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HEYMANN:**
25 YEARS OF
NAXOS

IN REVIEW:

**HIGH-VALUE
SPEAKERS
FROM FALCON,
MAGNEPAN,
WILSON BENESCH**

**HIGH-PERFORMANCE
AMPLIFIERS FROM
AYRE, BRICASTI,
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**THE EXTRAORDINARY
SPERLING TURNTABLE**

» AUGUST 2015

THE FIFTH ELEMENT

BY JOHN MARKS

THIS ISSUE: Wilson Benesch's remarkable entry-level loudspeaker, and music not to be missed!

Wilson Benesch Revisited

Chris Huston is as soft-spoken and unassuming a chap as you would ever hope to meet, a real gentleman of the old school. He also has an amazing backstory. He and John Lennon were close friends at Liverpool's College of Art, and later had "dueling bands" that played at Liverpool's Cavern Club. Huston's band was the Undertakers, with lead singer Jackie Lomax. Like the Beatles, the Undertakers spent time playing gigs in scrappy clubs near the Hamburg docks. However, Huston is not just an asterisk in the music encyclopedias. He co-engineered Led Zeppelin's *II*, earned a Grammy for producing War's *The World Is a Ghetto*, and has produced and/or engineered more than 80 gold and platinum records.

Huston and I were discussing loudspeaker design when he asked a question that brought me up short: "Should a loudspeaker have a personality?"

It took me a moment to collect my thoughts—I had never thought of things in quite those terms. I quickly ransacked my memory for peak audio experiences, then said, "Yes."

Huston's reply is one of the most concise and insightful bits of audio wisdom I have ever heard: "A loudspeaker without a personality is like a song without a hook."

But it sounds as counterintuitive as it is bound to be controversial. Shouldn't we want speakers to sound as neutral as possible—that is, to have no personality? Shouldn't a speaker be the acoustical equivalent of "a straight wire with gain"? In theory, yes.

In practice, however, the laws of physics seem to dictate that, in designing a loudspeaker, to get *this*, you have to give up *that*. You squeeze it *here*, it bulges *there*. Pick your poison. In speaker design, there's always something you give up—even if it's only affordability. We use speakers not in anechoic chambers but in actual rooms of actual houses, to listen not to sinewave test tones, but to imperfect recordings of *music*.

At some point, speaker designers must nail their colors to the mast and let the world hear what *they* think a speaker should sound like. And that's what that speaker's personality is.

But do loudspeakers need personalities? I think Chris Huston was right. Too often, the price you pay for neutrality is a subliminal disconnection from the music.

For many years, I've been a fan of the loudspeakers made by the British audio company Wilson Benesch. Their speakers *definitely* have their own personality. I first reviewed a Wilson Benesch loudspeaker while a columnist and reviewer for *The Absolute Sound*, and how that came about was amusing. As WB's then US importer was packing up his exhibit at the 1999 Consumer Electronics Show, by mistake he put labels with my address on them on the boxes containing the show samples of WB's revolutionary A.C.T. One, the first loudspeaker to have a curved carbon-fiber enclosure, a sloping top, and a baffle of cut steel. And a very nice late Christmas present they were, too.

My comments on the A.C.T. One ran in the August/September 1999 *TAS*, issue 119. I praised it to the skies;



45Hz bass extension from a 10-liter cabinet has JM soundly impressed.

even Harry Pearson himself had to admit that, had he not listened to the A.C.T. One (which at the time cost *ca* \$10,000/pair), he would not have been

able to "put his finger on" what was not quite right in the midrange of a *ca* \$80,000/pair speaker prominently featured in that issue.

Of all the audio equipment I've heard in my three decades as an audio writer, the A.C.T. One and darTZeel's NHB-108 stereo power amplifier tie for first place in terms of my regret at not having bought them. Enlightened Audio Designs' Ultradisc 2000 CD player is in second place. It's telling that A.C.T. Ones rarely seem to come up for sale on eBay or Audiogon.

In 2000 I moved from *TAS* to *Stereophile*, and in September 2004¹ I wrote of the A.C.T. One's successor, the ACT, "The hallmarks of Wilson Benesch's 'house sound' are extremely low distortion, seamless coherence, unfussy easefulness, rounded liquidity of tone, articulate dynamics, and seductively natural imaging and soundstaging." For what many might perceive as American tastes, I also had to note that WB's house sound favored elegant bass quality over bass quantity, and further, that the combination of high tech and high style meant that WB speakers, tier by tier, cost more than those of their built-in-the-US competition.

So, despite a small but committed fan base, a sprinkling of

¹ See www.stereophile.com/the5thelement/9045th/index.htm.

committed dealers, lots of respect, and some great reviews, Wilson Benesch's presence in the US market has not been uninterrupted. In 2014, WB reconnected with Steve Daniels of The Sound Organisation, importers of Rega Research and other brands. Together, they've been rebuilding WB's US dealer base, starting with the Series II edition of WB's entry-level speaker, the petite, rectilinear, non-carbon-fiber Square One.

I had a wide-ranging conversation with Wilson Benesch's owners, Christina and Craig Milnes, who believe that their company offers to audio-enthusiast music lovers a unique combination of values and benefits. First, their speakers embody 25 years of fundamental research in materials science, much of it funded by Her Majesty's Government. They have in-house control over the complete manufacturing process. Then there's WB's design aesthetic, revolutionary 20 years ago but since picked up by others. Finally, they offer a sound quality they feel is different from that of any other speaker company. "Voicing a loudspeaker is a very personal thing, I think," Craig told me.

Craig Milnes stated that the Square One is the least-expensive speaker WB can make without deviating from their technical, aesthetic, and sound-design heritage—that it is, in fact, at \$3800/pair, something of a loss leader. That said, he thinks that the Square Five (\$17,000/pair) is their highest-value product, in that all of its technology is borrowed from WB's flagship model, the Cardinal (\$115,000/pair). The Cardinal has sold even better than was hoped, especially in Germany, about which the Milneses pronounce themselves "more than happy." Christina noted that the entry-level Square One boasts the Cardinal's quality of veneer, from the same supplier.

Wilson Benesch Series II Square One

Wilson Benesch's Series II Square One is a stand-mounted, dynamic loudspeaker measuring 12.8" high by 8" wide by 11.2" deep and having an internal volume of 10 liters. A vented two-way design, it has a 1" soft-dome tweeter, a 7" mid/woofer, and, on the rear panel, a 7" Assisted Bass Radiator (ABR or passive radiator). Unusually, both ports vent through the bottom panel. Therefore, the speaker enclo-

sure has, at the four corners of its base, metal standoffs. These can be covered with small, compliant, self-adhesive hemispheres (supplied) for installation on a bookshelf or sideboard. Alternatively, the standoffs accept the supplied hefty machine screws, installed upward through holes in the dedicated, all-metal stands. The stands cost \$1395/pair, for a total system cost of \$5195/pair.

Securely locking a loudspeaker to its stand is a concept I heartily endorse. One doesn't want toddlers to pull speakers down on top of themselves by their cables. Nor does one want an adult guest to inadvertently hip-check one's speaker onto the floor.

In addition to the unusual combination of bottom ports and ABR, the Square One's design includes "critical mass damping pads." A Square One on its own weighs 22 lbs; each hefty spiked stand (available only in black, front spikes permanently attached) weighs 26 lbs. The standard finishes are Natural Cherry Stain; or, in Gloss, Black, White, Birds Eye, Red Birds Eye, Red Tulip, Walnut, Burr Walnut, Ebonyed Walnut, and Zebrano; or, in Satin, Maple and Oak. The review pair was in Ebonyed Walnut Gloss,

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which looked almost black, except in full daylight.

The fit and finish were second to none. The Square Ones came with the most purposeful steel-framed grilles I have ever beheld. I admired them once, then left them in the shipping cartons. The four speaker-cable terminals are machined in-house from rhodium-plated copper alloy; high-quality jumper wires are supplied for single wiring.

Wilson Benesch's specifications for the Square One include: a sensitivity of 87dB/2.83V/m, on axis; impedances of 6 ohms nominal, 4 ohms minimum; a crossover frequency of 5kHz (first-order bass rolloff, second-order tweeter crossover); a frequency range of 45Hz–24kHz; and a power-handling capacity of "200W, peak unclipped program."

I checked the bass-extension claim by listening to the "Full Glide Tone" from Ayre Acoustics' *Irrational, But Efficacious! System Enhancement Disc, Version 1.2*. At the moment in the tone's sweep upward—it starts at 4Hz—when I believed that the Square One's woofer was actually producing "tone" and not just fecklessly flopping, I hit Pause on the Parasound Halo CD 1's remote control, noted the elapsed time

on the CD 1's display, and, using the Amadeus Pro II app, opened the "Full Glide Tone" digital-audio .wav file, and captured a small sample that included about one second to either side of the indicated time. From the "Analyze" pull-down menu I selected "Spectrum." The spectrum I obtained was centered on 44.1Hz. Keeping in mind unavoidable experimental error, I find WB's claim of 45Hz credible—and very impressive for a speaker with an internal volume of only 10 liters.

Listening

For all of my listening, the source (and volume control) was Bricasti's M1 DAC, fed either by Parasound's bombproof Halo CD 1 as a transport, or from my iMac running Audirvana Plus. Cardas Clear balanced or single-ended interconnects linked the Bricasti M1 to one of the three power amplifiers I used: Channel Islands Audio's E-200S (200Wpc), and Luxman's M-600A (30Wpc, class-A only) and M-700u (120Wpc, class-A/B).

My review samples of the Square Ones had come from a dealer's show-room floor. Even so, they required a certain amount of break-in (or

re-break-in). The rear-mounted ABR's inverted surround was *very* stiff. Even very loud music with significant bass content didn't cause large excursions.

Wilson Benesch does not state a minimum recommended amplifier power, but, with its ABR and claimed 87dB sensitivity—and its characteristic WB trait of favoring bass quality over bass quantity (or extension)—I'd say that 50W would be the bare minimum, and that the amplifier should have great current drive and exemplary damping factor. Doubtless a safer bet would be 100Wpc. Luxman's M-600A (30Wpc) just could not deliver the goods to the Square Ones. But when I switched to the slightly more "modern"-sounding M-700u (120Wpc; see my June 2015 column), what I heard sounded almost like another full octave of bass extension.

In among all that, I experimented with positioning. I moved the Square Ones closer to the front wall than I've placed most speakers in my room, which firmed up the bass without causing any bothersome side effects. I ended up with the Square Ones completely toed in to the listening position, and with the center of each

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rear panel 12" from the wall behind it. Placing each speaker a third of the way along the front wall made the distance between the centers of the front panels about 5.5', and resulted in the speakers and listening position describing a slightly elongated isosceles triangle.

The opening movement, *Trauermarsch*, of Mahler's Symphony 5, from Eliahu Inbal's underrated (I think) recording with the Frankfurt RSO (CD, Denon CO79737), had startling dynamics and amazing depth of soundstage, the brasses and percussion sounding surprisingly powerful for a speaker of so small a footprint. That said, while there was a suggestion of bass impact, there wasn't much slam. (One workaround would be to partner the Square Ones with Wilson Benesch's Torus, a passive subwoofer with vertically firing, 18" driver: \$6730.)

Standard audio reference recordings of female voices—eg, Jennifer Warnes on her *Famous Blue Raincoat: The Songs of Leonard Cohen* (CD, Attic ACD-1227), and Margo Timmins in "To Love Is to Bury," from the Cowboy Junkies' *The Trinity Session* (CD, RCA/Classic RTHCD8568)—were as plangent and as emotionally engaging as I have ever heard them, with, again, remarkable depth of soundstage.

A rare find indeed is an almost-unknown French-Swiss recording of a Tommy Flanagan New York City studio date from 1993, *Lady Be Good... For Ella*, with bassist Peter Washington

and drummer Lewis Nash (CD, Groovin' High 521 617-2). Flanagan spent many years as Fitzgerald's music director, and all of the songs here are associated with or at least reminiscent of her. For what it is—a multitracked studio recording with an arbitrary stereo perspective—it's a fabulous recording. The playing is soulful, in places elegiac. It took me a while to figure out that Flanagan's slow solo-piano intro to the first of two iterations of "Oh, Lady Be Good" fit the words to the nursery rhyme "Mary Had a Little Lamb." A message in a bottle, perhaps?

The Square Ones were the perfect match for this music. Their soundstage abilities made the studio's sound larger and freer, while the music's bass demands didn't outrun the speakers' bass capabilities. The clarity of the sound of Flanagan's piano was exemplary. While the Square One didn't sound "analytical," it also didn't sound like a traditional British BBC-heritage loudspeaker, by which I mean a tailored frequency response with mid-range warmth on almost all recordings.

Back to Mahler, this time *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*, for mezzo-soprano Sarah Connolly's luminous, nearly heart-breaking "Urlicht" in the recording by Philippe Herreweghe directing the Orchestre des Champs-Élysées (CD, Harmonia Mundi 901920). Yes, the Historically Informed Performance Practices crowd has caught up with Mahler (though despite the claim of

period instruments, A is here 440Hz, not 432Hz). Fear not—it's a stupendous performance. It sounded stunning through the Square Ones, in part because this is the Gustav Mahler of dimly remembered Lutheran chorales played by brass choirs, without any huge side-drum thwacks. Given the Square One's rather high crossover frequency of 5kHz—an octave higher than the norm—I kept listening for some discontinuity between midrange and treble, but heard none. In my estimate, Connolly's performance is as treasurable as Anne Sophie von Otter's. And what a way to end a listening session!

The Square Ones are a premium-priced product, to be sure. However, they have much of the same technology and the same build quality as Wilson Benesch's more expensive models, and provide a smaller-scaled version of WB's house sound: "extremely low distortion, seamless coherence, unfussy easefulness, rounded liquidity of tone, articulate dynamics, and seductively natural imaging and soundstaging." The price tier of a \$5000/pair (including stands) is crowded and competitive, but the Square One is a standout performer that I think absolutely deserves a very high Class B (Restricted LF) rating in our "Recommended Components." It very well may be over the line into Class A (Restricted Extreme LF)... but John Atkinson will have to decide that after I have sent them to him for measurement.

JAZZ REDISCOVERY OF THE DECADE

Purely by chance, I came across a used CD: *Jo + Jazz*, featuring Jo Stafford (1917–2008), a once-famous singer whose career began in the 1930s, and whose unstinting service entertaining military personnel during WWII earned her the nickname "GI Jo."

Stafford and her husband, the arranger Paul Weston (1912–1996), later became famous for their comedy act Jonathan and Darlene,² in which Weston played the piano as though he had two right hands, and Stafford, a trained singer, sang perfectly off-pitch. When I glanced at the recording date for *Jo + Jazz*, I was surprised. I had thought that, by 1960, Stafford was no longer making serious records.

A closer examination left me fairly agog. The list of assisting musicians is stellar: Ben Webster, Johnny Hodges, Ray Nance, Jimmy Rowles, Mel Lewis, Conte Candoli, Russ Freeman,

Don Fagerquist.

Orchestrations were by Johnny Mandel, from the time before he struck pay dirt with "The Shadow of Your Smile." *Jo + Jazz* was recorded just 16 months after *Kind of Blue*, in the same studio, with the same producer—Irvine Townsend—and (I must assume) the same equipment and engineers. Remarkable! Why had I never heard of this?

The CD I discovered was from a label I'd never heard of, Corinthian Records, but *Jo + Jazz* was originally released by Columbia, and therein lies a tale. Despite some truly arresting singing, and great arrangements played by a phalanx of legendary



musicians, *Jo + Jazz* seems to have been a flop. Stafford and Weston reportedly thought that Columbia failed to promote the record adequately. That might have been the case. But, in the label's defense, tasteful jazz singing was going begging in 1960, the year of

"Yellow Polka-Dot Bikini," with top chart positions going to Elvis Presley,

² Paul Weston's stage name, Jonathan Edwards, was perhaps the ultimate musician's inside joke. Over successful lounge pianist Louis Jacob Weert took as his stage name Roger Williams, the name of the 17th-century Baptist theologian of Rhode Island. Therefore, at the suggestion of Columbia Records producer George Avakian, Weston took the name of Jonathan Edwards, an 18th-century Calvinist from Connecticut. (The 1970s singer-songwriter Jonathan Edwards apparently came by his name honestly.)

Chubby Checker, the Drifters, and a strong showing for Ferrante & Teicher's "Theme from *Exodus*."

Weston and Stafford eventually acquired the rights to the master tapes, and reissued the LP. (The *Corinthian* reissue and original Columbia LPs are often on eBay.) Their son Tim Weston, working with engineer Roger Nichols (1944–2011),³ of Steely Dan fame, later remastered the project for re-issue, and a darn good-sounding CD it is (*Corinthian COR 108CD*). The two standout cuts are "The Folks Who Live on the Hill" (Stafford's is now my go-to version) and "Imagination," but the entire album is a treat: a pre-

cious moment in time forever frozen in amber. I played some tracks for speaker designer Winslow Burhoe and his wife, and Burhoe remarked on the recording's excellent dynamic range. Yes indeed.

The remastered CD is available from Amazon.com for \$12.99; the price includes a free MP3 rip. What's not to love?

³ Roger Nichols had a fascinating career. In college, he studied nuclear physics. Later, his day job was in a nuclear power station, but he moonlighted in a studio he and a friend had built in a four-car garage. They took whatever work was available, including radio commercials. Nichols may have been the first to record Karen Carpenter, whom he used for voiceovers.

LOLLIPOPS BEYOND DELIGHTFUL

Composer Ottorino Respighi (1879–1936) was also a pianist and a string player. He played viola in the orchestra of Russian Imperial Theater in Saint Petersburg during the seasons of Italian opera there, and later played first violin in an Italian string quartet. During Respighi's formative years, the musical life of Italy was "all opera, all the time." However, during Respighi's sojourn in Russia, he became a composition student of Nicolai Rimsky-Korsakov's, from whom he learned the power of orchestration.

Respighi's fame rests on his Roman Trilogy of orchestral sketches: *Pines of Rome*, *Fountains of Rome*, and *Fête Romane*, recordings of all of which have been longtime audiophile favorites. I saw a favorable notice of a recent Respighi recording by an orchestra unfamiliar to me, Belgium's Liège Royal Philharmonic, and a conductor I'd barely heard of, John Neschling, who turns out to be a grandnephew of Arnold Schoenberg's. The music, too, was less than familiar; I'd never owned a recording of either *Impressioni Brasiliane* or *La Boutique fantasque*, the latter Respighi's ballet score based on Rossini tunes. So I requested a review copy (SACD/CD, BIS 2050).

Well, SACD fans, it's again time to vote with your wallets. The sound is *beyond* stupendous—the crystalline triangle strokes in *Notte Tropicale*, from *Brazilian Impressions*, just float, shimmering above the atmospheric strings.

The Liège orchestra sounds like a world-class ensemble, aided no doubt by its beautifully preserved, Italianate-Eclectic/beaux-arts Philharmonic Hall, built in 1887. I cheerfully admit, however, that my impressions of the sound are dependent on Respighi's magical evocation of Rio de Janeiro at twilight—all sinuous, airy, impressionistic suggestions and pastel colorings. Beethoven from the heaven-storming end of the

dynamic range *Notte Tropicale* is not.

Neschling grew up in Brazil, and I can't imagine more polished, more idiomatic performances of this music—or more vivid sound. If you love *Pines*, *Fountains*, or *Festivals*, you owe it to yourself to grab this SACD/CD. ■

John Marks (john.marks@sonic.com) loves pausing to listen.

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