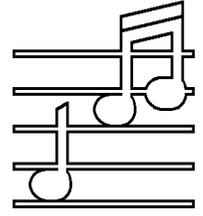


AUDIO BASICS



A MONTHLY NEWSLETTER OF AUDIO INFORMATION
VOLUME NINE NUMBER SIX JUNE, 1990

“Live” Music is Possible, IF You Attend the Right Theater!

[Here is a first, dear readers, an opening *Audio Basics* essay by my son, Frank Van Alstine Jr. Inasmuch as I am late this month because I spent two weeks with Frank Jr. exploring eastern Canada, teaching him how to drive, and attending the Canadian Grand Prix at Montreal (now that was really music to our ears), it was only fair that I put him to work slaving over the word processor to help me catch back up. So here is a fresh viewpoint about “live theater sound.”]

Amused over Dad’s review of the Ordway Music Theater’s destruction of the musical *Chess* last month in *Audio Basics*, I thought it was necessary to explore this concept further to find if there was any hope of attending a production and not having to listen to sound routed through enormous speakers at the side of the stage. I have attended a number of different productions in the past year, and have found some varying results, and do have some good news to report.

First, a follow-up on the Ordway. We gave them one more chance to allow the performers to “speak” for themselves when we attended the Flying Karamazov Brothers concert this spring at the Ordway. The Brothers masterfully displayed their juggling talents, but suffered from the Ordway PA system! Small turtle shell-shaped microphones on the stage routed their voices out to the giant distortion boxes on the side of the stage, then boomed out to the audience, destroying their natural voices. With our seats down near the front on the side, it soon became very annoying needing to face right to see the performers on stage, and hear the “sound” come out somewhere to our left. In retrospect, we probably ended up with the worst seats in the place, as their voices carried out from stage and missed us to the right, and the speakers shot the sound out distorted to our left, leaving us in a small vacuum of limited sound. This is not the way to enjoy theater!

Thoroughly upset by this inability to make anything sound aesthetically pleasing to the ears at the Ordway, I am happy to report that the Twin Cities are not completely out to lunch when it comes to proper performance sound. The Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis is a good example of how “live” music should be done!

The theater is shaped in the ancient Greek fashion, with a stage that drops forward towards the audience, while the seating arrangement is horse shoe shaped around the stage. The Guthrie is a much smaller theater, holding maybe half the size of an audience that the Ordway could have, and thus benefits from being small enough to actually allow the

performers' voices to carry through the entire theater unassisted. When this occurs, the boomy distorted amplified sound is not needed, and one can actually hear everything that is spoken! One can actually sit back and enjoy pure music. This is how theater is supposed to be!

The Guthrie has this concept down pat. Attending the musical *Candide* last February, I could easily understand each performer's voice as it was, unassisted. One could even understand the more difficult passages when several people were singing different tunes at the same time, or even when the entire cast was out on stage. And this was with seats punched up against the back wall of the theater! The general construction of the theater in addition to the actor's ability to project their voices to the back rows made those horrible wireless microphones that were the Achilles heel of the Ordway completely obsolete at the Guthrie. (Besides, during a love duet the leads at *Candide* nearly strip each other down to nothing, leaving no place for the wireless mics to be placed!)

Having attended several performances at the Guthrie theater through the years confirms that the place has not needed to consent to the popular believe that the sound must be distorted for the audience to enjoy, since the distorted sound is what they are familiar with! We had front row seats years ago for a Karamazov Brothers show at the Guthrie, and we could definitely hear the performers then. Even stuck in the Bob Uecker seats one time for a play production proved that one can even understand, unaided by amplification, what the performers were saying when they had their backs turned and were fifty feet away!

Another place that has gotten it right is the Cricket Theater in downtown Minneapolis. This performance consisted of a singing

quartet and a five piece band reviving the great songs of Tom Lehrer. (What, you have not heard of Tom Lehrer and his songs such as "Poisoning Pigeons in the Park"? – they are finally available on CD now.) The singers' voices again carried through the theater with no trouble at all, understandably clear from any part of the stage, and were not drowned out by the orchestra. All this with out the amplified PA speaker sound we loath. The Cricket theater is smaller than either the Ordway or Guthrie, holding perhaps 300 people at most. However this again allows the voices and instruments to carry unaided to every part of the theater. Even being stuck on the extreme right side of the theater did not hamper the sound, as we could clearly understand what was being sung from anywhere on stage.

If attending an expensive theater production may be out of someone's price range, there is still some hope of attending a play and hearing natural sound properly. A number of the small private colleges in the area probably put on several plays and or musical productions a year, and are produced just as well as the Guthrie theater. The play I saw at St. Olaf College's performing center this spring was also just the right size to allow the performers to project their voices to every point in the theater, unassisted. Despite being stuck on the extreme left side of the stage for this performance, (what do you need to do to get good seats anyway?) I could clearly understand the performers from where ever they were on stage, whether it was a soliloquy or several performers trading lines faster than the old "Who's on First" routine. Considering that small colleges probably do not have the money to let their art and theater departments have enormous PA systems and wireless microphones, the budding new actors and actresses of tomorrow are probably learning how to properly enunciate and make their voices understood regardless of the size of the auditorium. There is hope!

Summer B&W Speaker Specials

Now is the time to take advantage of great specially low prices on some of the best B&W loudspeakers. These prices are only available from the current stock in the U.S. warehouse. We made many readers very happy last year with incredible values on the DM1600s and DM1800s. Now it is your turn for true bargains.

First, we can offer more **Matrix Three Series II floor standing three way speakers at \$1750 a pair** delivered in the continental USA instead of our normal selling price of \$2250 per pair (list is \$2500 per pair). They are available in walnut, black ash, and natural oak but call us first to confirm availability before ordering. I have told you before that these are great speakers, about 90% of the performance of the 801 Matrix (and better to my ear than the 802 Matrix) for less than half the price. Now the price for these electronically protected, bi-wireable, real wood veneer, real matrix construction speakers is the lowest it will ever be. They are 90 dB efficient so even our smallest amplifier drives them to realistic music levels without stress and they are long term keepers. Act now, this special won't go on for long. If you have ever wanted "dream speakers" but couldn't afford them – well – now here they are.

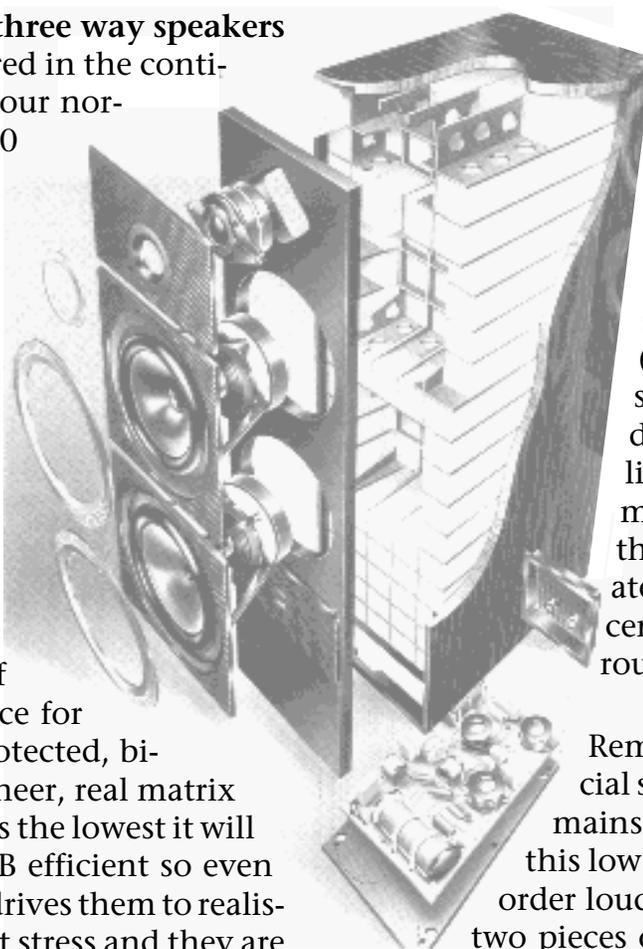
Here is another great special – the stunning **three piece combination of a pair of B&W DM560 larger 2-way speakers (with their pedestal stands) and the Acoustitone sub-woofer all for \$695.00** including

shipping to you in the continental USA. Our lowest selling price on this combination has been \$907.50 but a B&W pricing special makes this offer available for a limited time. You get wonderfully clear sound, tunable deep bass, easy to drive 90 dB performance, and lots of attractive speaker in a little bit of space.

To save even more space and money, order the three piece combination **with the smaller B&W DM550 speakers instead of**

the DM560s and the total cost drops to just \$450.00.

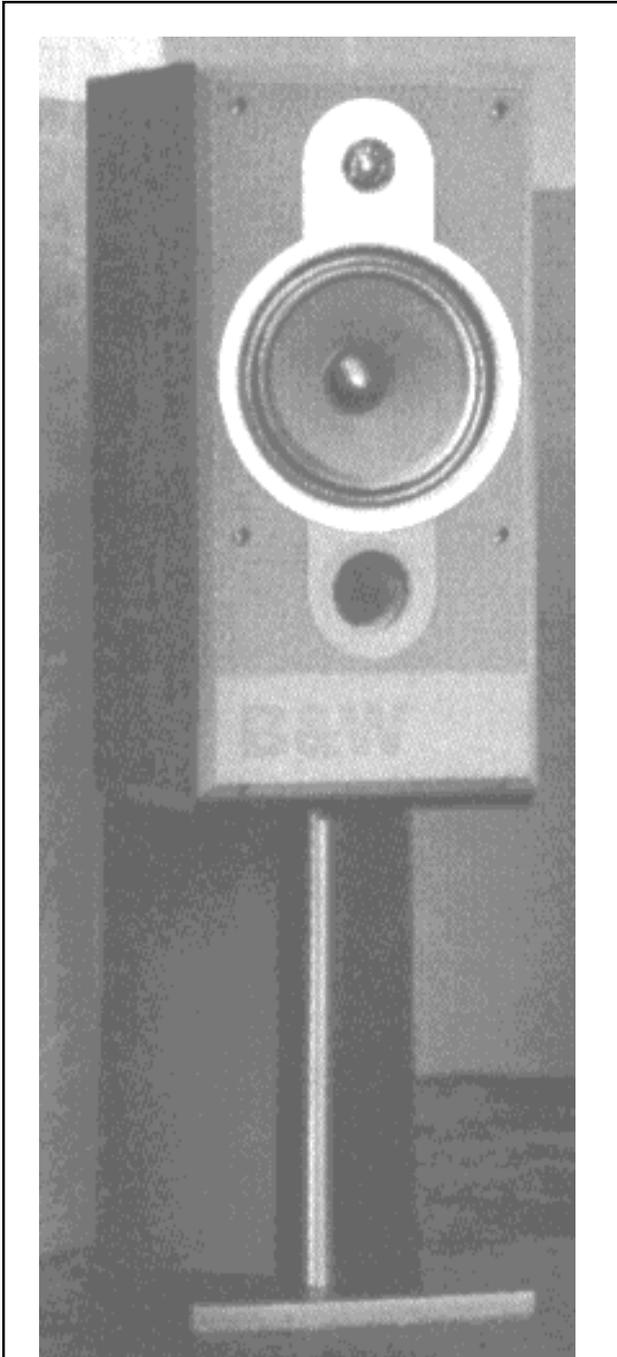
The stands are not included as they do not fit the DM550s. I am using these in my high fidelity television system right now (driven by the amp section of a Omega 50 directly from a satellite receiver) and the musicality is better than in any movie theater I have visited in recent years, Dolby Surround Sound or not.



Remember, that our special system pricing still remains in effect even with this low speaker prices. If you order loudspeakers and at least two pieces of Audio by Van Alstine electronics at the same time, you get an additional 10% discount on the electronics. Would you believe that so far only one reader has been smart enough to **really** take advantage of this offer? He already had great larger B&W speakers purchased from us, so when he bought a Fet-Valve amplifier and preamplifier, he was clever enough to order a smaller set of B&W

speakers for his son too at the same time. He was then eligible for the 10% system discount that nearly paid for the speakers!

Sorry, no returns possible on these special sale speakers. This one time low pricing does not allow for that possibility. Let's hear from you before the stock runs out.



B&W DM560 on Pedestal Stand

A Further Acoustat 11 Improvement

This enhancement to the great Spectra 11 loudspeakers comes right from Acoustat engineering as a "spin-off" from the soon to be released more expensive Spectra 1100 model. The \$1495/pair Spectra 1100, besides having a little fancier appearance and an improved woofer (we fixed that on the Spectra 11 already), has a three-way high frequency contour control that adjusts the level of electrostatic high end from slightly soft to "just right" to slightly hotter, depending upon the tastes and room conditions of the listener.

The contour control works by changing the value of a resistor in the crossover network. That resistor is a fixed value 1 ohm 25 watt unit in the Spectra 11. If that resistor is changed to 0.4 ohms (the "normal" setting for the Spectra 1100), the high end of the Spectra 11 is "perked up" just the right amount to remove the nagging feeling that there aren't quite enough highs.

Happily, not only does the improved high end sound better than ever, but the balance between the top and bottom is enhanced too. The necessary set of two 0.4 ohm 15 watt resistors are available from Hafler, or if you buy the speakers from us, we will install them for you at no extra charge. You need to remember to disconnect the power supply to the electrostatics when you work on the crossover and to avoid touching the bare ends of the colored plugs as they now carry the high voltage (but low current) charge of the panels – like a charged capacitor. We changed resistors in one of our demo speakers, gave a quick listen (it was a no contest improvement) and then did the other.

Acoustat has a track record of making every possible improvement on their products available at low cost to past production when ever possible. Given the durability and musicality of their great electrostatics I can't understand why there are not long lines at their dealers waiting to buy them. Their only disadvantages are size, need for a high quality amplifier, and less dynamic range than really good dynamic speakers. But for musical representation of space and female voice I don't think they can be beat. They are still just \$995/pair.

The Parsec Wave Catcher

Once in a while we run across something really inexpensive that is more than worth the money and the new Parsec WaveCatcher AM-FM passive antenna fits that description completely. This very cute little (7 1/2 inches tall) and inexpensive (under \$25.00) passive antenna showed up here at exactly the right time.

We have just started shipping our new Omega and Fet-3i circuits in Hafler's brand new AM-FM tuner, the SE-130, and while we have had good indoor FM antennas available for some time, there hasn't been anything around for AM reception at a low price that I can remember. Like most AM-FM tuners, the Hafler has a built in "loop" AM antenna hung on the back, and like most receivers and tuners, the AM reception is terrible if the antenna is used while located right behind the chassis.

Actually, there is not a much worse place for an AM antenna than close to a metal chassis. While at least the Hafler loop antenna can be snapped off the chassis and used away from it, there is no good way to locate or mount it. In my below ground level listening room, AM reception with the Hafler AM antenna (either on or off the

chassis) was essentially nil. Note that Hafler has been making a silly little mistake in the connection of their built in loop antenna in packing and shipping. The folks on the assembly line are carefully connecting the AM antenna lugs to the ground screw on the chassis (which kills the reception completely) instead of to the AM antenna terminals. But even with that "problem" fixed – it only takes a few seconds – AM reception was still unusable for me.

So, the Parsec WaveCatcher was given a trial just as soon we received it. The connections are simple. There are two sets of terminal cables coming from its connection module instead of the single set you would find on an FM only antenna. The FM cable ends in a standard screw on F-Connector (a 75 ohm to 300 ohm transformer with spade lug fittings is supplied for those



FM tuners without a direct F-Connector jack). The AM cable ends in a pair of spade lugs which are connected to the two AM screw terminals standard on most receivers and AM-FM tuners. Thus there are two antenna connections (both FM and AM) and your tuner's built in AM loopstick is not used. The WaveCatcher can be placed upright for more or less omni-directional operation, or it can be tipped down and pointed at more difficult to receive stations.

The little antenna fits on top of my main equipment cabinet and is so unobtrusive that you have to look carefully to see that it is there. FM performance is really amazing considering its small size. I get all the stereo FM stations in my listening area clean and free of multi-path with the exception of the public radio station in Northfield, the college town about 50 miles south of me. On that station, I sometimes get a slight bit of background noise depending upon the weather conditions. But, that station is received with severe multi-path distortion with my main house antenna system – so actually the little WaveCatcher is more than doing its job on FM. On AM it is working a whole lot better than Hafler's built in, but still not good enough for my location. Now I get many more AM stations, but still with background noise. However, in a higher location I suspect it will do much better. I will try it in another location and report further.

Remember though, this is a passive (not powered) antenna and it is really inexpensive. It is certainly worth your attention. It might be all you need. If not, Parsec has an under \$100.00 active AM-FM antenna coming soon. Write to Parsec at 400 West Ninth Street, Wilmington, DE 19801 to find out

when the new active AM-FM antenna will be available. I think it will be just what I need.

Used Equipment Available

The Transcendence 400 power amp and prototype Omega preamp were snapped up quickly last month, but don't despair, we have a few new special values for you.

First, due to the generosity of a subscriber, I have four Dyna solid state tuner chassis available in which our new Omega FM tuner circuits can be built. This is probably your last chance to get a complete AVA Omega tuner in a Dyna chassis unless you already own an FM-5 or an AF-6. They are getting very hard to find. We have checked these units and all have solid front ends and three of the four have good faceplates and chassis. The fourth is OK but not as clean. Normally we charge \$305.00 for our Omega FM circuits installed in your chassis (a complete new board set of our design of much higher quality than you will find in mass produced tuners). While these four chassis are available we will charge just **\$395.00 for the complete Omega tuner** and give you a 90 day warranty on the Dyna parts and of course two years on our new circuit boards. Act now, the early bird gets the nicest faceplate and chassis. These are probably the best sounding analog tuners that have ever been done and if you have been looking for a tuner you can tune exactly to your station instead of just coming up on pre-determined digital numbers, the Omega tuner in the Dyna chassis is the best for you.

We have two more good **stock Dyna Pas vacuum tube preamplifiers at \$95.00** each. Both have been checked out, both have new heater supplies installed here to replace tired original heater circuits, and both

have had all controls and switches Cramolin cleaned for quiet and reliable operation. One has an exceptionally nice faceplate and knob set. Both are good sounding stock Dyna tube preamps that can be used in the future for our Super Pas and Omega circuit sets. Both get our 90 day warranty.

We still have the two Fet Three Plus DH-110 preamps mentioned herein a couple of months ago. These are attractive and musical preamps. Call us with your offer – perhaps you can make your audio system better than ever for less than you would think. **Remember to include payment for shipping on all units.**

Frank and Darlene Van Alstine