

REPRODUCING THE RECORDED ARTS

Toeing The Line



► Line Stages

Naim NAC552

Gryphon Sonata Allegro

Lamm L2 Reference

Tom Evans Audio Design "The Vibe"

► Loudspeakers

Audio Physic Spark

Epos M14

Cabasse iO/Jupiter

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► CD Players

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MADRIGAL AUDIO LABORATORIES
1972 - 2002

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to appear out of context.

Editorial

Reviewing products for this issue has dragged a system matching concern, kicking and screaming across my audio sight-line. First, in reviewing the trio of cartridges featured in the Audio Smorgasbord section, I was once again amazed at the differences in sound quality generated by even tiny adjustments in the gain of the Phonomena phono stage. Then came the Rothwell Electronics attenuators, simply little 10dB pads that can be used to trim input levels or overall system gain. In the right circumstances, they too have a clearly beneficial effect on sound quality. But just what are those circumstances?

Whilst the mean efficiency of speaker systems has risen in the last few years, it's an influence that's prevalent at the lower end of the market. The actual variation in efficiency of such speakers has remained much the same. That makes for an easy situation to resolve. However, further up the price/quality spectrum things are rather different. Here, the advent of truly high efficiency designs alongside the existing wide-bandwidth low efficiency models means that the spread of possible speaker sensitivity extends from around the 80dB mark (Sound Lab, MBL) up to and beyond 100dB. And that's a yawning chasm.

Given the sonic results of my listening with the Phonomena, the whole question of system gain and input sensitivity takes on a new significance. It's not just an issue that needs consideration in selecting equipment, but the ability of that equipment to adjust these parameters becomes much more important too. When PM questioned its absence on the Naim NAC552 it certainly rang bells with me.

Roy Gregory



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The full benefits of CAST-X are best heard through Krell's fabulous range of LAT loudspeakers, from the floor standing LAT-1 reviewed by Martin Colloms as having 'exceptionally low coloration, high resolution and very fine stereo imaging' (HFN April 2002), to the compact stand mounted LAT-2.

There's also hot news for movie buffs on a budget with the new Krell Showcase 7.1 THX processor and Showcase 5,6 and 7 channel amplifiers.

Call **Absolute Sounds** for full details.

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Upper_Showcase Processor
Lower_Showcase Cinema Amplifier

Far right_Krell FPB 750MCX Amplifier



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Heathrow Show In September

Autumn in London is taking on a familiar aspect and I don't just mean the weather. After three rather less than successful years at the Hammersmith Novotel hotel, the September show, now called The Hi-Fi Show and AV Expo 2002, is returning to its spiritual home at Heathrow. Greeted with a sigh of relief from the industry, the decision has produced a significant increase in exhibitor numbers, including for the first time Hi-Fi+.

Spread across two hotels, The Renaissance (what most of us still call The Penta) and Le Meridien (formerly The Excelsior, across the Bath Road). Both have been refurbished since the show was last held at Heathrow, promising better facilities than before. The show runs from Friday the 13th, which is reserved as a trade day with no public admission, through to Sunday the 16th of September, and is open from 10am to 6pm.

Getting to the show will be pretty much as before, except that now those coming by tube should travel to Heathrow Central (Terminals 1,2 and 3) where they should pick up either a 111, 105, 205, 140, 555 or 557 bus, all of which stop outside the Renaissance Hotel. The bus services are free.

The list of exhibitors includes all the usual suspects along with a selection of newcomers like Pen Audio who've impressed us at European shows. The like of Absolute Sounds, Audiofreaks



and Path Premiere will be putting on their normal excellent demonstrations, and demand for tickets for the closed ones is sure to be high, so make them your first call of the Day. Elsewhere it's nice to see the return of Gryphon, who'll hopefully be playing the fascinating speakers that they first showed in Frankfurt, while other newcomers such as Perigee ensure that there'll be plenty of interesting kit you haven't seen or heard before.



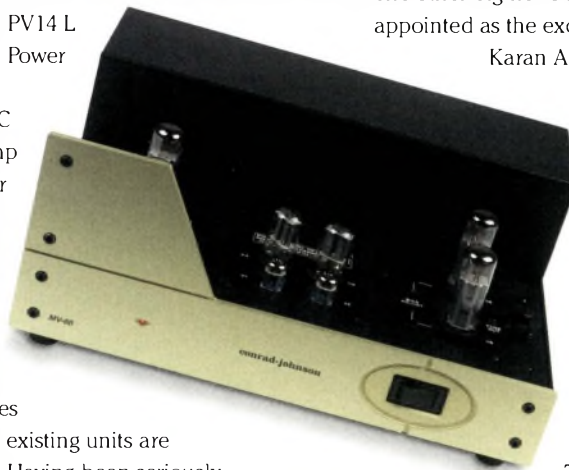
The Hi-Fi+ stand offers you the opportunity to meet and greet the Hi-Fi+ editor and publisher (so that you can tell us what we're doing right, and just as importantly, what we're doing wrong), and we'll have a full range of back issues available, so we look forward to seeing you there. Visitors can get further information from the show web-site, www.avexpo.co.uk as well as pre-registering on-line.

The Hi-Fi Show &
AVEXPO
AUDIO-VISION 2002



c-j upgrades and Karan Acoustics availability

Audiofreaks have announced revised models of the Conrad-Johnson PV14 L line-stage and MV60 amplifier. Power supply revisions in both units and a switch to Svetlana 6550C output tubes for the power amp are claimed to result in greater transparency, resolution and musical body. The MV60SE also offers an increased output of 65 Watts per channel. Price for the PV14L remains unchanged at £2200 while the MV60SE rises slightly to £2995. Upgrades for existing units are available at a nominal charge. Having been seriously impressed by the original 60 we're looking forward to reviewing both units shortly.



The other big news is that Audiofreaks have been appointed as the exclusive world-wide distributors for Karan Acoustics products from Yugoslavia.

Debuted at last year's Novotel show Karan's state of the art solid-state audio electronics attracted an enormous amount of international attention. The IA180 integrated amp we reviewed back in Issue XX certainly lived up to expectations. The advent of a silver finish merely increases its appeal. Interested parties can contact Audiofreaks at:

Tel. +44-208-9484152

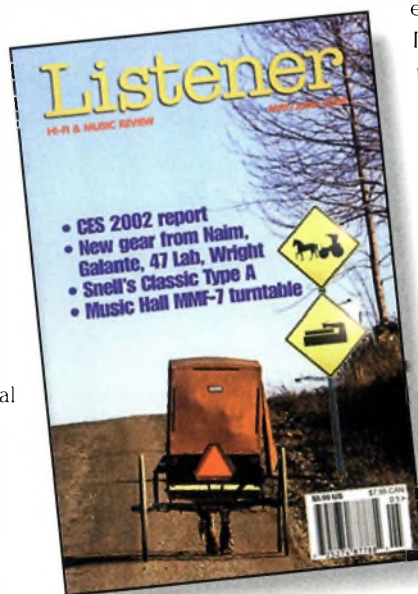
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RIP the Listener, 1994–2002 (but hopefully not for too long...)

In a posting on audioasylum.com, the most respected and informative of the various audio web-sites, and dated 15-08-02, Art Dudley, the founder and editor of US magazine *Listener* announced that the title was to cease publication. The magazine had suffered the classic problem of specialist audio journals, poor distribution and consequently low circulation. Three years ago acquisition by a commercial publishing house, Englander, seemed to promise salvation, with greater commercial muscle and savvy. However, despite an aggressive subscription campaign, sales failed to grow fast enough to satisfy commercial demands, and Englander have reluctantly pulled the plug. It's a salutary lesson for all audio



enthusiasts and manufacturers alike. If we value an independent press then we'll have to support it.

Throughout its colourful history, *Listener* garnered a reputation for straight talking and an attitude that was more anglophile than any of the English press. Managing to successfully negotiate a tightrope that teetered between the opposing Linn and Naim camps, gives you some idea of Art Dudley's verbal and political dexterity. It was a real world real-politik that satisfied his many readers and will be sadly missed. Only time will tell whether Art can resurrect *Listener* and its ideals in another guise. Both myself and many others will certainly be hoping so.



We like to be a bit different.

You've probably noticed a lot of our products are rather unusual. Some are brands you can't find anywhere else in Britain, others are visually quite different to the mainstream, others do things differently. The criteria they all have to meet are good value for money, exceptional sonic performance, and (selfishly) giving us pleasure selling them.

We can get away with this because we're proudly independent of any manufacturer or importer, and not constrained by having to cater for AV or multiroom as well, a decision we took right from when we started. Some have said it's commercial madness. We (and, luckily, our customers) disagree. There is still room for individuality and the aim of sonic perfection without multimedia strings attached. Come and hear what we have to offer - we think you'll be very surprised!

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The full Duevel range of omnidirectional speakers. Exceptional performance from the little Venus (£1795), the popular Bella Luna (£2995), and the imposing Jupiter (£7500).

We now have all three new models from Audio Physic on demo (Avanti pictured) and what stunners they are.
Yara - £999
Virgo 3 - £3499 / £3999
Avanti 3 - £6599 / £7499
(prices for black / wood)



The Nottingham Analogue Spacedeck (£862.50) and Hyperspace - pictured - (£1955), both priced without arm, are firm favourites here. They ooze quality and sound great; a lasting investment.



We are delighted with the success of the Brinkmann Integrated - £2000 - from Germany. Completely fuss free, brilliant sound, loads of power, all in a compact, stylish package.



Conrad Johnson have been making some of the finest toob (sorry, valve) amps for as long as we can remember. The PV-10B Pre (£1495) and MV-60 Power (£2895) Amps demonstrate this perfectly and show the benefits of years of experience.

IMPORTANT!

We are very strong supporters of Vinyl with masses of experience setting up new turntables to their absolute optimum, or maintaining your old one. Most popular new purchases? Rega P2 and P3, and the absolutely unstoppable Michell Gyro SE !!! If money is no object, look at the Amazon, Clearaudio, SME, and Verdier turntables. We also stock Origin Live tonearms and mods, are the sole source for Morch arms in the UK, and can demo a vast range of cartridges (by appointment, please). We're also one of the very few sources of Vinyl accessories - record inner sleeves, brushes, tracking gauges etc etc etc, all usually from stock! You really must visit our popular website for a Vinyl treat:

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Incoming!

Please address letters to the Editor at Hi-Fi+, Unit 12 Albany Business Park, Cabot Lane, Poole, Dorset, BH17 7BX, or via the web-site at www.hifiplus.com

Dear Sir,
I breathed a sigh of relief when in the editorial I was told that there would be less Pop and Contemporary music reviews. However I was not prepared for what greeted me on pages 116/117. "Lateralus" "Flatlanders" "Stewboss" are you having a laugh!

Where do these artists come from and more importantly do I need to know?!

Quite honestly I think that record/CD reviews in Hi-Fi mags are a complete waste of time (unless the reviews happen to be of the type of music that interests you or are of such commonly available and well known artists so as to make the inclusion of some use to the majority of readers).

Yours faithfully

Robert Powell

Surrey

The purpose of the music reviews in Hi-Fi+ is to try and encourage people to listen to music that they might not otherwise experience, and that's especially true of the Pop and Contemporary section. The featured albums are all interesting and musically valid alternatives to more mainstream acts, so yes you should know about them. As to whether you should buy them, that's a case of dipping your toes in the water. Try a few discs, see which of the reviewers are closest to your taste and then buy accordingly. It beats the hell out of making random selections in your local MDC! Ed.

Dear Sir,
May I add my twopennyworth to your excellent article on the LP12. Like many of your readers I buy second-hand and such articles are like gold dust. In fact virtually my whole system is second-hand, I have heard some great systems in my travels and met some great people who have tolerated my stupid questions while I've learnt a great deal. I would commend the second-hand route to any of your readers, I don't suppose your advertisers would approve, but it keeps the whole system on the move. Enthusiasts can't upgrade unless they sell their old gear first.

I promised myself an LP12 when I was a poor House

Doctor in the late 70's(I got a Thorens B 160 instead). I bought a second-hand Valhalla/Ittok last Autumn and have been tweaking since. May I add my experiences towards your next article on upgrades.

1. An Anniversary Ringmat was cheap and added clarity and base.
2. A new interconnect, any new interconnect seems vital. I chose the Origin Live. It has seemed strange to me that reviewers emphasise cabling for amps/CD players but seem to forget the cheap cable supplied by some expensive turntable manufacturers.
3. Your article seemed to dismiss the Trampoline base. A friend gave me a heavy copper plate with adhesive foam backing by Kopperea of Dundee. They claim RFI and vibration isolation, it's cheap and it seems to work well to me.
4. I hope you will address the thorny PSU issue, Armageddon or Lingo. I was going to buy an Origin Live DC motor but will wait for the next issue and your advice, particularly after your warnings about inexpert poking around inside the turntable.

I hope my experience is useful, more of the same articles please. Why not an article on good second-hand valve/solid state amps which are in good supply. I assure you I wouldn't be the only reader interested.

By the way I was shocked by your ignorance. The ancient scrolls clearly demand the sacrifice of a goat not a chicken before opening the LP12, with a careful reading of the entrails.

David Wise

Rest assured that this is only the first of a number of articles on second-hand equipment. Ed.

Dear Sir

I write regarding your review of the Chord Electronics DAC64.

What I would like to know is whether or not you realised it was a phase inverting device, if you had it connected appropriately to compensate, and if you think that absolute polarity is relevant (I do but can't say why and the effect is so inconsistent that I sometimes change my mind!). As this isn't mentioned in your review, I am guessing that like

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my hi-fi dealer and me you were unaware that the DAC64 is polarity inverting. It certainly isn't mentioned in any of Chord Electronics publications including the owner's manual. This Chord say, is an oversight.

The unit is undoubtedly an excellent piece of equipment and is by far the biggest improvement in CD reproduction I have heard to date (whichever phase you hear it in). I think though that despite the subjective nature of the effect of absolute polarity consumers should be informed so that they can at least consider it.

I think that Chord Electronics have a duty to fully inform their customers as to what their product does and what it is optimised for.

I look forward to your comments.

Ivan Marsden
Sheffield

Having spoken with JMH I can confirm that he too was unaware of this situation. Clearly Chord should include this information in their manual, and I believe that that is now being done. Ed

Dear Sir,

Last night I read again your review on the Mark Levinson Reference System. You mentioned two discs that stuck into your memory. One of them was The Dvorak String Quintet in G on AAA Phoenix.

I'm looking for a very long time where I can purchase that CD. Please will you let me know where it is available.

You've been impressed, and that is understandable for me, by the Levinson System. Maybe it is nice to review in a next issue the Spectral Reference System (DMC 30SL/360/SDR 2000/SDR 3000) and you'll get surprised what level this system has. Writing this I remembered the 360 mono amps are not for sale in the UK. Spectral's owner is little bit 'strange' in distributing his stuff. Maybe the Dutch distributor (More Music/Harry van Dalen) can lend you a pair.

Met vriendelijke groet/Best regards,

Geert Beks
The Netherlands

The AAA disc is, as far as I'm aware, only available on vinyl, but you can contact the Analogue Audio Association at:

*Postfach 12 27
D-72764, Reutlingen
Germany
E-mail. info@AAAnalog.de*

The Spectral Reference System is about to acquire its first dealer in the UK, and as soon as it does so we'll be queuing up for a listen.

Dear Mr Gregory:

Your magazine has only recently come to my notice, and I have very much enjoyed the last two issues.

The article by Glen Armstrong on monaural records in the July/August 2002 issue, however, was particularly excellent. I applaud Mr Armstrong's assertion - contrary to what one reads in a certain American hi-fi magazine, which maintains an 'absolutely' opposite view (it's a wonderful publication, nonetheless) - that "the first thing to remember with any record is that what you are hearing is not real". For me, a great recording has always been rather like a great photograph: it captures a kind of essence of reality that might elude ordinary listeners/viewers.

I was excited to hear about Mr Armstrong's experience with monaural cartridges, and how well they make monaural records sound. I would guess that about a quarter of my 2000 or so records are monaural. I'm in the process of upgrading my hi-fi system, and I will definitely plan for a new turntable with the provision for two cartridges. Any reviews on mono cartridges to come in future issues, or information about where to find them?

Yours Sincerely,

Ivan Kursar
Bath

Mono has been long overlooked by the stereo dominated hi-fi press, but the times they are a changing. Currently we have the Lyra Helikon mono awaiting review, and models from 47 Labs and Grado due to arrive, so the single channel movement is definitely on the up. Ed.

Dear Sir

Just wanted you to know that your review of The Hovland system was right on the money. I don't own The Sapphire yet, but my system is all Hovland including a pair of speakers that the Hovland gang made in the late 80's. (They only made 10 pairs).

I'm not sure why the company had you review with the 9 Line speaker cable. The Hovland Reference speaker cable blows the 9 Line out of the water. See if they'll loan you a pair. I own both, and feel its fair to comment.

Anyway, I just subscribed to your magazine because of your thoroughness and the fact that you take the time to really listen to the products you review.

Sincerely,
Ken Beckman
Reno, Nevada

I used the 9 Line bi-wires at the request of the importer. However, Hovland share your view and are sending the necessary Reference cables. Ed.



Vienna



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dCS Verdi Transport

For many years dCS users all over the world have been asking us to make a disc transport to go with their dCS DACs. Well here it is - the dCS Verdi. The Verdi is two products in one - a CD transport and a SACD transport. Every effort has been made to obtain the best possible playback fidelity from both media. Compromising one to favour the other was not an option. We have achieved this by paying attention to the transport as a system, rather than concentrate on one or two specific features. The Verdi's low jitter on-board clock ensures that it will give excellent CD playback with non-dCS DACs, but it really comes into its own when used with either the dCS Edgar plus or dCS Delius D/A converters, where the ability to synchronise the Verdi to precision clocks built into the Edgar and Delius takes CD playback to another level. We firmly believe that the quality of playback possible from the DSD layer of SACD's when using the Verdi, is the closest to the original master recording so far achieved with audiophile equipment.

Verity Audio - Parsifal

This is a highly flexible high-end loudspeaker that complies with ease to every listening environment. It uses custom designed parts of an utmost quality mounted on a rigid and reinforced asymmetrical enclosure. The extremely fast midrange driver gives you the sweetness of an electrostatic loudspeaker without bottom end limitations.

The unique custom made bass driver employed in the Parsifal Woofer module offers collaboration finer bass reproduction than extends from the low bass frequencies to the lower midrange. It's seamless integration with the very transparent Verity Audio Parsifal Monitors provide natural and resonance free musical reproduction. All components used are carefully computer matched and indexed for optimum sound staging performance.

The result is a high-resolution loudspeaker that gives a great sense of liveliness, scale, and presence in the listening space. The Parsifal, without any doubt, sounds naturally even throughout a seemingly unlimited frequency spectrum and dynamic range. It gives hours of enjoyable music without any fatigue.

The quality of its finish and the beauty of its appearance deserve the designation of a piece of art.

Nagra PL-L

One of the most respected names in the world of professional Audio, Nagra has a forty year history of producing leading edge electronics for the recording industry. Their move into high end audio was a welcomed surprise, and their gear has met with rave reviews.

Many listeners requested a line stage preamp, and Nagra listened. The PLL will interest many, not only because of the great sound, but also for the new found convenience of full remote controllability. Balanced outputs are available as a option. As with all Nagra equipment, expect superb Swiss craftsmanship and meticulous attention to detail.

Nagra takes great pride in introducing the ultimate preamp, the PL-L, line input cousin to the PL-P. The PL-L combines the unmistakable sonic excellence of the PL-P with the convenience of remote control for those whose source components do not include Phono. The features of the PL-L include four selectable inputs, one for balanced and three unbalanced, dual output zones, each with two unbalanced outputs. An optional balanced output is available as well.

Midland Audio X-change MAX

Rega P3 Turntable

The new P3 is, in our opinion, the ultimate performance turntable available to the music-loving public. We designed the P3 with no financial restrictions whatsoever. The platter alone costs more to produce than our P25 turntable! It is made from pure ceramic, a material that you would otherwise find used for insulation tiles on NASA's space shuttle. The reason for using such an exotic and difficult to produce material? It is the hardest material known to man apart from diamond!

The main bearing assembly is engineered to extremely tight tolerances. This results in virtually friction free rumble-less performance, which, if lubricated correctly, will last your lifetime!

The plinth is a complex, CNC machined spherulite structure encased in highly rigid phenolic resin laminates. The equivalent to the carbon fibre 'monocoque' chassis of the formula one car - an ultra lightweight, ultra rigid foundation for this high performance turntable.

Audio Research VS55

The VS55 represents a fresh, new design direction for Audio Research. Using an open (rather than fully enclosed) chassis architecture, the VS55 features a milled, anodised top plate through which the input and output tubes project upward. The chassis is finished in matte black with silver lettering, while the top plate is clear anodised with an inset logo. Behind the tubes and finished top plate are located the output and power transformers and a row of high-quality power-supply capacitors. The appearance is crisp and logical without being overly 'neuro'.

Best of all, you will find the sound of the VS55 a delightful complement to any Audio Research preamplifier, especially the SP-16. While offering excellent soundstage focus and a vivid, liquid midrange, the VS55 also has surprising musical dynamics. Bass extension and impact are impressive compared to other amplifiers in this power range, thanks to generous power-supply energy reserves and to the efficient output-transformer design. In all, the VS55 bears the sonic hallmarks of being a true Audio Research amplifier: a quick, dynamic and powerful acoustic envelope surrounding an illuminated midrange of palpable lushness and realism. Matched with appropriate, high-quality loudspeakers and source components, the VS55 will give listening pleasure far beyond normal expectations in this price and power range.

Spectral - DMC-15 Preamplifier

Spectral's latest addition to their superb range of electronics will be available from late July as a replacement for the DMC12. A line level remote controlled preamplifier with topology taken from the DMC20's Reference preamplifier, we are very excited about this product please call John Roberts to discuss the possibilities, with any Spectral component.



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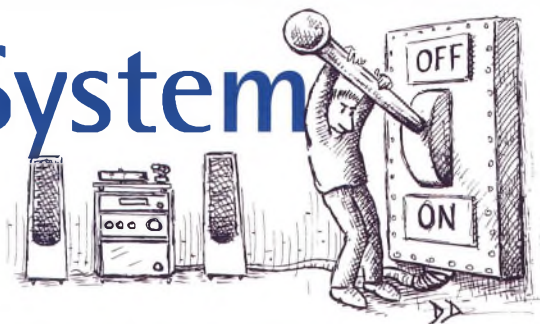
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MAX Midland Audio X-change

Playing The System

by Roy Gregory



What follows is an extract from the confidential transcript of a Special Branch surveillance tape recording of an AA (Audiophiles Anonymous) meeting. We have changed the names of the participants in order to protect the identity of the innocent victims, but nonetheless, we feel obliged to publish the contents and place this worrying information in the public domain. It seems to be a uniquely male phenomenon, which means that sufferers may well be able to lean on female partners for help, but as we shall see, the nature of the psychosis attacks these fundamental bonds first. We apologise should any of you find this necessarily frank account disturbing.

Arnold G. Many of you will remember the problems I described at the last meeting. It's my wife, and while many of you might think that this is a standard "she doesn't understand me" whinge, I can assure you that it really isn't. I mean, this woman is completely unrealistic, and I'm not sure how long I can continue to tolerate her mood swings and constant demands. Just like you, I read all that stuff in the papers about battered husbands, but I never thought it would happen to me. Not that she hits me: there's nothing physical you understand – oh no, not for years. It's far worse than that: it's almost as if she attacks my system...

(At this point the tape records a shocked and sympathetic silence, a poignant backdrop to the soft sobs...)

I'm sorry, but it all gets too much for me sometimes. I've tried, I really have, but she moves things you see. (Stifled gasps!) Oh yes. The other day I discovered one of my speaker leads lying well within a foot of the mains lead for the standard lamp. And it had a kink in it. And my stylus brush. That was on the left hand side of the turntable. That's the wrong side. It throws the Seismic Stand's air suspension completely out of true. But it's what she does to the records that's really horrible. The other day I found Peter Gabriel's *So* (you know, that special German limited edition pressing where the third synth note of the second track, the one that's right under the zero tracking error point, is speed corrected to the true 36 Hz) filed in the GA section of the racking. I need that record. I use it everyday for checking the bass alignment and in room frequency response. Could she put it back where it belongs? In the GE section, under Original Band Members – Solo Projects. Oh no, that's far too simple. I swear she did it on purpose

just so I wouldn't be able to tell if she'd moved the Mordaunt-Short Signifer, the one I use as a sympathetic resonator. You know, last time I measured it was definitely an inch off the centre line of the hall, and more than the nine inches it should be from the bottom of the stairs. Hmm... Perhaps I should think about a set of brass tie rods to brace it to the walls... That would give me the option of tuning the resonator system as a whole simply by tightening and loosening them... And Nobby could knock them up for me. His shed's an Alladdin's cave of plumbing parts, ever since Brenda made him live in it. Oh, don't worry about that – she can always use the back door...

(At this point there's a muffled response from the moderator. No matter how hard we've tried we can't quite decipher it but it sounds suspiciously like "I bet she doesn't shut it on her way out"...)

Mark B. Gawd, you're a sorry lot. I don't even know why I'm here. Well, actually it's because I promised the girlfriend. But I don't have a problem with hi-fi. I just buy whatever Chris Grasper recommends. Oh sure, it means I spend a bit of brass, but my system's always right up to the minute. And I sell what I'm not using. And it's great being a valued customer. I even get Christmas hampers from Absolute Sounds and Path Premier, so that's got to be worth something hasn't it. And while we're on the subject, does anybody want a pair of second-hand Wilson Sophias? Only three weeks use and yours for a couple of grand. Only I hear there's the new System 7's on the way, and I just know CG's going to love it. But then, once you find a reviewer you can really trust you've just got to go with what he says. Otherwise you're a fool to yourself.

Peter P. Money, money, money. You think this is just about money. Well my friend, as the man said, you can't buy a thrill. It's not what you use, it's how you use it. Give me a selection of 70s separates, a tape measure, spirit level and a weather vane and I'll show you a thing or two. Make your overpriced selection of audio exoticica sound like the trash it really is. We never moved on from the original days of solid-state you know. And as for all

▶ this single-ended garbage...

Peter X. You just can't leave it alone can you? You know that the direct heated triode is the light the truth and the sole path to musical righteousness! I hope you live out the after life (voice steadily rising) with the anode voltage of an 845 strapped across your testicals. That, you worm (voice continuing to rise) will give the devil's system some serious high-end response. And two and a half watts might not sound like much my friend, but try the warm glow of that on the soles of your feet for a couple of thousand years.

(A final demonic cackle before muffled thuds and grunts suggest that he's being dragged from the room. A brief flurry is finished with a receding yell. "I'll be back... Oh yes... and then you'll be sorry. Only sinners use more than the holy three Watts, and all those seeking redemption should give me a call so that I can supply your modest power requirements in return for those huge wads of cash that are weighing down your souls..." Mercifully, a door slams and cuts off the phone number half way through.

John T. Thank God he's gone. I really don't know why we let him in. There's no room here for obsessives, especially the ones who obsess about equipment. That's just the medium. What we should all be concerned with is the message. And that means software.

Me? I'm always suspicious of anybody whose system is worth more than their record collection. Dodgy sense

of perspective see. Let me give you an example. I was out on a job the other day with Dave, my oppo, and we got called to a middle-aged man who'd been watching the England-Argentina game and collapsed. As ambulance men we get a lot of that. So, as soon as I walk in I can see he's past helping, so do the only thing I can. I check out his record collection and make his wife an offer. You know, not only did she get all snotty with me, but Dave backed her up. He wanted to use the De-Fib paddles. Equipment freak you see. I knew it as soon as I found out that he's got one of those Michell turntables. I mean, who wants to spend more than the price of a second-hand TD160BC on a record player? And as to his CD player, who's going to use one of those then? All that going to the freezer every time you want to play a disc: I don't know how anybody puts up with it.

Dave S. You analogue luddites are all the same. You just can't accept the fact that CD is fundamentally more accurate than the rubbish you're still using...

At this point a general brawl appears to ensue, so we'll leave the proceedings there. I think from the brief except that we felt able to release that you can see the grounds for our concerns. Qualified medical opinion has examined this evidence and the response is unanimous: these people are dangerous. Lock up your husbands, hog-tie your male children, or you too might end up harbouring an audiophile! Now you know the truth, is it really a risk you want to take?



Music Matters



by Alan Sircom

Digital-quality pictures and multi-channel sound are both new concepts for the home, yet remain squirted down connections that are electronically ancient, and – for pictures at least – resolutely analogue. That's about to change as we move deeper into the digital domain. And there is even a bigger change coming in video signals, as they too turn digital in time.

The traditional Toslink optical and coaxial electrical digital audio connections were designed to connect a domestic CD player to a digital to analogue converter. The Sony/Philips Digital Interface (S/PDIF) was specified from the outset of the Red Book standard, even though there were no external DACs or digital recorders available when the format was launched in 1981/2. It was

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► important for the interface to be easy to connect and cheap to implement, but it was only later that the limitations of the connection began to appear. Jitter, not considered as a problem when the format was conceived, soon became a thorn in the side of S/PDIF.

Unfortunately, there is no way to squeeze a clock signal, running from the DAC to the transport, along the S/PDIF connection; it simply is not part of the specification. Manufacturers have found their own ways around this; usually by either producing a reclocking circuit within the DAC (a la Trichord) or a synchronisation lock between the DAC and the Transport (such as used by Arcam and Linn), but this required a second lead between the two products.

Today's digital signals require even more from the interface. The Dolby Digital and DTS multi-channel signal from DVD-Video just about managed to survive down the S/PDIF connection, in part because they are compressed. But, when it comes to DVD-Audio and SACD, the digital signal makes too great a series of demands on the digital interface. Both require six channels of less compressed or even uncompressed digital audio, which means higher-speed digital data; but, more importantly, both insist on some form of digital copyright protection, whether a 'watermark' or other forms of copy protection. As such, so far SACD and DVD-Audio signals are decoded within the player itself and reach the processor by six analogue phono connections, thereby preventing direct digital copying.

But not for long. The home cinema manufacturers, beginning with Pioneer, have latched onto the FireWire connection for the next generation of digital audio link. FireWire (or i-Link or IEEE1394, depending on which license the manufacturer chooses to subscribe to) is currently used to connect high-speed digital signals, such as connecting a digital video camera to a PC for real-time video editing. It has two big advantages; it can transfer data far faster than S/PDIF (up to 400Mips), it also allows two-way data traffic from one section to the other.

Why is this so important? Well, the faster data transfer can cope with SACD and DVD-Audio multi-channel signals... and then some! It is designed to accept both compressed (Dolby, DTS) and uncompressed (MLP, LPCM or DSD) multi-channel datastreams. But the second point – that the link is bidirectional – is almost more important. Not only does it allow the decoder to clock-lock to the transport, but it also means that operational controls can be passed from component to component. So, the processor can control the functions of the DVD player and vice versa, or when playback is started on the DVD Player, the amplifier/receiver Selector is switched to

'DVD' automatically. It even allows daisy-chaining from digital source to digital source.

The other big plus is that it allows for full content protection. Manufacturers of DVD-Audio and SACD titles have been reluctant to allow users access to the digital datastream, because it essentially gives duplication pirates access to something closely resembling the master recording. This is like leaving the Crown Jewels cabinet in the Tower of London open and hoping none of the tourists steal them. The FireWire specification developed for digital transmission features Content Protection for Pre-Recorded Media and Digital Transmission Content Protection which is hoped to halt piracy in its tracks.

FireWire is only part of the issue. The picture is due for an overhaul, too. The new HDMI (High Definition Multimedia Interface) is currently in its final stages of completion (it's currently at Version 0.9) and is anticipated to appear in mid-2003, but makes true all-digital pictures a real possibility. There have been all-digital video transfers before, but so far all have been either broadcast standards, such as SDI or DVI (some of these have made it into homes, but only in custom systems. The single cable connection looks like a form of USB cable found in recent PCs and Macs but allows both video signal and, if required, CD quality digital audio and communications signals, too.

The video signal performance is very high; HDMI will easily support PAL and NTSC signals (in the extremely cinematic looking progressive scan instead of standard interlaced TV pictures). But it can also support HDTV standards up to 1920x1080(interlaced) or 1280x720(progressive). What's more it can control the picture on a pixel-by-pixel basis, making the picture far more focused and precise than ever before. Of course, this requires an inherently digital monitor, but the dramatic price drops in plasma and LCD sets and LCD or DLP projectors mean this is a very real possibility for 2005.

This represents a Copernican revolution in AV technology, perhaps as dramatic as DVD itself. But what significance does it have to the audiophile? Well, HDMI video pictures are of no real import, but FireWire will make a big difference to tomorrow's hi-fi systems. Picture this; a Digital Radio and a DVD-Audio/SACD/CD player connected by a daisy chain of FireWire links to a multi-channel amplifier. Because the digital signal is no longer stuck in the player, it can be dealt with in the decoder, allowing precise tailoring of the sound to fit the speaker layout (something that is currently impossible with DVD-Audio and SACD decoders built into players). Everything operates as elegantly as a well-behaved multi-room installation. It sounds like a dream, but by 2005, it'll be a hi-fi reality.



Careful with that axe Eugene...



by Jason Kennedy

Last issue I made a first stab at identifying the reasons for having a great hi-fi system, but it's a big topic and the Editor has indulged my rambling tendencies and commissioned a second tranche. But first I have a complaint: 'professional' air guitar does not involve implements of any kind, no tennis racquets and definitely no brooms. Ex, right where was I.

One remarkable thing about recorded music is the way that it can transport us to places and times that are otherwise difficult to evoke; it acts as a catalyst for our memories. We tend to associate particular pieces of music with specific times in our lives, and hearing them brings back vivid pictures of those times. They may be memories of people that we used to spend time with and/or places that we spent time in. I doubt I'll be able to listen to another Orb album without recalling the great time I had watching the 'band' at Glastonbury in the early nineties. While the Clash's *London Calling* brings back a carefree time in my teens when Friday nights were a somewhat more lively time than they are now and we drunk as much beer as we could afford - fortunately not that much.

You don't need a great hi-fi to musically reminisce but you need one that you want to listen to, which when it comes down to it is the same thing. When you're young almost anything that works is good enough so long as you've got the music to play on it, which I guess is the reason behind the MP3 phenomenon. It sounds pretty rough to us but a teenager's priorities are slightly different. Which begs the question, is it our love of hi-fi that makes us strive for greater degrees of resolution in our systems or is it a desire to hear more of what's on the recording. This might be because it gets harder to find new music which engages us. Or, and this is the least appealing option, is it because our hearing ability diminishes with time that we need better and better kit to get the same level of musicality out of the recordings which once sounded awesome on an

8-track. Perhaps awesome isn't the right word, but I admit to having spent time listening to the Rolling Stones' *Sticky Fingers* on that format and played back through an Akai reel to reel with built in 8-track drive, amp and speakers. It sounded like great music at the time and it still sounds good now except it's gotta be original vinyl on a record player that costs more than the car!

There's another aspect of time travel to music appreciation. What we are listening to is a time capsule from a studio or concert hall in another place and era. Much like a camera captures a moment in time so does a recording, and while it's not a visual record it's still powerful and evocative. After all you can't reproduce atmosphere with images alone, and there's nothing like a decent live recording for creating atmosphere. Just listen to some of Zappa's *You Can't Do That On Stage Anymore* recordings and you'll hear the music, the concert hall, the audience and the vibe that made his concerts so powerful. The atmosphere is charged in a way that rock concerts rarely are. Unfortunately not many performers were as organised as Zappa when it came to capturing, and more importantly, gaining rights to, their live material, otherwise there would be more great live material around.

Of course it's not just live performances that transport us back in time, great studio recordings are plentiful and the better your system the more their characteristics become apparent. The awesome drumming on Led Zeppelin's 'When the Levee Breaks' was recorded in Headley Grange, John Bonham and kit placed at the foot of a big stairwell with mics well above him. Bonham was a great drummer made greater with some lateral thinking from those around him. A decent system will take you to that stairwell in 1971 and let you hear the power of those drums.

For me however, live recordings are nearly always preferable to their studio counterparts, presumably this

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► is because performers respond differently to the situation. The stimulus onstage is to entertain an audience whereas in the studio the pressures are less focussed, there's always the possibility of another take if you get it wrong. And reproducing live material in a convincing manner takes a decent system, one that plays loud without distorting and also provides the resolution for you to be able to hear what's really going on. There are great live recordings that sound atrocious in a pure hi-fi sense, AC/DC's *If You Want Blood* is a great example. It's ear bleedingly bright and most systems hammer this aspect home so well that you can't play the thing, but a decent system will let you hear through the superficiality of the balance and offer up the energy and power of tracks like 'Problem Child' in all its

Cro-Magnon glory.

I guess this is an extension of the theory that the best hi-fis are the ones that make all your music sound good rather than those that pick out a few on the basis that they are 'the best recordings'. After all it's the music that we're trying to listen to, or at least it should be. The nature of hi-fi evolution is such that accuracy or fidelity is the goal, hence the name high fidelity, but the question that has to be asked is fidelity to what? Ignoring for a moment the vagaries that commercial pressures inflict on the process of creating software, we can look at the audiophile engineer who does his or her utmost to achieve fidelity to the original performance. The degree to which this can be successfully achieved depends on the sonic factors which that engineer considers paramount. Often as not this ends up being maximum detail through purism, and in many respects this is the logical way to tackle the job. However, it's not necessarily the best way to produce an engaging recording, sometimes careful use of tonal adjustment, reverb and even compression (boo, hiss) results in a recording that creates a more 'real' performance when reproduced in the home. The AC/DC live recording mentioned above 'sounds' terrible but it conveys the energy and power of a live performance better than many others.

Very few audiophile recordings turn out to be musically very gratifying. This is largely because getting top notch

performers to take the time and effort to work this way is nigh on impossible, let alone commercially unproven. But occasionally you get a happy coincidence of great recording plus great performance, the Grateful Dead's *Reckoning* being a fine example. Although not audiophile in its true sense the engineer has captured the atmosphere and scale of the event perfectly and with a reasonably powerful system you can recreate the evening in your, somewhat smaller than the original venue, living room.

But audiophile recordings also fail because they get too close to the subject of detail and miss the purpose of the exercise, music. The two are by no means mutually exclusive. Listen to Glenn Gould's recordings; they sound fluent and totally engaging yet they contain myriad edits as a result of his quest for technical perfection.



We have to be careful that the way we evaluate and

choose components to play our music on serves the music before our craving for detail. I'm sure you have

experienced a track on the radio, in the car or through a mono radio that sounded fantastic only to find that when you play the disc on a 'decent' system it seems to have lost some of its magic. This is partly to do with the way we listen to different music sources, some music seems to sound

better when you're not

concentrating on it, but that's not the whole story. Some systems are so detail oriented that they almost stop you hearing the beauty of the music, so try to upgrade by following the path that improves musical intelligibility rather than macroscopic detail resolution.

Ultimately music is more important than fidelity, you can have the greatest recording in the world but if you don't enjoy the music it's not a lot of use. This is another way of saying that we don't really need hi-fi to enjoy music, we just need audio. Fortunately for those of us in the industry, audio is not good enough for concentrated listening once you have heard something better. Hi-fi ignorance might well be bliss but we've got the bug now and there's no getting away from it. There was a cartoon in TAS once, it depicted one tramp saying to the other "Everything was fine until I started hearing differences in audio components".

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Toeing The Line... Naim Step Up To The Mark

by Roy Gregory

Naim Audio have ploughed a resolutely individual, almost iconoclastic path to their present position amongst Britain's pre-eminent hi-fi companies. It's a track that's made them a few enemies along the way, and a few firm friends, most notably their incredibly loyal customer base. But standing apart from the crowd, impervious to fashion (I don't foresee a Naim built, single-ended triode amp anytime soon) has helped to build that attractive quality of individuality. Whatever winds of change have howled across the hi-fi landscape, Naim and its loyal customers have been able to stand aloof, untouched and certain in their unshakeable confidence in their chosen path. But eventually all paths cross, and when they do then both their source and destination come under inevitable scrutiny.

With the launch of their latest and most ambitious product, the new NAC 552 two-box line stage, Naim have finally stepped squarely into the middle of territory they've previously avoided, even scorned. At close to £12000, the new pre-amp comes slap up against products from the likes of Krell, Mark Levinson and Burmester to name but a few. And those companies are all unshamed,

even vociferous participants in the great circus that goes by the name of 'The High-End'. Which is where, by default and association, Naim too now pitch their tent.

But surely, I hear you say, didn't the NAP 500 power amp go there first? Well, no, for two reasons: firstly its eclectic sockety made it difficult to interface with the existing incumbent pre-amps, and secondly, it wasn't actually expensive enough to command attention. Que? Yes, I'm afraid so. The emerging rule of thumb in the high-end community dictates that you should be spending around twice as much on your power amp as you do on your line stage, and that makes the 500 a near perfect match for the existing NAC 52. It simply didn't compare to other flagship amps in terms of price or power output, and we all know that in the school playground it's which one's bigger that matters.

But the NAC 552 fits the high-end bill to perfection, and that makes comparison inevitable, both by commentators and customers alike. So, can Naim rely on the customer loyalty that's served them so well in the past, or, given the keys to the sweet shop, will those same customers

taste forbidden fruit and find the familiar wanting? All of which makes the 552 something of a pioneer, and coincidentally presents the prospective reviewer with something of a dilemma. Which product do you review? The upgrade offered in the context of a top-flight Naim system, the stand alone pre-amp, or the high-end debutante? The answer of course is to do all three, and that demands three different reviewers. So to that end Paul Messenger, long time Naim devotee and NAC52/NAP500 owner examines the new arrival from the viewpoint of the potential upgrader. Chris Thomas, the one time Naim dealer who has moved on to pastures new, examines the 552 as a stand alone partner for alternative power amps, while yours truly gets to put it into a wider context, with the help of similarly priced products from Gryphon in Europe and Lamm in the United States. These are established and respected players in the high-end market place, and representative of exactly the kind of competition that the NAC 552 will have to overcome if it is to establish itself beyond Naim's traditional customer base.



Naim NAC 552 Line-Stage

by Paul Messenger

When Naim first introduced its NAC 52 in 1990, this monster of a two-box pre-amp set new price and performance benchmarks amongst the bigger UK operators. Although foreign exotica like Audio Research's valve devices cost as much or more, none of the major British brands had dared launch a pre-amp costing anywhere near \$4,250.

However, Naim seemed to have judged to mood of the market and its customers very well. The '52 proved notably successful commercially, and also broke fresh ground in combining what most will acknowledge as an 'audiophile' standard of sound quality, with full remote control operation, the latter now much more widespread. Still available today, the '52 has changed only slightly since then, the most significant bit being the upgrading of its outboard power supply to SUPERCAP status. The combination now costs £6,300 (£3,850+\$2,450), which seems a reasonable enough rise over a 12 year span.

However, Naim has just upped the ante with a vengeance, introducing the new NAC 552 which carries a potentially ruinous \$11,750 pricetag. Is it an improvement over the '52? You bet your sweet bippy it is. Is it worth the extra money? That's a much harder question to answer. Given over-heated house prices and a collapsed stockmarket, a nice new pre-amp might seem quite an attractive investment prospect right now. Certainly I never regretted purchasing my NAC 52, though how I'm going to be able to afford a 552 is another question altogether.

In outline terms the two pre-amps have more similarities than differences. The 552 adopts Naim's relatively new

'tryptich' design for its chunky alloy fascia, and smart, if sharp-edged extrusions for the rest of the casework. Otherwise, it's superficially 'mixture as before', with large knobs on the left for volume and balance, plus two rows of eight buttons independently to select 'listen' inputs, 'record' outputs plus mono and mute modes on both.

As expected, the 552PS power supply has matching casework but is otherwise

featureless, its 18(!) separate supplies and the stereo signal linking to the pre-amp via two umbilicals, one a modest 5-pin 240 degree DIN Snaic, the other a massive multi-pin hawser like affair, of the type used in medical electronics for example, known to its friends as a Burndy. Unconventionally, though entirely in the Naim tradition (in order to maintain star-earthing arrangements), the main pre-amp output is fed via 4-pin 240 degree DINs on the power supply unit.

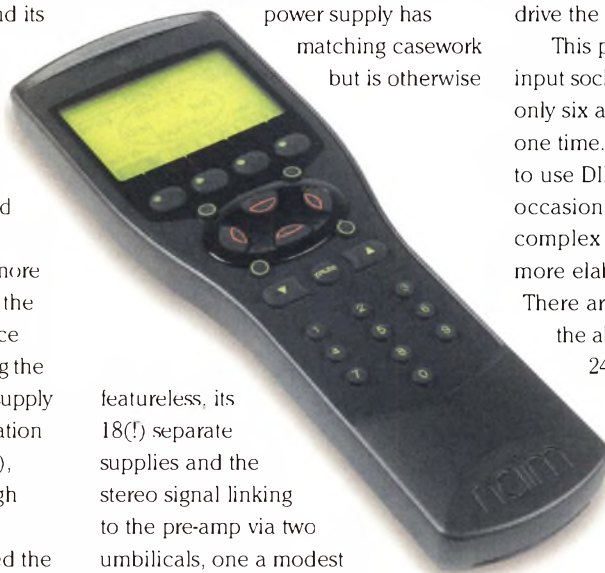
For the company that virtually invented hi-fi minimalism, however, the 552 is a real volte-face. It might not have tone controls, loudness or by-pass buttons, but there's plenty of hidden complexity under the bonnet here, all of which help enhance the flexibility

Unlike the '52, which has interchangeable MM/MC vinyl input boards, the '552 is a line level only pre-amp. But it does include one special input/PS socket (using an unusual 240 degree DIN) which can be used to supply power to Naim's Stageline and Prefix outboard phono stages, as well as accepting the line level signals which they output, or to drive the Headline headphone amp.

This pre-amp has nine stereo pair input sockets, of different kinds, but only six are available for use at any one time. Naim has always preferred to use DIN sockets (alongside the occasional IEC and BNC, plus the complex multi-pin Burndys on its more elaborate power supplies).

There are seven DINs in toto here: the abovementioned PS-equipped 240-degree special, three input-only sockets, plus three more in/outputs for use with stereo recorders. Two of the latter may also be configured for 'unity gain', so the stereo system's two channels become operational 'slaves' to the volume control of an AV processor when doing the multi-channel home cinema thing. Phonos have always been an anathema to Naim, but the company has finally yielded to customer pressure and incorporated just two pairs of phono inputs, for those who like to use fancy fat cables and plugs, and non-Naim sources.

Just which six socket sets are used is up to the customer, who can not only choose any six from nine, but also decide which input socket should be assigned to which of the six front panel (and corresponding remote handset) buttons. All these



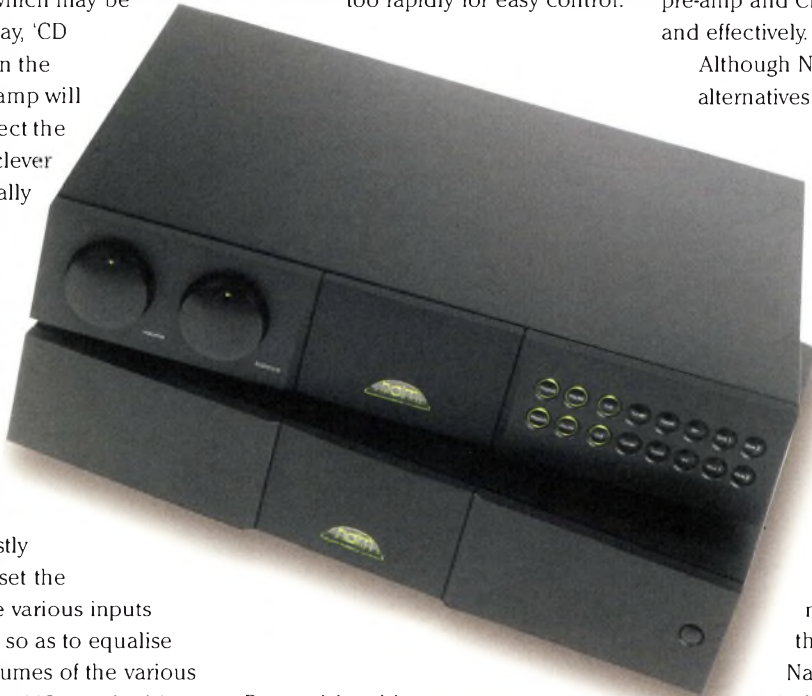
▶ mapping options are set up via the 'program' mode on the elaborate Flash system handset which comes as part of the 552 package. And because there's no longer a 'fixed link' between specific input and selector button, each socket has a little associated LED that blinks briefly when that socket is selected.

Other features include a 'display off' mode, and optional automatic input selection, which may be set up so that if, say, 'CD play' is pressed on the handset, the pre-amp will automatically select the CD input. It's all clever stuff, though initially at least I did miss the rather more straightforward simplicity of my NAC 52. And I would gladly trade most or all of the above, for the ability – available on the much less costly NAC 112 – to pre-set the sensitivities of the various inputs to different levels so as to equalise the perceived volumes of the various sources I use. (The 112 can do this because it has a resistor-ladder volume control arrangement, but for sound quality reasons the 552 instead uses a motorised potentiometer.)

Still, the extra flexibility is quite nice. I'm happy to find that the badges are less brightly illuminated on these latest Naim components, but do find the new little round selector buttons a retrograde step, as they're much harder to read from any distance than their predecessors. I guess one quickly gets used to which input is assigned to which source, without the need for visual confirmation.

The volume control is the most important element in the ergonomics

of a pre-amplifier, especially when it's motor-driven and remotely controlled. I found the 552 a little tricky to use at first, but mainly because it was a very early production sample. A quick stab at the volume up or down button inches the control by a tiny amount, which is very handy for making fine adjustments. Holding the button down, however, tended to rotate the volume rather too rapidly for easy control.



Recognising this, the guys at Naim have already instituted a change in the software driving the potentiometer motor, so that a double-click on the volume buttons puts the pot into a slow rotation mode, which should make it much nicer to operate, even than the 52. That said, I still find the potentiometer as a whole rather cramped, especially when using high sensitivity speakers. With CD and similarly high output sources I rarely use much more than a quarter of its full range rotation.

Flash by name and flash by nature, this classy looking handset comes as part of the 552 package, and is a necessary part when it

comes to programming such features as the input mapping. It has a nice button 'feel', a helpful LCD screen, and is a pretty well conceived and intelligent example of the type, though for my taste it's also a rather heavy, bulky and cumbersome affair. I'll probably carry on using the simple, slim, lightweight plastic remote which I'm well used to, and which continues to drive the pre-amp and CD player very simply and effectively.

Although Naim explored various alternatives, the actual audio circuitry remains substantially unchanged from what the company has been using for many years. Rather the changes have come in how the circuitry has been implemented – in the component layout, the power supply arrangements and anti-microphony measures. For instance, this is the first 'official' Naim pre-amp to use 'split-rail' power supplies, feeding all the circuits from

low-noise positive and negative feeds that are kept separate from the earth rail, and hence away from any noise generated therein. A very large transformer with new rectification and very low noise regulation feeds the 18 separate supplies.

The casework is notably rigid and solid here – indeed massive, given that each of the two units turns the bathroom scales to around 14kg. The main circuitry is split onto two separate PCBs, each mounted onto a heavy subchassis that's spring-decoupled to isolate it from environmental vibrations. Four bolts are used to hold these

▶ boards in place during transit, and are then removed, freeing the suspension and allowing the boards to 'float', when the unit is in use.

It doesn't usually do to audition a new Naim component as soon as you've plugged in and switched on. In my experience it's liable to go on getting better for around a week, so rushing the auditioning is inadvisable. At the same time, a couple of guys from the factory have just driven halfway across the country to bring you their latest state-of-art baby for its first ever review. It would have



been churlish to have simply said: "Just plug it in over there; I'll give it a listen next week".

So we powered up the 552, sat it atop my regular, well warmed up 52, and connected it between my regular sources and a NAP 500 power amp. The result was a real no-brainer. Right from the off, the superiority of the 552 was immediately and unequivocally obvious, especially in its sweeter, cleaner, more open, delicate and detailed top end.

Speech sounded significantly more natural, with less nasal coloration and greater openness. The bass too seemed obviously better – cleaner, deeper and weightier, with less midbass coloration. The 552 seemed to maintain better resolution at both

ends of the audio band, but its real overwhelming superiority over the 52 is seen in its dramatically improved dynamic range, and consequent ability to resolve the very subtlest of low level detail.

Indeed, the better the source, the more obvious was the improvement to be had. The best components make differences easiest to hear, and this is where this pre-amp excelled.

I normally power a Prefix phono stage by a HiCap outboard supply, yet I was quite astonished by the improvement that came about through power it from the supplies built-into the 552.

In truth the sound doesn't quite match

the delicate midrange 'hear through' transparency of the finest valve equipment, but then I doubt there's much (if any) thermionic equipment out there that can match the 552's bandwidth or dynamic range (never mind all that remote control ergonomic convenience etc.).

This pre-amp might be just a little too matter-of-fact and lacking in romance for some listeners, but the strength of the 552 has much to do with its neutrality, and the way it seems to get itself out of the way while letting the maximum musical information through. In a very real sense this is a 'fit-and-

forget' product, that does just what you want it to, while drawing very little attention to itself. Characterless is a word that springs to mind, and must be seen as a compliment, as transducer components like loudspeakers – and indeed the listening room itself – will always add their own contributions to the character of a system.

I did most of my listening with Naim's NAP 500 power amp, which made a beautifully complementary partnership. The 500 does rather show up the limitations of the earlier NAC 52, revealing colorations which were much less obvious with earlier Naim power amps like the NAP 135s. The 552's improved coloration levels are immediately obvious through the 500. At the same time, it doesn't hide anything either, and made me rather more conscious of the bandwidth limitations of a very decent valve power amp.

While I did most of the listening via B&W's Nautilus 800 loudspeakers, to very good effect, out of curiosity I also brought my very different Rehdeko 175s into the frame, and was both pleased and a little surprised at the efficacy of this combination. The latter's very high (c97dB) sensitivity does reveal some mild thermal background noise in the 552, but the pre-amp's clean presence and treble, and wide dynamic range, seemed to work rather well with the extraordinary qualities of the big Rehdekos.

All good things come to an end, and this magnificent pre-amp had to go off for photography, and for CT to have a go. This proved rather depressing, as returning to the 52 made me conscious that it was rather crude and coarse by comparison. I'll still be enjoying my hi-fi, but it won't be quite the same after sampling what the 552 can do, especially when playing my vinyl. ▶

Going Solo

by Chris Thomas

I can remember when the NAC 52 was released, back about a dozen years or so, what a revelation it was for the Naim owner. After all, it did cost about 9 times the price of their existing top model, the NAC 72, which was really an updated NAC 32 in a new-look case. The 52 took the performance of Naim systems to a completely new level. Back in those days there were very few Naim electronics being used with anything other than other Naim electronics. But as far back as the late 70's I was using a Naim 12S pre with a TVA export valve amplifier. Yes, I was once a tube man and as I remember the results were pretty good by the standards of the day. But eventually I ended up with a NAP 250 in an all Naim system, first driving the IBL, which became a pair of SBLs and then finally the mighty room dominating DBL. All of these speakers were driven both passive and actively as the electronics grew in both the number of boxes and the complexity of the cabling. Naim equipment has always had that incestuous nature whereby it always seemed to work better with other Naim equipment. But since the introduction of the CDS1 and 11 Compact Disc players I have found that it is quite possible to successfully incorporate Naim source components with American

amplifiers and speakers to really good effect, the only problem being Naim's insistence on using Din output connections.

But last year when I tried the NAP 500 power amplifier I was quite surprised how well it worked with the Spectral DMC-12 pre-amplifier and Nordost SPM speaker cable. Despite this, I had to conclude that the good old 52 was a better match and produced a better balanced and more wholesome sound, despite the Spectral being superior in certain areas, particularly with the SPM which illuminated the upper mid and treble far better than the NAC 5 cable. So when the NAC 552 arrived with instructions from the editor to try it in non-Naim systems I was geared up and ready to go. Only this time my job would be made far easier due to the fact that Naim have now fitted a couple of optional RCA inputs to their new flagship. Is this perhaps a sign that they want the 552 to be able slot into non-Naim systems? If so, they have only gone half-way and the fact that there are no RCA or XLR outputs sitting alongside the din sockets suggests to me that they know that well over 90% of 552 buyers will be using it with a Naim power amplifier. The American market though may be a different matter. I think that they

have really only equipped the 552 for alien source components so I drafted in a Mark Levinson No. 39 CD player alongside my trusty CDS 11 to do the honours.

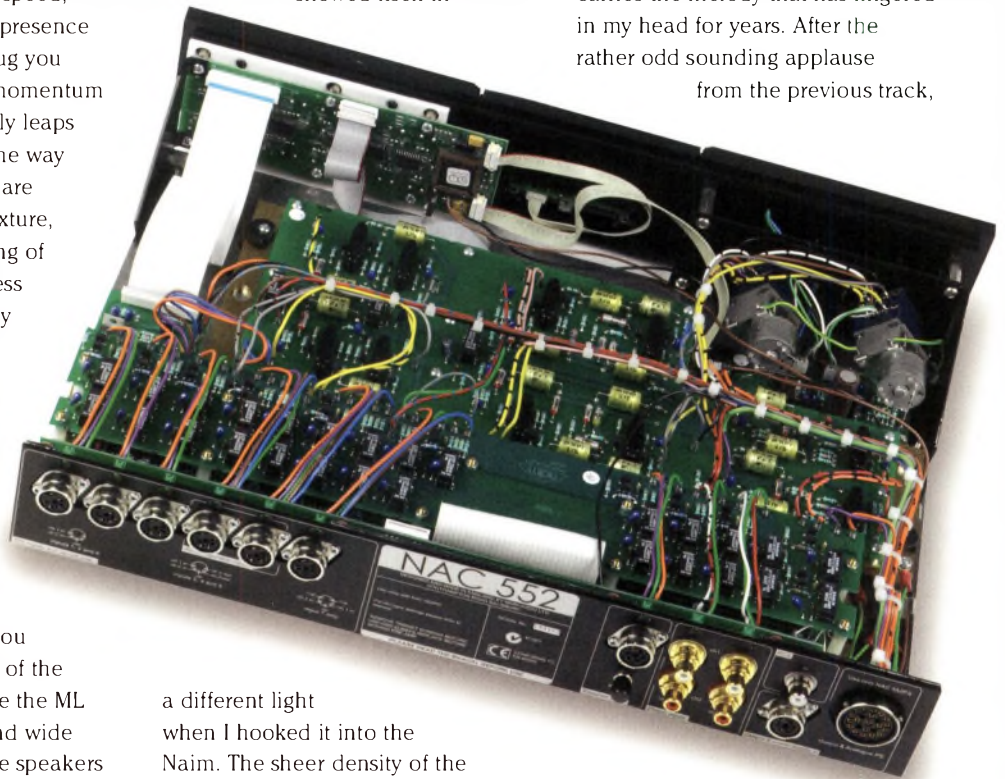
The latest interconnects that Naim supply are very well suited to their equipment but to connect the 552 to another manufacturers power amplifier meant that cable choice was always going to be critical, though that Din connector obviously limited my choice somewhat. My first thought was for the Nordost Valhalla but I just couldn't see myself, soldering iron in hand, trying to forge a union between them and a 4-pin din plug. Help came courtesy of the Chord Company who supplied two sets of mono interconnects with both phono and XLR terminations and Russ Andrews who chipped in with a Din to RCA lead of Kimber Silver Streak and I am indebted to both. Speakers would be my Revel Gems. These can be great, but are very fussy and show any imbalances in the system as ruthlessly as any speaker I have ever heard. Power amplifiers would be the Spectral DMA 100 and the superb little 30-watt Aloia ST 13.01 reviewed elsewhere in this issue.

Regardless of what system you are used to, the NAC 552 instantly has that mark of quality about it. ▶

► From the first few bars of music it is apparent that bandwidth, strength and resolution are here in abundance. It sounded rather small initially and needed a couple of days to really settle down during which time the sound seemed to have expanded width-wise every time I listened to it. All the classic sonic hallmarks of Naim electronics were there immediately though. The speed, rhythmic drive, midband presence and that rare ability to plug you straight into the music's momentum and energy. But what really leaps out as being different is the way that the high frequencies are handled. Now there is texture, tonal subtlety and a feeling of freedom and expansiveness that the NAC 52 only really hints at. Listen to a Mark Levinson system and the overall presentation will beguile you enough to want to look further into the music. The Naim is a direct communication device in comparison. It shows you the rhythmic architecture of the piece immediately. Where the ML system creates a broad and wide soundstage far beyond the speakers that instruments exist within, the Naim spreads very little behind but builds a musical perimeter and anything that is mixed forward of that line is pushed into the room with vivid and sometimes startling effect. This is the stereo soundstage – Naim style.

Experimentation with the Spectral power amplifier was interesting but I abandoned it quite early on. Spectral, like Naim, only really seems totally at home when being driven by its own kind and I think that they are both "about" different things. When you get to this quality level of equipment

everything has to be right and any disparity of tonality, speed or presentation between pre and power amplifier will be enough to destabilise the musical balance, so you end up with neither component being at their best. But the Aloia was, in many ways, a more successful partner. This 30 watt power supply by its own inductive power supply showed itself in



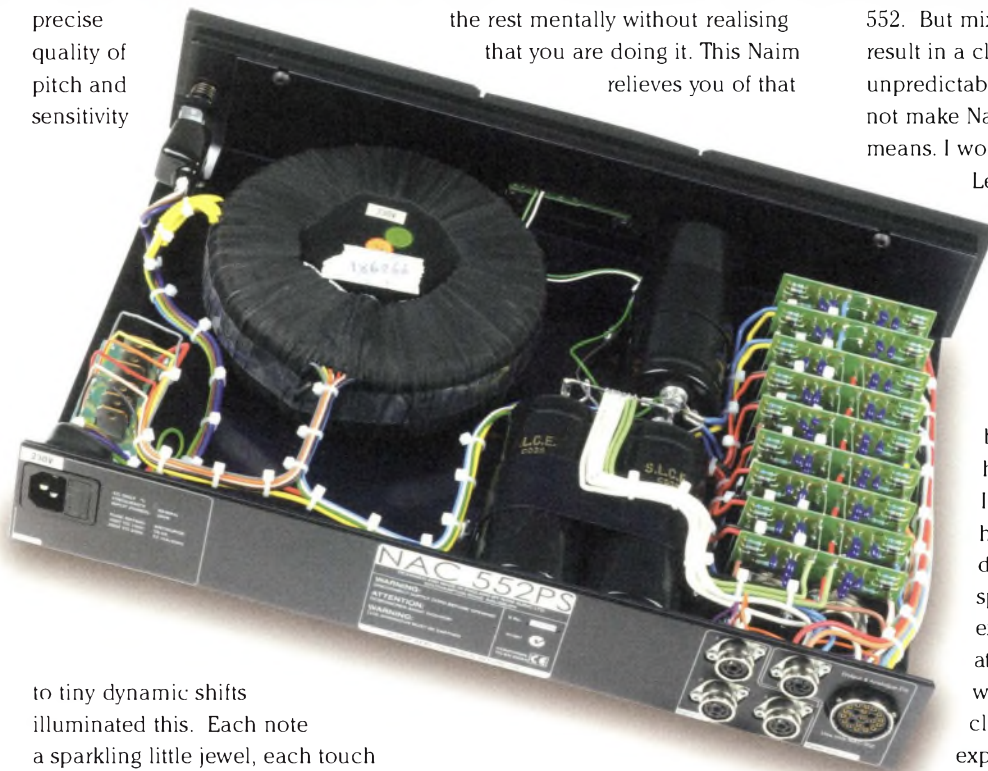
a different light when I hooked it into the Naim. The sheer density of the information the 552 is able to resolve gave the sound a somewhat darkly shaded hue with the Chord Company cables and the rather warm Aloia but the Kimber, with its brighter and leaner mid and top lightened the flavour somewhat, which I much preferred. This is no cable comparison but rather the use of the interconnect as a tone control, not something that Naim owners usually need to indulge in as the supplied cables are brilliantly suited to their electronics, but in this case entirely justifiable.

Sparks always fly when John McLaughlin gets together with

Indian musicians and on *The Believer* (Verve 549 207-2) his re-formed Shakti collaboration showed their sensational abilities during their European tour of 1999. It is a musical tour-de-force for all concerned and technically contains just about the most mind-blowing guitar playing I have ever heard. But it is the slow, ebbing beauty of 'Lotus Feet' which carries the melody that has lingered in my head for years. After the rather odd sounding applause from the previous track,

McLaughlin writes the prologue for what is to come with a series of beautifully mystical chiming chords. Then, as the clapping fades, you hear the sound of the auditorium and it is the quality of this type of silence that the 552 captured so beautifully. It just drips with the feeling of a large audience mingling with the sound of the amplification and the feeling of the musicians on the stage. You can call it atmosphere, but it is there, hanging in the air in front of you, making you a part of the occasion, and dragging you into the performance. Then as the

► tabla lightly dances in and out there comes a sequence of descending chords that lay the rhythmic and harmonic foundations for what is to come. And then there's that melody, which seems to grow from nothing and stretches over several bars. It seems simple enough, but no matter how many times you hear it there always remains something elusive about it that you just can't lock in your head. I loved the way that the 552's precise quality of pitch and sensitivity



to tiny dynamic shifts illuminated this. Each note a sparkling little jewel, each touch of the strings the perfect culmination of emotion and technique. It just carries you along on a gentle ride into tranquillity before the percussionist begin to make their presence felt. Just the sheer dynamic swings the 552 can deal with are impressive enough but it does it with no sign of strain or leading edge compression whatsoever. The tabla just appears before you with such impact that you believe it and you realise that this is a pre-amplifier that is well capable of gently stroking your cheek while

kneeing you in the groin at the same time.

One of the joys that a top pre-amplifier brings is the ability to retain tight control over its whole bandwidth and while Naim amplifiers have always been good in this respect, the 552 just takes things to a new level. Quite often you understand the bass line up to the point where it gets very low and then I believe that you pick up what clues there are and extrapolate the rest mentally without realising that you are doing it. This Naim relieves you of that

subconscious chore as it is simply excellent at starting and stopping, even at the low frequency extremes, where it also retains supreme pitch control. It certainly took the Aloia into areas I had never heard it go before.

But my brief was to check the viability of the NAC 552 in non-Naim systems and my feelings are mixed. Look; let's face it. How many of these pre-amplifiers are actually going to be used with other manufacturers power amplifiers? Not many, is the answer.

Not because it doesn't work, it does. But Naim have done their marketing too well over the years and the question should be, is it worth doing? As far as source components, I say yes. The Mark Levinson No.39 worked extremely well into the Naim, helped enormously by the very welcome phono sockets, but as for alternative power amplifiers, I don't think so. If you want the Naim sound, then you know where to look and I promise that you will be delighted with the 552. But mixing and matching can result in a clash of audio cultures with unpredictable results. But this does not make Naim a special case by any means. I would suggest that a Mark Levinson pre is best

partnered by a power amp from the same company, and to that list you can certainly add the names of Jeff Rowland and Spectral.

This is, I believe, the best product that Naim have ever made and I am looking forward to hearing it with a NAP 500 driving the new SL2 speakers. It has all the expected technical attributes but couples this with an ability to move you closer to the experience, expanding your understanding and appreciation

of whatever music you love. It opens your ear to the physical nature of instrumentation in a way that the venerable 52 could not. I personally have difficulty in judging value for money once the price gets above \$5K but more and more manufacturers are finding a market for pre-amplifiers in excess of \$10K and I've heard a few of them. The Naim is right up there but I guess that, in the end, it's just a matter of what flavour you prefer.

Happy hunting. ►

Flying High Above A Flat Earth

by Roy Gregory

Placing the NAC 552 in the wider high-end context is fraught with difficulties, starting with the question of a matching amplifier and finishing with the issue of cabling to hook everything together. Well, the obvious place to start is at the beginning, and that means with the NAP 500, thoughtfully supplied by Naim, along with all the necessary cabling. The Naim combination was the last piece of this particular jigsaw to arrive, which meant that I got to it after I was well accustomed to the Lamm and Gryphon units. Hooking up the Naims, I gave them a quick blast just to make sure they were producing noise out of both channels – and received a considerable shock. After the other pre and power combinations it was like listening through a letterbox. Things could only get better – and they did. Which brings us to the first (entirely unsurprising) conclusion: where the Naims are concerned you can't afford to rush to judgement. Returning to the sound after three

days it had improved out of all recognition, another three and it was better still.

The problem was that it was still well adrift of what I'd consider a high-end performance. It was also well adrift of the alternatives I'd been listening to. The sound was forward and dimensionally flat, with a distinct lack of transparency and focus. Leading edge definition was excellent, yet at the same time the music seemed smoothed and small. Further listening isolated the problem to a lack of deep bass extension and weight, combined with a lack of textural and harmonic insight that leant notes a strangely congealed quality. Playing the Heifetz Sibelius *Violin Concerto* reduced the maestro's renowned power and poise to a syrupy sub-Stern smoothness, devoid of bite or harmonic complexity.

Time to ring the changes or ring the factory and have them take it all away. Fortunately the latter course proved unnecessary. Investigation quickly revealed that the primary

culprit was the NAP 500 power amp. Changing to the similarly priced Hovland Sapphire or the much more expensive Lamm ML2s brought instant benefits. The soundstage expanded in all dimensions, with far greater transparency and focus (especially in the case of the ML2s). Bass notes were far more weighty and convincing, while there was far more colour, space and texture to the music. The results made the 552/500 combination sound distinctly forced, crude and broad brush in comparison. But before you write off the NAP500, bear in mind that both the Audioplan and Living Voice speakers used in the listening were a less than ideal match. In my experience, Naim amps like something to get their teeth into, which means a difficult load and inefficient to boot: Linn Saras anybody? They tend to sound lazy and congealed when you don't ask them to work hard enough (and yes, I'm sure that PM will have something to say about that



▶ observation). So, I reserve judgement on the NAP500. However, nothing I've heard so far suggests that it's even remotely in the same class as the NAC552.

Playing the 552 through the Lamms, using the Valhalla cables to hook up source components and speakers and relying on the same Kimber Silver Streak lead that CT used to connect to the power amps delivered excellent results. Bass was close to the Gryphon in terms of power, speed and pitch definition, although it couldn't match it for tonal quality and texture. Nonetheless, its confident and surefooted bass reproduction combined with the traditional Naim virtue of excellent top to bottom coherence allowed the system to track the music's ebb, flow and shape with ease.

Take *Tea For The Tillerman* as an example. The NAC552 might lack the tonal palette and extraordinary individual separation provided by the Lamm L2 Reference, the absolute transparency and low-level resolution of the Gryphon, but it counters with a strength and purpose of its own. Its ability to lay bare the structure and shape of phrases reveals the musical elements that flange and interlock to create the deceptively simple soundscapes of this album. Its leading edge precision and dynamic tracking make the power and attack used by the musicians to provide contrast in and emphasis to their playing especially dramatic. It's a musical integrity which too many of the highly touted opposition have lost sight of in their scramble to offer ever greater levels of musical dissection. As you might expect, the new Naim is never less than

entertaining and engaging. It is here however that its true character really emerges, an artefact of its heritage and forebears.

Listening to the 552 it's impossible to ignore the drive and momentum it brings to music. Just listen to the clarity and easy lollap with which it delivers James Leary's upright bass on 'Way Out Basie' (Count Basie *Farmers Market Barbeque*, Analogue



Productions APJ 023). It's a passage that many amplifiers leave rounded and indistinct and it's easy to blame the recording. But the 552 offers easy pitch definition, the nicely spaced steps of the walking bass line adding an effortless progression to proceedings, rooting the track even under the most enthusiastic of brass tuttis (and they get pretty enthusiastic believe me). So far so good. What is less impressive is the deft placement of the Count's brief piano interjections. Rather than the sly prods that prompt and direct the

overall flow of the track, the 552 regiments the stabbed chords, placing them within the rhythmic structure of the piece rather than around and about it. It's coherent, solid and directed, but it's losing something in the process. This presentation is all about progress: all about starting rather than stopping. Breaks in the musical flow seem hurried, as if the system can't wait to get on with it. It makes for a dramatic and engaging performance, and the NAC552 does provide a very real sense

of the performance, but I occasionally found myself wishing that it would allow the musicians (and their notes) a little more space to breathe. But then I guess it wouldn't be a Naim.

Ultimately, I decided that the Sapphire was a better match for the 552 than the ML2s, its more colourful and generous nature playing to the Naim's particular pattern of strengths and weaknesses rather better than the almost astringently clean clarity of the Lamms. Never less than thoroughly entertaining, used together the Hovland/Naim combination offered a fluid and richly mobile view of proceedings, full of life, colour and presence. At the same time the superb control at both frequency extremes allowed the system to scale dynamic heights with aplomb. Even the hammered bells on the Supercussion recording of *Spartacus* (Trenner and Friedl T&F CD1) passed without pain or distress, testament to the iron grip in the Naim's velvet glove. I guess you can't have your cake and eat it. Perhaps the price you pay for banishing any hint of intrusive



▶ strain is that last ounce of rhythmic sophistication, the ability to get really loose but remain in control.

The Naim NAC552 comes as something of a surprise, bringing its own sound successfully to the high-end market. It offers considerably more bandwidth, more colour (and less coloration) and much greater transparency than I expected. Whether or not it remains a Naim will depend on your point of view, but for me it has built triumphantly on the foundations established by the 5 Series. Whilst retaining the companies' traditional strengths it has added a much more balanced and natural tonal palette together with a serious measure of those hi-fi attributes that contribute so effectively to musical insight, understanding and enjoyment. It is by some margin, Naim's most capable and impressive product to date.

The thing that I find interesting is how closely my findings mirror those of CT. From the effects of warm up to our sonic observations, they track astonishingly well, despite the fact that we approach the 552 from almost diametrically opposed historical perspectives. That says something of fundamental importance about Naim's ability to straddle the middle ground with this product. How effectively does it challenge existing high-end designs? PM has described at length the operational sophistication of the unit and I have to agree.

Whilst its simple exterior might be no match for the architectural elegance of the Gryphon, it has nothing to fear from the Lamm. Simply placing the



new casework next to an older Naim unit shows just how far that casework has come, whilst still managing to retain an acceptable level of commonality with the older product base (vital if the company is going to continue to feed on the upgrade market).

The NAC552 might be a reluctant debutante, but as Naim's first serious assault on the high-end it carries its heritage with it, meets the opposition head on and can do so with its head held high. It hasn't scaled new peaks or established new levels of performance, but it

is clearly at home amongst the more rarified levels of competition. It's a unit that can be mixed and matched with success, but does that make this a course you should pursue?

I'm afraid, that just as with every other high-end pre-amp, you're going to have to suck it and see. The one thing I can guarantee is that you'll have fun trying. Now if they'd only include phono and XLR outputs they could really be onto something ...



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Product:	Naim NAC 552/552PS
Type:	2-box line level pre-amplifier
Inputs:	Choose any 6 from: 3x DIN in-only, 3x DIN in with record outputs 2x phono stereo in 1x DIN in with PS output (for phono stage)
Input sensitivity:	75mV for 1V max output
Input impedance:	100 kOhm
Input overload:	40dB, all inputs/frequencies
Main Outputs:	3x 4-pin DIN via vol control & PS
Output level/imp:	0.775V, <50 Ohms
Tape outputs:	3x DIN, 75mV 600 Ohms
Size (WxHxD):	432x87x314mm each
Weight	14kg each
UK Price	£11,750

Manufacturer:

Naim Audio Ltd
Tel (44) (0)1722 332266
www.naim-audio.com

LAMM
audio laboratory®

OUTPUT LEVEL

LEFT
RIGHT

reference

LINE 1
LINE 2
TPE
REF

PHONO

LINE 1

TAPE

LINE

MUTE

LINE 2

SOURCE

DIRECT

OPERATE

LAMM
audio laboratory®
model L2 PS
reference

PREAMPLIFIER POWER SUPPLY

POWER

ON

OUTLETS

OFF

The Lamm L2 Reference Line-Stage

by Roy Gregory

When it comes to high-end electronics, and pre-amps in particular, their emergence into the UK market will always be indivisible from the products of the Audio Research Corporation. In fact, for a long time it seemed that every serious pre-amp came from America, with silver rack mounted front panels and grab handles *de rigueur*. Of course it wasn't really like that, but it's a legacy that lives on to the extent that if you crossed an ARC SP10 with a CAT SL1 and anodised the offspring black it would be indistinguishable from Lamm's latest line-level only offering, the L2 Reference. The slab fronted casework and handles, those irritatingly long and vulnerable chrome switches, even the CAT clone rotary volume controls are pure tradition. But appearances can be deceptive and this is, after all, a Lamm product, which virtually guarantees that its plain and functional exterior will shield some considerable surprises.

By now you'll be thinking along the lines of this being the traditional two-box valve alternative to the solid-state options offered by Naim and Gryphon. Tube and transistor, UK, US and European: that just about covers all the bases in a nice neat package. Well, yes it would if that's what we were planning. But like I said, appearances can be deceptive, and my intentions aren't quite that obvious. You see, the Lamm isn't a valve unit at all, at least when it comes to passing the audio signal. This is a solid-state design based around selected Mos-fet devices, fed by a choke filtered, valve regulated, valve

rectified, external power supply. It's an unusual approach to say the least, and one for which the term 'hybrid' is inappropriate, even misleading. The stated aim is to provide a combination of the overall tonal and harmonic accuracy long pursued by solid-state designs, with the capability of matching the kind of massive output voltage swings that have characterised the presence and sheer musical energy of the best valve units. So, no more pale but interesting, no more voluptuous but gushing, and like all the best pitches, it promises the best of both worlds. Whether it succeeds or not we'll get to in a moment, but first we'd better look at the facilities on offer, because there too, appearances are deceptive.

The L2 Reference arrives in a pair of large wooden grates. When you've undone the last of the many, many screws you'll release the two four-square black chassis. As you tilt them up for a first look the thing that hits you is the sheer number of controls and switches. Spread across the two large fascias are a pair of left and right channel volume controls and a full dozen of those oh so familiar chrome finger switches. But look round the back and there's but a single row of input and output sockets - something doesn't compute. Fortunately it's nothing sinister. Starting with the power supply, its four toggle switches control the operation of a pair of remote 13Amp outlets. It's a bit of an anachronism in this day and age, more at home on the kind of products that the L2's aesthetics echo than on a modern, state of the art

unit. But it certainly does no harm.

Moving onto the control unit proper, the crisply detented left/right volume controls are flanked by a further four toggle switches a side, which makes quite a visual impact. The large number of switches is necessitated by the unit's totally dual-mono status. Three of each set allow the user to select between Direct and Line, Line 1 and Line 2 and Tape and Source. The extra switches are a Mute/Operate on the left and a 0/180 Phase switch on the right. Which all told has to be just about the most intricate method available for controlling three line inputs and a tape loop! So, despite appearances to the contrary, the L2 Reference is about as straight line as it gets, the multiple switches meaning that your primary source will only have to pass through a single set of contacts and a stepped attenuator. True to its hair-shirt approach, there's no remote control.

The back panel offers phonos for the various connections and a choice of single-ended or balanced XLR outputs. The connection to the outboard power supply is via a flexible umbilical terminated with multi-pin XLRs.

Which gives you the bare facts of the situation, but is far from the whole story. Just like the ML2s that it is designed to partner, the L2 Reference is remorselessly, almost flagrantly understated. Its appearance is an extension of its musical function and nothing more. There are no styling features or fancy finish, no ostentatious casework or real wood trim to distract attention from the Lamm's functional purity. ►

▶ This is a product that you buy for one reason and one reason only: its performance. Having said that, once you've figured out that you're dealing with two of everything, actual operation is a snap, those long, long switches acting as immediate status indicators and the 41 discrete steps on each volume control making the setting of precise level and balance simplicity itself (even for those allergic to dual volume controls).



Internally, the construction is exemplary, with beautifully laid out boards populated with carefully selected premium parts. The lack of valves in the control unit still surprises me every time I look inside, but as far as the L2 Reference is concerned that type of visual discontinuity is actually the norm.

I listened to the Lamm with both Hovland's Sapphire hybrid amplifier and its own matching ML2 mono-blocks. Sources were the Kuzma Stabi Reference turntable paired with either the VPI JMW 12.5 tonearm or (to spectacular effect) the latest version of the Tri-planar, reviewed elsewhere in this issue: Cartridges were the Clearaudio Accurate, Koetsu Red K Signature and Lyra Helikon. Phono amplification was provided by the Groove, cabling by Nordost or Hovland and speakers by Living Voice and Audioplan.

The Levinson No 390S CD player offered the necessary balanced and single-ended outputs to ring the changes. As well as all the listening to the various line stages, it's a set up that has served for a host of other projects too, never failing to deliver exceptionally enjoyable and informative sound that goes quite beyond the ordinary. That is in itself a compliment to the quality of these pre-amps, arguably the hardest bit of electronics to get right.

And make no mistake; designer Vladimir Lamm has definitely got the sound of

the L2 Reference right. Which isn't the same as saying that it's devoid of its own particular character. It's just that that character is intensely musical in nature. Fortunately, the presence of the outstandingly natural ML2 mono-blocks makes it reasonably easy to put your finger on exactly what's going on.

The L2 Reference offers the listener a sound that's full of movement and energy, propelling the musical performance along. There's none of the pinched dryness that afflicts so many of the high-definition designs that have come to typify 'High-End' sound. Indeed, it's almost as if the Lamm consciously eschews the absolute transparency, focus and resolution of the competition,

preferring to ensure that the music is allowed to breath, swell, ebb and flow more naturally. How can I be so certain? Because the ML2 offers the best of both worlds, so Lamm clearly know all about transparency: they're just not prepared to sacrifice musicality in order to achieve it.


Listening to a familiar track like 'At Seventeen' (Janis Ian *Between The Lines* Grapevine GRALP 303) it's easy to get lost in the rolling rhythmic progression of the song and the bitter sweet lyrics, the Lamm doing an especially fine job of conveying the subtle vocal inflexions and emphases that make this such a beautiful performance. So much so that I found myself forgetting to listen to the influence that the L2 Reference was having on proceedings. But dragging myself back to the job in hand all became (fascinatingly) clear. Whilst the appealing musical momentum was both obvious and effective, it also conceals some subtle shaping of the sound, most obviously at low frequencies. The Lamm is lighter in the deepest bass than a lot of the competition and slightly lighter than reality. It's a careful tailoring that removes minimal weight or impact (compensated for by the greater sense of mid-bass speed and attack) but adds significant pace and clarity to the sound as a whole: a clarity that comes from the lack of drag or clogging rather than superior resolution. It creates an aural conundrum by at once sounding less cluttered but also less obviously detailed than the other units under test.

Which brings us to separation and the really interesting part. Normally, superior separation comes with greater resolution and transparency. Yet the Gryphon (which is superior to the Lamm in both respects) offers inferior instrumental separation. On 'At Seventeen' Ian employs a beautifully understated brass break, played on the unusual combination of a trombone and flugelhorn. Not only does the Lamm identify the specific instruments far more readily, it also gets their

► interaction and interplay just right. The Gryphon sounds more like a trumpet and a euphonium, and although the instruments are more clearly positioned in space, their actual relationship is far harder to decipher.

It all comes down to tonality, harmonics and energy spectrums. Although the Lamm doesn't possess the Gryphon's transparency and inky black background, it has an almost uncanny grasp of the sound

to grasp the energy spectrum of individual instruments makes for superb overall dynamic coherence, even if dynamic tracking and leading edge definition aren't as obvious as they are with other line-stages. And that's the whole point. What the Lamm isn't is obvious. It's subtly correct, almost insidiously seductive, without ever drawing attention to itself or its

You might well read this as a critical review. Let me assure you that it isn't. I'm full of admiration for both the L2 Reference's musical achievements, and the method by which they achieve them. The real issue in assessing a product like this is whether I'd choose to live with it, and the answer to that is definitely affirmative – assuming that I ever noticed its presence enough to make a conscious decision! Music at home is seldom this good. 



an instrument makes and the way that its notes expand into the soundstage. It achieves tonal separation where the Gryphon attempts the same goal spatially. It's an interesting revelation and one with profound implications for the way in which we understand reproduced recorded music. It's especially interesting in the context of the Naim, a company that has always ignored spatial considerations, but prioritised the rhythmic and organisational at the expense of the tonal. All of which means that what we have here are three very different approaches indeed.

The Lamm's portrayal of the performance makes for riveting listening; it's so easy to understand the inter-relationships within the music. Its ability

performance. It never steps up and introduces itself. It just quietly charms you.

Overall dynamic range is merely good rather than outstanding; its soundstage is adequate rather than expansive. It's a competent performer when it comes to the hi-fi attributes. But where it really shines is in its overall musical coherence: the wholeness of the picture it paints. And bear in mind the extremely revealing nature of the system being used. It's not every day that you hold a magnifying glass as explicit as this to the performance of equipment. Lesser systems that don't open the window quite so wide (which means pretty much all those not using the Nordost Valhallas and ML2s) are going to have a lot more trouble making out the shortcomings.

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Solid-state line-stage with sophisticated valve power supply
Tube Complement:	1x ECC83 voltage regulator 1x 6C19P voltage regulator 1x 5651A voltage reference
Inputs:	2x 12AX3 rectifiers Three single-ended line + tape
Input Impedance:	41 KOhms
Input Sensitivity:	0.135V
Outputs:	Single-ended main (phonos) Balanced main (XLRs) Tape (phonos)
Output Impedance:	130 Ohms
Gain:	15dB
Dimensions (WxHxD):	482x115x387mm each
Weight:	
Control Unit:	7kg
PSU:	8.6kg
Finish:	Black
Price:	£12500

UK Distributor:

Integrated Engineering Solutions
Tel. (44)(0)2380-905020
Net. www.highendaudio.co.uk

Manufacturer:

Lamm Industries
Net. www.lammindustries.com



VOLUME

INPUT

MONITOR

MENU

THE GRYPHON SONATA-ALLEGRO

Gryphon Sonata Allegro Line Stage

by Roy Gregory

Gryphon is a small Danish company that has come a long way. It started life manufacturing a tiny, dual-mono head amplifier, but now makes a complete line of electronics that compete with the likes of Madrigal's Mark Levinson amplification in terms of fit, finish and overall sophistication. The launch of a fascinating and impressive new speaker at this year's Frankfurt show now means that you can own a complete Gryphon system, with three different levels of electronics to choose from. The Sonata Allegro reviewed here is the companies' top line stage, and offers exactly the kind of facilities and impressive presentation that that status demands. But it's much, much more than just an outstandingly pretty face. Even a cursory examination shows that the beautifully finished fascias that decorate the two boxes are simply a natural extension of the almost obsessive care and attention to detail that has gone into every aspect of the chassis and circuitry.

The most obvious symptom of this is the totally dual mono construction of both units, with only the front panel common to the left and right channels. It's an approach that has typified Gryphon products right from that first head amplifier, but here it even extends to the mains plugs: You'll need two IEC leads just to plug the Sonata in. Mind you, that obsession with power supply quality and quantity is reflected once you get inside the unit as well, with custom built C-core transformers supplying 33000 microFarads of reservoir

capacitance for each channel. That's enough for a fair sized power amp. Add to that the internal power line conditioning and 11 separate stages of regulation (as well as the totally independent power supply for non-audio functions) and you can understand why designer Flemming Rasmussen describes the unit as a virtual battery "just without the disadvantages".

Once inside the control unit proper you find an ultra-wide bandwidth, fully symmetrical circuit. This offers three balanced inputs and one single-ended, plus a single-ended tape loop.

There are two balanced outputs per side, which means that only power amps with balanced inputs need apply. DC power enters via a pair of multi-core umbilicals from the power supplies, which each also offers a second, different connection to drive the stand-alone Legato phono stage. There's also an internal phono board available for those who want a slightly simpler solution to the issue of record replay. All inputs are micro-processor controlled via high quality relays that automatically isolate any source not in use, while the volume is set by a passive resistor network. Entering the processor menu via the front-panel button allows you to set channel balance for the system, maximum level, start-up level, individual

sensitivity for each input and whether or not you want the display readouts to switch off when not in use. There's also a trigger for the Green Bias function that allows you to control the idle bias current used by the massive Antileon power amp. As one of the few genuinely high powered class A amplifiers out there, this is a facility that can make a big difference to the owner's electricity bill, as well as their eco-conscience.

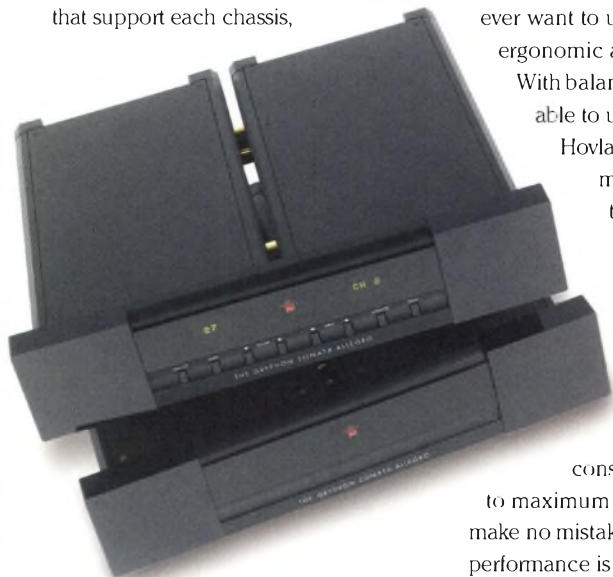
Overall, it's a level of control that's second only to the Levinson No32, which is impressive considering the relative size and resources of the two companies.

What's second to none however, is the aluminium and Fersplex casework. The back-lit display with its solid acrylic shoulders and extruded aluminium

frame offers a sumptuous contrast to the solid aluminium housings that protect the circuitry and power supplies. The twin structures, held together with heavy gold plated spacers and the substantial looking fascia creates an impression of dark, weighty solidity. But pick up the units and you'll discover that although they are incredibly rigid and solid in feel they are far from the weight you'd expect. Conditioned by years of over built casework (designed to give the impression of quality through sheer weight?) the structural elegance of the Sonata comes as a bit of a shock, ▶



▷ but don't let that put you off. Its lighter structure is carefully designed to dissipate energy rather than storing it, and is combined with extensive mechanical de-coupling to help protect the circuitry from external mechanical interference. The most obvious example of this is the striking feet and cones that support each chassis,



providing a single mechanical earth route for individual circuit blocks. The end result is as broodingly impressive as any piece of equipment I've ever used, and what's reassuring is that the care and thought that's gone into that casework is reflected in the selection of its contents. The circuit boards and interfaces are characterised by premium grade parts and connectors, and overall construction is absolutely superb.

Which brings me to the remote control. Now, I don't usually bother with remotes, and I certainly don't get too excited about them, but the Gryphon unit is an exception to that rule. Small and solid without being ridiculously heavy, it's a simple unit with just six large round buttons that control mute, on/stand by, volume and input. They have a really nice positive action and are well spaced. But what makes it really special is a simple thing indeed. The chamfered bottom corner allows it to fit snugly into the heel of your hand.

Add the subtle logo, clear labelling and wide acceptance angle/power and you've got a serious contender for best remote out there. It stands alongside the fabulous little unit that comes with Levinson's 383, and once again, if you can't programme the control unit from it, so what? It's got everything you'll actually ever want to use and is a model of ergonomic and stylistic elegance.

With balanced outputs only I wasn't able to use the Sonata with the Hovland power amp, which meant slumming it with the ML2s. Quelle dommage!

In fact, the Lamms' astonishing bass definition and texture proved an ideal match for the Gryphon, displaying the line-stage's considerable strengths to maximum advantage. Because, make no mistake about it, the Sonata's performance is built on a substantial low frequency foundation that brings astonishing stability and presence to music.



And with that stability comes an almost luxurious sense of grace and power. • It's big, solid and smooth.

The XRCD re-issue of Reiner's *Pictures* provides a perfect window onto the Gryphon's performance. You are immediately greeted by a really well developed and defined acoustic, one that drips with the tension preceding

the opening notes. And as those first familiar bars unroll before you they are peopled with solid instruments putting flesh on the musical bones as the piece makes a powerful, almost stately progress. Transparency is excellent, with instruments precisely located in space, and low frequency definition and tonal differentiation is amongst the best I've heard, easily picking the tonal and textural distinctions between double basses, organ and bass drum: even in the crescendos, which for once are carefully underpinned by a number of different elements rather than a single amorphous bass 'mass'. For once you get a real sense of the weight and sheer power available to the orchestral composer and conductor. And believe me when I say that Reiner makes full use of it.

Where the Sonata differs from a line-stage like the Lamm is in attempting to work across the whole musical bandwidth. The low-frequency tailoring of the Lamm is unacceptable in this context. The gains are in that rooted, convincing presentation and weight (and I've not heard anybody do deep bass as convincingly as this): the losses are in the life and colour with which the Lamm floods the midrange. The Gryphon simply doesn't possess the micro-dynamic

discrimination and tonal palette that comes with ultra high-resolution (in the style of the Vibe) or a distributed energy budget. Why that is I can't say, but for the moment the two aspects of musical reproduction seem mutually exclusive. So you pay your (considerable sum of) money and takes your choice. Except that things aren't quite that simple, because there's more than one road to musical satisfaction, and much as I love the

► vivid immediacy of the Lamm's mid-band, there's a very real appeal to the Gryphon's presentation too.

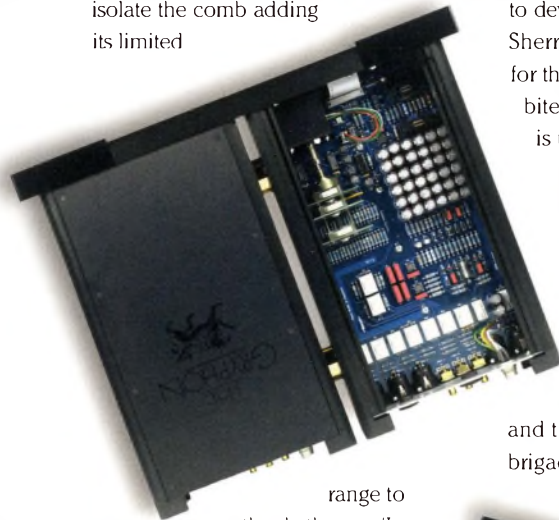
Let's look at what it does with less than audiophile recordings, and Stewboss certainly fit that category. There's enough resolution to isolate the comb adding its limited

in the image makes for astonishingly relaxing listening. You simply sit back and enjoy, the overall clarity and coherence allowing you to effortlessly unravel lyrics, and the singer to communicate that much more directly. It's a capability that can be deployed to devastating effect on material like Sherry Cothran's sardonic delivery for the Evinrudes. The songs gain real bite as their underlying intelligence is unleashed.

So where does that leave us with the Gryphon? Devoid of the earthbound, ultra-definition sound that bedevils so much of the really heavy-weight solid-state competition, it also lacks the sparky immediacy of the light-weights and the vivid colours of the valve brigade. Instead, it parades its virtues less obviously. Well, okay, so the bass is

controlled power built on that solid foundation. In fact, it's closest to (but definitely distinct from) the musical presentation of the Levinson equipment that it outwardly resembles. The strengths and balances are subtly different, but the insistence on long-term musical satisfaction and the reliance on musical correctness to overcome the superficial attraction of the more obvious alternatives are a strong common bond. This product is about long-term satisfaction rather than short-term gratification.

Listening to the easy weight and agility of Patrik Boman's upright bass as he underpins Lisa Ekdahl's wondrously fragile vocal, it's an approach that I could certainly buy into, different to the other units here, but possibly the most ultimately satisfactory of all.



range to the rhythm on 'I Hope You Miss Me', and whilst that rhythm might lack the obvious, toe-tapping quality so admired in bandwidth limited systems, the music retains its engaging quality. Play 'Meet Me In Your Dreams' (the Gryphon is the only line-stage here that matches the weight, power and impact of this track played live) and you begin to work out what's going on. It might not make your feet tap: it simply shakes your whole body, because the parcels of musical energy are properly arranged and arrive on time. The structure as a whole is all present and correct, allowing the music to breathe, rather than relying on a chopped and artificially quick bass to drive the music and hold your attention. You could say that the Gryphon lets the music drive itself.

The effect on voices is wonderful, whether we're talking Greg Safarty or Lisa Ekdahl. The presence and separation makes them convincing and engaging, while the absence of wander

pretty splendiferous, but the rest of the range plays its hand far more discretely. It might not match the Lamm for tonal colour, or the Vibe for resolution, but it's got enough of either quality to satisfy, and more importantly, convince. This isn't the pale grey, washed out imitation of reality that passes for neutrality. It isn't the overblown and exaggerated rainbow of colour that washes away resolution. Instead, it's a middle path, tempered and underpinned by the



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Two-box solid-state line-stage
Inputs:	3x balanced XLR 2x single-ended phono
Input Impedance:	25K Ω single ended and 50K Ω balanced
Input Sensitivity:	+ 18dB gain
Outputs:	2x balanced XLR 1x single-ended tape
Output Level:	max 23Vrms
Output Impedance:	5 Ω
Dimensions (WxHxD):	2 times 48x13x38 cm
Weight:	8.5 kg, 11kg (Pre Amp, Power Supply)
Price:	£7900

UK Distribution:
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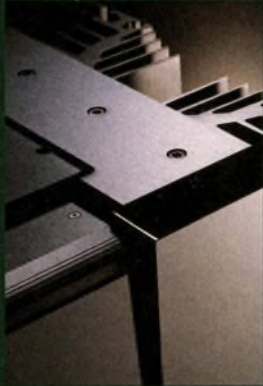
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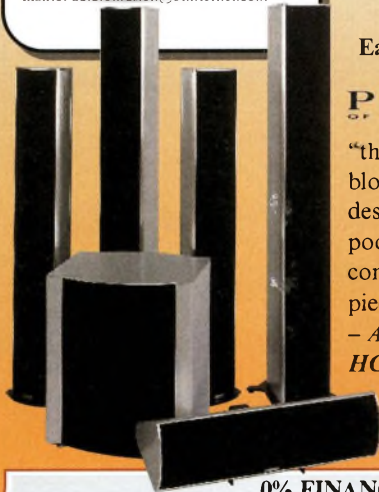
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Nº 390S
CD PROCESSOR

Mark Levinson No.390S CD Processor

by Roy Gregory

Bowled over by, nay, scattered to the winds by Madrigal's Mark Levinson Reference system back in Issue 11, I've been diligently plying the lower slopes of their product lines in order to discover just how much of the bigger system's musical communication and absolute authority the more affordable units retain. I started with the No.383 integrated amp and followed that with the Revel Performa M20 stand mounted speakers. Here then comes the last piece in the jigsaw, the No. 390S CD Processor as Madrigal refer to it (or 'player' to the rest of us). Together, these parts make up Levinson/Revel's entry level system, and whilst £XXXX might not seem like a very entry level price for a CD player, what you're entering is the high-end, and maybe, just maybe that's what it costs to get high-end performance off of the silver disc.

There's something else that each and every one of these products represents, whether at the entry level or the opposite extreme, and that's excellent material value for money. Each one is literally packed with engineering, be it the in-house drivers in the Revel speakers or the regenerative power supply built into the 33H power amps. Yup, that's a regenerative supply capable of meeting the needs of a mono-block amplifier with a 1.2kW constant output capability into a one Ohm load! These guys are not messing around and it shows. The 390S is no exception.

A development of the original 390

(reviewed by CT back in Issue 1) the 390S bears the same relation to that model that the 380S pre-amplifier does to its predecessor, and older players are upgradeable to the new standard. The heart of the new player is its clocking arrangement. Rather than placing the master oscillator in the electrically noisy environment close to the motor and suffering the resultant

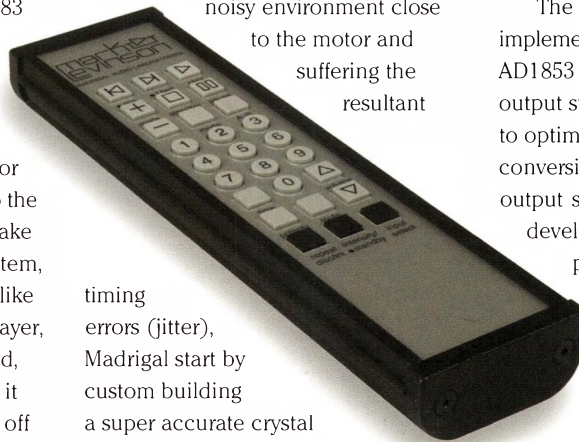
timing errors (jitter), Madrigal start by custom building a super accurate crystal oscillator that they place immediately before the DAC, thus re-clocking the data stream immediately before its conversion to analogue. Then they slave the other electrical and mechanical sub-elements to that clock in a closed-loop arrangement, including the transport and its speed control servos. The result of this careful lay-out is that the DAC receives a jitter free signal which it then feeds directly to the analogue outputs.

The filter technology in the 390S employs a word depth of 24 bits and over-samples to 352.8 or 384kHz depending on the input signal (44.1 or 48kHz). In fact, madrigal got so fed-up with people insisting on adding

up-samplers to their systems (that actually reduced the sample rate!) that the player actually tells you each time you load a disc exactly what the sample and bit rate will be. There is also an HDCD filter in order to take full advantage of the benefits of that encoding system.

The DAC is a balanced implementation of the Analog Devices AD1853 offering a differential current output stage, allowing the designers to optimise the critical current/voltage conversion stage. That feeds a buffered output stage based on the one developed for the No.32 Reference pre-amp, making the player's output extremely robust in the face of awkward cable or power-amplifier input impedances.

Power-amps? Ahh yes, there's more to the 390S than initially meets the eye. This is where it lives up to its processor name. Buried inside, you have the option to employ the same analogue volume control as used in Levinson's pre-amplifiers. That's right, the one that offers discrete 0.1dB steps. To go along with that you also get a pair of digital inputs, one TosLink optical the other S/PDIF co-axial (phono), so that you can employ your heavy investment in digital filtering and conversion on additional digital sources. Which means that you can hook up a DAB tuner or a digital recorder (there's also a pair of digital outputs). The entire circuit, digital and analogue, ►



► employs balanced topology, and both single-ended and balanced digital and analogue outputs are provided. The end result is perhaps best thought of as a digital processor/pre-amp that just happens to have a CD transport attached to it, a concept I first encountered (albeit with some fascinating differences) in the shape of the Wadia 861, but more of that later.

The other really impressive aspect of the Levinson Reference system was its sheer user friendliness. It's a quality the 390S embodies in full. Despite its compact overall dimensions (around half the size of the Wadia) and bomb-proof yet immaculate construction, the player also offers the full gamut of convenience features, down to Levinson communication links and an i/r trigger. There's even a superior variation on the old 'Favourite Track Selection' facility, which was always one of CD's better ideas. It's just that now the player recognises the discs for itself. All in all it's exactly the sort of impressive package that I've come to expect from Madrigal, and the sound is up to scratch too.

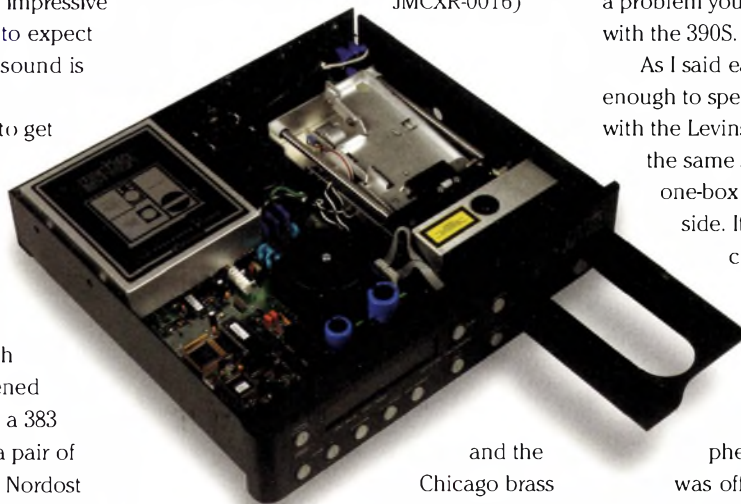
I was lucky enough to get to play with the 390S in the context of the serious line-stages reviewed in this issue, as well as the all Madrigal starter system. But I also spent time with it in the US, where I listened to a system built around a 383 integrated amp feeding a pair of Audioplan speakers, via Nordost Valhalla cables. The usual source for this set-up? None other than the Wadia 861. A very interesting comparison indeed, as you might well imagine.

If you want three words to describe the sound of the 390S you could do

worse than solid, rhythmic and dimensional. They're qualities that hit you as soon as you play the first disc. But what is really impressive is the overall coherence that binds them together into a single musical whole, a quality that does descend directly from the Reference system and one that



allows, no let's make that encourages, long term listening. The sound of the Levinson is substantial, warm and inviting. It's also full of rich, vibrant colours. Play the superb new XRCD transfer of the Moussorgsky *Pictures At An Exhibition* (Fritz Reiner and the CSO JMCXR-0016)



and the Chicago brass is burnished bright and rosy, the bass instruments underpinning it full and weighty, but boy do they arrive with a bang when it's called for. Tonally, the instruments of the orchestra are

beautifully separated, each character distinct and easily identified. In typical Mohr/Layton style, this is a recording with a really well developed soundstage that the Levinson makes the most of, particularly in the depth dimension, with a clearly defined rear wall behind the orchestra, set well back behind the speakers. Instrumental choirs are well layered, and overall

the soundstage remains extremely stable even through the loudest crescendos, a seriously underrated attribute when it comes to relaxing in front of and becoming completely immersed in the music your system's playing. It's not until you've lived with such an utterly stable presentation that you start to realise just how distracting

and intrusive small movements with frequency or wanderings in the soundstage really are. They act as a constant, almost subliminal reminder that what you're hearing is synthetic. That lack of relaxation is a major contributor to listening fatigue – not a problem you'll be suffering from with the 390S.

As I said earlier, I was lucky enough to spend a couple of weeks with the Levinson and a Wadia 861 in the same system, two of the top one-box contenders side by side. It made for a fascinating comparison, with the two machines adopting opposite tacks in almost every performance category. The Levinson's phenomenal stage depth was offset by the Wadia's greater width, its richer colouring and roundness by the Wadia's greater transparency, focus and texture. Take the bass as a case in point, and 'The Great Gates Of Kiev' as an example. The 390S delivers

▶ a bombastic, explosively energetic performance full of dramatic impact. The 861 goes deeper, with greater insight and texture, but without the sheer weight. You pay your money and take your choice, but it's a choice that's further complicated by the connection options. Hook up the Levinson with balanced cables and it gains a measure of control and definition at the expense of a little of that presence and energy. Likewise, run the Wadia single-ended and it gains a bit of body and jump, moving the two players closer together in style. But even then you'll not confuse them. The point is that you shouldn't simply assume that the balanced options are to be preferred. Options are just that, and should be investigated with an eye to your system's overall balance and virtues. Likewise, if digital components constitute your major sources, you should definitely investigate the direct connection of the CD player to the power amp. Despite the opposite nature of the approach (analogue volume control as opposed to digital in the Wadia) this is another machine that gains significant authority and transparency when direct connected.

Despite the difference in the two presentations, each of these players is capable of a supremely musical performance, delivering sound from silver disc that makes me (uniquely) unconcerned whether the music to be played is available on vinyl or not. For me, the absolute authority of the Wadia is telling, but it's hard not to be beguiled by the romantic sweep of the 390S. In fact, you could almost characterise the Levinson's delivery as valve like, which is especially ironic (or impressive, depending on your point of view) given that it comes from a company that in its original

incarnation established the high-end credentials of solid-state! Along with the rich tonal colours and sheer presence, you also get the impressive rhythmic momentum that characterises big valve amps working well. It's a powerful, even compelling view of events and one that



dovetails perfectly with the finesse of the 383 integrated amp and surprising low frequency weight and impact of the Performa M20, and whether these products have been specifically engineered to complement each other or not, they definitely combine to deliver more than the sum of the parts. Personally, I doubt whether any tailoring has taken place, as this would fly in the face of the Madrigal development philosophy. Rather, I think it's yet another example of just how successfully that philosophical coherence is embodied in the products.

Playing 'Forgiven' from the Echo album *Evergreen*, the Madrigal components perform in concert, providing a satisfying combination of focus and detail along with the sort of grounded weight that delivers convincing power from this anthemic closing track. Given the modest dimensions of the speakers it's an impressive presentation that works on a hi-fi level, but more importantly, on the musical level too. Switch to something smaller scale and more intimate and the results are just as

good, testimony to the innate balance possessed by this system.

If the world of musically capable CD players starts with the Regas and steps up a level with the likes of the Resolution Audio and Wadia 301, the Levinson 390S is firmly entrenched alongside the likes of Wadia's 861 yet another level up from there. Here you'll find players that can live alongside top-class analogue set-ups without resorting to trying to sound like them, and without being so obscenely costly as to put them totally beyond reach. Which means that next time I get asked for a desert island system I've now got two machines to choose from. ▶

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Single box CD processor
DACs:	Dual differential 24-bit
Conversion Rate:	24bit, <384kHz
Inputs:	1x TosLink Optical 1x S/PDIF (phono)
Outputs:	1x AES/EBU XLR digital 1x S/PDIF (phono) digital 1x Balanced XLR analogue 1x Single-ended (phono) analogue
Output Impedance:	10 Ohms
Output Level:	<4.45V balanced <2.225V single-ended
Dimensions (WxDxH):	400 x 97.5 x 363mm
Weight:	23kg
Finish:	Black
Price:	£6495

UK Distributor:

Path Premier
Tel. 01844 219000

Manufacturer:

Madrigal Audio Laboratories
Net. www.madrigal.com

For stockist see page 112



audio research

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PREV PLAY NEXT PAUSE STOP EJECT

AC3000 CD37

HIGH DEFINITION CD PLAYER

Audio Research CD3 CD Player

by Roy Gregory

Audio Research Corporation built their reputation on their range of valve pre- and power amplifiers, units that flew in the face of then current thinking. Seminal designs like the SP3, SP8 and SP11 pre-amps and D79, D125 and D250 power amps have achieved a near legendary status and still stand comparison with some of today's leading units. Their silver fascias and rack mounting handles have become as recognisable to audio enthusiasts as the Coca-Cola logo is to the rest of the world. They are big, solid units full of high voltages and glowing bottles, neither of which you find inside the average digital product. Which is another way of saying that the Audio Research name on the front of this CD player, isn't in itself, enough to make me take it seriously. Nor is the \$5000 price tag. Price has never been a guarantee of quality, and it's a maxim that applies with a vengeance to hi-fi.

So what convinced me that the CD3 was worth a review slot in what are becoming increasingly overpopulated pages? So many products competing for so little space. It's the main reason that we publish predominantly positive reviews. We don't have the time or patience to waste on sub-standard units. Yet here it is, and read on and you'll discover that it qualifies on merit. So what gave the game away?

Well, with hi-fi there are certain things that even if they don't guarantee

success at least suggest that it's a better than average possibility. When it comes to CD players a top-loading transport is always a good starting point. When you read the blurb and it tells you that the box contains separate power supplies for digital and analogue, even down to separate transformers, that's a plus point too. Throw in critical mechanical damping of the chassis and internal structure, along with properly tuned isolation feet and I really start to get interested.



But the clincher had nothing to do with the player itself. Both at CES and again in New York, Dave Wilson, manufacturer of the notoriously critical Wilson Audio speakers, and no mean audio critic himself (he used to review for The Absolute Sound) was running his normal collection of heavy weight and high priced amplification. But as a source he was using this relatively modest (everything's relative) one-box player from ARC. It probably cost less than the interconnects it was hooked up with! Now that gets my attention.

Of course, whilst their reputation

really rests on the shoulders of their valve electronics, Audio Research have a long history in both hybrid and solid-state design, both fields that will stand them in good stead when it comes to digital peripherals. Power supplies, control logic and output stages are all critical to CD performance. Incorporate a healthy dose of innovative digital design expertise and it's a marriage of new thinking and established principle that might just give birth to spectacular offspring.

Much of the digital design budget in the case of the CD3 has been expended on that hoary old chestnut jitter reduction. And whilst just about every player on the market makes some sort of claims in this direction, ARC go so far as to identify the specific target of their concern: in this case the analogue servos controlling the transport and laser functions. By replacing these with sophisticated digital devices they claim dramatic improvements in stability and reductions in overshoot. Given how hard these servos have to work it's a claim that I find easy to believe, especially when I listen to the end results embodied in this machine.

Maintaining the companies' tradition of standing opposed to the forces of fashion, Audio Research have also eschewed the multi-bit, software driven DAC solutions favoured by the likes of Wadia,



► Mark Levinson and dCS, in favour of a one-bit converter. On the end of this they hang a Class A output stage that remains permanently powered as long as the CD3 is connected to the mains. Both digital and analogue stages are provided with balanced and single-ended outputs, the balanced circuits being transformer coupled.

In use, the sliding lid of the top-loading transport might feel alien at first but you soon get used to it.

Simply drop the disc onto the waiting spindle, locate the magnetic clamp (similar to the ones used by Naim, but slightly larger and easier to handle) and slide the lid closed. Once you get used to having to do the mechanics yourself, in the absence of a sexy motorised drawer, the biggest inconvenience of the arrangement is that it demands a top shelf location on your rack. Control buttons on the front of the player are limited to the basic, a cheap, generic plastic remote control providing all the extras. It's not going to impress your buddies the way those milled from solid, too heavy to lift units so beloved in the high-end will, but it works just as well (and better than some) and as you'll see, impressing your mates isn't what this player is all about.

First impressions are important and never more so than with the CD3. Choose the discs for your initial listening with care – because you're going to hear exactly what's on them. Play the Analogue Productions remaster of the Johanos/Rachmaninoff *Symphonic Dances* (APCD006) and you'll marvel at the sweeping scale of both the soundstage and the music. The opening kettle rolls are way outside the left-hand speaker; the

individual instruments that make up the impressionistic opening are carefully and precisely delineated in space. As the orchestra combines to build those ramped stages leading to the massive opening crescendo the



steps between levels are nicely delineated, the power and impact of the final result as impressive and dynamic as always. But listen critically and you'll be aware of a degree of tonal bleaching, an overall paleness compared to the familiar rich colours of the Turnabout original. Ah, I hear you say, that'll be the bit-stream decoding then, but that's a dangerous assumption to jump to.

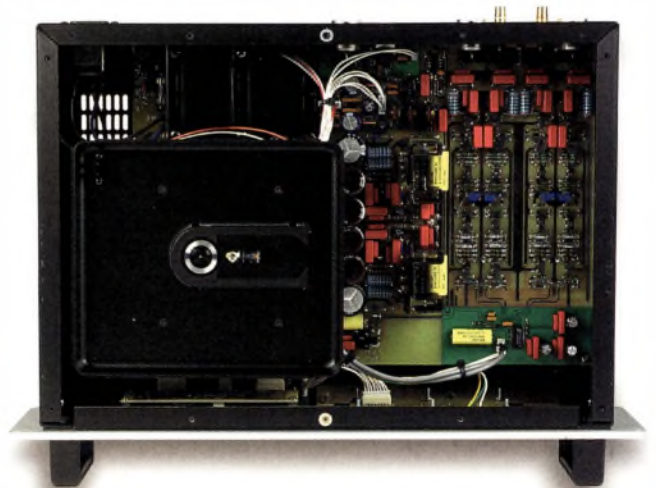
Play the newest JVC XRCD issues like *Scheherazade* or *Pictures* and you'll hear the richness and warmth that typifies the sound of Living Stereos and underpins their enduring popularity: No bleaching or lack of colour here. What you're hearing on the Johanos disc is the age of the transfer. The Analogue Productions CD was released in 1991,

and good though it was in its day, digital technology has come a long way since then. Which is what I mean about this player letting you hear exactly what's on your discs: Play *S Club 7* and you'll get exactly what you deserve: Play a great recording and that's what you'll hear. But unlike some "Super-Accurate" players the Audio

Research never strays into the realms of the clinical. Play great music and that's exactly what you get! It's a neat trick if you can do it, and Lord knows how many have tried (and failed). The stumbling point always seems to be the dichotomy between accuracy to the fact of the performance and accuracy to its spirit.

So often, ultra high-resolution renditions seem simply to pick the music apart. The CD3 never does that.

This is a classic case for the application of that old trick, listening from outside the room.



Put on a disc and go do the washing up (or write a review in this case). You'll be surprised how engaging the music sounds, how much sense it makes and how easy it is to enjoy. It's a trick that first appeared along ►

▶ with Linn, Naim and the whole idea of playing tunes, and it only works if your system has got its rhythm and timing up and together. Which is exactly where the CD3 is so impressive. You can forget any notion that this is a big, warm and turgid player in the style of so many American offerings of the past. When it comes to the structure of the music, the precise placement of notes and the relationship between them, the Audio Research excels effortlessly. Unlike some players that sound forced or driven, imposing a rigid sense of timing on the music, this machine has all that rhythmic snap and toe-tapping involvement precisely because it does get things in the right place, without sounding like it's using a shoehorn and a grid. So whether you're playing a Beethoven string quartet or the pseudo-Motown of Gabrielle's 'When A Woman' this machine gets the rhythm right, rather than just playing everything at the same pace.

Much of this has got to be down to the work that Audio Research has done on the transport elements of the player. The top-loading drive is a fine starting point, but the control electronics still have to make it work. I haven't tried it as such, but I suspect that the CD3 would make a fine transport, even if that does risk breaking the one cardinal rule I haven't mentioned yet: It's a lot easier to keep the transport and DAC in the same box, all running off the same master clock, than trying to pass the digital signal through an interface. Which is probably another contributing factor in this player's easy grasp of the music's essential elements.

Combine then, the excellent musical performance of the CD3 with

its accurate rendition of tonal colour and recorded acoustic, and what you have is, in effect, a monitor CD player. Which kind of explains Dave Wilson's interest. As I said, if you really want to know what's going on... And that's the million-dollar question:



Just how much do you really want to know? Because I'd be lying if I said that this machine was in any way forgiving or easy on the ear. You want rose tinted hearing, look elsewhere. But that doesn't mean that the ARC rips discs apart. Quite the opposite. It may not wrap them up in fake warmth and technicolour shades, but it doesn't pin them out like a laboratory specimen either. Instead, by reaching into the heart of the music's structure and getting those basics spot on, it allows the disc to arrange what it has got to the maximum possible advantage. Which means that threadbare discs still sound threadbare, but at least they get to cover their modesty.

It's an effect that is most apparent in the bass. As I said, the CD3 has none of that brooding heaviness that seems to go hand in hand with what many listeners consider to be good bass. But listen to the Johanos again and you'll see that there's no way this player lacks bass weight or impact. It's just that it's only there when required. Which makes for

a wonderfully open, transparent and uncluttered mid-band and bottom-end alike! Which is one of the key aspects of this machine's ability to accurately reflect what's on a disc, down to the smallest detail in a player's technique.

So, if you want insight into the musical performance rather than a system that makes everything sound the same, then you should consider the CD3. If you are developing product or making recordings, then you should consider the CD3. Or, if you just want a machine where you never have to struggle to hear what's going on, then you should consider the CD3. Nothing added, and very, very little taken away! ➤

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Single-box CD player
Chipset:	Single-Bit
Analogue Outputs:	1 pr Single-ended 1 pr Balanced
Output Level:	Balanced 5.4v Single-ended 2.7v
Digital Outputs:	1 x BNC, 1 x AES/EBU
Output Impedance:	Balanced 400 Ohms Single-ended 200 Ohms
Dimensions (WxHxD):	482x134x311 mm
Weight:	11.4Kg
Finishes:	Black or Silver
Price:	£5490

UK Distributor:

Absolute Sounds
Tel. (44)(0)208 971 3909
Net. (44)(0)208 879 7962
Net. www.absolutesounds.com

Manufacturer:

Audio Research Corporation
Net. www.audioresearch.com

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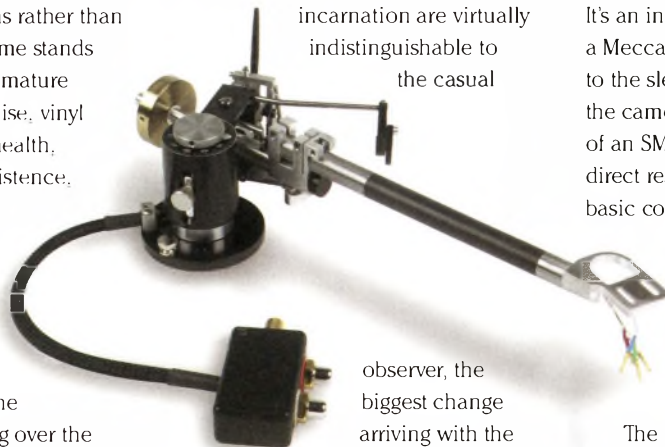
The Tri-planar Ultimate Mk. VI Precision Tone-arm

by Roy Gregory

The pace of digital life might be accelerating, with software versions superseding each other quicker than you can assimilate the differences, processor speeds leap-frogging each other in a blur, and format lifespans being measured in months rather than years, but for analogue, time stands still. Indeed, since the premature announcement of its demise, vinyl replay has enjoyed rude health, flourishing in its limbo existence, hovering between market relevance and total obscurity. It's a situation that allows products unusually long shelf lives, and none more than tone-arms. Back in the days when I was agonising over the cost of my first Planar 2, the Hadcock and Morch uni-pivots were already well established, while the first fledgling air-bearing Eminent Technology parallel trackers were just over the horizon. But the real objects of desire for this fledgling listener were the gimbal bearing designs from Breuer and Wheaton, the latter called the Tri-planar. Of course, each and every one of those designs is still available, but it's the Tri-planar (the Wheaton pre-fix is long gone) for which I've always held a candle.

I don't know when designer Herb Papier built the first Tri-planar tone-arm, but it has to be nearly twenty-five years ago. Back then it was a hobby, designed to keep him occupied in his retirement. Who could have guessed where and how far it would lead. In that time the arm has evolved through a series of modifications, hence the current Mk. VI

status. But many of these involved little more than changes in wiring or termination. The arm's structural and conceptual identity has remained virtually unchanged. Indeed, original models and the current incarnation are virtually indistinguishable to the casual



observer, the biggest change arriving with the Mk. VI. Herb has finally called it a day, the design passing intact to a new producer, Tri-planar Precision based in Minnesota and run by a gentleman with the not inappropriate name of Dung Tri-Mai. But whilst that hasn't changed the design or structure of the arm, it's had a remarkably beneficial effect on the standard of finish. Earlier Tri-planars were literally hand built by Herb, carrying the marks of his machining, the tiny variations in alignment and finish that come with individual construction. They had an indefinable quality, a mix of precision and mechanical austerity that reminded me of lab equipment. The Mk. VI retains that appeal, but with the advent of CNC machining and the application of some serious business intent, the final construction, finish and presentation of the arm finally live

up to its legendary performance. For make no mistake, musical performance is what the Tri-planar is and always has been all about.

Just a quick glance will tell you that this is no ordinary tone-arm. It's an incredibly complex structure, a Meccano kit of a product compared to the sleek simplicity of the Breuer or the camera finished compact solidity of an SME 5. But that complexity is the direct result of a deceptively simple basic concept: the desire to combine high-quality gimbal bearings with the ability to adjust the cartridge precisely in all three planes. All without compromising rigidity. Hence the name.

The heart of the beast is the all enclosed bearing cradle and arm post. The cradle contains the main gimbal, while the post incorporates the mounting base and VTA adjustment. This is what really set the arm apart, right from day one, its micrometer style adjustment, since adopted by the VPI JMW arms, allowing the user to adjust this critical parameter, simply and repeatably, whilst the record was playing. Other attempts to offer this ability in a pivoted arm have failed miserably, straight imitation being the only viable solution. But it doesn't stop there. Overhang is handled in the conventional way with a slotted headshell, but the Tri-planar also offers azimuth adjustment (unlike the Breuer, SMEs, Linn arms etc) via a transverse set screw located above the arm-tube, in front of its mounting yokes. Again, the emphasis is on simple, precisely repeatable adjustment. ▶

► In fact, even the cueing height and rate can be user adjusted.

Open the shipping carton and you discover the arm, completely encased in close cell foam along with its main and three auxiliary brass counter-weights. You'll also find a really well thought out set-up jig and alignment protractor, as well as a pair of really nice allen drivers in the necessary imperial sizes required to set-up and adjust the arm. There's also complete mounting hardware, including bolts, ny-lock nuts and the option of screws, an optional finger lift, a simple stylus balance and a syringe of silicon fluid for the variable (naturally!) damping facility. The review arm arrived in an excellent black finish and fitted with a termination box. The arm cable exits the rear of the post just above arm-board height rather than below it, and a conventional cable can be fitted in place of the box if you so desire (although given the availability of so many specialist arm cables these days it's not an option that I see too many people taking). The knurled thumbscrew on the post allows you to lock the arm-height: the one on the base provides an anchor point for an earth wire if required.



Set-up (on the Kuzma Stabi Reference) was simplicity itself, aided by the excellent manual. The only things missing were the physical specifications of the arm, a surprising oversight given its otherwise comprehensive approach to set-up and optimisation of your cartridge's operating parameters. Mind you, that's easily rectified. The easily followed, logical and repeatable series of adjustments mean that dialling a cartridge in becomes

a straightforward, incremental process. There's no hit and miss here. A decent test record like the Image Hi-Fi one reviewed in Issue 17 makes it even easier. So much so that regardless of the sound of the arm itself, its ability to extract the optimum performance from the cartridge so readily constitutes a real head start in this particular arms race. Add that to a sonic performance from the tone-arm which effortlessly combines

the best of hi-fi with the most convincing of musical attributes and you have a spectacularly impressive and engaging product.

So unobtrusive is the signature of the Tri-planar that it seems almost disingenuous to discuss its sound. It makes more sense to discuss the absence of sound: the way it allows musical dynamics, energy and colour to expand unimpeded into a wonderfully transparent soundstage. Put the Tri-planar into the system and the first thing you'll notice is the transparency, clarity and focus it brings to music. Of course, all those things are indicative of absence: absence of grain, absence of smearing, absence of instability in the replay system. The transparency also indicates excellent low-level resolution and it is this that brings the arm its other immediately obvious attribute. Its ability to differentiate tiny shifts in energy levels means that it starts leading edges earlier and more precisely. It's this that brings the snap and rhythmic integration to proceedings, and which makes music so enjoyable and immediate.

Carefully move the arm across the

opening grooves of Martin Stephenson's 'Wholly Humble Heart' (*Gladsome Humour and Blue*, Kitchen Ware KWLP8) and position the stylus for cueing. Carefully because the silky smooth bearings are so free moving and lacking in resistance that clumsy handling will shoot the arm

half way across the record, bouncing alarmingly against the lift. The Tri-planar looks like a precision device – it needs to be handled like one too. This arm is not to be confused with an RB250. Tip the perfectly positioned cueing lever and the stylus settles smoothly into the groove. First the gentle rush of the lead-in (but like surface noise, quieter than you expect) and then, faintly at first, the long, drawn out lump of the bass introduction, repeating, growing, pushing. But this is no simple thud. It's a rolling, swelling hump of bass energy, rearing up, slowly gathering itself before the



final crash, like a wave on a shingle beach. On it comes, each louder, more solid, more insistent than the last. The building tension is palpable, the sense of impending power, the shadow of gathering momentum... released by the staccato cannonade of the drum intro. That explosion of musical energy frees the jangly guitar, the even promptings of the bass and establishes the pace and progress of the track. Everything thereafter rests on that foundation: not just the track, but the whole of the side. The Tri-planar allows the music to happen in such dynamic and rhythmic freedom that the structure is never in doubt, the music never

▶ less than dramatic. In this respect it easily matches the overall coherence of the best parallel trackers.

Ah yes, coherence. The more you listen to the Tri-planar the more you realise that the other thing that sets it apart is the evenness of its performance. In the same way that it renders bass notes, precisely placed, with shape, texture, pitch and colour, it does the same thing for cymbals at the other end of the spectrum. The shimmers behind the opening of 'Hard Headed Woman' are crisp and cleanly resolved, but above all, their energy envelope stands unimpeded against the other instruments. You don't lose them against, and they don't track the levels of the voice or guitars. The unimpeded dynamic range allowed by the Tri-planar is its real gift to the music lover, enabling it to release the life and energy in a performance, vivid expression that's all too often swamped by the system. Likewise it allows the full overtone structure of acoustic instruments to develop, giving them their true colour, weight and identity, whether it's Basie's piano or Heifetz' fiddle.

I used the Tri-planar with the Lyra Helikon, Clearaudio Accurate and most spectacularly with the Koetsu Red K Signature. Whilst it was impressive with the other cartridges, with the Koetsu its incisive quality, cutting right to the structural and rhythmic centre of proceedings allowed the cartridge's rich tonal palette to parade to maximum advantage. I've never been all that sure about the Heifetz Sibelius (Classic Records/RCA Living Stereo LSC-2435), despite its legendary standing. Playing it with the Red K/Tri-planar readjusted my view. It was huge, dramatic, sweeping and majestic: it was tiny, precise, intimate and direct: All at the same time. Sure, Wicks is more lyrical, the greater interpreter: Haendel is undoubtedly more authentic. But here is a monumental performer, at the

height of his powers, giving it to you with all the considerable authority at his disposal. And authority is the word. Absolutely stable, unflappable under dynamic duress, yet supremely delicate when demanded it's a performance that matches the tone-arm perfectly – or should that be the other way around?

So is the Koetsu a fat cartridge making up for a thin arm? Absolutely not. Read the review of the cartridge in Issue 17 and you'll see

that this is a newer, leaner and altogether more athletic performer, with none of the padding of old. It's just that the arm enables it to perform to the limit of its considerable abilities. The same as it allows the detail and clarity of the Helikon to flourish, or the sheer heft and dynamic wallop of the Accurate.

Judicious use of damping (which I never felt the need for) will further broaden the arm's compatibility; as well as offering the last word in bass depth and stability. Conscious that this arm had to go back to the importer I was loath to contaminate the pristine trough, especially as past experience indicates that I prefer minimal damping if any at all. Besides, I was having too good a time to worry about it.

Nary a month goes by without some new arm appearing on the market. With all these shiny new toys vying for your attention, why should you buy a design that's knocking on 30 years old? Because this is categorically the best pivoted tone-arm that I've ever used. In its latest incarnation its structural refinement finally matches its musical performance. Its life, power and musical vitality offer the promise of spectacular results that

build on the strengths of super stable and heavily damped tables like the Kuzma. So much so that I'd go as far as to say that owners of SME turntables probably have no idea what their record players are capable of if they haven't tried them with a Tri-planar.

Nearly all the tone-arms that appear on the market today are uni-pivots. That's because they're much cheaper and easier to make, and rather like valve amps, they don't sound too bad when you get it wrong. But get hold of a really good gimbal bearing arm and it's capable of demonstrating just how lack-lustre much of the competition really is. The Tri-planar is, as I said earlier, the best I've used, giving even the best parallel trackers a run for their money. It's expensive, and it's taken a long, long time to get one into my system, but it was well worth the wait. I just wish I could afford for it to stay. ▶+



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Gimbal bearing tonearm
Effective length:	250mm
Pivot to spindle distance:	233.5mm
Overhang:	16.5mm
Offset angle:	22 degrees
Effective mass:	11g
Termination Options:	RCA or XLR termination box RCA or XLR 1.25m lead
Finishes:	Silver, Black and Silver
Price:	£3350 (termination box) £3500 (1.25m lead)

UK Distributor:

Audiofreaks
Tel. (44)(0)208 948 4153
Fax. (44)(0)208 948 4250
E-mail. info@audiofreaks.co.uk
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Tom Evans Audio Design



Tom Evans' Audio Design The Vibe Line Stage

by Roy Gregory

The physical manifestations of Tom Evans' fertile imagination bear an uncanny resemblance to the more violent excesses of Dutch master, Jimmy Floyd Hasselbaink. You see, Jimmy Floyd sulks around the field for 89 minutes before, just when you're beginning to think you've got away with it, with little back lift and even less warning, he unleashes one of those 40 yard meteorites. It flies unerringly and unstoppably, past the stranded 'keeper and into the far top corner. In exactly the same way, Tom promises to deliver the goods for months on end, until you've just about given up hope. Then, unheralded and unexpected you receive an innocent little box that arrives with all the power and precision of a Jimmy Floyd thunderbolt, and with a similarly disturbing effect on the existing status quo.

First there was the Michell Iso phono-stage, an outwardly simple little box that upset a whole market's worth of apple carts. Then came The Groove, bigger and much, much better than its spiritual forebear, it too rearranged the accepted high-end landscape, dragging stellar performance down to previously undreamed of levels of attainability. And now, typically inconveniently, the matching line stage turns up hard on the heels of a trio of five figure, state-of-the-art contenders, ready to embarrass them all, given half a chance. Enter then, The Vibe, and Mr Evans' latest assault on the sensibilities of the nation's listeners.

Of course, I've been using The Groove for a while now, which has in some ways prepared me for what

The Vibe can do. It didn't prepare me for the two in combination. Open the carton and you'll find inside a small Perspex box, identical to the casework of The Groove, but graced by two, large, rotary knobs, one for volume, the other for source select. Round the back you'll find connections for five line inputs, a record and two main outputs. That's your lot:

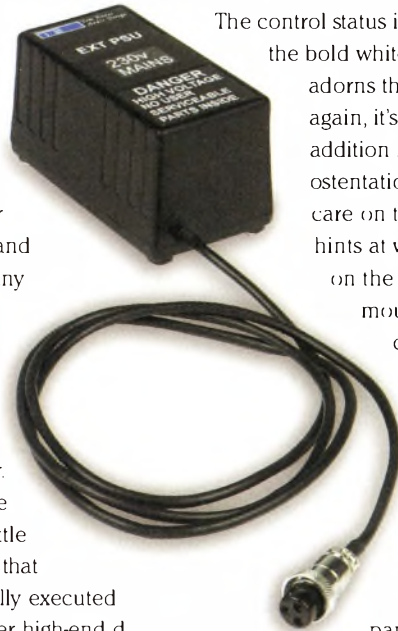
No remote, no balanced connections, no user configurable inputs and no fancy display of any kind. The Vibe is as basic as you can get. Even the outboard power supply is a simple moulded block affair. But the Devil is in the details, and look a little closer and you'll see that The Vibe is as carefully executed in its way, as any other high-end design, regardless of price.

The casework is beautifully executed and surprisingly solid (my Groove surviving a feline induced four foot fall unscathed – which is more than can be said for the offending creature). The multi-pin connector that terminates the lead from the power supply screws solidly into place, while the rest of the socketry is both of decent quality and refreshingly lightweight, avoiding the overbuilt tendency that afflicts the sound of so many high priced products. The one concession to styling comes in

the shape of the beautifully turned and waisted Delrin knobs, large and grooved to accept nicely tactile rubber O rings near their ends. It's a combination that makes for really positive control, and which complements the crisp feel of the switches to which they're connected. The control status is easily read, given

the bold white engraving that adorns the fascia. Once again, it's a functional addition rather than an ostentatious one. But the care on the outside only hints at what's been done on the inside. Even the moulded block supply contains a far from off the shelf transformer.

Inside the chassis you'll find a high-tech four layer board. The socketry is all bonded to the rear panel and hard wired, each with its own separate earth track. The volume control (which represents both the heart and a significant proportion of the sound of any pre-amp) is a 24 pole, discrete stepped attenuator. But the really important bit is the Lithos regulation, the same discrete circuit used to such telling effect in The Groove. This is where The Vibe discovers its inky black back-ground, the basis of its astonishing transparency, resolution and dynamic range. In these areas it matches or betters anything that I've heard, ▶



▶ to the extent that listening to The Vibe, especially in combination with The Groove, actually illuminates your understanding of just how hi-fi systems work. It lets you hear that much more clearly, just how the system drives the room – and how the recording drives the system.

When things are this simple then set-up is pretty straightforward. But there are two things to watch. Cable selection



is critical, for reasons that will become apparent. I was in the fortunate position of using the Nordost Valhalla, a cable whose capabilities fit The Vibe like a glove, but if that's beyond your means (as it is for most of us, myself included) then look for something quick and open and steer well clear of any slugging, rounding or extra weight. The second caveat concerns burn-in. The Vibe, just like The Groove, needs at least three days of use before it gets over the lean, pinched and dry phase. After another two weeks or so it really starts to blossom, gaining tonal colour and harmonic sophistication. All my observations refer to a unit that's been permanently connected for the better part of a couple of months. Just don't expect these results straight out of the box.

In my Groove review I described it as shortening the path, giving you

greater access to the information stored in the recording. The Vibe does the same thing. Used as a line stage to pass the signal from a high-quality CD player, it inculcates the music with a sense of order and precision, a rightness of placement and position coupled to total stability, that events just seem to unfold, completely naturally in the space before you. It all grows out of that incredibly low noise floor. Wind the volume wide open with nothing playing and you'll hear nothing from the line-stage. The power-amp maybe, but The Vibe isn't just ghostly, it simply isn't there. And what that ultra silent background allows is resolution, but not just in the form of information or detail. The Vibe isn't just quiet, it's also quick, and that allows it to mimic and measure micro dynamics in an

uncannily natural fashion. Play a solo acoustic instrument to hear what I mean, like Joe Pass's guitar on track five of *Take Love Easy* (JVC XRCD 0031-2). Each string is a band of energy that expands from and resonates in the body of the instrument. Such is the discrimination of the system that you can place the individual strings in space, and more importantly, in relation to each other. It's almost possible to place the fingers flitting across them, so clear is each step from string to string. It's a perfect model of the way each string releases

its energy.

Now translate that onto a bigger stage. The trumpet phrase that opens the Reiner *Pictures* (another XRCD, this time JMC XR-0016) punches out across the darkness of the soundstage, illuminating the rear wall with reflected energy, until, underpinned by the orchestra, the space is filled by the chorus of instruments that swell to form the opening crescendo. Above it all, the trumpet soars, separate and distinct: As is each instrument that comprises the whole. What you're hearing is an energy map of the entire orchestra, the energy generated, and the way it is dispersed from each instrument. It's this that helps locate, separate and identify each one. Just compare the output from the organ, the bass drum and the double-basses, all jostling for space as the opening arpeggios of 'Gnomus' role forth. It's the shape and pace of the notes that identifies the instruments, where and how they appear in the soundstage.



Now, wheel The Groove into the equation and repeat the experience. This time I used the excellent Alice Artzt recording of *English Guitar Music* on Meridian (the record label, not the electronics manufacturer – E77037). Similar instrument but vastly more demanding repertoire. The fractured phrasing of the Walton Bagatelles leaps from the speakers, a solid, vibrant presence of incredible substance and attack. The contrast ▶

▶ between the delicacy and poise of the mid section contrasts dramatically with the dynamic impact and power of the Allegro's opening and closing passages. It's a dynamic tour de force that matches the skill and power of the playing. Indeed, power is the key word, as the instrument responds to, and the system tracks the carefully graduated pressure and attack of the playing.

It's a dramatic step up in performance. Good as The Vibe is on its own, and it's impressive indeed, until you hear it with The Groove you really aren't going to get it. But how can adding an extra stage of (extremely critical) amplification improve things? Isn't less always more? Well generally I'd go along with the outline concept, but things aren't always quite what they seem. Despite the CD player being able to dispense with the phono electronics altogether, let's not forget that the player itself contains its own fair share of amplification stages, and even in a machine as accomplished as the 390S, they're going to take their toll. The Groove contains four of Tom's proprietary Lithos regulators to The Vibe's two (as well as an awful lot more gain) but adding the two together doesn't so much double the impact as square it. The sheer presence and musical substance that results is the closest thing I've heard to the Connoisseur Definition 4.0 combination, four boxes that contain no fewer than 72 discrete regulators. Which says something about the importance of voltage regulation and the quality of the Lithos circuit. It makes you wonder what would happen if Tom went hog wild with a \$26000 budget.

Playing *Tea For The Tillerman*, a disc that's found its way through all the resident line-stages recently reviewed I was caught quite unprepared. 'Where Do The Children Play' normally

gets pigeon holed as a nice, slightly limp ballad. I was pinned to my seat by the power and feeling in the performance, the astonishing impact of its musical purpose. With 'Hard Headed Woman' to follow I was on the



verge of diving for cover, but I needn't have worried. Along with the power comes poise, grace and superb control. The players are perfectly disposed, their instruments immediately identifiable, the chemistry within the band explicit. The Groove/Vibe combination gives you full value for what's on the record, but never over eggs the pudding. It simply provides an outstandingly vivid, tactile and engaging performance, releasing the artist intent from the shackles of what have always seemed like indifferent recordings and pressings. If The Groove represented a whole new record collection then the combination simply bypasses the medium and buries you straight in the message.

Don't go getting the idea that these products are perfect. I'd still like a wider range of tonal colour and expression, something that the Lamm offers in spades and at which the Connoisseur excels. The Gryphon offers more weight and textural detail at low frequencies, and none of the above come even close to the Connoisseurs absolute rhythmic fluidity and lack of constraint. But that's not the point. The sheer fact that I am discussing The Vibe in the context of products that sell for around four times its ticket tells you just what a bargain it represents.

It lacks the material substance of the units I've just mentioned, as well as their operational sophistication and versatility. It offers the barest of bare bones. But if musical communication and performance is your primary aim then it performs to a standard that challenges the very best. Use it with the matching phono stage and a decent record player and you'll hear something really quite extraordinary. And the best news of all is that it's performance that's actually attainable. The scary bit is that Tom keeps threatening me with the valve amp. I'm sure it'll finally turn up when I least expect it...



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Solid-state line-stage
Active Devices:	Op-amps
Inputs:	5x line, all phono
Input Sensitivity:	1v in for 4V o/p. More gain on request
Input Impedance:	15 KOhms
Outputs:	2x main, 1x tape, all phono
Output Impedance:	12 Ohms Capable of delivering ± 100mA
Phase:	flat to < 160 KHz
Bandwidth:	DC - 300KHz
Dimensions (WxHxD):	330x90x180mm
Weight:	1.82 Kg
Price:	£2700 (\$5200 Export)

Manufacturer:

Tom Evans Audio Design
Tel. (44)(0)1443 833570

International Distributor:

Best Hi-Fi In The World.com
Tel. (44)(0)1483 278594
E-mail. sales@ex-cell.co.uk
Net. www.besthifiintheworlds.com

For stockists see page 112

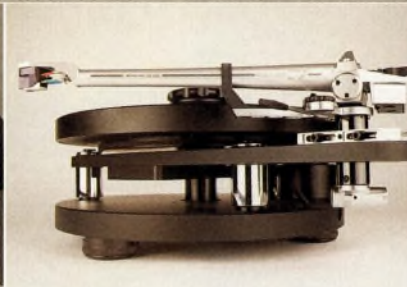
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Aloia PST 11.01 Preamplifier and ST 13.01 Power Amplifier

by Chris Thomas

When you have spent years around high-end audio equipment you get a feel for the kind of quality that different investments should yield. You get to know, for instance, how much better, and in what areas a £6K preamp usually is over a £3K model. Or what sort of musical improvements are likely to be forthcoming when you trade in your 30 watt integrated amp for a 75 watt pre/power combo. This is not a rule though and there are, of course, lots of exceptions where it is quite easy to double the outlay and end up with half the sound and that's not good. And let's not forget the law

of diminishing returns which can and does, kick in with really savage effect over about £5K per box.

If you are looking for the "truth" or some sort of perfection from your audio system – forget it, it probably ain't gonna happen. But if you live in the real world and understand that the best you can achieve is a system that you personally find musically and emotionally rewarding then read on, as I may have found an amplifier to help you along the way.

Aloia amplification is made in Italy under the guidance of Bartolomeo Aloia who has been designing and building audio electronics for over 40 years. The combination of the solid state 11.01 pre and the 13.01 power amplifier makes this a four box design with separate power supplies for both stages of amplification, which is quite rare. All four units are impressively assembled inside and, being Italian, the look and

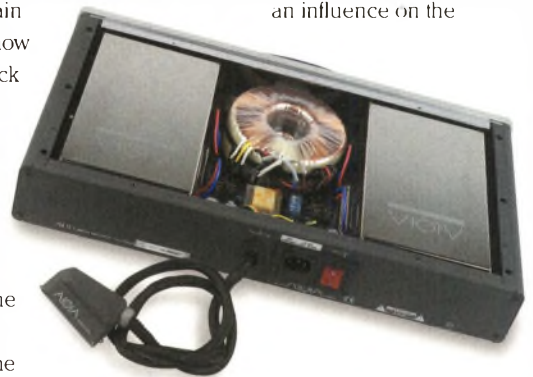
feel of the casework has obviously received more than a passing thought. It has a lightly textured, slightly matt finish in a pale grey/blue offset by the deep blue centre panels which house the standby switches on the main units. I can't help but mention how good it is, especially for the neck muscles of a reviewer, to have the descriptions of the rear connections clearly labelled on the top of the cases. While the power amplifier is bereft of knobs and buttons, the pre has them in abundance, as this is one of those designs with separate record and monitor sides and the individual controls to allow this. The 11.01 came configured as a line stage with 5 inputs, plus tape though there is a phono card

available that can be supplied when new or retro-fitted by the customer. It also has two sets of outputs, which,

like all other connections, are phono sockets as there are no balanced input/outputs fitted. The 13.01 has one set of phono inputs and is rated at 30 watts though it must be added that this a very generous 30 watts which, rather like Naim amplifiers, has plenty of reserve power to be able to swing big transients with ease. There is a 60 watt alternative available called the ST 15.01 but I haven't heard it (yet).

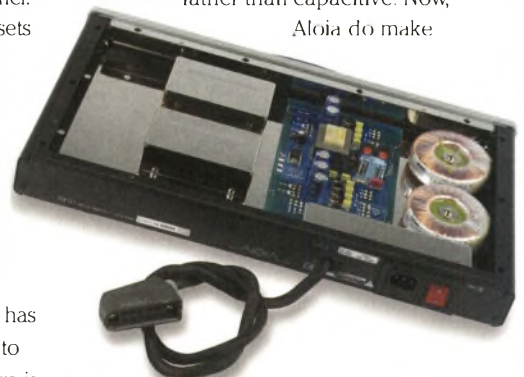
The unit is remote controlled of course through a very simple and neat little unit that, thankfully does not mirror the plethora of buttons on

the front panel, and the volume knob is motorised. Though there is no conventional balance control Aloia have fitted two small trim pots which, after a bit of experimenting, I felt had an influence on the

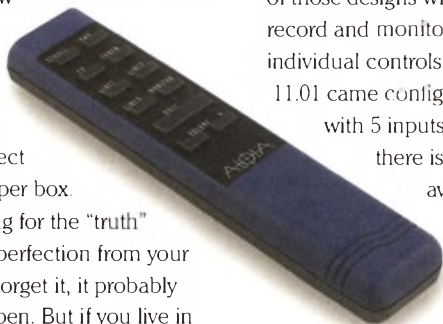


body and weight of the sound. I preferred the results when they were both fully retarded.

Both pre and power amplifiers have separate power supplies and this is where the Aloia stands out from the crowd as both supplies are inductive rather than capacitive. Now, Aloia do make



capacitive power supplies as well, and at less cost, but their UK distributors Audio Reference only import the inductive supplies as they believe, along with everyone else who has heard both, that these



► are what really give these amplifiers their exceptional performance. As someone who is more at home in the back of a vintage Fender Strat than an audio power supply I rang a few amplifier designers to get their opinions of inductive and capacitive. I should add here that they all design capacitive supplies so I suppose

I was on a bit of a loser from the start. I cited Bartolomeo's premise that the quality of the energy stored in an inductor is of better quality as there is less harmonic content present or that the release of that energy was smoother as there were no ripples present as the capacitors recharge. Even that the inductive approach placed less strain on the components. There was general agreement over these points but then a whole list of caveats, what ifs and "of course, you must understand". No-one said that the inductive supply was inherently better. But then again, how could they? Because they could easily anticipate the question that would have followed.

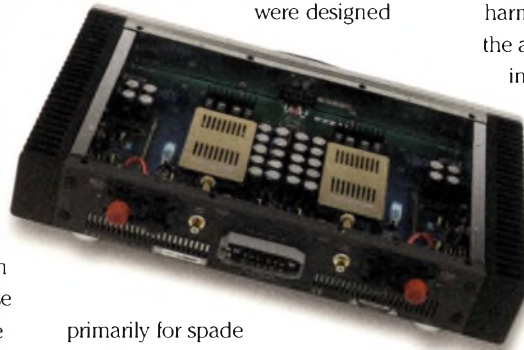
One price you pay for going down the inductive route is weight. All those chokes, wound with copper wire, give both the Aloia supplies one of the highest weights for their size of any audio equipment I have used. The fairly slim supply for the power amplifier is separately known as the PSU13i and tops the scales at a whopping 18Kg (the capacitive version is 4.1Kg). There must be a couple of miles of wire in there. Both supplies connect to their respective units via a Scart-type connector that is captive on the PSU's. This enables the supplies to be left permanently on via rear rocker



switches while touch buttons on the front of the pre and power amplifiers bring them in and out of standby. It is a neat and elegant design and I particularly like the fact that they don't make any switch on/off thumps through the speakers when being cycled, but then this is generally a very, very quiet amplifier. Aesthetically I think they look great, especially when sited in a rack

like the Fraim where they have spent the last two months and my only criticism is that I think the standby switches should be illuminated in blue instead of orange. And if that's the only thing I can find to mention,

you better believe that I like their presentation – a lot. I was also going to criticise the speaker connections which, on the review sample, were designed



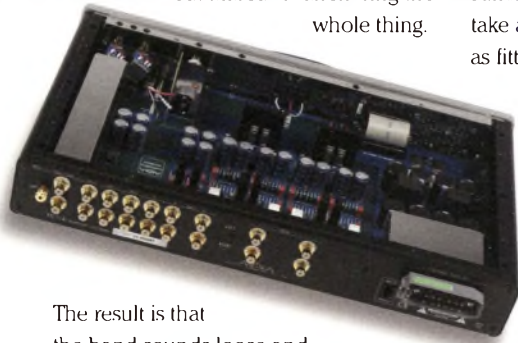
primarily for spade terminals though you could wedge some 4mm plugs in, but just before writing this I was told that they had been changed to accommodate both, so I can't.

I slotted them into my home system, where the Spectral DMC12 /DMA 100 usually sits and began to listen. They didn't seem to need much warm-up time at all and within just a few bars they had convinced me that they constitute a seriously musical amplifier. Usually I need time to adjust to a new

arrival and often that adjustment never quite reaches a happy conclusion. The Spectral, at more than twice the price, is such a fine all round amplifier that most amplifiers (at any price) struggle to live with it, especially on its own terms and although I may not be considering a comparative review, the inevitable happens. But, as with the splendid integrated Canary Audio amplifier I tried recently, the Aloia does things very differently, but with enough impact and rhythmic integrity to make you sit up and take notice. The balance is warm but not soft and though the bandwidth does not extend forever skywards like the Spectral, it has the ability to light up the textural and spatial aspects of the recording, throwing the soundstage open across the room and far behind the speakers. It is also quite transparent and couple these attributes with a stable and ambient image of the performance and you have an amplifier that always presents music in an attractive way. It does sugar-coat the music to a certain extent, but in a similar way to the Canary. The tonal richness and harmonic warmth that flows throughout the amplifier should not be taken as an indication that the Aloia is soft or particularly slow. You just get the impression that this is an amplifier designed for musical enjoyment rather than to recreate what went on in the studio by stripping the recordings to the bare bones.

Rhythmically it is slightly slower than many solid-state designs but has such harmony of tempo across its bandwidth that you won't notice it. Take Marcus Miller's 1995 album, *Tales* (FDM 36571-2) and the track Rush Over which is built around a shuffling drum and high-hat figure beneath which Marcus toys with time, forever dragging the tempo back with his Fender Jazz bass, despite playing the melody line. Now, unlike the Precision, the Jazz has always had that metallic slap to the front of each ►

► note underpinned by a distinctive bass growl and Miller is the arch exponent of using this to delicious effect. He is so far behind the beat on 'Rush Over', that the contrast in rhythmic variation between the bass and drums gives the tune its whole "feel". When the female vocals float into the mix they are pushing things along with the percussion but Marcus is anchoring the whole thing.



The result is that the band sounds loose and free while being super, super tight. The Aloia was superb at opening the ear to these possibilities as it can stop and start so quickly. It always remains rhythmically coherent yet manages to combine this with a colourful sense of instrumental tonality and colour.



The more you listen the more you realise that this happens to be just about the easiest amplifier to live with you have ever heard. It is so inoffensive and easy on the ear and never gets flustered. Even at high levels the sound just softens off somewhat but never really hardens or grows uncomfortable. The modest 30 watt output feels like more and unless you listen in a large room and/or use very inefficient speakers will probably be enough: and if not then the 60 watt version is now available. Very low level listening levels however are not the forte

of the Aloia as it sounds rather small and flat, but lift the level a little and the whole musical picture swells in size as well as volume. Unfortunately the remote control unit makes it hard to set the volume as precisely as you would like which is really annoying, especially as this is a fault that practically every other remote amplifier I have tried also suffers from. Please, dear manufacturers, take a close look at the remote volume as fitted to the Mark Levinson amplifiers if you really can't work out how to do it properly. You can adjust the volume on the ML equipment to any level and I'm absolutely astonished that audio companies seem to regard this as an afterthought when, being that part of the amplifier that we use most, it really should be one of the most important considerations of the design.

So the Aloia is a great little amplifier and one that will give many far more expensive designs a real run for their money. It is made for the living room and not the laboratory. Listening through it is a musical pleasure and not an academic exercise in spotting micro detail. In fact absolute resolution is probably the one area where the Aloia will show its limitations as it simply cannot match the ML or Spectral amplifiers for that leading edge precision and articulation that they are so good at. But it is a real success because it does what all good hi-fi should do and that is to bring music into the home. In many ways it can stand comparison with designs costing twice as much and from far better known manufacturers though whether this makes the Aloia cheap or those expensive is another matter. I think that, when you consider the whole package it offers really excellent value for money and I would encourage you to lend it an ear.

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Pre-amplifier	
Type:	solid-state - remote operated
Inputs:	5xline level + tape (phono card optional)
	All single ended RCA
Outputs:	2 pairs - both RCA
Input impedance:	20 Kohm
Dimensions:	81x465x305 mm hwxwd
Weight:	6kG
Power supply.	
Type:	Inductive
Dimensions:	62x465x272 mm
Weight:	9kG
Power amplifier	
Type:	solid state
Power:	30 watts per channel into 8ohms
Inputs:	1 pair phono RCA
Negative feedback:	0dB
Dimensions:	90x465x300 mm
Weight:	7.5kG
Power supply	
Type:	Inductive
Dimensions:	81x455x270 mm
Weight:	18kG.
Prices:	
Preamplifier/Inductive power supply	£2345.00
Power amplifier/ Inductive power supply	£1965.00
Optional phono card	£185.00
UK Distributor:	
Audio Reference	
Tel. 01252 702705	
e-mail. info@audioreference.co.uk	
www. www.audioreference.co.uk	
Manufacturer:	
Aloia	
Website. www.aloia.it	
e-mail. aloia@aloia.it.	





Sim Audio Moon Air Tuner

by Paul Messenger

There's a certain *déjà vu* about this Moon Air tuner. Not because I have any previous experience of Sim Audio's products, but because it shares country of origin (Canada) and a good deal of technology with Magnum Dynalab, whose MD100 I reviewed a year ago in *Hi-Fi+* No13. Although I liked the MD100 well enough, I actually bought the next model up the line, the MD102, and it's my understanding that this 102 is the model which shares much of its internals with the Moon Air tuner.

Internals maybe, though certainly not the externals, which are much more modern and stylish than Magnum Dynalab's decidedly retro offerings. While I rather like and find the latter's illuminated swinging needle meters very practical, one recent visitor laughed and joked at the 102's antedeluvian appearance. He, I'm sure, would be much happier with the altogether more contemporary Moon Air with its glowing LEDs sitting up there on the shelf.

Swinging needles notwithstanding, even I'll happily concede that the slimline Moon Air with its tasty cast and finned casework, chunky thick fascia, and stylish (adjustable) pointy pillar feet looks and feels much more the high end thoroughbred. But it's also a pricey proposition at £2,750, and does lack the pre-setting and remote control tuning feature that was a major reason why I went for the 102 in the first place.

You do get a remote handset with the Moon Air, but it does everything apart from doing the most important task of all, in controlling the actual tuning functions. Although the manual claims: "This choice is dictated by the fact that the Air is an analog [italics] FM tuner. It wouldn't have been practical to

motorize the potentiometer because of the fine tuning necessary." There's a germ of truth in this, to be sure, but I suspect it might also be a means of rationalising the fact that Magnum Dynalab's very bulky remote board may well not fit inside the Air's much slimmer case.



While I might be a confirmed couch potato, many are perfectly happy to tune radio stations manually, and there's no denying one soon gets used to dialling in the right figures for one's favourite stations. I wouldn't say the tuning knob here is a classic, in terms of feel – there's little in the way of flywheel effect, and my well-travelled sample was actually a bit graunchy, but might not be typical here. But it's a chunky knob to grab hold of, and has a very nice law for trawling up and down the FM band, from 81.5 to 108.7. Five assorted buttons provide backup of one sort or another. It's all very tasteful and discreet, though the pale legends aren't the easiest to read against the shiny gunmetal fascia.

FM is the only band covered here, to which I've absolutely no objection. Although this is very much an analogue tuner in modus operandum, the tuned frequency is actually shown numerically (digitally?) on a good size red coloured 3/4-digit display, which is arguably the

best of both worlds. Scattered around the edge of the numbers are various other useful bits: a three-LED set provides accurate centre-tune, and a bargraph row gives an indication of signal strength or multipath distortion.

The signal strength meter is effective but a little coarse: even with a booster amp I never managed to light up more than six cherries, yet the tuner always lit up two even with nothing connected to the antenna inputs.

A single LED lights when the IF bandwidth is switched to 'narrow' selectivity (unhelpfully labelled BW2). Although this sacrifices some top end extension and transparency, it can be a useful option if the local spectrum is crowded, or if you're trying to pick out weak stations close to strong ones. Other LEDs illuminate to show stereo or mono, interstation muting, and antenna input statuses. All these peripheral functions, excepting of course the actual tuning, are remote controllable.

Round the back there's two separately selectable antennae inputs, both using satellite-style F-plugs rather than the more traditional 75-ohm TV aerial plug/sockets. And a pair of phono sockets supplies the stereo signal output.

According to the propaganda, the Air has a five-stage analogue front end, uses a power supply with a shielded toroidal transformer, ultralinear capacitors and precision voltage stabilisers, and has oxygen free wiring throughout the audio signal paths. Since our review example was manufactured, Sim Audio has incorporated a new 'high blend' circuit, which reduces noise by sacrificing some high frequency stereo separation. First order blend

▶ (6dB/octave) starts at 1.8kHz, increasing to 2nd order (12dB/octave) at 5.5kHz, using Wima capacitors and metal film resistors.

The tuning knob might not feel great, but the front-end alignment seems very good, showing excellent symmetry as one tunes 'through' a station.

Sensitivity seems very high here. While it's always worthwhile to use a proper roof aerial, in order to provide the cleanest and most interference-free RF signal for your tuner, this Moon Air started reacting and reproducing, albeit a little noisily, with just a short length of co-axial patch-cord connected to its aerial input. Flat-dwellers and others for whom outside aerials are problematic could well find this tuner a tempting prospect for indoor aerial use.

My formal listening tests began haltingly and confusingly – not that this was the Moon Air's fault. An obvious starting point was to compare it to my own Magnum Dynalab, which should have been easy enough to do, and for best audio quality with minimal



compression and other manipulation, Radio 3 is the obvious station to use. I therefore also called up R3 on my satellite TV receiver, as this gives a handy on-screen programme guide to what's on. I then foolishly (the assignable inputs of the NAC552!) confused the sources, jumping to the conclusion that the Air sounded pants when I was actually listening to the compressed digital MPEG sound of the satellite receiver instead.

Sorting that out took very little time,

but I then made a second false start by initially auditioning the Moon Air in 'narrow' mode, a state which does, as one would expect, audibly compromise the sound quality. It's an easy mistake to make, because the 'narrow' setting on the display LED is unhelpfully labelled BW2, so you then need to refer to the manual for the appropriate translation.



I finally got myself properly comparing like with like, and the similarity between the Moon Air and my own MD102 is unmistakable, making it amply clear that the Air is a top quality tuner. However, the two are by no means identical. Although the bass and midband sound more or less identical, there's a quite obvious difference at the top end of the band, where the Moon Air sounds distinctly less 'bright' than the MD102.

Whether one is more 'right' here than the other is difficult to state categorically, but the signs do point towards the Magnum Dynalab being the more neutral, and the Moon Air being the rolled off, if only because my Naim NAT01 casts the deciding vote in the MD's favour.

It's quite likely that the Moon Air's restrained and gentle top end is quite deliberate. It's certainly not in any way unpleasant, and indeed I daresay there are plenty of people who will positively prefer the slightly softer result. Certainly I wasn't really conscious of this characteristic in isolation, and only really became aware of it when making direct comparisons.

Although there is a slight loss of overall 'air', this is a very tidy and

communicative tuner, which does an excellent job of recreating the solid architecture of complex musical works, delivering very convincing stereo perspectives. The Moon Air arrived just in time for my favourite period for tuner reviewing. Starting in mid-July and extending until mid-September, the BBC Proms season provides nightly live concerts of the highest transmission quality.

The Moon Air acquitted itself exceptionally well, and really showed its strengths by making utterly unknown material exceptionally enjoyable. David Sawer's *Piano Concerto* was a BBC commission that received its world premiere in late July. The fact that it was a highly enjoyable musical experience says a great deal about the quality of the tuner, and its ability to make good sense of totally unfamiliar material.

The high price of this tuner is undoubtedly a disincentive, as might be its lack of full remote control. But it's a gorgeous looking piece of kit, no question, does a fine job of musical communication with a pleasantly restrained character, and has potentially useful high sensitivity too. ▶+

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Hands-on analogue FM tuner
Input (aerial):	2x F-sockets
Output:	1pr single-ended phonos
Size (WxHxD):	430x100x370mm
Weight:	6.5kg
Finish:	Charcoal grey, silver
Price:	£2750

UK Distributor

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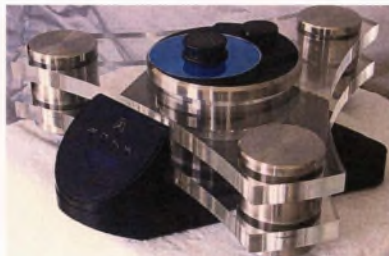
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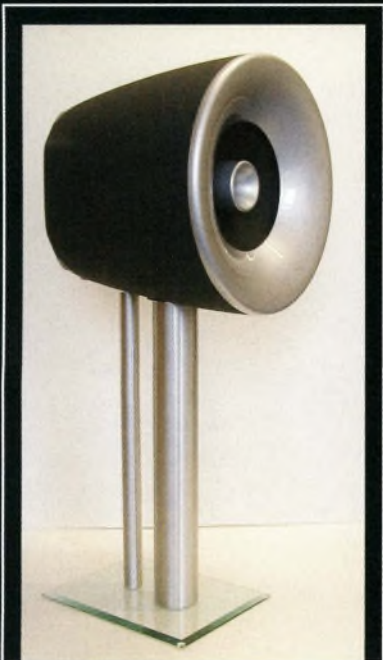
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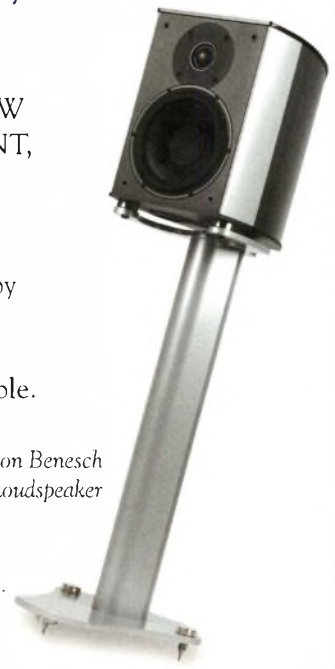
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Audio Physic Spark loudspeaker

by Jason Kennedy

It would seem that in hi-fi (as in life?) it's hard to achieve all your goals in one go. Certain components do certain things extremely well but at the expense of other aspects of performance. This is especially true of loudspeakers which are almost always compromised in one respect or another - there are few if any speakers which are cost no object, appearance irrelevant all encompassing works of sonic wonder. From time to time a speaker is promoted as being all things to all men but getting all men to agree that this is indeed the case is another matter entirely.

I guess the problem is that the job of turning an electrical signal into a realistic soundwave is almost impossible. On the one hand loudspeakers are pretty straightforward - traditional dynamic drivers being very simple in principle - but on the other getting them to produce a convincing facsimile of live sound using the formats that we can buy is a major challenge.

Alongside the relatively minor variations introduced by ancillary equipment loudspeakers have to interact with all manner of rooms, and they have to produce a broad range of sound pressure levels. It certainly seems to be the case that some speakers sound more convincing at higher rather than lower levels and vice versa.

In these unpredictable circumstances speakers attempt to reproduce the gamut of perceived sound and the many elements that contribute to high fidelity, of which timing, dynamics, tonal realism and imaging are probably the easiest to

objectively assess.

Imaging is what loudspeaker specialist Audio Physic is all about. Of course it designs products to address all the requirements of the music lover but the seriousness with which it approaches loudspeaker set up leaves you in no doubt as to what gets these particular Germans hot! The set up instructions run to five A4 pages including diagrams and a treatise on the 'principles and techniques of speaker placement'. The basic idea is to make sure that the first part of the sound you hear comes directly from the loudspeaker, which requires the elimination of early reflections. As well as being the key to great imaging this apparently has the secondary benefit of reducing the influence of the room on the balance of the speaker.

In order to avoid early reflections you need to follow Audio Physic's extensive guidelines, which unfortunately are not quite as straightforward as one might hope. All seems clear to begin with, place the listening seat against the wall "where room nodes are suppressed" then get out the tape measure. Establish the dimensions of the room and then divide these figures by odd and even amounts, AP's theory being that placing the speakers at the

even divisions reinforces bass with odd divisions cancelling bass. I didn't compare one to another but was surprised at the low frequency energy that could be achieved with speakers three eighths of the way into the room - a point that's much closer to the listener than usual.

So far so good, but the next step involves adjusting the space between the speakers to find the widest position that gives a precise central image and then twisting or toeing in the speakers to focus that image. So you end up with the speakers away from the theoretically desirable divisions. Aanvil Audio the UK distributor has attempted to simplify the process with a diagram showing the speakers sitting at the junction of an imaginary line drawn between each room corner that the listener faces and a spot about a metre behind his or her head, and a line bisecting the room. This is easier to do or would be in a room that was devoid of furniture but does leave the speakers in highly inconvenient positions - even in a dedicated listening room. Aanvil's suggestion to make sure each speaker is exactly the same distance from the listener was easier to implement.

I think the most useful element of this approach is the bit about aiming the speakers at an imaginary point behind the listener's head, so instead of the more common flat on or toed in with the axis crossing in front of



▶ the listener, the axis crosses behind and you can see part of the inside face of each speaker. While this makes for a rather precise sweetspot it works better than most of the alternatives that I've tried.

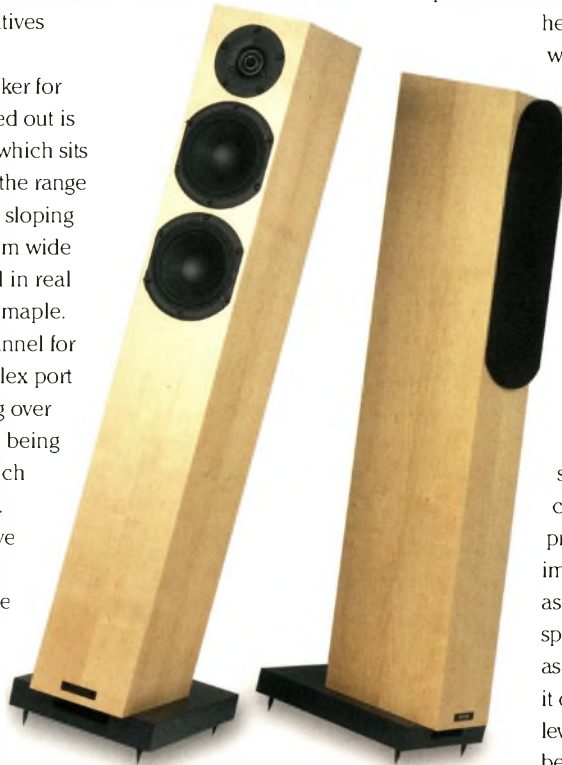
The Audio Physic loudspeaker for which all this activity was carried out is the slender Spark floorstander which sits one up from the entry point in the range and costs £1,700. It's an elegant sloping design measuring a mere 147mm wide and 220mm deep and finished in real wood veneer - this example is maple. The bolt on plinth acts as a channel for a base mounted, gas flowed reflex port and stops the Spark from falling over backwards, its seven degree tilt being more than enough to ensure such an outcome without assistance.

The two and a half way drive unit line up consists of two five inch Peerless Nomex cones, one producing bass alone and the other covering bass and midrange, while a Vifa ring radiator tweeter delivers high frequencies. The latter is customised with two additional vents and sits in its own airtight chamber to escape the influence of the bigger cones.

The cabinet is more complex than it appears, consisting of three internal chambers with damped porting between bass and mid/bass, and varying damping thickness from top to bottom, although overall damping is said to be quite light. Cable connection consists of a single pair of very nice terminals, bi-wire socketry is available as an option but because this subtly changes the way the speaker works AP prefers the single pair approach. It's nicely put together and neat touches like 'invisible' grille mounting (pegs under some of the drive unit mounting bolts) and the lovely terminals do nothing to undermine pride of ownership.

As my room is arranged so that the speakers fire down its length I started out by placing the Sparks in a similar

position to that usually occupied by the Living Voice Avatar OBX-R, my front line speakers so to speak. In fact because of the set up



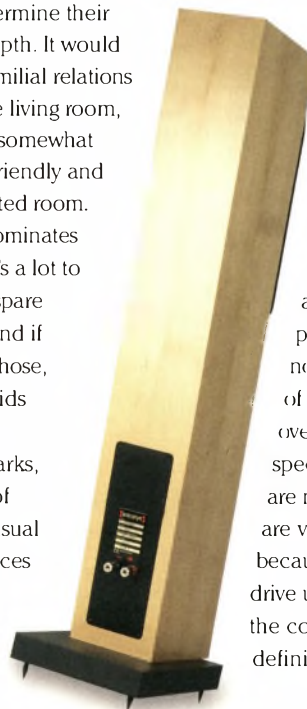
procedure outlined above the Sparks ended up closer to me than usual, but this didn't seem to undermine their bass performance or depth. It would however under-mine familial relations if applied in the average living room, the AP set up system is somewhat less than domestically friendly and really requires a dedicated room. But given that the TV dominates most living rooms there's a lot to be said for annexing a spare room for the purpose, and if you haven't got one of those, remember how much kids like bunk beds!

But back to the Sparks, initial impressions are of a leaner balance than usual (not just than Living Voices but also B&W S805s), this is presumably due to the flat anechoic

response that AP prefers. Fortunately within a day or so this aspect was considerably less obvious. The only time it tends to rear its 'pointed little head' is when you want to turn the wick up and, er, rock out. Then there is a tendency to forwardness almost to the point of brightness. Fundamentally this is not a loud speaker, in the raw power sense of the word. If you are after realistic SPLs I'd suggest looking elsewhere within the range, as the bigger APs are better able to deliver energy without losing composure.

But dynamic performance is the Spark's real Achilles heal. Every speaker designer has to choose their compromises with relatively affordable products and in this instance timing and imaging appear to have been selected as more important criteria. So the speaker doesn't track micro-dynamics as finely as can be done at the price and it doesn't seem to be suited to high levels, even with 200 watts of control behind it. But not everyone is a head-banger and many would agree with AP's choice of priorities.

Where it does come into its own is with transients, the sharp changes in music which are a critical element for both timing and imaging. While brighter speakers naturally emphasise transients, high frequencies being 'faster' than low ones, the Sparks are not bright at normal playback levels, yet there is no doubting their fine sense of timing. The absence of bass overhang certainly helps: the spec quotes 38Hz (-3dB) so they are not exactly bass shy but they are very tight. They are quick because of the relatively compact drive units (quoted as 5inch but the cone is smaller) and good definition from the tweeter. ▶



▶ In practise this means that whatever you listen to the transients make their mark. Be it the remarkable timpani on the Omnibus Wind Ensemble's interpretation of Zappa's *Inca Roads* (Opus3, SACD) or Mark Levinson's antique double bass noodling on the Red Rose sampler, bass is fast and tight. With some amplifiers I suspect the word 'slam' might be appropriate! And this means that the beat is always strong, clear and precise whether it be complex, such as you get on Beefheart's more entertaining compositions, or relatively straight-forward in the vein of The Cinematic Orchestra. In terms of sheer resolution this is not a particularly transparent loudspeaker. It's probably about par for the price point: you can hear most of what's going on, all the fundamentals are there but harmonics and the finer detail tend to be less apparent. This could be because of the neutrality factor, I guess AP would argue that other speakers emphasis certain parts of the spectrum unduly and thus pull out more detail there. Alternatively it could be because of the nature of the Spark's bass. Naturally bass strong instruments certainly sound very convincing and nimble, notes go deep but they lack some of the timbral colour that can sometimes be found with the competition.

As with all Audio Physic designs the point of the exercise is imaging, and when you've managed to rearrange your room to put the speakers, and listening chair, as close to the optimal points as possible it's remarkable how broad the stage becomes. I wouldn't say that stage

depth is particularly stunning. It's very good yes but not significantly better than some stand mounts in the same price range can achieve. Nor as dramatic as AP's own original standmount the Step as far as I recall. The 'widescreen' listening experience is rather different and highly entertaining though, giving the instruments and player's more space

to breathe in certainly helps create a convincing musical presence. With the speakers firing across the width of the room, some recordings do get a little thin in the centre but a surprising number fill out the stage admirably. Little Feat's classic *Waiting for Columbus* is a great example of a live recording with plenty of atmosphere; check out Fat Man in the Bathtub again if you haven't played this one for a while. The Sparks do a great job of placing the players on a stage, each with their own space and ambience.

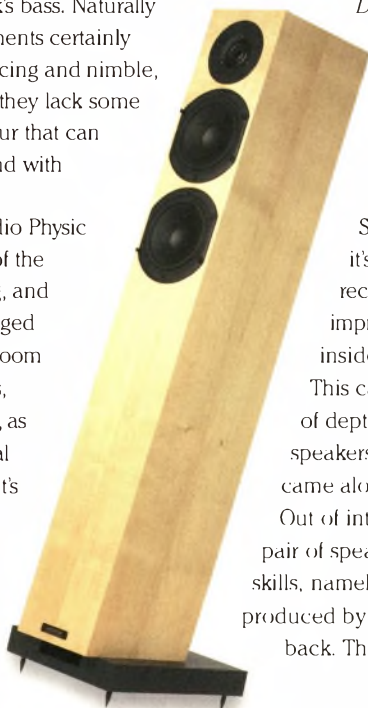
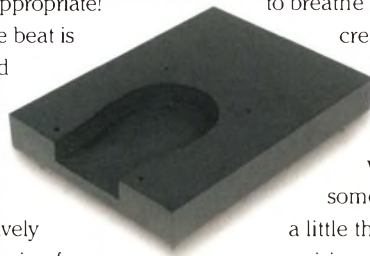
Voice is also very well served, alongside Levinson and his double bass on the Red Rose disc is his actress wife Kim Cattral reading the poem *Little Dog's Day*, and very real she sounds too. One track that is guaranteed to bring out the depth of field in any speaker is the Gaudeamus choral work *Sacred Feast* (dmp SACD), which although it's a six channel surround recording can create a pretty impressive impression of the inside of a church in stereo.

This came across with plenty of depth and didn't phase the speakers when the high notes came along.

Out of interest I dug out another pair of speakers with strong imaging skills, namely the Eikos standmounts produced by Tom Evans a few years back. They use a single Jordan

drive unit in a flocked polystyrene cabinet and have a pretty distinctive tonal balance but again imaging and timing are the strengths. Next to the Sparks they gave less bandwidth but greater image precision and made the wooden speakers sound, well, wooden - he didn't use polystyrene for its looks. The Spark is a much more rounded product but if its imaging precision rather than overall acoustic space that you are after then there are stronger alternatives and not all of them are as single minded as the Eikos.

That said this elegant Audio Physic represents a well-judged balance of compromises. For those after an attractive, wide bandwidth speaker that times exceptionally and images deftly it's worth serious consideration, especially if you've the room to site it optimally. It works fine with more conventional set up but then you don't get the stage width, which leaves it sounding a little, well, conventional. ▶+



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Drive units:	25mm tweeter 125mm mid/bass 125mm bass
Frequency response:	38Hz - 40kHz (-3dB)
Impedance:	4 ohms
Sensitivity:	89dB/W/m
Dimensions (WxHxD):	98x147 x 980 x 220 mm
Weight:	17kg ea.
Finishes:	cherry, black ash, American maple, maple (pictured)
Price:	£1,700

UK distributor:

Aanvil Audio
Tel. 01359 240687

Manufacturer:

Audio Physic
www.audiophysic.de



The Wilson Benesch Arc loudspeaker

by Chris Binns

"The last thing the world needs now is another small two way loudspeaker..."

Overheard at a hi-fi show recently, I did not stick around to find out where this particular comment was aimed, or indeed coming from. In truth, there is certainly no shortage of small loudspeakers on the market, so I guess there must be a demand for them - there are a lot of people out there who either do not have the room for large loudspeakers, or by choice opt for the benefits a small loudspeaker can provide, and to hell with the compromises. The most obvious of which, is of course a limited bass response, and/or compromised efficiency and loudness capabilities. Although there have been over the years many miniature loudspeaker designs with a respectable performance, and the use of sub-woofers might have liberated very small boxes from the usual constraints, the cabinet of around 12 Litres with a nominal six inch bass driver still has an enduring popularity. In practice, (i.e. an average sized living room) it would seem as if this provides a desirable compromise between attainable volume and bass extension versus domestic intrusion. This would go some way in explaining why speakers of this size have not enjoyed similar success in America, where the average living room is considerably larger.

In many ways the die was cast back in the early eighties with the original Celestion SL6. Sure, there were small loudspeakers about, such as the LS35/A, but it was the Celestion that seemed to immortalise the formula of a six and



a half inch bass unit and dome tweeter, with a very definite preference for stand mounting away from room boundaries. Most small loudspeakers at the time were intended for the bookshelf. It opened the floodgates for this type of design, to the extent that floor standing models would not get a look in for nigh on a decade, when fashion would once again swing around and favour larger cabinets. Such is the way the industry works, particularly with loudspeakers - think metal dome tweeters (again precipitated by the SL6) or curved side-walls on cabinets, very much this years thing.

So the Arc is situated in a crowded market. Fortunately it has a number of features that set it apart from the mainstream, and go some way towards justifying what is a high price for a small loudspeaker. Small? Deceptively so; although the frontal area is quite large to accommodate what is actually a seven inch driver (an extra half an inch is quite

significant in terms of cone area) the cabinet tapers in rapidly toward the back, thus the internal volume is not as big as it would seem. Pivotal to the whole structure, this part of the cabinet is fabricated from carbon fibre, while the top and bottom are made from Perspex. This leaves just the front baffle and the remaining side cheeks which are made from MDF. Bass loading is via two ports that exit on the underside of the loudspeaker, and bi-wiring is available via spade and 4mm friendly binding posts, for which Wilson Benesch are thoughtful enough to provide a spanner.

The use of carbon fibre is a large part of the *raison d'être* of not only the ARC, but Wilson Benesch the company. Formed in 1989, the availability of a grant to research the use of carbon fibre in the production of hi-fi equipment saw the release of a turntable, closely followed by a tone arm and cartridge to much acclaim, and considerable success. Bear in mind too, that economically 1990 was not the best time to be launching high end products on the world. The development of a loudspeaker seemed to be a natural way forward, resulting ultimately in the Bishop project; much of the research carried out has found its way down through the range to the smaller models, such as the ARC reviewed here.

So just what is the big deal with carbon fibre? From a structural point of view it is both immensely rigid and lightweight, both desirable properties, while the ability to be able to fabricate complex and unusual shapes opens ►

► new avenues from a manufacturing point of view. Unfortunately both the material and the processes involved do not come cheap, but the advantages in using it as a cabinet material are highly attractive. The high rigidity should mean low levels of vibration, while energy storage is minimised due to the low mass, and the inherent damping properties of carbon fibre act to further quell unwanted resonances. The result should be a step closer to a virtually inert cabinet that should contribute little to colour the sound.

Of course, this is not the first time lightweight materials have been used in the fabrication of loudspeaker cabinets. Having mentioned the Celestion SL6, further development by Celestion resulted in the SL600 and latterly the 700, whose main claim to fame was the use of a lightweight material called Aerolam. The level of engineering was both impressive and expensive, while sonically the results were something of a mixed bag. While offering genuinely low levels of colouration, the system was somewhat lacking in musical dynamics, partly due to the cripplingly low sensitivity, and finding suitable amplification to wake the loudspeaker up became a real challenge, if not almost impossible.

Aesthetically, the ARC's look suitably high tech. With a refreshing lack of wood veneer, the carbon fibre has a depth to its appearance, while the black Perspex and silver cheeks compliment it well. Real wood veneered side cheeks are available at extra cost. Construction is to a reasonable standard, although the seam where the top and bottom join the side panels was not quite as tidy as I would

expect – maybe I am being picky but a loudspeaker of this size and price really should be 'small and perfectly formed'. The dedicated stands are a good match visually to the ARC's,



and bolt on via three bushes in the base of the loudspeaker. This, in conjunction with the downward firing port makes the use of any other type of stand almost impossible; the only reason I mention this is that I was not entirely happy with the stability of the whole structure once

it was set up. The vertical array of binding posts in conjunction with a heavy cable tended to 'pull' on the relatively lightweight speaker, ultimately filling the stands might help lower the centre of gravity and thus prove more stable.

High frequencies are handled by a Wilson Benesch specified version of the Scanspeak one inch soft dome tweeter, a unit that has been gathering a reputation as one of the best soft dome designs around. Crossover to this unit is a relatively simple second order design. The partnering bass driver is used throughout the

Wilson Benesch range, and is unique in that the company took the brave decision to manufacture their own drive unit, rather than settle for using an off the shelf design.

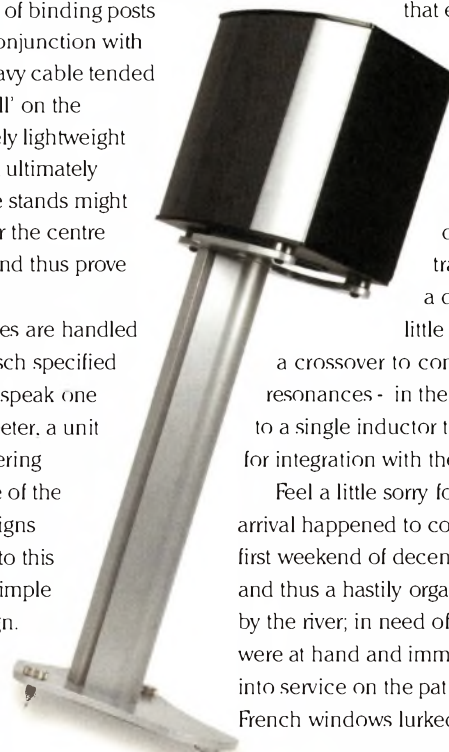
Built around a chassis machined from a solid billet of aluminium, this costly process results in a highly rigid structure that offers minimal turbulence and hence interference to energy radiated from the rear of the cone. The use of rare earth materials allow the magnet assembly to be similarly small and aerodynamic, while achieving a stronger and more focused magnetic field than the more common ceramic assembly.

The cone material is also of some interest. Although the actual material of manufacture is polypropylene, which is common enough, the way in which it is used is somewhat different. Instead of the more usual moulding process, the polypropylene is treated to give it a crystalline structure that allows it to be drawn into a fibre and subsequently woven; layers of this material are welded together and a final thin skin is melted on to the structure. The result is a cone

that exhibits superior characteristics to a more conventional diaphragm in terms of both rigidity and damping. That translates into a driver that needs little in the way of

a crossover to control cone resonances - in the ARC this amounts to a single inductor to 'voice' the unit for integration with the treble unit.

Feel a little sorry for the ARC's. Their arrival happened to coincide with the first weekend of decent summer weather, and thus a hastily organised barbecue by the river; in need of music the ARC's were at hand and immediately pressed into service on the patio. Just inside the French windows lurked a monster in ►



▶ the form of the Plinius SA 250, one of the bigger power amplifiers to grace my system. While this could have ended up as a sort of 'baptism by fire' ritual – a powerful amplifier, the great outdoors and bottle or two of decent wine – the whole episode remained remarkably civilised, right through to the small hours, despite ever increasing volume levels. Plans for further investigation the next day were somewhat compromised by a (I think) unjustified hangover, but come the evening the Wilson Benesch were properly installed in the living room where I could get a more realistic impression of their capabilities.

With the Plinius amplifier still running, I was able to confirm that for a small loudspeaker the ARC is capable of pretty impressive levels, even from a vinyl source where sub-sonics can compromise low frequency reproduction with a small loudspeaker. Bass response was pretty impressive for the size, and remained tuneful and concise as far as it went. Moving them from the middle of the room toward the rear wall gave bottom end more authority, but without clouding the mid range to any degree. Which was surprising; most speakers that I have tried favour one position or the other, the ARC's seemed happy with both, which could be good news in smaller or more 'difficult' rooms.

The ARC's were comfortable with all types of music, having the stamina necessary for more uncivilised forms of rock, yet a delicacy that worked well with acoustic music. One tends to associate exotic cabinet materials and drive units with incredible 'laid bare' detail and a rather analytical performance – those looking for this

will be disappointed. While not lacking information, the ARC's are mercifully free of any tendencies to flaunt their unconventional construction, and sound particularly coherent and engaging. It is only after a while that you realise there is a refreshing lack of smearing and muddiness to the sound that makes it so appealing. This was particularly apparent with complicated

music where a lot of things were going on at once. It was easy enough to discern individual instruments, but never at the expense of losing the feel of the music – sometimes a criticism I have of 'high resolution' designs where music is dissected to the extent of becoming meaningless.

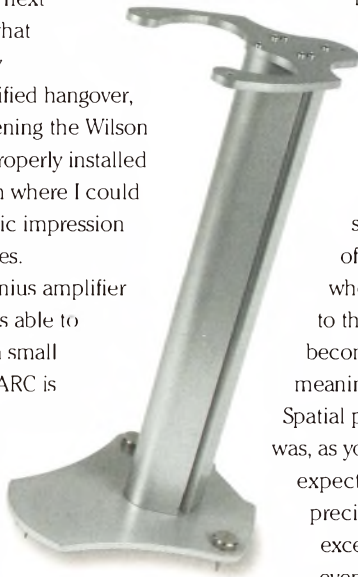
Spatial presentation was, as you would expect from a small precision monitor, excellent. Holding up well even off axis, the ARC's were able to project a solid image away from the cabinets to good effect, and while the depth was not as far developed as I would like, remember that I was using them closer to the wall than I would normally.

While the quoted sensitivity is not that high, the ARC's do not need massive amounts of power. Combinations that on paper would seem ludicrous, actually netted some remarkable results. A Leak Stereo Twenty that I had just re-valved for a friend sounded gorgeous, and we sat and listened to a variety of music for a couple of hours while the ARC's weaved a degree of magic totally out of proportion to what you would expect from twelve Watts per channel.

The ARC is an expensive small loudspeaker with a considerable amount of novel technology to its name. The result is not entirely what I had expected. There will always be

a demand for small innovative loudspeakers that dare to be a bit different. I have witnessed, and been party to many hours, if not days of coaxing the last little bit of performance from a small box, and been suckered in by, say 'the exceptional mid range performance' of certain designs. And then you realise that actually it was all a waste of time because it sounds about as musically interesting as a bed bath.

The ARC's approach is totally different. It would seem as if the refined materials have contributed to a loudspeaker that rather than trying to impress you with one particular aspect of its performance, neatly sidesteps all the issues usually apparent with small boxes and thus proves thoroughly rewarding with a wide range of amplification and listening environments. The ARC is a small loudspeaker I could easily live with. ➤



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Driver compliment:	170mm bass mid, 25mm tweeter
Sensitivity:	88dB 1 Watt @1 metre
Nominal impedance:	8 Ohms (4 Ohms minimum)
Crossover frequency:	5Khz
Crossover type:	1st order bass 2nd order treble
Dimensions(WxHxD):	230 x 310 x 300 mm
Weight:	10Kg
Finishes:	Architectural Polymer or choice of real wood veneers
Price:	£2400 £2576.25 in wood

Manufacturer:

Wilson Benesch

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The Cabasse iO Satellite And Sub-Woofer System

by Roy Gregory

In Issue 17 I looked (at some length) at the potential problems and benefits attending the use of sub-woofers in high quality audio systems. Along the way I also listened to the REL Stadium III, by way of establishing a recognisable benchmark for hi-fi (as opposed to AV performance). Next we'll be looking at some of the more radical solutions on offer, but before we do that, there's a step down in price and sophistication available to us, and I'd be remiss not to examine it. Having said that, not all dedicated sub/satellite systems are cheap, and whilst a plethora of six in a box AV solutions at ever decreasing prices have undermined what shreds of credibility the approach still retained, we are also seeing the re-emergence of high quality options. The Bristol show saw the appearance of the Leema system, Frankfurt the Penn Audio set-up and in New York the latest incarnation of the tiny Gallo globe speakers with their modular active bass arrangement. Prices might vary, but the intent is still the same: compact quality with hidden bandwidth.

Longest standing of these, or at least the one I've known about the longest, is Cabasse's iO system. Based on the three-way concentric globe that graces the companies' flagship designs, the iO satellites use

a smaller 160mm diameter two-way sphere. Inside is a 130mm sandwich coned mid-range unit surrounding a semi-horn loaded dome tweeter,

delivering a sensitivity of 93dB and usable

output down to around 180Hz.

The review speakers arrived with a pair of truly elegant stands that also allow connections to be made at their



base thus eliminating unsightly trailing wire syndrome, a vital consideration in the lifestyle type environments in which the iO is most often going to find itself. To that end, the spheres are also available with shelf and wall brackets, the latter employing magnetic attraction to fasten the speaker in place, thus allowing you to place it at any desired angle. It's an astonishingly effective solution to wall mounting satellites and quite the neatest I've seen. It makes the expansion of a single pair of iOs into a 5.1 set-up about as painless as it's ever going to be. All of which is fascinating,

but a little off the point. I'm interested in the iOs as a stereo solution, and to that end the quality of the sub-woofer is critical.

To match the iO you receive a large black or cherry box, not surprisingly called the Jupiter. Ironically, as cute, svelte and tactile as the satellites are, the sub is the complete opposite. It's big, bulky and rather bluff to look at. It's also reassuringly heavy and carries a full complement of controls, which bodes well for its performance. And whilst its size means that you'll be pushed to hide it away behind the sofa, if you are interested in maximising its benefits you'll not be doing that anyway. The built-in amplifier offers 150 Watts to drive what is I believe an 8" unit, placed in a complex dual ported arrangement. On the rear you'll find a rotary crossover and output level controls, along with the all important phase switch. There are also line level in and outputs and the standard high-level connections, the latter using 4mm binding posts! All in all, it's a sensible package that should allow the user to integrate the sub's output without too much trouble. Of course, it helps if you've got some idea of where the sub's going to work best anyway, and having experimented extensively with the REL I had something of a head start in this regard. Thankfully, both the stands and sub are tapped for spikes, a further indication of the serious intent behind this system.

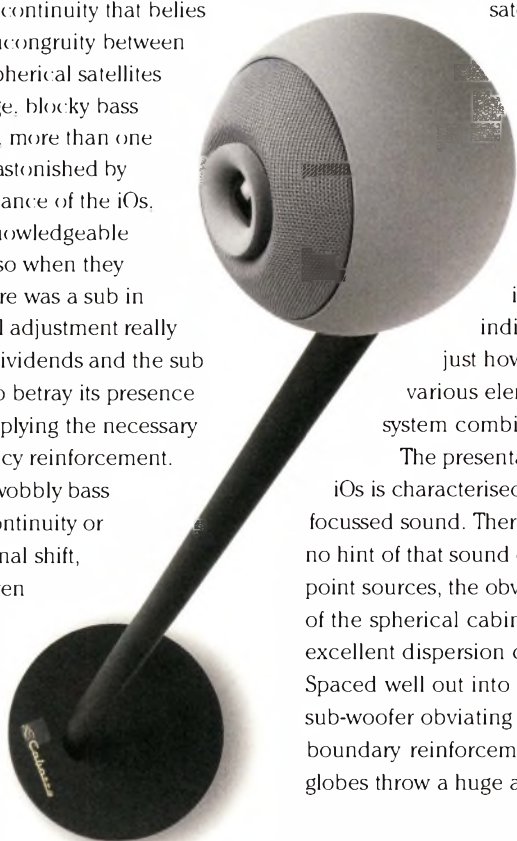
I chose to run the sats full range, directly connected to the amp. A brief experiment with them connected

▶ through the sub confirmed that this was the better option, offering greater transparency and immediacy whilst careful adjustment of the sub's volume and level controls achieved excellent overall integration with no telltale roughness at the sats' lower limit. That aside, hooking up was completely straight forward, only the sub's



integration demanding the anticipated time and care, but the results were certainly reward for the investment. As I said earlier, the necessary controls are all there, but without the sophistication and repeatability (or cost)

of the REL. Add a far wider range of adjustment, unnecessarily so in my view, and the process requires both patience and deftness of touch. But once you get it right you'll achieve a degree of continuity that belies the visual incongruity between the svelte spherical satellites and the large, blocky bass unit. In fact, more than one visitor was astonished by the performance of the iOs, the more knowledgeable even more so when they realised there was a sub in play. Careful adjustment really does bear dividends and the sub does little to betray its presence beyond supplying the necessary low-frequency reinforcement. There's no wobbly bass notes, discontinuity or dramatic tonal shift, just nice, even extension.



Playing the Gary Karr *Adagio d'Albinoni* as part of the set-up procedure I was astonished by the seamless descent of the bowed double bass as it walked down its arpeggios, deep, deep down to the bottom of its range. Could I hear the transition between satellites and sub? With the set-up finalised the shift in sound source was only betrayed by a subtle change in the overall spectral balance. The globes, compared to the highest standards, have a slight but pervasive plasticky colouration that is most easily detected on vocals and acoustically recorded string instruments. It's subtle and demands familiar material and subjects to detect. But once identified it's one of the few clues as to where the

satellites end and the warmer and more rounded tones of the sub-woofer. It's a far from obvious shift, and the fact that it's the prime indicator tells you just how effectively the various elements in this system combine.

The presentation of the iOs is characterised by their open, focussed sound. There's absolutely no hint of that sound emanating from point sources, the obvious benefits of the spherical cabinets and their excellent dispersion clear to hear. Spaced well out into the room, the sub-woofer obviating the need for boundary reinforcement, the little globes throw a huge and independent

soundstage, unrestricted by the room's natural boundaries. Pointing straight at the listener and perched on their tall stands, they throw an acoustic space which is distinct

and specific to each recording, whether it's Heifetz and the Chicago Symphony captured by Mohr and Layton, or Crowded House captured in the studio. The difference to the precision and open clarity provided by the majority of mini-

monitors that this is a soundstage and musical presence underpinned by the substantial contribution of the matching sub. It anchors the performance, spatially and musically, adding the weight, scale and drama that makes music immediately more satisfying and hi-fi's reproduction of it that much more convincing.

Of course, all that weight is only any good if it's applied in the right quantity, place and at the right time, which is what makes set-up so critical. It's simply not sufficient to plonk the sub-woofer down behind the sofa and hope for the best. I know I keep saying this, but if you want to achieve anything like the performance potential of a sub/sat combination you are going to have to be prepared to work it. If you are lucky you'll be blessed with an experienced and knowledgeable dealer, but if not then the REL technique (which I think is available on the companies' web-site) is a good starting point.

But get it right and... Even the difficult, undulating bass line on Crowded Houses' 'Fall At Your Feet' swells and throbs with



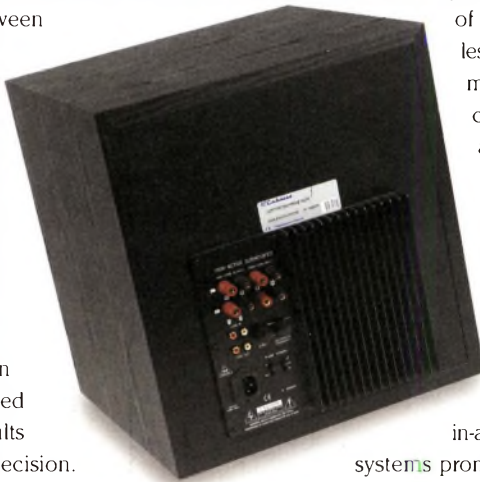
▶ a momentum and power that's a world away from the turgid, lumpy, pitchless morass that emanates from too many of today's affordable floorstanders. Which of course, brings us to the crux of the question. Undeniably stylish, attractively compact and unobtrusive, even placed well out into the room, how does the performance of the iO/Jupiter system compare to comparably priced two-box, two or three-way alternatives. Well, the likes of a Neat Petite will beat the Cabasse combo for overall coherence and dynamic integrity, scaling the micro-dynamic steps in a player's technique with greater dexterity. But it can't match the scale, drama and substance of the iO/Jupiter. It's a choice between communication and stable clarity, intimate immediacy and the sense of overall performance.

Going to the other extreme and comparing the Cabasse to an equivalently priced floorstander results in a no-contest decision. The two-box set-up can't match the Jupiter for scale or extension, the iO for open, focussed clarity, and the big cabinet panels contribute far more (and far more nasty) colouration to proceedings than the tiny spherical enclosures of the satellites. Which is kind of ironic. Whichever way the conventional model turns it finds itself trumped

by the capabilities of the sub/sat set-up. Bandwidth is a non-starter. Efficiency? Well, the Cabasse offers a realistic 93dB. Colouration we've covered. Integration, scale, dynamic range, the list goes on. The point is that you might beat it on one count but the balance of virtues presents an unassailable combination. I find it ironic that it's the home cinema market that has created this situation.



On the one hand its influence has pushed the average efficiency of floorstanders over the 90dB mark. On the other, the requirement for bass weight has led to optimistic voicing and the pursuit of ever larger, less braced and more coloured cabinets, with a resulting reduction in musical capability. At the same time, the appearance of a whole host of five-in-a-box speaker systems promising AV



nirvana through five dinky drivers and a cheap sub, all for less than £500 has undermined what little credibility the sub/sat approach still retained. The result is that few serious hi-fi buyers would give the iO/Jupiter combination so much as a second look. Yet despite the prejudice that afflicts its chosen design path, this is a truly worthy hi-fi performer, and

would also make the heart of an excellent 5.1 set-up.

Combine the Cabasse system with its 93dB efficiency with a small but high quality amp like the Sugden A21 and all you need is a decent source for a system capable of some seriously convincing large scale musical reproduction. You might opt for something with a little more immediacy and directed intimacy, but you'd be very hard pressed to better it for scale and the easy ability to work on every kind of music, large and small. The Cabasse iO and Jupiter might be unusual in appearance, but it's also unusually musically versatile and satisfying. Take a walk on the wild side – the results might just surprise you. ▶

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Two-way satellite and active sub-woofer system
Drivers:	25mm hard dome-tweeter 130mm sandwich bass cones 210mm Bass Driver
Sensitivity:	93dB
Bandwidth:	Satellites 180-20000Hz ±3dB Sub-woofer 35-200Hz ±3dB
Impedance:	Satellites - 8 Ohms
Dimensions:	Satellites - 16cm diameter Stands - 105cm high Sub (WxHxD) - 400x430x426mm
Finishes:	Satellites - White, Black, Grey Sub - Black or Cherry
Price:	£1200

UK Distributor:

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Tel. 01252 702705
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Manufacturer:

Cabasse
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Epos M12 Loudspeaker

by Jason Hector

Whenever you read about a pair of Epos speakers the word coherent gets used many times, and call me a plagiarist but I can see why. I would also add the synonyms; lucid and articulate just to be sure you know where I am coming from (and to show I can use a thesaurus). In this review I am reporting on the M12, the current entry-level speaker. An evolutionary design the M12 followed the ES12 which was itself a replacement for the classic ES11 which was a reworked and miniaturised ES14. As the ES14 first saw the light of day back in 1986 these speakers have a definite pedigree. Epos has had a turbulent history in the last few years with several owners in that time. Fortunately Michael Creek has picked the company up to allow Creek/Epos the ability to provide a system solution, something becoming more popular in this industry as it tries to square itself with the pure lifestyle market. Not surprisingly the M12 is a good match to the Creek 5350SE and 4330 amplifiers I have been listening to recently. We have however decided that the Creek/Epos system deserves another article to fully encompass the various components and combinations and we will be looking at what you gain as you move through the range in a couple of issues.

The M12 is shipped with a good set of instructions that help you to correctly site your speakers. I found it was worth spending some time moving the speakers around to achieve the correct balance of bass weight, with various amounts of toe-in used to tune the image and the treble response. In my room when listening from my relatively "near-field" position I ended up with the speakers a good 18 inches

from the rear wall with some toe in. To be honest I was never completely happy with the sound in this arrangement. The bass didn't quite work and the speaker seemed not to have enough space to integrate properly. So I tried firing down the room. The speakers then ended up 12' from the rear wall (not that they needed that much, but room constraints placed them there) with 2' and 3' from the side walls, so a real free space position, with my listening seat about 12' from them. Ah much better! For small speakers they certainly like decent amounts of space! If the above puts you off remember that all rooms are different, so if they sound good to you in a demonstration then get them home to check in your room. Sensibly the instructions encourage experimentation with position and state that "if it sounds right it is right": good advice for all system setups.

First thing that strikes you on firing these speakers up is that they major on the traditional Epos virtues of speed and good timing. They can rock out really well. With Furslide – Adventure we have plenty of distorted guitar work. This album is simply produced and captures a young band really playing off of each other. The M12 seems to thrive on this, presenting a superb and engrossing result that is extremely well integrated. They don't manage the big speaker trick of physically presenting the music. Put simply, drums won't

wallop you when struck hard, but they always locked onto the dominant rhythm, making listening to the M12 an interesting and entertaining experience. This speaker plain gets the fundamentals right. I did find some hardness in the treble as the wick is advanced which leads to a bit of fatigue after a long period but these speakers will play loud. A good example is the latest album by Kasey

Chambers – *Barricades and Brickwalls*. This album deserves to be played loud to fully appreciate the visceral impact of the music. Unfortunately this recording suffers from a degree of digitus and is quite brittle and unrelenting across the upper frequencies which just exposes the M12 a tad. Shame really

because the rest of its performance on this album is excellent providing a very believable rendition of that powerful Kasey Chambers voice.

The crossover region is particularly well handled in that it's not obvious where it is. This lends vocals and the spoken word in particular a rare continuity at this price, none of that personality change as a voice moves through the octaves. Quite remarkable when you consider the crossover is a single component, a capacitor to protect the tweeter from low frequencies. The roll off of the bass mid is purely mechanical which can be a recipe for disaster but



▶ the Epos guys have more than enough experience with this approach as the result shows. I think the lack of crossover goes a long way to explaining the immediacy of the speaker.

The speaker is of average efficiency for its size and seems to thrive on clean power delivery in the same way the old Epos speakers did. Although I believe, and this is from memory, the M12 is less fussy about partnering equipment than the old ES11 or ES14. The older Epos speakers seemed to need a Naim NAP250 or similar to give their best where these M12's are happy with the, admittedly superb, Creek 5350SE integrated amplifier. I can only assume that the Creek components and the M12's were designed together because they match each other extremely well. For example the very easygoing treble performance of the Creek CD53 5350SE combination is a natural foil to the M12's slightly aggressive top-end.

The product is very well finished for the price. In fact it is very well finished for a speaker at three times the price. The veneer is of excellent quality and picking the speakers up tells you that there is plenty going on inside. The carcass is thick MDF with the veneer over all except the moulded baffle. Multiple braces are used to further strengthen the cabinet and stop it singing along while the baffle is screwed into a solid frame. The basket of the bass/mid driver is an integral part of the moulded baffle (you can't beat the materials matching there) which should allow much more control of the interaction between the driver and the baffle

because it is such a repeatable and controllable construction.

The main bass/mid driver is a 150mm diameter device made in the best Epos tradition with a moulded plastic cone which according to the literature is "profiled to improve



transient response and integration with the tweeter without the need for a complicated crossover". It features a fixed and shaped pole piece and is shielded for use near a cathode ray

tube based TV in home cinema systems. The tweeter is a 25mm dome made from aluminium and like the bass/mid driver it is designed in house.

The targets for the design are quoted as improved sensitivity, transient response and a reduction of smearing. All fixing hardware is hidden again reinforcing the quality look of these speakers which is good

news considering the speaker is designed for grilles off running. I hope you have the impression that this speaker is well constructed because it certainly is.

Round back connection is via the commonly seen gold plated bi-wire multi-way posts mounted on the ubiquitous shaped plastic panel. This for me is the one area where Epos could easily improve things. I would prefer to see higher quality sockets entering the cabinet proper.

This should keep the cabinet stronger while providing a better connection regime and do we really need bi-wiring? I always found the biggest upgrade that bi-wiring manages is bypassing the crappy connectors that are used to link the two sets of terminals for single wire operation (but that's just my opinion and the rest of the

market still seems to require four connectors per speaker). Also round the back is the reflex port which must be well designed as I could barely detect the usual port induced timing issues normally found with this acoustic loading system. The rear port will place constraints on the minimum distance the speaker can operate from the wall. Sensibly the M12 is supplied with a set of foam bungs for the port which are designed to allow tuning of the speakers response to your room. Thankfully the bass proved tuneable in my room. With the Dynavector power amplifier in my usual system the speaker produced bass that was bloomy with the port open. Adding the supplied bungs was a revelation. The sound tightening and balancing out, end result? A very even response and very little bass overhang. These Epos' do not go hugely deep but the quality of the bass is good with a rich balance which helps fool the listener that they are going deeper than they really are. Fortunately they avoided that one note character which is often the result of trying to get serious bass from a small cabinet and a port.

The M12 stands are a very

▶ simple, open frame design. Supplied as a multipart flat pack, when bolted together they offer good support. You have a choice of termination supplied, spikes or pads for the bases, spikes for me. For the tops either spikes or counter sunk screws to allow the speakers to be blu-tacked to the stands.



So back to the music and the *O brother, where art thou?* soundtrack. The opener is a simple chain gang song (literally) with the only backing being the pick axes and chains of the workers. Well this track is superficially simple but listen a little harder and there is quite a lot happening. The various deep male vocals are all intermingled and it takes a pretty decent pair of speakers to make sense of it all; suffice to say the M12 handle this with aplomb. The rest of this album

of course featuring the Soggy Bottom Boys, has spurred the huge revival in American Folk music or bluegrass. If you don't know, the film itself is yet another Coen brothers classic and probably makes the best use of its soundtrack since Tarrantino's *Reservoir Dogs*. Anyway the songs feature plenty of pedal steel, mandolins and banjos and if you can't tell which is which well it certainly isn't the M12's fault. Their capability with acoustic instruments is very high. All the harmonic richness is preserved and the fundamental driver quality means nothing is overly emphasised again preserving the real qualities. The overall tonal balance is even although there's an issue in the midrange that can make the vocalist sound like he's singing through "cupped hand" at times. Not a big problem, but noticeable compared to my reference speakers.

I recently managed to track down a minter of a copy of a *weapon called the world* by those eco-campaigners the Levellers. The Levellers have a rare knack when it comes to creating an anthem or two to rail against the state of the nation. These songs always feature big choruses with plenty of powerful dense playing. The M12 did very well with this album resolving the various instruments but still managing to

keep the forward momentum and coherence of the songs intact. The Levellers vocalist has a great voice and these speakers did it real justice and in isolation the only serious omission is the raw power I know should be there. You simply can't get that sort of response from a speaker of this size or at this price.

Natalie Merchant's *Motherland* is an album that seems to have received a load of stick, but I like it and it is a great test of a loudspeaker's ability to get out of the way of the music. The emotion of the music is obvious with these speakers. The image thrown by

these speakers is relatively small although stable in space. The feeling of space around performers is somewhat lacking, but temporally everything is present and correct leading, again where the recording allows it, to a realistic impression of a real band playing together. The level of detail retrieval is good for the money; yes it misses many of the clues which more expensive speakers present, but that doesn't detract from the speakers obvious qualities when you are listening just to enjoy the music.

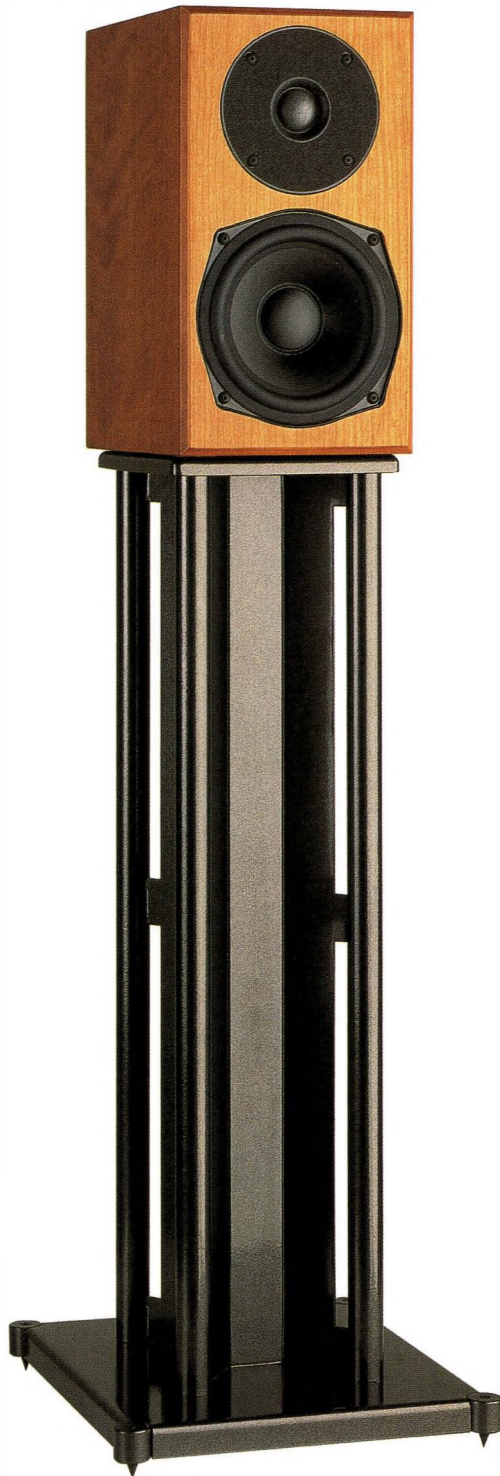
So is it worth spending more? Well yes the Royd RR1 for example offers a more civilised sound without the hard edges of the M12, although they won't play quite as loud. Overall the M12 is an extremely balanced product that doesn't try to be all things to all people. Instead it is a product for which a sensible performance envelope has been defined and the speakers perform admirably within it, making the M12 a complete product and very good value. They are sure to be a satisfying long-term purchase. ▶+

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Two-way reflex loaded speaker
Bass Driver:	150mm
Tweeter:	25mm aluminium dome
Power Handling:	75 Watts Max
Frequency Response:	60Hz - 20kHz + 3dB
Impedance:	8 ohms Nominal
Sensitivity:	88dB/1 watt/1 metre
Dimensions (HxWxD):	375x200mmx250mm
Weight:	8.8kg
Finish:	Light Cherry or Dark Cherry wood veneer.
Price:	£499

Manufacturer:

Epos Acoustics
Tel. (44)(0)208 361 8864
Fax. (44)(0)208 361 4136
Net. www.epos-acoustics.com



London Area Cornflake.co.uk, LONDON, Tel: 0207 6310472
Rayleigh Hi Fi, LAKESIDE, Tel: 01708 680551
Thomas Heintz, BAYSWATER, London, Tel: 0207 2292077

South East Rayleigh Hi Fi, RAYLEIGH, Essex, Tel: 01268 779762
Rayleigh Hi Fi, CHELMSFORD, Essex, Tel: 01245 265245

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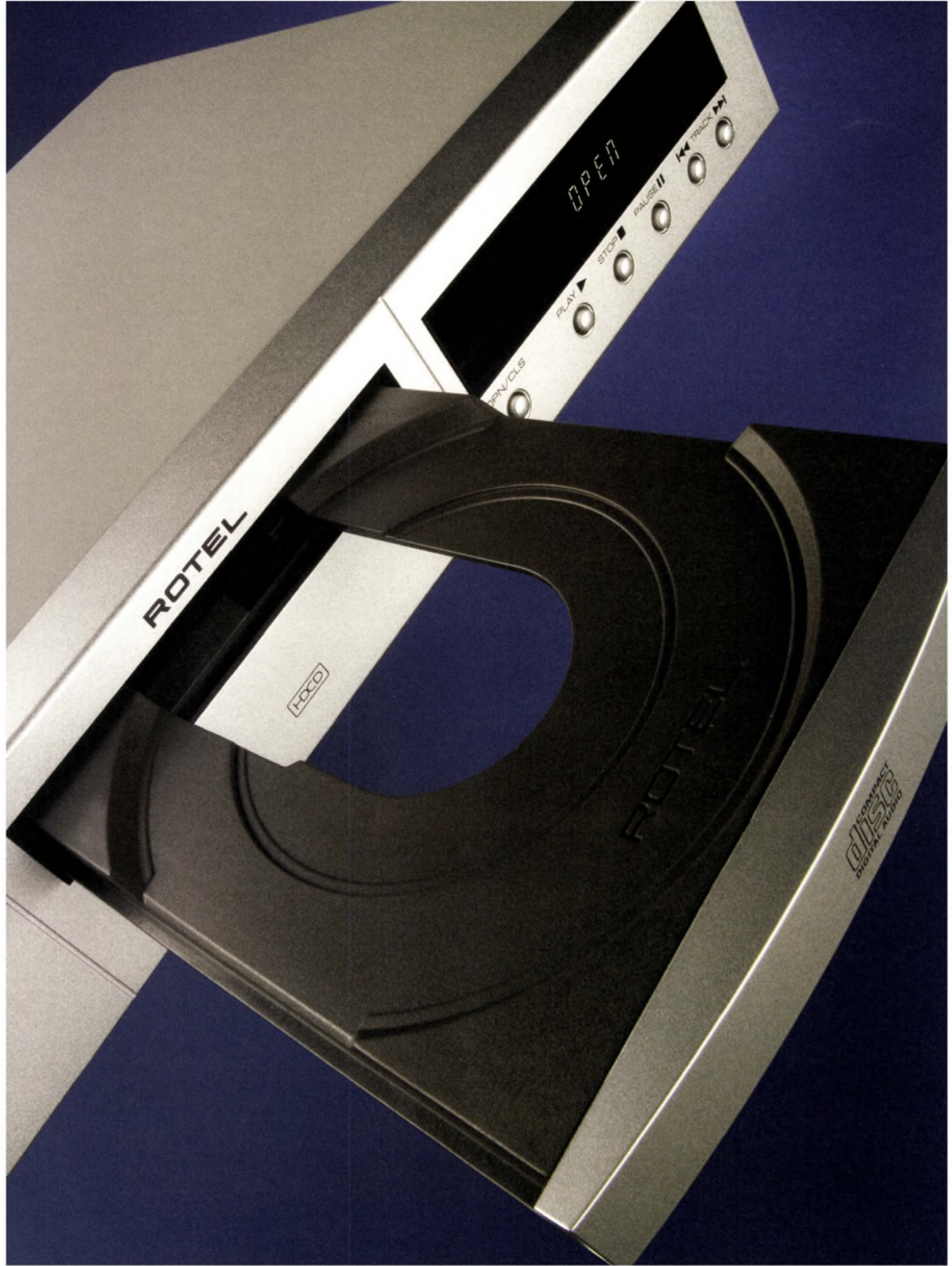


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The Real Deal

Rotel RCD-02 CD player

by Jimmy Hughes

Rotel have long enjoyed a reputation for producing affordable quality hi-fi for those on a tight budget wanting excellent performance. So the new 02 series is heir to a well-established tradition. There are currently three components in the line; the RA-02 remote-control amplifier at £349.95 (an RA-01 also exists - as the RA-02, but minus remote control at £249.95); the RT-02 RDS FM/AM tuner at £274.95; and finally (subject of this review) the RCD-02 CD player costing £374.95. A separate pre/power amplifier combination will be added to the 02 range fairly soon.

Crisp, focussed, lively, forward, detailed, immediate - these are the sort of sonic attributes one expects from Rotel kit. And, true to form, the RCD-02 impressed with a combination of sharpness and lucidity that made the music sound bright bubbly and articulate. The RCD-02 CD player's built around a Burr-Brown 18bit HDCD decoder with 8 times over-sampling. The transport features a high-precision linear motor with low-jitter servo circuitry - as used in Rotel's more expensive RCD-1070. A large power transformer is used, with separate windings for analogue and digital stages.

Operationally, the RCD-02 is straightforward and uncomplicated. Track access is fairly nifty, and it's easy to cue tracks using the direct-entry keypad on the supplied remote handset. Disc tracking seems to be completely competent, and given a damaged CD that can't be played, the machine mutes rather than going into continuous repeat

or stuttering. Unusually, it's not possible to switch off the illuminated display, nor can one access index points - though it has to be said that fewer and fewer CDs feature index points these days. You can decode HDCD discs, which is slightly more useful.

The RCD-02's overall sonic presentation definitely sits on the lively forward side of neutral. The upper treble, although clean and focussed, is sharp, tactile, and very detailed. It's not an especially rich, warm, or beguiling sort of sound. This sonic impression one of lucidity and control is aided by a bass end that's very firm and tightly damped. It's a honed lean sound - not an ounce of spare fat anywhere. Yet, although the presentation is forward, the balance isn't unpleasantly stark or lacking in weight.

I liked the RCD-02 more on rock and pop than classical. Its added impact and immediacy works well with electronic music, and anything with percussion, creating plenty of excitement. On classical music, a little more richness and warmth would've been welcome. Listening to the RCD-02 is akin to moving a few seats closer to the instruments; the impression is one of increased attack and impact, with

less hall ambience. To be fair, CD tends to do that anyway - emphasising sharpness and lucidity at the expense of warmth and richness. So the RCD-02's hardly unusual.

Mechanically, the RCD-02's transport is very quiet - a faint whirring can just be heard with the ear close by - but in

normal usage the player

is to all intents and purposes silent.

Build quality is nice and solid for this class of component, and finish and styling were exemplary.

Controls on the front panel are kept fairly minimal, with the more esoteric functions being found on the remote handset. The player's illuminated display is clearly laid out and easy to read, and as previously mentioned, the transport operates quickly. At the rear there's a set of unbalanced analogue outputs.

For those wanting to hook up an external DAC, there's a co-axial digital output via a phono socket, but no optical output. And the mains lead attaches via an IEC plug - making it easy to replace the supplied mains cord with a specialist mains cable, should this be desired. There's a choice of finish too; silver or black brushed aluminum. And, as all components in the 02 range feature a 12V trigger system, the entire system can be placed in

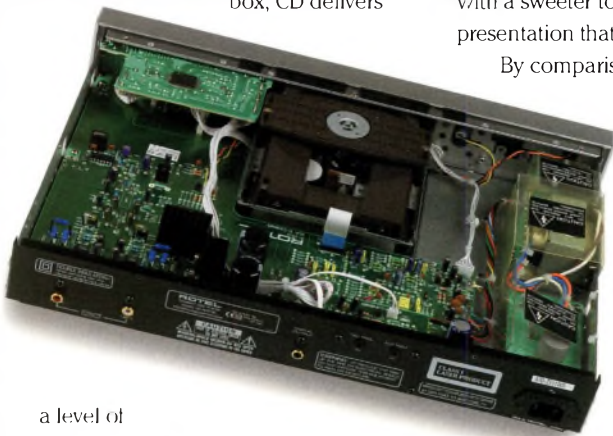


► Standby mode from the amplifier.

Like past Rotel products, the 02 system is designed by teams in Japan and the UK (though the components themselves are now made in China) with an emphasis on value, performance and reliability. For example, the Burr-Brown 18bit HDCD decoder with 8 times over-sampling was selected after extensive listening tests. Obviously, price was a determining factor. But, within such constraints, Rotel have tried to pack in as much performance as possible.

Certainly, Rotel's RCD-02 offers excellent value, and the performance is very good - especially considering the very reasonable selling price. I have to confess, my views on CD have been somewhat shaken-up by having experienced Chord's DAC-64.

Put simply, with this magic little box, CD delivers



a level of performance one might've thought impossible given CD's 'limited' 16bit 44.1kHz specification. Inevitably, such perfection comes at a price. It's sobering to reflect that the complete Rotel 02 system - amplifier, tuner, and CD player - costs approximately half that of a DAC-64...

Whether a product like the Chord DAC-64 justifies its price premium over something more reasonably priced, like Rotel's RCD-02, is something only the individual listener can decide on. A more meaningful comparison came

when I tried the RCD-02 against Musical Fidelity's excellent A3.2 up-sampling CD player. This is closer in price to the Rotel, but still costs almost three times more. The MF player sets high standards at its price point, and is a tough product to compete against.



Perhaps inevitably, the MF was that bit better. But three-time better? Possibly - possibly not. It depends on what you're looking for. The A3.2 is smoother and better-balanced at bass and treble extremes, with a sweeter top end and an overall presentation that is more civilised.

By comparison, the RCD-02 sounds less sophisticated and refined; it's slightly more rough and ready - lacking in the niceties. In food terms, it's meat and potatoes, rather than fancy delicacies. Pub grub verses an expensive upmarket French restaurant.

But, although the MF is superior, it's my hunch some listeners might actually prefer the Rotel's blend of immediacy and uncomplicated in-your-face up-front attack. There's a freshness about the Rotel that's very attractive. What it lacks in etiquette is more than made up for in enthusiasm. It's a simple uncomplicated sound; brilliant, fresh, immediate. By MF or Chord standards it might not reveal subtle inner detail or unravel complex rhythmic patterns with the same unerring precision. But it's still very

enjoyable for all that.

On reflection, I think Rotel's RCD-02 probably represents the sonic turning point where reasonable price and good overall performance start to diverge - the point where, to get to the next level, you need to spend more and more in order to achieve really significant degrees of improvement. So, while

there are better CD players out there, you'll probably need to spend quite a bit to get something of truly superior capability, as opposed to something that merely sounds nicer or more to your taste.

Next issue, I'll look at Rotel's matching RA-02 40W integrated amplifier, partnering it with the RCD-02 to see how the two perform together as a combination. Promises to be interesting.



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Integrated CD player
Chip-set:	Burr-Brown 18bit, 8x over-sampling
HDCD Capable:	Yes
Outputs:	1pr analogue (phonos) 1x S/PDIF digital (phono)
Output Level:	1.0V
Output Impedance:	100 Ohms
Dimensions (WxHxD):	435 x 72 x 316mm
Weight:	5kg
Price:	£375

UK Distributor:

B&W Loudspeakers UK
Tel. (44)(0)1903 750750
E-mail. uksales@bwspeakers.com

Manufacturer:

Rotel
Net. www.rotel.com

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PRICE	from £395
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CONTACT	01256 889530

Obsessing with mains filtration and conditioning systems is not part of my life. One of the primary reasons I sunk my life savings into building a screen listening room was to avoid the problems created by noisy, grungy mains. This, I did what can only be done when you start from scratch. I specified audiophile-grade wiring, the best

side. But it's not something you'd want to move around any more than necessary. A basic SubStation starts with a single 150VA module, designed with 'typical source' components in mind. The more modules you add, the more improvements you'll see. The reality was that with less than £1000, I was able to achieve a level of performance that was well beyond what I was expecting. I was able to enjoy my music in a way that I had never before. I was able to hear the subtleties of the music that I had never before. I was able to hear the subtleties of the music that I had never before.

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Dear Agent Tim

The dossier that has been forwarded to you is of the utmost secrecy and is for your eyes only.

As you are aware our organisation has been established to disrupt and pollute the power to consumer homes in order that their appliances do not function to their optimum level. This activity has allowed us to increase sales, especially to those interested in home cinema and high fidelity audio. These individuals alas will never complete their quest but at least we, through our secret distribution companies, can be sure of future sales and upgrades.

Enclosed in this dossier is information about a company that severely jeopardises this activity, their name is **'ISOTEK SYSTEMS'** (web: www.isoteksystems.com). They have developed a range of products that removes mains noise and allows appliances, especially audio visual and high fidelity to work perfectly. What's more they have already established a strong dealer base throughout the UK and have many reviews in all of the major audio publications.

Enclosed are the following:

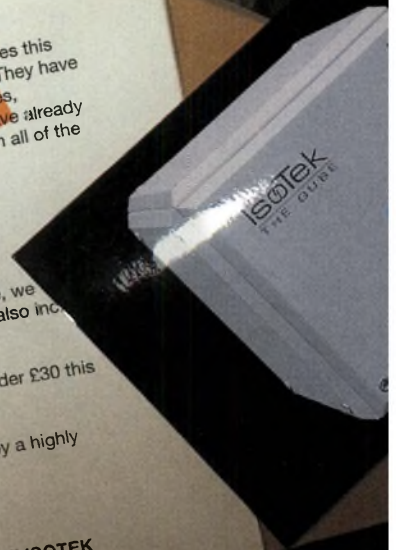
There are two photographs, one of which is their sales representative, we they are using a company called **'ACTIV DISTRIBUTION'**. We have also included a dealer list. The second photograph is of the **'THE QUBE'**.

Inside the padded envelope is a product they call **'ISOPLUG'** at under £30 this represents the most worrying 'accessory' in their range.

The leather bound wallet contains a copy of one of their reviews by a highly reputable audio magazine.

Your mission Tim, should you decide to accept it, is to purchase all **ISOTEK** products before they can get into the hands of the public. Naturally if you or any of your secret force of elite agents become captured we will deny all knowledge of your existence.

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Shop Talk...

by Roy Gregory

The Shop:

The Audio Works, Cheadle

The Brief:

A nominal budget of £9000 to provide a CD based system capable of doing justice to classical and smaller scale acoustic music.

The System:

Accuphase DP55V CD Player,
Sugden Masterclass Integrated
Amplifier and
JM Labs Electra 906 Loudspeaker

It might seem like an odd thing to say, but in many ways the most characteristic products in this system are missing from the list above. In this day and age, the hi-fi industry, and the way it does business, is changing, and that includes the role of the dealer. Increasingly, we see retailers broadening their product base by dabbling with the limited distribution of products. Still others are doubling up as manufacturers, putting their own designs into small-scale production. The Audio Works fits into the latter mould, although the history in this case is a little more involved.

It all started when they got concerned about the quality of the mains supply to their dem studio. One thing led to another and before long they were making their own mains leads. Soon they were

selling them, to both customers and other dealers, followed by a distribution block. Having looked at one of the fundamentals when it comes to system set-up, the logical next step was mechanical support. Taking their preferred Quadraspire racks as a point of departure, a similarly evolutionary process resulted in the development of the Quadraspire Reference rack, since put into full production by the company themselves.

It's an interesting scenario, not because of the specific products it's generated, but rather because of what it tells us about The Audio Works, and more specifically, just how far they're prepared to go in order to get the best out of the equipment they sell. It's an almost obsessive attention to detail that pays clear dividends in terms of system performance. It certainly paid off in the case of the system they demonstrated for me.

Audio Works owner Larry Ogden had put together a varied set-up, drawn from across the shop's small but carefully selected range of product lines. The chosen CD player was Accuphase's DP55V, that companies' cheapest offering, despite a £3000 price tag. Don't be fooled by the clean, uncluttered

fascia: there's more here than meets the eye, including the ability to switch between two external digital sources, thus allowing you to apply Accuphase's Multiple Delta-Sigma decoding to other 44.1/48kHz formats, maximising the return on your not

insignificant investment.

Amplifier of choice was the Sugden Masterclass Integrated, a large lump of an amp which operates, true to the companies' traditions, predominantly in Class A. Again outwardly simple, the Sugden offers five line inputs, including one balanced, and an internal MM/MC stage, should your future plans embrace the black disc. Output power is rated at 33 Watts/Ch, which gives you some idea just how much of that output is actually Class A, but then it's a term with a sliding definition these days, a bit like those amps that used to claim sliding bias. Needless to say, like any amp with pretensions in this direction, it runs hot, although the extensive heat sinking keeps things within the bounds of reason (and legality). Price equals the Accuphase at around the £3000 mark.

Which brings us to the speakers and the first surprise. JM Labs Electra series is one down from the flagship Utopia range, but the small, two-way stand-mounted 906 model weighs in at only £1149 (plus stands), or around a third the price of each of the partnering electronic boxes. Which also only uses around a third of the remaining budget, by the time you've added a pair of Alphason Acros 2 stands. But then, this is supposed to be a £9K system, and Larry's leaving room to include proper mains and signal cables, as well as a proper stand. Naturally enough, the



► mains supply is delivered courtesy of the Music Works products, the block costing £230 and the IEC leads £60 each. The signal cables were a Chord Chrysalis interconnect (\$40) and a five meter pair of Townshend's Isolde cryogenically treated, single wired ribbon speaker cables, which contributed a healthy \$600 to the bill.

But the real oddity is the Quadraspire Reference rack, especially for those brought up on the concept of rigidity uber alles. It wobbles like a jelly, and there isn't an inner tube in sight! Built on the twin base unit, the Reference actually rests it shelves on the shoulders of the carefully waisted uprights. The top shelf gets an additional layer of spike decoupling, although rather than sitting on their points, the spikes make anular contact with the uprights. The veneered surfaces of the shelves are also carefully routed out so that only the core MDF



ever contacts the uprights, preventing the veneer skin acting as a resonant membrane. Finally, the shelves themselves feature large rectangular cut outs, helping to prevent standing waves within the shelves, and also reducing their overall mass and thus their ability to store energy. So although your first reaction might be to recoil as the rack moves to your touch, it's actually a carefully considered response to the problem of isolating a hi-fi system, providing light-weight decoupled shelves linked directly to the ground via the aluminium uprights. In the two

(active) shelf version seen here, the rack will cost you \$410, with extra shelves adding \$160 each.

Tot that lot up and you end up with a grand total of around \$8600, which even leaves enough for a few discs to play on your brand new system.

It's nice to see one



of these systems actually coming in inside the budget for once, although the addition of a decent tuner and aerial would soon take care of any surplus.

Larry's starting point in this demonstration was to establish the role played by what most people would consider the supporting cast. To that end he started off by running the electronics from the Audio Works block but using good quality standard leads. The results were nice enough, but a little flat, small

and grey. Simply substituting the Audio Works IEC leads for the standard items transformed things. In the spirit of a true demonstration I was sticking to a few discs that I know really well. 'Way Out Basie' from the Count's seminal *Farmers Market Barbeque* outing was given such a lift that it was almost like a different track (either that or the band had received a sudden injection of adrenaline). Suddenly there was space and air around the instruments, greater transparency and colour, less grain and a much lower noise floor. All of which adds up to a much blacker background, wider dynamic range, and much livelier micro dynamics.

Just take the acoustic bass line: suddenly its mobile, pacy and full of bounce. The pitch of each note is far more apparent, the spaces between them far more precise. At the same time, the Count's trademark stabs are far more purposeful while the previously submerged guitar steps out as a separate and identifiable instrument. And the big brass entry finally starts to climb convincingly.

At a grand total of \$120 you could say I was convinced.

The comparison between a standard Quadraspire table and the Reference version was equally convincing, although in a rather different way. The standard rack was nicely weighty and rounded, but again the shift onto the Reference rewarded us with a leaner, crisper and quicker sound. Dynamics were much better and so was rhythmic expression. The early break in the Basie track was now far more dramatic, the left hand emphasis much more sudden and emphatic.

At this point Larry chose a track from Norah Jones' album *Come Home With Me* to demonstrate the system's vocal capabilities, which it did to great effect, the rich, creamy voice big, bold and solid between the speakers. But changing to the XRCD of Reiner/CSO *Pictures At An Exhibition* started to reveal the first cracks in what was otherwise an incredibly impressive performance. The huge scale of Mussorgsky's orchestral showpiece



► started to tax the lower end and ultimate dynamic range of the diminutive speakers. The result was a ragged top end under stress, a lack of weight and a lack of this Living Stereo recording's characteristically palpable soundstage.

My comments left Larry undismayed, and to be fair, working within its limits the system as presented was both extremely engaging and enjoyable. And I have to admit that jazz vocal on one hand and the man Modest on the other certainly represent opposite extremes. Maybe that's why Larry was looking so calm: he knew what was coming next. Okay, so I bit...

"Uhhh, so what do we have to do to make it cover both ends of the spectrum?"

Upgrade time! But no blank cheques: Anything that Larry was going to do was going to have to be cost effective. And given that his first change still didn't break the original budget I couldn't really complain at that. Substituting a £500 Spectral/MIT interconnect for the Chord Chrysalis certainly wrought an immediate improvement, offering greater width and depth, together with a richer, weightier tonal balance. There was also a worthwhile improvement in rhythmic subtlety, one that made the £40 Chord lead sound rather chopped and mechanical. However, it wasn't entirely positive, the extra bandwidth adding weight at the bottom end: weight that made the low frequency cut-off of the 906s' that much more obvious. So, although things were better in many ways, the system had fallen out of balance, undermining its overall musical coherence. The conclusion was unavoidable, and good as they were, taking the system further meant losing the little JM Labs.

In fact, Larry had a variety of

options available, including the addition of a dCS converter, but keeping the value for money issue in mind this was placed firmly in the 'future possibilities' category. Which leaves

the bigger speaker course beckoning. Expecting the imminent arrival of the floorstanding 926s, Larry surprised me again by wheeling in a pair of the small, stand-mounted Micro Utopias. With a starting price of around £3800

(including the matching stands) you'd expect a serious lift in quality from the substitution, but what about bandwidth? On paper at least, the Micro Utopias go



no lower than the 926s, with identical -3dB points at 50Hz. They manage to go down an extra 3Hz at the -6dB point, but you wonder how significant that could be given the context in which we're using them.

Well, once again my concerns were unfounded. The Micros brought an immediate, expansive quality to proceedings. Gone was any hint of high frequency strain, replaced by a beautifully delineated and textured top-end. It was a quality that passed right down the range, where the dynamic discrimination fleshed out the mid-range, bringing voices and instruments to life, full of presence and intimacy. And at last the system could cope with the dynamic demands of the Pictures disc. It still lacked that sense of

definite volume and foundation to the soundstage, but now the ebb and flow of the music was convincingly effortless, with excellent lateral placement and depth within the soundscape. The naturalness of the perspective was also impressive, and whilst there are those who dismiss the importance of imaging in the overall scheme of things, it was apparent listening to this system that its convincing coherence was rooted in getting everything in the right place at the right time. And that means spatially as well as temporally.

Which brought us to the conclusion of a highly enjoyable demo. You can only do so much and it's a mistake to try and move too fast. I was really happy with what I'd heard, both the initial system and the upgrades, once the Micro Utopias stepped in to make the most of the extra signal coming from the Spectral interconnect. What's clear is that The Audio Works know their product range inside out, and just how to combine it to best effect. The table and mains products were especially impressive and cost effective, under-lining the old adage that it's not the system you buy but who you buy it from that matters. Whatever equipment you choose, I'm confident that The Audio Works' exemplary advice and attention to detail will ensure that you get the best out of it.



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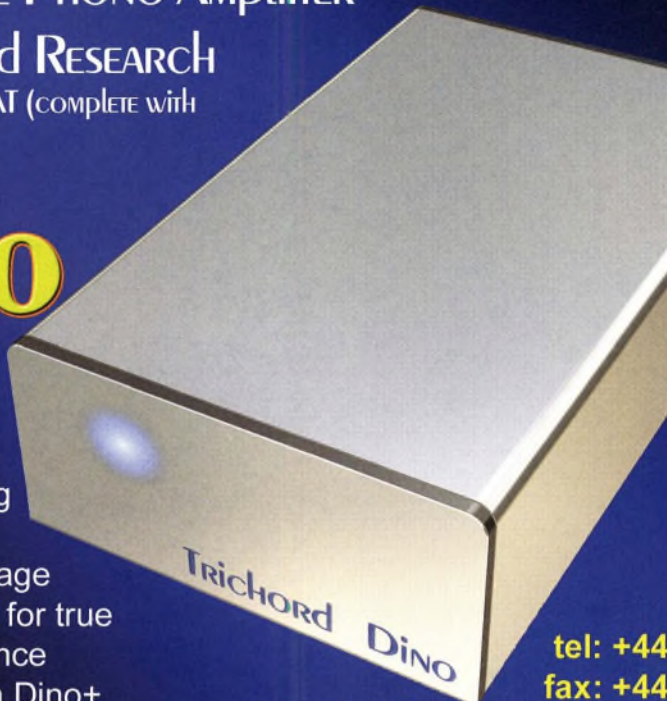
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Reconnaissance In Force...

Further developments to the VPI Aries Scout

by Roy Gregory

Back in Issue 16 I enthused about VPI's new budget turntable, the Aries Scout. Well, the unit reviewed was an early sample, and before it reached full production a number of small but significant changes were made. The good news is that it got even better, and the price stayed the same.

Sonically, the most significant change is from the standing bearing design in the original review unit, to an extremely neat inverted

design, running

with a steel ball resting on a teflon thrust pad!

This soft interface makes

for a ghostly

quiet bearing which you hear

through the deck as a lower noise

floor, greater transparency and focus.

Musically it makes for a little extra snap, dynamic precision and finesse, icing

on the cake of what was already an

impressive performance. But the best

thing about the new bearing is that, like

most inverted designs, it's a lot cheaper

and simpler to produce, which frees up

money to spend elsewhere without

breaking the budget, and that

elsewhere is on the arm.

The final version of the JMW 9.0 is much nicer than the one I had to play

with. There are a couple of small but

significant cosmetic changes: the fixing

screws are countersunk now, which

looks an awful lot neater, and the bearing tower has been shortened to bring it more into proportion with the arm's shorter length relative to its longer cousins. To compensate for the slight loss of stability that results from the reduction in the height between the pivot point and the arm's centre of gravity, the 9.0 now inherits the low-slung out-rigger weights of the bigger versions.

So far so good

– it looks nicer but so

what? Well, the other two

changes are more significant. The

captive lead-out wire now has the

same Lemo connector as the big arms,

making the arm assembly a totally self

contained and removable unit. Buy

a spare armtube and you can set-up

another cartridge, correct in all its

parameters, ready to simply swap in

when the fancy takes you. You want to

play a bit of mono Basie or a Coup

d'Archet record of Yvonne Lefebure?

Just reach for your alternative arm, the

one carrying the Helikon Mono, and listen as you should, in glorious living mono, straight out of the groove.

Of course, there's one adjustment that the armtubes don't incorporate, and that's VTA. The micrometer adjustment of the 12.5 and 10.5 would be too much to hope for, and way too expensive to include, but the ever inventive Mr Weisfeld has come up

with a less costly (and admittedly less precise)

alternative: The junction between the arm's pillar and its mounting

collar is now

graced by

a secondary

ring that

engages a thread

cut into the arm

pillar itself. Rather like

Incognito's Easy Riser

for the Rega tonearms, you

simply twist to lift, except that

in this case the locking Allen screw

is mounted in the side of the collar,

making it a whole lot easier to deal

with. It's also 2mm in diameter,

making it the same size as your

cartridge fixing bolts and the grub

screw that locks the counterweight,

a small detail, but one that doesn't

half help when it comes to setting

the arm up. The same, supplied,

Allen driver deals with all the major

adjustments, just one more



▶ example of Harry Weisfeld's common sense approach and vast experience as an analogue devotee. VPI make more expensive tables than the Scout, and better sounding ones too, but with these added refinements it's the baby in the range that currently represents its crowning

glory. I say currently because the Weisfeld imagination never tires of further refinements and whole new products. But as a budget approach to serious record replay, the Aries Scout is going to take some beating. Could I live with one? I do every time I visit the States. ▶+

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Pin Money...

The Zyx RS30H, R100FSH and Benz Micro ACE moving-coil cartridges

by Roy Gregory

It seems that there are more pricey styli vying for your attention these days than ever before. Which is remarkable given that few revolutionary developments have occurred. Rather we're looking at constant, incremental refinements of existing electro-mechanical structures (or is that re-packaging of the same old sound?). All these cartridges come from long, long historical lines, although that might not be immediately obvious, especially in the case of the Zyx models.

What few people realise is that there are relatively few actual cartridge manufacturers and almost all of them also build models for other companies, especially when it comes to Japan, where nothing in the cartridge world is quite what it seems. So whilst Zyx is hardly a household name, analogue aficionados with long memories will recognise the bodywork on the RS30H from the long gone Monster Alpha Genesis models, CB's personal favourite until the arrival of the Lyra Helikons.

The Zyx RS30H

The cheaper of the two Zyx cartridges reviewed here (it costs £700) is a diminutive plastic housed design that



actually looks significantly more solid than it feels.

Despite appearances, the beefy shoulders are actually hollow mouldings. Pick it up and you'll be astonished by the low weight, which along with its tiny size has serious implications for installation. The RS30 has a shorter than average stylus tip to fixing distance which means that it needs to sit well forward in the headshell slots – and that's just as well. Mounted in the VPI JMW 9.0 (which has longer slots than most) I ended up with the counterweight wedged hard against the low-slung weight ring to achieve a preferred tracking weight of 1.8g. In the absence of a data sheet I can't give you an accurate weight for the 30, but I reckon that it's got to be under 4g,

and that's light – problematically light for some tonearms. The good news is that its small dimensions mean you won't have any problems accommodating it in even the tightest headshell. Just don't over do the fixing screws or you'll crack the body, and that brings us to the other installation issues: the close set connecting pins aren't colour coded, and it's back to good old fashioned nuts and bolts for mounting. Neither thing is a disaster, it just adds to the fiddle of mounting this tiny unit.

With the cartridge up and running, and run-in, you'll be in for another surprise. The RS30 might feel fragile, especially in this age of milled from solid cartridge bodies, but its sound is anything but. Drop its tip into the waiting groove and you'll be astonished by the focussed, powerful sound. Playing Shawn Colvin's 'Shotgun Down The Avalanche' (*Steady On*, CBS 466412-1) the little Zyx delivers a huge, solid bass line full of energy and momentum that propels the track along. It's a presentation that majors on the substantial, even the finger bells and percussion motifs are crisp and solid. The result is plenty of drive and ▶

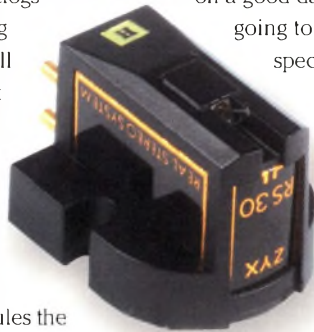
► rhythmic drama that makes for an exciting sound.

But not all is sweetness and light. Along with the sense of purpose comes a certain lack of delicacy, almost as if the cartridge is shouldering its way through the music. There's also a pervasive, orange tang to the sound that collapses the colour palette and clogs the soundstage, limiting its depth and the overall transparency. The result is a hollowness and coldness to the midrange, leaving piano sounding tinkly and exposed, shorn of its complex harmonics. Ultimately it's this that rules the RS30H out as far as I'm concerned, lending a sameness to music which I find increasingly intrusive over time. However, if you value its sheer energy and clout over and above its tonal shortcomings then this could be right up your street. It's never less than exciting to listen to. In fact, not since the ClearAudio Gamma 2000 have I heard a cartridge that delivers so much musical verve at such a modest price (relatively speaking you understand).

If Zyx could lose the coloration then they'd be onto a winner here. It's awfully tempting to point a finger at the flimsy plastic bodywork, and I'd love to hear a version of this generator built on a more substantial basis. Still, things are seldom so simple. I'll investigate the other options in the range and see if such an animal exists. Meanwhile, watch this space and think about the 30's more expensive brothers.

The Zyx R100FSH

Just to confuse the issue further, here's another cartridge from Zyx that doesn't even bear a passing resemblance to the 30: At least not to start with. Built into a clear plastic block with steeply bevelled shoulders, the R100 actually shares the cheaper model's open mounting



arrangement and short stylus to fixing distance. Thankfully it weighs a little more (4.2g) and the budget stretches as far as colour coding the pins. It also uses silver windings for its coils, offering a lowish output of 0.24mV. At £1700 it comes up slap bang against the Helikon (the audio equivalent of Marvin Hagler on a good day) and that means that it's going to have to offer something special in order to justify its existence. Fortunately it does exactly that.

First and foremost this is the quietest tracking cartridge I think I've ever used, gliding over surface noise as if it simply isn't there. And gliding is the word. There is a smoothness and grace to the Zyx which eliminates all sense of the mechanical from the music it produces. You simply don't hear it working. Hard to describe but you'll recognise it instantly if you listen to the R100. There's no suggestion that the sound emanates from a rock being dragged through a groove, or that that process is anything other than utterly straight forward. This isn't just about secure tracking, it's about the absence of any sense of strain or mechanical intrusion on the musical event. It's about enjoying the performance rather than being reminded where it's emanating from.

Listen to the Zyx playing familiar music and it's different to believe that it comes from the same stable as the 30. Gone is the cheaper cartridge's rumbustious energy and bustle, replaced with poise and refinement. Unfortunately, gone too is the 30's power and energy. Listen to them one after another and the 100 sounds like a limp and effete version of events, but that's

actually an over reaction to the excessive zeal of the 30. Let the R100 bed in properly and you'll find its dynamics and bass clout more than satisfactory. However, you'll also discover just how critical it is of precise set-up.

It goes without saying that alignment and VTA need to be spot-on. But the same applies to loading and tracking force, the combination of which can make or break the appeal of the Zyx. The R100 is not without character, and leans toward the cool, dry side of neutral. The problem comes in trying to balance its strengths against that tonal leanness. Track too high or load the cartridge too low and it will sound pinched and emotionally detached, robbing the music of life and interest. But, simply because higher tracking forces and loadings offer greater colour and solidity, pushing the images forward, it's tempting to over compensate. In fact, I settled on just a touch over 1.8g and 121 Ohms used with 60dB of gain on the Phenomena phono stage. The 100 Ohm standard setting of the Micro-groove proved to be just a shade too lean, although still enjoyable. The



problem is that each of these values will vary from system to system, so a fully adjustable phono stage is essential if you want to hear what the R100FSH can do.

Don't misunderstand me. The Zyx will never offer the lush romance and harmonic complexity and insight of a Koetsu. It's a cat of quite a different colour. Get it right and the R100 will reward you with a fabulously refined, open and unforced musical delivery, full of expression and insight. Whilst it might lack the oomph and rhythmic drive of the 30, it is far more subtle and sophisticated when it comes to rhythmic shape and manipulation. It's this quality that's most fragile, and easily destroyed by incorrect tracking force. As little as 0.05g ►

► (measured with the Cartridge Man gauge) either way, and its gone. But when it's there it introduces a magical dimension of human input to proceedings. Just listen to the subtle speed shifts in Lloyd Cole's 'Cut Me Down' and you'll get the picture.

Which makes the Zyx R100FSH a challenging but potentially rewarding performer. It won't be for everyone, and certainly won't suit systems that lean to the lean or analytical (what the ultra definition crowd would call neutral). But for the listener who values expression and intricacy over broad-brush musical dramatics then it offers a uniquely smooth and natural delivery of the musical event. And don't get the idea it's a cartridge just for chamber music. It plays rock and pop just as well. It's just that it offers a very specific perspective. If that view equates to your own personal requirements then you'll consider the Zyx a bargain. It all depends what you're looking for (and how much trouble you're prepared to take to get there).

The Benz Micro ACE

The ACE is Benz Micro's cheapest low-output moving-coil, although that doesn't stop it being a handsome beast. Despite a superficial similarity to the clear plastic block of the Zyx R100FSH, the multi-faceted shape of the Benz is dramatically more attractive, looking stylish and purposeful where its opposite number looks rather, how can I put this... cheap. It also has tapped mounting holes (drilled into the metal of the chassis, not the plastic of the body), colour coded pins and a standard distance between stylus tip and its fixings, all of which make it a joy to mount. The 8.8g mass is also right in the ball-park, and combined with a 15cu compliance should mean no compatibility problems with the vast



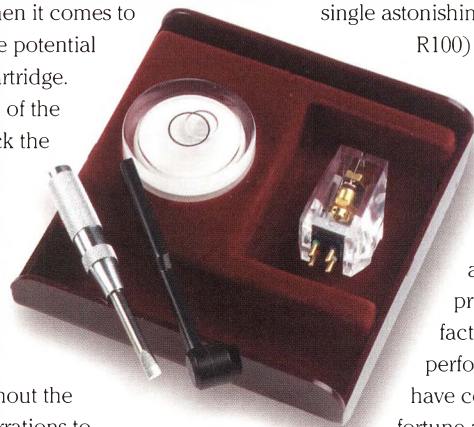
majority of arms. The small package in which it arrives also contains a neat (and very easily read) spirit level, decent hardware, screwdriver, stylus brush and a comprehensive spec sheet. You don't get a stylus guard. That makes it by far the most complete package here.

Not surprising when you consider that it comes from Europe's other great cartridge manufacturer.

Tracking at 2g, the ACE offers a healthy 0.8mV output, making it a lot easier on the phono-stage*. I ran the Phenomena at 243 Ohms and 53.7 dB of gain, a combination that afforded plenty of energy and definition.

Lower loadings left the sound rather dry and a little sat on, while higher gains tended to bleach the tonal colours. Again, these settings will depend on the system used, but do stress the critical aspect of all performance parameters when it comes to maximising the potential of a pick-up cartridge.

The sound of the Benz might lack the fluidity and grace of the R100FSH, but it is also a far more balanced and even performer, without the Zyx' tonal aberrations to compensate for. In fact, assuming you've got the VTA spot-on then the tonal balance of the ACE is beyond



reproach, especially at the price. Run it tail down and it quickly becomes dull, brown and rounded. Like the Zyx, it also loses its sense of get up and go. In fact, if the sound you're getting from the ACE tends to the dull and uninteresting then it almost certainly signals a VTA error. This is not a cartridge with which you can take alignment liberties. But get it right and the ACE's combination of natural tonality and solid rhythmic integrity make for a rewarding listening experience, especially on piano, where it easily sorts out phrasing and differences in key pressure and attack. It also sailed through the difficult vocals on the Shawn Colvin, easily rendering the slurred words intelligible whilst also providing a clearly focussed and solid central image.

In many ways the least initially impressive cartridge of the three, it will actually offer the greatest long-term listening pleasure in the greatest number of systems. It might not possess any single astonishing strength (like the R100) but it does every-

thing pretty much equally well, and to a surprisingly high standard considering the affordable asking price (\$395). In fact, this level of performance would have cost you a small fortune a few years ago.

The key to the Benz Micro's performance is its balance of virtues, and that includes the price! ►+

As Branko Bosnic, the Benz-Micro importer points out, the ACE is actually available in three different versions: L(ow) with 0.4mV output – (not actively marketed in the UK), M(edium) with 0.8mV output (reviewed here) and H(igh) with 2mV output which is also available in the UK. In the great scheme of things it therefore makes more sense to refer to the 0.8mV version as the Medium output, although it's still 'low output' in the sense of requiring something more than a straight MM input. In fact, 0.8mV is about as much as you can extract from a 'coil before it starts to suffer from the adverse effects of increased moving mass.

When less is more... The Rothwell In-Line Attenuators

by Roy Gregory

Ever since the arrival of CD, systems have been faced with higher and higher input levels. Couple that to a trend towards increasingly sensitive speakers and you can easily find yourself in a situation where overall system gain is a problem. With anything up to 4 Volts coming off of a CD player (or around five times the line level standard of 0.775 V) then line level overload is a serious possibility. Ever increasing speaker efficiency means that more and more systems run their volume controls near the base of their range. That makes for channel balance problems as well as poor signal to noise performance. Just see PM's review of the NAC552 for an example of this.

It's a situation that has led to line-stage designers incorporating user variable input sensitivity and overall gain into their designs, although that tends to be an expensive option. Alternatively you can get leads from a number of specialist cable suppliers (Russ Andrews and The Chord Company spring to

mind) with built in attenuation. The problem is that that solution either ties you to that manufacturer's cables for your whole system, or creates an undesirable mix and match situation.

Well now you have an alternative in the shape of these neat little in-line attenuators from Rothwell Electronics. Built into a pair of phono plugs, but with sockets where you'd normally expect the cable to be, they offer 10 dB of attenuation (matched to within 0.1 dB) and can be used at the pre-amp input to prevent overload, or at the power-amp inputs to reduce overall system gain. They're neat, simple and at £39, where required, extremely cost effective.

Used between a Helios Model 1,

a player with a prodigious output, and a Densen Beat, the reduction in top-end strain was immediately obvious, but the longer I listened the more I came

to enjoy the increased colour, stability and presence of the musical picture. Swapping back to the un-attenuated set-up I was astonished to note just how stilted and forced the music seemed.

The problem is that until you try an attenuator of some sort you'll remain blissfully ignorant of the problem. It's just that you won't be getting anything like the full enjoyment out of your system. ▶▶



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Washington is a city of restaurants, with prices fuelled by expense account dining and lavish attempts to buy influence. Unfortunately, just like hi-fi, price is absolutely no guarantee of

quality, or even in America of service. So an adventurous menu at a reasonable price is the exception rather than the rule. Add a relaxed and understated interior, friendly

and helpful staff and a sensibly chosen and priced wine list and you've the recipe for a wonderful evening out. Just make sure to book in advance as this popular restaurant is also on the small side, putting tables at a premium.

The menu favours fish and my experience suggests that's the way to go. The meat dishes are also fine, but they suffer more from the American obsession with quantity, which puts

them on the heavy side of comfort. But with an excellent range of delicious starters and salads, and a chef who'll actually cook to your wishes (rather than over cooking which is the US norm) a well-balanced meal is easily achieved. The Tuna I ate on my last visit was sublimely flavoured and cooked to perfection. Stick with the fish and the excellent selection of domestic wines (don't be afraid to ask for guidance) and you'll not be disappointed. Persimmon is a rare jewel in a sea of ostentatious and over-priced mediocrity.

Two starters, shared salad and two main courses, around \$70. ▶▶

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Roy Gregory Hi Fi + Issue 9

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Splendid Isolation...

The Isotek mains distribution products

by Roy Gregory

Regular readers will know that I'm a long time admirer of the Audioplan range of mains leads, distribution blocks, filters and isolation transformers. These German products offer a really well thought out solution to the issues and vagaries of a decent mains supply for your system, but their modular nature makes them necessarily expensive (all those separate cases) while their availability in the UK has been sporadic at best.

You can imagine then, my pleasure when Isotek announced a range of mains distribution products that incorporate much of the thinking of and many of the advantages that go with the Audioplan approach. But these are no simple imitations and add new wrinkles all of their own, as you might expect from a designer of Nic Poulson's pedigree (and that includes the looks).

The first and simplest item is the Isoplug, a simple parallel filter built into a plugtop block, almost indistinguishable from the Russ Andrews item with which you are probably familiar (if not, go back and read issue 9). It does the same job, and although I haven't compared them directly I'd say it performs in much the same way. Simply scatter them around the house, close to any potential source of nasty noise (computers, fridges, heating thermostats etc), which at £29.95 you can easily afford to do. So far so good, but the really interesting bits start now.

The first box up (and boxes are

just so much more sexy than moulded plugs) is the Clean Line. A large, rack width, stainless steel case, it has a plain fascia, an IEC input on the back and six 13 Amp sockets. There's also an earth post so that you can wire it to an independent earth spike, sunk in your



garden. Inside there's a small circuit that provides parallel filtering and spike suppression. So what you really have here is a high-quality six-way distribution block in an equipment case, the reason being that it means you can put it on your equipment rack, which makes for a nice, neat solution, rather than all those cables ending up stuffed underneath.

A decent distribution block is definitely the first step towards a proper mains supply for your system, but the Isotek Sub-Station takes the concept a whole stage further. Around twice the height of the Clean Line and a little deeper, the Sub-Station has the same single IEC input and six 13 Amp outputs on its back-plate. However, it's best considered as a modular space frame,

the contents of which can be configured in a number of ways. In its most basic form it arrives with a serial filter similar to the type found in the Clean Line, but its real function is to house individual filter and isolation transformer modules. It can accommodate up to four 150 VA, three 300 VA or two 600 VA transformers along with their associated filtering, or any combination of the above that will actually fit inside.

The modules are designed to provide multiple independent filtering for different units within the system, thus preventing interference between them (CD players,

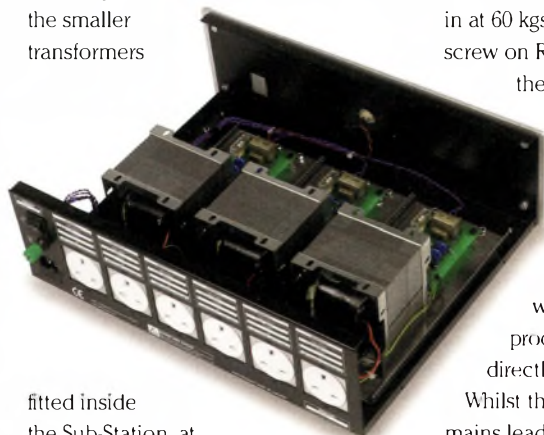
anything digital and switch mode power supplies are particular offenders). Each module can be wired to any number of the rear outlets, allowing you to customise the arrangement to suit your system. What's more, if your system changes and thus your requirements, the internals can be reconfigured as necessary.

There are other customisation possibilities too: You can specify any type of output socketry that suits, be it UK, European or US style, or a mixture. Likewise, should you so wish you could specify one or more transformer modules as a stepdown unit, reducing output voltage to 110 V to run a piece of imported (or inherited) equipment. The really good news is that with the sole exception of the expensive US Hubble hospital grade sockets, all these options are covered by the basic prices. Those are £295 for a Clean Line distribution box and £280 for a Sub-Station

▶ chassis with its basic filter module adding another £115. The transformer modules weigh in at £175, \$205 or \$285 respectively. You simply decide which options you want and tot up the total.

The review sample arrived fitted with three 300 VA modules, each wired to a pair of output sockets (the arrangement is annotated on the back of the unit in case you forget or become confused). These should be sufficient to run most source components and pre-amps, valve or solid-state, but more on that later. As it is it's perfectly arranged to power an analogue front-end, digital front-end and a phono-stage and line-stage, without letting their motors or power supplies upset each other.

You'll notice that power-amps don't feature on that list. That's because the current requirements of power-amplifiers are too great for the smaller transformers



fitted inside the Sub-Station, at least not without suffering dynamic limitations. For that, Isotek offer the Qube, which is pretty much exactly what it says it is. A cubic stainless steel chassis containing a massive EI core transformer, and clad with thick aluminium slabs. On the back is an IEC input, a circuit breaker and two 13 Amp outlets, although an alternative termination can be specified. The EI core is used in the Qube (and the Sub-Station modules) because it provides more iron and thus greater current reserves than a toroid of

equivalent rating. This is something that Isotek are adamant about, pointing out that whilst imitators can (and will) appear, simply comparing ratings on paper doesn't tell the whole story. Toroids are cheaper and more compact, but they are not nearly as effective, especially when it comes to transient current demands, the



very area that's got isolation transformers a bad press in the past.

Isotek Qubes are available in three sizes: 1 kVA (£1195), 2 kVA (£1495) and a monster 4 kVA (\$2200) which weighs in at 60 kgs! Each one arrives with three screw on RDC cones to help minimise the influence of any mechanical energy thrown out by the transformer. In fact, the one concern I have about the whole approach is placing a Sub-Station full of transformers on your rack where whatever vibration they produce will be transmitted directly to the other equipment.

Whilst the idea of running a single mains lead to your rack is undeniably neat and attractive, it's worth looking at the design of the rack to ensure that it will dissipate any additional energy produced. If in doubt then a little extra isolation would be a good idea, with Sorbothane blobs or a Voodoo platform being top of my list.

As to which size(s) of transformer you'll require for the various bits of your system, although consumption in Watts should be directly translatable into a VA rating, Isotek suggest that in

practice this isn't the case, another reason why people have tended to under-rate isolation transformers in the past. Their advice (spelt out at length on their web-site for those of a technical bent) amounts to allowing around double the VA rating suggested by the specs of the equipment. As each Sub-Station is built to order anyway, Isotek will be only too happy to advise, adding their growing pool of experience to the theory.

Much of my listening was done with the Madrigal starter system, the 390S CD player, 383 amp and Performa M20 speakers, to which I added the Sonifex Redbox as an additional digital source, and the Kuzma/Groove set-up to play records.

Despite being a fairly straightforward set-up in terms of the number of boxes, the large class A/B power output of the amp will stress the capabilities of any in line devices. Levinson have built their reputation on the quality of their power supplies so that should leave little room for improvement, whilst with all the digital control functions available, the complex CD player and the Redbox, there's plenty of potential grunge for the Isotek products to deal with. All in all, a less than promising scenario as far as mains treatment is concerned, with no easy points to score and plenty of difficulties to deal with.

I started out with the Isoplug, simply inserting it into an empty socket



on the hi-fi's ring. It duly delivered the expected improvement in focus and transparency, resulting in a blacker background, slightly improved colours and crisper dynamics and attack.

Playing the live track 'Love We Made' (Anne McCue *Amazing Ordinary Things*) rendered a much greater sense of the overall acoustic space in which she was performing. ▶

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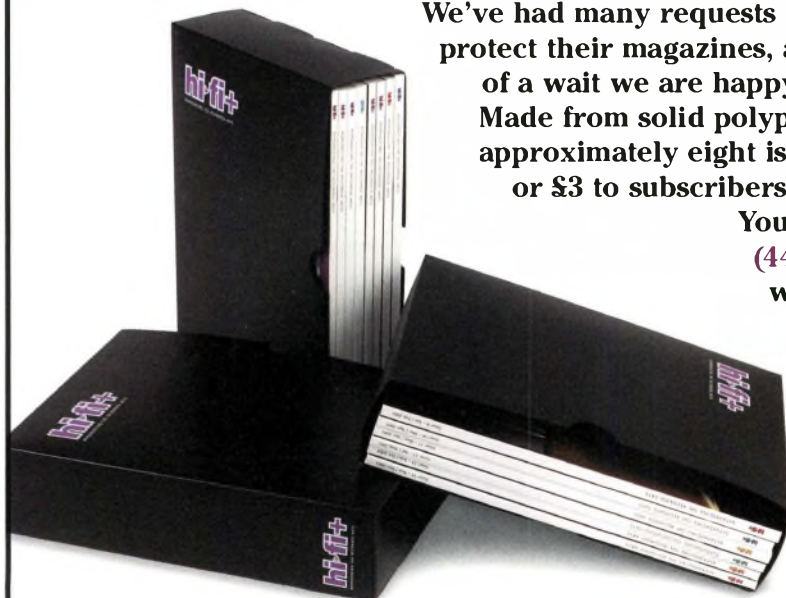


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► The main system was hooked up using Kimber Power Kords but a conventional six-way block with IEC input. Substituting the Clean Line produced a further dose of all the benefits you get from the Isoplug but to a much greater degree. Anne McCue's bass counterpoint gains weight and definition, with much greater pitch security, while the trumpet solo that occupies the track's break is far more real in tone and shape. This was definitely a cost effective upgrade, and you might expect the benefits to be even more marked in a cheaper system with less of its own, built-in protection.



The Next step was to move the 390S, Kuzma and Redbox each to an individual circuit on the Sub-Station, putting an isolation transformer between each of them. With both the DAC and the Kuzma running, I played the Anne McCue track again. The improvement in the solidity and the coherence of the image was immediately apparent, most especially in the height dimension. Now the bass counterpoint is fully integrated into the image of the guitar, unmistakably the product of that instrument rather than a separate one. Now you know that there are only two musicians on stage whereas before the degree of positional ambiguity meant that you were making a leap of faith. That degree of clarity and coherence is crucial to fully understanding the internal workings of a track, and there's no doubt that the Sub-Station certainly delivers. Incidentally, plugging the Redbox into the same circuit as the 390S significantly disrupted the timing and integration of the voice

and guitar, actually sounding more disjointed and confused than the two units plugged into the Clean Line, providing solid support for Isotek's claims regarding the desirability of mutual isolation. You just need to follow it through, all the way to the logical conclusion.


The final step was incorporating the 2 kVA Qube into proceedings, running the 383 and The Groove.

The resulting increase in transparency, substance and stability was immediately obvious, while the increase in dynamic security allowed much greater expression and rhythmic subtlety. Both

Ms McCue and her trumpeter suddenly sounded like far better musicians, smoother and more controlled. The improvement in top-end definition and the control of vocal sibilance was particularly noticeable.

Of course, acoustic guitar and voice hardly stresses the system's dynamic envelope, traditionally the Achilles heal of mains conditioning. Switching to the XRCD of *Pictures*, the opening of 'Gnomus' proved instructive. At first hearing, direct connection to the Clean Line seemed to offer greater speed, impact and power, but listen more critically and you soon realise that the Qube extends the bass way down. Now you can hear the floor of the hall, with the result that the bass arpeggios sound less concentrated. Instead they have more extension, pitch and texture.

At the same time the quieter background delivers a dramatic improvement in dynamic range and discrimination, so that when you get the bass drum shots, they jump much further and faster, with real suddenness and impact. Suddenly, the system running off the Clean Line sounds dynamically and spatially constricted and two-dimensional. The Qube might be less obvious, but it's also far more sophisticated and ultimately, convincing.

Of course, this is just one system and set of circumstances, and my conclusions have been drawn across a range of equipment and situations. It's just easier to explain it in a single set-up so that you get a better idea of how the different elements in the Isotek system interlock. These products have never failed to deliver the sonic goods, no matter how impressive the system sounded without them. With basic systems, the transformation is often astonishing, and my mains quality is generally pretty good. It's tempting to conclude that the Isoteks are worth their weight in gold, except that they weigh so much. With an increasing number of dealers stocking the products a home trial is strongly recommended. Oh, and the front panels come in black too... 



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Digital dexterity

– the Sonifex Redbox RB-ADDA

by Roy Gregory

With systems getting progressively more and more digital in nature as time goes by the requirement to handle digital source inputs is becoming increasingly common. The Mark Levinson No 390S reviewed in this issue may look like a CD player, but it's also a digital control unit, offering the option to use its digital inputs to switch sources, its expensive DAC to decode them and its analogue volume control to feed a power amplifier direct. It's an elegant solution and one that sounds pretty darn good too – assuming of course that you don't have more than two external digital sources or want to play records.

Sonifex are a predominantly studio equipment manufacturer who market a whole range of neat digital expansion and switching units under the Redbox moniker. But by far the most interesting model is the RB-ADDA, the one I'm reviewing here. Clad in a bright red anodised slimline case it looks for all the world like a host of other DACs, and it's priced like them too, at £500. The

difference is that it's not just a DAC it's an A to D too.



That's an analogue to digital converter, just in case you're getting confused by all those Ds and As. It offers balanced and single-ended (phono), analogue and digital, inputs and outputs, selected by rear panel push buttons. There are also a whole host of dip and rotary pre-sets, but I'll get to those.

Basically, the unit can be configured

in a whole host of ways. But from a hi-fi point of view its main attraction is that it allows you to both expand a range of digital inputs and integrate analogue sources or recorders into a digitally controlled and switched system. And it does it at a remarkably reasonable price. The digital electronics are capable of full 24bit/96kHz performance, and can be set to output anything from 32kHz upwards and 16, 20 or 24 bit depth, allowing integration with pretty much anything out there. That accounts for the rotary control. The dip-switches allow you to set input gain and output level within a 12dB scale at each end, allowing you to match the level of sources connected through the Redbox to other, direct inputs. More importantly, it allows you to optimise the signal levels for maximum bit length when the unit is being used to encode analogue signals. It's a benefit that you can readily hear, and whilst I don't see users adjusting the level for each and every disc, it's nice to be able to

select a useable mean value. Given the versatility of the RB-ADDA, it would take a while to check out all its possible modes and uses.

I limited myself to employing it as a DAC (using the Rega Jupiter as a transport) and as an encoder in order to feed signals from the record player into the 390S. With the Jupiter it offered an immediate improvement in focus transparency and detail. The acoustic space on recordings was both blacker

and more obvious, with a small but worthwhile increase in dynamics and an improved tonal palette as a result. So, used as a straight DAC the Redbox easily justifies its price. However, what really surprised me was how effectively it performed between the record



player and the Levinson CD player.

Feeding the signal from the Kuzma Stabi Reference, Tri-planar, Clearaudio Accurate combination, through The Groove and into the Redbox before using the 390S to reconvert the signal into analogue flies in the face of just about everything I believe. But, with the 390S running straight into the Hovland Sapphire, I was astonished at just how good the turntable sounded under what I can best describe as less than ideal circumstances. What was most interesting was that the 24/96 encode/decode process managed to retain most of the character and appeal of vinyl without doing too much digital damage. Comparisons to the record player running via the The Vibe confirmed a loss of colour and presence as well as the presence and solidity that come from the Groove/Vibe combination. In the context of a top flight analogue front-end like this one the cost of The Vibe would be justified, but for someone simply wanting to incorporate a basic vinyl replay capability into a digital

system the Redbox would be a very sensible option.

Given its performance the RB-ADDA can be warmly recommended purely on sonic grounds. Add its versatility into the

equation and the possibilities in the recording milieu for which it was designed and the Sonifex constitutes an absolute bargain – assuming of course that you want what it offers. ▶+

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The Numbers Game... Nordost's Valhalla goes digital

by Roy Gregory

Ever since I've been using the Nordost Valhalla cables, my reference as regards digital signal transfer has been the Silver Shadow 75 Ohm lead. It's pretty much the same colour, uses the same micro mono-filament technology and sounds better than anything else I've used – until now.


Firm believers in offering a completely coherent cable system (and upset at the notion of their best customers slumming it with something from further down the range), Nordost have launched digital versions of the Valhalla cables, two models optimised for either 75 or 110 Ohm connection, although outwardly identical. They enjoy the same silver screening as the analogue interconnects and are substantially thicker than the Silver Shadow.

Having gone through the seemingly interminable burn-in process that's necessary with all the Nordost cables but especially so with the Valhallas, I sat down to compare the two 75 Ohm leads. Physically the Valhalla is both bigger and sexier than the Silver Shadow, with nice Clearaudio plugs in place of the cheaper lead's Neutriks. These sound excellent but also offer some welcome strain relief as hard use (and reviewers really use their leads to the point of abuse) has seen screening strands starting to escape from the Neutriks' grip on some of my analogue cables. What the improved

appearance hadn't prepared me for was the gulf in performance between the two cables.

The Silver Shadow is a darn fine lead, better as I said than anything I'd used previously: The Valhalla buried it. Its superiority was so shocking that I had to repeatedly swap back and forth, changing discs just to make sure that I wasn't hearing things. But sure enough, each time I changed to the Valhalla I was rewarded with more detail, greater stage depth, focus and transparency, much greater weight and vastly improved tonal colours. Improvements in dynamic range, discrimination and musical presence were just as dramatic, and dramatic is the word for the lead's effect on the musical performance as a whole: Crisper, more direct, more immediate and far more communicative. And all this from a digital interconnect? The Valhalla Digital is just as impressive as the rest of the range, enjoying the same margin of superiority over both the competition and its own cheaper siblings.

The scary thing is that the AES/EBU version is actually even better, with slightly better focus and separation,



a more stable and rooted bass performance and even greater overall clarity, all without sounding pinched or sat-on the way some balanced leads can. The Valhalla name is not one to take lightly. These latest additions to the range fully justify the moniker. ▶+

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Ringmat join the cable wars...

by Roy Gregory

Supporters of all things that support, Ringmat Developments recently sent us samples of their latest products, an interconnect and speaker cable. Quite a departure from their usual ground you might well be thinking. You might also be wondering who in their right mind would want to get involved in what is already a saturated marketplace? Well, undaunted, John Rogers has sallied forth with what are outwardly a pair of utterly conventional designs. The interconnect is a simple four core structure, as is the speaker cable, although the latter is both significantly heavier and more flexible than most cables at this price. Despite the four cores it is not intended for bi-wiring. Costs are £120 a metre pair for interconnects, a three metre pair of speaker cables weighing in at £225, and both are nicely terminated with sensibly chosen connectors. Extra length will cost you \$7.50 and \$25 a mono metre respectively. The terminations themselves are actually much more unusual than they seem, the interconnect using only one core for signal and three for ground (shades of the Eichmann ratio here) while the heavily stranded speaker cables are slightly reduced in diameter (from 56 to 49 strands) before being crimped up. The end result is a set of leads that sit firmly in the one up from budget category. So dropping them straight into the Madrigal starter system,



immediately after the Valhallas probably wasn't the kindest thing I could have done!

Surprisingly, the Ringmat leads stood up remarkably well, which speaks volumes for their musical balance, evenness and coherence. Sure, they lacked the detail, transparency, focus, dynamics and scale of the Nordosts, but at least they were playing recognisably the same recordings,

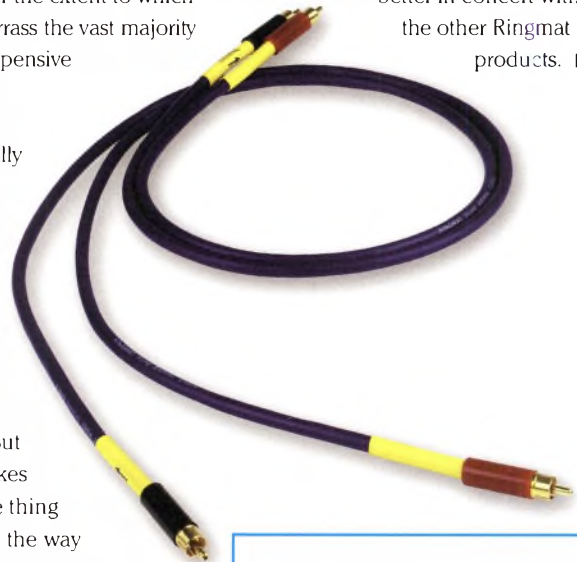
and that's quite a feat when you consider the extent to which the Valhallas embarrass the vast majority of even the most expensive competition.

So, with good bandwidth, especially at low frequencies, good presence and an excellent sense of pace and musical flow, the Ringmats can certainly hold their own against their price peers. But that still hardly makes them news. No, the thing that intrigues me is the way these cables dovetail with the other Ringmat products. I first noticed it when I used the Statmat CDi Blue in the 390S. A much bigger than normal difference. Experiments

with a Ringmat on the record player were similarly impressive, as were the Statfeet.

All of which suggests to me that either the Ringmat products manage to interrelate regardless of system (which is pretty weird) or that John has managed to define certain common features in their performance, features that work in concert with the cables. Certainly, what was an indifferent degree of treble separation and definition in the original system was dramatically improved by the application of other Ringmat products. Similar effects were noted across the range, building detail, dynamics and finesse onto the basis of the cable's impressive body and presence, lifting the overall performance well beyond the norm. All of which I think you'll agree, is pretty spooky.

Good cables at the price, but much better in concert with the other Ringmat products. ➤



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ECM at 30

First issues in the Rarum anniversary series

by Phil Ward and Dave Davies

How long does a phenomenon have to last before it becomes an institution? ECM records definitely began as a phenomenon, appearing from nowhere in 1969 when Manfred Eicher, previously an orchestral bass player and production assistant, had his smart idea to tap into a new and vibrant Northern European and Scandinavian Jazz scene with a label that borrowed Classical production values, yet exuded cool and style. Now, I think, 33 years later, and on the release of the Rarum series of compilations, we're justified in calling ECM an institution. But the extraordinary thing is, the characteristic musical and aesthetic values that it was born with are still in place and endure today. That's quite some achievement, so maybe ECM is still a phenomenon after all.

In some respects ECM redefined what a "record" label was about. Before Eicher, a label was simply a commercial mechanism for the production and distribution of recorded music. Yes, some European Classical and American Jazz labels had developed identities, personalities even, that existed apart from the music, but these were more of accident than design and perhaps more apparent in hindsight than contemporaneously. In inventing ECM Eicher realised that a label could be far more than just well, a "label". On a creative level it could become the aesthetic framework within which the music was produced; almost defining an unwritten "style guide". And on a commercial level, firstly it could use the framework to spread the investment risk on new and often challenging music - high volume discs helping pay for the experiments. And secondly,

it could operate as a marketing device that helped listeners take risks in buying unfamiliar music. You always knew (and know) at least a little of what to expect from an ECM disc.

There are three fundamental elements to the ECM framework. Firstly, the music. In the early years ECM was unashamedly a Jazz label, albeit with a European slant. European artists such as Jan Garbarek and Terje Rypdal found in ECM a perfect home for their unmistakably cool Scandinavian "chamber Jazz".

But soon Keith Jarrett opened the floodgates for US artists who perhaps found in ECM a label more open to experimentation and risk taking than the more formulaic and commercially minded US labels. Lester Bowie, Gary Burton, Charlie Haden, Ralph Towner, Chick Corea, Bill Frisell and a toothy young guitarist called Pet Metheny all crossed the Atlantic to record on ECM in pretty short order.

The second element is the sound. Even now, the majority of ECM recordings give the impression that they result from just putting-up a few microphones and pressing record. Of course, the reality is probably very different, but it's the results that count and Manfred Eicher productions consistently pull off the trick of sounding like real performance and not manufactured facsimile. That's not to say every ECM recording is wonderful - some of the early ones especially are not entirely un-challenging ▶



▶ experiences, but even they have “the sound”. Partly the sound is a result of the style of music (small group Jazz recorded quickly leaves little time for too much messing about), and partly the sound is a result of loyalty to a small roster of studios and recording engineers. But also I’m sure it goes back to Eicher appreciating that if his framework for ECM was too succeed, there had to be a appropriate consistency in the sound of his recordings.

The third element was the packaging. ECM artwork was, from the word go, a perfect foil for the music. Turning his back on the typically bustling, gauche look of Jazz sleeve graphics that had gone before, Eicher chose to go with a reflective, cool look often based on stock black and white landscape photography in combination with white

sans-serif face. It was an inspired idea, often since imitated, and worked



a treat in ensuring that ECM releases were differentiated, used the graphics to say something about the contents, and looked good enough to eat.

Of course, as emphasised by the breadth of music to be found on the Rarum discs, ECM is no longer simply a Jazz label. In 1984 ECM gave birth to the *New Series*, the rationale of which was to do the same for small scale Classical as had been done for Jazz. Not only were oft-recorded standard works given an ECM interpretation, Jarrett’s *Bach Suites* for example, but contemporary composers from Steve Reich through John Adams to Arvo Pärt found comfortable and indulgent homes. And apart from the *New Series*, ECM has also moved away from its Jazz roots in other ways. Perhaps the early cross-fertilisation of European and US Jazz artists was partly responsible, but ECM is now a World Music label, or maybe a “category on its own” label. Musicians from the World over (and from

a huge range of musical dialects) now regularly appear on ECM discs, either as leaders or within groups. Unlikely combinations of musicians have always been part of Eicher and ECMs success. Jan Garbarek improvising over the top of the Hilliard Ensemble probably seemed a barmy idea when Eicher proposed it, but their first release, *Officium*, went on to be one of the best selling ECM discs (and no doubt helped fund quite a few discs that have only sold in the hundreds).

So, now we have the *Rarum* series that celebrates the beginning of ECMs fourth decade with 30 compilations of selected artists’ work - from the ubiquitous Jarrett and Garbarek to the lesser known Bobo Stenson and Tomasz Stanko. This isn’t the first milestone ECM has celebrated with a series of compilations. The *Works Series* of 1985 celebrated 15 years with much the same idea, although the significant difference with *Rarum* is that the tracks included in each compilation have been selected personally by each artist. There’s some interesting liner notes too, if reading liner notes is your bag, and of course the packaging and presentation of each disc shows how it is possible to make CDs covetable objects in their own right. A complete set of *Rarum* sat alongside the B&O would just look so damn cool.

Keith Jarrett

Rarum 1

It’s a measure of the extraordinary volume of work that Keith Jarrett has produced over 30 years with ECM that this collection merits a double CD set.

It’s a good attempt to cover the range of his achievements, but there are some obvious omissions. Where’s that ‘70s favourite *The Koln Concert*? And Jarrett himself admits that he’d like to have included ‘Mirrors’ from *Arbour Zena* but since that track is 27 minutes long it had to be left out. In selecting the pieces to include, Jarrett pursued a policy of selecting a good quantity of material that he felt merited more exposure.

Opening with three selections from *Book of Ways* these clavichord pieces although improvised have at first listen a stately baroque feel to them. Hardly jazz at all in the ▶



► conventional sense but that's probably as much due to the qualities of the instrument as anything else, and Jarrett has long been known as a musician who can comfortably carve his own niche which when he chooses is somewhere between jazz and classical. Listen on from the first selection, and by 'Book of Ways 14' new and strange territories are being entered. In fact for this album what you're hearing is three clavichords angled together allowing Jarrett to play two simultaneously at any time.

Despite the absence of *The Köln Concert* from this set, there's a good selection of Jarrett's piano improvisations taken from *Concerts* and *Dark Intervals*, for me though his strongest work is with the various ensembles represented here. Check out the two cracking tracks from *Belonging* and better still the two selections from *My Song*. Incidentally all four numbers went a long way towards shifting my negative view of Garbarek. He's a much more muscular player here than the reedy, spectral soul that comes across on so much of his later stuff. 'The Journey Home' which closes this sequence and the first album is one of the strongest, most melodic and enjoyable numbers in the collection.

Album two opens with two meditative and rather beautiful solo pieces from *Dark Intervals*, before two tracks from *Invocations* featuring Jarrett on both soprano sax and pipe organ. This makes for unsettling listening. Maybe it's the religious associations that go along with the sound of the organ, coupled with the cavernous acoustic and echo, but it's distinctly spooky stuff.

Three tracks are included from the great trio with Gary Peacock and Jack deJohnette, and these for me are the very best of the bunch: 'The Cure' from the album of the same name, and 'Bop-Be' and 'No Lonely Nights' from *At the Blue Note*. This is simply great, powerful playing whichever way you look at it (listen to it?). The three are so in tune with each other it's simply a joy to listen to. The best recordings of a well recorded set too!

This is a fascinating compilation and I'd be amazed if any individual will like it all equally well. There's such an extraordinary and diverse range of material here. But for anyone who wants to know what Jarrett is about this is a great place to start. I'm already planning to fill a few gaps in my collection.

DD

RECORDING



MUSIC



Jan Garbarek

Rarum II

I don't think it would too much exaggeration to propose that if our esteemed Editor were given the opportunity to go back in time and strangle the baby Garbarek at birth, in spite of RG's fundamentally tolerant and moral nature, the young sax player's survival would be a close run thing. RG really, really is not Garbarek's biggest fan, and that kind of sums up all you really need to know about the Norwegian saxophonist and composer - he's a love it or hate it musician. As one who generally falls into the "love it" category, I'm not entirely sure what it is that the others don't get on with, but I suspect it's a combination of Garbarek's stark, uncompromising sax tone, his occasionally simplistic, folksy way with melody and his sporadic excesses of noise over content. Of course it could be that he's a successful, clean living, tee-total and cool Scandinavian that gets to travel the World and play with pretty much any musician he likes, and that "hat" is actually spelled "envy"...

I guess falling into the "love it" category is the reason I got to review Garbarek's *Rarum* release. My adoration isn't entirely blind, or I suppose deaf, however and there's been a few Garbarek pieces over the years that have left me frowning. So it's with some frustration I have to report that there's a couple more of them on this 2 CD compilation than I'd have liked. Complaining about the choices is I guess the archetype criticism of a compilation so maybe it would have been too much to hope to find each of my best loved pieces here, but even so, there's a few surprises of omission as well as inclusion. Perhaps it says something about Garbarek's uncompromising nature that he's chosen the uncompromising tracks.

There's a slightly different slant to each of the two CDs. One carries pieces from Garbarek's own releases while the second carries works from other projects on which he's played. The second disc works better for me. Maybe the nature of a compilation suits a wider breadth of work, or maybe playing for others reins in the Garbarek style? But should you buy it? Well if you're new to Garbarek I'd say probably no. One of his mid to late period releases or maybe one of the collaborations, perhaps with Jarrett, would be a better introduction. But if you're a fan, can handle the odd excess and know where the "next" function is on the CD player? ►



► Well you have to really. (I've only downgraded the Music rating 'cause some of my favourite bits aren't included!)

PW



Chick Corea

Rarum111

Opening with a couple of tracks from one of my most cherished albums, the first (and best) *Return to*

Forever album,

this set gets off to a fine start. 'Sometime Ago' and 'La Fiesta'

comprised the suite that closed that album and epitomised its gentle, flowing feel. Flora Purim's voice soars over the complex, driving patterns laid down by her husband Aírto Moreira, the whole thing gaining even more momentum from Corea's keyboards and punctuated by great soprano sax from Joe Farrell. It always recalls the first time I saw Aírto live at Ronnie Scotts, it was a memorable night and this set represents some of his very best recorded work. It's Corea though that holds the whole thing together and there's no mistaking who's leading the band.

Next up are some outstanding samplings from two of Corea's duo recordings with vibraphonist Gary Burton. Taken from *Crystal Silence* and *In Concert*, if anything these are even more engaging than the *Return to Forever* set. In fact the duo deliver their version of 'What Game Shall We Play Today' from that album and manage to improve on the original. The dexterity and sympathetic interplay between the two makes for some superb music making and Burton entirely banishes any hint of the slightly soporific 'sophisticated' jazz feel that can mar enjoyment of the instrument in the hands of many others. 'Mirror Mirror' from the live set will convince you of this.

Moving to more straight ahead driving stuff from Trio's, Corea is joined by Miroslav Vitous and Roy Haynes. With hints of the Avant Garde about them, these numbers never tip over the edge and preserve a melodic integrity that makes for intriguing listening.

Just listen to 'Trio Improvisation 3' for a good example of what I'm on about. This selection also includes three Thelonius Monk numbers that allow Corea to stamp his own identity on Monk's tunes without losing their essential spirit. Fantastic bass and percussion work throughout too, and a charming take on 'Eronel'.

The album closes with three tracks from *Trio Music - Live in Europe*. The standout here is a stunning take on 'Summer Night', which segues into 'Night and Day'. A fitting close to a truly outstanding and well-recorded selection.

DD



Gary Burton

Rarum IV

If you wanted to play the Kevin Bacon game with a contemporary Jazz musician, vibes player Gary Burton wouldn't be a bad choice.

The Kevin Bacon game illuminates Stanley Milgram's Small World theory (also known as the "six degrees of separation" theory). It uses Bacon's professional links with film actors to illustrate the characteristics of "small world" networks. It's said that you can get from Kevin Bacon to any actor in any American film in four links or less. I'm not going to sit here and work it out, but I reckon you could similarly get from Gary Burton to any contemporary Jazz musician just as easily, and to any musician that's ever played on an ECM release in less, two maybe. Gary Burton is THE hub. And, sad as I am, it's just occurred to me that you can even get from Gary Burton to Kate Bush via just one musician (for those that are equally sad, sometime Burton bass player Eberhard Weber played on Bush's *The Dreaming*).

But it's not just that he's played with a lot of people. Gary Burton has been in at the beginning of quite a few notable careers. His quartets and quintets of the 70s and 80s gave early exposure to many musicians that went to forge significant careers both within and outside ECM. Pat Metheny's first serious gig and ECM recording was



► in Burton's group, Eberhard Weber similarly gained important exposure in the US, and even Scotland's finest sax player Tommy Smith found that time spent in Gary Burton's band opened doors.

Even though Burton's last release for ECM was in the mid 80s, he recorded ten albums for the label as leader and appeared on eight others. Not a bad work rate over fourteen years. His single CD *Rarum* release takes tracks from seven of the leader releases and despite the changes in personnel there's a satisfying consistency of feel and style across them. This is an anthology that seems not to suffer too badly from the bits and pieces effect. While the Garbarek *Rarum* is probably not a good place to start if you're unfamiliar with the artist, the Burton one is. Definitely recommended.

PW

RECORDING



MUSIC



Bill Frisell

Rarum V

As the Ed knows, I'm a big fan of Frisell and so was a natural choice for this set. Opening with 'Mandeville' from Paul Motion's '81 album *Psalm* it's Frisell's unique style that grabs you straight away. He has the ability to merge seemingly disparate influences into his own individual blend which here recalls Hawaiian and calypso with a hint of what? Search me, maybe Western swing, but whatever the mix Frisell is unmistakable every time, even this early in his career.

After a couple more strong numbers with Motion and glossing over the track with Garbarek (sorry, I'm



just not a fan), we come to the first of a selection from Frisell's own albums. 'In Line' from the eponymous album is an intriguing multi-layered acoustic piece. With repeated figures recalling church bells, overlaid with great surges of melody this was a good start for his first album.

Better yet is 'Resistor' from his album *Rambler*. Here a galumphing tuba figure plods along against driving percussion before Frisell's guitar synthesiser kicks in like some wounded primordial beast. With the addition of Kenny Wheeler's trumpet, the track takes off but never loses its eccentric, off-centre dynamic. There are two more selections from this album which are just as compelling helping exemplify Frisell's ability to play with your imagination, recalling half forgotten memories, elements of film music, places, whatever. Try 'Music I Heard' for a good example of this: touches of Nino Rota maybe, but just plain intriguing. These selections, by the way, benefit from a particularly full-bodied, punchy recording.

'Lonesome' from *Lookout for Hope* sees Frisell getting together with what have become his regular stable mates, Kermitt Driscoll, and Joey Baron. In this material there's already a hint of the even finer music that the trio would be making in their subsequent and very wonderful Nonesuch albums.

'Kind of Gentle' sees Frisell in a different setting contributing with Lee Konitz and Dave Holland to the superb Kenny Wheeler album 'Angel Song'.

After another strong number this time from Paul Bley's album *Fragments* the set closes with an elegiac piece 'Sub Rosa' from the Gavin Bryers Ensemble. Sans Frisell, it is dedicated to him and beautifully rounds off an extraordinary journey through the mind and musicianship of an extraordinary man.

DD

RECORDING



MUSIC



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Record Reviews

How To Read Them







The information contained in the record reviews is presented in the following way. Albums are identified by label and serial number. Beneath this you will find one or more icons which denote the available formats for the recording. The first icon refers to the format reviewed.

The ratings at the bottom of each review reflect the reviewer's opinion of the recording quality, and musical merits of the album. You'll soon realise that a great many musically significant albums offer less than wonderful sound. Don't let it put you off! For your information the scale rates a standard, good quality pop recording as slightly below average.

The reviewers are identified by their initials.

They are:- Chris Binns, Pete Christie, Dave Davies, Roy Gregory, Jason Hector, James Michael Hughes, Jon Maple, Reuben Parry, Dave Ayers, Andrew Hobbs, Chris Thomas, Mark Childs, Simon Groome.

Key to Icons

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Snout

Managing Good Looks

W-MINC WMINCD022 

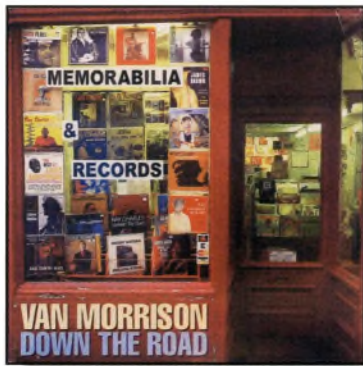
Lead singer and wordsmith Ross McLennan fronts this leftfield guitar-based band in a role not dissimilar to that of a Lloyd Cole minus those trademark intellectual property rights. Allusionless, perhaps, but the wit and ear of a poet are unveiled for the Cole-like intonation in "The Prince Of Plainsong".... The heir of monotone". Other tracks such as 'Sloth' suggest that there is definitely a much harder (punkish) edge to McLennan's malcontent. His Commotions – Anthony Paine (bass guitar) and Ewan McCartney (drums) – are equally comfortable in both contemplative and combative roles. Penetrating and probing lyrics melodically scrape away at modern day gelt, which is that "... refuse at the tin edge of the ecosystem". (No Nine Savers). R.M. pushes his nose in where it's not wanted. He's an insider 'Kickin' Up A Racket' and the informer delivering a 'Little Brittle Sound'. As the closing 'Margin:lla' suggests, these insights are as sandpaper rubbing away at the outer reaches of the status quo. Musically, these are attention grabbing killer grooves. Ideologically? Well, most will approve but do nothing. Is there hope for any of us?

RP

hotrecords@pavilion.co.uk


RECORDING
MUSIC





Van Morrison

Down The Road

Exile 589177-1 

Van "The Man" rolls back the years and taps into those earthy R&B roots for an extended metaphor on a singer/songwriting life. Whereas McCartney's journey was a long and winding trip to your heart, Van drives rhythmically along through Chicago and New Orleans hotspots and opens a window on a blues musician's art in the process. Wearing out acres of shoe leather, learning in equal measure from the knock downs and adrenaline highs – all invaluable experiences long ago cemented in Morrison performances – it's rekindled here within fifteen songs like 'Choppin' Wood' and 'What Makes The Irish Heart Beat', with their predominantly home spun themes. Lyrically, the mountainous landscapes of 'Steal My Heart', 'Man Has To Struggle' and 'The Beauty Of The Days Gone By' poetically mirror the toil, exertion and personal sense of fulfilment as these great edifices in our lives are traversed. All are sympathetically underscored with saxophone, flute, trumpet and even an Acker Bilk clarinet solo. Van's is a pensive, reflective and persuasive voice, whose refrain on 'Whatever Happened To PJ Proby?', abhors the meek acceptance of a mediocrity so commonplace in today's music when true artisans are still making their way down the highway with a monkey on their backs.


RP

Cherished Record Company



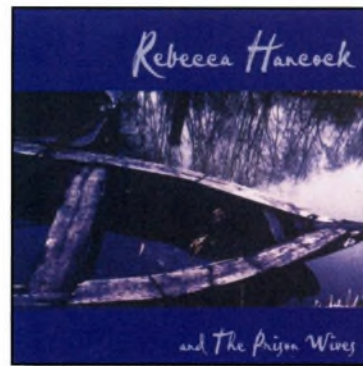
Alan Tyler

Faithful

Littlefield Records Littled001 


In 1992, a lil' ol' country band called The Rockingbirds surfaced on the Heavenly/Columbia label and although they didn't change the face of popular music they did manage to attract a fiercely loyal band of followers who pushed their highly acclaimed debut album into the public eye. Unfortunately the band loved to drink and party to excess and this had a detrimental effect on the quality of their music, resulting in the poorly received second release *Whatever Happened To The Rockingbirds?* They split and lead singer Alan Tyler went on to form Famous Times with his fellow singing partner Sean Read. Again signed to heavenly, they cut two great singles but the album was shelved, leaving Tyler hurt and disillusioned with the music business. After a lengthy absence, Tyler's passion for making music returned and he linked up with Sean Read once more to complete *Faithful* at Read's own Cockerel Sound Studios in late 2001. *Faithful* consists of 11 acoustic based country flavoured songs and Tyler again shows a lovely feel for strong melodies and thoughtful lyrics. Forthcoming single 'Nickel In A Diamond Mine' is an absolute peach, Tyler's rich vocal blending sweetly with co-vocalist Hannah Reese to stunning effect. A folky edge surfaces on 'Ivanhoe' but country music's Tyler's lifeblood and Waylon Jennings his hero – as 'There's A Place In My Heart I Call Texas' and the photographic tribute in the booklet testifies.

AH



Rebecca Hancock And The Prison Wives

Somewhere To Land

Hot Records HOT 108 

This strikingly original debut from an established four-piece Aussie outfit hangs on the elastic vocal strengths of Becky Hancock. She splices together eight self-penned songs and two covers that synthesize a variety of wholegrain musical textures to deliver her own authentic sound. A white noise intro for 'Moon Wants A Lover' opens out into a rockin' showcase for the Wives, as Mark Bradridge rides guitar, John Sandow piano hops, and Nick Fisher beats some lively skin behind Hancock's big, composed phrasing. A coarsened and double-tracked mix working over these longing lyrics has plenty of snap. Contrastingly, play the title track which oozes classy folk-pop. Hold your breath, though, for a closing cover of Joy Division's post-punk anthem on a fragmented relationship, 'Love Will Tear Us Apart?' Can Hancock do punk? Probably - but not here. This is "broken-hearted" very much in the R&B style of Gladys Knight's 'Midnight Train To Georgia' and, even if the notes don't soar, it still works brilliantly – testimony indeed to the genius of Ian Curtis whose creativity was at a peak when he penned this haunting number.

RP

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Eddie Martin & The Texas Blues Kings

Pillowcase Blues

Blueblood Records BB007

In the '60's and '70's Britain produced great blues based artists almost at will; John Mayall, Eric Clapton, Peter Green, The Stones, Led Zeppelin, Rory Gallagher etc. Then it all seemed to dry up in favour of new romanticism and all manner of electronic pop. It's therefore extremely pleasing to report that the British blues scene is still alive and well and in safe hands. *Pillowcase Blues* is Eddie Martin's sixth album and showcases his marvellous talent on the slide guitar- electric slide that is.

Martin wears his influences on his sleeve, so what you get are affectionate nods towards great American players like Hound Dog Taylor and George Thorogood. It's a really earthy, gritty blues that comes tumbling out of the speakers and boy, does it rock! 'Down the Road' opens proceedings, almost 7 minutes of ear shredding slide over a wicked Bo Diddley beat. 'Pillowcase Blues' follows, the guitar highly reminiscent of Thorogood's classic 'Move It On Over' period. 'Underwater Woman' revisits the Bo Diddley groove whilst 'Natural Thing' slows the pace down, allowing Martin the chance to show off his considerable prowess on the harmonica. I could wax lyrical for pages but suffice to say Eddie Martin plays the blues with the same intensity and authenticity as the late, great Rory Gallagher, and I can't pay him a higher compliment than that.

AH



Fiji

the glue hotel tapes

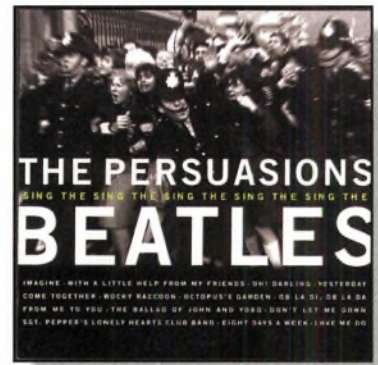
IMPCD 003 Impresario

The glue hotel tapes was an album born from the ashes of the deceased adrenaline-fueled three-piece 'Scarfo'. Singer, guitarist and self confessed control freak Jamie Hince grasped the reigns, set up his own label and proceeded to write, record, produce and distribute his own material under the moniker 'Fiji'. The first surprise was just how different he could sound on his own, given the time and space. At six songs *the glue hotel tapes* barely counts as a full album, but as the only substantial output from a disappointingly brief career as solo artist, it never fails to impress.

Jamie's voice remains as enigmatic as ever, over garage guitars and slick drum beats. For the most part the songs burn slowly, with strong rhythms and understated vocals, but just occasionally they explode with energy and life.

The album is distinguished by its skillful use of sounds and instruments, injecting the kind of change into the songs structure more normally associated with dance music, and by inventive songwriting and composition. But the real excitement in *the glue hotel tapes* is its entirely raw sound. *The glue hotel tapes* is seriously hard to acquire, but worth the effort many times over. Stripped down to its essentials and allowed to develop, the sound of solitude was never better.

MC



The Persuasions

Sing The Beatles

Chesky JD220

You can see it going through someone's little brain and a light-bulb going off. Take an audiophile record label, an a cappella group with impeccable audiophile credibility and you've got a sure fire hit. All you need is music that everybody loves... Which is when the light-bulb went off. Shame it didn't short out. Like a lot of projects that look good on paper, even a moment's reflection should have set the warning bells a ringing. The Persuasions have never included Beatles numbers on their previous releases (I wonder why?): You tinker with people's favourites, the ones they know note for note, at your peril: The majority of Beatles songs are built around close harmonies of their own. You don't have to be Einstein to see that the whole plan is fraught with danger. But the thing that really puts the tin-hat on proceedings is that the performers seem to realise that they're riding for a fall. This is the lamest, flattest and at times most downright tuneless performance I've heard in a long, long time. The clumsy arrangements can't help either. Aware that we normally only review discs we actively recommend and that I might be overstating the case, I've played this disc to everybody I can. They've been universally appalled or amused, but not one has approved. This recording should carry a government taste warning!


RG





Idlewild

the remote part

Parlophone 7243 540243 

On my first listening to the remote part I feared Idlewild had lost it. Compared to the fierce emotional blast of their previous albums, this record might seem soulless and formulaic. And whilst it's true that remote part is less varied, less energetic, with that maturity comes subtlety and depth.

The remote part is Idlewild for the masses, changing the way they deliver the message, but not the content. They have successfully changed the band they were, switching the focus from live intensity to recorded audio velvet, a fact convincingly demonstrated on the current single 'American English'. Gone are the howls of anguish, gone is the feedback and white noise, and in their place are huge anthemic rabble-rousers, with lush production and solid gold hooks.

But if the first half of the album is home to the radio-friendly stadium-fillers that will win Idlewild the chart positions that they rightfully deserve, it is the second half that contains the true gems. 'The remote part/Scottish fiction' and 'live in a hiding place' see them stepping away from the formula and making use of their fondness for non-rock genres.

The remote part is the most coherent collection of songs the band have released, complex and intelligent but also accessible and professional. Idlewild may well have made their perfect album.

MC



Liz Horsman

Roaming

The Red Club TRC001 

I was in music retail when EMI Parlophone were touting Liz Horsman as the music industry's latest superstar in the making. The amount of promotional material and badgering from record company reps was frightening and I imagine the pressure to succeed on a young woman new to such a cash hungry, instant for results mentality must have been enormous. Liz Horsman gives a broad hint as to the pressures at that time in the accompanying press release; "In my experience major labels throw hundreds of thousands of pounds at an artist to achieve instant commercial success. The pressure on the artist becomes greater and greater, I could not suffer that environment anymore".


In truth the album in question, *Heavy High* wasn't really that good; the songs didn't linger in the memory and there wasn't an instant single that would have given the record company the return on their £125,000 investment that they wanted. Now she is free from corporate restraints Liz Horsman can express herself more openly, and it's pleasing to report that *Roaming* is a massive improvement. The songs have much more substance and there are at least two potential hit singles in 'Catch Yourself Crying' and the dreamily hypnotic 'Here Lies'. Recorded on a budget of £2,500, *Roaming* shows that Liz Horsman has come of age. The future looks very bright indeed.

AH



Supernaturals

What we did last summer

Koch Records 343985 

Gosh, I didn't know they made records like this anymore, it's a pop record entirely without focus. Two or three years ago the Bluetones discovered that they didn't have to play the game anymore. Realizing that they were never going to be seriously big, but that their fan-base could keep them afloat, they stopped trying to keep up with the zeitgeist and instead relaxed to find their own niche. In doing so they transformed themselves from indie also-rans to whimsical pop supremos. At the same time The Supernaturals were floundering without direction (or record label) and were obviously watching with interest. *What we did last summer* attempts exactly the same trick, with mixed results. Discarding the guitar hooks and rock posing they have created a slice of pure pop, understated and dripping in sunshine chic. Gone are the attempts at big singles, and instead the album is left in limbo, never quite settling into a comfortable groove. The songs are familiar Supernatural material, but the handling is just as uncomfortable as previously it was forced.

The album is still a seriously stylish nugget of feel-good pop, sounding like a night around the pool or the first flush of a holiday romance. For one night only The Supernaturals have transformed themselves into the Pet Shop Boys, but this turns out to be no bad thing.

MC





Mike Harrison & The Hamburg Blues Band

Touch

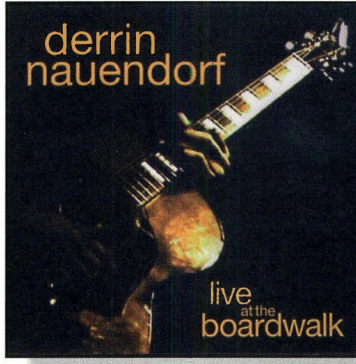
RUF Records RUF107 (CD)

Mike Harrison was the lead singer with Spooky Tooth who disbanded in 1975. After a reunion in 1998 went nowhere, he was left wondering what direction to take next when Fate led him to Thomas Ruf, owner of the german blues label RUF Records, who introduced him to the Hamburg Blues Band, which judging from this album is a marriage made in heaven.

Touch is a truly masterful piece of work and one that really allows Harrison the room to stretch out and prove what an excellent singer he is. His vocals ooze passion, power and true grit and the Hamburg Blues Band in beautifully behind him, creating a big muscular blues/rock sound. The twin guitars of Gert Lange and Alex Conti (ex Atlantis) are a delight throughout, ranging from all out assault on 'hold back' to bad company style riffing on 'Movin' on' and subtle restraint on the emotive ballad 'Try Me Again'.

Mike Harrison is up there with the very best blues rock singers and *Touch* hasn't been out of my cd player for months. It's the biggest surprise of the year for me so far; It's a fabulous album and I just can't recommend it highly enough. Get down to your record store and purchase immediately.

AH



Derrin Nauendorf

Live At The Boardwalk

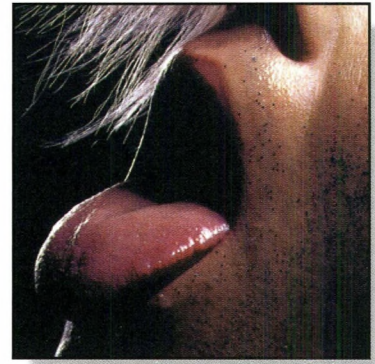
Swing 6350 (CD)

Modern blues in a sparse and beautifully captured performance, and with a difference. Derrin Nauendorf sings and plays a mean guitar. He writes a mean song too. For help he brings along percussionist David Downing and little else. It's a minimalist mix that leaves the performers nowhere to hide. Fortunately they're up to the task. There are nine tracks here (plus encore), all penned by the man himself with the sole exception of a nine minute tour de force, acoustic version of 'Voodoo Child'. If you're going to carry that off without sounding like some sad hippy then you need presence and a touch of panache. Guitar and vocals with attitude, underpinned by nicely judged percussion that fills the voids without getting intrusive or flashy. It's a nicely judged balance and the result is power beyond the scope of the instrumental forces involved. But power that's used sparingly, making it all the more effective, especially on the quieter tracks like the session closer 'Danielle'.

Add an excellent recording with decent dynamics and immediacy and you've got all the ingredients for a classic demo disc. For once the recording's virtues are more than matched by the musical merits, making this disc something of a treasure. Definitely worth seeking out.

RG

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Fischerspooner

#1

FS Studios / Ministry of Sound FSMOSCD1 (CD)

Take two shameless self publicists, add a musical concept that has sat out of fashion for a decade and a half, a truck load of cash, a handful of celebrity concerts, make-up artists and a myriad of costumes, add just a pinch of talent, and what do you get? An international sensation. Fischerspooner have become an overnight success, turning heads and gaining critical acclaim worldwide. But is it justified? Warren Fischer and Casey Spooner make up the electro-pop duo Fischerspooner. Although sold as future music, nothing on this album is a revolution. We can only assume Warren and Casey were asleep through the eighties, the only difference is that Fischerspooner have access to better samplers. But the real mystery is why they insist on surrounding themselves with the hype. The showy frills, the bold statements, the onstage antics and press baiting just stir up the mud, and manage to successfully cover the fact that they have actually made a superb album. Its not future music, its not world changing, but it is a bloody good stomp through bass lines and synthesizers. Debut single 'Emerge' may well be the best track on the album, but the rest aren't far behind. The album simply oozes sexual tension. If the album warrants criticism it is the fact that it fails to keep its pace through to the end.

MC



Sonic Satori

by Michael Mercer

Ashley Casselle

Response



With dance music being so inundated with DJ mix CDs it's nearly impossible to navigate your way through the shelves at the local record shop and find what you're looking for. And when you think you've got a firm hold on the sound you're seeking another genre gets introduced, splitting your already fragmented brain into yet another ten categories. Well my friends, I hate to sound cliché but Ashley Casselle has delivered with *Response*. Call it progressive house, call it trance, whichever label you deem appropriate this CD is a fantastic looking glass into clubland (at 3am with the right crowd). In this digital day and age DJing is truly an art form, and I defy anyone who would argue the point. Ashley's musical selections coupled with his skillful mixing make for a masterful double disc set. His beat matching is engaging and precise. The introduction via Astroglyde's *Oraphi* (re-edit) gives you a glimpse of what you're in for. Cascading with synth infused 4/4 beats and bubbling melodies, this track goes for the gut straight out of the gate. The triggered blips and driving bass lines of Quirk's *Soft Focus* (Hyperion Remix) are enough to make any couch potato get up from the listening chair. *Response* definitely packs

a punch when played through a system capable of being loud without distorting low-end frequencies. Don't blast this through your Mission bookshelves (hopefully you don't own them to begin with). The mid-range is exceptionally vibrant and clean. Hi hat hits and clicks are articulated well, without piercing the eardrums. Looking for an album to pump in the car on the way to a good night out? Pick this up, and support Casselle's noble efforts.

South

From Here On In



South presents a tough case. This trio is undoubtedly talented and capable of carrying a tune. However, there's nothing particularly groundbreaking about this record, which makes it even more difficult to articulate just how damn good it is. Maybe it's the fact that there is no eye candy or over the top antics, and it's still a great record! Quite uncommon in the current musical landscape. The lyrical content is honest and simple, no political pandering or celebrity bashing. It's refreshing to listen to a band that concentrates more on connecting with their audience rather than separating themselves from the pack. *Paint The Silence* is the single (I believe) and the label made a wise decision here. It's got a hooky chorus

and emotive melodies. The band sings well in unison and the engineer chose the right reverb for the vocal tracks. *iLive Between The Lines* is a vibe-full track. Its upbeat chorus is just the thing one needs to deal with their long commute home from their daily grind. Most of the tracks mesh well. The moody arrangements combined with Joel Cadbury's vulnerability as a lead singer make *From Here On In* a great soundtrack to life. Sonically the record could be more defined. With such expressive vocals, it's a shame the spatial quality is lacking at certain points. Tones are pleasantly crisp but it's the air in-between that's missing. I suspect some of the more organic textures in the music were lost through the chosen mastering process. Despite its audible faults *From Here On In* is a must own for any Charlatans fan or anyone looking for some wholesome non-pretentious rock/pop. If only I could keep up with the ever changing musical categories these days.

Response



South



definitive audio

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Roy Gregory

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"The Avatar is a near perfect balance of size, bandwidth, efficiency and tonal refinement, its slim lines and small footprint deliver a genuine 94db sensitivity, and excel when it comes to delivering the scale, vibrance and colour of the music. Its unobtrusive quality allows it to cut straight to the heart of a performance, unlocking the music trapped in the recording, whilst its refinement makes it equally at home with both basic and surprisingly expensive amplification."

Roy Gregory

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Antonin Dvorak
Legends; Notturmo; Miniatures;
Prague Waltzes
Fischer, Budapest Festival
Orchestra

Philips 464 647-2

It's probably fair to say Dvorak's *Legends* do not rate among his very best works; certainly, they're not played or recorded very often, and could justifiably be described as neglected. Yet Brahms thought highly of them, and so too did the critic Hanslick. They were originally written for piano duet, like the popular *Slavonic dances*, but lack the latter's bright primary colours and catchy appeal. Nevertheless, given a sensitive and intelligent interpreter like Ivan Fischer, the music is actually much better than one might previously have thought – fresh, natural, and often inspired. Certainly, Fischer makes a convincing case for Dvorak's *Legends*, bringing out their changeable moods and shifting quixotic colours. Rhythmically he's very flexible, making sure the music is crisply inflected and kept moving in the faster more animated passages, while broadening out for the more expansive lyrical sections. He treats the work as though it were a masterpiece, and the result is extremely impressive and convincing. The other works are also lesser-known Dvorak, but attractive well-crafted music nonetheless, and made to sound engaging when played with such insight and conviction as here. The Philips recording is smooth, clean, and very well-balanced. Clarity is excellent, allowing lots of inner detail to be heard, but there's no sense of instruments being spot-lit or balances being artificially manipulated by the engineers.

JMH
 RECORDING
 MUSIC



Telemann
La Bizarre
Akademie für Alte Musik Berlin

Harmonia Mundi HMC 901744

Georg Philipp Telemann brought a light-hearted essence to Eighteenth Century German music, interspersing his works with his humour and wit, and using his sharp and satirical imagination to often write contrary to the trends of the time. But he has also long been pigeonholed as an undemanding composer, rather than a creative, innovative one, discouraging many from exploring his more challenging side. Telemann was drawn to the fantasy world of opera, so it was a natural progression for him to write *Overture* and *Orchestral Suite*. This release contains one *Suite*, two *Overture* and a *Violin Concerto*, and is an inspired programme to end the "light" composer stereotype. The performances are exceptional, featuring spirited playing that can become quite boisterous during *Les Nations*, with prominent contrasts and thrilling tempo changes. The *Overture "La Bizarre"*, although subtler, is no less appealing, but it is in *Les Rainettes* that we are treated to the highlight of the disc. Midori Seiler's violin screams and shrieks, providing an extraordinary experience, and with Harmonia Mundi's engineering also sounding superb, this essential, spirited release should make the most lethargic classical music listener take note, hopefully motivating them to investigate this accomplished composer further – a remarkable achievement.

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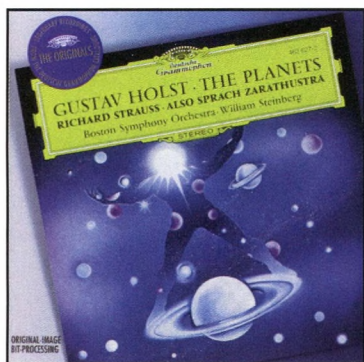


Gustav Mahler
Symphony Nr 10
(completed Joe Wheeler)


Olson, Polish NRSO
 Naxos 8.554811

With the Naxos Mahler cycle still awaiting a recording of the eighth symphony to complete it after nearly ten years, getting a disc of the reconstructed tenth symphony is an unexpected bonus. Especially as conductor Robert Olson has chosen the previously unrecorded Joe Wheeler completion. The orchestration is leaner than the more familiar final version by Deryck Cooke, who revised his first completion by scoring the music for a larger orchestra in order to create a more authentic Mahlerian sound. Wheeler's faithfulness to Mahler's original is commendable, but Mahler himself would have expanded and enlarged the score when finalising it for publication. Alas, no one knows precisely what Mahler would've done – so, whether sticking to the specifics of what he left, or attempting to second-guess his possible revisions, you're left in a no-win situation. Speaking personally, I find the two scherzo movements less and less convincing the more I hear them, but do prefer Cooke's extra winds because they make the music sound more like authentic late Mahler. Still, at just under £5, the new Naxos is worth hearing; the performance is committed and mostly well-played, though the conception is small-scaled. The recorded sound is a bit thin, but I think that's down to Wheeler's orchestration, not the engineers. Some sections sound very undernourished and 'exposed' compared to real Mahler.

JMH
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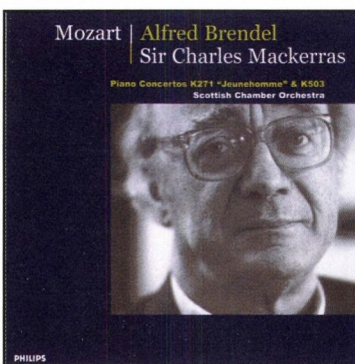


Gustav Holst
The Planets
Richard Strauss
Also Sprach Zarathustra
Steinberg, BSO


DG The Originals 463 627-2 

Had ill health not curtailed his activities, William Steinberg might've had a long and distinguished career with Deutsche Grammophon. As things turned out, he made only 3LPs for the yellow label; an all Hindemith disc, plus the two works coupled on this CD. Apparently it was DG's idea for Steinberg to record Holst's *Planets* - he'd never conducted the work before. Yet his performance is masterly, if faster and glossier than (say) Boult's more typically English interpretation. Steinberg's gives a crisp virtuoso account of the score, helped by immediate forwardly-balanced sound. Most of DG's early '70s Boston recordings sounded spacious and reverberant, with the orchestra set back at a nice distance. Here, the impression is of a closer seat in the hall, almost 'conductor's rostrum' close at times. The sound varies from Planet to Planet, and there are some odd details - for example the glockenspiel pitch sounds slightly 'flat' in the first half of Jupiter, but not the reprise. *Zarathustra* sounds beautifully rich and spacious - technically one of DG's best Boston recordings - witness the marvellous opening. Steinberg's performance is brilliant and exciting, if without the intoxicating opulence and dramatic splendour of Karajan's celebrated 1974 Berlin account on DG.

JMH

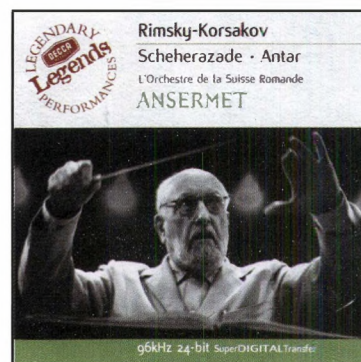


Mozart – Piano Concertos
Nos. 9 and 25
Brendel/Scottish chamber
Orchestra/Mackerras

Philips 470 287-2 

Alfred Brendel has developed since his Mozart recordings of the 1970s. These performances are still full of character but are more affable and poetic, rather than the more impulsive, rather mischievous earlier readings. The tempi are a touch slower, revealing more colour, and there is a certain correctness and authority to Brendel's playing, allowing each piece to flow in a broad but simple line, rather than forcing the issue. In *Piano Concerto No. 9*, the first movement is the model of polished expressiveness, with Brendel simply listening to the orchestra, shaping each phrase accordingly, and indeed it is this exceptional relationship between pianist and orchestra that is at the heart of these performances. In the *C major Concerto (No. 25)*, Brendel contributes embellishments in the *Andante*, balancing sophistication and eloquence in a performance of sympathetic refinement. Despite this he still manages to promote each work from new perspectives, with the composer's themes occasionally twisted into new forms. Mackerras and the SCO also perform to a high standard, with the strings and woodwind particularly impressive. While there are a number of rival versions available, this release may just have a performance edge, with Brendel supplying performances of great intelligence and proficiency.

SG



Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov
Scheherazade; Antar

Ansermet, OSR

Decca Legends 470 253-2 

The recording of *Antar*, taped in June 1954, was Decca's very first stereo recording. They could hardly have chosen a more brilliantly scored and colourfully orchestrated piece. Agreed, *Scheherazade* has always been more popular and celebrated, but *Antar* is every bit as impressive musically and technically - the exotic and exciting third movement, for example, contains one of Rimsky's best tunes. Apparently, when Ansermet heard a playback of *Antar*'s first movement in stereo, he was utterly amazed - declaring the result '...magnificent' and 'wonderful... Just as if I were standing at the rostrum!' Even today, the recording impresses; there's a faint hum audible from time to time, but tape hiss is low and tonally the sound is full-bodied and surprisingly rich. Yet this is the first time the stereo tapes have been issued commercially - the previous LP re-issue on Decca's Eclipse label being pseudo-stereo from the mono tapes. Ansermet's performance is enthusiastic but sensitive, bringing out the gorgeous orientalism in the music. *Scheherazade* dates from 1960 and remains one of Ansermet's (and Decca's) most famous LPs, prized by audiophiles for its brilliant sound. It still sounds great; tonally, early SXL copies of the LP could be a shade 'hard' and closed-in, but here the sound is crisp and open.

JMH





Words of the Angel

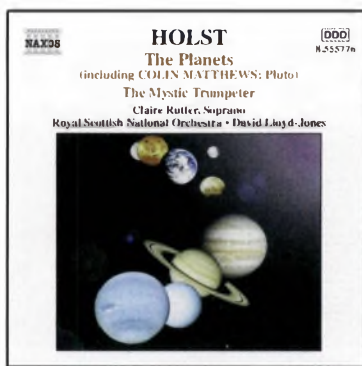
Trio Mediaeval

ECM New Series 1753 461 782-2

The repertoire here may worry some, comprising mainly anonymous pieces in Latin, without translation, and with little overall perspective to the collection. The title of the CD comes from the 1998 composition by Ivan Moody; a beautiful example of how ancient part-writing can be combined with modern ideas on harmony. The female Norwegian vocal group, Trio Mediaeval, sing with verve and rhythmic drive, causing much of the music to resemble the contemporary, despite its Fourteenth Century origins. The performers appear as three clear voices, as opposed to the vocal quartet, the Anonymous 4's more unified sound, creating more timbral colour and unmistakable expressions. These more noticeable gestures are most evident in the songs that are interspersed between the movements of the *Messe de Tournai*, ranging from the dance-like *In excelsis gloria* to the curiously delightful *Benedicta es celorum*. The sound could reveal more of the vibrant timbres and dynamic poise of these singers, but is still clear and precise, in the best ECM fashion.

While some may prefer a recording with a single context, and notes that include English translations of the text, this excellent display of measured fervour and technique should appeal to anyone simply looking for a beautiful musical experience.

SG

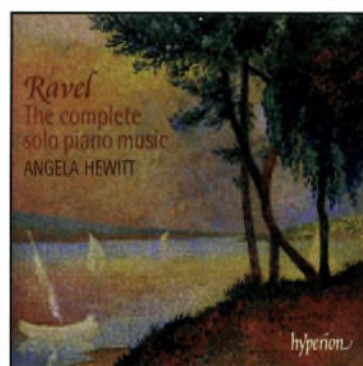


Gustav Holst
The Planets
The Mystic Trumpeter*
Claire Rutter, soprano*
RSNO, David Lloyd Jones

Naxos 8.555776

Released to celebrate 15 years of Naxos, this new version of Holst's popular orchestral showpiece includes Colin Matthews' extra movement *Pluto*, plus Holst's *Scena* for soprano and orchestra *The Mystic Trumpeter*. *The Planets* gets a good solid straightforward performance, one firmly in the English tradition as laid down by the work's first interpreter Sir Adrian Boult. Tempi are well-chosen, not too fast or too slow, and Lloyd Jones commendably keeps the music moving. Colin Matthews' extra movement *Pluto* (Holst died shortly after *Pluto* was discovered) makes an interesting appendage - though Holst made things difficult here by writing a 'fade-out' ending to *Neptune* - most inconsiderate. Matthews' movement does not sound like anything Holst would've written, but it's an effective atmospheric piece - that is, if music describing the outer regions of space can be called 'atmospheric'! It also gives Holst's off-stage choir a bit more work to do. *The Mystic Trumpeter*, with its heady intoxicated text by Walt Whitman, breathes a very different air. How strange that someone shy and introverted like Holst should've been attracted to such a bold and outgoing poem. Then again, perhaps it's not so strange! The Naxos 24bit recording has an extremely wide dynamic range, but needs to be played loudly for full impact. The spacious balance suits *The Mystic Trumpeter* better.

JMH



Ravel
The Complete Solo Piano Works

Angela Hewitt

Hyperion CDA67341/2

Ravel was not the greatest of pianists, but his colourful and rhythmic compositions for the instrument demand perfect technique. Angela Hewitt possesses such musicianship but, while her acclaimed Bach recordings are fabulously poised and fluid, here she can sound a little too deliberate at times, with *Pavane pour une infante défunte* being far too measured, lacking sparkle and verve. Ironically, it is in the more substantial, less Bach-like, works where she is generally more successful, with her tremendous ability allowing some beautiful interplay between the left and right hands. In her recent Wigmore Hall recital, Hewitt performed *Gaspard de la nuit* with notable panache, and so too here, although she does not quite let herself go as she did then, attaining more control, yet revealing some exquisite phrasing. *Le Tombeau de Couperin* includes some wonderfully varied articulations, especially in the *Toccata*, while *Jeux d'eau* flows delightfully, and *Miroirs* is performed with great intelligence, revealing Ravel's layering of tones. Hyperion's engineering is clear and detailed, without entering the demonstration class. The set is complete, including the relatively recently discovered *Sérénade* grotesque, and Hewitt's performances are intelligent and full of contrasts, yet never quite attain the exhilaration found in the greatest performances.


SG





Richard Strauss An Alpine symphony Rosenkavalier-suite

Thielemann, VPO

DG 469 519-2 

This CD documents Christian Thielemann's impressive debut with the Vienna Philharmonic in Strauss' massive *Alpensinfonie*. Recorded live in the Musikverein, the performance is beautifully paced and meticulously balanced. Tempi are a shade broader than usual, but the music never drags. Any worries that the acoustic of this famous hall might be a little too cramped and dry for Strauss' mighty forces turns out to be groundless; the sound is impressively clean and detailed, without becoming dense and opaque during climaxes, and there's a proper feeling of scale to those room-shaking climaxes. Clarity is excellent, and you can hear lots of detail. Indeed, listening to Thielemann's performance, one realises that much of *Alpensinfonie* consists of orchestral chamber music - so much of it is delicately scored and finely shaded in terms of tonal colour and instrumental balance. As a result, one fully appreciates that the musical content of *Alpensinfonie* is actually very high - it's more than just a compendium of grandiose orchestral effects strung together. The disc is completed by a sumptuous account of the suite from *Der Rosenkavalier*. Again, the playing is beautifully shaped and refined without becoming effete. In other less expert performances, the more rumbustious parts of the suite so often sound 'noisy', but not here; even Strauss' vulgar Oom-Pah finale remains outstandingly clean and precisely articulated.

JMH

RECORDING 
MUSIC



Buxtehude – Seven Sonatas, Op. 1

Convivium

Hyperion CDA67236 

Buxtehude – Sonate a due, Op. 1

Kraemer/Quintana/Roberts/Börner

Harmonia Mundi HMC 901746 

These two alternative new releases of Buxtehude's *Seven Sonatas, Op. 1*, contain music of profound personality, intrepid ingenuity and wonderful articulation, with the composer achieving all this through freedom of compositional constraints. They are full of passionate virtuosity and were very unorthodox works for their time, a fact that the members of Convivium obviously understand, breathing much life into each sonata, while the Harmonia Mundi disc includes the addition of a second violin. This soliciting an extra instrument was common practise during the Baroque, enabling the ensemble more freedom to improvise, embellish and develop. The results here are a heightened atmosphere of spontaneity and a tremendous depth of tonal textures that give an even greater sense of verve. Manfredro Kraemer's first violin's energetic tempos also give the performance greater momentum than the Hyperion disc. With such directions as *con discretione* and *stylus phantasticus*, Buxtehude encouraged players to freely express their own musical ideas. Kraemer and his colleagues seize the opportunity to give a breathtaking performance, with Kraemer's violin struggling with



the rest of the group for principal position. In the *Sixth sonata* his virtuosity is a marvel, alternating from leading the charge to subordinate as each movement dictates, without the slightest wavering. It is only in the final *poco presto* that some kind of alliance is found, but only because the composer treated each instrument independently, rather than signalling a truce between them. Alternatively, Convivium are a little more restrained and polite, lacking a little of the quartet's freedom of expression, resulting in a slight lack of tension, but only when directly compared to the Harmonia Mundi disc. While the Hyperion recording is very good, being smooth with beautiful, accurate tones, Harmonia Mundi's presentation is first rate and even more detailed, fully revealing the textures and energy in each piece, and supplying more depth to the performance. The Hyperion disc also includes a cover note that implies that Richard Tunnicliffe plays the cello, while he actually performs on the composer's specified instrument, the viola da gamba, with its distinctive timbre. The Hyperion disc is a lovely account of these unfairly neglected masterpieces, but it is the more consistent display of sensitivity and attention to detail, as well as the broader presentation of the Harmonia Mundi release that make it the first choice. This is a truly exceptional recital, enthusiastically performed, and which finally realise the full potential of these extraordinary compositions.

SG

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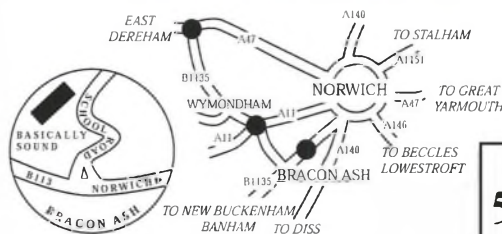
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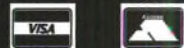


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Sonny Rollins

Way Out West

VICJ-60088 XR

An all-time classic, from the slightly embarrassed looking sax totin' Rollins on the sleeve to the great music within, this is one of my favourite Rollin's albums. Following the great *Saxophone Colossus* this is where Rollin's started to demonstrate his fondness for unlikely material: 'I'm an Old Cowhand' and 'Wagon Wheels' for two. Whatever the raw material Rollin's, very ably supported by Ray Brown and Shelly Manne, make's it his own. The interplay between the three is superb throughout. The set features six numbers plus three alternate takes, including a 10 minute version of 'Old Cowhand'. Recorded in '57, the stereo is very hard left (Rollin's) and right (just about everyone else), with not too much going on in the centre. Fortunately the content more than compensates for this. A quick trawl through the shelves revealed that I have two other CD versions of the album: the original OJC CD, and as part of the very fine *Freelance Years* set on Riverside. A quick spin of each in comparison quickly revealed that the OJC version is Oxfam bound. The XRCD is much fuller bodied, with much better detail. The Riverside version however beats both hands down sounding more full bodied still and much faster. However it is part of a set and I'm not sure if it's available separately. The XRCD is a commendable second and does the music credit.

DD

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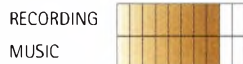
Monty Alexander

Monty meets Sly and Robbie

Telarc SACD-63494 SA CD

This could have been an embarrassing experience for all involved, not least your reviewer. I mean, Monty Alexander's middle of the road piano style is hardly challenging, and the whole thing does smack of a run-of-the-mill payday for the Jamaican rhythm kings. Look at the track listing and it could almost be the soundtrack for a bad Hollywood re-make of some sixties hip movie. Happily, my fears were unfounded, and instead what you have here is a group of confident musicians having fun and giving each other the space to express themselves. The album opens with Herbie Hancock's 'Chameleon', before taking a spin through tracks like 'The In Crowd', 'Sidewinder' and Jo Zawinul's 'Mercy, Mercy'. It's a track listing that majors on easy familiarity, making the perfect playground for Dunbar and Alexander's playful sparring. But don't get the idea this is purely frivolous. There's plenty of musical purpose here, as well as an evolutionary strand that binds the album together into a slowly emerging reggae groove. It's a goodtime trip that manages to stay well the right side of the trivial schmaltz it threatened to be. Recording is fine, adding easy access to the musical appeal, and making the most of Robbie Shakespeare's sub-terreanean contributions.

RG



Oscar Peterson/ Dizzy Gillespie

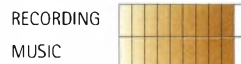
Oscar Peterson & Dizzy Gillespie

JVCXR - 0219-2 XR

The first of what ultimately became five duo sessions that Oscar Peterson recorded with trumpeters (the others are Edison, Eldridge, Faddis & Terry) Gillespie and Peterson are a match made in heaven. Both are consummate musicians at the peak of their powers and not for a second is a rhythm section wanted, both men having such an instinctive feel for the essential pulse of the music. The pair romp through a mix of standards and originals with obvious relish. Peterson's flamboyant runs offset the earthier tones of Gillespie's trumpet, the opener Ellington's 'Caravan' which is taken at a terrific lick, drawing you immediately into the music making. On the slower numbers ('slow' is a relative term in this set) like 'Blues for Bird' Peterson somehow manages to keep the essential down-home bluesy feel whilst overlaying it with his own sophisticated cadences. Not an easy job but he delivers with ease. Gillespie is also on superb form throughout the set. There's not a weak track here and the album is sheer enjoyment from start to finish. The recording is excellent. Really full-bodied and 'in the room' with Gillespie's foot stomping and the grunts of encouragement from each player to the other just adding to the realism. If this session is at all representative of the series, let's have them all on XRCD please!

DD

Supplier: Vivante - www.vivante.co.uk





Stan Getz/ Cal Tjader

Stan Getz, Cal Tjader, etc.

JVCXR – 0218-2 

Tjader had admired Getz from the outset and Getz in turn had heard Tjader as part of Dave Brubeck's trio. Bringing together from Getz's band the then little known Scott LaFaro and Billy Higgins, and Tjader's regular pianist Vince Guaraldi, along with guitarist Eddie Duran, this had all the makings of a great album. The one-off '58 session was recorded in a single day in San Francisco.

This is essentially a very pleasant and lightweight set. The opening number 'Ginza Samba' was prophetic, foreshadowing the boss-nova music that was to be Getz's biggest commercial break a few years later with 'Jazz Samba'. This is one of the strongest, and fastest paced tracks here and the band really take flight with Tjader in particular shining. Other standout tracks include the charming waltz 'Liz Anne' and a particularly good take of 'I've Grown Accustomed to Her Face', where the band really gel as they languidly stroll through the number, both Tjader and Getz delivering outstanding solo's.

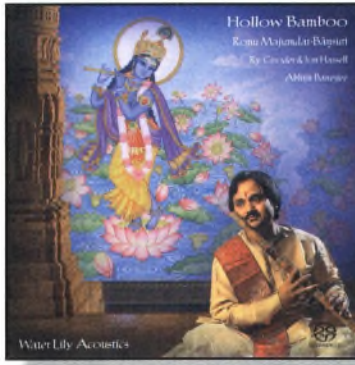
The recording does this laid back set proud.

A little hard left and hard right but that's not unusual for the period, and each instrument is nicely captured. Recommended for a lazy summer afternoon.

DD


Supplier: Vivante - www.vivante.co.uk

RECORDING 
MUSIC



Ronu Majumdar-Bansuri/Ry Cooder /Jon Hassell/Abhijit Banerjee

Hollow Bamboo

Water Lily WLA-CS-71-SACD 

"Ronu is definitely the Dr Feelgood of Indian Flute," proclaims Ry Cooder on the sleeve. Who am I to argue? Recorded in Christ the King Chapel, in Santa Barbara in '97 immediately after the *Fascinoma* session, this is another Water Lily purist release and it shows. Every nuance of Ronu's expert playing is captured, the cool tones of his bamboo flute perfectly caught. The percussion and oh so subtle and sympathetic contributions from Cooder and Hassell are also well, just natural. You can almost see Banjerjee's fingers hitting the tabla, and feel Ronu's breathe across the mouthpiece. I won't try and single out specific numbers since each flows seamlessly into the other. I'll just say that this is one of the most successful, and subtle, musical meetings of East and West yet. All is set in an appropriately spacious acoustic (well it is recorded in a chapel after all), and the entire set is a soul-soothing treat. Try it after a hellish day at work and it calms you faster than even the largest, coldest G&T can manage. I have no higher praise than that!

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Jacintha

Lush Life

JVCXR – 0217-2 

When it comes to female jazz vocalists, Ella, Sarah and Billie remain unsurpassed, but it's not possible to dwell solely in the past and whilst they are a million miles from these greats there are some excellent contemporary singers about. Jacintha is one such and this, her third release for Groove Note is her strongest yet. Moving from the jazz-group backing used in her previous albums (Here's to Ben and Autumn Leaves – The Songs of Johnny Mercer), the sound here is fleshed out with the addition of a string section with arrangements from pianist Bill Cunliffe. Fortunately the strings are sensitively and sparingly used and add to rather than compromise the jazz feel. Just listen to 'Summertime' for a taste of this. Jacintha is on her best vocal form yet, injecting much more feeling into the lyrics. The best example is on the title track. This Strayhorn classic is never an easy number to deliver effectively. Jacintha however realises a near definitive performance which alone is worth the price of admission. Add a very sexy 'Machina de Carnaval' a great after-hours take of 'The Shadow of Your Smile', and a sultry languorous 'September Song' along with a great selection of other classic numbers, throw in a superb recording with real presence and we have a winner.

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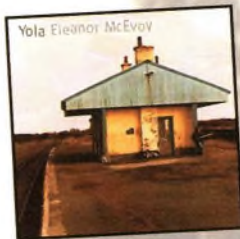


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Eleanor McEvoy: *Yola*

Yola comprises of eleven wonderful songs, sung with real depth of feeling. The band features acoustic guitar and subtle shadings of colour from the piano, with the most understated accompaniment of bass and drums. Eleanor has a great voice and she fortunately has written some great songs on which to use it. Her subject is love and it's complexities in the modern age. A subject that most of us will be able to identify with. She has enlisted some classy assistance in the writing department, Lloyd Cole and Henry Priestman (The Christians), but really it's McEvoy's show throughout. The feel is folk/roots, the production job is first rate (the sonics are some of the best we've heard in a long time) and the appeal of the music, limitless. Fans of Suzanne Vega, Mary Black and Tracy Chapman will love *Yola* as will anyone who knows good music when they hear it! Standout tracks include: *The Rain Falls, Leaves Me Wondering* and *Last Seen October 9th*.

As this is a Hybrid disc, those customers without SACD playback can still enjoy this disc, and at £14.95 that's what we call in the trade a bit of a bargain. SACD gives a rich, broad and spacious sound picture that adds to the musical experience.
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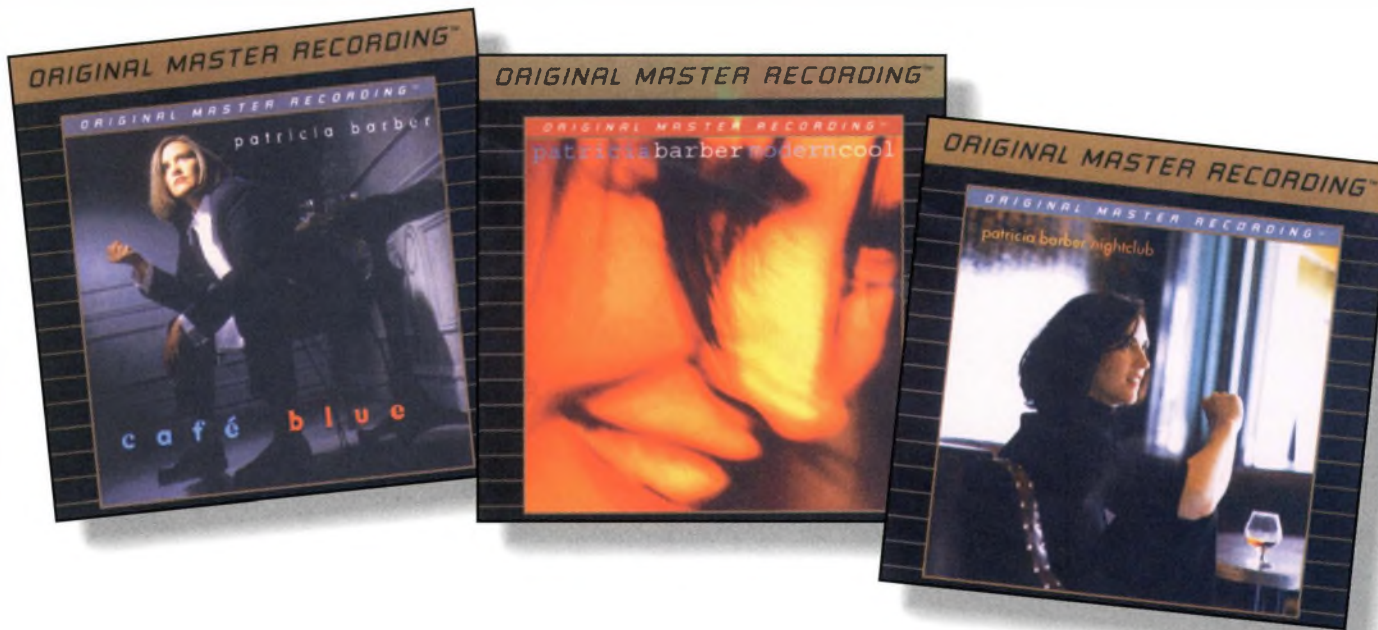
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Patricia Barber

Café Blue

UDSACD 2002

Modern Cool

UDSACD 2003

Nightclub

UDSACD 2004

MOBILE FIDELITY 

Resurrected, in name at least, Mobile Fidelity Sound Labs have re-entered the audiophile arena with a significant statement of intent. In the past it was Mo-Fi who were synonymous for cutting edge recording techniques. Half-Speed Mastering from the original tapes delivered LPs like the astounding *Sinatra* box set. Two hundred gram anadiscs (Joe Cocker's *Sheffield Steel* amongst them) gave vinyl a new lease of life with a requisite Nineties heavyweight makeover, while gold ultradisc CDs embraced the digital medium through a reassuring presentation of classic material such as Billie Holiday's *Body and Soul*. Now relocated (or reborn if you will) in Chicago, the new generation of Mobile Fidelity releases

does not abandon those central ideals, it's primary colours having been firmly hitched to a flagship format in these SACD recordings. The focus upon an industry darling in Patricia Barber also reveals a degree of commercial acumen that was perhaps not so obvious in the old days. Frankly, I was always rather mystified by the repressing on an album like the Bee Gees *Trafalgar* or Emerson, Lake and Palmer's *Pictures At An Exhibition*. Give me Modest Mussorgsky under Reiner's baton ahead of this every time. Which is not to say that I wholly approve of a Miss Barber triple-decker. In private I have intimated that the unbridled adulation originally heaped upon *Café Blue* and its descendants did over state her abilities. She is a good singer, whose strong delivery feeds an interesting variety of shapes and improvisations, which do enliven songs - especially familiar covers. This, in tandem with her own writing and piano playing talents, makes these albums praiseworthy but surely not peerless. To a degree, like many performers, Barber has benefited from being in the right place at the right time. May good fortune continue to shine: I wish her no ill. However, I was intrigued to hear what SACD exposure would bring to the table on these already sweetly engineered Jim Anderson recordings. Undoubtedly, *Café Blue* is a self-consciously clever immersion in jazz styles, though Barber, when lading on the melancholy in this dark reverberate acoustic chamber for 'Morning Grace', simply

overstays her welcome. SACD resolution reveals that fine dividing line between "smartly done" and "smarty pants". Barber here steps beyond that mark. Too much skating on 'Manha de Carnaval' and irritating vocal overlays for 'Woods Is A Pleasant Thing To Think About' are further black marks. Yet, when she drops the façade and does the slow steamy number 'The Thrill Is Gone' or a machine gun 'Yellow Car III', the revealing SACD Direct Stream Digital process functions to her advantage. Bass, piano, sticks, guitars and rich, full-bodied vocal textures are beautifully defined right down to the precise decay of individual notes. Moreover, this disc conveys better than the original a notion of interplay. It transcends individual musicianship to deliver that seamless sense of an ensemble. Cut through a fashionable contemporary post-modern veneer and you hear Barber's 1998 release, *Modern Cool*, ratchet up this sense of a togetherness and common purpose inherent amongst these players. Popular standards 'Light My Fire', 'The Fool On The Hill' and Paul Anka's 'She's A Lady', which normally came fully clothed in preconception, shed their constrictive hair shirts too, instead, wrap themselves in finery tailored from that moody and often chilling fabric of Barber's own designer label. Thematically, though, these familiar covers still

retain those distinctive piquant qualities at their core, while astute arrangements and a far less intrusive acoustic overcoat amplifies moments of passion and sadness but does not exaggerate them. Even darker shades of melancholia, which echo Barber's take upon the late Twentieth Century condition, flow freely from her pen in an opening 'Touch of Trash' and throughout the ambiguous 'Silent Partner' and literal 'Postmodern Blues'.

Spin *Nightclub* (Barber's offering to a new millennium) and one could perhaps be forgiven for expecting a spontaneous, atmospheric and intimate affair. In truth, I believe it's the opposite that plays out here. A very carefully considered selection of songs, the precisely held or clipped phrase and, of course, supremely accurate engineering iron flat the humanity present within tracks like 'Autumn Leaves' or 'I Fall In Love Too Easily'. This album cries out for a touch of frailty and genuine emotion. Not the distance and this coldly analytical sense of objectivity which Barber places into our hands like a magnifying mirror. I understand the lesson – confront an audience with what it has become using every available tool. Clever, clever, clever stuff: But surely too smug, self-regarding and guileless in its acts of deliberacy. Ultimately even what should be a fleet footed 'Summer Samba' complies with Barber's grand design. Sacrifice pace and leach all the joy from these normally infectious rhythms and you get music that is as charmless as the target of her wrath. Perhaps, in certain quarters, this will be considered a harsh criticism of the Barber discography, but I believe it to be a valid one.

RP

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CAFÉ BLUE



MODERN COOL




NIGHTCLUB



Moussorgsky
 Pictures At An Exhibition

Reiner, CSO

RCA/JMC XR-0016 

Pictures might never have been the recording that *Scheherazade* was, but it's still pretty impressive by less exalted standards, carrying a heavy dose of the Living Stereo gene pool. It predates its more illustrious stable mate by a couple of years and could almost have been written for the sumptuous, disciplined power of the Chicago under Reiner's baton. Assuming your interest in the work survived (or was maybe sparked by) Emerson Lake and Palmer's pomp rock excesses, then this is the version to own.

The brass is as excellent as expected, while those rumbling bass belches that signal the opening of *Gnomus* give fair warning of what's to come. Wide and sudden dynamic shifts, full of orchestral weight and colour make this exactly the musical showpiece it was intended to be. It might lack the immediacy, focus and transparency of the Rimsky-Korsakoff recording, but it's still pretty spectacular. Anybody finding the sound a little too rounded for their tastes should compare 'The Hut On Fowl's Legs' to the *Gladiator OST*: An illuminating exercise in more ways than one. Looks like nothing's changed there then!

RG

Supplier: Vivante - Tel. 01293 822186



Sarah Vaughan

The Lonely Hours

Classic/Roulette Birdland SR52104 

Effective and well-matched Benny Carter arrangements for this orchestra-backed 1963 recording do distance Vaughan from those earlier classic EmArcy jazz albums in favour of a more commercial emphasis which did rather typify her Roulette label releases throughout the Sixties. Perfect intonation, eloquence, phenomenal range and a subtle control of Walter Donaldson's 'You're Driving Me Crazy' or Irving Berlin's 'If I Had You' still showcases her vocal brilliance, but the throaty counterpoint or nasal variations in pitch are far less in evidence on their warm, lightly touched harmonies. The presence of a Clifford Brown or Cannonball Adderly would have helped to pierce a dreamy soft-focus speculation on loves lost, distant or unrequited. However, drawing out Sassy's most poignant and piquant qualities for 'Always On My Mind', 'These Foolish Things', 'So Long My Love' or 'Solitude' was never really part of an agenda where all parties are content to pour on the syrup. Quite clear y this is a record for the sweet-toothed. A matching set of acoustic properties – rich ambient midrange, strong vocal resolution and complimentary space and separation – sit comfortably in this context.

RP

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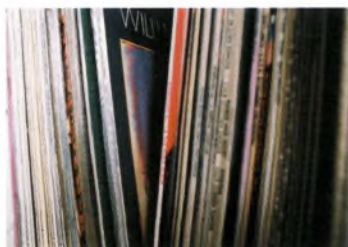
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Casting out your net Record Shopping with eBay

by Reuben Parry

Record buying is a serious business. Sometimes it even promotes down right ritualistic behaviour. Throw in a few Latin incantations and those natty ankle-length robes and you'd be well on the way to forming a new World religion. Although over the years I have witnessed an occasional record shop spat, there really are very few albums out there either to kill or to die for: There's always another day and another copy. So, generally, acolytes from competing sects at least tolerate each other. Even if I, like many, have worn that tell-tale worried expression and felt my heart skip an occasional beat as the guy thumbing through the rack ahead of me has stopped at that LP I've wanted all my life. Still, there was never any real need to start a fight for it.

In the late Eighties or early Nineteen Nineties, this would have been a Saturday morning vignette played out during one of those obsessively familiar trawls through my favourite shops. Today, though, I am just as likely to be looking over my shoulder "on line" amongst a thriving eBay community where buying records, CDs and music memorabilia from across the globe really couldn't be easier. The vast majority of sellers are private individuals who have found here at their fingertips a vehicle which can get them a better deal than they might have expected from their local secondhand store. However, you will also find plenty of businesses placing goods up for auction as well.

Participating either as a buyer or seller in an eBay



Internet auction should hold no fears. But for now I will limit my observations to the buying process. Begin by simply entering www.ebay.co.uk and browse away. The first choice on this web site will be whether to limit a search to either the goods located in the United Kingdom or those available to the U.K. The latter will widen the search pattern to auctions around the planet. In reality this opens up the single biggest market – that of the U.S.A, while more advanced searches by Country or even Region can be made if required. Then it is just a matter of keying in a specific artist, band, album or even record label. Left click on the "find it" icon and wait a few seconds for the page to appear with a list of current auctions. Each entry on this page can be further clicked upon to

reveal particular descriptions, pictures, grading and pricing details of the item for sale.

But, before placing that very first bid on eBay, you do need to complete a pretty straightforward registration. The site will ask for an email address. This enables them to confirm any bids that are made, give notification if you have been outbid on an item and inform you whether or not a bid has been successful after an auction ends. When eBay send out a congratulatory email confirming that you've won an auction, they automatically forward your email address and user identification to the seller, who will in turn provide you with details of the preferred method of payment, postage and packaging costs etc. ▶

▶ The unique user I.D is created during the registration and will continue to appear on all ongoing auctions for as long as you remain the highest bidder. An eBay password known only to you will also be generated and this is employed as a security measure during the bidding process. It is also used when access to your personal transaction information on “My eBay” is required. Nobody can view this password. Now, once registered, you can engage in an online auction as a bonafide eBay member complete with I.D and secure password. The best and the easiest way to describe what happens in an auction is to follow one of my own bids and use it as an example.

Readers familiar with issue 14 of Hi Fi+ will perhaps recall a certain fondness for the solo work of Aimee Mann and, having recently seen her live at the Manchester Academy, she was on my mind. So it was her name that was then typed into the search box. A more specific entry could have been made, but I didn't have a particular CD, LP or single in mind. By extending the search to include the tick box, “in titles and descriptions”, I knew that it could just as easily flag up auctions where a seller made mention of Aimee's old band, Til Tuesday and films like *Magnolia*, which used her songs in their soundtrack. It may even pull out a poster or magazines making mention of her. Anyway “aimee mann” was duly entered and the search began.

Nineteen U.K auctions were posted. A legend on the left-hand side of the page indicates in which matching categories a search was found. Though I would say that the “consumer electronics/remote control” match was probably in this case an anomaly. The really pertinent pieces of information contained on this page are the individual sellers titles for each auction, a price that (if no bids have been received) will be the opening one and the time remaining for an auction during which bids can still be made. The number of bids placed against an item are also shown and where this occurs the price reflects the current highest bid.

Scrolling down the page I passed several entries that had a “Buy It Now” option, one being a two-disc *Magnolia* DVD. This means that, providing no lower bids have been made, the *Magnolia* discs in question could be purchased immediately for £9.99. However, it was the ‘Aimee Mann – Rare Live 10 inch single’ auction that caught my eye. Clicking on this item opens the seller's detailed description for this auction. Here, as well as the condition grading, track listing, payment instructions and postage rates, was

a scanned picture of this single just to whet the appetite. At the head of the page are further details including auction period dates, time left for bidding, bid history, highest bid user identification, seller's location and I.D. You will notice that there, in brackets against the seller's identification, is a number. This is of great significance because it relates directly to the eBay method for assessing the reliability of a seller or, for that matter, a buyer as well. This number

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Picture	hide	Item Title	Price*	Bids	Time Left
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		AIMEE MANN - WHATEVER UK CD * NEW *	£5.08	-	3h 35m
		AIMEE MANN - I SHOULD'VE KNOWN - CD SINGLE	£1.70	2	5h 33m
		Magnolia 2-disc DVD Region 1	£6.50	2	1d 00h 41m
		AIMEE MANN DIDO SADE J LOPEZ NELLY 7 VIDEOS	£20.00	-	1d 02h 59m
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		MAGNOLIA CD SOUNDTRACK US RELEASE	£3.64	5	2d 04h 35m
		JERRY MAGUIRE-CD SOUNDTRACK(NEW)!!!	£9.99	-	2d 19h 20m
		Aimee Mann 1995 Single Track UK Pro CD P/S	£1.88	-	3d 21h 58m
		Steph n Duffy 155 minute Video VHS PAL / NTSC	£16.00	Buy It Now	4d 00h 14m
		David Arnold James Bond Project CD:Shaken	£3.18	-	4d 03h 33m
		Q Magazine CD - DCCC CD1	£1.90	-	4d 20h 24m
		Aimee Mann - Superb UK 3 Track CD Single	£4.99	-	4d 22h 53m
		MAGNOLIA (TOM CRUISE), VHS PAL	£1.50	-	5d 06h 53m
		C uel Intentions - OST (New mini CD)	£6.69	4	6d 09h 00m
		MAGNOLIA (2 Disk Set) - REGION 2 DVD	£7.99 £9.99	Buy It Now	7d 20h 59m
		AIMEE MANN - Rare Live 10inch Single	£4.99	-	8d 07h 11m
		MAGNOLIA 2 DISC SET DVD SEALED	£4.99	-	8d 22h 55m

(points total) refers to the system known as feedback. An individual's feedback profile is established by obtaining a response from both buyer and seller once the entire auction transaction is completed. A seller can respond once payment is received from the buyer. While a buyer would make their feedback entry after the goods from the seller have arrived. Feedback provides an excellent opportunity to comment upon any aspect of an auction. Responses fall into three categories: positive, neutral or negative feedback. There is also a comment box where specific statements of up to 80 characters can be left. If you believe an auction has been accurately described and the whole transaction process well-handled, then you should make the effort to leave a positive feedback. This will go towards the calculation of a seller rating total. One point is earned for a positive reply, none for a neutral comment and minus a point for each negative response made by a buyer. This system, when coupled with a facility to actually view any comments left for a seller by previous purchasers of their auctions, enables a prospective buyer to quickly judge the seller's reliability. Likewise, a seller

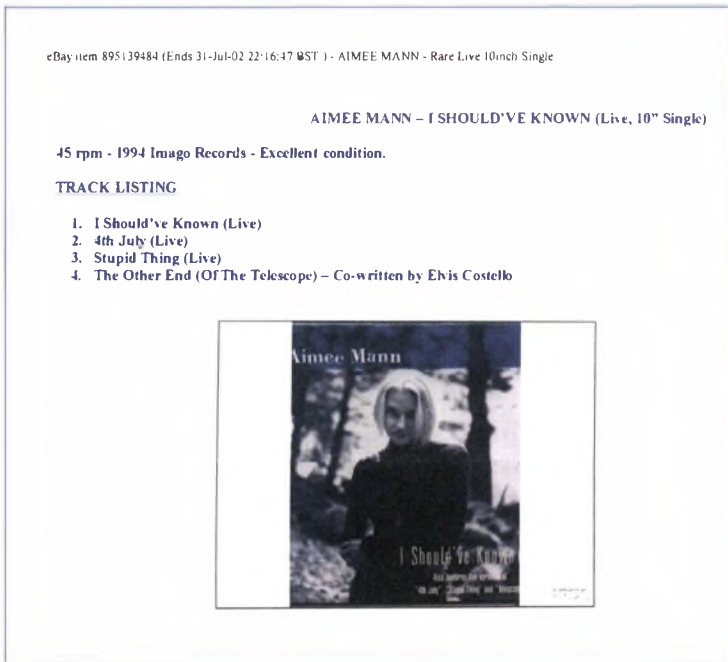
▶ can view the buyer's eBay history and establish whether or not you are a prompt payer. Feedback underpins the whole of eBay because this establishes a means to buy and sell with confidence. Nobody wants inaccurately described auction goods or, for that matter, buyers who won't and can't pay. So feedback weeds out the undesirables. A quick glance at the seller profile for doughoho (109) before making a bid on this Aimee Mann auction was reassuring.

maximum bid amounts, type in your eBay user ID (mine is raven 652), enter that secret password and click upon the "Place Bid" symbol. This, in turn, opens up a page which explains whether or not you are the highest bidder. Clearly, because mine was the only bid placed on *I Should've Known*, I was indeed the highest bidder. However, at this juncture, if the hypothetical \$5.00 bid had been entered by another buyer then a proxy bidding response comes into

play and would automatically increase my bid price above the \$5.00 – at the same time informing the other buyer that they were not the highest bidder. Importantly, you should always bear in mind that the highest bid is a form of contract.

Once you've made a successful bid, eBay sends a detailed confirmation to your email address. As there were still over eight days to go on this auction, I could quite easily be outbid by another buyer. If this was to happen I will again get an email, this time an outbid notice. When this auction ends a final email notification provides confirmation of the closing price, together with the appropriate congratulations or commiseration's. A successful auction winner then exchanges emails with the seller to conclude matters.

So why shop with eBay? Well, it's a great source for rare or difficult to find albums, having the equivalent of hundreds of record



This page also provides an opportunity to view the seller's other items for sale. A useful tool because if a number of auctions are bid and won from the same seller then savings against postage and packaging rates can be made.

Returning to the Aimee Mann, *I Should've Known* 10 inch Single, I decided to make a bid. Scrolling further down to the bidding section of this page, I entered my maximum bid of \$6.99 and hit the "Review Bid" icon. Being the first bid for this item meant that a bid would be registered for the opening price of \$4.99 only. However, should a bid by another eBay user be received of, say, \$5.00, then eBay will automatically incrementally bid on my behalf up to that maximum bid figure of \$6.99. This is known as proxy bidding. A user's maximum bid is always kept secret from other members to ensure a level playing field is maintained at all times.

The next sheet/page is for bid review and confirmation purposes. Here is where you must check the current/



shops at your fingertips is a tremendous asset in these circumstances. There are definite bargains to be had too. For example, I have picked up the odd Mobile Fidelity and DCC discs for under a fiver and nice records like the early Tracey Thorn album, *A Distant Shore*, for as little as \$1.49. It can also be something of an eye-opener. A mint condition blue-back copy of the DECCA SXL 2020 *Espana* LP recently seen as an

▶ eBay auction had a “Buy It Now” price of \$450.00. The ongoing bidding with several days to run was up to \$385.00, but the reserve price had still not been met. If a seller enters a “reserve” on an auction they are not obliged to sell unless it is met or exceeded. As an aside, the last copy I bought is now in the editor’s collection – a charity shop 20 pence purchase. If I find another *Espana* it’s going on eBay! However, for secondhand audiophile LPs and CDs you really should investigate the American auctions. There are hundreds of entries for records and CDs on the Mo-Fi, DCC, Nautilus, Mercury and RCA

Living Stereo labels. In general, the quality and description accuracy of these overseas auctions is unequalled. When the Yanks call a used LP “mint” this usually means one of two things – either the record is still sealed, or it’s opened but unplayed.

Having now participated in several hundred auctions, I feel reasonably qualified to offer a few tips. Here are my top five:

Firstly, don’t get involved in a bidding war. Decide what your maximum bid will be and stick to it. You can all too easily get caught up in the momentum of an auction – avoid competitive instincts - they will cost you dear.

Secondly, remember that postage and packaging can be expensive. Always try to combine auctions, especially those from overseas, wherever possible.

Thirdly, it is worth noting the vagaries of the U.S. Postal Service. Although they have never yet failed to deliver, I have on one occasion waited six weeks for an item sent by airmail. Franking confirmed the date advised by the seller. It was actually beaten to my door by a surface mail parcel sent later. A few dollars extra spent on insurance

can help allay those fears. (In fairness to USPS, this was around the time of America’s collective Anthrax phobia. Generally post coming across the Atlantic is twice as quick as that going. Ed.)

Fourthly, articles purchased outside of the European Union can attract Customs duty and administration charges.

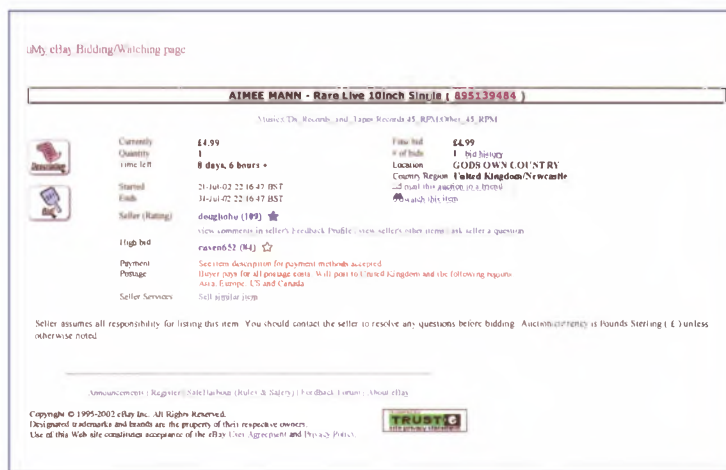
As an example a friend recently won an auction for the thirteen Record *Mobile Fidelity Beatles Box Set*. The closing price was \$800.00. With insurance, postage and packaging, this rose to \$875.00. Obviously, an insurance slip for around \$1000.00 was declared. HM

Customs and Excise obtained a payment of over \$160.00 from Parcel Force before the box set was delivered. Parcel Force, in turn, would not release the package until these charges were reimbursed by the recipient. Customs and Excise tend not to bother with goods valued below about \$50.00.

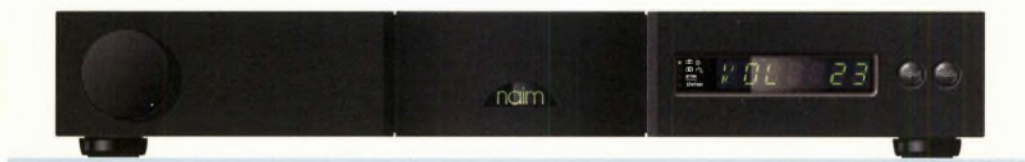
Fifthly, join one or more of the online payment organisations. Many sellers prefer monies to be paid through Billpoint, Western Union Bid Pay or PayPal. These are

secure, instantaneous payment methods that can, if required, be taken from a credit card, an essential for most International auctions, which are frequently priced in dollars. International Money Orders are OK but there is a \$8.50 bank charge for each of these on top of the overall sum. PayPal is my personal favourite among these systems, but it’s joining procedures (linked to your credit card statement) are the most protracted.

Hopefully, these and my earlier observations will encourage you to investigate the eBay market place and ease the passage of those first auctions. Happy hunting. ▶+



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