

## HP's WORKSHOP

### Meditations on the Components and Assemblage of a Super Stereo System

I believe that I have stumbled onto something special in the way of a home-audio system. I say stumbled because, in the course of every-day testing of components in a reference set-up, I came, unsuspectingly, across a synergy of electronics that brought the hybrid Wisdom Audio system to the kind of musical life it had never demonstrated before (even to the amazement of its designer, Tom Bohlander). As I begin writing this "meditation," I haven't yet sorted out all the provocative implications this may have in our assessment of the current state-of-the-art in two-channel sound, but for me, it is clear that we now stand on edge of a breakthrough to a new kind of realism in the reproduction of music in the home. And without having to "surround" ourselves in a sea of manipulated digits.

I am going to write this essay from the ground up, starting with the primary components of the "super" system (as assembled in Sea Cliff) and then describe what the combination sounds like as an entity. Since my space is limited in this issue (thanks to my tardy deadline ways), these thoughts may well run over into the next issue.<sup>1</sup>

I shall begin with the first of the two components that brought the Wisdom Audio M-75s to a state of living stereo.

#### The VTL Reference MB-750 Tube Amplifier, "Brunnhilde"

The natal version of Luke Manley's design, Brunnhilde (a.k.a. The Signature 750), did not much impress me. Yeah, it had power to spare, but ironically perhaps, didn't sound as powerful as a 750-watt-plus power rating might have suggested. It was dark sounding, rolled-off and soft on top, a bit slow, and thick and inarticulate at the bottom of the spectrum.<sup>2</sup> It impressed upon the soundfield its own distinctive sonic signature, which to my ears, made it hard to distinguish differences between the 750 and other electronics in the VTL line. The

VTL "sound" has always been consonant with the way music sounds, as, for example, in a different way, the Magnepan speakers are. Like the Maggies, the VTL products have always been fairly priced, and so in terms of musical truth (particularly through the midrange), VTL has historically been something of a bargain, from the days when the company was headed by David Manley, at present retired. The basics of the senior Manley's design won laurels, but instead of building on them, the elder Manley rested on them. I have been waiting to see when and how his son, Luke, would put his own creative stamp on VTL designs, and in Brunnhilde's "reference" garb, Luke has stepped from behind his father's long shadow and made the VTL sound his own.

I heard the updated version of Brunnhilde at last year's Consumer Electronics Show, and despite all the variables in set-up, room, and associated components, it was immediately evident that Luke's big B was an immensely improved amplifier. Just how immensely I was to find out after the arrival of the Wisdom Audio hybrid planar system.

What was troubling in our testing of the Wisdoms was our inability to lay hands on a high-powered tube amplifier to use in evaluating the speaker's performance. The transformerless AtmaSphere amplifier from Ralph Karsten didn't exactly go bonkers driving the speaker, but it clearly wasn't a happy explorer looking into the mysteries of the planar magnetic (quasi-ribbon) design, and for reasons that eluded me, given Bohlander's insistence that the planar drivers were essentially flat in terms of impedance (circa 5 ohms across the board, said he). It lost its top octaves and sounded harsh. We had been promised either the update of Audio Research's 600 watt (per side) Reference One amplifier or the 300 watt monoblocks, but neither has yet made it to these shores. Since Bohlander, in designing the system, had used only solid-state amps,

we proceeded with the testing, finding that the Wisdoms weren't exactly a match made in heaven with most solid-state gear, so ruthlessly did they reveal every amusical solid-state coloration. And, hi-lo and behold, none of the solid-state amplification we used with the speaker sounded exactly effortless when pushed, save for the Krell FPB 650, which we were disinclined to use to drive the towers when it performed so superbly with the woofer system, even though its power draw (say, during the Roman-games cut on *Gladiator*) opened the basement circuitbreaker every now and again. (It's a 20-amp line, and we need, it is now obvious, a 30-amp line for the big boys.)

None of us, and this includes both Bohlander and Luke Manley, were exactly certain whether the Wisdoms would be happy with a big tube amplifier like the VTL, and we delayed installing it until after the review of the speaker system was (I thought) complete.

Installation was, as it happened, a snap. And there were no compatibility problems.

And now, for a *divertimento*. I shall paraphrase Luke Manley on some of the key points of Brunnhilde's update from "Signature" to "Reference":

- (1) The power supply has been doubled in its capacity (there are now "four big reservoir capacitors," sez he), like the power supply of Brunnhilde's dad, Wotan, VTL's 1,200-watt monoblock top-of-the-line amplifier.
- (2) The main board has been significantly revised, especially in its signal traces and grounding.
- (3) The power transformer has been upgraded, and new coupling caps inserted.<sup>3</sup>
- (4) Significant upgrading work has been done on the output transformers, with far more interleaving in the new as

opposed to the old, resulting in, Luke Manley says, “lower capacitance and better frequency response.”

(5) The amplifier’s chassis has been made more rigid and thus, presumably, less susceptible to the kind of unwanted vibrations that color the sound.

(6) And last, but hardly least, from a purely practical point of view: Brunnhilde now has a two-stage turn-on switch that won’t blow your circuit-breakers (or it hasn’t here), given her Valkyrian and immense power output. (There are twenty-four 6550 tubes split evenly between the two amps. Which, by the way, ran cooler than I expected; no Ref 600s these, in terms of BTU output.)

With a solid-state preamp, the esteemed Burmester 808 Mk V, Brunnhilde demonstrated some, but hardly all, of her seductive charms to the would-be Siegfrieds in the listening room. It wasn’t until we inserted the new version of the Conrad-Johnson line stage, dubbed the Anniversary Reference Triode, or ART, now in its Series II edition (more about this a little further down our imaginary road), that we found the happiest match. *Indeed, the sonics I am about to describe cannot be achieved without the simultaneous use of the ART Series II in the system* (my analysis of which will follow in the next issue, as I continue this super-system traversal).

As it happened, all of this came together (with the Wisdoms) during a visit with Michael Hobson, head mojo at Classic Records, who brought along a stunning new transfer of our Super Disc favorite, David Crosby’s *If I Could Only Remember My Name*, which shot an electric charge through Listening Room 3, to the accompanying clank of dropped jaws. (More about this, too, further down our imaginary road.)

The first thing about the “new” Brunnhilde sound that may pin you against the wall is an effect well observed in Dr. Pfeffer’s review. He calls it “image density” and describes it as “the ability to create an almost infinite number of images, next to each other or across a crowded [stage], while giving each one full dynamic freedom and [accuracy of] timbre...the amps’ miraculous ability to pack more music events into the same room [or stage] space. My walls and ceiling haven’t moved an inch, but the stage I hear and visualize is larger, more densely packed, yet with less elbowing than before. Somehow the 100 pieces of an orchestra and the 200 voices of a large chorus have more room to perform within the same focal area.”

Nor is this all courtesy of the simply superb images-on-a-stage capabilities of the Wisdoms (which, of course, ASP does not have). It seems to me that the acoustics of Lis-

tening Room No. 3 have become irrelevant. (The room is critically damped at the first and second reflection points.) Brunnhilde posits an independent space within the confines of your listening area and that independence of space includes giving you an uncanny sense of the volume of the original recording site. It should be, but isn’t, kind of weird to have a larger space within the smaller spaces of your room, but that is, honestly, the way it is, and the effect is completely startling. Pfeffer speaks of “parallel” playback universes, but I think of the effect more as parallel dimensions. Brunnhilde adds a new dimension, that of the recording site, to your listening room, and it exists as a larger world within a smaller one. Just incredible, say I.

But that is hardly it. Within that sound-field, as ASP so shrewdly observes, you hear more of the individual musicians. With the Wisdoms, the effect goes beyond what I would almost call that mere (but not just mere, you’ll understand) feat.

You can actually hear the envelope (or pocket) of air around each player; and with individual orchestral instruments, you can perceive not only the front wave of sound the instrument makes as it splits the air, but the more subtle resoundings of the much more delicate sounds emanating from that instrument’s sides and back. Musical instruments are reproduced as if they were pulsating spheres. And, glory be, the tailing off or decay of the instrument’s sound as it quietens or stops is more audible with this amplifier than any other I can remember, just possibly any other I have experienced. I would, accordingly, suggest that the better your particular system is at creating images on a stage, the more profound will be your reaction to the Brunnhilde sound.

Some of this has to be attributed to the amplifier’s phase (read: time) coherency, supposedly not a strong point of amplifiers with big output transformers, but nevertheless a strong point with this particular amplifier. On musical material (the bass guitar licks on the David Crosby disc or on Cat Stevens’ *Tea for the Tillerman*) have a you-are-there coherence that is, almost eerily, “present” in the room, without ever demonstrating the colorations of “presence” as some folks define that word. The scrim-effect just isn’t a problem. There’s less between you and the music.

Lest I forget, the MB 750 Reference is supernaturally quiet, even by solid-state standards. It can resolve low-level information, especially on some of the better CDs, that you will not have heard before. Two particularly striking illustrations of this point come from Asia, one gold CD by an artist named Dadawa (no kidding) in her Warner Music Album *Sister Drum*, in which the dynamic range is just incredible. The disc is cut at a quite low level and hardly suggests in the lead-in to her first song just how loud it’s going to get or how

much low-bass information is encoded therein. The other is a Marco Polo disc of Chinese percussion music. In the second cut, there is a solitary instrument, deep and far back on the soundstage (and it sounds extremely far away in the capacious soundspace created by the VTL), a percussive instrument that is shaken, not stirred, and shaken *slightly*. This instrument simply isn’t there on conventional playback systems. I cite this as but one example of how this amplifier can reach below what would otherwise be some sort of noise floor (and don’t think that solid-state designs, even those that sound as quiet as the Edge NL-10, don’t have artifacts and noise texture that you may only become aware of in a cross-comparison with Brunnhilde).<sup>4</sup>

Another breathtaking thing about Brunnhilde is her top-octave response. Sweet, extended, and airy – provided you can find a tweeter that can do her justice. These highs are never there unless they’re supposed to be, so you can well assume, with either the wrong material or the wrong tweeters, that Brunnhilde runs out of steam, like many an aging operatic soprano, at the top. Not so. Even a diehard skeptic like Scot Markwell, who was ready to hear a receding top-end here, had to acknowledge, as we played material heavy with high-frequency overtones and transients that Brunnhilde was in a tube class by herself in this respect. Whether you’re a confirmed VTL fan or a skeptic, you’ll be surprised.

The midbass transients in their tautness and articulation have a “live” quality (when Brunnhilde is correctly dialed in) that extends upward through the lower midrange and into the octave above middle C. This is why I use, half wittingly, the term “living stereo” to describe the especial difference the Reference 750 brings to the reproduction of music. The effect is in far greater evidence on LPs that are denser and richer in information. Not saying, by the way, you can’t get a sense of this out of CDs, particularly in the bottom two octaves where there is more information, but that the effect might not necessarily be as lifelike. And the bottom end, in terms of articulation, weight, and a field of shuddering low-frequency air leaves little to be desired (though Luke Manley and others suggest that Wotan himself has an even more “fabulous” bottom – no pun intended).

Add all this up and you would have a stunning achievement and, to my way of thinking, almost out of the blue.

But wait, there’s still more:

First of all, the MB-750 has little overt coloration that I can detect. And yet I find myself teetering on the razor’s edge of a contradiction. I have discussed at some length the neutrality of certain solid-state electronics (Burmester and Spectral) and the seemingly as neutral, if somehow more liquid, Audio Research electronics (minus that touch of upper-midrange

brightness seemingly inherent in the tube gear coming out of the company these days). This VTL amp, however, doesn't sound like the "neutrality" I have ascribed to the solid-state stuff, which in a black-and-white contrast, now sounds to me (just maybe), a touch too "white," a touch too skeletal. Now, I know that "touch" isn't a particularly revealing word. But how else describe the less continuous, less information-dense sound of the most "neutral" solid-state gear? The "whiteness" I'm describing is there, say, with the Burmester electronics, no matter what the recording venue. But it doesn't get in the way of the music, even as, I am beginning to suspect, the neutrality "evens out" or flattens some musical information.

And as for continuousness, that is a characteristic I've never heard in any solid-state gear, nor I have I heard the three-dimensionality, that pulsating sphere effect, from any solid-state designs (to date). Nor do I have any idea what accounts for Brunnhilde's ability to create a continuous soundfield, one capable of reproducing a facsimile of the acoustic volume of a hall or natural recording site, or one with so little texture, which I am inclined to attribute to the discontinuities of transistors switching on and off, however rapidly.

I've been bedeviled for some time trying to get a grasp on my own concept of continuous-

ness, trying to devise a way of explaining it and how it sounds, and even puttering about design theory (in conversation mostly), seeking an underlying method of divining a measurement that would reflect its existence. Some of the Jadis electronics had this quality. Some Conrad-Johnson stuff does, too, particularly the two versions of the ART – the new ART, which is far, far quieter than the original, has more of it. Continuousness almost strikes me as the absence of nearly subliminal noise or other such artifacts. One visual analogy of the concept lies in photographic imagery – looking at a picture made from an 8 x 10 negative versus a blow-up of a 35mm picture.

Could we be facing an almost Zen-like contradiction? Continuousness containing the parallel dimensions of utter quiet and of information density?

HARRY PEARSON

*Part II will consider, in some detail, the Conrad-Johnson Anniversary Reference Triode line stage and, if space permits, the new 47 k/ohm version of The Groove, a solid-state phono stage from Great Britain of hair-raising sonic accomplishment.*

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<sup>1</sup> You may be thinking, "There he goes again, promising another part to an essay that may never appear at all." And I confess that, upon reflection, I decided I had said about all I

had to say about Dave Wilson's Watt/Puppy Model Six stereophonically and that my thoughts on its use as part of a surround system for home video would appear in *The Perfect Vision*. I also promised, at one time or another, the second parts of interviews with the Wilsons and with William Zane Johnson, Audio Research's guiding genius and principal designer. Truth be told, no one ever asked for the second part of the quite candid Wilson interview, and though several readers expressed interest in a continuation of our discussion with Johnson, I thought that virtually all the meat of that interview was covered in its first part. No doubt someone will remind me of another missing second half to something.

<sup>2</sup> Much as Dr. Arthur S. Pfeffer reported in his perceptive account in Issue 125, page 53. Do read this, as well my own remarks on the Wisdom Audio system in the last issue, to get the most out of this review.

<sup>3</sup> VTL is now using the Right Reverend Peter Moncrieff's InfiniCaps, also used by Audio Research in a different design configuration. Luke Manley says these caps bring about "better focus," a more extended top end, with greater clarity, as well as a slightly better-articulated bottom end. As for the politics and the origins of these devices, I remain mum.

<sup>4</sup> Neither disc is presently available on the American market, although a cut from the Marco Polo disc can be found on Burmester's second CD sampler, which is imported into this country by Manhattan's Lyric Hi-Fi.