

THE 2011 GOLDEN EAR AWARDS

14 PAGES
OF OUR
FAVORITE
GEAR

the absolute sound

NEW
HIGH-END
STARS

*Constellation's
State-of-the-Art
Electronics*

BONUS!

*Full Reports From the
Newport Beach and
Munich Audio Shows*



SEPTEMBER 2011
\$6.99 US / \$6.99 CAN / £4.50 UK



www.theabsolutesound.com

THE RAW TRUTH About Music Download Sites
BRYSTON'S BDP-1 Revolutionizes Computer Audio
MUSIC FROM Paul Simon, The Cars, Bill Frisell, and More

MUNICH SHOW REPORT

As a result, my show report is necessarily an abridgment—a report on the rooms that made the strongest impressions. Trust me: I listened to a good many more loudspeakers, electronics, digital sources, and turntables than the ones I've written about here. (If you go on-line to jvalin.zenfolio.com/p949810798, you can get a better idea of how many other products I heard but didn't have space to write about. And what is shown on the Web site is just the tip of an iceberg.)



I'll begin with the 250,000€ (yes, that's Euros, not dollars) **Cessaro Gamma 1** with **P8** basshorn—a beautifully made, five-way, wooden-spherical-horn system with active woofer towers. The Germans, like the Japanese, certainly love their horn loudspeakers, as I saw far more of them in Munich than I've ever seen at an RMAF or CES, and this pair from Cessaro was particularly impressive. Essentially scaled-up versions of the smaller Cessaros I've auditioned and liked at previous trade shows, the Gammas made a very good first impression, in spite of the fact that I could hear the massive outboard woofers as separable elements of the presentation (but then, as noted, I could hear woofers in just about every room I went to). This said, the overall sound was as coherent as subwoofered horn systems get. On Stravinsky's *Symphony in Three Movements*, the bass was solid but not as extended as it should have been. And on my Melody Gardot album, the mix seemed a little polite (surprising in a horn system), center imaging a bit ill-defined, and depth somewhat curtailed. Nonetheless, the Gamma 1s were very lifelike in timbre and texture. Indeed, this

was perhaps the smoothest, most natural horn system I've heard at a show.



Although they're a far cry from my usual beat, I was quite impressed with **Focal's** new 799€ **Bird** array—a surprisingly good-sounding, compact, desktop/wall-mount two-way speaker system that comes complete with an ingenious compact amplifier/subwoofer (called the "Power Bird") that, in combination with the *iTransmitter* and an Apple music player like an iPad or an iPod, can wirelessly receive and transmit CD-quality sources from anywhere in your house. For replaying music or soundtracks in a dorm room or small TV room, the Bird/Power Bird combo appears to be ideal.



Tune Audio of Greece was showing another giant horn speaker—the three-way, 109dB-sensitivity **Anima** with 15" woofer in a folded-horn enclosure, 5" spherical-horn midrange, and 1" compression-driven tweeter also spherically horn-loaded. The entire array was paired with Tune's new "Pulse" active horn subwoofer, making for one very large loudspeaker system. Nonetheless, the sound of the Anima was surprisingly delicate—lovely, dark, and sweet. Not

perhaps as neutral as the Cessaros, but very beautiful and enjoyable.



The Dutch company **Kharma** was showing a new three-way floorstander, the **Elegance dB9**, which, unlike all past Kharma speakers I've heard, did not use ceramic drivers. Apparently, Kharma's Charles van Oosterum has been paying attention to the latest developments in cone technology, for the *Exquisite* is equipped with a van Oosterum-designed 7" carbon-composite midrange (called the KCD) and a beryllium tweeter, along with two 9" aluminum woofers, all housed in a refashioned cabinet. (The more expensive flagship *Exquisite* speakers now also use in-house-designed carbon-composite cones—for both woofers and midranges—and diamond tweeters.) The *Elegance* sounded quick and dynamic, a little dark and bass-heavy (like virtually everything else at the MOC), but very present on voice and richer in timbre than any ceramic-driver Kharma I remember hearing. It's been awhile since Kharma has been distributed in the United States, but van Oosterum assured me this would change by year's end. If it does, I would certainly be interested in reviewing one of Kharma's new models.

T.H.E. SHOW NEWPORT BEACH

ALAN TAFFEL

Exhibitors were skeptical but willing to give it a go. Organizers sensed an opportunity. Attendees couldn't believe it was even happening. And to the surprise of all, the inaugural Newport Beach event turned out to be a roaring success.

All the touchstones were there: Rooms were packed; the industry's rock stars came out in force ("Look, there's Richard Vandersteen!"); exhibits featured all manner of drool-worthy audio bling; the press sent its heavy hitters ("Look, there's HP!"), and manufacturers could be overheard cursing their digs yet nonetheless managing to produce good sound. Yes, TSNB was a real show, and everyone concerned was delighted.

More than most shows I've attended, TSNB seemed to me primarily a speaker showcase. As I journeyed from room to room, I increasingly pitied Neil Gader, who was focusing on speakers. I was asked to comment on digital gear, which I will, but because of the show's emphasis on transducers I will first offer a few speaker-related observations.

Some speakers seem to sound good no matter when or in what system you hear them. The **TAD Reference 1**, for example, has long been regarded as one such speaker, and TSNB was no exception. Other models now establishing this reputation include the **Sony SS AR-1**, **Nola's Contender**, and the **GoldenEar TritonTwo**. I have yet to hear any of these relative newcomers sound bad, and in SoCal they once again blew me away; the Sony for its overall excellence, the GoldenEar for its uncanny imitation of a Quad, and the Nola for its resolution and remarkable bass extension considering its tiny footprint and price. The latter, humming along with **PrimaLuna** electronics, offered the show's best affordable sonics.

Several big speakers sounded better at TSNB than I have ever heard them. The **MBL 101 E Mk II**, sandwiched into an undersized room along with the company's massive electronics, were calmer and more natural than they've



As close as most of us will ever get to the MBL 101E Mk II.



And yet they disappear sonically. The Focal Grand Utopia EM.



The diminutive Jolida Glass DX tube DAC.

T.H.E. SHOW NEWPORT BEACH

ALAN TAFFEL

been at recent outings. **Magico's Q5** seemed particularly happy to be matched with **Spectral** gear, delivering a glorious... um, spectrum of tonal colors and the best sound at the show. At a (slightly) more modest price point, the **Wilson Sasha** showed well with **VTL's** speedy new monoblocks. Finally, despite towering over and being mere inches in front of listeners' heads, the **Focal Grand Utopia EM**, driven by a refreshingly simple setup consisting of a **Burmester** CD player/linestage and a Burmester stereo amp, disappeared sonically and revealed elegant, delicate sound.

One last speaker of note was the **Gradient Revolution**. Gradient craftily left its room door open, and I found myself incapable of walking past it without being drawn in by the wonderful sound. These speakers, at \$8000 for the passive version and \$12,000 in active form, are clearly worth further evaluation. They no doubt benefited from the **Resolution Audio** gear, including an upgraded USB DAC.

Speaking of digital, I was pleased to see a proliferation of inexpensive but great-sounding (at least here) USB DACs. Particularly impressive was the **Jolida Glass FX** tube DAC, diminutive both in size and price—just \$379—but not in sound. I also admired the **Antelope Gold**,

with its slick controls, outboard power supply, and provision for both analog and clock inputs. The Gold is \$4500, but by the time you read this Antelope will have released the \$1800 Silver version, which dispenses with some features but not with the core audio modules.

I was delighted, too, to see **Theta Digital** re-emerge as a show presence. The **Casablanca III**, which I once reviewed and proclaimed the best-sounding digital controller extant, now has an HDMI capability that makes it fully competitive. The Theta demo configuration was novel and intriguing. An **Oppo BDP-93** played SACDs, but not through its analog outputs. Rather, the Oppo internally converted the DSD-formatted data to 96/24 PCM, and then fed that stream to the CIII via HDMI. This elegant arrangement permits virtually any stereo or multichannel disc to be played through a controller—not necessarily one as ritzy as the Casablanca!—over a single interface. With Blu-ray gaining traction, the simplicity of such a setup could help revive multichannel music.

Another exhibit that caught my eye, quite dramatically, was the astonishing **Meridian** room, featuring its top-line D-ILA projector and a scaler that *quintuples* 1080p, all played out in stunning richness and clarity on a 60-foot (!) wide

screen. I was also taken with the **Sonorus PR99** tape deck (about \$10,000). These units are not rebuilds but brand new machines, with Sonorus electronics and NOS Studer/Revox heads and motors.

This was a show, though, where the gear was secondary to the spirit. Everyone had fun and got what he came for—and then some. Hopefully TSNB's success will spur other markets to take a similar plunge.

THE BEST OF

BEST ENTRY-LEVEL SOUND

Upscale Audio: PrimaLuna components driving Nola Contender speakers

BEST MODERATE-PRICED SOUND

SimpliFi Audio: Resolution Audio components driving Gradient Revolution speakers

BEST OVERALL SOUND

The Audio Salon: Spectral components driving Magico Q5 speakers



The Gradient Revolution.



The sexy new Sonorus tape deck.