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2005

GOLDEN EAR AWARDS

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141

IN THIS ISSUE

ISSUE 159 ■ FEBRUARY 2006

82 COVER STORY

Balanced Audio Technology VK-600M SE Monoblock Power Amplifier

Can a massive solid-state power amplifier deliver the immediacy and delicacy of a low-power, single-ended design?

40 2005 GOLDEN EAR AWARDS

Our editors and frequent contributors choose the gear that found a place in their hearts.

Golden Ear Awards, and a Short Think Piece on Digital Domination

Harry Pearson

Golden Ear Awards

Amplifiers

ASR Emitter II Series 2005 integrated (fanfareintl.com)	\$25,900
Wyetech Sapphire 300B single-ended triode (wyetechlabs.com)	\$6800

Integrated Turntable

VPI Super Scoutmaster Signature (vpindustries.com)	\$5500
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Moving-Coil Phonograph Cartridges

Dynavector XV-1S (dynavector.co.jp)	\$4250
Benz Micro LP Ebony (musicalsurroundings.com)	\$4700

Compact Disc Players

47/Lab PiTracer CD transport and Gemini converter (sakurasystems.com)	\$25,000 and \$3500
Jadis JD-1 player and JS-1 digital converter (pierregabriel.com)	\$40,000
Bluenote Stibbert (fanfareintl.com)	\$4900

Accessories

Nordost Thor power-distribution system (nordost.com)	\$3200
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Multichannel Equipment

EMM Labs CD/SD SACD playback deck (onahighernote.com)	\$7900
EMM Labs DAC-6e SACD digital-to-analog converter (onahighernote.com)	\$11,500
Edge Electronics G AV 55 modular amp (500-watt module version) (edgeamps.com)	\$11,250

Digital Domination: Thoughts on Imported CD-playback Gear



It may have been symptomatic of the current malaise in key parts of the American high end that designers from overseas have taken the high ground in the uphill battles to make CDs really competitive with analog recordings.

Now, please note I did not say that the best CDs bettered the best analog; that day has yet to come. And possibly won't until we have a commercially viable digital encoding system that surpasses the limitations of the 16/44 process. But from abroad, we have here

at hand a group of outstanding CD players. These show the medium to its advantage; they play to digital's inherent strengths, which we now see far exceeded our initial, pessimistic expectations and which, heard aright, can actually be a source of much musical enjoyment.

One of the more interesting questions the enhanced sonics of these players pose is this: What will be the American response?

The harbinger of this revolution in player and decoder excellence came about seven years ago with the

Burmester 969 player and 970 DAC. These were set at a price and (viewed then as now) as little short of the hideous, namely, in excess of \$60,000. But they set the (sonic) stage for the offspring to come.

Then three years ago the Italian company Lector set the cognoscenti of the high end on their collective ear with a simple two-piece player and tubed DAC priced (at first) just above \$2000.¹ That combo was quickly followed by Lector's more expensive, four-piece digi-drive design, (currently at \$7000+). The

¹ That price has now soared in several jumps to \$4300+, which genuinely annoys me since I smell a correlation between a positive review from yrs. truly and indiscreet price-inflation. Ditto, by the way, for the L'Art du Son CD cleaning fluid.

HP'S WORKSHOP

four-piece tubed unit was/is, in my estimation, twice the performer of the two piece CD2-7TS: it got all that much deeper into the music's soundfield, with the same darkish coloration, but without the susceptibility to acoustic breakthrough that plagues all but the best-isolated units. A most romantic sound.

There was a problem, to be sure, and that lay in Lector's inability to keep up with the ensuing demand once the word got out. The American importer, one Victor Goldstein, took matters into his own hands and discovered the Bluenote Company, another Italian firm that specialized in all sorts of high-end gear, from LP playback systems to electronics. What first attracted Goldstein's attention there

was the Stibbert, Bluenote's tubed CD unit, competitively priced, we might add, with the four-piece Lector. It does all that the Lector does, and a bit more—without the darkish coloration, coming closer to the ideal of tonal neutrality.

The Bluenote Stibbert, reviewed in Issue 156, turned out to be of greater value than I knew. It also, we learned, decodes 96/24-encoded two-channel discs, such as the DADs once issued by Classic Records (but not DVD-As). The Stibbert, I hasten to add, needs to play for a while (30 minutes or so) before it sounds its best with CDs. You'll hear its strengths right out of the box, but the topmost octaves will sound whitish and thin. Once it settles in, that

“sound” disappears, leaving its spectacular bass and highly convincing dynamic contrasts. However, if it's DADs or their like you're going to play, then I've found the warm-up time is even longer, say, an hour or more. If it sounds edgy on high-level fortissimos, it needs more break-in. (I believe the two best-sounding Classic 96/24 issues, a collection of Ravel and Gershwin recordings from Marc Aubort and Joanna Nickrenz, are still available and much worth having.)²

About the same time the Bluenote player arrived, the Jadis JD-1 Mk II and JS-1 DAC (now being imported through Pierre Gabriel, working out of Quebec) showed up in Sea Cliff. As we were to

² Oh, horrors, I am informed that three “improvements” have been made to the Stibbert—the newer version arrives four days after the final deadline for this issue.

HP'S WORKSHOP

learn, the units were the ones that Gabriel had been using, and t'weren't long before the player's mechanics went ker-flooy and it had to be returned. Thanks to problems with U.S. Customs, among other things, we had to wait until just before deadline to hear the Jadis combo once again. If you've ever heard any of Jadis' tubed designs, you won't be surprised at its sound. Which is big, expansive, and just plain gorgeous. The price of \$40,000 is a big leap forward, toward the peaks established by Burmester, if not quite so stratospheric. Jadis, now back in full swing after a few years of great difficulty, has not lost its touch. The sound is beautiful—uncolored, dynamic, and, like I said and Ed Sullivan once did, *really* big. When I say “uncolored” I mean without a sonic signature to either the yin or yang side of

just plain music, although in a way the Jadis reminds me of the midrange sound you get from a well-designed SET amplifier, which is to say, romantic. Most easy on the ears. It, like the Stibbert, benefits from balanced operation. You won't find any overt or noxious digital distortions, and I dare say if the earlier Jadis digital gear had sounded like this, the era of feel-good digital we are now beginning to enjoy would have come years sooner.

47/Lab, which produced the Miyabi moving-coil cartridge I quite admired (and still do), has come out with a CD player, the 47/Lab PiTracer, that despite clunkiness in its mechanical operation (the origins of which I still am unable to pinpoint, and so I am not sure whether it is somewhat unreliable or I am) is, just maybe, the world-beater of digital play-

ers. I know of its excellences, but at this point there is another contender in the wings and I am going to have to, in short order (in one of the next two issues), run a survey pitting the best imports one against the other. It is not as expensive as the Jadis, nor does it have balanced outputs, nor do I have the room in this essay to discuss the theory behind its operation, which is intriguing.

So why I am so impressed—sonically, so far? Let's take one example. One of my favored Mercurys of yore was the LP entitled *Winds in Hi-Fi*, a Frederick Fennell/Eastman disc, the first Mercury stereo issue that had sweet, pure, extended highs, particularly in the capturing of transients, like bells and the overtone structure of winds and percussion, notably in the first and last cuts of Percy Grainger's *Lincolnshire Posy* and

HP'S WORKSHOP


the first and last movements of Bernard Rogers' knock-out *Three Japanese Dances*. With the ASR in the primary reference system (in Room Three in Sea Cliff) this disc, along with the Hanson *Composer and His Orchestra*, showed me the strengths of the alternate digital universe. (It was Wilma Cozart Fine, who oversaw the mastering of the Philips Mercury reissues, who said, a decade or more ago, that the CDs weren't one whit inferior to the analog LPs, that they just showed alternate strengths—a notion I didn't buy until now.) But, for the first time, with the 47/Lab PiT in play, the CD has exactly the same balance, tonally, as the LP I so cherish, down to the exquisite high bells and high-frequency nuances that are just not audible with the best of the other players. The 47/Lab sounds not only more precise,

in the sense of unstrained accuracy, but more delicate when delicacy is required, and more dynamically thunderous, especially in its taut articulation of the lows. This I did not expect. With the 47/Lab, there is a sense of air and freedom at the top that is unrivaled in my experience with digital encoding, which, to these ears, always fell short of the kind of top-octave reality that demarcates the "hi-fi" from the musical. The player and its accompanying converter aren't exactly a bargain—\$28,500 for the combo, more if you must have two of the extra power supplies for that last word in refinement.

So, if it's a final word you want just now, sorry. I am setting up a comparative survey that will, in some depth, compare, side by side, the Jadis, the bargain-priced player from Music Hall, the new Zanden from the

Pacific Rim, an improved Stibbert Bluenote (yes, believe it or not, the new one is said to sound even better), and the 47/Lab, which we shall also "better" with the addition of yet another power supply.

Moreover, the American "response" has just this day arrived, in the form of the... Well, think that, for now, it'll be my secret. But it would be ironic, and perhaps even fitting, if it turned out that it trumped all those just given golden ears here.

I don't think you are going to go wrong, musically speaking, with any of the top three I've discussed here (or with the four-piece Lector, either). The cutting edge, in the metaphoric not the sonic sense, is now a digital one—and it's about time. 

HP would like to encourage you to write him at HPsAudioMall@aol.com
