

Golden Ear Awards '08

STEREO • MULTICHANNEL AUDIO • MUSIC

the absolute sound[®]

SPECIAL REPORT: INSIDE THE CHINESE AUDIO INDUSTRY

SPEAKERS FROM **SPENDOR**
PREAMPS FROM **BAT AND PARASOUND**



PATHOS AMP
& CD PLAYER

ITALIAN SEDUCTION

PLUS: HI-RES SOUND ON BLU-RAY DISC

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ITALIAN SED



Pathos Logos Integrated Amplifier and Digit CD Player

the absolute sound Cover Story by Paul Seydor. Photography by Adam Voorhes

DUCTION

ITALIAN SEDUCTION

I don't know audio history

well enough to remember when the first tube/solid-state hybrids were introduced. But in the eighties I used to roll my own by using a Nova solid-state preamplifier (with apologies to Mark Levinson, this MOSFET-based cult-classic remains for me the first true state-of-the-art solid-state preamp) to drive Quicksilver Audio's behemoth MX-190, one of the first really powerful all-tube amps, generating 95 watts a side that sounded like maybe four times that much. This setup, feeding various Acoustats or ProAc Studio 3s, gave me an ideal combination of low noise and distortion where the signal levels are low, and tube roundedness, dimensionality, and solidity in the room. I know it flies in the face of conventional wisdom, but in those days I always felt I got better reproduction when tubes drove the speakers.

The Italian company Pathos Acoustics has made hybrids a house specialty, though, as is common these days, tubes are used fore, transistors aft. (Lower-noise and lower-distortion circuits now make this a plausible alternative, though no doubt economics has a role.) These are the second and third Pathos products I've had for review. The first, the Pathos

One Mk II integrated amplifier (since superseded by a Mk III), I found among "the sweetest, most musically natural ambassadors for the tube/transistor hybrid approach" (Issue 160). I'm happy to report that the Logos integrated under review here offers a more powerful version—110Wpc into 8 ohms, as opposed to the One's 70—of essentially the same sound. The sweetness of the 70 is here replaced by restrained neutrality, a civilized authority that is the antithesis of big-amp breast-beating. The same goes for the Digit CD player, but with a difference, about which more later.

When the importer, Musical Surroundings's Garth Leerer, delivered the units, he put on the Reiner CD of Mahler's Fourth Symphony. Out of curiosity, I started digging through my shelves and was amazed to discover I had at least six other recordings: two Bernsteins, Zander, Salonen, Tennstedt, and Tilson —Thomas. So we indulged in some comparative listening. This initial experience spoke volumes for the Pathos components' ability to reveal a wide variety of recording philosophies and an even wider variety of interpretive approaches, from the sober-faced, rather scowling Reiner (in this of all Mahler symphonies!) to the hyper-dramatic early



Specs & Pricing

Pathos Logos Integrated Amplifier

Power: 110Wpc @ 8 ohms; 220Wpc @ 4 ohms

Frequency response: 2Hz-200kHz +/-0.5dB

THD: <0.05%

Dimensions: 17" x 16.5" x 6.7"

Weight: 62 lbs.

Price: \$4000

Digit Compact Disc Player

Dimensions: 19.5" x 18.5" x 3"

Weight: 14 lbs.

Price: \$2700

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Pathos Logos Integrated Amplifier and Digit CD Player

Bernstein and the lovingly caressed later one. (The most sheerly beautiful recording, a lovely performance too, is the most recent, Tilson Thomas's from San Francisco, with its nuanced, almost Debussyian soundscape.)

Throughout the many listening sessions, I found I kept making notes to this effect: "I get the feeling I'm hearing everything I need to hear without any of the usual audiophile hype." On *My Foolish Heart: Live at Montreux* [ECM], for example, Keith Jarrett's vocalizing (not a pretty sound) is in ample evidence, but it's up to you whether you want to concentrate on it or on the wonderful music-making, like the utterly hypnotic rendition of the title tune that Jarrett withholds in its entirety until the very end. In other words, detail is available but in an entirely uncoercive way: Leaves, moss, textures of bark are never allowed to obscure the tree.

Do these Pathos units favor one kind of music-making over another? Not in any way that I could tell. In the aforementioned Mahler comparisons, Salonen's lean, almost Hockney-colored Los Angeles sonorities were revealed as impartially as the glowing, almost Straussian colors of Bernstein's Concertgebouw. The Pathos components handle big symphonic material, like the Mata Rachmaninoff *Symphonic Dances*, with considerable punch, drive, and dynamics, and chamber material, like the Sitkovetsky *Goldbergs*, with scrupulous attention to felicities of expression. Play realistically recorded strings like those on Harmonia Mundi USA's extraordinary new Tokyo Quartet's Beethoven Opus 18 at a civilized level, close your eyes, and you will "see" the four string players arrayed across the front of your room. Vocalists are likewise rendered with a rare lack of imposed electronic character. (You can practically tell which vintage Sinatra you're listening to without reference to CD covers.)

Switching to vinyl sources—Basis Vector IV arm, 2200 turntable, Ortofon Windfeld pickup (review forthcoming), Nova Phenomena phono-preamp—left the same neutral, low-coloration personality, only translated into the terms of

analog. Which means that more richness and color were heard. When I cued up a really fabulous vintage recording like *This One's for Blanton* (Acoustic Sounds' 45 rpm version), that first plink from Ellington's right hand in the piano's upper register snapped me to attention and never let me go until I had played all four sides. That said, however, the Logos' is not the kind of presentation to leave you raving about "the sound." What I said about the Pathos One applies here as well: This is an amp for music listeners, not head-bangers, lease-breakers, or plaster-peelers.

In the imaging and soundstaging departments, the Pathos components, together and separately, typically set presentations slightly back, that is, a foot or so behind the plane of the speakers (exact distance is level dependent), with further depth generated from there back. Inasmuch as I listen mainly to Quad ESLs or other speakers of restricted (that is, directed) dispersion, the soundstage stays within the confines of the speakers (anything else I consider an artifact, however pleasing). But within these confines, things cohere solidly, with nice dimensionality. This is shown to excellent advantage on piano recordings. In my view, pianos are rather more difficult to reproduce to realistic effect than, say, symphony orchestras. Nobody knows what an orchestra should or would *realistically* sound like in a living room—Flanders and Swann were surely right: It might be "high fi-del-i-tee," but hardly "high fidelity"—yet we've all heard pianos in normal-sized rooms, so an aural picture of what constitutes realistic reproduction is arguably more familiar. The Richard Goode *Waldstein* [Nonesuch], my current favorite pull-the-stops-out piano recording, is powerfully projected by this Pathos duo except for the deepest, loudest passages in the left hand and the sound of his feet moving over the pedals. Which may have been a case of both the Quads and the amplifier giving out (though the speakers' protection circuits were never activated). Ease back on the overall level a tad, however, and, as with the Tokyo, I could close my eyes and imagine Goode right there in the room.



Pathos Logos Integrated Amplifier and Digit CD Player

The Logos is of impressive bulk, but at 110 watts into 8 ohms, it doesn't represent even a 3dB increase in *acoustic* output over the Pathos One. This was easily demonstrated when I switched to my long-standing reference, the McIntosh MC-402. At nearly four times the power, here is an ease and relaxation at high levels, a freedom from stress, that the Logos could not match. While I'm at comparisons, the 402, fed by Mac's C46 preamplifier, also commanded a bolder, more variegated tonal palette than the Logos and somewhat greater clarity and transparency (bear in mind this combination also costs over *twice* the price of the Logos alone).

I know there are many audiophiles who regard high neutrality, musical naturalness, or restraint as synonyms for boring, unexciting, or uninvolved. Indeed, I've already read one review of the Digit from across the Atlantic complaining about alleged suppression of high frequencies, excessive smoothness, and lack of involvement. I grant that of the two components, the Digit carries restraint about as far as you might want to go, while its tonal palette puts me more in mind of, say, Monet than Van Gogh. But never did I feel the reproduction was ever *positively* deficient in top-end extension or balance (most recordings have way excessive highs). As for involvement, one of the last CDs I played before wrapping up this review is Isabelle Faust's stunning new recording of the Beethoven's Violin Concerto and *Kreutzer* Sonata on Harmonia Mundi. If the Digit has any serious deficiencies in top-end response, it would certainly have robbed her instrument of harmonic richness, of which I

heard no evidence. And anyone who can listen to her and her pianist slash and burn their way through the fast portions of the first movement of the *Kreutzer*, with rapier-like pizzicatos and hair-trigger dynamics, and complain of lack of involvement and insufficient excitement must have a very different sense of what constitutes drive, pace, and rhythm from mine!

Where exactly do these components fit into the overall marketplace? Well, their styling makes them for all practical purposes unique. The minimalist Logos would be hard to beat for music lovers who desire excellent performance without having to engage with equipment as such. As my regular readers know, I prefer a higher degree of function and feature from my control units, so around this price I'd be mighty tempted by the Luxman L-550A II integrated [TAS 177]. I confess I've next to no idea of who is buying what when it comes to expensive CD players. For a little over two grand more than the Digit's \$2700 you can buy Luxman's DU-50 universal player [TAS 177], which will spin any five-inch disc on the planet except high-res video. For about half the price of the Digit you can get Benchmark's DAC-1 and any decent player-as-transport and have outstanding playback of Red Book sources. I ran the Digit's output into the Benchmark and found the DAC-1 to be more accurate-sounding: a bit cleaner and clearer, as well as airier, more well-ventilated and transparent. But within the terms of its slightly softer overall sound, the Digit nevertheless made beautiful music that might be preferred by any number of listeners, especially those with strong allegiances to analog. **TAS**

TECHNICAL STUFF

Like all Pathos products, aesthetically these go to the head of the class, the Logos distinctive even by these Italians' high-style standards (e.g., the heat sinks flanking the chassis are configured to spell "Pathos"). Almost everyone who saw the Logos on my equipment shelf wanted it. Also like other Pathos products, minimalism reigns and labeling is nonexistent. The Logos has only a volume control and a front-panel button, each for on/off and source-selection, all duplicated on the remote handset—a sleek wooden affair also lacking any sort of labeling. The preamplification section is powered by its own dedicated supply and features a pair of 6922 tubes at the input stage operated in pure Class A *sans* global feedback. The completely resistive volume-pot is a 100-step digital control (a centered LED indicates the numerical setting) that, it is claimed, achieves perfect channel balance. The output stage is dual-mono with oversized transformers for higher current. There are two pairs of balanced XLR and five RCA singled-ended inputs. A pair of jacks accesses preamp out, but the amp section cannot be operated separately.

Although mostly a Red Book player, the Digit uses a DVD transport that can play DVD-Audio, including DVDs burned from 24/192 downloads. (Rumor has it that the Digit is a forerunner to an eventual Pathos DVD-Video player.) Although the CD is visible through what looks like a top-load-

ing mechanism, the Digit is in fact a front-loader. As in the Logos, there is a pair of tubes, but here in the output stage and also operated pure Class A with no feedback. Pathos claims sophisticated error-correction circuitry and "constant group phase delay" filtering that minimizes phase distortion. With balanced circuitry throughout, Pathos recommends using the XLR outputs, which I did (RCAs are also provided). The absence of labeling on the amp is easy enough to live with, its functions few; but the Digit's a bit of a nightmare, the on/off button rather counter-intuitively placed second from the outside right (there are six buttons in all). Equally annoying is the beat or two that lapse between pressing a button and the initiation of the intended action. The remote handset, a disappointingly cheesy plastic affair, at least has labeling. Contrary to the instruction manual, when randomly selecting single-digit tracks, you must first enter "0," then the number. Since most CDs have few tracks exceeding ten, I found this a pain. (Most of the time I gave up and used the track advance or recede buttons.) In sum, while I quite enjoyed the truly lovely sound of this unit, its ergonomics leave much to be desired. Although Musical Surroundings supplied these units together, stylistically the Digit is sized and dimensioned to match the Pathos One integrated amplifier. **PS**