

AS WE SEE IT

Jeff Wong

J. Gordon Holt, April 19, 1930-July 20, 2009



stereophile

October 2009
Vol.32 No.10



FEATURES

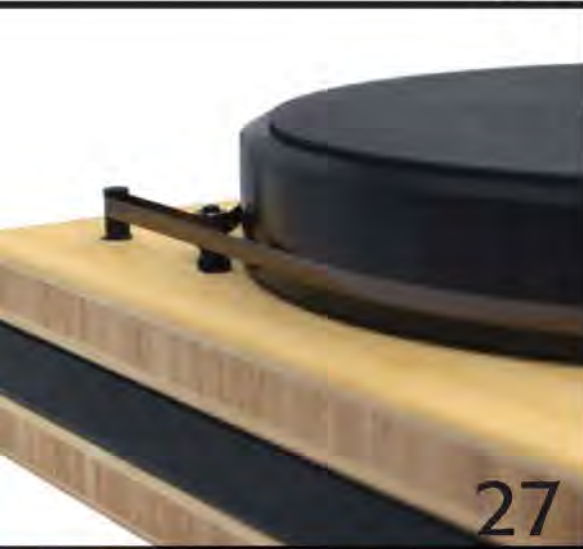
- 49 Recommended Components**
Stereophile's editors and reviewers rate the best-sounding audio gear.
- 115 The Beatles Remasters**
Courtesy of a long overdue remastering, popular music's most beloved jewels are polished to a new luster. By Robert Baird.
- 150 Hitting it on the One**
Wes Phillips offers advice on how to get the last few drops out of digital audio files.

EQUIPMENT REPORTS

- 120 Zu Essence loudspeaker**
Art Dudley
- 129 Acoustic Energy AE1 Mk.III Special Edition loudspeaker**
John Atkinson
- 137 Chario Premium 1000 loudspeaker**
Robert J. Reina
- 143 Ayre Acoustics QB-9 USB D/A converter**
Wes Phillips

FOLLOW-UP

- 134 PSB Imagine B loudspeaker**
John Atkinson
- 134 Spendor SA1 loudspeaker**
John Atkinson
- 150 Bel Canto USB Link 24/96 USB-to-S/PDIF converter**
Wes Phillips
- 150 Bel Canto e.one DAC3 D/A converter**
Wes Phillips
- 153 Ayre CX7-e^{MP} CD player**
Robert Deutsch
- 155 Nagra BPS phono preamplifier**
Fred Kaplan
- 156 Sooloos Control 10 music server**
Jon Iverson
- 157 Totem Acoustic Mani-2 loudspeaker**
John Atkinson



STEREOPHILE
OCTOBER 2009

COLUMNS

J. Gordon Holt 1930-2009
See pages 3, 8, 9, 11, & 13

3 As We See It
Famed illustrator and audiophile Jeff Wong pays tribute to Stereophile's founder, J. Gordon Holt, who passed away in July.

11 Letters
Readers offer their memories of J. Gordon Holt.

Get on your Soapbox! Visit www.stereophile.com.

13 Industry Update
High-end audio news, including the dealer-sponsored events taking place in September and October and an appreciation of J. Gordon Holt's life and achievements by erstwhile Stereophile publisher Larry Archibald.

Want to know more? Go to the "News Desk" at www.stereophile.com for up-to-the-minute info.

21 Sam's Space
Sam Tellig discovers an amazing integrated amplifier, the NAD C 375BEE, and matches it with the NAD C 565BEE CD player.

27 Analog Corner
Michael Fremer reviews the latest version of a classic tonearm from Graham Engineering, the Phantom B-44 II, and tries out a top-performing turntable, the Artemis SA-1.

37 Listening
Art Dudley has the world's finest audio system in his room—but for one night only!

43 The Fifth Element
John Marks continues with his quest to put together an affordable high-end system, and finds in the process that he very much likes Arcam's affordable Solo Mini CD receiver.

161 Record Reviews
For October's "Recording of the Month," we've chosen Far, the latest from New York anti-folk star Regina Spektor. In classical, we have a celebration of the Guarneri Quartet's glorious career. In Rock/Pop, there are reviews of Black Moth Super Rainbow, The Duke & The Kind, and Wye Oak. In Jazz, the latest from drummer Jack DeJohnette gets a critical listen.

169 Manufacturers' Comments
Responses to our reviews from Zu, dCS, NAD, Graham Engineering, Artemis, Arcam, and Ayre.

178 Aural Robert
Paperback Writer(s). A TV interview in Des Moines? A radio broadcast in Melbourne? John off to the Loo? A new crop of Beatle books timed to coincide with the Remasters takes Beatlemania to a whole new level, finds Robert Baird.

INFORMATION

- 176 Audio Mart**
- 174 Manufacturers' Showcase**
- 175 Dealers' Showcase**
- 175 Advertiser Index**



Nagra phono preamplifiers

Discover the full potential of your LP's



- Nagra BPS: solid state compact preamplifier
- Nagra VPS: valve preamplifier
- Modular, highly configurable input boards for optimal load-matching to any MC or MM cartridge
- New, custom input transformers made by Nagra
- Dead-quiet operation: external power supply (VPS) and battery powered (BPS)

its Measure and Listen options, and much preferred Listen. I made the same comparison with the CX-7e^{MP}, and although I once again preferred Listen, this time the preference was not as great. The main difference in sound was that the Measure setting sounded brighter, more forward—but by no means unpleasant. Overall, I preferred the more “refined” sound of the Listen setting, but I can imagine that in some systems Measure might be preferable. At least you have the option.

Should You Upgrade? Because upgrading the CX-7e to MP status requires hardware changes, the unit must be returned to the factory. The CX-5e MP update—which, in addition to the firmware change, includes a full check-out and adjustment of laser alignment, if necessary—costs \$200, whereas the cost of the CX-7e MP update, which includes all that plus the hardware changes, varies from \$250 to \$900 (the latter only for some very early units). I’d say the money is *extremely* well spent, and I urge every CX-7 and CX-7e owner to get in touch with his or her local Ayre dealer to arrange the update. The price of a new CX-7e with the MP filters remains at \$3500, and the addition of the MP filter options make it an even better buy.

—Robert Deutsch

Nagra BPS phono preamplifier

Even after switching to Krell’s FBI integrated amplifier, I’ve hung on to my Audible Illusions Modulus 3a preamplifier so that I could keep using the latter’s moving-coil phono section, designed by John Curl and long lauded as the model’s strong suit. But Michael Fremer’s review of Nagra’s BPS battery-powered phono preamplifier (\$2400), in the June 2009 “Analog Corner,” stoked my curiosity, so I requested a review sample.² Then, midway through listening to the Nagra, I overhauled my analog gear, and so was able to gauge it with stuff old (VPI HW-19 Mk.IV turntable and JMW Memorial tonearm, Clearaudio Victory H cartridge) and new (VPI Classic table with updated JMW arm, Lyra Argo *i* cartridge). The improvement in both setups was substantial.

Michael praised the Nagra BPS’s “sharp, clean, exciting transients,” its tight, dynamic bass, and its “so clean” highs—though he added that, if linked

2 Nagra USA Inc., 180 N. Belvedere Drive, Unit 5A, Gallatin, TN 37066. Tel: (615) 451-4168. Fax: (615) 451-4175. Web: www.nagraaudio.com.

with dry components, some might find its “up-front” presentation “fatiguing.” The BPS, he wrote, emphasized “rhythm and pace” over “harmonic structure and richness,” although, he added, “the latter, too, were in good supply.”

I agree completely, though I’d upgrade that supply from “good” to “very good.” With one LP after another, highs were more pure and extended than I’d ever heard in my room—an effect I’d noticed with other battery-powered preamps (there’s no AC like no AC), though never to this extent. And bass lines were tighter and more dynamic as well—a surprise.

There was also a spooky absence of noise. Music beamed and wafted from a black-silent backdrop with palpable texture and detail. Trumpets blared, strings purred, drums slammed (except when brushstrokes made them fizz), all with an aliveness I hadn’t heard before from my system. I’ve been listening to high-end analog for a quarter-century now, and only with the insertion of the palm-sized BPS—and especially after installing the VPI Classic table with Lyra Argo *i*, which deepened the silence and purity—did I find myself musing, “This is what I’ve been aiming for all these years.”

A few technical matters that Michael didn’t bring up: The Nagra sounded good plugged into the AC, but it sounded a lot better when it relied on its 9V battery for power. This was true even when it was plugged into a very good AC power conditioner, the Bybee Reference. Nagra’s sales rep, John Quick, suggested keeping the BPS on at all times, but plugged into the wall when not in use, to save the battery.

Also, I second MP’s advice to experiment with cartridge loadings. This is easy: Open the chassis, pull out one of the loading plugs, push in another. With MC cartridges, do load *something*. My review sample was set to 47k ohms, the default mode when no loading plugs are inserted (and the correct position for moving-magnet cartridges); it sounded thin. I found that, with both MC cartridges I used, 200 ohms sounded best.

Set up properly, the Nagra BPS is a delight. Bottom line: I bought the review sample.



Batteries included—the Nagra BPS.

Sooloos Music Server Control 10

Stereophile published an extensive review of the Sooloos Music Server System in the September 2008 issue, and it subsequently became our “Product of the Year” for 2008. But many readers chafed at the system’s price of about \$13,000, and made sport of comparing the feature and hardware list of the Sooloos system with cheaper off-the-shelf components and freeware. You can’t blame them, really. Who wants to be told that the only way to accomplish what Sooloos has done costs not hundreds of dollars, but thousands?

Still, in my mind nothing can manage a collection of thousands of albums, or tens of thousands of songs, as well as the Sooloos approach—it’s more than just a pretty interface. Due to Sooloos’s front-to-back hardware implementation, the interface scales where others quickly tangle. This ability to maintain ease of use as the number of tracks stored rises to five figures is a key element that costs money to get right, and no one else I’ve seen has done it as well at a lower price—higher, yes, but not lower. My Sooloos system now contains more than 5000 albums—almost all lossless imports from CDs—and all of it appears and sorts instantly, with no buffering delays. The Sooloos makes it far easier than anything else I’ve seen to quickly and intuitively move among the thousands of choices.

To my mind, that last point can’t be over-

stated, and it’s why, for me, the Sooloos music-server redeems its big price. Yes, it costs money to implement properly—more money than many have or can justify spending (believe me, I sympathize)—but it delivers not just convenience but musical satisfaction in spades.

And now the good news: the newest Sooloos

hardware and software not only improves the system, it lowers its price. First, the hardware changes.

The Control:One touchscreen has been replaced by the Control 10, which at \$5500 is still not an impulse purchase—but now you no longer need Sooloos’s Source:One DAC to go with it. They’ve packed all the networking hardware into the base of the Control 10, and it has an S/PDIF or Meridian SpeakerLink output for direct injection into your system. A fully functional Sooloos system with 2-terabyte Twin-store hard-drive storage now starts at \$8000. You supply the DAC.

Looking at the Control 10, you’d think it was a Control:One. But the only thing the 10 has in common with its predecessor is its case, glass touchscreen, and CD slot. Inside, both the parts and the overall concept have undergone complete makeovers. One result of this is a host of new connections on the rear panel. Where the Control:One had a single Ethernet jack and power cord, the Control 10 sprouts a small forest of connectors: Audio In RCA jacks, Trigger and Remote In jacks, Meridian comms and Speaker-



The new Control 10 displays some familiar CD covers.

3 Meridian America Inc.,
8055 Troon Circle, Suite C,
Austell, GA 30368. Tel: (404)
344-7111. Fax: (404) 346-7111.
Web: www.meridian-audio.com.