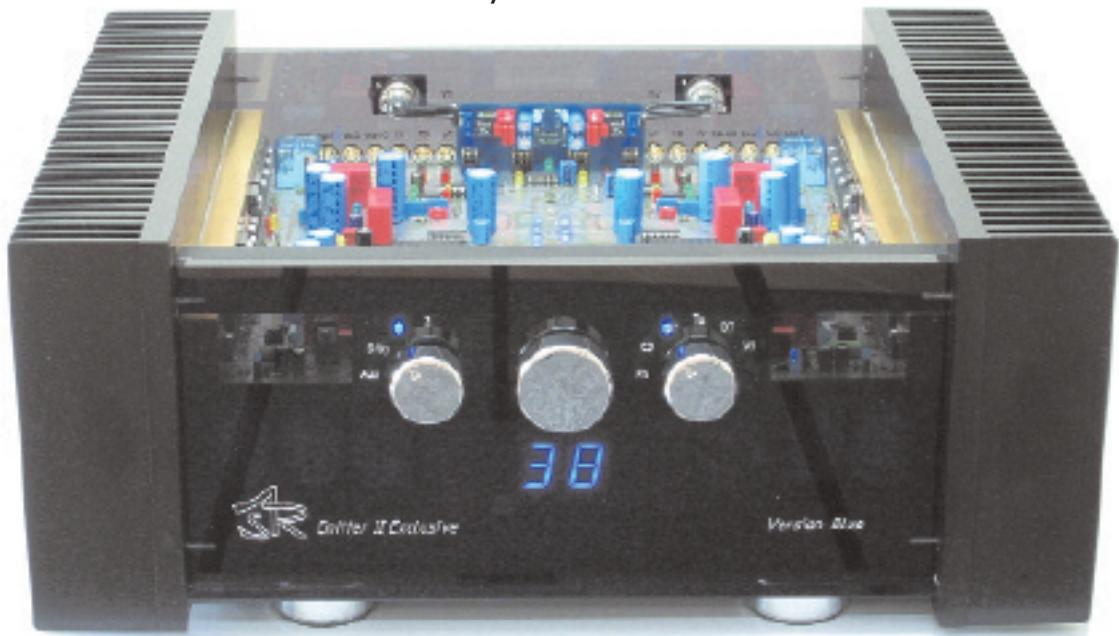


Revolution in a Black Box

The ASR Emitter II Exclusive

Harry Pearson



No component since this magazine's inception in 1973 has troubled me as much as the ASR Emitter II Exclusive, a German-made-and-designed solid-state amplifier. Not because it is a flawed product—quite the opposite. This amp is so far beyond the usual that I call it “revolutionary,” and this in a field where design breakthroughs are, at best, evolutionary. It has taken me six months to try and get its measure, and in the process I've had to upgrade the reference system to meet the ASR's mettle. The essential elements of its performance defy the usual descriptives, at least with the audio language we have at our disposal today. And that is why it is troublesome. What words do you use to describe the absence of the usual colorations indigenous to electronics—when they just aren't there?

I have been asking myself: How can I find the words to give the reader not just the sense of what this amplifier sounds like but of the experience of listening to music through it? How do you convey how something *doesn't* sound, at least in the ways to which we've grown accustomed?

There is enough sophistication in the design of the circuitry to give technofreaks the frizzies.

The Emitter's technical intricacies are ferocious and would require an entire essay unto themselves and that is not

something I am, at this point, inclined to tackle. However, one of, if not the, most critical differences lies in the amplifier's topology. With the Emitter II Exclusive you do not need an intervening linestage. It comes with a battery-powered input stage (some might liken it to a passive “preamp,” which it isn't, but if it were, it would be one with balls) so powerful that the usual criticisms we have about battery-operated devices—restricted dynamic and frequency ranges—just don't apply here. In this regard the Emitter is not dissimilar in performance characteristics to ASR's justly acclaimed battery-driven phono stage.

There is enough sophistication in the design of the circuitry to give technofreaks the frizzies. But for now, let's start with the fact that the amplifier section, a dual-mono design on a single

chassis, is conventionally powered—if the word “conventional” isn’t being bent in describing the 20 MOSFETs that drive its output. Its innards even include an integrated circuit (IC), usually considered the *bête noire* of good sonics. There are not, and this isn’t incidental, any relays in the input stage, so it is as pure as pure can be in this regard. Our unit is rated at 280Wpc into 8 ohms, 500 into 4, and 900 into 2. In addition to its sleek-looking basic chassis, the ASR comes with two outboard power supplies as well as a separate battery-powered supply for the input stage, good for a hundred hours or so, and simple as can be to recharge.

The virtue of its input stage is that you can plug the outputs of a phonostage or CD player directly into the amp, and so the ASR’s designer, Friedrich Schäfer, calls this an integrated amplifier, but it is not integrated in any sense that this reviewer has ever thought of. It is so versatile you may, if you must, use its input section with an external (AC-powered) linestage. But why bother?

By high-end standards, its \$27,000 cost is relatively reasonable, considering that you don’t need a duded-up linestage, that its power output (and, like tube vintages of yore, this amp sounds more dynamic than its power rating would suggest) is more than sufficient, and that (given the value of today’s dollar overseas) it is imported.

Its “authority” was evident from the start. I was half-expecting a Teutonic solid-state sound. But that I didn’t get. Indeed, there was no transistorized “footprint” I could detect. No hardness, no constrictions, no electronic “glaze.” Some of my listening-panel members suggested at first that I was impressed with the Emitter in part because it did not exhibit the sonic signature of solid-state devices. But that just wasn’t so, because neither did it impart the identifying fingerprints of tubed electronics—no softness of focus nor any of the forgiv-

ing character of most tubed gear at the frequency extremes. No dynamic compression of fortissimo blockbuster passages nor any dynamic smearing, either. Nope. Over time, I became aware that there is an almost ineffable “something” about the way this amplifier refuses to interact with prerecorded signals that is unique in my listening experience. It seems as if it keeps its own counsel, refusing to add or subtract anything when it sees an analog or digital source, thus allowing the two very different encoding processes to speak more purely, each with its own individual voicing.

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Before my sessions with this amp, I was only half-conscious of all the ways in which digital recordings interact, to their detriment, with the sound of solid-state, and only a little more so of some of the more esoteric ways analog recordings and tubed electronics combine to produce (an oft too) lush and forgiving synergies—those not inconsonant with what the ear hears as natural.

I found the ASR’s performance so bewitching, authoritative, and just plain dazzling, that I invited other trained ears in for an audition and asked several of them to write their unvarnished observations and impressions of the amplifier. I assembled this impromptu listening panel to confirm (or not) my enthusiasm, and their thoughts and reactions (somewhat edited and not all of them used) accompany this article, and not always in ways I expected. I certainly didn’t need anyone else’s opinion to confirm mine about the singularity of

this product, but it is a comfort to have some backup when you begin throwing around the word “revolutionary.”

By a fluke of circumstances, the listening sessions with the ASR began with digital sources. The road to analog was fraught with difficulties that arose elsewhere in the system.

Analog aside for the moment, the initial setup was relatively crude compared with what we would be able to achieve as we upgraded the system to meet the amp’s sonic potential. As it was to turn out, the ASR provided so much resolution, and without any of the annoying anomalies we’ve come to associate with the so-called *high-definition* electronics, that we were able to radically improve upon the overall sound of the Sea Cliff reference. Indeed, each new component we introduced into the chain immediately and definitively exposed individual differences, for the better, and sometimes for the worse.

The speakers were the Alón Exotica Grand References, which were to go through several iterations (not to mention a name change to Nola, Alón backwards); most of the basic wiring was Nordost, and much of that Valhalla. This too would go through extensive modifications. And we started out using the two-piece Lector CD player, the CDP-7T. After some experimentation, we found the Hurricane tubed monoblocks from Antique Sound Labs the best match for driving the Exotica woofer towers and providing continuity with the ASR, whose “character” they match. This was the way we began the listening.¹

Back to the digits. One of the great astonishments, at first, to every person who auditioned the system (including yours truly), was the way the best digital recordings sounded. Shockingly musical, given our uniformly low expectations, was the sound, even with the simplest player we used, the original Lector.²

In the last issue, I mentioned two recordings we used as reference right

1 I have simplified and compressed some of the details about this setup. Aside from the DynaVector XV-1S moving-coil cartridge and the Hurricane amps, nearly every other component we used during the half-year or so of evaluation was either upgraded or replaced.

2 The CDP-7T, by the way, must be thoroughly acoustically isolated if it is not to exhibit a kind of midbass bulge other reviewers have quickly noted. It has been our experience that inexpensive combo players as well benefit from careful setup, that is, if you want to get something approaching bottom-octave performance from them. The Lector’s importer, Victor Goldstein of Fanfare International in New York, avows that experimentation with different brands of tubes in the Lector will give, often as not, substantially better sound.

It's what we hear in unamplified sounds,
be they in a hall or from the voices of
people nearby.

from the beginning, recordings that were almost indistinguishable from excellent analog and in some respects preferable to their LP counterparts. One was Hanson's *The Composer and His Orchestra* [Mercury], the other a compilation disc with cuts from the original *Winds in Hi-Fi* album, most spectacularly those from Percy Grainger's *Lincolnshire Posy*, notably "The Lost Lady Found." (Later on, we came across the superior JVC XRCD transfers, done in L.A., not in Japan, of London/Decca recordings of Mehta's classic take on Holst's *The Planets*, particularly "Saturn" and "Uranus," and the Ricci/Gamba hi-fi frolic through Sarasate's *Carmen Fantasie*, a set of tran-

scriptions for violin and orchestra.)

There was none of the strain almost always evident on high-level fortissimos, none of the glass and grain, and none of the high-frequency edginess or stress one expects. We always had a sense of power in reserve, even at those very moments that before on these discs had sonically undone the sense of realism that digital was supposed to afford. Not only was there a top octave, but also a heretofore unrevealed airiness and often delicacy way up yonder. Most striking was an immediacy to the sound that was more analog-like than digital. It was, from the best CDs, a revelation. None of us had, I think, suspected that the 16/44

system had this kind of potential.

The insertion of better-sounding CD players into the system—the four-piece Lector digi-drive setup, the Stibbert player from Bluenote, and, to top them all, the \$40,000 super-player, the Jadis JD-1 Mk II (available, along with the company's tubed electronics, in North America)—led to a much more spectacular naturalness (I hope this isn't an oxymoron). The Bluenote and the Jadis, in particular, did not exhibit the darkness of the Lectors; the Blue Note was on the yang side, with the kind of lightness we've encountered with the Edge electronics, while the Jadis' inherent "character" was reminiscent of the best tubed units, say, Audio Research during Wm. Z. Johnson's design heyday there. The Jadis, in particular, rendered a spectacular width of macrodynamics. As the quality of CD player increased (and none we used were less than inherently musical, something we could not have said

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about pre-Burmester designs), we got significantly better resolution of hall ambience. Actually, the amount of hall ambience on these records proved illuminating to more than one panel member, including this writer, who had always supposed that digital vitiated the ambient signature of a recording site. On the Hanson CD, you can clearly tell that Hanson has recorded his comments in an empty hall, and the better the player, heard through the ASR, the more ambience retrieved. You can even hear the walls behind Hanson. When the instrumental excerpts are played, you hear the sound bounce off the opposite and back walls; it is the clarity of this that is the revelation.

Remember that this transfer was overseen by the one and only Wilma Cozart Fine, a key player on the Mercury team and possessor of some of the best ears I have ever come up against. And the transfer was done in 1996, well before the

important improvements in digital transfer technology. I am sorry to say that a few listeners, who did not hear the analog playback once we had it perfectly dialed in, thought the ASR made digital sound *better* than analog. In time, this would set me to thinking about the way the ASR did not (or refused to, if you want me to be poetic about it) modulate with the digital signal (on any of the players). Which is why, I think, the digital just didn't sound any more "digital" than the ASR sounded "transistorized." Once upon a time, I did speculate on the way transistors modulated noise components as if they were part of the music, as opposed to the way tubes modulated noise elements in a separate plane ("like degrees of dirt upon a windshield").

The *raison d'être* for a battery-operated input stage, of course, is the reduction of the exaggerated noise floor in the electronics. This reduction is the result of the isolation of the input stage from

the power line. If it is, as I suspect, then the audibly reduced noise floor inherent in this design pays off in allowing greater "purity" (yes, purity) to shine through from digital sources. The transistor cannot modulate with the noise, cannot treat it as part of the musical signal.

With the ASR battery-operated phonostage—even before we laid hands on the Emitter—we were able to build on this insight and reduce the noise floor in other parts of the system, e.g., the wiring setup, the isolation devices, and the turntable itself. Several of the listening-panel invitees became convinced that the merit of the sound lay not so much in the ASR amp as in the entirety of the system itself. My response to this is simple enough: Before the ASR we did not get and were not able to get this degree of realism—the ASR made the critical, even magical, difference.

Having said this much, I think I should say that the ASR Emitter is not

I think this amplifier is revolutionary because, mostly, of the things it doesn't do.

without an inherent coloration of its own. It is on the yin side of the yin/yang spectrum, by which I mean it is more darkly hued than any competing design from Edge in the solid-state field or Audio Research in tubes. It is not as dark as some of the older Madrigal/Levinson designs, but its "color," now that I think it over, is close to that of the Hurricane amps. (In the case of the darkish-sounding tube and solid-state gear, both then and now, that character came from the application of large amounts of distortion-lowering feedback.) And the Emitter can be temperamental. You have to take care in using its switches, or you'll cause it to shut down. A few minutes with a knowing dealer, getting a feel for its functions, will save you both confusion and grief once you get it home. But then, if it weren't difficult at times, it wouldn't be high end, would it?

The ASR has no difficulties in recreating soundstage width. Its performance in generating a field of depth is striking—just maybe the most realistic I've heard. Normally, even with "layered" depth and a sense of great front-to-back spaciousness, the best amps are missing something tricky to describe (using our current language) but instantly audible.

Before I get around to the differences we perceived on analog sources once we got the setup optimized, I want to discuss the changes wrought in the system itself. The ASR served as the focal point, the "enabler," if you will, that allowed us—me, Danny Gonzalez (the successor to Scot Markwell and Mike Mercer), and some of the designers themselves—to fine-tune the jizzy-wits out of the primary reference.

I have in past issues described the sound of most of the components we had on hand when the ASR first arrived, and more recently, I have tracked some of the improvements in the associated equip-

ment, while delicately sidestepping the performance of the ASR that enabled these upgrades.

Carl Marchisotto, the designer of the big Nola (née Alón) speakers, upgraded the main towers' three-way crossover unit—fancy new transformer windings—and that provided smoother integration of a system that had already demonstrated a degree of continuousness difficult to find in other major designs. He also devised better isolation for that external crossover box and ditched the wires connecting it to the speaker system in favor of Nordost wires, and this led to an improvement in clarity and low-level resolution.

Harry Weisfeld upgraded his modestly (for high end) priced Scoutmaster turntable in several respects, which we have already detailed. It is now a Super Scoutmaster Plus, and there are still improvements to come. The most audible mods were his installation of Nordost wiring in the turntable and arm, as well as his inclusion of the HRX motor assembly to drive the table. The noise floor was further lowered and the Nordost led to far greater clarity, like unto Salome removing a veil or two.

While we flirted with several cartridges, most notably the Benz Ebony LP, which was much to our liking for its sheer musicality, we chose to stick with the Dynavector XV-1S, which is the first five-star cartridge I have evaluated. Though the importer would rather I didn't, I have to say that, in our experiments, the XV-1S had to be tracked at higher-than-recommended forces. We worked with both 2.7 and 2.9, each provided a degree of life and tracking stability simply not present at 2.1 grams. Since we had a second sample of this cartridge, we were able to do some A/B work, especially useful when the Kuzma straight-line air-bearing arm and table arrived as a challenge to the VPI. More on this another day. Not all was happy times in the analog-playback games.

Clearaudio's "Everest" system (so named because it rises to waist-high levels from the floor) struck me, with all cartridges we used with its two modified Souther straight-line arms—perfect nightmares to set up and keep tuned—as being oddly heavy in the bottom octave or so. In this regard, it reminded me, at a somewhat more leaden level, of a similar rise in the Miyabi Lab 45 cartridge that we did not use in these sessions.

There were more changes than I can document in this part of the essay. However, two of the more striking ones came when we made changes to the system setup that we could have done well before. One, at *HI-Fi+* editor Roy Gregory's insistence, was a two-stage revamping of the Nordost speaker cables and interconnect installation. (Before, it was rather like the vines in a Tarzan movie, and that spells added noise and cancellation effects.) The second stage came when we installed the Nordost Thor AC distribution device (itself rendering the system another step forward sonically). The second modification, at Classic Records' Mike Hobson's urging, was the removal of a slew of components we had stashed away in Music Room 3, which effectively increased the size of the room and reduced some unwanted diffraction effects. (These are changes we knew we would have to make but had put on hold while we ironed out more pressing set-up tangles.) And, lest we forget, there was the aforementioned upward evolution in the quality of CD playback gear to the remarkable Jadis JD-1Mk II, a tubed-based deck and decoder that does for digital playback what a massive tube amp, like the Audio Research 600-watter, does for inefficient multi-speaker systems.

I have not, as many of you will observe, tried to describe the sonic effects of each of the improvements we made. Each effect, though, was immediately audible and worked to the advantage of the music's reproduction. There were, however, two consistent ones. First, each change brought about a lowering of the noise floor, which could be heard in the way that low-level details, normally buried in the muck—bass sub-

harmonics for instance—came to life, or to audibility. You could hear more of music's subtle cues, the things that lend a "life" to reproduced sound, not the least of which was an enhancement of the microdynamic contrasts that give unamplified music its "kick." And, second, the changes increased the sense of transparency of the entire sound-stage/space. Now, I, for one, had never associated transparency with the kind of velvet-colored "character" or signature of the ASR, but there it was. We found that we could "see" more deeply into the soundfield. To summarize, with a kind of believe-it-or-not assertion, each improvement in other parts of the system was immediately audible as greater "clarity," with even less of an artificial reef between the listener and the sound of the music—the window on the soundfield just kept getting cleaner (if you are of the more vivid disposition, you may say the effect was like that of Salome doing a strip-tease).

nward to analog! The first problem we encountered came when the ASR was newly installed in Music Room 3 and designer Friedrich Schäfer himself came to check out the sound. He decided to update the phonostage on the spot, rather than send in an entirely new unit, a decision that threw the evaluation process into limbo. The amalgamation of new parts and old ones was not a happy marriage, and the sound from the so-called "improved" unit was hard, bright—it had all the characteristics we have come to know and despise from solid-state sound. Now this wasn't the way the original Basis battery unit sounded (see review, Issue 151, p. 106). Schäfer decided, after giving it some thought, that we'd best hear a completely new production unit. And so it arrived. We let it burn in for ages, but not with much improvement in the sound over the hybrid unit. Finally, after what seemed like forever, a technical

change to the circuitry that Gonzalez could effect—lowering the unit's drive voltage—put us on the track to solving its problems. (The current production units incorporate this change.) The improvements in the sound were most notable: greater high-end extension—a lowered distortion that led to increased purity on transients and increased resolution of quite high overtones. More remarkable to these ears, used to the somewhat softer bass of the Nola woofer towers (four 12-inch units, ported, per side), was the now-articulated and tensile strength of the bottom fundamentals. And finally, there was a degree of integration in the Exotica system that we had despaired, well, not quite despaired, of course, of eliciting from the design.

But that was nothing compared with what the ASR gear, and the system itself, could elicit from information-rich analog sources, both from the standing references of the LP Super Disc list and from the new Quiex, 200-gram pressings from Classic Records.³

One overlooked recording that survived the 1985 fire was the Benjamin Britten-led performance of his ballet, *The Prince of the Pagodas*, on the budget-priced Decca Ace of Diamonds label, a two-disc set out of print but not impossible to find through the specialty record hunters, and sometimes even on eBay. It is as good a recording as Decca, at its very best, ever made. And played back on what was now a kind of Super System, it has sonically (and musically, too) floored everyone who has heard it. Classic Records has improved on the originals with its nine-disc 45rpm transfer of *The Royal Ballet*, which sounds so much better than the original that you might think it an alternately-miked take of the Ansermet-led ballet excerpts. Ditto for Classic and its four-disc 45rpm transfer of David Crosby's *If I Could Only Remember My Name*, which is, in every respect, better than the superb original; try "Traction in the Rain" if you want to hear why the ribbon tweeters in the Nola speaker are at the state of the art. And if you want a cold chill or two.

We went back into older recordings. Some (notably, Kraftwerk's *Autobahn*) didn't hold up under the magnifying glass of the ASR-based system; others, like Art Garfunkel's "Breakaway" and the eponymous *America* album on Warner, were newly revealed as sonic masterworks, and I say this well aware that they were always head and shoulders above other releases of their time. It's just that now you can hear all sorts of details, lines, spatial cues, ambiances real and artificial that before were lost in the gunk.

It is easy to get lost in the details of the specific recordings and it is a temptation to describe all the aspects of these great recordings that once were buried and now stand out clear and, so to speak, in the open. But there is more to it than that with the ASR in the reference.

In the best recordings of yesterday, with the best systems, we could often achieve moments of reality, moments when a sound or sounds seemed to be "there" in the room. These were occasional and always impressive, seeming to be almost prescient of days to come when we might exact more reality, more living presence from the music we love.

With the ASR, things do not sound real. But, and this is an important point, and the thing that makes it so hard to describe the sound of the "amp" and how it performs in a great system: The sound is less unreal, less artificial, less electronic; there are more of those moments when you might well be fooled into thinking you are, indeed, in the living presence of a performer. In other words, there are more "real"-sounding moments.

Such a thing happens on one of the simplest of recordings, that of Bill Henderson, accompanied by piano and bells, singing in a small L.A. nightclub. The song is an exquisitely and heartfelt delivery of Stephen Sondheim's "Send in the Clowns," and Classic Records has made it available on a single LP, one side cut at 33, the other at 45rpm. It's from an album of no particular sonic distinction otherwise, but it was originally analog. Even on the CD where most of us

³ Obviously I have to keep this essay/evaluation to a reasonable size, so many of the recordings and the things I have discovered will have to wait until HP's Workshop in the next issue.

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first heard it, the sound is remarkable. But on disc, on this disc, with the lights down low, and late at night, you are transported into the small room of the club itself—your room has disappeared, even its boundaries. (With the demonstration-quality CDs, we never get this effect of the listening-room boundaries being subsumed by those of the recording site.) The illusion of Henderson, there before you, this great blues singer, is as uncanny an experience as I've had in audio. You forget to listen to the sound, as I have many another time during the extended evaluation (and not a good thing for taking notes), and instead get pulled into the music. There has, in the past, always been a tripartite separation between me, the system, and the music itself. Now, some of that, maybe much of it, has dissolved and the listening process becomes a more intimate, more involving experience. The Henderson disc is not flawless—he gets too close to

the mike at one point, and with the greater clarity, you can hear extraneous nightclub sounds much more clearly (clinking glasses, a whispered word or two). Oddly, as the system has grown more transparent, those very extraneous noises increase the you-are-there experience. Henderson's interpretation is so deeply felt it will make you hold your breath and may make you weep, such is his impeccable phrasing and timing (even down to his deliberate bending of time with the phrase "losing my timing this late in my career").

There is a quality the ASR suggests on some of the best digital recordings that becomes dominant on the best analog. We might describe that as the sound of the back wave, or better yet, that of a 360-degree radiating pattern from individual images within the two-channel field. I am most definitely not talking about a "surround"-like effect in the listening room. I am talking about being

able to hear the sound emanating in all directions (including from the back of the singer or instrument or whatnot).

Imagine a singer before you, and imagine that you can hear, as you will with the best gear and recordings, the sound of his/her chest tones, and the waves in the air generating from the voice itself. Now imagine an amplifier that can let you hear not just these waves, but the separate and distinct pocket of air surrounding the singer her (him, its) self (these are not, not the same things). And if you want to carry this further, you can hear the same phenomenon of pockets of air surrounding ensembles and even players within the ensemble. It's what we hear, but are seldom conscious of, in unamplified sounds, be they in a hall or from the voices of people nearby. So instead of a portrait of a three-dimensional space, one we've been able to achieve in modern component design, we can now dis-

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solve some of the artifice that separates the sounds from true continuousness. And what, you ask, is this so-called artifice? I say it is noise. Artifacts of noise. Added electronic noise.

The crux of the matter is this: We have grown so accustomed to a kind of electronically reproduced sound, one we can instantly divine as not real, that there is the shock of the “new” when something comes along that robs us of the anchors of our expectations. There is just less in the way of our getting into the music—our imaginations don’t have to work so hard to convince us that we are enjoying “music.” Because I love music so, my encounters with the amp in this system have been exhilarating; nev-

ertheless, if you haven’t been sitting there in the listening room, you can’t know the effect it will have on you. You won’t have heard anything quite like it. I hadn’t.

I think this amplifier is revolutionary because, mostly, of the things it doesn’t do, and because of the see-into-and-through transparency that results from its dramatically lowered noise floor (which allowed us to make similar reductions in much of the rest of the audio chain). It has other distinctive attributes, including a sense of “ease” on everything you can throw at it, and maybe to a degree I’ve never heard from any solid-state product before. It also packs a genuine wallop of those big bass notes that allows you to feel, for example, how tight the skin of a drum is. In other words, it has all the best attributes of the most serious state-of-

the-art amplifier contenders.

It is the second component from which I see a revolution springing. The seeds are here for a sea change in conventional electronics design. The other was the Infinity/Magnepan QRS/1-D, a hybrid marriage of two ribbon/quasi-ribbon systems that allowed, for the first time, a realistic and believable recreation of soundstage width and depth. (I can’t say I realized its significance at the time, only later.) Speakers that followed in the path of the QRS/1-D eliminated the diffraction effects that prevented a soundstage from developing, and gave an entirely new meaning to the word “imaging.”⁴

I can’t imagine that the ASR will remain a unique hybrid for long. Other designers of “statement” amplifiers will surely find a way to create a good bat-

⁴ To be fair, the original Dahlquist DQ-10 had a not-dissimilar prophetic effect. Jon Dahlquist eliminated the box-type baffles around all of the speaker drivers, except for the woofer, which was enclosed in a box, and thus freed the speaker from an inherent boxiness. The hybrid QRS system was basically dipolar, from top to bottom, and thus entirely eliminated the box and its sound.

tery-operated input stage with their amplifiers, tubed or otherwise. And who knows where that will lead? In time, perhaps inevitably, to a fully integrated system? The door to the future opens.

The journey is not over. In another essay, soon to come, I shall evaluate the ASR Emitter II Exclusive Version 2005 (it's now called the Exclusive), which, to my genuine surprise, went the one reviewed here several steps better. Also I have not subjected the amp to other speaker systems to see what happens with less than "statement" type designs. Also, we now have the capability of using another ASR on the Grand Reference, making the sound full range; obviously, I am curious to see whether the difference is revelatory or just adds to the coherency. Also, the Emitter provides, a bit further down the road, the ideal device for a/b-ing the linestages we recently reviewed and those we have on hand. I did not discuss our reactions to the absence of an external linestage in the chain; but I will then.

Listening Panel Commentaries

Roy Gregory, *Hi-Fi+* There Are Three Steps To Heaven... Or, Two Reviewers Divided by a Common Language

It's easy to underestimate the importance and semantic niceties of the words that make up the raw material of audio commentary, and never more so than when one's grappling with new experiences beyond familiar boundaries. HP has been talking "continuousness" for a few years now, without my really getting hold of the concept or its importance. Not only do I not much care for the word itself, which has a spiky, arhythmic awkwardness that is completely at odds with its sense, but I've had my own concerns and emerging phenomena to try and explain. Yet even when discussing broadly similar experiences with the same product, linguistic nuance can inhibit understanding to

such an extent that you fail to join the dots that lead ultimately to a higher understanding. Well that's my excuse anyway, and I'm sticking to it.

Here we were, throwing thoughts and theories backward and forward without my ever grasping that "continuousness" was the overarching glue that bound my separate strands into a coherent whole, the "new place" I was trying to define. There again, I don't have unfettered access to the Sea Cliff microscope—or the \$120,000 speakers hanging on the end of it.

For me, it started with Tom Evans' The Groove phonostage. Or to be more precise, with what The Groove did to the Argenta/Yepes Rodrigo Guitar Concerto. The brilliance and physicality of the playing left me groping for words to describe a previously unsuspected quality and level of reproduction. I sketched it in terms of access to the performance; of microdynamic tracking and

noise floor; of the placement and spacing of notes. And as with all new discoveries, further products added to and brought shape to the notion I was seeking. The Lyra Titan, the Connoisseur 4.0 line and phonostages, the Avalon Acoustics Eidolon Diamond, Conrad-Johnson's ACT-2, and the Zanden CD replay system all added grist to the mill and phrases to the circling spiral of thoughts that I was struggling to focus. There was the concept of the "energy budget" and the resolution of both the magnitude and nature of each parcel of reproduced musical energy. There was the independence of the individual strands within the music, yet the connectivity betwixt and between the notes within those lines. Then there was the extension of that into duration—the length of the notes as well as the spaces between the strands and the notes themselves. Each brought a facet of what I was reaching for; none encapsulated it

completely or expressed its totality adequately. But then nor did the systems to which I was listening.

It's been a long and frustratingly faint trail to follow. What I only fleetingly perceived was the shadow of a fellow traveler. Well, at last we've met and suddenly all, as they say, has become clear. The source of the sudden illumination? None other than the latest incarnation of HP's reference system. The event? Revisiting the Rodrigo.

**Randy Tomlinson, contributor,
The Perfect Vision
The System As a Whole Was
Responsible For Magic...**

I got a special invitation to meet John Cooledge, who helped HP found TAS many years ago, over at HP's house for a listening session of his new Reference System. The system was excellent with CD, but never really came into its own until the vinyl came out. Overall, the

sound was a bit tipped up on the low end (from "measured" flat response—measured by my ear that's been "calibrated" over and over with RTA analysis of systems), but that caused it to sound full as "the absolute sound" of a symphony orchestra from an audience perspective rather than a microphone perspective. Room acoustics were outstanding (even though there was very little actual "treatment") and helped the system achieve the best mid-bass power, fullness, and *definition* I've yet heard in 45 years or so of seeking the holy grail of audio.

HP pulled out an old LP of Lionel Richie (one I'd used dozens of times to EQ large night-club sound systems I built back in the 1980s) and totally blew me away. While the treble was excellent (maybe not quite like the Magneplanar ribbons, but still very good) and upper midrange was very neutral or a touch recessed (in a good way),

it was the mid- to upper-bass region that made this system stand out. Wilson (and Nudell, too, among others) has been trying to get this “big” sound for years with his monster speakers and has (in my opinion) never succeeded without various undesirable colorations and listener fatigue at high levels. HP’s system achieves this in a startling way.

In hundreds and hundreds of demos at shows, dealers, and individual homes over the years, no high-end system I’ve heard has ever had the capability to sound like this in the mid to upper bass. What this (fullness in the bass) did was allow high sound levels and incredible definition through the mids and treble without a hint of “ear pinching” shrillness. That’s been done before, but never with the clarity and definition HP’s system has throughout the bass—and with “cheap” tube amps driving the bass! Though I

didn’t have a collection of my own records to play, I didn’t hear a single undesirable trait with the music we played over several hours. Full bass, for sure, but audiophiles seem to willingly forgive that “sin” if it doesn’t muddy up the rest of the spectrum (and it didn’t).

The more I listened, the more sure I was that the system as a whole was responsible for this magical sound. The speakers and room, of course, were primary. Few speakers (if any) at any price have the capability to sound like this in the bass (regardless of what’s driving them) and few (if any) other line sources with multiple drivers that I’ve heard have done their job without some sort of annoying coloration. Still, the “magic” extended to amplifiers, those hideously expensive Nordost cables, and of course, the analog front end. Any part done differently could

have stripped away some of that magic. It was an incredibly synergistic system.

I came home and was more dissatisfied than ever with my Magneplanar 3.6s, which have a big suck out (due both to speaker and room acoustics) right where HP’s system bloomed. Listener fatigue made me lose interest after about an hour, in spite of the excellent overall sound I’m getting from 300Hz up. There’s a lot to be said about the importance of clean mid and upper bass to balancing out a high-definition system, and it’s something totally beyond the capabilities of any subwoofer.

Atul Kanagat, TAS Cutting Edge Advisor

Take three pillars of audiophile doctrine, i.e. separates are better sounding than integrated amplifiers, monoblocks are superior in resolution of soundstage reproduction than stereo amps, and tubes

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sound different, and mostly better, than transistors. Then turn these pillars upside down. What do you get? In my opinion, the most spectacular amplifier ever built, namely the ASR Emitter 2 Exclusive.

Yes, this is an integrated, stereo transistor amp that, at least when paired with the Nola Exotica Grand References via Nordost Valhalla cables, reproduces music with an honesty of expression that I have never experienced before in my 20-something years of audiophile pursuits. I have been a regular visitor to Sea Cliff for over two years and have witnessed and enjoyed the incremental changes to HP's system. There was nothing incremental, however, about the Emitter's impact on the sound of an already spectacular-sounding system. So moved was I when I first heard it, I told Harry that I felt the way I did the first time I entered the Sistine Chapel—in almost religious awe.

So what is all the fuss about? The amp played through the Nolas recreated the soundstage in a mesmerizing way. While many amps are able to create height and width as accurately as the ASR, the depth of the soundstage it produces is truly spectacular. The rear of the stage has the same proportions as the front. Music and sound emanating from the rear of the soundstage have the same energy and tactile feel as the front. And the singer, on vocal recordings, stands out in front of the band, leaving the listener with an uncanny sense of being right there.

There is nothing “transistory” or “tubey” about the sound. Transients develop as sharply as with the best solid-state amplifiers, and decay with all the richness of overtones that tubes so musically replicate. Bass notes are perfectly controlled and flow without colorations, at ground-shaking decibels and in the

quietest of passages. And all this with Antique Sound Labs Hurricanes driving the bass towers; who knows what will happen when Harry replaces them with a second Emitter?

Will the Emitter sound the same with other fine loudspeakers or is there some strange synergy going on with the ASR/Nola/Nordost combination? I can't wait to find out. For now, I say if Heaven does not have this combo, I'm not going. 

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