

# Benchmark HPA4 headphone amplifier/line preamplifier Page 2

Quote:

Playing *Tango: Zero Hour* (one of my all-time favorite album titles), the HPA4 + HiFiMan Susvara combo showed each instrument in dramatic bas-relief. It accomplished this by presenting cleaner, better-articulated bass and manufacturing a sharper midrange focus than I had experienced previously with either my solid state reference, the [Pass Labs HPA-1](#) preamp/headphone amp, or the tubed Linear Tube Audio Z10e line-stage/power amplifier/headphone amplifier (see [Gramophone Dreams #36](#) and [Gramophone Dreams #45](#) elsewhere in this issue).

And then ...

I stumbled on a simple, easy-to-duplicate comparison; one I thought best illustrated how the HPA4 + Susvara played music. My discovery occurred while listening to *Lightnin' Hopkins Live at Newport* (16/44.1 FLAC Vanguard/Qobuz). Michael Bloomfield's spoken "Introduction" and all of Lightnin's performances are recorded very simply, giving listeners a feeling of a small wood stage and a small but enthusiastic audience.

With Linear Tube Audio's Z10e, the sound was near-the-stage, live-concert vivid. There was a strong sense of an outdoor space, but I could also hear a microphone picking up the interior volume and wood body of Lightnin's guitar. Michael Bloomfield's voice sounded like I know it sounds. With the Z10e, Hopkins's between-song jabber and guitar exhibited extraordinary levels of resonant, lifelike presence. Applause sounded like it was made by real people with soft flesh on their bones. The snares on the snare drum on "Instrumental" sounded like wires buzzing against tightly stretched skin. Intermittent cheering and random, low-level crowd sounds enhanced the recording's three-dimensionality, providing clues to the size and density of the audience. (It seemed one microphone was used to pick up audience sounds.)

When I played this demonstration-quality recording through the HPA4, Bloomfield's and Hopkins's voices, and Lightnin's guitar, appeared dramatically closer to their microphones. My listening position was more *on* the stage than near the stage. My perceived volume of the interior of Hopkins's guitar was diminished. My perceptions of wire snares buzzing on taut skin, a stage made of wood, and a fleshy audience, all clearly "apparent" with the LTA Z10e driving the Susvara, were less audible with the Benchmark. Naturally, this caused me to wonder: Which of these two reproductions best reflects the original analog tape? I concluded: The truth probably lies somewhere between these two exaggerations.

## Powering Abyss TCs

Sticking with planar-magnetics but moving up the sensitivity ladder (to 88dB/mW), I again played *Tango: Zero Hour*, listening this time with the [JPS Labs Abyss AB-1266 Phi TCs](#) (\$4995), still via the HPA4's balanced outputs.

For me, the Abyss Phi TC headphones deliver an uncanny unhyped form of

neutral, natural, no-glass transparent reproduction. Most amazing is their complete absence of diaphragm breakup or modulation noise. With the right amplifier, the AB-1266 'phones feel like they strip everything away between the listener and a recording. A while back, I auditioned the Abyss TC powered directly by the output of [Benchmark's ABH2](#) stereo power amplifier. It was then I first noticed the Benchmark's recording studio-type sound.

Compared to the TCs with the Pass Labs HPA-1, the HPA4 made Astor Piazzolla's strange majestic tango tenser, better focused, and more brightly illuminated. Instrumental lines stood out more and were easier to follow. My brain kept repeating the words *order* and *specificity*. The Benchmark directed my attention to how each instrument was positioned on *Zero Hour's* soundstage.



The HPA4's success clarifying the Piazzolla *Tango* inspired me to restudy the entire *Dead Man* soundtrack—with the high-rez Benchmark powering the high-rez Abyss TCs.

Ultimately, the Benchmark-Abyss combo really clicked for me. It gave me a fresh, intriguing look at my most familiar recordings. On *Dead Man*, there was fierce growl and sharp bite and every Foley sound was easy to identify. For the first time, Johnny Depp's voice sounded like "young Johnny talking to a microphone": very direct. The Benchmark-Abyss-*Dead Man* soundfield had this evenly lit, glare-free, corner-to-corner, front-to-back focus that I found especially fascinating.

With the HPA4 driving the AB-1266s, the dramatic "hammer of fate" crashing sounds at the beginning of "Murder/Mermaid/Heavy Labour" on *The Lighthouse* soundtrack (24/96 FLAC Milan/Qobuz) had giant, movie-theater power and crisp inner detail. Deep bass emerged with great volume and energy.

The JPS Labs Abyss AB-1266 Phi TC are the most revealing audio transducers I know, and the more I used them with the HPA4, the more I thought the term "cinema sound" described the lucid character of this amp-headphone combination.

### **With ZMF Vérités**

The HPA4 exhibited no difficulty driving low-sensitivity, low-impedance planar magnetics. Next, I wanted to see how the THX 888 would fancy the 99dB/mW-sensitive, 300 ohm ZMF Vérité closed-backs (\$2499) I reviewed in [Gramophone](#)

[Dreams #35](#). The Vérité employ 50mm dynamic drivers made of polyethylene naphthalate. Since I wrote my report, I have become even more enamored with the lively, refined purity of the Vérité sound. Its electromechanical silence and illusion of speed and transparency meet or exceed the best electrostatics I've used. I imagined in advance that the Vérité + HPA4 would make a quick, brightly lit open sound, and it did. (I listened from both the HPA4's balanced and 1/4" outputs.)



Lately, Carlos Cipa's *Correlations (on 11 pianos)* (24/44.1 FLAC Warner Classics/Qobuz) is the primary recording I use to assess tone character and reverb tail lengths. And guess what? On this Cipa recording, the ZMF Vérité showed me a gentler, more well-tempered side of the HPA4. As expected, reverb tails were shortened compared to the Vérité driven by ZMF's own, Justin Weber–designed Pendant amplifier, but now, with the HPA4, they were also radiant and beautiful and a pleasure to observe. The ZMF's 300 ohm load seems to have brought out a bit of spring-sun sensuality from the usually stoic Benchmark.

If you are considering buying or already own an HPA4, I recommend you audition the Zach Mehrbach–designed Vérité closed-backs. They were my favorite music-listening headphone with the HPA4.

**Driving Focal Stellias**



Despite the fact that I can hear (and feel) their closedness, as you can see from above, I am a fan of dynamic-driver, closed-back, circumaural headphones because, to me, the best ones sound a bit less "hi-fi" and a bit more matter-of-fact *real* than their open-back counterparts. The ZMF Vérité and the \$2998 [Focal Stellia](#) are my references in the closed-back category.

Of all the headphones in this test group, the 35 ohm, 106dB/mW Stellia present the easiest-to-drive load. Like high-quality, high-sensitivity floor speakers, the natural ease with which the "sound of music" flows out of them is the main reason I keep the Stellia in my daily-driver desktop system, where they are on my head most of every day, usually powered by either [Mytek HiFi's Manhattan II](#) preamp-DAC-headphone amp or, more often, by the OTL triode-tubed \$2599 [Felix Audio Euforia Mark II](#) headphone amp.



Whether I listened from the balanced or 1/4" outputs, the Stellia's ease of flow was not diminished while being driven by the Benchmark HPA4 with music served up by the HoloAudio May DAC. Playing the hip new album *Long Time Passing: Kronos Quartet and Friends Celebrate Pete Seeger* (16/44.1 FLAC Smithsonian Folkways/Qobuz), I thought, "This Benchmark amp sounds like my memory of the original 'chrome-bumper' [Naim NAIT](#) integrated amp." The HPA4's punch, vigor, and rhythm-keeping talents are the traits the NAIT was famous for (footnote 2). The HPA4 moved these Pete Seeger songs along with a

foot-tapping, finger-snapping, Linn-Naim–flat-earther pace, rhythm, and timing (PRaT). The HPA4 showed me also how solid state amp design has evolved since the 1980s. Compared to those famous Naim amps, the Benchmark's PRaT was delivered with a more silent, refined, grainless, microdetailed quality. (If you don't understand this comparison, you might enjoy learning about Naim Audio's relation to the flat-earther movement by reading Art Dudley's [Listening #161](#) and [#205](#), footnote 3.)

### **HPA4 vs Feliks Audio Euforia**

About 30 seconds into "Mbube (Wimoweh/The Lion Sleeps Tonight)" off the Kronos-Seeger tribute album, I was choking back tears. I had the May DAC feeding the \$2599 output-transformerless (OTL) [Feliks Audio Euforia Mk.II](#) headphone amplifier powering the Focal Stellia 'phones, and these Pete Seeger songs were putting me in touch with strong feelings about love, beauty, and creativity. As I listened, I remembered how, when I was a youth, folk music encouraged me to reject a life of commerce and action and instead choose to be a hermit artist and live my life in dreamy meditation. I remembered also why I ditched my Hafler gear and switched back to tubes.

With the Feliks Euforia Mk.II powering the Focal Stellia, the sound of every recording was more 3D, more harmonically complex, more "audio-on-acid," than with the drier, sharper-focused HPA4. The differences between the LSD-tubeness of the Feliks and the sober-as-a-judge solidstateness of the Benchmark represent opposite extremes of the classic (yawn) tube-vs–solid state dichotomy.

### **Who would have imagined?**

My romantic-dreamer mind adapted surprisingly well to the Benchmark HPA4's presentation. The more I used the HPA4 to drive high-resolution headphones, the more comfortable I felt with its precise, pro-audio recording-studio aesthetic.

Spending a month with the HPA4 forced this old triode-tube lover to first acknowledge, then accept, and finally enjoy a new type of engagement, one that satisfied my engineering mind and my audiophile lust to look and listen into the hidden nooks and distant corners of every recording. Thank you, Benchmark.

---

Footnote 2: Although the early NAIT's rhythmic character may have been at least partly a result of a rolled-off frequency response above about 4kHz; see [here](#). As JA's measurements show, the HPA4 does not share that characteristic.  
—**Editor**

Footnote 3: I also recommend Art's [Listening #8](#) from 2003. The Naim Nait discussion starts at the bottom of p.2, but just read all of it. If you do, you'll miss Art terribly, as I do, but you'll still thank me.—**Editor**