

John Marks Something Special

Wilson Benesch Actors loudspeakers (\$7,000)
Electrocompaniet EMC-1 CD player (\$4,000)
Electrocompaniet ECI-3 integrated amplifier (\$2,000)
Nordost Blue Heaven cabling (\$800)
Custom Power Cord Company power cords (\$500)
RPG acoustical panels (\$700)
System total: \$15,000

For \$15,000, you should get something really special. By which I mean a system that can play almost any recording, and have its essential high-endedness, its *raison d'être*, apparent to even casual or unskilled listeners. I do not refer to matters of bang and boom! I mean, for example, that in playing, at a moderate volume level, a well-miked Ella Fitzgerald recording (or a Mary Black recording, if you prefer), you'll hear so much closer an approximation to a real, live person singing, that nearly everyone listening would agree that spending that amount of money, instead of buying a Bose Wave Radio/CD player, was not a completely irrational thing to do.

Starting off, I will say that I think that it is, indeed, irrational to spend more than \$10,000 on audio playback without devoting substantial attention to the room's acoustics. Other things being equal, \$10,000 worth of equipment in a bad room will not sound as good as \$7,000 worth of equipment in that room with \$3,000 in acoustical remediation products placed properly.

If you last evaluated room acoustic treatments when the Bee Gees were at the top of the pop charts, I have news for you: The Foam (only) Age is over. Part of the new wave in acoustical products is diffusion, which has the ability to break up specular reflections in time and direction without shortening reverberation times or rolling-off high frequencies. It would be the rare room that would not benefit from placement of RPG Skylines or Binary Amplitude Diffusor panels (my two favorites). So I start from the premise that some money should be spent on increasing the room's acoustical diffusion. (Since rooms differ, that expense may have to be mostly off-budget.)

My next point is that the essential sound of the system is determined by the speakers' radiation pattern, tonal balance, and timbre. Having to work within a budget, even as generous as \$15,000, means that I have to balance the attributes of the source, amplification, and speakers synergistically to achieve the most from each.

What best filled the loudspeaker bill were the Wilson Benesch Actors, which have the drivers, crossover, cabinet shape, and strong family resemblance to the sound of Wilson Benesch's glorious but pricey Act Ones [review, Issue 119], but without the high-tech materials.

Specifically, the Actors omit the Act Ones' carbon-fiber body panels, alloy baffle for driver mounting, laser-cut steel intermediate base plate, and cantilevered base. Also, the Actors' top cap is one slanted thinner board, instead of the Act Ones' opulent beveled slab of solid cherry. The spikes are not aircraft-quality, and the terminal block does not allow tri-



Electrocompaniet ECI-3 integrated amplifier



Electrocompaniet EMC-1 CD player

wiring. But a nip here and a tuck there saves you four grand (\$7,000 for the Actors versus \$11,000 for the Act Ones), so we are grateful.

Most of the observations in Issue 119's coverage of the Act Ones apply to the Actors, with the understandable qualification that the Act Ones' otherworldly coherence really does owe much to their glorious dollars-(or pounds)-be-damned engineering overkill. Some of that astonishing sense of locked-in focus is missing. The essential timbre is the same, but the imaging and articulation are a bit softer. And, yes, the bass below 40 Hz is still a bit light in heft.

Properly set up, and heard on their own, you can listen to the Telarc/Shaw *Ein deutsches Requiem* on the Actors and not feel that you are missing out; without question, though, a truly full-range loudspeaker will deliver fuller measure of organ pedals and orchestral basses. But that is only one recording of one composition. My guess is that 90 percent of recordings will not suffer from the Actors' lack of ultimate bass extension, but all of them will benefit from their addictive sweetness and clarity.

The next requirement is a source that complements the Actors' tonal capabilities, and I found it in the (justifiably) pricey (\$4,000) Electrocompaniet EMC-1 CD player. A top-loading player based on a Philips professional transport, and using 24-bit 96-kHz dual-differential balanced digital architecture, the EMC-1's design pays special attention to

mechanical resonance control. A thoroughly thought-out, mature design with remarkably fine low-level detail, crisp imaging, and inviting timbral character that is not achieved by rolling off the top end. On the contrary, the top end is extended but not grainy. (Despite its digital architecture, which is designed to eliminate the need for brick-wall digital filtering, the EMC-1 does not upconvert the data from 44.1/16 CDs, and it is not equipped with a laser that reads DVDs. It is meant to be a state-of-the-art CD player. As I have said before, unless your music collection is all on vinyl, you will need a great CD player, and I have my doubts about jack-of-all-trades approaches to the new playback formats. As I have not heard regular CDs played back on Sony's new, more-affordable SACD player, I could not consider recommending it as of yet. But it may be a viable option.)

Having used up a lot of the budget and still needing amplification, I opted for finesse over ultimate power and chose the Electrocompaniet ECI-3 integrated amplifier (\$2,000), mostly for its remarkably subtle line stage. Just as the Wilson Benesch Actors are the Act Ones on an austerity budget, the ECI-3's line stage is identical to that of Electrocompaniet's \$2,000 separate preamplifier except for having a less robust and well-regulated power supply. The ECI-3 is rated at 70 watts per channel, and in day-to-day use is certainly adequate to the task. Not to be disregarded is the "style et luxe" impact of the solid cherry-trimmed Actors in tandem with Electrocompaniet's classy industrial design, fea-

turing black-backed, clear acrylic face plates, midnight-blue readouts, and gold accents.

The Electrocompaniet units are both solid-state, but have an essential lushness that many people associate with tubes, and the Wilson Benesch line uses fabric soft-dome tweeters, so cabling choices are rather important to prevent the whole thing from going butterscotch. Nordost Blue Heaven speaker cables and balanced interconnects did the trick at a total cost of approximately \$800. (Nordost's SPM breaks the budget, but in glorious fashion.) Power cords were two Custom Power Cord Company Model 11s, at a total of \$500. (Marigo's active line conditioner, at \$1,895, brings wonderful subtlety to the dynamics and articulation, but is, again, over budget. Consider it an upgrade.) This leaves \$700 as a start on room acoustic treatments.

This system's high resolving power and low distortion combine well with its slight romantic coloration. It excels on vocals of all kinds, orchestral and solo strings, acoustic jazz, and most orchestral music. Orchestral blockbusters such as Mahler's *Fifth Symphony* do lack ultimate bass weight, and even with a beefier amp, the Actors' design means that bass will be the most obvious limitation of this particular assemblage. This system gives all the spatial information and articulation of detail you need to feel involved in the flow of the music, but has as close to zero fatigue factor as I have heard at this price in a system that is reasonably full-range in frequency and dynamics.