



# Grace Notes™

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Music & Audio News and  
Information from Gifted Listener Audio.

## Encode/Decode

By James Tanner

There is a serious problem here folks. With all the talk about surround systems in our homes moving to 6.1 and 7.1 surround systems someone forgot to tell the recording studios.

The 6.1 and 7.1 EX and ES systems consist of the standard 5.1 surround system but add one or two back channels as well. This version of a 7.1 system is in distinct contrast to the previous 7.1 systems you may have seen which had a standard 5.1 setup but included two side channels. There is also the issue of 6.1 as well, which is the same as the standard 5.1 but adds a single back channel instead of two back channels. Boy this is getting confusing isn't it?

My concern here is simple. Very few of the studios out there that produce the sound tracks and recordings that are played back on these 6.1 and 7.1 systems have moved beyond the standard 5.1 surround format. The reason for this is that the 5.1 format is the recording standard and will probably remain so for a very long time to come.

There will always be the exception of course and some of the big blockbuster type movies may be recorded in 6.1 surround but they certainly will be the exception. The other point is that all DVD

movies also include a 5.1 version of the film as well, even if they have mixed a 6.1 or 7.1 optional soundtrack. Also remember that rear coverage of sound is more a product of the need to provide a sound field behind the listener in large commercial theater venues. At home, in a reasonably sized normal room, rear sound field coverage is easily handled by two properly positioned quality loudspeakers.

So what we have here is an industry where the encode side (studio) is producing a product which gets played back or decoded on a different system than it was recorded and mastered on. In the days of Stereo that would be analogous to setting up your stereo system with no thought in mind of where each speaker should be placed to replicate the stereo sound field the recording engineer intended you to hear. The old joke about going over to your friends house to hear his new stereo and finding out he put the left stereo speaker in one room and the right in another is representative of this issue.

When the encode side of the industry produces a movie or recording the number of channels are always quoted as to the number of discrete channels used. So 5.1 means five discrete channels with a discrete sub/effects channel.

With 6.1 it would be six discrete channels and one sub/ effects channel. So 5.1 or 6.1 or 7.1 would indicate the number of discrete channels at the encode side of the equation. At the decode side of the industry the number of channels is a function of the number of playback channels and the Digital Signal Processing used. So 5.1, 6.1 or 7.1 is a function of the decoding capabilities available in your specific processor not necessarily the number of discrete channels recorded by the recording engineer.

When you see all these companies referring to their products having six and seven channel surround modes recognize that most of the time this refers to playback only. So in a lot of cases when you

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# Rotel Delivers Again

As you've no doubt seen, there are a hundred choices in receivers from the mainstream mid-fi manufacturers. Trouble is they look and feel as if they were designed for hi-fi pilots and hearing them makes it obvious that there isn't a dime's worth of difference among them.

About once a week we hear from someone who has thoughts of putting up a modest system in the family room to enjoy home movies. Nothing complicated, just something easy to use, affordable, expandable, and above all something that sounds good.

If these are your requirements, come have a listen to the new Rotel units, especially the **RSX-1065**. Crisp, dynamic, and powerful, it breezes through the "sounds good" test. All its inputs are assignable so you can set the darn thing up the way you want it for your family. Heck, you can even change the names on the display so that regular-type folk (a.k.a. family members) can tell what they selected. And, AND, it's just about as future proof as a component of this nature can be. It can decode any format extant: Dolby Pro Logic II, automatic decoding for Dolby Digital 5.1, DTS 5.1, DTS ES Matrix 6.1, and DTS ES Discrete 6.1 channel digital sources. For music sources, you get automatic HDCD decoding, and surround modes (and inputs) for playback of any source material on 5, 6, or 7 channel systems. On the video side, you get composite, S, and component video I/O and switching.

For \$1,895, that's a lot. Even more when you consider that the 100 watts rating (all channels driven at once) are "Rotel watts", i.e. there is no exaggeration. The amps are designed to produce that power into real world speaker loads, not just into an eight ohm resistor on the bench. You can verify this in minutes just by listening.

When I consider the five year warranty and that proverbial Rotel customer service (and the GLA support), I can't imagine any other solution for someone needing the best one chassis unit.

# Sign Up for 2002 Musical Evenings

Well, there aren't really 2002 of them, and we know you wouldn't have time for that many anyway, but we do have two really good ones scheduled. We hope you'll come by and warm up with some beautiful music and the latest news. As usual, doors open at 7:00 PM for some light refreshment and a little chatting. Presentations and discussions begin around 7:30 and are usually over by 9:00 PM.

Reservations are required. Call 703-818-8000 anytime to place your name on the list.

## Linn Hi Fi Thursday January 17

Mr. Paul Condron (one of Ivor's many right hands) has graciously accepted our invitation to visit with you. Of course, Linn's flagship system, including the new Komri speaker and Sondek CD12, will be on display along with the Ninka, Katan, and Sizmik subwoofer. Paul is just the man to tell all about the design and development of these new products and tell us the latest coming attractions in home audio.

## Thiel Audio Thursday February 7

The new CS1.6 will be here and we couldn't pass up the opportunity to have Ken Dawkins pay us a visit to tell us all about it. Rumor is that Jim Thiel has other updates and new models in the works. Maybe we can get Ken to spill the beans on what's coming.

## Encode/Decode

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listen to the movie or recording in 6.1 or 7.1 you are not hearing the recording in its original 5.1 format. The processor is synthesizing the extra channels from the 5.1 original recording.

So you can understand my concern here. If the whole point of the exercise is to replicate the intent of the recording engineer then we have a serious problem because the recording and playback sides are not mirrors of each other. Even the positioning of the six or seven channels is at odds with some systems advocating side and rear channels and others advocating rear and back channels.

Unless we can agree on standards that provide a correlation between the recording and playback side of the equation the industry will remain in chaos.

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# Low Output Lyra

So that's what LOL means! Lyra is shipping a new version of its Helikon phono pickup, but this is no laughing matter. The new version is called the Helikon SL. Not a replacement, just a different version where the moving coils are wound with half the amount of wire used in the regular version.

Think back to physics class. You remember, don't you? That sunny spring afternoon when the teacher was talking about the effects of mass in a resonant system. Well, in case you were looking out the window, what he said in a nutshell was that the lower the unsprung mass, the better the moving parts are able to follow the "bumps in the road" without disturbing the rest of the system.

The teacher probably used automobile suspensions as an example, but we were all thinking of our record players, weren't we? Of course we were, because in a phono rig, while there are hundreds of parameters to juggle, low mass at the stylus generally translates to reduced risk of damage to the vinyl and more accurate information retrieval. The reduced risk of damage is a result of reducing the force necessary to accelerate the moving system. Remember that it is the passing modulated groove that applies this force, so we get less wear and tear on the vinyl. Low mass also means that the stylus is better able to trace the groove without losing contact, so we get a more exact replica of the information encoded in the groove. Lyra already uses one of the lowest mass stylus in existence. Reducing the mass of the moving coils makes that tiny diamond even more relevant.

There is a tradeoff. The output level has dropped by half (to .22mV) and the impedance has also dropped (to 3 ohms). While neither of these values is terribly low, you will need a top quality, quiet phono amp to get your money's worth. And you will get your money's worth! It's among the two sweetest cartridges I've heard lately. Very, very nice. Pristine. Delicate.

If you want to hear more out of those LPs (and why not), you can pick up the new SL pickup for \$2,195, installed to perfection on your table. Call us about your application, and we can advise you of the suitability of the SL vis-a-vis your arm and table and amplifier. If you already have a Lyra cartridge and would like to upgrade, your cost with exchange is only \$1,479.

## THIEL 2.3 UPGRADE

Thiel owners should take advantage of an improved midrange/coax driver developed for the latest generation CS2.3. Better materials and gluing methods have improved the drivers reliability and smoothed the upper midrange response. If your serial number is above 4567, you already have it.

The update, which consists of replacing the coaxial driver and a few parts on the crossover board, is straightforward though probably not something you'll want to do yourself. You can send your speakers to the factory for the update. A better way is let us do it right here in the store and save the cost and risk of shipping speakers to Kentucky. Cost of parts and labor is only \$475. In home cost is \$575.

## THIEL ANNOUNCES THE CS1.6!

So here I am writing about something I haven't seen or heard yet. But I do know well Thiel's reputation for introducing new products only when Jim Thiel has something to say. The CS1.6 is entirely new and judging from the looks of it, he has a lot to say!

We also know well their 25 year reputation for good sound. At \$2,395, I expect it to be the best value Thiel has ever produced. (If not, I'll take it all back in the next issue.)

Our first CS1.6 (in the new Natural Maple finish) is scheduled for arrival in late December.



# Burn the Candle, Brightly, at Both Ends

New speakers from Linn advance the state of the art in two directions.

Always at the forefront of technology, the folks at Linn have got to be among the busiest people on earth. (Having visited the factory and seen their work habits and their drive, I think this just may be the case.) In the past year we have seen advances in speaker technology alone that have our heads spinning. Our faces are grinning from ear to ear and our toes are tapping though.

At one end, Linn introduced the new **Katan** (\$995/pair) bookshelf speakers and its big sister, the **Ninka**. The Katan is a replacement for and a big advance in

both sound and finish over the beloved **Tukan** (1992-2000, R.I.P.). If you have a spot for the perfect little bookshelf speaker, I hope you'll take a few moments to hear this one. That's about as long as you'll need to know how good it is.

As good as the Katan is, there's nothing like a full-range floor stander. This is why the Ninka has generated so much excitement around here. Funny name, great speaker. A direct descendent of the Keilidh, the Ninka has shown itself to be the most popular speaker we have ever presented. I'm

not surprised. I knew it from the first, and that first pair is still in my family room.

Now it's even a little better. You can replace the included wooden base with an upgrade granite-like polymer/ceramic base which controls extraneous vibrations very well. The improvement in bass articulation and tonal purity is noticeable to even the most casual observer.

If you don't yet have your Ninkas, buy the bases at the same time and save a few dollars. You can buy both together for \$1,795 for the pair in Maple or Cherry, less for the black ash finish. If you already have your Ninkas, you can of course get the bases at the same savings, making them \$220 for the pair.



## Home Theater Fans. *Listen up!*

If looking for a speaker upgrade for your home theater, do not pass up the opportunity to hear the Ninka in that application. As with music, it is nothing short of outstanding! When combined with the new **Trikan** center, the Sizmik subwoofer, and a pair of Katans for the rear you have a remarkably satisfying, easy to drive, easy to look at six-piece system for \$4,995. (Slightly higher for cherry or maple.)

## Attention AV5140 owners.

Linn is now making a ceramic base for your speaker too. At a cost of \$295 for the pair, you'll find it a worthwhile sonic improvement.



And now the BIG ONE. I love it when a company has the engineering expertise as well as the financial and manufacturing resources to truly advance the state of our art. The **Komri**, Linn's new flagship speaker is, in my humble estimation, the most complete, most enjoyable speaker system I have ever heard. I love going out on limbs, so to speak, but this time I feel pretty safe. Two months worth of listening has only bolstered that opinion.

Tonal accuracy, subtle dynamic gradients, true (and very musical) bass exten-

sion, three-dimensional presentation—it's all here. From the most delicate vibrato to the full weight and impact of an orchestra or rock band, this is the speaker for the music lover who wants it all. Yes, it's (very) expensive, but...

Linn developed what they call the 4K Acoustic Array (you know they just had to get a K in there somewhere), a new integrated approach to the treble and mid-range sections of a loudspeaker, the likes of which I haven't seen before. The super tweeter, tweeter and midrange domes are mounted in a module designed to minimize diffraction effects caused by horn-mounting. The supertweeter and tweeter are mounted within this module on a narrow bridge which eliminates the reflections caused by traditional baffle mounting. The upper bass drive unit is mounted directly behind the treble drivers. (It appears to be on axis with the supertweeter.) The acoustically optimized structure enables all the drive units to be mounted extremely close together. The acoustic center of all four drivers is thus very nearly coincident so that from 100 Hz to 40kHz the acoustic center of the Komri appears to be a single point and the horizontal and vertical dispersion patterns of the Komri are almost identical.

The bass drivers are exceptionally long-throw units with powerful motors. In conjunction with the active servo bass system they provide the most astonishing bass response I've experienced, even more astonishing when I consider that it is from a relatively small cabinet. Each of the drivers is connected to its own internal (Klimax-derived) power amplifier, which is in turn driven by the Active Bass Servo. The Active Bass Servo uses an accelerometer mounted on the voice coil of the driver to measure the precise motion of the driver and compares this signal with the original audio signal. It can then modify the output to the power amplifier to compensate for any non-linearity of the bass driver.

The concept is not new, but my ears tell me that the implementation is. The result is extraordinary clean bass with a frequency response that Linn says (and that I believe) measures ruler-flat to 20hz even at high listening levels.

It is stunning to hear the effects of all this engineering and workmanship. Fortunately, special audiophile recordings are not needed. I've got two examples of albums that have been around here for years and which I am now understanding as never done before. First up is this Frank Sinatra remastering that Tim brought to the store. We've all read many reviewers going on at length about his natural reading, his turn of a phrase. I remember William Livingstone writing about this in Stereo Review back in the 70s. I didn't get it then. I get it now. This may not be your kind of music (I never thought it would be mine), but do come give this a listen on the Komri. See if you can pick up what I'm referring to.



*Komri 4K Array*

Miles Davis' *Kind of Blue* is probably the most played album in hi fi shops across the country. And for good reason. I'm not a big jazz guy, but if a visiting alien were to ask me what jazz is, I'd play this one for him. AND I'd be sure to play it on the CD12 with the Komri. I've heard this album a thousand times. I've NEVER heard it sound like this. Rhythm? Pitch? We talk about these a lot, and Linn often uses the term "pitch accurate" in their literature. We too easily think of pitch as a more basic and therefore easier thing to get right, with rhythm only slightly harder. Fair warning: one listen to *Kind of Blue* on the Komri system and you'll never again wonder about the importance (or difficulty) of rhythm and pitch accuracy. Even better, you will as I did "get" this 42 year old performance as never before.

Please. Come by and hear this system. Bring your favorite recording, LP or CD, the music you love the most, the one you've heard so often you know everything about it. See if the Komri doesn't show you something that lets you forge a new emotional connection with it, as it does for me every day.

# Was/Is Sale.

*LOTS of stuff this time, including some prime demonstrator equipment that must be rotated, so it's priced to move.*

		Was	Is
Thiel CS1.5 Teak	(D)	2,365	1,565
Goldmund Mimesis SRP Preamp	(U)	1,795	495
Goldmund Mimesis 10C DAC	(D)	13,000	2,500
Linn Tukan Speakers Rosenut	(U)	850	595
Marantz SR18 AC3/dts Receiver		2,795	1,495
Micromega Stage 3 CD Player	(U)	1,495	295
Nikko CD500R Player	(U)	695	95
ProAc Studio 2 Speakers w/stands		1,650	795
TEAC A3300SX Reel to Reel	(U)	995	295
Kyocera T-910 AM/FM Tuner	(U)	600	250
Pioneer SX-650 Receiver 35W	(U)	325	100
Nakamichi RX-505 Auto Rev.	(U)	1,395	495
Mark Levinson No.383 Integrated	(D)	5,990	4,800
Rotel RSP-980 6ch Analog Preamp	(U)	1,300	250
Linn Klimax Solo 500W	(D)	ea. 9,500	7,500
Thiel CS7.2 Speaker w/warranty	(U)	13,500	7,900
Mark Levinson No. 332 200W Amp	(U)	7,500	4,500



**A PICTURE IS WORTH A THOUSAND WORDS.  
BUT THE SOUND CAN LEAVE YOU SPEECHLESS.**



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