

SAM'S SPACE

Sam Tellig

Sam Trades in His Hi-Fi For a Victor Talking Machine

When manufacturers or other guests come calling, if I don't pull out Spike Jones, I love to trot out *The Complete Recordings of Enrico Caruso*: nearly 260 performances on a 12-CD boxed set (Naxos 8.101201). The recordings were made between 1902 and 1920 (Caruso died in 1921), and all of them are acoustical: no microphone, no electronics, no tubes. Caruso bellowed into a horn, and the sheer force of his voice, acoustically amplified by the horn, cut the discs. When you play back the recordings on a mechanical, wind-up gramophone with horn, no electronic circuitry comes between The Great Caruso and you.

I have such an apparatus—a pristine, wind-up, tabletop Victrola that was a wedding anniversary present from our pal Val. It is the antipode of the iPod. I sometimes set it up on the dining-room credenza with a stack of 78s and a box of cactus needles—one needle per side. You don't want to gouge the grooves, after all. Mikey should have one of these. "I've traded my hi-fi for a Victor Talking Machine," I tell my guests.

The frequency response is limited—it's all midrange—as are the dynamics. But there's a startling, lifelike immediacy to the sound that even Naxos' excellent Caruso transfers don't quite capture electronically. These acoustical recordings were meant to be played back acoustically.

Caruso, born in 1873, was a native of Naples, where he launched his career. In 1903, he made his debut with New York's Metropolitan Opera and took the world by storm. The following year he began his lifelong association with the Victor Talking Machine company. Some might say he *made* the Victor Talking Machine company, which RCA gobbled up in 1929. His 1902 recording of "Vesti la giubba," from Leoncavallo's *Pagliacci*, became the world's first million-selling gramophone record.

In 1925, Victor switched from acoustical recordings to a newfangled electrical system, developed by West-



Signor Nasta takes his wine seriously.

ALL PHOTOS: SAM TELLIG, EXCEPT WHERE NOTED

ian city of Treviso, about a half hour from Venice. They began by occupying half the building. Now they're taking over the other half.

Opera may be the only hi-fi company in the world with its own temperature-controlled wine cellar—perhaps one reason signor Nasta needed to occupy the entire building. Installing a wine cellar at home would have meant that his wife, Donatella, would know about every one of his wine-buying jaunts.

CARUSO'S 1902 RECORDING OF "VESTI LA GIUBBA," FROM LEONCAVALLO'S *PAGLIACCI*, BECAME THE WORLD'S FIRST **MILLION-SELLING** GRAMOPHONE **RECORD**.

ern Electric, using microphones. Caruso by then was back in Naples, in his grave. While recording went electrical, Victor's phonographs remained acoustical—for a while. Not everyone in America had electricity, after all.

Giovanni Nasta, founder of Opera Loudspeakers, was born in a hillside town not far from Napoli. His company's first loudspeaker was called the Caruso. A few years ago, signor Nasta was making loudspeakers in a small, cramped factory, or *fabrica*, that looked a lot like a lumberyard with sawmill. That's because this factory *was* a lumberyard with sawmill. Opera builds its own speaker cabinets, and signor Nasta would sometimes cut the wood himself.

The days of Giovanni Nasta sawing wood are long gone (unless it's in his sleep). Five years ago, Opera Loudspeakers and its sister firm, Unison Research, moved into a spacious, modern *fabrica* just outside the northern Ital-

Whenever time allows, Giovanni escapes into the countryside in his Chrysler minivan to fill it with case after case of the finest Italian wine, all purchased at *cantini* (as vineyard headquarters are known). Only Italian wine—for Giovanni, there is no other. Have you ever seen a restaurant in Italy that features French wine...or a restaurant in France that highlights the best Italian wines?

Opera is also, undoubtedly, the only hi-fi company with its own *caffè*. The company is located in a new industrial park—no shade, except for one olive tree in front of the *fabrica* that Giovanni managed to save. (The property had been farmland.) There's no sidewalk *caffè* within walking distance or even a quick drive, so he built one next to his conference and meeting room. Espresso, anyone? A glass of prosecco?

In a world in which many electronics manufacturers are part of global con-

glomerates and stuff is often designed by committee, it's refreshing to deal with Italian hi-fi. Real personalities produce real products that reflect those personalities' tastes and priorities and culture. Italian hi-fi is like no other in the world, which is why it sells around the world. Whatever the make, Italian hi-fi gear tends to share a distinctive sound. The treble is sweet, the midrange sings. It's the voicing. Designers and engineers take months, sometimes years, to get the voicing just right.

Opera's first model, the Caruso, has long since been discontinued, and bears no resemblance to Opera's new flagship model of the same name, which is something altogether more ambitious. (Opera's best-selling model to date has been the Callas, which is still in production.) Last spring, signor Nasta invited his distributors and a few journalists to hear the new Caruso at his *fabbrica*. There would be a surprise in store, he promised.

Opera is unusual in building its own speaker cabinets, something most speaker makers outsource. In fact, signor Nasta *bought* an entire furniture factory to make his cabinets. (Producing the cabinets within the *fabbrica* created problems. Dust. Smells. Of those speaker manufacturers who build their own cabinets, almost all do so off-site.)

Speaker drivers for Opera's current models are sourced from SEAS, of Norway. The drive-units are customized, and SEAS engineers are involved in designing the crossovers and cabinets. Technical matters are under the supervision of Dr. Mario Bon (physicist on the faculty of the University of Padua), a big, burly native of Venice who looks like a lion, and whose forebears, it is said, number among that city's doges. *Il leone di Venezia*, Nick Green, of Opera's UK distributor, calls him. And with every reason. Mario possesses a dark,

CONTACTS

Opera Loudspeakers and Unison Research, via Barone 4, 31030 Doson di Casier (Treviso), Italy. Tel: (39) 0422-633547. Fax: (39) 0422-633550. Web: www.operaloudspeakers.com, www.unisonresearch.com. US distributor: Epitome AV, 210 Springfield Commerce Drive, Building #4, Debray, FL 32713. Tel: (321) 283-2266. Fax: (253) 981-9158. Web: www.epitomeav.com

SAM'S SPACE



Caruso loudspeaker and Unison Research Reference amplifier in Maurizio Felluga's listening room.

wicked sense of humor—a true Venetian, I'm told.

Dr. Bon's meticulous notebooks could rival those of Leonardo da Vinci for their neatness and exquisite penmanship. Dr. Bon, an academic, is always teaching. I've seen him do it on the vaporetto in Venice, explaining

focus—coherence, if you will. This is due, in part, to Dr. Bon's way of attenuating the bass drivers so that they reinforce but don't overwhelm. The same idea is found in Opera's new Quinta model, which I'll get to in a moment. And the Quinta is affordable: \$3895/pair.

IN A WORLD IN WHICH **MANY** ELECTRONICS MANUFACTURERS ARE PART OF **GLOBAL** CONGLOMERATES AND STUFF IS OFTEN DESIGNED BY COMMITTEE, IT'S REFRESHING TO DEAL WITH **ITALIAN** HI-FI.

details of a crossover to signor Nasta—in the middle of a vineyard, wine-glass in hand, telling my colleague Paul Messenger about a new speaker. What's *perfetto* on paper may not always be so in practice, however. Signor Nasta always has the last listen, and often asks for changes.

Ah, the Caruso. You might possess a palazzo for this speaker—or a large villa. Each one weighs more than 220 lbs (100kg). I'd be happy if I got down to 220—it's my resolution for 2007. At \$39,900/pair, the Caruso is no purchase to be taken lightly. On the other hand, if you're prepared to pay that, the Caruso is a must-hear, even if you have to fly to Venice to do it. Finishes are cherry or silver lacquer.

"You can look at the Caruso as a two-way with a passive subwoofer in the same cabinet," wrote Dr. Bon. On the speaker's front panel are four

midrange/woofer drivers and a tweeter. Four 8" woofers are set into each cabinet's inward-facing side. The rear panel has four tweeters that take over from 2kHz up.

For all its drivers—13 per speaker—Dr. Bon refers to the Caruso as a "two-way." And for all its weight, the Caruso sounds fleet of foot—indeed, like a small two-way monitor in terms of imaging, soundstaging, and

focus—coherence, if you will. This is due, in part, to Dr. Bon's way of attenuating the bass drivers so that they reinforce but don't overwhelm. The same idea is found in Opera's new Quinta model, which I'll get to in a moment. And the Quinta is affordable: \$3895/pair.

We—the assembled guests, distributors, and journalists—auditioned the new Carusos in Opera's main listening room at the *fabbrica*, driven by Unison's Reference electronics: the Reference Pre (\$19,900) and the Reference monoblocks (\$19,900 each). That's a total of \$99,600 for preamp, power amps, and Carusos.

Each Unison Reference monoblock uses four 845 output tubes to produce 70W of single-ended-triode (SET) sound. I'd heard the Reference gear a year before and been mightily impressed. This time, too. The sound was full-range, dynamic, and—what's especially important—full-bodied. Light from within, truth of timbre, harmonics in register. In 2005, I spent an entire day with these amps—solo most of the time, while my wife, Marina, went shopping in nearby Treviso, returning with two handbags, three sweaters, and some assorted trinkets.

She looked like the cat who'd swallowed the canary.

At the moment, no dealer in North America is displaying this \$100,000 combo. *Alora*. Fly to Venice and one of Giovanni Nasta's sons, Bartolomeo or Riccardo, will pick you up at Marco Polo Airport for the 20-minute drive to the *fabbrica*. Be sure to contact Bartolomeo in advance: bartolomeo@operaloudspeakers.com. While there, you can check out the *caffè* and tour the wine cellar. Your spouse or significant other can explore beautiful Treviso, which is free of tourists and where prices are much lower than in Venice.

Signor Nasta's surprise was another day with the Carusos and the Unison Research Reference gear—this time at the villa in the famed vineyard of Livio Felluga, about an hour away in the far northeast of Italy, a few kilometers from Slovenia. Now in his nineties, Livio Felluga has handed things over to his son, Maurizio—a *melomane!* The family villa sits in the center of one of Italy's largest vineyards, and perhaps the largest in the North. The *cantina*, where the wine is stored and bottled, is in town, a few minutes away.

Across the street from the *cantina* is a fine small hotel. (Request a room facing the back and your balcony will open on a small vineyard.) One of the guides at the *cantina* was born in Italy, grew up in New Jersey, and has wisely moved back home. I learned more from him in a half-hour than on any other wine tour anywhere. Felluga has an excellent website, www.liviofelluga.it, which has a version in English.

It was Maurizio Felluga who purchased the world's first pair of Carusos—and the aforementioned Unison Research Reference electronics to go with them. We were all invited to help deliver and audition the system.

Is Maurizio Felluga's hi-fi the finest in all of Italy? I had only a few minutes to listen to it with him before dozens of people, wineglasses in hand, crowded into the listening room. And, of course, nothing had had a chance to settle in. But I think it's one of the finest hi-fi systems in the world. The Carusos have tremendous authority—they can erupt like Mount Vesuvius when the music calls for it. Think Verdi! Yet the speakers also have exceptional delicacy. Think Vivaldi. And they image like mini-monitors.

SAM'S SPACE



Dr. Mario Bon (left) and journalist Paul Messenger at Maurizio Felluga's villa.

Opera Quinta loudspeaker

Back down to earth, and back home in the US, I received review samples of the second iteration of Opera's Quinta loudspeaker (\$3895/pair) and a very simple integrated amplifier from Unison Research, the *Preludio* (\$2995), said to pump out a mighty 14Wpc.

The standard finishes for the Quinta's side panels are cherry and mahogany. Add \$400 if you want coats and coats of piano-black lacquer. (Ever see a Fazioli piano? These, the world's most beautiful pianos, are produced in the same general area of Italy.) The original Quinta sold for \$2995/pair—alas, the US dollar. But the higher price does get you a better speaker than the old.

Each Quinta measures 46.3" high by 9.5" wide by 15.15" deep. The cabinet is made of MDF, its sides curved to prevent standing waves. The side cheeks are finished in real-wood veneer, of course. (Vinyl? This is *Italy*.) The top plate and the front and rear baffles are sumptuously finished in padded leather. A front baffle of soft, padded leather helps deal with soundwave refractions. Some speaker designers use felt padding, but leather is altogether more elegant. A metal brace at the back of the base gives the Quinta outstanding stability, even on carpeted floors.

You could regard the new Quinta as a diminutive Caruso. The estimable Dr. Mario Bon had a hand in designing both, as did the engineers from SEAS, in Norway; and the development of the two speakers was more or less concomitant: trickle-down technology meets leak-across. Whatever thinking and sweat went into the new Caruso (and Opera's new Tebaldi) went into the new Quinta as well.

The Quinta's frequency response is given as 30Hz–20kHz, though with-

out a \pm dB specification. The sensitivity is stated as 89dB/W/m, the nominal impedance as 6 ohms (8 ohms maximum, 4.8 ohms minimum) from 100Hz to 2kHz. Each Quinta weighs 75 lbs (34kg).

Professor Bon took the lectern: "The electrical impedance curve of the Opera Quinta is always above 5.9

ohms; and although not completely resistive, it is extremely regular with phase [angles] close to zero over a wide range of frequencies from 200Hz upwards. This ease of drive makes the Opera Quinta very rare and contrary to the prevailing tendency of the vast majority of loudspeakers currently produced."

The minimum amplification recommended for the Quinta is 10W—meaning that near-flea-watt amplifiers (although not those of the 2–3W variety) might apply. I used Unison Research's *Preludio* integrated and Rega's new Saturn CD player.

The new Quinta, like its predecessor, is described as a 2½-way design. It's that extra half that's interesting. The cabinet comprises two chambers. In the upper chamber are two SEAS drive-units: a 1" fabric-dome tweeter (the same as is used in the Callas) and a 6.5" aluminum-cone midrange/bass driver. The crossover point is at 2.3kHz. This upper chamber serves, in effect, as a minimonitor. The lower chamber houses two more SEAS 6.5" bass/midrange drivers identical to the one on top, and attenuated by a passive, resistor-capacitor network. The lower chamber has a rear port.

Up to about 400Hz, all three bass drivers receive the same electrical power, explained Dr. Bon. Then, in a "transition zone" between 400 and 800Hz, the output of the single bass driver in the upper chamber increases, while that of the two lower bass drivers decreases. Above 800Hz, the outputs of the lower drivers are attenuated by about 6dB/octave. The result is that the two lower drivers don't drag the speaker down by their own weight. These drivers are thus simultaneously heard (in terms of bass rein-

forcement) and *not* heard (in terms of making the Quinta sound bass-fat and boomy). This arrangement works so well that I marvel that no other speaker manufacturer that I know of is doing anything similar. Of course, if an American speaker manufacturer paid for three bass drivers, he'd probably want them to pump out as much bass as possible.

According to Dr. Bon, the Quinta's "acoustical center" is up with the bass/midrange driver in the top chamber, so that the speaker will sound, in effect, like a two-way monitor. In effect, it does. Dr. Bon has written that, at low frequencies, this "acoustical center" coincides with the middle bass/midrange driver (the top driver in the lower chamber). At higher frequencies, this center moves upward until it coincides with the single bass/midrange driver in the top chamber. The ultimate intended result is to extend the Quinta's bass response beyond what it would be if the speaker actually were a stand-mounted minimonitor with only a tweeter and one bass/midrange driver.

Listening to the Quintas in my room, I heard extended, very tight, controlled bass—it was never bloated or boomy—coupled with the kind of imaging and soundstaging I usually associate with small stand-mounted minimonitors. The treble was slightly soft and ever so sweet—fabric-dome driver, up there on top, so as not to induce metal-dome tweeteritis. Dr. Bon has handled the transition from the fabric-dome tweeter to the aluminum-cone midrange/bass drivers very well. The cone materials may be different, but I heard no sign of discontinuity. The SEAS engineers worked very closely with Opera to get this right.

I listened to full-range symphonic music at loud levels, and thought the Opera Quinta could make use of more than 14Wpc when it came to bass extension and control. I briefly tried Musical Fidelity's new X-150, a 100Wpc integrated amp with a tubed preamp stage and a solid-state power-amp section (see next month's column). Along with more power, there was better grip down below. But the Preludio has its own single-ended magic.

For those with larger living spaces who also want to listen large, Opera proposes stacked Quintas: a pair of them per channel, connected in parallel. "The impedance of two loudspeakers in parallel remains within 3 to 4

SAM'S SPACE



PHOTO: GIOVANNI NASTA

Maurizio Felluga (left) with Marina and Sam.

ohms," notes Dr. Bon. "Two loudspeakers in parallel produce approximately 95dB SPL with 2.83 volts at one meter and are able to fill even very large listening rooms with sound."

You just might find that the Quinta is more flexible than most floorstanders in terms of where you can put it without creating boomy bass. Ultimately, I placed them in my favorite sweet spots, about 6' from the front wall, less than 4' from me, about 8' apart, and toed in about 15°. Signor Nasta likes the Quintas closer to the wall behind them and closer together.

I lost some bass reinforcement from the room boundaries—hey, a *secundo* pair of Quintas might have been welcome—but was rewarded with an exceptionally spacious soundstage. This is where stacked Quintas might excel: front-stage imaging, rear-stage authority.

Unison Research Preludio integrated amplifier

The Preludio integrated (\$2995) is the smallest in a new series of amplifiers from Unison Research that also includes the Sinfonia and the Performance. All Unison amplifiers are designed by signor Giovanni Sachetti, founder of Unison Research (he winces when I call him the "godfather" of Italian hi-fi, but he is), and Dr. Leopoldo Rossetto, a department head at the University of Padua. Each model in the series acquires one more KT88 output tube per channel: one KT88 in the Preludio, two in the Sinfonia, three in the Performance.

But—*three* KT88s? How do you do push-pull with *three* output tubes per channel—or one, for that matter? You don't. All three amplifiers are single-ended. But observe, students, that the Preludio, Sinfonia, and Performance are *not*, strictly speaking, SET designs. They're single-ended ultralinear and run in class-A. In effect, the output transformers (wound in-house) trick the KT88 output tubes into thinking they're triodes rather than pentodes.

So why not just use a triode tube, like a 300B or a 2A3? You'd get less power, for one thing. Besides, those triode tubes are expensive and notoriously twitchy, and Unison aims for reliability. The KT88 output tubes are not pushed to their limits. Rather, Unison runs them very conservatively, at a fairly low bias current. The tubes sound sweeter this way, signor Sachetti told me, and last longer. The output circuit compensates as the tubes age along with you, signor Sachetti, and me. Unison uses Sovtek KT88s. Want to try another make? No problem. Want to try a set of 6550s? Signor Sachetti is fond of new old stock (NOS) Tung-Sols. Just drop 'em in. (The 6550s will deliver slightly less power.)

The Preludio has just two tubes per channel: the single KT88 output tube and an ECC82 input tube, used in the preamp stage. The ECC82's heater current derives from the KT88's plate current through a regulating circuit devised by Dr. Rossetto and signor Sachetti. The result is that the current is more filtered than usual, thus improving the sound quality.

The Preludio measures 14.6" wide by 6.3" high by 13.6" deep (347mm by 170mm by 350mm). Its features are few: no balance or tone controls, and just a single pair of speaker terminals. No different-output transformer taps: the Preludio is optimized for a 6 ohm load, which signor Sachetti says is ideal for most speakers. There are four line-level inputs, a tape-monitor loop, and (usefully) a preamp output labeled Subwoofer.

The Preludio comes with a remote control whose wood matches the woodwork of the amplifier itself: cherry or walnut. (The same remote can control a Unison Research CD player.) Using the remote means you forgo the pleasure of holding and turning the volume-control knob, which is a sensual experience. Only in Italy could something be machined like this. The Preludio is one of the most beautiful

SAM'S SPACE

amplifiers in the world.

Listening to the Preludio with my Triangle Comete Anniversaire loudspeakers, I did note that, while the bottom end was always controlled, tight, and well-defined, it could have had more authority—compared to, say, Musical Fidelity's new X-T100 integrated amp. But that was what I expected to hear. The Musical Fidelity is rated at 70Wpc, the Preludio at 14Wpc.

The Preludio is a wonderful integrated amplifier that can probably drive all but the most current-hogging North American loudspeakers to realistic levels in most listening rooms. If your listening room is of small to medium size, do you actually need anything bigger?

If you do, there are two larger integrated amps in the series: the Sinfonia (two KT88s per side), and the back-breaking, \$9500 Performance (three KT88s per side), which I reviewed in my May 2005 column (Vol.28 No.5). Yes, I know: the power, the sweep, the panorama. Multiple output tubes do that sweep thing: expansiveness. But *one* KT88 per side? *Magnifico*. As almost any SET enthusiast can attest, there's an inherent magic to that. It has to do with keeping the harmonics in register, with truth of timbre.

The exquisite little Preludio does what you'd want of an Italian amplifier. It sings. It soars. It produces some of the sweetest midrange and treble I've heard—without obscuring fine detail, thickening the bass, or romanticizing the sound. The Preludio does need to run in for 100 hours or so; after that, it needs to be warmed up for about an hour before any critical listening. But what's so different about that? I've fallen in love with this thing: its looks, its sound, its utter simplicity.

By the way, the Preludio runs very quiet—no mechanical noise, and no electrical noise to speak of. It also runs fairly cool, though you do want to give it plenty of ventilation. And anyway, who'd want to hide something this beautiful inside a cabinet?

I'm sure Maurizio Felluga is enjoying his Unison Reference gear with the Carusos. Meanwhile, as I write, I'm savoring his magnificent Pinot Grigiot 2004 (I pay about \$22 per bottle)—and I'm especially enjoying my Preludio with the Opera Quintas. Do I feel envious of signor Fulluga? Nah. Only a little. ■