

Sam Tellig

Sugden & Harbeth, so very English!

British hi-fi has lately taken its lumps. Quad electrostatic speakers are now made in China. Wharfedale, Epos, and Mordaunt-Short speakers are all made in China. Cambridge Audio electronics, once actually produced in Cambridge, England, are assembled in PRC, which is code for People's Republic of China. And the new A5-series components from Musical Fidelity? "Built in Taiwan."

Yet hi-fi products continue to be made in the UK, France, Germany, Italy, the US, and Canada. As one hi-fi manufacturer explained, "If you're talking about expensive products and limited production, I can make them at home. Besides, I have no choice. Most Asian OEMs [original equipment manufacturers] aren't interested in producing a few dozen or a few hundred of an item. They want orders for thousands or tens of thousands of units."

There's irony. Many Asian audiophiles, in China and elsewhere, place a premium on products made in the West. Harbeth speakers, made in England, have long been favorites in Hong Kong. The Vietnamese, with something of a French cultural past, take to Triangle speakers. It's the same around the world. Moscow hi-fi buffs regard McIntosh gear as capitalist and cool.

Maybe there's room for everyone at the table—big firms and small, those who mass produce in China and those who sell specialist hi-fi kits in China. Still, look for even more production to migrate East in the future.

Item. Rumor has it that one very high-end US manufacturer now has its faceplates made in China. Which might account for the leap forward in quality. The old faceplates were crappy.

Item. One European electronics maker told me he plans to keep production of his established brand at home, but he's considering a new budget line, under a different name,

designed in Europe and made in China. We're likely to see more of this.

I still have a soft spot for small, specialist hi-fi firms based in the US, the UK, and Europe. Or Asia, for that matter. Perhaps no electronics firm is closer to my heart than Sun Audio, whose Japanese premises are said to more resemble an atelier, or workshop, than a factory.

I like firms such as Creek, Rega, Conrad-Johnson, Quicksilver Audio, Unison Research—firms that haven't abandoned two-channel hi-fi in the

happiness? I declined the invitation.

A 49-year-old physician, posting on an Internet discussion group recently, observed the pathology of *Audiophilia nervosa*—or *Audiophilia psychosa*. Where are happiness, humor, and humility, he wanted to know, among those who pay \$30,000 for a pair of speakers or lay out \$10,000 for a set of speaker cables?

I've written about my late friend Lars, who died of a heart attack at the age of 59. I think his audiophile hobby became the occasion of more stress and tension than relaxation and pleasure.

Another friend, the Brass Ear, came to much the same conclusion. Fortunately, he's still alive. He traded in his gear and downsized to a Bose Wave radio. Ever the audiophile, Brass put the Bose on a set of Tip Toes.

I might have suggested another possibility to Brass: buy a Sugden A21a. I've been living with this



The Sugden A21a integrated amplifier.

25Wpc integrated amp for two months now, and I've derived more pleasure from it than I have from some hugely expensive separates.

Sugden A21a integrated amplifier

Sugden. The very name sounds so English, so down-to-earth. Like Creek. Or Leak. Or Mordaunt-Short.

J.E. Sugden & Co., Ltd., is located in what looks to be an old mill in West Yorkshire—a site where stuff has been made since the dawn of the industrial revolution. I wouldn't be surprised to find that the factory is powered by a water wheel.

The firm's founder, James E. Sugden, retired more than two decades ago. He's said to be alive and well, hanging out somewhere in a rural part of northeast England. Tony Miller has run the company for more than 20 years, building on Sugden designs that originated in the 1960s, when the fledgling company was in the vanguard of British solid-state hi-fi.

rush to cash in on home theater.

Put this in your pipe and smoke it, as my Uncle Harry—still chipper at 94—likes to say: The boom in home theater is part of the housing boom; like the rest of the housing boom, it's fueled by low mortgage rates and rising property values. People are using mortgage money to install home theaters as part of the house. What do you think might happen when mortgage rates rise significantly and the housing bubble bursts? The lucky firms might be those that are sticking with two-channel stereo. Like Sugden.

And maybe it's time to wring out the excess. The other day, I received a press invitation from a well-known speaker manufacturer inviting me to audition a half-million-dollar surround system. That's \$500,000 for the speakers and the electronics, not counting the video. The manufacturer described this as a "dream system."

More like a nightmare. Do you think such a system would bring its owner

"Sugdens," as Miller refers to the firm, introduced the original A21 in the mid-1960s. It delivered a powerful 10Wpc, said to be class-A. This was not quite the 40-year-old design that I have the pleasure of listening to now. The A21a harks back a mere 20 years, having been introduced in the mid-1980s. (Tony is somewhat vague on dates.) The A21a is rated to deliver a mighty 25Wpc—again, the claim is class-A operation for the output stage.

I quizzed Tony about class-A. The A21a runs warm—downright hot—as you'd expect. But wouldn't the amp need to be as large as a small refrigerator to deliver its full 25W in pure class-A? (I remember the huge class-A amps from Krell, Threshold, and Classé—when their amps actually ran in class-A—of two decades ago.)

"The output configuration of the Sugden A21a is theoretically capable of 50% efficiency," Tony replied by e-mail, "and in practice we achieve about 40%. This is much better than the 33% achieved by most amplifiers. This also enables us to be economic with the size of the units."

The A21a comes in your choice of black or titanium faceplate for \$1895 without phono board. A factory-installed moving-magnet or moving-coil phono board tacks on \$200. (My well-used review sample came with an MM board.) Without phono, there are five line-level inputs plus a tape-moni-

tor loop. With phono taking up one pair of jacks, you have four line-level inputs. There's also a preamp out jack for biamping or driving a powered sub. The A21a has no remote control or headphone jack.

This amp runs not just warm but fairly hot—be sure to give it plenty of ventilation and don't stack anything else on top, including your cat. In West Yorkshire, they don't worry too much, as it never warms in summer and no one heats in winter. An A21a could come in handy.

By the time you read this column, Sugden will have introduced the A21SE (special edition). Tony Miller tipped me off in advance: It will deliver almost twice the power and cost roughly twice as much as the A21a, which will remain in production.

Now, if 25Wpc isn't enough, you have two choices. You could cough up twice the dough and buy the new SE, or you could purchase the A21a and match it to an A21ap power amp. You would probably use the integrated to drive the tweeters and put the power amp—also

THE **SUGDEN** SLOGAN IS "RESCUING MUSIC FROM TECHNOLOGY." MY OWN MOTTO MIGHT BE RESCUING SOUND FROM AUDIOPHILES.

The A21a uses a single pair of NPN bipolar output transistors per channel to deliver its rated 25W into 8 ohms. Obviously, the amplifier is best suited for sensitive speakers and, perhaps, small rooms.

The Sugden slogan is "Rescuing music from technology." Quite proper, that. My own motto might be rescuing sound from audiophiles. Sugden's Tony Miller went so far, in an e-mail, as to term technology the "bête noire of music reproduction." The French would love that. (My first teacher of French called me "the bête noire of the classroom." *Bête noire* means *black beast*.)

According to Sugden, "Technology is generally employed and developed to encompass mass markets and create infinite growth in demand and fuel the next generation of must-have items. No time to stop and smell the flowers or even observe they exist.

"Sugden's task is to embrace technology, then apply it to obtain the reproduction of an art form which is far too abstract to conform totally to technological disciplines. The experience of different circuits and their interrelationships, coupled with the performance of selected electronic components, all wrapped up in many pairs of trusted ears, creates a font from which we draw. ...[O]ur final arbiter is the sense of satisfaction in the listening experience."

News flash!

Sugden does not rush to market with new products all the time, so this is news:

rated at 25Wpc—on the woofers. This assumes you have biwireable speakers.

I gave my review sample of the A21a a thorough workout—first with the four Triangle speakers I reviewed last month (new Celiu, Antal, Comete, and Titus), and then, in our living room, with the Harbeth Super HL5. I used Musical Fidelity's A5 tubed CD player. For the most part, analog took a holiday.

The Sugden A21a and the Triangles seemed made for each other, which of course they are not. The amp is English, the speakers French, and they're handled in the US by different distributors. Yet, somehow, I think the sensibilities are the same—or quite similar. Few dealers carry both Sugden and Triangle, unfortunately. The matchup was magic.

I was reminded of an amp I admired some 20 years ago, when I first got this gig: the A1 integrated amplifier, said to be class-A, from Lacium Ytiledif. (I've spelled the manufacturer's name backward to avoid knocking certain Internet inmates off their rockers.) The A1 ran hot—hotter than the A21a, if memory serves me correctly. We all ran hotter in those days—Antony Michaelson, too.

With the Sugden A21a, there was a sweetness of sound I had not heard from solid-state since the A1—not even from those hot-running Krell, Threshold, and Classé behemoths. As my late Aunt Emily liked to say, "Them was the days."

I heard no hardness, no harshness from the Sugden. I got surprisingly strong bass from a 25W amp. Overall

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resolution was very good, if not exceptional. There was what my late friend Lars used to term a "whale" over the sound. He meant *veil*. At its modest price, I warmly recommend the A21a. You might save on heating oil.

My colleague John Marks, too, likes this amplifier, mentioning only "incremental shortcomings" ("The Fifth Element," in the November 2003 *Stereophile*, Vol. 26 No.11). Indeed, it was the illustrious Mr. Marks who put me on to the amp's availability here in the US.

The sound wasn't tube. Solid-state can have its own set of virtues. I did not note the startling sense of immediacy I experience with single-ended triode at its best, typically with one of the flea-watt persuasion. But I don't get that from most tubed amps, either.

I did hear sound that was consistently satisfying and seductive with all types of music. I'm particularly taken by *The Complete Recordings of Enrico*



The Harbeth Super HL5 loudspeakers.

Caruso—just issued as a set on Naxos. You'll hear about the set shortly, after I've had more time to sort through it. For the moment, I will tell you that the original 78s have never been transferred so successfully to any other medium. A triumph.

Was the Sugden a little...you

know...polite?

Enrico Caruso didn't think so. Nor did Ezio Pinza, Maria Callas, Jascha Heifetz, and so on. The heck with Hillary Hahn.

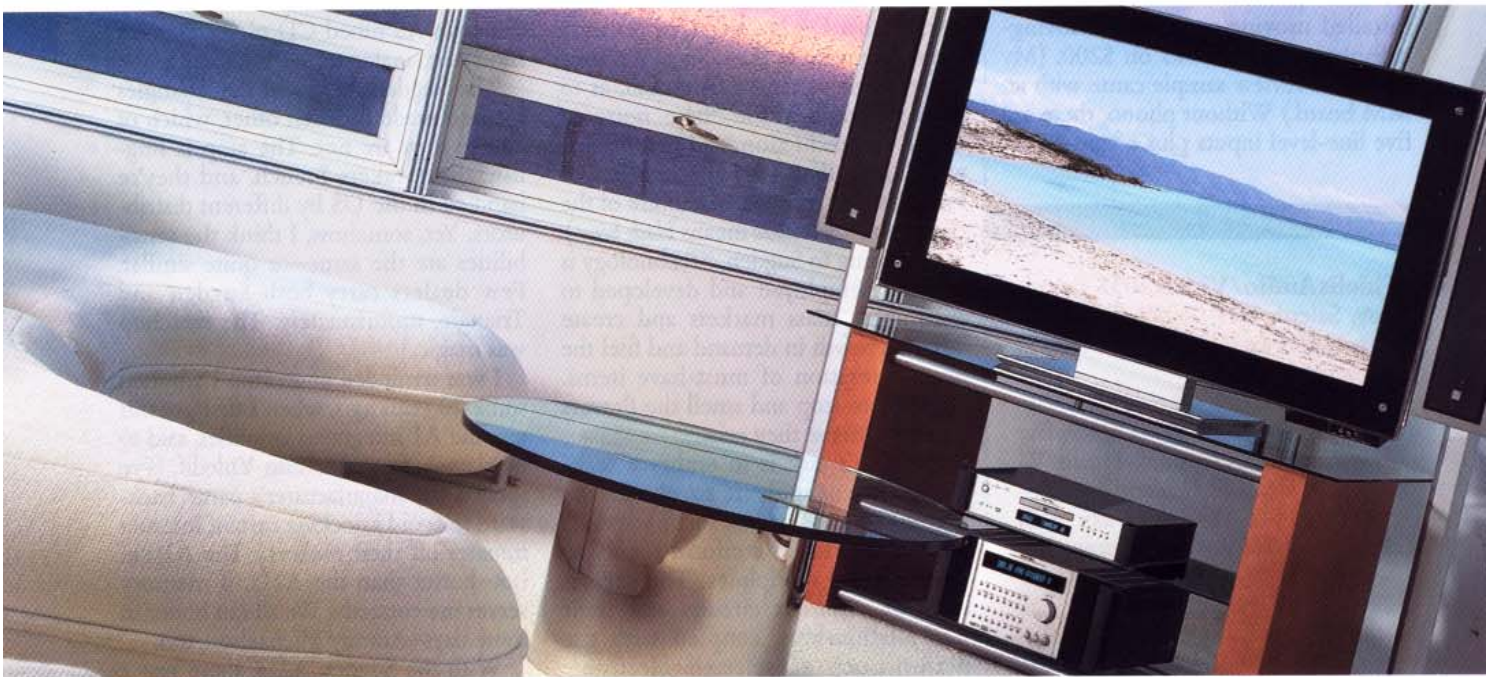
The Sugden A21a has a way of making most other solid-state amps sound a wee bit sterile. Dry. Harmonically threadbare. Want a great integrated amplifier for your parents? This is it. My friend Marc is considering one for his son, who is finishing up his cello studies at the Eastman School of Music.

You might consider matching the Sugden to a pair of Triangle speakers. I could assemble a real

"dream system" for as little as \$4000: Triangle Heliade speakers, perhaps, for a little over \$1000; a suitable CD player, or a DAC. Bada bing, bada boom, as they say over in Bay Ridge.

Harbeth Super HL5 loudspeaker

Harbeth is located in the south of Eng-



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SAM'S SPACE

land, so they and Sugden are not neighbors. The two firms are on friendly terms, though, and share much in common.

Harbeth is not so old as Sugden—but in some ways the tradition goes back even further. The company was founded in 1977 by Dudley Harwood, ex of the BBC's Loudspeaker Research Department, and his wife, Beth. The launch product, back then, was called, simply, the HL monitor. I considered buying one, but I already had Spendor BC1s. The HL went through several versions: Mk.2, Mk.3, etc.

In its fifth incarnation, the HL became the HL5, introduced in 1988. There was a change a few years later when the Harbeth-made Radial driver was substituted for the original Audax polypropylene bass/midrange driver; this was the HL5ES. Finally, there was an "upgrade twist," in Alan Shaw's words, a few more years later with the addition of the supertweeter. (Alan Shaw bought Harbeth from the Harwoods in the 1980s.) This is today's Super HL5.

"Dad, what are you doing with the review pair?" inquired my son, David, over Thanksgiving.

"Packing them up, sending them back, I guess. Want to help?"

"Yes—on condition that I buy them," David declared, decisively.

"Good choice!" I exclaimed.

My son does not usually buy Dad's review gear. He last bought a pair of speakers 15 years ago. Something about the Harbeths hit home. Literally.

"Yes, the Harbeths," he said. "These speakers. I want these, this pair."

My son is now 38, so perhaps this represents a long-awaited (by me) maturing of his oft-wayward musical tastes—Lounge Lizards and the like. He and his wife, Julie, spend much more time now at Carnegie Hall and Lincoln Center. Not long ago they went to Iridium to hear Les Paul. There's always hope your kids will turn out right. I'm talking musically, now.

"The Harbeths sound so natural," David said.

"I'm not wild about the shape of the cabinets," said my wife, Marina.

Killjoy.

The Super HL5s' beautifully finished cabinets are foursquare—*forthright*, one might correct. Each speaker measures 24.9" high by 12.6" wide by 11.7" deep

and is meant to be placed on a 12"-16" stand, which runs counter to the current fashion of building loudspeakers down to the ground—*ie*, to make floorstanders. Even Harbeth and Spendor seem to be accommodating contemporary fashion with their new floorstanders. Yet traditional speakers remain in both manufacturers' lines.

"This is the classic two-cubic-foot BBC box," I said, putting on my expert's hat. Marina and Julie hadn't a clue what I meant, but David did. With our black-and-white TV locked in the closet—and such miserable reception the kids didn't want to turn it on anyway—David and his sister, Amy, had spent their childhood evenings with the Spendor BC1s in our living room.

"Yeah, Dad, the sound. It's real."

I phoned the Harbeth importer, Walter Swanbon, of Fidelis AV.

"Sorry, Walter. Didn't want to disturb your holiday, but the speakers are gone. My son heard them and took them. He had a rented SUV, so it was an opportune time."

The Harbeth Super HL5 is available in your choice of two light standard finishes: eucalyptus and cherry. Real wood



veneer, of course. Go for the eucalyptus. The grain is beautiful and the wood should darken naturally over time. The price is \$3995/pair.

Add \$250–\$400 for the bespoke stands made by Skylan Stands, of Canada. Fine stands these, made by a genial Irishman, Noel Nolan. The tops and bases are made of MDF (medium-density fiberboard) and the columns are made of polymer. Those materials ring less than metal. The stands can be filled with sand or lead shot. Check them out at skylanstands.com. Not just for Harbeths.

Harbeth gives the nominal impedance of the Super HL5 as 8 ohms, the sensitivity as 86dB/W/m; they recommend 25–150W of amplifier power. We're not talking about some American-made monstrosity whose impedance dips to 2 ohms or less. This is a proper Beeb-inspired design that's possible to drive without having to buy a grotesque American hyper-powered amp. (I do have to give John Atkinson something to delete. Marina and other Russian speakers will get the joke.)

The three-way Super HL5 is actually more of a classic two-way in that a single bass/midrange driver handles most of the music. Harbeth's Radial 7.8" bass/mid driver, made in-house, is at the heart of this speaker and the Harbeth sound. The cone consists of injection-molded polymer with a glass microsphere fill. It's terminated by a nitrile rubber surround. The driver is proprietary; only Harbeth has it.

Harbeth doesn't specify, but the Radial driver crosses over to a 1" aluminum-dome SEAS tweeter at around 3.5kHz. The tweeter, in turn, gives way to a 0.8" Audax titanium-dome supertweeter at around 15kHz.

If the glory of the Super HL5 is its neutral midrange, the treble is exceptionally well presented—extended, open, and sweet. What happens where you can't hear might affect what happens where you can. This is part of the appeal of CD upsampling—the magic bullet. Ask your dog or cat.

The Super HL5 is not cheap, but the product hasn't been cheapened. The construction is labor-intensive—each cabinet must be carefully assembled and tuned. The thin speaker walls are part of the design. The Super HL5 is meant to resonate, much like a string instrument.

When I consider that I bought my Spondor BC1s in 1972 for around

\$750, a price of \$3995 for a pair of Super HL5s seems fair, even understated. I figure inflation as being at least sixfold since 1972. That would put the HL5 at \$4500/pair. And much as I loved my Spondor BC1s at the time, Harbeth's Super HL5 is a better speaker. It sounds cleaner, handles power better, and has more air on top. It retains the midrange magic of the Spondor BC1 and, for that matter, of the original Harbeth HL.

Some observations:

The Super HL5 joys with some juice—or, as the late Lars might have said, yoys with juice. (I do miss teasing

Something else about the Super HL5. It really is a full-range speaker (please, Chief, no placing it in the "Recommended Components" category of "Limited Low-Frequency Response"). The frequency range is given as 40Hz–24kHz, ± 3 dB, in "free space." Which I suppose means don't stuff it in a corner, as some Americans do, or put its back flush with the wall, as some Brits seem fond of. Give it space to breathe and come alive.

I thought the Super HL5's bass was exceptional. David did, too: full, rich, deep, warm without being woolly. I think you'd have to be an audiophile

THE **HARBETH SUPER HL5** IS ONE OF THE FINEST SPEAKERS TO COME MY WAY.

him. I used to stalk him with a notepad, taking down each bon mot.)

I loved this speaker with Parasound's Halo JC 1 mono amps, rated at 400W each. Overkill, perhaps—but the sense of control and dynamic ease was wonderful. Of course, one should take care. A powerful amp is like a powerful car—the power is there in reserve. Remember, you're more likely to damage a loudspeaker driver with too little power than with too much.

The Super HL5 does not seem a likely candidate for use with a flea-powered single-ended-triode (SET) tube amp. A larger SET tube amp, such as the Cary 805C, might be the cat's whiskers, however.

The Super HL5 doesn't seem to need tubes to sound sweet and musical. So you might just go with solid-state and avoid tube *tsuris*. (Tube *tsuris*, or grief, usually involves power-amplifier output tubes, not small input tubes.)

For most of my listening, I used one of two integrated amplifiers: the Musical Fidelity A5 and the Lavardin IS, which the Harbeth importer is bringing in. (*Bienvenue*, Lavardin!) Much depends on room size, listening levels, etc. My son drives his newly bought Super HL5s with a rebuilt Marantz 8B—thirtysomething watts per side. I found the Sugden A21a a mite shy on power for this speaker. (It might work better in a smaller room.) But you could add the Sugden A21ap power amp—or go for the new Sugden A21 SE integrated.

idiot to want to extend—and most likely spoil—such seamless quality of sound with a subwoofer.

The Harbeth Super HL5 is one of the finest speakers to come my way. Give it a listen, lest you spend more—much more—and get far less lasting musical satisfaction. This speaker has been a classic for more than a quarter of a century, and will still be a classic 25 years hence. You'll likely never regret having bought a pair.

Funny thing. We had a visitor from Israel—originally from Russia—who has considerable musical experience. During the days he spent with us, he heard several loudspeakers. I did not show favoritism to any particular one. Eddik (that's Eddie, in Russian) took his time with listening, as you might, too. He fixed on the Harbeth.

Don't expect the Super HL5 to blow you away right away. That's not what it does. And please do not subject this speaker to some idiot audiophile "shoot-out" at your dealer, where you chase from speaker A to speaker B—an exercise almost certain to make any two speakers sound almost the same, and akin to a dog or cat chasing its tail.

To appreciate the Harbeth Super HL5, do what Eddik and my son did: sit down, relax, listen at length. No jumping up and down to change the CD. No switching back and forth between this speaker and that. Give the HL5 the respect it deserves. Just sit down for a long run, relax...listen.

Then listen some more. 