

High End 2013 *Part 2*

MARKUS SAUER PROVIDES A GERMAN PERSPECTIVE ON THIS YEAR'S BIG EVENT IN MUNICH



Audiovector's Ole Klifoth with Discreet components

The 2013 Munich show was another success for the German High End Society. Exhibition space and the number of exhibitors were stable, attendance was up by 7% (private) and 18% (trade), and it's now recognised as the world's premier audio show.

This show is so big that a dozen show reports may have relatively little overlap. No single journalist can hope to cover it all in the time available. Plus there's the social aspect – all the people you see just once a year and with whom you want to chat. But of course, the main focus for a journalist must be on the new gear, and trying to get a handle on the industry's general direction.

Silly Prices

Of three main themes running through the show, the first is the now all-too-common absurd pricing. Bringing a new high-end component to market is expensive. R&D, manufacture, demo units, show participation, travelling to dealers, it all adds up to a significant overhead before even the first product is sold. To recoup investment from just a handful of sales, as seems to be the norm for many hi-fi specialists, prices can seem preposterous in relation to manufacturing costs and the mass-market competition. My favourite example at the show was the *La Grande* loudspeakers from new (to me) company Audiaurum; a medium sized (104cm high) two-way floorstander with good ScanSpeak drivers but not rebated into the front, good veneer on conventional enclosures, advertised for €37,200 (hastily revised after the show to a still ambitious €14,290).

Manufacturers themselves are often unhappy with the prices they have to charge (and will moan about the margins they have to give distributors and dealers; they certainly don't get rich on the products I'm talking about). But they don't see a way out of this, except through higher production to bring the overhead on individual items down, which won't happen as long as an ever increasing number of tiny brands chases a small market segment. And of course there's the argument: "if I don't price high, nobody will take my product seriously". As a consumer, I find this situation deeply unsatisfactory, but can't offer a solution myself, save the suspicion and/or hope that this segment of the market will, at some point, implode. Forgive me, then, if this

report doesn't acknowledge many millionaire-only offerings. Soundwise, not many came anywhere near to justifying their prices anyway, because the demo rooms are generally ill-suited to high-quality sound, and more modest systems stand a far better chance of showing their potential.

Cool Again?

A second theme was that visitors failed to follow the middle-aged male stereotype. A significant number of females came to the show, admittedly often in tow to their husbands or boyfriends, but their eyes did not seem to glaze over with boredom as might have been the norm, say, ten years ago. A significant number of young (under 30) visitors also attended. I don't think hi-fi is cool again quite yet, in the eyes of the young man and woman in the street, but it seems to be moving in the right direction.

I suspect the main attraction for this younger clientele is the third theme that was running through the show: the high end industry is finally getting to grips with wireless connection and integrated solutions. Any number of Tivoli and Geneva type components are found at the more affordable end of the market, but a good number of more serious and upmarket products are starting to appear. French company Devialet introduced an entire new range, priced from €5,000 to €23,000 and promising that the models differ in features and power but not (apart from the top monoblocks) in sound.

Also from France, Trinnov showed the production version of its *Amethyst* preamplifier. This has two balanced and two single-ended analogue inputs, an MM phono pre-amp, a 24-bit/192kHz network renderer, AD/DA converters, digital active 2-way crossovers, and a room correction system. The €9,600 price includes the measurement microphone needed for the loudspeaker/room optimisation function. It's controllable by an included infrared remote, a smartphone, pad or even a Crestron unit.

Pro-Ject introduced a nifty device called the *Remote Box S* (€350) that will convert WiFi commands from the Pro-Ject control app into infrared code for 'normal' hi-fi components. So now a smartphone can control existing remote-controllable components. I was also glad to find a Qobuz stand, spreading the word about its online CD quality streaming library (like Spotify, but 16/44 data plus the occasional 24/192 file).