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## New Year's (Higher) Resolution

**Date:** January/February 2007

**Written By:** Mike Quinn

Last month we examined a few home entertainment products that didn't fit into the convenient categories provided by our usual monthly soirees. Since there wasn't enough room for everything competing for your bucks, we'll finish up this month with a few other goodies that can greatly enhance the jazz-listening experience in your home. That's what we're here for, after all: improving audio-for-jazz resolution, one living room at a time.

### Speakers of the Future

It's impossible to read the news these days without the constant reminder that real estate prices, by and large, continue to spiral endlessly upward. Anyone who's looked for an apartment in New York, San Francisco or Boston knows that domestic space now commands an astronomical premium, so expansive yet affordable living rooms are a thing of the distant past. Thus choosing



*NHT Xd Powered Loudspeaker System*



*Anti-Cable Speaker Cable*



*Rega Apollo CD Player*

a high-performance speaker system for the square-footage-challenged can be difficult, particularly if high style is also a consideration. Speakers capable of achieving high levels of resolution and volume are typically too large for smaller listening spaces, both in terms of sonics and their sheer overpowering physical size.

NHT (nhthifi.com) offers an elegant solution for this dilemma in the stunningly beautiful Xd powered loudspeaker system (\$6,000). With two handsome satellite speakers, a robust subwoofer and an outboard processor/amplifier module (the key to the system's success), the Xd offers a peek at what the future of audio will probably be like, at least in many homes. The Xd is a veritable intelligent loudspeaker system, unlike most speakers that rely on a passive internal electronic crossover to channel each frequency band to the appropriate speaker driver: highs shuttled to the tweeter, lows to the woofer and so on. The problem is that these crossovers are often inexact, so there is usually a too-large overlap in the frequency assignments, such that the woofer has to deal with frequencies it shouldn't, and the tweeters likewise. This inevitably mucks things up in the resulting sound of the speaker as a whole. In addition, these passive crossovers can't compensate for individual anomalies in the drivers themselves. Sometimes a specific tweeter might have a small frequency peak or dip which will also have adverse effects on what you eventually hear.

The Xd handles both of these issues in a novel way. It essentially places active crossovers before the amplifier, then bi-amps the speakers so that the tweeter, midrange and subwoofer all have their own amps. Since all this processing is handled in the digital domain, the signal for each frequency band can also be altered, or equalized, to reflect any dips or peaks in the drivers themselves, eliminating those particular problems up front. Most importantly, the crossover points between each band can be more exact, so that only the appropriate high frequencies reach the tweeter, the appropriate mids to the midrange driver and so on, eliminating that sort of muddiness that can occur when two very dissimilar drivers are reproducing the same information.

After the processing, the signals are fed into their appropriate high-efficiency switching amp of which there are four in the box, one for the highs and one for the mids of each satellite. The subwoofer has its own self-contained 500-watt amp specifically designed to power the walloping lows that emanate from the dual 11-inch drivers in this quite fashion-conscious unit.

In addition, the musical signal can be EQ'ed to compensate for the satellites' room placement in order to optimize the sonics in any given system setup. Whether the satellites are up against a rear or side wall, or placed well into the room away from all

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walls, the Xd knows how to accommodate and adjust the output accordingly.

Did I already mention that these babies are really, really good looking? The sats, which occupy a very small footprint, come mounted on distinctively designed matching stands and feature a stunning high-gloss finish that comes in a variety of colors. Their small size and the adjustable equalization allow them to be placed nearly anywhere in the room and still produce grand music that belies their diminutive appearance. The matching sub is also compact and can be placed conveniently out of the way, though it will pay off soundwise to experiment with sat placement.

So what about the sound? Well, chances are you have never heard such large, lifelike music coming from such a small system. The integration of the various drivers is seamless and the overall presentation is nothing short of unbelievable, both in the sheer size of the image and the rhythmic and tonal accuracy. Every detail in sound is accounted for and the bottom end is very present and punchy—not bloated in any way. A Norah Jones vocal floated magically—almost palpably—between the satellites, while her backing band cooked along behind her, pitch perfect and perfectly sculpted in a nearly holographic way.

This is not an inexpensive system for sure, but the price seems more like a bargain when you consider the system includes not only three excellent speakers, but also five high-performance amplifiers and some groundbreaking processing technology, all housed in an easy-on-the-eyes, visually sophisticated bundle. If your domestic space is in short supply and you treasure a sound system that will make jazz come alive therein, then the NHT Xd system merits an audition.

### **Making a Solid Connection**

When I bought my first truly high-end system back in the late '80s, the dealer sold me what at the time were considered to be some of the best speaker cables around: impressively fat, well advertised and supposedly state of the art, or close to it. As time passed, I realized my speakers and amps had more potential than I was getting from them, so I went back to the dealer for advice. He suggested I try new speaker cable to alleviate these problems, and though I was a bit incredulous, I agreed to the experiment. I assumed I would try 'em out and return them the next week. What I was not prepared for was the actual outcome. Suddenly my speakers had bass they'd never exhibited, and a previously noticeable lack of cohesion and clarity in the high frequencies disappeared. It was almost like having different speakers or a new amp—the differences were that apparent. So I made that switch permanent, a clear no-brainer.

One of the main differences between the first cables and the second pair was their construction: the first was a braided multi-strand design comprised of many, many tiny copper strands woven and twisted, and surrounded by thick layers of insulation; the second was a thick solid-core copper wire with only very thin plastic insulation. I've been a big believer in solid-core cable ever since.

In the meantime, the cable business has grown into a multimillion-dollar affair with some boutique speaker cables going for tens of thousands of dollars per pair, real insanity in my humble opinion. And apparently to many others as well, including engineer Paul Speltz, who has recently introduced his own line of cables dubbed the Anti-Cable ([anticables.com](http://anticables.com)) because they are unlike most modern high-end wire: They don't cost a fortune and they don't have that thick layer of insulation which has been proven to degrade the sound of cable. Insulation, technically referred to as the dielectric, can affect the musical signal by storing some of the electrical energy from the wire, acting like a capacitor, and then releasing it sporadically back into the cable, thus distorting and smearing the signal and the sound.

Speltz's solution is to utilize a thick, high-quality solid-core copper wire, insulated simply with a light, airtight coating which is there mainly to prevent sonically harmful oxidation. His no-BS wire runs about 10 bucks a foot, or \$80 for a standard eight-foot pair, quite a bargain relative to much of the high-strung exotica on the market today.

Speltz explains the cable's qualities this way: "We believe the Anti-Cables are sonically transparent and neutral because they virtually eliminate the most common source that gives speaker cable their sonic signature, the plastic dielectric material. Beyond the extremely thin red coating, there is nothing left but air, and air is a near-ideal insulation dielectric because it causes virtually no dielectric effect."

Indeed, using the Anti-Cable in my personal system allowed me to experience these qualities firsthand. Bass definitely tightened up and was also fuller and more present. An increased focus in the midrange became apparent, especially on vocals and acoustic piano, both of which became more fun to listen to after the new cables were installed. In addition, there was no loss of high-frequency information nor was even a trace of distortion added.

If you are still using inexpensive "zip" cord in your audio setup or one of the more costly well-known cables and not getting what you think you should be out of your components, consider switching your speaker cable. It really can make a difference, and the Anti-Cable is an incredibly affordable way to do this. If you don't like the cable, Speltz offers a 30-day return period,

but chances are you won't need to take advantage of that offer. Speltz also offers interconnects utilizing this same wire, but in a much lighter gauge, likewise affordable, and likewise effective. Thanks to drummer Billy Drummond for turning us on to the Anti-Cable.

### **All Hail the CD Sun God**

It's ironic that, as dedicated CD players become harder to find on mass-market shelves—mostly replaced by DVD players which now multitask in many homes—the technology of CD playback continues to improve by leaps and bounds. Today's better players, i.e., lesser known, high-end products, are light years ahead of the players of just five or 10 years ago. Even the \$500-\$1,000 players of 2006 leave the \$5,000-plus units of 1998 in the dust.

And though we'll do a more complete survey of some very wonderful players later in the year, I had to jump the gun to let you know about one in particular, the Rega Apollo (rega.co.uk, \$995). It is just that good that I couldn't hold back. So let's just cut to the chase: I want to own this CD player; it's just that good. Is that loud and clear yet?

Roy Gandy of the U.K.'s Rega Research made his fame and fortune designing some of the best turntables to revolve around the sun. Along with Linn and Nottingham, Rega is at the top of the UK turntable heap, which speaks volumes in that very stiff competition. But when CDs entered the equation, Gandy took his time. As late as 1996, he introduced the first Rega CD player, the much-lauded Planet. He had to ensure that any music device bearing the Rega name would live up to the standards set by his exalted 'tables. It was definitely worth waiting for.

Flash forward to late 2005. After three years of intensive design, Rega introduced the successor to the Planet, somehow managing to keep it at the same just under a grand price point. It was also worth the wait. Like the name change, the Apollo is no planet; it's more like a digital deity!

In the often messy world of digital, only a few big names have produced the chipsets/software that all players have used to harvest and control the information from those shiny silver discs. And since most silver disc players made these days include the initials DVD in their description, those big-name companies have ceased to service the dedicated CD player market. This presented Gandy with an interesting challenge, and Rega, along with a few other UK firms, developed completely new controller software that takes advantage of today's more robust computing and processing power. The result is a dramatically increased computing capacity with 20Mb of memory in the chipset that helps stabilize playback and error

correction tremendously.

In addition to this, the Apollo employs one of the best 24-bit DACs on the market, sports a greatly improved power supply and features some dramatic improvements to the output amplifier of the unit. The CD transport is also new, though like the Planet, still top-loading. Unlike the Planet and its magnetic puck, the Apollo uses three spring-loaded ball bearings to hold the disc in place. A few other goodies: the Apollo is MP3 friendly, the remote allowing for total navigation of MP3 discs; a button on the remote allows you to turn off the display lighting which results in even better sound by eliminating electrical interferences injected by the display. All of these upgrades combine to create a truly astonishing piece of gear.

I don't think I've heard a "one-box" CD player sound as good as the Apollo. In fact, I'm sure I haven't. Yeah, the detail is there with resolution to spare, the frequency extension and balance are exemplary and the tonal accuracy is likewise superb. But the best quality I've found in the Apollo is its natural way with music. Nothing's added; nothing's subtracted. It's easy to listen to and the music that flows from this thing is simply, well, it's music. I am able to hear things in a new way through the Apollo, with more nuance, more rightness to the rhythm and more clarity than I can remember from other players. The overall feeling of listening to the Apollo is damned close to listening to vinyl.

Having worked with Brazilian music for nearly 30 years, I'm very familiar with the sounds made by all those mesmerizing percussion instruments, the deep-voiced seven-string guitars and so on. The Apollo won me over when playing an old Brazilian favorite from 1977, singer Beth Carvalho's *Nos Botequins da Vida*, which explodes with all those distinctive instruments. I was able to finally hear the unique sonority produced by the calfskin drumheads of the low-pitched surdos, or bass drums, which mark the beat of traditional sambas. There is a certain muffled ringing of the head just after it is struck that is rarely heard on CD; the Apollo presented it clearly and naturally, such that I could have almost been fooled into thinking the drum was in the room with me. And the high-pitched staccato of the metallic jingles from the rattling tambourines was also easy to follow, while some lesser players can distort this light yet driving instrument into oblivion. And Carvalho's husky voice was as rich and full as real life, demanding the listener's attention as only she can. I've heard this disc hundreds of times, on vinyl and CD, and I think the Apollo offers the best reproduction of it I've ever heard.

My nightly routine includes fairly regular doses of Glenn Gould playing Bach on piano. The Apollo catches every nuance of Gould's instrument, including the leading percussive edge of the

hammer hitting the string, like no other digital playback I've heard, at least anything anywhere near this price point. Gould's Jarrett-like humming also comes into focus in a new and fascinating way, charming and in no way distracting.

Perfectly rendered piano, commanding female vocals and dance-inducing Brazilian jangles: What more can you hope for? The Apollo is a top-notch component, and anyone searching for a new CD player should definitely give it a spin. It may not quite best Rega's staple turntables, but it comes closer than it has any right to. The Sun God has definitely emerged a winner for Gandy and his crew at Rega.

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