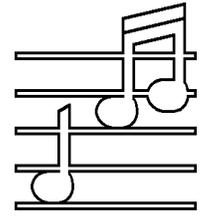


AUDIO BASICS



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What is Happening to "Live" Music?

On three occasions recently, I have paid to be subjected to the modern world's interpretation of what "live" music is, with most unsatisfactory results. The only positive aspect of my recent experiences is that it is becoming easier than ever to assure you that our audio components are "as good as live." Hell, given the way live performances are going these days, our components, properly used, are going to give you much better than live results at home. Let me explain.

The First Disaster was at Superstar

A revival of Andrew Lloyd Webber's early rock opera Jesus Christ Superstar played recently at the restored State theater in Minneapolis. It is too bad they did not revive and restore the performers too. The original Jesus and Judas actors appeared again, and creaked their way through their roles with all the enthusiasm of cafeteria line servers. Judas could not sing, he simply shouted his way through the part.

The "orchestra" consisted of about seven people each in their own little plexi-glass cubby-hole in the pit all wearing headphones (more likely, ear protectors). There were far more AC power lines and computers than musical instruments. Their musical output was the pits. I reached the conclusion, at the concert, that combined acoustical output of this little warren of tangled wires would have been better served with one big DCC boom-box on stage playing back a taped copy of the original score. Unfortunately, this notion expressed at the concert was later fulfilled for me, much to my dismay.

The music was pathetic. Most of the fill instrumentation was simply missing and the kick and dynamics I would have expected did not exist at all. Yes, it got loud, but so does a clock radio turned up too far. The vocal presentations were terrible. They came across with all of the grain, grit, mud and fuzz that you would

hear emanating from the scum speakers at the "top 40" CD store in your local shopping mall. There was no chance to understand the words. When will the idiot producers realize that wireless microphones have no dynamic range? They simply overload and squash and ruin the music. For our convenience, the music at musicals has been relegated to garbage.

No wonder it is so easy to sell awful plastic multi-channel home entertainment systems these days. If one's reference is the garbage they pawn off on you live, then any trash you buy at K-Mart will do just as well.

I left that concert feeling horribly cheated. I could not believe that there were any smiling faces there at all. The "McDonaldization" of musical presentations to match the expectations of the lowest common denominator is well along the way.

But there was still hope – my wife and I had a one week Caribbean cruise planned on Princess lines. The voyage was supposed to include "live" entertainment every night in their giant new three story high show lounge. I assumed (given a consistent venue to deal with on a huge new ship) that the entertainment and PA experts would have tuned their sound systems to perfection on the Regal Princess to give us music to match their fancy color brochures and promises. You would expect that they would have had the time and client feedback to get it exactly right. Wrong!

“Live” on a cruise is not live at all!

We had lip-synced canned tape recordings, produced and recorded in Los Angeles for our listening convenience at sea. It was ghastly! It would have been better if they had just fed us Spam in the dining room and then herded us back to our cabins for Loveboat reruns on the VCR.

There we were, all dressed up for the first night’s performance when the first group of singers and dancers came out, each with their own little wireless microphones. I thought, “Oh - Oh, more wireless mics, not more overloaded bad vocals coming up?” It wasn’t bad, it was worse!

You see, the singers did not really have microphones at all, they were all dummies. They did not sing at all. They just lip-synced their way along with a complete canned and pre-recorded taped presentation. The whole live performance was a fake. It was an exquisitely bad screeching and booming PA playback of a scummy tape recording. I really could have done much better with a hi-fi VCR recording in my cabin. Much to my dismay, my subconscious wish to replace the bad musicians and microphones at Superstar with a boombox had been granted! Now I didn’t have to worry about the hum and buzz from the scattered wiring runs. I did not have to cope with too few musicians to handle the score. I did not have to worry about bad wireless stage microphones. Nothing was live, nothing was real. And of course nothing sounded real either.

The little problem to this approach to “live” entertainment is pretty simple – it is fraud! I paid for live, I got tape recordings instead. If I wanted to spend my evenings for a week listening to pre-recorded music I could do that for free at home and get incomparably vastly better fidelity! Big business is screwing us again and nobody is noticing! A four page letter to Princess cruises detailing my observations of the failures of their promises (the music was not the only thing that had been repackaged for mass-consumption) has gone unanswered.

We have been on nine cruises over the past 30 years. My list of questions to ask before taking another is growing. High on the list is, “Is the

live entertainment really live or is it canned?”

This is a question that never needed to be asked before. Now with the advent of big business marketing and packaging, you had better be sure before you pay because the managers on board simply don’t care how bad it sounds. They don’t care if you don’t come back. They have a large supply of uncomplaining suckers out there that have never heard real live music or even a mediocre high fidelity system so they can continue to foist off their canned entertainment without repercussions. If you don’t stand up and shout, “fraud!” the marketers will give you what they think you deserve.

So we came home feeling a bit low from a week at sea mostly wasted. A day brightener awaited us – we had won a set of free tickets to see the Mannheim Steamroller’s live Christmas concert at the new art-deco restoration of the Minneapolis Orpheum theater. This theater is much bigger than the State, with lots of space, great sight lines, and a large and deep stage. American Gramophone and Chip Davis had a reputation of turning out true high fidelity recordings with lots of musical talent, enthusiasm, and originality. They have a track record of giving us electronic music that was truly musical. With a good theater and a fine experienced musical group that understood what high fidelity was all about, we anticipated finally a rewarding musical experience in live pop music. Boy, were we ever mistaken. The event turned out to be –

A Mannheim Steamroller Non-Concert!

The best thing about the event was that our tickets were free. We got our money’s worth!

We should have known better when we saw the electric drum set on stage. We really should have known better when we saw the giant mixing board complete with computers and sound analyzers at the back of the theater manned by two PA engineers. We should have known better in listening to the loud “buzzzzz” emanating from the stack of PA speakers at idle. We should have left before the affair started and saved our parking fee.

The concert started, the musicians appeared to be playing, but they were not playing the instruments we were hearing! The piano player

was not keeping time with his piano music – notes seemed to be coming out even when his hands were not on the keyboard! We had a great deal of trouble locating the hammered dulcimer because it was not there at all. The locations and space of the musical performance simply did not match what we were viewing on stage. The electric drum set was particularly pathetic. Why oh why use a toy drum set with no musical quality or impact! If you must use electronic drums to practice with in your bedroom, fine. But for real world music, I want real world musical instruments please!

At the very end, when the musicians all stopped “playing” and stood to take a bow the reason for our discomfort became obvious – for the music did not change or stop playing when the musicians did! The whole thing was basically another canned pre-packaged session. The computers and synthesizers were doing nearly everything by themselves – musicians not needed at all.

There was one slightly redeeming interlude. For a too short section of the second half of the performance the musicians left their electronic gismos behind, gathered at the front of the stage with acoustic instruments, and played us a few works of real live non-electronic music generated by real people. It still is possible to do this! It still is the only thing worth paying for.

The rest of the program was trash. None of the quality that you can hear on any American Gramophone CD was audible. No nuances, no spirit, no delicacy at all. Just honking, thrashing, blating thick PA sound, mostly done by pre-programmed computers.

The sound engineer told me that it was hopeless trying to get good sound in a real hall – that his Class D Crest switching amps were just fine and that it was pointless to try and do better. I was pointedly (and defensively) informed that a high slew rate amplifier would perform no better with all the air he had to move. He launched into a diatribe of how difficult it was to get the hum out of his complex tangle of electronics, how many computer controlled synthesizers he was using, and how he really didn't need to be there at all because it was essentially all pre-programmed. I gather he has

never heard “live” at all or had forgotten that the purpose of the event was to provide us with music. Yes, you can do better, but only if you care and only if you have some clue as to what music is all about. I rated his amplifiers and his engineering as Class F.

This “live” canned performance of Mannheim Steamroller made me wonder how they have managed to produce any good recorded music at all. What they provided us in concert would suggest they don't care any more.

Actually, there was one other good thing about the concert – it was really three concerts for the price of one – assuming that the 30 minute length of a typical Fresh Aire CD is their standard of value.

Years ago, James Patrillo led the musician's union on a long strike against the recording industry because of concern that recorded music and musical sound tracks on movies were putting the live stage musicians out of business. Now even though the musicians appear on the stage, the performance is still likely to be canned. Give the live entertainment industry a few more years with holograms and a few more blinking lights and they will dispense with the need of any more real performers at all.

It does not have to be done this badly. Earlier this year we were thoroughly entertained by a live performance of Webber's Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat at the State theater featuring Donny Osmand.

The voices were fine, the children's choir was refined and transparent, the orchestration was dynamic and clear, and Donny was obviously thoroughly enjoying himself. It was the best live musical theater I have heard since we had front row center seats at Cats in London a few years ago.

It can be done if you care to do it right and if you know that is what is demanded. It is in the final analysis, up to you. When the performance is scum, let them know that you did not like it. (If it was great, let them know that you did like it.) If you put up with low-fi live, that is all you are going to get.

Don't Do That With Your Computer!

For the past two months I have spent many hours of wasted effort chasing ghosts and bugs in my computer system. It has been crashing and burning randomly, costing me several week-ends of bashing head against wall trying to get to the bottom of the problem. The system behaved like it was virus infected, except all the virus detection programs in the world said it was clean. The last straw was in discovering that the vast majority of all my high resolution graphics images were severely corrupted. I back-tracked for hours on end, finally learning that I had to go all the way back to a backup tape made October 31th to get clean files. Everything done since then (files, programs, and operating system bits) was suspect. All my backups since then were corrupted too, as I was backing up already damaged data. I have finally completely restored the system and salvaged nearly everything (thank goodness for that one clean backup DAT tape) but the amount of productive time I have lost in the past few weeks is pretty terrifying.

The culprit was the combination of two factors. The first was the use of a MacTools disk defragmentation utility to relocate and reassembly all the files on my hard disk. It screwed up and did random minor damage to files. The big damage was done to graphics files stored in a compressed format. Then, small errors were compounded into huge errors when the information as to how to decompress the files was lost. A wrong colored bit in a picture is fixable, a file that is completely scrambled is not.

The morals of the story are as follows:

Backup often and keep your old backups, you can never tell when you might really need them.

Never use a defragmentation utility. Any program that reads and writes to your disk outside the context of the basic operating system is suspect. The files you defragment may be the files you ruin.

Never store files in a compressed format. When they are damaged while compressed, the damage will be much more severe and likely not recoverable. It took me a major disaster to learn this. Don't repeat my mistakes.

Used Equipment

Super Pas Three Preamplifier. This is a clean AVA built pure vacuum tube preamp in a recent good Dyna Pas chassis. It is complete with the gold AVA jack set, ceramic selector switch, precision volume and balance controls, black AVA faceplate and knob set, excellent select Chinese tube set, and fresh construction (built new in 1991). It includes the 8.2 μ F film capacitor upgrade to the line section previously discussed in *Audio Basics* which gives it brand new performance. We will provide a six month parts and labor warranty on this great preamplifier. \$345 plus \$10 shipping in the continental USA.

Super Pas Three Omega Preamplifier. This is a nice 1990 AVA upgrade of an older, but solid and functional, Dyna Pas chassis. It is complete with the gold AVA jack set, ceramic selector switch, precision volume and balance controls, silver AVA (Super Pas Two) faceplate and knob set and a brand new select Chinese tube set. It includes the AVA Omega phono and line buffers just upgraded with the newest AD843 chips and with the new line interstage capacitors. We will provide a six months parts and labor warranty. Music performance like a Super Pas 4i at a much lower price. \$425 plus \$10 shipping in the continental USA. (Add \$50 for a brand new black AVA faceplate and knob set installed.)

Super 70i Vacuum Tube Amplifier with new AVA jack set, and all new signal tubes. This is as nice as a small vacuum tube amplifier gets and is a great match for speakers such as our B&W DM640i with AVA upgraded crossovers. We have several good chassis and can offer this package with our new insides for \$645.00 plus \$15 shipping in the continental USA. These units have a two year parts and labor warranty on our circuits, six months on the chassis and mechanical bits, and 30 days on the tubes. Add \$100 for the AVA power transformer and solid state rectifier installed too.

Transcendence Two DH-330 FM Tuner. This is a good sounding discrete solid state AVA circuit set in a good black Hafler DH-330 FM tuner chassis. It has a volume control and a headphone jack. There are five FM station pre-

sets and scan and seek functions. It has a big attractive LED digital readout and signal strength meter. It has switchable mute sensitivity, switchable mono-stereo, and switchable noise filters. It can be tuned between standard frequencies to accommodate out of spec. cable systems. Our fine discrete solid state preamp circuits of the late 1980s vintage make this an unusually clear, dynamic and listenable unit. It is in good condition (a little wear but no major dings) and has an attractive black chassis. The optional rack mount ears come with it too. We checked it out and cleaned the controls and switches. It functions just fine, sounds great, and we can offer it to you for just \$225 + \$10 USA shipping with a six month warranty on our circuits (the chassis and mechanical parts and switches are not in warranty).

B&W DM640i Loudspeakers (black) with AVA crossover upgrades. This is an interesting story - one speaker is brand new, the other (only 10 units away in series number) is slightly used. The original pair was recently sold to a client who liked them (and his new Ω mega II amplifier) so much he decided to go even further and traded them back to me on a set of B&W 803 Series Two speakers. One speaker survived the trip back here, the other did not - UPS bashed it and got to buy it. Fortunately B&W still had a brand new single from the same batch so we have an identical matched pair again. These actually are the newest 640i models (with improved midrange units and better sound than ever) but in 640 cartons. B&W got the new speakers in production before they had revised shipping cartons and paperwork completed. Actually any 600 series speakers you have purchased from us in the past three months have all been the "i" series models, just without the "i" identification yet. Anyway, UPS's loss is your gain. This pair of 640i speakers (one new, its mate used but in brand new condition) can be yours for just \$995 plus shipping. You will only get a B&W warranty card for one of the pair, but we will warrant the other ourselves to match the B&W limited 5 year parts and labor warranty. This is a one time best price we have ever had on these, call us now to insure they are still available before you order!

B&W Acoustitune Sub-Woofer (black). This great little two channel passive sub-woofer can upgrade the performance of any small speaker system without need for an additional crossover or amplifier. It is in brand new condition, in the original carton with all of the tuned ports for adapting it to a wide variety of applications. It belonged to my son, who used it with a pair of B&W CM1 minis while he was in college. This Christmas we surprised him with the better yet CM2 SW woofers to turn his speakers into complete integrated Series 90 CM 2 systems leaving the Acoustitune available for you. The Acoustitune is not imported into the USA any more as most B&W dealers want to sell something much more expensive and sell an additional amplifier and crossover with a sub-woofer too. We sold all we could get. Now we have one more at \$250 plus shipping with our six month parts and labor warranty. Call for details. It is a nice system enhancement.

Big Power Amplifiers! We have two decent Dyna 400 based chassis with which we can build you a killer amplifier at an advantageous price. One is a mediocre Dyna 416 (silver rack mount faceplate, grab handles, an led blinking power display, cooling fan and all). We can build a 220 watt per channel Ω mega II power amplifier in this chassis with either four, six, or eight big-die power mos-fets per channel. With four mos-fets per channel the amplifier is rated for 8 ohm and 4 ohm loads. With six mos-fets per channel it is safe into 2 ohm loads. With eight mos-fets per channel it becomes the ideal Apogee driver - great gobs of power and safe one ohm load drive capability. One client tells us this made his Infinity 4.5s sound the best ever. Pay \$895 for the basic four mos-fet per channel Ω mega II circuit set installed, \$125 extra for six mos-fets per channel, or \$250 extra for eight mos-fets per channel, and we will charge you only \$150 more for the Dyna 416 chassis! You get a two year parts and labor warranty on our circuits and six months on the original Dyna parts (cosmetic wear and tear not included). The other chassis is our own Double 400 version of this design. It has a very attractive black VA Double 400 faceplate with power meters. The meters work, but are not illuminated. The heat sink is identical so we can offer the

same options at the same price. It is cleaner overall, but does not have grab handles or a full rack mount width on the faceplate. Add \$25 for shipping on either in the continental USA.

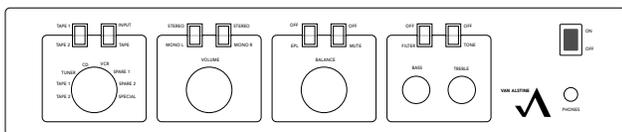
Small Power Amplifiers! We just got in two Dyna St-120 chassis and one Dyna St-80 basic amplifier chassis. We can build either the Delta or Omega II circuits in the 120s (just the Delta 80 in the little St-80 chassis). Pick your circuit set from the rebuild prices in our catalog and add just \$75 for the chassis. Our two year warranty applies to our new circuits, and we will provide a 90 parts and labor warranty (except cosmetics) on the original Dyna materials too. If you have been looking for a great low priced, rugged, and musical smaller amplifier, now is your chance.

It was a good year for us, and we hope for you too. Let's do it again!

We designed and developed our very own series of basic power amplifiers from scratch this year working so well there have been zero field circuit failures and no satisfaction guarantee returns (except one from an audio club that had never intended to keep it in the first place).

We are almost done with our second preamplifier chassis – the “big preamplifier” mentioned a bit prematurely in our *Audio* ad.

The design is done and the prototype metal is due from our sheet metal shop any day now. We can tell you that it is 17” wide x 3.5” high and is very attractive and unique looking.



It has eight sets of inputs, gold switch contacts, switchable tone controls, switchable EPL loop, switchable filters, mono-stereo left/right switching, dual tape monitors, dual audio outputs, headphone amplifier, switchable AC outlets, and more.

It will accommodate several different circuit sets at different price ranges. The lowest priced version will be a full function Omega II preamplifier with tone controls. Phono circuits, phase inverters, tape buffers and more will be op-

tions. Our famous Fet Valve hybrid vacuum tube preamplifier circuits will be available too, complete with switchable tone controls and optional phono circuits. We shouldn't tell you this, but we have a new advanced solid state discrete Omega III circuit set nailed down too. It is actually a very refined miniature version of the Omega II power amplifier complete with complimentary power mos-fet output circuits. It sets new standards for bandwidth and load driving capability. It sounds like – well – you just gotta hear it and then you will know.

Because the new big preamp chassis accommodates our existing circuits, we likely will offer a “chassis transplant” service for those who like what they have now musically with their smaller AVA preamp but lust for the new additional functionality. We support our clients and will try our best to not let your existing AVA equipment become obsolete.

If you have already heard an Omega II or Fet-Valve hc power amplifier you know the direction we are moving – towards a purer yet presentation of all the nuances and transparency of live acoustic music in natural space. The limits of true high fidelity reproduction have not yet been defined. Stick with us as we push back the outer reaches of audio engineering.

If the number next to your name on your address label reads 9312 or 9401 then your subscription to Audio Basics is expiring.

We have appreciated your past support and would like to have you with us for 1994. There are changes coming like crazy in the world of high fidelity. The mass market is trying to redefine high fidelity out of existence. They are replacing it with multi-channel low fi and lifestyle enhancements aimed at the lowest common denominator because “things” are much easier to sell than quality, especially when you don't have quality to sell at all, just more molded plastic.

We will watch what is happening carefully and report to you the way we see it. What is worthwhile? What is not? We will try and keep up with it and let you know what is really going on. Send us that renewal now, and thank you for your support.

Frank and Darlene Van Alstine