

Stereophile 3111: SamSpace-3111.doc
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STEREOPHILE 3111 3-COLUMN COLUMN

NOTE TO EDITORS: it's Han van Meegeren, not Hans

Title: Sam's Space

Subtitle: Sam Tellig

Heading: The Great CDeiver: Shanling's MC-3000

Remember Doc Brinkley, the subject of *Charlatan*, by Pope Brock? I discussed this most famous medical quack in America history in my May column, along with the goat testicles he so often prescribed. Now I'd like to introduce you to another famous 20th-century scoundrel.

Han van Meegeren, the most famous art forger in history, was perhaps the best ever. He conned critics, curators, collectors, and art dealers for nearly a decade. In fact, he might not have been tripped up in his lifetime had it not been for a wartime connection with Hermann Göring, Hitler's No.2 man. Most art forgers are outed because they deceive one person too few; van Meegeren deceived one person too many. See *The Forger's Spell: A True Story of Vermeer, Nazis, and the Greatest Art Hoax of the Twentieth Century*, by Edward Dolnick (New York: HarperCollins, 2008).

Han van Meegeren was a Dutch painter of middling talent and modest renown who made a good living painting portraits of the wealthy but was scorned by the art establishment. So he decided to get even, and enrich himself in the process. In 1937, he duped a famous Dutch politician and an over-the-hill art critic into authenticating a "newly discovered" painting by the great 17th-century Dutch artist Johannes Vermeer. The painting was *Christ at Emmaus*, and it was a fake.

Van Meegeren created the painting from scratch in his own kitchen. Artistically, it was crude and should have fooled no one, but as a forgery, it was a work of genius. Van Meegeren had found a way to simulate the appearance and the qualities of a centuries-old painting.

The key was Bakelite—an early plastic made of formaldehyde and phenol—which van Meegeren mixed into his paints. (It sounds like a recipe for an exotic speaker cable.) If you touched van Meegeren's "Vermeer" with a cotton swab dabbed in alcohol, the paint would not come off, as fresh paint normally would. Bakelite had hardened it.

Van Meegeren then cooked his "Vermeer" in an oversize oven to achieve *craquelure*, the network of fine cracks seen in the paint and varnish of old paintings. The surface of the painting looked real, down to the accumulated grime in the cracks, which van Meegeren had rubbed in. He used an old frame from the 17th century, along with an old canvas from which he'd painstakingly removed the paint.

Van Meegeren managed to fool Holland's most famous art critic, leading editors, curators

of Holland's most famous museums, collectors, and the art crowd in general. If all the experts said the painting was a genuine Vermeer masterpiece, then it was. Never mind that the painting was only a crude imitation of Vermeer, filled with bric-a-brac from and other references to actual Vermeer paintings. Never mind that the faces looked exactly like those in van Meegeren's previous paintings, which were not at all obscure. Nonetheless, the experts were hoodwinked.

But not Edward Fowles, of the Duveen Brothers Gallery, who said that the purported masterpiece looked like "a poor piece of painted up linoleum" (Dolnick, p.189). But should Fowles cry foul? The art crowd didn't want to know. Van Meegeren's genius, aside from the technical aspects, was to realize that the art world *wanted* the discovery of more Vermeers—so much demand, so little supply (only about three dozen genuine Vermeers now exist). What people want to believe, they *will* believe. Those who offer audiophiles expensive and outlandish tweaks know this full well.

After the success of *Christ at Emmaus*, van Meegeren went on to create a half dozen more Vermeers, each more slipshod than the last. He didn't lavish so much care on his subsequent forgeries because the experts were already primed to accept them.

During World War II, van Meegeren went on to hoax Hermann Göring, who was in competition with Hitler to see who could amass the world's greatest "private" art collection. Van Meegeren was tripped up after the war only because Dutch authorities, looking into looted artwork, discovered documents linking him to Göring.

Like *Charlatan*, *The Forger's Spell* is all about gullibility.

The Great CDeiver

If memory serves me right, more than 20 years ago, at the Las Vegas Consumer Electronics Show, Sharp introduced a product called the CDeiver. From Sharp minds come Sharp products. (Old slogans never die.) TEAC subsequently issued something similar, called the Music Core. The idea was to combine a CD player, tuner, line stage, and power amp in a single box. TEAC had speakers to go with theirs; I am not sure Sharp did.

I tried to get a CDeiver for review.

"*Stereophile?* What's *Stereophile?*" a Sharp mind on the convention floor wanted to know.

What the hell. Why pursue it? Back then, a lot of manufacturers didn't know who we were.

The CDeiver came and went. I never heard about it or saw it again. I think the problem was more the name than the product: *CDeiver* was too close to *deceiver*. I read some comments on the Internet that TEAC's version was quite good; Sharp's was probably okay, too.

The Chinese manufacturer Shanling is canny enough not to call its new product a CDeiver, but that's the idea behind the MC3000: The Music Center. Music Hall, aka Roy Hall, is importing it. For a modest \$2500, the MC3000 is no joke. It's made in China, of course. It couldn't be made anywhere else and still look so smashing, sound so good, and cost so little. Why does so much hi-fi have to look so drab, so geekish, so aggressively . . . masculine?

The MC3000 Music Center is seriously good—so good that I chose to listen to it through my reference Harbeth Compact 7ES-3 loudspeakers (\$3495/pair) instead of the nice Epos M5i minimonitors (\$899/pair) that Roy had brought along. Good-sounding speakers, those Eposes—and heavy little buggers—but I'll leave them to Bob Reina, who has more experience with inexpensive stand-mounted minimonitors. You can use any Epos model with the MC3000, and if you do, your dealer may cut you a deal. Or you could choose another speaker make; there are no “captive” speakers with the MC3000. I'll bet a pair of modestly priced Focals or Triangles would mate beautifully with the Music Center.

The Shanling MC3000 is a standalone do-it-all product. Instant hi-fi: just add speakers. Think of all the money you'll save on pricey interconnects. No digital cable. No wires from the CD player or built-in tuner. No cables from your iPod.

You *will* need speaker wire; it's not included. Maybe your dealer will throw some in. But he won't throw in the Abbey Road speaker cables that Roy distributes (\$2100/2m pair). Roy handed me some Glaswegian guff about how Mike Creek said that *these* were the cables that best coupled his amplifiers to the speakers—the kind of claim you *always* hear about speaker wires. Han van Meegeren could have been a great cable manufacturer, and he could have stayed legit: The more costly the speaker cable, the more you'll hear. Guaranteed.

“I have avoided the whole speaker-cable business,” Roy told me, trying to sound serious, “but these are really special.”

Actually, I think the Abbey Road cable *is* special, but it costs almost as much as the MC3000 Music Center. Ask your dealer to throw in a pair and see how far you get.

“Notice that the banana plugs engage very tightly in the sockets, on both the amplifier and the speakers,” Roy added.

In fact, the Abbey Roads engage *so* tightly that Roy had already busted two of the connectors trying to remove the cables. They still made electrical contact, but now fit loosely. Our cat, Maksim, could dislodge them. He did.

Roy then proceeded to break the flimsy FM antenna that accompanies the Music Center. The thin wire just broke loose from the connector, which had a strange adapter for use somewhere else in the world, maybe Asia. No matter—any standard 75 ohm connector and antenna should fit just fine, without the adapter. I cannibalized an indoor antenna

from a Music Hall RDR radio.

The MC3000 doesn't have an AM tuner, which is probably a good idea: The digital circuits of the CD player would likely overwhelm AM signals with static. And there's no Hybrid Digital Radio, if that matters to you. (It might, if you have an NPR station with an interesting second or third program feed. That station had better be nearby, though. HD Radio's reception sucks; you can't rely on a signal more than 20 miles from the transmitter. Effectively, FM stations cut their coverage area by as much as half. Or more.)

Sources selectable include the built-in CD player and FM tuner, plus the iPod dock and three line-level inputs. "User shall purchase iPod player separately," says the manual. Who, me? I shall *not* purchase an iPod. Or an iPhone 3G, which will also fit into the dock for recharging.

There's a useful pair of preamp-out connectors that can drive a powered subwoofer, an RCA digital out for use with an outboard DAC, and a video output to export whatever video you've loaded onto your iPod or iPhone. I would have welcomed a USB input and dedicated onboard USB DAC for Internet radio—even if I had to pay several hundred dollars more.

Roy himself is a big fan of Internet radio; he spends half his waking hours listening to BBC's Radio Scotland. "News of rush-hour traffic jams in Glasgow is a gas," he told me.

My wife, Marina, gets the same kick out of hearing about traffic in Leningrad—oops, St. Petersburg—especially if she thinks her ex-husband might be stuck in it. *Schadenfreude!*

The MC3000 Music Center measures 17.8" W by 6.14" H by 13.5" D (452mm by 156mm by 334mm) and weighs 25.1 lbs (11.4kg). This is one substantial box, with a beautiful brushed aluminum chassis that couldn't be made in the West for this price. The feel is fantastic, the look exquisite.¹

The CD player is a top-loader with three LEDs that create a ring of blue on the acrylic lid. The LEDs—and the blue ring—stay on as long as the MC3000 is powered on, regardless of the input selected. Alas, the beautiful illuminated acrylic lid drops with a clatter if you release it halfway down. In the upright position, the lid holds firm. I quickly learned to hold on to the lid and glide it into place myself. The MC3000 defaults to CD when you place a CD in the Philips-made transport. You can see the CD spin around several times, initialize itself, then stop. Then you hit Play.

Remarkably, for all its features, the MC3000 manages to avoid clutter and not look like some geekish hodgepodge. The On/Off switch is cleverly placed on the left side of the chassis, toward the back. The 1/4" headphone jack is on the right side of the chassis, up front. You wouldn't want to enclose the MC3000 too tightly in a cabinet or on a shelf.

The Music Center sits atop four pointed, isolating feet that terminate the product's four corner columns. The input selector is atop the left front column. The volume control is

built into the top of the right front column. Accessible and unobtrusive. The Chinese are good at ergonomics. Feng shui? The design has elegance and balance.

Above all, the MC3000 does not look cheap. The chassis is solid aluminum, not polished stainless steel, which is a magnet for fingerprints. The MC3000 is a tube/solid-state hybrid design, but looks all-tube because of the three transformer covers atop the rear of the platform. Oops—only the center housing covers a transformer. The other two ventilated housings enclose the heatsinks.

Four 6N3 tubes are arrayed in front, each ringed by two acrylic protectors. From left to right, two tubes amplify the line stage, and two more tubes provide output for the headphone amp. As far as Roy Hall knows, there are no transistors in the signal path of the headphone amp. The headphone signal goes through all four tubes.

The main power-amp section uses a single pair of Sanken bipolar output transistors to deliver a claimed 60Wpc into 8 ohms (no 4-ohm rating is specified). Herein, perhaps, lies some of the MC3000's magic: just a single pair of output transistors per channel. In my experience, almost all great solid-state integrated or power amps do this. The magic of the darTZeel NBH-108 power amp? The LFT Integrated Zero amp? Only two output devices per channel.

The digital section uses a single Burr-Brown PCM1794 DAC, with 24-bit resolution and up to 192kHz sample rate. This is not the most up-to-date chip, but I know its sound very well, and what it may lack in resolution it makes up for in musicality. This should be enough to squeeze most of the information from a standard 16-bit CD. SACD playback is not on offer.

As for the FM tuner, it's adequate if the signal is strong. Roy Hall chided me for not attaching an outdoor antenna. Because I now listen mainly to Internet radio, I can't be bothered. Still, I've tried other FM tuners with various indoor antennas in that very spot in my room. You do need a strong signal for clean stereo from the MC3000, and its tuner was not so hot at pulling in weak, distant stations whose broadcast frequencies were next to those of strong stations. On the plus side, pushing the Band button on the remote gives you mono. (The same remote is probably used for another Shanling receiver, with which this button switches between FM and AM.)

The reception was adequate for NPR news programs and *The Big Broadcast*: 1920s and '30s music from WFUV FM (90.7) in the Bronx. WFUV streams online at www.wfuv.org, and the show airs/streams from 8pm to midnight EST on Sunday.

I like having the FM radio so handy: I can go from a CD to the news, or some NPR talk show on why the worldwide banana supply is threatened. Meanwhile, for Internet radio, the MC3000 cries out for a USB input and internal USB DAC—even though these likely would add several hundred dollars to the cost.

After a few dozen hours of break-in, the MC3000 required about an hour of playing to

come on song, as the British like to say. Then the sound just filled out and fleshed out. I could hear the MC3000 begin to open up after half an hour; after another half-hour, the performance was at its peak.

Roy brought over his iPod. So did my kids. Marina docked her iPod, filled with Russian pop—Alla Pugachova, Maksim Galkin, Philip Kirkorov. Next thing you know, Marina's mother will possess an iPod. All were pleased by the sound, such as it was. The MC3000 certainly didn't make MP3 files sound any worse. With CDs, the sound was at another level, of course, and superb with my highly revealing Harbeth Compact 7ES-3 speakers. And just think: Roy Hall once had the opportunity to distribute Harbeth in the US. He could have offered a Shanling-Harbeth package.

I thought the MC3000 produced some of the best tubed/solid-state hybrid sound I have heard, regardless of price, and especially in terms of its harmonic presentation. Voices and instruments sounded immediate and truthful—almost like a great single-ended-triode tube amp. The soundstage was spacious and precise, with lots of the ambient detail that puts the *there* there. The MC3000 may be a receiver—or a CDeiver—or a Music Center, but it delivered true high-end sound. I wonder if they call it the Music Centre for export to the UK.

Most of my listening was to CD. For comparison, I tried the Cary Audio Design CDP 1 CD player (\$2000), my current reference, which I wrote about on the April 2007 issue. I thought the Cary delivered greater low-level resolution. Still, I'm not complaining, considering how much functionality and value is built into the MC3000.

I could have wished for a little more grab-ass bass (tighter, tauter, more extended) from my Harbeths. Again, considering that I wasn't listening to separates that cost much more, I was pleased with the Shanling's power delivery. The bass was extended and well controlled—not at all loose, as with some tube amplifiers. At louder listening levels, I ran out of power and the sound compressed—as expected from an amp rated at 60Wpc.

Above all, the MC3000 hit the harmonics just right, in the manner of a good all-tube amp. There was none of the hard, desiccated quality I associate with most solid-state. The music had warmth, body, bloom. I wasn't expecting sound like this from a CDeiver—er, Music Center.

Which brings up the question of speakers. If your budget allows, you might pair the MC3000 with a speaker that costs more than the Music Center. I'd look for one of high impedance (close to 8 ohms) and high sensitivity (90dB or better). But the MC3000 did just fine with the Harbeth Compact 7ES-3s in our living room, despite those speakers' sensitivity of 86dB—so long as I didn't ask the amplifier to play too loud.

There's a bonus with the MC3000: a tubed headphone amp that isn't merely an afterthought. I tried the MC3000 with my AKG K701 and Audio-Technica ATH-AD700 headphones, and the sound was excellent with each. (The MC3000's power to the speakers mutes when you plug in a pair of 'phones.) And when you recall that some

audiophiles pay \$1000 or more for a headphone amp, the MC3000 becomes even more of a bargain. **I loved the MC3000 with 'phones.** It was so convenient, when Marina went to bed early, to switch over to headphone listening—and I sacrificed very little, if anything, in terms of musical enjoyment.

Headphone listening also allowed me to confirm that the Cary CDP 1 offered superior low-level resolution to that of the MC3000's onboard CD player. I couldn't care less. With its harmonic rightness and free-flowing musicality, the MC3000 excelled.

One more thing: The MC3000 ran relatively cool, which is always a good thing for component life. You do want to give those tubes adequate ventilation, however, and you need to leave room on the sides for using the On/Off switch and the headphone jack. Anyway, you wouldn't want to hide this component. Flabbergast your non-audiophile friends with the blue ring around the CD-player lid; fool your audiophile friends into thinking the MC3000 is an expensive all-tube job.

Tube/solid-state hybrids are funny: some sound more solid-state than tube, and some the opposite—as was the case here. If you want the slightly soft, warm, immediate sound of tubes but don't want to be bothered with expensive, possibly troublesome output tubes, the MC3000 may be for you—even if you *weren't* looking for a one-box solution.

For all the MC3000's features, its value is phenomenal at \$2500. As an audiophile, you may prefer separates and their attendant upgrade flexibility. But the MC3000 should do splendidly in a second system, and it would make an excellent holiday gift for a parent or family member. You could even throw in that pair of speakers you're no longer using.

The MC3000 is fun to use, lovely to look at, and sounds exceptionally good—especially if tonality is your top priority, as it is mine. I know this will go to Roy Hall's head, but **the MC3000 Music Center is very highly recommended.**

And I'm no CDeiver DCeiver.

FOOTNOTE

1 Art Dudley reviewed the similar-looking but flea-powered Shanling MC-30 in March 2008: see www.stereophile.com/integratedamps/308shan.—**Ed.**

POSSIBLE DECKS

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For all the MC3000's features, its value is phenomenal at \$2500...very highly recommended.

SIDEBAR

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