

FIFTH ELEMENT

John Marks

It's a Wrap

The recording project I've mentioned before in this column, that of documenting the historical and significant pipe organs of Rhode Island, is finally (!) in the can. (Except that today, of course, we no longer use cans. Or tape, for that matter.) It has been a learning and growing experience for us all—more than a dozen remote-location recording dates, spread over eight months.

But before sending any PMCD master files off to the pressing plant, it's necessary to give it a few very careful listens. Some tools for doing so are the subjects of the first part of this column: a high-performance headphone amplifier and two pairs of headphones. I then briefly profile some enviable microphones I got to use in the wrapping-up.

RudiStor RPX-33 mkII headphone amplifier

RudiStor, a name new to me, is a boutique electronics manufacturer in Italy. In addition to the very impressive headphone amplifier their US representatives lent me, RudiStor makes integrated and power amplifiers, and other models of headphone amplifiers, including a portable. RudiStor's designs variously employ solid-state devices or tubes, in a range of implementations. The RPX-33 mkII (\$1900) appears to slot in the middle of RudiStor's line of headphone amps; above it are balanced versions and a high-end tube model, and below are more affordable, non-dual-mono versions, and the portable.

I didn't set out to borrow a headphone amp, much less a somewhat exotic one from a true-believer company I'd never heard of. I was discussing the upcoming mastering of the organ project with my music and engineering

mentor, Jerry Bruck (www.posthorn.com). Jerry mentioned to me that although he hadn't yet heard them, some of his engineering colleagues were very impressed with headphones from the German company Ultrason. Indeed, at least one peer had said that they were the best he'd heard. My usual reaction to such a claim is at least to form the thought "How many others has he heard?" (if not speak it outright, for good manners' sake). However, when the declarant is from Jerry's circle, I assume it is an observation of more than average validity.

I called Ultrason USA, which is based near Nashville, in Franklin, Tennessee. History buffs will remember the town as the site of the Battle of Franklin, by the end of which no fewer than six Confederate generals were laid out dead. Science-fiction buffs may recall the Battle of Franklin as central to the class-leading military/alternate-history/time-travel novella *The Chronicle of the 656th*, by George Byram. But I digress.



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Ultrason USA's Cathy Kelly fairly radiates enthusiasm for Ultrason headphones. If her professions of their superiority are insincere, she deserves an Oscar. Her advocacy also encompasses RudiStor headphone amps, which, she tells me, Ultrason USA began handling simply because they sound so good, and mate so well with Ultrason's cost-no-object Edition 9s.

Okay then. Please ship me a RudiStor headphone amp, Ultrason's cost-no-object headphone model, and something more affordable.

The box arrived promptly, but the RudiStor amp was DOA, owing to its front-panel power switch, a miniature toggle, having been completely bashed in. The toggle itself stands proud of the front panel, with nothing to shield it. In view of the fact that there's an identical toggle on the rear panel for ground lift, I was reluctant to risk more shipping damage by sending it back for repair.

With John Atkinson's and RudiStor's permission, I opened the unit and bypassed the power switch by soldering together the wires leading to and from it. I not only matched up the right wires, my self-inflicted burns were limited to one solder splatter. It seems that whenever I unsolder something, at least one wire is under tension—spring-loaded, so to speak. As soon as the solder melts, the wire acts as a tiny catapult, launching a tiny sphere of molten metal my way. That's why I leave the DIY stuff to my soul brother, Art Dudley.

I did suggest to Ultrason USA tech Evan Doyle that RudiStor replace their vulnerable spindly toggles with the kind of milspec (MS25224-1) guarded arming switch Tom Cruise had to lift in *Top Gun* before firing a rocket. Doyle probably thinks I was kidding. At least, get a righteous hard-shell case for the press loaner (Hardigg is my fave: www.hardigg.com) and rethink the packaging for the civilian units.

The RPX-33 mkII is a dual-mono class-A headphone amplifier that also has a pair of RCA preamp outs. There are also "repeater" output jacks directly under the RCA line-level inputs, if you need to run the input somewhere else at the same time—such as to your main system. Clever.

The design is dual-mono from the IEC power-cord inlet on. There are two hefty (for such an application) toroidal power transformers. Most of the components are on a single large PCB. The internal layout is cleanly symmetrical.

The RPX-33's case construction is a bit unusual. Its faceplate is taller than its chassis, overlapping it top, bottom, and sides. The casework itself is 13"

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wide, 1.6" high, and 11.25" deep. The front panel is 13.75" wide, 2.4" high, and the usual $\frac{3}{8}$ " thick. Stick-on rubber feet add half an inch to the unit's height. Weight is a substantial 9 lbs.

The front panel is covered with a thin veneer of black plastic. This is not glued, but held on by four Allen bolts and the headphone jacks. My unit had black casework; I imagine that the available silver-casework option dispenses with the plastic veneer.

Left to right, the front panel holds the toggle switch for power (the one that arrived smashed in); a very small pilot light; a large, round, shiny, centrally located volume knob with a very small, uncolored position-indicating dimple (the volume control has very smooth action, and obviously is a high-quality part); and two $\frac{1}{4}$ " headphone jacks marked H and L—for output level, not impedance.

I used the RPX-33 mkII with Ultrason's Edition 9 and PROline 2500 headphones, listening not only to raw and mastered takes from the organ project, but also to all the recordings I recommended in my February column (www.stereophile.com/thefifthelement/207fifth). And others, to be sure.

Listening through the combination of RPX-33 mkII and Edition 9 to Eric Whitacre's *Cloudburst*, and *Secret and Divine Signs*, tenor Michael Slattery's disc of the music of Craig Urquhart, brought me very deeply, hauntdly into the music, and put me at risk of concluding that I hadn't praised those recordings fervently enough. (I'm not going to worry about the Hyperion Arvo Pärt SACD I praised—it's just won a Grammy.) But, rereading what I wrote in February, the moment passed. To put it in as few words as possible: The RudiStor RPX-33 mkII is a phenomenal headphone amp. Paired with the Ultrason Edition 9, it's extraordinary.

The RPX-33 mkII is a noticeable step up in dynamics, bass drive, and resolving power from both the Benchmark DAC 1 and Grace m902 D/A headphone amps, as well as the headphone amp on the Sound Devices 722 digital recorder. There was more of a sense of "thereness" to the ambient sound of live recordings—by which I mean the sound before the music starts. I attribute this to the RudiStor's very robust bass performance, dynamic reserves, and dual-mono design.

After all, that's the way it should be. The RudiStor is a single-purpose design that costs more than the Bench-

mark and Grace "Swiss Army knife" DAC-headphone amp-line-stage models. Although I suppose that if you had only one source, or didn't mind swapping out cables, you could use the RudiStor as your system's preamp (I didn't try this). It's also a bit sobering to note that the RudiStor costs not all that much less than Sound Devices' 722, which records at up to 24-bit/192kHz and has an internal 40GB hard drive. And has all kind of cool lights.

The RPX-33's internal layout is impressive. But, on the whole, its design and build quality are utilitarian rather than elegant—only a couple of steps above average DIY. This is not "audio jewelry." However, people aren't going to part with \$1900 based on the way it looks, but the way it sounds. Which in my book is excellent.

I don't do all that much headphone listening. Nonetheless, I was sad to see it go. Conclusion: RudiStor's RPX-33 mkII is a luxury item, but if headphones are your principal means of listening, I recommend it highly.

Ultrason Edition 9 headphones

Ultrason's earlier top-of-the-line model, the Edition 7, was a limited edition. The Edition 9 (\$1500) does not appear to be such. Which is all to the good. I can imagine quite a few headphone listeners falling for the Edition 9's ultra-rich, lush, seductive sound.

The Edition 9s are dynamic, closed-back headphones. The drivers are 40mm titanium. The headphone cord is a nondetachable Y running to both sides. A hinge-and-pivot arrangement allows the earpieces to flop flat for storage in the provided mock-Anvil transit case. The earpieces can also tuck up within the headband, although why someone would want to do that with such expensive headphones escapes me.

The Edition 9s feature a headband and earpieces of exotic leather—Ethiopian lambskin, as far as I can discern from Ultrason's website. The Edition 9s sport an all-black color scheme, with gold logos on the silver escutcheons of both earpieces. A standard $\frac{1}{4}$ " phone plug, with miniplug adapter, is provided.

The Edition 9s are extremely comfortable, with the caveat that if your outer ears resemble Lyndon Johnson's more than Barack Obama's, you might find the Edition 9s' mostly round earpads a tight fit (as distinct from the Sennheiser 600/650s' quite elongated ones). The fit I experienced wasn't cramped, but neither was there lots of room.

As I said above, the Edition 9s' basic timbre is smoothly beguiling. It is certainly not bright or peaky. Listening to the CDR of tenor Brian Cheney's mini-recital for the microphone-comparing benefit of the great and the good of New York City's audio engineering community (JA was in attendance; more about this below), I found absolutely nothing to fault about anything.

Ultrason promotes S-Logic, a proprietary spatial-effect enhancement technology that is claimed to involve the localization function of the outer ear to a greater extent than the norm, through use of offset positioning of the drivers, among other means. Trying the 9s on backward resulted in a markedly more distant, but also above-

or "in-the-head" sound—there's definitely something spatial going on related to the positioning of the drivers. Furthermore, the effect of the Grace m902's crossfeed was, for practical purposes, inaudible. So, again, there definitely is

something going on. As the S-Logic feature is nondefeatable, it would be best to make sure it's your cup of tea before buying.

Listening to the headphone-demo CD that came with the more affordable Ultrason PROline 2500s (\$399), I did find that the Edition 9s excelled at out-of-the-head imaging (at least when worn as intended, and not switched left-for-right). One percussion track was holographic in a way I had never heard with headphones before—a drum appeared to occupy a space about 5' in front of my nose. But, at the end of the day, I listen to headphones for timbre and fine detail, and not so much for spatial effects.



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The Edition 9s are noticeably more sensitive than the PROline 2500s, which sounded lighter, and perhaps gave the impression or illusion of being more agile, but that could also be chalked up to the inherent differences between closed- and open-back designs.

All the participants in the organ project who heard the Edition 9s driven by the Sound Devices 722 digital recorder were tremendously impressed; two jokingly said the combo sounded *better* than live. (Think what they might have said had they heard the Edition 9s with the RudiStor.) A few wanted to know “How much?” The resulting chagrined looks indicated that some fond ownership dreams had crashed to earth.

As I’ve pointed out before, headphones are the most personal and idiosyncratic audio purchase—they are the only piece of gear you wear. I can easily imagine the Edition 9s becoming a person’s “last” headphone purchase. I

can also imagine someone deciding that they are not their cup of tea. I’d say the same for any headphones.

I suppose that those not tempted to buy the Edition 9s would be those looking for a more prominent or incisive treble. An audition or a money-back guarantee is necessary. (There is other competition I have not heard in this price tier, such as Stax’s SR-404 electrostatics, at about the same price. AKG’s K-1000s, which I also loved, are no longer made.)

I was as reluctant to pack up and send back the Edition 9s as I was to send back the RudiStor amp; they made for a divinely synergistic combination. I can’t make a slam-dunk case on the grounds of value for money, except to note that the Edition 9 plus RPX-33 combo costs less than many pairs of loudspeakers readers of *Stereophile* will buy. Again, it comes down to how much headphone listening you do. Highly recommended for consideration by the hardcore headphone listener.

Ultrasone PROline 2500 headphones

Back here on earth, or at least in a more affordable neighborhood, Ultrasone’s PROline 2500 headphones have a suggested retail price of \$399. Apart from that aspect, the PROline 2500s’ other major distinction is that they’re open-backed, while the Edition 9s are closed-backed. (Ultrasone’s PROline 750 resembles the 2500 in all respects, except that it’s a closed-back design.) A minor difference is that the 2500s’ cord goes only to the left earpiece, rather than the Y shape of the Edition 9s’.

Although the company is new to me, the 2500s’ packaging, accessories, and owner’s manual make plain that Ultrasone is ready for prime time. The 2500s have been completely thought through, and are ready to compete on a level playing field with the products of any other headphone company I can think of. They come with a replacement pair of earpads, in this case cloth velour rather than exotic leather. If the straight cord doesn’t do the job for you, a coiled cord is provided. (The cords screw into the left earpiece rather than just push in.) The owner’s manual is multilingual, colorful, and informative. Also provided are a cloth carry satchel and a very nice 20-track demo CD of well-recorded environmental and musical examples.

It is unavoidable and unfortunate

that the 2500s will suffer in direct comparison with their far more expensive stablemates, the Edition 9s. The Edition 9s’ sound was direct, focused, and intense, the 2500s’ spacious and airy, with a slight prominence in the articulation or detail-frequency ranges. While the 2500s could create more “holographic” images than the 9s, those images were a tad insubstantial—reminiscent of the transporter in the original *Star Trek* TV series.

But if you can’t afford the Edition 9s, don’t despair. While writing this, I’ve been doing a quick refresher listen to the 2500s, using the excellent Grace m902, my reference for a relatively affordable DAC and headphone amp. Brian Cheney’s singing of “Che gelida manina,” Rodolfo’s aria from Act I of Puccini’s *La Bohème*, brought tears to my eyes. Furthermore, due to their frequency-response difference, the 2500s revealed certain details—such as a quietly rattling heating grate or organ part at one church—that were not so evident through the Edition 9s.

Oppo DV-970HD universal player

A few quick words about this inexpensive universal digital player (\$149), which punches far above its weight class. At the time of writing, I had no idea what Wes Phillips said about it, but his full review was published in the May issue. Judging only by its two-channel audio performance, the Oppo DV-970HD is a very respectable player. Taking its price into account, it is an exceptional bargain.

Oppo thoughtfully includes an Audio Only function on the remote control, which disables the player’s video functions. However, I could hear no difference, even through the Oppo’s analog outputs. Audio Only, by the way, disables itself when the DV-970HD is placed in standby, which is probably a smart thing. Otherwise, if the player were to be part of a home-theater system, a non-audiophile trying to play a DVD might become very frustrated, getting sound but no picture.

Using the far more expensive Grace m902’s input switch to compare the Oppo’s analog outs to its digital out feeding the Grace’s DAC and listening through the Grace’s headphone jacks (which allowed for quick comparisons), I preferred the sound using the Grace’s DACs, but, it was not a night-and-day difference.

The only things that keep me from making the DV-970HD a “no-brainer”

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