

# The Goldmund Mimesis 9 Amplifier

*As published in The Absolute Sound.*

---

## Important Notice:

*(This notice is reprinted on specific request of the magazine).*

The Absolute Sound : This review has been reprinted in its entirety from *The Absolute Sound*, with not one word censored or deleted. *The Absolute Sound* is the sole journal of High End audio and reports its findings on audio components and recordings without fear of or favor from any interests, commercial or otherwise. Music (the absolute sound) is the sole measure of reference. Subscriptions may be obtained from the business office at a special rate of \$54.95 for eight issues in the U.S (Canada, \$60; international, \$75). You may call us directly with your Amex, Visa or Mastercard in hand at (516) 676-2830 (9 a.m. - 5:30 p.m., EST) or mail your check to *The Absolute Sound*, P.O. Box 360, Sea Cliff, New York 11579.

---

## The Goldmund Mimesis 9 Amplifier

THUS WE BEGIN another look at basic amplifiers, the weak link in the electronics chain. When last we essayed the field [Issue 51], we found the three leading contenders - the Audio Research M-300 MkII, the Rowland Research (now called Jeff Rowland Design Group) Model 7 Mk III, and the Levinson No. 20, monoblocks all - sounding quite unlike (which shouldn't have been the case, were all things equal to the same thing) and all noticeably shy of the state-of-the-audio-art. However, with the arrival of a new generation of basic amps, the same cannot be said.

We have recently [Issue 59] reviewed the Carver Silver Sevens, a throwback to the brute force high-powered tube designs of yester's lore - it's really the lineal descendant of the Audio Research D-150 and the Conrad Johnson Premier One, both of which, like the Carver, had the elusive quality we call "authority", i.e., all three were capable, particularly in the midbass and midrange, of recreating a sense of the crushing weight and majesty of a full orchestra. And now we have at hand an amplifier, different from the Carvers (and about \$10,000 less dear), that represents the sort of breakthrough that must necessarily make us rethink some of our assumptions about the "sound" of amplifiers. I would be less than candid if I didn't forewarn you of further surprises as this survey unfolds.

Little in Goldmund's Mimesis line actually prepares one for the shock of encounter with the 9 stereo

amplifier. The Mimesis 2, a preamp, sounds silken and seductive, but it suffers from soundstaging distortions, a flattening of image dimensionality, and a kind of soft high-frequency texture that bespeckles the top octave. The Mimesis 3, its first solidstate amplifier, resembles the Two sonically; but it is temperamental (it hates DC, promptly overheats when driven hard, and simply does not have enough power for most of those systems with which it is likely to be used).

The Mimesis 9 is actually just as contrary. It is almost impossible to use it with most preamplifiers of tubed provenances (\*) since nearly all of them (if not all of them) emit DC, and thus we were prevented from assessing it with the Convergent Audio Technology; it is intensely susceptible to radio-frequency interference and to induced hum fields (shades of Freddy and Elm Street); and getting it correctly grounded puts one through a bizarre series of experimentations. I am beginning to suspect that its sonic character varies with line voltage (if your joint runs in excess of 120, as mine usually does, so much the better). There were several points at which I was ready to drop it from these sessions, so crazy did its correct set-up drive us. Before I purchased the 9, I would make certain my dealer had it installed to my satisfaction; this, by the way, is not so simple as it would seem. This thing can sound fine one moment, and buzz like Rimsky-Korsakov's bee the next. In other words, make sure your dealer will return if a problem develops down the line (it may or it will, depending upon your luck with such things).

*(\*) Obviously, these are preliminary findings-we haven't tried every tube preamp yet, and will report future findings including measurements. -FD*

Part of the problem, one supposes, is occasioned by the amplifier's bandwidth; it is capable of full power at 1,000,000 Hertz. (Do I have to warn you about overdriving your tweets?) Consequently, the presence of RFI doesn't surprise me, nor would, for that matter, the presence of spectral spirits. As for its grounding, one can only suppose that the Europeans have their own exotic way of going about these things (the amp is manufactured in the land of cuckoo clocks). But it can be made to work, provided you are willing to give up the satisfactions of a tubed preamplifier and when it does work, it will provide an experience singular in audio listening. For here we have an amplifier that does not sound at all "bright" or "electronic".

One of the accepted conventions of audio listening, I am now forced to conclude, is amplifier blare or brightness. It is so endemic to the designs that have been used up until now that we simply accept it as a given; indeed, we become unaware of it. That blare is virtually always accompanied by some sort of "grain" or "texture" - even one that manifests so subliminally that we call it "roughness" or, as I said, "blare". Blare is grain.

When I say "convention", I mean, of course, that word in its classic use. It's part of the game. You accept it because it is always there. Part of the package. Therefore, it is a shock when, suddenly, you find that it doesn't have to be.

The Mimesis 9 has the least colored upper midrange and high frequency I've heard from any amplifier. It is stunningly pure, and there is an absence of any identifiable texture. But better, there is absolutely no

brightness, no blare, none (or next to) of the cues that let you know you're listening to a piece of electronics, a melange of resistors, capacitors, transformers, and wiring. Along with this, there is a substantial reduction - perhaps an order of magnitude, metaphorically - in "blurring".

Blurring is another, more subtle of those conventions we accept when listening to amplifier designs. It is something few designers attempt to correct for in making other parts of the chain sounded "etched" or in the race for "clarity" (as opposed to transparency). Almost all amplifiers are not only guilty of brightness and blare, but virtually every one blurs the sound, as well, particularly in the critical 4- to 8-kHz region and up. It's hard to hear this until it is gone.

Given the contemporary emphasis on "brightness" (no doubt a compensation for a generation whose hearing has been notched by exposure to loud sounds, from Walkmans to big city life), and the rising characteristic of most professional audio equipment and too much High End gear, it is hardly surprising that we all have failed to concentrate upon its presence in contemporary electronics. Blurring, however, is another matter. Only the designers of today's best gear, who have the advantage of standing upon the accomplishments of the past decade, would have realized the interactive effects of resonances upon the elements of a system.

Taken together, blurring and blare have represented two obstacles to the achievement of a lifelike sound in audio systems. Their substantial reduction in this amplifier can only be a portent, *an augury of this decade's (coming) best work*, provided the High End is able to survive the (coming) onslaught of commercialization, a process now moving from second to third gear.

So what does it sound like?

First off, in terms of its overall "character", the Mimesis 9 is like unto an Audio Research, that is, almost exactly as neutral as the real thing. If it errs, it does so on the yang side of neutral, tending toward what we will (have to, with apologies) call an alabaster cast, replete with silken sheen in the upper octaves. It is not a vividly projected sound, akin to the Carver, but rather more reticent, without actually being what we term "polite" or "shy". Musically? Its overall character is closest to that of the unmodified, and fondly remembered, Orchestra Hall.

When we talk about the character of an amplifier (or preamps, for that matter), we are, in terms of analogies, probably apt in referring to the sounds of different halls (with one exception). That is to say, both Rowland Research and Conrad-Johnson designs have a character akin to that of Symphony Hall in Boston. While Audio Research, Convergent, Goldmund, and Spectral are rattier similar in overall character to Carnegie (pre-mod), Powell (in St. Louis), and Orchestra Hall (Chicago, pre-mod). The exception: No hall I know of sounds "dark", like the electronics from Madrigal, Yves-Bernard Andre, et al.

The easiest way of divining the quality of character, well, the most immediate one, is to listen to the brass. If massed brass (trombones and French horns) don't have that golden glow (which they always do

with the C-J and Rowland), then the sound is yang. However, if every sound has that golden aura (trumpets as opposed to trombones), then you've got a yin sound. Ideally, there should be no "character", but there always is.

The Mimesis's dynamic contrasts have me a bit puzzled. With the Classe DR-6, which is no great shakes in the dynamics department, the Mimesis sounds unable to accommodate dynamics much above a *forte*, though its recreation of nuances in the soft passages and the contrasts between differing levels of softness is exceptional. However, with the Goldmund preamp, the 9 is dynamically vigorous. The problem, upon installing the Mimesis Three, is that you actually lose some of the 9's spectacular qualities, its transparency, its lack of blurring - the Goldmund preamp (and this went unheard by us in our preamp survey) injects texture, obscuring the see-into and seethrough purity of the amp. In our preamp survey, the Goldmund was not adjudged considerably more dynamic than the Classe, so who knows what accounts for this mixed bag of interaction? For sport, we substituted the latest (and much improved) revision to the Rowland Coherence preamp - the Series II - and found the dynamics simply spectacular. But again we encountered some sort of grounding problem, which resulted in what sounded like low-frequency instability, such were the mumblings and jumbings from the speaker system.

As for its power rating - either 200 watts into 8 ohms, if you listen to what Goldmund representatives tell you, or 175 into 8 if you read what they told *Audio* for its equipment directory - the Mimesis 9 simply isn't capable of the kind of mid-bass "authority" one becomes accustomed to with Carver's Silver Sevens. The midbass sounds lean. And it is, in fact, beautifully defined. Musical evidence? Shostakovich's *Eleventh Symphony* [Stokowski, Houston, Capitol SPBO-8700], where, in the last movement, the celli and double basses go to war, with hair-raising results. Prokofiev's *Lt. Kije* [Reiner, Chicago, Chesky RC-10], wherein the interplay of double basses and celli stands articulated as I've never heard it before. Part of this effect may, to be sure, be attributed to the 9's spectacular reproduction of the bottom octave, where the amp manages to sound both more powerful and more controlled than the Carver (and, by extension, almost everything else now in production). And I am sure that some of the leanness can be attributed to the Spectral Signature - however, we did listen at greater length with the Grasshopper van den Hul through the Signature Well-Tempered table via the Classe DR-6 into Dave Wilson's junior WAMM system, with both the Carver and Mimesis - and need I say that the Carver had both authority and a superior ability to differentiate among instruments in the midbass (celli, lower violas, lower percussion)? Michel Reverchon, head of Goldmund, says that a 300-watt monoblock version of the 9 will be introduced at the Chicago Consumer Electronics Show. Perhaps the increase in power will give this amplifier the one quality it needs to become the definitive amplifier, the one that truly can be called the best, and that is the weight and authority (the sense thereof) of the real thing.

One thing that you'll hear - from Jennifer Warnes's *Famous Blue Raincoat* to Dag Wiren's *Serenade for strings* [EMI ESD-7001] - is that the 9's sound becomes richer and more rewarding as it descends from the upper midbass down into the basement of the orchestra. Considered against the competition, excluding the Silver Sevens for the moment, the 9 would be considered a world-class amp simply for its reproduction of the frequencies below 100 Hertz. It certainly exceeds, in both accuracy and transient speed, the amplifiers we reviewed two years ago.

When we switched in the Classe DR-6 (into the second alternative reference system, Music Room 1), we noticed some remarkable changes. And it is herein that I must make a point: in the preamplifiers we have auditioned with the Mimesis, we have found the inherent differences, one to another, to be much more marked, much easier to hear-to the point that I felt compelled to delay a shootout among the best, at least among the solid-state, until I could take a final listen. We had been using the Yves-Bernard Andre Signature, which arrived here just after the winter CES, in a revised version. Not only did it create a peculiar image (a sharply circumscribed semi-circular arc of very limited depth), but it exhibited an entirely too subdued top end. The Classe DR6 ran rings around the Signature, which may or may not be as much a function of the Signature's performance as it is of some, to us, esoteric interaction between the two. I had been listening to Warnes singing Cohen's "Raincoat" [Attic LAT-1227, Canadian pressing], and it was as if we had gone from twodimensional sound to three. Not only did the highs open up, and the field of depth increase as far as the junior WAMMs would allow, but we were able to make differentiations that surprised this reviewer. Most distinctive among them? Well, you could hear the artificial 'verb on Warnes's voice-it sounded as if she were singing in a large steel cell, and when her voice echoed, it echoed with a metallic twang (not irritating but unnatural). Its fakery was nakedly revealed. The string quartet, which I thought never balanced correctly into the mix, suddenly stood revealed, three-dimensionally, its counterpoint to the other instruments audible and, for the song, enriching.

Well, onward to Sheffield's *The Moscow Sessions* (TLP-26, one of the two releases to which the Fund for Recorded Music has contributed money and backed a winner). I had been aware of the acoustic in which the orchestra was recorded, and I had not thought the orchestra and its sonic environment particularly well-integrated. Well, no more. In Loeffler's *The White Peacock*, the solo flute floats on a gorgeous cushion of air. The flute itself caught me by surprise. Normally, woodwinds, solo or in concert, are dried up, their harmonics bleached, by the limitations of ordinary solid-state design. But here we had a flute that sounded as if it were moving a column of air. I wish I could better describe this effect, but with the Mimesis, on this and other recordings, you could hear a column of air when the woodwinds were playing (it was. rather as if you could hear the air inside the column of the woodwind tubes). And what had sounded undefined before, the orchestral first waves interacting with the nearby walls of the hall, now was audible as a lovely acoustic-warm, inviting, and mellow. The string sound had that silken sheen the real things manage on rare occasion (and which solid-state amps never manage, it seems, or seldom manage I still recall with fondness the string sound from the Levinson No. 20). You could even hear the string players spread in space; there was none of that congealing of the top harmonics from the players in the section and none of that compression of the space within which the string players sit.

Because we were encountering hum problems with the Brisson/MIT Shotgun CVT interconnects (\*), we switched over to Straightwire (leaving the Shotgun speaker cables in place) and, more to my surprise, we found the \$175 per meter interconnects sounding lusher and to my ears more accurate in the upper midrange and lower treble than the \$1150 per meter CVTs, which I found more "Hi-fi" than musical in this range. This move somewhat aggravated the leanness of the midbass; but we were later to use the full IRS with MIT cables, CVTs and regular Shotguns, to find improved definition in the critical midbass region (if not, of course, the weight and authority we sought). The up side was that the accuracy afforded us by the Straightwire allowed precise one-time settings of cartridge vertical tracking angle. A little off,

yeech. Right on, *ahaaa*.

(\*) *The results of a broken shield; the bad cables have since been replaced with good ones. -FD*

What we noticed next, particularly on the Shostakovich *Symphony No. 1* (still on the Sheffield Lab Moscow set), was how, despite a neutral perspective on the orchestra, the Mimesis was, within the soundfield, able to create quite vivid and dimensional effects - listen to the piano in the second movement, for instance. Even though it is set back in the stage, you can hear that it is a grand (you can hear its size, even though it's not close to the mikes).

Then we put on Malcolm Arnold's *English Dances* [Lyrita SRCS-109]. To my surprise, the acoustic picture cleared to a degree I would not have thought possible. I was not, at this point, even remotely expecting such a result. That's because my first impressions, listening with equipment with resolution limitations, was of the 9's, ultra-low distortion, its sonic "sweetness" (as music is sweet, m'dears) and its freedom from obvious solid-state artifacts. As we improved the associated equipment, its high-frequency and upper-midrange delectabilities - its resolution, if you will - captured my attention. "Captured" is really not a right accounting of my impressions: I found myself just listening most of the time, and my notebook mostly devoid of notes.

This problem persisted throughout the evaluations; I really couldn't be bothered, much of the time, in transcribing what I was hearing. I *was listening* to the music.

I noted the tuba in one of the dances and found myself tickled that it not only had the weight and volume of a tuba (talk about columns of air, however serpentine) but the instrument itself was squatly cushioned in its own space, upon its own "bed" of air, playing merrily away. Furthermore, I could hear its sound hitting the side walls of the studio (or is it a small hall? It actually sounds as if it were recorded in a large studio constructed of wood). When the three brass sections played, and each was deployed in *its* own space along the rear wall, I could hear the first attack slap the wall and activate its distinctive (wooden?) sound. Now I suppose if you strained until you popped, you could hear some of what I'm describing through an excellent system sans the 9; but with the 9, all of these ambient cues, normally smeared and ill-resolved by even the best systems, are clearly easily obviously to be heard. (Which means, you may have guessed, that you can hear bows dropped-in the Chicago recordings; stage doors closing-the Wren *Serenade*; pages turning and players (the brass) breathing. None of these effects, perhaps, new, but now all, instead of veiled or subtle, perfectly apparent. The high-frequency percussion on the Arnold disc is a near miracle: You get what I have been waiting to hear on disc-the percussion floating free and pure above the orchestra and arriving at your ear, uncontaminated by other orchestral harmonics.

Arnold's scoring includes considerable writing for the woodwinds. And make no mistake, with the 9, we hear that interplay in all its complexity. But no matter the level, what is so natural is that the entire harmonic intricacies of the winds (so quickly lost in inferior reproduction and always lost on digital) are accurately retrieved, their structure intact. That would be achievement enough, but the woodwinds are brought back with that sense of the column of air intact, no matter the level. In the Munch/Boston

recording of Ravel's *Daphnis and Chloe* [Chesky RG-15], especially in the Daybreak section, the winds will give you goosebumps - that is unless you're dead or deaf. Oh yes, and the string arpeggios near the end of Side One are ravishing. Just as Ravel intended. Try the Reiner/Chicago *Rapsodie Espagnole* [Chesky RC-11] with its exquisite upward ascending pizzicatos, played softly, under an increasing orchestral storm.

One more surprise for me, and it has to do with digital. I have no idea whether this is an effect of the wide bandwidth or another of the amplifier's features, but when I'm in a candlelight mood, I like to play "E.T and Me" from the John Williams soundtrack. Always, before, I found the one climax in the piece entirely too digital-tinny, honky, grain-strewn. But somehow with the 9, the distortions nearly disappeared; I could listen without wincing; in fact, I didn't notice the distortions were gone till the cut was over, so I had to go back and play it again. Thence to CDs, where I learned that the 9 ameliorates considerable amounts of digital harshness. Why? It certainly is capable of reproducing ugly sounds where such are recorded. Could it be somehow that digital's filters, in avoiding high-frequency sounds, introduce ultra-high-frequency distortions that only a wideband powerhouse like the 9 can unravel? Don't know. Just reporting the facts.

After several more listening sessions, including several on the IRS V (where the Mimesis produced both a soundstaging accuracy and a pellucid limpidity to the upper mids and highs new to the IRS), I decided to ask Reverchon what made this amplifier so different.

His explanation I am summarizing (if you don't like what he says, don't blame the journalist):

The two things that are unique in the 9 are (1) its mechanical grounding and (2) its speed. "The amplifier is mechanically grounded," Reverchon says, "so that the output is isolated from its input stage." In other words, by using a variation on the Goldmund cones, etc., the designer was able to cancel the resonances that invariably color the more sensitive inputs. Reverchon says a simple test will confirm this: Disconnect the speakers and, using a microphone in close proximity to an amplifier, measure what it hears (which will be the orchestra, or whatever, playing). In other words, in an ungrounded amplifier, the entire chassis is "playing" the music. He says the 9's output stage, and two transformers are "totally decoupled" mechanically from the input.

(2) Noting that most amplifier designers "slow down" their high-powered amps, with the resulting decrease in accuracy, he says the 9 produces full power at 1 megahertz "with no phase error in the electronics". He attributes to phase errors the various artifacts we normally associate with amplifier sound, grain, texture, what I call the "blare". I suppose I should note that Spectral pioneered wide bandwidth high-powered solid-state amps with its DMA-200 [which we have not auditioned], so I wonder if (2) is indeed unique to the 9.

Reverchon says there are several other features, in fact, used by other amplifier designers, that contribute to overall performance. "There are no capacitors in the signal path and no electrolytics anywhere near the signal path." He says the unit uses a very fast small transformer - the power supply is "very small" -

that that power is taken from the AC line, "not from the power supply." Oh yes, it's 200 watts into 8 ohms, double that into 4, sez he.

His explanation, whatever its inherent merits, certainly makes sense in terms of what I heard (well before talking with him, which I did to see if there were some explanation for its breakthrough sonics); both would explain the lack of blur and blare. But you don't have to know one twiddle about science to hear what hath been wrought in this instance: a basic amplifier that really does substantially reduce the unreality, that electronic barrier, between the music and those of us who love it.

**HP**

---