

# HIFI NEWS

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## RECORD & REVIEW



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MARK LEVINSON  
No 31

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AUDIOPHILE AMP

**LP12 UPGRADE**  
THE LINN CIRKUS

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MISSION, MONITOR AUDIO

**BACK TO BASICS**  
CD MECHANICS



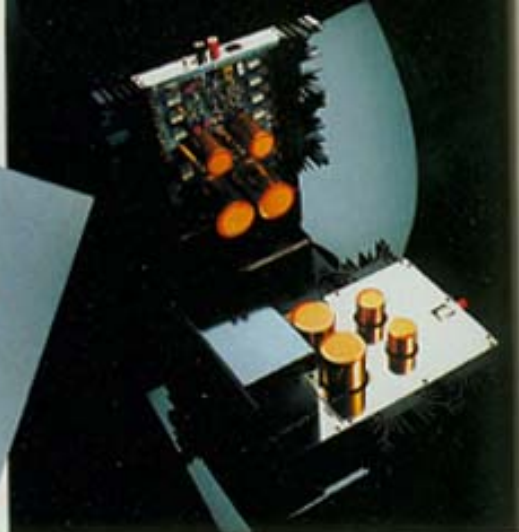
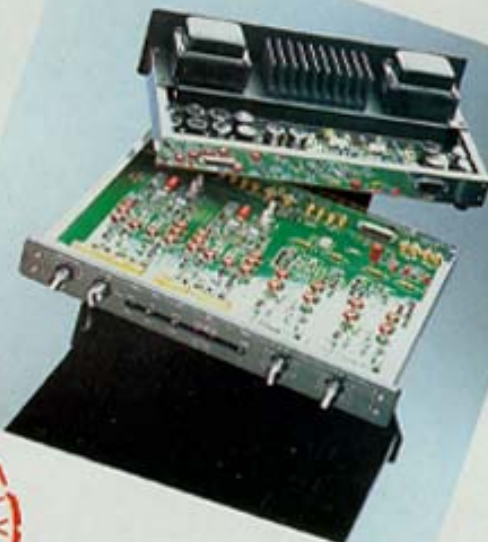
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Right, Opulence  
pre-amp; far right,  
Soliloquy power amp



Metaxas offers something  
different – but is its conduct  
unbecoming?

by KEN KESSLER

# METAXAS: DISTILLED DOWNUNDER...

**Like the earlier Metaxas system I tried, this pairing is so fussy I had to remind myself of how much masochism meant to hi-fi enthusiasts before remote control became politically acceptable**

**W**hat's the biggest challenge facing today's hi-fi manufacturers? I'd say it has to be 'Fighting boredom'. I popped into my local hi-fi emporium recently and left it underwhelmed by the much-of-a-muchness of over 200 'audio' components, all of which were 430mm wide and black and, well, boring. It positively frightened me. And that's just the mass-market druck. High end? It's more a case of sheer overkill. As in: there are far too many brands out there chasing far too few customers. The blessed, welcomed Recession we're still enjoying – as wonderfully Darwinian an event as one can name – has failed to achieve the one good thing which always comes out of recessions. It has failed to weed out the manufacturers, cull the herd. There are still far too many 'high-end' brands out there, by a factor of three at least.

And so on to Metaxas Audio Systems, a part of the herd fighting gamely with a welcomed dose of iconoclasm, and now with pukka UK distribution.

As far as I can tell, Metaxas faces the same challenges that all high-end brands outside of the Big Five (Krell, Mark Levinson, Jadis, Audio Research, Jeff Rowland) have to face.

Semi-obscurity and 'smallness' are either curses or virtues, depending on who's doing the talking and who's doing the buying. What Metaxas has going for it is styling just freaky enough to polarise married couples, and operational behaviour which suggests that Kostas Metaxas has used Ferrari rather than Mercedes as his standard of excellence.

In other words, switching on a Metaxas amp is an adventure. It's almost as if the original TVA-1 has come back to haunt us.\*

The ludicrously named Opulence pre-amp and Soliloquy power amp are the top of the range in yet another over-crowded catalogue. Price-wise, they're hardly exorbitant by today's measures: the pre-amp sells in line-only form for £4600 (£5500 with phono section) and a brace of the 100W Soliloquys costs £5990. If you consider lots of polished surfaces to be luxurious (eg, if you're of German extraction), then the Metaxases are definitely upscale. One thing's for certain: MAS doesn't scrimp on fascia finish or detail, with even the two-box Opulence's outboard power supply looking as much like a stand-alone component as the main pre-amplifier chassis, or 'mainframe' as MAS calls it.

The pre-amp is minimalist but completely usable/practical, demanding no great sacrifices if you run a system with more than one source component. The facilities include four line source inputs with record out facility, full tape monitoring, direct access of the phono section, muting, stepped balance in 1dB stages, volume and stereo/reverse. All of the hardware – the front-panel toggles and rotaries, the socketry at the back – is top quality. The mains-isolated power supply connects to the mainframe with an umbilical cable terminating in a computer-grade connector, and its front panel provides on/off and LED monitoring of mains conditions. The outboard unit is of such overkill design by virtue of the large transformers and heat sink visible to all, that it could be mistaken for a small power amplifier. Which, it turns out, it is: the company describes the power supply as a 'single channel of the Iraklis power amp', operating in Class A.

However much this control unit looks like a proper piece of laboratory equipment, the power amplifier resembles an... I don't know what. All I could think of was that gag about a camel being a horse (or elephant) designed by a committee.

\*Actually, it has...  
sort of. See HFN/RR  
June 1993, p 42



A verbal description suggests something whole and right and complete and conventional, in that it consists of a chassis, a front panel, the necessary switches and sockets and lots of heat sinks. But, as with the smaller Solitaire [HFN/RR, May '92], it's just daft. The front panel serves no purpose whatsoever, aside from holding the name plate, because the on/off switch and 'on' indicator are mounted on the front of the chassis; when the fascia is fitted, the rocker switch/indicator peeps through a cut-out. So you can dispense with the front panel altogether.

A proper case protects innards from the elements and keeps fingers and falling objects away from the electronics. This amp is a throwback to the Colin Clive School of Hardware Design. Behind the free-standing fascia is a lump of a transformer in a black can, four copper-coloured, phallic capacitors, and lots of shiny steel. The chassis is edged in sharp, ankle-scratching heat sinks. And I was mightily disheartened to find that, when I moved the Soliloquy with one mitt on the transformer case that it came away in my hand.

The company describes the Soliloquy as the world's only fully regulated solid-state amp which doesn't employ any capacitors in the regulator circuits or bypassing the regulator outputs. Each Soliloquy consists of five complete amplification circuits on a single PCB, designed to produce absolutely stable voltage and current irrespective of the mains conditions. To this end, the unit features a 2kW grain-oriented steel, bifilar-wound transformer that's electrostatic and Faraday shielded. Those highly visible caps supply the energy storage to the output stage and filter the input voltage gain stage. The caps are bolted directly to the PCB. This layout, however much I take the mickey out of it, has been designed for ultra-short signal paths; I just don't share the company's faith in the public's handling of 'naked' electronics, however safe the units may be. Remember: this country can boast consumers who plug electric irons into the auxiliary mains outlets on the back of integrated amplifiers, and put electric frying pans onto gas burners.

Like the earlier Metaxas system I tried, this pairing is so fussy, so temperamental, I had to remind myself of how much masochism meant to hi-fi enthusiasts before remote control became politically acceptable and took the torture out of audio. There's no weird switch-on procedure and you needn't don an apron or roll-up a trouser leg prior to use, but actual set-up is a nightmare. Shielded or not, the Metaxas units are highly susceptible to calibre and

type of cable, where you site the components, how far apart you position each unit from the other, what kind of supports you use, ad nauseum. I know this used to be par for the course, but I've since been spoiled by components which minimise the need for large-scale tweaking. Indeed, MAS should talk to Mana Acoustics [see 'Headroom', August] because that company's amplifier tables eliminated much of the grief of installation.

I settled on NBS for pre-to-power connections, XLO speaker wire and Mandrake between the Krell MD-20/Studio CD system and the pre-amp. Also tried were players from Primare and Marantz, as well as the G36 Revox tweaked by Tim de Paravicini. So neutral, though, is the Metaxas set-up that I could have used just about any sources I liked once the interconnecting cables were sorted. All I'd be hearing were the individual characteristics of the source components. The trick was finding the right speakers for the 100W Soliloquy, and not because of power mismatches.

#### ALMOST ENOUGH GRUNT...

My notes suggest: too lean with the WATTs on their own, just about right with WATTs/Puppies. Almost enough sheer grunt for the Apogee Stages, Sonus Faber Extremas. The little Linacums sounded so sweet and transparent driven by the Soliloquys, but what about about the MAS system's lower registers?

So where did I turn? To the not much larger, not-all-that-sensitive Sonus Faber Minima Amators and, sigh, LS3/5As. Oh, and lots of not-too-raucous listening through the WATTs/Puppies, which needed just a bit more slam than the Soliloquys could provide. If I didn't know better, I'd swear these monoblocks have less urge than the smaller, stereo Solitaire, which took on everything I threw at it. I remember it fondly as a Terminator of an amp.

Credit where it's due, though: this MAS set-up behaves with far greater decorum than the Solitaire/Marquis, and for a number of reasons. I would assume that much of the extra control and greater composure is down to the more substantial power supplies. And trivial though this may seem, the more robust construction of the power supply chassis of the Opulence may be contributing as well, for I had less trouble positioning it than I did the ringing, rattling tin can of a container used for the Marquis. The 'mainframe' proved far more troublesome to locate.

However neutral and 'naked' the sound, the MAS doesn't come off as 'transitory' or clinical. It's almost an about-face after the earlier system,

which was hyper-detailed as well as fierce, overpowering, almost barbaric. The dearer combination swaps some of the muscle for finesse, a welcomed change of approach in a year which has seen some of the greatest advances in CD transport and DAC performance, and mainly in the areas of the greatest subtlety. This MAS system's sound, and I admit that I expected it to border on the anarchic because of previous experience, had a feather-light touch and a way with tiny details that suggested either a pedigreed 60W or 70W/ch tube amp of recent vintage, or a small, stereo Krell.

And yet you can hammer the Soliloquys, though less successfully than you could the brutish smaller brother. Even in my medium-sized room, you can get them to clip through the Wilsons - impossible with the Solitaire - and the Soliloquys run out of steam well before the Extremas scream 'Ouch!'. The area where the MAS amps are most seriously challenged is in the lowest octaves, with the treble remaining crisp, clear and fast long after the bass has started to crumble.

Which leads me to a cop-out. Because the speakers designed by MAS for use with the company's electronics tend to be high-sensitivity designs - the Ulyssis (sic) has 96dB/1W/1m sensitivity - I'm downplaying the performance limitations with the hungry, 82dB/1w stuff. Why? Because I firmly believe the 'horses for courses' rule which, for instance, suggests that a given CD transport will favour a DAC from the same manufacturer. Which leads me to using this costly system with the sub-£500 LS3/5As. It was a magical experience only slightly less thrilling than that of the Audio Research package reviewed in this issue. The speakers proved so undemanding that the Opulence/Soliloquy set-up sang without any pressure. The bass anomalies were filtered. The speakers themselves snapped and crapped out well before the amplifiers.

Is this, though, conduct becoming of a ten grand package? I suppose not if you're of the camp which argues, quite justifiably, that any pre-/power combination costing as much as a loaded Peugeot 205 should have just as much horsepower. Me? I only wish I'd had a chance to try the MAS gear with the Klipsch Heresies.

So MAS has succeeded by being different, almost eccentric, definitely not a 'me, too' product. What you have, then, is a thoroughbred combination ideal for a listener who cherishes luxu-details, exclusivity and finesse, and cares less about absolute power. Which, as we all know, corrupts absolutely. †

**Each Soliloquy consists of five complete amplification circuits on a single PCB, designed to produce absolutely stable voltage and current irrespective of the mains conditions. To this end, the unit features a 2kW grain-oriented steel, bifilar-wound transformer that's electrostatic and Faraday shielded**

**Supplier:**  
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## STATEMENTS

**M**etaxas Audio Systems (MAS) is a high-reputation company based in Melbourne. Its range of speakers is designed to bring the music, all kinds of music, and respond all over the world. It's clear that the company's 15,000 speakers (including the MAS 1000) are available in many parts of the world. This speaker package is available in many parts of the world. This speaker package is available in many parts of the world.

# Metaxas Audio Systems Opulence and Soliloquy

Alan Strom flexes muscles as well as ears while coming to terms with a seriously bitchy pre and power amp from Australia.

What with all of us writing off the word "bitch" as a derogatory term, it's hard to see how it could be applied to a speaker. But the MAS 1000 is a speaker that's been designed to be a bitch. It's a speaker that's been designed to be a bitch. It's a speaker that's been designed to be a bitch.

Both amps are big, ugly and beautifully finished. The latter is a speaker that's been designed to be a bitch. It's a speaker that's been designed to be a bitch. It's a speaker that's been designed to be a bitch.

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**If any component is not in the top league, the amps will betray the culprit with surprising honesty.**

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