

SAM'S BY SAM TELLIG SPACE

THIS ISSUE: A sweet-sounding amplifier from LFD & sweet-sounding headphones from Thinksound.

Sam gets what he wants and still wants it

In 1920, Irving Berlin wrote lyrics and music to a song you may have heard in the first season of HBO's *Boardwalk Empire*: "After You Get What You Want (You Don't Want It)." Kathy Brier sings it, backed by Vince Giordano and the Nighthawks, at www.youtube.com/watch?v=YZEDM96cXtQ. You can hear Van and Schenck's original recording on YouTube, too: www.youtube.com/watch?v=8sUe28J921U. There's a fine version by the Nat Cole Trio that appears on more than a dozen Cole compilations. Marilyn Monroe sang it. Berlin could put some real bite into his lyrics. Listen before you get married.

Or before you get involved in hi-fi. I've been married to LFD Audio's LE integrated amplifier, on and off, in different iterations, for nearly 20 years. I've got it. I still want it.

This diminutive, 65Wpc (into 8 ohms) integrated started out in 1995, as the LFD Mistral. It blew some cool tunes my way. I was blown away, but too dumb to keep it.

Hi-fi, wives, cats. When you get what you want, learn to want what you've got.

That's what I tell my friend Dima, who owns an LFD Integrated Zero Mk.III LE, the third iteration of the original

Mistral circuit: Keep it. Now I may get him to change his mind. The great thing is, LFD's new LE V is so small I can take it over to Dima's digs and tease him with it. It plays Russian music very well.

Not that your average audiophile or Russian oligarch or moneyed millennial would be impressed. The LFD LE V is *too* small. Has no features. Isn't flashy. Looks as if it could have been made in 1995.

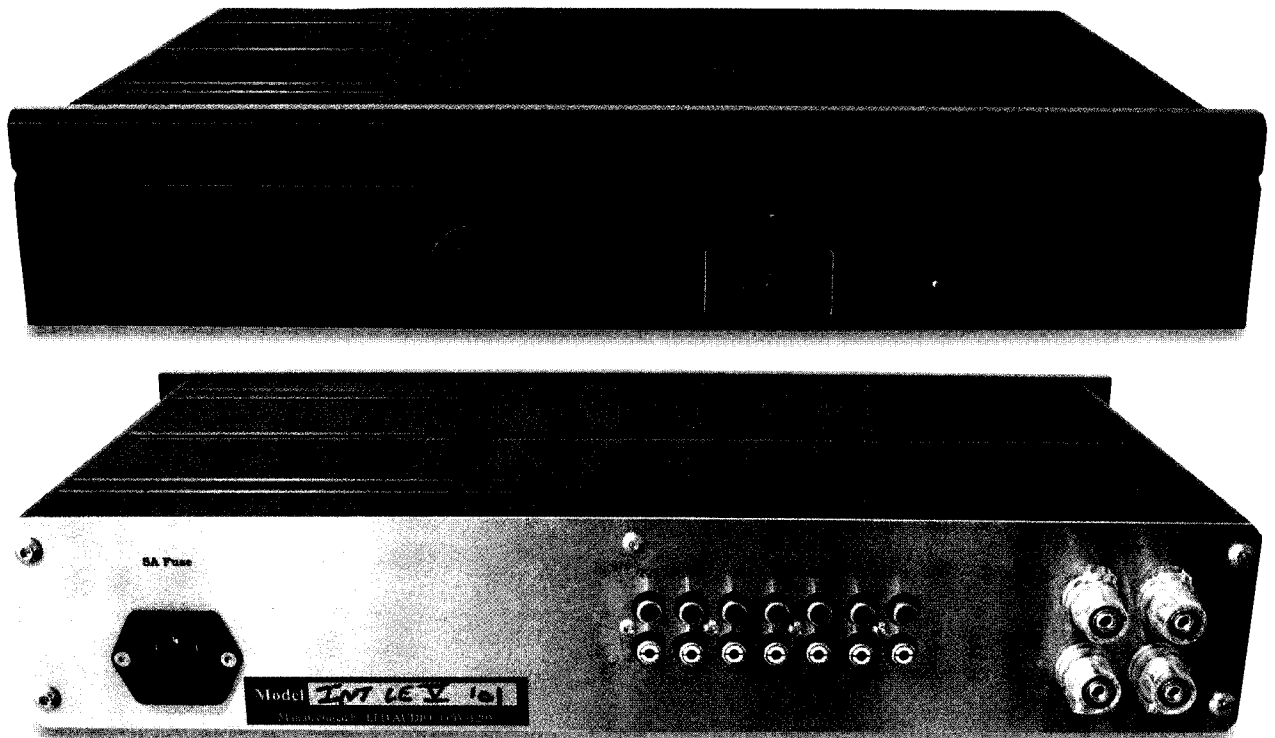
I have never heard Bluetooth sound better. Of course, the Bluetooth receiver (Musical Fidelity V90-BLU) is a separate product. So is the Musical Fidelity V90-DAC. There's nothing aboard the LFD to degrade the purity of the sound. No digital circuitry. No remote volume control. No balance or tone controls. No display. No menus. No headphone output. No instruction manual that I saw. *[It had inadvertently been omitted.—Ed.]* No proper website. There's nothing to configure or figure out.

Oh, yes, one more thing. If you want it, you can't have it.

Only kidding. But for a while, this was true in the US.

But be prepared to stand in line. LFD has very few US dealers: importer Walter Swanbon, of Fidelis AV, in Nashua, New Hampshire; and Gene Rubin Audio, of Ventura, California, who talked Walter into becoming the importer, are

Minimalist amplifier design from England—LFD's LEV costs \$4495.



the main purveyors. It's Gene's favorite amp. My favorite solid-state integrated.

The retail price is \$4495. Four and a half grand gets you five line-level RCA inputs, one tape loop, and a volume control.

A few customers told Walter that they'd buy one if it had a remote volume control. Dr. Richard Bews, founder and owner of LFD, must find this request risible. A motorized volume control would increase the cost and degrade the sound. If you have a young child, use her or him as a remote control.

With help from an assistant, Dr. Bews assembles each LFD product himself, in Clacton-on-Sea, Essex, England. He doesn't advertise or display at hi-fi shows, although some of his dealers and distributors do. He doesn't do public relations. He holds a PhD in electrical engineering from the University of Essex, where he studied under the legendary Malcolm Omar Hawksford.

"Technically, the LE V and LE IV are the same—same PCBs, same [power-supply unit]," says Dr. Bews. "The power output is the same—*ie*, 65 watts into 8 ohms." The circuit, of course, is the same, and has been since Drs. Bews and Hawksford designed it in 1995, for the Mistral. "I don't claim that it's the best circuit in the world," Bews told me some years ago, "but it's the one I've chosen to develop." The price, alas, is *not* the same, having crept up from less than \$1895 (if memory serves me right) to \$4495.

The LE V far surpasses the original Mistral in build and appearance—and sound. It's 16.9" (434mm) wide by 3.5" (90mm) high by 11.7" (300mm) deep and weighs 20.25 lbs (9.2kg)—slightly heavier than the LE IV, "since the LE V chassis is deeper and heavier," per Dr. Bews.

I first caught up with the LFD Mistral in 1997, when I read a review in the June/July issue of the French hi-fi journal *Haute Fidélité*. The writers, Herve Benichou and Pierre-Yves Maton, danced a *gigue* over the amp's openness, transparency, truth of timbre. I contacted Dr. Bews, who agreed to send me a sample, even though he then had no US distributor.

Yes, it was as good as the scribes from *Haute Fidélité* had said. A year later, Dr. Bews found a US distributor, and I reviewed the LFD Mistral for the September 1998 issue of *Stereophile*. It cost \$1095. Alas, the distributor could

sell many more units than Dr. Bews could supply, since he made every one himself and wasn't going to have anyone else make them for him.

Gene Rubin, one of LFD's first US dealers, was reluctant to become the brand's distributor. When you're a distributor, your phone rings 24 hours a day. You're expected to respond to "emergencies" as quickly as a heart surgeon. Gene didn't have the heart for that, so he put Walter Swanbon up to it. Fidelis AV already supplies Gene with Harbeth and Stirling Broadcast loudspeakers from the UK.

At that time, the product was the LFD Integrated Zero Mk.III LE. I wrote it up for my February 2008 column. The name Mistral? Gone with the wind. Three years later, in January 2011, I reviewed the LE IV. And bought it.

Before I tell you what I heard from the LE V, I'll let you in on a little industry secret. Mass-market consumer electronics are produced by the thousands, sometimes the tens of thousands, usually in China, using the cheapest parts available in Asia. (The biggest supplier is Malaysia.) Obviously, there's no time to listen to each part. Solution? Put in more parts to cover up mistakes. Specialty manufacturers who care about good sound also often have their products made in China, but tend to use higher-quality parts from Japan, Taiwan, even Europe.

The rub for a small specialty manufacturer is the size of the production run. Let's say you're making a headphone amp. You can make 2000 units for little more than it would cost to make 1000. So you make 2000 and keep your fingers crossed. If you have demand for 2500, you leave the 500 orders on the table and move on to the next model. If you sell only 1500, you're still ahead. Blow them out at Audio Advisor. I don't know how big Dr. Bews's production runs are. I hear he makes a dozen or so units at a time and has an order for each one. This is like communism: no surpluses, only shortages. A perfect economy!

Bews uses as few parts as possible, and of the highest quality—from suppliers in Japan, Taiwan, and elsewhere in Asia and in Europe. Some are vintage parts, no longer produced. Others are custom-made. About three years ago, Dr. Bews began researching the sound qualities of electronic capacitors and commercial resistors. "I had been having a problem when good-

sounding parts are discontinued and eventually become unavailable. These deletions by component manufacturers keep prices low, but unfortunately more and more parts made today sound inferior to the best components made in the past.

"During our evaluation of electrolytic capacitors, I found a capacitor source from the Far East that had the ability to reduce grain and improve the bass. This has improved the overall sound significantly, to give a smoother presentation."

And resistors. Dr. Bews has heard "large variation in sound from one manufacturer to another. . . . However, a source in Taiwan have supplied several types that have almost the best properties of metal-film and carbon-film resistors—*ie*, the 'energy' of a metal-film and the 'nice' sound of a carbon-film. These components are now employed in the input of the power-amplifier section of the LE V."

Buy your LFD LE V today.

Here's something else the industry doesn't want you to know. Many products could be built to a far higher standard if: a) the production runs were shorter, b) more skilled labor were involved, and c) the consumer were willing to pay for upgrades that probably don't affect test-bench measurements one iota.

Some manufacturers will perform this last service for customers on request. The manufacturer knows where the shortcuts were taken—where the sound quality was compromised—to meet a popular price point and/or to bang out thousands of units. I wouldn't have modifications made by a third party unless the modifier has the approval of or once worked for the manufacturer.

Back to Clacton-on-Sea

Do you like tube amps? I do. But Dr. Bews says that there should be little, if any, difference between the sounds of a well-engineered solid-state amplifier and a well-designed tube job:

"I believe that if a solid-state circuit and a tube circuit are optimized, they will sound almost the same—*ie*, there is *no* such [thing as] solid-state or tube sound. However, when circuits are not optimized, solid-state often sounds grainy and lacks extension in the top end and possess[es] poor dimensionality."

Poppycock? I would have said so, once. As I get older, I know less and

less. Sorry—I interrupted Dr. Bews:

“A non-optimized tube circuit can have poor bass quality and reduced resolution, and sometimes modern designs can be bright sounding. Therefore, if you were to purchase a compromised product, many customers will prefer a tubed circuit, due to its more preferable sonic compromises.”

I used the LFD interconnects and speaker cables I received at the time I reviewed the Integrated Zero Mk.III LE. I chose my reference Harbeth 30.1 monitor speakers because I know them so well, having used them for nearly a year, mainly with the LE IV. This is the combination you're likely to hear if you book an audition with Fidelis AV or Gene Rubin Audio, or visit them at hi-fi shows.

I found the LE IV excellent—it was my solid-state reference for nearly three years—but for me, the LE V is a showstopper. I mean that literally. I didn't want to write; I wanted to listen. How could this be, when Richard Bews says that the LE IV and LE V are technically the same?

I have yet to try the LE V with my Triangle Comète 30th Anniversaire speakers, but I did use it with my KEF LS50s. All speakers listed in Class A (Restricted Extreme LF) of our “Recommended Components” are created equal, but some Class A speakers are more equal than others. The LS50 is an astonishing bargain, but doesn't give me the midrange and treble refinement of the Harbeth 30.1, which sells for four times as much.

With the LE V, I heard a substantial improvement over the LE IV. The midrange and treble were smoother, less “electronic,” less fatiguing. At the same time, the midrange and treble were less garish—or garish—than some glassy tube amps tend to be. Are gas and glass all that great?

Spatial resolution was extraordinary: the echoes and the aura of each recording. Woodwinds, ravishing—even from certain vintage jazz and classical recordings. Brass had bite, as does my cat, Maxik, when he craves attention. Everything just fit into place: harmonics, timing, resolution.

Currently, one of my favorite classical discs is pianist Maria-João Pires and cellist Antonio Meneses's *The Wigmore Hall Recital* (CD, Deutsche Grammophon 4790965). This is one of the finest performances ever released of Schubert's Sonata for Arpeggione in A Minor, D.821. It's followed by

Brahms's three Intermezzi, Op.117, for solo piano. I was transported to London's Wigmore Hall, where notes were suspended in space.

I dug out a Chopin CD from two decades ago, with Pires and the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra conducted by André Previn (Deutsche Grammophon 437817). It contains a fine performance of the Piano Concerto 2, but what especially enchanted me were the 24 Preludes, Op.28. I felt drawn into performances the way I am with the finest flea-watt, single-ended-triode tube amplifiers. With historical performances, too, I heard that same truth of timbre. The LFD LE V and Harbeths were a splendid combination. I'll soon try the LE V with the Spendor D7s. Gene Rubin can demonstrate the LFD with Harbeth, Spendor, and Stirling Broadcast speakers.

The other day I put on a little Berlioz festival—John Atkinson's favorite composer [short—Ed.]. I listened to recordings of three different performances of *Symphonie Fantastique*, all conducted by Igor Markevitch. These included two historical performances in mono—the first, with the Berlin Philharmonic, from 1954 (Deutsche Grammophon 459015). It's one of my favorites for its exquisite woodwind and brass playing—and braying. Who needs stereo?

I happened across another recording while perusing the Berkshire Records Outlet catalog: Markevitch conducts the RIAS Symphony Orchestra Berlin (CD, Memories Reference MR2140). RIAS stands for Radio in the American Sector. It was 1952. This time Markevitch really nailed it, with tempos that seemed to march the orchestra off a cliff—or to the scaffold, as it were. A real devil, that Berlioz.

A 60-year-old “live” mono recording, made more listenable with the LFD LE V than with the LE IV.

I am so tired of hearing small amplifiers dismissed because they can't produce the full weight, scale, and dynamic range of a live symphony orchestra. But you *can't* fit Mahler or even Mendelssohn into a living room, even a large one. All that money spent

on crazy-expensive speakers and the amplifiers that go with them? Why try? A complete waste, in my opinion, and somewhat grotesque. But I'm sure that moneyed millennials don't care. They probably don't have time to listen.

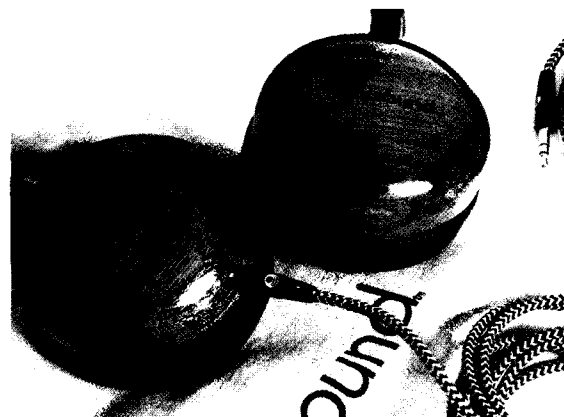
Whether the music is classical or jazz, what I want from a system are each instrument's tone and aura. I want truth of timbre: the reedy quality of a clarinet, the burnished brass of a trumpet, the tone of a Steinway, a Bechstein, a Fazioli. I get that from LFD Audio's LE V, and I'm not at all impressed that your system costs ten times more than mine. That's commerce. This is audio art.

I have what I want and I want what I have.

ThinkSound On1 headphones

Before he left *Stereophile* for Audio-Quest [see *Industry Update, June, p.13*], Stephen Mejias asked ThinkSound to send me these closed-back headphones. He thought I might like them.

Cool beans, Stephen. I do. These are



among the nicest 'phones I've come across lately. List price is \$299.99, but the street price—sometimes directly from ThinkSound—is usually \$249.99. You save an imaginary \$50. That's \$50 of your savings that you can share with me in Bitcoins.

ThinkSound is a new company founded by Aaron Fournier and Mike Tunney. Fournier earned his BS in Audio Engineering from the University of Hartford, and went on to work for *Consumer Reports*. (I laugh my evil laugh.) Tom DeVesto hired him to work at Tivoli Audio, where he met Tunney.

The On1s' earcups are made of wood: sapele (or sapelli), to be precise. It's the same wood that Chinese factories use to produce furniture. If you