

Cello Chorale and Rhapsody from Matthew James

by Dirk Sommer

The brand Cello looks back on a turbulent history. Founded by Mark Levinson, it had a long, successful period, with products that are desirable classics even today. At the turn of the century it experienced financial collapse. Since then, the Cello tradition has continued and thrived under the company Matthew James.

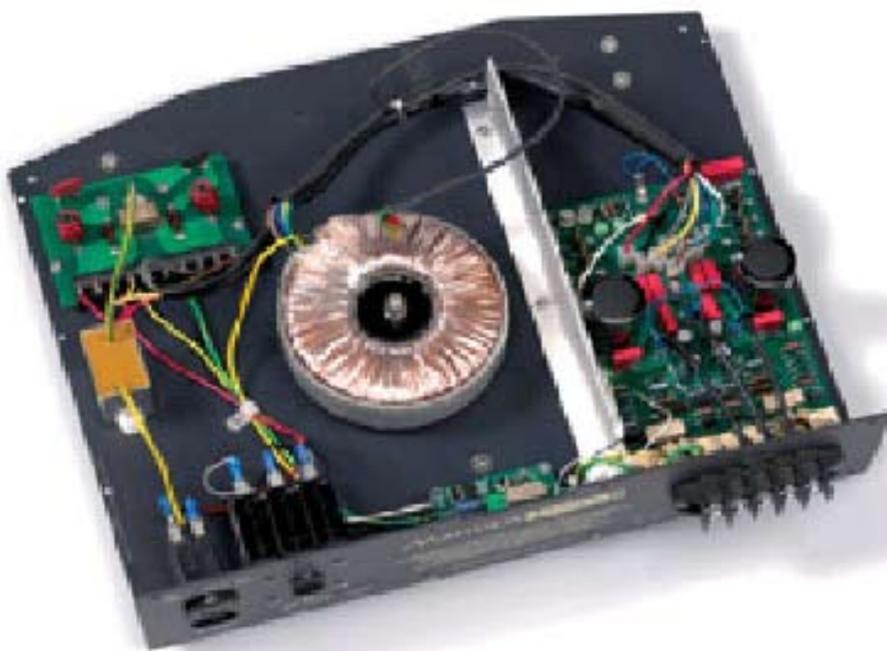
The man behind Matthew James is Jim McCullough, who first met Mark Levinson in 1978, being deeply impressed by his HQD system. For five years McCullough worked for Madrigal Audio Labs, where Mark Levinson products were designed and manufactured. For another five years, he worked among the digital specialists of Wadia, before moving on to Cello. Shortly after the breakdown of Cello, Ltd. he founded his own company, which not only supplied parts for service and technical information to owners of Cello equipment (who were now without

not only warranty, but even a source for information about their components), but also offered updates for existing Cello products. In January 2003, the first new product developed solely by his new company was introduced: the Rhapsody power amplifier, which could be configured as either a two- or three-channel amplifier. After a lengthy development, the Chorale, the first Cello preamp from Matthew James, made it's debut in January 2006.

The Matthew James' Cello products differ dramatically in

appearance from their Cello predecessors. The design reminds me of Rimowa carrying cases or Ju-52-look of that German airplane of the 30s and 40s. With subtle nuances like the screwless appearance of these new components, Cello products have, for the first time in the brand's 20+ year history, that touch of luxury appropriate for their level in sound and price.

Designing the basic circuits, Jim McCullough and his engineers were guided by well-known and proven Cello designs. From a technical point of view, the Chorale is clearly a descendant of the legendary Encore, one of the most commercially successful of all Cello products. Like the Encore, the Chorale comes with four single ended inputs with the unusually high impedance of one MegaOhm. This makes life easy for attached sources because, due to the high impedance, the source's output stage experiences almost no load. The balanced input has an impedance of 10 kiloOhm for each side of the circuit, but can be switched to one MegaOhm if a single ended source (RCA to XLR connection) is connected. Gain can also be increased with a switch inside the chassis, for instance



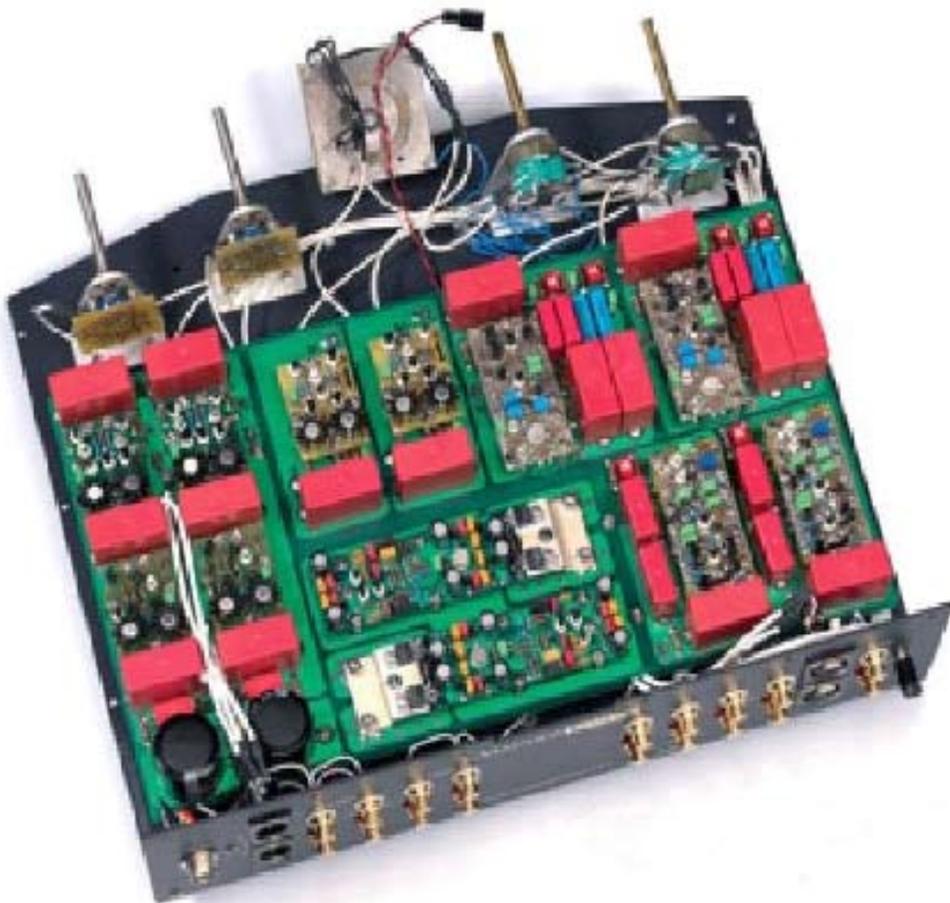
The preamp's main power supply is conservatively designed so that it will never be strained.

to bring an unbalanced source to studio level. But the lucky Cello owner will not use this feature for experimenting (and similarly for switching gain and load impedance in the phono stage, which comes for, compared to the whole package, an expensive \$1,000 extra). The reason for that is the exemplary manufactured chassis themselves, the construction techniques for which complicates accessing the internal switches. The procedure requires not only opening 20 screws, but also disconnecting the cable to the power LED and removing all knobs and switches from the front panel. One pleasure of doing so is the appreciation one understands holding the weight of the knobs which are turned from solid brass. But the effort to get inside is also rewarded with the now

unobstructed view of the extremely detailed tri-levels of electronic circuitry. The lower circuit board, which covers nearly the whole bottom surface of the preamp, is responsible for power distribution and ground. Silver-coated standoffs, made from six nines copper (99.9999% pure), lead to the second level, which accomodates the circuit paths and a number of passive parts. The active components reside on the third level: Ten discrete operational amplifiers and four voltage regulators are (as already mentioned) in contact with the main board via the silver/copper standoffs. Individual wiring from the input/output connectors to and from the switches, volume control and the circuit boards, is implemented with handmade, carefully shielded, wire made again

from very pure silver. One is uniquely grateful for the lack of a remote control, because it allows for the possibility of adjusting volume in one decibel steps through the extraordinarily complex and excellent 59-step manually controlled dial with high precision fixed resistors. Matthew James has improved upon the traditional Cello 59 position control, now in production for more than 20 years, through the use of a new contact material (silver, mixed with each 10 percent of gold and platinum) will ensure longevity and improve performance. These types of improvements (solid chasses, silver wiring, copper silver standoffs, high tech contact and connecting materials) raise the costs of manufacture and, I must admit that the price for the new Cellos was not a pleasant surprise. But, considering the quality in general and that of the chasses in particular (the included 350VA Master power supply for the Chorale also exhibits the same exquisite outward appearance), and knowing that the retail price in Europe is the same price including all taxes as in the US, the quoted price for the Chorale is more than acceptable.

While I continue to believe that the Cello Encore is the best amp for powering my LumenWhites, I may be regarded as a Cello fan but not as a technical expert. Guided again (actually previously) by an existing circuit layout, Jim McCullough and his team designed the Rhapsody. Available as a two channel (or three channel in the home cinema version) amplifier, all channels share the single toroidal transformer and the two powerful 100-Volts/56 000 microfarad



electrolytics. From here current is delivered via heavy metal buss bars to the output device assembly, each of which are equipped with six 250 watt power transistors and two heat sinks.

Signal currents are conducted through flat, Kapton insulated ribbon cables, purest copper for the ground and purest silver for the signal.

My prior experiences with Cello amplifiers made me just too curious to hear the Chorale and Rhapsody, so I skipped the usual optimizing of positioning and interconnect wiring, before listening to the Cello electronics. As always I used HMS Jubilee cables for signal transport. And instead of the original power cables the amps were fed by special Powercord Ultimate, provided by the German Cello distributor Hifi-Tuning. Since Matthew James incorporates Hifi-Tuning's fine silver fuse, Bernd Ahnes' recommendation for a power cord may also be considered equally trustworthy.

The test program was delivered by the Studer A80, the Alesis's hard-drive (with my own recordings) and a Lyra Titan i, which still was in its break-in period, while its

signal was, as usual, brought to line level by a balanced external phono stage. Regardless of the volume control settings, the Chorale hissed a little bit more than my reference preamp, at least while working with the extremely low impedance inputs of the Brinkmann power amplifiers. However, even in this system configuration, the Matthew James' Chorale charms you with it's musical nature and an exquisitely realistic sound stage presentation. Regardless of any other considerations, there is no desire to switch back to the reference, even though it is not the inferior of the Cello with regard to dynamics and musical spirit. Together, with the Chorale the reference amps sounded just a little more lithesome and – usually I try to avoid this term in this context, but here it is absolutely appropriate – more natural than with the reference preamp.

Inserting the Rhapsody amplifier into the system then brings an even more serious improvement: The background system noise of this setup is well below that of the Chorale connected to the reference amps. It seems that recording studios have become even more voluminous, and music flows into

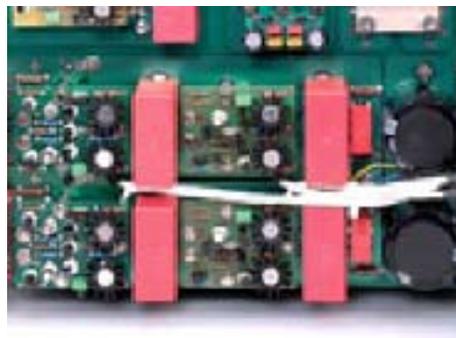
the room almost free of technical artifacts. The mighty Rhapsody and the elegantly charming Chorale are unpretentious servants to the music. In a few moments they are completely forgotten, as well as the task of describing the differences between them and other electronics. One simply becomes lost in the music.

Following these first, really positive impressions, I listened exclusively to the Cellos for several weeks and I was very content and felt no need for any kind of tuning measures. I can justify my contented passivity at least with regard to positioning: All of the three Matthew James chasses are mounted on feet with integrated ball bearings, decoupling them from ground vibrations and thus turning experiments in different locations simply obsolete.

Of course I also played with the phono stage of the Chorale. Unless otherwise specified when ordering, gain is set to middle of three settings and the MC input impedance is one kilo ohm, so the EMT JSD 5 was the preferred partner, since it is known to work well with resistors larger than 250 Ohm and (applying an



Modular design of the output stages ensure easy upgrades.



Additional voltage regulation in the preamp.



Switches with fixed resistors serve as gain controls for balance.

output voltage of approximately 1 millivolts at a speed of 5 cm/s) does not need a notably sensitive MC input. As expected the Chorale makes the EMT reveal all its outstanding and well-known abilities: it's unshakable, solid low and fundamental frequencies, its well controlled dynamics and its exact timing. Even if other, more expensive, cartridge/phono equalizer solutions are able to expose a few more details, a little more space and one or the other additional tone color, it is hard to surpass the EMT combined with the Chorale phono board in enthusiasm, emotional involvement and pure musical thrills.

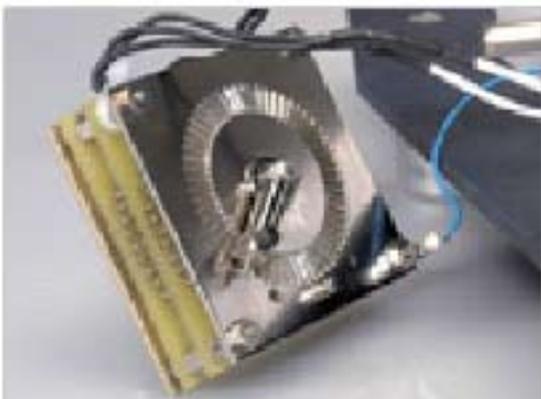
Before testing the phono stage with the lower output Lyra Titan i, I open Chorale's security vault-like enclosure and change gain from 47 to 60 decibel. This setting also harmonizes perfectly with the EMT and, despite his relatively large output voltage, it never reaches the overload threshold of the phono

stage. The Chorale phono input has plenty of headroom and, in contrast to common belief, in this case the termination of a low resistive MC with a high impedance load does not generate extra noise. Sound characteristics are airy, spatial representation is widespread, and transients come with the desired speed.

Although it is hard for me to admit: teaming up with the Accuphase CD player, the Cello system provides a great listening experience with a pleasantly diverse range of musical types, absolutely glowing with bright and luscious tone colors, while drawing the listener into the music with natural dynamic contrasts. Even with a test CD I have already listened to a thousand times, Ravi Shankar's "TanaMana", there is a new appreciation for the quality of the recording.

Finally, I do need to make mention of the Matthew James cables. Ignoring them would indeed have

been unforgivable. Not because they significantly improve upon my reference in any particular area, but they are so close to them in so many fields, and all that at quite an affordable price. You will miss a faint hint of space, and the last bit of darkness in the lower frequencies. For connecting Chorale and Rhapsody the Strings can definitely be recommended. And that is why they stay there, while between the main amp and the LumenWhite speakers the Cello Strings speaker cables leave the same brilliant impression. Only in the highest frequency range, the reference cables surround the instruments with a bit more air and therefore suggest slightly more spatial extent. Nevertheless, I would recommend the Cello Strings and Cello electronics from Matthew James, as they were designed together with the maximization of each other's strengths in mind..



left: Classic high-end: The Chorale's 59-step volume control.



Matthew James uses silver fuses by Hifi-Tuning.

Conclusions:

What is good:

The classic, musically graceful Cello sound, and the construction quality.

What is missing:

The Chorale phono stage lacks a lower input impedance.

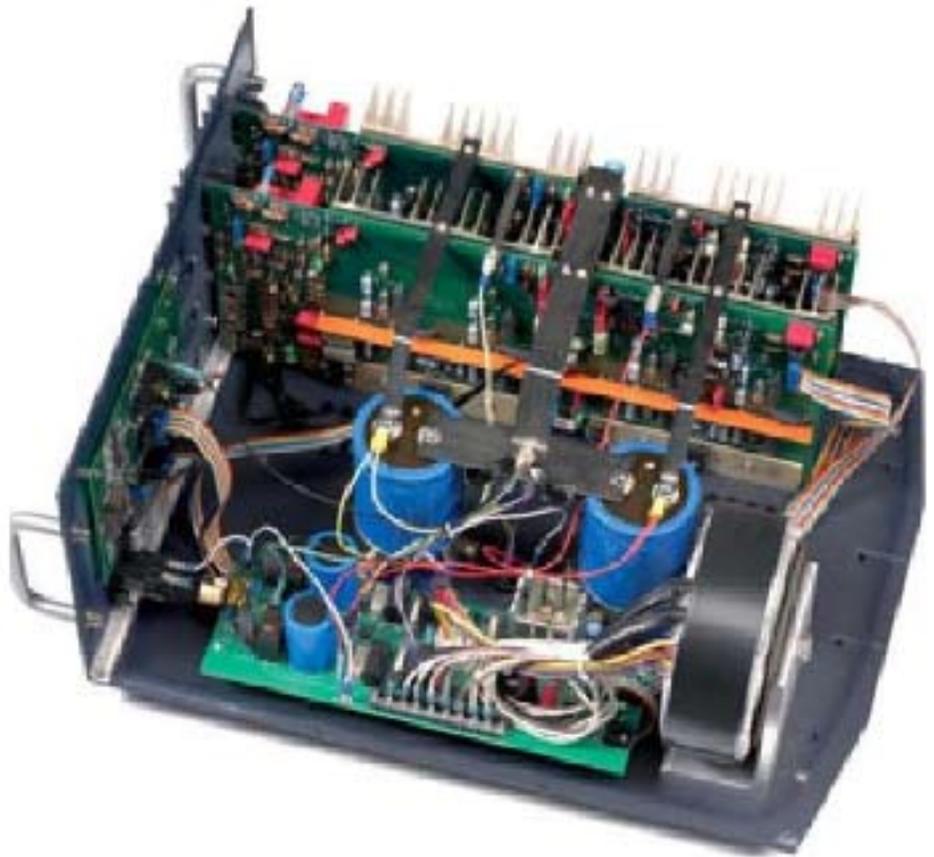
The Rhapsody is missing universal speaker terminals, which are not constricted by rear panel handles.

What is surprising:

The fact that in Germany these US products are not more expensive than in their country of origin.

What to do:

For the first time be amazed by Cello's sound and appearance.



One power supply feeds both channels in the Rhapsody.



Current to the power transistors is conducted through the heat sinks.