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AUDIO REVIEWS

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FEBRUARY 2007



MUSIC LOVERS SERIES

AN AUDITORIUM 23, HARBETH, LEBEN, SHINDO AND SONY SYSTEM

Reviewer: Jeff Day

Analog: Garrard 301, Cain & Cain plinth, Denon 103 MC cartridge, Pete Riggle Audio VTAF, Fi Yph phono stage, Auditorium 23 moving coil step-up transformer, Origin Live Silver MkI & MkII tone arms, *Paschetto Empire 208 turntable* [in for review]

Digital: Meridian 508.20 CD player, Audio Logic 2400 DAC, Sony PlayStation 1 SCPH-1001, *Shindo Arome CD matching transformer* [in for review], *47 Labs Shigaraki DAC* [in for review], *Hagerman HagUsb USB to S/PDIF converter* [in for review]

Preamplifiers: Tom Evans Audio Design Lithos 7 Vibe with Pulse power supply, *Shindo Monbrison* [in for review]

Integrated amplifiers: *Leben CS600* [this review], Almarro A205A Mk1 & Mk2

Amplifiers: Fi 2A3 monoblocks, Tom Evans Audio Design Linear A, *Shindo Cortese* [in for review]

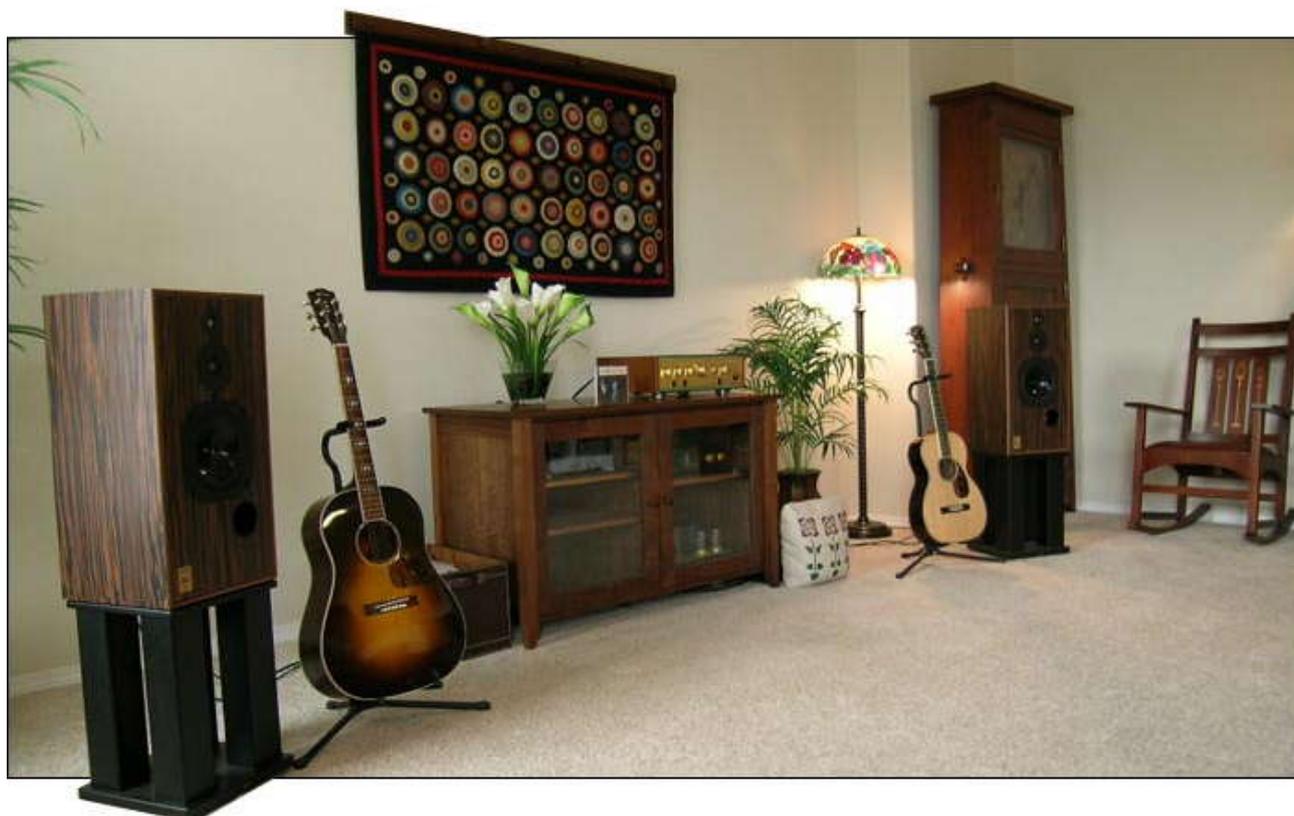
Speakers: Avantgarde Duo 2.1, Harbeth Super HL5 with 18" Skylan stands, Omega Super 3 (with 24" Skylan Stands), *Omega Super 3 XRS* [awaiting the new Omega hemp drivers for a follow-up evaluation], *Merrill Zigmahornets* [in for review]

Cables: 47 Laboratory OTA Cable Kit; Nirvana S-L & S-X interconnects, S-L speaker cables, Duo wiring harness, and Transmission Digital Interface; Cardas Neutral Reference digital cable, *Auditorium 23 speaker cable* [this review]; Tom Evans Audio Design interconnects; *Shindo silver interconnects* [this review]

Stands: McKinnon Bellevue Symphony walnut media cabinet, Atlantis Video Reference equipment rack, Skylan speaker & amplifier stands

Room sizes: Room 1: 20' L x 17' W x 17' H; and Room 2: 11' L x 11' W x 9' H

Review component retail: Leben CS600 \$4995; Auditorium 23 2.5 meter speaker cables \$950; Shindo silver interconnect \$950/meter US (all available through Jonathan Halpern at Tone Imports and his dealers); Harbeth Super HL5 loudspeakers, \$4299 in Cherry, \$4399 in Eucalyptus and \$4599 in Tiger Ebony (available through Walter Swanbon at Fidelis and his dealers); Skylan SHL5 speaker stands \$360 (available directly from Noel Nolan). Total system price as reviewed: \$11,854



For those of you who have been following the *Music Lovers Series introduction*, you already know that music lovers' interests inhabit a parallel universe to the one most audiophiles live in. The music lovers' universe is music -centered instead of focused on the 'sound' universe of audiophiles, absolute or otherwise. Music lovers want HiFi equipment that flatters all music regardless of how well it is recorded because there's lots of great music that isn't recorded that well. The equipment must serve the music, not the music the equipment as is often the case in audiophile circles. Music lovers often want a presentation just to the warm side of neutral, with a natural and organic presentation with plenty of tone color and musical texture. Music lovers want to experience the full glory of the music's beat, rhythm, melody and mood in such a way that they can get lost in the music. Their gear must possess that elusive and controversial element called musicality. A HiFi system that plays music really well can forever change your perspective on what this hobby is all about. Ultimately it can change your life for the better. That is why my little tongue -in-cheek motto for the Music Lovers series is "Save the music, save the world".



I've come across a complete HiFi system that I think is the epitome of the Music Lovers experience. In fact, I like it so much that I've purchased it for my own listening enjoyment and plan to use it as my reference for the Music Lovers series that's my focus this year. I guess you can view my purchase of the system as the sincerest form of recommendation there is.

The First Music Lovers Recommended System

Logistics rarely allow for assembling a complete system for review but it turned out in this case that all the moons aligned. I had already picked the Harbeth Super HL5s as my reference speakers for the Music Lovers series and couldn't have been more tickled when the Leben CS600 integrated arrived for review and worked so gratifyingly well with my Harbeths. The combination provided a magical musical experience with every kind of music I threw at it. I suspect HP would positively love it! No, not that HP. I meant Harry Potter. This combo is pure auditory magic!

I was (and still am) so impressed that I laid down my own hard-won greenbacks to acquire the Leben CS600 as my reference Music Lovers integrated amplifier. Thus was born the idea of the first source-to-speakers recommended system for Music Lovers. I chose the Auditorium 23 speaker cables made by Keith Aschenbrenner in Germany which have proven unfailingly musical in every application I've tried them in. Keith doesn't make interconnects because he doesn't feel he can improve on those made by Ken Shindo in Japan, hence his Auditorium 23 speaker cables are voiced to be a synergistic match with the Shindo silver wires. Since I also had the Shindo interconnects in-house as part of an upcoming all-Shindo feature review, it made sense to give them a whirl in this system too - and they delivered in spades.



During all this audio fun, my pal Pete Riggle stopped by with an audio underground digital favorite, the Sony Playstation 1 (Model No. SCPH-1001). I had heard rumors of just how good this particular version of the PS1 is when used as a CD player and was curious to give it a listen. This kid's video game player really does have outstanding audio performance. I'm guessing you'd have to spend more than \$6000 on a one-box CD player to equal let alone better it.



So there you are, the first Music Lovers recommended system consisting of the Sony Playstation 1 as a Redbook digital source, Shindo silver interconnects, Leben CS600 integrated amplifier, Auditorium 23 speaker cables, and Harbeth Super HL5 loudspeakers sitting on Skylan stands. It's a slam-dunk musical treat that's ridiculously good where it counts - with the music!



The Leben Hi-Fi Stereo Company

By way of introduction, let me present Mr. Taku Hyodo, founder of Leben Hi-Fi Stereo Company. Before Hyodo San founded Leben, he designed electronics for Luxman. He had made some amplifiers for himself and a few friends. They loved the sound of his amplifiers and encouraged him to use his obvious talent to start his own audio company. Hyodo San responded to their friendly encouragement by founding his own 'private label' electronics company to reflect his philosophy that 'music is life'. In keeping with this philosophy, Hyodo San called his company Leben, which is a German word that literally means *to be alive* and *life*, period.



Leben has a very lively following in Japan and enthusiastic owners have even established a fan club called the Leben Audio Lovers' Club which meets periodically for fun and games. New Leben model introductions there are heralded in much the same way as new models of Porsches or Ferraris are by sports car enthusiasts. Leben has been available exclusively in Japan until recently and because there are only a small number of Leben products hand-crafted each year, when they are all sold no more are to be had - kind of like special wine vintages. Fortunately for those of us who live in the USA, Jonathan Halpern of Tone Imports has started importing a small number of Leben products for those discerning few music lovers who can appreciate them (count me in that number - I'm a big fan already).



I had seen all of the Leben products at Pitch Perfect Audio in San Francisco except for their new CS660P amplifier [above], which had not been released at the time. I was very impressed by Leben's build quality and their elegant good looks. The transformers and many of the internal parts are made in-house by Leben too. If you look closely at the front of the Leben CS600, you'll see that it says 'A Motion Sound' across the top. This phrase piqued my curiosity so I asked Hyodo San about it. "When I was a youngster, my father worked as a movie projectionist and I went to see many movies with him. Paramount Pictures used to call a movie A Motion Picture and I adapted this phrase to Leben." Movies consist of many still shots of theatrical performance that when run at speed on a film projector brings the movie to life-like motion for its viewers. In the same way A Motion Sound conveys a film of a musical performance -- a recording -- and brings the sound to life or motion through a Leben amplifier.



I asked Hyodo San what influences have shaped him as a designer: "I have been listening to live music and playing musical instruments like the guitar, clarinet and drums since I was young. I was a professional acoustic guitarist for a few years in my twenties and now I continue to enjoy playing musical instruments as a hobby. My experiences performing and listening to live music helped me a lot in designing my amplifiers. Listening to live acoustic instruments guides my amplifier designs as live music always helps people relax and enjoy the music.

"For example, when designing an amplifier, audiophile grade components don't always bring better sound. If I were to make an amplifier with nothing but premium audiophile components, there is no guarantee that the amp will sound good. It is more important to select components by listening so that as a whole, the amplifier plays music better. The most important thing is to achieve a total musical balance. I am aiming for a natural sound in my designs that allows the listener to relax and enjoy the music so I always try to consult with as many ordinary listeners as possible, friends and family. I design my products for real people, the unspecified music lovers. I think Mike Eliot has it right (formerly an engineer with Mark Levinson, now Aria Audio) who said (paraphrased), "Don't rely on audiophile-grade parts to give you a musical sound. When you design a new amp, pick what you think are the most musical parts. Then consult with your wife or lover to see if they think it makes the music sound enjoyable as a reality check."



The Leben product line includes three integrated amplifiers (the CS300, the CS300X Limited [below] and the CS600), a two-chassis full-function preamplifier (the RS28C) and two power amplifiers (the CS250 and the CS660P). The \$2495 Leben CS300 is a 12-watt integrated amplifier using EL84 tubes. Both the CS300 and the CS300X Limited Edition use a simple push-pull circuit which Hyodo San feels provides the most musical design. This is the entry level Leben integrated amplifier and uses a hand-selected complement of parts that are cost effective yet still provide for a musical sound in the Leben tradition. All of the integrations share a common styling that is tastefully retro. The integrated amplifier chassis all have attractive wood sides, which is referred to as *cabinet style* in Japan.



The \$3495 Leben CS300X Limited Edition is a premium version of the CS300. The CS300X has upgraded cosmetics and at 15wpc is slightly more powerful than the standard CS300. It includes a cost-no-object selection of parts and tubes (like NOS Mullard EL84s) to give maximum musical performance. This is Leben's most popular product and if you want one you better move quick. Jonathan Halpern of Tone Imports [left] told me that "the CS-300X is just about sold out. I've ordered a few for stock but they're running low. Hopefully I'll get a few of the last pieces to take us through the winter months."



At 30 watts, the \$4995 CS600 is the most powerful Leben integrated. The CS600 was developed at the insistence of Leben customers who wanted the Leben signature sound in a more powerful integrated amplifier to drive their less sensitive loudspeakers. Hyodo San designed the appearance to be similar to the CS300 and CS300X with the intention that this style of appearance would become a symbol of Leben's integrated amplifiers.

The \$5495 RS28C is a two-chassis full-function tube preamplifier with MM phono stage and a separate power

supply. It warms my heart to see phono stages included in preamplifiers, it's the way HiFi should be. Kudos to Leben! The RS28C maintains the retro styling of the integrated amplifiers by using wood side panels, gold knobs and faceplate with green highlights. The phono stage is a high gain CR design using Amperex Bugle Boy 12AT7 tubes with no feedback to track the RIAA equalization curve to +/- 0.3%. Premium parts are used throughout. The line section uses an SRPP circuit with Siemens E288CC tubes to give an output that is almost double that of typical preamplifiers at 80 Volts, allowing optimum performance with a wide variety of amplifiers.



The \$3195 CS250 stereo power amplifier [above] uses French Visseaux 6K6GT power tubes with Hammond transformers to produce 10 watts. The amplifier has -3dB points at 10Hz and 50 KHz. NOS RCA or Sylvania 6K6GT tubes are available as an option. The \$9500 CS660P power amplifier is a brand new offering from Leben and there isn't a lot of information available yet. The CS660P comes stock with KT66 tubes and like the CS600 integrated can use the 6V6, EL34, KT-88 and other tasty tubes with the flip of a switch. Power output is 40 watts in stereo, 80 watts as bridged monoblocks and -0dB points are 10Hz and 100 kHz (180 kHz at -3dB). Output impedance is selectable at 4/6/8/16 ohms to allow optimization with a wide range of loudspeakers.



There is one thing that doesn't yet exist in the Leben product line which I'd really like to see added: a stand -alone phono stage styled to go with the integrated amplifiers. How about all you vinyl -loving Leben integrated fans writing Hyodo San to offer him friendly encouragement to make one? Consider this my letter of encouragement to get the ball rolling. Leben amplification products are known for excelling at playing music in a natural and effortless way, being harmonically rich, tonally correct and transparent, having a tight and tuneful bass response and very wide bandwidth - but more about that in a moment.



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