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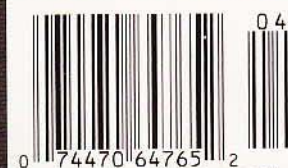
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Prokofiev Second sounded every bit as gorgeous as it did with the Cary electronics. The Air Tight amps may not be the last word in neutrality, but they are so damn beautiful-sounding you may not care—the closest thing to Marantz 9s currently in the marketplace.

Relatively new to me were the \$25k **Rosso Fiorentino Siena** three-way, five-driver, sealed-box floorstanders, driven at the show by AMR electronics. These speakers were one of the great surprises at CES. They simply sounded terrific, which is to say transparent and lifelike, on everything I played, from Heifetz to David Byrne. Very neutral and high in resolution, the Sienas also had (for me) lovable bass without any of the port overhang that adds excess energy and color to cellos, doublebasses, and, yes, electric bass (at least as it is recorded on LP and CD). To hear "Take Me to the River"

through this system was to hear something very close to the transparency and realism I hear at home on this same cut. A definite Best of Show finalist from an unexpected and unheralded source. (I must also commend the sound of the AMR phonostage and the Dr. Feickert turntable in this room.)

I heard the \$90k **Marten Coltrane II** three-way floorstanders with ceramic mid and woof and diamond tweeter in several rooms, the first time with the wonderful Engström & Engström Lars SFT amps and dCS digital. These nice-looking speakers

sounded very neutral on Diana Krall doing Joanie from *Live in Paris*. I thought I detected just the slightest hint of ceramic whiteness or enclosure grain, but, even so, the overall presentation was very natural. On a Paul Bley piano recording, the Coltrane IIs did a nice job of reproducing mike placements and ambience, bespeaking high transparency to sources. Here, the Coltranes came close to being finalists for BOS.

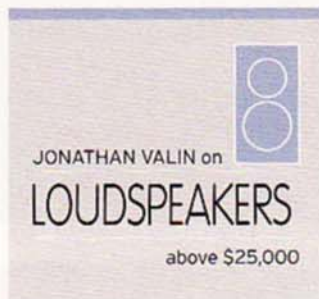
I also heard the Coltrane IIs with Marten's own amplification, which produced a very lively sound with less chalkiness than I'm used to from ceramic-driver speakers, though there was still a touch of dinnerware-white to the presentation (just as there was in the Lars room). For giggles, I had them throw on the Mario Lanza disc—to see if the speakers would cry uncle on *fortississimos*. They did not; in fact, they did an excellent job on the big dynamic swings, without any of the compression that some ceramic-driver speakers tend to show at loud levels. No question that the Coltrane II is an excellent speaker—and, in two rooms, one of the better sounds at the show.

The **Magico Q5s**, my current reference speakers, were being shown by Soulution this year, driven by Soulution's 710 amp and 721 preamp. The combo elicited wonderful microdynamics from my Satie piano recording (a terrific sense of "touch"), albeit with a slightly darker tonality due, I think, in part to the room interacting with Soulution's big bottom end. The sound here was first-rate, albeit a little heavier-of-hand than what I'm currently getting with Technical Brain. Voices, like Julie London's, weren't quite as "there" as

I know they are capable of being. I also thought the speakers could've used a bit more toe-in than they were given.

Like several other speakers on this list, those shapely \$32k three-way floorstanders from **Morel, The Fat Ladies**, driven by Technical Brain, were a story of two days. Recently upgraded with a slightly improved woofer (there have been no other changes), the Ladies sounded a bit dark and lacking in presence and immediacy on my first listen (on Thursday). However, by the time I returned on Sunday, they had mutated into Best of Show finalists. Apparently, there was some problem with the polarity of the amps' power cords, which, when rectified, turned a very very good sound into an outright great one. I don't know what Russell Kauffman has done to these speakers—or, rather, how a small change in the woofer could make such a large difference in presence—but the things I criticized The Ladies for in my review in Issue 208 (the very things I heard in the room on Thursday—a slight lack of presence and immediacy) have been fixed. The Ladies now sound almost as full of light and life as Magico Q5s, with a near-ideally-neutral balance (unusual in a ported speaker) of bass to mids to highs. And their resolution! Well, I guess some of the credit for that should go to Technical Brain's TBP Zero EX and TBC Zero EX (which, I was told, Morel purchased during the show).

Though they're not in my bailiwick, I need to say a few words about **Magnepan's** much-anticipated debut of its replacements for the venerable 3.6s, the 3.7 true-ribbon/quasi-ribbon dipoles. At least on a first listen (with



The biggest sonic surprise at this year's CES was the Rosso Fiorentino Siena loudspeaker (above). Morel's improved Fat Ladies (below), driven by Technical Brain, also made it to the finalist's circle.