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November | December 2013/2014

**A Fantastic Music System For Just Over \$2,000!
Wharfedale Speakers and Cambridge Audio Gear**

***Inside: Our Annual
Holiday Gift Guide!***



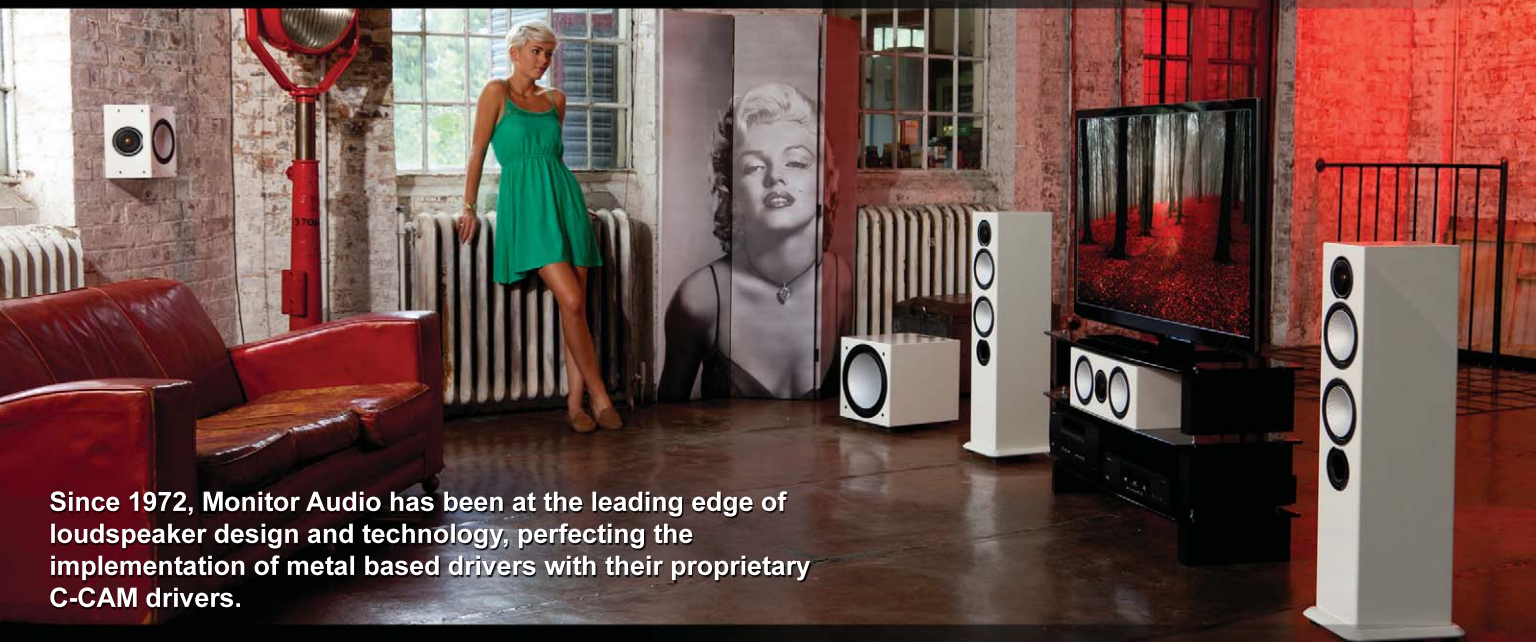
Plus Hot Product Reviews of:

Monitor Audio Silver 8 Speakers

Axiom Audio ADA 1500 Multichannel Amplifier

Sony XBR-65X900A/XBR-65X850A 65-Inch 4K Ultra HDTV

A Peek at Various Audio and Home Theatre System Tweaks



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CANADA HiFi

december/january 2013/2014

forward >>>

The holidays are a great time of the year to spend time with your family and friends. Since we spend more time indoors, they also present the perfect opportunity to listen to more music, watch movies and play video games. In this issue we decided to forgo the regular Product News section and instead entertain with you an expanded holiday gift guide. We hope that you have as much fun reading it as we did putting it together. You should find plenty of great gift ideas for that special someone on your list and for yourself as well. Many of the products you'll find on our list found their way there because we either reviewed them in a past issue or discovered them at a store, a show or a friend's house. It shouldn't be a surprise then that we would love to own many of them ourselves! I can't lie, when I get into the holiday shopping mode - I'm always very tempted to buy myself a couple of gifts from my own list. If you'd like to see even more unique gift ideas, I invite you to check out our Guydster "the guy's guide to everything" website at www.guydster.com - this site contains an amazing collection of some of the funnest, most distinct products available today.

With a little more time on your hands, the holidays are also a great time to try some performance tweaks on your audio or home theater setup. In this issue, Malcolm Gomes offers some wonderful advice on how to get the very best out of your current setup in his article "A Peek at Various Audio and Home Theatre System Tweaks". And as you've come to expect, we've also got several great product reviews for you to check out.

On behalf of the entire CANADA HiFi team, I wish you the warmest season's greetings and a Happy New Year!

Suave Kajko
Publisher / Editor in Chief

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2013 Holiday Gift Guide

Happy Holidays From Suave Kajko & George de Sa!

Under \$100

Paradigm SHIFT Earphones e2i \$99

Don't settle for the lousy sounding earphones included with your phone! The e2i earphones are designed for those who listen to music on the go and need perfect integration with their smartphone. They deliver the full audio spectrum with amazing clarity, a perfect tonal balance and deep bass performance. The built-in microphone allows you to make calls, while the Apple remote lets you control various phone and playback options. www.paradigm.com



INSTEON SwitchLinc Remote Control Dimmer \$59

Getting up off your couch to dim the lights is sooo yesterday. The SwitchLinc works together with the INSTEON Hub (\$129) to give you control of light switches and dimmers in your home with your smartphone or tablet, from anywhere in the world - including your home of course. The system can be expanded to include outlets, thermostats as well as motion, window and door, water leak and smoke sensors. www.insteon.com



Grado SR60i Headphones \$109

Okay, I admit I'm over the limit with this one – but only by 10% and these are just oh, so great! The Grado 60i is a true value/performance leader headphone from an Italian company with over 60 years of experience. With the Grado 60i, you not only get great sound but also great value – arguably one of the best headphones around, at their price. Being open-back headphones, you'll need a quiet setting to get the most from them but that's perfect for truly appreciating music listening. www.gradolabs.com



Logitech Harmony 650 Universal Remote \$79

Even if your loved one is a true couch potato you can do them some good with a little organization, which is just what they'll get with the Harmony 650 remote. Think of the convenience of controlling up to five devices with a single remote - less clutter, better ergonomics, a colour LCD screen and it's web programmable. The Logitech Harmony 650 is one of the best universal remotes you can buy for under \$100 bucks and shipping is free! www.logitech.com



Acoustic Panels Canada (APC) 48-inch Standard Panel \$79

You can spend a ton of money on audio equipment and still get poor sound if your room is not acoustically balanced. Adding a few acoustic panels can provide dramatic improvements in sound. With APC's Standard Panel (48" x 24") it's not only easy but very affordable to control unwanted echo, improve clarity, tighten bass and get better imaging. These panels are lightweight (just 5 lbs), can be easily installed without tools and come in four décor-friendly colours including black, grey, brown and white. www.acousticpanelscanada.com



Ideal-Lume Standard Light \$59 US

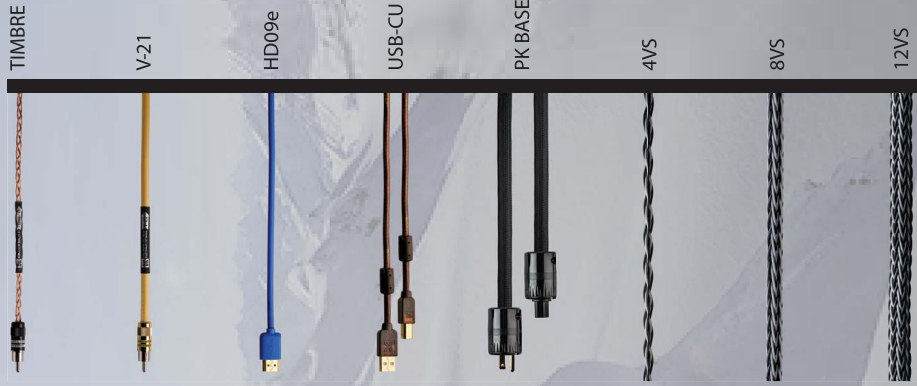
Got a movie buff on your list? The TV picture looks far more better in a dark room since the reflections of the room lighting are gone and hence they don't interfere with the picture. But watching a TV in a completely dark room causes eye strain and viewing fatigue. These problems can be solved by placing the Ideal-Lume behind the TV screen. And there's another benefit - using the right colour of white light behind the TV helps preserve correct colour perception of the picture. www.cinemaquestinc.com

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You've yet to build that dedicated listening space but you still want to get the most out of your stereo or home theater system. Kimber Kable's Base series furnishes entertainment systems with a more natural sound than any other cable system on the market, rounding out the rough edges and imbuing your system with warmth and character.

For the dedicated music fan.



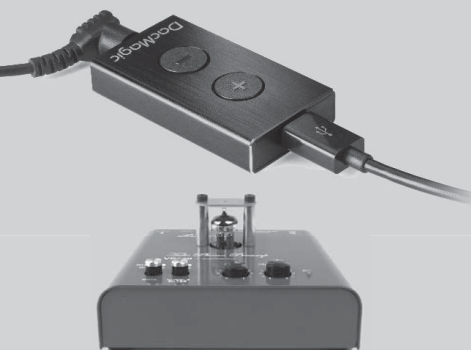
You have a quality music system in a dedicated space. Now it's time to tweak the details to make your good components sound great. Kimber Kable's Ascent series presents you with a musical experience that is clear and accurate, heightening your musical satisfaction without deflating your budget.

For the discerning audiophile.



You've done your research and purchased your key components. Now it's time to invest in the perfect cable to elevate your system from awesome to amazing. Kimber Kable's Summit series offers you the purest imaging and the most natural soundstage of any cabling system available, allowing you to hear every last detail in your music.

Gifts Under \$300



Cambridge DacMagic XS USB DAC/Headphone Amp \$199

A lot of people listen to music on their laptops and for good reasons - their digital music library combined with streaming services, internet radio and video sites give them access to an unlimited amount of music. But plugging headphones into the poor quality headphone jack of our laptop is far from ideal for anyone that cares at all about sound quality. The DacMagic XS solves this problem by taking the digital signal from the USB output of the laptop, and dramatically improves the sound quality. A perfect gift for anyone that uses a laptop for music. www.cambridgeaudio.com



Bellari VP130 Tube Phono Stage \$275

A good phono stage is as important to good sound as the turntable and the cartridge/needle. The VP130 is a perfect way to ensure that you get great sound from your vinyl playback system. With a 12AX7 vacuum tube, it provides warmth that makes music sound luscious. And the VP-130 looks as good as it sounds in its fire engine red powder coat finish. It works with most MM phono cartridges and if that isn't enough, it has an integrated headphone amplifier, mute switch, low-frequency rumble filter, and output volume controls. A killer deal! www.rolls.com



Apple iPad mini \$318+

The days of expensive high-end remotes are far gone. An Apple device like the iPad mini in combination with the right audio/video gear can give you complete control of your audio or home theatre system. It will also let you control lights, outlets and the thermostat when used with products like those from INSTEON mentioned earlier in this gift guide. Plus you'll be able to view your iPad's content on your big screen HDTV and do all the other things that tablets were designed for - like surfing the web, checking your Facebook, etc. A must have device for all home theatre and music fans! www.apple.ca



Meridian Audio Explorer USB DAC & headphone amplifier \$299

There are numerous USB DACs around but few are as compact as the Explorer from Meridian Audio. Aside from being small and easy to use, it's well built and very sophisticated looking. A simple USB connection gets you significantly better sound as the Explorer avoids the noisy soundcard you find in most computers. Plus it has an integrated headphone amplifier for personal listening with your favorite headphones. www.meridian-audio.com



Nordost Leif Red Dawn

Power Cable \$279 (1.5m length)

Our experience shows that upgrading the power cords of various audio components can offer significant gains in audio performance. Depending on your system, a well-designed power cord can offer improved musical details, a lower noise floor, a greater soundstage and deeper, more defined bass response. Which cords should you upgrade first? We recommend starting with the power bar and the amplifier - the components of your system where power delivery is most critical. Then you can move on to the preamplifier, disc players, digital players, DACs, etc. www.nordost.com



Audio Physic Sound Optimizer VCF II Component Version \$220 (set of 4)

Perhaps you're wondering just what this product is or more importantly what it does? The acronym VCF stands for vibration control feet and that's just what they do - control vibration. Use them under electronic components or even a turntable and they will isolate the device from external vibrations as well as reduce internally generated mechanical and electro-magnetic component vibrations, resulting in more accurate and natural sound. Since just three are usually enough for a typical component, you can economize when you add more sets for all your components. www.audiophysic.com

Gifts Under \$600



Samsung GALAXY Gear Smart Watch \$329

2014 is shaping up to be a year when we'll see lots of wearable technology devices. Samsung recently became the first big-name company to embrace this trend with the introduction of the GALAXY Gear smart watch. The Gear connects with GALAXY smart phones and tablets and can notify you of incoming calls, texts, emails and alerts. It delivers a preview of those messages on the screen and lets you accept or discreetly ignore them. A built-in speaker will let you make hands-free calls, while a 1.9 Megapixel camera will allow you to record photos and video. The Gear can also control music playback - and yes, let's not forget that it's also a watch. www.samsung.ca

Focal Spirit One Classic Headphones \$399

Love great sound from headphones and want something that is very comfortable to wear, stylish and offers a bit of luxury? Then look no further than the Spirit One Classic headphones. The Spirit One Classic comes from the very reputable and prestigious French loudspeaker manufacturer - Focal. It's been designed for audiophiles and music lovers - providing a well-balanced sound combined with warmth and dynamics. The Spirit One Classic's sound is especially great for home use, where it's extended even-handed bottom end, detailed mid-range and linear top end will provide an open and immersive sonic experience. www.focal.com



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HI-FI WORLD

04/2012 (UK)
Rating: 5/5 Globes



AURUM C5 Reference CD-Player

Value for Money:
Excellent
STEREO 09/2011

HI-FI WORLD 01/2012
Rating: 5/5 Globes



AURUM A5 Reference Integrated Amp

Value for Money:
Excellent
STEREO 09/2011

HI-FI WORLD 09/2011
Rating: 4/5 Globes



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More Gifts Under \$600

Kimber Kable 8TC SBAN Speaker Cable \$510 (8-foot pair)

Good cables do make a difference and this is exactly the case with the Kimber Kable 8TC. The 8TC is a uniquely braided cable made up of sixteen individual conductors for a 9-gauge thickness. It's also a bit of bling to an audio system with its attractive combination of eight clear and eight white strands. Hyper-pure copper and VariStrand conductor geometry ensure a full, accurate and holographic-like sound. One of the best buys in speaker cables around and my personal reference speaker cable (-GD-). www.kimber.com

PlayStation 4 (\$399) or Xbox One (\$499)

Got an avid gamer on your list? They'll definitely want one of these babies this holiday season! Both new gaming consoles offer impressive technical specifications to run next generation games. The new gaming titles offer higher resolution graphics, greater picture details and raise the bar for realism. Which console do you choose? They are both great gaming machines - the deciding factor should be the choice of gaming titles. What does your avid gamer prefer - Gran Turismo or Forza Motorsport? We'll probably end up picking both consoles for the CANADA HiFi head office. www.xbox.ca | www.playstation.ca

Alpha Design Labs X1 Portable Headphone Amplifier \$499

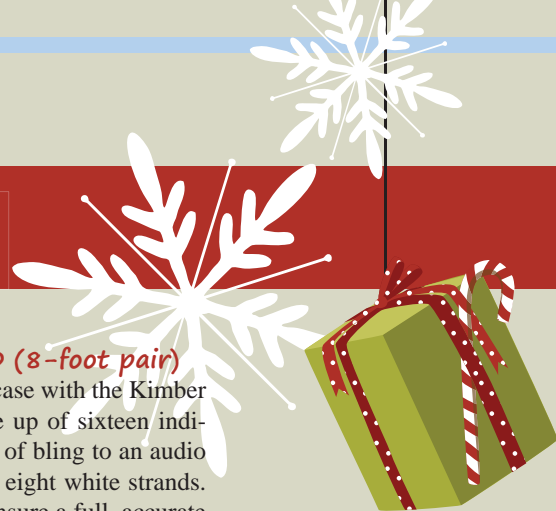
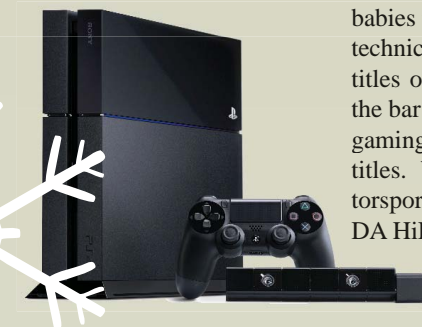
Don't short change yourself by plugging your headphones directly into the output of your smartphone/playback device. Employing the ADL X1 will allow it to grab the digital output of Apple devices and USB computer ports and produce far cleaner and more detailed sound. It offers a complete set of connections, including 1x3.5mm input, 1xUSB A input, 1xUSB mini-B input as well as 2x3.5mm outputs. Its internal battery can be recharged via a PC USB connection or a separately sold power adapter. Available in a number of funky custom colours to perfectly match the personality of that special someone on your gift list. www.adl-av.com

Monitor Audio Airstream S300 Multi-zone Wireless Speaker System \$549

If you want great sound but don't have the space then the Monitor Audio Airstream S300 will do the job. It's a curvaceous AirPlay-enabled 140W stereo speaker system that can stream music from the Internet, a computer, a smart phone or a tablet. With the latest in wireless technologies and room equalization the S300 can bring energy, detail and dynamism to your music listening experience. Hear all the music from your iOS devices or personal computer in the way it should be heard - rich, pure and clean. www.monitoraudio.ca

Serene Audio Active Speakers \$495+

Please someone on your list with both function and style this year! Serene Audio speakers come in three funky shapes/models called the Tailsman, Pebble and Paisley. The active versions come with a built-in class-AB amplifier which offers 40 watts of power, along with a subwoofer input. Designed to be paired with a computer, laptop or smartphone, they can also be used with Apple's AirPort to bring music wirelessly to any room. They offer some of the most detailed and natural sounds we've heard from powered computers speakers and their looks are hard to compete with. In fact, they sound so good, I've got a pair sitting on my computer desk (-SK-). www.sereneaudio.com



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Gifts Under \$2,000

Anthem Electronics MRX 510 AV Receiver \$1,759

Anthem makes some of the finest sounding AV receivers at price points accessible to just about all home theatre fans. That's why we've got one of its first generation receivers running one of CANADA HiFi's home theatres, along with the Paradigm Reference MillenniaOne speakers. This new model, offers the sound quality that we loved from the first generation MRX 500, but with numerous new features including remote control apps for Android and iOS devices, the new Anthem Room Correction (ARC 1M), larger number of HDMI inputs, 4K upscaling and pass-through and many other improvements. www.anthemav.com



ADL Esprit DAC and Digital Preamplifier (by Furutech) \$899

Looking for better sound from your digital music and something to drive your headphones? The ADL Esprit DAC is definitely worth serious consideration. It is not only a high-quality 24-bit/192 kHz USB/SPDIF DAC but also an ADC (analog-to-digital-converter) that can help turn your vinyl into digital music. The Esprit will perform as a preamplifier – connect it directly to powered speakers or a power amplifier as the hub of a music system. Its integrated headphone amplifier is also a high performer. Anyway you cut it, the Esprit DAC has you covered. www.adl-av.com



Paradigm SHIFT Soundtrack System \$799

There is just no room in your place for five speakers and a subwoofer to do a full out 5.1 surround sound home-theatre. Well, Paradigm Electronics has the solution for you with their SHIFT Soundtrack system. It's a 2.1-channel soundbar and wireless subwoofer combination that provides room filling, dynamic sound, all in a small package. The wireless subwoofer can even be tucked under furniture. With 2 x 25 watts from the soundbar and 100 watts from the subwoofer this system can and does punch beyond its modest price. www.paradigm.com



Focal Chorus 706 Bookshelf Speakers \$749/pair

CANADA HiFi's love for the sound of Focal speakers is undeniable, in fact my (-SK-) personal reference speaker for the last several years has been the Focal Electra 1008 Be II. Focal offers several speaker lines ranging from attractively priced models, all the way to the dreamy Grande Utopia EM flagship model. The Chorus 706 is 2-way bass-reflex bookshelf speaker that offers incredible sound performance and value. It produces a wonderfully natural sound with an expansive, well defined soundstage. Its elegant design is impossible to ignore and will surely put a big smile on that special someone this holiday season! www.focal.com



Trigon Vanguard II Phono Stage \$895

The Trigon Vanguard II is high-end audio, right from Germany. This MM / MC phono stage is extremely flexible via its externally accessible dip-switches that allow perfect matching of gain, impedance and capacitance to suit almost any phono cartridge. An external power supply allows for placement of the Vanguard II phono stage close to a turntable so that interconnects can be shorter, minimizing interference. The Trigon Vanguard II has been developed as a high-value component that will compete with phono stages that are considerably more expensive. www.trigon-audio.de

Monitor Audio Silver 2 Bookshelf Speakers \$1,099/pair (Wood Veneer)

It shouldn't be a surprise to find Monitor Audio speakers on the CANADA HiFi gift list. Our main HT is outfitted with the amazing sounding Gold GX series speakers, and they put big smiles on our faces every time we hear them. Like all of the models in the new Silver series, the Silver 2 employs tech previously introduced in the Gold and Platinum series, along with some new driver innovations. Yes, this speaker is slightly above the \$1,000 mark but it is worth stretching your gift budget for. Check out the Silver 8 review in this issue to get a better sense of this speaker's sonic character. www.monitoraudio.ca

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the guy's guide to everything



buyer guides rides gear tools style home audio&video food&drink



www.guydster.com

What Dreams Are Made Of!



Samsung 59C 55" OLED TV \$9,999 (est.)

Though this won't be available until after the holiday season (in 2014) – from what I saw at TAVES, it is definitely worth the wait. Amazing picture quality, impressive design and innovative features are what the Samsung OLED TV is all about. This television with its curved screen provides a captivating visual experience and a welcome stylish statement. It's capable of playing two video images at the same time - both viewable and audible via the included 3D glasses (2 pairs) – no more fighting over what to watch. Amazing! www.samsung.com



Raidho D1 Loudspeakers \$28,000

If I had the money – the Raidho D1 loudspeaker would be at the top of my list of audio dream gear (-GD-). The D1 produces sound that is spectacularly pure, transparent and rich. It delivers all the subtle details from the connected equipment and the source recording, while captivating the listener in musical nirvana. Using Raidho's quasi-ribbon tweeter paired to a diamond/carbonite mid/bass driver this monitor is capable of rendering state-of-the-art music reproduction and realism. Pair the D1 with Raidho's custom stands (\$3,000) for the ultimate experience. www.raidho.dk



Sony 4K Ultra HDTV XBR-65X850A \$5,699

Looking for that perfect "family" gift these holidays? Thanks to its 4K resolution and TRILUMINOS colour tech, this Dynamic Edge LED backlit TV will allow you to see picture details like never before, elevating the level of realism to new heights. Until more native 4K content comes out, the sophisticated 4K X-Reality PRO video chip will up-convert your existing HD content to 4K with impressive results. This TV should be at the top of the list for all movie buffs and families that enjoy catching a good flick together! www.sony.ca



Nordost Sort Füt \$1,499 US (for a set of 4)

Mechanical vibrations are greatly detrimental to sound performance, but don't worry Nordost has come to the rescue with its new Sort Füt. These resonance control devices are designed to improve upon the spikes included with speakers and racks. Integrating the sophisticated Sort Füt into a high-end system can result in lower distortion and an improvement in tonal and textural musical details. A must have tweak for those who desire nothing but the very best from their audio system. www.nordost.com

Thorens TD 209

Turntable \$1,499

Vinyl is alive and thriving among true music fans! This gorgeous turntable comes with a pre-installed tonearm and cartridge and shares many technical features offered by its more expensive TD 309 brother, which has won numerous awards, yet it does so at a more attractive price point. This made-in-Germany turntable is built using high quality materials and parts and offers 33-1/2 and 45 rpm record playback, with the flick of a switch. Be sure to include a couple of records as part of the gift for that special someone. www.thorens.com

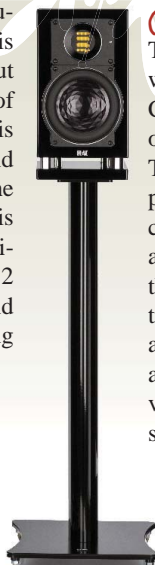


Unison Research Italy One Integrated Tube Amp \$2,495

If your loved one has a passion for music, give them the gift of tube sound this holiday season! This is a compact but very capable amp that received a lot of praise from us in a review earlier this year. It offers a rich, luscious sound with a touch of warmth that everyone loves tube amps for. Made in Italy, this amp is made of high quality materials, offers a very attractive design, 12 watts/ch of power, plenty of inputs, and best of all it is capable of transforming your listening experience. www.unisonresearch.com

ELAC Air-X System \$5,500 (2 speakers + BASE)

This system delivers wireless functionality with sublime sound. Using a trio of integrated Class A/B amplifiers, it provides 225 watts of output for an immediate and powerful punch. Thanks to an integrated DSP, sound can be precisely controlled and the system can be connected wirelessly or via balanced/unbalanced analog inputs. With two speakers and the Air-X BASE station – all wireless audio is transmitted at 24-bit/48 kHz for superb sound and up to three zones can be controlled. Available in exotic gloss black or white – this is a very convenient and truly hi-end performing system. www.elac.com





Enjoy the magic of tube sound plus the convenience of solid state design. Available from hybrid Unico designs.
Starting at \$1,995.



Unico Primo Hybrid Integrated Amplifier



Unico CDPrimo CD Player with USB output

www.unisonresearch.com

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A Peek at Various Audio and Home Theatre System Tweaks



Malcolm J. Gomes

One of the well known tendencies among dedicated music listeners is the urge to upgrade components in the quest to attain better sound quality. The conventional way of going about this is to upgrade key components like source components, amplifiers, cables and speakers. However not everyone has the coin to upgrade major components on a regular basis. Fortunately, there are other more affordable ways to squeeze better sound quality from your existing system other than upgrading major components and that is by acquiring tweaks that either help your major components perform better or by improving the acoustics of your listening room.

Tweaks have come a long way since the days when claims that painting the edges of your CD with a green marker was considered by many to be a legitimate way to improve compact disc sound quality. Over the past couple of decades, tweaks have gained in popularity quite exponentially. The positive impact of this is that it has prompted many more manufacturers to enter this arena thereby offering music listeners an ever-greater range of tweaks to choose from. On the negative side it has prompted many charlatans to also enter this growing segment of the market with offerings that amount to little more than snake oil.

In fact some of the audio tweaks being sold are so brazenly fraudulent, I can't help but be amazed at the chutzpah of the charlatans behind them. One of the more daring examples of this is an attempt to sell a jar full of pebbles of different colours, which the sellers claim, improve the sound quality by just placing the larger pebbles around your listening room and by taping the smaller pebbles to cables and other components. The claim is that the pebbles have highly symmetrical crystals that address specific resonances and which absorb RFI and EMI that pollute the audio signal.

Another equally brazen attempt to suck-er consumers are small metallic cups and sculpted objects made from exotic woods that claim to improve sound quality when placed in strategic spots around the listening room. These are sold at obscenely high prices, which I assume is part of the marketing ploy to get consumers thinking that something that costs so much has to be effective.

When looking for audio tweaks, you would be well advised to compare the option of adding tweaks to the cost of upgrading the component. For example, if you plan to add tweaks worth \$500 to your \$1,500 amplifier, you have to compare it to the option of upgrading to a \$2,000 am-

plifier and carefully evaluate the performance of the two options to see which one gives you bigger bang for your buck. This means that you need to deal with a retailer that allows you to try both options before pulling the trigger.

Another rule of thumb to be cognizant of is the difference that the tweak makes to the overall performance of your audio system and then factoring in the price of the tweak to gauge if it really does deliver good value for money.

Some tweaks are priced low enough to become impulse purchases where you feel that it is so cheap, you can take a chance on them and not have too much of buyer's remorse if they underperform or prove to be duds. You usually get dinged for tweaks of this sort at audio shows where you see fancy audio gear at obscene high five-figure prices and amidst it all you find these tweaks that do not even break the three figure barrier, which in comparison looks like chump change.

Let me give you my experience with a few tweaks that I have tried in my own system, which I feel, have had a positive effect on the sound quality and are worth the price I paid for them.

The first of these are acoustic panels and bass traps. The former is to trap the early reflections from the side walls and

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the latter is to tune the bass response of your room acoustics. Both these tweaks are made by Inity Acoustics, a Toronto based pure Canadian operation that caters to professional recording studios and consumers.

The acoustic panels measure 2 feet by 4 feet by 3.5 inches. I used two panels on each of the side walls using a mirror to determine their position. I sat in the sweet spot while a friend moved a mirror along the side wall and marked the positions where I could see the driver units of the speaker in the mirror. The panels were placed in those spots.

The bass traps measure approximately 2 feet by 4 feet with a 12.75-inch depth from the middle of the facing side to the corner. They can be mounted on top of each other and can be ordered in custom sizes to fit the ceiling height of your listening room. The panels have a sturdy wood construction, are filled with rock wool and covered in a dark brown fabric. I used two bass traps in each corner to provide floor to ceiling coverage.

When measuring the low frequency response of my listening room with my Pyle Sound Level meter, I had a stubborn dip at the 30 Hz and 70 Hz frequencies. I tried numerous methods to even these out with limited success, but installing the bass traps corrected those dips right away.

The combination of the acoustic panels and the bass traps made an easily discernable difference to the sound quality that I heard from my audio system. The sonic image solidified and gained in clarity. There was a significant reduction in the smearing of the sound and the bass became more tuneful and played deeper.

Many music listeners assume that since bass traps absorb a lot of low frequency signals, there will be a reduction in the intensity of the bass sounds that you hear. While this may well be the result in some rooms, in my room the bass received a boost because the bass traps, in absorbing some of the bass frequencies, actually reduced the amount of cancellation that hitherto occurred in the low frequencies resulting in more rather than less bass.

Given the very reasonable prices of the bass traps (\$130 each) and the acoustic panels (\$60 each), I would recommend these tweaks to anyone with a rectangular listening room that has an uneven re-

sponse from 20 Hz to 120 Hz.

The bass traps from Inity Acoustics are well built and have a very utilitarian look. If you prefer to attain more accurate bass response in your room while also giving your room a more polished and sophisticated look, albeit at a higher price, I would recommend the Super Bass Extreme (SBE) model from Vicoustics. These are made in Portugal and distributed in Canada by Charisma Audio. They have a very elegant wood front and are available in five different finishes.

Unlike the bass traps from Inity that work based only on absorption, the SBEs are designed to be Helmholtz Resonators and so are tuned to absorb frequencies from 60 Hz to 125 Hz with the maximum absorption occurring between 75 Hz and 100 Hz. The front panel has non-linear sequential cavities to achieve the right proportion of absorption and diffusion. The inside of the SBE consists of a membrane, two high-density foam layers and a micro-perforated rear panel. The advantage of this sophisticated design is that you get excellent bass control without making the listening room sound dead. The SBE units retail for around \$300 per piece and if you choose to stack them, you will need the Vicoustic stackers which sell for around \$120 each.

Both, the Inity bass traps and the Vicoustics SBE did a great job in controlling the bass response of my audio system to deliver tight, deep, visceral and very tuneful bass in my room. The latter however had an exponentially more sophisticated and elegant look and was a tad more effective in getting closer to the ideal bass response because of its ability to tune the bass to a finer degree.

The next tweaks on the agenda are cones from Vibrapod and Black Diamond Racing (BDR). First up I tried the unbelievably affordable Vibrapod Cones. These cones can support up to 25 pounds each and can be used with their ball bearing facing up or down, though I found it performed better with the former. They help reduce the amount of room and rack vibration that reaches the audio component. The ball bearing siphons energy away from the chassis and transfers it into the cone that is made out of materials that absorb the energy. With the Vibrapod cones in place under all my audio components,

I could detect a small but easily discernable increase in detail and a quieter background.

If you have a mid-fi or an entry level high-end audio system in the \$2,500 to \$7,000 price range and have a very limited budget for tweaks, you owe it to yourself to try out the Vibrapod cones which at \$8 each, have got to be one of the best bargains in all of audio.

If you would like to achieve even better performance than the Vibrapod cones, albeit at a significantly higher price, you could consider the BDR cones. The retail price on these is \$60 for a set of 3 cones. They are made from a composite of carbon fibre (which has five times the tensile strength of steel) and an aerospace grade resin and have an amazing crush point of 10,000 pounds each. These cones can be placed directly under your audio components or secured with screws which offer even better coupling to your component chassis.

BDR cones are offered in two different versions; the Mk3 cone is tailored to lend a warmer sound and stronger bottom end while the Mk4 version is designed to deliver better treble extension. The two versions can be mixed and matched to get the result that is most pleasing to you. BDR recommends that the pointed end faces the surface that has the most resonance.

My experience with these cones was that they made a bigger difference in every component that I tried them under. However, the biggest differences occurred when used under components with moving parts like CD players and turntables.

It was easy to detect a blacker background, which in turn revealed more details and greater dynamic contrast in the music. I could play the music at a much lower volume level without losing micro details and the overall sound was a lot cleaner.

Although not as cheap as the Vibrapod cones, the BDR cones are still very affordable and well worth their price. When used with components with moving parts, don't be surprised if the result is comparable to upgrading that component to a level or two higher.

Let us now move to a tweak that has many music listeners rolling their eyes in disbelief, the wall duplex AC receptacle. Most hardware stores sell these at 'dime

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a dozen' prices or to be more precise, a dollar will probably get you two or three of these. So does it make sense to switch these out for the premium receptacles that cost 100 to 1000 times more?

I was a skeptic myself so I decided to put these to the test, fully expecting to reveal that these were just snake oil. I started out with the PS Audio Power Port Classic that retails for \$50 per receptacle. Hubble builds this hospital grade receptacle to PS Audio specifications. It can handle 15 or 20 amps and has fifteen coats of polished nickel over high-purity brass to ensure more resistance to corrosion and provide a superior grip of your AC plug.

It could well be because I had such low expectations, but the difference this tweak makes, took me by surprise. The reduction of the grunge in the sound was so noticeable, at first I could not believe that it was the receptacle that made the difference so I switched my system to a generic receptacle and then back to the Power Port model and the difference was as clear as day! Colour me converted!

The next step was to try out receptacles further up the food chain in the \$100 to \$200 category. Here, I could hear further improvements but they were only marginal and so my conclusion is that beyond the \$50 price point you get into diminishing returns.

Is it worth the money? If you look at it from the point of view that even with a \$50 receptacle, you are paying around 100 times more than a generic receptacle, it does seem like a lot of coin. However if you compare it to other tweaks in the \$50 price range, you will be hard pressed to find another tweak that will give you more bang for your buck than the Power Port Classic.

Finally, I decided to check out another tweak that many music listeners scorn at, which is power distribution boxes. I have to admit that I too regarded so called premium power distribution boxes as just dressed up power bars at obscene prices. I had to admit I was wrong when I reviewed the \$300 'Testament' from Audio Sensibilities. This component made such a significant difference to the sound of my system, I had to admit that generic power bars were a major weak link in the audio chain and

so I decided to explore what was to be had further up the price ladder for this category of components.

Numerous letters from readers pointed me to the WyWires Power Broker. This unit is a totally passive power distributor with no active conditioning of the power at all and it still carries a hefty \$2,500 (with silver HC power cord) price tag, which is enough to get you a true high-end amplifier, so I wondered what so many of my readers saw in this product despite its sticker shock price. And if you think that this is expensive, let me lower the boom with the price of the upgraded version with the Gold HC power cord and 2 Bybee high current purifiers, which retails at a near cardiac arrest inducing price of \$3,900.

The first thing that struck me about the Power Broker is its incredible solid ¾-inch hardwood/maple finish that is non conductive and non magnetic and which WyWires claims, has natural resonance damping properties. The box is handcrafted by Daedalus Audio, known for their loudspeakers with beautifully crafted cabinets. The Power Broker represents wood craftsmanship at its best but, I'm not one to judge a book by its cover and so I proceeded to investigate if the value offered by the Power Broker is only skin deep.

Embedded in the box, I found very well designed receptacles that are custom made for WyWires and designed for high tensile strength for better contact pressure on the pins of the cables that are plugged into them. The wiring inside is asymmetrical Litz wire made of pure copper and wrapped in two layers of unbleached cotton enveloped in PTFE to reduce the inductance. The geometry is asymmetrical with differing signal propagation properties between the hot and neutral poles, which corrects the phase angle of the incoming AC signal.

Partly justifying the steep price is the fact that the Power Broker comes with its own ten AWG per pole (seven AWG in total) Juice HC power cord, which is hard wired to the unit. Bought separately, this cord would set you back by around \$500. Like the internal wiring, this power cord is also wrapped in unbleached cotton and housed in a PTFE tube. The receptacles are all wired independently

from each other to prevent cross interference. The main unit rests on a separate wooden base that is constructed of pressure-laminated maple and which sits on brass spikes. This base adds another layer of resonance and vibration absorption.

So let's go from brass spikes to brass tacks. Does the Power Broker contribute anything positive to the sound quality? The short answer is, well beyond what I was expecting. Through the Power Broker, the dynamic range of the music widened quite appreciably, the sonic image and soundstage snapped into sharper focus than I have hitherto heard from my reference audio system and tonally it sounded a lot closer to a live performance. Overall, the sound reproduction was significantly cleaner and more relaxed, which reduced the fatigue factor quite a bit.

The fact that it is totally passive gives the Power Broker a jump on some active power conditioners that restrict current. However it is important to note that this unit does not incorporate any form of surge protection, which is a feature that you will find even in some of the very cheap power bars. This was done intentionally because incorporating it would have restricted the delivery of AC power to your audio system.

Is the Power Broker worth \$2,500? Now that is a really difficult question to answer. Is the Bentley Mulsanne automobile worth over quarter of a million dollars? For something as subjective as this, you need to listen to the Power Broker in your system and judge for yourself. Thankfully WyWires has a 5-year warranty plus a 30-day money back guarantee, so if the Power Broker does not meet your expectations you can simply return it for a refund.

The tweaks I have reviewed here are just a fraction of the tweaks that are available in the sphere of high-end audio. What I can tell you is that once you get into the world of tweaks, it is so much fun, that it can become quite addictive. So, fair warning. Step into this world with caution but do step in, because if you don't, you are missing out on one of the great pleasures of this wonderful hobby we call high-end audio.

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**Cambridge Audio Azur 351A Integrated Amplifier, Azur 351C CD Player
& Wharfedale Diamond 10.6 Speakers**



George de Sa

There's no shortage of audio products in the marketplace today – everything from low-cost MP3 players and ear-buds, right up to amplifiers and speakers that can carry a price-tag of six figures – I kid you not. Consumers, like you and I, tend to believe that spending more will get us more – more in the way of performance, as well as, durability, styling and construction. Though this may hold true in some cases, it would be naïve to rely on this as a rule to shop by. In addition, beyond price, the complexity in pairing audio components from different manufacturers to extract more performance than the sum-of-the-parts is an art in itself. There is definitely something to be said for synergy, and coupling the right set of affordable components will often provide a better result than a mismatch of components costing several times as much. This brings me to a system that I've been putting my ears to for the last few months – a system aspiring for greater performance through the complementary pairing of high-value components. What's the system? Well, it is a combination of audio components from two well-known manufacturers –

both of which have many years of experience and are based out of England; namely, Cambridge Audio and Wharfedale. On the Cambridge Audio side we have the Azur 351A integrated amplifier and 351C compact disc player, and from Wharfedale we have their Diamond 10.6 tower loudspeakers. This system is no hodge-podge of components but rather a system recommended by the knowledgeable Canadian distributor for both brands – Plurison.

design features

Before I get into telling you about the sound of the system, let me tell you a little about the companies and the components themselves. First up, is Wharfedale, an England based loudspeaker manufacturer with a history that goes back just short of 80 years. Though the Wharf-



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Wharfedale Diamond Series has been around for over 30 years, the most recent Diamond 10 Series was introduced in 2009 and continues to be Wharfedale's best-selling loudspeaker series. The Diamond 10.6 loudspeaker (\$999/pair) sits as the second largest speaker in the Diamond 10 line. It is a floorstanding 2.5-way, bass-reflex, rear-ported design that utilizes a 6.5" Kevlar bass driver, 6.5" Kevlar mid/bass driver and a 1" soft-dome tweeter. Power handling is from 20 to 150 watts with a 6 Ohm nominal impedance, sensitivity of 88 dB/1w/1m and a frequency range of 35 Hz to 24 kHz. Average in stature, the Diamond 10.6 measures 35.4" (H) x 8.8" (W) x 11.9" (D). With this latest edition of the Diamond 10 Series, Wharfedale has incorporated a number of technological advancements to improve the overall performance of the series. The key improvements include stronger curved MDF cabinet sides, which help to reduce standing waves internally; large retention flanges to secure the drivers and improve stability; moulded diamond pattern blended SRBP cone surrounds that reduce distortion; a metal grid diffuser in front of the dome tweeter to smooth high-frequency response and improve clarity; and the use of neodymium magnets for the tweeter that sits in a cast alloy mounting plate, optimizing dispersion and driver integration. The Diamond 10 Series also comes in a larger variety of vinyl finishes, including Cool Maple, Wenge, Blackwood, Cinnamon Cherry, Winter Maple, Walnut Pearl and Rosewood Quilted. My review sample was in Blackwood, which complemented the gloss black composite front baffle and silver flange rings that encircle the drivers. Fit and finish were good and in-line, if not slightly above, competitively priced products.

Second up is Cambridge Audio, a London, England based audio product manufacturer with a history reaching right back to the late 1960's. Within Cambridge Audio's product line-up there is the Azur Series of two-channel stereo components that is divided into the 351, 651 and 851 Series. The Azur 351 Series is the entry-



level / value oriented series and benefits from trickle down technology that comes from the more advanced and more expensive Azur 651 and 851 Series. Inspecting the 351A and 351C revealed a surprisingly excellent fit and finish that could easily have them mistaken for considerably more expensive components. Their weight and the gauge of metal was the only thing that seemed to be indicative of their price point (\$599 each). The silver finish of my review samples was very attractive, though Cambridge Audio also provides them alternatively in a black finish. The volume control, the rotary selectors and buttons all provided a very positive feel and I was quite smitten by the build quality of the supplied remote control. The remote has good weight and build and was very functional – providing control over all key functions of both the integrated amplifier and CD player.

The 351A integrated amplifier pumps out 45-watts per channel (RMS) into 8 ohms and incorporates an oversized toroidal transformer. The volume control is a high-quality ALPs film type / black box and there are also fully defeatable bass and treble controls. The THD is rated below 0.15% (20 Hz – 20 kHz at 80% RMS), while the signal-to-noise ratio is 92 dB. The Azur 351A provides five analog RCA inputs plus a USB 1.0 type B input to an internal 16 bit / 48kHz capable DAC. There are also two sets of binding posts for connection of both A/B speakers but beware, a plastic collar prevents the use of cables with typical spades. On the front panel, along with input selection buttons, volume and tone controls is a 3.5mm analog jack for easy connection of portable music players. There is also a front accessible ¼" headphone jack. The 351A measures 16.9" (W) x 13.4" (D) x 3.4" (H) and weighs just 6.0 kg / 13.2 lbs.

The 351C CD player features a host of

top grade components including Cambridge Audio's in-house-designed, audio-only CD transport, a custom CD servo and a robust low-noise toroidal transformer – quite uncommon at this price point. The 351C is a true CD player, incorporating a high quality Wolfson WM8728 DAC chip. Cambridge has also built the 351C circuit boards and DAC stages using double-sided surface mount technology, which reduces signal paths and increases contact area for better performance versus conventional through-hole mounting. In terms of specifications – the 351C CDP has a rated frequency response of 20 Hz to 20 kHz, THD under 0.003% and a signal-to-noise ratio of 99dB (A-weighted). It measures 16.9" (W) x 12.2" (D) x 3.4" (H) and provides almost full control of its functions via the front panel. The remote control is full function and is the same as the one that comes with the 351A integrated amplifier – so if you buy the components together, you'll always have a back-up remote.

After unpacking the components, the only assembly required was to screw in the metal floor spikes on the speakers. Hook-up was straightforward with just a couple IEC power cords (one for the 351A and one for the 351C); a single set of RCA interconnects (a pair of my 1-meter Kimber Kable PBJ's) and a pair of speaker cables from the 351C to the Wharfedale Diamond 10.6 speakers (a set of 8-foot Kimber Kable 8VS). Though the system came to me already broken-in, I'd estimate I put an additional 500 hours on it before I began my note taking.

performance

One of the artists that I never tire of is Diana Krall. I put on the album, *The Look of Love* and listened to the first track "S'Wonderful". The system brought across a sense of openness and I heard the feath-

ery shimmer of the cymbals. The shakers had their characteristic grainy rasp, while violins playing sounded smooth and delicate, as they traced out the deepest regions of the soundstage. Though on this track, the soundstage was limited in breadth by the left and right outer sides of the Diamond 10.6 loudspeakers, it did reach out before me just past the front wall of my room and seemed to fill-in right into the front corners. As the string ensemble played, I did get an alluring sense of height from the draping string notes. Bass notes were taught and pleasantly extended, allowing me to gain a good sense of the upright bass. So many low-cost systems tend to cater to the masses with overdone, flabby bass – just head into a big-box store and you’ll find this commonplace. But in this case I was pleased to hear an affordable system aiming to produce accurate bass. When it came to Diana’s vocals, they were clear and very intelligible and more than sufficient to keep my attention drawn throughout the track. Moving over to the title track, “The Look of Love”, the playing of Conga drums laid bare the knocks and slapping of the drum skin providing the gist of realism that makes for a stimulating listen. Again, on this track, I found that the outer edges of the speakers defined the breadth of the soundstage; while the percussion sounds pushed out a little beyond the front wall of my room. Bass strings were snappy with good body, but lacking sufficient detail to pinpoint the placement of the stand-up bass. That said, I could clearly hear that the bass was centred and also sitting, as it were, just behind Diana. The vocals on this track came across as defined and detailed, while Diana’s tone seemed to be a little leaner than I’m used to hearing it. Though the treble was pleasant overall, this track did reveal some fizziness with cymbal play. Piano notes carried a pleasant and inviting glow, while all-the-while remaining playful in nature. I also noted the tapping of a snare drum and the fact that the system was able, once again, to reveal the signature sound of a drum skin.

During one of my listening sessions, I turned to the Tron Legacy Soundtrack. This recording has become one of my go-to albums given its wide range of instrumentation, addictive sound effects and exciting bass rhythms. First up, the track

“Rinzler” brought an onslaught of Tympani strikes that were visceral in their weight, if only lacking a bit in ultimate dynamic slam, if compared to a more expensive, more powerful amplifier. The general presentation of this track was more forward than I’m accustomed to and provided a different experience, one that was very present and intimate versus the usual more panoramic impression I’m used to hearing. The music seemed to exist from the front plane of the speaker baffles, towards the back and just beyond the front wall of my room. Then I skipped over to the track “The Game Has Changed”, which, if you’ve seen the movie (and you should) is the track that anchors the light cycle race. The bass notes and drum impacts, together with the violins and synthesized sound effects had my pulse up from the start. I found that the Cambridge Azur 351A integrated amplifier in combination with the Wharfedale Diamond 10.6 loudspeakers was able to generate significant volume in my room. At about the 10:00 o’clock position on the volume knob, it made for an engaged listening session and at about 12:00, the sound filled my 13’ x 20’ room completely, while remaining very listenable. Going past this, I began to detect the limits of the system, as compression and congestion began to set in. That said, at a rather modest 45-watts/channel rated output, the Cambridge Audio integrated amplifier more than surprised me with its capabilities on this album.

Melody Gardot’s album, *The Absence*, was another album that caught my attention with the Cambridge Audio / Wharfedale system. In its own right this is a magnificent album that explores a slightly different side of Melody, inspired by her travels and incorporating a mosaic of instrumentation. Playing the tune “Amalia”, the plucking of string instruments were very engaging and Melody’s voice remained both lush and soothing. On this track, the soundstage crept a little broader, extending just beyond the outer limits of the speaker’s. String instruments carried a sense of warmth and were melodic, and the bass was rich with commendable extension. Moving ahead to the track “Lisboa”, the opening church bells caught my attention, sounding close to how I’ve come to expect them on my significantly more expensive reference system. Detail

retrieval was more than sufficient to entertain me but not of the level that provides the lucid realism that this recording is capable of generating on the most revealing of systems. With my listening session done, I was convinced that the Cambridge Audio / Wharfedale system was able to deliver the essentials towards a pleasurable musical experience.

Summing it up, the Cambridge Audio Azur 351C CD player, 351A integrated amplifier and Wharfedale Diamond 10.6 loudspeakers proved to be a synergistic combination of high-fidelity products. It is a system that is greater than the sum of its parts - a bonus for those who choose to conjoin them, as such. I also found that each of the components in and of themselves were of high value and deserving of consideration in their own right. Of these, I was personally most taken by the svelte 351A integrated amplifier, which performed beyond my expectations and ran all day and night without as much as a fever. In fact, the 351A had me thinking, if Cambridge can do it so well with their entry level components, what might they do when budget is less of a concern? I may just have to seek out an audition of their 851 Series components at some time. Clarity, liveliness, potency and rhythm are how I would characterize this system and if these are the attributes you seek, you should definitely give this system a good listen.

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**Cambridge Audio Azur 351A
 Integrated Amplifier**
 Price: \$599 CAD

**Cambridge Audio Azur 351C
 CD Player**
 Price: \$599 CAD

Wharfedale Diamond 10.6 Speakers
 Price: \$999/pair CAD



Monitor Audio Silver 8 Speakers

Phil Gold

You have to see the new Silver 8 up close to appreciate just how much care has been invested in its design. The front baffle for example shows no screws, the edges are elegantly rounded and the black and silver theme is a thing of beauty. Compared to its predecessor, the Silver RX 8 (itself no slouch), this new Silver 8 is shallower and taller while at the same time easier to drive and position within the room. What's not to like? It is one of a full range of Silver speakers which includes 2 bookshelf speakers and 3 floorstanders and various models designed to complete a home theatre system.

design features

The Silver 8 can be yours for \$2,299. This speaker should not sell on its looks alone – there's a whole bunch of interesting technology at play here. It's always good to know that a component sounds good, and that's enough for most people. But I also like to know why something sounds the way it does – what were the designers trying to achieve, and did they succeed. If you've got the time, I'd like to take you through some of these finer points.

Let's start with the four (count 'em) drivers. Up top is a new Ceramic Coated Aluminum Magnesium (C-CAM) gold dome tweeter with a damped rear chamber and dome venting designed to increase bandwidth and lower distortion. The dome is actually formed from a C-CAM alloy, gold anodized to optimize stiffness and damping. It sits behind a protective black screen, always a good idea when a delicate dome is involved. The 4" C-CAM midrange is built around an underhung voice coil and motor system so that the voice coil remains in the magnetic gap

for better control. Beneath this sit twin 6.5" long throw C-CAM bass drivers with a dished profile that mirrors that of the midrange driver. Monitor Audio calls this design RST which stands for Rigid Surface Technology. The lightweight alloy cones in the bass and midrange drivers are made more rigid by the inclusion of a pattern of dimples which allow the surface to resist bending which can lead to distortion. This technique allows the use of thinner cone material. Thinner means lighter and lighter means more responsive to fast signals. The dimples also help to displace standing waves. Did I mention how cool this looks? You may be wondering how Monitor Audio manages to attach the main drivers without the use of screws? No there's no glue involved. These drivers must be very firmly connected to the chassis to prevent any movement between them. In fact there are bolts that run the full depth of the speakers to connect the drivers directly to the rear wall of the box. You can only see the connection if you're sitting behind the speaker or inside it! There are two single rear ports which include rifling (HiVe II) to increase airflow and reduce turbulence. Monitor Audio provides foam inserts for the ports to adjust bass response but I was happy without them. I am happy to see that the grilles are magnetically attached, but I think you should keep them in the box – there's nothing here that needs hiding or protecting.

The speaker sits on a black plinth with four adjustable spikes. My test pair sported a luxurious high gloss black lacquer finish, but you may prefer high gloss white lacquer or one of the four wood veneers available. Height is a metre, width just 18.5 cm and depth is 30 cm. Efficiency is quite high (90 dB) and the Silver 8 presents a 4 Ohm load, which will suit most but not all amplifiers. Monitor Audio suggests amps ranging from 80 to 200 wpc, but I suspect low powered tube

amps will also have no issues driving the Silver 8 from their 4 Ohm taps.

performance

I bi-wired the speakers to the amp using Nordost Valhalla cabling, but if you only have single wire (like most people) you can use the jumpers provided. Partnering equipment included a Meridian G08 CD Player, EMM Labs Pre 2 preamplifier and a ModWright KWA 150 SE power amp, which can deliver 200 watts per channel into 4 ohms.

After warming up the system I was immediately immersed into a warm spacious soundfield with no trace of harshness, one that drew me into the music and made me happy to listen for long periods. I was not expecting this much involvement from such a modestly priced floorstander. I was testing it alongside a number of higher priced models, and it never embarrassed itself in their company. I suspect the gold domed tweeter is responsible for a good part of my satisfaction. It has a wide dispersion so you are not limited to a narrow sweet spot, and it offers excellent extension and strong levels of detail without sounding etched.

The deep bass flowed effortlessly on Diana Krall's "Boulevard of Broken Dreams" which also highlighted the open nature of the treble through the attack and sparkle of Krall's piano riffs. If you like African music you may be familiar with Ali Farka Toure's "Bonde". Here the soundstage is wide, with instruments well located within it. It's a big sound, hypnotic, detailed and fast paced. I really enjoyed the sharp transient attack from the Calabash. Now when I switched to my reference YG Carmel speakers (\$18,000), I could hear considerably more detail, dynamics were much stronger and the image took on more depth, while it was easier to hear each individual instrument. But you sure pay a lot for that level of realism.

Jazz presented no challenge to the Silver 8 speakers. Art Pepper's classic track "You'd be so Good to Come Home to" sounds very clear, extended at both frequency extremes, while the percussion comes through clean and fast. Pepper's sax is well focused, effortless and dynamic. Red Garland's piano is a little on the light side but shows great control. I felt the instruments were a bit crowded

around the speakers. The Carmel speakers added a touch of weight to the piano and spread the instruments out further from the speakers.

Turning now to a massive symphonic work, the Silver 8 produces a very punchy rich orchestral sound and conveys good weight in Shostakovich's Tenth on the Naxos label. Its reflexes are fast, its performance effortless as always, and it is easy to follow the complex structure. On the other hand, dynamic range was greater with the other speakers I tried, as were image depth and ultimate resolution. In a smaller scale classical work, Mozart's Divertimento in E Flat, I enjoyed the rich string tone and instrumental colour, the strong imaging, the wide bandwidth and the excellent overall balance, which allowed me to follow each line simultaneously.

Paul Simon's "Dazzling Blue", a return to his old form, reveals lots of instrumental color and good detail, but could be more focused in the low bass. I also heard slight sibilance on Simon's voice, also apparent through the ELAC BS244 speakers but noticeably absent on the upscale Kudos Super 20 speakers and the reference Carmel. Eric Clapton's lament "Tears in Heaven" benefits from the strong bass and good attack of the Silver 8, and reveals a gentle, natural vocal line.

So there you have it - a very successful package fully competitive with others at its price point and even 25 percent above. It has refinement, wide bandwidth, warmth, speed and tone colour all in its favour, and it seems to take everything easily in its stride. It must take second place to some more expensive speakers when it comes to fully scalable dynamics, low level retrieval, image depth and ultimate realism. But the sins it has are of omission, not commission, and that's a good thing. In other words, while we are not hearing everything there is to be heard (we never do except in a live performance), what we hear is accurate, not harming the sound to any appreciable degree. If you need a closer approximation the the real thing, you might look at Monitor Audio's upscale Platinum Series, which has impressed me a great deal over the years. If you are looking today for a floor standing speaker for under \$3,000, put this right at the top of your audition list. You won't be sorry.

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For full details go to
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productreview

Axiom Audio ADA 1500 Multichannel Amplifier

Suave Kajko

An audio amplifier can easily be compared to a car engine. You may not always need its full power but you'll be glad to have it when the situation calls for it. When listening to music or watching a movie, there are plenty of occasions that rely on the amplifier to occasionally deliver a copious amount of power. A good dedicated amplifier shouldn't be all about brute force of course, its job is equally important in providing superior musical details and clarity. While an AV receiver may be good enough for most home theatres, there is no question that if you desire the most accurate sound from your music or movies, you should look to a powerful, high quality dedicated amplifier. Axiom Audio aims to fulfill this need with its ADA 1000, ADA 1250 and ADA 1500 series amplifiers. The higher the series number, the more power the amplifier offers and the more it is capable of driving lower impedance speakers. Each amplifier series can be ordered in two to eight channel configurations.

design features

For this review we asked Axiom Audio to provide us with its top of the line ADA 1500 amplifier in a seven channel configuration, priced at \$3,630. For comparison, a seven channel ADA 1000 model goes for a very reasonable \$1,580. The ADA 1500 may not be the biggest, nor the baddest looking amplifier but don't be fooled by its appearance, this is one mighty amplifier. Its design combines a class-D amplifier with a massive toroidal transformer and a large storage capacitance of 144,000 uf. When driving two channels simultaneously this amplifier is capable of outputting a whopping 325 watts per channel into an 8 ohm load, and doubling that into 650 watts with a 4 ohm load. My seven channel review model is rated at a remarkable 214 watts per channel with both 8 and 4 ohm loads, with all channels driven. These power ratings are achieved with less than 1% distortion and measured from 20



Hz to 20 kHz. The rear panel of the amplifier offers both single ended RCA and balanced XLR inputs, along with gold plated multi-way speaker binding posts. The ADA 1000 series amplifiers offer just the RCA inputs. A 12 volt trigger allows this amplifier to be powered on automatically by a preamp, while the removable power cord means you can try an upgraded cord. The flat black chassis is constructed out of heavy gauge steel and finished with a 10mm machine aluminium faceplate. At 28 kg (58 lbs), the ADA 1500 is a hefty component and built like a tank.

While you might consider connecting the ADA 1500 to an AV receiver as an intermediate upgrade of your home theatre, to fully realize its potential it should be set up with a dedicated preamplifier/processor. I connected it to the incredible Anthem Statement D2v 3D A/V processor, which was awarded the Editor's Choice in the previous issue of the magazine. The speakers I used were my reference Monitor Audio GX Gold series.

performance

So the ADA 1500 certainly looks good on paper but how does it sound? Well, now came the fun part of the review. I spun up Star Trek Into Darkness on Blu-ray in my Cambridge Audio 751BD player and planted myself on the couch. This highly dynamic soundtrack would be an excellent tool for testing this amplifier's capabilities. From the get go, this film served up a mix of scenes ranging from

the whisper-quiet to ones that shook my room. The ADA 1500 delivered the quieter scenes with amazing resolution and clarity. When the onscreen action suddenly demanded a beefed up audio presentation the amplifier offered plenty of power, giving proper weight to the instrumental movie score, character voices and sound effects. When asked to reproduce louder film passages that consist of many audio layers, a lower quality amplifier, or a typical AV receiver, will often mash all the layers together, making the individual components tough to distinguish. This can result in audio that sounds harsh. But that was far from the case here. The ADA 1500 resolved all of the various layers with ease, even during the most demanding scenes. The excellent dynamics, power and control translated into an experience that was more realistic and vibrant than you could ever experience from an AV receiver.

My Monitor Audio Gold GX speakers are relatively easy to drive (the GX 200 fronts have a sensitivity of 89 dB and the GXFX surrounds are rated at 87 dB) and so they didn't pose much of a challenge for this amplifier. But the beauty of an amplifier like the ADA 1500 is that it is designed to power far less efficient speakers, like many of Axiom's own 4 ohm models.

The action sequence at the beginning of World War Z on Blu-ray instantly put the ADA 1500 through the ringer. As the garbage truck plowed through the street

jam-packed with cars, this powerful scene was filled with smashing metal, breaking glass, screeching tires and dozens of horns, among other sounds. The ADA 1500 easily sorted through all these sounds and reproduced them with a frightening realism. In many other parts of the movie, the sound of people screaming and gunshots were chillingly real. With the volume turned up, I was getting a true movie theatre experience from the comfort of my couch. I have to admit, I don't normally watch zombie-type movies and the combination of the picture and the aggressive soundtrack had me freaked right out.

With the Axiom Audio ADA-1500 amplifier and the Anthem Statement D2v 3D A/V processor spending a good deal of time in my home theatre I was able to watch many different movies, and enjoyed the audio with great pleasure from every single film. This wonderful duo of components also significantly raised my gaming experience on the PlayStation 3 and Xbox 360. But movies and games are only a part of the performance equation here, as I had more rigorous music tests scheduled on the way.

Toronto's own Ray Montford's "A Fragile Balance" CD (2-channel) played with great fluidity and richness. The musical details and clarity achieved when listening to these tracks through the ADA 1500 reached an excellent level of immersion and engagement. Thanks to the fact that the Anthem A/V processor was so transparent I could effortlessly identify the tones of different guitars and the various effects applied, from one track to the next. Drums and bass notes played with speed and tightness, while high hats and cymbals sounded crisp and sparkly. The performance had a great sense of presence, I felt almost as if the performers were playing their instruments right in front of me.

While listening to Florence + the Machine "MTV Unplugged" album, the ADA 1500 once again showed its ability to clearly resolve the various musical layers and lay out a wide, deep soundstage. Florence Welch's voice was directly in the centre, with backup vocals further back and to the right, the string instruments to the left and the drums deeper on the stage. All of the nuances of Welch's distinct voice were reproduced with amazing

clarity and the acoustic reflections helped to visualize the atmosphere of the original recording venue.

Two-channel classical recordings sounded just as impressive here as I would expect them to on a high-end two-channel system. With Holst "The Planets" performed by the Los Angeles Philharmonic orchestra, the ADA 1500 laid out a very wide, deep soundstage that even offered a good amount of height. The various parts of the orchestra were clearly positioned within the soundstage, yet they played with perfect harmony. Every individual component of the orchestra played with the richness of a real instrument. Percussion instruments had fast attacks and realistic decays. Strings sounded woody and organic. Woodwind instruments sounded light and airy, offering fine details. What I was hearing here in my home theatre approached my 2-channel system's dangerously close, although there were a few observable differences. My 2-channel system did offer slightly improved soundstaging and a greater amount of air around voices and instruments. The overall tonality was a little warmer and the high frequencies sounded just a tad more neutral, both of these factors likely thanks to the tube-based ModWright Instruments LS 100 preamp. But this is really just nitpicking.

Delighted with the 2-channel performance, I decided to switch gears and listen to some music that employs the surround channels. Nine Inch Nails' "With Teeth" DVD-Audio sounded just wicked in surround. Regardless of how high I turned up the volume, the soundstage always kept its composure and I never detected any strain - and believe me, at times I like to listen very loud. Another indication of the quality I was getting here was that I listened to track after track at high levels, yet my ears didn't seem to mind at all.

Pink Floyd's "Dark Side of the Moon" SACD was nothing shy of spectacular. The alarm bells at the beginning of "Time" rang with the realism and veracity of dozens of clocks. The mid-bass and bass played tunefully with precise articulation. Smooth highs and deep but very tight bass.

Collective Soul "Home" Blu-ray is no ordinary rock concert. The combination of the rock band with the Atlanta Symphony Youth Orchestra is simply intoxicating

and makes for a fantastic disc to test an audio system. The ADA 1500 provided more than enough power for the highly dynamic passages and allowed me to crack the volume up to real rock concert levels. The audio reproduction was so very realistic, I got goose bumps when familiar songs came up. As requested by Ed Roland, I joined in for a sing along with some of the tracks. Despite the loud distorted guitars, the most delicate of instruments like harps and flutes were always clearly audible. Before I knew it, I was about 30 minutes into the performance and didn't take any notes for this review. The sound was so engaging I simply got completely lost in the performance.

Some class D amplifiers can sound a little harsh and 'digital' so I listened very closely for any signs of this when auditioning this amplifier. Believe me, I tried pretty hard but I really can't say that I detected any hard edges or harshness.

Evaluating this amplifier turned out to be genuinely fun. The Axiom Audio ADA 1500 is a solid performer and a clear winner in my books. It has the power to drive just about any speakers and offers dynamics, sonic precision, clarity and transparency that only a standalone amplifier is capable of. The ADA 1500 is designed to offer a clean, detailed sound at high volume levels in the largest of rooms. Sonically it offers the delicate qualities of a new-born puppy and raw energy of hungry lion. If you're working with a tighter budget and a medium or smaller room, you might want to consider the ADA 1250 or ADA 1000 series. As with Axiom Audio speakers, these amplifiers can only be purchased directly from the company's website, come with a 30 day home-trial, and a five year warranty. Once you discover what it means to have a dedicated amplifier for your music and home theatre needs, there is just no going back.

quickinfo

Axiom Audio
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Sony XBR-65X900A/XBR-65X850A 65-Inch 4K Ultra HDTV



Mike Osadciw

One criticism of early fixed pixel displays (FPD) was that they didn't look analogue, like the CRT technology that we were all so used to. The big square pixels that made up the picture of 480p displays coined the term "screen door affect" when describing the viewable image. When viewing one of these displays it literally seemed like you were watching a TV through the screen door of a house. Compared to the smooth image of a progressive CRT display, these new digital video devices appeared unnatural, harsh, and inferior to any theatrical film or home video experience. To improve consumer confidence in these new LCD and plasma FPD video technologies, manufacturers went hard to work. Consequently, they've improved on reducing the pixel size, thus increasing visible detail. Even though most of today's big screen TVs offer a 1080p resolution (1920x1080 pixel array), pixel size can be reduced further. Ultra HD 4K televisions such as Sony's KDL-65X900 have four times as many pixels as 1080p dis-

plays. In other words, a "1080p pixel" is replaced by four pixels in the same space. The result of doing so, is greatly improved fine details with all current 1080p Blu-rays. Better still 4K TVs are ready for 4K content that's just around the corner. As of September 2013, Sony's 4K televisions were available in two 55-inch models - the XBR-55X900A (\$4,499) and the XBR-55X850A (\$4,199), as well as two 65-inch models - XBR-65X900A (\$5,999, reviewed here) and the XBR-65X850A (\$5,699). The key difference between the X900A and the X850A series are the side-mounted speakers available with the X900A series.

design features

Wow - this TV is wide! When the long box arrived, it took some lengthy unpacking but the assembly was quick. The XBR-65X900A looks different from the rest. Polished in a glossy piano black finish and with built-in speakers on the sides, in the era of thin bezels, this Sony stands out as something different.

There are plenty of inputs and outputs:

4 HDMI, 1 component or 2 composite (shared), 3 USB, an RF, and a number of audio outputs. The television is thicker to accommodate my favourite LCD feature, local dimming, which dramatically improves contrast ratio because of its ability to produce deeper blacks. This TV plays bright so it'll easily fit into rooms with sunlight. Sony claims a contrast ratio of over 1,000,000:1.

Sony's 4K X-Reality PRO Picture Engine chip, with Reality Creation and Super Resolution processing, is designed to squeeze the most resolution out of any source. From smartphone video to Blu-ray discs, Sony's processing will map the video to the 4K screen with the best detail. It's user adjustable to give the best results per source.

Sony is pushing colours beyond their borders with the TRILUMINOS display feature. Our HD BT.709 specification covers about 37 percent of colours that we can see with our eyes. The TRILUMINOS display increases green and red saturation, if the source material contains it, such as the 'Mastered in 4K' Blu-ray



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discs. Being able to display more colours brings television closer to reality. Sony's Motionflow XR 960 feature offers a judder-free image with ultra-smooth camera pans. Which of these features you choose to use and to what degree is entirely up to you. For those who love 3D movies, you'll be happy to know that you can view full 1080p resolution 3D content thanks to the passive 3D glasses. Gamers can also view two completely different full-screen images from the same game when playing 2 player games, without the need to split the screen, by using the optional SimulView glasses.

While most TV makers now offer tiny, albeit lousy sounding, speakers built into their TV sets, Sony has done exactly the opposite with the X900A series. Mounted on both sides of the screen, Sony's proprietary Magnetic Fluid Speakers allows big sound from six drivers in thin cabinets. The speakers look slightly crammed into the frame, but it's a big step up from the tinny sound often offered by flat panel TVs. These speakers can also simulate 5.1 surround audio to more than one viewer. While writing this review, Sony announced the new X850A series of Ultra HD TVs which offer all of the same tech-

nology as the X900A series, without the speakers - for those who wish to use their own speakers.

Smart TV functionality promises a convenient way to view mobile content from Android devices by using a Mobile High Definition Link cable and various ways of "mirroring" your device's picture on the big screen. You can also stream on-line content from the internet, through a wired or wireless connection, from Sony's Entertainment network and made-for-TV apps such as Netflix, YouTube, Facebook, Skype, etc. The X900A series also offers a web browser. Best of all, you can control the TV with your Android or iOS smartphone/tablet and learn about the programs you are viewing or become more social about them with Twitter.

performance

For this review, I viewed the XBR-65X900A with both 4K and 1080p content. An HDMI splitter helped me compare 1080p content on this 4K TV alongside my reference Panasonic 1080p plasma television. Source materials included test patterns from an Accupel DVG-5000 signal generator and an Oppo BDP-95 Blu-ray player. All 4K content was delivered

by the Sony POP-FMPA1 content server which was provided to me along with the TV. My viewing distance for both 2K and 4K material was 7 feet. This is my preferred viewing distance for 1080p images on 60" to 65" panels, but it may seem awkwardly close for large rooms (which is why 80"+ panels will be the norm in a few years). A 7 foot distance still takes up less field of view than sitting at the back row of a typical movie theatre - and that's the selling point of Sony's 4K: we can sit closer to the image if we want to without the dreaded screen door effect.

Sony's picture controls are spread out all over the TV's menu system. Picking the right combinations with the appropriate controls turned on or off is the key to achieving the best picture. If you're not familiar with the Sony menu, the task can be daunting and you're bound to miss an image-altering feature. Along with standard image controls, there are user adjustable controls for the Reality Creation, 4K Resolution and Motionflow features. The precise effect of these features cannot be done by eye alone; test patterns are needed to see the effect on all image aspects and most importantly for this 4K TV, preservation of resolution. After spend-

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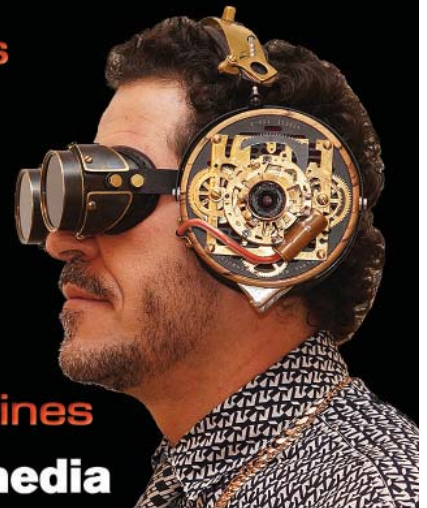
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ing some time putting the TV's controls through the grinder by trying every possible combination in a majority of picture modes, I finally settled on one I liked and carried on with image calibration. Using the reference Konica-Minolta CS-1000A spectroradiometer for measurements, I can confirm this TV does an excellent job at keeping grayscale at D65 from dark to bright images and its colour points very close to BT.709. Sony's only ongoing omission is a colour management system to precisely fine tune colours for hue, saturation, and lightness. Using the HQV Benchmark Blu-ray disc, this TV didn't fare so well in the Jaggies 1 and 2 tests which means that you'll want to do your 1080i to 1080p conversion outside of the television (as in an A/V receiver or Blu-ray player). For further calibration results, please visit the 4K TVs forum at www.canadahifi.com/forum.

My first impression when watching 4K content on the XBR-65X900A was that the picture looks analogue, very analogue. With the pixel grid reduced to a new minimum, I felt like I was watching an image less digital, rigid and coarse. When watching 1080p material from Blu-ray, the image finally had breathing room that would never be possible on any 1080p television. I noticed an increased presence of ultra-fine details that were nearly completely absent on my 1080p display. I blitzed through many episodes of *The Bible* miniseries on Blu-ray. The series is bright, colourful, and has become one of my reference discs. The amount of fine texture in clothing and in the background (rocks, sand and dirt) became so apparent on this 4K TV, it could have been mistaken as native 4K content. Without the pixel grid present on the 4K set, I could enjoy the image more like a film rather than video through a screen door. Looking back at my 1080p television suddenly seemed much less satisfying. Screen uniformity was very good from edge to edge. Many cheap LCD screens and plasmas cannot show the same level of white from edge to edge without some dark patches. With the LED Dynamic backlight setting set to 'Standard', the image was very impressive. Black level was very deep across the screen, with only a minor amount of glowing around bright objects (typical of LED local dimming displays but an acceptable

trade-off to milky black levels.) The drop in black level allow me to see all of the finest shadow details that are hard to see while watching the original 1979 film *Alien*. I didn't miss a detail as the Nostromo crew ventured into the dark areas of the alien spacecraft.

While watching film-based movies such as *Moneyball* and *Men in Black*, film grain structure finally looked like genuine film grain rather than an annoying artifact obstructed by a pixel grid. The XBR-65X900A delivered an absolutely rock-solid image. With true 4K content, film grain should become even more resolved. But for now, with 1080p content, film purists should be demanding these 4K sets. The conversion of 1080p to 4K is very good; the result is much more impressive than Sony's own flagship VPL-VW1000ES 4K projector. With the correct combination of the 'Resolution' and 'Mastered in 4K' controls, I achieved a very pleasant picture with minimal horizontal and vertical edge enhancement. Using native 1080p content, the image this 4K set and my 1080p set beside it began to look similar just before 10 feet away, as the pixel grid on the 1080p display almost entirely disappeared. I chose these films because they are part of Sony's new Mastered in 4K series Blu-ray disc collection. Sony uses 4K sources for the Blu-ray master and an attempt to ease off on the high video compression (but don't expect perfection).

When watching 1080p 3D content, performance was quite good using the passive 3D glasses. I didn't get as much of a headache with the passive glasses and the picture looked much brighter than that from an active glasses system. This gave 3D the punch of brightness is deservedly needs. Watching my IMAX 3D discs and clips from *Final Destination 5* was fun but not a priority for me. Just know that if you are a 3D buff, this is one of the few televisions on the market that will give you a bright, punchy, and accurate 3D picture.

I'm a little tired of people saying they need to be sitting very close to notice the benefits of native 4K. Stop listening to those people, it's simply not true. Using Sony's 4K media server, I could see the benefits of 4K standing 15 feet back from this 65" TV. Since that's further than most seats in a living room, that means every-

one will enjoy native 4K at home. I got a hold of many of the same 4K demo clips on Blu-ray discs at 1080p, which allowed me to compare the images side by side. At closer distances, 1080p cannot remotely compete with the 4K image. Step back – way back, and the 4K image was still the clear winner with radically refined edges, contrast and depth. The image was also much cleaner from artifacts, likely to do with compression on Blu-ray discs. After seeing this, how could I not be excited for native 4K content!

After experiencing a 4K TV for an extended period of time, I'm completely sold on 4K. Since sending the review unit back, I've experienced somewhat of a withdrawal. Watching the Sony XBR-65X900A made me realize what I'm missing on my 1080p television. As I was completing this review, Sony announced that these sets will support HDMI 2.0 via an easy software update before the end of the year. This version will accommodate higher data rates, like 3840x2160p at 60fps, a rate that the current versions of HDMI 1.4 do not allow (max is 2160p at 30fps). Among other benefits, the higher frame rate will improve picture detail in fast moving programs such as gaming and sports. At \$5,999, the XBR-65X900A is not an inexpensive purchase but realizing the picture quality it offers makes it easier to justify. And if you choose to use your own speakers, you could save a few hundred bucks by getting the XBR-65X850A model.

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