



Associated Equipment:

Analog Front End

Audio Aero Capotole MK-II

EMM Labs/Meitner DAC 6

Philips SACD-1000 (used as a transport [modified by EMM Labs])

SME 30/SME-IV.vi turntable/tonerarm

Manley Steelhead phono stage

Clearaudio Insider and Van den Hul Colibri cartridge

Amplification

Lamm M1.1 hybrid power amplifiers

Switchman II preamplifier

Tenor 75 OTL amplifiers

Loudspeakers

Kharma Midi-Grands

(2) REL Stentor III sub-bass systems

Cabling

Nordost Valhalla speaker cables and interconnects

Accessories

ASC 20" Super Tube Traps

Michael Green's ceiling and corner wall pillows

A Match Made In Heaven: The Kharma Grand Ceramique Midi 1.0 Loudspeakers and Tenor Audio Classic Series 75wp OTL Monoblock Amplifiers

A Love Story In Two Acts

Frank Peraino
18 August 2003



Specifications

Kharma Grand Ceramique Midi 1.0

Type: Three-way dynamic with ported enclosure

Size: Loudspeaker 14" W x x 49" H x x 22 " D;

Weight: 170 lbs. (180 lbs. with stands)

Bandwidth: 28-25khz

Impedance: 8 Ohms.

Sensitivity 91 dB 1W/m

Features:

1" Titanium Tweeter (modified)

7" Concave Ceramic Mid-bass driver:

11" Nomex/Kevlar bass driver

Finish: Aubergine

Price: \$32,500 (includes SDDS Stands) (note: the former optional \$4,000 "Enigma" upgrade consisting

of cable, cryogenic treatment and crossover will now be standard in the U.S. on all Midi-Grands at the new price of \$36,500; optional diamond tweeter also available, call dealer for pricing)

Tenor 75Wp

Rated power @ 4, 8, 16 Ohms: 55, 75, 75 W

Dynamic headroom: 6dB

Class A power: 40W

Harmonic distortion at rated power: < 0.5%

Signal to noise ratio: 100 dB A

Input impedance: 40 K Ohms

Output impedance: 0.4 Ohms

Input sensitivity: 700 mV

RCA or XLR, input

Bias and DC balance meter



Input tube (pairs): 12AX7A, 6H6P, 6H30P
 Output tube: 4 x 6C33C-B
 Oiled cherry wood hand finished
 Dimensions: (17.25" x 11" x 23") (W/H/D)
 Weight (each): net 70 lbs.
 Shipping weight per pair: 180 lbs.
 Warranty Amplifier/Tubes: 3 yr/1 yr
 Price: \$20,900

Prologue: "Synergy and balance, grasshopper - that is the secret of the meaning of life" (and audio)

The More We Know, the More We Know We Don't Know

Life for me is a matter of perspective. That perspective has been heavily influenced by, and is in large part the product of, among other things, my experiences. My audio life is certainly no different. I still recall with fondness my first infatuation with the intoxicating allure of music at age 11. About a year and a half later, I developed an almost equal attraction to the equipment conveying the music. I was just twelve the first time I saw the "hi fidelity" department at a local Korvettes Department store and was immediately smitten by the Dual and Thorens turntables, the Marantz and McIntosh receivers, and by the Ohm, Wharfdale and Advent speakers. I knew then that I HAD to have them and I saved every cent from a newspaper route in order to purchase my first system, comprised of a Dual 1019 turntable with Ortofon cartridge, a Marantz 2230 receiver, and a pair of Ohm speakers. Well, my fascination with music led to the study of jazz and classical music and an all too brief six-year career as a professional trumpet player (cut short by an accident that destroyed my "chops"). However, my love of both music and equipment continues even more passionately today, some 36 years later.

Thirty years ago, I also had a fascination with automobiles that, by virtue of waning interest and the need to prioritize my spending habits, has fallen by the wayside. However, an analogy to automobiles may help clarify what I have experienced in my audio journey. Back in 1970, I bought a Dodge Charger (yes, those were the days of "true" muscle cars: Holly carburetors, Hurst shifters, "mags" and white lettered tires reigned supreme). I thought that car was a genuine muscle car extraordinaire. Well, that is until I drove a friend's Hemi-Cuda (they just don't make 'em like that any more!) Years later, as a gift to myself for surviving law school, I bought a Nissan 300ZX and thought it was the ultimate performance machine-that is until I drove a Porsche 930 Turbo and drooled all the way home from the dealership (my friend worked there and let me test drive it). You get the drift. I was happy with what I had, believing my car, in each case, to be the pinnacle of performance (based on my experiences at the time, they were). However, it was not until I drove something even better that I could understand, appreciate or put into perspective the relative strengths and weaknesses, or the performance parameters of my automobile



automobile.

Although the designs of the early Mac and Marantz gear still hold their own against today's designs in many ways (I still own a number of early Marantz pieces), throughout the past 15-20 years of both purchasing and reviewing equipment, I have had to consistently re-think what I considered top shelf or state-of-the-art (at least for the time and in my experience). Even though I have thoroughly enjoyed music through most of the equipment I have been privileged to audition, own or review, I have always felt that there were certain areas of the system or sound that could be improved or modified to reach that audio Holy Grail. Don't get me wrong, because I enjoy music so much, I have had many incredibly enjoyable listening sessions over the years where I was swept up in the emotion of the music, whether conveyed on my very first system, my car stereo, my meager office system or my then current reference system, without obsessing over what was wrong with the sound. What has changed over those years is that the bar has been raised on the level of realism, harmonic purity, dynamic impact, and subtle detail I have come to both enjoy and expect from a high fidelity system.

This leads me to my current review of the Kharma Midi-Grand Ceramique and the Tenor 75 monoblock OTL amplifiers. Before I begin, I would like to admit that I am breaking one of my own rules and why I am doing something I usually do not like when done in other audio rags: writing a review of two components together. Although I will describe my evaluations of both components apart from the other, my compelling reason for reviewing these two incredible musical instruments together will become obvious to readers. While I will keep my life's lessons in mind and NOT state that this piece or that piece of gear is the BEST (at least on an absolute basis - which I personally do not believe can ever be claimed in this highly subjective and system dependent hobby), I will state up front, that the final incarnation of my system as reviewed with the Kharms and Tenors has produced the best sound I have ever heard in my 36 years in this hobby. It is also the first system I have heard, where I honestly do not know how or where improvements could be made to further my audio objectives (which I know, from past experience, may very well change in the future), and the only system that is equally adept at any of the wildly varying genres of music I listen to.



ACT I -- "Look grasshopper! A reflection of musical harmony"

The Kharma Grand Ceramique Midi (GrCeM) 1.0 Loudspeakers

Description

The Kharma Grand Ceramique Midi 1.0, as part of the Reference Ceramique line, is in the middle of the Kharma speaker hierarchy between the Ceramique line (Kharma's lower priced line) and the Exquisite line (Kharma's all out assault on the state of the art). The Midi-Grands are a three-way design using a 1" titanium dome Focal tweeter (highly modified by Kharma) handling frequencies above 2kHz, a 7" concave Accuton ceramic midrange driver (treated with a substance called AVT for dissipating vibration into

heat) handling frequencies between 150 Hz and 2kHz, and an 11" Nomex/Kevlar Eaton woofer doing duty below 150Hz (acoustically treated as well). The Midi-Grands utilize a series crossover (although not totally unique in high-end audio, they are more the exception than the rule in speaker designs, with most multiple driver designs using parallel crossovers) which, if I were a betting man, I believe is responsible for much of the utter seamlessness and coherence of this speaker. But I am getting ahead of myself here. The Midis can be bi-wired and are supplied with jumpers made from the same material as the associated internal wiring. Also included as standard equipment are the Kharma SDSS stands, which are substantial and very effective. The fit and finish of the entire package is first class and gorgeous. My review pair was finished in Aubergine (one of those fancy terms for eggplant!), with subtle metallic speckles which, at certain angles in direct sunlight, looks like gloss black. Whatever color you want to call it, it is beautiful (the finish is reportedly applied in Italy).



Although I had read and heard various comments and various accounts about Kharma speakers, I had never had the opportunity to hear any Kharma speaker before the January 2003 CES. I also had a number of audio e-buddies that I had befriended over the months who raved about these speakers, so I went to Las Vegas with the Kharmas on my shortlist of "must hear" components. Kharma was demonstrating its 3.2 Reference Monitor and the Midi-Grand Ceramique at CES 2003. As I was most interested in hearing the bigger brother, I spent considerably more time in the Midi-Grand room. The Midis were powered in Las Vegas by the venerable Tenor 75 watt OTLs fed directly by an Audio Aero Capitole MK-II CD player. What I heard at CES was an incredibly coherent speaker with a huge soundstage, captivating midrange, world-class imaging and finesse, and with what I thought was good but not outstanding bass (MUCH more on this later). I found myself time and time again in the Khama/Tenor room or the Rockport/Tenor room listening to my favorite discs. This experience led me to conversations with Bill Parish, the Kharma importer and his offer to ship the show pair of Midi-Grands¹ to me direct from Las Vegas-an offer I accepted without hesitation.



Setup and Associated Equipment

When the Midi-Grands arrived at my home, I uncrated them and carefully walked them into my listening room (sans stands) and let them settle in for a day. I began my set-up with the speakers about 5 feet from the back wall and 3.5 feet from the side walls (measured from the front baffle, and the middle of the tweeter). I ultimately ended up with the speakers approximately 68" from the back wall and 34" from the side walls, with no toe-in at all (as suggested by Kharma). My review of the Midi-Grands took place in two phases. The first phase lasted approximately two and a half months and found the Midis driven by an Audio Aero Capitole MK-II direct into a pair of Lamm M1.1 hybrid power amplifiers. During this phase, I also experimented with augmenting the Midis with my two (2) REL Stentor III sub-bass systems. The second phase lasted approximately three months and had the Midis driven initially by the Capitole and then by the new heavyweight contender EMM Labs/Meitner digital gear, i.e. the DAC 6, Philips SACD-1000 as a transport (modified by EMM Labs) and the Switchman II

preamplifier, into the Tenor 75 OTL amplifiers. Also doing duty during phase two was the SME 30/SME-IV.vi turntable/toner arm combo, the Manley Steelhead phono stage and a Clearaudio Insider and Van den Hul Colibri cartridge. Speaker cables and interconnects were Nordost Valhalla. My listening room is 14' x 17.5' feet and treated with various treatments including ASC 20" Super Tube Traps; Michael Green's ceiling and corner wall pillows; the ability to vary between absorption, diffusion or reflection on the front and back walls and treatments for first side wall reflections.

"Relax your mind and listen to the different sounds, grasshopper -- understand first the sum of the parts"

You Say You Need a Good Foundation? You Bet Your Bottom Dollar They Do Bass!

The first thing that caught my attention in my listening room was that the bass response was much better than what I had heard in Las Vegas. Normally this would not have surprised me, considering the often compromised and occasionally horrific acoustics in so many CES rooms. However, considering that: (1) one of my favorite reviewers had previously reported that this same pair of Midi-Grands could not produce any kind of respectable bass; and (2) my own impressions in Las Vegas were that the Midis produced good but not excellent bass, what I was hearing was so antithetical to both that report and my own CES experience, I have to admit I was mildly shocked, but very pleasantly surprised. Before I expand on the excellent bass response I was hearing, I would like to address what I think happens all too often to audio lovers and reviewers alike, which, unless at least disclosed or addressed, will often lead people to unfairly judge a component. Most of us are aware that our rooms are one of the most, if not THE most, important components in our system and that a bad room may compromise the rest of our system to the extent of rendering even the most highly regarded or sophisticated components drab, uninvolved or, at best, "average." To add insult to injury, if the room hasn't already reduced a good component to the equivalent of a Bose Wave Radio, mismatching components can deliver the final knockout punch. Yes, I know most of us are aware of these audio pitfalls, and that we valiantly attempt to avoid them. However, it is not always as easy as it seems. Unless a reviewer has either unlimited funds or unlimited access to a professionally designed and acoustically perfect room, as well as unlimited access to associated equipment of all types and price points, the equipment is going to be placed in a "reference" system that may not be suited for the component and in a less than perfect room (at least it may be less than perfect for that piece of equipment). As such, the reviewer must be both responsible and cautious in an attempt to avoid or minimize: (a) mismatching the component (this can include anything from the typical mismatching of an inefficient planar speaker with a low powered amp to pairing a \$40,000 speaker with a \$1,000 amplifier, to irresponsible set-up); (b) changing anything in the system other than the component to be reviewed (this can be impossible when trying to avoid the pitfalls in (a) above); or (c) due to the aforementioned inherent limitations, ascribing any absolute qualities to the component if there is any chance such

constraints have compromised its performance in any material way.

I mention these obstacles as one way of explaining why the Midi-Grands would sound so different to both a previous reviewer and to myself at CES, than they did in my system at home. I can speculate that my treated room and ancillary equipment were the differences. Whatever you attribute it to, I can emphatically and unequivocally state that the speaker I was hearing had anything but insufficient bass response. For me, whether a particular speaker has good bass is more than just a matter of whether it has too much or too little bass. That speaker's bass response must also be judged on the basis of its speed, articulation, decay, texture, harmonics and its lack of intrusion on the rest of the frequency spectrum. This is one area where the lessons learned in my automobile analogy apply in my audio experiences. Having the Midi-Grands in my system proved to be another of life's lessons where I gained a greater understanding of the limitations of my previous system and my previous reference speakers. I have come to believe that many "audiophiles" and reviewers alike listen to and prefer speakers, music or entire systems with a definite mid-bass emphasis or bloat. I have no qualms with such an emphasis if that is your preference. However, until I heard what the harmonically accurate and beautifully textured bass response of the Midis did to allow the rest of the frequency spectrum to sing out in bold relief, I was unaware of what I had previously been missing (I guess ignorance was bliss). I do NOT want the reader to misinterpret what I just said as a disguised description of a bass deficient or wimpy speaker-do so at your own peril.

During the second phase of my review (with the incredible Tenor 75s and the EMM Labs gear), I had the opportunity to have Mike Arnopol, the talented bassist for Patricia Barber, come by my home. Mike and I had purchased some equipment from each other, and while picking up some gear he decided to listen to my system for a while. Mike had commented during a previous phone call how almost all of the mega-buck systems he has heard were sadly disappointing, and that they just could not reproduce an acoustic bass that didn't sound "boomy." As Mike noted, an acoustic bass produces more of "thud" with harmonic overtones than a boom. Mike sat and listened for a while when he asked me to do something he normally doesn't do - he asked if I had any of "Patti's" stuff so he could hear himself as a familiar reference. I produced the goods and told him to pick his poison. After inserting the *Modern Cool* disc and hitting the "play" button on the mighty EMM Labs combo, Mike sat there stunned. He told me he had never heard his bass or the group sound so true on any system before. Mike then asked if I had one of his "guilty pleasure" discs - a not so common R&B, funky, soulful CD by the Brand New Heavies (sorry Mike!). Having eclectic tastes in music, I had the disc. This CD, unlike *Modern Cool*, has plenty of heavy electric bass and thumping bass drum. Turning on the dime, the Midis now conveyed all the slam and impact with articulation and decay, but without exaggeration or bloat, thereby infusing the music with more emotional impact. What this disc, like disc after disc demonstrated, was that the Midis were delivering more truthful bass and delivering it in much better balance with the rest of the frequency spectrum. This was allowing a fuller, more detailed midrange to emerge, paving the way for the most coherent and seamless overall

presentation I have heard from any speaker in my system.

A case in point of this emotion emancipating "balance" I was hearing was on Chris Botti's *First Wish* CD (1995 Verve Records). Through the Tenors and the EMM Labs gear, the Midis did something no other transducer was able to accomplish to date - get me to listen to Track #6!!! Why, you may ask? Well, the answer lies in the delivery, not the music. Prior to the Midis, I would listen most often to track #1 then skip to track #5 and immediately either skip to another track or stop the disc when track #6 would begin. You see, *First Wish* is a very bass potent disc with plenty of programming (both of the drum and bass variety) and on track #6, the bass was always so bloated and overstated in my room that it distracted from the music to the extent of rendering it unlistenable. I had always chalked this off to an over zealous recording engineer pandering to the typical "boom-box" mentality. However, here I was taking notes on the Midis while listening to track #5 when I suddenly realized I was 3/4ths of the way through track #6 and loving every minute of it! Holy Kick Drum Batman! This track sounded like an entirely new song! GONE, was the bass bloat! In its place was a powerful, deep, extended bass line free of the congesting overhang that had previously so obscured the midrange, particularly Chris' rich tone-truly an emotional revelation on this disc! I could go on and on about disc after disc, where the artists' emotional message had been freed of this truly annoying and infringing bass bloat. It was easy now to differentiate the subtle difference between bass with proper decay and harmonic overtones, and that infringing overhang that had so obscured midrange detail before. At no time did this freedom come at the expense of visceral impact, deep extension or, in particular, articulate and harmonically rich bass which the Midis were delivering in spades in my room. **Let me state this as simply as I can - the Midis do bass and they do it superbly!** So much so, in fact, that this is the very first speaker (in a long line of respectable contenders) that did not benefit from my mighty REL Acoustics Stentor III subwoofers (now in my second system and doing great duty there). Mr. van Oosterum likely did not anticipate use of a sub when designing these speakers, as their world-class coherence and transparency was adversely affected with a subwoofer (and the REL is one of the best).

The Magic is in the Midrange You Say?

Color me a fan of the Kharma concave ceramic midrange driver. The midband of the Midis was a glorious montage of unveiled and crystal clear resolution, truthful tonality, and complex, non-sterile harmonic textures. What it wasn't was a hyper-analytical, "hey look at me" in-your-face frontal attack. To use a 1950's female movie star analogy, the midrange didn't draw attention to itself in a bold and provocative Marilyn Monroe sort of way, but rather in a confident, subtle yet alluringly "pure and honest [as far as you know] girl next door" Audrey Hepburn kind of way. What this did for the emotional content of the music cannot be overstated. No longer was it even remotely tempting to play half a cut from a song off this "demonstration" disc or 30 seconds from that "audiophile-approved" disc to impress either myself or anyone else. Heck, pop anything in the CD drawer and let's sit back and enjoy! I was being caressed and seduced without ever being frontally attacked or bored by a lack of resolution. If the magic truly is in

the midrange, I felt like freaking David Copperfield!!!

Ah, But What About Up Top?

Yes, it's a titanium tweeter and metal is supposed to sound bright and etched, right? NOT! I do not know exactly how or why Charles van Oosterum modifies these Focal tweeters (reportedly including draining the ferro fluid and removing the tioxide coating), nor do I care, since the end justifies whatever means he uses! With such stellar bass and midband performance, tilted up or bright sounding treble extension would have surely been a let down. But this was not to be. The treble is where I believe that most difficult of my expectations was not only met, but surpassed: delivering outstanding resolution and detail, while preventing the highs from being harsh or etched, through a means other than simply rolling them off! That the Midis have detail was evidenced by their performance with two of my all time favorite CDs; both discs have passages where the singer faintly whispers a phrase that is barely audible, let alone decipherable. In each case, the phrase I had never understood, was finally clear enough to understand. Other musical subtleties were now both more clearly delineated and harmonically richer as well. As a former professional trumpet player-although I am partial to trumpet players-I am more critical of a system when listening to them. If the system doesn't let me clearly decipher the bright and piercing tone of Maynard Ferguson from the mellow seductive tone of Chris Botti, or reveal the differences between the raspy, full-bodied, and occasionally biting tones of a Nicholas Payton, Roy Hargrove or Terrel Stafford, I stand up and take notice immediately! Through the Midis, my favorite trumpet players came to life, when applicable, with that biting or crisp edge yet they were always tonally accurate, leaky spit valves and all! If life is in the details, now I was feeling like CNN!!!!

"Now grasshopper, it's time to listen to hear if these different sounds work together in harmony as one for a greater good"

How Are the Parts Presented You Ask? How about the BIG Picture?

Big is not certainly the right word here! HUGE, now there's a word. How about ENORMOUS? GIGANTIC? EXPANSIVE? PANORAMIC? Stop me any time you like because they all apply! The soundscape and stage presentation coming from these two mid-sized, shiny boxes has to be heard, to be believed. I have come to enjoy and appreciate all the different musical aspects that various types of audio equipment can bring to the table. I have an SET system in my bedroom with the immediacy, delicacy, and air that breathe life into intimate jazz vocals. I have a set of electrostatics that serve up speed and transparency in spades. But if you want the feel, emotion, and dynamic impact of a large orchestra, or the illusion of a live band spread out across your favorite outdoor amphitheater, look no further (hint, you will not find it in my SET system or with most other small systems). You think monitors image well? They do-but certainly no better, and in many cases, not nearly as well as the Midis. You think monitors disappear? They do-but Harry Houdini ain't got nothing on the Midis. Anytime you want to hear a panoramic presentation extending in a seemingly limitless fashion

beyond the boundaries of your listening room, listen to what the Kharma Midi-Grands can do, driven by the Tenors and the EMM Labs gear on such majestic soundtracks as *Gladiator* or *Titanic*. Better yet, let me share with you my experience near the end of my auditioning on Track #6 from the *Braveheart* soundtrack. It was a typical late night (maybe there IS something to this theory that the power is better after midnight!) session, during which I was in a soundtrack sort of mood. I pushed "play" on the transport and settled in for a roller coaster mood ride. What transpired on Track #6 is almost beyond exaggeration or hyperbole. If I hadn't known what system I was listening to, I would have sworn I was listening to a 5 channel, 5 speaker, SACD presentation. The music was emanating from places all around me: directly beside me, behind me, in the middle of the speakers, beyond the speakers -- it was downright eerie!

To make the presentation even more convincing, the images were precisely focused and hung, suspended throughout the stage. The air around the instruments allowed for a "reach out and walk through the band" feel, while the Midis' macro and microdynamic capabilities served up a start-and-stop-on-a-dime contrast without even a scintilla of congestion. Finally, if I had to choose a single most impressive characteristic of the Kharma Midi-Grands, it would without a doubt be its utter seamlessness and coherence. All of the constraints and limitations normally inherent and associated with "box" speakers and multiple driver integration are simply non-existent in the Kharms. I challenge anyone to claim they can hear the transition between the drivers. Heck, so smooth and unnoticeable is the hand-off from woofer to midrange driver to tweeter that it would make the best Olympic relay team or NFL quarterback envious!! Are you getting the impression I LOVED these speakers? Don't like rave reviews? Then look elsewhere. For me, to fault these speakers would either be a pretentious intellectual fishing expedition, or an outright fabrication. Are the Midis perfect? No. No transducer is. Can I find areas where they can be improved? Not at this time. Then again, if I learned anything from my early automobile purchasing experiences and my 36 years in this hobby, there MAY be a better speaker than the Kharma Mid-Grand out there-I just haven't met it yet. On second thought, hey Bill, can I get a pair of those Kharma Exquisites! Oh sure, the Midis' price of admission is steep, so I guess one could criticize them for this. Are they worth the cost? In my opinion, absolutely if you value the sound of real instruments and real voices, and you enjoy live music, particularly of the unamplified kind (although the Midis reproduced my beloved Tower of Power in the most believable fashion yet!). Finally, I urge the reader to take note of the fact that, although my admiration of the Kharma Midi-Grand is unwavering, to extract what this speaker is truly capable of the Midis must be set up properly in the room, accompanied by associated equipment commensurate with their stature, and that will showcase their many strengths. A case in point: what I firmly believed to be already tremendous performance from the Midis when mated with my former reference Lamm M1.1 hybrid amplifiers and the Audio Aero Capitole MK-II, was convincingly eclipsed by the harmonic purity and lifelike realism of the Tenor 75s and the industry standard-setting EMM Labs digital gear. This pairing revealed that the Midis are capable of mind-numbing realism so please read on to Part II of this review for the details.

To say that I enjoyed the Midi-Grands is like saying that Bill Gates has a small nest egg. The Kharma Midi-Grand is a stunning musical masterpiece, conveying in the most coherent manner this reviewer has ever heard, every last drop of emotional and intellectual detail, with unparalleled ease and finesse. It paints from a balanced palette of infinite strengths to deliver a spectacular portrait of the musical event. My unequivocal and highest recommendation!! Bravo Kharma!

Next Week Act II: The Tenor Audio 75Wp Mono Amplifiers

¹ The same pair previously reviewed by Stereophile



Don't forget to bookmark us! (CTRL-SHFT-D)

A Match Made In Heaven

