

Munich High-end Show - 2014



PROST, PROST, KAMERAD. *Prost, prost, Kamerad. Wir wollen einen Heben. Prost, prost, prost!*

Okay, so I learned a German drinking song (or two) while in Munich this year for the High End Show. But besides immersing myself in local culture and its *gemütlichkeit*, I also saw the very best high-end audio show in the world. In fact, this was one of the best, most organized, most professional, and most enjoyable trade shows of any kind I've ever attended. It was operated and organized with German precision. But even the Germans aren't quite perfect. I noted the Germanized misspelling of Oscar Peterson's and Benny Goodman's names as designations for two of the show's aisles. Classic!

This year High End Munich took place May 15 through 18 at the M.O.C. Exhibition Center. We had great weather, and the show was well attended, particu-

larly over the weekend. On Saturday and Sunday, it was almost impossible to get into some of the exhibit rooms, most notably those of the prominent German manufacturers — Burmester, MBL, AVM/Gauder Akustik, and ELAC among them.

The M.O.C. is a great venue for a high end show. The center consists of four halls, two atriums, a glassed-in showroom, six conference rooms, and 140 modular rooms; there's one very notable difference between this show and other high end shows — there are no hotel rooms!

Another interesting aspect of the show was the extent to which English was used, which was fortunate in my case. While I lived in Germany for 10 years and understand the language, I can't speak it well when I've been away for a while. It becomes "German-ish." That was very common all over the show — a great blending of

the two languages. I couldn't figure out, though, why when I greeted somebody in perfect German, they would always seem to respond in English. Was it the way I walked, my clothes, or just maybe my press pass for "The Audiophile Voice, USA?"

The sound, particularly in the large and solid atrium rooms, was incredibly good. In the modular rooms, it was not so great. In fact, most manufacturers who exhibited in a modular space chose not to play music, but to display statically instead. In addition to being the largest high end show in the world for end consumers, the Munich show is also a very important trade show. The first day, in fact, was trade only and a significant amount of business is written there. Manufacturers have show specials; and a number of world-wide product introductions take place at this show, including several from US manufacturers this year.

I was struck by a few recurring themes — the importance of vinyl and analog in German high end, and the absolutely mind boggling number of turntables and tonearms on display, many commanding their own rooms and exhibit space. Then there was the presence of the Heil Air Motion Transformer. I counted seven different manufacturers using the Mundorf version of the driver in their designs. And a new company, **Air Motion Technologies**, showed AMTs actually made on the original tools in Sacramento by Oskar Heil's industrial engineer, including both high-end home drivers and pro. All were refined, with out-of-band performance smoothed and response linearized, certainly beyond anything ever produced on those tools in the past. Then there was the absolute innovation, **Devialet**, from Paris, which premiered their new 120. What I found interesting about this product is that not only is it a D/A processor, USB DAC, and an absolutely unique hybrid Class-A/Class-D amplifier, if that wasn't enough, in Munich they introduced an active intelligence program for it that Devialet calls "SAM," for Speaker Active Matching. You input the name of your speaker, and to the extent that Devialet has collected and stored information on your speaker's parameters in their data base, the amplifier's intelligence custom adjusts its performance for your speakers. If they don't have your speaker in their data base, they will endeavor to add it. I asked about dialing in room dimensions, distance from rear wall, and other listening room parameters. They responded first with a polite "Good questions." Then they reassured me that they are working on adding this capability.

The U.S. was extremely well represented. The first of the friendly American personalities I encountered on day-one was Jeff Rowland. The **Jeff Rowland Design Group** had a static display in one of the modular booths, and featured Jeff's 400 watt integrated amp, the Continuum S2. Not much further down the same aisle, I ran into Roy Hall and David Saltz — of **Music Hall and WireWorld, respectively** — exhibiting side by side, with a single malt Scotch meeting room in between. Both displays were static, and both very busy.

In this same Halle 4 I also found **Ayre Acoustics**. Theirs was a static display, but it was large and impressive. They featured their new preamplifier, the KX-R Twenty — commemorating the company's twentieth anniversary — and the MX-R mono amplifier. While not part of the American contingent, but in this same exhibit hall, I was really impressed with what I saw and heard at the **King Sound** booth. They showed full-range elec-



Jeff Rowland, left, with Lucien Pichette, currently Director of Sales at Jeff Rowland Design Group, who looks incredibly much like ... J. Gordon Holt!

trostatic models KS-10, King III, and Prince III, and despite being in a modular, very compromised setting, these speakers acquitted themselves very nicely. They were smooth, detailed, and delicate on simple acoustic music, female, and male voice, but also fully capable of resolving even the most complex and dynamic music.

The best sound I heard on the ground floor among the modular booths, was another electrostatic manufacturer's room. **Janszen** was pretty clearly the best sound in the modular demo area. The name Janszen is synonymous with electrostatic design, and among the most revered in all of audio. Current owner David Janszen's father, Arthur Janszen, designed one of the all-time classic loudspeakers, the full-range electrostatic KLH 9. I have a pair. David's room at the Munich Show was so good I didn't want to leave. He displayed a floor-standing electrostatic hybrid, the zA2.1, which TAV reviewed a couple of years ago, and featured his new stand mount hybrid, the zA1.1. A friend brought Ry Cooder's CD, *Jazz*. The cut, "We Shall be Happy," almost brought me to tears with Ry's beautiful pacing on the guitar and the acoustic backdrop of a New Orleans street band. Lieber Gott! The musicians were in the room. The sound was absolutely homogeneous — not a hint of discontinuity between the dynamic drivers and the electrostatic elements.

David Chesky was at the show to help support his new **HDtracks** European office. When I ran into David walking the show, I asked if he was excited about Neil Young's new PONO portable high resolution downloader (designed principally by Ayre Acoustics). David reached in his pocket and pulled out a smart phone. This he said is the future—the world's first 192-kHz phone!

PS Audio was in an adjacent hall. Nothing new, but as always Paul McGowan drew a crowd.

Walking up the stairs to the Atrium levels, one and two floors above the ground floor halls, took me into another world. There the manufacturers had a pavilion, beautiful showrooms, glass fronts, solid walls, and the possibility to both showcase products and create some really good sound. **Aesthetix**, from Moorpark, CA, had a large and impressive display on the second Atrium level which they shared with a couple of other companies, among them **AMG**. My good friend, Jim White from Aesthetix, proudly premiered his latest design, the dual-mono, vacuum-tube line stage, Metis. Anticipated price, \$20,000. Availability last quarter 2014.

Just down the hall, on the same level, **Constellation Audio** also had an important product launch; and chose

Munich as the venue to premier their new Inspiration Series. The line consists of the PreAmp 1.0 line stage, the Mono 1.0 monoblocks, and the Stereo 1.0 two channel

room **Vandersteen** shared with **Brinkmann Audio**. Richard Vandersteen sat quietly by, and as he usually does at CES, letting the music dominate the room. Andrea

heard was preceded by an intro in Italian, by someone I came to believe was either the conductor or the violinist, but when the violin concerto began, he stood back,

Try to attend the Munich High-End Show at least once, it will be an unforgettable experience!

amplifier. The sound with the **Wilson Audio** Alexia speakers was extremely musical. In fact, I've never heard the Alexias sound better, and I have heard them in other great settings. Detail, air, and a real listen-through quality. The Inspiration Series products are lower in price than you'd conjecture after hearing what they can do and seeing them in person. Designer Peter Madnick attributes most of the savings to cost-effective and clever chassis design by Alex Rasmussen of the Neal Feay Co. in Goleta, CA.

One of my favorite rooms on either of the Atrium levels, and the display offering what I thought was the best sound from the American contingent, was the

Brinkmann, who seems to get lovelier with each show, introduced her new Spyder turntable. Brinkmann electronics powered the Vandersteen Model 7s. Whether simple music, massed voices, complex orchestral, or jazz, the speakers simply disappeared. A wonderfully musical room.

The best sound at the show, however, belonged to the Germans. Home court advantage? Maybe. But **MBL** took the prize with an absolutely breathtaking room. With two different listening areas in one large room, they alternated demos between the two. The larger of the two systems, featuring the mbl 101 X-treme loudspeakers, was beyond stunning. The demo I

swayed to the music, and moved with each pause. Incredible. I could have been in the concert hall. That's how real it was. The audience, filling the room to the rafters, was equally moved, perhaps in disbelief, too.

Very close in sound to MBL was the **Manger** room, shared with **Lindemann**; and the **Gauder Akustik/AVM** room. Both were jammed most of the time, and I had trouble even getting in, though the effort was well worth it.

The Eva Mendes award for beauty had to go to the Devialet 120 at this show.

So, prost, prost Kamerad! Munich 2014 was an unforgettable experience.