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Pathos Endorphin CD Player

The unorthodox approach

Wayne Garcia

It's a fair bet that any company named Pathos and any product named Endorphin did not originate with conformists. And indeed, this Italian company's motto is "the unorthodox approach."

Founded in the northern city of Vicenza in 1994, Pathos is the audio love-child of three close friends—Paolo Andriolo, an industrial designer schooled in Venice; Gaetano Zanini, a high-end audio retailer; and Gianni Borinato, a tech guy who came up with the idea for a new type of Class A amplifier circuit. As the rather romantic story goes, Gianni built a prototype amplifier, and using Gaetano's shop as a testing and listening lab, the three quickly decided that Borinato's circuit was so superior to anything else in the shop that the design should go into production. The zero-feedback circuit was dubbed INPOL (*Inseguire a Pompa Lineare*, or Linear Pump Tracker), and ended up in Pathos' first production unit, the unfortunately named but beautiful-looking T(win) T(ower) amplifier. That amplifier is still in production—the latest version is called the TT Anniversary—and it helped define two of the company's ongoing themes.

One is a horror of rectangular boxes and the "ugly" look the Pathos guys see

as rampant in the audio industry. As U.S. importer Garth Leerer of Musical Surroundings told me, "Their goal from the beginning was to make high-performance 'lifestyle' products that are as beautiful (or more so) than B&O's, but with the very finest sound." Andriolo and friends needn't worry about their stuff looking like anyone else's. Pathos electronics, like the Classic One MK II integrated amplifier reviewed by Paul Seydor in Issue 160, utilize a striking combination of metals, woods, and dramatic accents such as red capacitors and black acrylic, and are handmade in the company's three-year-old Vicenza factory (prior to that, Pathos was leasing a manufacturing facility).

As for the ziggurat-shaped Endorphin, which retails for \$8000, its aggressively modern appearance is not only a departure from Pathos' more romantic-looking earlier products, but is also radically different from any other CD player I've seen. A model of uncluttered design, the Endorphin adheres to the philosophy of "form follows function." Having determined that anything but a dedicated CD-only transport would result in a sonic compromise, and being disinterested in the then-ongoing but ultimately moot format war between

Specs & Pricing

MUSICAL SURROUNDINGS

5662 Shattuck Avenue
Oakland, California 94609
(510) 547-5006
musicalsurrroundings.com
pathosacoustics.com

Type: Top-loading hybrid CD player

Drive: Philips CDM Pro

Tube complement: Two 6H30

Type of outputs: Stereo XLR and RCA; coax and optical digital

Dimensions: 19.75" x 4.3" x 15.75"

Weight: 28 lbs.

Price: \$8000

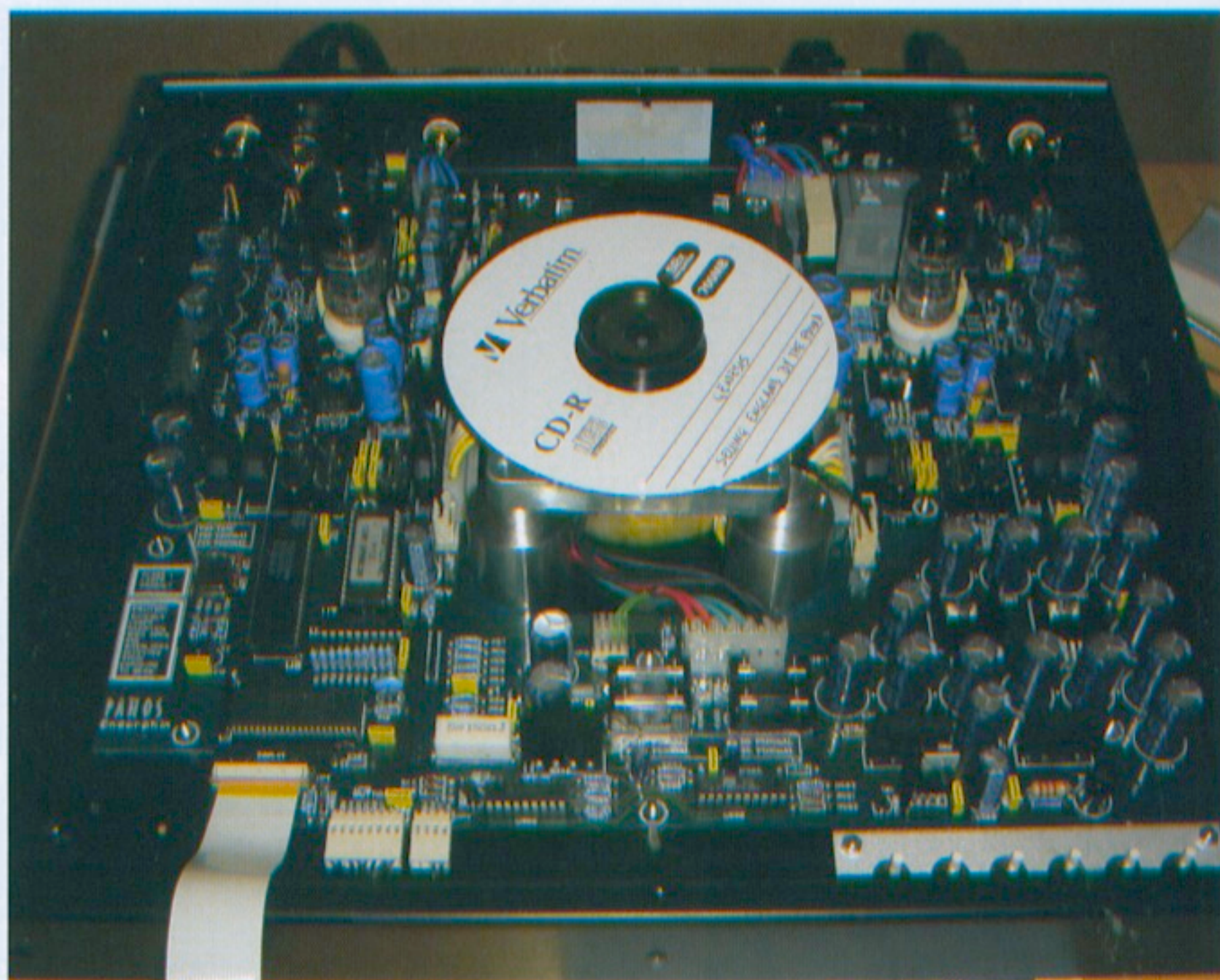
Associated Equipment

Avid Acutus Reference turntable, SME V arm, and Mobile Fidelity cartridge; Redpoint Model D turntable, Graham Phantom arm, and Transfiguration Temper V cartridge; MBL 1521 A CD transport, and 1511 E DAC; Artemis Labs LA-1 linestage and PL-1 phonostage; MBL 5011 preamp and 9007 monoblock amplifiers; Kharna Mini Exquisite loudspeakers; Kubala-Sosna Emotion interconnects, speaker cables, power cords, and Expression digital cable; TARA Labs Zero interconnects and digital cable, Omega speaker cables, The One power cords, and AD-10B Power Screen; Finite Elemente Spider equipment racks; Furutech DeMag; L'Art du Son CD cleaning fluid

Pathos Endorphin CD Player

SACD and DVD-A, Pathos built the Endorphin around the popular Philips CDM Pro transport, which is also used by the likes of Zanden, Audio Research, and others. The ziggurat-ish part of the player is a solid chunk of cast aluminum, a material also found in the clamp that sits atop the disc. These provide mechanical stability to the CD and make a striking visual contrast to the player's black top, which is composed of clear acrylic layered over black. The clamp itself takes a little getting used to. The first few times I tried to seat it I couldn't get the player to recognize that it had been fed a disc. But once I began easing the clamp on, gently rolling it from the back onto the front of the disc, I never again caused a glitch. The (manual) flip-up display window adds another nifty touch, as do the five unmarked control buttons, which, once used, are a snap to remember, so intuitive is the layout (Play, Pause, Stop, Forward, Back). Two remotes are supplied—one regular plastic type chock-full of buttons and one custom unit with the same five (still unmarked) function buttons found on the player.

A peek at a photo of the unit's inside layout reveals the Philips transport device and its stainless steel chassis mounts, as well as a toroidal transformer that resides under the transport, an arrangement which is said to aid the player's mechanical grounding. The analog outputs are mirror-

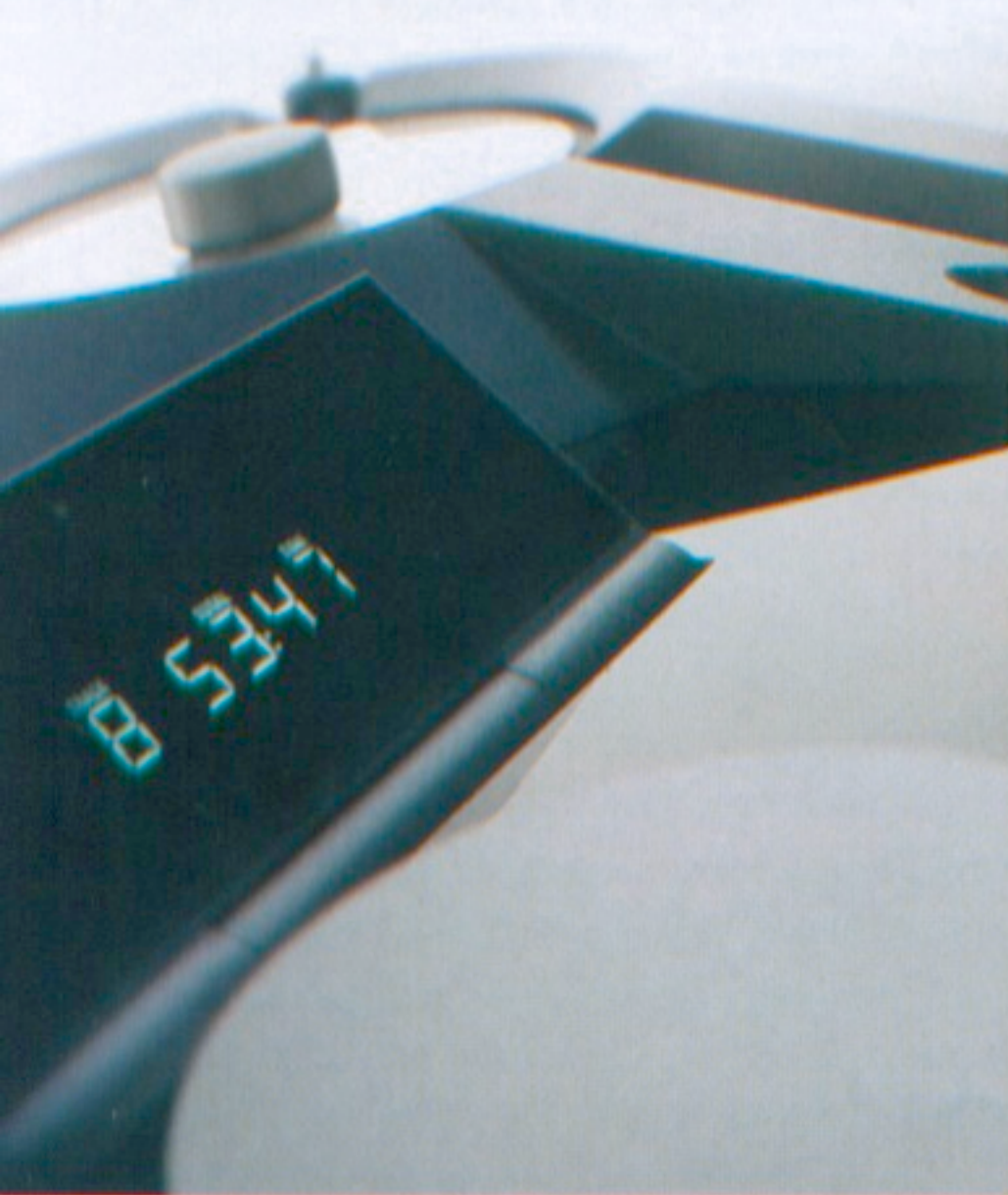


imaged, and a dense field of filter caps is spread across the circuit board, reflecting the Endorphin's use of 12 independently regulated power supplies. The 24-bit DAC is a chipset from Crystal, with low clock jitter and upsampling to 192kHz. But the main reason Pathos selected this DAC is that it is able to feed a balanced output directly to each of two Russian-sourced 6H30 tubes (one for each channel). This balanced-out capability has generated quite a buzz in the DIY world, and leads to the second Pathos constant: Except for the company's battery-powered solid-state phono stage, where tubes are too noisy to use with such low-level signals, all Pathos components are zero-feedback, fully balanced, hybrid designs, using a tube voltage-stage and solid-state (MOSFET) current amplification. Leerer also told me that, "Pathos does not use tubes because they sweeten the sound, but because they choose their devices based on what's best for each application."

And that, he says, also goes for the Endorphin. Although one naturally imagines a sweeter high from tubes than from solid-state (especially with a name like this one), the Endorphin—whether due to tubes or not—is one very sweet-sounding compact disc player. This

was evident from the first disc I placed in the unit's top-loading well, Louis Andriessen's recent opera, *Writing To Vermeer* [Nonesuch]. As (film writer and director) Peter Greenaway's libretto imagines it, while the great Delft painter is away from his family, he receives letters from his wife, mother-in-law, and model. Two sopranos and a mezzo sing the roles of the three letter writers, and along with a supporting chorus of women and children the opera is scored for orchestra and electronic music by Michel van der Aa. For lovers of the female voice, this is about as close to heaven as you'll get outside of Strauss' *Four Last Songs* or the *Verklärung* (Transfiguration) from Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*. In the opera's dreamy sounding prelude, the Endorphin gave an appropriately airy, slightly soft, almost impressionistic presentation of this quite good recording. The chorus was nicely laid out across a wide soundstage of impressive depth, and Susan Narucki's soprano was truly beautiful, with excellent projection and the kind of bloom that helps bring recorded music to three-dimensional life.

These qualities were further supported by one of Harry Pearson's perennial faves, Howard Hanson's "The Composer



Talks," from *Howard Hanson Conducts...* [Mercury], where the Endorphin's depth, air, three-dimensionality, and large-scale dynamic capability made for a thrilling experience.

On terrific live rock recordings, like the Grateful Dead's *Fillmore West 1969* [GD/WEA], I was also taken by the Endorphin's ability to differentiate the size and ambience of different recording venues, and its way with the tone and texture of bass instruments, from Phil Lesh's rumbling electric bass to the complex two-drummer arrangement the band used over most of its career. But I also noticed that the overall dynamic range didn't seem to be as free as I normally hear it, and that the "impressionistic" quality I heard with the Andriessen opera remained.

Moving on to avant-garde guitarist Nels Cline's recent take on the music of Andrew Hill on the CD *New Monastery*

[Cryptogramophone], the Endorphin displayed a wide palette of tone colors with the accompanying cornet, clarinet, accordion, bass, and percussion. Instrumental bodies were nicely fleshed out, with a richly layered if not super-weighty bottom end. And while Cline's guitar work was never less than involving, it lacked the whip-like precision and dynamic bite I'm used to hearing from my reference MBL 1521 A CD transport and 1511 E DAC, which, granted, are more than double the Endorphin's price.

All components have a sonic signature, and in my system I would characterize the Endorphin's as consistently lovely, rich in color and never dark or thick, with a beautiful harmonic expression, but not the last word in detail, transparency, and dynamic contrast.

For example, on one of my old favorites, pianist Martha Argerich's excellent recording of Ravel's *Gaspard*

de la nuit [Deutsche Grammophon], the Pathos revealed the ravishing beauty and complexity of Ravel's tone shading, and filled the air with overtones that seemed to linger forever, but the notes did not emerge from absolute silence, nor was there the same degree of air around individual notes or of the dynamic excitement I'm used to hearing from this piece. It's not that the Endorphin wasn't good—as the above examples illustrate, it is quite good. It simply fell short when compared to the best I know.

The Endorphin is an exciting first source component from a company that has managed to build its distribution to some 30 countries in roughly a decade. And while its sound may not match my reference, its strikingly original looks and beautiful sound will win over plenty of music lovers. **TAS**