

CH PRECISION C1, D1, A1 AND WILSON BENESCH A.C.T. ONE EVOLUTION

PART 2

# The other choice

**In the first part of my story about these special and ground breaking products, I explained the ideas and thoughts of these two totally different - but in a way connected - companies through the means of two interviews. CH Precision with its historic and heroic Goldmund background and forward thinking Anagram Technologies experience and Wilson Benesch as the innovator and pioneer in the use of carbon fiber in their products. In this second part my available space will be dedicated to a thorough review of the most recent designs of both parties involved. Products that made me wonder if they would be innovative not only technologically, but sonically as well.**

## CH Precision

After some deliberation with Garmt van der Zel from Audio Ingang - distributor for both brands, we decided to choose an illustrious foursome for this particular review. A combination in which the C1 D-to-A convertor with built-in streaming facility served as the nerve center and two 'small' A1 stereo amplifiers - bridged to mono - would take care of power amplification. The last candidate in the system was to be the very prestigious and most of all very weighty D1 SACD/CD transport/player. This might seem a strange and in this case expensive choice in an age where streaming audio is the default, but as a supporter of the still unbeaten control simplicity and typically engaging sound quality of the different existing disc media, I find this type of high end products still enormously captivating.

## C1 'D/A controller'

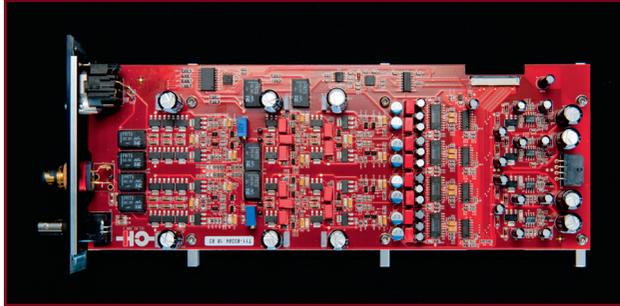
On first acquaintance with CH Precision, these products turn out to be the most solid, weighty and different audio products I have ever had the privilege to meet. Although the looks are not alike, both the choice of materials and certain aspects of their implementation make me think of another well-known Swiss brand: Soudation. In both cases, the enclosure of thick and beautifully machined aluminium

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looks as if it is one single part and the pricing for both is also comparable. Additionally, both Soudation and CH Precision design for almost endless (power supply) stability and the widest possible bandwidth / shortest rise times. That's where similarities between both companies stop and it turns out their design methodology, functionality and musical approach are very different. Despite earlier encounters with CH Precision during shows, I must confess being surprised by the substantial weight of the C1 when lifting it from the box. No thin metal sheet, no tolerance in the fit of the controls and no visible screws or other imperfections... Just a simple but elegant design that feels like it is made out of a single block of solid aluminium. With dimension 44 cm wide, 12 cm high and 44 cm deep, its dimensions are not out of the ordinary. The looks are though... It's beautifully curved fascia featuring only one big two-part turn/press dial and a big AMOLED display looks very balanced and uncluttered.

A beautiful and subtle detail is the red LED in the second 'leg' of the 'H' in the CH logo that shows operating status. By turning and pressing the two-part dial, most of the functionalities of the C1 can be controlled. A very complete set of options can also be accessed through a specially developed Android App. For an owner of very conventional high end products, this really was an eye opener! Apart from configuring display info and sources, a vast amount of other options can be changed. To keep this short, I would like to point to the first part of this story, where these possibilities are detailed. A very solid all-metal remote is also included for the most basic functions. This handsome device is felt-lined on the bottom and can be attached to the side of the C1 by magnetic force. What a great detail! Simple but clever is the mechanical coupling present in each CH Precision product. By using adjustable spikes hidden within the structure of the enclosure, the devices can be easily stacked. Not only does this sound better, it looks fantastic as well. Very smart and practical!

### A1 stereo power amplifier

In the next two boxes, both A1 stereo power amplifiers are packed and these turn out to be wolves in sheep's clothing. Not because they look so much different from the D/A Controller, but the weight has been increased from 24 kg to a back breaking 43 kg! Just as the C1, the A1 is a token of elegance. Not the least because next to the big AMOLED display, only five very tiny round knobs can be found. Although a networked CH Precision system can be fully controlled with a tablet, it is comforting to have a way to control the devices from the front panel.

The A1 can be used in a number of ways: as a stereo power amplifier, bi-amped (both passive and active), bridged or mono (with double power supply). For maximum control and grip on the Wilson Benesch A.C.T. One Evolution, the A1's





were set for bridged operation. A big advantage of this is an increase of the nominal 2 x 100 W (8 Ohm) power to 1 x 350 W. But don't let these numbers fool you, because in use I have found the A1 to be the most stable and powerful power amplifier that has ever graced my listening room, regardless of its configuration!

### D1 (SA)CD transport/player

Although I am used to (I might even say, spoiled by) high end audio, the D1 (SA)CD transport/player still makes a deep impression from the very first moment. Not by its looks, which are mostly identical to the C1, but by its 32 kg weight. A mass which is to my knowledge only surpassed by the famous Japanese manufacturer Esoteric with their Grandioso models. Speaking of Esoteric: CH Precision makes use of their beautifully constructed Esoteric VMK-5 VRDS-Neo in the D1. A mechanism right in line with the amazing touch that

makes the World's best turntables such desirable objects. In this case, it is almost a shame the user is unable to see the beautiful insides of this machine, except enjoying the smooth and silky movement of the solid aluminium tray. The extremely stable and musically convincing presentation however leaves no doubt!

A state of the art optical transport is of course just one (although very important) shackle within a digital disc player's chain and other aspects like mechanical decoupling, construction and digital/analog engineering are just as important. Like mentioned earlier, CH Precision takes great care in the mechanical construction of its products. Other aspects of it's design are just as accomplished however, thanks to the combined Anagram/Goldmund background of its designers. The D1 is a completely modular device, like the other models. This means a very wide choice of output options, including high end surround! As expected, extreme care has been taken to ensure extremely low jitter by means of a VCXO (Voltage Controlled Crystal Oscillator). If this is not enough, a possibility also exists to buy an optional synchronization board. When combined with a similar board in the C1, all clocking will be externally controlled by the C1. To be able to transport uncompressed DSD streams for ultimate performance from the D1 to the C1, CH Precision developed encrypted 'CH Link'. Icing on the cake are the completely discrete, zero feedback, fully balanced circuits, completely biased in class A.

### A.C.T. One Evolution

The full meaning of the acronym A.C.T. is 'Advanced Composite Technology' and refers to the carbon fiber technology that started Wilson Benesch as a venture in 1989 and made the company known and famous. A.C.T is also the name of the first loudspeaker - actually, it was called A.C.T. One - Wilson Benesch made in 1991. The fact that

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designer Craig Milnes and his team again have chosen for this historical, almost 'sacred' name, adding 'Evolution' to point to the new technologies inside, says a lot about the significance of this new Wilson Benesch model in the line-up.

The sloping top, which is so typical for this model has been present in every incarnation of the A.C.T. and the One Evolution version is no exception. Nevertheless, together with the comparable dimension of earlier models, any similarities end. Not only is the Evolution a much taller speaker with its majestic 119 cm height, its 2.5 way bass reflex driver layout with three independently tuned internal compartments is completely different. Apart from the lowest woofer, the main trio of drivers form the Troika system: a concept for optimal tonal coherence and linearity of phase in the very important midrange for a more natural rendition of the original recording. As you may have gathered - Troika is Russian for 'group of three'. The upper 17 cm bass/midrange unit is completely unfiltered and plays uninhibited, while the two other Tactic II units are only filtered by a first order crossover. The 'Semisphere' tweeter, also made in house by Wilson Benesch, has an upper range limit of 30 kHz and is filtered below 5000 (!) Hz by a second order high-pass. In tandem, these drivers are responsible for the completely natural presentation which is so typical of the Geometry series, according to Wilson Benesch. Specifications are quite normal (apart from the weight of 50 kg): frequency range is quoted from 34 Hz - 30 kHz +/- 2 dB and sensitivity is a highish 89 dB. Nominal impedance is 6 Ohm, with 4 Ohm minimum. In theory, it should present a benign load. The A.C.T. One Evolution easily competes with the International elite regarding concept, design and choice of materials.

#### CH Precision listening test

Although I was completely unknown with the CH Precision brand before this review, I wasn't with Wilson Benesch. Not only have I been playing for more than 10 years with the 'Arc' monitor from the 'Odyssey' series in my second system in the living room with total satisfaction, I also have tested several models from this lovely and technologically advanced



company during the last decennium. If I had to describe the sound of all these earlier WB models, it would be characterized as composed, without any exaggerated edges or frills and with a very spacious sound completely free from the cabinets. Tonal balance is usually very even and combines a slightly warm touch with very controlled bass and open sounding treble. Wilson Benesch speakers generally are not bought to go through life jumping on the beat, but for deep and conscious musical satisfaction. One of the main reasons for the described sound characteristic with basically all WB models is the extremely low degree of cabinet colouration and smearing, thanks to the stiff and resonance free carbon fibre enclosure.

Because the A.C.T. One Evolution was delivered a few weeks later than the CH Precision equipment, it was the ideal time to explore the operation and sound of the electronics hailing from Switzerland. The first round of listening begins with streaming audio from the C1 through the means of a separate Synology NAS running Miniserver, supplied to me by the distributor. During the complete evaluation, the unit was used in its complete form, using the built in volume control. It can also be used as a DAC/streamer with the volume at a fixed level.

Although the range of musical expression of these Swiss components almost reaches into the extreme, I found the rated album 'Electrified' by Yello cofounder Boris Blank (Polydor 4708870) to be extremely well suited to these electronics, especially because this very tastefully produced electronic music spans the complete creative gamut of Mr. Blank. Played back through a system that starts and stops the music as perfectly as this one, musical information - hidden on most systems - is brought to the fore almost as transformed. The rendition of tiny sounds in the stereo image - in focus and out of focus and especially the reordering of chaos both in tonal colours and transients always remaining completely in line, makes for extremely compelling listening. The influence of the adjustable amount of feedback in 20% steps in the A1 power amplifiers can also be traced very vividly with this



type of music. The CH Precision components show all the typical solid state virtues from the first moment. Not a cosy emulation of something resembling tubes or fake behaviour trying to confuse the listener. Instead, I immediately hear a very high degree of definition, extreme ease and drive and near perfect control over the loudspeakers connected. Never does the playback have a 'dead' or mechanical character - it remains realistic and relaxed at all times.

#### **Extreme current delivery**

How powerful, even and stable the qualities of these CH Precision components truly are, was quickly evidenced when I received the very impressive YG Carmel II loudspeakers during the review period. As my own Master Contemporary C loudspeakers or the A.C.T. One Evolution were dissipating a 'mere' 140 W during peaks (the track 'Amuseum' from 'James Newton Howard & Friends' - Sheffield Lab CD 23), the YGs were coping with very real extreme levels of 1200 W power, as read from the A1 display. Ouch... That is intense and a testament to the extreme undistorted (!) performance on musical peaks from the bridged A1 power amplifiers with their 350 W (8 Ohm) rating. Just when you were wondering if I might be crazy playing so extremely loudly... I can tell you that these extreme peaks in the music were short and not perceived as overly loudly. Fortunately however, the performance of these amplifiers entails so much more than mere brawn! Generally, they are not flustered or impressed by any single genre, dynamic jump, loud or soft passage - no matter how extreme. I would describe the total tonal signature as 'fast transistor realism' without any frills or false accents.

It's funny most people think that 'fast' amplifiers sound analytical, thin or even shrill - in other words: unmusical. In practice, the opposite is the case most of the time. Anyone fortunate enough to have a listen to the latest generation amplifiers from Spectral Audio, Soudation, Constellation Audio or - for that matter - CH Precision, will realize that the sound instead becomes more fluid, softer, more informative and accurate. Where the confusing may come from, is the fact that all these brands - despite their individual

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sound signatures - in a way sound very neutral. No excess fat, vagueness or 'blowing up' and no exaggeration of harmonics. The latest generation of Spectral Audio amplifiers for example tend to be tonally saturated with a beautiful and infectious combination of ambience and musical realism. The latest Soulution products are tuned richer and more powerful than their predecessors, with extreme bass definition and performance, irrespective of volume level. Constellation Audio has very different priorities and combines a remarkable softness with extreme levels of delicacy and very airy ambience. With CH Precision, aspects like sobriety, endless ease, almost limitless dynamic contrasts without any form of exaggeration and a natural direct form of communication come to the fore. Although each of these brands have their own positive traits, it is CH Precision that forms the most beautiful package of qualities in these products tested. Together with the super solid construction and almost endless tuning/configuration possibilities, I have met a brand that in my opinion belongs in the top echelons of High End audio. Not bad for such a relatively 'young' brand!

### C1 versus D1

Personally interesting for me is the 'battle' between the disc based versus streaming audio. As more or less expected in this price class, I immediately hear the extreme composure and stability that also comes naturally to the top Esoteric players, with which the D1 shares its mechanism. The extreme care taken with the retrieval of information makes the following data handling an easy job and this is what clearly can be heard. In practice, a very even tonal balance without disturbing dissonants can be heard with the D1 and beautifully fleshed out powerful tonal colours. The stereo image is placed ultimately stable and rock solid before, behind and outside of the speakers. Streaming the exact same music, the presentation changes subtly. You could call it more finely pitched and clean, but in absolute terms also less grand, less colourful and in my experience also a bit less emotionally involving. Not less in quality, but ultimately, my preference tends to be (like usual) the physical disc medium.

### Listening to Wilson Benesch

In this second and last listening report, you can meet the beautifully formed Wilson Benesch A.C.T. One Evolution. Beautiful in a way that made me subtly but blatantly greedy when these beauties were gently towed into my listening room. Wow, these loudspeakers look truly beautiful! Just the right use of materials (in my opinion), dimensions and design befitting a pair of loudspeakers costing € 28.500,-/pair. Not particularly 'cheap', but you get a lot in return, like with the CH Precision components. Besides being partnered with CH Precision, the A.C.T. One Evolution was evaluated with a large array of top amplifiers from the likes of Accuphase, T+A HV series, Constellation Audio and Zanden. And although the differences were at times big between these amplifiers, the general impression of this Wilson Benesch remained surprisingly comparable. The first thing that struck me, when compared to its predecessors and other WB models, was the much greater power and drive especially in the lows and lower mids and a much 'softer' tweeter presentation. Where earlier generations could sometimes be described as somewhat 'static' and less involving, the same could not be said about the One Evolution. Stated differently, you could argue that this model is more music oriented. Instead of listening from a certain distance, the listener gets closer to the music and involvement is increased. I did have to get used to the somewhat shy high frequencies. Not that it can be called reticent or even dull, but the presentation of the high frequencies has a softer character, totally devoid of hardness or false accents. Together with the fuller mid bass presentation, this results in a - so eloquently called by a colleague from The Absolute Sound - 'bottom up' balance. In other words a characteristic which is full blooded and rich instead of shrill, thin or threadbare. And yet, this character never veers into colouration and is in essence close to the sound you can perceive in concert halls.





Trying to describe the sound of this speaker with typical audiophile parameters is of no real use because of the almost 1:1 sense of scale and rich live experience. Everything is there and everything is in perfect balance. Just like it needs to be, but is seldom experienced with hifi. To further illustrate my take on the musical presentation of the A.C.T. One Evolution, I would like to let the great American composer David Maslanka describe it himself through his 'Garden of Dreams' (Reference Recordings RR-108) album. This album is full of mysterious music full of sweet promise. The sound comes on at once, can be enormously layered and triumphant, to end again in silence. The tonal colours of this album, it's enormous stereo image and the suspenseful atmosphere are brought fully alive by the CH Precision and A.C.T. One Evolution system, by virtue of its qualities that perfectly match the sound of the album. Together, music and system form a wonderful unity and it makes me think this is how high end music playback should be sounding, totally forgetting all technicalities and be one with the music.

### Conclusion

The system tested here has been the most expensive one to have ever graced my listening room. It is truly a top notch system however that never ever puts a foot wrong and especially shares a lot of common ground with real music. The best thing is that this time the theoretical backgrounds beautifully match the hard reality. Both the CH Precision as Wilson Benesch components share a common and clear vision: a solid and matured design as a basis, molded together into a completely natural and self evident unity with knowledge and craftsmanship. In the first phase, I was very much busy trying out all of the equipments' settings and possibilities – as an example, playing with the

amount of global feedback within the A1 amplifiers, 0% of feedback turned out to be the most natural in my room (the distributor had found different values to be applicable for other loudspeaker designs, rooms or tastes, quoting 40% as the most chosen). But during the course of the review I found myself relaxing - and in the end totally giving in to - the grand musical scale, communication and grandeur. Again, the total cost of the system is quite high and for less it also possible to find musically satisfying products. If you however search for technological, technical and musical perfection in one complete single package, this system scores extremely high. Despite the ambition of both Wilson Benesch as CH Precision to make the best they can make, the best thing is that both companies remain very modest and sober and let the products speak for themselves: beautifully built pieces of art with a deeply rooted vision of quality, but without the false (commercial) bling that typifies so many other brands of the same breed.

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CH Precision and Wilson Benesch

#### PRICES:

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| CH PRECISION D1 SACD/CD DRIVE/PLAYER   | FROM € 30.674,- |
| CH PRECISION C1 PREAMP/DAC/STREAMER    | FROM € 24.866,- |
| CH PRECISION A1 STEREO POWER AMPLIFIER | FROM € 28.072,- |
| WILSON BENESCH A.C.T. ONE EVOLUTION    | € 28.500,-/PAIR |

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