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Issue 37  
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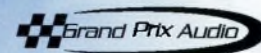
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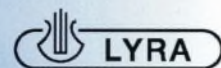
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# Editorial

This issue, one of the review products arrived broken, not once but twice. That's no reflection on the product, but it definitely reflects on its packaging. This was clearly transit damage and equally clearly, the packaging was to blame. So what's my point?

Well, I was able to call the distributor and get a replacement – twice! Besides the delay that caused and the looming presence of a fast approaching deadline, no harm done – except of course to the product. What got me thinking was the question of what would have happened if I'd been an internet purchaser? I'd have paid my money, I'd have received goods and they wouldn't have worked. That confronts me with the cost and hassle of returning them as well as the delay in gratifying the urges that made me purchase in the first place. Not too serious if your supplier is in the same country, but what if you are self-importing from – say – the US? Suddenly those savings don't seem quite so attractive.

The problem is magnified when dealing with small companies with limited stock and a fragile life-expectancy. Even if you parallel import a reputable brand from a US dealer, don't expect any help from the UK distributor. The problem here is that you are very much on your own and the other guy doesn't even have to answer the phone.

You know, there really are times when paying the extra for the peace of mind and a hand to hold is worth every penny, no matter how low the dollar slides.



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AUDIO REVIEW Italy, July 2004, Claudio Checchi

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HI-FI WORLD, August 2004, Dominic Todd



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# Contents

## Equipment+

### Regulars

- 5 Columns
- 16 Letters

### Interview

- 20 An Enduring Passion...  
Cartridge and cable pioneer  
A.J. van den Hul.

### Equipment Reviews

- 28 vdH Condor and Frog  
Moving-Coil Cartridges
- 33 My Sonic Lab Eminent  
Moving-Coil Cartridge
- 36 Cartridge Man Music Maker III  
Variable Reluctance Cartridge
- 40 VPI TNT 6 Record Player
- 48 Spj Alba Turntable and  
Lyla Tonearm
- 54 Nordic Concept Artist Turntable
- 62 Audio Research CD3 Mk II CD Player
- 68 Lector CDP-7TL CD Player
- 74 conrad-johnson Premier 18LS  
Line-Stage
- 78 Lavardin IT Integrated Amplifier
- 84 McIntosh MR85 Tuner
- 88 PMC DB1+ Loudspeaker

### Audio Smorgasbord

- 94 A neat, tube phono stage for very  
little money, neat new plugs from  
WBT and the very neat finite  
elemente CeraPuc isolation feet.

## Music+

- 100 West Coast Legacy...  
Creedance Clearwater Revival  
get the re-issue treatment
- 105 Pop and Contemporary Music
- 111 The Bluesville Years...  
Everything you need to learn  
about the blues.
- 115 Classical Music
- 119 The History Man...  
More things vintage and vinyl and  
a clever support from those  
Stillpoints people.
- 123 Audiophile Music Reviews
- 128 Music on New Formats
- 132 An American Tale...  
The RCA Living Stereo and  
Mercury Living Presence SACDs.

### Departments

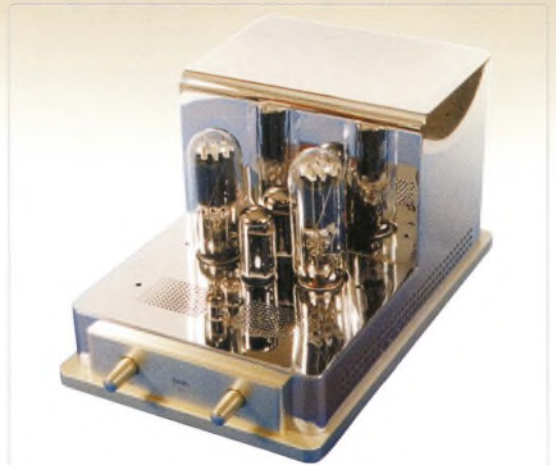
- 73 Back Issues
- 83 Subscriptions
- 87 Binders
- 127 Advertisers Index



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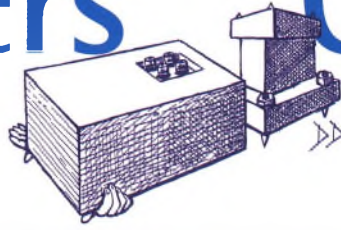
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# Speakers Corner



by Paul Messenger

Last month, for Hi-Fi+'s first Annual, editor RG set us contributors an impossible task, as it involved nominating our personal 'top seven' albums, plus our favourite film. I'd have found it far easier to nominate my 'top fifty' albums and 'top ten' films. Boiling the lists down to a parsimonious seven discs and a pathetically paltry single movie proved a powerful pain in the posterior. But it also served to stir up the grey matter in a number of unfamiliar and unexpected directions.

With list-making, there's a the Law of Inverse Difficulty: the shorter the list, the harder it is to make the decisions. I don't have a single 'favourite film' – one that towers comfortably above all others – and the more I pondered the question, the more contenders started popping into my mind. And the more I started pondering the meaning of 'favourite', and the role that movies play in my life.

These days I try to avoid reviewing movie replay equipment (and indeed multi-channel stuff in general). I've been down that route, and by the late 1990s and after a ten year stint, I'd become pretty disenchanted by deteriorating standards of domestic picture and sound quality. Today I'm happy enough viewing movies at home with a simple stereo soundtrack, and actually prefer visiting a cinema if possible, accepting the usually indifferent sound for its superior picture quality.

My interest in movies isn't as great as my passion for music, mostly because I hardly ever want to watch a film more than once, any more than I'm inclined to re-read the same book. I therefore remain somewhat bemused by the enthusiasm with which the public at large – and my twenty-something children in particular – spend large sums of money building up sizeable collections of DVD movies. Perhaps it's a generation thing, but I tend to buy music for repeated listening, while I'm happy enough to rent movies and watch them once.

The number of movies I can watch repeatedly is very small indeed, and this was a key factor I considered when shortlisting my favourites. Which movies would I tune into when they happen to come on the TV, even though I've

seen them before and they hold no surprises? The big surprise for me – because it's not a genre I normally find interesting – was finding that the majority of my 'top ten' movies turned out to be musicals of one sort or another, or at least to have substantial and important musical content. I guess it's partly because both suspense and dramatic plot lines are invariably less effective second time around, while a good song can be enjoyed many times over, and both satire and comedic timing wear the passage of time pretty well.

Forced to pick one, I went for Dickie Attenborough's star-studded film adaptation of the late Joan Littlewood's satirical musical *Oh What a Lovely War*. It's a great movie, but one that's gone missing for many years. (The DVD has been delayed because Littlewood's estate is still being sorted out, though old VHS releases are sometimes offered on eBay at high prices.)

Other music-oriented movies in my personal top ten would include Mel Brooks' *The Producers*, Leonard Bernstein's *West Side Story*, the Beatles' *Yellow Submarine*, and *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (not exactly a 'musical', but even W.S. Gilbert would admire the rhyming of Camelot with 'pram a lot'). My final 'musical' was also my favourite film of 2004. *Standing in the Shadows of Motown* is a brilliant feature length documentary that finally gives due credit to The Funk Brothers, a generic term for the dozen or so virtually unknown Detroit musicians who put the musical power into all the Motown hits (up until the time Berry Gordy lost the plot and moved everything to LA).

Music plays an important role in some of my other favourites too. I bought the soundtrack album for *The Good the Bad and the Ugly* many years ago, and Enrico Morricone's marvellous soundtracks still put Sergio Leone's movies on a pedestal. And if I've singled out Morricone for special mention, others such as Bernard Hermann and Michael Nyman have also created marvellous movie music, and a strong case can be made that film music has been largely responsible for preserving a classical

► tradition that the 20th Century avantgarde movement did its best to destroy.

Throughout the last century, music dramatically augmented and totally transformed the power and influence of film – and on balance I'd say that movies have had almost as much of a positive effect on the development of music. And while it doesn't do to confuse medium and message, I'm rather concerned that DVD will ultimately have some unfortunate consequences for the way we enjoy our music in the future.

Predicting the future is impossible, and while sales of CD are still very healthy here in Britain, there are ominous signs that DVD could well become the music carrier of the future. Ominous, because sales of music DVDs increased by

50 per cent last quarter, and now represent 5 per cent of total album sales, which suggests that DVD could well gradually take over from CD. And I'm still far from convinced that either DVD-A or SACD have a long term future, so the really ominous bit is that, whether we like it or not, we could well end up with much of our music pushed into a surround-sound-with-pictures format using the rather bland sub-CD compressed digital sound used by Dolby Digital and DTS.

It may never happen, and I for one remain optimistic that our regular stereo sources will carry on regardless. But history has shown how software is invariably produced to feed a well-established hardware base, and there are already millions of DVD players (and recorders) out there just waiting to be fed.



# Music Matters



by Alan Sircom

I've recently come to the opinion that there are four types of hi-fi enthusiast. For all our different tastes in music, equipment and trousers, we can be differentiated into four distinct groups. I call these four groups Artists, Scientists, Mystics and Moonies.

Artists view the whole hi-fi system as a blank canvas, upon which great music is painted. They aren't particularly concerned with measurements and performance ratings, it's the sound that counts... and how it looks helps, too. As a consequence, Artists talk about feelings a lot, are passionate about their music and their hi-fi alike and often end up with vinyl and valve based music systems, often with gorgeous-looking speakers.

Scientists approach hi-fi from an entirely different end. They look upon the technology as a means whereby good music is transcribed from a music carrier, with as much accuracy as possible. Good measurement and excellent build quality are what attract Scientists to individual hi-fi components; fancy design – unless in a Bauhaus form-follows-function kind of way – is unimportant. This means, where the Artist is impassioned, the Scientist is precise... often sounding dismissive of

'fluffy' hi-fi and the people it attracts.

Although it seems Artists and Scientists are at loggerheads, in fact they share many commonalities. Both are deeply interested in music and paradoxically both tend to end up with the same hi-fi components. They differ when it comes to things like cables and tables, of course. To the Scientist, until neatly nailed down by background research, the claims of table makers and cable companies are just 'pseudo-science'. The Artist is more forgiving of such claims, but views the same claims as 'psycho-babble'. However neither is particularly swayed by the White Papers produced by cable companies,

Where these White Papers work is to convince the Mystic hi-fi buyer. This is an oddity, pretty much unique to hi-fi. The Mystic chooses and uses their hi-fi system not according to its technical performance, good reviews or even demonstrations; instead the Mystic buys according to the glib nature of the sales pitch. Well, almost; the Mystic seems to choose products that have a sales pitch that would simply fail to work with any other buyer. The products are not sold on their technical merit,







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► nor are they sold on the basis of sonic or physical attractiveness. Instead, the Mystic buys products on the basis of... well, something else. Anything that appears meaningless to the outsider is taken as gospel to the Mystic and their dream products often eschew good solid engineering or elegant design, but come with a 'vision' or 'philosophy'. Never mind the fact that one out of four CDs will not play, and one in six will spin across the room beheading the cat, the company's 'vision' will overcome such trifles.

In fairness, Mystics seem to have never recovered from the whole Peter Belt mania of the late 1980s. Back then, it was briefly considered perfectly acceptable to use a £100 turntable with a £100 amp and £50 speakers and

have it outperform £20,000

worth of hi-fi, just as long as you drank your polarised water, put bulldog clips on the radiator and had little bits of silver foil taped to key components in the room.

Naturally, although the hi-fi was cheap, the little bits of silver foil were desperately expensive.

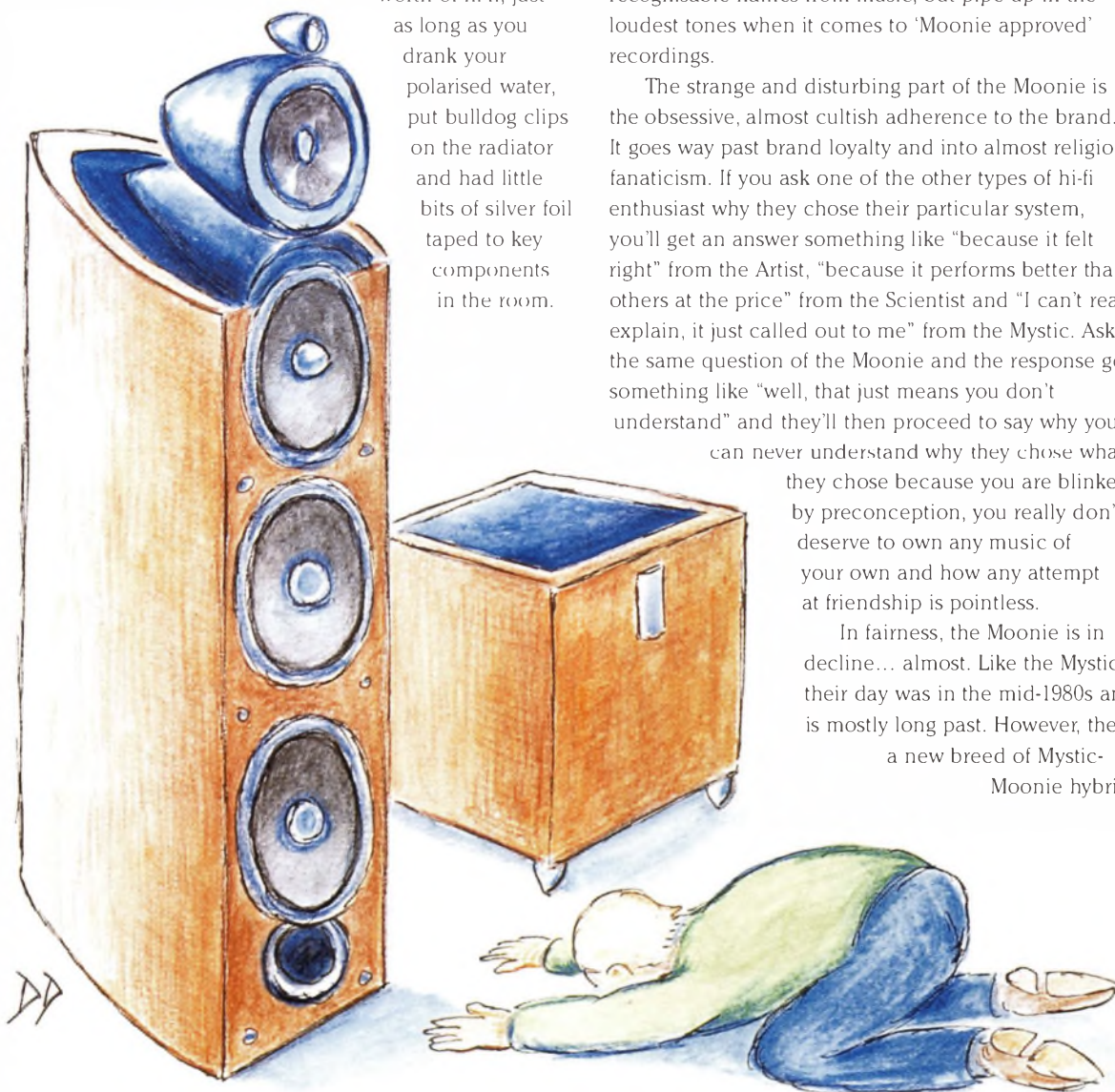
But arguably the strangest of the lot though is the Moonie. They will not disclose what frame of reference they used to select their original system, but that's unimportant. Now, they have a specific direction, and a mission. Of all the types mentioned here, the Moonie is best spotted by the number of times he (it's almost always a 'he') mentions music. Unlike other hi-fi enthusiasts, the Moonie mentions music almost continually, but never actually plays any. Moreover, they have a music collection that is practically identical to the collection of all the other Moonies (or, at least, all the other Moonies that use the same equipment). They go strangely silent when the discussion turns to recognisable names from music, but pipe up in the loudest tones when it comes to 'Moonie approved' recordings.

The strange and disturbing part of the Moonie is the obsessive, almost cultish adherence to the brand. It goes way past brand loyalty and into almost religious fanaticism. If you ask one of the other types of hi-fi enthusiast why they chose their particular system, you'll get an answer something like "because it felt right" from the Artist, "because it performs better than others at the price" from the Scientist and "I can't really explain, it just called out to me" from the Mystic. Ask the same question of the Moonie and the response goes something like "well, that just means you don't understand" and they'll then proceed to say why you can never understand why they chose what

they chose because you are blinkered by preconception, you really don't deserve to own any music of your own and how any attempt at friendship is pointless.

In fairness, the Moonie is in decline... almost. Like the Mystic, their day was in the mid-1980s and is mostly long past. However, there's a new breed of Mystic-

Moonie hybrid ►



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# Walrus

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This ad features a few new products we're excited about, as well as a couple of old favourites (which we're still excited by even after all this time!) From top right, going anticlockwise, first off are the Anthony Gallo Reference 3 loudspeakers (£2400/pr). You can't tell from the picture, but these are actually very compact (about 3 feet tall) but have the most amazing bass extension and a very open sound. Next, the brand new Musical Fidelity A5 series amplifier (250W/ch) and CD player, at £1499 each, are superb value. They are designed to be better, and cost less, than the popular 308 series, and don't even feel embarrassed in the company of the famous Nuvista and Trivista series. The CD even features a valve output stage, just like the late lamented Trivista DAC! The Duevel Bella Lunas (£3160 to £4160/pr dependent on finish) need no introduction. This superb Omni design, featured at the recent Heathrow Show, should be on everyone's shortlist. Origin Live's new Sovereign turntable (£3850 plus arm) sets new, even higher standards for this already envied manufacturer whose decks already receive huge acclaim from the press. Next up is something we thought we'd never see - a valve / transistor hybrid power amp from Tom Evans, famous for their Groove phono stage and Vibe preamp. The Linear A (£3999) is a truly innovative design which draws on the strengths of both technologies to give transistor speed and control with valve naturalness and texture, another milestone for Tom! Many people will still remember the success we had with the Magneplanar MG 1.6 speakers at the show. These flat non-electrostatic panels with ribbon tweeters produce the most amazingly believable soundstage, all for the direct import no-middleman price of £1500/pr. The new Duevel Shuttle-Disk rechargeable battery CD player (also £1500) is on permanent demo - bring your own CDs and be pleasantly surprised! Lastly, we had to squeeze it in, what we regard as probably the finest all round (pardon the pun) turntable in the world, the Brinkmann LaGrange with the Brinkmann 10.5 tonearm (£8395 in total), a truly staggering combination.



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▶ that is bubbling under the hi-fi scene; obsessives who read the White Papers of some brands and criticise anyone not using their specific brand. Often it has nothing necessarily to do with the brand itself; I suspect Nordost (for example) has not engineered its own cult following (the people and – to a large extent – the products are too pragmatic and sensible), but those with a full dose of Nordostism are unable to stomach any

mention of any other cable without flinching. Similar cults seem to be emerging throughout the industry; the 'phase-correctees', the 'single-ended-sleepers' (who are staging a comeback, having slumbered for a dozen years) and the 'Garrardians' who insist that all music must be played on a Garrard 301 if it is to count as real music. Hang on a minute, though. They may just have a point...



# Home Truths



by Jimmy Hughes

The Christmas break found me in a cold and windy Covent Garden sifting through secondhand LPs on a market stall. I know it's sad, but I still find it hard to resist looking. Now many stalls offer a motley assortment of pop LPs in mediocre (or worse) condition. And this one seemed to be no exception. But among the rubbish were a couple of boxes devoted entirely to LPs of film scores, musicals, and shows. Not only that, there were books, magazines and posters - all to do with the theatre. It was an impressive collection.

Some magazines went back to the early '50s. Clearly, it was someone's obsession; the result of a lifetime spent collecting. Many of the discs were mono rather than stereo; vintage original pressings from the 1950s. But more important, the overall condition (sleeves/vinyl) was superb – these records had been lovingly looked after. In the old days I might've bought 20 or 30 discs. But I disciplined myself and chose just half a dozen.

The stall-holder told me that what I'd just looked at was merely the tip of the iceberg; he had shed loads more at home – all from the same collection. So I promised to come and see him again next week... Of course, it's exciting when you find a big interesting LP collection in mint condition for sale. But sad too. To think; a lifetime spent collecting, and it all ends up unloved and unwanted on a market stall in the wind and rain!

When I was younger, I stupidly used to think I was collecting records for some undisclosed higher purpose

– that one day (having collected so assiduously) my efforts would be recognised. Perhaps there was a record collector's OBE, or something, waiting to be awarded. Every time I found a rare or unusual disc and added it to my collection, it felt as though I'd discovered and saved some rare and exotic species from extinction.

One day, no doubt, my entire collection would find its way into the British Museum, or perhaps the V&A, to be marvelled at by future generations... People would gaze in awe at shelves upon shelves of LPs and CDs. 'How did he find time to listen to them all?' people would ask incredulously. 'How did he manage to track down so many strange and exotic discs?' they'd wonder – 'What determination and commitment!'

Alas, I think I may have been mistaken. The sad fate that awaits most record collections after the demise of their owner is – break-up. Sold to a dealer, then disseminated among other collectors – each one greedy to get their hands on your legacy to posterity. And – as for being venerated by future generations – most will find the music you loved now sounds hopelessly dated and boring. I can't quite see someone brought up on Rap or Grunge suddenly developing a taste for James Last or Mantovani, let alone Brahms.

Not only that, but the present i-pod generation will no doubt regard those with vast record collections as people slightly unhinged. Why is your entire house full of records. How do you explain it? What made you go out week after week searching for recordings?



► At best they'll probably conclude it's a cry for help; at worst, the obsession of an unbalanced, anally retentive jerk who wasted most of his life visiting record shops and market stalls.

I was in HMV a few days later (well, the Sale was on...) and a friend working there told me a record reviewer had died, and that his collection was on sale at a certain collector's shop; the unspoken message being - Get down there immediately and buy while stocks last. But, I didn't go.



I've got enough and don't need any more. And anyway, for me, collections are one big family, related by the interests and passions of the person that put the collection together. To break it up is to dismember it.

One other sad thing about the Covent Garden collection of shows and film scores, was that so much of the material – although hugely popular and significant in its time – is now almost completely forgotten. Maybe

theatre buffs would be interested, but few of the great hit shows of (say) thirty or forty years ago would now be able to sell out a West End theatre for months on end. Perhaps that's as it should be; after all, we're talking about contemporary popular music.

One LP I bought was of a show called *Careless Rapture* by Ivor Novello – a smash hit in 1936 that allegedly left audiences gasping. I gasped too; it was like listening to something from another planet! The LP sleeve listed recordings of other Ivor Novello shows, each of them now utterly forgotten. I can understand why. The musical world of Ivor Novello seems very distant and strange.

Although I can empathise deeply with all sorts of music from the near and distant past, and from many different countries, something from Britain dating from the first half of the last century feels quite alien. Perhaps it's too much a reflection of the times that created it to have the universality of a true classic. For me, the world of Mozart's *Magic Flute* is much easier to enter into than Ivor Novello's *Careless Rapture*.

Yet to people in the 1930s, Ivor Novello was god; a theatrical genius comparable to Sondheim or Lloyd Webber. Perhaps in 2050 their musicals will sound as hopelessly dated as Novello's. Of course it's difficult to tell what will last and what will be forgotten. These things go in cycles. Speaking

personally, I find it hard to understand the appeal of Gilbert and Sullivan to modern audiences. Its twee cleverness irritates. Yet their operettas remain popular, especially in the USA. The Sound of Music still has a loyal following. Mozart's opera *The Magic Flute* (effectively an early Musical packed with catchy tunes) has triumphantly stood the test of time. So perhaps Ivor Novello's music will be revived in (say) 50 or 100 years time to great acclaim. Which means that LP I bought of *Careless Rapture* could be worth a few bob.



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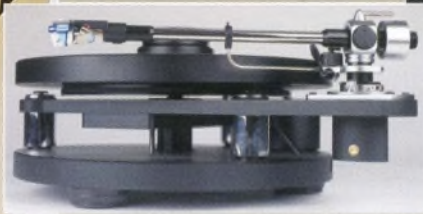
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# Incoming!

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](http://www.hifiplus.com)

Dear Sir,

Thanks for reviewing more equipment that us mere mortals can afford! I did drift away from Hi-fi+ for a bit because the review content was becoming a little outlandish in terms of availability and price. Hopefully the recent corrections in this regard will become permanent.

I think you need to make the magazine a little more accessible and balanced towards younger audiophiles like myself (without alienating your senior readership - admittedly, a very difficult balance to strike). I cannot advocate changes in the absolute editorial content and structure of the publication, but I would like to see fewer references or comparisons against equipment & recordings from yesteryear.

Whilst I'm sure the references are absolutely valid, they are of little practical use to younger audiophiles who neither have the recollection, or ability to procure/evaluate such items for themselves.

Also, I think it would be worthwhile to make a few minor changes in the music review section. Please state ALL the formats the album is available on, not just the format currently under review.

There have been occasions where I have purchased an album on SACD, only to discover that a vinyl version is available (and vice-versa). Uninitiated readers might be led to believe album "X" is only available on the formats listed above the review (unless the reviewer is otherwise kind enough to draw attention to the fact).

**Mr A B Ahari**

PS. I thought the Focal 707 S review was spot-on, by the way!  
Via e-mail

*We do try to review as much affordable equipment as possible. The problem is that Plus is a hi-fi magazine and too much of the equipment whose price can be measured in hundreds rather than thousands of pounds has abandoned quality in favour of quantity. Twenty years ago the NAD 3020 was the budget amp of choice. It cost a shade under £120. Go into a high-street hi-fi shop today and you'll find that their range starts at not much more! Not only that, the amps on offer will probably claim more power, have better finish and appearance (not difficult) and probably a remote control. It's hardly surprising that sonic standards have slipped.*

*At the same time, Sugden's A28 cost £179. The broadly equivalent A21 is around the thousand mark. You see the problem; it's not just one of price pressure (which is severe enough,) but that relatively few companies are still producing budget amplifiers that put sound quality first. We've reviewed the Cyrus, Sugden, Rotel and Densen options, as well as a few others. At that point they get pretty thin on the ground.*

*As regards the format icons appended to the record reviews, I couldn't agree more. We've all been there. Unfortunately we can only inform you of the available formats we are aware of, and in a situation where vinyl versions are more often than not licensed to separate company from the digital ones, with the possibility of a DVD-V, DVD-A or SACD version from yet another source, even speaking to the company responsible for the CD issue often doesn't elicit the necessary information. After all, they probably either don't know or don't want to know about alternative versions. With no central source of information the whole situation becomes impenetrable – and that's before any oversights or errors at our end! We do the best we can, but unfortunately, definitive information is not only virtually impossible to come by, but the situation can often change over time, with vinyl releases following weeks or months after their CD counterparts.*

*What we can do is continue to provide as much format information as possible, as well as hunting out the rare budget gems that do exist in the equipment world. Rest assured that we'll be making every effort in both regards. Ed.*

Dear Sir,

I have been a US subscriber since issue 23.

First, my compliments on your fine publication. As a longtime audiophile and subscriber to TAS, Stereophile, and several other long-gone high-end publications (e.g., Audio Critic), I believe that HiFi+ is, by far, the best.

However, try as I can, I cannot fathom what the "Availability as S/H LP" icon is intended to mean. Does it have anything to do with shipping/handling and vinyl long-playing records? If so, what does a "1" mean? What does an "N" mean?

Yes, I understand that you now offer e-editions, but, I like to hold HiFi+ in my hand, carry it around, and (casually) leave it on the coffee table for visitors to see. So, my question involves getting issues more quickly than your US distributor is capable of delivering them. Is this an alternative? (Perhaps an

► e-subscription combined with a mailed version would meet my needs for both currency and beauty/portability.)

Finally, a suggestion: I would love to read a comparison of the vinyl and DSD re-issues of the classic Mercurys and RCAs by you and your colleagues.

**Professor Leroy B. Schwarz**

Purdue University

Via e-mail

*"The reason it's called 'research' is that one has to search at least twice."*

*The 'Availability as S/H LP' icon is intended to suggest how easy it might be to find re-issued material in an original pressing. In this instance S/H indicates second-hand, used or "pre-owned" – perhaps even "cherished" as some dealers would have it. It's a sliding scale from 1 to 9, with 1 being the rarest and 9 being available at every other thrift shop and yard sale. N means that an original record is not available; the "re-issue" might well be of an unreleased recording or one that was pressed in such small numbers as to be effectively unavailable.*

*We are working on a combined subscription as you've suggested but, as the print and electronic editions are provided by separate companies, it's taking a little arranging. We will announce its availability as soon as possible and will also inform all subscribers at that time.*

*The redoubtable Mr Foster has looked at the SACD releases of both RCA and Mercury recordings in this issue, comparing them to the originals. The plan is that we'll be comparing examples of all the re-issued versions (CD, XRCD, LP and SACD) in the next issue, the load spread across RSF, RP, SG and myself. That's the plan anyway, with the piece targeted for issue 38. However, given the complexity of such a task, it might possibly slip to 39. But – we are on the case. Ed.*

Dear Sir,

I've been harbouring the suspicion of a growing Audiofreaks bias in the pages of hi-fi+ for some time, but with Issue 36 it became a stone cold certainty. Four awards and a six page interview isn't the start of a slippery slope – it's throwing yourself off a cliff and selling your soul on the way down! But then, why should I be surprised? It's just like Hi-Fi News and Absolute Sounds all over again.

**M. Anderson**

Via e-mail

*Yes, we do review a lot of Audiofreaks equipment. That's because they import a lot of interesting products, with Conrad-Johnson in particular, enjoying a purple patch over the last couple of years. They also keep us informed of developments and availability as well as actually delivering products for review when they say they will – not something that can be said of all distributors by a long, long way.*

*Having said that, the Audiofreaks products that come for review are treated in exactly the same way as any others, without fear or favour. We gave awards to the ACT2 (which establishes a new benchmark for line-stages) and the Premier 350 (which matched the standard of the award-winning Hovland RADiA whilst adding more power). We also gave awards to the superb Eidolon Diamond and Reimyo CD player (which impressed AS as much as the LAC impressed me). Which of these products is undeserving?*

*In the same issue we interviewed Branko Bozic of Audiofreaks. Far from being a case of over exposure, it's actually a logical, almost inevitable, extension of those awards. The role of the traditional importer/distributor is under threat. Operating in this way inevitably adds a margin to the equation and thus increases the price of a product to the end-user. Dealers who import products, or distributors who sell directly to the public can easily undercut traditionally distributed products on price – a situation that is increasingly common. Thus, in terms of the "state of the nation" approach given to the interviews in Issue 36, it was necessary to include a distributor alongside the hardware and software manufacturers. Given that we were already interviewing Dave Wilson of Wilson Audio (distributed by Absolute Sounds) the only logical choice was Branko, underlined by the four (actually three) awards he'd received. The purpose of these interviews is to allow the interviewees to express their views in their own words. That way you, the reader, can make your own mind up regarding their position, in this case the question as to whether or not the extra cost of the traditional distributor/dealer supply chain represents added value when it comes to performance. Do they present an interesting and coherent argument or do they indulge in shameless self-promotion? Read and decide.*

*The presence of Audiofreaks products in our pages is a reflection of the quality of those products. All the time their products maintain their current standards of performance, we'll continue to review them. Perhaps you'd prefer it if we ignored them? I mean, why let people know that the £4000 Premier 18LS is now available at less than £2500? I can't see that being of interest to serious listeners, can you? We are interested in and assess a product on the basis of its sound quality, reliability (of both the product and the supplier) and whether it represents a new or particularly interesting approach. Novelty is optional – the other two are both essential. Who it comes from is only of interest in as much as it relates to those criteria. Anyone can have a product reviewed by the magazine; they only have to ask. Unfortunately many distributors who complain that we don't review their products either haven't approached us or don't/won't supply us. We have neither the time nor the inclination to light for product. I repeat – we review product that interests us, is available, reliable and can be supplied to us reliably. Meet those criteria and the world – well, hi-fi+ – is your cyster. Ed.*



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 – Jimmy Hughes, *Hi-Fi+* Issue 34, pages 88-91

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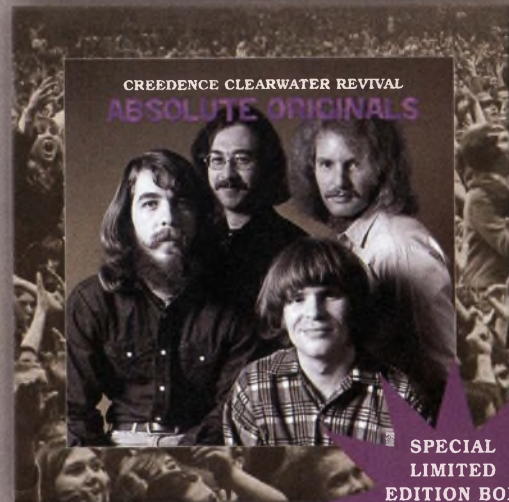


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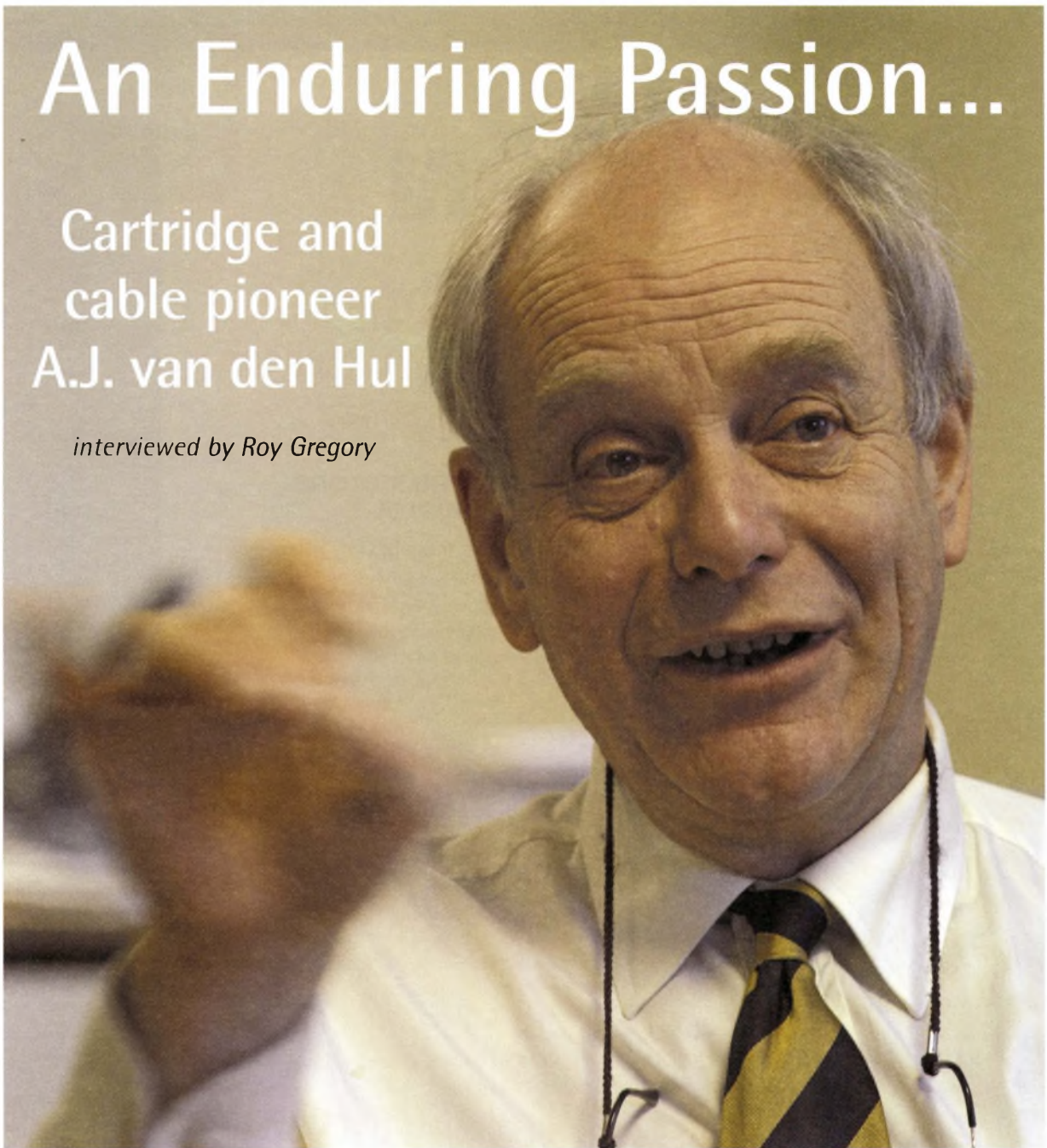
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WHAT HI-FI?  
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# An Enduring Passion...

Cartridge and  
cable pioneer  
A.J. van den Hul

*interviewed by Roy Gregory*



**Roy Gregory.** Where I'd like to start is where you started, with the design of your stylus profile. When and how did you arrive at it?

**A.J. van den Hul.** It started at a time when I was a reviewer, invited by a German diamond stylus manufacturer to visit his operation. He showed me a design of his own, almost like a sharpened screwdriver, which he thought should work – but he wasn't sure why. I explained to him that it wouldn't work

because of the (cross-sectional) shape of the groove, and whilst describing this I realized that there must be an ideal shape to fit the groove, but one that's different to the cutter. Then, lying awake one night at about three o'clock in the morning I visualised the problem by imagining myself lying at the bottom of a huge record groove, watching the stylus to see how it moved through that groove – what it did right and what it did wrong. That's when I got the idea to squeeze the stylus, making the contact line longer with a narrow

▶ edge. This I thought would be the perfect shape, so then I made some experiments at home. First I cut the stylus shape from wood, then I made a groove in butter and traced it with my wooden model. That way I could see exactly what was being traced.

Unfortunately the original manufacturer that I'd visited was unable to cut this profile because his machinery was not sufficiently precise. In the end I worked with a Swiss manufacturer and we built a machine together to produce the stylus. It took two years, but at that point I abandoned my job as a reviewer and set up on my own.

At first it was very difficult to convince cartridge manufacturers to consider my stylus. They said that it was too sharp and that it would scratch away the music. Some people even suggested that you'd see smoke or swarf coming from the stylus, but I knew that this wouldn't happen – that it would work. It still works and now 1.4 million styli have been sold world-wide and I think quite a bit of analogue enjoyment can be owed to this stylus.

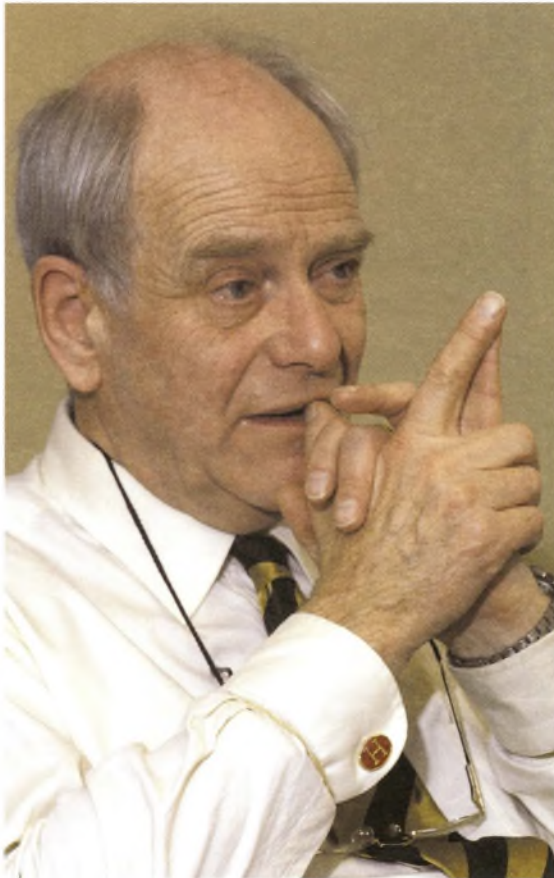
**RG.** Which was the first company to start using your stylus?

**AJvdH.** That was Goldring. They were extremely successful with the GL900IGC. Once that cartridge was on the market nobody could say anymore that the stylus wouldn't work. That was in about 1980 and more and more people became interested in the stylus until 1982 when CD was launched and the whole analogue world collapsed. But even then it was obvious to me that my stylus sounded better than digital systems and I decided that there must be other people who would agree with me, so I carried on working on my cartridge designs. Once you have a stylus you think about what to do next and naturally, a cartridge is the obvious choice. It was winding coils for the cartridge, listening to different wires that led to the cable business. So, the stylus to the cartridge to the cables – that is the logical line in my life.

**RG.** When did you first produce a cartridge?

**AJvdH.** That was in 1980 with the EMT. That was the

first cartridge that I took and modified. There were 23 modifications on each EMT and it was extremely successful, especially in the US where a great many were sold. I got more and more distributors around the world – it just spread by word of mouth – despite the brute force of Philips and Sony. They even offered me money to stop producing my stylus. When I pointed out that I could earn more in a year than they were offering me and asked them why they thought I'd accept their response was that "It's important to support CD"! I said "Thank you, but no. I'll be sticking with analogue" and you can see where that decision has led. I have my building, my business, my farm and more cartridge work than ever!



**RG.** When did you produce the first cartridge to your own design, as opposed to modifying someone else's?

**AJvdH.** That was in 1982, a cartridge called the DDT.

**RG.** The model with the screwed together metal body which looks like, the Benz-Micro?

**AJvdH.** That's right, it was originally built by Benz-Micro and he was going to pay a royalty for each cartridge produced. However, he was injured in a car accident and forced as a result to sell his company. Mr Lucashek did not feel himself bound by the agreement so I never received my

royalties, but I continued to order the various parts and bodies from him. However, we no longer shared technical information and I started to have internal elements made elsewhere, so from this point onwards, although the cartridges look externally similar their internal design started to diverge as we each followed our own development path. From the Frog upwards, there are no common parts inside. I'm happy to cook my soup in my kitchen while he bakes his pies in his kitchen. ▶

► The parts for the Frog are specified from another manufacturer and then assembled by me, here in my workshop.

**RG.** Are the Frog parts common to the other, more expensive cartridges like the Grass Hopper and Colibri?

**AJvdH.** No, although the Condor does use the same magnet and rear pole as the Frog. But whereas the Frog has a closed magnetic circuit, the Condor has an open one. The coil system is quite different, the suspension is quite different and the sonic results also, are very different.

**RG.** So the various elements used to construct the cartridges are sourced from Benz-Micro and another manufacturer, the latter supplying the parts in particular for the more expensive, open bodied cartridges?

**AJvdH.** Correct. Also the various bodies for the Grass Hopper, the Black and White Beauties and the Colibri and Condor also have different suppliers depending on what material they are made from – metal, plastic, even wood.

**RG.** How has the stylus developed since it first appeared?

**AJvdH.** At first the stylus was an almost perfect fit in the groove. But following some complaints from cartridge manufacturers and customers Fritz Geiger who manufacture the styli actually rounded the extreme tip slightly, despite my objections. This is the Type 2 stylus, although I still use the original Type 1 and that is what is fitted in the cartridge I have built for you. Otherwise it would not have such resolution. The Type 1 is no longer manufactured, but I bought plenty before he stopped so I still have stock. It is also known as the FG1. Now that the patent has lapsed there are all different versions from different companies – fine line, micro-ridge and others – but they all share the common feature of a constant radius, extended right down the tracing surface. That was my original idea. The Japanese designed various profiles with tapered tracing edges, from maybe 30-microns at the base to 5-microns at the tip. In my design the tracing radius is 2-microns all the way from the tip to well above the groove; it avoids inter-modulation, improves tracking and also resolution. It has extremely high resolution. When drums are touched you can

here the brushes, the skins, the rims – you can hear everything, just like when you listened last night and this morning. Not many styli can do that.

I also made a less extreme version for use in moving-magnet cartridges, 7-microns by 40 microns high as opposed to the 2 by 70-microns of the Type 1. Namiki in Japan also make a version of my stylus (without asking) and they make it with a 1-micron tracing radius. I have bought some from them and I have to say that they really are superb. I always use the Type 1 when I build a cartridge.



**RG.** One of the things that I found fascinating was your ability to make a cartridge to match my preferences. You were able to modify or adapt the construction to meet those performance parameters. What degree of variation can you achieve within your cartridge designs?

**AJvdH.** Extreme. When you study cartridges, which I have never done by training but only by experience, and with a lot of understanding of physics, then it's not too difficult. You can create any sound that you like. But I know (also from experience) that you are more critical of sound than a regular consumer, so you have to specify your requirements much more precisely. I have to listen to you very carefully; look at you, and of course I know a little of your character, so I can say "He is that type of person, he wants that type of sound".

**RG.** Having watched you build the cartridges, and then having taken them upstairs and listened to them side by side – the one you built for Jason and the one you built for me – I find it incredible that their performance tracks so precisely the requirements stated...

**AJvdH.** You can't expect this from Ortofon. You can't expect this from any other cartridge manufacturer, because they ►



▶ are not interested in doing that.

**RG.** It constitutes a bespoke cartridge, and if I understand this correctly, this is something that you can do for any customer, given the necessary information?

**AJvdH.** Oh yes. But our distributors are maybe not so interested to adapt the cartridge to fit it to the customer. To them, an MC10 is an MC10. I always like to know at least what the tonearm and equipment used with a cartridge will



be, but usually this information is not available so you end up with an “average” MC10 cartridge. But if a customer tells them “I’m mainly playing Deccas” then I build an MC10 for Deccas. It is all about supplying information with the order. Of course, you can’t buy such a cartridge from stock, but the advantages easily outweigh the short wait while it’s built.

Of course, all this adds to the time taken by the importer and the complexity of each order, and time is money, so I completely accept that some importers don’t want to get involved. It’s also difficult. You have to understand cartridges in order to understand the language of style and technology – how what someone wants relates to the final design decisions. There is also a problem of expectation, especially because the cartridge has to be used with the existing system. No cartridge can make up for a tiny pair of speakers if that is all your wife will allow! However, most distributors no longer hold actual stock, so each cartridge is built to order. Thus the opportunity exists to tailor each one to the individual end-user.

**RG.** So the customer ordering a cartridge should also supply details of tonearm, phono-stage, loading preference and gain, as well as the rest of the system?

**AJvdH.** Loading is very important. Also if possible some details of what they listen to – type of music or records – and what aspects they prefer – space or dynamics. Any importer can pass this on, it’s just that many of them underestimate the value available from this service. Something else that is also unique is that after 200 hours you can return the cartridge so that I can tune it to exactly the specification you required. So if the tracking is a problem, or the frequency balance, I can tune it to correct this. This is also a standard service available to any customer at no cost except for

shipping. I don’t mind if it is 300 hours, even 500, but I make a little note on the cartridge just for me so that it can’t keep having 200 hour services every five years! Each cartridge carries tiny inscriptions and these tell its history. Normally you only see these things if you have a good microscope – and trained eyes.

Philips didn’t want to ask me for my stylus so through a dealer they sent me two 422s (their four-channel cartridge). But in very small writing on the back was an indication that these were

selected samples so I knew that they had come from Philips and I wrote a little letter underneath saying that perhaps next time they should ask me openly rather than sending them through a dealer! They didn’t want to ask because I’d just refused their money to stop the stylus. At this time even they weren’t sure that CD would succeed so they were also looking at alternatives.

**RG.** Did you get a reply?

**AJvdH.** Never, but they must have read it because they needed to check the stylus type and what had been done.

**RG.** Could you give us a brief outline of your current range of cartridges and how they relate to each other?

**AJvdH.** First there are the regular cartridges which all look the same but vary in output and resolution. They start with the DDT, then the MC10 and finally the highest resolution that I can achieve in a regular cartridge is in the MC1 Super. There’s also the higher output MC2. These cartridges mainly differ in resolution, differences that result from the different coils and suspension rubbers, and the way in which they ▶

► are put together. The tension applied to the suspension is especially critical. I always squeeze the rubbers slightly because if they get soft then the sound becomes harsh, but it's a question of feel, and each rubber will relax slightly over time, so a new cartridge will settle into its correct performance after a little use. That's why sometimes it will need to come back for a little fine-tuning.

That is the end of the regular range. Then comes the Frog, Grass Hopper III, Grass Hopper IV, White Beauty, Black Beauty and finally the Colibri. The Condor fits just below the Colibri in my opinion, with some qualities that even the Colibri can't match. So, for example, the lower-midrange is especially powerful and convincing with the Condor, where with the Colibri it was always a little thin. The second special quality of the Condor is the lack of needle-talk, which is more important than just removing a possible distraction. If you listen to the equipment in your system, the turntable plinth for example, with a stethoscope then you'll be amazed at how much noise is present. This is a cheap and really easy tip for all hi-fi users. The Condor is the first cartridge I have made which does not lose energy mechanically from its generator. I think this is really important for its sound.

**RG.** With the Frog, you start to introduce the internal elements that originated in the larger, open cartridges. How does the range develop from the Frog onwards?

**AJvdH.** First I made the Frog with copper coils. Then I did a silver coil version, and now, at the moment, the gold wired version is extremely popular, especially in the Far East. I've even made a platinum version although I prefer to save my limited stocks of platinum wired generators for use in the highest quality cartridges, rather than lower down the range. But the Frog represents the middle-way; it always works in any arm, anyone is happy with it. It is very reliable and really not too expensive.

When you want something more exotic then you can look at the other models and these are the ones where I really like to know what the customer expects from the cartridge. I want him to be happy when he recognises the sound he was hoping for. What is most difficult is the question of listening style. The style in the Far East is quite different to the style in Europe. We are used to having the space that allows speakers to disappear. In Taiwan and China, customers want to hear their speakers, some sound from this one, some from that. It is not just the cartridge but the whole recording that contributes to that effect. A sort of multiple-mono mixed with stereo. It is a very different way of listening. English sound is the opposite, where if you shut your eyes then the speakers should disappear and just leave the performance. That's the style of listening that I like the most.

The Grass Hopper pre-dated the Frog, with Model II, III and

IV, each in copper, silver and gold variations, each with AlNiCo magnets. You can use Samarium Cobalt but the stronger flux means a wider gap in this design to prevent collapse of the armature and that immediately reduces dynamics. So AlNiCo and resolution don't really go together, although it has excellent tonal qualities and it's very good for output.

With a two-pole design, precise centring of the coil is absolutely essential to improve resolution. So is the tension in the rubber. Using a long cantilever means using too much tension (in order to control the resonant frequency) for maximum resolution. So there's a balance to be struck between the mass of the cartridge, the mass of the coils and the rest of its moving mass to achieve good tracking, a correct frequency response and low cross-talk. Those three things are essential to the design of a good cartridge and you must know the combinations of suspension rubber, tension and cantilever length that work. This work led to the two Beauties.

The Colibri was the first single-pole design that I produced. I had a prototype in the second arm on my turntable for three or four years, and one customer, every time he came and heard it he said that it sounded so great that I should produce it, but the output was very low. At that time I didn't have the samarium Cobalt magnets that I have now, and it was these that made it possible. They are the strongest available on the market and they work here because it's a one-pole system. Too many manufacturers are concerned only with the mechanical aspects of the design and its electrical aspects. They don't really optimise the magnetic design. But theory suggested that the one-pole design might be more linear while avoiding the risk of a magnetic shunt inherent in using Samarium Cobalt in a two-pole design. I will continue now with one-pole designs. The Colibri is the first and the Condor the second. There is I think one other single-pole design, in Japan, but I've never heard it and it followed after the Colibri.

**RG.** Having seen you building the cartridges it becomes very apparent that this is a single-unit, hand-building process that's incredibly labour intensive and totally dependent on skill and experience to create consistent results. Not many people realise that you personally construct every single cartridge. How can you price a product like that?

**AJvdH.** It's a question I can hardly answer. It's not just the time that goes into each cartridge, it's all the years of experience too. It's also a question of lifespan and my eyesight, which isn't getting any better, so that experience, concentrated into each cartridge is becoming a rarer and rarer commodity. I'm extremely careful with food and medicine to protect my eyes, but I cannot make them any better than they are. Sooner or later I'll have to stop.

**JK.** You haven't been able to train anybody else? ►

► **AJvdH.** I've trained five different people and each time they run off and say, "Now I can do this myself". I never see them again, so now I have stopped this. The problem is that even if you have the desire to learn you need to have a huge amount of technical knowledge of different rubbers, of micro dynamics before you can progress. You need to be able to handle the tools before you can learn, otherwise you are simply copying a process, rather than adding value to it. That's exactly why I like to build a cartridge for a specific individual – that way I add the maximum value available from my knowledge and experience.

I recently stopped supplying one distributor because even when the cartridges were ready he made his customers wait for another two months – I think just to make the cartridges seem even more rare and exotic. That's not customer service. The customer will wait if they understand what they are waiting for, that they gain a performance advantage as a result, and that is reasonable. That is adding value. The cartridge sitting on a shelf for two months adds nothing, so that's why we stopped supplying that distributor.

**RG.** Are you still modifying other manufacturers cartridges?



**RG.** How many new cartridges do you produce in a year?

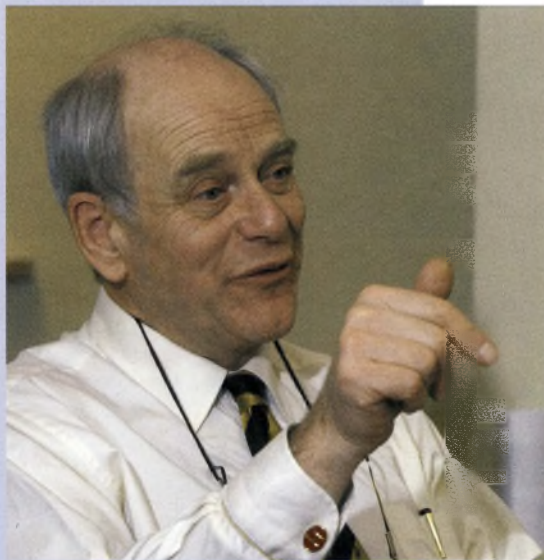
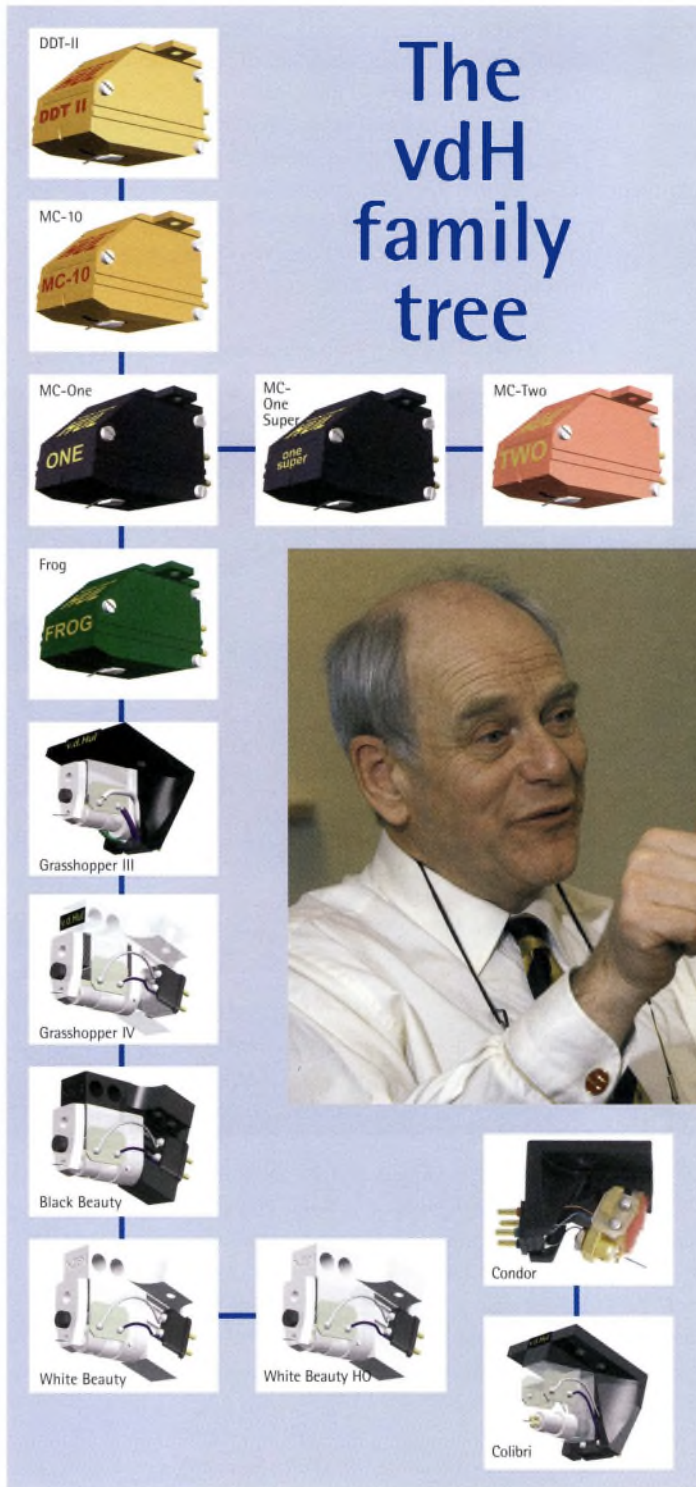
**AJvdH.** It's about 1200, as well as all the repairs – and only in the evenings and at weekends. That's it. I can't do more, because there simply isn't the time. My working hours are at the factory and only my spare time is here where I have the workshop. The cheaper models are far easier, so each week I might manage three, or maybe four, Colibris or Condors at most. I can make three or four of the regular designs for each of the expensive ones. Also, dedicated customers of many years standing can receive extra care and attention simply because I understand their requirements much more precisely – but that again takes extra time. Normally, as long as I'm not abroad it should take no longer than two weeks for me to meet an order, but there will shipping and customs and other delays on top of that.

**AJvdH.** Oh yes. Any cartridge can be upgraded and returned as long as I can work on it. Some you can't access, some have parts that are irreplaceable. Otherwise it's all hand-work. Coils have to be hand-wound, other parts hand cut to fit. Of course, another manufacturer's cartridge is also something worthy of respect. Another man made it and loved it and the owner loved it too, so you must be respectful of the design also.

**RG.** How do you see the future for analogue record replay?

**AJvdH.** I see a big future for cartridges because there is a very big move back to analogue, partly because of very high-quality re-pressings. I'm very grateful for that because without those re-pressings it would be too difficult for today's audiophiles to enjoy the qualities of those recordings from the ►

# The vdH family tree



can make a part but it's difficult for one company to make all the parts because you need variation in expertise. What I think is a pity is that tape has lost its popularity. I still think that tapes are a real alternative to LPs. (As witnessed by the stacks of pre-recorded open-reel tapes in AJ's listening room. Ed.) But saving tape is too difficult. Too much of the hardware has disappeared and the system is too complex to reconstitute. Nowadays, the turntable is much easier. With today's computer controlled machines it is possible to make very good turntables at a medium price. However, I think that it is important for customers to concentrate on technical aspects of turntable design and performance and not just looks. Too many turntables these days are made for nothing but cosmetic reasons.

What is also forgotten is that even in quite expensive tonearms and turntables, really cheap signal cabling is used – often too stiff. A typical example was the Linn. Such stiff cables simply by-pass the suspension, coupling the arm directly to the outside world. For me this is a mismatch. It's also an example of confusing what to care for and what not to care for. The internal wiring in an arm also needs to be really good. I'll mention no name but a well-known manufacturer of tonearms approached us to produce an internal arm cable but he wanted to pay no more than ten-pence a meter. I can't produce good wire for ten-pence a meter so I won't produce it at all. Now he buys our internal cabling but at that time he wouldn't spend the money. I said, "Shame on you, you sell your arms for £1500 or £2000 but you won't more than ten-pence a meter on the internal cables?"

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**RG.** With the burgeoning interest in true mono replay of mono records, will we see a mono version of one of your cartridges?

**AJvdH.** So far it's something that I've not considered. I'm too busy with stereo to consider mono. It's not too difficult to make a mono cartridge but for me, at the moment, it's a little bit of a side comer in the market. I think I can make more people happy with a stereo cartridge than a mono one. That's the only reason. Certainly, it is technically not a difficult problem.

▶ past. So I must thank all those manufacturers who put so much time into restoring all those old recordings. It's a huge help.

I'm also grateful to both the new and the traditional turntable manufacturers who continue to support analogue. They're essential because we all need each other. Each of us



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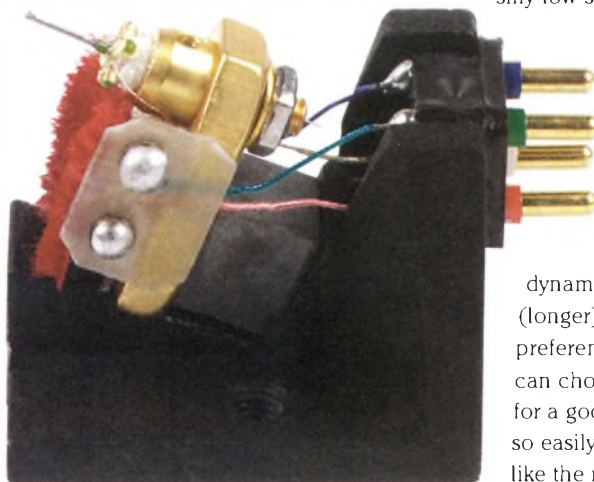
FROG

# The van den Hul Condor XCM and Frog Gold Moving Coil Cartridges

by Jason Kennedy

When you buy a loudspeaker you get to choose the veneer. When you buy an amplifier, if you are lucky you sometimes get a choice of black or silver for the front panel. But for most other audio components you get what the company makes. When you buy a van den Hul cartridge on the other hand, you get what amounts to a menu of choices that would leave most audiophiles scratching their beards. AJ van den Hul makes each cartridge by hand in a small room in his farmhouse in northern Holland. Each one is individual and can be tailor made to suit your musical tastes and analogue hardware. To the best of my knowledge he is the only cartridge maker in the world offering such a service. What's more there is no premium, all you have to do is make your selection from a series of choices, but the choices are perhaps not as obvious as you might hope. For instance do you want silver or gold coil wire? Plastic or metal cartridge body? If that's a problem, and for most of us it will be, you can let AJ work it out for you, just tell him the tonearm you use, the input impedance of your phono-stage and your taste in music and he can equate that to a cartridge that will be a perfect fit with both your record player and your records.

In simple terms he uses variation in compliance to match a cartridge to a specific tonearm – the lower the mass of the arm the higher the



compliance being a general rule of thumb. But given that, all other things being equal, higher compliance means lower tracking force and thus lower groove wear, so he errs toward the softer side with suspensions, if the arm is up to the job. Output level depends on the amount of coil turns on vdH's cross shaped coil formers. AJ can add or remove coils to alter the output level to suit a given phono-stage or personal preference. While higher outputs can give a more robust

sound a good phono-stage seems to get better results, overall, with lower outputs, so this was my particular choice. Then again we're talking about the half a milli-volt region, not silly low such as the point one

you get from Audio Tekne and Audio Note MCs... By varying the length of the boron cantilevers he uses AJ can select a sonic balance between

dynamics (shorter) and space (longer) that suits your listening preferences. Alternatively you can choose a point in between for a good mix of the two. Not so easily quantifiable are factors like the material used for the cartridge body (plastic or metal), and the alternative coil wire types available. You can pick from copper, silver, gold and even platinum but the dearer metals do of course carry a price premium.

When pressed on the subject AJ explains the characteristics of these different metals thus: copper has a "pleasant harshness" but is not the best thing for "spacious reproduction". Silver produces a "more accurate picture", with copper's distortion being replaced by "more correct harmonic



## The Bespoke Experience

by Roy Gregory

Sitting in a tiny room watching AJ van den Hul, chatting away as he peers through his binocular microscope, hand building a moving-coil cartridge is a faintly unreal experience. Watching him build one just for you – that’s really out there...

The source of this experience was a visit by JK and myself to meet and interview this elder statesman of the cartridge and cable world, a visit that started at AJ’s home, in one of the most congested listening rooms I’ve ever witnessed. This wasn’t a listening room, it was a museum, every available inch of shelf and floor space crammed with hi-fi, cameras and recordings. One clear path led to the equipment, another to the single listening seat, positioned in front of the huge A Capella speakers, where we were able to experience, each in turn, the entire upper range of vdH cartridges, from Grasshoppers through Colibris to the new Condor, in a bewildering range of

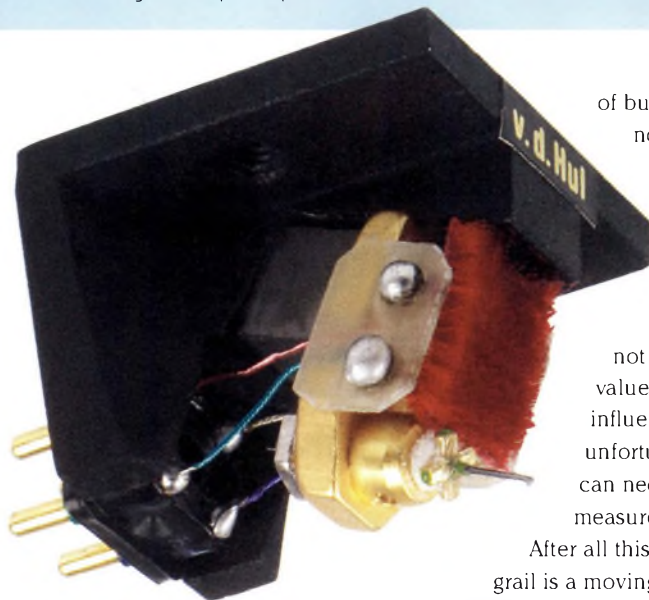
different guises and body materials. The maestro deftly switched headshells in his vintage Technics arm, able to swap between his current designs, experimental projects and examples of his earlier products. It was a fascinating experience which left me with a dramatic overview of the performance goals that continue to drive AJ to ever greater heights. It also left me with a high regard for the Colibri in particular. Later, sitting downstairs he calmly announced his intention to build each of us a cartridge. Not just any cartridge but a Condor tailored to our individual systems and preferences. And if that wasn’t impressive enough he went on to announce that this was actually a facility that was available to any prospective customer. All he needs is a little information regarding your listening preferences and the system context in which the cartridge will be used. As JK has related, you need to provide details of arm and phono-stage, and preferences as regards the sound. AJ will do the rest, just the same as he does with every cartridge he builds, selecting from his pool of parts the most

appropriate combination, hand cutting the cantilever, adjusting the tension of the tie-back and the resilience of the suspension rubber. It’s as much about feel, intuition and experience as it is about materials and measurements.

With the cartridges duly built we retired upstairs for a listen, comparing the hand-tuned models to a standard Condor XCM. The first thing that was obvious was how different each sounded: JK’s was dynamic and full of punch and body, where mine was more subtle with a greater sense of space and musical flow. Each suited our preferences to an almost uncanny degree, perhaps a reflection of how well AJ knows us both. But what was most impressive of all was the fact that sitting there, listening to my bespoke cartridge, there was no question in my mind that this was the finest sound I’d heard in AJ’s system. Better than the Grasshoppers, better than the Colibris and much, much better than the standard Condor. What’s more, I’m positive that JK

► structures” and greater spatial resolution. Gold is “smoother” with “more detail on extremely low signal levels” and it offers gains in terms of “space and detail”, however its sound is “a bit soft and mild for inexperienced ears”, yet it is “very close to the real sound”. Platinum is “the best” in all respects with “no harshness and resolution of extremely low level signals” although it’s hard to get and hard to work with.

It is surprising given AJ’s considerable enthusiasm for carbon cables as interconnect and speaker lead that there is no carbon coil wire option. However when you realise how much spring there is in carbon filaments it is pretty clear that for mechanical reasons alone it is not an appropriate material for coil wire.



All of this variety might suggest that there is no absolute sound with van den Hul cartridges, but the same is true not only with transducers generally – loudspeaker designers have to make choices which go beyond attempting to get maximum accuracy in the process

of building even a cost no object speaker — it’s also true of nearly all audio equipment. Components like capacitors have a character that is not defined by their value yet has a distinct influence on sound quality; unfortunately not one that can necessarily be directly measured against accuracy.

After all this high fidelity holy grail is a moving target thanks to the variations in recording styles for starters.

So although it would be easier to say I want the best Condor you can make to AJ, that best cartridge is in fact the one that fits your system and tastes the best, not an arbitrary absolute. You could have one exactly like those that AJ uses on his ►



felt exactly the same about his cartridge! That's quite a hike in performance when you consider the difference in price between a condor and a Colibri. A hike that's cost you nothing more than the time it takes to jot down a few details and supply them along with your order. Incidentally, AJ also suggests that you return the cartridge after 200 hours or so, just to have it tweaked - all part of the service. With listening completed the cartridges were packed in their wooden boxes, each inscribed in biro with the precise specification of the unit in question, but not before the cartridges had been "autographed" by AJ, with owner's name and date in writing

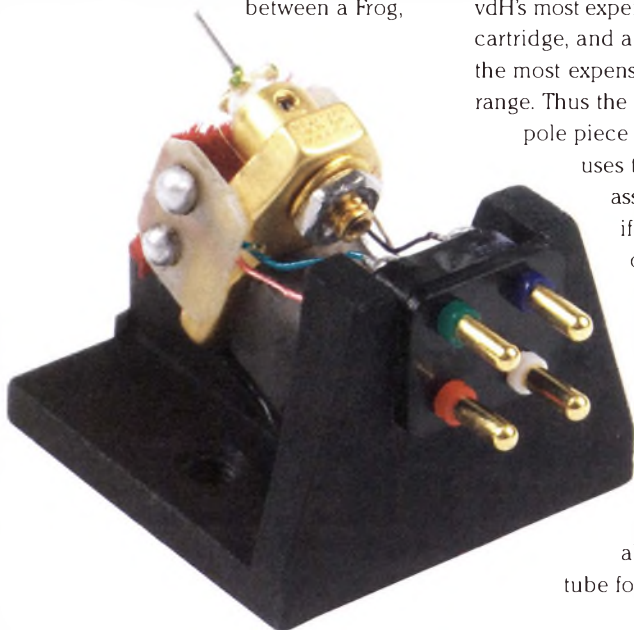


so small that you needed the microscope to see it.

What's on offer here is as far as I'm aware, an utterly unique opportunity. Optimising the pick-up to match not just the electro mechanical demands of your system but your own preferences as well, reaps an impressive dividend, a performance boost that elevates already impressive performers into genuine giant killers. After all, why have someone else's view of perfection when you can have your own?

Brinkmann turntable with its old school Technics tonearm but it wouldn't sound the same on your turntable.

The new Condor moving coil is described as a cross between a Frog,



vdH's most expensive enclosed cartridge, and a Colibri which is the most expensive cartridge in the range. Thus the Condor has no front pole piece like a Colibri but uses the same generator assembly as you'd find if you prized the lid off a Frog. The lack of a front pole piece means the cantilever can be shorter and this reduction in mass is further bolstered by a shorter aluminium support tube for the cantilever.

The Condor's cantilever is 2mm shorter than the Frog's and it achieves 4dB greater separation, but then the cartridge does cost twice as much.

Further variations between these needles include the use of a damping pad on the Condor which has the remarkable effect of completely defeating needle talk, this is the quietest cartridge I've come across and a major boon for anyone who sits near an open turntable when playing vinyl. Not that near either - some cartridges can be heard a few metres away.

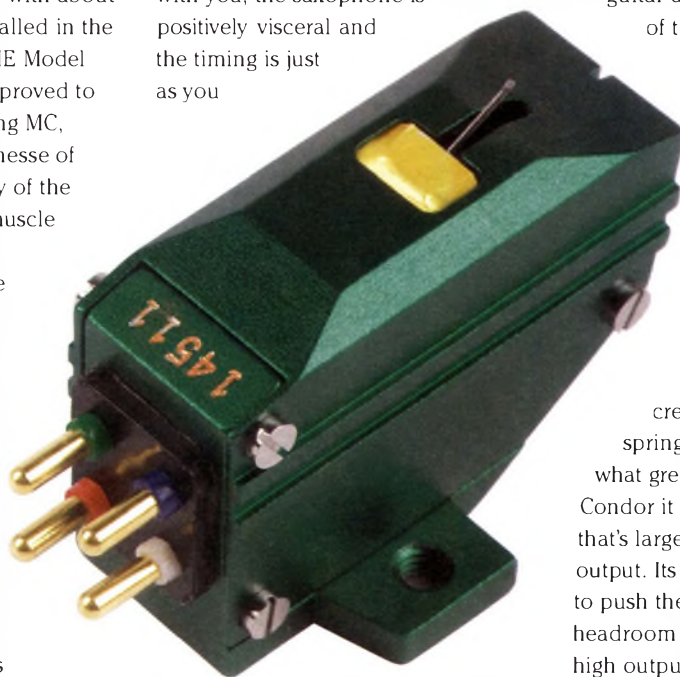
The greener of these two MCs has the protection of a case and the advantage of nearly twice the output level at 1.1mV. It is more robust then and has enough signal to drive a sensitive MM stage should that be desired. Both designs feature van den Hul's type 1 tip with its distinctive V shape and fine line contact

▶ with the groove wall. They are also higher compliance designs (as coils go) and will track as low as 1.3grams with ease. Their mass means they are suitable for medium mass tonearms, but as mentioned, the Condor's optional plastic body means that it can be built to suit old school low mass arms if that's what you have.

The Frog is more standardised in its construction, which keeps costs down, but AJ says he has built silver coiled versions in the past with about half the output. When installed in the Series V tonearm of an SME Model 20A turntable the Condor proved to be a powerful and revealing MC, combining much of the finesse of the Colibri with the energy of the Frog and adding a bit of muscle of its own. In its copper coiled, metal bodied guise (XCM), with a preference for a high 1kOhm load impedance, this Condor produces a full bodied, three dimensional sound that has a reach out and grab it quality you don't often hear. It is extremely insightful with phenomenal low-level resolution that leaves very few fine ripples in the groove wall unturned – in fact low level information is abundant, from the condition of the pressing to the finest nuances of sound. Take the pinnacle of Tom Waits' career, *Swordfishtrombones*, with the Condor you get below the gravelly voice to the heart of the song. You also fully appreciate just how hard the drummer is pummelling the skins, not to mention the way the electric guitar slices into the mix alongside some of the most vivid percussion I've heard on vinyl. This cartridge manages to do the subtle stuff extremely well but has the dynamics to deliver the energy of

the music just as effectively. We're talking here about a 'standard' Condor, the one sent for review not one that has been tweaked for any particular tastes or emphasis, but if anything solidity of image and dynamic impact are in the premier league and far too good for a premiership footballer, or his wife.

With the Keith Jarrett classic *Eyes of the Heart* the band and piano are up front and in the room with you, the saxophone is positively visceral and the timing is just as you



would expect of a live ensemble of this quality (Charlie Haden, Dewey Redman and Paul Motian). The way Motian thraps the drums with his brushes creates a wall of sound energy that with speakers of the ATC SCM150ASL class makes for a very real experience. Distortion is vanishingly low so you can play as loud as the system/room will go without suffering. At least not until you go downstairs and find out how loud the other half thought it was.

Less spectacular recordings/pressings take on a new found lease of life as well, which is in many

respects even more impressive. In this instance what has often seemed like a rather flat record of the Mahavishnu Orchestra live, an album which has to live up to the title *Between Nothingness & Eternity*, turned out to have a lot more dynamic and tonal contrast than expected. This clearly was the supergroup to beat them all, the explosive drumming of Billy Cobham matched by the speed and fluidity of John McLaughlin's guitar and backed up by some of the most imaginative musicians of the time.

All this is present on this very late pressing but it's deep enough to elude most needles. Here the bass has grunt and the stage opens up to reveal depth and width. The Frog on the other hand is a more lively creature with plenty of spring in its step and a somewhat greener carcass. Next to the Condor it seems a trifle brash but that's largely down to its higher output. Its signal level seemed to push the Trichord Delphini's headroom even when set for a high output MC.

Now *Eyes of the Heart* bristles with energy, the piano playing sounding not unlike Dollar Brand at times, the drumming is as vivid as ever and the band positively brims with life. All it takes to get an idea of the hall acoustic is a single cough from someone in the audience (there's always one!). Changing the input impedance to 1kohm brings the action even closer with a change in perspective that's quite dramatic. With this album at least the 100ohm setting seems more appropriate, giving a calmer result that takes the stage away from the listener. Joni Mitchell's *Court And Spark* has lovely full bass and her voice is strong and solid ▶



▶ at 1kohm, but switching over to 100ohms relaxes the presentation, which in turn makes it less exciting but smoother and cleaner.

Having established its suitability for this impedance setting, the Groove (fixed 100ohm) was brought in to see if any more resolution could be extracted. Well, it certainly was, with Lambchop's *Bugs* revealing a very open soundstage, so much so that it seemed to have a halo.

But this combined with a solid low frequency thump and a stereo image that was reminiscent of the Condor. There is less fine detail than with the nude cartridge but a smoother, less revealing top end that makes this a more accommodating cartridge. Lesser recordings can be turned up

without fear of searing treble and great ones still have plenty of sparkle.

The bass is deep and round when it's called for and while it may not plumb the depths of its sibling, it does a pretty good job nonetheless.

These are both dynamic, powerful and revealing cartridges that turn in a compelling performance. Yes you can hear more through the Condor but you can hear plenty with a Frog and still have some money left to buy more vinyl to play.

Such as Humble Pie's performance *Rockin' the Fillmore*. The atmosphere on here is electric. As Steve Marriot so aptly puts it "it's a gas, man", and he wasn't talking about neon! ▶

#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Condor	
Weight:	12.7g
Tracking force:	1.35 - 1.5g
Output voltage:	0.55mV, 0.25mV - 0.55mV
Load impedance:	500ohms - 47kohms
Compliance:	To order depending on tonearm
Price:	£2,400

Frog Gold	
Weight:	8.2g
Tracking force:	1.35 - 1.5g
Output voltage:	1.1mV
Load impedance:	100ohms - 47kohms
Price:	£1,200

#### UK Distributor:

Henley Designs  
Tel. (44)(0)1235 511166  
Net. [www.henleydesigns.co.uk](http://www.henleydesigns.co.uk)

#### Manufacturer:

Net. [www.vandenhul.com](http://www.vandenhul.com)

# My Sonic Lab Eminent MC Cartridge

by Jason Hector

My Sonic Lab couldn't be anything other than a Japanese company. What a great name, a name thought up by a Mr Y Matsudaira who has been specialising in tonearms and cartridges all his life. You don't get many men like that on this side of

the globe. I can't think of a single company that makes both transducers and tonearms. There are a few arm makers, Brinkmann come to mind, who get someone else (EMT) to make them a cartridge which bears their name, but that's not quite the

same. Given the significant interdependence of these two components there's a lot to be said for both coming from the same source. That's not to say that cartridge makers can't make transducers that work perfectly well in arms made ▶

► by others. This after all is the combination that most of us use. It's just that there must be some advantage in designing and making both components together.

Unfortunately My Sonic Lab has not been able to afford the tooling costs of rebuilding the Audio Craft arm that Matudeira-san originally designed. So we're back to the normal situation of choosing an arm that suits the cartridge's mass and compliance. Fortunately my SME Series V does that with ease, and while there may be more auspicious tonearm choices this one should not hamper the Eminent's chances.

Matsudaira set up My Sonic Lab in 2003 but has been in the business for over forty years. He started out at Tokyo Sound in 1959 where he manufactured cartridges and tonearms for broadcasting. Eight years later he went to Spex and Co where he designed and engineered arms and both MM and MC cartridges for various companies, work which culminated in 1979 when he joined an independent development team that produced designs that are still in use by some of the better known Japanese cartridge builders today. In 1981 he joined Audio Craft as chief engineer and produced the AC-3 (no, not Dolby Digital!) cartridge alongside step up transformers and phono-stages. Not a bad career all in all.

With My Sonic Lab his quest has been to build a moving coil cartridge with very low internal impedance. Matsudaira San states that the energy producing potential of most MCs is not realised because of impedance

limitations. His premise is that high source impedance "causes considerable consumption of" the energy generated by the coils and that this in turn leads to a weak sound. He has tackled this by designing a high efficiency magnetic circuit which he claims does not saturate the pole piece, a problem

he has identified with most MCs.



Matsudaira uses an ultra high- $\mu$  material which he has dubbed SH- $\mu$ X – not such a great name as My Sonic Lab but it looks damn technical. This material is claimed to have "huge saturation flux density", so much so that it allows a "remarkable reduction" in the amount of coil wire required to give a decent output level.

The only potential disadvantage

with this approach is that it theoretically requires an equally low impedance transformer or phono-stage in order to be fully beneficial. My Sonic Lab does not specify the ideal input impedance but does make a step-up transformer, this, however, was not supplied for the review.

The resulting Eminent MC has an internal impedance of 1.8 ohms combined with a healthy 0.5mV output. Its construction includes a neodymium SH- $\mu$ X magnet, 'dual structure' super duralumin cantilever and a semi-line contact stylus. Downforce of between 2 and 2.2grams is recommended, which suggests that compliance is low.

No recommendation for tonearm mass is made but the 9g mass of the cartridge combined with the compliance would suggest a medium to heavy arm is best. In action, aboard an SME Model 20A and feeding Tom Evans' Groove phono-stage the Eminent turned in a performance that would suggest its maker's claims about getting energy out of a cartridge are well founded. This is a powerful

MC with impressive low-level resolution and a sense of speed that is quite rare. It suits more lively recordings extremely well. Him's *Many In High Places Are Not Well* mixes percussion, drums and bass with guitar to produce subtle, but engrossing music with a sense of tension that this cartridge makes the most of. It's crisp and clear yet also muscular and hard hitting when you get someone like Narada Michael Walden kicking the bejeezus out

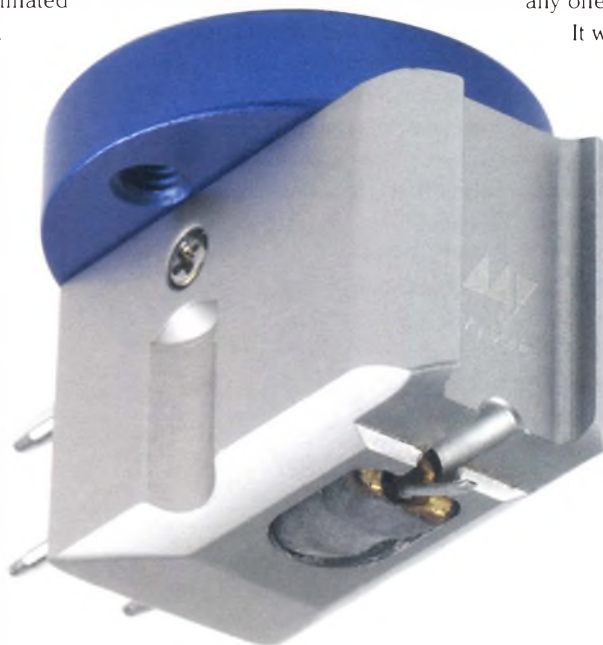
► of his kit on Jeff Beck's *She's A Woman*. Jeff's playing is rendered in a highly nimble yet fluid fashion that seems to be as responsive to the subtleties as it is to the weight in the bass.

Bringing the VTA down a bit to pretty well flat improved the bass response even further and eliminated the hiss that was apparent with some LPs. Spinning Massive Attack's *Mezzanine* under the Eminent's tip proved a scary, dark and hypnotic experience, so much so that it inspired me to write up the album as an audiophile classic for another magazine. If you enjoy low frequency power there are few more entrancing albums in contemporary music, it is a bit dark and foreboding though, so not for the Elton John enthusiasts.

The more upbeat rhythms of Cornelius are delivered in richly textured fashion, the guitar and bass portrayed with a chunkiness that makes them seem all the more real. While the dynamic impact of the Eminent is slightly behind my vdH Grasshopper III GLA, it clearly has smoother high frequencies. There's no shortage of power and weight though, an area where both these cartridges excel. In fact the Eminent's bass is both taut and deep, the usually over-blown double bass on the Cinematic Orchestra's *Theme De Yo Yo* enjoys a degree of resolution that I've not previously heard. Which might suggest that this is a lean cartridge but this is patently not the case, as albums such as *Mezzanine* prove. This tautness also brings with it a tunefulness in the bass which is extremely gratifying and means that tunes make better rhythmic sense.

With acoustic material such as

John Fahey's *Rain Forests, Oceans and Other Themes* there is a vitality and expansiveness that is entirely convincing and natural – his guitar strings have a fresh zing combined with plenty of body and tonal colour while the reverb on the percussion



behind him sounds very realistic and adds genuine acoustic space to this fine recording. This album gave the cartridge a chance to show off its ability to expose the quieter sounds such as the rub of fingers moving along strings from the accompanist. On Fourtet's so called electronic folk album *Fause* the cavernous reverb applied to a typewriter used as a rhythm section is fully realised while on Steely Dan's classic *Night by Night* the wah wah guitar provides a sublime pulse that drives the track along. There's no getting around the slight compression of the recording but it's nice to be able to differentiate the two guitars so easily.

Going over to a vdH Colibri XGP (gold wire, plastic body) you actually hear more weight but less shimmer which makes for a more relaxed

sound that's a little more fussy about vinyl condition and presents slightly more body. There's no denying the strong sense of pace that the Eminent brings to the party and the degree to which it responds to each recording. This is a first class moving coil that deserves to be a front-runner for any one with this sort of budget.

It will dramatically revitalise any decent record collection (probably some rubbish ones too!) and bring back the vital spark that made you buy each album in the first place. Maybe there is something in low internal impedance after all. ►+

#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Low-impedance, low-output moving coil cartridge
Output Voltage:	0.5mV/1kHz
Internal impedance:	1.8 Ω Core material:
Stylus pressure:	2 - 2.2g
Cantilever:	Super-duralumin dual structure
Stylus tip:	Semi-line contact (37m x 307m)
Channel balance:	within 0.5dB (1kHz)
Weight:	9g
Price:	£2750

#### UK Distributor:

Heatherdale Audio

Tel. (44)(0)1903 872288

Net. [www.hifi-stereo.com](http://www.hifi-stereo.com)

# The Cartridge Man Music Maker Mk III Variable-Reluctance Cartridge.

by Jimmy Hughes

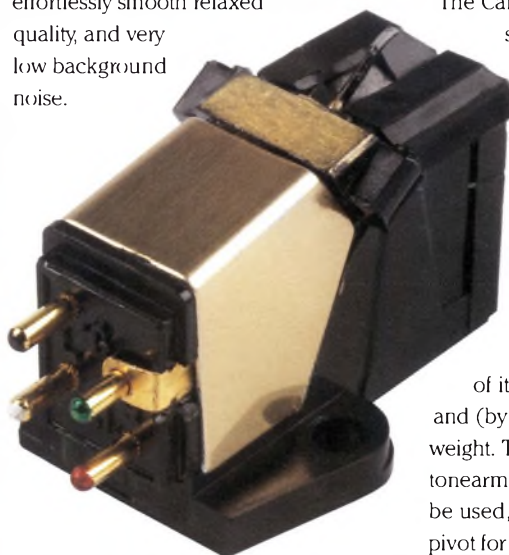
The great cartridge debate; moving-coil verses fixed-coil. Each with its benefits and drawbacks, depending on personal taste and individual requirements. And if today the debate is not quite so heated as it once was, it's perhaps because the best modern MC pickups are so good - masterpieces of micro engineering and electro-mechanical design, with fewer of the compromises and limitations found in models of an earlier generation.

Alas; such perfection comes at a price... Most of the better MC pickups cost well over four figures. Some are reputed to be incredibly difficult to make, requiring skilled hand assembly from master craftsmen and women. While Zen-like tales of little old white-haired men sitting at the foot of a mountain making pickup cartridges are no doubt a slight exaggeration, it definitely ain't easy to make a great pickup.

The Cartridge Man's Music Maker fixed-coil pickup has been around for some years, and is now in Mk III guise. It's based on the Variable Reluctance Grado Signature design, albeit heavily modified. This is quite interesting, as Joseph Grado himself held several key patents for moving-coil pickups, yet never marketed an MC cartridge. He believed his fixed coil design was capable of superior performance.

One immediate benefit of the Variable Reluctance principle is its low moving mass. With no heavy coil or magnet at the other end of the cantilever, tracking performance is improved, along with high frequency clarity and transient sharpness. Yet curiously, the 1970s Grado pickups I recall did not quite balance this sharp open top end with a suitably full mid-band and bass - tonally, the sound tended to be bright and somewhat thin.

The latest Mk III version of the Music Maker is said to sound more airy and open than previous designs, and such qualities were certainly apparent when playing the first few LPs. The sound produced was extremely open and transparent; very sharp and tactile, with excellent transient attack and fine detail. At the same time I noted an effortlessly smooth relaxed quality, and very low background noise.



The music sounded clean, sharp, and crisply focussed, with a lovely natural tonal balance - spacious, airy, and sparkingly brilliant. By MC standards, most fixed-coil cartridges tend to sound slightly 'hard' tonally and shut-in. Not this one; it's very open and free-sounding, with a lively yet spacious treble that's extremely smooth and natural. Despite the outstanding sharpness, there's very low emphasis of surface noise.

The stylus tip is made from a grain-orientated gem-stone quality diamond that's carefully polished and finished. The custom fine-line shape has quite a large area of contact with the groove wall, and the net result is a clean low-noise signal. Vinyl roar is impressively

low, and most LPs reproduce with a very clean quiet background - as though the stylus were finding the cleanest/quietest part of the groove.

Suggested stylus downforce is 1.5g, and the makers suggest close attention to detail - correct playing weight, optimum VTA, geometry, alignment and anti-skate - when installing the pickup.

The Cartridge Man, Len Gregory, strongly recommends his own cartridge test LP (available from Moth Marketing (44)(0)1234 741152) to check set-up. It's a real torture chamber that will test any cartridge and arm to ensure optimum results! The Music Maker is a fairly fussy pick-up when it comes to tonearms; partly on account

of its high (30cu) compliance and (by MC standards) lowish playing weight. The maker maintains that only tonearms of the highest calibre should be used, recommending a good uni-pivot for its low friction, but always used without silicone damping fluid. A good alternative is a parallel tracker of suitably low-mass like the Clearaudio designs. RG will be assessing that combination shortly. Output voltage is around 4mV @ 5cm/s.

I actually partnered my review Music Maker with a Townshend Excalibur on a Rock Anniversary, without fluid damping. Despite the medium-mass of this arm and its fixed bearings, the cartridge seemed to work very happily, sounding relaxed and effortlessly smooth, yet tactile and immediate. Partnering phono-stage was the outstanding battery powered Sutherland PhD I reviewed a few months back - suitably reconfigured for lower gain and 47kOhms input impedance. ▶

▷ The choice of a good phono-stage is crucial – almost as important as selecting the right tonearm and turntable. Because most of the best pickups are low output MC types, you sometimes get the impression that the fixed-coil input on some phono-stages has less care taken over it than the MC stage. There's certainly less need for outstanding quality given the lower standard of fixed-coil cartridges overall.

Of course, in many cases the signal passes through the same circuitry – the MC option being a high gain pre-amplifier in front of the MM input. So, if anything, the MM stage should sound better as it has one less gain stage. The Sutherland PhD impressed enormously when used with low output MC pickups, but would it prove equally as special with a high quality high-output fixed coil?

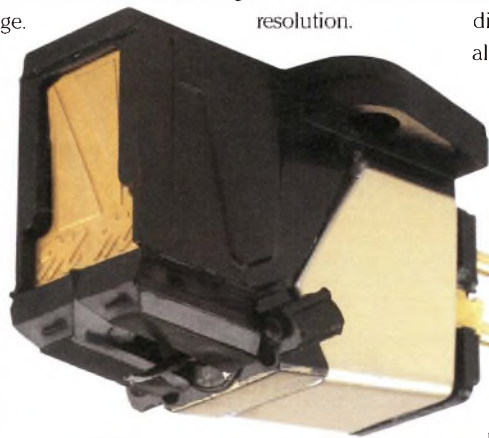
The answer? An emphatic Yes! Having tried the Music Maker with a couple of other quality phono-stages, my early impressions (while certainly favourable) fell slightly short of ecstatic. The sound was good; clean, well groomed, and natural, but lacking a certain magic. Compared to the Technicolor blitz of some MC pickups, the Music Maker almost seemed a shade over-refined and lacking in drive.

Using the PhD certainly maintained that deliciously smooth, clean and well-balanced sound. But now I could really hear how natural and subtly detailed the Music Maker was. The mid-band and bass came through more powerfully, balancing the brilliant immediacy and fast transient attack of the treble. With other phono-stages the sound had been good; now it was in an altogether higher league.

The overall result produced by the Music Maker and PhD was very much on a par with what I'd expect from a top quality moving-coil pickup; comparable tonal smoothness and refinement, plus an effortless brilliance and immediacy – delivering a broad range of tone colours

and hues that makes analogue LPs sound utterly natural and involving. Overall, there was a distinct 'rightness' about the sound.

Voices and instruments sounded very real and highly believable. The music had pace and drive, with excellent timing and attack. So – does the Music Maker better the best MC pickups? I wouldn't necessarily go that far. But via the PhD it's not far off. Subjectively, the Music Maker sounds slightly leaner than many MC pickups; it doesn't offer that honeyed richness and weight one gets with some top MC cartridges, nor their ultimate resolution.



Against that, it has to be said the Music Maker's forte is its exceptionally neutral and accurate presentation – very much like a good master tape – not added overtones. Bass is actually very deep and powerful, but the upper bass seems slightly less voluminous than usual – flatter and more CD-like – with no overhang or blur. It combines the tonal accuracy and precision of CD with the flowing liquidity of good analogue.

This extra bass warmth/weight was and is one of the qualities people liked about MC cartridges – and analogue LP. It can be very alluring and seductive. Whether or not this upper-bass richness is accurate or correct is another matter. Some additive-type analogue aberrations are actually quite pleasant subjectively, even if they're wrong! LP reproduction is after all very subjective thing. Most

people choosing analogue are primarily interested in a sound they like and enjoy.

Accuracy, especially the academic 'technically correct' sort, is probably not high on the agenda. If you want all that you can go buy CD! Yet, given the basic aim of High Fidelity – to faithfully and accurately recreate the original sound with nothing added or taken away – truthfulness is an important characteristic. Someone buying a Music Maker will be getting a cartridge that really is very neutral and free from coloration.

This is a pick-up that faithfully recreates the music in the grooves, adding and subtracting very little. If it disappoints, then look at setting up and alignment, and make sure the partnering ancillaries are up to scratch – turntable, arm, and phono-stage. Unless these are pulling their weight you won't get a great sound. The other thing to bear in mind when making comparisons, of course, is price.

The Cartridge Man Music Maker retails for £625. Which makes it substantially cheaper than many of its exotic MC cartridge rivals. So, even if there were certain aspects you preferred about an expensive MC alternative, faced with a \$1000+ saving, the difference might suddenly not seem quite so significant! So – a first class pickup then. Definitely one for the list if you're shopping for a top-class cartridge. ▶+

#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Variable reluctance phono-cartridge
Stylus Type:	Complex line-contact
Output:	4.5mV
Compliance:	25cu
Mass:	6.5g
Loading:	35K+ and >100pF
Price:	£625

#### Manufacturer:

The Cartridge Man  
Tel. (44)(0)20 8688 6565  
Net. www.thecartridgeman.com

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# The VPI TNT 6 Record Player

by Roy Gregory

First, some history...

Turntables are renowned for their longevity; decks like the LP12 and Gyrodec are now well into their third decade. Against such long established competition, VPI's TNT seems like a mere stripling, but the arrival of the Mk. 6 incarnation coincides with 18 years in continuous production and development – and I do mean continuous. It's a remarkable achievement for a deck that arrived in the wake of CD, devoid of an established reputation to lean on, a manageable footprint to accommodate or even a cover to guard the acres of black acrylic just waiting to trap dunes of dust. But to understand just why the TNT has survived and flourished it's necessary to look back in time before following the path forwards.

Whilst it's fair to say that the TNT, as an entirely new design, had no established reputation to rely on, that certainly isn't true of VPI or their earlier turntable, the HW19. Indeed, having started life manufacturing isolation platforms before graduating through a series of accessories to record cleaning machines, VPI had already established an enviable reputation for soundly executed and cost effective engineering. At a time when the turntable wars were becoming increasingly bitter and political, not to mention voodoo-esque, the no-nonsense HW19 came as a considerable breath of fresh air.

As it evolved from its initial, extremely basic form, it gained an external power supply, enhanced cosmetics and a cult following who appreciated its straight-forward approach, ability to accept any tonearm, great sound and upgradability. It also cost a lot less than the opposition. It was a formula that designer Harry Weisfeld was to build on for the TNT, basically an HW19 writ large.

The original TNT\* took the HW19's four point, sprung suspension and enclosed it in corner mounted towers, each topped off with a large adjustment knob. These supported a massive skeletal chassis constructed from two slabs of inch thick Perspex, to which were bolted the full-depth armboard and massive standing bearing. The platter, a lead, acrylic and cork laminate was constructed on a similar scale, and incorporated a screw down centre-clamp. But, apart from sheer scale and mass, the place in which the TNT really diverged from the '19 was in the drive system. A separate, stand-alone, mass-loaded 'T'-frame was placed beneath the otherwise freestanding chassis. This supported the motor as well as a pair of auxiliary idler wheels that flanked

the platter, limiting the two drive belts to three-point peripheral contact.

The thinking here was to maximise isolation of the (noisy) drive system as far as possible from the stylus/record interface – and boy did it work. Compared to other decks available at the time the TNT threw a huge and incredibly stable soundstage,



which combined with its ghostly quiet noise-floor made for impressive dynamics and musical presence. Meanwhile, the open chassis and huge armboard meant that it would accept any known tonearm, and was especially suited to the passive parallel trackers, just starting to make their mark. Teamed with the ET2, the TNT delivered truly state-of-the-art performance at a distinctly real world price. It also possessed a Bauhausian elegance that was at once impressive and understated – as long as you could ignore the sheer size of the beast. But nobody ever mistook the TNT for anything other than a very serious turntable indeed, or

\* It stands for "The New Turntable", code for the product during its development phase and before it had an official name. There again, it does have a certain ring...



► queried the cost. It even looked good enough to make it onto the big screen, a luxury icon in millionaire Robert Redford's house in the otherwise truly awful *Indecent Proposal*.

It would have been easy, even sensible, to leave the successful debutant well alone, but it simply isn't in Harry Weisfeld's make-up to do that. Soon the tinkering started. Pulleys came (and went) and so did an external flywheel. The power supply was totally redesigned and the springs eventually succumbed to the arrival of air pods. The chassis became a one piece construction, which along with stainless steel in the motor housing, suspension towers and platter, dramatically improved the already attractive appearance.

Finally, the optional elimination of the armboard produced the so-called Hot Rod, an even simpler device that bolted the matching JMW arm directly to the chassis.

At this point we take a short detour, via two other projects. The Scout was a budget version of the non-suspended Aries design. In order to meet the target price, engineering costs needed to be cut, so Harry decided to redesign the bearing. Such pressures often act as a creative catalyst, and so it was to prove. What he came up with was an inverted design, which used a Teflon thrust pad. The softness of the material necessitated a new, all acrylic platter in order to reduce the mass, but the results were incredible. So much so that he became determined to incorporate the benefits into a new, high-end design,

the HRX. This used a laminated acrylic and aluminium chassis combined with a larger diameter Teflon bearing and deeper acrylic platter. For the first time a peripheral mass-ring/record clamp was incorporated, machined from stainless steel. To drive this he developed a new, twin motor, vibration cancelling drive system that incorporated its own flywheel, thus reducing motor noise and the deck's footprint in one fell swoop.

to mention new air-pods that he's working on to replace the existing units. When or even whether they'll see the light of day, who knows? But you get the picture. The one thing you can be sure of is that if they do, they'll either sound better or be easier to adjust – probably both. That's the beauty of the TNT – it just keeps getting better.

Anyway, back to the unit at hand. The TNT 6 consists of the familiar skeletal chassis, constructed from a single slab of 50mm thick



So, take the motor system and platter from the HRX and combine them with a TNT one-piece acrylic chassis, complete with armboard, and what have you got?

No prizes for guessing that it's a TNT 6.

Now, what I'm going to describe here is the current incarnation of the TNT 6. You see, even as we speak, and given that construction through to

publication takes around six months, Harry will be beavering away on modifications and upgrades. The good news is that these are nearly always retrofitable. So chatting 'table details with him the other day he happened

Perspex and with a stainless steel suspension tower in each corner. These contain the air suspension bladders, each filled through the top-mounted valves, most easily accomplished with a bicycle pump. The chassis also offers a large, detachable armboard capable of accepting most tonearms, while the sheer inertia of the design coupled with its broad footprint makes it extremely stable. The inverted bearing is very slightly shorter than the one on the HRX but is otherwise identical in design, quality and function. The platter, record weight and peripheral clamp are also taken directly from the flagship model. The spindle is also threaded to take VPI's one-piece clamp should you ►



▶ prefer that option. The twin motor housing and flywheel assembly also comes direct from the HRX, fitting neatly within the chassis dimensions and thus reducing the deck's total footprint compared to previous models. It is driven from the superb and extremely sophisticated SDS power supply, allowing exceptionally fine speed adjustment of both 33 and 45 RPM while accepting any input voltage or frequency.

I asked for the 6 to be drilled for my JMW 12.5 uni-pivot, although even here, there are modifications to be fitted and updates to be had. The deck arrived with a large, teardrop shaped baseplate that fits between the arm base and the armboard. A front-mounted post passes through the cueing platform, while a knurled thumb screw similar to the one on the VTA tower locks the two together. The improvement in overall rigidity as well as coupling to the chassis is impressive, whilst operation is in no way impaired. Of course, the 12.5 is only one of VPI's arm options. There is also the similar but slightly simplified and undamped 12.6 version (a false economy in my opinion) and the much simpler 12.0 derived from the 9.0 fitted to the Scout and devoid of the sophisticated VTA adjustment. Instead you get a knurled collar around the arm base, which means that swapping arm wands is still a practical possibility, although far more fiddly than with the more sophisticated versions. Alternatively, other arms can be specified, the TNT being particularly suited to parallel trackers like the Air Line and Air Tangent.

As long as you've got the surface to support it, setting up the TNT 6 couldn't be simpler. Assembly is perfectly straightforward and self-explanatory, while the excellent packing contributes to keeping things

orderly. The main chassis arrives as a single piece with armboard and suspension towers in place. Mount the arm (if necessary) and position the chassis. Now add the motor block, platter, belts and hook up the SDS. The latter will require setting, but with the clear instructions that isn't difficult. Finally. With the arm on board,



the clamp and record weight in place and a disc on the platter, it's time to level the suspension. This is surprisingly simple once you get the technique. Unscrew the valve covers and inflate all the bladders so that the deck sits clear of their supports. Get down on their level and this is obvious. Now, like all air

suspension systems, the TNT's sounds best with the least amount of air in it that still floats the chassis. All you have to do is dip the nipple inside each valve to release air and adjust the ride height. With an accurate spirit level on the platter, simply release air from the rear right bladder until you have about 3mm of easy movement before grounding. The weight of the arm demands the highest pressure from this bladder. Then simply repeat the operation with the other legs until the deck is level. I normally go front right first to establish the fore and aft level,

then I attend to the other end and level side to side. If you let too much air out, just put a bit back in. However, there is one tip that will save you a lot of time: invest in a high-pressure, narrow-bodied pump (Blackburn make excellent examples) with a push-fit or quick-release head. Screw-on designs let air out more quickly than they put it in just as soon as you try to remove them. The air chamber is so small that you end up right back at square one.

Once the deck is level it stays that way, while the superb set-up tools and the best VTA adjustment on the market make cartridge alignment simplicity itself. I'd also recommend getting an extra arm wand, even if you don't see yourself using more than one cartridge. Until you've had this facility it's hard to appreciate just how appealing it is. And that's pretty much that. The deck should stay perfectly in tune almost indefinitely. The air-bladders don't leak, the 'table doesn't move and the speed stays spot-on. In practical terms, all it needs is a lid to be perfect - all you need to do is play records.



At first, the peripheral clamp can seem a little daunting, but Harry has improved it since the original version appeared (no surprise there then). By slightly increasing the inner diameter and using felt locating pads, lifting or replacing it becomes seriously easy, ▶

▶ whilst there's no substitute for peripheral clamping when it comes to keeping your records flat. If you really can't face an extra operation in the process, simply run it under the record, resting on the shoulder of the platter. That way you get the advantages of its mass without ever having to move it except in the case of a rim-warp vinyl outrage. There's nothing like having the best of both worlds!

Play almost any record on the VPI and you'll hear its hallmark qualities, characteristics that have been apparent right from the very first version and that have been refined over the years.

player, and good as earlier TNTs were (and they definitely were) the 6 marks a step change in quality. It's tempting to point to the bearing and platter along with the new motor system, and experience with the HRX whence they came certainly suggests that they are responsible. However, what's important is not so much why things have changed as the changes themselves.

What makes the TNT6 so special?

Give me two records and I can show you:

but it's also about the mortar that fills the cracks. The scale and precise placement of major structural elements in the music is essential to establishing a credible (and coherent) foundation. It's the subtle detail and texture that binds them together that ultimately convinces. The problem is that you need both. All the detail in the world is useless if it doesn't actually make sense; getting the bass beat in the right place might make your feet tap but it doesn't mean that the system is communicating the sense and feeling in the music.

Let's start with *The Poet Game*. The

opening track is 'Brand New '64 Dodge', a gravely reminiscence of childhood and home and a time that was both simple and comforting

but saw the first daunting shadows of the outside world looming. This is a lovely recording and the TNT 6 captures the space within it, the contained energy of the instruments and their separate, individual characters. So far so familiar; what separates the 6 from previous TNTs is the resolution of detail and texture. The early models were never bad in this respect, showing a clean pair of heels to most of the opposition, especially in textural terms, but the 6 takes things to another level altogether. It's a combination of two attributes that make the difference. Firstly, there's greater resolution, apparent as increased detail and air. Secondly, there's greater dynamic control and precision, this latter leaving more room for the increase in detail without robbing the music of any of the life and body that's so important. Indeed – quite the opposite. Now we have greater transparency, focus and separation, each instrument is more clearly and believably defined, its notes more solid and more immediate. ▶

Greg Brown's *The Poet Game* (Red House Records RHR 68, 180g vinyl pressed by RTI) and the Ruggiero Ricci's *Carmen Fantasie* on Decca SXL 2197 (original wide-band, pressed at the New Malden plant).

I've already talked scale and substance, weight, energy and dynamic range. All desirable features, most of them surprisingly rare in the world of high-end record players. Familiar with the term "everything in moderation – including moderation"? It applies with a vengeance to hi-fi where balance is everything and it's way too easy to get too much of a good thing. It's not just a case of possessing these qualities but binding them to the central musical strand in a way that contributes rather than disrupts. It's a process that means getting the bricks in the right place,

There's the huge soundstage, peopled with beautifully separated images. The images themselves are stable and solid; they don't wander with level, they don't crowd forward in crescendos. They have substance and dimensions, physical volume and a natural sense of scale, all set against the TNT's black, almost soft, velvety background. Then there's the dynamic range and the sheer energy that the deck produces. I've described previous versions as "infectiously enthusiastic" in their approach to music, and this deck certainly captures the life and vitality in a performance. Roll these qualities together and you've got a sound that's big and bold, dynamic and emphatic, adjectives that could sum up any of the TNTs. So far so very good, but there's more, much more to being a really top-flight record



▶ Greg Brown's voice is simply there, in front of you, in the same space as you, singing to you. The 6 effortlessly slips between the half spoken and half sung phrase of the song, separates the guitars, the bass and drums, tracking dynamic levels and yet keeping loud and quiet separate and independent. This is where the magic lies. It's what makes Conrad-Johnson's ACT 2 so memorable; with a good recording on the 6 it's a haunting experience. This effortless ability to keep the whole together yet the elements separate is one of the major differences between the live and the recorded experience. The TNT 6 significantly narrows that gap.

Move on to track two and there's no hesitation as the 6 locks step with the up-tempo pace of 'Boomtown'. Equally at home with fast or slow, large or small-scale works, the added control makes this latest TNT a more confident yet also a more sophisticated performer. It perfectly captures the contrast between the slightly lazy, Mark Knopfler does Lou Reed vocals and the pushy insistence of the arrangement. At the same time it leaves you in no doubt that this is the same voice you just heard in track one. That tonal fingerprint is unerringly accurate and identifiable.

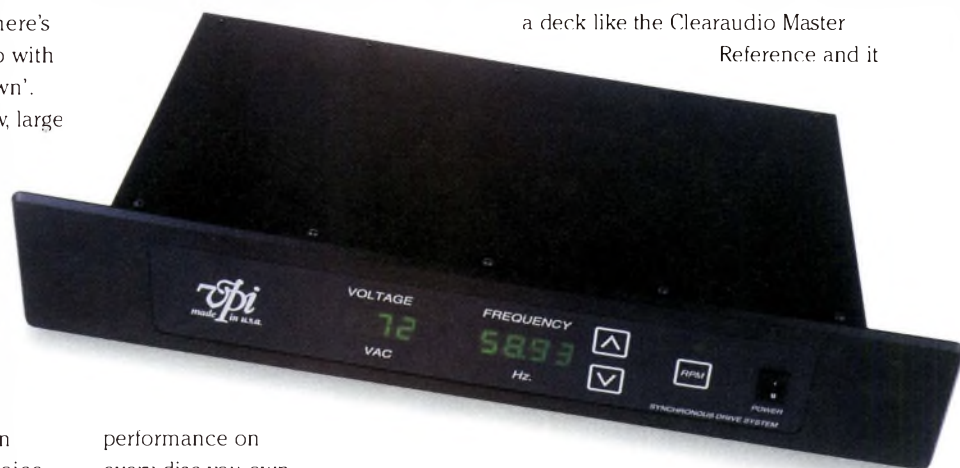
Change records to the Ricci *Carmen Fantasie* and you come to the next ace up the TNT 6's sleeve. Actually it's the revised JMW that's holding the card, but the 6 that's really letting you hear it. I've described the effect of VTA changes with this arm before, way back in Issue 10 when I reviewed the Hot Rod. Well, given the 6's greater insight into detail, texture and timing, those effects are even more obvious now.

Drop the JMW by five increments on its vernier scale and the pace, attack and dynamics of Ricci's bow-work soar above the performance with the arm set for the 180g RTI pressing. Suddenly there's focus and immediacy, but more importantly a verve in the playing that brings this incisive and demonstrative player vividly to life. It's the difference between a good performance and a memorable one, competent record replay and a truly communicative record player. Yes, you can live with a deck that acts as the lowest common denominator and drags all your records down to the same level. Or you can have one that allows you to maximise the musical

clarity with which you hear the differences, but also the ease with which you can make the adjustments, their repeatability and the fact that you can lock the entire mechanism.

So let's put these differences into some sort of context. Leave the arm height set for the 180g Greg Brown and play the Ricci and it doesn't sound bad. Optimise the VTA and you don't get bowled over by a sudden welter of detail or extra information. Instead, you simply get much the same information but much more coherently presented. This isn't a quantitative thing, it's about quality – or more specifically, about quality of experience. That's what makes it so fundamental. Listen to a deck like the Clearaudio Master

Reference and it



performance on every disc you own.

Don't underestimate the importance of the peripheral clamp in this equation\*. It might seem like a palaver but it contributes mightily to the end result, all part of the VTA equation.

"Oh – it can't possibly make that much difference" say the apologists. "Oh – you're deluding yourself" they say. Sorry guys, VTA is real, it's really important and if you bothered to listen to this deck you'd realise that it isn't going away. The beauty of the JMW 12.5 mounted on the TNT 6 is not just the

major on clarity and inner detail. The less than optimum TNT 6 leans more to substance and overall shape. The detail is there but it doesn't really hang together and hence it doesn't contribute. Dial in the arm height and all that changes. Now you can hear how each individual note is shaped and how it relates to the next one. You can hear the tail of the note and the space between notes. In other words, you can hear each phrase from inside and outside; internal structure and overall shape. In the same way the relationship between soloist and orchestra is far more apparent, as are the relationships within the orchestral space itself. The left/right echo ▶

\* Like the recent commentator who tried to prove that tiny adjustments in VTA on the JMW 12.5 couldn't possibly make the differences reported, his logic being that records aren't flat so rim warps are of a greater magnitude than the VTA adjustments themselves. Shame he didn't bother to find out that the deck uses a peripheral clamp. Needless to say he also used mathematics rather than his ears!

▶ effect that Sarasate uses in the opening passage of his Bizet arrangement is far more effective and dramatic. Suddenly the music makes more sense. This is no small or trivial tweak. This is exactly what is at the root of high-end hi-fi performance. It's exactly what the JMW 12.5 can deliver when coupled to a motor unit of the quality and stability (in every sense) of the TNT 6.

Roll all these things together and you get a deck that approaches the HRX in terms of detail and resolution



whilst trading a little of its neutrality for a more solid and slightly warmer and more forgiving balance. The added air and dynamic discrimination of the 6 mean that for the first time I prefer the deck with the clamp AND weight used on every record. The HRX is certainly VPI's most tonally accurate deck, but the TNT has always kept the spirit of the music close to its heart and the 6 is no exception. It tracks Ricci's incisive and blindingly fast playing with a sure-footed poise and grace that mirrors his technique; it downshifts through his sinuous changes and stretches of tempo before easing into the flow of his slower passages. The accents and little rhythmic kicks and hesitations that punctuate Greg Brown's emotive songs are equally deftly handled, giving the track just the right emphasis and impetus. It's an impressive performance

from a deck that has evolved into a truly balanced all-rounder, devoid of significant weaknesses in its armoury. Does that make it perfect? Not at all. There are decks with even greater resolution, wider dynamics and greater tonal accuracy. But what makes the 6 special is the balance it strikes

between the various aspects of the musical performance, the poise and power with which it binds them into a single, coherent whole. VPI turntables have an enviable and well-deserved reputation for delivering solid musical and material value in a world with too many high-priced under-achievers. Does that make the

TNT 6 the best value high-end turntable in the world? To paraphrase the immortal words of

Richie Benaud, I'm not sure it's even the best value high-end turntable in its own family, what with the Super Scoutmaster waiting in the wings. However, impressive as that hybrid of Scoutmaster chassis and the new, twin motor drive undoubtedly is, it doesn't possess the Bauhaus elegance of the TNT 6, or its surface finish. The TNT 6 in combination with the JMW 12.5 offers an astonishingly complete package that blends material value with superb musical performance, practicality with attainable optimisation of each and every record. It also looks a million dollars whilst costing rather less. I don't know which is the best value turntable in VPI's range: I don't know for sure which is the best

performer in absolute terms: But I do know which is the one I want to own – which is why the TNT 6 is staying right here. It's been a long, long journey since the arrival of my first, original model TNT, and I've never lost the faith. It's a loyalty that has now been handsomely rewarded. Sometimes, just sometimes, it really is better to arrive than to travel hopefully. ▶+

#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

##### TNT 6 Turntable

Type:	Air-suspended, twin motor, belt-drive turntable
Speeds:	33 and 45, electronically switchable and user variable
Power Supply:	External, synthesised and user adjustable for speed, voltage and frequency
Clamping:	Peripheral clamp and centre record weight
Lid:	None
Dimensions (WxHxD):	635 x 270 x 480
Price:	£4999

##### JMW Memorial 12.5 Tonearm

Type:	Damped uni-pivot with interchangeable arm-wands
Effective Length:	308mm
Effective Mass:	11.5g
VTA Adjustment:	Graduated vernier scale
Prices –	
JMW 12.5 Tonearm:	£1995
Spare arm-wand:	£900
JMW 12.0 Tonearm:	£1395
JMW 10.5 Tonearm:	£1695

##### UK Distributor:

Cherished record Company  
Tel. (44)(0)1579 363603  
Net. [www.cherished-record-company.co.uk](http://www.cherished-record-company.co.uk)

##### Manufacturer:

VPI Industries Inc.  
Tel. (00)(1)732 583 6895  
Net. [www.vpiindustries.com](http://www.vpiindustries.com)



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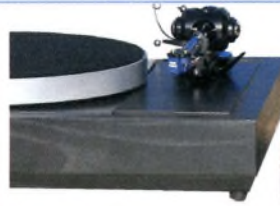
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# The Spj Alba Turntable and Lyla Tonearm

by Roy Gregory

Someone once described the Spj La Luce turntable as a “cathedral in acrylic” and while the prose is a touch florid, I know exactly what he meant. Judy Spothem’s decks are far more vertiginous than most, the massive stack of cylindrical elements, piled one on another giving them a monumental quality, their height almost as great as their width.

Well, the Alba, subject of this review is no different. Indeed, it is to all intents and purposes the La Luce realised in stainless steel and aluminium rather than acrylic. And, despite appearances, the motor unit is in fact simplicity itself, albeit simplicity writ large. Actually, perhaps we ought to make that really large; when a deck contains this much material, it’s going to be heavy. Once the majority of that material becomes stainless steel, the finished structure becomes very heavy indeed. Fortunately the Alba is constructed from a series of sub-assemblies each of which can just about be managed. Once you start to combine them, there’s no way you can manipulate the deck as a whole. Adjusting its position on the support used for photography was a three-man job. You get the picture...

The Alba is built on a central spine, constructed from a shaped aluminium plate 42mm thick, joined to a substantial cylindrical cross-member made of the same material.

The arms of the cylinder and the other end of the plate (which supports the main bearing) are pierced by massive threaded spikes that allow for levelling of the whole assembly. The spike that sits beneath the platter is effectively fixed. The other two

are positioned between the platter and the arm-mount, one in front,



one behind, and are fitted with massive knobs to facilitate adjustment, and substantial collars to lock them in place. Everything short of the threads is chrome plated, which at least makes it easy to clean. The main bearing is equally massive, a standing design that is built into a lump of phosphor-bronze the size of a family can of Heinz Tomato Soup. The top of the bearing shaft is fitted with an aluminium sub-platter which supports the platter proper. The massive post at the opposite end of the spine supports the arm, but more on that later.

The spine stands with its three points resting on support discs –

which is just as well given the weight involved, sufficient to punch the spike tips through the surface of most supports given time. The feet provided consist of aluminium discs, each dimpled to locate the spike that rests on it, glued to a disc of what looks like solid wood flooring, a handy solution that provides a suitably random structure. Cavities drilled in the underside of the wood are used to locate a number of power-balls, anything between four and seven

depending on the foot (and therefore the mass) being supported. It’s the rubber balls that prevent the deck moving in use – or being slid during set-up, so make sure you build it where you actually want it!

The platter itself is a two-part assembly, visually dominated by its lower element. Cut from another sheet of 42mm aluminium, it comprises of a single 13” diameter disc, grooved to accept the drive belt. This sits on the sub-platter. Arranged around its periphery is a curtain of stainless steel rods, each 80mm deep and 25mm in diameter, adding significantly to the mass of the platter, as well as placing that mass at the edge where it’s most effective. It’s this feature that makes the Spj turntables so instantly recognisable.

The top section of the platter is not that much less substantial. ▶

▶ A 25mm thick disc of aluminium is bolted to a 42mm thick disc of acrylic, profiled to accept the record. Identical in diameter to the lower section, the top element is separated from its supporting one by three spikes that allow for precise levelling. The central spindle is threaded to accept a two-part clamp, again executed in acrylic.

The motor is an AC unit, housed in massive cylinder of stainless steel that stands beside the turntable. It's supported on a disc similar to the ones that support the deck, but this time there's no aluminium top surface and three rather vicious spikes

convenient around the platter, depending on the space you have available and your preferred footprint. Just bear in mind that you need to access the motor switches each time you change a record.

Actually supporting the Alba is likely to be the biggest headache. The importer provided a Shun Mook slab of appropriate dimensions, which worked fine, but this or something similar will be essential as I can't see many racks taking the Spj decks au naturelle.

it as close to the pivot point as possible in order to aid tracking performance. Likewise, the bias weight is adjusted by adding or removing discs from the threaded rod that hangs at the end of the bias thread. The tonearm wiring drops vertically from just in front of the pivot point, allowing a single unbroken run from cartridge tags to the carefully chosen phono plugs. However, it's not over long, especially given the height of the 'table, which means you'll need to place your phono stage pretty close at hand.



in place of the rubber balls. The motor is controlled by a pair of switches: The upper one is the on/off switch used to start the deck moving (although a helping hand on the platter is also recommended). The lower one switches between the high-torque start-up setting and a low-torque, low noise setting employed once the platter's up to speed. 33 and 45 are provided for by the simple expedient of a large, stepped pulley perched atop the motor housing. Positioning the motor is simplicity itself, with the centre of the spindle needing to be a distance of 9cm from the platter. Beyond that, the motor pod can be placed wherever is

The Lyla arm is a damped uni-pivot design and as delicate as the deck is massive, its spindly 12" armtube tiny in comparison. The tube itself is a stepped design machined from titanium, a demanding and expensive process. Likewise the delicately angled headshell with its minimal offset is a solid titanium piece. The decoupled counter-weight and azimuth outriggers are both low slung and run on threaded rods. These allow the user to build a composite weight from the plentiful range provided, matching its mass to that of the cartridge and thus keeping

The armtube exists as a separate entity which you simply place onto its pivot

point. The ability to lift it off as a piece means that you can if you choose, run more than one cartridge in different wands, but the lack of graduation on the VTA adjustment does make this less practical than on the VPI arm. What it does do is make cartridge set-up a doddle, especially as you get an acrylic rest to support the arm wand (either way up) while you work on it, as well as excellent tools for setting overhang, offset ▶

## Material things...

It's interesting to speculate on the impact of the Alba's construction and materials on its sonic fingerprint. As a complete record player, it's impossible to separate the sound of the arm from that of the deck, although the arm is available separately in a slightly different guise, employing an aluminium rather than a titanium armtube. What got me wondering was a similarity between the tonal quality of the Alba and that of the (titanium bodied) Lyra Titan cartridge. Add in the fact that the La Luce turntable is an essentially similar structure realised in acrylic and you have an interesting

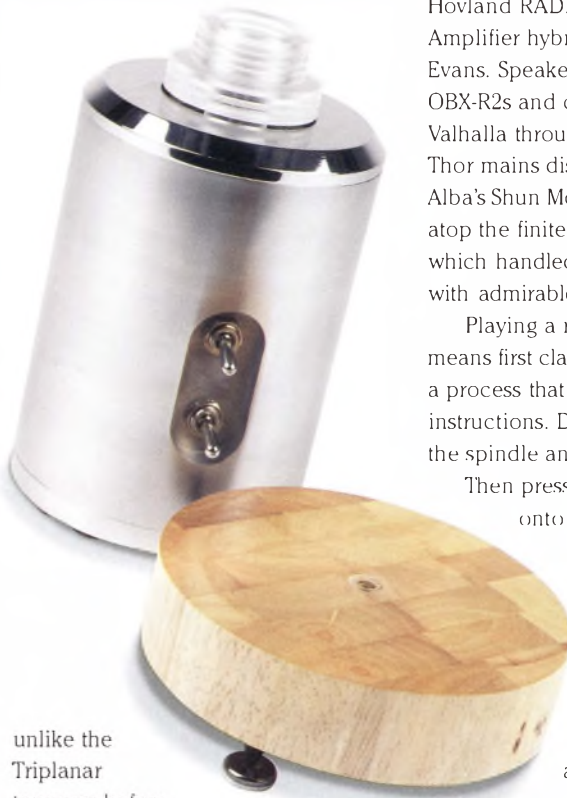
opportunity to compare the impact of different materials and whether it's the arm or the deck that is dominating proceedings. It's a question I'd like to return to given the opportunity to get both decks in the same place, but certainly, my limited experience with the La Luce suggests a warmer, rounder and more forgiving balance than the cool, confident control of the Alba. Perhaps time will tell, but with such a small difference in the price of the two tables, Spj must be in something of a unique position, assuming my guess regarding their respective sonic qualities is anything like correct.

▶ and pivot to spindle distance.

The protractor is a particularly nice piece, laser cut with a thoughtfully minimalist grid that works a treat. A great deal of care has gone into this important aspect of the product, and as a result, the deck is going to sound a lot better a lot of the time.

The arm's pivot and damping well are fitted to the top of a solid billet of stainless steel, along with the rod over which the bias thread falls. This in turn is bolted to the massive arm tower that rises from the deck's spine, incorporating the VTA adjustment. This is based on a thread and knob similar to the ones that are used to level the deck. The action is smooth but reassuringly solid, so that whilst there's no locking mechanism, the inherent damping in the system renders it unnecessary. In use it's simplicity itself, whether the record's playing or not, making VTA adjustment for each disc a natural extension of putting the record on the platter. My only wish would be for some kind of graduation, although this would be easy to improvise.

The general construction and finish of the Alba is good but far from perfect, reflecting its limited production and bespoke nature. This is a product with a crafted feel rather than a jewel-like surface to it, not



unlike the Triplanar tonearm before

its recent makeover. It also makes one hell of a statement once you've built it in your listening room. Aesthetics are a very personal thing, but for me the Spj is more striking than attractive, more imposing than elegant. But, in keeping with its bespoke character, each deck is personally collected from Holland, delivered and installed

by the importer. This reflects in part the nightmare involved in devising shipper-proof packaging for something this heavy and this awkward, but also underlines the care and personal attention invested by everyone involved with this record player.

I ran the Alba with the Koetsu Jade and Benz LP cartridges, although there is an Spj cartridge sourced from Benz. Whether by coincidence or not, the LP certainly proved an excellent match. All pick-ups were fed into the Groove Plus phono stage. The rest of the amplification was either the Vibe/Pulse or the c-j Premier 18, the Hovland RADIA and the new Linear Amplifier hybrid design from Tom Evans. Speakers were the Living Voice OBX-R2s and cabling was Nordost Valhalla throughout, including the Thor mains distribution block. The Alba's Shun Mook slab was positioned atop the finite element HD04 rack, which handled the top-heavy load with admirable stability.

Playing a record on the Alba means first clamping it to the platter, a process that involves precise instructions. Drop the record over the spindle and thick, felt washer.

Then press the disc of the clamp onto the label until tapping the lead-out groove produces a damped thunk. Then screw down the locking knob. This prevents over-tightening of the clamp which would actually raise the outer edge of the disc from the platter, and in a worst case scenario might actually embed debris into the underside of the record. In fact, cleanliness of both sides of the record is critical with any clamping system. With the disc in place, flick up the top switch on the motor and give the platter a helping swing to get it started. Once it's up to speed, flip the

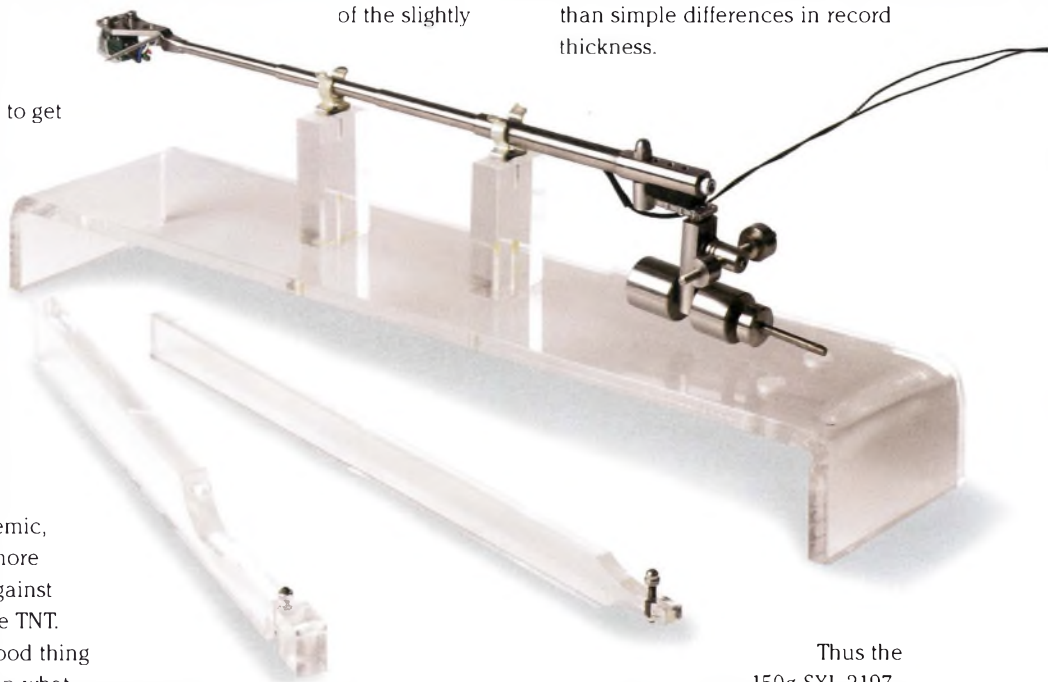
▶ lower switch for the low-torque setting. Drop the needle with the slow and extremely precise cueing action and you're away. All that remains is to tweak the VTA, settle back and enjoy the music.

The sound of the Spj Alba has a definite character, dominated by its really wide and incredibly stable soundstage. Images are well separated and never, ever wander, which is testimony to the weight of that platter I guess. Along with that stability you get excellent focus and transparency, meaning that you can see into the soundstage, clearly locating individual instruments or singers. The stage is underpinned by a deep and very powerful bass, deep enough to get you into trouble if you haven't positioned your speakers just so. But get it right and lower registers can give the music an almost irresistible momentum.

That sense of clarity is coupled to a controlled presentation. This is one of those decks that can sound studied, even slightly academic, a tendency which is even more obvious when compared against the explosive urgency of the TNT. Of course, this is either a good thing or a bad thing depending on what you're looking for, but there's a distinctly contained, precision feel to the music played by the Alba. So, playing the Greg Brown track 'Brand New '64 Dodge' the separation of the three guitars across the front of the stage is excellent, the playing cool and collected. The bass is, as expected, deep and propulsive, but it's the voice that makes you pause; there's a slight lack of immediacy, and more throat than chest. It's an effect that is apparent from the guitars too, where the tonality of

plastic stringing becomes extremely obvious.

In fact they're all clues to a relatively low-level yet persistent colouration that is also a part of the Alba's particular sound. It's best described as a lightness, an almost burnished quality that runs through the upper mid. The effects are mild but they are consistent, robbing voices and instruments of a little body, casting a coolish light upon the stage. They also smooth textures and together with the contained but beautifully stratified dynamics, I think that it's this that robs the sound of the slightly



forward immediacy that tends to typify those 'tables built on a plastic chassis (I'm thinking of the TNT and Clearaudio in particular).

As I said, the Spj's character is pretty definite. It's not one of those things that you wouldn't notice outside of a close comparison. However, take the requisite care in matching (which I'd like to assume is a given with a record player at this price) and it's far less of a problem than my description might lead you

to think. The rich, natural tonality of both the LP and the Koetsu suited the deck perfectly, and I'd be intrigued to try it with a warmer, slightly more forgiving phono-stage than the Groove; conrad-johnson's Premier 15 S2 springs to mind, or the Ayre if you need more gain. Here again, VTA plays a crucial role, so it's just as well that the arm is equipped with such an excellent height adjustment system. The tonal impact of the correct setting is such that the arm easily differentiates between the different cutting angles used by different mastering houses, rather than simple differences in record thickness.

Thus the 150g SXL 2197 (the Ricci *Carmen*

*Fantasia*) actually requires almost identical arm height to a 180g Classic Records pressing, while the 180g RTI pressing used for the Greg Brown needs the arm raised significantly. Get the arm too high and you'll hear a hollowness and obvious lack of body. Too low and the sound becomes sluggish and sat on. Fortunately the sweet-spot is readily apparent while the smooth resistance of the adjustment knob makes setting really positive. ▶

▶ As I mentioned earlier, I'd have liked graduation, but in practice the necessary adjustments become surprisingly intuitive.

What all this means is that the Spj is a deck that concentrates on telling you what is being played rather than how. The shape of phrase is wonderfully clear, as are the interlocking elements of complex orchestration. Whilst the deck is perfectly happy to play smaller, more intimate recordings, where it really comes into its own is with the really large-scale stuff, where its control, stability and separation can be breathtaking. *The Carmen Fantasie* was beautifully fluid and emotive, the emphasis being on the drama and contrast between the soloist and orchestra rather than on Ricci's brilliant technique. The Alba delivers the whole rather than an assemblage of parts, bringing Sarasate's arrangement to the fore, his deft exploitation of the familiar melodies. Prokofiev's sweeping orchestration of *Lt Kije* is just as impressive, the deck echoing Reiner's iron mastery of the score. But it was the likes of Shostakovich and the Berglund Sibelius recordings for which I found myself reaching. Those and Grand Opera, which really played to the 'table's strengths. I'll (somewhat shamefacedly) admit to a complete, highly desirable yet virtually unplayed

collection of Wagner operas. With the Spj in residence they'd have seen a lot more action as four sides of *Die Walkure* proved.

Living with the Alba has been an interesting experience. The sound of this deck is, in many ways, as individual as its appearance. There is an unmistakably handcrafted feel to the elements, with all the care and attention to detail that that suggests. Those looking for Transrotor standards of finish will be disappointed. Having said that, they won't have to suffer Transrotor sound quality either. Just as the structure and construction of the player make a bold statement, so too does the perspective it offers on the musical performance.



It's not without character, and at its elevated price it's essential to appreciate the nature and effect of that character. Having said that, I suspect there are many listeners for whom this deck will fit the sonic and aesthetic bill like a glove. This 'table is much more about music than hi-fi, much more about playing any sort of record than

just a chosen few. It's easy to make a record player that sounds fantastic with a girl and a guitar: Rega have been doing it for years. It's far harder to create one that is so completely unflappable in the face of even the most dramatic and overpowering musical forces. Whilst it will, almost inevitably, be the structure that first catches the customer's attention, there's plenty of merit in the sound too. But one thing's for sure – own an Spj and there's no mistaking the seriousness of your intent. ▶

#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

##### Alba Turntable

Type:	Solid, high-mass motor unit
Speeds:	33 and 45, from exposed, stepped pulley
Lid:	None
Platter weight:	30Kg
Dimensions (WxHxD):	610 x 415 x 350mm

##### Lyla Tonearm

Type:	Damped uni-pivot, decoupled counterweight
Effective Length:	312mm

##### Prices –

Alba Turntable c/w	
Lyla Tonearm:	£14000
Spare Armwand:	£4000

##### UK Distributor:

Magneto Projects Ltd.  
Tel. (44)(0)1424 443074  
Net. [www.magnetoprojects.co.uk](http://www.magnetoprojects.co.uk)





# The Nordic Concept Artist Turntable

by Roy Gregory

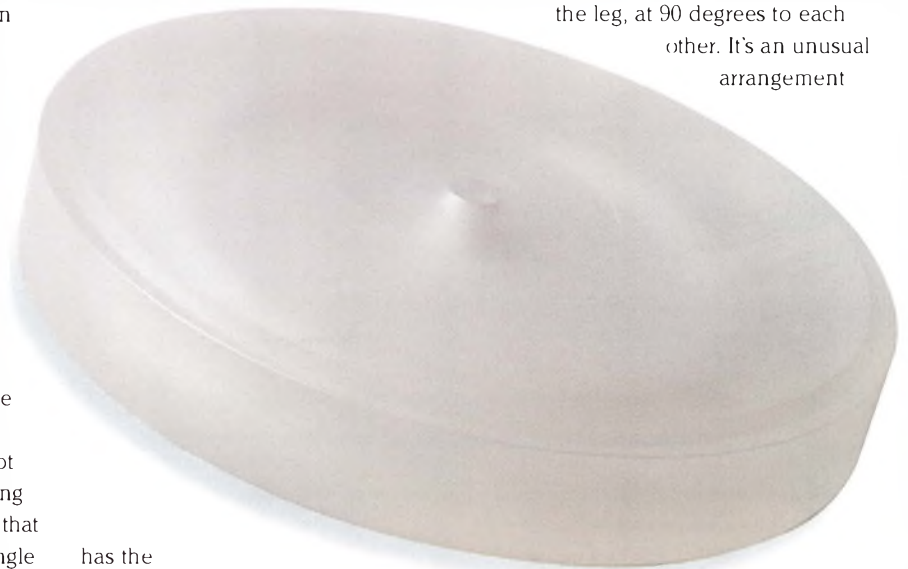
If the name Nordic Concept seems familiar it's probably because we reviewed their massive Signature model back in Issue 26. The twin chassis design arrived complete with its own stand on the simple basis that there was no way that it would physically fit onto anything else! Yet, despite its outsize dimensions there was an undeniable Scandinavian elegance to it, and a lot more than simple brute force. Indeed, the Signature employed a novel resonance control system that used counter-balanced masses, along with a reliable and simple battery power supply, a miracle in itself. However, for many potential customers if the size didn't dissuade them then the £7650 price tag probably would. Which is a shame because the Signature is a genuinely impressive turntable.

Enter then, the Nordic Concept Artist, smaller sibling to the imposing twin-chassis design; actually, make that much smaller. But, although the single chassis 'table is also considerably cheaper, don't go assuming that it's simpler too. In fact, the Artist manages to embody every aspect of the Signature's design (save the physically separate motor) into a footprint that will fit on any standard hi-fi rack. It also lops four grand and the special stand off of the price tag – which considering that the stand is nothing more than a sturdy level surface is good news indeed.

So, take a look at the Artist's make-up and once you get past the

slightly disconcerting distance between the two plinths, you discover that the technological checklist is extremely impressive. There's the same resonance control and isolation system as you find on the Signature. There's also the same battery power supply technology and platter/bearing/clamp set-up too. How then,

top-plate with three large dimples machined into it. The plinth proper is supported on three, large diameter legs, again turned from Delrin. The front left leg contains the switches that allow you to switch the deck on and off and select between 33 and 45. The switches themselves are tiny and set into small recesses in the outside edge and back of the leg, at 90 degrees to each other. It's an unusual arrangement



has the importer managed to cut the price? In the face of total dealer indifference, he has elected to sell the product directly. Given the straightforward nature of the 'table's set-up, it's an arrangement that should hold no fears for the prospective purchaser.

Starting at the bottom, you get a weighted base, constructed from Delrin. This is supported on three adjustable, decoupled feet similar to those found on the Signature. This has a separate, polymer-decoupled

but one that is surprisingly easy and intuitive in use. The rear leg contains the same small DC motor used in the Signature and the connection socket for the external battery pack. Both legs are decoupled from the plinth itself by rubber O rings, ensuring that internal energy should travel down the legs into the base. The legs are each covered by a cosmetic cap, the one for the motor having a slot to allow



► access for the drive filament. The leg on the right is solid and simply supports the tonearm end of the plinth.

The plinth itself is constructed from beautifully veneered MDF available in a range of wood finishes which provide a visual contrast to the black base as well as continuing the Nordic aesthetic. Mounted on its underside, between the left-hand legs is the motor control circuitry. At first, the exposed circuit board might be



alarming, especially when you consider its proximity to the speed control switch, but panic not, these are extremely low-voltage electronics so there's no shock risk. A channel machined in the plinth carries a ribbon cable to two small trim pots on the left rear that allow fine speed adjustment (Hurrah!).

However, the main function of the plinth is of course to support the platter and tonearm, and in the latter department we see a marked improvement over the arrangement employed by the Signature. A large Delrin sleeve is sunk into the plinth through which runs a plug of the

same material, 90mm in diameter and some 60mm in depth. A small grub screw, passes through the sleeve and locks the plug in place, but the tight fit and large contact area ensures that it can be raised and twisted smoothly and minutely to adjust arm height and the bearing to spindle distance. The supplied puck was drilled to accept a Rega arm and has its own grub screw arrangement to lock the arm-pillar in place; again

neat and very simple. However the depth of the puck itself would make the mounting of a Linn type arm an interesting proposition. Best to stick to Rega compatible or top mounted arms like the big VPI or Triplanar – or the forthcoming Nordic Concept tonearm. Personally, I reckon the RB1000 would be an excellent choice and it's a combination I'll try as soon as I can get hold of one.

The main bearing is an inverted design with a large ceramic ball and

Teflon thrust pad. It and the one piece acrylic platter are familiar from countless other European turntables, but far from being a criticism this should be a guarantee of consistency and quality. The platter used on the Artist is slightly shallower than the one fitted to the Signature, but otherwise, as far as I can tell, these elements are identical in both design and execution. The large record weight, complete with spirit level, is also similar but once again turned from Delrin rather than alloy.

The battery pack is housed in simple plastic casework and is compact enough to simply tuck out of sight. It is fed from an intelligent plug-top trickle charger that has an LED to tell you when it's actually charging. It's a fit and forget arrangement that operated faultlessly throughout the review period and ensures that the turntable is never ►

▶ left without power.

Taken together, the various elements that go to construct the Artist comprise a compact yet surprisingly heavy whole with a nice, modern appearance. I'm not sure I'd stretch as far as "elegant", the proportions are just a little too leggy for that, but it's certainly practical and pleasing to the eye. The one significant omission is a lid, but it's hardly alone in that these days. Otherwise, you can pretty much tick all the Desirable Design Elements boxes: excellent isolation, both from the outside world and between motor and stylus; stable relationship between motor and platter to ensure good speed stability; accurately machined bearing and platter assembly along with pitch control to ensure speed accuracy; sophisticated electronic supply; accurate mounting of tonearms to ensure correct geometry. All in all it's not a bad end of term report. But the question is, does the musical performance add up to more than the sum of the parts?

Before you can discover that you need to get the deck up and running, which is pretty

straight-forward as the description above should suggest. However, there are two glitches in the otherwise simple operation. One is passing the near invisible filament used for the belt through the slot in the cosmetic cover and over the pulley. This involves pushing the belt through the slot with the cover held in one

hand, then looping it over the pulley, applying some tension and slipping the cover into place before running the "belt" around the circumference of the platter.

As the manual suggests (understates?) this requires a little practice. The other problem is with the screw feet. These consist of a rubber collar with a brass ferrule top and bottom that each takes a threaded rod; the top one screws into the underside of the Delrin base, the lower into the aluminium foot. The problem is that the deck is so heavy that the feet pull the rods out of vertical alignment if they are extended, allowing the rubber collar to flop sideways. End result is that the deck becomes almost impossible

you are placing the deck, once the deck is actually in situ. Of course, decent adjustable feet would be even easier. All I can say is that the

problem didn't appear on the Signature so maybe these are a bad batch. Either way, it

shouldn't be hard to fix, but it's something the designer needs to look at.

I used the Discovery rewired and modified RB250 for my listening with the Nordic Concept turntable, mounted with the Benz LP for much of the time. This kept a degree of consistency between the various

decks in-house, as well as offering an excellent match of qualities in sonic terms.

The moderate weight of the cartridge also suited the arm rather better than the heavier options available. With the deck up and running, the first thing that will strike you is just how easy and inviting it sounds. The artist shares the



to level as the degree and direction of flop (and hence height of the foot) differs each time you lift the deck to make an adjustment. The solution is simple: screw the feet fully in and adjust the surface on which



▶ smooth flow and lack of mechanical grain that characterized the Signature. Combine that with its remarkably even top-to-bottom energy spectrum and this is a deck that stands aside from the music, rather than imposing itself between you and the recording. Change the record and you change the tonality and presentation in step with the character of the recording, indication that here we have

*Piano Concerto* (Dorati, LSO Mercury SR90283) on the Artist should demonstrate two things immediately: The natural warmth and harmonic character of the strings and piano, and the superb grasp of pace and flow within the phrasing. Indeed, even in the most rapid of the piano passages there's no hint of hardness or the crystalline glare that infects so many piano recordings, no doubt as to the shape and direction of the phrase. The volume of the soundstage is beautifully captured,

whose crashing crescendos and dance tempo are delivered with uncluttered grace, the separation and identity of bass instruments never in doubt. But here we run up against the limitations of the partnering tonearm. Too much treble energy, too many big cymbals and the upper registers start to splash as the Rega's character comes to the fore. Likewise, the absolute transparency is limited by the grain and greyness that are also familiar from the basic Rega arms. In the same way that the Artist lets you hear the character of recordings, it also makes you aware of limitations in the partnering equipment.



another of the new generation of genuinely low colouration turntables.

Part of the deck's invisibility stems from the lack of intrusive artefacts. The evenness of its energy spectrum does away with bloat or false emphasis, its smoothness and natural warmth banish edge and glare. The isolation system that proved so impressive on the Signature is just as effective here, delivering plenty of low-level detail and resolution. The space within the soundstage and between instruments is clearly defined, as are individual voices and instrumental textures. So far so good, but what does it mean for music?

Playing the Speakers Corner re-issue of the Byron Janis *Rachmaninoff 3rd*

as is the location of the instruments themselves, but importantly, never thrust forward or overly explicit. It's there for you to hear rather than waving at you and drawing attention to itself (normally seen as a prelude to drowning in most hi-fi systems).


'Listen To The Radio' (Nanci Griffiths, *Storms*) is full of pace and infectious energy, but you can still easily separate the various vocals, whilst Nanci's distinctive voice is tonally spot-on and unmistakable. The insistent tempo will capture your feet, the catchy melody will have you singing along. Likewise the Massenet *Cid*,

It should be obvious that I really enjoyed listening to the Nordic Concept 'table, but there's no escaping the fact that it needs a better – a much better arm than the budget Rega, even in rewired and upgraded form. It also leaves me in something of a sonic limbo as regards its relationship to the bigger and much more expensive Signature model. I listened to the flagship with the superb and superbly cost effective VPI JMW 9.0 uni-pivot, a discrepancy that makes even

▷ memory-based comparison between the two decks extremely difficult. Each time I attempt any sort of conclusion, the limitations of the Rega are thrown into stark relief.

So let me tell you what I can rather than what I can't. The Artist's inherent stability makes for good rhythmic and spatial integrity, while the clever and surprisingly simple isolation system ensures excellent tonal definition, texture and separation. The bearing and battery power supply ensure isolation from mechanical and external interference. The end result is a neutral and impressively

armboard, with its grub-screw rather than bolted fixing, provides a 22mm hole, which means that the JMW won't fit. The other candidate for investigating the Artist's ultimate capabilities is the RB1000, but our loan sample is currently with JMW and I can't recover it before the deadline for this review. Combine these circumstances with the impending availability of Nordic Concept's own tonearm, a magnetically damped, thread bearing design best considered as

Concept deck can be remains to be seen (and heard) but two things are for sure: you can use it with an RB300 but you won't be getting close to its true capabilities; and at this price it's a serious bargain. It's about time other turntable manufacturers grasped the nettle proffered by the budget VPI decks. The likes of the Scout Master and Nordic Concept Artist make affordable, high-end analogue sound an attainable and practical reality. The only question now is how high? 



communicative record deck that punches well above its weight and price tag. The question that remains open is just how far you can take it?

I have a sneaking suspicion that the compact and almost prosaically sensible Artist might be capable of getting embarrassingly close to the Signature in terms of purely sonic performance. (It's never going to compete on aesthetic grounds.) The question is how best to investigate that proposition. The obvious answer would be to mount the JMW 9.0/Titan combination that I mainly used on the Signature, but unfortunately that is easier said than done. The JMW uses the Rega standard 23mm mounting hole, whereas the Rega arm columns are actually 22mm in diameter. The Nordic Concept

a conceptual cross between the Well Tempered and the Schroeder, and it becomes clear that I'll be revisiting this deck in the not too distant future.

What conclusions can be drawn at this, the close of the Nordic Concept Artist review, Part One? This is a fascinating and highly promising deck in the same mould as the VPI Scout and Scout Master, impressive decks that also share certain salient design features, especially as regards their main-bearing and platter assembly. Each of these products deliver a different blend of virtues, not least their overall concept, the Artist being a one-time solution, the VPIs offering an extensive range of upgrade options. Just how good the Nordic

#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	High-mass motor unit with integrated isolation
Speeds:	33 and 45, user adjustable
Power Supply:	External battery pack with smart charger
Lid:	None
Dimensions (WxHxD):	490x280x330mm
Finishes:	Black with maple or walnut plinth
Price:	£2500

#### UK Distributor:

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An advertisement for Final Laboratory. The top half shows two large, vertical, cylindrical speakers with a metallic finish, standing on a wooden surface against a wood-paneled wall. In front of them are various audio components, including a turntable, amplifier, and cables. The bottom half features a black background with the text "final opus 204 speaker" written vertically on the left. In the center, there is a logo for "final" in a stylized font. Below the logo, the text "FINAL LABORATORY" is written in all caps, followed by the address "8-2 tenoyama fukozu kota nukata aichi japan 444 0124", phone number "tel/fax : 81 564-63-3279", website "http://www.finalab.com", and email "mail@finalab.com". At the bottom, there are four small, circular, metallic objects, likely insulators, arranged in a 2x2 grid. The text "always final audio research" is written in a light font across the bottom left, and "final daruma insulator" is written in a light font across the bottom right.

final opus 204 speaker

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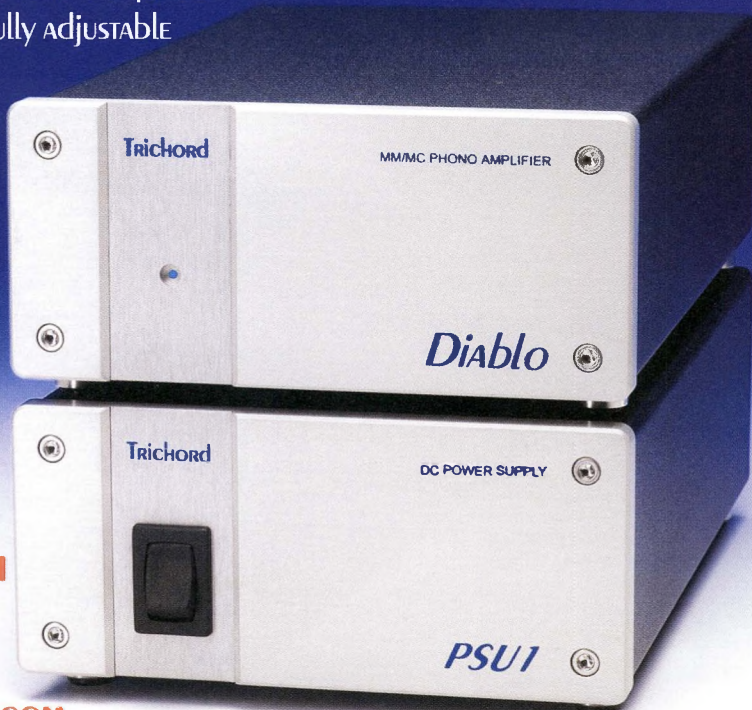
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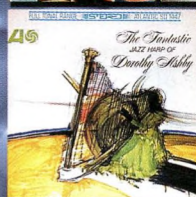
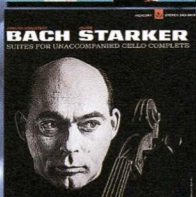
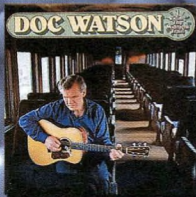
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CD PLAYER



# The Audio Research CD3 Mk. II CD Player

by Alan Sircom

Audio Research is one of those invulnerable brands, like Patek Philippe in horology or Aston Martin in cars. It's so well crafted, has such a cachet of quality entailed with the name that you are prepared to forgive 'minor transgressions' that would be unforgivable in other products simply because of the performance in other areas. Of course, these brands get to this esteemed position by dint of a series of extremely good products that need no forgiveness. And, on occasion, there is a brand that bypasses the whole 'transgressions' bit and knocks out hit after hit after hit. And that's where ARC scores highly – there may be a duff product buried somewhere in the history, but the reason for Audio Research's invulnerable position as hi-fi maker par excellence is because it doesn't know how to make a bad product.

The £5190 CD3 is typical of the ARC approach. It is beautifully, if conservatively, constructed, with a style that is timelessly Audio Research. If you don't like the look (in black or silver), chances are you will skip the whole ARC range. If you do, the CD3 is the equivalent of a gateway drug; the rest of the system will follow, turning slowly ARC-wards. The engineering beneath the heavy, quality chassis is as refined as the exterior, and as conservative.

Sometimes, I can't help feeling that the whole 'frequency extension' thing is a bit of a cult. You take a perfectly good CD sound, tweak it in ways we can't actually hear directly and that results in better sound; the whole thing smacks of mock-

metaphysical musings with no direct bearing on performance. The fact that it entails a large set of products that you also cannot actually hear directly but which alter what you can only serves as reinforcement. My badreligioscope just starts pinging at this point, and I often think the next step is to be dragged off to a secret location, to be locked in a room for a week with a Wadia but no food, water or sleep until I really, really believe.

Trouble is, these frequency enhancing CD players are consistently the best loved models around. Along with Wadia, if you're after a cost-no-object CD player that isn't a Linn or a Naim, chances are the player will estimate what music is taking place in those frequency regions well above the disc's 22kHz brick wall filter. And there is good reason for this; if the players sounded bad, they wouldn't be so popular among audiophiles and hi-fi reviewers. But, sometimes I crave a good, no-nonsense CD player without any of the mumbo-jumbo. And that's where the Audio Research CD3 Mk II kicks in.

This is a largely fuss and freak-free player. It has desperately practical things like phono and XLR sockets and digital outputs. The CD drawer is fixed, so the player has a sliding cover and a magnetic puck to keep the disc in place when in use. There's a simple display and an equally simple set of rubbery control buttons on the

front panel. And there's a remote control. Add in handles and feet and that's it. No bells, no whistles... what more do you want?

The top loading nature of the player means, of course, that it takes up the top shelf of any rack it rests upon, it needs extra space for loading room and is best if used from a position of looking down on the player. In short, it sits best in exactly the same position you place your turntable.

And, like a turn-table, it's vibration sensitive... well, almost.



There is a level of shock protection afforded by the conventional CD mechanism that is missing from a solid transport, but – unless you are prone to playing discs mid-earthquake – this will never affect the performance of the CD3. A good stand is mandatory, though, and the quality of the stand makes a small, but noticeable difference to the sound of the player (specifically, the CD3 and Quadsraspire Reference wobblestands do not work together in any fashion).

How much of an initial run in is required of the player is not something we could define; the



## Friends reunited...

by Roy Gregory

It's easy to see (hear) what AS likes so much about this player. I reviewed and was suitably impressed by the original version, so his enthusiasm for this updated model hardly comes as much of a surprise. Still, it's (usually!) nice to visit old friends and this seemed like too good a chance to miss...

Well, Alan's right about two things: the character of this player and the need to take care when it comes to its support. The original CD3 was not the most detailed player but more than made up for that by dint of its wonderfully neutral tonality and overall sense of musical balance. It was a machine that majored on insight into the performance and recording, rather than any artificially imposed romance, accuracy at the expense of forgiveness. However, if you're expecting the same thing from the Mark II then you're in for a shock. Plonk it down and let it rip and you'll be rewarded with a bold, solid and incredibly emphatic sound that's all about purpose and attitude. The Naim association is enlightening and it's easy to hear the dynamic integrity and rhythmic drive that you get from the best Naim players in the sound of the CD3 Mk. II. Unfortunately you can also get a rather clumsy, unsophisticated and unstoppable sense of momentum too, and that's less desirable.

Which is where the support comes in.

It was clearly apparent that the player was unhappy perched directly on the finite element HD-04 rack. Swapping to the titanium Aavik was different but no better, so various support options came into play. A voodoo platform was effective but by far the best option was the combination of the HD-04 with a set of finite element's CeraPuc feet between player and shelf. The effect was far from subtle. Playing the 'Bridal Ballad' from the *Merchant Of Venice* soundtrack, the ARC sat straight on the shelf produced a sound that was big on presence but lacked any real agility when it came to tracking the delicate vocal inflections. The phrasing was uncharacteristically clumsy while the relationship between the voice and lute was horribly simplified and crude. Adding the CeraPucs allowed the vocals to soar and freed the full range of expression. At the same time the dramatically improved phrasing was echoed in the playing of the lute which now took on its proper musical stance; its phrase responded to the vocal, the hesitations in the tempo adding a new emphasis where they'd simply sounded clumsy before. This was not a small change and was echoed on everything I played. The bass guitar on the Stewboss track 'Wanted A Girl', plodding and pitch blurred before, was crisper, better placed and far clearer of pitch. What had slowed and dragged on the track now provided

a subtle push and a needed lift in the low frequency energy that brought just the right sense of hesitant life to proceedings. With proper care given to its support, the CD3 Mk. II adds solid presence and a sense of new purpose to what was an already impressive performance. Comparisons with the (twice the price) Wadia 861SE might be invidious but do reveal a lack of absolute detail, air and separation, the last ounce of musical delicacy, but many will willingly forego such pleasures in return for the enticing body and convincing presence that ooze from the ARC. This player has a real feel for the shape and structure of music, a quality that has been further enhanced by the additional flesh it now puts on those bones. But the really good news is that there's no downside to these changes. The weight is in the right place, and it arrives at the right time. What it's doing is filling out the harmonic envelope and tidying up the temporal one – ironically, exactly the benefit you get from extending the bandwidth. The result has made what was already a great player even better. With musical integrity to make a flat-earth smile and soundstaging to please the most fastidious of valve fanatics, the CD3 Mk. II really could be all things to all men. What price this player, dressed in black naturally, fronting a NAC552 and NAP300? Stranger (and far more costly) things happen all the time...

▶ player had already been used extensively and successfully in a dealer's demonstration room. Nevertheless, being bounced around in the back of a delivery van is normally a fine way of undermining all the good work done by warming up. The CD3 took about a day and a half to come on song, but even stone cold, it showed its mettle and was clearly something special. Just how special would take a day or so to discover.

There is something preternaturally correct about the sound of the CD3.



That fuss-free demeanour extends perfectly to the sound quality. It's so unquestionably 'right' in so many respects, it really does make you think the frequency extending players are partaking in some kind of odd behaviour. The digital

processing in the CD3 is so naturalistic in presentation, it makes many other players sound synthetic. This is a double-edged sword. The

naturalness of the player makes live orchestral and naturally recorded acoustic discs sound truly wonderful, with the sort of openness

and soundstaging normally reserved for good vinyl. However, those recordings are precious. Recent classical recordings (especially those of the early 1990s) seem almost ego-driven, with the microphone virtually in the f-holes of the violinist, for example. These sound truly vexatious at the best of times, but the CD3's quality merely shows how unnecessary and exaggerated such an approach really is – as well as ruining the imagery in the process. Yet, strangely, this does not undermine the musical performance, it just makes you realise that if more recording engineers listened to their efforts through a CD3, they would simply be more prepared to make more balanced recordings. ▶

▶ A big part of the CD3's success story is its ability to stick to a rhythm like glue. This is one of the funkier high-end CD players around (at least, the funkier without a Naim badge on the front). For all the big soundstage, the solidity, deep bass and supreme detail, the player is first and foremost an entertainer, and will manage to find the beat in a CD of sound effects from Dr Who. Play something truly up-beat and the sound takes on a taut, bouncy rhythm, all of which suggests the CD3 is essentially transparent to the beat and just plays music. It's only when you compare this to other players, do you find that this rhythmic-agnostic performance is so extremely rare.

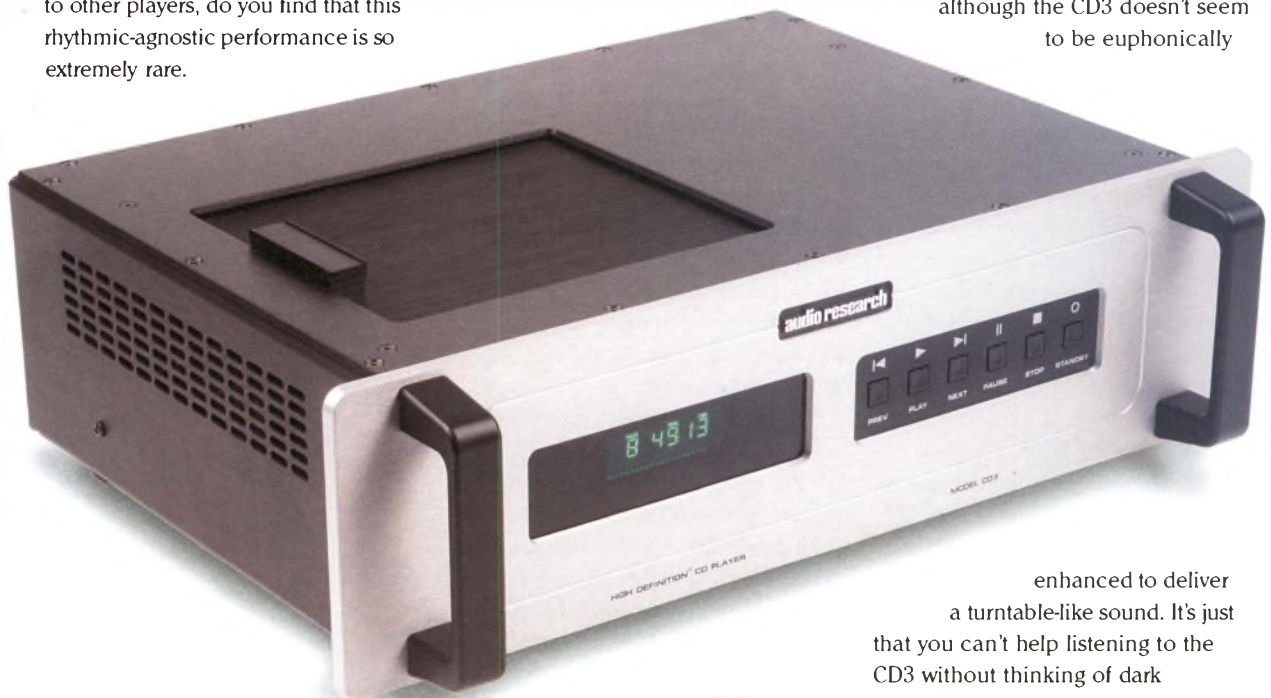
front row are sitting on the laps of those in the second and so on. Here, the orchestra is right-sized and every instrument seems to have its own space within a fully-formed soundstage.

Good soundstaging only comes from good detail and the ARC delivers detail in spades. It's not stark or brutal in its detail, but even the slightest error when it comes to drop-ins and you will know about it. Listen real hard and you can hear what kind of toothpaste the singer uses. That sort of information is on offer.

We often call good products 'architectural' in their

players have a bass as slower than a diesel Morris Minor, but here the CD3 manages to keep bass lines coherent and separate from the really deep underpinnings. There are times when the player pushes so much information at the listener, it slows down; don't expect Mahler's *Eighth* to bound along like a happy puppy. But, swap Mahler for Monteverdi and the sound steps up a gear, as those voices (without the supporting pipe organ) do not need the boat anchor bass.

All of which leaves one reminded of a good, well-engineered turntable, although the CD3 doesn't seem to be euphonically



Soundstaging is another strong suit. Like much of ARC's product, the CD3 produces an image that is primarily deep rather than wide, but it still manages to throw its stage well clear of the speaker boxes. There is a sense of soundstage layering like a good record deck, too. Often with even very good CD players, there is a slight perspective shortening on well-recorded orchestral works, that makes it seem like the players of the

solidity, making the reader think of bold, powerful buildings like the Bank of England. But 'architectural' isn't strong enough for the CD3 – it's 'geological' in its bass performance. Sounds are produced from an unshakable foundation and if a sound is produced in a certain space in the soundstage, it is physically locked there to such an extent, you feel like you could trip over the musician. Yet, the bass is light and lithe, too. Often, solid

enhanced to deliver a turntable-like sound. It's just that you can't help listening to the CD3 without thinking of dark sounding solid and musical turntables like The Basis or an SME. There is a commonality of musical integrity here, and this is something altogether rare in CD spinning: Especially those CD players that don't tweak the frequency extension, such as Wadia and the Reimyo.

Of course, there is the choice of balanced and single-ended outputs. This is not really a choice, more a decision based upon the options available on the amplifier. If you have a pre-amp that sounds best with ▶

▷ XLRs, use XLRs. If it sounds best on phonos, use phonos. If you want to experiment with the sound of both in a pre-amp that handles both, knock yourself out and go for it – it'll still come down to the pre-amp in the end. In other words, the CD3 is so damn well engineered, so unfussed by such things, that the balanced output sounds pretty much identical to the single-ended ones.

At the turn of the 1990s, most of us had to make our big 'first digital' decision, often without having big sums to spend on a player. Back then, my choice was limited to models from Arcam, Marantz and Rotel, and these players could be neatly summed up as 'warm', 'exciting' and 'honest' respectively. Like many, the Rotel RCD-965 was the best choice for me. In many ways, the CD3 is like the Rotel, writ large and without any of the limitations or shortcomings. If this seems like a back-handed compliment (comparing a modern £5000 player with a decade old £400 model), it shouldn't be. This was the first player I encountered that made CD sound like CD and yet didn't make it unlistenable in the process. That the ARC can replicate the feelings I had about Rotel's model means the player's honesty makes it my first choice for a high end CD player these days.

If I could change anything about the CD3 (aside from making my sample have the words 'Property of Alan Sircom' printed on the side in understated, but definitive letters), I would revise the buttons and give them a more positive, less spongy, pocket-calculator feel. That's it.



Everything else about this player is pretty much as good as it gets in its unfussy, fundamentally right sounding manner. No wonder ARC doesn't need to bother with a CD player for its Reference Class amplification – this one fits the bill perfectly.

Ultimately, there is a word to sum up the Audio Research CD3, and it is all-too infrequently used with CD players. That word is 'likeable'. Far from damning the player with faint praise, it highlights that not only does this player deliver the sort of hi-fi sound needed from a five-grand player, it also makes the sound intensely listenable and musically enjoyable. Few players are this good. If you think all that extra sound beyond 22kHz is just invention and want a player that deals with the true sound and nothing but, the CD3 is a welcome breath of bullshit-free air. It's little wonder this is ARC's only digital product; it's good enough to bring out the best in both the cheapest and the most expensive amps in the range. You can spend much, much more on a CD player and get much, much less. Heartily recommended. ➤

#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Top-loading CD player/transport
DAC:	24bit Delta Sigma
Outputs –	
Analogue:	Balanced XLR, 5.4V RMS Single-ended RCA phono 2.7V RMS
Digital:	Balanced XLR (AES/EBU), 110ohm, 4V P-P BNC co-axial S/PDIF, 75ohm, 0.7V P-P
Output Impedance:	400ohm balanced, 200ohm single-ended
Dimensions (WxHxD):	480x134x311mm (handles extend 38mm from front panel)
Weight:	11.4kg
Finishes:	Silver or black
Price:	£5190

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CDP 7 TL

tube compact disc player

Lector



# Lector CDP-7TL CD Player

by Chris Thomas

Every time I hear a new CD player I am reminded of the enormous sonic differences that exist between them. Any notion that digital source products were going to become the great leveller and eliminate the need to spend serious money in this critical area to obtain real music have long since vanished. There are as many variables in their musical characteristics as any other part of the audio chain but the inclusion of a valve stage in a CD player was, until recently, a new experience for me. Having been, by default, a staunchly solid-state kind of guy I have, over the past few years, had a gentle introduction to the delights and effects of just what it is that thermionic devices do to music when found in amplifiers. But in CD players? This was new.

Somewhat surprisingly for an Italian audio component the Lector CDP-7TL and its matching power supply the PSU-3T lack the svelte and stylish "lifestyle" design elements of manufacturers like Pathos and Sonus Faber. In fact the Lector has a rather practical, business-like appearance and is certainly never going to win any beauty contests. It is all black acrylic fascias and minimalist controls which are slightly at odds with the wooden side panels that the player came equipped with. It just doesn't quite work with the rest of the design to my eyes. But the unit is available without them and you save yourself £75 in the process. In fact this player is manufactured in a range of seven variable guises. Some configurations offer balanced outputs via XLR, with or without the inclusion of a super-permalloy transformer, or various types of digital outputs utilising RCA, BNC or the SF-11 professional connection.

This means that you can choose the machine that most closely matches your

particular requirements. The review sample was the bog standard and least expensive version, which provides for analogue output only via a pair of RCA sockets and no separate digital connections. The transport is a custom made type which sits under the sliding door atop the machine and utilises both a lattice rubber and a neoprene suspension to decouple it. The disc is held in place with a twin axis stabiliser clamp that grips it with magnets in both the vertical and horizontal planes. Closing the door starts the disc reading process and for once the digital readout on the front of the machine is large enough to make for easy understanding. At the rear of the CDP-7 is a rocker switch that will switch the display off altogether but unfortunately this renders the remote control inoperative as well and the machine becomes purely manual. This is obviously a slightly weird arrangement and there really should be a way to turn off the display while still maintaining remote operation. The remote unit itself does not offer a numeric keyboard, which I would have preferred and the window of acceptance on the machine is a bit too narrow. At the right rear of the top plate are the easily accessible twin tubes that drive the player's output.

The half-width PSU-3T provides power to the player via a multi-pin connector and provides individual switching over both the digital and analogue sections. While this may be of more limited use with the player in this basic single-output form it does allow the output section to be left unpowered

to extend the life of the valves or if the Lector is being used as a transport only. This is a highly unusual arrangement in my experience but I can certainly see the benefits.

The CDP-7 has three aluminium feet but these enclose a screw thread mounting point for small conical inserts which provide for a different level of decoupling. Unfortunately these did not come supplied with the review unit but, after experimentation with several other decoupling arrangements, I certainly believe that they would be well worth seeking out as the rubber surrounds that the player actually sits on do have a detrimental effect on the already slightly soft balance. Minimising foot contact and removing the compliant element bought a very worthwhile sense of tautness and snap to the sound and went some way to improving the focus of the bass which was to remain something of an issue throughout my time with the player.

The Lector takes about a half hour to begin to show its capabilities and actually carries on improving for some time after that. I started listening with the excellent Moon i-5 integrated amplifier driving the Reference 3A Da Capo speakers and spent my time alternating with the Pathos Classic One and a larger integrated from the same manufacturer which you will read about in the next issue. What was immediately apparent was that here was a machine with very little sense of digital glare at all. In fact it has a remarkably analogue feel ▶



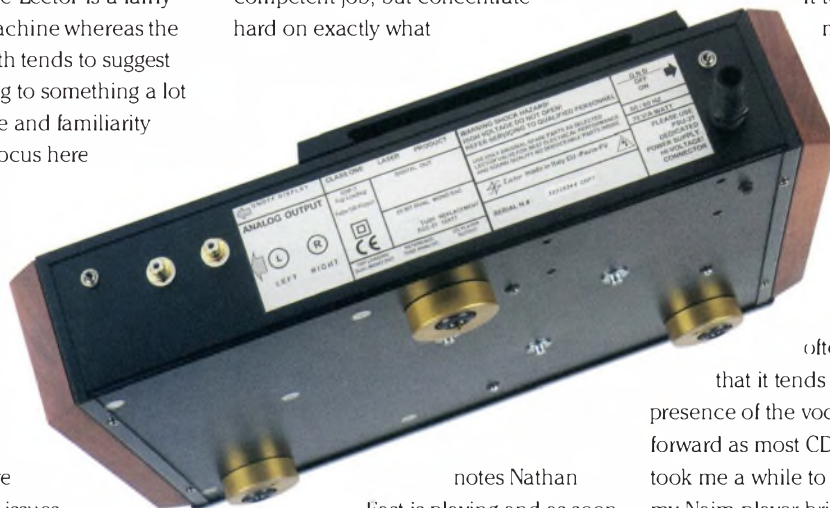
▶ about the way it makes music. As I mentioned earlier it initially seems balanced on the soft side. A little slow and quite polite with a tint of cosy warmth across its bandwidth.

After changing the footing though and allowing it a few hours of playing time it became much more articulate as the instrumental leading edges started to get some bite to them and the music began to flow with more urgency. Even from cold it has a notable way of expressing itself rhythmically as the tempos seem to flow effortlessly along. But what it was lacking was pure speed of response and this picked up after a while. It is never going to offer the rhythmic snap, pure drive and unadulterated pace that a good all solid-state player will, but it always feels rhythmically coherent from top to bottom. In fact it only takes a couple of days to get used to and then the speed and tempo never really seem quite as much of an issue. What could be a factor though is that the bottom end resolution constantly reminds you that the Lector is a fairly modestly priced machine whereas the rest of the bandwidth tends to suggest that you are listening to something a lot more expensive. Use and familiarity brings a degree of focus here and the sense of rhythmic flow and movement is fine but somehow the pure resolution and note shape leaves this area a little muddy and this means that there are also some pitch issues where you can feel the pulse of the bass but are less sure of which way it is travelling. Fourplay's *Heartfelt* (RCA 62918-2) is a very good case in point. With a rhythm section of Harvey Mason and Nathan East you could

spend your time with this band studying the relationship between bass drum and electric bass guitar as these are two of the most superb exponents of their individual arts. It is what Foreplay are founded on and is



the both the rock upon which all of their music sits and the rudder which steers it forward and into the remarkably difficult changes the band glides through. I often listen to this and other Foreplay albums just to remind myself what "tight" means. Timing wise the Lector does a wholly competent job, but concentrate hard on exactly what



notes Nathan East is playing and as soon as he drops low on that bottom string you can only really tell by intuition as the pitch resolution drops away. But the ear is drawn more toward the guitar and keyboard and here the Lector absolutely excels. It certainly

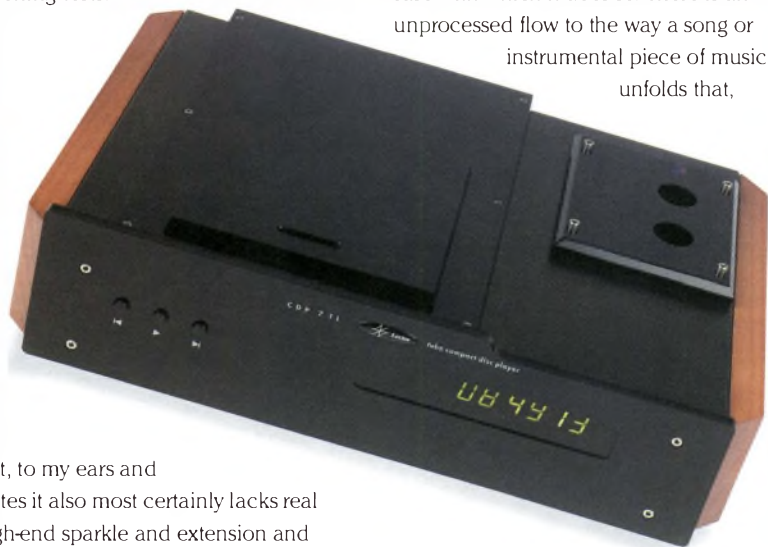
lacks the needlepoint fine resolution of a pure solid-state player like the Naim CDS3 but I really like the way it describes the character of the instruments and the mood of the piece. Note and chordal development are excellent and tonally it is very colourful, slightly warm, but always interesting and oh so easy to listen to. There is a broad, wide and deep soundstage to help here which seems to give each instrument ample room for expression. This is not one of those meticulously rock solid views of the music where the stability of the picture is locked in space. But there is excellent depth, which means that background detail actually feels like it is truly behind the lead instruments and not just mixed at a lower level and this ability to sonically describe an acoustic whether it be natural or electronically constructed is something that is quite rare for any player, regardless of price.

For a player with such definite attributes I was expecting it to behave a little more intimately with Gillian Welch's *Soul Journey* (Acony 6868-2). David Rawlings dry and natural production normally shifts the music straight into the room but the Lector's balance can often seem very flat in that it tends not to project the presence of the vocal and guitar so far forward as most CD players. Again, it took me a while to get used to this as my Naim player brings the musicians in front of me. But the Lector does not make you feel so much as if you are sitting a few rows further back, but rather that the musicians are differently placed and further from the microphones. But it is very good at showing the physical ▶



▶ aspects of making music. Fingers sliding up and down the fretboard making different shapes, the voicing of chords and noteplay and vocal breaths, exhalations and framing and expression of lyrics are notably good. I always felt that there was a slight lack of weight and real substance though and the vocals were thinner than I was expecting and this makes the CDP-7 less intimate and close than I was hoping. But perhaps I'm being a bit too harsh here and when I think of the other considerably more expensive players I have heard recently it really is a compliment to the Lector that it stands comparison at all.

It never grows compressive and certainly does not have that sense of glossy brightness to the treble that can seem so alluring in comparative listening tests.



But, to my ears and tastes it also most certainly lacks real high-end sparkle and extension and so employing it in a system where the amplifier or speakers are already excessively smooth might not be a good idea, especially if you like your music to engage you head-on. Now some would say that the Lector's sound is more natural. They might even use the word uncoloured. Everyone will have their own idea about the energy levels this

CD player provides at high frequencies. But ultimately, to get the best out of it is going to be a question of system synergy.

A simplistic view might be that it will appeal to classical listeners more than those whose tastes lie more with drum kits and electronically powered instruments and there is something in this. But the Lector CDP-7 does bring that bit extra to the game and is more than a little different in the way it presents music and the ease with which it does so. There is an unprocessed flow to the way a song or instrumental piece of music unfolds that,

if you are sensitive in this area and I know that some are not, is very addictive. It makes many other similarly priced machines sound as if the music is being squeezed out of them through an electronic processing filter. So, if you are interested in the Lector please make absolutely sure that you hear it for

at least a couple of evenings at home and listen to it with as broad a range of material as your tastes will allow. If you have the time and the inclination then do try some rudimentary experimentation with siting it and see where it takes you. If you like it, you'll probably love it and think that the asking price is more than fair and even if you don't, you will still have a lot of respect for it and realise as I did, that it is a machine that offers exceptionally good value. ➤



#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	CD player with outboard power supply and valve output stage.
Digital Section:	20 bit PCM 63 dual mono oversampling
Outputs:	Various. Contact importer.
Transport:	Top loading custom-made. Three stage isolation.
Output stage:	2x triode, pure class A with passive filtration.
Power Supply:	14 stages of regulation.
Dimensions (WxHxD) -	
CDP-7:	400 x 112 x 305mm
PSU-3T:	230 x 90 x 305mm
Weight -	
CDP-7:	10kg
PSU-3T:	3.2kg
Price (as reviewed):	£1875

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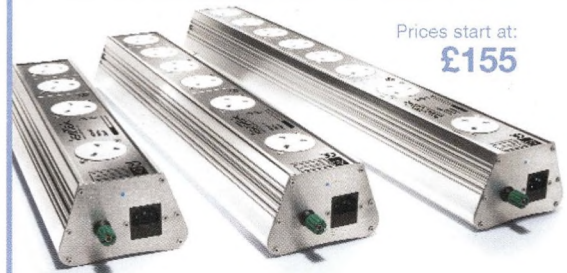
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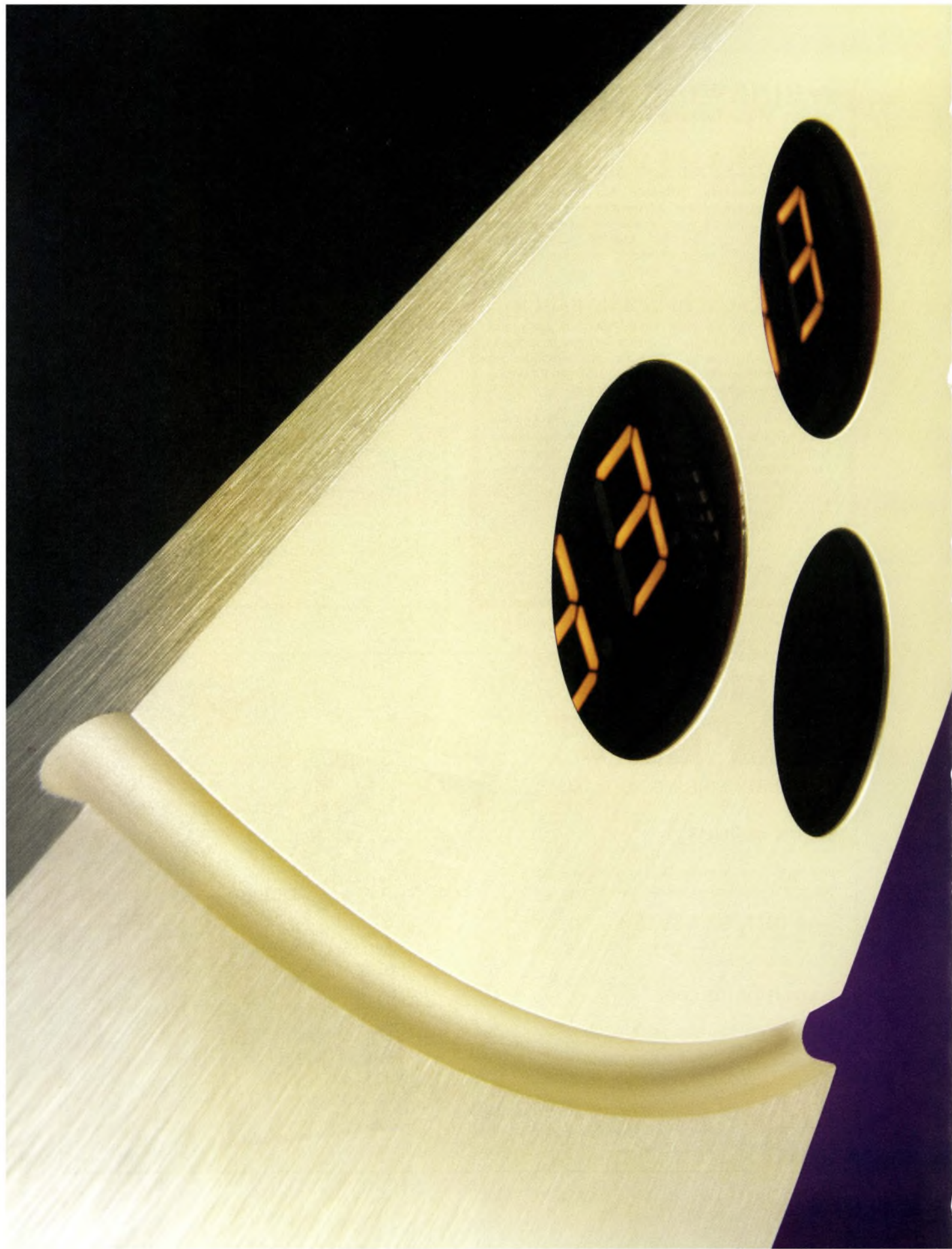
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# The conrad-johnson Premier 18LS Line-stage

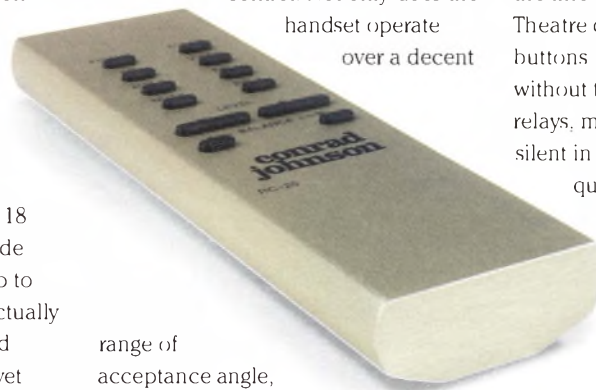
by Roy Gregory

It's a cool trick being able to read minds. But then, sometimes it isn't that difficult. How many of you, looking at the heading at the top of this page will be thinking, "Ahh, another imported product with an impeccable pedigree and predictably accomplished performance" – and you'd be right. You'd probably then be thinking something along the lines of "conrad-johnson, so that means a tube line stage with a stratospheric price tag" – but that's where you'd be wrong, on both counts. You see, not only is the Premier 18LS a solid-state design, but the price is a lot more approachable than you're probably expecting – but more on that later.

Physically at least, the Prem 18 offers no surprises at all. The wide front-panel and deep chassis help to keep it looking slimmer than it actually is, while the curved groove milled into the front-panel is a discrete yet remarkably successful styling motif that genuinely lifts the appearance. The footprint and capacious internal volume are more than likely a carryover from the company's vacuum tube designs, technology that doesn't really run hand in hand with compact dimensions. Opening the lid might leave you thinking that the interior looks a little sparsely populated, but J-fets are physically smaller than valves and run at much lower voltages, which makes a lot of the associated components smaller too. It also means that there's plenty of space to achieve optimum circuit layout, and the Prem 18's board is a model of neat and tidy execution. I guess it's a lineal

descendent of the superb little PF-1 pre-amplifier, c-j's first J-Fet design. That unit must be more than 15 years old by now, yet still sounds surprisingly impressive today, a fact which underlines just how long, and how successfully, conrad-johnson have been working with solid-state circuitry.

Externally, it's all pretty familiar too. The three circular windows offer left and right channel numerical readouts for level and the receiver for the remote control. Not only does the handset operate



over a decent range of acceptance angle, the numerical displays are actually big enough to read from the other side of the room without resorting to opera glasses. It's exactly the kind of workable, commonsense solution to a simple problem that most designers seem to get wrong that I've come to expect from Messrs Conrad and Johnson. In many ways it serves as the perfect example of the no-nonsense practicality that runs right through this unit.

The control line-up is equally flexible and logical. Alongside five line-level inputs you get two external loops: EPL1 is to all intents and purposes, a standard tape-loop, while

Theatre (EPL2 on the remote) automatically sets the Prem 18 to unity gain, ideal for integration with an external surround processor. There are two rows of five LEDs: one for each of the line inputs on the top row, indicators for source, EPL, Theatre, Standby and mute in the bottom one. Likewise, the push button controls are disposed in two rows of three, with mute, volume up and volume down on top, source (which toggles through the line inputs in order), EPL and Theatre down below. Thankfully, the buttons (and remote) all operate without the accompanying clack of relays, making the Premier 18 all but silent in operation. In fact, my only quibble with this (and all the

other c-j pre-amps) is the apparently loose fit of the buttons themselves. It in no way effects performance, but I can't help feeling that the feel of the products would be significantly improved by a more positive fit for these components. Having said that of course, I'm probably about the only person in the world who actually prefers to operate pre-amps manually. Those using the excellent remote will probably never even touch the front-panel controls, so you can dismiss my observations as the ramblings of a deluded Luddite if you fit this latter category.

The RC-20 remote handset is another triumph of practicality over outlandish styling. Offering direct switching for each input, the two external loops, volume and mute, it also adds a balance control to



▶ the equation, making the only omission from the control roster the deeply unfashionable but increasingly useful mono switch. The resurgence of interest in single channel recordings post-dates the introduction of the 18, so I can hardly blame c-j for the oversight, but it would be nice to include the facility (if possible) in any future revision. Physically, the curved edges of the medium sized remote control fit your hand well, while the buttons are big enough to find and have enough space around them for easy operation, even in a darkened room. Milled from solid aluminium and with four soft, dimple feet on the underside,

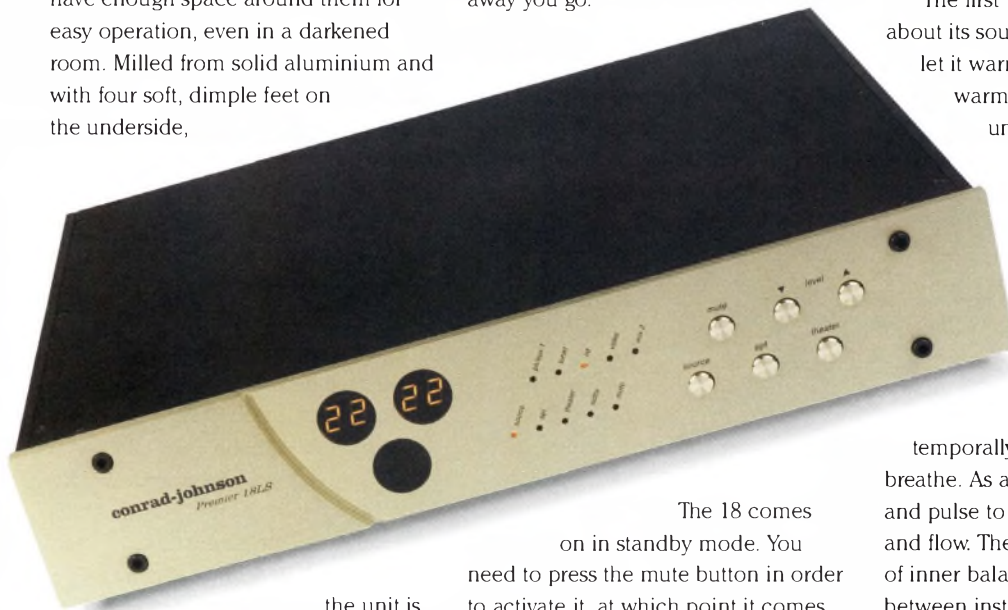
Premier 18 with the unit powered down. That means disconnecting the mains lead as there's no mains switch. Also, and in common with other c-j pre-amps, this one inverts absolute phase. If you're not using it with a c-j (or other phase inverting) power-amp, you'll need to reverse your connections to the speaker terminals. Once you've hooked everything up and placed the 18 on a suitable surface (I used my standard finite element HD-04 rack) connect the power cord and away you go.

without fear or favour throughout the review period. This unit does exactly what it needs to, without any fuss, as soon as you tell it to. You'd be surprised how many (especially, expensive) line-stages fail that basic test. Used with amps as various as the Hovland RADIA, Rogue Audio Model 90 and the new Tom Evans hybrid design, it never failed to bring the same invitingly natural quality to musical proceedings. Indeed, natural is the word that best sums up the Premier 18.

The first thing that will strike you about its sound (assuming that you've let it warm up properly) is a warmth and sweetness that's unusual amongst solid-state designs. There's nothing mawkish or cloying about it, just a naturalness and lack of intrusive edge to the tonal palette. At the same time it allows music the space, dimensionally and

temporally, to stretch out and breathe. As a result there's a presence and pulse to the music, a sense of ebb and flow. There's also an innate sense of inner balance within the band, between instruments and voices. And finally, there's the sublime phrasing, the shape and accent of a melody wherein resides so much of the performers' expressive potential. The Premier 18 allows you to dive straight in...

Now, a lot of this is down to the c-j's spatial abilities. The Prem 18 throws a wide and very deep soundstage. More importantly it's a soundstage that's clearly delineated not just laterally but also in depth and volume. Playing the Speakers Corner re-issue of Ella Fitzgerald Sings The Irving Berlin Songbook (Verve MG VS-6005-2) Ella is a solid, physical presence between the speakers, the power and control in her voice manifest in the elegance of her phrasing and delivery. The space behind her is apparent, and to



The 18 comes on in standby mode. You need to press the mute button in order to activate it, at which point it comes on with a default volume setting of 20 and the CD input selected. Press mute again and the output levels go automatically to zero. Press it again and you return to your previous volume level. To return to standby, simply press mute for two seconds. You'll notice that the Premier 18 never actually switches off. This is important as it sounds distinctly better once it has warmed up for a few days.

When a reviewer's complaints are limited to the absence of a mono switch and something as subjective as the feel of the control buttons, you can pretty much guarantee that a product is doing everything else right. That's certainly the case with the Premier 18, which performed faultlessly and

the unit is heavy enough to stay put for single-handed operation on a coffee table, solid enough to inspire confidence, yet not so bulky or massive as to represent the first stage in a home exercise programme.

Connections are all single-ended phonos of sensible rather than male-jewellery proportions, well-spaced and clearly labelled. There is only one pair of main outputs rather than the increasingly common two, but that will only worry those rare individuals wanting to run bi-amped systems. That and a 13 Amp IEC input is your lot.


Set-up is simplicity itself, with only two minor details to take note of. In common with all Fet devices, it's wise to make and break connections to the

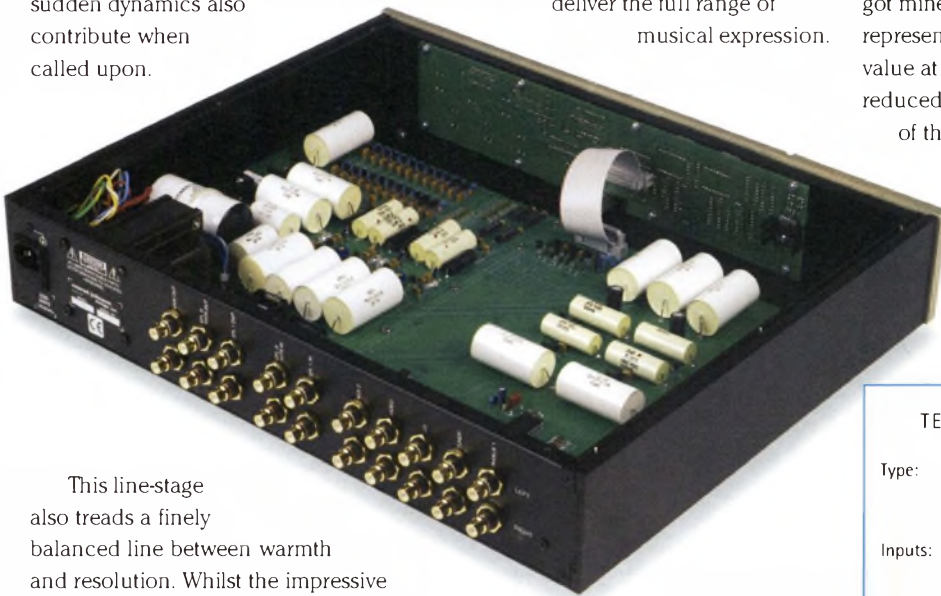
► either side, even when the band isn't playing. But when it is the soundstage is populated with perfectly scaled and dimensional instruments, the piano weighty and real to the left, the brass solid and rich and blatty as it provides punctuation and emphasis to proceedings. There's a convincing quality to the sheer presence the Prem 18 instills in a performance that is both enticing and addictive. Needless to say, the impressively sudden dynamics also contribute when called upon.

clarity and lucidity that combine to create the holy grail of intelligibility and that's what is really important. Even a track as meandering and unfocused as Ryan Adams' cover of 'Wonderwall' (*Love Is Hell, pts 1&2, Lost Highway 986 136-1*) discovers a coherent sense of direction.

It's no accident that every musical example I've quoted involves a vocal. The combination of natural tonality, solidity, tempo and dynamics deliver the full range of musical expression.

the 350, will be available through authorised UK c-j dealers at the exceedingly attractive price of £2495. Yes, I did say £2495.

Now, let me just underline that this is no precursor to an update, nor is the model about to be discontinued. This is your opportunity to buy a fully guaranteed, current spec unit at a seriously reduced price for no other reason than Conrad-Johnson want to get your attention. Well, they've got mine. I think that this line-stage represents superb musical and material value at its full asking price. At the reduced price this is a genuine bargain of the sort that doesn't come along every day. Audiofreaks are offering you a belated Christmas present. I'd think very seriously indeed about exploiting their generosity. 



This line-stage also treads a finely balanced line between warmth and resolution. Whilst the impressive coherence that makes it sound so natural means that detail doesn't necessarily stand out, listen in and you'll be surprised just how much information is present. The c-j might not match the likes of the Vibe/Pulse for sheer transparency and dynamic definition, but it integrates and scales information superbly. Just try listening at much lower levels than normal. Hear how the dynamics and separation don't collapse, how the performance remains solid and convincing. Play something intricate like Jocelyn Pook's score for *The Merchant Of Venice* (Decca 475 6367 – and absolutely beautiful) and appreciate the easy way in which the system handles the detail and intricacy of the music, particularly the balance between voices and instruments. There's a

Yes, you can do better – but not at this price. Ahh yes, the price: Look on an Audiofreaks pricelist and you'll find that the Premier 18 LS will set you back a not inconsiderable £4000. Worth every penny too! I reckon the Vibe/Pulse represents a bargain, but I could happily swap it for the musical charms of the c-j – and gain some serious versatility along the way.

However, it seems that Messrs Conrad and Johnson remain somewhat perplexed by the lack of public acclaim heaped on their solid-state designs. The recent rapturous reception received from all corners of the UK press by the solid-state Premier 350 power-amp has goaded them into action. For a short period therefore, the Premier 18 LS, natural partner to

#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

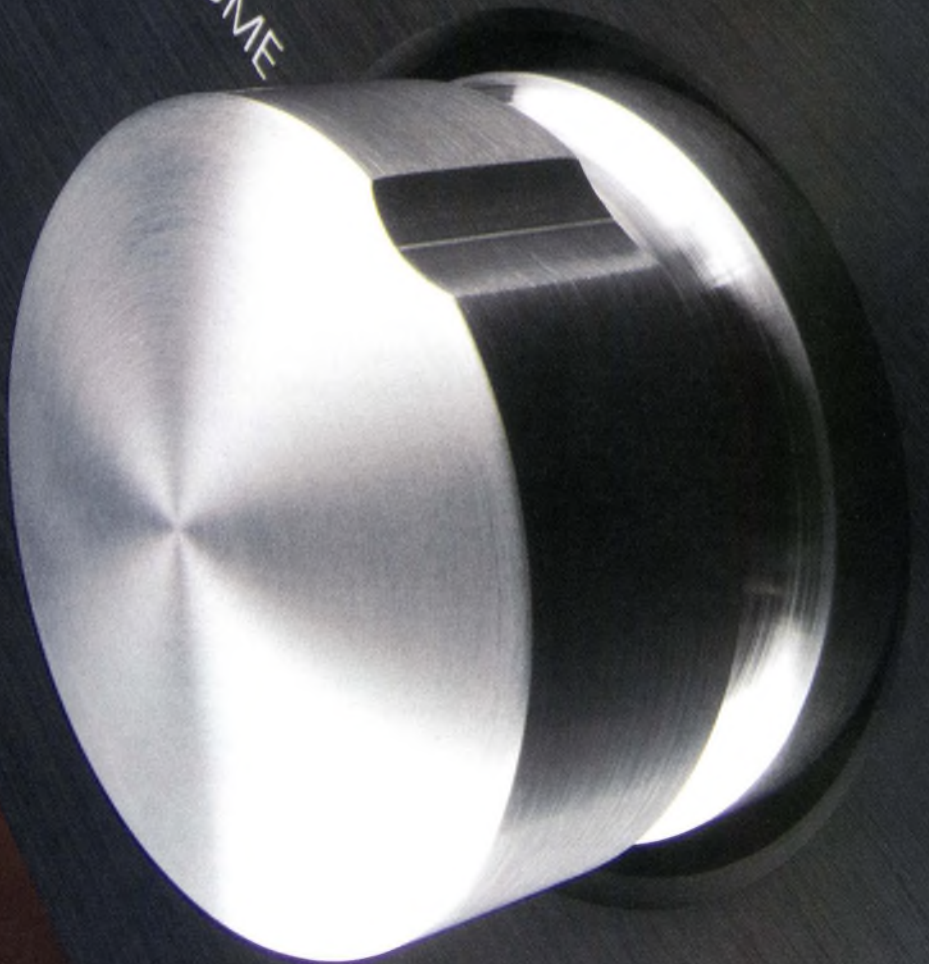
Type:	Solid-state, remote-control line-stage
Inputs:	5x line-level 1x EPL (tape) 1x Theatre (unity gain)
Outputs:	1x main out 1x EPL (tape) out 1x Theatre out
Input Impedance:	>12 kOhms
Gain:	22 dB
Maximum Output:	9 V
Output Impedance:	200 Ohms
Dimensions (WxHxD):	482 x 84 x 387mm
Weight:	7.25 kg
Price:	£2495

**UK Distributor:**  
Audiofreaks  
Tel. (44)(0) 208 948 4153  
Net. [www.audiofreaks.co.uk](http://www.audiofreaks.co.uk)

**Manufacturer:**  
conrad-johnson Inc.  
Net. [www.conradjohnson.com](http://www.conradjohnson.com)

lavardin  
TECHNOLOGIES

VOLUME





# The Lavardin IT Integrated Amp

by Roy Gregory

Long ago, in what seems like a former life, I worked for an importer of exotic record players, a producer and distributor of audiophile vinyl. Like all such operations we received our fair share of unsolicited offers from overseas manufacturers looking for UK representation. More often than not they never got beyond the phone-call stage. Imagine my surprise then, when arriving at work one morning I discovered a rather battered, French registered Renault 5 parked outside, complete with sleeping Frenchman; surprise that quickly turned to embarrassment as I realised that Fordingbridge might be able to provide most things but a decent cup of coffee (as defined by the French palette) wasn't amongst them.

Still, Jean-Christophe Crozel (for it was he) took the lack of coffee in his stride just as easily as the fact that the partner in the company who'd arranged the visit had forgotten to inform anybody else about it, or even put in an appearance. He was, he announced, here to demonstrate his integrated amps. Thinking on my feet and wanting to appear at least polite, I rapidly arranged a visit to Pete Christie at Movement Audio, purveyors of many things integrated, including the well-regarded Shearne amps. On arrival J-C unshipped two cardboard boxes containing small, yet expensive amplifiers of a design and presentation so plain as to please the Amish. No, we were informed, they didn't require warm-up, although

a bit of care in connecting the speaker cables would pay dividends, as would a wooden support. With no such shelf available, our indomitable Gaul seized the grill from a suitably large speaker and inserted it between the smaller of the two amps and the glass shelf of the Sound Style rack. Announcing himself satisfied he sat back with a beatific grin and bade us listen.

The rest, as they say, is history. The little IS integrated promptly demolished the Shearne (along with its second power amp for bi-amping). Indeed, it left just about everything in the shop sounding muddy and confused. Except that is, for its big brother, the IT. Half again as powerful, twice the height and around half the inputs and no line-level outputs, this was the stripped down hot-rod of the range, and if we thought that the IS was good, the IT frankly left us flabbergasted; this from a product that had arrived unexpectedly and unannounced. It was one of those hi-fi epiphanies that are, in reality all too rare, and all too often reveal themselves as false dawns. Yet we were far from the only ones duly impressed. The performance of the IT was sufficient to open a serious fault-line in the edifice of PM's 25-year devotion to Naim electronics, a response that was echoed in one form or another by all who heard it. Here was a true, audiophile gem.

With stunning and brutally apparent sonic superiority on its

side, along with the reviews to support the fact, the rest should all be plain sailing, no? No indeed! Lavardin amplifiers, through no fault of their own, were about to embark on the rockiest of roads. First the importer imploded when the same partner who'd overlooked the original appointment managed to overlook rather a lot of company funds as well as his other responsibilities. Not a good start for a fledgling brand. Dealers grew understandably suspicious of the repeated assurances they'd been receiving, and the products they hadn't. Then, tragically, the amplifier's designer was killed in a traffic accident. J-C was facing meltdown. The problem was that the Lavardin amps depended on a new topology and understanding of distortion artefacts in electronic circuits. The simpler IS could continue in production, but reverse engineering, even servicing the IT was so complex as to be almost impossible, at least in the short term, leaving the company without the jewel in its crown.

However, one dealer had kept the faith and Audiocraft duly worked as the UK distributor to shore up and slowly re-establish the IS, the tweaked and refined IS Reference and the pre-power spin-offs. Meanwhile, Lavardin got to grips with the IT and in the process of deciphering it and developing the IS Reference, realised that a new design combining the original hot-rod concept with the newly acquired body of



▶ knowledge could produce an amp that was even better than the original; which is what we have here.

Lavardin's original IT was as simple as an integrated amp could get. Four line-level inputs only. No tape or line outputs (because it sounds better that way): Only one pair of binding posts per channel (because it sounds better that way): No balance control or any other additional facilities (Because it... oh, you get the picture). A squat, solid block of an amplifier with two rotary control knobs (for volume and source select),

initial disbelief – matched only by the disbelief when you finally got the sceptic to take a listen.

Well, the current model, still known simply as the IT, is the same in every important feature, except for the power output which has been boosted to a more "acceptable" 55 Watts a side. Otherwise, the two amps are externally virtually identical. The new version has a slightly nicer front-panel, with better profiling, while the

In that it frankly, simply represents a wider truth by revealing that much more clearly exactly what glass shelves actually do – apart from looking nice. Speaker cables are best connected as bare wire through the binding posts, and interconnects should ideally be either Lavardin's own, the technologically similar Chord Signatures or Nordost.



an on-off switch and serious heat-sinks on each side, it was prosaically basic yet somehow rather elegant. But with only 45 Watts per channel and no remote control (and you know that it sounds better that way!\*) along with a £3200 price-tag, it was always going to be greeted with

surface finish has improved throughout. It also now has silver knobs rather than the original's black. If in doubt the only conclusive way to tell the difference is that the new model serial numbers all start with a 2K2 prefix.

Otherwise, set-up is just as it used to be. The amp still reaches full performance within 30 minutes, sounding absolutely fine within around five. It still prefers a wooden support, with glass being an absolute no-no.

Avoid at all costs high-capacitance flat ribbon speaker cables of the Goertz type as they can actually damage the sound of the amp, and in some cases its output stage. Check with your dealer before going for something exotic. I relied on my standard Valhalla leads and finite elemente HD-04 rack, a combination that suited the IT perfectly.

When it comes to listening it's immediately apparent that things are also pretty much the way they used to be. The IT's strong suit was always its phenomenal resolution and clarity, an effortlessly clean sound that made music lucid and lyrics intelligible. It's a quality that allowed it to seriously ▶

\* Although, JC is about to relent and offer a remote control option that will be retro fittable to older amps as long as they are the newer model.

► embarrass some seriously heavy-weight competition, and nothing has changed. Of course, it's one thing having phenomenal resolution and detail – it's quite another being musical with it, and so many high-resolution devices over the years have strayed into the realms of the clinical, even the sterile. But the beauty of the IT was that for an amp with so many of the classic solid-state

expressive in the context of the song as a whole, bridging as they do from the almost unaccompanied opening into the entrance of the full band. It's a critical point in the song if you are to appreciate the full expressive breadth of the performance. With the IT there's no chance that you'll miss it. In this respect the French integrated amp is a match for The Vibe/Pulse and RADIA. It equals them too in terms of separation, overall clarity, transparency and focus – aspects in which the far more

the music is underpinned by a tactile, agile and sure footed bass that keep things mobile and moving in the right direction.

The problem with replacing a legend is that there will always be those who question whether the new model is quite as good as the old one. Actually, it's largely irrelevant as the messy distribution history means that there are very few of the original model in this country, despite the number of people who wanted to buy them. It's also irrelevant because the new IT builds noticeably on the strengths of the old one. This is a significantly better amplifier.



strengths, it was also fluid and engaging enough to charm a valve aficionado. It's a neat trick, so how does it do it.

The IT's secret is its ability to define not just detail, but also dynamics, not just space but also time. Take a track like the delicate and intricate 'Bridal Ballad' from the *Merchant Of Venice* OST. The ability to precisely scale and place musical energy, to map tiny changes in level against time, means that the IT easily reveals the subtle technique in Hayley Westenra's vocal, as well as the perfect counterpoint from the lute that underpins it. The beautiful accents used in the three note phrase that close the first verse are absolutely beautiful, minor in themselves but so

expensive (nearly four times the price!) pre/power combination is genuinely world class. In case you haven't got the point, this is a very impressive and very musical amplifier indeed.

It is also one of the world's great all-rounders. Large-scale classical works like the Dvorak *Cello Concerto* are handled with aplomb. Murky modern recordings like Stewboss are unravelled with such effortless ease as the IT cuts directly to the core of the music that you completely forget the dubious quality of the recording. Rhythmically expressive,

What it adds to the mix is slightly greater power which translates to greater control over the energy budget. The current IT has more in reserve and that translates into greater musical poise and presence; the new design has all the strengths of the older model but a more graceful and solid presentation. It makes the performers sound like they have more time; it makes them sound like better players.

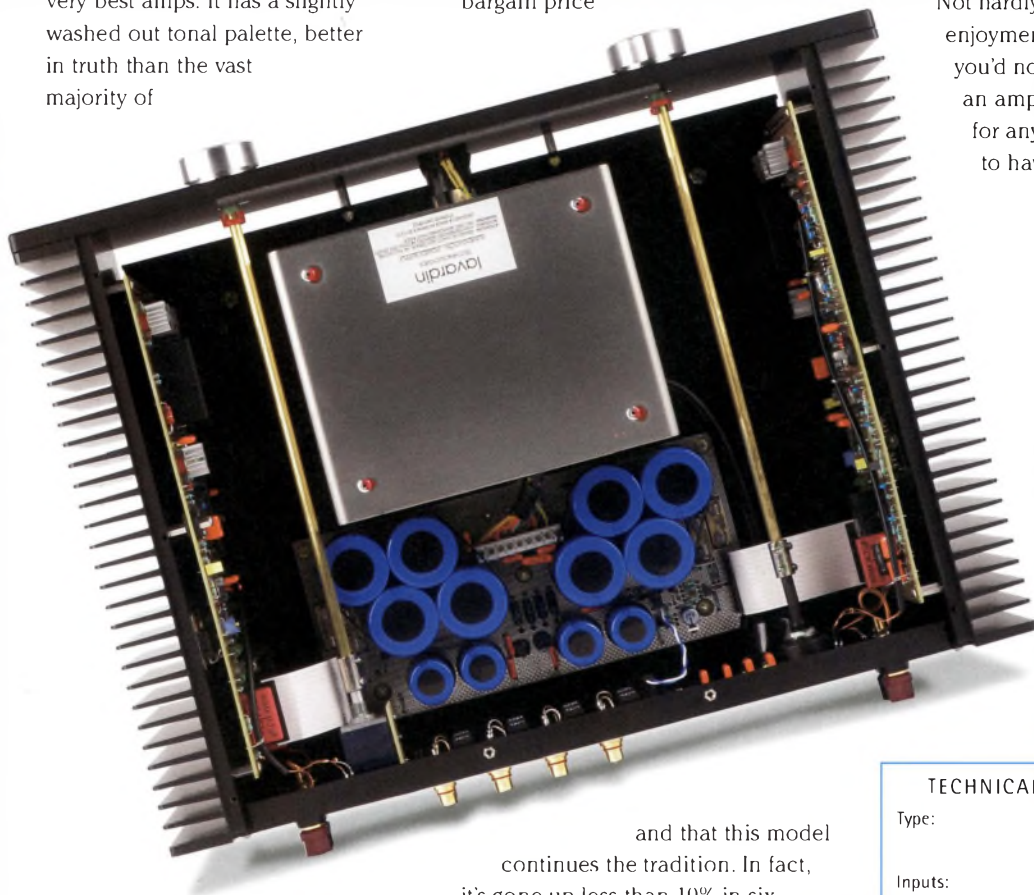
In fact, if forced to criticise ►

▶ the IT, which is frankly churlish at the price, I'd look at two areas. Despite its greater presence and solidity the new version still can't quite match the tonal range and accuracy of the very best amps. It has a slightly washed out tonal palette, better in truth than the vast majority of

and dynamic coherence is such that you can listen far quieter anyway!

By now, you should have got the idea that the original IT was a superb performer at a bargain price

them are vastly more expensive. If I ever get to the point of giving up my expensive toys, this is the amp I'll buy to replace them. Will I listen to any less music? Not hardly. Will I get any less enjoyment out of it? Not so's you'd notice. The IT really is an amp that's good enough for anyone, and it's nice to have it back. ➤



amps (at any price) but still a failing in absolute terms. Secondly and in common with the original design, I'd dearly love to see a pre-out to allow for bi-amping. Given the relatively low power of the IT, it would broaden the range of possible speaker matches significantly. Of course, the IT shares the Lavardin trait of exceptional load tolerance. Exceptional in the sense that asked to drive an awkward load you don't lose transparency, control, dynamic range or the frequency extremes the way you do with most, especially low-powered amplifiers. Instead you just lose a little maximum level. Having said that, the IT's clarity

and that this model continues the tradition. In fact, it's gone up less than 10% in six-years, while the fit and finish have improved considerably. £3495 for a 55 Watt integrated amp that's devoid of facilities save the absolute bare minimum might not seem like much of a bargain but look at it another way. How about £3495 for an amp that can live with the highest of the high-end (and beat a lot them hollow). Sounds like a bargain to me.

Because it makes listening so easy, the IT also makes it inviting. This amp is just as accomplished musically as it is in technical, cosmetic, hi-fi terms. There are better amps, but very few that are better in every respect, and all of

#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Solid-state integrated amp
Inputs:	4x line-level
Line Outputs:	None
Rated Power:	55 watts
Speaker Terminals:	1pr/channel
Remote Control:	None
Finish:	Black
Dimensions (WxHxD):	430 x 135 x 330mm
Weight:	12Kg
Price:	£3495

#### UK Distributor:

Audiocraft  
Tel. (44)(0)895 253340  
E-mail. kevin.walker@audio-craft.co.uk

#### Manufacturer:

Lavardin Technologies - Ceil  
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# McIntosh

MR 85 AM/FM TUNER



# McIntosh MR85 Tuner

by Paul Messenger

Although it has been something of a rarity here in Britain, McIntosh is one of America's best-respected hi-fi brands, and can fairly be regarded as one of the ancestors of today's 'high-end'. The brand has actually been in existence since 1947, when it came up with a new and superior way of winding amplifier output transformers, so it was in at the very birth of hi-fi. While it's no longer owned and operated by its founders – current owners are a company called the Ripplewood Group, which also owns and operates the Marantz and Denon brands – McIntosh has been encouraged to retain its own identity and traditions.

Distinctive styling is a central part of the brand's unique identity, very much in the established McIntosh tradition, and very different from the current fashion for slimline silver. The £1,900 MR85 might only be an AM/FM tuner, but it's bigger, bulkier and heavier than most people's amplifiers, and will require plenty of solid shelf as a result. The front panel is black glass with silver alloy end pieces, backlit with green logos and lettering, plus a large, bright blue central display.

Overall microprocessor control makes it quite a complex and sophisticated device as tuners go, with most of the features you might want, as well as several you'll probably have little use for. Certainly there's no acknowledgement of the virtues of simplicity here. As standard it provides access to both the FM band and medium-wave AM, but there's also the probably unique and possibly useful facility of being able to add a second AM/FM tuner module, so that two different stations can be received independently, and fed to alternative zones in a multi-room installation.

Although there's no direct remote control of the tuner itself, there are 18 non-volatile presets (nine on the AM and nine on the FM band), and these may be accessed either directly, using a stepped rotary knob on the front panel, or via a system remote handset if the tuner is partnered with a McIntosh Pre-amplifier or Control Center.

Besides the pre-set selector knob (on the left of the central display), a matching knob on the right provides



traditional style flywheel-assisted tuning with a very nice 'feel'.

The multi-function fluorescent display has large characters that are easily visible from across the room, and the brightness can be varied from 0 to 31. The display has five distinct sections, showing the preset number, the tuned frequency, the waveband, the relative signal strength (0-to-9 scale), and a 'blob' indicating whether a stereo signal is being received. In preset mode the tuned frequency section may be replaced by custom eight character station identity legends. One minor irritation is that because the display is set back somewhat behind the glass front, it's difficult to read when operating the tuner unless the unit is somewhere near eye level – rather high off the ground for a six-footer like yours truly.

Besides the presets and the manual

tuning modes, there are also up/down buttons for 'seek tuning'. Other buttons switch between stereo and mono and wavebands, add something called 'Spatial Enhancement', and supply inter-station muting. Given the significant feature count here, the omission of any 'wide/narrow' selectivity option is a little surprising.

The back panel is a pretty busy affair too. There are two pairs of output phonos for both the supplied and the optional tuning module: one of each pair is at fixed level, the other is variable via a small adjacent potentiometer. Separate AM and FM aerial inputs are also provided for both tuner modules, with F-type sockets for the FM antennae, and a special DIN socket for a supplied external antenna that comes in a small plastic box with a long connecting lead so that it can be moved around to find the site that gives best performance. Mains is supplied through the normal IEC 'kettle' lead.

The upside of complexity is flexibility, and that is an obvious bonus with this tuner, especially for multi-room installations where the extra tuner module may have extra relevance. Happily, the manual is well laid out and easy to understand, so getting the whole thing up and working proved no problem. The range of tuning options is useful, and the 'seek threshold' seemed very well chosen, even though it's not adjustable.

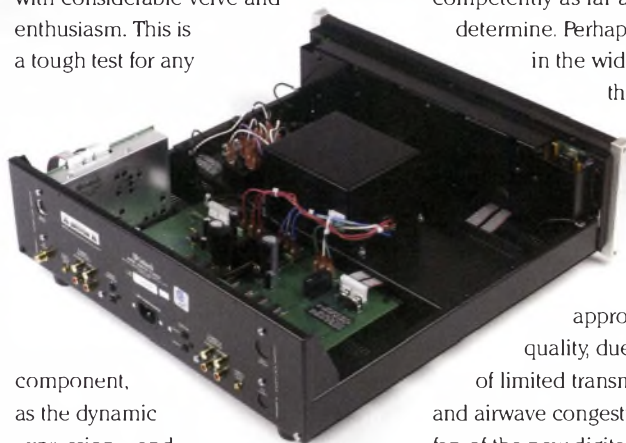
The good news is that it sounds rather good too, on the FM band at least, with a warmth, coherence and solidity that's both entirely convincing and thoroughly entertaining. One might wish for a little more openness and transparency at the extreme top end of the audio-band perhaps – in this

▶ respect the sound is just a little cautious and conservative, possibly reflecting the chosen selectivity compromise – but apart from a slight lack of ‘sparkle’, especially if using the ‘variable’ output sockets, there’s nothing deserving of criticism here, and much to admire in its tonal richness and powerful dynamic integrity.

It’s the sheer body that this tuner brings to the music that’s its most appealing characteristic, and this brings a warmth to classical material in particular that can be quite delicious. Radio 3’s Wednesday afternoon

*Choral Evensong* is a regular sonic treat, consisting of live broadcasts from some of the finest acoustic spaces in the country – the medieval cathedrals and churches. One week recently the broadcast came from Chester Cathedral, and the full scale of the choir singing in this large resonant space came through very convincingly.

Human speech is also reproduced with considerable verve and enthusiasm. This is a tough test for any



component, as the dynamic expression – and expressiveness – of spoken words is easily diluted and weakened by poor coherence and/or timing, and this McIntosh tuner proved more than usually effective in this regard, scoring high on believability and ensuring good intelligibility even at very low listening levels.

Although classical music seemed to be a particular forte, with fine insight into the size of an orchestra as well as the acoustic surroundings, the MR85 is a versatile device that proved well able to deal with all kinds of music, handling driving beats just as



effectively as sweeping strings, and also delivering the vocal clarity that makes it easy to understand the lyrics, no matter how indifferently they’re being sung.

The AM capability is obviously useful for the extra stations it makes available, and is handled very competently as far as one can determine. Perhaps AM remains useful

in the wide open spaces of the USA, where digital radio is not yet a factor, but in Britain these days AM can never achieve anything approaching hi-fi sound quality, due to a combination of limited transmission bandwidth and airwave congestion. While I’m no fan of the new digital radio services (DAB, Freeview or Sky), and prefer to listen to FM stereo when transmission is available and conditions are favourable, there’s no denying that these various digital versions are preferable to noisy and interference-prone AM, and offer a greater variety of stations too. While the

McIntosh’s AM band might be handy, those who want to listen to non-FM stations with any regularity would do better to add some form of digital radio tuner for that express purpose – DAB and Freeview receivers can both be purchased for less than £100 these days.

But for top quality FM reception, the MR85 is a very persuasive and effective, albeit costly solution. Operation is straightforward and flexible, and if the microprocessor adds some of its own idiosyncracies to the proceedings, its influence is fundamentally benign, with sensible choices throughout – even the signal strength meter has a useful range and scaling. While the unusual styling and lack of independent

remote controls suggest its most likely role will be alongside other McIntosh equipment, the superior performance has certainly whetted my appetite to try some of the other components from this legendary brand.



#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	AM/FM analogue tuner
Features:	Remote only via McIntosh system Optional second tuner module for multi-room applications
Aerial Sockets:	2x F-socket (for FM); 2x DIN (for supplied outboard AM antenna)
Output:	Two sets of fixed and variable single-ended phono pairs
Dimensions (WxHxD):	445x153x483mm
Weight:	11.6kg
Finish:	Black
Price:	£1,900

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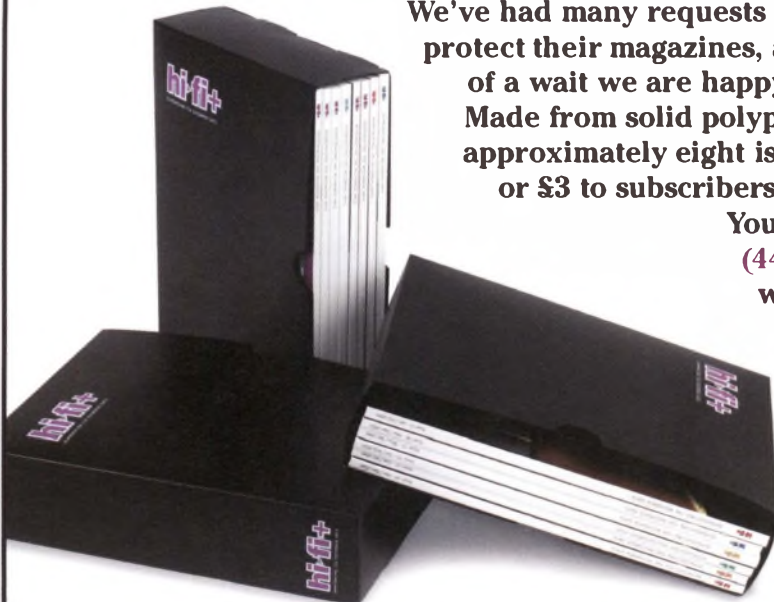
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# The PMC DB1+ Loudspeaker

by Roy Gregory

I'm not quite sure why, or even where the roots lie, but the hi-fi industry seems to have an ongoing fascination with extracting the most bass from the smallest speaker. Things really started to hot up with the appearance of the AE1 and various Sonus Fabers. However, the fact is that if you are prepared to accept certain (serious) operational compromises then getting great dollops of low-frequency output from even quite tiny cabinets isn't actually that challenging. All you need to do is accept a low efficiency, a cruel impedance curve and own an amplifier the size of Battersea power station. You'd be amazed just how many people are prepared to do just that.

Unfortunately, this rather misses the point; quantity is one thing, but quality is quite another. Trying to get deep, tuneful bass that still sounds like it's attached to the mid-range benefits of a small cabinet – now that's a challenge. It's also, like just about everything else associated with loudspeakers, a compromise. The secret is balancing quality against quantity and the difficulties the two of them pose for the driving amplifier. Get this triangle roughly equilateral and you've got a fighting chance of producing a loudspeaker that might actually work in the real world.

Which is where I've got to make an admission. You see, with the Bryston 7Bs still loitering after CB's review, and with PMC's smallest speaker waiting in the wings, it seemed like too good a chance to miss – but let's be honest, there's nothing terribly real world about using a pair of 600 Watt mono-blocks with speakers little bigger than shoe-boxes. Which seems to be about where we came in...

So, leaving my lack of common-

sense and moderation to one side, what is it that makes the PMC DB1+ more than just another pint-sized stand-mount? Well, in common with other PMC designs, it's a transmission line. Which, for a speaker this size makes it unique as far as I'm aware (I'm sure there's another one out there, probably built in Lithuania and sold "exclusively" on the web, but if there is



I don't know about it!) Of Course, for PMC it's very much business as usual – except that there's nothing terribly usual (some would say sane) about folding a five-foot transmission line into a cabinet a little under a foot tall and nine inches deep. While transmission line loading has received a lot of attention recently, mainly as a result of the shaped chambers used by B&W to terminate the high and mid-frequencies in their Nautilus designs, what we're talking about here is a full-on bass line good for around 50Hz in room.

Take a look at the cut-away cabinet

and it immediately becomes obvious that this is an extremely complex construction, which, given the small size of the panels involved and the bracing provided by the internal baffles, is going to be seriously rigid, a fact underlined by the 4.5kg weight of each speaker. Notice also, the copious quantities of acoustic foam used to control resonance and reflection of the back-wave. PMC point out that precise tuning of the line, specifically the physical characteristics and quantity of the (proprietary) foam used is critical to the line's operation. I can't comment, other than to observe that too many of the transmission line speakers I've heard over the years sound slow and lumpy in the bass, characteristics that are notably absent from the PMC range.

Mounted in the narrow front baffle of the beautifully finished cabinet is a small, 140mm mid-bass driver with a doped paper cone, paired with a 27mm soft-dome tweeter. The "Plus" part of the model number comes from a recent upgrade that has allowed PMC to incorporate the tweeter from their far more expensive speakers into this and other models nearer the bottom of their range. The fabric dome design replaces the previous aluminium one, allowing the crossover point to be dropped from 3 to 2kHz, as well as re-engineered as a true second-order filter. This makes the mid-bass driver's job a lot easier, aiding overall integration and coherence, as well as giving the little DB1+ the same high-frequency fingerprint as the larger models in the range, particularly critical in these days of multi-channel music and given PMC's involvement in studio-monitoring where 5.1 is fast becoming the de-facto standard. ▶

► To that end the FB1+ is both shielded for use next to CRT monitors and available as a centre-channel, with repositioned tweeter and re-orientated terminals. All models are bi-wirable.

I've already mentioned the 50Hz low-frequency roll-off, a figure that perfectly balances the issues of extension and quality, as witnessed by the other numbers: An efficiency of 87dB might not seem particularly impressive until you take the bandwidth and diminutive dimensions into account:



Likewise the nominal impedance of 8 Ohms, with a 4 Ohm minimum and no sharp corners in the plot. So, no worries at all with 600 Watts on tap, except the continuous power handling of 150 Watts! In fact, I used the DB1+s with a range of amps, including the Levinson 383 and Rogue Audio Model 90, and never got that constipated sound you hear when an amp isn't really getting hold of a speaker. I never got a chance to try the PrimaLuna Prologue Two, but I reckon that too could be an excellent match, the heart of a modest yet musically convincing set-up. However, there's no denying that the 7Bs did do a rather fine job, bringing an effortless, almost bottomless quality to the sound. Not so much in terms of absolute extension of course – just in terms of energy. This is one small

speaker that really can sound BIG.

In order to get that sense of scale you're going to have to take a bit of care. The rigidity of the cabinet, combined with the excursion of the bass-driver at high levels means that a good quality stand is essential. PMC do offer brackets for wall mounting but I think that's inappropriate in a domestic environment. Not only will you risk over-doing the bass, you lose the imaging and soundstage coherence that are this

speaker's other great strengths, built on the foundation of that beautifully integrated low-frequency extension. I used a pair of IF Designs Tallis stands, whose oak columns were a near perfect match for the little PMCs. Even better would be the Roger Stone Signature version of this excellent design - whilst expensive, the performance of the DB1+ certainly warrants the cost. After considerable experimentation I positioned them 22 inches from the rear wall, just slightly closer than normal, and gave them a modest amount of toe-in.

The first thing that strikes you about the little PMCs is the uncanny natural-

ness of their mid-band. It's not just a question of accurate vocal or instrumental colours (although they do that really rather well). It's also about perspective and maintaining the correct proportions between the various singers and instruments. It's partly a result of the excellent integration between the two drivers that results in impressive top-to-bottom coherence, and partly the result of not making that little mid-bass unit work too hard. Dropping the cross-over to 2 kHz makes for even dispersion through the cross-over point which,

along with the excellent behaviour of the small bass driver at the upper end of its working frequency, gives the midrange a refreshing sense of body and substance. In fact, so impressive was the mid-band presentation of the DB1+ that I indulged in a little experimentation. Teaming them with a pair of Townshend Maximum super-tweeters and the massive (and massively expensive) Velodyne DD18 sub-woofer proved to be a conspicuous success. Now, £800 worth of ticklers and an 18 inch, motional feedback and PCM corrected sub-woofer might seem like, indeed is, total overkill in the context of the DB1+s. About the same level of

overkill as the 7Bs. But the fact that it worked so well, that the baby PMCs took it in their stride without even a wobble is impressive and informative. On the one hand it underlines the quality and coherence of the midrange. On the other, it tells us a great deal about the bass and in particular, its linearity.

The thing about bass and small boxes is that it's really not that difficult to generate impressive quantities of low-end thud from even the smallest boxes. However, the impression of bass and its reality are two very different things. A healthy hump in the bottom end of a small, reflex loaded enclosure goes a long way towards convincing the listener that the bass is deeper and more powerful than it actually is. ►

► That belief falls apart once you start actually trying to follow bass lines or separate bass instruments. What you're getting is plenty of energy but no resolution or detail.

The DB1+ is a very different kettle of fish. It's totally devoid of that mid-bass lump that so many small speakers rely on. Instead, it offers clean, clear and surprisingly linear bass down to around the 50Hz mark, and actually gives useful information lower still. No, the bass power won't bounce you out of your seat, but the texture and timbre will catch you unawares. It's the smoothness of the low-frequency extension that makes it integrate so successfully and easily with the sub-woofer; it's the evenness of the bass as a whole that contributes to the impressive stability and natural weight of the mid-band. This is small-box bottom-end done properly; there's enough to make things convincing while the costs in terms of amplifier load are well on the right side of manageable. The speakers' overall efficiency means that you need around 100 Watts of solid-state or 50 Watts of push-pull valve power to do the trick, and more will deliver greater dynamic range, but that's eminently attainable, along with the musical benefits that accrue.

With the DB1+s back flying solo, it's remarkable how musically satisfying they can be. In the style of speakers that put coherence and balance ahead of the obvious attractions of detail and separation, it's no one aspect that grabs you. It's just the overall sense of rightness. Play Alison Krauss' 'Forget About It' and the speakers instantly pick up the insistent urgency of the tempo, revelling in the contrast with the long, stretched syllables in the phrasing. The image of the voice is solid and stable, so that you know that the fragile delicacy is part of the singer's character rather than an artefact of the system's reproduction. Dynamics are less than full range, lacking the sprightly jump of more efficient designs, but they are beautifully

scaled. So, when Sam Bush builds that strummed arpeggio on the mandolin, the musical accent is there, even if the energy ramps up a little smoothly.

The inherent balance of the DB1+ is especially obvious in small-scale yet demanding works. The precision and controlled aggression that Michele Auclair brings to her performance of the



Prokofiev *Sonata for Violin and Piano No 2*, (Coup d'Archet COUP 0011) is beautifully captured without being artificially smoothed or emasculated. The interplay between the piano foundation and the violin, the way the latter echoes its accompanist before departing on its own, vivid path, is perfectly teased out, the listener never losing their grasp on the filigree strands that keep the relationship intact.

Even on the biggest works, the PMCs scale the dynamic contours with grace, easily picking the tonal and spatial differences between the UK pressing of the Dorati *Birds* and the Speakers Corner re-issue. Whilst the DB1+ isn't the most immediate speaker, or the most explicit, if there's space and

transparency in the recording, they certainly let you know. Likewise, you might not think the top-end is that extended until you suffer tape hiss and surface noise. It's there – it's just clean and unexaggerated.

PMC's DB1+ is a beautifully judged balance of virtues. Erring on the side of coherence and musical integrity, those who want greater transparency and more obvious separation should look to the likes of the little Spendor. But at a shade over £600 I can think of no speaker, regardless of type that matches their all-round musicality. There's enough bass and enough dynamics to underpin the real quality that extends across their other attributes, giving them a beguilingly natural sense of musical purpose. They'll work with a wide range of amps too, but you know – I've got this sneaking suspicion that the NAP250 might be just about perfect. The natural successor to the Linn Kann? No, the DB1+ is much, much better than that. ➤

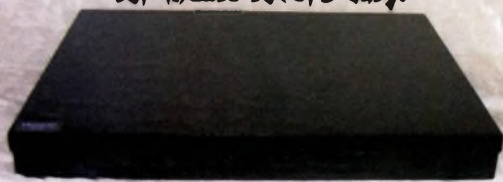
#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Two-way, stand-mount transmission line.
Drivers:	27mm fabric dome 140mm doped paper cone
Power Handling:	150 Watts continuous
Efficiency:	87dB
Impedance:	8 Ohms (nominal) 4 Ohms (minimum)
Bandwidth:	50 Hz – 25kHz ±3dB
Finishes:	Cherry, Maple, Oak
Dimensions (WxHxD):	155 x 290 x 234mm
Weight:	4.5kg ea.
Price:	£625
Upgrade, DB1 to 1+	£198

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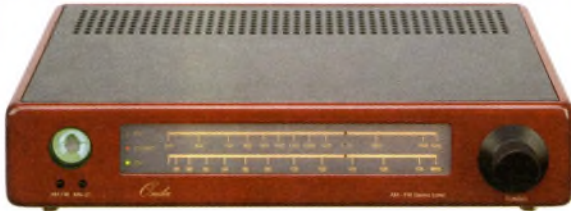


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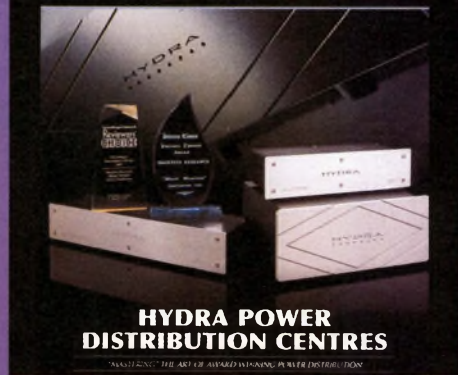


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# Bellari Rolls VP129 phono-stage

by Jimmy Hughes

While it's undoubtedly the case that phono-stages come in all shapes, sizes and prices, most of the ones I've had of late have been large, heavy, and somewhat expensive. Here's one that's small, light, and comparatively inexpensive; a mere £179.99 in fact. It's a simple single-tube design offering around 30dB gain for magnetic pickups. You could also use it (just!) with some of the high-output MC cartridges, though MM cartridges with a more robust 5mV output will provide a better match.

The unit uses a small outboard 12V power supply, and noise levels are very low with a claimed S/N ration of 80dB unweighted.

As well as a set of outputs for feeding to line level preamps, the unit has a separate headphone socket using a 1/4in jack plug. Both this and the main output have their own independent volume controls. There's a mute button and a switchable 20Hz rumble filter. During use the valve gets barely warm to the touch; otherwise there's little or no heat generated.

The circuitry is housed in an

attractive red-painted box, that's nice and small – though the valve cover looks like an afterthought. Some phono-stages are quite unbelievably massive and complex, but not this one; it's remarkably small and light. There's a single well-filled circuit board crammed with components, with the 12AX7 valve more or less in the centre. Bellari are aiming the VP129 at a broad market – from DJ's to Audiophiles - and those who have vinyl collections they wish to transfer to CD via their PC.

With a typical low output MC cartridge already fitted to

I did, finding an old A&R P-77 in my cartridge box.

Now this was a much-loved and popular cartridge in its day, but one I probably hadn't listened to in well over a decade - probably more. Via the Bellari, I was surprised by how attractive and well balanced it still sounded; smooth and warm, yet open and crisply detailed. The Bellari seemed to create a sound that was rich natural and appealing. Surface noise was low, and the music emerged from a crisp clean quiet background. It was an excellent sound by almost any standards; one I was very happy to listen to.

The bane of cheap vinyl reproduction is excessive brightness/harshness. The Bellari sounded focussed and articulate, but rich and warm too – with an attractively full bass and sweet open mid-band. Even when there was a hint of the cartridge mistracking it kept its cool, sounding contained and

controlled rather than edgy and splashy. Okay, there wasn't quite the subtlety and velvety finesse one gets with an expensive MC cartridge and state of the art phono-stage. The sound was solid and slightly plain.

You didn't quite get that magically holographic 'out of the boxes' sound that characterises the best vinyl. But nonetheless the results were extremely listenable. The sound needed no excuses making for it. Indeed – if you didn't know how a top class MC cartridge and phono-stage could sound, you might find



my turntable, I briefly tried the Bellari VP129 with it just to see. I knew it wasn't recommended, but – what the hell? It worked, sort of. But (minor problem!) there was virtually no volume – the unit's 30dB gain was completely inadequate. The only way around this would be to use an MC step-up transformer or pre-preamp, or replace your MC cartridge with a higher output MM type. That's what



► yourself wondering if the Bellari could be improved. It really was that good.

It has no glaringly obvious weaknesses or limitations – save that it does not quite put to shame some rival phono-stages costing eight or ten times as much! Which is how it should be. Otherwise, there'd be no point in spending more. The limited gain and MM-only configuration are its principle limitations. But only by making the unit bigger, more complicated, and more expensive could these concerns

be addressed. And then, of course, the beautiful simplicity and low selling price of the VP129 would be lost.

Given the sort of end user Bellari have in mind, the VP129 is a near perfect blend of price and performance. It sounds smooth, clean, and richly atmospheric, with excellent fine detail and superb clarity. Providing you use a suitably highish-output MM cartridge (3mV to 5mV for the usual parameters) there's virtually no self-noise either. Speaking personally, I'd have welcomed

a stereo/mono button in place of Mute, but you can't have everything I guess. An excellent performer at a very reasonable price! ➤+

Bellari Rolls VP129

Price: £180

Distributor:

Smart Sound Direct

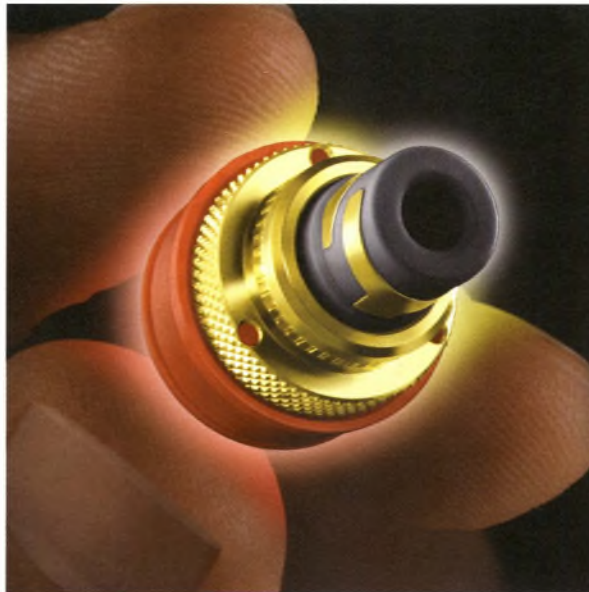
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# The WBT-0110 Cu Next Gen Phono-Plug

by Roy Gregory

Phono-plugs, indeed, connectors of almost all types, are amongst the most misunderstood things in audio. Massive, gold-plated creations of ever increasing weight and mechanical complexity seem to be de rigueur if you want to sell today's ever more expensive cables. Not because the manufacturers believe they sound better but because the public demand and expect it. Yet, by and large, these gilt encrusted artefacts simply undermine the performance the end user is paying so much to achieve.

DNM started by making amps out of plastic. It wasn't long before that low-mass, non-metallic philosophy had extended to embrace the plugs on their solid-core interconnects. The benefits were clearly audible in comparison to more ornate alternatives and customers were happy to extend an alternative philosophy that had already embraced solid-core



conductors. But then, the leads themselves only cost around £30. Increase that by a factor of 100 and purchasers might not be so willing to contemplate tacky little plastic mouldings and bits of bent metal. They hardly extend the image of precision engineering after all.

The first design to make a stab at re-engineering the lowly phono-plug

into something sonically a little more serious was the by now legendary Eichmann Bullet Plug. Reviewed back in Issue XX the simplicity itself Bullet Plug sonically destroyed the competition and did so at an extremely affordable price. It was however, not without its problems – mainly mechanical in nature. The reliance on plastic injection mouldings made the plug vulnerable to excessive heat when soldering as well as clumsy handling. I've never broken one but I know plenty of people who've never had one that

hasn't broken. Heavy handed they might be, but it's enough to deter other manufacturers from fitting them as standard, despite their acknowledged sonic benefits. The other issue surrounds the single size of barrel on offer, a situation which impairs both strain relief and cable compatibility. Nevertheless, many

► DIY customers have fitted these plugs to a whole range of leads and are ecstatically happy with the results.

Clearly, something had to give - and it has, in the shape of WBT's 0110 Next Gen plug. It's really not too strong to say that WBT looked at the Bullet Plug, recognised the lesson it was teaching them and re-engineered it to higher standards of mechanical integrity, adding a few wrinkles of their own along the way, as well as a matching socket. The end-result is a surprisingly solid, plastic construction.



The end results were extremely interesting. It was immediately apparent that both the Silver Bullets and the WBTs sounded significantly better than the Neutriks, which offered no benefits at all, other than their

mechanical integrity (and even that is suspect, the sprung earth connections being a weak spot, sonically and physically). However, the precise differences between the two plastic bodied designs were fascinating and far more subtle.

Let's start with the Silver Bullet. Compared with the Neutrik it offers a far more natural and convincing

presentation. There's much greater transparency, focus and detail, crisper micro dynamics and tremendous intimacy from the subtle textures, accents and inflexions they effortlessly reveal. Music is also far more fluid with a natural pace and breath to proceedings. Hesitations in tempo are much more apparent and carry far more musical relevance, while the inner harmonic complexity of instruments is laid bare. Simple recordings take on an almost crystalline clarity and breathtaking immediacy. The piano and vocal, straight to two-track recording of 'Some People's Live's' (Janice Ian, *Breaking Silence*) is a perfect illustration. There is a delicacy and poise to the piano notes, an effortless flow to the phrases, embracing and underlining the hesitant tempo that gives the instrumental lines their fragile beauty. The complexity of the instrument adds power to the sparingly used left hand, while the texture and breathy vibrance of Ian's vocal is wrenchingly intimate.

Turning to the WBTs we find a different but ultimately even more impressive performance. Whilst they lack the immediately obvious detail and transparency of the Silver Bullets, the 0110s deliver a more integrated, grounded, weighty and coherent picture. The piano phrases on the Janis Ian track have more weight and shape and careful listening to other material reveals greater low-frequency clarity and definition, tone and texture. Indeed, the tonal balance of the WBT plugs is more natural, along with more dimensional images and greater musical presence and body. Listening to the upper register piano notes you realise that the shape of the notes, their percussive quality and decay is far

In order to examine the performance of the WBT plug I had a manufacturer fit them to a set of high-quality leads. At the same time I had an identical set made with Silver Bullet plugs and another with Neutriks. They were then run-in both with the cable toaster and music, producing a test sample of three identical leads in all respects save the plugs on the end of them. (The manufacturer in question asked to remain anonymous in order to ward off a host of enquiries for plugs and re-termination. Don't expect your cable company to re-terminate existing leads, or even brand new ones, to individual order!)




► more apparent and realistic. The vocal line is also more naturally weighted, and if it lacks the breathy immediacy that's so impressive with the Silver Bullets, it makes up for it by being integrated and scaled into a single coherent whole along with the piano.

It's this contrast that really separates these two terminations: on one hand the holistic, on the other the particular. Whereas the WBTs create a single acoustic space, peopled with solid images and instruments, the Silver Bullets concentrate on the minutiae of individual elements, producing a sharply lit and highlighted presentation, redolent with micro-dynamic detail and texture. In contrast the 0110s deliver a more complete and tellingly, a more expressive performance. Whilst both

plugs bring tremendous dynamic tracking and fluidity to the music, it's the WBT that makes the most sense out of the information, the most easily read message from the music.

Those of you who actually bothered to read the title of this piece in its entirety might well have noticed the Cu suffix appended to the WBT product. Yes, it refers to the copper conductive elements and yes, as you have by now surmised, there's also a Ag (or silver, to the chemically challenged amongst you) model on offer. That has to represent the next step in this particular investigation. In the meantime, whilst the WBT-0110 undoubtedly isn't the final word in phono-plug design, it genuinely does represent the first example of the Next Generation. Expect to see a lot of them; cost effective, mechanically adept and sonically

supreme, at least for the present, there really is no excuse not to use them. Now, if we could only persuade hardware manufacturers to fit the sockets we could be onto something really good... 

Eichmann Silver Bullets  
Price: £74.95 (set of 4)

UK Distributor:  
hififorsale.com  
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Net. www.hififorsale.com

WBT-0110 Cu Next Gen  
Price: £82.95 (set of 4)  
WBT-0110 Ag Next Gen  
Price: £129.95 (set of 4)

Both available from hififorsale.com


# The finite elemente CeraPuc isolation feet

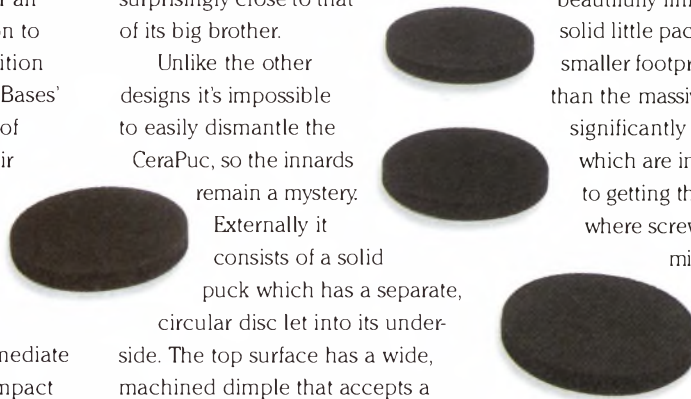
by Roy Gregory

I have already reviewed finite elemente's ceramic ball based isolation feet in both their (affordable) CeraBall and (expensive but wonderful with it) CeraBase forms, in Issues 21 and 31 respectively. The Ceraballs offer an extremely cost effective solution to wringing extra focus and definition out of a system, while the CeraBases' collective impact is little short of astonishing – which makes their considerable cost even more painful to the purchaser requiring additional sets. So I was pleased to receive a new, intermediate model. Dubbed the CeraPuc, it's intermediate in every sense, being more compact

and cheaper than the Cerabase but significantly more substantial than the CeraBall. The price is intermediate too, which is nice, but the really good news is that the performance gets surprisingly close to that of its big brother.

Unlike the other designs it's impossible to easily dismantle the CeraPuc, so the innards remain a mystery. Externally it consists of a solid puck which has a separate, circular disc let into its underside. The top surface has a wide, machined dimple that accepts a

chunky cylindrical foot. The top of the foot is threaded to accept the supplied M8 studs, used for attaching the foot to suitably threaded items such as speakers or stands. It's an elegant, beautifully finished and reassuringly solid little package. It also has a smaller footprint (top and bottom) than the massive CeraBase and a significantly lower rise, both of which are important when it comes to getting them under equipment, where screws in the baseplate might prove embarrassing, as can a dramatic increase in height. The CeraPucs measure 55mm 



▶ across their base, 34mm across the top and stand 35mm high. The cylindrical upper foot has three holes drilled into its sides so that you can insert the tool provided to ease levelling of heavy or awkward objects. Once again, finite elements seem to have covered all the bases.

Whereas the Ceraballs can be a component of some weight in exchange for the focus and resolution they bring, that's not the case with the CeraPucs. Placing them under the ARC CD3 Mk II didn't diminish this player's considerable musical energy one iota. What it did do was make sure that it was all in the right place. Stood straight on the shelf of an HD-04 rack, the bass was heavy, slow and detached, lagging behind the punchy mid-band and slowing the musical momentum. Inserting three CeraPucs, maintained the weight but brought it back into line with the pace and timing of the rest of the range, improved bass definition and pitch considerably and leading edge definition and transparency across

the entire range. These were not small differences, easily sorting out what had been a turgid performance of the Stewboss anthem 'Fill Station'. What had been muddy, leaden and plodding was now full of urgency and purpose, the persecuted anger of Greg Sarfarty's clever vocals infused with a pointed and lucid



quality that highlighted the damned if you do, damned if you don't duality of the song.

Classical and jazz fared just as well, with string bass in particular, taking on a new life and vibrance, a sense of life and energy to go with its new-found agility. The pizzicato strings at the beginning of the Barbirolli *Tallis Fantasia* took on more definite pitch and definition, although even the CeraPucs can't do

anything about the sing-a-long-a-riser that they're stood on – except to tell you that it's there.

They were also very successful under the Hovland HP100 valve pre-amp, introducing some welcome extra precision without diluting the overall musicality.

I've arranged a second set of CeraPucs in order to try them under speakers, which is I suspect their true calling – especially for those with polished wood floors. I'll report further. However, in the meantime, if you are searching for extra focus and transparency I your system along with a more secure dynamic and rhythmic foundation, these should be just the job. ➡

finite element CeraPuc :  
 £169 (set of 3)  
 £229 (set of 4)

UK Distributor:  
 Audiofreaks  
 Tel. (44)(0)208 948 4153  
 Net. [www.audiofreaks.co.uk](http://www.audiofreaks.co.uk)

## Quicksilver alive and kicking...



It appears that JK inadvertently (and prematurely) gave the impression of Quicksilver's demise. His report as they say, was greatly exaggerated. In fact, the respected US manufacturer of valve amplification is hale and hearty as the accompanying picture of their new V4 amplifier (£4000/pr) shows. The original mono amps are long gone, sunk by their reliance on the excellent but unavailable 8417 output tube. Current product is imported into the UK by RPM (Tel. 07790 907737 Net. [www.rpm-audio.co.uk](http://www.rpm-audio.co.uk)) and certainly looks interesting enough for review. Watch this space – who knows, I might even get JK to write the copy.

- Vinyl
- Audio Note TT-1 & IQ3
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- Audio Note Dac2.1 Sig
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- Verdier Control B pre amp
- Stoetkit valve amps and kits
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- ProAc Reference D38
- Rethm horn speakers
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- PHY-HP drive units
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- Chord Signature cables
- Nordost cables
- Something Solid supports
- Voodoo Airtech Isolation
- Isotek GII mains filters
- And many more...

**Featured product: Verdier Control B**



Verdier are perhaps best known for their turntables, but they also produce a range of valve amplifiers. The Control 'B' pre-amplifier featured here has a superb phono stage suitable for both MM and MC cartridges (the latter via high quality internal transformers). It costs £1,200 and can even be upgraded by connecting an external valve regulated power supply (£1,075 extra).

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# West Coast Legacy

by Reuben Parry

Creedence Clearwater Revival  
Absolute Originals  
Analogue Productions APP CCR7  
7 180g LPs & Bonus 45 LP  
7 180g 45rpm LPs & Bonus 45 LP  
7 Hybrid SACDs

## The 7 LP Box....

This Analogue Productions box set charts the rise and fall of one of the great San Francisco Bay area bands. It takes us from a 1968 eponymous and derivative debut album through their rockabilly, R&B and Creole New Orleans styled eras to the classic and progressive rock music heard until they were officially disbanded in October 1972. This quartet first took to the stage in 1959 as a high school group. They then worked the Californian club circuit before turning fully professional as Creedence Clearwater Revival in December 1967 having previously been known as The Blue Velvets, Tom Fogerty And The Blue Velvets and recording seven singles as the Gollywogs; singles that included two gilt-edged garage band classics in 'Fight Fire' and 'Walk On The Water' as well as a Beatles influenced 'Don't Tell Me No More Lies'. Throughout this eight-year period and the five years as Creedence Clearwater Revival (CCR) the line up remained unchanged with John Fogerty (lead guitar and vocals), Tom Fogerty (rhythm guitar and vocals), Stu Cook (bass) and Doug Clifford (drums). Such stability and continuity is rare indeed. The almost compulsive descent into acrimony and legal action that dog most rock music careers did not surface until after the group's demise.

The band's Trans-Atlantic popularity and record sales success can be quite well judged when taking a trip to your local second-hand music store where I guarantee there will be plenty of CCR re-issue LPs to be had. These were probably pressed in the '70s or '80s. I assume that things are little different in the States, which does rather beg the question (on one level at least) of whether we really needed to have 180g releases when the albums are still so readily available on vinyl in the first place. Sonically though these new heavyweight records are



undoubtedly a great improvement. Some of the titles, *Willy And The Poorboys* amongst them, have been revisited in the recent past by the now defunct DCC audiophile record label. It was Steve Hoffman then and it's Steve Hoffman now who tackles the mastering of these tapes and he adopts a purist approach with signal processing being kept to a minimum. Hoffman does admit to polishing up the John Fogerty vocals but pretty well leaves the rest of the original mixes alone. Consequently, these cuts drip with integrity. Interestingly, on that subject the booklet accompanying this set reveals that Fogerty only mixed songs the once and that he purposefully often went with the narrowest of stereo mixes to get as close to a "stereo" mono reproduction ▶

► as possible. It is something that's certainly worth bearing in mind when playing these LPs.

As good a starting point as any is CCR's self-titled album. Oddly enough for a debut LP it stands at something of a crossroads. One where John Fogerty penned songs like 'The Working Man' are slotted in alongside rock and roll standards like a Cropper-Pickett 'Ninety Nine And A Half' and an extended version of the Dale Hawkins classic 'Suzie Q' which was to peak at No.11 in the U.S. charts. They also reworked Gollywogs material for this album as well and while you can feel the way in which such durable songs have been spliced together it does remain a surprisingly solid



presentation overall, even though it's stylistically stretched out in an attempt to cover all the bases. Still an amalgam of styles and influences does give it something of a transitional feel, one which is backed up by the knowledge that the later releases are instead centred upon tightly constructed three-minute songs written by John. But CCR has much to recommend it. There's strong and sustained bass lines that range between the languid and the driven. Fogerty's bold and versatile voice holds down and controls all eight of these tracks and effectively propels you through quality blues numbers such as his 'Get Down Woman' or the song 'Gloomy' with its distinctly Jim Morrison/Doors like temperament. Putting for one moment those bad haircuts, beards and handlebar moustaches aside, this is a record that encapsulates the cosmopolitan contemporary San Francisco sound of the Sixties in a clean and clearly enunciated way.

Within a matter of months Fantasy Records had the second album *Bayou Country* securely in the can.

Although follow up LPs can be notoriously difficult to deliver *The Revival* effectively banished those demons from the studio. As this title suggests there's spicy Southern R&B musical influences at play here while that hazy and slightly out of focus artwork no more than hints at the loosely woven progressive thread beginning to sweep through America at that time. Of course the personal grooming hadn't improved any but now for this seven-track session there was only one cover, 'Good Golly Miss Molly'. On *Bayou Country* the point of attack had noticeably shifted towards perceptive originals written by Fogerty in his small El Cerrito apartment. Among them 'Bootleg' has Creole genes. 'Born On The Bayou', the side one opener, makes a considerable statement with its bloated bass rolling around the soundstage as John unleashes crunching yet well-defined vocals over it. A meandering eight-minute blues track like 'Graveyard Train' gets its jagged hooks into you as its working class sensibilities filter through. But remarkably perhaps, it was the tale of a simple washer-woman, 'Proud Mary', which

not only confirmed Fogerty's blue collar credentials but as an unlikely single release took that coveted top ten spot both here and in the States and gave them their first gold disc in the process.

Another album (Fogerty's favourite) *Green River* quickly followed in 1969. Its popularity, a growing lyricism and yet more single successes with a

title track release and 'Bad Moon Rising', further helped to consolidate the band's status. They definitely possessed that common touch; one that seems to come so much more easily to these rock musicians than it did to their psychedelic contemporaries. Possibly that decorative dreamy detachment of ultra hip San Francisco bands like Jefferson Airplane or the wandering and improvisational acid rock sound of the Grateful Dead was not straight talking enough to reflect gritty everyday concerns. CCR certainly played it as they saw it. Even songs about personal melancholia ('Lodi') which touched upon a journeyman musician's depression at playing yet another dingy joint had resonance enough to elicit a degree of ►



► understanding when as a theme it could just as easily have been greeted with derision. Audiences warmed to lyrics that reflected Fogerty's own spiky determination to improve his lot in life. They also liked the band's organic American approach, mixing blues grooves, a plump bass sound, occasional country rock chords and the incisive guitars that snipe away on tracks like 'Commotion' or the Robert Johnson influenced 'Tombstone Shadow'. The direction is all John Fogerty. His songs, his arrangements, his production and his personal tribute to the Memphis sound of Sun Records in 'Cross-Tie Walker' and 'Green River'.

By the time *Willy And The Poorboys* was released later in the year CCR were a hot property enjoying both critical acclaim and the commercial success. A winning formula saw its opening song, that euphoric and populist 'Down On The Corner', became their fifth U.S. top ten single. It paved the way to the record racks for this album. John's continued praise for American folk traditions on this occasion surfaced with a salute to Leadbelly and the African-American blues movement in 'Cotton Fields' and 'The Midnight Special'. Consciousness raising social and political statements came in the shape of the withering 'Fortunate Son', a song which lamented the fact that it was the working classes and the nation's poor who went into the Vietnam meat grinder while strings were pulled to allow the son's of rich families to stay at home. It has the urgency and a more sharply observed feeling about it than do some of the more vitriolic protest songs of the day. I see the accessibility in this approach and the down to earth storytelling as having a greater blue-collar appeal in an age when much of the protest movement had a liberal middle class bias. Well, in the light of America's recent presidential campaign, this is still a subject that has considerable relevance and mileage some thirty-five years later.

Those effective and tightly focused three-minute long anti war songs also featured on *Cosmo's Factory* which was the first of two CCR LPs cut in 1970. Fogerty piles in with 'Who'll Stop The Rain' and 'Run Through The Jungle', songs which haul the U.S. government over the coals for its willingness to send their young men into a futile South

East Asian conflict. Again this LP release was preceded by a string of singles to be found later on *Cosmo's Factory*. All three: 'Travelin' Band', 'Looking Out My Back Door' and 'Up Around The Bend' had b-sides containing yet more album material and all three singles went gold. A trademark homage to American music came in the form of an extended and slightly indulgent eleven minute long rendition of the Tamla/Motown classic 'I Heard It Through The Grapevine'. This is another set of CCR songs that define the band's economical sound with music based around an implicit understanding, strong heartfelt

storytelling, a conscience and sympathetic and supportive playing. The three records from their middle period: *Green River*, *Willy* and *Cosmo's* all show John, Tom, Stu and Doug to be fully in control of these powers.

By comparison the two remaining LPs in this set *Pendulum* (November 1970) and *Mardi Gras* (February 1972)



highlight increasing artistic tensions and show how deep seated internal problems can surface so quickly to break up such a close knit group. The most notable differences were Tom's desire to return as a lead vocalist and John's refusal to sanction it, while Cook and Clifford's wanted far greater involvement in the compositional process. John Fogerty, underestimating his own immense talent unnecessarily dabbled in the progressive musical imagery of the day, and although *Pendulum* featured an eighth gold single in 'Have You Ever Seen The Rain', as an album this lacked much of the virility heard in its predecessors. Of the ten songs only 'Molina' and 'Pagan Baby' really sparkle. Other self conscious tracks like 'Rude Awakening #2' and 'Chameleon' contain



▶ references to the band as if John knew the end was not so very far away and was leaving that little something for posterity. This was also the last of the CCR albums wholly written and produced by Fogerty. In February 1971 Tom left to pursue a solo career and although the remaining members toured extensively as a trio, the 1972 studio return to cut *Mardi Gras* was a big disappointment. Stu Cook and Doug Clifford exerted their democratic rights here with six insipid compositions - three each. They also shared the vocal and production duties with John and generally muddied the waters of the band's disjointed swan song. The rare moments of quality belong solely to John. He too only wrote three of its ten tracks (the other was a reprise of the Gene Pitney penned Ricky Nelson hit 'Hello Mary Lou' on which he sings alone). But in 'Sweet Hitch-Hiker', 'Lookin' For A Reason' and a prophetic 'Someday Never Comes' we have classy and intelligent original tunes.



### The 45rpm LP box...

Rather than simply reproduce these original albums again in their entirety as 45rpm cuts this second box (limited to 2500 copies) contents itself with a reprise of the best tracks found on each LP but this time cut at that higher speed. Curtailing the size of this set makes

a lot of sense. To throw a 45rpm blanket across all of this CCR material would have given us an unmanageable collection of twenty or more LPs that few could afford or even hope to carry! It is also quite an appropriate way to present the Creedence sound because in the days when you had to sell many

hundreds of thousands of singles to earn

that top ten position they maintained

a huge reputation as a singles

band. So it's an approach which

should please those who

are concerned with

sonic improvements

and still satisfy

fans and purists

who have a

genuine feeling

for the historical

perspective. A choice

of songs here generally

reflects the relative merits

of each of the original LPs.

So the weaker albums at the

back end of the CCR catalogue

are barely mentioned, with only four tracks found on the

*Pendulum* and *Mardi Gras* excerpts - two respectively being

taken from each in 'Have You Ever Seen The Rain' and

'Hey Tonight' and 'Sweet Hitch-Hiker' and 'Someday Never

Comes'. Although the debut album which is a far better

offering than both of these LPs put together is definitely

under represented. Here too there is only enough room

for the two tracks in 'Suzie Q' and 'I Put A Spell On You'.

However, *Bayou Country*, *Green River*, *Cosmo's Factory*

and *Willy And The Poorboys* are given much greater

representation with eighteen covers and John Fogerty

originals spread amongst them. The big titles are all



The latter is an ambiguous number that closes side one and has been variously interpreted as an omen for the band's demise or a reflection on the Vietnam legacy. Everything else that followed: the singles anthologies, compilations and especially the live albums were unrepresentative.

However, the box set does not quite stop there. There's a five-track 45rpm bonus LP to contend with. This includes the rare 1975 wide stereo/quadrasonic re-mixes of 'Proud Mary' and 'Bad Moon Rising' as well as further 45rpm cuts of 'Lodi', 'Penthouse Pauper' and 'Good Golly Miss Molly'. I'd say that's probably enough to make dyed in the wool CCR fans drool.

► present and correct-including 'Proud Mary', 'Good Golly Miss Molly', 'Bad Moon Rising', 'Lodi', 'Down On The Corner', 'Fortunate Son', 'Run Through The Jungle' and 'I Heard It Through The Grapevine'. The bonus 45 found in the LP box has also been thrown in for good measure.

Cosmetically, beware. The standard LP and 4 5rpm box sets are almost identical. The exterior photos and booklet covering the history of the band are the same. Only in the reproduction of the individual sleeve artwork found inside these boxes and (necessarily) with the track listings do they differ. Although the original album sleeves are reproduced for both sets, in the 45rpm collection they are sepia coloured instead of the full colour printed sleeves found inside the 33rpm set.

### The Hybrid SACDs...

Collectively and individually this journey of mine following the artistic rise and fall of the blues-tinted Creedence Clearwater swamp rock sound has been a pleasantly illuminating one. I cannot admit to being their biggest or most vociferous fan but I do salute fine musicianship and the importance of their role within an American West Coast movement. The exemplary and frequently challenging song writing of John Fogerty and the band's famously well worked covers have been re-mastered with terrific dedication and great care. Steve Hoffman really keeps the faith. His desire to reveal as much of this music without any obvious manipulation of the original tapes is truly commendable. The honesty and integrity put into those LP pressings is replicated on the SACD releases, and remember, this is a format which more than any other can, if poorly handled really poison the musical waterhole through an excessive manipulation of the material in the mastering suite.

Take that soulful and heavily reverberating acoustic produced for 'I Put A Spell On You' as a good example. It naturally sweats out an intoxicating emotional

ambience while those raucous and demanding Fogerty vocals pierce the cloying fabric of such a narrow soundstage. The familiar urgency and bite of a combative lead guitar also tears another pathway through this cloth.

The SACD replicates these sounds and maybe just polishes up the guitar and vocal lines a little. It plays it straight and doesn't over commit. Arrangements for drums and lead, rhythm and bass guitars do not need or take a lot of sorting out, so SACD's legendary organisational qualities are rarely called upon. But for each album and each individual song it does effortlessly develop that evocative side present within these recordings; the wailing melancholia of a blues groove with its wiry guitars, the drive,

dynamism and increased volumes for rock songs. Those chunky bass lines hanging on spiced Creole dishes spread across a bed of dirty rice. All are delivered with appropriately atmospheric touches that have a reassuringly uncomplicated and irresistible appeal to them. For once, those of a digital bent have not been short-changed on the re-issue merry-go-round.



Individual Analogue Productions SACD issues:

*Creedence Clearwater Revival* CAPJ 8382 SA  
*Bayou Country* CAPJ 8387 SA  
*Green River* CAPJ 8393 SA  
*Willy And The Poorboys* CAPJ 8397 SA  
*Cosmo's Factory* CAPJ 8402 SA  
*Pendulum* CAPJ 8410 SA  
*Mardi Gras* CAPJ 9404 SA

# 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, Michael Mercer, Richard Clews, Sian Drinkwater.

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Alison Krauss And Union Station

### Lonely Runs Both Ways

Rounder RRCD 525 

Take hold of this disc with both hands, grip tightly and under no circumstances let it go. Over the last decade Alison Krauss and Union Station have released beautifully crafted contemporary blue grass albums and the exquisite and evocatively titled *Lonely Runs Both Ways* encapsulates all that is good about them. Accompanied by her core band of superb musicians, Krauss gives one of those quite delicious displays of singing that will melt the coldest and most uncaring of hearts. The writing as always is of the highest calibre and this again contributes to the power and success of her latest recording. Robert Lee Castleman supplies four of these songs and stalwart Union Station guitarist Ron Block another two. There's also room for old timers like Woodie Guthrie and Del McCoury whose enduring folk blues classics 'Pastures of Plenty' and 'Rain Please Go Away' rub shoulders with the more modern and piquant flavoured 'Wouldn't Be So Bad' which comes courtesy of the brilliant Gillian Welch and David Rawlings partnership. Welch's song deserves to be in such auspicious company. There's a nice blend of lively traditional grass chewing rural tunes and the honeyed melodies penned by John Scott Sherrill for 'If I Didn't Know Any Better' or R.L. Castleman in 'Gravity' and 'Restless'.

RP



RECORDING  
MUSIC





Biffy Clyro

Infinity Land

Beggars Banquet bbqcd238  


Infinity Land sees Biffy Clyro complete their transformation from Nirvana wannabes to alternative rock giants. Last years *Vertigo Of Bliss* made it clear that the Scottish three-piece were intent on pushing their music further from the mainstream in search of fresher pastures and this latest record certainly continues this move. This album is resolutely difficult, although each song has firm foundations in structure and tune, layer upon layer of complexity are added until the tracks become a study of careful discord and disjointedness. The band play with time signatures and dynamics, fracturing each song into multiple parts that barely fit together, mashed in with guitar trills and harsh vocal assaults. In short: this is not chart friendly material. So if this album is so much effort, why bother? Well, Biffy Clyro have quietly crept into the consciousness of the underground, slowly gathering a dedicated following. Whilst most alternative rock bands seem content to follow the crowd, Biffy Clyro are determined to cut their own path. And their popularity has been built on the realisation that beneath the white noise there lie some big hooks and fantastic tunes. Perhaps this album is difficult, perhaps even self indulgent, but it's certainly good. Infinity Land is an album that grows and grows. If you like your music loud, this one's for you.

MC



James Cotton

Baby, Don't You Tear My Clothes

Telarc CD83596 

James Cotton's paid his dues. From nine years old he was on the road with the legendary Sonny Boy Williamson. At 15, he inherited Sonny Boy's Band and after a short tenure left to become a solo artist, recording with Howling Wolf and Don Nix on the Memphis blues circuit. The real big break came when Muddy Waters hit town looking for a replacement for his harpist, Junior Wells. Cotton got the job and stayed for the next 12 years, before breaking out on his own again. Throat surgery has curtailed his singing career but he still blows a mighty fierce harp. With a pedigree like his it wasn't difficult for Cotton to assemble some pretty influential friends for this new Telarc album. He's brought in the likes of ex-blaster Dave Alvin, Marcia Ball, Odetta, Rory Block, C.J. Chenier and Bobby Rush to handle various vocal parts, and all their contributions are first class. With a house band featuring David Maxwell (Piano), Derek O'Brien (Guitar), Noel Neal (Bass) and Per Hansson (Drums), Cotton and his guests cut loose and slip into some lovely, laid back shuffles and boogies which will delight anyone into harmonica driven blues. James Cotton is 69 years old and still has what it takes: he's what the spirit of the blues is all about.

AH



Bob Marley

Young Mystic

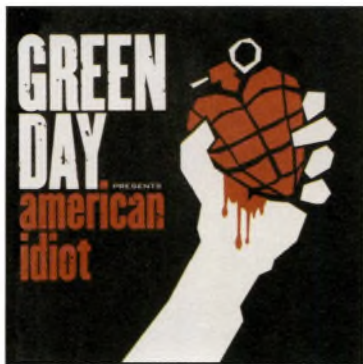
Audio Fidelity AFZ 021  

Coupled with The Wailers and The Upsetters this early outing from Marley was produced in the early 1970's by Lee 'Scratch' Perry. The sessions were raw and minimalist with Marley backed by The Upsetters comprising Alva Lewis (guitar), Glen Adams (keyboards) and the Barrett brothers Carly (drums), and Aston (bass). The band would lay down their backing tracks supervised by Bob, Bunny and Peter who would then contribute their vocals. Perry's contribution to the whole thing remains a controversy, but rumour has it that it was pretty minimal. Asked what tunes the Wailers would give Perry and which they'd retain for Tuff-Gong their own label, Bunny said "The throw-away stuff". If so, this is the finest collection of rubbish I've heard. Including a number of tracks that were to become better known in later incarnations such, 'Kaya' and 'All In One' (a medley including an early outing of 'One Love'), this is a very fine set. The Wailers sinuous harmony vocals are to the fore and in Steve Hoffman's expert re-mastering of this material, every nuance of their vocals can be savoured, alongside deep, warm bass and crisp percussion. And whilst the original material would never have won any hi-fi awards, Hoffmann has wrought wonders in wringing every drop of value from it. This is a set that can stand proudly next to Marley's more famous titles.

Supplier: [www.vivante.co.uk](http://www.vivante.co.uk)

DD





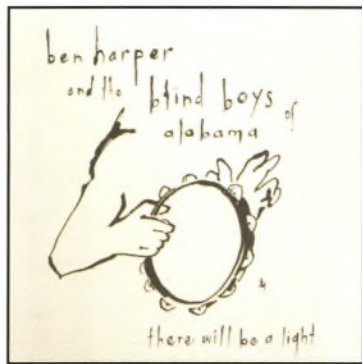
## Green Day

### American Idiot

Reprise Records 9362-48777-2 

In 1994 Green Day released *Dookie* which stormed to success and stands as a landmark in the American punk music landscape. It unleashed a sound that now defines a generation and spawned hundreds of copycat bands. To me *Dookie* represents perfection of a genre. So, ten years later, with *American Idiot*, the band return to that point to see how things have changed. This is a strange record. The track-list is dominated by two huge tracks, 'Jesus of Suburbia' and 'Homecoming', each of which have five themes. These tracks seem disjointed, never quite building properly over the entire length of the song. But over their length familiar hooks leap out at you, snatches of tracks from *Dookie* as well as themes spookily reminiscent of old Bryan Adams tunes. But around and between these über-tunes, this album is crammed with straight-down-the-middle Green Day singles. And these singles are the equal of anything the band have done before. Like so many bands, the current situation in America and around the world has acted to fuel a creative fire. Green Day have sprung back, enlivened and revitalised, as current and relevant as ever: older, more mature, but just as good. This album constantly invites comparison with *Dookie*, and consistently comes out shining. Less a return to form, more a coming of age.

MC



## Ben Harper & The Blind Boys of Alabama

### There Will Be A Light

Virgin Records


The foundations for this collaboration between Ben Harper and The Blind Boys of Alabama can be traced back to the New Orleans jazz and Heritage festival in 2001. It was there they performed together for the first time, something they were to repeat when the Blind Boys played (sang?) the opening slot on Ben Harper's final European date in Paris last year. Once back home the two bands returned to the studio to cut a couple of songs for the next Blind Boys album. That was the general idea anyway; this was the end result. *There Will Be A Light* features 11 tracks, eight from the pen of Ben Harper. He also produced it and contributed plenty of his trademark slide guitar behind the formidable vocal harmonies of the Blind Boys. The blend is toxic and hypnotic, especially on 'Satisfied Mind', where Harper's guitar weaves its magic behind Clarence Fountain's passionate gospel wail. A few of the songs don't work quite as well; 'Mother Pray' is a plodding capella and 'There Will Be A Light' is a tad lightweight. But when it's good, it's very good indeed. I've always had a fondness for Ben Harper's music but have only ever shown a cursory interest in the Blind Boys. I find endless references to the Lord a touch grating, but have to say this project works very well.

AH



## John Carpenter

### Assault On Precinct 13

Record Makers 3 700078 409060 

John Carpenter's B-Movie cult classic *Assault On Precinct 13* was loosely based upon the Howard Hawks western *Rio Bravo* and its avant-garde minimalist soundtrack is widely credited with influencing many of the action movie scores that followed as well as a hip-hop and techno sounds of the 1990s. Those repetitive bars of the main theme played on a synthesiser reinforce an acutely atmospheric sense of isolation, oppressive fear, loneliness, desolation and the overriding menace as faceless Los Angeles gang members besiege the abandoned police station. Eerie electronic effects and a relentless beat dramatically add to the claustrophobically stark celluloid images. Archetypal moments abound. The short but robust and laconic theme for his anti-hero Napoleon Wilson is one that would be recalled in later films for Kurt Russell characters like Snake Pliskin (*Escape From New York*). Out of these sparse electronic soundscapes Carpenter even manages to delicately create a groove to sensitively deal with some of the film's most shocking and difficult scenes. These include that drive-by killing of the innocent girl buying ice cream near the start of the movie and for the death of Julie during the early stages of the Precinct gun battle. The transfer by French-based label Record Makers has surprising clarity and depth perception for a mainstream release.

RP





Marta Gomez

Cantos De Agua Dulce

Chesky 

Oh no, another bossa-lite album I thought. Fortunately my hasty judgement had let me down again and against all expectation this is a delightful set. Marta Gomez, a Colombian, has a lovely sensual voice and is sensitively backed in this set by a well-chosen band comprising guitar, percussion and electric bass. The accompaniment is kept deliberately simple allowing Gomez to shine. One track rolls silkily and seamlessly into another in this set and all are strong but particular favourites include the delicate, evocative opener 'La Finca' ('The Farm') remembering Gomez's childhood home. The lovely rolling 'Seis' with its pattering percussion, sinuous accordion and a cappella closing chorus, the old Venezuelan song 'Tonada de la Luna Ilera' ('Song of the Full Moon') with Gomez's voice soaring above the simplest percussion, and the closing 'Aguellas Pequeñas Cosas' ('The Simple Things'). This short song where she is accompanied by just acoustic guitar and accordion is for me the most heart-tugging of the set as, in a song learnt from her first voice teacher, Gomez sings of the simple things in life, of poignant memories that return at the most unexpected moments. This is a fitting close to a wonderful album. Very well recorded in St Peters NYC by David Chesky and Julio Santillan, this set is a real gem and is strongly recommended.

Supplier: [www.vivante.co.uk](http://www.vivante.co.uk)

DD



Lloyd Cole and the Commissions

Rattlesnakes Deluxe Edition

Polypro 982 182-0  

In a decade dominated by the New Romantic Movement and synthesised pop music there were few remarkable albums to write about. One of those rare exceptions was the Lloyd Cole debut *Rattlesnakes*. Its sound, backed by shimmering strings and dominated by vibrant keyboards and guitars, had a refreshingly honest quality about it, while the intelligent lyricism and freedom of expression was quite sublime. Those who simply dismissed Cole's regular use of literary, cinematic or philosophical allusions as pretentious failed to see the wry, witty, frequently ironic and self-deprecatory persona behind these songs. Thematically he went out and nailed his targets to the wall with a series of tuneful, melodic, dryly humoured and wistful numbers. 'Perfect Skin' critically observed the image-making industry, while others like 'Forest Fire' dealt with the hectic nature and underlying pressures of life. All of the songs beautifully moved the debate away from fragile interpersonal relationships to another level with their internal dialogues and commentary on the divisive and destructive social experiences of the Thatcher years. This two disc deluxe edition not only re-masters the ten original songs but reels out the demos, radio sessions, B-sides and out takes as well to the tune of a further eighteen tracks. Live cuts of 'Charlotte Street' and radio performances of 'Patience', 'Rattlesnakes' and 'Speedboat' should not be missed.

RP



Perez Prado Orchestra

The Best of Mambo

JVC SVCD1046 

Familiar now from innumerable TV ads Perez Prado know as 'El Rey de Mambo' first brought the mambo to public attention and huge popularity in the 1950's with some of the decades biggest hits including 'Cherry Pink and Apple Blossom White' (not for some reason included here), and 'Patricia' which topped both the pop and R&B charts. It was Prado's band that indirectly kicked off the whole mambo craze when Sinatra's arranger and bandleader Sonny Burke released a successful cover of Prado's 'Que Rico de Mambo' renamed (as it is here) as 'Mambo Jambo'. Mambo's real breakthrough into mainstream popular music came with novelty songs like Rosemary Clooney's 'Mambo Italiano', and Perry Como's 'Papa Loves to Mambo'. Perez, whilst he appealed hugely to the broader record-buying public never enjoyed the success with New York's Latin audience of his contemporaries Tito Puente and Machito. His music was considered too simplified and commercial in comparison. Despite all this the set is great fun when viewed as the punchy pop it undoubtedly is, with its strident brass riffs, driving percussion (cowbells to the fore), and vocal interjections. And whilst the start to finish playing of this 63 minute compilation is too much of a good thing, a few numbers to intersperse more weighty material makes for highly enjoyable listening.

Supplier: [www.vivante.co.uk](http://www.vivante.co.uk)

DD





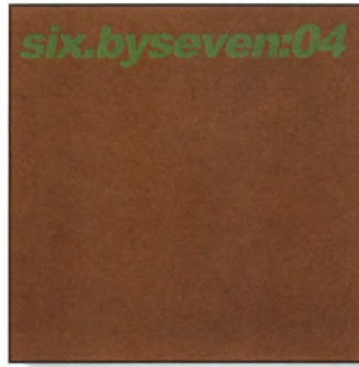
Shawn Colvin

## Polaroids

Columbia 519299 2 (CD)

In the absence of an album jam-packed with new Shawn Colvin songs we will have to make do with this retrospective which spans the Grammy award winner's fifteen year recording career from *Steady On* to *Whole New You*. The bonus track, which has not previously featured, is a lovely and quite softly delivered version of Lennon and McCartney's 'I'll Be Back'. The lazy tempo and carefully weighted lyrics are beguiling and reminds us that she can also brilliantly revisit other people's songs as well as perfectly execute her own material. Bob Ludwig re-masters this and another fourteen classic Colvin numbers. These include 'Diamond in the Rough' and 'Shotgun Down The Avalanche' and the title track heard from her debut album as well as songs like 'Round Of Blues' and 'I Don't Know Why' (*Fat City*) and 'Sunny Came Home' and 'Get Out Of This House' lifted from *A Few Small Repairs*. Strong original songs and intelligently structured covers help to make *Polaroids* a rewarding introduction to this music or a welcome reprise for existing fans of these contemporary American folk songs that compare so favourably to the works of a Joni Mitchell, Joan Baez or Suzanne Vega.

RP



Six By Seven

## 04

Saturday Night Sunday Morning Record ssm001cd (CD)

With this, their fourth album, *Six by Seven* have done something that would previously have seemed impossible. Previous purveyors of the finest in dark brooding despair, they have made an album which can only be described as uplifting. Their debut was steeped in depression and bitterness, their second fuelled by anger and their third furious and cynical. Without these emotions it would be quite possible for this album to seem empty and pointless. Without the fire of their angst what could drive this record on? And yet, this album seems to be driven by something quite different – by hope.

Perhaps all this seems a little abstract, but it marks a distinct change for the band. Stripped down to a lean three-piece, the band have changed their sound dramatically. This record seems to have been influenced by bands such as Spiritualised and the Stone Roses. This might be a new, happier, more relaxed band, but they certainly know how to belt out a good tune. But whereas previous *Six By Seven* albums have been consistently excellent, right through the track-list, *04* can flag at times as the band test their new formula.

If you're looking for their best material, buy an older album. But if you're looking for something without the grinding depression and raw fury, this might be more your taste.

MC



Steve Earle

## The Revolution Starts Now

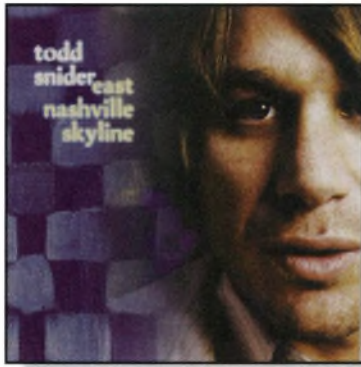
Artemis RCD 17023 (CD)

Steve Earle is a brave and honourable man and a writer who always approaches the art of songwriting with honesty and integrity. It's no secret that he holds no affection for the administration currently governing his country; he's spoken out on more than one occasion and his last album contained a song that had half of America calling him a traitor (John Walker's Blues). He isn't; what he is passionate about justice and truth. He's not anti-American – in fact, in his own words he feels 'urgently American'. Earle comes from a (supposedly) democratic nation and as such exercises his right to freedom of speech through his songs; *The Revolution Starts Now* is his take on what he sees happening to his beloved country. It's a powerful statement, both lyrically and musically, and it packs a punch. You don't need to be an academic to understand the sentiments expressed in songs like 'Rich Man's War' and 'F. the C.C.' He's angry and it spills out with vitriol: "F.k the F.C.C., F.k the F.B.I, F.k the C.I.A., livin' in the motherf..kin' USA."

Steve Earle will always be his own man, He'll continue to write from the heart and stand up for what he believes in, and if you don't like what he does or has to say then brother that's your choice and, as the man says, "your motherf..kin right".

AH





Todd Snider

East Nashville Skyline

Oh Boy Records OBR031 (CD)

It might be coincidence but Todd Snider's latest record is released on Oh Boy Records, the label owned by John Prine. Prine has recorded some magnificent albums over the years and always includes a liberal dollop of humour in his songs, something Todd Snider is also very good at. I remember Johnnie Walker playing the hidden, untitled song on his *Songs From The Daily Planet* album, a track about a band that don't play a single note and go on to mega-stardom and a spot on MTV unplugged!

*East Nashville Skyline* follows a similar path with songs like 'Tillamook Country Jail', the true story of Snider's incarceration for something he insists he didn't do. In the extensive liner notes he claims "Jail was actually pretty nice (!) I just don't think I should have been there. I think I'm an alright guy!"

Snider has this uncanny knack of finding humour in the unlikeliest places; take 'Sunshine' as an example, a song about a guy who tries to kill himself but makes a right hash of it, or 'The Ballad Of The Kingsmen', a talk song lamenting the mixed messages society feeds our kids. Snider's songs are clever, humorous, touching and brilliantly crafted. He'll tickle your musical taste buds and make you cry and laugh out loud at the same time.

AH



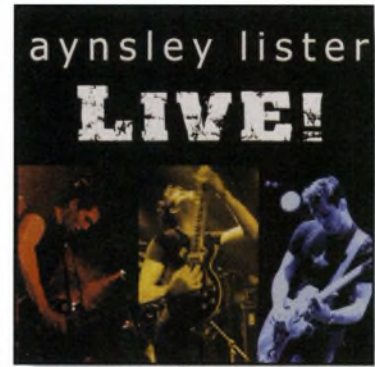
Michelle Shocked

Arkansas Traveler

Mighty Sound (CD)

*Arkansas Traveler* if memory serves me correctly was first released back in 1992 and this new edition which has been expanded from fourteen to twenty one tracks remains as musically controversial and demanding as ever. Shocked looked right across the spectrum of American music and in the process blurred the boundaries to recreate a vital and truly organic sound for herself that is notable for its originality, substance and outspoken sentiments. Into the mix went blues, soul, gospel, folk and country tunes with Michelle remaining remarkably true to those traditions while carving out a challenging groove of her own. She is strong on the kind of storytelling that still has a striking degree of relevance. Observations about inequality (Prodigal Daughter) an attack on corporations (Strawberry Jam) or the simple wit and country humour found in the title track resonate even though they are built upon much older musical forms. Duets with the likes of Alison Krauss, Doc Watson and Jimmy Driftwood delightfully capture the variety and vibrancy present in these genres while at the same time throwing down a real lyrical gauntlet. Of the new tracks a stunning acoustic studio demo of 'Come A Long Way' should be prized above all. But live cuts of 'Worth The Weight', 'Blackberry Blossom', 'Down In The Arkansas' and 'Introducing Dollar Bill' sparkle nearly as brightly.

RP



Aynsley Lister

Live

RUF Records RUF1100 (CD)

In this country it's rare for a twenty-something young man with boy band good looks to be championing the blues, but make no mistake – Aynsley Lister has got serious blues running through his veins.

Lister has been interested in the form since the age of eight, when he used to hide away in his bedroom for hours and play along to his father's Freddie King, Eric Clapton and John Mayall records. He's released some very tasty albums along the way, always maintaining a heavy blues streak but also incorporating fairly large doses of classic rock and funk into the equation. Those rock influences were heavily prominent on his last studio recording, with 'Balls Of Steel' paying homage to AC/DC, one of his favourite hard rock bands.

Recorded in March 2004 in front of an enthusiastic audience at the Crossfields festival in Germany, *Live* is 80 minutes of Aynsley doing what he does best – loud, sweaty, bluesy rock n' roll. There are a few new tracks that fit seamlessly into the set alongside live favourites like 'Angel O' Mine' and 'Everything I Need', but the standout track is 'Sometimes It Gets To Me', a 10 minute slowish blues with some jaw-dropping soloing and a deft touch. *Live* is another fine release by Lister to add to his ever impressive back catalogue.

AH





# The Bluesville Years

by Richard S. Foster

## *"But the blues still fell this morning"*

Paul Oliver

There are many collectors who believe blues music was more than over at the end of the 78 era. Based upon so many of the later compilations I've heard on various LP re-issues, they may not be too far wrong. I have a hard time with much in the way of the blues after the early 1960's. There are, however always exceptions.

Blues music is highly personal. For me, it either touches me or doesn't. Very simple. With some categories of music, i.e., classical orchestral, chamber music, opera, etc., we may learn to love and develop strong feelings and emotional bonds either immediately or over time. Personally, I have seen my tastes change, grow and develop. Twenty years ago you'd never find me listening to an opera. I felt chamber music was a total bore. Well, as you know, this is certainly not the case today. Regarding the blues however, I've played certain recordings by artists I've owned over the years, and have discovered that, unlike other categories, if I didn't like it in 1975, I don't like it in 2005. Why this is, I don't know.

Because there is so much Blues Music out there, I thought I'd offer some suggestions that may get folks interested in exploring this great category of music.

First, let me say that if you're a 'must have the best possible sound period' type of person, you may be disappointed when you get into heavy exploration of

'da blues'. This is especially true for vinyl. At a later date I'll venture into some of my LP recommendations, where some, by accident, happen to offer great sound quality.

The Bluesville LP years, covers a period from approximately 1959 through 1964. Bluesville records were a division of the highly regarded jazz label, Prestige. Although they numbered from 1001 to 1089, there were not ninety Bluesville releases. By mid 1964 the label would be folded directly with the Prestige label. On many of the early pressings you're going to see those initials RVG [Rudy Van Gelder] etched in the



deadwax area.

Today, these labels now all fall under the banner of Concord Jazz which just purchased the company from Fantasy Records. The original records, while very spotty as far as quality control goes, can be sonically fabulous. There are some stereo issues in the mix, but most of these are all pure 100% mono performances. ▶

## How To Sing The Blues\*

by Lame Mango Washington  
(attributed to Memphis Earlene Gray with help from Uncle Plunky, revisions by Little Blind Patti D. and Dr. Stevie Franklin)

1. Most Blues begin, "Woke up this morning."
2. "I got a good woman" is a bad way to begin the Blues, 'less you stick something nasty in the next line, like " I got a good woman, with the meanest face in town."
3. The Blues is simple. After you've got the first line right, repeat it. Then find something that rhymes ... sort of: "Got a good woman - with the meanest face in town. Got teeth like Margaret Thatcher - and she weigh 500 pound."
4. The Blues are not about choice. You stuck in a ditch, you stuck in a ditch; ain't no way out.

5. Blues cars: Chevys and Cadillacs and broken-down trucks. Blues don't travel in Volvos, BMWs, or Sport Utility Vehicles. Most Blues transportation is a Greyhound bus or a southbound train. Jet aircraft an' state-sponsored motor pools ain't even in the running. Walkin' plays a major part in the blues lifestyle. So does fixin' to die.

6. Teenagers can't sing the Blues. They ain't fixin' to die yet. Adults sing the Blues. In Blues, "adulthood" means being old enough to get the electric chair if you shoot a man in Memphis.

7. Blues can take place in New York City but not in Hawaii or any place in Canada. Hard times in St. Paul or Tucson is just depression. Chicago, St. Louis, and Kansas City are still the best places to have the Blues. You cannot have the blues in any place that don't get rain.

8. A man with male pattern baldness ain't the blues. A woman with male pattern baldness

is. Breaking your leg cuz you skiing is not the blues. Breaking your leg cuz an alligator be chomping on it is.

9. You can't have no Blues in an office or a shopping mall. The lighting is wrong. Go outside to the parking lot or sit by the dumpster.

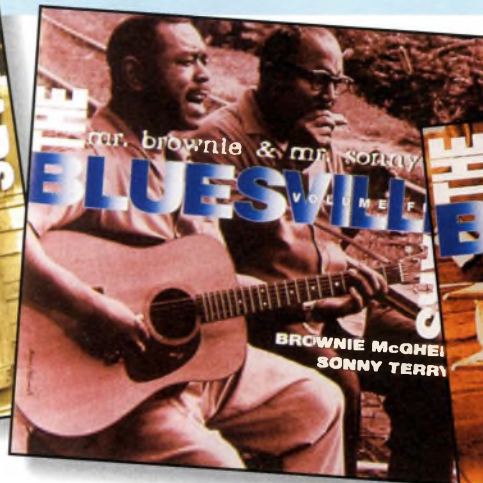
10. Good places for the Blues:

- a. highway
- b. jailhouse
- c. empty bed
- d. bottom of a whiskey glass

Bad places:

- a. Ashrams
- b. gallery openings
- c. Ivy League institutions
- d. golf courses

11. No one will believe it's the Blues if you wear a suit, 'less you happen to be an old ethnic person, and you slept in it.



► This series of a dozen CDs, all containing excellent sound, will give anyone a great introduction into a cross section of blues artists. While there are many artists not represented here, you will still find a wealth of fabulous music, well produced and re-mastered quite honestly and still true to the music.

The series can be purchased in the U.S. directly from Fantasy (<http://www.fantasyjazz.com>) for \$14.98 a disc. Almost all of them contain sixty plus minutes of music. Search the internet and you may be able to find them at prices even lower, not to mention the fact that you don't HAVE to have all twelve... but you should. Each CD

has been carefully matched, meaning the artists on each disc really work well so you get a 'feeling' about all the performances being of the same mood.

It's so hard to advise people exactly which are the 'Best' of this series to purchase. I'd suggest starting with numbers 3, 8 and 11. Digest these and I am sure you'll start digging further. These cover some of my favorite artists and although Furry Lewis had recorded so many years earlier, my first exposure to him was on Bluesville. He recorded two

12. Do you have the right to sing the Blues?

Yes, if:

- a. you're older than dirt
- b. you're blind
- c. you shot a man in Memphis
- d. you can't be satisfied

No, if:

- a. you have all your teeth
- b. you were once blind but now can see
- c. the man in Memphis lived.
- d. you have a retirement plan or trust fund.

13. Blues is not a matter of color. It's a matter of bad luck. Tiger Woods cannot sing the blues. Gary Coleman could. Ugly white people also got a leg up on the blues.

14. If you ask for water and Baby give you gasoline, it's the Blues.

Other acceptable Blues beverages are:

- a. wine
- b. whiskey or bourbon
- c. muddy water

d. black coffee

The following are NOT Blues beverages:

- a. mixed drinks
- b. kosher wine
- c. Snapple
- d. sparkling water

15. If it occurs in a cheap motel or a shotgun shack, it's a Blues death. Stabbed in the back by a jealous lover is another Blues way to die. So is the electric chair, substance abuse, and dying lonely on a broken down cot. You can't have a Blues death if you die during a tennis match or getting liposuction.

16. Some Blues names for women:

- a. Sadie
- b. Big Mama
- c. Bessie
- d. Fat River Dumpling

17. Some Blues names for men:

- a. Joe

b. Willie

c. Little Willie

d. Big Willie

18. Persons with names like Sierra, Sequoia, Auburn, and Rainbow can't sing the Blues no matter how many men they shoot in Memphis.

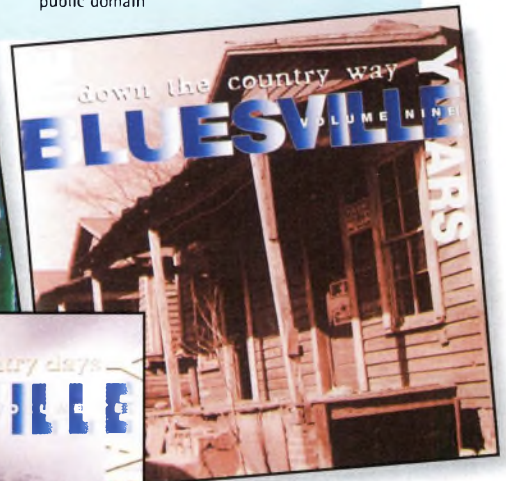
19. Make your own Blues name (starter kit):

- a. name of physical infirmity (Blind, Cripple, Lame, etc.)
- b. first name (see above) plus name of fruit (Lemon, Lime, Kiwi, etc.)
- c. last name of President (Jefferson, Johnson, Fillmore, etc.)

For example, Blind Lime Jefferson, or Cripple Kiwi Fillmore, etc. (Well, maybe not "Kiwi.")

20. I don't care how tragic your life: you own a computer, you cannot sing the blues. You best destroy it. Fire, a spilled bottle of Mad Dog, or get out a shotgun. I don't care.

\*public domain



▶ LPs for them and you will hear some stunning bottleneck guitar playing when he opens with 'John Henry'. You're also going to be shocked when you hear the level of ambience captured in this recording and quite frankly, Fantasy have done an impressive job of transferring this to CD. Memphis Slim, Lucille Hegamin, Alberta Hunter, Victoria Spivey, Lonnie Johnson and of course, Willie Dixon and the great Lightnin' Hopkins are all covered with these three titles. My feeling is that these will be the bait to bring you in to explore further.

This is highly infectious music, sung and played by some of the greatest artists of the last century. This series is highly recommended and I find it an indispensable resource of great blues music.

I would like to thank Stuart Kremsky, archivist at Fantasy for his invaluable assistance in some clarification on dates and other information. ▶

# The Bluesville Years in 12 volumes

1. **Big Blues Honks and Wails**  
PRCD 9905-2  
Sunnyland Slim  
Roosevelt Sykes  
Mildred Anderson  
Jimmy Witherspoon  
Al Smith
2. **Feelin' down on the south side**  
PRCD 9906-2  
Otis Spann  
James Cotton  
Billy Boy Arnold  
Homesick James
3. **Beale street get-down**  
PRCD 9907-2  
Furry Lewis  
Memphis Willie B.  
Memphis Slim
4. **In the Key of Blues**  
PRCD 9908-2  
Mercy Dee Walton  
Memphis Slim  
Little Brother Montgomery  
Willie Dixon with Memphis Slim  
Roosevelt Sykes  
Curtis Jones  
Sunnyland Slim
5. **Mr. Brownie and Mr. Sonny**  
PRCD 9913-2  
Brownie McGhee  
Sonny Terry
6. **Blues Sweet Carolina Blues**  
PRCD 9914-2  
Pink Anderson  
Reverend Gary Davis  
Larry Johnson  
Brownie McGhee  
Sonny Terry
7. **Blues, blues, blues, white**  
PRCD 9915-2  
Danny Kalb  
Geoffrey Muldaur  
Tracy Nelson  
Dave Van Ronk  
Tom Rush  
Eric Von Schmidt  
The New Strangers
8. **Roll over, Ms. Beethoven**  
PRCD 9916-2  
Alberta Hunter  
Lucille Hegamin  
Lonnie Johnson  
Victoria Spivey
9. **Down the Country Way**  
PRCD 9917-2  
J.T. Adams & Shirley Griffith  
Robert Curtis Smith  
Smoky Babe  
Robert Pete Williams  
Wade Walton  
Big Joe Williams  
Pete Franklin  
Scrapper Blackwell  
Blind Willie McTell  
Tampa Red
10. **Country Roads, Country Days**  
PRCD 9918-2  
K.C. Douglas  
Alec Seward  
Doug Quatterbaum  
Scrapper Blackwell & Brooks  
Berry  
Jesse Fuller  
Snooks Eaglin  
Henry Townsend  
Mercy Dee Walton  
Shakey Jack  
Arbee Stidham  
St. Louis Jimmy
11. **Blues is a Heart's Sorrow**  
PRCD 9921-2  
Roosevelt Sykes  
Sunnyland Slim  
Mercy Dee Walton  
Jimmy Weatherspoon  
Lightnin' Hopkins with Sonny  
Terry  
Henry Townsend  
Willie Dixon with Memphis Slim  
Lonnie Johnson  
Mildred Anderson  
Little Brother Montgomery  
Curtis Jones  
Pete Franklin  
St. Louis Jimmy
12. **Jump, jumpin' the blues**  
PRCD 9922-2  
K.C. Douglas  
Sonny Terry  
Memphis Willie B.  
Lightnin' Hopkins  
Memphis Slim  
Willie Dixon with Memphis Slim  
Little Brother Montgomery  
Billy Boy Arnold  
Homesick James  
Otis Spann and James Cotton  
Shakey Jake  
Roosevelt Sykes  
Curtis Jones  
Jimmy Witherspoon  
Mildred Anderson  
Sunnyland Slim





## Vivaldi Concert for the Prince of Poland

Andrew Manze & The Academy of Ancient Music

Harmonia Mundi HMX 2907230 

Director and violinist Andrew Manze is a self-confessed champion of the Baroque and there are few better ways to hear this music from the Seventeenth Century than when it is played on period or reproduction instruments. Here the Academy of Ancient Music, whose pedigree in this field goes back to the early 1970s, is stripped back to a tight chamber group of twenty or so musicians. They are a compact, refined and technically adroit outfit of specialists centred upon the eight first and second violins. Their playing lends an appropriate amount of weight and no little illumination to Vivaldi's *Violin Concertos in C and E major*, the *Sinfonia in G major* and those equally colourful *Concertos in D minor, A and C major* which are featured here. These bristle with sonorous and innovative instrumental scoring. The *C major Concerto* even has a pair of chalumeau and two mandolins. Yet because of this small-scale approach the intimate and gentle sounding strings of the lute and viola create a touching sense of aural eroticism for the *D minor* work. Recorded at St. Jude-on-the-Hill, London this CD lacks that last degree of clarity and separation but does have plenty of warmth in its presentation of such varied textures.

RP

RECORDING   
MUSIC



## Norwegian Classical Favourites

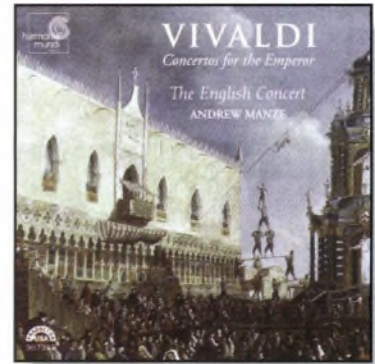
Iceland Symphony Orchestra/Engeset

Naxos 8.557018 

This astonishing and exhilarating selection of acutely Nordic music can hardly be classed as "favourites". Unless you studied Scandinavian music, there would be little to find familiar among the ten works included. But represent their homeland they most certainly do, with music about drinking, legends, the sea, and of course trolls, all presented in a most distinctive manner. Even the composers are far from familiar, with the most notable being Geirr Tveitt, whose work I have praised before. But despite the misleading title, there is very little to criticise. Bjarte Engeset leads the Iceland Symphony Orchestra through each piece in a most committed and enthusiastic manner, relishing the more colourful phrases of the lyrical and tender moments, while also attacking the plenty of thrilling music, and producing some tremendously dynamic and spine-tingling results. Characteristic is Harald Sæverud's *The Ballad of Revolt*, with gentle moments interspersed by more rousing passages, hinting at both Borodin and Mahler. Add Naxos' scintillating engineering, which in this case can be classed as demonstration quality, and you have a most enthralling release of unknown Norwegian music that could certainly become favourites. I certainly look forward to volume 3, although what would be on it would be anybody's guess.

RG

RECORDING   
MUSIC



## Vivaldi Concertos for the Emperor

The English Concert/Manze

Harmonia Mundi HMU 907332 

Anyone seeking some compelling Baroque music should look no further than this most enjoyable release. It features Andrew Manze's second outing as leader of The English Concert and, more importantly, some truly astonishing Vivaldi. The six pieces are taken from a set of twelve that were given to the Holy Roman Emperor Charles VI, in 1728. They are presented here in reconstructed form; offering excellence of study, as is usual with Manze, but also supplying some artistic license; as in *L'amoroso*, where the baroque guitar has been utilised rather than the original harpsichord continuo, to emphasise the "love" theme. The sound is also supremely clear and atmospheric. But the highlight of this CD is in the performance, where Manze and his charges produce some of the most breathtaking and thrilling playing to be found on any such release. Their playing can exhibit either lyrical charm or rather crude and unrefined textures, dependent on the composer's needs. Add to this the rather curious and often disconcerting melodies that these works sometimes offer, and you have a release that may not delight those looking for a gentle listen, but is simply a must-hear for the rest of us.

SG

RECORDING   
MUSIC



**Beethoven & Brahms  
Violin Concertos**

**Steinberg, Pittsburgh Symphony  
Nathan Milstein**

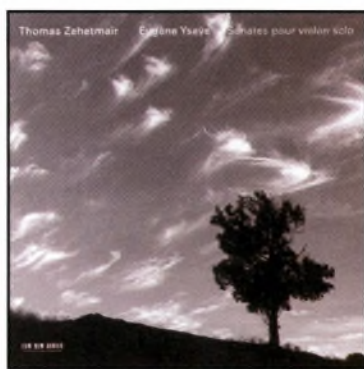
EMI 7243 5 67583 2 2



Milstein's famous violin recordings from 1957 and 1954 respectively were dusted down at Abbey Road and mastered by Allan Ramsey using their Prism noise system back in 2001. The results are sonically rewarding when compared with the original mono LPs. Both of these monumental romantic *Concertos* benefit from a realistic and natural orchestral balance that neither places the soloist too near or too far from the audience. There is warmth, instrumental clarity and a good sense of soundstage width and depth, with accurate and well-proportioned images. Given the age of these masters the virtual absence of background tape hiss is also commendable. The strings of course have bite and real presence, while Milstein's sweet and sinuous sounding violin is revealed in all its expressive spine tingling moments of beauty. He is marvellously focused for the Beethoven as he achieves those spiritual and quite majestic highs so integral to a satisfying reading of this work. Appropriately in the Brahms, Milstein shows exceptional energy to heroically propel us through the score, especially in the outer movements. His rapport with Steinberg and the Pittsburgh Symphony musicians is palpable and they convey a sense of unity and joint purpose that cannot and should not be ignored. It adds much to the overall pleasure found in these renditions.

RP

RECORDING  
MUSIC



**Ysaÿe  
Sonatas for violin solo, op. 27**

**Thomas Zehetmair**

ECM New Series 1835 472 6872



Eugène Ysaÿe's *six violin sonatas* were produced in 1923/24, and are arguably the most eminent solo violin works since Bach. In fact, the Belgian violin virtuoso exploited the Baroque master for his inspiration; providing him with both formal and technical illustrations from which to work, and supplying some actual segments of music that are incorporated into *Sonata No. 2*. Each work is dedicated to a great violinist of the composer's day, such as George Enesco, Fritz Kreisler and Joseph Szigeti; playing on the specific strengths of each given virtuoso. The results are an amalgam of various musical styles, from neo-Baroque to late-Romantic, but there is an overall coherence. A number of excellent exponents have tackled these pieces in recent years, either as individual works or complete cycles, but few, if any, have had either the imagination or skill to conquer Ysaÿe's countless technical demands. Thomas Zehetmair on the other hand has such requisites, and he has produced an album of utterly captivating music, combining his own fascinating style with those of each sonata to supply a captivating sequence of violin moods. Helped along by the most intimate engineering, the results are elegant, vibrant and intensely profound.

SG

RECORDING  
MUSIC



**Albeniz, Granados & Lopez-Chavarri  
Recuerdos de España**

**Duo Favori**

Tacet 109



The classical guitar may lack those vocal-like qualities of a violin or the wide ranging statements available to the piano but in the right context and with sympathetic transcriptions it can attractively tease and tug at our emotions. Duo Favori (Barbara Grasle and Frank Armbruster) doubles those languid, enchanting and resonant effects in these carefully chosen arrangements tailored for two guitars. Spanish compositions throughout, that cultural synthesis of Christian and Moorish society, offer an intriguing pictorial and atmospheric blend of mysteriousness and magnificence. Diverse traditions that are embedded deep within the Albeniz *Cordoba* and his idyllic swaying melody for *Mallorca Barcarola*, then surface through sonorous harmonic effects. Archetypal and spectacularly varied impressionistic sun drenched landscapes are also crafted for his *Suite Espana*. Elsewhere, in the Granados *Valses Poeticos*, our senses are beguiled by a subtle idiomatic feel. Those essentially romantic motifs are discretely communicated to us through clean and polished musicianship rather than extravagant gestures. The Lopez-Chavarri *Leyenda del Castillo moro* is an academic inclusion - one that is more representative of the late Nineteenth or early Twentieth Century style of guitar playing.

Supplier: [www.vivante.co.uk](http://www.vivante.co.uk)

RP

RECORDING  
MUSIC





**Beethoven**  
**Symphony No. 3**  
**"Eroica"/Symphony No. 8**  
**NDR Symphony Orchestra/Wand**

RCA Classic Library 82876 60858 2 (CD)

The late Günter Wand's Beethoven cycle with the underrated NDR Symphony Orchestra remains one of the finest on disc; lacking idiosyncrasies, yet full of character, and allowing the authentic personality of the composer to shine through: and while these two performances may not rank with the best the set has to offer, they certainly do not disappoint. Now re-issued as part of RCA's Classic Library series, this disc also exhibits much improved sound over the original "Red Seal" CD from the 1980s, thanks to 24-bit technology. The "Eroica" reveals some slightly cautious tempos, light yet sparkling textures, and tight rhythms, and it follows a more Romantic path rather than a purely classical direction. While its opening movement may appear slightly stiff, lacking a little in the way of spontaneity, no such problems exist in the *8th Symphony*; where Wand's interpretation is overflowing with light-hearted humour. This performance also profits from some careful attention in the bass lines, especially during the opening *Allegro vivace e con brio*; supplying some additional authority. With such polished performances, as well as the increase to the original sound quality, those wanting these magnificent works on disc can consider this mid-priced re-issue with confidence.

SG

RECORDING  
 MUSIC



**Jacqueline Du Pré**

**The early BBC recordings**  
**1961-1965**

EMI 7243 5 86236 2 8 (CD)

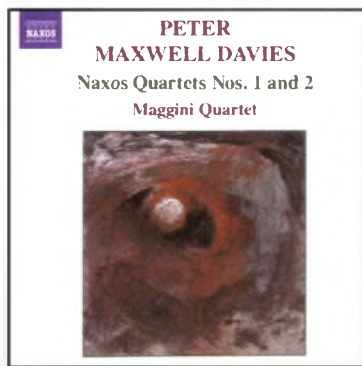
These mono recordings of works from Bach, Britten and Falla to Brahms, Couperin and Handel were made for radio by the BBC and broadcast as part of their Home Service, Music and Third Programmes. All have been digitally re-mastered at Abbey Road by Andrew Walter. The second Brahms *Cello Sonata* is an Edinburgh Festival live performance and it, together with the Couperin *Trezieme Concert* for two cellos, has the most natural sounding balance even though the soloists Jacqueline Du Pré, Ernest Lush (piano) and William Pleeth (cello) are a little distant. The Brahms, passionate and rhetorical early on and more carefree in its finale, is one of his finest chamber pieces and Du Pré gives us a solid and enjoyable account. While the *Trezieme Concert*, idiomatically French in style, has many likeable colourful moments it is quite inconsequential by comparison. Falla's *Suite Populaire Espagnole*, also with Lush on piano, although conceived as a collection of folk songs for keyboard and voice does transfer quite successfully and with Du Pré's cello taking up the lead role, it too has plenty of native flavour. Another rearrangement for cello and piano is the Handel *Sonata in G* which was originally one of his youthful oboe concertos. Again both parties capably address this piece and Du Pré clearly revels in the

freedom afforded by such an attractive ten-minute bauble. She plays with a delightful enthusiasm and even though it is a less precise performance than heard elsewhere on these CDs it is hard to be critical of a 1961 recital that comes from so early in her development as a musician. Four years later in the short *Scherzo Fizzicato* and Marcia of Britten's *Cello Sonata in C OP.65* we are treated to a gripping reading - one which is brimming over with maturity and authority. This devilishly difficult *Sonata* is indeed a strange piece and unlike anything previously written by the composer. It was dedicated to master cellist Mstislav Rostropovitch and its spiky nature is strongly reminiscent of Soviet compositional forms. The soloist is very exposed but Du Pré wrestles these problems to the ground and tames the score. Her relationship here with pianist Stephen Kovacevich is critical to that end. For precocious playing and instinctive lyricism though, look no further than the opening Bach *Cello Suites 1&2* that were broadcast on January 7th 1962. Bold flowing strokes from a prominently positioned instrument reveal the kind of emotional depth and range, romance, spontaneity and capricious brilliance for which Jacqueline Du Pré was to become renown. Wonderfully melodic music and an attention grabbing and truthful reading even though she doesn't have total command or technical mastery of these sublime suites.

RP

RECORDING  
 MUSIC



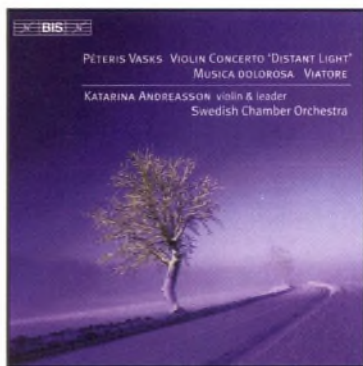


**Maxwell Davies**  
**Naxos Quartets Nos. 1 & 2**  
**Maggini Quartet**

Naxos 8.557396 (CD)

It is rare to find a patronage as generous as the one granted by Naxos to Peter Maxwell Davies, when they commissioned ten string quartets, to be written over a five-year period. The fifth has now received its premiere, but this disc features the first two, which I first heard at their première performance at the Wigmore Hall. This release commemorates the 70th birthday of the composer, but also marks one of the high-points of his career. These two quartets are rather difficult to categorise; with abrupt and explosive changes of character, under-pinned by haunting melodies that evoke the landscape of the composer's home on the Orkney Islands. There is the sense that the actual emotion is just beginning: as if the later works in the series will complete their growing maturity. But their musical integrity is never in doubt, and the Maggini Quartet come up trumps in terms of supplying the required confidence and insight to make true sense of both pieces. Neither quartet can be classed as easy listening, but perseverance allows one to recognise Maxwell Davies' perception of melody and rhythm; and so be fully rewarded by his distinctive and motive intensity.

SG



**Péteris Vasks**  
**Violin Concerto "Distant Light"/Musica Dolorosa/Viatore**  
**Swedish Chamber Ensemble/Andreasson**

BIS-CD-1150 (CD)

Latvian composer, Péteris Vasks' work supplies us with music of striking melancholia; with ghostly melodies interspersed with an incredible intensity. Katarina Andreasson handles all this with utmost command and tenderness: both as violinist and leader of the Swedish Chamber Orchestra. With the exception of Viatore (Wanderer), which receives its world première here, these works appeared on disc previously, but this release is a clear winner for Vasks' music; both in terms of the clear and resonant sonics, and the performances. Andreasson simply eclipses all her rivals in the single-movement Violin Concerto; including those far more illustrious, such as Gidon Kremer (Nonesuch) who was the work's inspiration and first performer. Her performance here is both notable for the way she manipulates the shape of the composer's phrasing, as well as her ability to not allow the submerged chaos within the musical structure to take control. This is also evident in the Musica Dolorosa and Viatore, which are also beautifully written, with poignant string tones and evocative textures, each performed with the same authority and confidence. The results are beautiful and incredibly moving, and anyone wanting to hear Vasks' stunning work should look no further than this breathtaking disc.

SG



**Nathan Milstein – The Last Recital**  
**Beethoven, Bach, Handel, Sarasate,**  
**Prokofiev, Tchaikovsky, Paganini etc**

0927-49563-2 (CD)

For an understanding of the phenomenal technique, dexterity and musicianship displayed throughout a playing career spanning eight decades look no further than Nathan Milstein's final recorded performances made for Swedish television in June 1986. On the morning before the first of two recitals he suffered pain and stiffness in the first finger of his left hand and so began to revise all the fingerings for the entire programme. This was only possible because he had regularly changed fingerings in the past to combat complacency and routine. The first rendition on June 16th was disappointing, with the pain adversely affecting Milstein's bow work. But on the evening of June 17th having continued to revise and practise throughout the day he gave a captivating and virtuoso account alongside his close friend the pianist Georges Pludermacher. The Beethoven *Violin Sonata No.9* and Handel *Sonata in A OP.1 No.3* are elegantly crafted. Vignettes taken from Sarasate's *Introduction et Tarantelle*; a Bach excerpt in the *Allegro assai No.3* and the Paganini *Caprice for violin solo OP.1 No.13* fully express the passion and excitement present in these scores. The Bach *Partita No.2 Chaconne No.5* offers a stunningly beautiful and perceptive view. A terrific and musically compelling £2.99 budget label release.

RP







# The History Man

by Richard S. Foster

Readers of this magazine know my fondness for my Thorens 124. Mine is from 1957 or '58 and I love it dearly. While I've always had this set for mono playback utilizing the 1950's French moving coil cartridge manufactured by Pierre Clement, mounted to the excellent Ikeda 407t, I've recently enjoyed some fine stereo playback using a couple of vintage Ortofon SPU cartridges. There is nothing like listening to vintage recordings with vintage playback gear.

Anyone who owns the original 124 (1957-66) is well aware of the short coming inherent in the design: the cast-iron platter. Although one of the great physical strengths of this table, this cast iron design has had an unfortunate effect in limiting the breadth of cartridges one could use. Phono cartridges with exceptionally strong magnets were heretofore a definite no-no. You put the cartridge on the arm, place the arm on the lead in grooves and watch in horror as the magnets in the cartridge would cause the stylus assembly to bottom out on the record. Also, trying to adjust proper tracking force was a major problem - readings taken with gauges like the Shure were almost always wrong. Just so you understand, there is an aluminum 'shell platter' that sits over the cast iron platter. Affixed to the aluminum shell are a rubber mat and a 'hidden' spring loaded 45RPM adapter. A slight push and turn of this adapter and voila, you could now play your favorite 45's with no hassle.

There were distinct advantages to the consumer when Thorens released the MKII version of the table in mid-1966. Not only were there major mechanical updates, perhaps the most important change of all was in their selection of materials for the new platter. It was aluminum and zinc. While this opened the door on an infinite choice of cartridges, I personally couldn't help feeling that some of the magic was lost with the aluminum product.

While the short comings of the 124 have never really bothered me, I'd always wondered what the overall performance of the table would be like with either a NOS

Ortofon SPU or, more to the point: a modern pickup like the Lyra Titan. How would this table perform compared to my VPI TNT/JMW combination? Unfortunately, this was never going to happen based upon the limitations of the cast-iron platter.

Well this has now all changed thanks to my friend Juerg Schopper of Winterthur, Switzerland.

Schopper, together with several Swiss metallurgists have solved the cast iron sub platter problem. They've developed a replacement that is so far superior to the original product, it's almost laughable. The project to bring this to market took more than two years and was not, in a word, easy.

The right combination of materials took extensive research and an awful lot of trial and error. A technology known as 'grey cast' was put to use in the manufacture of this new platter. It has something to do with the development of an alloy (cast iron with graphite flakes) used by the U.S. Marines for the production of drive components for Minesweepers during World War II.

The new platter weighs in at approximately 5 kilograms, very close to the original cast-iron platter weight of

approximately 4.32 kilos. Let me first describe the procedure for changing platters and then we'll get to the sound. First you remove the aluminum 'shell platter' and put this in a safe place. You will immediately see three flat head screws which lock the cast iron platter to the bearing. You can pull either this entire assembly out (which

may not be a bad idea especially if you

have used any of your Thorens bearing oil on the bearing shaft in the last six months), or you may just unscrew the three screws. Whichever way you decide to handle the procedure it really is just removing the cast-iron platter with these three screws. Pull the platter off and place it in a container for storage... you will not need it again.

When you remove the old platter, you will probably notice the painted strobe patterns, for the first time. Schopper has done an excellent job in repainting these patterns on the new platter. Place the new unit on top of the bearing assembly ▶



► and replace and tighten the three screws. Place your aluminum 'shell platter' on top and turn the table on. Whether you have or haven't lubricated the bearing, let the table run for approximately 20 minutes before you adjust the speed. Please remember, whenever you adjust the speed of a table, you want the oil in the bearing to be 'warm'. You also want a record on the platter with the arm and cartridge in place.

Whether you adjust the speed using the built in strobe of the 124 or decide to use the wonderful KAB speedstrobe, <http://www.kabusa.com/strobe.htm>, or via Moth Marketing 01234-741152)

this will take you just a few seconds. I've always been amazed at how there is no drift with this table. Perhaps I'm just very lucky that when it was rebuilt, it was done properly. I've had this table approximately three years and take care of it like a newborn baby. As I've previously mentioned, I'm fully aware of the 'flavour' this combination (mostly

from the cartridge) imparts on the playback chain, but it's a wonderful euphonic player that suits the music so well.

Now for the sound. It's simply outrageous! This new platter is a major upgrade. Anyone who's heard the before and after with the table has been shocked. The dynamic swing is quite simply incredible. The table is much faster, offering a lower noise floor and much greater impact and both the low and high frequencies. I wasn't really ready for this.

I've now had the opportunity to use my Thorens in stereo mode with a variety of cartridges and find the experience to be exceptionally satisfying. The sound of this Swiss table has really been transformed and it continues to prove to me how important the right platter material is in turntables.

The Schopper platter for the 124 is an absolute must have for anyone who is really serious about maximizing the performance of their Thorens. And please... contact Schopper to see if this platter will work with your Mark II.

Information is available at:

[http://www.schopper.ch/static/services/z\\_top\\_audio/Neutrik/TD124\\_Mainplatter\\_english.html](http://www.schopper.ch/static/services/z_top_audio/Neutrik/TD124_Mainplatter_english.html)

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Fax. + 41 52 213 4331

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PO. Box 185

CH-8402 Winterthur

Switzerland



Price, FOB Winterthur, is \$850USD

### More Stillness...

And now back to one of my favorite subjects... vibrations, isolation, resonance dissipation and those wonderful people at Stillpoints.

There have been a few changes since I wrote about the virtues of using Stillpoints in your audio system. It seems that some of their German clients weren't happy with 'hearing' the ceramic bearings inside their Stillpoints when handling them,

so the company decided to minimize this by changing from five to six 'balls' inside the inner shell. I've auditioned the new Stillpoints and really didn't hear much in the way of a change.

Sometimes it's hard to take an almost perfect product and make it 'more perfect.' They've also been busy creating a fantastic cryogenically treated

component stand that I can't stop raving about. It's a very clever design consisting of three legs (more can be ordered), an upper and lower hub (to lock the legs into place) and three mini inverse risers with nylon tipped set-screws for the component to rest upon. Each leg also rests on a 'set screw', which in turn, is screwed into a small but highly effective device attached to the underside of the leg which incorporates Stillpoint technology. In other words, each leg contains full Stillpoint technology (The Component Stand is the first product, outside of the Stillpoints themselves, to incorporate Stillpoint technology in its design) Simple. Brilliant. Unbelievably effective.

Each leg has been machined so there is an elbow that fits inside the hub (the elbows are on the top and the bottom, [think of a 'thick' "T" at right angles]. These legs fit into grooves in the hub, so that they can be angled to suit whatever piece of equipment is to be supported. The top of the hub is held in place by a large allen bolt. The legs need to be angled so that the mini inverse risers which slide along their top edges can be ideally positioned, depending on the shape of the base

plate and the weight distribution of the supported unit. When you've got everything nailed you tighten down the locking screw and then back-off a half turn. So, what you're looking at might be as simple as an equilateral pedestal or perhaps you want to create more of a "Y" effect (as I did when ►

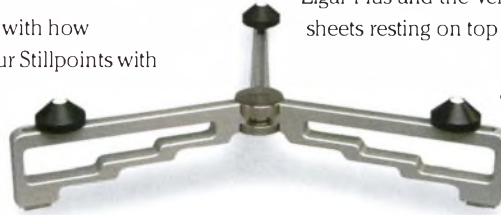


► using under my Manley amps which are only 7 1/2 inches wide but approximately 22 inches long. It's a really versatile package that should accommodate almost all eventualities. The stand weighs in, with three legs at 3.5pounds (1.6 kg). The assembled height, is 3.75 inches. Oh, and by the way... each stand will hold 300 pounds! (136kg)

Now... I was totally knocked out with how well the previous system (utilizing four Stillpoints with risers and inverse risers) performed under my amps, so I was kind of skeptical that this stand could do as good a job. Well, trust me - it does. Perhaps even better! It offers outstanding rigidity for the amplifiers and there is less contact area (inverse risers are gone) on my carpeted floor area. The same ability to remove unwanted resonances from any mechanical feedback is being offered in a new, sleek package. Where this really became evident was in my experimentation with a four-legged stand underneath the dCS Elgar Plus/Verdi LaScala SACD/CD playback system.

David Steven of dCS was kind enough to lend me this setup for my RCA/Mercury SACD reviews and I've really garnered great respect for this equipment. One of the qualities this system offers is uncanny resolution and information from digital media. Without a doubt the dCS equipment has opened my ears for the first time to the qualities that great digital has to offer. What it also did, was allow me to really screen carefully what I was hearing with the component stand.

RG advised me in advance that his experience has shown that this equipment needs two major allowances: a rock solid foundation and the ability to remove unnecessary vibration. I know just the product! Well, thanks to Paul and Mike at Stillpoints, they've come through again. In carefully putting the component stand together, I asked for four legs and opted to replace the four screw 'toes' underneath the legs, with Stillpoints and inverse



risers. I tried this setup first without the Stillpoints/riser additions and then with. No doubt about it. I was deriving a definite increase in resolution, stability of the image and ability to hear into the sound-field when the Stillpoints and inverse risers were added. I also placed sheets of ERS between the Elgar Plus and the Verdi LaScala as well as a couple of sheets resting on top of the Verdi.

For those who are going to ask, the answer is yes, I did try Stillpoints, risers and inverse risers between the Elgar and the Verdi but felt the sound was superior when the mass of these units was together and not

separated. If someone had the room or inclination, perhaps another component stand might be the answer, but based upon where I have the equipment positioned, it works best for me in the above configuration. I tried several combinations of the stand and Stillpoints with the dCS components and feel that four legs with the risers and Stillpoints maximizes my resonance control, isolation and rock solid support.

Let me make this very simple for you. These component stands are not optional. They are 'must have' units. Something is going on here and I'm not sure just what it is, but what I am hearing is a clarity and lucid detail I've never obtained before, whether used under the Manleys or the dCS.

In the meantime, I've also placed a set of Stillpoints/risers /inverse risers under the Audio Physic Luna 2 sub-woofer that's recently arrived and I'm finally getting that lower octave I missed so much. Here also, the Stillpoints system worked wonders over the manufacturer supplied pointed feet... but that is a topic for another day.

### Mass matters...

I'd always felt that a lot of what I liked from my early VPI 'tables was down to the mass of the platter. For years I kept my original lead filled acrylic platter, passing on several incarnations: the delrin platter, the aluminum and delrin platter and it wasn't until the stainless steel and delrin version of the Mark 4 (I believe) became available that I switched. I switched again of course because of the benefit of the peripheral ring and weight for the TNT6, but again, we're taking mass here. There is something about this mass that equates to the dynamics, speed and noise floor I find lacking in acrylic only platters. Something which RG too seems to have discovered in his time with 'tables like the Spj Alba and Blue Pearl. Mass might be a pain to deal with, but when it comes to record platters I'm afraid there really is no substitute.

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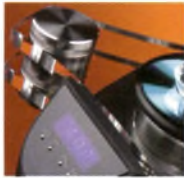
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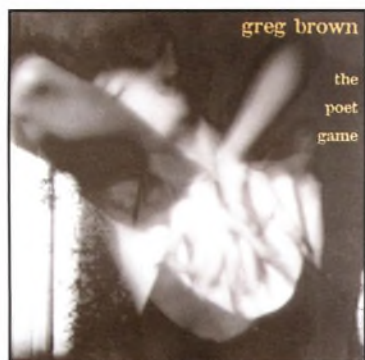
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## Greg Brown

### The Poet Game

Red House Records, RHR 68 **180g**

While in Salina, Kansas for the outrageously wonderful Blues Festival put on at Blue Heaven Studios last October, I had an opportunity to listen to some artists I'd never heard before. For the most part, there's probably a good reason I'd never come across of them. Then Chad put this album on the turntable. It blew my socks off!

I'd never heard of Greg Brown and only later did I find out he's been around for approximately twenty odd years and has a couple dozen albums to his credit. Having said that, he's also written songs for some of the biggies in the business including Willie Nelson and Carlos Santana to name but a couple.

This 1994 album is a sonic spectacular. I'm not sure who's behind the LP version (perhaps it is Red House) but they've issued a spectacular album on RTI's ever dead silent 180gram vinyl.

Two cuts on side one that will really grab your attention are 'Brand New '64 Dodge' and 'One Wrong Turn'. This record will set you back in your chair and cause your mouth to hit the floor. Hopefully your local retailer can obtain a copy for you but it's also available at Acoustic Sounds. Great acoustic blues/folk that gets my Absolute Highest Recommendation!

<http://www.gregbrown.org>.

RSF



## Sarah McLachlan

### Afterglow

Classic RTH-2013 **200g**

After a six year hiatus McLachlan returned to the studio and in many respects has delivered an album that feels very little different from 1997's *Surfacing*. The dreamy, immaculately produced and tuneful alternative pop songs heard here strike an accord somewhere between melancholy and euphoria with her softly atmospheric and languidly paced vocals beautifully caressing the ears throughout. Its dedication to her dead mother and young daughter adds a degree of poignancy to proceedings. But sometimes this genteel style of singing almost completely insulates you from the intense and intelligently framed message found on tracks like 'Dirty Little Secret' or 'Stupid'. A grimy theme or moment of realisation occasionally needs more punch behind it and the abrasive rub of a voice that peels away at the lyrics until the grain of truth at the song's core is revealed. McLachlan's voice tends to bathe proceedings in that warm half-light suggested by the album's title, which is fine when handling those lightweight romantic entanglements played out in 'Push', 'Perfect Girl' and 'Train Wreck', but elsewhere it carries insufficient conviction. The step up to 200g vinyl is handled with great care and this LP is a sonically translucent and wide-ranging triumph that captures the essence of the McLachlan vocals and supporting piano, keyboards, strings and guitars.

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RP



## Roger Sessions – The Black Maskers Colin McPhee – Tabuh-Tabuhan Hanson, Eastman-Rochester Orchestra

Speakers Corner/Mercury SR90103 **180g** **1**

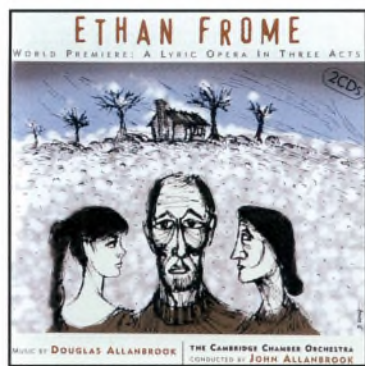
Definitely one of the top sounding Mercury Living Presence recordings, SR90103 also has the distinction of being one of the most elusive to find. A long term resident on HP's Super Duper list, this truly is a sonic masterpiece. The exceptionally wide dynamic range of this recording is captured quite naturally in the re-issue and will certainly offer those whose tastes are wide and varied an aural treat and a true system workout. The recording is a 'see-into-the-orchestra' production. There is also some bass information in this re-issue that will shake the very foundation of your house. Remember, you've been warned!

Colin McPhee's *Tabuh-Tabuhan* offers an orchestral palette based upon exotic Balinese themes and folklore. There is a wealth of unusual colours painted by the Eastman-Rochester Orchestra with an equally diverse make-up of instruments including marimba, xylophone and glockenspiel to delight the senses of most every listener.

Speakers Corner has delivered another winner in the sonic category as they continue to bring forth the great and unusual recordings from the Mercury catalogue. I do so hope they delve further into the American repertoire as these two performances are quite simply unmatched to my knowledge anywhere else. I like 'em both... but the edge goes to Sessions. Highest recommendation.

RSF





Allanbrook

Ethan Frome  
Cambridge Chamber Orchestra

Mapleshade07182

This World Premiere disc of Douglas Allanbrook's Lyric Opera composed in the early 1950s was recorded live to two track over three January days in 1999 at the Sanders Theatre in Cambridge. It is based upon the Edith Wharton drama about Ethan Frome (S. Mark Aliapoulos, baritone) and his wife who are joined at their isolated farmhouse by their young cousin Mattie Silver (Leanne Gonzalez, lyric soprano) who is to nurse an ailing Zeena played by mezzo soprano Anita Costanzo. A classic triangle develops and the jealousy and sexual tension is palpable in the love duets. When Mattie is forced to leave because Zeena needs proper care a sense of misery and imminent catastrophe descends. The breaking up of the lovers is pre-echoed in the second scene of Act Two when Ethan as he reaches to embrace Mattie knocks a red pickle dish to the floor where it shatters. The opera closes with a return to the Frome farmhouse some fifteen years later. The roles are reversed. Zeena is now physical fit and it's Mattie who sits crippled in a wheelchair. A lame Ethan returns from town, places a piece of wood on the fire that has nearly gone out and as in the opening of the opera gazes out of the window and sings of what might have been. Filled with motifs and striking symbolism throughout all three of its acts, this opera takes

upon itself the virtues of the Nineteenth Century European tradition and places them firmly within a mid-Twentieth Century New England context. Yes, it is thematically threadbare, but name an opera from any era that isn't. The plain storytelling drives our attention towards the quality in the singing and in the instrumental score. All the set pieces are there to hear with the arias, duets and trios moving the action ever onwards, during which the composer's music closely mirrors the emotional turmoil felt by the vocal soloists. So much so that shortly after Mattie's arrival the instrumentation consciously soars with Ethan's hopes for a better life and a landscape free of winter's harsh grip. Elsewhere the Cambridge Chamber Orchestra musicians under John Allanbrook's direction offer suitably subdued textures beneath the singing when it contemplates moments of resignation and despair. Mapleshade's engineer Pierre Sprey gives us a clean sounding and nicely balanced CD that establishes fine instrumental and vocal separation. There's vocal clarity at its core with firm and rich orchestral tones filling in behind, between and around the singers.

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RP



Johanna Martzy

Favourite Short Works

Coup d'Archet COUP CD 006 180g

Glenn Armstrong's single-minded pursuit of recordings by Johanna Martzy was a labour of love which has given us seven inspiring LPs, all of which have rightly received glowing reports in the early days of this publication. Nor should this CD of Falla's *Danza Espanala*, the *Handel Sonatas in A Et F*, her much adored Beethoven *Randino* and some delicious vignettes by Fiocco, Ravel Martinu and Milhaud found here be missed. While these transfers together with those six atmospheric Bartok *Romanian Folk Dances* lack the tactile quality of a record and perhaps the last ounce of presence heard from recordings lodged within the analogue domain they do reveal the poise, assurance and beguiling musicianship of Martzy. An empathic understanding developed with pianist Jean Antonietti helps make these virtuoso performances especially memorable and while some of the cuts like Martinu's *Etude Rhythmique-Arabesque No.1* show their age, their musical significance remains undiminished by the technical frailty of their source. The level of emotional and intellectual engagement through these readings is more than palpable. It starts at the extremities and reaches deep inside you to fill the void with satisfying insights, gentle cadences and incisive interplay.


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## Liszt & Chopin

Piano Sonatas in B minor  
Alan Gampel, piano

Mapleshade 07382 

Alan Gampel plays these two contrasting but quite brilliantly conceived *Sonatas in B minor* with passion and intelligence. This finely etched, bold and natural sounding recording of his Fazioli Model 278 concert grand piano at St. James Episcopal Church, Leesburg captures the essence of both pieces. The Chopin *No.3 Op.58* is a magnificent series of emotional statements true to the four movement classical sonata form and yet at the same time deeply affected by the composer's own deteriorating health, the ending of a seven-year love affair and the death of his father. The tension builds throughout culminating in a truly heroic ending. Liszt's extrovert single movement work is propelled by his imaginative preoccupation with Faustian themes. Musically, it juxtaposes frenzied and demonic displays with sensitive and delicately sculpted images and in the process gives ample opportunity for virtuoso flamboyance. Gampel traverses these situations with appropriately weighted and exquisitely melodic performances. His poise, the control, dignity and fluency is captivating, as are these rich and voluminous notes cast by the Italian Spruce soundboards that dominate a spacious and dry acoustic where the vibrant piano image has terrific solidity, presence and intensity.


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RP



## Carmen Lundy

Old Devil Moon

JVC JVCXR-0037-2 

Great jazz singers are like the very best sportsmen and women. They possess a delicacy of touch, perform tremendous feats effortlessly and seem to have much more time than their less gifted peers. Carmen Lundy the Fifty-year-old Miami-born diva has these abilities to burn. Her timing, emphasis, phrasing and the appropriately weighted thrust given to the lyrics of classic material like 'In A Sentimental Mood', 'Just One More Chance' or 'Flying Easy' are exquisitely managed. Elsewhere with her own songs 'You're Not In Love', 'I'm Worried About You Baby', 'At The End Of My Rope' and in 'Love Me Forever' she swings, improvises and teases out an unimaginably rich tapestry. The vocal range and variety of textures spun throughout these skilfully crafted numbers about fragile loves and the tenuous grip that we hold over them is a reflection of her artist's eye for colour and depth perception. An exceptionally fine relationship also exists with pianist Billy Childs and her acoustic bass player Santi Debriano who are beautifully captured by the transparency of Joe Ferla's New York recording. It clearly reproduces that finely tuned sense of ensemble generated by this exciting and tightly knitted group of musicians. A CD to place at the very top of your wish list.

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RP



## Prokofiev

Romeo and Juliet;  
Ballet Suites 1 and 2.  
Skrowaczewski, Minneapolis  
Symphony Orchestra.

Speakers corner/Mercury SR90315  

This is one great record in its original form and I felt this would be a real test for SCR, but they've come through with another sonic blockbuster. Keep in mind please that there are definite differences between the original - a 35MM recording - and this re-issue. Having said that, this is orchestral classical music for everyone. If you're even the least bit shy about 'jumping into the world of classical', look no further. Prokofiev was one of the great geniuses of the 20th century and these suites offer a wide cross section of melodies from the complete ballet. Those who might scoff at Skrowaczewski and the Minneapolis, would be well warned to listen before you offer your opinion. The playing is first class as well as that famous Mercury sound quality - an absolutely winning combination. Is this release better than an original? Quite frankly, it really doesn't matter because this record will garner lots of playtime on your turntable, of that I can assure you. This is extremely musical and highly involving repertoire. I'm beginning to feel a bit like a broken record myself because I just keep heaping praise on this ever so important project from Speakers Corner Records, but there is no doubting what I'm hearing. I really like these records and I guarantee you will also.

RSF





**An Evening with Belafonte/Makeba;**

Speakers Corner/RCA LSP 3420 **180g** **4**

At first I wasn't quite sure why this album was brought back from the archives by SCR, but after listening to several tracks, I can fully understand. There is an infectious quality to the rhythms of these African songs. Having never heard the original, I'll bet you that the re-issue will be far superior to another of RCA's Dynagroove travesties. The sound on this record is natural, open and airy. The arrangements of these songs, although I am unfamiliar with this genre, should delight those who are interested in World Music. Makeba and Belafonte of course need no introduction and a variety of superb backup singers make this a really entertaining album. The album is well put together, starting with the 'Train Song' and by the time you're finished and begin side two with 'Gone are my Children', you really get hooked into the mood Makeba and Belafonte are trying to offer. Keep in mind the political environment of the segregated-mid '60's and you'll have a greater understanding as to what this album was trying to say. Had Belafonte not been such a big star with RCA, and had Makeba not exposed him to the music of Africa, we would not have had this document. A very entertaining album recommended for listeners who enjoy great sound and the unusual.

RSF



**John Coltrane and Johnny Hartman**

Speakers Corner/Impulse AS-40 **180g**

Well those who know me will have a good laugh over this because this is the only John Coltrane album I own and they know I'm not a big fan - he's generally a little too out there for me. But, teamed with Hartman's great baritone voice, McCoy Tyner on piano, Jimmy Garrison on bass and Elvin Jones on drums, this makes a great record. Engineered by the legendary Rudy Van Gelder, the sound is absolutely stunning. Hartman is right at home with these timeless ballads and the band accompany him perfectly. This is another one of those grab your favorite lady, turn the lights down low (after also pouring your favorite beverage) and just sitting back and enjoying the flow of Hartman and the solos by these artists. Really quiet 180 gram vinyl is characterized by Jones' soft brushes coming through ever so gently from the right rear of the recording venue. There are three cuts on each side, not the most generous of offerings by Impulse, but the sound quality as well as the quality of the work contained on this record more than make up for any concerns you might have. Starting off with, 'They Say It's Wonderful' and ending with 'Autumn Serenade', you get some absolutely gorgeous solos by Coltrane that are simply excellent. Top Recommendation.

RSF



**Sarah Vaughan**

Speakers Corner/EmArcy Records MG36004

Wowza... that's all I have to say. This is one heck of a stunning album. With the likes of the great Clifford Brown on trumpet and some other fine accompanists, this record just blew me away when I first heard it. Now to be fair, I've not heard a Sarah Vaughan album in many years, but this one is a real grabber. Such wonderful standards as, 'Lullaby of Birdland', 'April in Paris' and so many more make this a definite must own album. This is, sonically, an excellent studio recording and you'd never know - much less believe - that this tape is 50 years old! We're dealing with A+ musicians in Paul Quinichette, Tenor Sax; Herbie Mann on Flute; Jimmy Jones on Piano; Joe Benjamin on Bass and Roy Haynes on Drums. The vinyl is dead quiet and listening to this with a mono cartridge is a real aural treat. Vaughan is in your room as are the musicians. There is absolutely nothing you can do but devote your complete attention to the artists once your stylus hits the groove. No doubt for me, 'Lullaby of Birdland' just grabbed my attention and it was over for the next couple of hours as I played and replayed the album several times. A first class treat!

RSF







*'Early Hour's'* - the superb new album from Eleanor McEvoy

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Liszt

**Annes De Pelerinage–Premiere Annee (Suisse)**  
Yoram Ish-Hurwitz, piano

Turtle Records TRSA 0020

Franz Liszt's years of pilgrimage began in 1835 after he scandalised Europe through an unrestrained and impassioned relationship with the already married countess Marie d'Agoult. They eloped to Switzerland and there began one of the happiest and most productive passages in the composer's life. Although this nine-part work depicts all the key ingredients and experiences one would expect to find in a Swiss mountain idyll, we should banish those images of awe-inspiring scenery to the very back of our minds. Instead, try to concentrate upon the feelings generated by being in the presence of a good-natured farmer or if trapped by a raging storm. Yoram Ish-Hurwitz's impeccable playing, emotional command and tenacious understanding of this music develops those sensations that this composer so skilfully embedded within the score. To think of panoramic vistas is to diminish Liszt's art. Our hearts must always soar with elation, miss a beat with apprehension or quicken with that sickening sense of fear developed by Yoram's fantastic keyboard work. He transmits all this and more through immaculate phrases, perfect timing, inspired virtuoso passage or that simple decay of a note. The recording of his Steinway D-274, which has tremendous clarity and presence, helps to sustain the tension between powerful explosions of notes and contrasting softly evocative passages.

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RP



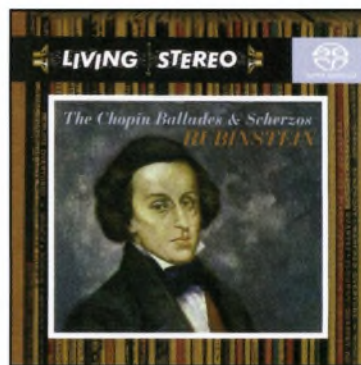
Telemann  
Paris Quartets, Vol. 2

Florilegium

Channel Classics CSS SA 20604

Despite my not actually hearing Florilegium's first disc of Telemann's *Paris Quartets* until well after its initial release in 1998 (CCS 13598), there have still been a few years of eager anticipation for a second helping. I have since experienced them live, on numerous occasions at the Wigmore Hall, as well as becoming the proud owner of each recording they have produced. With each and every performance I have been seduced by their gracious interpretations. Now that second volume is here, and it has been well worth the wait. While these works are already particularly well represented on disc, this new SACD beats all others in terms of both sound and performance. Ashley Solomon's flute playing is most enchanting, and his playing combines seamlessly with Kati Debretzini's tender violin. Along with the remaining members, they provide such captivating music that it is just about the ideal illustration of Telemann's wonderful chamber work in the current catalogue. With engineering that supplies a wonderfully real acoustic space as well as a great clarity and natural presence, the beauty of this disc may even be good enough to interest those who ordinarily avoid baroque chamber music. And I cannot give higher praise than that.

SG



Chopin

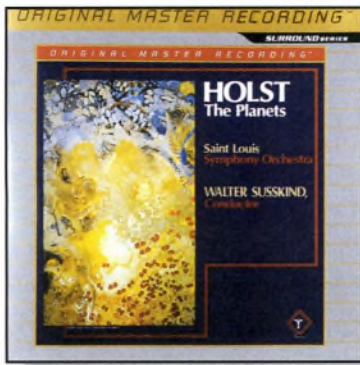
**Four Scherzos/Four Ballades**  
Arthur Rubinstein

RCA "Living Stereo" 82876 61396 2

I read with interest JMH's *Home Truths* article in Issue 34, in which he discussed the differences in certain performer's recorded sounds to those produced in the concert hall. One such pianist was Arthur Rubinstein, and I concur that his "big" concert hall playing was often not the most conducive to engineering techniques: a fact not helped by mixing down a recording from three-track tapes to stereo. This new SACD may not be a full-blown multi-channel release, but it does allow the listener to hear Rubinstein performing in the original master tape perspective, with the left, right and centre channels utilised. We still get those wonderfully clear and concise renditions of Chopin's Ballades and Scherzos, performed with respect and controlled freedom, but without the contrived individualism stamped on many of the more modern examples by youngsters struggling on the road to fame and fortune. But now we can hear Rubinstein's performances without the intrusion of the mix down: this SACD revealing a more natural ambience, even when listening in stereo; with Rubinstein's playing more articulate, more animated, and with greater presence. Simply put, we acquire a greater appreciation of his legendary concert hall tones: and with Rubinstein that is crucial.

SG





## Holst The Planets

Susskind / Saint Louis Symphony

Mobile Fidelity MFSL UDSACD 4005 

Holst's *Music of the Gods* is scored for a super-charged orchestra and has wide ranging dynamic contrasts and many brightly shining instrumental moments culminating in the ethereal chorale of female singers at the end of Neptune. The shock and awe of *Mars, The Warbringer*; a pensive nobility in *Saturn*; infectious *Jupiter's* ripe, full-bodied and quite jaunty gait; that fleet-footed clarity of each mercurial step and the smooth benedictions from Venus are all convincingly realised in these crisp performances from the Saint Louis Symphony Orchestra players. A clear-headed Susskind is also thoroughly even-handed with his vigorous use of trombones and tubas which alongside the timpani imaginatively develops those grandiose articulated rhythmic figures that announce the arrival of *Uranus, The Magician*. This disciplined approach and the splendour and sensuousness of the SACD transfer creates a nicely balanced account. One that holds opulence, expansiveness and no little electricity in one hand and sensible speeds, purposefulness and solidity in the other. True, the climactic sonic eruptions are startling, but elsewhere in his subtle direction from the podium Susskind will reward a careful listener in other ways through understated and satisfying strategies which do not unduly draw attention to themselves with elaborate and unnecessary gestures.

RP

Supplier: [www.vivante.co.uk](http://www.vivante.co.uk)

RECORDING	
MUSIC	



## Grieg Piano Concerto/Symphonic Dances/In Autumn Gimse/Royal Scottish National Orchestra/Engeset

Naxos 6.110060 

While some dismiss Grieg's work as lacking substance, this disc is able to encompass an enjoyable concert of his music, while demonstrating just how much essence its composer's work can actually reveal. At the heart of this release is Harvard Gimse's rather fine performance of Grieg's *Piano Concerto*. It exhibits brisk, yet not too fast tempos, and is played with enough bravura not to let the more lyrical moments to ever sound dull or lifeless, emphasising Grieg's love of the vibrant and vigorous. In fact, despite Gimse adding the odd dynamic effect to try and emphasis a point, the overall performance is thrilling enough on its own and does not require them. The remainder of this SACD exhibits similar enthusiastic playing, with a *Symphonic Dances* that, while not quite in the class of Kristian Ruud and the Bergen Philharmonic's captivating performance (BIS-SACD-1291), is one of the best renditions available, especially in the long *Andante* finale. The opening *Concert Overture: In Autumn* makes an effect introduction; and with performances by all being aptly spirited, this release can wholeheartedly be recommended, despite Naxos' sound that lacks absolute clarity and much in the way of soundstage width.




SG

RECORDING	
MUSIC	



## The Polyphonic Spree

Together We're Heavy

Hollywood Records  
2061-62423-1   

Powerful psychedelic choral rock music has never sounded bigger, bolder or more bombastic. The Polyphonic Spree's songs are an aural experience laced with soaring trumpets, French horn and trombones. Unearthly chords produced by theremin, synthesiser and harp gel with the ten piece choir and an array of instruments that include viola, violin upright bass, flute, piano, organ, guitars, pedal steel and a whole host of whistles, clicks and pops: Sometimes the vinyl cut does struggle to decipher a congested and instrument filled stage. The band unreservedly enjoys the theatre and pageantry surrounding every wildly bohemian gesture, simply loving their cult status and the attention that it and their colourfully flowing robes brings. There is an undisguised majesty within much of what they do. An anthem like 'Hold Me Now' echoes 'A Day In The Life' while elsewhere there's plenty of drama, chanting and the surging instrumental storm crashing over the finale of a ten-minute 'When The Fool Becomes A King'. For such a big cast the Spree are also eminently capable of trembling and quite intimate moments as well as glimpses of dark melancholy in numbers like 'Diamonds/Devotion To Majesty'. But the smiling faces, high spirits and undisguised enthusiasm always leave on an optimistic note.

Supplier: [www.vivante.co.uk](http://www.vivante.co.uk)

RP

RECORDING	
MUSIC	

# The RCA Living Stereo and Mercury Living Presence SACD Re-issues

## Is this as good as it gets, digitally speaking?

by Richard S. Foster

In a word, yes... and no. Each company released an opening volley of 10 SACDs. In several cases each release contains two original LPs.

All the Mercury recordings were made from the original three channel masters and as such each SACD offers three formats for your listening pleasure: two channel SACD, three channel 'stereo' [front left, center and front right] SACD and the original two channel CD mix by Wilma Cozart Fine.

RCA has released four of the ten titles recorded with their three-track stereo tapes: the Rubinstein, Mussorgsky/Russian, Cliburn and part of the Price discs. So... these four SACD issues also have three formats on one disc: two channel stereo SACD, three channel 'stereo' [front left, center and front right] SACD and a new, down-converted stereo portion for the CD layer. (Thanks to John Newton of Sound/Mirror mastering labs for this information).

I want to first thank David Steven of dCS for the loan of the fabulous Verdi LaScala transport/upsampler and the equally magnificent Elgar Plus Stereo digital to analogue converter I've had some experience, albeit not much, with rather inexpensive SACD playback and, to put it mildly, was not overly impressed, so it made sense to use some of the best gear available for these sessions. David thank you... by the time you read this I will have moved and changed my home telephone number so... it's going to be hard to part with this equipment. The dCS playback system has given me a view into not only SACD, but also up-sampled 16/44 and regular 16/44 playback which has absolutely changed my opinion about how good this medium can be. Is it better than my vinyl

playback setup? No. But in the same vein, my vinyl playback system isn't as good as attending a live concert.

For the purposes of these sessions, let me be clear; I listened to all the RCA issues and eight of the ten Mercury releases. I was unable, at the time of this article, to obtain copies of the Sousa and Hanson recordings so I will not

comment on them of course. I did do some up-sampling with a couple of the original Mercury CD issues as well as one RCA I had on hand and the results were inconclusive. For the SACD listening sessions I listened to both the CD and SACD two channel stereo mixes.

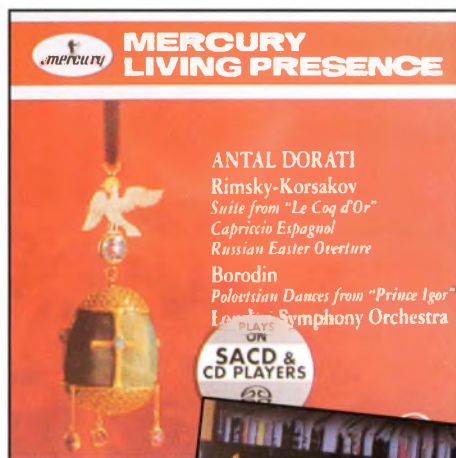
Two things I'd like to get out of the way early:

1) I feel the new Mercury SACD containing the original Wilma Cozart Fine layer, sounds superior to the

original Mercury CD release.

2) I have listened to several other RCA/BMG CD releases of the Living Stereo recordings and thought them to be quite horrid. The one release I did have on hand where I could do a direct A-B comparison was BMG 09026-61494-2 (*Zarathustra* and *Ein Heldenleben*). BMG

boasts this is an Apogee UV-22 encoded 'Super CD' delivering 20-bit resolution. This is one CD from a five CD set of *Reiner conducting Strauss* (09026-68635-2). Listening to the new release of this performance in 16/44 was very pleasurable. The release from the last decade was abysmal. Not only is it bright and strident, but it does not deliver



▶ the bass foundation from the organ contained in *Zarathustra*. It is also lacking the string-bass foundation available on the newly released product.

So, my conclusion regarding the 16/44 releases for both the RCA and the Mercury product is that the newer releases are far and away superior. I also find the original Mercury 16/44 layer to be a little on the bright side (and issued at a higher level than previously), but still more revealing than their original mid 1990s releases. The RCA 16/44 layers are quite exceptional and for those of you who own CD players, I still think these issues will be quite an upgrade.

Now for the SACDs:

The results are quite variable. If I had to make a general statement, it would simply be the RCA SACDs, as a whole, are superior to their Mercury counterparts.

The three best of the eight Mercurys I heard are the Bach *Cello Suites*, the Chabrier/Roussel disc and the Romero's Rodrigo/Vivaldi performances. These three alone are musical, truthful to the original performances and in the case of the Rodrigo, may even offer greater strengths than the original LP in terms of tonality and harmonic integrity.

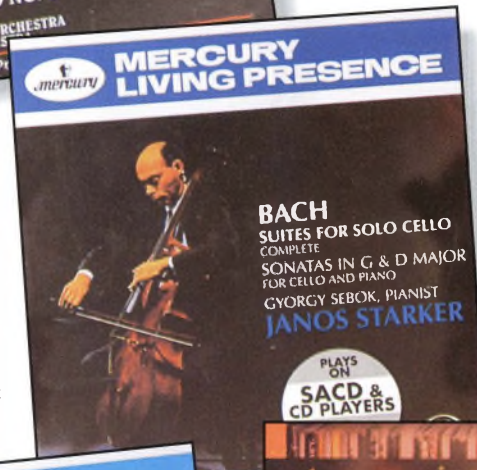
I had problems with the Byron Janis performance of the Rachmaninov *Third Piano Concerto*. The piano seems to be a little too 'tinkly' for my tastes. The body of the instrument is just not accurate. While the *Third* and *Second* were recorded at different times and different venues, I think you'll still be surprised as to just how good the *Second* was (recorded in Minneapolis). The *Preludes* are also quite nice, musically speaking.

The Bach *Cello Suites* are wonderful. Clear, and authoritative, Starker's instrument is conveyed in a natural ambience present in the original recording. The violoncello is nice and woody. The performances are legendary. This SACD will be the best you're going to hear Mr. Starker in the digital domain.

I was disappointed in the Respighi disc of the *Ancient Airs and Dances*. One of the qualities missing in both the SACD layer and the original CD release is the energy level from the string basses these performances provide. That magic around 80Hz and 140Hz is just not on these issues. Sad.

The SACD containing the *Capriccio*

*Espagnole* is just a little over the top in the upper registers for my ears. While the sound does settle down for the suite from *Le Coq d'Or* and a wonderful *Polovtsian Dances* from *Prince Igor*, the brightness returns for the *Russian Easter Overture*.



Again, not the most enjoyable of releases.

The Suppé and Auber overtures SACD offers quite excellent sound if this is music you're going to listen to. Not only was the SACD layer quite musical, the CD layer has also taken on a new life, albeit a little shy of some information.

Now, regarding the release of *The Firebird*... I think I'm saving the worst for last. Firstly, I have no idea what the ▶

▶ people at Universal Music were thinking when they released this SACD. While it contains almost two full LPs, the way they've placed the track listing is beyond me. This contains the original release of SR90226, *The Firebird*, along with SR90387, another all Stravinsky recording containing *Song of the Nightingale*, *Fireworks*, *Scherzo À La Russe*, *Four Études* and *Tango*. In my mind, you could start with either disc... but no, they begin the first track with *Fireworks* and then track 2-23 is *The Firebird* and then they skip to *Tango*, *Scherzo* – but alas, no four studies. To be fair, there wouldn't have been enough room for everything, but having said that, they could perhaps have left the *Fireworks* off and then included the studies complete.

The entire recording is a bore.

The gripping excitement *The Firebird* seems to have been totally stripped of all tension throughout. The performance bears no resemblance to *The Firebird* I know. There are momentary glimpses or parts of movements that show what could have been, but they are way too few and far between.

If you want my advice, do one of two things: either keep your 16/44 original *Firebird* on Mercury 432 012 2, or purchase this in

the new format and listen to the original CD layer. The SACD *Firebird* is terribly disappointing. The *Scherzo* and *Song of the Nightingale* do come off better, but they are hardly the keys to the kingdom.

Before I get into the RCAs, a word or two regarding 'ambient information retrieval'; It's spotty with both companies. Definitely the best acoustic information on the Mercurys is heard in the Starker performance. This would make sense as this large solo instrument is alone in an auditorium. However, let's make no bones about it, both companies have missed the ambient magic that makes these recordings so special. It's possible that this information is no longer on the tapes, but given the evidence available from vinyl re-issues I think that's unlikely. More probable is that the loss is an artifact of the process or medium itself – most

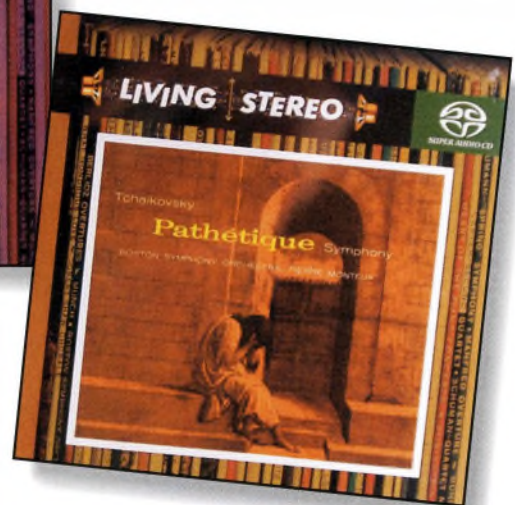
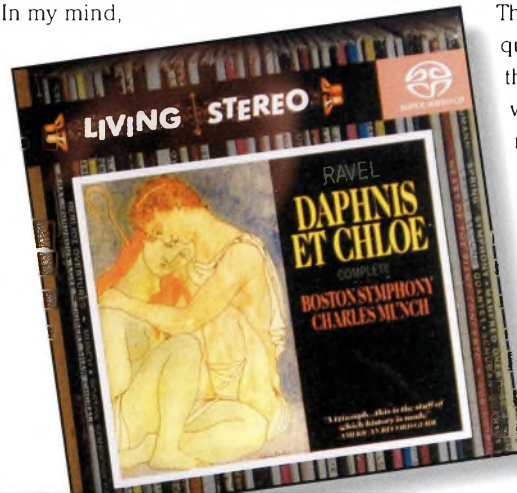
probably the former, as there's no shortage of ambient information on the Mo-Fi (or other) SACDs. Tape deterioration is clearly part of this equation, but whatever the truth of the matter, don't expect consistent acoustic space of legendary quality from these discs...

They simply don't have it.

The RCA issues are, on the whole, quite superb. There is no doubt they are different from the records, with the loss of ambience already noted as well as a more defined, even etched quality to the sound. There's nothing cuddly going on here. However, I'll make a broad statement regarding these as I stick my neck in the reviewers noose: They are the best of the digital versions I've heard. I should qualify that by pointing out that I'm not familiar with the XRCDs, and that we'll be examining the various

alternatives in greater detail in the next issue, but as of now, these rule the digital roost.

I made comments earlier about how good the *Zarathustra* was compared to the



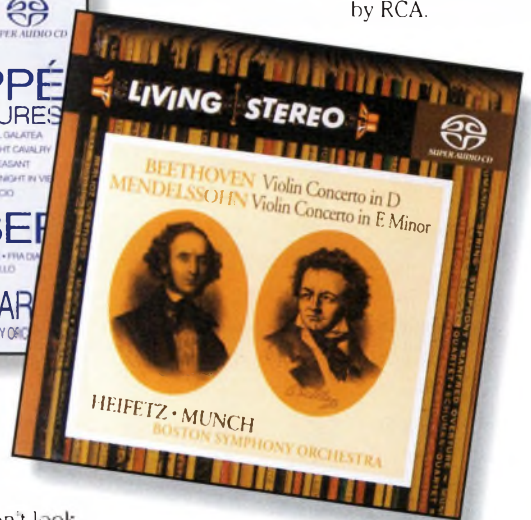
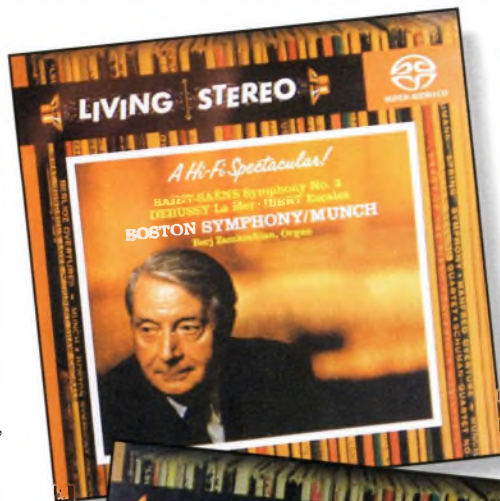
earlier 20Bit release, and it's better by a HUGE margin. The *Ein Heldenleben* also shares the same superior sound quality, but for me the magic of these early two-channel recordings is the amount of space one can hear in the original LSC and VICS vinyl editions. Whether that information is still on the tape or not, you can't hear it on these discs, with just momentary aural glimpses to tantalize the listener. Having said that, in other respects ▶

► Sound Mirror has done an excellent job with this production. Both performances contain excellent string tone (more so in *Heldenleben*) and the organ in *Zarathustra* is quite fearsome.

I really enjoyed what was done with the *Pictures at an Exhibition* production. Great depth, wonderful decay, ultra fast transient response are all offered on this combination of LSC 2201 and the *Festival LP*, LSC 2423. Definitely the best performances of these ever offered in the digital format.

Let me say from the start that I'm not a big Leontyne Price fan. I think much of her singing is far from effortless and based upon comparisons with other sopranos, she may have sung too far back in the throat... I also feel her voice was not as agile as some and her lower register was a little on the weak side. But this is only my opinion and I'm sure there are many that will disagree. However, what I really like about the Price disc is that it leaves you in no doubt that she is actually moving about the stage, turning her head left, right, etc. The recreation of this is wonderful. Like any compilation disc there are definitely some high points, and in this case it is the aria 'Vissi d' arte' from *Tosca*. All in all, I doubt you'll find Price on CD with finer production values than here.

Arthur Rubinstein was a master of the piano, he was also, as John Culshaw has written in his *Putting the Record Straight*, a royal pain in the fanny. Rubinstein wanted to dominate the recording. He wanted his 'audience' to hear him and on many of the recordings, hear him you do. So this disc was one of the great surprises for me in this series.



Sound Mirror has done a wonderful job in capturing his piano. Perhaps a little too big for some, the sound is extremely natural with no chattering or shattering keystrokes. The performances are outstanding and this will be a disc I shall return to often... amazing for a 55 year old recording!

Fritz Reiner 'owned' certain orchestral works. Among them he can claim many of the works of Bartok Here again we have another superb release which offers an excellent SACD and CD layer. These are all legendary performances and it's nice to

have them served properly. There is nothing out of line here and you won't find these performances and sound bettered in the digital domain.

The Cliburn disc however is not up to snuff, but this is more I would guess, due to problems with the original recordings than anything else. The Tchaikovsky was rushed to market to capitalize on Cliburn's then recent win in the Soviet Union. This was the first classical LP I'm aware of that sold over a million copies! Those collectors of the original US pressings have always found it very hard to find the original 1S/1S pressings because of the sheer volumes of this record issued

by RCA.

Well... don't look

for it anymore, it's not worth it. It's not an audiophile delight. Nor has it improved with age. There is a splashy chatter to the piano in the opening movement and this sets the stage for a mediocre release. The Rachmaninov *Second* also, while better than the Tchaikovsky, was

▶ never regarded as a great recording and it's certainly a little too muddy for my tastes. Although the SACD makes the most of what's available, unless you are collecting the whole series, you will find far better performances to investigate.

Monteux's 1955 recording of the *Fatigue* (Tchaikovsky's *Sixth Symphony Op. 74*) is a stunner. While this does not have the width of soundstage the original record does (LSC1901), it has all the harmonic and tonal rightness of that recording.



original recordings. The Beethoven had always been a little on the muddy side and while this is still the case, there is a greater clarity on the SACD than on any other digital issue of this performance I've ever heard. The Mendelssohn also, while being a three-track recording, offers Heifetz front and center and you know from the beginning who is in control. SG has previously commented on the SACD release (Issue 35, page 131)

and I'd like to correct one small point. The record was not released in 1958, but 1960. It suffered the same

fate as Zarathustra in that people who had recently (four to six odd years earlier) purchased the mono copy, weren't going to repurchase the same performance just because it was in stereo. This is the main reason these two records are rare, a fate shared by the hyper-rare Schubert *Trout* (LSC 2147), originally released in mono in 1958 and later released in VERY small numbers in 1962.

The Ravel is ravishing, the absolute best I've heard it any digital format. This is definitely well worth adding to your collection.

In the Mercury portion I saved the worst for last...here I have to go with, in my opinion, one of the very best: The St. Saëns *Third Symphony, opus 78* and the two recordings that comprise LSC 2111, Debussy's *La Mer* and Ibert's *Escales*. This is one spectacular SACD - one I find nothing short of sensational.

All the atmosphere, excitement, musical involvement and playability are here in spades. There are comments on the ▶



From the opening low-register of full strings and the haunting sound of the bassoon (and you can really tell this is a bassoon) this particular release has NEVER sounded better digitally. An exciting performance given a world class transfer, this is one of THE performances of this work. Many also like Mravinsky on Deutsche Grammophon, but I guarantee you will find new respect for Monteux when you hear this performance. As far as I'm concerned, the best sound of any of the Monteux Tchaikovsky recordings for RCA.

It was fascinating to listen to the Beethoven and Mendelssohn with Heifetz, Munch and the Boston. What I like about the SACD is the 'trueness' to the






▶ back of the case about finding a newly discovered three-track master for the St. Saëns and I believe it. The organist Berj Zamkochian is simply outstanding. I love the natural shadings of the subterranean levels that his organ reaches. Clearly one of the very best.

I really liked the RCAs. They sound very different to the LPs, but they are very, very enjoyable. The Mercurys I have given mixed reviews and they're generally not in the same class. We'll have to



wait and see what happens with the next round of releases, but these two forays into the world of SACD certainly demonstrate the potential performance on offer when it comes to preserving the back catalogue – assuming you get the right tape of the right performance and handle it in the right way. So, nice new format maybe – but otherwise, nothing else has changed... 

## The RCA Living Stereo and Mercury Living Presence SACD Re-issues

### RCA:

- 61387** St. Saëns: *Symphony No. 3 in C minor, Op. 78*  
 Claude Debussy: *La Mer*  
 Jacques Ibert: *Éscales* (Ports of Call)  
 Boston Symphony Orchestra, Charles Munch  
 (Recorded in 1956 and 1959)
- 61388** Ravel: *Daphnis et Chloé*  
 Boston Symphony Orchestra, Charles Munch  
 New England Conservatory Chorus and Alumni  
 Chorus, (Recorded in 1955)
- 61389** Richard Strauss: *Also Sprach Zarathustra, Op. 30*  
*Ein Heldenleben, Op. 40*  
 Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Fritz Reiner (Recorded  
 in 1954)
- 61390** Béla Bartók: *Concerto for Orchestra; Music for Strings,  
 Percussion and Celesta; Hungarian Sketches*  
 Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Fritz Reiner  
 (Recorded in 1955 and 1958)
- 61391** Ludwig Van Beethoven: *Concerto in D, Op. 61*  
 Felix Mendelssohn: *Concerto in E Minor, Op. 64*  
 Jascha Heifetz, violin;  
 Boston Symphony Orchestra, Charles Munch  
 (Recorded in 1955 and 1959)
- 61392** Pitor Ilich Tchaikovsky:  
*Piano Concerto No. 1, Op. 23 in B-Flat Major*. RCA  
 Symphony Orchestra, Kiril Kondrashin  
 Sergei Rachmaninoff: *Piano Concerto No. 2,  
 Op. 18 in C Minor*. Chicago Symphony Orchestra,  
 Fritz Reiner
- 61394** Modest Mussorgsky: *Pictures at an Exhibition*  
 Piotr Ilich Tchaikovsky: *Marche Minature*  
 Modest Mussorgsky: *A Night on Bald Mountain*  
 Alexander Borodin: *Prince Igor: Polovtsian Dances*  
 Piotr Ilich Tchaikovsky: *Marche Slave*  
 Dimitri Kabalevsky: *Colas Breugnon, Op. 24- Overture*  
 Mikhail Glinka: *Ruslan and Ludmilla- Overture*  
 Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Fritz Reiner  
 (Recorded in 1967 and 1959)
- 61395** Guiseppe Verdi: *Aida* - Ritorna vincitor!; Qui Radamès  
 verrà!...O patria mia  
*Il Trovatore* - Che più t'arresti?...Tacea la notte...  
 Di tale amor, Timor di me?... D'amor sull' ali rosee.  
 Giacomo Puccini: *Madama Butterfly* - Un bel di  
 vedremo; Tu? Tu? piccolo Iddio! (Morte di Butterfly)  
*La Rondine*: Chi il bel sogno di Doretta  
*Tosca* – Vissi d'arte  
*Turandot* – Signore ascolta!; Tu che di gel sei cinta.  
 Leontyne Price, soprano; Rome Opera Orchestra  
 conducted by Olivero de Fabritis and Arturo Basile  
 (Recorded in 1959 and 1960)
- 61396** Frédéric Chopin:  
*Ballades, Nos. 1-4; Scherzos, Nos. 1-4*  
 Arthur Rubinstein, piano (Recorded in 1959)
- 61397** Piotr Ilich Tchaikovsky:  
*Symphony No. 6, Op. 74 in B Minor "Pathétique"*  
 Boston Symphony Orchestra, Pierre Monteux  
 (Recorded in 1955)



► **MERCURY:**

**4706442** (Two SACDs)

Bach:

*The 6 Cello Suites, Sonata in G major, BWV 1027, Sonata in D major, BWV 1028,*  
Janos Starker (cello), Gyorgy Sebok (piano)  
Recorded: Ballroom Studio A, Fine Recording,  
New York, April 15, 1963 (*Suite No.2*), April 15 & 17,  
1963 (*Suite No.5*), September 7, 1965 (*Suite No.1*),  
September 7 & 8, 1965 (*Suite No.6*), December 21 &  
22, 1965 (*Suites Nos. 3 & 4*); April 16, 1963 (*Sonatas*)

**4756183** Emmanuel Chabrier:

*España Suite Pastorale, Fête Polonoise,*  
"Guendoline" *Overture, Danse Slave, Joyeuse*  
*Marche, Bourrée Fantasque*

Albert Roussel:

*Suite in F*

Detroit Symphony Orchestra, conducted by  
Paul Paray

Recorded: Cass Technical High School, Detroit,  
November 18, 1960 (*Espana*, etc.), Old Orchestra  
Hall, Detroit, April 5, 1959 (*Marche Joyeuse*), Ford  
Auditorium, Detroit, March 19, 1957 (*Bourrée*  
*Fantasque & Suite in F*)

**4756181** Howard Hanson:

*Symphony No.1 "Nordic", Symphony No.2*  
*"Romantic"*

Eastman-Rochester Orchestra, conducted by  
Howard Hanson

Eastman School of Music Chorus

Recorded: Eastman Theatre, Rochester, New York,  
6 May 1957 (*Song of Democracy*), May 4, 1958  
(*Romantic*), December 16, 1958 (*Nordic*)

**4706392** Rachmaninov:

*Piano Concertos Nos.2 & 3, Prelude in C sharp minor,*  
*Op.3 No.2, Prelude in E flat major, Op.23 No.6*

Byron Janis: piano

London Symphony & Minneapolis Symphony  
Orchestras,  
conducted by Antal Dorati

Recorded: Northrop Auditorium- Minneapolis,  
April 17 & 18, 1960 (*Piano Concerto No.2 &*  
*Preludes*); Watford Town Hall- June 16 & 17,  
1961 (*Piano Concerto No.3*)

**4706372** Respighi:

*Ancient Airs & Dances - complete*

Philharmonia Hungarica, conducted by Antal Dorati

Recorded: Grosse Saal, Wiener Konzerthaus,  
June 9 - 11, 1958

**4756194** Rimsky-Korsakov:

*Le Coq d'Or Suite, Capriccio Espagnol, Russian*  
*Easter Festival Overture*

Borodin: *Polovtsian Dances*

London Symphony Orchestra, London Symphony  
Orchestra Chorus conducted by Antal Dorati

Recorded: Walthamstow Town Hall, July 4, 1956  
(*Polovtsian Dances*), July 5, 1956 (*Coq d'Or*), June 6,  
1959 (*Capriccio Espagnol, Russian Easter Festival*  
*Overture*)

**4756184** Rodrigo:

*Concierto de Aranjuez, Concierto Andaluz*

Vivaldi:

*Concerto in B minor for 4 Guitars, Concerto in C for*  
*Guitar, Concerto in G for 2 Guitars,* The Romeros  
(Celedonio, Celin, Angel and Pepe Romero)

The San Antonio Symphony Orchestra conducted by  
Victor Alessandro

Recorded: Municipal Auditorium, San Antonio,  
Texas, November 1967

**4756182** Sousa:

*Sound Off, Nobles of the Mystic Shrine, Sabre and*  
*Spurs, The Picadore, Our Flirtation, The High School*  
*Cadets, The Invincible Eagle, Bullets and Bayonets,*  
*The Liberty Bell, Riders for the Flag, Solid Men to the*  
*Front! The Gallant Seventh, The Rille Regiment,*  
*Golden Jubilee, The Gridiron Club, New Mexico,*  
*Sesqui-Centennial Exposition, The Black Horse Troop,*  
*The Kansas Wildcats, Manhattan Beach, Ancient and*  
*Honourable Artillery Company, The National Game,*  
*The Glory of the Yankee Navy*

Frederick Fennell conducting the Eastman Wind  
Ensemble

Recorded: Eastman Rochester Auditorium - May,  
1960 and May 5, 1961

**4706432** Stravinsky:

*Fireworks, The Firebird, Tango, Scherzo à la Russe,*  
*Song of the Nightingale*

London Symphony Orchestra conducted by Antal  
Dorati

Recorded: Watford Town Hall, June 7, 1959 -  
*Firebird*; June 22 & 24, 1964 - *Song of the*  
*Nightingale*; June 27, 1964 - *Fireworks* and *Scherzo*  
*a la Russe*; July 7, 1964 - *Tango*.

**4706382** Suppe:

*The Beautiful Galatea, Pique Dame, Light Cavalry,*  
*Poet & Peasant, Morning, Noon & Night in Vienna,*  
*Boccaccio*

Auber:

*The Bronze Horse, Fra Diavolo, Masaniello*  
Detroit Symphony Orchestra conducted by

Paul Paray

Recorded: Cass Technical High School, Detroit,  
November 29, 1959 - *Suppé*; Old Orchestra Hall,  
Detroit, April 4, 1959 - Auber



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The mark of a truly great tweeter – one that can release all the vivid detail in your music – is what's called 'perfect piston behaviour'. As long as the tweeter dome is vibrating rigidly, like a piston, its delivery will be accurate. The higher the frequency, though, the harder that becomes. The materials most resistant to 'break-up' combine lightness and stiffness. And there's one that does that better than anything else on earth.

The new B&W 800 Series feature tweeter domes of pure, ultra-hard diamond. It may seem extravagant, but nothing gets closer to the behaviour of a hypothetical 'perfect tweeter' – one with infinite stiffness. Our diamond dome carries on vibrating like a piston well beyond the range of human hearing, and delivers audible sound with unheard-of clarity.

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