

cellini STATUS







ROCK

BY **KEN KESSLER**

The **SATISFYING TICK** of a mechanical **WATCH'S ESCAPEMENT** at **WORK**. The **PRIMAL THRILL** of a bass **DRUM'S IMPACT**. On paper, they are **WORLDS APART**. And yet the way they **SOUND** and how they make us **FEEL** reveal the **DEEP CONNECTION** shared by **TIME** and **TONE**.

If you savor your finest wines in Zalto glasses, sign your checks with a Montegrappa pen, and view the America's Cup through Swarovski binoculars, then why not treat your ears with the same respect? The sound of the world's finest audio components, once experienced, will force you to treat plastic iPod docks the way you regard plastic watches.

Everyone understands what a watch does, and what the finest watches represent. On a base level, a watch merely tells the time. A superior timepiece celebrates it. So, too, do state-of-the-art hi-fi components exceed the basic function of merely extracting music from a CD, LP or digital file. The analogy is appropriate: iPod docks and car stereos make sounds. "Proper" hi-fi components make music.

Elusive to many are the qualities that distinguish a superior sound system from a mere boom box, but it's not rocket science. Any feeling of insecurity upon entering a hi-fi emporium will be recognized as the same sensation experienced by those who feel that they don't know or "understand" a wine list. But the taste buds do not lie, and neither do one's ears. The sole purpose of a specialty sound system is to make recordings sound real, as if the musicians were in the room: no distortion, no coloration to make the sound you hear seem artificial. It should always be remembered that the term "high fidelity" means "faithful to the original sound."

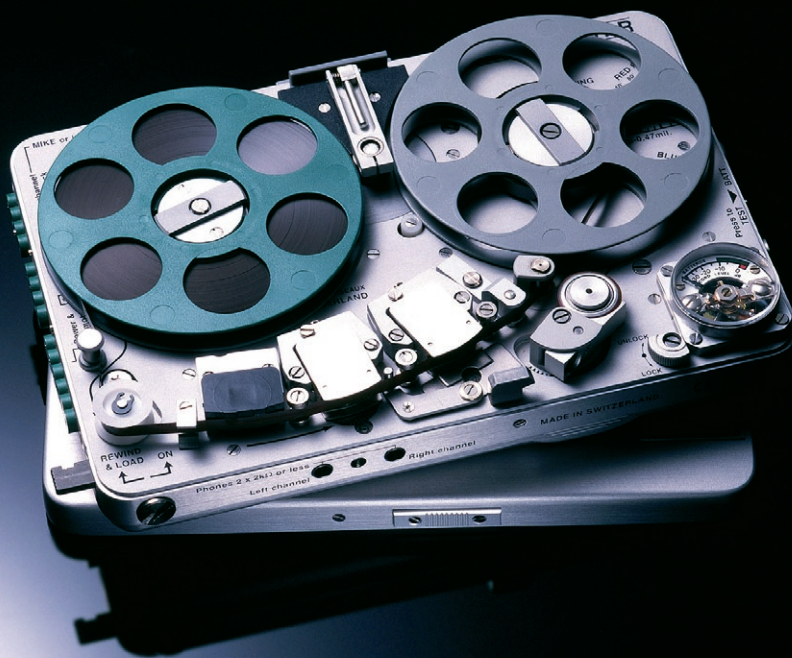
Clearaudio's handcrafted Champion Wood turntable uses a tonearm made of satine wood to enhance the sound's warmth.

AROUND THE CLOCK

MUSICAL MACHINES

What many watch connoisseurs may not know is that mechanical wristwatches have more in common with purist audio components than such disparate objects might seem to possess at first glance. Every watch lover knows of the car/watch connection. Both are machines, both appeal to the same senses. But, so do high-end audio components. They have been called many things over the years in the audio community: "purist," "extreme" or "specialty." But a recent term might say more to non-audiophiles: "high-performance components."

It is not a conceit: the sole *raison d'être* of cost-no-object components, designed without size or material limitations, is to deliver sound quality simply not offered by the mass-market hardware



produced by giant multi-nationals. Designers of high-end audio equipment think like the great watch designers, who live to extract even greater accuracy and dependability from timepieces developed without constraint.

Just as the most inventive car engineers exhibit similarities to watch designers, their hi-fi counterparts seem cut from the same cloth. And all are "boys' toys" aficionados. Joe Grado, who patented the moving-coil phono cartridge in the 1950s, whose company produces superb headphones, and who just celebrated his 88th birthday, began as a master watchmaker. Top loudspeaker designer Karl-Heinz Fink collects watches and cameras. The late Julian Vereker of Naim audio was a competition-level driver who adored Minis and collected big sport watches.

From top: This gem is Nagra's SNST-R mini-recorder, beloved of spies and ordered for the CIA by JFK. Its footprint is only 5¾"x4"x1".

Nagra's 300i is an integrated amplifier that uses the 300B tube, an audiophile's favorite that dates from 1937; its case is machined from aluminum.



CONVENTION OF TASTE

Just as the watch industry welcomes the trade to the *Salon International de la Haute Horlogerie* (SIHH) in Geneva every January, and Baselworld in the spring, the high-end audio community gathers every January at the Consumer Electronics Show (CES) in Las Vegas. CES 2012 was rife with watches of note. Easy to spot were an IWC Big Pilot or two, a couple of Portuguesers, a rose gold Portofino, a Franck Muller Master Banker, an early Patek Philippe Nautilus “Jumbo,” a period Jaeger-LeCoultre Reverso and a Geographique, a Cartier Roadster, a cluster of Royal Oaks, a Girard-Perregaux Traveler II, and a Roger Dubuis with a hand-painted “Samurai” dial on the wrist of a European audio distributor.

Conversely, tourbillon wizard Christophe Claret, De Bethune’s David Zanetta, Bremont Technical Director Peter Roberts, and many others in the watch kingdom harbor a love of music that won’t be satisfied by an iPod dock. Dig deeper into the Swiss character, and you find that they apply the same standards to manufacturing hi-fi equipment that they employ in watchmaking.

SWISS SOUND

Switzerland has its own high-end audio industry, one that dates back to the birth of specialty audio equipment in the late 1940s and into the 1950s, with the invention of the stereo LP. Early milestones included Thorens’ and EMT’s fabled turntables, while Revox and Stellavox are remembered for sublime open-reel tape decks. But the most important audio brand of Swiss origin is Nagra, best known for security devices, professional equipment, and other hardware not immediately associated with hi-fi.

Celebrating its 60th anniversary in 2012, **Nagra**, 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. It is a marvel of engineering, an open-reel tape recorder that fits in the palm of one’s hand. Its role in recording everything from loquacious Mafiosi to indiscreet politicians is the stuff of legend. Its tape recorders are so distinctive that they appear in the very films they record, if there’s a need to show a recording device for serious eavesdropping.

Swiss to the core, one of Nagra’s factories actually faces Cartier’s atelier in La Chaux-de-Fonds; others are in Cheseaux, Geneva, and



Nagra's VPA Monoblock Power Amplifier — you need two for stereo — uses another classic tube adored by high-end enthusiasts, the 845. Each VPA delivers 50 watts. Note the company's signature touch, the Modulometer in the front panel.

Nyon. News journalists and on-location movie soundtrack engineers alike swear by Nagra’s seemingly-unbreakable portable tape recorders, which first appeared around 1951 and were present on a Swiss attempt to climb Mt. Everest, as well as on the *Trieste* with Jacques Piccard as he descended to the deepest part of the Earth’s oceans.

For 15 years, Nagra has produced equipment for domestic hi-fi users, including tube and solid-state amplifiers, CD players and digital converters. Naturally, the sound quality is superlative. But for Nagra — like most other high-end manufacturers — that is not enough. What completes their worth as objects for connoisseurs is the kind of astonishing build-quality familiar to anyone who has ever handled a fine wristwatch.

HOROLOGICAL INSPIRATION

That intense attention to detail lives on through a number of younger companies operating in the same tradition. Firms like Geneva-based **darTZeel**, is so utterly Swiss that its amplifiers feature custom-made screws to hold the panels together. Their compatriots include Soullution, Da Vinci Audio, the recently revived EMT, Thorens, Daniel Hertz, Goldmund, and others. In every instance, the resemblance to Swiss watchmaking standards is unmistakable.

Among those outside of Switzerland who are guided by the standards of Swiss watchmaking is **Dan D'Agostino**, who founded Krell and now heads a Connecticut-based company bearing his name. D'Agostino has been a watch collector for decades, having owned Franck Mullers, IWCs and others. His appreciation for watches is reflected in the first D'Agostino products.

His initial offering, the Momentum amplifier, sports a power meter inspired by classic Breguet aesthetics, including a "Breguet-style" hand. The chassis is machined from solid aluminum, with heat sinks made from solid copper billets. The metalwork matches the precise fit of a watch case. The difference is that his amplifier measures 5"x12.5"x21" (HWD) and weighs 90 pounds.

English manufacturer **SME** produces some of the world's finest tone-arms and turntables. It was founded by Alastair Robertson-Aikman, an engineer who won the Meccano International Model Building Competition at age 12. He took inspiration from his Rolex DateJust, a watch he considered to be a magnificent example of precision engineering in a serial-production object. As a side note, a watchmaker-cum-audiophile of my acquaintance recently returned the compliment by saying SME's build quality equals the best that Switzerland can produce.

MAKING A BEAUTIFUL SOUND

It sounds great, but how does it look? You can banish any thoughts of identikit, knob-festooned boxes with laboratory styling that lowers the aesthetic perfection of your living space. Modern high-end equipment now looks and feels as good as it sounds. For evidence, you need look no further than **Wilson Audio's** \$200,000 XLF loudspeakers with automotive paint finishes; the exquisite electronics made by Porsche-enthusiast **Dieter Burmester** in Germany whose sound equipment can be ordered with your Panamera or Cayenne; **T+A's** satin-finished tube amplifiers; the \$100,000-plus turntable from **Continuum**; and the jaw-droppingly gorgeous loudspeakers from **Sonus Faber** in Italy.

High-end audio is one of the best-kept secrets in the world of the luxury lifestyle. It shouldn't be, especially among those who appreciate beauty, elegance and authenticity. A magnificent audio system, and not a mere iPod dock, should provide the sounds that accompany the long, lingering sip of a 60-year-old Scotch, or the cloud of a Partagas. Nietzsche noted that, "Without music, life would be a mistake." In the presence of a superior sound system, such a mistake is forever banished. ☺

Clockwise from top left: SME Model 30/2 turntable/Series V arm; darTZeel NHB-458 amplifier; T+A V10 amplifier; Wilson Audio XLF speaker; D'Agostino Audio Momentum stereo amplifier; Burmester 909 Mk5 amplifier; Sonus Faber Guarneri speaker; Continuum turntable (center).



