

Audio Expo North America (AXPONA) 2019

Rainbows, Unicorns, and Great High-End

By
Oliver A. Masciarotte
(United States)

The Escher-esque Renaissance Schaumburg Convention Center and Hotel

This year's AXPONA was a sort of Groundhog Day, in that a fierce storm accompanied the event. Rather than last year's fight to get home amid the literal wreckage strewn about the highway, my battle this year was traveling to the show. However, my trusty hybrid plowed through it all, and I settled in for some excellent audio the following day.

I had read about a new speaker prior to the exhibition, and was pleased to sit down for a bit with Zoltán Bay to discuss and listen to the worldwide launch of BAYZ Audio's new flagship, the \$97.1k Counterpoint (www.bayz-audio.eu). The 4 Ω Counterpoint plays "...lower (3 additional Hertz to around 24 Hz) and louder (+3 dB SPL) with a bigger vertical soundstage and lower distortion" than the existing Courante range. In the Counterpoint, his 200 mm Bay Radial Speaker (BRS) tweeter is combined with dual opposing, Danesian-designed 9.5" papyrus cone woofers and an all-carbon fiber "cabinet" for a low distortion delivery that both excelled at imaging and envelopment. The unorthodox, yet handsome pre-production prototype had crazy good sound—lively and organic.

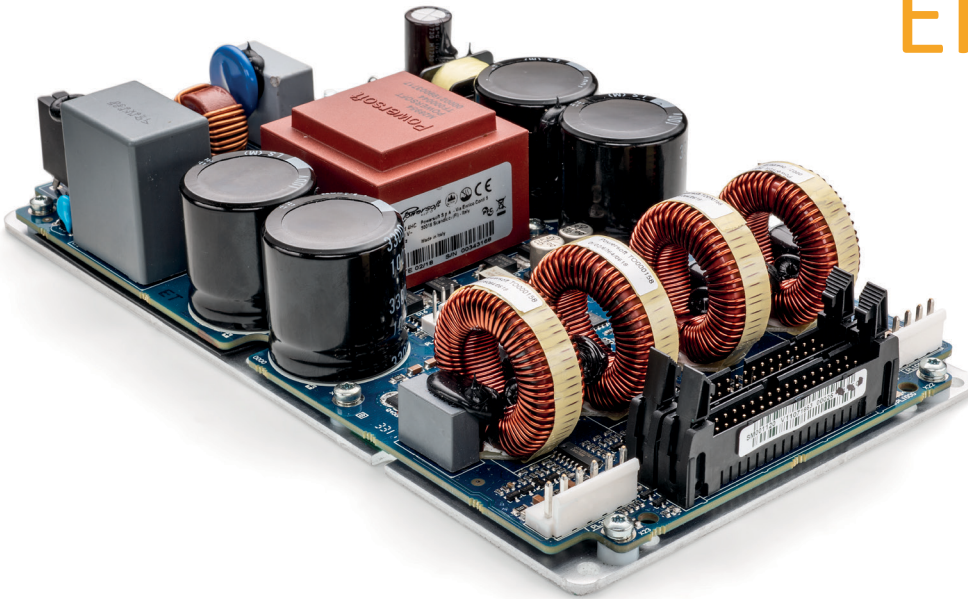
Synergistic Research (www.synergisticresearch.com) supplied Atmospheric X Level 3 Euphoria

cabling (8' speaker \$5,495, 1 m RCA \$3,495, and 1 m XLR \$3,995) and \$2,995 Power Cell 8 UEF SE power conditioning (which includes a \$1,995 Atmosphere X Excite power cable) connected to CH Precision's (www.ch-precision.com) I1 integrated amp/DAC fed from one of Zoltán's custom Linux-based servers. The I1 starts at \$38,000, and includes a digital input card (AES/EBU, S/PDIF, TosLink, and CH-LINK HD) and a balanced plus unbalanced analog input card. Additional options include two digital choices, \$3,000 USB or \$5,000 Ethernet, and a \$4,500 phono stage with six EQ curves.

More Speakers

While on the subject of Danes, let's talk about the Raidho division of Dantax (www.raidho.dk). Specifically, its chief designer, Benno Meldgaard, who has been on the job for the past 18 months

LITEMOD 4HC EMPOWER YOUR SPEAKER DESIGN

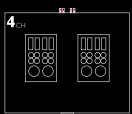


Whatever Your Applications

LiteMod 4HC is the most versatile amplification platform for high power OEM applications. Integrating PFC Power Supply and four output stages, LiteMod 4HC boosts flexibility by allowing any combination of output channel configurations. It also offers 2Ω operation capability, making it a perfect solution for a huge number of applications, from high power subs to multichannel rack amps.

- ⦿ 4 output stages (750W@4Ω each)
- ⦿ 4, 3, 2 channels, or single high power (up to 2400W@4Ω) channel configurations
- ⦿ High channel count applications
- ⦿ Universal mains PFC equipped power supply
- ⦿ Comprehensive set of protection and on-board limiters

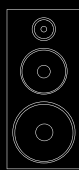
Application Examples



4/8 Ch Amp



2/4 Ch Amp



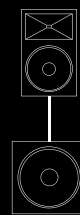
3 Way



Single / Double Sub



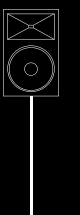
Monitor



Sub + Top



Sub + 2 Tops



since Michael Børresen decamped to start his namesake endeavor. Meldgaard and his team have upgraded and updated the D4.1 with tech adapted from its top line TD4.8, creating the new, scaled down €107,000 TD4.2. Its six new five-layer, tantalum-coated "Diamond" drivers have upgraded motors, while internal damping and the ribbon tweeter has been improved as well. They also took that same tech and applied it to a new stand mounter revision, the €20,500 TD1.2. The new tweeter provides several orders lower distortion and increased sensitivity to boot. A new €88,000 TD3.8, later announced at the High End Munich show, is on its way as well...

I discovered AQ s.r.o. (www.aqaudio.cz) at last year's AXPONA, and have kept track of the company since. AQ's quality products are reasonably priced, neutrally voiced, and visually pleasing. This year, the company had its \$5,000 Passion Anniversary model playing—an 8 Ω, 40" three-way tower with smoothly satisfying sound. SB Acoustics supplies a 1" tweeter and 4" polypropylene mid, both from

the low distortion Satori line. For low-frequency duties, four Scan-Speak drivers are employed, for an overall response of roughly 25 Hz to 30 kHz.

Next up in the realm of speakers, the always jovial Vinnie Rossi (www.vinnierossi.com) was demo'ing his \$20,000 Stiletto 15. The three-way model, a new product class for him and somewhat reminiscent of a Dalek in appearance, combines a 15" open baffle paper cone woofer with a 5.5" paper cone mid and 1" fabric dome tweeter. The mid- and high-frequency drivers are together in a sealed enclosure. Mundorf and Jantzen crossover components combined with WBT NextGen terminals round out the configuration. Response is spec'd at 39 Hz to 40 kHz ±3 dB, and impedance is a nominal 6 Ω.

Acora Acoustics (www.acoraacoustics.com) was busy at the show, with not one but two loudspeaker



The curvilinear carbon BAYZ Counterpoint



The towering Raidho TD4.2

debuts. Playing for most of the proceedings was its \$28,000 SRC-1, a ported 8 Ω two-way with 7" sandwiched paper mid-woofer and a 1" ring radiator for the high-frequency tasks. Weighing in at 246 lbs. and 43" in height, these faceted towers are constructed of 3 cm granite. The 13" stand mounter, the SRB, tips the scale at 58 lbs. With a 5.5" mid-woofer mated to a 1" beryllium dome, they don't go as low as the SRC-1, roughly 43 Hz versus 29 Hz, but the metal tweeter lets them reach up to 35 kHz.

Lest you think megabucks are needed for a satisfying system, consider Vanatoo (www.vanatoo.com) and its new Transparent One Encore, introduced at the event. The \$530 powered two-way includes aptX Bluetooth along with analog plus USB, Toslink and coax digital inputs, a subwoofer output and even a full remote. Together with a compact 10" RSL Speedwoofer 10S subwoofer (\$399), the diminutive Transparent One Encore made, according to my notes, for a "killer entry-level system."

Local heroes Magnepan (www.magnepan.com) had another new, price conscious entrant, the 48" \$650 LRS planar magnetic. Yup, 650 bucks for a



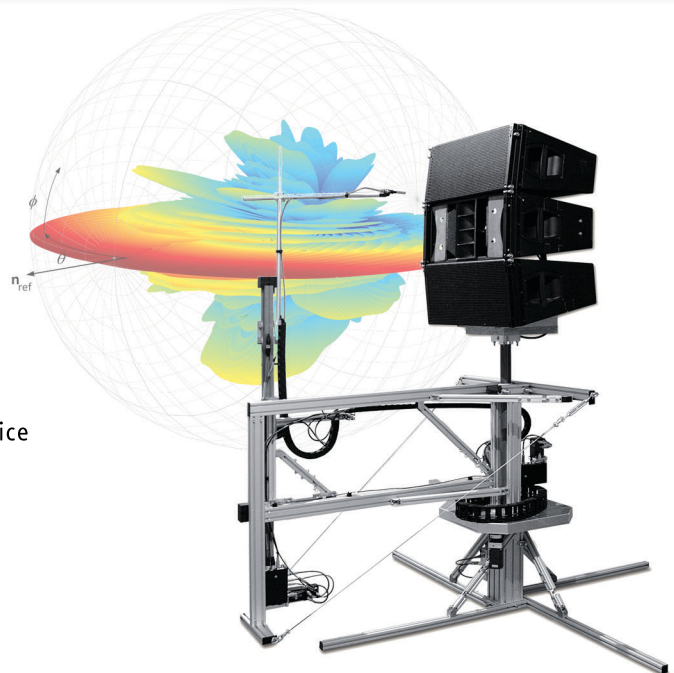
NFS

NEAR FIELD SCANNER 3D

TRUE ANECHOIC SPL AND DIRECTIVITY

For portable speakers, laptops, phones, smart home devices, pro sound ...

- ▶ automated measurement in normal room
- ▶ SPL at any point in 3D space (near & far field)
- ▶ balloon, contour & polar plot, power response
- ▶ transducer baffle extension (half-space) - new!
- ▶ export for room simulation (EASE, CLF, VACS, MATLAB)
- ▶ higher angular resolution, better accuracy, lower price than anechoic chamber



Maggie. Insanely affordable, I wrote that they offer “astounding fidelity for the price,” while the diminutive size would make any significant other happy in their living space. Of course, being Maggies, they need a fair share of current to drive the 4 Ω load they present, and maybe a subwoofer if you like pant-flapping bottom (-3 dB at 50 Hz), but these little critters could become the basis for an excellent starter system anyone could live with for a very long time.



Parasound’s rocking little NewClassic 200 INT integrated

At the show, Wendell Diller was driving the little Maggies with a novel, not-for-sale Maggie amp. A more realistic choice would be the \$1,195 Parasound (www.parasound.com) NewClassic 200 INT integrated amplifier/DAC, available “...in early summer.” The slim unit offers a great set of analog and digital features, including 110 W of Class-D power supplied by Pascal technology. It also integrates a “...superb MM/MC phono stage,” two RCA line level inputs plus digital inputs for USB, coaxial, and optical sources. There’s even a home theater bypass for Left, Right, and two subs, plus a front panel auxiliary in for those damnable portable devices.

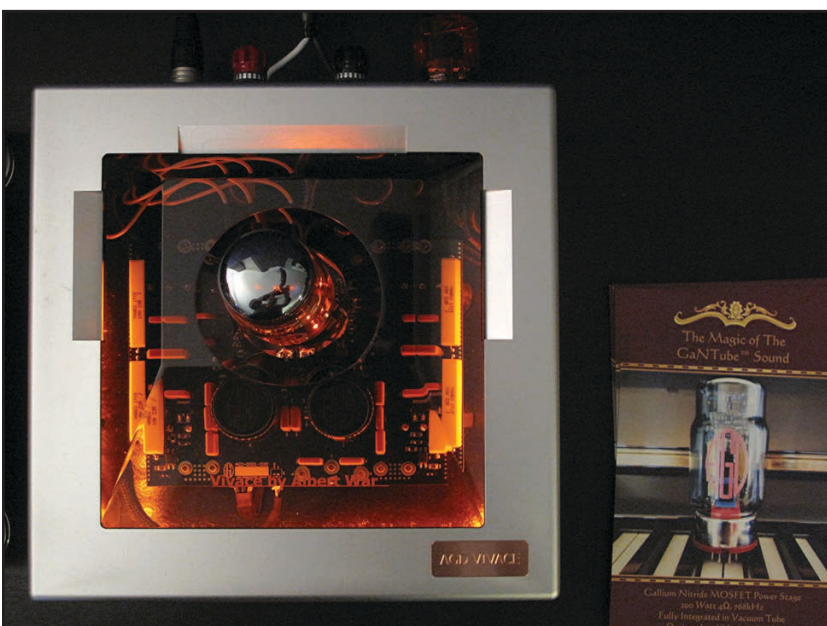
In the demo suite, the NewClassic 200 INT was fed by an OPPO Digital BDP-105 via Straight Wire \$30 Musiccable II interconnects, while the amp was driving a pair of Buchardt Audio S400 two-ways (www.buchardtudio.com) via Straight Wire’s \$250 Symphony SC speaker cables (www.straightwire.com). The \$1,800 Danish speakers, making their North American debut, rested on \$180/pair Norstone Stylum stands (www.norstone-design.com). The 4 Ω S400s are just over 14” tall, with a 6” aluminum cone midwoofer, and a 0.75” soft dome tweeter coupled to a 7” aluminum waveguide. On the back is a 5” x 8” low mass, racetrack passive radiator. They cross over at 2 kHz, and the response is listed as 33 Hz to 40 kHz ±3 dB. My notes mention that, all together, this was “...a perfect budget system” with low distortion, admirably even response and very gratifying results.

Stepping way up in cost, AXPONA saw the world premiere of EgglestonWorks’ new 18” tall, tapered top Nico Evo bookshelf model (www.egglestonworks.com). These \$4,295 8 Ω two-ways have a 6” custom mid/woofer mated to a 1” soft dome, both by Morel. Matching stands are \$495 and, at the show, they were powered by Primare’s \$4,995 I35 Class D integrated (www.primare.net) and entry-level Audience cabling (www.audience-av.com).

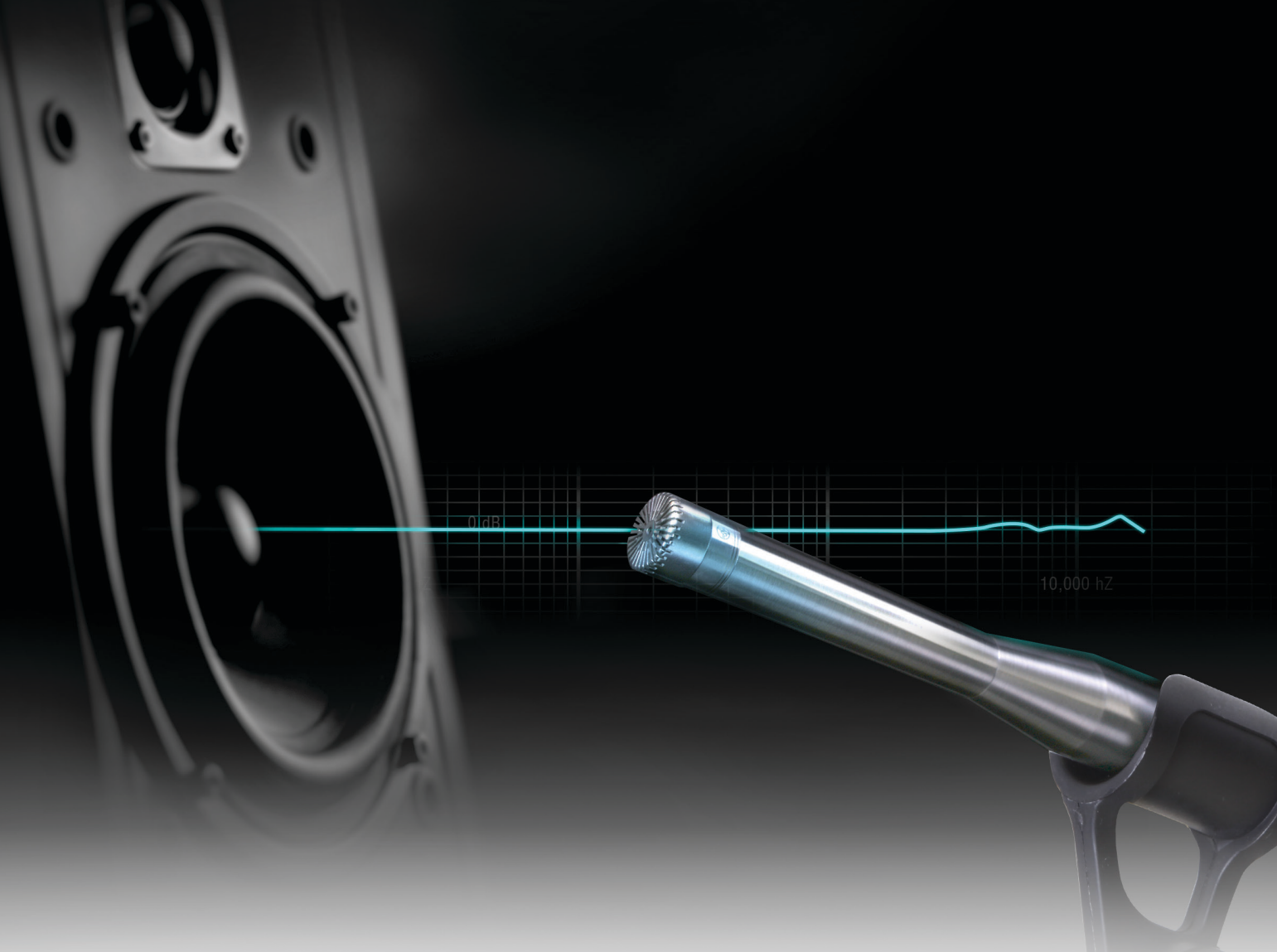
Something Old, Something New

In the Something Old, Something New category was the AGD and Ocean Way room. If you don’t know the name Ocean Way, you should. Its guiding light, Allen Sides, is an exemplary engineer and founder of storied Ocean Way Recording in Hollywood. That facility began life as the legendary United Western Recorders. In 2015, after decades of listening, Sides began selling his own line of studio monitors and, at AXPONA, I finally got to hear a pair.

At the show, a set of Ocean Way Audio Montereys (www.oceanwayaudio.com) were mated to new, 100 W into 8 Ω monoblocks from a company hitherto unbeknownst to me: AGD Productions



An overhead view of AGD’s GaN-powered Vivace



**CLARITY.
FLEXIBILITY.
TRUE SOUND.**

MODEL 426A14

2-IN-1 PHANTOM POWERED MICROPHONE PREAMPLIFIER

- 156 dB 1% THD and flat frequency response for high definition recording and modeling instruments
- Quickly change between ½" and ¼" O.V., IEC 61094-4 compliant microphones
- Lab grade microphones 3 Hz to 100 kHz, calibrated for superior test results



PCB PIEZOTRONICS
MTS SYSTEMS CORPORATION

1 800 828 8840 | pcb.com/phantom

MTS
SENSORS

MTS Sensors, a division of MTS Systems Corporation (NASDAQ: MTSC), vastly expanded its range of products and solutions after MTS acquired PCB Piezotronics, Inc. in July, 2016. PCB Piezotronics, Inc. is a wholly owned subsidiary of MTS Systems Corp.; IMI Sensors and Larson Davis are divisions of PCB Piezotronics, Inc.; Accumetrics, Inc. and The Modal Shop, Inc. are subsidiaries of PCB Piezotronics, Inc.



A pre-pro JansZen Lotus fed by my reference Calyx M DAP

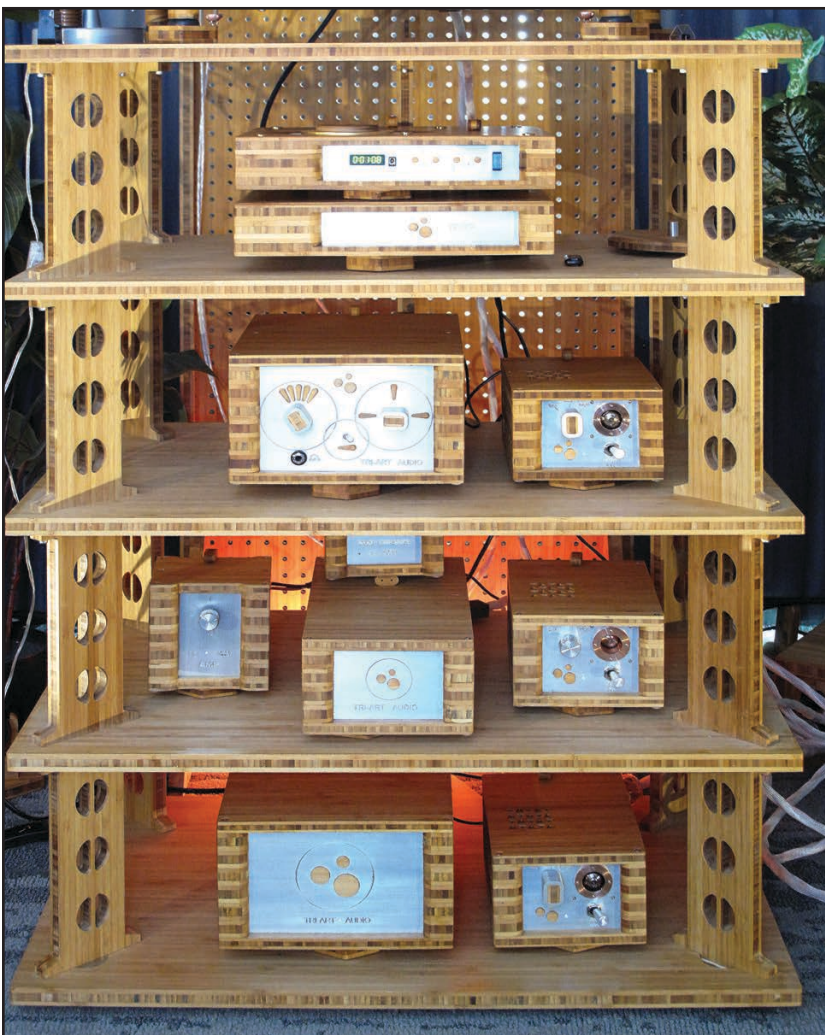
(www.agdproduction.com). The gallium nitride power MOSFETS used in the design are a bit unusual but, even crazier is the form factor. The GaNTube, which incorporates the key elements of the output power stage, including the GaN semiconductors, are "...integrated within a glass tube, which not only delivers the unique look of the AGD Vivace, but also allows the possibility for future seamless upgrades of the power stage." The wide bandwidth, 5 Hz to 100 kHz ± 3 dB may contribute to the sound but, all I'll say is the sound quality of their rig was detailed, unvarnished, effortless and, according to my notes, simply "lovely."

Also hewing to the Something Old, Something New theme was the "reborn" KLH brand. Along with many other rooms, I was not impressed with the sounds I heard from its \$1,298 three-way Kendall towers, but I'll give them another shot at a future show.

Last year, we caught the first glimpse of headphone manufacturer Periodic Audio's upcoming amp, the "Ni" or Nickel, in keeping with its periodic table product theme (www.periodicaudio.com). This year, they were distributing evaluation examples of the forthcoming \$299 self-powered miniature *analog-only* headphone amp. The tiny beast has great specs—THD "below 0.005%" across the audio passband, 150 mW of power delivery into 50 Ω , 270 mW into 16 Ω , and is stable into an 8 Ω load. A wide bandwidth, basically flat from 8 Hz to 30 kHz, ensures that your HRA content will sound properly airy.

At the last AXPONA, JansZen (www.janszenaudio.com) showed a proof-of-concept of its Lotus self-energizing active true electrostatic headphones. This year, David Janszen had an additive manufactured, pre-production version. With a 18 Hz to 30 kHz response, his over-the-ear cans sounded great. Despite the 500 gm weight, they were quite comfortable. Pricing is tiered, starting with an Indiegogo campaign price of \$795, which launched in May. Once a fixed number have been sold, the price will rise in steps to \$1,495.

On the subject of headphones, you may remember Warwick Acoustics (www.warwickacoustics.com) from my 2016 RMAF report. Well, they were back with a vengeance at AXPONA. The latest product, APERIO, is a stunningly good, do-everything electrostatic headphone plus energizer/pre/DAC that sets a new standard for performance. My notes indicated, "Such transparency, such ease!" The wideband hardware (subsonic to >60 kHz) is about 1U tall by 16" wide, and incorporates three distinct signal paths for LPCM (up to 384 kHz), analog and DSD (up to DSD4 over DoP). Analog is all Class A with balanced and unbalanced I/O, and the embedded DSP for equalization, etc.,



A veritable forest of bamboo on show from Tri-Art Audio

is (64 bit) double precision fixed point. Pricing is \$24,000 for the whole kit and caboodle.

As Mike Klasco and Nora Wong reported in the May 2, 2019 *The Audio Voice*, audioXpress' e-newsletter, "True wireless (has been) the main engine of growth in the total value of the headphones market...as consumers demand for new premium features remains strong." Boy, you can say that again! Quite a few vendors had true wireless products on offer, you couldn't swing a cat without hitting one. Of them all, Sennheiser got my nod for best implementation.

Another vendor new to me, Tri-Art Audio (www.triartaudio.com), had a room filled with good sounding budget gear. First, the company debuted its \$1,800 bamboo corner trap Resonating Trees. These are not your typical passive traps. In addition to quotidian corner placement for reducing low-frequency room resonances, they are also potentially active, with embedded super tweeters, though amps to drive them are not included. But wait, there's more! The trees also have holes drilled for optional resonating "wingots"—tiny silver bowls that, when activated by the super tweeters, "energize the air." Tri-Art Audio also showed the new \$275 S-Series moving magnet phono preamplifier.

Decibel 9 (www.decibel9.com) was showing its three stock retro chic furniture offerings, including the \$2,969 CR-101 equipment cabinet. With an MDF core and walnut veneer, this curvy fellow would complement a wide range of decor. If the stock items aren't to your liking, Decibel 9 also does custom as well.

Focal NAIM (www.focal.com) purchased North American distributor AudioPlus Services at the beginning of the year, and has added several lines, including IsoAcoustic (www.isoacoustics.com). Vice President of marketing Romain Vet hefted the beefy yet cost-effective new IsoAcoustics Delos isolation platform, in four sizes, from 18" x 15" x 1.25" at \$399 on up to the 22" x 16" x 3" at \$699. Vet also ran me through the new Astral AVR from Focal, the company's first foray into electronics, in addition to the huge inventory of brands and models they were showing.

Cary Audio (www.caryaudio.com) introduced the new SLI-80HS Heritage Series integrated amp (\$4,495 to \$5,880). Feeding the dual concentric Fyne Audio (www.fyneaudio.com) F1-10, the Cary piece "maintains the integrity of its past." Minimal feedback and solid-state rectification are highlighted, while a pair of switches select either 40 W Class A triode mode or 80 W Class AB ultra-linear mode. Fyne Audio is a company born of the sale and contraction of Tannoy a while ago, and its dual concentric designs recall Tannoys of yesteryear.



Warwick Acoustics' fantastic APERIO

LP-SERIES STUDIO MONITORS



Kali Audio's debut studio monitors have won accolades in the recording industry for their linear response, detailed imaging, and low distortion, all at a price point that puts them in anyone's budget.

With Boundary EQ tunings that were measured at The Village Studios in Los Angeles, they are easy integrate into any listening environment for accurate, captivating sound.

Read the audioXpress Review on Page 50

More info available at KaliAudio.com





Caution: Curves ahead at Decibel 9

Credo Audio System (www.credo-audio.ch) had a huge room in which to demo its big speakers. The designer, Michael Kraske, took me through the construction of the new, \$169,000/pair Cinema LTM three-way line array. Each speaker is composed of three cabinets: a long, front-facing polymer enclosure for the 32 ring radiator tweeters and 14 mid-woofers. The 22 mm silk dome tweeters are arrayed in six banks, while the 4" kevlar cone mids are in four. Two additional sealed cabinets, stacked one over the other, each house two passive, aluminum cone 12" woofers for response flat down to 20 Hz. EMM Labs provided the drive electronics. The cabinets and passive crossovers are all manufactured in-house.

Speaking of Swiss audio engineering, I was more than a bit surprised to see Mr. Weiss Engineering himself, Daniel Weiss manning a table in one of the big rooms. When asked why he was sitting all by his lonesome, he told me he was prospecting for new dealers and reps.

Also quite surprising, a few tables over was that force of nature, EveAnna Manley. She was holding down her own display, demo'ing the new \$4,500 Absolute headphone amp/pre (www.manley.com). This feature-laden critter has variable feedback, Baxandall-style tone controls, stepped relay ladder attenuator, on-the-fly switchable push-pull or single-ended topology, and an RF remote that will work clear across the house.



The Cinema LTM is fine Swiss engineering



Romain Vet with the substantial IsoAcoustics Delos



The aesthetically correct SINGularity monaural phono stage from Lejonklou HiFi

Truly Unique Offerings

Finally, in the “I can’t even think about it...” category, was Lejonklou HiFi and its cost-is-no-object assault on vinyl’s shortcomings (www.lejonklou.com). Casting aside all constraints, the new SINGularity phono stage took eight years of research and development. The beautifully minimalist result is a \$42,700/pair monoblock, machined out of annealed copper billets, with 13 factory setting for cartridge loading built in.

At AXPONA, the SINGularities were paired with \$9,900/pair Sagatun monoblocks mated to \$9,900/pair Tundra Mono 2 power amps via Linn Silver interconnects. The source was a Linn LP12 tricked out to the tune of \$23,690 and the sink was a set of Quad ESLs. In my mind, Lejonklou tied with BAYZ Audio for the “Most Audacious” award at the show.

Year of the Unicorn

2019 is shaping up to be the Year of the Unicorn, with pop culture and the financial world completely saturated with mutant equines and their attendant rainbows. Well, AXPONA 2019 certainly must have gotten the memo, since this show was chock full of “esempi di unicorno,” also known as good sounding show rooms!

From budget to budget busters, I was more than happy to hear systems that exceeded all expectations, whether entry level or eye watering. Also, show attendance was up 15% over last year, with a very good mix of more than 9,500 bodies, making it the largest show to date. With so very many exhibitors and only one OMs, I have to apologize if your favorite vendor didn’t make the cut for this report. I’m looking forward to next year’s event, and I hope you’ll be able to experience it for yourself. 🐾

MIC CAPSULES ALL TYPES

STOCK + CUSTOM
Mic Capsules
Housings + Mounts
Lead Attachment
Connectorizing
Waterproofing
Wind Screens
Circuitry
PCB Assembly
Testing

Mic Assemblies
For Any Purpose

Low Minimums

HOW MAY WE
HELP YOU?

JLI ELECTRONICS
215-256-3200

www.jlielectronics.com