

**SPECIAL SPEAKER ISSUE: 6 MODELS REVIEWED**

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**Musical Fidelity's KILOWATT AMPLIFIER**

**2003 REVIEW INDEX**

## The Fifth Element

John Marks



To the great surprise of not that many people at all, at Home Entertainment 2003, as at the two immediately previous shows, the room featuring loudspeakers by Joseph Audio was voted by showgoer ballot “Best Sound of Show” (see September 2003, p.62). I’m not going to pick a fight over that. Not only was the sound very, very good; the entire vibe was confidently relaxed, while at the same time being purposeful in a manner businesslike yet friendly.

Some other manufacturers and exhibitors could learn a few things from Jeff Joseph and his co-exhibitor colleagues. Not everyone, of course, is blessed with Jeff’s winning sense of showmanship; but even on the basic level of what happens once someone walks into an exhibitor’s suite, in many cases there was ample room for improvement.

The management axiom “if something is everybody’s job, it really is nobody’s job” was proven true, time and again at HE2003. I refer to “jobs” such as saying hello, explaining what the system is, and offering to play some music or to change what is playing.

Not every company has to run a well-oiled get-out-the-vote machine that’s eerily reminiscent of John Kennedy’s early election campaigns in Massachusetts (or his presidential race in Illinois, for that matter); in fact, that would be a real downer. There’s a lot to be said for free-form, no-pressure, come-as-you-are demoing, as opposed to timed, scripted run-throughs that have people lined up in the hall, waiting for the next one.

I’m always a bit leery of getting locked into timed and scripted demos, if only because, if I have to leave early to make a previous engagement, negative inferences might be drawn. The other side of the coin is that in San Francisco there was one particularly loud press demo I wanted to flee, but instead just sat there with my index fingers in my ear canals. (Hint, hint.) One other exhibitor was playing his setup so ridiculously loudly, for his sole enjoyment (he was alone in the room, and you are just shocked), that I sent in a foolhardy volunteer, asking that he turn it down so I could enter. Seriously. I suppose that, in

the land of the deaf, he who can hear even a little is king. As my safe-hearing guru Bob Ludwig asks, usually both rhetorically and to little effect, “Do you plan to make a career out of using your ears, or are you in it just for today?”

Speaking of fingers and ears, here is some handy practical advice from loudspeaker manufacturer Duntech’s website ([www.duntech.com.au](http://www.duntech.com.au)): Take your thumb and first two fingers and rub them together in the nearly universal “It’s a matter of money” gesture (my

In the land of the deaf,  
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characterization, not theirs). Do this reasonably close to, but not right on top of, one of your ears. If you do this close to your ear while you’re playing music but can’t hear your fingers, you’re probably playing the music too loudly. This is a rough and ready measure, obviously, but it seems to me a very sensible and portable, no-tech test. Pass it on!

Getting back to HE Show voting—and, again, going somewhat out on a limb here—I am often left with the sneaking suspicion that the polling results would be tighter if more exhibitors had spent more energy envisioning creative ways to use limited amounts of time to let consumers (and even journalists), who perhaps had not previously even known of a product’s existence, hear something of what it can do.<sup>1</sup>

To digress for a bit, and without taking away anything from the fine sound

<sup>1</sup> Having long ago been involved in politics as well as having made an academic study of aspects of it, I know that it is not quite all that simple. There is doubtless an “incumbency effect” at work here as well. Showgoers will naturally seek out rooms that have scored well in the voting in the past, to hear what all the fuss has been about. And some rooms are located more advantageously than others. But it is a multifaceted problem. One great-sounding room in San Francisco (Dali Megaline speakers, Ming Da amps, etc.) was almost directly opposite the elevators, yet many people seemed to bypass it to go wait in line for the Joseph-Manley and/or VTL-Wilson Audio Specialties demos.

achieved through the hard work of Jeff Joseph and his colleagues (in that room, the Ensemble Amarcord CD I raved about in the September issue, [www.stereophile.com/showarchives.cgi?932](http://www.stereophile.com/showarchives.cgi?932), had people holding their breaths), other rooms I found to be on an equally elevated level of sonic and emotional involvement were (in no particular order):

- **Triangle Magellan speakers, with Hovland electronics:** This room featured tremendously involving, authoritative (but most assuredly *not* “in your face”) playback of one of my own unreleased organ recordings, yet it scaled down just fine for small vocal groups. I have in the past had problems with (and mentioned in print) the tipped-up tonal balance I heard with some of Triangle’s speakers, but that was not the case at all with the Magellans.

- **Dali Megaline speakers, Ming Da amps, etc.:** A different take on the Magellans’ modular construction technique—yet, curiously enough, at the same \$30,000/pair price, and with a similar name—the Megalines sport ribbon tweeters running nearly full-length along the insides of *ca* 6" stacked (three per module) woofer-mids. As heard with Ming Da’s classy tube amps, the result was a lighter yet sweeter, more Romantic sound, with supernatural imaging between the speakers. I buttonholed several journalist peers and dragged them into a room they doubtless had walked past many times on their way to the press lounge. Once they’d sat and heard, though, not one objected to the imposition. These speakers deserve a full review.

- **Wilson Benesch loudspeakers:** both the home-theater setup—with Naim electronics powering Chimeras at the front, W-B’s dedicated center-channel speaker, and Arcs at the rear—and the two-channel setup, with the jewel-like dedicated rack of Chord separates powering the remarkably smooth and supple Discoverys (which I raved about in my January 2002 column, [www.stereophile.com/showarchives.cgi?493](http://www.stereophile.com/showarchives.cgi?493)). Not to pig-pile, or kick a dead horse, but I still think that Diana Krall is to jazz what Ann Coulter is to political discourse. And, furthermore, that the pop-

## The Fifth Element

ularity of both is more related to the oft-revealed flawlessness of their lower limbs than to anything else. Nonetheless, I confess to having been uncharacteristically mesmerized by a music video. Because of the sound.

• **Cabasse speakers, Butler Audio amplifiers:** The speakers resembled Cyclopes who had entered the Franciscan order, but that was soon forgotten as the near-magical imaging and tonal trueness became apparent. Finely scaled dynamics, which made setting the proper volume level for each and every track a near necessity, were probably due in equal measure to the Butler amplifiers, the operating principle of which I failed to grasp—but they appeared to be getting crazy amounts of power out of one tube per channel.

Back (for the last time) to the HE “Best Sound of Show” voting: The other factor possibly contributing to the outcome, apart from Jeff Joseph’s showmanship and marketing, appeared to be that the brands selected to display together worked well together, both in the audio and personalities senses.

Few things are more cringe-inducing than the (one is to be thankful, rare) experience of walking into an audio demonstration room where things have not been going well on the audio side, and as much or more energy is being dedicated to apportioning blame than to fixing the problems. One even hears of “quickie divorces” and “second marriages” in the early days of a show (usually at the Consumer Electronics or similar shows), when brands that had fallen together by chance, and perhaps had never before met or auditioned together, fall apart from audio or personal incompatibility.

Such was certainly not the case in the Joseph Audio room, where Manley Labs, Cardas, Equi=Tech, Grand Prix Audio, and Orpheus Laboratories amicably synergized to make inviting sounds, and never

circuit designs in audio products for the professional and consumer markets ([www.orpheuslab.com](http://www.orpheuslab.com)).

Feeling that I was adequately familiar with the other products being shown, I was immediately attracted to the crisp, clean, unmistakably Swiss industrial styling of the Orpheus CD transport and DAC, as well as to the crisp, clean sounds I was hearing. Orpheus’ Marc Chablaix kindly refrained from commenting on my Southern New England French accent, and gladly played a few selections from discs I had brought, which soon confirmed that Orpheus’ gear enviably combined detail retrieval with essential musicality.

I was immediately attracted to the crisp, clean, unmistakably Swiss industrial styling of the Orpheus CD transport and DAC.

I requested a review sample of the Orpheus transport configured as a one-box CD player. Orpheus’ US media representative, Ralph Bauer, tried to get me to take the transport-DAC combo instead. He felt that only the separates (which retail for about \$12,000) deliver the full advantages of Anagram’s proprietary digital implementations. I begged off because, at \$7999, even the one-box is outside the outer limit of what I want the average price of the units I write about to be, and I had just reviewed Esoteric’s \$14,000 two-box CD-playing combo.

As it turned out, I ended up dragging John Atkinson to hear the Ensemble Amarcord disc there, and he was sufficiently interested in the Orpheus gear (they also make a preamp, power amp, and integrated amplifier) to take some photos. There we also encountered *Stereophile’s* digital maven Kal Rubinson, who said he would be willing (in the fullness of time) to do the honors for the two-box setup.

The Orpheus Zero—that’s their name for their transport configured as a CD player—arrived in a sturdy shipping carton, and I set about breaking it in and becoming acquainted with it.<sup>2</sup>

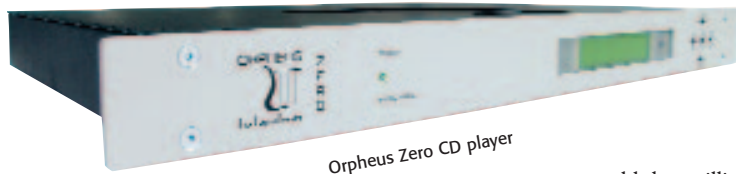
The Zero weighs about 22 lbs and is unusually configured: it’s only one standard professional rack unit (1.75”) in height, and the standard professional rack measure (19”) in width. (In the rack-unit sizing system, width is a given and fixed at 19”, while height is expressed in 1.75” rack-unit increments, as in a component’s being “3RU” high.)

I’m familiar with a couple of other 1RU CD players, but they’re professional components intended for radio station or commercial public address use, and they are, understandably, front-loading. The Orpheus transport-player is a top-loader, so one is faced with the counterintuitive proposition of a professional-looking piece of gear that can be used in a professional rack only if you leave empty a sufficient number of rack slots above it. Perhaps the answer is that Orpheus was making more of a design statement than a practical recommendation for placement. As it was, I used the Zero on a Symposium Ultra isolation platform, to predictably excellent effect.

Although I’m usually less than tickled (in fact, I’m usually annoyed) with trapdoor CD-loading mechanisms that require you to mess with a puck thingy, the Orpheus Zero’s was among the better-thought-out I have seen. The trapdoor is manual, moving from front to back smoothly and with minimal effort. The puck thingy is a compound, ringlike affair with an upper, outer metal piece that might be titanium, and an inner, lower collar that is strongly magnetized.

The puck cutout and the spindle that the puck grabs on to are not the usual round affairs; each is in the negative or positive shape of a triangle with bulging sides, somewhat akin to the rotor of a Wankel engine. Other than the engineering bravura that Orpheus’ manufacturing tolerances are so remarkably close that you can hardly see any seam when the puck has been fitted onto and has grasped the spindle, I could not figure out any benefit to this arrangement. There is a negative aspect, however: Each time you change the CD, instead of just dropping the puck on the spindle, you have to align it rather precisely, and the spindle tends to rotate during this procedure.

As soon as you begin moving the trapdoor, thanks to a magnetic sensor



seemed to get in each other’s way when it came time to get product information. For me, at least, the discovery was Orpheus Laboratories, a relatively new Swiss firm, the mission of which is to realize Anagram Technologies’ digital

<sup>2</sup> For all this listening, I used Custom Power Cord Top Gun Series 2 power cords, the aforementioned Symposium Ultra Platform, interconnects and speaker cables from Wireworld and Nordost, amplifiers from Sugden (both integrated and separate) and Jeff Rowland (the new 302, more about which later), and speakers from Magneplanar and Dali (the MMG and MS5, respectively, and more about both later).

on its rails, red LEDs (the intensity of which are adjustable via the programming menu) illuminate the disc compartment. If the unit has been in standby, it powers up. If the disc has been spinning, it stops, as though Brembo brake calipers had grabbed it in earnest. As soon as the door is closed, the disc spins to read the table of contents. The music begins playing a few, rather than a couple, of beats after Play is pressed, but it's not a case of a seemingly interminable wait. The unit was essentially silent while spinning discs. All in all, first-rate mechanical performance from the transport section.<sup>3</sup>

The front panel has a gray-on-green LED display, and five very small pushbuttons for navigating the transport functions and programming menu. The sleek and elegant remote-control handset duplicates the five pushbuttons, which does seem to limit its functionality to the familiar menu of Next/Previous/Pause/Stop; navigating the deeper layers of options in the software menu requires being able to read what's on the LED screen.

Concerning its digital workings, the Zero uses Orpheus' proprietary amplifier, located between the disc-reading system and its servo. The claimed benefit is that the error-correction system is rendered redundant and therefore never engaged. Orpheus also uses its own clock-synchronization design, claiming, as a result, jitter-free performance. Although Orpheus' separate DAC, the One, uses Anagram's Adaptive Time Filtering asynchronous 24-bit/192kHz upsampling, implemented by use of Analog Devices' SHARC ADSP-21065L digital signal processor chipset with 40-bit floating-point arithmetic, for cost reasons the one-box CD player uses a Wolfson WM8740 oversampling DAC with 16/176.4 performance.

The Zero's upconverting and all other signal processing are nondefeatable—you can't make comparisons, on the fly or otherwise, between plain "Red Book" data and the upconverted results. However, absolute polarity is switchable between 0° and 180°, and can be accomplished using the remote control.

I have tilted at the upconverting windmill before (*Stereophile*, November 2001, and [www.stereophile.com/show\\_archives.cgi?451](http://www.stereophile.com/show_archives.cgi?451)), and I won't do that again here. I am more interested in how a unit sounds and less in how that sound is made possible. The quick bottom line is that, at less than half the cost of the wonderful, world-class Esoteric D70-P70 combination, the Orpheus Zero has very little to apologize for. There was a wonderful balance between detail and the musical whole; the presentation was crisp and clear, but not at all dry.

<sup>3</sup> When I was first listening to the Zero, I noted that, when playing CDs whose music began with the first digital frame assigned to that track—at the "0 seconds" point—the Zero delayed a small fraction of a second before producing any sound. This chopped off the very first bit of the music on such CDs. I attributed this to some hangup in a digital mute that was failing to unmute in time. I informed Orpheus' press rep about it, and sure enough, once people listened for this phenomenon, they heard it. The unmute hangup would not be noticeable with discs that have some room tone or tape hiss after the track start and before the start of the music. All that was required was a software revision, and that was accomplished by mailing me a chip that was a drop-in replacement. Problem solved.



Inner musical voices and low-level detail especially seemed to benefit. Listening to a variety of well-recorded early-music CDs—from Colin Tilney's excellent new Scarlatti recital, *Ladders to Heaven* (Dorian DOR-93253), to Jordi Savall's evergreen *Tous les Matins du Monde* soundtrack (Auvidis Travelling K 4640), to a great new discovery, Convivium Musicum's *Monsieur Arbeau's School of Dancing (1589) Vol. II* (MRCD 005)—there was always a sense of newfound insight into the soundstage, and into the structure of the composition as well.<sup>4</sup> The Orpheus Zero is analytically informative without being clinically overbearing.

So, one might ask, how could the Orpheus Zero be bettered? I'm not sure, but one straw in the wind is that, for more than twice the money, and with perhaps an even more involved upconverting scheme, the Esoteric D70-P70 did everything the Orpheus did but with an extra measure of musical solidity and weight and, most of all, a lush tonal ripeness and temporal languor that beckoned rather than cloyed.

Musical images rendered by the Esoteric

D70-P70 seemed to glow from within. Perhaps that was an artifact of its own upsampling approach, or of its proprietary intelligent guessing as to what the nonexistent high-resolution data would have been. And, perhaps, the Orpheus separates, at near the Esoterics' price, would substantially close that gap.

To tally up: Pros: excellent build quality, excellent sound quality, switchable absolute-polarity inversion, good value for money, Swiss high-tech styling, and a clearly marked upgrade path. Cons: Top-loading, idiosyncratic styling, user interface not very intuitive, does not play SACD or DVD-Audio discs.

There are far worse ways to get the attention of the US marketplace than by having one's products used in a room that gets voted "Best Sound of Show." Based on my time with the less-expensive one-box player from Orpheus Laboratories, as well as what I heard of the full-boat two-box version in San Francisco, Orpheus certainly should be on your shopping list if you plan to spend more than \$5000 on a CD player, and don't need or want to play back high-resolution formats.

Questions, comments: [jmrcds@jmrcds.com](mailto:jmrcds@jmrcds.com).



<sup>4</sup> I also listened to non-early music, such as Josh Groban's self-titled Euro-pop effort; J-Pop such as Two Mix's *Super Best Files 1995-1998*; and even, in a fit of nostalgia, Boston's self-titled debut, during which I did see my Marianne walking away (except she never really was mine...).

## Manufacturers' Comments

### Orpheus Zero

Editor:

We were very happy that John Marks decided to evaluate our Orpheus Zero CD player after hearing our source components in the award-winning "Best Sound" exhibit room at the San Francisco show. We thank him for his complimentary comments about the Zero, and we look forward to seeing Kalman Rubinson's thoughts about the Zero paired with our model One D/A converter.

Regarding John's comments about the styling and functionality of the Zero, we can only say that our studies showed that people like the "crisp, clean" styling that he said attracted him in the first place. Given our components' 1RU (1.75") height, someone can install a complete Orpheus system in a 4RU space. Obviously, we at Orpheus think that the Zero is certainly worthy of its own parking space at the top of a rack or component stand, but given its short stature, the top door and transport are still easily accessible between the shelves of a normal equipment stand.

To answer the question about the benefits of our triangular spindle and puck, I can say that there is indeed a good engineering principle behind it. The close manufacturing tolerances he observed allow the puck and spindle to couple solidly and prevent any microvibrations that can occur with a round spindle and clamp. That, combined with the strong magnetic clamp to hold the disc firmly, ensures exact disc rotation and accuracy.

Again, thank you for a fair and insightful evaluation.

Marc Chablaix  
Orpheus Laboratories Sàrl