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George Graves

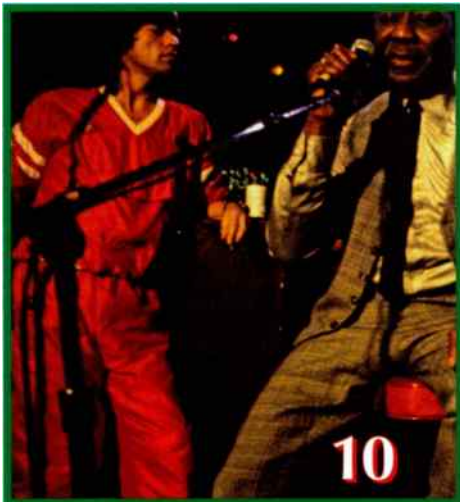
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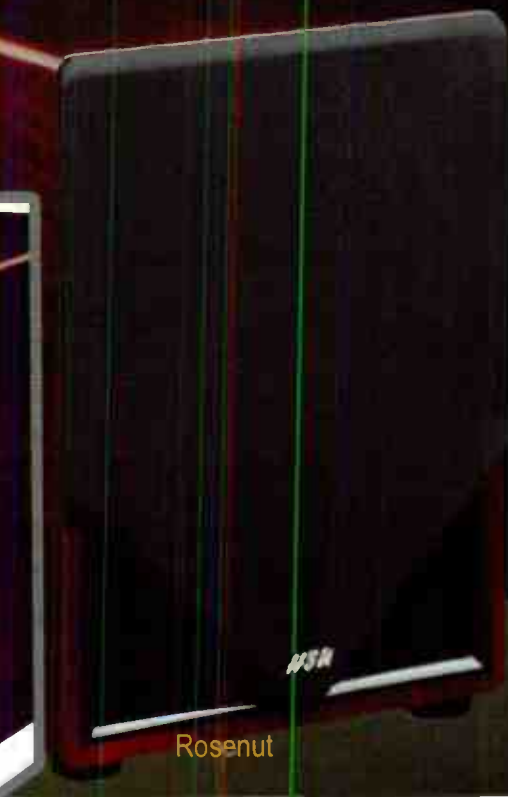
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— Brent Butterworth, Sound + Vision, www.soundandvisionmag.com, February 2011

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— Tom Norton, Home Theater Magazine, December 2011



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Logitech Squeezebox Touch: Update

George Graves and
Robert Pierce



IN MID-NOVEMBER, we had a very interesting e-mail exchange with Robert Pierce concerning George Graves' recent review of the Logitech Squeezebox Touch. We editors felt the exchange was timely, as Graves had uncovered some additional issues with the Squeezebox Touch and this gave us an opportunity to address them in the context of a reader query. We reproduce it here, with Pierce's materials in *italic RP*, and Graves's copy marked with his **GG** initials in **bold-face**.

*From: Robert Pierce via e-mail
Sent: Friday, November 11, 2011
To: audiophilevoice@verizon.net
Attn: George Graves, Re: Squeezebox Touch*

Dear George,

I had been considering one of these for my system and could use a small amount of additional information. You mentioned the server software can work with iTunes. Can it work with Pure Vinyl working with iTunes, possibly with Airfoil if required?

GG: Good question, Mr. Pierce. The answer is that the way the Logitech server software works, iTunes is actually irrelevant. iTunes is a music database and it stores ripped music in a folder called "iTunes" and on a Mac that folder is found at /Users/(your user name)/Music/ iTunes. On Windows, you will find it in MyComputer/Music/iTunes. All the music on your

iTunes application is stored there. The Squeezebox server software requires that you choose a folder (any folder) on your computer's hard drive and designate it as your music folder. If you want the Squeezebox Touch box to see your iTunes ripped library, you merely designate the aforementioned iTunes folder on your computer as your music folder in the Squeezebox Touch's server software control panel.

Now, here's what I mean about iTunes itself being irrelevant. Any supported music file or format placed in that iTunes folder will be seen by the Squeezebox Touch server software irrespective of its origin. Example in point: Let's say that you have downloaded, from HDtracks, for instance, the 24/96 high-resolution WAV version of the famous Verve Getz/Gilberto Jazz Samba album. Now, without something like Amarra or Pure Vinyl, iTunes itself cannot work with that 24/96 file, and even though it is being stored in the iTunes folder, it will not show up in iTunes playlist nor will its presence in that folder interfere with the operation of iTunes itself. But the beauty of the Squeezebox setup is that it doesn't care. If the high-resolution files are in the iTunes folder, and if they are all in a format that Squeezebox supports, they will show up, along with the correct artwork (if available), on the Squeezebox Touch device's LCD screen and can be played from there and streamed from the iTunes library folder on your computer. You don't require Pure Vinyl or Amarra to

play high-res (24/96) downloads from your computer to the Squeezebox touch because iTunes itself is NOT required for Squeezebox Touch to "see" and "use" iTunes rips. Logitech has made it ultra convenient for iTunes users to make their iTunes playlist available of the Touch appliance without actually using the iTunes application or requiring any iTunes "helper" applications to play higher res material.

A couple of caveats, however. Even though the Squeezebox Touch will support (and play) all of the Apple iTunes compression formats (AAC, AIFF, Apple

a widely known bug and as of yet, there is no workaround. Sometimes (for reasons unknown) it works (I got it to work the first time I tried to connect a thumb-drive with a couple of WAV files on it, but after that, nothing) but most of the time it doesn't. Never fear though, streaming from the computer always works.

RP: You didn't mention if you had any drop-out problems with your Wi-Fi connection. I have run into that. It may have something to do with router placement.

GG: I have never had drop-out problems per se, but I have a friend who has. We decided that even though

With the many types of software being used for music files, it is easy to get confused about procedures.

Lossless, MP3, and WAV) it will NOT see any of the Apple music files bought from the iTunes store. If you ripped it, or imported it from a source other than the iTunes store, the Squeezebox will have no problem with it. Also be advised that the Squeezebox Touch is the only music streamer on the market (of which I'm aware) that will support Apple Lossless compression scheme (ALA). The Cambridge NP-30, The Marantz, the Bryston, the Musical Fidelity, etc. do not support ALA. If you are an audiophile with an Apple TV or an iPod, then you have most likely ripped your CD collection using Apple's Lossless compression. The Squeezebox Touch unit will play those files, the others won't. This would require that you re-rip everything as MP3 or WAV (if you want to maintain iPod compatibility) or some other lossless scheme (such as FLAC or Ogg Vorbis) if you don't care about iTunes/iPod compatibility.

Before moving on to your other questions, I want to stress that there are several ways to play music files on the Squeezebox Touch. Of course, if you have iTunes and you have a lot of your CDs ripped to iTunes in one of the above mentioned formats, you'll want to set the iTunes folder as your default music folder. But it doesn't have to be.

You can assign any folder, even a new one that you have just created, to be the default music folder. But you need to be aware that iTunes files won't be available if another folder is chosen, and that only one such folder can be used at a time. To change folders requires that you open the Squeezebox Touch control panel and deselect the current folder and choose another.

It is also supposed to be possible on the Touch for you to store music locally to the Touch itself. On the actual unit, there is both a USB port and a SD card slot. Supposedly, you can connect an external USB hard drive (or "thumb" drive) to the Squeezebox Touch unit upon which you have loaded supported format music files, and play them from there. You can also load such files on a SDD card and plug that in as well. However, I was never able to get that to work reliably. I can get the Squeezebox Touch unit to see these attached memory devices, and to see the album cover artwork, but for some reason, the Squeezebox Touch unit thinks that this artwork is a "slide show" and it never sees the music. I have talked with the Logitech support people at length about this problem, and have consulted all of the on-line forums about it. It is

the Squeezebox Touch only supports 802.11g and slower, you get the most reliable result if you have an 802.11n router! Something about the faster capability of the "n" protocol makes for a "firmer handshake" with the Squeezebox Touch unit. What I have had from time to time (and this only while playing Internet Radio on the Squeezebox Touch unit) is a complete loss of signal, requiring that my router be re-booted. This has never happened while streaming music from my computer's hard drive.

RP: I have been trying to solve this problem for quite a while. I got a first generation AppleTV only to discover it was limited to 44.1 kHz. My DAC automatically up-samples to 96 if the input is lower and Pure Vinyl and my MacBook Pro can output 96 kHz. The AppleTV pinched the signal. It also had a small problem with my wireless system (see above) which I got around by using internet over power line devices.

GG: Yes, the Apple TV is limited to 44.1, but as I have said, the Squeezebox Touch Server software does not rely on Apple's hardware or iTunes (with or without helper apps) to stream at up to 24/96.

RP: My latest attempt is a 35' length of Toslink. It has the same problem as the AppleTV. It is too long to handle 96 kHz but handles 44.1 just fine. At least now I can output 44.1 directly to my DAC (without any dropouts) and have it upsampled to 96, but I would still prefer to have 96 kHz output from the MBP.

GG: As I said, a decent 802.11n router, sending wirelessly to the Squeezebox Touch unit, works flawlessly for me, and the Logitech server software solves all problems with high-resolution computer file playback.

RP: The problem I had with the Squeezebox was nobody could tell me, until now, if it would work with iTunes or not. That problem is solved. The next problem is whether I can use PureVinyl to drive it. Do you know or can you suggest where I can find out? Logitech, Channel D, Google and the various audio forums have not been helpful.

GG: Hopefully, you now understand that since the Logitech Squeezebox system does not use the iTunes software for playback, but merely makes use of the music files, and it doesn't care about the bit depth and sample rate as long as it's 24-bit, 96 KHz or lower and is of the supported format type, the question about PureVinyl is irrelevant.

The RMAF - 2011

Chuck Bruce



ONE EXPANDING area of equipment that's obvious to attendees at recent audio shows are items for use with computers and desktop audio. They are starting to appear in unrelenting incarnations and last fall's RMAF 2011 in Denver was no exception. Many examples were quite interesting and offered remarkable performance, as well as very handy features. The building of playlists, cover art and notes, and the ability to download Hi-Res music files are quite engaging. All of this requires consumers acquire new knowledge and skills, and yet the necessary gear may be acquired at fairly reasonable cost. Attendees such as TAV's Editor who brought only CDs for demo purposes may have been disappointed because quite a few rooms were devoid of a CD/DVD player. A "thumb" drive may be the next demo source for those wishing to "roll their own." However, and this was quite often in the same rooms, turntables were spinning LPs, much to the joy of vinyl fans (including me). Quite an irony that while this latest generation of "computer" and portable music gear is proliferating, we have the trusty LP warming the hearts of those devoted to fine audio gear as well as ordinary music fans. I can attest that the sonics were second to none.

Peachtree Audio launched their new desk-top scale "Grand Pre" tube-solid state hybrid integrated amp which sports 400 watts of class "D" solid-state power, giving plenty of punch and dynamics, in a modest-size single box. The finely crafted piece of gear included headphone output for desktop "Can Head" audio fans, as well as onboard 24/192 Ultra Sabre DAC featuring async operation. The unit has all manner of I/O connections for both analog and digital operation as well as interfacing to external digital devices and music sources. Price is a reasonable \$4295. Also on demo in the Peachtree Audio room was the new Sonus Faber Elipsa (SE edition), a floor-standing loudspeaker from Sumiko priced at \$22,900. It made a first-rate impression on me, both for craftsmanship and performance.

TAD usually puts on one of the best demos at any show, and here they were again using their own solid-state electronics to drive their top-drawer speakers. As usual, the demos are hosted by the ultra-polite and ultra-knowledgeable Andrew Jones, whose sessions are always lots of fun and full of great music. Andrew was showing a new pair of TAD monoblock power amps that never seemed to run out of steam. His demo music featured explosive transients and he put on a very, very engaging and dynamic presentation with bass to the center of the universe, forget the planet! This was, indeed, an attention grabber, and the vintage Boz Scaggs tracks never sounded better.

Audio design veteran Steve McCormack, chief of SMC Audio, was showcasing his new wideband J-FET based VRE-1C pre-amp offering both balanced and single-ended connections in a single box. The SMC room also featured a top performing pair of Genesis G 7.2 F tower loudspeakers providing copious amounts of punch and rhythm in a seamless, homogenous presentation.

Long-time audio veteran Frank Van Alstine was demonstrating his hybrid DAC and pre and power amps with SALK Soundscape loudspeakers to good effect. The massive soundstage and deep bass was most engaging. Life size instruments and accurate voice reproduction made a strong impression.

Germany's Cessaro horn loudspeakers driven by Tron tube amps were wowing listeners with music exhibiting some of the least "horn-like" character that I've ever heard. Tony Bennett and Ella were *in* the room with us, part of a nearly 3-D presentation done via first-rate playback from TT Acoustics. It was difficult to break loose from this demonstration. The midrange was about as palpable and natural as it gets; horns were done right and paired with excellent amps, and the accuracy and truthfulness that the two singing voices achieved brought the presentation to a quality level all its own.



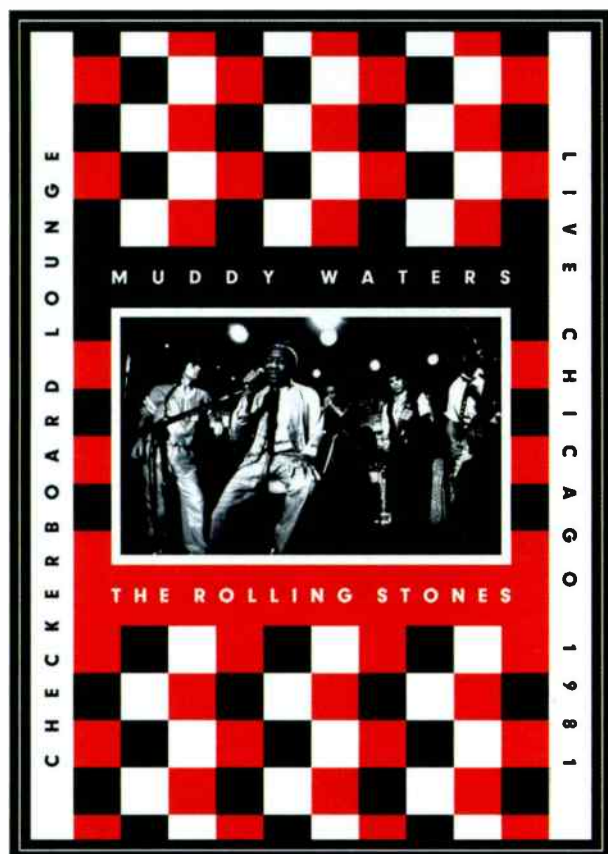
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Blues

Muddy Waters & The Rolling Stones
Live at The Checkerboard Lounge,
Chicago, 1981
Kayos DVD and DVD/CD set
Eagle Vision EV305529

THE 1981 ROLLING STONES tour of America to promote *Tattoo You* was the largest grossing tour of that year with over \$50 million in ticket sales, nearly three million attendees of the concerts promoted by Bill Graham, and setting of various local ticket sales records at an average of only \$16 each. On November 22nd, 1981, one of The Stones "off" nights, close to 200 concert goers who were fortunate enough to select The Checkerboard Lounge as their destination, were in for the event of a lifetime.

When I first received this disc set, I was skeptical about a number of factors. First, the sound and video quality; second, the size and functionality of the venue to handle such an event, and thirdly, the basic authenticity and coolness of the evening all together.

The outcome: It is my opinion that every blues fan living today should watch and own this video as soon as possible. It looks, sounds and walks like the coolest "Blues Duck" you have ever seen or heard. One has to be impressed how masterfully the three cameramen operated their now-outdated Sony Betamax cameras (I am speculating about which cameras) to achieve ultra crisp resolution despite low-level stage lighting common to every small and basic blues club in Chicago. Back then, The Blues Genre was not as commercialized as it is today. There were no Blues Cruises nor annual Blues & Roots Festivals with 100,000+ in attendance. Chicago Blues Clubs were mostly on the south or west sides and Buddy Guy was not yet a worldwide brand. However, this little venture gives us Muddy Waters (1915-1983), John Primer, Rick Kreher, Lovie Lee, Earnest Johnson, Ray Allison, George "Mojo" Buford (1929-2011), Mick Jagger, Keith Richards, Ron Wood, Ian Stewart 1938-1985), Lefty Diz, Buddy Guy, Nick

Charles and Junior Wells (1934-1998), all at the same time, in the same place, with audio channels synched, and visible on stage! This show and the way it was captured give us a big portion of authentic juke-joy and barrelhouse beauty.

The DVD/CD set opens with Lovie Lee on upright piano and singing a traditional blues favorite "Sweet Little Angel," after which he jumps into "Flip Flop and Fly." Lovie is accompanied by Muddy's band that noticeably has Mojo Buford blowing harmonica and John Primer on lead guitar to prepare for the introduction of the maestro. Muddy is sitting in the audience at the edge of the stage at the head of a 12-person long table that has the only empty seats in the house. Mojo Buford introduces "The Father of The Blues," who modestly takes center stage, perches on a tall barstool, and slips on his red Telecaster. Ordinarily a sharp dresser, he's robed in a jacketless, tailored, three-piece gray plaid suit. He opens with "You Don't Have To Go" and then slides into "Country Boy". The sublime slide playing in "Country Boy" meets every Chicago Blues playing standard, tradition and then some. It's textbook Muddy taking us to school about roots music, the blues and about being The Man! Primer reminds us that he is a star pupil and would soon be the world-wide recognized master blues player that he easily is today. Rick Kreher takes his moment in the spotlight with skillful picking and Muddy wraps things up. As he "turns the lamp down low" with "Baby Please Don't Go," a note on a card is flashed to Muddy from the front row which signals the arrival of Mick, Keith, Ian and Ronnie who enter and sit down immediately so as not to be disrespectful or disruptive to Muddy. They get their Jack Black and Cognac bottles opened, swigged and then are

introduced by Muddy seamlessly in a matter of minutes. Mick is the first to be called up on stage; he hesitates until Muddy encourages him at least four times. The pro he is, Mick sings "Baby Please Don't Go." Then Keith walks the 12-foot table top to the stage, takes his axe and melodically questions and answers with strings. Next Ronnie makes the table top migration to take his place next to Keith and close out this once-in-a-lifetime rendition of the great standard. The stage is set for music history and history is initiated with "Hoochie Coochie Man". Mick's call and response is amazing and is something that I have in the past only experienced in

of the other blues masters in any way, shape or form. This is the best-behaved Mick Jagger I can recall seeing for some time. He sings, gestures and jams like a real deal Delta blues man. Keith and Ronnie's playing is loose, soulful and authentic to a jam instead of mixed and groomed for a massive stage production with Jack Black flowing neat and trademark lip-dangling of Marlboros.

There are two cool bonus tracks on the DVD that include Muddy's Band performing "You're Gonna Miss Me When I'm Gone" with a lot of audience cut-aways (with some hair and clothes that need to stay back

Every blues fan living today should watch and own this video as soon as possible.

Mississippi jooks. Ronnie takes the helm with a slide as this blues "super group" slows things down with "Long Distance Call". Everything gets all right next when Muddy and Mick both start witnessing with "Mannish Boy". We are reminded that when Muddy says "I'm a Rollin' Stone" during this anthemic masterpiece, that THIS song is where the Stones got their name. Waters is jumpin' and jerkin' throughout the song like the rock star that he was in addition to being a blues master. It is hard to believe that he left us less than two years after this November 22nd, 1981 performance, on April 30th, 1983. Muddy is now replaced momentarily by Chicago's Blues Elite: Lefty Diz, Buddy Guy and Junior Wells. Junior wails on his harp and masterfully sings as axe battles ensue between Buddy Guy and The Stones' string section followed by an attack from Lefty Diz. All emerge victorious and unscathed. We now notice that Lovie has relinquished the keys to Rolling Stones co-Founder Ian Stewart. The new crew on stage bless the audience with "Got My Mojo Workin'", "Next Time You See Me," "One Eyed Woman" and threaten to end the evening with a reprise of "Baby Please Don't Go."

But Muddy saves the day by coming on the stage again to do "Clouds in My Heart" and "Champagne and Reefer" where he's accompanied by some insane guitar playing. Somehow Mojo Buford and Mick fit themselves back onto this crowded stage where it doesn't seem even one additional single solitary human being could even begin to fit on. Magically, they get there and it all works out.

Throughout the performance, one tends to forget that the world's most popular rock band is on the stage with the Father of The Blues. It's great to say that none of The Stones upstage Muddy or any

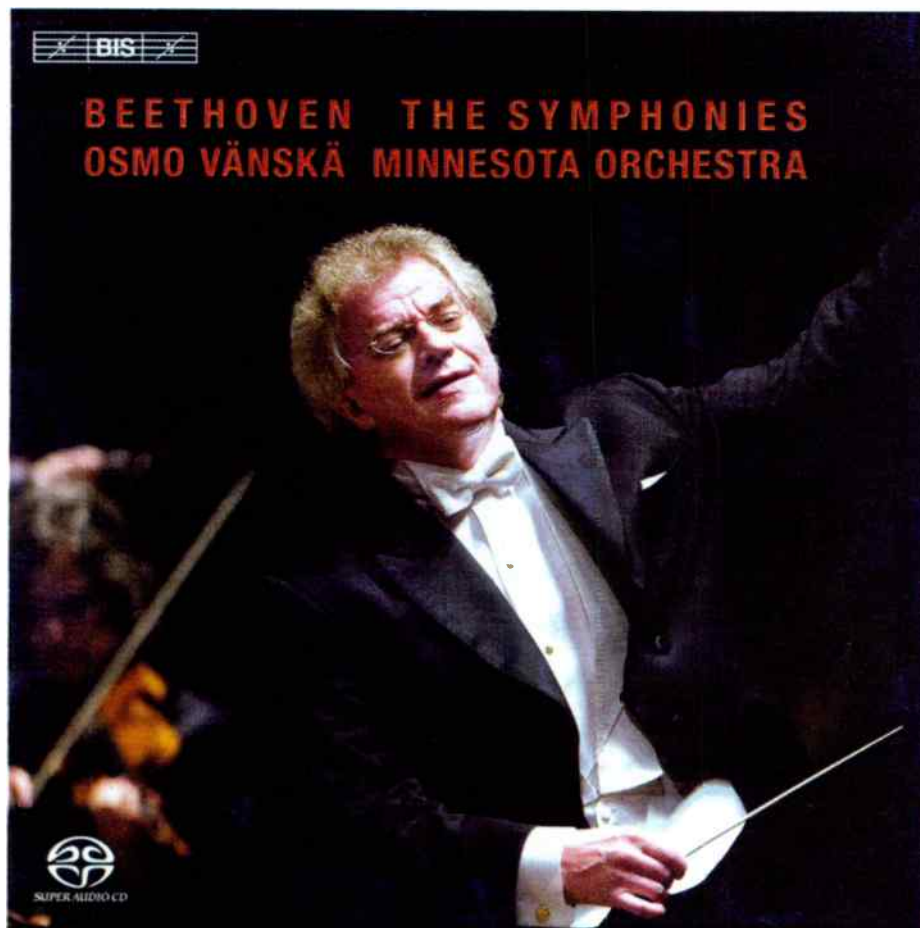
there) and a live version of "Black Limousine" from The Stones' main stage tour performance where we get to see Charlie Watts, Bill Wyman, Bobby Keys, Ian McLagan and Ernie Watts who had not made the Checkerboard gig.

Bob Clearmountain, assisted by Brandon Duncan, remixed this magical event wonderfully in Dolby Digital 5.1 DTS Surround Sound and Dolby Digital Stereo. Audio was re-mastered by Mazen Murad at Metropolis Studios. The set comes as either just a DVD or as a DVD & CD pair; the latter has 11 of the 16 tracks featured on the DVD. A "Dual Vinyl" set is scheduled for release in September 2012 along with the DVD.

This is a wonderful tribute to the legacy of all artists who were captured on this special evening, notably The Rolling Stones who celebrate their 50th Anniversary together as a band this summer. Rock on my brothers! And then there is the incomparable Muddy Waters. If you buy this set, you don't miss him so much. "Good night, sweet prince, and flights of angels sing thee to thy rest."

Photos, here and cover: Michael Halsband.





Classical

Ludwig von Beethoven *The Nine Symphonies*
 Andrew Rangell, piano; BIS SACD 1825/25
 Minnesota Orchestra & Chorale;
 Osmo Vänskä, conductor; Helena Juntunen, soprano;
 Katarina Karnéus, mezzo-soprano; Daniel Norman,
 tenor, and Neal Davies, bass-baritone

George Witterschein

REVIEWERS AROUND the world have been calling this box the one to get. "... the definitive [Beethoven symphonies cycle] of our time" is how *The New York Times* put it.

I'm going to go out onto a limb reviewers fear, and say that I agree.

Vänskä's Beethoven Nine really only has one competitor, among offerings both *recent* and *on SACD*: Bernard Haitink and the London Symphony Orchestra (on the LSO's own label, *LSO Live*.) By virtually

universal consensus, the Haitink cycle receives stellar marks. So why would anyone buy Vänskä and the Minnesota Orchestra's entry?

First, the Haitink is a box of live recordings, and not everybody likes their symphony takes live.

Second, while the LSO's execution of the scores is almost beyond praise (I've heard them several times in New York in recent years, and to my ears they are unequalled), the Minnesota Orchestra, on this recording, is

playing with a special spirit. Sometimes this Spirit of Excellence, or Collective Excitement if you will, settles on a recording project. When that happens, you get special results. Listening to the beautiful bite and intonation of the French horns' first entry in the Fifth Symphony, I was impressed and deeply gratified. That kind of thing happens elsewhere and often in the Vänskä set. The orchestra also plays with a characteristically American — and marvelous —

rhythmic precision, and even swing, throughout.

Third, and this is really a claim for cultural/civilizational *relevance*, the Vänskä interpretations are more *au courant*. They more clearly manifest the influence of the Period Practice Movement in classical

And I'm guessing that wild madness is also "contemporary." No sweet, reasonable nice-guy Beethoven for us postmodern 21st century deracinated tough guys.

An important word about the sound. BIS' engineers and pressing standards serve Beethoven extraor-

nies like Sony, Chesky, and Telarc included so much choral music. The singers have individuality, and seem to be standing vertical in the soundstage, with good-quality SACD, while at the same time the massed sound of the chorus as a group comes across in all its complexity, power, and

This Beethoven set, comprising all of the composer's nine symphonies, is outstanding in every important way, from musical execution to sonic quality.

music today. This I hear primarily in Vänskä's use of today's obligatory Quick Tempos Strictly Executed. Choosing tempos that are by his standards pretty fast, Haitink, too, shows some of the influence of this contemporary stylistic movement, but not nearly to the same extent as does Vänskä. In fact, there is something akin to wild madness at times under the Swede's baton, particularly in the last movement of the Ninth. This is Toscanini, the Great White Forefather of modern quick-tempo conducting practice, but on steroids!

dinarily well in this boxed set (as they generally serve whatever music they issue). Beethoven's obbligato lines, sometimes almost drowned out, especially when written for the woodwinds, are always easily audible. This adds to the comprehensibility of the work and the interpretation, I found ... and makes the set an audiophile delight, too. (By the way, the CD layer, if you *still* don't have an SACD player, offers terrific Red Book sound.)

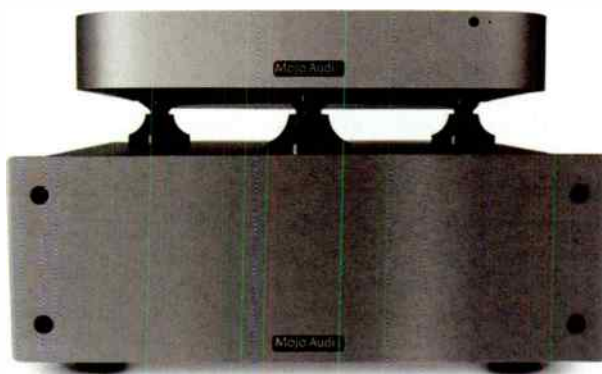
Also, SACD serves choral music especially well. This may be why the early SACD samplers from compa-

detail. Witness the eponymous choral fourth movement of the Beethoven Ninth in this cycle, rousingly delivered by the Minnesota Chorale.

This is a box containing nine different symphonies. While some people may prefer other interpretations of a particular work — the Abbado Sixth on DG with the Vienna Philharmonic is, for example, the favorite Sixth of my friend Jens; John the Chiropractor prefers the 1963 Fifth by von Karajan and the Berlin Phil — taken as a whole, this set is the one I'd recommend of the current releases.

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Gene Pitts

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AS MOST READERS are aware, we reviewers and editors usually carry along a handful of CDs to conventions and press conferences such as the Consumer Electronics Show or The Home Entertainment Show. We need a standard set of tracks to wring out equipment on display. Most manufacturers prefer to play just the music that makes their gear sound good, but that's not what an editor needs. Some of us will rip perhaps 10 or 15 individual tracks for a personal burn so as to have a good batch of test material and not have to carry around that number of CDs. I can't remember what we did when the source materials were only on LPs. I certainly didn't carry around a case of LPs or tapes either, neither open-reel nor cassette.

Because the venues and associated pieces of gear are so varied, I don't normally try to do much evaluation of anything at a show save loudspeaker systems. Even that task is tough enough what with using ears from a different time zone and which have been assaulted by pressure changes in moving elevators. Can you think of the total number of times you've heard the opening words of Lincoln's Gettysburg Address? That is about the number of times a track will need to be auditioned daily.

So, the solution is to bring along music I can listen to for long periods of time e.g. from 10:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m., repeatedly, room after room. And it also has to be stuff that gets at the weak points of speakers. Gary Karr's string bass playing "Albinoni's Adagio" not only gets down pretty deep on the musical scale (an open low E at 32 Hz, I believe), there are also several runs where the music goes up from the bass driver through the crossover into the mid-range speaker. All too often, with too many speakers, I hear a change in timbre, and with some speaker systems, I hear a change in level of the bass when different notes are played. There is also an organ played by Harmon Lewis on this magnificent recording; on bad speakers, some pedal notes are played such that they don't stand out separately as different notes.

So, what I am recommending to you here is a collection or sampler put together by Turtle Records of the

Netherlands from their archives at the request of a leading German loudspeaker maker, Audio Physic, which is celebrating their 25th anniversary in this way. This disc seems so far to me to have that same eloquent voice as the Karr-Albinoni. I can listen to it for a long time and do that frequently.

The approach Turtle Records takes is to show the many varieties of playing classical music in use today, and to show them as demonstrations of utmost sound quality and realism in recording and playback techniques. (So says Bert van der Wolf of Turtle in the accompanying booklet, and I agree so far as I am able, not being enough of a specialist.) Some musicians and some recording firms will use only instruments appropriate to the period in which the music was composed. That method is "plausible" writes van der Wolf, who also points out that many performers of Mozart's piano works gain new insights and ideas when they are played on a modern Steinway grand piano. I have often thought much the same about Johann Sebastian Bach and how he would feel if he encountered a new, modern piano. He must have hated the slowness in the actions of the harpsichords of his day.

There are 16 tracks on this CD, and all are classical music. The earliest is by Giovanni Antonio Terzi da Bergamo in the late 16th century. There is an excerpt from the 1883 version of Mahler's "Titan," while the latest appears to be André Jolivet's 2nd Concerto pour Trompette from 1954. In addition, there are pieces by Schubert, Haydn, Mozart, Schumann, J.S. Bach, Albeniz, Locatelli, and Beethoven; I skip a couple of composers less known to me.

What is known, and very welcome, is the amiable sweetness and veracity of these recordings. The instrumental and vocal timbre is about as perfect as I've encountered, especially with the piano cuts, and the sound staging is quite fine, too, though a bit distant for my personal taste. There is a quiet darkness to the background such that the musical notes can be given by musician to listener quite softly, and yet nothing is lost. Great atmosphere.

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Hsu Research ULS-15 Subwoofer & HB-1 Mk 2 Speaker

Gene Pitts



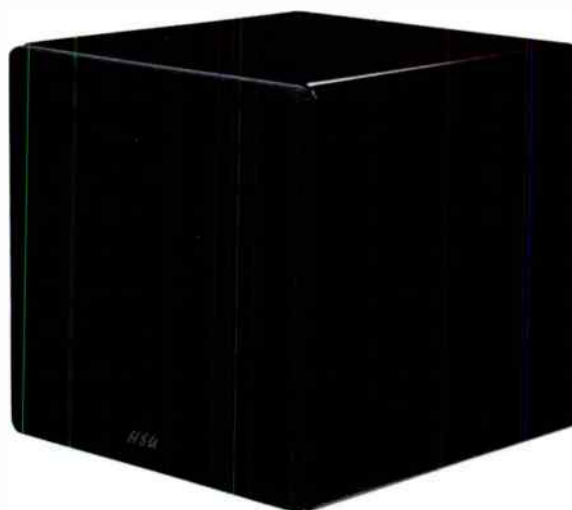
UNDER THE “NORMAL operating conditions” prevailing in my 13x33-foot listening room, I don’t make a permanent change in my reference loudspeaker system very often, however frequently I might drag some intriguing speaker in for a listening trial. First of all, I am too much of a cheapskate, and the really good systems ordinarily cost out to dollar totals that are in the same

league as car prices. Too rich for my blood or rather my bank account. While I can usually hear the difference achieved by a system with a five-digit price over one with only four numbers to the left of the decimal, if there is one, I’d rather put those dollars into the music, i.e. the LPs, the tapes, the CDs, and now the downloads and computer memory banks for tune storage. I have

frequently quipped that the music is more important than the gear and that I can always tell the difference between Bruce Springsteen and Barbra Streisand. However, I am not too arrogant to admit that sometimes two different speaker designs will sound enough alike for me to confuse them if I am not listening closely. This is particularly true if they have been level matched at perhaps 3 kHz and here I do not mean equalized over a broad band. The other main reason I don't change speaker systems often is that the good ones are big and heavy and I am too lazy and weak to deal with such difficulties if I can think of some sneaky way to get a better result. And that's what I am discussing here, getting good sound inexpensively without much effort.

My first pair of speakers were AR2-ax's from Acoustic Research, and I bought them not long after I graduated college. I bought them one at a time, because audio systems hadn't yet made a total transition to the stereo pair. Thus, one of those ARs had a nice oiled-walnut veneer finish while the other was plain plywood with a white birch (?) surface which eventually got stained and waxed heavily. As I recall, those speakers cost less than \$130.00 each and were generally considered to give their big brother, the AR3, a good run. The AR3 could play louder and do more "justice" to lower notes, i.e. open E strings at 41 Hz from a rock 'n' roll bass. Eventually I replaced the ARs with ADC 303Ax speakers, having come under the tutelage of George Tillett, who was editor of Audio Magazine just before me and who went on to do engineering at ADC. His non-stereo home reference system used a single Quad electrostatic that sat about five feet away from his listening chair and was aimed directly at his feet which were usually propped up on an ottoman during listening sessions. I never cared much for the sound from that Quad, as it was beamy in dispersion and could not play very loudly without arcing in a disconcerting manner. It didn't do bass well either, but the mids and highs possessed a wonderful air and characteristic sweetness rarely matched since. And how long ago was that Quad came into use? Sixty plus years?

Anyway, I have come to believe that the most cost-effective way for cheapskates like me to do a home system is to use a subwoofer with a pair of satellites, though it's better with two subs if you can afford the cost and the space. There usually is stereo signal down in the 20 to 80 Hz range, but few civilians knew that until CDs came along. The uninitiated also think that subwoofers merely add on some few nearly irrelevant bass notes, ones that an ordinary floor-standing speaker can handle at least passably. Even if they are using cheap and smallish monitors, they seem to think, "why bother?" or "not worth the expense." The short and quick response to this churlish attitude is that one gains



another 20 Hz or more on the low end, the equivalent of the difference in musical note output between the AR2Ax and the AR3. Or between a string bass and no bass. There is a lot of left-hand piano down there too, not to mention some important organ notes.

But there is MUCH more to the question. Adding a sub helps in quite a few ways, ones not widely known or expected. First, there is the big increase in overall loudness, where the whole system simply plays MUCH louder, without distortion, and you find yourself playing it more loudly without realizing it. Then there is the much improved accuracy of instrumental timbre, and this includes both men's and women's voices. One would think that two satellites would have precisely the same timbre whether connected up with a sub or not. Not true. At first I didn't believe what I was hearing because the primary tones in these voices are well above the crossover frequency out of the sub. What happens is that the low bass notes no longer interact with the higher notes to produce what is essentially IM distortion.

It appears that most buyers of three-piece systems focus almost solely on the satellites, items like the justly famous BBC monitors, and don't think much about the

NOTES

Hsu Research, 985 No. Shephard St., Anaheim, CA 92806; www.hsuresearch.com; 800/554-0150; sales@hsuresearch.com.

NOTES

ULS-15 Subwoofer

Bass Extension: 15 Hz, ± 0.5 dB.

Woofer Diameter: 15 inches.

Amplifier Power: 1000 watts short term.

Crossover Frequency Range: 30 – 90 Hz, by-passable.

Crossover Slope: 24 dB per octave.

Crossover Type: Linkwitz-Riley, low pass only.

Phase: 0° or 180°.

ULF Trim: 16 – 50 Hz.

Dimensions: 18 inch cube; feet add 1 inch; grille and heat sink add 1.5 inches.

Shipping Weight: 84 lbs.

Price: Rosenut real wood veneer, \$1199.00; satin black, \$1099.00.

subwoofer, about what it does and how well, let alone how well it integrates with the satellite. This last is a tricky proposition because there are many, many aspects of performance to match up. It seems like a parlor trick when the satellites are connected up in the three-piece mode and all of a sudden are producing much less distortion than they did when played as a stereo pair. This has to do with NOT hitting them with a low blow, i.e. bass notes lower than they really can handle whatever their specification says. It has been my universal experience that the satellites sound cleaner, showing much less distortion, when used with a sub and a decent crossover.

wound up cheaper buying a new subwoofer, indeed to move up to the Hsu ULS-15, than to try to repair the sub previously in my system, if indeed it could have been repaired. (The maker doubted that was possible, and even if it was, the cost incurred to hire an appropriately good repairman for long enough, not to mention the cost of parts, overwhelmed the difference in the MSRP's of the two subs.)

I have known Poh Ser Hsu, the guy behind the Hsu subwoofers, for a couple of decades and knew of him earlier for perhaps another 10 years. He came out of MIT as an engineer, and caused something of a stir around the Boston Audio Society with his first sub

This sort of three-piece system, using a subwoofer and two bookshelf-size monitors, is about as easy on your wallet as possible, yet can achieve GREAT sound!

But let me describe why I really did need to fix or upgrade my system. One day, it appeared that the satellites were not playing well, that one of them was at a lower level than the other and both were distorting. I had put them into my system, which has used a sub for more than three decades, only about two years previously, replacing another pair of satellites from the same maker on which the foam surrounds on the woofers (midranges, actually, in the three-piece system) had failed on both sides. Doing the standard logic, I switched cables from the output of the sub, but no change. Eventually, I realized that the sub was not playing and that its built-in amp and crossover were gone despite what the pilot LED showed. Apparently, someone had stepped on the IEC-style power cord so that it was intermittently in contact with the sub's plug; the sudden in-rush of power apparently fried the circuitry. It

which used what was essentially a large mailing tube for the speaker cabinet. It was extraordinarily cost-effective and truly innovative! To my judgment, his subs are still as cost-effective and innovative. I will say that his ULS-15 is rather more stylish than a mailing tube; the reason I can write this with great assurance is that my wife gave it a top-of-scale Décor Score by not even noticing it had been introduced into the listening room!

All pro speaker reviewers have a set of "favorite" or "chosen recordings," usually CDs these days for better portability to shows, and of course I have mine. A reviewer needs to be able to play and replay short track sections of one to three minutes such that the speaker system undergoes a tough test and that the listener can stand hearing this same piece of music perhaps three dozen times on each day of the show. With a subwoofer, one wants the music (no, not test tones) to go down to the bottom. The lowest musical note I know of is the 16 Hz pedal on the Saint Saens: *Organ Symphony*. It isn't that low on every recording of the Saint Saens, but you can find it on the Boston Audio Society's Test CD-1. Micha Schattner supplied the excerpt from the second movement (Poco Adagio). It was performed by the Boston Civic Symphony and conducted by Max Hobart in Boston's Jordan Hall 1983. You can obtain a copy by joining the BAS. In addition to the piece of organ music, the CD has a test tone, a slow downward sweep from 80 to 10 Hz. One point of such testing is to find out whether the speaker under test does get down that low or simply cuts out at some intermediate point. The other point is to reduce your dry-cleaning bills.

Because of my listening biases for these long-term sessions, I favor a 1982 recording of an acoustic double-bass, a Kontrabass, from Gary Karr whose instrument is a 1611 Amati which formerly belonged to Serge Koussevitzky. Karr is accompanied by Harmon Lewis playing the pipe organ in the Vega Hall of Takarazuka-shi, a spa hamlet about 20 miles from Osaka, Japan. Originally on King Records, the title is *Adagio d'Albinoni* and it runs nearly nine minutes, though a reviewer needs only about the first 2-3 minutes. There is also a wonderful *Ave Maria* from Bach-Gounod. The Vega Hall sounds like it's a church but that might be an

NOTES

HB-1 Mk 2 Bookshelf Speaker

Frequency Response: 60 – 20 kHz, ± 2 dB.

Enclosure Type: Vented.

Woofer: 6½-in. treated paper cone with treated cloth surround, flat poly-cotton spider and high temperature aluminum voice coil.

Tweeter: Very high efficiency, controlled-directivity horn with neodymium magnet and ferro-fluid voice coil.

Recommended Amplifier Power: 10 – 250 Watts.

Sensitivity: 92 dB at 1 meter for 2.83 V rms in half space.

Nominal Impedance: 6 ohms.

Minimum Impedance: 4 ohms.

Dimensions: 15 in. H x 8 in. W x 8 in. D.

Net Weight: 12.2 lbs.

Price: Rosenut real wood veneer, \$179.00; satin black, \$149.00.

illusion because of the nature of the music. It is a mildly wet recording, which is to say one can hear the room, hear the bass bounce off the back wall when Karr and Lewis stop. Karr's bass stands in front of the Lewis organ by a good distance, and it has been astonishing over the years to hear how very differently the timbre and placement of this fine instrument are handled. In one case, a celebrated top-of-the-line French speaker "added" ripples to the organ's bass pedal line which was absolutely the same loudness on every other speaker I ever played this cut on. (No, not all of them went down to the bottom note.)

The main point for a reviewer using this music are the several runs Karr makes. They go down through the crossover from midrange to bass, and I have found through years of checking that there are very few other recordings that do this. The point is that if there is the slightest difficulty with level matching of the two drivers, it will be clearly shown. Similarly, the timbre of the two speakers must be well matched or "voiced" by the designer so that an organ's pedal notes sound like those from the keyboard. To my ears, a poor match is equivalent to a bass singer such as Trace Adkins sounding like Lady Gaga when the notes rise is pitch.

The lowest notes in standard instruments are those very few below 40 Hz. A full 108-note pipe organ is supposed to do down to 6 Hz, an 880-note piano has an A at 27.5 Hz; Mr. Karr's Amati has as its lowest note C at 32.7 Hz. The sung bass vocal range starts at E or 82.4 Hz and rises to the coloratura soprano's F of 1396.9 Hz. While no vocal notes should come from a subwoofer or the bass section of a full-range speaker, I am consistently amazed at how much first-rate reproduction of the human voice will tell you about a speaker system's low bass performance. It is as if the "errors" in the bass sneak up into the throats of singers and do damage.

But let me give Karr his due as a musician; because he plays so nicely, I have no difficulty playing this CD five to eight times per day over the course of an audio show. I even play it at home, for my own pleasure. He plays as if he's a Viennese gypsy, simply full of brio and schmaltz and romance and emotion. Some of his vibrato may be overdone, too wide, but not by much and it does go with the territory. I have sometimes quipped about Karr having extra long arms because of the way he's able to play the runs. The Hsu ULS-15 sub's performance if, so far, the very best I have experienced on this disc.

If you don't care for organ pedal notes on classical music, there is an SACD version of Bob Dylan's "Stuck Inside of Mobile with the Memphis Blues Again" from the *Blonde on Blonde* album with a truly wonderful bass line. On my new Hsu ULS-15, the bass is clean, clear, musical, distinct, and purely fine. This sub sets a new level of performance on this. While I commonly listen to guitar lines, not bass lines, this track has changed my focus, maybe permanently. These electric bass notes hang in the air like weather balloons, big, plump, and impossible to overlook.

But I ought quit this orating and start describing these two speakers' design and sound, as well as my set-up procedures. The ULS-15 subwoofer first. It's heavy, so be prepared, and follow the instructions on the outside of the box. Best to unbox very close to its final location. As Poh Ser mentions, in the manual, right at the top of



the first note, "subwoofer placement is critical in order to achieve optimal sound quality." While a sub may radiate sound omnidirectionally, it is not perceived in that way. Even VERY low pedal organ notes, sufficiently loud, are "in that direction" for me, and they come in stereo these days. Poh Ser suggests and I generally agree that one ought to avoid the center of the room and try near-field placement or corner placement. Hsu says putting his sub into an entertainment center is okay if you obey some caveats, e.g. "fire the woofer straight into the room," etc. I put the sub below and beside his HB-1 bookshelf system, on listener left. The sub includes a Linkwitz-Riley low-pass crossover with a 24-dB-per-octave slope and also has a mono amp which will produce 1000-watt peaks. There are adjustments on the back panel for crossover frequency range of 30 to 90 Hz, phase (0° or 180°), overall volume, and for trim of the ultra-low frequencies or bottom end in order to deal with room gain. If you are using a receiver or other piece of electronics with a Dolby Digital "subwoofer or LFE output," the ULS-15 will accept low level signals. And there are five-way binding posts which accept high-level inputs from an amplifier. There is also a set of XLR or balanced inputs; to be recommended! The power switch has three positions: Off, On and Auto in which the unit senses the presence of bass signal and turns the subwoofer on. Perhaps the most innovative aspect of this sub is its wireless connection. One connects the low-level pre-outs to the two inputs of the wireless transmitter, and then matches up the control channel indicators on the transmitter and receiver on the back of the sub. This cuts down on wiring and can help in home theater systems.

Now, being a Certified Knuckle-Headed Editor (CKHE), I decided to ignore the Hsu's built-in crossover, exemplary in its design, and use my personal external electronic crossover, an XM44 from Marchand which uses small cards with edge connectors (as with computer memory) to change the center frequency of the crossover. It's set at 80 Hz. I have no inclination to change crossover frequency or to change to another method of doing the crossover.



Even though I had previously been using a rather fine pair of bookshelf monitors, my respect for Poh Ser is such that I agreed pretty quickly when he asked that I try out his HB-1 Mk 2 speakers with his sub. He knows what he's doing and I can always learn something. These HB-1s are two-way speakers which use a controlled-directivity horn for the top and fairly standard paper cone woofer. They are good enough, versatile enough and inexpensive enough that they can do a creditable job in every application from stereo pair through center channel on out to five in a 5.1 system or seven in a 7.1 system. Poh Ser had some pretty specific instructions and requests on positioning and aiming his speakers, the sort of thing that gets to Ye Grumpy Editor. After three decades of dealing with my listening room with various speakers, this CKHE tends to ignore or resist such things, but it turned out that Hsu was right and was right without even being in my room. The height of the tweeter off the floor was about the same as my previous speaker, and the distance to the back and side walls were "within reason." But Poh Ser suggested, much to my surprise, that I use about a square foot of acoustic foam on the left side. I didn't think it was going to change anything, for better or worse, but the left-right imaging got markedly better, with considerably improved definition or space between instruments. In addition, there was an improved stage behind the speaker line, a three-dimensional space I can hear into. It's there and better on more recordings, and not just the well-recorded ones in my collection.

The HB-1 Mk2 speakers mate up with the ULS-15 better than my previous pair of bookshelf monitors did with the busted sub or with the new ULS-15, to my consternation, and so I am out of pocket for them, too. I tend to raise an eye-brow when a horn is used in a home application, but boy, oh boy, it's done right on the HB-1. The horn in the HB-1 is pretty shallow, and I have the notion that in part Hsu uses it to control dispersion of the high frequencies it reproduces. That is, he wants you to hear the direct sound, the stuff that is really the source, and not some "intermediate sound" that's had its sonic character changed by being bounced off a side wall. Every different wall construction will change that in its own sweet way, concrete vs. plasterboard vs. a shelf of LPs, etc. In addition, horns are usually more

efficient than cones for the same frequency range, but I am not so certain of that being a big deal because of this unit's shallow design. Whatever, the HB-1 plays loud, as loudly as I want it. Very much more and I would be uncomfortably close to "bleeding ear" range. It felt like the sub was just loafing at these levels.

But the HB-1 plays softly, too, without losing detail or changing timbre. Some speakers need to be driven pretty hard to get their motors moving properly, exhibiting too much non-linearity when first starting up. They are just not accurate at low levels, and only when driven to their mid-levels and above are they "good sounding." These little guys aren't like that. They will play the part of "background speakers," such that the lowest levels are submerged in the whirr of the refrigerator two rooms away, but they are accurate and musical even when driven at "idle." I didn't like listening to them in such a manner, as it constituted some sort of insult to the music.

One of my all-time favorite cuts for testing the midrange of speakers like the HB-1 is "*Who Knows Where the Times Goes*" by Sandy Denny. It has a truly wonderful note that she holds for several seconds, so that it's easily possible to do a quick A/B switch between pairs of speakers being tested, frequently with "unhappy" results for one or the other. I also use the Jeklin recording by Hans Ludwig Hirsch of Benedetto Marcello harpsichord works and the Mercury SACD version of Janos Starker's rendering of Bach cello suites. Incidentally, I do not think my aural memory is so good that I can accurately remember the sonic signature of loudspeaker system more than a few seconds, and in fact, it is MUCH easier to tell two speakers apart if one can switch between them with little or no delay. And this is where such tracks as Denny's help distinguish the chaff from the champs. If you have not tried a quick A/B yourself, you should, and you will thank me when you have. This is where the store's salesman can frequently get to you.

I mentioned above that Poh Ser suggested I try a square of sonic foam beside the left HB-1, and I am very glad I did that. Most of the wall is an old, wood dental cabinet with drawers irregular in size and whether they are open or shut. A small part of that wall has bookcase filled with CDs, and the foam sits on some of these, and is close to the HB-1. I have been playing with speakers for hobby and job for decades, and I am a fan of foam as it usually does good things. I hadn't expected to get my center image moved a little to the left and items in it reduced in size. It took about a week before those changes sounded correct, but at this point, I would not go back.

This trio of speakers from Hsu is nothing if not hugely cost effective. For less than \$1600 MSRP, you get a world-class system. You also get low-frequency performance that I think is rarely if ever matched, but never bettered, and then at a substantially higher system cost. You get accurate and musical sound over a wonderfully wide dynamic range, perhaps not that of a symphony orchestra up-close, but approaching that range. You get musical timbre and accuracy from the mid through the top frequencies that gives most every other system a run for the "best of" award. The only thing you don't get with the HB-1 Mk2s and the ULS-15 are a big dent in your wallet from the ego thrill of outspending your audio buddies.

Mojo Audio Lucent Interconnects

Chris Reardon-Noblet



Mojo Audio Lucent
Copper Interconnects



Mojo Audio Lucent
Silver Interconnects

SUBTLY ATTRACTIVE in appearance like a tailored tuxedo, the Mojo Audio Lucent interconnects bespeak a quiet sense of quality – the Lucent Copper perhaps a Joseph Abboud and the Lucent Silver, with its carbon fiber and stainless steel-barreled connectors, a Hugo Boss.

Both cables use ribbons – of copper or silver reflecting nomenclature – with micro dielectric coating and in a Teflon tube for a near-air dielectric, according to Benjamin Zwickel of Mojo Audio. This configuration “all but eliminates the capacitive effects caused by dielectric absorption, and our edge-oriented parallel ribbon geometry minimizes inductive effects caused by conductor proximity.”

The Lucent interconnects are lightweight and flexible. They route easily and drape nicely, especially if you orient the RCA plugs appropriately in their sockets to account for the ribbon cables’ nearly flat cross-section. The Furutech connectors’ cable clamps are of excellent design, providing a smooth, positive connection without necessitating undue force when unplugging (if you’ll pardon the description).

The Furutech CF-126R (Lucent Silver) and FP-126R (Lucent Copper) both incorporate Furutech’s Alpha-OCC cryogenically treated and demagnetized rhodium-plated center pins and negative leaf contacts. The CF-126R’s case or body uses the firm’s patented piezo ceramic compound covered by stainless steel and carbon fiber. Both have Teflon insulation, differing only in barrel construction. Each interconnect is available with either connector, price varying based on length of cable and model of connector. See Mojo’s web site for more info.

Nota Bene: This is an entirely subjective review. I’ve heard obvious and even gross differences in analogue interconnects from my early days in this hobby, long before the internet filled up with vituperative missives pro and con on the subject. In a very positive way, the Mojo Lucent have again confirmed to me the importance of actually listening when it comes to purchasing interconnects.

In the equipment array for this review, I used analogue interconnects solely between my Benchmark DAC1 HDR preamplifier and Parasound Halo A21 stereo power amplifier. I only used digital sources

where no other analogue interconnect would be required in the reproduction chain. The preamp and amplifier are very well designed in terms of output and input characteristics. Both accept RCA as well as XLR connectors. This minimized the possibility of sonic differences resulting from electrical mismatches or colorations introduced by other analog interconnects. Moreover, both manufacturers opine that their designs require no great expense on cables beyond a good level of quality. Following this reasoning since first putting this system together, I used Canare Star quad balanced analog conductors with XLR connectors at a cost of about \$70 for the pair. They had provided very good sound.

tament to the benefit of balanced interconnects.

When the Mojo Audio Lucent interconnects arrived, Mojo owner Benjamin Zwickel cautioned that they were only halfway broken in (the Furutech connectors require hundreds of hours to sound their best). Identical in basic construction, both cables have "floating" shields grounded at one end. Mojo Audio suggests trying them both ways in terms of signal direction, but ground-at-preamp is how I roll.

With the freshly installed Lucent Copper, I decided to have a sneak preview via my Magneplanar 1.7 loudspeakers. I immediately heard an improvement over the Canare-based and Chord interconnects across a variety of listening material. I perceived an extended frequency

I have never heard the elements of this music so clearly, so precise yet soulful, and so delicate yet swinging.

Upon learning that I would review the Mojo Audio's RCA interconnects, I swapped out the balanced XLR cables for an excellent one-meter pair of Chorus Anthem 2 interconnects (current price circa \$500) with RCA connectors, just to provide myself a baseline. I heard insignificant differences between the Canare-based and Chorus cables, which I then considered a tes-

response; more pronounced, dynamic and coherent bass; incrementally more lucid vocals and instrumental tonality, and somewhat more coherent imaging against blacker backgrounds. The only significant departure from neutrality that I sensed was a slight emphasis on leading edge transients and a slight diminution of decay trails. In this particular regard, the Lucent reminded me of the attractive character of classic Naim components I own and treasure.

I let the Lucent Copper interconnects burn in for 150 hours (using a USB drive filled with a wide variety of music via my Oppo player set on "repeat") before listening again, at which time my initial impressions were confirmed. With the Lucent Copper interconnects I felt a closer connection with the music than with the two other interconnects I had used previously. I found listening more stimulating. I *enjoyed* it more. To quote an old Naim saying: There was more *music*. This was achieved with an interconnect that, while indeed more expensive than the balanced Canare-based cable, costs about half the price of my previous reference, the Chorus Anthem 2. This initial impression of the Lucent Copper was confirmed by week after week of continued listening across a wide range of CD and 24/96-based media, during which time the sound did indeed continue to improve. (Yes, I often heard details in familiar recordings that I hadn't noticed before.) Conclusion: The Lucent Copper is a fine interconnect and a great value.

I then replaced them with the Lucent Silver interconnects and let those interconnects burn in by the same method. Five days later, I sat down to listen. At first, I was disappointed. Everything seemed sonically vague. Vague as in flaccid bass, flattened imaging, similar-sounding sibilants and limited dynamic response. I checked the Lucent Silver's orientation. Same as the Lucent Copper. "Jeez," I thought. But since Benjamin Zwickel had indeed warned me that the Furutech connectors could take hundreds of hours to break in properly, I left the Silvers in my system, cranked the preamp's volume up to maximum and went away for another week.

NOTES

Mojo Audio Lucent Ribbon RCA Interconnects, copper with Furutech FP-126R plugs, \$299.95 per one-meter pair; silver with Furutech FP-126R plugs, \$699.95 per one-meter pair; connector upgrade to CF-126R, \$200.00 additional. Mojo Audio, 1971 McKees Rocks Road, McKees Rocks, PA 15136; phone 412/735-3618, web site www.mojo-audio.com, various contact methods via web site.

Associated Equipment

Benchmark DAC1-HDR preamp and DAC; Parasound Halo A21 stereo power amplifier; Oppo BDP-93 universal network 3D Blu-ray disc player connected via e-SATA to G Technology 500-GB G-Drive; Sony X33ES cd player as transport via optical cable; MacBook computer via Airport Extreme, USB cable and optical cable; Kimber 8TC speaker cable in shotgun configuration; Magneplanar 1.7 loudspeakers; PS Audio P300 Power Plant a.c. regenerator; LAT International AC-2 power cords; iTunes, Decibel and Pure Music playback software.

And *what* a difference that week did make! When I returned, turned on my power amp, and sat down to listen, from the first notes, I was amazed. Glorious, intoxicating sound. I had been prepared to swap out the Lucent Silvers and focus this review on the Coppers – but what I now heard was the finest sound from any system I’ve owned. The ugly duckling interconnect had become a swan; a link purportedly only needing to be task-adequate had enabled a new level of sound quality. *Whodathunk?*

Analysis or pleasure? Take your pick. To wit: Nick Drake’s *Five Leaves Left*, which I first heard on LP in 1970 and which I rank among the greatest singer-songwriter albums ever recorded. More than ever before, listening to a 2000 Universal/Island-remastered British CD I was able to appreciate Drake’s precise elocution – saw-toothed Zs, hissing Ss, velvety V’s – the unique vocal quality of his slight tonal wobbles around a true pitch; his extraordinary colors; the alternately flutey, feathery, woody, always rounded vocal tones; his nasality not in the sense of whiny but in the rich resonance of Drake’s vocal oeuvre. There is up-close, “you are there” reproduction of his virtuosic steel-string finger picking. Accompanying string instruments go from resinous to sweet. While I had never heard the elements of this music so clearly, I’ve also never been able to wallow in its gestalt so freely – precise yet soulful, delicate yet swinging.

Analysis combined with raw enjoyment, detail with gestalt: To me those are the benefits of transparency to the source, which is what the Mojo Audio Lucent Silver enables in my listening area. I won’t bore you with further description, suffice it to say I traversed score upon score of songs from doo wop to hip hop,

many of which I’ve grown to know intimately from hundreds of listenings over the years. Each seems freshened, carrying an impact close to a first listening, the recording seemingly a generation closer to the master tape. Characteristics of acoustic space and/or artificial reverb were particularly well reproduced. It was fascinating to so easily hear two or more discrete reverberation characteristics on some multitrack recordings, reproduced with continuousness and coherence. No, I wasn’t smoking anything. But do you get it that I am completely taken with the Lucent Silvers?

I’ve learned, sometimes through expensive mistakes, that cost does not always correlate with performance or listening pleasure in this hobby of ours – at least in the price ranges where I’ve been able to experiment. This is especially true with regard to speakers, phono cartridges, turntables and interconnects. But I can say this about the Mojo Audio interconnects: The Lucent Copper is an excellent, highly competitive interconnect that punches well above its price range, however if you can afford the additional gelt the Lucent Silver just may bring your system to a new level of performance, as it did to mine. Both cables are highly recommended.

As well as a lifetime warranty for the original owner, Mojo Audio Includes a 45-day no-risk audition period during which the full purchase price will be refunded; a 90-day full value upgrade period, and a six-month period during which Mojo Audio will allow 80 per cent of the purchase price toward an upgrade. They will even credit 70 per cent to an owner who wishes to upgrade as long as a year after purchase. Those are some user-friendly terms!

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George Graves

Pro-Ject Debut Carbon Turntable, Tonearm & Phono Cartridge



IN THE LATE 1980s and 1990s, the CD all but killed off the market for LP record-playing equipment, but something of a renaissance started after the turn of the millennium, a renaissance that continues to this day. While it would be impossible to sell a turntable of the value of Edgar Villchur's legendary Acoustic Research for that unit's paltry \$78 price tag (or even 10 times that much) in today's much-devalued currency, there are a number of turntables on the market for less than \$500. While these new turntables are built using new and different materials and technologies, they frequently offer the budget-conscious audiophile a fairly inexpensive route to the pleasures of quality vinyl playback, often with even better performance than the venerable old AR achieved.

One such firm which has become a major player in today's turntable marketplace is the Viennese company, Pro-Ject Audio Systems. Pro-Ject makes turntable and arm combos which start under \$300 and range up to

over \$12,000! Like Rega from England and the American firm Music Hall, they offer decent performing turntable ensembles for less than \$500.

We will concentrate on Pro-Ject's latest entry-level table, the Debut Carbon. This ensemble consists of a manual, belt-driven turntable, a newly designed carbon-fiber tone-arm (thus the word "Carbon" in the model name) and a Danish Ortofon moving-magnet cartridge called the 2M "Red," and retails for \$399. The base of the Debut Carbon is made of high-density fiberboard and comes in a range of high-gloss colors. The table ships with a plastic dust cover and an antistatic platter mat. One can select from black, green, blue, yellow, silver or white, two of which are shown.

Setup

When unpacked, the Debut Carbon looks quite unprepossessing with its light-weight construction and painted, stamped-steel main platter. The plinth is very

light and comes completely assembled with the motor and tone-arm already attached and the cartridge already mounted and aligned. All the user needs do to the arm is attach the separately packaged counterweight and install the anti-skate device.

To balance the cartridge, one moves the weight back or forth on its mounting rod until the arm, when removed from its resting post and with the cartridge stylus guard removed, floats level on its bearings. Pro-Ject, and Ortofon both recommend 1.8 grams (the range is 1.6 to 2.0 grams), but this reviewer believes in using the highest specified tracking force for any cartridge. The increase in record wear is negligible, and a higher tracking force increases tracking ability and avoids record damage. Too low a tracking force will result in much

wall-wart power supply to the provided jack on the back of the plinth and the a.c. wall socket.

Notice that the pre-mounted cartridge needs no set-up except for stylus pressure and anti-skate bias. This means that from opening the box to playing your first record should take no more than 15 minutes, even if you've never set up a turntable before.

A Stamped Steel Platter?

The biggest eyebrow raiser with this product is the platter itself. It's a stamped sheet of steel. The platter is painted black with what looks to be a powder-coated finish and has a turned-over lip so that it resembles a shallow frying pan. The label area around the spindle hole is recessed in the normal way. If you balance the

Clearly designed to be affordable, Pro-Ject's Debut Carbon gives far better performance than you'd expect.

more record damage than too high a force. Just don't exceed the manufacturer's maximum recommended force to avoid long-term fatigue of the stylus assembly. The use of an accurate stylus force gauge is highly recommended here, as it turns out that the gram markings on the counterweight (once "zeroed-out") are not precise. To be fair, I find this to be true of almost all tone-arms. I use the venerable Shure stylus gauge and see no reason to spend any more on such a device. Shure's gauge is easy to use, very accurate and reasonably inexpensive at less than \$40. I've had mine for more than 30 years.

Lastly, you need to fit the anti-skating weight. This is accomplished by placing the loop in the end of the provided nylon "fishing line" over the groove in the anti-skate lever corresponding to two grams, and draping the weight on the other end over the wire support provided.

After plugging the supplied cable into the RCA jacks on the back of the Debut's plinth (or fitting your own "premium cable" if you are of that particular religious persuasion) and connecting the other end to the moving-magnet inputs on one's phono preamp, the next step is to mount the platter. To do this, you set the polycarbonate plastic sub-platter on the plinth by inserting the bearing (long) end of the shaft into the bearing well and let the platter settle as the shaft displaces the air in the well. Then it is a matter of using the supplied tool (I gather that Pro-Ject discourages touching the belt with one's fingers) to wrap the belt around the sub-platter and then around the smaller of the two steps on the motor-shaft pulley (for 33½ rpm). Then merely place the larger platter over the spindle, so that it rests on the sub-platter, set the antistatic mat in place, and you're almost done.

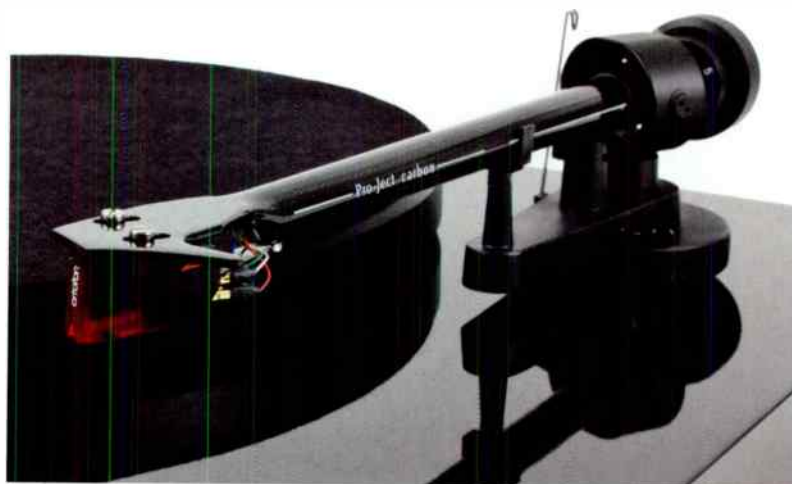
The final steps are attaching the dust cover and connecting power. The dust cover slips over two L-shaped hinges at the back of the plinth. The hinges are stiff and the dust cover is light so when you lift it, it stays where you put it. Lastly you need to plug-in the supplied 15 V a.c.

platter on your extended finger and plunk it with your other finger, it rings like one of Quasimodo's bells. This worried me, as it's more than a little counterintuitive. First of all, most turntable manufacturers currently go to a lot of trouble to make sure that their turntables are anti-resonant. Some, such as Rega, use heavy sheets of glass as platters. Such platters are fairly inert, inexpensive and provide the flywheel mass required for good speed stability. Others (including Pro-Ject for some of their other low-cost models) use Medium Density Fiberboard (MDF) for the platter material as well as for the plinth. While neither of these materials is very elegant looking, they do the job at the required price-point.

Another concern of mine was that steel is magnetic, and modern magnetic cartridges use powerful, rare-earth magnets to generate their signal. I was concerned that a steel platter could attract a magnetic cartridge in a manner deleterious to its performance. Nonetheless, I placed the platter on its spindle and sat down to listen to some records.

Operation

The Debut Carbon's operation is simplicity itself. Curiously, the on/off switch is located on the underside of the left-hand corner of the plinth. The supplied feet



are tall enough so that one can reach this rocker switch with the index finger of one's left hand quickly and easily. Switching it on causes the platter to come up to speed in less than a single revolution. This is surprising for a turntable in this price range, especially given the weight of the steel platter and the apparent size of the a.c. motor, but it obviously has a lot of torque!

The tone-arm is probably the Debut Carbon's most impressive feature. Being of carbon fiber, it is incredibly light. Being so light, it needs but a very small counterweight. Light arms are low-mass arms, and this one is about as low as any I remember. In fact (and I'm relying on memory here), it seems to be even lower in mass than the famous Infinity Black Widow tone-arm of the 1980s. Just as importantly, the arm was designed with the Ortofon cartridge in mind, with the idea of making the

(with Antal Dorati and the London Symphony Orchestra on the Classic Records single-sided 200-gram re-mastering of Mercury SR90226). This is, without a doubt, the best sounding LP that this listener has ever heard. I figured that if anything would reveal this turntable's mettle, it would be this recording. I was right. The pressing is as pristine and master tape-like as any I've heard and so it was with the Debut/Ortofon combo. The playback speed accuracy was as good as it is with my reference Gyrodec SE, which is saying something, as the JA Michell is well known for its superior speed accuracy.

As I mentioned earlier, the Ortofon 2M "Red" cartridge works very well with this arm, but being a budget cartridge, no one should expect it to perform like my Grado, and indeed it doesn't. I must say, however, the aspects where the Grado bests the 2M Red are sins of

I could nit-pick some things about this combo, but it still performs very well, besides sounding really good.

two into a system. The resonance of the arm and cartridge combo is ideal at 8-11 Hz and they handle warped and eccentric records like no other that I have seen. This alone makes this record player worth having. Such arm and cartridge matching is usually a crap-shoot as there is really no way for the average audiophile to know whether his choice of arm and cartridge will work well together except by trying them. This approach by Pro-Ject removes that variable from the set-up.

How It Sounds

The first thing I did was to move the belt to the 45-rpm pulley and place my copy of Stravinsky's "Firebird" ballet

omission rather than commission. The Ortofon lacks the high-end airiness of the Grado. This airiness is not caused by a rising top-end response on the Grado, as with so many moving-coil cartridges, because the Grado actually sounds somewhat subdued compared to most moving-coils. No, the difference is in the extension. The Ortofon's response seems to fall somewhat short of the Grado's and this can be heard in the strings and the percussion as a lack of sheen though I would not term this a dulling of the highs. The Ortofon/Debut Carbon combo does impress with its tracking ability, however. Together they remind me of a Shure V15-V, running in an SME Series IV arm I once owned. The combo seemed to track anything including the notorious record with Frederick Fennell and the Cleveland Winds playing the Holst "Two Suites for Military Band" (Telarc LP 5038), which has drum whacks that are so loud that one can actually see the grooves for them from across the room. The World Book Encyclopedia once called this "The Bass Drum Heard 'Round the World". While the drum beats were tracked perfectly by the Debut/Carbon, without a hint of distortion, their low-end response seemed somewhat attenuated from my reference. This could be anything from the cartridge not having the low-end response of the Grado, to some anomaly in the carbon fiber tone arm, or resonances in the platter itself. To figure out what was causing the loss of bass, I'd have to do a lot more research.

Throughout the next several weeks, I played record after record on the Pro-Ject Debut almost non-stop and I was never less than completely satisfied with the reproduction I was getting. Yes, I could easily live with this turntable and would have to make no apologies for it, but the mystery of that steel platter was nagging



at me. Looking at Pro-Ject's web site, I noticed that they sell an acrylic platter as an upgrade. While this supposedly fits all of their older or cheaper tables, this seemed odd, so for confirmation, I called John Paul Lizars at Sumiko, Pro-Ject's American importer. Yes, John Paul confirmed, the \$130 "Acryl-it" platter upgrade will, indeed, fit this new Debut Carbon, and yes, he'd be delighted to send one along to me. Now, I thought, we'll see what the steel platter is contributing (or detracting) from this ensemble's performance.

The Acryl-it platter upgrade arrived in due course, and taking it out of its box, I was impressed with its well-finished appearance. It is a "milky-clear" hunk of plastic, machined to fit over the sub-platter and clear the motor spindle. It has the required label

player designed and built to a price, it's more than just fine. Indeed, it's miraculous and worth every penny of the \$399 list price. However, if you can afford the extra \$130 for the "Acryl-it" upgrade, I say, do it!

Downside?

Nothing's perfect, and I'd be remiss indeed if I didn't mention the Debut Carbon's few (and minor) faults. First of all, the arm is very light and the finger-lift is very short. Add to that an armrest post that is just a smidgen too tall, and you have a recipe for the arm flying out of your hand (with potentially disastrous results) if you don't lift it high enough to clear that post.

The second problem is the anti-skating weight. This uses a thin piece of nylon thread with a loop on one

The Pro-Ject Debut Carbon turntable, arm and cartridge will out-perform any other "bargain LP player" I know of.

depression and is about an inch thick at the rim. It is lighter than the supplied steel platter, but it is also mechanically inert. Thumping it with one's forefinger creates nothing but a dull "thunk." It is easy to fit and makes the deck look like a million bucks, but how would it sound? That was the important question.

I tried it two ways. First I used it with the supplied anti-static record mat and then without. Light and flimsy as this mat is, it stays put on the 'table and you don't need to resort to double-sided tape. Plus, due to its antistatic qualities, it does not stick to the underside of your records. Nonetheless, I found that while it (or something similar) would surely be de rigueur for the steel platter (for acoustic dampening as well as a cushion for the delicate playing surface), the acrylic platter sounded better without it. I have to say that I did use a record clamp with both the steel and the acrylic platters and highly recommend the practice. I use the J.A. Michell clamp that came with my Gyrodec SE, but there are many effective ones on the market.

The first thing I noticed with the acrylic platter is that the slight forwardness or rise in the midrange that I had earlier noticed, was gone. Now, the Pro-Ject was much more similar to my reference Michell Gyrodec SE. And as I suspected, the bass firmed up considerably and just exhibited "more." This was the whole reason for this exercise in the first place. The bass drum on the Telarc "Fennell/Holst" record was definitely both louder and deeper, with much more of the drum's fundamental coming through. Bowed bass viols had a more deeply resinous bottom octave to them and as did Major Holley's plucked bass on Coleman Hawkins "Desafinado" (Impulse IMP-227 GRP re-mastering on 180-gram vinyl from 1997). This is a quite definite improvement.

Now, I can't say for sure that the steel platter in any way had a negative effect on the magnetic parts of the Ortofon cartridge, but I can certainly hear and attest to the difference between a platter that rings audibly and one that doesn't. I'm not saying that the steel platter makes the Debut in any way unacceptable. For a record

end and a weight at the other. The loop goes over a narrow post, mounted parallel with the rear of the arm-tube. This post has several notches in it to locate the loop of thread. The thread then is placed over a wire pylon from which the weight hangs. All is fine and good unless you move the front of the arm beyond its armrest post. If you move the arm too far to the right, the loop will slip off its notched mount and the weight will fall to the plinth. A drop of hot glue applied to the loop with a toothpick stopped that difficulty, but there should be a better way. Other than that everything works as one would expect. There are really no other complaints.

Summary

The Pro-Ject Debut Carbon is a definitely a turntable built down to a price. It's not fancy, but it is well engineered and nicely constructed. The carbon-fiber tone-arm is a gem. Its low mass and decent bearings coupled with a fitted cartridge of excellent specifications and superb tracking ability, make it a budget ensemble to envy. A clear upgrade path (better platter, electronic speed controls, and better quality Ortofon 2M cartridges) is available from Pro-Ject and makes it an entry level table that will grow with its owner as he (or she) becomes more interested in collecting vinyl, either new or used.

Well done, Pro-Ject! Good Show, Sumiko!

NOTES

Pro-Ject Debut Carbon, \$399.00. U.S. distributor, Sumiko, Inc., 2431 Fifth St., Berkeley, CA 94710; phone 510/843-4500; fax 510/843-7120; e-mail mail@sumikoaudio.net, web site www.sumikoaudio.net.

Sanus Super-Slim HDMI Interconnects



Bernard Kingsley

THE TRUTH IS, interconnects and cables are not much fun to deal with. Indeed, they can be a real pain when you set up a system or frequently move components in and out. This is especially true when you don't want to move your basic rack or equipment or when the space in back, between the plugs and the wall, is tight. Just getting the right plug in the right hole was always confusing enough when you couldn't see the name of the jack, but today's multi-channel video-oriented systems made the whole task a lot harder.

One of my "significant others" has never liked the looks of cables, and declared "they ought to just find a way to get rid of them." Maybe she was prescient. Here I sit writing this on my laptop connected to the internet via Wi-Fi, and my phone is connected to the laptop using Bluetooth. Wireless.

Still, I am also listening to music with a mile of wires connecting the gear. Cables are still necessary to play any sort of program at all, let alone achieve really good quality sound and video. Yes, you can try to "hide" them somewhat in your system by using one of the tubes, clamping them down or through other means, but they remain.

This fairly new HDMI cable from Sanus takes a stab at the ease-of-use issue while trying to maintain the high quality of signal we have come to expect from the format. When it was first introduced, HDMI was a major step forward in that it combined the audio (even surround) signals with the video signals in a single interconnect. In most set-ups, this means six audio and three video paths in one cable! The newest HDMI cables,

including the one under review, are now capable of carrying an Ethernet signal as well. You may not care about that, but it's nice to have.

These Sanus interconnects distinguish themselves by being skinny as in having a very tiny wire diameter. The result is a cable that is more flexible and can get around corners more easily. That can make a big difference when you are reaching in behind a heavy, hanging video monitor or trying to plug into a video receiver you don't want to move, not at all.

Furthermore, the connector is 40 per cent shorter which also matters if you put a component close to a wall. I didn't realize just how much difference it was until I pulled out my usual Monster HDMI cables which were quite thick compared to the Sanus. Most of this "smaller" is where it matters most, i.e. from the tip where the plug is to where the wire comes out.

Not all cables are alike, either. I do have an "ersatz" "slim-line" HDMI cable which I use mostly to set up equipment. It was dirt cheap; I think I picked it up in a discount store for about \$12.00. It works just fine for setups, but I found that this El-Cheapo model left something to be desired for video. Never tried it for critical audio listening.

So, I hooked up the very, very slim cables from Sanus and first tried some movies which I know really well. The film *Black Robe* is challenging because of its gorgeous coloration. Right away, it was clear to me that this slim Sanus cable is every bit as good as the thick "call brand" cable it replaced. This was not just in the presentation of the colors but also the perceived depth

of the picture (similar to a soundstage in audio). Better than Monster Cable, the de facto category sales leader? You need to look for yourself. I am not sure, because I find it's not possible to switch cables in and out fast

als science. But if you are looking to replace a cable, or just need something less visible and more flexible, not to mention easier to handle, I recommend these. It is possible their shape and size will allow you to set up a

**Can't get your HDMI cables to easily plug into a tight space behind a video receiver?
Try the Super-Slims from Sanus.**

enough for a good A/B comparison. However, it is safe to say that the reduction in the bulk of the cable in no way comes at a cost to color accuracy or to picture quality. Certainly, these Sanus interconnects at least hold their own in the video arena.

So what about audio? I listened to my system in 5.1 audio mode, playing some movies, some DVD-Audio discs (only have a few), and some SACD discs. Same story. I loved the sound of my original setup and these cables did nothing to change my mind about that. Music had all the depth and response which my system is capable of producing. Nothing was compromised by using this slim cable.

The conclusion is that if you are having trouble with tightly set up systems and want to use the HDMI connections, go with these "Super Slim" interconnects from Sanus. I am not sure how they did it, but it looks like there's been no compromise of quality of workmanship and materials. Maybe they did some research in materi-

system that you couldn't do previously; at least, it will be easier to get the pieces together in tight quarters. These Sanus HDMI's do a first-rate job with minimum of fuss.

NOTES

Sanus Super-Slim HDMI Cables, ELM4303 3.3 foot, MSRP \$29.99; ELM4306, 6.6 foot, MSRP \$39.99; ELM4308 8.2 foot, MSRP \$44.99.

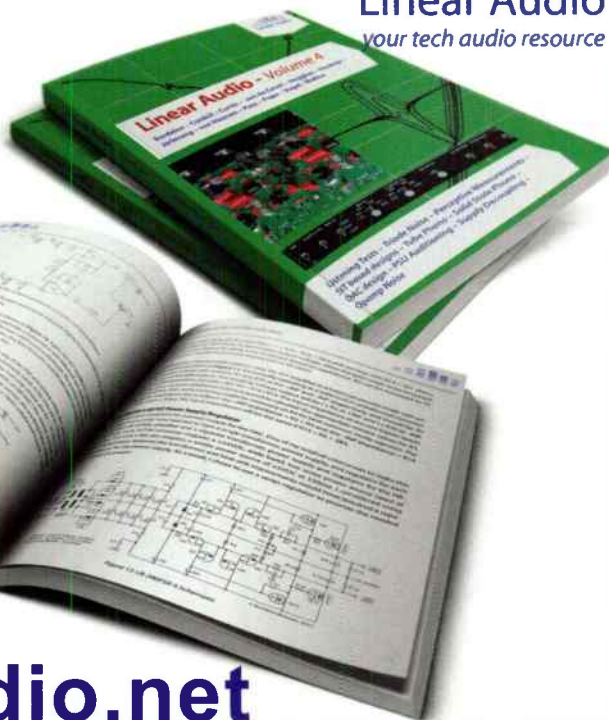
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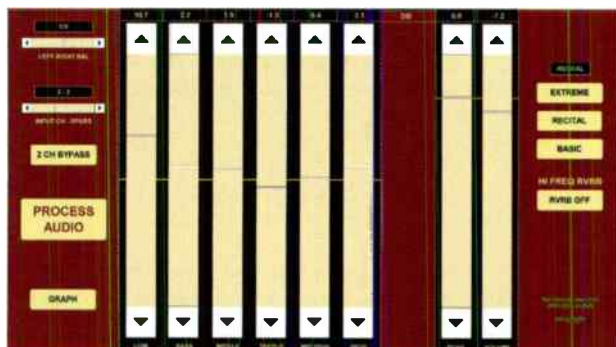
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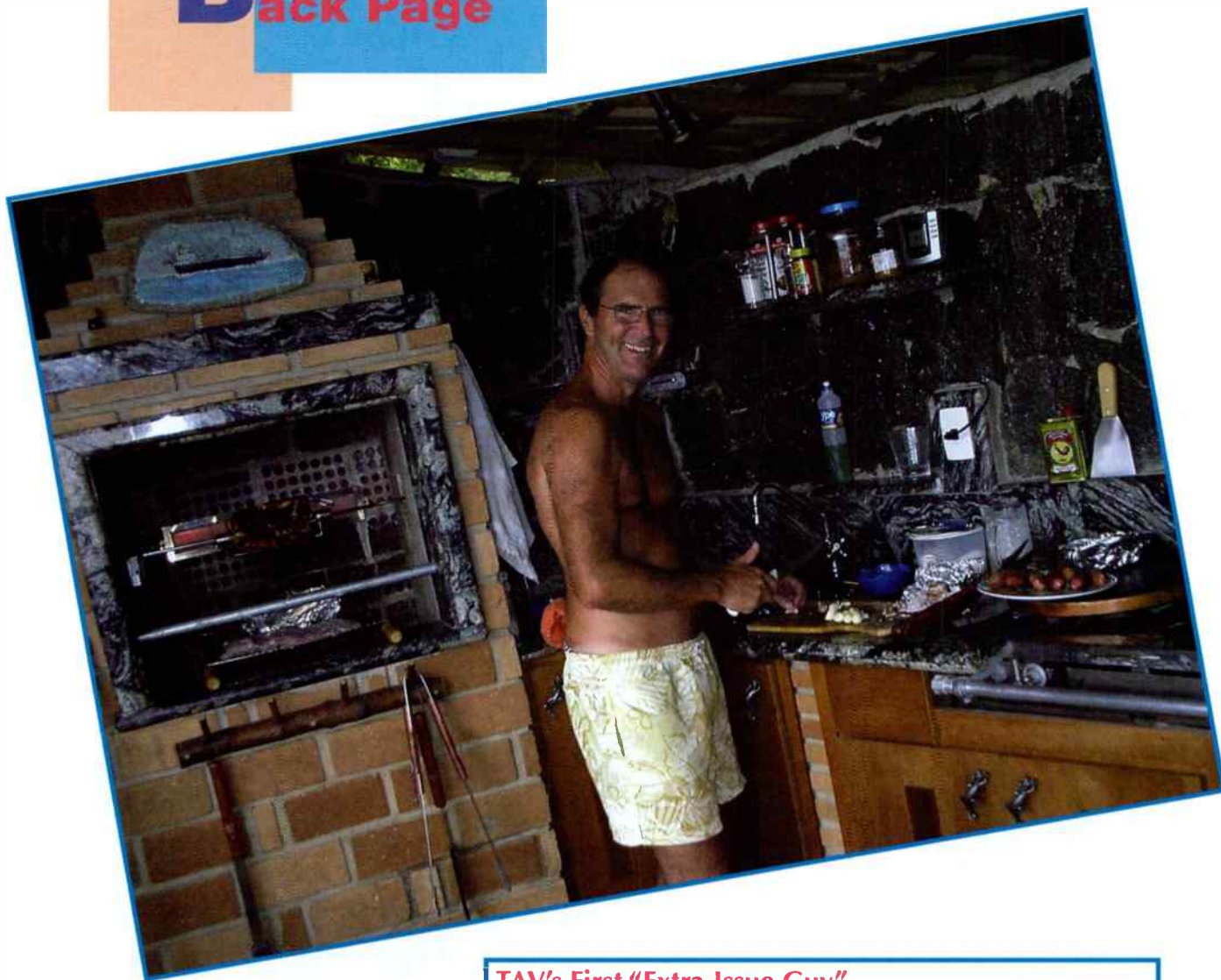
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Photos Never Lie!

TAV's First "Extra-Issue Guy"

is Michael Dean who is shown preparing churrasco at his island hideaway in Ilhabela, Brasil. Not only does Michael have good taste in magazines, he has good taste in food and in "island hideaways." Clearly, his subscription to *The Audiophile Voice* goes along with his "do it right" life-style.

More seriously, Michael Dean is my first designated "Extra-Issue Guy" because he is helping me kick off a new subscription renewal technique. Because he sent me his renewal via the PayPal form on the magazine's website at www.audiophilevoice.com, AND included his e-mail address so it's inexpensive and easy for me to remind him when his sub expires, I am awarding him an extra issue and rewarding him with this write-up.

You, too, can get an extra issue if you use the method. Let me know if you have any questions. It really is easy.

Gene Pitts, Editor.

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