

Part II: Alón Grand Reference Speaker System Revised

One of the things that bothered me about Alón's Grand Reference multi-driver speaker in its original incarnation was the way the low frequencies never seemed to get out of the system's woofer towers in a way quite coherent with the rest of the sound.

And in a conversation with its designer, Carl Marchisotto, I finally said so. Marchisotto, being the audio perfectionist he is— he did basic training with Jon Dahlquist back when— went back to the drawing board. And came up with what he described as “minor” mods to the crossover as well as the substitution of a quite different sounding Krell amp, of vintage yore, the KMA-160, a Class A design that grabbed the Reference's huge woofer array and made them kick posterior in a way hitherto unheard from the Krell FBP 600 stereo amp we had been using.

The bottom octave then came alive in a way it hadn't before. To demonstrate his point, Marchisotto brought along several woofer buster CDs, including a new orchestral recording of John Williams' score from *Jaws* [Varese/Sarabande] that made the walls of the listening room seem to bulge outward. Low, deep, and clean in a way you do not ordinarily hear from any ported woofer array. Capable of making the floorboards under your feet vibrate. Out came the blockbusting (almost literally) CDs: *Gladiator*, *The Thin Red Line*, Vaughan Williams' *Sinfonia Antartica*, the Marco Polo *Master of Chinese Percussion (II)*, *Patriot Games*, et al. Each, I might add, now perceived, as if in a different light.

It wasn't long before I noticed a kind of midbass thickness that hadn't

been there before. (It was particularly obvious on the string bass, as in Decca's original LP of Mehta doing Holst's *The Planets*—the opening of "Saturn"—or, say, in Track 7 of *The Thin Red Line* soundtrack, where the orchestra quiets to a pianissimo and the string bass growl.) The midbass is the range in which, I have come to believe, the ear is most unforgiving in deciding whether sounds are "authentic" or not. Muck up that region, the foundation of musical sound, and you're eventually going to be bored with the monotonous dum-dum-dum of the sound.

Well, Marchisotto to the rescue again. More minor mods. This time, however, something magical happened. With the midbass in proportion, there was, as we expected, greater articulation (you could hear the rosin on the doublebass strings), but, miraculously, you could also hear low-frequency ambience in a new way. Now the volume—the size—of the original

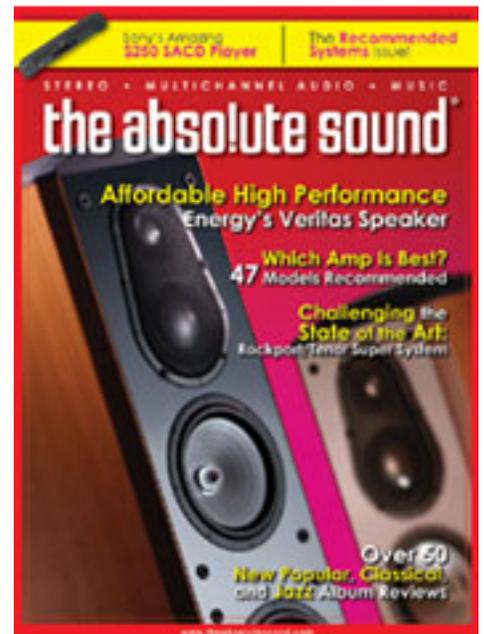
recording site became apparent. It's easy enough, with a good recording, to hear the ambience of a hall, but not the low-frequency ambience that evidently helps recreate a sense of the hall's volume. (Many a moon ago, in reviewing some earlier VTL amplifier designs, I found I could, given the superior low-end performance of these tubed circuits, get a definite impression of a hall's size.)

There was an associated effect that was very nearly breathtaking, but difficult to describe if you've never heard it. I'd be tempted to call it midbass transparency, for now we could hear straight through the orchestra to the hall's back wall. With several systems of genuine excellence, you can hear front-to-back depth from the lower midrange up through some of the high frequencies. But, if you pay attention, you'll find a kind of "mud" and "confusion" around instruments with their energies centered in the low to upper midbass frequencies. Their position is

not so apparent as that of instruments further up the spectrum—you cannot hear "around" them, in three dimensions, all that clearly.

But now, with the Grand References, there is an uncanny verisimilitude, call it bass to lower-midrange transparency that is reminiscent of the old Tympani Ones (from Magnepan and Acoustic Research), though without quite the transient "slap" and "snap" of that as yet unequalled classic. But, then, if memory serves aright, those speakers did not bring the sense of dimensionality and body to most low-frequency instruments (aside from plucked string bass) that the Alóns now do. Still, I believe that the bottom octave, assuming its transient articulation is not hampered by the many ports in the two bass towers, is not the definitional equal of the rest of the system, even if quite overwhelming taken on its own terms.

So what was, once upon a review, an excellent speaker—Alón's best and furthest departure from its house sound—has become a great one, verging on the state of the art and worthy of the five stars I now bestow.



from TAS 136

HP's Recommended System System Number One: No Holds Barred

- Alón Grand Reference Revised speaker system (\$120,000)
- Aesthetix Callisto line stage (\$13,500 w/dual power supplies)
- Joule Electra Rite of Passage amplifier (\$21,000)
- VTL Wotan amplifier (\$27,500/pair)
- Clearaudio Master Reference Playback System with Clearaudio/Souther SLT arm (\$18,500)
- Lyra/Helikon moving-coil cartridge (\$1,995)

or

- Graham Nightingale pick-up arm/cartridge combination (\$1,995)
- Tom Evans The Groove phono preamplifier (\$2,940)
- Burmester 969 CD player and 970 DAC (\$27,930 & \$30,670, respectively)
- Edge NL Signature One monoblock amplifiers (\$31,200/pair)
- Krell KMA-150 Class A monoblock amplifiers (\$7,900/pair)
- Nordost Valhalla interconnects (\$3,800/1.5 meter pair)
- Nordost Valhalla speaker cables (\$6,100/2 meter pair)

System Total: About \$300,000

System Number Two: The Challenger

- Magnepan MG-20.1 loudspeaker system (\$12,000/pair)
- Wyetech Opal tubed phono stage (\$7,500)
- Gamut CD-1 player (\$2,995)
- Gamut M 250 monoblock solid-state amplifiers (\$11,000/pair)
- Nordost Vallhalla interconnects (\$3,800/1.5 meter pair)
- Nordost Valhalla speaker cables (\$6,100/2 meter pair)

System Total: \$65,900

I always find the assembling of a recommended system akin to sailing North Carolina's Outer Banks, tricky and with the potential for well-nigh fatal misunderstandings.

My first thought was to alternate my choice for an ultimate system with one nearly as good but dramatically less pricey, one centered around Magnepan's stratospherically good MG-20.1, itself one-tenth as dear as



Clearaudio Master Reference Playback System

the Alón Grand Reference, but only marginally less impressive.

But, after some serious thinking-it-over, I decided that there was a danger—the shoals—in simply commending one set of associated gear with the Maggies. Provided you give it enough muscle, the Alón is likely to sound astounding; it would take a near nit-wit to mismatch it, so powerful a sonic signature does it have.

On the other hand, the Maggies will change sonic complexion at the drop of a hang-nail, and for any particular combination of gear you use with it, there will be equally convincing alternate approaches that will yield often dramatically different outcomes. The combination I was going to propose, centered around the new Gamut 250-watt monoblock amplifiers and Wyetech Opal tubed line stage, would have been reticent, highly musical and subtle. Substituting, say, the Joule Electra Rite of Passage monoblocks, particularly if the Burmester 001 CD player were inserted into the chain. That's a for instance, and I could keep on piling proposed combinations up, some that would show the speaker's

transparency and see-into lucence, others that would demonstrate its low-end ability to shiver the rafter timbers. No particular combination I could devise, in the rush to early judgment, could show off all the glories of which the Maggies are capable.

And that is the problem with any recommended system. You find yourself wondering if anyone will assemble exactly what you found to be an optimal combination, and further, wondering if anyone should, given the wide variations in room acoustics, musical tastes, and individual idiosyncrasies. I well recall trying to set up a super system at the so-called high-end Show last year, only to find that folks were not only fussing with the system's critical settings, but playing the darned thing so loud as to make moot its considerable virtues. All of which, to be sure, invited the hyenas in for the kill.

Well, except for the power rating of the amplifier, I think you'll find, at least on material from compact discs, this system to be bulletproof.

If you want more power, power beyond expectation, you can substitute VTL's 1250 watt-per-channel Wotans, which will transcend, with

ease, any crescendi from any recordings. The recommended Edge NL-Ones, driving the towers in an average sized room, will do just about everything save the acid tests posed by a CD like *Gladiator* or an LP like the Classic Records reissue of the Mercury Dorati-led Stravinsky *Firebird*. On recordings like these, the *ffff* climaxes will either sound dirty and distorted (but only these most intense moments)—as in *Gladiator*—or disturbingly bright—as in the *Firebird*. Let me be clear about this: The Wotans are for that half per cent (or less) of musical moments that will strain any system's resources. They will, if inserted into the system, be somewhat more colored than the Edges, and, conversely, somewhat richer in the rendering of harmonic information. (Remember that I said: Somewhat. And meant it.)

I chose the Valhalla cables and interconnects simply because, in my experience, they contribute no sound (that I can detect) to any system into which they are inserted. A first in my experience. Yes, they will send you into your savings account, or toward a second mortgage, but you aren't going to have to replace them anytime during the next decade or so. For the reviewer, having a cable that works superbly in each and every system and tops that by working without imposing its own nature on the sound means you have a constant, not just another variable that has to be worked around. For the music lover in me, such brings you just one step closer to the ideal of hearing back through the chain to the original performance (a phrase first used in *Audio* to describe Stewart Hegeman's Citation amplifiers).

We have discussed the Burmester CD system at some length in these

pages and I am going to refer you to back issues if you want to explore their "sound" at some length. At last, there are competitors coming up from the rear to challenge some of the Burmester's king-of-the-mountain status. The humbly priced Gamut CD-1 player, while no Burmester killer, does have a greater truth and musicality in the middle frequencies, suggesting that an update ought to be in the makings, whether it is or not at the German factory. I, for one, won-



Aesthetix Callisto Line Stage

der if future Burmesters can achieve the airy, free-floating highs they now so beautifully render without the belt-drive, pivoted-arm mechanism that its manufacturer has discontinued (but not before Burmester bought up all the existing stock). In the recent evaluations, it was interesting to hear the Burmester playing back hybrid SACD discs more naturally and musically than *any* SACD player we could rustle up.

We have also discussed the virtues of the Clearaudio playback gear at some length, while, perhaps, insufficiently emphasizing the kingdom of tweakdom

you'll have to enter to get the best results out of the Clearaudio/Souther arm, which not only must be kept meticulously clean, but is the very devil to adjust either at the outset or whenever you want to change a setting.

And so, as an alternate, I would recommend the latest iteration of the classic Graham unipivot arm, along with the Nightingale cartridge (a variation on the Transfiguration design). It can, along with two other arms, be mounted on the Clearaudio table, and it is a snap to maintain, and since it may be obtained with other arm/cartridge tubes, back and forth playtime is easily accomplished. However, the Graham combo sounds quite, quite different from the Souther/Helikon, not nearly so relaxed and uncolored, though darker and, just maybe, more precise. If I were really in the mood for fun and games, I'd get a VPI JMW Memorial arm, the 12-inch version, with one of the new Dynavector moving coil cartridges, which are eye-openers and represent a triumphant return to form for that company.

While we are at it, I cannot say it often enough: Tom Evans' ExCell Power Solutions

The Groove phono stage is, dollar for dollar, the best buy in separate phono stages, anywhere, anyplace. (And he has a preamp at the ready, and waiting for review!) You'd never know it was solid-state just from the listening. And that's the first time I can say that about a transistorized phono stage. I cannot imagine it easily being bettered.

The true secret of this system lies in both its width of frequency response and in its ability to reproduce dynamic gradients, from the very soft (*ppp*) to the top-of-the-world *ma!* fortissimos (*ffff*). And no

Recommended Systems

other line stage in my experience captures those dynamics and their contrasts with greater truth than the new Callisto from Aesthetix. It's a tubed unit, like his Io phono stage of several years back, and, like the Io, it has a "character," weighted toward the lower half of the spectrum. That is, it's a bit dark (see review, to come), which, ordinarily, would have me on full alert. But, this is one of those times when I feel forced to trade off some of the hard-won neutrality we've been striving for to get the greater truth of accurate tracing of dynamic swings. Carl Marchisotto designed the Grand References to have a consistent dynamic envelope top-to-bottom and it is only with this

line stage that you can appreciate the degree of his achievement.

Elsewhere in this issue's Workshop, I've discussed some significant improvements to the Alóns, most of which have taken place in the lower frequencies. And there you will find the justification for the switch to a different Krell amplifier, the Class A series of KMA monoblocks. And there you will read a description of how the speaker sounds with these particular components.

Truth to tell, I find it easier to describe a component taken alone, as opposed to describing the sound of an entire system. This particular one now, with the Alón revisions, has few

shortcomings, and no significant ones, at least in terms of its coherence, its coverage of the entire frequency spectrum, and, for the here and now, its ability to suggest the kind of dynamic nuances and contrasts you can find in the real thing. It does have a character, one that stands in apposition to the more neutral and transparent Maggies. I'd call it liquid, more than a little romantic, and easy on the ears no matter what the playback level—conventional distortions just don't seem to exist with the Grand Reference. But which, you might ask, is the more truthful? And that, my friends, depends on exactly which parts of that truth you most value. 



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