

World's Best Amplifier?

ASR's Revolutionary Emitter II



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The Absolute Sound

Issue 156

The Best Amp Ever ?

HP's WORKSHOP Revolution in a Black Box The ASR Emitter II Exclusive

Harry Pearson

No component since the magazine's inception in 1973 has troubled me as much as the ASR Emitter II Exclusive, a German-made-and-design solid-state amplifier.

Not because it is a flawed product – quite the opposite.

This amp is so far beyond the usual that I call it “**revolutionary**”, and this in a field where design breakthrough are, at best, evolutionary.

It has taken me six months to try and get its measure, and in the process I've had to upgrade the reference system to meet the ASR's mettle. The essential elements of its

performance defy usual descriptions at least with the audio language we have at our disposal today. And that is why it is troublesome.
What words do you use to describe the absence of the usual colorations indigenous to electronics – when they just aren't there ?

I have been asking myself : how can I find the words to give the reader not just the sense of what this amplifier sounds like but of the experience of listening to music through it ? How do you convey how something *doesn't* sound, at least in the ways to which we've grown accustomed ?

There is enough sophistication in the design of the circuitry to give technofreaks the frizzies.

The Emitter's technical intricacies are ferocious and would require an entire essay onto themselves and that is not something I am, at this point, inclined to tackle.

However, one of, if not the, most critical differences lies in the amplifier's topology. With the Emitter II Exclusive you do not need an intervening linestage.

It comes with a battery-powered input stage (*some might liken it to a passive "preamp", which it isn't, but if it were, it would be one with balls*) so powerful that the usual criticisms we have about battery-operated devices – restricted dynamic and frequency ranges – just don't apply here. In this regards the Emitter is not dissimilar in performance characteristics to ASR's justly acclaimed battery-driven phonostage. (i.e. the Basis Exclusive phonoamp)

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There are not, and this isn't incidental, any relays in the input stage, so it is as pure as pure can be in this regard. Our unit is rated at 280Wpc into 8 Ohms, 500 into 4, and 900 into 2. In addition to its sleek-looking basic chassis, the ASR comes with two outboard power supplies as well as a separate battery-powered supply for the input stage, good for a hundred hours or so, and simple as can be to recharge.

The virtue of its input stage is that you can plug the outputs of a phonostage or CD player directly into the amp, and so the ASR's designer, Friedrich Schafer, call this an integrated amplifier, ***but it is not integrated in any sense that this reviewer has ever thought of.*** It is so versatile you may, if you must, use its input section with an external (AC-powered) linestage. But why bother ?

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By high-end standards, its \$27,000 cost is relatively reasonable, considering that you don’t need a duded-up linestage, that its power output (and, like tube vintages of yore, this amp sounds more dynamic than its power rating would suggest) is more than sufficient, and that (given the value of today’s dollar overseas) it is imported.

Its “authority” was evident from the start. I was half-expecting a Teutonic solid-state sound. But that I didn’t get. Indeed, there was no transistorized “footprint” I could detect. No hardness, no constrictions, no electronic “glare.” Some of my listening-panel members suggested at first that I was impressed with the Emitter in part because it did not exhibit the sonic signature of solid-state devices. But that just wasn’t so, because neither did it impart the identifying fingerprints of tube electronics—no softness of focus nor any of the forgiv-

ing character of most tube gear at the frequency extremes. No dynamic compression of fortissimo blockbuster passages nor any dynamic smearing, either. Nope. Over time, I became aware that there is an almost ineffable “something” about the way this amplifier refuses to interact with prerecorded signals that is unique in my listening experience. It seems as if it keeps its own counsel, refusing to add or subtract anything when it sees an analog or digital source, thus allowing the two very different encoding processes to speak more purely, each with its own individual voicing.

One of the great astonishments, at first, to every person who auditioned the system, was the way the best digital recordings sounded.

Before my sessions with this amp, I was only half-conscious of all the ways in which digital recordings interact, to their detriment, with the sound of solid-state, and only a little more so of some of the more esoteric ways analog recordings and tube electronics combine to produce (an off too) lush and forgiving synergies—those not inconsonant with what the ear hears as natural.

I found the ASR’s performance so bewitching, authoritative, and just plain dazzling, that I invited other trained ears in for an audition and asked several of them to write their unvarnished observations and impressions of the amplifier. I assembled this impromptu listening panel to confirm (or not) my enthusiasm, and their thoughts and reactions (somewhat edited and not all of them used) accompany this article, and not always in ways I expected. I certainly didn’t need anyone else’s opinion to confirm mine about the singularity of

this product, but it is a comfort to have some backup when you begin throwing around the word “revolutionary.”

By a fluke of circumstances, the listening sessions with the ASR began with digital sources. The road to analog was fraught with difficulties that arose elsewhere in the system.

Analog aside for the moment, the initial setup was relatively crude compared with what we would be able to achieve as we upgraded the system to meet the amp’s sonic potential. As it was to turn out, the ASR provided so much resolution, and without any of the annoying anomalies we’ve come to associate with the so-called *high-definition* electronics, that we were able to radically improve upon the overall sound of the Sea Cliff reference. Indeed, each new component we introduced into the chain immediately and definitively exposed individual differences, for the better, and sometimes for the worse.

The speakers were the Altec Exotica Grand References, which were to go through several iterations (not to mention a name change to Nola, Altec backwards); most of the basic wiring was Nordost, and much of that Valhalla. This too would go through extensive modifications. And we started out using the two-piece Lector CD player, the CDP-7T. After some experimentation, we found the Hurricane tube monoblock from Antique Sound Labs the best match for driving the Exotica woofer towers and providing continuity with the ASR, whose “character” they match. This was the way we began the listening.¹

Back to the digits. One of the great astonishments, at first, to every person who auditioned the system (including yours truly), was the way the best digital recordings sounded. Shockingly musical, given our uniformly low expectations, was the sound, even with the simplest player we used, the original Lector.²

In the last issue, I mentioned two recordings we used as reference right

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1 I have simplified and compressed some of the details about this setup. Aside from the DynaVector XV-15 moving-coil cartridge and the Hurricane amps, nearly every other component we used during the half-year or so of evaluation was either upgraded or replaced.

2 The CDP-7T, by the way, must be thoroughly acoustically isolated if it is not to exhibit a kind of midbass bulge other reviewers have quickly noted. It has been our experience that inexpensive combo players as well benefit from careful setup; that is, if you want to get something approaching bottom-octave performance from them. The Lector’s importer, View Goldstein of Fanfare International in New York, notes that experimentation with different brands of tubes in the Lector will give, often as not, substantially better sound.

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In the last issue, I mentioned one recording we used as reference from the beginning, recordings that were almost indistinguishable from excellent analog and in some respects preferable to their LP counterparts. One was Hanson's *The Composer and His Orchestra*

<Mercury>, the other a compilation disc with cuts from the original *Winds in Hi-Fi* album, most spectacularly those from Percy Grainger's *Lincolnshire Posy*, notably "The Lost Lady Found.)" (*Later on, we came across the superior JVC XRCD transfer, done in L>A>, not in Japan, of London/Decca recordings of Mehta's classic take on Holst's **The Planets**, particularly "Saturn" and "Uranus", and the Ricci/Gamba hifi frolic through Sarasate's **Carmen Fantasie**, a set of transcriptions for violin and orchestra.)*

It's what we hear in unamplified sounds, be they in a hall or from the voices of people hearby.

There was none of the strain almost always evident on high-level fortissimos, none of the glass and grain, and none of the high-frequency edginess or stress on expects. We always had a sense of power in reserve, even at those very moments that before on these discs had sonically undone the sense of realism that digital was supposed to afford.

Not only was there a top octave, but also a heretofore unrevealed airiness and often delicacy way up yonder. Most striking was an immediacy to the sound that was more analog-like than digital. None of us had, I think, suspected that the 14/44 system had this kind of potential.

The insertion of better sounding CD player into the system – the four-piece Lector digi-drive setup, the Stibbert player from Bluenote, and , to top them all, the US\$40,000 super-player, the Jadis JD-1 MKII (available along with the company's tubed electronics, in North America) – led to a much more spectacular naturalness (I hope this isn't an oxymoron). The Bluenote and the Jadis, in particular, did not exhibit the darkness of the Lectors; the Bluenote was on the yang side, with the kind of lightness we've encountered with the Edge electronics, while the Jadis' inherent "character" was reminiscent of the best tubed units, say, Audio Research during Wm. Z. Johmson's design heyday there. The Jadis, in particular, rendered a spectacular width of Macrodynamics. As the quality of CD player increased (and none we used were less than inherently musical, something we could not have said about the pre-Burmester designs), we got significantly better resolution of hall ambience. **Actually, the amount of hall ambience on these records proved illuminating to more than one panel member, including this writer, who had always supposed that digital vitiated the ambient signature of a recording site.**

On the Hanson CD, you can clearly tell that Hanson has recorded his comments in an empty hall, and the better the player, heard through the ASR, the more ambience retrieved. You can even hear the walls behind Hanson. When the instrumental excerpts are played, you hear the sound bounce off the opposite and back walls; it is the clarity of this that is the revelation.

Remember that this transfer was overseen by the one and only Wilma Cozart Fine, a key player on the Mercury team and possessor of some of the best ears I have ever come up against. And the transfer was done in 1996, well before the important improvements in digital transfer technology. I am sorry to say that a few listeners, who did not hear the analog playback once we had it perfectly dialed in, thought the ASR made digital sound *better* than analog. In time, this would set me to thinking about the way the ASR did not (or refused to, if you want me to be poetic about it) modulate with the digital signal (on any of the players). **Which is why, I think, the digital just didn't sound any more**

“digital” than the ASR sounded “transistorized”. Once upon a time, I did speculate on the way transistors modulated noise components as if they were part of the music, as opposed to the way tubes modulated noise elements in a separate plane (like degrees of dirt upon a wind-shield).

The *raison d’être* for a battery-operated input stage, of course, is the reductions of the exaggerated noise floor in the electronics. This reduction is the result of the isolation of the input stage from the power line. If it is, as I suspect, then the audibly reduced noise floor inherent in this design pays off in allowing greater **“purity”** (yes, purity) to shine through from digital sources. **The transistor cannot modulate with the noise, cannot treat it as part of the musical signal.**

With the ASR battery-operated phonostage – even before we laid hands on the Emitter – we were able to build on this insight and reduce the noise floor in other parts of the system, e.g., the wiring setup, the isolation devices, and the turntable itself.

Several of the listening panel invitees became convinced that the merit of the sound lay not so much in the ASR amp as in the entirety of the system itself. simple enough **My response to this is simple enough : Before the ASR we did not get and were not able to get this degree of realism – the ASR made the critical, even magical, difference.**



I think this amplifier is revolutionary, because, mostly, of the things it doesn't do.

Having said this much, I think I should say that the ASR Emitter is not without an inherent coloration of its own. It is on the yin side of the yin/yang spectrum, by which I mean it is more darkly hued than any competing design from Edge in the solid-stage field or Audio Research in tubes. It is not as dark as some of the older

Madrigal/Levinson designs, but its “colour”, now that I think it over, is close to that of the Hurricane amps.

(In the case of darkish sounding tube and solid-state gear, both then and now, that character came from the application of large amounts of distortion-lowering feedback.)

And the Emitter can be temperamental, you have to take care in using its switches or you'll cause it to shut down. A few minutes with a knowing dealer, getting a feel for its functions, will save you both confusion and grief once you get it home. But then, if it weren't difficult at times, it wouldn't be high-end, would it ?

The ASR has no difficulties in recreating soundstage width. Its performance in generating a field of depth is striking – just maybe the most realistic I've heard. Normally, even with “layered” depth and a sense of great front-to-back spaciousness, the best amps are missing something tricky to describe (using our current language) but instantly audible.

Before I get around to the differences we perceived on analog sources once we got the setup optimized, I want to discuss the changes wrought in the system itself. The ASR served as the focal point, the “enabler”, if you will, that allowed us – me, Danny Gonzalez (the successor to Scot Markwell and Mike Mercer) and some of the designers themselves – to fine-tune the jazzy-wits out of the primary reference.

I have in past issues described the sound of most of the components we had on hand when the ASR arrived, and more recently, I have tracked some of the improvements in the associated equipment, while delicately sidestepping the performance of the ASR that enabled these upgrades.

Carl Marchisotto, the designer of the big Nola (Alon) speakers, upgraded the main tower's three-way crossover unit – fancy new transformer windings – and that provided smoother integration of a system that had already demonstrated a degree of continuousness difficult to find in other major designs. He also devised better isolation for that external crossover box and ditched the wires connecting it to the speaker system in favor of Nordost wires, and this led to an improvement in clarity and low-level resolution.

Harry Weisfeld upgraded his modestly (for highend) priced Scoutmaster turntable in several respects, which we have already detailed. It is now a Super Scoutmaster Plus, and there are still improvements to come. The most audible mods were his installation of Nordost wiring in the turntable and arm, as well as his inclusion of the HRX motor assembly to drive the table. The noise floor was further lowered and the Nordost led to far greater clarity, like unto Salome removing a veil or two.

While we flirted with several cartridges, most notably the Benz Ebony LP, which was much to our liking for its sheer musicality, we chose to stick with the Dynavector XV-1S, which is the first five-star cartridge I have evaluated. Though the importer would rather I didn't, I have to say that, in our experiment, the XV-1S had to be tracked at higher than recommended force. We worked with both 2.7 and 2.9, each provided a degree of life and tracking stability simply not present at 2.1 grams. Since we had a second sample of this cartridge we were able to do some A/B work, especially useful when the Kuzma straight-line air-bearing arm and table arrived as a challenge to the VPI. More on this another day.

Not all was happy times in the analog-playback games. Clearaudio's "Everest" system (so named because it rises to waist-high level from the floor) struck me, with all cartridges we used with its two modified Souther straight-line arms – perfect nightmares to setup and keep tuned – as being oddly heavy in the bottom octave or so. In this regard, it reminded me, at a somewhat more leaden level, of a similar rise in the Miyabi Lab 45 cartridge that we did not use in these sessions.

There were more changes than I can document in this part of the essay. However, two of the more striking ones came when we made changes to the system setup that we could have done well before.

One, at *Hi-Fi+* editor Roy Gregory's insistence, was a two-stage revamping of the Nordost speaker cables and interconnect installation.

The second stage came when we installed the Nordost Thor AC distribution device. This second modification, at Classic Records' Mike Hobson's urging, was the removal of a slew of components we had stashed away in Music Room 3, which effectively increased the size of the room & reduced some unwanted diffraction effects.

And, lest we forget, there was the aforementioned upward evolution in the quality of CD playback gear to the remarkable Jadis JD-1 MKII, a tube based deck and decoder that does for digital playback what a massive tubeamp, like the Audio Research 600 Watter, does for inefficient multi speaker systems.

I have not, as many of you will observe, tried to describe the sonic effects of each of the improvements we made. Each effect, though, was immediately audible and worked to the advantage of the music reproduction. There were, however, two consistent ones.

First, each change brought about a lowering of the noise floor, which could be heard in the way that low-level details, normally buried in the muck – bass harmonics for instance – came to life, or to audibility. You could hear more of music's subtle cues, the things that lend a "life" to reproduced sound, not the least of which was an enhancement of the microdynamic contrasts that give unamplified music its "kick".

And, secondly, the changes increased the sense of transparency of the entire soundstage/space.

Now, I, for one, had never associated transparency with the kind of velvet-colored "character" or signature of the ASR, but there it was. We found that we could "see" more deeply into the soundfield. To summarize, with a kind of **believe-it-or-not** assertion, each improvement in other part of the system was immediately audible as greater "**clarity**", with even less of an artificial reef between the listener and the sound of the music – the window on the soundfield just kept getting cleaner (if you are of the more vivid disposition, you may say the effect was like that of Salome doing a strip-tease).

Onward to analog ! The first problem we encountered came with when the ASR was newly installed in Music Room 3 and designer Friedrich Schafer himself came to check out the sound. He decided to update the phonostage on the spot, rather than send in an entirely new unit, a decision that threw the evaluation process into limbo.

The new parts was not a happy marriage, and the sound from the so-called improved unit was hard, bright – it had all the characteristics we have come to know and despise from solid-state sound. Now this wasn't the way the original Basis battery unit sounded (see review, Issue 151, page 106). Schafer decided, after giving it some thought, that we had best hear a completely new production unit. And so it arrived.

We let it burn in for ages, but not with much improvement in the sound over the hybrid unit. Finally after what seemed like forever, a technical change to the circuitry that Gonzalez could effect – lowering the unit's drive voltage—put us on the track to solving its problems. (The current production units incorporate this change.)

The improvement in sound were most notable: greater high-end extension, a lowered distortion that led to increased purity on transients & increased resolution of quite high overtones. More remarkable to these ears, used to the somewhat softer bass of the Nola woofer towers, (four 12-inch units, ported per side), was the now articulated and tensile strength of the bottom fundamentals. And finally there was a degree of integration in the Exotica system that we had despaired, well, not quite despaired, of course, of eliciting from the design.

But that was nothing compared with what the ASR gear, and the system itself, could elicit from information-rich analog sources, both from the standing references of the LP SuperDisc list and from the new Quiex, 200-gram pressings from Classic Records.

One overlooked recording that survived the 1985 fire was the Benjamin Britten led performance of his ballet, *the Prince of the Pagodas*, on the budget priced Decca Ace of Diamonds label, a two disc set out of print but not impossible to find through the specialty record hunters, and on eBay. It is as good a recording as Decca, at its very best ever made. And played back on what was now a kind of Super System, it has sonically & musically too, floored everyone who has heard it.

We went back into older recordings, some Kraftwerk's *Autobahn* and Art Garfunkel's "Breakaway" and the eponymous *America* album on Warner.

It is easy to get lost in the details of the specific recording & it is a temptation to describe all aspects of these great recordings that once were buried and now stand out clear, so to speak, in the open. But there is more to it than that with the ASR in the reference.

In the best recordings of yesterday, with the best systems, we could often achieve moments of reality, moments when a sound seemed to be "there" in the room. These were occasional & always impressive, seeming to be almost prescient of days to come when we might extract more reality, more living presence from the music we love.

With the ASR, things do not sound real. But, and this is an important point, and the thing that makes it so hard to describe the sound of the "amp" and how it performs in a great system : **The sound is less unreal, less artificial, less electronic ;** there are more of those moments when you might well be fooled into thinking you are, **indeed**, in the living presence of a performer. **In other words, there are more "real" sounding moments.**

Such a thing happens on one of the simplest of recordings, that of Bill Henderson, accompanied by piano and bells singing in a small L.A. nightclub.

The song is an exquisitely and heartfelt delivery of Stephen Sondheim's *Send In The Clowns*, and Classic Records has made it available on a single LP, one side cut at 33 & the other at 45rpm. It's from an album of no particular sonic distinction otherwise, but it was originally analog. Even on the CD where most of us first heard it, the sound is remarkable. But on disc, on this disc, with the lights down low, and late at night, you are transported into the small room of the club itself – your room has disappeared, even its boundaries. (With the demonstration –quality CDs, we never get this effect of the listening room boundaries being subsumed by those of the recording site.)

The illusion of Henderson, there before you, this great blues singer, is as uncanny an experience as I've had in audio. **You forget to listen to the sound, as I have many another time during the extended evaluation** (and not a good thing for taking notes), **and instead get pulled into the music.** There has, in the past, always been a tripartite separation between me, the system, and the music itself. Now, some of that, maybe much of it, has dissolved and the listening process becomes a more intimate, more involving experience. The Henderson disc is not flawless – he gets too close to the mike at one point, and with the greater clarity, you can hear extraneous nightclub sounds much more clearly (clinking glasses, whispered word or two). Oddly, as the system has grown more transparent, those very extraneous noises increase the you-are-there experience. Henderson's interpretation is so deeply felt it will make you hold your breath and may make you weep, such is his impeccable phrasing and timing (even down to his deliberate bending of time with the phrase "losing my timing this late in my career").

There is a quality the ASR suggests on some of the best digital recordings that becomes dominant on the best analog. We might describe that as the sound of the back wave, or better yet, that of a 360-degree radiating pattern from individual images within the two-channel field. I am most definitely not talking about a "surround" like effect in the listening room. I am talking about being able to hear the sound emanating in all directions (including from the back of the singer or instrument or what not).

Imagine a singer before you, and imagine that you can hear, as you will with the best gear and recordings, the sound of his/her chest tones, and the waves in the air generating from the voice itself. Now imagine an amplifier that can let you hear not just these waves, but the separate and distinct pocket of air surrounding the singer her (him, its) self (these are not, not the same thing).

And if you want to carry this further, you can hear the same phenomenon of pockets of air surrounding ensembles and even players within the ensemble.

It's what we hear, but are seldom conscious of, in unamplified sounds, be they in a hall or from the voices of people nearby. So instead of a portrait of 3-dimensional space, one we've been able to achieve in modern component design, **we can now dissolve some of the artifice that separates the sounds from true continuousness.** And what, you ask, is this so-called artifice? **I say it is noise. Artifacts of noise. Added electronic noise.**

The crux of the matter is this: We have grown so accustomed to a kind of electronically reproduced sound, one we can instantly divine as not real, that there is the shock of the “new” when something comes along that robs us of the anchors or our expectations.

There is just less in the way of our getting into the music – our imaginations don’t have to work so hard to convince us that we are enjoying “music”. **Because I love music, so my encounter with the amp in this system have been exhilarating** ; nevertheless, if you haven’t been sitting there in the listening room, you can’t know the effect it will have on you. You won’t have heard anything quite like this, I hadn’t.

I think this amplifier is revolutionary because, mostly, of the things it doesn’t do, and because of the see-into-and-through transparency that results from its dramatically lowered noise floor (which allowed us to make similar reductions in much of the rest of the audio chain). It has other distinctive attributes, including a sense of “ease” on everything you can throw at it, and maybe to a degree I’ve never heard from any solid-state product before. It also packs a genuine wallop of those big bass notes that allows you to feel, for example, how tight the skin of a drum is. In other word, it has all the best attributes of the most serious state-of-the-art amplifier contenders.

It is the second component from which I see a revolution springing. The seeds are here for a sea change in conventional electronic design. The other was the Infinity/Magnepan QRS/1-D, a hybrid marriage of two ribbon/quasi-ribbon systems that allowed, for the first time, a realistic and believable recreation of soundstage width and depth. Speakers that followed in the path of the QRS/1-D eliminated the diffraction effect that prevented a soundstage from developing, and gave an entirely new meaning to the word “imaging”.

I can’t imagine that the ASR will remain a unique hybrid for long. Other designers of “statement” amplifiers will surely find a way to create a good battery operated input stage with their amplifiers, tubed or otherwise. And who knows where that will lead? In time, perhaps inevitably, to a fully integrated system? The door to the future opens.

*The journey is not over. In another essay, soon to come, I shall evaluate the ASR Emitter II Exclusive Version 2005, which, to my genuine surprise, went the one reviewed here **several steps better**. Also I have not subjected the amp to other speaker systems to see what happens with less than “statement” type design.*

Also we now have the capability of using another ASR on the Grand Reference, making the sound full range; obviously I am curious to see whether the difference is revelatory or just adds to the coherency.

Also, the Emitter provides, a bit further down the road, the ideal device for A/B –ing the linestages we recently reviewed and those we have on hand.

I did not discuss our reactions to the absence of an external linestage in the chain but I will then.

Atul Kanagat, TAS Cutting Edge Advisor

Take three pillars of audiophile doctrine, that is separates are better sounding than integrated amplifiers, monoblocks are superior in resolution of soundstage reproduction than stereo amps, and tubes sound different, and mostly better, than transistors.

Yes, this is an integrated, stereo transistor amp that, at least when paired with the Nola Exotica Grand Reference via Nordost Valhalla cables, reproduces music with an honesty of expression that I have never experienced before in my 20-something years of audiophile pursuits. I have been a regular visitor to Sea Cliff for over two years and have witnessed and enjoyed the incremental changes to HP's system.

There was nothing incremental, however, about the Emitter's impact on the sound of an already spectacular sounding system. So moved was I when I first heard it, I told Harry that I felt the way I did the first time I entered the Sistine Chapel – **in almost religious awe.**

So what is all the fuss about ? the amp played through the Nolas recreated the soundstage in a mesmerizing way. While many amps are able to create height & width as accurately as the ASR, the depth of the soundstage it produces is truly spectacular. The rear of the stage has the same proportions as the front. Music and sound emanating from the rear of the soundstage have the same energy and tactile feel as the front. And the singer, on vocal recordings, stands out in front of the band, leaving the listener with an uncanny sense of being right there.

There is nothing 'transistory' or 'tubey' about the sound. Transients develop as sharply as with the best solid-state amplifiers, and decay with all the richness of overtones that tubes so musically replicated. Bass notes are perfectly controlled and flow without colorations, at ground-shaking decibels and in the quietest of passages. And all this with Antique Sound Labs Hurricane driving the Bass towers; who knows what will happen when Harry replaces them with a second Emitter ?

Will the Emitter sound the same with other fine loudspeakers or is there some strange synergy going on with the ASR/Nola/Nordost combination? I can't wait to find out.
For now, I say if Heaven does not have this combo, I'm not going.

Distribution Information in the US :

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vgfanfare@aol.com

2005 Editors' Choice Awards

The Ultimate Guide to Great Gear!



STEREO • MULTICHANNEL AUDIO • MUSIC

December 05 issue#157

the absolute sound®

33 and 45rpm strobes for both 50Hz and 60Hz turntable motors. Side 2 features 33 and 45rpm strobes for a 300Hz blue-light laser. This is infinitely easier to use, due to both the ability to shine the laser directly on the Test Disc and the higher frequency used for speed tuning. Both sides of the Speed Test Disc feature cut grooves so you can speed tune the turntable with the actual stylus drag accounted for. Lastly, both sides feature break-in grooves to assist in putting time on a new cartridge and to warm up your cartridge prior to serious listening sessions.

The Speed Laser, which is the matching 300Hz blue laser for the Speed Test Disc, costs an additional \$150.¹ It looks like a blue laser inset in

a fancy keyholder. Shine its little blue light on the disc, and, voilà, speed can be calibrated. The Clearaudio Speed Test Disc and Speed Laser have become part of our reference accessories list. And much welcomed.

Back to the turntable, briefly. We have a new motor, filched from the VPI HRX turntable that we were about to install in a new setup in Room 2, and the Scoutmaster is holding speed (with the “white” belts), and all is well. Just for kicks, we ran the Clearaudio stuff on another turntable we were contemplating reviewing, and found it slightly fast. And, wonder of wonders, the Clearaudio Everest that Leerer himself set up ran even slightly faster than that. Makes me, and maybe you, wonder, doesn’t it?

Follow-Up: The ASR Emitter II Exclusive, Version 2005

In the last issue, I assessed the revolutionary ASR Emitter II amplifier. And promised a second part in which I would look deeper into the amplifier’s performance with other speaker systems and use the amp as the basis for a second look at linestages.

At the time, the ASR amplifier I had only covered the two front towers of the Nola Grand Reference (these operating from about 40Hz up), while the closest match I could find to drive the twin bass towers was the Antique Sound Labs tubed monoblocks, the Hurricanes. A second ASR arrived, of even more refined sound than the first—designer Friedrich Schääfer is always tinkering improve-

¹ My associate and set-up man Danny Gonzalez’s thought that this device could be made for about \$10.

ments into the design—and so we moved the tested amps to the bass towers, and, thus, had ASRs covering the entire frequency range. (The amplifiers can be strapped together so that one volume control works for both.)


I wasn't sure what differences I would hear, and was not entirely convinced that if there were any, they would be major.

Well, there are, and they are. But, as with the first time I tried to describe the sound, I found myself almost at a loss for words, meaning, it is, as I suggested before, difficult to describe a kind of sound that has few of the guideposts we can use for sonic orientation.

One thing was immediately obvious. Most of the ambient cues in recordings are at the bottom end of the sonic

spectrum. And once the noise floor is lowered in that area, the soundspace expands to a much greater extent than before, and the apparent size of any instruments in the nether region assumes the kind of proportions they have in the concert hall. For instance, the tuba on the Howard Hanson disc *The Composer and his Orchestra*, impressive though it was with a single ASR, became Wagnerian in impact—tubas move a great deal of air, and in every other system in my experience, they are miniaturized; ditto for the tympani, also on this demo disc.² But smaller sources, like Hanson's voice, aren't "larger" in any sense. This provides a range of contrasts in scale that I find quite unprecedented in a system, and much more like

life itself. More intriguingly, the dynamic shadings are—how to say it? While wider in contrast, they are much more microdynamically correct. The acoustic space in which the instruments are playing has become much more three-dimensional, and, with good analog material, there is a much greater sense of being in the space with the performers, as opposed to listening to hi-fi from your chair.

The effect now is spooky at times. I am not, you must note, saying it sounds "real," for that occurs only in short bursts. What I am saying is that it dissolves veils between you and the recorded experience, and enables you to, nay makes you, listen to the music as music, not as an aural experience. 

² In Issue 155's edition of the Workshop, I bemoaned the fact that this Hanson Mercury recording, a touchstone of mine, had gone out of print and was now commanding out-of-sight prices. It is now once again available in a multiscd set that includes other Hanson works.

recommended products

aging 8150/8200. Still compact in size, it pumps out a healthy 200Wpc, and thanks to its strong Class A bias, the 9200 is sweeter and richer than ever. Even the all-new phono stage is quieter and more dynamic. Sonics have developed a beautiful patina in the 9200. Bass doesn't sound as darkly ominous or extended as in years past, but control and definition are strikingly improved. A major leap forward for a reference integrated at its price—and perhaps any price.

Reviewed by NG, Issue 156

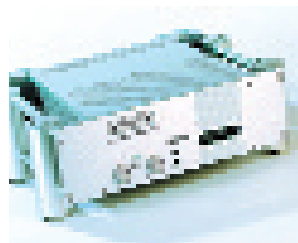


BAT VK-300X \$3995–\$5995 (depending on options)

balanced.com

Available in your choice of three different preamp stages—solid-state, tube, or 6H30 “SuperTube”—BAT's VK-300X is a great integrated amplifier. Although refinements occur with each upgrade, its basic sound is airy, detailed, harmonically well-structured, and very immediate. And with 150W output, it will not only drive pretty much any speaker, but it will do so with dynamic authority as well as agility. Music Editor Bob Gendron's reference.

Reviewed by WG, Issue 138



CHORD CPM 2600 \$4500

bluebirdmusic.com

While the Chord does not have the last molecule of “reach out and touch it” presence that a great tube amplifier has, its intoxicating bass performance and large, well-defined soundstage had our reviewer lost in the music. Its smooth midrange and extended high-frequency response

aren't fatiguing, even after hours of listening.

Reviewed by JD, Issue 152

YBA INTÉGRÉ PASSION

\$4650 (\$4800 w/phono)

audioplusservices.com

Elegant execution and jeweler-like attention to detail—both inside and out—make this 100-watter a top-flight contender. Isolation of the internal components from vibration contributes to the vivid imaging, excellent resolution, transparency, and wide soundstage. The Passion is competitive with any integrated amplifier of similar output near its price, and a high-quality remote control is also included.

Reviewed by NG, Issue 148



EDGE G3

\$4950

edgeamps.com

Although it lacks some of the technical refinements that make Edge's separates special, it's remarkable how close this integrated design comes to the sound of those designs. At 85Wpc, the G3 doesn't have the tonal “darkness” and grain frequently heard from transistor gear. It's quite neutral in balance, with a lack of electronic artifacts—brightness, edginess, hash—that makes it unusually easy to hear “into” the music.

Reviewed by WG, Issue 152

VAC AVATAR SUPER

\$6500

vac-amps.com

This beautifully retro-looking model delivers 80Wpc via a quartet of KT88 output tubes. Its sound throughout the midband is simply gorgeous, while the frequency edges are likewise lovely and a touch romantic—seductively soft and airy on top, with a roundness, warmth, and good weight to the bottom end. Excellent spatial resolution, too, particularly in the depth department. Because it has identifiable sonic fingerprints and power limitations, this amp is not for every

listener or speaker, but its transparency and inherent musicality will win over many.

Reviewed by WG, Issue 148



MUSICAL FIDELITY KW500

\$7000

musicalfidelity.com

Arguably the most powerful integrated amplifier on earth, this 500W tube/solid-state hybrid can drive just about any load you care to throw at it. The kW500 builds on the strengths of Musical Fidelity's Tri-Vista 300, offering greater resolution and inner detail, slightly better imaging, more expressive dynamics, and even tighter and more extended bass. It comes with a good (though modest) phono stage.

Reviewed by CM, Issue 152



ASR EMITTER II EXCLUSIVE MODEL 2005

\$25,900

fanfareintl.com

In every respect, a triumph of audio design. It is a solid-state unit that has no transistor “sound,” nor tube-like colorations for that matter. It doesn't require an input stage, having a sort-of one in its battery-operated front end. Its noise floor is so spectacularly low that analog and digital can be heard at their unmodulated best, and its output devices (20, count 'em) provide seemingly unlimited amounts of power, without ever crossing the line into hardness or distortion. But most of all, the ASR is like unto magic in its ability to let you hear so deeply into the soundfield that you'll almost believe you are really “there” with the music.

HP's Workshop, Issue 156

Preamplifiers

Under \$1000



NAD C 162

\$599

nadelectronics.com

Following other legendary NAD performers, the C 162 delivers plenty of resolution and three-dimensionality while—more importantly—emphasizing the kind of overall musicality that draws out the natural warmth and expressiveness of instruments and voices. To get the most from it, try matching it with the companion C 272 amplifier via a set of PNF Audio Icon interconnects and Symphony speaker cables. Also features an astonishingly good phono stage; some listeners may buy it for that feature alone.

Reviewed by CM, Issue 148

QUAD 99 AND QC-24

\$999 (each)

iagameric.com

Along with a dandy mm and mc phono stage, the Quad 99 features a novel tilt control for tone correction that works like a charm when you need it—a solid middle-level performer lacking mostly the ultimate transparency, liveliness, and dynamic openness of the very best units. The all-tube QC-24 linestage is the least expensive to suggest that elusive quality of “continuousness” in its presentation. The QC-24 has first-rate imaging in all dimensions, and a lively, engaging, remarkably neutral presentation.

Reviewed by PS, Issues 128 and 135

\$1000–\$2000

PRIMALUNA PROLOGUE 3

\$1295

upscaleaudio.com

The vacuum tube-powered Prologue 3 preamp makes an ideal companion to PrimaLuna's Prologue 5 tube power amp. Like the power amp, the preamp combines traditional tube warmth and richness with a clear, crisp, pre-

recommended products

Phonostages

Under \$2000



GRAM AMP 2 SE

\$399

elexatelier.com

This stripped-down little bugger has a sweet, mellow sound, and very low noise and perceived distortion. It's strictly for moving magnets and high-output moving coils. The sound is a little veiled (though remarkably grain-free), and, while not the last word in wide dynamics, has astonishing composure and musical integrity.

Reviewed by PS, Issue 134

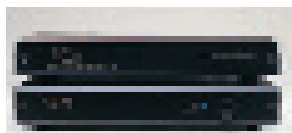
GRADO PH-1

\$500

gradolabs.com

The wood-bodied PH-1 is a versatile unit that works equally well with high- and low-output cartridges. Though it is susceptible to environmental noise, the sound is open and easy, with an expansive soundstage, natural highs, and bass that has texture, tonal refinement, and power.

Reviewed by WG, Issue 141



PHONOMENA

\$600

musicalsurrroundings.com

An Apollonian grace, poise, low noise, and neutrality characterize this excellent unit, which includes options for fine-tuning the loading and gain of both moving coils and moving magnets. Add the external power supply for even lower noise

and distortion, and greater transparency. Some listeners may want more dynamic "punch" and personality, but this is hard to beat for low coloration. Add \$600 for BPS power supply.

Reviewed by PS, Issue 133



LEHMANN BLACK CUBE

\$695

audioadvancements.com

This much-praised model now comes with a much beefier power supply. Otherwise, features remain the same, including switchable mm/mc and limited options for loading. Now really wowie-zowie in the dynamics department, with imaging so stable you could map out each instrument. Bass is ample and articulate; transparency is very good. Principal reservation: a certain "whiteness" that translates into a mild dryness.

Reviewed by PS, Issue 133

BENZ LUKASCHEK PP-1

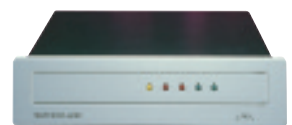
\$1350

musicalsurrroundings.com

A solid-state, miniaturized hide-away box powered by a wall transformer. External AC plus short signal path yields very wide dynamics and space retrieval with a comforting middle-of-the-road sonic balance and airy bloom much like that of the Benz Ruby 2 cartridge, if a little darker. Warmth is enhanced by 22k input impedance.

Reviewed by Arthur S. Pfeffer, Issue 127

\$3000-\$6000



SUTHERLAND PHD

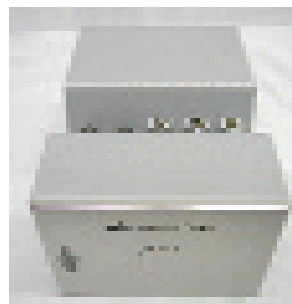
\$3000

acousticssounds.com

Ron Sutherland's battery-powered PhD is so quiet that it

takes awhile to get used to its sound. Once you've adjusted, expect to hear "into" your records in a way unlike before. Beyond its silence, the PhD has a tube-like liquidity, terrific detail, wonderful dynamic nuance, and remarkable transparency.

Reviewed by WG, Issue 144



ARTEMIS LABS PL-1

\$3350

aydn.com

Like its companion linestage, the PL-1 is a tube-driven phonostage delivering exquisitely musical and lifelike sound. Record after record left our editor with that "as if hearing it for the first time" feeling. Beautifully balanced, with low noise and a great range of tone colors, the PL-1 is also dynamically explosive and very transparent. A terrific achievement from a young company.

Reviewed by WG, Issue 155

AESTHETIX RHEA

\$4000

musicalsurrroundings.com

As with Aesthetix' matching Calypso linestage, the Rhea phono preamplifier redefines what's possible at this price level not only sonically, but functionally. With three inputs, variable cartridge loading—adjustable at the listening chair via remote control—and front-panel display of gain and loading, the Rhea is the Swiss Army Knife of phonostages. Although the Rhea has tons of gain, the noise level is extremely low, making it compatible with a wide range of cartridge outputs. The Rhea's family resemblance to the Calypso is unmistakable: transient quickness and speed without etch, a feeling of effortless-ness on crescendos, and a deep, layered soundstage that maintains its depth at the left and

right edges rather than sounding triangular. Fine build-quality and outstanding ergonomics are the icing on the cake.

Reviewed by RH, Issue 151

ASR BASIS EXCLUSIVE

\$5950

fanfareintl.com

In its latest revised version, this battery-operated phonostage sets the standards against which all other contenders must be judged. (And the competition in our upcoming report is stiff, especially from Tom Evans Designs and the folks at Aesthetix, whose Io is a wow-O).

HP survey in the works

\$6000 and Above

LAMM LP 2 DELUXE

\$6990

lamindustries.com

With a superb built-in coupling transformer to handle lower-output moving coils, the all-tube Lamm LP2 phonostage has the inestimable advantage of being dead quiet, which makes it ideal for folks, like JV, who live in RF Valley. Though not as "alive" or bloomy as the Aesthetix Io on large-scale dynamics, the Lamm is rich, beautiful, and extraordinarily delicate-sounding on all music, with detail, transient response, and soundstaging that are superior to the competition. Be forewarned: This preamp takes a good deal of break-in before it sounds its considerable best, but its best is well worth the wait. One of JV's references.

JV, review forthcoming

AESTHETIX IO MKII AND MKII SIGNATURE

\$6500 without volume control;

\$9000 with volume control;

\$9000 for Signature without

volume control, \$11,500 for

Signature with volume control

musicalsurrroundings.com

Phono fanatics with both space and cash will want to audition this 24-tube, two (large) chassis beauty. Yes, it eats shelf space; yes, it throws a lot of heat; and yes, it is as good as it gets. Exquisite dynamic contrasts? Check. An easy, relaxed presentation? Check. Headroom to spare?

STEREO • MULTICHANNEL AUDIO • MUSIC

February 2006 issue #159

the absolute sound®

**2005
GOLDEN EAR AWARDS**

The Best of the Best!

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
-----------------------------------------------------------	--------

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
-------------------------------------------------------------	--------

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

AMPLIFIERS

ASR Emitter II Model 2005

This amplifier not only joins the rank of the great classics of audio design, like, say, the Audio Research D-150 and Reference 600s, but also actually advances the art in its fiendishly clever integration of a battery-powered linestage into the amp itself. It sounds as if there is no linestage at all in the circuit.

The battery-powered linestage is, I am sure, partly responsible for the vanishingly low noise floor of this high-

powered, solid-state component. If there is a “new wave” in high-end sound, and I maintain there is, it lies in those components—like the Dynavector XV-1S moving coil, the VPI Scoutmaster Signature, and ASR’s own battery-powered Basis phonestage—that have so lowered the noise floor that we, the listeners, are able to hear much more deeply into the recorded soundspace.

But it isn’t just the lowering of the noise floor that accounts for some of this amp’s magic; it is also the reduction of what Lew Johnson (of connie-j) calls

“the grunge.” You can decrease the noise floor of a given component and still hear above that its electronic or mechanical signature. In the case of tubes, we have called this “tube rush,” and in solid-state gear we have heard it as a kind of subtle electronic hash or fine-grained sandiness or electronic glaze.

I came at this backwards when I noted the way the Emitter allowed a listener to hear through both the compact disc and the analog LP in a new way, without their usual seemingly inherent sonic signatures—the kinds of anom-

alies you just learn to listen around. Their absence was startling in the case of the best CDs—e.g., Mercury's two-disc set of *The Composer and His Orchestra* and the XRCD transfer of *The Planets* from the Decca/London original. The best discs didn't sound "digital" in the way we have all come to dread. I just wish I knew, technically, how the designer Freidrich Schäfer accomplished this. Especially since his amps contain two of the solid-state bad boys—op amps and no fewer than 20 MOSFETs, in the past, sure indicators of rocks in the sonic belfry.

Since I wrote that review, I have gotten hold of a second ASR (on loan, naturally) and assigned it the task of driving the bass towers of the Nola Grand Reference, thus replacing the Antique Sound Labs Hurricanes. The 200-watt Hurricane monoblocks were more than an acceptable match with the woofer system—four 12-inch ported drivers per channel that operate below 40Hz—surprisingly so, and in contradistinction to the usual mythology about tubes and deep bass. Once the second ASR was in place, the shortcomings, comparatively speaking, of the Hurricanes became obvious: an overly romantic mellowness in the 30-to-40Hz range and just enough tube grunge to create a slightly veiled masking effect.

With the ASR on the woofer towers, not only was there an articulation and purity in the bottom frequencies (well down toward the lower 20Hz mark), but we could now hear deeper into the stage, getting even more ambient information from the recording site and a much clearer picture of the relative "size" of instruments from bass drum to bassoon. Some of the improvement was actually audible in the harmonics well above the woofers' range—and I mean well above. There was a richer field of harmonic information past the middle frequencies. The principal gain in ambience retrieval came in two ways: (1) with an enhanced sense of the actual depth and delineation of real space from front to back, and (2) in our ability to hear the sounds of the acoustic shell surrounding players in a real space, i.e., the walls of the stage

"sounding" as instruments are being played. This furthers the sense that you are in that space with the players instead of listening to a replica of the original sound. (I am assuming here that those of you who are serious listeners will have damped the sidewalls of your music room to minimize their interplay with the hall sounds.)

As we discussed originally, because of the absence of a separate AC-powered lineage we have been able to plug both phonostages and CD players directly into the ASR's battery-operated input, and, when it strikes our fancy, to compare both balanced and unbalanced outputs if the gear in question has balanced outputs. This has given us a much clearer picture (see our notes on CD players below) of the real capabilities of the new generation of digital playback gear. And, again, as noted, we found that using the balanced inputs does make a difference in further lowering the perceived noise floor of the playback gear and, to our ears, in improving the tonal balance of the sound, perhaps simply because we can hear more deeply into the soundspace. Oddly, methinks, the top octaves become sweeter, more dimensional, and seemingly better at the rendition of dynamic contrasts.

The ASR does have a sonic "character," and that is a "yin"-like darkening of the original. It is certainly not as neutral as say the best of the early Bill Johnson-designed tubed amplifiers, nor is it as Symphony Hall (Boston) golden in sound as the best conrad-johnson work. But it doesn't sound like either "solid-state" or "tubes," a distinction even the audio neophyte can usually make instantly—in this respect, the ASR is essentially colorless. It has so much output power (greater, I would think, than the nominal 275 watt-per-channel rating) that it has the ability to float effortlessly over the most intense fortissimos I can throw at it (and don't think for a moment I am not expert at this). Put all of this together and you, perhaps, can see why I am wrung in the withers over the yin of its character.

Mechanically, things are a bit more

complicated. And the ASR is a bit kinky. It is best to turn it off if you aren't going to be around for extended periods of time, and best, if you *are* going to be around but not playing it, to let its batteries recharge (they are good for 100 hours of play) and to be careful not to send transient pulses through it, lest you shut it down. Also, it sounds best after it has been in the operating position—that is, at full power—for 30 or so minutes.

Oh, yes, we have begun to test its abilities with other speaker systems. From the field reports I hear, the ASR can drive even a difficult and cantankerous load, such as the big Wilson speakers.

(SEE FULL REVIEW, ISSUE 152, PP. 104–119)

Wyetech Sapphire 300B single-ended-triode monoblock amplifiers

If you do not insist on overtaxing this unit with high playback levels on low-sensitivity speakers—those, say, with less than 95 or so decibels of measured sensitivity—you'll be in for the same surprise as I was. Up until the Sapphires, SET amplifiers struck me as having a similar sonic signature despite the design differences of their individual circuits. That is to say, SET amplifiers had a "soft" bottom octave, a somewhat protuberant and romantic midbass, a *très* sweet midrange, and a vanishing top octave. Perhaps in a narrow band of the midrange, they sounded "purer," more "alive," even a shade faster than they did elsewhere in the frequency range.

Now it seems that the more recent work with the better SET designs has licked this characteristic commonality and that SETs are finally coming into their own, if we can find good-enough high-sensitivity speaker systems to take advantage of their strengths. (Some veterans of the audio wars may remember how a five-watt amp could drive the bejeezus out of the biggest and best designs in the latter days of the mono LP.) With a speaker system both flat and highly sensitive and with a not-so-sensitive but highly neutral speaker from Audio Physic, the Caldera, I have been playing single-ended games.