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Xavier Y. from Z. (privately) and Tobian Soundsystems (officially)

ABOVE THE CLOUDS

A ROCK 'N' ROLL GENTLEMAN PLAYS WITH THE ELEMENTS

By Cai Brockmann. Photography: Cai Brockmann

_____Günter Tobian has proved to be a door opener, and today he's even serving as a gate opener. You see, we've gone to central Switzerland to visit Xavier Y., who lives so high up on a mountain that a certain Cai B. from M. couldn't just speed up the side of the hill and shout *Grüezi miteinand!* (Swiss German for "Hi, guys!"). I'll just say this: Private switchback roads, a gate with an entry system, and an audiophile "Mount Olympus of rock 'n' roll." And Tobian plays a key role in all three: He's the driver with an adroit hand behind the wheel of the off-road vehicle, the porter who opens the gate, and, by special appointment, the preferred supplier to the domicile of Mr. Y.

One of us

Together with the boss of Tobian Soundsystems, I pass through the aforementioned gate. The secluded retreat of the owner, a gentleman of means, is not only located on a beautiful mountain but also directly on (or, better put, 500 meters above) a beautiful lake. I used to think you couldn't have it all, but, actually...

Xavier Y. values his privacy above almost all else. Enjoying the prime of his life right now, this man has previously turned down all ("there must have been around a dozen") requests for any kind of article to be written about his home. Until today. Yours

truly has now become the first journalist to be allowed access to this exceptional home to write an article: first, because I'm not interested in nosing around the whole chalet, rather just one single room—yes, it's the music room of course; and second, because Mr. Y. had already met me on neutral territory and accepted me "as one of us." By that he presumably meant that we shared a passion for music and great sound. Aside from the fact that we both have dedicated music rooms, we are truly worlds apart in every other respect. Instead of thrilling switchback roads, all I have to offer is a quiet cul-de-sac; "my" local mountain, forest, and stretch of ▶



Look and outlook: If you should ever tire of looking at the vintage wooden interior décor or the perfectly matched Tobian 15 loudspeakers with their distinctive coaxial horn drivers, then there's always the enticing window facade to keep you entertained: Set about 500 meters above the lake, it offers spectacular panoramic views. The scene at night from atop the "Mount Olympus of rock 'n' roll" in central Switzerland is no less impressive. Even if there's a storm. You'll always find your ears being lavished with sound every bit as spectacular as the visual treat from atop the mountain.



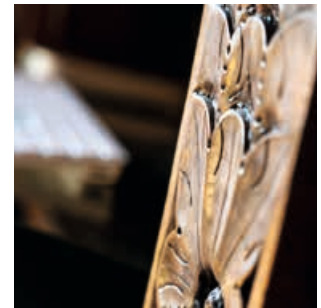
water lie a good 70 kilometers away from my humble abode; and the sofa where I do all my listening offers a view of the multitude of vinyls and hi-fi equipment in the room but no daylight. There's just one small window to supply my basement studio with fresh air (and the neighborhood with fresh music).

Xavier Y.'s music room is not only twice as big, it's the exact polar opposite: Atmospherically somewhere between a fireside lounge and a formal study, it seems to have been beamed here from another, earlier century. And instead of a small window, it has an enormous glass sliding door leading onto the terrace that features a breathtaking view of an unbelievably beautiful landscape. The panoramic scene is simply stunning; and when the skies are clear, you can even make out mountain ranges 120 kilometers away. I start imagining myself very close to the heavens—even without

Reinhard Mey's "Über den Wolken" ("Over the Clouds"). A relaxed Mr. Y. takes a drag of his Dunhill, smiles, and nods: "This view even makes the music sound just that much better," he says, although by music he's referring to anything but Reinhard Mey as I would later see and hear.

With this panorama, it isn't all that easy to focus squarely on the interior design of the music room. But it, too, is definitely worth a closer look: Amazingly, the comparatively modern Tobian 15 loudspeakers with special veneer fit in perfectly with the room's interior design, which is dominated by vintage wood. The unavoidable loudspeaker cables are invisible, having been laid in a duct underneath the parquet flooring. The electronics are also, broadly speaking, invisible and lie at least outside one's direct field of vision. Two imposing tube power amplifiers, also Tobian

devices, have made themselves comfortable in the right-hand corner behind the huge listening sofa. Along with the low-hanging chandelier directly above them, they form a gently glowing lighting ensemble. All other devices, including preamplifiers, have been installed on the other side of the wall. They sit in the rather impressively large "antechamber" that you have to pass through to reach the music room. This is where a few mundane items are also located alongside the premium high-end audio components: a monster of a desk, a sea of sofas, a home movie theater, and a Hannl vinyl cleaning machine featuring knotty-wood housing and gold hardware. At the computer monitor, the infamous Rolling Stones' logo sticks its tongue out at me. Various miniature electric guitars stand rank and file on a small shelf, and a fully functional Les Paul ("from an earlier life as a keen hobby guitarist") crowns



Reminiscent of a bygone era: Wooden walls, a wooden ceiling, and hardware have been “imported” from a venerable old château to grace the music room; they have a couple of centuries under their belts. The Tobian 15 loudspeakers bring old loudspeaker designs right up to the present, reinterpreting them and featuring clever modifications. Apart from the loudspeakers and a pair of tube monos in a corner at the back, none of the hi-fi system is visible in the music room. The Revox tape deck is, like all the rest of the electronic equipment, housed in the large “antechamber.”

the crossbeam above the passageway. The rock 'n' roll memorabilia provides a clue as to Mr. Y.'s personal music preferences. It does, however, refrain from turning into a private Hard Rock Café though.

Out of hiding

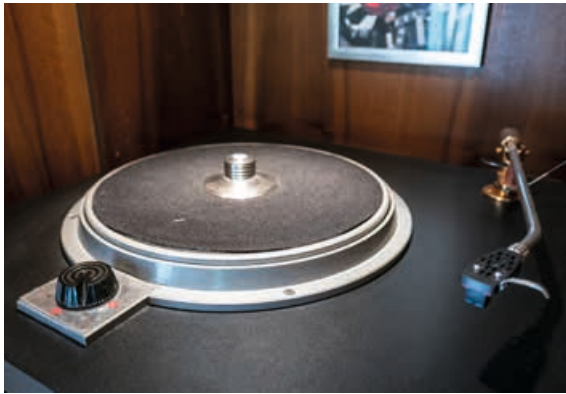
Back to the audio electronics. They fill an entire stylish built-in cabinet and boast a wide range of formats: a new-old-stock Commonwealth turntable from the Australian Broadcasting Corporation with a Schick tonearm and a Nagaoka system, a Gryphon CD player, a tube preamplifier and tube DAC from Tobian Soundsystems, a MacMini, and a mint-condition Revox tape deck—the only thing I couldn't spot anywhere was a reel-to-reel tape recorder. “Yes, I said good-bye to my Revox A77 when I discovered how easily I

could access my entire music collection over a digital network,” the pragmatic gentleman of means says, adding: “And when Günter Tobian brought over a new, fantastic-sounding DAC for me to try out, it was clear what was going to keep me fully occupied over the entire winter.” Xavier Y. ripped his favorite disks onto a hard drive without losing anything (which must have been a lot of fun as he actually did it all himself). Since that winter, he's been able to manage around five terabytes of music data from the comfort of his sofa using his iPad. The turntable has been feeling rather neglected, but Mr. Y won't be bidding farewell to it just yet. Two tape decks are actually in use in this household: “I also have a second model from Revox in the guest house by the pool,” Mr. Y. explains, promising to take a little detour there with us before it got too dark. There's actually a second music system there ...

Thunderbolt and lightning, very very frightening!

We had a few enjoyable hours ahead of us until any of that would show up. It was now starting to rain over the lake, but so far away that the freak weather conditions didn't pose much of a concern to us—it was more entertaining than anything else. A proper downpour “all the way down and over there” is nearing an end after four or five long tracks. Simply amazing here above the clouds ...

“Up here you sometimes get some really scary weather,” Mr. Y. tells us, adding reassuringly: “Right here, right now, thought, it's rather enjoyable.” And with those calming, confidence-bolstering words, we turn our attention back to the audio system and back to the music. Both have always belonged ▶



International meeting point: Professional-grade turntable from Australia. MM system from Japan. Tonearm, platter puck, and accompanying cleaning machine from Germany, tube preamplifier and tube DAC from Tobian from Switzerland.

together for Xavier Y. In the 1970s—"the ultimate decade!"—he was really into rock, blues, funk, and fusion and quickly realized that better sound quality would help him have more fun with music. That marked the point when he started to place increasing importance on having a "proper stereo system." Over the decades, the very best of renowned high-end brands have graced his premises. The guitar enthusiast's basic equipment has included audiophile beauties from the likes of Accuphase, ATC, B&W, Dynaudio, Gryphon, and Vivid to name but a few. As I'm sure you've already guessed, Mr. Y. does not exactly have to give much thought to material things all the time. This affable gentleman represents the third generation of a respectable Swiss business nobility and can afford whatever he wants. Always. And with everything. He is the epitome of a real connoisseur. So what makes someone who

doesn't have to count his pennies ultimately decide to buy a Tobian sound system? The Swiss-made devices don't exactly go for peanuts, but then again they aren't any pricier than many of the top-class components Mr. Y. has previously installed. So it can't really be the price.

Fifteen-incher for fun

"All things considered, Tobian is hands down the best!" explains live-gig fan Xavier Y. He loves using his home system for delving into the recordings of his music heroes and letting himself get fully carried away with their energy and "all the emotions." In the past, however, he'd get "a little bored" after a couple of hours of this kind of concert in his living room. Then, around 12 years ago, the first Tobian component found its way into the merry life of this personable bon vivant, and

the T7 DAC seemed to permanently erase all traces of boredom. Curious as to whether the Swiss small-scale manufacturer's other components could improve upon this already fantastic result, Mr. Y. decided to stock up. So, armed with the "15" series loudspeakers and other devices, Tobian then became the long-standing preferred supplier to this discerning customer. "With Tobian devices, I can finally listen to music for hours on end without ever getting bored. It's as simple as that. And when I finally received a pair of 15s with this veneer (Mr. Y. gestures to the Tobian 15s in the music room) to test out, there was no way I was going to let them leave my house!" In addition to appreciating the acoustic performance, he clearly also values the loudspeakers' exceptionally dapper housing, which fits in perfectly with the existing interior décor. Let's not forget that we listen with our eyes as well.



The most important equipment lives in the custom-made cupboard “round the corner.” Practically everything in Xavier Y.’s music room relates, in a broader sense, to listening to and making music.

Mr. Y.’s Tobian 15 series loudspeakers have by this time already given us a few hours of top-class, emphatic, serious musical enjoyment, an all-around perfect mix of presence and power, attention to detail, and exceptional force. At this point, all the gentlemen present are in a great mood, having already stopped addressing each other formally and now taking turns playing an extremely broad range of guitar heroes (“What do you mean you don’t know this one?”). Yours truly isn’t the only one conscientiously taking notes right now. It all speaks for itself really, or perhaps for the Tobian 15 series loudspeakers, which are also meant to be the subject matter of this article. At some point, it dawns on me that we’ve so far played a lot of fusion and jazz tracks and even more blues and rock, but not yet even a single sonata, suite, or étude, not to mention a symphonic movement or a heroic aria. “Given the plush and, in the best sense of the

word, conservative setting, wouldn’t a classical intermezzo be just the thing?” I’m thinking to myself.

Classy rocker

Xavier Y. has an older brother who’s been extensively involved in the classical music scene for ages. Mr. Y. himself has never really been able to come to grips with classical music, even to this day. Could I really see rock ’n’ roll as a lifestyle choice for the well-to-do? Pensively, Xavier Y. states that he simply feels much more moved when someone skillfully plucks the strings of an electric guitar, perhaps even accompanied by a party-hearty spirit. “Frank Zappa is one of the absolute greats!” and from our conversation it turns out that Joe Satriani is an old friend who occasionally enjoys Xavier Y.’s hospitality. And top-notch food, I correctly hazard to guess. “Yes, of

course. Good food, fine wine, great hi-fi, and fantastic music make for a pretty cool combination,” states the well-dressed rock connoisseur in his engaging Swiss dialect. He lights another Dunhill, sips some good red wine (correction: very good red wine), and casually adds another guitar track to the current playlist using his iPad.

We had long since made ourselves really comfortable in the music room in front of the Tobian 15 series loudspeakers. Naturally, the aforementioned Joe Satriani had played several times for us, but we had also listened to Jimi Hendrix, Stevie Ray Vaughan, and Ronnie Earl with a few less-known tracks from Swedish bass dervish Jonas Hellborg thrown in for good measure as well as some tracks from John Lane and his six string, a musician new to me. We had been enjoying lots—and I mean lots—of top-notch rock ’n’ roll and raw talent, which is just the ▶

For a particularly relaxing experience, music can be enjoyed using the second system in the guest house. This could, of course, also be due to the adjacent pool and the equally spectacular view here, too.



perfect match for the setting. But where had the sun gone?

Cool by the pool

The closest neighbor is a couple of hundred meters up the mountain, and Mr. Y's guest house is just a stone's throw away, with its flat roof docking almost immediately onto the main house on one side. The guest house enjoys the same spectacular panoramic view on the lake side as the main house—and it was proving to be a picture show I simply couldn't get enough of. To the rear, a massive sliding door leads directly out to a pool of Brobdingnagian proportions. Obviously the man of the house has ensured this area also has a fitting sound system suitable for outdoor use. Yet instead of tapping into the digital music network that's also available here, Xavier Y. conjures up a cool mixtape from his denim-jacket pocket, feeds it into the aforementioned additional Revox deck, and fires up the other components of his "second system." I discover an old-school Sony ES series CD player, two suspiciously understated tube devices (that turn out to be DAC and pre-amplifier "early works" of a certain Günter Tobian), and two strapping Altec monos used in large movie theaters in an earlier life. In the guest house, the modified power

amplifiers jolt two small professional-grade Martin speaker towers into action.

In and around the pool and party area, the music-related focus isn't necessarily on high-level audiophile enjoyment with top stereo sound. No, level stability and splash resistance are top priorities here. That said, the sound achieved around the softly lit pale-blue pool is well rounded and decent and, of course, powerful enough to get the party started when required. Real three-dimensionality fanatics wouldn't give the stereophonic stage reproduction between the pool and the chillout area top marks, but the lively, fun setup easily compensates for this with "real" space (right up to the starry sky) and upper bass and pleasure in droves. And I'm sure that as soon as the bubbly start flowing and the canapés start coming, even the most hardened hi-fi enthusiast would go weak at the knees. When outside in the fresh air, is it really that important for the digital music stream to sound any more transparent and neat than the analog tape deck? We treat ourselves to a good hour of fresh air by the pool and a very chilled mixtape of funk and soul and fat grooves. And then all of a sudden we notice that it's grown dark.

A musical feast

Now back in the main house and back in the music room, an array of interesting things

await us, for example the panoramic view that had completely changed: The now pitch-black glimmering lake is surrounded by flickering city lights whereas "all the way down and over there" a smallish, fast-moving storm provides some brisk supplemental entertainment. Then suddenly a tray of international delicacies appears on the large square-shaped "multi-functional table" in the music room. I have absolutely no idea how Xavier Y. manages to whip up so many tasty treats in next to no time or where he gets them from (the staff has the day off), but it's all thoroughly delicious. While digging into some freshly baked bread and hard cheese, we all realize the sound being produced by the Tobian 15s has grown a little more focused and "larger" than three or four hours earlier. At the same time, the entire system continues, just as Xavier Y. had described, to thoroughly captivate us with its sound; it isn't getting the slightest bit boring even after several hours. A huge achievement given the incredible nuance of sound and the by no means unrestrained volume not to mention the fact that we haven't exactly been choosing tracks known for their audiophile qualities. I have this to say about the Tobian 15 loudspeakers: They are magnificent speakers that totally focus on the music and surpass themselves when paired with choice, finely tuned electronic equipment and when placed in a unique environment.

With Günter Tobian in one of his studios:
Here there's a Tobian 15 HC for comparison
purposes as well as super-swish special
edition models and historical memorabilia.

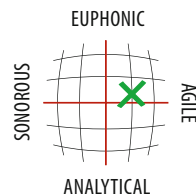


ACCOMPANYING EQUIPMENT

Turntable: Commonwealth 12 D | **Tonearm:** Schick 12 | **Cartridge:** Nagaoka (modified) | **CD player:** The Gryphon Adagio | **Network players:** Apple Mac-Mini with iPad | **Tape deck:** Revox B-215 S | **Tube DAC:** Tobian DAC T9 | **Tube preamplifier:** Tobian SC-12 | **Tube mono power amplifier:** Tobian MA 70 Classic | **Cables:** Tobian Heptal, etc. | **Phono furniture:** Custom-made pieces | **Accessories:** Hanni vinyl cleaning machine

Tobian 15/15HC floor-standing monitors

Thrilling, joyous, and exceptionally versatile all-arounder in modest-looking housing. Extended music-session enjoyment guaranteed thanks to musical focus. Perfect for tube amplifiers.



At the conclusion of a wonderful day full of top audio enjoyment, Mr. Y. has a very fitting audiophilosophical observation to make: "The hi-fi system is an instrument for listening to music. And when it transports you to the heart of the music, you know you've actually done everything right." I couldn't have said it better myself.

Gate, part two

My final written note from that wonderful day reads: John Lane, guitarist. My final mental note from that wonderful day reads: Günter Tobian is the world's most original

gate opener. I don't want to (not may I) say anything more about our "organized retreat" in the middle of the night. The gods of that "Mount Olympus of rock 'n' roll" in central Switzerland may well have been having some fun. ■

An added note: The next day, I popped into Günter Tobian's studio where the developer gave me a thorough demonstration of the "HC" version of the Tobian 15 series loudspeaker, which is different in terms of numerous details, as well as of many other models. Hot damn, this is all exciting stuff! I'm already all fired up to do a report on Tobian

Audio Systems once the current expansion and merging of various parts of the company have been completed.

Tobian 15/15HC floor-standing monitors

Two-way coaxial horn loudspeakers, bass reflex or back-loaded bass horn (HC) | Equipment: 1.5-inch high/mid compression driver, 15-inch bass driver | **Efficiency:** approx. 99 dB | **Nominal impedance:** 8 Ω | **Finishes:** Bespoke according to customer's wishes | **Dimensions (W/H/D):** 46/110/55 cm | **Weight:** approx. 46 kg | **Warranty:** 20 years ("lifetime") | **Price for pair:** From €28,900 (HC from €34,500)

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