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Gato Audio system:
AMP-150 integrated amplifier, CDD-1 CD player, and FM-6 speakers

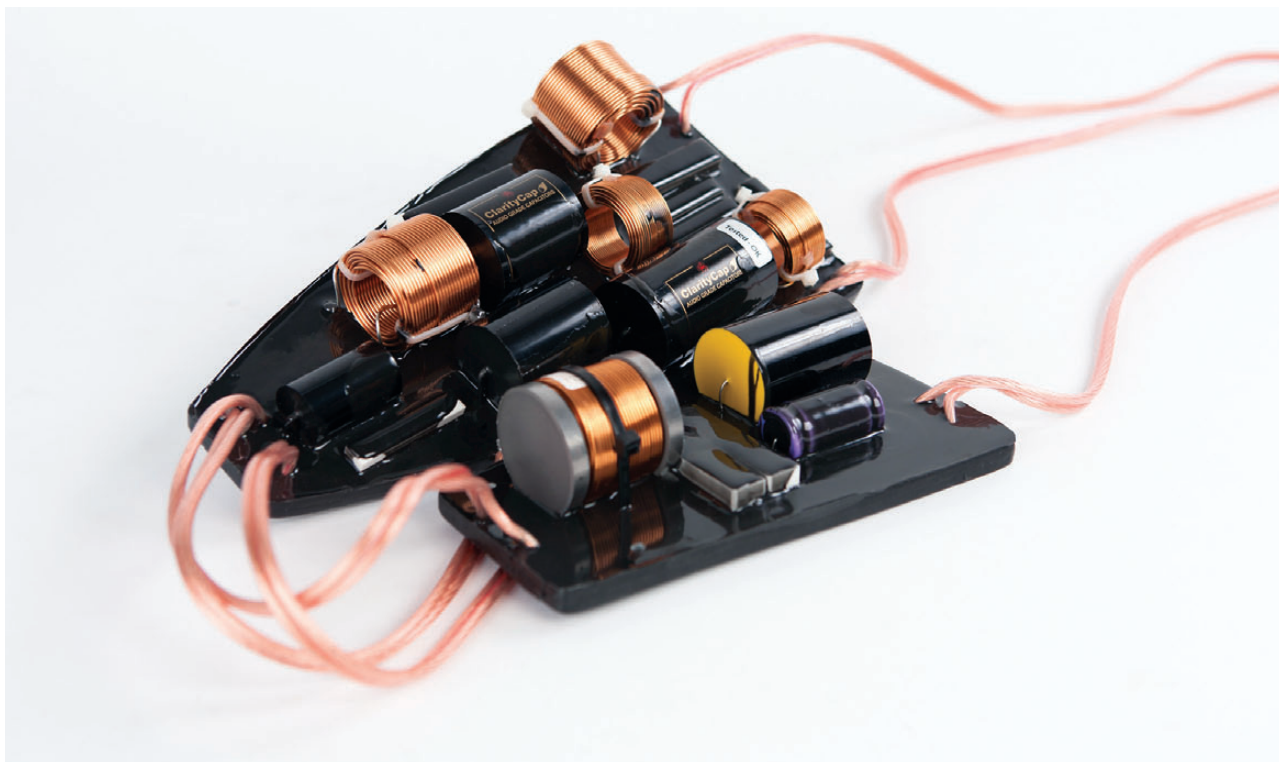
A Kingdom for the Danes

As with the Sendor article in the last issue, this report was triggered by this year's High End in Munich. As I roamed the aisles of the convention halls, I discovered audio components I had never heard of that captured attention with their attractive design and also appeared to be very well manufactured. Gato Audio from Denmark... huh, my brow creases - a Danish manufacturer that apparently has succeeded in eluding my hi-fi horizon. But just looking at their products, it's immediately clear that these aren't inexperienced newcomers to the industry - someone with years of experience and lots of expertise must be working there, that much is clear. A brief inquiry reveals...

A Long History

In the 50s Poul Rossing worked in his father's company and got his first experience there with electrical devices like radios and with servicing them. His passion for hi-fi must have been kindled somewhere among all those boxes, radios, and tubes, which led to Rossing founding "Rossing Electronics" in the late 60s, a company that eventually specialized in the sale of international brands like Audio Research, Luxman, Cabasse, and Fidelity Research, to name just a few. Poul Rossing was very successful in Denmark as a distributor of established hi-fi brands. In the mid 60s he started to develop speakers and to produce and market them under the brand name Avance. Despite its





success, various circumstances led to the sale of the brand to China, although Rossing was still essentially involved in Avance's developments. Gato Audio's path led further through Frederik Johansen and Kresten Dinesen, employees in Holfi, which caused quite a stir with its "wood-encased" hi-fi components. After the turn of the millennium both went over to Thule Audio, another Danish company. Poul Rossing and the Holfi employees Frederik Johansen and Kresten Dinesen then crossed paths in 2003. The Danish manufacturer GamuT had at this point fallen on some hard times, and Poul Rossing, together with his partner of many years, the acoustics engineer Milad Kahfizadeh, was supposed to put the company back on the path to success. For this purpose he brought Frederik Johansen from Thule Audio on board, who took over GamuT's development, and Kresten Dinesen to support him. They managed to put GamuT Audio back on the path to success with various hi-fi products, and Poul Rossing sold the company in 2006 in order to begin his well-deserved retirement. Kresten Dinesen and Frederik Johansen founded Gato Audio in 2007 and brought a further leading Danish developer on board, Rasmus Holm. Kresten Dinesen and Frederik Johansen then somehow managed to

reactivate Poul Rossing in 2009 and reel him in for Gato Audio. Rossing also arranged a small injection of capital and took on a strategic management position. Gato Audio has been headquartered at its current location in Herlev (Denmark) since the end of 2009, where the production facilities are also located. Today the Danish manufacturer conceptualizes itself as a full-service provider which offers high-end electronics, speakers, and cables in its selection.

Hi-Fi or High End?

As an author I'm often confronted with the following questions or similar ones: How do you actually recognize high-end components? How can you pin down their difference from normal hi-fi equipment? Where does the boundary between the two lie, and what characteristics even define "high-end"? If such questions torture you to the core of your being, then just have a look at (and a listen to) Gato Audio's products. Suddenly, almost like an epiphany, the Danes will provide you with a comprehensive answer to these questions. They embody, as very few comparable products do, the idea that lies behind the "high-end" concept.

This is where technology, sound, and design are offered at the highest level, with no compromises, no shortcuts. Their creative unity already impresses me when I unpack and set up the Gato system. The rounded aluminum molding that decorates the sides of the amplifier and CD player is also found on the back of the speaker, where it serves as the rear enclosure of the housing. The optical effect is absolutely harmonious—they really thought the design of this through! However, anyone who wants to enjoy these components will have to overcome an obvious obstacle to acquiring them, which makes sense: “real” high-end components could never be available for peanuts. But in the case of Gato Audio, that the tribute that must be paid would definitely be described as appropriate, even exceedingly fair.

The Transformation

Let’s begin with the speakers, which are already set up where they belong in no time, thanks to well-designed and, above all, sensible packaging. But given their weight of 30 kilograms each and dimensions of 102 cm x 20 cm x 37 cm (H x W x D), this is not exactly a cakewalk; a helping hand would certainly not hurt. But once the adjustable spikes are screwed into the base plate, the further alignment of the speakers is child’s play. The glossy surfaces of the housing, which are available in white, black, or walnut, are a feast for the eyes; the glossy walnut of the test already looks powerfully classic. The mounting of the two-and-a-half-way speakers, supplied by the Danish chassis producer Scan Speak, is equally classic. It consists of two 180 mm woofers and a 30 mm ring radiator with a neodymium magnet system. These chassis are definitely among the world’s best as far as their acoustic properties are concerned.

With a border of polished aluminum mounting rings, with screws to which the magnetic chassis cover attaches, they provide the best possible basis for sound quality. This however is the object of my only (!) critique of the workmanship, because the countersunk heads of said screws protrude a little—but this makes no further difference when the covers are used, which give the speakers an unostentatious appearance anyway. The FM-6

speaker’s baffle is tilted slightly backwards so that the sound from the ring radiator reaches the listener at about the same time as that of the bass/midrange driver.

It hardly needs to be mentioned that only the best-quality is found in the crossover components as well. The efficiency is given as 90 dB and the frequency range as 38 Hz—30 kHz (-6 dB) with a nominal impedance of 4 ohms.

On the back there’s a bi-wiring terminal made by the German specialists WBT, though you should also replace the standard metal bridges with sensible cable bridges—but that’s all familiar stuff.

The Amplification

Let’s now turn to the integrated amplifier, which deviates from the 19-inch standard a little, at least as far as width is concerned, with its dimensions of 32.5 cm x 11 cm x 43 cm (W x H x D), but that, among other aspects, is exactly what is responsible for the Dane’s well-proportioned, pleasing appearance. Furthermore the Danish electronics clearly stand out from the crowd with their tapered housing, glossy tops, and aluminum molding on the sides. Combined with the round, centrally-placed indicators on the front, they give rise to a self-sufficient and unmistakable design. The 13.8 kg live weight of the amplifier, whose back side presents



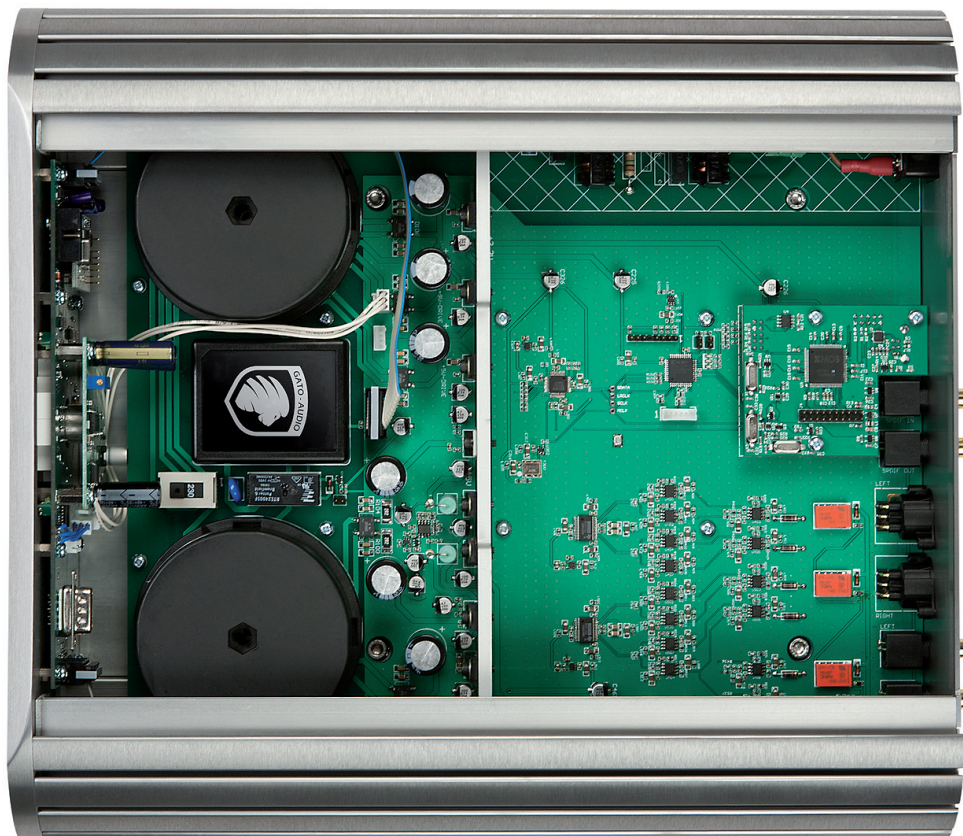
several connection options, shows that they were not cutting corners with the power supply any more than with the front-plate, which is a finger's width thick. This is where the high-quality RCA jacks of the four inputs and stable speaker connections are located. Another balanced input via XLR is also available as a preamp output, which is present in both balanced (XLR) and unbalanced (RCA) form. It generally won't need more, which also applies to the output of the integrated amplifier, since 2 x 150 watts at 8 ohms are absolutely sufficient for most occasions, especially since it delivers 2 x 250 watts at 4 ohms and doesn't cut out for loads above 1.5 ohms. The two power supply capacitors in a "soda can configuration", which only into the housing lying down, must have some responsibility for these very respectable output data. Switching the inputs happens via high-quality relays directly in the vicinity of the jacks to avoid long conductor paths or even cables. The volume control is also located on this board in the form of a proven Burr-Brown chip. This solution is—when well-made, as in this case—superior to most volume controls based on a potentiometer. I would also like to mention the "mute" and "heat" functions, where the latter "preheats" the amplifier and thus

brings it to the optimal operating temperature within a short time.

By the way, the all-metal RC-1 remote control is included with the amplifier and can control all the functions, including those of the CD player. It is excellently manufactured and provides volume control via a special rotating ring which feels great when you adjust the volume remotely.

The Source

Now we come to the source device in the Gato system: the CDD-1 CD player is of the so-called top-loader variety. The half-open aluminum cover, which must be attached during operation, has a magnetic latch. As soon as that engages, the mechanism starts reading the CD. For the drive Gato Audio opts for a very fine component, a Phillips CD Pro2 LF (one of the best drives that has ever been built); in the CDD-1 it is mounted on a 1 kg aluminum block and shielded with sorbothane. The data that are carefully read off the CD and converted up to 24 bits/192 kHz so gentler filters can be used. Moreover the CDD-1 can be used as a DAC for other drives or sources.



With the integrated USB connection you can even use a computer as the source; the software needed for this is included in the contents.

The width and height of the CD player are identical to those of the amplifier; only the CDD-1's depth of 37.5 cm is a little less, leading to slightly a lower weight than the Amp-150, 10 kg, which is still quite hefty for a CD player.

The top loader's rather extensive features are completed by a balanced XLR output through which the CD player can be connected to the Amp-150's balanced input.

Common to both devices is the round central indicator, illuminated with white light whose brightness is adjustable. For the amplifier it primarily serves to indicate the volume and the source selected. The needle shows the volume setting and moves in a way analogous to the volume control, which is really cool. On the CD player the indicator shows the elapsed playing time, where one rotation corresponds to 100% of the title just played or the total playing time of the CD, depending on how you set it. In other words, the indicator moves through the scale at a different speed depending on the length of the track, e.g., half as fast through a six-minute track as through a three-minute one.

An integrated LED unit indicates the track number being played. Once you get used to this type of display, you'll never want to do without it. And to come right to the point: the same is true for Gato's sound quality.

Bathing in Sound...

As I already mentioned above, to me this Gato system encapsulates the concept of "high-end" comprehensively. The Danes have done everything right and have made the leap to the big leagues, from a tonal point of view as well.

ECM label productions have also delighted me for many years with their excellent quality and thus seem perfectly suited to this listening test. The outstanding characteristics of these productions are, among other things, their tonal clarity and purity, properties that the Gato components exhibit to the same degree. So let's set out on a musical journey through ECM's catalogue.

We begin with the CD "Jasmine" (ECM 2165) in which Keith Jarrett and Charlie Haden have recorded some tranquil and very lovely pieces in a private studio atmosphere: just Haden on the

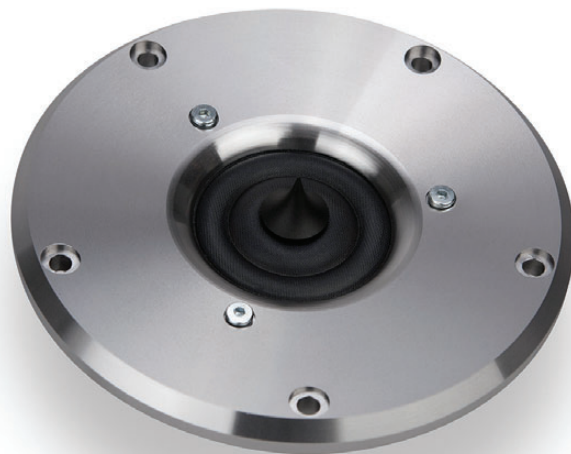




bass and Jarrett on the grand piano, nothing else. The FM-6 speakers project the instruments, which were recorded very directly in this production, into the listening space unerringly and with acoustic credibility. String and fret noise, along with Jarrett's powerfully resonating grand piano, provide a "physical presence"; you feel like you're right there in the studio. The overall sound of the Gato system is very balanced and homogeneous, while at the same time exhibiting grandiose detail. I'd also like to mention here that the speakers don't lay the fundamental on too thick and thus leave room for perceiving the low frequency range spread out far below. Together with the AMP-150, which is able to pump out a respectable thump down below, this leads to a taut bass that at the same time has a powerful and organic effect.

It's fantastic how this reproduced Jack DeJohnette's bass drum on the live album "Inside Out" (ECM1780) at full tilt so it exerts an agreeable pressure on the listener's stomach—not his ears (!). The air between the musicians, the audience—everything seems so real that you could reach out and touch it, though the enormous clarity of the tone is due in no small part to the capabilities of

the CDD-1, which does really outstanding work here; only very few CD players manage that. But back to the sound of the whole system, since that's the real issue. Let's switch back to a studio production and move on to some rather unfamiliar sounds with "Which Way is East" (ECM 1878/79), a double CD by Charles Loyd and the unfortunately deceased Billy Higgins. Under no pressure and free of commercial goals, these two musicians play experimental jazz here. That is not admittedly everyone's cup of tea, but the Gatos afford me such a deep insight into this music, which seems so odd when observed superficially, that I can perceive and even share the musicians' feelings. The Danes provide me a real "musical" way into "Which Way is East", which had previously led a truly miserable existence on my CD shelf for quite a long time. Let us come to the transparency I've already touched upon: The Danes possess this to a high degree, and it provides tonal experiences of a special kind. You are probably already familiar with expressions such as "you can practically see the singer behind the microphone" from hi-fi tests. With the Gato system such expressions take form and can be experienced "live". An example of this is the album "The Light" (ECM 2056), recorded in 2008 by Ketil Bjørnstad (pianist and author) together with Lars Anders Tomter (viola) and the Norwegian Randi Stene (mezzosoprano). The first tones from Bjørnstad on the piano already evoke a special mood in me; shortly after that Randi Stene's singing begins... or better, takes shape before me; each of her movements is plain perceptible all the way down to her legs. An absolutely authentic



atmosphere arises, almost a reflection of the actual music. There are recordings which, when heard through the Gatos, can make you get ideas that I'd prefer not to express here... A colleague of mine once wrote something about "pornography" or the like in this regard... and I think that's quite accurate. But back to the topic at hand: at the end of the listening I return to appreciating Keith Jarrett: "The Köln Concert" (ECM 1064/65). On the evening of January 24th, 1975, when this recording was made, the ECM crew had some difficulties to overcome. Above all, the artist was not satisfied with the grand piano he was supposed to play. Luckily those in charge managed to still induce Jarrett to play at the appointed time; thus arose, despite the initial problems, what is probably the best-known and perhaps the most authentic recording from this jazz pianist. As soon as I press the start button on the CDD-1, the Gatos transform my listening space into a concert hall and make the illusion perfect; you think you're in the first row, you forget time and space and hearken only to Jarrett's unique playing. These are exactly the moments in the life of a music lover that reward him for all his effort and financial outlay—this is how high-end components are supposed to work!



In a Nutshell

Not cheap—but extremely good, and gorgeous! Gato Audio shows that design, production, features, and sound absolutely can be united at the highest level. The Danish premium manufacturer has implemented the concept of high-end audio nearly perfectly with the audio system presented here; there's nothing more to be said. Fortunate are those who have the necessary "pocket change" to bring the Gatos home. Enjoy...

MARKUS LEIBL

Distributor:

Adagio Music Deutschland
Bernhard Hauptmann
Taunusstraße 32
D-65183 Wiesbaden

Tel.: +49 (0) 611-5900728

Fax: +49 (0) 611-524656

Email: hauptmann@adagio-music.de

Internet: www.adagio-music.de