

The Cutting Edge

Music-Minded Controllers, Part I: The Middleweights

The first part of a survey intended to find musically oriented multichannel controllers.

Alan Taffel

Analog lovers, prepare: A digital controller is very likely in your future. As you make the jump from stereo to multichannel, or from music to home theater, owning one of these multifunctional devices will be all but unavoidable.

What's that? You intend to maintain a purely analog core in your system, even as it undergoes these transitions? Friend, I hear you. And I share your vision. But just how will you accomplish it? Multichannel analog linestages would serve, but there are few on the market. Furthermore, that approach presupposes the existence of a source—a DVD, universal, or some future HD player—as adept at format-decoding as controllers are. Regrettably, even great players can't match the sheer processing-power and flexibility a good controller applies to this task. So those who opt for a multichannel analog nerve-center, yet shrink from compromising their digital sources, face the prospect of buying and cobbling together a multichannel linestage *and* a controller.

An alternative approach is to drive the front channels with a stereo preamp, with a supplemental controller handling digital-decoding, bass-management, and back-channel chores. That way, stereo analog signals never confront the digital demon. But the controller's front-channel



material must pass through both its own linestage and the stereo preamp, which can't be good. And there is still the complexity of coordinating two control points, plus the requirement (again) of purchasing a controller.

Since there is bound to be a controller on the scene in any case, the most elegant approach is to find one that's as fluent with music—be it stereo or multichannel, analog or digital—as it is with films. Such a “music-minded” controller would combine, in one operationally- and functionally-integrated package, the breed's innate digital capabilities with analog performance comparable to standalone analog preamp. Indeed, given such a controller, the need for a costly separate analog linestage would evaporate.

Does such a device exist? After all, controllers have heretofore been pointedly focused on film formats like Dolby Digital, DTS, and their seemingly endless variations. As a result, few of the analog linestages that reside within them

have benefited from the engineering skills regularly lavished upon standalone analog gear.

Thankfully, signs indicate the situation is changing. Our home-theater publication, *The Perfect Vision*, recently reviewed a smattering of controllers with surprisingly satisfying analog-domain performance. This trend is exemplified by the \$2999 Rotel RSP-1098, praised by Neil Gader in Issue 51. Companies with proven preamps have begun transplanting them into their controllers. For instance, the \$5500 McIntosh MX-119 incorporates a clone of the firm's well-regarded C46 preamp. Manufacturers whose reputations rest solely on analog achievements are also wading into the world of controllers. As an example, Halcro is shipping its \$9990 SSP100. Theta Digital, a premier controller designer, has pioneered a unique approach whereby its universally hailed Casablanca III (approximately \$17,500, depending upon configura-

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tion) can be complemented by the \$2000 Six Shooter, a standalone yet operationally-integrated pure-analog multichannel linestage.

In order to assess just how music-minded controllers have become, I gathered the aforementioned units, placed them in analog-bypass mode (to circumvent the digital conversions and DSP manipulations anathema to analog lovers), and fed them high-quality LP, CD, and DVD-Audio material over the course of several months. Since they occupy vastly different price points, I compared them not to each other but to two excellent stereo preamps, the \$4500 Aesthetix Calypso (see "Follow Up" sidebar) and \$25,000 Goldmund Mimesis. Did I

expect to find controllers every bit the equal of their standalone analog counterparts? I did not. But I was sure hoping to.

Rotel RSP-1098

I nearly wrote off the RSP-1098—until I listened to its multichannel input. Naturally, I began by playing material through the stereo analog inputs. But those sound clamped-down in both frequency extension and dynamics. Regarding the latter, while the stereo inputs convey dynamic swings with gusto, subtler gestures are all but smothered. In addition, vocals and many instruments—especially violins—have a hard, grainy edge. The whole affair offers nei-

ther the involvement nor the relaxed quality of good analog.

However, the stereo inputs also do a lot right. This controller is wicked fast, so it easily captures transient details like the intricate guitar plucks on "The First Day of My Life" from Bright Eyes' wonderful *I'm Wide Awake, It's Morning* CD [Saddle Creek]. Imaging is another strength. The 1098 creates a broad and deep space for musicians, giving each instrument room to breath. And the Rotel maintains a consistency of tone and top-to-bottom balance that are consonant with music.

Performance of these inputs improves in direct ratio to the volume control's numeric setting. When set high, either to

play music loudly or compensate for a low-output source such as a moving-coil cartridge, the sound blossoms. Highs become more extended, providing a much-appreciated breath of air. Dynamics turn noticeably more vibrant. Moreover, at these settings, the 1098 displays a panoply of orchestral colors, as evidenced on "Jupiter" from the Super Analogue Disc LP reissue of Holst's *The Planets*.

But it is the Rotel's multichannel input that makes the strongest case for playing music through this controller. Whereas the stereo inputs must run through a switching IC in order to give users the option of engaging digital processing, the multichannel input is always pure analog; it has the most direct signal path in the box. Minus the burden of any switching or processing circuitry, all that it needs to function is a gain stage and a volume control. The sonic benefit is not small.

With its multichannel input in action, the 1098 takes on an infectiously boisterous personality. Dynamics no longer flop but pop. While still vaguely present, edginess is considerably ameliorated. And pace is irrepressible. Meanwhile, all the best-case strengths of the stereo inputs are preserved and amplified.

Of course there are still drawbacks, as one would expect at this price point. Instruments are not as harmonically fleshed out as in real life, or as wrought by the Aesthetix. Dynamics are somewhat crude and could be more nuanced. Resolution and transient detail, while quite good, fall short of the reference gear. For example, the Rotel cannot quite capture the room reflections in the aforementioned Bright Eyes track. Finally, while nicely weighted, bass

is rather indistinct. On the DVD-A of Ray Brown's *Soular Energy* [Hi-Res], the Rotel replaces with a more generic version the strikingly variegated instrument summoned by the analog preamps.

Nonetheless, these are all relatively minor sins of omission, which are vastly preferable to those of commission. The biggest problem with the 1098's multichannel input is that there is only one, for ultimately this controller is capable of sound that is as good as or better than you're likely to find in analog gear at anywhere near its price.

McIntosh MX-119

Deep inside the MX-119's sleek exterior lays a great preamplifier struggling to get out. You can hear it in the Mac's wide-ranging and highly refined dynamics. Listen, for instance, to "Bydlo" from the Classic LP reissue of RCA's *Pictures at an Exhibition*. If properly produced, the crescendo in this movement should be downright scary. When I heard it through the MX-119, my neck hairs stood up. Yet this controller can be delicate, too. It easily conjures the small but critical vocal inflections that lend poignancy to Bright Eyes' music. These dynamic capabilities extend down deep, where Ray Brown's acoustic bass retains its ability to surprise with short, accented bursts.

The Mac also reveals its inner strength through the colors of an orchestra. As "Jupiter"—which includes everything from ballsy brass to wisps of percussive flourishes—makes clear, this controller's palette is plenty diverse (though still not to the degree of the

Features & Usage Notes

Rotel RSP-1098

Aside from its sound, the star attraction of the 1098 is the TFT display that dominates its front panel. This feature is a godsend for those collecting DVD-As, as it allows a disc's menu to be viewed and navigated without having to fire up an otherwise superfluous video rig. In back, however, the Rotel's rear panel is crowded and poorly labeled.

Bass management is rather crude for digital sources; the crossover points can only be set in insufficient 20Hz-increments. Analog bass management is available (which is good), but only for the multichannel input (which is bad) and only at one crossover point, 100Hz (which is baffling). In most situations, this feature will be useless. (Bass management is available for both digital and analog sources. Only when the 1098 is in "bypass" mode is the bass management not in effect.)

Rotel has a tradition of producing terrific DACs, and the module within the RSP-1098 is no exception. Its sound is clearly not in the same league as a reference-caliber outboard DAC driving multichannel analog inputs. But for those who cannot afford that option, utilizing the 1098's internal DAC in conjunction with a good CD transport or player's coaxial digital output is a highly tenable solution.

McIntosh MX-119

The MX-119 exhibits all the hallmarks that give McIntosh products such cachet: a sexily backlit front panel, beautiful build-quality, and silky, noiseless operation. Less obvious but very much appreciated are its clearly labeled, uncluttered back panel and meticulously written and illustrated manual.

The MX-119 offers two analog bypass modes, either of which is available for any analog input. "2 Channel" is a pure pass-through for stereo sources, whereas "Pure Stereo" enables bass management. In the latter mode, the original signal is routed through an analog crossover at 80Hz; frequencies below that point are directed to the subwoofer while those above it go to the front speakers. This mode entails a tiny audible sacrifice in purity, but for those whose main speakers are not full-range, it's ideal.

Avoid the Phono/Aux input except when actually using the controller's built-in MM phono stage. When switched to Aux, this input noticeably rolls off the highs.


The MX-119's internal DAC produces a pleasant sound, but lacks the resolution and dynamics of good outboard units. With this controller, analog is the best way to come in. **AT**



Aesthetic). Again, this quality extends to the low frequencies, where Brown's bass shows its chameleon nature. Overall, the MX-119's presentation is vibrant yet, like the best analog, emanates smoothness and ease.

So what's the problem? It's that all this goodness must seep through a persistent electronic glaze. Rather than air enveloping the players, there is gel. This glaze should not be confused with a harsh grain, which would preclude the relaxed qualities this controller possesses in spades. Rather, the glaze smoothly but consistently pervades the music, submerging clarity, curtailing depth, restricting highs, and erasing low-level details like note decay and reverberant space. Macs have traditionally exhibited a laid-back, polished sonic quality. But the MX-

119 goes beyond that to approach the plasticity that is the dominion of mid-fi.

Still and all, the inherent qualities of the C46 preamp (thoroughly described by Paul Seydor in Issue 147) within this controller go a long way toward salvaging the listening experience. Despite my sonic objections, the MX-119 delivers in enough musically important areas to consistently draw me in. My hope is that McIntosh will address whatever—insufficient shielding of the analog circuitry from digital and video noise, perhaps—may be creating the glaze, thereby allowing the undeniable qualities within this controller to fully emerge. 

Part II will appear in an upcoming issue of TAS and will assess heavyweight controllers from Halcro and Theta.

Follow-Up: Aethetix Calypso Linestage

I cannot claim as did Robert Harley in his ecstatic rave (Issue 151) that the Aethetix Calypso is the best-sounding linestage ever to grace my system. That honor still belongs to my reference Goldmund Mimesis 20. However—and this is big news, indeed—the Calypso hangs right in there with the Goldmund, at one-fifth the price.

How does the Calypso stack up against one of the world's best linestages? Both pieces exhibit the rich (but not over-ripe), mellifluous sonority and even-handed tonal balance of real music. The Calypso's bass, particularly, holds up its end extremely well, with unusually good definition (both pitch and transient) and a wealth of timbral information. At the other end, highs are rolled off only at the tippy top. Though the Aethetix may lack the Goldmund's sense of unlimited openness, it is more than adequately extended.

Dynamics are one of the Goldmund's surpassing strengths, but here again the Aethetix is no slouch, especially when it comes to nuanced dynamics. The Calypso can't quite match the "jump" or overall scale of the Goldmund, but nonetheless acquits itself very well and only suffers in direct comparison. Likewise, the ultimate resolution and speed that endow the Goldmund with its "you are there" capability are dialed back just a hair on the Calypso. As for musical qualities such as pace, line, and expressivity, the Calypso is triple aces and gives up nothing to the reference.

Rather than reiterating additional Calypso virtues already thoroughly enumerated by RH and with which I completely concur, I will dwell on one attribute that deserves further attention—the Calypso's ability to paint a stunning array of tonal colors. Like a kaleidoscope, it reveals a spectacular field of colors that shift and combine but always remain distinct. Instruments sound so vividly like themselves that they can never be confused with any other.

So impressive is the Calypso in this regard that for a time I suspected it of a hyperbole that would grow tiresome. But a quick check against some references (both the real and electronic variety) confirmed that it is not guilty. When it comes to timbres, the Calypso presents only what is there, but it presents it all.

A few notes on operational matters. Who would have thought that, like solid-state gear, this tubed component must be warmed up (in standby mode) for nearly four to five days before its true sound emerges? Even then, when it is switched from Standby to On, the tubes need 30 minutes to settle in. Also, while the Calypso is anything but tweaky in everyday use, it significantly benefits from the standard arsenal of audiophile tweaks such as isolation cones and a good power cord. With these tips applied, this superb linestage comes into its full glory.

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SPECIFICATIONS

ROTEL RSP-1098

Decoding Formats: Dolby Digital, Dolby Digital EX, DTS, DTS-ES, Dolby Pro Logic II, DTS Neo:6, LPCM, HDCD, MP3
Inputs: Stereo analog (nine), multichannel analog (one), coax digital (five), optical digital (three), composite video (five), S-video (five), component video (four)
Outputs: Stereo analog (five), multichannel analog (one), coax digital (two), optical digital (two), composite video (four), S-video (four), component video (five)
Dimensions: 17.01" x 6.46" x 17.13"
Weight: 34.6 lbs.
Price: \$2999

MCINTOSH MX-119

Decoding Formats: Dolby Digital, Dolby Digital EX, DTS, DTS-ES, Dolby Pro Logic II, DTS Neo:6, LPCM
Inputs: Stereo analog (eight), balanced stereo analog (one), multichannel analog (one), coax digital (three), optical digital (three), composite video (six), S-video (six), component video (three)
Outputs: Stereo analog (three), balanced L/C/R analog (one), multichannel analog (one), coax digital (one), optical digital (one), composite video (three), S-video (three), component video (one)
Dimensions: 17.5" x 7.6" x 18.75"
Weight: 27 lbs.
Price: \$5500

ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

Goldmund Studietto turntable; Graham 2.2 tonearm; Clearaudio Insider Gold cartridge; Goldmund Mimesis 36 CD transport & Mimesis 12++ DAC; Arcam FMJ DV-27A DVD/DVD-A player; Goldmund Mimesis 22 and Aethetix Calypso preamps; Goldmund Mimesis 29.4 power amplifiers; Metaphor 1 & 2 speakers; Thiel SS2 and B&W ASW850 subwoofers; Empirical Design cables and power cords; Goldmund cones; ASC Tube Traps

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