

The Q7 Loudspeakers and RI-100 Integrated Amplifier
An Unusual Match Made in Heaven

review by Robert Youman

I was recently invited out for some sailing along the Chicago lakefront on a beautiful clear sunny day. We were just a mile or two out, cruising on a Bob Perry design Baba 30 Sailboat (30 feet long) which I am told is one of the finest ever for "bluewater" enjoyment. I know little about sailing, but I knew this was something special the moment we stepped aboard and set out to Lake Michigan.

Sometimes ignorance is bliss. Quality, craftsmanship, and performance are things you can usually understand and feel, even with no specific knowledge or experience. As a comparison, I often see this with non-audiophile friends when they hear a superbly set up audio system for the first time. You can see it in their eyes, their smiles, and sometimes even in their tapping toes.

If you have never seen a major city skyline from the lake or ocean side perspective, you are missing something quite spectacular. At 5 or 6 knots, the feeling is like an explosion to your senses—and I mean all of your senses!

The Chicago skyline view is extensive, many miles from north to south. Parks, bridges, marinas, and building after building of world-class architecture that never seems to end. The blue shades of water and sky provide a framework around the brick, steel, and glass of every color imaginable. It takes your breath away.

Beyond the incredible visionary impact, the sounds, and even the smells, are overwhelming. You can hear the rustle of people and cars at this distance. Boats of every size and domain along with the many sweeping seagulls in the sky set an aural background that whirls around you. The fresh lake air and streaming wind off the bow opens up your eyes and nostrils in excitement.

Yes, this was quite a memorable day. Hopefully I have not described a feeling that is too over-the-top (my apologies upfront for the drama), but this is the closest thing that I can compare to my experience with the Magico Q7 speakers and Vitus Audio RI-100 integrated amplifier. I will reiterate later in detail, but let's just get the cat out of the bag upfront. The sound with these two components working in tandem was an absolute amazing assault on the senses.

The aural landscape was vast, sensational, and breathtaking—almost overpowering on certain music. The emotional connection was like nothing else I have experienced for two-channel audio. For the very best recordings, the experience, at times, seemed real.

You can please sit down now, or stop screaming at me, or both. Yes, I used the word "real." I need not apologize. In this case, it is appropriate. Again, sorry for the drama.



Review System

Magico Q7 Speakers

Vitus RI-100 Integrated Amp (w/phono stage)

Playback Designs MPS-5 CD/SACD/DAC

VPI Aries Extended Turntable

VPI 12.6 Memorial Tonearm

Van den Hul Frog Cartridge

Kubala Sosana Elation Power Cords, Interconnects and Speaker Cable

Synergistic Audio Element CTS Power Cords, Interconnects and Speaker Cable

MIT SL-Matrix50 Interconnects and SL-Matrix90 Speaker Cable

Synergistic Research PowerCell10 MKIII Power Conditioner

Magico QPod Footers

Set Up

I would be remiss if I did not give a big shout out and thank you to the folks at both Vitus Audio and Magico. Though always traveling the world, or on rare occasions located at headquarters in Denmark, Hans-Ole Vitus was extremely responsive with email and setup advice almost daily. His helpful suggestions and honesty were much appreciated. This man also has quite a sense of humor. Check it out if you ever have an opportunity at one of the major shows.

Alon Wolf, Irv Gross, and Dave Shakleton from Magico were also there at every turn (literally). There was some question about getting these 750 pound beasts into my basement listening room. Alon gave me his personal assurance. "If you can get them through the door—it can be done." My wife looked away and hid her eyes at the first turn on the staircase, and all I could think of was that famous Antoine de Saint-Exupery line, "What saves a man is to take a step. Then another step." One hour later, and with the steady hands of four 300 pound piano movers (two were wearing Green Bay Packer tee shirts), the Q7s were safely in place.

I also must thank Mick Survance at Quintessence Audio located in Morton Grove, Illinois. Mick has helped me set up several systems over many, many years. "In Mick's Ears I Trust" should be framed and posted on my wall. I have said it before, you can buy through the Internet, but are you really saving money? In the end, a good dealer with years of experience can help you avoid poor choices, endless swapping, and much frustration. Component selection for ultimate synergy is both science and art. I have found that proper speaker setup can be a revelation in the right hands.

"Yeoman" Of The Guards - Protecting the Crown Jewels

The Q7s were not difficult to set up. Mick and Irv were very patient, and followed a true time-tested process. After starting with some basic room dimensions and placement, out came the tape measure and the laser. By ear, one speaker at a time was repositioned for best bass response and rake angle. Lastly, both gentlemen used their favorite music tracks to make final tweaks.

All I can say is thank goodness for Teflon furniture moving pads. With smiles from ear to ear, they pointed to my listening chair and asked me to sit and take a listen. The speakers were located further into the back corners, further apart and closer to the back walls than I would have guessed. I never felt inclined to reposition them differently. It was magic from the beginning.

Bottom line: these folks care. They are proud of their products. They want things to sound their very best. They want their customers to be happy. It's that simple. Thanks guys!

Caveat Emptor

System synergy and personal taste are critical when evaluating high-end audio products. This review is based on my subjective requirements, my subjective ears, and my specific system and listening room. These combinations of components are only a few data points of many that exist out there. For further insight into my personal biases, check out the "Meet the Writers" section of *Positive Feedback*. Please consider my comments and analysis appropriately.

Sacrilegious Thoughts

When I told several audiophile friends about the sound that was flowing from this review system, the reaction was consistently curious, troubled, and in awe—all at the same time. Knowing my sometimes unfair and discriminating ears, and my benchmarks from past systems, they all wanted to come over as soon as possible for a listen. The descriptors that I was using had never come from my lips before. However, wasn't this sacrilegious? Wasn't the configuration of this system in direct contradiction to common audiophile logic? Why was I ignoring the so called fundamental laws of proper component selection and system investment?

How dare I use an integrated amp with speakers like the Magico Q7s? Even the RI-100 with all its royal lineage as a Vitus Audio product could not possibly be appropriate! Separates are a must! From an investment perspective, is there not a golden rule that you should always spread your money as evenly as possible between all your components: speakers, amplification, wire, resonance, etc.? If not, basic principles dictate that the best of each will not be realized.

Well folks, I am not really known as an out of the box thinker, but in this case I say "forgetta about it" as Tony Soprano might proclaim. The rules do not apply. Call me a rebel, or even slightly misguided, but I sometimes enjoy breaking the rules when I can find a logical and reasonable way to do it!

Would the Q7s (\$185,000) sound better with a preamp and big monoblock amplifiers from Vitus, Constellation, Solution, or VAC—an investment in the \$100K range or more? Maybe. Well, probably. The Catch 22 is that I have never heard these combinations in my system or in my listening room. I have heard these products at shows with other speakers, and they are all superb, but until I get that opportunity I am more than just pleased with the RI-100 (\$16,000 with phono stage). Considering the law of diminishing returns at these prices and the quality of sound that I have experienced, how much more could I possibly realize for the money? This system is so rewarding and satisfying as is, I cannot imagine anything much better. Still sacrilegious you say? Maybe. Read on.

If you have kept up with my reviews over the years, you know I am very much into integrated amplifiers. If you can find something that performs like the RI-100 you can save on interconnects, power cords, and resonance devices. You can use these funds to upgrade your other components (including wire and resonance), or just leave it in the bank for other priorities—not a bad thing at all. You do lose some flexibility to tweak the sound presentation without a separate preamp and amplifier from different manufacturers, but I like the whole concept of one vision and one voicing behind the design. Also, you have no worries about how the interconnects between both, and the power cords for both, might be altering the final output.

I love the clean look of one box solutions with minimum wire and platforms. My wife also supports this philosophy. Don't forget that for most families, the wife or significant other typically has an equal vote if not the power of attorney for the big decisions. Maybe that only applies to my family. Maybe not. Now don't scream foul. There are many potential models out there. As just one example, I would guess that for this level of investment, you might just find the following number of boxes in a typical two channel system:

- two speakers
- two subwoofers
- two monoblock amplifiers
- preamp
- preamp power supply
- CD/SACD/transport
- DAC
- DAC power supply
- Laptop
- two hard drives for music files and backup
- phono preamp
- phono preamp power supply
- turntable
- turntable synchronous drive
- power conditioning and distribution center

I'm not even going count up the resonance platforms, speaker cable, interconnects, and power cords for all. I understand that many components do not have stand-alone power supplies, but at this price level it is not uncommon. Subwoofers are not loved by all, but I have seen more and more in some very sophisticated systems. When used, two subwoofers are almost the norm these days. It's also not unusual to see a couple pairs of optional front ends from the list above—separate CD and SACD players, two turntables, etc. All I can say is OUCH! My wife's comments are unprintable for this family periodical.

I kind of like the looks and sound of this current configuration under review. Check out the pictures below. One pair of speakers that handle the entire frequency spectrum like the Q7s. One integrated amp like the RI-100. A one box CD/SACD/DAC solution like the Playback Designs MPS-5.

If I fall in love with any new wire products or resonance control devices, I will not have to go nuts worrying about purchasing them for the entire system (each box). Or, grinding away thinking about that one \$3K power cord that I did not have the funds to implement and match to the rest of the system.

I can't quite give up yet on my turntable as it still warms my soul like nothing else. As discussed below, the RI-100 now has an optional integrated phono stage (one less box). However, the day may come that if the budget or space will not allow, I can be a very happy camper with only one digital front end. I say this based on the amazing killer sound emanating from several new DACs, DSD, and double DSD music files that are now hitting the market. This includes the Playback Designs MPS-5 with the latest software upgrade that I am using for this review. I know. I know. Yowzer! Even more sacrilegious words!

Have an open mind and some long-term vision! I recently enjoyed a wonderful presentation by Peter McGrath at Audio Consultants in Libertyville, Illinois. Thanks to Simon Zreczny and his crew for hosting such an enlightening event. Mr. McGrath never fails to entertain and delight. He was using a simple laptop music server and all Ayre components driving a pair of the new Wilson Audio Alexia speakers. His DSD files of Nat King Cole, Elton John, and especially Bill Evans (the exquisite *Waltz with Debby* recording) were absolutely sensational. I felt closer to the master tapes than ever before.

Now settle down please. Stop throwing those tomatoes and cabbages on stage! Bottom line—if simplifying and finding a superb performer like the RI-100 allows you to afford and own speakers like the Q7s, I say go for it. There, I've said it. I feel much better.

Vitus Audio RI-100 Integrated Amplifier

The RI-100 is without compromise from any possible perspective or listening criteria. Remember now, that's just my humble opinion based on my listening biases. It provides some of the most neutral, detailed, and transparent sound that I have heard in my listening room. The RI-100 is lightning-quick. There is no edge or whiteness along for the ride as with many solid-state designs. Timbre, pitch, and tone are spot on. There is no romance—all artificial harmonics are stripped away, and you are left with the real thing.

Did I mention that bass performance is as good as it gets? The RI-100 can handle the most demanding low frequencies with an iron grip, and the Q7s are the perfect vehicle to prove it. At 88 pounds, 300 watts per channel into 8 ohms, and 600 watts per channel into 4 ohms, the RI-100 is a beast and has power to burn. Texture and slam is the best. Let me be clear, the sound is not lean! If you love a certain amount of warmth and additional bloom to your bass, look elsewhere. No overhang, no mid bass hump—just a vivid articulate presentation that will make you believe.

Highs and mids are wonderfully fleshed out without excessive bite or grain. Strings, woodwinds, and female vocals are always a tough challenge. I have never heard better on vinyl, SACDs, and 192 files. Even well recorded CDs can raise the hair on the back of your neck as Yo Yo Ma, John Coltrane, or Sarah Vaughn work their way into a frenzy. Like no other amplifier I have experienced, piano recordings finally have the correct weight, timbre, and inner density.

Soundstage is vast and extensive beyond the speakers when the music calls for it. You will not find any manipulation or false dimensions as you listen deep into the recording venue. Imaging is consistently superb and almost holographic with the very best recordings. You don't have to lean into the music to see and hear these variables, just sit back and absorb.

Comparisons

To my ears, and compared to other impressive amplifiers that have graced my listening room, the RI-100 still stands tall and strong, if not without peer, when paired with the Q7s. With what I had on hand during this review, and with help from friends, I was able to evaluate three additional amplifiers. All are well respected high performing products and might match better with your own listening biases. The Q7s are an excellent tool for evaluating and comparing these combinations—the best evaluating tool that I have experienced. Every small change in the system could easily be heard and differentiated.

As insinuated earlier, I hope that I may have the opportunity to hear the Q7s down the road with some of those products with MSRPs that make your head spin. Having said that, many of the amplifiers discussed below, and the sound that they can provide, are very familiar to most *Positive Feedback* readers. Synergy realized with the Q7s can still be informative and educational.

The Pass Labs XA160.5 monoblocks (\$22,000) have that signature Pass Labs Class A sound that is so addictive and soothing. Mids have a rich romantic emphasis that can compete with all but the very best tube amplifiers, yet still have the extension on both ends that solid state can provide. The XA160.5 plays it close, but it cannot keep up with the RI-100 in terms of transparency and transient speed when driving the Q7s, I am talking at all frequencies here. Matched with the Pass Labs XP-20 preamp (\$8600), the XA160.5 even at 160 watts per channel lacks the bass slam and depth of the RI-100. Still, on female vocals and intimate romantic settings, it's a tough one to beat. As good as the XA160.5 monoblocks are, I have been told that the new Pass Labs Xs preamp and monoblocks are a different animal all together and can drive the Q7s to nirvana. I am curious, but not overly motivated to check this out. The RI-100 is that inspiring.

I must also mention my trusty and reliable Pass Labs INT-30A integrated amp (\$7150) conservatively rated at 30 Class A watts per channel into 8 ohms. As stated in my earlier review, I still feel that it is one of the best values in all of audio. Despite this power rating, the INT-30A has always done a good, if not excellent, job driving virtually every speaker load that has passed through my listening room. In this case, it just does not have the raw power and current to make the Q7s sing like the other amplifiers mentioned here. I have been told by many that despite the 94dB sensitivity rating, the Q7s need plenty of juice to bring out their best. This is only one data point - but it supports that theory.

Paired with the Pass Labs XP-20 preamp, the Krell Evolution 400e monoblocks (\$24,000) rated at 400 watts into 8 ohms is an interesting comparison. For me, Krell has come a long way from the old-school days that defined the brute force solid state amplifier market. The late Lou Reed would no longer cry out "White Light/White Heat" as the 400es have plenty of soul and more warmth than I would have guessed. However, matched up with the Q7s, I still found the RI-100 to have a slightly more refined and natural presentation in the highs and the mids. Micro and macro dynamics were just more realistic.

Predictably, per the Krell tradition, bass output was very impressive with additional weight and energy over the RI-100. Slam was about the same, maybe just slightly tipped to the Krell's favor. I prefer the tighter rock-solid bass provided by the RI-100. On occasion during certain recordings, I felt the bass was getting in the way of the midrange—still the most important grade on my report card. Maybe if paired with a Krell preamp, and when utilizing Krell cast interconnects rather than XLR, we might find different results. Even so, if you want to add some giddy-up to your Led Zeppelin, the 400es driving the Q7s might just be your cup of tea.

RI-100 Phono Stage

The RI-100 has been out for some time now, but the new player in the ball game is the optional integrated phono stage. Even at \$1000, this phono stage cannot be considered an afterthought. Nothing is from Vitus Audio.

Overall gain is 65dB which suits well for most moving magnet (MM) cartridges, and many high output moving coil (MC) cartridges. Cartridges with at least .50 mV of output are recommended for proper compatibility. There is no switching for MM and MC settings, but specific impedance loads can be custom ordered and set at the factory, or delivered off the shelf at 100 ohms.

I use a Van den Hull Frog MC cartridge with a relatively high output of .85 mV. It was a piece of cake for the RI-100. I have used the Frog at many different settings depending on the phono stage. Yes, I wish I could play with the impedance, but at this price I was happy to get as much quality and investment into the actual circuit design.

Based on my past experience, guidance from Hans-Ole, and discussions with my friends at VPI Industries (always a good source for advice on anything analog and they have considerable experience with all VdH cartridges), I had the factory set the impedance load at 1000 ohms.

What do you get for your \$1000? Again, not much of a cash outlay compared to the other equipment in this system, but I would call this option an absolute steal! We are not talking here about the Vitus Audio MP-P201 phono stage (\$60,000), yet the level of transparency and natural bloom is outstanding at all frequencies. Bass seemed just slightly truncated if at all, but highs were exciting with plenty of life and proper harmonics. Soundstage and imaging were impressive.

I compared the RI-100 to two standalone phono stages on hand: the Pass Labs XP-15 (\$3800) and the Joule Electra OPS-4ME (\$8800). From a sound perspective, the overall output was somewhere in between as expected. Not quite as warm and rich as the tube design OPS-4ME and not quite as dynamic and locked in as the solid-state XP-15.

The XP-15 had a slight advantage in bass depth and slam—but it was close. The mids on the OPS-4SME were more creamy and lush—the RI-100 phono stage was more accurate. Both standalones had a slightly more sophisticated presentation, yet the RI-100 had advantages in terms of speed, detail, and a more extended sound stage.

Again, could the RI-100 phono stage sound better if you there was an opportunity to dial in impedance settings? Probably. Would it be nice if the phono stage could handle low output MC cartridges? Yes. However, if like me you want to eliminate boxes, or if you are seeking some additional flexibility until investing more later, this is a no brainer.

Magico Q7 Speakers

My focus here is on the sound. I will not go into all the extraordinary specifications and design choices for the Magico Q7 speakers. The Q7s are an engineering marvel. Please see the graphic below and the Magico website for additional details. Needless to say, the Q7s are an aesthetic and technical tour de force.

You can take the first four paragraphs above for the RI-100 and paste them in right here. Well, rather than have you back track, I am actually going to do that for you. My apologies for the redundancy, but these two products speak the same language. Just want to reaffirm the point about synergy.

The Magico Q7 speakers are without compromise from any possible perspective or listening criteria. They can provide some of the most neutral, detailed, and transparent sound that I have heard in my listening room. The Q7s are lightning quick. There is no edge or whiteness along for the ride. Timbre, pitch, and tone is spot on. There is no romance—all artificial harmonics are stripped away, and you are left with the real thing.

When driven by the right equipment, the Q7s can handle the most demanding low frequencies with an iron grip. Texture and slam is the best. Let me be clear, the sound is not lean. If you love a certain amount of warmth and additional bloom to your bass, look elsewhere. No overhang, no mid bass hump—just a vivid articulate presentation that will make you believe.

Highs and mids are wonderfully fleshed out without excessive bite or grain. Strings, woodwinds, and female vocals are always a tough challenge. I have never heard better on vinyl, SACDs, and 192 files. Even well recorded CDs can raise the hair on the back of your neck as Yo Yo Ma, John Coltrane, or Sarah Vaughn work their way into a frenzy. Like no other transducer that I have experienced, piano recordings finally have the correct weight, timbre, and inner density.

Soundstage is vast and extensive beyond the speakers when the music calls for it. You will not find any manipulation or false dimensions as you listen deep into the recording venue. Imaging is consistently superb and almost holographic with the very best recordings. You don't have to lean into the music to see and hear these variables, just sit back and absorb.

The biggest compliment that I can give the Q7 speakers is that they are like chameleons. They have no limitations as far as my ears can tell, they reflect whatever is handed off. Matched with components based on your specific listening biases, you can build a killer system that will satisfy your personal taste and needs like never before. In my case, the RI-100 fits the bill nicely.

Do you admire what small monitors can do for jazz quartets and chamber music? Despite their size, the Q7s can do this with ease. Presentation can be as intimate and delicate as the best. Do you love female vocals on electrostatic speakers? For many, excessive bass or an overbearing tremble can mask the emotional connection on flagship goliaths. Managing the output and crossover performance on multiple dynamic drivers can be troublesome. The Q7s are seamless. Female vocals come through like the real thing and without distraction.

Do you lean towards pop, rock, and on occasion some wild electronic music? The Q7s can rock and bang with the best. You can feel it in your heart and your arse! Do you enjoy huge orchestral symphonies with choral backgrounds that extend past your listening room walls? Not a problem. Orchestra Hall in Chicago has come to stay.

Do you crave proper weight, pitch, and timbre when considering piano, brass, woodwinds, or strings? You have never heard a Bosendorfer piano sound like this before.

Talk about dynamic punch and thunder! Trumpets have the correct amount of blat and aggression without edge. You can clearly hear the reedy woody smack and jump factor on clarinets and saxophones. Violin and viola are easy to differentiate—even on digital recordings. You can sense the bow skating along the strings and rosin floating in the air on acoustic bass. There is never any confusion when listening to steel versus nylon strings on acoustic guitar.

A closely miked audiophile recording is not necessary to hear any of the above, the Q7s deliver.

Comparisons

I have not had the opportunity to compare the Magico Q7 speakers to some of the other flagship models—only at the major shows, not always under ideal conditions. I debated whether I should add any thoughts about the Q7s in contrast to some of the other speakers that have spent considerable time with in my listening room. Many audiophiles are familiar with all four. All are extraordinary products, and all are highly respected if not cherished for their sound performance—and rightly so.

Some would argue that the difference in pricing is so extensive that any comparison would seem unfair, if not ridiculous. Despite this, I strongly feel that my comments can provide some interesting and educational insight. Yes, the Q7s are better, but are they worth it? Only your ears and bank account can make that decision, but some of the fundamental differences that I was hearing just might help you understand the level performance that the Q7s can provide.

I have been a huge Sonus Faber fan for many years. I continue to be a strong advocate and believer. I have owned, at one time or another, their entire Homage line of speakers—including every new generation of the Amati. There is something almost surreal about their reproduction of strings and vocals. I can understand why many listeners prefer these speakers regardless of the competition.

You would think that it would be a tough transition from Sonus Faber to Magico. Many have the impression that Sonus Faber speakers lean towards the musical end of the scale, and Magico speakers lean towards the "truth to the source" end of the scale. I don't agree with either statement. Despite these over simplifications, the transition to the Q7s was immediate and without pause.

Sonus Faber has been rolling out a new design philosophy over the last couple of years. Current models like the Amati Futura (\$36,000) can provide detail and speed to satisfy many, if not most, ardent fans of these variables. The Stradavari Homage (\$45,000) still have the best ported bass response of any speakers that I have heard in my listening room.

As good as these speakers are the Q7s take it up a couple of notches. Again, at this difference in price, they should. The point here is that the Q7s are extremely transparent and fast, yet can still provide a very natural and musical presentation—even when compared to benchmarks like Sonus Faber. The sealed bass cabinet design of the Q7 has opened my eyes and ears to new possibilities for low end performance. I am hearing qualities at all frequencies that I have never heard before. The Q7s have set new standards for my listening room. They can handle the entire scale.

The Vienna Acoustic Klimt the Music (\$30,000) is another outstanding performer with a wonderfully addictive disposition. Their sound reminds me of the Magicos—a blistering fast neutral response, yet still silky and smooth. However, the treble and bass output of the Q7s are from a different planet. The contrast is not subtle. With the Q7s, highs seem to flow endlessly with even more air and extension. Bass slam and texture are so much more stimulating and organic.

Lastly, we have the B&W 800D speakers (\$24,000). At this price, I find the 800D's to exceed most, if not all expectations. PRAT (pace, rhythm, and timing) is everything you could want. Soundstage and imaging are beyond reproach. Mids and bass can measure up to anything in this price range and much more. These babies can really rock, very exciting stuff.

However, I remain unconvinced about the diamond tweeters. On the very best material, I heard plenty of stimulating and rewarding response. When directly compared to the Q7s and their beryllium tweeters, and with recordings of less quality, the sound could be almost clinical, if not ruthless. Maybe I just did not experiment enough to find the right combination of components, but I would prefer just a bit more roundness with some additional natural harmonics coming out of that tweeter. Again, the Q7s can give it all without compromise.

Music

***Musica Nuda* - Petra Magoni & Ferruccio Spinetti (CD)**

I know that many who regularly attend the big audio shows will probably sneer, but this recording can be very revealing and useful. Lately, it seems like every show demonstration either begins or ends with this CD. Since so many are familiar, the hope is that you can relate to what I am trying to communicate and how special the RI-100 and Q7 combination can be.

This is basically a closely miked recording of an acoustic bass player and female vocalist. There is a wonderful flair and entertainment to the delivery. All of the tracks are covers of hits from various rock bands, soul singers and even movie soundtracks.

I find the sound of this CD to be right on the fence for that "musical" vs. "truth to the source" discussion. If your system is just slightly analytical, you will feel the pain as acoustic bass and vocals kick in on certain passages.

Track one is "Eleanor Rigby" by the Beatles. From the first note, the sound quality will surprise and startle you. Ferruccio bangs away at his acoustic bass with some amazing sizzle and authority. There are plenty of thrilling dynamic shifts as the performance rattles through your listening room. I have never heard bass reproduced like this before. So much speed. So much detail. Tight! Tight! Tight! Yet never analytical with just the right amount of bloom and weight.

When Petra ramps up at the end of the song, the words "all the lonely people, where do they all come from?" are repeated over and over again until a brilliant vocal crescendo reaches its peak. Despite all the drama, with the Q7 and RI-100, her voice is just as natural and flowing as running water.

This is not always the case. More often than not, I have been forced to leave a listening room while this CD was playing—even with many cost no object systems. Not this time. I stayed glued to my chair and my smile never left either!

Duke Ellington – *Dukes Big 4* (CD)

This is one of my go to CDs for evaluating piano reproduction. Duke Ellington in a small group session is something special. This one took place in 1973 at the tender age of 74 on the Pablo label. The JVC XRCD release is my favorite version of many available.

Despite the advance of father time, Duke was still swinging with the best back in the 1970s. The quartet also includes Joe Pass on guitar, Ray Brown on bass, and Louis Bellson on drums. Produced by Norman Granz and engineered by Val Valentin, this was an all-star team from virtually any perspective. Track 4, "Prelude to a Kiss" is the highlight of the session and is considered by many as one of the classic compositions of the jazz era.

There is a tremendous amount of ambiance and air to this recording. The RI-100 and Q7s lock in the recording venue, the musicians, and the instruments like no other combination that I have experienced. The speakers disappear and you can feel the joy and sweat and the concentration of all four. These folks are having a blast and thank gosh Granz and Valentin were there to capture it. Glorious!

You have heard it before. Piano is extremely difficult to record and reproduce correctly. There is a certain amount of articulation, impact and realistic timbre that is needed to get it right. No problem here with our dynamic duo. In this case, we also get an almost holographic view into the body of the instrument and the location of the key board as Ellington gracefully and melodically strides through the keys.

There is a sweetness to the rhythm section that belies digital recordings. Don't get me wrong, there is plenty of power and drive that also comes through, but you don't need to consciously seek out any spatial queues or inflections, they spontaneously roll off the stage as if the genuine thing was right there before you.

Rimsky-Korsakov: *Scheherazade* – Fritz Reiner: Conductor - Chicago Symphony Orchestra (LP)

The Classic Records 45 rpm two record set of this recording is a joy to behold. Long an audiophile classic on 33 rpm vinyl, you just might think that you are hearing it for the first time.

The 45 rpm format, the RI-100, and the Q7s will throw a soundstage at you well beyond the speakers and in all directions. Violins and double bass light up the sound stage and make you squirm in delight.

Woodwinds and brass are dazzling and colorful. My favorite instruments here are harp and flute—imaging and tone are superb as they enter and exit the score. For me, there is no other RCA Living Stereo recording that can compete. The seduction and majesty of the CSO is overwhelming.

I have listened to the CSO at Orchestral Hall, Medinah Temple, and Ravinia. Obviously, never with Reiner and this particular orchestra, but will Georg Solti in the 1990s do? There is something beguiling about hearing a world class group of musicians like this up close and personal. An appropriate amount of foundation and weight never seems to come through in a big orchestral symphony—whether it be on CD or vinyl. I'd love to hear a DSD version. Mr. McGrath (Wilson Audio) and Mr. Kassem (Acoustic Sounds)—are you listening?

For the first time, I have a true sense of the musical power and undercurrent needed from the orchestra to make you feel like you are experiencing close to the real thing. Driven by the RI-100, the Q7s have the unique ability to move so much air and with such immediacy and information, that you will be blown away by the experience. Finally, we can just converge into the music and forget about the equipment. Isn't this the goal for all of us?

Wire & Power Conditioning

I have to be relatively brief here as I have not had the time yet to fully evaluate new products from Synergistic Research and MIT, delivered just before deadline. As mentioned earlier, the good news is that the RI-100 and Q7 allow you to see and hear into every small change in the system like a Carl Zeiss camera lens. Experimenting with wire can be a very instructive exercise.

For the last three years, my standard for speaker cable, interconnects, and power cords have been the Kubala Sosna Elation. There was never any reason to change, though I have auditioned several other high-end products. The Elation is still my benchmark for midrange performance—a combination of natural harmonics and resolution that has not been surpassed (though possibly equaled—see below). Yet, on the frequency extremes and for soundstage and imaging, we may have some new contenders, which is a surprise. The Elation is that good.

The new MIT SL-Matrix products are not your father's MIT. It's always impressive when top of the line technology finds its way to other price points in the portfolio. In this case we steal some thunder from MIT Oracle product development. First impressions indicate that I may have a new standard for bass performance. This is probably no surprise, as MIT has always been known for this quality, but what struck me is the level of unleashed sweeping mids and highs that I now hear. Stay tuned.

Like above, the Synergistic Research Element CTS products utilize trickle down technology from their flagship Galileo designs. At all frequencies, there is so much new information flowing into the listening room now that I find it difficult to take it all in. Active shielding is not new, but these folks have found a practical way to implement it with outstanding results. This stuff easily passes the goose bump test and enhances the RI-100/Q7 combination even further. A full review is in the works.

What has been a true revelation so far is the Synergistic Research Powercell 10 SE MKIII. I have not had good success with power conditioning products in the past. All definitely change the sound in one way or another. For some variables, there is improvement. For others, not so much—maybe even a step back. My experience has been that in every case there just seems to be something wrong. The Powercell does not impede anything, but sorts out all the edge, smear, and distortion that I was never even aware of. It does it in a very natural and holistic way. It does this for everything that I plug into it. You know that I don't like to add boxes to the system. I cannot ignore what this box is doing. Be patient. I can't wait to get my impressions down on paper.



Summary

Well, this has been a very long adventure—six months in the making. As you can tell, I am quite enamored with the Magico Q7 speakers and Vitus Audio RI-100 integrated amplifier. From my perspective, the synergy is both bewitching and brilliant. We talk about discrete things like specifications, technology and response, but these two have simply brought tremendous satisfaction and joy into my listening room. A seductive assault on the senses? Yes! An emotional connection with reality? Yes! Has this commitment to seek the truth finally been realized? Well, we shall see. The journey never ends. Don't you just love this hobby?

Final Note

My guess is that there will be plenty of postscript comments and complaints about the considerable investment required to purchase these components. From a different perspective, there will be many asking why would anyone who can afford spending this much money on speakers ever worry about the costs of all the supporting equipment?

Don't shoot me; I am only the piano player. Just trying to do my job and to communicate to those few fortunate souls who have the interest and the proper budget, or lack thereof, to consider their options. What can I say? Simplify and consolidate is my motto! You might just have a few bucks left over to finally get that BMW 7 Series for the help. After all, the kids do deserve a nice ride to school and soccer games. Must be nice. RS Youman