

First Impressions: Day one as a new Sound Lab owner

Has there been some mistake?

I ordered a pair of Millennium 1's, and instead it seems you have sent me a time machine/teleportation system.

Now, don't get me wrong, I'm not complaining. Annie Haslam and Renaissance just left, and before them I enjoyed a visit from Jonny Lang and Joan Osborne (I got Jonny's autograph, too - wanna see it?)

Now, if I could just figure out how to calibrate the time machine, I'd like to see that girl I had a crush on back in algebra class, the one I was too chicken to ever talk to...

Okay, maybe they are speakers, after all. That still doesn't explain the autograph, though.

So anyway after Brett (Sound Lab's production manager) talked me through the assembly I figured better check to see that I got it right. I hooked the M-1's up to the only amp I had on hand, a bottom-of-the-line Adcom. For a preamp I hooked up my little Headroom headphone amp, being too eager to bother with the big Cello just for a sound check.

Well, the sound check has lasted about five hours now. I have honestly never enjoyed reproduced music so much. And, frankly, whenever I'd remember to, I was trying to find something not quite right. The whole sound field experience was so different from what I was used to, I wondered if something was out of place. But nothing musical was. I think I've figured it out, if you'll permit a digression...

Back when I was a kid, early 70's, I used to sit for hours by my dad's stereo, headphones on, recording my favorite songs off AM radio stations. Then one day I recorded a song off an FM station, in stereo. Brand new territory for me. When I played it back, it sounded way too different. I wasn't sure I liked this - it wasn't "natural" like I thought AM was. Not that it wasn't enjoyable, but it suddenly made my pile of AM-radio recordings seem dull and lifeless. I had too much time invested in those recordings. I rewound and recorded over the FM stereo recording - I just wasn't ready for such a big leap. In a few days I came around, and began all over again, this time recording only off of FM radio stations, because this stereo thing was pretty neat once you got used to it.

The difference in perspective I get with the M-1's dipole line source is comparable to the difference I got as a kid going from AM mono to FM stereo. It's that much of a leap. As I mentioned, I was trying to find something not quite right so that when I wrote you I could impress you with my audio prowess by pinpointing some little fault that only the designer would know about. I put on my harshest discs, I put on my dullest discs. I put on ones I don't even like, so I wouldn't get caught up in the rhythm. And I forgot what I was doing and instead enjoyed them all! I put on discs of what might be considered

second rate recordings of first rate performances, and the performances came through so vibrantly I forgot all shortcomings. I found myself totally swept up in the music of old recordings that my audiophile ears had long ago turned their noses up at.

I found myself jumping up and dancing, or nodding on the teetering edge of sleep, depending on what the energy of the music was. Some passages teleported me to an altered state of consciousness, like in deep meditation. There's something wonderful that goes on there, but that's another story. And no, there was no contraband involved.

There was no harshness, even where I expected to find it. There was no loss of detail, only discovery of detail. The bass was the most pitch-defined and natural I have heard - just like a live acoustic event. The midrange was autograph quality. Getting the imaging and depth to come together was just a matter of adjusting their position. Following a single voice or instrument was not only easy, it was a delight. I effortlessly listened through all the annoying little recording inadequacies that normally distract me, because the music was so.... so.... present. It was like at a concert you simply don't hear the coughing or whatever when you're totally into the music. I could listen at low volumes and still hear everything. Here's an interesting test - turn the volume way down 'till you can barely hear it, and how does it sound? The last sounds you can still hear are typically the areas where a speaker has midrange peaks. The Sound Labs were very smooth all the way down to inaudibility. As a veteran amateur speaker builder, I can say, "Well done!"

As I adjusted the placement and angle of the speakers (they are very responsive to small changes), I reflected on their radiation pattern (no pun intended). The most intelligent I have encountered. I have designed and built between 40 and 50 different speaker systems over the last 20 years, and they didn't start getting decent until I took radiation pattern into account. I began using arrays of drivers and L-pads to get the reverberant field to have the same tonal balance as the on-axis sound, without going to a pure omni design. My last system was to have been a dynamic dipole, but would have been so expensive that I might as well have bought a pair of used Quad electrostatics, which is what I did. Now the midrange of the Quads is legendary, and rightly so, but I encountered this drawback: When the music would really move me I'd want to move along with it, and so I'd stand up to conduct, play lead air guitar, whatever. Trouble is, with the Quad's point-source type radiation pattern, when you stand up Elvis leaves the building. With a tall, line-source system, Elvis is himself again. I might mention that, with the Quads, I encountered a mild upper-midrange prominence that showed up in Joan Osborne's vocals, for example. It was absent with the Sound Labs.

Now, Sound Lab doesn't have the only full range dipole game in town. Two others that come to mind are Magnepan and Audio Artistry, both of which were finalists on my list. The Magneplanars are a classic figure-8 dipole at low frequencies but have much wider dispersion at higher frequencies as the ultra-narrow ribbon tweeter kicks in. The result is more high frequency energy in the reverberant field, relative to the on-axis response. This can be tamed by propping up a strip of foam behind the tweeter, sort of like your Sallie, but since the speaker is voiced with that treble energy in the room it will now

sound a bit dull. The Audio Artistry design consciously tries very hard to get the reverberant field right, and I think it does, but then it's using conventional drivers and losing the quickness and effortlessness of a planar magnetic or electrostatic. I have been in love with electrostatics since I first heard Janszens years ago, though the used Quads were the first pair I owned. I also own a pair of small Magneplanars.

As I understand it, Sound Lab's electrostatic naturally has a figure-8 pattern in the bass, and maintains essentially the same pattern all the way up by virtue of its curved geometry. When I leave the room it sounds like the band is still right there where I left them. This is phenomenal. The only other speaker I've heard convincingly recreate this "in the next room" illusion is the Klipschorn, which maintain essentially constant directivity across its frequency range. I have come to believe that when the reverberant field has a significantly different tonal balance from the direct sound, no matter how "good" it sounds, it'll eventually give you a headache because your brain has to work too hard to integrate the two.

Let me tell you how I became aware of Sound Lab. I saw an ad in Stereophile's classified where some guy was selling his 28 grand Audio Artistry Beethovens for 16 grand. Turns out he'd already taken a deposit so they were essentially spoken for, but I asked him for his impressions since I was considering the Dvoraks. He said they did everything well, he just had wanted to upgrade to a Genesis system (40 grand, as I recall). He mentioned that he'd owned many high end systems, and spoke with fondness - wistfulness? - of his old Sound Labs. It sounded to me like he missed them, so I asked him what Sound Labs were. He said they were wonderful full range electrostats, and that fortunately he'd sold his pair to his brother so they'd found a good home where he could still visit them. I thanked him and hunted down your website, reading every word, and finally calling when I saw there was no dealer near me (I'm in that picturesque reclaimed swamp known as New Orleans). I spoke with Brett who told me the CES veteran Millennium 1's were available, and suggested I consider the toroidal transformer upgrade. The rest is history.

So I bought them unheard, not based on some review or because I couldn't wait to spend my money, but because I knew I'd found what I was looking for (assuming your claims were honest, which they absolutely were). In my book, a full range dipole that generated a reverberant field with the same tonal balance as the direct sound was the way to go. Perhaps I'm coming at this from a different angle than you are (reproducing the cardioid pickup pattern of studio microphones), but your design just made sense to me.

My Millennium 1's are serial numbered "001", so apparently I have the very first pair. If you have inquiries from people who would like to talk to someone with a pair in their home, at least for now I'm the one and only. I invite you to send them to me.

So anyway I want to thank you for building such an outstanding product.

I hear someone in the living room now, so I better go see who it is this time. Maybe it's that girl from algebra...

D. L.