



The Exciting Sounds of Audio Expo North America (AXPONA) 2016

AXPONA
AUDIO EXPO NORTH AMERICA

Welcome to
AXPONA!

A placid six-hour drive brought my trusty hybrid and its passengers from the Twin Cities to the suburbs of Chicago for another spring exploration of the new and novel in high-end consumer audio. Held April 15–17, AXPONA 2016 was hopping, with attendance up 16% this year. The count settled at 5,934 attendees through the doors to see 400 exhibitors in Rosemont’s Westin O’Hare.

By
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(United States)

Let’s start with the Ear Gear Expo section of the show. The cans that started me on the road to headphone nirvana were my set of Etymotic ER4PT in-ears (www.etymotic.com). At the Expo, Etymotic upped the ante making “the world’s most accurate earphones...better!” With an anodized all metal body, dual balanced armature (BA) transducers, and a detachable cable, the new \$349 ER4SR has, to my ears, lower distortion with that subjectively uncolored, distinctive Etymotic sound. For mo’ betta bass, the \$349 ER4XR gently lifts your low end starting at around 500 Hz.

Campfire Audio (www.campfireaudio.com) has extended its line of machined aluminum in-ear monitors (IEMs), with the new \$1,099 Andromeda featuring five BAs, and the \$499 Nova. The more affordable model relies on dual BAs, also in an aluminum shell.

At two previous shows I’ve attended, Woo Audio (www.woaudio.com) had WA8 prototypes out for inspection. This time around, it was a done deal. The \$1,799, 2.4 lb WA8 Eclipse totable hollow-state headphone amplifier/DAC is in production, and it

looks and sounds great. Based on a ES9018K2M chip, the Class A SET unit has an analog input for desktop versatility, and includes a clear Pelican hard case. Mike Liang also directed me to the updated WA7 Fireflies, with a newly designed DXD-capable DAC and improved amplification.

Trend setters Iriver had a beefy new version of its non plus ultra of high-resolution audio (HRA) portables, the Astell&Kern AK380 (www.astellnkern.com). The \$3,999 AK380 Copper and companion \$999 AK380 AMP Copper amplifier/powerpack retain the hi-fi pedigree of the aluminum versions, but opt for solid CNC-machined copper cases that are both weighty and wonderful.

Zach Mehrbach showed me his latest creation, a prototype of “The ZMF” headphone amplifier, a collaboration between Sonnare Audio and ZMF headphones (www.zmfheadphones.com). With pairs of 41NP and 6SN7 tubes doing the work, the product was designed with sound quality, not specsmanship, in mind. The production version should cost about \$1,000.

Michael Fierro of Taction Technology gave

me a fun demo of their closed-back circumaural Taction Kannon (www.tactiontechnology.com). The \$499 Kannon puts the slam in headphone listening, with the inclusion of an adjustable, planar magnetic haptic transducer in conjunction with its 40 mm dynamic driver. These cans sound far better than any gamer/enthusiast headphone I've heard, and the palpable low-frequency aspect only enhances the experience.

Another new IEM vendor was on the scene, this time from north of Atlanta. Empire Ears (www.empireears.com) sells custom and universal IEMs, starting with the \$429 dual BA Supra-II. Its top of the line \$2,099 Zeus-XIV is a 14 BA "seven-way" design with two low-frequency BAs, six for mid frequencies, and six to handle high-frequency tasks. The Zeus-XIV delivers all that through four separate bores.

The kids at Cavalli Audio (www.cavalliaudio.com) were giving attendees a taste of their Liquid Tungsten prototype headphone amplifier. Still a bare board, the new hollow-state flagship will sell for approximately \$5,000 when it's ready to ship.

Though Sennheiser didn't bring the HE 1 to AXPONA, there was another, far more affordable electrostatic headphone option at the show, from MrSpeakers no less (www.mrspeakers.com). Two Ether Electrostat prototypes were playing, powered by Cavalli Liquid Lightening and, from my brief listen, they sounded less strident than what I'm used to from Stax. The price isn't not yet set, but it is expected to be somewhere between \$1,500 and \$5,000. They're scheduled to ship by the end of this year. MrSpeakers will provide an adapter with the headphones for Stax-style pinout to make it easier for users to find amplifiers and energizers.

You may remember Echobox (www.echoboxaudio.com) from my report of last year's Rocky Moundtain Audio Fest (RMAF) show. At AXPONA, the company announced that its \$449 Explorer will be shipping around June to IndieGoGo backers, and around July for everyone else. Explorer is a rare beast in both its wooden hip flask form factor, and it's Wi-Fi radio. The network feature enables it to be a TIDAL client, and it'll ship with a three-month trial subscription.

Accessories

There's always plenty of accessory vendors at shows, and AXPONA 2016 was no exception. One item I enjoyed messing with was Bendy Head's headphone stand (www.bendyhead.com). Made of labyrinthine cut thin birch ply, the stands are lightweight, stable, and flex to conform to the shape of your can's headband.

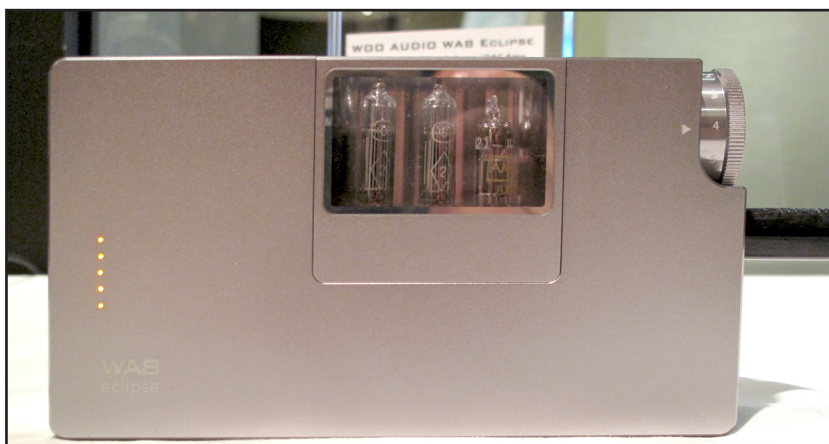
Pioneer and Onkyo (www.onkyousa.com) had



Headphone madness during Day 1 of the Ear Gear Expo.



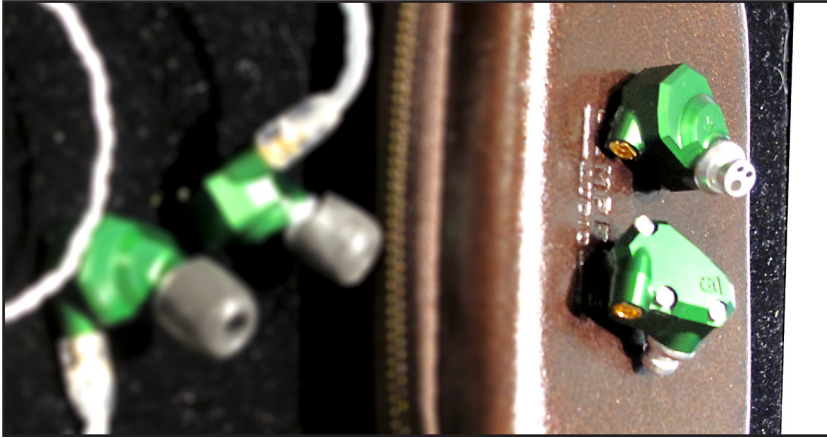
Angstrom Audio's new Stella is a Class A 100 W integrated amplifier.



Woo Audio's new WA8 DAC/HPA is shipping.



Bendy Head's flexible wood stands pack flat.



Campfire Audio's new Andromeda featuring five balanced armatures



DS Audio's flagship, the new DS Master1 optical cartridge features improved opto-mechanical guts and a sapphire cantilever.



ELAC's amazingly good sounding UB5 cost \$499/pair.

separate tables showing their Android-based HRA portables. Onkyo had its \$899 DP-X1 with an upscale audio chain, and Pioneer displayed its \$700 XDP-100R-K. Both include TIDAL streaming support and Master Quality Authenticated (MQA) decoding via a firmware update, the only Digital Audio Players (DAPs) to date that include MQA.

Other new products from Pioneer (www.pioneerelectronics.com) include an "ecosystem" of products for on-the-go or at home: the PL-30K belt drive record player, the SX-N30 receiver, SE-MHR5 headphones, and the aforementioned HRA portable. Including an arm and MM cartridge, the \$300 PL-30K is interesting in that it includes built-in, bypassable RIAA equalization for use with amplifiers and modern DAC/preamplifiers without "phono" inputs. The sturdily constructed \$300 SE-MHR5 headphones fold flat, employ a 40 mm driver, offer a frequency response of "7 Hz to 50 kHz," and come with a balanced cable for use with the XDP-100R. The \$600 SX-N30 is a stereo receiver with networking and can use the Digital Living Network Alliance (DLNA) to push or pull content to or from the DAP, as well as having a phono input to connect legacy playback. The SX-N30 has two built-in zones so you can play one source in your main room and the same or a different source down at your workbench.

Speaking of MQA, another vendor I reported on at RMAF was Mytek (www.mytekdigital.com). Back in October, it announced a new DAC and soon-to-follow companion ADC. At AXPOA, the Brooklyn DAC was shipping. Thanks to a firmware update the day before the exhibits opened, MQA decoding was awakened. To my knowledge, this makes the Brooklyn the first desktop DAC to include this ability. At \$1,995, it's a reasonably priced, feature-packed component, with analog in, balanced as well as unbalanced outputs, and an included Apple remote. Plus, it has the ability to disable MQA decoding on the fly for easy quality comparison. I'll be reporting more extensively on MQA and the Brooklyn family in a future issue.

Ear-Catching Products

Elsewhere at the show, Panasonic's Technic division (www.technics.com) was showing its EAH-T700 over-the-ear, two-way cans. The new model is equipped with dual drivers, a 50 mm dynamic plus a 14 mm super-tweeter positioned below and forward of the ear canal. Built like a tank of mostly aluminum, yet light and comfortable, these \$1,200 cans look and sound good.

Top-flight stalwarts MSB (www.msbsbtech.com) were giving attendees a listen to their \$89,000 Select DAC, \$11,990 Universal Media Player V and

\$27,500 M203 monoblocks. The M203 has since been replaced by the M204, with a quieter, larger capacity power supply and, according to MSB's Vince Galbo, "...other audio circuit improvements."

Local dealer Kyomi Audio's room (www.kyomiaudio.com) was pumping out some analog love... The 200 W per channel, \$31,990 Convergent Audio technology JL7 Triode mono amplifiers were having their world premieres, though the \$27,000 TechDAS Air Force 3 turntable and extremely wideband, three-way Coltrane 3 speakers were having their US debuts. Listing for \$100,000, the Coltrane 3s feature an Accuton CELL tweeter with a diamond cone and ferrofluid damping mated to a distinctive CELL ceramic midrange unit. The first-order crossover is in a carbon fiber cabinet. Feeding those Coltranes was the Air Force 3, equipped with A.J. van den Hul's \$7,995 Colibri Stradivarius cartridge hanging from Graham Engineering's \$14,000 Phantom Elite 12" tonearm.

There are many of us who would like to digitize those few, rare vinyl artifacts that were never migrated to CDs, and there are those who simply want their entire record collection to be living in a



Jack Vang shows off his Empire Ears.

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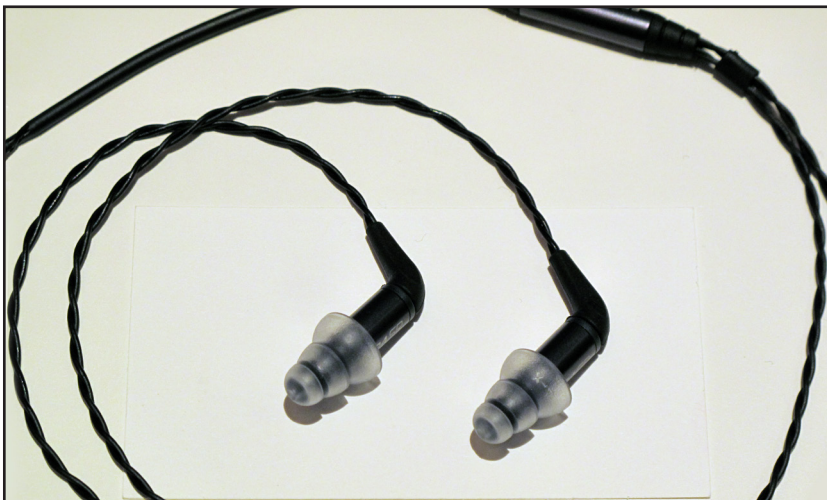
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Merrill Audio's new \$3,500 Cara preamplifier has independent source volume settings and four-channel output.



Etymotic's new ER4SR IEM was on display at AXPONA.



This is MSB's \$100,000 stack.

server. Well, for \$2,000, engineers in Mountain View have created SugarCube, the Deus Ex Machina of phonograph record digitizers. The product, shown by SweetVinyl (www.sweetvinyl.com) at the last CES, includes automatic metadata lookup in their own database, optional impulse noise reduction, and one button recording. It's the "...modern Hi-Res digital equivalent of the cassette tape deck for the vinyl lover."

Open-Baffle Designs

Several open-baffle designs were displayed at the show. From Italy, Diesis Audio (www.diesisaudio.com) was showing its midline \$20,000 Aura, sporting a 12" woofer rolling at 200 Hz, and a 10" midrange that transitions at 1,800 Hz to a 1" horn-loaded compression driver. The Aura is available in wood or Corian baffle treatments. Emerald Physics (www.emeraldphysics.com) demonstrated its upgraded top end in the form of the EP4.8. With all new custom carbon fiber drivers, its MSRP is \$8,500/pair. Emerald Physics expat Clayton Shaw had his new Spatial Audio's \$2,595/pair Hologram M3 MkII Turbo-S, a two-way, 4 Ω open-baffle speaker with twin 15" woofers crossing over at 800 Hz to a Spatial M25 compression driver with titanium diaphragm for mid- and high-frequency duties (www.spatialaudio.us).

Ribbons and Tweeters and More

Along with horns, ribbon and pleated tweeters were everywhere at the show, Audiophile Direct (www.audiophile-direct.com) conducted the US premier of the Aurum Cantus Melody M-102SE, a \$2,500/pair three-way, vented floor stander with an aluminum ribbon tweeter.

Wells Audio (www.wellsaudio.com) teamed up with Salk Signature Sound (www.salksound.com) to provide an affordable system with high-quality sound. Driven by Wells' new Majestic, a 150 W into 8 Ω bipolar class A/B design, Jim Salk's new \$2,895 per pair Song3 vented three-ways... well, sang quite nicely! The Song3 sports a RAAL 64-10 ribbon on top, a 4" bamboo cone mid, and a Satori 7.5" woofer. The \$3,499 Majestic features a "relaxed feedback" design, remote volume/mute/standby and a unique, moving coil volume setting readout called the Volumeter.

Salk had another room down the hall that housed additional new products, including the compact and kickin' \$2,195 PowerPlay two-way active monitors, with analog and digital inputs and an electronic crossover via DSP, along with the third generation of the Linux-based \$1,695 StreamPlayer server.

Another room that proved high-end sound

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Pioneer's U-05 DAC drives the new SE-MHR5 headphones.



SweetVinyl's SugarCube automatically looks up your vinyl metadata.



This is a pre-production prototype of Taction Technology's kickin' Kannon cans.

doesn't have to carry a high price tag, Andrew Jones was demonstrating the first two models of his high-performance Uni-Fi range for ELAC (www.elac.com), first heard at CES. Also playing was his \$179 B4, the newest entry into the Debut series. The B4 is a ported two-way with a 1" cloth dome tweeter coupled to an integral waveguide crossing over at 2.5 kHz to an aramid cone 4" woofer. The model weighs less than 10 lb and has a minimum impedance of 5.4 Ω and, though the sound quality was a bit rough at higher volumes, was amazingly good for less than \$200/pair. Lastly, ELAC had its new \$1,099 Discovery server, which supports TIDAL streaming and is Roon-ready.

At the show, music servers were numerous, especially Windows-based ones, but one in particular did stand out. The Intel i3-based Auranas SRV (www.auranas.com) does all the things you'd expect from a modern server, but the cool aspect for me was its operating system. The RuneOS Linux distro is the brain child of Rune Audio (www.runeaudio.com), an engineering collective based in Italy. The company's open source operating system is free, lightweight and, as with other audio-specific Linux distributions, optimized for near-real time operation.

Hollow state continues to fascinate, with glowing filaments everywhere. Accomplished young turk Vinnie Rossi was letting attendees warm themselves in the light of his new Class A output transformer-less (OTL) direct-heated triode option for the successful LIO modular preamplifier (www.vinnierossi.com). Flat from 10 Hz to 200 kHz, the zero feedback LIODHT PRE allows for easy switching among a range of triode families, and will cost about \$4,000 to \$5,000 to play.

Audio Bunker (www.automatedlifestyles.tv) showcased the new Essence Chimera. It is a \$2,700 passive circuit that attaches to the back of a speaker. According to designer Duane Randleman, it "...filters back EMF, eddy currents, and uses carbon nano tubes to eliminate the phase shift in cables." The network will be incorporated into the company's flagship Essence speaker cable and an upcoming amplifier. The cables will be out by the end of 2016 and the amplifier the following year. The amplifier "... will be a 100 W Class A amp that is an updated and redesigned version of the original Essence Jasper from legendary designer Dale Pitcher," Randleman said. The new model, the Jasper IV, will have a full power bandwidth of 20 MHz.

Local Wadia alums Exogal (www.exogal.com) provided a glimpse of an upcoming "power DAC," the Ion. Designed as a companion to the Comet, the \$3,750 Ion is fed via a proprietary digital interconnect and data is converted locally to analog.



Aurum Cantus' Melody M-102SE is shown with a 100 mm ribbon.

Power out is 250 W into 4 Ω, and an upgraded power supply is available.

High-end DAC pioneer Andreas Koch launched his \$13,000, 260 W into 4 Ω IPS-3 power DAC at the show (www.playbackdesigns.com). The piece was announced quite a while ago but is only now ready. A new \$7,000 Pinot ADC is also in the works, with Word Clock I/O and able to convert to DSD4 plus LPCM up to DXD.

April Music (www.aprilmusic.co.kr), better known for its DACs, unveiled the Aura Spirit, an integrated amplifier with receiver. Scheduled for a mid-summer release at around \$2,000, the Spirit includes 150 W into 8 Ω of MOSFET power, analog ins and outs, a modern USB DAC, AM/FM tuning, and a remote.

Overall Impressions

This year's AXPONA was bigger, busier, and certainly had better music playing. I heard not only Metallica and Aphex Twin but, imagine... Yello! The demographic for high-end hi-fi is growing younger, and savvy vendors are acknowledging the change. Servers, integrations, and high-end all-in-one systems are pointing the way toward the commercialization of convenience for younger, quality conscious moneyed consumers. Another important emphasis for younger buyers is mobility and choice is the name of the game for both hi-fi portables plus in- and on-ear headphones. I look forward to the fall crop of consumer electronics audio shows, and you'll be there with me for the fun.

The 2017 AXPONA returns to the Westin O'Hare in Chicago, IL, April 21–23, 2017. For more information, visit www.axpona.com.

About the Author

Oliver A. Masciarotte has spent more 30 years immersed in the tech space, working on facilitation, optimization, and product development for clients worldwide. As an author and a speaker, he enjoys informing people about technological best practices. For more information, visit his websites—seneschal.net and othermunday.com.

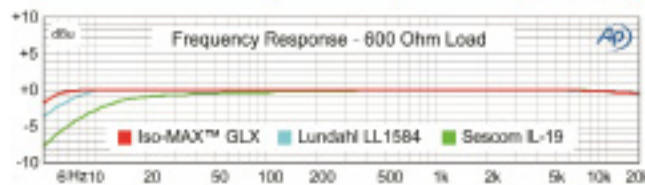
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Distortion @ 20Hz:	.001%	.01%	.1%
Distortion @ +4dB:	.005%	.06%	.3%
Phase shift @ 20Hz:	0°	0°	20°
Ground lift switch:	Yes	No	No
Construction:	Metal	Metal	Plastic
Warranty:	3 Years	1 Year	1 year
MAP Price (estimated street)	\$89	\$139	\$45



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