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Getting Real

Date: July/August 2003

Written By: Mike Quinn

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



Magneplanar MG1.6



Red Rose Spirit Integrated Amplifier



Harbeth Monitor 30



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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 earth-quaking bass would likely not even be noticed because all the other aspects of the reproduction are so darn good.



Cain and Cain Abby

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 re-create 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. To that end, there are some speakers and speaker-amplifier combinations worthy of consideration.

In the past few years planar speakers have achieved wider recognition due to their implementation in home theater systems as well as appearing as compact "flat panel" speakers for computer audio systems. A few months back we discussed the Magneplanar MMG (\$550; direct purchase from Magnepan only) and its ability to faithfully reproduce the sound of a piano and human voice in a way most box-enclosed speakers can't even approach. Well, the MMG's larger sibling, the MG1.6 (\$1,725) does everything the MMG can do, but does it better. There is bass, maybe not window-rattling, but it is tight, fast and very accurate owing to the very light weight of the thin membrane the Magneplanars use in place of a paper or fiber cone. The amazing clarity of these speakers is also due to the

quick response of the membrane to demands made upon it by the music. Realistic dynamics constitute another critical attribute of these babies. Plus, the five-and-a-half-foot size of the panel offers a very large, room-filling image of the music and the ambiance of the hall. Few speakers can match the Maggies for speed, accuracy and clarity. You can be in heaven with some of Holly Cole's cutting-edge vocalizing or a bit of Marcus Roberts' in-the-tradition piano. And all spot on-you'll think the musicians are in the room with you.

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."

You might expect audio equipment designed by a jazz player to have special qualities. In the case of Mark Levinson, "special qualities" would be an understatement. His initial line, which bears his name, continues to inspire the competition with its commitment to no-holds-barred design standards that practically guarantees jaw-dropping performance. His new company, Red Rose Music, allows for a wider spectrum of equipment from affordable to mortgageable and includes speakers as well as electronics ranging from modest solid state amps to state-of-the-art tube models-his stated mission is to produce real value for the money at a variety of price points. And while his more expensive offerings are truly amazing, perhaps even more so is his new sprightly Spirit System (\$2,000) comprising a compact integrated amp, the design of which is based on his critically acclaimed Rosette amp and a pair of diminutive speakers based on the likewise acclaimed Rosebud speakers.

The speakers feature an exclusive ribbon-style tweeter (a similar idea is used for the "tweeter" of the Maggies as well), which is capable of a purity of timbre and a clarity impossible with traditional cone speakers. The five-inch woofer produces quite acceptable bass for a speaker system smaller than a breadbox. The overall effect is highly musical, very listenable and damn respectable, especially in terms of that magic word "accuracy" which, when push comes to shove, is a damn hard quality to really get right. For 2,000 bucks, you'd be hard-pressed to find a system this size that sounds so good. And you can even buy it from Amazon!

For a more esoteric approach, check out the sound of a high efficiency speaker, perhaps even a horn design, powered with a

rich, startlingly dynamic tube amp, preferably a flea-powered single-ended amp that needs to be mated with very efficient speakers because of its low wattage-sometimes these beauties can be rated as low as three watts! But the music they make is unbelievable in its spine-tingling realism. Check out the Loth-X Amaze (\$895 from Southernelectrcaudio.com), which use a classic tri-cone full-range driver (a single driver handles bass, mids and treble) and results in a very coherent sound unrivaled in most other traditional box speakers. In the traditionally designed box speaker, if the sound emanating from individual tweeters and woofers is not somehow calculated to arrive at the listener at the same time, the resulting music is smeared and confusing to the ear-that coherency thing, or lack thereof. And who wants to listen to smeared Charlie Parker?

If you are a tube-aholic, then the Amaze is something to check out because they can be driven to ear-splitting levels with only a couple of watts. But the sound is spectacular in its effortless naturalness. The simplicity of the design-no internal crossover-the electronics that route highs to tweeters and lows to woofers-allows for the efficiency and the immediacy of the sound. There is nothing to get in the way of the music. From an intimacy standpoint-getting into the expression of the musician and the accompanying nuances-the Amaze, with a quality tube amp, would be a hard system to beat. Though another suitable speaker for this type of system would be the lovely Abby by Cain & Cain, which we reported on in April. It is another single-driver speaker, but the box is unexcelled in its beauty because Cain & Cain started out as furniture makers and their love of music and great audio led it to create an interesting, and gorgeous, line of speakers.

In the near future, expect to read an extensive report on Abby and her sibs in these pages. In the meantime, know that with one of these single-driver/tube-amped systems you'll be extracting 99 percent of the magic heard during the live performance of Up For It, the fantastic (musically and sonically) new release by Keith Jarrett and his Standards Trio. Great music deserves great playback and the Abby will deliver Jarrett and crew into your living room for a rousing dose of each.

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