

Sam Tellig

Sam visits Triangle's New Owner

Who is George Sank? My wife, Marina, wanted to know why a posh Paris hotel, the Four Seasons George V, is named after a British monarch. And I do enjoy lecturing.

George V (George Cinq en français) was King of England during World War I, when Britain came to the aid of its ally France. But following the Bolshevik Revolution, in 1917, George V abandoned his cousin, Tsar Nicholas II. Prime Minister Lloyd George offered asylum to the Russian monarch and his family, but George V torpedoed the idea. Some hold "George Sank" partly responsible for what befell the Romanoffs.

History of a more cheerful sort was made last fall, when Triangle Electroacoustique held a major international press event at the Four Seasons George V Hotel, just off the Champs Elysées—the first such event since Olivier Decelle took over the company in 2006. (Paul Messenger wrote about the change in ownership in the February issue's "Industry Update.")

With some chutzpah, Triangle now calls itself "The French loudspeaker company." *Eh, bien.* While Triangle is actually France's No.2 speaker manufacturer, they have a huge domestic presence. France accounts for three-fourths of their sales.

You trip over Triangle everywhere: When you shop for books, CDs, or a digital camera at fnac, the largest French retailer of cultural and consumer electronics products. When you rent a video. When wifey wants a washing machine. Good hi-fi is widely available in France.

Maybe it's because the French still sit down to listen to music. There seem to be plenty of *melomanes*—music lovers—in France, judging by the number of music festivals and the fact that France supports two major classical-music magazines.

Triangle makes budget models for this broader domestic market, including the floorstanding Thema, which I

heard in the fnac basement. Through some arm-twisting by Richard Kohlruss, of VMAX Services, Triangle's US and Canadian distributor, the Thema is now available in the US for \$1695/pair. I wonder if it will run on my flea-watt Sun Audio SV 2A3 amplifier. We'll soon find out.

Triangle founder Renaud de Vergnette remains with the company. Olivier Decelle describes him as a *concepteur*—a superb idea person—and not just for hi-fi. Renaud has created some of his own furniture, including a dining table that stores cutlery in drawers built into the legs. No need to miss a beat if someone drops a fork.

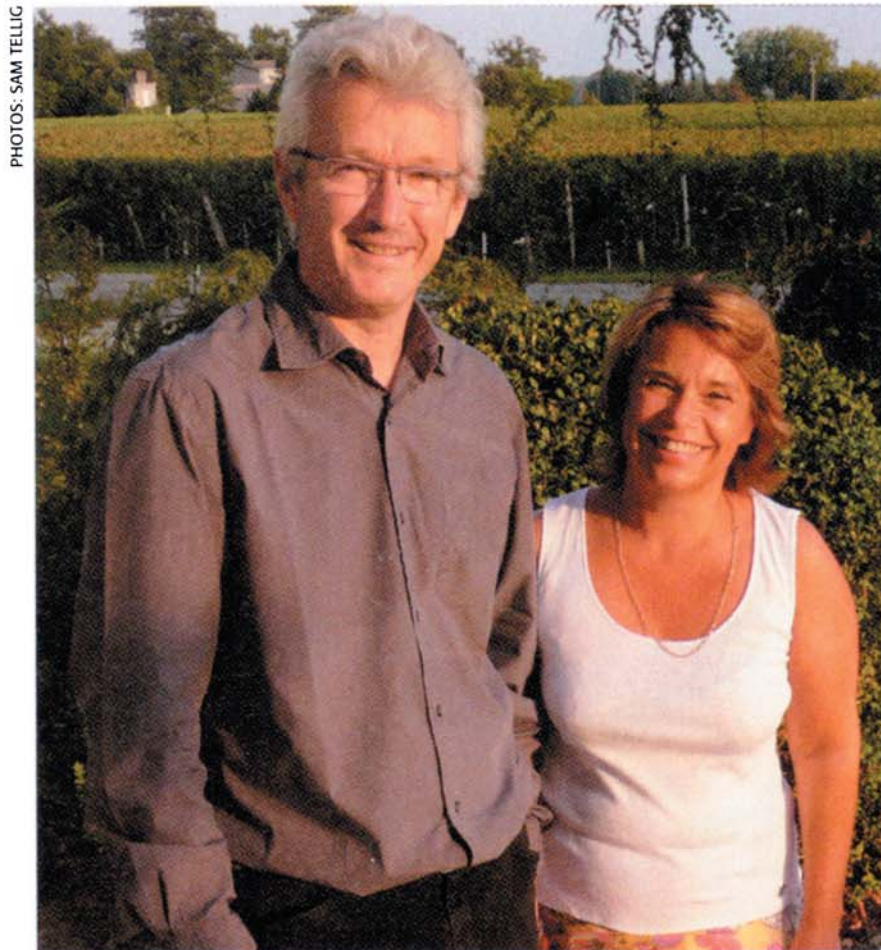
Renaud wasn't trained as an engineer and doesn't have a business degree, which make his accomplishments all the more remarkable. The French hi-fi scribes revere him. He's passionate about jazz and classical music. He avoids e-mail and doesn't have a cell phone. Born in Paris, he now lives in the village of Droizy, near Soissons, whose population, at last count, was 79. People, that is. Probably several hundred farm animals. Cows, goats, pigs, chickens wander into the lane, which is one vehicle wide.

I once told Renaud that my philosophy of life was never to grow up.

"*Exactement,*" he replied.

Renaud did it the hard way. He didn't stuff someone else's drivers into a box and put his marque on it, but designed and built his own drivers. "If they are not our drivers, these are not our speakers," Renaud once told me—or words to that effect. While Renaud has handed over the reins, he remains on board to say *Triangle ou pas Triangle*—Triangle or not Triangle.

In the February issue, my colleague



Olivier and Anne Decelle at Chateau Jean-Faure.

John Marks cited examples of "conspicuous production in hopes of conspicuous consumption." I wish I'd written that. Triangle has done the opposite, perhaps to the detriment of its balance sheet. At Triangle, technology doesn't trickle down from the flagship Magellan line—it pours. The speakers in the Esprit series come close to the performance of the company's more expensive models.

All this might have been lost had Triangle been taken over by a multinational conglomerate, but Olivier Decelle is determined to keep Triangle French: French-owned, French sound. The speakers have a Gallic personality and flair. After all, someone has to wrest good sound from the British. (That's a joke, JA.)

All loudspeakers are supposed to be neutral, and Triangle has measurements to show that theirs are. But that's like evaluating wine by chemical analysis. Great loudspeakers have personalities behind them. They exhibit a house sound, even as the manufacturers provide measurements to show that they don't. Would you want a world in which all speakers sounded [*ahem*] British? (I do have to give the Chief what to cut, as Marina says.)

SAM'S SPACE

Triangle unveiled so many products at the George V that there wasn't time to hear them all. These included a complete revamping of the best-selling Esprit line, all clad in vinyl (\$795-\$2895/pair). The new Genèse models are veneered in wood and sure look nice (\$2795-\$6595/pair). The Magellan line has filled out, too. I have my eye on the floorstanding Magellan Cello (\$12,900/pair).

Triangle does things in style. To help calibrate everyone's ears, they treated guests to a concert at the Théâtre des Champs Elysées the evening before the George V event: Zubin Mehta conducting the Israel Philharmonic in Mahler's Symphony 7. Francophiles Paul Messenger and Alvin Gold were invited, of course. Alvin, an avid Mahlerian, was ecstatic over the performance.

Renaud de Vergnette founded Triangle in 1980, in the ancient city of Soissons, in Picardy, 65 miles northeast of Paris—in the wrong direction. That's one reason Renaud loves the place: There is a total absence of weekenders or summering Parisians. *L'été? A Soissons?* But British retirees are moving to the area. They think it's warm here, Renaud told me. He calls this *la vraie France*—the real France. Unchanged. Unspoiled. Mostly untrampled by Parisians like himself.

Ancient Soissons antedates Roman times. Julius Caesar mentioned the place when it was called Suessiones, part of Long-Haired Gaul. An archaeological dig next door could stall another expansion of Triangle's facility. The ruins may be pre-Roman.

Today, it's a time warp. There's no direct motorway to Paris, only an indirect two- or three-lane highway. There's no TGV high-speed train service, only a lazy local from Paris that stops running after 8pm.

Like Renaud, I love the place, the people, the food—robust and hearty, nothing light and trendy. You know

how everyone is thin in Paris? In Soissons, lots of people are BIG. Like me. Richard Kohlruss of VMAX loves the place, too. The mischievous Renaud put quite a scare into Marina by suggesting that we might like to live in drowsy Droizy, where he recently built a house. The Dungeon of Droizy is nearby, where Renaud is rumored to lock up hi-fi critics who cause him grief.

I'd visited the Triangle factory twice before so Olivier Decelle suggested that, instead of northeast, Marina and I might swing southwest, to Bordeaux, where he pursues his main passion: viniculture. As *mes confrères* boarded the bus for the dank delights of sooty Soissons, I laughed my evil laugh.

Olivier's father, Armand, established the Picard chain of frozen-food stores (the company used to deliver ice)—not ordinary, supermarket frozen food, but gourmet entrées and desserts that harried housewives can defrost, heat up, and pass off as homemade. Olivier told me the secrets of Picard's success: Sell nothing you wouldn't eat and serve yourself, and be fanatical about quality and freshness. Picard's slogan: *plus frais que frais* (fresher than fresh).

You can check out the website at www.picard.fr and fret over the fact that Picard stores are found only in France and Italy. Couliabac (salmon in a pie crust), escargot, crêpes, quiches,

moules à la marinière—if they flew this stuff to Manhattan, there would be riots. I know exactly where to put Picard: Grand Central Station. They did try a shop in London, but you know the Brits: fish and chips.

Renaud established Triangle in 1980. One of his first dealers was Olivier, who then, not yet drafted into the family freezer, ran a small hi-fi shop in Paris. Renaud made a sales call, speakers in tow. Olivier liked them, became Renaud's first Paris dealer, and the two hit it off. In 1984, Olivier closed the store and joined his father and brother at Picard, but he and Renaud remained fast friends. (As Olivier told me, in France, *dealer* means *drug dealer*; the proper word is *revendeur*, for *reseller* or *retailer*.)

The Decelles sold their majority



The historic center of Saint-Émilion (top), Chateau Jean-Faure, in Saint-Émilion, near Pomerol.

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interest in Picard 10 years later. The company then switched hands almost as often as has *Stereophile*. Weary of France's Wall Street types, Olivier decided to pursue another passion. Today he owns and actively runs three outstanding vineyards, including Mas Amiel.

His Bordeaux vineyard is Château Jean-Faure, located in Saint-Émilion, close to the boundary with Pomerol, in the heart of Bordeaux red wine country—Cheval Blanc abuts, Petrus is just up the road. You pay a lot more for Petrus than you do for Château Jean-Faure. That's why Russians love Petrus, Olivier wryly observed. When he can fetch three or four times the price for Château Jean-Faure, Russians will love his wine, too. (Stock your cellar now with 2005.)

In the heart of the Bordeaux wine region, all the famous vineyards are close to one another—yet a short distance can make a huge difference in a wine's quality, as Olivier was quick to point out. It's mainly a matter of *terroir*—the land, the earth, the place. How much sun or shade it gets. Of course, it matters greatly how good a wine-maker you are: your skills, staff, barrels, equipment, your weather-forecasting ability. It's not an occupation in which you can let things slide. Mistime the harvest by even a day and you could wind up with sour grapes.

Château Jean-Faure had gone to seed. The Château itself—a heartstopingly beautiful building—was in ruins, and the vines weren't much better off. Olivier gutted the building, saving the walls. Now the Château gleams like a precious gem, the vines are meticulously manicured, and all the wine-making equipment is up to date.

Olivier is ready to roll up his sleeves—literally. I saw him do it. When we visited, the harvest was just a few days away. During the harvest, everyone pitches in—even the accountants—and does whatever is necessary to bring in the grapes.

Travel 20 miles northwest from Saint-Émilion and you find yourself in one of the most sparsely populated departments of France, as well as the home of expatriate British-designed Audion amplifiers. Again, *la vraie France*. But that's another column.

Triangle Antal Ex loudspeaker

Several months passed before two of the new Triangle models found their way *chez nous*: the floorstanding Antal

Ex and the stand-mounted Titus Ex. I reviewed the previous Antal model, the Esw, in Vol.29 No.4. (Don't tell my daughter and her husband about the new version. They have the Esw and still think it's the latest.)

The Ex series is new from the ground up—new drivers, new crossovers, improved cabinet bracing. Credit to Renaud for recognizing from the start that cabinet vibrations were to be [*ahem*] evacuated. A Triangle trait: *À mort les vibrations!*

Gone are the Celius and several other Esprit models. The Antal Ex tops out the line at \$2895/pair. If this seems a steep increase over the Antal Esw, last seen selling for \$2249/pair, it is. Blame the Bushwhacked dollar. The good news is that the Antal Ex is a much improved speaker, easily surpassing the old Celius, which sold for the same price when first offered.

All models in the Ex series—including the Comete, which AD reviews this month—use the same horn-loaded, 1" titanium-dome tweeter. The horn-loaded enclosure is deeper now and is made of PVC rather than metal. Triangle has played around with the phase plug, too. To my ears, the new tweeter is an advance in terms of smooth, fatigue-free extension. The sound is sweeter, more refined. (Marina says I should be, too.)

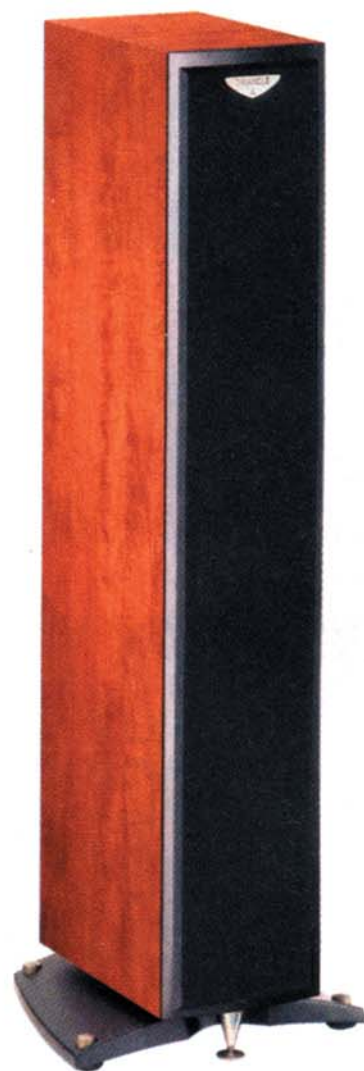
The single 6.3" midrange driver has a cellulose-fiber diaphragm (in plain words: a doped paper cone) and a new double-fold fabric suspension system. Then there are *les boomers* (French for *woofers*): two 6.3" bass units, each with a fiberglass diaphragm (new for Triangle). The crossover frequencies lie at 250Hz and 2.5kHz. The frequency response is given as 40Hz–20kHz, ± 3 dB. The sensitivity is said to be 91dB/W/m, the nominal impedance 8 ohms, with a minimum of 3.4 ohms.

The Antal Ex measures 44.9" (1060mm) high by 14.6" (370mm) wide by 15" (380mm) deep, including its integrated plinth, which now comes already attached. That's a good thing: dealers and buyers (distributors, too, like Richard Kohlruss's VMAX) often put the plinth on backward. The Antal Ex weighs 50 lbs (23kg) and comes with twin binding posts for biwiring or biamping. The vinyl-clad finish is Cognac, as in Courvoisier. After all, this is "The French loudspeaker company."

The redesigned plinth remains unusual. It gives the speaker stability, making it hard for kids or pets to tip

over. A large cone-shaped foot at the bottom center is said to drain away cabinet vibrations. A cup for this cone is provided to protect delicate floors. But if you're a real Triangle buff, you're sure where to place the speakers, and your wife won't kill you, you could drive a Phillips-head screw into the floor and sink the large cone into that.

The Antal's front panel is curved to break up reflected soundwaves and preserve the imaging. You could leave the grille in place, but the speaker sounds better and looks okay naked. Triangle is now better able to design its cabinet bracing, thanks to its investment in new



Antal EX tops out Triangle's Esprit line. New drivers make this an entirely new speaker.

equipment, including a laser accelerometer, which you can think of as a super stethoscope. This has ratcheted up the speaker's resolution.

In my listening room, at my listening levels, I easily got by with last month's Melody Audio 12A3 push-pull integrated tube amplifier, rated at 18Wpc into 8 or 4 ohms. I also tried the 60Wpc, solid-state LFD Integrated Zero Mk.III LE integrated amp that I used in February. And I used the 9W Quicksilver SET Mono Amps with various preamps, including the Audio Electronics AE-3 Mk.II line-level. I judged the Antals to be very amplifier friendly, as I've come to expect from Triangle. Don't tell Mike



Triangle Antal Ex bass driver

ver SET monos for our friends Lev and Sonia—no audiophiles they. Their jaws dropped. Sonia: “Why would you ever leave the room?”

The Triangle Antal Ex is a must-hear: the best affordable floorstander yet from one of my favorite loudspeaker manufacturers. It's also one of the most tube- and SET-friendly loudspeakers on the planet.

I wrest my case.

Triangle Titus Ex loudspeaker

You do know that *Triangle* is pronounced *TREE-on-gle* in French, right? And that *Titus* is not *TIE-tus* but *TEA-tous*. Say it: *TREE-on-gle TEA-tous*. Fun, *n'est-ce pas?*

An earlier version of the *TEA-tous*, the Titus 202, was—and still is—a favorite of mine, because of its ability to soundstage like mad in the nearfield, and its way of running on flea power—a mighty 3.5Wpc—from my Sun Audio SV-2A3 amp. Alas, I did not have the chance to raise the Sun from the basement. But I can tell you that 9Wpc from the Quicksilvers did just splendidly in my listening room, nearfield. *How* nearfield? Try 6'.

I still got splendid sound when I used the Titus Exes in the farfield in the living room, about 15' from my listening chair, but they sounded a little lost in this larger chamber—not surprising. Consider these speakers for a smaller room and close-in listening. Then, the soundstaging effect, as one French hi-fi scribe noted, is hallucinogenic. I mean the speakers completely “vanished”—a tribute, in part, to the drivers' beautiful integration.

The Titus Ex (\$995/pair) measures 12.6" (320mm) high by 7.5" (190mm) wide by 11.8" (300mm) deep and weighs 14.3 lbs (6.5kg). There's that tweeter on top—same one as in the Antal Ex. The 5.1" bass/midrange driver has a doped paper cone. The Titus Ex's frequency response is given as 55Hz–20kHz, its nominal impedance as 8 ohms with a minimum of 3.8 ohms; the sensitivity is

specified as 91dB/W/m. The crossover is at 2.5kHz. Cognac finish only. There are two pairs of binding posts, for biamping or biwiring.

Stands are necessary—figure 20" high or so, and you may want to angle the stands up. I recommend Triangle's own oddly attractive—and great-sounding—Boomerang stands. They're expensive at \$495/pair, but almost obligatory—they're that good. The big cone in the center acts like the big cone on the plinth of the



Triangle Titus Ex presents an almost hallucinogenic soundstage.

Sanders, of Quicksilver, but in a smaller listening room, listening close-in, 9W might suffice.

Or, if you're my son, maybe not. He knows I like Tom Waits, so he gave me a copy of *Mule Variations*. “Try this with your favorite flea-watt amp,” he snorted, rather like John Atkinson. Yes, it's true: This was a no-go.

A slow-healing shoulder injury kept me from moving the speakers around, so they stayed where Richard Kohlruss had placed them: in the nearfield, about 7' from my listening throne. As per Richard K.'s suggestion (and that of French hi-fi scribes), the speakers were aimed to cross well behind the listening position; *ie*, with a slight toe-in. As I recall, the Antal Esws liked to be a little farther back for the drivers to fully integrate. This was not an issue with the Antal Exes: the drivers blended seamlessly, and the entirely coherent soundstage went deep and wide behind the speakers.

You want me to write more than five sentences about the sound? (Some readers want me to drone on like an audiophile.) You know the recording of J.S. Bach's violin concertos by the Akademie für Alte Musik? (CD, Harmonia Mundi France [heh-heh] HMC901876). This is a Sam Tellig *CD être à la morte*—a disc to die for.

All right. If you love Bach, get it, go to track 7, and hit Play. Listen as the woodwind players inhale. Breathtaking—literally. *Plus frais que frais. Plus vrai que vrai, peut-être*. There it was: proof of single-ended triode's superiority to push-pull, and a tribute to the Antal Ex's resolving ability, as well as its ability to get by with a minimum of watts.

I played this disc with the Quicksil-

Antal to evacuate vibrations. I've tried the Boomerangs with numerous speakers, always with excellent results. With them, the Titus costs roughly half the price of the floorstanding Antal.

My gosh, I need to write more than five sentences about the sound.

Like other Triangle models, the Titus Ex was fast. Fleet of foot. It soundstaged and imaged like crazy, and lent itself to nearfield positioning. If you set them just right, you might be surprised by their bass response. (You could always fill in with a subwoofer or two.) And, as in the Antal, the Titus Ex's new tweeter is smoother, more refined than before.

You can find good minimonitors for less, but they probably won't have such sophisticated drivers. Their in-house drivers are why Triangle rules. Like the Antal Ex, the Titus EX is a must-hear. If you don't believe me, ask Artie Dudley—the Comete EX is cut from the same cloth.