



# Grace Notes™

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Music & Audio News and Information from Gifted Listener Audio.

## Sound and Music Make sure you get both.

**W**here is the performer on the stage? Where are the other musicians? Can you tell? Do you care?

A few years back, I was listening to some music with one of our suppliers who was paying us a visit. A few minutes into the soloist's performance, the visitor exclaimed, "My goodness! I can't even tell where she is on the stage". I sat silently. I took this to mean that she didn't like what she was hearing. I wanted to ask "But how does she sound? Don't you just love the way she plays?", but decided to let it go.

Over the past twenty five years much effort has been expended toward recreating the illusion of what has been called real musicians in a real space, due in no small part to prodding by the audio press. Fact is, the soloist was nowhere to be found in the 'space'. The fiddle in that recording is miked so closely that its acoustic space, its air, seems not contiguous with the orchestra behind. Sometimes I wonder if it wasn't overdubbed after the orchestra. But then, why wonder? I like the music and the playing. I didn't buy the album to analyze it.

I've written before about analyzing the sound and missing the music and how I burned out on

audio because of it. The reason is simple: not hearing the music, I derived no benefit, only fatigue. Returning some time later, I heard things in a new way as if I had just gotten my first stereo.

We've been on a mission ever since: when we listen to music, we want to know why a performer is on stage, not just where. That means hearing what makes each performer special. After all, they have recording contracts; they must be good at something. (Well, most of them anyway.)

Now some recordings do show very nicely the acoustic space of the performance, and I'm the first to admit that they are fun to listen to. But the overwhelming majority doesn't come close. Some sound just plain bad. However, a decent recording on a good system does get the important things right: pitch, rhythm, phrasing and their cousins, dynamic contrast and control. Interestingly, besides serving to distinguish good performers from the not so good, these attributes are what we feel and remember about music of any genre.

So don't be like me. Don't get so wrapped up in audiophile micro-characteristics that you don't hear the music anymore. I know it is easy to do because we

are forever in pursuit of perfection. We are, more than most, attuned to sonic differences. But I doubt that you got into music listening as an intellectual pursuit. I know I didn't.

With that in mind, the next time you want an improvement, concentrate on the music and its performance. Let yourself go. Let it roll across the room and flow all around you. Do it with the music you love—high brow, low brow, big label or small, natural recording or radio-compressed version, Bruce, Britney, Brubeck, or Bruckner. If we do our job well, you'll hear it in a new way and maybe even remember why you bought the album in the first place.

*Tom Unger*

### Inside This Time

Vienna Acoustics: Different . . . .	2
SACD: Is it Really Super? . . . .	2
Musical Evenings Return . . . .	3
Where Did I Put that CD? . . . .	3
New Mark Levinson No. 383 . .	3
Music to Buy? . . . . .	4
Limbik Regions . . . . .	5
Was/Is Sale-New Arrivals . . . .	6

# Vienna Acoustics: Different.

Ever have one of those days when everything seems to click and you really get into the music? You listen for hours on end unaware of the time. I had a day like this when the Sumiko company brought the Vienna Acoustics speakers to us for an audition.

One of the nice things about being in business for a while is that manufacturers know about you and they want their products in your store. So we get lots of offers to listen to new things, especially speakers. Not many measure up. But then we already have the Thiels, the Linns, the Magneplanars, even the little JPWs. So it usually turns out that a new speaker line offers us nothing that we can't already do better.

Things were different that day the Viennas arrived. We set up the Mozart, one of the mid-priced models (\$2500), in about a half hour. We hooked them up to the Ayre electronics and the Linn Ikemi player, a combination I know well for its rich, dynamic, presentation. I had heard these components numerous times with many speakers. This was different! I rounded up my favorite albums. One after another: 4 o'clock, 6 o'clock, 8 o'clock, 10 o'clock. I went home, and once there couldn't wait to get back in the next morning.

So what's different? Well, for starters there's bass extension and volume that you and I have learned not to expect from a speaker of this size. But there is more than just bass. You know by now that I am a big fan of vocalists, so I can't stand anything that gets in the way of my singers. More often than not when we hear speakers with bass like this, we find that it gets in the way by coloring the midrange. The Viennas don't get in the way. In fact they present all the body, harmonic richness, breath and air of the voices that I love so well, and they do it with a clarity and separation that lets me appreciate them in a new way. It's not false clarity either. By that I mean that they play without any trace of grain or edge on top. Still, there is no apparent rolloff of high frequencies. Beautiful. Just beautiful.

We have since bought all the Vienna models starting with the bookshelf-sized Haydn (\$995) and going all the way up to the large yet (very) elegantly proportioned Mahler (\$9,800). In between are the aforementioned Mozart, the Bach (\$1,500), and the Beethoven (\$4000). Never offensive, never boring. Always satisfying. Each of them.

Standard finishes are black lacquer and, my favorite, natural beech. The rosewood is striking and naturally costs a little more on all models except the Mahler. Just wait until you see the woodwork! We are accustomed to finely finished products around here, so the Viennas fit in perfectly. Eye-poppin' good, I say. You'll want to display these in the living room.



## SACD: Is it Really Super?

We've been listening to the Marantz SA1 player for a few months now. I bought one, not to find out how it sounded with Super Audio CDs (I expected it to sound good with those), but to know how it handled regular CDs. Since we have thousands of those, and since the CD will be with us for long time to come, I think this is the much more pertinent question. In fact, I've gotten reports from users of other SACD players that standard CD performance is not as good as might be expected.

Not so with the Marantz SA1! At \$6,450, it ought to hold its own, if not outperform, similarly priced CD players, and I'm happy to report that it does just that and then some. In this case at least, it really is super. If you haven't had the chance to see or hear one, please accept my invitation to come by and have a listen.

Will Sony/Philips be successful with their SACD efforts? Don't look to me for the answer. While we might be gifted at listening, those gifts do not include psychic powers. (I'm guessing that they might, but it will take about five years.) Right now there are only about 200 SACDs available, mostly reissues. In order for the format to take off, the powers that be will need to convince record label execs to produce new material in SACD. Because this unit sounds so good with regular CDs however, I can recommend it highly today. Since it also plays SACDs, it's a safe bet for the future. If you're in the market for an upgrade, you should have a listen.

# It's that time of year again!

I hope you can join us for a couple of very musical evenings we have planned this Winter. Doors open at 7:05 to refreshments and conversation. Presentations begin around 7:35 and will last about an hour. Reservations are required. You can call anytime to have your name put on the list.

## **Madrigal Audio Laboratories** **Thursday, January 18, 2001**

Mr. Keith Dowd will be here to show and tell all regarding the newest Mark Levinson designs, especially the No. 32 Reference controller and the beautiful new No. 383 integrated amp.

## **Vienna Acoustics & REL Subwoofers** **Thursday, February 8, 2001**

The boys from Sumiko will visit to discuss with you the various designs and models of the Vienna Acoustics line of speakers. Also, if you have questions about how musical bass extension might add to your musical enjoyment, this would be a good evening for you.

## **Linn Hi Fi** **Thursday, February 22, 2001**

The good people from Scotland will visit to discuss the latest offerings and the future of home audio as seen by one of the world's largest and most successful high performance audio companies.

## *Now where did I put that CD?!*

If you are like us, you enjoy music anywhere you can get it. Maybe you even have one of those multi-disc units installed in the car. But the day surely comes when you want a CD at 10 PM and remember that it's in the trunk ... in the garage.

So why not have doubles of everything you like. Or even compilations of your favorites? With the cost of CD recorders down and the cost of blank CDRs way down (about \$1.50 each) there's almost no reason not to.

The DR6050 (\$689) is a dual tray unit that reduces copying tracks or whole albums to the push of a few buttons. If you have one of those players with an alphanumeric display, you might even enter the names of the artists and tracks on the copy. It's easy and takes only a few extra minutes.

If you already have a good CD player, or if you will be recording analog sources and want better A/D circuitry, then I suggest the improvements offered by the DR6000, a single tray unit with better electronics and optics at \$639.

# Things Fall Together

*Sometimes with pleasing results, as the new Mark Levinson No. 383 shows.*



It's interesting to note how trends go. For years it was thought that for the best sound, you needed a separate component for each function. Integrated components, whether amplifiers or CD players, were viewed as mere cost-cutting measures, so we paid the extra dollars for multiple chassis. Then about five years ago, things started coming back together as manufacturers and designers found ways to make a unified component come very close to the performance of its separate kin.

This trend first manifested itself with the new crop of CD players that started to arrive about five years ago. The last couple of years have seen a welcome resurgence of the integrated amp. Without a doubt, the best example of this I've ever seen is the new Mark Levinson No. 383.

I say welcome resurgence because sometimes the size and complexity of a separate amp/preamp combination is just not practical. There are cost considerations too. Getting the sound and build quality of Mark Levinson audio had until now meant spending over \$10,000 plus interconnect cables. With the 383 you can get very, very close to that performance level for under \$6,000.

One look will tell you that the No.383 is built to the same high standards as all other Mark Levinson products. In other words, it's built to last a long, long time. Those build standards go beyond mere appearance however. Madrigal engineers have avoided the usual tradeoffs inside that can very easily make an integrated amp a compromised amp. The 100W per channel amplifier uses the same technology and parts as the 300 series amplifiers. If you've listened to the No.335 or 33H power amps we have on display you know that this is a good thing. If you would like that performance level in a (relatively) compact unit, I urge you to come in and have a listen to this new beauty.

# MUSIC TO BUY? HERE'S MY 2¢ WORTH

I read that Townes Van Zandt once said that the goal of a songwriter is harmonic symmetry between the three components that give a song its soul: the music, the lyric and the voice. Doing that, he said, is easily explained. Simply play one note correctly, ring that same note together with your voice and match the combination to the meaning of the lyric for that moment in time. Only then, he says, can you hope to touch somebody with the essence of your work and, perhaps, make a small bit of difference.

Lee Ann Womack's *I Hope You Dance* makes that small bit of difference. The album has been out for a few months now, but I never tire of it. Oh, we had better say it right away: you'll find this album in the Country/Western section of your favorite store. (If they don't have a Country section, tell them to get one.) Actually, this album is popular enough that you can find it anywhere. While it isn't today's watered down version of country, it is not your father's country music either. This is tuneful stuff.

*"Music and creative arts  
are as important as the air we  
breathe. We need this  
nourishment for the spirit  
and the soul."*

—Anne-Sophie Mutter

Reared in Jacksonville Texas, Lee Ann is steeped in the C/W tradition and can sing traditional country-western music with the best, as her first self-titled album showed. (Also, check out her rendition of *Heart to Heart Talk*, on the Grammy winning Bob Wills tribute album, *Ride with Bob*. It is pretty beyond words.)

These are more than just hummable ditties though. Listening to the radio these days makes me wonder where songs for grown-ups, about grown-up things, disappeared to. Well, Lee Ann's got 'em right here. She has rounded up some of the best songwriters, e.g. Buddy & Julie Miller, Bruce Robison, Rodney Crowell and presents their work with soul and inspiration. Since we're already into November, I'll stick my neck out and declare it a candidate for album of the year. I hope you like it too.



Beethoven's Violin Sonatas by Anne-Sophie Mutter, violin, Lambert Orkis, piano, 4CD set.

Back in '98, Suzanne and I heard Miss Mutter and Mr. Orkis perform some of these at the Kennedy Center. I knew she was planning to record them all, but then it got away from me. Thankfully, Hugh Campbell, G.L. brought this to our attention.

I'll not pretend to be a know-it-all music reviewer. I'll just say that there is no (classical) fiddler I enjoy more than Miss Mutter. Her pitch, phrasing, and control allow us to experience the essence, the soul, of these works. Of her accompanist, Miss

Mutter says all that need be said: "I need a pianist with broad stylistic ability and a great intuitional grasp. And finally, I need someone who expresses his own opinion. Lambert is all of this."

Miss Mutter plays what she describes as a Lord Dunn Raven Stradivarius, made in 1710. She explains that she considered another violin, an Emiliani, which she says "is missing a certain dimension. It sounds superb, but that's all. It has no stridency." She says that she "needs the harshness for the eruptive moments" of the sonatas. Listen for this. It might be fun to identify what she is talking about.

Not a big classical fan? Go on. Try this one anyway. And play disc four first. In fact, start with the short last track, a minuet, and you'll see exactly what I'm talking about in just over three minutes. Since the sonatas span 15 years of Beethoven's life, some feel that they should be presented in a particular order. Forget all that. Play what you like.

Not a classical fan at all? Doesn't matter. Music like this belongs in your music library. It's not for nothing that they call it classical.



Deadline addition:

Like your Americana a little more rocked up (but not too much)? Check out Allison Moorer's second album, *The Hardest Part*. One reviewer described Miss Moorer's first album this way: "If ... its 11 cuts of purified lonesome and heartache don't eat at your very soul, then I'm sorry friend, but you just don't have one." *The Hardest Part* is all that, and more substantial.

# On to the Limbik Regions

**limbic system** *n* (1952) : a group of subcortical structures of the brain that are concerned especially with emotion and motivation.

**Y**ou probably already knew that, but Linn's new multi-channel process sent me scurrying for a dictionary. What a perfect choice of name!

Limbik is the new program for the Linn AV5103 pre-amp. Being software, it is nothing you can look at. But, boy oh boy, can you ever hear it. (And I don't mean "hear it" in an annoying or distracting way.) To quote from Linn's description: Limbik is an algorithm (a process) which runs in the Digital Signal Processor in the AV5103. It takes in two channel (stereo) audio and generates up to three more channels to enhance stereo imaging and room ambience. As I've said, recordings with a natural acoustic are few and far between. Wouldn't it be nice to have that sense of acoustic space with the recordings we love?

I know what you're thinking. This is a terrible thing to do to the original stereo signal which has been nurtured and cared for, carried with precision from the source into the 5103. Any experience with surround modes (jazz club, cathedral, etc.) from other AV processors is certainly enough to arouse deep and well founded suspicion of any enhancements to the original signal. However, don't throw the baby out with the bathwater!

It is obviously impossible to add more information to the original stereo signal. But the stereo signal is not the sound at the original performance of the music, it is already processed and condensed from a natural "surround sound" to the two channels you get from a CD or record or other source. The Limbik process extracts some of the spatial and positioning information contained in the stereo signals and sends this information to the extra loudspeakers available in a multi channel sound system. The result,

*carefully used on appropriate source material*, is to create a sound a bit closer to the original performance, without losing or damaging the fundamental musical information.

As Limbik can only work on the spatial and positioning information present in the stereo signals the result is entirely dependent on the original recording technique. Some recordings benefit enormously from Limbik, some are (without question) better without it.

Limbik allows you to optimize ten parameters for different sources, different types of recordings, and your listening room. The default settings are the ones Linn has found to be best for a variety of music, in their listening rooms. Part of the fun is that I can experiment with impunity; I can't do any damage, and I can instantly get back to the defaults, or even to stereo, with one button press.

Limbik can be used with both digital and analog inputs, however only you can decide if for a particular analog source the extra conversion steps are outweighed by the Limbik processing benefits.

The new program is included in all AV5103 preamps as of this writing (as well as Dolby Digital and dts). Even better, the price didn't change. It's still \$7,750 (if you delete the RF input option).

If you've listened to anything here in the past two years, you already know that the AV5103 is one of the two or three least colored and most musical preamps available. It is the only such unit that is hardware and software upgradeable. Now with Limbik, it is the most versatile, and without a doubt the most fun!

## Only a listener?

Since our attention is always focused on the musicians, we can forget that we listeners are as important to the music and to them as they are to us. Listen to this:

"It is the breathless silence of the audience that forms the fertile environment in which music thrives."  
— Anne-Sophie Mutter

"I've got all the friends I need on that front row." — Chely Wright

## Was/Is Sale.

We don't like to keep our demonstrator units on the floor too long, so you get some really good buys on perfect merchandise. Mostly demonstrator units this time. All Dem units are new and carry the full manufacturer's warranty.

	<u>Type</u>	<u>Was</u>	<u>Is</u>
Goldmund Mimesis 10++ D/A	D	\$13,000	\$6,500
Goldmund Mimesis 39 Player	D	\$6,950	\$4,950
Linn Klout Amplifiers	U	\$4,200	\$3,200
Linn AV5103 A/V Controller	D	\$7,750	\$6,200
Mark Levinson No. 36S D/A	D	\$6,500	\$3,250
Marantz DV18 DVD Player	D	\$1,200	\$950
Proton NT3720 36" TV	D	\$2,500	\$1,650
Proceed PMDT DVD Player	D	\$5,950	\$4,950
Sharp 64" RPTV HDTV Monitor	D	\$6,500	\$5,000
Thiel MCS1/pair w/stands	D	\$5,400	\$3,900
PS Audio Lambda/Ultralink	U	\$4,000	\$795

## More Recent Arrivals

It's impractical to write about every new arrival. Here are some recent additions you should know about.

Rotel RSP-976 5.1 System Controller	\$1,150
Rotel RSX-972 5.1 Receiver	\$1,195
Marantz VC8100 301 disc CD/DVD	\$1,350
VTL Integrated Amp 2x85W	\$2,490
Linn Katan Bookshelf speakers	\$995
Linn Sizmik Active Bass Speaker	\$1,700
Linn Ninka Speakers	\$1,575
Synergy A/V Furniture in Cherry, Maple and Walnut. Starting at	\$400
Rega Planet 2000 CD Player	\$950

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