



MIRACLE IN MONTREAL

As the 2016 edition of the Montreal Salon approached, we sensed trouble. The past two editions of the Salon had been mishandled by its new British owners, the Chester Group. One thing these people were good at was nickel nursing. We had heard from a number of exhibitors that, frustrated with the terrible organization, they would never *ever* be back. Sarah Tremblay (that's her at right) had been co-owner of the Salon along with Michel Plante (at left). She was kept on under the new ownership, but she announced partway through the Salon that she was quitting. A lot of tears were shed, and they weren't all hers.

Bad as it was, it got worse.

March 2016 was to be the 30th anniversary of the Montreal show. Rumor had it that a lot of long-time exhibitors had decided to sit it out. Indeed, the Chester Group site was short on details, and it didn't even have a list of exhibitors. This might turn out to be the final show, ending the long Montreal tradition. And then...

The axe fell. Just 10 days before the Salon was to open, the Chester Group announced it would be "on hiatus." Until when? Until the 12th of never? Translation: after three decades, the show was cancelled. Dead.

But not so fast. Michel Plante was now working for Plurison, a major audio distributor. He and his boss, Daniel Jacques, were on a business sojourn in Germany when they heard the devastating news. They made a decision. Even if Plurison turned out to be the only exhibitor, the show must...and *would* go on.

That meant making a lot of phone calls. Sarah, back in Montreal, was available. Previous exhibitors were fond of both her and Michel, and many announced that, yes, if the Chester Group was out of the picture, they would return. A non-profit organization was quickly registered. The rooms at the Bonaventure Hotel were already booked. Because the hotel was under renovation, the cost was more than reasonable. Volunteers were brought in.

In the meantime, the Salon's Web site still bore the lugubrious news that the show was dead. Over at Concordia University, a student group set up a new site, and then hacked the Chester site so that visitors were redirected to it. Everything was coming together.



The sign above was the only one that didn't just come from a laser printer. The show guide was just a double-sided sheet. No one complained.

No tickets were needed, since admission was free. However, some exhibitors were persuaded to donate prizes for a draw, and of course visitors could buy as many tickets as they wanted.



A common way for show organizers to save money is to hold it in a venue far



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from the city centre. The Audio Fest (the Salon's new name) remained, and will remain, at the Hotel Bonaventure. It's right downtown, atop a Métro station, with a spectacular setting that includes a four-season outdoor pool and a waterfall catering to resident ducks (above).

For several years, the show had been awarding a statuette to pioneers of the audio industry. That award had been a victim of cost-cutting in 2015, but Michel and Sarah quickly resurrected the tradition.

Not all of the music at the Audio Fest came from loudspeakers.



Yes, that's cellist Vincent Bélanger playing in the Audio Note room. Audio Note was so impressed with him that they offered him a recording contract. His new album, *Pure Cello*, will be launched at the Audio Fest in March. Also performing at the Audio Fest was singer/songwriter Anne Bisson. She and Vincent have a superb joint album, *Conversations*.

Our colleague Albert Simon, as usual, invited a friend to tour with him, to see what he thought. His account starts on the next page.



The winner this time was John Banks, who had long worked for Audio Centre.



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TOURING THE MIRACLE

How would a computer engineer, a guitarist and a lecturer on music, Baroque art and new technologies react to the Montreal Audio Fest? My friend Karim, whom I invited to the 2016 event, is all three.

I told him it would be up to him to decide which room he would enter, and in which he would choose to sit and listen. I also asked him to simply share his impressions, if he wished, as we walked along the hallways. “This isn’t going to be about the equipment,” I said, “just impressions and comments about what you hear.”

Karim was selective during our short tour, not too talkative when he didn’t appreciate something, but passing by some rooms I would have chosen.

In the Codell Audio room, Karim listened intently to *Sabara Rain*, on Antonio Forcione’s *Tears of Joy* LP. The Linn system delivered impeccable reproduction of this evocative piece, I thought. I admired the blend of rapid percussion and Forcione’s acoustic guitar, supported by the subtle bass line. Karim was thoughtful on the way out. “The lows were well separated,” he said. “It’s the first time I’ve heard them like

that. I could even hear each instrument’s lower range. The only time I’ve heard it so clearly is in live concerts.”

In the Summit Hi-Fi room, tiny Elac B6 speakers filled the room with Musorgsky’s *Night on Bald Mountain*, played on the ERC-3 CD player. The rest of the Emotiva line featured the XSP-1 preamp and XPA-1 monoblocks. It was a powerful combination for Reference Recordings’ famous *Mephisto & Co*, a sampler often heard at hi-fi venues. The orchestra lift-off on this track followed us out into the hallway. “Very impressive for such small speakers,” Karim said, “but I felt they were hitting their limits.”

All of a sudden he stopped walking, listened and broke into a wide smile. “Flamenco!” he said and headed for the Coup de Foudre room. The room was small and narrow. We sat in front of a Triode Lab integrated amp connected to a pair of Vivace Mini speakers. The volume was...well, *loud*, as in first-row-stomp-those-heels-head-on-the-boards loud.

Some audiophiles, we were told, can even tell the type of wood the boards are made from. Really? They checked? (I can

by Albert Simon

just imagine them. “I think it’s pine.” “Pine? Of course not, it’s hardwood, hickory for sure.” And then they would have rushed out and called the recording label and checked.)

Karim remained quiet as we went left, standing silently in the hallway for a while. I could see he was disappointed.

“What?” I asked.

“I couldn’t hear the guitar,” he said. “That’s what I was looking for. All I heard was the clacking of heels and the harrowing voice, blotting out the guitar.” I nodded, not wanting to explain that some recordings are aimed at the easily impressed among us, those who trade music for sound.

In the Audio Pathways room, Karim mellowed and relaxed as we listened to Gene Ammons’ *Nice an’ Cool* LP, recorded in 1961 and recently reissued in 45 rpm. Beautifully played on an air-bearing Bergmann turntable, Ammons’ saxophone came to us through a pair of Raidho D-1 speakers (yes, I know, I love them too). Karim was looking for the right words. “Such finesse,” he said, “so subtle, so beautiful...and the sax was... so sweet.”

In the second Audio Pathways room, featuring another Raidho pair, we were introduced to the amazing quality of MQA files, studio-quality sound in files small enough to easily stream and download. I thought we would be speechless as we stepped out of the room, but we couldn’t stop raving. “I could hear the sound that came *after* the drums,” Karim said. “You know what I mean, the sound that lingers and blends with that of the hall. I really thought I was at a concert.”

The Oscar Peterson Trio was playing in the next room on a VPI (upgradable) turntable, with Moon amplifiers and Joseph Audio Pulsar speakers. The room was crowded, everyone was quiet, the bowed double bass moaned gently, the lightly touched piano seemed to nod in approval, and we just sat, listening and smiling. “That was so refined,” Karim said later, “no bells and whistles, just raw beauty. That system was assembled not to dazzle us but for only one purpose: sound quality.”

I wanted to add that, yes, isn’t that what anyone here would be aiming for? But I knew what Karim meant. He could



the best systems, I could see them just as clearly.”

No sooner had he spoken than we found ourselves in the Audio Note room, in front of cellist Vincent Bélanger. “One has to be crazy or very confident to do this kind of demo,” David Cope said in his preamble, speaking to



“But the reproduced sound, originally produced by the same instrument, has vibrated in front of a microphone,” I said. “It was then recorded and saved, and is now delivered to us after having gone through a whole system. So even if that system is as remarkable as this one, the sound we hear cannot match the feeling of the sound that we experience with a live instrument.”

I realized afterwards what a good system can achieve if we also do our part: it does not seek to impress and blow us away, but it turns to us kindly and shushes our thoughts, inviting us to stop analyzing and comparing, to unwind, to feel the joy of actually listening, not to the system but to the music — but it does all that *only if we let it*. And if we let ourselves be touched. And that, for some of us obsessive audiophiles forever seeking elusive perfection, is the hard part. *Our* part, *our* contribution.

It’s something we might all want to work on.

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More and more of the readers of *UHF Magazine* are choosing to read it on a computer or — better yet — on a tablet, such as an iPad. There are several advantages. You get it faster. It costs less, just \$4 (Canadian) no matter where you live (sales taxes apply within Canada only). And the photographs glow as no printed picture ever could.

The next edition of the Montreal Audio Fest runs March 24 to 26 at the Bonaventure Hotel, right in downtown Montreal. Admission is free, so you can feel free to invite your audio-curious friends.



see past impressive-looking audio gear and had no knowledge of price, concentrating only on the music.

(Try it. Next time you want to listen to a system, don’t. Don’t listen to the system, listen to the *music*.)

“That’s why I like live performances so much,” he said later. “I always try to sit in the front rows, close to the musicians. I want to see them. And here, in

the audience in the small packed room. The system included a pair of black AZ Two D speakers positioned near the side walls, the P2SE Signature tube amplifier, the DAC 0.1x and the top-loading CD Three/II transport. Vincent sat in the middle and, cradling his cello, told us we were going to hear a trio with him playing all three parts. He had recorded the other two cello parts, which would be streaming out of each speaker, while he would play live between them.

It began with the serenely beautiful *Grave* from Handel’s *Concerto Grosso in D Minor*, followed by the *Fugue* from the same work. During the first minute, as expected, I concentrated on comparing the live and recorded cello sound, straining to mentally list the differences, but that didn’t last. I let go, my brain relaxed, and I found myself blending the sounds instead of separating them, flowing with the music.

We were then treated to an arrangement for three cellos of two Piovani pieces from his score for *La Vita è Bella*, followed by a *Largo* by Vivaldi. We left reluctantly, still under the spell.

Karim, however, was discovering the limitations of reproduced music. “Even if we heard an excellent system,” he said, “it just couldn’t recreate what we actually feel in the presence of a cello.”

I agreed. “The instrument is vibrating in front of us,” I said, “creating the sound that we hear and that we feel, because it vibrates in the same air that we share in the moment.”

“Yes, the strings are vibrating right here, in front of us.”

Top: An Oracle Element turntable, about \$3,000 with arm and cartridge.

Left: Gershman Acoustics’ new Inspiration speaker, \$5,900.

