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**TAV**

**The Audiophile Voice**

Vol. 15, No. 6; \$5.95 US; \$8.50 Can

**Equipment Reviews:**

**AudioQuest Dragonfly**

**Astell & Kern AK100**

**Portable Player**

**Linn Kiko System**

# The Future of Music Is Streaming

Grace Notes:

**Ed Dell, Brian Cheney,  
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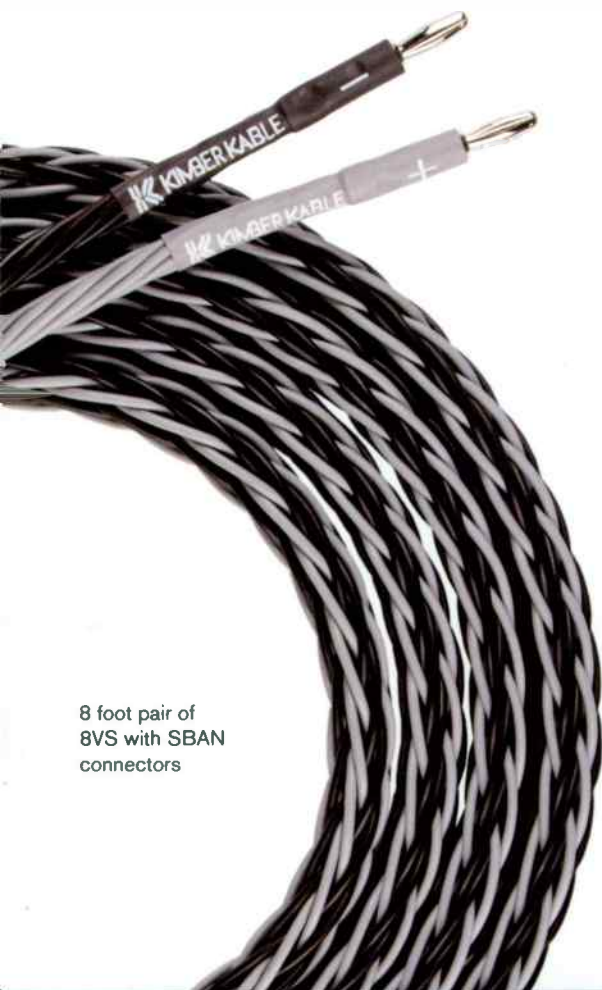
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World Radio History

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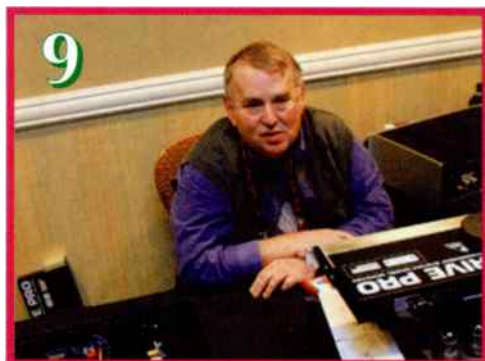
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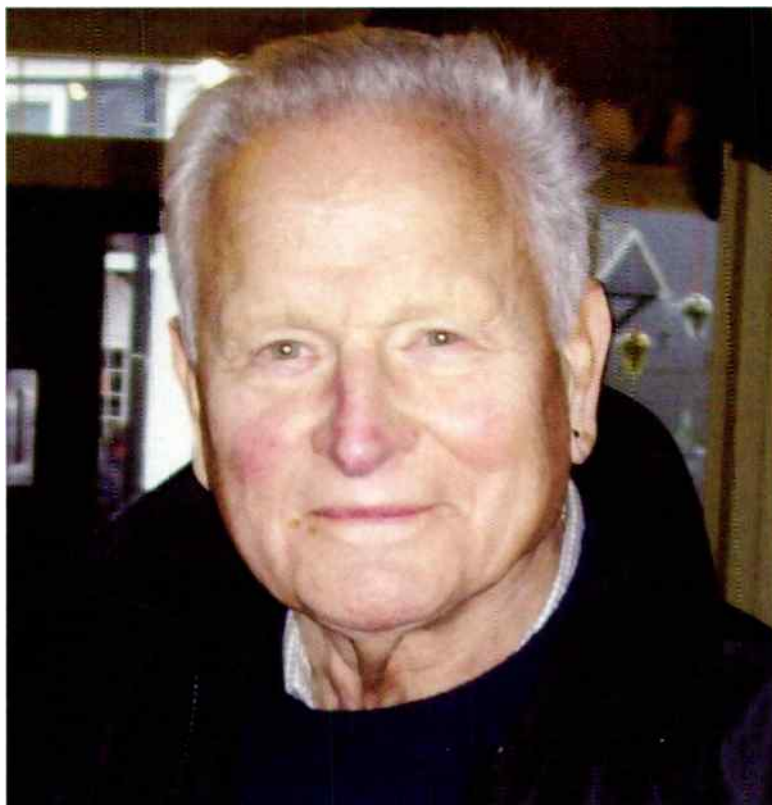
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INNOVATION, PERFORMANCE, & VALUE

World Radio History

## Edward T. Dell, 1923 - 2013 Editor & Publisher, *Audio Amateur*

Jan Didden, *Linear Audio*



**T**HE LATE '60s found Ed Dell, as editor of *The Episcopalian*, living in Swarthmore, PA; as luck had it, he lived across the street from J. Gordon Holt, *Stereophile's* legendary editor. In 1969 Ed had rebuilt what was perhaps the most famous amplifier of the time, the Dynaco Stereo 70. He was dismayed that the very best mil. spec. equipment the defense industry could produce was destroyed after a defined life time, often unused, while consumer equipment failed prematurely because it was being built with cheap parts and cost cutting techniques. So in rebuilding the 70, he scrounged the used parts shops in Boston for the very best mil. spec. parts he could find. Gordon Holt published the project details in *Stereophile* with the amp's schematic gracing the centerfold. But he received numerous complaints from readers who were not at all interested in building stuff! That is when Ed decided to start his own publication, dedicated to building audio electronic equipment and loudspeakers. Holt "lent" Dell his subscriber list and *The Audio Amateur* was born, as a quarterly, with the first issue published in 1970. The venture prospered and specialized publications were added including *Speaker Builder* and *Glass Audio*. In the '90s, Dell united the separate publications as *Audio Amateur*, and later changed the name to

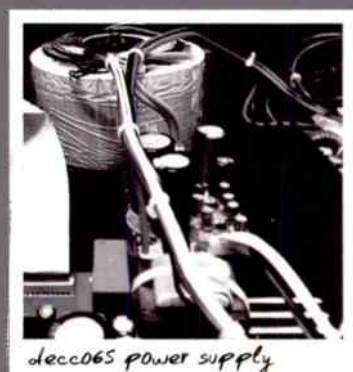
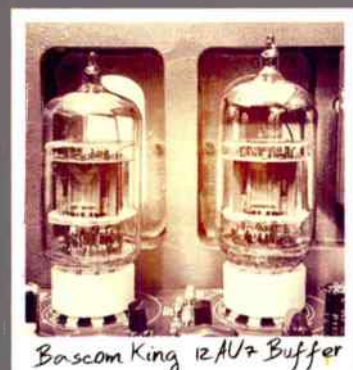
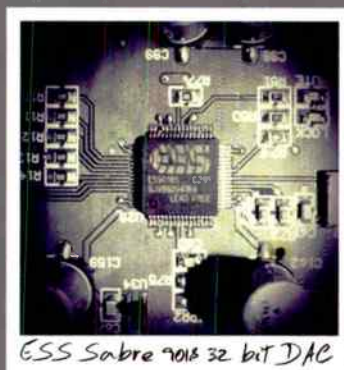
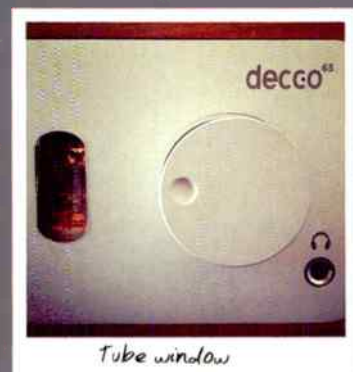
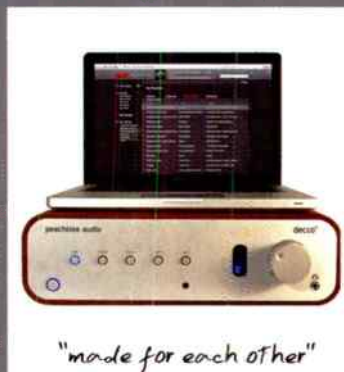
*audioXpress*. In 2004, AA went on the web, offering combinations of printed and on-line subscriptions.

For many years, Dell had been friends with Netherlands-based *Elektor*, swapping advertisements and articles with them. It was natural that *Elektor* branched out into the States as *Elektor USA* and acquired Audio Amateur Inc. in 2011 when Ed reluctantly decided, at the age of 88, to retire.

As editor and publisher of *The Audio Amateur*, Dell never tired of pointing out that making things with your own hands, and enjoying the fruits of that labor, was highly satisfying. He believed that this was most important for people in a time when many jobs started to become, if not dehumanizing, then at least boring or seemingly irrelevant.

His message must have resonated with tens of thousands during his 40-plus years of publishing. Audio DIY is arguably a tiny part of the grandness of humanity. Yet, I am convinced that Dell did touch many, many lives, giving people more self-respect and self-esteem by motivating them to make things with their own hands and developing their personal electronics knowledge and experience. Dell was a dear friend, whom I respect enormously. Many of us will miss him and mourn his passing in February, 2013, days after his 90th birthday.

Remember when HiFi was fun? It is again.



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Stephen Mejias on stereophile.com June 2012 Newport

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# Grace Notes

## James Bongiorno, Audio Designer



### Hugh Mandeson

**T**HE AUDIO industry lost a great man and very gifted audio designer January 9, 2013, when James Bongiorno finally succumbed to multiple melanomas which he had been fighting for a couple of years. He beat liver cancer in the '80s but this finally wore him down. James was an extremely energetic and flamboyant personality. Anyone who met him would recall the occasion and he loved to dress a bit flashy. He was very outspoken with his views and spoke his mind, often loudly. The last time we spoke he was telling me how much he missed his good friend Brian Cheney, who had died not long before. They had exhibited together at T.H.E. Show held parallel to CES in Las Vegas for years.

Not many were aware that James was a professional musician, he was fabulous on piano and claimed to be even better on the accordion. His jazz piano was masterful and creative. His CDs are still available on CD Baby, and you can read the reviews in TAV. He had a few stories about Las Vegas in the days of the Rat Pack since he had mixed with that crowd as well as hotel and casino owners. He toured

all over the country as a young man. James told me he had gotten his start in electronics in radio in NYC. He recounted an occasion to me when a giant transmitter tube had exploded in his presence, scarring him permanently. He had worked for Wurlitzer, Dynaco, Marantz, and SAE.

I wish we had spent more time together and that I'd asked more questions about his personal history. He told me he was self-taught which I find laudable. His place in audio history is prominent and notable. He will certainly be missed, but his contributions survive. TAV's Editor, Gene Pitts, once told me that he thought Bongiorno was one of about five guys in the world who could actually originate audio designs.

Bongiorno treated me as a friend and he was the person who introduced me to writing for TAV in the first place. You can find a history of his designs and career at [www.ampfilla2000.com/James\\_Bongiorno.html](http://www.ampfilla2000.com/James_Bongiorno.html). There are also many comments and accolades to be found on line.

Excuse me, I think I've got something in my eye.

## Brian Cheney, VMPS Itone Loudspeakers

Hugh Mandeson



**B**RIAN CHENEY was born in Flushing, NY, August 26, 1946. to parents Warren and Pat. He was raised in Granada Hills, Los Angeles where he played little league baseball as a pitcher. When he was 14 he moved to Germany with his family. There Brian developed an interest in audio and started building amplifiers and speakers from scratch.

Brian started his own company that imported hi-fi gear from America, and eventually opened his own hi-fi store. He began with redesigning a crossover in a speak-

er, which lead to VMPS Itone Audio ribbon loudspeakers. He was a fixture at The Home Entertainment Show, which is run parallel to CES in Las Vegas each year. Brian became famous for his "Live vs. Recorded" demos that used real musicians playing live music to challenge recordings played using his impressive speakers. Brian frequently used amplifiers designed by his friend and colleague James Bongiorno.

Brian won a Best of CES award for High-End Speaker Design in 2002. Sadly, VMPS will close after

35 years of exemplary work. Many will recall his early kits and amusing classified ads in *Audio Magazine* as well as his great ear, even greater love of music, and his sweet, intelligent character. He will be greatly missed by many.

Brian passed away on December 7, 2012 from cancer. He is survived by his brother Eric and sister-in-law Dee, daughters Terra and Dorica Cheney, his wife Shirley Cheney and his ex-wife Astrid Hutchinson, his stepdaughter Kenyatte Cornelius, and grandchildren Ayanna and Kabyah Cornelius.

# Forget CDs Forget Downloads Streaming is the FUTURE!

Mark Block



**A**LBUM SALES have tanked to a shocking degree, dropping from almost 700 million in 2004 to about 300 million in 2012, according to the IBISWorld Industry Report 51222. Audiophiles love to blame this sorry state on the evils of iTunes and its business model of 99 cents per song, but they're wrong. Sure, iTunes sold 10 billion songs by 2010, but if you want a truly mind-boggling statistic, consider this: The leading music-delivery format for teenagers last year was ... YouTube, surpassing both iTunes and radio. So says the Nielsen survey for August, 2012.

Many in the music business realize that a paradigm shift is happening again, less than a decade since the opening of the iTunes Music Store. Recognizing the change in how people consume music, Billboard began including "On-Demand" streaming data in March of 2012. Then on February 21, 2013, history was made when YouTube views were added to the calculations for the Hot 100 chart. Shockingly, a novelty song called "Harlem Shake" came from nowhere to debut at #1. A Rihanna song jumped from 57 to 3. If the past belonged to records, then cassettes, then CDs, and then down-

loads, the future is here now. If I were giving updated advice to Dustin Hoffman in *The Graduate*, I would change that one famous word of wisdom from "plastics" to "streaming," and I would say that of the many streaming services out there today, two clearly lead the way: Pandora and Spotify.

Audiophiles owe it to themselves to give these two very different services a listen. The fundamental shift we're experiencing is not about singles versus albums or downloads versus CDs. In a nutshell: Young people don't care so much about owning physical media. But, happily, they still love music. Consumers may own less music, but they listen to more of it than ever.

As I walk around "open plan" offices, I see most under-40 people wearing headphones (when they're not on the phone). More of us are enjoying more music than at any time in history, and given the quality of headphones nowadays, we're hearing the music more clearly. A few years ago at my office, people were sharing their iTunes libraries on the company network, and piles of recently purchased CDs were much in evidence. Then along came Pandora.

Pandora Internet Radio, the commercial outgrowth of the Music Genome Project, was started in 2000 by Will Glaser and Tim Westergren. The two came up with over 400 attributes for categorizing songs, then devised a complex algorithm to create relationships between songs. Musicologists were hired to listen to and analyze tracks, then apply the proprietary taxonomy. It's a synthesis of human experience and computer power.

When you sign up for Pandora Radio, you can choose the free service and endure ads, sort of like free broadcast radio, or pick the Pandora One premium ser-

then play whatever you want from that search. Yep, you can play a new album without buying it. There's a social aspect, too. All your Facebook friends show up in a sidebar, so you can see what they're listening to. You can also create playlists and share them with everyone else on Spotify.

I like to discover new songs by listening to the playlists of people who I've marked as having interesting taste. A new feature is that Premium users can download songs to their computers or mobile devices for listening offline, no Internet connection necessary.

---

## Pandora is the best thing since chicken soup, even if dangerous to my credit card balance!

---

vice, which eliminates the ads and offers a higher bit rate, 192k, for \$36 yearly or \$3.99 per month. Once you've registered, you can use Pandora via a web browser, a desktop app or a mobile iOS or Android app. Many newer car stereos feature Pandora connections, as do home theater receivers and Blu Ray players. Pandora Radio has become almost ubiquitous.

Why is Pandora so cool? Instead of choosing from your own library of purchased music, you are now the virtual owner of the world's biggest radio station, hosted by the world's most knowledgeable DJ. Instead of thousands of songs to choose from, you have almost a million at your DJ's disposal.

Here's how it works. You create a "station" based on artist, song, composer or genre, then let the Music Genome algorithm do its thing. As songs play, you can fine-tune the algorithm, customizing it to your taste, by clicking on the thumbs-up or thumbs-down icons and skipping songs you don't like. (I'm glossing over some of the nitty-gritty here, but you get the drift.) The station is saved to your account, so you can get back to it any time, anywhere, on any device. And, of course, you can change your mind and listen to something else on a whim. You're the boss. It's like telling the on-air DJ that the radio station is no longer classic rock, it's classical. Instantly, you have a new radio station, with no complaints from the "staff."

Pandora is only available in the U.S., Australia and New Zealand, but it has reached almost 60 million users. While Pandora was growing in the colonies, Spotify was taking Europe by storm. Started in Sweden, Spotify came to the U.S. in July of 2011 after several years of negotiations with record companies. By then, the Spotify buzz was deafening. Although it now offers a free-to-all, ad-based service like Pandora, at its U.S. launch the free membership was by invitation only, which certainly stirred up the Spotify hive. Registered Spotify users were allowed to invite friends, so a Spotify account was a valuable social commodity. Currently, the paid options (\$5.99 per month for Unlimited and \$9.99 for Premium) offer an ad-free service, a 320k bitrate and various additional features. Spotify hit the 20 million-user mark about a year ago.

So what's the buzz about? Unlike Pandora, which is a virtual radio station, Spotify is a virtually unlimited album library. You search for an album, artist or song,

That's huge: You can legally have songs on your device that you didn't actually purchase.

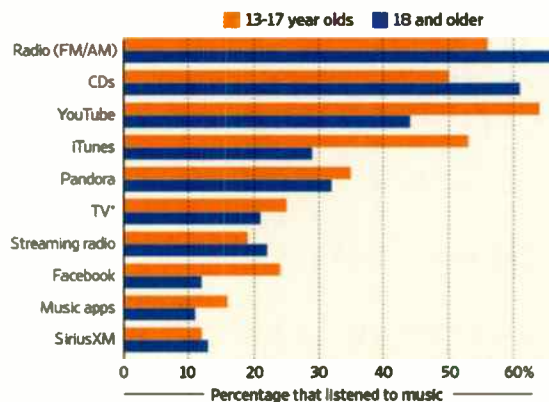
How does it sound? Variable. But in general, Spotify at 320k sounds excellent. There is some controversy about how much of the Spotify library has been upgraded to 320k from the original 160k. With albums that have been mastered multiple times, you may not be sure about the provenance of the tracks. But overall, it's very listenable on good headphones or on a high-end system.

Allow me an anecdotal example. I quite like a little group called Barnaby Bright. I preordered their new CD, *The Longest Day*, but I've been enjoying it on Spotify while the CD was in transit. Now that I have the CD, I can say that, yes, an uncompressed CD rip sounds better. But not so much that I couldn't live with the Spotify 320k stream.

What's not to like? Some complain that Pandora and Spotify don't pay artists enough. Perhaps, but that's not a reason to boycott streaming. Artists do get paid — whatever the music industry has negotiated. My sympathies are with musicians who don't get a big enough cut. However, as these streaming services gain popularity, artists will make more money, and the industry might

### The Great Divide

Teenagers and adults listen to music in different ways. How each group has listened to music in the last 12 months:



\*Includes music channels, streaming services, video on-demand  
Source: Nielsen Music 360

The Wall Street Journal



even have some leverage to negotiate better contracts. In any case, record companies have *always* screwed *their* artists. What's new? All I can say is that I've been exposed to, and paid for, the music of many dozens of artists that I never would have heard without Pandora and Spotify.

Another complaint is that "cloud" servers and streaming are not reliable. I disagree. I'm writing this article on a document that doesn't exist on my computer; it's in the infamous "Cloud." I don't care that it's not on my hard

drive; all I care about is that I can get to it whenever I want, wherever I am. Same deal with music. My "anachrophile" friends on Facebook love to gloat when one online server or another goes down: "Hey Mark, how ya gonna listen to Pandora (or Amazon's Music Player, or iCloud, or whatever) when the servers are down?" Well, I guess I'd be just as screwed if a tube failed in my amp or a cantilever broke on my turntable, except that if Pandora went down, I'd just switch to Spotify.

And if my Internet connection went down? I'd switch to LTE on my mobile device. And if that went down? Well, my house could burn down, taking all my LPs and CDs with it, but that's no reason to not buy physical media. If I can enjoy the music I love without actually owning it, I have nothing to lose. Isn't that what Kris Kristofferson called "freedom?" Of course, if I love something enough, I will still buy it, whether as a CD or an HD Tracks download.

While writing this afternoon, I listened to some music by creating a Paul Simon station on Pandora. A cut from James Taylor's *JT* came up, and it sounded lovely. What followed was something from the Pousette-Dart Band. Uh? Oh, yeah, forgot about them. They're good! A few minutes later I heard a track by Sonny Condell. Who? Who cares? It was wonderful. Within 45 minutes, I'd listened to four great tracks from artists I've never heard of, in addition to some of my favorite Paul Simon hits. And I bought Sonny Condell's *Camouflage* CD on Amazon.

That's why Pandora is the greatest thing since chicken soup for music lovers, if dangerous to the balance of my credit card on file at Amazon.

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HEART+ SOUL YOU CAN HEAR

# The Chester Group NYC Show 2013

The Editors



**Gene Pitts:** The eleven-eleven room, in the corner of the 11<sup>th</sup> floor of the Palace Hotel, is my choice of Best Sounding Presentation at the Chester Group's 2013 NYC Show. I spent only the press day at the Palace so I hope you understand that I "heard" the room to be so very good and important that I went into it three times and spent nearly two hours there over all. The sound of the room took me back to a highly distilled sweetness that I first encountered at the Japan Audio Fairs held on the island in Tokyo Bay. Actually, not at the main sec-

tion of the fairs, but in a hotel a little way off. (Wish I could remember what its name was; Google doesn't show anything there.) But how rare to encounter it again, and to do so in the States, instead of Japan.

The experience reminded me of another memory dragged back from foreign lands. My wife and I were with *NY Times* writer Hans Fintel in Vienna during a junket put on by a headphone and phono cartridge maker. Hans introduced us to the incredible and unique taste of *marillon* liquor. If there is a "best wine in the world," then this is the best liquor. So it was with the sound in the eleven-eleven room.

The gear in the room was all from the Japanese firm Kondo, with the presentation being made by a local NYC dealer, Rhapsody Music & Cinema, which is situated on West 24<sup>th</sup> Street in Manhattan. Most of the time I was there, we listened via the Kondo Ongaku 27-watt integrated amp (\$96,000) and the Kondo Biyura speakers (\$63,000) to LP signal from the Kondo Ginga turntable with arm and IO-M cartridge (\$95,000). The combined cost of this relatively basic system is above a quarter million dollars (\$266,500). Pricey, yeah, but worth it? In spades!! Also on display were Kondo's GE1 phono stage (\$12,500) and M1000 Mk II preamp (\$78,000) and then there's the still-to-be-determined price of the pair of prototype Kondo Kagura 55-watt

mono SET amps. But believe me, this is a batch of gear one ought to go a



**The Kondo Ongaku  
integrated amplifier.**

long way to hear. Why? Because it's absolutely world-class! Totally outstanding! Those and a few similar descriptors were all I have come up with for the sound of Kondo equipment, both that day and since. Go listen, even if you think you know what "best anywhere, at any time" means.

Another interesting set I ran into were the iFi Micro series, which included the iDAC, the iPhono, the iUSB Power, and the iCan headphone amp. Being about four inches wide and four inches tall, they will fit in many places their standard-sized competitors won't. Still in display prototypes, I didn't get to listen, but both you and I ought follow up. Looks very promising. Two other very interesting items were Mytek's Stereo192-DSD DAC at \$1595, in silver or black, and the Merrill Audio Veritas monoblock amps at \$6,000 per channel.

In the Woo Audio room, #912, I sat down with **MA Recordings' Todd Garfinkle**, who's known for his discs' amazing sound and adventurous material.

**TAV:** What motivates you to pursue sonic excellence in your recordings?

**TG:** I want everything I record to possess a pure, uncolored elegance. This is somewhat subjective, but I think I have developed a good idea of what uncolored sound is. And living in Japan for almost 25 years influenced my perception of elegance.

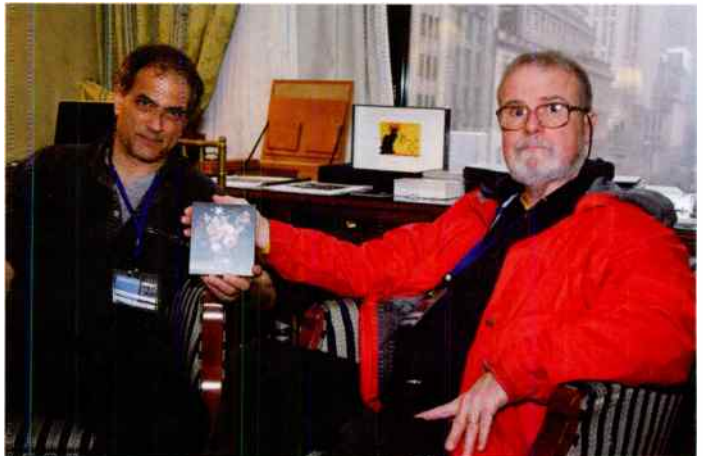
Over the years, I strove to acquire the best gear I could. Just as important as the gear is the space in which the music is performed and recorded, and the quality of the musicians. I have been blessed to work with superb musicians playing superb instruments, and to record them in amazing-sounding spaces in Europe, Argentina, Japan, the USA, Hong Kong, etc.

I am not interested in recording most music that has already been recorded because there is no reason to do so. But with J. S. Bach, I feel that I can present the music in a newly refined "Sonic Light." There's also a wealth of still-unrecorded early and ancient music and there are musicians studying and playing this music on instruments that are works of art in themselves. Discovering music should never stop. Unfortunately, many audiophiles haven't figured that out yet.

The music has to be played by those born or at least immersed in that specific culture. So, I need to get on an airplane and go to the source. That is the only way for me and I am pretty sure you can tell that from how the music sounds and feels. My gear has to work anywhere, meaning I need to be able to take it on an airplane. It's akin to a musical (and spiritual-anthropological) odyssey that the open-minded listener can join without physically going anywhere.

**Joel Shumer:** Jeff Joseph, founder and chief guru of **Joseph Audio**, was demonstrating his newest speaker, the Perspective. Essentially, it is the highly acclaimed stand-supported Pulsar turned into a floor-stander with an additional 5.5-inch woofer. The foot prints of both speakers are identical, 8.5 inches wide and 13 inches deep but the Perspectives, with a height of 36 inches, stand on their own three feet.

Over the last two months I have had a pair of Pulsars in my house and have been in awe of their wide dynamics, sense of presence, and bass extension. The Perspectives take the virtues of the Pulsars and ratchet them up a couple of notches. Listening to the demos at



**Truly professional photographers use props of a known size, such as a magazine, to give viewers a good idea on how large an unfamiliar products such as the iFi line actually is. Todd Garfinkle with George Witterschein and the Nima Ben David *Résonance* CD George reviewed in TAV Vol. 15, No. 4**

the show, the Perspectives produced a big sound with unusual glare-free clarity and with a clean bass that goes well beyond the Pulsars. Great speakers, but at \$11,800 a pair, they ain't cheap.

If you are considering buying new headphones, consider Dan Clark's Mad Dog phones made in house in San Diego, CA. I was convinced and after the show phoned Dan at 858/342-3445 and I ordered a pair at his normal every day price of \$299. You can also reach him at [www.mrspeakers.com](http://www.mrspeakers.com). Dan offers a money-back guarantee and says that only 5 per cent of purchasers have asked for a refund. I like them. Compared to my reference Grado1000 Signature phones, the Mad Dogs are considerably more comfortable, provide an excellent seal around the ears, even with glasses, and produce a cleaner deeper bass. The soundstage is broad,



the tonal spectrum is neutral, and the presentation is laid back. If not the last word in providing up front detail (what does?), they offer a comfortable, realistic, and non-fatiguing listening experience. Quite happy I bought them.



Fidelis, located in Derry, NH, is the U.S. distributor for Harbeth speakers and Dwight DiMartino, of Fidelis, was enthusiastically demonstrating Harbeth's latest, its Monitor 30.1s. These two-way box speakers are about 18 inches in height and were mounted on stands, which put their tweeters at ear level. No "wow, gee whiz, listen to me" aspect of the presentation. Rather, it all seemed about the music instead. Their sound reminds me more of my Quad 63s than any other box speaker I have heard, and I mean this as a sincere compliment. The M30.1s play louder with greater macro dynamics, and despite their small size, they seem to have better bass extension than the Quads. At the same time the M30.1s had a similar smooth, uncolored mid range that helped make the Quads legendary. Fidelis has promised *The Audiophile Voice* a pair for review. Can't wait.

Jeff Joseph and Joel Shumer with the new Perspective speaker from Joseph Audio.



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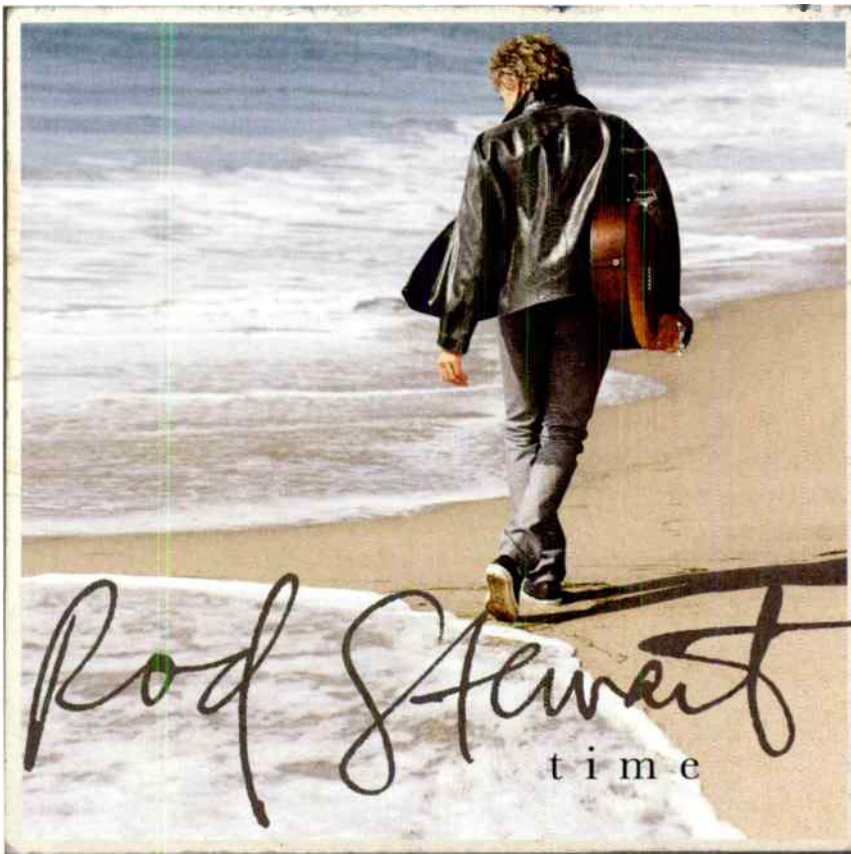
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Michael Tearson



Rock

Rod Stewart Time  
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**S**OUNDS LIKE LIFE is really good in Rod Stewart's world. He has just released his first new studio album of new songs in a dozen years and it is not just a wallow in the past. After four albums in his *Great American Songbook* series and one each of rock and soul oldies, he has surprisingly re-emerged as a songwriter. Eleven of the 12 *Time* songs are Stewart co-writes, the most he has ever done on one album. He hadn't helped write more than one on an album since the six on *Vagabond Heart* in 1991 and none at all since 1998's *When We Were The New Boys*.

This songwriting eruption follows Rod penning his autobiography, *Rod*, which was released in October 2012. In the liner notes (author curiously unaccredited), Rod confirms this, saying how while poring over his past, the songs started coming to him, and, yes, they do reflect on times, places and people he has known.

Rod sings splendidly throughout, truly pouring his heart out in his new songs. There's a commitment here I haven't heard in his voice for many years, especially in the *Songbook* and oldies albums, which were fun but I felt were slight and on auto-pilot. This dedication is most welcome. He starts strong with the unabashedly joyous "She Makes Me Happy" which is about his current wife, and continues with the rousing "Can't Stop Me Now" which relates his vindication and success despite the many music industry naysayers who predicted he had no chance. "It's Over" and "Time" limn a marriage in collapse, yet these are refreshingly free of recrimination. "Brighton Beach" is a rosy memory of a young summer love that burned bright but had no chance of lasting. Several more celebrate how good his life is these days: "Beautiful Morning," "Finest Woman," "Sexual Religion," "Make Love To Me Tonight." Two are mes-

sages to his kids, both encouraging them to embrace life. "Live The Life" is a response to a son with a freshly broken heart. "Pure Love," a most appropriate closer, is a benediction to his kids far flung around the world.

The one cover is Tom Waits' tender sweet and sad "Picture in a Frame" which Rod says reflects a rough patch in his marriage. Produced by Rod and keyboardist Kevin Savigar, *Time* continues a collaboration of over 30 years. The performances are strong throughout and offer very nice variety. "She Makes Me Happy" and "Can't Stop Me Now" rock out like "Every Picture Tells a Story," but with way better recording these years later. "Sexual Religion" recalls the near-disco of "Do Ya Think I'm Sexy." "Make Love to Me Tonight" has a lovely, lilting violin that recalls "Mandolin Wind." "Brighton Beach," "Pure Lover" and "It's Over" are gentle and intimate.

"Time" plays as a soul ballad a la Sam Cooke.

In sum *Time* is the first Rod Stewart album I have been able to call satisfying and compelling in more years than I'd care to think about. In it, Rod truly reclaims his stature in the rock world. At the same time, and despite how wealthy he's become, he still

*Give It Up*. Very nice stuff, all three of 'em.

Target stores had a limited exclusive edition deluxe version with "Here Comes the Night" which Van Morrison's Them made famous, Tom Waits' rollicking "Cold Water," and with a nod to his early blues days with Long John Baldry and Jeff Beck, a sizzling take of Elmore

totally delighted me with his excellent work here. I've had trouble seeing Rod as anything more than a storied past for years, but *Time* shows he is still a vital artist and in top form as well!

In fall 2013 Rod is scheduled to tour with Steve Winwood (delayed from spring). These should be a memorable series of shows by two

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**Rod is at the top of his game on this new album,  
in great voice and writing eleven new songs.**

---

sounds like the everyman persona people came to love in him. It is a triumphant album.

But there is more. There are two different deluxe versions each adding three bonus tracks. The more accessible version available in most record shops, Amazon and iTunes adds "Corrina Corrina" reaffirming Rod's long and abiding love of Bob Dylan, a soulful original rocker "Legless" and Eric Kaz's stunningly sad "Love Has No Pride" which Bonnie Raitt introduced over 40 years ago on her second album

James' "Shake Your Money Maker." I'm not crazy about "Here Comes the Night," but the others are terrific. By the time you read this, the Target edition will be somewhere between difficult and impossible to find, probably long since sold out, but worth finding.

Truthfully *Time* is an album I didn't think Rod Stewart still had in him. It is thoroughly fun and a most worthy addition to the Rod Stewart classics on my shelf. Admittedly, I had approached the album with very low expectations, and Rod

all-timers who can both still bring it. Catch 'em while you still can. After hearing *Time*, I eagerly anticipate seeing the show. Too bad classic rock radio refuses to even consider new work by its core artists, however good it may be, or they'd be all over *Time*. But after utterly ignoring such high-profile 2012 albums as Bruce Springsteen's *Wrecking Ball*, Neil Young & Crazy Horse's *Americana* and *Psychodelic Pill*, and Bob Dylan's *Tempest* to name but a few, one cannot expect anything different.

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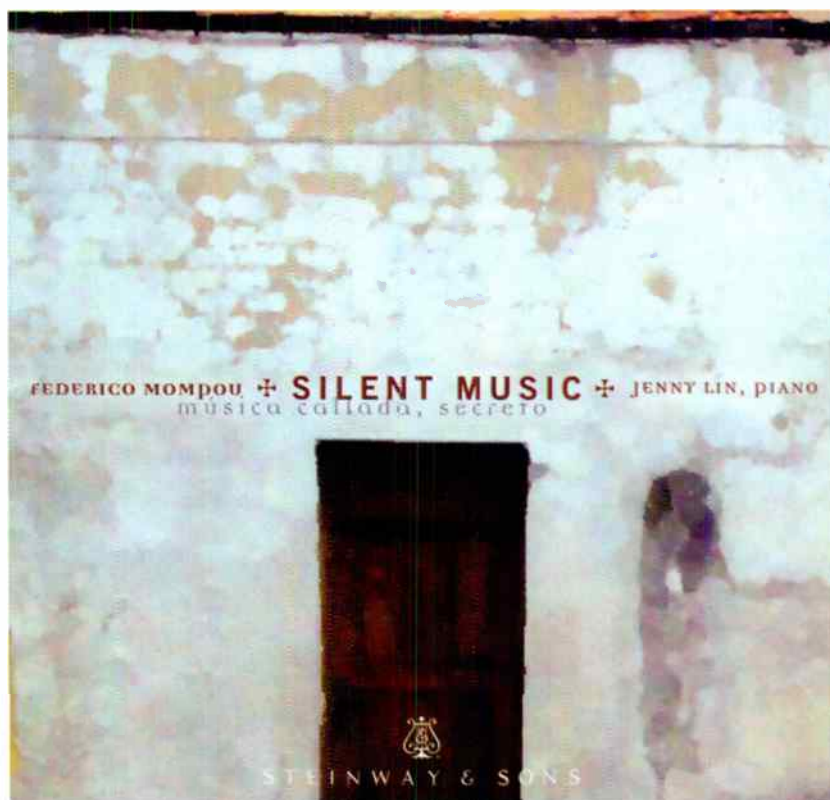
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“I HEARD IT on a Steinway CD.”  
“Don’t you mean a Steinway piano?”

No, I mean a Steinway CD! *And* a Steinway piano.

In case you hadn’t heard, back in the spring of 2008, the legendary piano maker Steinway & Sons acquired the world-leading on-line retailer for classical recordings, [www.arkiv.com](http://www.arkiv.com). Steinway did this, according to the press releases, to support and further classical music around the world, especially classical piano music. And furthering classical music would be good for a piano maker, no?

In addition, owning Arkiv (where I’ve been buying most of my CDs and SACDs for several years now, since the demise of brick and mortar retailers) gives Steinway a chance to promote its own “record

label.” It’s not really a broadly based record company, with releases of all sort of music for many different instruments, so much as a focused series of high-quality CD releases of piano music. Played, of course, on Steinway pianos.

As far as I can tell from internet research, there are now four CDs in this series. We have two of them under review here.

The first one in the series, Jeffrey Biegel’s *Bach on a Steinway* recital, is a worthy way to get the effort started. Biegel is one of a very large number of gifted classical pianists who aren’t household names, despite the fact that his resume is very deep. He’s really very good.

The point of this CD is that, contrary to what the Period Instrument Mafia will tell you, the modern Steinway piano (as opposed to the

“historically correct” harpsichord or clavichord) can, in fact, do a magnificent job of re-creating “early” music like that of Bach. Biegel is a good choice here, because he knows how to incorporate “Period Practice” into his playing on a 21st-century instrument. This means he keeps his tempos brisk and his foot off the sustain pedal, as well as offering his own quasi-improvisational ideas about ornamentation (trills, grace notes, etc.).

This excellent playing here makes the point strongly. While he won’t displace my favorite current Bach pianists (Simone Dinnerstein, Angela Hewitt, Murray Perahia) from their places, he certainly has gotten onto my radar screen alongside them.

The second CD under review here, *Silent Music*, from pianist



# BACH ON A STEINWAY

J.S. BACH  
PLAYED IN A  
17TH CENTURY STYLE

JEFFREY BIEGL  
Pianist

Jenny Lin, is much less familiar territory. This disc presents works by the obscure Catalan pianist Federico Mompou (1893-1987), who specialized in solo piano compositions. *Silent Music*, or "Musica Callada" in the original Spanish, is a collection

on a Steinway Model D) serves the pieces perfectly.

The two CDs vary some in sound quality, even though they were both recorded in the same hall at SUNY Purchase. Beagle's Bach disc is "Very Good but Not Audiophile,"

Lin's Mompou makes the grade however. The soundstage is high, wide and deep, and there's plenty of low level detail, air, space, and (above all) warmth and presence. I sat with a bunch of fellow travelers from the New Jersey

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**You'd not be wrong to associate Steinway with the best pianos, but their CDs are among the very best.**

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of short meditative pieces for, yes, solo piano.

They're not so much "music" as aides to meditation, in my humble opinion. By that I mean that they're fairly difficult to "listen to" (because not much happens), but if you were to use them as aids to meditation, or perhaps as *pre-* or *postludes* to meditation, I think you'll get the point. This has been my experience. And I'm sure that would be just fine with the composer, who was a quiet, introspective, mystical sort. Lin's sensitive playing (like Biegel,

which is a shame, especially since Steinway/Arkiv paid legendary producer-engineer Steven Epstein to record it in 24-bit/88.2-kHz resolution. Thus, they *intended* it to be an audiophile disc, I guess. It's close – big in soundstage and image, harmonically excellent and clear as a bell, but it lacks the air, space and presence of a true "audiophilia nervosa" production. Those qualities exist somewhere, probably on the original masters, but apparently didn't make it through the stamping and onto this CD.

Audio Society and compared the Steinway CD to a 1993 ECM recording with pianist Herbert Henck. We listened on two different hardware systems, and the vote was unanimous in favor of the Lin/Steinway. For sonics and performance too. In fact, among those who know, Lin's is widely thought to be at the top of all recorded versions.

Welcome, Steinway Records! More, please! And please let the Mompou CD set your standard for sound.

# AudioQuest DragonFly DAC

George Graves



**C**OMPUTER AUDIO SEEMS to be with us for good, but it seems to me that there should be a way to do this without hogging a whole computer, even on a part-time basis. The other stand-alone solutions that have been tried have been either partial solutions (in that they still require a separate computing device with a web-browser to download the high-resolution files from the Internet or standard resolution files from the likes of the iTunes Store) or they have been eye-wateringly expensive and always more than somewhat restrictive. Thus, I guess we're stuck using computers as music appliances, at least for the foreseeable future.

For quite some time now, to handle my music download needs, I have been using my Logitech Squeezebox Touch in conjunction with the very Macintosh computer upon which I'm writing this. It works like this: I have the Logitech music server software installed on my Mac and pointed to my iTunes folder, where all of my CD rips are stored as Apple Lossless Compression (ALC) files. My downloaded hi-res music is stored as ALF, wav, or FLAC files in the same folder. The Mac then uses Wi-Fi to connect wirelessly to the Squeezebox Touch. All of the music in that folder then appears on the screen of the Touch unit. My Touch then feeds my stand-alone 24-bit/96-kHz up-converter providing a digital path to the 24-bit, 192-kHz DAC built-in to my HK-990 Integrated amplifier. Thus, any 24/96 downloads get

wirelessly transferred to my stereo system. It works OK, but the Logitech Squeezebox chokes on anything with a higher sampling rate than 96 kHz and sometimes (for reasons I don't fully understand) some files simply refuse to show up on the Touch. With those, I have to transfer them to either an SD flash memory card or a so-called USB thumb-drive flash memory device via sneaker net.

All of this is made somewhat moot by the recent news that Logitech has stopped making the Squeezebox Touch and haven't, to my knowledge, announced any plans for a replacement. Too bad. In spite of its somewhat quirky and non-intuitive graphical user interface, the Touch was, nonetheless, an excellent product and a bargain for the price of \$299. There is really nothing else quite like it, anywhere.

So, we're back to using a computer again to download files from the Internet sources and supply them to a Digital-To-Analog Converter (DAC). This means either a DAC with a USB interface built-in or an interim device to convert the computer's USB data stream into SPDIF (Sony/Philips Digital Interconnect Format), the format used by most consumer DACs. (In this review, to avoid confusion, all my uses of the acronym "DAC" will refer to the complete product, as sold from the manufacturer, and the term "D/A" will refer to an actual converter chip or module inside those DAC products.)

One can buy a USB to SPDIF converter from a number of sources. One notable is from Musical Fidelity, their 24/96 V-Link (about \$130 these days from Audio Advisor) or their 24/192 V-link192 (\$400). These are

clever way to indicate sampling rate. Many component-sized DAC boxes costing a thousand dollars or more don't give any indication of sample-rate. In fact, the fancy D/A section of my Harman-Kardon HK990 gives

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## **AudioQuest's Dragonfly is a watershed product, offering small size and great performance at low price.**

---

excellent units that have been highly praised for their low-jitter isochronous/asynchronous USB interface (in which the converter box usurps control of the USB signal from the computer to which it's connected, thereby insuring that the music data stream has priority over any other USB tasks including keyboard and mouse). If one already has a fine DAC, then the V-Links' outputs (either coaxial or optical Toslink) can feed it a proper high-resolution data stream from one's computer.

Possibly a better, more integrated solution would be AudioQuest's new "DragonFly" DAC. This small device is no larger than an average "thumb drive" USB memory stick and, in fact, at first glance, looks like one as well. It is black, has a cap on one end covering the male USB connector and has no controls on it anywhere. What it does have, on the opposite end, is a 1/8-inch mini-stereo headphone jack. This jack will drive a pair of headphones directly or, when equipped with a suitable adapter or mini-phone plug to male RCA cable, will feed into a spare line-level input on one's amp or pre-amp.

### **How Do They Do That?**

This is an incredible piece of miniaturization. The AudioQuest DragonFly has more than 100 components stuffed into a package that can be concealed in a child's fist! Among these components is a 24-bit ESS SabreDAC. This D/A chip is widely thought to be the best sounding integrated circuit Digital-to-Analog converter on the market today. While similar IC D/As are available from companies like Texas Instruments (Burr-Brown), Analog Devices, and Wolfson, to name just three, many high-end DAC makers and CD/DVD manufacturers choose the SabreDAC D/A chips for their superior sonic performance. Also in this module is a TI USB controller chip (TAS1020) with the "Streamlength" cross-platform, isochronous/asynchronous firmware designed by Gordon Rankin who also designed the DragonFly DAC for AudioQuest. Along with the DAC and the controller chip is a Burr-Brown audio driver chip to drive headphones to a comfortable level as well as driving an external amplifier with exceptionally low distortion allowing the DragonFly to connect with one's stereo system. Then there are the five separate power supplies to ensure that the 5 volts DC supplied via the computer's USB bus is adequate for good sound and a sufficient drive capability for today's best headphones.

The body of the Dragonfly contains a silhouette of the dragonfly insect with the name "DragonFly" above it. When first plugged in, the dragonfly logo lights-up green to indicate the computer's default setting of 44.1 kHz. If the sampling rate changes to 48 kHz, the dragonfly logo changes to blue. At 88.2 kHz, it changes to orange and at 96 kHz, it changes to magenta. This color-coded indicator is a welcome one and a very

no visual indication of sample rate. Kudos to AudioQuest and Gordon Rankin!

### **Set-up and Operation**

The operation of the DragonFly is simplicity itself. Since there are no controls on the dongle, things like volume and maximum sample-rate are controlled by the computer to which the DragonFly is connected. Simply plug the USB end of the Dragonfly into a convenient USB 2.1/3.0 port on one's computer and then connect either a suitable cable, adapter, or pair of headphones into the mini-phone jack on the other end. On the computer, there are set-up procedures that differ depending on which operating system you use. On the Mac, this requires opening the "System Preferences" and choosing the "sound" item. Under the "output" pane, one selects "AudioQuest DragonFly," which should show up if it is attached. Next you should access the "Utilities Folder" in your Mac's "Applications Folder." In there, you will find an application called "Audio Midi Setup." On the left, all of your connected audio devices should show-up. "AudioQuest DragonFly" should be one of them. It looks as if the default settings for the DragonFly will be 96 kHz for the sample rate and 24-bit for the bit-depth. You can change the sample-rate if you wish to 44.1, 48 or 88.2 kHz, but it's not necessary. The bit-depth, however, is fixed at 24-bit, two-channel. That's OK as the DragonFly will parse any of those sample-rates and any bit-depths, 24, 20, or 16.

Windows 7 setup is also quite straightforward. Again, plug the DragonFly module into a spare USB 2.1 or USB 3 port. Then, under the Windows "Start" menu, select "Control Panels." Click on "Hardware and Sound" to bring up the next page. The third item down from the top should be "Sound" and under that is a series of three options. Choose "Manage Audio Devices." Under the "playback" tab, the DragonFly should be shown as the current default device (it will have a green "checkmark" beside it. If it doesn't, select it by clicking on the icon). Click on the "properties" button and then the "advanced" tab at the top of the page. Under "Default Format" There is a pop-up menu that lets you choose 96 kHz, 48 kHz, or 44.1 kHz. Choose "24-bit, 96,000 Hz (Studio Quality)" and apply. Then quit the "Control Panels" menu and go back to the desktop. As with the Mac, there is no reason to go back and change these settings for different bit-depths and sampling rates, as the DragonFly itself will adjust to whatever is fed it. The computer settings merely indicate the maximum that the device will handle (even this is somewhat misleading). According to AudioQuest, if you play a 176.4 or a 192 kHz file, the DragonFly will still play it, but it will just down-convert the higher sample rates to 96 kHz. This goes for 32-bit recording too.

Basically, this is a “set it and forget it” situation.

This down-conversion is not the big deal that one might think. “Real” 96-kHz recordings are flat to 48 kHz of audio bandwidth and 192-kHz recordings are flat to 96 kHz of audio bandwidth. Nobody is suggesting that any human can hear 48 kHz, much less 96 kHz, but sampling rates higher than 44.1 kHz do have an advantage. They move the Nyquist cut-off frequency further away from the theoretical 20-kHz human hearing limit, and therefore will move any phase-shift or other Nyquist artifacts further away from the audio passband. While this *might* make a recording sound better, what truly does improve the sound is going from 16 to 24 bits. I have made recordings at both 96 KHz and 192 KHz, and nobody can tell the difference by listening, but you can hear the difference between 16 bit and 24 bit. So, down-sampling the higher rates to 96 kHz is not really all that important.

## How Does This Thing Sound?

In a word, excellent! Now I haven’t been able to compare the DragonFly against any of the discrete component DAC boxes such as the aforementioned dCS or MSB offerings, but I have compared it against the DAC in my Harman-Kardon HK990 which uses dual-differential 24-bit AD1955 D/A chips from Analog Devices and is generally very good. But with computer-sourced music, the DragonFly is superior. Of course, to use the HK990 with a computer, one needs a USB to SPDIF interface box such as the MF V-Link, and I was able to borrow one from a friend to compare the HK990’s built-in D/A with the DragonFly. As I said last year in my review of the Harman-Kardon, the only thing they missed (other than including the kitchen sink) when designing the HK990 Integrated amplifier was a USB input to the DAC section of that unit.

To test the DragonFly, I used a number of “high-resolution” downloads (mostly 24 bit/96 kHz) from places like *HDTracks* and *e-Classical.com*. I also used the HRX sampler disc from Reference Recordings, which consists of a number of cuts from their 24-bit/176.4-kHz releases. These HRX discs are *not* DVD-A’s and in fact most DVD

players (there are some exceptions) won’t play them. What they are is a series of raw Wave (.wav) files designed to be transferred to one’s computer and then played from the computer’s hard disk. In other words, the silver disc is merely a DVD container for the data that represents the music. These same files could just as easily been delivered via the internet and, in fact, you can download many of them from *HDTracks*, but the downloads from this source are down-converted from 24/176.4 to 88.2 kHz or 96 kHz and are available in wav, AIFF, and FLAC formats. This is not really that much of a compromise, because the sonic differences between an 88.2 kHz, 96 kHz, and 176.4 kHz or 192 kHz are dubious to non-existent in my experience. As I said earlier, the fact that the sampling rate has been moved way out of the audio passband is much more important than the actual sampling rate. To the human ear, the 24-bit format is much more important. As long as a “hi-res” file is 88.2 kHz or higher, the material will have the *potential* of sounding better than the 16-bit, 44.1-kHz standard CD format. Like everything else, there are more things at play here than just the bit depth and sample rate. I have standard CDs that sound unbelievably good and I have so called “high-resolution” files in various formats that sound lousy. So, caveat emptor.

Along with the DragonFly, AudioQuest sent me a two-meter cable they call the “Big-Sur” cable. This milk-chocolate brown cable is very well made with high-quality connectors (1/8-inch stereo phone plug on one end and left and right male RCAs on the other). The only criticisms I have of the “Big-Sur” are that it is kind of stiff and at \$130.00 list, the price is a bit stiff too. I also have a similar six-foot long cable from MyCableMart.com, and like the Audioquest cable, it is well made and uses real RG-59 coaxial cable. It lists at less than \$6.00! I have listened to both cables extensively, and in an ad-hoc blind test. I could hear no difference over 10 tries. However, since AudioQuest sent me the “Big-Sur” cable to use with the DragonFly, I used it exclusively for my evaluation.

My source computer was a fairly new, inexpensive Toshiba laptop running Windows 7. I did not use J-River Media Center or any other “helper” program and relied entirely upon the stock Windows Media Player with a generic FLAC enabling plug-in. (For some reason, Microsoft doesn’t support FLAC natively. As this is a major format for high-resolution downloads, I find this a big-league error in judgment on Microsoft’s part.)

First I plugged the DragonFly into the spare USB port and went into the Windows control panel and set the audio control to “24-bit, 96,000 Hz (Studio Quality)”. The white Dragonfly silhouette on the dongle’s body changed color from green to magenta, showing that the computer was, indeed, set to the 96-kHz sampling rate.

My first selection was a download of the famous Stan Getz/Joao Gilberto recoding from Verve records (V6-8545). This was originally a 35-mm analog magnetic film recording and for *HDTracks*, it was digitized at 24/96. I also have the LP of this recording (the original issue, not a subsequent re-mastering) as well as the CD. Comparing the hi-res download with the CD, I was immediately struck by how much more “dimensionality” there was to the hi-res version. I don’t mean imaging or soundstage because like most studio jazz recordings, this one is three-channel mono. I.e., all of the instrumenta-

## NOTES

**AudioQuest Dragonfly USB D/A converter,** \$249.00. AudioQuest, 2621 White Rd., Irvine, CA 92614, phone 949/585-0111, [www.audioquest.com](http://www.audioquest.com).

### Associated Equipment

Harman-Kardon HK-990 amplifier with built-in DAC; Sony XA777ES CD/SACD player; Denon DVD-758 DVD player; J.A. Michell Gyro SE turntable with JELCO SD 750 tonearm; Grado Ref Series Platinum 1, Sumiko Blackbird, and Sumiko Blue-Point cartridges 2; Otari DTR-85 DAT; TASCAM CD-RW 700 CD burner; Logitech Squeezebox Touch Media Player; Martin-Logan Aeon-i Speakers, and two Athena P-3 powered sub-woofers.

tion is located in one of three groups arrayed across the soundstage with any vocals pan-potted to the phantom center group. What I'm saying is that, for instance, Astrud Gilberto's voice seems to take on a dimensionality that it lacking on the CD altogether and is only hinted-at on the LP! This is something that's difficult to explain yet it sticks out like a sore thumb when you actually compare the three versions. Astrud's voice has a more breathy quality than I have heard before. Instruments seem more real, especially Getz's saxophone.

Moving on to the Reference Recording's HRX sampler at 24/176.4, the DragonFly perfectly down-converted it to 96 kHz without a glitch. This, I compared with another copy of this HRX sampler which I down-sampled to 96 kHz using Korg's Audiogate app. on my Mac and placed it in the same folders as my iTunes database so that it would show-up on my Logitech Squeezebox Touch. The Touch's coaxial digital output then fed a digital input on my HK990. All I needed to switch between them was to toggle between the digital input and a spare analog input on the Harman-Kardon using my remote. After adjusting the volume on the DragonFly via the computer's volume control and equalizing, at my listening seat, the volume on both inputs using my trusty RadioShack digital sound level meter, I was able to quickly and directly switch between the two DACs, reasonably sure that any differences I heard would be the DACs themselves, the rest of the analog chain being identical for both.

Compared to my own DAC, the DragonFly has better bass. Not only is it deeper, but it is also better controlled with seemingly faster attacks. The treble goes on forever. Playing a recording that I made (mastered in DSD and converted to 24/96 using Korg's Audiogate software) of a

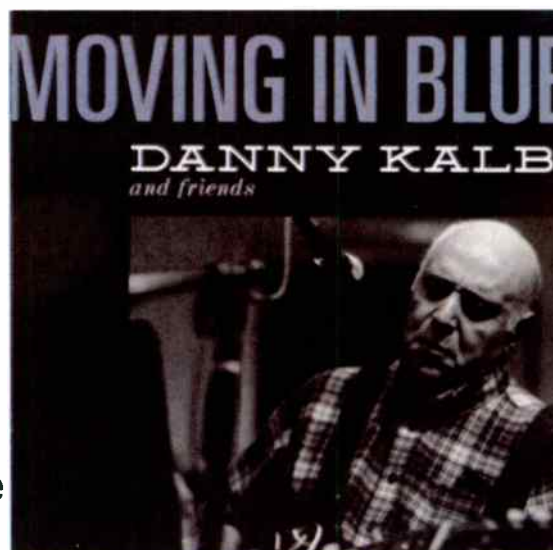
symphony orchestra, the strings have a sheen and a clarity that my HK990's DAC just hints at. While they play as an ensemble, each individual violin adds something to the whole, and this can be heard on good recordings. Since my symphony recording of Stravinsky's *Petrushka* is real two-microphone stereo, it is a perfect recording with which to gauge soundstage and image specificity. Here, too, I played my file from within my iTunes folder on my Mac to the Logitech Squeezebox Touch, so that it could be played through the digital inputs of my HK990 for comparison to the same file played through the DragonFly. The ability to retrieve front-to-back and image location in space with the DragonFly is the best I've heard. Images were solid, easy to pick out (best done with the lights out) and the soundstage is wide, though not quite as wide as the D/A section in my HK990 (do two D/A chips in dual-differential mode perform better than just one?).

## Conclusion

The DragonFly by AudioQuest is a watershed product. Its tiny size and big performance is equal to solutions costing several times its modest \$250 price. For a way to get high-resolution audio out of one's computer, it can't be beat. It's less costly than any stand-alone box with an isochronous/asynchronous USB input or a combination of a separate USB to SPDIF converter box and a stand-alone DAC box. Because of its 1/8-inch mini-phono plug output, it can easily accompany a "road warrior" on his or her travels and, with a decent set of headphones, it can supply high quality audio on the go. This makes it unique in the marketplace.

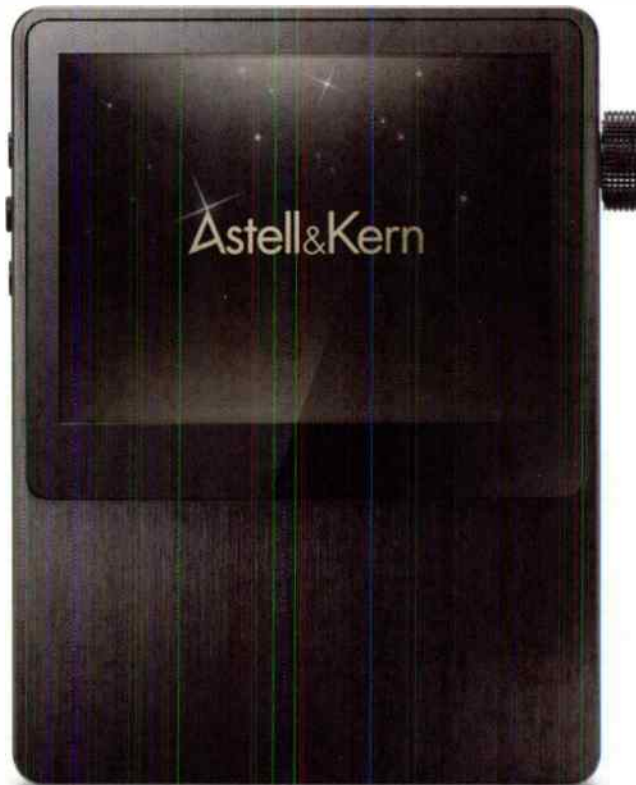
A masterpiece of miniaturization, the DragonFly is the perfect solution for integrating one's computer into one's stereo system.

Nearly 50 years on from his vital work in the Blues Project, Danny Kalb has released a great double CD of 25 songs. Some tunes come from classic bluesmen, such as Muddy Waters or John Lee Hooker, with others from Bob Dylan, Johnny Cash and Hank Williams. Better, there are a handful Danny himself wrote. Check out *Moving In Blue* from Sojourn Records. You can buy it at Amazon or at CDBaby.



# Astell & Kern AK100 MQS Portable Music System

George Witterschein



**I**'M AN AUDIOPHILE, and yes, I *can* take it with me, thank you.

As long as I have my AK100, that is. Because it damn near lets me carry around the High End Music Room in My Basement ... with me on my head!

The "MQS" stands for Mastering Quality Sound and while this might appear to be hyperbole for this palm-sized portable system, I am here to report that this remarkable, indeed astonishing portable player is a

dream come true for the headphone-oriented audiophile. Particularly so for those among us who love great portable sound.

Of course, you lose something as a headphone listener, the air and space of your music room. But you also gain something, the intimacy of experiencing the music "inside your head." If you've been paying attention, faithful readers, and I know you have, you'll realize that I am one of those late-night, deep soul-music-



listening people. You'll also understand that even when there's no need for me to be quiet about my late-night listening, headphones are often my preferred mode.

The AK100 is as small (2.3 x 0.7 x 3.1 inches) as some of the larger French chocolates under the display glass at Enjou Chocolates in Morristown, NJ (where I should go less frequently than I do). And it's lighter (a shade over 10 ounces) than most anything in your pocket right now, possibly including your wallet in these lean economic times.

But: how good is it? This is an audiophile magazine, so let's the cut to question number one: sound quality, please? The AK100 delivers superb sound. With its Wolfson DAC (model 8740 to be precise) and ability to play high resolution files all the way up to 24 bits/192 kHz, it's just about equivalent to carrying around my main system music room on my head.

Being addicted to the AK100, I've spent enough time listening to this device to state accurately that it offers true high-end sound. The 24 bit/88.2 kHz Mahler *Sixth Symphony* (Ivan Fischer and the Budapest Festival orchestra) preloaded on my reviewer's copy of AK100 is an audiophile recording if there ever was one. It's from Channel Classics, available as a Hi-Rez download from HDTracks.com for \$18.98, and it provides all manner of sound tests, what with its extraordinarily varied orchestral palette, very

wide dynamic range, and rich bass. Heard from the AK100 through my AKG 701 headphones, the sound was totally satisfying. Plus, it was *in* my head!

As if to boast about the playback quality, Astell & Kern (the high-end division of well-known portable player maker iRiver) included on my reviewer copy a whole list of top shelf music offerings. Everything from Pink Floyd's *Dark Side of the Moon* (24/96) and John Coltrane's *Blue Train* (24/192) to two different recordings of the Bach solo cello suites, one each by Janos Starker (16/48)

and Mstislav Rostropovich (16/44). Plus, *Getz/Gilberto* and *Glad Rag Doll* by Diana Krall were also on there, both in 24/96.

I mention this partial list of the reviewer's goodies on the AK100 sample I got, because if any of those sounded less than great through any reputable headphones, the AK100 would fall flat on its face. And *The Audiophile Voice* and I would never have chosen to review the thing and waste your time and our column inches on it. But the AK100 is still upright and standing tall, and you are reading my review!

More pluses: The AK100 can also store and play FLAC ("free lossless audio compression") files, which has become the de facto standard among lots of high resolution playback nuts like me. FLAC holds down file size (which can get pretty robust with higher resolution material, since it contains so much more information than traditional Red Book 16/44). The number of *in-room* playback components that can directly play FLAC format is not all that great; among *portable* devices, it's an absolute luxury.

Because high resolution files tend to be larger in byte-size – make that much larger – than your standard WAV file, FLAC is extremely useful in the high-resolution world. It's also helpful in the *portable* world, because with readily available software, you can easily convert any of your standard 16/44 WAV files to FLAC, without any loss of fidelity. (Or at least none that I've ever been able to hear. I must add that caveat because in the audiophile world, there is always somebody who is going to write a letter to the editor saying otherwise, possibly in intemperate language. In fact, the editor has been known to write such intemperate e-mails on the topic.) I use AVS4You media file conversion software, which you can readily find on the Internet as a download, and it comes recommended by me.

The AK100 can hold a *lot* of FLAC files or WAV, or MP3; or OGG or WMV or APE or AAC or AIFF or ALAC files, which I'm glad to know, though I've never dealt with sound files from the latter grouping (so don't feel bad). Storage capacity is a whopping 96 GB – 32 GB on the internal hard drive, plus another 64 GB in the slots for two internal microSD cards of 32 GB each. MicroSD cards are very easy to find and buy on the Internet, and are getting cheaper every day. Translated, you can take 100 standard-rez CDs worth of music with you on the road in the AK100 – even more if you use space-economical FLAC files.

Not bad for a French chocolate!

Getting to the device's mechanics, I have to say that the handling of the AK100 also suited me just fine. The user interface is the currently-fashionable "Sweep Your Fingertips across the Screen" iPod/iPad variety, which I find is just dandy for very small devices like this one. There seem to have been some glitches in the operating software early on, but those were gone by the time I got my copy with firmware "rev 1.33." [Late breaking flash: by the time you read this, Astell & Kern will have released another upgrade to the firmware! Talk about customer awareness.]

The device offers two jacks: one is for headphone or any other 1/8-in. device/cable output and also doubles for digital optical output. The other is an input jack for 1/8-in. digital optical if you want to hear a digital feed from another device. With the Wolfson 8740 in there, the AK100 can function as a very good DAC, and the



iriver people are very proud of that. Product and Business Development VP Owen Kwon even emailed me to that effect. Sorry, Owen, but that's not the main thing you are selling the AK100 for. So, my readers, consider it an extra and a good one.

There's also a micro USB input slot (you'll need to use a USB cable to transfer your music files onto the device's internal hard drive) and to two microSD card slots, protected by a tiny sliding door.

Battery life is somewhere around 15 hours, depending on whether you play higher resolution files or not. Recharging the captive internal battery takes around six hours (I plug it in and walk away, or let it charge up while I sleep overnight). Needless to say, I'm amazed as well as very pleased that such a small and truly portable device can come so close to substituting for my beloved main rig.

Is there any competition for the AK100? To my mind, not really. There are a lot of headphone amplifiers on the market, and plenty of good ones, too. But not a lot of portable players aimed at the *audiophileous-nervosa*



either group of lunatics. It's pretty clear which group I belong to.

Other criticisms have included an alleged lack of output volume. There is some truth in this one, to the degree that the AK100 is "headphone dependent." It

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### **The Astell & Kern AK100 is truly a remarkable, indeed astonishing portable recorder.**

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target market. God bless it, the market economy will undoubtedly provide competitors someday, but as of now, this niche belongs to the AK100.

Is the AK100 absolutely and utterly 100% perfect? No electronic device, especially not a groundbreaking new one like this, will ever be totally flawless. There's been some carping among audiophiles in forums, and even in (non-audiophile) magazine reviews: "It's not an iPod," meaning you have to actually transfer music files into it with a cable. The Apple people understood the human craving for convenience in making it effortless (mindless? profitable for them?) to get music files from iTunes into your iPod. The AK100 fails this convenience test. But then the AK100 never said it was the iPod. Or that it was intended for the iPod crowd. It's one of the glories of a consumer economy that one can choose to join

won't drive every headphone under the sun. With its much-too-high 22-ohm output impedance, the AK100 prefers driving low-to-medium impedance phones like my AKG 701s (67 ohms), or my in-ear noise canceling Etymotic ER-4s (they're sealed to your inner ear so you and I can't hear anything else anyway). So you should take care to match headphone impedance (and sensitivity too, to be on the safe side), preferably by way of audition from your merchant if possible. Remember too that The Cable Company offers you the opportunity to trial high-end headphones at home before buying, so you could conceivably set up a double tryout before buying.

Department of Endlessly Complaining Audiophiles: Some have even moaned that the AK100 won't play back *Dark Side of the Moon* "gapless," meaning that it observes a brief pause between tracks/files. For some of my friends, this is even a showstopper. It hasn't bothered me. The AK100 pauses nicely, and normally, between the movements of the Mahler Symphony, just as I want it to. The Floydies I know insist that gapless is a must for *DSOTM*, and that it's the coming thing.

I was going to pass these complaints, if they are complaints, along to the people at Astell & Kern. However, as I write this, we hear there is new "gapless" firmware being shown at T.H.E. Show in Newport. Moreover, there will be a new version of the player coming out in a few months, the AK120, which is louder, and plays gapless, and offers an ideal output impedance of only 3 ohms (*that will drive anything under the sun short of an 18 wheeler*). It will employ not one but two Wolfson 8740 DACs, which means it might be the thing to have around when the millennium arrives.

But I may never know, because I may just stick with the present rev. You'll have a hard time prying it out of my grasp, possibly even at the end of time.

## **N O T E S**

**AK100 Mastering Quality Sound Portable System, \$699.00.** Astell & Kern, division of iriver USA, 9 Peters Canyon Rd., Irvine, CA 92606; phone 949/336-4540; email, support@iriverinc.com; website [www.astellnkern.com](http://www.astellnkern.com), visit site for purchase information.

### **Associated Equipment**

AKG 701 dynamic headphones and Etymotic ER-4 earphones.

# Linn Kiko System

Bascom H. King



**A**NOTHER INTERESTING member of the new generation of network-connected player systems has come to me in the form of the Linn Kiko. The Kiko is the newest and smallest member of now four such systems from Linn. The system consists of a pair of small speakers and a matching control unit. The other, larger, and more expensive members of this series have larger speakers and more input capability in their control units. These other systems, in ascending order, are called Majik, Akurate, and Klimax.

The Kiko's speakers are connected via Neutrik Speakon connectors at each end of a rather thick and stiff set of speaker wires. The back of the control unit has provisions for the two speakers, three HDMI inputs and one HDMI output, a pair of RCA female analog inputs, a coax and Toslink SP/DIF inputs, an Ethernet connector, and, finally, an IEC-style a.c. power connector. In addition to these normal types of connectors, there is a little switch in a hole labeled "fallback," to be used in the event of a failed software update. An a.c. power switch is located near the front side of the unit. On the front panel are a mini headphone jack, an auxiliary analog input mini jack, and a small display that indicates input selected, volume setting, and other such things.

When I unpacked the system, I was surprised by the lack of a manual so I started researching the Linn web-

site for more information. I emailed the person from TC Group Americas that set up this review and asked about the lack of a manual. I was informed by Darrin Kavanagh, VP of Residential Sales from TC Group Americas, that Linn dealers are specifically trained to set up all Linn systems for the end user, therefore no manual is required. In addition, there is a setup wizard for guided step by step instruction for getting any Linn DSM up and running quickly and easily.

Well, OK – but being the impetuous, impatient, and experimentalist type that I am, I hooked it up in my lab to see what it took to get it to go. My experience pretty well confirms that a Linn dealer ought be left to do this install. They will earn their keep.

First, I treated the Kiko as a D/A converter/power amp and fed its coax SP/DIF input, and then played around with the remote until I got a signal out. At that juncture, I was able to set the volume level, get an idea of the max power out, and to plot a frequency response of the amplifier outputs. I found the output power to be about 20 watts at the point of clipping into 8 ohm loads, and most likely would make the 33 watts claimed for the system into 4-ohm loads. The frequency response of the low and high output parts of each channel showed a mild low midrange and bass lift with a crossover between the woofer and tweeter of about 2 kHz. I then brought the system in from my lab to hook up to my video setup. I

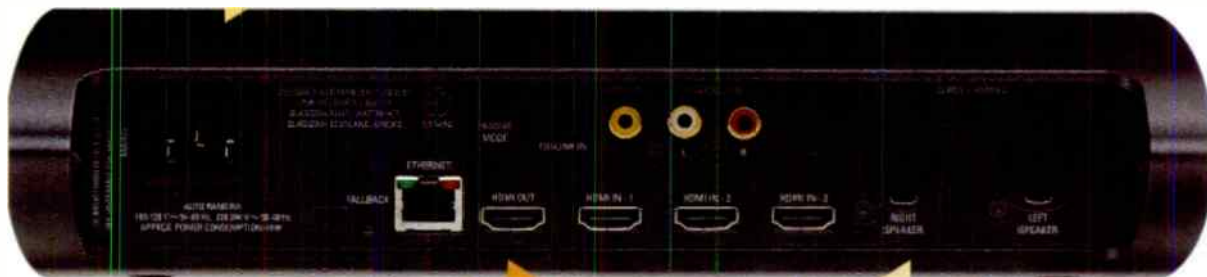


Fig. 1 - Kiko back panel.

connected up the speakers and a.c. power and then connected the coax digital output of my Outlaw 970 HT preamp into the coax input of the Kiko. (As an aside, we fondly call this otherwise most satisfactory preamp "The Coyote" as it occasionally comes on with a more or less full-scale howl. Surely wakes one up.) It was not long before I got whatever was selected on the 970 to course forth from the Kiko speakers.

I have a wireless game adapter in my video system area for connecting to my DirecTV Ethernet input and decided to connect it instead to the Kiko. At this point I thought that I needed to call Linn and learn how to set up Kiko in my network. "Wait," a visiting friend said, "look up on your network on your computer to see if the Kiko shows up." Well, what do you know, it did. And miracle of miracles, one could choose to configure it, so I did that. After some more navigating of the web page that came up for configuring, I got the internet radio going. "Wow," I thought, "I am on a roll here!" Well, it seems that Linn hosts some 14 stations somewhat like Bryston does with their BDP-1. So, while the dealer ought to do the configuration, the Kiko is not totally impossible to get running.

The Kiko speakers are two-way units and the control unit has two power amps per channel, one for the woofer and the other for the tweeter, making it an active (or Aktiv in Linn speak) two-way design utilizing digital crossovers. I set the Kiko speakers to the left side of the two Infinity powered VRS-1 prototype speakers that I have used in my video system for a very long time. These speakers sound quite good and produce a surprising bass wallop in the listening sofa on the opposite side of the room. With various signal sources played through the 970 HT preamp, I can play either or both the Kiko system and the resident speakers. One of the resident disc players in this setup is an older Sony DVP-NC685V carousel unit. I used this to play a few CDs to get an initial idea of the way the Kiko system sounded. The first CD was a set of down-sampled hi-res files that I use to test systems that have only a CD player as a source. Well, some of the wham-bam cuts sounded pretty reasonable, loud, and impactful. Orchestral sounds pretty good, too. Then, I played a most rare CD of two guitarists playing Vivaldi's "Four Seasons," one a classical and the other a steel string instrument. This album sounded a bit different and less detailed than what I am used to when it's played on my main system. When I switched to the resident Infinity speakers, the sound was more like that of my main system. This was puzzling, as that first CD sounded more or less okay. I will get back to this a bit later.

I started to peruse the Linn website more seriously and after first thinking how complex and circuitous it

seemed, slowly information started to reveal itself. I was able to find one most informative page within the Linn site that has a plethora of vital information including a setup guide for getting the Kiko system up and running. (I should have gone to it first. As a matter of interest, the URL for that page is <http://www.linn.co.uk/support/software>.) Further, the site offers a number of Linn programs for running the Kiko from a computer and various tablet devices. A good number of aftermarket programs are also listed for controlling the Linn Systems. I downloaded the Linn Kinsky program for my laptop and for my iPad from the App Store. I also downloaded Linn Konfig and the Linn Wizard (the setup guide). Going further, I enabled the Twonky server on my desktop machine where a number of various resolution files reside. In the Kinsky program, I was able to see the

## NOTES

**Linn Kiko System, \$3990.00.** Linn Products main office, Glasgow Road, Waterfoot, Eaglesham, Glasgow G76 0EQ, Scotland. UK toll-free phone 0500 888 909; international phone number +44 141 307-7777; e-mail [helpline@linn.co.uk](mailto:helpline@linn.co.uk). North American distribution by TC Group America. Phone 519/745-1158, fax 519/745-2364, information e-mail [info@TCG-americas.com](mailto:info@TCG-americas.com).

### Associated Equipment

Sony DVP-NC685V carousel CD player, Outlaw 970 HT preamplifier, Infinity VRS-1 prototype video speakers, Genesis 6.1 speakers, DSPEaker anti-mode 8033 room EQ units for the Genesis active servo woofers, Constellation Audio prototype 200-watt power amp, Aesthetix Calypso preamp using Tung Sol 12AX7 and 6H23Pi-EB tubes, Bryston BDP-1 File Player, ModWright OPPO 95 Player, Berkely Alpha DAC, Berkely Alpha USB, PS Audio PWT, Apple iPod Touch, Apple iPad, Apple Mac Mini computer with Audirvana and Pure Music player programs, Gigaware USB extension cable connected to the Alpha USB, HP dv6604cl laptop with J River Media Center Player program, WireWorld Silver USB cable connected to the Alpha DAC.



**Fig. 2 - Screen shot showing the Kinsky program on the author's laptop pc.**

music files on the Twonky server and was able to start playing those files. A screen shot of the Kinsky program on my laptop PC is shown in Figure 2. And not only could I play CD resolution files but the higher sample rate files up to 24/176 played perfectly, too.

It is also worth mentioning that in addition to the third party file serving software Twonky, Linn offers a program called Songbox which will enable the playing of the contents of a user's iTunes library and can be installed on either a Mac or a PC. In addition, there is a Linn program called Songcast that acts as a virtual

it. It is called Apple Airplay in the case of the Apple devices. What impressed me more was that any audio signal on the iPad or Touch like Pandora, Tunemark, and MOG would in a like manner go out over Apple Airplay. This is another route to getting more internet radio stations. It turns out that the Twonky server had some choices of internet stations called Shoutcast Radio. However, it didn't have one of my faves, "181.fm – Classical Guitar" or some of the higher bit rate AVRO classical stations that I know can be had with other players that I use.

Back to that initial experience of the two guitars not sounding right. I played some test files of pink noise and various warble tones and found that at my normal listening position on the left side of our listening sofa, the sound was not balanced properly for where I had placed the Kiko speakers. I moved forward, centered between them, and set another listening chair. Here, things were much better balanced and more normal sounding.

I played quite a variety of material, including some files of my grandkids talking and singing and myself playing my classical guitars in various recordings I have made. All sounded quite good and convincing. Finally, playing the original two-guitar CD sounded much better now. As I write this, I am at my laptop in my office in the main listening room and that album sounds dammed nice way away from the Kiko, too.

Next, it was time to bring the Kiko system into my main listening room where I could feed it some of my usual and reference digital signals. The speakers were

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## Linn's Kiko System is fascinating, flexible, quite good sounding

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sound card on the host PC, so you can stream anything from your PC or Mac to the DS (Pandora, Spotify or YouTube as examples).

So, at this juncture, I could now play sound from my video system, play the internet radio stations hosted by Linn, and play music from my desktop server. All this is nicely controllable via Kinsky on my laptop or iPad, iPod Touch, and in a much more limited sense, from the Kiko remote control.

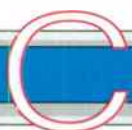
At one point in my listening, I connected the headphone output of my iPod Touch into the AUX input on the front panel of the Kiko to listen to some of the iTunes music on it. I heard a bit of irritation and slightly wrong sounding sibilance on some things and then pulled the cable out of the Touch and plugged in my nearby Grado SR-125 phones in and noticed that the tracks that I had just played sounded normal and good on the phones.

Then came the eye opener. When I unplugged the phones from the Touch, the music from it started to come out of the Kiko speakers. Whoa, how did that happen? I went to my iPad and it played music through the Kiko. Turns out that a little Linn symbol shows up in the iTunes player with a choice of having the music play on the iPod Touch or "Main Room: Kiko DSM." This is amazing; somehow, when a potential player device comes on, the network lets a device like the Kiko know it and will allow the player to communicate with

placed on lab stools that put them about 25 inches off the floor and just to the inside of my Genesis Advanced Technologies 6.1 speakers. Initial impressions were of a soundstage with greater depth than in the TV room situation where they were much closer to the wall. However, there was a blurry upper bass that was not anywhere near right. I moved the speakers increasingly forward and ended up with them about 15 inches forward of the initial position. Now, the sound is much more balanced and quite impressive in detail, imaging, dynamics, and how loud and cleanly it played. Sound was much better with this setting. I also believe that the time breaking in the system helped here, too.

This has all given me a fairly good understanding of what the Kiko system can do. There is lots more that Kiko players might do in different systems or rooms, e.g. playing BluRay or DVD movies and albums by connecting the HDMI output of a player into the Kiko and then on through to the HDMI input of a monitor to improve the sound of these sources.

A better idea for seeing what the Linn systems can do is to talk to a dealer or just peruse their web site. And I ought repeat, on instructions from the editor, that one should get the Kiko set up by the dealer. In conclusion, I found the Linn Kiko system to be a fascinating, flexible, and quite good sounding little system. It and its bigger brothers can surely bring the music into one's home.



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# Photos Never Lie!

### How to play the ...

... hottest new records? No, I think not. This might be a reasonable way to "melt" warps out of 45-rpm records like this one on the stove, as well as LPs. Most warps found in vinyl records were there when the record left the factory, whether the buyer could see the wiggle or not. They often got worse later on. Most usually, the warp was the result of too short a pressing cycle, so that the vinyl biscuit didn't have enough time to "relax" in its new, flat shape. It appears to me that the long-cycle LPs now being made with big 180-gram biscuits of virgin vinyl should not have this problem. Yes, they will cost more of today's inflated dollars, but good things usually cost more. This pic was sent in by Terry Eckert of Las Vegas, an audio engineer for conventions and conferences including CES and other local events.

Gene Pitts, Editor.

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