

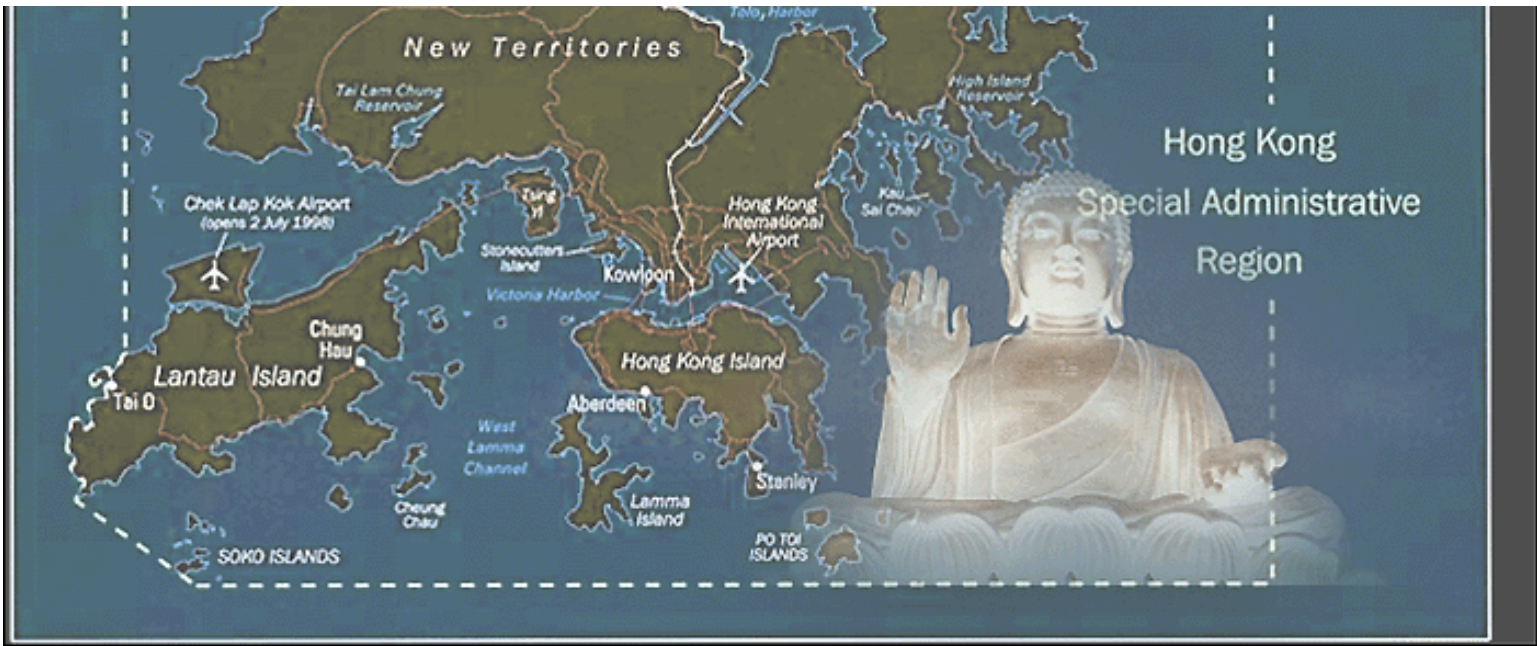
AUDIO REVIEWS

sixmoons.com

DECEMBER 2006

Audio Exotics in Hong Kong





J. Lam owns **Audio Exotics**, an import/retail establishment for fine audio in Hong Kong, the City of Life. The selection of brands he brings to this city nation of 200 audio establishments of all sizes demonstrate a particular sensibility. There are Franck Tchang's acoustic resonators under the French Acoustics System Int'l brand and Argento Audio's unshielded silver cables from Denmark. There's Audio Valve from Germany and analogue and tube gear from Da Vinci Audio of Switzerland. There are FAL drivers from Japan and Horning Hybrid analogue, tube amps and speakers from Denmark. There's Karan Acoustics from the former Yugoslavia and the Mosquito Neo speakers from France. There are ORB Audio power products from Japan and electronics from Orpheus Laboratories of Switzerland. There's Tron valve kit from the UK and TW Acoustics analogue from Germany. There's WAVAC and Zanden tube electronics from Japan.





When J. Lam asked whether I'd like to visit and have him introduce me to five of his best clients and their systems -- our own Linnman included -- I didn't have to think twice. 6moons' *RoadTour* format was especially designed to accommodate such opportunities, for learning how our virtual neighbors live with their hifis - whether a few exits down the freeway such as Michael Lavorgna routinely arranges for; in a different state such as Jeff Day's visit with Pitch Perfect Audio in San Francisco recently chronicled; or in a different country altogether. No matter, it's all on the same wavelength. If there's one thing that transcends boundaries of language, religion, culture and location, it's how listening to music provides succor, meaning and enjoyment for people around the globe. And as their interactive web forum proves beyond a doubt to anyone following just a few of the exchanges, the clients of Audio Exotics are into it for the right reason. They're decidedly not trophy hunters but music connoisseurs. What's more, they view their involvement with audio as an ongoing apprenticeship where there's much to be learned and discovered and nothing etched in stone. In short, just my kind of passionate audio nuts.

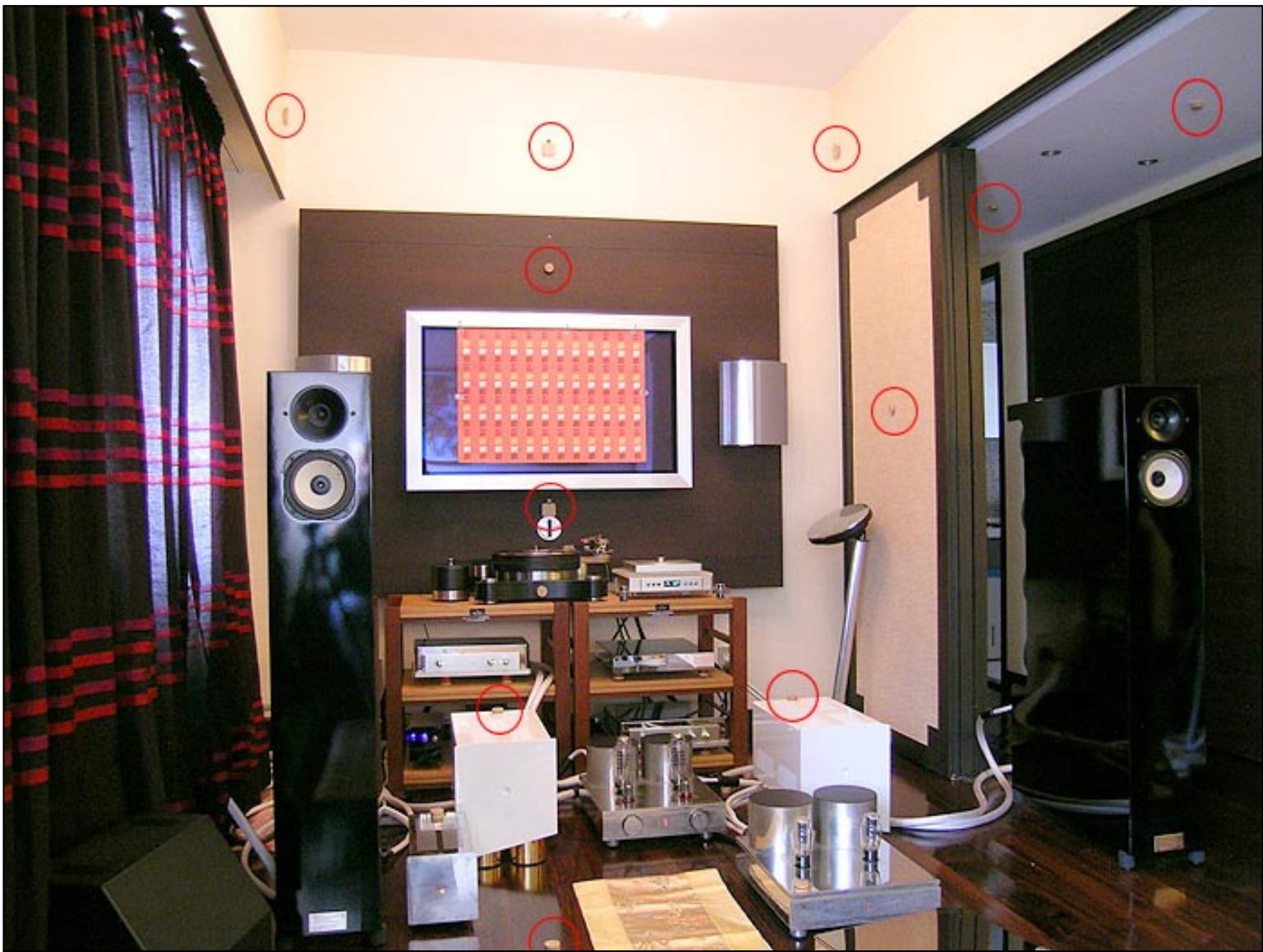


With a full schedule honed to perfection by Linnman and with Marvel acting as high-class chauffeur of unbelievable punctuality (a *true* marvel considering Hong Kong traffic), J. Lam had secured the hospitality also of Wilson Leung, Peter Tsang and Doctor Kenneth to act as my hosts for this trip. And when I say *hospitality*, I mean it in capital letters. Seldom has a *kwei loh* or foreign devil been made to feel like such an important dignitary, an audio ambassador of sorts. Truth be told, these gentlemen -- Doctor Kenneth missing from the above photo -- were their own ambassadors, their homes embassies for audio refugees who seek asylum from sterile boring sound. The story naturally begins at Audio Exotics or AE for short, located not in the business district like all others but in a residential building whose back faces the Hong Kong University [second image below]. AE is by appointment only. There *is* a secret handshake to get in. But it's not the size of your wallet. You have to truly love music. You must have outgrown the silly obsession with trophy audio which is primarily concerned over brand image, what others think about it and second-hand resale value.





Considering our Asian locale and its unique system of medicine, it seems only fitting to consider describing the different audio systems I encountered in terms of the *elements*: metal, wood, air and ether. Metal stands for the leading edge, wood for the bloom/body portion of a tone and air for the decay. Just as different body types and personalities require different medicine for optimum health, so sensitive listeners require a particular mix or balance of these elemental qualities to most powerfully trigger their nervous systems into conducting the subtler dimension of life force, prana or ether. Ether thus becomes synonymous with musicality, what we might call the goose bump or tugging heart string factor. It envelopes all the other qualities while partially standing aloof as senior exactly like how in a compromised concert hall and bad seat, flawed sonics can coincide with superior music making abilities. Naturally, the opposite is also possible. You can make good sound but musically, your system might remain somewhat unconvincing or not as communicative and transporting as one that exhibits obvious sonic flaws yet still electrifies your senses.



AE's system at the time of my visit sported Tommy Hørning's new Eufrodite speaker which uses four pairs of isobarically loaded woofers per cabinet. Those slender open-backed floorstanders in black lacquer were driven from Hørning's SATI 300B integrated and fronted by either the Raven turntable feeding a Zanden Audio phono stage or the Zanden Model 2000p/5000S combo with the new SuperClock. All cabling was by Argento -- which has become the de facto house brand of AE -- and Frank Tchang's resonators and diffusors could be spotted in key locations where resident room acoustics ace Linnman had put 'em. Linnman has spent considerable time with Frank Tchang to learn his method of room tuning. He by now has more than 50 rooms under his belt. This includes a small study barely large enough to house a concert grand where a young girl practicing couldn't concentrate because the piano's lower registers overloaded the room. Judicious applications of resonators fixed the problem and the young lady is no longer troubled in her practice.

The presence of these devices here and subsequently epitomized the resident spirit of open mindedness plus shared appreciation for the basic fact that buying the right boxes and stringing them together with cables is only the first step toward the goal. Especially in the smaller spaces typical for the city's very expensive but compact real estate, it's common to see listening rooms double as dining rooms, having to fulfill two functions at once.



Treated room acoustics thus become paramount to achieving desired results while having to coexist with the decor. Enter the tiny *Tibetan singing bowls* on minuscule tridents grounded in small wooden panels that affix to the walls with double-sided tape.

Made of copper, silver, gold or Platinum and outfitted with lateral wings, their size and apparent rationale defy common sense to make them easy targets of ridicule.

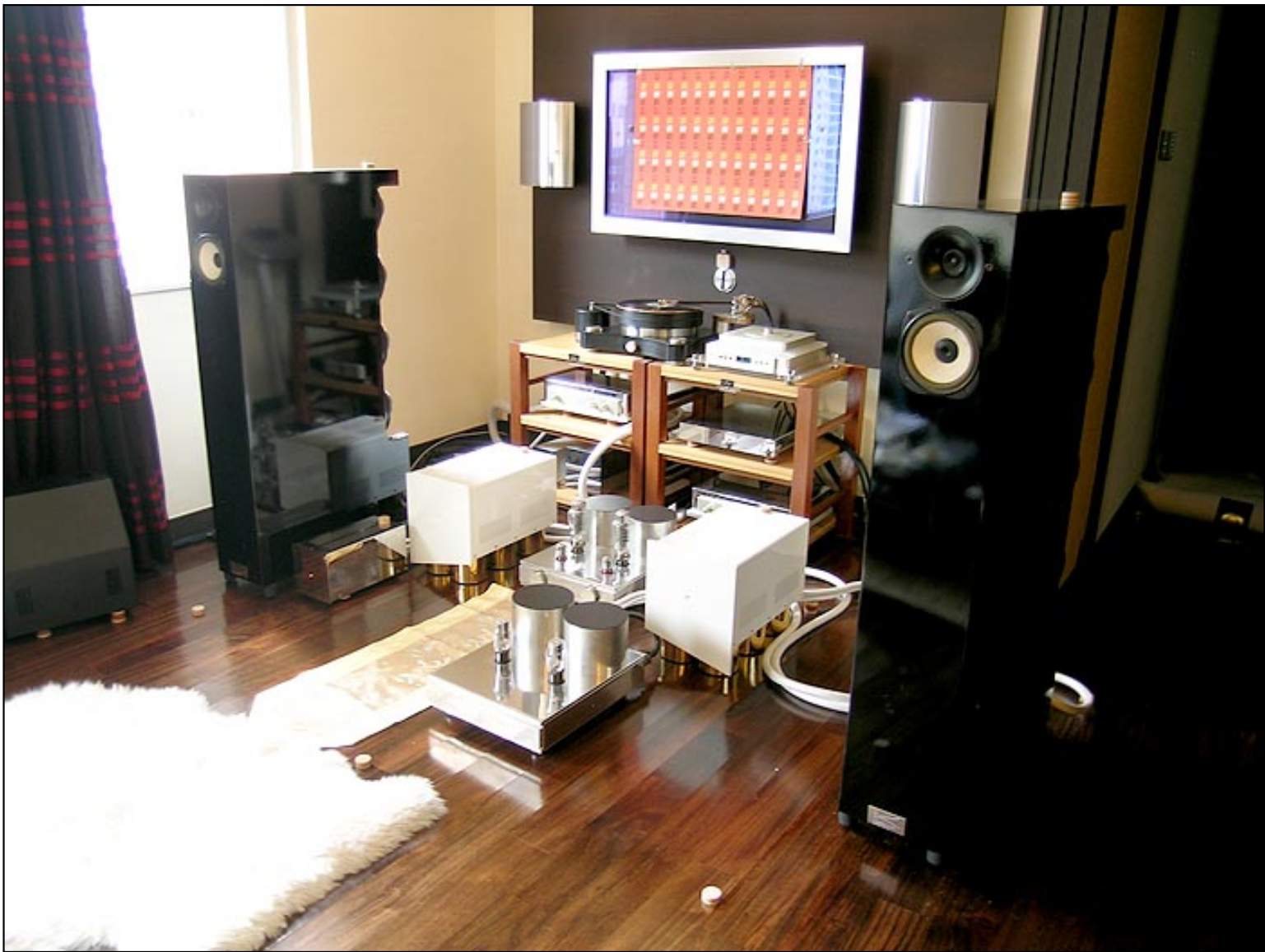
If you think of them as tuning forks, you can appreciate that specific frequencies will set them off to resonate sympathetically.

Considering the finger tip size of these metallic cups, you'll equally appreciate that these will be fixed and high frequencies. This is where common sense balks. The most severe room resonances occur below 300Hz. Problem areas are unique from room to room. How can resonators operating at *fixed* high frequencies address them universally? They clearly can't behave as basic mechanical notch filters.

No more needs to be said to suggest why most commercial audio establishments wouldn't be caught dead promoting these items. They smack of voodoo. Technically astute clients will insist on explanations that seem unlikely to convince them based on accepted acoustic theories. Nevertheless, they work. Asked what the price ceiling was for a worst case scenario, Linnman offered that based on the 50+ rooms he's treated, nobody to date had to



spend more than \$5,000. Most got by on considerably less. That figure will seem high looking at the actual hardware only before you admit that many 'philes spend that amount on a single designer power cord that'll be utterly ineffective at addressing the particular problems these resonators do. In Peter Tsang's Kondo/Hørning system further down this report, Linnman affixed a single silver resonator on the wall behind the speakers. We all heard the improvements in tauter bass and cleaner midrange. Peter wouldn't allow Linnman to remove it again. "Send me the bill." Signed with a smile. Hearing is believing as they say. It's something naysayers operating in the dark of predictive theories will gladly overlook. They'll prove, on paper and in the chat rooms, why these devices couldn't possibly work. C'est la vie.



Like all Hørning speakers, the Eufrodite uses a *neutered* Lowther. Its whizzer cone has been removed, its operative bandwidth restricted to where a dedicated tweeter handles the treble and an array of woofers the bass. In its present incarnation -- relatively new and still undergoing final break-in -- this setup had sonic problems in the 40-60Hz band where the bass was highly resonant and boomy to muddy up proper assessment of the elemental balance on my test CDs. After hearing Peter Tsang's system two days later, his Eufrodite driven from Kondo Gakuoh 30-watt p/p 300B monos in a considerably smaller room were free of these bass issues. Without the time to experiment with speaker placement or amp substitutions at AE's, I wasn't able to determine the cause of the bass boom. Tommy Hørning's comment that he had voiced this model on his own 300B amp suggested that contrary to our shared strong suspicions, it was probably *not* his SET being underpowered or insufficiently damped but the speaker positioning in the room which was the culprit still.



Spinning specific baroque music on the Raven turntable completely avoided setting off the boom. Under those circumstances, I heard a *very* well-balanced sound, meaning that the metal, wood and air elements were all properly accounted for, none of them exaggerated or unduly diminished. Contrary to Lowthers run full-range, the Eufrodites were entirely free of shoutiness as well as tonal leanness which often accompanies exceptional speed and rise times. Simply put, they made music.

In fact, the wood or tone element was very much present and -- clearly not coincidentally -- mirrored in Frank Tchang's judicious use of select woods in the Acoustic Systems stands supporting the hardware. Structurally very basic, these racks avoid all metal - no screws, nails or spikes. Even the speakers sat on wooden pucks. Listening to unfamiliar music over the Raven rather than my own CDs didn't allow for a complete sonic assessment but my hunch is that reorientation along the long wall might solve the present narrow band room node issue to become a very impressive setup indeed not just musically -- which it already is -- but also in a strict HiFi sense. (Incidentally, the big white units on the floor are the driver stages for the Da Vinci Audio power amps which we didn't play.)



J. Lam also runs a music school and owns interest in a restaurant in the gambling paradise of Macao among other business ventures. This affords him the luxury of operating AE without the usual hard-sell pressure tactics. He views AE as a *cultural institution* instead and his main function as an educator and facilitator. Two years ago, he was the first to organize a **Hong Kong HighEnd audio presentation** where live musicians alternated with playback demos to educate attendees and where musicians shared their observations about the differences. My visit fell into this cultural exchange milieu too. As Humphrey Bogart said so memorably in the closing line of *Casablanca*, I believe that this encounter with AE was merely a beginning.



J. Lam laughed about "burning money" when it comes to operating an audio establishment in direct opposition to Hong Kong's mainstream which views this 32-year old upstart and his unconventional ideas with perhaps a bit of trepidation. J. Lam takes delight in swimming against the stream. His growing and very loyal clientele suggests that he isn't alone in believing that change is necessary in the prevailing domestic climate of trophy audio worship. The fact that he operates a music school whose students, parents and teachers necessarily know what real instruments sound like merely adds to his unique profile as perhaps the City's youngest retailer of upscale exotic audio.

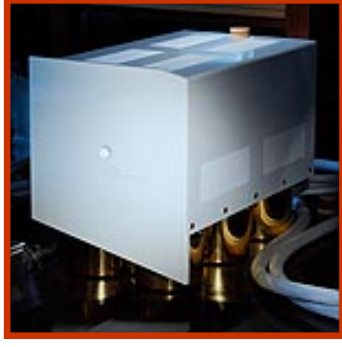
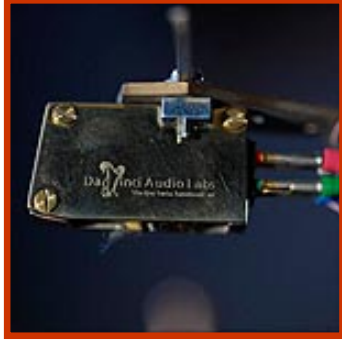
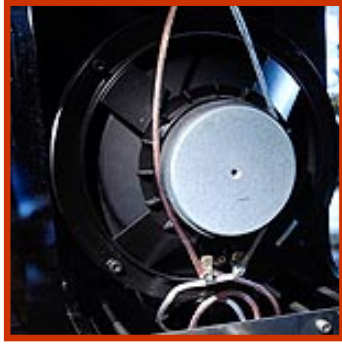
HONG KONG

中國香港



As a networker and visionary, J. Lam has some exciting boundary-crossing ideas for the future. I've already happily pledged 6moons' support. You see, on one level, audio is nothing but flashy boy toys. It's about ego gratification and all manner of silly one-upmanship. On another level, audio appeals to the mysterious element I've called ether. When magnified, it stimulates our very core during listening to the kind of music that calls on our feelings. *That's* the common ground that then transmutes into Stevie Wonder's higher ground. Listeners, go on listening. Sharers, go on sharing.

It's this focus and its possible creative outcomes which have me excited, not the shiny toys. AE's expanded family of music lovers practice the same ideals. Who knows what supportive endeavors can spin out from our meeting? Being invited into the homes of complete strangers where, *within minutes*, the aroma of a shared passion suffused everything was clear evidence that despite its considerable trappings, our hobby has the potential to be far more. Stay tuned as J. Lam, Linnman and I explore our next steps together. Compliments of Mr. **Gen Pau** of the eponymous photography studio, here are more images of AE's setup, with the cropped thumb nails opening in a new window in full 800 x 600 size.





ALL CONTENT AND GRAPHICS ON THIS SITE ARE PROTECTED BY COPYRIGHT AND MAY NOT BE USED WITHOUT PRIOR PERMISSION

SITE CONCEPT & DESIGN BY NOBUKO NAGAOKA OF KUMADESIGN.COM

JAVASCRIPT CODING BY ANNEKE AUER OF CUCKOO@XS4ALL.NL

AUDIO REVIEWS

sixmoons.com

Marvel owned the system that, from a HiFi perspective, was the most immaculate. It was *tuned* to the extreme between Marvel and Linman to avoid any and all acoustical problems. Bass extended into the abyss without exhibiting any hot spots whatsoever, treble shimmered without undue excitement. Truly stunning.



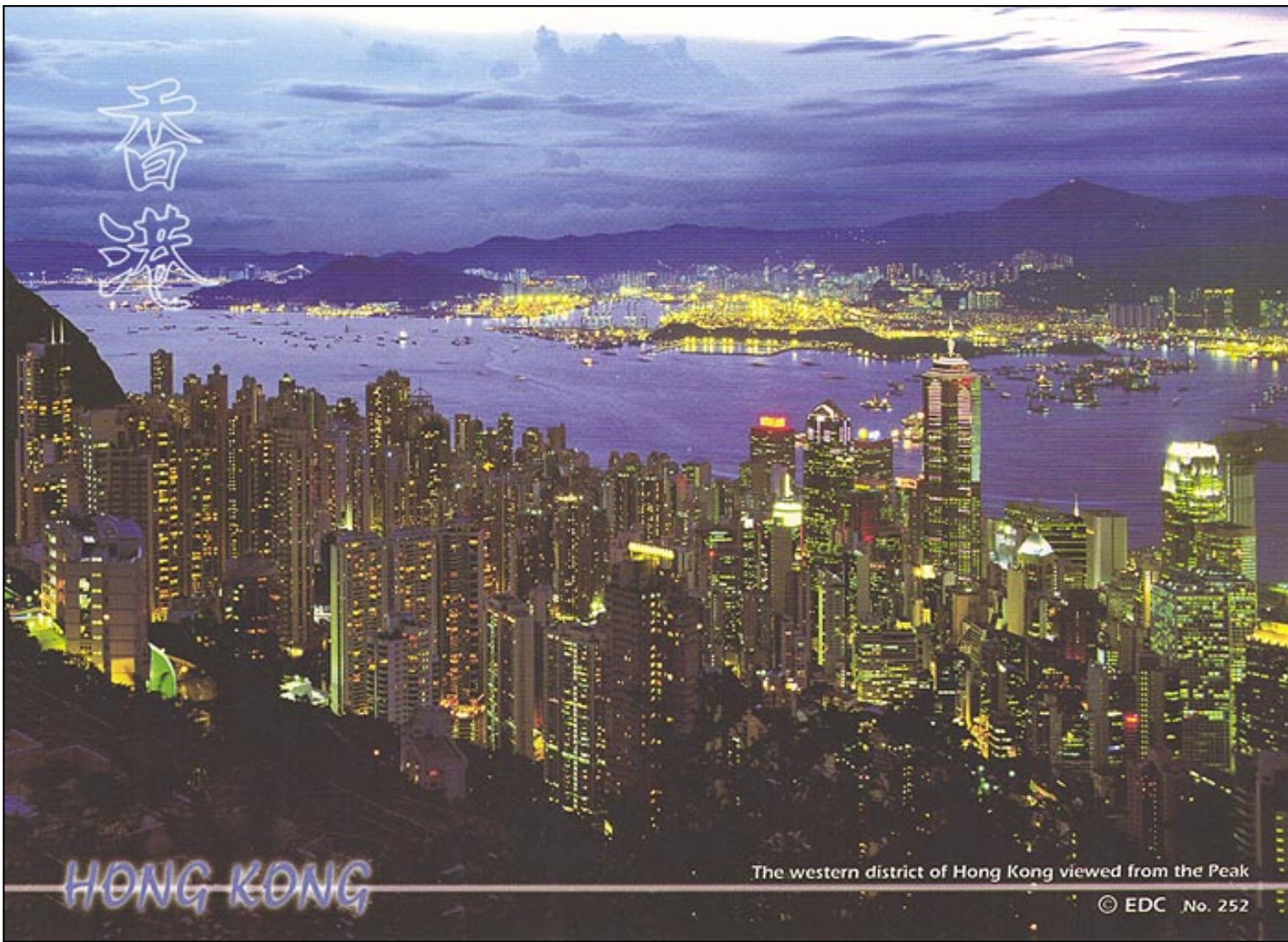
Despite plenty of hard surfaces -- glass and stone -- Marvel's system didn't betray any hardness or the hollowness and ringing from environs that are often plagued by slap echo or empty bathroom ambience.



In fact, it passed my most challenging test tracks with flying colors, exhibiting a nearly supernatural level of spatial resolution that was testament to the ultra-low noise floor of the best unshielded cables Argento makes, plus Linnman's expert use of acoustic resonators. Marvel is well-known in Hong Kong circles for having gone through an enormous amount of gear over the years. His current incarnation is anchored by the huge Audio Valve Baldur monoblocks and Mosquito Neo speakers which seem to be exceptionally well paired. What comes ahead of the German tube amps is where Marvel still plays the polygamist. His front end affords various choices between the Zanden Duo, an older Goldmund transport which he finds superior to the current one and the Orpheus Lab Heritage DAC. Preamps are either the two-box Karan or one-box Tron Syren, the latter in its most upscale all-silver version.



By the way, the views Marvel enjoys from the window behind the system are out of this world. His high rise flat sits far enough up on the hill to where commuter helicopters fly slightly *below* his elevation to have him overlook the entire bay from an elevated vantage point. My attempts at capturing the night views with extended camera exposure failed miserably from lack of a tripod but the postcard version below is a close-enough approximation to convey the idea.



Marvel's speakers and amps sit on Frank Tchang wooden platforms to optimize the - um, *wood* element of the sound. Once the three elements are in balance, you can load up their respective scales with more and more substance without undoing the innate balance. That's exactly like increasing the load of a measuring scale from 1lbs to 10lbs. As long as both sides measure identical, balance is maintained. And Marvel's scales are rather loaded, meaning that transients are duly sharp, the harmonic envelope is rich and full and decays are very extended.



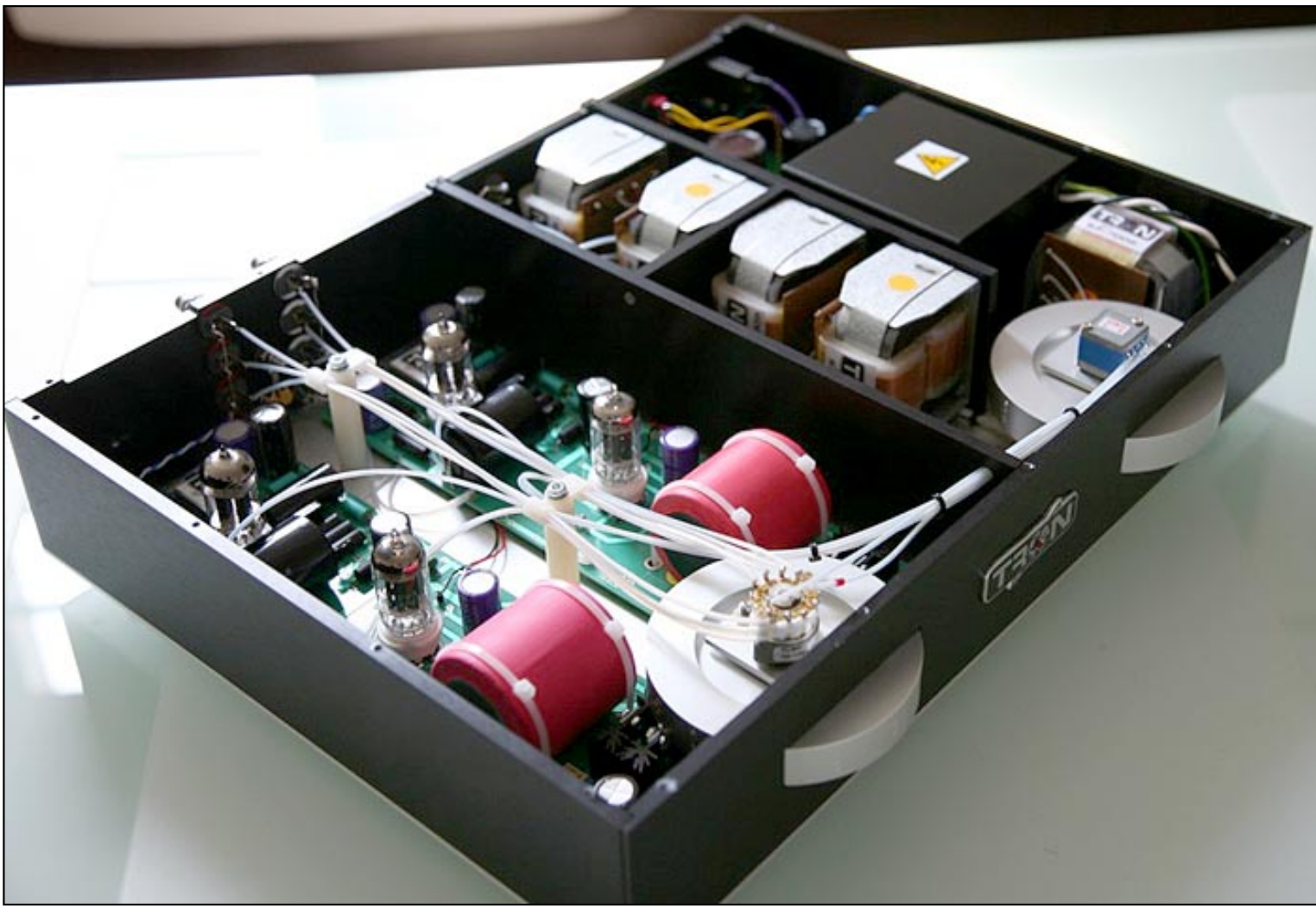
It was very obvious to me that Marvel had been at this game for a *long* time and paid sufficient attention. His type of results don't happen by accident. Rather, they're the outcome of sweating the smallest of details - which means caring in the first place and then spending the time and money necessary to experiment and fight for tiny percentile advances. In AE, Marvel has found the requisite resources to do so.



The only wish for improvement I could level at the system from an ultimate *sonic* perspective -- it's bloody rare to be presented with this balanced and elevated a base line! -- were slightly more ripples in the microdynamic domain when the Karan preamp was in the system. When Marvel substituted the Syren preamp, that was addressed and decay trails elongated even further. On the other hand, something about the spatial presentation now acquired a somewhat resonant quality which I couldn't pinpoint properly but found just a bit too intense. Too bloomy. On classical, it was tremendous. On the kind of rhythmically complex fare I fancy, I had to give the Karan the nod. Between the digital choices, the Heritage DAC was cooler and structurally more organized on large-scale orchestral. The Zanden duo with the new SuperClock flowed more organically and conveyed a more intimate perspective.



Of the systems I heard in Hong Kong, Marvel's exhibited the highest level of resolution, with the concomitant nearly complete overlay of recording acoustic over the domestic acoustic. Plainly put, if you want to hear the space that's recorded, you cannot hear the space you're in. How to subtract the latter from the equation so that the former asserts itself is what separates just parking boxes on shelves and floors from tweaking, dialing and tuning. It's here where Marvel has gone the farthest yet to enjoy the most advanced benefits.



When we discussed the dichotomy of perfect sound versus musicality, I felt that the Kondo system -- despite certain flaws from lack of full speaker break-in and minor room issues not yet addressed -- operated on a higher dose of ether. Fortunately, Marvel was present for that listening session at Peter's. He could instantly relate. He knew what I was trying to say. That isn't a given in this racket when you deal with this elusive musicality, something that's often considered a reviewer weasel word precisely because it lacks a hard universal definition.

香港



HONG KONG

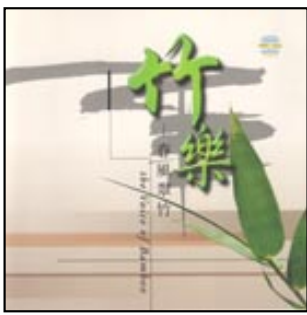
Victoria Harbour viewed from Lugard Road, the Peak

© EDC No. 1225

Even with agreement, knowing how to go about achieving *higher ether* is where we hit the brick wall that is audio predictions. If one could bottle musicality and sell it 1-2-3 in clearly marked steps, the hobby as we know it would cease to exist. For the sake of definition, "musical" here isn't synonymous with pleasant. It means getting triggered into an altered space where there's a transmission of energy, from the musical medium to the body mind of the listener who experiences a heightened state of awareness.

Clearly, the qualities important for that are well outside measurements as we understand them. That makes putting together a system that does the energy trick vexingly difficult. It's why *arriving* usually comes at the tail end of a long -- and often expensive -- journey. Part of the journey is about learning what triggers us, personally, and to find parallels between the occasions when it happened, to extrapolate something meaningful to our circumstance. In Marvel's case, it'll mean having Peter visit with his Kondo M-77 preamp to see whether in Marvel's system, it'll do the same magic. One thing I strongly recommended against was him touching his amp/speaker interface. Getting a speaker to play the room is 80% of the challenge *and* includes having the right amp for it. Marvel has that solved to perfection. Whatever he does next will involve trying to duplicate the energetic thrill which the Kondo system elicited so spontaneously in all of us.

Marvel gifted me with a rare, out-of-print copy of *The Voice of Bamboo*, a CD of an orchestra comprised of instruments built exclusively from bamboo, from pan flutes to transverse and end-blown straight flutes to marimbas, xylophones, drums, mouth organs and stringed instruments with bamboo resonators. From piercing high-amplitude whistles that would break up ordinary tweeters to sonorous drums, sharp percussive sounds and soulful singing strings, this CD is a system killer of the first order. I shall soon find out whether my own rig is up to the task as well as Marvel's proved to be.



Mr. Zanden is what the owner of the next system seems to be called informally and to protect his privacy. Once I saw his system in his suitably large room -- quite a rare commodity in this city -- I understood exactly why. He runs a *complete* suite of Zanden components, sources to amplifier.



However, chances are that first-time visitors will notice little else but the heavily faceted Avalon Sentinels which take pride of place on either side of the central table disguised as a colossal book on its side.



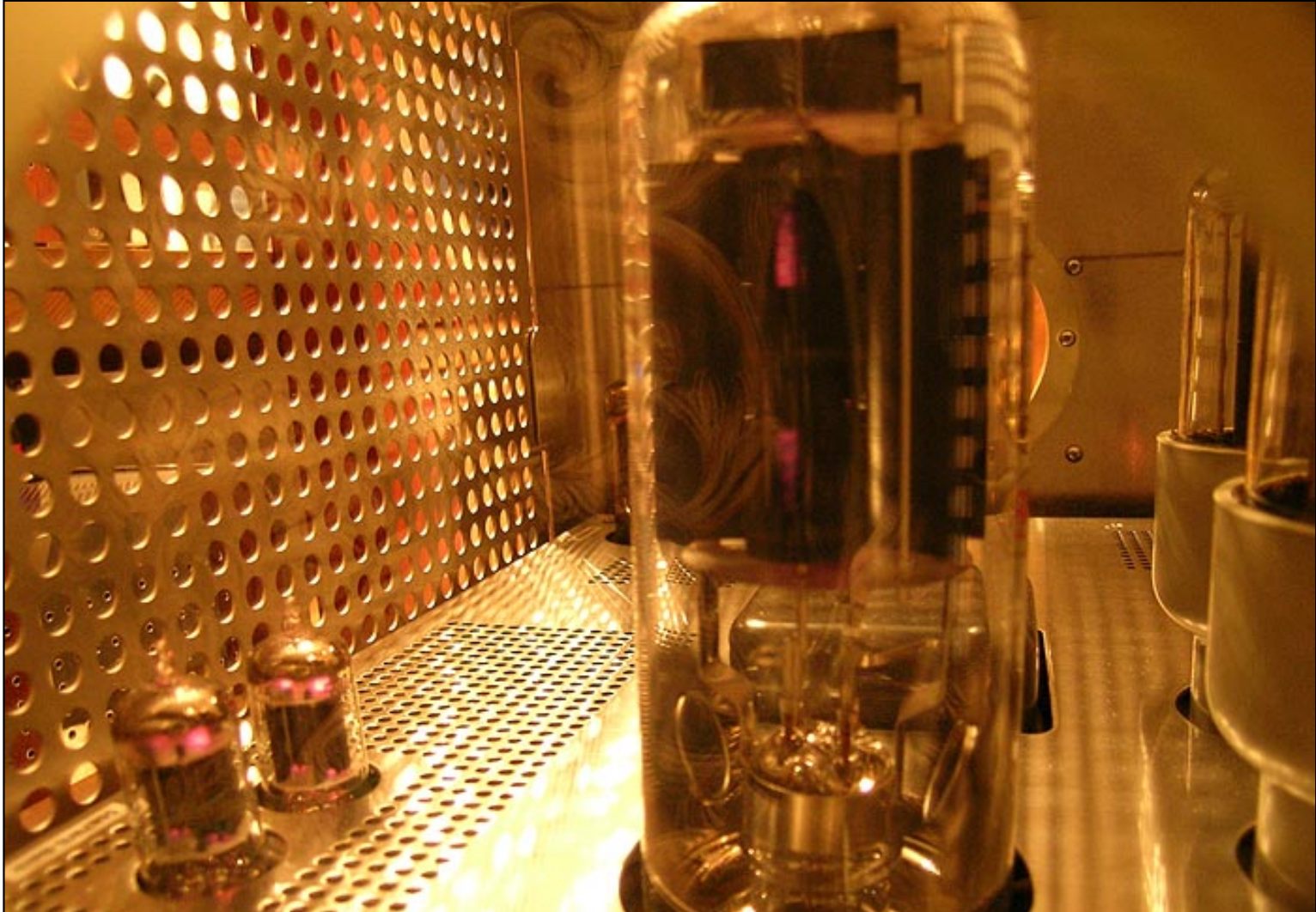
These rarely seen speakers come with active bass systems whose control and amplification units sat behind the table.



Frank Tchang's simple racks housed a four-box Zanden digital front end, a two-box Zanden phono stage, a Zanden preamp with outboard power supply and a massive top-line Kuzma turntable with linear tracking tone arm. Bracketing this highway to the stars were two of Yamada-San's 2 x 845-powered 9500 monos, the most *Zandified* system in all of Hong Kong.



Our host is an avid concert goer and listens primarily to classical Western music. Not surprisingly, it's exactly his favorite large-scale music which this system serves ideally by elevating the wood element over the metal and air constituents and adopting a midhall perspective for the listener based on the subjective mix of ambient and direct sounds.





Not as preternaturally resolved as Marvel's system, this setup enjoyed the room size to do very large dynamic swings with aplomb, without overpowering the room with undue pressure or hitting room lock (a phenomenon absent in concert halls but curiously valued by certain misguided audiophiles).



Mr. Zanden had a vinyl recording duplicated on polycarbonate to give our listening crew an even-Steven comparison between both formats. One immediately obvious difference occurred in the bass. On digital, it was tauter. On vinyl, it sang. Tonally, vinyl held the edge by painting with a richer palette, though not perhaps to the degree expected. Zanden's digital is simply awfully advanced in that regard. While coming in second, it did so without apologies.



Yamada-San of course is a vinyl devotee of the first order himself. He has taken a close look at Kuzma's tone arm and reportedly called it the best he's seen. It's quite the piece of mechanical engineering.



Running one of my bass test CD tracks, I noticed a relative lack of extension below 30Hz which these speakers should be capable of but perhaps not without some in-room EQing, something I don't believe the Avalon bass amps offer as a feature. However, with the exception of the occasional organ show-off track, classical orchestral music essentially lacks information this low so that particular aspect won't be relevant to its primary user.



I don't believe that the kind of startling microdynamic finesse their breed seems generally endowed with -- let's call it the immediacy factor -- can be as easily duplicated by more conventional speakers or the amps required to drive 'em with as it can with highly sensitive speakers. The Avalon presentation here certainly supported that notion. For my tastes -- and classical symphonic admittedly no longer factors very much in my listening sessions as it did in the past -- this system was voiced to favor the kind of music I don't listen to over the one I do. And that was exactly as it should have been. It's so easy to forget that an audio system's *only* responsibility is to pleasure its owner. This one fulfills its owner's needs to the 'T'. He is to be congratulated for having arrived already where most of us are still striving and struggling.





ALL CONTENT AND GRAPHICS ON THIS SITE ARE PROTECTED BY COPYRIGHT AND MAY NOT BE USED WITHOUT PRIOR PERMISSION

SITE CONCEPT & DESIGN BY NOBUKO NAGAOKA OF KUMADESIGN.COM

JAVASCRIPT CODING BY ANNEKE AUER OF CUCKOO@XS4ALL.NL

AUDIO REVIEWS

sixmoons.com

Doctor Kenneth [to right in lower picture] lives in a new complex in a reclaimed sector, meaning that the area previously was undeveloped or industrial and has since given way to very upscale apartment complexes whose lower levels house elaborate shopping malls that provide all the necessary living amenities without ever needing to step into a car or tram.



As in Linman's father's setup, Dr. Kenneth's super classy listening room doubled as the dining room. This put his speakers halfway into the space close to the sidewalls to automatically make for *enormous* stage depth. Riveting stuff.



Choice electronics included a gorgeous Metronome Kalista top loader with outboard power supply, a Viola Labs Cadenza 2-box preamp, Jeff Rowland ICEpower amp and Sonus Faber Homage Amati Anniversario speakers.





I'd never before seen a Viola Labs product in the flesh. Needless to say, cosmetics were elegant and refined.

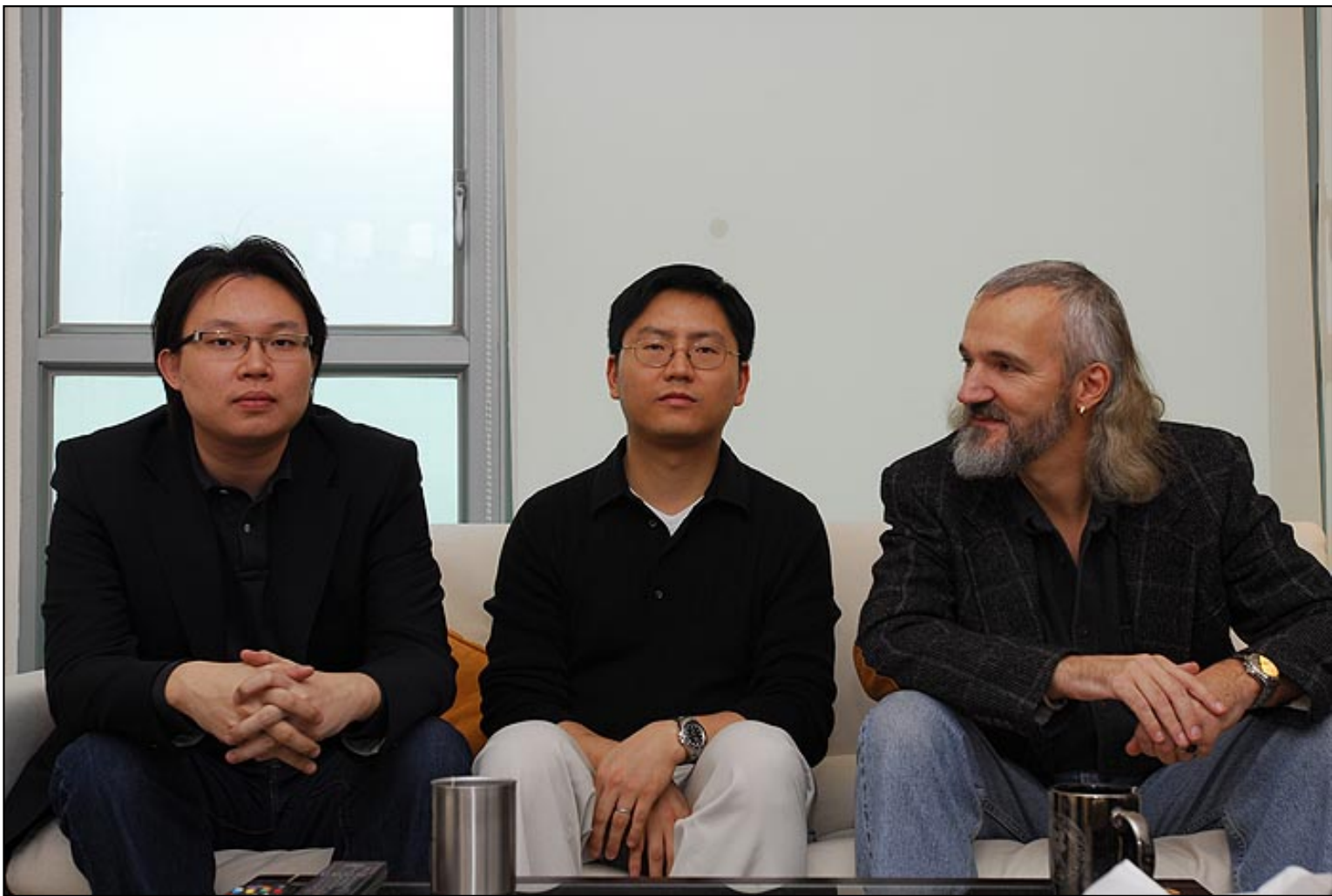




This system too benefitted from a plethora of wooden feet, shelves and similar tuning devices. In keeping with the generally accepted Sonus Faber aesthetic, the sound here was exceedingly pleasant and listenable though from the persnickety HiFi perspective, it ultimately lacked somewhat in metal and air. Transients were slightly rounded over, decays somewhat truncated. Coupled to the Jeff Rowland amp's tremendous damping factor at low frequencies, the bass quality was very damped and weighty. This created a somewhat unnatural impact that lacked ringing out on the tail end. *American bass* I call it. It's widely admired and was aptly accomplished here.



On the other side of the spectrum, the highs and upper harmonics didn't exhibit quite the air and speed of the Hørning or Mosquito systems, focusing instead on fatigue-free midrange glory underpinned by meaty bass. Of all the systems heard, this one was perhaps the least honed to the kind of energetic tracks I'd burned to three CDs and brought with me as small tokens of appreciation to my various hosts. It put me a bit on uncomfortable footing. One doesn't visit an unknown man's beautiful home, drink his tea and tell him his system doesn't conform completely to one's own peculiar preferences. Which, in the end, is all it is - preferences. Simultaneously, honesty demands that you tell your host what you think if he asks, provided he understands that your opinion matters nothing if he's happy.



Apparently however, I was merely last in line to echo what many others before me had opined. This system wasn't singing and breathing quite as freely and unfettered as one would wish for the sake of its owner who clearly put a lot into it. Fortunately, the affable Dr. Kenneth can avail himself of the listening opportunities afforded by AE's growing circle of music lovers. He can examine options and learn what might please him more now that his tastes have changed over time since he first assembled this system. Interestingly enough, this minor HiFi criticism doesn't at all conflict with the fact that from a sheer listenability perspective, this system scored very high - *far* higher in fact than the Kharma setup we'll still get to. This is a good reminder about how artfully increased resolution, the balance of the three tonal elements and emotional projection power need to proceed hand in hand as audiophiles keep pushing forward in their quests. Dr. Kenneth is far ahead of the vast majority of modern systems with their synthetic tone, their bright mien and their relentlessly unnatural character. He's home free where all of that goes. He's got the comfort and leisure factor in his back pocket. It's when you want it *all* that the journey begins all over. It seems, Dr. Kenneth is getting restless once again...





ALL CONTENT AND GRAPHICS ON THIS SITE ARE PROTECTED BY COPYRIGHT AND MAY NOT BE USED WITHOUT PRIOR PERMISSION

SITE CONCEPT & DESIGN BY NOBUKO NAGAOKA OF KUMADESIGN.COM

JAVASCRIPT CODING BY ANNEKE AUER OF CUCKOO@XS4ALL.NL

AUDIO REVIEWS

sixmoons.com

Simply called *Uncle* by us in the Chinese tradition of deferring to one's elders, Linnman's father held his audio court in the family room while Linnman's more expensive rig was consigned to one of their flat's bedrooms. That's seniority in action.



Uncle's speakers of choice were Revel Salons, with electronics by Karan, a Linn Sondek CD12 front end and cables by Stealth and Kharma.



Very similar in general setup to Dr. Kenneth whose system he enjoyed very much, Uncle particularly likes Western opera, with Mozart being his favorite and Puccini and Donizetti regularly on the menu as well.



Uncle built his own tube amps when he was young and knows audio going back decades. It makes him a valued back story mentor for AE when it comes to putting present goings-on into context.



This system was surprising in how it took the basic gestalt of the previous setup and elevated it a few degrees on the raw resolution end of things. The Balkan electronics didn't telegraph transistors at all and the sound was full-bodied, dynamic and ridiculously far behind the speakers which were set up effectively in the nearfield as enforced by the door behind the right speaker.

Despite being crammed into living rather than dedicated listening quarters -- the unruly viper's pit of cables in plain view, a thick bundle even snaking across the high-traffic wood floor to reach the right speaker -- this system performed like a true HighEnd system such as you'd expect to find in an upscale salon. But then perhaps not, seeing how the usual Hong Kong audio dealer suffers from the wall-of-speakers syndrome where every speaker model in inventory is stacked three deep and two high in the main room to act as unpredictable bass traps and resonant acoustic devices.



With less metal than the Hørning and Mosquito systems, more wood than Marvel's but less air due to a more damped room, this system's ether level was somewhat higher than the Sonus Fabers. When Uncle asked what I'd recommend as the next upgrade step, I pointed at Marvel and his Mosquito speakers. Of similar layout as the Revels, their carbon fiber hulls and stout metal launch plate guarantee complete freedom from boxiness. They seem like natural stand-ins for the Salons at an even higher level of resolving power. That's how J. Lam does the business. He just sits quietly on his couch and lets his own clients do all the talking and selling. What a setup!



Linnman meanwhile confided to a lack of interest in listening to his own system. As a result of many experiments in gear substitutions, his had recently devolved. Taking the pulse confirmed the matter. His three-way Kharma Exquisite Midi References were all metal, no wood. Unconsciously expensive, their vaunted ceramic midrange seemed to be the culprit. Linnman's Orpheus Lab source, Wavac preamp and Zanden 9500 monos clearly were innocent. Perhaps not fully broken in yet -- this is a relatively recent upgrade for Linnman -- the speaker at present exhibited an annoying lack of tone plus bite in the upper midrange that telegraphed particularly two octaves above middle C on piano and female vocals.





Rather than upset, Linnman was visibly relieved when I described my impressions. Though he intends to give his Kharmas a fair shake at prolonged break-in, he's perfectly prepared to part with them should things not progress deeper into the tone/body domain. He's been too close to things to put his fingers on the precise reason why he's been listening more and more to AE's resident system and less and less to his own of late. The feedback was welcome and he'll be in the saddle soon again. He'll apply his tuning magic which was so aptly demonstrated at AE's and Marvel's to his own crib.



Which gets us to Peter Tsang, alternately referred to as Mr. Kondo for reasons obvious in a moment.



Peter is one out of two AE customers who've opted for the new Hørning Eufrodite outside of J. Lam's own digs. Peter's source is a Naim top-line two-box unit. Everything else is Kondo - an M-77 preamp and the Gakuoh monos or legendary Ongaku, with all wiring by Kondo.



Here's an interesting tidbit which our resident Kondo-maniac Edward Barker will confirm shortly in his own writeup. If you fancy the Kondo sound, be advised that you *must* start with the preamp and the cables. No Kondo cables, no glory. Start with a Kondo amp but forget about the preamp and you'll miss the boat. Use a Kondo preamp and his cables -- silver between source and pre if you can only afford it there, copper between pre and amp -- and you'll get 80% of the magic using a good amplifier from a competitor (Canary Audio in Edward's case).



TEST REPORT
Gold Lion Tubes

PRODUCTION LOT: *PS 462*

TUBE TYPE: *U707*

The figures on this Test Report were recorded by the Quality Control Department from measurements made on a statistically significant and randomly selected group of tubes. These values are retained and new Test Reports printed for each production group. The Mean value is the average of all tubes tested for each particular parameter. The Zone Maximum and Zone Minimum are fixed values within which the Mean is constrained for constant surveillance of measured results and the prompt application of corrective measures when indicated. Every Gold Lion Tube is 100% tested for each major characteristic and rejected if it does not fall within the close tolerance limits established.

Life: Tubes of this type, selected at random, have passed a life test of 1000 hours without failure. These tests are carried out in an independent testing laboratory.

Residual current: In order to achieve the optimum performance designed into high fidelity equipment it is necessary to control anode current within close limits.

Measured at: _____

Grid voltage for a given anode current can be measured. This affords the same control in measurement of anode current and is preferable for some tube types.

Measured at: _____

Anode grid current: A low value of screen current is essential to ensure the highest possible efficiency and maximum voltage gain.

Measured at: _____

Alignment: Current is controlled to avoid excessive drain on the power supply when measuring alignment factor.

Measured at: $V_f = 6.3V$ 0.41 0.41 0.41 A

Balance is measured to ensure that adequate current may be drawn from the cathode.

Measured at: $V_f = 6.3V, I_a = 75mA$ (Cathodes measured separately) 27.5 27.5 27.5 V

Transconductance is the figure of merit which effectively relates the power output to the applied signal.

Measured at: _____

Amplification factor is a measure of the tube's voltage amplification.

Measured at: _____

Heater cathode insulation test is maintained at a high value to ensure against short circuits and burn.

Measured at: $V_f = 6.3V, V_{a-b} = 65V$ 100 170 - M.D.

Cathode ray capacitance: μsec test leads
 μsec test grid
 μsec

Control voltage needs to be controlled to give linear amplification close reducing distortion.

Measured at: _____

Vacuum: The tubes must be evacuated to a very low pressure to ensure long life. This is measured by measuring the grid current in the reverse direction.

Measured at: _____

SPECIAL TESTS:
Short Circuits and Microphone: This tube has passed a hammer tap test.

Load Test:
 $A_1: V_a = 250V, I_{a-1} = 70mA, R_{p1} = 150\Omega, C = 4\mu F$ 33a 33a -

Checked: *J.P.* Approved: *M.A.W.*

BRITISH INDUSTRIES CORPORATION
80 SHORE ROAD, PORT WASHINGTON, N.Y.

Initially, the system evidenced no real *sonic* problems except that the sound just sat there behind the speakers, seeming slightly pale and lifeless and removed. It's when Peter -- whose parts inventory includes rare WE transformers and vintage tubes I've never heard of, seeing he's built plenty of tube amps from scratch in his life time -- replaced the M-77's stock 6X4 rectifier with a Gold Lion U707 that the ether element jumped from zero to hero on a moment's notice. The difference in gestalt was enormous. All of us heard it, all of us responded in kind - incredulous. I was instantly triggered and Peter's system, more so even than AE's, was ripe with the kind of musical magic where sounds reach across space and make something in your heart vibrate. Peter had clearly been testing the *kwei loh*. Had I signed off on the original sound, he'd probably advised J. Lam to ask for a refund on my airline ticket.



Though he had only 3 weeks on his Eufrodites, Peter's evidenced none of the remaining bass plumminess of AE's. In fact, the Kondo Gakuohs amps shocked all of us with their incredible drive, especially playing fare that likely wouldn't have occurred to Kondo-San who was exceptionally fond of classical violin and piano. Peter broke out in a huge smile when I put on Renaud Garcia-Fons, Yasmin Levy and Bebo y Cigala, all alien fare to him. The bass energized the entire room without causing compression; the speakers completely disappeared as apparent sound sources; and the metallic overtones of Gitano vocals didn't suggest tweeter breakup but telegraphed as deliberate vocal stylings.



This system majored on wood and air, with sufficient metal to support overtly rhythmic fare but a clear emphasis on tone and harmonics. There still were a few bass notes slightly too hot but the speakers sat directly on the carpet; Peter hadn't even tried the Ongaku yet knowing he first needed to go through break-in (can you believe his patience?); the speaker placement hadn't been tweaked yet; and Linnman hadn't performed his full Acoustic Systems room tuning magic yet.



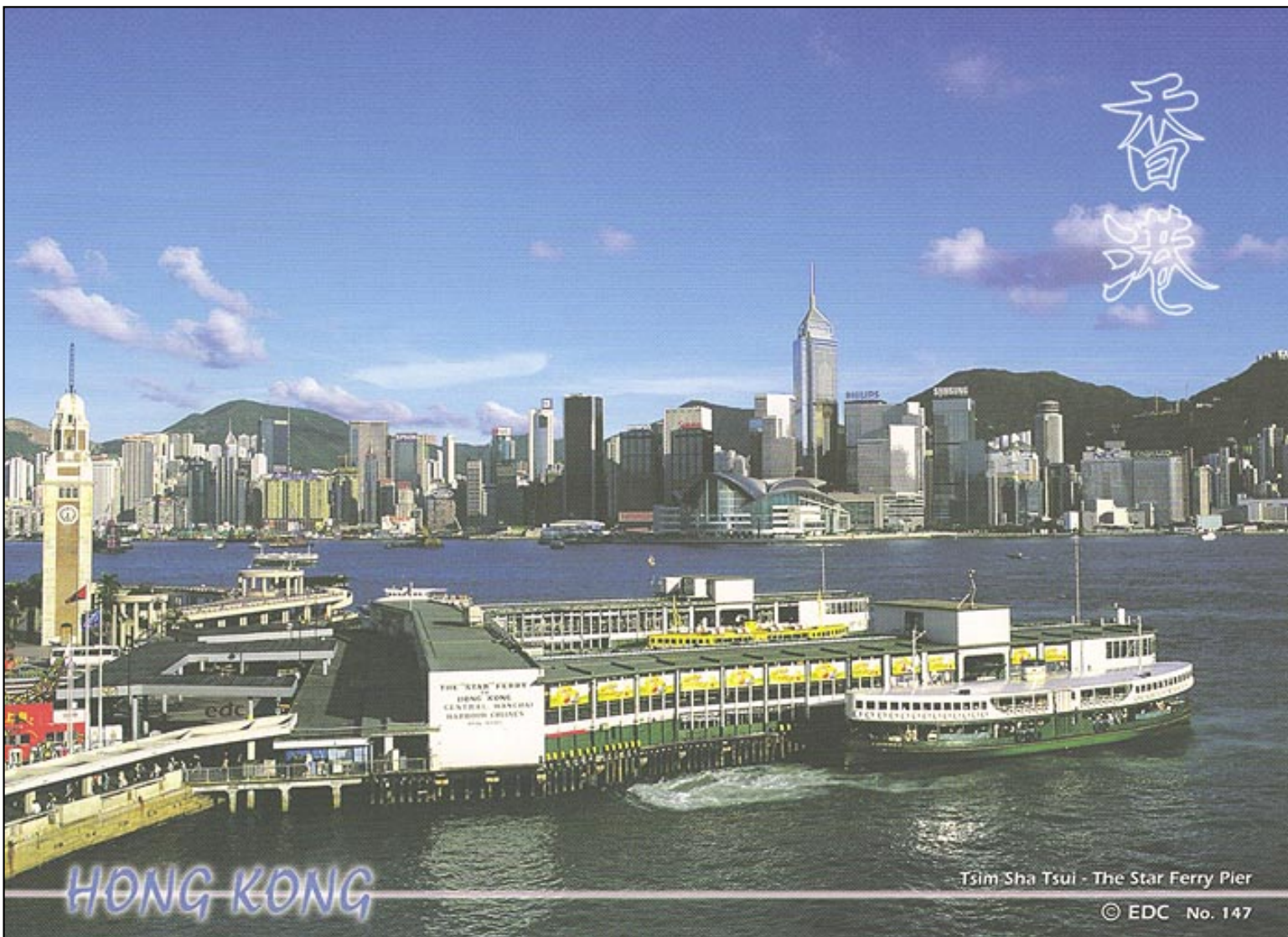
Regardless, this system *communicated* in superior fashion to anything else I'd heard in Hong Kong. This goes to show that HiFi issues are secondary. Even perfect sonics and ultimate resolution have to pay their respects to the senior ether element. Lucky are the few who can start there, then attend to the remaining loose ends in the world of measurements and tangibles. Most of us toil in the latter trenches, hoping to eventually break through to the intangibles. Peter sits pretty on top of the mountain. Lucky devil, our Kondo man.



And what a bloody difference one lone tube could make. A rectifier at that. It boggles the mind.

In the end, when I was made, somebody decided to wire me as a high-efficiency speaker guy. From a musical mojo aspect, the two Hørning systems did me the most even though one still had obvious sonic issues to overcome. Marvel's system was the most advanced in HiFi terms and emotionally compelling while not *as* powerfully so as Peter's or J. Lam's. Peter's simply *sang* to me. In a perfect world, you'd cross Marvel's and Peter's rigs and hope that their offspring inherited the best of both. Mister Zanden's system was eminently well tuned to his purposes and might just benefit from a little bit more metal or leading edge definition. Doctor Kenneth's superb electronics might be asking for a speaker change to keep up with his evolving needs. My own rig? If these gentlemen came to Cyprus for a visit, they might tell me to sell it all and start over again. You see, it's easy to critique someone else's system. Suggesting *how*, exactly, to improve it is an entirely different kettle of fish. That's what you have folks like J. Lam for and audiophile friends. Reviewers are just talk.

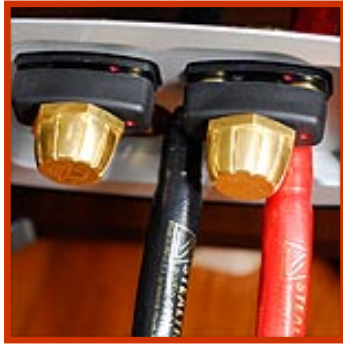
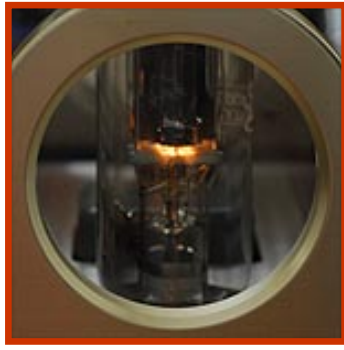
香港



This visit to Hong Kong proved to be a crash course in Chinese hospitality, audiophile brotherhood and a shared curiosity into what tickles our musical monkey bone and how to make it happen more often. What impressed me most was my hosts' honest desire for candid feedback. Let's face it, we all have not just money but also our egos invested in this enterprise. How often do **you** invite complete strangers to your digs to ask their honest opinion, especially if your rig would be considered high profile by anyone's measure? See what I mean? These guys were a bit **fou**. That's not faux by any stretch but **verrückt** as the Germans would say. Or fou in French, a bit crazy and mad. Thank the heavens for such craziness.

Sincere thanks are due to my many hosts, for many fabulous meals, beautiful music, taxi services but above all, the instant friendship and kindness offered to a complete stranger. More than anything else, that really touched my heart!

謝謝。 Let's play it again.



Srajan Ebaen



ALL CONTENT AND GRAPHICS ON THIS SITE ARE PROTECTED BY COPYRIGHT AND MAY NOT BE USED WITHOUT PRIOR PERMISSION

SITE CONCEPT & DESIGN BY ΠΟΒΥΚΟ ΠΑΓΑΘΚΑ ΟΦ ΚΥΜΑDESIGN.COM

JAVASCRIPT CODING BY ΑΠΠΕΚΕ ΑΥΕΡ ΟΦ CUCKOO@XS4ALL.NL