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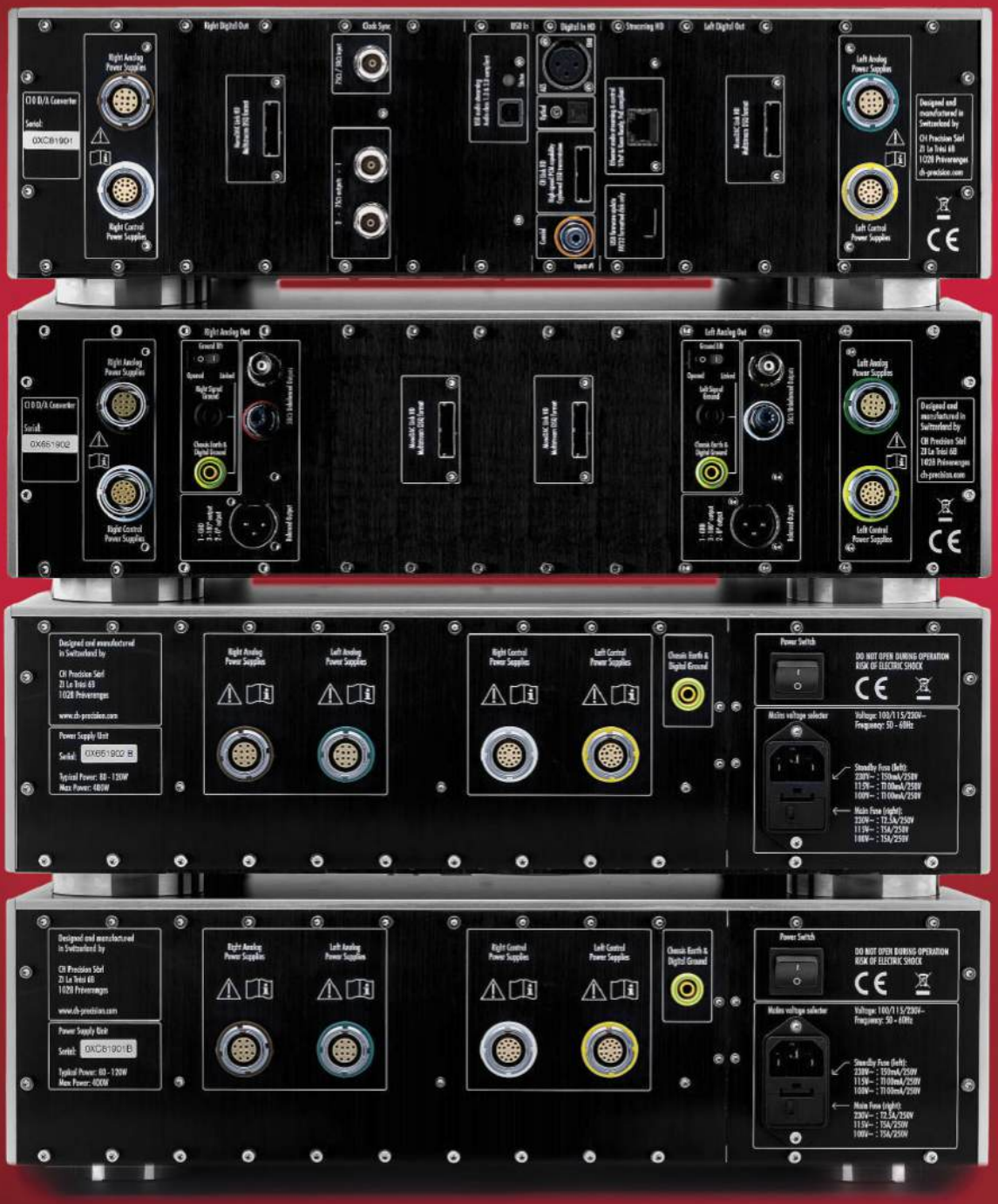
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CH Precision C10 Statement DAC and D10 Reference Transport



15 Pages of Music Reviews

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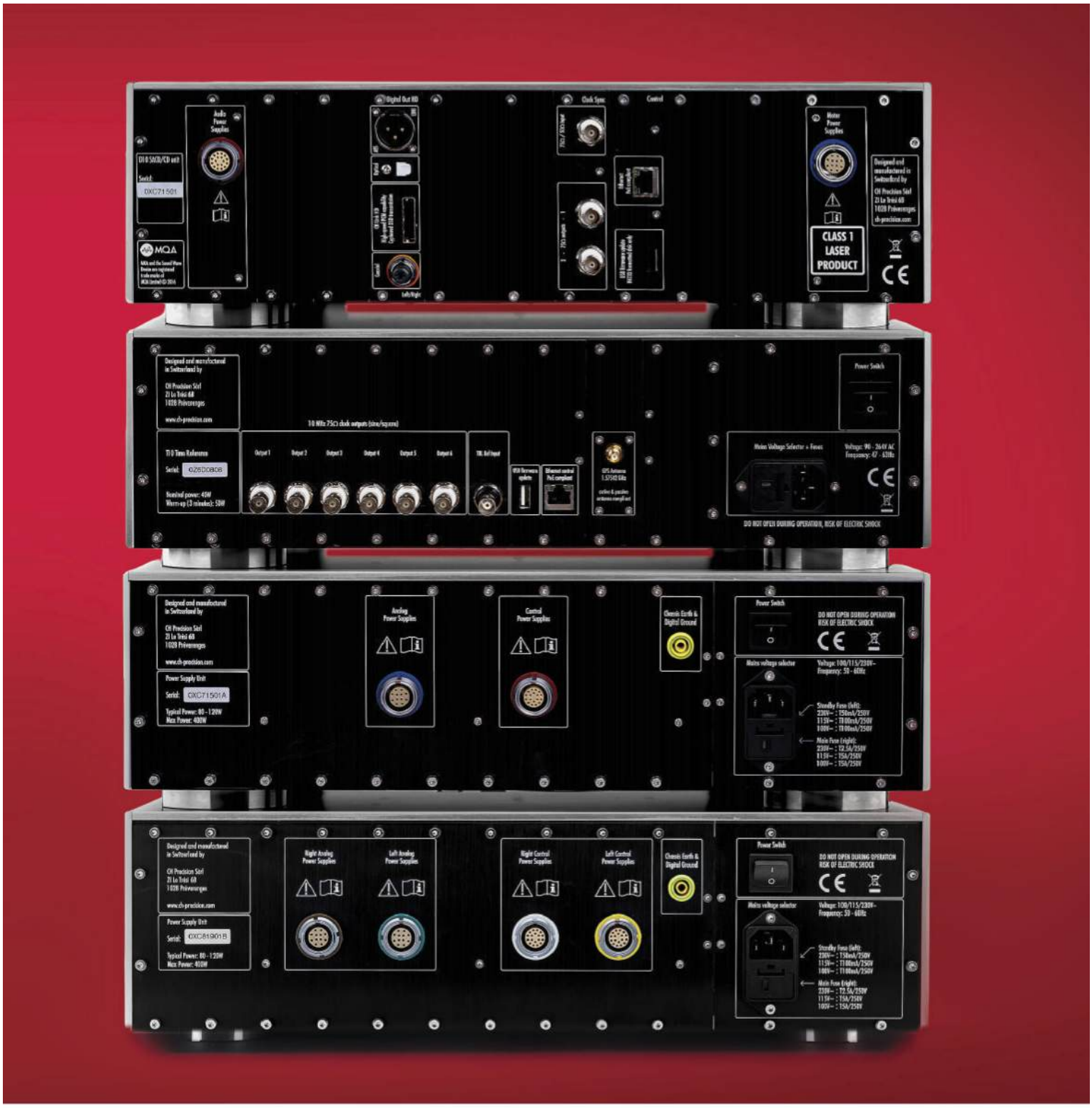


CH Precision C10 Statement DAC and D10 Reference Transport

THIS PAST JUNE, I TRAVELED TO MANHATTAN TO ATTEND THE grand opening of The Pocket, a swanky new jazz club located underground in the Muse Hotel near Broadway and Times Square. The club has something of a 1950s vibe to it, featuring booths lined with green velvet as well as white-cloth tables. There was an audible buzz of excitement among the crowd as it anticipated the arrival of the renowned jazz trumpeter and educator Wynton Marsalis. Marsalis has helmed the Jazz at Lincoln Center orchestra since 1987, when mainstream jazz was in the doldrums. Marsalis, who has done much to revive interest in the genre, recently announced that he will step down next year. I've heard the orchestra several times at Lincoln Center, but what I experienced at the club that evening surpassed my expectations.

As the band launched into Thelonious Monk's fiendishly tricky tune "Four In One," I was riveted by the ensemble's warmth, transparency, and unity. Marsalis' thick, burnished sound on his custom Monette trumpet cut to the back of the room. And even as the orchestra swung hard (and, boy, did it ever), each section—saxes, trumpets, clarinets and so on—could be discerned with remarkable clarity. The music itself was as fresh as ever. "If it was good then," Marsalis said, "it's good now." You're darn tootin'!

To what extent could my stereo system reproduce that exhila-



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rating sense of swing and dynamism? Enter the all-new eight-box CH Precision C10 Statement DAC and D10 Reference Transport. With its welter of cables and connectors, the CH gear almost requires a doctorate in engineering to wire it up correctly, but I was more than a little curious to hear what all the whiz-bang technology might deliver. I had some familiarity with CH gear, having used its nifty phonostages—first the P1, then the new P10—for several years. I also reviewed the company's versatile A1.5 power amplifier a while back. But lordy, eight boxes for digital playback seemed like overkill—until I heard the results.

In its full glory, the modular CH stack consists of separate power supplies and four front-end units. This complex array—a D10 top-loader transport, C10 Statement DAC, which includes the C10 Conductor, and a T10 Time Reference—deserves some technical explanation, which should provide more than a few clues to its sonic prowess. The first thing that may raise some eyebrows is the presence of a disc transport at a moment when streaming has come on strong. As it happens, the compact disc often sounds su-



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perior to streaming systems, no matter how much they have been tricked out. The physical medium, whether it's LPs or CDs, seems to have an edge in high-end audio. CH has gone to great lengths to ensure that its top loader is also a top performer. For one thing, it features a modified brass-enclosed laser mechanism that weighs almost 29 pounds. The unit itself is almost too heavy for one person to carry. The top loader, which has a passing resemblance to the Starship Enterprise, hovers in the air after you open it. Just be careful not to impede it physically, as the motorized mechanism begins its measured descent to encase the CD. The D10 is fed by its own independent power supply in order to eliminate crosstalk and ensure pure power to the transport motor and master clock.

From the outset, the sonic prowess of the CH stack was abundantly apparent.

At the heart of the digital system is the C10 Statement DAC. It does not offer a choice of filters but has a proprietary upsampling filter. According to CH, "Developed entirely in-house, PEtER—Polynomial Equations to Enhance Resolution—restores the waveform's natural curvature and continuity with far greater fidelity than conventional interpolation methods. It preserves



each original sample value while sharply reducing the spurious energy introduced by traditional digital filters." The claim of this PEtER principle is that the approach has a salubrious effect in eliminating longstanding digital nasties like overshoot and ringing.

At this point, I should note that controversy attends the DAC's employment of a decades-old Burr-Brown chip for digital-to-analog conversion. The detractors argue that it's an antediluvian approach to rely upon a vintage chip employed in the likes of Sonic Frontiers and Mark Levinson gear from the mid-1990s. CH will have none of this. It believes that a misconception continues to persist about the C10's conversion architecture.

Rather than using the chip for digital-to-analog conversion, it relies upon a precision resistor network fabricated on a common substrate, with the switching, control, reference, and surrounding analog circuitry implemented by CH. CH contends that this distinction matters because the substrate is not a self-contained DAC IC in the conventional sense, nor does it exert a decisive effect on the converter's architecture. The design seeks to treat the resistor ladder as one element within a much larger proprietary conversion system, whose accuracy depends upon resistor matching, thermal tracking, grounding, and the analog output





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stage. The DAC is balanced at the digital output source. In this regard, viewing the C10 as centered around a vintage DAC chip, CH contends, is myopic, misrepresenting the component and the advanced engineering that went into it.

I ran a pair of mono DACs, employing a separate power supply for each that allows each channel to operate independently. (In my experience, one of the main benefits of mono power supplies is that individual instruments become even more firmly anchored in the soundstage.)

Next comes the innovative C10 Conductor. As its name suggests, it serves as the impresario of the system. The Conductor functions as a digital hub, isolating digital signal processing from analog conversion, managing source selection, analyzing input phase and signal frequency, and transmitting audio data and clocking commands to the D10 via a proprietary CH-Link that has BNC connections at each end. Speaking of clocks, the T10 Time Reference master clock rounds out the ensemble. Designed to combat jitter and phase noise, it features a 10MHz reference clock and a thermally stabilized, oven-controlled oscillator that is housed in a solid-billet aluminum block.

As I mentioned, wiring up these units is not for the faint of heart. To set up the system, two representatives from CH traveled to my home—Kevin Wolff, the director of global sales, and John Giolas, global marketing director. Wolff set the output voltage of the DAC to 2.5 volts in single-ended mode, which translates to 5 volts in balanced mode. When using it with the robust Zikra preamplifier, I reduced it to 1 volt, which translates to 2 volts in balanced mode. Once you get the hang of it, it's easy to adjust the internal controls, ranging from phase to voltage, by accessing the diminutive front-panel buttons. In addition, I was able to wire up the units myself after I had to disconnect all eight pieces during the review process. As always, there is no substitute for hands-on experience—it gives you a better feel for what's transpiring, or what's supposed to be transpiring, between the otherwise mysterious boxes. I ran them both via Qobuz Connect and the D10 transport.

So, what did the whole shebang sound like? Listening to it was like visiting a medieval cathedral in one of the capitals of Europe. It was the sense of quiet majesty—what Evelyn Waugh refers to in his 1945 novel, *Brideshead Revisited*, as "cloistral hush"—that was the most distinctive characteristic of the CH stack. Not a few visitors to my listening room genuflected to its ability to deliver an abundance of musical revelations. Coupled to the Avantgarde Trio horns, the slight dollop of romanticism that the CH gear imparts resulted in a towering and potent soundstage. Add in the sublimely musical and mighty tubed Zikra gear from Michael Zingenberg in Denmark—the 22-watt SET monoblock amplifiers are based around the 211 tube—and you had a stereo system that sounded as though it was powered by rocket fuel.

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From the outset, the sonic prowess of the CH stack was abundantly apparent. Some audio gear has you pondering what is taking place when you first plunk it into your system. Not the CH. The first disc I listened to was one of my all-time favorites, a Sony recording of Mozart's Double Concerto in E-flat major for piano and orchestra that was performed in 1988 at the Aldeburgh Festival at Snape Maltings by two all-star pianists, Radu Lupu and Murray Perahia. This was the only complete double piano concerto that Mozart composed, and it has a sweep and pathos that are well-nigh irresistible.

I've listened to it innumerable times, but I was gobsmacked by what the CH delivered. From the very first note, the dominant impression that the CH created was one of sweeping grandeur that carried you along in its path.

For a start, the image scale was off the charts. Mozart scored this work for a light orchestra to ensure that the pianos weren't drowned out, and the CH nailed the opening orchestral ritornello, neither exaggerating nor miniaturizing the size of the ensemble. The French horn clarion call was perfectly placed in the rear right of the concert hall. Nor was there any slurring or blurring of the violins; rather, the operatic character of the work came to the fore. After the pianos enter with an audacious octave trill, it was easy to distinguish each of them. Indeed, I've not previously heard the two pianos emerge with such notable clarity and sweep as the orchestra is accompanying them. The CH captured the interplay between the two pianos, rendering it simplicity itself to hear the first instrument (Perahia) sound the theme, then the second (Lupu) duplicate it an octave lower. Everything about it was inviting—the seamless flow of pearl-like piano notes, the dynamics of the orchestra, and the wistful sonorities of the woodwinds. Throughout, I had the feeling that the performers were in their element—at the peak of their musical powers with nary a hint of meretricious showboating.

Another crowd-pleaser that I've been listening to with some regularity—and what's wrong, incidentally, with pleasing crowds?—is the venerable Bach, Gounod "Ave Maria." Gounod memorably noted that "in the vast sky of art, Bach is the mist that is yet to be condensed." He performed some of the condensation by lifting Bach's Prelude No. 1 in C major and adding a melodic vocal line to it. The version I listened to was performed by the German violinist Anne-Sophie Mutter together with the pianist Lambert Orkis. Two things struck me most forcibly about the CH's presentation of it.

The first was its ability to convey not only Mutter's rich tone but also the intensity of her musicianship. Mutter remarked to San Francisco's *Classical Voice* that "for a musician, if you feel comfortable, something is wrong with you. Not all pieces require that you write a doctorate about them, but at the end of the day, it's not about you. It's the struggle. To be comfortable would be horrible." The superlative resolution of the CH meant that you heard the energy of Mutter's performance with amazing clarity—down to the subtle variations of pressure of her bowing technique. This, in turn, added to the emotional impact of the recording, which has elicited waterworks from more than one lis-

Specs & Pricing

Digital inputs: 1x CH Link HD, 1x AES/EBU (XLR), 1x SPDIF (RCA), 1x SPDIF (TosLink) per digital input board
Analog output: 1x balanced XLR, 1x single-ended RCA per channel
Total harmonic distortion + noise: <0.003% (@ 20Hz–20kHz, A-weighted)
Bandwidth: DC to 155kHz (–3dB)
Signal-to-noise ratio: >121dB, high output level, >120dB, mid output level, >117dB, Low output level (20Hz-20kHz, A-weighted)
Sampling rate: CH Link HD: PCM 44.1kHz to 768kHz, DSD 2.8224MHz to 22.5792MHz; S/PDIF, AES/EBU: PCM 44.1kHz to 192kHz, DSD 2.8224MHz (DoP format); Ethernet: PCM 44.1kHz to 768kHz, DSD 2.8224MHz to 22.5792MHz; USB: PCM 44.1kHz to 384kHz, DSD 2.8224MHz to 5.6448MHz (DoP format)
DAC: Conversion type: DSQ R-2R, 24 bit/2.8224 MHz, 8 DACs per channel
Upsampling filter: Proprietary ultra-short, low-ringing, time-optimized, synchronous, 32-bit fixed-point PEtER algorithm
Clocking option: Clock master or synchronization to reference clock or optical disc transport
Bit depth: PCM 16 to 32 bit, DSD 1 bit
MQA: Full MQA decoding (unfolding and rendering) at 24bit/705.6kHz or 768kHz
File format: PCM: WAV, AIFF, FLAC, ALAC, AAC and MP3; DSD: DSF and DFF
Dimensions: 440 x 133 mm x 440, all units (DAC, Power Supply)
Weight: 20kg (DAC) + 23kg (power supply)
Price: C10 Statement Mono DAC, $227,000 (five chassis); T10 Time Reference, $27,500 (one chassis); D10 Reference Transport, $105,000. Other versions: C10 Reference DAC, $105,000 (two chassis); C10 Statement DAC, $187,500 (four chassis).
Price as reviewed: $359,500

CH PRECISION SARL
ZI Le Tresi 6D
1028 Preverenges
Switzerland
info@ch-precision.com
ch-precision.com

Associated Equipment
Loudspeakers: Avantgarde Trio G3 with 6 SpaceHorns and 4 Wilson Benesch IGx infrasonic generators.
Amplification: darTZeel NHB 18NS, Mk. II preamplifier and NHB-468, Mk. II monoblock power amplifiers, Zikra Audio preamplifier and 211 monoblock power amplifiers, HSE Masterline 8 preamplifier
Cabling: Transparent Audio Magnum Opus, Siltech Ruby Crown Series and Nordost Odin 2 interconnects and speaker cables.
AC Power: Equitech 10WQ wall mount
Support: HRS VXR and Stillpoints ESS Ultra Rack

tener. Then there was the arpeggiated harmonic accompaniment of the piano, which was fully discernible rather than evanescent.

The lifelike sense of spontaneity that the CH offers was also in evidence on a recording of standards by the Vache brothers, Warren and Allen, on trumpet and clarinet, respectively, from an album called *Remember* on the Nagel Heyer label. On the song "Tangerine," the lilting bossa nova beat had an infectious quality, much of it provided by the nifty drumming of Ed Metz, Jr., who whacks the cymbals like an anvil. The pitch and speed and timbre of the various instruments—guitar, piano, clarinet, trumpet, and bass—were reproduced with startling realism. Again and again, the CH zeroed in on the transients. I noticed on guitar, for example, that the plucks possessed an almost virile pop to them on "Tangerine," as well as on a Ruby Braff and George Barnes album of Rodgers and Hart songs.

The punch of the CH also came through on a variety of pop recordings, including Sade's "Smooth Operator." The combination of suavity and power seemed to suffuse every nook and cranny of my fairly large listening room with music. Throughout, the CH had a sense of muscular authority, an ability to recreate the drive of the music.

In my view, the prodigious power of the CH begins from the bottom up. It's no secret that the bass region helps set up the entire soundstage by creating the illusion of hall space. In this regard, the CH was a champ. It provided new sonic information about the way that the kettledrums were struck on baroque recordings. It also translated to piano and vocals. On the tenor Benjamin Appl's performance of Schubert songs on the album *Heimat* (Sony Classics), I was impressed by the sense of stentorian heft that it provided.

...Marsalis' trumpet blasts were awe-inspiring, and that's what I heard on the CH.

On big numbers like Aaron Copland's *Fanfare for the Common Man*, it was uncommonly good at providing a thunderous whack during the open bass drum solo. For grins and giggles, it was entertaining to listen to Michael Jackson's album *Thriller*, where even the creak of the door was more audible, down to hearing its hinges move. Not surprisingly, the bass line seemed subjectively faster, which is to say more in tune with the rest of the music rather than lagging as can occur when a stereo system struggles to control the nether regions.

The most notable characteristic of the CH is that it lowers the pitch center of the note when contrasted with other digital systems. The dCS is more neutral than the CH but less impactful (critics of the CH will say, "less bloated.") It also does not reach as low in the bass (though the new digital cables that Transparent Audio has developed for the Varèse notably improve its bass reproduction). Wadax has an even smoother and warmer sound. To some degree, these judgments must remain provisional. Digital is a perpetually moving target as manufacturers regularly upgrade their products. Never have I witnessed the equivalent of an arms race more acutely than in the digital domain.

For now, I can safely say that in tonal balance the CH falls somewhere between the dCS and Wadax. It's warm but not cloying, dynamic but not strident. It doesn't require unique auscultatory powers to divine the strengths of the CH. If anything, this sonic powerhouse jolted me out of any lingering complacency about the heights that digital reproduction can attain. It represents what the founder of this magazine, Harry Pearson, liked to refer to as one more step toward the absolute.

Nowhere did this come home more audibly than when listening to Wynton Marsalis and the Jazz at Lincoln Center orchestra's live recording of tunes from Louis Armstrong's Hot Five and Hot Seven. As noted, when I visited the Pocket Club, the weight and richness of Marsalis' trumpet blasts were awe-inspiring, and that's what I heard on the CH. It was worlds removed from the razor-sharp sound that you might be accustomed to hearing from the likes of Dizzy Gillespie or Jon Faddis. The CH delivers body and soul. I've referred to it throughout this review as a digital stack, but that is a misnomer. It is a masterwork.

