



AXPONA 2018

The Renaissance of High-Quality Sounds

Audio Expo North America (AXPONA) is the largest high-end audio show in North America. The three-day experience (April 13–15, 2018) featured multiple hotel floors packed with listening rooms, The Exhibit Hall featuring Ear Gear Expo and The Record Fair, seminars, and live musical performances.

By
Oliver A. Masciarotte
(United States)

This year's AXPONA show was held in a new venue, which received mostly positive responses from attendees and exhibitors. The Schaumburg Convention Center and attached Renaissance hotel offered plenty of good-sized rooms, decent amenities, and a dated but pleasing vibe somewhat reminiscent of Barbarella.

The show was well attended, with a record-breaking 8,134 attendees—up 21% over 2017. This year was a bit of a change for me as well, deciding to drive with an audiophile buddy rather than my better half, who couldn't get time off. Though attendance was up, it was the rare room that was too crowded to enter. Most vendors experienced good traffic and found the rooms to be workable. Rooms around the atrium interior had a bonus view, open and airy, when you left those spaces.

Unlike years past, I didn't spend a great deal of my time in the headphone area, instead concentrating on the more than 100 exhibitors I had preselected. Despite that, I missed quite a few due to very heavy snow and winds to the west, which forced us to head home on the wreck-strewn interstate a day early.

Electronics

On to the show! I'll start my coverage with electronics, specifically Cambridge Audio (www.cambridgeaudio.com). You may remember my 2017 Rocky Mountain show coverage, where I mentioned that the company had been working on a new range of higher end electronics, which sounded very pleasing. "With a minimal signal path, intelligent biasing and no caps to degrade the audio," I stated that the prototypes was a departure from their normally budget priced offerings. Those proof-of concept separates have matured into the new Edge series, celebrating 50 years in business with a clean, aesthetically pleasing \$5,000 Edge A integrated, the well-appointed \$4,000 Edge NQ pre/streamer, and the \$3,000 Edge W power amp. Part of what makes the DC-coupled amp and preamp sound good methinks is their ultra-wide bandwidth, with a published frequency response of 3 Hz to 80 kHz ± 1 dB. Rupert Neve would be proud.

Ayon Audio (www.ayonaudio.com) was showing off its new \$28,800 hollow-state Orthos II XS Gen 4 in an all-Ayon stack driving \$49,900 Lumenwhite Kyara

Atria, a sure cure for claustrophobia

speakers. The mighty Orthos II XS yields 300 Class A W into 8 Ω in pentode mode, and 180 W in triode mode.

Axiss Audio (www.axissaudio.com) was showing Resolution Audio's 3.0 version of their \$9,500 Cantata Music Center for the first time, with an upgraded R-2R ladder DAC and analog attenuator (www.resolutionaudio.com). It also includes a pair of line level stereo analog inputs and a Red Book-only optical disc transport. Due to the proprietary DAC architecture, the USB input is limited to 192 kHz.

In another Axiss room, I had a nice visit with the A&M Ltd.



Cambridge Audio's new Edge W employs modified A/B operation for clean and efficient power...good looking as well!



Dual Orthos II XS amps heat up the space.



The newly revised Cantata Music Center 3.0, stacked on a Cantata C50 2.0 integrated amp

includes while company Director Yutaka Miura ran me through the specifics of their new AirTight ATE-3011 phono preamp. Hewing to the company's more than 30 years of high-end hollow-state heritage (www.airtight-anm.com), Miura-san told me the ATE-3011 features three phono inputs and a solid copper chassis. Retro illuminated independent selection of low "turnover" and high frequency "rolloff" de-emphasis, including NAB, RIAA, FFRR, AES, and flat settings, covers current and many legacy standards. The model ATE-3011 will arrive at the end of the year, in time for CES, and pricing has yet to be set.

Ozan Turan, President of High End By Oz (www.highendbyoz.com), had the Vitus Audio Reference Series RI 101 integrated amp with optional DAC on demo (www.vitusaudio.com). The new \$15,800 RI 101 boasts an entirely new preamp stage, and its output boards, along with their initial PSU, are completely redesigned for even better performance. With crazy wide frequency response, way past 700 kHz, this brawny beast outputs 300 W of Class A/B power into 8 Ω and 600 W into 4 Ω .

Due to their lack of euphonic color, low output impedance, wide bandwidth, and moderate pricing, Linear Tube Audio had its gear in several suites at the show (www.lineartubeaudio.com). This visit, I was focused on the new \$6,800 ZOTL Ultralinear. As with previous ZOTL designs, the Ultralinear eschews an output transformer, instead relying on an RF carrier. A review of the ZOTL Ultralinear is in process, so stay tuned!

With a prototype having been shown at last year's Rocky Mountain Audio Fest, Classic Tube Audio was proud of a production example of its 2A3-based, \$4,900 Whammerdyne DAA-3 (whammerdyne.com). A two chassis configuration, with a PSU base "docked" to the amplifier above, the DAA-3 flaunts DC coupling, wideband operation (-1 dB from 12 Hz to 95 kHz,



AirTight's ATE-301, a final product candidate in Golden Age champagne cosmetics



The understated new Vitus Audio Reference Series RI 101

-3 dB from 6 Hz to 130 kHz) and a suggestively DIY aesthetic for audiophiles with limited means and high-end taste.

A real hollow-state blast from the past is Western Electric, and its revival of the brand as well as WE 300B manufacturing (www.westernelectric.com). They brought along an interesting prototype to the show, a Class A2 single-ended integrated

amplifier with an MC/MM phono stage, no negative feedback, and microprocessor-controlled bias. The production 91E will run \$9,995 and makes "20+" watts of yummy, dual triode goodness.

The irrepressible Richard Schram was chillin' at AXPONA, attending the birth of his new \$5,995 Halo JC 5 stereo amp—essentially two Halo JC 1 monoblocks in one classy chassis. Designed by analog yoda John Curl, the JC 5 provides 400 W into 8 Ω of direct coupled Class AB power, with the first 12 being Class A (www.parasound.com).

A vendor I always seek out for his two-way, stand mounters is John "Fritz" Heiler (www.fritzspeakers.com). He took two new, all Scan-Speak models to the show for high-end performance at a nice price. The updated \$2,800/pair REV 7 SE includes a 7" Revelator mid/bass driver and Illuminator ring tweeter, while his \$3,800 LS 7 model is equipped with a 7" Illuminator mid/bass driver and the top-of-the-line Revelator tweeter. He mentioned that both models are 3 dB down at 30 kHz, and employ an Acoustic Reality-style capacitor and resistor-free series crossover.

Trade show trooper, longtime friend, and HRA evangelist Mark Waldrep was in residence at the AXPONA Expo, and when I stopped in passing, he said "You gotta hear this," motioning to a small soundbar on his table. Not just any soundbar, it was Comhear's \$389 to \$599 YARRA 3DX speaker array (www.yarra3dx.com), with MyBeam beam forming technology. Radio frequency beam forming has been around for many decades, especially in radar



Linear Tube Audio's new ZOTL Ultralinear, in austere Fern & Roby-designed casework



The DAA-3's separate PSU boasts seven low-noise regulated DC supplies.



The beefy JC 5 in black livery from Parasound



The homely but promising 91E prototype from Western Electric



Fritz's new LS 7, at left, and REV 7 SE, at right



A 10" driver with extraordinary mid-band clarity

Even before we finished building it

Right from the start, it was clear that the CF1025C was going to be something special. Using laser interferometry early in the development phase, Celestion's engineers built an accurate picture of the cone's movement across the frequency spectrum, providing the essential data needed to achieve extraordinary mid-band clarity.

CF1025C

From a range of small-diameter,
high performance Celestion
professional drivers

MANUFACTURERS

Contact Celestion to
request a sample



celestion.com

CELESTION

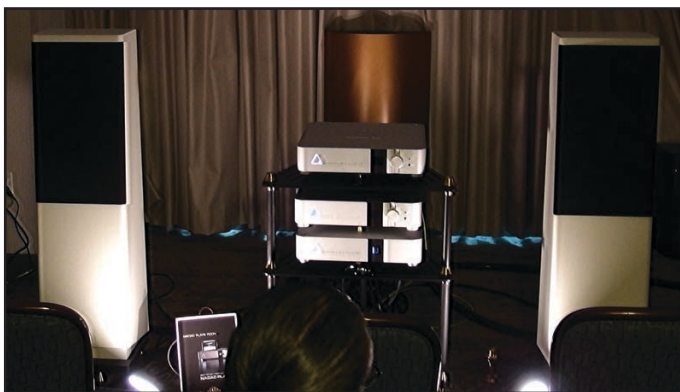


applications, but its use in audio has been mostly restricted to sound reinforcement. As I dropped into the YARRA 3DX sweet spot seat, I couldn't help noticing that the entire soundstage actually swung down into view from stage left. This sensation, akin to entering a stage from below, was totally unlike any I had experienced. The bar provided solid imaging that extended well outside the physical speakers. I noticed what may have been timbral issues with the unfamiliar music, but that might have been due to not enlisting their mobile app for customization.

I also visited the folks from Merging (<http://nadac.merging.com>), as we have a long relationship related to my day job at a pro audio software manufacturer. They had a sweet setup going, with PSI Audio prototype loudspeakers resting on Star Sound Technologies BSPL101 platforms (www.starsoundtechnologies.com). The floorstander speakers, still unnamed, were based on PSI's existing A25-M stand-mounted three ways with a 10" woofer. In keeping with the PSI philosophy (www.psiaudio.swiss), the active design is all-analog, with a Class AB amp for the tweeter and dual Class G/H amplifiers for everything else. Roger Roschnik, CEO of PSI, filled me in via e-mail after the show. "Phase compensation, adaptive output impedance damping, all entirely analog in to out..." he said. "Entirely handmade, tuned, and calibrated in our large anechoic chamber. The idea is to offer the best of professional monitors for domestic use."

Speaking of DSP, Gayle Sanders premiered a modern loudspeaker, comprised of a hand-sculpted, multi-way floorstander with constrained-layer damping, an integral electronics package, and lots of DSP (www.eikonaudio.com). The Image1 active speaker system includes Bernt Böhmer's (www.bohmeraudio.com) wavelet-based Eikontrol to provide internal temporal and frequency compensation within the speaker, and externally for boundary compensation and uniform wavefront propagation into the room. From my brief listening session with unfamiliar material, I assert that the Image1 provided what could be the most uniform low-frequency coverage of any rig I've heard. The complete Image1 system includes paired speakers, amplifiers, and a mobile app-controlled Eikontrol for \$24,500.

Vehement Audio (www.vehementaudio.com) had its killer little \$2,495 Brezza EOS on demo. A rear-ported bookshelf model,



These still unnamed towers are PSI Audio's first high-end consumer product, reflecting the 40 years of pro audio analog design of the Swiss company.

the freshest Brezza sports a RAAL 64-10 for the very top and a custom 6" SEAS mid/woofer crossing over at 3.8 kHz. The acrylic front baffle could contribute to the 30 lb. weight but, whatever the magic employed, they sounded exceptionally nice.

Another vendor I always enjoy, for value and fidelity, is Ryan Speakers (www.ryanspeakers.com). A preview of the upcoming S610 was on hand, a time-aligned two-way with an upper 3 dB down at 35 kHz. A 1" beryllium dome crosses over at 2 kHz to a 6.5" laminated Nomex mid/woofer. A port on the front of this \$3,995 bookshelf makes for easy placement.

Do-it-all techie Steven Norber (www.pranafidelity.com) was at AXPONA with his \$4,950 per pair Bhava. Teamed up with his own purna/ca preamp (\$4,500 to \$9,950) and \$8,950 purna/ma 1200 W into 2 Ω power amp wired with Kubala-Sosna Elation! cabling, the sound was predictably reference quality. "Aside from their shape, the materials for the cabinets are different...along with changes to the crossover," he said. There were also changes made to the internal acoustic treatment. "It may be worth noting the Fifty90 cabinets were produced in China, while the Bhavas are built and



Electrostat pioneer Gayle Sanders is back with Eikon Audio.



Vehement Audio's little champ, the Brezza EOS

finished locally (in Colorado) using materials unavailable in China.” The result? In Norber’s words, an even more “...refined and focused sound without giving up dynamics or sounding too ‘polite.’”

Neat Acoustics (www.neatacoustics.com) had a new jumbo Iota on show for the first time, a production version of the \$4,995 Iota XPLOERER . While I use jumbo in a relative sense, the XPLOERER is a larger version of the ALPHA. The latest Iota retains a 2.5-way design, with a 170 mm mid/bass unit and an AMT tweeter in a sealed enclosure. The lower cabinet section contains a separate “iso-baric,” downward-facing dual magnet-to-cone woofer configuration, tuned to 35 Hz. Frequency response for the XPLOERER is roughly 25 Hz to 25 kHz, and the sensitivity is 88 dB at 1 W.

At any show, I always find at least one loudspeaker vendor that is new to me, and this year’s example is Orinda Acoustics (www.orindaacoustics.com). Their enticingly named new “12” 2-Way Be” model is a two-way floorstander, with a beryllium compression



Ryan’s new raked cabinet two-way, the S610, will arrive this summer.



PranaFidelity’s compelling Bhava, a “step-up” from his Fifty90

driver (1” exit) fitted to a 300 mm symmetrical horn. A 12-inch long excursion, paper cone woofer in a vented cabinet takes care of the low-frequency duties. Frequency response is roughly 25 Hz to 25 kHz, and the price is \$22,000/pair.

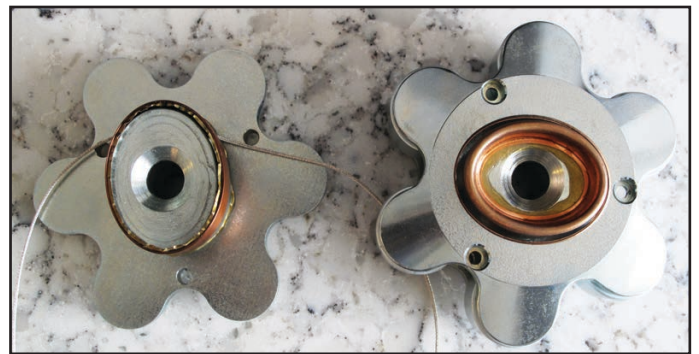
You may have seen recent coverage of Scan-Speak’s new Ellipticor line in this magazine as well as *Voice Coil* (April 2018 Test Bench—“The New Ellipticor Drivers from Scan-Speak”). I can tell you that seeing an elliptical voice coil up close reminded me of those less than ideal race track speakers you typically find in car doors. Of course, one of the design goals for such a unique motor was reducing modal resonances. In talking with Scan-Speak’s Fran Hasselriis about these rare beasts, he said it was a tough manufacturing challenge. The hardest part of bringing the line to life was proving to themselves that they could do it (www.scan-speak.dk).

Hasselriis also tipped me off to a customer of his that was new to me; Acoustique Quality (www.aq.cz). Though they have a range of high-end ported hi-fi speakers, the Passion line, their latest is an unassuming desktop active speaker, the M24BT, making its North American debut at the show. The price is yet to be determined, but the wall wart-powered M24BT includes Bluetooth 3.0, two 40 W Class D amps, and a remote.

Ear Gear Vendors

João Martins, the hirsute editor of *audioXpress*, asked me to minimize my coverage of headphone happenings, as they’re taken care of elsewhere. While staying within that guideline, I did take a good look around, and found several Ear Gear vendors sequestered in a light-filled mezzanine suite, including Woo Audio (www.woaudio.com).

With electrostats making something of a comeback, Woo was showing its latest, the lovely \$8,999 3ES, an all-balanced headphone preamp/amp/energizer with a mad scientist vibe. Based on the



The guts of Ellipticor



The headphone suite (Photo courtesy of Michael Newman)

W33, the 3ES delivers up to 10 W of wideband power into Stax, MrSpeakers, and HiFiMAN cans.

New Gear

Another fave cans vendor is Dan Wiggins and his Periodic Audio gang (www.periodicaudio.com). This AX-PONA hosted the first glimpse of their upcoming amp, the “Ni” as in Nickel, for all you science nerds. The forthcoming self-powered miniature headphone amp has a modest gain of 3 dB to accommodate a wide range of impedances without noise, and will go on sale for \$299.

Doshi Audio (www.doshiaudio.com) had two new items, a stereo amp and a headphone amp. Based on its Monoblock, the \$18,995 Stereo Amplifier is a hybrid, with JFET input and paired EL34/6CA7 output and low overall feedback. The result is 50 W of Class A power, and a maximum of 65 W. The imaginatively named Headphone Amplifier features a completely balanced design with both balanced and unbalanced outputs, three impedance ranges and direct coupling throughout.

Mark Gurvey of Source Systems (www.sourcesystemsllc.com) had a new big brother to M2Tech’s EVO mini-stack (www.m2tech.biz). The Rockstars Series is composed of the \$1,699 Young MkIII DAC/preamp, the Nash MM/MC phono preamp, the DXD-capable \$1,899 Joplin MkII ADC, the \$1,299 Crosby Class-D power amp, and the

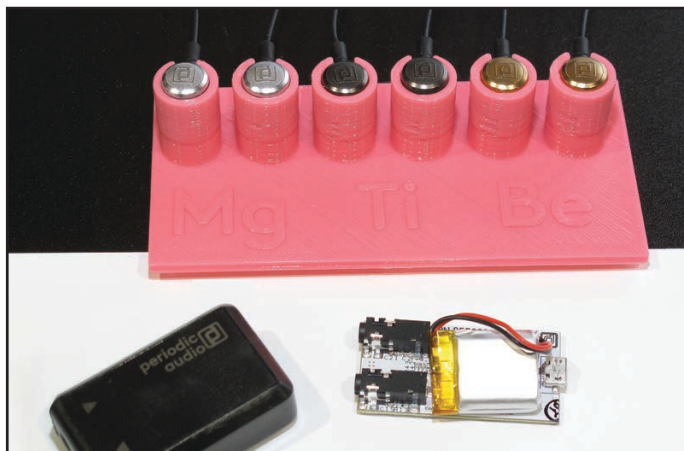
Van Der Graaf MkII low-noise PSU, also \$1,299. Pricing is not yet set on the Nash. The Joplin MkII offers variable gain with choice of digital de-emphasis and H/LPF. The revised Young handles DXD and DSD4, as well as analog and Bluetooth in. Though Der Bingle wasn’t a rock star, the Crosby may just be, packing 110 W (4 Ω) of power into the same compact form factor as the rest of the line. Adding to the allure, the Van Der Graaf MkII acts as a power hub for the whole system, and features user-defined power up/down sequencing. Gurvey also had fidata’s HFAS1-XS20U high-end music server, an upgrade to the XS10U, which now supports four RAIDed 1 TB SSDs. The pairs of striped drives, which optionally can be mirrored as well for increased data integrity, reduce current draw on the PSU. In turn, this improves fidelity as any server designer knows all too well. The HFAS1-XS20U runs \$7,000 to \$9,000, depending on storage complement (www.iodata.jp/fidata).

Duane Randleman of Automated Lifestyles brought along two entries in the new gear category; Bionic Cable and Aesthix’s first



Doshi’s handsome Headphone Amplifier is priced at \$3,795.

Woo Audio’s (ahem) heady new 3ES



A prototype Nickel case and quad-layer PCB, accompanied by Periodic’s trio of insert-style cans



The Rockstars of M2Tech: Young MkIII, Crosby, and Van Der Graaf MkII

UDP-203

4K UHD Blu-ray Disc Player



All-Around Excellence

The UDP-203 one of our most powerful, flexible, award-winning players to date. Combining state of the art 4K video processing, exquisite audio processing, a custom-made disc loader for quicker disc loading times, and a bevy of supported disc and file formats, the UDP-203 remains the ultimate home theater companion for audiophiles, cinephiles, and media enthusiasts.

oppo

OPPO Digital, Inc. | www.oppodigital.com | Menlo Park, CA



integrated amp. Developing 150 W into 8 Ω , the \$7,000 hybrid Aesthix Mimas combines elements from its award-winning Calypso line stage and Atlas power amp, and includes optional phono board and DAC. Internals are truly balanced and differential, and a 1 W into 32 Ω fully discrete, Class A headphone amp option replaces the default 1/3 W A/B version (www.aesthetix.net). Bionic Cable is a new company and this was the first show for that line (www.automatedlifestyles.tv).

There are plenty of commodity Ethernet switches available that support basic Quality-of-Service (QoS). SotM (www.sotm-audio.com) has gone one better with its sNH-10G, designed with audio in mind. This smart switch folds SotM's noise filtering and isolation tech from its \$700 iSO-CAT6 Special Edition ethernet filter/isolator, and includes a house clock output for connection to its master clocks, such as the new \$4,000 sCLK-OCX10, keeping all participants in perfect frame sync. The model also has two fibre ports for very high speed, long throw LAN connectivity. Pricing on the sNH-10G is yet to be set.

Vinyl

I don't subscribe to the Vinyl Revival, having had a turntable, originally an AR-XB, since college. A little over a decade later, I was introduced to what we now call HRA digital, and have never looked back. I still own a Pioneer PL-12D, but never use it 'cuz now I have FiDef but that's another matter. Anyway, there were two turntables at the show that caught my attention—one for its subtle tastefulness, and the other for its novel approach. Let's start with EINSTEIN Audio Components (www.einstein-audio.de) and its The Record Player. At \$12,000, this base isn't for the faint of heart. What struck me about this lovely piece was the lack of Trumpian ornamentation, a study in understated elegance. In high-end audio, nothing succeeds like excess, and The Record Player bucks that thinking .

Now for the novelty...Fern & Roby (www.fernandrobby.com), crafters of wood and iron, have a new product. The \$6,750 Montrose



May Park shows off SotM's new sNH-10G eight port switch.

Kit consists of the Montrose turntable, a Maverick phono preamp with either MM or MC daughterboard, a Denon 103r cartridge, an alignment protractor, and four isolation feet. What I found fascinating was the turntable's gray cast iron makeup, inherently massive and resonant-resistant.

The Widget

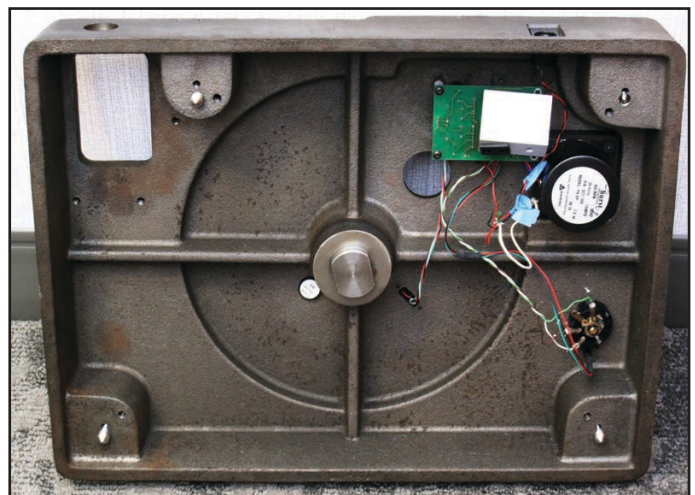
Only one widget in this year's report, the unmistakable Pneupod NP-1 from Pneulance Audio (www.pneulance.com). Employing a tried and true technique, the Pneupod consists of a synthetic rubber dome captured by a metal collar with valve. Hand-pressurizing the dome provides a pneumatic lift for any platform the Pneupods sit under. A set of four costs \$1,195, and that kit will support up to 80 lb of distributed weight.

Overall Impressions

Several tendencies were evident at this year's show. First, Master Quality Authenticated (MQA): Notice that this is my only mention of the emerging format. Why? Because, at least for mainstream higher fidelity manufacturers, inclusion of MQA support is becoming a given. The new Young MkIII is an example. Look, despite what conspiracy theorists and non-oversampling DAC manufacturers may say, MQA is a great way for record labels to distribute high-resolution audio (HRA) that's not the master file. With forward and backward compatibility built in and sound that's way better than Red Book, what's not to like?

Next factoid of note was my repeated encounter with electronics that exhibit much wider frequency responses than the old school "20 Hz to 20 kHz" dictum. I mentioned pro audio legend Rupert Neve earlier...Neve holds to the sensible notion that, in order to have clean phase behavior in the audio passband, you have to design for at least two times that bandwidth. Seems that manufacturers are increasingly following that path—an outstanding example being the pre-production L2 Signature monoblock that Vinnie Rossi (www.vinnierossi.com) showed, with 250 kHz bandwidth.

Having worked with what is now "HRA" since the late '80s, I'm loving it. I asked Nick Doshi of Doshi Audio, "Is ultra-wideband




Fern & Roby's cast iron plinth



Pneunce Audio's Pneupod

a fad or simply good design sense?". He stressed that frequency extension alone is not enough, and cautioned that "...an amplifier with a wide bandwidth is also more susceptible to Radio Frequency Interference (RFI). Its design must include adequate RFI protection in our increasingly (RFI-) polluted world." Doshi also added that a "...phase margin for stability into less than ideal loads and low output impedance for control over tough loads" are also recommended. His new Doshi Amplifier exhibits frequency response within 1 dB from 20 Hz to 100 kHz and the all-tube monoblock is within 1 dB from approximately 10 Hz to 75 kHz with -3 dB down at 117 kHz.

Last item...After-hours entertainment at this year's AXPONA was decidedly not old skool, with one of them being a Bowie tribute rather than lounge lizard jazzers. This skews toward the third, and perhaps most significant trend for the audiophile industry—the ever larger participation of youth at the show, especially women. Since the saner sex has statistically better hearing than men, often accompanied by a more refined design sense and an expanding disposable income for singles, it's no wonder women are increasingly drawn to high-end hi-fi.

Overall, I find all these developments refreshing, and look forward to acceleration in all those directions. I can also look forward to future AXPONA shows, now that they've settled on a winning venue. 

About the Author

Oliver A. Masciarotte has spent more 30 years immersed in the tech space, working on facilitation, optimization, marketing, and product development for clients worldwide. As an author and speaker, he enjoys informing folks about technological best practices. More information is available at seneschal.net and othermunday.com.

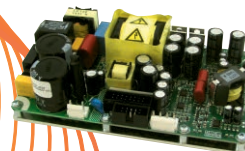
hypex NCxxxMP series

overview

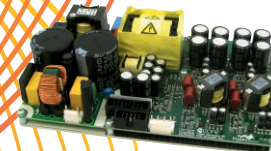
The NCxxxMP amplifier module incorporates a low power standby power supply (meets 2013 ERP Lot 6 0.5W requirements), a highly efficient switch mode power supply and a high-performance Class D amplifier in one compact and easily applicable power brick.



NC122MP



NC250MP



NC252MP



NC500MP



NC502MP

Add-on Module NC100HF
The NC100HF is a dedicated tweeter-amplifier which fits the NCxxxMP series.



Highlights

- High efficiency
- Universal mains operation
- Flat, fully load-independent frequency response
- Low output impedance
- Very low, frequency independent THD
- Very low noise

Features

- One or two channel amplifier
- 5W standby SMPS
- Advanced over current protection
- External controlled operation
- Auto-switching (115/230V)
- Low weight
- Compact

Applications

- Monitor loudspeakers for recording and mastering studios
- Audiophile power amplifiers for professional and consumer use.
- Public address systems
- Active loudspeakers

ncore
audio power conversion

hypex electronics
www.hypex.nl