



The Rocky Mountain Audio Fest (RMAF) 2016

Fall in Denver is a glorious time to be on the high plateau, with golden acacia leaves falling like snow, and the real white stuff high on the mountain peaks. This year, the Rocky Mountain Audio Fest (October 7–9) faced quite a challenge, as the promised renovations to its preferred venue had not been completed on schedule. The result: perplexed exhibitors and attendees, with substandard space for exhibitors and poor lighting for all parties in the tent where most headphone vendors were exiled. Still, show traffic was decent but not exceptional, and your intrepid reporter got his harried self to quite a few “rooms” during the three days of the event.

By
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(United States)

Let's start with the headphone tent (see **Photo 1**). In the “OMG, these are so affordable!” category, 1More (usa.1more.com) was showing its new \$60 iBFree Bluetooth in-ears featuring aluminum alloy housings, aptX, and titanium dynamic drivers. Also new, the \$150 MK802 over-the-ears Bluetooth cans, which feature aptX and beryllium drivers for great sound in a lightweight housing (see **Photo 2**). While I was at their table, I finally got to listen to the wired in-ears, which are a tremendous bargain for the sound quality.

I'm not sure if the defunct Sonoma brand will provide any lift, but Warwick Audio Technologies was showing its new Sonoma M1 Headphone System

(www.sonomaacoustics.com). The M1 employs DSP for a “pseudo-diffuse field response,” along the lines of what Dr. Sean Olive and the Audio Engineering Society (AES) have been investigating as the best subjective choice for headphone playback. Built to last, the \$4,995 package uses Warwick Audio's novel “HPEL” electrostatic transducer and includes a modern DAC Class A amplifier, DXD-capable ADC for analog inputs and energizer (see **Photo 3**). The latter provides a very high 1,350 VDC bias for a

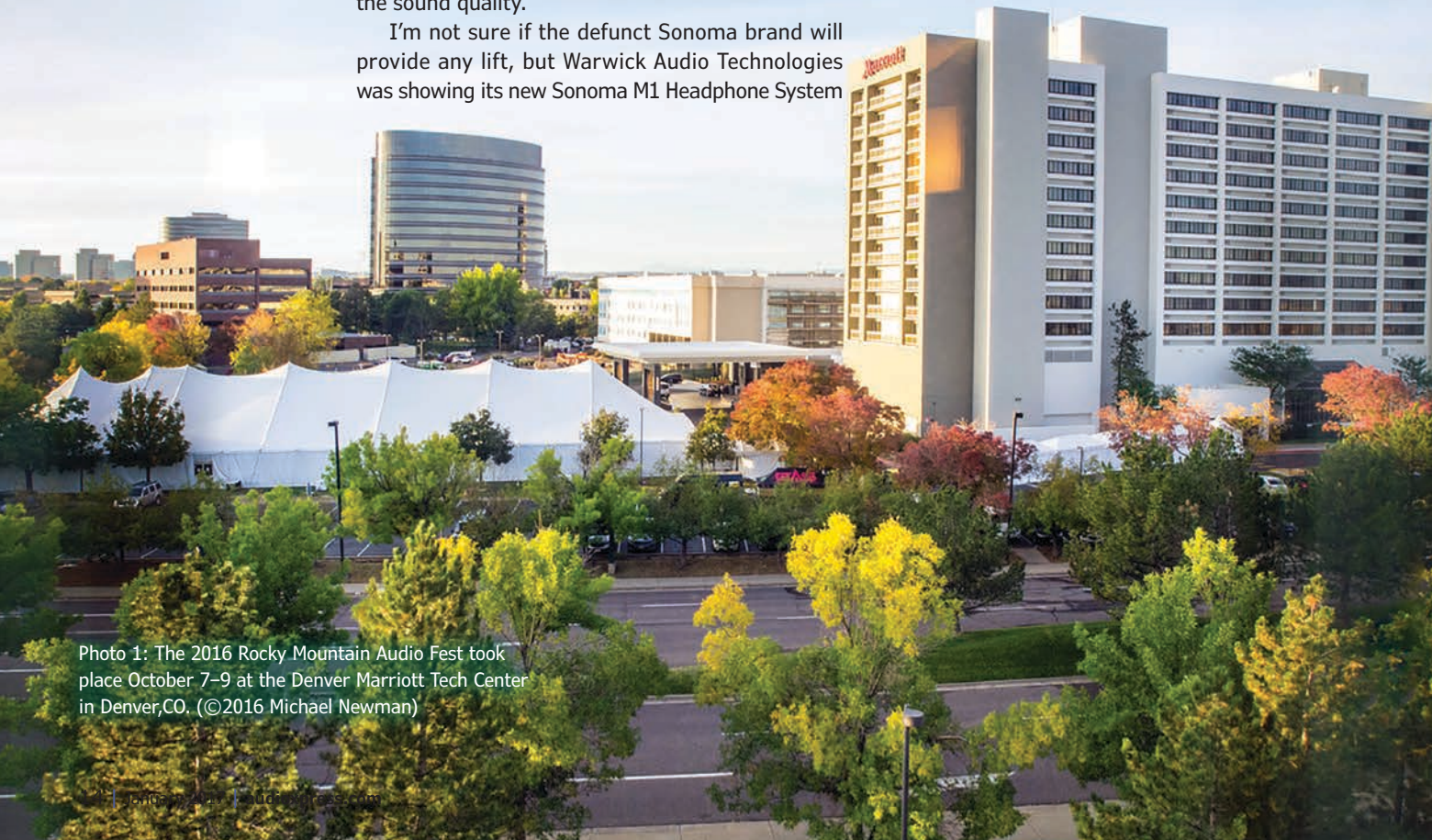


Photo 1: The 2016 Rocky Mountain Audio Fest took place October 7–9 at the Denver Marriott Tech Center in Denver, CO. (©2016 Michael Newman)

tight grip on the vanishingly thin diaphragms, and a marvelous, extended uncolored sound.

The electrostatic proliferation continues...A recognized name, HIFIMAN, has also gotten into the electrostatic game (www.hifiman.com). At the show, the company was spotlighting SHANGRI-LA, its new \$50,000 entry in the ultra-premium cans category. With a retro modern 300b-based hollow state amplifier/energizer, the SHANGRI-LA certainly makes a statement of, ahem, excess?

Etymotic ER4SR and ER4XR (www.etymotic.com) replace the venerable ER4, with more accuracy, better sensitivity and that same honest Etymotic sound and great triple flange isolation and fit. The XR adds a slight bass lift. Both single balanced armature (BA) models are still priced at \$349.

beyerdynamic's open-back \$599 DT 1990 PRO ships with two sets of velour ear pads, allowing you to choose between an "analytical sound" or a slight low-frequency uptilt (www.beyerdynamic.com). With replaceable headband pads, a detachable cable, and 250 Ω impedance, these cans would satisfy pros or consumers looking for honesty, extended response, and comfort.

Astell&Kern (www.astellkern.com) has branched out with the quasi-coincident AK Recorder option for its 300 series players. The \$999 Recorder accepts AES3 as well as mic and line inputs, includes 48 V phantom power, and records in DSD2 (5.6 MHz). Also new is its AK XB10, portable Bluetooth-capable DAC/amplifier that adds Bluetooth to any headphones. The \$189 XB10 employs aptX HD, has both balanced and unbalanced outputs on 2.5 mm and 3.5 mm jacks respectively, and includes a built-in microphone for taking hands free calls. In an announcement before the show, Astell&Kern affirmed that it will support TIDAL in all its current, Wi-Fi-enabled portable players via a firmware update.

Kris Cartwright, who designed the new Westone W80 with twin brother Karl, was on hand at the show to discuss their latest design (see **Photo 4**). The great sounding, \$1,499 Signature Series W80 is an eight driver three-way with four high-frequency BAs, dual mids, and dual low-frequency bass BAs. Included is ALO Audio's "Reference 8" cable and capacious case.

Also showing was the new, lightweight IPX4-compliant MMCX Audio Bluetooth 4.0 wireless cable accessory, Westone's \$150 take on how to add wireless headset functionality to existing IEMs (www.westone.com).

The dynamic duo of Bevin and Zach Mehrbach of ZMF fame demonstrated their first foray into an all in-house design (see **Photo 5**). It is a departure from their usual models based on Foster planar magnetic guts. They're ramping up production of the



Photo 2: Bargain cans of the decade from 1More



Photo 3: The excellent Sonoma M1



Photo 4: Kris Cartwright (left) is shown with Blake Gaiser, holding the W80 and its included modular case. Gaiser set up his case with an AK380 and all of his IEMs.



Photo 5: Bevin and Zach Mehrbach display their new models.

\$999 Atticus and the \$1,299 Eikon. Both use 50 mm drivers and have 300 Ω impedance. Atticus houses a Thermoplastic Elastomer (TPE) copolymer diaphragm while my hands down favorite of the two, Eikon, employs bio-cellulose (www.zmfheadphones.com).

Walking the aisles of the headphone tent, I was more than a bit surprised to see a brand familiar to me from past Audio Engineering Society (AES) and Tape Op shows, and that is Rupert Neve Designs or “RND” to us pro geeks (www.rupertneve.com). Rupert used to design mixing desks, as they say in his native Britain, and his designs, clones of his designs, and virtual digital models of his designs are all in high demand. I own Universal Audio versions of half a dozen of his signal processors.



Photo 6: The no frills RNHP

At the show, the stark Neve table had the new \$499 RNHP, a no-nonsense half rack, 1U design, with the unusual addition of a 3.5 mm input alongside the more common balanced-on-XLR-3/TRS 1/4” combination input and RCA unbalanced (see **Photo 6**). Neve was a pioneer in specifying very wideband response in his gear to insure that phase and frequency response in the “audio” passband was spot on, and the RNHP is no exception. Frequency response is listed as an extremely tight ± 0.2 dB from 10 Hz to 120 kHz.

Prism Sound (www.prismsound.com) was another pro company new to RMAF. The well-respected UK manufacturer of pro and semi-pro ADCs and DACs came to the show with CALLIA, a \$2,750 desktop DAC with the same D/A conversion as its semi-pro Lyra—but with an improved, switchable gain headphone amplifier able to drive very low impedances and DSD capabilities up to DSD2 over DoP. Though CALLIA supports DXD (8x 44.1/48 kHz) on its USB input, the data is unfortunately downsampled, very nicely I’m sure, to 4x rates. Paired with ATC’s SCM40As, the system sounded accurate and enjoyable.

Headphone stalwart Fostex (www.fostexinternational.com) debuted its \$599 TH610, a comfortable, high-end closed back design with 50 mm dynamic drivers, walnut cups, and a slightly mid-forward voicing (see **Photo 7**). Published frequency response is claimed to extend from 5 Hz to 45 kHz. The TH610 was mated to its optional, \$299 ET-H3.ON7BL balanced XLR cable.

From Sweden comes the affordable, stylish, sturdy, and good sounding JAYS line of in and on-ear cans (www.jaysheadphones.com). The u-JAYS on-ear features a 40 mm diaphragm in a closed but vented cup, and is priced at \$179 for a headset version and \$119 for a headphone-only version. The q-JAYS are \$279 in-ears, and employ dual BAs in a tiny, all metal enclosure. They include headphone and headset cables, interchangeable by way of a custom threaded SSMCX connector—akin to a tiny F connector.

Another vendor new to the headphone herd is Labkable (www.labkable.com), a Hong Kong-based manufacturer of aftermarket cables for cans. With close to a dozen conductor/jacket choices terminated in a plethora of popular connector types, the possibilities boggle the mind.

Sony (www.sony.com) had a trio of new personal products, the \$2,199 TA-ZH1ES desktop HPA, the \$2,299 MDR-Z1R cans, and the \$3,199 NW-WM1Z Signature Series Walkman. The latest entry in the iconic Walkman series is a blingy, oligarch friendly special edition of the NW-WM1A. The NW-WM1Z sports a gold-plated, solid-copper chassis, upgraded internal components, and four-wire Kimber Kabling inside.

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Photo 7: The TH610 from Fostex



A hybrid design, the TA-ZH1ES headphone amplifier combines Class D with an analog feed forward stage to correct non-linearities. It also includes balanced and unbalanced outs, and a USB DAC that supports double speed DXD and DSD8. Yup, you read that right. Though it might seem like a case of specmanship run amok, a colleague who used to work for Sony on the now-defunct Sonoma DSD DAW project (see Sonoma M1) told me that, with DSD, "... something magical happens at 8x."

Last but not least, I had a brief visit with Naotaka Tsunoda's newest child, the MDR-Z1R. These open-

back beauties feature a dual material, 70 mm aluminum-coated polymer diaphragm. According to Tsunoda, the outer portion of the diaphragm uses a liquid crystal polymer to better cope with radial and transverse modes, selectively damping undesirable motion.

Electronics

The kids at Schiit (www.schiit.com) had some new toys to ponder, a microprocessor-controlled power amplifier, and a pair of hybrid passive/active attenuators. The \$699 Vidar is a dual mono, 100 W into 8 Ω /200 W into 4 Ω bridgeable design. Servo-less DC coupling, a linear power supply and microcontroller-managed bias distinguish this piece from similarly priced products. The \$699 Frey and the \$349 Saga are balanced and unbalanced hollow-state preamps, respectively, with the option of passive, relay-switched passive attenuation, and remote control. The Freya has an additional twist, the choice of JFET or tube buffering, and better headroom than the Saga.

Ampsandsound from Southern California (www.ampsandsound.com) teamed up with North California Sonic to show their latest, hand-built hollow-state designs, the \$3,600 Agarth and the \$1,850 Leeloo combination amps. The former pairs a 6SL7 up front with an overspec'd power supply and 300b triode on output. The latter is both headphone and power amp, using a 12AX7 or equivalent for input (see **Photo 8**). With a pair of EL-84s out to deliver 2.6 W into an 8 Ω speaker, little Leeloo will also drive a 32 Ω headphone with a dead quiet 1 W of hollow-state bliss. Agarth kicks out 5 W of triode power into an 8 Ω load, and also 1 W into 32 Ω headphones.

It's been a long time since Sonic Studio (www.sonicstudio.com) crossed the Great Operating System (OS) Divide but, at RMAF, it happened again...Amorra was the first and still one of my favorite dedicated music players. At the show, the Sonic guys were previewing Amorra 4, which will not only support Mac OS, but will also be cross-platform, running on Windows 8 and 10. Just in time too, as I just got a new Lenovo W10 laptop at work! There's also a new member of the family, Amorra 4 Luxe which, in addition to the existing Amorra spiffs like outstanding room correction and EQ, also adds the Amorra Hx headphone processor. Hx integrates stereo-to-binaural convolving from Darin Fong Audio right into the product.

CanJam

You couldn't move in the CanJam tent without hitting a high-resolution audio (HRA) portable. From seemingly out of nowhere, Acoustic Research



Photo 8: The groovy Leeloo combination HPA/power amplifier

(www.acoustic-research.com) is back, with its \$1199 AR-M2 and new \$699 AR-M20 pocketable players. The hefty half-pound M2 features a Class A headphone amplifier, ALPS analog volume control, and dual temperature-compensated clocks. The AR-M20 is slimmer and lighter than its big brother, and bypasses the OS for better audio quality (see **Photo 9**). Running the Android operating system and supporting 802.11B/G/N, both pieces run Qobuz and TIDAL clients.

Zhuhai Spark Electronics Equipment brought a pile of its Cayin brand of gear (www.en.cayin.cn) to the tent, including hollow-state amplifiers, solid-state DACs, and its broad line of low-priced DAPs. New for the show was the \$60 CS-30TCR USB-C-to-coaxial cable. The double-shielded assembly turns the new and exotic USB-C connector into analog RCA for use in a traditional setup.

Busting out of the CanJam tent, an unexpected delight was the Nagra (www.nagraaudio.com) room, with a pair of \$16,000 CLASSIC AMPs, the new \$17,000 CLASSIC PREAMP, a \$14,000 CLASSIC DAC, and a \$16,000 CDT transport. Also for sourcing, a \$4,800 solid-state Nagra Seven recorder was on hand, along with a \$35,000 Pro turntable and \$8,500 Black Beauty tonearm from Kronos (www.kronosaudio.com). Hanging from that, a \$3,750 EMT (www.emt-international.ch) S75 cartridge. What I loved though was that all that Swiss gear was playing through a pair of Avalon Acoustics \$34,995 Indras (www.avalonacoustics.com), one of my favorites. All cables were Kubala Sosna Master Reference (www.kubala-sosna.com) and, if you have to ask how much those cost, forget about it!

For Entry-Level Audio Enthusiasts

Two of my favorite rooms for aspirational audio enthusiasts was ELAC's, and the "\$5,000 Entry Level Room." The \$5,000 room was put together as an antidote to the crazy stupid expensive and less than wonderful sounding stuff to be seen elsewhere at the show. A \$1,299 Macbook Pro and a \$1,199 VPI Player turntable was feeding a \$1,499 Wyred4Sound mINT integrated amplifier. The amp powered a pair of \$2,995 Ono Paka loudspeakers with optional but seemingly necessary \$400 stands, a hybrid omni/dipole three-way design derived from Siegfried Linkwitz's LXmini (www.onoaudio.com). The Pakas, officially debuting at RMAF, are a refinement of Linkwitz's designs and, for an almost entry-level speaker, sounded really nice (see **Photo 10**).

Also affordable and highly capable, ELAC (www.elac.com) touted its new EA101EQ-G integrated amplifier as an all-in-one for both starter and second systems. With three AES inputs (RCA & optical) plus 192 kHz USB, 80 W into 4 Ω of amplification, iOS, and

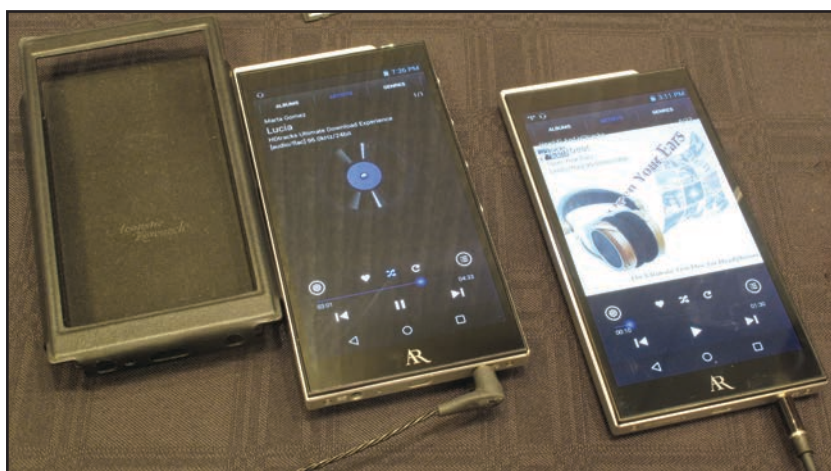


Photo 9: Acoustic Research's AR-M2

Android control, a headphone out and a subwoofer out with automatic setup, Dolby Digital decoding, and Bluetooth with aptX, the EA101EQ-G is good looking and easy to use. At \$699, the ungainly model name is the only thing to complain about.

High-End Equipment

For a diametrically opposite open-baffle approach from the Pakas, you need only look to Vos Loudspeakers' Array, with its 7' tall, dual-cabinet design (www.vosloudspeakers.com). One slim tower carries twelve 6" cone mids plus nine AMTs in a side-by-side, open vertical array. Complementing that is a wider tower, weighing in at around a quarter ton, which houses four 12" woofers coupled to a 14' transmission line. With an external crossover, the entire system rings up at \$135,000.



Photo 10: Ono Audio's Paka, a singular and successful approach to affordability

Photo 11: The Allegro Unum sporting a white fascia



Photo 12: The Noesis 210RT and Cherry amplifier



About the Author

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

The Brinkmann/MQA demo was lovely, with Mathias Brinkmann's new \$18,000 Nyquist DAC (www.brinkmann-audio.com) into a pair of \$29,900 Vandersteen 5A Carbons via \$52,000/pair Vandersteen M7-HPA monoblocks (www.vandersteen.com).

Jinlang Audio Co.'s Aurum Cantus (www.aurumcantus.com) showed its V3M, a \$2,000/pair two-way. With a 110 mm ribbon tweeter, and a 6.5" carbon fiber and Kevlar low frequency driver, the vented, stand mounted speaker was paired with a \$3,599 Majestic from Wells Audio. The V3M is not new, but RMAF was its first showing in the US.

Unique Equipment

The affable Vinnie Rossi was excited to tell me about his new VR MINI power supply, a retrofit power supply unit (PSU) for third-party gear (www.vinnierossi.com). As with other Rossi power tech, the \$995 VR MINI utilizes an ultracapacitor bank as the power reserve, charged by a special linear regulated circuit.

Since last year's show, Dave MacPherson of Studio Electric (www.studio-electric.com) has taken back manufacturing of his \$2,500 two-way SE Monitors, which proved too fiddly for Benchmark. His stand-mounted passives have been upgraded with a new mid/woofer and new finish. His deco \$8,950 T3 3-way floorstander was also on show, with a new 1" soft dome tweeter.

Speaking of speakers...newcomer Aluminous Audio (www.aluminousaudio.com) was showing a relatively expensive and novel slim floorstander. The \$39,900/pair Gravitas is composed of a rear vented two-way in an aluminum enclosure, with stands and matching compact cubic subwoofers. The main cabinets are suspended, via webbing, from the stainless and aluminum stands. The theory is that the webbing interrupts vibration, preventing structurally-borne transmission from the hanging mass of the cabinets to the floor stands.

Another brand I had not heard of before was Sonner Audio (www.sonneraudio.com), a company hailing from New Hampshire. Its new \$10,500 Allegro Unum is a stand-mounted, vented two-way, with a 1" ring-radiator tweet and a 6" magnesium cone mid/woofer that crosses over at 4.3 kHz (see **Photo 11**). A nice decorator touch is the availability of interchangeable faceplates in multiple colors.

Network audio players (NAP) continue to integrate into all levels of the audio market, and Teac's Esoteric division (www.Esoteric-usa.com) brought a higher end piece to the show. The new N-05 NAP, at \$6,500, comes in toward the premium end of the category. Known for its value priced components, Audio Alchemy (www.audioalchemy.com) was showing

the \$1,795 DMP-1. The new NAP is Roon Ready, and includes an I²S interface for connection to its DDP-1 digital preamp/DAC, and AES spigots for connection to other gear.

Horn-loaded compression drivers continue to be a trend, and all the usual suspects were in evidence, along with some new entries (see **Photo 12**). One was JTR Speakers (www.jtrspeakers.com), showing its \$4,600/pair Noesis 210RT, a front vented three-way with two 10" woofers combined with a "ultra" fancy coaxial compression driver fitted onto a symmetrical wooden horn with 60° x 60° coverage. The 43" tall towers weigh in at 125 lbs and were powered by diminutive Maraschino amplifier from the Digital Amplifier Company (www.cherryamp.com).

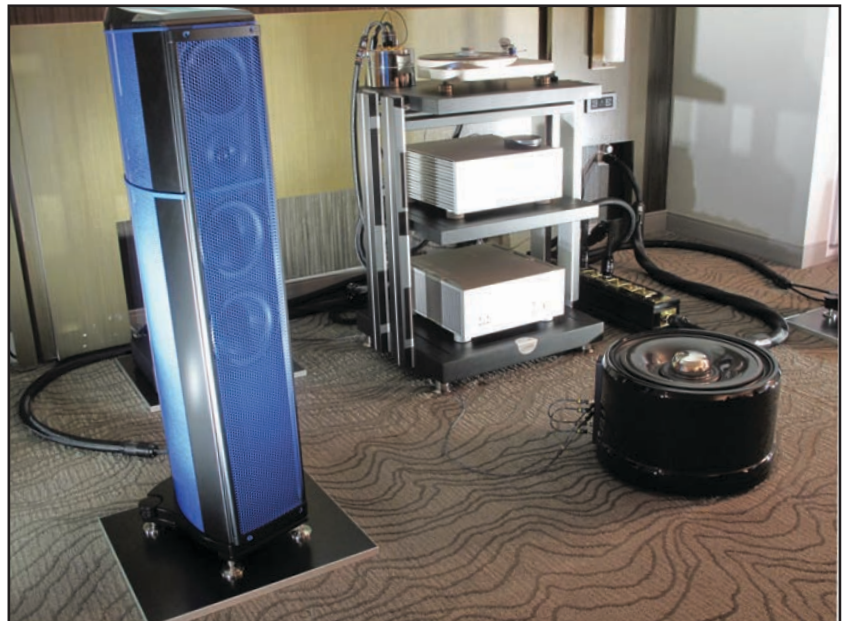
NAD (www.nadelectronics.com) was showcasing its new Classic DAC/amplifiers, the \$649 C 338, the \$899 C 368, and the \$1,599 C 388. The company also showed a new CD player, the C 568. In its high-end Masters Series, NAD previewed the \$3,499 M32 integrated amplifier and the \$3,999 M50.2 Digital Music Player. Where the Classic series amps use Hypex Class D technology, the M32 employs NAD's version of the more advanced Ncore, for exceptional Class D sound and performance. A jack of all trades, the remoteable M50.2 acts as a server, has a MM phono input, plays CDs, and rips to internal storage. It also includes wired GigE and wireless Wi-Fi plus Bluetooth capabilities for streaming I/O. All new members of the Classic Masters Series have expansion slots for future functionality upgrades, and TIDAL and MQA support is in the works.

The folks at Wilson Benesch (www.wilson-benesch.com) are celebrating their return to the US and, drawing a direct line to their new rep Audio Imports' branding, collaborated to "...create a new "Ettore" blue finish for the A.C.T. One Evolution P1." Named in honor of Ettore Bugatti, the French automobile designer and manufacturer who founded Bugatti, the \$40,300 Ettore's royal blue finish is possible thanks to Hypetex colored carbon fiber (see **Photo 13**).

Exhibiting for the first time in the US, Pristine Vinyl (www.pristinevinyl.com) from the UK brought its human as well as ViVac families of record cleaning machines to the show. Pristine Vinyl has two models, the manual \$2,225 ViVac RCS1 and the ViVac RCS2 which, for \$2,450 uses a precision pump and automatic arm to deliver cleaning solution.

Future Events

Right around RMAF time, there was a change in the management of Western audio events. The shakeup will affect which shows I'll be attending, but it's always fun to bring you coverage. This year's RMAF get together had its good and bad aspects—a



still subpar venue but that should improve before year end. Plus, far fewer jaded old men playing stale music with overpriced technology, and many more upbeat young sales people tending exhibits of innovative, affordable, and forward-looking products. All I can say is, "w00t, it's about time!"

Photo 13: Wilson Benesch thinks maybe bluer is better

For more information, visit www.audiofest.net. 

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