

# Speakers

PART 3

## Introduction

*This is the eighth **Audio Perfectionist Journal**. Here we will conclude the discussion of speakers that began in **Journal #5** and continued through **Journals #6 and #7**. The articles in this issue will complete a series on stereo loudspeakers and add information that applies specifically to center channel and surround speakers in a multichannel audio system. The articles about time domain performance will restate some facts presented earlier and then I'll share some subjective observations regarding these facts.*

## Speakers

Speakers are a favorite subject for every audiophile, and everybody—audiophile or not—has an opinion about speakers. I'd like to assure readers that if your opinions differ from mine you are not alone and you are not necessarily wrong. Listening to music is an emotional experience and people are as emotionally diverse as the shapes of snowflakes. Our choice of speakers provides a path to emotional satisfaction and it stands to reason that our choices will be as varied as our personalities.

I believe that loudspeakers should accurately reproduce the recorded signal. Accurately reproducing the recorded signal includes preserving the timing relationships between various ranges of frequencies, in my opinion.

Early on I defined high fidelity as maximum adherence, or faithfulness, to the recorded signal and stated that the **AP Journal** would follow the tenets of this philosophy. I write exclusively from that perspective but there are other viewpoints and I respect them.

Many people prefer loudspeakers which embellish the recorded signal in some way. They feel that the enhancement provided by their favorite speaker system helps to create a sound that is more like a live musical performance and provides them with a more satisfying connection to the music. Who can argue with that?

If connecting with the musical message is our goal, there will always be differences of opinion about how to achieve that connection and people will choose a variety of paths because music speaks to different people in different ways.

I've found that the best path for me is the one that most accurately presents what the artists created when they made the recording but others want more—more ambience, more “detail,” more spectacular spatial effects, more bass.

## More Than Accuracy

Many of today's popular speakers are designed to do more than accurately reproduce the recorded signal. They are engineered to produce sound that is bigger, more spacious, or more “detailed” than the sound that is captured on the recording. Examples include direct-reflecting, bipolar and dipolar types and speakers with large shimmering radiating surfaces like ribbon, planar-magnetic and electrostatic designs.

High-end speakers that emphasize parts of the frequency spectrum provide “more” of certain things at the expense of others. Simulated line-sources made from arrays of dynamic drivers have a unique sound all their own.

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I don't find these speakers satisfying because I'm accustomed to, and prefer, hearing the recordings without this embellishment but others find these effects pleasing. If you're one of them stand proud. You are entitled to your preferences in personal matters and nothing is more personal than your emotional response to music. How you achieve it is your business and none of mine.

I must write from my perspective. Some of what I present in the **Journal** is simply factual information and some is opinion based on my interpretation of the facts. I may point out that the shimmering movement you see when you shine a flashlight on the diaphragm of your electrostatic hybrid speakers is producing sound that is not on the recording. If you like that sound, then I accept your preference.

### In this issue

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The article titled *Value?* is a think piece to remind readers about the current state of the high-end and to keep us in the right frame of mind. This article was rejected by one of the high-end print magazines but I think it needs to be published and you deserve to read it.

The title *CES Report* is self-explanatory. I thought you should be able to read something about the Consumer Electronics Show that wasn't predicated on pleasing big advertisers. I'm impressed by good sound, not by high price tags and I don't sell advertising. Size does matter but, when it comes to loudspeakers, size is often inversely proportional to sound quality.

The articles about speakers that follow conclude a series of discussions about speakers that started in **Journal #5**. *Loudspeaker Time Domain Performance* restates some facts, and some opinions, about the importance of time domain performance. This piece is followed by three articles that present my subjective listening impressions of three time- and phase-accurate speaker systems: the Dunlavy SC-IV.A, the Thiel CS6 and the Vandersteen 3A Signature/2Wq.

The articles *The Truth About Center Channel Speakers* and *The Truth About Surround Speakers* present facts that readers should consider when choosing speakers for a surround sound or home theater system.

This **Journal** concludes with an article titled *High-End Speakers and High SPL* that explains how to protect your hearing and your equipment from damage caused by excessive loudness.

### Value?

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by Richard Hardesty

*Can an \$80,000 pair of loudspeakers or a \$20,000 pair of speaker cables represent good value? Do hyperexpensive products really perform better?*

*While astronomical price tags have become commonplace in high-end audio, few reviewers have questioned whether these ever-escalating prices can be justified on the basis of actual manufacturing costs or if the highest-priced products offer any real performance benefits when compared to well-engineered components which cost far less.*

Instead, it has been generally assumed that those components which cost more are built to higher quality standards and sound better than those components which cost less. These assumptions are not necessarily true, and they have taken a toll on the high-end audio industry.

In fact, retail prices for high-end audio components are often completely unrelated to manufacturing costs and may be used solely as market positioning tools. In the instances where hyperexpensive products actually do provide some audible advantage, the gain is likely to be small and may be achieved at the expense of some other aspect of performance.

When an industry is filled with a variety of products which are artificially priced to position them in the marketplace, that entire industry becomes suspect. Customers get less for their investment in a market where manufacturers are vying for prestige rather than competing to provide value for money.

### Why Make it Better When You Can Just Claim That it is?

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As is true in most industries, high-end audio manufacturers used to vie for market share by trying to offer more for the money than their competitors. Originally "more" meant audibly superior performance but eventually "more" evolved to include better cosmetics or industrial design and/or enhanced prestige.

Some manufacturers discovered that, while it was difficult to produce products which actually sounded better, it was easy to generate lots of attention from magazine reviewers and dealer sales people by simply claiming to offer higher performance and attaching a high price tag to new products.