



It was almost exclusively about two-channel sound, and almost exclusively about very pricey gear. To be sure, there's still plenty of affordable stuff out there (and you'll find the cream of it on the following pages), and aspiring to the highest of the high end has always been an expensive game, but never before have we seen so many components at \$10,000 and above. Manufacturers routinely described systems comprising \$30,000 monoblock amps, \$15,000 preamps, \$20,000 DACs, and \$25,000–\$60,000 speaker systems as “affordable.” To actually come across a component that was “merely” \$10,000 was a kind of perverse relief. In our current economy, the gap between the haves and have-nots is growing and the middle class is shrinking. If this trend is reflected in specialty audio—and we believe it is—it indicates that what was once the bread-and-butter price range of \$1500–\$5000 per component is shrinking as well. If last year's show indicated a growing separation between two-channel audio and home theater and an increase in analog sales, this year's—at least in our little high-end world—even more forcefully announced itself as two-channel, analog-based, pricey, and proud of it. So, pour yourself a drink, put on some music, sit back, and tour the show with our staff. Eight enthusiastic and ultimately footsore gents were assigned to report on the most interesting components seen and heard. Although we don't list every item displayed in every room, we're confident that our commentary reflects what makes CES—and our hobby—so much fun. Finally, apologies to the many worthy manufacturers who we were unable to mention due to either time or space limitations.

LOUDSPEAKERS \$4000–\$10,000

NEIL GADER

Every CES has its own characteristic vibe. Over the last few years that vibe has been decidedly downbeat in the audio sector, with the home-theater groundswell creating a siege mentality among high-end exhibitors. In a half-baked response, a bevy of new subwoofers, center channel and surround speakers, and even in-walls were floated like lifeboats on the swiftly rising video-centric tide.

This year the mood was more upbeat, even defiant. And certainly more focused. Clearly attendance was lighter and exhibitors fewer, but according to some distributors more serious business was being done. The exhibits seemed to pander less to potential crossover buyers and more to the

high-end's dedicated base.

TAS' Neil Gader chats with Elite's Scot Markwell (a former colleague)

As a result, entry-level products played second fiddle to some of the most impressive flagship loudspeakers I've seen in some time. There was even an unapologetic trend towards small but mondo-expensive "statement" components in product categories typically associated with cost savings. Whereas integrated amplifiers and stand-mounted two-ways were rarely priced north of three or four grand a few years ago, they sure aren't today. Fresh integrated amplifier offerings like the CA200 control amplifier from **Conrad-Johnson** and the Précis from **Chapter Electronics** and speakers like the Duette from **Wilson Audio** and the 121 from **MBL** exemplified this champagne-and-caviar trend.

Small Speaker for Big Spenders

These noteworthy compacts may not be at the top of their respective lines, but the seriousness of their performance could signal a revolution in small-speaker design—and an important development for high-res multi-channel fans seeking space-saving alternatives to large floorstanders.

Eben of Denmark made a strong impression in a couple of settings, but it was its X-Centric (\$9200), a stand-mounted monitor with a planar-magnetic tweeter, that demonstrated a speed, dynamism, and punch rare in



this weight class. From **Elac** of Germany the BS 602 X-Jet, a compact stand-mounted three-way, offered an interesting spin on the concentric driver, wrapping a circular planar magnetic/honeycomb midrange around Elac's own Jet III ribbon tweeter.

Replete with inverted aluminum-cone woofer and high-tech

Acapella's Fidelio II aluminum enclosure, it jettied in at \$9000. At \$6800 the **Acapella Fidelio**

II was a tiny but brilliant reproducer of vocals, although it will certainly benefit from a subwoofer for more aggressive listening. Beautifully constructed of layered hardwoods rather than the customary MDF, it uses a pair of small woofers nestled tightly against a centered tweeter. Bass output and extension are said to be roughly the equivalent of a single 7" driver.

The **Wilson Audio Duette** falls just wide of my category at \$11,000, but I'll take the liberty of mentioning the impressive performance it displayed at a demo in the *Mirage*. Its understated looks conceal some intriguing technology. Built to meet the challenges of "hostile environments"—that is, positioning at weird heights, like bookshelves or near boundaries—it can be optimized via an extravagant external crossover and custom crossover-to-speaker cabling. In an A/B/C comparison with two other ultra-prestige speakers, a compact two-way and a hefty floorstander, the *Duette* made the sonic pecking order clear.

Goldmund introduced the *Logos Active*, part of the company's new (and for Goldmund, affordable) *Metis Line*. The *Logos Active* is a two-way satellite with solid aluminum cabinets. Each of the speaker's drivers is powered by a 200-watt Goldmund *Telos* amp. In addition, since Goldmund DACs are built-in, the *Logos Active* accepts digital input. Total cost is \$10,000.

Jewel-like in its construction, the **MBL Radialstrahler-**

Compact 121 (\$10,000) produced vivid three-dimensional imaging and soundstaging thanks to the omnidirectional tweeter/midrange technology that it shares with the vaunted **MBL 101** and **111** speakers. With surprising bass output from its push-pull woofer configuration it displayed more than a passing resemblance to



MBL Radialstrahler-Compact 121

NEIL GADER'S Best of Show

Most Significant New Product

Any product that draws the younger generation toward the high end is significant. So my most significant new product is **Arcam's** r-Lead (\$85)—an "intelligent" cable that enables Arcam's Solo remote handset to control the iPod, and provides track, song, and other iPod information on the receiver's display. A more advanced unit, the r-Dock arrives later this year.

Cooler New Products

Thorens premiered a series of stunning electronics—the \$2000 TEP-302 phono preamplifier, the TEP-3800 preamp at \$14,995, and the TEM-3200 tube/transistor hybrid monoblock amplifiers at \$29,990.

Cooler Accessory

Synergistic Research has been clever enough to exploit the possibilities of one of the most musical subs out there, the REL line. Its SR Spec cables with active shielding, specifically voiced for REL subs, are a natural expression of this cable manufacturer's spirit of innovation.

Most Frequently Heard Demo Music

Diana Krall and Kodo drummers were popular. So was Nils Lofgren's guitar-slashing "Keith Don't Go." I was pretty numb from this track until I heard it on the Coincident Speaker Technology Total Victory—a heckuva loudspeaker.

Greatest Value

In the mini department, **Silverline's** Prelude at \$1200 is a tiny tower capable of playing surprisingly big and clean. From Finland, the **Amphion** Ion is a petite two-way that was tuneful with a vibrant presence range at \$1350. Finally, there was the Majestic Magic Diamond II two-way from **TBI Sound**. This mini with a 2" paper-cone tweeter and 5" cone woofer made some serious high-end music, while clocking in at an estimated \$1000.

Biggest Surprise at CES

The sheer number of turntables actively being used in exhibitor's rooms was truly eye-opening—as was their performance.

Best Sound at CES

Sonicweld takes a systems approach with its active loudspeakers. Not inexpensive at \$49,000–\$64,000 (depending on subwoofers), the system comes complete with triple ICEpower modules for each quasi-line-array satellite speaker, a Subpulse bass module, and the DEQX PDC (preamp-style functions and digital crossover and room correction). Sonicweld's trademark CNC aluminum construction throughout is a mindblower.

TAS Family Reunion:
Neil Gader, Harry Pearson,
Jon Valin, and Wayne Garcia



PHOTO BY ROBERT HARLEY

its slamming big brothers. The new rosewood finish was a breathtaking change from the more somber piano black seen throughout the show.

Curves Are In

It's well known that non-parallel sidewalls make for better loudspeakers, and they made their presence known this year. Musical Surroundings, the distributor of all things analog, has taken on its first speaker line with fascinating **Vivid Audio**. Out of South Africa, with an ex-B&W designer at the helm, Vivid offered a series of graceful ovalur loudspeakers that use carbon-fiber-loaded polyester-compound enclosures and drivers of Vivid's own design and manufacture. The fully decoupled midrange and tweeter feature aluminum domes mounted in tapered tubes. The new V1.5 (\$7500), a two-way with a single pole floorstand that flares out to a broad pedestal, is likely to be the meat-and-potatoes of the line. Available in any Pantone color for an additional \$750.

Much ink has been spilled writing about the Model 1 loudspeakers from the **TAD Pro** Division of Pioneer Electronics. The new **Pioneer EX Series** embodies many of the Model One's virtues, including the Coherent Source Transducer (a beryllium tweeter mounted within a magnesium midrange), in a much more affordable package. Available as the stand-mounted three-way S-2EX for \$6000 and the S-1EX floorstander at \$9000.

Curves were also in evidence in the Evolution line from Italian maker **Pearl Evolution**. The speakers' dynamic drivers are essentially decoupled from their front baffles, though

they remain pistonicallly linear and stable thanks to a rigid horizontal pole running from the rear of the cabinets to the back of the transducers' magnets. The resulting sound was boxless and electrostat-like in the mids and highs, melding transparency with dynamism like few speakers at the show. The Evo-203, a two-way Pearl, will retail for \$6000.

Mirage has rescaled its small potent Omnisat technology and driven it uptown with the curvaceous OMD-28. On display in a vivid burl grain, this three-way, upward-firing omni with concentric tweeter/midrange sports a dual port in its base. Due in late spring at \$7500.

Perennial Frontrunners

Quad, one of the high-end's legendary darlings, displayed the 2805 (\$9000) and its larger cousin the 2905 (\$11,500) electrostats. Derived from

Harbeth's new, unnamed speaker



the current 988 and 989 respectively, both boast improvements to the stator panel membrane and greater frame rigidity (thanks to hefty aluminum side extrusions and top caps, and an aluminum buttress in the rear).

Focal's new Electra 1007Be (\$3995) compact two-way projected rich sonics via a beryllium inverted-dome tweeter. The bass-reflex design locates the port at the back near its base. Also available as a floorstander, the 1027Be, that will list for \$7495.

Harbeth premiered a mysterious, mid-sized, three-way, tri-wireable floorstander in gorgeous burl that employs a dual-woofer design with a rear port. The speaker embodied the characteristic Harbeth qualities of tonal neutrality and warmth in an updated design. Available later this year. (Pricing has not yet been announced.)

Importer/distributor Immedia has replaced Audio Physic in its distribution chain with another German contender, **Sonics**. The deep, narrow-baffle designs of the Allegretto and Allegro (\$5300 and \$7800) are reminiscent of the best of Audio Physic (they should be with former AP designer Joachim Gerhard at the helm), and judging by a quick listen to Tony Bennett/Bill Evans tracks on the flagship PassionS (\$32,000), Sonics offerings obviously have the transparency and many of the same soundstage qualities that have always distinguished AP loudspeakers. ▶

INTEGRATED/"CONTROL" AMPLIFIERS

JIM HANNON

As the audio venues in Las Vegas demonstrated, integrated amplifiers offer some of the best values in audio, and several new offerings grabbed my attention. Designers are overcoming some of the physical and performance limitations of integrated amplifiers, namely the relatively small size of power supplies and the inability to completely isolate sensitive preamp circuitry from the noisier power amplifier section. Indeed, this show suggested that the performance gap between integrated amplifiers and their "separates" counterparts is narrowing.

Several of the trends that I note in power amplifiers (see "Power Amplifiers under \$10,000" below) also apply to integrated amplifiers. Some of the biggest names in audio are using their integrated and control amps to expand their markets into lower-priced segments. The good news here is that many are using the same circuits in their integrated amplifiers found in their more expensive separates—but at a significant savings. Unfortunately, many of these components were on static display, so I am unable to comment on their sonics. However, if you've ever dreamed of owning Conrad-Johnson, McIntosh, Bryston, or MBL separates but found their prices beyond your budget, I encourage you to check out their new integrated or control amplifiers.

What's a control amplifier? **Conrad-Johnson** is calling it a new category between power and integrated amplifiers. The Conrad-Johnson CA200 control amplifier (\$6500), for example, combines a set of input selector switches, a stepped attenuator positioned at the input of the amplifier, and a reduced power version of CJ's Premier 350 amplifier. This design

JIM HANNON'S Best of Show

Most Significant New Products

The upcoming **Classic Records** reissues, particularly the 35mm Everests, the mono Blue Notes, the Coltrane (*One Down, One Up*), and *Voodoo Child* from the Jimi Hendrix collection.

Coollest New Products

The **Manley Labs** Manta Ray integrated (think two Snappers on one big chassis, five line inputs, a USB connector, and a remote), and the **Wavelength Audio** Jupiter 50 (the first commercially available amp based on the RCA 50 tube).

Coollest Accessory

The **Acoustic System** Resonators. These minute metal objects that rest on wooden bases can help focus your soundstage and disperse room "nasties."

Most Frequently Heard Demo Music

Can't say since I asked them to play jazz and classical music.

Greatest Value

The **McIntosh** MA6300 and **NuForce** IA7 integrated amplifiers with circuits from their much more expensive separates.

Biggest Surprise at CES

The number of turntable rigs being used in demos. How I wish I could afford the **Kuzma** straight-line arm and Reference table. Listening to the marvelous sound of the **Merlin** VSM-MXs driven by a **VPI** TNT VI rig made my ears go "Ahhhhh!"

Best Sound at CES

Besides the \$750,000 Bosendorfer Grand Piano, the big **SoundLab** Millennium-1 PXs (Tascam DV-RA1000/Blowtorch Pre/Parasound JC1s) captured my heart with their seamless coherence from top to bottom, ultra-low distortion, transient speed, and truth of timbre. However, my head said the nod should go to the big **MBLs** for their resolution and incredible dynamic range. Honorable mentions: Merlin, Kharma, Wisdom Audio/Edge, Rockport/Nagra/Purist, Verity Audio/Nagra, Usher (particularly the BE-20s), Wilson/Audio Research, and B&W/Musical Fidelity.



Conrad-Johnson CA200 control amplifier

essentially eliminates the linestage and has no gain in the “control section.” We’ve seen some fine amplifiers with volume controls, but this solution allows the use of multiple sources.

McIntosh premiered its MA6300 integrated amplifier (price is still TBD but is projected around \$3000), which combines the preamp circuit from the C46 Audio Control Center with the output topologies of its MC2KW power amplifier and MA6500 integrated. It is rated at 100Wpc into 8 ohms and uses a new type of output device that locates the thermal sensor inside the transistor. This is said to result in lower distortion at all power levels without excess heat. All switching is done at the jacks, and the switches are encased in a nitrogen bath. Switches need to be cleaned once every 325 years—so put that in your will.

Bryston’s B100-SST (\$2995) integrates the circuitry and power supply of the 2B-SST stereo amplifier with the BP-16 preamplifier in a dual-mono configuration. The layout of the amplifier looked very clean, with good isolation of critical components, and it comes with a full-function remote control.

The **MBL** 7006 integrated amplifier (\$3500) is rated at 180Wpc but uses the same circuits as the MBL 8006 B amplifier and 4006 preamplifier combo that I liked so much driving the low-sensitivity MBL 121 compact monitors.

Two less familiar makers of high-performance separates also introduced noteworthy products that made me forget I was listening to integrated amplifiers. The **Karan** KAI 180 (\$8500) is hand-built with no caps in the signal path, no phase distortion, gold-plated circuit boards, resonance control, and no negative feedback. It is balanced from input to output and held the new **Ascendo** C7s under complete control, yielding a highly musical result with excellent detail, transparency, and transient speed. The **Chapter** Précis integrated (\$6500) exemplified an emerging trend towards using Class D output stages. It is rated at 130Wpc into 8 ohms and, like the Karan, its sound was fast, accurate, and liquid without a trace of hardness. It also sports



KEF's KHT 3000 Series system

an iPod input on the front panel, a feature that is appearing in more new integrated amps.

Perhaps the most anticipated introduction among Class D integrated amps was the **NuForce** IA7 (\$1195). It utilizes the same chassis as the NuForce Reference 9 and is said to include two Reference 9 boards and the board of the P8 stereo preamplifier. It comes with a remote, preamp outputs, and home-theater bypass, and can be daisy chained for surround. The sound on a pair of monitors was clean and transparent but given the Reference 9's performance, I suspect it will also produce very good bass. (Given the speakers, it was impossible to verify this.)

Several manufacturers of integrated amplifiers displayed offerings at very attractive prices, typically because of off-shore-manufacturing efficiencies. The **Genesis** I60 (\$3495) is rated at 60Wpc, uses KT88s, and employs very little feedback. If it sounds anything like the Genesis M60 monoblocks (\$3995) I heard driving a pair of G3 speakers, it is definitely something to check out. That Genesis combo had a lot of dynamic slam but also considerable harmonic richness.

LA Audio was showing its A-6550 integrated (\$3900) rated at 150Wpc with point-to-point wiring and hand-wound transformers.

PrimaLuna was showing a prototype of its Dialogue One (\$2000), an EL-34-based integrated with a remote control and triode/ultralinear switch. At approximately 70 pounds this baby was heavy.

Some attractive entry-level integrations were the **Music Hall** A25.2 (\$600), the **Creek** EVO (\$895), and the **Audiolabs** 800S (\$995). Creek was also demonstrating a fine-sounding integrated under \$2k, the **New Destiny**, which uses MOSFET output devices. It sounded very natural and musical on vocal recordings.

As part of its Masters Series, **NAD** was showing its M3 dual-mono integrated amplifier (\$2799). It is rated at 180Wpc into 8 ohms and uses custom-made Holmgren transformers. NAD's Bjorn Erik Edvardsen designed the preamp section to keep signal paths as short as possible.

Last, but certainly not least, was the new **Manta Ray** integrated from **Manley Labs** (\$4000). It is essentially a stereo integrated version of Manley's popular Snapper monoblocks, using Manley's own output transformers in a low-feedback design with a fully symmetrical circuit. It looks very cool. As



Manley Labs Manta Ray



Final Sound's Virtual Home

an aside, the Manley Labs folks seemed to be having the most fun at the show. ▶

LOUDSPEAKERS UNDER \$4000

CHRIS MARTENS

CES 2006 left me convinced that now is a terrific time to be shopping for loudspeakers in the sub-\$4000 price range. Why? The short answer is that technological and market forces are converging in ways that both enable and compel manufacturers to build speakers that sound great for not a lot of money. We're all for that, aren't we? To see how speaker manufacturers are pulling this off, let's consider three trends.

Budget-priced surround systems as entry-level music systems

Surprising though it seems, today's most cost-effective and musical small speakers are often found in surround systems. That's because space and budget constraints are leading many enthusiasts to choose multichannel home-entertainment systems that serve double-duty for film and music playback. And buyers' performance expectations run high, though their equipment budgets are slim by audiophile standards. Further, mounting anecdotal evidence suggests that many "home-theater" customers regard music listening as the primary activity for which they use their systems. Manufacturers are answering this challenge by developing new technologies calculated to help small, affordable speakers perform as never before. At CES, three good examples of this trend came in the form of new surround speaker systems from Definitive Technology, KEF, and Final Sounds.

DALI's IKON series

Definitive debuted its \$1099 ProCinema 800 and \$1499–\$1649 ProCinema 1000 5.1-channel systems, both with satellite speakers that incorporate top-mounted passive radiators and drive units featuring innovative new suspension systems. The result is a small satellite/subwoofer system that offers almost shocking levels of openness and midrange subtlety, and terrific dynamics.

The British firm KEF unveiled its new KHT 3000 Series surround system, which will sell for approximately \$1500, with drive units that—much like those in the Definitive systems—offer innovative new suspension systems. As an additional twist, KEF molds slender radial stiffening ribs into the backs of the KHT 3000 Series mid/bass driver cones—a change said to increase resolution of low-level details. A brief listening session showed that this system offers remarkably smooth, well-focused sound with unexpected dynamic punch.

Finally, the Dutch manufacturer Final Sound exhibited a remarkably affordable 90i-based 2.1-channel Virtual Home Theater system based on two stand-mounted, dipolar electrostatic panels and a very fast powered subwoofer—all for just \$1300. Final Sound has developed new-generation electrostatic panels that offer good dispersion, support surprisingly high playback levels, and eliminate the weight and bulk of previous designs. Final's entry-level Virtual Home Theater system puts electrostatic sound within reach at an unprecedented low price. The sonic gravy, so to speak, is that the system's dipolar electrostatic panels sound particularly good when used with the SRS-type virtual-surround-sound decoders in modern A/V receivers.

Compact speakers that offer a taste of "audiophile heaven"

Each year, it seems, CES brings us a new crop of compact speakers that somehow manages to deliver disproportionately huge



CHRIS MARTENS' Best of Show

Most Significant New Products

Class D amplifiers from a variety of manufacturers are changing the way we think about amplification, both for purist audiophile and home-theater systems. The best designs provide sonic finesse and substantial power in surprisingly small, cool-running, affordable packages.

Cooler New Products

Combo cellphone/PDA/digital-video-and-audio-players from a variety of manufacturers. Could future high-end audio systems be based on handheld devices? Perhaps.

Cooler Accessory

The **Chang Lightspeed** Encounter parallel noise sink/power strip. Just plug the Encounter into the same power circuit you use for your hi-fi system and watch the noise floor drop. Neat.

Most Frequently Heard Demo Music

There were few clear-cut trends, but various Diana Krall tracks, especially "Narrow Daylight" from *The Girl In the Other Room*, appeared quite frequently.

Greatest Value

DALI's new IKON loudspeaker family offers value that is off the charts.

Biggest Surprise At CES

The **SLS Loudspeakers** Q-line surround system (endorsed by Quincy Jones), which provides five ribbon-driver-equipped satellites, a powered subwoofer, and an AVR for—I am not making this up—\$500.

Best Sound At CES

The **Sound Lab** Millennium-1 full-range electrostats. Accuracy, neutrality, high resolution, and musicality converge right here.

helpings of audiophile magic. My sense is that as driver technologies continue to improve and as designers become more adept at juggling performance trade-offs, small monitors are becoming more and more capable of surprising us with what they can do. This year, two of the most pleasing surprises came from ERA and Amphion.

ERA loudspeakers are developed by the team at **Signal Path International** (the U.S. distributors for Musical Fidelity), and at CES ERA demonstrated its tiny new Design 3 loudspeaker, whose projected price is just \$400, alongside a pair of B&W's flagship 800Ds. The funny part was that the little ERAs sounded so full, warm, and three-dimensional that some suite visitors sheepishly asked, "Which ones are playing?" Does this mean the \$400 ERAs sound as good as the big B&Ws? Of course not, but it does mean they're good enough to keep listeners guessing, at least for a while.

Amphion is a Finnish loudspeaker manufacturer whose designs emphasize controlled directivity, achieved by using dish-shaped waveguides said to help minimize interactions between the speakers and the listening room. (The theory: You hear more music and fewer room anomalies.) Among the least expensive Amphions are the \$1300 stand-mount Ions, which I

found capable of remarkable purity, delicacy, and expressiveness. Though not the last word in bass extension or high output, the Ions in other respects remind me of more costly monitors.

Brilliant generalists at affordable prices

The best speakers in the \$2000–\$4000 range have gotten so good that they truly qualify as brilliant generalists that do all things well. While expensive top-tier models have undeniable appeal, I suspect speakers in this lower price range will, for many music lovers, represent the point of diminishing returns. And judging by the sounds of three new floorstanders from DALI, ProAc, and Reference 3A, those sonic returns are greater than ever before.

TAS readers will know our writers hold DALI's Helicon Series speakers in high regard, so what we didn't see coming was a new family of DALI loudspeakers that deliver about 90% of the goodness of Helicons for about one third their price. Yet that is precisely what DALI's new IKON Series speaker offers. The IKON features wood-composite fiber-cone mid/bass drivers, oversized fabric-dome mid/high drivers, and ribbon tweeters, just as the bigger Helicons do, yet the flagship IKON 7 floorstanders will sell for just \$2100. A brief listen to the IKON 6 floorstanders (\$1595) convinced me these speakers are the real deal.

ProAc speakers from Great Britain have long been audiophile favorites, and while they offer compelling sonic merits I doubt anyone would have termed them "bargain priced"—until now. ProAc demonstrated its delightful new Studio 140 floorstander, and my first impression was that it offered the kind of balanced performance and effortless musicality likely to make it extremely expensive. I was surprised and delighted to learn the Studio 140 will sell for just \$2800. (Based on its sound, I feared it might cost twice that.)

Finally, I was entranced by **Reference 3A's** new \$3000–\$3300 Veena floorstander, specifically because it does all the good things for which Reference 3A's smaller stand-mount monitors are famous—openness, textural finesse, terrific resolution of inner details—while offering improved three-



A bevy of Pro-Ject turntables

dimensionality, greater bass extension, and more neutral tonal balance. What particularly caught my ear was the Veena's ability to reveal deep interior aspects of the music—much as costly top-tier speakers do—but at a budget-friendly price. ➤

PREAMPS UNDER \$10,000 AND ANALOG SOURCES

DON SALTZMAN

I thought I had the plum assignment with analog sources—report on a few turntables, maybe a random cassette player or 8-track, then kick back and enjoy the Las Vegas nightlife. *Not*. There was a turntable here, turntable there, everywhere a turntable. I had to scramble all four days just to try to cover them all. Vacation, anyone?

No CES in recent memory had had a better showing of analog sources, including new vinyl. That's the good news. The not-so-good news: Statement turntables are now priced like cars, and I'm not talking about that most musical of vehicles, the Hyundai Sonata. Let's see, do I buy that new M-B 500S or a Continuum Caliburn turntable? Maybe that shiny Carrera S I've spied at my local dealer, or a Blue Pearl Audio JEM? Perhaps an easy decision for most folks, but, sadly, if you've got the analog bug you'll decide there's really nothing wrong with the Civic you've been driving for the last 10 years.

To be fair, there was no shortage of affordable turntables, either. Let's start with those manufacturers who showed continuing devotion to making analog accessible to the masses.

Sumiko showcased a static display of stylish new Pro-Ject turntables that should make it easy for those presently without analog to see what they've been missing. At only \$299, the Debut III includes a pre-mounted Ortofon OM-5E moving-magnet cartridge and, for a slight upcharge, is available in one of eight different colors. The Xpression II (\$499) includes a carbon-fiber arm with pre-mounted Sumiko Oyster cartridge, while a handy feature on the Xperience (\$999) is a plinth-mounted phono-input jack which allows use of connecting cables of your choice. Rounding out the new offerings are the space-efficient RM-5 (\$649, carbon-fiber arm, quick VTA and azimuth adjustment) and RM-9.1 (\$1499, acrylic platter, single-piece carbon-fiber arm and headshell). Pro-Ject also introduced a tiny phono preamp with up to 60dB of gain and a matching turntable speed controller, each priced at only \$119, about 5% of the sales tax on Sumiko's superb SME 30/2 turntable. If that isn't attractive to the vinyl lover on a budget, what is?

The friendly folks at Roksan were showing their very attractive Radius 5 turntable which features a frosted acrylic platter and a plinth available in acrylic, walnut, or maple. Roksan also has an updated Artemiz tonearm (\$2495) and a too-cool electronic tracking force gauge that reads to the hundredth of a gram for only \$199.

Clearaudio had an entire room devoted to turntables, arms, cartridges, record cleaning machines, and fascinating accessories including "The Vinyl Doctor," a device that looks like a laptop until you open it up to discover it is designed to bake (safely, Clearaudio assures me) the warps out of records. As always, Clearaudio showed an amazing array of beautiful tables and arms at all price points, simply too many to cover in this report—but it was the incredible new "Statement" turntable that had the visitors buzzing, more about which later.

In the "mid-price" category I found the new SE-1 record-playing system from Sound Engineering of Nashville, Tennessee. Since it came from Nashville, I shouldn't have been surprised to see it sporting a precision platter made of wood similar to that used in Gibson guitars. With a custom Tom



Roksan's Radius 5; Immedia's "Spiral Groove" SG1; Continuum's \$90,000 Caliburn 'table and Cobra arm

Evans-designed DC motor-controller, beautifully machined center weight, and periphery clamp, the SE-1C retails for a still-reasonable \$7450. Unfortunately, I did not get to hear this 'table because an amplifier had failed just before I visited the room, but it sure looked like it was worth a serious audition.

Venerable turntable manufacturer **Thorens** had its new TD350 on static display. With a floating sub-chassis, belt-drive, motor controller, and TP250 arm, it should offer typically outstanding Thorens performance at an affordable \$3599.

DON SALTZMAN'S Best of Show

Most Significant New Product

A four-way tie to new turntables that attempt to advance the state of the art—the Caliburn by **Continuum**, the Statement by **Clearaudio**, the JEM by **Blue Pearl Audio**, and the top models from **Transrotor**. All use magnetic suspension as part of their design philosophy.

Cooliest Accessory

A tie between the **Roksan** digital stylus force gauge and The Vinyl Doctor from **Clearaudio**.

Most Frequently Heard Demo Music

Selections from Harry Belafonte and Ray Charles.

Greatest Value

Epiphany 6-6 Plus. At \$10,900, these speakers added two 8" bass drivers, self-powered, to the six midrange/bass cones and six ribbon tweeters of their 6-6 model. I thought the speakers were a knockout. Open and spacious like other Epiphany models, they now have true bass slam and extension and need make no apology whatsoever for their low-frequency performance. I also must add the lower-priced turntable/toner combinations from **Pro-Ject**, **Clearaudio**, and **Basis**, which offer high performance at a reasonable cost.

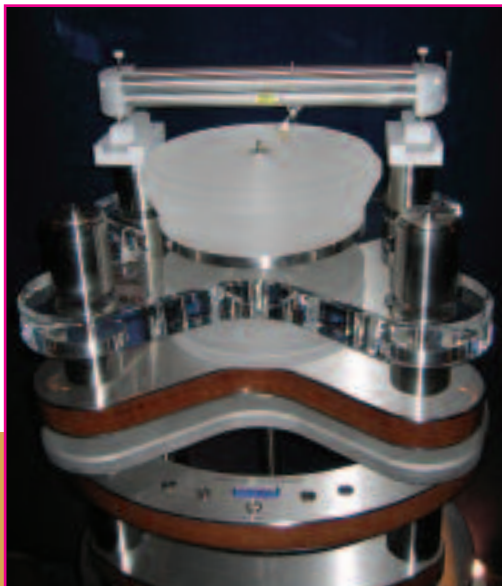
Biggest Surprise at CES

I didn't catch a cold—first time for a CES. Other than that, I was pleasantly shocked at the great proliferation of analog sources.

Best Sound at CES

The first was the room showing the **Continuum** turntable, **Boulder** preamplifier, **Wavac** amplification and **Venture** Grand Excellence Signature loudspeakers. While the sound varied day to day, at its best it was extremely direct with great body, tonal color, and pacing. For once, you could forget about the equipment.

Kharms have been speakers I admired but could not quite see bringing home. They didn't seem to fully flesh out large-scale orchestral music, although they certainly excelled at the presentation of almost everything else. But the combination of the **Kharma** Midi-Exquisites (\$75,000), **ASR** Emitter II amplifier, and **MBL** CD player took me over the top. The soundstaging and imaging were truly phenomenal; the speakers disappeared, as did the walls of the demonstration room. While they still did not *quite* deliver the majesty of a full orchestra, they came close enough so it wasn't a distraction.



Clearaudio's 770-pound "Statement"

Very intriguing was the new Monaco turntable from noted equipment-stand manufacturer **Grand Prix Audio**. The result of substantial research and development, the Monaco features a beautifully designed carbon-fiber plinth, active-feedback speed control for its DC motor, a magnesium platter and bronze flywheel supported by a pressurized film of oil, and magnetic drive. This 'table looks fully race-

ready, in a Ferrari sort of way, and I want a test drive! I refuse to let the \$15,000 price set me back—my wife can work two jobs if necessary.

MusicDirect exhibited the sexy **Avid Acutus** which, at \$13,000 with motor controller and suspended 22-pound platter, represents the top of the Avid line of turntables. Gracing the armboard was a Dynavector DV-507 arm (\$4200) that features a pivot in the vertical plane located right behind the headshell.

Not to be outdone by Clearaudio, Grand Prix Audio, or Avid on the all-important sexiness front, the entire line of **Transrotor** turntables was simply dazzling in the **AXISS** room. It was hard to take my eyes off the **Tourbillon** (about \$35,000), with its three drive motors, thick clear acrylic plinth to accommodate up to three tonearms, and frosted acrylic platter with chrome or gold outer weights. After only two or three minutes of gazing at the spinning **Tourbillon**, your spouse will be hypnotized into agreeing you really need one. Equally enticing was the **Apollon TMD** (\$15,000), constructed of polished aluminum and black acrylic and also capable of holding three tonearms. "TMD" stands for Transrotor Magnetic Drive, while the new **FMD** Magnetic Drive System featured on the **Orion** and several other Transrotor models drives the platter through a separate flywheel with magnetic coupling.

Big news at the show came from Allen Perkins of **Immedia** Distribution. No, he has not left Immedia. But he has started a new company, "Spiral Groove," devoted to the manufacture of new turntables and arms. He showed two new 'tables at CES. The **SG1** (about \$20,000) is a compact design constructed largely of stainless steel, aluminum, and layers of damping agents. The turntable base is extremely dense—I was shocked when I tried to lift one corner of the table and discovered it weighs 70 pounds. A very cool feature is a bayonet mount for the arm board, allowing quick changes of tonearms. The **SG1** also has a stainless-steel periphery ring at the bottom of the platter for increased speed stability. Similar in design, the less

expensive SG2 (about \$12,500) has lower mass than the SG1 and gives up the bayonet mount for a removable arm board. The new Spiral Groove arm was not on display.

And now, something completely different—**Garrard**, yes Garrard, still lives. The British manufacturer of fine record-cleaning machines, **Loricraft**, is distributing a modern version of the Garrard table utilizing a drive system whereby an idler wheel directly drives the inside of the platter. The new Garrard 501, at approximately \$20,000, looks a little retro but uses the finest parts. The manufacturer claims that idler drive eliminates the minute, but audible, speed fluctuations of most belt-drive turntables.

Which brings us to the Big Boys of the show, the cost-no-object contenders for state of the art in turntable technology.

Continuum Audio Laboratories of Australia mounted a compelling demonstration of its Caliburn turntable, Cobra arm, and Castellon isolation stand (all for approximately \$90,000, give or take). Space does not permit a detailed description of these technological wonders, but in a nutshell the Caliburn is driven by a battery-powered DC motor and provides vacuum hold-down via a small and silent pump, while the Cobra (about \$12,000 separately) has a computer-designed shape like no other tonearm and is built of organic materials. The Castellon features two heavy, opposing magnetic plates that are said to completely isolate the Caliburn from external vibrations. An exciting package that produced exciting sound (see “Best of Show” on p. 38). The show sample was purchased (before the show) by a friend who lives near me—I’m sure I’ll get to know the ’table better in the next few months.

Also falling squarely within the second mortgage category is the incredible new “Statement” turntable from **Clearaudio** (approximately \$90,000), shown in static display at CES. Weighing 770 pounds (!) and standing over four feet tall on its dedicated stand, this ’table too is a technological *tour de force*. I can’t possibly describe all of its features here. Indeed, I don’t fully understand how it all works. What I can tell you is that the huge frosted acrylic platter rests entirely on a cushion of air created by opposing magnetic forces. The platter is magnetically driven by a sub platter, a magnetic clutch so to speak, with no physical



contact between the two. The main chassis is oil damped, and the motor drive is controlled by a high-speed processor. But wait—there’s more. Hanging from the sub platter is a long metal tube with a very heavy weight at the bottom, like a pendulum. As I understand it, the tube rides in a gyroscopic-type bearing so that the weight of the pendulum keeps the top platform (and therefore the platter) level at all times, with no air pumps or compressors. The new Statement TQI linear tracking arm was in prototype form, with the production version anticipated in a few months. The turntable will hold up to four different arms. I already have a call in to my mortgage broker.

Also using a magnetically suspended platter, the British-built **Blue Pearl Audio JEM** turntable is a relative bargain at only \$82,000—its 103-pound platter is supported by a beautiful, floorstanding base that appears to be made of granite. Shown with an SME arm, the JEM was an exquisite sight to behold. This was at the end of the show on Sunday, and by this time I was delirious and actually considering the possibility of a third mortgage (or heading to the casinos). Mercifully, the manufacturer saved me by informing me that HP had already laid claim to the JEM.

With too many turntables and too little time, I apologize to those manufacturers with new products I may not have mentioned in this overview. Any omission was purely unintentional.

Two channel is still very much alive and well, as witnessed by a number of new stereo preamplifier entries in the under-\$10,000 category. **Balanced Audio Technology** displayed its new reference solid-state preamplifier, the VK-42SE (approximately \$6000). Using a topology similar to its acclaimed tube preamplifiers, with proprietary oil capacitors in a new power supply, this unit promises the delicacy of BAT’s tube preamps with the bass extension and slam of solid-state.

Also promising to deliver more than a little of the great sound of the 6010 D that **JV** has raved about, **MBL** displayed its full remote 5011 stereo preamplifier (\$8382). This should offer a great amplification system when paired with one of MBL’s Noble line of amplifiers.

Rogue Audio displayed two new tube preamplifiers, the 99 and the 66. Surprisingly well finished at their price points, the 66 Magnum (\$1495) can be configured as a linestage or a preamplifier with phono. The 99 Magnum (\$2495 linestage, \$2995



Edge GM 8 Statement amps (bottom); Kharma Matrix MP150-SE amps (top)

with phono) offers a larger power supply, additional flexibility, and higher-quality components. Both preamps have separate power supplies and an analog remote volume control. While I have not heard either of these preamps, Rogue Audio has a good reputation for quality sound at reasonable prices, and I would expect both to further that reputation.

Simaudio introduced the Moon P-7 preamplifier, the newest addition to its Evolution Series. This \$5500 preamp offers elegant cosmetics, individual gain trim for each input,

precision volume control, and great flexibility for stereo and/or home-theater use.

Thorens displayed its new TEP 302 phono preamp (\$2000). This attractive and nicely finished solid-state unit offers 60dB of gain (MC) and adjustable input capacitance and input impedance. ➤

POWER AMPLIFIERS UNDER \$10,000

JIM HANNON

Twenty-five years ago I attended my first CES. I recall that the main floor was awash in a sea of white shoes, white belts, gold chains, and polyester, and I felt like I had traveled to another planet. However, quietly ensconced in a separate hotel were a group of high-end audio companies with representatives with strikingly different demeanors and clothing. There were some of the titans of the industry, easily accessible to all who walked through the doors of their hotel suites. While the main hall has changed considerably, I still enjoyed some of the same vibe at the audio venues that I had many years before.

Perhaps in response to the soaring prices of years past, I noted three trends in the under-\$10K segment. First, many of the big boys—you know, the ones who produce products you covet but can't afford—introduced products that are more within reach but have some of the same sonic attributes as their more costly brethren. New entries from Edge, Boulder, Musical Fidelity, and MBL definitely caught my attention and were included in systems that produced some of the best sounds of the show.

The new **Edge GM 8 Statement** amps (introductory price of \$8488) are dual-channel amps in two chassis. They are rated at 575Wpc into 8 ohms but lack the laser-biasing of Edge's more expensive amps. They were driving a new luxury speaker system, the **Precision Acoustic Labs Model 27**, on extremely demanding material, with terrific control and explosive dynamics, and without the faintest hint of clipping, transistor brightness, or grain. I am one admitted tube lover who could happily live with them. For those on tighter budgets, Edge displayed the two-channel **GS 8 Statement** (\$5288) at 150 watts a side, as well as the **100Wpc G.5** (\$2488).

The **MBL 8006 B** (\$3500) is a new 180Wpc stereo power amplifier that was effortlessly driving the 82dB-sensitive **MBL 121** monitors. This combo offered surprisingly good resolution, imaging, and freedom from distortion, as well as the ability to start one's toes tapping.

Boulder introduced the 850 mono power amplifier, the

ROBERT HARLEY'S Best of Show

Most Significant New Product

Rather than follow traditional methods of improving loudspeaker-driver performance, **Jim Thiel** has forged his own path in the radical new **Thiel CS3.7**. This new speaker's corrugated metal diaphragms and coaxial midrange-tweeter are just the start of the CS3.7's innovations.

Cooliest New Product

Imagine the sound quality of a freestanding loudspeaker coming from a small speaker mounted on a shelf or in a cabinet against a wall. That's exactly what **Wilson Audio's** new *Duette* promised—and delivered, based on the demonstration I heard.

Cooliest Accessory

The new line of **Pro-Ject** LP-playback products, which share a tiny yet sturdy chassis, were the coolest—and cutest—accessories. The *Head-Box II* is a headphone amplifier; the *Phono Box II* is a miniature outboard phono preamp; and the *Speed Box II* turntable speed regulator allows you to switch from 33rpm to 45rpm without moving a belt. The units are priced at \$119 each.

Most Frequently Heard Demo Music

Bizarrely, Dire Straits' *Brothers in Arms*.

Greatest Value

Although not demonstrated, the **M3** integrated amplifier, part of **NAD's** new *Masters Series*, looks like a winner. The **M3** sports gorgeous metalwork along with interior parts and build-quality that would be at home in a product costing \$10k.

Biggest Surprise at CES

Without question, the biggest surprise was the move toward super-expensive products, along with the introduction of lots of very high-end turntables. The industry has apparently decided to pursue customers who are upgrading rather than those just getting into high-end audio.

Best Sound at CES

The **MAGICO Mini** didn't have quite the size and scale of some of the show's behemoth loudspeakers, but this stand-mounted two-way bowled me over with its staggeringly realistic rendering of timbre, huge and nuanced spatial presentation, and wonderfully direct musical communication. I'm going to cheat and also mention the **Aerial 20t** and its fabulous top-to-bottom coherence and super-sweet yet detailed treble.



Jim Thiel with the radical new CS3.7

company's first \$10,000 amplifier offering "in a long, long time," according to a Boulder spokesperson. The 200-watt-per-channel, all-analog 850 draws on technology developed for Boulder's 1000 and 2000 series amplifiers. I was impressed by its crystalline highs and ability to reproduce subtle details when driving B&W 802D speakers.

Another attractive alternative at the \$10k price point is the **Musical Fidelity** kW 750. This all-choke-regulated powerhouse was ultra-quiet, with nice timbre and focus. Driving a pair of B&W Signature 800Ds, it produced some of the best, most-tightly-controlled-and-defined bass at the show—Jaco Pastorius' bass guitar sounded terrific.

Another high-power amplifier, the **Cary** 500 MB (\$7000/pair), is a 500Wpc monoblock (into 8 ohms) that offers traditional Cary musicality in a true balanced, solid-state design. The piano on a recording of Beethoven's *Appassionata* sonata sounded quite natural with particularly impressive bass on the Dynaudio C4s.

Another trend among new power amplifier entries is the use of Class D/switching technology. Designers seem to have really attacked the noise, distortion, and dynamic-limiting problems associated with previous Class D amps. The **Kharma Matrix** MP150-SE monoblocks (\$6800) were producing lovely, nuanced sound from the Kharma Mini-Exquisite loudspeakers, and soundstaging fans will likely go nuts over this combo. The 150s use a unique pulse-control scheme yielding extremely low output impedance over their entire bandwidth.

In passive displays, **Halcro** was showing its low-distortion MC20 amplifier (\$4600) using its patented LYRUS tech-



Bardone's Music Server

nology, and **Rowland** was premiering its diminutive Model 102 (\$1490), a 100Wpc stereo amp milled from a single piece of aluminum. It uses ICEpower technology and sports balanced inputs (adaptors are available for single-ended use).

Not to be outdone, one of the pioneers in producing musical Class D amplifiers, **John Ulrick** of **Spectron**, was showing his Musician III stereo power amplifier (\$5495) rated at 600Wpc into 8 ohms. It seemed to have a bit more refinement in the highs and mids than some of the less expensive Class D amps I heard at the show.

Another good performer among Class D amps was **Channel Island's** new D200 Class D monoblocks (\$2300).

The final trend is that several companies are offering power amplifiers with price/performance capabilities unheard of a few years ago, typically through off-shore manufacture.

For those of you who always wanted a **Threshold S/350e** but couldn't afford the \$3900 price tag more than a decade ago, the reissue is practically half the price at \$2000.

I walked into the **Hyperion** room and spotted some 845-based amps, thinking they were approximately \$10k, but they were less than half of that. The HT-845s (\$4600) are rated at 25 watts of pure Class A, have point-to-point wiring, and use hand-wound transformers. They were mated to the new HPS-986 loudspeakers; the



DCS Verdi Encore



Olive Opus

combo had transient quickness, coherence, and surprisingly controlled deep bass.

Antique Sound Lab introduced the bargain-priced Explorer 805 DT amps (\$2995), which produced a seductive and musical sound driving the Reference 3A Veenas.

Continuing its welcome tradition of offering high-value tube products, **PrimaLuna** introduced two new 70Wpc monoblock amplifiers in the Upscale Audio suite: the EL34-based ProLogue Six (\$2295) and KT-88-based ProLogue Seven (\$2695). These monoblocks feature PrimaLuna's adaptive auto-bias and soft-start capabilities, as well as wideband, low-loss output transformers that are built to handle difficult loads. Both amps sounded great, and I'd love to try them on my Quads.

A few noteworthy amps do not fit into any of these categories. The **Muse Model 200** (\$3275) starts life as a power amp, but with the addition of optional modules can become an integrated amplifier.

For single-ended fans, the new **Wavelength Jupiter 50** (\$6000) is the first commercially available amplifier that is based on the RCA 50 tube (RCA's answer to the WE300B). If you can get by with 5-watts/channel, you could be in heaven. ▶

DIGITAL SOURCES AND MULTICHANNEL ELECTRONICS

ALAN TAFFEL

At this year's CES, everything old was new again. Peggy Lee's chestnut "Fever" wafted through the Alexis Park and St. Tropez corridors. Stereo experienced a renaissance, as not a single audio system I saw boasted more than two channels. The resolution of source material—universally CDs or LPs—never exceeded the level available twenty years ago. Conventional solid-state or tubed electronics drove, for the most part, conventional cone or even horn speakers. And in one of the show's biggest announcements, Classic Records unveiled its plan to release a slew of early Everest recordings—in *mono*.

This is the cutting edge of audio? Yes, it is, if sonics is your yardstick. Though the ingredients were old-fashioned, the sound cooked up at this year's CES was impressively consistent in its excellence. Determining the best sound of the show entailed real deliberation.

ALAN TAFFEL'S Best of Show

Most Significant New Product

Olive Opus (\$3000). A fully networked high-resolution media server, with wireless connectivity to multiple listening zones, the Opus also plays and burns good old CDs. But beyond features, the Opus is significant as a harbinger of what such devices can and will achieve sonically.

Coollest New Product

Goldmund Logos Active Speaker (\$10,000). This satellite speaker, a steal considering its built-in twin 200W amps plus Goldmund's excellent DAC, accepts either digital or line-level analog signals. Small though the Logos' aluminum enclosure may be, it delivered towering dynamics and a rhythmic insight sorely lacking in many of the show's "statement" products.

Coollest Accessory

Stello HP100 headphone amp (\$595). In a revelatory demo, this amp goosed a pair of Sennheiser 600 headphones to unsuspected sonic heights—highly detailed, open, and dynamic.

Most Frequently Heard Demo Music

Peggy Lee's "Fever."

Greatest Value

Resolution Opus 21 CD player. Three grand for a CD player seemed cheap at this show, but the Resolution's performance belied its sane price. Not to be missed.

Best Sound at CES

The **Kharma Mini-Exquisite**/mbl/Kubala-Sosna Room. An exceedingly difficult choice this year, but the finalists came down to the Lamm room, with its impeccable setup of the Wilson Maxx2's, and the two Kharma suites. The system that kept calling me back featured the new Mini-Exquisite speakers, the entry level for diamond-tweetered Kharms. I preferred its purity and coherence over even the larger, costlier Midi-Exquisites next door. No doubt the associated equipment played a major part in this system's effortless ability to conjure the magic of real music.



Stello HP100 headphone amp

Still, a novice visitor might be excused for wondering whether recent innovations such as multichannel audio, high-resolution media, Class D amplification, or post-Fifties music ever existed. Next year, I predict, the availability of Blu-ray and HD DVD—with their associated hi-res Dolby and DTS digital audio formats—will prompt a metamorphosis of the venerable audio architecture. In the meantime, there were still some noteworthy trends on display at CES 2006.

Cost is (Apparently) No Object

One thing truly new at this year's show was the shockingly stratospheric prices to which functionally humble, technologically mature components have climbed. Imagine an auto show at which every car on display is some variation of a Bentley, and you have the equivalent of this CES. Perhaps manufacturers were convinced that a Nineties-like economic juggernaut will materialize to mint thousands of new millionaires. Or maybe, given the current limbo between old and new sonic frontiers, they simply saw few options other than maximizing quality (and thus cost). For whatever reason, manufacturers abandoned affordability in droves.

I lost count of the bonanza in new \$40,000+ speaker models—how many people can really afford such things?—and a surprising number of CD playback systems emerged in similar territory. These included the \$43,000 dCS stack consisting of the new Verdi Encore transport (\$17,995) plus \$25,000 worth of existing clocks and DACs; a resurgent Wadia's \$38,000 rig that includes its new 781 transport (est. \$10,000); and



mbi's exquisite 1622 transport (est. \$24,000), designed for use with its \$21,450 1611 DAC. In the context of such extravagant introductions, the plethora of new \$5000 CD players—occupying a price point once considered fairly lofty—resembled downright bargains.

CD Strikes Back

Last year, even two-channel systems took advantage of high-resolution formats such as SACD. Not so this year, as CD and CD-playing equipment made a triumphant comeback. The announced players sported several features that elevated them above Plain Jane status. For instance, while universal players were virtually extinct, nearly every new CD player could also accommodate SACDs. This puzzled me, since that format, along with DVD-A, is essentially dead. However, several manufacturers explained that CD and SACD are technologically "friendlier" to each other, at the design and implementation level, than are CD and any other format. All three of the aforementioned flagship models play SACD, but the trend was evident at every price point, as exemplified by Esoteric's new X-01 Limited (\$14,000) and SZ-1 (\$5600) players, as well as Goldmund's Eidos 18 (\$5450).

While CD player prices climbed—five grand qualifying as "entry-level" at this show—many of them partially offset that increase by obviating the need for a separate lineage. To accomplish this, several players featured digital inputs and/or digital volume controls, enabling them to serve as a system's control point. Typifying this trend,

which began last year with Meridian's 808i (\$14,950), was Wadia's 581i (\$8450) and Burmester's 052 (est. \$8000). Many players, including the dCS, Burmester, and Wadia units, also included upsampling circuitry, once the exclusive province of outboard DACs.

Music-Minded Media Servers

Media servers are no longer novel, but CES demonstrated that these devices are beginning to take sound quality more seriously. In general, servers fell into two categories: those utilizing a PC platform, and those aimed at mitigating the need for a PC. In the first camp is Bardaudio, whose hardware, along with the user's choice of PC music software (iTunes, etc.) turns one's computer into the front end of a 2.4GHz wireless, whole-house music system.

Ofra and Eli Gershman displayed the impressive Black Swan speaker; Sonicweld's aluminum speaker



ROBERT E. GREENE'S Best of Show

Most Significant New Products

The **Avega** Wireless System and the **Lyngdorf Audio** "Room Perfect" correction device and algorithm. The Avega seems to be the way of the future. Meanwhile, kudos to Lyngdorf and inventor J.A. Pedersen for their efforts on the big frontier: room-correction algorithms that give natural, truthful sound.

Cooler New Product

Morch anisotropic arm (prototype). At long last, a pivoted arm that plays the bass of records right (bigger moment of inertia horizontally than vertically, for deep bass and warp tracking both at once). [Note: I was an informal, unpaid consultant on this project.]



Morch prototype arm

Cooler Accessory

Isol-Pads. This small, inexpensive isolation device (set of four for \$25) does a lot of what the far more awkward and expensive ones do.

Most Frequently Heard Demo Music

A category, not a single recording—the miserably recorded, male, pseudo-blues vocal accompanied by sound without acoustic antecedents. (Multiples of a middle-class monthly salary to hear this?)

Greatest Value

Tyler Acoustics PD 20. Imaging, natural voices, clarity, bass extension, and big dynamics for \$2800. Some horn artifacts, but so what, at the price?

Biggest Surprise at CES

So much DSP!

Best (DSP) Sound at CES

Sonicweld, in a room exhibited with enough damping, very close to the reality of the recordings. Honorable mention: the Lyngdorf system. And for bass: Wisdom Audio/Edge electronics (analog EQ'd).

At the PC sits the BardUSB, a thumb-sized transmitter of content that resides on either the PC's hard drive or on a CD inserted into the computer. Significantly, music is sent in uncom-

pressed 44.1kHz/16-bit format, providing full CD-quality sound. At the receiving end, users can choose either a Bardone receiver/DAC, which then connects to a traditional audio system's analog input, or a Bardthree, which includes a 25-watt stereo amplifier for direct connection to speakers. Refreshingly, both options are eminently affordable; a BardUSB/Bardone set lists for \$599, while a BardUSB/ Bardthree combo sells for just \$1295.

Olive Media represented the music-server camp. The Symphony (\$899) and Musica (\$1099) models look like traditional CD players—indeed, they can play CDs normally—but are actually ultra-quiet, ultra-intuitive, 80- and 160-gigabyte servers, respectively. Olive offers a simple wireless receiver, the Sonata (\$199), which employs the 802.11g Wi-Fi standard. The forthcoming Melody receiver (\$499, April availability) will also include a built-in amplifier and small speakers.

Olive's most noteworthy show introduction was the Opus (\$3000), a 400-gigabyte server that raises the stakes on sound quality. Built around Burr-Brown DACs, the Opus can download music from the Internet in virtually any format. For example, Opus can receive 96kHz/24-bit material from, say, MusicGiants, then transmit that content losslessly to any system in the house. Compared to a \$40,000 standalone, non-networked CD player with inherently lower resolution, the Opus and its ilk make more sense all the time. ➤

DSP AT CES

ROBERT E. GREENE

This was the breakout year for the use of digital signal processing (DSP) in high-end speaker design. There have been DSP-based speakers earlier, from Philips, more than ten years ago, Meridian on an ongoing basis for a long time, and the conspicuously successful NHT design of a year or so ago. But this CES seemed the moment when DSP became a "go to" thing for new designs aspiring to the proverbial state of the art. Products from Sonicweld, Wasatch, and MSB represented all-out attempts to compete at the highest level. Digital room correction also continued apace, with new developments from Lyngdorf Audio (formerly TacT Europe), from TacT USA, and DEQX. DSP room correction also continued to expand its presence in the lower-priced world, with developments from Denon/Audyssey and Harman.

Perhaps the most striking of all, however, was the Avega system. The Avega involves actual products—a DSP speaker called the Oyster, for example—but it is preeminently a vision of the digital future. It is based on wireless data transmission from computer source to speakers (if you insist, though, you can wire a CD player to it). This is no doubt a convenience, but more importantly the system is based around the idea that once music is made digital, it becomes natural to treat it as computer data. In its ultimate form, the Avega system will allow the

user not only to do equalization for room correction or just to taste, it will also allow manufacturers and perhaps eventually consumers to change the crossover settings—frequencies and slopes/alignment—of the speakers, or indeed of any speaker which is using the DSP and amplification provided. Wireless data transmission is fast enough with room to spare to do uncompressed digital audio in real time (16-bit words at 44.1kHz require 706kbps, while Wi-Fi is on the order of several Megabits/sec, depending on the standard used). And, of course, computers are plenty fast enough to do crossover and room-correction calculations in real time. But somehow no one had put it all together until Avega. The days of the stand-alone audio systems may well be numbered. Only speakers, the actual mechanism of making sound, will be anything but a computer peripheral in this brave new world. Stand by for the revolution!

In the world of conventional standalone speaker designs, DSP speakers from **Sonicweld** and **Wasatch** were using the **DEQX** digital box to good advantage. Both systems used crossover slopes much steeper than usual, taking advantage of digital filters with steep slopes but linear phase. Both speakers have very flat frequency response and excellent phase behavior. They also have a very wide radiation pattern, which implies some considerable dependence of the sound on the room characteristics (above the bass, where DEQX room correction was being used). As it happened, the Sonicweld was in a large, heavily curtained room. It sounded very smooth all the way up, and indeed offered quite stunning performance. Neil Gader called it “lovely,” and it seems an apt word. I had the sense of hearing very exactly what was on the recordings. Listening to my own playing (from *REG Plays Dvorák*, available on regonaudio.com) was like looking in a mirror, sonically speaking, so exactly did it sound like my own instrument. The Wasatch, in a smaller and less damped room, was also superb in the bass and

midrange, with altogether remarkable reproduction of Reference Recordings’ Rutter Requiem. But to my ears, the speakers would have benefited in the top end from a “softer” environment. In the treble, the room still counts, even when the bass is DSP corrected!

The **MSB S8** speaker, a DSP design using a custom digital crossover, with an enclosure of an unusual spherical shape, was sounding very natural on vocal material. All three, MSB, Wasatch, Sonicweld, are remarkable—at a price. (All three systems were in the \$40,000–\$65,000 bracket.)

Lyngdorf Audio demonstrated a new room-correction system developed by Jan A. Pedersen called “Room Perfect,” which is based not only on measurements at the listening position but also on overall room behavior. Demonstrated with corner woofers, it sounded really excellent in the bass and midrange, in spite of the small room, though the target curve was set a bit “hot” to my ears in the top end (this is user-adjustable, though the initial choice of target curve is automated). This system may well be a major advance in room correction, where the real DSP action is to my mind. (Analog speakers already work quite well, but their interaction with the room usually does not.)

Tact USA was silent when I visited due to speakers being damaged in transit, but it had on visual display a digital, PC-based, “while it plays,” tone-control system—just point at the screen and click to change the tonal balance—and an interesting system of “loudness controls,” with personalized Fletcher-Munson-type equi-loudness curves for unusual listening levels (e.g., low, one hopes). Really good ideas here.

Interestingly, the best bass I heard at the show was from **Wisdom** (with Edge amplification)—Wisdom adjusts bass to the room by analog electronics, not DSP. Stunning bass sound, with power and superb definition combined.

Analog design in more affordable price ranges was neglected, though I did not do a systematic survey. At entry-level prices, **Tyler Acoustics** new PD20 gave excellent imaging (controlled dispersion really works), loudness without strain, and something overall a lot like music in a pro monitor context (Eminence drivers)—not perfect (a few horn artifacts), but at \$2800 and drive-them-with-anything-at-all sensitivity, one impressive system.

Two of my perennial favorites, **Harbeth**, with a prototype floorstander with superbly natural midband, and **Gradient**, with an improved woofer system offering the room independence that only controlled radiation pattern can provide, were sounding fine, indeed. Even in an increasingly DSP world, analog sound was alive and well and living in Las Vegas in 2006. ▶



Hanl record cleaning machine

HIGH-END LOUDSPEAKERS AND ELECTRONICS—THIS AND THAT

WAYNE GARCIA

My assignment for this year's show was to cover speakers and electronics between \$10,000 and \$20,000, and my pal Jon Valin was to cover the same items priced above \$20,000. Problem was, as Jonathan and I made the rounds together, it quickly became clear that most of the rooms at the Alexis Park and St. Tropez fell into his half of the draw, or, at the other extreme, well below both our designated ranges. And because his report later in this section is so thorough and straddles both our categories, I've decided to focus on what I found to be the best-sounding and most interesting items regardless of cost.

Elite Audio Video Distribution displayed a system comprising the **Kuzma Stabi XL** Turntable and **Airline** arm (\$27k), an **ASR Basis Exclusive** phono stage, the **Plinius M8** linestage (\$3695) and **SA-Reference** amps (\$14,495), and the \$12,000 **Nola Viper Reference** speakers (all very fine items but for some reason Nola speakers don't seem to sound their best at shows). What captured my fancy were three relatively compact, remarkably quiet, and beautifully made record-cleaning machines from Germany's **Hannl**—the **Micro** (\$1399), the **Mera** (\$1999), and the top-of-the-line **Aragon** (\$2999). The **Mera** is on the way for review, so I'll report back.

I believe I was more impressed by the sound in **Von Schweikert Audio's** display than Jonathan was, but then I didn't have his experience with this same setup at the Rocky Mountain show, which I missed due to illness. Plus, as anyone who has been to any audio show can tell you, between horrid acoustics, marginal AC, and a host of other potential disasters, good sound at these things is a rarity; great sound is a combination of luck, know-how, and something like a miracle, and we must cut manufacturers a healthy bit of slack if their sound isn't up to snuff. On Tom Brosseau's *What I Mean To Say Is Goodbye* CD, the \$60,000 **Von Schweikert VR9-SEs** displayed a good balance, natural sounding vocals, and very (overly?) sweet violin sound. And with **JV's LP**

of Prokofiev's First Violin Sonata, the **Andante** sounded lovely, with lilting microdynamics during a pizzicato passage. The system was fleshed out by the Swiss-made **Dartzeel NHB-18NS** preamplifier and **NHB-108 Model One** amps (\$18,000), which are red-hot these days, the **EMM Labs CDS** and **DAC6**, and the \$15,000 **Grand Prix Monaco**, a carbon-fiber composite direct-drive(!) turntable, and **Tri-Planar VII** arm (\$3900).

Importer/distributor **Music Hall** was showing its wide range of goodies, but the three that stood out for me were the new **Whest Audio Reference V** phono stage with outboard power supply (est. \$7k–\$8k), and Music Hall's own **rdr-1** table radio and **Takahashi One Box**, a mini stereo CD player. **Whest's James Henriot** (one hell of a sweet guy) was a bit sheepish when we met each other, as he's been promising me a review sample of the **MC Reference** for the past several months (designs usually take longer than expected to complete). In any case, it appears to be worth the wait and is not simply a hot-rodded version of the company's acclaimed **PS.20** (a review of that one is in the works) but a totally fresh design. As for the Music Hall items, how refreshing it is to see a guy with Roy Hall's high-end standards think "outside the box." The \$189 **rdr-1** (stands for "radio done right") is a compact table radio with remote control that, while on static display only, should be one sweet-sounding item, given its pedigree. The \$699 **Takahashi One Box** was also on static display, and in a rainbow of available colors appears to be something of a high-enders mini-stereo—a pair of 3" speakers sit just a few inches apart in the unit's lower section. Whatever else it does well, a wall-to-wall soundstage is probably not something one should expect.

Distributor **Aydn** displayed a very fine sounding system comprising the **Artemis Labs SP-1** amplifier (\$11,400) as well as the \$2850 **LA-1** linestage and \$3350 **PL-1** phono stage I reviewed so favorably last year. Speakers were the \$5800 **Triangle Australe**, which were open, sweet on violins, and rich sounding with piano (if not the last word in deep bass), while a **Galibier Stelvio** table and **Schroeder Reference Arm** combo (\$17,550) provided the signals.

As they usually do, **Coincident Technology** and **Manley Labs** showed together, and fun was had by all. This is easily the most down-to-earth room at the show, in large part due to EveAnna Manley's party-girl spirit, which bubbles over all who visit. Manley's outstanding **Steelhead**



Von Schweikert VR9-SE



Music Hall's rdr-1 radio



phono preamp (\$7300) and Snapper monoblocks (\$4250/pair)—fed by VPI's HRX turntable and a Helikon cartridge, as well as an Audio Aero Prestige CD/SACD player—were driving Israel Bloom's Coincident Technology Total Victory II speakers (\$13k). The sound was lively, quite coherent, tonally warm, and musically inviting.

Alon Wolf and his **MAGICO** line are generating a great deal of positive buzz (see last issue's feature on this exciting young company), and over at the St. Tropez Alon's near-field setup with an Esoteric digital player, Edge Signature One linestage, and Convergent Audio Technology JC-1 monoblocks sent chills down my spine. Whether it was the Barber Violin Concerto [Stern on Sony CD] or Wilco's "Jesus, Don't Cry" the sound was incredibly open, detailed, and lively, with beautiful textures and lots of air. JV is slated to get the Mini, so expect more on this little sweetheart in a future issue.

Also at the St. Tropez was Peter Clark of **Redpoint**—another of my recent favorites—who was showing his newest turntable, the Model D (\$16,000) with a Tri-Planar MK VII arm and Transfiguration Temper cartridge (\$4k each) with a comparatively modest system made up of the **Naim** NAP 112 preamp

(\$1350) and **NAP** 200 amp (\$3495), and a new, yet-to-be-priced-or-named **Harbeth** floorstanding speaker. Though the sound was not as airy, detailed, or dynamic as I'm used to hearing from the Redpoint Model B and Tri-Planar at home, it still exemplified what a great front-end can do by creating sounds so inherently beautiful, inviting, and musically pleasurable from very good but modestly-priced speakers and electronics.

Back at the AP, **Hovland** was playing a particularly lovely sounding system using its \$9500 HP-200 tube preamplifier (which I'm in the process of reviewing), the newly introduced \$34,000 Stratos solid-state mono amps, a modified Kenwood LO-7D turntable/Grado Statement cartridge, a Mac Mini-based digital source feeding a prototype USB DAC, and Avalon Eidolon Diamond speakers. The sound here was consistently elegant, detailed, and natural, with

WAYNE GARCIA'S Best of Show

Most Significant New Products

Too many to choose just one: I would cite two newly revised horn-cone-hybrid speakers as raising the bar for their type—the new **Avantgarde** Duo Omega and the **Acapella Arts** High Violin MKIII. Both are from Germany, both hover just above \$25k the pair, and both are exceptionally low in horn coloration, unusually coherent, and possess the immediacy and lifelike dynamics horns excel at. I'd also have to mention the new **ARC** Ref 3 preamp, and the new affordable analog goodies from **Pro-Ject**.

Cooliest New Product

Kharma's Mini-Exquisite speaker...cooler than cool.

Cooliest Accessory

The **Hanni** record cleaners distributed by Elite Audio Video.

Most Frequently Heard Demo Music

Since JV and I walked most of the show together—does that make us Brokeback audiophiles?—I heard everything on his list plus Nine Inch Nails' *With Teeth* [Innerscope], David Bowie's *Earthling* [Sony], and my own pop and jazz discs: Wilco's *Yankee Hotel Foxtrot* [Nonesuch], Tom Brosseau's *What I Mean To Say Is Goodbye* [Loveless], Bright Eyes' *I'm Wide Awake, It's Morning* [Saddle Creek], and James Carter's *Chasin' the Gypsy* [Atlantic].

Greatest Value

Music Hall rdr-1 radio.

Biggest Surprises at CES

Stratospheric prices, fewer exhibitors, so many (really good sounding) horns, and so much more analog stuff than even last year.

Best Sound at CES

Being a sucker for a great two-way, I'm going to give a close runner's up nod to the **MAGICO** Mini, with my best sound at the show reserved for the **Kharma** Mini Exquisite. And exquisite is the right word for this speaker's sound, look, and build-quality.



Valin and Garcia relaxing with Roy Hall

Hovland's own musical selections and also with Wilco, Bright Eyes, and Jon Valin's LP of the Prokofiev sonata.

Canada's **Pierre Gabriel** showed his speakers and cables with a bevy of **Jadis** electronics, and after several years' absence in the U.S. it's nice to see Jadis back.

No real listening was done, but we did get a run down on the French tube maker's extensive line of gear, which now includes many affordable components. We're lining up review samples for future issues.

AXISS Distribution had its extensive line of goods on hand, from **Accuphase** to **Air Tight** to **Shelter** to **Transrotor**. Among the new offerings were a lovely sounding new **Koetsu** cartridge called the **Bloodstone** (\$7k), which during a brief listen sounded very Koetsu-like—beautiful, tonally rich, and highly seductive—and the first cartridge from **Air Tight**.

As per usual, distributor **GTT Audio** was making some of the best sounds at the show, and was I ever smitten by the new **Kharma Mini-Exquisite**, which is an aptly named two-way floorstanding design (\$45k) of exceptional musicality. Essentially a super-duper version of my reference **Kharma 3.2** with a newly fashioned cabinet, crossover, ceramic mid/bass driver, and diamond tweeter, it swept me away with the purity, detail, and sheer beauty of its sound. I listened to it with a wide range of music and could barely tear myself away. Luckily, I'll soon be getting a pair for review. And if I'm even luckier, I'll get the same system **GTT's Bill Parish** and the **Kubla-Sosna** cable boys were playing. Along with the **K-S** cables it comprised **MBL's** 6010 D solid-state preamp (\$19k), 1611-E Reference DAC (\$21.5k), and Reference CD transport (\$21k), as well as the diminutive and terrific sounding **Kharma MP150-SE** monoblock amplifiers (\$6800). ▶



Hovland's new **Stratos mono amps**

weren't being shown alongside traditional stereo systems. This show was about old-fashioned two-channel audio, above all else.

Trend two rather proves the point. This year there was more analog to be found at both the AP and ST than at any time since the early 1980s. It seemed as if everyone was demo'ing with vinyl (or, at least, with vinyl and CD), once again reinforcing the traditionalist high-end bent of this year's CES.

Need more proof? Trend three: There was *a lot* more very-high-priced, very-hardcore-high-end two-channel gear at this CES than in years past. It was almost as if the middle ground—which had been largely taken up by multichannel and dual-purpose home-theater rigs—had disappeared. The goodies on display here were for the very-well-heeled, analog-loving, two-channel audiophile.

Put all three trends together and what you get, I think, is the end of an identity crisis that has been plaguing high-end audio shows since the advent of home theater. It's almost as if everyone decided at once that dual-purpose theater systems just weren't what the monied hi-fi buyer wanted to see at a high-end expo. It was time, instead, to return to two-channel roots, and admit that the customers high-end dealers really want to court are wealthy audiophiles old enough (or young enough) to appreciate the glories of analog and the superb reproduction of music via stereo. I will leave it to others to speculate on how this trend jibes with the

ULTRA-HIGH-END LOUDSPEAKERS AND ELECTRONICS

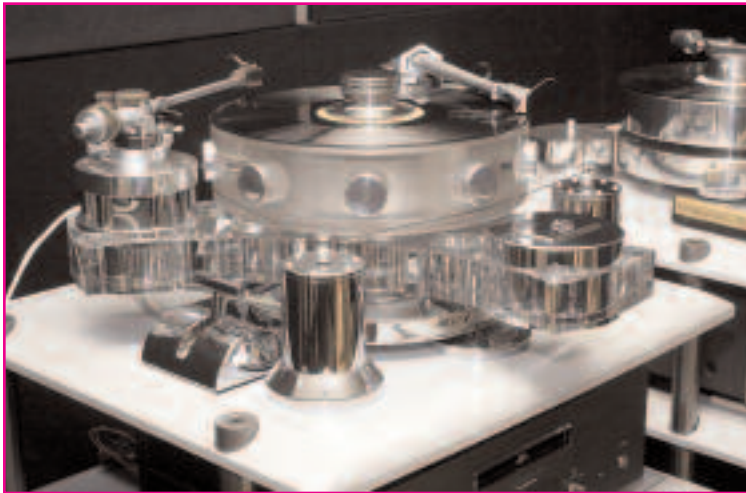
JONATHAN VALIN

All things considered, this was the most interesting CES I've been to—not just because the sound was on average better than usual, but because of three trends that together add up to a seismic shift in what got shown at the world's biggest high-end audio expo.

Trend number one was the reduced number of exhibitors at the Alexis Park and St. Tropez. Usually, virtually every room on every level of the AP and ST houses a display. This year there was more of a "gap-toothed" distribution of exhibits, with empty rooms (and empty floors) galore. The reason for this is simple: With a few exceptions, home-theater systems

Jadis Orchestra integrated amp





A multi-armed Transrotor w/Koetsu Bloodline

Bush economy and the current conservative spirit of this country, but there is clearly some sort of fit.

Other sub-trends which fed this larger one were the ascendance of high-priced European high-end gear, especially gear from Germany (two-and-a-half of my Best Sounds at CES were German systems). Given the premium Americans must pay for foreign goods, it is clear again that, at least at this year's CES, price was not the deterrent it has been at previous shows. Also, we are seeing more horn speakers than ever before—or speakers that make use of horn drivers. Once again, it takes a committed audiophile to buy a horn-loaded speaker. Handsome though they may be, horns take up room and, generally, cost a lot.

There is an obvious downside to the trends at this year's CES, as well. Laser-targeting the very-well-heeled traditionalist audiophile is also a tacit concession that the high-end market is aging and is or will, alas and alack, soon be shrinking. But then the high-end market has always been small and select—and in this economy they are plenty of young monied folks who may catch the high-end fever, just as we did when we were young. The reduced number of displays may also be a sign of show-exhaustion. With CES, CEDIA, Rocky Mountain, the two Primedia shows, and the innumerable Canadian, British, European, and Asian expos, resources have to be shepherded in what is, after all, a small specialty market.

Time to get off the soapbox and on with the show, which was, as noted, mighty good sounding. My assignment this year was to report on speakers and electronics above \$20k. Little did I know that there would be so much of both. Below you will find a selection of what I heard; my apologies in advance to exhibitors I didn't get the chance to visit or I didn't have the space to comment on.

I have organized my report by room, listing the system and then commenting on it. Remember: This is a report on the sound of rooms at a trade show, *not* a series of formal reviews of equipment.

Nola I

Nola Viper Reference (\$12k)

Kuzma Stabi XL Turntable (\$18k)

Kuzma Airline tonearm (\$9k)

Plinius SA-Reference amps (\$14.5k)

Plinius M8 linestage (\$7k)

ASR Basis Exclusiv phonostage (\$5690)

The relatively diminutive Nola Vipers were transparent, but brighter than and not as detailed nor as incisively dynamic as what I'm used to hearing on the Shostakovich Second Piano

Concerto LP and other discs. Perhaps the Plinius electronics were holding them back because the Vipers sounded great with deHavilland tube gear at the Rocky Mountain show.

Von Schweikert I

Von Schweikert VR-9 SE (\$60k)

Dartzeel amp and preamp (\$18k apiece)

Monaco turntable and Tri-Planar arm (\$18,900)

This system was one of the great hits of the Rocky Mountain Audio Fest. At CES, it was less impressive. Part of the reason had to be the room, which was about a quarter the size of the one in Denver. In any event it is clear that these very large speakers need space around and behind them to show their best. In Vegas, they sounded a little "hi-fi" and considerably more forward and less expansive and alive than in Denver, but still warm, sweet, and solid, though they did have a bit of a "cupped hands" coloration in the mids and were a little closed-in on top. Overall, the Von Ses were just too syrupy for my taste, at least in the room they were in at the AP.



Kharna's Mini-Exquisite



Kuzma Stabi XL turntable and Airline arm

Calix

Calix Venus Phoenix Grand horn-loaded loudspeaker (\$13k)

Chord CPM integrated amp

Chord CD player

A dynamic horn speaker system, the Calixes are, ultimately, prettier to look at than to listen to because of driver integration and localization problems.

Wisdom Audio/Edge

Wisdom Audio M-75s ribbons line-source with separate cone subwoofers (\$52k)

Edge G CD player (\$4788)

Edge G 2 solid-state preamp (\$4788)

Edge G 8 stereo amplifier (\$6588)—subs

Edge NL12.1 stereo amplifier (\$18.5k)—panels

The M-75s were a little reticent dynamically (which has always been the case with Wisdom speakers driven by Edge electronics), but had good openness, bloom, and neutrality (all of which are also typical of the Wisdom/Edge pairing). This year, I thought the integration of the outboard subwoofer and the ribbon panel was considerably less than ideal. (OTOH, REG thought it was the best bass at the show! Go figure.)

TAD

TAD Model 3 three-way floorstander with concentric

beryllium mid/tweet and 10" bass drivers (\$40k)

Pass Labs XA600.5 for bass (\$12k)

Pass Labs XA150 for concentric mid/tweet (\$20k)

Keith Johnson custom DAC and TEAC Esoteric transport (\$TBD)

This fancy TAD loudspeaker, with technology borrowed from Andrew Jones' top-of-the-line Model 1, had good focus, con-

Hiroyasu Kondo, Rest in Peace

It is with considerable sadness that we report the death of Hiroyasu Kondo, founder of Audio Note Japan, who passed away in his sleep on January 8, 2006, while attending CES in Las Vegas. He is survived by his wife Kazuko, his son Yuji, and his daughter Hisae.

The son of a Buddhist priest, Kondo San was a professor of electronic engineering and molecular metallurgy before founding Audio Note in Japan in 1976. Famous for his revolutionary use of silver in audio equipment, Kondo almost single-handedly revived the single-ended-triode amplifier; his 211-based SET, the Ongaku, remains the exemplar of Japanese high-end audio.

TAS Associate Editor Jonathan Valin, who reviewed Audio Note's Neiro and Kegon amplifiers in *Fi*, says: "It's both appropriate and ironic that Kondo San passed away at the Consumer Electronics Show—appropriate because high-end audio was his art and ironic because he was as far from making 'consumer electronics' as a human being could get. He was an artisan like Fabergé and Tiffany, and the beautiful things he made, like theirs, were fit for czars and kings."

Audio Note Japan reports that Kondo San had been in ill health for some time. In order to ensure that his standards would be maintained, he appointed his close colleague and chief designer Masaki Ashizawa as President of Audio Note Japan six months ago.



Andrew Jones describes the TAD Model 3

trol, and coherence and very good tight bass. Though plenty lively, the Model 3 was not as abrasive as TAD speakers have sounded at other shows. (But then I wasn't listening at the rocket-launch levels I've heard TADs play at in other shows.) I was very impressed by the Pass electronics, which were neutral and detailed and civilized without being polite, making these sometimes too-aggressive speakers sound less "shouty" than usual.

Acapella Arts

Acapella Arts High Violin MkIII three-way horn-loaded/hybrid floorstander (\$26k)
Einstein "The Tube" preamplifier (\$13.5k)
Einstein "The Final Cut" monoblock tube amplifiers (\$25,250/pair)

To my ear, these gorgeous horn speakers (with dynamic woofer) from Germany, driven by gorgeous-looking (and sounding) Einstein tube electronics, sounded far more like electrostats than horns: extremely delicate, beautiful, open, transparent, and detailed. Though perhaps a little "dark" in overall balance, they were one of the better sounds of the show—very close to one of the best. Coincidentally, they also represent a mini-trend. Although Acapella has been making horns for better than thirty years (it pioneered the spherical horn), the show saw more and more manufacturers using the oldest of loudspeaker technologies, the horn driver, as a component in some of the newest and most sophisticated designs.

AAA Audio

AAA Audio XLH Ref 1812 three-way horn-loaded/dynamic loudspeaker system (\$50k)
XLH SL-11XS dual-mono preamp (\$5k)
XLH M-2000 monoblock amplifier (\$20k/pair)
Original Leonardo A9.3 CD player (\$3k)

These remarkable-looking speakers from China combine a huge horn tweeter (working from 1.8kHz up) with high-quality treated-paper midrange and woofer drivers. The sound they produced was very live, open, and transparent. I could hear a little localization of the horn (unlike the Acapella), and the bass from the 18" woofer (!) was considerably overblown. The midrange, however, was great. On the whole, a promising design.

Lumen White

Lumen White Silverflame Precision Monitors (\$27,750/pair)
Ayon Spheris tube preamplifier (\$24k)
Ayon Reference monoblock SET amplifiers (\$30k/pair)
Blue Pearl Audio JEM turntable (\$80k)
Graham Phantom tonearm (\$4.4k)



**Lumen
White
Silverflame
Precision**

Lyra Titan cartridge

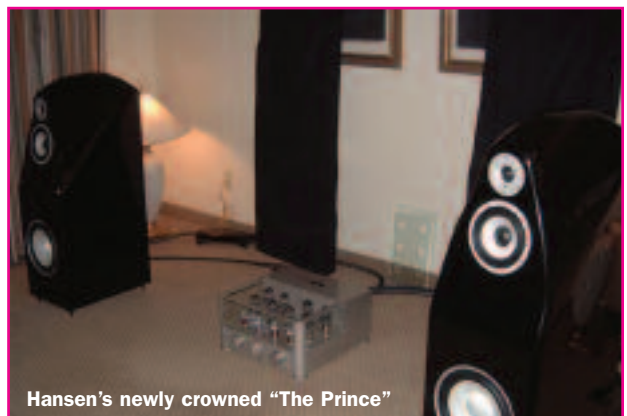
Though the presentation on several familiar recordings was not quite as spacious as what I'm used to, and a little closed in on top and dark overall, these beautiful jigsaw-piece Austrian speakers and superb Austrian tube electronics were nevertheless gorgeously detailed and gorgeously rich in tone color. One of the better sounds of the show, they illustrate yet another trend in hi-fi: the ascendance of European (particularly Austro-German) high end to a position of equality with—and in some cases outright superiority to—American products.

Harbeth

Harbeth "Untitled" floorstanding loudspeakers (\$TBA)
Red Point Model D turntable (\$16k)
Tri-Planar MkVII tonearm (\$4k)
Transfiguration Temper cartridge (\$4k)
Naim NAP 112 preamp (\$1350)
Naim NAP 200 amp (\$3495)

A little lacking in dynamics with imaging that is slightly miniaturized and flatter than life, these new, as yet unnamed multi-way loudspeakers from Harbeth were still strikingly lovely sounding—so voluptuous in tone color they reminded me of mini-Sonus Faber Stradivarii. The Harbeth room illustrated yet another trend at CES—the triumphant return of analog. No more than a year or two ago,

you would only find turntables in one out of twenty or thirty rooms. This year the digital-only-room was the exception. Analog was everywhere, which either means that retailers are selling it far more briskly or that the folks who run show demos have recovered their hearing. Either way, ain't it grand!



Hansen's newly crowned "The Prince"

Hansen Audio

Hansen "The Prince" loudspeaker (\$27k)

VAC Reference preamp (\$10k)

VAC Phi 300 power amp (\$15k)

Redpoint MG turntable (\$20k)

Tri-Planar tonearm (\$4k) with Phasteck cartridge

DCS P-8i CD/SACD player (\$14k)

Dynalab MD109 tuner (approx. \$10k)

Lars Hansen introduced "The Prince" floorstanders, slightly smaller versions of the excellent-sounding "The Kings" he demo'd at RMAF.

Immedia

Sonics PassionS loudspeakers (\$27k)

Alan Perkins Spiral Groove turntable with Immedia arm (\$20k)

Lyra Titan cartridge (\$4k)

Lyra Connoisseur 4-2L linestage preamp (\$25k)

Lyra Connoisseur 4-2P phonostage preamp (\$25k)

German designer Joachim Gerhard's PassionS—a modular three-way D'Appolito floorstander that looked a bit like a segmented orange slice—sounded open but also a bit bright and stressed-out on heavily modulated passages. The electronics, originally designed by Mares Design of California, were from the Japanese cartridge-design firm Lyra.

Ridley Audio

Ridley Audio powered loudspeaker (\$TBA)

Ridley Audio One full-function preamp (ca. \$15k)

Ridley Turntable with modified Well-Tempered Arm (\$TBA)

These self-powered ribbon/cone hybrid line-source loudspeakers were undoubtedly the



The Sonic PassionS

Up and coming—Ray Ridley



best sound I heard at the show from equipment that wasn't yet for sale. The whole system—from speakers to amps to preamp to turntable—was a prototype designed by British engineer Dr. Ray Ridley. The self-powered speakers were particularly fascinating. The amp sits atop the columnar speaker and is designed to look like an integral element. What makes it so fascinating (and perhaps part of what made the system so good) was a little stroke of genius that, like most great ideas, is so simple you wonder why no one else thought of it. It dawned on Dr. Ridley that all amplifiers—tube and solid-state—sound better after their parts have "warmed up." So why not warm them up immediately? To this end he literally heats, via internal elements, the amp so that the components will operate from startup at precisely the right temperatures to function optimally. I assume the heating element is sensitive to ambient temperatures, so that the amount of heating depends on the warmth of your room.

Fanfare International

Pearl Evolution four-way loudspeaker (\$20k)

ASR Emitter 1 (\$15.5k)

Stibbert Blue Note Mk II CD player (\$4950)

The Pearl/ASR/Stibbert combo was very detailed with nice sparkle on the upper octave of piano in the Rachmaninoff Third, but it was also a little light in the bass and, I thought, slightly too homogenized overall. I will have more to say on this subject when we come to the ASR Emitter 2/Nola Pegasus room later in the report.

Zanden Audio

Peak Consult Empress three-way loudspeaker (\$25k)

Zanden 3000 5687-based tube preamp (\$15k)

Zanden 9500 845-based monoblock amplifiers (\$40k)

Zanden 5000 MkIV Signature DAC (\$15.5k)

Zanden 2000P Premium transport (\$28k)

The most analog-like digital I heard at CES. Spacious, lively, extraordinarily airy, wonderfully detailed and neutral, Zanden electronics from Japanese guru Yamada San (in combination with these very nice floorstanding three-ways from Denmark, which sound like slightly-more-hooded Kharma Reference Monitor 3.2s) are in a class of their own (the Weiss Medea DAC excepted) when it comes to making Red Book CD sound like LP. Like all digital the presentation was a little less three-dimensional in the midband than analog (though the room may not have helped here or in the bass, which was a little lightweight). One of the better sounds of the show.

E.A.R.

Martin Miles III loudspeakers (\$12.5k)

E.A.R. 913 preamp (\$10k)

E.A.R. 810 amplifier (\$5595)

E.A.R. Discmaster turntable (\$13.5k)

Helius Omega tonearm Deluxe (\$4k)

Tim de Paravacini's latest amp and preamp were just plain beautiful-sounding. Very detailed and defined, the E.A.R. gear was at once the slightest bit dark and bright in balance and perhaps a little reticent on really hard transients; nonetheless, tone colors were ravishing.

Acoustic Precision

Venture CR One loudspeaker (\$15k)

Lamm ML 2.1 SET monoblock amplifiers (\$30k)

Lamm L2 Reference preamp (\$15k)

Metronome Kalista Reference CD transport/C2A

Signature DAC (\$37k)

Very spacious and detailed (heck, Acoustic Precision was using the world's best low-powered amp with their French speakers and French CD player). Like the E.A.R. gear, this wasn't the bloomiest sound I heard from CD (for which see Zanden above or Weiss below), but it was still mighty damn fine.

Talon/Joule Electra

Talon Firehawk Diamond loudspeakers (\$32k)

Joule Electra Rite of Passage OTL monoblock amplifiers (\$28k)

Joule Electra LA150 preamplifier (\$5250)

Joule Electra OPS2 phono stage (\$4100)

In the past I've very much liked the Talons, which (like Kharma speakers) use high-quality diamond tweeters and Accuton ceramic drivers in a three-way configuration. I am also a fan of the always-beautiful-sounding Joule Electra elec-



Zanden 9500 amplifier

tronics. While the sound this year was as gorgeous as ever, and spacious and nicely detailed to boot, there was a definite peak in the midbass (and some glare in the upper mids, too) that made for a disappointing presentation. Too bad, because this gear is first-rate.

Nola II

Nola Pegasus loudspeakers (\$50k)

ASR Emitter II amplifier (\$30k)

Lector CD player (\$8500)

Nola's new Pegasi were notable for their openness, neutrality, and tonal accuracy in the mids. That said, they, like every other large Nola I've heard at shows, have a bass-driver integration problem that simply swamps the speakers' otherwise-excellent sonics. I need to say something here about the ASR Emitter amplifier that was driving the Pegasus. I heard it (or versions of it) in several rooms, including several rooms that I liked. It is a very low-noise, very detailed device, with world-class reproduction of low-level dynamic and harmonic information. It is not, however, in any of the rooms in which I heard it on any of the speakers I heard it with, a world-beater when it comes to *large-scale* dynamics and the reproduction of bass. It is, in fact, like many battery-powered products (it has a battery-powered input stage), rather polite in both these regards. I realize that in saying this I am contradicting my mentor, HP, whose opinions about audio I value most highly. But I think I know why HP doesn't hear the ASR as I do: In his system (and in others), the ASR Emitter II may be com-

Designer Tim de Paravacini



E.A.R. Discmaster and Helius Omega arm

compensating for an excess of Nola bass, its slight politeness going unnoticed or actually playing to the strengths of the overall presentation.

Burmester Audiosysteme

Burmester B100 loudspeaker (\$, mucho)

Burmester 808 MkV preamp (\$, see above)

Burmester 909 monoblock power amp (\$, see below)

Burmester 969 CD transport (\$, go to top)

Burmester 970 SRC DAC (\$, see above)

This very costly, entirely Burmester-designed-and-manufactured system was, along with the MBL room, the best all-digital display at CES. Though I've not been a fan of previous Burmester loudspeakers, the B100s sounded terrific this year—exceptionally open, extraordinarily detailed, and neutral without the customary Burmester chill or bite. Soundstaging was superb. Though Burmester digital does not sound analog, like Zanden's and Weiss' great CD players do, neither does it sound dark or lifeless like virtually every other digital device on earth. It is its own, quite realistic thing. One of the better sounds of the show.

Coincident Technology/Manley

Coincident Technology Total Victory II (\$13k)

Manley Steelhead phono preamp (\$7300)

Manley Snapper EL34-based monoblock amplifiers (\$4250/pair)

VPI HRX turntable with Helikon cartridge (\$10k)

Audio Aero Prestige CD/SACD player (\$14.8k)

The Total Victory IIs, powered by Manley, were extremely coherent-sounding at very loud levels, though lacking the deepest bass.

Eben Loudspeakers/Radho

Eben XCentric planar/cone two-way, stand-mounted loudspeaker (\$12k)

Chapter Précis integrated amp (\$6800)

Electroaccompaniet CD player (\$5k)

These cute Danish two-ways from designer Michael Boerresen sounded lively and lovely and freed-up in the mids, a little soft in the treble, and a little muffled in the bass. The integration between planar tweeter and cone mid/bass, though not perfect, was acceptably good. Designed to be used as a stand-alone mini or the center channel of a surround system.



Jim Wang of Harmonic Technology



Party Girl EveAnna Manley

Sound Lab

Sound Lab M1-PX full-range electrostatic loudspeaker (\$22,770)

Parasound amp, preamp, and CD player (\$, affordable)

Simply gorgeous-sounding, this latest, updated version of the Sound Lab M-1 was the best full-range 'stat at CES, with incomparably beautiful tone color and superb inner detail. Even the bass, which has been a touch overblown in past M-1s, sounded "right," though the M-1s are not the kinds of speakers that stage outside the "box." You need space for these babies and height, too. As in past demos, the affordable Parasound electronics the M-1s were paired with drove these 'stats extremely well, proving that you don't have to spend a fortune on amps, preamps, and CD players to get a world-class system. One of the better sounds of the show.

Artemis Labs

Triangle Australe loudspeaker (\$5800)

Artemis Lab LA-1 linestage preamp (\$2850)

Artemis Lab PL-1 phonestage preamp (\$3550)

Artemis Labs SP-1 amplifier (\$11,400)

Galibier Design Stelvio turntable with Schroeder Reference arm (\$17,550)

The Triangle loudspeakers were neutral, open, and transparent, with very nice bass down to 50Hz but a slight (probably room-induced) discontinuity in the upper bass. The Galibier turntable, which sounded terrific at the Rocky Mountain show, was again impressive, as were the Artemis electronics.

MAGICO

MAGICO Mini (\$22k)

Convergent Audio Technology JC-1 monoblock amplifiers (\$20k)

Edge Signature One battery-powered linestage preamp (\$15k)

We come now to the first of my Best Sound at CES award-winners. These exquisitely made, stand-mounted two-ways from ultra-perfectionist designer Alon Wolf have everything I most prize about loudspeakers: liveliness, neutrality, openness, bloom, presence, natural size and scale, and seamless, single-driver coherence. On top of their Kharma-grade disappearing act and soundstaging, the Minis have terrific bass for a two-way (down to about 50Hz, I'd reckon) and extraordinarily natural tone color (the most realistic vocals I heard at the show on Wayne Garcia's Wilco CD). I have to say a word or two about the electronics, as well. Alon happened to be using "my" Edge pre-

**Chapter Précis integrated amp**

amp (the review sample I shipped to CES), which, as I've noted, is a wonder when it comes to reproducing tone colors and the natural size and bloom of instruments and voices, but isn't (like all battery-powered stuff) the last word in dynamics or bass. Happily, he was also using Ken Stevens' JC-1 monoblocks, which *are* close to the last words in each. Simultaneously among the most dynamic and most delicate of pentode tube amplifiers, the JC-1s were able, in combination with the preamp and speakers, to reproduce the physical scale and "action" of the real thing. A truly wonderful stereo system.

Audio Research Corporation

Wilson Audio Specialties Sophia Series 2 (\$12k)

ARC Reference 3 tube linestage preamp (\$10k)

ARC Reference 210 monoblock tube amplifiers (\$20k/pair)

ARC Reference PH-7 phonestage preamp (\$5995)

VPI Super Scoutmaster turntable/JMW arm

The three words I wrote down, after hearing a trio of my favorite LPs played back on the ARC/Wilson system, were "gorgeous-ity," "bloom," and "depth," all of which this system had in spades. Indeed, the Audio Research/Wilson gear was *the only combo* that reproduced the piano in my Prokofiev LP at the proper depth and distance from the violin. Were it not for the fact that I am not wild about the Sophias' tonal palette, the ARC system would've been a shoe-in for one of my Best Sound at CES awards. But the speakers were just a little too dark and opaque for my taste. Even at that, they couldn't conceal the glory of the electronics. So, for its quality alone, the ARC Ref 3/210/PH-7 phono combo earns one of my Best Electronics at CES awards. (BTW, that Super Scoutmaster is a helluva turntable!)

**MAGICO Mini**

Ascendo

Ascendo Systems M/S three-way ribbon/cone hybrid loudspeaker (\$45k)

Convergent Audio Technology SL-1 Ultimate preamplifier (\$9k)

Convergent Audio Technology JL-3 Signature monoblock amplifiers (\$36k)

Reimyo CD player (\$13k)

Though these ingeniously time-aligned ribbon/cone hybrids from Germany didn't image much outside their boxes, spreading sounds between the speakers but not far beyond them, they still evinced gorgeous tone color with simply marvelous reproduction of strings (both the string itself and the body of the instrument) on the Barber Violin Concerto, tremendous dynamic power, and great low-level detail. Part of their excellence, I'm convinced, was due to the driving electronics from Ken Stevens, who, for his showing here and in the MAGICO room, earns my second **Best Electronics at CES** award. Despite the slightly curtailed soundstage, the Ascendos were certainly one of the **better sounds of the show**, narrowly missing a Best Sound award. (P.S. The Reimyo CD player was also fabulous.)

Avalon/Hovland

Avalon Acoustics Eidolon Diamond loudspeakers (\$33k)

Hovland HP-200 full-function tube preamplifier (\$9500)

Hovland Stratos solid-state monoblock amplifiers (\$34k)

Hovland-modified Kenwood LO-7D turntable with Grado Statement cartridge

I haven't been a fan of Avalon Eidolon Diamonds, but they certainly showed well this year driven by Hovland electronics. Light in balance, they were airy, nimble, articulate, and fast-sounding. On the Prokofiev sonata LP, they came very close to the lifelike sound I hear in my own system at home. Cooler than the Ascendos and not as voluptuous in tone color, they are realistic in their own

right, with wonderful integration of their drivers. Certainly, one of the **better sounds at CES**

Eben XCentric



Convergent Audio Technology JC-1

and, like the Sound Labs, Lumen Whites, and Ascendos, razor-close to one of the very best.

Signals-SuperFi

Peak Consult Zoltan loudspeaker (\$37k)

Continuum Audio Labs Caliburn turntable/tonearm/isolation-rack system (\$90k)

Wavac HE-833 v1.3 SET amplifiers

Boulder 2008 phonostage preamp

Boulder 2010 linestage preamp

This 90 grand turntable/tonearm didn't sound sixty grand better than a Walker Proscenium Gold, IMO.

Jeff Rowland Design Group

MAGICO Minis (\$22k)

Rowland 302 solid-state stereo amplifier (\$14.8k)

Rowland Synergy full-function solid-state preamplifier (\$6200)

SME Model 20 turntable with SME 4 arm and some farchachdat strain-gauge cartridge

Jeff Rowland was having some trouble with his strain-gauge cartridge, which may have contributed to the slightly smoothed-out, less lively, more homogeneous sound of the MAGICO Minis in this room. For instance, while the violin and piano of the Prokofiev sonata LP had good meat on their bones, they didn't have the life they should have had—and did have—in other exhibits. Nor did the speakers seem to have the same reach and coherence in the bass that they had in Alon Wolf's room.

DALI Loudspeakers

DALI Megalines (\$40k)

McIntosh electronics (\$God only knows)

This room was a true disappointment, since the ribbon/cone hybrid Megalines are among my favorite linesource loudspeakers. With McIntosh driving them, they sounded wiry, flat, and boomy on the Barber Violin Concerto—a hard feat to accomplish with a





**Audio
Research
Reference 610T**

disc this gorgeous, but DALI, Mc, and AP sonics managed it.

Ayre Acoustics Inc.

JBL K2 S9800se loudspeakers (\$30k)

Ayre P-5xe phono preamp (\$2350)

Ayre K-1xe linestage preamp (\$7k)

Ayre MX-R monoblock power amps (\$TBA)

Ayre C-5xe universal disc-player (\$TBA)

SME Model 20 turntable with SME Model IV.Vi tonearm and SME Celebration cartridge (\$15k)

Seeing JBL loudspeakers at the Alexis Park certainly took me by surprise. But these numbers are rarities, usually available only in Japan—three-way floorstanders with horn-loaded supertweeters and horn-loaded mid/tweeters and 15" ported woofers. The sound was surprisingly smooth and well integrated, but, alas, not very alive.



Chord CPA 4000 preamplifier

Avantgarde Acoustic

Avantgarde Duo Omega two-way spherical-horn loudspeakers with dynamic subwoofer (\$27k)

Avantgarde One.A solid-state monoblock amps (\$40k)

Avantgarde One.P solid-state preamp (\$30k)

Weiss Medea DAC (\$18k)

In the past, the only Avantgarde spherical-horn/dynamic-sub loudspeakers I've truly liked have been the three-way Trios. This year, however, I was absolutely floored by the two-way Duo

JONATHAN VALIN'S Best of Show

Most Significant New Products

The **ARC** PH-7 Phono and Reference CD-7, which (along with the Reference 3 preamp and Reference 210/610T amps) completes ARC's fabulous new suite of Reference electronics, and the **Avantgarde** One.A amp and One.P preamp, which worked wonders with Avantgarde's Duo Omega horn loudspeakers.

Coollest New Product

Though I was greatly impressed with **Lumen White** Precision loudspeakers and the **Ayon** electronics, the **Ascendo** ribbon/cone hybrid loudspeakers, and the **Sound Lab** M1-PX electrostats, the Mini-Exquisite two-way loudspeakers from **Kharm**a would get the nod from me.

Coollest Accessory

The good old 33rpm long-playing vinyl record. New, used, or reissued it just comes closer to the sound of the real deal.

Most Frequently Heard Demo Music

The Andante of Prokofiev's First Violin Sonata [Salerno-Sonnenberg/Rivers, Musicmasters LP], the Andante of Shostakovich's Second Piano Concerto [Ogdon/Foster, EMI LP], the Allegro of Kodály's Duo for Violin and Cello [Hajdu/Déri, Hungaraton LP], "All My Trials" from PP&M's *In the Wind* [Warner LP], "All the Love in the World" from Nine Inch Nails' *With Teeth* [Halo LP]—all discs that I brought to the show.

Greatest Value

The best value system I heard (and remember because my assignment was the ultra-high end, I didn't hear a lot of lower-priced gear) comprised the **Tonian Acoustics** TL-D1 ribbon/cone hybrid two-way floorstanding loudspeakers (\$1500) driven by **Stellavox** (Goldmund/JOB) monoblock amplifiers (\$3000) and a **Marantz** PM17 player (\$1700). The sound was simply swell for about \$6k.

Biggest Surprise at CES

As noted, the amount of very pricey two-channel-only gear and the number of rooms equipped with analog playback equipment were the biggest surprises.

Best Sound at CES

Perhaps it is a testament to the general quality of the show, but there wasn't one system that stood head-and-shoulders above all other (as for instance, the MBL 101 Es did last year). My four best sounds—the **MAGICO** Minis driven by **Edge/CAT** electronics, the **Avantgarde** Duo Omegas driven by Avantgarde electronics, the **Kharm**a Mini-Exquisites driven by **MBL/Kharm**a gear, and the **MBL** 116 Elegances driven by MBL components—were all stand-outs.



JBL K2

find in a horn-loaded speaker (short of MAGICO's monsters). Avantgarde's owner Holger Fromme and his ace-designer Matthias Ruff have clearly outdone themselves, reaching a new plateau of horn-loud-speaker excellence, for which they earn my second **Best Sound at CES** award and, also, one of my **Best Electronics at CES** awards for the tremendous improvements their phenomenal preamp and amp have made to the sound of their speakers. (The preamp is battery-pow-

ered, BTW, but with speakers as inherently dynamic as the Duo Omegas any slight politeness—coupled with the extremely low noise floor of the battery-powered One.P—only worked in this high-sensitivity system's favor.)

Omegas, driven by Avantgarde's superb electronics and fed by "my" Weiss Medea DAC (the review sample I shipped to the show). Either the new Avant-garde electronics are eliminating previous coherence and coloration issues or the speakers themselves have been greatly improved or both, because past problems with woofer/horn integration didn't crop up, nor did driver-localization troubles (wherein sounds seem to be pinned to individual horns), nor did "cupped-hand" horn colorations. The presentation was, in fact, superb: lively as hell, transparent as glass, detailed as all get-out, and as neutral as you can

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Von Schweikert II

Von Schweikert VR-7 SE loudspeakers (\$36k)

VAC Renaissance MkII full-function tube preamplifier (\$9k)

VAC Renaissance Signature 140 triode-tube monoblock amplifiers (\$14k)

Oracle Delphi Mk V turntable with SME 345 tonearm (\$10k)

This Von S/VAC system had lovely presence on the Prokofiev sonata LP, with very good attack and adequate decay on the lower octaves of the piano. Though a little thick in the mid-bass and a little down on top, it had nice midband transparency, too. Like the E.A.R. system, this was among the most gorgeous of sounds at the AP; it was, nonetheless, not among the most realistic, being a bit prettier than life and not as wide-range.

Genesis Advanced Technologies

Genesis G3 ribbon/cone hybrid linesource loudspeaker (\$30k)

It was a pleasure to see Arnie Nudell's work back at the show—with the old familiar circular ribbon tweeters, newly designed midbass couplers, and sidemounted servo-woofers. Bass, as you would expect from Genesis, was very deep and powerful and, as you might *not* expect, fairly well integrated. Depth was good; width somewhat constricted. Overall balance was problematical, with a bit too much tweet and woof for my taste.



Reimyo CD player; Avantgarde's Duo Omega

GTT Audio

Kharma Mini-Exquisite two-way floorstanding loudspeaker (\$45k)

MBL 6010 D solid-state stereo preamplifier (\$19k)

MBL 1611-E Reference DAC (\$21.5k)

MBL 1621 Reference CD transport (\$21k)

Kharma MP150-SE monoblock amplifiers (\$6800)

We come now to my third Best Sound at CES award winner and it happens to be another two-way. (Curious, ain't it?) Though its tonal balance is nothing like that of the MAGICO Mini, it shares with that remarkable stand-mounter those virtues that I most prize in speakers, which, once again, are: liveliness, neutrality, openness, bloom, presence, natural size and scale, and seamless, single-driver coherence. The Mini-Exquisites are improved-upon versions of the Kharma Reference Monitor 3.2s that were my refer-

MBL's 116 Elegance

ence speakers for two years and are currently Wayne Garcia's reference speakers. Since I know the sound of the 3.2s almost by heart, I can assure you that these *are*, in fact, improved. Equipped with diamond tweeters, an even better ceramic mid/bass driver, and an Exquisite-level cabinet, they were stunning to hear. A more detailed loudspeaker will be hard to find and so, in this case, will be a more beautiful-sounding one. Driven by what I consider to be the world's best solid-state preamp, the MBL 6010 D (for which, see below), and Kharma's own superb Class D monoblocks, this was a sound I could live with and Wayne Garcia (lucky man) will, as he is slated to review the Mini-Exquisites. Brace yourselves for a rave.


MBL of America

MBL 116 Elegance 4-way loudspeakers (\$20k)

MBL 5011 solid-state preamp (\$8.4k)

MBL 9007 solid-state stereo amplifier (\$13.3k)

MBL 1521 A (\$8.9k)/1511 E DAC (\$9.1k)

As I hear them every day and know their incredible virtues, I didn't audition my own reference speakers—the 101 Es—which MBL had set up in an adjoining room. (I'm told that they weren't quite as mind-boggling this year as they have been for the last two in a row, but I'm sure they were still plenty boggling.) Instead, I listened long and hard to MBL's second line of gear and all I can say, again, is "Wow!" Even upon coming from room after room of very fine gear generating very fine sonics, as soon as I heard the 116s start to play I felt as if I'd stepped from a hi-fi store into a concert hall. To my ears, even at this slightly reduced quality level, MBL is still high among the fullest-range, most alive-sounding music-reproducing equipment that money can buy. The 116s' bass was through the floor, its midrange was just plain realistic, and its treble was, as all Radialstrahler treble is, nonpareil. So, my final **Best Sound at CES** award goes to the MBL 116 room and my final **Best Electronics at CES** award also goes to MBL, not only for the gear I heard playing in its own display but for the phenomenal 6010 D that I heard in Bill Parish's GTT Audio room. 

Photographs by Leonard Norwitz (www.lensphoto.com), with supplementary shots in their sections by RH, JH, CM, DS, and AT.



Memoirs of CES:

What Happened in Las Vegas Doesn't Stay in Las Vegas—This Time Around

Harry Pearson

There are so many things about the Consumer Electronics Show and Las Vegas that they don't tell you in the usual show report, which this one isn't going to be. They don't tell you about the dry heat, and how it dehydrates you—to the point you'll get new meaning out of the phrase brick, uh, outhouse. So you'll see most everyone lugging bottled water around, and tubes of what we now call lip "balm." Oddly enough, with all the swimming pools and incessant waterings of the endless golf courses here in the desert, the air manages to be both dry and sweat-sticky at the same time.

They probably don't have to tell you that the area itself is the fastest growing in the United States. And that this has brought with it, mushroom-like fields of box housing and thickening traffic where lickety-split is the driving speed at any hour. Its hooker population now exceeds the taxi fleets in number—and there even appeared to be members of its "sisterhood" hired to entice the innocent into sparsely attended exhibits at the Alexis Park, the main high-end audio venue. They probably don't tell you that taxis are at premium during "rush" hours (the hookers, of course, at any time) and that you may have to wait in line a half-hour to go where you could walk in the same or less time. Or that, if you want to see more than just the esoterica of audio—say the more grandiloquent audio manufacturers and the big-time video guys—you'd have to tote yourself all over town; that's how spread out the show is, how, really, impossible it is to get more than a taster's sampling.

It isn't even possible in the four full days of demos to see/hear all that the high-end establishment has to show (off), for even the most indefatigable. The Alexis Park is packed with exhibitors and next door, in a rat's maze known as the St. (Saint? Really?) Tropez, there is something called T.H.E. show, the T.H.E. standing for, not "the high end," but rather "the home entertainment" experience, where the even more esoteric tended to congregate. In all, between the two hotels, there were in excess of 450 high-end audio companies exhibiting. As for me, I hadn't darkened the show's doors in seven years and so, like Maine taffy (as opposed to Coons) I got yanked in all kinds of directions by all sorts of people and wound up feeling as if I had hardly skimmed the surface. But, what I did get was, I think, choice.

Another thing you probably could surmise, but that almost no one writes about, is the social aspect of the show, at least in

high-end-audio terms. This is a small industry, albeit with an increasingly international flavoring, in which almost everybody either knows or is acquainted with everybody else, and this works in sometimes unexpected ways. And, oh, what a talkathon it can be, with more than a bit of nasty backbiting, especially when "sacred cows" are the topic.

They talk over breakfast convocations, where the search is always on for the best (preferably, and often in this town, free) buffet. (The one at Steve Wynn's new pleasure dome got the highest ratings.) Keep in mind that audiophiles tend to the sensory pleasures, so the serious fooding, partying, and drinking is done evenings, especially now that most of America's most famous chefs have set up shop in Lost Wages. Now let it be said that these self-same stars are virtually never personally in attendance, so there is a pig-in-the-poke kind of gamble involved in striving for a reservation in a "name" place. In certain circles, there's a hot competition to see who can go to and rave, bitch, or moan about these starless (nighttime) establishments. And it would be for naught if there weren't a larger-than-life aspect to all this, so typical of Vegasanary inflations. For example, Picasso, in the Bellagio, has nothing but original Pablo Picassos lining its walls, making for what just maybe the world's most expensive wallpaper. And in some places, the old LV hustle yet abounds. At a "deluxe" sushi joint, Shibuya in the MGM Grand, where my birthday was celebrated, the quality of the fish, which started out a breathtaking level (along to be sure with the prices), descended as our consumption of sake ascended until the last course one my pussies would have given an "F" rating—a true demonstration of the PPDD, the Pearson Principle of Descending Discrimination, in this case the theory here was that one's discrimination descended as one's sake intake ascended, an inverse proportion rule that definitely does not apply to this writer.

One can only wonder at what this fiesta of sound must cost the small companies who have to pay for it all—the hotel rooms (never acoustically heavenly), the cost of shipping the gear back and forth to Nevada, and the man-hours spent in the process, not to mention the not-inconsiderable "extras," like food, transportation—well, you get the picture. And we haven't even begun to wonder at the totals the foreign manufacturers must run up. And I have no way to estimating what might be lost at the gaming tables, which are ubiquitous, but, perhaps happily, not at the two high-end show sites.

And there are disasters too numerous to count. Since it is high-end gear,¹ there are breakdowns, especially with the power surges that plagued the Alexis Park. Sometimes a perfectly good display of gear is either ruined or seriously compromised by mismatches in the system or clumsy setup. One particularly noxious episode occurred in the big Von Schweikert room at the St. Tropez, where the firm (minus Albert when I was there) was demonstrating the VR-7 SE Reference, an ambitious four-way system, complete with a pure ribbon supertweeter and a dual-woofer system said to reach down into the 15Hz region. Four of Kevin Hayes' 140-watt amplifiers were driving the two speakers, and the soundfield was both expansive and eerily "right." But, the Oracle 'table setup, complete with the Dynavector XV-1S, was off. The cartridge's vertical tracking angle was set too low, which robbed the highs of air and bloom, and made the midbass fatter than I think, based on what I've heard from Von Schweikert's earlier works, that it should have been, obviously, to these ears, obscuring the very bottom octave. And the tracking pressure was too light. But despite my protestations and Kevin Hayes' intervention on my behalf, the guy in control would not change the settings, saying it would take 20 minutes to do. Well, it wouldn't have taken me 20 minutes to make those adjustments. And so, rather than listen to colorations that ought not to have been there, I walked out.

Similarly, I was invited for a private demonstration of the new Zanden equipment, being imported here from Japan. The CD player and decoder were the very same units I've had for evaluation (and loaned back to the company for the show), and they are honeys. So, to my ears, were the visually stunning electronics² designed by Kazutoshi Yamada, their quite proud papa. But, to hear the strengths of the electronics, I had to listen around the speakers, which were not of Yamada design, and whose ringing tweeters reminded me of those Focal units in the Wilson MAXX IIs. Once you've heard enough combinations of components, you can hear past an obvious irritant to see the magic that's happening underneath, and this is exactly what happened to me here.

I was surprised that there was such an abundance of turntables at the show. I'm not objecting, of course, but it does seem someone is doing the time warp again, as the number of new recordings on LP approach zero (disregarding, for the moment, the proliferation and increasing abundance of remasterings of the Oldie Goldie hits from the past) and the prices of many turntables rise toward mania. The \$100,000 pricing of the Australian-made Continuum was, negatively speaking, the talk of the show—would I ever like to get my hands on this to see if it could be, let's say, 20 times better in sound than the circa-\$5000 Super Scoutmaster. But, as the manufacturer let me know, that's not bloody likely. I did, I think, manage to

wrangle a promise from the guys behind the British Blue Pearl table (circa \$90,000) for an evaluation sample. Roy Gregory, editor of *Hi-Fi+*, a magazine I admired long before AMI acquired it, wrote an impressive review of this that sparked my interest. Given the conglomeration of equipment in the room where the Blue Pearl was being demonstrated (with the wonderful new Graham Phantom arm), I could make no judgments about its sound.

There was a turntable that I could "hear," and it was the Baron Tim de Paravicini's "magnetic" suspension DiscMaster (priced at a *measly* \$16k—it's a joke, Maude, a joke). There looks to be no "connection" between the drive mechanism and the platter, and, within about five seconds, it was obvious to me that something special had been achieved in the reduction of inherent turntable noise pollution. (Happily, they had on hand one of my reference recordings for LP testing, the Bartók *Hungarian Sketches*, with Reiner and the Chicago, and this, friends, told the tale.) That I intend to test. The sound in this room was, in its way, as good as anything else I heard—and I heard at least three other setups that were, putting it mildly, stunning (and that in a hotel room no less). FYI: The other gear was the Esoteric Audio Research (the Baron's company) 912, the 890 amplifier, and his new CD player, the Acute—about which more very shortly—the Marten Design Miles III speaker system, Jorma Design One interconnects, and Acro-Link power cords.

Now, that CD player. I can't be sure of this, without hearing it in my reference setup in Sea Cliff, but, with the Howard Hanson *Composer and His Orchestra*, I heard what I thought was the cleanest high-frequency reproduction and extension I had encountered from a CD. By the time you read this deathless prose, I should have the unit in hand and be better able to see whether it was the excellent setup in Dan Meinwald's suite or the player or my fevered imagination.

Another most excellent setup was at the Hovland suite, an acoustic the Hovland folks have mastered since they insisted on the same room for three years running. The sound was a coherent and nearly flawless entity, smooth, extended, and lush in all the right ways. The biggest surprise for me were the Avalon Ediolon Diamonds (at \$33,000 the pair), which far surpass (at last) the original Avalons that so endeared themselves to JWC (and me) many a moon ago. The sound was so coherent that I, for once, couldn't be quite sure what was contributing what. I would have, that said, been curious to hear an analog source other than their own modified version of the Kenwood L0-7D playback system, with the Grado Statement moving-magnet cartridge. But, for the record, the system consisted of the HP-200 (weird initials those, *n'est ce pas?*) preamplifier, which is available as a linestage without the phonostage, the yet-to-be

¹ Pearson's Second Law of High End: The more vital it is for the gear to work perfectly, the less chance it will.

² For example, the 845 push-pull mono blocks, the 1200 phonostage, the 3000 preamplifier, and 300 passive linestage were on display.


released Stratos solid-state monoblock amps—and, boy, do they ever have looks to drool over—Hovland interconnects, and a prototype USB digital-to-analog converter, and I quote “to become part of a complete computer-connectable CD player with a new technology data-extraction transport,” set for December release. In this instance, we heard most undigital and convincing digital sounds from a transport that was the Apple Mac Mini and iTunes “loaded,” it is said “with uncompressed CDs.”

I don't think anything quite prepared me for the show's sonic ballbusters. I stopped by Jeff Rowland's suite because I was curious to know why he had dropped off the sonic map for a while—I didn't find out. But we did discuss his new line of Class D amplification, which he said was neither digital nor switching in its design. While there I heard two quite small two-way speakers with voices bigger than a Metropolitan Opera star's and inquired after them. “They're called MAGICOS,” the guy said, with the requisite sneer about the Wal-Mart sound of its name. Then, later, one of our writers—pretty sure it was Valinsky, who had already managed to bag an evaluation pair—said if I thought they sounded good at Rowland's place, I ought to go over to the St. Tropez and check out MAGICO's own suite, to which, you can be sure, I hied me thither.

I encountered the resident singularity behind what he calls

the Mini's, Alon Wolf, who came to the U.S. from Israel 17 years ago with \$324 in his pocket and has come to this. He had the Edge linestage and Ken Stevens' imposing looking (and impressive-sounding) Convergent Audio Technology JL-3s. (I didn't care much for the TEAC Esoteric player he was using, because I knew he could have done better, given the great strides forward in CD player design. But the Esoteric's top-end digitis wasn't fatal to the sound of the speakers).

The speakers really took me by surprise, by storm even. You wouldn't expect drivers this small (they are bonded to the rock solid cabinet) to have wide frequency response, particularly down low, or a dynamic response that illustrates better than anything I've heard of late, the concept of “jump,” i.e., the ability of a speaker to respond, instantly, to microdynamic variations, and, in this case, not just microdynamics, but the macros as well. The sound is big, big, big. Not in the bloated sense, but big like lifelike sound is. More than one person visiting the suite wondered where Wolf was hiding the non-existent woofers. I heard no obvious colorations during the session (which, included, you can be sure, some unamplified classical cuts).

To me, it was almost—I said almost—worth putting up with Vegas to make discoveries like this one, and the Baron's “magnetic” drive turntable. It puts that old thrill back in high-end audio. 

Manufacturer's Comments

Krell SACD Standard

I would like to thank Fred Kaplan for his very thorough review of the Krell SACD Standard. There are two points that need to be reinforced.

Since we are not a transport manufacturer, we are at the mercy of our OEM manufacturer of this part. As a company that places sound reproduction first and foremost, we selected the Philips transport because it best met our performance criteria. The inherent drawbacks of this device, as Fred points out, are a necessary evil.

Not everyone is able to take full advantage of the latest high resolution SACD software. For us, it was extremely important to produce a machine that would give exemplary performance on Red Book CDs as well. We appreciate Fred's careful listening and critical evaluation of the SACD Standard with CDs in this format.

Dan D'Agostino
Chief Executive Officer, Krell Industries, Inc.

Mark Levinson N^o-432 Amplifier and N^o-326S Preamplifier

To say that we are pleased with Robert Harley's commentary

on the N^o-432 amplifier and N^o-326S preamplifier would simply be stating the obvious. We offer a heartfelt “thank you” for the time and effort that led to his review.

Beyond that, we'd like to offer your readers an observation. Both products benefited from significant work by the Mark Levinson team (HSG). Specifically, the N^o-432 underwent some circuit and manufacturing changes to enhance reliability. The N^o-326S was revised even more thoroughly. Although based in part on the N^o-320 preamplifier (a product that existed only in prototype form when Mark Levinson moved to MA), the 326S underwent extensive listening tests, parts selection, and voicing. Mr. Harley's comments show just how successful those efforts were.

The point is that the passion and aural sensitivity that was so instrumental in establishing the Mark Levinson brand over the last three decades is, if anything, even stronger today than it was several years ago. In addition, the resources we can now tap through Harman's world-wide technology network ensure that Mark Levinson products will continue to lead the industry in sonic accuracy.

Walter Schofield
Vice President of Sales & Marketing, Mark Levinson