud, is this what neutral sounds like? Is this what people mean when they say a preamplifier doesn’t add anything to the signal, no sound of its own?

Can I just write a quick review saying that the XP12 and XP17 sounds like nothing at all? Will that be enough? (For the record, “like nothing at all” is sort of an in-joke around here that refers to Ned Flanders talking about his new skin-tight jogging suit, causing Homer Simpson to remark “Stupid sexy Flanders.”)

Scot said no. That got me thinking about the Pass Labs gear, and how it might just be neutral in every way. From there I started thinking about neutrality, and whether or not it was something I desired from a piece of high-end audio gear. I’m on the record saying that I like euphonic colorations, which is why I gravitate to products like tube amplification, analog, high-efficiency speakers and SETs with power ratings in the single digits. I like different, because it’s invariably fun. I don’t believe in a single perfect sound to which all other audio equipment is measured.
Why Should We Need Neutrality?

There is a reasonable explanation for why we need certain components to get out of the way of the music. Preamps and phono preamps are usually in that category. With the XP12 and XP17 in my system, I could suddenly hear what the other components in the system were doing. This was especially important while I was reviewing the humongous McIntosh MC2152 power amplifier that’s reviewed elsewhere in this issue. The MC2152 was remarkable because it was perhaps the finest McIntosh component I’ve ever heard. Whatever you think about the sound of Mac, that it’s dark or that it’s warm or that it’s utterly perfect for what you want from music, the MC2152 will ignore your preconceptions about the marque.

I didn’t figure that out until I mated the MC2152 with the XP12 and the XP17. Other preamps and phono preamps I had on hand added their own distinct character to the overall system. The Pass Labs gear did not. I was able to conclude that the Mac was absolutely fantastic, but only with the Pass gear standing out of the way and letting it show off.

That goes against some of my ideas about preamps. Many years ago, when I first started reviewing, I had assembled a system of otherwise fine components, but something was missing. I had just moved into a new place, and my reference system sounded nothing like it once did in my previous home and its much larger dedicated listening room. I heard a distinct lack of dynamics and a reduction in the weight of the lowest frequencies. I felt lost with a system that should have otherwise been completely familiar.

It was only when I reviewed a very expensive preamp that everything snapped into place. I felt at home in my new pad for the first time. This preamp was definitely adding something that was missing. It couldn’t be neutral. When I look back on the most satisfying high-end audio systems I’ve used, a high-quality preamp was always at the heart of it.

I thought neutrality was something I didn’t really want or need to be happy. With these two Pass Labs pieces, I’m not so sure anymore.

Pass Audio Labs XP12

The XP12 is a compact yet feature-filled solid-state preamplifier for Pass, balanced in Class A, with a new design that uses a new toroidal power supply that is much quieter than before. The single-stage volume control is the same used in the much more expensive Pass Labs XS line preamp ($38,000)—it offers more steps, and lower distortion and noise thanks to some innovative filtering.

You get both XLR and RCA outputs—I used the fabulous Cardas Audio Clear Beyond XLR interconnects with the MC2152 and Furutech Linetlux RCA interconnects with my reference Pureaudio Duo2 power amplifier. The XP12 has a total of five inputs—two XLR and three RCA. Everything is controlled via a nicely machined remote.

Pass Audio Labs XP17

The XP17 is a very simple, straightforward phono preamplifier—there are no controls on the front and loading is done through dip switches on the back panel. It shares many of the same features as the XP12—the same toroidal power supply, RC filtering and input filter module. It’s a cosmic match with the XP12—it’s obvious that these two preamps were designed to go together.

The loading options are quite comprehensive—you have 200 choices between 10 and 47K Ohms. I used three magnificent cartridges in the $1000-$2000 range with the XP17: the ZYX Bloom 3, the Sumiko Starling and the Hana ML. It was exceptionally easy to tailor the XP17 to each of these MC cartridges.

I’ll explain why this is so welcomed. I have one of those original Athena pressings of Donald Johanos conducting the Dallas Symphony Orchestra for Rachmaninoff’s Symphonic Dances. It’s an old, well-loved reference of mine, which means that over the years it’s collected a disappointing amount of surface noise. I’ve cleaned this album over and over, using both live enzyme cleaners and ultrasonic machines, and those pops and clicks have been reduced to the point where I can still include this album as part of my normal rotation. (There was a time when I’d simply see the LP cover and shed a single, solitary tear over its condition.)

Sound

Using the XP12 and the XP17 together, I learned about the true value of “getting out of the way.” Both of these components are designed for low distortion and low noise thanks to the extensive use of filters. The noise floor is incredibly low—if there’s one mark of truly neutral preamplification, it’s silence. While I’ve chosen to avoid that cliché about sounding “like nothing at all,” I’ll invoke another—with the XP17 and XP12, I was able to fixate on that elusive blackness between the notes on my favorite LPs.
With the Pass Labs in the system, the surface noise sounded lower than ever before—perhaps because the noise floor was lowered so significantly that the music overwhelmed the wear and tear. The overwhelming majority of my reference LPs are quite playable, and in most cases they are close to pristine. The XP12 and the XP17 increased that feeling of an untrampled frontier, of having a new, clean album played for the first time.

Again, the Pass Labs preamps weren’t eliminating surface noise—no amplification can really do that, in my opinion—but the relative lack of distortion and noise was so noteworthy that I no longer took my record cleaning rituals for granted. I knew when a record was cleaned properly. I could hear it, and deeply. In this way the Pass Labs XP12 and XP17 qualify as a supremely objective tool for enjoying high-quality analog playback.

Conclusion

For a combined cost of just over $10,000 for the pair, the Pass Labs XP12 preamplifier and XP17 phono preamplifier are, indeed, much more transparent than any other pair of preamps I’ve heard at this price point. They remind me of the idea that reference components should perform their tasks as objectively as possible. They should be utterly reliable in the sense that you shouldn’t have to worry if they’re limiting performance or adding something that shouldn’t be there.

I’m sure the XS line from Pass Labs offers even more of those strengths, even less noise and distortion—but for a lot more money. The XP12 and XP17 are devices that utterly reliable, in the best possible way. And that’s something I do want when it comes to my audio system.
My dear readers I have been quite busy for most of the last year so I’m sorry I haven’t written until now. I was actively covering some new cryogenic technologies for high-end audio that have been relentlessly fascinating yet fraught with setbacks. Just when I thought I could write about breakthroughs in the field of cryogenic engineering I was continuously told that it was back to the drawing board for all the concerned parties. It had been a frustrating 2019 for these scientists.

Much of this research has been carried out by a scientific consortium known as CryOAudio which is located in Northern Canada about 450 miles north of Calgary in the province known as Alberta. The location has been ideal for such research. It is very cold there.

The leader of the research team is an old acquaintance of mine named Dr. Robert J. Flaherty III. Dr. Flaherty called me in the spring of last year to consult as an audiophile expert on cryogenics. I have been a long-time enthusiast of cryogenics ever since I peer-reviewed some research in Japan that led to these technologies being used in audio cable designs. The Japanese team offered compelling evidence supported by numerous highly magnified photographs of how the molecules of copper realign themselves after cryogenic treatment. If you believe that cryogenic treatments do not improve the signal transmission then I have some photos I would like to share with you at your earliest convenience.
When I first traveled to the CryOAudio Labs in early April the team was already deep into the first phase of the research. As Dr. Flaherty explained, “Once the Japanese team had completed their research back in the late 1990s, we were very interested in applying those same principles to living tissue.”

“You mean human tissue?” I asked.

“Of course,” Dr. Flaherty responded. “Of course the main obstacle was frostbite you know. In this neck of the woods we know a lot about the effects of frostbite. Why even I have only eight toes at this point of my life.” He followed that revelation with an awkward and somewhat chilling laugh.

Dr. Flaherty then started talking about all the humans who have been cryogenically frozen over the last few decades. Many rich people with terminal diseases have had their bodies frozen cryogenically so that years later they could be thawed out once an effective treatment had been discovered. This is a story that I have heard many times.

“The public has been misled a number of times about the wisdom of cryogenically freezing humans so that they could be resuscitated later you know,” Dr. Flaherty continued. “For instance the most famous case would be Walt Disney. For many years there was a rumor that he had not died in 1966 but had actually been frozen. The public believed that without question. Then a second wave of rumors followed that claimed that this was an urban legend. The public started believing that. But with all of the advances in DNA research and cloning it became obvious to most of us that cryogenically freezing a human and then bringing that person back was scientifically viable. This was confirmed when I saw it a couple of years ago.”

“Walt Disney’s head. I saw it in a research lab in Barrow Alaska. Disney’s head frozen in a jar. I must say that it was shocking. Mostly because old Walt has looked better you know.”

Dr. Flaherty explained that Walt Disney was indeed cryogenically frozen back in 1966 a few minutes before he passed away. But the lab was located in Tucson Arizona and over the years there were quite a few power outages. “They just kept refreezing poor Mr. Disney,” Dr. Flaherty explained. “I guess they had so little confidence in cryogenics that no one would notice or care about the final results.”

That is when the CryOAudio research began. Dr. Bob and his team were encouraged by the successes of cryogenic technologies. One question started popping up in the team’s mind: could we cryogenically treat the human ear to make it perform better just like copper?

Nyla

“We couldn’t just start freezing the ears of audiophiles to find out if their hearing could be improved by cryogenics,” Dr. Flaherty recounted. “But I had the perfect test subject, my beloved Samoyed Nyla.”

Nyla was the Flaherty family pet, a beloved dog that had become so old that her hearing was starting to fail. “She wouldn’t come when I called and that was a very dangerous condition when winter storms arrive out of nowhere. So we cryogenically treated Nyla’s ear canals just to see what would happen.”

The treatment was a success. Not only was Nyla’s hearing restored but it was enhanced to a very high degree. “Before Nyla’s treatment, she couldn’t hear me from across the living room. Afterward she could hear a whisper from across a big snowy field!”
A few days after the procedure, Nyla passed away in her sleep. “Like I said, she was very old. I don’t think there was a connection. We still managed to secure funding from the Canadian government and we were approached by many elderly audiophiles who wanted to try the Nyla Treatment. Plus, Nyla was sort of a passive aggressive pooch. She must have heard us discussing how much longer a 17-year-old Samoyed could live, and she set out to answer us definitively.”

While a few human subjects experienced a profound improvement in hearing, some did not. In more than a few instances these audiophiles were rendered completely deaf. All the funding from Ottawa was used up after several large settlement checks were written. “An ordinary subject would have accepted far less money and we would have been able to carry on with the research. But those audiophiles were really pissed.”

Beta Phase

CryOAudio did survive the setback and soon Dr. Flaherty and his team started working on the next project. “We had to find a way to cryogenically treat the human ear through a much less intrusive method. We thought about a sleeve made out of copper that could be cryogenically treated and then custom-made for a specific ear canal much like hearing aids.”

The first copper sleeves did not work that well. The metal added significant colorations to the subjects’ hearing. “It was like listening through a metal funnel you know,” Flaherty told me. “Plus the added weight of the copper gave most of the test subjects a stiff neck. We had to find a new metal that would be thin, light, rigid and soft enough to conform to the ear canal. Plus it had to preserve the effects of the cryogenic treatment so materials such as carbon fiber and various types of plastic were out.”

CryOAudio experimented with softer metals. But if you know your chemistry, dear reader, you’ll know that soft metals are usually highly toxic. “We had to write out a few more checks,” Dr. Flaherty explained, sighing deeply.

Gamma Phase

Dr. Flaherty and the CryOAudio team almost ceased to exist at that point. The team dispersed and went back to their “day jobs” as you Americans call it. Then one day Dr. Flaherty was home and watching Hulu and he experienced an epiphany while watching some episodes of The Six Million Dollar Man.

“Why haven’t they adapted this series into a movie like Hollywood always does?” he wondered aloud. “I know it would probably be called The Six Billion Dollar Man by now. We paid more than six million each to those damned deaf audiophiles!”

That’s where Dr. Flaherty started thinking about bionic ears. “We could simply replace those ear canals with robotic ones! Audiophiles will finally be able to hear the highest frequencies of all those ribbon tweeters once we cryogenically treat all those mechanical ossicles!”

That’s where CryOAudio is, dear readers, at the beginning of the year 2020. Dr. Flaherty has named the bionic experiments Project Hulu and he is currently securing more funding from the Canadian government. “That part is a piece of cake,” he told me.
It all started back at High End 2019 in Munich when I asked our two analog gurus, Richard H. Mak and Panagiotis Karavitis, a simple question: who do you think makes the best phono cartridges in the world right now? Both of them had the same answer, delivered without hesitation. ZYX.

Here’s the thing—I asked them separately, on different days and in different places apart from each other. That meant something to me. I know Richard has a long history using ZYX cartridges since it seems he’s reviewed every single model. He reviewed the $17,000 ZYX UNiverse Optimum SE 1Ω cartridge for Part-Time Audiophile about a year ago, and pretty much declared it the finest cartridge he’s used. “It is now the new reference standard for me,” he wrote, “by which all future cartridges will be judged against.”

That’s good enough of a recommendation for me, but there’s only one issue. I don’t have $17,000 to spend on a cartridge, nor do I have the kind of table and arm that would be optimized for such a cartridge, especially one with a 0.12 mV voltage and a 1Ω impedance. That’s when Richard started talking about the entry level ZYX, the Bloom 3, which retails for just $1100. “This thing can compete with $3000 cartridges,” he told me more than once.

**My Cartridge Woes**

When I first joined the PTA team, Scot Hull asked me what I wanted to review. “Cartridges,” I told him without skipping a beat. My own cartridge situation has been precarious over the last year or so. First, I have a drawer of them and they all need re-tips. My usual reference, the Transfiguration Axia, has first priority—I’m still working on that. The only cartridge left was the trusty Denon 103 I’ve been using for Project 103, documented in my review of The Cap in the Summer Issue.
My plan was this—review a bunch of cartridges so I wouldn’t have to worry about it for a while. But the idea of an $1100 cartridge that sounds as good as Richard says? I couldn’t resist. Richard contacted SORASound up there, you know, in Canada, and the ZYX Bloom 3 showed up on my door a couple of weeks later.

Like Madness in the Spring

The ZYX Bloom 3 is a low-output moving coil cartridge. Its output voltage is just 0.24 mV, which might be the lowest I’ve used. (It’s also available in an H version, with an output of 0.48 mV.) I’ve had step-up transformers on hand from Bob’s Devices and Miyajima, and I used them both with the Bloom until the fabulous Lab12 Melto2 phono preamplifier arrived from Greece. This was a magic combo, with no need for a SUT, so I continued with this combination for the last half of the review.

The ZYX weighs just 5 grams—again, one of the lightest cartridges I’ve used. This allowed me to mount the Bloom on the relatively heavy Acoustical Systems Arché 5D headshell from Germany and still have plenty of space to set the Technics SL-1200G tonearm’s tracking force at 2 grams. (The Denon DL-103 with The Cap modification was right at the limit—the counterweight was almost to the end of its range.) Impedance is 4 ohms, and the recommended impedance load is 100 ohms.

What makes the Bloom 3 different, especially at this price point? Nakatsuka-san, who makes these wonderful ZYX cartridges, has come up with many innovations in his designs such as a Real Stereo Generator System, which eliminates time distortion and ensures that both channels are balanced with each other. He uses rubber as damping material instead of powder, which extends the life of the cartridge. His Air Resonance Damper System and an eddy-free cartridge body also contribute to Nakatsuka-san’s “13 vital design points” which makes his designs unique.

The Sound

As I mentioned before, the Bloom was placed in my analog chain as it was evolving, so it took a while for me to figure out what the Bloom was doing right, and what everything else was doing right. From the first day, using the Bloom with a Nasotech swing headshell and the inboard phono stage of the Luxman LX-380, I noticed a tremendous sense of rightness in the sound, that everything sounded correct in size and weight. There was an uncommon clarity to the sound as well, something that was probably a direct function of the lowered noise floor. The Bloom was impressive right out of the box, more than every other cartridge I’ve used in the last 20 years.

By the time I had the whole analog chain—Technics, Arché 5D, ZYX, Lab 12—settled in and fine-tuned, I started my serious listening sessions. That sense of “rightness” only increased with each alteration to the chain. It wasn’t so much what the Bloom was doing right as the fact it simply did nothing wrong. I’ve used some fantastic $1000 cartridges in my life, but each one ultimately bumped its head on the ceiling when it came to ultimate performance whether it was clarity, dynamics or even tracking. (That’s another thing—the Bloom, with its line-contact stylus, is one of the best trackers I’ve heard.)
I used this rig to evaluate all of Lyn Stanley’s direct-to-disc recordings for her recent Julie London project, including London with a Twist: Live at Bernie’s and The Challenge LP. Remember, I had a chance to hear the digital masters at Ocean Way Sound, so I have a pretty good idea of what this should sound like.

The sound of the Bloom 3 throughout these evaluations was just magical. SORAsound raves about the honest and direct sound of the ZYX cartridges, and with Lyn’s recordings I could see their point. It seemed like there was little to nothing between me and the performance. I could feel the energy that day, the movement and the excitement that grew as the recording session neared its end.

Hey, Can You Ring Me Up?

I’m talking about an $1100 cartridge here. I’m a guy who’s owned Koetsu and Transfiguration, who’s reviewed Miyajima and Benz-Micro and Lyra and Dynavector, and I think the ZYX Bloom 3 is so good that it’s a shock. It’s not the greatest cartridge I’ve heard, obviously, but it’s certainly the best $1100 cartridge I’ve heard so far, and not by a margin I would call dainty.

I told Richard and SORAsound that I would buy the ZYX Bloom 3 if I really liked it, and if it measured up to Richard’s unbridled enthusiasm. Obviously it did, and I’ll be mailing out a check. I’ll even go a step further and say that if you’re using the Technics SL-1200G, the ZYX is a wonderful match, and at a sane price. I’m hoping to keep the Technics/ZYX/Arché 5D combo around for a long, long time.
What difference does a headshell make?
I tackled that question in my August 2019 Vinyl Anachronist column for Perfect Sound Forever, one titled “Headshell 101.” The truth is, I haven’t had to worry about headshells since nearly every one I’ve used in the last thirty years was integrated with the tonearm. But ever since I started using the Technics SL-1200G turntable and arm, I’ve gotten a crash course. I brought that turntable home with both the stock headshell and the famous “swing” headshell from Nasotec. My conclusion from this rather small sample size was that yes, headshells do make a difference. Since it’s part of the structure of an analog rig, that should be a no-brainer, right?

At AXPONA 2019, I ran into my old pal Norm Steinke from Rutherford Audio. He showed me the Acoustical Systems Arché 5D headshell after I told him I was using the Technics. I marveled at the sheer engineering that went into this little gem and he asked me a simple question: Do you want it in black or silver?

I chose the black and took it home.

A Headshell with a Difference

The Acoustical Systems Arché 5D headshell costs $695. I’ve been an audiophile far too long to balk at this price—of course there’s a $700 headshell out there. Sure, it cost more than an entry-level analog rig from the likes of Pro-Ject, Rega or Music Hall, but you wouldn’t put the Arché on any of those. Not if you’re sane, anyway.

But the Technics SL-1200G? You’d better believe it. I’ve been so smitten with the Technics ever since I reviewed it for the Summer Issue, I’ve been attaching it to some fairly lofty ancillaries. As I’ve mentioned in my review of the ZYX Bloom 3 in this issue, I’ve settled in with an incredibly satisfying analog set-up that includes the Technics, the Arché 5D, the ZYX and the Lab12 Mello2 phono stage. I’m deliriously happy. But what did the headshell bring to the table?

First of all, I had to wait a few weeks to compare it to the other two headshells I have. The mounting nuts for the ZYX are integrated into the body of the cartridge, and the Arché is quite thick. None of the screws I had in my loose hardware box were long enough to catch, so I bought an extra set. Once those arrived, I was ready to go.

There was one more issue to overcome. The Arché is rather heavy as well. When I mounted the longest screws in the hardware pack, I had to push the Technics’ counterweight almost to the very end. That gave me a tracking force of 2.25 grams, which is within the correct range of the ZYX, but not optimal. I realized that the screws were probably a little too long, so I went to the next shorter size and was able to get the tracking force to 2 grams, which is perfect. I’ve never had to adjust tracking force through mounting screws before, but there ya go. Everything was set.
What makes the Acoustical Systems Arché 5D headshell so unique is that you can make most of the alignment parameters from the headshell—even if it’s already mounted on the arm. That makes everything much easier. You can adjust overhang, azimuth and most importantly, the stylus rake angle (SRA), which is adjusted through a removable plate in the center of the headshell. This allows for what Acoustical Systems claims in true SRA-alignment, which is one of the reasons for its improved sound quality.

Add to that the way the 5D is machined and engineered, to extremely close tolerances, and you have an idea of why this headshell makes a difference.

Sound
I had everything else in the analog chain fine-tuned and broken in—the AS was the last link in the system I added. That allowed me to compare the differences between headshells. I was not disappointed. Not only did the sporadic tracking issues I had up to that point completely disappear—I was driving myself a little crazy trying this and that and the other—but the sound of the rig was simply more secure and confident. While I’ve praised the Technics for its solid, trouble-free operation, the Arché simply made perfect alignment that much easier to achieve.

Think about it—all you have to do is get your cartridge mounted to this headshell, and the headshell mounted to the arm, and all the fine tuning can be achieved through adjusting the tiny hex screws (which, of course, are included). A tiny bubble level is also included so you can get the azimuth spot-on. On the back of the headshell, above the jack, there are tiny marks to help you. Just loosen another tiny screw and the jack rotates until perfect azimuth is achieved. It’s about as easy as it gets.

Conclusion
The Acoustical Systems Arché 5D headshell is pricey, sure. But once you use it, you’ll realize that it represents an incredible value. It takes much of the guesswork out of cartridge alignment, and its superb design extracts even more detail from the groove. Highly recommended!

“I’ve never had to adjust tracking force through mounting screws before, but there ya go.”

—Photos in article by Marc Phillips
The SMOKING JACKET

IN SEARCH OF BEHIKE

By Marc Phillips
After smoking premium cigars for more than 22 years, I’ve whittled my cigar bucket list down to just one—the Cohiba Behike.

I first heard about Cohiba’s Behike line back in 2010, when Cigar Aficionado voted the smallest Behike the Cigar of the Year. The staff remarked, in so many words, that it was the finest Cuban cigar they had ever smoked. Obviously, I wanted one.

My sources weren’t what they are today, and so I checked out some of the grey market shippers—the ones in places like the Cayman Islands where they remove the bands and ship them to you separately so customs won’t grab ‘em. I’ve never dealt with one of these places, mostly because the very act of opening the box and removing the bands give these people a greater opportunity to swap in some counterfeits. But the price was about $35 to $50 per stick back then, which was certainly in my budget. Unfortunately, these places don’t sell single sticks, and I would have to buy a box. I waited for a more capricious day, one that never came.

Years went by and many great cigars were smoked. I learned more and more about the Behike legend as I went along, however. Perhaps the most troubling part of this quest was getting a really top-notch Behike. As those guys at CA mentioned, the smallest is the best. ([There are three Behikes—the BHK 52, BHK 54 and the BHK56, and the number denotes the ring size.]) In addition, the best Behikes were from the first few seasons, and that season started in 2004. The newer sticks, over the years, have been deemed “not as good.” One of my best sources for Cubans told me that he had a box of 2006 BHK 52s and that he would never, ever sell one under any circumstances. They were his, to be rationed out over the remainder of his life.

The closest I came to a Behike was a BHK54 that one of my cigar buddies received as a birthday gift. I sat right next to him as he smoked it. His comment after he was done: “It was good, but not the greatest thing I’ve ever smoked.”

The Canadian Connection
I almost stopped my search for the Behike after that. A year ago, however, I visited a cigar shop in downtown Niagara Falls in Ontario. This was a very classy place, with a great selection and a young man behind the counter who really knew his stuff. I told him I was an American, and we discussed some of the issues with the embargo lately and out of the blue I asked him if he could get Behikes.

“Usually I can get one if you give me about two weeks,” he replied. He told me the cost would be about CDN$120 per stick, and that he could only get BHK56s. He added that the later vintages of the 56 were much improved and even better than the 52 and the 54. I told him I’d call when I was ready.

Mistake #1
I waited a year to call this guy back for a Behike BHK56. I called him on the phone a couple of weeks ago. I’m not sure it was the same person, but I felt like it was. He told me that he couldn’t get Behikes anymore. The supply has been exhausted, and he hasn’t seen any opportunities to get more in months. So, boys and girls, procrastination is bad.

Mistake #2
I went up to the store anyway. It takes two hours to drive each way, 100 miles, and let’s not forget about an international border that needs crossing along the way. I had a plan B, which may involve a future column so I’ll stop there, which is why I decided to go. I checked the hours on the store’s website and Facebook page, and they were open regular hours, 10am to 5pm. I got there at 10:30am, paid for parking, and walked up to the front door where a sign was pasted explaining that the store would continue to be closed on Tuesdays as part of the “winter hours.” Yes, it was Tuesday.
Mistake #3
I succumbed to that feeling that I didn’t want to leave Niagara Falls, the Canadian one, empty-handed. I did a search on my phone and quite a few cigar shops were listed. Most of them had “Cuban Cigars” right in the name of their businesses, so I merely picked the one closest to me. A few minutes later I found myself in front of one of those common “smoke shops,” which are more about cigarettes and hookah and glass pipes and less about quality cigars.

In this store, however, there was a lone cabinet marked “Cuban Cigars” right behind the counter, and it was chained and padlocked. I thought that was a good sign, unless it was just theatrics. The young man was very helpful and knowledgeable, and once he opened the cabinet I felt a little better. While the cabinet was full of odds and ends, some of them in fairly bad shape, there were several new boxes fully packed with lovely Cuban cigars. The seals on the boxes looked good, the labels looked good, and the cigars looked untouched.

I chose three of my favorite Cuban cigars. I chose a newer, “petit” version of the Montecristo No.2, my favorite cigar of all time, a Partagas Series D-4 (always a solid and usually affordable choice) and a Bolivar. The first cigar I ever smoked was a Bolivar, and that’s how I was hooked on this hobby. I headed back to the states, my entire international adventure lasting less than 90 minutes minus drive time.

Here’s a Steaming Plate of Schadenfreude for Ya!
You guessed it, they were probably counterfeit. The first cigar, the D-4, tasted pretty good but burned unevenly. Counterfeit Cubans often taste pretty good for a while because they’re using authentic Cuban tobacco—but it’s the stuff that gets swept up off the floor that winds up in these cigars, not single leaves rolled together. The second cigar was the No. 2, and it was so bad that I immediately knew I’d been had. This Montecristo is my favorite, and yet my opinion of it is now tarnished by this foul-tasting, tunneling, canoeing collection of expertly rolled weeds from a vacant lot in Havana.

The Bolivar was last, and I dreaded lighting it. But for the most part, it smoked much better than the other two sticks. In fact, it could have been 100% legit. It did start to canoe right off the bat, but then it quickly corrected itself. It was probably a tad dry, but that’s my fault for not letting it age in my humidor. How could I know without lighting it up?

At any rate, the relative success of the Bolivar leads me to believe that this particular cigar store is not crooked as much as they just take whatever the get from some mysterious and untrustworthy distributor.

That’s Right When I Learned an Important Lesson
The fact that I fell for counterfeit cigars made me realize two important things. First, it’s really not worth it to chase Cuban cigars. The best Cubans I’ve smoked were given to me by friends—who have navigated their way through this world of deception and know a thing or two. It’s when you start trying to find Cuban cigars, when you really put forth an effort, you usually get screwed.

Second, I recently smoked a cigar that was so perfect for my tastes that I almost don’t care about Cubans anymore. I smoked a couple more that came close. Backlash against Cuban cigars these days is full steam ahead, and the predominant argument is that there are so many great non-Cuban choices out there that are equal if not better. My very first Smoking Jacket column asked the question “Do You Really Need to Smoke Cuban Cigars?” The point was no, you don’t.

Will I give up searching out Cubans? Possibly. I have one more Cuban cigar story to tell next time, and I’m confident I can get the real thing. After that, however, I’m going to talk about those aforementioned non-Cubans that might make this sacrifice very easy.

—Photos in article by Marc Phillips

“It’s when you really start trying to find Cuban cigars, when you really put forth an effort, you usually get screwed.”
I have an audiophile buddy named Bob, and he’s really into heavy metal. I’m not talking about the cool stuff I like (Tool, System of a Down), but really heavy stuff like Napalm Death, Carcass and a few other bands with names that probably shouldn’t be printed here. He used to go to CES every year and he’d bring his demo CD and he’d clear rooms like an old pro. He was proud of his music, too, and he’d get angry and acutely dismissive if you complained. Since he’s a pretty large and scary-looking fellow, he didn’t get a lot of complaints from exhibitors.

Anyway, Bob always had a pretty decent system back home. He was very fond of JBL. One day he told me he had $20,000 to spend on a new pair of speakers to replace his classic L100s. I made the usual recommendations; he shot them all down. Not enough bass. Not enough volume. Not enough cajones. When he pulled the trigger, it was on a new pair of $20,000 JBLs. Other than the Everest, which was Bob’s real first choice, I didn’t know JBL had a model in that range. But they did, and it played Cannibal Corpse really loud. Bob was happy because he knew he’d found his final pair of speakers.

Here’s the thing. Bob wound up playing with a lot of different speakers over the years, but he always stuck with one amplifier brand—Bryston. He loved the fact that Bryston had a 20-year warranty since he had a habit of blowing up both speakers and amps. He loved the power. He loved the industrial looks. He loved the big, big sound.

That’s what I think about when I think of Bryston. Big, powerful, reliable, Bob-approved. Other than the fact that I once considered the classic (and still available) B60 integrated amplifier for my own system many years ago, my seat time with this Canadian manufacturer has been limited. So when I walked into the Bryston room at the 2019 RMAF, I had no idea what to expect—other than loud. Bob loud.

After hearing an all-Bryston system including their newest line of loudspeakers, I was truly impressed. Even though I made them play the title track from Tool’s Fear Inoculum, this didn’t sound like Bob’s system. It had finesse and clarity and plenty of texture. Bob would have been happy with the deep bass response of the system, but I was happy with the entire package. Before I knew it, I had agreed to review the new B135³ integrated amplifier.

B135³ Integrated Amplifier

For some reason I thought the B135³ was an entry-level integrated, much in the same spirit as that B60 that caught my attention many years ago. That misapprehension continued when I unpacked it—it was compact and not terribly heavy. It looks even smaller when viewed from overhead since the heat sinks are cut out of the sides of the chassis.

Then I learned it was $6695, with inboard MM phono stage and DAC available as options for $750 each. (These can be installed by the factory, or added later by your Bryston dealer.) I wasn’t concerned about value yet. In fact, I was pleased because I wouldn’t be reviewing an entry-level integrated but a more ambitious product that had the potential for high performance. But the B135³ is small, and it’s loaded with features, and it offers 135wpc into 8 ohms. The DAC and the phono pre definitely take up some room inside the B135³, but there’s also a headphone amp, one that I really liked.

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And there’s more. A lot more. The B135³ offers seven analog inputs (the DAC module removes one of these and adds two RCA digital inputs and two Toslink optical inputs). It offers a home theater bypass input and uses separate power supplies for the two channels and the preamp. You can separate the preamp and the power amp. The only thing the B135³ lacks is balanced XLR inputs—perhaps that was the point where everything was packed so tight that the whole chassis exploded. That’s not a big deal, especially considering that this amp is so compact that it’s probably intended for audiophiles who are tight for space and won’t be needing long runs of XLRs.

My review sample featured the DAC, but not the MM phono stage. (The latter is the same one found in Bryston’s BP-2/MM outboard phono stage.) The DAC, according to Bryston’s Gary Dayton, is “derived from our BDA-3—it uses the same digital chipset and only lacks USB (and therefore DSD) and balanced output. But it is startlingly close in sound quality.” I would have liked a USB connection but was able to evaluate the DAC with Toslink cables provided by AudioQuest.

Compact dimensions aside, that’s a lot of integrated amp for $6695.

System Configurations

I used the Bryston B135³ integrated with three very different systems during its stay. First, I placed it in the ever-growing reference system in the main listening room with the Von Schweikert Audio ESE speakers—this was a configuration that would show me the Bryston’s ultimate potential. While it had to follow the proverbial tough act—the McIntosh MC2152 power amplifier and the Pass Labs XP12 preamp—the resulting sound was anything but a letdown. It turned out to be a different flavor, less warmth and lushness and more detail, sort of like using a little vinegar in the recipe to cut through the fat and the unctuousness. (You can tell that Colleen and I watch a lot of programs on The Food Network.)

The second system was for dedicated headphone listening. I paired the B135³ with my trusty ol’ Unison Research CDE CD player and my AudioQuest NightOwl Carbon headphones and finished many music reviews for my Vinyl Anachronist column with this combination. I’m becoming more and more impressed with some of the onboard headphone amps of some of the integrated amps I’ve been reviewing, such as the Luxman LX-380 I reviewed for the Summer Issue of The Occasional. I’m not sure what’s so special about the headphone amp in the Bryston, but I found it exceptionally clean and clear for evaluating recordings. Transients, in particular, were tight and fast and realistic.

Gary Dayton also gave me some insight into the headphone amp: “This is a separate pure class A output that’s all discrete. It doesn’t have the same kind of output power as our dedicated BHA-1 headphone amp, but for those with compatible headphones, it should indeed sound amazing. Output impedance is about 50 ohms. This is one of those features we’re never sure people use, but we designed it assuming everyone who wants to use the headphone out has great cans and needs all the detail they can get.”

The final system was sort of a lark. I’ve been buried in gear lately, and I decided that a second “break-in” system in my office was required. The first system was comprised of the Bryston, the Unison CD player, the Martin Logan 35XTi 2-way monitors with a loom of the new cables from Raven Audio. I had just added the AudioQuest Niagara 1200 power conditioner with an AudioQuest power cord going into the wall outlet. I was modestly surprised that my break-in system sounded so good in what’s basically a spare bedroom, and the flexibility and features of the B135³ were key to the success of this project.

Sound

As I’ve mentioned, the Bryston isn’t a particularly warm amplifier—other than the fact that it physically runs a little hot for solid state. It possesses a neutral sonic signature, in other words, one that doesn’t editorialize. With each of the three systems I could hear an extraordinary amount of detail in recordings. As I mentioned in the review of the Pass Labs XP12 preamp and XP17 phono preamp, neutrality can be welcome to a reviewer when you’re trying to figure out what the other components in the chain are doing. The little Martin Logan monitors really opened up with the Bryston at the helm.

Initially I heard a leaness to the sound, one that might have been categorized as a minor shortcoming to a fan of euphonic colorations like me, but after a few weeks as a workhorse the Bryston started to open up and reveal a more confident manner. Deep bass was strong and steady and dependable with the small two-ways which made me instantly think of Bob and whether or not he’d like this sound. I know everyone is getting sick of me talking about Tool’s Fear Inoculum all the time, but the Bryston seemed like a perfect match for the thunder and the space and the sheer dynamics of this brand of thoughtful and sophisticated prog metal. My positive experience at RMAF was now easily duplicated in my listening room.

Conclusion

I didn’t answer the question I just proposed. What about Bob? I think Bob was enamored with his four large Bryston monoblocks pumping out blood and fire through his big JBLs. He’d take one look at the relatively petite B135³ and say the he needed more to truly rock.

Bob’s opinions would probably fold under strict blind tests, however. It’s strange to see such a compact piece of gear deliver such a powerful sound, one undeterred by inefficient speakers with challenging impedances. It’s fun to have something so reasonably priced and sized that can alarm your neighbors, but that’s not what I want or need from an integrated.

I want detail and dynamics, but I also want balance and finesse. As I’ve mentioned, the Bryston isn’t a particularly warm amplifier—other than the fact that it physically runs a little hot for solid state. It possesses a neutral sonic signature, in other words, one that doesn’t editorialize. With each of the three systems I could hear an extraordinary amount of detail in recordings. As I mentioned in the review of the Pass Labs XP12 preamp and XP17 phono preamp, neutrality can be welcome to a reviewer when you’re trying to figure out what the other components in the chain are doing. The little Martin Logan monitors really opened up with the Bryston at the helm.

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Scot Hull told me an interesting story when I went to his house to pick up the Living Voice OBX-RW3 loudspeakers for review. Scot owned an earlier version of the OBXRWs, and he explained how Part-Time Audiophile almost didn’t happen because he was so satisfied with the Living Voice’s performance. He almost got off the high-end audio merry-go-round once he put those speakers in his system. “I was done,” he told me. He was happy to spend the rest of his life with these amazing UK-built transducers. Almost, because we all know the rest of that story.

My own experience with Living Voice was confined to considering the high-efficiency Living Voice designs for use with my sublime 2wpc Yamamoto Sound Craft A-08 45 power amplifier more than a dozen years ago. I put them on the short list with other speakers such as the Audio Note AN/E HE series and perhaps even a pair of Klipsch La Scalas, but this was back in the days when I first started reviewing equipment and had to sell the Yamamoto because I simply couldn’t review very many loudspeakers with them.

But the entire Living Voice approach to high-sensitivity designs was very seductive, so much so that I could have jumped off the carousel as well if I had pulled that proverbial trigger.

Let’s settle back into 2020. If you read any of my show reports from High End 2019 in Munich, you’ll know how impressed I was with the Living Voice R25A Anniversary loudspeakers. I haven’t heard a pair of speakers at that price, roughly 5000 euros/pair, that could fill such a big room with a balanced and authoritative sound. I asked Living Voice to put me on the short list for review, but they weren’t in production yet. (I’m still hoping to get my hands on them ASAP) Instead, Scot asked me if I wanted to spend some time with the current version of the larger and more expensive OBX-RW3s, and I jumped at the chance.

The Living Voice OBX-RWs, now in their third version, are the flagship of the line next to the outrageously opulent horn-loaded Vox Olympian and Vox Elysium models. These speakers feature outboard crossovers that are available in the same lustrous veneers as the speakers and are roughly as big as your average British integrated amplifier. My speakers were finished in a gorgeous Rosewood Santos optional finish that brings the price of the OBX-RWs from the base price of $13,525/pair to $14,050. Other finishes include cherry, walnut, black ash, maple, flat white, matte black, ebony, burr oak and glossy ebony (the last which retails for $17,750/pair).

The OBX-RWs are indeed efficient—they are rated at 94dB with a nominal impedance of 6 ohms. I used them with a variety of low-powered amps, everything from the Luxman LX380 integrated I reviewed for the Spring Issue of The Occasional (20 wpc) to my reference Pureaudio Duo2 power amplifier (25wpc in pure Class A) to the Linear Tube Audio Z-10 integrated (12wpc) that I’ve already reviewed. Most of the time, however, I used the Unison Research Unico 150 integrated amplifier, which offers 160wpc into 8 ohms and 220wpc into 4 ohms. Pairing such a powerful beast with a 94 dB pair of speakers seems counter-intuitive, and I had to use a great deal of discretion when turning the volume knob, but I liked the ease of connectivity with the bi-wired Triode Wire Labs bi-wired speaker cables that Scot provided.

I felt the 150’s sweet treble was optimal for the extended high frequencies of the OBX-RWs, and I settled in for the long haul.
Sound

My first impression of the Living Voice OBX-RW3s was the superb delivery of the lowest frequencies, perhaps the best I’ve had in my current listening room up to that point. (I use this qualifier because I have some BIG speakers on the way.) The Living Voices have a measured frequency response of 35 Hz to 30 kHz, but they coupled to the room in a way that allowed deep bass to rise from beneath the floorboards and create a soundstage that was extended on all three axes.

Placement of the Living Voices was fairly straightforward, even though I had to make room for the crossovers (I placed Cardas Audio wooden blocks underneath them so those lovely veneers wouldn’t get damaged on my bare wooden floor) and account for the added height of the integral wooden stands. Instinctively I felt that the stands made the OBX-RW3s seem a little too tall, and a little too narrow and somewhat precarious. In addition, that considerable height made leveling these speakers even more important. (My suspended hardwood floors aren’t as level as they should be.)

Once I started listening, however, positioning these speakers correctly in my room was relatively easy and I left the stands in place. One factor was the lightness of the enclosures—without the crossovers and stands, the Living Voice OBX-RW3s are only 20 kg each and very easy to push around. Most of the speakers I used at around the same time tended to be compact but heavy, so I appreciated the break in my audiophile workout regimen.

Once settled in, the OBX-RW3s made an immediate impression that wasn’t too far from Scot’s opinion that Living Voice speakers can easily be the end of the road for even the most demanding audiophiles. In addition to the superb bass performance, the Living Voice OBX-RW3s are exceptionally well-balanced, with a top-to-bottom coherence that is downright staggering in its ability to let the music shine.

Sound

My first impression of the Living Voice OBX-RW3s was a richness and beauty that was downright uncommon. I don’t want to overuse the adjective smooth, but that’s what they were. At the same time, I was equally impressed with the Living Voice’s ability to project an incredibly satisfying tonal balance while presenting a wide frequency response that verged on ultra-realistic. I’ve already mentioned the superb bass response, one that accurately presented the lowest octaves with complexity and depth. I’ve also hinted at the superb tweeter, a custom version of the beloved Scanspeak Revelator.

That certainly provided me with all the highs and lows I desired, but a high-efficiency speaker must also handle the midrange frequencies with finesse—especially if you’re going to use a low-powered amp like an SET. You want that “hanging in mid-air” feeling to music, that you can reach right out and touch those voices and instruments, that everything is right there even if you can’t see it. Even with the beefy, powerful Unico 150 integrated I was generously treated to that remarkable illusion. Voices, in particular, were incredibly lifelike. These were not mere notes that I was hearing, but a real and in-the-flesh human being just a few feet away that was communicating something essential to my listening experience.

Conclusion

I intended to hold onto the Living Voice OBX-RW3 loudspeakers for just a few weeks more, since I had some exquisite amplification from Mactone on the way and I knew that the 23wpc tubed power amplifier would make fast friends with these British speakers. (That’s something that was echoed by Steven Mishoe of In Living Stereo in NYC, who’s sending me the Mactones. He was excited when I mentioned I’d be using the Living Voices.)

Then I got a phone call from Scot. He wanted to know if I was done with the Living Voice review. “I miss them,” he said. I totally understood, and I brought them back with considerable reluctance.

The Living Voice OBX-RW3 offered quite a rare feeling, though, that if you looked at the individual parts—those wonderfully finished outboard crossovers, the modest speaker enclosures that were small enough and light enough to defy expectations, the Triode Wire Labs cables that seemed to be the perfect match—you were truly in the presence of something that was much greater than the sum of its parts.

These loudspeakers are indeed special in every conceivable way—like the finest components, they form an emotional bond with the listener that cannot be overstated.

—Photos in article by Marc Phillips
With almost 1000 grape varieties and over 250 high quality wine regions, Italy provides a constant source of wine news. Here’s just a small sample:

**Vino Nobile de Montepulciano**

Picture this: it is the mid-16th century, and you’re the cellarman to the Pope. Finding excellent wines for his Eminence is your job. Through writings dating back to 1350, you have known about a wine from southeast Tuscany that has been traded and exported from that area. Upon tasting, you proclaim this wine **perfettissimo tanto il verno quanto la state odorifero, polpito, non agrestino, né canico di colore, sicchè è vino da Signori.**

Simply translated: perfect as you are smelling it, full-bodied, not overripe nor full of color, this is a gentleman’s wine.

Now it’s 2020 and you are a self-cellarman/woman. Finding excellent wines for daily drinking and saving is a fun thing to do, and delicious! And because wine is now democratized, you don’t have to be a Pope, Doge, Earl or Viscountess to buy wines originally designated as suitable for nobility.

Enter the tiny and famous wine region of Vino Nobile de Montepulciano, producing wines made from one of Italy’s noble grapes (Sangiovese) and meant now for the noble of heart—oligarch bank accounts not required.
Wine Region Snapshot

Vino Nobile di Montepulciano
Sienna province, Tuscany region, central Italy
65 kilometers southeast of Sienna
3,100 acres planted with grapevines of 40,772 acres in region
74 Cantine (wineries)
13 Coops (necessary due to ownership of tiny plots)
Main approved red grape variety: Sangiovese (Prugnolo Gentile sub-species/clone)

All over Tuscany, the Sangiovese grape produces different expressions according to the local terroir. The cinematic hill towns of Tuscany are the result of ancient geologic events which generated a mix of soil types ideal to make great wine. Vineyards usually surround these hill towns at different sun aspects and elevations, giving way to diverse ripeness, acidity and tannin levels. Depending on where the grape is grown, it morphs into its own local version.

The hill town of Montepulciano is known for wine, but also as the picture-perfect location for Hollywood. Cobblestone streets, a clock tower, walls to fend off foes, and charming shops. The valley spreading out from the town is famous for the foods that work so well with the local grape. Think of pasta from local wheat, lentils, pecorino cheese, truffles and the stunningly beautiful white Chianina cattle which ends up as bistecca a la fiorentina in restaurants all over Italy.

Characteristics of Vino Nobile di Montepulciano

Expect medium to high acidity, medium tannins, and a long finish. Aromas of bright and tart cherry, tomato water and tomato vine leaf in the younger wines, dried sour cherry and sun-dried tomato, dried Mediterranean herbs (garrigue) in the Riserva wines. The DOCG wines of Montepulciano should have elegance and acidity in balance. In the best years, the tannins will remind you of your Alfa Romeo Giulia (affordable, smooth, racy). Reviewers and journalists note the region for the elegance and acidity of the wines, which sometimes need to be tamed by picking grapes at full ripeness.

Other grapes may be used in these wines but in much smaller percentages. Canaiolo and Mammolo are in the recipe.

As in other Italian wine regions, the highest designation is DOCG; the next level down is Rosso di Montepulciano which requires less aging (less time in wood) and are the easier drinking wines, at great value. When regions separate these two designations, the top quality is elevated and the level down carries the reputation of the whole region. This is not table wine, but it is reasonably priced and from very good producers.

I recently attended a seminar and tasting of several producers from this famous wine-producing area. Wines from the recently released 2015 vintage were presented, these were my favorites and should be available nationwide:

- La Ciarliana Vino Nobile di Montepulciano 2015 [Regal Imports]. Sangiovese, Mammolo. 24 months in large Slavonian oak vats and French oak barrels. $28 USD. Aromas of sun-dried tomato, fresh blue flowers, dried Mediterranean herbs, fennel seed. Super-acidic, persistent and long finish. Dusty tannins. The most expressive wine I tasted that day.

Now is the time to buy Rosso or Vino Nobile di Montepulciano – the 2015 vintage released this year was rated by the region as excellent (2017 and 2018 as well). The values for any of the quality levels are going to be a surprise for consumers used to spending over $30 per bottle for ready to drink wines. I recommend trying a few bottles and purchasing a few more of your favorite to open up in the next few years. It’s not necessary to wait decades to see the beauty that a few years of age will reveal in these wines.

“And because wine is now democratized, you don’t have to be a Pope, Doge, Earl of Vicountess to buy wines originally designated as suitable for nobility.”

Laura Donadori of The Italian Wine Girl Blog
— Photo supplied by Laura Donadori
Yes, That Pinot Grigio

Pinot Grigio/Pinot Gris gets a bad rap sometimes, likely due to one major Italian producer marketing a so-so wine to the US from this grape. Here in the US, we’ve been accustomed to a pleasant wine well-chilled for quaffing on a warm day, a not complicated wine that is somewhat expressive in the glass.

My colleague Laura Donadoni (The Italian Wine Girl blog) filled me in on a new revolutionary denomination for what used to be labeled simply as Pinot Grigio IGT from the Triveneto areas of Trento, Friuli, and the Veneto where this has been a mainstay white wine grape. The production area is large, results differ and range from that pleasant quaffer to a full-bodied burst of white stone fruit with enough guts to stand up to a weinerschnitzel when PG is grown in the foothills of the Alps.

In 2017, a new denomination in Italy was established specifically to celebrate and cultivate the reputation of Pinot Grigio from these areas: Della Venezie DOC. This is the first and, so far, the only intra-region appellation of Italy based on a grape variety.

Producers here have been working on elevating this grape for quality through vineyard management, improving water use, sustainability and most notably through decreased production. You should be able to find this new DOC in stores around the world at this point.

Moscato d’Asti Secco

Finally, a new style of sparkling Moscato d’Asti was at the wine tasting I mentioned. This is a dry Moscato sparkling wine, and I loved it. Moscato is one of the official “aromatic” grape varieties in the wine world; this Secco version had all the aromas of orange blossoms and candy but with a dry palate. Wonderful with aged cheeses or on its own, seek this out in specialty wine stores.

—Photo in article by Nina Rosenblatt Sventitsky
When I first joined The Occasional and started taking photos of review equipment, I realized that I needed a new equipment rack. The old one, from Quadraspire, was certainly capable—but it was getting a little long in the tooth. Check some of my older photographs and you’ll see all the places where I had to go in and spot-fix the images thanks to various scratches and chips and missing chunks of wood.

The Quadraspire rack was the one we used at high-end audio shows during my eight-year stint as an importer and distributor. In addition to all those battle scars, the Quadraspire’s shelves were beginning to bow thanks to too many heavy tube amplifiers over the years. Leveling turntables on the top shelf was becoming tricky.

Here’s my problem with high-end audio equipment racks. First, they’re expensive. That’s okay, I expected that. But my first rack that I had for twenty years or so was a used four-tier Target rack that I bought for $25. We got a great deal on that Quadraspire—I think we paid $400 for it. But most serious racks these days are well into four-figures, and even five.

Second, I’m not sure if I like the looks of most of them. Modern racks tend to feature a lot of shiny chrome and glass and other materials that simply take away from the beauty of your components. I have to stare at this piece of furniture while I’m listening to music—I want it to meet my aesthetic priorities. I’m not a shiny chrome and glass kind of guy.

The Fern & Roby Equipment Rack

By Marc Phillips
The Fern & Roby Equipment Rack

After a few months of walking through high-end audio shows with a secret agenda—to find that perfect audio rack—I failed to find something that checked all the boxes. Then I remembered Fern & Roby. I love the look of Fern & Roby’s gear—the turntables and the loudspeakers especially. When I reviewed the Raven loudspeakers for Part-Time Audiophile, I loved how they instantly became part of my home.

"Wait a minute," I said to myself. "Doesn’t Fern & Roby make equipment racks?" Indeed, they do. I gave Christopher Hildebrand a call.

A Rack for All Seasons

First of all, Fern & Roby equipment racks aren’t exactly cheap. But that’s okay, since I’m really looking for something that will last me the rest of my days. I’m looking for something that’s built to last forever, something that won’t bow and bend over time, something that will look great in photographs and, most importantly, one that provides effective isolation.

I chose a double-wide two-tier rack, one that was open on the bottom so I could provide additional room for big, heavy amplifiers. (Fern & Roby also makes beautiful wooden amp stands, which might be in my future.)

The frame of the rack is angle iron—it’s very industrial in appearance and looks as if it was salvaged from some giant structure. The iron is not polished until it gleams—it seems to carry with it decades of wear and tear, but in a graceful and charming way that suggests repurposing or recycling. (Fern & Roby describes this as “hand-finished with a traditional patina that allows the industrial, hand crafted character to remain present.”) It’s a superb idea—I won’t freak out when it gets a couple of dings in it.

The shelves are made from massive planks of hardwood. Each one is almost too heavy for me to lift comfortably. (I definitely can’t lift the assembled rack by myself.) The shelves are sanded and oiled and loved by the master craftsmen at Tektonic Design Group, the parent company that includes Fern & Roby.

Angle iron and wood? What makes these effective audio racks? Well, Christopher and his team don’t stop there. First, the adjustable feet have Delrin glides so this massive rack is easy to push around. Sorbothane pads shaped like little black doughnuts are placed between the wood shelves and the iron frame to dampen vibrations. When set properly, the heavy shelves should feel like they’re almost floating on air.

Conclusion

I love my new rack. My living room now looks like a million bucks, I have room for all my equipment, and some other pieces-in-waiting as well. It serves all my purposes. Every time I post a photo on social media with all sorts of esoteric gear, people ask “Where did you get the rack?” (So far no one has taken the bait by exclaiming “Nice rack!”)

As I said, the Fern & Roby equipment rack is not cheap. They’re custom made, and available in other styles, but this rack would probably retail for $6500. As Christopher says, it’s a rack that possessed an heirloom quality. It’s something to treasure, something to hand down to younger generations.

I can’t stop looking at it. It’s gorgeous.

— Photos in article by Marc Phillips

“I can’t stop looking at it. It’s gorgeous!”