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A NOTE ON LISTENING

BY

JOHN F. ALLEN

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A frequently frustrating dilemma in the audio business is uncontrolled listening tests. A maker of one of the better cinema processors told me about an exhibitor who visited a theatre to hear the sound system. Unfortunately, the film which was playing at the time was not recorded well. Even worse, the exhibitor did nothing to investigate the problem, simply blamed the processor and left. Nothing could persuade him that the film was at fault. Obviously both the manufacturer and the exhibitor lost out. Had the audition been controlled, with high quality program material used, the results would have been different.

The speaker business often suffers from the same foolishness. People regularly blame loudspeakers for many things that have nothing to do with them. For instance, if one first plays a recording that has excessive highs over a system that is deficient in highs and then over a second system which is fine, the sound will be too bright on the better system. Many people would automatically blame the good speaker for the problem and leave it at that. Judgments made in this fashion are not only inaccurate but self defeating.

What should one then do when auditioning sound equipment? This can be greatly helped if at least two things are tried. First, have someone with a full sounding voice speak live through the system using a high quality microphone, such as a Sennheiser MD 421. At least this way you know how the person really sounds and any coloration heard through the sound system can be attributed to at least some part of the system.

Even this acid test doesn't convince some who should know better. After a presentation of a theatre sound system a technician complained about the changing dialog quality from film to film. He blamed the speakers. He was asked how the voices of the guests had sounded live over the same sound system and speakers. He said "Great." He was then asked how the loudspeakers could possibly be at fault? The technician could neither answer nor change his mind.

Another thing to try is to play several known films of known high quality sound. There are quite a few to chose from. Some of my favorites are; "Apocalypse Now" 70 MM reels 3 and 4, "Raiders of the Lost Ark" reel 1, or more recently, "ET", "Footloose" and "The Last

Dragon”. Of course the 8 minute Dolby “Listen” film is also useful as a reference. The various scenes and their sound effects, from simple dialog to cannon fire, provide a wide choice of listening material. Also, Dolby’s. “Jiffy Test Film” begins with a very good recording of their Vice President loan Allen. Since we all know his voice, this is an excellent test for naturalness and clarity of reproduction.

When listening to a new product or system, it is best to have a representative from the manufacturer present. He can assure that everything is properly set up. A slight misadjustments in the sound head or anywhere else can make a listening test a waste of time. If you are shopping for sound processors, let the manufacturers suggest the theatres where they believe their systems are shown off fairly. What good would it do to visit a theatre which suffers from inadequate amplifiers and loudspeakers or poor room acoustics?

Another problem we all have to one degree or another is accurately diagnosing a real problem or defect when we actually hear one. Some of us who deal with sound everyday get fairly well practiced at this and still get fooled all the time. Frankly, our customers are not always as good at listening as they would have us think. We can all hear, but we do not all listen the same way. We have prejudices. Some people simply prefer the kind of sound (good or bad, clear or distorted) which they are used to hearing. Just go into any Hi Fi store and listen to the many different sounding systems that people buy. This is why I don’t just ask if something sounds good, I ask how accurately does it reproduce the original live sound. Since we usually can’t know this for sure because we didn’t hear the original, the live microphone test can be useful.

Making serious judgments about sound quality takes time and patience. Often several days are required to live with a component. Program materials of various kinds and quality should be tried. Pluses and minuses must be weighed. If something is unsatisfactory, find out the real reason.

The point is not an easy one, but when evaluating theatre sound systems, be certain you know for sure what you are listening to before you decide how it sounds.

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