

# meet the DESIGNER

Dave Nauber, Classé Audio



Classé Audio has an enviable reputation as one of the high-end's most venerable stalwarts. Classé's beautifully built and designed products have been well-reviewed throughout the world and the new Delta Series components are considered by most authorities to be at the cutting edge of audio and visual technology. Dave Nauber, Classé's Vice President for Brand Development recently visited Australia and Australian HI-FI grabbed the opportunity to catch up with what's happening with this famous Canadian manufacturer...

**AHF:** Can you tell Australian HI-FI's readers a little bit about your background, and how you came to be working for Classé Audio?

**DN:** I have been in high-end audio my entire adult life. I worked in a high-end audio store whilst I was gaining Degrees in Electrical and General Engineering from the University of Illinois. I sold many high-end products whilst I was there, including Mark Levinson. The person who hired me, Mike Wesley, later went on to become the marketing director for Madrigal. Whilst in Connecticut we got together and Mike asked me what I was thinking about doing after I graduated. Ultimately he offered me to come work at Madrigal. My first real job was at Madrigal. I was there for almost 17 years, and eventually became Director of Sales and Marketing. I was generally quite happy there. I liked the people I worked with and I believed in the products we were making. But as just businesses have their cycles we also had our ups and downs. Then in 2002 I took a phone call from Joe Atkins, the owner of Bowers and Wilkins. He's owned it for about 20 years now. I had never met Joe but of course I knew about him having been a big fan of B&W and I had seen what he'd done with his company in the marketplace. He ended up making me an offer I couldn't refuse.

**AHF:** Did this happen at about the time Madrigal was taken over by Harman International?

**DN:** Actually that occurred earlier. What did happen around that time was that we'd formed the Harman Specialty Group, which essentially combined Madrigal and Lexicon into a single entity. It was that transition that had me questioning whether it was a good place to be long-term.

**AHF:** Didn't Harman International move Madrigal into the same manufacturing facility used by Lexicon?

**DN:** Well, at the time we didn't know that was going to happen but the changes already afoot had made me uncomfortable so when Joe Atkins talked to me about what was possible at Classé it seemed very exciting for someone who does what I do. So I joined Classé Audio in August of 2002 and started with what was essentially a clean sheet of paper. Basically the idea was to make an electronics line that was the equivalent of the 800 series B&W speakers. We built it using the Classé Audio brand because we wanted it to survive with its own identity.

**AHF:** Was this line to be independent of Classé's Omega line?

**DN:** Yes. We took the approach that we already had a working high-end factory that could build high-end products and we had design capabilities, yet if we were starting from scratch, what would we do? Basically, you need the three 'I's: investment, ideas and the individuals to execute those ideas. So we began the task of bringing the right people on board, some of them in the engineering department, then about a year after I started we brought in Tom Calatayud who was one of the best hardware engineers at Mark Levinson. This gave us serious digital expertise, because Tom designed every single digital product Mark Levinson ever made.

Then we brought in Alan Clark who for the ten years prior had been Head of Electronic Design at Linn. He's now VP for Research and Development at Classé Audio and Chief Technology Officer for the B&W Group. Alan not only co-ordinates the activities of a number of designers around the world, he also identifies emerging technologies for future research. So we've put this formidable design team together to start work on a new range of products without being encumbered by what had come before. There were no sacred cows, and no "it has to be this or it has to be that because it's what we've always done."

**AHF:** *We imagine it would be quite liberating to be able to start with a clean slate...*

**DN:** Never in my life did I ever have such a clear opportunity! To sit with a group of people and be able to say: 'What do you think of this' or 'What if we did that...' and debate what was happening in the market. This was also a time of great change in the market because people who were our customers of the 80s and 90s were changing, getting older and more mature and in a sense they were getting tired of experimenting with their equipment and were instead looking for something that was simple, beautiful, super-high performance and very reliable but conceptually different compared to what was out there on offer from the other companies. We wanted to make products that were more contemporary.

**AHF:** *Several of us at Australian HI-FI have been Classé Audio fans since the early 90s when the company's range was not overly extended. A lot has changed since then, so how is the changing face of digital audio influencing Classé's product range?*

**DN:** That's actually a very good question and it's the key to explaining why Classé is new, to ask what happened back then. If you think about the state of the market when Classé Audio started back in 1980, the truth was that if you had a soldering iron you could build an amplifier, and you could be in the high-end audio business. But technology began to intrude in our peaceful world. Transistors became integrated circuits and analogue become digital. At each step of the way you had high-end companies not managing to make the transitions. So some companies that use vacuum tubes never use transistors and some transistor designers never use integrated circuits, some analogue

companies never produced a digital product. Classé always managed to climb to the next level; to compete in the next technical arena. We also offered both digital and AV multi-channel products. This might sound straightforward and simple, but actually it's quite difficult for a small company to produce these types of products. What we've seen is the pace of technology not slowing down but continuing to speed up. That's caused two things. It's caused the marketplace to ask for new and different products and at the same time it's made it more difficult for high-end companies to produce new and unique products.

**AHF:** *You're saying that advancing technology has forced companies to expand their product lines?*

**DN:** Right. And when that happens you find you now have to manage a great many different product categories yet you don't have the financial resources or the technical depth to support such a broad line. That's why the clean sheet of paper gave us the opportunity to say 'What is it that we really need to do and what is it that customers will really want in the future? Who do we need to help us deliver those products and to kind of start over but to do it in the context of a working, successful high-end company like Classé Audio?

**AHF:** *Speaking of future technologies, does Classé Audio have any plans to introduce Class-D amplifiers?*

**DN:** We are certainly working on it. But whereas most people think of Class-D being a new technology it's actually very old. What's really different is the availability of new high-performance component parts that make Class-D viable. Only a few years ago the performance of Class-D really wasn't really acceptable. Class-D reminds me of the way audiophiles reacted to CD many years ago. There were some very serious listeners who heard the benefits of CD and immediately embraced it and there were others that even today don't embrace it. After a period of time the great majority of people came to embrace the qualities available in digital audio. I think that will probably happen in a similar way with Class-D where today we have some products on the market that people think are very good. I think that despite the advances, Class-D has a way to go before we'll put a Classé badge on one. But it will happen and it will happen first on an

entry-level product. Certainly the benefits of Class-D—its small size, low power consumption, and low generation of heat—are all potentially valuable. People who are willing to give up a little performance in order to get these specific advantages will be buying Class-D amps. As we improve on the technology I believe that eventually the performance will be so good that even people who don't really care about these advantages will choose Class-D amps.

**AHF:** *How much of the Omega technology will be trickled down to lower-rung Classé products?*

**DN:** You could say quite a lot in that the person who designed the Omega amplifiers has also designed the Delta series amplifiers. You could also say that the Delta series amps are the next generation-thinking, so that although we haven't spent as much money on the power supply, the regulation of the power supply or the output stage, the sophistication of the design actually surpasses that of the Omega, so it's quite a remarkable achievement and quite good performance for the money.

**AHF:** *Many international companies are now outsourcing their manufacturing to China. Has Classé any plans in that direction?*

**DN:** Not at this time. I have nothing against making product in China, so long as it can be built to the right standard, in fact for many companies there is no real choice. There's been a lot of controversy about it and companies are sometimes ostracised for outsourcing their manufacturing but in many cases the only other option was to go out of business. The market is brutal and it demands that you deliver absolutely the best product at the lowest price. This is true even at the high-end of the market, although it's a bit different because when it comes to the high-end, value also attaches to where a product is made, in the same way as it is with fine watches and wines: there's something intangible about the origin of the component.

**AHF:** *Isn't there also a caplet for so-called 'boutique' brands that are made in small quantities by small manufacturers?*

**DN:** You are paying a premium for the products that are made in very small quantities. In those cases the savings aren't that great. Having said that, I would add that in the future if there are reasons for us to buy parts or boards—or anything that helps us



