



## AUDIOMAT OPÉRA RÉFÉRENCE

Reviewer: Paul Candy

- Source: Rotel RCD-971 as transport, Audio Zone DAC-1, CEC TL53Z [in for review], Audiomat Tempo 2.5 DAC [on loan], Pro-Ject RPM 5 turntable, Pro-Ject Speed Box, Ortofon Rondo Blue cartridge.
- Preamp/Integrated: Manley Labs Shrimp, Audio Zone AMP-1, Pro-Ject Tube Box phono stage.
- Amp: Manley Labs Mahi monoblocks.
- Speakers: Green Mountain Audio Callisto (on sand filled Skylan stands), Hornshoppe Horns, (2) REL Q108 Mk II subwoofers, AV123 Strata Mini [in for review].
- Cables: Actinote MB 130 & LB 530 [on loan], Acoustic Zen, DH Labs, Silver Fi interconnects, Stereovox XV2 digital.
- Power Cables: Actinote CS 150 & CS 150 Signature [on loan], Audience, GutWire, Harmonic Technology, DH Labs.
- Stands: Grand Prix Audio Monaco four-tier rack.
- Powerline conditioning: BPT Pure Power Center w/Wattgate 381 outlets, Bybee Quantum Purifiers and ERS cloth, GutWire MaxCon, Blue Circle BC86.
- Sundry accessories: Grand Prix Audio Apex footers, Herbie's Way Excellent II Turntable Mat, Herbie's Black Hole CD Mat, Isoclean fuses, Walker Audio SST contact enhancer, Nanotech Intron 8500 CD fluid, Audio Magic/Quantum Physics Noise Disruptors, dedicated AC line with Wattgate 381 outlet, Echo Busters acoustic room treatments.
- Room size: 11' x 18' x 8', long wall setup, hardwood floors with large area rug.





Mutin, e n.m.: A rebel, a person that refuses collectively and openly to subject itself to the orders of the authorities (military, police) to which he is liable.

If this amp were a narcotic, then I'd be in dire need of an intervention. I was hooked within five minutes upon firing it up and I'm convinced that after an hour or two of listening, anyone with even a remote interest in music will also fall under this amp's spell. The Opéra Référence is by far the most musical and involving amplifier I've had in my home to date. The sheer transparency, tonal and textural purity were overwhelming. I was downright depressed upon returning the Opéra. Withdrawal is indeed a bitch. Somebody get me to a Methadone clinic, now.



Even my wife was completely bowled over. Within minutes she said, "It's as if the music is floating on brightly colored silk ribbons". In fact she was so impressed, she penned her own paragraph for inclusion a few days later: "I am enraptured by the serene melodious odyssey upon which the music transcends both the room and equipment; floating on ribbons of silk it envelops and caresses me as I'm carried into a dimension of sublime harmonious musicality never before experienced." My initial reaction was to accuse her of churching it up a bit but she was adamant. That was exactly how she felt. There have only been two products to evoke this sort of emotional response from my wife. One was the GMA Callisto, the other is the Opéra Ref. Incidentally, both are an ideal match.

Based in France, Audiomat was started in 1986 by brothers Denis and Norbert Clarisse. Denis designs the equipment and Norbert manages the company. Their first product was a whopping 110lb 20





Watt OTL amp with 16 6AS7 triodes, two stages, no feedback and pure class A. Several integrated amps and DACs followed which received plenty of positive press and sales particularly in North America. As a result of that success, the brothers Clarisse asked distributor Pascal Ravach of Mutine to set up manufacturing in Canada. In 2002, Mutine became responsible for all Audiomat amplifier production (i.e. phono stages, preamps, power amps and integrated amps) in non-European markets. Besides the Opéra Référence, Audiomat currently offers three other integrated amps, a phono stage and three DACs. Audiomat had released a pre/power combo, the Opus and Duo, but those were discontinued when the Solfège Référence integrated amp launched. Pascal felt that its balance of virtues was similar to the separates - for half the price. However, a new preamplifier and monoblocks which have been under development for 12 years (!) will be available in 2008. Mutine also imports CEC (belt-drive CD players, transports, DACs and amps), Mimetism (amps and CD players), Mosquito (subwoofers), Actinote (cables) and Pluto (turntables). Just recently Mutine became the Canadian distributor for Duevel loudspeakers. They will also be reintroducing the Equation loudspeaker brand with their unique series crossover designs in early 2008.



My first exposure to Audiomat was several years ago via Toronto retailer Rob Doughty of Applause Audio. Over the years, I have heard most of Audiomat's amplifiers at Applause, usually hooked up to JM Reynaud or Equation loudspeakers. While brief listening sessions in a retail environment can be dodgy, I have been consistently impressed. When I started writing, Mutine's Pascal Ravach was one of the first people I contacted. Three years ago I spent a lovely afternoon at Pascal's home chatting



and listening to music. With over thirty years experience in the audio industry in Canada and Europe, Pascal definitely marches to the beat of his own drum and is one of the most uncompromising audio personalities I have met. That is probably why his key dealer network, the Audio Zendos, is limited to a select few like-minded souls.

Initially we discussed reviewing Audiomat's entry level *Arpège Référence* and possibly one of CEC's new belt-drive CD players. However, it wasn't until this past summer that Pascal was able to send me review samples. My patience was rewarded when Pascal bumped me to first class and instead sent the second from the top *Opéra Référence*, CEC's new TL53Z belt-drive CD player plus a fistful of Actinote cables. Sweet.

Elegant in appearance in a massive silver-grey aircraft-grade aluminum way, the Audiomat *Opéra Référence* is the very epitome of simplicity in amplification: a single box with just the basic controls and a mere seven vacuum tubes for the precious elixir to travel through. There's no need for a



screwdriver and multi-meter since the *Opéra*, as are all Audiomat amplifiers, is self-biasing.

All of the *Opéra Référence*'s 30 watts run in class A via a quartet of EL34 tubes. The input stage features a trio of NOS 5965s for phase splitting and driver duties. The amp sits on a trio of large nickel-plated brass cones and the chassis is aircraft-grade aluminum with a 10mm thick front panel. Available finishes include brushed aluminum or anodized black.





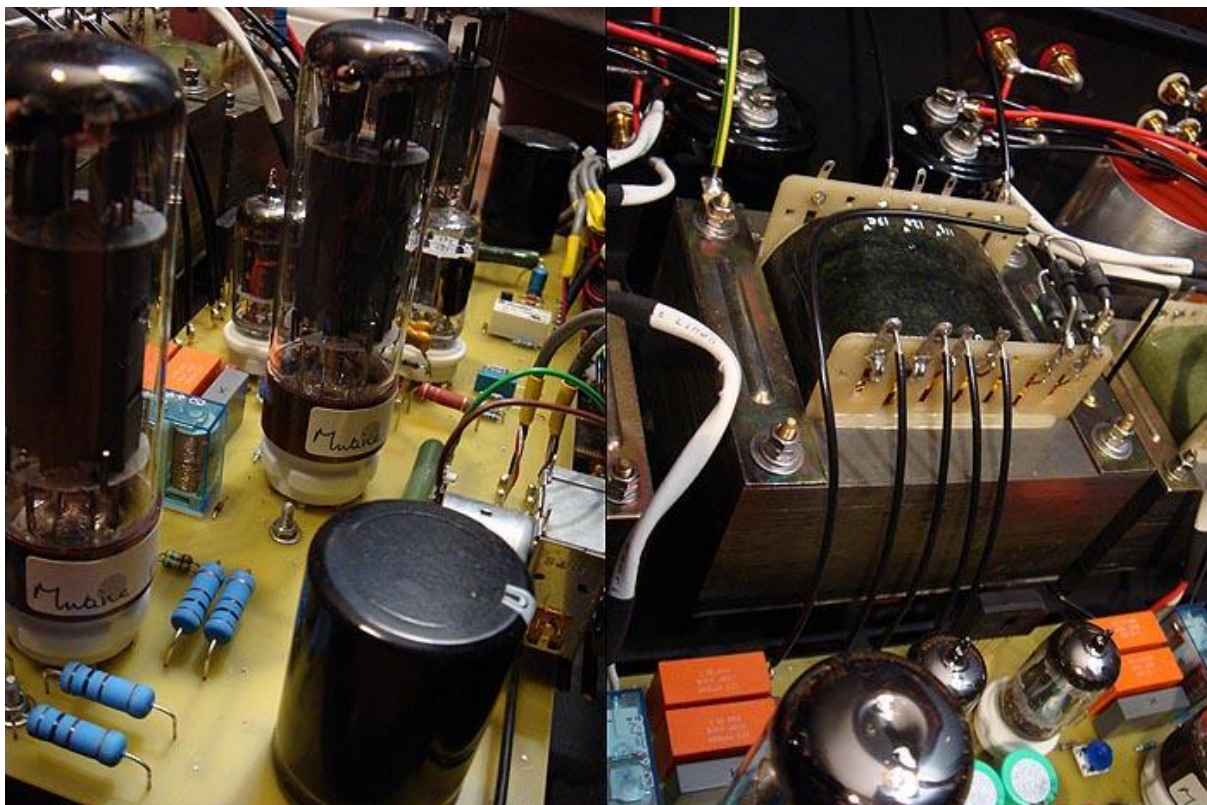
On the front panel there is the motorized ALPS volume control, an input selector for 5 sources and two toggles for power on/off and mute. Two blue LEDs indicate power and mute status. On the back panel there are five pairs of gold-plated line level RCA inputs, one pair of RCA line outs and gold-plated twinned binding posts for 4 and 8 ohm speaker loads and biwiring. A substantial brushed aluminum remote controls volume and mute.

The amp mutes upon power on, the volume knob turns itself down to zero and won't let you crank it up for approximately 30 seconds. Overall build quality is excellent. Internally, I was surprised by the sheer mass of the transformers as well as the pop can-sized storage caps. As the photos indicate, this is one well put together amp.

Unlike many other tube amps, the Opéra's valves sit inside the chassis. While many listeners might miss the romantic glow of tubes sitting on deck, placing them inside the chassis actually reduces susceptibility to airborne vibration. During my two months with the Opéra Référence, I experienced no operational issues. However, the Opéra runs quite hot. You'll want to give it lots of space. I placed the amp first on my hardwood floor, then on a maple board but ultimately preferred it on my Grand Prix Audio rack.

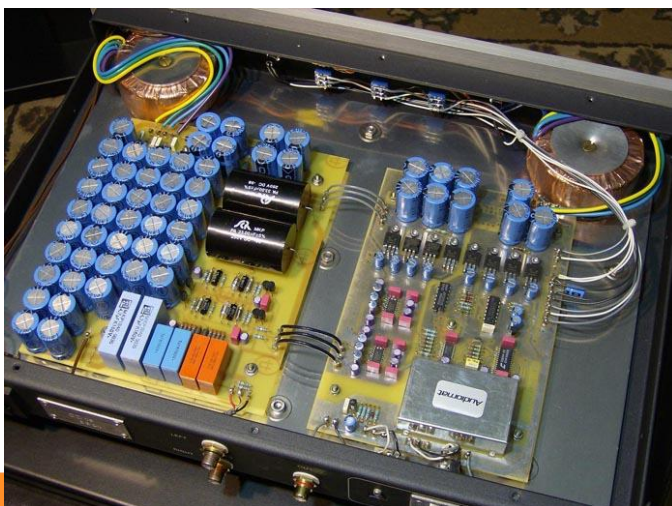
During the two months I had it, the Opéra Référence was on almost constantly. I spent many late nights going through my music collection. I listened to a wide range of music both analog and digital. Two of my favorite LPs of the 80s were House of Love's first two untitled albums [Creation 34 & Fontana 842293], two discs of the most sublime melancholy you'll ever hear. Stephen Osborne's recording of Debussy's Preludes [Hyperion 67530] has garnered plenty of air time around here. This disc is one of the top two or three interpretations I have heard. The vinyl reissue bonanza continued unabated with two great re-releases this past summer: Sonic Youth's landmark Daydream Nation [Goofin 013] packaged in a terrific box set with plenty of extra tracks; and Public Image Limited's Metal Box [4Men with Beards 500] also got the deluxe remastering treatment. Here's a case where the reissues cleanly beat the original pressings.

Your subwoofer will love the PiL. The Hadouk Trio's Live at Fip [Melodie 003] double CD set is easily one of the most interesting and best sounding CDs I have heard in quite some time. It's a fascinating mélange of Middle Eastern and European influences with a touch of electronica thrown in. Another beautifully recorded disc is Tonas y Tonadas [MA Recordings M072A], La Chimera's follow-up to their Buenos Aires Madrigal disc. This release features an interesting mix of early Spanish music and South American folklore. I also listened to a ton of Duke Ellington [Definitive 11170] and Count Basie [Definitive 11173] recordings from the 30s and 40s. Hardly SOTA material but unlike so many audio products, the Audiomat did not highlight the limitations of the source tapes but instead allowed me to simply enjoy this wonderful music. It certainly revealed the tape hiss and limited dynamics but that didn't seem to matter. If a component or system restricts me to certain genres or recording quality, it ain't worth owning in my book.



The first thing I noticed upon powering up the Opéra Référence was the complete lack of tube hiss, ticks, pops or hum, even with my ear pressed near the tweeter. There was no mechanical hum audible from the transformers either. No doubt a result of this very low noise level, the amount of musical detail this amp conjured was astounding. It removed a veil of haze from the music that I've never thought was there in the first place. It was a reaction that reminded me of the first time I heard Green Mountain Audio's Callisto loudspeakers - a clarity and transparency that gave me a closer connection to the music.

I heard details buried in recordings suddenly blossom to life. And I don't mean the typical "I could hear the subway rumbling beneath the recording venue" variety. Signs of anything even hinting of the electronic or artificial were stripped away to such a degree that I listened deeper into the music

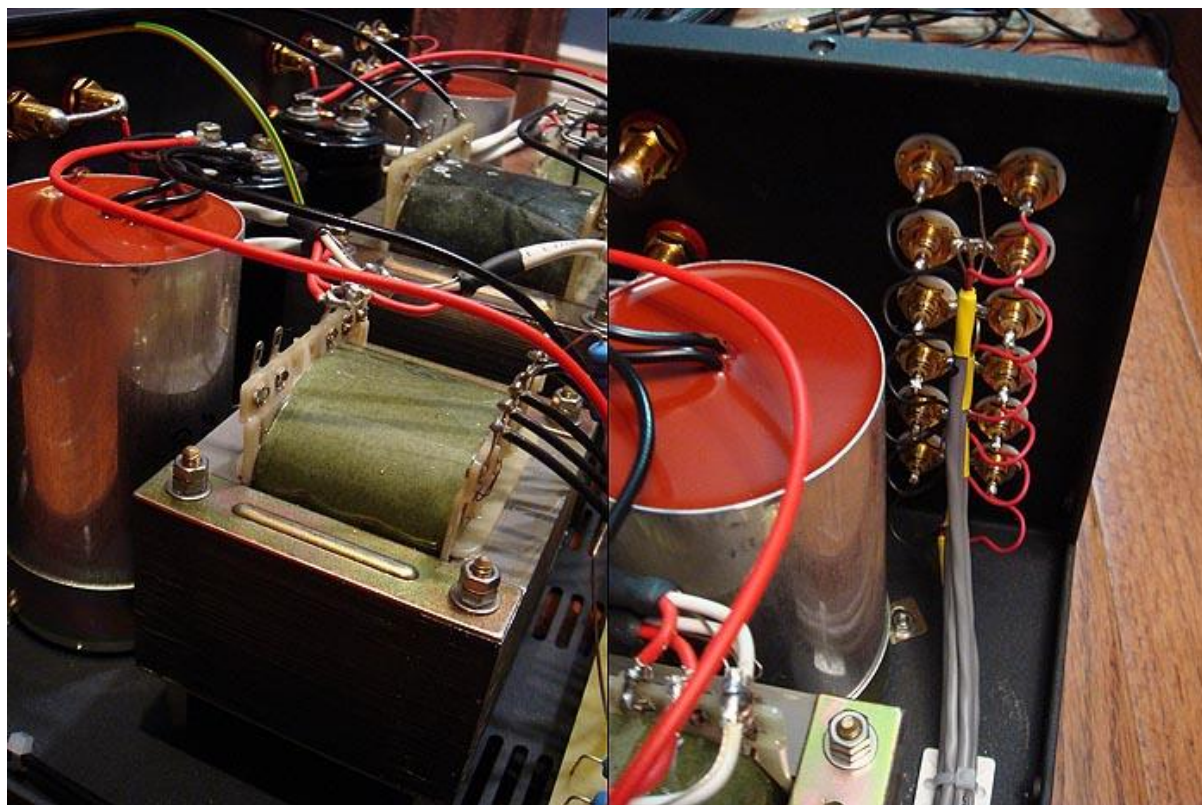


than I thought possible. The sense of hearing real living breathing musicians was downright uncanny and the Opéra Référence had a way of transmitting the emotion and excitement of music to completely captivate me. I haven't heard another amp convey the sheer joie de vivre of music as this one does. Ultimately, isn't this what we are truly after in audio? My apologies to those who





were expecting a note-by-note breakdown of soundstage width, imaging, midrange, treble etcetera. If you need to know



The Opéra's presentation was extremely natural and harmonically rich without being the least bit grainy or harsh. The bottom end displayed a surprising degree of weight and slam. In fact, it was difficult to believe that the Opéra was only 30 watts. The sense of forward momentum and pace was

exceptional. Vocal and instrumental timbres were nothing less than superb.



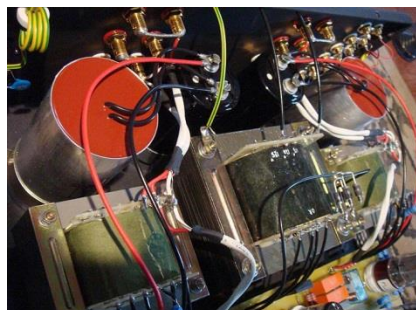
Due to the Opéra Référence remarkable transparency, it will clearly show up lesser components in the signal chain. While the CEC TL53Z is an excellent CD player and one of the better ones I've heard, I could detect a



slight thinness and the typical digital edge and rhythmic reticence when connected to the Opéra. Strangely, I was oblivious to this when I hooked the CEC up to my Manley separates which, by the way, were quite outclassed by the Audiomat. At twice the price, it should. Later in the review, I was able to borrow an Audiomat Tempo 2.5 DAC which was a better match for the highly resolving Opéra. While the CEC was no slouch, performance went way up with the addition of the Tempo DAC. The Tempo was a wonderfully musical converter and certainly superior in conveying the light and life in music to a higher degree than any other digital component I have heard. Incidentally, the bottom chassis sports a lead/aluminum sandwich to control and dissipate vibration, hence the whopping 28.7 lb weight. Pascal tells me that the Tempo 2.5, while a fine component, doesn't come close to the \$14,490 Maestro Référence DAC. I beg you not to loan me one, Pascal. I'll have more to say about the CEC player in a future review.



The Actinote cables were excellent as well. While the other cables I had on hand were perfectly fine, the sense of reality and musical communication increased with the Actinotes. While I didn't spend a lot of time experimenting, I would describe them as smooth, well balanced and devoid of grit or top-end glare.



For me, the Opéra Référence was to musical reproduction what Heifetz was to the violin, Kleiber to the baton or Callas to the voice. Forget the usual HiFi boom, bang and sizzle; the Opéra simply plays music. I don't know how else to say it. In fact, I'm a trifle disappointed in my review of it. I can't quite find the words to express how good I think this amp is and what, specifically, it does so well to be so superior. You need to hear that for yourself. Suffice it to say, my quest for the ideal integrated might be at an end. If you ever tire of listening to this amp, you might as well throw yourself under a bus. Your zest for life will have surely faded at this point. Nothing I





have heard to date has gotten me so close to the music and the artists' intent than the Opéra Référence. A truly wonderful amp.

Along with the GMA Calypso, I'd have bought the Opéra Référence had my purse been agreeable. However, the Opéra Référence savings fund has officially started and I do accept donations. It is said that the best things in life are worth waiting for; that half the fun is the chase itself. At least that's what I keep telling myself...

- Quality of packing: Excellent. Ships in a wooden reinforced crate.
- Reusability of packing: Appears to be reusable several times.
- Quality of owner's manual: Easy to read and comprehensive.
- Condition of component received: Flawless.
- Completeness of delivery: Perfect.
- Website comments: Informative with good quality pictures and price lists. Lots of other interesting info.
- Warranty: 90 days basic. 2 years extended.
- Human interactions: Quick, professional, helpful and friendly.
- Pricing: No complaints. Worth every penny.
- Final comments & suggestions: If you buy this amp, you may never leave home again.

• **Paul Candy**



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**MUSICAL INSIGHT & EMOTIONAL INVOLVEMENT**

• **IN THE TUBE INTEGRATED CATEGORY** •

