

High-End Audio for the Rest of Us

"The victor belongs to the spoils."

—F. Scott Fitzgerald,
*The Beautiful and
the Damned*, 1922

The *New York Times* reported that more than 3000 foreigners had abandoned their cars at Dubai airport.¹ Deep in debt and out of work, had they stayed they could have been thrown into debtor's prison, just as in the London of 200 and 300 years ago. (Charles Dickens's father languished in debtor's prison. So did Samuel Johnson, until a friend sprang him. The Debtor's Act of 1869 abolished this.)

Mercedes, BMWs, even Maseratis . . . abandoned in the dust.

I'll bet a lot of high-end hi-fi was left behind, too. Dubai was a hot spot for expensive hi-fi, as I heard several years ago when I met one of Dubai's leading audio distributors. If you made a \$107,000/pair loudspeaker, you could surely sell it there. The sands of time have probably stopped that.

Talk about economic stimulus—debtor's prisons are a capital idea. The US already imprisons one adult in 100, according to the organization In The Fray (<http://inthefray.org/content/view/3192/39/>). For once, we have the infrastructure. Why not imprison those who default on their mortgages or fail to pay their credit cards? The economy would gain two ways: from all the new prison cells that would have to be built, and from a smaller labor force, which would lead to a drop in unemployment and a general rise in wages. The surplus children left behind? Sell them for adoption and reap the revenue. I am surprised my fellow Republicans haven't thought of this.

Things are rough in Russia, too, but I haven't heard of any debtors' prisons there yet. A lot of high-end hi-fi used to be sold there, too. Sources tell me that at least one Russian distributor has gone belly-up—*bankrot!*



The V-series components are so small the manufacturer calls them accessories.

According to the *New York Post*, "Moneybags Muscovite playboy Mikhail Prokhorov . . . [is] trying to back out of a deal to buy the world's most expensive mansion on the French Riviera. Last year, he thought nothing of making a deal to pay \$634 million for the Villa Leopolda. But after losing \$8 billion of his \$20 billion net worth, Prokhorov is trying to get back his \$49 million deposit."²

I wonder if he's asked for his deposit back on those \$107,000 speakers he just ordered. Only kidding. But Prokhorov is—or was—that sort of customer.

Another Mr. Moneybags, former oligarch Mikhail Khodorkovsky, is languishing in one of Putin's prisons. (Russians have always known how to use prisons.) He couldn't take his hi-fi along, assuming he had one. And no CDs or DVDs, which can be weaponized.

Still, hi-fi manufacturers continue to introduce hyperexpensive products as if nothing has changed. Take British manufacturer Antony Michaelson, of Musical Fidelity. He recently announced his Primo tubed preamp for £7900, and a Titan power amp for £19,999 (about \$11,300 and \$28,600, respectively, at recent rates of exchange). Maybe he'll be able to sell them somewhere in the world. If not Dubai, then perhaps

Shanghai or Mumbai. But I think the jig is up everywhere. It's about time.

Several months earlier, Antony did something entirely different. Last fall, in what later seemed an act of astonishing prescience, he introduced his V series of mini-components—days, if not hours, before the worldwide economic collapse. The V models are so cheap and so small that Antony can't bring himself to call them components. They come blister-packed for retailers to hang on the accessories rack. Pick and pull.

This is as if the watchmaker Patek Philippe had decided to take over Timex—you know, to sell to the very top *and* very bottom of the watch market. Has this really happened to hi-fi—that there's no middle any more?

I don't think so. Meanwhile, frugality can be fun, and there's still stuff to buy—besides shaving brushes and toothbrushes.

Musical Fidelity V Series

Last month, I cackled as I wrote up the little Sony XDR-F1HD HD Radio tuner, which sells for under \$100. It's given me more pleasure than any other tuner I've had. I hope it outlives Sony's 90-day warranty. (By the time you read this, it already has.) Now I take glee in writing about Antony Michaelson's new V series. Here's Antony, on his website, writing in Vox Pop mode:

"Most high-end components offer incredibly bad value. [Tell that to John Atkinson or Michael Fremer.—ST] Why do

1 Robert F. Worth, "Laid-Off Foreigners Flee as Dubai Spirals Down," *New York Times*, February 12, 2009: www.nytimes.com/2009/02/12/world/middleeast/12dubai.html?ref=world.

2 Todd Venezia, "Russian Reneging on Record \$634m House Buy," *New York Post*, February 20, 2009: www.nypost.com/seven/02202009/news/worldnews/russian_reneging_on_record_634m_house_bu_156064.htm.

we say this? Because . . . about four to five percent of the cost of good value high-end electronics is in the actual electronics that do the work. The other 95% of the cost is in the metalwork and other items that don't contribute to sound production or sound quality. Basically, high-end is a lot of show and not much go for a huge cost."

Most high-end components' front panels, or faceplates, represent 30% of the build cost, averred Antony. This squares with what another well-known manufacturer told me many years ago, off the record: that he could reduce his retail prices by 40% if he didn't offer them as hi-fi jewelry.

"With the exception of power amps that require big heatsinks and large transformers, every other component does not need to be housed in a big box," Antony continued by phone. "Manufacturers try to fill the box with stuff which looks impressive and powerful, but it's meaningless with low-level signals."

Unstoppable, he proceeded to extol the V series: "You start with a pile of components and you ask yourself, how does that get housed as cheaply and efficiently as possible? You design a custom extrusion that fits around a small PCB—the same extrusion for each of our V products, saving money there."

"With the V series, the signal flow starts at one end and ends at the other end. It doesn't start at the side and wiggle around the middle and cross backwards and forwards across itself and come out on the same side. The very physical configuration of the V components, with the input on one end and the output on the other, means that everything is symmetrical from beginning to end, and works better."

The V components weigh ounces, not pounds (grams, not kilograms). Each black V box measures 6.7" (170mm) long by 3.75" (95mm) wide by 1.7" (40mm) high, including all feet and terminals. Each is powered by a DC wall wart that allows rectification (turning AC into DC) to happen. Although using another wall wart or power supply is expressly forbidden, a V-series power-supply upgrade might be forthcoming.

Each V is small enough to carry in a shirt pocket (stuff the wall wart into a coat pocket). Take any one of them to a friend's place and put it up against the fat-cat stuff he's bought. Practice your evil laugh. Don't expect your pal to admit the superiority of your V gear.

Instead, he'll say something like, "Oh, that's very good for the money." Meanwhile, the certainty that he's overspent will gnaw at his innards.

Marina says it's a wonder I have any friends at all. Or a wife.

I received a V-DAC D/A converter, a V-CAN headphone amp, and a V-LPS phono preamp. The V-CAN and V-LPS sell for \$199 each; the V-DAC costs \$299 because there's more stuff inside. I haven't seen them discounted anywhere. In addition to a V-PSU power supply, there might be other V-series products, but there *won't* be a V-series power amp. The chassis is too small, and besides, Antony likes digital switching amps even less than I do.

These products share the same sonic signature to such a degree that to ascribe a sound to one is to describe all three: clean, clear, fast, not at all dry or transitory, and slightly soft, on the forgiving side of neutral. The downside is that all three [ahem] accessories strike me as sounding a mite wee. Which, after all, they are.

Musical Fidelity V-DAC D/A converter: Considering that the Musical Fidelity V-DAC sells for \$299, the value for money is remarkable. Twenty years ago, MF introduced its first outboard DAC, the Digilog, for \$1000. I haven't owned or heard one in a dog's age—or a cat's age, for that matter—but I'm certain the V-DAC surpasses it in every way, except possibly weight and authority.

The People's V-DAC uses a single Burr-Brown DSD1792 chip and an SRC4392 upsampling device to provide the magic bullet: the illusion of digital information that isn't actually there. (Cambridge Audio's DacMagic incorporates the magic bullet, too; see below.) The V-DAC's separate USB input relies on a Texas Instruments TI2706 chip.

"What you *don't* get, compared to a \$5000 DAC, is a huge box and lots of snake oil and bullshit," proclaimed Antony in one of his more expansive moments. I think I caught him at home, after dinner and a glass of wine. Or two. Mid-afternoon, my time. His cat and mine traded transatlantic *meows*.

What about that tiny wall wart?

"I don't see why you need a monstrous power supply on a DAC. The important considerations with a power supply are that it is very quiet and has very low

impedance. There's no reason to have massive transformers and physically enormous capacitors that don't actually do anything. But high-end audio is typically about what it looks like, not what it does. The idea is that the V series should not be on display; they should be hidden behind your CD player or next to the back of your amplifier and not be seen at all."

So what's the idea behind the £7900 Primo and the £19,999 Titan?

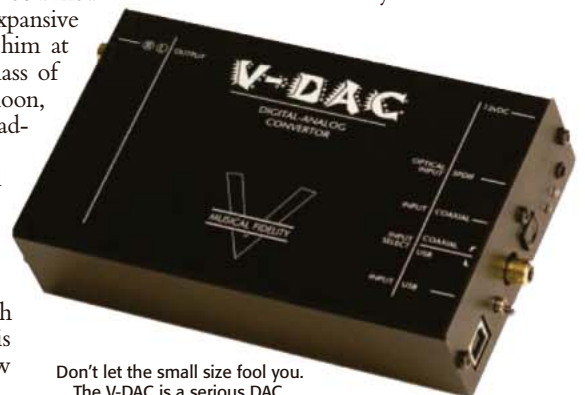
I didn't get an answer. Marina says it's a wonder I have any . . . Or a . . .

I did much of my listening through the V-CAN and my pair of Audio-Technica ATH-AD700 headphones, to which I find myself turning more and more for their musicality and lack of overanalytical sound. I've seen them at Amazon.com for \$100 plus a few pennies—get a pair while you can.

I changed transports from a Marantz CD63 Special Edition to a Denon DCD-1650AR CD player; the more robustly built Denon delivered better sound with both the V-DAC and the Cambridge Audio DacMagic: more solid, more rhythmically right. I didn't expect the change of CD player to make a dramatic difference, but it did—in terms of bass control, low-level detail, and overall solidity of sound.

The Marantz and Denon players are both long out of production. The Denon originally sold for \$1000, about twice the price of the Marantz, and is built like a battleship. I've seen it for about \$300 on eBay. Digital cable (S/PDIF) was Analysis Plus Digital Oval—at more than half the price of the V-DAC. Of course, digital cables should make no difference.

The V-DAC sounded extraordinarily quiet, as if I were hearing an *absence* of digital processing. That's subjective, of course. Like those of the other two V components introduced so far, the V-DAC's midrange was silky smooth, its treble sweetly extended—a



Don't let the small size fool you. The V-DAC is a serious DAC.

very pleasing sonic signature for such inexpensive [ahem] accessories.

The V-DAC begs to be compared to the Cambridge DacMagic, which retails for \$449 (actual street price is \$400, so the DacMagic effectively costs 1/3 more than the V-DAC). The DacMagic, which I wrote about in March, offers more features, including balanced analog outputs, a phase-reversal setting, variable digital filters—and a larger wall wart, if that makes any difference. It's cool the way the DacMagic can stand vertically on its rubbery isolation base—there's no need to hide it away, and it doesn't flop over. All the V components are so lightweight that our cat can paw them around. And does.

I tried the two DACs using the Denon player as a transport and the V-CAN headphone amp (see below). Back and forth I went, playing a classical work all the way through, or a movement or two of a symphony or concerto. Through the Audio Technica ATH-AD700s I heard more low-level detail with the DacMagic, more ambience, more of the recording venue. The V-DAC was a little airless by comparison, but seemed balanced on the slightly soft side of neutral—no bad thing when it comes to digital recordings and headphone listening. The DacMagic appeared to have a fuller, richer, if not tighter bottom end. The DacMagic bloomed but didn't boom. But, as Bob Deutsch would say, I am less a leveler than a sharpener: I look for differences to overemphasize.

I couldn't establish a clear preference for either DAC; your choice may be determined by features and price. Many customers will turn to mail order—Audio Advisor, for instance, carries both.

CONTACTS

Musical Fidelity, Units 24-26,
Fulton Road, Wembley HA9 0TF,
England, UK. Tel: (44) (0)20-8900-
2866. Fax: (44) (0)20-8900-2983.
Web: www.musicalfidelity.com. US
distributor: KEF America, 10
Timber Lane, Marlboro, NJ 07746.
Tel: (732) 683-2356. Fax: (732)
683-2358. Web: www.kef.com.

Quicksilver Audio, 2506 Maggio
Circle, Unit A, Lodi, CA 95240.
Tel: (209) 334-6640. Fax: (209)
334-6647. Web: www.quicksilveraudio.com.



If you love ambient detail, you won't go wrong with the Cambridge Audio DacMagic. If you lust after a silken, sweet (but not oversweet) sound, you'll marvel at the Musical Fidelity V-DAC. When I'm listening to one, I don't miss the other. Always a good sign.

Musical Fidelity V-CAN headphone amplifier: Headphones are a great way to do hi-fi on the cheap. You can set up your headphone rig for maximum sound quality and relegate your "real" system to casual, party, or background listening. When it comes to hearing what's on a recording, nothing beats a serious set of cans.

For "regular" listening, you can choose a modest but good-sounding integrated amplifier—from, say, Creek, LFD, or Unison Research Unico—plus a pair of equally modest speakers recommended by Bob Reina or John Marks—or maybe even me. Better yet, maybe you can use a low-powered single-ended-triode (SET) tube amp; if you need more power, just turn off your amp and slip on your 'phones.

Do you think that buying very expensive speakers will lead to happiness? It may do the opposite. Or, as Antony Michaelson admits, "pleasure is not always proportional to price paid."

But these musings are purely my own: Let's say you buy a \$50,000 pair of speakers. Two months later, another \$50,000 pair of speakers appears on the cover of *Stereophile*, accompanied by even more glowing praise. Or worse, let's say your Mk.VIs are soon to be replaced by Mk.VIIs, which fix all the flaws you didn't hear with the Mk.VI but now do. Fact: Some manufacturers who produce expensive amplifiers and speakers don't actually own any samples of the products they make.

Back to headphones . . .

For serious headphone listening, you need an outboard, standalone headphone amplifier. Sorry, but the

headphone amps built into most CD players and some preamps and integrated amps just don't cut it. The V-CAN, however, drove my AKG 701 headphones with relative ease. Indeed, I liked the way the silken midrange and soft treble helped mitigate the 701s' analytical sound. So I put the question to Antony: Why buy a more expensive X-CAN^{V8p}?

There was a pregnant pause, during which his cat traded more transatlantic noises with ours. "I don't want to prey upon my own products," he finally responded.

One could cavil about what you don't get with the V-CAN. No USB input (the V-DAC has one). There's no easy way to use the V-CAN as a line stage without using a headphone jack and a clumsy adapter. (The V-CAN could be a neat way to drive powered loudspeakers in your office, however.) The V-CAN does have two headphone jacks: a standard 1/4" and a 1/8" mini.

The V-CAN has the sonic signature of the V series: easy on the ear, fast, and a little lightweight compared to the X-CAN^{V8p}, which is among the very best. With the V-CAN, you pay less up front and don't have the eventual worry of replacing tubes.

"The vast majority of headphone amps do not drive the headphones properly," Antony offered. "They have an output impedance of between 50 and 100 ohms, so they cannot drive a 30 ohm headphone properly."

The X-CAN^{V8p} has an output impedance of 0.1 ohm compared to 5 ohms for the V-CAN—still low enough to control the headphone diaphragms. If the output impedance of a headphone amp is too high, the diaphragms flop around and the bass turns flabby and tubby. With the V-CAN, you can have a superb but bare-bones headphone amp for a killer price.

I'm keeping both. I just love the V-CAN in combination with Audio Technica's ATH-AD700 headphones: a match made in heaven. For a little over \$300, you can achieve heavenly headphone bliss and not worry about those \$107,000/pair speakers with bass from hell.

Musical Fidelity X-CAN^{V8}: Update: The X-CAN^{V8} is now the X-CAN^{V8p}, with a pair of variable line-level outputs standard, as suggested by yours truly. That's the good news. The other news is that the price has risen from \$500 to \$650. Add another \$500 for the X-PSU^{V8} power supply if you're going to

use your X-CAN^{V8p} as a line stage. Now we're up to \$1150. But . . . worth it.

The X-CAN^{V8p} offers more flexibility than you might think. There's a built-in USB DAC, accessible from a toggle switch on the front. You could connect an outboard DAC to the single pair of RCA inputs, using sources like a CD transport or an HD Radio (but not the little Sony XDR-F1HD). Run your computer through the USB DAC.

Musical Fidelity V-LPS: Phono Staging on the cheap: Not being fond of self-flagellation, I don't usually *do* analog. I am not a fuddy-dudley, nor am I especially fremerous.

Ivor Tiefenbrun, founder of Linn, told me 25 years ago that CD players were fine for "little old ladies with shaky fingers." I am neither a lady nor little. And so far, I am not shaky. But I'm too old to fuss much with LPs, which I regard as a flawed medium in its own right and worthy of respect but not veneration. Still, I remain analog-retentive.

Most preamps these days do not offer onboard phono stages. If they do, it's an option that's not always wise to opt for, even to have everything in one box. There's much to be said for buying an outboard phono stage, including flexibility with gain and loading and the possibility of upgrading. I particularly dislike tubed preamps with phono stages that burn up tubes even when the phono is not used for weeks.

Obviously, no one is going to pair Musical Fidelity's V-LPS phono stage (\$199) to use with a Continuum Audio Labs Caliburn turntable and Cobra tonearm (*ca* \$120,000). It should work like a charm with real-world priced 'tables. You could even treat yourself to a low-output moving-coil cartridge.

I've owned Rega turntables for the past 25 years, beginning with the original Planar 3 with Lustre tonearm. I currently have a P25 (discontinued) with Rega arm and Goldring 1042 moving-magnet cartridge.

I used the Musical Fidelity V-LPS with my Rega-Goldring rig, LFD Integrated Zero Mk.III integrated amplifier, and Harbeth Compact 7ES3 speakers. I thought the V-LPS was at least the sonic equal of Clearaudio's Smart Phono at \$600, and better in terms of low-impedance loading for moving coils. I think you need to spend \$1000 or more to get one substantially better.

Only so much can be stuffed into the little V-series boxes, so I wasn't expecting a lot of flexibility with adjustable gain or loading. Actually, I got

more than I expected. The MM input goes straight to the RIAA section. The separate MC input goes through a "proper head-amp" first, as Antony put it. Input impedance loading is a standard 47k ohms for MM, 100 ohms for MC. Input sensitivity is given as 35mV for MM, 450 μ V for MC.

I put the MM and MC sections through their paces, then did the same with my Musical Fidelity MI turntable, SME M2.9 [*ahem*] pickup arm, and Ortofon Kontrapunkt B MC cartridge. In both systems, I ran the V-LPS into the V-CAN with the Audio-Technica headphones.

This was not the most dynamic, expansive phono sound around—but then again, you can't have expansive *and* inexpensive. Detail retrieval was quite good with both cartridges, especially the Ortofon—but the Goldring has a sweetly extended sound that nicely complemented the V-LPS.

There are certainly better phono amps than the V-LPS—at higher prices. My EAR 834P (\$1595) isn't leaving my living room any time soon. While I haven't heard it in my system, PS Audio's GCPH (\$1000) might be a world-beater in terms of sound and value.

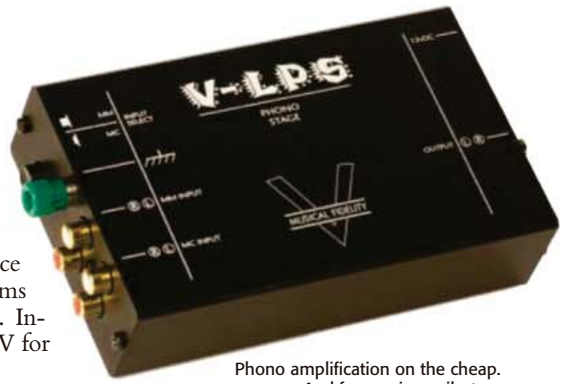
If you decide to upgrade later on, the V-LPS will make a splendid backup. Or use it in a second system.

Musical Fidelity V-Tilt control: I don't have a Musical Fidelity V-Tilt and I've never seen one. It exists only in prototype, but Antony has already let the cat—in this case, Joe—out of the bag. Here's how it was described on the back of the original V-series blister pack:

"With the V-Tilt subtle alterations in a total balance are possible. It works by tilting the whole frequency response either up or down without affecting any particular frequency. It is perfect to subtly adjust the tonal balance of systems to get correct room matching."

Or deal with overly bright or overly dark recordings. In most systems, a V-Tilt could be placed in the tape-monitor loop of an integrated amp, or in an external processor loop, to be placed in the signal path as needed. This is one more instance of how music lovers suffer at the hands of audiophiles.

In this tilted-down world economy, I understand Antony Michaelson's hesitation. Non-audiophiles won't know what a V-Tilt is, while audiophiles will decide it's a tone control and decide, without hearing it, that they don't want one.



Phono amplification on the cheap. And for moving-coils, too.

I want one. If you do, too, tell Antony you're antsy at info@musicalfidelity.com.

Those who've owned a classic Quad preamp will know and have used a Tilt. As implemented by Quad, it worked around a pivot point of just under 1kHz. There were three steps up and three steps down. One advantage of Quad's Tilt control was that the listener knew instinctively what to do. There was no fussing around with sliders or knobs, no fiddling with the horrifying complexity of digital room correction.

I loved the Tilt control on my old Quad 34 preamp, and have missed it since the day I sold it. Now that you know what it is, if you want it, please tell Antony. You, dear reader, can tilt the balance.

Quicksilver SET Monos

Mike Sanders, of Quicksilver Audio, told me he'd made some changes in his SET Mono amps—meaning mine, too. These mainly involve the front-end, where Mike has simplified circuits and reduced the parts count. "Simplicity is especially important with single-ended triodes," he declared.

Indeed so. Owners of early-production SET Monos can send them back to Mike for updating. (Contact Quicksilver for details.) I sent mine back.

The price of the Quicksilver SET monos remains the same: \$2800/pair. If your Quicksilver dealer is slow to appreciate SETs, you can order directly from Mike, although I must warn you that he'll probably try to talk you out of it. Only 9Wpc, after all.

There's still the 1.7V input sensitivity to contend with. Voltage gain is 14dB via the 8 ohm tap, 11dB via 4 ohms. You need an active preamp (as if there were any other kind), and I do mean active. The Musical Fidelity X-CAN^{V8p} worked perfectly, using an awkward adapter. I await the X-CAN^{V8p}.

If 9W isn't enough, sell your speakers.

Just kidding. A little.