

EQUIPMENT REPORT



Odyssey Audio Khartago Stereo Amplifier

Good Enough

Jonathan Valin

For the past six months I've been using the superb \$40k Souolution 710 stereo and \$115k 700 monoblock solid-state amplifiers from Switzerland in my system—the latter the same amp with which Magico triumphantly debuted its M5 speakers at CES this past January. I'll be reviewing the Souolution electronics in an upcoming issue, but I can already tell you they'll get a rave. I've never heard any amplifier, tube or solid-state, as low in noise and high in transparency as these Swiss numbers. With a suitably transparent speaker like the MartinLogan CLX or the Magico M5 and a suitably transparent front end like the Walker Black Diamond or the AAS Gabriel/Da Vinci (both fitted out with the Da Vinci Grandezza cartridge), it's as if the electronics aren't in the system. And their disappearing act makes the disappearing act of the front end and the back end that much more complete. That's what transparency of this order buys you in an amplifier or preamplifier—less of the physical and electronic presence of all of your gear, more of the presence of the music, the musicians, and (sigh) the recording and mastering engineers.

Why am I talking about the Souolution amplifiers in a review of Odyssey gear? Because I heard about both from solid-state-amp connoisseur Alon Wolf of Magico. I wasn't a bit surprised when he recommended the Souolution 700s—they cost a fortune and had a helluva reputation for excellence. But I *was* surprised when he suggested that I also give a listen to a little amp called the Odyssey Khartago. First of all, I'd never heard of Odyssey, though, as it turns out, the company's been around for a decade, and second...well, I'll get to that in a moment.

"I've been using the Khartago in the factory for years," said he, "to test loudspeakers. It isn't a Souolution 700, but it's...good

enough." Good enough for the Wolfman is good enough for me, thought I, and promptly called Klaus Bunge of Odyssey, who happens to be located a scant two hours away in picturesque Indianapolis, Indiana. A week or two later Klaus, a big bearded bear of a man, drove down to Cincy with a Khartago and a pair of Stratos monoblocks in hand—both hands, actually. (Though I won't have the space to talk specifically about the Strati, you can take it for granted that everything I say about the Khartago goes double for Odyssey's monoblocks.)

Bunge has been importing German hi-fi into the United States for better than twenty years. Indeed, throughout the eighties he almost single-handedly put the German electronics company Symphonic Line on the map. In the late nineties, he decided to offer a more "cost-effective" line of amps and preamps in addition to his pricey imports. Somehow he managed to talk the folks at Symphonic Line into supplying him with the same circuits it used in its amps, which Klaus then builds, stuffs, tweaks, sticks in handsomely finished custom-made anodized-aluminum boxes, and sells factory-direct. (All this work is done in the good ol' U.S. of A.) The Khartago, for instance, has specs that are nearly identical—as they should be, considering they use virtually the same boards—to those of the celebrated Symphonic Line RG-1 Mk IV. Both output 115Wpc into 8 ohms; both have a bandwidth that extends out to 400kHz; both have high damping factors, exceptional slew rates, and oodles of current. The only thing they don't share is price. The Symphonic Line RG-1 Mk IV is currently \$6800; the Odyssey Khartago costs \$799.

Yep, you're reading that right: \$799. *That* was the second reason I was surprised by Alon Wolf's suggestion. When a guy with his champagne taste recommends a beer-budget amplifier like this

EQUIPMENT REPORT - Odyssey Audio Khartago Stereo Amplifier

one, you tend to pay attention.

Apparently, eliminating the distributor and retailer and selling factory-direct pays some pretty handsome dividends to Odyssey's customers. (See my interview with Klaus for details.) Of course, the version of the Khartago that Klaus brought me didn't cost \$799. Since it had a better Plitron transformer, an extra bit of power-supply capacitance, and superior parts—three options among many (including Nichicon Muse caps, Vishay/Dale resistors, extra WIMA metal-film caps, custom colors) that Bunge offers, along with his standard *twenty-year transferable* warranty—it cost a whopping \$995.

You would think that switching from the \$115k Souolution 700 monoblocks to the \$995 Khartago with what is probably the highest-resolution speaker I've had in my home, the \$89k Magico M5, would result in a *tremendous* falling-off, sonically. With amps in the Odyssey's price range, you have every right to expect decent sound, but you don't expect Souolution-level refinement. There will be noise; there will be grain; there will be soundstage constriction, timbral anomalies, dynamic and SPL limits, less detail, less everything.

Not with the Khartago. Here there was none of the usual peppery solid-state grain (and I mean none), no added brightness and coarseness in the upper mids, no added spikiness on hard transients (the kind that turns a Martin acoustic guitar into a National Steel guitar), no transistor darkness in the treble (indeed, the Khartago has an ARC-like touch of light and bloom on top), no constriction of soundstage width (although I did get a bit less soundstage depth), no sense of listening through a scrim. Nope, what the Odyssey Khartago sounded like, for all the world and in direct comparisons, was a somewhat-less-finely-resolving, somewhat-less-transparent-to-sources, somewhat-less-low-in-noise-and-coloration, somewhat-less-well-controlled-in-the-bass, somewhat-less-energetic-on-top, somewhat-less-deep-and-wide-in-soundstaging Souolution 700. In overall tonal balance, the two amps were surprisingly similar—which is to say almost dead-center neutral with, in the Khartago's case, a bit more tube-like warmth and roundedness.

By the way, when I say "somewhat less," I mean a little not a lot. It's not as if you won't hear *plenty* of fresh detail through the Khartago; you just won't hear it in the superabundance of the incomparable Souolution 700. If you want a concrete measure of the difference between the two amps (other than that one is 115 times more expensive), listen to Ricky Lee Jones' fabulously moody, muttery, whispery, sometimes-hard-to-decipher cover of The Left Banke's great "Baroque 'n' roll" anthem "Walk Away Renee" from *Girl At Her Volcano* [Warner]. With the Khartago the catchy refrain is clear up until the third line, where the amp grows momentarily tongue-tied. What you hear (without straining to hear) is: "Just walk away Renee/You won't see me follow you back home/The empty sidewalks dum-dum-DUM-dum-dum the same/You're not to blame." Through the Souolution (and, I should add, *only* through the Souolution in my experience) you hear the whole quatrain with crystal clarity every time Ricky Lee sings it: "Just walk away Renee/You won't see me follow you back home/The empty sidewalks on my block are not the same/You're not to blame."

Or take the Steve Hoffman reissue of Joni Mitchell's *Blue*. With the Souolution gear, as I've noted several times before, the

overdub of Joni singing backup to her own lead on "Carey" and other numbers is unmistakably potted in. It sounds exactly like what it is—a different spot of space and time cameo'd into the soundstage. With the Khartago, the artificiality of this bit of engineering is a bit less obvious (as, by the way, it was meant to be). Although you still hear the overdub as an overdub, the effect doesn't stand out quite as nakedly as it does through the Souolution 710 or 700.

These differences in resolution and articulation aside, the Odyssey and Souolution amps are fundamentally more alike than different. Put on any well-recorded disc—say, Holly Cole's Tom Waits' tribute album *Temptation* [Metro Blue]—and listen to

SPECS & PRICING

Power: 115Wpc RMS @ 8 ohms
Bandwidth: 2Hz-400kHz
Current: 40 amps
Distortion: <0.04% THD
Damping factor: >500
continuous damping factor
Input impedance: >22kOhms
Inputs: One pair RCA
Weight: 30 lbs.
Dimensions: 18" x 18.5" x 4"
Price: \$799 (\$995 as supplied)

ODYSSEY AUDIO
Orders: e-mail to odav@odysseyaudio.com, or call (317) 299-5578
odysseyaudio.com

JV's Reference System
Loudspeakers: Magico M5, MartinLogan CLX
Linestage preamps: Audio Research Reference 3, Audio Space Reference 2, and Souolution 720
Phonostage preamps: Audio Research Reference 2, Lamm Industries LP-2 Deluxe, Audio Tekne TEA-2000
Power amplifiers: Audio Research Reference 610T, MBL 901i, Lamm ML-2, Souolution 700
Analog source: Walker Audio Proscenium Black Diamond record player, AAS Gabriel/Da Vinci turntable with DaVinci Grandezza and Nobile tonearms

Phono cartridges: Air Tight PC-1 Supreme, Clearaudio Goldfinger v2, Koetsu Onyx Platinum, DaVinci Grandezza
Digital source: Souolution 740, dCS Scarlatti with U-Clock, ARC Reference CD8
Cable and interconnect: Tara Labs "Zero" Gold interconnect, Tara Labs "Omega" Gold speaker cable, Tara Labs "The One" Cobalt power cords, Synergistic Research Absolute Reference speakers cables and interconnects, Audio Tekne Litz wire cable and interconnect
Accessories: Shakti Hallographs (6), A/V Room Services Metu acoustic panels and corner traps, ASC Tube Traps, Symposium Isis equipment stand, Symposium Ultra equipment platforms, Symposium Rollerblocks, Symposium Fat Padz, Walker Prologue Reference equipment stand, Walker Prologue amp stands, Shunyata Research Hydra V-Ray power distributor and Anaconda Helix Alpha/VX power cables, Tara Labs PM 2 AC Power Screens, Shunyata Research Dark Field Cable Elevators, Walker Valid Points and Resonance Control discs, Winds Arm Load meter, Clearaudio Double Matrix record cleaner, HiFi-Tuning silver/gold fuses

COMMENT ON THIS ARTICLE ON THE FORUM AT AVGUIDE.COM

EQUIPMENT REPORT - Odyssey Audio Khartago Stereo Amplifier

the same song, like her great cover of “Invitation to the Blues,” on both amps and be amazed at how similar they make Cole’s voice, Aaron Davis’ powerful piano, David Piltch’s big acoustic bass (admittedly, a bit tauter on the Soulution amps), and the light accents of Dougie Bowne’s drumkit sound in timbre, texture, and dynamic. Even performance details—like the characteristic way Cole drops her voice in pitch to “comment” ironically on lyrics she has just delivered in a sweeter, higher, softer, more childlike voice (as, for instance, in “Little Boy Blue”)—are reproduced clearly by the Khartago, though not as clearly as they are by the Soulution, which practically hands you the script and stage directions from which Cole, who like all fine singers is also an excellent actor, is working.

Yeah, the 700 and 710 are slightly, but nonetheless audibly and unmistakably, more neutral, lower in noise and color, and higher in resolution and transparency-to-sources than the Khartago—as well, they should be. (The Soulution amps also, as noted, have better grip in the bass, more clarity and power on top, and better staging.) For a lucky few, these advantages will be decisive. For the rest of us, here is an under-\$1000 amp that sounds so much more like a \$115,000 amp than any cheap Class AB solid-state amp I know of (and I’ve heard and reviewed a few) that it is downright astonishing.

I’m not saying you should run out and buy one of these things instead of a Soulution 710 or 700 if you own or are planning to purchase Magico M5s or Wilson MAXX 3s or Rockport Arraki (although, if you’re pinching pennies on the rest of your system to leverage a pair of pricey speakers, you could do plenty worse than the Khartago). What I am saying is that the Odyssey amp gives you more of the taste of the high-priced spread than I thought possible for \$995 (or anywhere near that price). And since the Khartago works into loads as low as 2 ohms, it mates up with virtually anything—not just Magico M5s. But don’t take my word for it. Try it for yourself. Odyssey offers the Khartago (and all its products) with a 30-day, no-questions-asked, money-back return policy. There is no “restocking” fee.

If all that isn’t good news, then I’m fresh out of headlines. **TAS**

JV CHATS WITH KLAUS BUNGE OF ODYSSEY AUDIO

Tell us about the development of the Khartago.

All of the different Odyssey models are based on the same singular design—a design from Symphonic Line, which by itself dates back to 1986. The Khartago is pretty much based on what was then a \$4200 Symphonic Line stereo amp, the Stratos monos on an \$8400 Symphonic Line mono amp. Both designs have been constantly tweaked and tuned, maturing for over two decades. Time is the real secret to our success here.

How do you build your amps?

When the boards and the parts are ready, we *hand-populate* and *hand-solder* every single board in our shop. Then we go through a five-part QC process, including substantial listening to each and every product. There are no bad apples or fluctuations in manufacturing-quality or parts-quality here.

For various reasons, including humanitarian ones, we try to be as U.S.-made as possible. For instance, all of our face- and back-plates are aircraft-aluminum billet, CNC-machined here in Indy. I personally hand-brush all the metal. Then they go to the anodizer, also here in Indy, and finally to the laser engraver, also in Indy.

I am very proud of the fact that after twenty years we are still unique. There is not another outfit that has the same factory-direct model with a true high-end design that has matured for 23 years, that has the same price structure as ours, and that offers 100% hand-made-in-the-U.S products.

How do you keep up with demand?

We have been back-ordered for at least 2-3 weeks since December of 2000. By not having units on the shelves, we essentially build amps to order. This gives me the chance to talk to every single customer, to see what he/she likes and is looking for, and get a detailed list of associated gear and room environs. In that way we are able to customize any amp for the prospective buyer. Not just the biasing, where we adjust the amp somewhat to suit either a bright or dark speaker, but actually customize to exact systems and rooms.

How do you do it all at such a low price?

When I started Odyssey I was looking to make a living, not a fortune. I honestly wanted to offer absolute bang for the buck with massive performance and massive, heavy, machined cases. Reviews weren’t important to me. I wanted a customer who was so blown away by the quality of what he bought that he couldn’t keep quiet and had to chatter about it nonstop. That was my goal and my business plan, and (thanks in part to the Internet) it worked. For a decade now, word of mouth has given us over 3000 customers. We have sold in excess of 5000 amplifiers. Plus my hopes for happy customers have been met. The loyalty of our guys is truly amazing.

Money isn’t everything, after all. I come from a true blue-collar Volkswagen factory-worker background. You know, the first in a large family to get the Abitur (highest high school diploma in the German tripartite system), the first to go to the University, etc. With this background, and being from Germany, social justice and human decency have always been more important to me than making millions. I have three Masters degrees and an unfinished Ph.D.—none of which I used in starting this business. Ah, well....