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ENSEMBLE HIGH-END AUDIO SYSTEM: PURSUIT OF THE MUSICAL EXPERIENCE

Excerpts from the review

I believe HP [the founder of the original *Absolute Sound* magazine] would have been quite smitten by this reference system because it vividly delivers those “goose-bump moments” he lived for, transporting back to the live musical event (on audiophile recordings that allow for such) time and time again.

it may take a listener some time to come to appreciate this system’s signature: a sound so present, alive and vibrant that it can be shocking and unsettling to those not used to such clarity and presence from an audio system. The more one luxuriates in this new type of sound, the more one realizes that the Ensemble System has a special window into the truth of any given performance

the Ensemble System was shockingly room-filling, its presentation not requiring one “sweet spot” for optimal listening.

demonstrated the Ensemble System’s aliveness in the area of sound staging: delivering a natural scale and solid image of Rijen (and the layered ensemble) each within its own natural airy space on the stage, which stretched beyond the lateral front areas of the *Ondiva* to the sidewalls of my room.

Even more uniquely, the Ensemble System created a layered depth plane behind the loudspeakers to the room’s rear wall, exposing a depth layering of players on the stage that was a new experience for me in my listening room.

Through the Ensemble System, not only is every inner detail of this conversation captured (down to the woody clacks of the bassoon’s metal

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parts) but in addition to this superb “definition,” is the ensnaring of those elusive qualities of these musical instruments that make them sound real. The more familiar the listener is with the sound of instruments played in performance, the more delightful this becomes.

True, I did not hear window-rattling from the lowest bass notes and did miss some of the saturation of air down very low (that one gets from a larger floor-standing loudspeaker), but there was also something more real to this bass: pungent, propulsive and swinging, even with a bit of looseness to it. Here was a human quality of playing an instrument (something that is missed by audiophiles always listening for damped “taut” “coherent” deep bass which does not always translate to hearing the reproduction of a “real” bass played by a human).

Putting this disc through its paces with the Ensemble System was a knockout of raucous heat and fun. Even at low to moderate volume, listening to the [Grateful] Dead stretch out on “Tennessee Jed” brought a rolling thunder of rock bliss,

Lesh’s electric bass was so fun to follow on the Ensemble System, so human, playful and defined, without missing any of those last iotas of its stentorian depths.

The Ensemble System’s alacrity in the service of fidelity and artistic expression in the low and mid-bass was also readily apparent in vocal recordings that test the mid-range and treble fidelity in the best audio systems.

This highlighted another uncanny quality of the Ensemble System: it projects music outward towards the listener with delectable flow and exuberant presence and energy and yet, at the same time, it invites the listener into the musical drama in an addictive way, to explore its ingredients without any fatigue or feeling of too aggressive forwardness.

There was also that addictive, inviting quality: you want to lean in to hear every nuance, tactile detail and gospel power that Porter’s music

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effortlessly delivers to the Soul.

The Ensemble System freed up his voice, unchained to soar like the human voice does in real life: outwards, dynamic and flowing and then decaying naturally into its surrounding air,

The *Ondiva* tweeter was a thing of marvel, exhibited by a complete lack of grain or reticence; clear and liquid to KHz well beyond my hearing limit.

The Ensemble System brought me right back to her graduation concert: the *Ondiva* two-way driver coherency was so seamless and harmonically right,

This was a good example of how the Ensemble System will not improve on tough recordings. Indeed, it will expose them with its vanishing noise floor and liquid articulation, but will not make them necessarily sound worse than they already are, (due to the Ensemble's uncanny signature for drawing one into the musical drama regardless of the quality of the recording). The Ensemble System encourages, even demands, the joy of exploring every LP and disc in your collection anew, knowing that sonic weaknesses in recordings will also be laid bare, maybe for the first time.

The Ensemble System invited one in to explore each moment of this music-making with a tonal neutrality, image solidity and vital open presence that delivered all the fresh wonder of these two pianists at their remarkable keyboards.

This is what makes home listening so exciting and such a joy to all music lovers: getting close to the live event and re-living it as viscerally as possible. And this is what Urs Wagner and his Ensemble System have achieved gloriously: a new way of hearing back into our favorite performances and, (closing our eyes as HP's "students of the audio arts"), sitting astonished once again in the presence of our favorite artists, marveling at their artistry and the human expressive power of music.