

Special Report, by Brian Maddern

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Hosted by the High End Society, Germany
Website www.highendsociety.de

The High End audio show in Munich each year is the premium display of the top end of high fidelity equipment. No where else can you see and hear so many brands of the very best hi fi equipment available. There were 245 exhibitors and 800 brands on display in two large halls and 83 demo rooms.

This year I visited the show for the first time with a number of objectives. Obviously I wanted to experience systems that represent the pinnacle of stereo technology. And I wanted to see the very best of home theatre. I was also looking for products that I could offer to my Australian market place.

There were a number of observations that I made.

The first was the sheer amount of money that presumably some people are prepared to spend on hi fi. Why else would these products be offered?

Secondly, although the top systems cost mega-bucks, it is possible to achieve wonderful results for much lower investments. As an example, the system that I thought sounded the best was about €38,000 (which is still an awful lot of money) but several were over €200,000. The A\$ is worth about .55€ so when you take freight into account the values in A\$ are



about double the Euro figures.

Thirdly, there is a great difference between live music and what is achievable in a domestic hi fi system. No system was able to reproduce the sound of an orchestra in a concert hall, but most were able to produce a convincing sensation of being in a recording studio with a small group of musicians.

In many cases the sound created was better than live! I've attended orchestral concerts but I've never heard anything as intimate and involving as the Saint-Saens organ symphony through Analysis Audio ribbon panel loudspeakers as demonstrated at this show.

I've divided up this report into a number of topics, in no particular order.

Loudspeakers

Loudspeakers being demonstrated ranged from less than €1000 to over €100,000.

The most common configuration was two or more woofers with forward facing midrange and tweeter in a tall slim cabinet. The styling and quality of finish was superb. In general the sound was excellent, however there was one characteristic that was common to practically all of them - the sweet spot. If you were sitting front row dead centre the stereo image was amazing, the definition of individual instruments and their location in space was very convincing. Yet if you moved your head a few centimetres to one side the vocalist (for example) seemed to then be coming from the speaker on that side. This effect was less obvious if you were further back. Only speakers with omni-directional mid-range and tweeters were exempt from this annoying characteristic.

Some speakers were very large and it is difficult to see how they could be deployed in a normal listening room.



All the best systems used bi or tri-amping.

Despite the sheer power available with the most expensive systems there were two demos which stood out.

The system which I thought produced the best sound of the show consisted of large panel loudspeakers driven by huge valve amplifiers. Total price was a mere €18,500 compared to several others which were over €200,000.

The second most impressive was a little pair of bookshelf speakers costing less than €1000 a pair. They were driven by a modest valve amplifier and mostly LPs were demonstrated. The system also included a large sub-woofer but it was placed unobtrusively behind the equipment stand. The stereo image and overall sound this small system produced in a large demo room was very satisfying. It couldn't match the sheer power of most other demos but from a practical, and budget point of view, was very convincing. The speakers were WLM Stella Monitors and I am intending to import these in the next few months.



I was hoping to see some loudspeakers based on EJ Jordan drivers, but the only one I found was a prototype of an omnidirectional design which will be released in a few months. It uses a single JX92S driver and is called Transition but I was unable to have a listen. I'll be following up on this and will report in future newsletters if I decide to import it.



Power Products

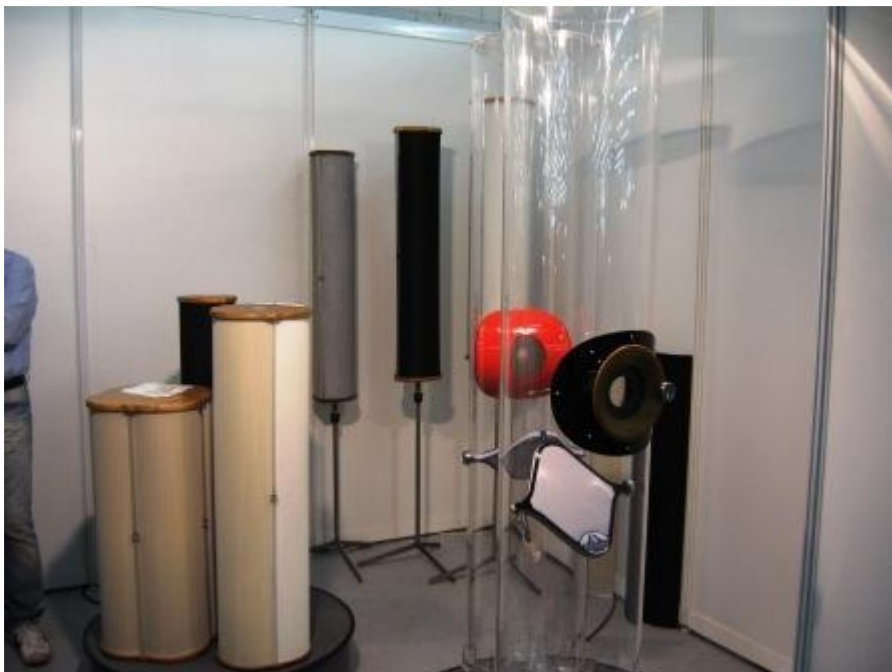
All demo rooms used heavy duty power cables and distribution boards, and many had power conditioners. One was even battery operated - there was a voltage reading on the front that continually varied between about 220V and 170V. The battery powered the equipment and as the voltage available dropped the mains power would top it up.

The Nordost exhibitor was doing demonstrations of the effect of using his top power cables compared to more modest ones, and there was an obvious improvement, albeit at a cost of €720 which in the scheme of things did not seem unreasonable.

I made several enquiries about cables and power blocks suitable for Australia but most manufacturers said they were unable to buy the correct plugs and sockets. Only Furutech make a high quality Australian 3 pin plug, and it sells here for \$140. I'll be doing more investigations in this area of products.

Room Acoustics

Most demo rooms were quite large and the equipment was placed well away from the rear windows and side walls. Panels of sound absorbing materials were positioned along the side walls in many rooms. There were several manufacturers displaying sound absorbing panels of various shapes and sizes and there were some very interesting devices with variable openings which could be tuned to eliminate problem room resonances. One device which looked interesting was the Polifemo acoustic resonator. This has variable ports and baffles to enable it to be tuned so that it can cancel out resonances in a room.



I suspect that most well furnished lounge rooms in Australian homes don't need acoustic conditioning but there are many occasions where hard surfaces provide an environment which could be improved by reducing reflections. This can obviously be achieved by floor and window coverings and furniture but there is a place for specialised acoustic treatments as well.

This is another area of interest that I hope will result in my being able to offer some reasonably priced products in the near future.

Turntables

Those exhibitors who used turntables tended to use mid-range units. For example, one had an Origin Live Sovereign with Enterprise tonearm, a mere €10,000.

Apart from Pro-Ject and Thorens, who had their whole ranges on display, there was nothing under €2000, and there were many in the €10,000 to €20,000 range. I think the most expensive unit I saw was €170,000. Tonearms ranged from €1,000 to €10,000.

It was difficult to identify what cartridges were being used in most demos. In general the sound from turntables was fuller and less clinical than from digital sources.

This maestro was selling his turntable with the violin bow tonearm for €30,000.

As I already sell the Origin Live range I was not really looking for alternative brands, but I guess one conclusion I came to was that the Origin Live range offer outstanding value for money compared to the brands and models on display here.



Other Sources

CD players were the most widely used, as expected, but the CDs being played were

very high quality.

Practically all CD players had a separate D-A convertor. Some exhibitors used SACD or DVD-A players. A common trend was the use of computer based digital players, where a large number of titles could easily be selected from a menu rather than have to load individual disks. There were also some BluRay audio players although there is very little available on that medium yet.

The very best recording I heard was a file from a recording session done by the same engineers who produced the Sheffield Lab direct to disc records in the 70s. Recorded in 24 bit/96Khz it will be released on Bluray Audio in the next few months. The immediacy of the sound was startling and it gave the sensation of actually being in the recording studio. Note the



computer screen in the photo above. Many of the demos were done from files on a computer. This demo room was by Technical Audio Devices, which is a Pioneer subsidiary company. The system including the large Reference 1 speakers was priced at about €200,000.

Future Trends

I think the move towards digital players is going to dominate hi fi in the future. There are several reasons for this. Firstly, people are used to the convenience of having their music available digitally. The popularity of iPods and other MP3 players and computer programs such as iTunes has firmly established that.

Secondly, the quality available digitally now supercedes what you can get on LP, CD, SACD, DVD-A, in fact everything except Blu-Ray audio. As an example some Linn Recordings are available on LP, CD, and SACD, but the very best quality is available by downloading FLAC files (Free Lossless Audio Codec).

To use these high quality formats you need a computer based digital player, but you can also access them on a normal computer and use an inexpensive device such as the Trends AC10.1 USB to analog converter to play them through your stereo.

This digital player facility is taken to the next level by units that also store video. The most impressive home theatre demos had dozens of movies stored on a digital player with a screen (or laptop computer) which enabled the selection of individual movie scenes with a mouse. Compared to the time it takes to load a DVD and get to the scene you want this was very slick.

Home Theatre

The best demos had truly professional installations. Nothing was compromised. The rooms were lined with blackout curtains to maximise the image quality. Acoustic panels were used to cut reflections, particularly from the rear of the room as in the photo here.

Power conditioners and heavy power cables provided clean power to all components. Massive power amps drove the multichannel speakers. The speakers themselves were all large and full-range. And the subwoofers were huge.

The best demo I saw used large B&W 3-way speakers for all 7 channels, driven by a single Rotel 7-channel power amp, and 6 sub-woofers. The sound was impressive, loud when it needed to be, but beautifully controlled - better than any commercial theatre sound I have ever heard.

The projector was a top of the line Mitsubishi, with an extra lens to enable 2.35 x 1

films to occupy the whole screen.

The film scenes demonstrated were all selected from a computer server, no fiddling with DVDs.

An obvious conclusion from all the home theatre demos I saw was that large hi fi speakers give the best results. No-one was demonstrating a system using small satellite speakers and a single subwoofer. The fact that the demo rooms were quite large and the demonstration tracks tended to be very loud obviously was a factor here.



My own experience is that small wide range speakers like the Jordan models are capable of sound quality as good as with large speakers in moderate sized rooms.

Signal Cables

Without exception, everyone used high quality interconnects and speaker cables. The prices of some were more than the amplifiers and other components. There is a bewildering assortment available, all claiming to be the best. Obviously good cables are important, but I have yet to come to any conclusions about what technology and what price range is necessary.

The important fact to recognise is that cables (signal, speaker, power) do influence sound quality, and they should be considered as another component, and a suitable budget allocated.

Vibration Absorption

This was another area where there was plenty on offer. As we already sell Vibrapods and Boston Audio products I wasn't particularly looking for more in this area, but some of the furniture was of interest.



One very interesting material was described as artificial coral, another as metal foam. At one display they were demonstrating a small music box on shelves made of different materials, and there was no doubt it sounded louder and clearer on the shelf made of metal foam. That could be relevant to using a turntable but to extrapolate to electronic units is a bit tenuous.

Due to the weight of most of the equipment stands the freight to import them is prohibitive but we will look into some products which come in modular form and can be flat-packed.

The number of devices on offer to absorb resonances makes it clear that is an important consideration in a hi fi system, but what is not obvious is whether individual devices (such as Vibrapods) on normal stands do as good a job as the more sophisticated (and expensive) specialized furniture on offer.

We have hundreds of customers using the inexpensive Vibrapods and getting good results so if you haven't yet tried vibration absorbers there is a cheap option.

The Weird Stuff

I'm fairly open to new ideas, particularly when they are scientifically based, but I am also pretty skeptical of the claims



made by some products.

But a demonstration can be pretty convincing. One exhibitor was selling a room conditioner and CD conditioner. I can't comment on the effectiveness of the room conditioner, but the CD conditioner demonstration was convincing. He took a freshly copied CD and played it through a modest system. The sound was good - good stereo image, good separation of instruments, the vocalist had a real presence. He then "treated" the CD and played it again. The sound was quite obviously better in all respects. If I hadn't heard it I would not have believed it.

The unit sells for €1000, which makes it a bit out of the question for most of us, but I am looking into whether it might be able to be hired out, so you could hire it for a week and treat all your CDs, then return it. For more info about this and other products go to www.steinmusic.com

The String Suspension Concept company has a range of sound improvement bases and pucks for all audio components. www.hifi-ssc.de

Another exhibitor was Creaktiv Systems. They claim that our environment is polluted with electric smog that affects our hearing and have developed a number of devices to reduce it. There are two brochures in English that you can download if you are interested. <http://www.4-steps-ahead.com/broschueren.php>

There is a device made by Audiodesk Systems which applies a bevel to the edge of a CD to reduce internal reflections. There are also CD and LP demagnetizers by Furutech.

Record Cleaning

Hannl have an impressive range of record cleaning machines. The base model doesn't do any more than a Moth RCM but their more sophisticated models are truly impressive pieces of German engineering.

The most innovative record cleaning machine was a new unit where the LP sits in the top like a toaster. It is totally automatic. You place the LP in it and 5 minutes later both sides have been cleaned and dried and you can put it into a sleeve. Price is €1800 and it is a product I will be pursuing. You can read more about it at www.audiodesksysteme.de.



Digital Radio

Digital radio has been available in Europe for many years but the improved DAB+ standard which has been adopted in Australia is only just being introduced. The range of Pure radios was on display at a stand promoting the future development of digital radio. I listened to a presentation by a young engineer who is working for the company that developed the MP3 standard of sound compression. His company has developed a technique to enable 5.1 channels to be broadcast over normal stereo transmissions. It's completely backwards compatible so existing receivers will get normal stereo, but a new generation of DAB+ radios will be able to produce 5.1 channels. There is considerable support in the motor vehicle industry for such a system as it will enable car sound systems to better utilise the multiple channels that many already have.

Here in Australia we are just entering the digital radio age and the Pure digital radios have now been added to our website.

For anyone who is an enthusiast about high quality sound, I can recommend the High End show as being well worth visiting, particularly with the low air fares on offer. Next year's show in Munich will be from May 6th to 9th, 2010.

If there are any particular products you are interesting in getting more information about please email me. I'll be happy to pass on any info I have or contact details where you can try to get more details yourself.

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