
Preface to the Sixth Edition

Each time I revise and update this book, I'm made vividly aware of the technological changes that shape the ways in which we enjoy music. Although the fifth edition was published six years ago, that short span of time has seen more profound changes in audio technology—transformative developments that open startling new possibilities for accessing music—than in any previous *decade*.

The new technologies that most readily come to mind are music servers, high-resolution streaming audio and downloads, and network-connected audio products. These technologies give me the ability to instantly access just about any piece of music I can think of, much of it with outstanding sound quality—far better than CD. It's like living in a virtually infinite music store. In my main audio system, a network-connected music server holds a growing collection of high-resolution downloads along with most of my CD collection, plus easy access to high-res streaming services Tidal and Qobuz, all accessible with a few finger-taps on a tablet. And when I travel, I can take high-res music with me, and listen to it through planar-magnetic headphones whose sound quality rivals that of six-figure loudspeakers. Never in history has so much music been so readily available to so many listeners.

But beyond these attention-grabbing examples of advancing technology, the quest for more lifelike musical reproduction has moved forward in myriad small ways across nearly every aspect of audio reproduction. These advances may not be obvious or profound, but, cumulatively, they take us that much closer to high-end audio's *raison d'être*: equipment that makes it possible to fully experience at home the intents of the composer and musicians. Take, for example, the apparently prosaic power amplifier: How much room for improvement was there in this category of audio component? As it turns out, a lot. Today's best power amps have significantly advanced the state of the art with improved power supplies and novel circuit topologies.

Every advance in one product category spurs improvements in other areas—a more resolving amplifier provides designers of loudspeakers and source components with a more transparent window on the sounds of their own products. Even that most venerable of audio technologies, the LP record, has a few new tricks up its sleeve. With the market for vinyl

playback gear and new LPs exploding, the industry has responded with a slew of innovative products aimed at extracting the most music from vinyl. Even more exciting, most of the records being pressed today sound better than LPs ever have. Audiophile reissues of classic albums, produced with loving devotion, bring the music back to life and engender the feeling that, for the first time, you're hearing the music as it was meant to be heard.

Audiophiles talk of the "golden age" of audio as being the 1950s or 1960s, when many of today's audio paradigms were established. As great as that period was, I think we're in the middle of a new golden age, and not just because of the advancing state of the art. The past few years have been marked by a democratization of high-end audio in which simple and affordable products designed and built with high-end values have become commonplace. Most of the people who buy these products wouldn't identify themselves as audiophiles, but these listeners nonetheless want high-quality sound. The future of high-performance audio looks bright indeed.

Finally, a few notes about how to use this book. As in the previous editions, each chapter begins with the most basic information and progresses to more technical discussions. When you've reached a level of complexity you're comfortable with and don't wish to go deeper, simply skip to the beginning of the next chapter, to begin reading the most basic information about the next subject. This book is meant to be used as a reference, rather than read straight through from beginning to end.

Keep in mind that you don't need to understand the technical aspects of audio to enjoy music in your home. I've included the more technical content for those readers interested in knowing how audio works, and to make this book truly *The Complete Guide to High-End Audio*.

Robert Harley
Albuquerque, New Mexico
June, 2021
