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The 2023 Capitol Audio Fest: Alan Taffel

SHOW by Alan Taffel | Nov 15, 2023

The panoply of audio shows is beginning to shake out as follows. Munich, as everyone knows, is the largest international audio event. Every major high-end manufacturer plans his most significant product introductions around Munich. In the U.S., AXPONA reigns supreme. Most U.S. audio companies, and even a sprinkling of international firms, organize important debuts there.

But what of the companies, domestic or international, that can't quite elbow their way into the Munich or AXPONA limelight? They have a new product to share with the press and public; yet they're either too small or unfamiliar—or the gear they're premiering isn't quite world-changing enough—to break through the noise. What's their recourse?

Increasingly, the answer is the Capitol Audio Fest. Though based in D.C. rather than, say, New York, the calculus works. CAF has grown so energetically—30% in the last year alone—that among U.S. shows it is now second in size only to AXPONA. The event has a prime Mid-Atlantic setting that's easily reachable by audiophiles in other major cities. CAF is well-organized and attracts throngs, which pleases exhibitors, and boasts a robust journalistic presence, which pleases manufacturers.

As evidence of CAF's stature, consider the plethora of new product introductions from all over the world at this year's event. A slew of lesser-known brands, like Treehaus Audio, Mon Acoustics, Belleson, Q Acoustics, and many others took the opportunity to bow new flagships or line additions. At the same time, many of the industry's biggest hitters—YG, Gryphon, emm Labs, TAD, Technics, Rega, and Tidal, to name a few—chose CAF to showcase important new models.

As the only TAS attendee to spend all three days at the show, my hands, to say the least, were full. There was no way I could give as much time as I would have liked to all 130 rooms; so, inevitably, I missed some systems and some news. I apologize in advance to any manufacturer or dealer I might have inadvertently slighted. Even so, my notebook brimmed with scribble about new gear and the sound of every room I entered. I've whittled all that down and hereby present the most significant new products and bewitching systems I encountered.

What's better than an all-mbl system? A white all-mbl system.

Top 5 Best-Sounding Rooms (In no particular order)

1. **Fidelity Imports/Magnepan.** Fidelity Imports doesn't handle Magnepan, but it turned over one of its *nine* rooms to allow the venerable speaker firm to showcase its new model, the 2.7i. (See Auspicious Debuts below.) Driven by the **Audia Flight FLS 10** integrated amp and an **Aurender** streamer, the sound on the first two days was incredibly realistic in a way that few besides Magnepan can muster, and the bass was shockingly good. Things got even better on the third day, when the Magnepan folks upgraded the speakers to 'X' status. Total system price: $22k/$26k.
2. As usual, the MBL room was a highlight of the show. This year the company opted to forego the X-Tremes and stick with the "plain old" 101 E Mk II's, which turned out to be more than satisfying. Indeed, the sense of being in the presence of the musicians and recording venue imparted by these speakers is spectacular. This was the most "3-D" presentation I heard at the show. Even choirs, one of the toughest tests for an audio system, sounded realistic. MBL sometimes gets knocked for playing too loudly at shows, but I was treated to many softer pieces, where the 101's showed off the delicacy of which they're capable. Total system price: $318k.
3. **Acora/Audio Research/VPI.** Although the presence of Acora on the list of best-sounding rooms may be getting monotonous, the sound these speakers make is anything but. Once again, Val Cora brought his $220k VRC-1 flagships; but this year he swapped out VAC electronics for **ARC** because, you know, he now owns the company. Rounding out the system was a **VPI Titan Direct** turntable and a **van den Hul** The results, as ever, were glorious. In particular, these were by far the most revealing speakers at the show, and bass wasn't just deep and tight but conveyed the character of the instrument playing. Total system price: $500k, including **Nordost Oden 2** cables.

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4. **Bending Wave.** For four years, Bending Wave's Elliot Goldman has had the same large room at CAF. There, he's experimented with various combinations of components, always featuring German speakers by Göbel. This year, he hit it out of the park, ironically with **Göbel**'s "entry-level" offering, the $90k **Divin Marquis**. Fed by **Riviera** electronics and a complete **Wadax** digital array, the system created a huge soundstage, with plenty of detail and air, excellent transients, and thunderous bass. Most importantly, it unfailingly got to the heart of the music. Total system price: $555k.
5. **Quad/Java.** What's this? A new **Quad**? (See Auspicious Debuts below.) Playing *loudly*? That's right. The surprise of the show was being driven to perfection by a **Michell Gyrodec SE** table and **Java Hi Fi Single Shot** integrated amp, and the result had all the virtues of Quads of old—lack of edge, infinite coherence, speed, and transparency—plus newfound traits of terrific dynamics and bass. Did I mention they were playing loudly? Manna from heaven. Total system price: $42k.

Gobel's Divan Marquis speakers and Riviera electronics made beautiful music.

Top 20 Auspicious Debuts

Speakers

Vertically integrated Japanese manufacturer **TAD** introduced the U.S. to the **Grand Evolution One** ($65k). This is the big brother to the Evolution One TX ($30k) reviewed favorably by Andy Quint. The extra cash buys dual 7** woofers, as opposed to five-inchers, and a bigger coincident tweeter/midrange driver. The former enable the speaker to hit 30Hz. As played by an all-TAD system (naturally), the GE1 had a lovely sound that nonetheless did not lack for naturally rendered detail. In this room, it easily reached the deepest depths. TAD also introduced a new preamplifier, the $25k **C1000**.

Maggies: The new Maggie 2.7's hit the size/price /sound sweet spot in the line.

Any new **Magnepan** is cause for celebration, but the latest may be even more so than usual. That's because the new **2.7i** ($6k) and upgraded **2.7X** ($10k) not only come in at a very attractive price point but are also big enough to be full range, while not being so large as to overpower a room. They include a true ribbon tweeter, too. Their sound at CAF was impressive (see Best-Sounding Rooms above). I predict the 2.7's will quickly become one of Magnepan's top sellers.

Lowther, the British speaker builder, introduced the **Edilia** model ($25k+ depending on options). As part of a growing trend, every speaker ordered is customized to the buyer's wishes. Options include aesthetic flavors such as grille-cloth color, as well as sonically impactful choices like driver size. The driver complement is a coincident tweeter/midrange, a super-tweeter, and a woofer—all horn-loaded. Interestingly, there is no crossover on the main driver. Efficiency is an astonishing 97dB, which explains how the Edilia could sound so capable when driven by a **Triode Amp** integrated with just 35Wpc.

Another horn speaker making its U.S. debut was the **Cessaro Wagner 2** ($65k). Driven by a 6-watt tube amp, the sound was what you expect from good horns: lively with extraordinary dynamics. Unlike many horns, though, the Wagner 2 was surprisingly coherent. There was no bass in this outing, but that probably was the fault of the room.

One of the most "inspirational" premiers of the show was the **Q Acoustics 5050**. Though only $2k, the speaker's design showed a great deal of thought. For instance, the driver configuration is MTM, and the mid/woof's cone shape is designed to optimize both extension and tweeter integration. Both attributes were clearly audible, as was bass that was simply unbelievable at this price.

Diptyque has been building out its line of handsome full-range planars. The latest is the **DP140 Mk II** ($17k), which sits in the exact center of the range. (The line runs from $8k to $50k.) Unlike many full-range planars, the Diptyques don't need gobs of power. At CAF, the DP140 was driven by the exquisite **Soul Note A3** integrated amp, which makes 120Wpc into 4 ohms. The sound was highly dynamic yet natural, though the speakers lacked for bass.

Jeff Joseph may be the most underrated and unsung speaker designer in the industry. But the man knows his stuff, as illustrated by his latest, the **Joseph Audio Perspective 2 Graphene** ($17k). Though a modestly sized floorstander, when driven by **Doshi** hybrid electronics with a **Berkley Audio Design** digital front-end at CAF, it evoked a sense of ease and scale that eluded many other systems.

I heard **The Living Voice RM80** in Munich, where it was much lauded, and have been awaiting its U.S. arrival. Now it's here at a price of $54k. As in Europe, the sound at CAF was warm and highly musical. The RM80s' 93dB sensitivity enabled them to be driven by a **Border Patrol** tube amp putting out just 16Wpc.

For the first time in the U.S., **Kroma** was showing the **Atelier Turnadot** ($220k–$240k) in finished form. The speaker features two AMT tweeters, two 6.5** midrange drivers, dual 12** woofers, and a crossover that makes extensive use of Mundorf components. The total package weighs 460 pounds! As driven by **Aavik** electronics, the sound was as beautiful on a Rubinstein piano piece as it was beefy on Dylan's "The Man in the Long Black Coat."

I was impressed with a new-to-me company called **Mon Acoustics.** At CAF, it released an upgraded version of the **Supermon Mini** ($2k). Compared to the old version, crossover revisions have improved both coherence and bass output. But what's so striking about these little guys is the quality of materials (aluminum cabinet, Mundorf parts) and innovative design touches (Isobaric woofers) you wouldn't expect at this price. Sonically, they definitely punch above their weight.

The bewitching Stenheim Alumine Two.Five.

CAF was my first opportunity to hear the **Stenheim Alumine Five SE**—driven by **DarTZeel** separates, no less. Either due to the room or the setup, the sound was disappointing. However, just down the hall I encountered the welterweight **Alumine Two.Five** ($23,500) making its first North American appearance. Slotting, obviously, between the stand-mount Alumine Two and the slightly larger floorstanding Alumine Three, the Two.Five has got that loads of that Stenheim magic. Indeed, they sounded simply wonderful: open, full of timbral detail, and dynamically impactful. At CAF, they didn't plumb the depths, but they produced solid bass circa 45Hz. For me, the latest Stenheim was one of the stars of the show.

CAF was also host to the world premiere of the **YG Carmel 3** ($29k). Successor to the beloved Carmel 2, the 3 incorporates the company's latest technology and manufacturing techniques. These have resulted in a more complex and effective tweeter waveguide, custom caps in the crossover, tweaks to the tweeter, and a thinner yet stronger cone for the mid/woof. Playing with **Vinnie Rossi** electronics, the new 3 was extended both high and low, with a touch of newfound richness.

The 2812X has all the historical Quad traits, and much more.

As already noted (see Best-Sounding Rooms above), there's a new **Quad** in town. It's called the **2812X**, and it lists, according to the rep at CAF, for $10k. That seems strange, since the current Quad 2812 runs $15k. We can but hope the new price is real. In any event, the 2812X is essentially a massively upgraded ESL63. In addition to the metal frame and other tweaks we've seen before, the latest iteration has a re-designed protection circuit that allows it to be played loudly with safety. Let me tell you, walking into a room and hearing Quads, with all their usual splendid virtues, playing at nearly uncomfortably loud levels induces cognitive dissonance. But it happened, so I'm a believer.

Electronics

Belleson, a company known among industry insiders since 2010 for its high-voltage regulators (which are found in many a high-end component) has moved into finished products. At CAF, it introduced its first: the **Brilliance** phonostage ($2500). The unit has three gain stages, of which the first two are current rather than voltage gain, which is said to reduce overall distortion. There are two inputs, each of which can be set to either mm or mc. The niftiest feature is an app that allows complete control of the inputs from your listening seat. For instance, in real time you can adjust resistive and capacitive cartridge loading on the fly.

Famous for its take-no-prisoner powerhouses, **Gryphon** toned things down a bit with the world premiere of the **333** integrated amplifier ($25k). The unit incorporates trickle-down technology from the far more costly Apex and Commander separates. Though an integrated, the 333 still manages to put out, well, 333Wpc into 8 ohms. Sweetening and already sweet deal, in first quarter of 2024 there will be optional DAC and phonostage cards.

VAC loves CAF, and as is its wont, used the occasion to inaugurate several products. First and foremost was the **202iQ** stereo power amp ($22k). The baby brother of the more powerful (and more expensive, at $42k) 300iQ, the new model delivers 100Wpc; it can also be configured as a 200-watt monoblock. According to VAC's Kevin Hayes, the two sound "like peas in a pod." In the VAC room, four 202iQ's running in mono mode were bi-amping a pair of svelte **Von Schweickert Endeavor Special Editions** ($27k). The combo proved up to the challenge of filling the huge room, evoking a large, fulsome soundstage. Dynamics and detail were nothing to sneeze at, either.

VAC's Essence line has a smaller footprint and more accessible price than standard VAC gear.

VAC also fleshed out its entry-level Essence Series, which have a smaller footprint and lower price point than traditional VAC gear. As of 1Q24, the **Essence Line** ($9k) linestage and **Essence 80** monoblocks ($10k each) will be joined by the **Essence Phono** ($9k). The new component features support for two cartridges and front-panel load selection.

Another world premier was the **emm Labs MTRS** stereo power amplifier ($65k). The hulk, designed and manufactured in Canada, delivers a healthy 200Wpc into 8 ohms. Its technology trickled down from the MTRS2 monoblocks, but the new model is a single-ended rather than a balanced design. Notably, emm says the MTRS will drive speaker loads down to a single ohm! At CAF, it was behind the estimable Joseph Audio Pearl Graphene, with excellent results.

Sources

Technics has replaced the SL1200 GR ($1800) turntable with the **SL1200 GR II** ($2200). This was the latter's first public showing. Two changes differentiate the models. First, the GR II has a beefier power supply. Second, the new version has an improved "Delta/Sigma" digital-drive control system for the coreless direct-drive motor. Together, they help remove micro-vibrations from the drive train, resulting in a quieter background and greater resolution.

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Naia is Rega's new flagship, and its first turntable over $10k.

Turntable specialist **Rega** has been gradually moving upmarket. The latest evidence, and the company's new flagship, is the **Naia**, which dips into five-digit territory at $13k, or $17k with Rega's **Apelion 2** flagship cartridge. Distinguishing the Naia from lesser Regas is a plinth made of sandwiched graphene-impregnated carbon fiber and sand. The titanium arm and bearing, and the alloy subplatter, are all new, as is the ceramic platter with a concave bottom (to shed weight). Though similar in appearance to the Rega Planar 10, the Naia is clearly much higher tech.

Linn's 50th Anniversary Edition of the venerable LP12 turntable

2023 marks **Linn**'s 50th anniversary, and to commemorate the occasion it has released a 50th anniversary edition of the venerable LP12 turntable. The new table is dubbed the **LP12-50** and is sold as a package, complete with Linn's top goodies—arm, cartridge, phonostage—for $60k. Aside from minor, though unquestionably-attractive cosmetic changes, the main distinction of the LP12-50 is a plinth made of layered beechwood and bedrock. Oddly, at least to me, the table can be ordered with a phonostage that outputs a digital signal. Fortunately, good old analog is available, too.

Other Notable Introductions

Wells Audio has a new integrated amp, the **Majestic II** ($6k), which outputs 150Wpc. **Ampsandsound**, which was previously focused on power amps and headphone amps, showed two new preamps: the **Yosemite** ($25k) and the **Yellowstone** ($34k). The two are similar, but the Yellowstone has a remote and a more sophisticated volume control. Both include built-in phonostages.

Rogue Audio revealed two new models. The **RP-5 V2** ($4k) is a preamp with much of its circuitry borrowed from higher models. Though tubed, it includes a solid-state phonostage. The **Cronus Dark** ($4500) is the company's new flagship integrated amp. Everything is upgraded compared to the standard Cronus. It sounded mighty fine driving the Joseph Audio Pulsar 2 Graphene speakers.

Legacy had a busy show, introducing a new speaker and two new power amps. The Aeris **XD** ($23,400) is an Aeris with greater low-end extension and includes active woofers. The **IV2** ($3850) and **IV4** ($6k) are two- and four-channel Class D amps, respectively. Both use ICE modules and put out a staggering 660Wpc into 8 ohms.

Acoustic Energy got a lot of buzz around the show for its **Corinium** speaker ($8500), new to North America. It has a slotted port, MDF cabinet with aluminum front baffle, a synthetic silk tweeter, carbon-fiber mid and dual woofer drivers, a second-order crossover, and a splendiferous finish.

The unique Treehaus Audio Phantom of Luxury.

Among the many other speaker intros was **Tidal**'s **Contriva G3** ($79k). As mentioned in the Munich reports, the speaker is gorgeous. **Treehaus Audio** upgraded its flagship model, the **Phantom of Luxury**. (Let's hope Rolls-Royce doesn't sue.) It costs $32.5k and features an open-baffle field coil driver, Iconoclast internal wiring, a newly upgraded woofer, and a transformer-attenuated super-tweeter said to have superior impedance matching with the other drivers.

There were relatively few DAC introductions at CAF. One was the **Geshelli Labs Dazzy** ($1300–$1700, depending on options), which employs an AKM 4499EX chipset. Another was the **Linear Tube Amplifier Aero** ($3600) non-oversampling DAC boasting an ARM front-end processor, six power supplies, and a David Berning-designed output stage. In other source news, the **VPI Titan Direct** ($60k) made its world debut in the Acora room.

Finally, among the cable introductions were three new power cords from **Triode Wire**: the **Digital American 2** ($549), **9 Plus** ($499) and the entry-level **11 Plus** ($299). All are cryo-treated. All prices are for 5-foot lengths. **Siltech** debuted the **Royal Crown** series (prices vary).

The Best of Show system: Acora VRC-1 with ARC electronics and VPI Titan Direct turntable.

Best Sound of the Show: Competition was fierce, but in the end the very best sound could be found in the **Acora** room—again. Listening to the VRC-1 after hearing virtually any other speaker is like switching from LP to mastertape. It's that revealing. Which makes it mesmerizing.

Best Sound (for the money): The **Q Acoustics** 5050 ($2k) speakers, paired with a **Unison Primo** integrated amp ($2k) and **Uno** CD player ($3k), made for a supremely accomplished combo. Not the most extended on top, but otherwise you'd never know you were listening to a $7k system.

Most Significant Trend: "Bespoke" components. That is, components that, like a Bentley, are tailored to the individual customer's preferences, both aesthetic and sonic. I saw half a dozen brands offering this service; some are doing it exclusively.

Most Significant New Product: A tie between the new **Quad 2812X** and the **Magnepan 2.7i/2.7X**. Both are full-range planars, comfortable in size and price, and both are sonic knockouts.

Best (Non-Humorous) Anecdote: Late Saturday night, in a packed Acora room, the Audio Research preamp temporarily crashed. The hotel's meager power (would you believe only 94 volts?) triggered its protection circuitry. Problem was, it wouldn't immediately come back up. VAC's Kevin Hayes was there, and asked Val Cora, who now owns and runs ARC, VAC's biggest competitor, if there was anything he could do to help. "I'm not sure," said Val, "but if worse comes to worst, I might need a preamplifier." To which Kevin unhesitatingly replied, "Whatever you need, you will have." That's what I love about this industry; everyone is pulling for each other. (The ARC preamp came back to life a few minutes later.)

Best Humorous Anecdote: The quick-witted Andy Quint couldn't make the show this year due to Covid, so this space shall remain blank.

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By **Alan Taffel**

I can thank my parents for introducing me to both good music and good sound at an early age. Their extensive classical music collection, played through an enviable system, continually filled our house. When I was two, my parents gave me one of those all-in-one changers, which I played to death.

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