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The Bluenote Stibbert Improved CD Player

Harry Pearson

Bluenote is an Italian high-end company that makes a sleek-looking and complete line of components, from turntables, arms, and cartridges to speaker systems. The company was born in 1985 as a consortium of musicians, engineers, and audiophiles, only to evolve seven years later into an importer of American audio gear and producer of accessories (its Midas tube dampers are still being manufactured and are the *ne plus ultra* of such designs). By 1994, the company was committed to designing its own basic components.

Its CD player, the Stibbert *improved*, is, by high-end standards for such things, rather modestly priced at just under \$5000. Modest at five grand, you say? Yep. Remember the breakthrough in CD playback came from Burmester, another European outfit, and its transport/DAC was priced at an Annapurna high of \$60,000 plus. But, at the time, it was the one that showed the promise and potential of the 16/44 digital encoding system. In the past two years, however, while Burmester rested on its (design) laurels, there has been a rash of new CD playback designs. Most notably, there was the Lector, in two versions, and, relatively speaking (again), far more modestly priced than the Burmester set.

But there were problems with the Lector. First of all, the company, also Italian, simply couldn't meet the demand for its units once the word got out about the musical way in which they reproduced all compact discs. Plus, to a lesser extent, the Lector was true to the dark side of the high end in requiring some fiddling to make it behave at its best. In that respect, it is proof of Pearson's Second Law of High End: If you can't fiddle with it and make it better, it isn't high end. (The first law: If it works the first time you turn it on, it isn't high end.) Like so many CD and



multipurpose players out there these days, the Lector required considerable isolation if it weren't to sound fat, bloated, and a bit bleary in the critical midbass region. It was almost as if there was no such thing as too much isolation.

I forgave its overall dark coloration—similar to that of Madrigal electronics of yesteryore—because of its inherent musicality, but a yin-like character isn't my cup of oolong, unless overwhelmingly trumped by the gestalt of the music itself.

Because of the first problem, limited supply, the U.S. importer, Victor Goldstein went shopping for something just as good that he could get in abundant quantities if push came to shove. And he came up with the Bluenote, which we, to be sure, have set up in contrasting demonstrations with the Lector Digidrive and Digicode, a four-piece system that sells for \$8680, significantly more than the \$4950 asking price for the (one-piece) Stibbert player. Both units are outfitted with tubes, two 6922s in the case of the Bluenote, and both provide for balanced as well as single-ended playback.

But, to these ears, there really is no competition. Much as I thrilled to the musical authenticity of the Lector units upon first exposure, I find myself even more impressed by the Bluenote. For one thing, it has a suspension system far more sophisticated than that of the Lector and sails calmly through anything the eight 12-inch woofers of the Grand Reference can throw at it. Bluenote describes the suspension as having "a double chassis completely isolated through four conical springs" as well as a plinth—black acrylic—of such rigidity and shaping to cancel almost all the vibrations from feedback.

Once it warms up, and this takes at least 30 minutes (don't go auditioning it cold if you want to hear what it can do), the Stibbert is tonally as neutral as some of the best Audio Research gear was during the glory days of designer William Z. Johnson, with a bottom octave little short of dynamically electrifying. It also digs deep into the music and retrieves harmonic nuances that, five years ago, we would have sworn weren't on CDs—and you might start with the best of Wilma Cozart

Fine's two-channel remasterings of Mercury's analog tapes.

There is a richness to the sound of strings that *is* the sound of strings.

Now, interestingly, if you play the Stibbert back through its single-ended output, you'll find the midrange sweeter, but not in the truthful sense. It is pleasing and seductive, but it ain't right. Another thing that happens with the Stibbert in single-ended mode is that the field of depth is truncated, front to back, and its amazing stage width is compromised in the rear field. All of this is obvious in a low-noise system. Indeed, because a reader asked what differences I might hear between the two modes, we decided to run a few tests, which turned out to be most enlightening, at least to me.

Given the current reference system, centered around the Nola Grand References and, now, two ASR Emitter amps driving its four towers, and given

the extremely low noise floor of the total system, the differences between balanced and single-ended modes are striking, and those differences are just as audible, say, with the Jadis JP-1 Mk II player, and of the same nature. Balanced: The sound-space is bigger, deeper, and clearer (in the transparent and "clean" sense). Unbalanced: The soundspace is cloudy, smaller, narrower toward the rear, and less nuanced. (Check the CD reviews in the Workshop two issues ago for a review of the discs we used most frequently, i.e., several Mercury issues and two of the JVC XRCD London/Decca transfers.)

If I had a reservation, it would be the same as I might have with most tubed gear, and it is a reservation I might not have stumbled across had I not goofed up and left the woofer towers off during a prolonged listening session with a visiting potentate (ah, the perils of reviewing). The Stibbert compresses the top-

end dynamics on fortissimo passages, but it compresses these in the same way tube amplifiers do; it gently squeezes them down, without any other form of audible distortion. Once the mighty and thunderous bass is back in play, the Stibbert shows its stuff and you might never notice (unless your system has a puny bottom end) this particular shortcoming, so psychoacoustically "right" is the total envelope of sound. When the system is playing full-range, I never notice this top-end dynamic limitation.

This Bluenote player puts to shame the present-day competition I've heard, save for the Jadis player, which developed mechanical problems (turns out, it was the importer's personal unit, a fact we didn't know) and whose successor we eagerly await. The Jadis costs some eight times as much, so you probably will want to bear in mind that, as good as I find it to be, eight times better it's not.