



Mr Liu loves the
Opera



For their 20th anniversary Opera Audio mobilises the XL chain. Valve meets valve – with a new horn-loaded speaker in the final act. The opera scene would rejoice: the star cast right at the stage front.



30 kilos for a 16-gram silver disc: CDs are fixed in the Droplet CDP 5.0 HD with a magnet puck, capped by an alu lid with an opal window. The glassy drops are included as an option, they are supposed to awaken the tuning pro and further enhance the sound.



Hand-wired with pure silver leads: Opera Audio designed the M15 20 as a two-way system plus super-tweeter, the mighty 15-inch woofer necessitates the large cabinet size with a front width of more than 20 inches.

It takes six good friends: the wonderful Opera Audio chain in all its glory. From left to right: horn-loaded M15 20th Anniversary speakers, Cyber 300B PSE mono power amps, Linear 1 preamp and Droplet CDP 5.0 HD player.



Author: Andreas Günther

Ideally both aspects fall together: in the Chinese opera every gesticulation has a meaning, in the European opera every single note. Great theatre directors have been trying for decades to join both. The combination can produce a big effect. A precisely planned score of the audible and the visible.

A change of business field would soon lead us to Mr Shi Hui Liu, the founder of Opera Audio. A man of audible and visible things – and with a big plan. Of course, he didn't pick the name of his company by chance – Mr Liu loves the big European opera. No – he has fallen for it. If he was a cool Chinese businessman, he would have located his manufacture in an anonymous, artificial industry town near the south coast. With all problems of global mass production. But he didn't do that. Opera Audio resides close to the heart of Beijing. According to western standards in an old building, situated in a mixed quarter with artists and start-ups. Fluctuation is low. His employees are keeping faith with Mr Liu. Since the foundation of the company exactly 20 years ago. Recently they celebrated a big birthday party. Journalists from all over the world also came over to pay their respects to Mr Liu.

Because being so nice to each other is a general trait of this branch? Probably less so. Opera Audio is appreciated because Mr Liu wants something. Above all show that high-end made in China is more than a financial concession. In the best case Chinese and Western tradition can reach new heights – like in both opera traditions.

And there's also a sense of mission: Opera Audio is an advocate of the valve. The glowing products all bear the name "Consonance" – a closer look reveals the logo of a miniaturised valve in the middle "N". On the occasion of the company's anniversary Opera Audio allowed themselves the maximum configuration level including horn-loaded speakers plus an array of the world's most peculiar noble valves. We could almost fill a whole page if we wanted to mention all the valve-based interim stages the signal is passing through. But compared with many other valve companies Opera Audio does not give a circus show: look how nicely they glow, listen to the harmonious sound. Turn off the light and enjoy yourselves at the fireplace.

Opera Audio frequently presents their circuit designs in a surprisingly cool, almost naked style. Only the CD player Droplet CDP 5.0 HD behaves unapproachably. Here, too, the output stage is built around valves, two Sovtek 6N30s, invisibly mounted behind the phono and XLR sockets. But the real eyecatcher is the heavily curved shape of the 30-kilo device. As if it were an extra solid kidney table with a tea ceremony. Available in five different wood variants. The silver discs are laid into an open Philips drive, weighted down by a magnet puck and finally covered by a holder with a frosted window. One cannot see the CD completely, but guess it rotating. Practical emotionalisation with vinyl handiness. Regrettable and a pity: the Droplet CDP5

reads no SACD tracks. But then again the player offers a sophisticated digital architecture with 24 bit/192 kHz multi-level sigma-delta converters, which in its new issue also accept external sources. On its own, the Droplet CDP 5.0 HD sounds superbly light, effortless – by the way, Mr Liu is also known all over town for his ample vinyl collection.

The Linear 1 preamp serves the valve culture fully visible on a silver platter. The connoisseur counts in amazement. One input stage with a 6SL7, followed by two 101D triodes. But what are the two large 2A3s there on the left for? Opera Audio uses them as a sumptuous voltage regulator. Combined with the piston shape of the two 101s the visual impression is super retro. One could suspect a designer at work. Actually the designers probably had the stronger say. In the measurements taken by our lab the valve characteristic and the equalisation behaviour were no less impressively beautiful than the visual appearance. In fact, the quality of workmanship of all components presented here is well-suited to create plenty of confidence.

However, there's more to it than that. Opera Audio orchestrates the Cyber 300B PSE mono power amps as a new old stock banquet – historic, but unused valves are combined with fresh merchandise. In front and easily overlooked: a JAN5AR4 rectifier valve, complemented by a classic Tesla E88CC and another little JAN5687. The initials stand for nobleness and durability. Under the >

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Opera founder Shi Hui Liu on why he turned hi-fi into a career:

„My parents were a strong influence. As a child I sort of inherited their passion for music and their knowledge about radios and electronics.“





Artists in the artists' quarter: Opera Audio resides in one of Beijing's most beautiful exposures – company boss Shi Hui Liu relies on the manufacturing concept and loyal employees.

JAN "Joint Army Navy" certification Philips produced mainly for the military and armament sector. Years ago. The JANs come from historic purchases by Opera Audio. The name-giving 300B carry the unmistakable label "Full Music" and are rookies from a Chinese noble supplier. Two glowing 300Bs are wired in parallel in single-ended mode, because one 300B would not deliver enough power to the speaker terminals (in 4 and 8 ohms). One mono block has a total output of 15 watts. Not much? Wait and see!

But this is not the end of the road yet. In the parlance of the musical theatre: the chamber opera now turns into an opulent sacred festival play – the M15 20 Anniversary speakers are the counterdraft to slimline column speakers which reveal forests and meadows when looking out of your veranda windows. The only slim thing about these 54 kilos is the pseudo two-way concept. Don't get fooled by the three drivers: on top sits a super tweeter which only chimes in at 18 kilohertz.

The basic form is defined by the 15-inch woofer cone. It simply can't be made any smaller. These speakers want space and then conquer the pole position in one go. Associations to Tannoy's Prestige Series emerge: my

friend, the sound wardrobe, modelled on a historic form. Once more a potential misunderstanding, Opera Audio doesn't seek the old-school design, another message lies at the heart. Again the CEO's penchant plays a role who has ever experienced a big opera recording – recorded in a big panorama – over a horn loudspeaker, will swear black and blue that this is precisely the sound inside an opera house. The M15 20's mid/high-frequency horn transports the energy of a singing voice with the same vigour which opera singers benefit from as well: by aiming at the centre of the stalls and hurling the peak note like an acoustic spear. Hard work, almost sporty. For singers and speakers alike.

The advantage of the M15-20 is their enormous efficiency. Which makes the interplay with the valve electronics rational and delicious. It was just this dynamic readiness that we first noticed, the high-level moments always remained harmonic in our test – over different chains and speakers the peak notes of vocalists often lose their bodiness, they become narrow, brash, hard. Not so with the Opera Audio community. Once again: you feel the ideal of the company boss; Mr Liu knows about the energetic relations of

Opera Audio

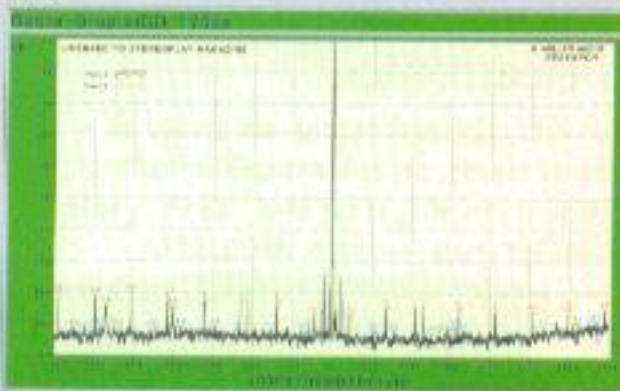
Droplet CDP 5.0 HD

List price: 5000 EUR

Weight: 30 kg (66.2 lbs.)

Dimensions (W x H x D):

52 x 17 x 43 cm (20.5 x 6.7 x 16.9 in.)



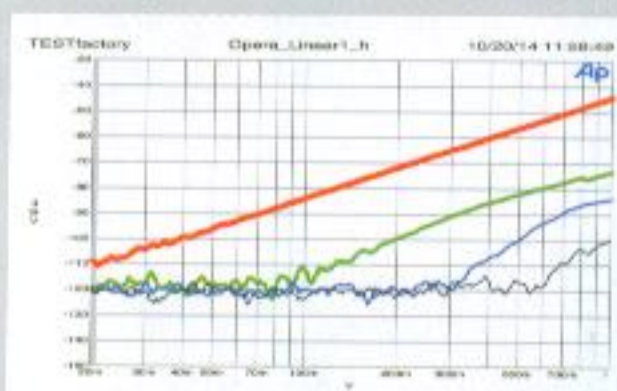
Linear 1

List price: 6000 EUR

Weight: 25 kg (55.2 lbs)

Dimensions (W x H x D):

43 x 22.5 x 40 cm (16.9 x 8.8 x 15.7 in.)



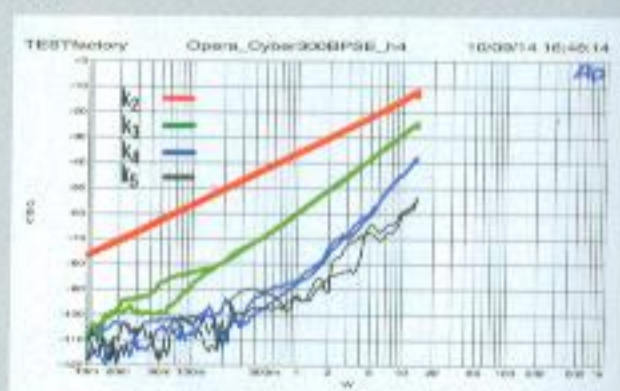
Cyber 300B PSE

List price: 10 000 EUR / pair

Weight: 30 kg each (66.2 lbs.)

Dimensions (W x H x D):

18.5 x 33 x 42 cm (7.3 x 13 x 16.5 in.)



good performances.

Among these recordings we would have to cite the Aida under Riccardo Muti, for instance. The Verdi opera exists in a good dozen of musically outstanding renderings – Solti, de Sabata, Serafin, Maazel, Abbado, Karajan even twice ... Yet nobody brings out the "con brio" more beautifully than Riccardo Muti in the 1974 EMI recording. The triumphal march is the benchmark. On many recordings things are just getting loud. With Muti, however, the turbo kicks in. Over good chains one can enjoy the peaks of the solo parts above the choir, over the exceptional chains the boiling-up mass hysteria from the upright basses to Montserrat Caballé in the name part. During our test the Opera Audio chain revealed this exceptional – always analytical, with a superb imaging performance of the recording venue.

Quite strong and new here: Mozart's Requiem under Masaaki Suzuki. Recorded by the Swedish BIS label in a Japanese university chapel with a mighty ceiling height – and a distinct, yet not blurring reverberation. A chain must be able to handle this: depict the room information, the precision of the single voices, the pinpoint illumination of musical spots of interest. The Opera Audio

chain masterfully executed this highly complex creation.

Weak points? Are 15 watts per channel not too skimpy? Not on these speakers. We experimented with a far more potent transistor power amp regardless – but immediately missed the elegance of the triodes. The Opera Audio monos are indeed skilfully chosen and adapted teammates. In particular as they are also masters of low-end control. With an edge, keeping shape – also, and notably, with smaller ensembles. Like e.g. on good jazz recordings. The Opera Audio chain pictured the spatial effect, here the surprisingly high degree of spectral kinship between trumpet and saxophone, there the steadfast bass information from a Hammond B3, complemented by the accurate bass punch from the drumkit.

Although the opera was and still is crucial for the development of the company: this is not a one-trick pony. Rock with bass drive, cuddling pop with a female voice in front of the speaker axis – you simply can't buy this all-the-way-right character with a fine valve touch on the fly. Again we see the presence of Mr Liu scurrying by – this man could indeed have wanted it exactly that way and worked towards it for 20 years. From Beijing with Love. <



Demo CD

Mozart
Requiem
Masaaki Suzuki

For Mozart's Requiem a conductor needs the right setting – in notes and concentration: Suzuki has both – one of the smartest, most touching recordings ever. Also technically – lots of room, air, reverb, definition.



The Author

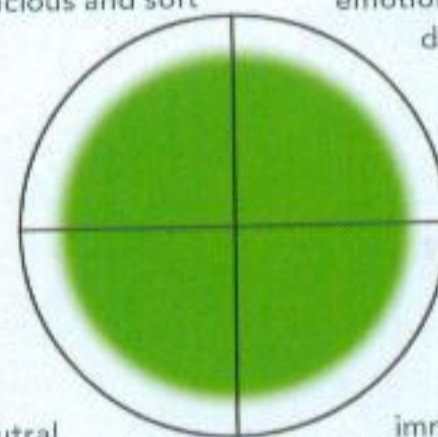
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Günther

I vividly remember an open valve amp on my father's workbench – which earned me an electric shock. And even more respect for this design principle. For our author valves are no diffusers, but in the right combination simply the best power sources.

AUDIophile character

effortless
spacious and soft

gripping
emotional and
dynamic



AUDIophile potential



Recommendation

Valves need space, just like horns do. Hence the combo performs best in larger rooms. But its broad sweet spot allows social couch listening.

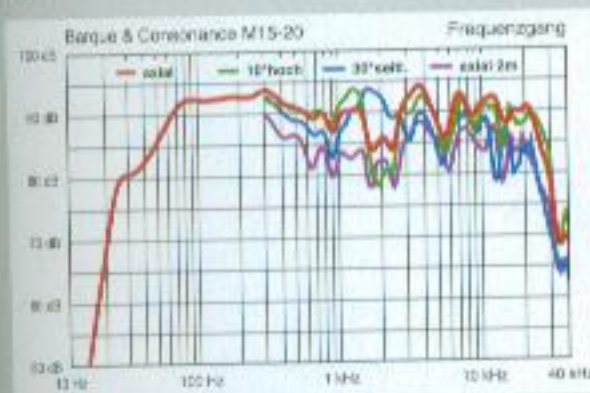
M15 20 Anniversary

List price: 8000 EUR / pair

Weight: 54 kg each (119 lbs.)

Dimensions (W x H x D):

55x102x50.5 cm (21.6x40.1x19.9 in.)



Warranty: 3 years

The Measurements

The CD player shows an immaculate linearity with very low jitter (1). Pre- and power amps feature triode-typically perfect dynamic distortion curves (2, 3). The power amps offer ca. 15 watts per channel which is well enough for driving the super-efficient speakers. Their frequency response (4) has horn-typical, yet harmless ripples and is otherwise very balanced and broadband with little distortion (not shown) and stable levels.