

# GUIDE TO **CABLES, POWER PRODUCTS, ACCESSORIES, AND MUSIC**

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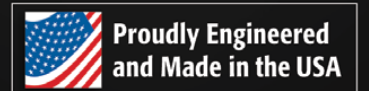


"...over the top. The sense of seeing through the soundstage to instruments at the back of the hall, and hearing them as separate objects rather than just part of the overall sonic tapestry, is alone worth the price of admission."

Robert Harley—*The Absolute Sound*, July, 2013

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# GUIDE TO STEREO • MUSIC the absolute sound<sup>®</sup> CABLES, POWER PRODUCTS, ACCESSORIES, AND MUSIC

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# FROM THE Editor

Welcome to *The Absolute Sound's Guide to Cables, Power Products, Accessories, and Music (2013)*.

While some treat cables, power products, and accessories as mere "afterthoughts", we at *The Absolute Sound* consider them more as essential ingredients that can make all the difference between audio systems that sound "good" at best and those whose performance vaults up to the next level—achieving moments of true sonic greatness.

The fascinating thing about these often-misunderstood classes of components is that they are all about maximizing the latent performance potential of every other component in your system. Picture cables, power products, and accessories, then, as elements roughly akin to the tires and fuel for an exotic high-performance automobile. If you set out to do a track day in a Ferrari that is fitted with inadequate or inappropriate tires, you are in for a frustrating and disappointing experience. Similarly, if you attempt to feed your Ferrari with anything other than fresh, pure, high-octane premium fuel, you could likewise be in for a very rude awakening. But, if you take the time and care necessary to get the tires and fuel right, you'll soon be in for an unforgettable ride of a lifetime.

So it is with high-performance audio systems. Taking the time to get cables, power components, and other tuning accessories right can unlock levels of performance (and musical satisfaction) you might never have thought possible. This Guide aims to help you make more knowledgeable and informed decisions as you select those "unsung essentials" that will help your system be all that it can be.

## Highlights include:

- An "On the Horizon" section previewing 15 new cable products and other high-end audio accessories soon to appear on the market.
- Reviews (and sneak previews) of 21 cable and interconnect products.
- Reviews of 5 power conditioning products and 13 high-performance power cords.
- A feature article on how Indy Rock Goes Audiophile (Sort Of), complete with an interview with Josh Bizar of Mobile Fidelity and Music Direct.
- A feature article on Analogue Productions' terrific new RCA vinyl reissues.
- An expanded Music section with no less than five (!) Top Ten lists, covering the year's best new CD and Vinyl releases, CD and Vinyl reissues, and High-Resolution downloads.

More so than in past Guides, this year's edition gives extra weight to its Music section, as is only appropriate. TAS Music Editor Mark Lehman and his team have gone the extra mile to create features articles we think you'll love, plus Top Ten lists that will lead you straight to rewarding new material to play. Better still, those lists arrive just in time for holiday shoppers looking for gifts sure to please the audiophiles on their lists.

Happy listening.

**Chris Martens**

*Click here to turn the page.*

# On the Horizon



# SL-MATRIX™

High Definition Audio Interfaces



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## ON THE HORIZON

# New Cables, Power Products, and Accessories Headed Our Way

Neil Gader



### Audience SE Line

[www.audience-av.com](http://www.audience-av.com)

In the same engineering spirit of its predecessors, the new Audience SE cable line up represents dramatically improved products. The SE line is the result of improved connectors for the existing well-regarded Au24 and Conductor lines of cables. These improvements are due to higher quality metallurgy, lower mass, and improved methods of termination. While possessing all of the sonic attributes that have made the Au24 and Conductor cables the favorites of many music lovers, the new SE cables offer more transparency and, to a surprising degree, a more convincing sound stage. All existing Audience cables are upgradable to SE. **Prices:** 1.0m Au24 SE RCA, \$1190; 1.0m Au24 SE XLR, \$1895; 1.0m Au24 SE speaker, \$1695; 6 ft. powerChord SE, \$995; 6 ft. Au24 SE powerChord, \$2420. **For existing cable SE upgrades:** RCA, \$220; XLR, \$440; Speaker, \$300; Power cords, \$275.



### AudioQuest Rivers Series

[www.audioquest.com](http://www.audioquest.com)

The AudioQuest "Rivers Series" of analog interconnects has been substantially revamped and expanded. Red River is the cost-effective new entry point in the line, while venerable Diamondback and King Cobra have been supplanted by two new cost-effective models, Mackenzie and a third new "River," Yukon. **Prices:** Red River uses Solid Long-Grain Copper (LGC) conductors and starts at just \$99 for a 1m RCA pair. Mackenzie (\$169/1m pr) and Yukon (\$295/1m pr.) employ AQ's best copper conductor metal, Perfect-Surface Copper+ (PSC+). While Red River and Mackenzie use Nitrogen-Injected Foamed-Polyethylene insulation, Yukon has the added sonic benefit of Polyethylene Air-Tubes, which reduce distortion even further. While Red River employs a Metal-Layer Noise-Dissipation System (NDS), Mackenzie and Yukon offer the substantial upgrade to a Carbon-Based 3-Layer Noise-Dissipation System. Red River, Mackenzie and Yukon also feature AudioQuest's most-recent thinking on plug design.



## ON THE HORIZON



### Cable Research Lab Gold Series

[www.cableresearchlab.com](http://www.cableresearchlab.com)

The redesign of the Gold Series line of interconnects, speaker cables, and power cords brings a significantly smaller diameter and more flexible interconnect to improve the ease of installation for the home audiophile. The power cord is a significant improvement in purity of sound and the speaker cables maintain their tried and true design for the impeccable sound quality that listeners have come to expect. Engineered and crafted with the highest quality copper and silver conductors, and terminated with the finest connectors, Gold Series audio cables are completely handmade in the United States. In the same tradition of CRL's many award winning cable designs, the Gold Series cables are neutral. Created by audiophiles and produced to allow you to hear high-end audio equipment and recordings at their pinnacle of performance. **Prices:** interconnects, \$1795 (1m/pr.); speaker cables, \$1995 (6 ft./pr.); and power cords, \$1995 (1.5m). Available in January, 2014.

### Clarus Crimson USB Cable

[www.claruscable.com](http://www.claruscable.com)

Designed by renowned cable designer, Jay Victor, the engineering of the Crimson USB cable is the result of careful consideration of the complex issues associated with the design of digital cable, namely the preservation of signal integrity including minimization of jitter and the elimination of noise. To ensure a transparent signal transfer medium, PCOCC, the purest copper available today, was chosen; 20AWG power conductors ensure there is adequate current flow while 22AWG conductors are used for the data line. To reduce jitter and timing issues, the cable is manufactured using high-precision wire twisting machines. Skin effect is minimized by plating the signal conductors with 6.1% solid silver. For noise elimination, there are effectively six layers of shielding. This prevents the power signal from corrupting the data signal as well as eliminating ingress and egress issues. The new USB cable is covered with an attractive black and red woven jacket, complemented by meticulous hand-craftsmanship. **Price:** \$250/1m; \$350/2m.



## ON THE HORIZON



### EnKlein Prairie Fire II

[www.enklein.com](http://www.enklein.com)

EnKlein has announced the first of its Dragon Skin EMR cables, the Prairie Fire II—it's a premium copper interconnect, using continuous cast oxygen free, high purity conductors. The Prairie Fire II incorporates many of the concepts of the firm's forthcoming "David" cable design at a lower price point. These concepts include EnKlein's revolutionary Dragon Skin EMR Control shielding on the connectors, proprietary "Uni-Tube" sealed air tubes, patent-pending Forward Feed Shielding technology, and Sacrificial Anodes for each isolated conductor. Whether you choose RCA or XLR termination, each core is made from premium materials. RCA - 24 carat Gold plating over a pure copper base. XLR - Billet brass with nickel over silver-plating. Designed for excellent top to bottom balance, detailed timbre and a powerful sense of spatial balance. Prairie Fire II, a prodigy of the "David" design, easily competes with cables twice the price.

**Price:** \$1700/1m.

### MIT SL-Matrix USB

[www.mitcables.com](http://www.mitcables.com)

Digital audio waveforms are in the shape of square waves, and the highest fidelity is achieved when a USB cable preserves the original squared shape. Most cables tend to overshoot or undershoot on those square waves as each pulse starts and stops, as well as exhibiting impedance mismatches between each data leg, creating timing (phase) errors known as jitter. MIT's SL-Matrix USB audio cables employ proprietary designs that minimize jitter. The two data legs are carefully matched and stabilized in impedance, and noise filters at each end of the cable provide equal filtering between each signal leg. This differential construction allows the USB device to check for residual errors. By reducing these timing errors and lowering the noise floor, your AV equipment's error correction circuitry will need to do less work, allowing your system to do its job better in getting all of the music to your ears. Proudly engineered and made in Rocklin, CA, USA. **Prices:** \$499/1m, \$559/2m, \$619/3m.



### Moon Audio Silver Dragon USB Digital Cable

[www.moon-audio.com](http://www.moon-audio.com)

The Silver Dragon USB builds upon the award winning Blue Dragon USB but utilizes Moon Audio's single crystal UPOCC silver construction to provide users with the best possible digital bus transmission. The cable uses 99.99998% UP-OCC Stranded Silver 24AWG Teflon insulated stranded conductors with a double layer shield to ward off outside interference. Standard USB cables are not up to the task of large bit-rate information so Moon Audio has optimized this cable for audio transmission of large high resolution files. Be prepared to be amazed at the difference it will make when transferring your computer audio catalog to your USB applications. **Price:** \$130/0.5 ft., \$140/1 ft., \$180/3 ft.

## ON THE HORIZON



### Nordost Sort Füt

[www.nordost.com](http://www.nordost.com)

The Sort Füt is Nordost's latest addition to Nordost's Sort System. It is a mechanically tuned resonance control device, which improves upon the standard spikes and stabilizers that are provided with loudspeakers and racks. The Sort Füt bypasses standard equipment footers and provides a mechanical ground path for the harmful internal energy produced by vibrations in components.

The body of the Sort Füt boasts an aluminum-bronze construction that is separated by three ceramic balls (ZrO2). These bearings minimize the surface contact area while still providing physical stability. The Sort Füt is completed with a finial dome, customized to decrease the effects of unwanted vibrations. While Sort Füt units can be purchased singly, the Premium Package includes four units, an adjustment tool allowing you to fine-tune the height of your components and a laser leveling system to ensure precise installation and optimum results from a loudspeaker system. All units come with 1/4-20, 6mm and 8mm threaded adaptors to accommodate any size speaker or rack. **Prices: \$350 each; Premium Package, \$1500.**

### Purist Audio Design Ultimate USB & 25th Anniversary 3.5mm-to-RCA

[www.puristaudiodesign.com](http://www.puristaudiodesign.com)

Purist Audio Design's all-new Ultimate USB Audio Cable is specifically designed for computer audio applications. The Ultimate combines passive filtering, a new cable design, and the largest gauge conductors allowed by USB standards to create the ultimate listening experience. Its conductors allow for accurate signal transfer up to 5 meters compared with other computer USB cables, which are limited to a few meters. This allows computers to be located away from audio components without compromising performance. Also new is Purist's 25th Anniversary 3.5mm-to-RCA cable, made for audiophiles who require an ultra-high quality cable for office or home systems. For example, this cable can be used with an Astell & Kern player to a high quality amplifier that is connected to headphones or speakers in a home or office. **Prices: Ultimate USB 1.0m, \$900.00; each additional 0.5m, \$90.00; 25th Anniversary 3.5mm-to-RCA 1.0m, \$650.00.**



### Shunyata Zi-Tron Alpha Digital Power Cord

[www.shunyata.com](http://www.shunyata.com)

As the name implies, the Zi-Tron Alpha Digital power cord was developed to target and measurably reduce the extreme high-frequency noise generated by all types of digital electronics, whether in audio or video applications. The noise reducing capability of the Alpha Digital is so significant that this can be objectively measured using a Power Analyzer. More importantly, even a brief evaluation will yield an unmistakable, dramatic improvement in sound or video quality. Measurements and comprehensive information are available on Shunyata's website.

**Price: \$995.**

## ON THE HORIZON



### Stillpoints Acoustic Panels

[www.stillpoints.us](http://www.stillpoints.us)

Debuting at the 2013 Rocky Mountain Audio Fest, Stillpoints' new focalizing acoustic panel complements its award winning line of mechanical isolation products. This new patent pending acoustic panel brings a new level of clarity to the listening environment. In a unique formula that combines traditional materials and methods of diffusion and absorption into one compact panel, Stillpoints breaks new ground in its design. Originally developed by Alfonso Perez, a very accomplished acoustician residing in the Minneapolis area, Stillpoints has refined the design and brought it to market. The design incorporates five separate technologies in each panel allowing its 22" x 22" x 3" size to belie its profound effects on listening room acoustics. In addition to the exquisite listening experience, Stillpoints acoustic panels can be tailored to your personal tastes with dye sublimation printing. Permanent rich vivid color transfers can be pressed onto the outer screen fabric thus personalizing each panel. **Price: TBA.**



### Synergistic Research XOT

[www.synergisticresearch.com](http://www.synergisticresearch.com)

Synergistic Research, a company known for technological innovation is launching XOT- the latest installment of its new Unified Energy Field Technology that includes the recently introduced acoustic/resonance control products HFT (High Frequency Transducer) and FEQ (Frequency equalizer technology). XOTs are high frequency filters for speaker crossovers that plug directly into the leads of your speakers. Synergistic claims a significant increase in resolution accompanied by a lowering of your systems noise floor for a more holographic soundfield. XOTs are terminated in either spade or banana connections and sold with a no-risk 30-day money back guarantee. **Expected retail is \$399 for a pair of XOTs.**

### Wireworld Supernova 7 Toslink

[www.wireworldcable.com](http://www.wireworldcable.com)

Supernova™ 7 glass Toslink optical cable continues Wireworld's tradition of exceeding the engineering and material quality standards of the audio industry. Instead of the acrylic plastic conductor used in standard Toslink cables, Supernova features 338 borosilicate glass fibers, selected for the lowest jitter and highest definition. Moreover, the ends of those strands are polished to a mirror finish, minimizing connection losses to provide musically expressive dynamics and truly lifelike tone quality. Supernova cables are available with Toslink-to-Toslink or Toslink-to-3.5mm connectors. Made in the USA. **Price: \$200, 1m.**



EQUIPMENT REVIEWS

# Cables & Interconnects

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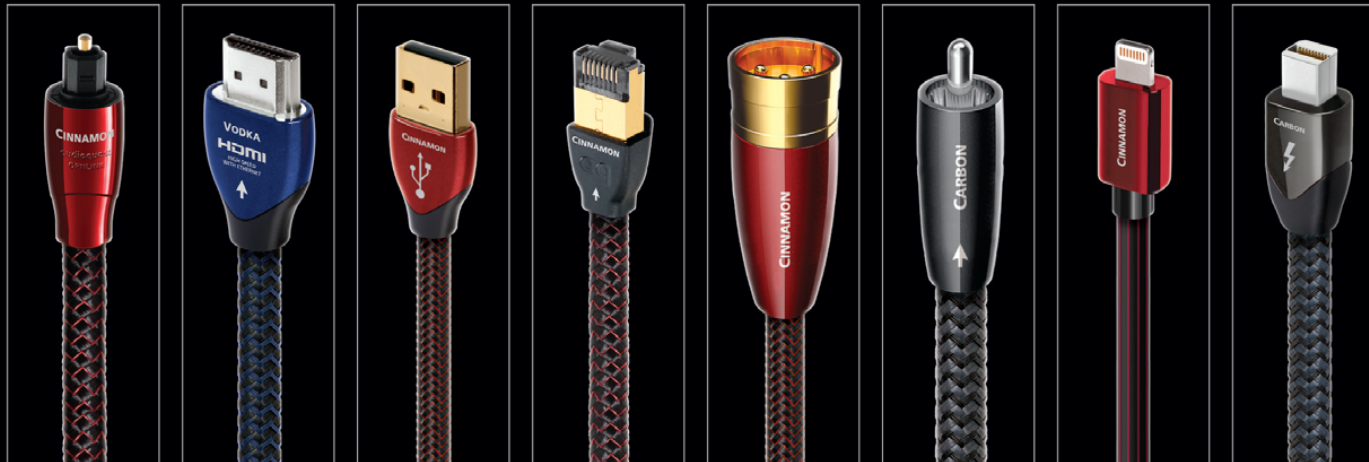
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## Analog ...



## Or Digital ...



## Audio Is Fragile, Audio Needs Respect

The frontier of transferring an audio signal keeps moving, the details change. However, the unchanging audio reality is that in every new application, and every way of packaging beautiful sound, audio is in danger of becoming not-so-beautiful ... unless love & respect, and good engineering & clever design, are applied at all times.

AudioQuest is proud to have been pushing the frontier of better cable design for 33 years ... through thick and thin, for analog and digital, for real-time and packetized.

We share the fantasy that someday transferring audio will be fully robust and immune to degradation. In the meantime, we are very pleased that AudioQuest can make a huge difference in sound quality, whether for just a few dollars, or for the state-of-the-art.

# Kimber 8TC Loudspeaker Cable

## The Budget Standard

Paul Seydor

Paul Hillier's baritone and Andrew Lawrence-King's harps and psaltery in their beautiful Harmonia Mundi *Bitter Ballads* recital are captured in a rich ambience, which Kimber's 8TC renders with rare coherence and extension. The musicians are fractionally less immediate, transparent, and detailed than the reference, but also less edgy; on the whole I prefer the 8TC. On Jacintha's "Something's Gotta Give" from her *Autumn Leaves* [Groove Note, analog/SACD], singer and jazz ensemble enjoy a big, forward, open projection that ideally mediates detail, liveliness, tonal neutrality, and dynamic contrasts, with a very realistic soundstage. Murray Perahia's magnificent *Goldberg Variations* [Sony, DSD/SACD] brought the only anomaly in the 8TC's performance, slightly less control and neutrality in the presentation of his piano than the reference, though this was evident only in direct A/B. With orchestral music such as Christopher Seaman and the Rochester Philharmonic's excellent new recording of *Francesca da Rimini* [Harmonia Mundi, PCM to SACD], the 8TC suggested an even tonal balance superior to the reference, offering a wide soundstage and again superb detail, with tympani clearly audible through densely scored passages. On Reference Recording's Oue/Minnesota Rachmaninoff *Symphonic Dances*—one of the half-dozen or so greatest orchestral recordings ever made—the perspective was ever so slightly distant compared to the reference, but holographic in its integrity of image and soundstage. This cable has been around for a commendably long time. Having used it for many years through countless changes in equipment and rooms, I can personally vouch for its versatility and benefits: great neutrality, transparency, and musicality, and a comfortable fit with amplifiers that never causes them distress. Tilting a tad toward the Yin on the Yin/Yang spectrum, the 8TC has that elusive ability to remain musical no matter what's happening fore or aft: an outstanding performer by any measure. tas



## SPECS & PRICING

Price: \$384 (8-foot pair)

### KIMBER KABLE

2752 South 1900 West  
Ogden, Utah 84401  
(801) 621-5530  
kimber.com

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[www.theabsolutesound.com](https://www.theabsolutesound.com)

# Kimber Hero Interconnect

Paul Seydor

Not surprisingly, this is a near-twin to my longstanding reference, Kimber Select KS-1021, yielding by direct comparison only a tiny bit to the latter in ultimate control, top-end transparency, and detailing. To my ears, this has the most accurate-sounding tonal balance of the group, and ties with the Synergistic as the most detailed and transparent. On the Mary Chapin Carpenter, the male background vocal is heard far more clearly and distinctly than on any of the others except the Synergistic, while the Hero's bass is the best in the survey: truly prodigious in amplitude and definition (rather better even than the reference). On the Hahn/Stravinsky, the presentation is exceptionally bold and vivid, with quite ear-opening clarification of textures and rendering of soundstage. Compared to the Integration and the Paris, the Hero is either dead neutral or tilts a notch to the Yang, with dynamics at once powerful yet finely resolved in a grain-free presentation. Add to this clarity and definition and an overall sound that is exceptionally natural (especially throughout the midrange), and it's obvious that Ray Kimber once again demonstrates his leadership in designing a superior performer at a reasonable price. tbs



## SPECS & PRICING

Price: \$150

**KIMBER KABLE**

2752 S. 1900 W., Ogden, Utah 84401

800-223-4039

kimber.com

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# Transparent Audio

## The Link Interconnect and The Wave Loudspeaker Cable

Neil Gader

**T**ransparent Audio, a gold standard in the high-end cable biz, has a reputation for designing wire on the cutting edge, like Opus MM2—an extreme cable and interconnect at out-of-this-world prices. But Transparent hasn't forgotten the rest of us Earth-bound audiophiles. I was urged to have a listen to one of Transparent's other extreme cables. Its extremely inexpensive ones—the \$85/£94 The Link interconnect and the \$200/£223 The Wave speaker cable.

Transparent's point-man, Brad O'Toole, described The Link/Wave as products that derive much of their design from elite cables further up the food chain. All point-to-point soldering is lead-free and still done by hand in Maine. The cables use five-nines (99.999% pure) copper conductors in a twisted-pair configuration. Cable networks are less a source of controversy than they were a few years ago, and O'Toole pointed out their advantages. The first goal was to eliminate the antennae effect by shelving frequencies above 1MHz. This reduces noise and hash and removes "hardness" from the sound. Additionally, the cable can be calibrated to match electrical values regardless of length—for example, a long cable will have identical filter characteristics to a shorter one, so they sound essentially the same. Networks also help maintain a common family-voicing. Finally, the network will add some inductance

which benefit the frequencies below 2kHz. Practically speaking, The Link/Wave cable is also physically consistent with the smaller-scale systems it's likely to be paired with. They're flexible enough to be easily routed through tight spaces and around tricky corners.

The temperament of The Link/Wave is easygoing, unobtrusive, and elegantly balanced to the midrange—not going for too much extension on top or overly boosting the bottom. In my view, this is a good route to take. Less expensive systems often give up a bit of resolution and transparency at the frequency extremes, so a cable that slightly softens or rounds these rougher edges is merely being responsive to market realities. The Link/Wave throws a wide soundstage, if not an especially deep one. Imaging is very good and there's very little veiling of details. Low-frequency pitch and timbre were



nothing short of remarkable. The only area where the cable exposes its modest origins is in its reproduction of the micro-dynamics of a recording. These tiny gradations are somewhat truncated creating a sensation of diminished pace and liveliness and a shallower sense of dimensionality—issues that arose during Mary Stallings' live version of "Sunday Kind Of Love" from [MaxJazz]. If you're familiar with Transparent Audio's more elite offerings you'd have to conclude that in comparison The Link/The Wave are a little slow off the mark—lively but not instantaneously so.

From the start, my cruel plan to embarrass The Link and The Wave with top-flight cabling from the likes of Wireworld and Tara Labs and Synergistic Research was thwarted by sonic realities. The Link/Wave combo may not be a competitive match for these fine brands but at a tenth the price, it's shocking just how

good they really are.

Believe it or not, nothing gives even a jaded old audio reviewer more pleasure than discovering a product that's not only really good but almost embarrassingly inexpensive. In the bang-for-your-buck segment The Link and The Wave are triple-threat wires—they're neutral, they're natural, and they're a no-brainer. **tbs**

### SPECS & PRICING

**Price:** The Link \$85/1m pr.; The Wave \$200/8 ft. pr.

**TRANSPARENT AUDIO**  
47 Industrial Park Road  
Saco, ME 04072  
(207) 284-1100  
transparentcable.com

# WyWires Blue Speaker Cable and Interconnect

Sweet, Supple, and Sensible

Neil Gader

**A**lex Sventitsky, the who behind the why of WyWires, says that he began thinking about making audio cables in 2002, but because of his career in the computer-software industry had to put that passion on the back burner—until 2010, that is, when he made the leap from software to wires. A self-described lifelong audiophile with music in his DNA (his father was an audio-equipment manufacturer in post-WWII Europe and Latin America), Sventitsky regards his firm grounding in mathematics as one of the keys to WyWires’ development. After Sventitsky completed his own intensive research, WyWires was officially launched in March 2010. Today, WyWires is a global company with distribution in ten countries along with fifteen dealers in the USA.

There are three WyWires lines. The entry-level is Blue, the middle-range is Silver, and the flagship is Gold. A new Platinum line is under development. They all share the same design

principles, using air, cotton, and PTFE Teflon dielectrics along with WyWires own Litz-wire geometry. The Blue line is derived from the Silver line with key differences that include a less costly combination of conductor, outer sheathing, and connector. Blue uses Cardas RCA and Neutrik XLR connectors whereas Silver is equipped with more costly Xhadow connectors. The elite Gold ups the ante in every dimension and, in a unique spin, integrates Bybee Slipstreams for interconnects, phono, and digital, and Quantum Purifiers for the speaker cables and Juice II Power cords.

All WyWires are manufactured by hand at room temperature, which according to Sventitsky allows the use of the best conductor material without fear of damage due to excessive heat. Conductors are ultra-pure copper allowing them to withstand prolonged, intensive use. WyWires use the ideal insulator: air with a little assist from cotton. The conductors are wrapped in organic cotton (mostly air after all) and then encased in a larger diameter PTFE tube—that Teflon tube is three isolating layers away from the conductor.



WyWires Blue is lightweight and very flexible, one of the most flexible cables I’ve handled in years. Yet it sounds anything but humble in playback. Its sonic signature is dynamically energetic, with a potent midrange, plenty of drive, and a slightly forward tilt. The Blue doesn’t sound juiced-up or overheated; if the goal is high transparency and black-satin background silences, it can be considered a real achiever.

The Blue may lack the physical bulk of some of its competitors, but don’t be fooled. Its bass response was strong, even intimidating, during the Copland *Fanfare* [Reference]. While veering slightly to the cooler side of neutral, it exhibited fine rhythmic pace, excellent top-to-bottom balance, and a good sense of dimensionality along the horizontal and vertical planes. Tierney Sutton’s jazzy vocals

were appropriately lively and playful—my attention was only diverted momentarily when I noted a hint of added sibilance on certain “s” sounds, as in the line “Get your kicks on Route 66.” During Mary Chapin-Carpenter’s intimate “When Time Stands Still” I heard the wonderful way the cabling has with inner detail. It revealed the striking amount of piano “pedal” in this song along with the breathy details borne of the close-miked vocal.

The purity of the WyWires’ performance makes it awfully difficult to be critical. At the end of the day it’s less about raw tonality and more about fairly minor subtractions. For example, during Norah Jones’ “Sinkin’ Soon” from *Not Too Late* [Blue Note] the Blue conveyed a presence range with a bit of silvering around the edges of images. During Evgeny Kissin’s performance of “The Lark” piano chords were

## EQUIPMENT REVIEW - WyWires Blue Speaker Cable and Interconnect

not as pristinely delineated as I've heard from some cables; there was just a hint of smearing that reduced the clarity of individual notes. During Ms. Sutton's "Alone Together," the low-end response from the standup bass had a little added thickness that undercut detail and subtracted some of the resonant decay at the end of each vamp of the intro compared to more expensive competition.

### WyWires Silver Series Litespd USB

I've been listening to a lot of hard drive-sourced music via USB lately so I had a go with WyWires Silver Series Litespd USB cable. I'm glad I did. Like the Blue speaker and interconnects, the Litespd is remarkably flexible. I'd recently downloaded Carol King's *Tapestry* [Ode] from HDtracks in 24-bit/192kHz format. It'd been nearly a generation since I sat down to listen critically to this mega-hit disc. It was both a disappointment and a delight sonically. Its vintage analog sound—warm and woolen—was dated to be sure, but amidst the nostalgic hiss of tape noise there also rose an acoustically unprocessed truth and honesty that is so often missing in today's recordings, where studios perform digital plastic surgery to lift, fill, and tune every flaw of a recording. The track "So Far Away" held some surprises. There was considerably more definition and punch to the simple kick drum downbeat and downward spiraling bass line; the images were nicely spread and airy. The guitars of James Taylor and Danny Kortchmar, in particular, were more detailed and defined than I recalled them. The Litespd turned in a terrifically musical performance with a

clean top end, very quick delivery of transients, and well-balanced tonality. In comparison, my current reference USB cable, AudioQuest's Coffee, has a few more ounces of weight in the bass frequencies and a touch more low-level resolution. However, in image focus and harmonic integration my guess is that both these wires have enough sonic caffeine to keep you up all night listening.

### Why Not?

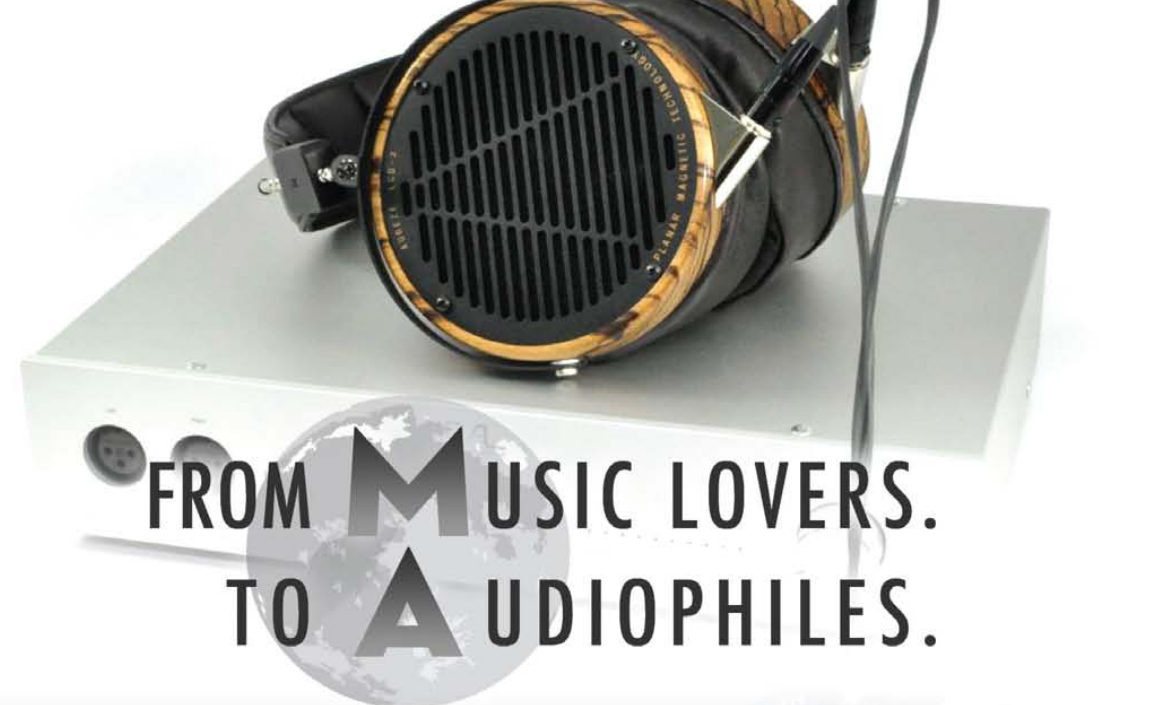
Some cables just want to be the star of the show. But nothing impresses me more than an unpretentious component that lets the quality of the recorded performance speak for itself. Here we have a humble cable in the WyWires Blue—a cable with a small visual footprint but a mighty sound. WyWires puts the music upfront and centerstage. A truly auspicious debut. **tas**

## SPECS & PRICING

<b>Price:</b> Blue Series speaker cables, \$599/8' pr.; RCA analog interconnects, \$469/4' pr.; XLR analog interconnects, \$499/4' pr.; Litespd S/PDIF digital, \$249 for 1m; Silver Series Litespd USB digital, \$429 for 1m	<b>WYWIRES</b> 16501 Sherman Way, Suite 120 Van Nuys, CA 91406 (818) 981-4706 wywires.com
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# New Interconnects and Cables from Cardas, MIT, and Wireworld

## Mid-Priced Cable Survey

Ron Doering

**E**arlier this year I reviewed Dynaudio's XEO 5 wireless speaker system, which wasn't truly wireless. While it was true that speaker cables were relieved of their duties, plenty of work was still found for AC cords, line-level interconnects, and coaxial and USB cables, which makes me doubt whether such "wireless" designs will ever be seen as a threat by the wire-makers of the world. Wire and electronics go together almost inseparably; yes, it's possible to make one that operates without the other, but it is relatively difficult to do. Wires, or more specifically the conductors inside wire, do a splendidly efficient job at two things that make electronics go: transmitting power and isolating small-scale signals. But conductors, any conductors—because none can completely remove itself from the process of transmitting an electrical signal—can't help but impart a signature of their own, as subtle as that may be. Thus, paradoxically, the best cable firms are also working hard to make the wires between components "disappear." Three of these firms are here under the spotlight in this survey of their latest mid-line interconnects and speaker cables.

Rightly or not, I took as gospel that it was the goal of cable designers is to eliminate any character imparted to the audio signal by the device itself. I also assumed that the more there was of the device, the easier it would be to discern this character. So I asked for three meters of interconnect—which wouldn't be out of place in order to more conveniently place a preamplifier near the listener—and another three meters or thereabouts of speaker cable. Although none of the interconnects tested was marketed as such, I also tried each connected to a moving-magnet input of my Parasound Z phono USB preamp, leaving the other end disconnected, as a check for shielding against

hum and noise.

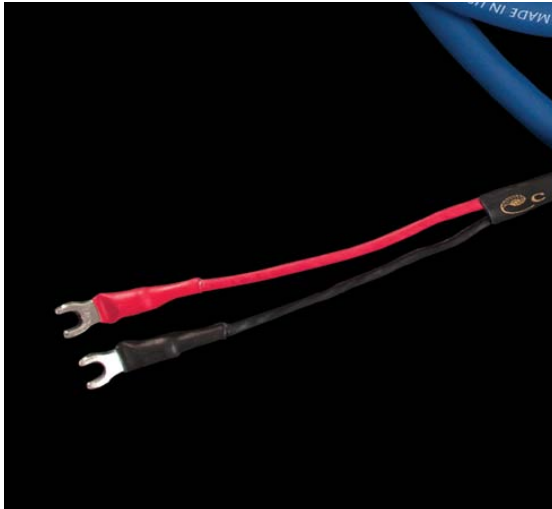
To preserve my sanity (and yours) and because most people I suspect would buy wire by the label, I chose not to report on the results of mixed-brand listening, although I did give it a try. My conclusion? Differences among the interconnect cables outweighed those among speaker cables. Finally, and again in the interest of my own sanity, I limited the music material to three recordings: 96/24 hi-res renditions of *Ella and Louis* [Verve] and the Grateful Dead's *American Beauty* [Warner Bros.], and Glenn Gould's 1981 performance of Bach's *Goldberg Variations* on *State of Wonder* [Sony], ripped to my computer and upsampled to 96kHz.

### Cardas Clear Light Interconnect and Clear Sky Speaker Cables

There are two things to like about these Cardas cables even before you connect them up. The first is that they are proudly (any other adverb possible?) designed and made in the U.S.A. The second is packaging, which is about as low-key and at the same time environmentally agreeable as you can get: a zip lock plastic bag and two-pieces-of-paper-worth of product info. I put the paper in the recycling bin and used the bags for sandwiches. Ok, maybe a brown paper bag would beat this, but really! All perfectly adequate to the purpose, and neither adds nor detracts from the inherent quality of the product itself. And, I think, a classy choice.

For the uninitiated, Cardas Audio is built on the philosophy of the supremacy of the "golden ratio" otherwise known simply as the irrational number 1.618 (in short form). It has been argued that this ratio accounts for the most pleasing aesthetics in art, architecture, and the human form. It is also suggested that it explains the

## EQUIPMENT REVIEW - Interconnects & Cables from Cardas, MIT, & Wireworld



growth patterns of some animals, including the nautilus shell, a cross-section of which is the corporate symbol of Cardas. I suppose George Cardas reasoned that if the golden ratio was good enough for art and nature, it should work a treat in cable-conductor geometry.

At \$692 for a meter pair, the Clear Light is Cardas' second priciest interconnect, but it's still a huge step below the top-of-the-line Clear's \$1840 price tag, while the Clear Sky speaker cable, at \$900 for a three-meter terminated pair, is fourth out of nine in the Cardas pecking order (the top-range Clear Beyond is priced at a cool \$9884).

Just keeping things in perspective.

Aside from the packaging, the fat blue cables are suitably physically impressive, and yet the soft rubber casings made them very flexible and easy to dress.

Except for the Wireworld Equinox 7 speaker cables, the Cardas wires were the chunkiest

I've ever used in my system, and I can't help to think that the visual image I have of these cables might have affected my aural observations (if true, then blind-listening tests may indeed have a purpose). So is my mind equating big and fat cables with big, fat, round, bassy sound? I may never know, but I heard good detail along with a slight fullness to the upright and electric basses. This warmth invited me when listening to Ella and Louis to focus a bit more than normal on Ray Brown's bass playing, which is really not a terrible thing, although the record's presentation now became that of three headliners rather than two. However, Phil Lesh's electric bass on "Box of Rain" was at the boundary of being a little too full, and with it suffering a wee loss of control and definition, although not unlike an experience I had listening to them live in New York's Madison Square Garden back in the early eighties.

Mind you, this was a relatively small magnitude effect which could easily have been the result of a system mismatch with my Snells and could be welcome in other setups. Hum rejection was quite good although somewhat less so than the Wireworld cable, which was almost inaudible.

### MIT StyleLine SL 8 Interconnect and SL 9 Speaker Cables

I always equated MIT (Music Interface Technologies) audio cables with crazy-unreachable prices even if you do get a set of magic boxes along with the wire. Try \$17,000 for the Oracle MA-X Rev. 2 Proline Balanced (1 meter) or \$53,500 for eight feet of Oracle

MA-X Super HD Bi-Wire speaker cable, and you see what I mean. But that's only the very top end of a quite large range in cable pricing. Towards the other end is the new StyleLine series, which starts at \$200 per meter pair for the SL 3 interconnects and \$500 for an eight-foot pair of SL 5 speaker interfaces (MIT speak for cables). I reviewed the slightly more expensive SL 8 (\$499) interconnect and SL 9 (\$799) interface. This line also encompasses HDMI, digital coaxial, TosLink, and USB cables, as well as power cords.

I'm not going to go too deeply into this as

I hardly understand it myself, except that superficially the numbers (3, 5, 8, 9, and so on) stand for the number of "poles of articulation," of which (you guessed it) the more the better. The company's high is 159 poles, so you see I'm really slumming. According to MIT a pole is an optimized range of frequencies at which a cable most efficiently stores and transports energy and therefore is the region where it has best articulation. These poles are relatively narrow, so the more you can get in and distribute evenly across the audible range, the higher the articulation achieved.

## SPECS & PRICING

**CARDAS CLEAR LIGHT INTERCONNECT AND CLEAR SKY SPEAKER CABLES**  
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480 Eleventh Street, South East Bandon, Oregon 97411  
(541) 347-2484  
cardas.com

**MIT STYLELINE SL 8 INTERCONNECT AND SL 9 SPEAKER CABLES**  
\$499 meter pair interconnect/\$799 for eight foot terminated pair speaker cable

**MUSIC INTERFACE TECHNOLOGIES**  
4130 Citrus Avenue, Suite 9 Rocklin, California 95765  
(916) 625-0129  
mitcables.com

**WIREWORLD EQUINOX 7 INTERCONNECT AND SPEAKER CABLES**  
\$200 meter pair interconnect/\$870 for three meter terminated pair speaker cable

**WIREWORLD, INC.**  
6545 Nova Drive, Suite 204 Davie, Florida 33317  
(554) 474-4464  
wireworldcable.com

**ASSOCIATED COMPONENTS**  
Rogue Sphinx integrated amplifier; Kenwood KT-8300 AM-FM tuner; Rotel RDD-980 CD disc drive; Meridian 203 DAC; Dell Inspiron 530 PC running Windows Vista, J River Media Center 15; Hegel HD2 USB DAC; Thorens TD309 turntable; Dual CS 5000 turntable (78s Only); TP 92 tone arm; AudioTechnica AT-95B cartridge; Ortofon OMB 78 cartridge; Bellari VP129 phonostage; Snell EII loudspeakers; JPS Labs Ultrconductor 2 interconnects; Kimber Kable KWIK-12 loudspeaker cable; Staples 5 meter USB cable; Have Canare DigiFlex Gold coaxial digital cable

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## EQUIPMENT REVIEW - Interconnects & Cables from Cardas, MIT, & Wireworld

Whatever is going on in MIT cables, the results sounded pretty positive to these ears. The SL 8 did have the poorest rejection of 60Hz hum and noise, but when it was used as intended I heard a very neutral top-to-bottom balance. Bass was certainly present, but it didn't overwhelm everything else. On the other hand, I was able to bask in the detail-fest that makes the sport of high-end audio so much fun: mouth sounds, the signatures of the microphones, the "sound" of the recording studio, the bite on brass that makes me fear for what Pop's chops must have been going through on Armstrong's solo breaks on "Isn't it a Lovely Day." How about the sound of the action on Glenn Gould's piano? Clear as day. Magic boxes? Poles of articulation? Just like my late-model computer-controlled car, it's beyond me how it works, but I do like what it does.

### Wireworld Equinox 7 Interconnect and Speaker Cables

The Equinox is right smack in the middle of Wireworld's extensive new Series 7 line of interconnect and speaker cable, which also encompasses HDMI, USB, coax/TosLink, and power cables. Priced at \$200/meter pair (interconnect) and \$870/3 meter pair (speaker cable), Equinox appears to be good value in a range that tops out at \$3000 and \$24,400 respectively.

Unlike MIT cables, there are no "magic boxes" to be found; instead, the Equinox is all about good quality materials and geometry. The conductors are of Ohno continuous-cast copper, and these are arranged to minimize inductance effects in what the company calls its DNA Helix configuration. Wireworld claims

a side benefit of this is superior immunity to EMI and RFI noise. Indeed, the 7 interconnect displayed the best hum and noise rejection of the cables in this review.

The Equinox 7 interconnect is a particularly good value, being possessed of a pleasingly rounded and warm presentation not unlike the Cardas Clear Light but for less than one-third the price. The tremendously bulky and stiff Equinox 7 speaker cable was also very similar to the Cardas Clear Sky in sonics, but in this case the prices were similar as well. While the Equinox was easy and never fatiguing to listen to, the added warmth was not what my system needed. But in a hi-fi that's a bit tilted forward towards the right of the frequency continuum, the Equinox 7 may be very welcome indeed.

### Conclusion

Like choosing among mid-priced sedans from Honda, Nissan, or Toyota, it will be hard to go wrong with any of the cables reviewed here. This is really no surprise as Cardas, MIT, and Wireworld are "blue chip" companies that have been in this business for quite some time, and they know what they are doing. Yet there are sufficient differences in the sonic personalities of these components that I highly recommend a trial listen before committing to a purchase. **tas**

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# Wireworld Series 7 Equinox and Eclipse Speaker Wire and Interconnect

Lucky Sevens

Neil Gader

**O**ver the years numerous examples of Wireworld Audio speaker cables and interconnects have crisscrossed my listening room. So many in fact that a common theme has gradually emerged. On a tonal basis, Wireworld's wires have been eerily consistent model to model—even to the point of predictability. Their character has always centered on the midrange first, eschewing frequency-extreme flashiness in favor of an overall neutral response. At times I'd characterize them as leaning slightly toward the darker side of the tonal spectrum, but that's an impression I don't want to exaggerate. It is more a reflection of the fact that Wireworld doesn't hype the treble octaves like many other cables I've encountered. There is no false detail or transient etching.

Still, in retrospect, there seemed to be room for improvement in its mid-priced offerings, especially in spatiality and low-level resolving power. Thus, when I was afforded the opportunity to hear Wireworld's popular Equinox and Eclipse wires in their new 20th Anniversary Series 7 configuration, I jumped at the chance.

These mid-priced wires are the heart of the Wireworld line—what I consider the two most popular upgrade price points. Both use Ohno Continuous Cast copper conductors (OCC), but Eclipse uses a heavier gauge, which results in thicker, stiffer products.

If my coverage of Equinox 7 is giving you a sense of déjà vu, it should. In Issue 236 TAS writer Ron Doering included Equinox in a survey of mid-priced cables. In that article RD pointed out its “pleasingly rounded and warm presentation,” a conclusion that I'd reached in an earlier go-round with Equinox. Even so, I wanted to contrast Equinox 7 with the uptown Eclipse 7 wires,

bouncing them off one another to illustrate what enthusiasts can expect when contemplating an upgrade.

My impressions of Equinox 7 essentially mirror RD's with the exception that compared with earlier Wireworld iterations, the Series 7 wires are a bit brighter and more open in the treble, and though they have a warm overall signature, low-level veiling has been reduced and the recovery of inner detail improved. The Equinox Series 7 is a more tonally neutral and open wire and bears a significant tonal resemblance to its pricier sibling, Eclipse 7. However as I listened to *Rhapsody in Blue* [St. Louis, Slatkin; Reference Mastercuts], the Equinox Series 7's balance was clearly more midrange-y and just a little brasher and flintier on brass transients. Soundstage width and dimensionality were mid-pack for this range with a corresponding hint of congestion around neighboring orchestral images. On balance Equinox will

## EQUIPMENT REVIEW - Interconnects & Cables from Cardas, MIT, & Wireworld

be a tough competitor with the recent reviewed Nordost Purple Flare and WyWires Blue (Issue 236).

Turning to Eclipse 7, its larger-gauge OCC copper conductors seemed to embolden its sonics. Several differences are obvious. Though very good in this regard, the Equinox 7's micro-dynamic energy can't match the vitality of Eclipse—the perceived rhythm and pace of pianist Jeffrey Siegel playing during *Rhapsody* is a good example. Keyboard feel is crucial to communicating Gershwin's music and Eclipse simply has more jump and immediacy that makes notes seem to spring from the keys. Likewise, Donald Fagen's "I.G.Y." from his *Nightfly* LP is a great example of how small shifts in soundstage geography are differently handled by these two wires. With Eclipse, Fagen drops back a step or two, and the stage widens, allowing the guitar fills on the left and the percussion licks on the right more elbowroom. Backup voices are more defined and layered and Fagen's lead vocal seems to float on a raft of air. As I listened to BS&T's "And When I Die" [Direct-Disk Labs] it was easy to hear that hard percussive transients, light hi-hat figures, and brass section bursts were generating more texture and complexity, particularly in sustain and decay. These are fine distinctions, yes, but if you ever wondered whether you get what you pay for, here is proof that you do.

Key, however, is how Eclipse 7 adds a finer and richer complexity to performances, particularly in the way it reproduces ambient space. During the Gershwin the sensation of the orchestra pressurizing the venue and launching a wave of sound outward into the space became more palpable. As I listened to a bevy of

orchestral vinyl like *The Wasps Overture* [RCA Red Seal], certain common traits with Wireworld's flagship cable, Platinum Eclipse (review forthcoming), presented themselves. Foremost was the sense of layered depth that brings symphonic works alive in the listening room. String sections and the positioning of individual players became more finely resolved, each instrument revealing its own voice blending among many rather than being homogenized into a single melodic line. In essence, Eclipse reproduced the performance in a fashion that came much closer to the reality of many players performing together.

The obvious conclusion would be to proclaim Equinox as the bargain choice of these two models. But as good as Equinox is, (a genuine go-to wire in its class) it's the pricier Eclipse 7 that steals that honor. Admittedly it's roughly twice the Equinox's price but its vivid performance draws closer to "statement"-quality wire (which includes my first impressions of Platinum Eclipse 7) than I would ever have imagined. If your upgrade plans include major system-wide renovations, this particular Eclipse is one you don't want to miss. **tss**



### DAVID SALZ ON THE SERIES 7 DESIGN

Twenty years in business is quite a milestone, no matter how you spin it. But Wireworld's 20th Anniversary Series 7 products are not just a collection of cosmetic upgrades, although the commemorative coins inset in some of the models is certainly attractive. I asked founder and designer David Salz the goal Wireworld set for itself in developing the Series 7. "Because it marks our 20th anniversary, I felt that Series 7 needed to be a real leap toward my ultimate goal of creating cables that preserve every nuance of a live musical performance.

"My development process for Series 7 began with the discovery that the most audible differences among cable insulation materials are caused by spectral variations in the noise they create. Furthermore, that noise is modulated and therefore amplified by the electrical energy of the music signal. This discovery led me to focus on custom-blending composite insulation materials to be specifically optimized for sonic purity. The result of that effort is our Composilex 2 insulation technology, which provides more vivid sound on a quieter background than ever before. Composilex 2 insulation technology dramatically reduces the triboelectric noise (note: static electricity occurring through friction is an example of triboelectric noise) generated by the interface between conductor and insulation.

"While our Series 7 speaker cables also benefit from Composilex 2, their greatest improvements result from new versions of our DNA Helix conductor geometry, which channels more electromagnetic energy and therefore more music, than the previous designs. Both of these advances improve preservation of timbre, dimensionality, and dynamics."

### SPECS & PRICING

<b>Wireworld Audio</b>	<b>Price:</b> Equinox 7,
6545 Nova Drive, Suite	\$200/1m interconnect;
#204	\$870/3m speaker
Davie, FL 33317	Eclipse 7, \$450/1m
(954) 474-4464	interconnect; \$1800/3m
wireworldcable.com	speaker

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# Nordost Purple Flare Cable

## My Blue Heaven

Neil Gader

**T**he original Nordost Blue Heaven cable was, for many years, one of my budget reference wires. It debuted in 1994 and featured Nordost's now iconic Flatline cable design. I knew this cable backwards and forwards—its many strengths (excellent transparency and detail) and its modest weaknesses (a slightly upward frequency tilt and a hint of opacity and edge in the top octaves). Blue Heaven has been improved at least a couple of times since I reviewed it. However, Nordost's Purple Flare, considered a rung below the current incarnation of Blue Heaven, doesn't just conjure up fond memories. It's a little trip to heaven of its own.

The visual look of Purple Flare speaker wire is unadorned classic flatline. It comprises fourteen 15-gauge silver-plated 99.9999%-purity OFC solid-core conductors in FEP (Fluorinated Ethylene Propylene) insulation. The interconnect is fully-shielded with six 26-gauge, silver-plated 99.9999% OFC solid-core conductors wound in a minimum cross-section configuration—a design Nordost uses to eliminate unnecessary fillers or padding elements. Insulation is also a high-grade FEP. There are two termination options: balanced or single-ended. Like all Nordost cables, Purple Flare is manufactured and hand-terminated in the U.S.A.

When a new wire enters my system for an initial round of listening, my habit is to glean an overall impression of the cable's signature. It's a casual, even subliminal process that helps me get a handle on tonal accuracy, dimensionality, dynamic anomalies, general transparency, transient attack, and so on. The more time I spend with the wire, the more specific and critical these impressions become. Straight out of the blocks the Purple Flare evinced sprinter's speed and did not suggest any serious tonal-balance discontinuities. Its treble range was wonderfully free from constriction. Not overly brilliant, it was, on balance, as open and transparent as I've heard from a cable in this class. It was highly revealing of the finer dynamic gradations and low-level details of well-recorded orchestral works. (The huge orchestra required for Ashkenazy and the Berlin Philharmonic's performance of Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* [Decca] is a superior test for this purpose—particularly the quieter moments featuring the delicate and colorful interplay between clarinet, bassoon, and oboe.)

During Norah Jones' "My Dear Country" from

*Not Too Late* [Blue Note], there was a natural amount of vocal air riding along with her voice, which imparted a relaxed warmth that settled the track into a smooth groove. This trait was also on display during James Taylor's "Only One" from *That's Why I'm Here* [Columbia/Legacy], a track that catches the clarity of Joni Mitchell's high harmony during the chorus. Like tapping a fine crystal goblet with a fingernail, the "ring" of Mitchell's soprano was pristine and impeccably defined. I can't say that the Purple Flare fully explored the dimensional component that exists on this pop track, but more on that later. Still, Purple Flare really shines in the midband with a slightly forward, driving energy that imparts a dynamic liveliness to all genres of music.

Tracks that I'm especially attuned to, like Rosanne Cash's "If I Were a Man" from *10 Song Demo* [Capitol Records], were as familiar as an old friend. This is a cut where you can select the right volume and almost forget it is a recording as Cash eerily begins to materialize in the room. And it's not just the vocal or the reassuring, almost metronomic strumming of the acoustic guitar that springs to life; it's the sound of the strings radiating off the soundboard, amplifying the note and projecting its energy in your direction.

One of the reasons I continue to listen to familiar tracks like Holly Cole's "Take Me Home" on *Temptation* [Capitol Records] is because the sparseness of the arrangement rewards the ear with a lot of reverberant information, low-level detail, soundstage layering, and the dimensionality of Cole's voice. The Purple Flare left the familiar cues in place and lined up remarkably close to my current reference cables, the Wireworld Platinum and Synergistic Research Element Tungsten.

One of the few tonal concessions Purple Flare

## EQUIPMENT REVIEW - Nordost Purple Flare Cable

makes to reference-caliber wire is the lowest bass, where it is not quite as full in extension or bloom. Also there's a bit of coolness in the middle treble that leads to a tiny hint of etch in the sibilance range, although overall this critical region is strikingly free from grain or grit. Transient speed is also very good but, as with the aforementioned sibilance region, there remains a bit of hardness on smartly struck percussion and high-intensity brass.

No doubt about it, Purple Flare has significant macro-dynamic punch. Orchestral crescendos, full-blown percussion breaks, brass section blasts, and so forth are impressive. However, after listening to a great deal of solo piano from Keith Jarrett to Evgeny Kissin, I noted that the Purple Flare reduces micro-information just enough to suggest a bit of damping of the player's touch during lightning-quick arpeggios, such as those flying from the fingers of Kissin's right hand. Similarly, low-octave chords that typically rev up the soundboard with wave-upon-wave of resonances come off just a bit lighter in color and power.

The best cables I've heard reveal ambient and reverberant cues that ultimately give shape to the soundstage. They define the venue's scope, and if the recording is especially good, its wall boundaries. As good as the Purple Flare is, some of this bass bloom and ambient expansiveness was curtailed a bit during Vaughan Williams' *The Wasps Overture* [Chandos]. The stage narrowed ever so slightly and there was the distinct sense that orchestral sections were cozying up to one another a little more closely. That said, perspective please! These minor flaws will seem almost silly when the Purple

Flare is placed in context with the entry-level audio systems it likely will be paired with.

My recent experience with WyWires Blue (a little cool, pacey, and highly dimensional), Analysis Plus Silver Oval (superb balance and a sweet, smooth treble response), and now Nordost Purple Flare continues to reinforce my opinion that the world of superior entry-level and mid-priced cables is actually expanding rather than contracting. And for those naysayers who promulgate the view that wire is wire—blah, blah, blah—I can only recommend they listen to this exciting segment.

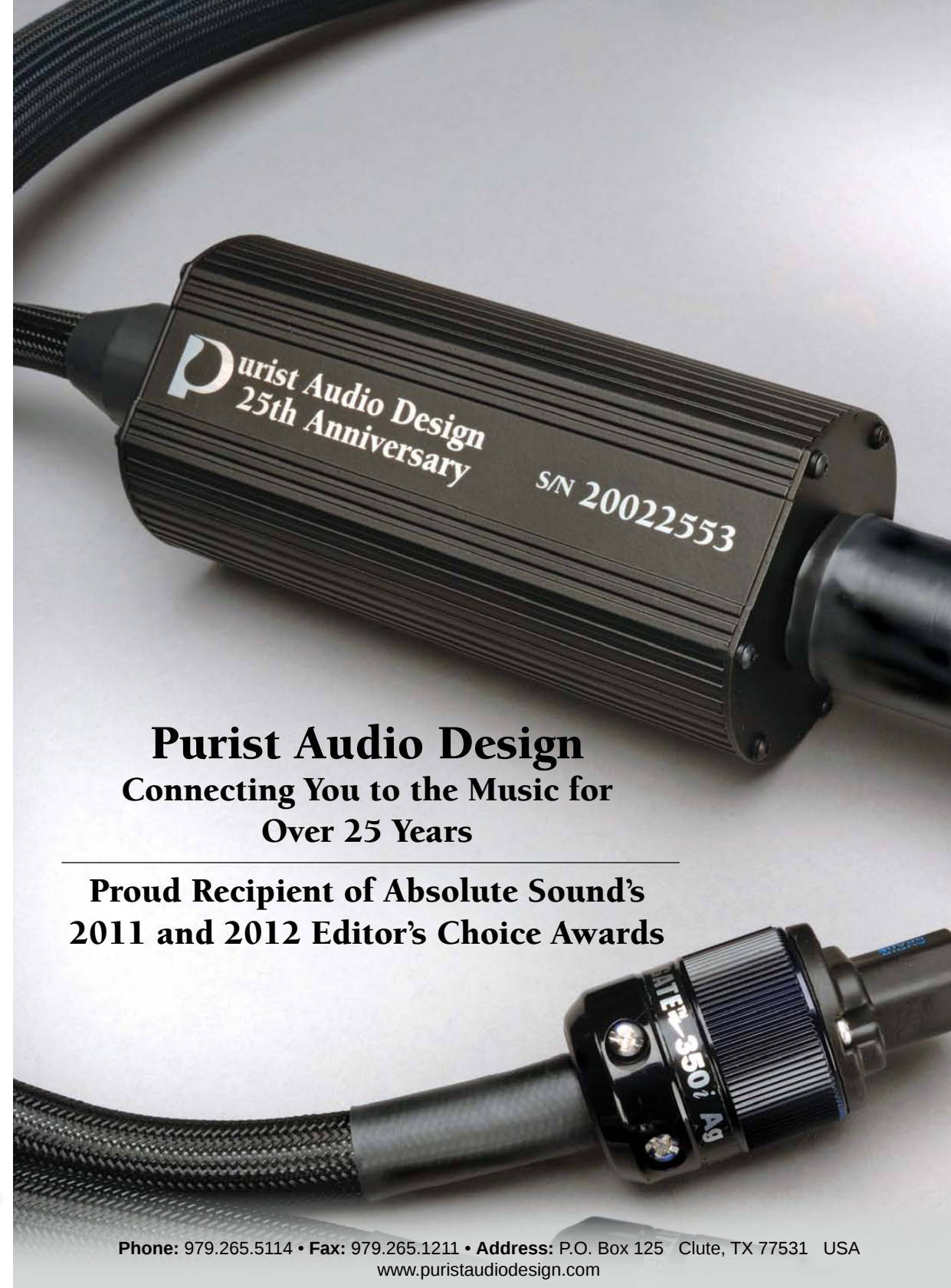
Far be it from me to preach to anyone on a budget, but let me offer two cents of advice. No one I know builds a system around cables. Rather, cables permit us to realize a system's potential. They add polish and patina and need to be selected in proportion to the system they'll be use with. How much to allot for wire? There's no hard-and-fast rule. But Nordost's Purple Flare certainly makes the decision less painful and expensive. I can't say it enough—Purple Flare is like a little trip to (Blue) Heaven for those of us earthbound on a budget. **tas**

### SPECS & PRICING

<b>Price:</b> Speaker: \$518/2m, \$596/3m; Interconnect: \$260/1m, \$365/2m	<b>NORDOST CORPORATION</b> 93 Bartzak Drive Holliston, MA 01746 (508) 893-0100 nordost.com
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# Analysis Plus Silver Oval Interconnect

Terrific No-Nonsense Wire

Neil Gader

I reviewed the Big Silver Oval speaker wire in Issue 215—my first experience with Analysis Plus products outside a trade show—and was unreservedly impressed with its performance. At the time I wanted to include its companion interconnects, the Silver Oval in the review as well, but the interconnects were revamped. So, in essence, this follow-up has been in the works for a long time.

Analysis Plus Silver Oval interconnects follow the lead of the Big Silver Oval speaker wire in that they use pure silver conductors over a stabilizing strand of oxygen-free copper. The key feature in their construction is Analysis Plus' patented braided, hollow-oval geometry—literally the core of the oval conductor is hollowed out, an innovation that maintains uniform current distribution.

Normally it's not an easy task setting aside the wire components of one's reference system to begin an evaluation. Reference systems

encourage attachments and continuity. However, I remember how well the Big Silver Oval scored a couple years ago. As I substituted Analysis Plus Silver Oval Interconnects for my reference stalwarts, the Synergistic Research Element Tungsten and Wireworld Platinum Eclipse wire, my feeling was more one of expectation than dread.

It didn't take long to realize that the question was not whether the Silver Oval was going to exceed expectations, the question was by how much. Immediately evident was a sonic signature that was wide open, seemingly unrestricted, and fluid across the tonal spectrum. Silver Oval's balance was superb, as neutral as they come.

But I didn't know how much of a treat I was in for until I fired up the Marc Cohn track "Dig Down Deep" from his eponymous first album [Atlantic Records]. The track was alive with dimensionality and tone color, and brimming with a level of image precision that I didn't expect from a cable in this price segment. Images like the six-string Fender bass seemed to generate their own unique physical impact on the soundstage. Cohn's heavily punctuated piano chords were mallet-like in impact, with swift attack transients and trailing soundboard resonances. Expecting to listen to only a cut or two, I ended up playing both sides of this LP, saving the Willie Dixon hit "29 Ways" for last. The track not only features an inspired

Cohn cutting loose vocally and behind the organ, but it's also a rollicking, syncopated cascade of drums and percussion courtesy of Jerry Marotta. From inner detail to transient attack this cut never sounded better. To the wire's credit, I think there are a couple issues at play here. The first is an expanded dynamic envelope—not so much in the *fortissimo* range where amplifier and loudspeaker design and limits are the greater defining factors. Rather, it's nuance at the micro-level—where the artist, in this case the percussionist, allows his own personal "touch" to color the performance—that is increased. The Silver Oval picks up on that. The other positive is the very-low noise floor that this wire brings to bear. The



## EQUIPMENT REVIEW - Analysis Plus Silver Oval Interconnect

less the cable affects the ambient sound of the venue, the greater the potential for the musical performance to reveal finer gradients of dynamic information.

A further example would be when Norah Jones adds her own whispery harmonies on top of her lead vocal during "Wish I Could" [Blue Note]. Recorded with the utmost delicacy, this track, if you're like me, will have you sitting on the edge of your seat, completely hypnotized. However this level of definition and airy transparency also can be easily smeared by a substandard chain of electronics and wire. In lesser setups my habit would be to turn up the volume slightly to try to catch these more intimate Norah moments. With the resolution and micro-dynamic output of the Silver Oval, I tended to do the opposite. Its ultra-low noise floor and low-level composure meant I could pare away volume and still hear deeper into the mix.

There's a similar level of "clean" that also follows in the harmonics range. A couple of recordings in particular brought this home to me. The first was hearing the piccolo and piccolo trumpet from a collection of excerpts from Stravinsky's *Pulcinella* [Argo]. These eardrum-piercing instruments will challenge the tracking abilities of a phono cartridge to be sure, but they also reveal frequency and phase artifacts in cabling. Against a pristine backdrop, the Silver Oval navigated their sections with ease, nicely matching the instruments' timbres against their raw transient energy. Similarly I use Evgeny Kissin's solo piano recording of "The Lark" [RCA], particularly a section where the pianist is trilling in the upper octaves—a

passage guaranteed to set your ears ringing like a tuning fork. The Silver Oval didn't just traverse this harmonic obstacle course cleanly note-for-note—no smearing or smudging—it was among the top two or three wires I've ever heard to master this trick without excessive brightness.

Compared to my own references the Silver Oval really has no overt flaws, only minor differences. The Synergistic, for example, is the king of soundspace and ambience retrieval; the Wireworld Platinum Eclipse has uncanny detail, a darker tonality and balance, and more top-end speed. The Silver Oval is just slightly cooler in timbre and has at its disposal an incredibly alive dynamic palette. Whichever way you slice it, this is one tight bunch of competitors. For me this was also further evidence that the sonic gap between reference cables and more affordable rivals is closing.

If anything I'm even more impressed with the Analysis Plus Silver Oval Interconnects than I was with the Big Silver Oval speaker wire. And that's saying something. This is terrific, no-nonsense wire that would be welcome in any system. Highly recommended. **tas**

### SPECS & PRICING

**Prices:** \$875/1m (1.5m/\$1120). Available single-ended with locking RCA connectors or balanced with Neutrik XLR connectors.

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# Audience Au24 SE Phono Cable

## Quiet Authority

Jacob Heilbrunn

**J**ohn McDonald is the president of the Audience Company, which produces a variety of products ranging from loudspeakers to power conditioners that have consistently garnered favorable notices over the past fifteen years. But it seems safe to say that the heart of the company is its cable lineup. Unlike some of the behemoth cables out there, Audience's are notable for their sleekness and flexibility. If the aspiration is to have a cable that is as unobtrusive as possible, then Audience has fulfilled that mission.

But that is only the start of the story. Audience cables, which I've tried in the past, have always delivered a lot of sound for the money, falling, like Magnepan loudspeakers, into the category of overachievers. So I was more than a mite curious to see what progress Audience had made in the intervening years in seeking to improve its cables. Perhaps there is no better test-subject than a phono cable, where the tiny signal is most sensitive. Audience sent me its latest version of the Au24 SE cable to audition.

To retain as much of the signal as possible, Audience offers three versions of the cable. A "low-Z" version for moving-coil cartridges with an impedance of less than 30 ohms and a "high-Z" one for cartridges exceeding 30 ohms. They also sell another version for moving-magnet cartridges. The cable construction itself is based on the contention that low-eddy-current resistance is essential for good performance and that the optimal material for constructing a cable is continuous-cast high-purity copper. Audience

also provides grounding plugs on the cable. Overall build-quality looks excellent.

What's the sonic payoff? Previously, Audience cables were smooth and detailed. But for this new SE version Audience has replaced the RCA connectors with new ultra-low-mass RCAs with improved tellurium copper metallurgy. (Owners of Au24 and Au24e cables can upgrade to SE status for \$220 per pair.) The result is a dramatic improvement. The dominant characteristic of the new phono cable appears to be a vanishingly low noise floor and an enticing tonal clarity. After pulling an old Angel pressing off the shelves of the famed harpsichordist Igor Kipnis—he used to drive around the country in a van that contained rubber foam and seatbelts to safely hold his instrument—playing Scarlatti sonatas, I was most favorably impressed not simply by the purity of the sound, but by its see-through quality. Any sense of haze is banished by the Au24 SE cable. Similarly, a vivid sense of presence came through on the LP *What's Up* [Steeplechase] with jazz

trumpeter Bill Hardman. The Audience provided an airy treble and captured the sound of his straight mute exceedingly well; the overtones, buzz, and rasp come through so audibly that they endow the Hardman sextet's playing with a genuine sense of effervescent propulsion. Nor was there anything lacking in the bass regions. The Audience lands firmly on the side of a tightly defined rather than a plummy bass, but it boasts enough whack to satisfy probably even the most ardent bass nut.

The pellucid character of the Audience translates into a number of bonuses when listening to LPs that you may have listened to frequently. Those small but significant improvements that endow a recording with a greater sense of realism, that move it from mere reproduction to true emotional engagement, are amply supplied by the Au24 SE. These thoughts are prompted by listening to several cuts on the new Acoustic Sounds reissue of *The Weavers 1963 Concert at Carnegie Hall*, a sonic standout that should be in every serious audiophile's collection. On the song "Guantanamera," for example, the Au24 SE captures the way Pete Seeger rolls his "r"s with amazing fidelity. Or

Ronnie Gilbert softly chuckling to herself for a split second on "Goodnight, Irene," something I don't believe I have ever heard before. Frankly, the whole combo with the Lyra Atlas, Ypsilon gear, and Wilson XLF's was pretty overwhelming.

All of the Audience's sterling qualities were evident right from the outset. The Audience is an extremely quiet and neutral cable. Its whiplash speed and transparency can become addictive, but it will not appeal to those searching for a cable that supplies additional perceived warmth or body. Instead, it exudes a quiet authority that makes it a very promising candidate for anyone searching for a first-rate phono cable. [tas](#)

## SPECS & PRICING

### AUDIENCE

120 N. Pacific Street  
#K-9  
San Marcos, CA 92069  
(760) 471-0202  
[audience-av.com](http://audience-av.com)

Price: \$1380, RCA-to-RCA 1.25 meter

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# AudioQuest Diamond USB Cable

Robert Harley

**T**he replacement of the S/PDIF interface by USB as the *de facto* standard for transmitting digital audio has been surprisingly rapid. Even more surprising is how variable in sound quality USB can be. No two implementations of the USB interface sound the same, with a huge performance gap between the best and the worst. The good news is that some talented high-end designers are addressing the problem, raising the bar in USB performance. The very best implementations are now very good indeed.

All of these observations about USB also apply to USB cables. There are, in fact, larger sound quality differences between USB cables than between S/PDIF or AES/EBU cables. Generic USB cables designed for connecting computer peripherals are so bad that even a \$29 designed-for-audio USB cable offers a huge leap in performance.

So how good can a USB cable get? I

discovered the answer when I replaced an excellent \$80 USB cable with a 1.5m run of AudioQuest's top-of-the-line Diamond USB (\$549 for .75m, \$695 for 1.5m) in my music-server system. (I use an iMac running iTunes and Pure Music, a Berkeley Audio Design Alpha USB Interface, and a Berkeley Alpha DAC, later replaced by an Alpha DAC Series 2.) It turned out that the state-of-the-art in USB

cables combined with a state-of-the-art USB interface sounds absolutely spectacular. My music server system took a significant leap in sound quality. Diamond USB may be quite expensive, but in the context of my system, it is well worth the price.

The Diamond cable is built from solid silver conductors—what AudioQuest calls “Perfect-Surface Silver” (PSS)—terminated with silver-plated connectors. AudioQuest’s 72V Dielectric Bias System (DBS) applies 72V across the dielectric via a battery attached to the cable. A wire attached to the battery’s negative terminal runs down the cable’s length. The battery’s positive terminal is connected to a shield around the conductors. Note that the battery’s + and - terminals are not connected together, so no current flows, which is why the battery will last for years. The idea is to saturate and polarize the dielectric so that it performs optimally at all times, and with no break-in required.

AudioQuest’s Diamond USB delivers exceptional resolution of detail, but at the same time is relaxed and easy-going. The cable presents a huge amount of information, from very low-level spatial cues, to inner timbral information that conveys the mechanism by which instruments create sound, to micro-dynamic nuances. For example, I’ve been listening to Rachmaninoff’s *Symphonic Dances* in 176.4kHz/24-bit via Reference Recordings’ HRx format for two years and know it well. After putting Diamond USB into the system, I heard even more very low-level information, particularly very quiet instruments at the back of the soundstage. This increased density of

detail expanded the soundstage, particularly in depth, heightening the sense of a large acoustic replacing the acoustic of my listening room. The increased resolution also made timbres more richly saturated and lifelike.

Concomitantly, the presentation became gentler and smoother. The treble, in particular, was revelatory. Thanks to the elimination of hardness and glare, I could listen at higher volumes without the sound bothering my ears. The presentation became more musically vivid without becoming more sonically vivid—a rare feat that I greatly value. It is this combination of resolution and ease that makes Diamond USB special.

When critics of premium audio cables complain about cable pricing, I suggest that they perform a simple test: Listen to the system for a couple of weeks with the expensive cable installed, and then replace the expensive cable with what they had been using before, or with a lesser-quality cable. They should then ask themselves: “Am I willing to live without the qualities the better cable delivers?”

I suspect that anyone who performs this test with Diamond USB won’t want to take it out of his system. **tas**

## SPECS & PRICING

<b>AUDIOQUEST</b>	audioquest.com
2621 White Road	Price: \$549 (1m); \$695
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# EnKlein Amphora Phono Cable

## A Promising Debut

Jacob Heilbrunn

**C**ables, it's commonly agreed, are one of the more mysterious parts of the high end. Designs vary wildly. So do prices. But only the most hardened double-blind-testers would deny that cables can significantly influence the sound of a stereo system, changing everything from bass impact to treble extension, from perceived instrumental detail to timbres. Thus, in recent years, a number of companies have entered the cable marketplace with new designs that promise to deliver on the promise of improved sound.

Into this very crowded field steps EnKlein, a manufacturer that specializes in low-mass cables. EnKlein produces a variety of interconnects and speaker cables. The one the

company sent me for review is the Amphora silver phono cable, which boasts the very lowest mass of all its cables, as well as some exceedingly attractive silver WBT connectors.

The cable appears to be carefully constructed. Its extreme flexibility means that it would take an effort to stress the connectors or otherwise harm the Amphora.

EnKlein suggests that the significance of low mass is often underestimated by cable manufacturers. The company works to minimize disruptive mechanical vibrations, which can have a deleterious effect upon the signal. Its director David Kleinbeck, who has worked for companies such as Sprint, has some pretty serious engineering chops when it comes to the wireless world. EnKlein's Web site says, "The thin film shield and sacrificial ground of 99.999% oxygen-free copper configuration creates a passive damper for extremely low capacitance and reactance, targeting the preservation of signals from a broad range of cartridges including extremely low-output cartridges."

In plain English, EnKlein is saying, I think, that cables need to have their own version of bodyguards in order to preserve bandwidth and detail. And make no mistake: listening to its cable was a pleasure. The qualities of the Amphora were not difficult to detect. It is fast, precise, and transparent. The bane of silver cables, however, can often be that that speed is accompanied by an etched and fatiguing sound, particularly in the treble. This was not my impression with the Amphora. On the contrary, its felicitous character was a welcome surprise. Take the LP *I Remember Django* [Black Lion Records], which, among other things, features a languorous version of the old standard "Honeysuckle Rose." Both Stephane Grappelli's violin and Barney Kessel's guitar were beautifully rendered

with a full body of tone and minute shadings. Particularly noteworthy was the hall ambience conveyed by the Amphora. This quality also came across on vocals: On an LP I recently acquired on Deutsche Grammophon of the baritone Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau singing Richard Strauss *lieder*, the Amphora provides a real sense of the joy and pathos that Fischer-Dieskau imparts to each song.

Perhaps it was the alacrity of the Amphora that was most startling. On *Trinity*, a sensational SteepleChase recording of Boulou Ferré, Elios Ferré, and Niels-Henning Orsted Pedersen (if you're a jazz or guitar fan, or both, snatch up this album if you come across it), the speed and snap of the guitars were almost enough to induce whiplash.

Given the staggering variety of phono cables available, it's important to emphasize that careful matching with a cartridge and 'table is essential. The Amphora is a reasonably priced cable that seeks to combine the speed of silver cables with a more full-bodied tone. If I had my druthers, I would try and add even a little more harmonic richness to the sound. But it's a very promising debut. In a cable world that is already swarming with competitors, and that continues to attract new entrants, EnKlein looks to be a comer. **tas**

## SPECS & PRICING

Type: Phono cable	ENKLEIN
Price: \$3595 (first 1.5 meters)	enklein.com

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# Furutech Flux Cables Series

Superb Craftsmanship, Superior Sound

Jacob Heilbrunn

**A**s anyone who has traveled to Japan knows, the country takes an obsessive pride in both the presentation and packaging of its products. Order a few chocolates as a present and the store's workers may wrap them up in as many as five boxes of increasing size. This attention to detail pays off in ways both large and small. While products from Japan used to attract a derisory snort when I was a little boy, those days, like my childhood, are a long way back. Today Japanese goods are more likely to excite admiration and bit of longing.

When it comes to high-end audio, Furutech's products are a case in point. Furutech has produced a number of innovative components and accessories in recent years, including its impressive LP demagnetizer, which I own and recently reviewed in TAS. Anyone contemplating upgrading wall outlets (yes, it makes a difference) or terminating his own cables also has to consider using Furutech. Its wares consistently exhibit a fit 'n' finish that put many other manufacturers to shame.

So when TAS editor Robert Harley asked if I was interested in reviewing the company's

marquee Flux cable series, I was more than game. So was Furutech, which is to say that it happily volunteered to supply an entire set of cables, not just for my Wilson XLF loudspeakers but also for the Hammer of Thor subwoofers, which are powered by a separate run of interconnects and loudspeaker cables. So we are talking about a fairly hefty commitment here on the part of Furutech, which was apparently confident that its cables would easily meet the test of rewiring my entire system.

In looking at Furutech's technical explanations for its line of cables, the company's confidence soon becomes understandable. Furutech's Graeme Cooley, who is based in Tokyo, gave me the lowdown on how the cables are designed. As he explained it, the cables feature what the company calls Alpha OCC conductors with a double layer of shielding and high-grade polyethylene dielectric with carbon-injected insulating materials. The connectors are finished in layered carbon fiber and nonmagnetic stainless steel with rhodium-plated copper conductors. The wire is cryogenically treated, which, in my view, is always a good thing. Nor is this all. The connectors are also very carefully constructed. They feature nano-sized ceramic particles and powered carbon. A floating field



## EQUIPMENT REVIEW - Furutech Flux Cable Series

damper—a precisely engineered sprung-metal bridge in the connector body—ties together the metal parts and shunts electrical potentials to ground. Furutech says that this lowers noise by reducing distortion for ultra-clean and stable power transfer. All this is done of course to provide the usual sonic audio goodies: a stable soundstage, superior dynamics, cleaner backgrounds, and—the alpha and omega of the high end—increased resolution.

So what did I get for crawling around on my hands and knees for the good part of an hour extracting and inserting a welter of cables? What I got was a lot of fast, accurate, and exciting sound without any etch or glare. Often cables that seem to offer a speedy presentation can come across as zippy or even, to employ another “z” word, zingy, the kind of sound that causes your body to brace itself before the high notes are even sounded on a recording. That kind of tension is inimical to actually enjoying the music, to letting go emotionally and relaxing, to achieving a state of mind where a grin crosses your face or your thoughts just start going wherever they want to start going. The Furutech cables allowed me to start, in the pithy title of a famous 1956 Miles Davis LP, relaxin’.

This was emphatically the case on Jamaican pianist Monty Alexander’s live recording in 1976 at the Montreux Festival, which has been rereleased on the MPS label at 192/24. I recently snagged a Speaker’s Corner reissue of this famous recording from Chad Kassem’s Acoustic Sounds—the last copy, in fact—but it sounds sensational in either medium. This very dynamic, sizzling recording provides a

great test for just about any piece of audio equipment, including cables, because it can move in an instant from a pianissimo to a thundering drum explosion, not to mention Alexander’s own pianistic fireworks, which he can toss off at the drop of a hat, and does.

On the cut “Battle Hymn of the Republic,” for example, the Flux cables really shone. After Alexander jovially quotes from a few bars of this old patriotic song, he and the band cut loose. The cables appeared to deliver every last swish of the drums and percussive effect of Alexander’s piano, where he often likes to dazzle in the upper register with glissandos alternating with stabbing sounds. The cables are so fast it felt like they had the character of a cheetah streaking after its prey. Their transient impact was phenomenal, transmitting the drums and cymbals with a great sense of snap and authority. It was not simply the shimmer of the note that was passed on by

### SPECS & PRICING

**Lineflux interconnect:** Tokyo 141-0031  
\$2704/ 1.2m Japan

**Powerflux AC cord:**  
\$3007

**Silver Arrows phono cable:** \$1970/1.2m (DIN-RCA)

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## EQUIPMENT REVIEW - Furutech Flux Cable Series

the cables, as alluring as that might have been, but also its structure. There is something very satisfying about such resonant decays that add to a profound sense of musical realism, and the Flux cable certainly provided it.

The sense of alacrity of the cables also helped endow the music with greater timbral fidelity. It became simplicity itself to distinguish orchestral instruments, whether it was a bassoon or oboe or clarinet. The mallets striking a vibraphone sound like they were bouncing like a ping-pong ball on top of a table. Any sense of smearing or bloat was absent.

This fine sense of discrimination also manifested itself on classical recordings such as British trumpeter Alison Balsom's new CD *Sound the Trumpet*, which features her playing a natural trumpet—one without keys—that has a more sonorous sound than modern trumpets. Together with Trevor Pinnock, the director of the English Concert, she plays a number of beautiful suites and arias by Handel and Purcell. What immediately became evident through the Flux cables was their ability to tease out the individual violin lines of the orchestra. Once again, instead of hearing the orchestra compounded into a congealed mass, it was no chore at all to hear the finely tuned string sections individually. This added to a palpable feeling of liveness and playfulness. It was also possible to hear the very distinct sound of Balsom's trumpet, the notes emanating from its bore with crisp incisiveness and resounding into the hall. It evoked the days when "Rule Britannia" was something more than an anthem and Britain really was starting to rule much of the globe.

What was my favorite of the Furutech bunch? To be honest, it was in the position where interconnects perhaps make the greatest difference—the phono section—that I was most wowed by the assortment of Flux products. I could say that the Flux sounded "right" but that would not mean very much. What I want to say is this: It was here that I felt Furutech achieved optimal balance between supersonic speed and a full sound. Here the Furutech sounded pretty darn infallible, conveying everything from trumpet to harpsichord with spot-on fidelity, never missing a beat. It was with the loudspeaker cables that I wished for a pinch more of a fuller sound.

I meant what I said above—none of the cables sounds thin or anemic, like they need to go on a protein diet. Far from it. But there was something about the loudspeaker cable that perked up my ears, suggesting that they leaned just a smidgen to the white side of neutrality. That means they will require careful auditioning from anyone interested in the Furutech line.

As always with cables—one of the most contentious products in the high end, given both the monetary stakes and the controversy surrounding technical claims—the Furutech cables will never satisfy each and every audiophile. But I was markedly impressed by their clarity, speed, and transparency. This is one of the very best cables available and another tribute to great Japanese engineering.

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# Crystal Cable Absolute Dream Speaker Cable, Interconnect, and Power Cords

**Absolutely Wonderful**

Jonathan Valin

**N**owadays, what I look for in a cable is pretty simple to sum up: higher resolution of those low-level details that bring instruments and vocalists (and the space they are playing in) to life; a neutral tonal balance, which doesn't favor the bass or the treble (i.e. isn't particularly dark, or bright, or both at the same time); high transparency to the sources ahead of and behind the wire so that differences in recording/mastering quality, digital and analog replay, amplification, and transduction are marked; freed-up dynamics with no sense that the wire (or the network box it may be plugged into) is sitting on the energies of the music, either at low levels or high ones; and the complete absence of RFI, hum, and other spurious noises, which some wires seem to tune in like antennae (and others don't). It is also nice—particularly for a reviewer, who is prone to plug and unplug his wires a helluva lot more often than the average civilian—if a wire is

both sturdy, relatively light, and highly flexible, rather than fragile, bulky, and stiff. The last thing I need is something I have to wrestle with every time I change review gear—or that begins to break down after a half-dozen or so swaps.

Like I said, what I want in cables and interconnects is easy to summarize; achieving it—all of it—is a different matter. I haven't heard a cable yet that does all of the things I'm looking for equally well, although (sonically, at least) Synergistic Galileo comes closest. And now—with some differences in emphasis that I'll get to by and bye—so does Crystal Cable's Absolute Dream.

Despite my aversion to cable reviewing, I took Crystal Cables' top-line wire and power cords on for two reasons: sentimentality (Siltech, Crystal Cable's partner, was my first indisputable glimpse of "better" in a cable and interconnect) and, well, charm.

The charm part was entirely the work of CEO of Crystal Cable, Gabi van der Kley-Rijnveld. The TAS crew and I had dinner with Gabi and

## EQUIPMENT REVIEW - Crystal Cable Cable, Interconnect, & Power Cords

her husband Edwin in Munich last year during the M.O.C. trade show, and in the course of the meal I got to know a good deal more about Ms. vdK-R, whom I'd only met in passing at previous trade shows.

A child prodigy—the first I've ever had the chance to talk to—Gabi spent her youth and young adulthood traveling the world, living the busy life of a professional concert pianist, before retiring to the Netherlands to become a teacher. (One of her first pupils was Siltech founder/CEO Edwin van der Kley-Rijnveld and...well, you can guess the rest of the story.) Though she never intended to become a businessman, life with Edwin and her own musical training (upon which Edwin grew more and more dependent for the voicing of his cables) gradually changed her mind. Crystal Cable was the outcome. While Edwin still does the technical design work, it is Gabi's ear and sense of style that distinguishes Crystal products from Edwin's own Siltech ones.

In my dinner conversation with her, Gabi proved to be as musically knowledgeable a person as I've encountered in the high end. When it comes to the sound of the real thing, a lot of people talk the talk. Gabi not only talks it; she has played it in concert and recital halls all over the world. To make a long story short, by the end of dinner I was thoroughly smitten. Reviewing Absolute Dream from Crystal Cable, the company that Gabi runs and Edwin designs for, was my chance to pay homage to both—the past and the present.

In one respect Crystal Cable Absolute Dream is quite a pleasant departure from what I've grown used to over the past decade. Though

complexly engineered by the redoubtable Mr. van der Kley-Rijnveld (about which, more in a moment), Absolute Dream cables and interconnects are not complex-looking. They have none of the bulk or doo-dads that previous cables I've reviewed have come equipped with. There are no "vacuum dielectrics" that end up making cables and interconnects as thick as corn snakes and about as inflexible and prone to snap in two at the connector ends as bread sticks; there are no massive junction boxes with leads so short you have to seat the cable box on a riser behind the speaker or component just to connect it to inputs or outputs; there are no active-biasing boxes that have to be plugged into separate power sources, creating a maze of crisscrossing wires that can, under the right (or would that be, wrong) circumstances, cause ground loops or screaming high-frequency noise or dead shorts. Nope, the Dreams are surprisingly thin (less than the thickness of your little finger) and easily manageable. In the "sturdy, light, and flexible" category they earn an A+.

They also earn an A+ in the looks department, although in this case their beauty is literally more than skin deep. Edwin van der Kley-Rijnveld has a long history with precious-metal cables; indeed, he was a pioneer in this regard. Absolute Dream is the culmination of his decades of research.

Literally at the core of the Dreams is a single conductor made from monocrystal silver—one of the first of its kind in an audio cable. A good deal of research has been done on how the impurities (typically iron) in precious metals create hysteresis effects (phase

and time shifts) that subtly alter the signals passing through them. It is also a fact that the inevitable spaces between the molecular crystals in the lattice structures of metals have similar hysteresis effects, which grow worse as those spaces are filled over time with iron oxides caused by corrosion.

For a while, van der Kley-Rijnveld sought to solve both of these problems by using the purest silver metal (which has fewer iron contaminants than copper) for his conductors and filling the spaces between the molecular silver crystals in his wires with gold, which doesn't oxidize. But relatively recently metallurgists developed a way to create metals that are essentially one large crystal with no internal spaces to fill. Unfortunately, the process used to create these monocrystal metals was slow and prohibitively expensive until the development of new, less costly (though nothing like cheap) manufacturing procedures made commercial use feasible. (Technically and sonically, monocrystal metals were always superior; they just cost too much to market.)

In Absolute Dream, the monocrystal silver core conductor is shielded with helically wound Kapton and Teflon dielectrics. (Kapton, of course, is the selfsame stuff that loudspeaker-manufacturers use for voice-coil formers.) The core is further shielded by two braided layers of silver-plated monocrystal copper and gold-plated monocrystal silver. Four of these coaxes are twisted into the dual braided layers of each cable—two signal-bearing coaxes and two for use in Crystal's patented "Bridge technology."

I'll be honest: While I can follow the construction of Absolute Dream this far, its "Bridge system" eludes me. It has something to do with lowering resistance to minimize signal loss, filtering ultra-high-frequency noise to prevent amplifier oscillation, and doubling up the return path of the cable to neutralize ground leakage. Like every other part of Absolute Dream, its purpose is to lower noise, enhance low-level resolution, and improve imaging, but I'd be lying if I said I understood how it does these things.

In keeping with Absolute Dream's all-in construction, the van der Kley-Rijnvelts chose to terminate their cable with extremely expensive Furutech Alpha connectors, which use OCC rhodium-plated conductors housed in a gorgeous carbon-fiber/eutectic (yeah, I had to look it up, too—it means "a material of greatest fusibility, i.e., with a melting point lower than that of any other alloy of the same

### SPECS & PRICING

<b>Price:</b> Absolute Dream speaker cable, \$28,100/2m pair; interconnect, \$13,100/1m pair; power cords, \$7200 apiece	(+312) 6 3539045 crystalcable.com Distributor Information Audio Plus Services (US Distributor) 156 Lawrence Paquette Industrial Drive Champlain, NY 12919 (800) 663- 9352 audioplusservices.com
<b>CRYSTAL CABLE-SILTECH</b> IAH WTC, Arnhem The Netherlands	

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## EQUIPMENT REVIEW - Crystal Cable Cable, Interconnect, & Power Cords

materials”), non-magnetic-copper housing. All lead connections are made via silver solder and crimping.

As I said earlier, to look at a length of Absolute Dream cable, interconnect, or power cord (all of which share these same extraordinary parts and construction), one would never guess that it is so rigorously and complexly engineered. It looks more like a strand of gold/silver jewelry than audio wire. But then that was Gabi’s intention: to hide the engineering beneath something beautiful to see, exceptionally light and flexible to handle, and sonically without peer.

Let’s talk about those sonics.

Here is what Absolute Dream can do: Coupled with the most discerning speakers and electronics (for which see my review of the Audio Research Reference 250 monoblocks, Reference Phono Two SE phono stage, and Reference 5 SE linestage in this issue), it can not only resolve those micro-details that make instruments and performers very nearly visible; it can do this same trick with things the eye *can’t* see—it can fill the space of your room, from wall to wall to wall, with the sound of the studio or hall in which the recording was made, all the while making the speakers themselves vanish (in so far as they are capable of vanishing) within this three-dimensional ambient field.

Now, lots of wire can reproduce “ambience.” And the Dreams’ exceptionalism in this regard depends entirely on what you take that word to mean. If by “ambience” you mean a *consistent* darkening or brightening of the air in your room—a “black” scrim-like curtain,

say, hung between your speakers—then the Dreams aren’t going to be for you. They don’t “color” anything, not even air. Instead, the Dreams reproduce an ambient field the way the best planars often do: not by adding a grainy texture or dark hue to the soundfield but by seemingly expanding the volume of air in your room and charging it with energy (as if a fan were blowing it in your direction), so that in a subtle (but fully audible and unmistakable way) it is still air—colorless, grainless—only no longer the *still* air of your room, but rather the *moving* air of the studio/hall in which the performance was recorded, lit by the energy of instruments and heard by the microphones. It turns the motionlessness of ambient air into motion-filled “miked” air—if that makes sense—while also altering the dimensions of your room by seemingly moving backwalls further back and sidewalls further to the sides in imitation of the volume of the recording venue.

I have no idea if I’m clearly conveying the point I want to make here. But, to put this more simply, Absolute Dream (like Synergistic Galileo) is capable of such colorless neutrality, limpid clarity, and extremely fine resolution of extremely low-level detail (such as the “sound” of air charged with musical energy as heard through microphones) that it is that veritable transparent window on the recording we all claim we’re looking for.

Obviously, Absolute Dream is very low in distortion. You hear this in the sheer abundance of detail it reveals at low levels and high ones—the whispery little vibrato that a singer like Melody Gardot adds to the tail ends



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## EQUIPMENT REVIEW - Crystal Cable Cable, Interconnect, & Power Cords



of certain notes as she runs out of one breath before taking another; the way that *pizzicatos* are passed across the stage from string section to string section during Bartok's *Music For Strings, Percussion and Celesta*, like wind rattling tree limbs; the hilariously explosive *sforzando* crash with which the piano answers that capering trumpet in the last movement of Shostakovich's marvelous First Piano Concerto (and the piano's own great caper, as it breaks into that droll Liszt-like dance right before the close); or, as I note in my ARC review in this issue (there will be other cross-references because, after all, a cable or interconnect is always working in concert with whatever it connects), the way the timbre of Lou Reed's voice on "White Heat/White Light" from *Rock and Roll Animal* is magically transformed from generic Lou Reed to that of a still-very-young man, fueled by the excitement of the moment and the enthusiasm of the crowd and the energy of that great pickup band of

his; or, for you transparency freaks, the way miking schemes (close/distant, spare/multi) and engineering (compressed/uncompressed, fiddled-with/pure) markedly change on great recordings from different labels, and the way the characteristic acoustic differences among the halls themselves—the alto note of Kingsway, for instance—are captured by that miking and engineering. It is the Dream's incredibly low noise floor that permits this astonishingly high resolution, dynamic freedom at low levels and high, and clear-as-glass transparency to sources.

But you don't just hear the Absolute Dream's low noise floor in the timbral, dynamic, and spatial details these cables retrieve from every kind of music; you hear it in the dead silences *between* cuts. The Dream's immunity to RFI, EMI, and hum—of which there is a superabundance in my 160-year-old house and RFI-rich neighborhood—is at least as good as that of my reference Synergistic Galileo (and

you may recall that Galileo's freedom from hum and noise was one of its most impressive virtues). Even with the volume control left way up after one of my—what is it Paul Seydor says?—"head-banging" sessions with Lou Reed or David Byrne, background silences remain very nearly dead-quiet with Absolute Dream in the system. (And this is with a phono source.)

If you're waiting for the other shoe to drop, you're going to be disappointed. I don't really hear a downside to Absolute Dream. Ergonomically, it is superior to Galileo; sonically, it is fully competitive, although (save for the incredible amount of detail the two retrieve) they do not sound the same.

In timbre, the Absolute Dream is a bit less "bottom-up-sounding," (to quote Raidho's Michael Borresen yet again) than Galileo. Now, the difference I'm talking about is every slight, but it is there to be heard. Maybe it is because the Galileo is a little more generous, bloomy, and deep-reaching in the bottom bass, and the Absolute Dream a little tighter and more controlled—kind of like the difference between tubes and solid-state. I could argue that the Dream is the more neutral and transparent of the pair, but that would be misleading because Galileo is not "colored" sounding and is anything but opaque. I could argue that the Galileo is denser in tone color, but that wouldn't be right, either, as the Dream is capable of swooningly gorgeous string, wind, piano, and vocal timbre (if they're on the recording). Even as a transparency-to-sources kind of listener I don't know which I'd pick.

Happily I don't have to pick. Crystal Cable

Absolute Dream cable, interconnect, and power cords (all three of which have exactly the same virtues) now joins Synergistic Research Galileo cable, interconnect, and power cords (ditto) as my references. *That's* how good I think they (all) are. **tas**

### BREAK-IN

The bane of cable reviewing (and buying) is the fact that wire—*any* wire—takes time to "break in." For a reviewer, this means that for several weeks and sometimes months you're listening to a moving target—a component that you can't be sure you've got a true fix on, because it seems to change its sound daily.

In this regard, Crystal's Absolute Dream was no exception. When I first got it I thought it was too light in balance then, a week or two later, too robust. Somewhere during the good four months or so I've been listening to it, it settled down to "just right"—to sounding like that transparent window on the recording (and the recording process) I've described in this review. My point is that, if you're fortunate enough to be able to spring for this stuff, be aware that it'll take some time to sound its absolute best. As is usually the case, it is the bass octaves that come in last. But they do come in, firming up, gaining color and control, power and extension. (This is particularly true of the Absolute Dream power cords, which, it seemed to me, took even more time to come into their own than the signal-bearing wires. Nonetheless, they now sound marvelous—the perfect match to the cables and interconnects.) **JV**

# Transparent Reference XL Digital Link Interconnect

Must-Audition

Jacob Heilbrunn



**C**lose readers of TAS—and what other kind are there?—may recall that I recently contributed a sidebar to editor Robert Harley’s comprehensive review of the new dCS Vivaldi CD/SACD playback system. In it, I compared and contrasted the performance of the dCS Scarlatti, the company’s longtime flagship, to the Vivaldi, concluding that the latter handily surpassed its predecessor. There I thought the matter rested. I was wrong. In recent months, there have been rumblings of even greater gains to be had by employing Transparent Audio’s new Reference XL line of digital cables. Transparent itself claims new technological advances in designing these cables. It says, “Reference XL Digital Link uses Transparent Advanced Expanded Foam Technology for precise impedance control and low noise signal transmission. With a solid OFHC conductor that is significantly larger than the Reference 75-ohm Digital Link conductor, Reference XL Digital Link has far more surface area with which to transfer digital signals accurately.” It doesn’t take more than a glance to see that the construction of these handsome cables is exemplary.

But how much further could the performance of the dCS Vivaldi be taken? Well, the answer to that question is not exactly what I thought it would be. After Transparent’s Brad O’Toole sent me the new cables for review, I anticipated some improvement in the bass and treble, and

perhaps a pinch more detail. Once again, I was dead wrong.

The improvement rendered by the new cables was not subtle or minor or difficult to detect. On the contrary, inserting them proved to be one of the most flabbergasting experiences I have ever had in the high end. The Reference line did not improve the sound; it took it into another realm. As good as the Vivaldi is—and it is superb—there can be doubt that ancillary equipment such as the digital cables employed on it not only can but do have a profound effect upon its reproduction of music.

This is not an easy concession for me to make because it adds substantially to the cost of the already costly Vivaldi. But friends, there is no way around it. The Transparent digital cable makes an immense improvement by banishing any lingering digital artifacts, opening up the treble, sending the bass plunging down another octave, fleshing out the midbass, and noticeably increasing the articulation and weight of instruments and voice.

Take the recording by the London Brass of Francois Couperin’s *La Triomphante*. The brass possess a vibrancy, a snap and sassiness, that simply was not present previously. Somehow micro-dynamics also benefit immensely from the Transparent cables. The attacks of trumpets are resounding—they pop into the air. They sound, to put it another way, as if they are supported by more air. The swells and crescendos of the brass choruses are vastly clearer. But at the same time, the increase in dynamic range means that pianissimo passages simultaneously sound softer and clearer. It is as though these cables increase the bandwidth of a recording. At the most basic

## EQUIPMENT REVIEW - Transparent Reference XL Digital Link Interconnect

level, the intonation of voice and instruments—the centering of an individual note—is much more precise.

Nor is this all. Soundstage separation also benefits. The soundstage seemed to expand laterally and to deepen. The sense of three-dimensionality, of an actual stage populated by musicians and instruments, is heightened. Suddenly a background chorus to Leonard Cohen on his CD *Old Ideas* isn't simply floating murkily in the background but is its own distinct entity. Or take John Eliot Gardiner's recording of Bach's "Advent" Cantatas for Arkiv. There is something profoundly moving about the ability to hear each chorus gently enter without intruding on the others. The anchoring of the instruments, the lack of any sense of drift, means that it becomes simplicity itself to track complex passages of music, something that also becomes abundantly clear on Andras Schiff's marvelous recording on ECM of the Bach Partitas.

But the greatest merit of the Reference XL is its supernatural ability to help deliver a kind of clarity on digital playback that I have never previously experienced. The slightest swish of the cymbals, a foot tapping on a piano pedal, the mildest brush of the bow on a cello—nothing is effaced by these cables. There is a limpidity and tranquility, a sense of ease to the sound, that are hard to forget once you've heard them. Whether on jazz, classical, rock, or rap, the Reference XL/Vivaldi possesses the ability to vanish from the signal chain, imposing no audible coloration.

No doubt further advancement in digital playback looms. The high end bears more

than a passing resemblance to an arms race in which various manufacturers constantly attempt to one-up each other. But for now, the combination of the dCS Vivaldi and Transparent Reference XL digital cables exceeds anything else I have heard. I could tell you that it took a lot of listening and chin-stroking to arrive at this conclusion. Fiddlesticks. It didn't take long at all to realize that these cables take digital performance to a glorious place. If you have a high-end digital rig, then auditioning Transparent Reference XL is not a good idea. It is a must. *tas*



### SPECS & PRICING

<b>Reference XL Digital Link (75 ohm):</b> \$3195 (one meter)	<b>TRANSPARENT AUDIO</b> 47 Industrial Park Road Saco, ME 04072 (207) 284-1100 transparentcable.com
<b>Reference XL Digital Link (110 ohm):</b> \$3595 (one meter) (longer lengths available at additional cost)	

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# GIBRALTAR 1999-2013 RIP ALL HAIL CASTLE ROCK!



Late one snowy night at a Michigan motel, January 1999, I designed Gibraltar speaker cable for my own system. I needed an extremely high-performance cable which would provide true Double-BiWire performance in a single attractive cable. While I needed to optimize a 2-way speaker, in which the transition between woofer and tweeter is above the midrange, the challenge I enjoyed overcoming in those early morning hours was designing a cable which would also be equally effective Full-Range or when used to BiWire a 3-way speaker (in which the bass/treble transition is below the midrange, the midrange information being carried by the treble cable rather than by the bass cable as with a 2-way).

Original Gibraltar's all important basics – superior geometry, almost ideal isolation between the magnetic fields of the bass and treble signals, Perfect-Surface metal, conductor size maximization (AQ's SST), etc. – are the fundamentals of our new Castle Rock cable, as are crucial post-1999 improvements to Gibraltar, such as even better metal and AQ's DBS (Dielectric-Bias System).

You might not notice that Castle Rock's new more nicely sculpted "breakout" (covering where the cable separates into red and black legs) is no longer metal. We have made this all-models upgrade because speaker cables and AC cables carry large magnetic fields which interact with any metal "collar" around the cable.

Smaller ingredients, such as non-metallic breakouts and the new NDS (Noise-Dissipation System) built into Castle Rock, and bigger changes, such as Castle Rock using the same sleek new Signature Series spades and bananas developed for the WEL Sig. Series cables, add up to an important difference in what you hear and enjoy.

Even though the jump up from last-generation Gibraltar to Castle Rock is no bigger than the cumulative improvements brought to Gibraltar over its long life, Castle Rock's own new systems and materials earns it a new name to honor Gibraltar's long-term evolution + Castle Rock's new ingredients.

Happy listening!

William E. Low

**audioquest**



# Sneak Preview: Synergistic Research Galileo LE Cable and Interconnect

New Contender

Jonathan Valin



In Issue 210, I started off my review of the Synergistic Research Galileo cable and interconnect with the following riddle: “What has twelve separate, current-bearing, actively shielded ‘air strings’ of copper-silver alloy, pure silver, pure gold, or (if you choose) pure platinum wire, twenty separate LEMO connectors and twenty separate LEMO receptacles, four DC-biasing/electromagnetic-power-conditioning junction boxes (called ‘Active Mini EM Cells’) into and out of which the LEMO-terminated ‘air strings’ are routed, a separate ‘quantum tunneled’ Mini Power Coupler power-supply that provides the DC current for the active shielding and EM power conditioning of all those cells and precious-metal ‘strings,’ and costs \$30,000 to \$50,000 (not counting the TESLA PowerCell 10SE power conditioner into which the Mini Power Couplers are ideally plugged)?”

The answer was *one* pair of Synergistic Research Galileo interconnects (\$30k) or *one* pair of Galileo speaker cables (\$50k).

At the time (well, still), the extremely difficult-to-make Galileos (it takes two weeks of hand-soldering and hand-assembly to fabricate a single set of interconnects or cables) were the most expensive, complex, and ingeniously designed “wires” I’d ever had in my system. They were also the best-sounding cables I’d ever had in my system—then unrivaled (since rivaled only by the Crystal Cable Absolute Dreams) in resolution, transparency to sources, and sheer sonic beauty. It didn’t take a golden

ear to hear the differences Ted Denney’s engineering marvels made with any and all components, although, as I said at the time, it might take a golden goose to afford them.

Comes now the Synergistic Research Galileo LE cables and interconnects. Still expensive, though much less so—Galileo LE interconnects are \$7500–\$9500 per one-meter pair (depending on whether they’re RCA or XLR), Galileo speaker cables are \$14,500 per six-foot pair—and still complex in construction and geometry, though much less so, the Galileo LEs are rather like condensed versions of the exploded-view Galileos.

Though Denney is still using precious-metal (high-purity, six-nines silver) “air strings” in his new designs, the strings are no longer stand-alone threads; instead the threads are twisted together with an air-dielectric insulating each string in the bundle. Though each of those air strings is still actively biased and shielded to lower noise, the EM cells which do the biasing and shielding are no longer housed in outboard boxes into which the individual air strings must be hand-plugged via LEMO connectors; instead, the cells, which still make use of precious-metal laminates and Teflon and silk dielectrics, are housed in integral carbon-fiber cylinders into which and out of which the bundled air strings are hard-wired. Bias current for the EM cells is provided by “hand-built” wall-wart power supplies, the business end of which can be plugged into a power strip or, ideally, into the companion Galileo Power Cell SE (\$10,000) and Galileo Transporter Ultra SE (\$2895).

I will have a good deal more to say about how the Galileo LEs and its associated parts work—and how each item is constructed—in my

## EQUIPMENT PREVIEW - Crystal Cable Cable, Interconnect, & Power Cords

upcoming full review in *The Absolute Sound*. But to give you a suggestion of how complex the construction (and the thinking behind the construction) of these new products remains, consider that each Galileo LE interconnect comprises three separate pairs of six-nines silver-string cables for RCA runs and five separate pairs of silver-string cables for XLR, while the Galileo LE speaker cables comprise ten separate pairs of cables (four high-current Galileo silver-matrix strings, two Tricon copper-silver strings, two pure silver air strings, one tungsten air string, and one silver active-shielding string). Though the LE design has been simplified vis-à-vis the original Galileo, it certainly hasn't been dumbed down.

What Denney has done (in addition to lowering costs by a factor of four) is greatly improve usability. As cool as they were and are—and the original Galileos are perhaps the coolest, most ingeniously designed products in high-end cable history—the Galileos weren't meant for use in systems (such as those of reviewers) where components are regularly swapped in and out. Though gorgeously made, they don't cotton to weekly or monthly plug-and-replug sessions. It's not that the connections inside the RCA or XLR jacks eventually fray and break (as is the case with so many cable and interconnects regularly jerked in and out of reviewer systems); it's the beatings that the individual air strings (and there are a lot of them) and that the hand-soldered joints inside the outboard EM cells take that can cause problems.

With their integral, hard-wired EM cells and bundled-air-string geometry, Galileo LEs do



not have these issues. They are much easier to situate when your components are mounted on shelves or stands, much easier and less space-consuming to dress on cable stands or on the floor. Indeed, from an ergonomics standpoint (and perhaps from a reliability one, though that will take more time to determine) they are a considerable improvement over the original Galileos.

That's all well and good, I hear some of you with money in your pockets saying, but how 'bout the sonics?

Well...I'm delighted to report that the Galileo LE cables and interconnects come very close to providing the same virtues as the Galileos—for one-quarter the price. There is certainly a strong sonic family resemblance between the originals and the "lites." You get the same silent backgrounds (which is to say, the same exceedingly low noise floor) and, as a result, virtually the same ultra-high resolution of

detail. You get virtually the same transient speed in the mids and treble, and downright superior bass and power-range color, power, and definition. In presentation, like most Synergistic Research products (including the original Galileos), the LEs have an almost tube-like palette—dark, sweet, and forgiving in timbre, with tubey weight, bloom, and three-dimensionality in imaging. In short, they are gorgeous-sounding regardless of what they are paired with.

I wouldn't say (at this early stage) that the LEs are quite the equals of the Crystal Cable Absolute Dreams in low-level resolution of timbre and texture or in transient speed. For instance, those Bartók pizzicatos in Crumb's *Four Nocturnes* [Mainstream] or the finger-picked strings of Keb' Mo's resonator guitar on "Am I Wrong" [MoFi] aren't quite as explosive and sharply resolved through the LEs as they are via the Crystals. (Don't get me wrong: By any other standard of comparison, transients are razor-sharp and super-fast.) On the other hand, tone color seems somewhat richer and denser via the LEs. The bass and power ranges, in particular, seem slightly more filled out (e.g., the Stax-like rhythm section on Janis Joplin's "Try Just A Little Bit Harder" [Acoustic Sounds] or the bass and drum lines on The Doors' "L.A. Woman" [Acoustic Sounds]), making for tiny but interesting sonic trade-offs.

Of course, in my experience no two cables from different manufacturers sound exactly alike (or close to it), and when you consider that the LEs are less than half the money of the Crystals, such small differences in emphasis don't amount to much.

Bottom line is that the Synergistic Galileo LEs are as highly and unqualifiedly recommendable as the original Galileos. Their inherently beautiful reproduction of tone color top to bottom, their lifelike bloom and dimensionality, and their bass and power-range weight and sock will appeal to every kind of listener, as will their greatly improved ergonomics. There is room in this world for more than one reference, so while the Galileo LEs won't replace the Crystal Cable Absolute Dreams in my system, they will alternately play alongside them. Here are cutting-edge reference-grade products at prices that are considerably lower than what reference-grade usually costs at the lunatic fringe of cables and interconnect design.

### SPECS & PRICING

<p><b>Type:</b> Actively biased and shielded cable and interconnect with 99.9999% pure silver and other precious metal conductors, separate ground conductors, and sealed air-and-Teflon dielectric shielding</p> <p><b>Prices:</b> Galileo LE speaker cable, \$14,500/6-foot pair; Galileo LE interconnect, \$7500-\$9500/1-meter</p>	<p>pair depending on termination; Galileo power cord, \$5600/5-foot cord; Galileo Power Cell, \$10,000; Galileo Transporter Ultra SE, \$2895</p> <p><b>SYNERGISTIC RESEARCH</b> 17401 Armstrong Ave., Suite 102 Irvine, CA 92614 (800) 578-6489 synergisticresearch.com</p>
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# MIT Oracle MA-X SHD Loudspeaker Cable and MA-X2 Interconnects

## Reference Quality

Robert Harley

**B**efore I describe MIT's top-of-the-line loudspeaker cables and interconnects and report on their performance in my system, I must address head-on the issue of their astronomical price. An 8' pair of MA-X SHD loudspeaker cables is \$49,999. A one-meter pair of MA-X2 interconnect is \$14,399. Can any cable be worth that kind of money?

When assessing the value of a component it's a mistake to think of that component in isolation and assign value based on your preconceptions of the component-category. If you used these criteria, no speaker cable could possibly be worth fifty grand. A more insightful approach, however, is to listen to a system that includes the cable under evaluation and then substitute a less expensive cable and ask yourself if, in the context of the entire system's overall cost and performance, you're willing to live with the performance reduction imposed by the less expensive product. Let your ears be the judge of what's worth the price, not prejudice.

There are two other factors to consider in this exercise. The first is the product's cost in relation to the overall system investment. The second is simply your financial means. To the vast majority of audiophiles, never mind the general public, a \$50k speaker cable can't possibly be worth the asking price. But to those who can afford the best of everything, why live with second best in your audio system if you don't have to?

That raises the question of just how good the MIT Oracle MA-X SHD and MA-X2 really is. For this asking price, the performance must be the absolute state of the art. Before tackling that question, I'd like to relate a story about this product's predecessor, the original Oracle MA. A few years ago the designer of a six-figure reference-grade loudspeaker arrived at my home to set up the newly arrived review samples. I was to have received the Oracle MA loudspeaker cables and interconnects before the loudspeakers showed up, but the cable delivery had been delayed. The loudspeaker designer proceeded with the setup using my

reference cables, but wasn't satisfied with the sound. He tweaked and tweaked, but the system just didn't cohere. At the end of a long day we agreed that he would return in the morning to keep perfecting the speaker placement. An hour into the next day's work with no progress, my doorbell rang; it was FedEx with the MIT Oracle cables and interconnects. It was the middle of winter and the cables were nearly frozen to the touch. Nonetheless, we put the MIT cables and interconnects straight into the system and instantly the problems the loudspeaker designer had been battling vanished. The cables literally transformed the system, and eventually allowed this statement-class loudspeaker to achieve its full potential. It was an eye-opening experience.

The cables and interconnects under review here are an evolution of those products. The developments in the new models include two technologies that go by the acronyms "SHD" (Super High Definition) and "FAT" (Fractional Articulation Technology). I confess that I don't understand how these technologies work, so I asked MIT founder Bruce Brisson to explain them in the accompanying interview.

The termination box on the loudspeaker cables is massive, measuring 12" x 7" x 5.5" and weighing about 20 pounds (a guess). One end of the box houses a massive threaded connector for attaching the cable that runs to the amplifier. The other end has short captive runs of cable terminated with spade lugs. The termination housing features a three-position switch marked SD, HD, and SHD. Two six-position knobs on one end of the termination box are marked "Articulation," one for the bass and one for the treble. Looking next

## EQUIPMENT REVIEW - MIT Oracle MA-X SHD Loudspeaker Cable and MA-X2

at the interconnect, its termination box is small in comparison (3.5" x 6"). It offers two adjustments, one to match the cable to the input impedance of the component it is driving, and the other a five-position knob marked "Articulation."

The MA-X SHD cables (MIT prefers to call them "interfaces") are designed for any loudspeakers. The MA-C interconnects that I received for review are a variation of the MA-X2 that has been specifically optimized for electronics from Constellation Audio (the impedance selector switch is disabled). My review system includes the Constellation Virgo preamplifier and Centaur monoblock power amplifiers. The rest of the system is truly of reference quality, with Magico Q7 loudspeakers, a dCS Vivaldi digital front end (reviewed last issue), and an LP playback system comprising the Basis Inspiration turntable, Air Tight PC-1 Supreme cartridge, and the Simaudio 810LP phonostage. The equipment sits on Stillpoints racks and the amplifiers rest on amplifier stands from Critical Mass Systems. AC conditioning is provided by the Shunyata Talos, Triton, and Typhon. My review samples included a one-meter pair of MA-X2 from the Vivaldi to the Virgo, and a 14' pair of MA-C (from the Virgo to the Centaurs).

The MA-X SHD loudspeaker cables and MA-X2 interconnects are an evolutionary step up from their predecessors, which were my references for many years. The new SHD versions share certain characteristics that I'm very familiar with. One thing that all MIT cables do, particularly the upper-end models, is present the music's spatial qualities with

tremendous depth, separation among images, and very fine resolution of spatial cues. You hear this clearly when switching from any other cable/interconnect system to the MA-X SHD; the soundstage with the MIT is suddenly larger, deeper, more finely woven, and has a greater sense of the vivid "air" in which the images exist. Moreover, the MIT paints a more tangible picture of the recording venue's size, shape, and acoustic characteristics by virtue of its resolution of micro-details. I also find that this interface system presents a tremendous sense of bloom around image outlines, as well as "action," the sense of hearing the expanding envelope of sound as an instrument projects its energy into the room. All these qualities contribute to the system's realism and life.

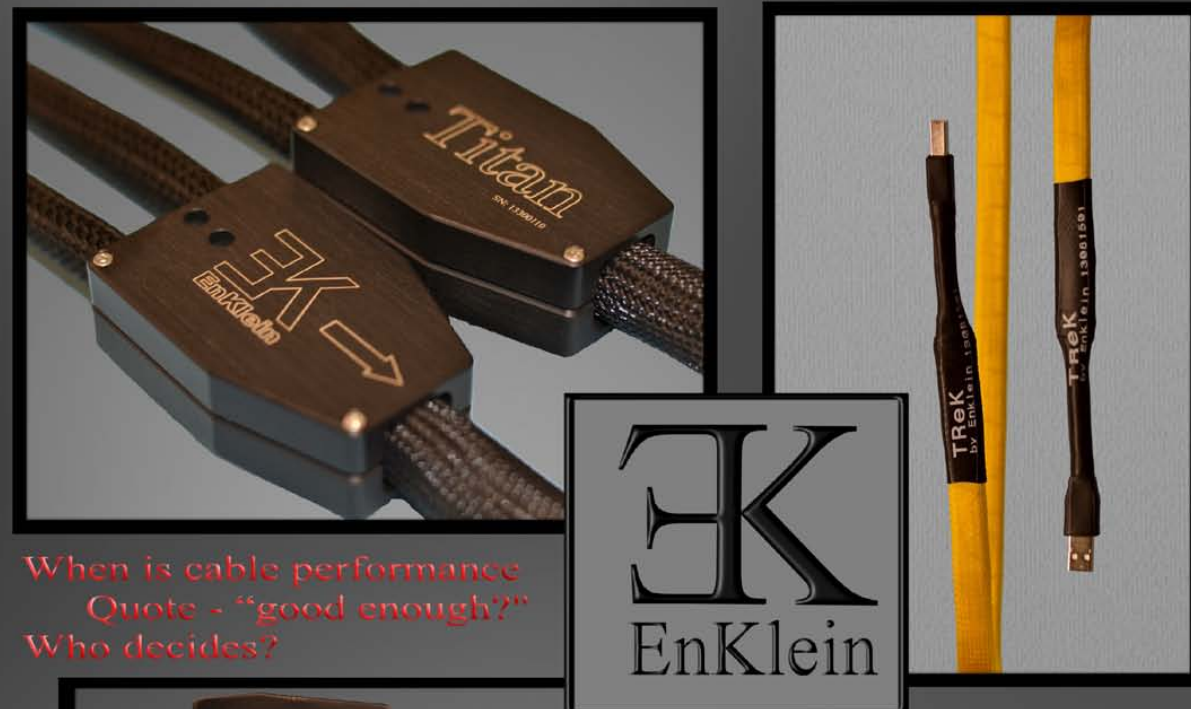
MIT cables, and particularly those reviewed here, are also notable for their fully fleshed-out tonal balance. From the upper bass through the lower midrange, in particular, these cables have a richness and harmonic density that sets the foundation for the rest of the system's sound. They have a warmth and saturation that reveal the power of left-hand piano lines, the body,

### SPECS & PRICING

<b>ORACLE MA-X SHD LOUDSPEAKER CABLE</b>	<b>MUSIC INTERFACE TECHNOLOGIES</b>
Price: \$49,999 (8' pair)	4130 Citrus Ave., Suite 9 Rocklin, CA 95677 (916) 625-0129
<b>ORACLE MA-X2 INTERCONNECTS</b>	
Price: \$14,399	

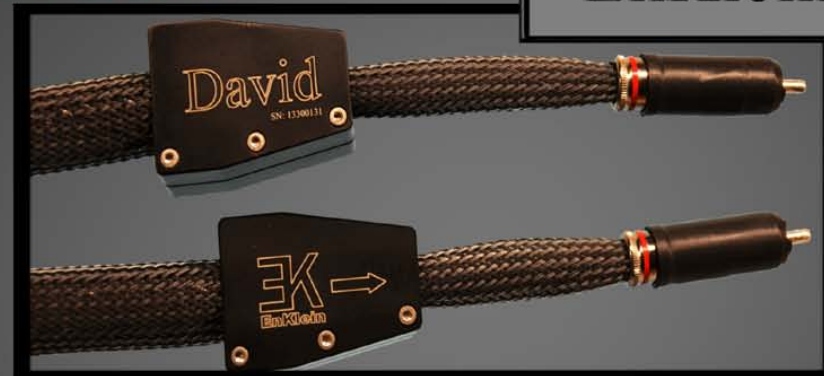
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The David - Our ultimate expression of analog playback.  
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Sacrificial Anodes for each conductor.

## EQUIPMENT REVIEW - MIT Oracle MA-X SHD Loudspeaker Cable and MA-X2

weight, and size of doublebass and cello, and the “purring” quality of a Fender Precision bass. This characteristic, which affects an orchestra’s “power range,” better conveys the physicality of orchestral fortes. These MIT cables also have extraordinary depth, weight, and impact in the bottom octave.

It would be a mistake to read what I just wrote and infer that these cables have a warmish coloration that adds a little plumminess to the bass, or a little extra bottom-end bloom, or a darkish cast to timbres. Rather, this tonal richness and warmth aren’t instances of artificial bloating or ripeness, but rather of the more natural rendering of instruments as we hear them in life. So many cables tend to sound thin in the power region, with “skeletal” timbres and threadbare tone colors. These MIT cables are unique in my experience in their ability to present the full harmonic richness of instrumental timbres without a trace of coloration or false warmth.

Higher up in frequency, the Oracle maintains this saturation of tone color and density of information. They are not bright sounding; yet they present a rich and vivid rendering of upper-midrange and treble timbres. It’s a wonderful combination—a highly detailed and resolved presentation without the treble etch that reduces listener involvement and induces fatigue. These cables are completely lacking in edge, grain, or treble forwardness.

The adjustments are interesting, particularly the “SD, HD, and SHD” knob on the loudspeaker cables. In the SD position, the loudspeaker cable is excellent, exhibiting the characteristics I’ve described. Turning the knob to HD increases

the clarity, renders timbres with more color, makes the soundstage more transparent, and better resolves individual musical lines within complex passages. Turn the knob again to SHD and these qualities are magnified yet again. The difference between SD and SHD is startling; the SD by comparison sounds a little opaque, lower in resolution, less lifelike in timbre, a bit congealed, and not as expansive. Switching from SD to SHD (bypassing for the moment the middle HD position), I heard an improvement that was certainly as significant as changing from an excellent power amplifier to a reference-quality model. Keep in mind the phrase “by comparison”; the cables in the SD position are superb but the SHD position puts them over the top. The sense of seeing through the soundstage to instruments at the back of the hall and hearing them as separate objects rather than as part of the overall sonic tapestry is alone worth the price of admission. The sound is so much more vivid and immediate in the SHD position. The wooden percussion instrument in the piece “Postcard” from *Playing With Fire* [Reference Recordings] is audible toward the back of the soundstage behind the orchestra, and somewhat indistinct in the SD position. Switch to SHD and the instrument is suddenly separate from the rest of the orchestra, the pitches are more apparent as are the transient attacks, and the instrument sounds more like wood being struck rather than simply an undifferentiated percussive sound. The cable’s two other adjustments, marked Low Frequency Articulation and High-Frequency Articulation had a similar, though less dramatic effect.

Given the obvious superiority of the SHD

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## EQUIPMENT REVIEW - MIT Oracle MA-X SHD Loudspeaker Cable and MA-X2

setting, why would MIT include the SD and HD settings? One explanation is that some listeners might value a slightly softer and more forgiving presentation. Another is that MIT wanted to show definitively that SHD is real and profound by creating a product that is a vehicle for instant comparison. Even though my system is extraordinarily resolving, I can't imagine a listener preferring the SD or HD setting to SHD. Whatever the case, you have the ability to listen to the settings and decide for yourself.

The MIT MA-X SHD loudspeaker cable and MA-C interconnects are simply without peer, in my experience. They are singular in their spatial resolution, tonal density, and ability to resolve upper-midrange and treble information with sounding bright or forward. I don't understand the technical explanation of SHD and Fractional Articulation Technology, but I can say that these cables and interconnects are world-class references.

Before dismissing these products out of hand because of their prices, you should listen to them in a reference-quality system and compare them with other cables. Assuming you can afford them, ask yourself if you're willing to live without the unique musical virtues these cables bring to the table. I think you'll find that the answer to that question is a resounding "no." tas

### MIT FOUNDER BRUCE BRISSON TALKS WITH ROBERT HARLEY

**RH:** Give us an overview of the Oracle Technology.

**BB:** The Oracle technology started with me designing an optimizing network for each of the octaves. We started at A440, because that's the frequency most musical information surrounds—and we worked on a network for each subsequent octave, up and down, from there. That was the original Oracle technology. We built on that by coming out with what we call HD, for high definition. What that meant was that we extended the Oracle technology to ten octaves and optimized for seven harmonics. The harmonics extend linearly from those octaves. Linearly means any harmonic has to be a whole number—no fractions. If there is a fraction involved, and it deviates much, it becomes a spurious overtone. Instruments and voices produce overtones, but we don't want to produce them in an audio signal-carrying conductor or in any amplifier. That covers the first two evolutions of the Oracle.

From there we created Fractional Articulation Technology, which is where our research led us next; to make optimizing networks for the musical information between the octaves. Not extending forward from the octave by something greater than one, but the inter-octave spectra, which we call notes. The distance between one note and another note can be expressed in "cents"—100 cents is a half step, 200 cents is a full step. With Fractional Articulation Technology we can optimize the spectra between the octaves.

**How specifically does the cable design do this?**

By forming what we call poles of articulation. This is simply how much energy a cable or a network stores and releases. Associated with that release of energy is a rise time and a fall time, which is accompanied by a settling time. We install networks in the cables which are formed from inductors and capacitors and resistors. We begin our optimization at A440, and then move out. So first we do the octaves then we do the six harmonics of the fundamental which is your 7th harmonic. Then we go between the octaves and we add networks to form the poles of articulation. But they don't have the magnitude that an octave would—they don't store as much energy. We make sure that the rise time and fall times are within certain parameters that we have learned, empirically, doing this over 30 years, that the audiophile's ear responds to.

**What do the adjustments on the network boxes do?**

On the speaker cables, the first switch allows you to play in either standard definition, high definition, or super-high definition. In the super-high definition we do one more thing, which is reducing analog jitter within the cable down to 2.8 microseconds. After reading some scientific information on jitter that suggested we could hear jitter between our right ear and our left ear down to 2.8 microseconds I became fascinated. I've got to find out why, right? These things control me; I don't control them. So I go on the hunt using a

novel device developed by Hewlett-Packard called an interval analyzer. I began to look at different cables and listen. This is what you've got to do in this business—measure, listen, measure, listen, measure, listen, then send it out for listening to different beta sites. I went to work on the project—it was about a two-and-a-half-year project—and what I found was exactly what I thought. Jitter affected spatial qualities. But more than that, and I was bowled over by this, was that it affected timbre to such a degree in the lower frequencies.

We found that reducing jitter made things sound much more natural and dense. I think the term "dense" is something that your readers will identify with. This all extends from the fact that audiophiles can't control the rhythm, the beat, the general pace of the music, but what they do tend to try to control is timbre and spatial qualities in their systems.

With the SHD line we bring that all together and it manifests itself as accurate timbre and also an accurate soundstage. Within the soundstage you have large images. Within the large images you have smaller micro-images. You have micro-level details like backwashes off one wall, the right wall, not the left wall. When you control jitter, all of those things, particularly that backwash off just one wall, become very, very apparent.

## EQUIPMENT REVIEWS

# Power Conditioners & Cords



*Click here to turn the page.*

# Silver Circle Audio Tchaik 6 Power Transformer

## Deep Tone

Scot Hull



Last fall, Silver Circle Audio introduced a flagship power transformer, the Tchaik 6, named after Tchaikovsky's 6th Symphony, the *Pathétique*. That the symphony is arguably Tchaikovsky's greatest work gives an indication of where Silver Circle's David Stanard feels his new product falls in his current product line. The next clue might be the price tag:

**\$9500. This is extraordinarily high and puts the Tchaik 6 squarely in competition with the two-box Shunyata Hydra/Typhon combination (which retails for \$10,000).**

Beware—the T6 is a tank, weighing in at 125 pounds! I threw my back out getting it out of the box. I threw my back out, again, trying to get it back in the box. I threw my back out just looking at it. Clearly, I'm a wimp. But wow, that

thing is massive.

At heart, the T6 is a honking-big (and completely silent) toroidal transformer housed inside a 12-gauge powder-coated steel chassis. There's also a soft-start circuit (good, because in-rush for that first half-cycle is huge), an input filter between the IEC and the transformer, and five fancy new "Wave Stabilizer" modules from High Fidelity Cables' Rick Schultz. How these modules actually work is a proprietary secret, but in essence they reduce noise on the current being delivered by the system. There are two stabilizers on the input side (positive and negative), two on the output side, and one on the ground. Super-dense Terrastone footers from Eden Sound provide the mechanical grounding/isolation. Four pair of Furutech GT-XD receptacles provides eight state-of-the-art plugs for all your gear, and a brand-new Vesuvius II power cord with updated/upgraded Furutech connectors rounds out the package. That last is quite a score—no power cord comes with the competing two-box unit from Shunyata, and its "recommended for the top-of-the-line conditioner" power cords start at \$3k.

What I heard via the Tchaik 6 was consistent, and it didn't matter what I was playing. Nor did it matter what I was "listening for." What I heard was "deep tone."

I'll argue that some audio equipment just lets you "see" a bit further into a stereo image—almost exactly like a photographer can by using a higher f-stop. That said, I also need to say that the analogy with the f-stop only goes so far. The difference is more like that between f5.6 and f22 than between f1.4 and f22; instead of a blurred-out background

suddenly resolving into perfect crystalline clarity, it is more like seeing background faces resolve into friends. Said another way, the soundstage was there, already set and beautifully dimensional. But as more of the image fell into focus, I heard a bit more of the character of each of the elements in it. They seemed more natural, more fully fleshed out, more organic, more ... in-focus. Every system I tried it with, every combo of gear I hooked into it, every time—the Tchaik just added this luscious sense of vividness. Of "deep tone."

Look—I can't justify this kind of expense for you. It's an incredible outlay; I readily acknowledge that. But if you have a system that can support a \$9500 upgrade, a Silver Circle Tchaik 6 shouldn't be on the list—it *is* the list. After a month with my review sample, it was obvious that I wasn't going to send it anywhere. Ever. That was a relief, actually, and I'm pretty sure I heard my back whimper a little prayer of thanksgiving when I signed the check. **tas**

## SPECS & PRICING

Type: AC power conditioner with five Wave Stabilizer modules	footers Price: \$9500
Supplied accessories: Vesuvius II power cord with Furutech IEC connector and power connector, and Eden Sound TerraStones	<b>SILVER CIRCLE AUDIO</b> 3507 Shadow Bluff Court Houston, TX 77082 (281) 870-8272 silvercircleaudio.com

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# Audience adeptResponse aR6-TSS AC Power Conditioner

"You Need A Power Conditioner"

Garrett Hongo

**I**n Oregon where I live, audiophiles I know don't tend to use any power conditioning, believing, rightly or wrongly, that the power we get locally and from the Bonneville grid is superior to the *dirty* power we read about folks having in big metro areas. I have mainly done without line conditioning, although I have noticed that grunge and grain creeps into the system periodically during summers, when everyone's running A/C. When that happens, I simply switch from my usual deHavilland KE50A tube monoblocks to a pair of Herron solid-state M1 monos

**and the problem goes away. In the fall, I switch back to tube amplification. One summer, though, I did try a line conditioner, a power regenerator with a transformer, but I didn't like it as it obviously compromised dynamics and added its own whitish haze to the treble. I sold it. And, up until a few months ago, I'd simply used power distribution without filtering, either from Isoclean, Siltech, or Weizhi, and had been very pleased with my sound.**

But a new pair of loudspeakers took up residence in my system recently—the Von Schweikert VR-44 Aktive (\$25,000, reviewed

in Issue 230). These speakers are much more resolving than my previous reference, the Von Schweikert VR-5 HSE, and challenged many things about my system and approach. I found the new speakers so highly resolving, in fact, that I was able to hear profound changes any time I swapped electronics or sources. Furthermore, they also revealed there was a lot of noise in the power line that manifested itself as high-frequency grit and grain in the audio signal, particularly compromising purity in the upper mids and treble and ruining my enjoyment of violins and choral music. At first, I worried the VR-44 speakers were the problem. Then I noticed that the issues disappeared late at night, when the power tends to be cleaner and more constant. It was then I recalled an old invitation from John McDonald, President of Audience AV. We were at RMAF a few years ago, listening to great sound coming from his demo room. I was praising his audio cables when John said, in that beautifully slight and sonorous Texas drawl of his, "We've got to get you to try our adeptResponse one of these days."

So I called McDonald and, after a brief conversation, we quickly agreed I should try the new adeptResponse6-TSS (\$6000) along with the new Audience powerChord Au24 (a \$1550 upgrade at 6'). He'd also send along the 6' stock Audience powerChord e (price included) as a reference. As this was late in the fall, there was a high demand for his units, and it took a few weeks for all to arrive, but once they did I immediately put them into the system and the results were remarkable. All the problems with line grunge I was having simply fell away and I could hear speakers and electronics easily singing together without the scrim of noise riding along on the current.

In fact, the aR6-TSS so clarified my sound, I could discern things I hadn't before regarding matching electronic equipment for optimum performance, source changes, and the distinct sonic differences that can be made switching through the various upsampling rates available on my Cary 303/300 CD player. The aR6-TSS made a *serious* improvement in my listening.

## Background

Audience AV has been making a version of the adeptResponse conditioner since the summer of 2005, when the first adeptResponse12 was released. Since then, there have been steady improvements in passive parts that Audience claims have lowered the noise floor, improved soundstaging, and resulted in wider-bandwidth filtration. In 2008, Audience introduced the aR-T, which substituted Auri-T Teflon caps for the Auricaps used in the original units. In 2010, the aR-TS was introduced, featuring another upgrade in capacitors (to the Auri-TO) and the addition of a ground plane inserted into the unit. Finally, released just this past year in 2012, the aR-TSS (the unit under review) features an optional S-filter that Audience claims lowers noise even further.

In a recent phone interview, I asked Audience engineer Roger Sheker what his goals were in designing the adeptResponse and what, in particular, was special about the aR6-TSS. He said the basic principles were threefold: (1) to have a low-impedance power path of less than 40 milli-ohms to allow current to flow without resistance (the problem with most power conditioners on the market); (2) to use high-quality parts in capacitors, wire, method of assembly, buss bars, and surge protection; and (3) *not* to use an IEC, which he considers a

## EQUIPMENT REVIEW - Audience adeptResponse aR6-TSS AC Power Conditioner

poor connection that doesn't ensure complete contact. He said all three contribute to the goal of a low impedance path.

Sheker further explained that they'd observed that the design of most line conditioners was actually quite good, but that there were big differences in execution, coming down to choices made in passive parts and power connections. For instance, from the start, after trying dozens of alternatives, Audience chose the well-regarded Hubbel receptacles for the best combination of sound and clamping force. Audience also eschews using the metal oxide varistor (MOV) employed by many other line conditioners to protect against high-voltage transients.

"It absorbs surges all right," McDonald chimed in (this was a three-way phone hookup). "But it's also always in the pathway, storing and releasing energy out of phase, creating distortion, and wearing out over time. Ours doesn't wear out and is not in the pathway *until* there is a surge."

Sheker also pointed out that they rejected the thermal circuit breaker used by so many others because it heats up when there's a transient and creates resistance, which ruins dynamics. Instead, Audience chose a magneto-hydraulic breaker at more than twenty times the wholesale cost as it *doesn't* get hot and compromise dynamics.

"It's the same reason we chose passive and not active conditioning," Sheker continued. "An active has to use a transformer, which has high DC resistance, limiting dynamics. There isn't an active conditioner that doesn't limit dynamics."

Through the years, Audience has not only changed the kind of capacitors it uses in the adeptResponse, but also the capacitor leads themselves from standard copper to the current monocrystal. They've changed the way the buss bar is built—from at first being drilled and pieced together to soldering those parts for more direct contact. A big change was adding the ground plane with the aR-T—a big copper plate on the bottom of the unit that is weld-connected in a star-ground configuration. For the TSS, the optional S-filter uses a passive Balun transformer that goes between the input connector and the circuit breaker, lowering noise from the upper audible range to well beyond the audible bandwidth, Sheker said, but resulting in an improved soundstage.

*But what about that IEC-business? "It's a sloppy connection,"* McDonald said. "It doesn't make good contact and was developed for computers, not audio. We chose the Neutrik PowerCon connector that twists and locks in, doesn't vibrate, and can never fall out of the socket, guaranteeing a secure connection and, again, a low impedance path."

Owners of previous adeptResponse models can upgrade their older units. Audience charges \$1000 to upgrade from the TS to the TSS. Upgrading from an aR-T to the new TSS is more involved, essentially constituting a rebuild of the unit, adding the ground plane, changing the buss bar from parted pieces to soldered, adding the S-filter, and changing all the capacitors to the TO version that are made with Ohno (monocrystal) leads. It costs \$2800 for the 6-outlet version.

Both cables are quite flexible and easier

to work with than most power cords, largely because they are made with stranded copper wire.

### Description and Installation

The six-outlet aR6-TSS sits at midpoint in the Audience line of power conditioners, between the two-outlet aR2-TSS (\$5200) and the twelve-outlet aR12-TSS (\$9995). My review unit came in silvery brushed aluminum (black is also available) with a faceplate just slightly bigger than the chassis, featuring understated lettering that said "adeptResponse/High Resolution Power" with a dot of an LED within an oval logo.

Installation and assembly were literally a snap. I plugged in all my power cords, including the one for my Cary CD player, as recommended by the manual—plugs for high-current units closest to the power inlet and plugs for front-end gear farther away. As each of the six outlets is individually filtered and double-filtered from every other outlet, the aR6-TSS is claimed to provide maximum component-to-component isolation. I have to admit, though, that plugging my CD player into the same line (via the aR6-TSS) went against my habit of keeping digital sources on a completely separate line from my other electronics (more about this later).

## SPECS & PRICING

**Current/voltage:** 15A or 20A/120V, 220V, 230V, 240V

**Power outlets:** Six Hubbell high-conductivity power receptacles

**Dimensions:** 10.5" x 4.75" x 8.25"

**Weight:** 11.1 lbs.

**Price:** \$6000 (6' powerChord e included); PowerChord Au24, \$1500/6' (upcharge)

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Raven Two turntable, TW-Acoustic Raven 10.5 tonearm with Zyx Airy 3 cartridge (0.24mV), Ortofon RS-309D tonearm with Ortofon 90th Anniversary SPU (0.3mV), Ortofon Cadenza Mono (0.45mV), and Ortofon Mono CG 25 DI MKII (1.5mV)

Digital sources: Cary 303/300 CD player, Apple iMac with Eximus DPI USB DAC

Preamplifiers: deHavilland Mercury 3; Herron VTPH-2 phono stage; Music First step up

Power amplifiers: deHavilland KE50A monoblocks

Speakers: Von Schweikert Audio VR-44 Aktive

Speaker cables: Siltech 330L, 330L jumpers; Audience Au24e with Au24 jumpers

RCA Interconnects: Siltech 330i, Audience Au24e, Auditorium 23

USB cable: Wireworld Silver Starlight

Power cords: Siltech Ruby Hill II, Siltech SPX-800, Cardas Golden Reference, Harmonix XDC Studio Master, Silent Source Signature

Power conditioner: Siltech Octopus Signature 8 with 20A Siltech Ruby Hill II power cord

Accessories: Box Furniture S5S five-shelf rack in sapele, HRS damping plates, edenSound FatBoy dampers, Winds VTF gauge

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## EQUIPMENT REVIEW - Audience adeptResponse aR6-TSS AC Power Conditioner

As for the pecking order of plugging the cords for amps closest to the power inlet, McDonald explained this was because the large capacitors that stored energy were situated closest to the Neutrik connector and that amps, needing that stored power at peaks, worked best connected as close as possible to them. Finally, I plugged the Au24 powerChord into the wall outlet and, once every component was plugged into the aR6-TSS and contacts seated and checked, I flipped the circuit-breaker switch, powering the unit on, whereupon the LED's blue light appeared. I was ready to go.

### Listening

On recommendation from John McDonald, I kept the aR6-TSS powered on constantly and spent about a week burning it in and not taking any notes but just playing through a variety of CDs of all genres. On first impression, there was a noticeable big gain in clarity and organicism, perhaps due to the monocrystal wire used throughout the unit, orchestral violins in particular sounding more natural. But, on subsequent days, I heard that dreaded treble grittiness in the violins of another orchestral CD, or a whitish sound in the treble, or occasional episodes of dynamic compression. The unit did indeed need burning in. After about sixty hours in use, I could tell it was settling down, noticing a marked reduction in the day-to-day sonic variation in the system. In fact, what had vexed me no end before—that intermittent grit and grunge in my system sound popping up on every odd day—no longer seemed to be a problem. That small yet dire tinge of stress I'd been feeling because of the

line noise was completely gone. To me, this was a very big deal, as, after about a week of the aR6-TSS being in the system, I never had any more of those periodic days of awful sound coming from my system. It just never happened again. The aR6-TSS had banished the nasties!

Sometime after everything had settled down, I put on a CD of Mozart's Piano Concerto No. 20 in D minor played by Ivan Moravec with the Academy of St. Martin in-the-Fields, directed by Neville Marriner [hänssler], and what I heard was very promising. The most immediate difference was string sound, which sounded much smoother. There was more detail, more sweetness, more mellowness. The aR6-TSS made a very musical difference. Orchestral violins were open and resolved and, on piano, the nuances of Ivan Moravec's pedaling were much more noticeable. I concluded the aR6-TSS had lowered the noise floor. Individual piano notes sounded a touch more incisive on attack, bloomed more palpably in sustain, and seemed to float in the air, lingering longer in decay. The soundstage was noticeably bigger and deeper and the overall presentation was sweeter, prettier! Bass was deeper and more articulate, tighter, and more focused. There were deeper orchestral space and spatial cues in the string notes too. But, though I was starting to feel quite taken with the aR6-TSS, I was not yet completely convinced. The presentation definitely sounded more organic and less electronic, but I also worried the Audience conditioner took some juice away, extracting some measure of verve and jump from the overall presentation.

Putting aside my focus on classical strings for the moment, I started listening to some jazz



When is cable performance  
Quote - "good enough?"  
Who decides?

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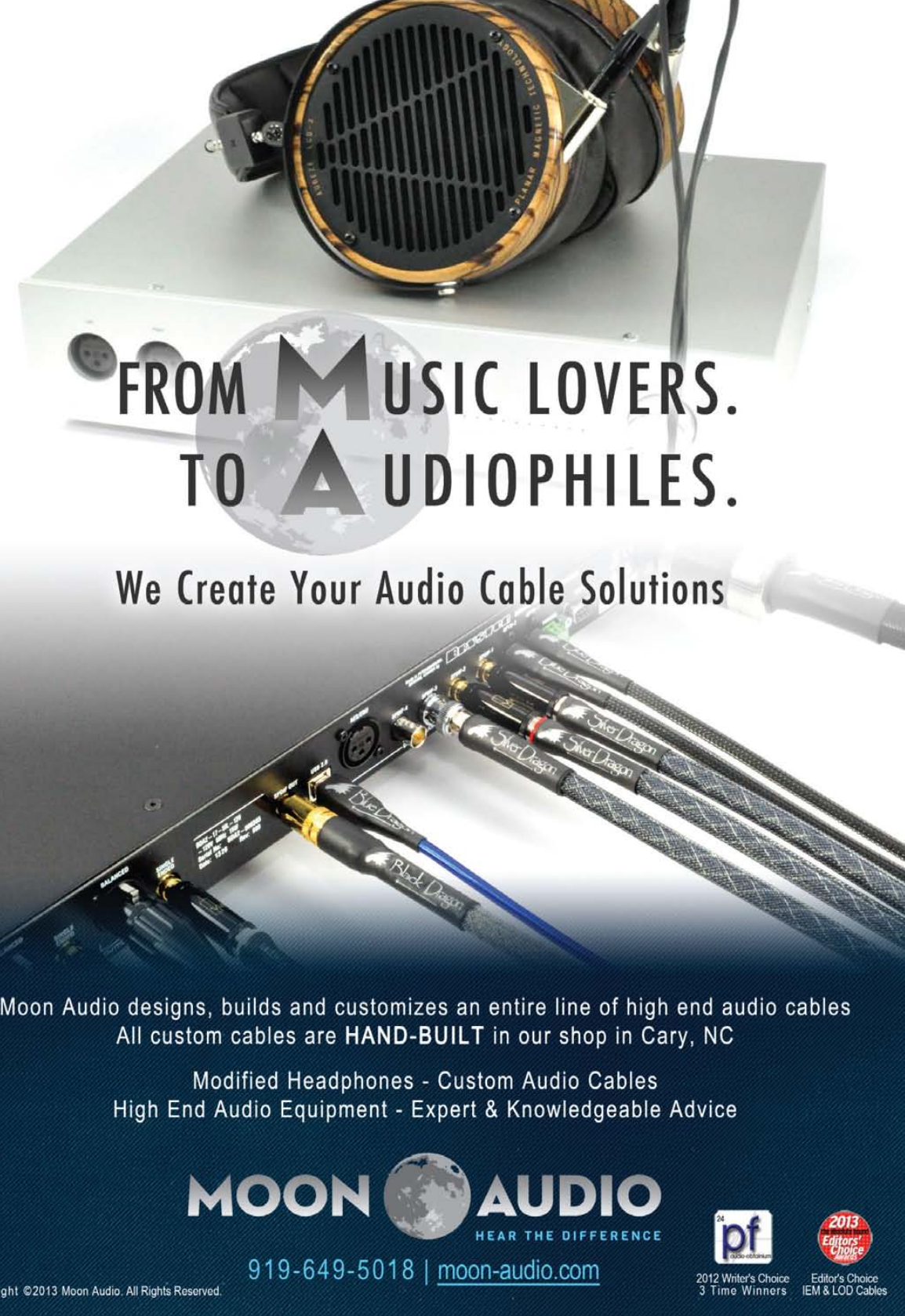
## EQUIPMENT REVIEW - Audience adeptResponse aR6-TSS AC Power Conditioner

CDs too, and the aR6-TSS did spectacularly good things. On James Carter's *Chasin' the Gypsy* [Atlantic], his homage to French guitarist Django Reinhardt, although I'd heard it before, that bass drum strike at the beginning of the first track was somewhat startling. The drum note was full of skin and harmonics, tactile and supremely present, then it reverberated and started dying away, its passing punctuated by a snare roll and the pattering of castanets. When Carter's dark and blatty bass sax took up the recognizable theme of Reinhardt's "Nuages," all was as sinuous and sublime as an anaconda flowing over the branches and trunk of a rainforest tree. Across the soundstage, an accordion wheezed melodically, suspended bells were deftly struck, an acoustic guitar was being rapidly plucked, each string distinct in attack and decay, and a beaded gourd rattled softly as a rainstick behind it all. The standup bass was tight, played deftly, notes distinct but flowing in an infectious tango rhythm. A purer silence in the background made the birth and departure of each sonic event seem more properly timed and clearly presented. There was a fabulous *depth* to the stage, a palpable sonic imaging of each instrument and the feeling of real space around them, particularly around Carter's bass sax as it dug into its lowest registers. I'll risk saying it was evident that what I was hearing was transparency to the source.

Clarity of imaging, a large soundstage of real depth, and the rhythmic presentation of a complex sonic tapestry of multiple acoustic instruments were all also evident on vinyl playback. On the Grateful Dead's "Ripple" from the classic *American Beauty* LP [Warner

Brothers], I heard, without any sharp transients marring the very natural presentation, a gorgeously articulate string-band-style interplay among a mandolin playing lead, multiple guitars in accompaniment, an electric bass, and drums. The soundstage was huge and very tall, the instrumental images stable within it. Though I thought the vocal imaging oversized, the clean, airy harmonies among those voices told me that the timing was perfect.

Throughout my listening, I did wonder about the conditioner's effect on dynamics. It was clear the system made huge gains in midrange smoothness, treble and bass extension and clarity, soundstaging, timing, and noise. But, from the start, I thought I'd heard a slight loss of punch and musical weight at times, particularly on orchestral crescendi. To test this, I pulled the CD player's power cord (a Siltech SPX-800) out of the aR6-TSS and plugged it directly into the wall outlet of a dedicated line separate from where the conditioner got its juice. This was my longstanding practice anyway, keeping digital sources on a different line from other electronics. Going back to the same Mozart Piano Concerto No. 20 in D minor performed by Moravec with the Academy of St. Martin-in-the-Fields, I now heard starker dynamic contrasts, more punch in the timpani strikes and more emphatic swells in orchestral tuttis. Piano notes were still sweet and clear, but *forte* keystrokes and bass notes gained impact and suddenness. On the downside, violins sounded glassy in accompaniment and the fine inner details of performance, particularly the coordinated swells of vibrato, were obscured. And the entirety of the music seemed stripped of its natural overtones,



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## EQUIPMENT REVIEW - Audience adeptResponse aR6-TSS AC Power Conditioner

its harmonic richness, dynamic shifts sounding more Spartan than Apollonian.

The conditioner's effects on my analog chain were also somewhat ambiguous, especially on rock and R&B. With my Herron phonostage's power cord, a Silent Source Signature, plugged into the aR6-TSS, I played *Otis Redding In Person at the Whiskey a Go-Go* [Sundazed]. The horn section on "I Can't Turn You Loose" had a punchy thunk in repeated choruses of the same riff, punctuating and pushing the driving beat, accentuating Redding's soulful and rhythmic bluesy hollers. But on "Mr. Pitiful," I felt that Redding's hoarse baritone voice sounded more gut-thunking with the phonostage's power cord plugged directly into the wall. And, absent the Audience conditioner's effects, horns were a touch more forward, the midrange generally had more presence, and the music sounded fuller and energized the room more. Though very close with it, I thought PRaT seemed a touch more immediate without the aR6-TSS in line.

On balance, however, I much preferred the sound of my audio system with the Audience aR6-TSS in it than without. For me, the real test of a system is how it plays large choral ensembles with full orchestral accompaniment. In this kind of music, there are big demands on power amps and the timing of all components as they try to work together, stressing their resolving capabilities and overall sense of spaciousness, their abilities to create a bloom of sound while maintaining musical coherence. I've made myself very unpopular at audio shows traipsing around with my demo CDs of *Mozart's Mass in C* and *Requiem*. These choral warhorses have crushed many a megabucks

system, solid-state or tube.

My own home system is put together expressly to meet the challenges I cite above—the deHavilland KE50A tube monoblocks, though only rated at 45W of output, nonetheless have a secondary stage of output (its design incorporates an interstage transformer in addition to the power and output transformers) that sustains power through increasingly demanding passages such as required with choral/orchestral music with operatic soloists. On the CD of the Bach Society of the Netherlands performance of Mozart's *Requiem* [Channel Classics], what you can hear, when the system is optimized, is the rendering of multiple thematic lines—men's voices, women's, strings, woodwinds, brass, and horns—with deftness and aplomb, giving each its particular definition and timbral character, the voices remaining open and clear throughout every crescendo. For example, there was a moment during *Lacrimosa*, the eighth movement, when I heard a stunning billowing of voices in the shape of one of Joseph Stella's Moebius strip sculptures. The face of the choral wave of sound moved in a kind of elliptical, figure-eight pattern across the front of the soundstage, surging from the sopranos down through the altos and then sweeping up through the basses to the tenors, then spuming back again—all in an instant. It was imaging at its astonishing best to me—not a mere holographic presentation of sound coming from a stable image of an instrument in space, but the dynamic movement of a splash of theme moving in the span of seconds across the face of the entire choir as depicted in the soundstage. It's the way music actually makes its swift

passage through an orchestra or choir—a theme sometimes taken up in a kind of semaphoric sequence as the singers or musicians sound their musical contributions. That my system, with the Audience aR6-TSS in it, could render this magical thing demonstrated that its contributions benefitting resolution and timing were more than considerable.

I also tried the aR6-TSS with the stock powerChord e instead of the Au24 powerChord and, in general, the system lost a smidge of intensity. On "Nuages" from James Carter's *Chasin' the Gypsy*, things became a touch muted by comparison, the saturation of tonal colors in the instruments a shade less intense and imaging within the soundstage slightly more diffuse. It wasn't a *big* difference—the overall character of the presentation was very much the same, just not quite as dramatic or vivid. Both cables are quite flexible and easier to work with than most power cords, though the Au24, being of stranded copper, is much more so. If it's within your budget, I highly recommend you spring for the upgrade to the Au24 powerChord. Or, you might start with the stock "e" cord and upgrade to the Au24 later. It's worth it.

### Conclusion

In the end, I found that I simply could not do without the salutary effects of the aR6-TSS and Au24 powerChord on most of my music, on the entirety of my system. The benefits far outweighed any slight downside. With all my components plugged into the Audience conditioner, violins were unfailingly silkier, voices and instruments emerged from a blacker sonic background with more nuance and

dimension to them, soundstaging was grander, and imaging and spatial cues startling. The aR6-TSS contributed a remarkable refinement and brought real precision to my system.

If you're in the market for line conditioning, I think you ought to take a serious look at this one. There can be differences in performance depending on the system and the nature of the power in your own region, but, for me, it was a no-brainer. Like TAS editor Robert Harley once said to me, "You need a power conditioner." I have one now. It's the Audience aR6-TSS. tas

## ROBERT HARLEY ON THE AR6-TSS

I've been using the aR6-TSS in my system and largely agree with Garrett's findings. The unit significantly lowers the noise floor, which in turn leads to increased resolution of very fine detail. This resolution increase is heard as more vivid timbres and density of tone color. Fine transient information is also better portrayed; listen to brushes on snare drum, for example. With the aR6-TSS there's just a greater impression of the mechanism by which the sound is made. The increased smoothness and reduction in glare that Garrett noted is, in my view, alone worth the price of admission. I don't hear any reduction in dynamics with the aR6-TSS. In fact, the lower noise floor fosters the impression of greater dynamic range; the silences are quieter and the background blacker, making transients seem as if they are delivered more quickly and with greater impact.

# Shunyata Venom PS8 Power Distributor, Venom Defender, and Venom HC Power Cords

How Dedicated Are You?

Neil Gader



**M**y history with AC power-distribution and line-conditioning products is a fairly spotty one. Sonically, they give and they take away, and I generally put them aside after a few weeks. Nowadays I just grab a power cord and head for the nearest available outlet, avoiding power-surge-protection strips for critical components. I've come to view such "convenience" strips as a hangover from the days of tower computers, forty-meg hard drives, and 14" monochrome displays, when the fear of a brownout sent shivers down the spine. My listening room isn't blessed with a dedicated circuit, either. I've considered remedying this but just haven't gotten around to hiring an electrical contractor. The truth is that I'm a little skeptical of monkeying with power and conditioning products. My room is quiet with a seemingly low noise floor. Basically what I'm admitting is that my listening space is probably a lot like yours. Sensible but nothing fancy.

Shunyata must've seen me coming. It has designed a system that takes the existing AC power entering a listening room to the next step without engaging the services of an electrical contractor. There are three basic components to its entry-level Venom Series of power products, starting with a Venom PS8 power strip. Nicely constructed of heavy, brushed steel, the PS8 is 20-amp rated to cover even the most demanding high-current components, provides eight Hubbell outlets that are cryogenically treated

using Shunyata's Alpha process, and a tough Carling Hydraulic Electromagnetic breaker. It sits on thick rubber feet, but steel spiked-footers with floor protectors are also offered as a \$195 option.

The second component is the Venom Defender—a tidy little plug-and-play power conditioner. Chassis-free, it's a plug-in module that incorporates the MPDA (multi-phase-differential-array), thirty-element parallel filters found in Shunyata's flagship Hydra models. Ruggedly built, Defender is equipped with 20,000 amps of surge protection and its own LED fault-detector. It can be plugged directly into the PS8 or, ideally, into the same wall outlet.

The final link in Shunyata's power chain are the Venom HC power cords. Big brothers to the original Venom cords (still a steal), they use heavier 10-gauge conductors, and employ hand-soldered contacts that are crimped to improve the metal-to-metal contact integrity.

All Shunyata components are cryogenically treated. Each can be purchased individually, but these three have been designed and priced to perform in trio. With *three* Venom HC cords, the complete Venom system Shunyata set me up with retails for under \$1800.

Shunyata's Grant Samuelson filled me in on Venom system particulars. He reiterated that "all home electronics are extremely peak-current-sensitive. Their power supplies draw current dynamically off the peak and trough of the sine wave. Any break or open contact in the electrical chain represents a *loss* that can affect system performance."

Shunyata, he says, "views current delivery as a high-frequency event, not a low-frequency

## EQUIPMENT REVIEW - Shunyata Venom PS8, Defender, and HC Power Cords

event because systems draw current at a high-frequency and they output high-frequency noise. It all starts and ends with junction integrity, material quality, material manipulation—all aimed to lower the insertion-loss of the device. The overriding design goal of this system is to minimize peak-current loss at every junction.

“The Defender builds upon the foundation the PS8 establishes. Its filters are computer-modeled to capture and filter the high-frequency noise that exists on any line and prevent it from re-circulating within the system. All of this is accomplished without any added connections and with no loss of peak current integrity—which is our baseline for performance.”

### All Amped Up

My approach to evaluating power strips, power cords, and line conditioners pretty much comes down to the same tried-and-true methodology. After concluding a period of extended listening with the current reference system, I unplug the entire rig, substitute the electricals under evaluation, and let 'er rip. Electronics in this instance were the Parasound JC 3 phono stage, the mbl Corona C11 preamp, and the mbl C21 stereo amplifier in rotation with the Aragon 8008 amp (review to come)—a system requiring three power cords. A Meridian Director USB DAC decoded computer-sourced files.

My first impression of the Venom system flat-out caught me off-guard, largely because my expectations were built on previous encounters with power distribution products, some good, some not so good. I began by cueing up *The*

*Wasps Overture* [RCA] followed by the third and fourth movements of the Beethoven Ninth Symphony [Decca]. In each instance I heard the same thing, which arrived in the form of newly discovered orchestral weight and a more rigidly grounded soundstage. The system revealed a density change in the way I perceived ambient information. At first I thought I was hearing a tonal shift downward, as if a darker palette of colors were being applied to the performance. But in truth this was more about system or line noise being reduced to the extent that significantly more ambient information and harmonic minutiae from venue and orchestra were freely emerging.

Celli and bass viols exhibited more pitch precision and less bloat. The individual voices of a chorus were unwavering in space and could be more easily pinpointed, almost visualized. String section layering was better defined in depth. The Venom system was not just quieting the system down; it was also allowing resolution within those silences of the acoustic/reverberant life that exists between notes or during musical pauses, but which is so often obscured. It was like the air was fueled with a different mixture of energy and harmonics. I listened closely to Copland's *Fanfare For The Common Man* and its near overpowering dynamic swings. Thankfully, what I *didn't* hear was a softening or smoothing over of transient detail and contrasts. The textures of music, from the reedy and bristly to the buttery, were fully represented. Compression of dynamics—the bane of many conditioning products—was non-existent on either the micro or macro scale.

Weirder still was that when I took out the Venom system the individual artists of St Martin's in the Fields, performing excerpts from Stravinsky's *Pulcinella*, seemed somewhat abandoned, as if they were separated by acoustic dead zones rather than joined as a contiguous ensemble. With the PS8 out of the system, the air and dimensionality, the swirl of ambient activity became spotty. The impression of a single soundspace unbroken from one end of the proscenium to the other, upstage and down, sounded more thread-bare, like an unframed musical canvas. Reinserting the Shunyata into the system, the fully framed picture rematerialized.

When I turned to pop vocals like Shelby Lynne's "Just A Little Lovin'," I encountered the same enriched ambient quality that I had with symphonic recordings. In this instance it was the distinctive, heavily damped, reverb-washed character of the recording studio. Imaging on this disc was truly stunning. Drums, bass, acoustic guitar cues were so clean, quick, and stable that it was as if someone had applied a squeegee to a grimy window. Even the title track's metronomic hi-hat had more drive and a thicker, less tinny quality. The Shunyata found more sustain in the instrument, while the slight smearing that collected in the wake of certain of its transients all but vanished. Bass response was further defined in character and timbre. For example, the bass vamp that kicks off the intro to Holly Cole's "I Can See Clearly" didn't come off as more deeply extended *per se* but as considerably tightened up, with more rhythmic bounce and melodic character.

In as little time as it takes to plug in a couple

power cords, I've gone from skeptic to believer. The Shunyata Venom system refined the voicing of my system to an extent I never would have predicted at the outset. And I never felt the music was being compromised. To be clear, Shunyata doesn't promise a seismic shift in system performance, but a subtle clarification of previously hidden musicality. Don't look at me to pull the plug anytime soon. For the dedicated among us (without a dedicated line) the Venom system represents a cost-effective, plug-and-play, real-world solution to power issues. Another way of saying that I guess I better tell my electrical contractor not to wait up for my call. **tas**



## SPECS & PRICING

### Venom PS8

Number of outlets: 8

Price: \$695

### Defender

Price: \$195

### Venom HC Power Cord

Price: \$295/1.75m

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# Shunyata Research Hydra Typhon

World's First Two-Chassis Power Conditioner

Kirk Midtskog



In September, 2012, the TAS Web site ran a short piece announcing the introduction of the Hydra Typhon, an optional, dedicated, A/C-line noise-reduction unit intended for use with the Hydra Triton power distributor. Since I'd reviewed (and highly recommended) the Triton in Issue 219, I decided to give Shunyata's add-on Typhon a listen.

The Typhon and Triton units have the same cosmetics, dimensions, and price (\$4995 each). The heavier Typhon is an additional, passive, noise-filtering "slave unit" which simply plugs—via a Typhon Umbilical cord—into either an unused standard A/C receptacle on the Triton or into a Typhon-ready receptacle. (Note well: You will have to order an umbilical cord—preferably as short as possible—with one of two different terminations, depending on the type of receptacle you intend to plug the Typhon into.) Shunyata recommends using an unused normal receptacle, but all Tritons come with an auxiliary receptacle, so that all eight normal receptacles may be used for electronics if needed. Since the Typhon is not in the current path, as such, it does not alter the total current-delivery capacity of the Triton (2400W at 120VAC, 4800W at 240VAC). The Typhon simply provides additional noise-suppression capacity to the Triton. In effect, the Triton and Typhon pair becomes one power conditioner in two chassis.

Fairly early in the development of a new, higher-performing power conditioner, Shunyata's designer Caelin Gabriel ruled out offering one large unit in favor of splitting up the two main sections into smaller chassis. This offers consumers more flexibility; they can start with a Triton and add a Typhon later

as funds allow. I have to say, the two smaller chassis are also easier to place than a single, double-sized unit would be. In my setup, the Typhon is on the bottom shelf of a rack, and the Triton rests on a spiked platform on the floor next to the rack. Shunyata does not object to stacking the two units if that works best for you. Shunyata also offers sets of four 1.25-inch-tall stainless-steel spiked feet (\$195) and matching protective discs for enhanced performance over the stock rubber feet when either unit is placed directly on a floor. (More on these optional feet later.)

Almost the entire internal chassis space of the Typhon is devoted to two large cylindrical Noise Isolation Chambers (NIC) filled with proprietary ZrCa-2000, a "ferroelectric" compound. The hot and neutral A/C power legs are routed through the NICs via Shunyata's hollow-core, high-purity, CDA-101-copper "VTX" wiring. The large volume of ZrCa-2000 material, combined with the large surface area of the internal copper cylinders, is said to provide very effective ultra-high-frequency noise-dissipation characteristics through "an E-field coupling between the ferroelectric material in the NICs and the electric field of the high-frequency noise that rides on the AC signal." The main unit of the tandem, the Triton, already has three fairly large NICs, so the add-on Typhon increases the total NIC capacity to a much more robust level.

Does the Typhon significantly reduce signal-obscuring noise? Yes, and I would add the Typhon's most prominent sonic effect on the connected system is that it enhances the system's ability to portray spatial cues. The Typhon does not alter tonal balance or macro-



## EQUIPMENT REVIEW - Shunyata Research Hydra Typhon

dynamic behavior, so listening for typical changes after you insert a new device is not a standard exercise with the Typhon. What the Typhon does do is allow your system to better reproduce depth of both individual images and of the overall soundstage. Spatial cues around individual images are more clearly defined, with more body and solidity. As a result of clearing up the surrounding, obscuring, gray electronic “fog,” images stand out in greater relief within their ambient surroundings. The Typhon also expands soundstage width and height, though not to an appreciable degree in my setup.

The Typhon also subtly clarifies a few other aspects of music playback: tonal colors and textures are more vivid, fine details are more apparent, transients are cleaner and less smeared, and micro-dynamic shadings—which seem to be so important to reproducing “artistic expressiveness”—also come through more readily. What this all points to, in my estimation, is a reduction in underlying noise across the board. Essentially, the Triton/

Typhon combo enhances what your electronics can already do, not only by feeding them a cleaner A/C stream but also by reducing the noise those electronics feed back into the A/C line. If your system already has a good measure of the qualities you are looking for, you’ll get more of them with the Triton/Typhon pair.

Realizing the benefits of the Typhon/Triton pair takes some time. Just as most of us would not unpack a new piece of electronics and immediately set about conducting quick side-by-side comparisons against warmed-up, familiar gear already in the system, the Typhon, too, should be integrated into a system with some “settling time.” Shunyata recommends plugging it in to an active Triton for at least five days before critical listening. I plugged the Typhon into the Triton and left my system on for eight days before I did any critical listening. When I first sat down to listen closely, the Typhon’s effect seemed subtle. As I mentioned, the typical cues we listen for with the introduction of a new piece of gear, such as a shift in tonal balance or macro-dynamic emphasis, are not there with the Typhon. Rather, the benefits of the Typhon become readily apparent when you pull it out of the system for a few songs and then plug it back in. Those qualities I mentioned (depth, spatial clarity, vividness of tone colors, etc.) were all better with the Typhon plugged in. I like the improvements so much that I would feel a bit short-changed without the Typhon, especially after living with it for over a month. Adding a Typhon will probably not transform a mediocre system into a “giant-killer,” but it will elevate an already good system another notch in

musically meaningful ways. I imagine that most audiophiles who would contemplate purchasing two \$4995 power conditioner chassis (and two good 20-amp power cords) have already invested a great deal of money in their systems and would truly appreciate the next level of realism the Triton/Typhon combo brings to the equation.

As for those optional spiked Stainless Steel Feet (SSF), they simply screw into the sockets of the stock rubber feet they replace. I tried them only with the Triton because the Typhon was sited in a rack without enough clearance to accommodate the Typhon with the 1.25" SSFs installed. At \$195 for a set of four, the SSFs are a good way to deploy the Triton directly on a floor—better than the stock rubber feet. The Triton’s ability to help my system’s electronics make leading edges sound more defined was improved when the SSFs were installed. Since the Triton is situated on a wood platform in my setup, I also tried a set of three Aurios Pro Max bearings between the Triton’s chassis and the platform. This yielded greater overall clarity than either the stock rubber feet or the SSFs. Since these sorts of individual tuning options can vary greatly from system to system, listen carefully for your own results if you experiment with Triton/Typhon footers.

In conclusion then, if you already have a Triton main unit and would like to ratchet up your system’s performance even more, adding a Typhon is a worthwhile option. If you do not already have a power conditioner and are comfortable with the \$4995 price tag for each unit, the Triton/Typhon combo very much deserves your consideration. The Triton can

get you started and the Typhon can be added later. The benefits the pair brings to bear serve the music well and do so without any negative effects. Highly recommended—especially for those with relatively high-resolution systems. **tas**



### SPECS & PRICING

**Connection:** One 20-amp receptacle  
**Power rating:** 2400W (120VAC)  
**Dimensions:** 17.25" x 5.75" x 16.50"  
**Weight:** 43 lbs.  
**Price:** \$4995 (requires a Typhon Umbilical cord)

running JRiver MC 17, Hegel HD2 and HD20 DACs, Ayre P-5xe phonostage, Ayre K-1xe linestage, Hegel H200 integrated, Gamut M250i power amps, Dynaudio Confidence C1 Signature, Aerial 7T, YG Kipod II Signature

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Basis Debut V turntable with Vector 4 tonearm, Benz-Micro LP-S cartridge, Ayre C-5xeMP universal disc player, Sony VAIO VGN-FZ-490

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# No Tradeoffs

## Synergistic Research Tesla PowerCell 10 SE AC Conditioner

Jacob Heilbrunn



A few years ago at the Rocky Mountain Audio Fest, Synergistic's Ted Denney III ushered Neil Gader and me into a small, dark hotel room that featured his latest Tesla cables, which used active shielding sourced via a complement of different tubes. Different tubes shouldn't have affected the sound, but, of course, they did. After that experience, I went on to try some of Synergistic's REL subwoofer cables, which added to the potency of the RELs, and not by a small margin.

So when the chance came up to try Synergistic's latest power conditioner, I bit. Having tried a fair number of conditioners over the year, I've become less enamored of them the more I've used them. The pluses and minuses almost always seem to balance out in the end. Sure, there's the initial excitement of hearing a few notes that weren't there before or a blacker background. But then reality begins to intrude. Weren't the highs a little more extended before I put conditioner X into my system? And so on. If it was just a matter of tradeoffs, it really didn't seem to be worth the outlay. Recent exposure to the latest conditioners from Audience and PS Audio suggested, however, that matters have begun to change for the better.

The \$5000 Tesla PowerCell 10 SE, which is supplied with Synergistic's top-of-the-line Tesla Precision AC cord, thus offered another chance to see if the conditioning field has continued to advance. Unlike many conditioners, it doesn't feature chokes or transformers. The chassis, Synergistic says, is electromagnetically inert, but on the inside it conditions the electricity by subjecting it to various electromagnetic fields. The power cord for the unit also allows for active shielding. The unit is said to be non-current-limiting—which many conditioner manufacturers say, but which often turns out not to be the case—and is lightweight, making it easy to move around. Nor does it have an on-off switch. You simply use its locking power cord and plug it into the wall. It's best to have any equipment you intend to use with it turned off before you plug it in. After letting it burn in for two weeks, I inserted it into my system, adding one component at a time.

The difference was surprisingly dramatic. The Einstein preamplifier I've been using recently is quite dynamic, but can be a little astringent at times. The Synergistic PowerCell immediately offered a warmer and more relaxed presentation. It also made the Wilson MAXX 3 loudspeakers sound more elegant, particularly in the highs. By comparison, the sound before I added the PowerCell seemed somewhat disjointed. In addition, the conditioner endowed intricate passages with greater resolution, helping to delineate musical lines more clearly. Overall, the PowerCell had a holistic effect, drawing me further into the music.

One of the Tesla's most palpable improvements was its ability to open up the soundstage. On Simone Dinnerstein's intriguing recording of Bach's *Goldberg Variations* [Telarc], which features a reconditioned Steinway Model D concert grand played in the town council of Hull in Northeast England, it was easier to hear both the reverberations of the piano within the concert hall and its rich, earthy sound, closer almost to a Bösendorfer than a Steinway. The sound of the felt hammer hitting the string was also more articulate. As always, such clarity may be something of a double-edged sword—recordings provide a lens into music-making that a concert hall simply will not offer, further proof, I think, that it's very tricky to compare CDs with live music. But honest to gosh, I almost swear you can hear the aged quality of the wood.

The ability of the PowerCell to help disentangle complicated passages was underscored by a wonderful piece, W.L. Thompson's "There's A Great Day Coming" [Gala], which is played by six trumpeters led by the New York Philharmonic's

Philip Smith. There was no suppression of dynamics; if anything the PowerCell conveyed a greater sense of authority and body. The burnished sound of six trumpets popping up seemingly out of nowhere was quite striking. In fact, I would say that it was the closest reproduction of the actual sound of a trumpet that I've heard.

But the most striking improvement rendered by the PowerCell was the ease with which the music unfolded. The presentation simply seemed more relaxed and self-assured. On Angela Hewitt's recording of Bach's *English Suites* [Hyperion SACD], for example, the piano simply sounded less constricted and compressed than it had previously. The graceful, composed nature of her playing emerged more fully.

Was the PowerCell, however, blurring transients? Not to my ear. I can see that not everyone will gravitate to the PowerCell. If your system tends to the warm, lush, rich side, you might not welcome the extra dollop of plushness that the PowerCell provides. But I wouldn't consider my overall system, given the number of tubes in it, on the dry side, even when using solid-state amplification. To my mind, the fuller presentation of the PowerCell was more authentic. What's more, the PowerCell really does seem to be non-current-limiting—it does not choke amplifiers, which, generally, are best run directly into the wall.

Perhaps the performance of the PowerCell shouldn't be surprising. The blunt fact is that the electricity flowing into most homes is pretty wretched. I have gone to some lengths to try and improve it by, among other things, installing a dedicated, active grounding rod, as well as a separate Isoclean breaker box and a

number of dedicated lines running from it. Even special wall outlets can make an improvement. But there's always more to be had.

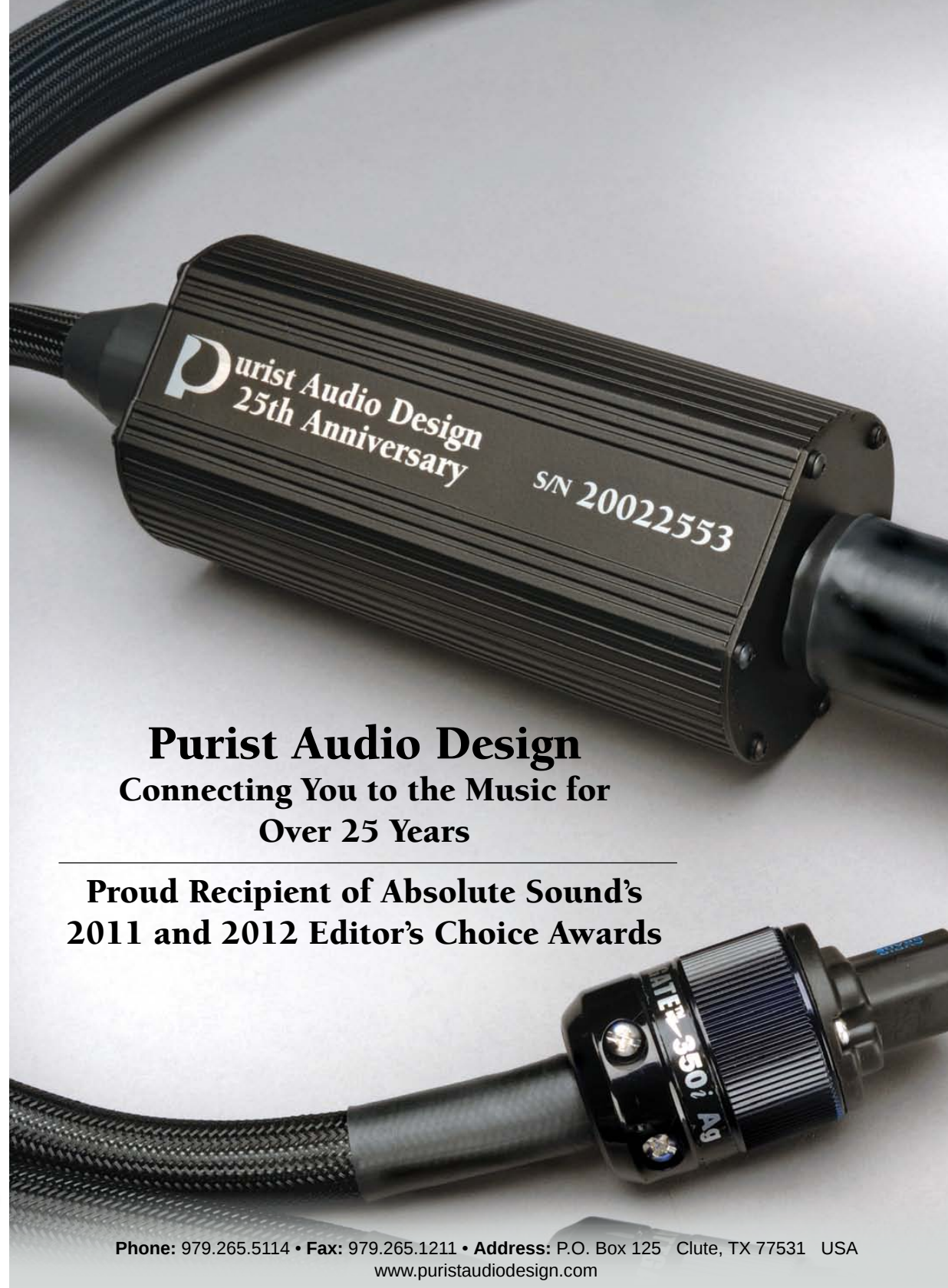
Conditioning makes a lot of sense, but the rub has always been that it often seems to subtract as much as it adds. Still, my sense is that it's hard to go too wrong with the PowerCell 10 SE. It ably improved the performance of a number of components and is simplicity itself to use. No doubt conditioners will continue to improve in coming years, and they seem to represent something of a black art. But the PowerCell represents a startling and welcome advance, suggesting that the inventive mind of Ted Denney continues to seek new ways to enrich musical reproduction. It would be too much to say that the PowerCell 10 SE provides a romantic presentation, but it may well win your heart. **tas**

## SPECS & PRICING

Type: AC power conditioner with five Wave Stabilizer modules	footers Price: \$9500
Supplied accessories: Vesuvius II power cord with Furutech IEC connector and power connector, and Eden Sound TerraStones	<b>SILVER CIRCLE AUDIO</b> 3507 Shadow Bluff Court Houston, TX 77082 (281) 870-8272 silvercircleaudio.com

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## EQUIPMENT REPORT

# Baker's Dozen

13 Power Cords \$500 and Under

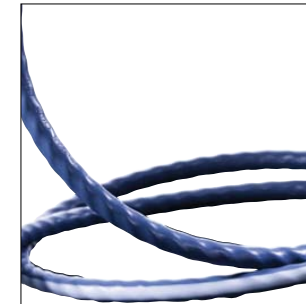
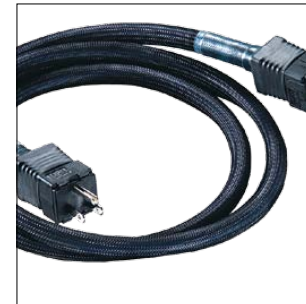
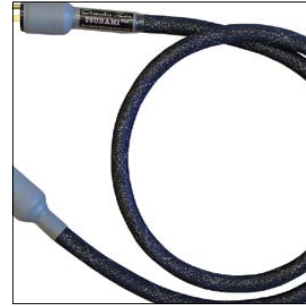
Neil Gader

There is no easier improvement to an audio system than upgrading from the original equipment power cord. Unplug the old, plug in the new, and listen. It's a good reason why this segment of the market is so competitive and why every cable company wants a piece of the action. And why, in my view, power cords were crying out for a listening survey. The premise was: Keep it simple. I'd use a reasonably priced, conventional setup—an integrated amp and CD player—that's two power cords. I'd listen, note the differences, compare to a reference pair of power cords, and then move on to the next pair. The price cutoff was established at \$500 or less—which kept the cost within the realm of a reasonable upgrade. I left it to the invited manufacturers to send a pair of cords of their choosing within that price range.

Note that this is not a discussion about power-cord technology or philosophy. Manufacturer claims about the superiority of a given cable geometry or dielectric are set forth at the companies' Web sites for all to read and investigate further. This survey only summarizes my listening conclusions based upon a single reference system. For that reference system, I used the Audio Research CD-5 compact disc player and the Audio Research DSi200 amplifier. Both excellent, high-resolution components that, as you will read, reveal any systemic differences. The power cord reference was the \$2600 Synergistic Research Tesla Hologram D for the digital source and the \$1800 Precision AC for the amp. I'm intimately familiar with these cords and they've performed at a high level with the finest of associated gear. They are the champs at maintaining a seamless curtain of ambient sound across the stage, and their combination of pace, delicacy, micro-dynamic nuance, and low-level timbral details has always been winning.

Going into this survey my general impressions

regarding power cords were that, compared with interconnects and speaker cable, their sonic virtues were less conspicuous and they did not create the same marked differences in tonal balance. These impressions held (relatively) true throughout the survey (although output level was another issue altogether, with various cables showing some remarkable variations). Mostly, the different cords tended to reframe the sonic tableau by either expanding or contracting the boundaries of the soundstage in width, depth, and focus. In essence they tended to speak the same language but with different accents and inflections. The largest single factor that distinguished one cord from another tended to be immersiveness. I'd call it a density factor, an aspect that envelops the listener in a dimensional soundstage—the sense of music being reproduced as fully saturated dynamically and tonally. I will reference this factor throughout the survey. In alphabetical order, let's begin.



## EQUIPMENT REPORT - 13 Power Cords Under \$500

### Acoustic Zen Tsunami

**\$350**

The Tsunami ran smoothly down the middle of this pack in terms of overall performance and sonic character. It possessed a modestly lighter balance, with a forceful midrange that marks it as just a degree or so cooler in presentation. Its strengths were its smooth mids and solid soundstage depth and dimensionality. Its treble range was properly detailed yet just a bit dry, so that during Jennifer Warnes' "Lights of Lousianne" there was a small amount of brightening on the leading edges of the accordion. I thought it could have been a touch sweeter and airier on top, but to be fair none of the cords matched the survey reference in that regard. Bass response was very good although the Tsunami couldn't quite reproduce the full extension or resonant timbre of the talking-drums in Warnes' "Way Down Deep." And there was also an aura of micro-dynamic restraint during violinist Anne-Sophie Mutter's reading of Korngold's Concerto for Violin and Orchestra [DG]. It handled the larger scale of complex symphonic orchestrations with aplomb and very little image congestion. While competitive with most of the other cords, it couldn't quite match the low-level resolving power of the survey reference, and it gave up just a shred of transparency and that immersive density factor to the very best in this survey. Overall and with only minor subtractions, this was a very satisfying power cord—one that established solid benchmarks for the rest of the pack.

#### Acoustic Zen Tsunami

**Conductor:** 10 AWG OCC 6N Zero Crystal Copper

**Insulation:** CL3 rating PE and two center Teflon tubing with air-twisting geometry Teflon tape, copper braided shielding.

**Connector:** AC plug and IEC plug custom made gold-plated OCC copper

**Price:** \$350 (858) 487-1988 [acousticzen.com](http://acousticzen.com)

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### Audience powerChords

**\$482**

From note-one it became abundantly clear that in many ways the Audience was nipping at the heels of the survey's reference cord. Music seemed to emerge from a profoundly quiet and orderly soundstage and to take on a more vivid presence and ambience. Imbued with a cleanly defined and deeply dimensional soundstage the Audience also offered the bass clarity, weight, and pitch resolution that placed it at or near the top of the pack. On a track like Rosanne Cash's "God Is In The Roses" there was a sense that the air around images had dissipated somewhat, but it was still close to the survey reference in this regard. The feeling of transient speed and sustain from the guitar during this same track was enormously satisfying. In fact, except for the slight treble congestion and somewhat laid-back overall presentation—a trait that I clocked with many of these cords—there was little deviation from tonal neutrality. I found that only a handful of cords approached the reference in creating black-quiet backgrounds—an element pivotal to revealing music's micro-dynamic charms. In this area especially, the Audience was one of the standouts of the survey.

#### Audience powerChords

**Conductor:** 10 AWG high purity stranded OFC

**Insulation:** Flexible PVC

**Connector:** Wattgate IEC and plug

**Price:** \$482 (5ft)

(760) 471-0202

[audience-av.com](http://audience-av.com)

### AudioQuest NRG-4

**\$350**

The AudioQuest NRG-4 was impressive in the workmanlike and honest manner it went about its job. Modest in appearance, almost electro-retro with its cloth-like jacketing, it was definitely midrange in balance, like the Tsunami. It's a signature that suffuses a singer's voice, male or female, with tangible tonal richness and physical weight. There was little out of joint here, and only a slightly lighter overall feel tended to lend it much character at all. The NRG-4 had a delicacy and clarity in the lower half of the treble that enlivened piano harmonics and brass ensembles. It began to narrow in the upper-reaches of the treble, but this was a minor subtraction. The NRG-4 had excellent dimensionality with good lateral presentation and an exceedingly well-focused center soundstage. A sense of modest micro-dynamic compression of the deep bass seemed to limit its slam, but this subtraction was more than made up for by a sense of speed and pace that was rhythmically very satisfying. String section layering was smooth and clean, although inner detail of violin *pizzicatos* during the Anne-Sophie Mutter Korngold lacked the finer delineation and decay of the reference. Although it didn't throw a big sonic image, its density factor, soundstaging performance, and dimensionality were very good, indeed. An excellent all-around performer that sweats the smaller stuff.

#### AudioQuest NRG-4

**Conductor:** Solid PSC conductors in a self shielding counter-spiral with two RF stoppers filters to block radio frequencies

**Price:** \$350

(949) 585-0111

[audioquest.com](http://audioquest.com)

## EQUIPMENT REPORT - 13 Power Cords Under \$500

### Harmonic Technology Fantasy AC10SE

\$500

Harmonic Technology has produced a high-output cable that seems to magically raise the volume level—a trait that was likely emphasized by its forward-leaning, highly charged presentation. Bass response in general was very tight, perhaps too much so. But, during the Copland *Fanfare*, dynamics and transient attack were nothing short of exhilarating. Although very smooth and extended in the upper registers, the Fantasy's treble never quite opened up completely, diminishing air and harmonics with high-pitched percussion, winds, and strings. The soundstage also didn't have the expansive spread of the survey reference so that during the Anne-Sophie Mutter performance of the Saint-Saëns, the orchestra doesn't have quite the ambient wingspan that I'm use to hearing from this track. And as explosive as the Fantasy is in the macro sense, it doesn't throw as much light into the micro-interiors of the soundstage. Thus during the "North Dakota" duet between Lyle Lovett and Ricki Lee Jones the interplay of their vocals had softer transient edges and a small degree of veiling. While other cords may offer superior low-level refinement, the Fantasy was explosively musical.

#### Harmonic Technology Fantasy AC10SE

Conductor: 6N copper

Insulation: PE insulation

Connector: Furutech

Price: \$500

(858) 486-8386

harmonictech.com

### Furutech Absolute Power I8P

\$352

The Absolute Power 18P won high marks and virtually matched the reference in output. It always made me consider backing off the volume a dB or so. Output aside, its general character was slightly laid-back, almost easy-going to the point of relaxation—a trait I ascribe to a darker tonal balance and a softening of micro-dynamics. My only reservation was a reduction of back-to-front dimensionality during Yo Yo Ma's "1A"—a characteristic that left soundstage layering just a bit flat and made the three-dimensional acoustic of the venue less enveloping. Similarly the spread across the soundstage for the three instruments (cello, bass, fiddle) narrowed slightly making it a little more difficult to follow the interplay of the musicians. However, its excellent bass and iron-fisted control made following acoustic or electric bass lines and rock rhythm sections a breeze. During Diane Reeves' "One for My Baby," I felt micro-dynamic energy waver and dip a bit in terms of outright immediacy—heard as a modest shortfall of liveliness and transient impact. And during some of the more electric passages from pianist Evgeny Kissin's performance of "The Lark," traces of congestion dampened the piano's notes. A solid performance that still only lands it midpack in this tough field.

#### Furutech Absolute Power I8P

Conductor: Alpha OCC

Insulation: PE with Teflon

Connector: Furutech, rhodium-plated

Price: \$352

(323) 466-9694

www.furutech.com



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## EQUIPMENT REPORT - 13 Power Cords Under \$500

### Kimber Kable PK-10AG

\$371

Years ago, Kimber Kable's original PK10 Palladian was a jaw-dropper, with revelatory soundstaging, dimensionality, and openness. The PK-10AG picks up where the mean green Palladian left off but in a more malleable, far less costly package. And once again, it connected with me. Dianne Reeves' cover of "How High The Moon" was reproduced with a very open and detailed signature. The Kimber nicely captured the weight and resonance of Reeves' full-bodied voice in much the same way it reproduced the resonant and throaty timbre of Pieter Wispelwey's cello during Bruch's *Kol Nidre*. On a track like Holly Cole's "Heart of Saturday Night," the Kimber was an exemplar of the heavy-hitting power cord—high output, energy, and dynamics. It had a rich dense midrange with an emphasis on soundstage depth—not unlike Kimber's topflight Palladian, although not as wide-open on vocals as the survey reference. But for bass extension and sustain it is deserving of some of the highest marks in the survey. Thus for rock music, it provided a rich heavy beat, even slightly overripe depending on your system, but nicely detailed and uncompressed. Compared with the reference there were touches of treble peakiness. The PK10 offered an open, colorful, high-density sound that placed it near the top of this survey.

#### Kimber Kable PK-10AG

**Conductor:** 10AWG copper/  
"spiral lay" or traditional twist

**Insulation:** Chroma-free TPE

**Connector:** Wattgate AG connectors, UL approved

**Price:** \$370

(801) 621-5530

kimber.com

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### Purist Audio Musaeus Praesto

\$360

As it turned out the Purist Audio Musaeus Praesto was the first cord plucked out of its box and dropped into the deep end of this survey. It set a standard that was often matched throughout these listening sessions of transparency and delicacy in the midrange, with a lighter overall balance and very good upper-frequency air. At the outset, it didn't exhibit any tonal balance anomalies, but later on I did note a slightly subtractive character when it portrayed Pieter Wispelwey's cello during the *Kol Nidre* with a little less woody resonance, making the instrument not quite as darkly mysterious. During Holly Cole's "Heart of Saturday Night," there was a little hint of midrange presence lift, a characteristic that probably bolstered the impression of enhanced transient speed (transients seemed to burst forth from the accompanying guitar and pedal steel). The Purist didn't seem quite as substantial in orchestral weight and lacked the dramatic depth and ambience retrieval of some of the contenders in this field. Although it didn't quite match the lower-octave bloom and slam of the survey reference during the Copland "Fanfare," this cord won high marks for low-level resolution, dynamic energy, and a general lack of congestion—attributes that kept the Purist Audio in the thick of the running.

#### Purist Audio Musaeus Presto

**Conductor:** Stranded 14AWG copper OFC

**Geometry:** Twisted

**Shielding:** Aluminized foil layer

**Insulation:** Polyvinyl chloride

**Connector:** Wattgate, screw termination, UL approved

**Price:** \$360

(979) 265-5114

puristaudio.com

www.theabsolutesound.com

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GREG CALBI, ENGINEER  
STERLING SOUND MASTERING  
NYC

"Overall tonality is simply ravishing"

THE ABSOLUTE SOUND  
9/2012



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## EQUIPMENT REPORT - 13 Power Cords Under \$500

**Shunyata Venom3****\$95**

If there was a ringer in this field, the Venom was it, providing much of the density factor and dimensional qualities of some of the pricier cords. Only a bit of image definition and focus escaped it, and only a hint of image constriction deprived the Venom of the last iota of realism. Tonally it was a little darker overall but with a very rich signature—so much so that after much listening I finally had to concede that there wasn't a lean bone in the Venom's slithery body. However, transient attack was a tick slower and Venom didn't quite have the depth of the reference. As a result the Venom3 sounded a bit more forward but its sound also provided an exciting experience that really lit up the low-level dynamics during the Rutter *Requiem* chorale. In this instance the layering was finely graduated and the decaying organ pedal points sustained nicely. Wispelwey's cello was wonderfully resonant while the orchestral sections remained relatively well focused rather than congealing together in soup of timbral generalities. As good as the Venom was, however, I still felt that during Anne-Sophie Mutter's Korngold the cellos and doublebasses were not quite as well defined and darkly forbidding in weight. Inner detail was good if not the final word in refinement. But for less than a hundred bucks, I had to ask myself, is Shunyata on a mission to embarrass everyone?

**Shunyata Venom3**

**Conductor:** 12AWG conductors, OFC, twist-link geometry  
**Insulation:** TPE dielectric  
**Connector:** Phosphor bronze contacts, medical-grade AC Connector 100% RFI/EMI shielding, UL approved  
**Price:** \$95 (360) 598-9935 shunyata.com

**Synergistic Research Precision AC Basik****\$250**

The kid brother to the survey's reference, the Synergistic Precision AC Basik strode through all genres of music with much of the same panache as the survey reference. Tonally just a bit cooler than its Hologram cousin, its strengths were evidenced in the way it imparted depth to orchestral sections, its retrieval of ambience, and its lively and extended bass response—bigger in fact than that of the Wireworld and Kimber. In many ways Basik veered very close to the survey reference; the critical differences lay in the fact that it didn't sort out inner voices as neatly as the reference, whose greatest strength is a lack of background noise, which allowed instruments to materialize from the authentic acoustic silence of the venue rather than from an electronic glaze overlaying the presentation. The Basik was, indeed, quiet, but like every other cord in this survey couldn't quite match the reference benchmark. Still, in every other way there was no denying the family resemblance of the Precision AC Basik—from its penetrating dynamics, to its finer gradations of low-level detail, to its immersive density factor. There was just a hint of added sibilance during Dianne Reeves' "One For My Baby," but overall I'd have to conclude that, like Shunyata with its Venom 3, the Synergistic team may well have outdone itself on the value side with Basik and, at \$250, ended up picking its own pockets.

**Synergistic Research Precision AC Basik**

**Conductor:** 14 AWG, quantum-tunneled copper, proprietary geometry, highly shielded  
**Insulation:** Modified PE  
**Connector:** Synergistic G07, quantum-tunneled  
**Price:** \$250 (949) 476-0000 synergisticresearch.com

**Tara Labs RSC Prime****\$500**

Don't be fooled by the plain-Jane, black wrapper of the Tara Labs RSC (Rectangular Solid Core) Prime. It may look like a stock OEM power cord but its performance was superb. Both fluid and immersive it delivers a big, dense sound in both timbre and bass definition. Although there's a good amount of midrange warmth, its character in the upper octaves was a bit drier and brighter than the survey reference. Fortunately, it was largely free of upper-frequency peakiness. On Mutter's violin, the RSC's voicing was smooth and refined, with one of the sweetest and most open upper registers in the survey. With its slight forwardness and quick-footed personality, it's a cord that can do rock or classical. Image or soundstage congestion was slight even in the the most complex orchestral passages, but there were some instances where I felt the immediacy factor could be bettered. For example, in the hands of the reference power cord I could follow in detail the rippling air of Mutter's vibrato and nearly feel the brushes along the drumhead of the snare during "One For My Baby." With the Tara (and to a degree all of the survey's power cords), this kind of low-level resolution was difficult to match. All in all, a power cord with no significant weakness.

**TARA Labs RSC Prime**

**Conductor:** Rectangular solid core conductors  
**Insulation:** TARA Labs' proprietary Aero-PE  
**Connector:** Wattgate wall plug and IEC  
**Price:** \$500  
 (541) 488-6465  
 taralabs.com

**Wireworld Electra 5.2****\$360**

Whatever smarts Wireworld uses to brew its speaker wire must've filtered into its power-cord recipe. Like its elite Platinum and mid-line Eclipse cabling, Electra has no tonal dips or peaks. The result is an even and immersive energy that places this cord up with the best in this survey. In fact, its powerful dynamic character, and its composure with thickly layered orchestral material, brought to mind the Kimber Palladian PK10. Images were not as widely spread as I would have wished, but no apologies were needed here either. With a vocalist like Jennifer Warnes the Wireworld offered a velvety warmth and weight that grounded the singer's body to the soundstage. However, I found that in comparison to the survey reference Holly Cole's vocal during "Jersey Girl" was skewed to a slightly cooler temperature, and I noted a very modest veiling on low-level percussion cues. The widely detailed soundstage was very impressive. Although there was little congestion *per se*, the Wireworld seemed at a slight loss, in comparison to the survey reference, when it came to sorting out the full harmonic and imaging complexities of a high-revving orchestra, but on the whole it struck a fluid balance of resolution and natural weight. The Electra's flat physical profile made these power cords among the easiest to handle. Though the Wireworld didn't quite equal the preternatural silence and immersiveness of the survey reference, this is still a cord that struck all the right notes.

**Wireworld Electra 5.2**

**Conductor:** Silver-clad copper-alloy contacts  
**Insulation:** Composilex **Connector:** Silver-clad brass contacts  
**Price:** \$360 (954) 680-3848 wireworldcable.com



## EQUIPMENT REPORT - 13 Power Cords Under \$500

### VooDoo Ultra Wave and Vector Dragon

\$375 and \$425

Voodoo specifies the Ultra Wave for analog power and the Vector Dragon for digital front ends. Since both were within the survey's price cap and would likely be offered to customers in this configuration, we tried both. The Voodoos were high-output cords with a forward sound and hint of a darker tonality that placed Pieter Wispelwey's cello nearer the edge of the stage than in a mid-stage central pocket. In that vein orchestral layering and soundstage cues were well defined, but I found the soundstage a hint narrower and not quite as immersive or as dimensional as the survey reference. Occasionally on a track like Jennifer Warnes' "If It Be Your Will," bass could sound slightly overripe and the vocal less rooted, but overall this was a very well integrated performer with music always sounding of-a-piece. More impressive was its reproduction of tracks from Clark Terry's *One On One* and the soundtrack to *Good Night and Good Luck* where transient energy and speed are key elements that really pace the percussion and rhythm sections and impart a realism and liveliness to this pure acoustic music. The track "Misty" produced a gorgeous piano sound that was both warm and naturalistic—dynamic rather than hard or icy. The VooDoos captured the player's touch—a feat that made it a near match for the survey reference in micro-dynamics. Add to that a sumptuous low end and the net result was a visceral performance with many satisfying qualities.

#### VooDoo Cable Ultra Wave

**Conductor:** 10 AWG silver-plated copper/concentric geometry

**Insulation:** Teflon and polyethylene dielectric/polyethylene-mesh jacketing

**Connector:** Wattgate 320i IEC and Hubbell 5266 AC Plug

**Price:** \$375 (510) 535-9464 voodocable.net

#### VooDoo Cable Vector Dragon

**Conductor:** 10 AWG silver-plated copper/helical geometry

**Insulation:** Teflon and polyethylene dielectric/polyethylene-mesh jacketing

**Connector:** Wattgate 320i IEC and Hubbell 5266 AC plug

**Price:** \$425 (510) 535-9464 voodocable.net

#### Conclusion

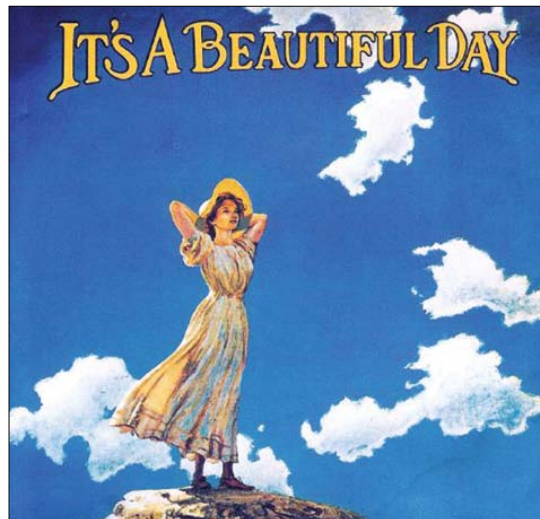
**My view is that power cords serve the system in much the way speaker cables and interconnects do—by honing and polishing areas of resolution that the owner considers a little soft, dull, sharp, or rough around the edges. That said, in terms of straight-line performance, clearly this was a tightly grouped collection—tighter even than my descriptions allowed. As alluring as it is to anoint a single "Best" in a survey, when it comes to wires so much is dependent on their synergy with associated system components that these impressions will better serve you as a guide to narrowing down your choices to a select two or three for audition. After that, your own ears won't lead you wrong.** tbs

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# Music

# Indie Rock Goes Audiophile (Sort Of)

Jeff Wilson

Occasionally you read something that, although it seems interesting at the time, ends up leaving a deeper impression than you anticipated. That's what happened to me after I perused the article "I Am an Audiophile" that musician, actor, and spoken-word artist Henry Rollins published in the August 2011 issue of *Stereophile*. Among the potential objections Rollins listed to his audiophile values was the sometimes staggering cost of high-end stereo equipment, an issue that didn't trouble him in the least. "Why spend so much time and money to achieve optimum playback?" he asked. "For me it is simple, perhaps brutally so: Life is short, and music is humankind's ultimate achievement." Surely, too, anti-audiophile complaints go beyond money, for if we happened to live in a world where great-sounding stereos sold for a paltry sum, some folks would still believe there was something too rarified about oohing and ahing over such trifles as soundscapes and imaging.

Rollins' defense intrigued me because of his musical background. As a member of Black Flag, Rollins used to perform at a club a few miles from where I lived, and although I never saw that band, the punk groups I caught there

included D.O.A., the Circle Jerks, Suicidal Tendencies, and Hüsker Dü. The sound at these shows was unabashedly dirty, raw, and crude, and so were the recordings those artists made during that period. Because Black Flag may have been the most aggressive of all those bands, Henry Rollins is not the first musician I would expect to extol the virtues of being an audiophile. The more I think about it, however, the more I suspect that the aforementioned bands shared some common ground with audiophiles. To explain why, we need to return to that bleak period during the mid-1970s, when neither camp had much to cheer about. (Actually, one camp didn't even exist yet.)

By the mid-1970s rock music often sounded sanitized, airbrushed, sterile, and overproduced. If punk, new wave, no wave, and post-punk releases differed from audiophile recordings in other respects, we can at least concede that both camps embraced a recording aesthetic that prized a more realistic sound than the pop music from that period. Although much of the new rock was sonically subpar and proud of it, the same dichotomies were at work: real versus artificial, human versus mechanical, genuine emotion versus simulated (or no) emotion. It's also worth mentioning that both schools have always had a soft spot for vinyl. Once punk and

new wave surfaced, colorfully packaged seven- and ten-inch singles and EPs suddenly proliferated, signaling a nostalgia for wax in forms that were no longer profitable enough for the big record companies, and when other genres abandoned vinyl, indie rock played a critical role in keeping it afloat. For that we can of course also give credit to the audiophile community.

Indeed the audiophile world and non-mainstream rock have increasingly and interestingly overlapped for reasons that have much to do with vinyl. Until fairly recently reissues by audiophile labels rarely ventured beyond mid-1970s classic rock, but that's changing. In 2009 Original Recordings Group (not the audiophile label abbreviated ORG) launched an alternative series with its reissue of Nirvana's *Nevermind*—a release that was wildly successful. The most persistent label to reissue non-mainstream rock has been Mobile Fidelity, which plunged in headfirst with reissues by such artists as R.E.M., Elvis Costello, and the Pixies. I wouldn't classify all the titles by these artists as audiophile, nor would I argue that some of the MoFi reissues of such 1980s artists as INXS and Cyndi Lauper will top TAS lists—but I would say that, based on the success that MoFi has been enjoying with these releases, there's a whole lot of interest



out there in getting a second opinion on some important titles. That trend, along with vinyl reissues of alternative records that were originally CD-only, warrants discussion here. Of particular note to those of us who have a soft spot for the early days of hi-fi are titles that embrace principles and technology that the majority of the recording industry considered antiquated.

The recording process for the first Cowboy Junkies album, *Whites Off Earth Now!*, bypassed many practices that were commonplace in

# Music Feature

1986. All the songs were performed live in the studio with a digital two-track and a single microphone, a strategically placed \$9000 Calrec Soundfield. "Because we only had one microphone," producer Peter Moore says in the liner notes to the Mobile Fidelity Original Master Recording edition, "you're mixing the sound as you play instead of on separate tracks at the end of recording. The only way you can do that is by physically moving around the space so that the mix works as you're playing."

The recording session took place in a garage, which for all its romantic associations to budding rock musicians can be a miserable place. "There was no room in the garage for the band and me," Peter said, "so we had to run cables out of there and into the kitchen which became my control room! We were in a heat wave, there was no air, 90 degrees. Man, it was hot in that garage. Stinky, smelly, with old, rotting mattresses packed up against the wall." Fortunately the artistic suffering paid off: if you've heard *Whites Off Earth Now!* you'll remember the sound. In the MoFi edition the warm sound of tube amps oozes out of the vinyl. In the sparse setting the subtleties that emerge include a pick sliding across guitar strings and a deep bass slithering around like a snake. Her drowsy vocals flitting in and out of the mix, Margo Timmons sounds half-drunk and half-possessed as she delves into decades-old songs by Robert Johnson, Lightnin' Hopkins, John Lee Hooker, and Big Joe Williams. There's some dark mojo to this album where the lyrics tell stories in which lives and souls are on the line. Here John Lee Hooker's "I'll Never Get out

of These Blues Alive" finds an extra ounce of angst; drinking coffee and smoking cigarettes end up feeling existential, a way to bide time while waiting for Godot. On *Whites Off Earth Now!* the tribute the Cowboy Junkies pay the old blues artists goes beyond the material; it also includes the stripped-down live-in-the-studio recording process.

Mobile Fidelity has also reissued as part of its Original Masters Series the first three albums by The Pixies. More than anyone could have predicted, these records became hugely influential for reasons that included their sound. *Surfer Rosa*, the first Pixies album, was one of producer Steve Albini's earliest recording projects. As drummer David Lovering described in an interview, "Steve kind of does that Led Zeppelin-y thing by miking the room. You mike all the instrumentation but you have room mikes up also. And that gives a live feel to it. That was kind of his little thing that he did—ambience." Also, where other producers were quick to erase more abrasive tones, Albini said "I like noise," and on *Surfer Rosa* there's no shortage of distortion, cacophony, bleed-through, and feedback. When *Surfer Rosa* was released it sold moderately, but its impact was quickly felt and its influence extended far beyond its initial modest sales. Other musicians were drawn to its sound, and other producers and engineers as well. Just as The Pixies were to become influential—Kurt Cobain's "Smells Like Teen Spirit" was inspired by them—Albini, who produced their first album, helped inspire other producers to re-think the recording process. Arguably, though, Albini's approach



wasn't breaking new ground as much as it was reclaiming old ground, and he wasn't the first to look backwards. When Bob Dylan recorded *Blonde on Blonde* more than 20 years before, he had baffles removed in the studio so that all the musicians could be in the same room, allowing a more organic sound to emerge.

For the next album the Pixies switched producers. If the recording was less raw, it was still far grungier than the norm, and the result was impressive enough to earn it a spot on the top 40 best-sounding records list in the 40th anniversary issue of TAS (Issue 234). For me, however, the next album was their peak, as *Bossanova* represents the Pixies at their most colorful, ambitious, unpredictable, and creative. Their songcraft was never more varied, and the more frenetic efforts are balanced by strangely beautiful gems like "Ana" and "Havalina." The outer-space themes are complemented by a

thickly-layered sound full of aural mystery that somehow, on the Mo-Fi release, reveals detail without sacrificing muscle.

Because there came a period when even the most vinyl-friendly alternative bands produced either CD-only releases or extremely limited vinyl releases that quickly went out of print, good-sounding vinyl reissues from that period are another important trend. The recently launched "Modern Classics" series by the Light in the Attic label is helping to fill a gap with an LP reissue of Mercury Rev's *Deserter's Songs*. When Mercury Rev convened to record what they originally perceived as their swan song, their sound underwent a major transformation. On earlier records electric guitar helped define the band's sound, but here they used a much more orchestral approach, with layers of sampled strings, horns, and woodwinds. The recording process involved a combination of cutting-edge technology and old-school hardware. This was the dawn of Pro Tools, and Mercury Rev was among the first bands to use it. The tapes were mastered to 35mm magnetic film, which by 1998 was considered a distant anachronism. As TAS readers who collect 35mm magnetic film Mercury Living Presence recordings well know, however, as anachronisms go, that's a good one. The result was, as producer Dave Fridmann has said, "a weird sound" that fit the band's "cinematic bent."

Again, Mercury Rev expected nothing to happen commercially—so band members were surprised when *Deserter's Songs* clicked with listeners and resulted in a higher profile.

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It was quickly followed by the Flaming Lips' 1999 release *The Soft Bulletin*, which also elevated the status of what was previously considered a cult band. Those two highly influential albums shared a musician and producer, and both will forever be associated with a period when spacey pop music embraced a panoramic sound. There's another band connected with the project as well—namely, The Band, as Levon Helm and Garth Brooks appear on back-to-back tracks. Long out on print on vinyl, *Deserter's Songs* has already secured its place as an enduring piece of music.

Light in the Attic's Modern Classics series is also responsible for the vinyl reissue of Morphine's *Cure for Pain*. The instrumentation for Morphine—vocals, baritone sax, two-string bass, and drums—sounds like the recipe for bare-bones minimalism, but by the second album the band's sound was developing a panoramic quality. On *Cure for Pain* producer Paul Kolderie's treatment of Dana Colley's baritone sax played a pivotal role in the development of Morphine's sound. "Paul would stack up unison tracks to create a really thick sound," drummer Billy Conway pointed out in the liner notes to the Light in the Attic edition. "This was a technique that had been applied a lot to vocals at the time, but with the baritone saxophone it created some amazing harmonics and overtones. It fattened up an already fat instrument." Some albums just beg for the vinyl treatment, and *Cure for Pain* is one of them, with a hefty low end, a crisp high end, and great dynamics. Prior to the Light in the Attic edition, the only vinyl for *Cure for Pain* was a limited edition Brazilian pressing that quickly went out of print. Used copies sell for over 200 bucks; fortunately now there's a much cheaper alternative.

TAS has said many good things about Gotta Groove, the Cleveland-based record pressing plant that didn't exist until 2009 and now presses so much vinyl that it requires two full-time shifts. Recently Gotta Groove launched its own label, Private Label, and for its first release it aimed high, with a classic early release by Luna, a band that included alumni from Galaxie 500,

The Feelies, and The Chills. A debt to the more lyrical side of the Velvet Underground runs throughout the record, and in fact the band is graced on a couple cuts by the presence of ex-VU member Sterling Morrison. When I spoke with Matt Earley, the head of Gotta Groove Records marketing department, he explained that in 1994 even bands that loved vinyl faced a serious challenge, as many of the remaining pressing plants in the US had recently closed. As to why Matt chose Luna's *Bewitched*, he explained,



"I've been a fan of the record, and it has never been on vinyl. When I got into conversation with someone at a record store, I said I wish I could see that on vinyl, and he talked me into doing it."

"It was direct to digital," Matt said of the recording, "but Bob Ludwig mastered the original, so there weren't any crazy compression issues. We made minimal changes to it, at the most a little bit of de-essing and RIAA curve." Sonically *Bewitched* differs radically from *Bossanova* or *Deserter's Songs*. Instead of aural mystery the sound is scaled-down and objective, bringing to the forefront solid songwriting and intricate interplay between the guitars. Now that the record has been released, Matt is pleased with the result. "In my opinion this is a complete album," he said. "It's perfect for vinyl, with a great side split." A year passed before permission to reissue *Bewitched* was granted, and during that time a question arose that added a new dimension to the project. "Dean Wareham ended up becoming personally involved," Matt explained, "and he gave me photographs from the original photo session. He said this was the album cover they originally wanted." The result is a different—and much more striking—album cover on the reissue [top left, this page].

That first-ever vinyl pressings and sonically ambitious reissues of indie rock will continue seems a safe bet. Partly that's because the audiophile world is growing and the demographics expanding; also, the list of what are now deemed "classics" continues to get longer. I suspect many of our readers could quickly drum up a wish list of records they would love to hear anew. I certainly could, and I suspect that quality reissue labels are already trying to secure the rights for many of the titles on that list.

# Interview

## Josh Bizar of MoFi and Music Direct

Josh Bizar seems well suited for his role as Director of Sales and Marketing for Mobile Fidelity and Music Direct. He's a music lover and sound enthusiast who just happens to make a living promoting products that appeal to people who feel the same way. Although a lot has changed since MoFi made a splash in 1977, the audiophile record label has continued to keep old fans and win over new ones by staying true to its legacy at the same time that it's offered some new twists.

### How does Mobile Fidelity choose the records it releases?

Everyone on staff makes suggestions. We have a very diverse staff, with a wide range in tastes. It's a different world for Mobile Fidelity today. Back in the early days, when we were the original audiophile reissue label, we'd get everything we asked for. The tapes just arrived at our facilities. Today, it seems hard to imagine the original Beatles tapes coming over from the Abbey Road vaults.

Of course we're also always interested in hearing from the fans. We certainly get inundated with requests, but mostly they request obvious titles (Beatles, Pink Floyd, and Led Zeppelin) or totally obscure titles with a cult following. We'd prefer to do both an analog and a digital version of every title, but in many cases the label, the artists themselves, or their management requests certain formats.

### When did your first few alternative releases start to roll out, and what were they?

Mobile Fidelity always had a soft spot for alternative titles. It may be hard to imagine now, but Muddy Waters' *Folk Singer* was an undiscovered hi-fi gem back in the day. If you're referring to alt rock, well, that genre seems to be "classic" rock 'n' roll in this day and age. The Nineties were quite some time ago! And classic rock is what Mobile Fidelity has always done best.

### Did you first see alternative rock as an enormous risk?

We rarely worry about risk. While our bread-and-butter titles will always be the best-of-the-best titles from iconic artists, there's a lot of great music out there that deserves our attention. Our catalog will always consist of the most obvious titles as well as other highly respected albeit less obvious choices.

### The Pixies' first album, *Surfer Rosa*, sounds abrasive (and proud of it). Isn't it kind of odd to give it the hi-fi treatment?

I prefer to call it the "Mobile Fidelity" treatment, not the "hi-fi treatment." Take a title like Bob Dylan and the Band's *The Basement Tapes*. Not exactly a sonic spectacular. Yet getting the best possible sound on every title we release, in whatever format, is our goal. We just want to present more of what exists on the original master recording; any subtle details we can unearth from the tapes will benefit the listener.

### MoFi's sound on Elvis Costello's *Get Happy!!* is stellar. How did that end up as a two-LP 45rpm release?

It's an interesting story, actually. When Michael Fremer heard we were starting at the beginning of the Costello catalog, he mentioned he once saw a 45rpm promo of *Get Happy!!* We were able to contact the individual who'd been given the special pressing from Elvis' manager. He sent it to us and we used it for comparison in the making of our 45rpm discs. Upon listening, we realized how those 20 tunes needed the extra space to breathe.

### Releases from the 1980s must be different from the 1960s. Is it easier or harder to get a good sound reissue?

Remastering can be more difficult as you get into the early 1980s, when you saw a plethora of strange digital masters—some on formats no longer supported. We have to search out legacy gear just to play back some of them. With regards to sound quality, it's truly stunning how a good tape from the mid-1950s or early 1960s can literally send shivers up your spine. Obvious advances in technology can be heard from there on, but newer isn't usually an indication of sonic merit.

### You describe some recent MoFi releases as "guilty pleasures." Care to fill in our readers?

We recently started a Silver Label series—titles we're passionate about but for one reason or another thought would reach a wider audience

at a lower price (\$22.99). They're presented on standard-weight vinyl. *K.C. and the Sunshine Band* is a title I'd call a "guilty pleasure" disc, though "under the audiophile radar" is a better description for some of our newer releases. Titles like Yaz's *Upstairs at Eric's* or others from the B-52's, Cyndi Lauper, Tears for Fears, INXS, and Judas Priest—albums you wouldn't normally associate with Mobile Fidelity—have proven quite exciting for a new generation of analog lovers. They're thrilled with these recent records and are clamoring for more. The same attention to detail goes into the mastering, cutting, plating, and pressing as every other Mobile Fidelity title.

### Many other audiophile labels have gotten into the game recently. How does Mobile Fidelity stand out in the crowd?

We have our own staff of engineers and we own all of our own mastering equipment. Our full-time engineers have the luxury of taking the required time to do the best job possible, and our equipment is heavily modified to simply pull more music off mastertapes. These differences can't be underestimated. **tas**

# ANALOGUE PRODUCTIONS' RCA REISSUES

## Some of the Greatest-Sounding LPs of the Golden Age in Improved Sound

Jonathan Valin

When I played him *Rapsodie espagnole* from a test pressing of Chad Kassem's soon-to-be-released (October 8) 200-gram Analogue Productions' reissue of *The Reiner Sound* [RCA LSC-2183], my buddy and TAS Music Editor Mark Lehman, whose musical tastes tend in the opposite direction of this glorious orchestral pastiche, sneered: "So corny."

And then...he asked me to play it again.

Why? Because what he actually said was: "So corny, so gorgeous." And indeed this piece *is* gorgeous—seldom more so than on this great RCA LP, recorded in Orchestra Hall with Reiner's Chicago Symphony Orchestra on November 3, 1956 (the Rachmaninoff *Isle of the Dead* on side two was recorded early the next year, April 13, 1957).

By this time RCA was recording three-track with a (for RCA) minimal number of mikes—three main Neumann M-50s or U-47s at the front of the stage (right, left, and centered behind the conductor's podium) and likely two M-49 wind and string "helpers" on stage. (RCA originally recorded two-track with two main mikes, set stage right and stage left, and two wind helpers on stage, but the "hole" in the center of the stage that resulted from this early "A/B" setup led to the addition of a third, centered main microphone.)

Of course, in 1956 and 1957, the transistor had yet to raise its prickly little head. Everything was still being recorded via tubes—in the mikes, in the tape decks, in the playback electronics, in the amplifiers driving the cutterheads. And it is the sound of tubes in this and other RCAs recorded and mastered prior to about 1961 that helps give strings and winds their ravishingly lifelike beauty, body, and bloom.

String and wind tone are, in fact, the blocks upon which previous reissues (and there have been many—from RCA itself, from Chesky, from Classic, from BMG, from JVC XRCD) have stumbled. The reason for this isn't just the mostly solid-state gear that has been used in re-mastering; it is also the condition of the fifty-some-year-old tapes, and the eq that some latter-day re-mastering engineers have applied to them.

It has always seemed to me that a certain amount of respect should be shown to the original mastering engineers, whose work was, after all, supervised by the producer and approved (and not without discussion) by the artists themselves. To assume, as some have done and continue to do, that the mastertapes are "blank slates" to be drawn on freely is not just to re-master the recording; it is to re-produce it without the advantage of having been there on the spot when the recording was made—without

hearing the music performed repeatedly before a live audience and then performed (in multiple takes) in the recording sessions. It is to make decisions about sonic emphases that affect music and artistry without having interacted with the producer, the recording engineers, the musicians, and the conductor, without knowing their intentions and forming a clear idea of how they wanted the sound shaped to recreate the performance.

However, to say, as I am, that the original mix should be the benchmark is not to say that it should be held sacrosanct—that better sound cannot be had. After all, technologies have advanced in the past fifty-some years. RCA's first-generation equalizers, for example, were capable of exactly two levels of boost and cut in the treble, midband, and bass, labeled "1" and "2." The exact amount of those cuts and boosts was so uncertain that Jack Pfeiffer, RCA's ace producer and later head honcho of its classical recording department, once told me that if he thought a tape

needed "a lot" of boost or cut he'd sent a note to the mastering booth ordering up position "2"; if he thought the recording needed "a little" or no EQ he'd order up position "1"—or none at all.

And then, of course, there was the way tapes were routinely dynamically compressed and bandwidth limited (with the low bass mixed to mono) to make them more playable on the turntables of the day. Perhaps the most famous (or infamous) example of this was



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*Pines of Rome*. In its original 1s/1s (first stamper) pressing, it was released without dynamic/frequency limiting. Pfeiffer told me that almost every single copy of that first issue was returned to RCA by angry consumers, who simply couldn't play it (their phonograph needles would literally jump out of the grooves), which is why the 1s/1s is so rare. The tape was immediately remastered and by the second stamper the customary dynamic/frequency limitation had been applied.

In Kassem's reissues I'd have to say that the usual stumbling blocks have been mainly sidestepped. Great care has been taken to do the right things, starting with the way the decision to remaster these RCAs was made.

To hear Kassem tell it there really was no compelling reason not to stick with Classic Records' remasterings for reissues. Indeed, there was no compelling reason to reissue these oft-reissued RCAs at all—unless they could be made to sound substantially better than previous attempts. To this end, Kassem had three RCA tapes re-mastered by the late George Marino's protégé, Ryan Smith, at Sterling Sound, in George's mixing room using Marino's VMS 80 lathe and an ATR 102 tape machine modified by Mike Spitz—the only one of its kind in the world. If the test LPs pressed at Chad's own facility, Quality Record Pressings in Salina, KS, from the lacquers made from these remastered tapes turned out to be merely as good as the Classic remasterings, Kassem decided he wouldn't go further with the project. If they were only a little better than the Classic remasterings, he decided he still

wouldn't proceed. The new LPs had to sound a *lot* better (by consensus of critical listeners) to justify the complete remastering of some 25 titles and the investment of several hundred thousand dollars. The fact that I'm writing this preview will clue you into the results. There will be a genuine windfall of choice RCA titles released over the next year or two, starting September 10, 2013.

Interestingly, Sony (which currently owns RCA) was not about to let the mastertapes—and Kassem's reissues were made from the original two- and three-track tapes (not from safety masters)—travel any distance. Those tapes that were stored in New York City had to be mastered by Smith in New York City (at Sterling Sound); those tapes stored in Los Angeles had to be mastered in or near L.A. by Doug Sax at The Mastering Lab. (It rather makes you wonder what sources certain other reissue houses, whose mastering facilities aren't located nearby L.A. or in NYC, are using.)

Test lacquers were sent immediately to Kassem's QRP facility in Salina—a state-of-the-art, no-expenses-spared record-pressing plant the likes of which has never been seen before in the U.S. *[It's the first to use microprocessor control over the presses' heating and cooling cycles, among other innovations. —Robert Harley]* Equipped with three different pressing machines, QRP also has Gary Salstrom, whom Kassem calls “the best plating man in America—maybe in the world,” managing the plant. According to Kassem a great LP starts with the plating. “We plate the lacquers the moment we get them with the most loving care

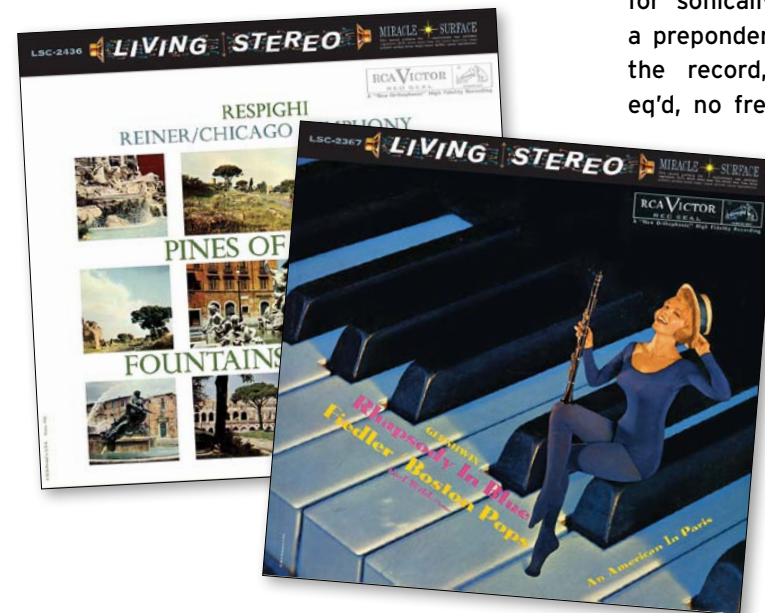
possible. Then we press on a flat-profile, 200-gram disc of virgin vinyl with many quality-control processes along the way.”

There are good reasons why recording companies worldwide send their lacquers to Kassem's QRP. His records truly are quieter, flatter, less bedeviled by those annoying ticks and pops that, even today, show up with shocking regularity on brand-new discs. (I once bought a pricey 45-rpm boxset of Holly Cole's *Temptation* from Classic Records—pressed on the transparent vinyl that HP raved about in our pages—in which almost every disc was not only grotesquely warped but so badly miscentered that the tonearm looked like a dingy negotiating a hurricane sea every time I played it. I'll “remember” that sound, all right.) And of course—as is the case with any kind of noise in stereo hardware or software—quieter

vinyl means an increase in low-level information and better dynamic range.

When I asked Kassem if he'd used tube equipment for his remasters, he got his back up a bit. “There is no guarantee that a vintage signal path will lead to superior sonic results,” said he. “Just compare the speed fluctuation on vintage tube tape decks with what is achievable today. Speed affects pitch stability. In fact, it affects everything.” I gathered that the gear at Sterling Sound—which has done such a fine job with Analogue Productions' Verve, Elvis, and Patsy Cline reissues (though not, IMO, AP's Cat Stevens *Tea For the Tillerman* LP)—is mostly solid-state. The Mastering Lab tends to be more tube-centric, although neither outfit is purely tube or transistor. Kassem actually makes a rather persuasive argument that it is the injudicious use of eq that is responsible for sonically disappointing reissues—and not a preponderance of tubes or transistors. (For the record, though doubtlessly judiciously eq'd, no frequency-range limiting or dynamic compression was applied to these new discs.)

Of course, the real proof is in the listening. And to my delight the listening proved Kassem's point. For this preview I'm not making a thorough record-by-record comparison to the Classic reissues or the originals (although I do draw a few specific comparisons). In general I've concentrated on string tone, bass, and dynamics. Here





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then are my initial grades for the Analogue Productions' RCA albums I've heard thus far.

**1) LSC-2183 *The Reiner Sound*. Reiner, CSO. Producer: Richard Mohr; Recording Engineer: Lewis Layton. Grade: A+.**

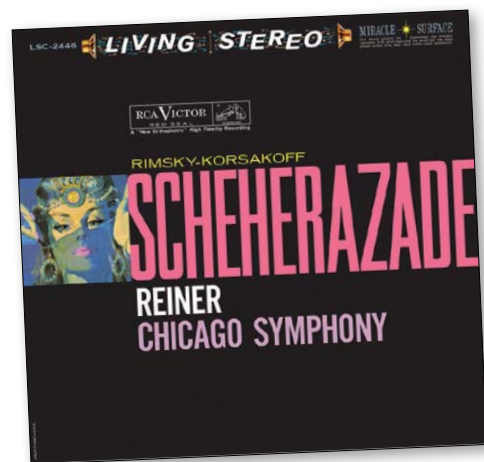
As good as this record has ever sounded. Liquidly beautiful string and wind tone, very deep and powerful bass (although the orchestra very occasionally overloads the mikes or mike preamps, as it does on the original RCA pressings), sensational dynamics on both the Ravel *Rapsodie* and the Rachmaninoff *Isle of the Dead* (with some of the lifelike ease you usually only hear on reel-to-reel tape), and astonishing preservation of inner detail (much of which I haven't heard before this clearly on vinyl).

**2) LSC-2201 Mussorgsky: *Pictures at an Exhibition*. Reiner, CSO. Producer: Richard Mohr; Recording Engineer: Lewis Layton. Recorded December 7, 1957, in Orchestra Hall, Chicago. Grade: A+.**

Once again, as good as I've heard this record sound. Gorgeous strings, superb bass, avalanche dynamics with that same tape-like ease, and sensational inner detail. The authority of the CSO is really something on *fortissimo* tuttis, of which there are many in *Pictures*.

**3) LSC-2230 *Spain*. Reiner, CSO. Producer: Richard Mohr; Recording Engineer: Lewis Layton. Recorded April 26, 1958, in Orchestra Hall, Chicago. Grade A.**

Another triumph with ravishing string tone, so



sweet and liquid it could've been poured from a jar. Not as spectacular as the previous two titles because the (mostly) Albéniz compositions aren't as consistently slam-bang dynamic as the Mussorgsky and the Ravel, though when the music heats up so do the sonic thrills.

**4) LSC-2367 Gershwin: *Rhapsody in Blue, American in Paris*. Fiedler, Boston Pops Orchestra. Producer: Richard Mohr; Recording Engineer: Lewis Layton. Recorded May 13-14, 1959, in Symphony Hall, Boston. Grade: A++.**

This is a disc whose sonics I have never been wild about (though it was always one of HP's favorites). My complaint was the cavernous hole in stage center, which made Earl Wild's piano sound tiny, distant, and swamped with reverberation. Here mastering magic has been done by Kassem and his crew. The central piano track, apparently not properly mixed (or mixed at all) back in '59, has been given the prominence it should always have had.

Don't worry: The "stage" ambience (usually a bit of a misnomer, given that the BPO was seldom recorded on the stage of Symphony Hall, more often in the "orchestra section" of the hall, after the first-floor seats had been removed and the balcony seats damped with blankets) has not been lost; it's just no longer overcooked, making a scintillating performance that much more immediate and exciting. (Thus the extra "+.")

**5) LSC-2436 Respighi: *Pines of Rome, Fountains of Rome*. Reiner, CSO. Producer: Richard Mohr; Recording Engineer: Lewis Layton. Recorded October 24, 1959, in Orchestra Hall, Chicago. Grade: A.**

The exceedingly rare 1s/1s pressing of this disc has been celebrated and sought after ever since Carol B. Keasler wrote her famous article in TAS on the best RCAs (she ranked the 1s/1s *Pines* the #3 RCA of all time). If you don't have a 1s/1s pressing, you will doubtlessly find this remastering sensational. Since I do have a 1s/1s, I'd have to say that these aspects of the 1s/1s that are marginally superior to the Analogue Productions reissue—and vice versa. Though beautiful, string tone doesn't seem quite as sweet and silken on the Kassem reissue as it does on the RCA original; on the other hand, the staggeringly powerful bass on "The Pines of the Appian Way" (replete with gong and organ) retains all of its thunder and then some on the Analogue Productions' re-pressing with, once again, a fair measure of tape-like ease and authority.

**6) LSC-2446 Rimsky-Korsakov: *Scheherazade*. Reiner, CSO. Producer: Richard Mohr; Recording Engineer: Lewis Layton. Recorded February 8, 1960, in Orchestra Hall, Chicago. Grade: A+.**

Another one of HP's favorites, this LP (at least in its earliest pressings) is famously wonderful sounding, and the Analogue Productions version certainly lives up to the hype. Once again string tone—and this disc is celebrated for its string tone—is ravishingly beautiful. The bass is astonishing deep and authoritative. And dynamics are tremendous.

In sum, I highly recommend all of these celebrated RCAs in their Analogue Productions reissues. They will cost you \$30 a disc, which is a more-than-fair price considering that they are, IMO, uniformly superb. All LPs can be pre-ordered at <http://store.acousticsounds.com/index>, though be aware that on the Web site the new AP reissues are mixed in with older Classic Records ones, so be sure you are ordering the latest versions (which have a release date of September 10, 2013, or later printed in red beneath each entry).

Also slated for release in December and January are new AP remasterings of LSC-1934, Bartók's Concerto for Orchestra; LSC-2150, Prokofiev's *Lt. Kije* and Stravinsky's *Song of the Nightingale*; and LSC-2341, Saint-Saëns' "Organ" Symphony. More will follow.

I should note that all the new Analogue Productions/RCA titles will simultaneously be reissued in the hybrid stereo SACD format. t88

# Top Ten New CD Releases of 2013



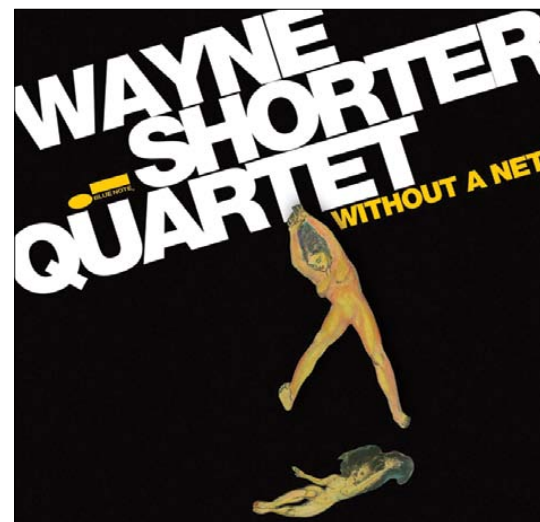
even makes a cameo in the third movement. The 1947 Solo Sonata is a sturdy, attractive piece, with a chipper, tuneful opening moderato and a concluding theme and variations that keeps moving ahead, alternately confident and flirtatious. Steinbacher's playing is exceptional: her technique is astounding, and she perfectly captures Prokofiev's inimitable mix of verve, pungency, charisma, and wistfulness. The sound in the Sonata is especially good: close, but with plenty of ambience. **Stephen Estep**

**Further Listening:** Tchaikovsky and Myaskovsky: Violin Concertos (Repin, Gergiev)



**Prokofiev: Violin Concertos. Solo Violin Sonata.** Arabella Steinbacher; Russian National Orchestra, Petrenko. Pentatone (SACD).

Prokofiev's First Violin Concerto reminds me of a phrase I used to hear in the South: "We'll treat you so many different ways, you're bound to like one." Fireworks, charm, neoclassic pirouettes, good humor, growling brass, shifting tempos, melodies that swing from an air of mystery to warmth within two chord changes—and fresh, piquant harmonies that turn on a dime. The dreamlike ending is one of the most magical ever written. No. 2 is a more straightforward, boasting a soaring second theme in the first movement you can whistle along with. The duck from *Peter and the Wolf*



**Wayne Shorter: Without a Net.** Blue Note.

After 43 years, the enigmatic saxophonist-composer returns to the label where he recorded a string of classic albums during the 1960s. Now 80, Shorter has led the same band (pianist Danilo Perez, bassist John Patitucci, drummer Brian Blade) over the past 12 years. The remarkable, near-telepathic chemistry they forged over that time is readily apparent on this aptly-named live recording culled from a European tour in late 2011. Two new Shorter compositions, the gentle rubato "Starry Night" and the atmospheric "Myrrh," build to ecstatic crescendos led by Shorter's wailing soprano sax, while the free-jazz "UFO" features him on tenor. "Orbits" is far more impressionistic and freewheeling than the hard-driving rendition

that appeared on Miles Davis' 1967 album, *Miles Smiles*. The like-minded musicians also turn in an open-ended 13-minute extrapolation on the title song from *Flying Down To Rio*, the 1933 musical film which first paired Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers onscreen. "Pegasus," an ambitious 23-minute suite, is augmented by the Imani Winds quintet; it leaps from Pierre Boulez-style abstraction to Aaron Copland-like passages and has Shorter coyly quoting from Sonny Rollins' "Oleo" along the way. In all, an incredible cornucopia of music from a living legend. **Bill Milkowski**

**Further Listening:** Wayne Shorter: *Footprints Live; Night Dreamer*

# Top Ten New CD Releases of 2013



Music  Sonics 

**Fauré: Requiem. J.S. Bach: Partita in D minor; Chorales. Tenebrae. LSO Chamber Ensemble, Nigel Short.** LSO Live (SACD).

In the summer of 1720, Johann Sebastian Bach returned to his home in Köthen after spending three months in Karlsbad with his employer. The circumstances that awaited him are unthinkable in our age of texts and tweets: his beloved wife, Maria Barbara, had died a week earlier, just 36 years old. She'd been entirely well when Bach had seen her last and no news of an illness had reached the composer before his arrival back in Köthen.

This extraordinary SACD owes its premise to the research of a German musicologist, Helga Thoene. Like many before her, Professor Thoene had wondered about the origin of

Bach's monumental Chaconne for solo violin, the concluding movement of the D minor Partita, BWV 1004—which was written in 1720. Through painstaking analysis, Thoene has determined that the Chaconne, which concludes a suite of far more modestly scaled dances, is most certainly a memorial to Maria Barbara Bach, and the movement is based entirely on funereal Lutheran chorales that are almost imperceptibly “woven into the music's fabric.” With notated musical examples provided in LSO Live's booklet, Professor Thoene demonstrates that Bach drew on a half-dozen chorale melodies, all relevant to the themes of death and renewal. Nigel Short leads the choral group Tenebrae—beautifully—in four of the source Bach chorales. Interspersed are the first four movements of the violin Partita, movingly performed by Gordon Nikolitch. Then, so there can be no question of the validity of Thoene's discovery, follows a unique rendition of the mighty Chaconne, with the quietly sung chorale melodies superimposed over solo violin. The effect is both eerie and profound. A code has been broken after nearly three centuries.

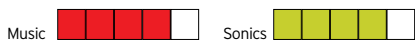
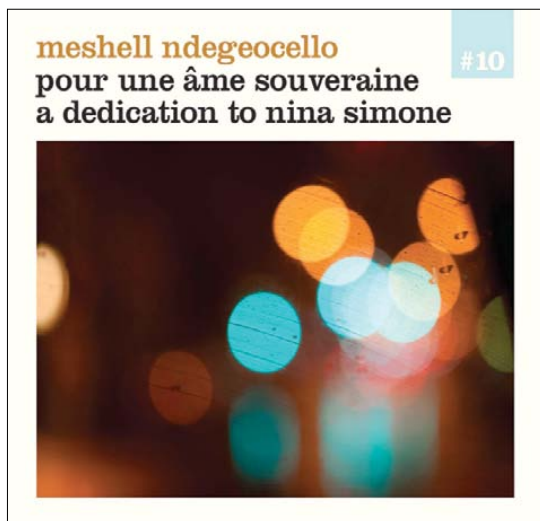
With hardly a pause, after the final note of the Chaconne has died away, Short moves on to a solemn and deliberate reading of Gabriel Fauré's Requiem, in the same key of D minor. The choral singing is exquisitely refined and expressive; the two soloists—Grace Davidson, soprano and William Gaunt, baritone—are at once self-effacing and spiritually committed. The version of the Requiem recorded here is the second, from 1893. Made famous by

John Rutter nearly three decades ago, it includes orchestral violins only in the final “In paradisium.” Gordon Nikolitch returns for a solo turn in the “Sanctus” movement. The overall effect of the performance is purifying, arriving at the place of quiet joy and peace with which the SACD closes.

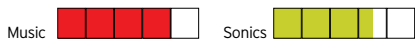
I haven't previously been overly impressed with the sound of LSO Live SACDs: there's a diffuse quality to the presentation that doesn't pull one into the performance, even a good one. Perhaps the problem is not the engineering but the venue. Virtually all LSO Live SACDs originate from the Barbican concert hall in London; this one was recorded in a church, St. Giles, Cripplegate. It's among the very best recordings of a medium-sized choral group I've ever heard, an ideal combination of blended ensemble sound and identifiable individual voices. A listener easily places the choir's sections—sopranos, altos, tenors, and basses—within a spacious acoustic. Solo violin is recorded at a slight distance and the size of the instrument fairly represented in relation to the vocal forces. **Andrew Quint**

**Further Listening:** *Canta Oscuro* (Anna Gourari); Bach-Busoni: Chorale-Preludes (Shehori)

# Top Ten New CD Releases of 2013



**Meshell Ndegeocello: *Pour Une Âme Souveraine*.** Naïve.



**Macy Gray: *Talking Book*.** 429.

When neo-soul surfaced in the 1990s, it shared a stronger connection with soul music of previous decades than later incarnations of the style. Yet neo-soul was never a carbon copy of its influences, and that female artists played such a large role in its development also suggested something new was happening. Recently two veteran major neo-soul musicians have released tribute albums to performers who've had a huge impact on soul, and the timing seems right. Had these albums appeared

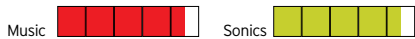
earlier, listeners might have been quick to view Meshell Ndegeocello and Macy Gray in the shadow of their predecessors, but by now both musicians have a tall stack of releases testifying to their artistic independence. That spirit is prevalent on these tribute records, and will please those who favor fresh, imaginative interpretations over textbook copies. Even the misfires affirm these artists took risks to breathe new life into familiar material.

If Meshell Ndegeocello's *Pour Une Âme Souveraine: A Dedication to Nina Simone* gets off to a rough start, perhaps that's because three of the first four tracks have already had so many brilliant interpretations that the weight of the past seems overbearing. "Don't Let Me Be Misunderstood," "Suzanne," and "House of the Rising Sun" strike me as dispassionate, but frankly, at this point intensely dramatic readings might prove more problematic. And by the fifth track *Pour Une Âme Souveraine* finds its slow, hypnotic, sensual groove. As "Turn Me On" and "Either Way I Lose" make clear, a smoldering vocal style suits Meshell quite well; the same could be said about Sinead O'Connor's take on "Don't Take All Night" and Lizz Wright's "Nobody's Fault But Mine." Disarming in its simplicity and sincerity, Cody Chesnutt's performance of "To Be Young Gifted and Black" is so inspiring that hearing it may brighten your whole day. Wisely, Meshell's moving renditions of "Black is the Color of My True Love's Hair," "Either Way I Lose," and "Four Women" toward the end of the record help return the focus to the artist whose name is on the title.

If you're going to recreate an entire album, you could certainly do worse than Stevie Wonder's *Talking Book*, which along with having zero filler reflected Stevie's newfound artistic autonomy. Although Macy tends to stick closer to the originals than Meshell, surprises do occur. Less funky and more cosmic than the original, the slowed-down "Superstition" is suitably ominous. The deep groove, psychedelic guitar, and washed-out vocals on "Maybe Your Baby" help underscore the frustration implied in the lyrics. At times on *Talking Book* the tempos seem rushed and the arrangements overly busy, but Macy never gets lost in the shuffle. And when she belts out "Tuesday Heartbreaker" and "Big Brother" like she means it, I have no doubt that she does. Both Meshell's Simone tribute and Macy's *Talking Book* have clean, polished sonics, but while sparse, ambient soundscapes compliment Meshell's near-whisper of a voice, the more extroverted Macy seems perfectly comfortable being the center of attention in a sometimes crowded room. **Jeff Wilson**

**Further Listening:** Nina Simone: *Black Gold*; Stevie Wonder: *Talking Book*.

# Top Ten New CD Releases of 2013



Hiromi: *Move*. Telarc.

Since emigrating from Japan in 1999, pianist Hiromi Uehara has explored everything from acoustic piano trio to high-powered fusion to intimate solo and duet projects, each highlighting her abundant chops and good taste. Lately she's been working with contrabass guitarist Anthony Jackson and veteran British fusion drummer Simon Phillips. *Move*, their third project together, again displays the remarkably tight execution and rock muscle that the electro-acoustic trio established on their impressive debut, 2011's *Voice* (reviewed Issue 215). The highly-charged title track navigates a labyrinth of stop-time phrases, challenging unisons, and odd time signatures, while "Brand New Day" is lofts cascading lines

in a lower dynamic. Shifting gears radically, Hiromi juggles funky wah-wah synth with piano in a contrapuntal dance as Phillips lays down a solid groove on "Endeavor," a tune which has her emulating her mentor Ahmad Jamal. Elsewhere, she deftly shifts from classical flourishes to slyly syncopated jazz on the stirring "Rainmaker" before blowing through the exhilarating "Suite Escapism: Reality" with runaway train momentum, then settling into a gently soulful, gospel-tinged groove on "Suite Escapism: Fantasy." The third part of that suite is the frenetic "In Between," sounding like a cross between Chick Corea and Franz Liszt. **BM**

**Further Listening:** Hiromi: *Spiral*; Stanley Clarke Trio: *Jazz in the Garden*

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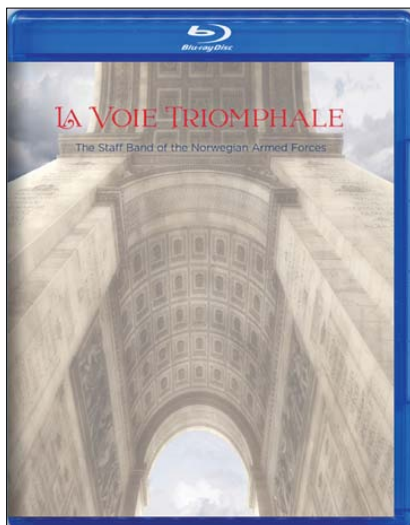
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# Top Ten New CD Releases of 2013



**La Voie Triomphale.** Norwegian Armed Forces Band. 2L (SACD, Blu-ray, downloads)

Most recordings from the Norwegian 2L label are “sonic spectacles,” and *La Voie Triomphale* is the most spectacular yet. The repertoire may have something to do with it. Since audio’s Golden Age of the 1950s and 60s, music for concert band has been well served by recordings. Frederick Fennell, of course, made close to two dozen records for Mercury with his Eastman Wind Ensemble and later worked with Telarc and Reference Recordings. RR continues the tradition to this day, with its impressive recordings of the Dallas Wind Symphony. It’s no surprise that the concert band and its subgroup, the brass ensemble, appeals to the best audio engineers and producers: the dynamics and

instrumental sonorities push the limits of the recording art.

This new 2L presents the Staff Band of the Norwegian Armed Forces led by Ole Kristian Ruud in an all-French program. The main event is the *Grande Symphonie Funèbre et Triomphale* of Hector Berlioz. The opening F minor “Funeral March” is powerfully evocative—at the first performance, it accompanied a procession of coffins to a new “garden of remembrance”—with solemn field drums setting the tone. A “Funeral Oration” follows, featuring a gorgeously intoned trombone solo, and the half-hour piece concludes with an ecstatic “Apothéose.”

The remainder of the program proceeds chronologically. Camille Saint-Saëns’ *Orient et Occident* sports “exotic” percussion accents—triangle, bass drum, a softly struck gong—and lavishly scored, melodically pleasing themes that contrast East and West. The brief *Fanfare to La Peri* by Paul Dukas is thrillingly played by the Norwegians, with precisely matched triple tonguing. Next up is Darius Milhaud’s *Suite Française* of 1945, a jaunty, celebratory work written to honor the French Resistance during Second World War, then comes Henri Tomasi’s over-the-top *Fanfares Liturgiques*, for brass and percussion. Its Gothic sensibility evokes vintage black-and-white movies with grey, cold cathedrals, muttering hunchbacks, and light shining from above onto upturned faces. The program finishes with Eugène Bozza’s exuberant *Children’s Overture*.

You won’t go wrong with any of the formats in which the program is available. The “physical media” option provides both a hybrid multichannel SACD and a music-only Blu-ray

disc; there are also a number of download alternatives, including 192/24 stereo and 96/24 multichannel. With all, the sound of the field drums in the Berlioz is scary-realistic, every stroke of every roll intelligible. When a tam-tam is hit at the outset of *Fanfares Liturgiques*’s finale, the sense of a large, heavy piece of metal set vibrating from its center and radiating outwards is uncanny. Dynamic range is stunning; woodwind and brass sonorities are rendered with their rich complexity intact. 2L’s multichannel sound is characteristically immersive. Detailed seating arrangements are provided for all six works: for some, there are a significant number of players positioned behind the conductor (and thus behind the listener.) The multichannel download is “only” 96/24, while the program on the BD is 192/24 in all channels. The latter is significantly better, and the best way to experience this program, with a reach-out-and-touch-it dimensionality rarely achieved on recordings. **AQ**

**Further Listening:** Grainger: *Lincolnshire Posy* (Fennell); *Chicago Symphony Brass Live* (SACD)

# Top Ten New CD Releases of 2013

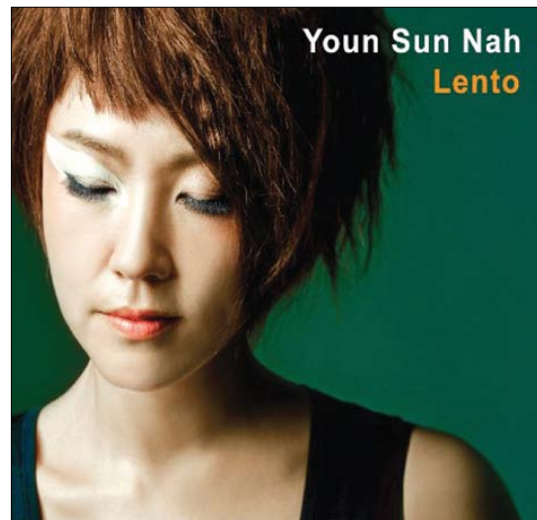


**Ibrahim Maalouf: *Wind*.** Harmonia Mundi.

Trumpeter Ibrahim Maalouf recently used another French film as inspiration while recording music to accompany René Clair's 1927 silent film *The Prey of the Wind*. If you've seen Louis Malle's *Elevator to the Gallows*, you know how effectively the soundtrack by Miles Davis underscored the film's bleak, existential tone, and a similar mood is conveyed on *Wind*, which stands out amongst recent recordings of small groups performing intimate, straightforward, well-recorded jazz. Playing a quarter-tone trumpet, Maalouf seamlessly integrates Arabic music and noirish-sounding jazz with a soft, rounded tone that recalls Art Farmer even more than it does Miles. Slow, brooding ballads are the main order of business here, with the

rhythm section providing an impressionist backdrop while Maalouf plays airy, melodic solos. Pianist Frank Woeste is both a sensitive accompanist and a thoughtful improviser who like Maalouf favors a spare style that makes every note count. There's just enough contrast on this session, with the more extroverted "Suspicious," "Questions & Answers," and "Excitement" shaking things up a little, but not enough to agitate the reflective mood. And the sound is as good as the music: clean, unhyped, realistic. **JW**

**Further Listening:** Miles Davis: *Ascenseur Pour L'Echafaud*; Art Farmer: *The Summer Knows*



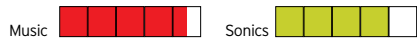
**Youn Sun Nah: *Lento*.** ACT.

Korean vocalist Youn Sun Nah favors sparse arrangements with acoustic instruments, and the results stand as a ringing endorsement for the "less is more" aesthetic. On *Lento* Nah works with various small-group combinations that mostly draw from the same core of musicians who've graced her two most recent albums, with her primary foils, nylon-string guitarist Ulf Wakenius and bassist Lars Danielsson, continuing to provide sensitive interplay. While recent outings have been weighted toward interesting and sometimes playful arrangements of an intriguing mix of covers, *Lento* emphasizes the songwriting of Nah and her bandmates. The record has a confessional tone, and the mood is more consistently dark;

tellingly, her cover of the Nine Inch Nails ode to pain, "Hurt," blends in smoothly with the originals. With its wordless vocal acrobatics, "Momento Magico" feels more like an exercise than a song, and her impassioned reading of the country-western classic "Ghost Riders in the Sky" also seems a misfire. But typically the music is more nuanced, combining subtlety with a deep level of expression that's heightened by a superb, dry, close-miked recording, and at her best (as on the title track, "Hurt," "Empty Dreams," "Soundless Bye," and "Arirang") Nah ranks with the best jazz vocalists out there today. **JW**

**Further Listening:** Youn Sun Nah: *Voyage; Same Girl*

# Top Ten New CD Releases of 2013

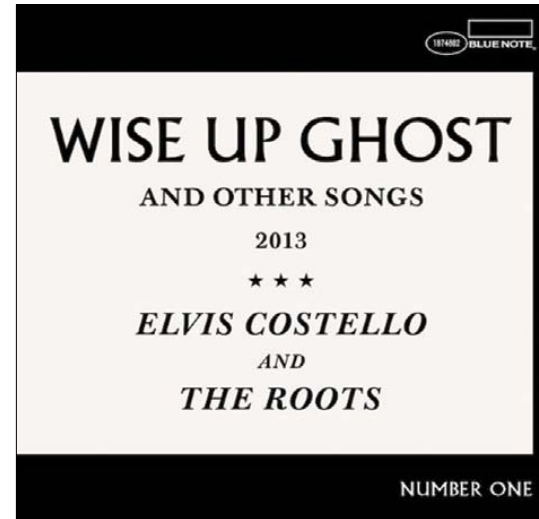


**AnnaMy: *Woodpecker*.** Subliminal Sounds.

AnnaMy is a young Swedish folk singer whose debut owes something to bands like Fairport Convention, Pentangle, and Renaissance. Her talent for multi-tracking harmonies is apparent on the opening track, “Snowflakes,” a vocal tour de force that, like many songs on *Woodpecker*, casts a dreamy spell. AnnaMy can also be feisty, as on the more rock-oriented “Care,” where she belts out “If you don’t care for nobody/Nobody will care for you” like she means it. Surrounded by musicians playing hooky from other folk groups, she receives stellar support on “Stegen” and “Come and Sit,” on which the cavernous sound and steel guitar work echo such Southern California gems as David Crosby’s “Laughing.” Recorded in Silence Studios

located deep in the woods, *Woodpecker* succeeds for the simplest reasons: good melodies, varied arrangements, memorable lyrics, and a vocalist who, one album into her career, seems completely self-assured. Nice sonics, too: often a few acoustic instruments and some vocal layering are all that’s needed to achieve an atmospheric sound. **JW**

**Further Listening:** David Crosby: *If Only I Could Remember My Name*; Fairport Convention: *Liege and Lief*



**Elvis Costello and The Roots. *Wise Up Ghosts*.** Blue Note.

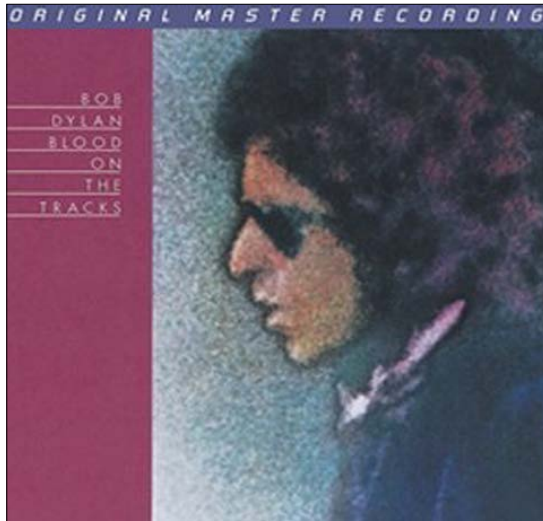
Following a slump in the 90s, Elvis Costello emerged with a string of strong if often unorthodox albums that at times have left fans cold (2003’s underrated *North*, for instance). Yet his more recent R&B-influenced projects—including his work with New Orleans great Allen Toussaint and T-Bone Burnett—have reignited the pop chameleon’s creative spark. This new, even bolder project teams the Brit pop star with America’s premier hip-hop band, the Roots. It may seem an odd pairing, but Costello sounds in his element. Of course, the Roots, house band for Jimmy Fallon’s *Late Night*, are used to backing a wide range of artists. Together—and with the Dirty Dozen Brass Band on two

tracks—these artists reinterpret Costello’s past work, creating hybrids infused with added bite. The postmodern “Stick Out Your Tongue,” for example, is a mash-up of “Hurry Down Doomsday,” from 1991’s oft-maligned *Mighty Like a Rose*, and the grim anti-fascist tome “Pills and Soap,” from 1983’s *Punch the Clock*. The result is a brilliant set of soul, funk, jazz ballads and hip-hop-infused pop. Best to get is the deluxe edition, with three bonus tracks including the surreal Beatle-esque psychedelia of “Can You Hear Me?” **Greg Cahill**

**Further Listening:** *Ghost Brothers of Darkland County*; Elvis Costello: *King of America*



# Top Ten CD Reissues of 2013



**Bob Dylan: *Blood on the Tracks*.** Mobile Fidelity (SACD).

Upon its release in 1975, *Blood on the Tracks* became the target of critics who disparaged the album's "shoddiness" (*Rolling Stone's* Jon Landau) and dismissed it as possessing little more than a "functional" sound (Greil Marcus), even as those same critics praised the songs for their intimate, confessional nature. Time has forgiven any fault Dylan may have shown as a record maker—*Rolling Stone* has ranked *Blood on the Tracks* as No. 16 on its list of 500 Greatest Albums of All Time—and now, thanks to state-of-the-art remastering, this classic has never sounded better, especially in this new Mobile Fidelity SACD, the company's latest offering in its limited-edition Dylan reissues.

Coming on the heels of 1974's acerbic *Planet Waves*, the album chronicles the dissolution of Dylan's marriage to Sara Lowndes through such songs as "You're Gonna Make Me Lonesome When You Go," "Shelter from the Storm," "Simple Twist of Fate," "If You See Her, Say Hello," "You're a Big Girl Now" and, of course, the biting title track.

Bitterness but also resolution come through in Dylan's voice as well as lyrics. The music ranges from the *Blonde on Blonde*-era organ balladry of "Idiot Wind" and the self-effacing blues of "Meet Me in the Morning" to the wordy "Lily, Rosemary and the Jack of Hearts" and the folksy finger-style guitar of "Buckets of Rain." The angst of this public break-up album—with stark tracks that sting like open wounds—takes center stage, but Dylan's wry wit also is on display showing he'd begun to move on in his emotional life. Indeed, his next album, 1976's *Desire*, found him returning, for the first time in nearly a decade, to topical songs, most notably "Hurricane," his plea to free convicted murderer Rubin "Hurricane" Carter, and "Joey," his controversial paean to mobster Joey Gallo.

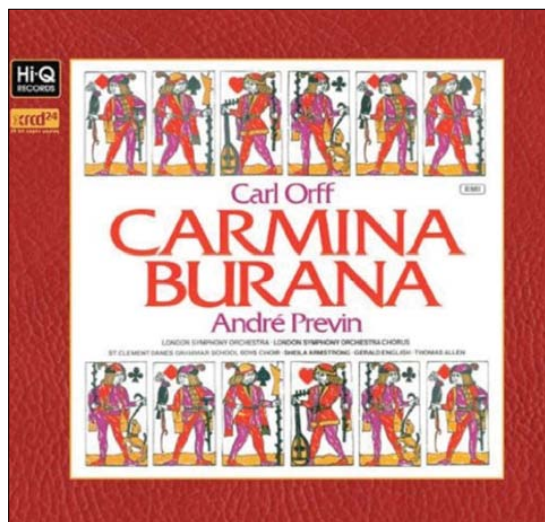
Mobile Fidelity Sound Lab's original master recording employs the company's patented GAIN 2 mastering system and is pressed on the label's Ultradisc UHR series, featuring both a high resolution SACD and a 16-bit/44.1 kHz CD layer. In comparison with Columbia's 2003 stereo/multichannel SACD reissue (with its rumbling bass lines), it has somewhat less visceral punch, but more than compensates with a clarity—a sonic purity—that well suits the intimate nature of these sessions.

Those who prefer their Dylan on audiophile-

quality LPs have had to be patient; the shortage of good pressing plants has slowed Dylan vinyl reissues. But if previous MoFi vinyl pressings are any indication, the pending 180-gram version of *Blood on the Tracks* should be worth the wait—these hi-def vinyl discs, pressed at RTI in California, have been nothing short of revelatory (Columbia didn't release its 2003 remasters on vinyl). Earlier releases in MoFi's series include *Freewheelin'* (SACD and two-LP 45rpm 180-gram vinyl), *Another Side of Bob Dylan* (SACD and two-LP 45rpm 180-gram vinyl), and the stunning remaster [reviewed in Issue 226] of *The Basement Tapes* (SACD and 33 1/3rpm 180-gram vinyl). Planned for this year are *Highway 61 Revisited* (SACD and two-disc 45rpm 180-gram vinyl), *Bringing It All Back Home* (SACD and two-disc 45rpm 180-gram vinyl), and *Blonde on Blonde* (SACD and three-disc 45rpm 180-gram vinyl). **Greg Cahill**

**Further Listening:** Bob Dylan & the Band: *The Basement Tapes* (Mobile Fidelity); Bob Dylan: *No Direction Home, Bootleg Vol. 7* (200-gram vinyl box-set)

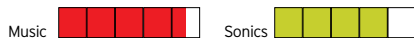
# Top Ten CD Reissues of 2013



**Grieg: Music from Peer Gynt.**  
Royal Philharmonic, Beecham.



**Holst: The Planets.** London  
Symphony, Previn.



**Orff: Carmina burana.** London Symphony  
with soloists and chorus. Previn.

The latest XRCD offerings, three musically exceptional EMI recordings, come in slimmed-down glossy cardboard boxes that take up less shelf space than XRCDs of yore but still exude the perfectionist nature of the product. One thing that hasn't slimmed down is the

price—\$40 a pop for LP-length programs (the Grieg runs just 41:42.) Whether this is a viable commodity in an age with HD downloads of Golden Age material readily available remains to be seen.

The *Peer Gynt* selections were taped at Abbey Road Studio No. 1 in 1957. These are thoroughly engaging readings that never seem self-consciously “expressive.” “Ase’s Death” has an austere aching sadness while “Anitra’s Dance” possesses a subtly sultry feel—this isn’t just innocent folk dancing. The two selections with solo soprano, “Solveig’s Song” and the concluding “Wiegenlied,” are exquisite. The chorus is naturally integrated into the sonic picture and percussion details—tambourine, triangle—are easily heard over full orchestra, as they would be in life. There’s a terrific sense of all the singers and players breathing the same air on stage, even as their placement on that stage is specifically localized. For better or worse, orchestral color is vividly presented: the oboe in the opening “Wedding March” is squawky and bass trombone wonderfully flatulent.

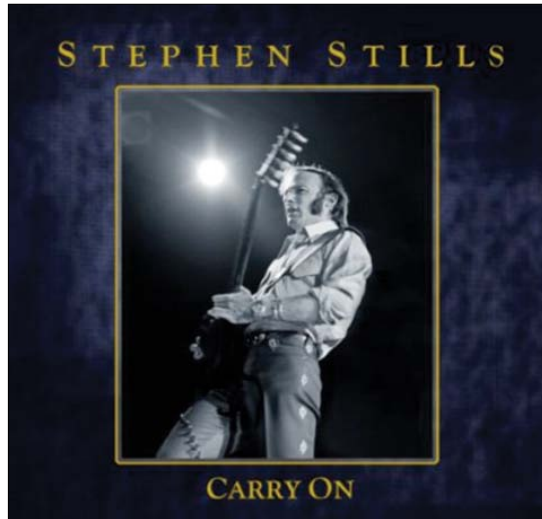
The two André Previn performances were recorded in Kingsway Hall in 1973 (Holst) and 1974 (Orff) by Christopher Bishop and Christopher Parker. While Previn’s later *Planets* for Telarc plays louder and lower, this one is no slouch sonically and it’s preferable from a musical standpoint. “Mars” is fast and merciless, “Venus” dreamily evocative. “Jupiter” sports a warm nostalgia, and the unison trumpets and trombones that begin “Uranus” are pretty scary in their stentorian

seriousness. There’s great detail: you can actually hear the xylophone, correctly scaled, at the loudest point of the Magician’s movement. In “Neptune” the wordless women’s voices sound positively intergalactic.

Though it’s true that subsequent digital recordings of *Carmina burana* more effectively contain the most dynamic—that is, *bombastic*—moments of Orff’s suite of “Cantiones profanae,” Previn’s performance isn’t about bombast. The conductor relishes the quieter, quirkier, rhythmically unstable, and lyrical moments of the score. Passages with shifting meters (such as No. 6 “Tanz”) as are gracefully effortless as you’d expect with an accomplished jazz pianist at the helm. Three terrific soloists are on hand—Thomas Allen, Sheila Armstrong, and Gerald English. English’s uncomfortable-sounding “Olim lacus colueram” depicts a swan turning slowly on a spit over a fire (from the swan’s point of view!) and Armstrong’s ineffably beautiful “In Trutina” is a highlight. Instrumental detail and color are outstanding: check out the riff for piccolo, flutes, oboes, and piano at the start of “Veris leta facies.” Massed brass sonorities are thrilling. Currently, one can choose among something like ninety *Carmina buranas* but none I’ve heard is preferable to this one. **Andrew Quint**

**Further Listening:** Holst: *The Planets* (Mehta); Britten: *Sea Interludes* (Previn)

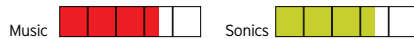
# Top Ten CD Reissues of 2013



demos, unreleased studio and live tracks, new mixes, and eloquent liner notes that make a case for Stills as one of the most multifaceted musicians of his generation. Especially revelatory are the acoustic performances (such as "Black Queen" and "4 + 20") that spotlight the nuances of his brown-sugar vocals and fingerpicked guitar. Stills is the last of his supergroup peers (David Crosby, Graham Nash, Neil Young) to be anthologized and feted with a deluxe box set. It was worth the wait.

**Derk Richardson**

**Further Listening:** Kooper, Bloomfield, and Stills: *Super Session*



**Stephen Stills: *Carry On*.** Rhino (4 CDs).

Stephen Stills may forever be identified with three iconic pop songs: "For What It's Worth" (Buffalo Springfield, 1966), "Suite: Judy Blue Eyes" (Crosby, Stills & Nash, 1969), and "Love the One You're With" (his debut solo single, 1970). But they are just three outstanding tracks among 82 others in this four-CD collection that spans 50 years of recording. Moreover, those tunes, as different as they might be, only scratch the surface of the Stills' stylistic range. Opening with a derivative but endearing folk original, "Travelin'," recorded in Costa Rica in 1962, and including a blues-rock jam with Jimi Hendrix and a 2012 CSN concert cover of Dylan's "Girl From the North Country," *Carry On* features classic album cuts,



purest strain of bossa nova, "Ao Amigo Tom," is a beautiful tribute to Antonio Carlos Jobim. When used sparingly, well-recorded strings, woodwinds, and female vocals are nice touches, though syrupy production mars "Jesus Meu Rei," "Black is Beautiful," and "Minha Voz Virá do Sol da América," and the reverb on Valle's lead vocals is sometimes excessive. Still there's much to like in *Garra* (chronologically the earliest of four Valle releases being reissued by Light in the Attic), and it's available on both vinyl and polycarbonate. **Jeff Wilson**

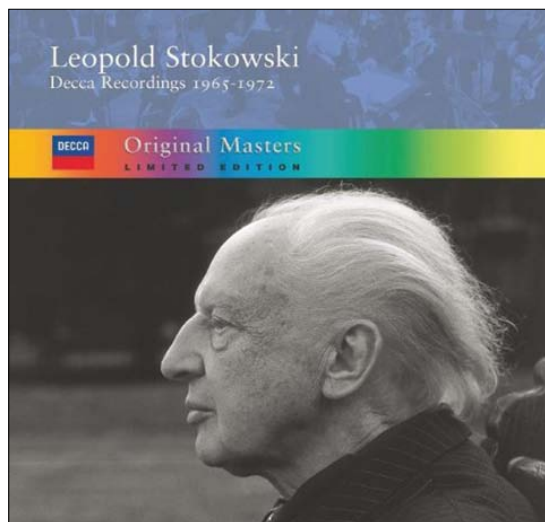
**Further Listening:** Marcos Valle: *Marcos Valle*; *Vento Sul*



**Marcos Valle: *Garra*.** Light in the Attic (LP and CD).

When Marcos Valle released *Garra* in 1971, his credentials as a bossa nova composer were already well established; he had, for example, penned the mellifluous "Summer Samba" made popular by Walter Wanderley and Astrud Gilberto. It was almost inevitable that a young Brazilian traveling back and forth to the US during that period would feel the urge to broaden his horizons musically, and *Garra* has strains of soul, funk, and psychedelia. But Valle never lost his penchant for penning concise, well-crafted songs. In fact, "Com Mais de 30," "Garra," "Paz E Futebol," "Que Bandeira," "Wanda Vidal," and "O Cafona" were as catchy as the best pop songs of the era, and the

# Top Ten CD Reissues of 2013



## Leopold Stokowski: *Decca Recordings 1965-1972* (5 CDs).

The five discs here are drawn from Stokowski's Indian summer in the Sixties and Seventies for Decca's "Phase Four" label. Multimiked to within an inch of their lives, the best of these recordings sound fantastic unless you adamantly insist upon "realism" to the concert experience. Certainly Stokowski didn't: more than any other great conductor he pushed the boundaries of sound and sonority in both the concert hall and the studio. Never lucky enough to have heard the old magician live, what I hear on these recordings are bold, vibrant colors, fabulous warmth and richness, textures at once transparently layered yet beautifully blended, Stokowski the organist evident in sonorities

built from the bottom up, with deep, ample, and—let's be unafraid to embrace the word and the idea—gloriously fat double-basses and cellos. How welcome such voluptuous pulchritude is in our time of excessively lean and hungry (not to say *meager*) orchestral sound!

For all Stokowski's reputation as an orchestral colorist who approached music first as sonority, I was surprised how "structural" several of these performances are, tempi moderate but steady, relatively few instances of pulling and hauling, lyric and melodic phrases expanding and contracting as naturally as breathing. Two of the best are a direct yet dramatic Franck D Minor and an elegantly characterized, gorgeously played *Enigma Variations* ("Nimrod" deeply felt with a powerfully moving climax). About half the repertoire here is French, beginning with Stokowski's only recording of *Symphonie fantastique*, tonally brilliant and reveling in the score's perennially astonishing orchestration, even if he was too much in love with sheer beauty to give full expression to the gnarlier sonorities of the "Witches' Sabbath" (though you will detect the composer's option of adding pianos to the bells, something I've heard no other conductor do). It's a wildly exciting performance, albeit too brashly recorded, with some extreme tempo fluctuations when the "*Dies Irae*" comes in.

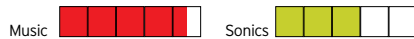
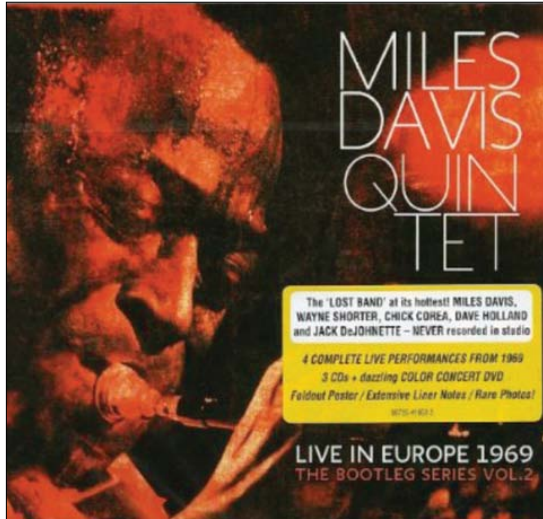
Though Debussy probably never imagined his *Faun* with this much rouge and eyeliner, it's irresistible, as are also the *Daphnis and Chloe* excerpts (with chorus), thrillingly played with colors saturated (think Gauguin) yet always luminous and lucid. Likewise *La Mer*, by turns languorous and tempestuous. The *Firebird*—

Stokowski's sixth recording (!), here with the London Symphony—has many felicities but lacks the whiplash tempi and shock of Dorati's (with the same orchestra). An exciting D minor Toccata and Fugue aside, the disc of mostly Bach doesn't include my favorite Stokowski orchestral arrangements (that of the sublime Chaconne a travesty).

The last of his five recordings of the Tchaikovsky Fifth, this one is either lovingly caressed and deeply felt or shamelessly manipulated and vulgar, with a "solution" to the detached coda of the last movement that involves shortening the pause while rolling the tympani through it. Yet rarely have I heard grandeur and energy mediated more surely or climaxes built more effectively. An object lesson in the art of the virtuoso romantic conductor in the grand manner, this is one of the prizes of the set, not least because hardly anyone conducts like this any more, and we are very much the poorer for it. **Paul Seydor**

**Further Listening:** Stokowski: *The Stereo Collection* (RCA); *The Columbia Recordings* (Sony)

# Top Ten CD Reissues of 2013

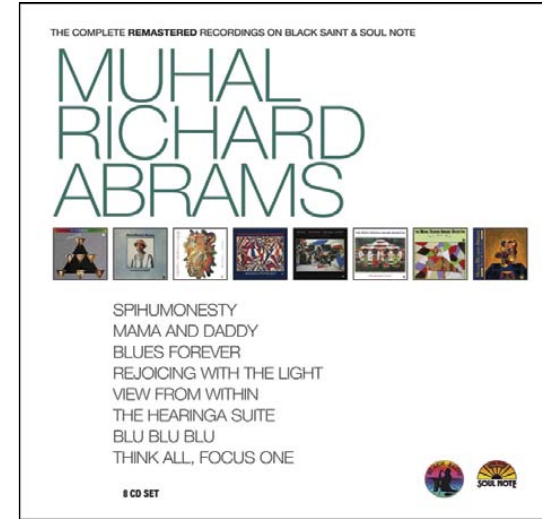


## Miles Davis Quintet: *Live in Europe 1969: The Bootleg Series Vol. 2*. Legacy (3 CDs).

Miles Davis' group evolved through the early 60s into what's known as his second great quintet, with Wayne Shorter on sax, Herbie Hancock, piano, Ron Carter, bass, and Tony Williams on drums, and remained stable until 1968. Davis then experimented with various lineups, until by mid-1969 his working unit was driven by a completely different rhythm section: Chick Corea, Dave Holland, and Jack DeJohnette. There are no studio records by this short-lived group, and until now documentation has been sporadic, but the music heard on these live recordings is, quite simply, the most adventurous of Davis' career. While the fusion soon to follow would be marked by

drummers keeping a steady beat, DeJohnette here sounds something like Elvin Jones with Coltrane—all over the place. Both Davis and Shorter play with fiery abandon, but the key ingredient is pianist Corea, who at this stage was an exciting avant-gardist, soon to form a quartet with Anthony Braxton. The material is an interesting mix of standards, holdovers from earlier times ("Milestones," "Footprints"), and tunes that would soon appear on *Bitches Brew*. Hype aside, until you know this music, you don't really know Miles Davis. **Duck Baker**

**Further Listening:** Chick Corea: *The Complete "Is" Sessions*



## Muhal Richard Abrams: *Complete Remastered Recordings*. Black Saint.

During his long association with the Black Saint label, Muhal Richard Abrams increasingly gravitated toward large ensembles, and this 8-CD set covering almost twenty years of recordings chronicles that evolution. Whereas many of his avant-garde colleagues embraced a more atonal and loosely-structured approach, Abrams shuffled personnel and instruments (whistle, vibes, tube, violin, Theremin, and synthesizer among them) in intricate arrangements. At times the more introspective and experimental early works have a chamber music quality while the most recent—*The Hearinga Suite*, *Blue Blu Blu*, and *Think All, Focus One*—are more extroverted,

their connection to the jazz tradition (including bop and pre-bop) that much clearer. Colorful, swinging, and spirited, those CDs should be played for people who complain that jazz is dry and stuffy. For that matter, this entire 1979-1995 compilation also helps counter the notion that the glory days of the avant-garde ended sometime in the 1970s. Italian-based Black Saint/Soul Note labels played a crucial role in supporting the genre, and their series of recently re-mastered compilations shows how lucky we are to have these recordings. **JW**

**Further Listening:** George Adams: *Complete Remastered Recordings*

# Top Ten CD Reissues of 2013



**Harry Nilsson: *The RCA Albums Collection*.** Legacy.

This 17-CD box-set chronicles the up-and-down career of one of pop's true masters. Nilsson—a brilliant, tortured soul who died in 1994 at age 51—sang the 1969 hit single “Everybody’s Talkin’” (by Fred Neil) from the film *Midnight Cowboy*; wrote Three Dog Night’s hit “One”; penned the score to the brilliant 1971 animated TV show *The Point*; and joined John Lennon on the then-ex-Beatle’s infamous Lost Weekend (documented on Nilsson’s 1974 album *Pussy Cats*). He could be funny (“Coconut”), sweet (“Me and My Arrow”), or fiercely romantic (as on the soaring power ballad “Without You,” which won the 1972 Grammy for best male pop vocal). But some of his best work evoked

his sophisticated, sentimental side (1973’s *A Little Touch of Schmilsson in the Night*, a collection of standards orchestrated by Sinatra arranger Gordon Jenkins). This set includes 14 expertly remastered original albums and three new discs of bonus tracks, many previously unreleased. Some highlight Nilsson as a singer and songwriter, but also include “Per Chi,” an Italian-language version of Badfinger’s “Without You;” a demo of “Coconut” replete with tricky tempo changes; and a hard-bitten funk take on 1975’s “A Tree Out in the Yard (Central Park),” mixed earlier this year by Thom Cadley. **GC**

**Further Listening:** *The Essential Nilsson*

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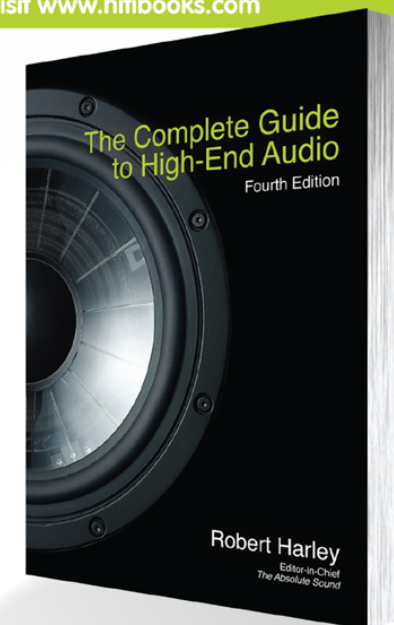
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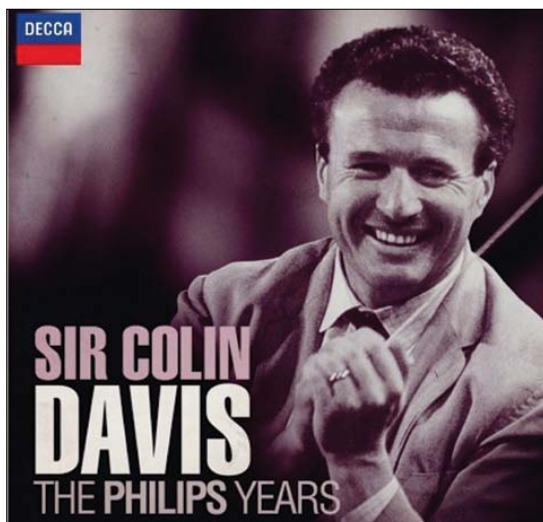
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# Top Ten CD Reissues of 2013



Music  Sonics 

**Sir Colin Davis: *The Philips Years*.**  
Decca (15-CD set)

The last of the great British conductors died when Sir Colin Davis passed away in April at 85. Back in the day I anticipated his recordings as eagerly as Bernstein's. This 15-CD box must have been rushed out to capitalize—let's be frank—upon his death. Regardless, it's a worthy tribute and one of best produced, presented, and (intelligently) selected of back-catalogue cannibalizations from the big classical labels scarfed up by multinational conglomerates, with excellent documentation and a fine essay on Davis' range and accomplishments between the mid-60s and the 80s as represented on Philips, for many of us his greatest recordings (along with some from his last years on LSO

Live). All concert music, there's nothing of his considerable operatic repertoire (save Tippett's *The Knot Garden*, the only odd choice—surely a couple of the symphonies would've been more at home in this company?)

Thirty-seven pieces are plainly too much music to cover in detail, so let me register two overall impressions: First, Davis was not a "personal" conductor in the sense of having a readily identifiable style or approach. As is not true of Toscanini, Furtwangler, Bernstein, Karajan, or Solti, I doubt one could listen to any of these performances in isolation and think, "ah, Colin Davis." Not that this is uninvolved, "objective" musicmaking—far from it, Davis's conducting being highly charged, urgently dramatic, full of emotion, and rhythmically incisive (yet rarely overly driven); and he was a master builder of glorious climaxes (Berlioz's *Requiem* and *Te Deum*, *The Planets*' "Mars"). It's just that he had a rare gift for identifying with the music without dominating it. Second, rarer than you might think, he knew how to secure an apposite sonority, the right "sound picture" as it were, for every composer, whether the spooky dissonances of Bartók piano concertos (Kovacevich), sumptuously colorful Berlioz yet tempered with Gallic elegance, chilly Sibelius with requisite weight of tone, Mozart (40<sup>th</sup>) and Haydn (94, 101, 104) generous of tone, vigorous and muscular, yet everywhere on point. And everything always beautifully played.

Though a formidable Mozartian (a last-minute substitute for Klemperer in *Don Giovanni* catapulted him to fame), a pinnacle for many of us remains his Berlioz, of whom he is the greatest interpreter for which there



is recorded evidence (the two choral pieces plus the *Fantastique* magisterial). Scarcely less fabulous is his Boston Symphony Sibelius cycle, represented by a staggeringly powerful First. His Dvorak Seventh and Ninth are turbulent and dark-hued, while the traditional modernist is represented by the aforementioned Bartók, Hindemith's von Weber *Metamorphoses* bracing, and Stravinsky's *Symphony in Three Movements*, beginning clangorously and throughout bigger boned than the composer imagined but full of wit, irony, and rhythmic verve. Though no Mahlerian, his *Das Lied* is intensely individual, "Der Abschied" (Jessye Norman) challengingly slow, almost static, desolate yet strangely compelling.

With a Beethoven Fifth and *Emperor* (Arrau), the *Enigma Variations*, more Mozart (including K450 with Haebler and *Exsultate, jubilate* with Te Kanawa), a *Firebird*, and still more, this set (self-recommendingly priced—\$55 at Amazon, under \$4/CD) could serve as a bountiful starter box for the novice collector while the older among us can reacquaint ourselves with a great conductor in his prime. The sonics are frequently superlative. **PS**

**Further Listening:** Davis' *Messiah* (Philips), Sibelius symphonies (Philips), all his Berlioz (Philips or LSO Live)

# Top Ten CD Reissues of 2013



Music  Sonics 

## Charles Mingus: *The Jazz Workshop Concerts 1964-65*. Mosaic (7 CDs).

Charles Mingus visited recording studios three times during 1963, resulting in his three outstanding records for Impulse. But when the label didn't renew his contract, he swore off record companies in disgust, and would not make another studio record until 1970, even going so far as to retire from performing for several years. Thankfully, however, he was recorded live on a couple of dozen occasions in the mid-60s, and some of the resulting music ranks with his very greatest. No fewer than 15 of these recordings were made by the spectacular sextet he assembled in March 1964 to do a couple of US concerts and a European tour. The first four CD's in this exemplary

collection come from two of these dates. The rest are drawn from appearances at the 1964 and '65 Monterey Concerts and in Minneapolis in '65. As an introduction to the period, this set is close to ideal, and specialists have over two hours of previously unheard material to savor.

The sextet that toured Europe was arguably the bassist's best-ever working band. One of the most original and influential altoists of all time, Eric Dolphy was probably the greatest soloist Mingus ever employed. He was equally adept on flute and on the unwieldy bass clarinet. Just as important was the presence of Jaki Byard and Dannie Richmond, surely the perfect pianist and drummer for Mingus (this same rhythm section is, happily, heard throughout the collection). Trumpeter Johnny Coles added a touch of delicacy, while the outstanding hard-bop tenor player Clifford Jordan sounds almost like the straight man here. The group's book was dominated by the leader's own compositions, including classics like "Peggy's Blue Skylight," and the prophetically titled "So Long, Eric" (Dolphy died at age 36, just two months after the tour ended).

Mingus appeared at Monterey in 1964 with Lonnie Hillyer on trumpet, Charles McPherson on alto, and John Handy on tenor, and basically stole the show. After two extended numbers, five more horns augmented the group for the stunning "Meditations on Integration," a 25-minute-plus epic that's one of the high points of this collection, and indeed of Mingus's career. The ad-hoc band bends itself to the leader's will and follows him through a labyrinthine group improvisation to a dizzying

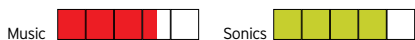
climax. The 1965 return date was less satisfying, owing mostly to his set having been cut short, but the four pieces heard here are invaluable for historic reasons, and one, "They Trespass the Land of the Sacred Sioux," is excellent.

The 1965 Minneapolis concert finds Hillyer and McPherson in the front line. Why the record of this concert was called *My Favorite Quintet* has always seemed unclear, but this was Mingus's working band during this period, and it's a good one. McPherson was more of a Charlie Parker disciple than Dolphy had been, and Hillyer was always dependable. Both men responded to the demands of this demanding leader with some of their most inspired playing. Some of the unissued tracks here are quite exciting, though one wishes the recording balance had been just a bit better, as Jaki Byard's brilliantly quirky accompaniment is hard to track at times. **DB**

**Further Listening:** CM: *The Black Saint and the Sinner Lady*; *Music Written For Monterey 1965*



# Top Ten New Vinyl Releases of 2013



**Donald Fagen: *Sunken Condos*.** Warner (CD and LP).

During Steely Dan's first go-round—the period from *Can't Buy a Thrill* (1972) to *Gaucho* (1980)—I remained dubious about the increasingly popular and steadily shrinking band. To me their reluctance to tour symbolized a growing distance between rock stars and fans. Their perfectionist tendencies in the studio plus a penchant for obscure lyrics also branded them as disengaged and aloof.

Yet I felt compelled to attend the New York Rock and Soul Revue starring Donald Fagen and Walter Becker in 1992. That was only the second show of the tour, but the half-dozen Steely Dan songs were played with an urgency that washed away my reservations.

When Donald Fagen raised his melodica to cue the horn section during “Josie” and the musicians responded with a look of intense purpose, it struck me that I was witnessing an artist who had as much business leading a band as anyone. That concert returned me to Steely Dan's catalogue at the same time that it instilled an interest in post-*Gaucho* releases, and thus far Fagen's solo work holds up at least as well as the group efforts. On his own Fagen has brought something new to the table, finding a lighter tone on *The Nightfly* and *Kamakiriad* and developing more extended compositions on *Morph the Cat*.

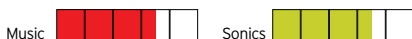
As with those releases, *Sunken Condos* boasts impressive musicianship. William Galison's harmonica adds a touch of sweetness to the proceedings while Michael Leonhart's vibes bring an eerie, otherworldly chill. The horn charts are sometimes quite ambitious, and the guitar solos by Jon Herington and Kurt Rosenwinkel combine studio expertise with that something extra that helped Steely Dan avoid the standard L.A. sound. Fagen and Leonhart coax nice riffs out of pianos, clavinetts, organs, and synthesizers. The 180-gram LP I listened to boasts remarkable clarity, although—I hesitate to say this because I've changed my mind before—at times it seems too clinical. At times, too, it seems as if top-drawer musicians and engineers do a stellar job of embellishing so-so material. *Sunken Condos* features some medium-tempo grooves that feel too comfortable for their own good, and lyrically some material comes off as uninspired. The insecurities besetting older men dating younger women becomes a tired

theme, especially compared to “Hey Nineteen” and “Babylon Sisters,” which were both wittier and darker.

It's primarily when Fagen ditches the relationship worries that *Sunken Condos* gels. The Cold War motif of “Memorabilia” will resonate with *Nightfly* fans. The funky Isaac Hayes composition “Out of the Ghetto” forces the band to turn off the cruise control, and the Klezmer touches create an intriguing musical crossroads. “Miss Marlene” involves a dead bowler whose presence can still be felt on Saturday nights. Sound maudlin? Perhaps it is, yet it's a memorable pop song. In “Good Stuff” a mob member with women problems invokes a strong work ethic in order to keep his emotions in check. It's sick, demented stuff—and one wishes this thug could share his brand of self-healing on *Dr. Phil*. Although “Planet D'Rhonda” is Fagen's third pass at the May-December theme, its lush, airy soundscape ultimately won me over—that and the line about CPR. **Jeff Wilson**

**Further Listening:** Steely Dan: *Katy Lied*; Donald Fagen: *Kamakiriad*

# Top Ten New Vinyl Releases of 2013



**Vivaldi: *The Four Seasons*.** L'Arte dell'Arco, Guglielmo. CPO (LP).

Since its founding in 1986, CPO has issued hundreds of superlative first-ever CDs of little-known classical music—mostly late-Romantic and modern-era works—that have much enlarged the recorded repertoire and brought joy to adventurous music lovers like me. Now this German label ventures into a “new” format: vinyl. The repertoire is both old and new: Vivaldi’s ever-popular *Four Seasons*, here in the first recording of a new arrangement which—following common practice in Vivaldi’s day—re-scores the work for different instrumental forces, adding winds (recorders, oboes, horns, and bassoons) to the original string-only ensemble. The result adds color to an already

exuberantly vibrant and pictorial score. The sinewy, penetrating period-style strings of L'Arte dell'Arco are joined by recorders tooting out birdcalls in verdant “Spring,” bassoons intoning solemn pedal-points in drowsy-then-stormy “Summer,” and horns sounding hunting-calls in vigorous “Autumn.” Only sere, blustery winter is left in its original strings-only dress (for reasons of authenticity explained in the liner notes). Soloist (and conductor) Federico Guglielmo plays with fiery abandon, and CPO’s sonics are detailed, immediate, and lively. Also available on CD. **Mark Lehman**

**Further Listening:** Mahler: Symphony 4, chamber version (Linos Ensemble)



**Cody Chesnutt: *Landing on a Hundred*.** Redeye (two 45rpm LPs).

*Landing on a Hundred* is a mature, thoughtful work that addresses such serious concerns as being a good father and husband and contributing to a community. At the same time it’s an infectious and often danceable slice of neo-soul that proves Cody Chesnutt has everything you need to be a convincing front man: lyrically imaginative, he can deliver a message without preaching; his voice is expressive and versatile; catchy melodies come naturally to him; and he’s an impressive band leader who keeps things tight even when he’s barking out instructions to group members. The album starts out so strong, with the upbeat and catchy reggae-tinged soul of “Till

I Met Thee,” “I’ve Been Life,” and “That’s Still Mama” commanding immediate attention, that you’d expect it to lose steam, but the varied set continues to evolve, exploring such extremes as the gloomy “Don’t Follow Me” and the sunny “Love is More than a Wedding Day.” The 2-LP 45rpm vinyl does a good job of capturing a cathedral-like sound that owes much to Marvin Gaye’s *What’s Going On*, but the track sequencing is so effective that a digital copy could save you from having to switch sides (and thereby break the spell) every few songs. **JW**

**Further Listening:** CC: *The Headphone Masterpiece*; Marvin Gaye: *What’s Going On*

# Top Ten New Vinyl Releases of 2013



**Jimi Hendrix: *People, Hell and Angels*.** Sony Legacy (CD and LP).

Being a musician can be an invitation to misery, as Jimi Hendrix discovered after making it to the top. By the time *Electric Ladyland* began taking shape he saw danger signs, and from there his problems only increased. Artistic and personal friction between Hendrix and bassist Noel Redding took its toll and threatened to capsize the Experience. Increasingly pressure came from black activists to change the racial makeup of his bands. A lawsuit put his career on hold, and in business affairs he was getting the raw end of a deal. At concerts fans called out for the hits, making him feel like a jukebox.

*People, Hell and Angels* is devoted to that troubled period that ended with Hendrix's

death. Musically the collection contains little that's revelatory. Although the seed was being sown for a more experimental approach—Hendrix jammed with John McLaughlin and Larry Young and planned to collaborate with Gil Evans—there are no hints here of where that might have led. As you might expect, there's superb guitar work on almost every song, but there are other recordings on which he flew higher. Many tunes Hendrix completists have heard already in a different form. On the plus side, the collection provides ample evidence of how Jimi reconnected with those he came into contact with before *Are You Experienced* catapulted him to fame. To some extent offering a leg up to musicians who hadn't shared his success seems like an act of generosity. Surely, though, he got something in return. Surrounded by sycophants and con artists, Hendrix must have felt eager to reach out to people he could trust, and perhaps that helped him preserve what sanity he had.

The four Band of Gypsys cuts include an ex-bandmate, bassist Billy Cox, as well as the drummer Buddy Miles, whom Hendrix befriended while both toured as sidemen. Of these tracks, the opener "Earth Love" stands out. It may, in fact, be the best cut on the album, with a rock-solid groove, fine supporting vocals by Miles, and some wildly cosmic lyrics. Billy Cox was also a member of the Gypsy Sun and Rainbows band that performed at Woodstock, as was another old bandmate, guitarist Larry Lee. The studio version of "Izabella" by the short-lived band is memorable, but to get the full experience you really need to hear, and see, their Woodstock performance.

"Let Me Move You" is a collaboration with saxophonist and vocalist Lonnie Youngblood, whom Hendrix had worked with as a sideman during his pre-Experience days. This up-tempo R&B jam offers a rare opportunity to hear an iconic musician perform as a sideman. Raw, gritty, and infectious, it harkens back to Hendrix's days with the Isley Brothers and Curtis Knight. The same spirit is present in "Mojo Man," a collaboration with Albert Allen from the International GTO's. Listening to the swagger that both Youngblood and Allen exude on vocals confirms where Jimi got it from.

Because this has been an issue in the past, I should add that *People, Hell and Angels* contains no posthumous tinkering with tracks by studio musicians. The sound is decent throughout (again, not a given with posthumous releases).  
**JW**

**Further Listening:** Jimi Hendrix: *Band of Gypsys*; *Live at Woodstock*

# Top Ten New Vinyl Releases of 2013



Music

**Arve Henriksen: *Solidification*.** Rune Grammofon (7 LPs).

Some music jumps up and down and begs for your attention. At the other end of the spectrum stands Arve Henriksen, a Norwegian trumpeter, vocalist, and multi-instrumentalist whose soft trumpet tone is inspired by the shakuhachi flute. Henriksen favors sparse settings, quiet passages, and glacial tempos. Playing with Zenlike concentration, he ensures that every note receives full attention. Even when a groove is established, the music seems remote. You have to come to it—and part of the pleasure of listening to Henriksen is escaping from the noisy everyday world.

Henriksen's music bears the stamp of his native country. While listening to *Solidification*

(with reissued material, unreleased tracks, and a new LP), I was reminded of *Dis*, where fellow Norwegian Jan Garbarek improvised on saxophone and wood flute over an Aeolian harp; I also thought of *Rosenfole*, on which Agnes Buen Garnas sang medieval songs from Norway. Like these musicians, Henriksen has recorded for ECM, and like them he sometimes comes across as a wild, untamed spirit, a nature mystic who seems far removed from the sterile confines of a studio.

As it turns out, he sometimes is. The earliest of these releases, *Sakuteiki*, primarily consists of performances recorded in churches and a museum. The contemplative quality you might expect from such settings is there in spades; so is a rich, natural reverb. Recorded direct to two-track with three microphones, *Sakuteiki* is a solo performance that presents Henriksen at his most austere; the busiest moments occur when he plays church organ with one hand and trumpet with the other.

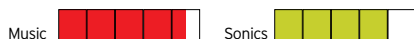
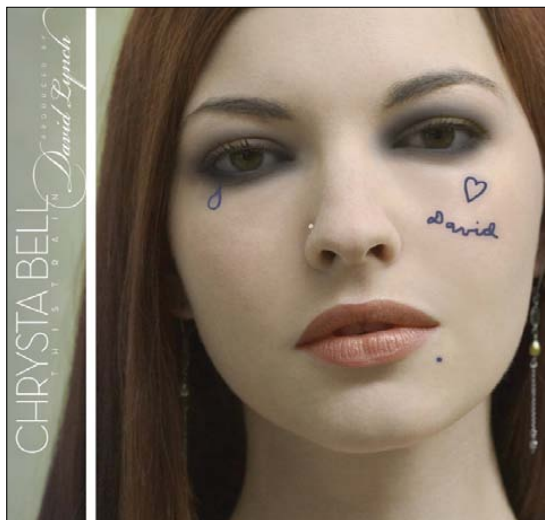
On *Chiaroscuro* Henriksen collaborates with Jan Bang on samples and electronics and Audun Kleive on percussion. Rather than spoil the mood, the electronics seem to merge the hi-tech with the tribal. On *Strjon*, where Henriksen is joined by his bandmates from Supersilent, even the song titles convey reverence for the natural world, from the most scaled-down ("Leaf and Rock") to the majestic ("Black Mountain"). Primarily a keyboard piece, "Glacier Descent" repeats a simple motif that builds in intensity; seldom have I heard such expressive use of electronics. Another solo effort, the new and previously unreleased *Chron*, is the quirkiest LP of the

bunch. Here the scenery changes frequently, with some pieces coming across as half-thought-out fragments. Again environment influences the performances, as some cuts were recorded on an airplane; apparently that was all it took for Henriksen to achieve a colder and less earthbound sound. *Chron* also has a touch of humor. On "Proto-Earth," it sounds as if a computer were programmed to play funk, but if so, something definitely went awry. The record also contains some of Henriksen's most straight-ahead, melodic, and concise trumpet passages. Here his resemblance to Danish trumpeter Palle Mikkelborg comes through most clearly, and I tend to prefer these moments over ones that are drawn out and highly introspective.

Sonics vary wildly on *Solidification*, from the warm atmospherics of *Sakuteiki* to the icy detachment of *Chron*. Although the source material was all digital, the decision to issue *Solidification* on vinyl along with a 24-page booklet seems a fitting way to draw together music from such a singular and provocative artist. The compilation also includes two data DVDs of WAV and FLAC files. **JW**

**Further Listening:** David Sylvian: *Uncommon Deities*; Supersilent: *11*

# Top Ten New Vinyl Releases of 2013

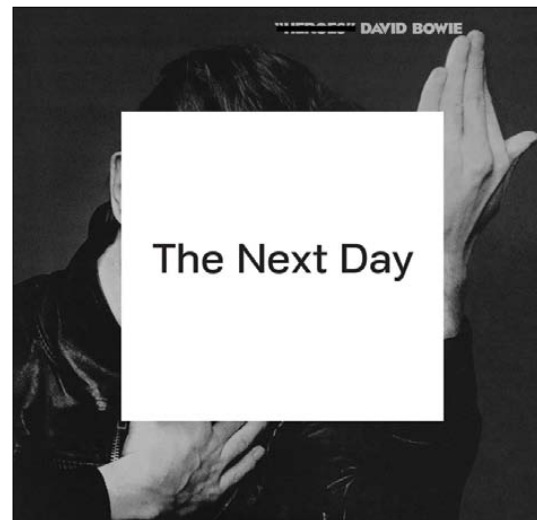


**Chrysta Bell: *This Train*.** La Rose Noire (CD and two 45rpm LPs).

Of David Lynch's recent musical projects, his solo effort, *Crazy Clown Time*, was quirky and interesting whereas *This Train*, a collaboration with singer Chrysta Bell, is seductive, bewitching, sultry, sensual, and hypnotic. Here Lynch plays producer, lyricist, multi-instrumentalist, and songwriter in support of Chrysta Bell's siren-like, reverb-drenched, heavily-layered vocals. The tempos are slow and the melodies mournful; the music often has a dreamlike quality, with lots of shimmering guitar and droning keyboards floating through a rich, expansive soundscape. Highlights include the dirge-like title track and "Angel Star," both of which do a masterful job of conveying loss

and longing. "Friday Night Fly" is edgier and "Swing with Me" and "Real Love" raunchier; these cuts convincingly leave the impression that the vocalist who sometimes seems to live in the spirit world is also prey to good old-fashioned earthly lust. If you're guessing that *This Train* is, like David Lynch films, far from casual, you're right, and I wouldn't recommend it for your next dinner party. That said, the dark romantics of the world need to own this record—and while you may not place yourself in that category, *This Train* may convince you otherwise. **JW**

**Further Listening:** Jennifer Warren: *Famous Blue Raincoats*; Julee Cruise: *Floating Into the Night*



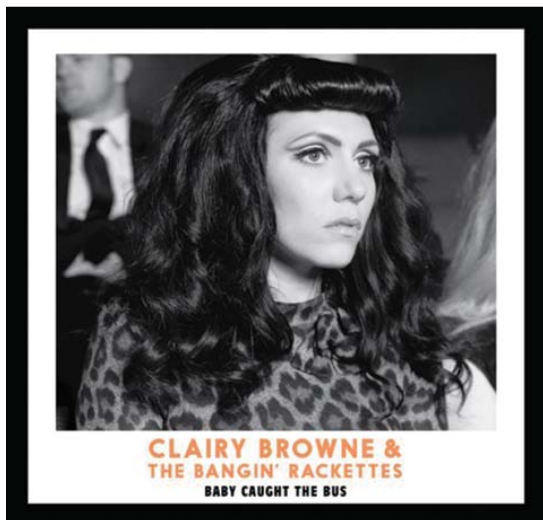
**David Bowie: *The Next Day*.** ISO (2 LPs and CD).

The top-secret recording sessions, recycled album cover, misleading lead-off single, and controversial video all point to the media games we expect each time David Bowie releases an album. In fact, extra-musical factors put such a spin on *The Next Day* that they threaten to obfuscate the obvious: here we have Bowie at his most straightforward—and rocking. What breathes instant life into the project is a revved-up and well-recorded rhythm section that may have been just what Bowie needed to shake off the cobwebs after a ten-year hiatus. Bowie remains in fine voice, and his songwriting is so consistent that, of the 17 tracks that appear on the vinyl release—which contains three bonus

cuts—the quality remains high throughout, with "Valentine's Day" and "I'd Rather Be High" taking top honors. The crunchy electric guitar and propulsive rhythms of *The Next Day* (which was mixed to tape with many backing tracks recorded live) seem tailor-made for vinyl, and two of the bonus cuts qualify as essential. "So She" proves that Bowie can still pen exotic art-pop confections while the alternate closing track "I'll Take You There" reminds you that this is first and foremost a rock 'n' roll album. **JW**

**Further Listening:** David Bowie: *Scary Monsters*; Tin Machine: *Tin Machine*

# Top Ten New Vinyl Releases of 2013



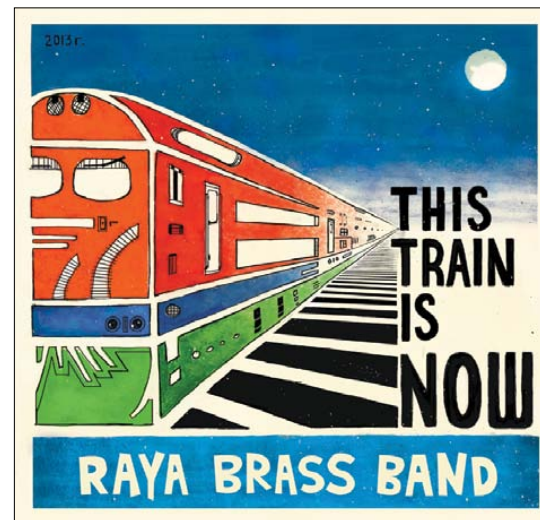
50s R&B, more Stax and King/Federal than Motown. Most of the strong songwriting is by Browne, producer Steven Schram, bassist Jules Pascoe, and saxophonist Darcy McNulty, whose baritone drives the arrangements. Together, this crew has done its homework, emulating the grinding, gritty soul and early rock 'n' roll of Memphis, Detroit, and even Kansas City's snarling honkers and bar walkers. Highlights include "Love Letter," "Baby Caught the Bus," "She Plays Up to You," and the doo-wop-inspired "Far Too Late." This is a sexy, lo-fi gem. **Greg Cahill**

**Further Listening:** James Hunter: *Kick It Around*



**Clairy Browne & the Bangin' Rackettes:** *Baby Caught the Bus*. Vanguard (LP and CD).

This campy Australian neo-soul group teased Stateside music fans last year with just a few seconds on camera singing their self-produced single "Love Letter" in a popular TV beer commercial. That flirtation sparked appearances this year at SXSW, a sold-out US club tour, and a deal with Vanguard to distribute this high-voltage debut album. The group is fronted by the raw, riveting singer Clairy Browne, who's supported by a trio of sassy backup singers. Browne uses her deep, smoky voice, bad-girl image, and kitschy vamping to plead with and scold unseen lovers. The music—and the group's polished stage show—is equal parts trash chic and beer-soaked, old-school



new material true to the idiom but making use of other things, trumpeter Ben Syversen's jazzy licks being an obvious example. I'd prefer this desire to add elements hadn't extended to digital drumbeats on some tracks as these seem to interfere with the group's natural rhythmic feel, and really, percussionist Nezh Antakli needs no assistance. Apart from this minor distraction, it's hard to imagine anyone not being delighted with this record. **Duck Baker**

**Further Listening:** Yuri Yunakov Ensemble: *New Colors in Bulgarian Wedding Music*



**Raya Brass Band:** *This Train Is Now*. Rock Paper Scissors (CD and LP).

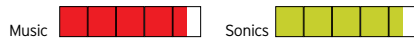
"Exuberant Balkan Music from the village of Brooklyn" is how this engaging gang of virtuosi bill themselves, a description which reflects the fact that, while their performance style is Balkan-based, they are happy to incorporate influences from closer to home. Or from anywhere that suits them, for that matter. The main stylistic elements are Bulgarian and Greek wedding music, but klezmer, jazz, and mariachi are also discernible in the mix. Calling Raya a brass band is a stretch as the group is basically three horns, an accordion doubling on keyboards, and a percussionist. They favor the odd-meter rhythms common in Balkan music, and use them to good effect. Even more impressive is how well they write and organize

# Top Ten New Vinyl Releases of 2013



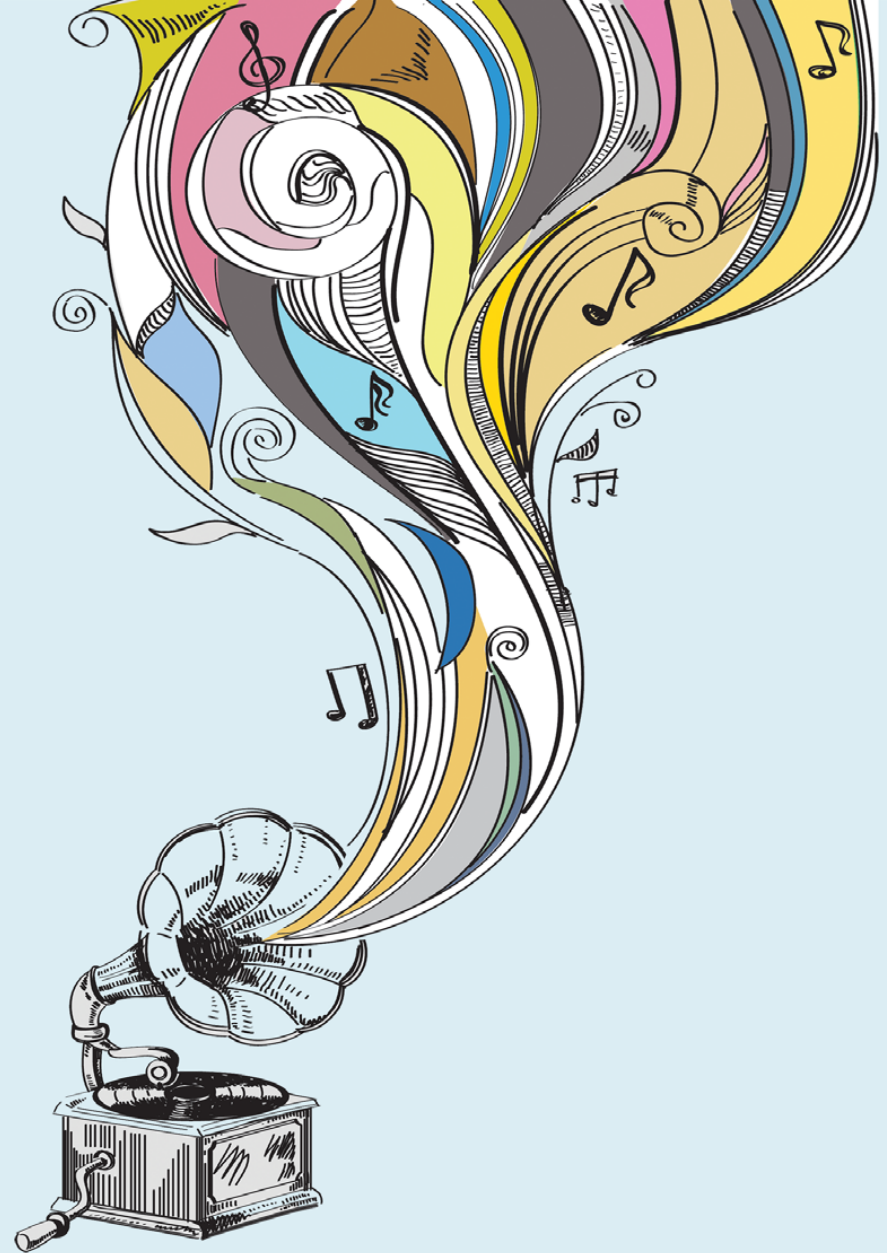
like "Nobody," "Jitterbug Waltz," and the jungle jazz ditty, "You Bring Out the Savage in Me," and there's a loose, relaxed feel to much of *WomanChild*, though things get tumultuous during her self-penned title track, where the music surges, pounding like waves. *WomanChild* is one of several Mack Avenue recordings that, along with CDs and downloads, is available on two-LP 180-gram vinyl. Considering the deep history of this music, that seems appropriate. JW

**Further Listening:** Valaida Snow: *Vol. 1, 1935-1947*



**Cecile McLorin Salvant: *WomanChild*.** Mack Avenue (CD and LP).

Two albums into her career Cecile McLorin Salvant has emerged as a distinct talent. On *WomanChild* the young vocalist seems equally poised and confident singing standards, folk, blues, originals, or early jazz songs recorded by Bessie Smith and Valaida Snow. Salvant has a deep voice, and when the situation warrants she can unleash a mean vibrato that works wonders on the old-timey numbers. In a variety of small-group settings (piano trio mostly), she and her band members even bring a fresh spin to such well-known jazz standards as "I Didn't Know What Time It Was" and "What A Little Moonlight Can Do" or the folk perennial "John Henry." She's marvelous on early jazz numbers



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# Top Ten Vinyl Reissues of 2013



**The Beatles.** Capitol (sixteen 180-gram LPs).

The quest for the best Beatles vinyl has pushed audiophiles into online bidding wars over Parlophone mono albums, original Capitol rainbow-label releases, 1982's Mobile Fidelity Sound Lab half-speed masters box-set, and Japanese Obi LPs (with delicate paper bands across the cover), among others. So word last fall that Capitol would reissue a 16-disc stereo vinyl box set, pressed on 180-gram vinyl, fueled anticipation. After all, the label's 2009 CD reissues had scored mostly high marks. The coveted catalog underwent a meticulous transfer of the original analog master tapes to 24-bit/192 kHz digital remasters. Those remasters were released as 16-bit/44 kHz CDs, though Capitol sold a higher resolution 24-

bit/48 kHz FLAC version on a limited-edition aluminum apple with a USB-drive "core." But there were problems: a drop out on the harmonica intro of "I Should Have Known Better," for instance, and other flaws.

For the vinyl transfers, the label has returned to the 24-bit/192 kHz digital remasters (the aforementioned problem was fixed). Engineer Sean Magee and his team used lacquer masters (instead of direct metal masters), employed the vintage Neumann VMS80 cutting lathe at Abbey Road, and opted not to de-noise or use a "limiting" process to boost volume. However, as TAS's Neil Gader pointed out in a September blog, returning to the digital remasters rather than the original analog tapes means these LPs can't pass the true analog test. For some inexplicable reason, the lacquers were cut from 44.1kHz/24-bit downconversions of the 192kHz/24-bit masters.

Here's what you get in this limited-edition LP box set: 12 British titles, plus the U.S. version of *Magical Mystery Tour* and a two-LP *Past Masters* set of singles and non-LP tracks; copies of the *Sgt. Pepper's* inserts, *Magical Mystery Tour's* 24-page booklet and the *White Album's* poster and iconic band photos; and a lavish 252-page hardbound book with essays and rare photos.

The Beatles' first four albums make their North American stereo vinyl debuts. *Help!* and *Rubber Soul* use George Martin's 1987 stereo remixes. On *Past Masters, Vols. 1 and 2*, "Love Me Do" (original single version), "She Loves You," "I'll Get You," and "You Know My Name (Look Up the Number)" are presented in mono.

The bass is tight, the highs are clear, and the

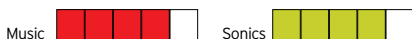
recordings have consistent clarity, but lack the midrange heft heard on earlier LPs. And, while these recordings were not remixed, the EQing has had an effect: on "Fixing a Hole," for example, the once-prominent splashy hi-hat and tight brushwork are washed down in the mix. When the pressing is clean, the sound quality can match, or even surpass, the MoFi masters. But several of the pressings I reviewed had defects: ragged edges; excessive dirt that caused surface noise, especially between tracks and in quieter passages; numerous pops, clicks, and skips; and warping on three discs.

The stereo LPs aren't the absolute audiophile experience (a mono box is due later this year). For the best expression of the Beatles' 24-bit/192kHz digital remasters, you can hope Capitol releases this catalog on Blu-ray. Until then, there's always a \$1000-plus Mo-Fi LP box-set up for bid on eBay. . . **Greg Cahill**

**Further Listening:** The Beatles: *The Collection* (Mobile Fidelity); *Let It Be . . . Naked*



# Top Ten Vinyl Reissues of 2013

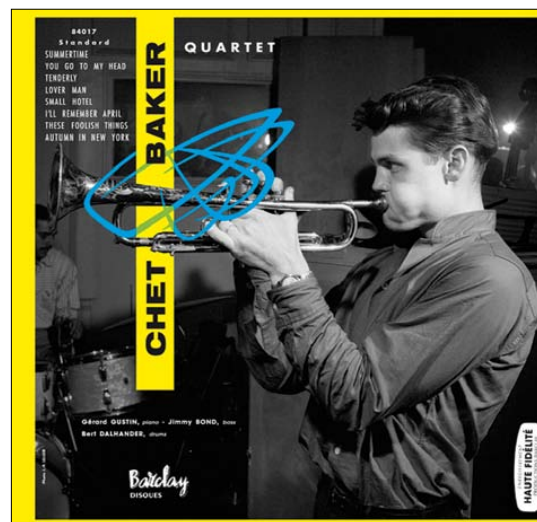


**Sam Rivers: *Fuchsia Swing Song*.** Music Matters (two 45rpm LPs).

Years ago I heard the Sam Rivers trio at a miniscule San Francisco jazz club; it remains one of the most memorable live music experiences of my life, even though until I'd heard the Mosaic set listed below, Rivers wasn't really on my radar screen. Whether this brilliant composer and saxophonist is on yours or not, I urge any jazz lover to consider Music Matters' superb reissue of Rivers' 1965 Blue Note debut, *Fuchsia Swing Song*. With Jaki Byard (piano), Ron Carter (bass), and Tony Williams on drums, Rivers' tenor sax speaks freely and eloquently, yet with great focus. His tone richly textured and throaty, his style smart yet earthy. His six tunes for this album

range from the energetic bop of the title track, to more laidback blues-based numbers in which his band mates prove *muy simpatico*. Other highlights include the sizzling "Luminous Monolith," the lovely ballad "Beatrice," and the gently swinging "Ellipsis." The recording is among the best from Van Gelder's solid-state years: immediate and dynamic, with an organic balance, tonal naturalness, and vivid sense of four guys making music in the same space together. **Wayne Garcia**

**Further Listening:** *The Complete Blue Note Sam Rivers* (Mosaic)



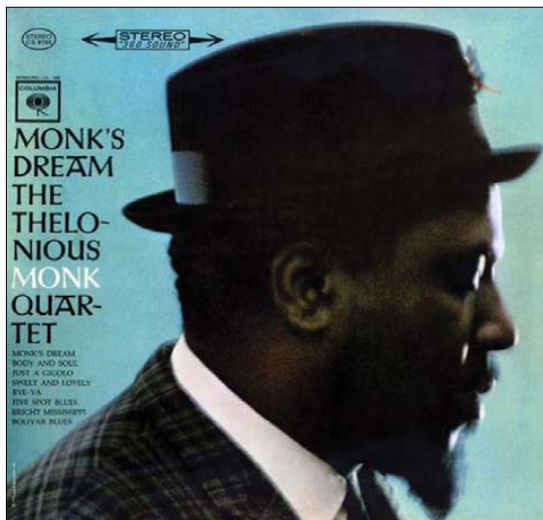
**Chet Baker Quartet: 1 & 2.** Sam Records (LPs).

Although recorded within two weeks of each other, *Chet Baker Quartet 1* and *2* are quite different records. Because pianist Dick Twardzik was calling the tunes, *1* consisted of Bob Zieff compositions that shared a Modernist slant. Ten days later Twardzik died from a heroin overdose, and the next session, featuring two personnel changes, was—probably because the musicians weren't as familiar with each other—devoted to well-known standards. No harm done, though, as *2* presents an opportunity to hear Chet Baker dive into several ballads. Sad, poignant, and hauntingly beautiful, "You Go to My Head," "Tenderly," "Lover Man," "Autumn in New York," and "These Foolish Things" are

classic Chet Baker. Yet the earlier recording, which contains no ballads, is as good as the second. In this atypical setting Baker never sounds less than distinguished, his lyricism intact even on the most hard-driving bop. Remastered from original master tapes and pressed by Pallas in Germany, these 180-gram mono LPs stand out for their clarity. The piano never sounds murky, the brush and cymbal work comes through nicely, the bass has real heft, and the trumpet floats above the other instruments so weightlessly you'd swear it was a voice. **Jeff Wilson**

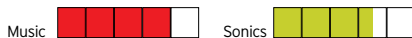
**Further Listening:** *Chet Baker & Crew*; *Chet Baker in Europe*

# Top Ten Vinyl Reissues of 2013



playing, it lacks a bit of the electrifying tension found on Monk's Riverside releases. But then Monk was Monk, one of jazz's most brilliant and fascinating pianists, and I'm happy to have multiple editions of his records. The sound here, as compared to original mono and stereo pressings, is more dynamically nimble and present, as well as tonally somewhat cooler. But if the early LPs sound warmer, they also have a hooded coloration that floats over the sound, making them sound more homogenized, and not as lively as this fine Impex reissue. **WG**

**Further Listening:** TM: *Live in Tokyo*; Monk's *Music* (Analogue Productions 45rpm)



**Thelonious Monk Quartet: *Monk's Dream*.** Impex (LP).

After a 5-year stint at Riverside, during which he recorded his finest body of work, a contract dispute would land Thelonious Monk at Columbia Records, a label with vastly greater resources for recording as well as promotion. Produced by Teo Macero, *Monk's Dream* was the first LP for his new label, and would also become the best selling of Monk's career. With the solid backing of his regular quartet members, Charlie Rouse (tenor sax), John Ore (bass), and Frankie Dunlop (drums), Monk recorded a typical mix of self-penned tunes and standards, with his own "Bright Mississippi" being the only totally fresh contribution. Although this is a terrific record, with outstanding group



(both of which feature the Brecker brothers on horns). Their own "Lord of the Thighs" evokes a sexy, witchy vibe. And, on a cover of rockabilly great Johnny Burnett's "Train Kept a Rollin'," the band gets in touch with its inner Yardbirds for one of the era's best boogies. Aerosmith would return to pop on 1975's *Toys in the Attic*. But this numbered, limited-edition audiophile pressing captures all the stray-cat strut of one of America's truly classic rock bands. **GC**

**Further Listening:** Aerosmith: *Toys in the Attic*; Montrose: *Montrose*



**Aerosmith: *Get Your Wings*.** Columbia/Legacy (180-gram LP).

In the fall of 1973, I used to lounge around my New Hampshire house listening to this epic sophomore LP on a big old Magnavox console. The previous year, the band had released its eponymous debut, which spun the smash hit "Dream On." Just a year before that, Aerosmith had graduated from the New England ballrooms and New York City clubs, where singer Steve Tyler and guitarist Joe Perry had honed their Mick and Keith routine. On *Get Your Wings*, the band ditches pop for a steely, snarling hard-rocking sound that would help define 70s rock. The music exudes malice, thanks to such originals as the bitter "Same Old Song and Dance" and "Pandora's Box"

# Top Ten Vinyl Reissues of 2013



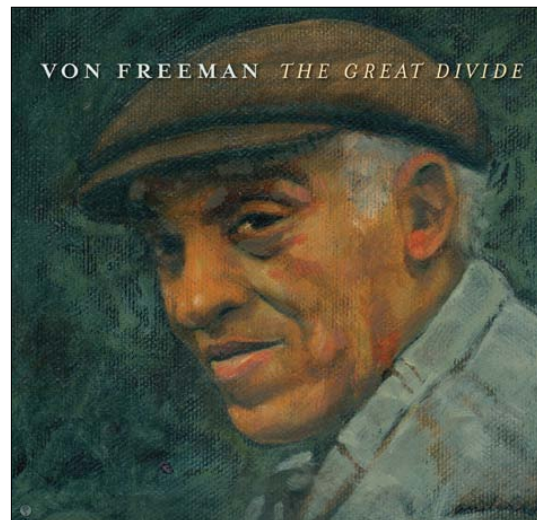
Laura Nyro, who at seventeen seemed to have done as much living as Billie Holiday. These compositions bring out the best in BS&T: the arrangements are imaginative, masterfully mixing styles and moods, and David Clayton-Thomas sings with authority. Again ORG amazes me with its ability to capture everything from the minutest minutiae to the rich blend of brass and/or flutes. Pressed at RTI and mastered by Bernie Grundman from the original analog master tapes, this is the definitive version of a memorable record. **JW**

**Further Listening:** Laura Nyro: *More Than a New Discovery*



**Blood, Sweat & Tears.** ORG (two 45rpm LPs).

Returning to *Blood, Sweat & Tears* after wearing the grooves out in grade school, I'm less impressed in some respects, yet there are strengths that eluded me the first time. Then I had no idea what a great drummer Bobby Colomby was—crisp, precise, relentlessly swinging, and remarkably versatile—and I now savor the impressionist instrumental harmonies of “Variations on a Theme by Eric Satie” and “Sometimes in Winter.” Also, placing “God Bless the Child” with “And When I Die” back to back is a nice touch. Both are profound songs written by major female artists from different generations. One was Billie Holiday, who experienced more in one lifetime than most of us would in ten, and the other was



Miles, Trane, and Cannonball—and on *Doin' It Right Now*. Mastered for vinyl by Doug Sax and pressed at RTI, the 180-gram LP boasts a lucid sound that perfectly complements the intimate performance, the bass and piano crystal clear while the closely-miked sax is free to employ the utmost subtlety, a strategy that's particularly effective on the remarkable solo performance of “Violets For Your Furs.” However, top honors go to “Blue Pres,” a Lester Young tribute that's a must for straight-ahead jazz lovers who appreciate one master paying homage to another. **JW**

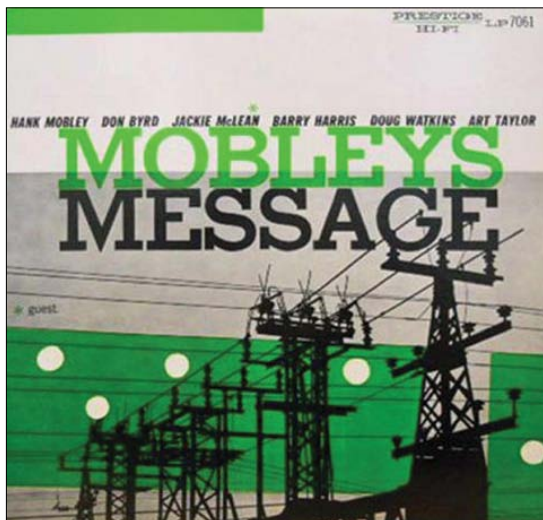
**Further Listening:** Von Freeman: *Doin' It Right Now*; Lester Young: *Blue Lester*



**Von Freeman: *The Great Divide*.** Premonition (LP).

When tenor saxophonist Von Freeman released his 1972 debut *Doin' It Right Now*, he revealed a unique blend of influences tracing back as far as the seemingly bygone age of swing. He continued to play in an authentic, unstudied manner throughout his career, and the inspiration he derived from previous masters, Hawk and Pres in particular, is still evident on 2004's *The Great Divide*, a previously CD-only release reissued now on vinyl. This gorgeous set includes the stellar accompaniment of pianist Richard Wyands (whose discography extends back to some classic Gene Ammons sides on Prestige), bassist John Webber, and drummer Jimmy Cobb, who recorded with

# Top Ten Vinyl Reissues of 2013



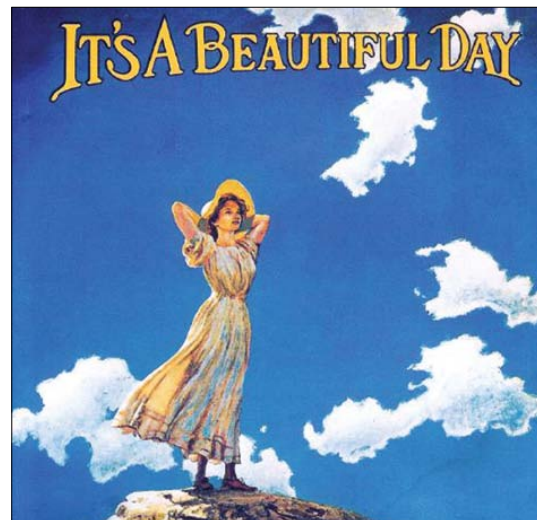
Donald Byrd. Altoist Jackie McLean is also on hand for Parker's "Au Privave," and the rhythm section of Barry Harris on piano, Doug Watkins on bass, and Art Taylor on drums, provides perfect support. By the time Mobley started his long association with Blue Note a few months later, he was really ready to deal, but hard-bop devotees shouldn't overlook *Mobley's Message*, especially when they can savor this superb vinyl reissue. **Duck Baker**

**Further Listening:** Hank Mobley: *No Room For Squares*



**Hank Mobley: *Mobley's Message*.** Analogue Productions (LP).

Hank Mobley was one of those musicians whose recording career took off in a hurry when he was a young man but wound almost completely down by the time he turned 40. This 1956 date catches him at the beginning of a 12-year stretch during which he led about two dates a year and appeared on dozens of others, establishing himself as one of the definitive tenor players of the hard-bop era, and also one of its finest composers. *Mobley's Message* includes a couple of early originals along with one standard and one tune each by three of the greatest writers of the early-modern era, Charlie Parker, Bud Powell, and Thelonious Monk. For most of the proceedings Mobley is joined by trumpeter



by Pattie Santos' more straightforward style and attractive voice. What makes it all work is that on the most memorable numbers, like the harpsichord-driven "Girl With No Eyes" and especially the evocative "White Dove," the various stylistic elements create a synthesis of psychedelia and art rock that's so much of its time as to almost have a folksy quality. It's great to have this cult favorite available on vinyl again, and on particularly beautiful vinyl, at that. **DB**

**Further Listening:** Moby Grape; *It's A Beautiful Day*; *Marrying Maiden*



***It's A Beautiful Day*.** Speakers Corner (LP).

Psychedelic fans will welcome the reissue of the first record by one of the most interesting (if not most successful) bands to have come out of San Francisco in the 1960s. Leader David Laflamme had played violin with both the Utah Symphony Orchestra and Dan Hicks & his Hot Licks when he decided to form a new group during the Summer of Love. With his wife, Linda, on keyboards, and Hal Wagenet on guitar, *It's a Beautiful Day* was armed with very sophisticated instrumentalists who liked to mix both instrumental timbre and style. David Laflamme's singing is stagy and melodramatic, more reminiscent of pop singers like Tom Jones than of other rockers, but suits the offbeat material and is very well balanced

# Top Ten Vinyl Reissues of 2013



**Strauss: Elektra.** Vienna Philharmonic, Solti. Speakers Corner (2 LPs).

Decca's early-stereo *Salome* is an audiophile landmark; no surprise it made the "TAS Top 40 Best-Sounding Recordings" in our July/August issue. *Elektra*—Strauss' follow-up, another lurid, blood-drenched parable of lust and revenge—is even more daring, stretching harmonies to extremes of discordance and intensity never-before-heard in an opera house. Made five years after *Salome* with the same stellar musicians (headlined by conductor Georg Solti and soprano Birgit Nilsson), venue, and production team (John Culshaw and Gordon Parry), Decca's recording again captured every shading of torment, pitch-black irony, and exultant ferocity in a riveting performance. As

good as the original release is, the Speakers Corner reissue benefits from both superb re-mastering that improves on the technical means available in 1966 (see Rob Pennock's detailed report on re-mastering Golden Age Deccas in Issue 229) as well as superior vinyl (pressed by Pallas in Germany) that noticeably lowers the noise threshold. The resulting sound is so much better it startled me when I compared the recordings; details are clearer (low strings more sharply articulated and potent), singers and orchestra more present and more vividly arrayed on a larger, airier soundstage. A very good recording is now spectacular, bringing Strauss' theatrical extravaganza to even fuller life. **Mark Lehman**

**Further Listening:** Birtwistle: *The Minotaur* (Blu-ray Disc)



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# Top Ten High-Res Downloads of 2013

## **Grateful Dead: *Workingman's Dead*. (96/24) HDtracks.com**

*Workingman's Dead* epitomizes the Dead's ability to seamlessly fuse folk, country, and blues using mostly acoustic arrangements, unpretentious playing, and loose harmonies. It even includes a couple of tunes that have easily stood the test of time. If this is your thing, this is your album. But which format? I didn't have the original CD, but I did audition the subsequent Rhino release and found problems. On certain tracks, notably "Casey Jones," the vocals are so sharp they're piercing, which seriously messes with the album's intended mellow vibe. Also, the vocals are so forward in the mix they relegate everything else to the background. Some tracks are less abrasive, but in no case do instruments emerge from the haze.

It takes only two seconds to hear the sonic improvements in the download, which gives the impression that the players all took three steps toward the microphone—and they cleaned the tape heads. Not only can the guitars be heard, they also have real body and air around them. Vocals remain prominent, but now there's a band to balance them out. Meanwhile, all traces of vocal shrillness are gone. Clearly the download is *the* version to own. For me, at least, it's revelatory. **Alan Taffel**

## **Rod Stewart: *Every Picture Tells a Story*. (96/24 and 192/24) HDtracks.com**

Listening to this classic album is refreshing in so many ways. Here's a band, fronted by Stewart's guitarist chum Ronnie Wood before he was a Rolling Stone, that could be considered "rag

tag" or even sloppy. They didn't bother about perfectly lining up every part to the measure marker—or even to each other. Stewart's vocals could hardly be considered pristine, either. Yet the resultant music is so much more human than today's quantized and auto-tuned exercises. Equally refreshing are lyrics that haven't been through a political correctness filter. Imagine a modern paean for a "slit-eyed lady" offering a "ride on the Eastern moon." Finally, it's bracing to hear Stewart in prime voice and feisty spirit, as opposed to his current incarnation as a standards crooner. The material has held up well, too. Most listeners will immediately think of the Stewart-penned hits, such as the title track, "Maggie May," and "Mandolin Wind," but the covers are equally rewarding. These include the definitive version of "I Know I'm Losing You" and a surprisingly tender "Someone Like You."

So how do the downloads sound? Overall, pretty darned good, at either resolution. This is one album that will never fool you into thinking the musicians are in the room. But nor is it harsh, muffled, bright, or afflicted with any of the other common pop maladies. Sound quality rises in inverse proportion to the number of musicians playing. For instance, several songs begin with a guitar, piano, or mandolin solo, with Stewart then joining in. These moments have a beautiful purity—a purity that crashes in flames as soon as the rest of the band enters.

The 96/24 download is hard to fault; it does nothing to compromise the virtues described above. The 192/24 version has a tad more top-end extension, which allows it to "breathe" a

little more. The difference is subtle, so unless you have a top-drawer USB DAC and cable I doubt you'll be able to hear it. On the other hand, the various CD editions clearly can't compete with either download. The 1988 re-master sounds tubby and claustrophobic, and suffers from some sort of time-based distortion that raises the hair on the back of my neck. The MFSL version fixes both problems, but this version is muffled throughout. Bottom line: download the highest-resolution file you think your system can handle and prepare for a thoroughly enjoyable experience. **AT**

## **Beethoven: *Symphony No. 3. Creatures of Prometheus and Egmont Overtures*. Orquesta Sinfónica Simón Bolívar, Gustavo Dudamel. (96/24) HDtracks.com**

## **Mahler: *Symphony No. 5. Philadelphia Orchestra, Yannick Nézet-Séguin*. (96/24) HDtracks.com**

Gustavo Dudamel is to conducting what Lang Lang is to piano playing. Both men are phenomenally talented (and photogenic) young musicians with an ultra-dynamic stage presence who've been in the public eye since they were teenagers. Both have hyperactive PR departments behind them to support each new release. And both seem immune to any sort of criticism, as if it would be unseemly to ever suggest that these two anointed saviors of Classical Music could ever be capable of an artistic misstep.

Sometimes good hair and podium pirouettes aren't enough. Dudamel's new version of the

*"Eroica"* Symphony with the Orquesta Sinfónica Simón Bolívar—the ensemble of which he was named music director at 18; now 32, he's also in charge of the Los Angeles Philharmonic—is pretty ordinary. The opening Allegro con brio gets a bit sing-songy and Dudamel's Funeral March is the longest I've ever encountered, the conductor dragging the movement out to 17:39. After the Symphony comes two shorter Beethoven items, *The Creatures of Prometheus* and *Egmont Overtures*; the latter may be the most successful selection on the program in achieving a Beethovenian solidity. The musicians of the Venezuelan ensemble play competently, sometimes more than that, as with the stirring horn passage in the *Eroica's* third movement Trio section. The sonic presentation is rather flat and not especially refined, no better than a good CD.

It's a very different scenario in Philadelphia. When Yannick Nézet-Séguin was named the eighth Music Director of the Philadelphia Orchestra in 2010, most casual music-lovers in The City of Brotherly Love hadn't heard of him. (Even now, that last name is too complicated and most locals simply refer to the 36-year-old conductor as "Yannick".) The French-Canadian steadily built a career over the past 15 years and has been impressing Philadelphia audiences since he arrived with memorable performances of blockbusters like the Verdi Requiem and Mahler's Sixth Symphony. If this reading of Mahler's Fifth isn't as white-hot as venerated versions of old from Bernstein and Solti, it nonetheless manifests the composer's characteristic emotional volubility. We also

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get *prima facie* evidence that the PO has been built into one of the finest orchestral groups on earth by its recent conductors; a special treat is Jennifer Montone's graceful execution of the Scherzo's obbligato French horn part. The sound from Verizon Hall has superior front-to-back layering and a good sense of the performing space. **Andrew Quint**

**Chesky: *New York Rags*. (192/24) HDtracks.com**

By the time you're reading this, the CD iteration of David Chesky's astounding *New York Rags* will have been released. *Don't get it*: This music and recording deserve the highest of high fidelity and that's just what the 192/24 download delivers. The piano sound is immediate but not claustrophobic. The listener gets an enormous amount of detail: it's apparent that the Yamaha DCFX Mark IV Disklavier concert grand recorded at the Hirsch Center in Brooklyn has been meticulously regulated, voiced, and tuned. This is certainly among the finest piano recordings ever made. And do try it with headphones for an extraordinary binaural "dummy head" experience. You're getting the performer's aural perspective. Except, of course, that there *is* no performer: the instrument is a "reproducing piano," programmed to flawlessly render Chesky's pianistically impossible miniatures.

Chesky is a New Yorker through-and-through. ("I really don't go to the Colorado Rockies or the Pacific Northwest and look at sunsets. I'm not inspired by that," he told TAS's Bill Milkowski, who wrote the album's program notes.) These pieces, in addition to serving as

an homage to the great ragtime composers of generations ago (Scott Joplin, James Scott, Joseph Lamb, et al.) also reflect Chesky's irrepressible love for his hometown. Most of the rags are played at brisk, sometimes manic tempos that reflect the pace of life in The Big Apple, both public ("Times Square", "Penn Station") and domestic ("Kids You're Late for School Rag"). The "J Walker Rag" has a slightly loopy feel—a native citizen ignoring a flashing *Don't Walk* sign, oblivious to the traffic rushing by—while the "Fourth Street Rag" sports the vibe of a Lower Manhattan hipster. There are nods to other musicians besides the Ragtime gods. "The Bernstein" has the slightest whiff of *West Side Story* (Chesky has always been a genius at just hinting at the essence of another composer when he pays tribute) and "The Duke" suggests both Edward Kennedy Ellington's refined piano style and a big band sonority. Those familiar with Conlon Nancarrow's player-piano studies may also detect affinities to those spidery, jangling mid-century excursions in superhuman rhythmic complexities. But, mostly, we get David Chesky's distinctive, disciplined yet spontaneous voice: The harmonic language is a sophisticated polytonality, meters are often irregular, and melodies asymmetric and spiky, as Chesky conjures up panoramas of his beloved Gotham. **AQ**

**Billy Joel: *The Stranger*. (88/24) HDtracks.com**

Typical of Billy Joel's music, *The Stranger* contains songs of undeniable loveliness and

catchiness—as well as an all-too-generous helping of maudlin moments. But by now you know how you feel about this music, so I'll talk no more about it and turn instead to sonic matters.

*The Stranger* has seen numerous CD-format releases. I had on hand the original issue as well as the super-duper Legacy version, which includes an entire extra disc containing a live concert. Between these two the original is decidedly better sounding. The Legacy edition is *louder*, but you know what *that* usually means. Sure enough, this version is compressed, and that compression renders Phil Ramone's production lifeless and the sound irritating.

So what about the download? It's one of those slam dunks. The hi-res version of this album is *much* more revealing than the CD; yet, at the same time, it is also far more relaxing to listen to. And that's not all. Upbeat songs like the title track get newfound drive, while softer entries such as "Just the Way You Are" take on greater beauty. In sum, the download is a major step up from the CD, and highly recommended. **AT**

**Janis Joplin: *Pearl*. (192/24) HDtracks.com**

The original CD of this superb blues-rock standard—sadly, Joplin's last studio release—suffers from a surfeit of grunge and puts an artificial edge on Joplin's voice—the last thing it needs. A later CD, *The Pearl Sessions*, contains additional material but no sonic improvement to the original tracks, which sound identical. (The liner notes are unclear about whether this is supposed to be the case, but either way, it

is.)

HDtracks offers *Pearl* in two resolutions. The 96k version at first resembles the CD. Then you notice that it is blessedly missing about half of that nasty vocal edge and virtually all the grunge. On further listening, you become aware that the download has noticeably tighter rhythms and greater top-end extension.

At 192k there are even fewer digital artifacts; yet, for some reason, the music doesn't "move" as well at this sample rate. The music sounds bogged down and sluggish. This appears to be a case where, in going to an even higher resolution, the baby got thrown out with the bath water. (It happens more often than you might think.) At any rate of all the digital versions of *Pearl* extant, the best I've heard and the clear choice is the 96k download. **AT**

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## **The Band: *The Last Waltz*. (48/24) HDtracks.com**

Here's the soundtrack to one of rock's greatest concert films (along with *Stop Making Sense* and *Woodstock*). Its charms are many, including the enduring songs, superior musicianship—especially Robbie Robertson's herky-jerky guitar and Levon Helm's gravel-throated vocals—and the amazing guest roster (Eric Clapton, Joni Mitchell, Bob Dylan, Van Morrison, and on and on). Yet the most astonishing thing about *The Last Waltz* is the chameleon-like way The Band just drops into the perfect style for each guest artist. Without seeing Martin Scorsese's masterful film, for instance, you could be forgiven for thinking Muddy Waters brought his own backup players.

Still, for all its musical strengths, the original CD is not especially pleasant to listen to. Dynamics are flat, as is spatial perspective. The sound can get rather gritty, too. In 2002, Rhino Records came to the rescue, bestowing upon the album the full deluxe re-issue/re-master treatment. The contrast to the original

CD is dramatic. Forget about a veil being lifted; Rhino removed all seven! Dynamics, space, extension (both high and low), pace, and a visceral sense of presence are all here in spades. So the question for the download becomes: how does it stack up against the Rhino CD? One would expect them to be close. After all, the resolutions aren't that different—the download is 48k to the CD's 44.1k—though of course the download enjoys a 24 to 16 bit-depth advantage. As it turns out, these small differences are insufficient to compensate for the superiority of the Rhino re-master, to which HDtracks presumably didn't have access. Yes, the download is more refined and transparent than the original CD; but it can't match the openness and verve of the Rhino disc.

That a particular physical disc sounds better than the corresponding download is academic if the disc in question is an audiophile limited-release and now hard to obtain. That's not the case here. So while this download is good, the superior Rhino CD is readily available. If you don't have it, you should. **Arthur B. Lintgen**

## **Stravinsky: *Le Sacre du printemps*. *Firebird Suite*. *Scherzo à la Russe*. *Tango*. *Budapest Festival Orchestra*, Fischer.**

## **Vivere. *Ragazze Quartet*. BOTH: Channel Classics. (DFF stereo and multichannel) channelclassics.com**

Channel Classics is one of a very few labels to currently sell DSD downloads. Its entire SACD catalog, over 130 titles, is available as stereo DFF files and, as of this writing, there are about

a dozen multichannel offerings. These files are huge—an SACD-length program weighs in at 5-7 gigabytes—and takes a few hours to download.

If you're not one of the very few who can actually decode a DSD file with your processor, you'll be asking your music management software to convert the DFF files to PCM. Things will work out much better if you pick a multiple of 44.1 kHz, rather than 48, 96, or 192. Also—and I have TAS computer-audio maven Karl Schuster to thank for the advice—resist the temptation to convert to 176.4kHz and go instead with 88.2. The lower sampling rate will prevent contamination of your sound with the ultra-high-frequency "noise-shaping" artifact of the DSD encoding process. As Karl put it, unless you want to "drive away bats or torture dogs," don't invite that stuff in.

Whether the repertoire is Dvorák, Beethoven, or Mahler, Iván Fischer is not a conductor given to grandstanding. His reading of *The Rite of Spring* has neither Leonard Bernstein's savagery nor the precision of Pierre Boulez. It's nonetheless an appealing performance that's beautifully shaped and colored, and undeniably danceable. Fischer's interpretive tendencies are better suited to *Firebird*, where the splendid tonal resources of the Budapest Festival Orchestra are put to good use. Stravinsky's circus-like *Scherzo à la Russe* and his tart but wistful *Tango* fill out the program.

The four young women who make up the *Ragazze Quartet* trained for two years at the Dutch String Quartet Academy and have since seen international success. Their death-obsessed debut program for Channel is, oddly,

entitled *Vivere*, Latin for "to live." Never mind. We get robust but aptly scaled performances of two chamber music staples, Haydn's "Quinten" and Schubert's "Death and the Maiden" quartets. Technically, the playing is top-notch and ensemble blend is gorgeous—but it's the lyrical, yearning quality that makes this program essential. Completing the program is a work by the contemporary German composer Jörg Widmann, his *Hunting Quartet*. The four players start off amiably enough but...well, let's just say that the *Ragazze* finishes as a trio.

Comparing the stereo DFF download to stereo SACD playback, while both are excellent, the download gets the nod. With the files, there's more tonal richness, superior spatial representation, and a more effortless sense of dynamic headroom—those 11 cataclysmic timpani/bass drum strokes that begin "Glorification of the Chosen One" in Part II of *The Rite*, for example. As for multichannel playback of DFF files: two-channel 88.2kHz data can exit your computer via a USB DAC for decoding in your processor but that doesn't fly for HD surround sound. For that, most will employ HDMI and standard implementations won't do the 44.1 multiples. Converted to 96 or 192kHz PCM, Channel's DSD-sourced multichannel downloads sound much less involving than the corresponding silver disc program. But an Oppo 103/105 will happily read a multichannel DFF file off a hard drive and send it via HDMI for processing as 88.2kHz; I spent an evening with a Beatis music server that could do it as well. The sonic results were Nirvana for the multichannel devotee. **ABL**



# Top Ten High-Res Downloads of 2013

## Norah Jones: *Come Away With Me* and *Feels Like Home*. (96/24, 192/24) HDtracks.com

Between Jones' first two releases, my preference is for the second, *Feels Like Home*. This highly satisfying album, featuring wonderful songs and uniformly tasty arrangements, is a reference-quality pop recording. Neither vocals nor accompaniment are pushed or processed; natural sound rules the day. Put the plain old original CD in your demo pile—it's well-nigh perfect save for the usual CD-format's pinched dynamic transients.

The 96k download is likewise excellent, though not necessarily better. It offers a tad more dynamic headroom, but gives up as much in bass fullness. The choice between these two is one of personal preference. Meanwhile, the unqualified best version is of this album is the 192k download, which has even more dynamic freedom than at 96k, plus a truly beguiling vocal purity. Indeed, this version crosses that invisible, ephemeral boundary at which point digital starts sounding believably analog. If you're perfectly happy with the CD, I can hardly blame you. But there is more realism available from the master tape. To hear it, you'll need to go for the 192k download.

Unsurprisingly, Jones' debut album sounds very similar to its follow-up. Both were recorded in the same studios by the same man, Jay Newland. And, once again, the CD sets a high bar against which to judge the downloads. But this is where the format similarities end, because the *Come Away With Me* downloads are not the equal of the *Feels Like Home* high-res files.

To begin with, the 96k version disappoints for two reasons. One is that it superficially sounds almost identical to the CD—so what's the point? Another is that with extended listening the CD proves to be significantly more relaxed. I suspect that some nefarious form of digital noise has crept into the download. The 192k version is much better in this respect, and is also subtly more revealing than the CD (listen to the string bass on "Don't Know Why"). However, this version has a disconcerting tendency to "shout" Jones' vocal exclamation points, which are many. So, in contrast to *Feels Like Home*, the CD is *Come Away With Me's* most rewarding format. **AT**

## Mozart: *Clarinet Concerto. Kegelstatt Trio. Martin Fröst; Bremen Kammerphilharmonie.*

## Stenhammar: *String Quartets 5 and 6. Quartet in F minor. Stenhammar Quartet.*

## Wagner: *Wesendonck-Lieder. Siegfried-Idyll. Nina Stemme, Swedish Chamber Orchestra.*

## Casella: *Symphony 3; Italia. BBC Philharmonic, Nosedá.*

## ALL: (96/24) eClassical.com

Robert von Bahr, who founded BIS in 1973, is accustomed to separating himself from the pack—how else could an independent classical record label have remained robustly successful after 40 years? Buying music at von Bahr's download site, eClassical.com, is like getting a salad at the hospital cafeteria. The cashier

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weighs it and you pay accordingly; eClassical's downloads are priced by the minute. The quality of eClassical's HD holdings is unmatched, offering not only BIS but also many other worthy labels, some available nowhere else.

Martin Fröst is one of those musicians who can do something quite difficult—say, play a long melodic line softly and absolutely evenly—and make it sound like the easiest thing in the world. And while it's true Mozart's concerto doesn't require a terribly advanced technique, it's a real test of a young artist's musicianship and Fröst has that in spades. Fröst eschews the usual pairing of the K. 581 Clarinet Quintet and programs instead the exquisite *Kegelstatt* Trio, for clarinet, viola, and piano. Leif Ove Andsnes takes on the keyboard duties. The recording provides plenty of dynamic nuance without spotlighting the solo instrument.

Wilhelm Stenhammar began his musical life as an admirer of Wagner and Bruckner but soon gravitated back to less overbearing Scandinavian models. The F minor quartet features a turbulent opening Allegro and a songful Adagio, expressive in the manner of Grieg; the third movement of No. 5 has a Mendelssohnian effervescence. The sonics provide a satisfying representation of bow grabbing string. Stenhammar's music is often contrapuntally elaborate and BIS's clarifying acoustic makes that aspect of the composer's art evident.

Nina Stemme is arguably the finest Isolde of the moment and her performance of *Wesendonck-Lieder* is stunning. Her soprano is fresh, earthy, sexy, and possesses the kind

of laser beam precision associated with her late fellow Scandinavians Kirsten Flagstad and Birgit Nilsson. The remainder of the program, available as well as a BIS SACD, fascinates for notably scaled-back realizations of some pretty large-scale music—two versions of *The Flying Dutchman* overture and the Prelude to *Die Meistersinger*. There's also a setting of one of the *Wesendonck* songs for violin and orchestra and an alluringly shaped rendition of the *Siegfried-Idyll*. If the soundstage is a little constricted, balances and ensemble blend are unassailable.

Alfredo Casella was of the generation of Italian composers who followed Puccini's, but focused their efforts on instrumental music rather than opera; the best known is Respighi. Anyone who likes *Pines of Rome* will go for *Italia*, and Casella's Third Symphony amply demonstrates that the composer is right at home working on a larger canvas. The 42-minute work has the structural rigor and advanced tonality of other twentieth century symphonic masters ranging from Hindemith and Martinu to Bax and Hanson. The BBC Philharmonic, under Gianandrea Noseda, plays everything with authority. This Chandos recording is typical of that company's efforts in recent years; the sound isn't what you'd call immediate, but it's certainly not "swimmy," manifesting a good balance of detail and hall ambience. **AQ**

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