Subject: Re: Houston Audio Society January 8th Meeting
Posted by AudioFred on Fri, 31 Dec 2010 15:02:11 GMT
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We have some new members who are just getting into high end audio, and the purpose of our January 8th meeting is to explore some options that don't sell for astronomical prices. We are intentionally not a DIY club, so our discussions don't include DIY options.

I still remember the first time I picked up a Stereophile magazine to read an article about budget equipment. Much to my horror I discovered in that insulated alternative-reality universe of audiophilia a "budget" component is one that costs about $3,500 or so. Eventually I recovered from the shock and discovered there are brands such as NAD, Cambridge Audio, and Parasound that manufacture and market components costing less than $1,000, and I was hooked.

One thing many audiophiles don't understand, is that few people who aren't already into audio are going to shell out several thousand dollars for their first two channel audio system. This includes most people, and not just the working poor and the middle class. My neighbors who have $100K worth of cars in their driveway would cringe at the thought of spending $5,000 on a stereo. One neighbor, whose net worth is in the $$$ millions, told me about his new HT system, "I don't care about the sound, but my wife does, so we got the Bose equipment".

In my version of reality, audio equipment falls into four price cagegories: inexpensive, entry level, mid level, and luxury. Sound also falls into four categories: bad, good, better, and best. Fortunately for the knowledgable audiophile, these two groupings don't overlap 100%. It is possible to get better sound at an entry level price. It is also very possible to get bad sound at the luxury price level.

Since the topic of our January meeting is "budget" audio, I plan to demonstrate three categories of sound: bad, good, and better, in three different rooms. We'll leave the best for another meeting. Here's a preview:

The "bad" sound will be from an iPod, a mass market stereo receiver, and a $35 pair of "house brand" standmount speakers that are poorly positioned in a bookshelf. This system also includes 18ga zip cord speaker cables courtesy of Home Depot. Total system cost (not including the iPod since everybody under 30 already has one) is less than $150. This is actually better than the equipment most people listen to their favorite music on, which helps to explain the demise of recorded music. I will explain, component by component, what's contributing to the bad sound, and how spending incremental dollars might improve it.

The "good" sound will be from an Oppo universal player ($179), a Cambridge Audio integrated amplifier ($500) , and a pair of Parts Express BR-1 standmount speakers ($175/pr). Belden high purity copper cables courtesy of Bluejean Cables. Total system cost under $1,000.

The "better" sound will be from a Cambridge Audio CD player ($1,500), a Parasound preamp and amp (about $1K each), and a pair of standmount MTM speakers that would typically retail for $600-800. Cables courtesy of Wayne, the club's cable guy. Total retail cost about $4,500. We can also hear this system with a pair of floorstanding speakers, using three higher quality Scan Speak Revelator drivers ($200+/ea), that retails for $3,500/pr.