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Interview with Mark Levinson



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Below is an interview Audio Excellence Inc. conducted with Mark Levinson, the man, on April 27th, 2009. Mark Levinson has been credited as the founder of the High End Audio industry. I hope you enjoy reading it.

Beginnings

Tell us a little about your family growing up.

My parents were psychologists, and valued education, humanitarian ideals, and freedom of expression. They encouraged me to follow my feelings, and when I chose to be a professional musician, my dad gave me his full support, even though I was forsaking the college education they anticipated for me. My mom was more ambivalent at first, but came around after a while. My mom played the cello – hence the name of my second audio company. My brother Doug became a very fine jazz pianist and played with jazz greats at age 14. My ambition from the age of 14 was to be a professional jazz musician, which actually happened. I doubt it would have happened without the support I received from my family.

Do you play any musical instrument/s? Did you ever play professionally?

My parents, both psychologists, loved music and encouraged me to listen to recorded music and learn to play instruments. I first chose the cornet, the instrument of Bix Beiderbecke, and later switched to trumpet and then to flugelhorn. I also learned to play the double bass, and later, the sarod, a stringed instrument of North Indian (India) classical music. I had the privilege of studying with Ali Akbar Khan, one of the great musicians of our time, for many years, and am still practicing 40 years later. I was the bassist for Paul Bley, a seminal jazz innovator, from 1966 to 1971. I had a chance to be friends and play with musicians like Sonny Rollins, Chick Corea, Keith Jarrett, Jimmy Garrison, Gary Peacock, sit in with John Coltrane, and many others. I was blessed to have these opportunities.

Who were some of your musical mentors/teachers?

In jazz, a main mentor was Herb Pomeroy, one of the unsung heroes of jazz. He was a great teacher, mentor, friend, trumpet soloist, big band leader, and

inspiration to so many artists. I was deeply saddened to learn of his death last year. Herb's understanding of melodic intervals and truly innovative improvising was astounding. Jimmy Garrison, bassist for John Coltrane, was another inspiration and friend starting when I was only 18, just out of high school. Gary Peacock was a big influence, also a friend, teacher, and guide. Ali Akbar Khan and his circle of classical musicians from India were teachers and friends, deeply inspirational, and still today, I am most moved by certain recordings and performances by these musicians. If you learn the language of Indian classical music, you can enter another and extremely beautiful music world. There are countless others, too many to mention, but I will add that jazz legend Lee Konitz has become a close personal friend and collaborator, with whom I share a special relationship.

How did you get interested in audio reproduction?

I heard that the sound we played as musicians did not sound like what came out of speakers, and decided to narrow the gap. That led to decades of involvement in audio – recording, equipment manufacturing, etc.

What were some of the products that inspired you and why?

Of course, the early McIntosh and Marantz tube products were amazing. The KLH9 electrostatics and Quads were seductive. But the philosophy of the early McIntosh company really got my attention, because it placed such a high value on quality, customer satisfaction, and long term performance. I was most fortunate to find Dick Burwen in 1971. Dick gave me the concept of using the highest quality of engineering, parts and materials in the service of music reproduction. His achievements in the early 1970's are still amazing today. Imagine a dynamic range of 110dB on magnetic tape at 7.5ips in 1972!

Mark Levinson Audio Systems

What was the first product you made, and who helped you?

The first products were mixers for location sound recording, and we only made a few of them. (**Note: one such mixer was used onstage at the legendary 1969 Woodstock event**). The first commercial product was the LNP-2 (Low Noise Preamplifier).



Dick Burwen developed the schematic and made the modules for the first years of production. Imagine a maximum dynamic range of 140dB in 1974, with accuracy to 0.1dB on all controls. This level of engineering shows how advanced Dick was before there was any “high end audio” in existence. I wonder how many preamps today can match the specifications of the LNP-2. My first employee was Ted Jensen, just getting out of high school, who stayed for 6 years. He is now premier mastering engineer and owner of Sterling Sound in NY. He does the mastering for Norah Jones, among others.

What was so special about it?

Like I said, the specifications were unbelievable, and it was made purely from passion. The sound is still considered revolutionary by some, and most are working perfectly even 35 years after they were made. The LNP-2 has so many special features, too many to list. Peak reading VU meters that could capture the first quarter of a 20 KHz waveform, for example. Switchable gain to accommodate any input or output requirement. 100% insulated Teflon dielectric wiring for 110dB crosstalk at 10 kHz, and so forth. But of all, I would mention the

fully hand engraved black anodized front panels, lettering filled with white lacquer, by F.J. Weidner and Sons, that will never be duplicated.

What were some of the other products that were designed and manufactured during your tenure at Mark Levinson?

The JC-1, JC-1 AC, LNC-2 active crossover, ML-1, ML-2, ML-3, ML-5/Studer tape recorder, ML-6, ML-7, ML-8, ML-9, ML-10, ML-11 and 12. The HQD system, tri-amped with 6 ML-2 mono Class A amps. Most products were never discontinued after production started, they just continued to sell.

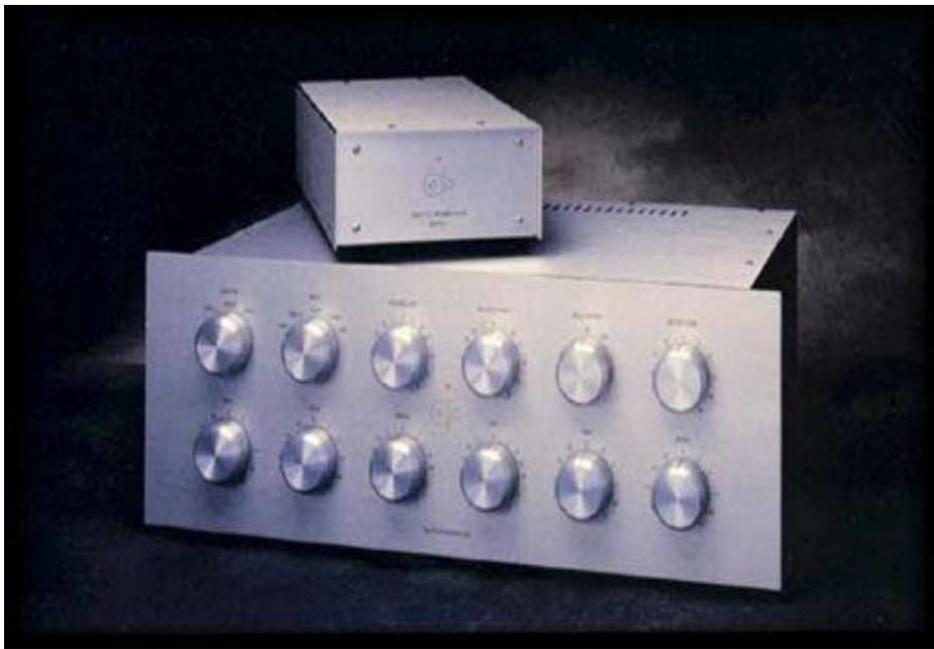


Cello



What was the impetus/inspiration behind Cello?

After MLAS, I wanted to create a totally different concept in audio. Cello's first product, the Audio Palette, originally conceived by Dick Burwen, introduced a paradigm shift in audio. It was the first sonically transparent equalizer in audio history. I doubt there will ever be another product like it. It was in steady production for almost 15 years with virtually no changes. Cello built around 1,000 units. In the beginning, experts said I'd be lucky to sell 10. The final price was \$25,000 per unit. Cello went on to develop a system concept, including electronics, cables and speakers, and a custom installation department. Cello achieved a level of total performance that was revolutionary in its day. The inspiration of Cello was total perfection, and in that day and age, we achieved it.



What were some of the groundbreaking products and technologies?

I could write a book on that. That's too long a story for now.

Who were the people who helped/designed these products?

Again, Dick Burwen helped start Cello with the Audio Palette concept. Chief Engineer Tom Colangelo really outdid himself with the implementation on the Audio Palette, Audio Suite, Performance Amplifiers, and so many other classics. My mentor in Japan, Yasuo Nakanishi, helped make Cello an international audio legend. Metal work by the Weidners was irreplaceable. That's another book to be written.

Who were some of the famous celebrities/institutions/people in the professional world who used Cello?

That another long list. Sony Music Studios used to call their main mastering room "The Cello Room." BMG, Atlantic Studios, the Library of Congress, mastering labs, Polygram, Bob Ludwig, Gary Karr (the great double bass soloist/legend), and many others.

You were involved in a number of music related projects during this time. What were they, how were you involved? (I remember reading about your involvement in trying to raise money for Jazz and R&B artists, your remastering/archiving for some labels, the CD you made that compared various Stradivari violins for Bein and Fushi etc).

Most important was the Music Maker Relief Foundation (www.musicmaker.org) founded by Tim and Denise Duffy, to assist elderly blues artists in the South. Tim and Denise have done incredible work giving musicians and their families hope, money, care, gigs, recordings, and all kinds of support. Anyone who cares about authentic blues music should contribute something to MMRF or buy some of their products. I remember when Eric Clapton came for lunch to meet Tim and Denise, and they played duets after. I did remaster some seminal recordings like the Miles Davis' "Birth of the Cool" on Bluenote records, and others. Again, that's too long a story for here.

What were some of the products you were most proud of at Red Rose, and why?

I think every RRM product has its own magic. I am proud that almost no one who bought RRM Classic speakers and an Affirmation amplifier ever sells them – even today. They create an emotional connection that is impossible to find at 10 times the cost.

Were there any ground breaking ideas/technologies developed at this time?

One idea was the use of special new ribbon speaker technology. Another was the idea of working collaboratively with high end companies in China. This offended many Asian markets who were caught up in the “Made in USA” idea. But I enjoy working with talented people from any country if they have the passion and dedication to excellence.

Who were the people who helped you design the products?

That requires a long answer for another time.

I understand that roughly around this time, Sony came to you for your thoughts on SACD. What were your thoughts, and were you involved in any way? What did you think of SACD compared to DVD-Audio or CD?

PCM (normal) digital audio was invented in 1976 when computing power was very limited. I recorded a number of SACD's to help introduce the format, which were very well received. Then, Sony issued many “SACD's” that were just regular CD material in an SACD format. Pure DSD, the format of the SACD, is capable of producing excellent sound if used properly. But the market wanted MP3 and download music, so Sony dropped it. Meanwhile, Dick Burwen developed Burwen Bobcat which is the most amazing technology. It upgrades the PCM waveform so it sounds and feels transparent like analog, but without the hassles. A CD made with or played back through Burwen Bobcat is amazing. Read the customer letters at www.burwenbobcat.com and listen to Rob Fraboni's voice MP3. Rob is the record producer for Bob Dylan, Eric Clapton, The Rolling Stones, and many other music legends.



LG

I understand you are currently involved with LG as a consultant. What do you do, and what are some of the products that feature your ideas?

I have been truly enjoying my work with LG as Chief Sound Advisor, upgrading LG's audio quality and bringing high quality sound to the wider audience at very affordable price points. The model names sometimes change with the country. I really like the FB163 (LFD850 in the USA), which has CD, DVD, iPod dock, AM/FM, memory stick, wireless remote, etc. and sells for around \$250! I have been working with mobile phones, TV's HTS, and other things too. I don't know why LG US decided not to use my name association in the US, but maybe that will change.

How is it different working with a large company like LG?

LG has huge power and is capable of doing great things that a small company cannot do. It intrigues me to help LG, because as far as I can see, it is the only big company that cares about excellence in audio. I am very proud of the many systems and improvements we have introduced. In fact, LG has just introduced mobile phones with a special version of Burwen Bobcat called BOBCAT MOBILE which is designed exclusively for optimizing earphone listening with the special earphones we developed for mobile devices.

Daniel Hertz

You have started a new company called Daniel Hertz. What is the significance of the name?

My great uncle was Heinrich Hertz, the physicist who first demonstrated the electro-magnetic wave – the beginning of audio. Daniel is my father's name, and also a family name. Daniel Hertz SA of Switzerland is dedicated to innovation, good engineering, and the soul of audio.

What are your musical priorities when you listen to, or are helping to design a music playback system?

The most important thing for me is a system that makes me want to listen, and won't let me stop. It's the seduction of a great live event. It should be like meeting someone who is so fascinating that you just want to keep talking and be with that person. The first priority is science. You can't achieve musical excellence with appearance. Good engineering is the foundation of my work. I look for those special engineers like Dick Burwen who have science and music in their blood. I also insist on recording music and playing it back. When the playback system sounds like the live event, you know you are doing something right.

Why?

Look at the roots of quality audio like the old tube McIntosh, the original Klipsch, Western Electric, Bell Labs, etc. Great audio comes from great engineering. Today, I have never seen such a frightening array of under-engineered over-priced equipment that sounds nothing like real music because of the lack of quality engineering.

Some companies use CDs, LPs, and even master tapes as their musical reference when designing products. What do you use as a musical reference?

The best reference is to hear the music as it is played in life, and then hear the reproduction. It is also important to listen to a wide variety of recordings to get a balanced picture. Fine tuning must be by ear. But you can only use the ear if there is enough solid engineering in the product.

You currently have a product that makes CD, DVD and MP3 sound as good as or better than SACD. What was the inspiration behind that?

Burwen Bobcat is a plug-in for Windows Media Player (XP or Vista). It uses high speed computing power to upgrade the waveform by averaging out the non-musical junk that PCM creates, that the musicians never played. You should interview Dick Burwen about it. Burwen Bobcat may be the greatest audio development in 50 years.

How much is the retail price in North America?

Currently, it's a \$200 download – a gift, really. Just use the Basic Bobcat. The other settings are presets that correct for flaws in some recordings, but it's too much trouble for most people to figure out how to use them. You can also use it to make bobcatted MP3 files for your iPod that sound pretty much like analog. For best sound, use a high quality external USB DAC like the Stello DA100 Signature.

What other products are you working on right now?

Daniel Hertz SA is just introducing a series of products that represent a combination of new and old ideas, to produce a stunning new level of music and HT reproduction. Science tells us that there is no substitute for high efficiency systems. You can turn electrical energy into sound or heat. Most systems today are simply too inefficient. The Daniel Hertz SA speakers are 100dB/1W/1M, 8 Ohms. That means that 1 Watt produces 100dB of sound pressure level (SPL). Most people never use 1W with Daniel Hertz systems. But the amps can put out enough to produce over 120dB with ease across the whole audio band. It's awesome at the lowest volume levels, but can also punch you off your chair. This requires bigger cabinets with adequate air volume, specially designed drivers, carefully tuned crossovers, bi-amping for the deep bass growl and detail, and many refinements that allow the most natural sonic quality I've ever heard. The amps are mono block units with built in active crossovers that allow flat, 80Hz high pass or 80Hz low pass operation, for full range or bi-amping. The special sonic feature of the M5 amp is that the sound is so pure in the milliWatt region, where most solid state amps don't perform well, but the headroom allows this huge, uncompressed dynamic range. The M5 has the big body, fast punch, totally non-electronic high frequencies, no noise, and high reliability that have never been available before to my knowledge.

What are some of the inspirations behind these products?

Look at the EV Patrician. See what was done decades ago, for very good reasons.

Are these the finest products you have been involved with? Why?

As far as I'm concerned, Daniel Hertz is the best of my career, because it sounds more like real music, and has the finest quality of construction. An advantage of living in Europe is access to the last truly artisanal factories and workshops. This kind of product is impossible to build in the US. High end audio never seems to offer the punch and excitement of high efficiency systems, but high efficiency systems generally do not sound natural. Daniel Hertz puts it all together.

What are some of the technological breakthroughs that are featured in these products?

Everything about Daniel Hertz products is different. We use special drivers, special wood for the cabinets, special finish which also improves the sound, all discrete power amplifiers with new topology, and so forth. While most companies tune their products to hide the ills of digital music, we fix the problem with Burwen Bobcat, and let the system go free. We are introducing a media PC that is a plug and play solution for the hard core music lover, DVD/Blu-ray lover, and the modern internet age PC user as well. Details will be out soon.

You are currently living in Switzerland. Are the new products made there? Where are they made? Why?

Europe still has a tradition on building things by hand to the highest quality standards, by people who have been working like this for countless generations. There is no substitute. But we are also open to top talent from other countries, such as American-designed high efficiency drivers and so forth. I think products should be judged on their merits, not their country of origin. Daniel Hertz is only interested in excellence.

When will these products be available?

We hope to start shipping in August, possibly some small quantities earlier.

What are the tentative prices?

Pricing is still being finalized, but the plan right now is to have the big M1 speaker at \$80,000 per pair; the M2 speaker for \$20,000 per pair; the M3 18" subwoofer for \$18,000; the M5 Mono Reference Amp at \$5,000 per channel; the M6 1 megOhms Preamplifier for \$8,000; the M7 speaker for \$8,000; and the M8 integrated amp for \$5,000.

Summary

Who are some of your audio/video mentors and why?

I must give the acknowledgement to Dick Burwen (audio engineering); Yasuo Nakanishi for unwavering support and giving me a product development philosophy; Tom Colangelo (in Italian it means "with the angels") whose work was infused with passion and engineering; Simon Lee (Korea) who knows my heart, brought me to LG, and inspired me to found Daniel Hertz SA; and the new team at Daniel Hertz SA that is enabling me to make a final statement in audio.

What inspires you to design a new product?

It's like eating. You do it when it's the right time.

Do you draw inspiration from other industries or hobbies, and if so, what are they?

Excellence in many fields inspires me – cameras like Leica and Hasselbald, fine Swiss watches, old Italian string instruments, the great pianos.

Why do you think so many of your past products still have such a strong and loyal following?

I've been blessed to be surrounded by people who worked more for love than money, respecting good engineering and quality in every aspect. Our compass was the sound and feeling of real instruments and voices. That never goes out of fashion.

Tell us about some of your most memorable challenges in this industry?

MLAS was one concept. Cello was radically different. Red Rose Music was yet another approach. And now, at age 62, Daniel Hertz introduces yet another vision on music reproduction. Re-invention is a challenge, especially when it often takes people five years to accept a new vision. Often, people want you to do what you did before, and not evolve. I do what I think is right, not what other people want me to do.

Most exciting experiences?

Having actor Jack Webb buy the first LNP-2; hearing the Audio Palette for the first time; hearing the new Daniel Hertz M1's M5's, and realizing they were much better than I hoped.

What are you working on?

Daniel Hertz! And of course, helping LG. Some surprises are coming soon from Daniel Hertz.

Favourite artists/musicians?

Too many to list. A few are, the best of North Indian classical, John Coltrane, Monica Salmaso, Norah Jones, great opera, especially Maria Callas, Bill Evans, Ruggerio Ricci.

Best recordings for realism/best for performance that inspires you?

Too many to list.

Which companies do you admire, and why?

Leica, for one. They've kept their pure analog cameras while partnering with Panasonic to create the Lumix line, which takes simply amazing pictures for a very affordable price with great design. Petrof, for making great pianos with a family-owned company for 200 years, still improving their instruments in sound and design despite the recession.

What do you do for relaxation?

Playing my instruments and boating on the sea.
Thank you for being so generous with your time and knowledge.

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