

Watch Dog #1

First Stereophile Letter

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I was the Equipment Review Editor of Widescreen Review magazine in 1999. The following was a personal letter to the editor of Stereophile magazine. It was published in edited form.

Here is the original text of my letter to John Atkinson, editor of Stereophile magazine:

Dear John,
I know that critical letters to the editor can get tedious if the writer gets on a soap box, but after reading the three loudspeaker reviews in the May Issue of *Stereophile* I feel compelled to comment. Our industry is languishing (to say the least) and maybe it's time to ask if we (audio equipment reviewers) aren't part of the problem.

The high-end segment of the consumer audio business has helped me to support my family for nearly thirty years now and, as I watch it drift slowly into oblivion, I can't help but feel that the decline we're experiencing is due to a complete loss of direction. In the beginning, the goal was to present a more accurate depiction of the original musical event in the home. Now it appears that many designers are solely concerned with delivering a sound that seduces magazine reviewers. Accuracy is no longer relevant and ridiculous price tags are deemed necessary to get journalistic attention. (A 10-inch three-way speaker for \$12,000? That's about what a Honda Civic costs and it probably has 20,000 parts.)

The *Stereophile* reviews of the Wilson MAXX, the Alon Circe, and the Genesis 500 speakers present

excellent illustrations. Look at the test results printed with these reviews. All three are seriously flawed designs (from the standpoint of accuracy) that can't even offer flat amplitude response within a ± 10 dB window. They range in price from a low of \$11,500 to a stratospheric high of \$38,900 a pair. Now I would



be the last to suggest that frequency response alone can fully represent the sound of a speaker, but it is the cornerstone of good design and I submit that no speaker can accurately represent the input signal if its basic frequency response curve is not reasonably flat. None of these reviewed speakers are time and phase accurate and, while I consider step response to be a far more important indicator of performance than you do, that matter is up for debate.

The Genesis is the least expensive of the lot and the only one to present a respectable spectral decay plot. The others continue to sing, long after the song has ended. I've listened to all three products and in my opinion, the test results that you printed accurately represent the sound of each one. They each may remind some listeners of some aspect of a live musical performance, but the word accurate certainly doesn't come to my mind. The question is, were they ever meant to be accurate?

Do you think that David Wilson doesn't know that the tweeter he uses goes off like a car alarm at 17kHz? Do you think that he can't afford a MLSSA so he doesn't realize that his speakers are up 5-8dB between 40 and 100Hz? Martin Collums admits in his review that the sound is "a tad rich and bass heavy for a European room" and says, "I can't say that it represents perfection or is totally accurate." He then raves about the MAXX in one of the longest and most accolade-packed reviews I've seen in your magazine. His conclusion, "...the Maxx represents one of those great experiences in music reproduction."

Do you believe that Carl Marchisotto designed the Alon Circe to have +5dB, -8dB variations in response by accident? The reasonably-priced offerings in his line don't have deviations this large. Your reviewer, Wes Phillips, described this speaker as having "a midrange and high frequency purity that is nothing short of magical." Maybe, but it's a long way short of correct. I wonder if he would have thought so highly of this product if its selling price were directly related to the cost of manufacturing it. Say \$4,000 retail?

Arnie Nudell has been associated with some controversial speaker designs in the past, but +6dB, -12dB deviations in response demonstrate the extremes to which a designer has to resort today in order to deliver a sound that is sufficiently different to "wow" a reviewer. Kalman Rubinson liked the Genesis 500s so much he wanted to keep them as a reference. He mentioned that the powered woofers made them unsuitable for amplifier evaluations. What about the 18dB response error envelope? How far can a speaker deviate from flat response and remain suitable for amplifier testing? 20dB?

I believe that all these speakers were artfully designed to fool your reviewers—a goal that seems to have been successfully attained. They may also fool the readers who will buy them based on *Stereophile's* recommendation—for awhile anyway. Highly colored speakers may complement some musical selections some of the time, but in my experience they won't bring lasting satisfaction. Consumers rushing to buy one flawed product after another, in an endless search for a satisfying musical experience, won't lead to industry growth.

Adding a little extra boom and sizzle to increase loudspeaker sales was the rule before high-end audio came along. Early high-end speakers were sold by demonstrating that they were free of these colorations. It looks like we have come full circle now. Truly accurate products just can't get the attention of a magazine reviewer, so exaggerations have to be added to both the amplitude response curve and the price tag.

You might have countered this trend by being a little more explicit when describing and interpreting the test results that accompany the reviews. Calling these results "enigmatic" is a hint to the more knowledgeable reader, but you could have said a lot more. If a speaker that is still producing full bandwidth hash on a spectral decay plot after 3ms is delivering "fine measured performance" how would you define poor performance?

There are still products being made that sound good, offer excellent, truly accurate response, and represent real value for money. Many of them have been reviewed by *Stereophile*, but most have received tepid verbal support. Dunlavys, pre-coax Thiels, and Vandersteens are all time and phase accurate designs that deliver good-looking steps along with flat frequency response within narrow limits. Do their reasonable price tags turn off your reviewers? Is it heresy to admit that some modestly-priced offerings outperform the outrageously costly products designed for the "carriage trade"?

The measurements are there for all to see in the back issues of *Stereophile*, but commentary about the importance of these measurements is sadly lacking in my opinion.

Listening impressions are still important of course, but reviewers may need to become reacquainted with the sound of live music so that they are less easily seduced by each new piece of equipment that has been designed to sound more “hi fi” than its predecessors.

I think that we need to support the few remaining manufacturers who still adhere to the original ideals of high-end audio, and acknowledge their achievements before it's too late. Otherwise we may all have to start writing about home theatre. Oops, I already have.

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