

# PASSIONS

SME's 30/12 turntable and arm - better than Swiss standards?



# AUDIO & WATCHES

Although the two fields of watches and high-end audio seem as if they could not be further apart, the “disconnect” is misleading. On so many levels, the two worlds meet, though not as commercially (nor as obviously) as cars-and-watches.

BY KEN KESSLER



Inside Nagra's PL-P pre-amplifier – made down the road apiece from Greubel Forsey, Breitling, Cartier and Patek Philippe

Like all boys' toys fixations, enthusiasts aren't bound just by a love for only one. If anything, multiple obsessions can inhabit any individual, and there are numerous watchmakers and manufacturers also hooked on cars, fine wines, pens, cameras, and, yes, top quality sound systems.



Nagra's 300i tube amplifier – as "vintage" in its own way as any mechanical watch

Dan D'Agostino's Momentum amplifier – the copper heat sinks are machined from solid billets, the meter inspired by a Breguet watch

**IT HAS REACHED MY ATTENTION** (in my capacity as a hi-fi reviewer, that is) that De Bethune's David Zanetta, Christophe Claret, top London retailer Marcus Margulies, Urwerk's Felix Baumgartner, Bremont's Peter Roberts and many others in the watch kingdom harbor a love of music that won't be satisfied by an iPod dock.

Conversely, there are so many audio designers who love watches that it's only fair to start with Joe Grado, who held the patent for the moving-coil phonograph cartridge in the 1950s, and whose company now produces superb headphones: he began as a master watchmaker. The late Julian Vereker of Naim Audio collected watches - his huge wrists had him seeking out extra-long straps at a time when they weren't that common - as does top designer Karl-Heinz Fink, who

now consults for Naim.

At the recent Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas, with little effort I noted on the wrists of various audio celebs an IWC Big Pilot or two, a Breguet XX, a Franck Muller Master Banker, a couple of IWC Portugueseers and a new rose-gold Portofino, a Roger Dubuis with hand-painted "Samurai" dial, a vintage Omega Speedmaster Professional, an early Patek Philippe Nautilus, too many Panerai's to count, a Rolex DeepSea and a green-bezel Submariner, an older Jaeger-LeCoultre Reverso and a Geographique, a Cartier Roadster, a Hamilton Khaki GMT, a cluster of Royal Oaks, and a Girard-Perregaux Traveler II.

So, please: dismiss any misapprehension about all audiophiles being G-Shock-wearing geeks.

### BREGUET STYLING

**AMONG THOSE WHO ARE** guided by the standards of Swiss watchmaking are Dan D'Agostino, who founded Krell and now heads a Connecticut-based company bearing his name. His first product, the Momentum amplifier, sports a power meter inspired by classic Breguet aesthetics, including a "Breguet-style" hand. The amplifier's chassis is machined from solid aluminum, with heat sinks made from solid copper billets. The metalwork matches precisely that of a watchcase in fit and finish - only here it's scaled up to 5 x 12.5 x 21 inches and weighs 90 pounds.

English manufacturer SME, producer of some of the world's finest tonearms and turntables, was founded by Alastair



Another Swiss audio icon, darTZeel's staggering NHB-458 mono power amplifier

Detail shot of the wittily-named controls on darTZeel's pre-amplifier



Robertson-Aikman, the most fastidious individual this writer has ever met. AR-A, as he was called, always wore a Rolex Datejust, and used its inimitably Swiss standards as his starting point. One watchmaker/audiophile, who chooses to remain anonymous, believes that SME's build quality equals the best that Switzerland can produce; at least one Series 30 turntable served its owner for twenty years before requiring servicing.

While manufacturers from Tokyo to Texas might emulate Swiss values, there is no mistaking the mindset behind brands that actually are Swiss. Switzerland has its own robustly healthy high-end audio industry, with a long and noble history embracing such brands as Thorens and EMT, who

produced legendary turntables, and Revox and Stellavox, remembered for world-class open-reel tape decks. Today's high-end scene also boasts a number of Swiss brands, most notably Nagra - celebrating its 60th anniversary in 2012 - and darTZeel.

Nagra's expertise, more than any other, has an affinity with watchmaking due to the miniaturization present in its most famous product, the SN tape recorder beloved of the CIA and other intelligence bodies. News journalists and on-location soundtrack engineers alike have long depended on Nagra's seemingly-unbreakable portable tape recorders while domestic hi-fi users have long enjoyed Nagra amplifiers and CD players, both tube and solid-state. It's enough that

they sound wonderful. What adds to their appeal is astonishing build-quality - instantly recognizable to any horologist.

Geneva-based darTZeel, which makes cost-is-no-object amplifiers that feature custom-made screws to hold the panels together, represents the latest generation of Swiss hi-fi producers. Their compatriots include Soulution, Da Vinci Audio, the revived EMT, Daniel Hertz, Goldmund and a host of others. While they may differ in philosophy and styling, they all seem to possess the same virtues and qualities that keep Swiss watchmaking at the pinnacle of the craft. Or, is it art? In the case of the wholly subjective performance of music-reproducing equipment many would argue that art it is. ♣