



CES 2012 - Part 1

by Steve Lefkowitz

CES, *The Consumer Electronics Show*, the granddaddy of all shows. I've been attending CES events since the mid 1980s, and never seem to get tired of them. There are so many exhibitors, spread out over several locations, that it is simply impossible to even contemplate seeing everything. Even just trying to stop in all the *High Performance Audio* exhibits (as CES refers to high end audio) to get a few photos leaves little time to actually listen to any of them for more than a minute or two. Add in all the exhibitors down the street at *The Home Entertainment Show*, and you realize how important it becomes to find a focus, something to direct you to those displays, rooms and suites that you can pay a little extra attention to, while justifying skipping over some others.

Since PFO had several writers representing them at the show, I decided to focus once again, like I usually do, on the more affordable offerings on display, while leaving the megabuck systems to others on the staff. That doesn't mean I avoided more expensive gear altogether, but I did try to spend the extra time as necessary with the less expensive. Admittedly, the concept of "affordable" gets skewed in an environment like CES, and after several displays of products costing \$50,000 or more, somehow a speaker for \$15,000 or a \$9000 amplifier starts to sound reasonable.

I usually don't offer up any *best of show* comments simply because I understand the difficulty of setting up a system in this environment. If a room sounds exceptionally good, I know the gear in it must be good, but if a room sounds mediocre, I'll write it off to setup, environment or the standard "show conditions" excuse.

I spent most of the first two days of the show covering the audio displays at the Venetian Hotel, and then spent the remainder of the second day and the whole third day at *The Home Entertainment Show* at the Flamingo. On the last day I went to the main convention center and to the Photo Marketing Association pavilion in the Venetian. I spent 30 years in the photo industry, and had to see what was left of that once great market.

Also, I always look to shows like CES to find proof that manufacturers are on the cutting edge, ready to move the market forward and ensure their future. I watched the photo industry fail at this over many years, and at this CES I was really looking to see how the audio industry was preparing for the future of networked audio and server based audio. To that end, I only brought a USB flash drive with Apple Lossless files or 24/96 WAV files on it. I did go expecting every display to be able to handle playing this files. Silly me...

If I left anyone out of this report, it most likely was just that I didn't get to your room, no offense intended. It most likely was that their gear was out of my price range and therefore not part of my focus. However, there were some rooms that I avoided for a few other reasons:

- You were playing music way too loud. I can't risk getting a headache at these shows, as unavoidable as that usually ends up being.
- You were showing movies. I was here to listen to audio systems playing music, not watch things blow up.
- You insisted on playing old audiophile standards, no matter how crappy the music might have been. I won't sit through Rebecca Pidgeon, Diana Krall, or bad, boring jazz. I don't expect anyone else to like the music I listen to, but hearing another close-miked acoustic guitar or deadpan female vocalist doesn't tell me anything about your product.
- You hassled me about playing the music I brought. If you had good music that I knew or liked in your room, I wouldn't have asked.

So, let's start with what I saw displayed at CES at the Venetian, that seemed reasonably priced and sounded promising, at least. In somewhat alphabetical order, here we go!

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Unison Research and Opera Loudspeakers

After a few years out of the North American Market, Unison Research and Opera Loudspeakers are back, being imported by Colleen Cardas Imports. This was one of the better sounding rooms at the Venetian, even when compared to rooms hosting much more expensive gear.

Here is the main demo system: Unison Research Unico 50 Hybrid Integrated Amp (\$4495), Unico CDE CD player (\$3895), Opera Quinta speakers (\$5495/pair). The sound was detailed, spacious, rich and very involving.



Here are the Unico Primo CD Player (\$2295) and Unico Primo Integrated Amp (\$2295).



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Well, that's it for Part One of my show report. Part Two will cover displays at THE Show Las Vegas, held at the Flamingo Hotel at the same time as CES. Then, Part three will cover my thoughts on some of the high priced stuff back at CES, and of the overall feel of the convention. I've been to a lot of trade shows over the years, and this one really did feel different.