

Shatki Hallograph Soundfield Optimizer
Versus your typical Audiophile
by Clement Perry Editor Stereo Times

May 2007

I love attending CES every year because it's the proving ground for audiophile things new and unexpected. It was here at the – now old – Alexis Park where I first found out about the Shatki Hallographs. Shatki Innovations founder Ben Piazza, maker of the Shakti Electromagnetic Stabilizer, stopped me as I was casually strolling by his room back in winter of '03. Piazza and Hallograph co-inventor David Caplan had developed a new type of room acoustic equalizer called the Shatki Hallograph Soundfield Optimizer and they were excited to have my impressions. Of course, I couldn't resist, being familiar with his "stones" for many years.

I took a seat in a sparse, smallish room that had no acoustic treatment at all. Moreover, the audio gear consisted of nothing more than an inexpensive receiver/DVD combo, cheap little monitor loudspeakers and Radio Shack wiring. I thought to myself, "Why spend money on a room at CES if you can't afford hi-end electronics?" Interestingly, those thoughts were exactly what Piazza and Caplan had hoped for because they didn't want me to associate what I was about to hear with any expensive high-end electronics.

Lying on the floor in front of me were a pair of wiggly, wooden fork-looking things that were officially called Shatki Hallograph Soundfield Optimizers (physically, they comprised of real wood and Ebony and stand 6 feet tall. Shatki's designers write at length on how they work on their website here. Anyone who has experienced Ebony, ala Shun Mook pucks, knows how capable this type wood is at taming harsh rooms). Both Piazza and Caplan spoke at great length about what these things do to change the acoustics of a room. Okay, I thought, but when do I get to hear them? Finally Piazza and Caplan positioned the Hallographs at the corners behind each mini-monitor. Piazza hit the play button and the sound was...okay, meaning the loudspeakers sounded bigger and better than their appearance had led me to expect. But the sound quality hardly justified the ten minutes of excited speculation and theory that had preceded it.

Then Piazza and Caplan stopped the player and moved the Hallographs back where they had been, on the floor right in front of me. Once again Piazza hit the same play button on the same cheap DVD player. In my astonishment, the first thing I wanted to know was who threw the switch? What switch? The one that changed the source from that cheap DVD player to one capable of transforming the soundstage, depth and imaging to this degree. I'm thinking some respected vacuum tube amplifier because the stage and depth changed so dramatically, and we all know what tubes do when it comes to that. I said out loud, "What's the gimmick?" and they answered, "None. The Hallographs in fact got their name based on what they do."

I was unconvinced. I checked the closet and, yes, the bathroom too, for hidden electronic devices with ingenious remote controls. And there wasn't anything, or anyone, in either place. I simply couldn't find an explanation for this trick. But a trick it most certainly was. Or was it?

I should also mention that I purchased a set of Hallographs after that first experience, as did many of my associates. When my buddy "installed" a single set of Hallographs in his system, the sound instantly became more dimensional, smoother and even seemed to gain more resolution.

Meanwhile, back at the ranch, the pair I had purchased proved to do little in my listening space. When placed in the corners behind my Ascendo System M loudspeakers, the results were positive but certainly not astonishing like what I heard back at CES or my friend's place. The sound of my back wall seemed to become less obvious giving my listening space an ever so slightly better sense of air and dimension. The Hallographs worked, but only slightly. This could be directly related to major sonic alterations produced by room correction. The Behold APU preamplifier I currently use as well as the Tact 2.2XP I used previously both offer this very sophisticated software. The ability for room correction to reduce cross-talk contamination and room frequency anomalies cannot be under-estimated. This makes it hard for the Hallographs to produce the wondrous results I heard at CES in my own listening space. As far as I'm concerned, there's nothing that can replace room correction when done correctly minus the acoustically perfect listening room. We all know that doesn't exist. Room correction isn't perfect either but it does offer a glimpse of what is acoustically possible

in less than ideal rooms such as mine.

Then a funny thing happened on the way to nirvana

My friend, who had purchased a set of Hallographs, was a local dealer but decided the business was tougher than he could stomach, and he got out. But before he quit, he offered me his pair of Hallographs at a discount. I figured that maybe one of the Stereotimes writers that doesn't use room correction wouldn't mind trying them out in their space. I vaguely remembered hearing Ben Piazza saying I should really hear two pair in my listening space. Of course I thought this was nothing more than marketing hype. But I happen to like Piazza and I decided to take his recommendation. I placed this second set of Hallographs slightly behind my listening seat.

The improvement was dramatic. The Shatki Hallographs, in this specific location, provided the experience I had had at the previous CES demo, with one great addition—this time the experience occurred in my own listening space—with room correction I might add. This of course, proves even great products such as sophisticated room correction devices can benefit from a helping hand too. I personally believe the Hallographs in some way assist the room correction.

Now I understand why Piazza and Caplan specifically named these gizmos Hallographs. In my case, two pairs did the trick. Once properly setup, the enhanced dimensionality of each and every recording was quite startling. They gave the music a far greater sense of stage-width, front-to-back layering and image specificity. These improvements gave more extension and life-like realism to recordings I was intensely familiar with, offering a rare glimpse into the recording venue that didn't quite happen without the Shatkis.

Test Drive is an appropriate track name because that's what it felt like the Shatki's were taking me on listening to the "Fossil Poets" CD from synthesizer icon Roger Powell [Inner Knot B000ION6W2]. Somewhat reminiscent of '70s classics such as Gary Wright's "Dream Weaver," Alan Parsons Project's classic "I Robot," and Giorgio Moroder's "Midnight Express" soundtrack, this atmospherically charged new release of synthesized instrumentals served as a welcome departure from my usual run of jazz standards.

The two pair of Hallographs allowed me to hear more spatial cues and harmonic density from this wonderful disc, providing a greater sense of realism. The drum tracks on the smooth and easy Too Much Rain, featuring the sound of electric guitar and organ, produced a very genuine-sounding space and synergy between these instruments. I found myself enjoying the Fossil Poets the more I played it due to its addictive easiness, musical flow and well-placed synthesized chord structures.

Co-inventor Dave Caplan, as it turns out, lives in downtown Brooklyn, not thirty-minutes from my Jersey City home, and only about a ten-minute walk from Behold importer Sam Laufer's audio salon. It was here during a Gotham Audio Society meeting that an interesting event took place. Jazz trumpeter extraordinaire Jon Faddis, a friend and audiophile (above right), accompanied me to the meeting (with his beloved instrument) on a cold February night. Jon was also kind enough to sign and give away two dozen of his latest jazz CD entitled Terenga

As it turned out, David Caplan was there with a couple sets of his Shatki Hallographs, hoping to demonstrate them to a group of skeptical NYC audiophiles, many of whom don't even believe wires make a difference. When Caplan got the opportunity to give his spiel about the Hallographs, it was obvious there wasn't much to say, because no one fully understood or would believe them without an audition. Here's where things got very interesting. Listening to a pair of Bolzano Velletri loudspeakers driven by a Behold system with a set of Hallographs loaded into each corner of this large listening room proved only somewhat successful. Some claimed to have heard a difference while others could not. I included myself among the latter group. That's when I asked Jon Faddis to try a live A/B comparison. This, of course, got everyone's attention. Jon first hit a couple of his famous high notes with the Hallographs out of the room.

The sound of a live brass instrument can be piercing particularly in a sparse, untreated room. And Jon's well-known big-band style of play makes that an understatement. That said, the sound of Jon's trumpet was very alive; the wonderfully melodic high notes made me want to run for cover. It felt as if the room couldn't handle the incredible bursts of made by Jon's cryo-treated Schilke trumpet that also boasts a silver bell.

Caplan then placed a set of Hallographs in the corners behind Jon. Jon then played the same musical notes. The difference with the Hallographs was remarkable. Jon's instrument became rounder and more full-bodied with a more burnished tone. Jon's legendary high notes were just that, without the associated etch and bite that piercingly present with the Hallographs removed in this sparsely treated room. Everyone looked at each other, again, as if they'd been tricked. They simply couldn't believe the sonic difference, reminding me of my experience at CES three years earlier. Most interesting was that Jon heard as well as felt the changes as he was playing by stating "what I was playing sounded better as well as organic to my ears."

Finally, even the hard-headed Gotham Audio Society members heard what the Hallographs could do to drastically improve a room's sonics.

It is a well-known fact that poor room acoustics destroys music's time and spatial cues. As much as the manufacturers of acoustic treatments have spent attempting to remedy poor acoustics issues through absorption, reflection and deflection products, in the end, no two rooms ever sound alike, which only emphasizes the importance of experimentation.

It's quite obvious there's quite a bit of research that went into the Shatki Hallographs. At a price of \$1000 per pair, I would say they're quite affordable in light of the potential dividends they yield. The magic for me came with a second pair since the room correction I use compensated for much of what I think the Hallograph could do. If you get big improvements from a single set as many claim, consider yourself part of the lucky majority. One thing's certain: the Shatki Hallograph Soundfield Optimizers qualify as a mandatory addition to my listening space. If I had not recommended them as my Most Wanted Component Publisher's Choice for 2006, they'd be my choice again this year! Highly recommended!

Clement Perry

Don Shaulis' Second Opinion

Slap Me Up Side the Head

My first encounter with the Hallograph Soundfield Optimizer was at CES 2006. The brief demonstration I heard there convinced me that I wanted a pair in my system. If someone had blindfolded me and told me I was listening to two different speakers I would have believed them and chosen the Hallograph pair every time.

My only concern was how they would perform with planar speakers. A quick telephone call to Ben Piazza, President of Shakti Innovations, dispelled my fears. Ben assured me Hallographs worked their same magic with planar speakers. Ben was quick to point out that Dave Caplan, co-inventor of the Hallographs, used Apogee Stage loudspeakers during the development of the Hallographs. Those are the same loudspeakers I use except mine are mounted on dedicated subwoofers and the DAX and passive analog crossovers have been replaced with modified TacT equipment. That was all I needed to know. I ordered a pair immediately.

Location, Location, Location

Proper placement of the Hallographs was somewhat daunting. I do not do well with infinite choices, my brain freezes like Windows 95. I called Dave for some pointers. Dave encouraged me to move the Hallographs to a far forward position. My final placement was with the "boomerang" shaped diffuser head almost wrapping the speaker panel and a toe-in of +2. Of course each user will have to find what is best for them. I only add these comments to encourage "flat earth" (planar) people to try a far forward position and get up-close and personal.

After finding the best location for the Hallographs it was time to pick some fresh music and do a comparison with and without the Hallographs. Two tracks I chose were "Black Crow" and "The Girl in the Other Room"

from Diana Krall's *The Girl in the Other Room* [Verve B0001826-12]. What I heard was a piano that sounded more authentic. Notes had more body and longer decay. The extra body and deeper resonance reminded me that a piano is made of wood. I had always been troubled by the apparent cacophony when Diana goes all "terminator" on the keyboard near the end of the track "Black Crow". With the Hallographs this section became more defined and took on greater depth. Now it sounded like a piano instead of a child's toy being tortured by the same. Throughout the disk, Diana's voice became fuller and less dry in a subtle way.

Due Diligence

I played a variety of music in an attempt to find any downside to the Hallographs. Frequently when I audition a component, wire, or isolation product I find trade-offs. I gain something but lose something else. That was not my experience with the Hallographs once I had finalized their position. While I found certain areas of the music (vocals, piano, violin, and guitar) were improved more than others, I did not find any area that suffered with their presence. What I did notice is that, while the changes I heard in my system were of the same type I heard at CES, the degree was much less in my system.

Perhaps I would have experienced a broader range and greater degree of improvement if I did not already have excellent bass control and definition by using TacT room correction. I did notice a greater degree of improvement with the Hallographs when used with the room correction bypassed. In addition to equipment differences, there are also several major differences between my room and the room at CES. I have 48 square feet of acoustic panels in my listening room and it is much different in size and shape compared to the room at CES. I have very little clearance between my speakers and the side walls. The Hallographs are somewhat shoehorned in.

Time Will Tell

Doing quick A/B comparisons can be somewhat "crazy making" and I find the "acid test" of a product comes after I have lived with it (or without it) for a while. I thoroughly enjoyed the improvements afforded by the Hallographs so I left them in place without moving them for five months before finishing my opinion of them. Gosh, my job is so hard.

One dreary, rainy day I removed them, but not for long. The Hallographs had found a home. Without them music took a big step backward. My system had not sounded that flat and lifeless before the Hallographs had it? No way, it couldn't have. But it had.

Without the Hallographs the soundstage on "Let Me Be the One" from Cleo Laine's Born on a Friday [RCA Victor 09026-61662-2] collapsed. The musicians sounded compressed and Cleo's voice became one-dimensional losing the breathy "shiver-making" quality that song has held for me for three decades.

Home Sweet Home

This proves once again what we all know but frequently forget. There is no substitute for trying a component or accessory in our own systems with our own music and giving it and yourself a real chance at a relationship. Not speed dating or a one night stand, a real relationship. That is why the Hallographs and all Shakti products are offered with a 30-day money back guarantee. Try the Hallographs, they may be just what you have been looking for to give a greater sense of reality to your music.

Don Shaulis