



# RMAF 2019

## THE HJORTLAND REPORT

5-7 SEPTEMBER

GAYLORD ROCKIES RESORT AND CONVENTION CENTER, AURORA, COLORADO

### **GENERAL OBSERVATIONS**

This was the first year for RMAF at its new venue, the Gaylord Resort & Convention Center. I'm sure it was a learning experience. The initial registration on Friday was a disaster, with long lines and waits. The rooms converted for the smaller vendors were scattered widely and confusingly over 9 floors. They did have signage on each of the floors that was a major help, however.

There have been rumors that RMAF has been struggling the last 2-3 years, and that Axpona is eclipsing it as the biggest US audio show. That's probably all true, and a number of major brands were not represented here this year. However there were still a lot of the big boys present, and the attendees seemed enthusiastic enough. On the concluding Sunday I asked a number of exhibitors how they felt about this year's show, and all that I spoke with were very favorable about it.

I was pleased to note that a majority of the exhibitors had analog sources, and many were actually using them. Digital sources were more prevalent, however.

Subjectively I think there were more women at this show than past audio shows I have attended. Granted, the majority of them were in the company of husbands or boyfriends, but not all. And many of them seemed genuinely interested in the sound they were hearing.

I regret to note that an unfortunate number of exhibitors still seem to equate volume with quality of reproduction. Truly sad.

My full report on the show would be too long and boring for anyone to actually wade through. The following is edited down by about half from that – believe it or not.

### **SHOW HIGHLIGHTS & COMMENTS**

The Aavik, Borresen, and Ansuz group from Denmark seems to be up and coming. I have admired the Aavik electronics since they debuted, and they are expanding the line. The Borresen speaker line begs the question, "Who needs Raidho anyhow?" Their 01

standmounts were sounding far larger than their size, driven to excellent effect by an Aa-  
vik integrated amp. They were also showing a prototype of a similarly-sized speaker, to  
be the first in a new range of more affordable Borresen speakers. The sonic signature  
was so similar that you'd have to have them side by side and listen closely to hear any dif-  
ferences.

AGD Productions was showing a pair of huge Sigma Acoustics speakers being run by a  
fascinating tube amplifier. There is a single tube on each mono amp, which they label a  
GaNT Tube, that incorporates mosfets into the tube construction. They run cool and pro-  
duce 200 WPC... The sound was extremely good – I didn't hear anything to criticize. (The  
speakers were fairly good, but I seriously doubt that they are worth whatever mega-  
bucks they doubtless ask for them.)

Sonus Faber was showing a number of models, most on static display but a couple being  
run with ARC electronics. The sound was excellent, smooth, detailed, and fairly expan-  
sive, but it was identifiably coming from boxes.

The ATC speakers that were being demo'd did not impress. In fact I didn't stay long  
enough in the room to identify which model it was. They sounded... heavy, not refined  
or delicate, at least to my ears and with the source material and other gear in use. I  
have heard them at least somewhat better than at this show.

I am a sucker for new and different speakers, and a couple such caught my attention.  
One became my personal "Best of Show" (see concluding note). The other was the  
Forty-10 with "bending wave" drivers, by MC Audiotech, driven by Pass electronics. If I  
was to pick a speaker on looks alone, this would be it! Curved panels with several of  
these drivers are mounted on top of interesting subwoofers. The package comes across  
with a mid-century modern look that I loved. (I showed a picture of them to my wife  
when I got home, and she groaned.) The sound was really very good as well, though no  
way would I pay the \$35,000 asking price.

Andrew Jones was on hand demo'g his Elac speakers, the small Debut 2 standmounts  
when I stopped in. Amazing for their inexpensive price point. He was using Audio Al-  
chemy electronics, from the company of that name that Elac bought. Peter Madnick (A.  
Alchemy founder) was standing by though not being asked to contribute much when I  
was there. If anyone asks me for a recommendation for a more affordable speaker, I  
have to say Elac.

Large dealer ListenUp had a corner suite showing a number of items. They recently  
started selling the Kirmuss Ultrasonic Record Restoration System, and Charles Kirmuss  
himself was present in a side room holding forth about and demonstrating his system.  
Though he is something of a character his system makes a lot of sense, and it was re-  
cently – and somewhat reluctantly – endorsed by Michael Fremer. It has significant

downsides in that it involves several steps and takes more time than any other system. ListenUp was running a show special on the complete kit, and... I bought one.

The revived Classe brand was showing their electronics driving Magico S5-Mk2's. The sound was quite impressive – the Magico's were top-notch, and the amps were pretty decent as well.

Alsyvox is a brand of full-range planar ribbon speakers, which looked gorgeous and sounded... well, decent. They were playing music that was mid-range centric, showing off the speakers' strengths. (A lot of exhibitors do this.) All digital, no analog here. At \$89,000 the pair I have to ask how they would compare to big Maggies or ML's. From what I heard, I suspect they would be left in the audio dust.

In the Nola room I was pleased to find that Carl Marchisotto was not playing his speakers at his usual ear-shattering levels. Loud, yes, but tolerable. Carl was showing his Concert Grand Reference Gold 2's, I believe one model down from the top of his line, which costs a paltry \$250,000. He was using VAC electronics and Odin 2 cabling. I've always liked Nola speakers, and hey – I could live with this system...

It's always enjoyable to spend a few minutes listening to Richard Sanders' electrostatics and accompanying amps. (\$17,000 with one amp, \$22,500 with two.) Their detail and transparency are truly amazing – possibly the best I've ever heard. Too bad about the "head-in-vise" sweet spot requirement, but it is what it is. I spoke briefly with Sanders, who explained that if not toed in to the listener the room acoustics become more of a factor and you lose transparency.

Well Pleased Audio/Video was showing – and playing! – the new Vinnie Rossi L2i-SE integrated (\$19,000), sounding very good indeed. I spoke briefly with the man himself, and congratulated him on this achievement – for such it is. Speakers were QIn, standmounts giving a good account with delicacy and soundstage, but not full range. Source was an Innuos server – no analog here, sigh.

CH Precision was showing with Rockport Atria II speakers, Nordost cabling and footers, & a Commonwealth idler drive TT. I had never heard of the latter, apparently it's Australian. The Rockport sound was surprising, better than I have heard their models, almost out-of-box. But the CH integrated amp was the star here, incorporating a DAC & phono-stage. The rep challenged anyone to show him separates that could do as well, and after listening... I don't think I could. CH seems to be THE high-end marquee these days. I just wish it wasn't so bloody expensive.

Sound Organization is the newly appointed distributor for the fairly new brand of Fyne speakers from Scotland, founded by former Tannoy people. I was quite impressed with the 702 model they were playing, one down from their top F1's which they did not have at the show. I consider myself a Tannoy fan, and would certainly love to hear the F1's...

PS Audio was showing in a good-sized room that was crowded pretty constantly throughout the show. They are coming out with a full range of electronics, including preamps, DAC's, phono pre, etc. They were also demo'ing and debuting a new floorstanding speaker, not yet formally on sale. I spoke briefly with the speaker designer, who said something about it being an homage to the late Arnie Nudell. They should retail for around \$15,000 – which should make them at least somewhat competitive for what they offer (which from what I heard will *not* challenge the sonic capabilities of Wilson's, Magico's, YG's, etc.). As of the 1<sup>st</sup> of this month PS is going all direct-sale, and home trials, at least of their electronics, will be available.

MusiChi is a brand of a music server and they were showing with Spoey 230 speakers, neither of which I was familiar with. I gotta say, though, the soundstage was fantastic. I won't be going for a server anytime soon, but if I was this would be one to check out!

Gated HiFi Distribution had a couple of rooms. In one they were showing Naim electronics powering Kudos standmount speakers. The latter were very impressive – British, and apparently very well-regarded across the pond. They are an isobaric design, and retail at \$12,500. Worth it? I'm not sure, but they were very good indeed.

### **HJORTLAND'S BEST OF SHOW**

Endow Audio was showing/playing a new speaker called the FS301, with "point array technology and passive signal processor technology." The front baffle is curved back from the bottom to the top, with a lower woofer and a tweeter array on top that looks like it came from a 1950's SF movie. (\$39,000 show price, regularly \$44,000.) This was perhaps the most impressive speaker I came across at the show, throwing an amazing soundfield with a well-defined sound top to bottom. Doubtless the Hegel amp driving them was helpful in achieving this impression. I talked with the owner/designer, and he said they plan to develop lower-priced models based on their design principals.

*And... that's all, folks!*