

MUSICAL NEWS

ISSUE 1

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Signature is back!

Many years ago Musical Concepts offered *Signature* modifications. We offered an all-out version of a modified Hafler DH-101 with all metal film resistors and other quality parts that bore the *Signature* name. With the discovery of some revolutionary ways to maximize sound quality, we again invoke the *Signature* name for a *complete series* of exceptional modifications.

Why now? For one thing, there are now a wide range of power rectifier diodes with exceptional performance. These diodes, by and large, are much better than those available only a few years ago. The best, the Harris "HyperFast" series, can make an astonishing improvement. Those who know me well, always accuse me of understating differences in sound - let me repeat, "**astounding improvement**". You'll hear more solid imaging with greater palpability. The soundstage has that "Rock Solid", unwavering quality. The presentation is a much more dynamic, transparent and well, just natural. Yeah, we listened to the "HexFred" and the "Gallium Arsenide" diodes and they finished in that order - well behind the "HyperFast". **I might add that we can be hired to put these in almost any audio product with those same results just described.**

In fact, we recently put HyperFasts into a local audiophile's Meridian 518 DSP/De-Jitter component. He was so impressed that he returned with his whole system for modification. Unbelievable! He had VAC Mono amps, Sonic Frontiers preamp, Anodyne tubed DAC, Wadia 8 Transport, Magnum Dynalab tuner and Entec powered subwoofers.

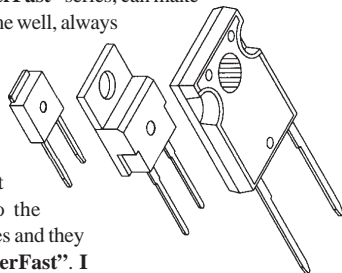
Another *Signature* feature is premium "BlackGate" N and NX series electrolytic capacitors. Man, these are scarily expensive, so for years we never even tested them. I'm glad to say that we finally extensively tested them in all types of circuitry from CD transports to huge amps. Our conclusion is simple. This is an incomparable electrolytic capacitor for audio use. The word incomparable is strong, but justified. Audiophiles have never enjoyed such wonderful definition and inner detailing, with no penalties of "etching", "hardness" or "edge". It is hard to describe the word *Organic* as it applies to music, but the BlackGate is the *King of Organic*. It strips away layers of "Haze" and "Glaze", to reveal more of the magic of real music. You advance an order of magnitude toward the sound of the real instruments, as opposed to the sound of traditional Hi-Fi colorations. We use the Premium "BlackGate", not the cheapies used in some so-so mid-price CD players. What's the downside? I hope you've got 3 weeks for them to go thru 'break-in'.

If you haven't heard the BlackGate, you are probably saying to yourself, "Hey, this is just a dumb electrolytic capacitor, how much difference can it make. Seriously, how much better can this thing be - and you know, it looks like all the rest of them." The BlackGate has news for you! I had the advantage of knowing firsthand the large differences in the sound of electrolytic caps and I tell you I wasn't ready for it! **And, I might add, we can selectively install these in almost any component for astonishingly better sound, but I digress.**

Signatures have some features we would rather not discuss, such as how we carefully match the sonic character of passive parts to get a perfect balance of sweetness and detail.

We have many *Signature* models, including CDT-4 Transport, Epoch VII CD player and PA-2 circuit board modifications for your Hafler amp. We can perform *Signature* modifications on your Adcom, B&K, Dyna (tubes, too!), Hafler, etc. *Signatures* are available for most everything we modify from Audio Alchemy to Rotel. Request our full literature for availability and pricing. And don't forget, we can upgrade your older mods to *Signature* status.

And don't forget, no matter how good you think it is now, these "State-of-the-Art" components can enhance your "Almost Any brand" component. Consult with us for estimated pricing on custom work. And, if you are the do it yourself type, we stock these components.



HyperFast Diodes



BlackGate

FREE INTERCONNECT!

We're so excited about the sound of our new *Signature* series modifications that we are giving away a 1 meter SuperConnect IV interconnect with any *Signature* purchase. Just purchase (or call to reserve) any *Signature* mod now thru April 15, 1997. This is a \$69 value.

But Wait, there's more! When you hear your new SuperConnect IVs and want more, we have extended our 20% off special on SuperConnect IV until April 15, 1997!

And while on the subject of SuperConnect IV, I want to relate a story. Just a few days ago I was talking to a high-end dealer. The conversation turned briefly to interconnects. I told him about a curious experience that I have had many times. Over the years, many audiophiles have purchased the SuperConnect cables. Then they drifted away to other brands and owned numerous "Audiophile" interconnects. The common thread is that over the years, they had steadily improved their systems **and** had stored their SuperConnects away in a closet or drawer. For a variety of reasons, some were unhappy with their systems or they just wanted to "play around", they reconnected their SuperConnects one evening. Then the shock set in. You see, their systems had steadily gotten better, but their interconnects were standing in the way of really hearing the improvements. The best interconnect they ever owned had been sitting in a drawer for three years. I told him, "You can't believe how many times I've heard this story." Just then, the dealer broke in and said, "I'm one of those people, remember I bought some SuperConnects a few years ago." If I may paraphrase the dealer, he then said "Yeah, I've probably got \$5000 to \$6000 worth of interconnects knocking around the house and I'm one of those people you're talking about!" Wow! It's a small world!

I apologize for keeping the SuperConnect IV such a closely guarded secret. SuperConnect IV is the **Stealth** interconnect. When you first listen there is nothing really special about it. However, as you listen longer, you begin to appreciate all of the things it doesn't do wrong. Then you realize that it is nearly peerless in the bass. I've had many customers say they have never heard anything like it in their subwoofer connection. Octave-to-octave balance is exceptional. SuperConnect has a wonderfully smooth character that lets human voices sound real in balance and intonation. Next, you start to think that your other interconnects just might be a bit too bright or steely. Maybe you've got the other type, since there are a lot to them in the CD era - you know the way too soft and slow sounding. Take that type of interconnect and play a really good Harpsichord recording, a good example is [The Harmonius Blacksmith, ARCHIV 413-591-2]. If you've ever heard a live Harpsichord performance, you'll realize the slow, soft cable makes it sound more like a Piano. One of the toughest sounds for any component is the Cymbal. It covers a wide frequency range, with vicious speed and dynamics. It is a great instrument for interconnect tests, since its sound is so easy to screw-up. You'll most often hear the instrument sound too bright and hashy. Interconnects will sound wildly variable on this instrument. If you have a really good system, SuperConnect IV can be a revelation on such wide ranging instruments, as you hear them sound coherent and unflustered from octave to octave. Spectral balance is the key. When it comes down to it, balance is the key to any wide ranging instrument, including the human voice. You need a good (but not necessarily expensive) system, to clearly hear the differences described. Oh yeah, you'll need a pair of **SuperConnects**, too!

True Story!!! Just last week I visited a local audiophile to help evaluate his system. He owned an **Adcom** preamp with our **MC-3T** preamp board, plus outboard power supply (OPS-8) and a **Musical Design D-75** amp, so the basics were excellent. The speakers were a bit tubby and peaky in several places, so the system was not taking advantage of his fine core components. I asked if he had ever tried our cables. He said he had some of them but wasn't using them, since he had bought some well-known \$400/meter cables. I asked him to try installing the **SuperConnects**, upon which the majority of mid and upper-end peakiness, thought to be in the speakers, just melted away. Even the bass was more transparent and natural. Unfortunately, he had purchased more than one of the \$400 cables.

Adcom 5800... is a new "Audiophile" amplifier offering. Our listen confirms what we had heard from many listeners. We were surprised that several listeners felt that the older GFA-555 series was preferable. Sure enough, we found the sound to be too dry and threadbare, bordering on "steely". Yes, there were some good thing there, which gave us hope that a mod would be effective. The circuit is very simple. There isn't even a DC restoring cap in the feedback loop. Their solution is a DC offset control in the front-end. This circuit requires a signal coupling cap in the 'front-end'. Hmm...., we wondered if this thing will develop increased DC offset over the life of the product, as transistors and such age. It would seem likely. As you already know, our GFA-5800 mod sounds great!

If I may digress, several audiophiles have called to ask if they could just "direct-couple" the input of this amp and earlier **Adcom "MK-II"** amps. The answer is **NO**. The GFA-5800 will amplify DC since it does not have a DC restoring cap in the feedback loop. Look, if the amp has a gain of 10, for instance, and your preamp has a DC offset of 100 millivolts, the amplifier will have 1 Volt of DC offset, **DC Offset = 10(gain) X 0.100 Volts(preamp offset) = 1V**. If you were absolutely sure that your preamp had 0.000 Volts of DC offset, there would be no **apparent** problem. I say apparent, because once you direct-couple your GFA-5800, the DC resistance to ground in the input circuit is changed. Why? Because the input impedance setting resistor is now in parallel with an output resistor that may be present in the preamplifier. This could change the DC offset, since input transistor DC leakage is now imposed across a different resistance.

MK-II amps have a DC Servo that applies a DC correction voltage to the input transistor. The only thing that keeps this voltage from entering your preamp is the Input Coupling cap. If you remove this cap, it's possible that your DC offset will go ballistic. **Bad idea!**

So how do we solve these problems? Simple, in the MK-II amps we scrap the Servo, since we are still waiting for a Servo that sounds better than a simple DC restoring cap, a finding shared by other high-end designers. **Then**, we DC couple the input! In the GFA-5800, we cannot be sure of the DC offset of the preamp. Our solution is to use a musical sounding composite input cap arrangement.

Can you believe I've rattled on this long about DC offset? And no, I'm not going to explain the rest of the things we do in these mods, since we're busy trying to make a living at this.

 **What's new...**

DDE 3.0... from Audio Alchemy, is our latest addition to the list of AA stuff we modify. In this unit, our main areas of focus are to improve the quality of the power supply caps and the Analog Filter. And while the Analog section appears to have some fine parts, there is room for improvement as owners of **modified DDEs** have testified. There are also some mods to the DAC circuitry! Some resistors get replaced, too. There is a *Signature* version with improvements to the already excellent sound. We also have *Signature* mods for their outboard power supplies - the ones with removable covers.

Would you believe... that Pioneer Elite 6 disc(\$300 list), 25+1 disc(\$300 list) and 100 disc CD changers sound pretty cool. Okay, they're not as good as a Stable Platter single-play unit, but not bad either. The 25+1 unit allows you to put in a single disc, via a loader functioning like a car stereo loader. You know, the kind that pull the disc out of your hand. Very sexy! These units with **Coax Digital Out** function pretty nicely as transports, in fact, better than many "Audiophile Transports"! We offer the same modification menu as on single play units including, you guessed it, *Signature* versions.

Callers often ask... "What have you heard lately?" or "What do you evaluate your products against?" Would you believe that we have a \$3000 **NBS** power cord in our possession. No, Brinks didn't deliver the thing. Right now, we have the **Stax** Tube Headphone rig. We just finished evaluating the wonderful **Meadowlark Audio Kestral** loudspeaker(\$995/pr). In some ways, they're as good as anything we've heard. We have their \$4000 **Heron** model on order. We have a pair of \$32,000 **Levinson** amps for the HyperFast diode treatment. Huh? A \$7500 **Esoteric P-2S** transport is in house for a mod with **HyperFasts** and our special **Digital Output Circuit Board**.

Your transport..., whether it is a single CD, multi-disc or Laser/CD combo, may not have a **Coaxial Digital Output**. Not to worry! We can convert your unit, if it already has a TosLink® output. Our conversion has a **new circuit board** with power supply, drive amplifier and output transformer. This ain't no slimy resistor and piece of wire affair, okay! **Conversions: \$195**

**And, in the mail bin...**

Dear John,

August 14, 1996

I have just finished my audition of both the highly recommended Meridian 508.20 CD player(see Stereophile June 1996) and your T1 Transport/DAC-1 combination. I certainly agree with Sam Tellig's conclusion that "the new 508 is a stunning player" and I very much like it's compact size.

However, from the sonic standpoint, the Musical Design T1/DAC-1 system was the clear winner. Your system was more liquid, more open, possessed better low level detail, and in short, more enjoyable to listen to. I have never heard as accurate a reproduction of cymbals, trumpets, and the piano as I heard with your units, and I have been to a lot of live performances lately. The 508.20 did seem to have more bass, but it was loose and over stated in my opinion.

If Sam Tellig thinks the 508.20 belongs in Stereophile's Class A "Recommended Components", I feel even better about my purchase of the T1 and the DAC1. Did I forget to mention that the T1/DAC1 setup is about \$700.00 cheaper too!

Sincerely,
J. McKell

Dear John

Oct.22,1996

I have tried to digest the changes the Signature mod rendered in my CD-2 before writing. While I am still hearing new things each day, I think I can safely describe the major change as "heft" and "solidity". By heft I mean a new quality to the bass/bottom end of the aural scale. Not just more bass (although there certainly is more), but a truer to life sense of the movement of the bass lines, True bass moves through a room/audience. The bass emanating from my CD-2 now does the same. The better bass also combines with a new sense of solidity to make the sounds more life-like. Before I heard a very good two dimensional palate of sound between and behind my speakers. Now I hear the third dimension, the extra 'depth' and 'presence' that some speak of. I not only hear the pluck of the guitar, but the air resonating around it as well. The blare of brass instruments is more punctuated. Voices now sound eery in the dark, the performer is now in the room with me!

You are cruel. Now I have to look at the rest of my components to see where the weak link is - it is certainly not in the CD player, This just may be the silver spike in the vinyl is better than digital argument. Not only is the playing field leveled, it may even now be tilted in the digital direction. Thanks for making this form of entertainment even more captivating.

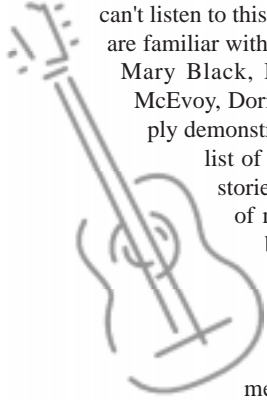
Happily yours,
Jay C.**USED COMPONENTS**

- 2 - CD-2(Used), minor cosmetic flaws, Orig. \$1495, Sale \$1095
- 2 - CD-2(Demo), minor cosmetic flaws, Orig. \$1495, Sale \$1195
- 2 - CD-2 Signature(Used, orig. ver.), some flaws, Orig \$1995, Sale \$1295
- 2 - D-150(black, latest ver.), Demo, very minor flaws, Orig. \$1495 Sale \$1295
- 1 - SP-2(black, latest ver.), Demo, very minor flaws, Orig. \$995, Sale \$795
- 1 - SP-2B(black, latest ver.), Demo, very minor flaws, Orig. \$995, Sale \$895
- 2 - DAC-1(black, not latest 1A), demo, minor flaws, Orig. \$995, Sale \$795
- 3 - D-75(black, latest), demo, minor flaws, Orig. \$795, Sale \$649
- 2 - DM-100(black, latest), demo, minor flaws, Orig. \$1195 Sale \$995
- 3 - D-140 with latest "Special" update, awesome sound, Sale \$895
- 2 - D-140i with latest "Special" update, awesome sound, Sale \$995
- 1 - Hafler DH-101 w/MC-3T board, "Monster" power supply(Call) Sale \$795

Music Reviews

There will be no learned dissertations here, just positive reviews of music we like. The emphasis is on sound quality, but not above substance. We have added valuable descriptions of the sound quality, so you can judge whether your system is doing its job. All discs are 'cleaned' on the Nitty Gritty CD Cleaner and spun on the 'Bedini' before evaluation. Your comments are invited. Important Note: It has been said that Ye Editor has eclectic tastes, some have even said wierd tastes, so pursuethe less standard discs here at your own risk.

A Woman's Heart, VARIOUS ARTISTS, [DARTE CD158] - As I just told the proofreader, "Various Artists" is not the name of a new group, so keep reading. Well here I go, starting off with a CD that is not cutting-edge soundwise(though close), but long on musical talent and playability. This CD is just so sweet and overflowing with talent. If you can't listen to this once a week, you might be a "Type A". If you are familiar with Irish female vocalists, this list is compelling - Mary Black, Frances Black, Maura O'Connell, Eleanor McEvoy, Doris Keane and Sharon Shannon. As the list amply demonstrates, this is mostly about Irish vocalists with a



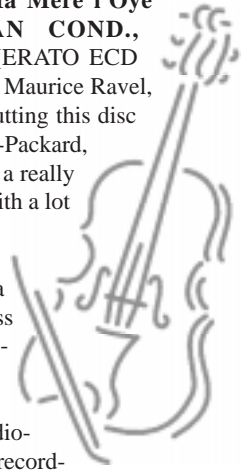
list of stories to tell. If you know anybody who tells stories any sweeter than these ladies, you're ahead of me. There are two instrumentals on the album by Sharon Shannon that are great fun and they border on some of the best sound quality you're likely to hear. I have heard Mary Black twice here in St. Louis at the intimate **Sheldon Concert Hall** with just minimal sound reinforcement and so I know this disc is fairly dead-ontonal. Oh yeah, I heard Frances Black at the same hall. This CD is almost as much fun as being there. It's my understanding that **A Woman's Heart** was at the top of the charts for weeks in Ireland, and it certainly would deserve to be. Buy it! If you don't like it, seek help! - JH

P.S. - Credit Norvelle Wathan from **Musical Images of Kentucky** in Louisville, Ky(1-502-339-9000) for recommending this CD. Norvelle is always a great source of recommendations and he carries a lot of musically interesting CDs. We'll feature another of his recommendations in the next newsletter, and who knows, maybe he will pen a guest review.

Don't Smoke in Bed, HOLLY COLE TRIO - [Manhattan CDP 0777 7 81198 2 1] Another recommendation from Norvelle Wathan, is the Holly Cole Trio with Aaron Davis(piano) and David Plitch(Bass and Percussion). This puts you in a smoke-filled room right with the musicians in a very intimate way. There are a lot of additional musicians on this CD, but I must single out Howard Levy's Harmonica playing on "Get out of Town", "Tennessee Waltz" and "Que Sera, Sera". Mr. Levy's playing is a lot of fun - you could listen to him all night. There is a lot of authoritative, i.e. close-miked sounding, stand-up bass here. You'll have to decide on Holly Cole's style of deliberate, slow delivery for yourself. I think you should audition before you buy, if you can. Although this is a good recording, it won't pin your meter. - JH

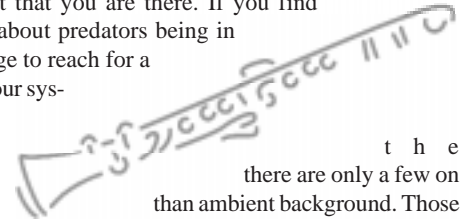


Bolero, La Valse, Alborada del Gracioso, Ma Mère l'Oye MAURICE RAVEL - ARMIN JORDAN COND., ORCHESTRE DE LA SUISSE ROMANDE, [ERATO ECD 88159] Pardon my gushing over the great talent of Maurice Ravel, but hey, you could get thrown out of my car for putting this disc down. Recorded in 1985 under the aegis of Hewlett-Packard, this CD must be "State of the Art". Played back on a really musical system, you'll hear a very ambient sound with a lot of hall reflections and a palpable layout to the shape of the orchestra. The sound stage is deep, deep, deep and the perspective is a bit distant, i.e. this isn't a row D type sound, but more like a first row Dress Circle - you know a first row balcony type perspective. There are a lot of **Goose-Bumps** here - towering dynamic contrasts, powerful bass, the whole experience. And yet, when you listen with your "Audio-ophile Ears", you may think it is less than the finest recording you've heard. Okay, then go back and listen with your emotions - you're hooked. Whatever it is, the great playing of the orchestra or the flawless baton work by Armin Jordan, you're in for a wonderful experience. I'm listening to this as I write, and yep, there went a goosebump. I count this as one of the top ten in my collection any day for pure enjoyment. - JH



Prayer for the Wild Things, PAUL WINTER CONSORT - [LIVING MUSIC LD0028] Here we have "Earth Music" from Paul Winter. Earth Music, in case you don't know, is a combination of environmental and wild-life sounds, perhaps a variant of 'New Age', with acoustic instruments. In case I don't know, I'm sure I will be better informed soon. And yeah, I'm not so sure you always get acoustic instruments, as in a perfect world..., but I do know when I'm listening to a very special recording. This recording was made outdoors in mountain country. The sound quality of the environment is stunning. In one cut, Winter describes himself standing on the edge of a precipice. You clearly hear a steady wind moving through the huge underlying valley. Stunning though it may be, there is a tremendous sense of direction to the sound and I felt if I were to walk just behind my speakers, I would fall in to the chasm. Wow! If your system passes this test, congratulations. In another cut, which you should only play after 11 PM or so when the ambient noise level of your home and surroundings is very low, there is a pack of Wolves crying in the distance. So transparent is the space between you and the animals, that you can practically feel the rain and damp night air. Again, this is so transparent that you are there. If you find yourself slightly concerned about predators being in the area and you have the urge to reach for a light rain jacket, you know your system has done its job.

Don't be scared off by 'animal sounds' thing, as there are only a few on the CD that amount to more than ambient background. Those highlighted sounds are very unusual and capture the animals in very mundane moments, the stuff of everyday life for them. As you see and hear animals on the 'tube', they are always in a struggle for survival, mating or living out other such pivotal moments. Not here! There is a passage with a Mountain Lion making what I might call a 'Lament' sound. There seems to be a sadness or loneliness to his voice, perhaps a sense that this life is barely worth living. Not being a Mountain Lion myself I can't be sure of intentions, but I was awed by my own overwhelming sense that the animal was *expressing an emotion* through this call. If your system is up to this disc, I'm sure you'll be astounded with how you genuinely 'feel' the environment. Even if you live in the middle of a city of 10 million people, this disc will temporarily transport you to a very different and awe-inspiring world. I can hardly pay a greater tribute to Paul Winter, though it seems I have forgotten to mention his enchanting musicianship as he leads you into a different world. - JH



P.S. I take it back, listen to this whole disc late at night when your home is quiet, so stunning is the increase in transparency. Hmm..., I haven't listened to this yet on the Stax Tube Headphones, see ya' later!

WHAT'S NEW AT MUSICAL DESIGN

CD-2 Signature... has undergone late breaking revisions with the addition of **HyperFast** diodes, **BlackGate** caps and several changes in the Power Supply and Analog Filter. There are exciting improvements in bass solidity and heft, a sense of speed without etchiness, and just plain musical transparency. Recordings of orchestra and chorus become 'larger'. You 'view' soloists in a more intimate light. You hear each individual voice in a well recorded chorus and you can follow one voice on a great system.

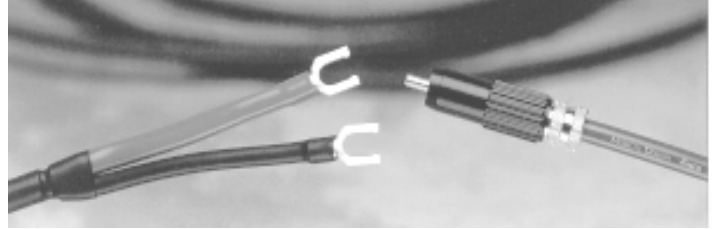
You've never heard so much *invisible* detail before. I mean, inner detail is one thing and in my estimation it means that you hear the myriad subtleties of an instrument, those details often hidden in 'softness, slowness or glazing' in most audio gear. *Invisible* detail is just things that you never heard before. You know, what used to just seem like a mysterious noise turns out to be a loud truck going by outside the recording venue and such. In other words, things that seemed unidentifiable before suddenly take on meaning. If you have an earlier **CD-2 Signature**, updates are available at \$350. If you have a **CD-1** or **CD-2**, you need the full update to *Signature* status, the cost is \$600.

DAC-1A... has a new PC board with revisions in the power supply and changes in the analog filter. Many new power supply caps are used. **HyperFast** diodes are now standard. The HDCD compatible DAC-1A has a vivid, powerful, yet elegantly smooth sound, still at the original price of \$995. The latest *Signature* DAC-1A is loaded with BlackGate caps and other careful tweaks for only \$1995

SP-2B now sports Hyperfast Diodes..., a new volume control and new operating point for the amplifier circuit. Wow, what a change, and I might add that we had first tried the **HexFreds**. They just didn't compete, especially in the SP-2B where we use HyperFasts, not only on the B+, but the 'Heaters' as well. The new volume control is the well known **NOBLE AP-25**, the large square black metal control used in many hi-end preamps. We think it is the best sounding, affordable pot. The new operating point gives the preamp a more dynamic sound with deep, powerful bass reproduction and exemplary transparency. I wish we could afford to put these new parts into your original SP-2B for free, but there's the rent, the lights, the insurance..., you know! If you would like your original SP-1, SP-2 or SP-2B brought up to snuff, call us. Still at the original price of \$995

If you have a D-140 or D-140i..., we have good news for you. We have developed a new "Special" update for these amps that is special indeed. The sound is extraordinarily clean and sweet. Be forewarned, listening becomes very habit forming. The update to any version is \$195. For special *Signature* modification, add \$200.!

Well, they're not exactly new..., but our promotion of AURA cables has gone into hibernation, so we thought we might brag a little. But, do we need to brag when they have a 30-day Money-Back Guarantee and a 20% off price until April 15, 1997? Sure, why not!



The AURA interconnect has a locking connector and the materials are Gold Plate/Teflon® insulation. A Triple Dielectric insulation system with a large center conductor and braid shield is used. Listeners comment on a smooth midrange, clear and solid bass, extended and smooth upper end, and well, just the transparency. Interconnects start at \$100(minus 20%). AURA speaker cable is a dual-concentric Transmission Line design with a Characteristic Impedance of 6 Ohms, i.e. it will deliver maximum power into a 6 Ohm load according to Transmission Line Theory. Since there are inner and outer cylindrical conductors, the outer conductor is used as 'Ground' and acts as an RFI shield. Listeners report that our cables are free of RFI that plagued them with other cables. I shotgun mine!

MUSICAL NEWS

Our Newsletter

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