

BLOG

# Reality Check...

## Visiting the new CH Precision listening room

By Steve Dickinson



Manufacturers have listening rooms for different reasons. Some are a technical R&D tool; some are a way to impress investors, clients and media, a physical extension of their marketing strategy perhaps; some are multi-purpose and compromised as a result. But rare is the audio manufacturer of any appreciable size that doesn't have one, in some form or another. Some go to considerable lengths: dedicated mains, room treatment, architectural cleverness; others do what they can with the space they have and a limited budget. I've visited a few and there's definitely no 'one size fits all' solution, nor even any obvious consensus over the fundamental guiding principles. The one thing that always holds true, in my limited experience, is that a visit to a manufacturer's listening room will be interesting and informative. And not just in the chance to play with interesting toys, but in the insights it offers into that manufacturer's approach to what they do and the way they do it...

I recently had the opportunity to visit CH Precision's new Swiss headquarters, get the factory tour, and spend some time in the Company's listening room. Regular readers will know that my head has recently been turned by exposure to the CH Precision stable, as RG predicted at the time, so this was interesting on many levels. It was part opportunity to catch up with RG himself and part chance to put my previous experiences with the Swiss brand into a wider musical and company context. I've spent time on the nursery slopes of CH-country in my own listening room, and heard the high-end stuff at shows, but here was an opportunity to experience the upper reaches of the range in what will become a more stable and settled environment – and to see how the Company is coping with the change. “Will” because the room itself is new, has only recently become fully operational and, like the rest of the office space, is still evolving. Not that you'd realise that at first glance. Indeed, I was struck by just how neat, quiet and calm the production facilities were. We watched CH Precision staff assembling 10 Series products in separate areas of almost library-like hush. No radio blaring pop music, or cluttered workbenches, just an air of quiet focus and attention to the job at hand: not a bad metaphor for the whole CH Precision way of doing things, as it turns out. A quiet focus I hope we didn't disrupt too much when we moved on to the listening facilities.



CH Precision has just moved its location – from one corner of the building in which it's located to the opposite corner, doubling the available space and consolidating its offices and production. The building itself is typical of office and light industrial buildings on industrial estates the world over. They occupy a couple of floors in a four-storey, modern-but-anonymous block that you could teleport into any reasonably sized town, anywhere, and nobody would notice. The listening room is a pre-existing part of that space, with all the limitations that implies when it comes to size, shape and the quality of the AC mains supply. It's a decent sized room, though given the sort of systems CH Precision produces it's not particularly large, measuring 7m x 7m, with a 2.5m ceiling. Spacious enough, but not the auditorium you might anticipate, it's also square(!) and that ceiling, suspended like millions of office ceilings everywhere, isn't doing it many favours. CH has installed acoustic ceiling tiles, and there's a gantry behind the system on the front wall, from which hang some carefully placed, theatre-style acoustically padded curtains (some of the same ones the company normally uses at the Munich show). The back wall is occupied by a bank of IKEA Kallax shelving, groaning under the weight of numerous industry and media awards but mostly filled with vinyl and CDs. There's half a Vicoustic Flexi Wave diffuser/absorber perched on one end of those shelves, balancing the doorway at the other end, but that's about it for room treatment. So if you are expecting to be shocked and awed, it's not the exquisite construction or extensive room treatment that's going to do it.



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Which is not to say there isn't shock and awe to be had. There's the eye-catching Göbel Divin Noblesse loudspeakers, for starters, flanking a pair of stacked M10 power amplifiers. Oh, and a pair of (currently unemployed) M1.1 power amps resting alongside, just in case you want to compare them to the flagship models, or use a (slightly) less extravagant set-up. Besides which, having struggled with their A1.5 baby brother, I suspect that they're just too heavy to move. The amps sit on precisely levelled platforms, Italian Solidsteel legs mated to locally produced plywood shelves, routed out to better accommodate the amplifiers' feet. So there's plenty to catch your eye, neither the Göbel nor the stack of six CH amplifier boxes being what you might call discreet or unassuming.

The Nordost Odin 2 cabling hooking all these together also trails off to more Solidsteel/plywood racking standing on the left side wall, stacked with source components and pre-amplification. Recently having been used for extended testing of and listening to the P10 phono-stage (launched earlier this year in Munich and just starting to be delivered) a P10/L10 combination is being fed by a TechDas Air Force 3PS with Thales Statement tonearm and an X-quisite ST cartridge, with its one-piece ceramic cantilever and coil armature arrangement. Look behind the rack and it's Odin 2 as far as the eye can see. In fact, every single cable in this system is drawn from Nordost's flagship line – with a single exception: the network cables that attach the SOTM switch to the C1.2 DAC are Valhalla 2, because there are no network cables in the Odin family!



So, pretty unimpeachable ancillaries and supporting componentry, which all goes to reinforce my growing awareness of CH Precision's clarity of purpose. The total consistency of supports and cabling is unusual to say the least. The care that's been lavished on dressing the cables and levelling both the racks and then the individual components, the use of Silent Mount SM3 titanium couplers between the 10 Series titanium spikes and the supporting surfaces all suggest that no stone has been left unturned when it comes to eliminating unexpected variables intruding on the listening experience. Somehow, this no longer surprises me. So naturally, they're not going to rely on a single system either, in case equipment interactions distort the developmental results. Nor does the Company want to become too closely associated with any particular partner, keen as it is to stress the universal nature of its products – perhaps the true sense of the over-used audio phrase, "Swiss neutrality". The Göbel Divin Noblesse can be replaced with the rather more 'real world' Magico S1 Mk.2s or, for a complete change of emphasis, Wilson Alexx Vs, with or without Watchdog subs. Stenheim speakers are regular visitors, while there are complete sets of Chord Co. Sarum T and Argento cables available too. There's also a second turntable on the rack, a 'standard' AirForce 3 with Thales Simplicity arm and EMT cartridge. Digital files are held on a NAS drive located elsewhere in the office, routed to the C1.2 via the previously mentioned SOTM sNH-10G network switch with its matching linear power supply.



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It's all very well talking about or claiming extraordinary attention to detail, but such talk is cheap. Spying a digital level on one of the shelves, I ran it over the racks and speakers. Yep, those racks are definitely level, as is all the equipment standing on them. But what was really surprising was the speaker rake angle: Not just similar, but identical! To two decimal places!! When they said they spent time on the nuts and bolts, they weren't kidding. Which is I guess, kind of reassuring given the cost of the equipment involved...



So, with the preliminaries covered and the kit duly inspected, stroked and coo-ed over, it was time to hear what it's all about. RG has been working with the P10 too, so knowing there'd be one available in the listening room, he brought with him a few of the discs that will feature in his impending review, starting with Sibelius and Colin Davis' account of the *Second Symphony*, on Philips (taking advantage of the Philips curve that the P10 has added to its range of EQ options). First impressions: now **this** is what it feels



like to sit in front of an orchestra. Reviewers, myself included, are apt to talk about imaging, sound-staging and such matters, and many systems I've sat in front of make a good effort at recreating the scale and spread of a large ensemble, but compared to what I'm hearing here, they are merely valiant attempts at the truth. Here and now, I'm sat before a wholly convincing stage with a symphony orchestra laid out before me. This is like sitting in the first few rows of the stalls – close enough to get the visceral impact and place individual instruments not simply groups of instruments. Actually, it's how I imagine it might sound from the podium, everything laid out and available for inspection, at will. Compared to this, most systems I've heard are more like the

experience from the front row of the dress circle – slightly impressionistic, blocks of sound that don't resolve down to the level of granular detail I'm hearing now.

Impressive as that is, it's just a means to an end, evidence that nothing got broken during retrieval of the signal. Crucially, musically it's also pretty much beyond reproach: Davis' account gets deep into the shape and the pulse of the piece, one senses the flow, and the sheer physicality of the music, and as the system clearly demonstrated, a lot of this is down to the ability to select the right EQ. But once you've extracted the music from the disc, getting it into the room is the next job and here, the M10s and the Göbel loudspeakers are supreme: Textures, phrasing, nuance, musical and performance choices, all those micro-dynamic subtleties that differentiate great music from merely good music. There's absolutely no question that this system's extraordinary imaging capability and spatial resolution is helping here, taking you beyond the 'willing suspension of disbelief', making it effectively irrelevant. Its fluid, unobtrusive way with pace and timing lets you simply forget about those challenges to reproduction entirely. But it's also the effortless ability to scale instant dynamic shifts, whether from quiet to loud, or loud to quiet, there's almost no sense of lag, drag or hysteresis, just music. There's so little scope for disbelief that closing my eyes puts me right there, at the performance.



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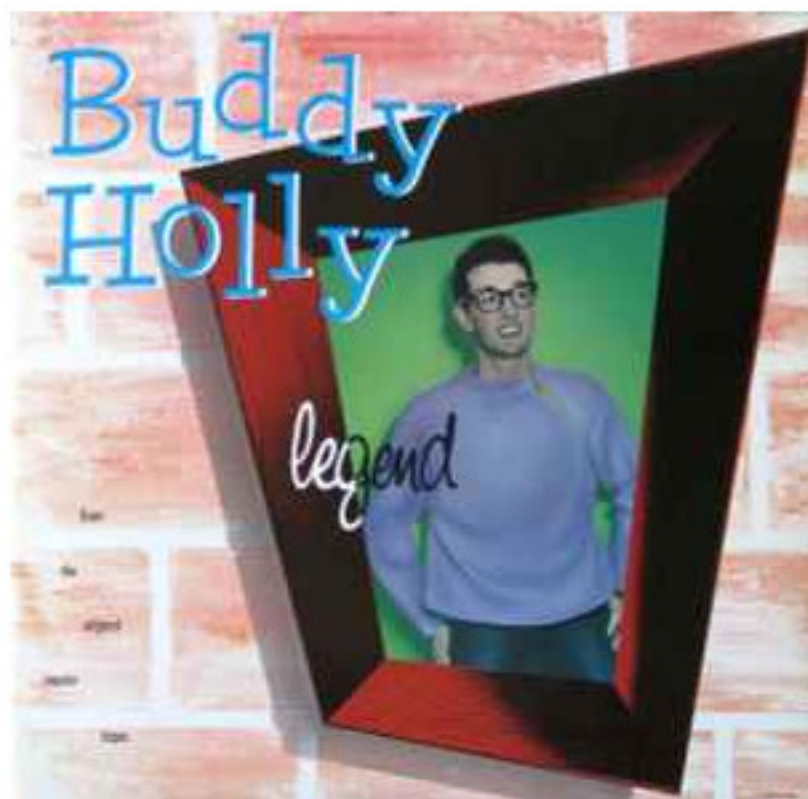
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Rodrigo, *Concerto for Harp and Strings* on DGG (Teldec EQ curve, just saying...). Oh, goodness, there's a life-sized harp and, as with the Sibelius, the orchestra occupies a properly proportioned and utterly realistic platform: it's just **there**. The natural sized harp thing is interesting. Too many systems and recordings give you a giant soloist bestriding the orchestra, so here's yet another way this system avoids breaking the spell, and just lets the listener in on the performance.

And yes, I've spent enough time with CH Precision now that this isn't entirely surprising, though the Göbel Divin Noblesse are, quite literally, revelatory. But what this shows also is not just the

value and importance of careful set up, but the absolutely critical need for it if you want performance at this level. I'm in no doubt that if the loudspeaker placement and alignment isn't attended to with almost obsessive attention to detail, the gain structure, global feedback, cabling, power and system supports are not adjusted and tweaked painstakingly, almost none of what I just heard would have taken place and we'd be back in Humdrum Hall, Unremarkablesville. Which, I now know, is where I spend some of my time, particularly at shows. What is quickly becoming clear is that CH Precision is about more, much more than just sonics. They understand about performance – that ineffable human connection we have with music – and they know how to bring it out of our recordings.



Buddy Holly. My parents' music, and therefore largely ignored by me for decades. Big mistake. Huge! as Julia Roberts once famously said. RG put on 'True Love Ways' and I was captivated. Holly's timing is effortless, the orchestra swings, soars and swoons, and so do I. I discovered Sinatra relatively late, for similar reasons, and now I have another back catalogue to explore. And this is what good systems do, of course, they reveal the music, the performance, and all the talent and skill that went into it. Sometimes, it's not enough to approach new music with an open mind, you need a system that lets you in, with the minimum of editorialising or interference.

Moving on to CD, with the D1.5 player as a transport, feeding the C1.2 and thence to the L10 line stage courtesy (naturally) of more Nordost Odin 2. And some of my music now: Chick Corea, Christian McBride, and Brian Blade, *How Deep is the Ocean* from 'Trilogy 2' [Concord Jazz]. Brian Blade is regularly lauded as one of the greatest jazz drummers playing today, and having heard him perform live, I'm not about to argue. It's not always apparent from recordings, though, but today there's no room for doubt. Quite apart from the lock-step timekeeping, his use of texture and the sheer inventiveness in his playing is being delivered without any suggestion that the system's capabilities are being stretched. Similarly, Christian McBride's bass has immediacy and power, but also texture; many systems fail to resolve the upper frequency harmonics in bass notes coherently, and then you hear a system that resolves them well, and you realise what you've been missing. It gives you so much more of the physicality of the playing. Bass notes still have leading edges, and the better resolved they are, the tighter, faster and more impactful that bass will be, and the more effectively it does its job.



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Or take ‘Songs of our native daughters’ [Smithsonian Folkways Recordings], an album that tells of the struggles of African-American women over the centuries. No mere historical oddity or worthy ethnographic study, here is a collection of songs that wrench the heart and twist the gut. Lines like ‘shackles on our feet, but we’re dancing’, delivered with a defiance that shouts of the human need for joy, a determination that the human spirit shall not be repressed by brutality and cruelty and will ultimately prevail. Here, there’s a visceral sense of participation, of being present at a musical event of real significance. I’m reminded that good art can not only reflect on, or offer commentary on, the world, but can also be an agent for change.



If that sounds pompous and pretentious, perhaps I should apologise, but listening to this system, in CH Precision’s listening room, these are the sort of thoughts that came to the surface. Music is an extraordinary phenomenon, with the ability to connect directly with our brains in a way few other sensory experiences can. And the CH Precision room makes this abundantly clear. What is also clear is that CH Precision’s approach is about preserving the musical event; they clearly understand what is needed, in a technical sense, to achieve that direct route into our musical awareness. And that extends beyond the CH Precision hardware to the supporting ancillaries, and how they interact with that hardware.

It’s not a remarkable room. In truth it’s a fairly prosaic room. And yet, it achieves remarkable things. To CH Precision it’s a tool. A way to evaluate development prototypes, try combinations of partnering equipment, experiment with placement and setup, listen for differences and learn from those experiences. As a reference point it needs to be stable and that stability relies absolutely on the consistency within the system being used and the care and consistency in its set up. It’s an honest room, without pretence, because it’s there to do a job for the manufacturer. But by the same token, it’s not some sterile lab environment; it’s equally clear that CH Precision’s approach is not merely about achieving technical excellence for its own sake. It’s a necessary, but not sufficient criterion. So while it’s not been conceived as a marketing tool, the CH listening room is also, by nature if not by design, a showcase. It’s a sonic and musical reference point. But it is also a place where partners, distributors or dealers can go to find out what makes this equipment so special – and to discover just what is possible when you go to such extraordinary lengths over system set up, ancillaries and partnering equipment. No doubt a higher ceiling or more harmonious dimensions, fewer reflective surfaces or careful acoustic treatment might wring even more from the system, but I left with one lasting impression: those things are ‘nice to haves’ not ‘must haves’. Start with the right equipment, set it up really carefully, and extraordinary things are yours for the asking.



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## The CH Precision Listening Room Equipment List

Obviously, the digital and analogue electronics are a constantly changing cast of CH Precision components, depending on what the company is working towards at any point in time. Here is the list of other equipment that contributes to the system:

### Analogue Sources

TechDAS AirForce 3PS turntable

Thales Statement Tonearm

X-quisite ST cartridge

TechDAS AirForce 3 turntable

Thales Simplicity Tonearm

EMT JSD Cartridge (various)

### Speakers

Göbel Divin Noblesse

Wilson Audio Alexx V

Wilson Audio WatchDog Sub-woofers and XO Crossover

Magico S1 Mk.2

### Cables

Complete looms (power cords, signal and speaker cables) of:

Nordost Odin 2

Chord Co. Sarum T

Argento Flow

### Supports

Custom cut 40mm birch-ply shelves used with uprights from Solidsteel

Silent Mount SM3 titanium footers