absolute sounds ltd.

International Distributors & Consultants of Specialised Hi-End Audio & Video Systems

AUTUMN 2022 NEWSLETTER
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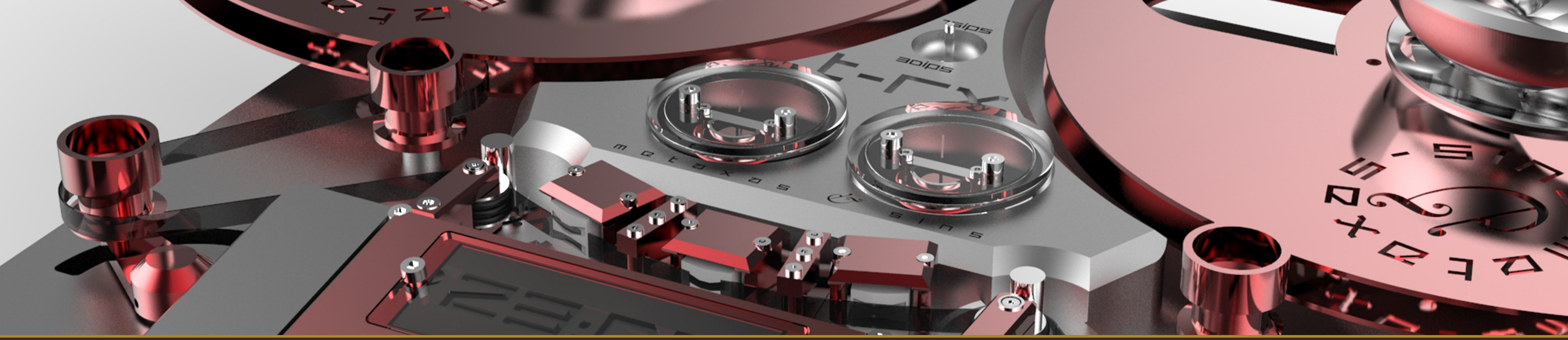


A WORD FROM RICARDO

Dear Music Lover,

This year, Absolute Sounds has finally introduced another source into its systems. We've long been the benchmark for the best in vinyl and digital replay, finding the best of both worlds along the way. But this year, it's time to welcome back an old friend – open reel tape.

To many, tape never really went away, but while those classic recorders from the pro and domestic worlds did a wonderful job at the time, they are like classic cars today; fragile, expensive to maintain, and often old-fashioned in approach. A modern design that doesn't use inexpensive op-amps or worn-out capacitors is going to deliver the kind of world-class sound that tape always had the potential to produce. In addition, there has been a worldwide surge in companies offering high-quality copies on tape (let's not be fooled by claims of these being master tapes or even sisters of master tapes... these are copies, no matter how high performance).

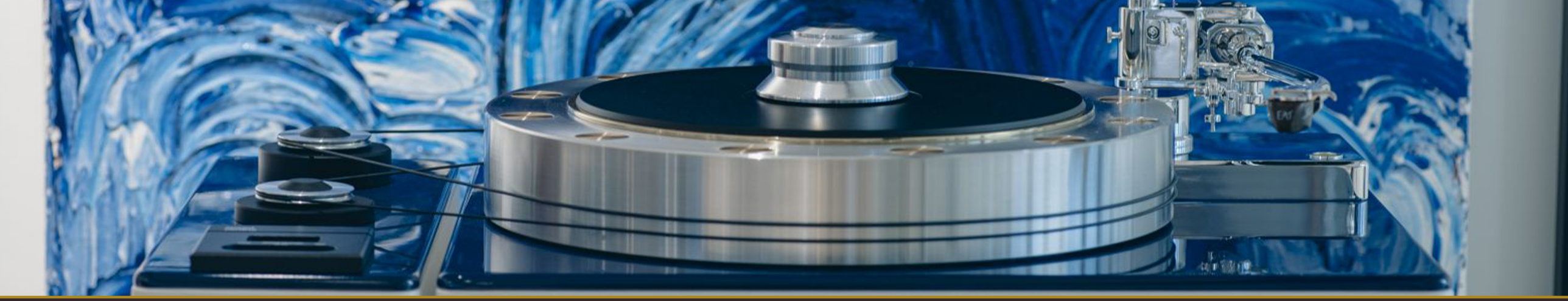
With tape joining LP, CD, SACD and streaming for discerning listeners, it's always good to take stock of the world of high-performance audio. And, while the world around us seems to keep falling apart, many take great comfort in enjoying great sound at home.

Our homes have become a bulwark against the world beyond; we are travelling less in the wake of COVID-19 and because of the increasingly inescapable environmental impact of holiday travel. With war, floods, famines, and fire tornadoes, it's perhaps no surprise that we want to switch off and take comfort in the simple pleasure of listening.

As such, we think there's never been a better time to seek that spiritual recharge you can only get from listening to great music, played well.

Health-care professionals are discovering the positive impact of music on mental health, caring for those with Alzheimer's disease, and more. And, in the case of Absolute Sounds, we are finding a higher level of ecstasy, which comes from balanced and fine-tuned systems; you don't just get a great sound but a performance that feels extremely good too.

Musically yours,
Ricardo Franassovici, Absolute Sounds



AUTUMN 2022 NEWSLETTER

In putting together a portfolio of components and instruments for Absolute Sounds, coupled with decades of experience in building systems that work together beautifully, it would be easy to think all this simply as an exercise in excess. In fact, the opposite is closer to the truth; we're all about 'Less is More' here.

We've created systems of elegance and simplicity from source to speakers. Although they often look as good as they sound, there's nothing superfluous to our systems and components. They are all designed to do one thing well, however; and that is make music sound good. And I think sometimes this sits uncomfortably with some audiophiles who consider music as something to show off their audio systems rather than the other way around.

We often see people who are either besotted by one or two audio brands, or who are enthralled by specification sheets, and they often seem to have lost their way. And sometimes the worst are the ones with what I call the 'Spaghetti Bowl' syndrome; if you look to the back of their audio system, it's like a bowl of spaghetti that's been slowly assembled over the years, with a mess of different wires and devices all thrown together seemingly at random.

We go with a more back to basics approach, and it's something we find is shared by many of our manufacturers and so often neglected by so many other high-end audio companies. However, something positive that's come out of the last few years is there are a few like-minded high-end brands who share our goals and ideals, even if they are not part of the Absolute Sounds portfolio. Those who attend our demonstrations this year might be surprised to see a couple of products from brands we do not supply in our rooms; in the spirit of the "less is more" concept, we're introducing to you a few more boutique brands that we feel share our outlook on high-performance audio. We also think their instruments sound really good too!

NEW ARRIVALS IN 2022

AUDIO RESEARCH

In many ways, there wouldn't be a high-end audio industry without Audio Research. From its early days 'hot-rodding' classic Dynaco power amplifiers, the company has gone from strength to strength. Audio Research's range of tube-based audio electronics are some of the most immediately recognisable and most highly respected for outstanding sound quality. Despite Audio Research's position as one of the mainstays of high-end audio, the brand has not rested on its laurels and its latest line-up – from the clever and colourful I50 integrated amplifier to the sophisticated 'Ghost Meter' display on its Reference power amplifiers, Audio Research leads the way.

And later this year we will be welcoming the Reference 320M, which will meet any loudspeakers high power requirement .

ARTESANIA AUDIO

Now with both its outstanding Classic Line and the more attainable Organic Line, Artesania Audio has redefined what is possible from equipment support systems. The frame-within-a-frame Classic system delivers world-class isolation for the best in high-performance audio, while the Organic system's use of low-resonant materials such as Krion and Panzerholz alongside clever use

of constrained-layer damping techniques makes it the ideal choice for those wanting a more conventional equipment support system.

José Luis Larfaga's sophisticated approach to equipment isolation and anti-resonance, anti-vibration techniques apply from the first product in the chain to controlling the loudspeaker cables; a fully integrated system!

CONSTELLATION AUDIO

There's never been a better named brand than 'Constellation Audio'. Unlike most audio electronics brands that either rely on one designer or a faceless team, Constellation Audio uses a dream-team of star audio designers, each an expert in their respective fields. The design brief for each member of this 'dream team' is simple; design the best product you can!

A modular approach to 'the best you can' means Constellation Audio can build four ranges of audio electronics: from the attainably priced Inspiration line right up to the ultimate Reference range. All Constellation products set new standards at their respective prices.

CONTINUUM AUDIO LABS

If ever there was a company that typified the phrase 'do just one thing, but do it well', it's Continuum Audio Labs. The company makes one turntable – The Obsidian – and one matching tonearm – the Viper – but each is designed as a class-leader in its field.

Obsidian starts by tearing up the rulebook and is designed like an elite sports car. Its engine is the unique DC motor driving a platter designed using finite element analysis with an oversized bearing and cleverly isolated arm board. Meanwhile the Viper tonearm with its distinctive large, yet light interchangeable arm is a low-resonance wonder!

COPLAND

A development of the popular CTA405 amplifier; the new CTA407 all-valve integrated retains Copland's famed minimalism, while adding more control than ever. It can automatically adjust for any tube in the 6550/KT88/KT120/KT150 family delivering 2x50W in high biased class A/AB mode in the process, with a 40-LED display showing bias and tube health.

The CTA407 employs five line-level inputs, including a tape monitor loop and a built-in RIAA phono circuit accommodating moving magnet as well as high-output moving coil cartridges. In addition, the amplifier features a motor-driven volume control and can be fully controlled by Copland's own RC102A remote control.

D'AGOSTINO MASTER AUDIO SYSTEMS

Dan D'Agostino's Relentless amplifier range added a preamplifier last year; but that showed just how the Relentless power amplifier can be improved, and the new Epic 800 and Epic 1600 are the result. With 300% more current, and its redesigned input and bias stability circuit increasing operating bias by 50%, the amplifier now has two variants; the Epic 800 for those demanding uncompromising sound in a 'smaller' package with 'just' 84 output transistors and the 'no quarter given' powerhouse of the Epic 1600 with its barnstorming 112 output transistors. Existing Relentless owners can also upgrade to Relentless Epic performance too.

Another success story this year is the incredible fully upgradeable performance lift for the Momentum Series, the Momentum S250 becomes the Momentum S250 MxV, and the M400 becomes the Momentum M400 MxV.

The same applies to the Progression Series but this time it's not upgradeable, but with an insane lift in performance. The new models are Progression S350 and the M550.

DARTZEEL

This highly specialised company, undoubtedly the Swiss leader in making high-performance amplifiers, is the sheer equivalent of a Grand Cru versus

a normal vintage. DarTZeel has a commanding reputation in audio that far outweighs its size, thanks to the company's visionary engineer Hervé Deletraz. With two integrated amplifiers, the LHC-208 streaming integrated amplifier and the other Reference standard CTH-8550 MkII, a virtual battery driven full preamplifier the NHB-18NS, a stereo amplifier the NHB-108 and a pair of mono power amplifiers the NHB-468, each one has carved a reputation for itself as delivering a sound that's faster; more exciting, and more dynamic than all other European amplifiers.

dCS

The dCS Ring DAC APEX board is the most important change to the company's proprietary digital audio platform in its 30-year history and the changes it brings to company's digital platforms are profound and significant. APEX is the result of dCS finding that conventional measurement systems are not resolving enough. In designing its own measurement platforms, dCS found the already vanishingly low levels of distortion and noise could be further reduced, allowing for world-leading linearity and signal-to-noise levels. Ring DAC APEX is fitted to new dCS Rossini and Vivaldi systems and can be supplied as an upgrade for existing users.

DEVORE FIDELITY

DeVore Fidelity's ever-popular Orangutan-line of loudspeakers is perhaps best known by the O/96 loudspeaker. But a scaled-down version of the excellent Orangutan speakers is always welcome, especially if it sounds this good. The O/baby is the perfect addition to the DeVore family; The O/baby features a horn-loaded 0.75" textile dome tweeter and a 7" woofer using the same uncoated German paper cone material used in the bigger O/96 and O/Reference. Its smaller tweeter and bass driver in a smaller cabinet help keep costs down, while retaining the efficiency, outstanding stereo, and just great sound that John DeVore does so well.

EUROPEAN AUDIO TEAM

Making high-end turntables, arms, cartridges and phono stages isn't easy. Making them built to look good, with high performance and without a high price is almost impossible, but it's precisely what European Audio Team does so well. The brand uses significant manufacturing facilities to build products and relying on economies of scale. This means a high-mass turntable with an off-board power supply, a high-performance tonearm the F-Note, a quality moving coil cartridge and even a valve phono stage can cost less than a similarly specified top-end tonearm. But good value alone is not enough; EAT turntables look great and sound fantastic too.

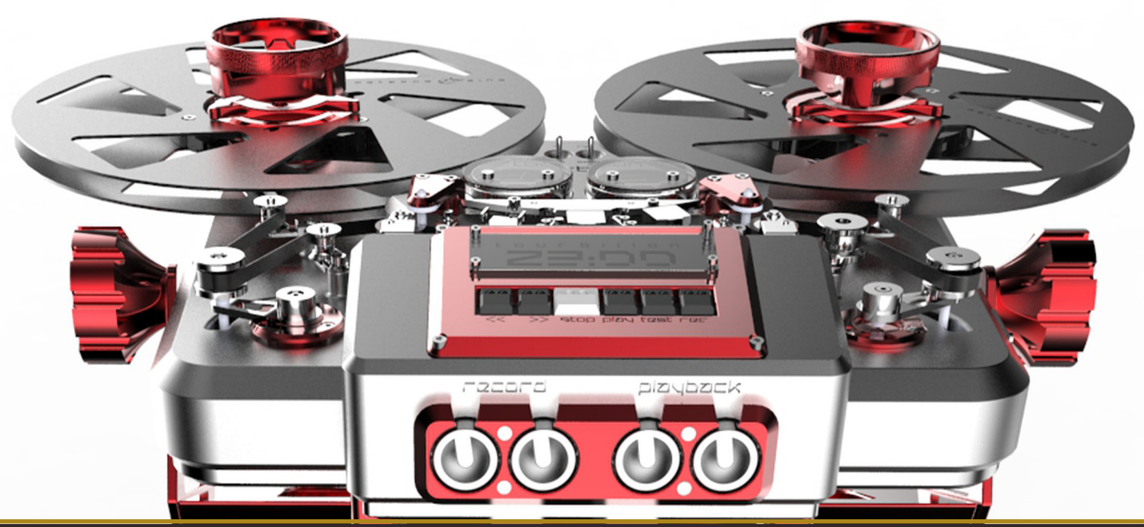
FRANCO SERBLIN

The founder of Sonus faber left behind a legacy of loudspeakers that have been realised by the company that now carries his name. The brand continues Serblin's true artisan spirit and original plans of making loudspeakers that have the finest in Italian cabinet making design, coupled with unique elegance, a beautiful finish, and a sound quality that is inviting and intensely musical. Franco Serblin's reputation stands strong thanks to the company that bears his name; the loudspeakers are designed and built by those with musical passion in their blood, inspired by the luthiers of Cremona! You really should see and hear these!

JADIS

French audio experts Jadis are experts in producing irresistible sounding tube amplifiers. The new I-70 and I-300 integrated amplifiers complete Jadis' range. The I-300 uses four 300B power triodes to deliver 10W of single-ended power per channel, the I-70 delivers 50W of push-pull power per channel. Jadis spent a considerable amount of time researching the perfectly stable power supply specifically for the heaters for the power tubes; by taking the heater circuit as seriously as all other power supplies in the chain, the I-300 sounds like no other 300B integrated amplifier. As for the I-70, this world premiere makes it a high power integrated amplifier; joining the finest league.

Jadis is popular because it makes amplifiers with a classic look and great sound.



KOETSU

This outstanding Japanese maker of cartridges needs no introduction. Made by second-generation cartridge legend Fumihiko Sugano and named after famed artist and ceramicist Hon'ami Koetsu (1558-1637), the brand practically invented the hand-wound artisan moving coil cartridge made design, using cartridge bodies of the finest wood or precious stone to make a vinyl performance that is little short of magical. With a range that runs from the classic Black K (that has much in common with the original Black cartridge from the 1980s) through the delightful Urushi models right up to the Platinum stone models, every cartridge is a beautiful jewel.

KRELL

A legendary name in high-end audio since 1980, Krell hasn't just made good amplifiers for decades. It could easily rest on its laurels, but instead has developed a range of state-of-the-art amplifiers, both for two and multi-channel systems, as well as extremely highly regarded DACs and home theatre processors. As Krell's product line continues to diversify, its fundamental research into amplifier design and performance remains at the core of its achievements. Every Krell component sports uniquely proprietary technologies—and Krell's discoveries in audio amplification continue to deliver unprecedented linearity, control and accuracy, which can only come from superior current capability.

MAGICO

Magico was created over almost two decades ago for the sole purpose of leading a no-holds-barred assault on what is possible in contemporary loudspeaker design. Inspired by the unique vision of industrial designer Alon Wolf, every Magico speaker is designed against the standard of perfect audio reproduction - live music. The company uses materials science intelligently, including the pioneering use of graphene in its bass drivers. From the ground-breaking Mini of 2004 to the A, S and the M Series masterpieces of today, Magico continues redefining the limits of technological development and what can be realised musically from a loudspeaker.

METAXAS & SINS

Bespoke audio manufacturer Kostas Metaxas long held a dream of remaking a classic of audio systems of old; the open reel (or reel-to-reel) analogue tape deck. Metaxas & Sins realised that goal with two exciting models; the epic, studio grade Papillon player/recorder and the more transportable TR-X `Tourbillon', which can be specified as player only or as a player/recorder in its own right.

Using the classic Stellavox players as a basis, Metaxas & Sins brought the open reel design up to date with computer-controlled motor systems and state-of-the-art componentry, as well as the elegant anodised touches and milgauss aluminium parts.

PRIMALUNA

Since 2003, PrimaLuna has created tube amplifiers with a unique construction found nowhere else. The company's technologies bring you closer to the music but do so at an extremely affordable price. With point-to-point wiring and sophisticated amp circuits, the amps share the same design aesthetic that's as refined as it is minimalist, and that fits perfectly with the sound they make.

Last year; PrimaLuna surprised us all with its first hybrid integrated amplifier. The EVO300 Floyd delivered the same effortlessly musical sound of its all-tube brothers, but with solid-state power on tap. You should always expect big things from PrimaLuna!

TECHDAS

Hideaki Nishikawa joined the audio industry around the time Goldfinger was released in the cinemas. For almost 60 years, he has turned his attention to making good sound better; along the way designing several masterpieces

including the Micro Seiki SX-8000 turntable. These decades of work are synthesised into the line of air-supported turntables from TechDAS. From the entry-level Air-Force V Premium to the titanic Air Force Zero (which weighs in at a mighty 330kg), Nichikawa includes the same ideals throughout; air bearing, air platter where possible, provision for multiple arms, and a build quality that puts the rest to shame.

TRANSPARENT AUDIO

Alongside its high-value off-the-shelf cable systems, Transparent Audio makes specialist cables dedicated for a specific connection. This level of dedication even includes creating a special cable resonant frequency profile made especially for high-end devices, effectively tailor-made cables for a particular choice of amplifier and loudspeaker, for example.

The company continues to go through painstaking research to develop ever better cable systems, as evidenced by last year's Generation 6 cables, which were the result of more than six years of intensive R&D into vibration and resonance control in state-of-the-art materials. Just a quick reminder; Transparent also offers a full range of Digital USB, AES EBU and RJ45 cables that bring music into your digital playback. That research and development shows through in vastly improved low-level performance and musical enhancement.

WILSON AUDIO

Few companies have so powerful a reputation in the high-end as Wilson Audio. The company's extensive range spans everything from small two-way bookshelf designs to man-sized, multi-box, infinitely adjustable speaker systems.

With a portfolio filled with new products, Wilson's output for 2022 is as exciting as it is different. With the LK; Willson Audio has created a smaller, easy to install, easy to manage 500W active subwoofer as a perfect match to the company's entry-point speaker range and beyond, while the Acoustic Diode brings the company's mastery of materials science to transform the way we mount loudspeakers to the floor.

THE ABSOLUTE SOUNDS STUDIO

Over the last 2 decades The Absolute Sounds Studio is the place in which we have sought refuge in peace and in confidence to evaluate all components that we distribute and decide not to distribute.

It is now open for trade customers to bring their favourite client or partner by appointments only for private audition with insanely good sounds.

Please make enquiries with your dealer.

Ricardo And A Number Of High End, Established & Respected Reviewers Share Their Thoughts On Aspects Of Enjoying Music On A System Consisting Of Professionally Assembled & Well Matched, Heart Ripping Audio Instruments.

These are their answers...

The Great Debate

by RICARDO FRANASSOVICI
Absolute Sounds

The great analogue vs. digital debate is fast becoming tribal, creating factions with strong opinions, more for the fighting than the quality of the music. We need to elevate the subject matter; although it's true to say the record industry has not been very helpful in recent years by not discussing the provenance of their pressings.

I love analogue, not only for the sound but for the whole quality of the experience; the large artwork, the liner notes, even the process of cueing up a record has become a meditative, totemic thing to me. But, while the sound of LP is often excellent and is still getting better; I'm not blind to the fact that digital audio has seen significant improvements too.

This digital improvement isn't simply down to better audio components; some of the great mastering engineers of the last 50 years have themselves mastered techniques of transferring their analogue tapes to 4xDSD (or similar).

Perhaps obviously, different formats sound different to one another. A glass CD sounds different (most would say 'far better') than a polycarbonate CD, even if the files on both carriers are the same. We know through listening that 180g vinyl will sound better than Dynaflex. All these media have a sound of their own. Ultimately, we instinctually choose and gravitate toward whatever flavour of format we prefer. For me, that puts LP at the top of the format tree, followed by open-reel tape, then SACD, CD and finally streaming bringing up the rear. Note that streaming can sound excellent, but one of my problems here is – once again – provenance.

So, instead, let's accept that we can get good sound from a range of sources, and each introduces its own sonic signature. I think that's better than blaming differences in quality on 'analogue' or 'digital.'

A Reel Revelation

by MATEJ ISAK
Editor - monostereo.com

The return of vinyl and tapes is a true rebirth, but analogue purists and connoisseurs see it differently. For them, these analogue media never disappeared; they were not up to speed when CD, digital files, and audio streaming came along.

The rapid demand for vinyl records led to a revival of old pressing plants and even new analogue media such as HD Vinyl, Master Cut Acetate, T Bone Burnett Iconic Originals, etc.

Not only is it easier than ever to find beloved music on Discogs, but companies like Acoustic Sounds and many more small labels like AudioNautes Recordings, UltraAnalogue Recordings, and others are releasing some superbly processed records and tape copies. There are also newly made tape machines like Metaxas & Sins.

LP records played on a perfectly balanced and finely tuned analogue turntable on an equally tuned high-end audio system can deliver a stunning reality that brings the listener remarkably close to the origins of music recorded in the studio or live.

The coveted first pressings of vinyl and audiophile releases can sound remarkable. Still, Reel to Reel's original copies takes everything a step further; revealing a uniquely faithful and immense superstructure of music, regardless of genre. Like superbly crafted vinyl, Reel To Reel can produce a spontaneity

of music reproduction that transcends the limits of the usual medium; where technology is secondary to music and where a superbly executed and calibrated tape machine becomes the chalk, brush, and charcoal on the infinite sonic canvas.

The analogue premium frontiers embody Wu Wei, stimulating our brain chemistry with electrons that allow a whole new dimension of music to unfold, with a more excellent chorus and continuity of the music. In the absence of the excessive focus that the digitized world enforces, vinyl records and analogue tapes offer a counterbalance, an ode to the wonder of music and the harmonic complexity of music's original message.

It's The Reel Thing

by KEN KESSLER

Author, Contributor - HiFiNews

Sometimes, you must suffer for your pleasures. And the finest sound reproduction in the home is only available from the least convenient, most expensive, near-obsolete, ill-supported format of them all: open-reel tape. It is the closest one can get to the original, analogue sound – and reality is analogue, not digital whatever anyone may tell you – and that is fact, as tapes are copied one-to-one, and do not suffer through myriad production stages as are LPs or CDs.

To enter the world of open-reel tape, you either salvage a used machine, or dig deep for one of the few models in current production. As for repertoire, sadly the record labels stopped issuing pre-recorded tapes in the 1980s, so all that's left are hugely expensive titles – often by artists of whom you're never heard, making music that wouldn't suit an airport lounge.

But those who do take the trouble to use open-reel tape, with its tribulations, are rewarded with authentic, deep, resonant bass, a vast soundstage, breathtaking transient attack, mid-band realism and other qualities no other medium can match. This has been shown to me by one of the world's greatest mastering geniuses, who showed me that technically no LP playback system nor frequency-limited digital source can hope to equal tape. Different, enjoyable, even dazzling, perhaps, but better than tape? No way.

It even works after the fact: copy a CD to open-reel tape and there is an ameliorative effect. This may defy the scientific types as it is illogical and there is no reason on earth why it should be so, but your ears will tell you otherwise. Reel-to-reel is expensive, it is inconvenient. But if your tastes are broad and your standards impossibly elevated, open-reel tape is to high-end audio what Romanée-Conti is to wine. There just isn't any better.

The Perils Of Over-Tuning

by ALAN SIRCOM

Editor - HiFi Plus

Some years ago, I attended the last of the TOP Audio shows in Milan. In one memorable room, the exhibitor had chosen a different set of 'correct' feet, platforms, vibration reducing pucks, fuses, grounding boxes, cables, and even choice of cable risers for each device in the system.

Consequently, the system sounded terrible!

Fine-tuning that can improve or even transform the performance of any audio system, but a piecemeal approach to fine-tuning can do more harm than good. Some companies have exploited this need for consistency by making everything apart from the audio electronics and loudspeakers, but this might be a step too far for some.

I follow the Sly Stone argument; It's A Family Affair. Ideally choose all the cables from the same 'family' (and if you are determined to ignore this, at most choose the one 'family' for power cords, and another for all the signal cables). Then choose all the feet from their own 'family', the same goes for grounding and so on. And, importantly, try each tuning family one at a time, rather than changing everything at once.

But if tuning can ruin a system, how can you tell if whether a tuning device is a force for good? We often get so carried away with the minutiae of a system that we fail to look at the bigger picture; good tuning protocols make you listen to the music, not just its component parts. Also, an acid test is to remove whatever you tried for a few days and see how you like the system as it was.

Finally, if you find yourself piling tweak upon tweak to your system take a break from tweaking or even back up a few steps. If in doubt, there's no shame in asking for help... from a good dealer.

Purity is Paramount

NOEL KEYWOOD

Editor - HiFi World

Audio purity comes in two main forms: simplicity of design and purity within components. There are upsides and downsides to both.

Design simplicity can degrade measured performance, fewer components

resulting in less gain and corrective feedback – a downside. But if the basic circuit is a good one, using audio-grade transistors or silicon chips, it can perform well with fewer components – an upside.

Valve amplifiers offer ultimate simplicity, especially Single Ended (SE) types. That's a reason why they are the Holy Grail of purity. A bit expensive and deftly heavy, but silky-smooth sound quality unlike anything else.

Then there is component purity, bringing audio grade components into the picture. The downside here – as you might expect – is cost. Whilst everyday parts cost pennies (cents), specialist parts can cost pounds (dollars), or be out on another planet, such as an MC input transformer. They dramatically increase cost – an MC phono stage input costs £3 with a silicon chip full of transistors, £30 with a transformer having no transistors. The transformer offers purity but these are rarely used.

More commonly, audiophile grade capacitors – especially electrolytics – are given premium status, getting talked up in website descriptions, and nowadays audio-grade silicon chips are appearing. (Which suggests that silicon chips never were audio grade!) These are some features to look out for.

High-performance audio equipment suits discrete circuitry, without resorting to integrated circuits (chips) – an approach to purity that's starting to re-appear. Designing with discrete circuit components is challenging, but computer design programmes aid success.

Purity improves sound quality; it's well worth pursuing. Keep an eye out for the approaches I've briefly talked about here.

Intelligent System Building Begins With The Power

by MICHAEL FREMER
Editor - trackingangle.com
Senior Editor - The Absolute Sound

People in the audio industry often talk about getting the basics right, but what does that mean? It means evaluating every aspect of a system. For example, start with the power because reproduced music is nothing but modulated alternating current.

Music lovers often overlook the importance of good power on a system. If your 'juice' is noisy, you may not necessarily hear it as 'noise' per se, but as Joni Mitchell sang in a very different context, "You don't know what you've got 'til it's gone". When the noise is gone, you'll know it!

Where possible, homeowners should hire an electrician to inspect their house wiring. Also consider building a separate dedicated spur for the audio system, creating a clean copper wire path from fuse box to plug socket.

However; that's not always possible or practical. Fortunately, power cords and conditioners made specifically for audio can act as a bulwark, limiting the impact of noise-creating elements (such as the fridge or phone chargers) on your system.

Staying with the basics, learn your room's acoustic characteristics to help figure out where to best place speakers and once situated, and a the very least get sidewall, floor; and ceiling first reflection relief. There's lots of effective room treatment available. Just ask any good dealer.

Finally, know your floor! A sprung wooden floor is often the enemy of high-grade turntables (a dedicated shelf might help) but finding the least 'springy' part of a floor can make a big difference to any system, vinyl-based or not. Note that springy floors can be rectified with the deliciously named 'turnbuckles' if you are rebuilding a room.

Of course, you can't make a mediocre system sound fantastic no matter how much you improve the power and the room, but you can make a fantastic system sound awesome!

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