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World Premiere!
Audiolics Anonymous Chapter 149
Classé Audio CT-SSP Pre-Pro World Premiere With New HDMI Update
Article By Bill Gaw



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Ah! Spring is in the air. Even up here in New Hampshire where we can get a blizzard in May, this has been a great winter with very little snow and relatively warm days. I'm writing this mid February and its 48 degrees outside. Hurray for global warming! Of course it's been going on for at least 12,000 years with intermittent times of rapid heating followed by cooling. Where I'm standing was less than 5000 feet of ice back then and the shoreline was about 100 miles out to sea and 300 feet lower, so I'm not concerned about a 1 to 3 foot increase in the ocean's levels over the next hundred years.



At worst it means that some people living 100 feet back from the shore now will have a significant increase in their property value and the at present rich seafront owners will be out of their investment. Plus every great leap in mankind's learning has happened during warming times and every reversal has occurred during the cold epics. Give me the warmth! So clear your conscience and keep those tube amps glowing brightly and to hell with digital amplification.

If you've been following this column over the past few months you already know that my system has had a greater improvement in sound than over the past 25 years. I owe this to fellow audiophiles who've lead me to make the changes. My reviewing problem lay with trying to figure out which change caused which improvement. Thus I've been experimenting with removing and replacing each in turn and noting the difference.

First was Roman Bessnow, alias Romy the Cat at [Good Sound Club](#) who guided me to his find, the [PurePower PP2000](#) power supplies, three of which have cleaned up the ac entering my system to the point where it is listenable 24 hours a day rather than just at midnight.

Second, was Steve Klein, owner of [Sounds Of Silence](#), who lead me to Steven Mrock, who has developed his Perfect Path Technologies system of scrubbing clean all electrical contacts from the house's service entrance to the system, then coating all contacts with his proprietary silver paste. Over the past two months, this has allowed the soundstage to deepen, widen and coalesce to the point where on the best recordings one can actually feel that one is at the recording venue. Veils haven't just been lifted but completely removed.

Third was Walter Swanborn, owner of [Fidelis AV](#), who brought the Stein Harmonizers, which further strengthened the imaging and allowed the recording venue to not only extend beyond my listening room's boundaries, but also to allow a feeling of image height above the speakers extending almost to my room's ceiling.

Second, was a sort of sameness to the sound on all recordings. I was oblivious to this until it was noted by Romy several months ago, but, like all things audio, once I became aware of it, has driven me bonkers.

While the problem could have been caused by the two above mentioned possibilities, on evaluating my system, the weakest link in the chain was probably my Integra 9.8 preamplifier/processor, a 7.1 channel Onkyo unit which was the best available three years ago, was a mid-fi product at best, and is now three generations behind the mid-fi units available now. So I decided to delve into what's available now, and went up to the [avsforum site](#) where they had a thread on pre-pros.

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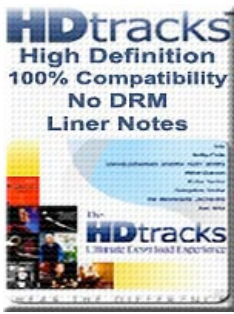
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I first thought of the Marantz AV7005 which appears to be a bargain at \$1499 compared to the other mid-fi products such as the update to my Integra, the 80.2, but felt that as the pre-pro was the weak point in my system I wanted to go much better. Then I looked at the specs for the Cary and Anthem units at \$5-8000, but both were becoming somewhat dated with the Anthem having only HDMI 1.3 pass-through and with video processing which was not needed and could only detract from the value of the audio. That left only two high end processors which could handle HDMI 1.4 processing, one the \$15000 ATI Casablanca unit, which was out of my price range.

Enter the...

Classé Audio CT-SSP Preamp-Processor

For years I've been looking at and listening at shows to products produced by this Canadian company and wishing for a review sample, as I was too cheap to purchase one directly. Then Classé Audio came out with an update to their preamp-processor making it HDMI 1.4a compliant this past fall. The innards are available on two different chassis, a gorgeous looking Delta Series SSP800 made for those who want to place it front and center in their media room, and their specifically designed for rack mounting but still great looking CT-SSP Series.



As I wanted the first unit available, don't really care for esthetics, just quality of sound as you could tell by looking at my sound room, and wanted a first review flag on my article from our fearless leader, I went for the CT-SSP as the electronics are identical, the cabinet was built with cooling of the innards in mind which should extend its life, and most important, it was available. Unhappily, as their first production run was completely sold out and their dealers were waiting for product, a reviewer must wait in line for a unit to be freed up. Thus it took almost three months to receive one for review. Was the wait worth it? *Hell yes!*

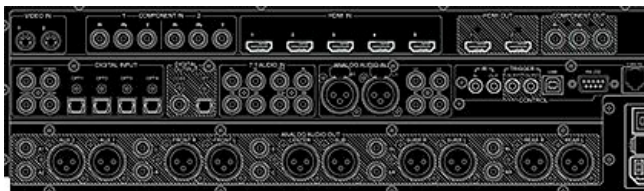


The unit comes doubly boxed and padded for the worst UPS delivery man. Included are the IEC power cord and side panels for rack mounting, cords, remote with batteries, and a USB thumb drive. It weighs about the same as an expensive amplifier. The front is somewhat utilitarian but elegant. Unlike other pre-pros that have fifty different buttons on the front, this one has a large volume knob, two small push buttons for mute and menu, a power standby pad and a large touch screen. The touch screen functions as the buttons for the unit allowing very quick setup with the various menu screens which can also be projected onto your video monitor. The touch screen can also act as a mini monitor giving a nice clear picture of the video going out. Thus one doesn't need to have the possibly noisy television monitor on while programming it or listening to music.

The lighted remote is also built like a brick outhouse with all of the necessary buttons. It also has the ability to set up four function and two profiles for quickly changing how the music is played back.

Instead of a written manual, a USB thumb drive with the manual onboard is included. One can therefore plug it into your computer, go up to Classé Audio's site and download the latest update of the manual and the unit's software to the thumb drive, thus saving reams of paper. This is certainly a plus for the tree huggers out there but must be a minus for the Canadian Forestry industry.

The back has multiples of every type of analog, and digital audio and video input known to man, with five HDMI 1.4a inputs and two outputs, 10 both single ended RCA and true balanced XLR outputs with the programming set for a maximum of a 7.1 channel system. At present, the extra two outputs can be used to either bi-amplify the front loudspeakers, drive two extra subwoofers independently with separate crossovers and frequency adjustments, or a set of stereo speakers in a separate room. The unit at present does not have the ability to run overhead or front side speakers available with the new Dolby and DTS super codecs which are not included with this unit.



There's the possibility to set up 20 different inputs in such a way that any audio input can be mixed or matched with any video input. Thus the HDMI video input can be used with all of the S/PDIF, and analog inputs from the same piece of equipment, or one can watch the video from your cable input while listening to music from your Blu-ray player. Unlike other processors, all of the analog inputs can either be directly passed through like the 7.1 analog input, or digitized for processing.

Unlike most of the low, mid and even some audiophile processors, Classé Audio has put all of their and your money into the audio side of the media equation. This unit is really made for the high-end audiophile who listens only to the best of the best.

Also missing compared to other processors are the following:

1. FM or AM tuner. This is no great loss as most of us either have FM tuners, or a computer with one, or don't listen to FM much anyway. Computers connected to the internet can pick up several thousand worldwide stations and transmit the signals to the Classé through HDMI, S/PDIF or analog inputs. So no loss there.
2. USB in and output. While it does have a USB input, it at present is only able to download updates to the processors software and not audio files. This can be overcome by using a computer's S/PDIF output or purchasing one of the asynchronous USB to S/PDIF units being sold now. This is a minor problem, as an asynchronous USB input would allow connection to computers or ipads which don't have any S/PDIF outputs. On the other hand, the CT-SSP is geared toward the high end audiophile who probably doesn't listen to low-fi software.
3. Ethernet connectivity. This is the one big mistake I think Classe made. The ability to reprogram the unit's CPU through the internet rather than through a computer should be available in every digital unit available today. Plus, it would allow one's server audio storage to be available to the unit without having to go through a computer, and with the proper programming open up the unit directly to the thousands of FM stations available on the web Even my OPPO BDP 95 Blu-ray Player has one.
4. Any video adjusting. The unit has no built in video processing. So what comes in goes out to the monitor. As all monitors and most sources today have their own processing which is usually better than that in most pre-pro's, this is not a problem and definitely decreases the possibilities for screwing up the signal.

There's one more thing missing that even some of the very low priced audio-video receivers have available to you that I didn't mention above. That's one of the room and speaker automatic setup programs such as Audyssey.

Now on to the important stuff, and I don't mean the audio and video specifications, which are by the way phenomenal. My discussion will be minus the room correction routine as I've previously been able to perform this with my setup using four way active crossovers with the ability to control most of my room's positive modes. Plus, that will be part of the setup procedure the dealer will be responsible for. If I find a need to do this in the future I'll report on it.

First, and most important to me, it is solved the two problems discussed above, which must have been caused by the Integra pre-pro. Gone are both the glariness and sameness to the sound, replaced by, in the best sense, tube-like quality to the mid-range, but with tight bass and clean and smooth highs that remind me of the best of the solid-state preamplifiers. The sameness mentioned above, has been replaced by each recording presenting a quality difference which I can't describe but that must be heard to be appreciated. And that's for two channel recordings. I'd have to compare the unit to the best preamps I've had the chance to evaluate over the past 30 plus years.

In addition, the surround field on the best Dolby and DTS HD recordings has become more coalesced into a whole. For instance, I have a recording from [AIX Records of the group Zephyr](#) on a 24/96/ 5.1 channel DVD-A Video disc, where it can be set up as if one is sitting in the audience or in the middle of the group on the stage. Until now, with the stage presentation each voice was found coming from a separate speaker and sounded as if they were in different spaces. Now the space is more of a whole with one voice's sound-space blending into the next seamlessly.

Unhappily the unit has not been able to clear up what I find to be the most annoying aspect of the classical Blu-ray recordings emanating from European television; their lack of a cohesive soundstage. That *isn't* the fault of the unit, but the recording technique used by the engineers, using a huge number of microphones



to highlight each soloist, thus ruining any semblance of ambiance. Happily this has not been a problem with those recording coming from the [Boston](#), and the [San Francisco Symphony Orchestras](#), on this side of the ocean and those from Russia, where more judicious use of spot mikes is being used, and they sound fantastic with this unit.

On the video side, even though the unit does no processing and passes the signal through intact, the picture is significantly cleaner than what I was getting out of the Integra. Whether this was due to the Integra muddying the signal or the CT's just keeping it cleaner is an unanswered question, but, like with audio, the less processing the better. Thus the unit's not having any processing may be a significant improvement over having more than one unit adjusting the video signal, especially if one already has a good video processor as a separate component or a monitor with great processing.

Believe it or not, this unit's asking price of \$9500 falls in the middle of the price range for pre-pro's. Considering you can get a good pre-pro for \$2000 and a very good one for \$5000 to 6000, the CT-SSP's \$9500 list price is sort of at the bottom of the range for the super high end units such as those from Krell and those from Harmon Corporation including Lexicon and Mark Levinson. Unhappily I've not been able to listen to any of the super expensive units lately so I can't comment on a comparison with the Classé, but compared to those in the bottom and middle rung, the sound is superb.

Considering that the sound in two channel from this unit compares favorably with preamps in the \$10,000 to \$20,000 range that I've evaluated, I'd say the unit is actually a steal, as, if you can bargain, it could also include, or should, the dealer installing it and doing a thorough room evaluation and correction, and speaker and input configuration.

How can I prove this to you the skeptical reader? After swearing to my wife that I was done purchasing expensive high end audio gear, I put down my pension plan dollars, bought the unit and it now sits proudly front and center in my listening room. Even though I may have to work an extra year to replenish my retirement fund, it was worth every penny of the purchase price. With about 100 dealers in the United States alone, there should be one nearby where you can do your own evaluation. Unhappily, with the run on the units that seems to be occurring now, you may have to wait a while to get one, so don't dawdle.

Now if they can only add DTS Neo X 11.1 channel processing, I'd be a truly happy camper for years to come.

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