

Trends in Components

By VICTOR BROCHNER, *president of the Brociner Electronics Corp.*

THE sale of separate high-fidelity components shows every sign of continuing to increase at a good pace in 1956. We have a healthy industry, steadily refining the perform-

ance of its product. The public for high fidelity is still obviously growing, after reaching dimensions that nobody would have believed eight or ten years ago. It is definitely a more knowing public, turning its back on the exaggerated, spectacular "super-fidelity" that caused a splash a few years ago, in favor of reproduction

that is more faithful to music. So optimism is rightly our basic mood. Acknowledging this fully, I would like to register a few minor complaints, be the devil's advocate in a matter or two.

First, can we develop a more uniform and fair practice for supplying the buyer with the service he needs when high-fidelity units are, or become, defective? It is a highly inconvenient and time-wasting method to return a unit to the manufacturer for routine servicing. If there is a manufacturing defect, naturally the manufacturer will normally want to make it good.

What happens too often, however, is that when a system begins to perform badly in the home the owner pulls out one component, say the amplifier, and sends it to the manufacturer with the information that it seems to be defective. The manufacturer, by running his test procedure, determines that it is in good order, and sends it back to the owner with this information. If everyone is lucky, at this point the owner calls in a competent serviceman to determine which unit in the system is out of order, and to repair, replace, or send it to the manufacturer for reconditioning, whichever is appropriate. But the owner has already wasted a lot of his own time and that of the manufacturer of the amplifier.

Many audio shops supply highly valuable services when systems are purchased, preparing interunit cables, testing units to make sure they work properly, etc. But you should not expect a shop from which you buy equipment to carry on, at no charge, with routine servicing, after your system has been in operation for a reasonable period. Continuing service is often available in the audio shops, at reasonable cost. It is a good idea to check on both the initial and continuing services offered, when you go to buy hi-fi units.

One of the major trends in component design I find strangely at variance with basic developments in the industry. Today we have the record manufacturers pretty well agreed on manufacturing methods that will make their product perform properly with a uniform playback equalization curve. We have a large public coming in to hi-fi which is less interested in the hobbyist side of hi-fi than in getting music into the living room. It would seem that a trend toward simplicity in control systems is not only logical but would be popular. But the actual trend is toward more knobs and special features instead of fewer. Are buyers really in favor of more complex hi-fi units? Or is it



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that you people who would welcome a move toward simplicity are not ordinarily found in hi-fi shops, listening to A-B tests of the latest audio units? [EDITOR'S NOTE: *There are still, of course, many records which pre-date current standard practices, for which compensation is needed.*]

I think you should be aware that some of the control functions and special features now supplied on some systems are approaching the point of excessive refinement. These are not necessarily bad features: they often do add real flexibility to a system. An analogy may make their character clear. Suppose you were offered, for your car: (1) a control on the dash for the low-speed jet of the carburetor; (2) a button on the dash to adjust the stiffness of the shock-absorbers (actually supplied on some luxury cars a few years ago); (3) a control on the power steering which allowed you to set the amount of power applied anywhere between zero and its top value. You might well agree that these were all good things to have, but decide that the extra cost, the complication of using them, and the extra chance of something going wrong made them, on balance, undesirable. Of course, on an audio control unit, as on a car, a certain minimum of controls is necessary. The rising popularity of magnetic tape equipment in hi-fi systems has naturally added to the number of controls that the listener needs for basic flexibility.


Another matter for comment is the public reaction to the physical size of amplifiers. A number of amplifier manufacturers, ourselves included, have taken advantage of the latest components and techniques and put a great deal of design effort into producing amplifiers that are a frac-

tion of the size and weight of those of similar quality available a few years ago. The idea is that, if a buyer is offered two amplifiers of similar quality, and one is about a half or a third as big and heavy as the other, the buyer will choose the smaller one. It will be much easier to transport and install.

The response to the compact amplifiers has been excellent, but I do too often sense a feeling on the part of hi-fi enthusiasts that a big amplifier is by that token a better one. Do buyers really believe this? It is, of course, much easier to design and build a big amplifier than a very com-

pact one, for roughly equal power and quality levels. However, I am sure that the manufacturers who have produced compact amplifiers are not going to relax their efforts in this direction. The idea has too much logic behind it.

I want to end with an observation that has not had much attention. The higher production rates of the last year have allowed many manufacturers to cut their costs, and this reduction has reached the consumer in the form of lower prices, or more often, in the form of higher quality at the same price. This welcome trend should continue.



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The Future of Pre-Recorded Tape

By C. W. SMILEY

EDITOR'S NOTE: *C. W. Smiley, president of Livingston Electronics, presents a view of 1956 from the point of view of a maker of recorded tapes.*

THE makers of recorded tapes have beating on them the white light of the public's expectations about the quality of magnetic tape recording. The word has gone around in the last few years that tape can mean high quality. This is, I know, the simple truth, but we must produce that quality if we are to win a large public. Our progress in the last few months makes me feel surer than ever that we are succeeding. I believe that tape will establish itself in 1956 as the home reproduction system of deluxe quality, carrying high fidelity to a new area of higher fidelity. Tape will not for an indefinite period "displace" disc recording, which will reach new levels of refinement in its own terms.

This prediction is not just a hope based on slow growth-trends. We are at a definite turning point in tape. The sales of my own firm, after several years of excellent growth, last fall took a very sharp upturn. We are scrambling to keep up with a several-hundred-percent increase in business. Sharply increasing business is general throughout our admittedly still small industry. Cost has been an important factor in determining the acceptance of tape, and admittedly the first cost of tape is higher. Under such arrangements as our club plan, tape is now available through local dealers for little more than the equivalent disc recording. Probably the most drastic price reductions have already occurred. We believe that further reductions depend on the spread of subscription plans, such as our club plan and others, which are based on dealer-manufacturer cooperation.

We are putting our major effort into building up our library of stereophonic tapes, because we feel that stereo reproduction will be the most important element for introducing tape into the homes of music-lovers who want top quality. As everyone knows, stereo adds roundness, depth, a higher sense of reality to reproduced sound. It allows the listener to follow the motion of the music from one section of the orchestra to another. It also

turns out, at least in our experience, that stereo is less critical as to the characteristics of the area in which the recording is done. We can make top-notch recordings in locations that are very poor for monaural recording.

Naturally, the establishment of tape depends on the appearance in thousands of living rooms of machines suitable for playing it. Here again a turning point has been reached. The "tape deck" or "tape phonograph," corresponding functionally to the record changer as an element of high-fidelity systems, and capable of playing stereophonic tapes, has in the last few months become a prominent item on the hi-fi market. Plans of manufacturers indicate that it will soon be even more so. The response to the Ampex Model 612, in the high-price bracket, indicates that a strong market exists for these playback units. A number of manufacturers have introduced units, at several price levels—Berlant, Magnecord, Viking, V-M, and others.

All this makes me believe that stereo tape will soon have an effect in some respects similar to that of the LP record after its introduction in 1948. Everybody gained from the LP—record manufacturer, equipment manufacturer, consumer—as standards were raised all along the line. Stereo tape may not, of course, achieve anything like the mass sale of the LP, at least for some time. It will exist alongside the disc record, as noted above, but it is sure to influence everyone's notions of what constitutes high fidelity.

Tape is physically a permanent medium, and it is therefore properly used for "permanent" music, the larger selections from the repertory of serious music that people will want to be hearing for a generation or more. In its present form it is obviously less convenient as the medium for shorter "pop" tunes and other entertainment music of relatively short public interest. This difference reinforces the idea that stereo tape will win its place primarily as the "de luxe" medium, at least in the

