

aX Visits Indonesia's High-End Audiophiles

While traveling in Indonesia, the author had the opportunity to visit two dedicated audiophiles and chronicles their search for realistic sound reproduction and willingness to go to extreme lengths to reach that elusive but fascinating goal.

By Jan Didden

I have known David for several years, having had many spirited controversial discussions with him on one of the many Internet forums dedicated to audio. I knew he lived in Indonesia, and after I planned a holiday trip to that fascinating country, I realized I would spend a day in his hometown of Bandung. We quickly agreed to take the opportunity to finally meet face-to-face. David arranged for us to visit two of his friends, who are well known in the Indonesian audio scene, so we would be able not just to

talk circuitry but also to listen to music.

LOOMING SPEAKERS

The first stop on our little tour was at the home of Mr. Ationg. After passing through a nondescript façade, we entered Mr. Ationg's dedicated audio listening room. What I saw there was a system totally different from anything I had seen before. The immediate attention-getters were a pair of 6+ feet high Acapella Campanile High speakers, supported by two equally impressive triple driver subwoofers (**Photo 1**).

I soon realized that the room had been specifically

designed and built as a music listening room, with a high ceiling and liberal use of sound-absorbing units on the walls before and behind the speakers. The system was bi-amped with a quad of FM Acoustics Resolution Series power amps.

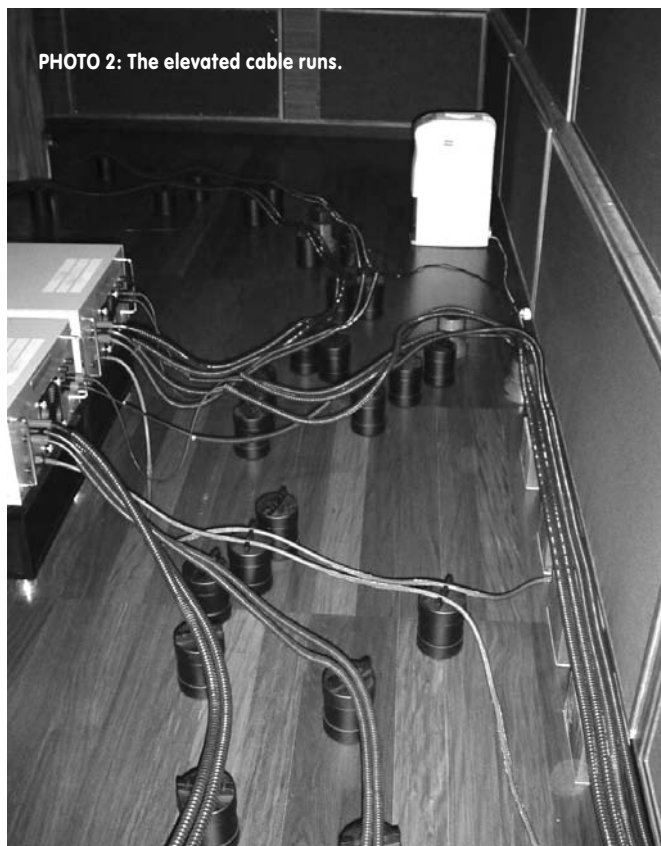
The phono preamp, line preamp, and active crossover were also by FM Acoustics. The turntable was by Brinkman with Goldfinger Clear-audio phono cartridge and a Kuzma Air Bearing arm. I had the feeling I was standing knee-deep in some of the most expensive audio equipment available.

The cable runs were particularly interesting (**Photo 2**), in that they

PHOTO 1: Acapella Campanile High speakers dominate Mr. Ationg's audio system.



PHOTO 2: The elevated cable runs.



were spread about 5" above the floor and 2" from each other on custom machined spikes/separators.

This system sounded better than *anything* I had ever heard. I was actually present at *Jazz at the Pawnshop*, thinking I could reach out and touch the musicians. Jennifer Warnes was standing before us, in very realistic height, position, and presence. It wasn't a matter of imaging, stereo width, instrument placement, or whatever. I was simply there. A lasting experience, to say the least.

After some pressing from my side, Mr. Ationg reluctantly agreed to dig out a CD equivalent of some of his many LPs and cue up both the LP and CD so we could switch back and forth. (I can't help it; at heart I am an A/B/X blind test guy.) It really was no contest; the CD sounded dull, flat, and lifeless. I didn't press the issue any further; I had no intention to continue to make a fool of myself!

After some more listening and a nice cup of tea, we bid farewell to Mr. Ationg and went to have a nice dinner in a well-known Chinese restaurant. Indonesia has a sizable Chinese population, and the change from the Indonesian to the similar but different Chinese cuisine was interesting.

ONE-OF-A-KIND TURNTABLE

Next we visited Mr. Kim San in another

part of Bandung. Another shock: a pair of Wilson Audio Wamm VI speakers dominated the equally well-endowed listening room. These speakers also had a separate subwoofer per side. The main speakers midrange unit consisted of nine smallish ELS panels, slightly angle-mounted as to resemble a curved surface, in the tradition of the vintage Janszen modules. You could slide the three main drivers forward and backward relative to each other on a calibrated slide, to help minimize phase differences.

Electronics again was FM Acoustics from Switzerland throughout, except for the active crossover, which was by Wilson Audio.

Particularly impressive, however, was the LP turntable (**Photo 3**). In the 1980s, Rockport Technologies in the US built four \$100,000 LP Transcription machines incorporating all of their knowledge and expertise in the field with a cost-no-object attitude. They were all slightly different: a 33 RPM machine, a 45 and a 78 RPM one, and one switchable between 33 and 45 RPM.

Three of those four *tour-de-forces* found their way to Sony's development labs. Number 4, the 33/45 machine, was standing before me in Mr. Kim San's music room on the reinforced floor. Calling this a turntable is an understatement.

The base was a slab of granite, about 2 × 3', and half a foot thick. The radial arm had air bearings and the records were vacuum-held to the platter. Below the granite slab were the vacuum- and air pressure pumps and a row of manometers, but the pumps were absolutely dead silent. The whole assembly radiated robustness, reliability, and durability as well as precision and finesse.

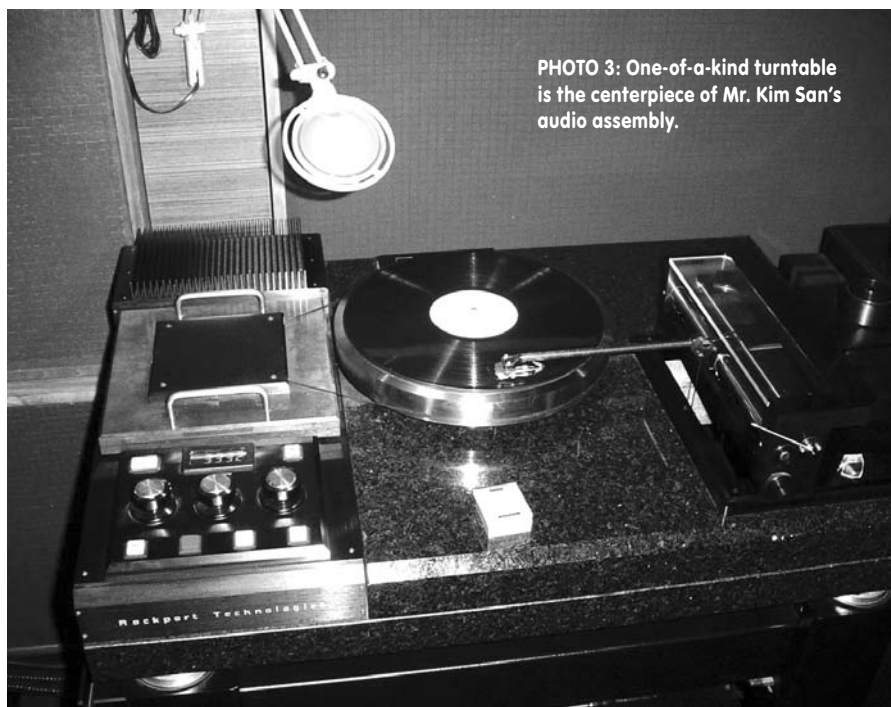
Mr. Kim San's room was even more purpose-engineered and designed with the final sound in mind (**Photo 4**). The wall sported no fewer than 240 box elements of 2 × 4'. Thickness varied from 1½ to 2'. The covering material of the modules varied depending on the need to diffuse, absorb, or reflect different frequency bands. Both sides are covered with a custom-designed fabric. The modules can be flipped over to change the room acoustic properties (**Photo 5**).

In his search for the best audio room, Mr. Kim-San has had this room torn down and rebuilt no fewer than 15 times over the years. And again, this sound was more live, more "being there" than any of my previous experiences. The room was clearly optimized for small venue and club sound rather than for large orchestral works. Even just having a conversation gives you the uncanny impression you are actually in a small jazz club. Mr. Kim San owned some rare vintage Frank Sinatra albums, and, despite being half a century old and subject to wear and tear, they sounded fantastically realistic, even with the audible clicks and surface noise. As with the previous system, cable runs were elevated from the floor and separated from their return run.

REFLECTIONS

After bidding farewell to Mr. Kim San, David drove me back to my hotel and we parted, having spent an evening I will never forget. Thank you very much, David!

The following days I reflected on my experiences, realizing they were, of course, subjective. Those who know me are aware that I am a champion for objectivity and (double) blind testing. In particular, I have never had any reason to believe LPs can sound much better than CD.



Mr. Ationg's CD player was a \$14,000 Reimyo CDP 777, feeding into the same line-level preamp (FM268) as the phono preamp (FM222MKII), so the different replay chains cannot explain the huge difference. I can find reasons why the CD sounded so lifeless compared to the LP. One is that it was all in the magic of the moment, and I was so impressed by that expensive equipment (I was!) that would be forever out of my reach that it *had* to sound superior. But I can't quite bring myself to believe that it was all subjective perception and the influence of being near very expensive and dominating equipment; the difference was just too great.

Another important fact is that while the CD is measurably better in distortion, noise, frequency response and so on, there is the little matter of how the original sound gets onto that medium. Early LPs (and increasingly re-issues) are recorded with simple equipment, often a single tube stage mike amp into the master cutter amp. CDs, on the other hand, are often extensively mastered, with a dozen or more different tracks being mixed and remixed into the final product. The signal would literally traverse hundreds of op amps and an ADC to the CD master. All that manipulation must leave a trace.

In that sense, an LP and CD from the same piece of music do not have an identical content, and thus can sound different. An interesting experiment suggests itself: Digitize the output of a phono preamp through a high-quality ADC and write it to CD, then compare the CD with the original LP. Sounds like a good future project!

POSTSCRIPT

Some time after I submitted this article, a few of my friends did the test I suggested at the end. They digitized the output of a phono preamp with a Sony DD record player with AT20SLA pickup and Sony preamp TA-E90ES to an M-audio Audiophile USB ADC, recording in Magic Cleaning Labs (24 bit/96kHz). Some tracks were auto-cleaned by the software, some manually (de-clicking, and so on). Then the resulting file was downsampled to a 16-bit WAV file and recorded at 4x speed with EAC.

The blank CDs were special audio MAM-E (Mitsui) Pro Studio, optimized for low write rates and low focus- and tracking error (they also apparently are guaranteed for 200 years life span...). The resulting CD really sounded like vinyl! My friend Leo who always has been quite critical about digital sound said, hey, this doesn't sound like CD at all, I could listen to this!

This was not a scientific piece of research, but it does reinforce the notion that the CD format is often blamed for problems caused elsewhere. It also would mean that archiving LPs to CD can be done in such a way that the original character of the sound is preserved, and that wear and tear on the LP can be avoided. *aX*



PHOTO 4: Mr. Kim San's listening room.



PHOTO 5: With movable modules, you can change the room acoustic properties.

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