

Where Did We Go Wrong?

By J. Gordon Holt • September, 1992 Editor's Introduction:

Thirty years ago this month, in September 1962, J. Gordon Holt, lately Technical Editor of High Fidelity magazine, was working on the contents of the first issue of his brainchild The Stereophile, a magazine that would judge components on how they actually sounded. We thought it appropriate, therefore, to use the occasion of the 1992 Summer Consumer Electronics Show, held in late May in Chicago, to invite some 200 members of the international high-end industry to a dinner to celebrate the occasion. Larry Archibald dug deep into the magazine's coffers; Ralph Johnson took time off from organizing the 1993 High End Hi-Fi Show to burn up the long-distance telephone lines faxing invitations; the conversation was excellent, the food superb, and the wine even better. Which is probably why the venerable JGH took the opportunity to remind the assembled luminaries what this whole business is supposed to be about. Here follows the text of his speech. I hope you find it as stimulating reproduced in these pages as did those who heard it live.—John Atkinson

Ladies, gentlemen, and esteemed members of the press: I thank you all for helping us to celebrate our 30th anniversary, and hope you enjoyed the food and wine as much as I did. And thank you, Larry, for making all this possible.

As I look around me tonight, I see a lot of old, familiar faces...some almost as old as mine, I might add. We old-timers remember the bright promise of what was then called "high fidelity": perfect reproduction of real, live music. We knew it was probably unattainable, like the legendary Holy Grail, but the search for it gave us a purpose and a direction—somewhere to go and something to aim for.

During the 115 years since Thomas Edison started all this, we have seen an incredible amount of technological progress. We went from acoustical to electrical, from tinfoil to aluminized polycarbonate, from mono to stereo, from direct disc to tape and back again, from 4 minutes per side to 75, and from 10dB S/N ratio to 96dB.

Every component, from microphone to loudspeaker, became smoother, cleaner, and more detailed, and all the while, manufacturers were making bold claims that their equipment sounded "just like being there."

Even today, the PR handout for members of the general public attending the 1992 Summer CES states, and I quote: "At the core of high-end audio is the pursuit of the live-music experience." The dream continues.

Or does it?

I've been getting the impression that we don't believe our own hype anymore. No one today would claim seriously that a reproducing system sounds "just like the real thing." And we're right. I've heard hundreds of classical concerts, a few stadium rock concerts, and a number of electric instruments playing in nightclubs and music stores, and I can attest that the vast majority of so-called high-end systems don't come CLOSE to reproducing those sounds.

But what's worse is that, among ourselves, we seem to have come to a tacit agreement that it's no longer necessary, or even desirable, for a home music system to sound like the real thing.

We speak in hushed and reverent tones about reproducing the ineffable beauty of music, when in fact much real music is harsh and vulgar and ugly. We design the all-important musical midrange out of our equipment in order to try—vainly, I might add—to re-create the illusion of three-dimensional space through what is essentially a two-dimensional reproducer. And whenever we hear a loudspeaker or a CD player that shows subversive signs of sounding more "alive" or "realistic" than most, we dismiss it out of hand as being too "forward" or "aggressive." As if a lot of real music isn't forward and aggressive!

Where did we go wrong?

Part of this new skepticism about reproduced realism is because we've trained ourselves to listen well—perhaps too well. We've learned how to listen into the fabric of the sound, and hear the small distortions that mean "imperfection," so our ears have become very hard to fool. Yet how often

have all of us heard music from a distance at an unexpected time and been startled by it because we knew instantly it wasn't reproduced, it was LIVE? How did we know so quickly unless, in fact, the real thing sounded completely different from what we're accustomed to hearing reproduced? Because that's where we're at. Real sounds very different from reproduced.

This does not need to be so. Those of us who work in the subjective end of audio know from long experience how to "shape" the performance of a loudspeaker, for instance, to make it sound almost any way we want it to. Why, then, can we not shape it to sound more like the signal going into it? We can. The question is more a matter of "Why don't we?"

The idea that all we are trying to do is make equipment that gives the listener some sort of magical emotional response to a mystical experience called "music" is all well and good, but it isn't what High End is all about. In fact, high fidelity was originally a reaction to the gorgeously rich-sounding console "boom boxes" that dominated the home-music market during the 1940s!

I've been hearing comments recently to the effect that the old excitement has gone out of High End. "Nothing seems to be happening any more" is heard time and again here at CES. Even those eternal optimists, John Atkinson and Larry Archibald, have voiced similar sentiments. I agree. I feel the same way, but I think I know the reason.

I think it's because we've lost our direction. We have the feeling we've arrived, that we've done what we set out to do. And in a way, we have.

The High End in 1992 is a multi-million-dollar business. It has recognition, clout, even a publicity and lobbying arm. But it's an empty triumph, because we haven't accomplished what we set out to do. The playback still doesn't sound "just like the real thing."

People, let's start getting back to basics. Let's put the "re" back into "reproduction." Let's believe our own hype, and promote products that dare to sound as "alive" and "aggressive" as the music they are trying to reproduce.

It won't be easy to fool an educated listener into thinking the reproduction is real, but then none of the other technological advances during the past 115 years have come easily, either. But the pursuit of that Holy Grail of perfect sound—even temporarily, if not forever—could give us back the sense of purpose we have lost in recent years.

It might even bring back some of the old excitement.—J. Gordon Holt

Listening #13

By Art Dudley • January, 2004

When some people record music, they make an effort to record the ambient sound of the hall or other performing space along with it. On the other side of the coin, some engineers work to capture only the sounds of the performers, so the recordings they make sound comparatively dry. And, of course, there are engineers who don't make an effort one way or the other, and whose work contains whatever hall sound does or does not come their way by accident.

The libraries and private collections of the world are filled with great recordings—masterpieces, in some instances—that were made in all the various ways described above.

Now let's switch gears and think about loudspeakers. Some are made to give the listener only what's on (one channel of) a recording. Others use, say, a rear-firing tweeter to give the spatial component of music playback a little pizzazz. And others still go thoroughly batshit in this regard, with drivers aimed every which way in an effort to "reproduce" the "true sound" of the "concert hall." (My overuse of quotation marks is meant to imply, of course, the misguidedness of such notions.)

Did I say loudspeakers? Now that I think about it, why stop there? Let's talk about entire systems. Let's talk about surround sound (pace Kal Rubinson). Some systems are made to present the home listener with only the material on the recording, the way the microphones heard it in the first place. Some systems are made to use additional amplifiers and loudspeakers to "reproduce" the "true sound" of...you know where I'm going.

What I want to know, Mister Death, is this: What happens when you play a reverberantly recorded piece of music through a loudspeaker or a system that was itself designed to add a reverberant effect? Or: What happens when you play a recording made with reverberation scheme A on a system designed to add reverberation scheme B? Or: What happens when you play back a dryly recorded orchestra on a system or loudspeakers designed to add only a tiny, chamber-music-sized dollop of room sound?

For once, I can answer my own stupid question. It might sound good or it might sound bad; your opinion of how it sounds might change over time, or even from day to day. But if you get something out of it—if the music moves you and connects with you in some otherwise indescribable physical, emotional, or even spiritual way—then it's good.

The end. Finis. That's all I really had to say.

The pursuit of unhappiness

The above is only one of the many, many reasons I say that real music and hi-fi have nothing to do with one another. They are different experiences. Wishing they weren't different is understandable and perhaps even noble, but pointless. Wishing won't make it so.

It won't make it so because, no matter what "philosophy" informs your hi-fi system, that system will do what you want it to do with only a relatively small percentage of the recordings in your collection—unless, of course, your collection is very tiny and very limited to well-recorded performances of...well, I guess it might actually work for an audiophile, after all. But for everyone else, the pursuit of fidelity is pointless—so you might as well just have fun with that multi-thousand-dollar rack of toys filling one end of your room.

Some readers, of course, will sniff indignantly (as if there were any other way to sniff): It's bad attitudes like mine that keep our industry from adopting the guidelines that could correct all this.

Guidelines? Yes, by all means—let's pass a law, by which any architect or contractor who aspires to create a museum must abide: Paintings and photographs must be centered at a certain height. Light must be a certain intensity, in lumens—no more, no less. People must be forced to sit a certain distance from each work of art, no more, no less.

Sound stupid? There's a good reason for that: It is.

Any attempt to define the way in which humans must interact with works of art is a foolish, venal thing, and doubtless the product of an intolerant and unhappy mind. For philistines like me to reject those guidelines—any guidelines—is not, as some would try to frame the argument, a matter of trying

to paint a moustache on the Mona Lisa; rather, it's a matter of saying that no one has the right to tell me how far to stand from it. (I remain free to imagine a moustache on it.)

Forcing people to appreciate the recorded arts in any way—mine, yours, anyone's—is just as wrong. Maybe more so, depending on how good or bad your hi-fi sounds.

The pursuit of unhappiness is constitutionally guaranteed, and you're free to go after it in any way you see fit. Go ahead and sink all your money into whatever it is that baits your hook or frosts your cupcake: A whole roomful of speakers. A 10-channel amplifier to go with your 10-gallon hat. A processor that you and I both know will be obsolete before the ink has even begun to dry on this page.

You are not free, however, to force your vision of unhappiness on everyone else ("unless, of course, they ask you," as Andy Partridge sings in "The Garden of Earthly Delights"). History suggests that a few of you will try to do that anyway, and because every playground has its suckups as well as its bullies, you'll probably succeed a small part of the time—enough to make you start to believe in your own goo-roo-vity. Go ahead...

...but remember!

Leonard Bernstein made some artistically brilliant recordings during the years when his label, Columbia Masterworks, opted for a house sound that today's audiophiles abhor: a little bit edgy and a little bit colorless, with brass instruments that sound too lean, instrumental images that often exhibit "unrealistic" (hoo, boy—don't get me started on that one) scale and perspective, and a shocking dearth of both stage depth and audible subway trains.

A lot of people choose not to listen to Bernstein's recordings, and that's their right. But to ignore his music merely because they don't care for his recorded sound strikes me as sad. Good grief, the man was an original—a distinct talent whose understanding of certain composers (Mahler, obviously, not to mention Ives and even Mozart) enabled him to create recorded interpretations of real importance. By all means, ignore Bernstein's recordings because you don't care for his exaggerations, his melodrama, his musical neuroses (no wonder he understood Mahler so

well), but not because you're afraid his recordings aren't conducive to the "high-end" listening experience.

When you die young and you cross The Great Divide, which are you likelier to say as you take one final look back at this world? That you regret not spending tens of thousands of dollars on surround-sound gear in order to heighten your appreciation of a minuscule percentage of available recordings? Or that you regret avoiding the music of Josef Hofmann, Arturo Toscanini, or Leadbelly, just because you thought you couldn't do without stereo imaging?

Everyone's personal relationship with music is different—an indisputable truth. Some people listen in order to get away from the events in their lives. Others listen to get closer to God. Some listeners revel in the abstract, the indescribable. Others listen to be reminded precisely what happened to Billie Jo McAllister. (Hint: It involved a bridge.) Whatever the case, we all get something different out of art, the only universal truth being that the more we bring to a work of art, the more we can take home with us.

I'm not going to raise my glass and toast the designer of a \$70,000 speaker with a pompous, fatuous, and ultimately untrue "To Music!"...and then slap on another Amanda McBroom side. What I'm saying is this: What you get out of a hi-fi is art. It isn't quite the same as live music—it's very different, since microphones and ears don't function the same way, a fact regarding which even the smartest engineers seem to have an endless supply of self-delusion—but it is music, and it is art. How you interact with it is your business.

Anger management

The only thing in the world of home audio that comes close to truly enraging me is the ranting of anyone who would suggest that there's anything in home audio worth getting enraged over. There isn't. Not the people who sell \$10,000 speakers with \$29 tweeters. Not the people who sell \$500 sets of pointed feet, yet who can't tell you whether they're acoustic "couplers" or "decouplers" (well, what do you want them to be?). Not even the magazines and websites that would offer you reviews written by people who are paid to promote either the gear they're reviewing or that product's

competitors. All of these are cause for annoyance and, one might hope, bemused dismissal. But anger? Nope. After all, no one's forcing us to buy any of those things.

Judging from a small portion of the responses John Atkinson and I have received to my column, the notion that hi-fi ought to be fun—that components should or should not be purchased solely on the basis of how much pleasure they seem capable of delivering—is just about the most noxiously dangerous idea in the history of the world. In my 49 years I've played music in biker bars and roadhouses, joined protest marches for unpopular causes, visited an inpatient in a mental hospital, and taught sixth grade. Yet, by far, the most pathetic paroxysms of anger I've ever had to endure as an adult have come my way since I began writing about hi-fi, and mostly in direct response to my suggestions that fun beats fidelity 10 times out of 10. There are so many genuinely nasty things in the world—things that truly ought to get our dander up (drunk drivers? drunk voters?)—that the idea of any person of any age getting apoplectic about listening to records just boggles my middle-aged mind.

I used to let other people's anger set me off—sort of like feeling my gorge rise when I see someone else throw up. But now I don't even go that far, and it's all thanks to *The Anger Habit: Proven Principles to Calm the Stormy Mind* (Writer's Showcase Press, 2000). This sensible guide to controlling your emotions, written by Carl Semmelroth and Donald E.P. Smith (I can only guess what the "E.P." stands for), is now available in paperback, at a popular price. With chapters like "Struggling for Control" and "Communicating Without Effect," it's obvious that this book was not only written with audiophiles in mind, but audiophiles whose relationships with Stereophile are causing them distress. Highly recommended to some of you right now. Don't wait for the (you'll pardon the expression) audio version.

Until then, I prescribe the usual: Get out. Go for a walk. Hug your children. Call your mom. Go bird-watching. Give a lot of money to someone you think really needs it (use your imagination). Buy a Zane Grey novel, take it to a nursing home, and read from it to the first patient you find there. (Old people love Zane Grey.) Go to a pet store and look at the bunnies. Smile more. Lose a little weight.

Go to the library and read a biography of your favorite composer. Shovel someone's sidewalk. Hug your children again.

Any of those things will serve the dual purpose of making you less angry, and giving you something more to bring to music the next time you approach it.