

Dave's Consumer Electronics Show Report Las Vegas, Nevada 2003



There is no place on earth that is better described by the old saying "*it's a nice place to visit but I wouldn't wanna live there*" than Las Vegas. It's like a sick kind of Disney World for adults. Everything is larger than life. Meals are especially ridiculous. If you can stick to any kind of diet in Vegas for more than one day, you are an incredibly strong-willed individual. I, of course, have to treat each meal like it's The Last Supper. But I'd rather have that as my weakness than an addiction to the craps tables.

Fortunately, going to the CES every day tires you out so much that you don't have the energy to gamble away all of your money at night. This year I actually had blisters on my feet from trying to keep up with RJ, who walks about as fast as I run. But there was plenty to see at this year's show. More than any previous CES I can remember. So here is all of the latest information from the show.

Vandersteen Audio

The very first place we went on day number one was Vandersteen's room to check out the new Model 5A. I was fortunate enough to have set up a pair at a customer's house a few days before leaving for Vegas, so I already had a taste of how great they sound. Upon arriving at Vandersteen's room at the Alexis Park (the high-end-audio section of CES) I was greeted by Richard Vandersteen's daughter Jaclyn and his wife Eneke (pronounced EEEenica).

We sat down and listened to the new speakers while waiting to meet with Richard. Just as at my customer's house a few days earlier, the 5As sounded incredible. RJ and John P. were sitting next to me making ooooh and ahhhhh sounds almost immediately upon hearing them. RJ, in particular had a vested interest in this visit, because he wanted to know when and how he could do the 5A upgrade to his pair of Model 5s.

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But, before getting into what the 5A is, let me say that the unbroken-in pair I set up before the show sounded better out-of-the-box than any pair of standard Model 5s I have ever heard, in any system, with any electronics! And they were hooked up to a Bryston loaner, a rather average sounding amp, that my customer was using while his Spectral was being repaired. That's how good the new 5As are.

So here is what's going on inside of them. There is an entirely new tweeter, a new cone for the midrange driver, partially new crossover and a new switch-mode power supply for the subwoofer amplifier. The first thing I asked Richard Vandersteen when we sat down at the show was how the new 5A could sound so much more detailed and yet become sweeter and friendlier- less analytical- than the standard Model 5. He said it was primarily the new tweeter with its special proprietary critical damping and its new pole piece that allows even less reflected back-wave energy out of the front of the speaker than the tweeter in the standard Model 5 does. "We have always stopped most of the bad reflected sound in our patented midrange driver, now the 5A tweeter is doing the same thing." Also, the new midrange driver is just flat-out better sounding with its new woven composite cone. It is lighter and faster than before, which leads to greater overall transparency. The combined sonic result of these two driver changes is nothing short of a miracle. Instruments and voices sound so crystal clear and lifelike without any trace of added hardness or strain.

And then you have the subwoofer amplifier changes. Richard explained that with a regular, linear, transformer-based power supply, which refreshes twice per cycle of the electrical service (or 120 times per second), it takes some time for the supply to recover after a big transient, which leads to inconsistent power delivery to the woofer. The new digital supply refreshes about 100,000 times per second and is fully regulated, so the voltage is always there. The result is much more stable and consistent power delivery to the woofer and you can tell right away when you listen to the 5A. The bass is even more controlled and yet effortless at the same time. As a matter of fact, the entire presentation from top to bottom can be best summed up by the word effortless.

One thing I discovered upon returning home and talking to Richard on the phone is that the pair of 5As he used at the show is the oldest Model 5s in existence. They are his personal speakers, which were the first production units ever built. So I guess it's safe to say that anyone with older Model 5s can do the full upgrade and know that their 5As will sound just as good as Richard Vandersteen's personal speakers do!

ProAc Loudspeakers

The next stop for us was the ProAc room. RJ and I were excited to see and hear the new flagship ProAc Response D80s. I have owned the predecessor Response 5s for a few years now and RJ has a pair of Response 3.8s. The D80 will replace the Response 5 and sell for \$15,000 per pair.

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Upon arriving, I spotted Richard Gerberg, who runs ProAc USA, sitting on the couch next to Stereophile reviewer Michael Fremer. We said our hellos and filed in right behind them to listen. The program material was all Fremer's own unlabeled CDRs which had all kinds of different music sourced from master tapes. The only problem was he couldn't ever seem to find any of the tracks he was looking for. My advice for him was to invest in a few Sharpie markers, but along the way we heard some pretty interesting and vivid recordings. It was obvious that the new ProAc's were making the kind of "you are there" sound they are known for.

The new D80 is a large floor-standing 3-way with two new Volt 10 inch woofers, twin 2" dome midrange drivers, and a brand new soft dome tweeter. The D80 also features a down-firing port that is vented out both sides of the speaker cabinet. Other than a little extra heft in the bass that Richard Gerberg attributed to a room mode he couldn't quite beat, the sound was excellent. The sound had superb imaging and wonderful dynamics.

It's funny how no matter what kind of drivers Stuart Tyler (designer of all ProAcs) uses, he always gets them to sound like a ProAc. In this case, none of the drivers resemble any previous model whatsoever, and yet he manages to coax out exactly the sound he wants. This speaker also resembles the flagship Response 4 from a few years back in that it can move a tremendous amount of air and play louder than most audiophile speakers do while still maintaining their composure. Richard Gerberg was telling me how much fun he had "rocking out" with the demo pair at his house prior to the show, and after listening to them for a while, it was easy to see why. They are terrific loudspeakers.

Also worth noting is that the system driving the ProAcs was all Audio Research. A CD3 fed a REF2mkII Preamp which fed the new 150M power amplifier that was configured with four identical channels for bi-amping. I was looking

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forward to hearing this new amp drive some different loudspeakers at the show, and it was nice to hear it work so well with a big pair of ProAcs like the D80s.

Linn Products

The next stop on the trail was Linn. I was particularly excited about this one because rumor had it that they were going to be unveiling the new Unidisc player. And sure enough, it was there, although it was tucked away where only Linn dealers could get near it. Fortunately, I was able to use my credentials to get a look, touch and even listen to it. Why is Linn guarding it so? Well, consider that the Unidisc is the first SACD player in the world to use a non-Sony engine for SACD playback. That's right, everything out there up until now has relied on the limited Sony SACD engine-including the \$12,000 Classe and the \$20,000 Accuphase.

So, no matter how much you spent on your SACD player, you have been listening to a Sony, more or less. Well, not any more. Linn got the rights to design their own SACD decoding engine from scratch and has been working on it for more than a year. The Unidisc will be the first player to utilize this new engine. As if that isn't enough to get excited about, the Unidisc is also a DVD-Audio, progressive scan DVD-Video, Red Book CD, and just about any other format you can think of, player. If the disc is 5- $\frac{1}{4}$ inches and round, the Linn will play it.

My new Linn regional representative took me into a room where the Unidisc was connected to a system consisting of multiple Klimax amplifiers, Linn speakers all around (sorry, I don't remember which ones; I was too excited about the Unidisc) and another new product called the Kisto. The Kisto is Linn's new top-of-the-line surround processor. It will do just about anything you can think of including Dolby Digital, DTS, ProLogic II and Linn's proprietary purist music surround.

The Unidisc player looked great, with an aesthetic somewhere between the Ikemi and the CD12. The back panel had all of the connections you could ever want and in front was one of their custom machined loading mechanisms that feels so nice. I sat down and we did some listening comparisons with two-channel SACD vs. multi-channel. From what I could hear, the sound was good, but honestly, the show booth was a difficult listening environment. Linn wanted to give dealers the chance to hear the new products even though they knew conditions were sub-optimal, and I'm glad they did.

Pricing on the Unidisc is unknown at this time, although we expect \$8K to \$10K as a range. There are also plans underway to release a more affordable version in the near future. The Kisto surround controller was also in prototype form with no projected retail price. Both pieces should be available before summer.

Audio Research Corp.

Next, we headed over to T.H.E. Show (The Home Entertainment Show) which was located at the San Remo Expo center. The main attraction there was Audio Research, who always has a room off-site from the regular CES. For years they were at the Golden Nugget with a small group of other manufacturers including Spectral, Avalon, Theta and Wadia. But this year they all relocated closer to the strip and the rest of the festivities.

ARC's room contained two exciting new pieces of equipment. First was their new multi-channel configurable switch-mode power amplifier, the 150M. This special amp uses a new digital switching output stage rather than conventional

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circuitry and the sound and specifications are said to be better than any previous sold-state model they have built. The 150M is also modular and can accommodate up to seven identical channels with its huge power transformer and rows of bulk filter capacitors located in the front of the main chassis shared by all.

Each channel then has its own additional local power supplies and a high quality circuit including accommodations for either balanced XLR or unbalanced RCA connection. They even use some Wonder Infinicaps on each amplifier board, something I've never seen them do on a solid state amp before. The channels are rated for 150 watts into 8 ohms and a true doubling of power to 300 watts into 4 ohms! The 150M can be purchased with any number of channels from one to seven, and there is an option to bridge any two channels together for a monstrous 600 watts if you just crave more power.

The other new piece debuted at the show was a prototype of ARC's new multi-channel preamp. It looked fully finished with a beautiful large display showing status and volume settings. Like the 150M, the preamp is flexible and can be configured for up to eight channels to accommodate the music that may be recorded in 7.1. It also offered XLR and RCA inputs and outputs for all channels as well as full remote controlled operation.



According to ARC, the main reason for these two new products is to make it possible to take full advantage of multi-channel SACD and DVD-A music recordings as well as movie surround tracks. And, from what I heard, they do a great job. The system was comprised of the new preamp, the 150M amplifier with 6 channels, and large Magneplanars all around.