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Basis Audio's Work of Art System:

A Visit and First Hearing



Vitus Audio SIA-025
Product Of The Year 2011 Award
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I think it is fair to conjecture that most audiophiles would benefit from seeing and comprehending the inner workings of a highly respected, successful audio manufacturer. I'd speculate further that it makes for a worthwhile experience at multiple levels. The understanding which comes from witnessing how the maker operates, and how that acumen translates into distinguished finished gear provides deeper insights into what it takes to envision, design, implement and market such



complex devices. For me, the opportunity to travel to Hollis, New Hampshire and spend part of a day at the Basis Audio facility did all of that and more. But allow me to offer some background first.

In recent months I became the happy and proud owner of the Basis 2800 Signature turntable combined with their Vector 4 tonearm. This remarkable combination includes a turntable with a highly evolved vacuum hold-down system, sophisticated isolation base, Synchro-Wave power supply, a newly designed micro-thin belt and several other features which can be seen in the review I did of this gear this past July. I can sincerely say that having this equipment as part of my phono playback system has been revelatory, exhilarating and captivating. In the process of working through that review I enjoyed several excellent interactions with the main man at Basis Audio, A. J. Conti. He embodies a high degree of professionalism coupled to a distinguished career as a professional engineer, audio designer and manufacturer. It became possible for me to visit his business operation very recently with a focus on seeing and hearing his truly outstanding statement turntable offering, which is known as the Work of Art. That day represents the main thrust of this report and I am grateful to Mr. Conti for his hospitality, excellent information and openness during that summer afternoon. Please note that this is not an equipment review per se, but rather a description of an informative and enlightening day, well spent.

It is noteworthy to mention that Basis Audio is a tried-and-true, highly regarded and trusted manufacturer. It runs as a tight ship in a modest but efficient physical plant within a small industrial park in a rural part of New Hampshire near the Massachusetts border. No space is wasted and organizational prowess competently exudes from all that happens there. I won't belabor going over the details of the general operation at Basis, but rather want to concentrate on the Work of Art and the listening room at the business facility.

Conti decided to arrange a dedicated listening space within his operation in order to evaluate his existing and prototypical products, as well as to provide fine music playback for himself and his staff. That "room" is actually a very effective area within the larger room where his assembly operations occur, however it is not physically divided off from the overall space by way of walls. This sound room is a quite inviting space, arranged smartly, with an understated elegance that comes from fine accoutrements, especially the oriental rugs both on the floor and hung on the wall behind the speakers. Since there are no side wall boundary surfaces near this area, the sound is generated in a very free, unencumbered, fully satisfying manner. The components of this stellar system include electronics from Pass Laboratories, speakers from Verity Audio and wiring by Basis Audio. On this visit the Work of Art [or WoA] was in place, fortunately for me, since it was undergoing some final auditioning before being shipped to its new European owner. Not many of these inspired beauties exist, so it was especially fortuitous that I could be at the shop while it was fully settled-in and performing marvelously. Here are details of the full sound system:

Amplifier: Pass XA 30.5

Phono Stage: Pass X-Ono

Preamp: Pass X1

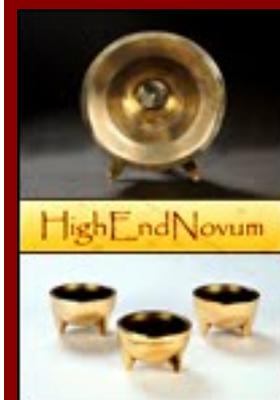
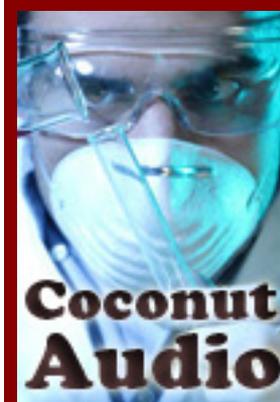
Speakers: Verity Audio Lohengrin II

Cables: Full Basis Cable System and Speaker Wires

Cartridge: My Sonic Eminent MC

Turntable: Basis Work of Art, which includes the Basis Vector 4 tonearm

Being a big fan of context, I'd like to say a few general things before launching into my estimation of the Basis sound room visit. Prior exposure to Verity speakers over the years has always been a very positive thing for me. The Parsifal model, in a few different iterations, was the most frequently heard system, although their Sarastro II



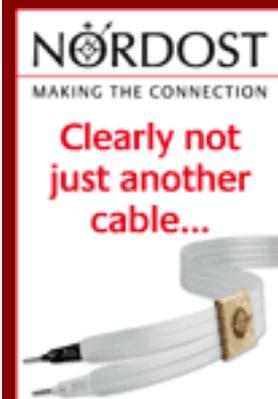
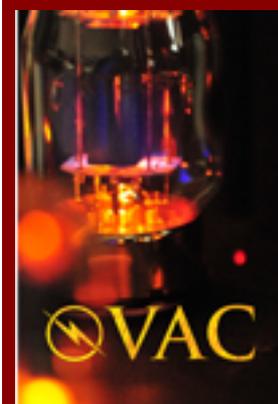
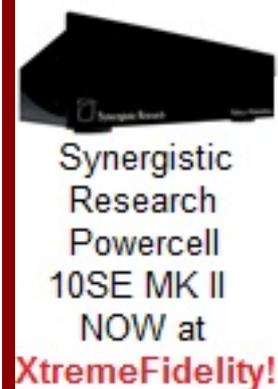
model did mightily impress on an occasion two years ago as well. The naturalness and delicacy of their house sound is quite agreeable. Now hearing the Lohengrin II speaker, which is at the top of their range, came as an even more delightful experience. In other systems I frequently get to hear Nelson Pass's fine electronics and know that they provide superb performance and possess top flight build quality. The Work of Art, itself, is a rare and exciting product. My previous awareness of it was limited to photos and written descriptions. Seeing this marvelous achievement 'up-close and personal' is a true eye opener. In broad sweeping terms, I can say that the quality of the sound being generated in this listening space is several steps beyond what most audiophiles get to hear outside of the concert hall. The ease and effortlessness of how the music flowed is amazingly communicative. All the notes are there, as one would expect, but even more so is the naturalness and grace of what one hopes to find at an excellent live concert. In fact, having enjoyed the rare opportunity to hear master tapes both at recording studios and in domestic settings, I was taken aback by the sheer involvement this system generates. It made the gap much smaller between superb master tape reproduction and anything else, short of live music.



I must confess that I had not heard this specific audio system configuration previously, so these listening impressions come from a few intensive hours of exposure. Through the kindness of other friends I have heard very exotic, phenomenally costly sound systems over the years. Whether from Infinity IRSs to Pipedreams, big Magnaplanar rigs, or mega horn systems, etc., each left indelible and happy memories. This Basis combination now ranks at the top of that pile. Since I own and know the sound of their 2800 turntable, I think it is fair to say that a significant part of the reproduction finesse manifested in NH had to come from the Work of Art turntable/arm system. It is beyond the intent of this essay to describe all the details of the WoA, so I suggest having a look at the Basis website for specifics and background information [www.basisaudio.com].

There was a well balanced variety of music played via a number of LPs, many of which are in my own collection. Here is the list of the discs and tracks we heard.

Beatles: *Love*, "While My Guitar Gently Weeps" and "A Day in the Life." **The Persuasions:** *We Came to Play*, "Gypsy Woman." **Dave Brubeck:** *Time Out*, "Take Five." **Moussorgsky:** *Pictures at an Exhibition*, "Side One", [Reiner on the Classics



Reissue of the RCA Living Stereo version]. **Tom Waits** and Crystal Gayle: *One from the Heart*, "Opening Montage" and "Once Upon a Town." **Gary Karr**: *Adagio d'Albinoni*, "Adagio in G minor."

Sade: *Diamond Life*, "Sally" and "Why Can't We Live Together."

The Nylons: *One Size Fits All*, "Town Without Pity."

I think it may be best to comment about how these LPs sounded in this system with broad sweeping strokes even though I am tempted to present some level of disc-by-disc descriptions. Let's see how it goes.

For starters, hearing the Moussorgsky piece, which is a long time fav, took me back to my teen years. Yes, I had the good fortune of seeing Leonard Bernstein conduct this piece in Carnegie Hall with the New York Philharmonic whilst I was still a pup. It represented a first 'musical peak experience' for me, so whenever I hear it again, profound swells of nostalgia and happiness permeate my thoughts. Clearly, listening to this entire first side on the WoA touched those deeper feelings and it was a glorious thing to behold. The grandeur of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra was ever-present and instrumental placement, space, transients and tonal nuances came across with a superb sense of ease and rightness. One big surprise was the exquisite quietness of this playback. Somehow the WoA, along with the rest of the gear, minimized the usual distractions one typically associates with vinyl. Yet there was a fully abundant complement of all the usual audiophilic expectations. This ability for the extraneous annoyances to almost disappear was consistent with each disc played and helped to make this kind of listening very special.

The Beatles *Love* LP set became a fast fav for me at home, but hearing it at Basis took it to another level. The articulation and inner detail were presented in a smooth and musically engaging manner, but happily, none of it carried that etched overdone edginess that too often happens on systems in need of help. Here the guitar and vocal strengths shined and gratified.

I grew up in the same city that the Persuasions called home. Hearing this album brought back wonderful memories of the a cappella singing that happened in the stairwells of Lincoln High School. This LP is certainly not an audiophile favorite, but I hear it a lot at home and the rendition of "Gypsy Woman" over the WoA was a stunner. The clarity of inflection and precision of placement of each voice was a major treat. My copy of this LP is in much worse shape than the one at Basis, but I know the newly revealed delicacies make me want to find a better copy for future enjoyment.

Gary Karr has impressed me mightily over the years. Fortunately, a lot of his musicianship is captured well and worthy of acquisition. Assisted by his long time accompanist, Harmon Lewis on pipe organ, this beautiful piece of music thrilled me in new ways. The linearity of the stringed bass sounds was gorgeous, and the resonances of the wood were felt in heretofore unknown ways. The acoustics and ambience retrieval were truly awesome. And again, the quietness made for the best rendition I have ever heard of this material.

Just about everyone knows Brubeck's "Take Five" and I've owned more than one copy of *Time Out* over the years. Yes the piano is fine, but this was where I first learned to appreciate the excellently sweet sax playing of Paul Desmond, coupled to the essence of timekeeping from Joe Morello. The drum solo had an explosive intensity that was a major adrenaline rush at this hearing. I know that I commented to A.J. that I doubted if the master tape sounded any better than that. So much more was revealed that it almost seemed to be a different recording in terms of timing, drum hits and notes that had escaped my attention in the past. There was plenty of punch, dynamics and excitement without any loss of refinement. Wow! Nothing but toe-tapping joy infused the room.



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As for the remaining LPs heard that day, let me lump things together, since I do not own those discs, but have a tangential awareness of them from hearings on other systems. The sound was engaging, instructive and beautiful. Things like tonal balance, space retrieval, depth, width, height and frequency extremes all came across with high success and meaning. Beyond these conventional audiophile descriptors, however, my greatest joy came from feeling that I was just somewhere else, not in front of a sound system, but in a different place where music lived. I've always wondered how much more one could derive from LP playback, even after hearing highly refined systems over the years. Now I know... and it is much more, particularly when heard with the Work of Art as the critical element of the system. By the way, you need solid flooring in order to use the WoA. It weighs a bit over 400 pounds and when fully outfitted with the Vector 4 arm with VTA adjuster, it will impact your wallet to the tune of about \$135,600. Clearly, this kind of equipment deserves the very best ancillary gear and A.J. Conti has assembled such a combination in his wonderful listening space.

The Basis Audio Work of Art turntable system is without question an absolute statement product. Not every manufacturer has the opportunity, wherewithal or ability to create his or her own statement product, but happily A. J. Conti has done so in spades. This is a visually stunning achievement, which bespeaks incredible attention to precision, design soundness and craftsmanship at every level. Since these are rare birds, one is likely to find them only in very special settings and I hope many others will have that experience. Basis Audio does exhibit at audio shows around the globe, so keep a keen eye out for where and when you, too, can have a chance to be engaged, transported and astonished.

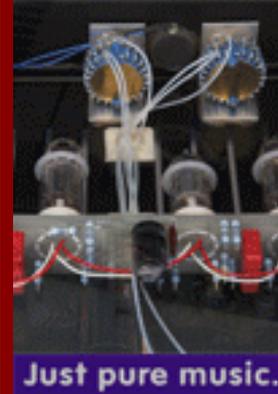
It was truly my good fortune to be able to hear the WoA and the full Basis room during my visit. As I departed that day I told Mr. Conti that he had certainly created world class sound and that something very special was going on in his sound room. That is the truth, but it still feels inadequate in attempting to encapsulate the wonderment of that listening session.

Congratulations and kudos to A. J. Conti and his staff at Basis Audio. The Work of Art is a thrilling instrument. As whipped cream on top of the cake, the Basis listening space is a major success and beautiful to behold. Such excellence of sound and music reproduction as this is what makes for memorable times. The purity, resolving ability, effortlessness, completeness, naturalness and communicative intensity I witnessed during this session contributed significantly to the freedom from worry and stress, which sometimes accompanies new listening sessions. When I can fully relax into the listening experience and give myself over to the music, I know that a marvelous situation is at hand. I could have remained in that seat all day!

That is how I remember my truly enjoyable visit to Basis Audio.

Happy Listening.

Les Turoczi

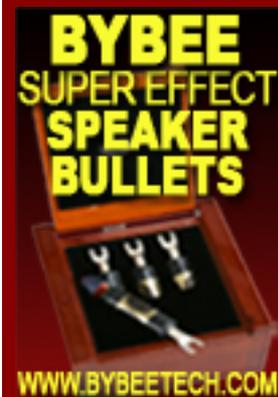




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