

## Loudspeaker Focus

# Gamut Audio Zodiac

## Danish Diva

Greg Weaver

**T**hough Danish manufacturer Gamut Audio has been making electronics for recording studios since 1982, the official establishment of its retail consumer division didn't occur until 1995. Even so, I'll bet those of you who've been around this industry for some time will have likely only become aware of the name recently, with its escalating profile over the past several years. The man responsible for driving this ever-increasing presence since 2012 is 42-year-old chief designer and CEO, Benno Baun Meldgaard.

Initially hired in 2011 as a repair technician and design consultant, he found himself inordinately troubled when the company's then RS5 loudspeaker received a considerably less than glowing review. That prompted him to undertake a re-design initiative, resulting in the introduction of the RS5i (originally referred to as "the Superior RS5") in 2012.

It wasn't long after its release that the press, dealers, and customers recognized just how remarkable the RS5i version was. As a result, Meldgaard was promoted to Chief Designer, and followed up his initial achievement with the successful release of the RS7i, followed soon by the remarkable stand-mounted RS3i monitor, all of which have garnered wonderful reviews. It was while he was working on the RSi revisions that he formed the ideas for how to accomplish his definitive design, a complete reworking of the RS9, which would be so different that it would deserve a new name.

Coincident with internal business issues, he was asked to take the helm at Gamut as CEO in 2015. By late 2016, his vision of an extraordinarily accomplished flagship loudspeaker was realized, and the Zodiac, under examination here, was born.

Most recently in the news at the end of January, Meldgaard was delighted to announce yet another accomplishment; Gamut Audio had joined the Dantax group of companies, along with fellow Danish high-end audio brands Raidho and Scansonic. This partnership assures enhanced capitalization, support, and representation, all the while allowing Gamut Audio to continue to operate as a distinct marque as it continues to increase its brand recognition in the fine-audio marketplace.

### Building a Mystery

Given the scope and time requirements of the manufacturing process, only 12 pairs of Zodiacs are assembled annually. As such, each bears a serial number that is based on the astrological sign that represents its creation period; my review samples bore the label Leo II. In astrology, Leo represents the period from July 23 to August 22, which I take to mean these units were



the second pair of Zodiacs to be built in August, the first having been built in August 2016, with this set assembled in August 2017.

Scandinavians are known for their love of living well and simply, so it should come as no surprise that Meldgaard has guided Gamut Audio to be as green a manufacturer as possible, using almost entirely all-natural materials, sourced locally. In large part, this is due to his realizations while he was re-envisioning the Gamut product line. Meldgaard told me that he found that the more he employed natural materials like wood, paper, and oils in place of metal, composite materials, and chemicals, the less mechanical or analytical, and more natural-sounding, all

his designs became. In fact, future versions of Gamut electronics will eschew metal cabinets in favor of a treated, stiffened paper material! But that is another story.

Using sustainable-forest woods chosen for their acoustic properties, sourcing drivers of Danish design and manufacture from companies such as Danisian Audio and ScanSpeak, and employing top-quality, high-grade copper and silver capacitors from Danish companies like Jantzen, Gamut does everything it can to minimize the carbon footprint of its product line.

Gamut loudspeaker bodies (they don't call them enclosures or cabinets) are handcrafted by Kvist Industries, makers of some

of the world's most iconic luxury furniture, including the distinctive Gamut Hi-Fi Lobster Chair, and whose facility happens to be just a five-minute walk from Gamut headquarters. Fashioned more in the manner of a luthier creating a cello or violin, the loudspeaker body requires the integration of impeccable materials and obsessive craftsmanship, with the goal of producing both a stunning aesthetic object and the recreation of only beautiful, unobstructed, unstrained sound.

Twenty-eight layers of hand-selected woods of varying thickness and variety (the outermost being ash), are formed into this distinctive, boat-shaped, tapered body using a prolonged heating and forming process that liquifies the natural wood sap in all the layers. This process facilitates more effective bonding of the multiple layers, allowing them to retain their new form after cooling. This more relaxed condition is said to significantly reduce material stresses or tensions that might otherwise give rise to distortion, contributing to an optimal resonant signature and enabling faster decay of unwanted vibrations in the finished loudspeaker. While undeniably solid, massive, and dense, the Zodiacs do not yield the same solid or dead thud to the knuckle-rap test as models that use milled or machined metals or composite layering do.

Standing 5' 6" tall, 12 1/4" wide, and some 26 3/4" deep, weighing over 430 pounds apiece, my review models were stained a gorgeous deep burgundy. The gracefully curved and distinctive boat-tail shape is used to minimize

### **With the Zodiac, designer Benno Baun Meldgaard has clearly established himself as a prominent member of high end audio's new guard.**

internal sonic reflections (standing waves) between parallel surfaces, while the carefully carved grooves in each side panel aid dispersion. And though the bodies are large by most standards, occupying a volume greater than 12 cubic feet, their elegant and distinctive appearance does not result in an imposing presence. Rather, they are quite inviting and of clearly superb quality, contributing to an exceptional sense of pride of ownership.

Built using the same woods as the outer panels, a rigid skeleton forms a complex, high-performing system of internal bracing, featuring fan-shaped reinforcement structures placed at a multitude of angles in very specific locations. This approach is said to dramatically reduce the need for internal damping, the reduction of which Gamut claims allows all of its loudspeakers—not just the Zodiac—to present significantly livelier overall dynamic involvement.

The grille for the Zodiac employs two 3/8" diameter by 56" long metal rods running vertically along the outside edge of each side of the front baffle, supported by five matching 3/8" round, 5/8" tall standoffs evenly spaced along their length. Between those two rails are 42 narrow elastic bands, each

wrapped with a proprietary woven fabric, with a 3/16" total diameter. These are evenly spaced along the lengths, at about an inch and a quarter apart, and are loose enough to realign, reposition, or remove, should you care to. But it is safe to say that this protection does not interfere with the resultant sound.

Moving to the rear, you'll note two beautifully machined brass and stainless steel ports about 2 3/4" in diameter, and about 10" deep, roughly centered vertically along the horizontal center line of the body. While porting is typically used to extend bass response, in the case of the Zodiac the carefully designed body and balanced drivers need no assistance to deliver the lowest frequency here, which is specified as 16Hz. Instead, these ports are tuned to optimize impulse response, assisting the drivers to respond more rapidly to changes in the signal, thereby improving timing and dynamism. More on this to follow.

One of the most unusual (and maddening) sets of binding posts I've ever run across can be found near the bottom of the rear of the body. Four 1" round knobs run vertically over about a 10" span from the bottom, with the two lowermost being the positive inputs, and the two uppermost being the negative inputs. The woofer inputs are the bottommost red and black posts (separated by the mid/tweeter positive input post), while the mid/tweeter inputs are the second from the bottom red and the top black posts. That odd spacing in and of itself is not a significant issue. However, if you are not using banana terminations on your speaker cables you are in for a challenge. No typical spade, no matter how large, will straddle the nearly 3/4" diameter posts! You will either need to employ a banana adapter or choose to only pinch the very ends of the two tips of the spade to the post. Given the otherwise exceedingly well thought out design of the Zodiac, this decision is hard to understand and seems a poor choice.

To Meldgaard's credit, he listens to feedback. I received an email from U.S. distributor Michael Vamos just days before my deadline stating that, in part because of my frustrations with the current terminals, all future Gamut Zodiac speakers will be fitted with Furutech rhodium-plated terminals, which will accept all standard banana and spade terminations as well as bare wire. Why that last option would matter is beyond me, but there it is.

A unique aspect of the design, as touched on briefly above, is that the midrange driver is not housed in its own chamber; rather, it shares the open space of the two internal chambers used by the woofers. This would normally allow the rear wave and resultant pressure generated by the woofers to interfere with, and critically affect, the performance of the midrange. Here Meldgaard has created a material which he incorporates between the internal chambers that, combined with the ports, establishes an effect he calls an acoustic vent. Because the midrange shares the much larger chambers with the woofers, it does not "see" a small chamber in the frequency range where it operates. Yet as soon as the woofer frequencies dip below 100Hz, the resistance of this material comes into play, preventing the woofers' low-frequency pressure from interfering with or affecting the performance of the midrange. This acoustic vent process is said to allow the midrange to move more freely and to sound more open.

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The five drive units are specifically aligned, both physically and electronically, on the front baffle. The driver configuration, from top to bottom, includes a woofer at the top of the front baffle, the tweeter below, then the midrange, followed by the other two woofers at the bottom. The swept-back, rear-tilted angle of the speakers provides for a very precise relationship between the position of the speakers' five drivers and your ears.

The complex base of the Zodiac is a massive, solid, stainless-steel plate-and-spike system, constructed in a five-layer sandwich of anti-resonance-coated metal and a composite damping material, and is crucial to the design. As well as providing excellent stability and decoupling the speakers from the floor, the four relatively massive (1 5/16" diameter) threaded spikes allow for full adjustability of both the vertical and horizontal alignment of each speaker. This is very important, as getting that perfect angle is part of what allows the Zodiac to make its own brand of magic. This is one of only a few loudspeakers that I've encountered specifically designed to have the slope of the baffle adjustable by the listener to accommodate the requirements of the listening room and listening position (nearfield or far-field, for example).

The tweeter is a modified SB Acoustics Satori TW29RN-B, a distinctive-looking 1.5" silk dimpled-dome ring radiator, using a high-saturation neodymium motor system with T-shaped pole piece, designed by Danisian Audio, manufactured by SB Acous-

tics, and built specifically for Gamut and with the company's input.

The midrange is based upon the famous ScanSpeak "Revelator" series mid/woofer, but it differs significantly from a standard-production driver, as it uses a cut-paper cone, the ScanSpeak SD-1 magnet system, its "Grasshopper" cast chassis, and its maximized air-flow and resonance-terminating mounting system. The spider is a special, softer version, built to much tighter specifications than the stock version.

The three woofers are based upon a 10.5" ScanSpeak 26W Series Revelator, featuring a 2" voice coil on a titanium former, a low-loss linear suspension, and symmetric drive motor, but again, with significant differences, including an optimized voice coil, a pure paper cone without the typical rubber coating, as well as extremely soft spiders. Where the original 26Ws were designed to be driven only as high as 500 to 600Hz, the Zodiac woofers share the region between 300Hz–1.2kHz with the midrange driver!

Once these drivers are received from ScanSpeak, further modifications are made to the spider to ensure as little resistance as possible for the moving parts, allowing them to achieve softer and more linear sonic traits. The goal is to significantly enhance both micro and large-scale dynamics. Next, lightweight wooden dust caps (stained to match the body finish) are glued to both the voice-coil former and the cone. This changes the contact area between cone and voice coil from just 2 or 3mm, to more than 10mm, further improving the

## Specs & Pricing

<b>Driver complement:</b> 1 x 1.5" ring radiator, silk cone, neodymium magnet tweeter; 1 x 7" sliced paper cone, oil-impregnated midrange; 3 x 10" paper cone, treated woofers	<b>Price:</b> \$159,900
<b>Frequency response:</b> 16Hz to 40kHz	<b>GAMUT AUDIO</b> Bransagervej 15 9490 Pandrup Denmark gamutaudio.com
<b>Sensitivity:</b> 90dB/2.83V	<b>AUDIO SKIES</b> <b>(NORTH AMERICAN DISTRIBUTOR)</b> (310) 975-7099 audioskies.com
<b>Impedance:</b> 4 ohms	
<b>Dimensions:</b> 12.20" x 64.96" x 26.77"	
<b>Weight:</b> 432 lbs.	

transient response of the drivers, stiffening the cone, enhancing speed, and advancing detail retrieval. Finally, all paper cones are impregnated with a proprietary blend of vegetable oils and other natural ingredients, used in a way that helps prevent the oil from deteriorating or evaporating over time. This is said to help reduce distortion by lubricating the paper fibers in the sliced fiber cone and to help lower odd harmonic distortions, assisting in providing more ruler-flat frequency response with a cleaner, more natural roll-off. Measurements verify the significant sonic improvements over the untreated stock drivers.

Meldgaard is rather elusive on the subject of the crossover, which he described as non-conventional, based on a first-order design. He explained that the slope gradually becomes steeper and steeper, as in higher-order filters, while at the same time keeping the phase response aligned at all frequencies for all drivers, not just phase-aligned an octave above or below the flex point as in more conventional designs. All internal wiring is Gamut's own Reference cable, and parts include high-grade capacitors, heavy-duty air-core coils, with the coils in the tweeter and midrange network using multi-core threading, and all point-to-point wiring. The resultant dividing network is said to weigh about 30 pounds.

## Witness

More so than perhaps with any other speaker to grace my listening room, room placement and resultant interaction were crucial to realizing Zodiac's best. Meldgaard, along with Michael Vamos, President of Gamut USA, delivered and installed these beautiful behemoths in my basement listening space. Even after their creator spent three hours of fussing with placement using a laser-based digital measuring tool, it took some weeks for final run-in, and many more fine adjustments to unlock their full potential. While they are both large and heavy, they were surprisingly easy for me to reposition by myself, and making those final 1/2-inch, or even, 1/4-inch adjustments to completely dial them in really paid off.

One of the Zodiac's more impressive attributes is its capacity to fashion a concrete and unshakeable foundation; its ability in

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the bass is exceptional. In terms of extension, resolution, and definition, its performance is, in a word, superb. Listening to Roger Waters' *magnum opus*, *Amused to Death*, [Analogue Productions APP 468761] as rendered by the Zodiac is a transformative experience. At the end of track 6, "Late Home Tonight, Part I," a fighter jet releases a missile and the resultant ridiculously dynamic detonation (watch the volume here!) presents a serious challenge for any loudspeaker.

Over the past two-plus decades, I've heard many excellent speakers recreate this passage; most of the time even the most competent of transducers portray it as a seriously powerful pressurization of the air in the room. The Zodiac, with its third woofer placed at the top of the baffle, above the tweeter, presents this intense event more literally as a moving pressure wave, one you can feel and sense rolling through the room, starting well beyond the wall behind the speakers, then rushing past your chair on its way toward the backwall. Before the Zodiac, I'd only experienced the wave effect this dramatically with two other loudspeakers, both of which are roughly twice the physical size, weight, and price of the Zodiacs.

Further into the same album, with the track "Three Wishes," the genie's Q-Sound voice not only fills the room, expanding beyond the boundaries to the sides, around, and behind the listener, but also unsettles pictures hanging on walls and rattles

glass inlays in tables in adjoining rooms. Do not misunderstand me. I'm not only discussing the quantity of the low-frequency performance; I am specifically referring to the *quality*, extension, and definition of frequencies below 50Hz.

I cannot overstate how much the Zodiacs' ability to accurately and solidly recreate the power and authenticity of frequencies down to and slightly below the 20Hz threshold contributes to the overall convincing reality of any recording. Zodiac is the smallest and least expensive loudspeaker I've ever experienced capable of such consistently credible results.

The midrange delivers an unexpected degree of reso-

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lution and detail, particularly for a design using all paper (albeit uniquely customized and treated) drivers. With a disarmingly open, spacious, and organic nature, the mids are both palpable and immediate, never sounding forward, overemphasized, or in any manner unnatural or forced. They communicate the entire spectrum of tonal



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color, texture, and bloom in the most remarkably faithful and disarming manner. In as much as they are almost the paradigm of proper voicing, with an unswervingly musical accord, and in all my time with them I noted no accentuation or minimization of any frequency band. What is surprising and compelling about the performance here is the imperturbable sense of musical coherence, openness, and naturalness.

The modified Satori tweeter really impresses in this application, communicating with relevant resolution, yet with an exceptional sense of atmosphere and extension. The treble is delicately detailed, clearly resolute, open, and full of sparkle and

shimmer, almost sounding as if those notes were created from the air itself rather than by a mechanical transducer. While I have often found much to love in the smoothness and airiness that the best silk domes are known for, I cannot recall ever before hearing such transparency, resolution, and extension as the Zodiacs delivered. While this tweeter may not achieve the full measure of effortlessness and extension that the handful of today's best domes or leaf tweeters are capable of, it is indisputably encroaching on that achievement. It's a stirring overachiever that never gets harsh or shows any glare or edge, unless those properties exist in the recording.

The overall tonal balance is exceptionally evenhanded, with vibrant, lifelike tone color and dense, complex texture. The Zodiacs' ability to render timbre, instrumental attack, body, and weight so compellingly, in addition to delivering a high degree of musical clarity, won over all who spent even the briefest time listening to them. The first word that comes to mind when in the presence of the Zodiacs is "natural." The effect is to disarm listeners, allowing them to drop all predisposed reactions to hearing "hi-fi," and simply bask in the musical *gestalt*. You are never drawn or even tempted to focus or speculate about anything of the audiophile ilk; you are simply given over to the power and persuasiveness of the musical message. These speakers simply do not call any undue attention to themselves with any apparent commissive or omissive behavior.

These attributes, combined with the Zodiacs' remarkable intelligibility, only speak to the ease, credibility, and completeness with which they accurately portray dynamic contrasts, shadings, and inflections of every nature. I must admit that they clearly exceeded all my expectations in this regard. This driver complement seems to be without any voice of its own, and as such, seems to have much less to contribute to the tones and textures it creates. This results in transients that have both vigor and exceptional control, with sharpened, more lifelike rhythmic drive, and distinctly diminished low-level noise.

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### The Zodiac has forced me to rethink the sonic limitations of traditionally crafted wooden enclosures and drivers with paper diaphragms.

Before their arrival, I'd not heard such speed, impact, weight, and drive from any speaker at any price using drivers not made of some more rigid, lighter, stiffer, material. Yet the Zodiacs' serene ability to present precise and varied musical scale is quite comparable to that of a number of competitors selling for twice their price or more. The Zodiacs are equally masterful at regenerating the power of a full orchestra, including conveying the scale of spatial and dynamic contrasts, or informing you about a single artist with an acoustic guitar in an intimate space. These speakers convey a whisper as evocatively as a drum whack or bass string snap.

More along those lines, they exhibit no clear preference for a single volume. At a nominal 4 ohms impedance with a 90dB sensitivity rating, they are just as expressive at 70dB playing *The Weavers' Reunion at Carnegie Hall* [Vanguard], as they are playing "Mars" from Holst's *The Planets* [ORG], or "Squonk," from Genesis' *Trick of the Tail* [MFSL] at 95 or 100dB. This uniform expressive fluency at any SPL cannot be said to be true of every loudspeaker, regardless of price.

While they use five drivers per side, the way in which that quintet manages to unite and

speak with what clearly appears to be a solitary voice is captivating. Their overall coherence and resultant seamlessness offers an engaging level of articulation, while at the same time, remaining unmistakably natural sounding. I've heard three-way floorstanders, and believe it or not, even two-way monitors, that could learn a lesson from Gamut on this element of performance.

As I've indicated, once positioned properly, their ability to so completely disappear from the listening room, leaving only a solidly portrayed soundstage with tangible and realistically sized, spaced, and located images,

is second to none. Timpani placed deep into the stage, like those in the fourth movement of the Solti Beethoven Ninth [MFSL], not only occupy a realistically proportionate space in terms of their size, shape, and physical relationship to the other instruments of the orchestra, they are also reproduced with riveting tone and texture.

At six and a half minutes into that same movement, the remarkable bass voice of Martti Talvela seemingly appears out of nowhere, and offers a visceral shock with its rock-solid embodiment. The tangibility of his body on stage is so believable, you feel like you could reach out and touch him. In this regard, the Zodiacs again rival the performance of some other *über* loudspeakers such as the Von Schweikert Audio Ultra 11 or the YG Acoustics Sonja XV.

The previously mentioned low noise floor of their drivers gives them a remarkable ability to elicit layered dimensionality from special recordings. Soundstaging and imaging are rendered as impeccably as I've heard by any loudspeaker, at any price. Stage width is not only conveyed outside the physical boundaries of the loudspeakers, but when the recording permits it extends well beyond the sidewalls. Space is not only portrayed behind the wall in back of them, but with a sense of layering and an exceptional degree of illumination into the rear corners that creates one of the most believable illusions of a venue I've ever heard. Yet it is the way that the Zodiacs render height and in particular, as I've touched on, the size and specificity of instrumental voices that brings chills. Voices are generated in pinpoint locations, at the proper height and in realistic size—never bloated or diminished.

As divining tools for differences in sources, electronics, or cabling, the Zodiacs are unreservedly revealing. I used several cable looms with them, and the strengths and weaknesses of each were effortlessly exposed. The full loom of Audience Au24 SX was clearly fluid, articulate, and natural. Furutech's flagship cables flaunted their dynamic, extended, and detailed character. The MasterBuilt Reference series revealed themselves to be spacious, quiet, and palpable. But the Zodiacs particularly relished my reference cables from Stealth Audio—the Helios phono, Sakra V12 interconnects, and Dream V14 loudspeaker cables—easily showcasing their vibrant, expansive, powerful, yet intimate nature.

The same revelatory qualities were evidenced with electronics pairings. The Zodiacs began their visit connected to my reference Audionet PRE G2 linestage and MAX monoblocks. Here, the Audionet signature quietness, control, texture, bloom, and body were clearly apparent. Moving to the Constellation Inspiration Linestage 1.0 with a pair of Inspiration 1.0 stereo amps used in a vertical biamp configuration, I heard the combo's superb bass control and extension (which, to my ears, is even more extended, faster, and more controlled than I recall hearing from the original Reference series), their arguably best-in-class midrange purity, and that characteristic Constellation treble air and extension. But it was moving to the Audionet Stern linestage and Heisenberg monoblocks that most vibrantly brought these speakers to life. Under the control of these electronics' blistering transient speed, rich, vivid, and textured timbre, precise focus, masterful rendering of air and space, and unparalleled effortlessness, they seemed



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to breathe life into the music they created through the Zodiacs.

### **Sweet Surrender**

The supreme level of accomplishment the Zodiac achieves has forced me to rethink the sonic limitations I thought had been defined with traditional crafted wooden enclosures and drivers with paper diaphragms. The amount of incoherent cone motion exhibited by paper diaphragms limits the degree to which such cones can recover low-level detail in a recording. In particular, their innate distortion of the signal, caused by cone flexure, energy storage in the cone and suspension, and even their significant bending-mode distortions, is indisputable. Yet several of today's leading speaker manufacturers, such as Sonus faber and Wilson Audio, still prefer to use drivers made of such natural materials, presumably to leverage the inherent naturalness and liveliness that such transducers bring to the party.

With the Zodiac, and in fact with all four current models of Gamut loudspeakers, Meldgaard has found a way to push past all these known previous limitations, and successfully moderate the materials' main shortcomings, allowing him to capitalize on paper's inherently musical nature and unlock otherwise typically constrained low-level detail, transparency, and resolution.

While there is no question that Gamut's flagship Zodiac does not render resolution and transparency to that final degree achieved by products using drivers fabricated of ceramic, metal, or composite materials, what it is capable of delivering in those areas is so consummate that, especially when combined with its other ample gifts of openness, indefatigable naturalness and neutrality, near-effortless dynamic prowess, and three-dimensional imaging and staging, you are wholly unaware of any deficiencies. They have that all-too-elusive ability to sing with one lucid and jubilant voice, as if they were some magical living beings that simply exhale music rather than sounding like an assemblage of electro-mechanical transducers struggling to recreate music from an electrical signal.

I have long posited, as has our own Jonathan Valin (most recently in his musings on the Magico M series loudspeakers), that those whose pursuit of musical bliss brings them into the exotic world of high-end audio simply cannot be defined by one goal; there is not one electronics or loudspeaker solution to please them all.

In my months with the Zodiacs, every listener who has graced my listening room, including a world-class concert pianist, other industry journalists, numerous industry professionals, right down to several who manufacture loudspeakers, have fallen as hard as I have for these meticulously crafted, gorgeous Sirens. While I still deem it unlikely that we shall ever find a single solution that satisfies all listeners, the Gamut Zodiac comes as close to fulfilling that goal as any speaker in my experience has.

While no one could successfully make an argument that at this asking price they represent a bargain, I still strongly maintain they offer exceptional value. My time with the Gamut Zodiac has allowed me to routinely experience music I have been listening to most of my adult life in a manner that consistently delivered new meaning and heightened expression and emotion, unraveling and revealing context and content like no speaker before it. If you are looking for that last degree of transparency and resolution, feel free to look to another camp. But if like me, you value a system that routinely unlocks and cogently communicates an artist's message in an accessible, never-fatiguing, comprehensive, organic, vibrant, lively, lifelike, authentically musical manner, the Zodiac is one of the biggest values in high-end audio today.

With Gamut's myriad accomplishments of recent years, culminating with the stirring achievement represented by the audacious Zodiac, Benno Baun Meldgaard has clearly announced Gamut's arrival as a top-flight high-end audio manufacturer, and firmly established himself as a prominent member of the new guard. This young, visionary, and gifted designer is the real deal, with a product lineup of exceptional merit. I can't wait to hear and see where he takes us next. **ES**

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