

Golden Ear Awards, and a Short Think Piece on Digital Domination

Harry Pearson

Golden Ear Awards

Amplifiers

ASR Emitter II Series 2005 integrated (fanfareintl.com)	\$25,900
Wyetech Sapphire 300B single-ended triode (wyetechlabs.com)	\$6800

Integrated Turntable

VPI Super Scoutmaster Signature (vpindustries.com)	\$5500
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Moving-Coil Phonograph Cartridges

Dynavector XV-1S (dynavector.co.jp)	\$4250
Benz Micro LP Ebony (musicalsurroundings.com)	\$4700

Compact Disc Players

47/Lab PiTracer CD transport and Gemini converter (sakurasystems.com)	\$25,000 and \$3500
Jadis JD-1 player and JS-1 digital converter (pierregabriel.com)	\$40,000
Bluenote Stibbert (fanfareintl.com)	\$4900

Accessories

Nordost Thor power-distribution system (nordost.com)	\$3200
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Multichannel Equipment

EMM Labs CD/SD SACD playback deck (onahighernote.com)	\$7900
EMM Labs DAC-6e SACD digital-to-analog converter (onahighernote.com)	\$11,500
Edge Electronics G AV 55 modular amp (500-watt module version) (edgeamps.com)	\$11,250

AMPLIFIERS

ASR Emitter II Model 2005

This amplifier not only joins the rank of the great classics of audio design, like, say, the Audio Research D-150 and Reference 600s, but also actually advances the art in its fiendishly clever integration of a battery-powered linestage into the amp itself. It sounds as if there is no linestage at all in the circuit.

The battery-powered linestage is, I am sure, partly responsible for the vanishingly low noise floor of this high-

powered, solid-state component. If there is a "new wave" in high-end sound, and I maintain there is, it lies in those components—like the Dynavector XV-1S moving coil, the VPI Scoutmaster Signature, and ASR's own battery-powered Basis phonostage—that have so lowered the noise floor that we, the listeners, are able to hear much more deeply into the recorded soundspace.

But it isn't just the lowering of the noise floor that accounts for some of this amp's magic; it is also the reduction of what Lew Johnson (of connie-j) calls

"the grunge." You can decrease the noise floor of a given component and still hear above that its electronic or mechanical signature. In the case of tubes, we have called this "tube rush," and in solid-state gear we have heard it as a kind of subtle electronic hash or fine-grained sandiness or electronic glaze.

I came at this backwards when I noted the way the Emitter allowed a listener to hear through both the compact disc and the analog LP in a new way, without their usual seemingly inherent sonic signatures—the kinds of anom-

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alies you just learn to listen around. Their absence was startling in the case of the best CDs—e.g., Mercury's two-disc set of *The Composer and His Orchestra* and the XRCD transfer of *The Planets* from the Decca/London original. The best discs didn't sound "digital" in the way we have all come to dread. I just wish I knew, technically, how the designer Freidrich Schäfer accomplished this. Especially since his amps contain two of the solid-state bad boys—op amps and no fewer than 20 MOSFETs, in the past, sure indicators of rocks in the sonic belfry.

Since I wrote that review, I have gotten hold of a second ASR (on loan, naturally) and assigned it the task of driving the bass towers of the Nola Grand Reference, thus replacing the Antique Sound Labs Hurricanes. The 200-watt Hurricane monoblocks were more than an acceptable match with the woofer system—four 12-inch ported drivers per channel that operate below 40Hz—surprisingly so, and in contradistinction to the usual mythology about tubes and deep bass. Once the second ASR was in place, the shortcomings, comparatively speaking, of the Hurricanes became obvious: an overly romantic mellowness in the 30-to-40Hz range and just enough tube grunge to create a slightly veiled masking effect.

With the ASR on the woofer towers, not only was there an articulation and purity in the bottom frequencies (well down toward the lower 20Hz mark), but we could now hear deeper into the stage, getting even more ambient information from the recording site and a much clearer picture of the relative "size" of instruments from bass drum to bassoon. Some of the improvement was actually audible in the harmonics well above the woofers' range—and I mean well above. There was a richer field of harmonic information past the middle frequencies. The principal gain in ambience retrieval came in two ways: (1) with an enhanced sense of the actual depth and delineation of real space from front to back, and (2) in our ability to hear the sounds of the acoustic shell surrounding players in a real space, i.e., the walls of the stage

"sounding" as instruments are being played. This furthers the sense that you are in that space with the players instead of listening to a replica of the original sound. (I am assuming here that those of you who are serious listeners will have damped the sidewalls of your music room to minimize their interplay with the hall sounds.)

As we discussed originally, because of the absence of a separate AC-powered linestage we have been able to plug both phonostages and CD players directly into the ASR's battery-operated input, and, when it strikes our fancy, to compare both balanced and unbalanced outputs if the gear in question has balanced outputs. This has given us a much clearer picture (see our notes on CD players below) of the real capabilities of the new generation of digital playback gear. And, again, as noted, we found that using the balanced inputs does make a difference in further lowering the perceived noise floor of the playback gear and, to our ears, in improving the tonal balance of the sound, perhaps simply because we can hear more deeply into the soundspace. Oddly, methinks, the top octaves become sweeter, more dimensional, and seemingly better at the rendition of dynamic contrasts.

The ASR does have a sonic "character," and that is a "yin"-like darkening of the original. It is certainly not as neutral as say the best of the early Bill Johnson-designed tubed amplifiers, nor is it as Symphony Hall (Boston) golden in sound as the best conrad-johnson work. But it doesn't sound like either "solid-state" or "tubes," a distinction even the audio neophyte can usually make instantly—in this respect, the ASR is essentially colorless. It has so much output power (greater, I would think, than the nominal 275 watt-per-channel rating) that it has the ability to float effortlessly over the most intense fortissimos I can throw at it (and don't think for a moment I am not expert at this). Put all of this together and you, perhaps, can see why I am wrong in the withers over the yin of its character.

Mechanically, things are a bit more

complicated. And the ASR is a bit kinky. It is best to turn it off if you aren't going to be around for extended periods of time, and best, if you *are* going to be around but not playing it, to let its batteries recharge (they are good for 100 hours of play) and to be careful not to send transient pulses through it, lest you shut it down. Also, it sounds best after it has been in the operating position—that is, at full power—for 30 or so minutes.

Oh, yes, we have begun to test its abilities with other speaker systems. From the field reports I hear, the ASR can drive even a difficult and cantankerous load, such as the big Wilson speakers. (SEE FULL REVIEW, ISSUE 152, PP. 104-119)

Wyetech Sapphire 300B single-ended-triode monoblock amplifiers

If you do not insist on overtaxing this unit with high playback levels on low-sensitivity speakers—those, say, with less than 95 or so decibels of measured sensitivity—you'll be in for the same surprise as I was. Up until the Sapphires, SET amplifiers struck me as having a similar sonic signature despite the design differences of their individual circuits. That is to say, SET amplifiers had a "soft" bottom octave, a somewhat protuberant and romantic midbass, a *très* sweet midrange, and a vanishing top octave. Perhaps in a narrow band of the midrange, they sounded "purer," more "alive," even a shade faster than they did elsewhere in the frequency range.

Now it seems that the more recent work with the better SET designs has licked this characteristic commonality and that SETs are finally coming into their own, if we can find good-enough high-sensitivity speaker systems to take advantage of their strengths. (Some veterans of the audio wars may remember how a five-watt amp could drive the bejeezus out of the biggest and best designs in the latter days of the mono LP.) With a speaker system both flat and highly sensitive and with a not-so-sensitive but highly neutral speaker from Audio Physic, the Caldera, I have been playing single-ended games.



The star performer so far, and one of the best-sounding amplifiers of any tubed provenance, is the Wyetech, which has a simply phenomenal bottom end—taut, articulate, and dynamic (even on low-sensitivity designs)—and an airy, uncolored top octave that won't sound ugly even when you push it into clipping, though it does exhibit a slight sizzle and minor tearing at extremely high levels on speakers it wasn't meant for (on the Caldera, for instance, the range of reproduced dynamics really suffers, but the Sapphire's bejeweled sonic strengths still shine through).

If you must view these words as anything, look at them as a sneak preview. I know how good this amplifier is—but what I want to do before writing about it again is spend much more time on the appropriate high-sensitivity speaker systems.

If a high-powered amp (say 100 watts or more per channel) could be made that was a sonic duplicate of this, it would immediately become, in my estimation, a reference standard in tube design. (REVIEW TO COME)

INTEGRATED TURNTABLES

VPI Super Scoutmaster Signature

There are, I do not doubt, "better"-sounding turntables to be found, or, put rightly, turntables less resounding, but I wonder if any are to be found any that combine performance and cost to the extent that the Scoutmaster Series does.

The Scoutmaster is Harry Weisfeld's "bargain" design that has evolved through three separate incarnations, each one more refined and better balanced than the last. I do not intend to delineate the individual changes to each model (you can do that yourself courtesy of VPI's Web site), but I think I should, to give a context, mention some of what is going on with the Signature.

Its arm is still the JMW 9-inch offspring of its 12-inch uni-pivoted brother. In the arm's last two iterations, Nordost interconnects (whose sonic effects we described in an earlier assessment) were added, first to the arm itself

and, in the newest version, to its junction box. The result, which will surprise no one familiar with what the Nordost can do, is less veiling, and, obviously, greater transparency, and, to these ears, a more natural tonal balance. The JMW-9, now raised to the Signature level, finally has a real anti-skate device instead of the awkward twisted-wire arrangement of olde. The amount of internal damping—again to reduce resonance—has been increased and, for the first time, there is external damping (in the form of the arm's stainless-steel tubing) as well as somewhat higher mass, thus allowing the use of lighter cartridges. For the 'table itself, there is a more refined motor drive (same as in the HRX), a better belt system (four black nitrates, replacing the oft-unreliable beige-colored slider of the previous version). There is also a periphery ring that holds down the outer lip of the disc—and it really works without getting in the way of the cartridge—and a center clamp. (I'd also recommend the SDS speed control, which adds \$1000 to the arm/'table's modest \$5500 cost.)

In and of themselves, these refinements may not seem, on paper, all that impressive, but each contributes to the audibly smoother and more neutral sound we get from this combo (and, no, guys, the arm's improvements don't begin to put it in the same league as the Kuzma air-bearing straight-line trackers). The new drive belts are not as prone to slipping, and thus speed variations, as those on the older versions of the 'table; the periphery clamp minimizes the torsional distortion that occurs thanks to the raised outside edges of most LPs, while the center clamp holds down the raised center of most LPs, and the added damping supposedly makes the sound far smoother. I don't know how to quantify each of the differences because I have not heard them added to the basic design one at a time. What I do know is that the thing, as it has evolved, has become less and less a creature with its own sonic signature and, thus, more and more transparent in the reference system. In many

aspects of its performance, it exceeds the best sound in 'tables available a decade or so ago. But not every last one.

What would you get for more money? One hopes better isolation from acoustic feedback—we first used ours on Arcici racks, where it needed extra isolation to prevent acoustic breakthrough. Then, of late, we have been playing with a new toy from the designers of an electron-microscope suspension system that just may be the last word in what the Vibraplane designers started years ago. We certainly could expect more precise speed control, just maybe more sonic solidity in the middle frequencies, and perhaps the kind of awesome thunder in the 30Hz region one gets from the better Clearaudio designs. But the Signature has considerable dynamic "jump" (as do all VPI designs), and a solid if not perfectly articulated bottom octave (below, say, 30Hz). It has a wonderfully musical authenticity and many analog lovers probably aren't going to feel the need to spend more for diminishing sonic returns.

MOVING-COIL CARTRIDGES

Dynavector XV-1S

This is a five-star moving-coil design. I have little else to say about it, since it is the best of these babies I have encountered—ever. I hear no serious flaws. I hate to say this, but, in the here and now and until I hear something more lifelike and better, I can hear no flaws at all. (One of HP's Laws of High End goes like this: You can't imagine sound better than the best in the here and now until you encounter it.)

However, I have loaded the cartridge into a 47k ohm input, and prefer that setting. I also have found, at that setting, a tracking force between 2.6 and 2.8 grams to be optimum (depending on the arm you use). Otherwise, before the cartridge actually mistracks, it sounds stressed and compressed in the top octaves on fortes. The importer has waxed furious over this tracking-pressure recommendation since he believes that force should be what the