MUSIC FROM Richard Thompson, Christian McBride, and Clark Terry, plus David Chesky’s new Piano Concertos

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200 Q&A
We talk with Joe Lavrencik of Critical Mass Systems.
What ignited your interest in the high end? Did it come from the music side or the electronics side?
The music side, for sure. I played jazz, classical, and rock guitar, and piano. I took lessons twice a week and tried to practice about six hours a day. Classical guitar was the best because the instrument is so textural and responsive to touch. For some reason, I clearly remember the sound and feel of the interplay between musicians. There was a purity of tone and timing that to this day I try to help bring out in reproduced music. I’m not alone in this; I think every dedicated manufacturer tries to recreate “reality” in the reproduction process. Maybe we are all frustrated musicians.

What gear made up your first high-end system?
A Wadia 860 CD player into a BAT preamp into a BAT amp and Ohm speakers my wife had bought for me. It was and is great stuff, but alas, now a distant memory.

When did audio develop from a hobby into a career?
For me, it was the day I was willing to walk away from a career in another industry. Yet I like to think that both aspects still reside harmoniously within me. I can enjoy music and then switch gears to do the hard, analytical work. There are many brilliant engineers and dedicated people populating this boundless arena for the pursuit of personal excellence. Working in audio isn’t a career; it’s a gift.

What education did you receive?
Not good enough for what I do right now, in my opinion. My son, Justin, is an Electrical Engineering PhD, so I have the luxury of tapping his brain to discuss physics or electromechanical phenomena that I suspect might occur inside electrical networks. But the latest iterations of our products have put me neck-deep in material science and that’s been very challenging and quite rewarding.

How do you define the difference between hi-fi and high-end audio?
Music should be an experience, not a song. Products that are high end can recreate the original musical event in your listening room. Having said that, I think that 99% of them can do this. My job is to remove the penalties imposed on components by vibration, to help the listener experience the many technological advancements that make their components high-end audio. The challenge for me is to make a cutting-edge, world-class product that mitigates vibration but doesn’t impose a thumbprint on the component.

What interesting fact about Critical Mass Systems might surprise audiophiles?
Maybe that Critical Mass Systems is homegrown. I wanted to build a company that lived or died based on the quality of the product. CMS started as a word-of-mouth company and there were pivotal moments that directly contributed to its life. For example, Vladimir Lamm [of Lamm Industries] gave us the opportunity to introduce all our racks and filter systems in his rooms at CES. Cyrill Hammer [of Soulution] brought CMS to Munich and exposed us to a global market. Most recently Peter Madnick made some extraordinarily insightful suggestions on a product that has had a far-ranging impact. These men were a strong influence on our success.

What is the most common misunderstanding about the A/V rack and shelf segment?
Probably the belief that they don’t matter in an audio system. The laws of physics make them a component in an audio system. If you want to degrade the performance of a great audio component, put it on a bad surface. If you want to experience the engineering of a great audio component, put it on a great surface. It’s physics.

Looking towards the future, how will high-end systems change in the next ten years or so?
Great question! There is an imaginary “wall” that exists at the front plane of the loudspeakers separating the musicians from the listener. We live with it every day and have come to accept it as “normal.” We're going to knock down that wall by dramatically lowering the noise floor using new innovations in material science. You can't do this with earbuds. The technology is already inside analog and digital components, and we’re catching up to them using material science innovations in our support systems today.

What are the challenges confronting the high end?
Our greatest challenge is to redefine ourselves and differentiate ourselves as much as possible from the mobile phone—more is more instead of less is more.

Outside of audio, what do you do for fun?
I collect red wine…I drink it, too.

What still inspires you about your work?
That one new discovery coming tomorrow.