

Chicago Audio Society Newsletter, August, 2005

Meeting Notice - Sunday, August 21st, 2005 2:00PM-5:00PM at Brian Richardson's home

Brian will be demonstrating an all tube multi-channel SACD Magnepan setup. And a redesigned room-Brian has been very busy since last summer's meeting! Brian plans to write up a detailed explanation of everything he did to his room to satisfy the typical insatiably curious audiophile. Also, he appreciates if anyone who can would bring either a side dish or dessert. We all had a great time at Brian's last August, so hope to see you all there.

JUNE MEETING RECAP

Joe Jurzec of Jam 'n Audio (<http://www.responseaudio.com/jamnaudio.htm>), a member and previous cohost at the meetings of SP Technologies speakers and Audiopoints products, demonstrated a system of his latest products consisting of:

Dynamic Audio One speakers from Daedalus Audio

<http://www.daedalusaudio.com/>

Reference 8 100 watt monoblocks from NuForce <http://www.nuforce.com/>

SWL 9.0SE linestage from Modwright <http://www.modwright.com/>

Denon 3910 with Ultimate Truth Modifications <http://www.modwright.com/>

Empirical Design Interconnects and Speaker Cable <http://www.empiricalaudio.com/>

SP-3 and SP-004 Sistrum racks/platforms from Star Sound Technologies

<http://www.audiopoints.com/>

In addition we were among the very first to hear the new 300 watt monoblocks from NuForce. This was a real treat to hear some of the very latest audiophile products at one place and time. Of course, they are demonstrated by Joe himself. And I believe all of the above products will be on display at the upcoming Rocky Mountain Audio Fest 2005 (www.audiofest.net) – more information on this further on in the newsletter!

The Daedalus speakers have all asymmetrical sides to break up standing waves and have 2 identical tweeters with one tweeter canted at an angle to increase dispersion. With 96 dB efficiency there was certainly no power shortage here and the 300 watt monoblocks sounded great as well as the 100 watt ones. The Modwright Denon 3910 had a substantial outboard power supply that I believe also incorporates the tube output section. Quite a bit of literature was on hand. Our thanks to Joe for a musical and involving meeting.

JULY MEETING RECAP

Rick Berta opened up his home to members for the July meeting. Two high efficiency systems were on hand. The first utilized a Lowther driver with a circular horn with a large bass bin off to the side that I believe used focal woofers in a horn loaded arrangement. The other setup combined the 15" Lambda low frequency driver crossed over low at 50 Hz, with an 8" French design PHY-HP extended range driver (<http://www.phy-hp.com/English/Products/Products.html>) and Fostex tweeters (<http://www.fostex.com/>) crossed over at a high range (about 8kHz). This system was also actively biamped. Both systems were driven by custom-built 300B amps from Rick's friend Minh from Canada. The digital player was a modified Denon 3910 by Exemplar Audio (<http://www.exemplaraudio.com/>). There was particular enthusiasm for the Lambda/PHY-HP/Fostex setup which members persuaded Rick to engage in a 6-man custom

acoustic room modification (relocating a pool table). At which point, all agreed the sound got much better. In addition, Rick treated us to some great food, including great beef mole tacos with all the fixings. Rick asked to thank all the members who braved glitchy Mapquest directions and came out, and we certainly want to thank Rick for all his hospitality and his unique high-efficiency audio setups.

ROCKY MOUNTAIN AUDIO FEST

Attention all audiophiles! The 2nd Annual Rocky Mountain Audio Fest will be held in Denver, CO Friday, Saturday, and Sunday September 30th-October 2nd. All the details are available at: <http://www.audiofest.net/>. I regret that I was unable to attend the first one last year and will not miss this one. No less a veteran than Robert Harley stated that he felt he heard more good sound setups at this show than any CES/T.H.E. Show combination he had ever attended. Feedback I got from a variety of sources echoed the same sentiments. The economics of this show enable many smaller, high-end manufacturers to attend than the C.E.S. show, and the show is geared especially towards audiophiles. In addition, a great number of the large audiophile mainstream brands will be on hand, if not directly by some manufacturers, then by a number of high-end dealer setups. And the Denver Marriott seems to fare better than many venues as far as having decent sounding rooms for setup. If you've ever thought of attending an audio show, try to do this one (but as Yoda might say, "There is no try..."). Audio Society members with ID are given a discounted 3 day admission of \$20 vs the already very reasonable \$30 for preregistering before September 25th. Discounted rates of \$79-\$89/night have been worked out with the Marriott. We will get ID's for anyone planning to attend.

BAROQUE BITS PT. I by Brian Richardson

(This was an older Baroque Bits that was rescued from the Bit Bucket by Brian.)

There are a plethora of new Baroque operas performed on original instruments being released at this time. Emmanuelle Haim's "Le Concert d'Astree" (The Concert of Stars) is consistently coming out with new, exciting readings of famous but rarely heard Baroque masterpieces. In the last Baroque Bits, I discussed her rendition of Monteverdi's L'Orfeo, which I would still recommend. She has also come out with a new version of Henry Purcell's Dido and Aeneas, with Susan Graham as Dido and Ian Bostridge as Aeneas. Dido and Aeneas is an opera I have actually performed in at the University of Illinois, although we did a truncated version that was in publication at that time, some 30 years ago. Haim's version is in three acts, and has witches and sorceresses and other metaphysical fun stuff that adds color and excitement to the score.

Christoph Gluck has had a couple of his operas revived recently, his Alceste with John Elliot Gardiner (English Baroque Soloists, Monteverdi Choir, Anne Sofie Von Otter, and Paul Goves) on Phillips, and now another "Orfeo", Orphee et Eurydice with Mark Minkowski and Les Musiciens du Louvre. Minkowski did a recent version of Handel's Giulio Cesare (Julius Caesar), which got rave review, and now this new Gluck work. I haven't listened to the entire opera yet, but what I've heard are crisp playing, beautifully clear and detailed sound, and ravishing orchestration.

The Arkiv label has re-released what many people consider to be one of the very best versions of Handel's Messiah on SACD, the recording with Paul McCreech and the Gabrieli Consort and Players, with soloists Dorothea Roeschmann, Susan Gritton, Barnarda Fink, Charles Daniels, and Neal Davies. This is a lean, crisp sound on this recording, and may not please those used to the massive forces and Romantic interpretations, but I found it quite enjoyable, with imaginative ornamentations to the arias by the soloists.

YoYo Ma has come out with a new Baroque recording with Ton Koopman and the Amsterdam Baroque Orchestra, "Vivaldi's Cello", with cello peices by Vivaldi, and Vivaldi pieces that have been transcribed for cello. This is a very enjoyable recording with good sonics and authentic interpretations.

Finally, as a musical curiosity, did you know that Ben Franklin, amongst his many accomplishments, invented a musical instrument that he called the Glass Harmonica. Do you know the sound that a wine glass makes when you rub a wetted finger around the top edge and it makes a very ethereal ringing sound? Well, Ol' Ben had glass cups of varying sizes made, arranged from big to small on a rotisserie wheel operated by a foot pedal. The soloist would play the instrument by rubbing the spinning glasses with his fingers. Thomas Jefferson claimed the Glass Harmonica was "the greatest gift offered to the musical world of this century." Many famous men composed for this instrument, including Mozart, Beethoven, and Donizetti. The sound of the instrument is both ethereal and a bit piercing, but in the way that a synthesizer, with it's pure waveforms, is piercing. The Glass Harmonica developed a bad reputation for causing madness in the men who specialized in playing it. As it turns out, instruments of the day were manufactured with leaded glass crystals, and these unfortunate musicians went mad from lead poisoning, probably from constantly licking their fingers while playing the instrument. In recognition of it's reputation, Donizetti, in the famous "Mad Scene" from his Lucia di Lammermoor, the Glass Harmonica plays as Lucia sings "Un armonia celeste, di', non ascolti?" (Say, can you hear a celestial harmony?)

Baroque Bits PT II by Brian Richardson

As usual, there is a plethora of new Vivaldi Opera recordings, all of them excellent, only some of which I have listened to yet.

Orlando Furioso, with the Ensemble Matheus, conducted by Jean-Christophe Spinosi, with Chicago's own Jennifer Larmore in the cast as Alcina, was voted the opera of the month by Gramophone. It is an excellent recording by the same group that did La Verita in Cimento. This is on the Naïve label. Performance I'd put in the 3 and a half star range, and sound in the 3 star range.

Farnace by the Spanish group Le Concert Des Nations conducted by Jordi Savall can be had in either a complete Opera version or a Favorite Aria version. The Favorite Aria version is a good deal at about 8 bucks, on the Alia Vox label. I like the sound quality (4 stars), the singers, with Sara Mingardo as the only recognizable name to me, all do a very good job, and the performance is engaging.

Andromeda Liberata on the Archiv label is a wonderful find. The manuscript had languished in a library until some musicologist recognized one of the arias as identical to an aria signed by the Red Priest himself. I love this recording. The sound is superb (5 stars), the performances by everyone is committed, spirited, and involving (5 stars). This Serenata (not opera, not oratorio) has either been composed entirely by Vivaldi or is a pastiche of a number of compositions by different composers of the era, however, to my ears, it all sounds gloriously like Vivaldi.

Bazajet is a brand new Vivaldi opera recieving first class reviews in Gramophone, with a stellar cast including David Daniels, Ildebrando d'Arcangelo and others. I haven't heard it yet, but I am looking forward to it.

There are two good solo soprano CD's - Renee Fleming's "Handel" CD and Isabel Bayrakdarian's "Cleopatra" CD. Renee Fleming's creamy soprano is heartbraekingly lovely on the adagio soli. She negotiates the florid coloratura arias well, but not with a lot of room to spare. The recorded sound is top notch, on the Decca label. Bayrakdarian's CD is a collection

of Baroque arias of the character Cleopatra. In it are arias from Carl Heinrich Graun's Cleopatra e Cesare, Johann Adolf Hasse's Marc'Antonio e Cleopatra, G F Handel's Giulio Cesare, and a world premiere recording of Johann Mattheson's Cleopatra. The sound is first rate (5 stars) and the performance is likewise. Bayrakdarian has no problems with the coloratura passages and is one of my favorite performers when she comes to the Lyric Opera, last seen in Beethoven's Fidelio. The revelation in this CD is Mattheson's opera, where the last four tracks chart Cleo's confrontation with her own death, decision to die, singing to the kiss of the snake "Wer in seinem Busen nährt Basilisk", and finally "So come, come poisonous vermin" where she dies. The orchestration is highly effective with hushed, whispering strings, the voice fading away, and the opera and disc ending on an unresolved harmony.

Biber fans can rejoice in two new discs - John Holloway has followed up his magnificent Unam Ceylon CD on ECM with Der Turken Anmarsch. The sound is 5 stars (ECM's recordings these days can scarcely be matched), and the performance is likewise. It is amazing once again how beautiful a violin, organ and harpsichord can be together in a beautiful acoustic space. And, if I haven't mentioned it before, there's a Chesky SACD of Biber and Schmelter Dance music by Ars Antiqua Austria. Another 5 star effort all the way around.

Bach fans may be tempted by Gustav Leonhardt's "English Suites and Partitas" on Virgin Classics "4 Pleasure" label. Leonhardt's interpretations are peerless, and you get 4 CD's for the price of one. The sound is about 3 stars. I am spoiled by SACD recordings of harpsichord, so this rating may seem a bit low to others.

On ECM, there is a wonderful CD of the Complete Music for Piano and Violincello by Beethoven, with Andras Schiff and Miklos Perenyi. Sound quality is 4 and a half stars, and the performance is transcendent - 5 stars (or more).

Finally, I wanted to mention a couple of Romantic SACD's. AnneSophie Mutter's new DG SACD of Tchaikovsky's and Korngold's violin concerti with her husband Andre Previn conducting the Vienna Philharmonic. In the Tchaikovsky, Mutter does the traditional cuts in the last movement, which some may like and others not. I prefer Tchaikovsky's version, but one cannot argue with Mutter's interpretation. The Korngold concerto is not in the standard repertoire, being comprised of some themes from his movie scores. But Korngold wanted this music to receive a wider audience appreciation. I liked it. Then, The Vienna Philharmonic performs Tchaikovsky's 6th Symphony conducted by Valery Gergiev. This is the best recording of Tchaikovsky's 6th in my collection. Most conductors capture the depression and resignation in the score, but most recordings make it sound like a defeat - Gergiev allows displays of anger and rage of a Great Soul confronting the inevitability of fate and death - "Rage, rage against the dying of the light" indeed.

UPCOMING MEETINGS

A number of interesting things in the works! Details to follow.