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Sam Tellig

Sam Goes Christmas Shopping

"Pathos Acoustics takes the unorthodox approach," Paolo Andiollo told me when I visited the company in Vicenza, Italy, several years ago.

Walking the streets of Vicenza, we were too preoccupied for Sam to scribble notes. You can't vroom through Vicenza: the entire city center is an architectural museum. This was the home town of Palladio, great architect of Renaissance Italy. Palladio virtually reinvented—and reinvigorated—the architecture of the West by returning to its classical roots in ancient Greek and Rome. (Thomas Jefferson was inspired by Palladio.)

I think Paolo and his team at Pathos Acoustics would like to do something similar for audio: remove the clutter, return it to its roots—or at least rethink conventional assumptions. And it's true: so much hi-fi is the same old same-old. When you buy a Pathos product, the promise is that it will be unorthodox, unconventional, and original.

Pathos was founded by three unconventional personalities. Paolo Andiollo takes care of industrial design and marketing. Gianni Borinato, an electrical engineer by profession, is the engineering guru. Gaetano Zannini, a former hi-fi dealer, handles the day-to-day business of running the firm. Their very different personalities seem to complement one another: Paolo is intellectual, intense, austere; Gianni is outgoing, easy, always ready with a joke or another beer; and the quiet, serious Gaetano loves family, food, music, and a glass of grappa after dinner.

Pathos Acoustics Classic One Mk.III integrated amplifier

The Classic One, Pathos's entry-level integrated amplifier (\$2750), is rated to deliver 70Wpc into 8 ohms or 130Wpc into 4 ohms. That's in stereo. Would you like more power? A pair of Classic Ones can be bridged to provide a fully balanced 270Wpc into 8 ohms.

The Classic One uses two Sovtek 6922 tubes in its fully balanced preamp

stage, and two pairs of MOSFET transistors in its power-amp output stage. The tubed preamp stage is described as "a real balanced network that works in pure class-A." In stereo, the output stage is unbalanced, like me. When you bridge amps, things get interesting. Paolo explained: "The balanced signals (+ and -) come from the vacuum-tube preamplifier stage to the right-channel power amp (+) and the left-channel power amp (-). The load, which is to say the speaker, is then connected between the + output of the right-channel power amp and the - output of the left-channel power amp...In bridged mode, the whole machine works in real balanced mode from the input to the output, including the speaker."

Paolo does not encourage customers to buy two Mk.III's "if they need to drive huge speakers at loud volume in a large theater. In the end," he wrote, "the machine has been designed and dimensioned for being a domestic integrated amp, so that high power in

twin tubes are protected by two Palladian tube cages. The amp runs just slightly warm and needs open-air ventilation. Who would hide an amplifier this beautiful inside a cabinet?

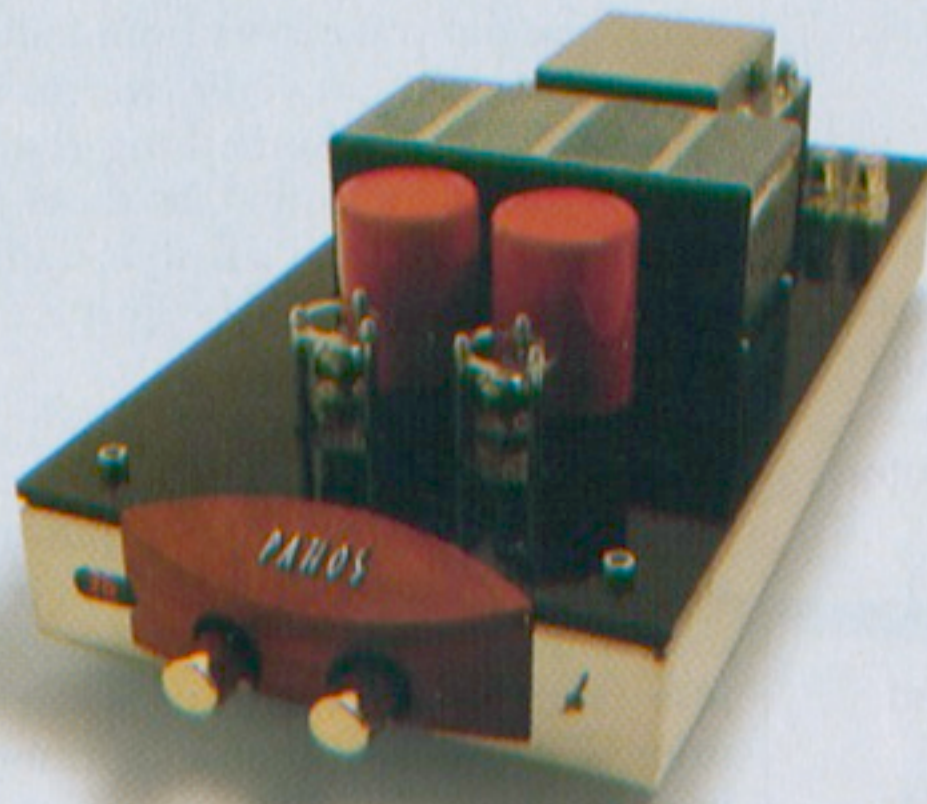
There are no frills: just four line-level inputs (one of them is balanced) and a tape loop. There's no balance control, nor is there a line-level out for a powered subwoofer. No headphone jack. The matching remote is made of wood and has just four buttons: volume up and down, mute, and unmute. The Classic One is absolutely free of annoying complexity and clutter. It is...Palladian. Minimalist. The parts quality looks to be very high: pure silver internal wiring, gold-plated RCA terminals, etc.

But despite the care taken with the power supplies (separate supplies for the pre and power sections), the Classic One is still a small, modestly powered amplifier. If you require gut-wrenching, lease-breaking bass from very large speakers, if you have a large room and like your music very loud, this is not the amp for you.

The Classic One would be perfect for an apartment in Manhattan—or in Boston or Chicago—or for an office. It's the ideal product for the burned-out 'phile who wants to quit the audiophile rat race in style. In this regard, the Classic One is an entry- and an exit-level product.

There have been some circuit and parts refinements since the Mk.II. Paolo filled me in:

- New "high-quality" op-amps to drive the MOSFET power amplifier: one per channel between the pre-amp stage and the power-amp section. Yup, op-amps. Integrated circuits (ICs). Op-amps aren't supposed to sound good, and often they don't. Here? No problem. *There's* unconventional wisdom for you. Paolo said that the new op-amp is "ultra low noise with high linearity and very low distortion." The result, according to him: "higher definition." I agree.



Pathos Classic One Mk.III. Visually the same as the Mk.II but lots of changes inside.

bridged mode gives users the freedom from peak compression, yet within the parameters of normal domestic use."

No photograph does justice to the Classic One. It may be the most beautiful piece of hi-fi gear ever made—small, elegant, exquisite. Its long, narrow shape is unusual: 9" wide by 5.5" high by 18" deep (including the front knobs). The

- A new volume control with a Burr-Brown IC that Paolo says is more linear than what was used before.

- A new power transformer that's less sensitive to voltage variations from the AC mains. Apparently, this was more of a problem in North America than in high-voltage Europe.

- A circuit that protects the output transistors against a short circuit on the

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Quad Electroacoustics, Ltd., IAG House, Sovereign Court, Ermine Business Park, Huntingdon PE29 6XU, England, UK. Tel: (44) (0)854-458-0011, (44) (0)1480-447700. Fax: (44) (0)1480-431767. Web: www.quad-hifi.co.uk. US distributor: Taiga, LLD, 310 Tosca Drive, Stoughton, MA 02072. Tel: (781) 341-1234. Fax: (781) 341-1228. Web: www.iagamerica.com/quad.

Ray Samuels Audio, 8005 Keeler, Skokie, IL 60076. Tel: (847) 673-8739. Web: www.raysamuelsaudio.com.

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DESPITE THE CARE TAKEN WITH THE POWER SUPPLIES, THE CLASSIC ONE IS STILL A SMALL, MODESTLY POWERED AMPLIFIER.

speaker connectors, along with new speaker connectors that do more to avoid a short circuit in the first place.

A Classic One Mk.II can't be upgraded to a Mk.III "because we made so many changes, in the power supply, for instance, and we had to change the entire circuit board." If I owned a Mk.II, I wouldn't be too tempted to sell and switch. The improvements are incremental, not dramatic.

It's been three years since I heard the Mk.II. Memory can play tricks, and since then many things have changed in my systems. Still, I'll hazard a guess that not much about the Classic One's sound has changed. It might be clearer, cleaner, faster—a tad more detailed than its predecessor, and more controlled in the bass. It's definitely more dynamic. *Questo amplificatore ha le palle*. This amplifier has balls. *Ha ancora più palle de prima*. Has more balls than before. I've been studying my Italian.

Nothing of the Mk.II's transparency and sweetness has been lost. This is an amplifier to make your speakers sing. What else did you expect from Italy? It is not, however, overly warm and romantic. There's something slightly austere about the sound, as there was about the Mk.II's. Call it Palladian. Call it Paolo. Or maybe just call it truthful.

I keep thinking that one reason the Classic One sounds the way it does is that it uses a single pair of output transistors per channel. It's when you try to match multiple pairs that you often lose something: definition, detail, immediacy, timbral timing (harmonics in register).

I had on hand a new Cary CDP 1 CD player with balanced outputs. The Pathos Acoustics Classic One Mk.III did seem to perform better in balanced mode—something to keep in mind when choosing a CD player to pair with it.

I tried the Classic One with several different speakers, and both in our living room and my listening room (where I got no argument from my wife, Marina). This amp is clean, clear, quick—to be glib, Palladian. Clear away that clutter. It mated beautifully, soni-

cally and aesthetically, with the Triangle Comete Anniversaire loudspeakers, which I reviewed in the October issue. This was a spectacular combination with whatever I played: classical, jazz, popular music of the 1920s and '30s.

Next up were the Klipsch La Scala II speakers. With a sensitivity rating of 105dB, the La Scala can scare up good sound from as little as 3W. Still, even this highly sensitive speaker responded to the Classic One with superior bass control. The La Scala II has no deep bass, but its mid- and upper bass tightened up. Talk about playing loud: the La Scala II responded to the Classic One as if the latter were a behemoth muscle amp putting out 500–1000W. Maximum Mahler. Thunderous Tchaikovsky.

I took the Classic One upstairs to the listening room for a date with the Quad ESL-2805 electrostatic speakers and the latest version of the Opera Quinta, just arrived. I got excellent results on the Quads, although the Ayre V-5Xe power amp (used with a complete Ayre system) provided better bass control. No surprise—the Ayre is much more powerful.

The Opera Quinta speakers had not yet been fully run in. Even so, the combination clicked right from the start. Mamma mia, the Operas have excellent bass: tight, tuneful, controlled. They and the Classic One seemed to get along quite nicely with one another, like good *paisanos*, even if their manufacturers may not. (Italian hi-fi is rife with rivalries. I love it!) An all-Italian system, anyone?

Triangle Comete Anniversaire loudspeaker

Remember the Triangle Comete Anniversaire speaker, which I reviewed in October? (In the photo accompanying that review, I wore one of these speakers' yellow chamois bags over my head.) The speakers didn't sound bad straight out of the box, but I gave them 100 hours or so of break-in. If I'd waited longer, I'd have missed a deadline—and a scoop.

But the Comete Anniversaire sounded even better after 500 hours: faster, smoother, sweeter; tighter, more