

The Golden Ear

February 1998

Newsletter of the *Chicago Audio Society*

Volume 5 Number 2

This Month's Meeting

February 15th

Tweaks

Open Discussion and Demonstration

Are you getting the most out of your system? What items and little improvements would be beneficial to enhance your musical enjoyment? Do you have some tips to share with others that you've found to work well?

A few suggested topics:

- ▶ Mechanical and acoustical isolation products (tiptoes, cones, pucks, platforms and shelves, etc.) and resonance control and tuning devices.
- ▶ CD treatments (antistatic, cleaning fluids, etc.)
- ▶ Anything else which comes to mind, controversial or not (cable thingies, M&M's, dots, lava lamps, etc. ☺)

This will be a free-for-all where everybody gets a chance to demo what they bring along and discuss what differences they hear or don't hear (yes, we want to dispel myths and warn about placebo effects). The focus is on tweaks that work, cheap or not so cheap.

As a bonus, **Martin DeWulf**, editor of **Bound for Sound**, will attend and will have some things to say. Marty is a cool dude and may have some stories to tell and tweaks to share.

As always, bring along LPs and CDs to play.

phone number is (630) 773-2750. Newcomers are always welcome to attend a meeting without obligation: a \$5 fee is refundable on joining.

Last Month

Rich Sacks, Denny Robertson and Brian Walsh reported on what they saw and heard among the many high end audio exhibits at the Winter Consumer Electronics Show held recently in Las Vegas. They reported on official and unofficial sites, including the Alexis Park, Hilton, Debbie Reynolds, Howard Johnson's, and Golden Nugget. They mentioned some of the better sounding as well as the worst sounding systems. While bigger and more expensive sometimes equates to better sound, that certainly wasn't the case with several exhibits, with some notable turkeys as well as some cost effective systems which made for very enjoyable listening.

Rich Sacks wrote up his show report and distributed photocopies at the meeting, as well as some photographs taken at the show. Rich and Brian reported on some of the parties and press events held.

We also played music, including tracks from a number of CDs and LPs obtained at the show. The ad hoc system consisted of a Stan Warren modified Teac CD player with Virtual Mode filter and interconnect (Stan Warren recipe) made of two low cost Nordost cables; Linn Sondek/Ittok/Asak turntable/arm/cartridge; Vendetta Research phono stage; Lectrafile interconnect from phono stage to line stage; BAT VK-5i line stage preamp; Eric Fong interconnects from preamp to amp; Bedini 25/25 amp; MIT MH-750 speaker cable; Rogers LS3/5A speakers on stands. Thanks to **Bob Schneider** for

Meetings are held on the third Sunday of each month in the Pinehurst Room at Nordic Hills Resort in Itasca. The meeting begins at 2pm, doors open at 1. Nordic Hills

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bringing the speakers and stands. By the way, members wanting to or willing to provide equipment for meetings are invited to let us know.

All three people plan to attend next year's WCES, having had a good time.

There was also considerable open discussion on the topic of the refundable \$5 fee for newcomers to attend a meeting without obligation, and upon a vote it was approved. We also discussed publicity of Society meetings and featured guests, to attract new members. We plan to be more active in this area, and further ideas are welcome.

Here's Rich's WCES report, in case you missed it:

First, a few brief words about Las Vegas, as this was my first trip there as well as my first winter C.E.S. If you like Epcot, Disneyworld, or Universal you will probably enjoy Las Vegas even though it is an entirely different experience. Don't take children unless you have to, despite the publicity otherwise, but if you do it won't be the disaster it would have been in the past. If you haven't been to Las Vegas since 1992, and enjoyed your last visit by all means go—you won't believe the change. The sheer scope of the excess of the mega-casinos must be experienced. Take the Unofficial Guide to Las Vegas by Bob Sehlinger with you and you'll be ahead of 95% of everyone else. Don't gamble unless you currently gamble now and know what you're doing.

Read the chapter in the Unofficial Guide on gambling carefully, decide how much you want to lose for fun, or realize you are subsidizing my seafood buffet tonight!

Video & Home Theatre

As I have an interest in these areas, as I am sure a large number of our group do, an overview is in order. I was mightily impressed by the picture quality now obtained by admittedly expensive front and rear projectors throughout the show. In particular, at the Golden Nugget I was initially knocked out by the DVD picture on what I would estimate to be a 15 foot screen of the movie *The Fifth Element* a sci-fi film I had seen in the theatre about 5 months earlier. The picture from the Cinepro projector with Faroudja processor significantly surpassed the detail I had seen in the movie theatre. No sooner had I left this suite when I entered the Home Theatre Suite using the Theta Casablanca home theatre processor and Wilson Witts for speakers! However, the sound was at background levels and I forgot about the audio as I now saw the same movie even better and brighter with a Hughes 340 projector! It is indeed possible to far surpass the theatre in video quality using a \$20-25 DVD disk—just have at least an additional \$15-25K to complete the video setup alone—then comes the sound setup! However, I expect this to trickle down to more reasonable price levels in the future. The gains

in picture quality in the past 3 years strike me as great as those in the past 15-20 years previously!

At the Hilton, Vidikron had an all out video presentation using 2 of their \$50K Testarossa-like projectors simultaneously focused playing HDTV tape of National Geographic-like nature material. The picture could best be described as a National Geographic photograph in motion! The audio quality for most Home Theatre setups I found to be disappointing for the most part from an audiophile perspective, with far too much of the screech and boom that may have turned off some audiophiles from investigating the possibilities of home theatre. Even the Sunfire setup with Sunfire amps, the Sunfire subs, and all Martin Logan speakers just didn't have the ease of presentation.

But take heart, video warriors! An excellent sound emerged at the Jolida Audio Suite at the Alexis Park Hotel (where most of the high-end audio was concentrated). Using 5 Jolida integrated tube amps (I apologize for not knowing what the excellent moderately priced home theatre speakers were—I intend to find out) the movie *Das Boot* was played at loud levels (I would estimate peaks in the range of 110db!) to demonstrate that one can get detail, excitement, and dynamics without the epidemic screech and boom. An excellent demo, with all the equipment in the room (just a 32" TV) including TV, DVD, AC-3 processor and the audio under \$10K. As the German U-Boat dove deeper and deeper until the rivets began to explosively pop, it was indeed a riveting experience that gave one a sinking feeling!

Alexis Park Exhibits

The Alexis Park Hotel and Suites is where most (at least in terms of sheer numbers and traffic) of the high-end audio exhibits are located. All rooms have outdoor access, which led to doors being open or half open to the outside most of the time. Glad I took my coat from the car! The rooms themselves strike me as not solidly constructed enough to support optimal sound, especially those rooms on the second floor where I heard two setups where I thought the cartridge might self-destruct as someone walked normally in the room. It was apparent the Golden Nugget, the Debbie Reynolds, and even a somewhat decrepit Howard Johnsons, where some other high-end exhibitors showed were simply more solidly constructed and capable of better sound, all else being equal. Nevertheless, a few very good sounds emerged. Melos (who just was at our December meeting) was sounding excellent on the first day of the show using essentially the same equipment as at our meeting, except for different cabling (Nordost vs. Synergistic) and a different speaker (Von Schweikert VR-4 Gen II vs. Von Schweikert VR-4.5). Interestingly enough, the VR-4 II is the first speaker in the line not designed by Albert Von Schweikert himself, but by a 22 year old designer named Frank Deriggo. Whatever the reason, I (and Sedrick Harris of Melos) felt the sound was far better than what we had at the meeting.

Joseph Audio was sounding very nice using their \$2300/pr speaker with Golden Tube electronics (the new 200 watt tube monoblocks). But when the source changed from digital to analog on this system the sound went from very nice to awesome using a custom built acrylic turntable from Holland that Cardas will be importing, as well as using the Cardas Heart cartridge (made by Benz). The cost of the turntable/arm is \$15K, and I'm sure at least an additional 3-5K for the cartridge, but its nice when a premium priced product delivers, not to mention value oriented products like Joseph Audio speakers and Golden Tube electronics. I hope my picture of the table gives you some feel for the craftsmanship. Other fine sounds included Proac showing the new Response 5, Rogers with their LS3/5A and matching woofer column (one of Denny Robertson's favorites), and Audiostatic (now distributed by Threshold) showing essentially the updated version of Brian Walsh's speaker, which of course we had at the November meeting (thanks Brian!). One sound that impressed me from a value standpoint was that from Clements Audio showing their top of the line speaker at a whopping \$950/pr! It was driven by the 100 w/ch Aragon amp, Marantz CD player, and home-brewed twisted speaker wire! The sound was easily in the top 20% of the sounds I encountered at the show at a beer budget price.

Other excellent products included the Nagra tube preamp (complete with phono!) for \$9K. Considering the excellent reputation of the company (see the review in the February Fi magazine) this could actually be a good investment for the audiophile in this price bracket. This is one company that has a good chance of still being around 20 years from now! Their matching 50W triode amps sell for \$10k/pair. Most people in the room assumed that was the per unit price given Nagra's reputation and build quality!

And now, for my annual Turkey awards shared by two products. The first is a product line I have never liked - Westlake Audio speakers. If this were a product sold at Best Buy at Best Buy prices I could just ignore it like the others. But the prices are eye-popping (5 figures are reached at their mid-line models) and the sound is reminiscent of Best Buy. In one of their recent ads they show a picture of a box surrounded by foam with the comment-"Got Muffs?" Well, at their setup they had a large box (approx.4.5' x 3' x 3') surrounded at the outside perimeter of the box with the same grey foam that one sees computer monitors packed in! A five figure speaker with a nice wood finish cosmetically destroyed! And since there is at least a 1 inch recess from the wood edge to the baffle what difference will it make? The grills were off and I saw about 3 or 4 drivers towards the top aligned horizontally! The sound and appearance were reminiscent of standing in front of a car audio display at Best Buy or Circuit City!

The other unfortunate sound came from a source I never would have expected-E.A.R. and Tim de Paravacini, who is something of a legend in audio for his tube designs. I entered

the room with his electronics laid out with an interesting looking speaker about 7 feet tall with 32 identical small gold drivers on the front handling frequencies from 100 Hz on up and a row of woofers on the inside baffle of each speaker. There was no digital! Instead, an Elite Townsend turntable rested on the top shelf. I eagerly awaited the sound and I assure you it was dreadful. I really suspect that there might have been some technical problem somewhere, perhaps the cartridge, but what concerns me is how anyone could play something sounding so wrong and not investigate or even not play if necessary! This is exactly what Audio Research did at their large suite at the Golden Nugget, where they were getting excellent sound from digital through their equipment through Wilson Grand Slam speakers, but opted not to play the turntable due to perceived setup problems-a decision I applaud!

The Rest of the High End

Besides the regular C.E.S. show, other high end manufacturers opted for financial or room quality reasons to display at other hotels-namely the Debbie Reynolds, the Howard Johnson (a real class place-the sign as you enter says IHOP and casino straight ahead!), and the Golden Nugget. At the Debbie Reynolds the rooms were obviously capable of supporting better sound, although size was definitely an issue, and perhaps the best overall sound at the show (at least with digital) was heard at the Quintessence Audio setup showing their \$40K Summit loudspeakers driven by limited edition Convergent Audio Technology electronics, a Wadia transport (a Luxman used a prior day was at least as good) and a custom modified Museatex Bidat Transport. This system had an excellent balance of bass,dynamics,imaging,detail, and delicacy in a room far too small for a 7 foot 300 lb. speaker where one was sitting even closer than the distance between the speakers.Nevertheless an excellent sound by any accounts.

At the other joint, namely the Howard Johnsons, the most impressive sound was delivered by David Berning using the top of the line \$10K Rosinante Signature speakers and his new 10 watt OTL and single-ended amp. Given the 95db efficiency of the speakers this amp/speaker combination was a real sweetheart. Brian Walsh played his John Gielgud CD with "To be or not to be..." and the my ability to follow the rhythm of his recitation was as good as I've heard. I could see some hard core tube-o-philes or those who don't enjoy large scale speakers possibly enjoying this setup as much as any at the show. Finally, the Golden Nugget. As a venue, everything the Howard Johnson's isn't-this place is. The exhibitors here had large salons typically 2000-5000 square feet. The exhibitors here included some of the "heavy hitters" of the high end who wanted the best possible space to show their products including: Audio Research, Spectral, Magnepan, Theta, Wadia, and Wilson. I alluded earlier to the excellent sound of the Wilson Grand Slam in the Audio Research suite. Spectral also had a very fine sound (one that might be the best for those who favor what I would call the

cutting edge, in a positive way, of solid state sound) with the Avalon Eidolon speakers. Magnepan was overachieving with a Bryston bi-amped setup on what I believe is their new \$1495/pr speaker-the MG 1.6. As an ex-Magnepan admirer and owner I would have liked to have heard these with tubes. At the Wadia suite, I did get to hear the flagship the MG-20 driven by the Audio Research VT-200. This should have had the makings of some kind of sonic nirvana, but fell far short. In speaking to Sedrick Harris of Melos (and MG-20 owner) he repeated his conviction that this speaker just doesn't come to life without biamping. As good as the sound was in these rooms I still found myself partial to the Quintessence room and analog at Joseph Audio as personal favorites.

Product of the Show

No, it wasn't at the Alexis Park, the Debbie Reynolds, or any of the others mentioned, but rather at the Sands Convention Center, which is comparable to the McCormick Place floor with all the attendant noise, crowds, and chaos. The product can only be described as a harmonic enhancement system. I can hear the groans and gasps already--has Rich been brainwashed by all the flashing lights and chiming slot machines of Las Vegas? Don't count on it. Consider this a preliminary report. A sample will be on its way to try on my own system (perhaps a future meeting may materialize from this).

The company is True Dimensional Sound, Inc., formed in 1990, and developed its product from research to dramatically improve SONAR retrieval systems used in nuclear submarines. The product has now recently evolved to be a totally passive device--no power supply, no capacitors, and according to the company uses no phase changes or time delays simply using a patented inductive circuit to restore fundamental and harmonic frequencies that already exist in the original signal. OK, that's nice--but does it work? Based on a demo right on a noisy showroom floor I'd have to say yes. The system was high-end Best Buy with the best part being a low priced pair of B&W mini-towers. I played a CD I was somewhat familiar with--Rickie Lee Jones' "Pop,Pop!" and the resulting sound was what I would expect from a good "Best Buy" system. Switching in the device was comparable to using a stereo/mono switch on WFMT and upgraded the resultant sound quality to what would be considered an audiophile sound. The basic home unit will retail for \$195 with an audiophile unit forthcoming for \$695. If this product by some chance turns out to be a disappointment in audiophile applications (my initial gut level feeling is that this won't be

the case) I still believe it will transform the sounds we hear from just about every other sound source other than our "big rigs". Thus far, the product has been used in professional recording applications mainly, with some very positive testimonials in their literature. I do believe that this product has the potential to influence audio as extensively or more as Dolby, but possibly much more for the better and that many in the High End will attack it regardless of merits. Stay tuned!

A Final Disclaimer

All opinions and observations expressed are obviously strictly my own and my apologies for anyone who may take offense at anything expressed. I'm just trying to tell it like it is. Please excuse the lack of specifics on model numbers, etc. in suites--I had to compose this extemporaneously without notes at the last minute. To do the show full justice would probably require the efforts of 5-10 people each writing 5-10 times as much as I did. Hey, how about it? Wouldn't you like to go to the show next year? See me and I can explain how to simplify the logistics. If you've read this far, all I can say is THANKS!

-Rich Sacks

Future Meetings

March 15 - To be announced. We're working to finalize this and future months meetings.

Industry News

Threshold and its associated companies (Forte, PS Audio, and US distribution of Audiostatic) reportedly have gone out of business. No word yet on where service will be available.

Happy Listening!

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