

CH Precision, Wilson Benesch, and Nordost system

by Roy Gregory

Suggesting that high-end audio has anything in common with Little Orphan Annie might seem like a stretch, but in one way at least they share a reality: for audio pilgrims who sign up to the quest for musical and sonic perfection, no matter how hard we try – or how much we spend – the constant evolution of equipment and technology means that the audio state-of-the-art is always a day away. No matter how hard we run we never quite catch up – and to make matters worse, these days the gap between dreams and reality has stretched to a yawning chasm. With more companies offering more and more expensive products, with speakers that shatter the six-figure price barrier seemingly run-of-the-mill, and with even a basic, high-end system costing more than a (very nice) car it's harder to compete and far more confusing to try – not least because so many of the super-expensive products on offer so often fail to deliver on those rare occasions you get to hear them.

So why do we keep the faith? Because occasionally, just occasionally, you experience a system that really delivers – one that ticks all the boxes and keeps all the promises; one that is so sonically adept and musically capable that listening and music take on that addictive quality we all remember from the very first good system we heard – the system that set our feet on this path in the first place. This is one of those systems...

This combination of CH Precision Electronics and Wilson Benesch speakers, all laced together with Nordost's 'value option' Valhalla 2 (well, it seems like value compared to Odin!) is one of those systems where the music just is. It doesn't obviously explode into the room or cuddle you seductively, it isn't propelled ever forwards by a metronomically toe-tapping beat, nor does it exist in a permanently cavernous acoustic. Instead, it just happens; a natural extension and impression of the original event, performance that is all about THE performance; that resides with the performers rather than the equipment in the system, that simply sounds like real people and real instruments. This is still recorded music, but it's recorded music with that instantly identifiable quality, the gestalt character of the real thing – and that makes it rare and wonderful.

On the basic, material level, this system could be described as impressive, complex, extravagant, or just plain expensive. In fact, expensive doesn't really cover it: in all honesty it demands the addition of a few adjectives – like "ruinously", "eye-wateringly" or perhaps the simple, expletive quality of Ireland's favourite descriptor, "fecking". But there's no denying that this system cuts no corners in

its pursuit of audio and musical excellence. On paper at least, it looks like a classic, high-tech, high-powered solid-state rig, with a stack of front-end boxes feeding a pair of massive mono-blocs – and that's partly correct. The CH electronics offer levels of software derived control and configuration that go beyond the necessary and well in to the realms of "because we can". I mean, who needs to control not just the duration and brightness of the displays but the test colour as well – and if the nine colour options on offer don't match your mood, shirt, or latest motor, there's always the opportunity to dial in a specific RGB shade! But as easy as it is to poke gentle fun at such electronic excess, there's a very real purpose behind it, the degree of configuration on offer allowing both topological simplicity and unparalleled versatility, the ability to adapt the amplifiers to the surrounding system to an almost unprecedented degree – and that has a direct, positive, and dramatic impact on performance.

This system is built around the L1 line-stage, supported by the X1 power supply and flanked by the P1 phono-stage and a pair of M1 power amps. Of course, it will accept digital sources, but the *raison-d'être* for this system and, in a very real sense, the secret of its success is the declared intent to extract the considerable best from record replay. To that end, the P1 offers no fewer than three independently configurable inputs (two current sensing and one voltage driven) with variable gain and loading as appropriate, as well as the option to include switchable ▶





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up by the X1 external power-supply – just to be on the safe-side. It’s a wise decision, and the benefits are all too clear to hear, but it does add another £12,400 to a final price-tag of £110,900 for the electronics alone.

Just as well then that we’ve got the budget options from the other suppliers, with neither the cables nor the loudspeakers representing their respective manufacturers’ flagship options. Nordost’s Valhalla 2 might use more conventional shielding and less metal than the Odin 2, but it shares the top product’s core technologies and all-important proprietary connectors – and it’s backed up here by their Q-Kore 6 grounding system, to help reduce system noise-floor and deliver realistic dynamics. Take one look around the back of the CH components and you soon realise what makes V2 make so much sense: when it comes to power cords this is one greedy system, with each power amp requiring two and the P1 and L1 still needing their own, despite the presence of the X1. Look at the price of Odin 2 power cords and all becomes clear...

The Wilson Benesch speakers might look familiar, but these are not the Cardinals. Instead, what we have here are the smaller but easier to accommodate and rather more elegant Resolutions, making up for their reduced internal volume by adding a Torus Infrasonic Generator to the mix. Named for another of Captain Cook’s vessels rather than their undoubted performance attributes, the new speaker shares the same driver and cabinet technologies as the flagship, but in a more compact, simpler and easier to govern package. The tailored response of the drivers makes for a minimal, phase- ▶

▶ EQ curves – all for the princely sum of £22,400 (EQ Filter £1,300). At the other end of the chain you find not one but two M1 amplifiers, a wallet wringing extravagance in the sense that these are not mono-blocs – at least not all of the time! In fact, the M1 is five amps in one: a straight stereo, a bi-amp (one input, two identical outputs), an active bi-amp (two inputs, two independently configurable outputs), a mono-bloc with the whole power supply dedicated to a single output stage, or a high-powered, bridged mono-bloc. Meanwhile, gain, and the ratio of local to global feedback can be set to further match the amplifier to the speaker’s sensitivity and electrical demands. With a rated output of anything between 2x 200 and 700 watts on tap, perhaps it’s not surprising that a single M1 will set you back a slightly gasp-inducing £37,400, making a pair cost £74,800!

Compared to the P1 and M1, the L1 seems almost prosaically simple: inputs, outputs, and a volume knob. But that is to misunderstand both the remarkable care that has gone into the design and construction of the L1 – and the critical role of the line-stage in any genuinely high-end system. I’m afraid that, if you want realistic dynamics, full bandwidth, convincing staging, and a real sense of scale, then neither passives, auto-transformers, nor a direct output from your DAC will deliver. Real systems use active line-stages, despite the demonstrable difficulties of getting one right – and the L1 is one of the select few that actually gets it just right. It is both the heart and soul of this system and is, in a very real sense, the root of its greatness. Having said that, this is a set-up that takes no chances, so both the L1 and the P1 are backed



► coherent crossover, while also delivering the often mutually exclusive attributes of tremendous low-level detail and a fully developed harmonic envelope. The cost in this case takes the form of lower than average sensitivity – which could impact dynamics except that the light-touch crossover makes the Resolution sound more efficient than it is while the system topology and L1/M1 combination takes care of the rest. Like other WB speakers this one just loves to be vertically bi-amped, which helps explain the over-kill option of that second M1, while in practice, I found that 10% feedback worked best on both the mid and the bass ranges, allowing me to run the amps in straight bi-amp mode, saving the price of a set of interconnects along the way.

After that? Well, there's always Odin 2...

There are some systems that simply sound the way they look. There are others that are defined by their chosen technologies, be they direct heated triodes, horn-loaded drivers, Class A solid-state output stages, or more ceramic than you can shake a stick at. But then looks can also be deceptive and technology can be applied in many different ways. Examine this system on paper and – price aside (and Lord knows, that's no reliable guide) – there's little to suggest the magic lurking within. The CH Precision electronics, with their near identical styling and muted blue-grey casework couldn't look more Swiss if they tried. The Wilson Benesch speakers offer, as I've already suggested, a familiar appearance and nothing new in terms of their technology. It's all been done before, in previous WB designs. Yet, just as there's an air of solid, compact competence about the CH pieces, the Resolutions have a certain confidence that comes from their balanced proportions and the sculpted elements from

which they're built. This is a speaker that just looks right and that alone, even if you think you know what Wilson Benesch speakers sound like, should give you pause for thought. Hear them on the end of this rig and you'll almost certainly be recalibrating those expectations.

Sadly for the headline writers and bandwagon jumpers, there is no secret sauce in this system. It's not about the what: it's all about the how. This is an object lesson in understanding what a given product wants and then making sure it gets it, both in terms of interfacing between components and in designing those components themselves. Rich in terms of tonal colour and instrumental detail, the Resolutions need an amplifier set up that's capable of delivering emphatic dynamics. Bi-amping helps but it's all about clean, available headroom and just enough damping. Given their substantial size, you might well consider the M1's 200 Watt per channel output as modest, but what it really reflects is the size of their power supply. Or as someone once famously said, the quality of ►



One Step At a Time...

Although this system is both seriously expensive and topologically complex, thanks to its almost modular versatility it's also surprisingly versatile and step-by-step achievable – assuming that you've got access to the considerable necessary funds! You could start with the P1, L1 and a single M1 driving just the Resolutions. Then you could add the X1 – which I have to say is pretty much essential to either the L1 or P1, or the pair if you are lucky enough to own both. Next you could add the second M1 and run bi-amped. Along the way you could also add the Torus, which would bring you up to the level of the system reviewed here. Somewhat alarmingly, that's only the start...

The next obvious step would be to add the second Torus – but after that things get seriously silly. Both the L1 and the P1 offer dual mono options, with a single chassis for each channel. Of course, that would necessitate an X1 for each pair, as it will only drive two external units. But then, having got this far, why wouldn't you dedicate an X1 for each individual, mono L1 or P1 chassis, making for an eight-box pre-amp. You could then add a second pair of M1s and run them all as mono-blocs and I'm sure that, if you really put your mind to it you could add two more and use those to run the Torus subs – although you'd need to meet the crossover requirement, surely a minor issue for anybody with this much invested, as between them I'm sure that CH and Wilson Benesch could be 'persuaded' to run something up...

- ▶ the first Watt is really what matters – but then so does the quality of the other 199 just waiting to get past it. Add that to the ability to adjust amplifier damping factor via the feedback ratio and you've got pretty much the perfect match for the Resolutions, a match that's heard in the weight, scale, and impact they bring to the more Zimmer-esque moments of the *GOT* soundtrack [Sony] as obviously as it contributes to the vivacious attack and intimacy, cut, thrust, and counterpoint of the Stuttgart Chamber Orchestra's scintillating performance of *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik* [Decca], a record that breathes new life into this most hackneyed of Mozart masterworks. Of course, the Resolution's are getting an awful lot of help from the Torus. Just how much is evident from the totally

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- ▶ OTT percussion on the *Game Of Thrones* recording, but its sheer quality and seamless integration really comes into play on the fleet-footed bass arpeggios of the chamber piece.

As well as highlighting the temporal and spatial integration of the system, that Stuttgart disc also switches the focus of attention to the other end of the chain. One of the main reasons this Decca SXL recording sounds so wonderfully immediate and present is the ability to replay it with the correct EQ. Switch to the standard RIAA curve and the incisive brilliance in the playing is dulled, the energy level drops, the physicality diminishes, and the band recede. This is no matter of taste or preference. The Decca curve captures the frisson of this remarkable performance and RIAA doesn't – and as we all know, any chain is only as strong as its weakest link. This system was built to reproduce the signals generated by a record player and I was lucky to have the Grand Prix Monaco v2.0 on hand. Combined with the Kuzma 4POINT14 and the Fuuga cartridge this is the most consistent, musically convincing record player I've ever used – a worthy front-end for this system. But even with a record player of such undoubted excellence, the ability to switch replay EQ on older classical and jazz pressings in particular was often the make or break factor when it came to delivering the difference between a good record from a stunning musical performance – from the self-same disc. Whether you need switchable EQ depends on the nature and content of your record collection, but its availability as an option on the P1 and underlines yet again how the versatility and configurable nature of the CH electronics plays directly into this system's stellar musical performance.

Meanwhile, sitting quietly at the heart of proceedings, the L1 goes calmly about its business, the anchor to which the system's absolute spatial and temporal stability are tied, the root of its remarkably low-noise floor and sudden dynamic response. In many ways it's the understated star turn that sums up the whole system. Is it perfect? No – and nor is it beyond criticism. But the real quality of this system, the thing that makes it a system in the true sense, rather than a simple set of parts, is the fact that its flaws do not intrude. Yes I could ask for more individual dimensionality and intra-instrumental air. I could wish for even deeper bass and a shade more immediacy – but do I notice those things when listening? Not for a moment. Not unless I go looking for them – and I don't do that because I'm so darned engaged by the music, the performance, and the performers. Perfect? No – but near enough for that not to ruin your enjoyment; near enough to deliver a timely reminder of just what's possible; near enough to convince you that, as expensive as it is, this is one system that's worth every penny. If you thought that the light at the end of the audio tunnel had finally flickered out, think again. It's there, it's stronger than ever – there's just more 'noise' between you and it. This system isn't a new dawn – it's just the same old sun, shining as brightly or brighter than ever. +

PRICES AND CONTACT DETAILS

CH Precision P1 Phono equaliser:

£22,400

CH Precision L1 preamplifier:

£24,800

CH Precision X1 power supply:

£12,400

CH Precision M1 power amplifier:

£37,400

Manufactured by: CH Precision

URL: ch-precision.com

Distributed in the UK by: Wilson Benesch

Tel: +44(0)114 285 2656

Wilson Benesch Resolution loudspeaker:

£35,500 per pair

Wilson Benesch Torus Infrasonic

Generator : £7,100 (incl. amp)

Manufactured by: Wilson Benesch

URL: wilson-benesch.com

Tel: +44(0)114 285 2656

Nordost Valhalla 2 interconnects:

from £5,500/0.6m

Nordost Valhalla 2 loudspeaker cables:

from £8,000/1.25m pair

Nordost Valhalla 2 power cords:

from £4,100/1m

Nordost QKore 6 parallel grounding system: £4,900

Manufactured by: Nordost

URL: nordost.com

Distributed in the UK by:

Atacama Audio

URL: nordost-cables.co.uk

Tel: +44(0)1455 283251