

John Marks

A Virtuoso Recital, an Amp, & a Speaker!

Were I trying to make a living by giving piano recitals, David Stanhope's new CD, *A Virtuoso Recital* (Tall Poppies TP184), just might tempt me to wash down a fistful of pills with a bottle of Scotch. The saving grace being that Stanhope seems to have enough things to occupy himself with in his native Australia. The risk of his showing up in New York City and playing a recital, thereby giving a lot of people existential crises and sleepless nights, seems remote.

Stanhope first came to my attention courtesy the nice folks at Stuart & Sons pianos (www.stuartandsons.com), whose innovative refinements of piano string-coupling technology I detailed in this column in the January 2005 *Stereophile* (Vol.28 No.1, www.stereophile.com/thefifthelement/105fifth/), in which I also mentioned several recordings made on Stuart & Sons pianos.

In due course I awarded *David Stanhope Plays* (Tall Poppies TP135) a nod for my 2005 "Records To Die For." It has since stayed in the rack in which I keep CDs I use to evaluate equipment, most of which I also listen to for pleasure. Listening to Stanhope thunder away on Busoni's transcription of J.S. Bach's "St. Anne" prelude and fugue through the ESP-darTZeel-EMM system mentioned in my last column, in April, was really something.

Interestingly enough, Stanhope's new recording was made using a Steinway piano. The venue was The Studio at the Sydney Opera House, so perhaps it was simply a case of the unavailability of a Stuart & Sons instrument. I somewhat prefer the almost harpsichord-like incisiveness of the Stuart & Sons sound, but if any disagree, I will not consign them to the outer darkness.

Stanhope seems to approach recording as though he were giving a performance. There is a great sense of organic development, tension, and flow. What may make his approach less rewarding for listeners of a certain bent is that, once in a great while, there is a minor imperfection in fingering or articulation. Such things usually pass unnoticed

in a live recital, but in our age of hyper-hygienic, over-edited recordings, they might impair some peoples' enjoyment. My advice: Learn from the experience. Get over it. Perhaps attending more live concerts would help.

I discussed this issue once with André Watts, who told me that when he was unhappy with one piece in a live recital that was being recorded for commercial release, rather than record an insert to be edited in later, he would

differently. I don't know if the listener's leg is being pulled, but in his liner notes Stanhope claims that because the Toccata's final chord calls for the stretch of a twelfth in the left hand, in order to avoid arpeggiating that part of the chord, he plays the left-hand top note with his tongue. How he can do that without knocking his head on the fall-board, I don't pretend to know. But I do have faith that it was not accomplished animatronically, or by editing.

STANHOPE SEEMS TO **APPROACH** RECORDING AS THOUGH HE WERE GIVING A PERFORMANCE. THERE IS A GREAT SENSE OF **ORGANIC DEVELOPMENT**, TENSION, AND FLOW.

insist on adding the piece to the next recital on that tour that was also to be recorded. He did this because he did not want to misrepresent an edited recording as a live one, and because he doubted that an insert could do justice to the overall architecture of that performance of the piece. So, with Stanhope, just as with some of the great old Nimbus "do it in one take" recordings, you gain organicity but lose some minute degree of cosmetic perfection. Sounds good to me.

As will surprise almost no one, Stanhope selected the music on *A Virtuoso Recital* from the list of dreaded fingerbusters. This is perhaps not always the deepest music, but I think there are times when we can enjoy instrumental virtuosity for its own sake, the same way we enjoy Olympic gymnastics or platform diving: that is, without worrying about their greater significance. *A Virtuoso Recital* is indeed arranged like a live recital, with a curtain raiser, two substantial works in the middle, a jaw-dropper, and an encore.

The curtain raiser is Schumann's Toccata in C, Op.7. Not exactly my favorite musical genre, but I recognize that I am in the minority; perhaps, were I a former piano student rather than a former violin and voice student, I would feel

Next up is the original piano version of Fauré's Ballade in F-sharp, Op.19. Stanhope revels in the Impressionist chromaticism, with subtly judged dynamics and pace. Following the Fauré comes the most substantial work on the program, Rachmaninoff's 13 Preludes, Op.32. Stanhope's approach is very personal, by which I mean that he views the Preludes as intensely personal utterances on Rachmaninoff's part, and finds in the last one a brusque "Take *that!*" at a sometimes uncomprehending world. Prelude 10, in b, swells to awesome volume, by the way.

The first jaw-dropper is Liszt's transcription of the *Wedding March and Elves' Dance* from Mendelssohn's *A Midsummer's Night's Dream*. In his notes, Stanhope remarks that perhaps Mendelssohn was fortunate not to live long enough to hear it. One can image a cranky Liszt thinking, "People think this is good music? I shall reveal the insipidity that lies within!" Some of the distortions of the familiar melody and its rhythm should have you cracking up; at times the proceedings verge on Gilbert and Sullivan. And of course, being solo Liszt, it is a finger-buster, and Stanhope dispatches it with aplomb.

The encore (also a jaw-dropper) is the first recording of Stanhope's own

transcription of Sibelius' song "The Tryst," and it is as fine a piece of late-Romantic keyboard swashbuckling as one could ask for. I suspect that its bodice-rippingly bombastic extravagances might not stand up to unlimited repeated listenings, but the pianists out there will be agog, for sure. Or giggling hysterically. (Violinist Arturo Delmoni's reaction: "I'm speechless.") Stanhope dishes out double handfuls of what, in another context, would be called power chords. His dynamic range is staggering. You really must hear "The Tryst."

Just as Ivan Moravec's performance of Brahms' *Intermezzo in A, Op.118 No.2*, is my touchstone for artistic nuance in piano playing, the Sibelius-Stanhope "Tryst" is my new touchstone for pedal-to-the-metal technical virtuosity and raw power. (In researching this piece, I discovered that Sibelius' first language was Swedish, and that the few of his songs that are not in Swedish are in German. Hunh. Huedathunquet.)

In short, Stanhope's *A Virtuoso Recital* is a great pianism-showpiece album in excellent sound. The Rachmaninoff Preludes go a long way toward offsetting the "empty calories" pieces, and Stanhope's Sibelius transcription is a treasure. Highly recommended. (Exhibitors at this month's Home Entertainment 2006: take note.)

Audionet SAM V2 integrated amplifier: \$4400

Last time out, I profiled ESP's Concert Grand SI loudspeakers in the context of a stereo system that, all-in, came perilously close to costing \$100,000. I don't apologize for that. There are people shopping for \$40,000/pair loudspeakers, and I believed they would benefit from learning about ESP's entry in that field. However, I also cheerfully acknowledge that, according to *Stereophile's* survey data (adjusted for inflation), the average reader has about \$15,000 invested in his or her two-channel system.

Opinions differ about how best to allocate the total budget for a stereo system, but I think that there can be no argument that \$4000 is a fertile price point for both amplification and a pair of speakers. This time out I discuss worthy contenders near that price in both categories.

Audionet is a German company I first became aware of from hearing my friends at loudspeaker builder Wilson

Benesch talk about how impressed they were with Audionet's electronics. They were so impressed that Wilson Benesch undertook to become Audionet's UK importer and distributor. I got in touch with Audionet's US representatives (www.audionetusa.com), who in due

much more expensive Jeff Rowland Design Group Model 302.

Options include a remote control, a phono module for moving-magnet and moving-coil cartridges, and a DAC module with sampling rates of 32, 44.1, 48, 88.2, and 96kHz at word lengths of up to 24 bits. The review unit was in silver finish with black lettering and blue display. Black metalwork with white lettering, and a red display, are also available.

There are six standard inputs. If the phono module is fitted, it takes over Input 1. Inputs 2-5 are assignable, as the SAM V2 is micro-processor-controlled.



Cutline

I THINK THAT **THERE CAN BE** NO ARGUMENT THAT \$4000 IS A FERTILE PRICE POINT FOR BOTH **AMPLIFICATION** AND A PAIR OF SPEAKERS.

course sent me an evaluation sample of their SAM V2 110Wpc integrated amplifier. The SAM V2's suggested retail prices begin at \$4400 and go up, depending on options.

The ca 100Wpc solid-state integrated amplifier (or, in the case of Magnum Dynalab, receiver) is a product that I think in many cases can offer an optimal blend of performance and price to the listener who wants to stop obsessing about equipment and just get closer to some music.

The SAM V2 is 17" (435mm) wide, 3.75" (95mm) high, 14" (360mm) deep, and weighs about 35 lbs (16kg). Its construction quality is very good. The faceplate is the usual 3/8"-thick solid aluminum, nicely machined. What is unusual at this price is that the rest of the cabinetwork is machined stock rather than bent sheet metal. Rear-panel RCA jacks are lugged on, rather than pass-through circuit-board mounts. Speaker terminals are of high quality and EC compliant. Industrial design and fit and finish are excellent at the price. To use two competing units as benchmarks, the Audionet SAM V2 is priced close to the Plinius 9200, but its build quality approaches that of the

Input 6 is half of a recording loop and is paired with the Record Out jacks; when Input 6 is selected, Record Out is muted, to avoid potentially disastrous feedback from inadvertently recording itself.

The rear panel also includes two RCA S/PDIF digital inputs for the optional DAC module (selecting these as inputs requires use of the remote control). A standard 1/4" headphone jack is on the rear panel, where preamp outs are also provided; a rear-panel IEC inlet allows the use of aftermarket power cords, and a master On/Off switch is adjacent. For regular operation, there is a standby/operate button (marked Power) on the front panel.

The front panel also includes a Set button for selecting menu options, a large fluorescent-display window (brightness is adjustable), and two rotary knobs. The left-hand knob selects among the six standard inputs, the right adjusts volume. Both knobs are indirect in operation: they give instructions to the microprocessor, which in turn operates relays or a motor-driven ALPS volume control.

Setup was a breeze, during which it became apparent that the SAM V2 has been very well thought out. Pushing the

Power button rouses it from sleep (the display reads “WAKING UP”). The microprocessor control even checks to see if your wall current is in reversed polarity, in which case it displays a warning. The microprocessor also monitors temperature, overload conditions, the presence of DC, and HF oscillation.

I went directly from listening to the \$18,181.81 darTZeel NHB-108 Model One amplifier, *Stereophile’s* Amplifier of the Year and Joint Product of the Year for 2005, to the \$4400 Audionet SAM V2. I might have expected to be crashingly disappointed, but was pleasantly surprised to discover that the Audionet was not that far away from the darTZeel in essential sonic character, with enviable imaging and dynamics and very impressive bass control.

It may be jumping to a conclusion, but perhaps the sonic similarity was accounted for by the fact that, like the darTZeel, the Audionet has only two output devices per channel and an unusually hefty power supply. But there is no free lunch, and I must admit that, as fine-sounding as the SAM V2 was, it just couldn’t match the more-than-four-times-as-much darTZeel’s refined sweetness in the treble and overall tonal lusciousness. Still, the SAM V2 sounded neither spare nor lean but rather creamy, perhaps even “tube-like,” and its dynamics were excellent. The SAM V2 was able to push the ESP Concert Grands to greater-than-concert levels with David Stanhope’s performance of Sibelius’ “The Tryst” without getting congested or raucous. The casework got moderately warm when the amp was pushed hard, but not to a degree to cause concern. Turning the SAM V2 all the way up on *Sunrise*, from Richard Strauss’s *Also sprach Zarathustra*, created a most impressive imitation of a Saturn V rocket launch. Bravo.

The Audionet SAM V2 integrated amplifier’s pros: sophisticated sound, great dynamics and bass, excellent build quality at the price, options allowing for great flexibility, solid value for money. Its cons? None that I can think of.

Audio Physic Tempo IV loudspeaker: \$3995/pair

Audio Physic’s Tempo IV loudspeaker is a handsome, slim floorstander with a suggested retail price of \$3995/pair (www.audiophysic.com). Its cabinet

design is unusually sophisticated for a speaker at this price. Over and above the faultlessly applied, high-quality, bookmatched cherry veneer, the 39”-tall cabinet is raked back 7° to time-align the midrange unit and tweeter.¹ The cabinet sides gracefully flare in and out in asymmetrical arcs from



Cultine

that hold the midrange to its compliant suspension are also the mounting points for the front grilles, which cover only the midrange and treble drivers. Neat! This avoids the unsightly appearance, when a speaker’s grilles are removed, of the receptacles for the usual plastic grommets. (I listened with all the grilles off.)

Each side of the Tempo IV holds a 7” bass driver positioned close to the floor, apparently to minimize the Allison Effect: irregular bass reinforcement and cancellation from floor reflections. These drivers are mounted back to back and wired in positive phase, which I suppose makes the speaker’s bass configuration “push-push.” Given its narrow grille and the fact that its woofers are in the same phase on both sides of the cabinet, the Tempo IV is not made in “handed” pairs. This may be of interest to that small number of devoted listeners who wish to reproduce the Golden Era three-channel recordings (such as Mercury Living Presence) now appearing in multichannel SACD form with three Tempos.

To lend stability to this rather narrow and top-heavy design, two lateral

THE TEMPO IVS’ **ABILITY** TO CREATE THE CONVINCING ILLUSION OF A **SOUNDSTAGE** LIVED UP TO THE FOLKLORE ABOUT MICHAEL FREMER’S WATER-HEATER **REPAIRMAN**.

front to rear and meet at the rear panel, which is flat and parallel with the front panel. The rear and top panels are veneered as well. The rear panel includes the terminal block, which includes high-quality single binding posts and is mounted on a compliant suspension to minimize the influence of structure-borne vibrations on the crossover. The rear panel also includes a moderately large, flared port. Nominal impedance is a claimed 4 ohms.

Near the top edge of the front panel is mounted a conventional soft-dome tweeter (not a ring-radiator, as found on some other AP models) and, immediately below that, a 5” metal-cone midrange, the sides of its basket cropped to allow the front panel to be as narrow as possible. The rest of the front panel is empty, save for an unobtrusive logo badge close to the bottom. One particularly welcome and sophisticated touch is that three of the bolts

braces bolt on to each speaker’s bottom, at front and rear. These, in turn, hold spikes. Again, clever design touches are in evidence: The spikes are adjustable from above, and, after final adjustment, plastic inserts cover the ends of the braces.

The Tempo IV lives up, in spades, to Audio Physic’s motto: “no loss of fine detail.” I can’t recall ever having heard the action noises of Joni Mitchell’s piano at the beginning of the title track of *Court and Spark* with more clarity from any speaker costing less than \$10,000/pair.

The Tempo IVs’ ability to create the convincing illusion of a soundstage also lived up to the folklore about Michael Fremer’s water-heater repairman. That chap walked right past the Audio Physic Virgos Michael had just played a Roy Orbison track for him on, thinking that the panel speakers behind them were the sources of the music—some speakers

¹Whether it does or not, of course, depends critically on the crossover topology. —JA

really can “disappear.” I believe a quote from the repairman featured for some time in Audio Physic’s US advertising. (See *Stereophile*, September 1995, Vol.18 No.9, p.121; www.stereophile.com/floorloudspeakers/147/.)

My initial setup was with the Audionet SAM V2 integrated amplifier driving the Tempo IVs, the speakers at the 1/3 points of the room’s width and about 7’ from my listening position, toed in so that their cabinet sides were not visible. I felt there was an unquestionable excess of energy in the range of the middle of the violin’s E string and upward (about 1320Hz and up). This caused the overall presentation to be a bit too intense, not only in timbre but also in imaging and dynamics. I had intended the setup to have adequate breathing room, but even with the Audionet’s ever-so-slightly *zafitig* contribution, the sound was far too forward.

Audio Physic’s US importer, Gabby Amram of Soundquest LLC (212-731-0729), revealed to me the error of my ways. The Tempos are designed to be listened to positioned rather far apart, close to the sidewalls, and not toed in at all. Ah. Moving things around as suggested resulted in a smoother treble balance, a more relaxed overall sound, and a much wider soundstage. Midrange textures were still on the light and agile side of the ledger, and the bass was ample but well integrated.

In essential sound, the Tempo IV is an interesting contrast to Spendor’s S8e (\$2995/pair), the last speaker in that general price tier that passed through here. The S8e delivered an updated version of the traditional, polite, British studio-monitor sound. The Tempo IV is more of a crisp, clear Riesling to the Spendor’s velvety Châteauneuf-du-Pape. If the Spendor S8e strikes you as insufficiently detailed and lively, the Tempo may be just the ticket. Given the \$1000 difference in their prices, I think that both speakers are cases of getting what you pay for.

To sum up the Audio Physic Tempo IV: Pros: Lively timbres, detailed and dynamic presentation with superb imaging, handsome looks, excellent design and build quality. Cons: Careful attention to setup and associated equipment required to prevent this speaker’s virtues from turning into vices.

Feedback: jmrlds@jmrlds.com. ■