

sound advice

by Mike Quinn

Getting Real

When a sax player wants to blow hard bop, he or she will grab a fairly hard reed; but when it's time to play, say an Ibert saxophone concerto, he reaches for something softer. And when a bass player wants to pull a Jaco-like sound he'll use a round-wound string on a Fender Jazz bass, but then out comes the bull fiddle with those classy gut strings for laying the foundation of a piano trio.

Selecting the correct instrument, or the correct setup of an instrument, is what helps a musician shape the sound he or she is looking for when performing-changing reeds or strings to suit the context is how a musician squeezes those last drops of expression, detail and interpretive nuance out of any particular piece of music.

Well, the same kinds of fine-tuning can be accomplished with audio gear. Crank up the radio in a '72 Nova on a James Brown tune or an old Blood Sweat and Tears classic - it just can't possibly sound any better, even on the most expensive system. The strong emotional content of those fantastic sides comes through loud and clear on the decidedly low-fi radio; in fact, stripping away the lows and highs seems to allow that gut-wrenching sound-lots of mid-range material in the drums and saxes-to come forward even better. But play a quiet Bill Evans piano solo, or the John Pizzarelli Trio doing something like "Tea for Tatum" on that Nova's radio and you get only a pale impression of what's going on in the music. Too many of the subtle cues that help us recreate the sensation of live music are missing when these selections lose their extreme highs and lows. (Now don't get me wrong, these are emotion-packed as well, but the nature of the recordings and the instrumentation do not translate well in low-fi.)

So let's bring this discussion indoors. Though some might argue that a good system should be able to do everything correctly, sometimes even very expensive systems have their strengths and weaknesses relative to the music at hand.

For example, some \$8,000 speakers, which can really sing, generally speaking, just don't have eight thousand dollars worth of bass. I recently read a review of a pair of speakers priced at \$30,000 that noted their inability to

plumb the lower octave or so of bass, meaning there was not much bass below 35Hz or so.

Now, my \$6,000 boxes can go down to something like 16Hz, so a \$30,000 set might be expected to get close. But the difference is that the musical information these particular, more expensive, boxes transmit is so accurate, so lifelike - so much better than my modestly priced speakers - that the slight shortcoming in the bass can be overlooked. The absence of earthshaking bass would likely not even be noticed because all the other aspects of the reproduction are so darn good.

Some of those aspects include the ability to create a holographic image of live musicians playing in a "real" space, the ability, to a surprising degree, to recreate the "sonic signature" of the recording venue, to convey some sense of the reverberant ambiance of the space, the ability for the speakers to disappear-that the sound is just there - with no reference to the speaker enclosures themselves and the ability to create a very transparent sound, which is related to the last quality to an extent but also implies a crystalline clarity and the ability to "see into" the music and past the speakers. Man, I know that sounds like a lot of mumbo jumbo, but it is very real, you just have to hear it for yourself.

Now the point of all this is some speakers do some or all of these things well, as stated earlier, but may just be a bit deficient in the bass department. And that brings us 'round, finally, to the point: if you have limited space and primarily listen to music that doesn't normally contain heavy bass information, like, say, deep, thumping bass à la Jaco, then you can get a pretty nifty, setup that will send you into audio ecstasy with your *Light As a Feather* CD, your *Thelonious Alone in San Francisco*, your *Art Pepper Meets the Rhythm Section*. Trading off a little bass for exquisite realism, musicality and sheer pleasure seems like a small price indeed.

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The British have a long-standing tradition of designing highly accurate monitor speakers thanks to research conducted by the BBC-

long renowned for its quality broadcasts of classical and popular music - to engineer the most accurate studio monitor possible to help ensure their broadcasts achieve tip-top fidelity. The BBC has licensed its technology to several speaker manufacturers who continue to offer various incarnations of the classic BBC monitor to discriminating music fans around the world. *Legendary* is too gentle a word to describe the reputation these speakers have garnered over the years.

"When I first heard these speakers, I said 'Whoa,'" proclaims Casey McKee of *ne plus ultra audio* in Austin, Texas, referring to the Harbeth Monitor 30 (\$2,995). "They were so smooth and so accurate. But they aren't for everybody - they're not for listening to Rush or Pink Floyd, but they have such a smooth midrange, they are perfect for the person who listens to acoustic music. For the person who knows the sound of real instruments in a real space, like a guy playing drums with brushes in a jazz club or an oboe in a small concert hall, these speakers are hard to beat."

He is correct. They are, excuse the expression, awesome.

"Harbeth was one of the original BBC licensees," McKee continues, "and they have produced a line of loudspeakers that are very resolved and analytical and transparent, but also very rich. They don't exemplify the dichotomy the audio world has set up that claims that you can have transparent, resolved sound *or* a rich, musical speaker, but not both qualities in the same product. The Harbeth speakers put a lie to that. The Monitor 30s can anchor a hugely capable system that would be ideal for small combo jazz or classical music short of large orchestral pieces like Mahler symphonies."

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