



(/index.php/component/banners/click/347)

Most-Read Opinion Articles (Last 365 Days)

(<https://www.soundstagehifi.com/index.php/opinion/1240-the-best-of-audio-video-show-2018#most-read-opinion-articles-last-365-days>)

The Best of Audio Video Show 2018 (/index.php/opinion/1240-the-best-of-audio-video-show-2018)

Details



 **Douglas Schneider** Monthly Column  01 December 2018

Since 2016, when I began covering Warsaw's annual Audio Video Show (AVS), it's presented one surprise after another. When first invited to attend, by the show's organizer and owner, Adam Mokrzyck, I'd had no idea AVS even existed. When I arrived in Warsaw and found that AVS occupied 170 rooms spread across three venues -- the Radisson Blu Sobieski and Golden Tulip hotels, and the Warsaw National Stadium -- I was less surprised than shocked *How could a show this big have gotten in under our radar?*

In 2017, Brent Butterworth accompanied me to AVS -- I knew it would be too big for me to cover alone, and it was. The big surprise -- for us -- was that in that year AVS celebrated its 20th anniversary. The previous year, I'd been so dumbfounded that I'd never asked Mokrzyck how long his show had been around. Now I was wondering how it could've flown under our radar *for two decades*.

Brent, it turned out, couldn't attend AVS 2018 (November 16–18), so Jason Thorpe came along. Jason and I had reported on shows together before, and besides, I was now an AVS veteran -- I figured the two of us could easily cover it for *SoundStage! Global*. Another surprise: while in 2018 AVS had grown only a little in numbers of rooms, to 174, now it seemed that more exhibitors were packed into those rooms, and that each of them was showing more new products than ever. The Radisson Blu Sobieski was so filled with attendees that it was hard to get around. (AVS claims a total of 14,000 showgoers at all three venues in 2018.) All of this meant that Jason and I couldn't include as many products in our on-the-spot *SoundStage! Global* report (<https://www.soundstageglobal.com/index.php/shows-events/audio-video-show-2018-warsaw-poland/802-audio-video-show-2018-speakers-part-1>) as I'd have liked to -- next year, at AVS 2019, there will be *three* of us in Warsaw.



Although we missed some products at AVS 2018, we still saw and heard plenty from which to choose "The Best of Audio Video Show 2018." They follow below, in the order we ran across them at the show, with prices in euros (€) or Polish zlotys (zł). Direct conversions of product's actual retail prices in USD are impossible because of other factors that affect sales prices from country to country, but at the time of writing, zł1 = \$0.26 USD, and €1 = \$1.13 USD.

Pro-Ject Audio Systems RPM 10 Carbon Silver turntable

Every so often, I toy with the idea of buying a new turntable. When I do, the model that most often comes to mind is Pro-Ject's RPM 10 Carbon. Jason Thorpe owns one, loves it, and almost daily encourages me to buy one for myself.

Well, the moment I walked into Pro-Ject's exhibit at the Warsaw National Stadium, I got one more nudge in that direction -- on display was an RPM 10 Carbon Silver, a limited-edition version of the RPM 10 Carbon, which itself is very dark colored. Only 50 Carbon Silvers will be made, at a price of zł13,990, including tonearm (but no cartridge). Talk about tempting.



Immediately following AVS, I wrote Pro-Ject's owner, Heinz Lichtenegger, to ask why the limited run. His pragmatic answer came back: right now, that's all the carbon fiber they have in silver. He did hint that, depending on the RPM 10 Carbon Silver's success, they might get their hands on enough silver carbon fiber to extend the limited edition, but for now, after Unit 50 rolls off the line, that's it. So, if you're in the same boat as me about getting a new turntable, this could be what pushes you over the edge. In fact, just writing encourages me to go ahead and pull that trigger -- in which case one more would already be gone, if they aren't all gone already.

Bang & Olufsen Beosound Edge wireless loudspeaker

When I first looked at B&O's new Beosound Edge loudspeaker (zł15,000), I thought it was maybe too gimmicky to be taken seriously. It's disc-like in shape, about the size of a small car tire, with an outer frame of aluminum polished to perfection, and front and rear surfaces covered in black fabric. It can stand on edge on the floor, or be mounted on a wall. (You could also probably hang it from the ceiling.) To turn up the volume, you roll it one way a little; to turn it down, you roll it the other way.



But the more I looked at the Edge -- and when *heard* it -- I thought, *This thing will catch on*. It looks cool, and its sound was surprisingly clear overall, quite capable in the bass -- and could fill the room. As for that rolling gimmick, I eventually concluded that it's interesting and, more important, offers a way for the user to interact with it through touch. All in all, clever.

Inside the Edge are a 10" woofer, two 4" midrange drivers, and two 0.75" tweeters. One tweeter and one midrange fire to the front, the other tweeter and midrange to the rear, but because bass frequencies are basically nondirectional, the output of the front-firing woofer goes everywhere in the room. The dual sets of tweeters and midranges can be turned on so they're all firing, for a room-filling sound, or you can have only one set working at a time, which might be preferable if one side of the speaker is close to a wall. Wireless connectivity is via Wi-Fi or Bluetooth, but the Edge also supports wired hookup via Ethernet, digital TosLink, and regular ol' analog. AirPlay 2 and Chromecast are supported, as is multiroom capability via B&O's BeoLink Multiroom technology.



Flying to and from Warsaw, I watched numerous episodes of the TV show *Billions*. The posh Manhattan loft of the main character, Bobby Axelrod (Damian Lewis), prominently displays a pair of B&O Beolab 90 loudspeakers -- as effective a product placement as I've seen in a TV show. I wouldn't be surprised if, next season, the Beolab 90s are replaced with one or more Edges on a shelf or wall. I sure wouldn't mind having an Edge rolling around my place -- and I think that the more people who see and hear it, the more B&O will sell.

Cube Audio Nenuphar loudspeaker

A confession: I tend not to spend too much time listening to single-driver speakers, and Jason doesn't either. At shows, we cover them and leave. In the past, we've listened to many of them, and almost all have sounded like dreck. It's a learned response.

At AVS 2016, Cube Audio changed that somewhat. Intending to run in, take a picture and get the product details, then run out, I was immediately taken by the sound of their Bliss C loudspeaker, which produced real bass, reasonably extended highs, good clarity throughout the audioband, and could play pretty darn loud -- all traits that I've found very rare in single-driver designs. I sat down and listened -- and listened. As a result of that experience, the Bliss C appeared in my [Best of Audio Video Show 2016](http://www.avforums.com/index.php/opinion/1025-warsaw-the-best-of-audio-video-show-2016) ([/index.php/opinion/1025-warsaw-the-best-of-audio-video-show-2016](http://www.avforums.com/index.php/opinion/1025-warsaw-the-best-of-audio-video-show-2016))



At AVS 2018, Cube did it again, this time with their new Nenuphar (€15,900/pair), which impressed Jason as much as it did me. The Nenuphar is Cube's new flagship -- they claim for it bass extension down to a rock-solid 30Hz and highs up to 18kHz from their proprietary F10 Neo 10" driver -- and that's just what it sounded like as we listened to a pair. But it wasn't only the Nenuphar's reproduction of the frequency extremes that we noticed -- its clarity throughout the audioband was outstanding, and its dynamics were superb, even when driven by a flea-watt tube amp. (The Nenuphar's specified sensitivity is 92dB/W/m.)



Cube Audio makes their own drivers and speakers in Poznan, Poland, and judging from what I heard, they really have something going on with their designs. I'm still not 100% convinced that a single-driver speaker is the best way to get great sound, but if there's a case to be made for it, Cube's speakers seem to be making it -- and the Nenuphar might make the best case of all.

Soundkaos Audio Libération loudspeaker

I may be a lot more comfortable with multi-driver speakers, but when I first looked at Soundkaos's Libération (€17,400/pair), which is adorned with four disparate drivers, all but the ribbon tweeter acting as dipoles -- that is, they radiate sound to the front *and* rear -- I almost yearned to see a single-driver speaker again. That the Libération is made by a company whose name includes *kaos* seemed entirely appropriate -- I couldn't see how this contraption could possibly work.



At the bottom of the Libération is an 18" woofer with a paper cone, crossed over to two 8" midrange drivers at a sensible 200Hz. Then it gets weird. Those paper-coned midranges -- which are not precisely identical in construction, or in the bandwidths they cover -- flank a ribbon tweeter to which *only* midrange hands off, at about 8500Hz. I have no idea where the other midrange tapers off -- if it does. With those differing driver types and mish-mash of crossover frequencies, all I could think of was how much comb filtering -- basically, destructive interference of the drivers' outputs -- such a design must produce. And I couldn't get over the Libération's look: With or without its bronze-colored grilles, this thing looks *alive*. Most of the people I talked to thought it looks like E.T.; to me, it looks like an owl.



But as messy as all those drivers looked, what I heard mostly wasn't. Although I can't say the sound was as cohesive as the speakers from Cube Audio or Sottovoce (see below), I really liked what I heard from the Libérations in terms of transparency and overall clarity. But it was Jason who went apeshit over the Libérations' sound, and who I had a tough time convincing to leave the room -- he sat there listening a good 30 minutes, which is unheard of for us at shows. Jason and I heard different things from the Soundkaoses: "Rich, relaxed, warm. Like swimming in soup," he texted me afterward, summarizing his impressions. I don't really know what he means by "swimming in soup"; the point is that I'm sure that if Jason could review a pair, he'd work all night and the next day to clear his review queue to squeeze them in. The combination of his enthusiasm and the reversal of my own expectations based on the speaker's appearance makes the Libération one of the highlights of the show -- another AVS 2018 surprise.

Sottovoce Audio Stereo 3 loudspeaker

As taken as Jason was with the Soundkaos Libération, I was as enthusiastic about the sound of Sottovoce Audio's Stereo 3 speaker -- a pair of them produced supersmooth, clear, natural sound with startlingly deep bass and stellar imaging. I also liked the Stereo 3's looks a lot -- with its white finish and just-right angles on the slender cabinet's top and backside, I thought they looked dramatic and elegant. But looks aren't everything: replete with built-in amplification, as well as analog and digital inputs, the Stereo 3 also has some tech going on to allow it to sound as good as it did.



Although Sottovoce calls the Stereo 3 an “active” loudspeaker, it’s only partially so -- only the woofer-to-midrange crossover (110Hz) is active. The handoff from midrange to tweeter at 3kHz is done passively, though that’s neither here nor there: it’s the sound quality that matters. The 7.9” woofers are mounted in opposition on the lower sides, with the backs of their magnets joined. This configuration is often called force-canceling: the two woofers, which fire in opposition to each other, cancel out unwanted vibrations before they can be transferred to the cabinet. Vivid Audio uses force-canceling in most of their speakers, as does KEF in their Blade models. The Stereo 3’s 6.5” midrange and 1.75” tweeter, the latter actually a compression driver, are coaxially aligned: the tweeter is nestled deep in the throat of the midrange cone. That’s probably why I found the Stereo 3s’ imaging to be so outstanding, and why the drivers had real cohesiveness through the midrange and highs. As I listened, one word kept coming to mind: *focused*.



I know little about Sottovoce Audio, other than that they were founded in Valencia, Spain, in 2014, and that the Stereo 3 is so far their only product. But what I saw and heard in Warsaw left a very positive impression; they seem to be off to a very good start. We'll keep an eye on them.

Block Audio Line and Power Block SE preamplifier and Mono Block SE amplifiers

Always leave them wanting more.

As I left Warsaw, that old adage popped into my head. I was thinking about the company that most intrigued me at AVS 2018, one I want to learn more about. Block Audio is based in the Czech Republic, and their stuff is far from cheap -- their Line and Power Block SE preamplifier and Mono Block SE power amplifier respectively retail for €37,500 and €52,000/pair. But the engineering acumen and product quality appear to be there to justify these prices -- Jason and I were very impressed with what we heard.



With a slogan of “Crafted Without Compromises,” Block Audio seems bent on building the very best products it can, regardless of cost. You only need to look closely at the Mono Block SE, specified to output 200W of pure class-A power into 8 ohms, or 500W in class-AB -- or the Line and Power Block SE preamp, which has not only an external power supply but also a built-in battery that lasts up to eight hours on a single charge, and is used to power the preamplifier even when it’s drained and taking a charge. Clearly, no expense is spared in the quality of internal components or construction.



Block also showed some more novel products: the Rack Block, an “active” equipment rack that you can plug directly into the wall, then plug your components into the rack; and the Lock Block, which clamps on to very large, heavy power plugs, to keep them from falling out of wall outlets. Smart -- and it’s all built to the nines.

From what we could tell, the sound quality Block Audio achieves is exceptional as well, though when I visited their room and listened to the above-mentioned electronics driving their Shelf Block two-way speakers, I thought it was a little too loud -- the walls were vibrating. (That the Shelf Block can really hammer out sound from a relatively small cabinet and just two drivers is not in dispute.) I’d rather have heard the Block gear at saner, less ear-damaging levels, to better determine the level of refinement they might achieve. Nonetheless, the promise of an interesting and innovative company pursuing the state of the art is there -- which is why I want to learn more about them.

Next year . . .

For the past three years, the Audio Video Show has marked the end of our show-coverage year -- after mid-November, the next event is in January, in Las Vegas: the annual Consumer Electronics Show. But CES is now basically dead as far as high-end audio is concerned, and it’s unlikely we’ll send anyone to cover what little hi-fi might be on display there. (Brent Butterworth might attend, but only to cover headphones.) However, our show coverage might start up again the month after -- February 8-10, the first installment of a new annual US show, the Florida Audio Expo, takes place in Tampa. Right now it’s 50/50 whether we’ll attend -- but we’ll definitely be covering the annual Montreal Audio Fest (March 22-24), followed by a slew of other shows, culminating in November with AVS 2019.

So no “Best of” show report in this space next month. Instead, you’ll see another “best” article: the SoundStage! Products of the Year -- the best of the best products reviewed across all of our sites in calendar year 2018. *That’s* a feature you won’t want to miss.

. . . *Doug Schneider*

das@soundstagenetwork.com(<mailto:das@soundstagenetwork.com>)