

The Fifth Element

John Marks

Let's start with some music—three discs I recently have been using to evaluate equipment as well as listen to for enjoyment. They are as contrasting in style as one could hope for, but all on an enviably high musical plane. (Space considerations compel brevity approaching that necessary to [sell screenplays to producers at cocktail parties](#).)¹

Ensemble Amarcord: *And So It Goes* (Apollon Classics apc 10102): Former choristers from Bach's own church make up this German version of The King's Singers. This contemporary a cappella program ranges from Billy Joel to Supertramp to a Cuban love song, but it was Amarcord's cover of Sinéad O'Connor's "In This Heart" that raised the hairs on the back of my neck when I heard them live. The CD isn't shabby either. Indeed, *And So It Goes* totally wowed everyone who heard it at Home Entertainment 2003 in San Francisco—John Atkinson quickly scribbled the particulars on his Palm Pilot. If you liked Cantus' *Let Your Voice Be Heard*, you're sure to like this. Just add it to your demo-disc pile. Well worth the trouble to get from Amarcord's US tour management, www.concertartists.com/Amarcord.html or (860) 560-7800. (If your church or school has a performing-arts series, book them. Right away. I guarantee goosebumps.)

John Mayer: *Room for Squares* (Sony CK 85293): Rock singer-songwriter-guitarist Mayer is often compared to Dave Matthews, but for me his combination of bedevilment over the fair sex, wry wordplay, smooth arrangements, and low-key vocal delivery strongly calls to mind Michael Franks' early work.

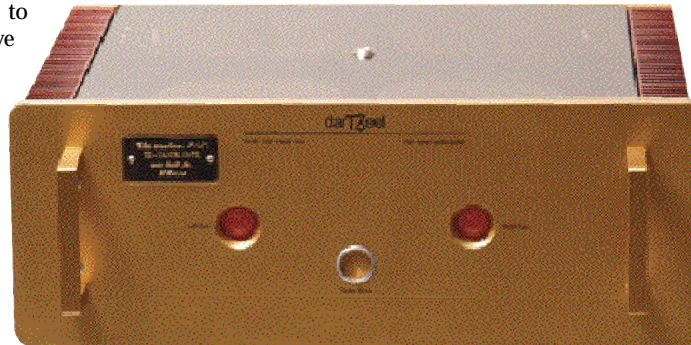
Mayer's "St. Patrick's Day" (which is not about St. Patrick's Day at all, but in-

stead observes that nobody wants to be alone at Christmas) is in feeling-tone emotionally vulnerable and wistful, yet hopeful. Michael Franks would be proud to claim it, and its knowing embrace of what just might be self-deception comes within striking distance of Cole Porter's. If you like Dave Matthews, you'll like this. More to the point—assuming you want to expand your horizons—if you like this, you should also like Michael Franks' four earliest Warner/Reprise efforts: *The Art of Tea* (2230-2), *Sleeping*

chocolate: with enraptured absorption.

The recording's vantage point is a bit too close, so you have a front-row perspective on the harpsichord's mechanical workings, even to the extent that at times you can hear its soundboard resonating with the registration changes. But, having made recordings in the same room where this CD was made, I can say that this disc seems to be a faithful document.

What lifts Brookshire's performances out of the usual audiophile (or academic Baroque) dead end is his unusual leavening of drama with humor, and perhaps even a light touch of self-deprecation. I sense that, when he waits just a tad too long for a cadential or false-cadential chord, he is having a bit of fun at his own expense rather than saying, "See how profound I am!" Great late-night listening—this is why they make Cockburn's Special Reserve Port, is it not?



darTZeel NHB-108 model one power amplifier

Gypsy (3004-2), *Burchfield Nines* (3167-2), and *Tiger in the Rain* (3294-2). Go for it!

I have been reading overweight pontificator Harold Bloom's *Genius*, and, to its credit, underneath the contrived Kabalistic trappings lies the first reasoned argument that can make me, even for a moment, consider Shakespeare as a genius equal to J.S. Bach. But then, when I once again single-mindedly listen to Bach, so much for *that*.

Of late, my minimum daily Bach requirement has been met by **Bradley Brookshire's** recording of *The French Suites* (Purchase PC 1575, www.bachharpsichord.com). While I am not ready by a long shot to declare it perfect or definitive, I am certainly ready to say "You must hear this." Brookshire plays [the harpsichord the way Nigella Lawson](#)² eats

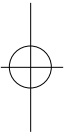
Luscious Watts

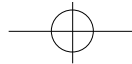
Last time out I mentioned darTZeel's NHB-108 model one from Switzerland as the sweetest-sounding solid-state power amplifier I have ever heard. NHB stands for "Never Heard Before," and I surmise it is also a nose-tweak aimed at the familiar abbreviation NFB, for "negative feedback." The (temporary) return of Stereovox's interconnects and speaker cables, and the arrival of Custom Power Cord Company's Series Two Top Gun AC cords (gloriosky, they're great!), only reinforce that impression.

Visually and sonically, what a gorgeous machine! The last time I was as excited by an amplifier, its nameplate said "Halcro." The good news is that the darTZeel costs less than half of what a pair of Halcro dm-58s do. In my medium-size room, darTZeel's 100Wpc coped with all the dynamic demands I threw at it. In my friend, retailer Bob

¹ My favorites in that genre are the pitches for Joan Didion's *The Panic in Needle Park* ("Romeo and Juliet on Smack") and D. Keith Mano's *Topless* ("Episcopal priest inherits topless bar"). Selling your script in five words or fewer is indispensable for highest honors.

² Appearing on your local cable channel in *Nigella Bites*, the home-wrecking little hussy. Memo to Nigella's publicist: When I refer to your client as a home-wrecking little hussy, I mean it in the most complimentary manner imaginable. Please let me know about the interview.





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Saglio's larger room, playing the loudest parts of Verdi's *Requiem* on his Duntech Sovereign 2001s louder than I would care to hear, the darTZeel's indicator lights briefly glowed brightly, indicating that we had gotten within 1dB of the amp's dynamic headroom limit, but the protection circuit did not kick in.

The NHB-108 is the first amplifier in my experience to **combine the pristine purity** of minimalist solid-state designs with power reserves more than adequate for most non-home-theater listening situations. By "minimalist" I mean that there are a total of just six transistors in each channel, the output devices for each channel being one matched pair of bipolar transistors. To say the least, I was puzzled by this choice: aren't bipolars, well, bipolar? As in, so 1970s?

darTZeel designer and occasional *Stereophile* contributor³ Hervé Delétraz makes compelling cases for all his idiosyncratic engineering choices in his two lengthy owner's-manuals-cum-*apologiae-pro-vita-sua*, both available for free downloading at www.dartzeel.com and both fascinating reading. Time and again I was reminded of the Firesign Theatre's "Everything you know is wrong."

To take one example, Delétraz makes a mathematical case for his claim that an extraordinarily high output current is not as important as one might think. He also makes plausible arguments that noise and harmonic and intermodulation distortion are not really relevant unless they are audible.

His central claim is that achieving low noise and distortion numbers are Pyrrhic victories. He claims that timing errors are introduced by having the music go through more than one silicon junction at once, those varying signal paths often being of varying length, and through multiple transistors that are very difficult to match. For M. Delétraz, it is nearly all **about preserving the purity of the** musical timing, and to that end he is cheerfully willing, after more than two decades of wandering in the wilderness of trial and error, to write off a lot of factors other companies obsess about.

That M. Delétraz may be on to something is suggested by the continuing esteem many cognoscenti feel for Plinius' SA-50 and Krell's original KSA-50 amps (both discontinued), each of which had an output topology similar to darTZeel's, but half the power. JA still

owns his Krell "purist" amp, and Sam Tellig for quite some time owned the Plinius version.

Delétraz claims that the NHB-108 has no switch, contact, fuse, or relay in its entire signal path, the only fuses being the mains fuses (one per channel). Neither is there any global feedback, DC servo compensation circuitry, or current limitation of any kind.

To avoid catastrophic failure in case of an output short, a Hall-effect sensor shorts the power supply by means of

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an industrial thyristor, the "crowbar" action of which is claimed to vaporize the fuse elements with 350 amps of current in 6.5ms, before the output transistors can go into thermal runaway. For this reason, the darTZeel absolutely must never be plugged into the wall unless speakers have already been connected to its outputs. Both the owner's manuals—and a separate warning card—drive this point home.

A wag once commented that it took an awful lot of money to maintain Gandhi in his life of poverty. In much the same way, darTZeel's extreme engineering simplicity comes at the cost of some very stuffed (but elegantly stuffed) circuit boards, and lots of weight: 65 lbs, not counting its very Swiss shipping carton with CNC-cut foam inserts holding a complete set of Swiss-made tools.

Some of the weight comes from the unusual design of the casework's "floor": between the amp's outer and inner bases is a 25mm air space, through which much of the wiring is routed. Much of the rest of the weight seems to be in the power supply, which is quite large for an amp of 100Wpc.

The provided hand tools are necessary: the darTZeel is shipped with a marine-grade plywood board substituting for its smoked-glass cover, the changeover of which requires a screw-

driver and suction cups. Special extra-long-nose pliers are required to reach the power fuses, which are situated where they do the least sonic harm, rather than in the locations most convenient for replacing them.

The glass cover, once installed, serves three purposes: It lets you admire the extraordinary build quality, the equal of Jeff Rowland's or Nagra's; it provides an airtight seal to keep the inside dust-free; and it is claimed to reduce the antimusical effects of electromagnetic forces' being reflected back into the signal circuitry by the usual metal cover.

This third factor brings into play one of my few caveats about the otherwise easy-to-set-up darTZeel. The transparency of the glass to EMF is a two-way street. Some degree of care is required to prevent the induction of hum by having a preamplifier or CD player's power transformer too close to the darTZeel.

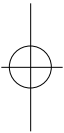
The darTZeel's visual design is firmly in the land of love it or hate it. The main case is meticulously anodized a warm yellow with an eggshell-gloss finish, very reminiscent of Jeff Rowland's early work although slightly more lemony in tone. The front panel sports a gold-plated plaque the size of a business card, on which are engraved the owner's name and the serial number. The heatsinks are of the red usually found in a glass of Campari with just a splash of tonic. The crescent-shaped bus bars for the power supply are gold, with the powder-blue capacitor tops showing between. The two gumdrop-sized power-indicator lights are pumpkin orange in most of their states.

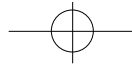
About the lights: The darTZeel is intended to be left on all the time, powered up but in standby. This is designed to help the capacitors reach their anticipated lifespan of more than 25 years. The front Power button is actually a standby/on switch. To power down the unit entirely, you must pull the line cord out of the wall.

The indicator lights are on, but nearly imperceptibly, while the unit is in standby mode. Powering up makes them glow softly, playing music above a certain threshold makes them light up brightly but not intensely, and with the approach of clipping and protection they shine forth with unmistakable urgency.

The questionable aspect is that, if you are listening to string quartets quietly with relatively efficient speakers, the power lights for the two channels will toggle dimmer and brighter independently as the music ebbs and flows,

3 His online-only series of articles about the NHB-108 model one's genesis begins at www.stereophile.com/shownews.cgi?825.





because the amp thinks it is coming in and out of its quiescent state. (The lights also blink for certain warning functions.) But the effect is only visual—I heard no audible glitches.

When you add up the Playskool primary-color industrial design, the fey naming of the power button and indicators “Nose” and “Eyes,” and the occasional late-night ballet of indicator lights, you get a strongly idiosyncratic product that some people will love and others will simply not get—but on grounds entirely apart from how it plays music.

For lowest hum and noise in most applications (excluding darTZeel’s own 50 ohm output preamplifier, not yet released), it is necessary to tie the negative speaker terminals together with a jumper wire. The provided plain wire was a pain to use with speaker cables terminated by spade lugs, to the extent that I asked Stereovox’s Chris Sommovigo to fabricate a single banana-to-banana jumper out of Stereovox wire. I unreservedly recommend such a wire (or the spade equivalent, if your speaker cables use bananas). At some risk to my reputation for being well-oriented in space and time, I must say it made an audible improvement over the stock one. But in all the listening situations I tried, some kind of negative jumper was necessary.

Due to its output configuration, the darTZeel will not double its power output as the speaker impedance drops to 4 ohms, and speakers lower than 4 ohms will present some difficulty. The solution for this is found in rear-panel switches that can be set for lower-impedance speakers.

Delétraz builds his amplifiers by hand (some assemblies and components are obviously subcontracted out), and at present is selling all he can make. He offers a money-back guarantee that so far has been relied on by not a single customer. Despite large fluctuations in currency exchange rate disfavoring American customers, Delétraz will maintain last year’s price of approximately \$10,000 for the rest of this production run, after which the price will go up to about \$11,000 for the next run, and \$12,000 thereafter. If you are in the market for a unique and sweet amp, contact the factory through its website or call (41) 22-784-3393.

Awesome Two-Way Loudspeaker

Last time out, I mentioned Peak Consult’s InCognito (www.tmhaudio.com)



Consult InCognito loudspeakers

com) as perhaps the apotheosis⁴ of the two-way loudspeaker. At 95 lbs each and \$13,000/pair, it is safe to conclude that some outer limits are being tested. A few months of careful listening indicate that among these limits is musical performance for this product class.

The Dynaudio 25th Anniversary loudspeaker, which I wrote up in the January 2003 issue (www.stereophile.com/showarchives.cgi?762), was wonderful. I imagined that the Dynaudio could be the ticket off the upgrade merry-go-round for some, and it does appear that it has found many happy customers. The Peak Consult, however, handily bested it in every area but one. This should be the case, after all—at more than twice the price, you **should expect clear performance gains**.⁵

The InCognito excels at bass (though not deep bass), midrange sweetness, and coherence, and has a very warm and nonfatiguing treble. Imaging and soundstaging are first-rate. None of this should surprise, either—extreme care (and little worry about cost) went into the entire design, from the dedicated and nonremovable stand (which houses the crossover, for better mechanical and electrical isolation) to the high-quality

⁴ Raising to godlike stature, a service many Roman Emperors claimed to have performed for themselves.

⁵ With all due respect to those who disagreed with the Class B ranking of the Dynaudio in “Recommended Components,” the Peak Consult does show rather markedly the differences between a Class B speaker and a Class A one.

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drivers and other components. The woodwork is excellent, the visual design slightly edgy but not really controversial.

If your listening tastes do not include pipe organ or deep orchestral bass, the ultra-high-quality InCognito may be just the ticket for you. Certainly it should go on your shopping list if you are in the market for a speaker in the range of \$10,000–\$15,000/pair. Depending on associated equipment, room acoustics, and personal tastes, I can easily imagine some people, in some specific situations, preferring the InCognito to the also-excellent Wilson Audio Specialties Sophia.

So what is my quibble? Two sides of the same coin, perhaps. The InCognito does so many things so well that its lack of deep bass can, paradoxically, seem more apparent than it might with lesser speakers. I found myself listening so intently, and hearing so much, that the absent fundamentals were more sorely missed than otherwise. Perhaps related to this is my impression that the InCognito really “came alive” only at volume levels above my usual ones. But be assured—when it did come alive, it was rich and full and coherent, not jangly or jumpy.

John Atkinson was discussing this precise point at one of the panel discussions at HE2003 in June. Due to the human ear-brain system’s varying sensitivity to bass at differing loudnesses, it is somewhat important to know the reference level a reviewer uses. JA forthrightly advised a questioner that if he listened 20dB more quietly than did John, he might very well find the same speaker to sound thin in the bass.

Peak Consult does make a larger, three-way speaker, which has a 10” woofer. Again, and paradoxically for some people, its \$22,000/pair price and assumedly (I haven’t heard it) more robust bass performance at lower volume levels might make it better value for money than the two-way. In any case, the InCognito is an impressive debut from a company that might turn out to be one of those overnight successes that were 25 years in the making—Peak Consult’s drivers, a ScanSpeak Revelator 1” tweeter and a customized Audio-Technology (ATI) woofer, are made by Per Skaaning, a founder of both Dynaudio and ScanSpeak.

Expostulations, reconsiderations, or trysts with Nigella: jmrads@jmrads.com ☒