

AXPONA 2015

ELECTRONICS GREG WEAVER

What a superlative event! While it is true that covering shows can be challenging, especially when producing an initial report for a new magazine, I freely admit that I was looking forward to this gathering, held for the second year at the Westin O'Hare in Rosemont, immediately east of the O'Hare International Airport.

Under the strong and steady guidance of JD Events, "AXPONA Presents AudioCon" has burgeoned into the most diverse, sizable, and exhilarating consumer electronics show in the Midwest. According to numbers provided by the promoter, this year's show realized an 18 percent increase in ticket purchases and a 33 percent increase in exhibitor rooms, with some 406 exhibitors sharing 104 rooms over seven floors. Tabletop exhibits, such as those used by the "Ear Gear" and music vendors, for example, saw a staggering 40 percent increase.

In an effort to produce my first show report for TAS in a timely fashion, I somehow managed to miss several rooms I would have loved to have visited, most notably the Octave/Magico and Audionet/YG suites. Please forgive this oversight.

The rooms I cover below were, for the most part, exceptional, especially for show conditions. I was pleasantly surprised that so many systems were able to gel and really transcend the sum of their parts, achieving that all-too-elusive magic that leaves the listener rapt in the moment. That is not the case at many shows. AXPONA Presents AudioCon has rapidly become one of the annual events that I most look forward to.

FIVE MOST SIGNIFICANT EXHIBITS



Doshi.

DOSHI AUDIO

Founder and designer Nick Doshi was on hand to introduce his **Doshi Audio V3.0** monoblocks (\$31,990/pr.), an imaginative 160-watt pentode design using three gain stages. Employing output transformers made in the UK by the oldest audio transformer manufacturer in the world (Sowter), utilizing a pair of 12SN7 drivers and four KT-150 outputs, the V3.0 monoblock conflates old school engineering with microprocessor technology. The result is superior protection and the ability to view the bias voltage or average life of any tube in the circuit directly from the front display. Fronted by the **dCS Puccini** (\$24,998) optical player, feeding the **Doshi V3.0** linestage preamplifier (\$15,995), using **Transparent Generation 5 XL** cabling, and driving the new **Wilson Audio Sabrina** (\$15,900) loudspeakers, this system was liquid and luxuriant, though full of detail and microdynamic shading. It could flex some serious muscle, too, all the while sounding very relaxed. I hope to have them in for review soon.



Bricasti.

BRICASTI DESIGN

Bricasti Design was showcasing its new **M28** (\$30,000/pr.) 200-watt monoblock power amplifiers. **Bricasti** President Brian Zolner was on hand to offer a captivating demonstration using a system with a basic Windows 7 laptop serving ones and zero's to the **Bricasti M1** DAC (\$9000) via USB, which was driving the **M28s** from its balanced outputs. All cabling was **Purist Audio Designs Luminist Series**, and the speakers were the now-discontinued **Tidal Piano Diacrea Diamonds** (\$30,000/pr.). Whether playing a ripped Red Book CD or a high-resolution file, this system was blisteringly fast, nearly as transparent as air, and rife with lifelike body and instrumental bloom. I was taken by its remarkable transient speed and immediacy. Look for a full review in an upcoming issue.

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CONSTELLATION AUDIO

The **Constellation Inspiration Series 1.0** preamplifier (\$9000) and **Mono 1.0** amplifiers (\$20,000/pr.) were displaying their amazing prowess driving the new **Endeavor Audio E-5 Reference** loudspeaker (\$35,000/pr.). Sourced by the rock-solid **YFS Ref-3** digital file transport (\$15,500) feeding the **EMM Labs DAC2X DSD DAC** (\$15,500), with **Delphi MasterBuilt** cabling, it was easy to hear why editor Robert Harley (review in Issue 249) was so taken with the Constellation's "above class" accomplishments. The Endeavor Audio E-5 Reference readily allowed the Constellation Inspiration electronics uncanny transparency and resolution to provide a startlingly "see through the music into the performance" presentation. The Mono 1.0's refinement and precise, stable spatial rendering were breathtaking, approaching that of some of the best electronics I've experienced.

AESTHETIX

One new phonostage caught my ear, the new **Aesthetix Rhea Eclipse** (\$10,000). Using a three-stage 12AX7 gain stage and 6922 outputs, this new phono preamplifier is quite versatile and exquisitely voiced. The Aesthetix Rhea Eclipse was doing the heavy lifting for a phono source that was one of the more expensive at this show: the **Clearaudio Statement V2** table and **TT1** tonearm, fitted with the **Goldfinger Statement** cartridge (\$200,000). Other electronics included the **Pass Labs Xs** preamp (\$38,000) and **Aesthetix Atlas** monoblock amplifiers (\$16,000/pr.), all feeding the new **Magico Q7 MkII** loudspeakers (\$229,000). Though the sound in the room progressively improved over the course of the weekend as the hosts honed in on and resolved room and equipment pairing problems (something not uncommon at a show), the vinyl system regularly excelled presenting musical scale and timbral naturalness and bloom.



ALLNIC

Theorem Science and Care Audio of New Jersey hosted a room with an all **Allnic** electronics chain, featuring the **DAC D-5000 DHT** (\$11,900) and a pair of 15-watt 300B **A-5000** mono amps (\$19,900/pr.) driving **Mosaic Acoustics Illumination** loudspeakers (\$20,000/pr.), and sourced by an **A Capella II** music server (\$5500). One of the more intriguing introductions at this event was the **Allnic L-5000 DHT** linestage preamplifier (\$22,900), which **Allnic** extols as the first commercially produced preamplifier with only directly heated triodes in the signal path. This system produced an engrossingly delicate and intricately layered soundstage, with extended, effortless, and airy high frequencies. Voices were vibrantly lifelike. Thanks in part to the Allnic's exquisite portrayal of microdynamics, the system reproduced all tracks with an intimacy and immediacy that were delightful.

AUSPICIOUS DEBUTS

One of the most exhilarating sounding (and looking) exhibits at this year's event was from retailer The Voice That Is. With all **Tidal** electronics, including the debuts of its **Presencio** preamplifier (\$77,990) and **Impulse** monoblocks (\$64,690), driving Tidal's **Contriva G2** speakers (\$69,690/pr., and also a debut), music was sourced from the **Aur-render W20 Reference** music server (\$17,600) and **Bricasti M1 DAC** (\$8995), connected by **Purist Audio Design's Luminist 25th Anniversary** (\$55,000) cables. From very natural timbre, to dynamic scaling of both the macro and micro varieties, to recreating an expansive soundstage with accurately sized and utterly stable images, this system did so very much right. The Voice That Is gets my commendation for achieving such an engaging and musical exhibit under show conditions.

Classic Audio, **Atma-Sphere**, and **Purist Audio Design** provided one of their best presentations in recent memory. While these manufacturers commonly exhibit together, this system comprised a **Kuzma Reference** table, **Tri-Planar Ultimate 12** 'arm, fitted with the discontinued **van den Hul Grasshopper Gold** cartridge (\$25,000), an **Atma-Sphere MP-1** preamp (\$20,260), a pair of the relatively recently resurrected **Atma-Sphere Novacron** amps (\$19,200/pr.), and the **Classic Audio T-1.5** speakers (\$72,950), with **Purist Audio Design's** new **Neptune Series** cables (\$39,000). While listening and taking special notice of the gorgeous **Novacron** amplifiers, I spotted *The Sheffield Drum Record* standing in the stack, and asked John if he'd mind giving it a spin. My jaw hit the floor! I've heard that cut on hundreds of systems since its debut in the early 1980s, but I was not prepared for what this system recreated. The dynamics, definition, palpability, and tonality were stunning! This was without a doubt the most lifelike reproduction of this track that I've heard.

Dan D'Agostino's drop-dead gorgeous **Momentum** gear, including the **Stereo Preamplifier** (\$31,500), and **Monoblocks** (\$55,000/pr.), was in full bloom and real-ly gave the relatively new **Wilson Audio Alexia** loudspeakers (\$55,880) a lilting voice. Sourced by a windows laptop serving the **dCS Vivaldi** four-box digital system (\$108,500) connected with **Transparent Audio Generation 5** cabling (\$120,000), and resting on **Harmonic Resolution System** stands (\$45,000), this system was as impressive to look at as to hear.

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Once again this year, **Simaudio**, displaying products exclusively from its **Moon Evolution Series**, and **Dynaudio** collaborated. Sourced by the **AMG Giro G9 'table/9W2 'arm** combination (\$10,000), fitted with the **AMG Teatro MC** cart (\$2750), and the **Simaudio 650D** DAC and CD player (\$8000), the electronics chain included the **Simaudio 610LP** (\$7500) phono stage, the **740P** preamplifier (\$9500), with the **860A** stereo amplifier driving the **Dynaudio Evidence Confidence C1 Platinum** loudspeakers (\$8750). The entire system was cabled with the remarkably musical **Kubala-Sosna Elation**. The resulting nearfield sound in that room was spectacular, with surprising weight and remarkable control.

The next room to catch my ear was the O'Hare 2 Suite on the 12th floor. The system included the **AMG Viella Cherry** turntable, fitted with the **12J2** tonearm (\$17,500), and the **DS Audio DS-W1 "Nightrider"** optical cartridge (\$8500), the **Audio Research REF CD9** DAC/CD player (\$13,000), the **GS Pre** preamplifier (\$15,000), and the **GS-150** stereo amplifier (\$20,000), once again all wired with a full complement of the wonderful **Kubala-Sosna Elation** cables. The beautifully appointed **Sonus faber Liliun** speakers (\$70,000) completed the system. This chain of components almost seemed to come alive at times, easily decoding the delicate space of recordings, with very natural tonal color, and a sense of body, bloom, and texture on instrumental voices that was quite natural and relaxed and almost spooky in its sonic verisimilitude.

IN OTHER NEWS

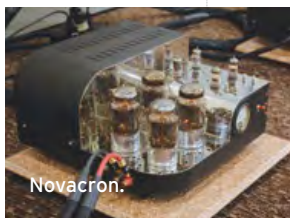
Having somehow lost or misplaced the detailed equipment listing for the exquisite **MBL** room, I'll leave it to others to fill you in on the system details. However, my early evening listening in that room, with analog tape playback, was one of the most enjoyable experiences I've had at this or any show in recent memory.

Dropping by the **Daedalus Audio/ModWright Instruments/WyWires** room was very rewarding. Besides wanting to take a close look at the new **ModWright PH-150** tube phono stage (\$7900), I couldn't resist the emotional magic that a ModWright-branded system can evoke. The source was the **ModWright-modded Oppo BDP-105D** (\$2500 mod only), handing off to the all-tube **Elyse** DAC (\$6900). The **LS36.5 DM** preamplifier, with **PS36.5** all-tube power supply (\$9995), powered the **KWA150 Signature** edition (\$8490) amplifier driving the **Daedalus Audio Poseidon V.2** loudspeakers (\$16,450-\$21,450/pr. depending on finish). The entire system was wired end to end with **WyWires** cables. I found myself irresistibly drawn in by the articulate, coherent, and harmonically rich sound it generated.

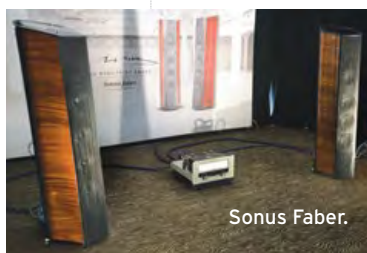
Music Hall introduced the **Creek Evolution 100A** integrated ampli-



Music Hall.



Novacron.



Sonus Faber.

fier (\$2195). Using the **Music Hall MMF 5.1 'table** with its captive 'arm and the **Magic 3** cartridge (\$995), the **Tannoy XT-8F** loudspeakers (\$2600), and **Nordost** cables, Roy and Leland managed to put together a *stunningly* musical and engaging system, all at a retail of about \$6000. Just how good was it? While in the room, Chad Kassem of **Acoustic Sounds** dropped by with a test pressing of "Keith, Don't Go" from Nils Lofgren's 1975 eponymous release. Within five seconds of

the needle hitting the groove, every listener in that room, myself included, was transfixed! What a marvelously musical synergy, full of detail, with goosebump-producing dynamics and a purity of tone that were just magical. For nearly as long as I can recall, Roy Hall has been finding and promoting affordable, overachieving products that can entice the novice into the fold. This system was a triumphant success.

Another room that could really sing was the **KingSound/KR Audio** collaboration. **Music Vault's** **Diamond Ultra** music server (\$4995) provided ones and zeros to the **Allnic D-500** tube DAC (\$11,900). **KR Audio** electronics included the **P-130** lineage (\$5600) and **VA-910 Ultra** Linear amps (\$16,500/pr.). Speakers were the **KingSound Prince III** two-way,

full-range ESLs (\$9995/pr.), and all wires were from **Dana Cable**. Detail, microdynamic resolution, and near pitch-perfect timbre were hallmarks of this seductive and engrossing system.

Emotiva released and featured its new **XMC-1** preamp (\$2499) in both multichannel and two-channel modes. It offers a high-quality balanced audio signal path, HDMI video switching, and room correction.

BEST OF SHOW

BEST SOUND (COST NO OBJECT) **Audio Research/Sonus faber/Kubala-Sosna** system. This room effortlessly and consistently promoted the suspension of disbelief, allowing music to "exist" in the space of the room, seemingly independent of the system.

BEST SOUND (FOR THE MONEY) The combination of the **Music Hall MMF 5.1 'table** with **Magic 3** cartridge, **Creek Evolution 100A** integrated amp, **Tannoy Revolution XT 8F** speakers, and **Nordost** cabling created an undeniable magic.

MOST SIGNIFICANT PRODUCT INTRODUCTION **Endeavor Audio's** new **E-5** Loudspeaker has all the promise of a game-changer at its price. Full review to come.

MOST SIGNIFICANT TREND Even though the personal audio segment of the market is quite mature, headphones and headphone amps are still showing up *everywhere!*

MOST COVETED PRODUCT The **Bricasti M1** DAC.