

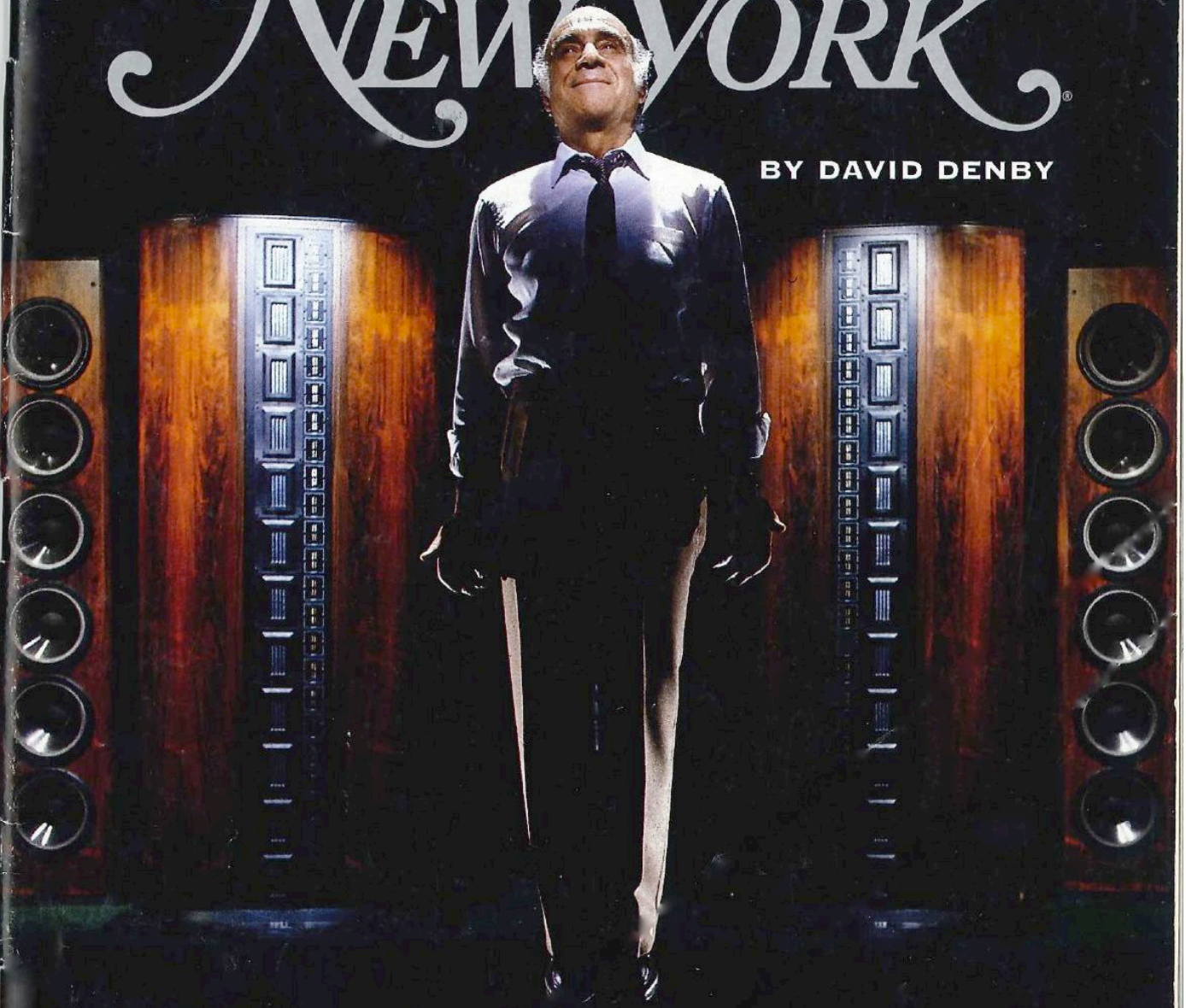
# SUPER SOUND

THE QUEST FOR THE ULTIMATE AUDIO SYSTEM

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# NEW YORK

BY DAVID DENBY



LYRIC HI-FI'S MICHAEL  
KAY WITH INFINITY IRS V  
REFERENCE SPEAKERS





# SUPER SOUND

## THE QUEST FOR THE ULTIMATE AUDIO SYSTEM

BY DAVID DENBY

**I**T CAME ON ME SUDDENLY AND ALMOST VIOLENTLY, like one of those desperate love affairs men my age are supposed to have. Some love affair! It was more like a mockery of passion. Instead of thinking about girls half my age, I was chasing around town after sub-woofers. I was shouting the names of small American loud-speaker companies deep in my dreams. Friends sighed unhappily on the telephone as I began some endless new rant. Handing in my copy at *New York Magazine*, I would disappear for three-hour "lunches," intimating appointments with powerful people, only to run off for a series of quickies at nearby audio "salons."

I was buying a new stereo system.

That's all it was. Nothing more. But it was also a powerful longing, halfway between an irresistible itch and a frantic search for redemption. For along the way, I had fallen in among fanatics, a techno-aesthetic elite. These were the audiophiles, the aficionados of "high end," and though lacking the principal qualification—money—I became one of them. Priestly and severe, the audiophiles (dealers, journalists, music lovers) were trying to will themselves, through technological hubris, into paradise. They sought only the best in sound reproduction. Thus they were stunningly contemptuous of the mass-market Jap-

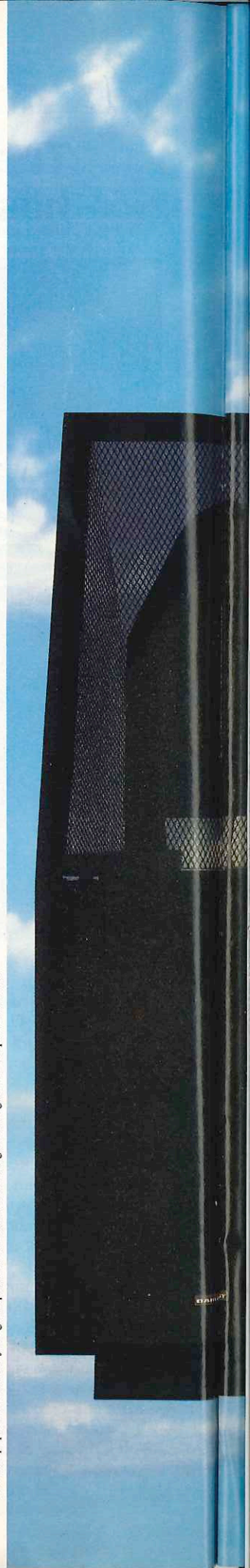
anese electronics that most people buy ("mid-fi" was the standard insult); they were devoted instead to a variety of small and medium-sized companies in America, Britain, and Canada, the sound of whose products was more accurate, refined, and musically involving than anything dreamed of by a Sony receiver.

Like so many moralists, they were powerfully seductive. Their appeal was a blend of righteousness, snobbery, national pride, and aesthetics. They were also infuriatingly correct in almost everything they said. Fascinated by their quest, I read, I listened, and I became more and more nervous. Taken seriously, high end could empty your purse overnight. (See "Dream Systems," p. 47, in which New York high-end dealers suggest equipment at different price levels, including an entry-level system.) In my pursuit of a decent sound system that wouldn't ruin me, I went through trials that may be instructive, even for people interested in doing nothing more than replacing a worn-out receiver or buying a new CD player or turntable. (See "How to Buy a Stereo System," page 42.)

As I ran from store to store, I was eager to convince myself that I was engaged in an opening of my responses to art, to sensuality, to levels of taste I had never known before. A soulful quest! I

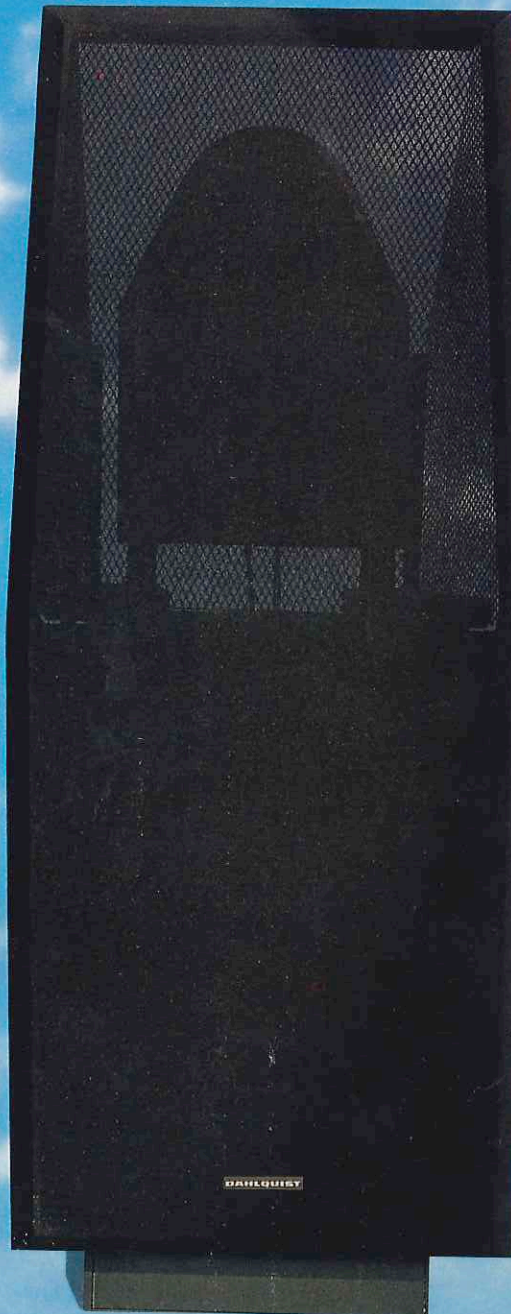
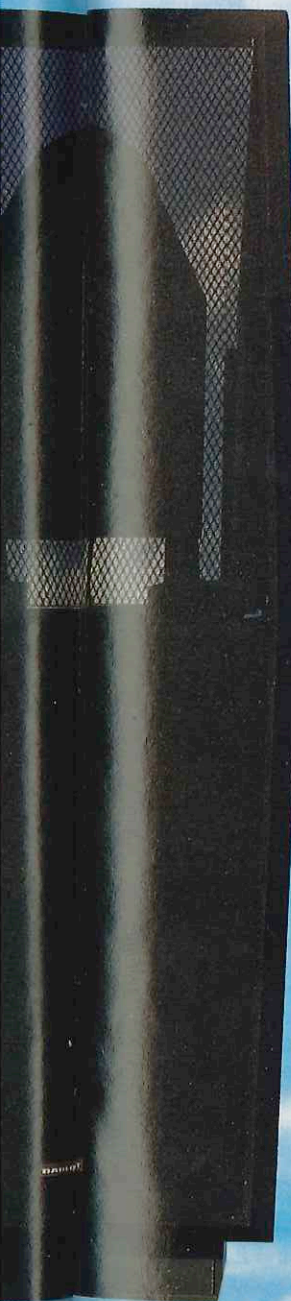
PHOTOGRAPH BY TOHRU NAKAMURA

Audio equipment: Sound by Singer. Speakers: Audio Breakthroughs. Background: Oliphant Studios.





Denby's system—for now: VPI  
HW-19Jr. turntable; Audible  
Illusions Modulus 2D  
preamplifier; Aragon 2004  
amplifier; California Audio  
Labs Icon CD player;  
Dahlquist DQ-12  
loudspeakers.





would improve myself! At the same time, I was struggling against the certainty that I had become an ordinary jerk caught up in a consumerist frenzy—and a frenzy of a peculiarly show-offy sort. At one point, having made a serious and costly “mistake,” I went into an absurd tailspin. If the Mets had traded Dwight Gooden, I couldn’t have been more of a mess.

### ALL YOU NEED IS MUSIC

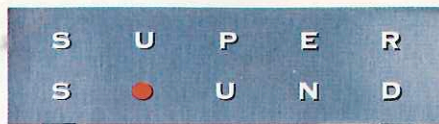
**T**HIS ALL STARTED BECAUSE I WAS GETTING FAT. MOVIE reviewing, after all, is a sedentary occupation. Sitting through too many teen movies had added years to my waistline. Last spring, eager to shed weight, I bought a Walkman clone, an **AIWA HS-G370** (\$40, discounted), and began jogging with music plugged into my head. Overnight, the boredom and anguish of running disappeared. Never able to chug more than a few hundred yards without pain, I quickly ran a mile, then two, then three.

Within a few months, I had amassed 50 or 60 tapes, most of them \$3 bargains from Tower Records. I needed something to play them on when I wasn’t running, so I bought a **TEAC V-670** cassette deck (\$450; discounted to \$298) at the local all-cash discount house, Uncle Steve.

The TEAC was nice, but I quickly discovered what many people already knew—that the prerecorded tape cassette, unlike the long-playing record and the CD, was not quite a high-fidelity medium. The sound is pleasant but not exciting; it doesn’t have quite enough presence—the performers sound a little distant. The cassettes, played at home, left me unsatisfied. Yet I couldn’t bring myself to listen to my records. There they were, a great inert mass, a thousand or more, collecting dust. They sounded lifeless to me. I began dropping in on audio stores and listening to speakers, and that’s when the mania began.

That I fell into this at all is strange, because for years I had been content with my dull but listenable old equipment. It was essentially a graduate-school rig, repaired when necessary. You know the type—everyone had them. Some people bought those sweet KLH packages with the turntable and AM-FM radio in a tidy box and the small speakers, fronted in beige, trailing their wires behind the plank-and-cinderblock bookshelves. In my case, it was AR-2ax speakers (\$220 a pair in 1968, when they were highly regarded); a 38-watt Marantz receiver; a Technics turntable. What was wrong with all of that? Nothing, actually. That kind of equipment took many of us a long way. Sinatra in his loosened-tie, under-the-lamppost phase; Billie Holiday and more Billie Holiday; Cream and the Who; Miles Davis and John Coltrane; Toscanini’s and Walter’s recordings of Beethoven and Brahms symphonies. Few complained of the sound.

Like millions of music lovers, I was proud of my indifference to the philistinism of “audio.” The equipment reviews filling up more and more space in the record magazines seemed dim, insular, masturbatory, and I happily skipped over their parochial pages. Is anything faintly relevant to musical pleasure conveyed by such sentences as (from a review of a new CD player by Julian Hirsch in last December’s *Stereo Review*) “The response variation, referred to a 1,000-Hz level, was +0, -1dB from 7 to 20,000 Hz”? Is there a single reader, encountering that sentence, who slaps his forehead and says, “I’ve got to hear this

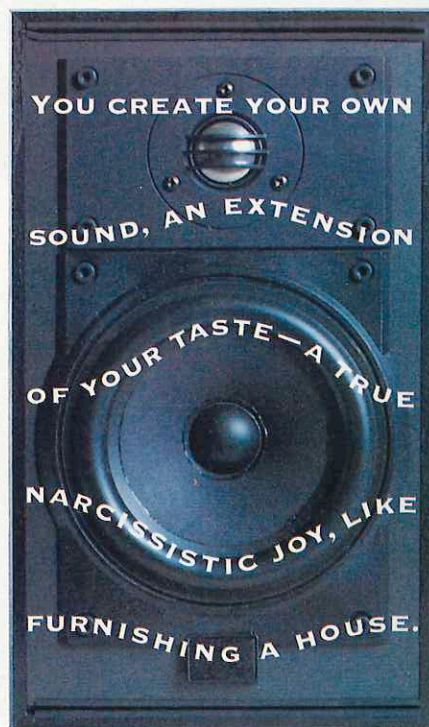


from one another, and the differences affect not only the sound of music but its meaning.

Yet no one knows this without proof. At Innovative Audio, the wonderfully friendly store in Brooklyn Heights, the management puts many of the new customers, whatever their interests or budgets, through a standard routine. Customers are asked to sit down and listen to, say, a Mozart piano sonata—or to “Be My Baby,” by the Ronettes—played on three different inexpensive CD players. (For the sake of a proper comparison, each player is hooked up to the same electronics and speakers.) The salesman running the test doesn’t ask the customer to make fine distinctions: Just follow the melody and the rhythm. I listened as instructed. Played on the **Yamaha CDX-520** (\$329), the Mozart was a little hazy, the rhythms indistinct; on the **Denon DCD 820** (\$400), the haze went away and the accents and melodic lines became clear—a pleasant sound; on the **NAD 5325** (\$299), the pianist’s two hands seemed to come into sync, and the sound suddenly attained warmth and body as well as clarity.

Music! That’s what it sounded like—*music*, rather than noise coming out of boxes. The Ronettes went through a similar evolution—on the NAD, with the bass line restored, the number turned into *dancing music*.

The point of the demonstration is to get us to begin listening critically—a sophisticated form of seduction, of course, since the customer, flattered by the discovery of his new ears, heart, and soul, longs to experience the same sense of connoisseurship at higher price levels and with different kinds of equipment. (Here’s the danger: As you go up the ladder, you immediately become dissatisfied with what you’ve enjoyed on the previous rung.) A whole system can be assembled in this way. The task requires time and patience and repeated visits, but the pleasure grows more intense, more involving, with each step. You create your own sound, create an extension of your own taste. A true narcissistic joy, like furnishing a house or planting a garden. The sound is you—although the “you,” as it listens and learns, keeps changing, which makes the whole game a little nerve-racking.



### CDS: WAITING FOR THE SOUND

**M**ORE OR LESS CONTENT WITH WHAT I HAD, I ignored the compact disc when it was introduced in 1983. Even before hearing the sound, I resented the obvious hard sell—the evident need on the part of the fading record industry, as well as the equipment manufacturers, to heat up the market. Who needed the CD? Yet such objections were confined to a cranky minority. Within a few years, the new discs, a roaring market success, had chased the LPs right out of the record stores. (At this point, you can find sizable numbers of records only at the Tower Records Annex at 4th and Lafayette or at used-record stores.) There was, of course, a good side to this: The expanded market opened a window on the musical past. Thousands of discontinued classical and jazz albums came back into stores in CD form.

But the sound! Intimidated by the new technology, by claims of a theoretical perfection, an astounding number of people





Andrew Singer with Krell KMA-160 amplifiers, Martin-Logan CLS II speakers, and Versa Dynamics Model 1.0 turntable.

back in 1983 and 1984—including a good part of the audio press—said that CDs sounded great. Ah, the wonders of digital, so superior to dear old musty analogue (LP) sound! What nonsense! Considered as sound, the early CDs were perhaps the biggest scam in the history of consumer electronics.

Yes, when plugged into a system with mushy old speakers and a grainy-sounding cheap receiver, CDs *were* an improvement over records. A \$300 CD player sounded better than a \$200 or \$300 turntable-cartridge combination. (And sounds even better today, if you buy the right CD player.) Pitch was firmed up, the bass line was tightened, and since the surfaces were flawless and remained so, hitherto buried details emerged with startling clarity from the underbrush of the music. Played on that same ordinary equipment, CDs were often an improvement over cassettes, too, which is what most people were buying in 1983. It doesn't hiss; it must be hi-fi! So people thought. And there was nothing muffled or reticent about CD sound. It was brash, forward, driving, brilliant.

It was also shockingly unmusical. Early CDs appeared to give more detail than records, but the detail was often unattractive—hard, scrawny, and cold as ice. A simple distinction: It's not just the amount of musical information that matters; the quality of it matters, too. Trumpets should not attack like acupuncture needles inserted under your scalp; violins should not be glossy, nor voices scratchy in the upper registers. If the sound is razory and shrill, it's not music. CDs seemed ready-made for people who

had never been to a concert, people who had heard only electronically amplified music. The gleaming little discs were delightful to handle and play; you could program the tracks and run the player by remote from across the room. But the sound was a chilly clockwork-orange premonition of an all-electronic future.

The high-end community, devoted to musical accuracy and naturalness, fought back. There was, for instance, a startling *New Republic* cover story in late 1985, "High-Tech Hi-Fi," by music critic Edward Rothstein, who made the case for analogue and ridiculed the pretensions of the CD. "After months of listening," Rothstein wrote, "I have not heard a single compact disc that sounds as good as the identical recording." The anti-musical nature of early digital, Rothstein pointed out, had caused the high-end manufacturers and polemicists to spring into action, to press their ideals harder. And one result is now becoming apparent. At considerable expense—\$600 and above (way above, in some cases)—you can buy an American-designed CD player made by **Harman Kardon, Melos, California Audio Labs, Madrigal, Mod Squad, Spectral**, and others that restore naturalness and warmth to the music. Even at moderate prices, players of English or European design, by **Philips, Rotel**, and **Magnavox**, will produce a more blended, less clinical sound than the equivalent Denon or Sony machine.

The digital technology exposed to the marketplace in 1983 simply wasn't mature; in effect, the record companies and





Elliot Fishkin with Linn LP 12 turntable, Edison Cylinder phonograph (not for sale), and Thiel CS 5 speakers.

## OBSESSION

**I** DIDN'T KNOW A LOT OF THIS WHEN I FIRST STARTED WANDERING about and listening. Trying to keep my expenses from ballooning (\$1,000–\$1,200 for a pair of speakers), I experienced bursts of exhilaration followed by disappointments so acute that I felt like a manic-depressive. I don't mean to claim anything definitive for my experience, but it raises issues that you may have to consider, too.

I began at Lyric Hi-Fi West, which, along with its flagship East Side outlet, Lyric Hi-Fi, is perhaps the most formidable audio store in the city. At Lyric, the Sony CD players and inexpensive speakers are displayed at the front, where people come in and get up the courage to ask questions, and the real goodies are hidden away in locked listening rooms. After hearing the small but potent **Rogers LS3/5a** (\$649 a pair) bookshelf speakers from England, my wife and I were conveyed to an inner chamber for the **Celestion SL 12si** (\$1,500 a pair), also British. These are smallish boxes perched on stands, and they have the dry but lively sound that the British prefer at this price level. *Chunk, chunk, chunk*, went the metallic-sounding winds in the Bach Brandenburg Concerto No. 1 played by English Chamber Orchestra. *Not enough bass*, I thought. "Well, that was—interesting," said my wife, obviously disappointed.

Yet the speakers, driven by good equipment, revealed the orchestra arrayed in space. The oboes were here, the bassoon

there, the horns were behind them both, and so on. "What's the next step up?" I ask timidly, realizing the enormity of my question. Our all-but-silent guide, smiling slightly, unsheathed his magic keys and passed us into another room. As you go up the scale at Lyric and the other stores, listening to more expensive and esoteric equipment, you burrow deeper into cavelike recesses, led by a man who is half seducer—glint-eyed exotic standing before the seraglio door—and half all-knowing Druid revealing sacred mysteries to the uninitiated. Lead me, master.

Now, what was *this*? Large, flat screens, beige, perhaps six feet tall, but only two inches deep, handsome enough but odd, very odd. They looked like something actresses in old movies might get dressed behind. The **Magneplanar MG 2.5/R** (\$1,695 a pair), is manufactured in Minnesota and is very famous, it turns out, among audiophiles. Immediately we noticed an astounding difference. The introduction to Beethoven's First Symphony (Von Dohnányi/Cleveland Orchestra/Telarc CD), which sounded dry and distant on the Celestions, was now velvety and rich and enveloping. The music doesn't come closer; seemingly, we go closer to *it*—and disappear into it. Magneplanar speakers (they go from \$495 to \$3,800 a pair) are a hybrid design, with large, flat, magnetized planes handling the bass and mid-range frequencies and a vertical "ribbon" handling the treble.

The next night, at home, a fever took hold. Everyone was asleep, it was two in the morning, and I was moving couches around the living room, hauling and sweating, trying to open up



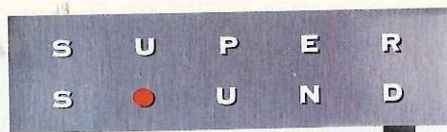
some space. There must be some way of fitting in these monsters. But how? Magnepanar speakers are supposed to stand two to three feet out from the wall with nothing placed between them. What we need, obviously, is a *listening* room. (While we're at it, why not an extra apartment?) Hopeless. In any case, the children! The two-year-old boy, now the fastest crayon on the Upper West Side, would be tempted by the screens, and his older brother would use them as target practice for his rubber darts. *Bang! Right in the ribbon!* My heart broke a little.

In the next couple of weeks, I listened to many speakers, some of them very highly regarded in audiophile circles. Out in Brooklyn Heights, at Innovative Audio, I tried the much-praised **Thiel CS 2** (\$1,650 a pair), a dynamic speaker (i.e., one with conventional woofer, mid-range, and dome tweeter in a box) made in Kentucky. At first, I was amazed. In Robert Shaw's performance of the Stravinsky *Firebird Suite* with the Atlanta Symphony (a Telarc CD), each woodwind solo, exquisite in color, hung limpidly in the air. The Thiel offers superb "imaging"—a clear spatial orientation of details within the overall "soundstage," which, in turn, refers to the entire complex of the sound in space, front to back and top to bottom, as well as left to right. If a pair of speakers "throws a clearly defined soundstage"—love that lingo—the sound should extend beyond the speakers right and left, and details should seem to come from the air between and on either side of them, not from the speakers themselves.

**T**HE THIEL CS 2S THROW A good soundstage and would probably throw a good party, too, but after a while, I found the sound, driven by inexpensive **Adcom** electronics (separate preamplifier and amplifier), a little cold and almost relentless. Modern equipment—especially the combination of solid-state electronics, CDs, and bright speakers—can produce a brilliant, penetrating attack that wears out pleasure. "Listener fatigue," it's called.

Everyone reacts to sound subjectively, which is why you have to decide for yourself. My responses tell me that I have trouble with the modern audiophile notion of clarity if it comes at the expense of body and warmth. Later, I had a similarly discomforting experience with the universally praised **Vandersteen 2ci** (\$1,320 a pair, including stands). Terrific detail, superprecise imaging, but overall a little hard-edged. On the other hand, the **Infinity Kappa 7** (\$1,398 a pair, though widely discounted) certainly has warmth. The bass is positively beefy, sometimes hanging around in the air for a second or so when it should be gone. *That* is no good, either (Infinity makes great speakers at a higher price range). To get both clarity and warmth, apparently, you have to pay more and more. Perhaps the bigger, more expensive Thiels and Vandersteens have it (I didn't want to tempt myself). The British classic, the **B & W 801 Matrix Series 2** (\$5,000 a pair), an imposingly odd-looking, low-slung box, produces a dark-toned magnificence that I find intoxicating. And with an almost painful sense of envy, I heard, at a friend's house, a smooth, powerful yet detailed sound on a \$20,000 system capped by the **Infinity IRS Delta** (\$5,500).

Pulled in one direction by lust and in another by a restricted budget, I was beginning to lose my way. At Audio Breakthroughs, on Amsterdam Avenue, I had a good time, but I dismissed it. A brand-new speaker, the **Dahlquist DQ-12** (\$1,200



a pair), whose front grille is oddly shaped like a black ironing board, features a blooming mid-range (which is where most of the music is) that was very pleasing. The strings have a nice feathery sound;

the speakers are a bit mellow. But I couldn't buy these! They hadn't been reviewed anywhere. Dahlquist, a Long Island company, doesn't show up at the moment in the demanding pages of *Stereophile* or *The Absolute Sound*, the two low-circulation high-end journals that were beginning to dominate my attention the way T. S. Eliot's pronouncements dominated the tastes of literary intellectuals 40 years ago. In brief, I no longer trusted my own responses.

## AMONG THE BELIEVERS

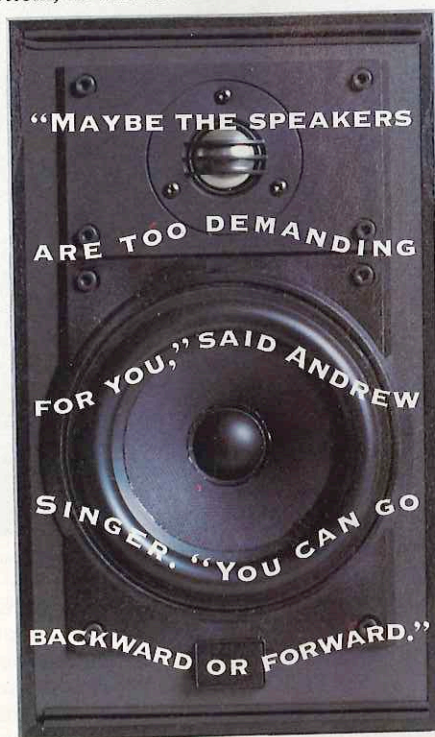
**I**'M NOT SURE WHEN I FIRST HEARD THE WORDS "HIGH END." Harry Pearson, the editor and publisher of *The Absolute Sound* and a power in quality audio, claims to have invented the phrase, but even he is not sure when. The phrase put a memorable tag on something that had already developed—a community, spread throughout the country, of inventor-manufacturers, mechanico-fusspots, and music lovers

who shared certain ideals and a restlessly critical spirit. They pursued the best sound to the point of mania and impoverishment. They were endlessly interested in analyzing weaknesses in the sound-reproduction chain, an obsession that had led them, in recent years, from the electronics and speakers to the turntable, from the turntable to the tonearm and cartridge, from there to the speaker cables and component interconnects (much laughter about this in the mainstream audio community), and from *there* to *AC* power supply itself (it's not, you know, *pure*).

Foolish? Perhaps, but I admire them anyway. They have the intense intellectual rigor of a self-sustaining religious group, a circle of seekers and doubters like the Transcendentalists of nineteenth-century Massachusetts. And in their nattering way, they are providing genuine guidance. In *Stereophile* and *The Absolute Sound*, the reviewers compare components and attack or corroborate one another's opinions, continuing to search for some sort of agreement about qualities that are finally ineffable.

Messianic, many of them, the audiophiles would like to rid the world of bad sound and redeem technology for art. They brood over the history of quality American audio—the industry's rise and fall and rise. American audio, it seems, flowered in the late fifties, culminating in the development of fine-sounding vacuum-tube electronics from such companies as Marantz, H. H. Scott, Bogen, and McIntosh. But then, in the mid-sixties, the Americans were nearly wiped out by the Japanese, who introduced their new solid-state (all-transistorized) equipment at lower prices. "The Dark Ages!" audiophiles moan, covering their eyes in despair. Some of the American companies, unable to compete, were bought out by the Japanese; others disappeared. Audio became standardized, functional, and often mediocre. (That millions were first able to afford at least decent sound in this period is not something that high-enders readily admit.)

Audio was boring, and by the early seventies, in response to the characterless sound, the Americans were beginning to strike back. The inventor-entrepreneur Bill Johnson had started Audio Research, reintroducing the vacuum tube to consumer electronics (for a warmer, rounder, more liquid sound. "Tubey," in





high-end circles, is a term of praise). Mark Levinson was making superb solid-state equipment; the Anglo-American company NAD had developed excellent components at moderate prices, including one of the few lines of receivers audiophiles will listen to. (There is also some Japanese high-end equipment, but leaving out such superb cartridges as the **Koetsu**, and a few stray components from Stax, Sony, Onkyo, and Pioneer, little of it is taken seriously by high-end types here.)

**C**OTTAGE-INDUSTRY CAPITALISM SAVED AMERICAN AUDIO. For the new companies were generally founded not by audio professionals but by scientists, physicians, and economists; by literature professors and record-store owners. "Artistic dreamers bored with the workaday world" (Harry Pearson), these investors and entrepreneurs began on a small scale and often remained independent. Thus they stayed where they started out, not in high-tech industrial parks but in rural or small-city Kentucky, Virginia, Minnesota, and California. High-end audio is a minority phenomenon but a truly national one. It accounts for an estimated five to ten percent of the total \$1.9 billion in factory sales (to America) of audio components in 1989.

The equipment itself is marvelous fun and physically rather striking—sometimes sleekly beautiful, sometimes as powerfully ugly as a Bauhaus classic from the twenties. High-end design and advertising create an aura of awed appreciation. In the ads, gleaming Mark Levinson power amps climb into the clouds; expensive speaker cables rise up wrathfully like cobras; Infinity's top-of-the-line IRS V Reference speaker system, which costs \$50,000 and consists of four seven-and-a-half-foot towers, evokes the assembled monuments of Stonehenge. The imagery says, There are gods, potent gods, gathering in these machines.

On the North Shore of Long Island, not too far from the city,

there is a Victorian gingerbread house, much restored, in which three roomfuls of superexpensive equipment live and breathe. Also a man, Harry Pearson, editor and publisher of *The Absolute Sound*. Pearson, a former environmental reporter for *Newsday*, is a rhapsodic yet lucid audio obsessive, a good writer, and to all appearances a happy man. (He has three listening rooms!) I delight in his ruminations and in his magazine, which turns out to be an expression of his ardent, expansive, yet exacting personality. Pearson has invented some of the language now commonly used to describe sound and its distortions, and though he never says as much, he conveys the impression that what happens in those three rooms (where new equipment is rigorously tested) has an effect, at some level, on the whole world of audio.

"We're looking for the illusion of an orchestra playing," he says. "We have to keep an eye on the goal and not get complacent." Together we listened to records on an awesome system costing more than \$100,000. An ordinary LP, a performance of the Dvořák Symphony No. 7 conducted by Colin Davis with the Amsterdam Concertgebouw (Philips), yields heaven-storming climaxes yet also the greatest transparency.

The sound was tremendous, elemental, but to my ears, it also had a hot, electric, slightly hyped quality that is not the sound of live music. No doubt the system will be improved. Audiophiles, by definition, are never satisfied and are always upgrading and fiddling ("tweaking"). As Edward Rothstein put it to me, "If only one person can hear the difference, that's what matters." Yet in talking to people like Pearson and Rothstein, I have had an uncanny impression: *For all their chasing after perfection, audiophiles don't really want to attain it.* The reason is obvious: The chase would end. Audiophiles must come closer and closer to their goal but never actually achieve it. Collectively, they are the new Sisyphus, in love with their frustrations.

## HOW TO PLAY A RECORD

DIGGING GREAT SOUND OUT OF THE GROOVES

**R**ECORDS, LIKE SNEAKERS AND jeans, are part of the disposable junk of American life, and the notion that there's a wrong way to play them strikes many people as mere fussiness. Oh, sacrilege! There's gold in them there grooves! You've just never *heard* it. Sure, there are many terrible-sounding recordings. But the good ones should be guarded like precious jewels.

First of all, if you have lots of records, you should buy a good turntable, tone-arm, and cartridge. This means spending \$500 or more. Why, you wonder, would anyone spend serious money on a turntable with the CD omnipresent and only a few new recordings available on LP? But *wait* a minute. Many people are now replacing their 100 or 200 favorite LPs with the same material on CD, at a cost of \$1,200 to \$2,400, and they are then hearing, often enough, sound that is inferior to what they could get out of their records. They might do better to hold on to the records and dig the sound out of them. Some of the less expensive good turntables are made by **Revolver**, **Rega**, **VPI**, and **AR**. In the \$1,200–\$2,000 range, there are marvelous turntables



VPI HW-16.5  
record cleaner.

by **Linn**, **SOTA**, and **Well Tempered**.

So how do you play a record "properly"? Well, if you haven't done so recently, you clean it. Nothing can be done about scratches (gouged records should be replaced with CDs), but one of the fluid-and-brush combos, like the ubiquitous **Discwasher**, will remove the pops and cracks that gather from dust and electrostatic tension. If you want to get out deep muck and actually improve the sound of the records, you need something more—for instance, the **VPI HW-17** record

cleaner (\$700; manually operated version, \$425). The VPI sprays fluid into the grooves, brushes out the grunge, and then vacuums up the fluid. Neat.

Clean as a baby, the record is placed on your good new turntable and clamped at the spindle with the turntable's heavy clamp. The pressure eliminates warps; your good new cartridge, properly aligned, will end inner-groove distortion. The surface is now almost as quiet as that of a CD. The sound? Wonderful. An amazing "singing" warmth up the middle. And a greater sense of depth than CDs give.

Now, I admit that some people go nuts over turntables. The **Goldmund Reference Turntable** (\$27,000 without arm), from Switzerland, is actually a heavy table with legs. Dark, forbidding, medieval. You could weave a rug, or torture a spy, on it. The **Versa Dynamics 2.0** (\$12,500) features a vacuum pump that pulls down the record through holes near the center of the platter. There's only one trouble: The pump is noisy and has to be kept in a separate room. (However, the manufacturer includes a wooden sound baffle for the pump *at no extra charge*. I'm sure that puts it over the top for you.)



# DREAM SYSTEMS

## LOW TO HIGH: TIPS FROM THREE MASTERS

In my wanderings, I found the following high-end stores to offer the most exacting expression of audio ideals. I had intensely pleasurable times at all of them, and learned a lot by talking to their salesmen and proprietors. These stores take a calm approach. They don't bully the customers. You can listen, compare, dream a little. They have selected the equipment they sell with great care, and though much of their stuff is pricey, they

carry inexpensive components too. We asked the owner of each store to recommend, at different price levels, complete systems (with some options) that can be assembled and auditioned at the shop. You can, of course, substitute or add components (a cassette deck rather than a turntable, for instance) as you please. (If the store offers components at a discounted price, as part of a system, we have listed the store's price.)



Nakamichi 1000 DAT recorder and processor.

Nakamichi TA-2A AM/FM receiver.



Linn LP12 turntable



Mirage 260 speaker.



### INNOVATIVE AUDIO 77 Clinton Street (Brooklyn Heights).

Innovative is probably the most comfortable place for the new, inexperienced customer. The Queens-born Elliot Fishkin, 40, a fiercely articulate man, dropped out of urban planning and then designed speakers for a while (customers can hear them); he now broods over methods of perfecting his basement kingdom in Brooklyn. Innovative exudes solicitude for customers, even the small buyer, and emphasizes follow-up and service. The philosophy of the store has been influenced by Linn Products, the

Scottish company that started a revolution in turntable design in the seventies. Following Linn, Innovative emphasizes the "front end" of the chain—turntables, CD players, cassette decks. A unique feature: Three of the store's five listening rooms are used to demo only a single pair of speakers, which are wheeled in when needed (lots of extra speakers in a room subtly distort the sound). Among the speakers wheeled about are models by Thiel, Mirage, Martin-Logan, Dahlquist, Linn, and Apogee.

#### ELLIOT FISHKIN'S RECOMMENDATIONS:

##### ENTRY LEVEL SYSTEM, \$750—\$1000

- CD Player NAD 5325 (\$270)
- AM/FM Receiver NAD 7020e (\$230)
- Speakers Mirage 260 (\$250 a pair)

**SYSTEM PRICE: \$750**

##### MODERATELY PRICED SYSTEM, \$1,600—\$2,400

- CD Player Nakamichi CDP-2A (\$495)
- AM/FM Receiver Nakamichi TA-2A (\$540)
- Speakers Linn Index Plus (\$600)

**SYSTEM PRICE: \$1,635**

##### OPTION: Turntable

Linn Basik with Linn Akito tonearm (\$550 for both); Linn K5 cartridge (\$150)

##### THE LOW END OF THE HIGH END, \$6,000—\$8,500

- CD Player Madrigal Proceed (\$1,650)
- Turntable Linn LP12 (\$1,165), with Linn Akito

tonearm (\$395) and Linn K9 cartridge (\$275)

- Preamplifier Linn LK1 (\$1,050)
- Amplifier Linn LK280 (\$1,495)
- Speakers Thiel CS 3.5 (\$2,450)

**SYSTEM PRICE: \$8,500**

##### SKY'S THE LIMIT

- CD Player Spectral SDR 1000 Series 2 (\$7,895)
- Turntable Linn LP 12 (\$1,165), with the Linn Ekos tonearm (\$1,995) and the Linn Troika cartridge (\$1,750)

- Cassette Deck Nakamichi Dragon (\$2,100)
- DAT Recorder Nakamichi 1000 (\$11,000)
- Preamplifier Krell KBL Line Stage (\$4,250)
- Krell KPA Phono Stage (\$2,700)
- 2 Krell KMA 160 Mono (\$7,900 a pair)
- Thiel CS 5 (\$9,200 a pair)

System requires about \$5,000 in wiring.

**SYSTEM PRICE: \$55,000**



Lyric, a pioneer in high end, is a little more forbidding than the other stores. Casual customers can be rather frostily queried, though serious ones will be well treated. "You convey a dignity to the music and the technology. That's how you respect the customer," says Michael Kay, the boss, who has the masterful look of a wealthy shipbuilder. Kay, who was born Michael Kadellis on the island of Lesbos in 1923, built high-power radio transmitters for the Greek government before emigrating to North America in 1955. At Lyric, he has cultivated a mysterious and awe-inspiring approach. In the East Side store, there is a kind of cathedral room with a rolling slatted ceiling—the home of the great beasts, the Infinity IRS Series V Reference speakers. Demonstrating the Infinities, Kay likes to turn off the lights so the music floats out with only the Carver tube amplifiers glowing in the dark. Lyric has a great selection of marvelous speakers, including Infinity, Magneplanar, Mirage, B & W, and Quad.

**MICHAEL KAY'S RECOMMENDATIONS:**

**ENTRY LEVEL SYSTEM, \$750-\$1,000**

- CD Player NAD 5325 (\$299)
- AM/FM Receiver NAD 7225PE (\$329)
- Speakers Celestion 3 (\$270 a pair)

**SYSTEM PRICE: \$900**

**MODERATELY PRICED SYSTEM, \$1,600-\$2,400**

- CD Player NAD 5100 (\$499)
- AM/FM Receiver NAD 7400 (\$999)
- Speakers Mirage 460 (\$600 a pair)

**SYSTEM PRICE: \$2,100**

**THE LOW END OF THE HIGH END, \$5,000-\$8,500**

- CD Player Madrigal Proceed (\$1,650)
- Preamplifier Audio Research LS-1 (\$1,495)
- Amplifier Bryston 4B (\$1,695)
- Speakers Magneplanar MG-IIIa (\$2,195 a pair)

**SYSTEM PRICE: \$7,000**

**OPTION:  
Turntable**

Well Tempered WTRP (including arm; \$895), with Grado 8MZ (\$200) cartridge. (Turntable requires substitution of Audio Research SP 14 [\$2,995] as preamplifier.)

**SKY'S THE LIMIT**

- CD Player Accuphase CD Transport DP-80L (\$4,750)
- D/A Converter Stax (\$13,000)
- Turntable Goldmund Reference Turntable (\$27,000) with T-3F tonearm (\$4,990) and Spectral MCR Signature (\$1,190) cartridge
- FM Tuner Goldmund Mimesis 4 (\$4,890)
- Preamplifier Classé DR-6 (\$3,300)
- Amplifier Carver Silver Seven (\$19,000 a pair)
- Speakers Infinity IRS V Reference (\$50,000 for system)

System requires about \$5,000 in wiring.

**SYSTEM PRICE: \$133,000**



Celestion 3 speaker.



NAD 7400 AM/FM receiver.

Goldmund Reference turntable.



Madrigal Proceed CD player.

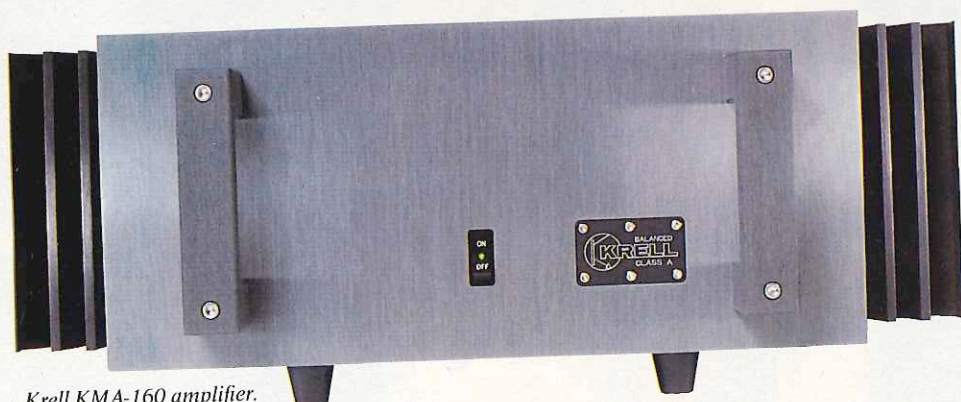




NAD 5325 CD player.



Adcom GFA-535 amplifier.



Krell KMA-160 amplifier.



Vandersteen 2ci speakers.

**SOUND BY SINGER** 165 East 33rd Street.

A wonderfully congenial place to listen and shop, with all sorts of superb equipment. The salesmen, a bright and friendly group, are eager to talk audio all day—they don't hold anything back. A big plus: They love and know music as well as sound. Somewhat cramped in its current headquarters, Singer is moving in mid-March to 18 East 16th Street, a very large space (12,000 square feet) with nine listening rooms. Andrew Singer, 39, a former lawyer who got tired of "arguing for things I didn't believe in," now argues for his equipment with logic and zeal. His latest enthusiasm: The new Hales System Two (\$2,750 a pair) speaker from California. The store has a particularly strong selection of American electronics, including Krell, Audio Research, Mod Squad, and Aragon.

**ANDREW SINGER'S RECOMMENDATIONS:**

**ENTRY LEVEL SYSTEM, \$750-\$1,000**

- CD Player NAD 5325 (\$299)
- AM/FM Receiver NAD 7225PE (\$329)
- Speakers Heybrook .5 (\$299)

**SYSTEM PRICE: \$930**

**MODERATELY PRICED SYSTEM, \$1,600-\$2,400**

- CD Player Adcom GCD-575 (\$600)
- Preamp/Tuner Adcom GTP 400 (\$350)
- Amplifier Adcom GFA 535 (\$300)
- Speakers Snell Type E/III (\$990 a pair)

**SYSTEM PRICE: \$2,240**

**THE LOW END OF THE HIGH END, \$5,000-\$8,500**

- CD Player Meridien 206 (\$1,650)
- AM/FM Tuner Adcom GFT-555 (\$300)
- Preamplifier Audio Research SP9 MKII (\$1,795)
- Amplifier Aragon 2004 (\$1,150)
- Speakers Vandersteen 2Ci (\$1,320, including stands)

**SYSTEM PRICE: \$6,200**

**OPTIONS:**

- Turntable VPI HW-19Jr. (\$600), with Rega RB300 tonearm (\$300) and Signet AT-OC9 cartridge (\$400)
- Speaker Substitution Martin-Logan Sequel II (\$2,500)

**SKY'S THE LIMIT**

- CD Transport Krell MD-1 (\$5,400)
- D/A Converter Krell SBP-64X (\$8,950)
- Line Stages 2 Krell KBL (\$4,250 each)
- Phono Stages 2 Krell KPA (\$2,700 each)
- Amplifier 4 Krell KRS Balanced 200 (\$18,000 a pair)
- FM Tuner Day-Sequerra (\$3,800)
- Speakers Martin Logan: The Statement (\$42,000)
- Turntable Versa Dynamics 2.0 (\$12,500) with Benz-Micro MC-3 cartridge (\$1,500)

System requires about \$5,000 in wiring

**SYSTEM PRICE: \$129,000**