

Obituaries

Rein Narma (1923–2011)



AES Fellow Rein (pronounced like the English word “rain”) Narma died on March 9, 2011, in Southold, NY, at the age of 87.

Rein was a man of great intelligence and

boundless energy. He was born on July 31, 1923, in Tallinn, Estonia. He studied electro-mechanical engineering at the Technical University of Tallinn, later earning an Executive MBA at Stanford University.

From 1945–1947 he worked for the U.S. Army 1st Div. 26th Reg. as a civilian radio engineer. His primary duty was the set-up and maintenance of IBM simultaneous translation equipment, as well as recording equipment at the Nuremberg International War Crimes Trials and the follow-on War Crimes Trials.

From 1948–1951 he worked for the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNRA)/ International Refugee Organization (IRO) as a public information officer. During this assignment he accompanied correspondents from the U.S., Canada, and Australia, traveling throughout Europe recording refugee music at various post-war refugee camps. He procured, designed, or modified the recording equipment. He interviewed refugees, acted as an interpreter, prepared, edited, and at times narrated radio programs.

Rein emigrated to the U.S. in 1951 and became a citizen. In 1951 he worked for Rangertone Inc., as a development engineer, designing tape and film recording equipment.

In 1952–1953, he worked for Gotham Recording Corporation, NYC, as a recording engineer, recording commercials, orchestras, and radio programs. Between 1953–1955, he worked for Gotham Audio Development Corporation, NYC as a cofounder of this company. He developed, designed, and built recording equipment. A fight between the other two partners caused the demise of this enterprise.

In 1955–1956, he founded Rein Narma Audio Development Company, where he

designed and built complex recording/mixing consoles, automatic volume limiters, audio amplifiers for recording studios, and modified Ampex multitrack recorders to meet more critical distortion requirements.

Rein designed and built Rudy Van Gelder’s Studios in New York and New Jersey, Olmsted Sound Studios in New York, and finally Les Paul and Mary Ford’s complete setup in New Jersey.

He invented the first-ever intelligent automatic volume control limiter, and sold a license to Fairchild Recording Equipment Corp, where it became the well-known Fairchild 670. A few of these limiters that have survived are now selling at more than \$30,000 each—the original price was \$400.

In 1956–1959, he started as chief engineer at Fairchild Recording Equipment Corporation, which by then had split from Fairchild Camera and Instrument. He managed the development effort of the first ever stereo phono cartridge, and the first stereo disc cutter head and system. Sherman Fairchild decided to split the company again, and Rein became the VP GM of the engineering/manufacturing half of the company.

In 1959–1969, he worked for Ampex Corporation, starting as manager of audio engineering, where he managed the development of professional magnetic recorders and special products. He became the director of audio development and advanced audio, then head of video operations, where he headed the development of the first single rotating-head color video recorder including its manufacture. He also served as a member of board of directors of Ampex’s joint venture company with Toshiba in Japan called TOAMPCO. He then became VP GM of consumer and educational products, and subsequently the group VP of consumer and educational products, including the Audio, Video, Ampex Music (tape), and Ampex Service Divisions. During his tenure Ampex grew from less than 50 million dollars to over 300 million dollars. In the Ampex days, he had a special project for using the Tape System for storing data for a “government agency.” He claimed the first 1 MB+ storage system—it predated the IBM tape models, and only two were built.

During the period 1952–1969 Rein was active in the AES, coauthoring five technical

papers, chairing a convention session in 1955, receiving an AES Fellowship in 1959, and being elected to the AES Board of Governors for the periods 1965/6 and 1966/7.

Rein left the audio field in 1969, taking management positions in General Instrument Corporation from 1969 to 1990, and as a management consultant, director, and investor at Patricoff and Associates Venture Capital from 1990 to 2005. During this time, he was also vice chairman of Manhattan Partners and CEO of CONTEC.

From 1969 to 1984 Narma held various executive positions at General Instrument Corporation, including head of Asia Pacific, head of cable products, executive vice president and advisor to the chairman of General Instrument Corporation. From 1984 to 1990, Chief Executive Officer of Contec LP from 1993 July to 1998 October. 1998 to 2005, Limited Partner of Contec Holdings, LLC. vice chairman of Contec LP, 1998 October to 2005. He served as director of Tessera, Inc. from 1991 to 2003

From his General Instrument period, he was very active in the semiconductor industry. In 1990/91 he brought together the IBM Engineers from IST to help found TESSERA. He got the funding from David Patricoff to form the company. The work at Manhattan partners was acquisition and management of Contec (Rein and Frank Hickey, ex-CEO of GI), and drove to become the largest cable products remanufacturer. They bought a cable division from Motorola, getting most of the major cable companies onboard.

He loved technology and adapted to the computer age well. He built his own computers and always strove to learn more. He was frustrated by the limitations of the digital/analog conversion, as he felt it lacked quality and naturalness. If he had lived longer, he would have pursued fixing that problem. His basement was full of test equipment with that aim.

Rein was interviewed by Irv Joel in 2002, and that is available at <http://www.aes.org/historical/store/>. He retired in 2006, after his wife of many years, Kiisu, died, and spent his last years listening to classical music, getting the sound in his home “just right,” and thinking about how to fix some of the problems with digital and analog sound.

Jay McKnight and Vaino Narma