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CES 2009, McIntosh MC303,
Sony SCD-XA5400ES

In always on the prowl for new multichannel equipment, and especially when I attend the annual Consumer Electronics Show, in Las Vegas. Some years ago there was a brief flowering of multichannel gear in the High End, but that was quickly followed by a contraction as the high-resolution multichannel format of SACD and DVD-Audio disc were ignored by the mass market, and failed to become popular even among audiophiles. Still, I hoped that, as home theater put multichannel audio into homes across America, more and more people would develop a taste for it and demand it from manufacturers.

With the emergence of HDMI, the interface protocol via which video, audio, and copy protection can be carried by a single cable, thus eliminating the need for tangles of multiple analog cables and the associated analog/digital/analog conversions, this has at last happened. There was a host of new multichannel equipment at CES 2009, far more than at last year's event, and all sporting HDMI. But the transition hasn't come easily, as many manufacturers have and continue to struggle with software problems, delays in supplies of parts, slipping delivery dates, and the deteriorating global economy. Still, this year's harvest of multichannel products is a bumper crop, and I intend to get my hands on as many of them as possible. Here's a list of what I saw, each with a few salient features.

Anthem showed their new Statement D2v preamp/processor, with its additional HDMI inputs and processing for the high-definition audio codecs, as well as advanced software for Anthem Room Correction (ARC). The D2v is shipping as I write (my review sample will be here soon), and Anthem promises upgrades to D2v status for owners of the Statement D2. Remarkably, the price remains unchanged at \$7499.

Acram's John Dawson set me an e-mail on the first day of CES, urging me to visit their suite. There he showed me the new AVR660 A/V receiver, which looked much like the English company's FMJ AV888 preamplifier-processor pretuned for the ac-



Ray Kimber (above) demonstrated his AudioMAGIC recordings on an impressive MM/Pass/DSD system. Acram (left) showed a prototype Blu-ray player as well as the Anthem roomcor.



caryaudio.com/products/cinema/cinema11a.html).

Another product already in homes and stores is **Classé Audio's** SSP-800 pre/ps, first shown at the 2008 CEDIA Expo. With its brilliant blue touch-screen, attention to quality, and unique multichannel parametric EQ, the SSP-800 is a statement product. In an introductory offer, early buyers will get it at no cost the multi-DSP upgrade, promised for spring. The upgrade will add, at the very least, decoding for Dolby True-HD, dm, and MA. Another statement product, though shown only in prototype, was the **McIntosh MX-150** Controller. Its distinguishing features, aside from a striking appearance, are the inclusion of the Secoray-Lyngdof Room-Perfect EQ and, I was told, support for multiple correction sets for different listening situations. Estimated price is \$12,000, with a planned April delivery.

Meridian's big news was their purchase of Sordius and their awesome video processor, but they also revealed their HDMI solution. The HD621 is a stand-alone box that will split the audio from the HDMI feed and, via Meridian's proprietary MHR connection, pass it along to their current A/V processors. Keeping with Meridian's philosophy to

onal quarter of 2009. The AV888 will have all the now-expected HDMI/HD audio features and 24-bit/192kHz Wolfson DACs, plus Internet radio, and Ethernet and USB audio playback. There will be room equalization as well, though that remains undefined as of now.

I entered the room of **Cary Audio Design** and was quickly ushered toward the new Cinema 11a pre/ps. The successor to the Cinema 11, which *Stereophile* selected as its 2007 Multichannel Music Component of the Year, the Cinema 11a is a completely new product under the skin. While the 11 lacked any video input, the 11a (shipping now) adds HDMI, as well as the ability to process HDMI audio ([PHOTOS: TONY HAZEL FOR STEREOFILE](http://www.</p>
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icates the audio and video signals, the unswitched video is then passed through an HDMI output.

NAD showed the T175HD and M15HD, successors to their current pre-pros, and featuring modular plug-ins for video and audio processing. Nothing is future-proof, but this will greatly help with longevity and serviceability. Interestingly, the M15HD will include compatibility with Audyssey-Pro and the proprietary Athena correction curve, but no on-of-the-box auto-correction mode.

Finally, Simaudio again showed a prototype of their Moon Evolution CP-8 preamp-proc, which incorporates almost everything one can think of for video, including NSV Precision/Fanulja DCDI processing, analog stereo with moving-magnet phono input, and multichannel audio via HDMI, with Audyssey and dual subwoofer outputs. At 47 lbs., a projected price of \$18,000, and Simaudio's vaunted (by John Atkinson and me) analog pre-amplification, the CP-8 seeks to be the new premier solution for high-end audio and HT.

McIntosh MC303 three-channel power amplifier

The first time I ever heard stereo sound, it was in a shop on Manhattan's Radio Row. In addition to the Studer staggered-head tape deck, the system consisted of pairs of McIntosh C8 preamps, MC60 power amps, and munter Batak B-330 speakers. I can still picture the room and almost hear the sound. I was then an impecunious high-schooler, and while I always moved to buy the best equipment I could afford, I unfortunately was never able to own any of these iconic products. However, when I saw McIntosh's new MC303 three-channel power amp glowing brightly on silent display at the 2008 CEDIA Expo, a light bulb went on over my head: I'd been assessing a series of three-channel and monoblock amps, and the MC303 would fit nicely into my New York City system.

The McIntosh MC303 (\$10,000) is an impressively rugged, heavy power amp rated at 300Wpc with an output-current capability of 60 amps. McIntosh states that this, along with its more than 200 joules of energy storage, empowers the MC303 to pump out up to 1200Wpc on music bursts, regardless of speaker load. One reason is McIntosh's employment of their proprietary output autotransformers to optimize power transfer for 2, 4, or 8 ohm speakers.



The massive McIntosh MC303 with its pretty blue power level meters.

That transformers can do this is well accepted, but to do it well, those transformers must be of very high quality and quite large. The MC303 measures 17.75" wide by 12.575" high by 22" deep and weighs 155 lbs., which makes it as big and heavy as JL Audio's Fathom F113 subwoofer. The MC303 has now joined the F113 as one of the only two products my delivery guys have ever complained about. At least two people are needed to unpack and position it.

Once in place, the MC303 looked gorgeous. On the front are three of McIntosh's signature blue power-level meters, along with gold-rimmed knobs for meter illumination and power. There's a substantial handle at each end of the front panel, and a Power Guard LED above each meter. I never saw the LEDs even flicker. A top view reveals the major amplifier blocks: Across the front of the chassis are the three autotransformers, with the main amp behind them. Having these up front probably makes for better weight distribution when using the front handles, but a picture of the underside of the chassis, probably never to be seen by mere mortals, shows the

output wiring from transformers to speaker terminals. Shouldn't they be at the back, to minimize the wiring to the output terminals?

Inside the main amp, the power transformer is central, sitting atop a stack of 27,000µF/300V capacitors, and flanked on the left, right, and rear by the three channels of power amp and heat sink. On the back are RCA and XLR inputs and a bank of four multiway binding posts for each channel. Setup was almost trivially easy, requiring two instructions. I say "almost" because the speaker terminals were too closely spaced for my fingers, especially using the requisite heavy speaker cables. Nonetheless, all one need do is connect the inputs, outputs, and AC, and enjoy it.

I used the XLR inputs and decided to first try the MC303's 4 ohm taps. B&W's official but ample spec for my 802D speakers is "8 ohms nominal, 3.5 ohms minimum." John Atkinson's measurements show that the 802's impedance remains below 4 ohms from 60 to 8000 Hz (www.stereophile.com/floorloudspeakers/1205bw/index4.html). That's a pretty meaty chunk of the midrange, and I figured there might be real advantage in favoring it. Also, the electrical phase angle ran from -50° to about +50° in that same range. The rest of the spectrum could probably fend for itself.

Lucky or smart—who knows? From the get-go to the moment I type this, the MC303 has elevated the sound of the B&W 802Ds, as well as the rest of my system and room, to a standard I have rarely experienced. The most obvious difference was that the low-frequency bump, shown in the direct response from the woofers in JA's graph (fig.4), was no longer audible. Even without Meridian's room-response correction, the bass was smoother and, because of this, subjectively extended. I could now more easily hear and appreciate the 802D's bass capabilities, which are substantial. (The speaker's performance via the McIntosh's 8 ohm taps was just marginally less superb, and noticeable mostly in the 3–4kHz range, where the ear is most sensitive, with recordings of the female voice.) That smoothness extended through the midrange and all

1 The McIntosh MC303 uses 110,000µF electrolytic capacitors, Inc. 2 Chantrelle Street, Binghamton, NY 13903-2659. Tel: (800) 334-6378, (607) 734-3112. Fax: (607) 734-0349. Web: www.mcintosh.com.

the way up, through, and past the crossovers without revealing even the tiniest seam.

Now, I know that McIntosh has a reputation for such smoothness, coupled to a slightly warm character and a wide, deep soundstage. In fact, some have attributed the depth of the soundstage to the total warmth, but I found no instance in which the presentation could be correlated with the brightness of the recording, even when I played recordings specifically chosen for their treble emphasis. Examples include the Classic Records DADs derived from Bert Whyte's Everest recordings, which at times I've found to be somewhat glaring in the upper midrange, played at 24-bit/96kHz from the modified Oppo DV-980H universal player or through a prototype ESS-9018-based DAC. De Falla's *Three-Cornered Hat*, as performed by Enrique Jorda and the London Symphony Orchestra (DAD, Everest/Classic HDAD9Plus 2019), was as spectacularly wide, deep, and detailed as before—but now, through the MC303, so much more open and relaxed that I relished the thrill I felt when I discovered the original LP so many decades ago. When I switched to the three-channel tracks of the De Falla—, better yet, of Malcolm Sargent and the LSO's recording of Shostakovich's *Symphony 9* (DAD, Everest/Classic HDAD9Plus 2018)—the MC303 and 802Ds approached the relaxed spaciousness and transparency of master tapes.

In three channels—or, abetted by a McCormack amp/B&W 804S combo, in five channels—my system played louder, clearer, and cleaner than ever with the MC303. The killer discs used were the three-channel version of Rimsky-Korsakov's *Scheherazade* with Fritz Reiner and the Chicago Symphony (SACD/CD, RCA Living Stereo 66377), and Christoph Eschenbach and the Philadelphia Orchestra's five-channel edition of Saint-Saëns' "Organ" *Symphony* (SACD/CD, Ondine ODE 1094-5). And look, ma, no subwoofers—even on the latter's powerful opening piece, Samuel Barber's *Boats for Sailing* for organ and orchestra!

Though I was thoroughly smitten with the MC303, it didn't exactly leave all other amps in the dust. Driven by Bel Canto's Ref 1000/II, the B&W 802Ds sounded firmer in the extreme bass and a bit less forgiving in the treble. The amps' audible differences



Top view of the McIntosh MC303, clearly labeled to show its internal anatomy.

seemed to parallel their distinct looks. Sitting next to the McIntosh, each Bel Canto monoblock reminded me of a tight, powerful, eager Audi 5-8 parked next to a strong, massive, capable Cadillac Escalade. The Class CA-5200, on the other hand, is almost in the same weight class as the McIntosh, was more forgiving of recorded emphases at both frequency extremes, and had great transparency throughout the audio band (automotive equivalent: a Mercedes S-65). What nosed the McIntosh ahead of these able performers was not a matter of balance or even of power, as all of these amps delivered enough for me; rather, the MC303 seemed to erase the 802Ds' crossover transitions and create an equally seamless frontal soundstage.

Still, I was faced with a paradox: I can hear and describe how each of the amps I have lately auditioned compare, and acknowledge that others have particular advantages over the MC303 with the B&W 802Ds—advantages I could also hear with PSB's Imagine T speakers. However, there was a gripping "rightness" about the musical performance of the MC303-802D combination that was not so apparent with the McIntosh-PSB, and that trumped rational analysis. This so troubled the logical side of my brain that I may have to keep the McIntosh MC303, if only to attempt to reconcile left brain with right. And that would be so much more enjoyable than sending it back.

Sony SCD-XA5400ES SACD/CD player

I remember when, sometime in the late 1980s, I decided to buy my last turntable. I also recall that, since that purchase, I have bought three more

turntables. So when I say that Sony's new SCD-XA5400ES (\$1499.99) looks like the last of its kind, or the last SACD/CD player that we or Sony would need... take it with a grain of salt.

Heretofore, SACD's irksome copy protection has prevented users from getting a digital DSD datastream out of the player and into a modern processor. Thus, users have had to get their DSD from SACD players' analog outputs, which has resulted in great competition among manufacturers to offer the best D/A conversion and analog outputs for the buck. It has also resulted in arguments and finger-pointing about direct conversion of DSD to analog vs. conversion via intermediary transcoding to PCM. All that was quashed with the arrival of the universal players from Oppo (<http://stereophile.com/musincintheround/108mtr/index.html>) and Pioneer (<http://stereophile.com/musincintheround/708mtr/>), which output DSD via HDMI.

Sony can be justly criticized for what many of us see as their inadequate support of SACD, a medium they created and that many of us continue to know as the best available all-around physical medium for music. But with the SCD-XA5400ES, the latest in their line of statement SACD/CD players, they have stepped up to the plate, recognizing the importance of HDMI for current and future compatibility. And, for stereo aficionados who demand them, Sony has also paid admirable attention to the D/A conversion and analog outputs.

In looks, the SCD-XA5400ES resembles its predecessors, the SCD-XA777ES and SCD-XA9000ES, with a beveled front panel that places the operator controls on a conveniently slanted pane. In fact, looking at the front, one is hard put to identify anything strikingly new about this latest ES model. To the left of the disc tray are buttons for Power/Standby and for selecting Time/Text, Multi-2Ch track, SACD/CD layer, and HDMI activation. When HDMI is selected, the analog and digital outputs are muted. To the right of the tray are the familiar buttons for tray Open/Close, Play, Pause, and Stop. At the bottom of the front panel, from left to right, are a headphone jack, a headphone level control, the remote

2. The Sony SCD-XA5400ES costs 1499.99. Sony Electronics Inc., 16536 Via Equillo, San Diego, CA 92127. Tel: (800) 223-7669. Web: www.sony.com.