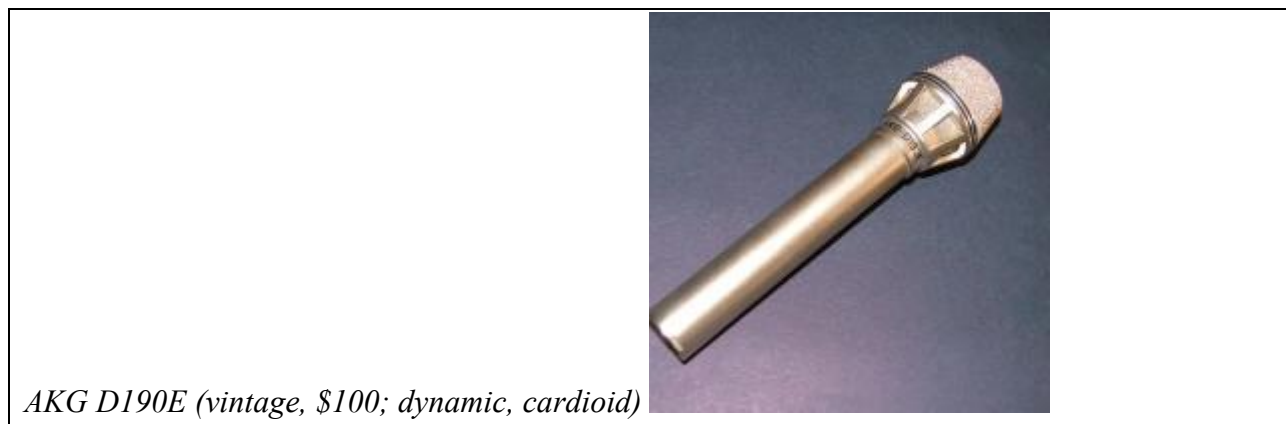
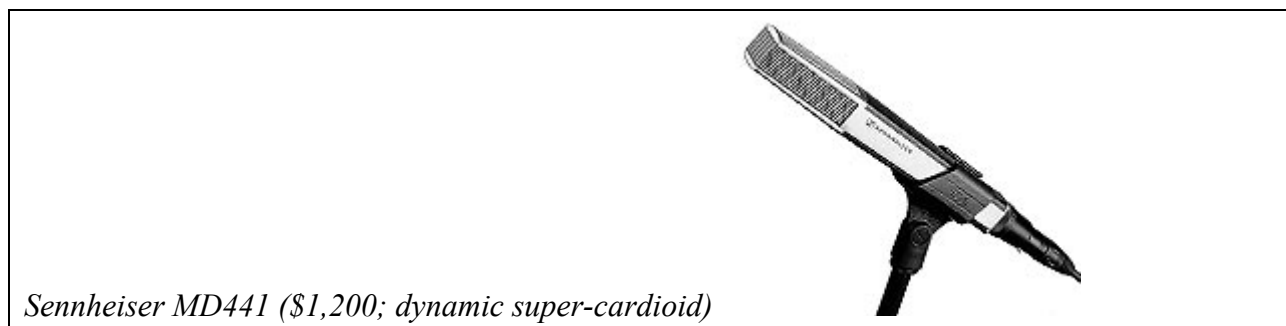




The high-fidelity initiate, bewitched, bothered, and thoroughly confused by the staggering selection of components he must choose from, often turns to a high-fidelity expert to assist him in assembling his dream system. The expert may be a local consultant, a dealer, or a magazine that the prospective buyer trusts as a source of accurate, down-to-ear information.

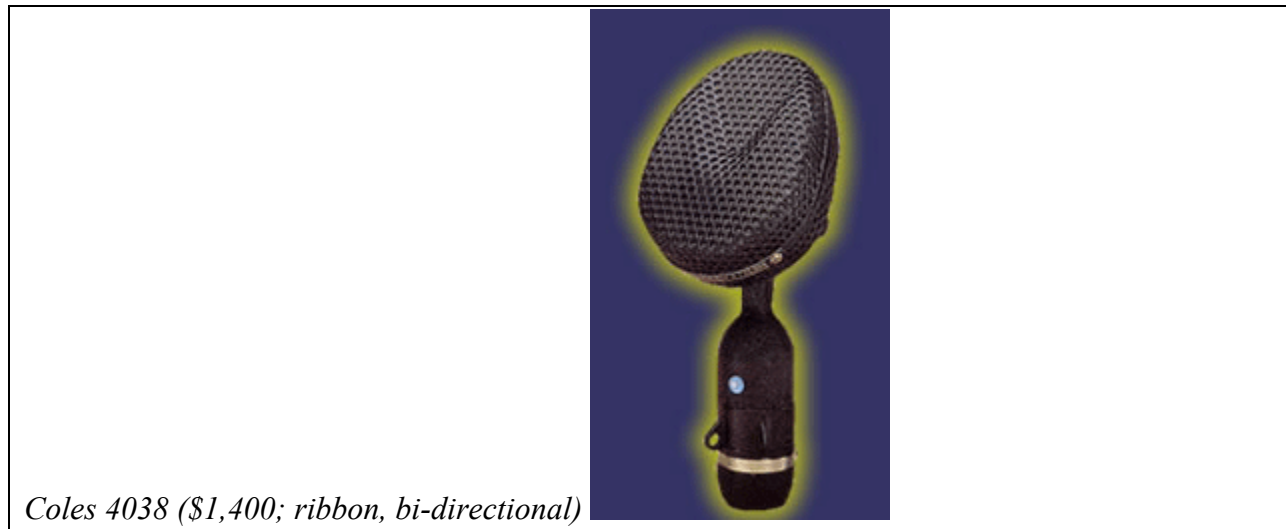


If this seeker of high-fidelity truth is wise, he will consult one expert and no more. The more expert opinions he gets, the more confused he will become, because every expert opinion will be different from all other expert opinions.

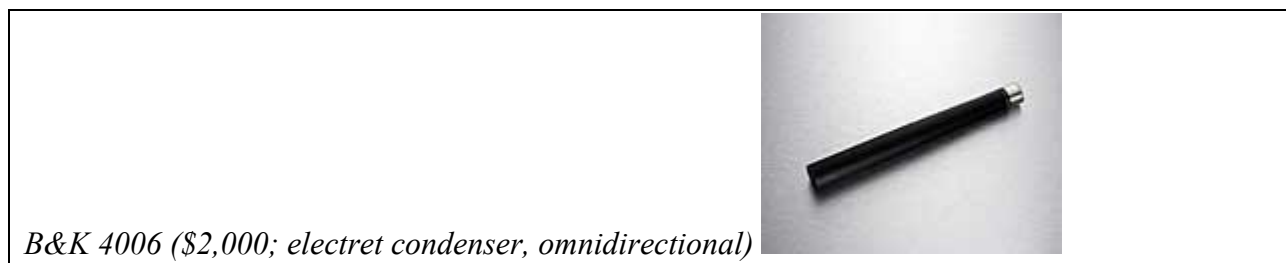


About the only thing that all high-fidelity experts agree about is that high-fidelity is supposed to be realistic sound reproduction. They may even agree that Marantz amplifiers are pretty good, and that Thorens makes a passable turntable. But try to pin them down about pickups, or other amplifiers, or tuners, or particularly loudspeakers, and one expert's preference is another one's anathema.

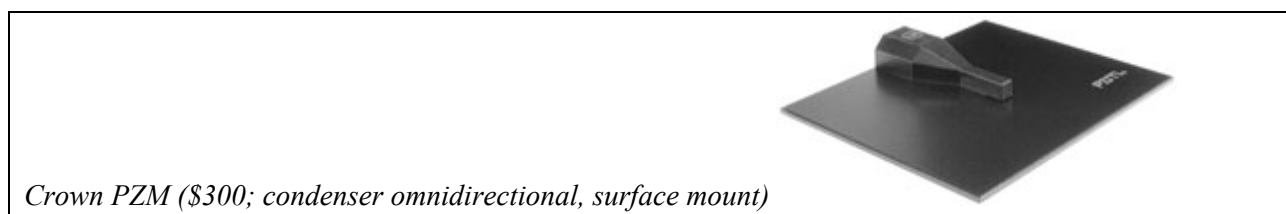
Of course, any expert worth his salt can tell you why there is so much disagreement. The reason?



Well, the other experts, although very nice guys, don't *really* know what they're talking about. Oh, they're pretty good *technical* men, mind you, but they don't really have the perceptive *ear* that's needed for a truly valid *musical* evaluation of reproduced sound.



This is the crux of the matter. Measurements can help to describe a component's performance, but the final criterion for judging reproduced fidelity has always been the ear, and when we start to fall back on subjective judgments, we always end up with a diversity of opinions.



A listener can train his ears to pick out all kinds of details in the reproduced sound—peaks, dips, phase shift, imbalance and the like—but many such trained ears have never heard a live orchestra, so they are hardly qualified to tell you what is and what is not realistic. Also, if they have never heard a system with really low distortion or really smooth response (which many experts have not), they will be oblivious to small amounts of muddiness or roughness that will be quite evident to someone who is accustomed to listening to a truly top-quality system.



Milab LC25 (\$700; condenser cardioid)

Listeners with identical hearing acuity and identical standards of judgment will usually be highly critical of different aspects of a system's performance. Thus, expert A may be terribly, terribly critical of what happens in the high treble range, expert B may be hypercritical of bass, and expert C may have a Thing about middle-range smoothness or "coloration."



Neumann TLM170 (\$3,000; condenser multi-pattern)

We can see how this might influence their judgment of, say, a loudspeaker system. If it is a bit rough at the top, smooth through the middle range, and bass-shy, expert A won't like it much; it will offend his critical ear for treble. Expert C won't be too crazy about it either, because of the low-end deficiency, but expert B, even while admitting that "the top isn't as smooth as I have heard," and "the low end leaves a little bit to be desired," will just as likely sum it up as "one of the most natural, musical-sounding speakers" he has tested.



Neumann U87 (\$3,000; condenser multi-pattern)

They can all hear the speaker's shortcomings, in the sense that the treble peaks and bass thinness will register on their hearing mechanism, but each picks out that aspect of its performance that is of particular concern to him, and tends to judge it mainly on the basis of that aspect.



Neumann U47FET (vintage \$1,500?; condenser, super-cardioid)

No equipment critic worth his salt will judge a component solely by one criterion, but it is not at all unusual for an equipment reporter to "slant" his evaluations on the basis of a few things which he considers to be of particular importance. As a matter of fact, it is almost impossible for him to avoid doing this, at least to some extent.



Neumann U67 (vintage \$ 1,500?; condenser, multi-pattern)

High fidelity may be a science, but it isn't an exact science. There are enough things about it that aren't understood to leave room for a goodly amount of educated opinion. This is one field, though, where one man's opinion is not as good as another's.



Telefunken U47 (vintage \$ 1,500?; condenser, cardioid/omni)

Many writers of books and articles about high fidelity advise the prospective buyer merely to choose what sounds good to him. Certainly there is no sense in anybody's choosing a music system whose sound he doesn't like, but in a field where definite standards of quality exist, simply liking something does not necessarily mean that it is good, by those standards.



Telefunken Ela M 251 (vintage \$1,500?; condenser multi-pattern)

A person who likes abstract art, for instance, may be judging it by any number of criteria, but resemblance to the original scene is not one of them. If it were evaluated on the basis of its "fidelity," or resemblance to the original scene, it would have to be judged a very poor copy.



AKG C12 (vintage \$3,000?; condenser multi-pattern, tube)

Similarly, the listener who prefers his sound shrill and brassy is perfectly entitled to his preference, but he is not choosing on the basis of fidelity, either.

This raises the question of whether high-fidelity can, or should be, better than the real thing.

AKG C12 modified

Certainly it can be made to sound richer, or bigger, or more highly detailed in a recording than it ever is in the concert hall, and the net result may actually be more exciting than anything heard at a live performance. The gimmicked recording may even, on occasion, serve the intent of the music better than a concert hall performance, but whether it sounds better or worse than the original, it is not true to the original, and thus cannot be considered a high-fidelity reproduction.



Sound recording may eventually become a creative art in its own right, producing musical sounds that bear no relation to any natural sounds. Indeed, some branches of it—pops and so-called electronic music—are already well on their way in that direction. This is not high fidelity, though, and there's no sense pretending that it is.

As long as we are concerned with the realistic reproduction of sound, the original sound must stand as the criterion by which the reproduction is judged.