

Sam Tellig

Sam Meets the Verity Audio Leonore loudspeaker

What do you do as an encore for your Fidelio loudspeaker?

Call your new model Leonore, of course.

In *Fidelio*, Beethoven's only opera, Leonore disguises herself as Fidelio, a male prison guard, in order to rescue her hapless husband, Florestan, a political prisoner, from being put to death. Somehow, *Florestan* doesn't click as a name for a loudspeaker—sounds too much like *floorstander*. Or, even more, like something they put in toothpaste. *Leonore* has strength, resonance, dignity. She's a heroine; *Florestan* is a wimp. I shall thus refer to Verity Audio's new Leonore loudspeaker as *she*.

Leonore sells for \$15,995/pair in piano black, \$16,995 in high-gloss wood. She replaces the Fidelio, but for \$3000 more—a price only slightly lower than that of the Parsifal Ovation I reviewed in December 2008 (which starts at \$20,995/pair in piano black). She's more sensitive, too—a claimed 93dB/W/m, as opposed to the Parsifal Ovation's 89dB. Both speakers have a nominal impedance of 8 ohms, but while the Leonore's minimum impedance is specified as 6 ohms, the Parsifal is said to drop to 4 ohms.

The Leonore is a benign load. Like me.

The twin cabinets of the Leonore are joined together at the factory, while the Parsifal's cabinets can be separated so that the woofer cabinet can face backward, toward the front wall (the usual setup), or forward, toward the listener. The isolation platforms, too, are different: aluminum for the Parsifal Ovation, but for the Leonore a composite wood material that Julien Pelchat, Verity's cofounder, says is *not* medium-density fiberboard (MDF). The two speakers are almost the same size. The Leonore is 41.5" (1065mm) high by 9.6" (247mm) wide by 17.3" (443mm) deep. She weighs 82 lbs (37.5kg).

While the Parsifal Ovation is no pig

for power, he can suck up some current in the bass, as I found when I overdrove a pair of them with my LFD Integrated Zero LE III amplifier, rated at 60Wpc into 8 ohms. NAD's C 375BEE integrated amplifier did the trick, grabbing Parsifal by the balls.

Julien Pelchat remembers speakers from the 1970s, such as the LS3/5A

sensitivity speakers. Thus you might spare yourself the expense of a preamp, which, unless it's *very* expensive, is likely to limit the system's transparency.

You can usually expect a sensitivity of 90dB or better with a speaker from Focal, Triangle, or Cabasse. These French manufacturers, all of whom make their own drive-units, tend to keep their crossovers simple, too. (When using ordinary, off-the-shelf drivers, speaker designers often correct frequency anomalies with complex crossovers that consume current and give off appreciable amounts of heat.)

Eh, bien. Verity Audio speakers are *almost* French. While high-end drive-units usually come from Denmark or Norway, some of Verity's are designed and manufactured in Quebec City, Canada.

Quebec City is more French than France. Stop signs there read "ARRÊT." Almost everywhere else in the world, they say "STOP"—even in France and Russia. The Russian word for *stop* is *ostanovityec*—by the time you read it, your car will have crashed. I wonder how many accidents are caused by English-speaking drivers puzzling over "ARRÊT."

"I get a kick out of the French hi-fi writers," Julien Pelchat confessed to me the other day, referring to their terminology. For

instance, a speaker basket in France is a *saladier*. "I keep thinking, where's the salad?"

John Quick, of Tempo Sales & Marketing, Verity's US distributor, swapped my review pair of Parsifal Ovations for a brace of Leonores. *Now* my LFD Integrated Zero LE III delivered firmer, tighter, more extended bass—without drooping like a limp penis.

Quick positioned the Leonores very carefully, and differently from how he'd set up the Parsifals. My listening room measures about 16' by 19', with alcoves and sloped ceilings. He placed the Leonores about 4' from the front wall and 3.5' from the sidewalls, which put them about 10' apart. Quick brought my lis-



Verity Audio's Leonore—an all-new design with different drivers—replaces the Fidelio.

and the Sendor BC1, that needed about 25W to get it up but could be overdriven with more than 80W. Easy to blow tweeters—even woofers. The Leonore is designed to have a wider window—as Verity puts it, "to work with an unusually wide array of power amplifiers." At the rated 93dB/W/m, she's almost as sensitive as Verity's Lohengrin (95dB).

Sensitivity matters. You may not have to overpay for a power amp or integrated. Many of the best-sounding amplifiers, tubed and solid-state, are low-powered. Furthermore, a high-sensitivity speaker may allow you to use a passive preamp because you don't need as much gain as you do with low-

tening chair forward about 2'—the distance from the drivers to my nose was now about 8'. The speakers were slightly toed in so that their tweeter axes crossed several feet behind my head. I felt as if I were listening through the hole in the middle—only there was no hole in the middle. This is something all Verity speakers have: the soundstaging of minimonitors with the full-range delivery of full-size Florestans—er, floorstanders.

The digital source was my Denon DCD-1650AR CD player into a Cambridge Audio DacMagic. Interconnects were whatever I could scrounge up—Klotz cable from Rega, mainly. Love those Neutrik connectors—no hum! Speaker cables were Triangle Silver Ghosts. Along with the LFD, I used the aforementioned NAD integrated. Then I switched to the lovely Quicksilver Audio Silver 70 tube monoblocks, using a passive preamp to control volume. The identity of that preamp will remain a mystery until the next issue of *Stereophile*. (By the way, I've decided that the term *passive preamplifier* is *not* nonsense. A preamp doesn't itself have to amplify; it is a *pre*-amplifier.)

I wasn't able to move the 82-lb Leonores around, and I had no slaves—*ie*, offspring—handy. I left the Veritys in place and moved myself—*ie*, my listening chair—coming in even closer than John Quick had suggested I should. I listened through the middle of the loudspeakers. Wall of sound! Pinpoint imaging. Want to know why these speakers cost \$15,995/pair? *Ecouchez*, as they say in Quebec. Listen. And look at the cabinets.

You know how you get a new pair of speakers (or any new piece of gear), then take out an LP or CD you haven't played in years? I found this in our basement: Beethoven's Symphonies 4 and 5, performed by Christopher Hogwood and the Academy of Ancient Music (CD, L'Oiseau-Lyre 417 615-2, now available only from ArkivMusic.com).

Who said that early digital was harsh and airless? These symphonies were superbly recorded—in 1986—by Simon Eadon at London's Walthamstow Assembly Hall, and showed off the Leonores' fantastic soundstaging and imaging abilities. I loved the tonal balance: smooth midrange, exquisitely extended treble. Maybe even a sweeter treble than the Parsifal Ovation's. There could be a reason for that: a new tweeter.

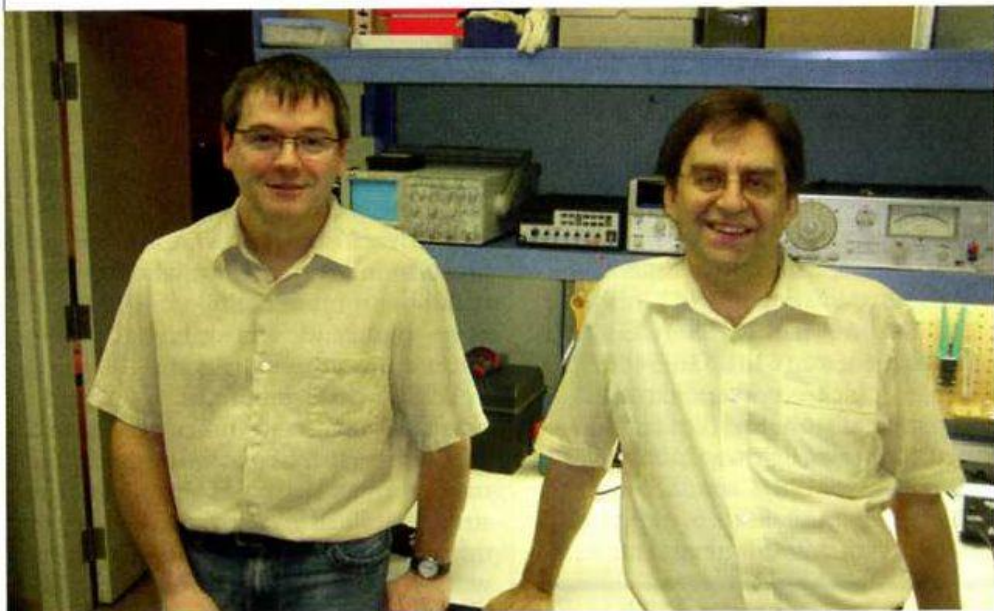


PHOTO: SAM TELUG

Bruno Bouchard (left) and Julien Pelchat. My late friend Lars called them "the Verity boys." The company is all grown up now.

Where was I? Oh, yes, chewing the fat with Pelchat. (His partner, Verity co-founder Bruno Bouchard, was on vacation.) "We were looking to upgrade or to make a replacement for our existing Fidelio. Customers loved the Fidelio because it was easy to drive and highly compatible with tube amps. So we tried to push things further that way. The Fidelio's rated sensitivity was 89dB. How high could we go without sacrificing bass extension and smooth frequency response? We ended up with 93dB."

The woofers were especially challenging, according to Julien: "We had some custom drivers designed by various sources with a 16 ohm impedance, with the idea of running them in parallel to drop the impedance to 8 ohms. . . . This was essential if we wanted the speaker to be compatible with the widest range of amplifiers."

The two 6.5" SEAS woofers in the Leonore's affixed lower cabinet are wired in parallel. Each driver is 16 ohms; in parallel, 8 ohms. The cone material is doped paper. But most of the music, as usual in a Verity speaker, comes from the midrange driver, a 5" "mineral-doped polypropylene cone" made by Audio Technology, of Norway—which is owned by Ejvind Skaaning and his son Per. The elder Skaaning founded ScanSpeak and cofounded Dynaudio.

"It's a rework of the same driver we use in the Lohengrin," Julien said. "But on the Lohengrin, we use this driver only from 400Hz up to about 6.5kHz. The Leonore's midrange driver covers the range from below 200Hz up to 4.5kHz. The 1" tweeter is from SB Acoustics," he continued. "I had a

meeting with the founders of the company in 2003 or 2004, during which we discussed a new ring-dome tweeter."

In a ring-dome tweeter, a voice-coil activates the cone from the center of its soft-fabric radiating area rather than from the edge of the tweeter. This allows for lower distortion and greater frequency extension—past the 50kHz limit of Verity's in-house test equipment.

The Leonore's 1" tweeter looks almost as if it's been damaged: dented by some visiting audiophile. Go ahead, poke your greasy finger at it—gently. It's supported from the rear. "The voice-coil former is tucked into the soft-dome tweeter just outside the inverted dimple," Julien told me. But note the absence of a ring-radiator's usual phase plug. A phase plug has problems with directivity. "The phase plug in the middle creates an off-axis shadow of the on-axis measurements. So the off-axis measurements were not as good as the on-axis measurements."

"Then SB Acoustics came out with a third generation, where you had the outer ring, but an inverted center ring in the middle. The Leonore uses the fourth generation of this tweeter. It has the same sound quality of a standard ring-radiator tweeter, without the off-axis problem associated with the phase plug."

A tweeter's dome can move more than 20,000 times per second, Julien explained. "The center of the dome tends to collapse under the number of Gs of acceleration. That's why manufacturers have come up with metal domes. But these have other problems.

CONTACTS

Verity Audio, 1005 Ave. St-Jean-Baptiste, Suite 150, Quebec City, Quebec G2E 5L1, Canada. Tel: (418) 682-9940. Fax: (418) 682-8644. Web: www.verityaudio.com.
 US distributor: Tempo Sales & Marketing, PO Box 541443, Waltham, MA 02454. Tel: (617) 314-9296. Fax: (617) 336-3486. E-mail: jquick@verityaudio.com.
 Canadian distributor: Dimexs, 9692 Trans Canada Highway, Montreal, Quebec H4S 1V9, Canada. Tel: (514) 333-5444. Fax: (514) 333-0449. Web: www.dimexs.com.

They are high-energy storage materials. And they resonate. We found that the SB tweeter is the closest thing to the ribbon we manufacture in-house for our Lohengrin and Sarastro loudspeakers. It is very natural sounding.

"We use a [low-pass filter on the midrange] that starts like a first-order crossover, at around 1kHz. It's a very gentle slope. Then we have another

crossover—third-order—at around 4.5kHz." Julien stressed that he likes to keep the crossovers simple. "I have always believed simplicity works. We have always tried to follow this when designing a loudspeaker. You get the best drivers, so that you don't have to fool around with the crossovers and make them more complex. When you keep the crossovers minimal, more music comes through."

With whatever music I played—classical, jazz, show tunes, 1920s and '30s music—the Leonore let the music come through, always showing off the strengths of a good recording, never making a less-good recording sound worse. The treble definition in jazz recordings was extraordinary: crisp, clear, extended. No smearing. No shrillness. This may be the best soft-dome tweeter I've heard.

What more could you want?

In my listening room, I could have done with slightly more bass extension—but maybe it's the room. Another reason I didn't care to move the speakers is that I didn't want to destroy their stunning soundstage and precise imag-

ing. The Leonore's overall frequency response is given as 35Hz–50kHz, ± 3 dB. Yes, the speaker could go lower. Its bass definition, however, was superb: tight, taut, tuneful. Bass freaks can add a subwoofer. My late friend Lars did when he owned the original Parsifals.

I got the best results overall using the Mystery Preamp and the Quicksilver Silver 70 monoblocks. But I couldn't resist trying the Mystery Pre with my favorite flea: the 3.5Wpc Sun Audio SV2A3 single-ended amplifier. Would the Sun have enough get-up-and-go?

Not quite. The SV2A3 didn't have quite enough power to drive the Leonores' bass drivers at anything more than low listening levels. So long as it didn't clip, however, the sound was marvelous: immediate, alive, tangible. It didn't take me to the recording venue; the venue came to me. That's single-ended.

John Quick said that the SV2A3 might have worked with the Leonores in a smaller room. A *very* small room. Maybe. Meanwhile, a 10–15W single-ended-triode tube amp might have done fine. All hi-fi is compromise.

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All in all, considering price and high sensitivity, the Leonore is my favorite speaker so far from Verity Audio. I wish she were more affordable, but there's no way she could be. Alas, Leonore is worth her price: a very classy lady. I think she is a must-audition—you might want to stretch your budget. After all, you may not need heavy-duty amplification. You may not need an active preamp. Save money on digital by buying a Cambridge Audio DacMagic.

On the other hand, if you were prepared to spend more than \$15,995 (in basic black) on speakers, you might want to rethink that, too. Because the Verity Audio Leonore is close to being as good as it gets. Listen for yourself and decide whether it's worth spending more.

Remembering Erich Kunzel

Erich Kunzel died on September 1.

You know him from the scores of recordings he made with the Cincinnati Pops Orchestra for Telarc International. Is there anyone reading this who *doesn't* own his recording of Tchaikovsky's *1812 Overture* (Telarc SACD-60541)?

Born to German immigrant parents

in New York City, Kunzel grew up in Greenwich, Connecticut, earned his bachelor's degree in music at Dartmouth College, and his master's at Brown University, in Providence, Rhode Island.

Erich—he was not yet Maestro Kunzel—was my music instructor at Brown in the early 1960s. He was scarcely older than the kids he taught—a kid himself, known on campus as simply “Erich,” never Mr. Kunzel. He was probably the best instructor I ever had, in terms of waking the subject (and the students), making it matter and making it fun. The charismatic podium personality of “Mr. Pops” was already set by 1960, in the classroom.

Students packed his courses, and if they hadn't actually registered for them, Erich didn't care. He treated paying and nonpaying customers alike. Lectures were typically packed to overflowing—like ants at a picnic table, Erich once joked.

Kunzel would do anything to engage students: show up in costume on Halloween, play practical jokes, you name it. One of his favorite ploys was

to pluck a student from the lecture hall and set him down at the piano.

“What's your name?” Kunzel would ask.

“Fletcher.”

“All right, Fletcher, let's play a little Brahms.”

Another encounter: “Let's hear you perform!” he shouted to a student in the back row.

“Who, me? But I'm not enrolled.”

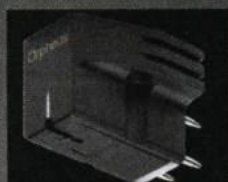
“No excuses. You're on.”

At the time, Kunzel was personal assistant to conductor Pierre Monteux. Then in his mid-80s, Monteux needed a lot of personal assisting in his role as guest conductor of the Boston Symphony. Kunzel referred to Monteux as “the Old Man,” and invited students to hear him and others rehearse at Symphony Hall.

“But Mr. Kunzel, I have classes tomorrow morning.”

“It's Erich, not Mr. Kunzel. And cut your classes. We are going to hear the Old Man rehearse *The Rite of Spring*. As you know, he conducted the premiere, in 1913, before your parents were born.”

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"I've got a test tomorrow," chirped another student—me.

"Say you were out sick."

Thanks to Erich, I also heard Erich Leinsdorf at Symphony Hall, rehearsing Mahler's Symphony 5. I then attended two of the performances. One of the great Mahler recordings (RCA Victor 60482-2), it's now available as a custom-pressed CD from ArkivMusic.com.

Kunzel was on track to become a serious conductor. In addition to Montoux, he was the protégé of Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra conductor Max Rudolf, and in Providence had sometimes conducted the Rhode Island Philharmonic. Did Erich have it in him to be a great, serious conductor? I think he did.

In 1965, Kunzel left Brown with his master's degree and, at Rudolf's invitation, joined the Cincinnati Symphony. That same year he joined the faculty of the University of Cincinnati's College-Conservatory of Music, where he stayed until 1972. Erich did conduct some "serious" music. He was trained for it, after all. Steeped in it.

Born in Frankfurt, Germany, in 1905, Max Rudolf was an old-school conductor of the European tradition. He literally wrote the book on conducting: *The Grammar of Conducting: A Comprehensive Guide to Baton Technique and Interpretation* (New York: Schirmer, 1950; 3rd ed., 1994). It remains the most widely used text in the field. If you admired Kunzel's baton technique, this is where he got it—and from being Pierre Montoux's amanuensis.

For whatever reasons, Kunzel largely abandoned the "serious" classical repertoire for Pops. Perhaps he wanted to succeed Arthur Fiedler at the Boston Pops (he didn't). In 1977, the board of trustees of the Cincinnati Symphony set up the Cincinnati Pops Orchestra, which Kunzel conducted until this year.

Last spring, Kunzel was diagnosed with terminal cancer of the colon, liver, and pancreas. He told the *Cincinnati Enquirer*, "It wasn't supposed to happen. It wasn't on the schedule." Already ailing, he conducted the National Symphony Orchestra in the annual July 4 Pops concert on the mall in Washington, DC. A month later, on August 1, far more seriously ill, he conducted the second half of a Pops concert in Cincinnati, then waved goodbye to his audience. He died a month later near his summer home on Swan's Island,

Maine—exactly one week after Telarc released his final recording, *From the Top at the Pops* (Telarc CD-80745).

Already speaking of himself in the past tense, he told Renee Montagne, of NPR's *Morning Edition*: "I was a music entertainer, like Beethoven was, like George M. Cohan was, like Irving Berlin was. I was a music entertainer. So was Bach. So was Brahms."

Telarc succumbed as a vital recording entity when its owners, Concord Music Group, fired the label's in-house production team. In the process, they appear to have scuttled the SACD format. I wasn't the first to notice that Kunzel died and Telarc became another zombie label within months of each other.

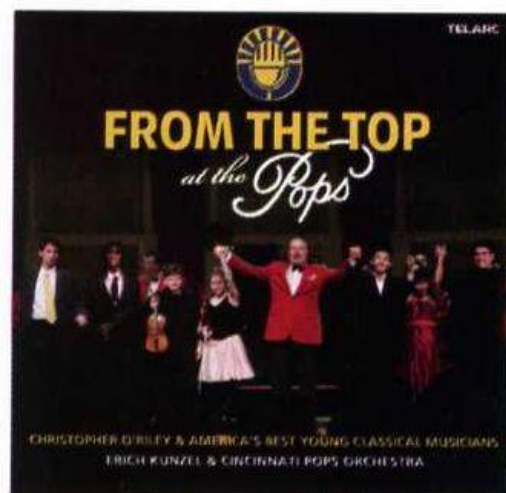
With approximately 89 Cincinnati Pops releases (even Telarc lost count), Kunzel was Telarc's most prolific and most popular recording artist. The two were made for one another: Kunzel the "musical entertainer," and Telarc the label that so often put sound ahead of sensibility. Telarc was about sound and show; it was *not* Harmonia Mundi or Hyperion. Of course, the label still exists, now living largely off its back catalog.

And Kunzel wasn't Pierre Montoux or Max Rudolf, although I think he could have been. Therein lies my ambivalence about my favorite instructor. Students loved him. In audience terms, he was a hit, filling Cincinnati's huge Music Hall concert after concert, and selling an estimated 10 million records.

Richard S. Ginell, culture critic of the *Los Angeles Times*, had this to say: "Kunzel and Telarc kept the show going at a prolific pace into the first decade of the 21st century, but their days were numbered in an era when the goal of great sound reproduction has been trumped by the convenience of compressed music on an iPod. As far as the public and mass marketers are concerned, it is video that makes news these days, and audio spectacles simply do not have the same clout that they once did."

Many of Kunzel's recordings were more than mere orchestral spectacles. There was the very fine *Gershwin Centennial Edition: The Complete Orchestral Collection*, issued in 1998 (2CD-80445); selections from *Porgy and Bess*, also in 1998 (CD-80434); and *American Jubilee*, in 1988 (CD-80144), with music by Ives, Copland, Gould, Sousa, and others.

But among all those Telarc discs were endless, tedious traversals of film and television themes, and re-



cordings that Kunzel himself called "corny." Take *Round-Up*, from 1986 (reissued as SACD-60141): The program begins with "Sounds of the West," a montage of sound effects—the braying of cattle, the sound of a cowboy and his horse's hooves, and, finally, front and center, the horse's loud neighing. As his former student, I knew instantly that Kunzel had put Telarc up to this.

Down on the Farm (CD-80263) was released in 1991. It opens with "Sounds of the Farm": clucking chickens, mooing cows, crowing roosters, a snorting pig—presumably, the pig Farmer Kunzel was holding on the cover. *Farm* sold badly in the US, but the Chinese loved it—they bought tens of thousands of copies, most of them counterfeit. Kunzel signed them anyway—he didn't care, just as he hadn't cared whether or not you were registered for one of his classes at Brown.

Kunzel's career is a curious one. He was like a great writer who, instead of writing serious fiction, turns to mystery novels or spy thrillers. Telarc's run as a record label was curious, too. I suppose, in a way, they'll both be missed.

You might tell Telarc's owners, the Concord Music Group. As of September 23, there was no tribute to Kunzel on Telarc's website—not even a mention of his passing: "The Cincinnati Pops Orchestra was founded in 1977 by the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra Board of Trustees, and Erich Kunzel was named its conductor. Maestro Kunzel continues to lead the Pops today."

According to the fools who now own Telarc, Kunzel isn't dead yet. Well, his recorded legacy lives on, even if his record label may not.

For all his public persona, Kunzel was a private man who gave few interviews. He leaves behind his wife, Brunhilde, who gives no interviews at all.