

Sam Tellig

LFD Integrated Zero Mk.III LE integrated amplifier

Gene Rubin plays bluegrass fiddle and Texas Swing. You can catch him in performance in and around Ventura, California. Since 1979, he's also run Gene Rubin Audio. But as a performing musician, Gene has trouble with audiospeak: "The worst thing is when someone phones about some piece of gear," he told me. "How do you describe how speaker A [sounds] vs speaker B?"

"I don't get most audiophile catchphrases. For me, either something sounds right or it doesn't, just like with making live music. Some nights, when I'm playing, it really feels good. On other evenings, I—and they—might be off. It either feels right or it feels off. That's the way it is for me with hi-fi. I can't put the experience into words. I am probably the last person who should be selling hi-fi."

Gene's listening studio is in his home, where he offers mainly British gear: Naim, Rega, Spendor, Harbeth, Creek...and, when available, amplifiers from a small cottage-industry manufacturer: LFD Audio, in Clacton-on-Sea, in Essex, England.

"I must have sold 50 or 60 of them," Gene said. "But it may have been bad for my business. The problem is that someone can't simply upgrade by trading in an LFD integrated for a few thousand more."

Gene's customers would buy an LFD integrated and demo it for their friends, who then would call Gene. Most of his LFD sales were by referral. Customers were pre-sold. Many were music lovers, as opposed to obsessive audiophiles.

Then, as successive importers got frustrated when supply couldn't meet demand, LFD products became unavailable in the US. Gene refers to this period as the seven-year drought. "If I took in a used one and put it on eBay, customers would fight over it. It would sell immediately," he told me. But he didn't want to get into the distribution business.

Enter Walter Swanbon, owner of Fidelis Audio/Video, a shop in Derry, New Hampshire, less than an hour



The best-sounding solid-state integrated that Sam has ever heard. DA! In Russian, that means yes. Ask Dima.

north of Boston. It's one of the best hi-fi shops in New England. Walter's in the distribution business, too; he imports Harbeth loudspeakers from England.

"What do you know about LFD?" Walter asked, before lifting off from Logan to visit Harbeth and LFD.

"Well, I regret sending back the review sample, that's for sure," I said. "It was one of the best-sounding integrated amplifiers to come my way. If you import it, please allow me to be the first to review the current version. If it's as good as I remember, I'll buy it."

Walter knows about the supply situation. LFD components are bench-built, one at a time. There's no way to ramp up production without changing the nature of the products. So, for the time being, Walter and Gene are LFD's only two US dealers. There's already a waiting list. If you want to hear this integrated, you have to venture up to Ventura, California, just south of Santa Barbara; or drive up to Derry, New Hampshire.

I first met up with the LFD Integrated Zero LE Mk.III integrated amplifier in 1998, after reading a review in the French hi-fi magazine *Haute Fidélité*. The French scribe loved the sound, and said that the Brits have a special genius for this type of product.

I was so hot to have one that I got in touch with Dr. Richard Bews, owner of LFD, to ask if there was a US importer. Bews said no, but agreed to send me the amplifier anyway. It was then

known as the LFD Mistral. I got the standard edition.

I flipped over the Mistral—it was every bit as good as the French reviewer had said, and then some. But before I could write about it, I had to wait for an importer—no sense in telling folks about a product they

couldn't get except by direct import, which is not for the faint of heart. (I've done it myself on occasion, but what do you do if you need service?)

What made the LFD Mistral unique was its way of imparting light and life to a recorded performance of any type of music, with any speakers. It sounded musical, not electronic—in much the same way as a flea-watt single-ended-triode tube amp. It had that quality of illuminating the music from within.

Gene Rubin concurred: "I don't know if this is a rhythm-and-pace thing or a harmonic thing. When I compare the LFD integrated to something else, I think that's the way [the music's] supposed to sound. I can't identify it. But it makes me think like a musician, not an audiophile: I'm playing with other musicians and we're all having a good day, the stars are lined up, and everything is working out right. That's how I respond to the LFD. With other amplifiers, it sounds like the musicians are tired.

"In a way, the amplifier is bad for business," Gene sighed. Evidently, customers hear the LFD and prefer it to pricier offerings. On the other hand, customers who buy it often recommend the amp to their friends. Even people who aren't audiophiles buy it. I laugh my evil laugh.

"You have to spend four or five times the money to get better sound, and even then, I'm not sure you will," Gene observed.

Walter Swanbon of Fidelis A/V is keeping his markup to a minimum. No ad campaign. No sales reps. No marketing. No 50 points. (Fifty points means a retailer buys a product for \$1000 and sells it for \$2000.)

Again I laugh my evil laugh.

I reviewed the original Mistral in the September 1998 issue (Vol.21 No.9), and the Mistral LE in November 2001 (Vol.24 No.11). LFD's importer at the time was Steve Daniels, of The Sound Organisation (he later became Rega's distributor). Steve supplied me with the Mistral LE: better parts, slightly more power than the standard edition. Unfortunately, I never got the chance to hear the optional moving-coil/moving-magnet phono stage, which must be installed at the factory (neither you nor your dealer can retrofit it). If I had, I never would have sent the review sample back to Steve.

In the 1980s, Richard Bews was a research assistant to the legendary Dr. Malcolm Omar Hawksford, many-titled academic and professor at Essex University, a stone's throw from Clacton-on-Sea. (Hawksford remains a consultant to LFD Audio.) LFD's first product was a battery-powered phono preamplifier. LFD stands for *low fuzzy distortion*, a phenomenon first described by Hawksford in an AES paper.

Yeah, I know—it sounds as if Drs. Bews and Hawksford are borrowing a page from the pharmaceutical industry: describe a disease, convince people they have it, and sell the cure. Like Restless Legs Syndrome.

But a phono stage deals with very-low-level signals, especially from MC

cartridges. The feedback signal is much more of a problem here than it is with a power amplifier, Bews explained. "When you are dealing with low-level signals, you are talking about the behavior of individual electrons."

Here the physics gets fuzzy: "Due to the physical behavior of the small number of electrons being amplified by a huge factor in the open-loop path of the amplifier, there may be a resultant 'fuzziness' to the output signal," Bews continued. "So low-level circuits, like RIAA phono stages, should have low feedback or no feedback." More techno-talk in a moment.

The name "Mistral" is gone with the wind; but the current production is, essentially, the same amplifier that Bews and Hawksford designed back in 1995 "to give customers an idea of high-end sound at a sensible price," according to Bews. Passive components and wires have improved since then, but the circuit is essentially the same. Now called the LFD Integrated Zero Mk.III, the amp is available in a standard edition and a Limited Edition (LE). (Actually, *all* LFD amps are limited editions—there's a limit to how many Bews can make.) Walter Swanbon imports only the LE.

The price is \$2695 without phono, or \$3295 with. That's for the silver faceplate and silver knobs, which I find quite attractive in a very understated way. I'm less keen on the version with the black, stonelike faceplate; it reminds me of a tombstone. You can ask Walter or Gene about it: It costs more. The non-tombstone version weighs 17.6 lbs (8kg) and measures 17" (432mm) wide by 2.48" (63mm) high by 13.1" (332mm). It runs cool. I leave it powered up while I'm at home, and turn it off when I'm not.

There are five line-level inputs (four if you opt for the phono stage), plus a tape monitor loop. The two pairs of speaker posts are terminated with plastic and can be tough to tighten with your fingers. (Slide a coin into the slots to get them tighter.) Richard Bews is no cheap-skate when it comes to parts, so I assume these terminals sound good.

There are no preamp outputs for a powered subwoofer. There is no balance control. There's no remote, not even remotely on the horizon. The amp turns on with a low-level *pop*. Why add parts that don't count? There was one minor annoyance: The top cover slides over the chassis, like a

cowl, with a 1" overhang in the back. This makes it hard to see and attach the RCA and speaker connectors when you don't have easy access to the rear panel.

A single pair of MOSFET output transistors per channel delivers the rated 60W into 8 ohms. There's often magic in a single pair of MOSFETs. "The amplifier can deliver relatively high currents for short periods of time—*ie*, around 10 microseconds," Bews elaborated.

I asked about power delivery into impedances lower than 8 ohms (no 4 ohm specs are given): "Power output into 4 ohms is around 90W continuous. But this doesn't indicate the amp's ability to drive difficult loads. What matters is the ability of the amplifier to preserve small-signal integrity in the presence of large signals; this is what determines the subjective 'power' of an amplifier. Continuous power ratings are of limited value, since we listen to music, not sinewaves. The peak to average power ratio is about 10 to 20 while playing music. So an amplifier that delivers 5W continuously provides peak power of around 100W at loud listening levels."

Richard Bews doesn't believe that very low total harmonic distortion (THD) necessarily results in subjectively better sound. It could be quite the opposite! What matters is what the THD is made of. Better to have slightly higher THD comprising mainly lower-order harmonics than lower THD high in higher-order harmonic distortion.

The LFD Integrated Zero Mk.III uses as little feedback as possible, keeps circuits simple, and, wherever possible, uses wires instead of printed circuit boards. "Quality wiring is better than any PCB track," sez Dr. Bews.

Every resistor and capacitor, every piece of wire, is chosen to give the best sound quality in its particular location in the circuit. Great care is taken with the power supply, including the design of the mains transformer.

"Simple circuits and passive component selection, including wiring, is very important to LFD products," declared Bews. "It is the essential difference between the competition and what I do. Our way costs money, since it is labor intensive. We have to stock the passive components in relatively large quantities since the parts are nonstandard. This is expensive, too. I often hear it said that 'There is not much stuff inside the chassis.' *That's the point*. The products are simple and use the

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best ingredients, like the best food. You do not expect a fast-food menu in a fine restaurant—lots of less-good ingredients in large portions. So why apply the fast-food mentality to hi-fi?

"I have a Japanese/British take on design and parts selection. While I am British-born and -educated, my mentor in research-assistant days, in the 1980s, was Be Yamamura, who exposed me to concepts within the Japanese high-end community that are completely alien to most Western designers. LFD Audio has more in common with Kondo and other small Japanese manufacturers. I use circuits and construction methods for superior sound. Most 'commercial manufacturers' use methods that result in less-good sound 99.9% of the time. They do it because skilled labor is expensive and minimalism doesn't visually impress. But isn't sound quality more important?"

I hooked up the LFD to a pair of BC Acoustique A3 loudspeakers, using a Cary CDP1 CD player as a digital source. (My first sample of the Integrated Zero Mk.III lacked the phono stage.) The sound was just as I remembered it from nearly 10 years ago. Gene Rubin is right: You can forget the audiophile bullshit. The Integrated Zero Mk.III just *sounds* right. It breathes light and life into all kinds of music. Harmonics are spot on. Each voice, each instrument has its distinctive tonal color.

"Call it coloration or non-coloration," said Gene, "but the amp sounds this way with all types of speakers." (Gene's favorite speaker with the LFD is the Harbeth Compact 7 ES3. Walter Swanbon took back the review samples that I wrote about last June, but I have a pair on order.)

That's all I'm going to say about the sound. It hit the harmonics just right. When an amplifier does that, everything else falls into place: delicacy, definition, detail, rhythm, and pace. The soundstage and imaging were breathtaking...But there I go, talking like an audiophile.

I decided to make some mischief. The LFD is small, so I took it over to my friend Dima's—Vadim Yarmolinets, City News Editor of New York's daily Russian-language newspaper, *Novoye Russkoye Slovo* (*New Russian Word*). Dima laughs his evil laugh. "It's true. We invent new Russian words all the time."

Dima and his wife, Larisa, have a beautiful pre-World War II Brooklyn apartment with thick walls and high ceilings. In their book-lined, art-filled

living room is a pair of Triangle Zerius loudspeakers. Zeriously.

We hooked up the LFD Integrated Zero Mk.III in place of Dima's old integrated amp, which is no longer in production. (I don't want to make enemies.) We let the LFD cook while we went out to dinner. It already sounded great, stone cold out of the box.

"Wait until after dinner, Dima. You're going to piss in your pants."

"This is what I want," he replied. "I want sound so good I piss in my pants."

Larisa darted Dima a look that said *Not here you won't*. Dima tends to take my English literally.

The Zerius speakers never sounded better, to my ears. The bass response was surprisingly strong—something I don't always associate with Triangle speakers.

"Dima, I call this the Chernobyl sound—it seems irradiated." I laughed my evil laugh. Dima and Larisa are from Odessa, Ukraine, one of my favorite cities. I've visited three times. "Well, you review audio gear for your paper, Dima. If you want the amp, let me know and you can write the first Russian review. In fact, why not just buy it? You can probably have this very amp...unless you want the phono stage."

Larisa mentioned my evil laugh. Dima demurred.

I went to work on him. I told Dima that Walter Swanbon was taking back my amplifier (true: he traded it for one with a phono stage) in order to sell it to a Russian doctor in Brookline, Massachusetts.

Dima saw through my lie in an instant. "I'd like to talk to that Russian doctor. Most Russian doctors want surround sound, expensive gear, home theater, bells and whistles."

True. Russians love to put on a show. I told Walter about my Russki ruse.

"That's funny," Walter said. "One of my clients is a Russian doctor in Brookline."

Sure enough, the memory of the LFD's sound—and the sheer electronic drabness of the sound of his own amp—began to eat Dima alive. Larisa relented—happy, no doubt, that the LFD is even smaller than the amp Dima wanted to dump. Or fob off on Genya, their son.

"I want one like yours," Dima said, over the phone. "I want it with a phono stage."

I hadn't known Dima was into vinyl. Then I remembered the open-air flea market in Odessa on Saturday mornings: lots of vinyl, all of it played on Soviet-era phonographs, alas.

Meanwhile, I tried my second ver-

sion of the LFD with my Rega P25 turntable, fitted with Goldring G1020 MM cartridge. The phono-stage gain is internally switchable: 38dB for MM, 53dB for MC.

This was my first encounter with the LFD's phono stage. I was expecting the usual ho-hum sort of stage built into most inexpensive integrated amps (when offered at all). What I got was totally unexpected: a first-rate phono stage that reduced digital to dust. Well, almost.

But oh, that sweet-sounding Goldring moving-magnet sound! Imagine—25 years after the introduction of the Compact Disc, tiny Goldring is still in the cartridge business. There's a reason. Right up till deadline, I totally abandoned CDs for LPs—something I haven't done in years.

I have two words of advice concerning the LFD's optional phono stage: Get it. Even if you don't own a turntable. It's so good that you might take up spinning vinyl again—or for the first time. I doubt you could find a better-sounding outboard phono stage for \$600—detailed, dynamic, rhythmically right. But remember: the phono stage must be installed at the LFD factory.

I don't know where else you can hear the LFD Integrated Zero Mk.III, except at Gene Rubin Audio or Fidelis A/V. That leaves you in the lurch if you're not in New England or southern California. But don't let that stop you. (John Atkinson will kill me for this.) If this amp intrigues you, buy one. Ask Walter and Gene about their money-back guarantees.

Several readers have e-mailed me to say that this amp (or one of its earlier models) is a killer with classic Klipsch speakers—in particular, with the La Scala or the Klipschorn. With a speaker rated at more than 100dB sensitivity, the LFD is likely to rock like a 500W amp. Usually, owners of such high-sensitivity speakers tend to think about flea-watt SET amps.

I'll throw caution to the winds (the Mistral?) and say that the LFD Integrated Zero Mk.III LE is the best-sounding solid-state integrated amplifier I have ever heard. I know of no other integrated, of any type, that sounds quite so right. I base this on listening to four different samples in sessions held nearly 10 years apart. It's not one of the best, blah blah blah, but *the best*. Ask Gene Rubin and Walter Swanbon. They don't bullshit. ■