

TOYS & GADGETS

By Rich Kirchen

Listen up

Purists stand by floor speakers for home theaters, stereos

“Listen to this.” Phil Hulstedt is not just showing off the ultra-high-fidelity sound of his stereo system. He’s also sharing his love and appreciation for the listening experience that replicates hearing music live in a nightclub, recording studio or concert hall.

Hulstedt plays a series of recordings ranging from Buddy Holly’s “True Love Ways” to Mozart’s “Bassoon Concerto.” He notes the nuance in the Holly tune’s background vocals and the clarity that makes audible even the pressing of the bassoon pads as Klaus Thunemann plays them.

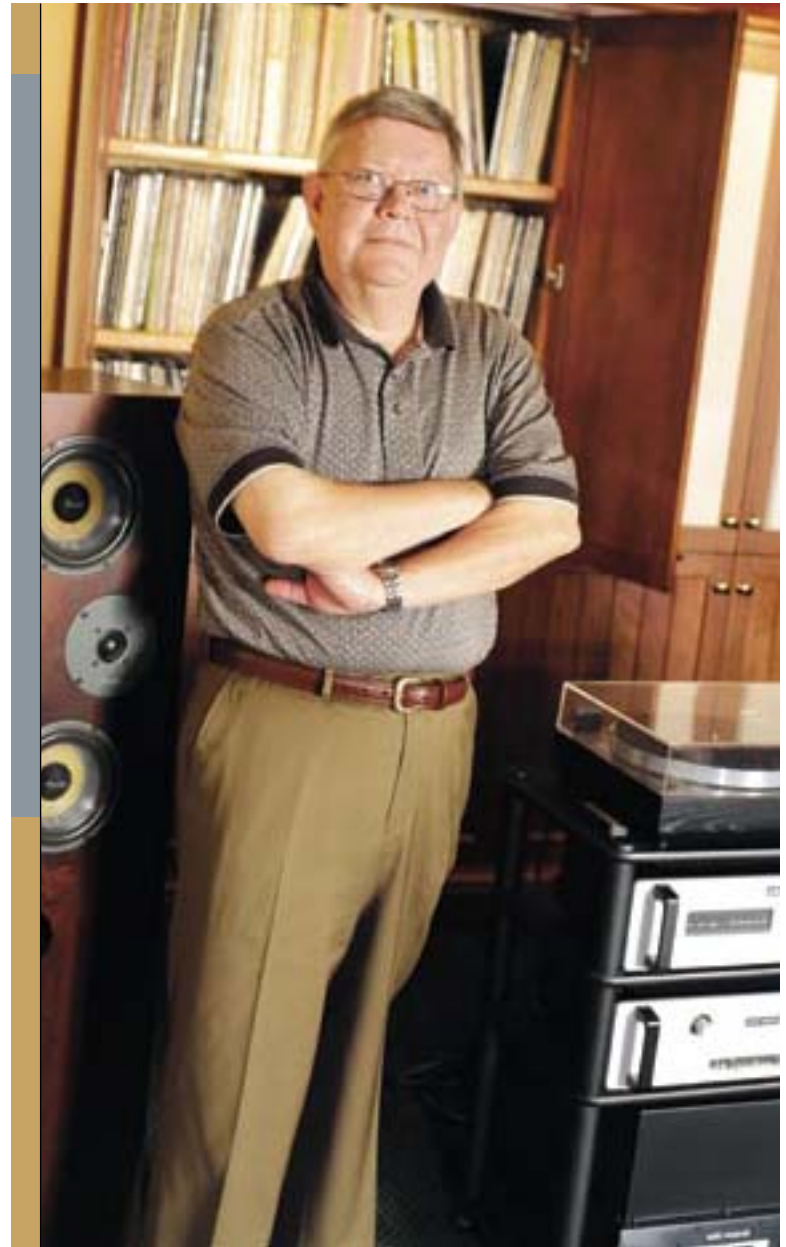
“Isn’t that beautiful?” Hulstedt says with a smile.

These sounds are conveyed by two 53-inch-tall ProAc D38 floor speakers, two subwoofers and two smaller speakers that retail for a combined \$18,000.

Hulstedt installed them in his Bayside basement den with assistance from Jonathan Spelt of downtown Milwaukee audio-video dealer Ultra Fidelis. Spelt visited from time to time over the first year to adjust the location of the English-made speakers by as little as one-quarter inch until they sounded just right to Hulstedt.

“I don’t think I’m an audiophile,” says Hulstedt, 59, president and owner of Mechtrix Corp., Menomonee Falls. “I just think I’m a ▶

PHOTOGRAPHS BY JOHN PAUL GRECO



“I DON’T THINK I’M AN AUDIOPHILE,” says Phil Hulstedt, president and owner of Mechtrix Corp. “I just think I’m a serious enthusiast and a music lover.”



PHIL HULSTEDT'S MUSIC ROOM features 53-inch ProAC D38 floor speakers, two subwoofers and two smaller speakers. The cabinets were specially designed to store Hulstedt's extensive collection of vinyl record albums.

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In-wall speakers gain popularity but lack positive reviews

serious enthusiast and a music lover.”

Passion for quality sound — coupled with tens of thousands of dollars — goes a long way when assembling the best in-home stereo and home theater systems. Enthusiasts know that speakers deliver the final output, but just as important are the stereo components driving the system and the cable linking the components to the speakers.

Audiophiles like Hulstedt hate to hear it, but the hottest trend in speakers is installing them in walls and ceilings. That's due to the overwhelming popularity of home theater systems that run sound from DVD players and televisions through stereos with in-wall speakers.

“More and more, people don't want to see the

speakers out — they want them to disappear,” says Peter Kotsakis, sales manager at Flanner's Audio & Video in Brookfield.

Nearly all audio-video shops are emphasizing home theaters with multiple channels of surround-sound speakers plus a subwoofer or two. Stores feature demonstration rooms where consumers can be immersed in big-screen video and its attendant audio tracks.

The quality of the technology for in-wall speakers has improved in recent years, Kotsakis says, pointing to a \$3,000 pair by SpeakerCraft. In-wall units are available from Flanner's for \$599 per pair on up. The price does not include installation.

Flanner's in-store home theater includes seven McIntosh speakers and two subwoofers at about \$18,000 for the set. A Jamo seven-speaker and one-subwoofer set on display at Sound Stage in Mequon goes for \$10,000.

These home theater systems all are capable of recreating the experience at an actual movie theater. They're loud and the listener can feel the decibels.

The downside of speakers installed in walls is that the sound suffers a noticeable drop in quality. ▶



It's caused by the shallow depth of in-wall units that limits the range of frequencies and the oomph the in-walls generate. Furthermore, in-wall speakers are stationary and can't be placed in, or moved to, a spot in the room that provides the optimal audio effect.

For speakers, bigger is probably louder but it definitely isn't better. Dealers and audiophiles explain that, unless a consumer simply wants pile-driving sound with no range of frequency, a high-quality speaker system will provide the best replication of all aspects of recorded music or video.

Beyond the speaker and the stereo components is the speaker cable that connects them. Wires can't conduct the sound waves at a level befitting a high-end system.

The Audioquest speaker cables in Hulstedt's den were about \$10,000 and include a battery pack that helps them warm up rapidly for better audio performance. Another high-quality speaker cable installation by Ultra Fidelis cost more than \$5,000.

For consumers who want the most expensive speakers regardless of quality, one manufacturer, Wilson Audio, sells a pair of speakers for as much as \$100,000. Spelt of Ultra Fidelis cites reviews that savaged those speakers as way overpriced.

Spelt believes top quality is available for much less — say \$8,000 to \$16,000 per pair. He likes the California-made Vandersteen Quatro, which he said provides "edge-of-the-art performance for less than edge-of-the-art prices."

For the highest-quality home theater and stereo sound, floor speakers are the best choice.

Dennis Bush, principal of Mequon residential developer Insight Development Group, was unsatisfied with the sound quality of the in-wall speakers and the complicated stereo-video technology at his previous home in

"I COME HOME AND LISTEN to music for an hour," says Dennis Bush, of Insight Development Group.

Mequon. So, when Bush, 55, moved to the Kilbourn Tower condos in downtown Milwaukee earlier this year, he was determined to keep his home theater and stereo system simple and high quality.

"I wanted to invest my money in the audio and video and not the extraneous technology," says Bush. "I come home and listen to music for an hour — that's my decompression time."

Bush decompresses to music via a Scottish handmade Linn Akurate Speaker set that cost \$25,000 at Ultra Fidelis. The set includes two floor speakers, two stand-mounted speakers, a subwoofer, and a center-channel speaker.

The speakers connect to a Linn five-channel amplifier, a Linn DVD/CD player and a Fujitsu TV with a 55-inch plasma screen.

The effect, says Bush, "makes you feel like you're part of what's on the screen or what's in the music." ■

RICH KIRCHEN is managing editor of The Business Journal. His stereo system includes a 1992-vintage Technics receiver and 1999-vintage Klipsch floor speakers — in other words, nothing approaching audiophile gear.