

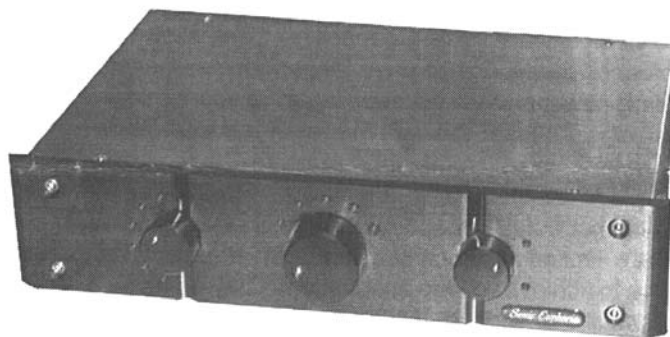
The Sonic Euphoria PLC

by MGD

The PLC from Sonic Euphoria, \$1,195. Jeff 's Sound Values, 205 W. 35" St., Suite F, National City, CA 91950. ph 619/585-1500. fax 619/585-1559. www.soniceuphoria.com. Jeff@jeffssoundvalues.com. Sample on loan from manufacturer.

Seldom does one come across a product that threatens to redefine an entire component category as does the PLC from Sonic Euphoria. The PLC (Passive Line Controller) is an autoformer based line controller that some would call a "passive preamplifier." It's obviously not an amplifier of any kind, but, because it utilizes transformers for attenuation you can squeeze "some" gain out of it. There are no active circuits internally, nor does one need to plug it into a wall outlet to make it work¹. It has a volume knob and six inputs, but no balance control. It looks to be nicely made. There is absolutely nothing about the exterior of the PLC that would explain why or how this unit sounds more transparent, and less musically intrusive than any unit I've used or heard in my life as an audiophile - active or passive.

For the last five or six years I've been happily using the Symfonia Opus 8 active preamp as my reference. It has served me well. During my time with it, it has been subjected to exacting A/B sessions against the likes of pre's from Paller, Aloia, Reference Line, deHaviland, Herron, Placette, Joule, CTC, Metaxas, Counterpoint, BAT, AudioPrism and many others. And not one line controller, (active or passive) out of that august group of noble performers was demonstrably better in every respect than the Opus 8. At least not until the entrance of the Sonic Euphoria. With the other line controllers on the list it was always a series of tradeoffs; they would surpass the Symfonia in some respects, but fall behind in others. One would have better bass, and another airier highs, but no preamp was able to out perform it in all respects, or even most respects. That changed with the audition of the Sonic Euphoria. At last, a line controller capable of taking the definitive step toward the goal of absolute transparency in a way that no unit before it has. For you see, the Sonic Euphoria doesn't merely have better highs, deeper bass or a more transparent midrange in the ways that we as audiophiles generally think. This is an altogether different kind of beast. The Sonic Euphoria presents to its owner a different way of hearing a recorded event, a way that is fundamentally superior to everything preceding it.



I believe that the autoformer based line controller sounds better than active preamps and other passive units because using a transformer for attenuation is simply a better way of doing things; at least when compared to how it's been done in the past. And it's not that transformers haven't been used for attenuation or step-up before, this isn't a new idea ... but it is a new application.

But, why an autoformer?

An autoformer is also known as an autotransformer, the most basic and simple of transformer designs. The simplicity of the autoformer lends itself particularly well for use in voltage attenuation, especially in audio applications. The clear advantages of the autoformer over resistor based passive units includes the efficiency that a transformer has over a resistor, and the impedance matching qualities of a transformer.

Let's talk about efficiency. The autoformer conserves energy by converting different amounts of voltage to current, which makes it a voltage attenuator in the case of a line controller. For example, the autoformer reduces volume by switching to different taps which convert greater amounts of voltage to current. Which in turn means that at the lowest volume settings, there is significant current capability. This allows the autoformer based unit to drive longer cables, maintain dynamic power and still drive low input impedance power amplifiers. Contrast this with the resistor based attenuation which must shunt away part of the energy it receives to function as an

attenuator. Resistor based units cannot output greater current at lower amplitudes, and are limited to discarding part of the power they receive to achieve volume attenuation. They burn off the excess voltage instead of converting it.

All of which is only part of the story as to why a transformer based unit is superior to one that merely uses resistors, especially in terms of impedance matching and reflection. True, resistance based attenuation is simple and straight forward, but from a physics viewpoint, auto-formers look to be superior.

My history with the Sonic Euphoria.

I first saw this device in Las Vegas last year. It was at T.H.E. Show in a small, room in a system that I couldn't really make sense of sonically. Still, there was something about the sound that day which caught my attention, making me want to hear more. I'd be lying if I were to say that I immediately knew this was to be a stellar performer - I didn't. Once back in Kewanee, I sent an e-mail to the manufacturer, which, when it went unanswered, gave me no reason for concern. Oh well, I thought...

As it turned out, the e-mail was routed to the store that the manufacturer runs and he never saw it. Only when he heard of my desire to audition the PLC from a third party did Jeff Hagler find out that I was interested and contact was established regarding a review.

Interestingly, much of my desire to hear the PLC was ignited by a conversation that I had some months before with John Chapman, the personality behind Bent Audio. A couple of posters on the AudioAnnex sent emails to tell me of some interesting posts over at the Audiocircle. I went over to AC to see what was going on, and in the process met some truly interesting audiophiles that had considerable knowledge regarding transformer based line controls. "Marbles" had a Bent, and he strongly encouraged me to contact the manufacturer for the purpose of obtaining a review sample. So, I did. The conversation with John Chapman of Bent was enlightening as well as a motivating force for getting to know more about the transformer based line controller. We had more than a few laughs and we swapped audio stories, but he didn't send a review sample. Time marched on, and as I prepared for the 2004 Winter CES in Las Vegas, one of my goals was to hear one of the "new" passive preamps with transformers inside. That's where and when I first heard the Sonic, Euphoria that resulted in obtaining the sample that I have in the Big Rig now.

My first use of the Sonic Euphoria in the Big Rig was as an attenuator in front of the Soaring Audio integrated power amplifier. Yes, that's what I said. As explained in the review of the Soaring Audio amp, it's an integrated with its own volume controls. But the output of the line source can only be so high before it starts to overload the inputs of the integrated amplifier². Well, with 6 volts out of the MSB Platinum every transient jump from the processor had the overload lights on the Soaring, soaring into the red light zone. The only way that I could think of to lower the output voltage from the MSB was to insert the Sonic Euphoria into the chain between the processor and

the integrated and attenuate it that way. I thought about the sonic degradation that could result from adding a passive pre between the source and the amplifier. I did it anyway.

To my great surprise, sonics were not degraded by adding the Euphoria to the sound reproduction chain. That didn't seem right. After all, over the years I have done preamp transparency testing by inserting (or daisy chaining) a second active preamp into the Big Rig to see what impact the second preamp would have on the sound of a regular system. It's never worked out all that well. On every occasion that I tried adding a second pre-amp to the signal chain, the music simply wasn't as dynamically free or as transparent as it had been before.³ But in this instance I couldn't hear the added component, at least not upon a simple audition without an A/B. The Euphoria, it seemed, had accomplished the near miracle of absolute transparency - I couldn't hear it! To confirm or reject the results of the Euphoria with the Soaring Audio, I inserted the Resolution Opus 21 CD player into the Big Rig without the Soaring. Since the Resolution has an internal analog volume control of high quality, I hooked it directly to the Edge G6 power amplifier and then listened to that combo through the Gallo Reference Mk III loudspeakers for a couple of weeks. After such time that I was able to get a firm grip on what the Resolution/Edge team were doing, I inserted the Euphoria between the player and the amp. For a while I fooled around with various amplitude settings on the Resolution and the Euphoria to see if there was an optimal placement for both. There didn't seem to be, other than the player liked to be opened up as far as it could go, and the Euphoria didn't care for settings at the lowest end of the scale. So, I did much of my listening with the Resolution turned up high or wide open, then attenuating that signal with the Euphoria as little as possible. In other words, I played around.

Again, the Euphoria did nothing negative to the signal being played; at least nothing that I could hear or discern after multiple A/B sessions with the Euphoria in and out of the system. In fact, there were times when I swore that the sound was a little more dynamic with the Euphoria between the source and amp than with it out. Now that should be a dead give away that I'd been tipping the Jack before my listening sessions, or.... the Sonic Euphoria is indeed something special.

Noting how wonderful the Euphoria was making the rest of my system sound, it was time to do some serious auditioning in hopes of assessing what made the Euphoria sound the way it did. I also wanted to discern if the Euphoria would be capable of impressing me as much in more diverse applications - or was it just synergy at work? But it was the idea of "synergy" that led me to contemplate the possibility of the Euphoria being the cornerstone of a "reasonably" priced super system. The fruits of which were the synergy system built in issue #157.

Set-up

I talked about set-up with the Euphoria a little in my

evaluation of the Edge G6 power amplifier (#159). After pulling the Resolution and sending it to Marc Yun for his analysis, the Dodson DAC 263 was installed in the Big Rig. The Euphoria kept its position as line controller and the Edge G6 stayed on as power amplifier.

Since the Euphoria is a passive device, it uses no power cord ...Yippee! Not worrying where the power was coming from meant that I didn't have to make sure it was close enough to a wall for power. I sat it all over the place, including directly upon the power amplifier. The added placement flexibility made component set-up for processors and amps all the easier. Nor, did I worry about finding just the right power cord for the unit (hehehehe). That's an instant savings of at least a couple hundred bucks, maybe more, the power cord hassle is simply gone and of no concern.

For the most part, I used the Tritium Gold and Platinum interconnects with the Euphoria. They are low capacitance, moderate inductance interconnects that worked extremely well with this passive. But, because the Euphoria is an autoformer based design, I was able to effectively get away with using higher capacitance interconnects than usual with a passive unit, and then run them to longer lengths also. I'm not talking about a hundred feet of MIT, even the Euphoria has its limits. But, a meter or two of DH Labs Air Matrix worked great, as did connections made with SAS wire and JPS Ultra. I simply couldn't uncover any obvious interconnect interactions unless I went to crazy extremes.

Impedance mismatches do not result between a line source and a power amp when using an active preamplifier. The active preamp acts as a buffer between the source and the power amp. But with a passive, a less than robust output section of a CD player or phono section can display a few problems. In the Edge G6 review I noted what I thought to be a potential interface problem when using the MSB Platinum processor to power the Edge G6 through the Euphoria ... now, I'm not so sure. In light of the amazing performance of the Dodson/Euphoria/Edge combination, I felt that there had been an unexpected drop off in performance when I took out the Dodson DAC 263 and replaced it with the MSB. Initially, I took the drop off to be an interface problem between the Edge and the MSB since when I used the MSB with the Monarchy SE 250 amps, things jumped back to life. Now, I don't know. Or, at least I'm not as sure of my diagnosis as I was before. Because there is this thing....

The Dodson DAC 263 hijacks this review momentarily

I've experienced it numerous times, but until now, I hadn't thought of it much. It goes like this: A product comes into the test system, otherwise known as the Big Rig. Up to that time, the system seems to be operating optimally and sounding great. But, with the addition of the new product (after set-up and break-in) the test system seems to take a quantum leap forward in sonics. As mentioned in H.R. Weiner's article and note "The System is the Hero" (in this issue), the new product was given total and complete credit for the improved (or worsened)

sound. In this case, it was the Dodson that rode into town to become the new Sheriff. At first, I simply concluded that the Dodson was stomping a mud hole in the MSB. But, something about the sound said things weren't as simple as that. So, I started experimenting trying each processor with a different power amp while still using the Euphoria as the line controller. Using the excellent Monarchy SE 250 mono power amps with their high input impedance of 100,000 Ohms seemed to narrow the gap between the MSB and the Dodson. It appeared that the MSB liked the Monarchy amp, while the Dodson preferred the Edge - both using the Euphoria in the middle. Eventually, I was able to get the MSB to perform at a comparable, or higher, level than the Dodson. The short version of this story being that the Dodson opened my eyes to what was possible with Redbook CD, and in doing so, charted a roadmap to better sound. Knowing where to go sonically, I was motivated to achieve more in my next set-up of the MSB and subsequently accomplished it. As a result, the Big Rig has never sounded more accurate or more true to the software being played - I'm playing CDs and records more now than ever in the past - it's been a revelation. (To read the long version of this part, see footnote 4 below)

Alright, what does this have to do with setting up the Euphoria? It means that the Euphoria is a better "buffer" between various line sources and power amps than I had given it credit for originally. It also means that the Euphoria is an incredibly transparent bridge between your source and power amp. Changes elsewhere in the system are naturally and clearly presented. There is absolutely no doubt in my mind that were it not for the Euphoria being in the Big Rig, the observations regarding the Dodson and the MSB could not have been made, nor would it have been possible to hear the changes wrought by seemingly minor set-up changes. The Euphoria, single handedly, allowed me to further dial in the Big Rig to perform at what I now consider its highest level ever.

At long last, the listening

The Sonic Euphoria is the closest thing to a perfect attenuator and line controller that I know of. And I can tell right now, that there is no way I can completely describe to you what this unit does (or doesn't) without you actually hearing it. When asked by a friend contemplating a purchase how the unit sounded, about all I could say was that once the Euphoria is in a system, veils upon veils that you never knew were there disappear. I have, as a result of my experience with the Euphoria, concluded that active preamp circuits, no matter how refined and expensive, distort the musical signal in ways that we as audiophiles have become accustomed to and expect to be present. We have learned to listen through their failings while not being able to identify or describe those failings with any degree of certainty. It was the problem of not knowing what was possible until the impossible was there before us.

The promise of passive in the past has always been its alleged purity, but what happened to the dynamics? Ultimately, giving up one thing (dynamics) to obtain tonal

purity amidst a bevy of set-up considerations turned out not to be worth the trip.

Now, we are confronted with the choice of something new. Something that challenges the sonic paradigms established over decades of listening and refinement. The autoformer based controller is in my estimation a better device, not because it does more to the signal it receives, but because it does less, a lot less. The truths this device tells aren't necessarily the easiest truths to hear, at least upon a short audition (such as the one I had in Las Vegas). But, once you tune into what the Euphoria does, it becomes abundantly obvious that one's musical perspective is about to change. Going from a world class active preamp to a transformer based unit such as the one I have on hand, seems to me like the sonic equivalent of going through life not knowing one needs glasses, then after being fit with the perfect prescription, taking that first peek outside. A friend of mine experienced that very thing while he was a freshman back in high school. His eyesight wasn't all that bad, and it didn't substantially prohibit him from doing many things. He could even hit a baseball (though not very well). But mandatory vision testing going into high school revealed that he wasn't 20/20. He was a little off. A mild prescription set of lenses were purchased, and the first thing he told me was that he didn't realize that you were supposed to be able to see the birds in trees half way down the street. He actually thought that everyone saw things as he had. Even though the improvement in vision was relatively minor, it was enormous to him as he started to see the world in a different light.

The Euphoria was like putting on a set of superior corrective lenses after having viewed life through good but slightly distorted ones. The sensation of being able to look all the way down the block at things not perceived or understood before was strong. Even things observed from up close appeared to be more in focus and surrounded by details not seen (or heard) before. The music took on a new completeness, one that active and passive designs had previously hinted at in the past, but had not dared reveal - because they couldn't with the Euphoria. Small complexities within the music, or even within a single note were naturally revealed for my inspection and enjoyment. On the whole, micro small relationships were being exposed everywhere I focused my audible gaze, a mist had been burned off. The Sonic Euphoria was taking me closer to what was recorded originally, much closer - all for the price of \$1,195...

The unit has a problem or two, as all units do. The balance tracking isn't as perfect as one would like at the lower end of the dial. At the lowest settings (below 10:00 o'clock) my unit tends to throw the soundstage to the right, although not hard right. Going up in volume centers the image, until one gets to high noon, where all things are visually in place. There also seems to be a bit of one might call "tube like warmth" in the lower mids. It's pleasant, oh man is it, and it might be what's actually on the recording (!), for there are times when it seems totally absent. But, on occasion, a sweetness appears that I don't recall hearing before on recordings that I've basical-

ly worn out from use. Fortunately, whatever it is never ever detracts from the natural detailing of the unit or its ability to delve deep into the music. Other than that, I have real difficulty picking out nits against the Euphoria. I suspect that any real criticism may have to await an even more accurate performer.

One of the things that I especially appreciate with the Euphoria is its dynamic expressiveness. This thing kicks in a way no resistor based passive I've ever heard has. I knew that the jump factor from the Euphoria was impressive when it out did the Symfonia pretty easily. But, I was really and truly impressed when reader with a CTC Blowtorch called to say that his new Euphoria displayed superior action, slam and dynamic contrast over the Blowtorch (the very strengths of the Blowtorch). And indeed, I've never heard any line controller so capable of preserving the dynamic activity of a recording.

All of which means that you will be closer to your recordings than ever before - perhaps too close. I'm not talking about an "up front" perspective as being too close. What I'm referring to here is perhaps hearing things on your recordings that might somehow destroy the illusion for some. I enjoy hearing all that a recording of any kind has to offer. As long as it reveals each and every detail in its original perspective, it heightens the listening for me greatly. But for those who love their overriding colorations and other pleasantries not existing in the real world - this may not be the unit for you.

Conclusion

Listening to the Euphoria has taught me a great deal. Like the experience with the Dodson DAC 263, the Euphoria brought me closer to the recorded music and taught me more about the ultimate goal of playing music back in the home. The Dodson established a bar for performance that I used in re-aligning my set-up of the MSB Platinum. The Dodson established where I wanted to go sonically. As I made changes to my set-up of the MSB, my experience with the Dodson acted as a roadmap. The result being, I've now attained performance with the MSB as good, or better, than I obtained with the Dodson.

Listening to the Euphoria has taught me a lesson regarding where preamplifier performance should be going: It too has raised the bar. Problem is, it may have raised the bar a little too high for the active and passive resistor based competition. My feeling right now is that it's going to take another transformer based line controller to extend the efficacy of the art over that accomplished by this unit.

One of the wonderful aspects about my seemingly unbounded enthusiasm for this product regards its price. Looking through periodicals on line and in print discloses a general emphasis on more and more expensive products. I even found some reports regarding this product on line wherein the writer appeared to be actively searching for reasons to like and be enthusiastic about a much more expensive product (his own), but had difficulty doing so. While reading that review I wanted to scream at the reviewer "Spit it out!" The reluctance of some to admit that something cheaper could be better drives me crazy.

For some, a line controller costing less than \$1,200 can't be as revealing as something costing ten grand or more.... But, the Sonic Euphoria is as musically transparent and overwhelmingly natural sounding as any product in my experience, and that experience includes preamps in the \$15,000+ range.

For all off you that have been crying out that quality components cost too much, and the high-end isn't responsive enough to the-ordinary audiophile, your ship has arrived. This is your answer. I know it's my answer ... just have to write Jeff a check to make it official.

Footnotes

1. Though it does have an ingenious grounding scheme where an outlet like connection goes to the wall to take advantage of the grounding in your wall while not connecting to the AC.

2. A very strange condition for a. modem day electronic device. Soaring Audio explains the low input requirement as a necessary condition to making their distortion reduction circuit work optimally.

3. The only active preamp that nearly pulled such a stunt off was the SAS 10A.

Footnotes 4 and 5 in original article were unrelated to the PLC and were left out of this reprint.

