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Kalman Rubinson

The "A" List

Last time in "Music in the Round," I wrote about the fading presence of SACD in the hardware and software markets. However, the enduring interest in LPs seems to tell us that where there is a demand for high quality by discerning audiophiles, there will be a supply.

There is a reasonably vigorous release schedule for high-definition music videos on Blu-ray, in all genres, including opera and ballet. My experience has been that these discs' higher audio and video resolution makes them of more enduring interest than standard-definition DVDs, but nonetheless, the music bears repetition better than does the video. In addition, some performances are of little or no visual interest, and the cost of video production must be a drag on the profits. So where are the audio-only hi-rez discs?

AIX Records has been making them for years, and now offers their hi-rez recordings via download, too, at www.itrax.com. Last year we saw a series of HD DVD music-only discs from Surround Records (www.surroundmagic.com), but the HD DVD format has since been abandoned. Recently, Surround began supporting Blu-ray and supplemented the first series, which were sophisticated synthesizer renditions of classics, with a new series of audio discs (with some video content) remastered from some of the best multichannel recordings in the Naxos catalog. Producer Alexander Jero assures me that the front three channels are identical to the Naxos originals, but that his new 7.1-channel mixes offer an expanded presentation.

The best news is of the appearance of the very first (as far as I know) music-only Blu-ray disc, from 2L Records (www.2l.no/2L.htm). The label, the source of some of the tastiest SACDs of the past six months, has released *Divertimenti*, a lovely program of works for strings by Bacewicz, Bartók, Bjørklund, and Britten, performed by the Trondheim Soloists (2L50SABD). It was recorded in DXD as 24-bit data at 352.8kHz per channel: four times the data content of

DSD on SACD, which leaves more headroom for editing and balancing.

While the performances are delightful and recorded in very immersive surround sound, the formats of the release make it fine fare for the obsessive audiophile. First, as an introductory offer, 2L includes in a single jewelcase a hybrid SACD and a Blu-ray disc, both for



the price of a single CD. The SACD includes 16-bit/44.1kHz "Red Book" and DSD two-channel tracks, and a 5.1-channel DSD track, the two DSD tracks at the standard SACD resolution of 2.8224Mbits/s/ for each channel. The Blu-ray is even more fully packed: a 24/192 LPCM two-channel track, and four 5.1-channel tracks: 48kHz-sampled Dolby Digital, 24/192 Dolby TruHD, 24/192 DTS-HDMA, and 24/192 LPCM. Leaving out all the video except for some simple menus leaves a lot of elbow room for the sound!

This set invites comparisons of all the different mixes and resolutions. All are quite good, and each is a paradigm of excellence for its particular codec—even the CD-compatible tracks. In fact, I invite you to begin your comparisons there and take one of two routes, depending on your equipment. Two-channel fans should see if the DSD and/or LPCM tracks offer any enhancements, but if you're using only your player's analog output, any distinctions will be constrained by the player's DAC and analog stages. Owners of multichannel players have more

options, encompassing the stereo options as well as all the lossy and lossless tracks on the Blu-ray disc.

Via my modified Oppo DV-980H and Meridian 861 processor, the already lovely CD was bested by the DSD stereo version, which removed from the highs a bit of artificial sheen. Going to the multichannel DSD mix was simply unfair: the two-channel tracks put all the musicians up front, whereas the multichannel tracks place the listener in the middle of the ensemble. Comparisons among the various multichannel tracks were a bit bewildering because of the different source components and connections required: different players for SACD and Blu-ray, of course, but the Anthem Statement D2 preamp/processor currently in my system would accept none of the HD codecs, and its upper LPCM limit is 96kHz. Down-converting everything to 24/48 LPCM was doable but pointless.

If you're as curious as I am about what the optimum format might be for HD multichannel music on Blu-ray, get *Divertimenti* and form your own opinions. I'll swap around equipment in the coming weeks, report what I find next time, and we can compare notes.

Anthem Statement D2 audio/video processor

Anthem's Statement D2 has been in the field for two years now, and has earned a solid reputation for its audio and video performance as well as for Anthem's continual updating of its software to fix minor glitches and add enhancements. It was the latest such enhancement, Anthem Room Correction (ARC), that at last inspired me to request a review sample. The Statement D2 with ARC costs \$7499; ARC can be added to a D2 in the field for \$399.

I've played with many equalization (EQ) and room-correction devices, and more are on the way. While none has been perfect in operation or results, I've learned that carefully applied electronic corrections can be extremely helpful—if only because too few of us pay enough attention to physical