

FROM THE EDITOR

The two biggest problems facing the high-performance audio industry today are, first, a general lack of awareness that it exists, and, second, the perception among those who *have* heard of the high end that this hobby is for the super-wealthy and the super-weird only. *The Absolute Sound* is committed to overcoming these obstacles to more people enjoying good sound.

To that end, as many of you have noticed, we're reviewing more entry-level and mid-priced gear. While this may be disconcerting to some long-time readers, I'll bet that even they started off with modest systems and built them up over the years. Affordable yet highly musical components are what initially convinced all of us that spending time, money, and intellectual energy on high-performance music-reproduction equipment paid us back in spades in musical enjoyment. Without those vital first rungs on the ladder, this magazine could never hope to share its passion for music and the quality of musical reproduction with a larger audience.

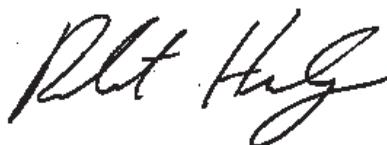
We've also introduced some graphic changes to TAS to make what we have to say more appealing and accessible. Our seventeen-page feature on the Consumer Electronics Show in this issue is a good example.

What hasn't changed at TAS, however, is our fundamental belief that because music is important, reproducing it with the highest possible fidelity is important. When I say "highest possible fidelity," I don't mean that *only* state-of-the-art gear is worthy of consideration. Rather, our goal at TAS is to help readers achieve the highest possible fidelity *for their given audio budget*.

This statement may strike some as a rejection of the idea of the absolute sound—the goal of recreating in our homes the sound of unamplified instruments in a real acoustic space. Entry-level products will obviously fall far short of that goal. But rather than considering entry-level products a rejection of the absolute sound, I see them—and all true high-end products, no matter their price—as an *expansion* of that ideal. If entry-level components come closer to delivering the absolute sound than mass-market ones do, then we need to bring such components to the attention of as many people as possible. And if TAS can catch the young music lover before he buys an audio appliance, and show him a more rewarding path, we've performed a great service not only to him, but to the high-end audio industry and, ultimately, to music and musicians.

To some few, reviews of budget equipment will always seem like an abandonment of what this magazine stands for, as stated in our name. But they are confusing an epistemology with an ideal. Yes, the absolute sound is the ideal that we all strive for, but it's also an epistemology—a way of discovery and knowing. That way of knowing—comparing the sound of unamplified instruments in a real acoustic space to its reproduction—gives us insight into the sonic merits of audio-reproduction components, no matter what their price. The concept of the absolute sound is a guide to discovery, not a justification for rejecting products that fall short of perfection. Of course, we'll continue to explore the state of the art in music reproduction technology in HP's Workshop and The Cutting Edge. Knowing what the state of the art is informs everything we do, but it isn't all that we do.

Our goal is simply to connect people with music. Can an audio magazine have a more noble purpose?



Robert Harley

the absolute sound

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design/production **Design Farm, Inc.**
editor-in-chief/publisher, AVGuide.com
Chris Martens
web editor **Jerry Sommers**

Absolute Multimedia, Inc.
chairman and ceo **Thomas B. Martin, Jr.**
vice president/publisher **Mark Fisher**
advertising reps **Cheryl Smith**
(512) 439-6951
Marvin Lewis, MTM Sales (718) 225-8803

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phone (888) 732-1625 (U.S.) or (760) 745-2809 (outside U.S.), e-mail
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editorial matters
Address letters to: The Editor, *The Absolute Sound*, PO Box 1768, Tijeras, New Mexico 87059, or e-mail rharley@absolutemultimedia.com.

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publishing matters
Contact Mark Fisher at the address below or e-mail mfisher@absolutemultimedia.com.

Publications Mail Agreement 40600599
Return Undeliverable Canadian Addresses to
Station A / PO Box 54 / Windsor, ON N9A 6J5
Email: info@theabsolutesound.com

Absolute Multimedia, Inc.
8121 Bee Caves Road, Suite 100
Austin, Texas 78746
phone (512) 439-6951 • fax (512) 439-6962
e-mail tas@absolutemultimedia.com

www.theabsolutesound.com



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HP's Workshop

I. The Lector CDP-Seven Compact-Disc Player

It has long been a high-end audio axiom that products approaching state-of-the-art performance will induce pulmonary arrest in consumers getting a gander at their exospheric prices. One happy break with this ignoble tradition came not so long ago via the Hurricane amplifiers from Antique Sound Labs. Here we found performance that we would normally have associated with electronics in the \$20,000 price range from two tubed mono amps that rang the register at just over \$4000, and whose unique sort of sonic realism is not bettered by any.

And now we have another genuinely dazzling audio component that verges on the state of the art—wiping out the competition, even competition priced at twenty times its cost.

It is a CD playback unit from Italy called the Lector (no kin to you-know-whom). It has an analog tube output stage with a separate power supply; it upsamples; it looks like the black beauty it is; and it costs a mere \$3300. (When I use the word “mere” in this context, I intend a comparative comment on the price of today’s “better” players.)

A short backward glance: The original Gamut CD player was priced at \$3000, but it is no longer in production in the form I reviewed it. (Gamut now has a new owner.) It also came in, without much in the way of comment at either end of the audio spectrum, sporting a decided lack of dynamic nuance. The MSB Platinum player, whose overall performance I found competitive with the better Burmester decks, is priced at about \$8000. It is a good, solid performer that does not injustice to the music, but it is not twice as good as the new Lector. The MSB, which I do admire, gets all the notes in the right places, but is missing the commanding “authority” of the Lector. And I do not find the CD playback of the new generation of components that play multiple media (e.g., SACD, DVD-A, and the like) remotely competitive with the best Burmester models or the MSB—a frustration when you consider that regular CDs are going to be with us for a long while to come.

The Lector arrived in Sea Cliff (courtesy of Scot Markwell, who drove into Manhattan to

retrieve a sample of the player from the importer’s warehouse) during this past winter’s severe cold snap. Even after being exposed to temperatures well below 20 degrees (Fahrenheit) and inserted at once into the Room 3 “reference system,” this un-broken-in player immediately made its presence, and its superiority, unmistakably known.

The first thing that was apparent was the Lector’s way with dynamics. Not only did it handle large-scale moments with aplomb, but along with those macro-dynamics, it rendered nuances—small, delicate dynamic shifts and transitions—with equal authority, gradating a wider range of dynamics from low-level pianissimos to huge orchestral climaxes. As a result, you feel as if the music, via a 16/44 system, is coming to you for the very first time, as if some kind of stepped compression has been removed from the way ordinary players decode digital dynamics. In this regard, it more nearly suggests the dynamic range you’ll hear from first-class SACD discs (decoded, of course, through Ed Meitner’s gear). Odd that during these days of the standard CD’s sunset, a player emerges that mimics the strengths of new higher-resolution formats.



The Lector also demonstrated command in reproducing both the width and depth of the soundstage. In particular, its rendition of depth was minus the normal apparitions we call “layering” (which I now see as a dissembling of the acoustic truth). What the Lector does, in common with the best cartridges on the best LPs, is create a three-dimensional field, without any seams, one that seems to extend back further than the room’s rear wall, but does so without calling attention to itself. In other words, you’re not conscious of how natural the field of depth is unless you make an effort to become conscious of it. Real depth you just forget about; the artificial kind always calls attention to itself—“Oh, wow, layered depth!”

The other thing it told us, right out of the box, was more of the truth about the harmonic structure of the individual instruments playing in that field; and with this filling out of harmonic information, the Lector reproduced the individual orchestral images with “body,” in other words, with their own dimensionality, their own 3-D likeness, and not with stereopticon “painted ships upon a painted ocean” flatness.

One of the CDs we played was that remarkable EMI recording of Puccini’s *Tosca* [EMI 5 57173] with a well-nigh overwhelming first-act finale—Scarpia a’bellowing; the cannon a’booming; organ pedal notes resounding; the choral forces a’singing; and the orchestra going whole hog. As much as I like this recording, and as often as I have used it as demonstration of how good conventional digits can sound, I had not, until that moment, gotten J. Gordon’s fabled “goosebumps,” nor been as tempted to “conduct” away (which, of course, I am not competent at, even in imitation). Particularly awesome was the way the Lector reproduced Ruggero Raimondi’s (Scarpia) voice. You could hear his chest sounding, a tough problem for analog and until now something I hadn’t heard from any digital.

To be sure, all was not, shall we say in a high-falutin’ way, *ab paradisum*. There was an upper-midrange brassiness and sizzle that wasn’t right, and, I thought, evidence of the fact that the Lector was “cold” and still virginal. And so we let the unit play continuously, evenings and all, for the next 100 hours (except for those short breaks when I was auditioning phonograph cartridges).

Sure enough, it wasn’t more than a day later that the aberration in the upper middle frequencies vanished.

Once that happened, I began to wonder if the Lector’s ability to transform CD sound extended to less-than-wondrously recorded discs, so I pulled out a new CD (from Naxos) of Alla Pavlova’s compositions. Pavlova now lives on Long Island not far from Sea Cliff, which is why I was curious to see if she, a Russian émigrée, were the real thing compositionally (like the amazing Jennifer Higdon—*vide, blue cathedral* on Telarc—is). I still haven’t made up my mind about the woman as composer, but there are moments in her work that I am intrigued by, especially the first and last thirds of the first movement of her *Third Symphony*. Like I said, the sound isn’t bad, just good enough at moments to make you wish it were better. You’re expecting me to say, perhaps, “*Ecce, a miracle.*” Nope, no way. But what was a promising recording with many rough spots became, in the Lector’s hands, appetizing enough to sit through, with some moments of real enjoyment.

To take another case, consider “Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds” from *Baroque Beatles* [Atma ACD 2 2218]. To me this disc—composed of Beatles’ songs transcribed for baroque instruments—mostly doesn’t work, but “Lucy” does and does so spectacularly. The sound is better on this cut than elsewhere (although I think the overly reverberant ambience unreal), so much so that I often use it as a demonstrator. With the Lector, all sorts of individualizing harmonics help identify the early instruments being played, while bringing out details hitherto masked, including some exuberant background shouts by the Quebec musicians toward song’s end. What was, pre-Lector, demonstration-quality sound became, with it, genuinely entrancing music.

Eventually, I turned to the soundtrack from *The Thin Red Line*, one of the best sounding CDs in my collection (along with *Gladiator* from the same sources). It’s HDCD, and the Lector, like so many other CD players from Europe, isn’t. But that wasn’t what I was looking/listening for. I wanted to find out if the Lector could reveal more of the inner voices in Hans Zimmer’s thickly scored opus, and make clear its sometimes congested-sounding lowest octave. But, hey, the bottom end sounded muddy to me—smeared and just a bit boomy.

Contemplating the “character” of the unit as it had played out during the first days of evaluation, I found it definitely dark, definitely yin-ski, even protuberant at certain of the middle low frequencies. Which would be a boon, I thought, for folks with not much speaker response below 40 or so Hertz, which, of course, are most folks. I did a little research and learned, from several sources, that the Lector, like the multidisc players from Teac/Esoteric and Panasonic, needed all the additional isolation one could supply. Mine was already sitting on the Arcici Suspense racks, and on its own feet. Furthermore, according to Victor Goldstein (Fanfare International, the importer), the designers of the Lector took great pains to make sure the unit’s internal isolation system was unusually well designed.

What the hell, I said to myself, and promptly put some rubber feet under the Lector’s own, sort of like galoshes. (Don’t even think of any other analogy.)

Wham bam! The dark coloration disappeared. The sometimes single-note boom disappeared, and the unit’s frequency response seemed to extend downward well into the bottom octave (which I define as 20 to 40 Hertz), creating pulsating low bass when such was there to pulsate. In practical audible terms, on the *Red Line* soundtrack, this meant the two types of bass drums used in the third track (one hit with a soft mallet, the other with a hard one) were sharply contrasted. Before the extra isolation, the first of the drum hits on the cut (the soft ones) were muddy, boomy, and overly reverberant, while the second (harder) lacked the leading waveform that the big Burmester units rendered so distinctively. After the extra isolation was applied, not only were the drums more truthfully depicted, but we could now hear the ambient air around both the drums and the other very low-frequency instruments in this and two other cuts on the CD (namely Tracks 6 and 7).

And with this change the Lector’s presentation of perspective also changed from forward, particularly at the bottom, to

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very nearly perfectly neutral for every CD commended to its mechanics. The top octave, which had sounded rolled (or is that submerged?), assumed its proper balance, indicating extension well up into the top two octaves, with leading transit attacks suddenly quite well-focused.

In short, with this disc and many another, the Lector had about the same tonal character and coloration as Audio Research's all-tubed units, circa the SP-10 era.

Just for fun, Scot Markwell suggested I remove the plastic damping sheet affixed to the *Red Line* disc. Back when, it had helped smooth out rough patches in the sound. He suspected that, with the Lector, all such artificial patchworkings could be abandoned. So, off it came. I can't say I was entirely surprised to hear a change in the disc. It was as if a veil or perhaps even something more like a sonic scrim that tamped down the life in the recording were now gone. There was no increase in any unpleasant artifacts, no extra bite or edginess, just the music with more information being retrieved in the upper partials, which led to a more textured sense of color.

The acid test? The Mercury/Howard Hanson CD of *The Composer and His Orchestra*. This is, without doubt, the most transparently recorded and tonally "right" recording of orchestral instruments and their dynamics Mercury ever made, or, for that matter (most probably), anyone else. Hanson's light Midwestern—and slightly nasal—tenor voice is no small thing to get right. But, beyond that, there are most of the instruments of the orchestra being showcased in musical fashion, from their own place on the original soundstage at Eastman Rochester and with both their frequencies and dynamics virtu-

ally intact. I'd already found that that, in addition to the human voice, the Lector was a wonder with string sound, from the guitars of the Romeros (another demanding Mercury CD) to those in the introductory passages of this disc. Until the Lector, the somewhat scrawny string section of Eastman players had always sounded strained, even harsh, during the *forte* sections. But not with the Lector. They sound like a small section, but their intensity still maintains the kind of naturalness you might expect when hearing a small orchestra at play.

Some of the more cynical out yonder might think that I am just hearing a sophisticated set of tube colorations in the strengths of the Lector. I would beg to differ. Colorations produce exaggerations of the sort any trained listener (to unamplified music) can immediately spot. Inner voices, harmonic information, attacks are lost or "smeared."

Not so with the Lector. What this player does is let you hear more information, in my case, more than I ever thought could be encoded on the best 16/44 CDs. It removes colorations and an electronic glaze over the sound, which some think "accurate."

That said, I think the Lector represents a new wave in CD sound. What it does right, it does with such authority and in so many areas that I may, for the moment, be insensible to its shortcomings, which must surely exist, but certainly not in any great magnitude. There is a more elaborate four-piece version (to be priced at \$6000 or so) coming, and I can hardly wait, but even if it weren't, for the experienced CD-o-phile, I'd say you can't go wrong here. Indeed, if you're at all like me as a listener, you may find yourself with a first-time case of digitally-induced goosebumps.