

Rocky Mountain Audio Fest (RMAF) 2017

America's Benchmark High-End Consumer Audio Show

Rocky Mountain Audio Fest (RMAF) took place once again in Denver, CO, from October 6–8, 2017. This was the perfect event to hear the trends and experience new products at the Denver Marriott Tech Center.

By
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(United States)

With a gun shop and a shooting range next door to my hotel and a Whole Foods just down the road, Colorado is a study in contrasts. With tony suburbs slammed up against the rugged Sawtooths, rawness and refinement exist hand in hand. Same goes for audio at this year's Rocky Mountain Audio Fest (RMAF).

The first person I bumped into was my friend Matt Reilly from Audio Plus Services. After a brief catchup, he said the word "premier" and dragged me to their suite to check out Focal's new \$10,000 Kanta (www.focal.com), a good looking and sounding ported three-way floorstander premiering at the show. Kanta's truly distinguishing characteristic is not the Focal signature smooth yet extended delivery, it's that the model's molded polymer front baffle is available in eight colors!



Focal's modern Kanta is sure to please everyone in the family.

Around the corner, I was hailed by Luke Manley of VTL (www.vtl.com). Luke was excited about a new, entry-level preamp on static display. His \$3,750 TP-2.5i phono stage revealed VTL's thoughtful and solid construction, I'm sure it'll sound good as well. His active demo, combining VTL's \$65,000 Siegfried Series II hollow-state power amps with \$62,000 Vandersteen Model Seven MKII, a \$18,900 Sub Nine for low-frequency duties, and a vinyl front end composed of Brinkman's \$32,000 Balance turntable with Lyra's \$12,000 Atlas cartridge, a \$12,500 VTL TP-6.5 phono stage, and a \$25,000 VTL TL-7.5 Series III preamp, demonstrated how incredibly well an all-analog, megabucks rig can sound.

Speaking of analog, Cambridge Audio (www.cambridgeaudio.com) has been working on a new range of higher end electronics aimed at elevated performance. With a minimal signal path, intelligent biasing, and no caps to degrade the audio, its prototype component line is a departure from its normal budget-priced offerings. The stereo power amp is joined by a modern, all-inputs-welcome preamp that also builds some fresh thinking into the design and layout. Paired with a set of Bowers & Wilkins 805 D3 stand mounters, it was the most lifelike presentation I've yet heard from these guys, very promising.

The Adante, ELAC's answer to more value and fidelity for less, is now in full production and are shipping (www.elac.com). The three-way AF-61 "Floorstanding Tower," driven by Audio Alchemy electronics, sounded crazy good for the price. With a broad sweet spot, Adante produced exceptionally natural sounds for those on a moderate budget. As

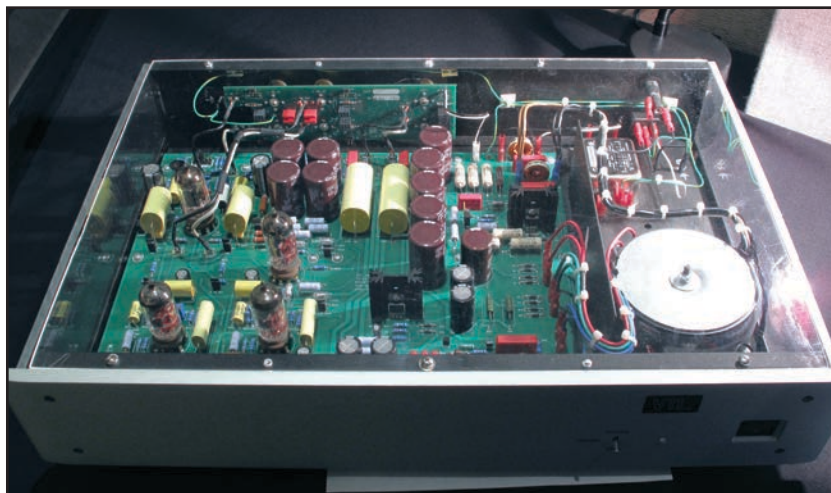
to sister company Audio Alchemy, inside the current casework was new circuitry. The DPA-2 amp now produces 650 W in mono mode by leveraging Hypex tech with special Peter Madnick sauce, and it does it nicely via a Class A input stage. The DDP-2, their next-generation Digital Decoding Preamp, now has more “DSP horsepower,” according to Madnick. In addition to Audio Alchemy’s well-known perceptual quality enhancement algorithms, the extra math power will support complete MQA unfolding. All that and more for about the same prices as the previous models. Also for the budget crowd, I got a demo of a complete Atmos rig assembled entirely from ELAC’s Unify line, and it too sounded great for, dare I say, a paltry \$5,000 outlay.

More Speakers

For more bucks with more performance, studio monitor stalwarts ATC (www.atcloudspeakers.co.uk) had the first US showing of its \$10,000 SCM19A active tower two-way speakers. Revealing yet not harsh, these little guys convey clean truthful sound. As with their other active examples, power is provided by in-house designed “...discrete MOSFET Class A/B modules, channeling 32 W to the high-frequency section and 150 W to the bass.”

Another speaker that delivered good sound was Paradigm’s \$10,000 Persona 3F, a ported four driver, three-way floorstander (www.paradigm.com). The Persona line atypically enlists Truextent beryllium in both tweeter and midrange drivers, (love those Fibonacci grills) plus dual voice coil double woofers. Paired with pre-production versions of Anthem’s STR preamp and 800 W into 2 Ω dual mono \$6,000 STR power amplifier, the slim tower from Paradigm provided exceptional soundstage depth and finely wrought transients...and they rocked Stevie Ray for my demo! The new two-channel STR pre comes with ARC room correction, DSD2 and DXD support via USB plus bass management for dual subs, balanced outs and MM/MC phono, all for \$4,000.

There’s something in France’s water that compels designers to build highly integrated, high-performance, monolithic gear. Micromega (www.micromega.com/en), the makers of some of my favorite budget wares, has moved upscale with its latest design. A far cry from its excellent, inexpensive MyDAC, the M-One is a slab of versatile integrated analog power, from the \$5,000 entry level M100, with 100 W, up to 150 W into 8 Ω for the \$8,500 M150. With a plethora of I/O choices, including Ethernet, Bluetooth, USB, AES/EBU, and HDMI, the higher powered model even includes Micromega’s own M.A.R.S. acoustic correction software. Paired with a set of \$14,000 Focal Sopra No2 in the demo



VTL's prototype TP-2.5i phono stage



Early prototypes of Cambridge Audio's as yet unnamed upmarket line augurs good sounds to come.



Audio Alchemy's reserved Peter Madnick and ELAC's irrepresible Andrew Jones hold court.

ATC's small yet exceptional SCM19A



room, M.A.R.S cleared up an upper bass chestiness and brought the soundstage into tight focus for a very engaging playback experience. Control is via an included remote or iOS and Android, and MQA support is in the works. Another plus: It can be ordered in seven standard finishes or more than 100 custom glossy colors.

Usually sporting fat, natural aluminum facia, Jeff Rowland (www.jeffrowlandgroup.com) is defying its own convention with the \$4,000 HA 60. A Rowland-class headphone amp, the diminutive HA 60 also acts as a compact and less costly 60 W stereo power amplifier.

Unlike last year's RMAF, this show was short on crappy sounding rooms and long on excellence in audio. This year, I also acquired a new found appreciation for two brands which, in the past, were far from my favorites. The first was Dynaudio, a brand that I have not had much appreciation of, even its pro lines. But its new little Special Forty is something else again. Paired with an all-Ayre signal chain including a prototype of the new QX-8, they yielded a very pleasing yet exacting sound. As the name implies, the two-way stand-mounted Dynaudio is an anniversary special edition. At \$2,500 a pair, these are exceptional speakers but, with a single port on the back, you can't call them "bookshelf." By the way, the QX-8 integrated amp, which will run from about \$3,500 to \$4,500 depending on options includes, when fully loaded, USB, AES and Ethernet inputs, and can understand Roon, TIDAL, and Qobuz. Bonus birthday beauty from Dynaudio (www.dynaudio.com), and more yummy goodness to love from Ayre (www.ayre.com).



The yummy STR power amp...Is Jacques-Arsène d'Arsonval spinning in his grave?

Another heretical opinion I hold is my displeasure, up 'til now, with what's come out from GoldenEar Technology (www.goldenear.com). I know, Sandy Gross is the quintessential audiophile speaker designer but I simply didn't "get it." I found his previous models to be timbrally weird, and their imaging vague. Well, I'm prepared to shut my mouth. His new \$8,500 Triton Reference, first shown at CES 2017, is not what I'd call "budget," but they exhibit a major leap in fidelity from past models while still being relatively affordable for such high performance. Even in the cramped quarters available, the 58" tall and 9.25" slim References, paired with all Hegel electronics, provided nicely controlled low-frequency response, with excellent imaging and even, credible voicing.



The champion of Micromega's new M-One line

Personal Audio

Time to turn my gaze to personal audio, starting with Klipsch (www.klipsch.com). I'm a total fan of its Xi series of in-ears, but was surprised by a breakout new product, the beautifully constructed

oppo



An Experience Beyond Headphones

Since their release in 2014, PM-1 headphones remain OPPO Digital's premiere headphone experience. From the gorgeous wooden storage box containing every cable and three sets of soft, comfortable ear pads; to their breathtaking, natural sound; PM-1 headphones turn the very act of listening to music into a luxurious, blissful moment worth savoring. For a start-to-finish sensory delight, music lovers reach first for PM-1 headphones.



PM-1 Open-Back Planar Magnetic Headphones are available for \$1099 from oppodigital.com and from select retailers nationwide.

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Small, black, and unassuming, the HA 60 bucks the trend.

\$1,200 Heritage HP-3 over-the-ear headphone. Accompanied by a bundled universal headphone stand, 0.25" adapter and detachable cable, the semi-open cups sport sheepskin pads and are available in your choice of three solid wood species. The sound was signature Klipsch and in keeping with the price—accurate, extended, and smooth. Klipsch also showed a new DAC/HPA, the \$500 Heritage Headphone Amplifier. With an ESS Sabre32 ES90128K2M at its digital heart, and dual



The redoubtable Sandy Gross with his newest tower, the shiny Triton Reference

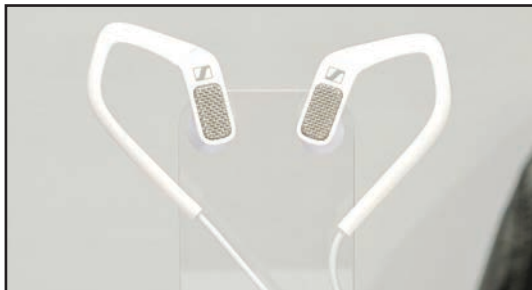
TI TPA6120A2 monolithic amplifiers driving its balanced and unbalanced analog outs, it sounded great and is very affordably priced. I particularly liked the very wide unity gain bandwidth, DSD2 support, walnut top and bottom, analog gain and real physical controls; long bat toggle switches; aluminum volume control and rotary selector; all clad in copper. These are not features one would expect at that price point.

Walking the aisles of CanJam, the Sennheiser (www.en-us.sennheiser.com) table stopped me in my tracks. Was that a set of headphones with, gasp, microphones on the exterior?! Yes indeed, the \$250 Ambeo Smart Headset serves as both single driver in-ear headphones and binaural recording rig. Currently for iOS only, the Ambeo Smart's cable terminates in a Lightning connector. The mic preamp has variable sensitivity and a soft knee limiter, and can be controlled manually or through its own app. As you'd expect with strategically placed mics riding on each ear, Ambeo Smart can also provide active noise canceling or "situational awareness," with external sounds mixing into the feed. Listening to a video capture of an amateur soccer contest with the product, I was pleasantly surprised by the naturalness of the audio, with a very believable match between visual and aural presentations.

Sennheiser also demo'd the new HDV 820 DAC/HPA in the US, first shown at Munich High End 2017. The HDV 820 is also based on the ESS Sabre, and is both DXD and DSD4-capable, and has crazy wide bandwidth. It has balanced outs and provides several choices for connector type, including XLR-3 XLR-4, 6.3 mm as well as the new 4.4 mm Pentaconn. Several manufacturers at the show supported



Klipsch's lovely sounding Heritage dynamic duo



Sennheiser's new Ambeo Smart Headset

Sony's TRRRS Pentaconn design. This emerging JEITA spec may become a new industry standard for fully balanced cans.

ZMF (www.zmfheadphones.com), known for fine quality closed back headphones, introduced Auteur at the show—its first open back design. Featuring the solid wood cups for which ZMF is known, the model will be available in several species options and a choice of perforated or non-perforated pads to dial in the perfect sonic signature. Pricing starts at \$1,400, and an oxygen-free copper cable is available for an additional \$60 when ordered with the cans.

Abyss (www.abyss-headphones.com), occupying the upper echelon of planar magnetic merchandise, has moved downmarket slightly with its new Diana, a \$3,000 lifestyle alternative to its iron maiden AB-1266 Phi. Machined from aluminum, with a matte ceramic coating and spring steel, leather-covered headband, these 40 Ω cans are now shipping in three finishes that will handily blend in on the street.

My current fave for wide band in-ears now ships in a wireless version. beyerdynamic's \$1,300 Xelento Wireless mates its high flux Tesla magnetics and super comfy, not quite in-ear fit with Bluetooth and true 48 kHz/24-bit aptX HD. Their never-tangle, silver plated cable terminates in a AAA battery-sized transceiver with a clip for tethering to apparel and over five hours of run time. An inline remote for taking calls completes the headset picture, and an included additional cable converts the Xelento Wireless into a classic wired in-ear (www.north-america.beyerdynamic.com).

Also new from beyerdynamic is the \$550 Aventhо Wireless, one of the first of a new class of headphone that offers up custom DSP voicing. These wire-free versions of the on-ear T51i work in conjunction with beyerdynamic's MIY app, which generates a custom profile and stores it in Aventhо's transceiver. MIY has a "Sound Watching" function, tracking exposure to stave off permanent hearing damage. Utilizing aptX HD, run time is spec'd at 20 hours before



Abyss sheds its geeky demeanor with Diana



beyerdynamic's Xelento Wireless—lightweight, comfortable mobile fidelity



Effect Audio's wide range of accessory cables

The new AR-M200 DAP



RHA's entry level MA390 at left, with its fancier MA650 wireless stablemate at right

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.

recharge. One more item from the crew in Heilbronn is Impacto Essential, a tiny, DSD2-capable inline DAC/HPA with choice of USB-A, USB-C or micro-USB termination. A Lightning version is in the works.

With a broad range of aftermarket headphone cables, Effect Audio's product ranges start at \$149 and head north of a breathtaking \$1,500 for its gold-plated ultra pure silver, multi-gauge, multi-strand Horus (www.effectaudio.com).

Also at the show with pre-production prototypes, CTM (www.clearunemonitors.com) let me listen to its high-end Da Vinci IX and X in-ears. As the name implies, the \$2,000 IX has nine balanced armature drivers and the X has 10! The case is CNC-formed aluminum, and the cables are oxygen-free pure copper. The Da Vincis will ship in the first quarter of 2018.

Acoustic Research (www.acoustic-research.com) has been busy since the last RMAF, with a new IEM, a new HRA DAP, and new planar magnetics. The \$200 AR-E10 in-ear phones combine an 8 mm beryllium dynamic driver with a single balanced armature. Frequency response for the 40 Ω unit is roughly spec'd at 20 Hz to 40 kHz, and a Pentaconn-equipped balanced cable is an option. Its \$400 AR-M200 DAP boasts Bluetooth aptX HD send *and* receive, a Class-A amp, individual grounding for left and right channels, and has both standard 3.5 mm and balanced Pentaconn outs. In Receive mode, a paired phone can stream data to the AR-M2000. Can't forget headphones! The AR-H1 is a new, \$600 circumaural planar magnetic headphone. With an impedance of 33 Ω , and vaguely spec'd 10 Hz to 70 kHz frequency response, this open back design was shown earlier at Munich High End 2017. A last Acoustic Research note: Its top of the line AR-M2 DAP has new firmware, and a lower \$1,000 price.

Those unconventional Scots at RHA (www.rha-audio.com) saw an opportunity in entry-level headphones, and answered the call with the new MA390 universal in-ear headset. With a brushed aluminum shell, universal remote, and understated good looks, these \$30 cans should have been in every Christmas stocking. Okay, some folks dislike encumbrances, and the MA650 fits that bill. The NFC/Bluetooth wireless MA650 headset is water resistant, has a 12-hour battery life, and includes a full Android remote. In case you're wondering, list price is \$60!

Compact Components

Let's turn to a different form of personal, the small form factor version. Those hollow-state folks from Texas, Raven Audio, had early versions of their new compact components on static display (www.ravenaudio.com).



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- Increased power-handling and improved dynamic headroom
- Available in 16, 14, 12 and 8 AWG foil



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Alumen Z-Cap:

The flagship of Jantzen Audio capacitors

- Specifically designed for tweeters and mid-range drivers.
- Extremely low ESR and fast response, due to the ultra-thin dielectric insulation
- Offers an increased, yet highly balanced tonal transparency



Premium Elko:

High-end electrolytic capacitor

- Made with smooth foil for better sonic properties.
- Especially made for the bass section of crossovers or when quality is needed where space is limited
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SilverGold Z-Cap:

A luxury MKP super capacitor

- Capable of adding an incredible level of transparency to your system
- Remarkable, fine-tuned micro-dynamics
- Creates a fascinating, bigger-than-life orchestra
- In the smaller capacitance values, it is a world class coupling capacitor for amplifiers



Silver Z-Cap:

MKP super capacitor featuring pure silver thread lead-wires

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Superior Z-Cap:

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- An affordable MKP super capacitor with a lot more performance than the price suggests



JA-8008 HQM:

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- Manufactured exclusively for Jantzen Audio by SEAS in Norway
- The "HMQ" is the mkII version of this driver and features several design improvements

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Two members of Raven Audio's Goldfinch Tabletop collection



The Goldfinch Tabletop Audio System is composed of four pieces, each in identical casework. The all-tube preamp, power amp and DAC with point-to-point internals are \$2,295 each, and the power amp develops 7.5 W into 8 Ω . A separate power supply for the three boxes is \$1,995 and, all together, the bundle runs \$6,995.

In Gamut's room, there was only a minor new item, a CCIR EQ option for its D3i preamp (www.gamutaudio.com). What interested me was the open reel deck they were using, a playback-only Lyrec FRED, originally designed as an editorial



Benno Baun Meldgaard and his monster Zodiac... (note the FRED reel-to-reel to his left)

workhorse. In Gamut's example, the internal electronics were bypassed, with the repro head directly feeding the new board. With their giant Zodiac flagships pumping out the tunes, the sound was, according to my notes, "...in your face, in a good way!"

Another brand new to me at this show was lumen white research (www.lumenwhite.com). Even though their White Light Anniversary model has been shown at previous shows, I was so taken by the model demo'd —the Kyara Lumenwhite, the White Light's baby brother—that I had to mention it here. Driven by an entire raft of new Ayon Audio hollow-state separates and connected via Synergistic Research cabling, these elegant towers yielded a very dynamic and resolving sound, one of the standouts at the show. At \$49,000, I can assure you that there were more expensive speakers at RMAF that I've not written about because of, in my own opinion, their laughably atrocious sound. This model is a tall slim, three-way design, with custom Accuton ceramic mid and low-frequency drivers. An interesting feature is variable acoustic termination of the slotted rear port for optimal in-room response.

Another unknown brand that rocked my world: Vehement (www.vehementaudio.com). As with the Focal Kanta, the \$7,000 Brezza Savant loudspeaker employs a solid polymer baffle, isteppped for time alignment. With dual custom 6" SEAS paper low-frequency drivers in addition to a RAAL ribbon tweet, the Brezza Savant manifest a wide, nicely delineated soundstage and extended but well-behaved high-



Lumenwhite gave me reasons to soldier on...

frequency regime. The bottom was a bit monotonous but it could have been the room. Driven by Exogal components, this was one spiffy speaker.

I was recently made aware of JERN (www.audioform.dk), a company know for its curvy cast iron enclosures. Microfactoid: Jern is Danish for iron. I had not yet heard any of its offspring, so RMAF gave me a chance to listen. The room setup included a single REL Acoustics T5i subwoofer, but I asked that it be disabled. The little, premium JERN14 ES was on active demo and they had a very pleasant hi-fi sound, in part due to Mundorf crossover components and other upgraded innards. Sitting on a toroidal rubber base for easy orientation and aiming, these \$1,750 acoustic suspension speakers are true bookshelf models, with no vents to mess up the low end. For tabletop use, a solid wood tripod is available, making for a stylish audio accent in any modern home. At the show, JERN's Steve French showed me a prototype on-wall, the model 8000. Imagine a giant tapered hockey puck, a very substantial two-way puck in particular. Pricing will run from \$500 to \$800, depending on component complement. A 14 plus 8000 pairing might be an interesting choice for an Atmos install.

Overall Impressions

There were many more interesting products at the show but, due to time and space limitations, some are on the cutting room floor. My apologies



The JERN 8000 on-wall is a 20 lb truncated cone of ferrous fun.

to those I left out. All in all, this year's RMAF was a refreshing change from last year's chaos, generally bad sounds, and inconvenient layout.

I was pleased to learn of several new companies, while my old favorites have only extended and improved their lines. Look for future reviews of some of the gear I've mentioned, and Stuart Yaniger's review of Vanatoo's Transparent Zero elsewhere in this issue. Until next time, keep listening! 🎧



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