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MICHAEL FREMER

# Gryphon Apex Stereo

## POWER AMPLIFIER

**S**ome time ago, an amplifier in for review caught fire when first powered up. I don't mean it smoked and sizzled and shut down—I mean that actual flames shot through the top grate. Fortunately, I was able to grab a kitchen fire extinguisher and douse the thing with foam. (Sorry, this was decades ago, and I don't remember the brand, but I think the company had a fire sale and was shut down.)

Another time, a representative of an amplifier manufacturer visited for an install. Once everything was connected and ready to be powered up, he assumed an unusually defensive stance. He turned his back to the amplifier, reached behind it, and, with a grimace on his face and eyeing the exit, flipped the power rocker on. Nothing exploded, and the amplifier powered up, but it was not a confidence-inspiring performance.

### A "massive" upgrade

With those late '80s experiences in mind, I watched the Gryphon Apex Stereo, a manatee of an amplifier at 445lb, as it was tipped on its side so that it could pass through the door and be rolled on a dolly into my listening room. The pair of linebacker-sized piano movers entrusted with the task skillfully,



**Fast, precise attack; generous, lingering sustain; clean, smooth decay—these, for me, are the hallmarks of a great amplifier, and the Gryphon excels at all three.**

## SPECIFICATIONS

**Description** Solid state, stereo power amplifier. Input: 2 balanced (XLR). Output: 2 pair custom gold-plated binding posts. Input impedance, balanced (20Hz–20kHz): 20k ohms. Output impedance: 0.015 ohm. Voltage gain: 31dB. Bandwidth: 0.3Hz–330kHz, –3dB. Max. input level: 1.16V

RMS. Output power: 210Wpc into 8 ohms (23.2dBW), 420Wpc into 4 ohms (23.2dBW), 800Wpc into 2 ohms (23.0dBW), 1490Wpc into 1 ohm (22.7dBW). Power supply capacity: 1,040,000µF. Power consumption, high bias: <0.5W at idle.

**Dimensions** 23.3" (593mm)

W × 14.6" (371mm) H × 34.8" (886mm) D. Weight: 445lb (202kg).

**Finish** Brushed black anodized aluminum and black polished acrylic.

**Serial number of unit reviewed** 5590000. Designed and built in Denmark.

**Price** \$99,000. Warranty: five

years parts and labor.

**Manufacturer** Gryphon Audio Designs ApS, Industrivej 10B, DK 8600 Ry, Denmark.

Tel: (+45) 86891200.

Web: gryphon-audio.com.

US distributor:

Gryphon Audio N.A.

Tel: (201) 690-9006. Email:

anthony@gryphon-audio.dk.

carefully positioned the Gryphon in the designated space between my reference monoblocks then deftly righted it, landing it gently on its feet without raising a speck of dust from the old carpet. Whatever their fee, it was worth it!

Packaging a nearly 500lb behemoth for safe shipping and easy unpacking is an engineering challenge of its own. It took a great deal of ingenuity to implement packaging for the Apex that satisfies both criteria. It makes clever use of slippery sliding sheets—the kind used in hospitals to move patients—to slide the amp off its shipping pallet, and it includes an inflatable air wedge (specifically, a Winbag<sup>1</sup>) to raise the amp, once off the pallet, one side at a time to remove the shock-absorbing shipping feet and, optionally, install the supplied spiked feet.

If you saw the Gryphon Apex Stereo amp on static display at

1 A useful tool. See winbagusa.com. Also available at amazon.com.—Jim Austin



## MEASUREMENTS

**B**ecause the Gryphon Apex Stereo is big and heavy, I drove to Michael Fremer's place in deepest, darkest New Jersey with my Audio Precision SYS2722 system,<sup>1</sup> digital and analog oscilloscopes, and test loads. I preconditioned the amplifier by operating it at  $\frac{1}{8}$  the specified power into 8 ohms for 20 minutes. At the end of that time, the temperature of the heatsinks was 113.6°F/45.4°C and that of the top panel 105.3°F/40.8°C. The bias was set at High for all testing.

The Gryphon Apex Stereo has only balanced inputs. The voltage gain at 1kHz was 30.85dB into 8 ohms, very close to

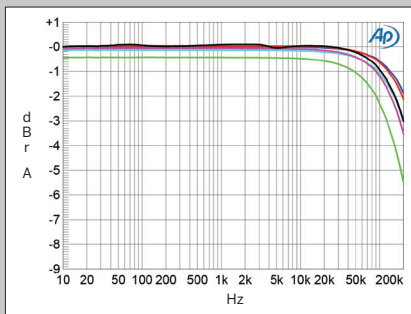
the specified gain of 31dB. The amplifier preserved absolute polarity, ie, was noninverting. The input impedance is specified as 20k ohms. I measured 19.9k ohms at low and middle frequencies, decreasing inconsequentially to 19.5k ohms at the top of the audioband.

Gryphon specifies the Apex's output impedance as 0.015 ohms. My measurement was slightly higher in the right channel, at close to 0.05 ohms (including the series resistance of 6' of speaker cable), and significantly higher in the left channel, at 0.17 ohms. I checked the wiring and connections and found nothing amiss. I am at a

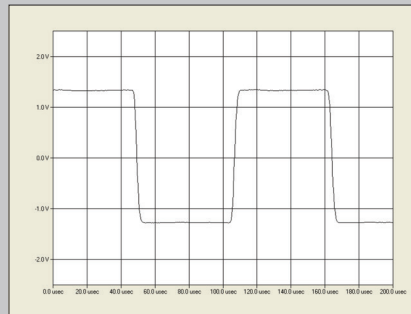
loss, therefore, to explain this discrepancy. The variation in the small-signal frequency response of the Apex's right channel into our standard simulated loudspeaker<sup>2</sup> (fig.1, gray trace) was inconsequential. Into resistive loads (blue, red, cyan, magenta, and green traces), the amplifier gently rolled off well above the audioband, with the -3dB frequency dependent on the load and channel. The left channel's response into 2 ohms (green trace) was down by 3dB at 130kHz.

1 See [stereophile.com/content/measurements-maps-precision](http://stereophile.com/content/measurements-maps-precision).

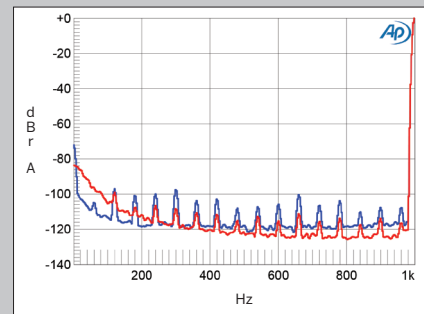
2 See [stereophile.com/content/real-life-measurements-page-2](http://stereophile.com/content/real-life-measurements-page-2).



**Fig.1** Gryphon Apex, frequency response at 2.83V into: simulated loudspeaker load (gray), 8 ohms (left channel blue, right red), 4 ohms (left cyan, right magenta), and 2 ohms (green) (1dB/vertical div.).



**Fig.2** Gryphon Apex, small-signal 10kHz squarewave into 8 ohms.



**Fig.3** Gryphon Apex, spectrum of 1kHz sine wave, DC-1kHz, at 1W into 8 ohms (left channel blue, right red; linear frequency scale).

AXPONA and noted how big it seemed in that large space, imagine how big it appears in my modest-sized listening room. It is nearly 3' deep, intimidating in its monolithic black oneness. It commands attention with a black hole pull.

The Gryphon Apex replaced a pair of darTZeel monoblocks in my system. Everything else remained the same, including the darTZeel NHB-18NS preamplifier. I carefully connected the amp to the speakers and to the preamp's balanced outputs and plugged the two AC cables into dedicated 20A lines. (I don't think this review would be possible if the electrical system of my house had not been upgraded a few months ago.) Once I was certain that all connections were correct, I flipped the two rear-panel power switches then tapped the red Standby icon on the touchscreen, bringing the Apex to life.

**WARNING! WARNING! WARNING!**

Red error lights flashing across the top of the touchscreen evoked flaming amplifiers in my mind and got my adrenaline flowing. Temperature Error, DC/HF Error, AC Phase—it looked like a massive failure through high temperatures and catastrophic input current. Had I crossed the speaker wires?

Thirty seconds of panic evaporated with the click of a relay, which extinguished the error lights and put the amp into Play mode. This was all completely normal. Whew!

You could admonish me for not reading the manual first. I did so later and learned that "all display indications will flash for approximately 25 seconds before the amplifier is fully operational." The Gryphon Apex will always be installed by a dealer, but I think it would be a good idea to provide a heads-up warning about those flashing error lights early in the manual and not wait until page 21.



### measurements, continued

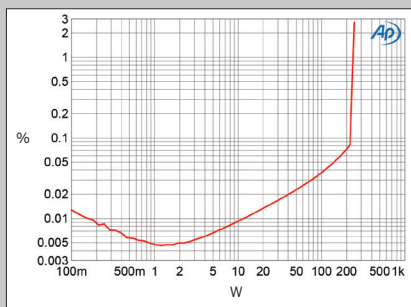
The Apex's reproduction of a 10kHz square-wave into 8 ohms (fig.2) featured very short risetimes and no overshoot or ringing.

As expected from its dual-mono construction, the Apex's channel separation (not shown) was superb, at >100dB in both directions below 2kHz and still 80dB at the top of the audioband. The unweighted, wideband signal/noise ratio (ref. 1W into 8 ohms and measured with the unbalanced input shorted to ground) was very good, measuring 73.4dB (average of the two channels). This ratio improved to an excellent 85dB when the measurement bandwidth was restricted to 22Hz-22kHz,

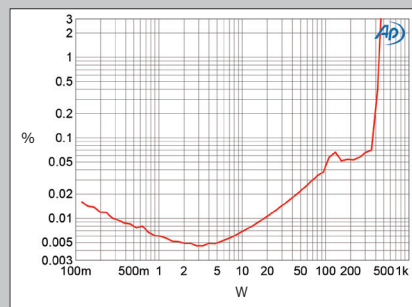
and to 90.6dB, left, and 94.1dB, right, when A-weighted. Spectral analysis of the low-frequency noise floor while the Gryphon Apex Mono drove a 1kHz tone at 1Wpc into 8 ohms (fig.3) revealed that although some AC-related spurious were present, these all lay at or below -100dB in the left channel (blue trace) and -110dB in the right channel (red trace). The Apex has individual AC power cords for its two channels. To avoid a ground loop, I plugged my test equipment into the same wall outlet as the left channel. However, I don't believe this was the reason for the higher level of noise and spurious in the left channel, as the spectrum

was the same whether I grounded the XLR input's pin 1 or left it floating. In any case, though higher than in the left channel, the level is still very low.

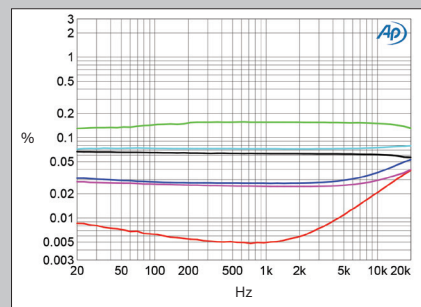
The Gryphon Apex Mono's maximum continuous power with both channels driven is specified as 210Wpc into 8 ohms (23.2dBW), 420Wpc into 4 ohms (23.2dBW), and 800Wpc into 2 ohms (23dBW). The Gryphon amplifier exceeded its specified powers into the higher impedances. With our usual definition of clipping as being when the THD+noise reaches 1%, I measured a clipping power with both channels driven of 240Wpc into 8 ohms



**Fig.4** Gryphon Apex, left channel, distortion (%) vs 1kHz continuous output power into 8 ohms.



**Fig.5** Gryphon Apex, left channel, distortion (%) vs 1kHz continuous output power into 4 ohms.



**Fig.6** Gryphon Apex, THD+N (%) vs frequency at 20V into: 8 ohms (left channel blue, right red), 4 ohms (left cyan, right magenta), and 2 ohms (left green, right gray).

(Not that it would have helped me, since, when it happened, I had not cracked the manual at all.)

That is the last negative comment you'll read in this review about the Gryphon Apex Stereo amplifier.

### Design and features

The Gryphon Apex Stereo and the sibling Apex Mono amplifiers (which were not auditioned here) are both powerful, cost-no-object designs. Both are biased heavily into class-A, meaning that the transistors never turn off, from the largest positive voltage through the maximum negative voltage. It's an inefficient way to bias transistors, but in addition to producing high electricity bills and a lot of heat, class-A bias also results in very low distortion and ear-pleasing sonics.

Gryphon says it distrusts autobiasing schemes that claim to dynamically adapt bias to changing conditions to optimize performance, believing such schemes have more to do with marketing than with technology. Gryphon admits that class-A entails heavy transformers, very large heatsinks, and large quantities of expensive metal and parts.

The inherent inefficiency of a class-A amplifier means that the Apex Stereo's massive dual-mono design, which uses 32 very high-current bipolar output transistors *per channel*, produces just 210W at 8 ohms. Available power dramatically increases, however, as load impedance decreases: 420 watts at 4 ohms, 800 watts at 2 ohms, and 1490 watts at 1 ohm. This makes it an ideal amplifier for driving speakers with punishing loads. The Wilson Audio Specialties XVX, for example, ranges from 2 to 4 ohms throughout most of the audioband but dips to as low as 1.6 ohms at 326Hz. Based

on Gryphon's specs, the more punishing the load, the better this amplifier performs.

Other design features include zero global feedback, 1,040,000 $\mu$ F capacitor banks—more than a farad of capacitance!—2kVA toroidal transformers, low-capacitance, class-A J-FET input buffers, balanced, dual-differential class-A input circuitry followed by a fast, symmetrical class-A voltage amplification stage, DC-servo coupling, four-layer 105 $\mu$ m (or less) copper-printed circuit boards, and many other build and circuit features. As with the recently reviewed Gryphon Apex Commander preamplifier, the designers paid particular attention to mechanical isolation.

Three bias options are available, selectable through the front-panel touchscreen: Low for efficient, noncritical listening; Medium, which provides 100W of pure class-A while higher power as class A/B; and High, which is 100% class-A power, for the ultimate performance. The instructions caution that after changing the bias setting, the amp requires approximately 45 minutes to “settle” before the effect on sound can be assessed.

I ran the amp the entire time in High; let the electricity bill be what it may.

In the interest of energy efficiency and environmental responsibility, Gryphon incorporates a feature the company terms “green bias.” When using the Apex with Gryphon's Commander preamp, the two can be linked with a special cable that allows adjustment of the bias according to programmable switching points within the preamp's volume control. I wasn't supplied with the accessory and did not test this feature.

Gryphon's founder, Flemming E. Rasmussen, endowed the Apex Stereo with a bold industrial design featuring several striking

### measurements, continued

(23.8dBW, fig.4) and 450Wpc into 4 ohms (23.5dBW, fig.5). With one channel driven, the Apex clipped at 750W into 2 ohms (22.7dBW, not shown), even though the wall voltage had only dropped slightly at that power, from 120.1V to 119.5V.

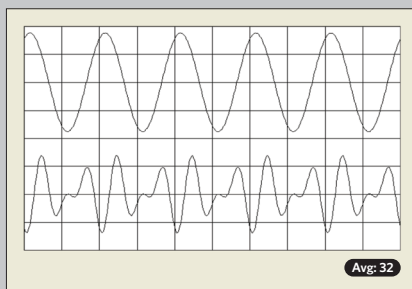
Figs.4 and 5 were taken from the left channel's output. Fig.6 shows how the percentage of THD+noise varies with frequency into 8, 4, and 2 ohms at 20V (equivalent to 50W into 8 ohms, 100W into 4 ohms, and 200W into 2 ohms). The THD+N was significantly lower in the right channel (red, magenta, and gray traces) than the left (blue, cyan, and green traces),

though still low into the higher impedances.

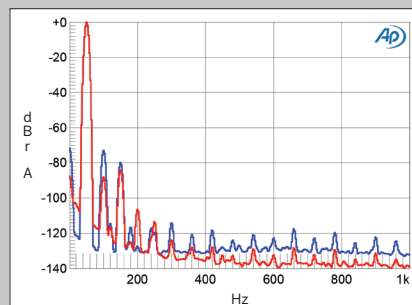
The left channel's distortion signature into 8 ohms predominantly comprised the second and third harmonics (fig.7). Spectral analysis at the same power (fig.8) revealed that while the third harmonic lay at similar levels in both channels, the second harmonic was 16dB higher in the left channel (blue trace) than the right (red), lying at -73dB compared with -89dB. Even with the left channel's higher level of harmonic distortion than the right, the Apex still did well driving an equal mix of 19 and 20kHz tones at 100Wpc into 4 ohms (fig.9). The 1kHz difference product lay 83dB (left) and 87dB

(right) below the peak signal level, and while the higher-order products at 18 and 21kHz were a little higher in both channels, they still lay at or below -72dB.

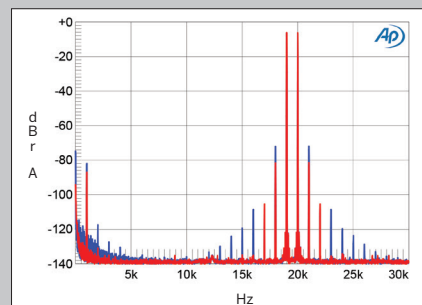
Presumably, the left channel's higher levels of distortion and noise and its higher output impedance than the right channel's are sample-specific. But even so, the Gryphon Apex Mono offers high power coupled with a wide bandwidth and primarily low levels of low-order distortion. I wish I could have stayed longer at Mikey's to listen to it driving his Wilson Chronosonic XVX speakers, but I had to beat the rush-hour traffic back to Brooklyn.—John Atkinson



**Fig.7** Gryphon Apex, left channel, 1kHz waveform at 50W into 8 ohms, 0.0278% THD+N (top); distortion and noise waveform with fundamental notched out (bottom, not to scale).



**Fig.8** Gryphon Apex, spectrum of 50Hz sine wave, DC-1kHz, at 50Wpc into 8 ohms (left channel blue, right red; linear frequency scale).



**Fig.9** Gryphon Apex, HF intermodulation spectrum, DC-30kHz, 19+20kHz at 100Wpc peak into 4 ohms (left channel blue, right red; linear frequency scale).

elements: large, smooth (fanned) heatsinks; massive, brushed-aluminum faceplates; robust spiked feet; and, with unabashed frontal prominence, the same triangular touchscreen seen on the Gryphon Commander preamplifier.

The Apex Stereo amplifier will set you back \$99,000 (as will each equally massive Apex Mono, the Stereo's monoblock twin—double that for a pair). While not exactly budget-friendly, the Apex Stereo's price is competitive in the rarefied top-end audio market. It comes with a five-year warranty on materials and workmanship.

If you compare the Apex Stereo and Mono specs, you might be surprised to find that although the latter employs twice as many output devices per channel as the former (64 *per mono channel*), its output is only marginally higher: 225W versus 210W at 8 ohms. That's because Gryphon does not bridge the amp to achieve greater power output. Instead, in the mono configuration, it uses 32 output devices for each phase, resulting in output impedance that's half that of the mono version.

#### Standing (and sitting) at the Apex

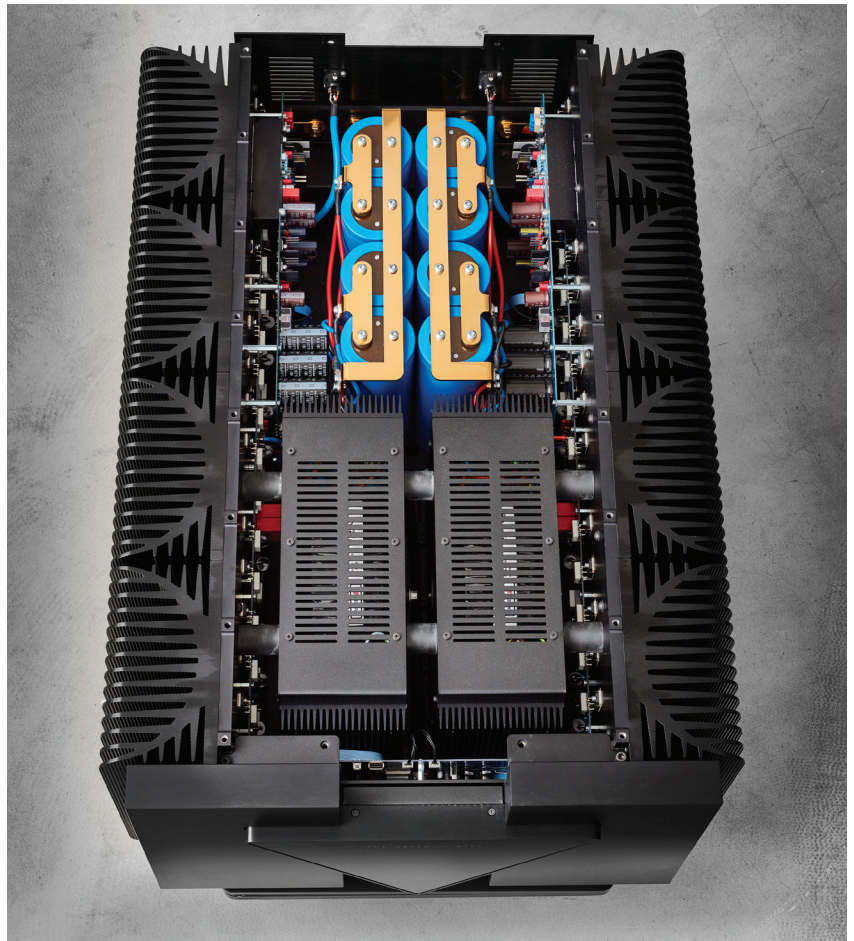
Once I was through the startup light show, satisfied that all was in good order, I warmed up the amplifier with an hour-long Roon stream while reading through some old reviews online. (Gryphon breaks in the amp at the factory before packing and shipping, but an hour's warmup is always a good idea, especially for a solid state amplifier.)

As I waited, I thought about some other amplifiers I've owned and reviewed and read some earlier reviews online: The relatively affordable Rotel Michi M8, which produced gobs of listening pleasure and musical delight, came to mind, as did the large and powerful Musical Fidelity kW750, which, in retrospect, was a little bright and rough around the transient edges despite its effortless power output, but then that was 17 years ago. I described the kW750 as "a big, heavy brute weighing 75 pounds"—hahaha—"and that doesn't include the 47-pound outboard power supply."

For my first critical listening session, I chose the double-45rpm 2009 Analogue Productions reissue of Nat "King" Cole's *Love is the Thing* (APP 824-45). The mastering annotation looked familiar; halfway through reading, I realized I had written it! The stereo recording from December 1956 is a string-drenched classic with a wide soundstage, but the violins have always had a slight, shrill edge. Nat, singing close to the microphone, has a rich, mellow sound, but the voice, too, is slightly edgy on top. Despite those minor flaws, this is a great demo disc.

The Apex Stereo's ease of presentation was immediately obvious: It was tossing off Nat and his orchestra with an almost offhand casualness, almost daring me to not pay attention. But it did the opposite—it fully engaged me. And I found myself drawn in deeper still by a newfound intimacy in Nat's voice. The amp exuded supreme self-confidence. It was like being in the presence of a charismatic person.

An undefinable, unmeasurable quality of the Apex asserted itself every day, in every listening session, imparting a sense of listening comfort. Over time, I concluded that this is due to the amp's



**It is nearly 3' deep, intimidating in its monolithic black oneness. It commands attention with a black hole pull.**

overall, top-to-bottom speaker grip. This is more about timing than timbral or spatial presentation (although the Apex performs equally well in those areas, too). Everything in familiar music appeared better organized, timed, and settled, without restricting the musical flow. I've reviewed other solid state amps with a similar ability to grip and control speakers, but this was always at the cost of musical flow and transient subtlety; the result was also a degree of cardboard-cutout imaging, unnatural transient attack, and hyper edge definition. The Apex takes grip and musical flow to a higher level, particularly in the upper bass through the lower midrange, without such compromises.

I've always loved this Nat record, but it always showed its seams during string swells and certain vocal passages. The picture the Apex painted was seamless, complete, and supple. The acoustical envelope and generous sustain around the lower strings, cushioning Cole's voice, produced supple, textural richness that didn't mask transient definition and detail. My skepticism about achieving this with a stack of transistors went out the window.

Next was Ravel's *Rapsodie Espagnole* from the box set *Ravel: Complete Orchestral Works* (LP, Electric Recording Company ERC 061/UK Columbia SAX 2477) with André Cluytens conducting the Paris Conservatoire Orchestra, first released in 1963. Although notably transparent, this recording sounded somewhat bright and

distant. The Apex presentation was wide and stable, the soundstage well back from the speakers, not adding warmth to the cool, bright, transient-rich sound.

Side 2 of this record concludes with Ravel's famous *La valse*, which goes from melodic, delicate, soaring strings to cacophonous, off-kilter explosiveness. It's filled with complex percussive transients, brass, woodwinds, rumbling timpani, and delicate harp glissandi—a treacherous environment for a grainy or etchy amplifier, equally so for one that blunts or softens transients. The Apex delivered this piece better than I've ever heard it, with a lifelike sense of depth. Harp glissandi were precise, rich, and not too sharply drawn. Brass and woodwinds had body and definition and were imaged precisely to mirror the physical stage. The timpani at the back of the stage were well-defined rhythmically and spot-on timbrally. Their occasional exclamatory smack demonstrated the amp's ability to oblige abrupt sonic demands with alacrity and authority. But beyond that, the presentation proved that the Apex can sizzle cleanly and quickly when called upon and deliver even complex musical strands without the etch and grain that often accompany highly responsive solid state amps. Fast, precise attack; generous, lingering sustain; clean, smooth decay—these, for me, are the hallmarks of a great amplifier, and the Gryphon excelled at all three.

Moving on to streaming, Neil Young's *Royce Hall 1971*, from his Bootleg Series (192/24 FLAC, Reprise/Qobuz), demonstrated the amp's transient precision, speed, transparency, and that special lower-midrange grip. Young's voice and guitar hovered palpably between the speakers, the hall acoustic trailing subtly behind, adding warmth and a strong sense of dimensionality.

Next, I played Daft Punk's "Get Lucky," from their album *Random Access Memories* (24/44.1 MQA, Columbia/Tidal). The Apex Stereo's attack speed, taut midbass, and clean transients were demonstrated amply. The vinyl version of this album (Columbia 88883716861) produced a far greater sense of three-dimensionality, no less midbass, and uncanny imaging; you could all but see the singers. Cranking it way up on "Beyond" bathed the room in Daft Punk 3D luxury. You can crank up this amp, and it won't let you down—not timbrally, rhythmically, nor spatially. It just gets bigger and louder and never becomes hard or loses hold of the speakers.

The Apex Stereo's grip on the speakers produced an unexpected, welcome effect: Because I sit quite close to the tall XVXes, sometimes, depending upon the recording, the soundstage appears higher than it should be, floating in space. The Apex, possibly because of its stellar performance in the midbass to bottom-end range, consistently presented a floor-based soundstage at the proper height. Listening to Charles Lloyd's delightful live recording *Trios: Chapel*, with Bill Frisell and Thomas Morgan (Blue Note promo FLAC; the vinyl's not due until the end of June), eyes closed, the soundstage appeared to extend from just above the woofer enclosures to a height that reflected the acoustic space of the recording, the Coates Chapel in San Antonio, Texas. And although the spatial presentation was high and deep, the musicians remained grounded and were imaged solidly and believably.

### A synergistic combination

It made complete sense to audition the Gryphon Apex Stereo amp with the recently reviewed Apex Commander preamp. The importer agreed to bring the preamp over, which was not an easy undertaking, as it consists of two bulky, heavy chassis.

Once here, the Apex-Commander team seemed to work synergistically and took my listening experience with the Apex Stereo—one of the best home auditions I've ever had—to a higher level still. (I've noticed similar synergy with the darTZeel amp-preamp combo.)

Back in 1997, King Records, in Japan, hired Record Technol-

## ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

**Analog sources** OMA K3, Acoustic Signature Montana NEO and J. Sikora Reference turntables, Schröder K3, Acoustic Signature TA-7000, acoustical systems Axiom, and J. Sikora KV12 tonearms; Lyra Atlas  $\lambda$  Lambda SL and Etna  $\lambda$  Lambda SL, Ortofon Diamond and Verismo, X-quisite ST, and Luxman LMC-5 cartridges.

**Digital sources** dCS Vivaldi One SACD player DAC; Lynx Hilo A/D-D/A converter; Mac mini (Room), Audirvana Digital Audio Player; Vinyl Studio software.

**Preamplification** darTZeel NHB-18S, Gryphon Commander, Ypsilon MC-10L, MC-16L, and MC-26L step-up transformers; Ypsilon VPS-100, CH Precision P1 with X1 PSU.

**Power amplifiers** darTZeel NHB-468 monoblocks, Music Reference RM-200 Mk2.

**Cables** Interconnect: TARA Labs Zero Gold, Zero Evolution, Zero, and Air Evolution, AudioQuest Dragon, Analysis Plus Silver Apex, Stealth Sakra & Indra, Speaker: AudioQuest Dragon, TARA Labs Omega EvolutionSP. AC: AudioQuest Dragon, Dynamic Design Neutron GS Digital power cord.

**Accessories** AudioQuest Niagara 7000, CAD Ground Controls; AudioQuest NRG Edison AC wall box & receptacles; RSX Industries Power8 box; ASC Tube Traps, RPG BAD, Skyline & Abffusor panels, Stillpoints Aperture II Room panels, Synergistic Research UEF products, Symposium Ultra platform; HRS XVR turntable stand, Signature SXR and 2 Stillpoints ESS stands, Thixar and Stillpoints amplifier stands; Audiodharma Cable Cooker; Furutech record demagnetizer; Orb Disc Flatteners, Furutech deStat; Loricraft PRC4 Deluxe, Audiodesksysteme Vinyl Cleaner Pro X, Kirmuss Audio KA-RC-1, and KLAUDIO KD-CLN-LP200T record-cleaning machines. Full suite of WallyTools including WallyTractor, WallySkater, WallyReference, WallyFulcrum, WallyZenith, WallyScope, and WallyAzimuth.—Michael Fremer

ogy Inc. (RTI) of Camarillo, California, to press a series of Decca/London reissues. Mastering overseer Robert Pincus (Cisco, Impex) sent me a stack of white-jacket test pressings, including Vladimir Ashkenazy's *Liszt Recital* (King KIJC-9206). That record through this system (X-quisite ST cartridge, the AXIOM tonearm reviewed elsewhere in this issue, X-quisite step-up transformer, and Stealth Helios DIN/RCA cable), with this Gryphon amplification, produced the most realistic piano sound I've ever heard in my room, in every known sound-reproduction parameter and probably a few that are not yet known. (The Lyra Atlas  $\lambda$  Lambda SL/Schröder arm/OMA K3 combo was slightly less percussive and somewhat darker but also riveting.) The combo also produced the most believable Rolling Stones performance yet on the supposedly murky and impenetrable *Exile on Main Street* (Artisan Sound original Rolling Stones Records 722507). A 50-year-old record played for 50 years delivered a huge shot of adrenalin—and not because the amplifier was about to catch fire!

I don't think I've ever used the old audiophile acronym PRaT (pace, rhythm, and timing), so I'll use it now, in my final *Stereophile* review: The Apex Stereo amp has PRaT, but the Apex-Commander combo has it in spades. The Apex Stereo amp, alone and combined with the Commander preamp, seems to up the pace of everything, as if your turntable is running fast, while simultaneously digging further down into each musical instant, making each gesture live longer, with precise attack, generous sustain, and long decay. The amp simultaneously speeds things up and slows things down. A neat trick. That's the long and the short of it. ■