

hi-fi+

Issue 38
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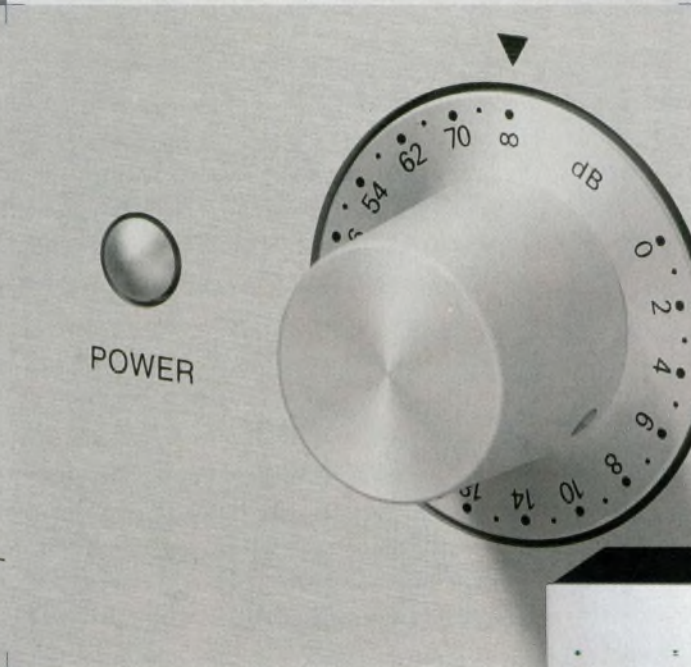
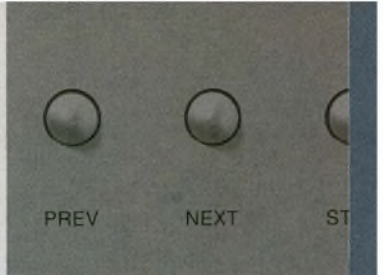
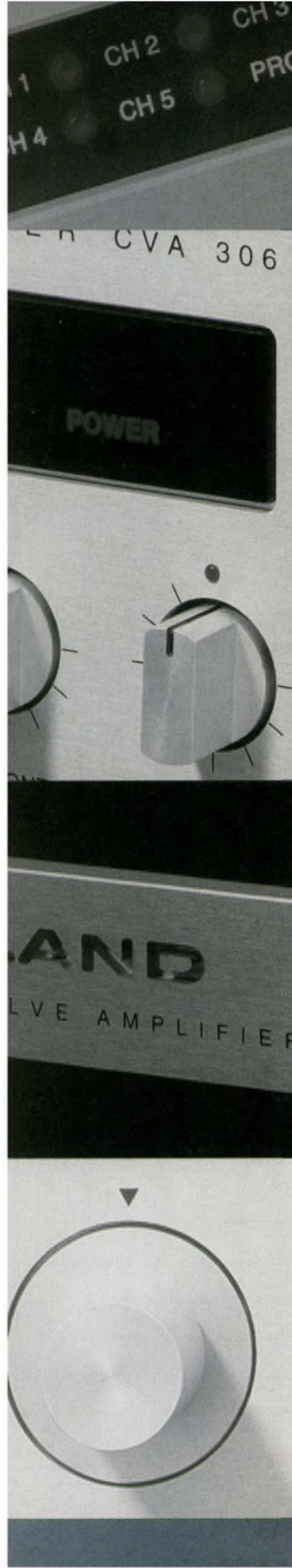
If moving house is supposed to be one of life's major stresses, then spare a thought for the poor audio reviewer. On top of all the normal problems you can heap physically moving enough delicate electronics to stock a decent hi-fi shop, the soft-ware to go with them (which actually probably matches the hardware for price and easily exceeds it in weight) and the complete trauma of getting to grips with a new listening environment. But you know what's exercising my imagination at present? Just how I'm going to do my job without completely destroying the polished wooden floors of our new abode. Chopping and changing equipment is hard enough without worrying about whether the rack you are putting it on is going to retreat as quickly as you can advance, or whether those lovely little dimpled discs are actually going to slide with the speaker or not...

Hopefully this will be a purely temporary, interim state of affairs, consigned to history by the completion of the dedicated listening room, but even being optimistic that's a time-scale to be measured in months rather than weeks. In the meantime I'm going to have to confront on a daily basis, the sad reality that the main reason for having a dedicated listening environment, along with dedicated storage to go with it, is to prevent our hobby (or in my case, job) completely overrunning the house. Still, every cloud has a silver lining, and the longer the rainbow, the more material it will generate along the path that finally reaches the legendary pot of gold. And if you happen to know a fish that needs a bicycle...



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Music+

Music Reviews

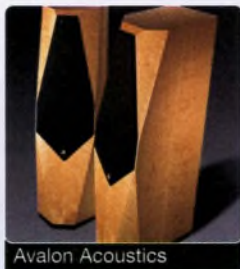
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for the love of music...



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Cardas



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conrad-johnson



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finite elemente



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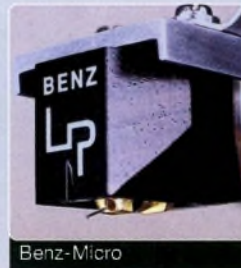
Magnum Dynalab



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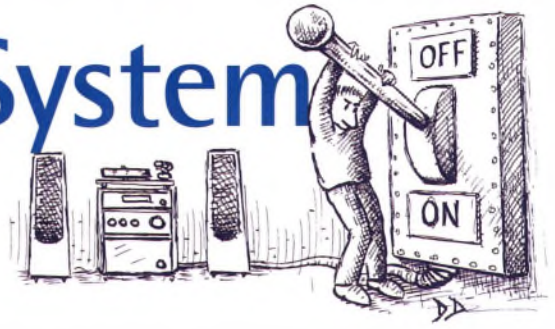
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Playing The System

by Roy Gregory



In the ongoing debate regarding the role (and/or usefulness) of distributors, there's way too much common knowledge of the "it's obvious" type being thrown around – normally prefaced by the words "as everybody knows..." I recently received this particularly startling example and felt that it offered the scope to explain certain unavoidable realities about the business that goes with out hobby.

Dear Mr Gregory,

May I take issue with your recent editorial commenting on the risks of parallel importing as well as your reply to a letter about reviews of Audiofreaks products. I have looked into direct imports from America, my experience is that large companies will not consider it. conrad-johnson for example, not only will not send direct to the UK, but will not modify the voltage of units less than six months old, for the quite honourable reason that they don't wish to undermine their UK distributor (Audiofreaks). Smaller companies with a low British profile will send to the UK. Monarchy Audio, for example were happy to send me an SM70 power amp, though I bought another instead.

I completely agree that there are risks to direct imports: lack of support, damage etc. As far as damage is concerned, UPS cover loss and damage in their wonderful service. I received a pre-amp from the mid-west in four days; our postal service couldn't deliver next door in that time. Against the risks you have to put the rewards and these can be staggering. I have followed US/UK prices for some years. About four years ago you would pay a few less pounds than dollars for an item, something like £90 against \$100. The situation now is comparable. The difference is of course, that the dollar stood at about 1.40 to 1.50 to the pound then, already a large and hard to justify markup, and now it stands at 1.88. In other words the dollar has dropped by about 31% and UK prices of American gear have hardly changed. A few importers have passed on some of the gains, most have not. It frankly amazes me; everyone knows the change in the Dollar's value and no one, no one, not manufacturers, distributors, reviewers, not even the poor long suffering customers, seems to mind.

I would like to illustrate the possible saving with some personal examples of importing nearly new kit. A year ago

I bought an eight-month old, mint condition conrad-johnson Premier 17LS pre-amp with a spare set of valves. The cost, including import duty at 22%, UPS delivery, sending the cheque and changing to 240 volts, was a little over £2050. I checked recently and they are quoted now, at a cheaper price on the Audiogon website. The Premier 17 costs about \$4500 in the US today and about £4300 here, can anyone explain that to me? Alright, you can talk of the extra costs of importing, but that much difference.

Lets take an even more clear cut example; the cost of items from a third country, in the US and UK market. Surely they have the same import costs don't they. I recently imported a Koetsu Rosewood Signature from a Swiss lawyer living in Florida and thanks for the review by the way. He had used it for a few hours before he went back to the greater detail of a Transfiguration cartridge. Yes I know I only have his word for the 30 hours use and buying second cartridges is very risky. Yet the unit was absolutely mint and the all-in cost, about £900. That cartridge costs \$2500 in the US and £2300 here, that is about \$4320 and they come of course from Japan. How can anyone even begin to justify that price difference. Someone in the supply chain is making not an excess, but an obscene profit and no one seems to mind. Well I do and am prepared to take the risks and put in the extra work, to avoid being taken for a mug.

Moving on to the value added by retailers and distributors, that you alluded to in your reply to Mr Anderson's letter, also in issue 37. I have pestered and annoyed a number of them over the years. Many of them have been unfailingly polite, helpful and patient with my inane questions. Step forward Jack at the Audio Salon, Kevin at Definitive Audio, Nick at the Emporium and Phonography, amongst others. I would trust the advice of these and some others implicitly. Yes they are in business, but they are also enthusiasts with real knowledge of the subject and an obvious desire to see a satisfied customer who will come back to them. A pretty good way of providing a service one would think.

Then there are the others who are curt, dismissive and condescending, chief amongst these, Mr Bozic at

▶ **Audiofreaks.** I first contacted him regarding the Finite Pagoda rack system. To paraphrase his reply, if I didn't know what a rack could do, or what I wanted it for, so how could he possibly advise me. Perhaps he was having a bad day, we all do, but no, on two other occasions I asked simple questions about a possible amp purchase and got a similar response. Was it just me? I have spoken to other audio friends who got a similar response and simply will not call him. I am sure there are time wasters and perhaps I am one, but that is no way to run a service. At my age, I will not be treated like a delinquent, slightly dim teenager.

My message to the industry, "Wake up and smell the roses." The drop in the dollar value has not been passed

onto consumers in any way and someone is exploiting the change to make outrageous profits. Well I and a number of friends can read the financial pages and use the internet. We will increasingly bypass UK suppliers and reap the benefits ourselves. I am a beginner at this; a friend in Berkshire has bought in a Magnum Dynalab, heavy Jolida amps, even large Avalon speakers, with no real problems.

There is by the way, no way you would publish this and I can understand that, you need the support of Audio Freaks and others to keep in business.

Yours

David Wise

Via e-mail

The most important consideration in presenting any argument is first defining the terms of reference, then ensuring that you compare like with like. Let's start at the beginning with the way an import company functions.

Any importer normally has to deal with currency conversion – one of the potential attractions of the EU, but let's not go there! As you cannot constantly adjust prices to reflect current exchange rates, the importer has to work from an estimated value. In the case of the US Dollar this tends to be between 1.60 and 1.65. Clearly, with current exchange rates running at around 1.85 (remember that the bank always takes a slice) the importers are in clover. However, as you mention in your letter, not so long ago, the US Dollar was trading at nearer 1.40. Oddly enough I didn't receive a corresponding clamor for importers to put their prices up! You really can't have it both ways. Yes, if a long-term adjustment sets in then prices can be adjusted to comply, but few if any companies that I know of will do so (printing new price lists, brochures etc along the way) much inside a year. And that's in any field. The fact that you can now see that happening suggests that hi-fi importers are merely reacting in exactly the same way as other industries.

So, having established the wider context in which prices are set, let's examine your examples. When an importer buys a product from a manufacturer he does so at the export price. That is paid up-front, along with shipping, duty and VAT before he even receives the goods. That price is then converted to the UK trade price by adding the importer's margin, usually in the form of a percentage. The goods are then sold through a retailer, who also adds a percentage margin. Again, this is an entirely standard arrangement that applies to everything from wineglasses to the wine that goes in them.

The things to notice are as follows. The profits made from producing the product are split three ways, and

because the margins are defined as percentage of cost, the person making the most money per unit is actually the retailer. Secondly, and again because of the percentage structure, the export price (and in particular its relation to the domestic trade price of the product in its home market) has a critical impact on the final retail price overseas. By way of an example, let's look at Magneplanar. For many years their export price was the same as their domestic trade price! Not only that, they appointed a European distributor, who obviously added his own margin to the process. Thus, someone buying a pair of Maggies in the US would pay the factory price plus one margin. The same pair of speakers in the UK would carry the burden of three, cumulative margins! And you wonder why Magneplanar have near-zero market presence in this country?

Now, this is clearly not a sensible arrangement, at least if you view it from this side of the Atlantic as well as via the North Sea. However, look at it from Magneplanar's point of view. They are clearly not interested in overseas sales given the massive home market support that they enjoy. Under those circumstances, why should they sell their products cheaper to overseas markets or force their home prices up? This is the crucial question, and one that has been thrown into stark relief by the internet. Price parity is only possible if it matters to the manufacturer. Sometimes it does, but sometimes it doesn't. Either way, the adjustment necessary (or lack of it) means that someone ends up paying more for the product, either in the home or the export market. Historically speaking, US companies, faced with the benefit of a huge domestic audience, don't pay too much attention to their export opportunities until they are well and truly established in their home market. When they do, do you really think that they are going to hike their home prices so that their export price can remain lower than their domestic



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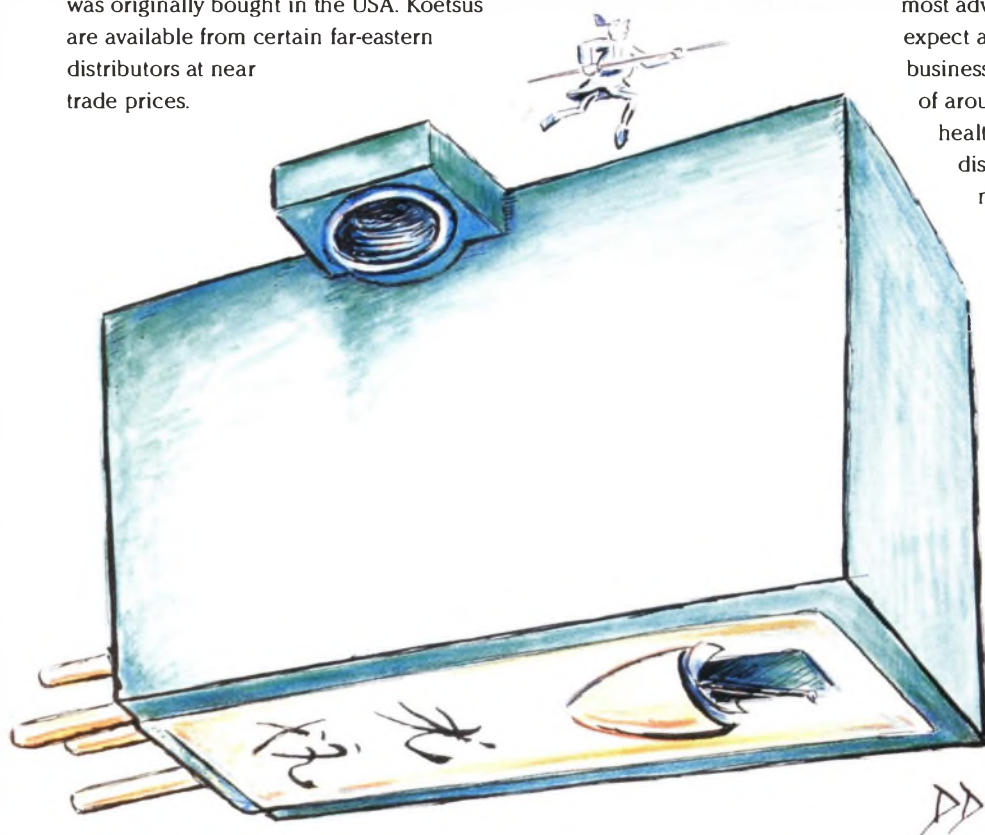
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► trade price? End result; many US products in particular are disproportionately expensive overseas.

Taking the example of your Premier 17LS, take the US export price, add duty, and shipping, add a margin for the importer and one for the retailer and then add VAT and see what you get. Bear in mind too that the US price you quote is devoid of sales Tax, which varies from state to state, but gets as high as 15% or thereabouts, which turns your \$4500 into \$5175 for starters. But hold on a second, the unit you bought was second-hand, which means that you avoid VAT too. So in actual fact what you should be looking at is the UK price for a second-hand Premier 17LS. Much more than \$2000?

I don't think so – and a lot less trouble too.

The same of course applies to your Koetsu, except that in this instance there are even more variables to consider. You don't for instance know whether the cartridge was originally bought in the USA. Koetsus are available from certain far-eastern distributors at near trade prices.



The problem is that their suspension compliance has been designed to accommodate tropical temperatures and humidity. You might save money on the cartridge but the central heating bills are a bitch! What's more, Koetsu is a case where different examples are named differently in different markets. So what exactly are you buying. And yes, the import duties into the US are different to the UK as are

the tax implications as noted above. All of which make the notion of buying an expensive cartridge from overseas fraught with even more dangers than anything else.

But the real issue here is contained in your throw-away thankyou for the review that appeared in the pages of this magazine. Who do you think paid for that cartridge and made it available to us, thus instantly decimating its value? The answer of course, is the importer – which is why he charges a margin. He has overheads that come out of that margin, including maintaining an office and storage, holding stock, providing equipment for review, the cost

of shows and advertising, offering

a guarantee and service facility.

The mistake you are making is to confuse margin with profit. As an example, a retailer who buys at the most advantageous price might expect a 40% margin. But his business probably runs at a profit of around 4% - and that's if it's healthy. Screw him for a 10% discount and it's costing him money to sell to you!

How an individual importer or retailer deals with his customers is a matter of personal choice, as is whether a customer chooses to buy from him. However, let me make it perfectly clear that importers and retailers have a highly developed sense of whether or not a customer is serious or not. At least they do if they want to stay in business! Audiofreaks have been in business for a good many years...

The problem with conclusions is that their

veracity depends on the quality of the evidence on which they're based. Hopefully those who complain about outrageous profits will now be in a position to understand both how retail prices are arrived at and who has the greatest influence over them. After all, if you are going to throw stones, it might as well be at the right target.



Walrus

11 New Quebec St, London W1



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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Incoming!

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

Dear Sir,

I enjoy your magazine but I have a question about a comment made in the Issue 36 Product of the Year award article about the Avalon Acoustics Eidolon Diamond Loudspeakers.

In this article Roy Gregory says "...the Diamond is neither particularly large nor, at £33000, particularly expensive". I live in Canada and, today (if I understand correctly) this converts into \$76,546.00 Canadian. I am not sure who the bulk of your readership consists of but my guess is that to most people \$76,546.00 for one pair of speakers is insanely expensive.

I have an average Canadian income and I own a stereo system worth about \$15000.00 Canadian. I consider it to be pretty expensive! Granted, I may make improvements on it but it will never exceed half of the price that Roy calls "not particularly expensive". What I (and, I think, most people with a taste for good sound) would call relatively inexpensive would be the Rotel RA 1062 at \$595.00 (\$1380. Canadian) or the JM Labs 707 loudspeakers at £349 (\$809 Canadian) a pair.

Yes, I realize that these represent budget products from an audiophile perspective so lets take it up a notch and consider the VPI Scout-Master Turntable and JMW 9.0 Tonearm at £2095-\$3495 (\$4859-\$8106). To me this is pretty expensive but I do own a Turntable in this price range. Considering the astronomically expensive prices of some turntables I can see how this could be construed as relatively inexpensive (but not to most people). But \$76546 for a pair of speakers!? I have to think that this is a pretty expensive pair of speakers from any perspective and that even the very rich would probably concede this.

How can Roy call this "not particularly expensive"? Have I got the conversion wrong? Is my perspective skewed somehow? Or what?

From

Peter and Rita Cornelius

Via e-mail.

Don't worry, we're not all millionaires at Plus Towers – far from it. The bit you omitted from your quote – "For what represents (for all practical purposes) the company's flagship speaker..." is what makes sense of the statement. The point being made is that compared to the likes of the Wilson Alexandria, the big

Pipedreams, Kharmas or Alons, the Avalon is indeed far smaller and rather less than half the price. Thus, whilst it could never ever be described as cheap, it's certainly cheap in the context of its peer group – both in terms of range position and performance. What is of wider interest is that it is far from alone, with a number of other companies also dropping the price, bulk and complexity of state of the art performance, a recurring theme throughout the awards issue. I hope that clears up any confusion. Ed.

Dear Sir,

I always enjoy reading HiFi+ and it is the only hi-fi magazine to which I have a subscription. The 'Product of the Year Awards in Issue 36 included an eclectic, esoteric and interesting mix of equipment and recordings but, there was no tuner included. Is this an oversight? Did a tuner reviewed last year not rate an award?

In review of the Magnum Dynalab MD 106t review in Issue 31, Alan Sircom positively drooled (if one can in words) over this tuner. Surely, a candidate for a prize if there ever was one.

Yours faithfully

MJ Crawford

Gloucestershire

As you are probably aware, we don't have predetermined categories for our awards. Yes, the Magnum Dynalab MD 106t is indeed a superb unit – but that's not exactly a secret, especially in the context of all the previous awards that Magnum Dynalab have received from us and others over the years. We can only give so many awards and we're already being slated for "liking everything we reviewed last year", so in the context of keeping the awards interesting, useful and stimulating to our readers, some hard decisions have to be taken. Yes, the MD 106t is an excellent device and no slur was intended. So too were the other award winners, and in the very personal judgement of the writing staff, drawing attention to those products made more sense for more people. That's the strength (and the weakness) of our awards – they are extremely personal. Besides, if they encourage people to disagree and draw up their own list, isn't that half the point. Thanks for your comment. It is, at the end of the day, just as valid as ours. Ed.

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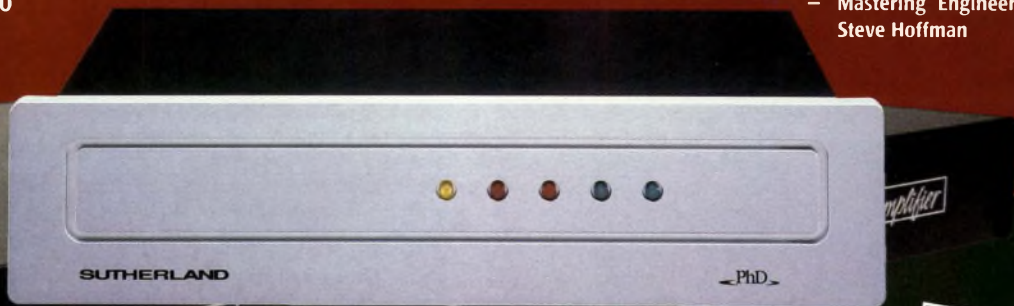
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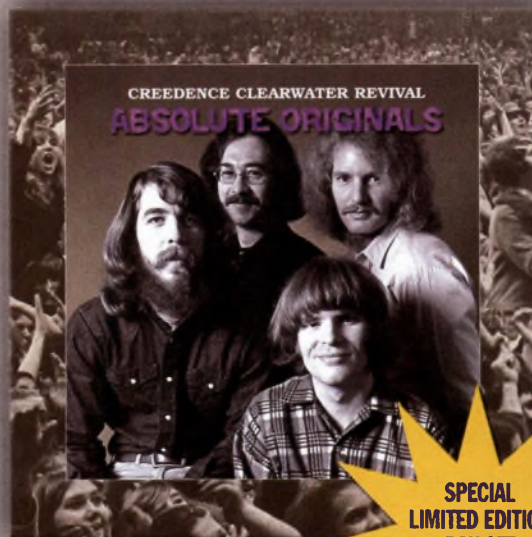
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Explorations: Bill Evans Trio



► Dear Sir,

It being the time of the year for awards and 'Best ofs' I thought that along with my subscription renewal I would highlight a few of my favorite bits from your magazine over the last year or so.

Firstly, the excellent article about the Cure, I agree totally that the first four albums were definitely the best, with Seventeen Seconds my favorite, mainly because of 'A Forest' – definitely in my top three all time best tracks. Next comes my thanks for your album reviews, the first review of Elbow's second album *Cast of Thousands* was too intriguing to ignore and although it may not be a "work of genius" it was my best album of 2004 by a long way.

Special mention must go to the article about Peter Gabriel and the guide to setting up a sub-woofer – which finally persuaded me to take the plunge and enter this unknown territory for the first time. In my last letter I requested a review of the KEF Reference 201's mainly to see if your views matched or totally differed from mine and hence gain some terms of reference by which to judge other reviews. I have had a pair of 201's for about two years now and I have never been less than totally satisfied with them. The version I have are probably an earlier incarnation than the pair you tried since the stands did not attach to the speakers, just sitting on small rubber pimples on the top plate, and there appears to be no way to fill the stands. Initially I found the sound had a metallic tinge which spoiled an otherwise clean and natural sound. A quick experiment with some homemade wooden stands showed it was resonance in the metal stand causing the problem. It was simply solved by swapping the metal spikes for RDC 1 cones, (thanks for that tip too); result, the best sound I'd ever heard in my listening room in 20 years of hi-fi and music listening. Upgrades of amplifier and CD player followed, and as your article suggests a bigger sounding amp and more grunt certainly does the trick; tri-wiring works a treat too. But right from the first couple of months spent with these speakers one could not help thinking, that if only I could add another 15-20 Hz at the bottom I would have a speaker to cure any upgrade junkie.

So on reading your review and every observation matching my own experience, once I had the rest of my kit sorted out I had to see what a sub-woofer would do. My room is only 3 x 4 m so a big 500w monster would be a disaster, so after talking with my dealer I settled on two M&K Kx 10 sub-woofers. These don't have massive power or extension, but their compact dimensions meant I could place them just inside and behind each speaker, and connecting them to my Cyrus pre-amp direct effectively gives me an extra driver for each speaker. After about two months of continuous adjustment and tweaking I finally have success; deep articulate bass with 'boing'. The best bit is the effect on the rest of the frequency range: sharper focus, better imaging, transparency, refinement

and dimensionality. The difference in overall effect is the difference between sounding natural and sounding real. I hope this experience might help in your investigations and I can look forward to the results of the endeavors suggested in your original review. The only trouble is that now I'm going to have to upgrade my amp again to really make the most of this great speaker combo.

Finally I would like to add my twopenneth to the interconnect test debate. I was fortunate to be able to try out four different, similarly priced interconnects at my home in my own system at my own leisure a couple of years ago. This taught me two things, interconnects do sound different and the best interconnect is the one that makes your system sound closest to how you want it too. Your test proved this and I feel you didn't set out to infer anything else from your results. As to the debate and stir it has caused, this just proves the value of attempting to illuminate the issue and that beauty is in the ear of the beholder

Yours gratefully

Mr Robin Sherman
Eastbourne

Dear Sir,

I always enjoy reading Hi-Fi+ and appreciate its bias towards analogue reproduction. I cannot understand, though, why you have so few (or no) reviews on what are considered by some to be excellent British products. For example, why have you not featured offerings from Nottingham Analogue and Origin Live and what about the Musical Fidelity M1 and Simon Yorke S7 turntables?

I always open each new edition of Hi-Fi+ with more than a little hope but you continue to disappoint.

Yours faithfully,

Stephen Bishop
Via e-mail

Well, it's not just us that decide what gets reviewed. The manufacturers have to want a review in the first place, then they have to want it from us. The problem is that for many small manufacturers, a review can cause more problems than it solves; a bad review could kill them, a rave could be just as lethal. With so many bad review experiences in the history of hi-fi, and more to do with turntables than any other kind of component, a certain reticence is to be understood. However, if any of the above mentioned manufacturers care to contact us we'd be only too happy to discuss potential reviews. Ed.

Dear Sir,

From Alan Sircom's reviews I know that he, like me is a fan of Magnum Dynalab tuners. I recently upgraded mine ►

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As a Wilson Benesch Major Stockist, where else can you visit and hear the entire range? The finish, design and performance of these loudspeakers are breathtaking and start at only £2100 for the award winning ARC.

Since a young age, Laurence Dickie has been passionate about music and the sciences but his particular obsession has been with loudspeakers. His achievements to date are noteworthy, to say the least, and he commands a deep respect from his peers. But, Dic does not simply design loudspeakershe takes the proposed design concept and improves it beyond the point most designers are happy to "sign off". Welcome to the world of Vivid Audio. Exclusive in Scotland.



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If you were fortunate enough to read one of the many recent reviews on the Triangle Magellan Concerto, you will be aware that this is a very special product indeed! When we first heard these with Nick Green of UKD who is the UK distributor - we said, 'We have to have these, they are amazing' and amazing they are! We have these on demonstration along with the rest of the Triangle range. 5 Stars and Editors Choice are all expressions synonymous with this range of superbly built, incredibly efficient and stunning loudspeakers.

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▶ from a 102 to the superb 106t. The music of course is amazingly realistic, and speech too – but for one problem. I am hearing a lot of sibilant hiss from both sexes (but especially women) when pronouncing the S or soft C. I wondered whether I was hearing what was always there, but not normally reproduced on low-end systems, or whether it was the microphones in the studios. It's there on most stations.

I have a roof aerial, high signal strength (81/2 – 9 on the meter) and the magic eye is almost always full.

I can live with it – but it would be nice to reduce it if possible.

My system is as follows:

Magnum Dynalab 106T

AVI Laboratory Series integrated Amp

B & W 805 Signature speakers

(on HNE granite stands)

Isotek Orian mains filter

Nordost Vishnu and Isotek super-elite mains cables.

Merlin top cryogenic interconnects

Audioquest speaker cables

Any suggestions.

Yours sincerely

Tony Yates

London

Some sibilance is to be expected from all kinds of radio, in part because of the close microphone technique used in radio studios. But for FM, the problem is compounded by multipath distortion - where the direct signal from the transmitter has to compete with reflections of the same signal bounced off nearby hills or tall buildings. This can be largely overcome by using an aerial with a narrow acceptance angle, pointed directly at the transmitter; or by repositioning the aerial to place your own house between the reflected signal and the aerial. It's best to speak to the aerial experts; Ron Smith on (01582) 736561. A correctly positioned Galaxy 17 will do wonders to reduce multipath sibilance, although it may make your home look like a GCHQ listening station. AS.

Dear Mr. Hughes,

I read your review of the Jadis DA-50S amplifier with great interest as, just like you, I own an EAR 859. I am very curious about the differences between these two amps. It would be a great help for me if you found the time to comment about what the JADIS does better or worse than the EAR.

Looking forward to hearing from you.

Best regards,

Steffen Zilles

Via e-mail

Thank you for your e-mail regarding the Jadis LA-50 Signature. I reviewed it a couple of years back, and (unfortunately) have not heard it since. But it made a very positive impression at the time, and I feel it would definitely improve on your EAR 859.

The main difference is a bigger sound; not just louder (although it will play with greater volume) but 'bigger' in terms of a larger more projected soundstage. The Jadis created a greater sense of height and breadth, along with impressive tonal richness and depth. It sounded more dimensional, giving an enhanced impression of space and depth. My wife who is no audiophile but has a good ear, noticed the difference immediately - unable to explain it in words, she simply gestured, raising her hands to the ceiling - meaning, the sound has 'height', as though the speakers had grown a few feet taller!

In terms of refinement and cleanness, the Jadis is every bit as good as the EAR - if anything, even better. It offers greater tonal richness and brilliance, making the 859 seem slightly boxed-in by comparison. But the Jadis is also more assertive. Possibly, the 859 might sometimes be preferred because it sounds a bit sweeter; more comfortable and contained by comparison. If you've got dynamic source material and speakers capable of handling wide variations of loud and soft, high and low, the Jadis will encompass greater extremes. It sounds more like real people playing - simple as that. JMH

Dear Sir,

In regard to the discography for Eliza Gilkyson in Issue 35, you omitted:

1989/Legends of Rainmaker/Gold Castle Records DI-71323

Best regards,

Hillel J. Kumin

Via e-mail

Dear Sir,

Having purchased a copy of Hi-Fi+ issue 37, I was most disappointed to find that the 'INPOL²' review (as advertised on the website) was not included.

What happened?

Regards

David Botting

Via e-mail

The best laid plans... CT actually ran out of time in preparing copy for Issue 37. Not wanting to rush any review, least of all one on as subtle and complex a beast as the Inpol², I decided to hold it over. It is, as you can see, included in this issue. Apologies for any frustration caused and enjoy CT's review - he liked it a lot as you'll doubtless see! Ed.





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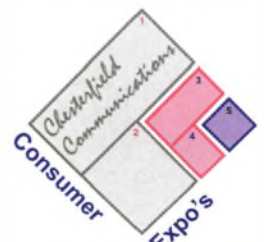
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Show report: CES 2005

by Alvin Gold

The Consumer Electronics Show, held annually in Las Vegas, is always instructive. Las Vegas itself has changed over the years, becoming more cosmopolitan than ever. Restaurant standards have steadily improved while getting around town is becoming more fraught as the roads have become more congested. The elevated monorail that connects some of the hotels along The Strip with the main Convention Centre, which had to be closed soon after opening last year, was back on the rails (so to speak) just days before this year's bash, but it's a bit of a toy town affair,



without the capacity to make much difference. As public transport goes, it's almost like being back in the UK. There was another parallel too. For 2005, Las Vegas decided to have that rarity in sunny Nevada - a full blown, English style, bone chilling winter. On one of the show days it even had the temerity to snow, bringing residents unaccustomed to such sights to the windows to point and comment excitedly.

But sometimes the more things change, the more they stay the same. I lost count of how many times I was asked if I would like to sit in on a demonstration, and was quite surprised with the vehemence with which I found myself turning them down. It was all down to experience and expectations - experience teaching me that I should not expect much. There were exceptions of course, and the reality is that in the hotel bedroom suites of the Alexis Park, the main venue for specialist component high fidelity, it is never easy to achieve good sound. Of course matters were far

sometimes a small subset of 'audiophile' recordings, or the kind of aural wallpaper you might hear on populist radio stations, most of which had no chance of providing me with a meaningful musical experience.

But of course there were exceptions, and taken together they are quite instructive. The best music I heard at the show, and in some respects it was accompanied with the worst sound, was in the Audio Note room at the Alexis Park where the resident DJ was Peter Quortrup (prop), with the wild-eyed and unkempt appearance of Beethoven in



his dotage. Not a big room, and the music was his usual East European classical material dating from the '60 and '70s on vinyl. The music was raw, but at the end of an hour, I walked tall out of that room knowing for sure that I had experienced something special, something worthwhile. Okay, so the sound wasn't exactly pristine, but it did make music.

Of course there were other highlights, and even the odd real pleasure. One such was remaking my acquaintance with T+A, the impressively iconoclastic German manufacturer of just about everything from disc players to loudspeakers, and hearing their new stereo SACD player, the SACD1245R, for the first time. Their room was also home to the best coffee I can remember for a very long time. The Capresso C1000 costs \$699, and in my view it is worth every last, damn cent; The perfect adjunct to a fine hi-fi system.

Another pleasure was making the acquaintance of a loudspeaker that ▶

worse at the Convention Centre, where listening facilities where they existed at all were mostly made from papier mâché and duck tape.

But it wasn't the sound, or even the maddening interference from adjacent booths or rooms that really got me down. It was the lazy demonstrations which consisted of endless variations on the same small set of themes: boring, undemanding C&W ballads, or

▶ wasn't exactly new (it was actually reviewed by Hi-Fi+ a couple of years ago) but which I certainly hadn't encountered previously – and the curious light it casts on the gulf that separates the US from the UK. It says something about aesthetics too: the speaker concerned is called the Octave, and it is from Israeli company Morel whose reputation in this country is centred on their well regarded drive units. The Octave is arguably the unloveliest pug of a loudspeaker that I can remember but, well, once seen, never forgotten. It has the visual footprint of an LS3/5a, but is considerably deeper, and the tweeter is housed in a separate sub-enclosure on top of the main one, which is made from Corian, a polymer billed as having some of the properties of marble. Clearly it wasn't the aesthetics that drew my attention, but the astonishing sound, which was complete and full blooded in a way that compacts almost never are. This is a big sounding speaker, a true quart in a pint pot. It has apparently had some success in the US despite its high price, but has been rejected by some in that country as being too small to be taken seriously. The solution? Stack another Octave upside down on top, which naturally enough turns it into the Octwin. I gather there's even a sub-woofer to match. Which all goes to show that someone, somewhere has completely lost the plot.

If the Morel Octave was unlovely, there were products that were just the



opposite. The seriously high end VAC range of valve amps, which are made in Florida, are simply gorgeous, both as aesthetic designs, and also in their exquisite detailing – they sounded pretty good too. Closer to home, Chord chose CES to launch their 'Brilliant' Edition hardware, which has a high gloss finish which somehow suits their already extravagant character better than the usual brushed finish.

Despite earlier comments, there were some impressive demonstrations if you looked hard enough. TAD speakers, including a new compact called the CM-1, were in use in several locations. TAD (Technical Audio Devices) is a Pioneer offshoot, and sounded impressive driven by various electronics, though the excellent and somewhat more than usually valve like solid state designs from the Pass Labs amplifier range appeared to match particularly well – but then I can't remember hearing any serious system with Pass Labs amplification that didn't. TAD is a high-end/studio offshoot of Pioneer, whose designs are the progeny of British expatriot Andrew Jones, who was involved with KEF's Uni-Q alongside Laurie Fincham. TAD speakers, which are not officially available in the UK, feature coaxial single-point beryllium tweeter/midrange units. The speakers are largely made to order and can only be described as ruinously expensive. They impressed RG a year ago and it's nice to see them still producing the goods.

The one product I saw that impressed me most, almost to the extent of knocking me sideways, was the prototype of a new loudspeaker from Martin Logan called the Summit. This model will replace the existing Prodigy, which is one of the biggest models in the current range, and remains a hybrid electrostatic with a characteristic curved electrostatic diaphragm of the kind associated with the marque, construction is quite different, and so is what has come to be known as its form factor. Although the total panel radiating

area is about the same as its progenitor, the panel frame that surrounds it is much thinner and stiffer, achieved as I understand by using square section metal tubing with an internal threaded insert to stiffen it further, an arrangement that offers physical advantages as well as taking up much less space. The moving coil bass section of the Summit appears to be designed in the image of the excellent MartinLogan sub-woofers, again with a saving in space. Well the details can come later. What you need to know now so that you can start saving right away is that it sounded magnificent. If asked to sum it up in a single word, it would be tactile: it presented an image of the source which you could reach out and touch, but with palpable depth and scale. And there's another word for you to store away and retrieve at the appropriate moment: remarkable.



Every year, Monster (the cable people, but word has it they want to hijack the carefully miss-spelt word 'monster-ous' for their own use, just as Bose did with 'lifestyle') holds a dealer awards bash which concludes with a music gig for as many as 5000 souls in the ballroom of the Paris Hotel, one of the swankier and more extravagant watering holes along The Strip. A couple of years ago Crosby ▶

► Stills and Nash (but not Young) were disinterred for the occasion and last year it was an excellent set from a clearly on form Santana. This year it was the turn of Rod Stewart, who sleepwalked his way through his past hits, and a collection from the Great America Songbook. Good music, but he was clearly out of form, and much of the time well off pitch. His band however was excellent, and was responsible for some excellent solo spots. I only wish I could give credit where it's due, but sadly the band was not named on the programme;

A monstrous oversight.

Last but not least, CES this year was the scene of some rather crude bad mouthing of SACD, which I was told on various authorities was due for the chop. So effective was the campaign (and it was a campaign, as I discovered later) that some manufacturers were asking me what it was all about. I was assured that DualDisc was the new great hope, and that those in the SACD business were about to shut up shop, and to do what Monster was reputed to be asking those who use a certain commonplace

English word – namely to cease and desist. I traced most of these rumours to a single source: a producer who is heavily involved professionally with DVD Audio. So for the record (so to speak), SACD was the only high resolution format to have any real visibility at CES, both in manufacturer demonstrations, and in the places where discs were on sale. And DualDisc was virtually invisible. Not to mention inaudible. I think there's only one word for this kind of demolition job: it is (all together now) monster-ous. ►✚

The Great Las Vegas Hamster Wheel...

by Richard Foster

While I look forward to attending CES each year, drawing up your own agenda is a whole lot more relaxed than having one imposed. RG was unable to attend and asked if I was available to help cover the show. Had I known what I was getting myself into, I'd have gotten very unavailable... quickly.

I really wasn't prepared for the amount of work which is entailed in actually going to each and every room and listening to and observing everything possible.

I've always enjoyed CES at a more leisurely pace, which has allowed me the luxury of time to flesh out any new or innovative equipment I may have heard about and had an interest in seeing and hearing. It's also always been a quasi-social event, catching up with old friends – and meeting new ones – while enjoying a warm weather break from old man winter's attack on Toronto.

I should have known what I was in for when it snowed on the first day of the show! Yes, snow in Vegas. For what it's worth, the balance of the week was cold, damp and raining most of the time. This certainly had a negative effect on

attendance. However, from what I heard from several manufacturers, they seemed to be quite pleased with the quality of dealers and distributors who did attend, the lousy weather acting as some form of commitment threshold filter. After all, this is what the show is really for, even if they did finally open it up to the public (but only because so many were bunking in on fake trade credentials).

As you would expect, there was the usual mix of the old and the new, the familiar and the just plain whacky. My only problem was one of time. I made the decision to visit every room at the Alexis Park and attempted to do the same at T.H.E. Show (The Home Entertainment Show – the bootleg event situated next door to the Alexis Park) to get a general feel and look to see what was interesting and what I would want to come back to and spend more time with later. Much easier said than

done! Weather was a factor in allowing (or preventing) anyone from walking/running freely through the venues, and even though canopies were erected with the traffic flow, you still got drenched which of course tended to slow progress and movement quite a bit. But the main issue, as with all shows, was that it's very hard to get any realistic picture of what's sounding good until at least midday on Saturday.

I would venture a guess to say that I saw more new speaker systems available than anything else (no surprise there then). Audio Physic was demonstrating their new Caldera and by Sunday it was really quite musical. There were some interesting speakers from Davis Acoustics in France that I thought ►



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 Roy Gregory - Hi-Fi+ magazine issue 28.



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► were quite interesting and thoroughly enjoyable. They were demonstrating several models, which I believe were in the Imagine line. Lipinski Sound from Bethesda, Maryland, a new name for me, offered a set of monitor loudspeakers as well as center, sub-woofer and a complete surround setup.



Although I felt the speakers had much promise, I don't think their room was a bonus. Lipinski is a name to look out for in the future. TAD, (Technical Audio Devices) not only showed their flagship

Model 1 Loudspeaker, but offered a new Center Channel Monitor, the TAD CCM-1 as well as the TAD CM-1 Compact Monitor. The sound of the CM-1 was very nice and I would love to have the opportunity to explore these further. Apparently the TAD Model 1 production for 2005 is already sold out. Two

engineers from Infinity were hired by this Pioneer backed venture and they've really done quite an excellent job. I also enjoyed hearing the Dali speakers from Denmark as well as the excellent Eben's by Raidho. Usher, a manufacturer from Taiwan, were demonstrating their evolving line of speakers which finally seem to be developing a character of their own, rather than simply cloning the opposition but with slightly smaller dimensions –

and a much smaller price ticket.

I was particularly impressed with the Credo Speakers from Phonar (Germany) driven by Thor Audio all tube components with analogue playback by SOTA. This room was setup by Joe De Phillips of Discovery Cable Company. Despite a relatively small room, Joe did a splendid job of coaxing a very musical sound from this system, one that I thoroughly enjoyed. I don't have to tell you what cables he was using. The Joule-Electra room was pretty impressive with lots of OTL power driving a pair of Vandersteen Model 5's in quite a good sounding room. This room was an all out assault on the high end utilizing Elrod Power Systems' power cords, interconnects and speaker cables. Also, on hand were Sound Application line conditioners as well as Critical Mass Systems equipment stands. They were using a Cardas Heart Cartridge with the VPI Scoutmaster and a Basis Model 1 Tone Arm. Finally, room treatment was handled by Auralex Acoustic Sunburst bass traps. I came back a couple of times and really

► enjoyed this room very much.

One of my favorite sounds was caught in the Coincident Speaker Technology/ManleyAudioLabs' room. Listening to the Super Eclipse III speakers with the Manley Snapper Amplifiers and Steelhead phono section was a real aural treat. Hats off to Israel Blume and EveAnna Manley for a very musical and enjoyable setup. This was another room I returned to several times.

I thought Keith Herron of Herron Audio was creating quite an impressive sound from yet another bad room. I know Keith and his wife Joan spent the time moving his prototype speakers by microscopic amounts to get the best position and it really paid off. His electronics – the M1 mono-block amplifiers, VTSP2 Linestage, VTPH1 Phono section and HL1 full-blown preamp with phono section – sounded quite outstanding by Saturday afternoon. Keith was using a modified Philips' SACD player and his vinyl playback was handled by the magnificent VPI HR-X 'table with JMW arm and Lyra cartridge. This was one of very few set-ups that actually succeeded in sounding like a complete system (as opposed to a collection of parts) and represented a rare treat.

Another of my favorite rooms was Nearfield Acoustics displaying their new Pipedreams. They were showing a new four-piece speaker system (retailing at approximately \$19,000USD) which was out of this world. Although they didn't have the best room at the show and were using middle of the road equipment, these speakers were the only full-range system I heard actually delivering the goods at the show. Of course I say 'full range' because these speakers really do go down with authority below 40Hz, and this was the only speaker system that allowed me to hear shadings in the deep bass region.

Red Rock Audio had a very musical

display in their room, featuring their Renaissance amplifier driving a pair of Precision Acoustic Labs Reality speakers. I hope to spend more time with these products at the Rocky Mountain Audio Fair in Denver at the end of September.

While there were certainly new electronics on display, there was nothing that really captured my imagination like the Caliburn turntable from Continuum Audio Labs out of Australia. The table is a thing of beauty and from what I heard,



sounds pretty fabulous too. Priced at \$40000, it offers several innovative features. The platter is 'nested' in the chassis to help eliminate airbourne vibrations. They have a unique bearing design couple to a vacuum hold-down design which locks the LP in place. They also have a "true zero cogging technology, batter-powered linear controlled DC brushless servomotor which utilizes a new patented coil technology to deliver ultra smooth power with 0.006% real time error." The tonearm, something they

call 'The Cobra' is also a radical design. The manufacturer states that it "...delivers a potent sound quality increase due to superior damping and stiffness, with reduced mass and weight." I heard this table several times with the legendary Lyra Olympos cartridge, not only with The Cobra but also with one of Frank Schroeder's wonderful arms and all I can say is that this is some special setup. Whichever arm was used (and I marginally preferred the Schroeder) the

sound from this table was stunning, with superb top to bottom coherence and detail. Expensive record players come and expensive record players go, but this is one you should definitely be hearing more about in the future.

Perhaps one of the major surprises for me was the introduction of three new products from dCS. It's not taken me long to fall in love with their Verdi LaScala, Elgar+ DAC and Verona Master Clock. It's offered me the finest digital experience I've ever had in my system. They've just created their first one-box CD/SACD player which includes built in DSD up-sampling from CD. It is called (rather unimaginatively) the dCS P8i and US retail price will be approximately



£6500 with availability from April. Also, on static display was the T8e Transport with built in DSD up-sampling from CD at \$4,999. This should be mated to ►

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feel it

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▶ the DAC8e, using dCS's patented Ring DAC, also at £4,999. While this was a static display, looking at the units and how they were configured for inputs and outputs, it appears that any arrangement the home enthusiast could possibly conceive of is here.

For me, equipment aside, the best sound at the show was the almost two hour concert in the Acoustic Sounds Room by legendary blues man, Lazy Lester. Lester is quite the hospitable soul and just talking with him is a pleasure. He played a variety of songs with guitar and occasional harmonica accompaniment. Born in 1933 in Louisiana, Lester originally recorded for Excello Records. He's been an accompanist for many artists including Lightnin' Slim, Slim Harpo and others. His played a selection of 1950s/1960's

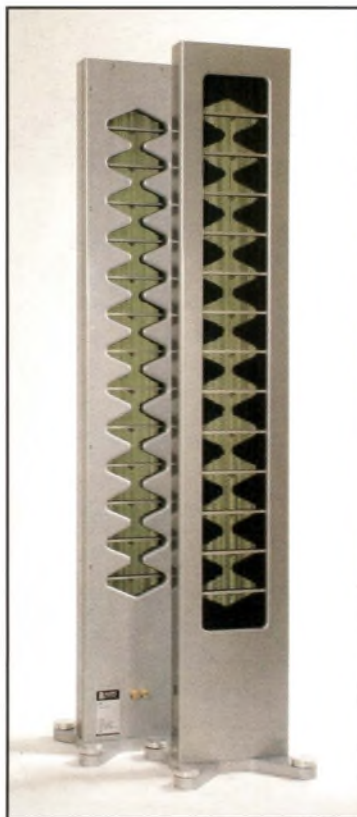
material, with 'I'm a Lover not a Fighter', 'Sugar Coated Love' and 'I Hear You Knocking' amongst the more familiar tracks. The small venue, which could only accommodate perhaps two-dozen lucky souls, made this an event to remember.

Considering the sprawl that CES has

become, and the sheer number of exhibits, the limited number of highlights really does reflect on what was a pretty ordinary event. There was no great white hope, no single extraordinary product that had people buzzing with excitement, that delivered spectacular sound. Instead, the



mediocrity of most of what was on offer reflects an industry in which too many people are prepared to keep their heads down, simply refining what they already do, rather than sticking them up above the parapet to get a look at what's possible. Those manufacturers I've mentioned – and I'm sure I've missed a few – are the exception to that rule. It shows in the results they achieve, both at the show and – if you'll give them the chance – in your home. ➤+



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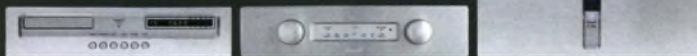
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Northern Exposure...

The Northern Sound And Vision Show

29th–30th January, 2005

For the fourth year running, Hi-Fi+ has sponsored the Manchester Hi-Fi Show, held at the Radisson SAS Hotel, Manchester Airport, and we're happy to announce that the event has continued to go from strength to strength. Exhibitor numbers were up and seemed to be matched by an increase in visitors too. What's even more important is that the style and character of the show is firming up nicely, this being "serious two-channel" in nature, in contrast to the more "budget and home cinema" stance of the Practical Hi-Fi Show. The complementary coverage of these two events in the same locality has to be a good thing for both the industry and the public, perhaps heralding similar developments elsewhere in the country? It would certainly be nice to think so.


In keeping with the increased profile of the show, it was especially nice to see the likes of Absolute Sounds, Symmetry, Audio Reference and RT Services joining the list of established exhibitors like Audio Craft and Metropolis Music. Amongst the fascinating products on show, one of the most intriguing was a two-

channel only SACD machine from Ayre Acoustic. This approach looks to finally realise the true audiophile potential of this medium by eliminating unnecessary multi-channel circuitry found on a machine like Krell's SACD Standard and, even more problematic in sound quality terms, the video circuitry found on universal players.

Two-channel certainly seemed to be the order of the day, with AV demonstrations being few and far between. Ironically, it was our by now traditional demonstration that broke the mould. You can read about it in detail over the page, but suffice to say it used everything from three-channels down to one, but in our defense I would point out that the 14" Loewe screen was only used to navigate the menus on the McCormack UDP1 disc player. However, locked in our demo for most of both days it was impossible to have a proper look around. A few things caught my eye and you can expect to see them reviewed in the near future, including TACT's digital amplification (which really seems to have come of age) and the fascinating

Dyer Audio active monitors.

All told, the great and the good of the serious two-channel scene seemed to be all present and correct, one way or another. Not just in hardware terms either, with plenty of vinyl and audiophile optical software on offer too. Which was just as well as we took the opportunity to hand out our 2004 awards on the Saturday evening. It was a relaxed and refreshingly positive event, rather like the show itself, which continues to build on its popularity and singular vision. If the London event, scheduled for the end of March and arranged by the same organizer can follow in its footsteps then perhaps the capital will finally have the dedicated high-end show it's been crying out for. (Those interested in further details of that event should look at www.chestergroup.org)

Meanwhile, it was nice to see so many familiar faces again, along with a clutch of new ones. Our demonstration this year was somewhat daunting to organise but certainly seemed to entertain the crowds. Thanks for your time and attention and we'll see you again next year. 

The Hi-Fi+ Demonstration:

Do high-quality formats guarantee high-quality results?

by Roy Gregory

Another Manchester Show and another of our by now traditional demonstrations; as always, the question was what exactly to demonstrate? Well, having been astonished by our own experiences listening to RSF's original US pressings of the Mercury Living Presence recordings at the London Show, and having devoted so much space to that and things Mercury in general, we thought it would be nice to let the public hear what the fuss is all about - in both the positive and the negative senses. Also, with Richard actually attending the show it seemed like far too good an opportunity to miss...

However, the various versions of the Mercury catalogue don't in and of themselves, constitute a broad enough subject for a general demonstration. So working from the basic theme of variations in mastering and pressing quality we worked up a three-stage demonstration. What we wanted to show was as follows:

- That properly executed re-mastering of even recent material can be very worthwhile.
- That the application of theoretically superior formats to older recordings still results in wildly differing standards of reproduction.
- That adopting the proper hardware, optimised to replay a given format, can have a profound effect on the results achieved.

Sounds simple doesn't it? Unfortunately, that was far from the case and just assembling a system capable of replaying the various formats required was something of a feat. You can see the specifics outlined in the sidebar overleaf, but suffice to say we stuck to products that we've reviewed favourably, in many cases that we've given awards to.

proven experience of McCormack and Bryston and fortunately we weren't disappointed. What's more, as you'll see, we only needed three speakers, which allowed us to bi-amp the main stereo pair to considerable effect. With Vertex AQ taking the integration of

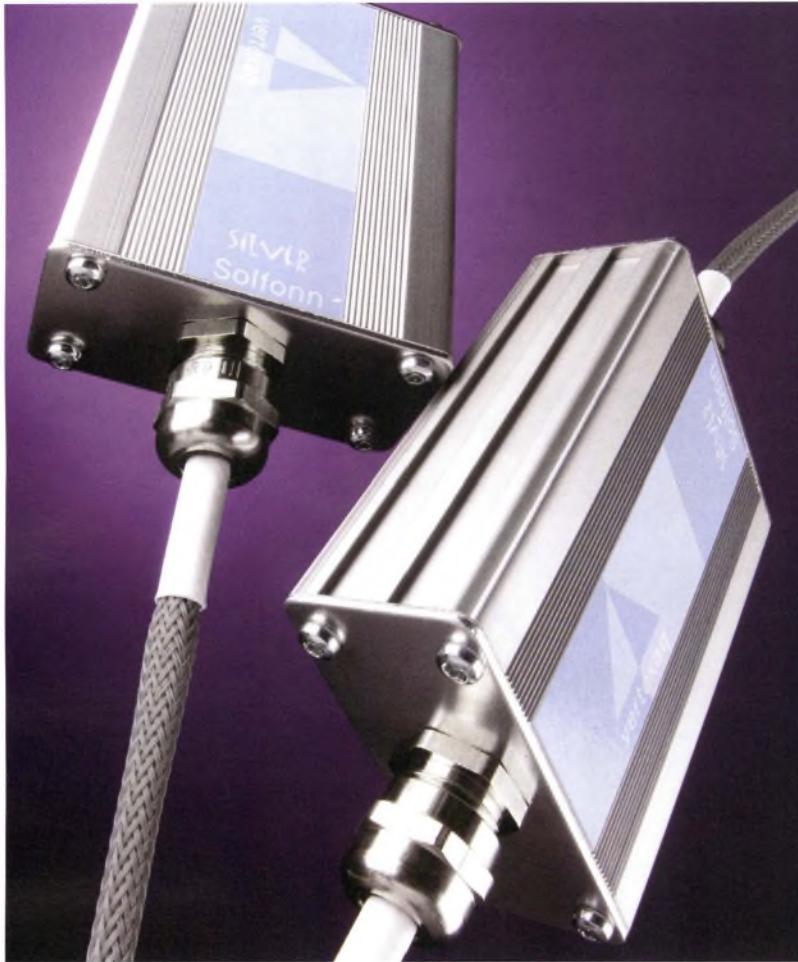


We also tried to select components that readers and the public might not have come across or would have trouble finding. After all, where's the fun in always hearing the same old stuff?

The basic requirement was for a system equally at home on stereo and multi-channel recordings. If things are going to remain manageable, that means a single chassis, multi-channel power amp and a six-channel pre-amp to match. The number of hi-fi capable products that actually meet that need is extremely small. We relied on the

ancillaries to a new high we were blessed with excellent sound from what might at first glance appear to be a pretty disparate group of products and an hotel room acoustic.

The recordings were somewhat easier to select. As a modern disc given the full re-mastering treatment, we chose Aimee Mann's *Lost In Space*. First released as a full price CD in 2002 it has since received both the Hybrid SACD and the full 180g vinyl treatment from Mobile Fidelity. But what made it an interesting recording from the point of view of the demonstration was the nature of the recording. Not only was it Pro-Tooled to the nines (making it totally representative of current



The System

Turntable:

VPI TNT 6 turntable
 JMW 12.5 tonearm with interchangeable
 arm-tops.
 Lyra Titan Stereo and Helikon Mono cartridges

Digital Front End:

McCormack UDP-1 Universal Disc Player

Phono-stage:

Tom Evans Audio Systems Groove Plus

Pre-amp:

McCormack MAP-1 six-channel line-stage

Power Amp:

Bryston 9B SST five-channel amplifier

Speakers:

3x Vivid Audio B1 loudspeakers

Cables and Supports:

Vertex AQ mains, signal and speaker cabling,
 plus Kinabalu platforms

Racks:

Hutter and Aavik

► pop practice) but producer Michael Lockwood had spent considerable time adding noise and subtle distortion to individualise the separate instrumental tracks. The end result is full of texture and contrast, yet also murky and congested, making it hard to reproduce with clarity as well as the character that had taken so much work to create.

Using the title track, we played the opening bars and chorus of the original disc twice, just to let the listeners get a real hold on what was probably an unfamiliar track. We then played the same excerpt from the Mo-Fi Hybrid SACD, but selecting the re-mastered CD layer (an exercise that required an LCD screen connected to the system to allow navigation of the DVD operating protocol employed by the McCormack UDP-1). Sure enough the sound was

crisper, more detailed, better separated, with greater dynamic range. The opening fuzz guitar riff had more texture and shape, the lead vocal more body, purpose and immediacy. The end result? A soundstage which you could see far further into, its careful construction far more apparent - and a song that communicated far more directly. This was a musically far more rewarding delivery, yet it was based on exactly the same tape and information.

Moving on to the SACD layer delivered yet more detail, separation and dynamic range, along with the grainless rhythmic fluidity that characterizes the format. Smoother, more texture and more intimacy still, again this was clearly superior to the original CD version - as you'd have

every right to expect from a premium priced audiophile release. Moving over to the 180g LP brought additional weight and drive along with solidity, warmth and humanity to the vocals. This was exactly what analogue fans rave about - again, despite the digital source material.

The results of this exercise allowed a number of conclusions. First and most obvious was the superiority of all the Mo-Fi versions to the original. Whilst we could discuss the differences between the various formats ad nauseam, regardless of which you were going to play and assuming you already owned the original version, you'd be plenty pleased with your new purchase. A fair expectation in the case of the SACD layer or 180g LP, but for me, the most



The Recordings

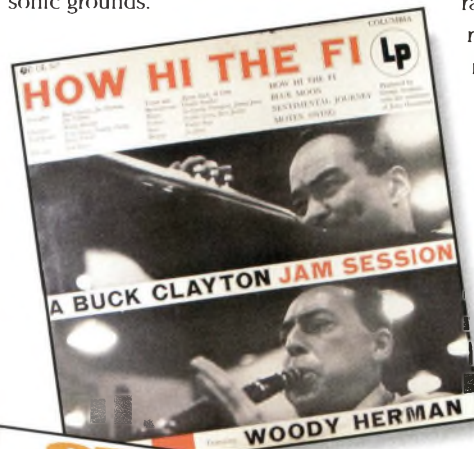
Aimee Mann - *Lost in Space*
 Super Ego Records WVR 1020882
 (Original UK CD issue)
 MFSL UDSACD 2021 (Mobile Fidelity
 Hybrid SACD)
 MFSL 1-278 (Mobile Fidelity 180g LP)

Stravinsky - *The Firebird*
 Dorati, LSO
 Universal Music 432012-2 (Mid-price CD issue)
 AMS (Original British pressing)
 SR90226 (Classic Records 200g pressing)
 Universal Music 470643-2
 (Hybrid SACD - 3-channel version)
 SR 90226 (Original, non-vendor US Promo
 pressing)

Saint-Saens - 3rd Symphony
 Munch - BSO, Verj Zanmkochian (organ)
 RCA 8287661387-2 (Hybrid SACD -
 3-channel version)

Buck Clayton and Woody Herman
How Hi the Fi?
 Columbia CL 567
 (Original 1955 mono pressing)

a testimony to the positive benefits of careful (re-)mastering and an example of exactly what a good audiophile re-issue should offer. More so too than just sonically; *Lost In Space* is an interesting recording certainly, but few would have selected it on purely sonic grounds.



Nice to see Mo-Fi making release decisions based on musical merit rather than audiophile reputation and sound quality - just the way it should be.

Having established the possibilities it was time to look at the Mercury recordings. This American classical catalogue has always been the subject of controversy in collectors' circles. Whereas vinyl based audiophiles in the US have generally held these discs in the highest esteem, on this side of the Atlantic we've tended to wonder what the fuss was all about; hence our little get together in London

and its outgrowth into this demonstration. What we were hoping to show was exactly why such different opinions could co-exist (and both be right!). Unfortunately, time pressure meant that we were confined to a single example, while the limited range of material available on recent audiophile vinyl re-pressing narrowed the field even further. Finally, we needed access to a US pressed version of the title too. The choice came down to the Dorati *Firebird*, appropriately one of the most highly rated Mercury recordings, even if musically the material didn't necessarily lend itself to demonstration (not enough tune and too slow to develop).

Despite the use of a single title, we still had five different versions to get through, ranging in level from 72 to 80.5 on the volume scale and -2 to +47 on the VTA adjuster! That and three different formats to contend with meant that Richard was a nervous wreck by the end of the weekend. Oh, and did I forget to mention that the three vinyl versions were all cut by different people meaning that the precise excerpt required (not the start of a track I hasten to add) appeared at a slightly different point on each one! Frankly, his performance was heroic and we couldn't have done it without him. Still, I suspect he's still waking up in the middle of the night drenched in a cold sweat...

Highly collectable in the US, extremely rare in the UK, original Mercury pressings have always commanded a high price. So, when Universal Music announced a series of CD releases in 1990 (overseen by original producer Wilma Cozart-Fine) many an audiophile rubbed their hands together with glee. For many of us it was our first real introduction to this legendary catalogue, so that's

► interesting thing was the superiority of the CD layer, making Hybrid SACDs a viable option for people without SACD replay.

Less obvious was the care that had to go into the comparisons. Levels had to be carefully matched and varied between 77 and 83 on the McCormack's digital volume scale, the LP being the quietest, the CD the loudest. Also, all that weight on the vinyl pressing became something of a muddy embarrassment if you didn't optimise the VTA (+32 in this case). The end result was a whole series of adjustments that needed to be made between each track, a task with which DJ RSF struggled heroically (and successfully) all weekend.

So, the Aimee Mann discs stand as

▶ exactly where we decided to start. Playing our chosen excerpt in 16bit 44,1K digital sound brought back exactly the same sense of disappointment I experienced the first time I heard these discs. Whilst there was some suggestion of the power, drama and energy that I knew from the few original pressings I possessed, the sound was grainy, opaque and muddled, shut-in and lacking any real transparency. The performance was robbed of any real purpose or dramatic integrity. Pretty amazing considering that our selected passage involved a series of ramped phrases leading to an impressive crescendo. Certainly, there was nothing here to suggest that this was one of the all time great recordings or performances.

Moving swiftly on we cued up the contemporary British release, pressed by EMI back in 1960 (0 on the VTA scale). At an estimated £50 for a copy in decent condition, you'd expect this to sound pretty darn good. Boy, would you be in for a disappointment! Splashy and bright with a course and forward tonal balance, the presentation was undeniably vivid - and fast, but that was mainly down to the lack of any real deep bass. Once again, there was nothing here to justify the stellar reputation enjoyed by this recording amongst our American brethren.

What better option to try next than the current Classic Records 200g re-pressing. Again, with Wilma Cozart-Fine involved in the process, Classic released six of the Mercury titles back in 1997, originally on 180g vinyl. These were later updated to their 200g, non groove-guard profile. Now, whilst I can live without *Balalaika Favorites* and *Hi-Fi a la Espagnole* (frankly scandalously opportunistic choices given the limited number of releases) they did at least offer the Dorati *Firebird*. Now here was a disc that should have been worth hearing. With the arm cranked all the way up to +47 and the volume at 72 we let

Being on the receiving end...

Show demonstrations are always interesting and this one particularly so. Not only do they allow us to meet and hear the views of the public and our readers, but in this case involved a degree of role reversal.

Demonstrating anything can be pretty nerve wracking, but given our position it's a prime opportunity to make a complete fool of your self. Consider then that in order to meet the varied requirements of the different formats it was necessary to assemble a system containing many products I'd never heard, relying solely on the reviewer's judgements of both quality and compatibility. So - not unlike the man in

her rip and gazed on bemused as a turgid and listless facsimile of the music oozed from the speakers. Overblown bass resulted in a clogged and muddled mid-band while the performance was robbed of any sense of urgency or rhythmic integrity - and this is dance music, remember? The top end was smoothed off and shut in and the whole was devoid of musical interest or energy. Even forewarned by our previous experience in London, it was still shocking to hear this sludgy rendition.

Latest entry in the digital stakes is the Universal Music Hybrid SACD series. This offers the original CD layer and a choice of two- or three-channel SACD layers. The latter is a fascinating option, given the coincidence of Mercury's three-mic tree recording approach and the early plans for Stereo to become a three speaker format. Yet, here again, the results were ultimately disappointingly muddled and lacking any real transparency or focus, drama or immediacy. Certainly, given the extra equipment necessary to achieve three channel playback (An SACD or universal player, a multi-channel pre-amp, an extra channel of power amplification and an extra speaker) this was a far from compelling

the street then! Thankfully, the show system demonstrated the reliability of their views...

It only remains to thank Audiofreaks (McCormack), Audio Works (the Loewe LCD screen), Bryston and Phonography (Hutter Racks) for the loan of equipment, Lawrence Dickie of Vivid Audio and Steve and John from Vertex for their considerable help in setting up and running the room. Last, but by no means least, many thanks to the indomitable Richard Foster (alias Dr. Evil), reader of record grooves, purveyor of fabled and fabulous recordings and parter of people from their hard-earned cash. Richard - it was a pleasure and we couldn't have done it without you.

argument for early adoption!

Finally, having bombarded our audience with a succession of variously disappointing versions it was time to reveal the full majesty of the piece. Richard duly unveiled a white-label, original non-vendor promo pressing of *The Firebird*, the most desirable of all Mercury pressings. Placing it on the platter and dialling back the VTA to -2 he reverently placed the stylus in the groove and sat back to enjoy the looks of astonishment on the faces of our listeners. Here was a huge and transparent soundstage, with air and immediacy, focus and vibrant energy. Instruments possessed their true and natural timbre, with weight and body to justify the Living Presence tag-line. Dynamics were impressively realistic but the biggest change of all was in the presentation of the performance. What had previously been lagging or disjointed suddenly became a living, breathing thing, full of purpose, tension, drive and drama. Dorati's command was palpable, the dramatic steps and leaps that accompany the music a natural extension of the bold, rhythmic impetus. Now you had a recording with quality to match a stellar performance. Now you

▶ had a disc to covet - and now you could finally understand why American collectors get so excited by the Mercury catalogue. And the price of such a disc? The example in use cost Richard around £130 (and just remember how weak the dollar is at present). In the UK, such a pressing is probably unobtainable, and who knows what it would cost if one came up...

What conclusions are we to draw from this? Well, the obvious one is that simply sticking old tapes onto some new, high-zoot format doesn't guarantee good results. It still matters who does the work and what exactly they do. Likewise, one bad experience doesn't condemn an entire format. By way of example we also played one of RCA's new 3-channel SACDs, in this case the Munch-BSO Saint-Saens *Symphony No 3* (from a disc titled *A Hi-Fi Spectacular*). This was dramatically more successful than the Mercury, and far superior to the full-price Red Seal CD issue. What's more, it actually used the air, space and dynamic capabilities of the three-speaker set-up to positive advantage, with a really powerful and yet controlled presentation: far more convincing in every respect. Likewise, Speakers Corner are doing a superb job of transcribing the Mercury recordings onto 180g vinyl, their pressings being close in quality to an excellent example of an original, non-promo US pressing - which is impressive indeed. Unfortunately, they're yet to tackle *The Firebird*, but some lucky listeners got to hear a comparison the Speakers Corner 180g and an original US pressing of the Respighi *Birds* - but more of that later.

Since the show I've heard (an unsubstantiated) rumour that the

third mic in the Mercury tree was actually there solely for the mono releases. If true, and we'll try and discover if it is, it would certainly help explain the disappointing results achieved with the three-channel Mercury SACD, when compared to the truly three (or more) channel RCA tapes. It would also underline just how important it is to match the material and format to the



correct replay hard-ware and set-up in order to achieve optimum results. It's a conclusion we'd already drawn, and for the final part of the demonstration

we chose to revisit the issue in what many might consider an eclectic fashion. Whereas most people find it easy to accept that there will be hardware implications if you want to play more channels (all that extra amplification and all those extra speakers) not many appreciate that the same is true if you want to reduce the number of channels. Time then, to enter the world of mono...

Using a 1955 Buck Clayton and Woody Herman recording, the not inappropriately named *How Hi the Fi?*, we first played it on the TNT 6 using the same £3000 Lyra Titan stereo cartridge we'd been using through-out the demonstration. Sure enough, it sounded like pretty much every mono record you've ever heard: thin, scratchy, rusty, bandwidth limited, disjointed and aimless. At which point most of the audience were probably wondering why we'd bothered. However, the JMW tonearm allows you to swap the entire arm-top, which along with the VTA adjuster makes rapid cartridge swaps simplicity itself. In the time it took me to explain that we were replacing the Titan with the Helikon Mono, a cartridge with half the channels and half the price-tag, Richard had already performed the deed. Listening again the difference provided most people with their biggest shock of the day. Now instruments had body, substance and natural tonality, the noise had virtually disappeared while what I'd previously thought was also noise was resolved into audience chatter and the sound of glasses clinking. But far more important was the fact that now the band were tight and the music was really swinging. Now you could hear why these guys have the reputation they do. The effect was to transform ▶

▶ the disc from a rarely played curio into a really involving and worthwhile musical experience.

But to do it you'll need a mono cartridge, and unless you've got an arm like a JMW, you'll need either a second tonearm (if your deck will accept one) or a second record player. Is it really worth the money and effort? Well, that depends on what music you listen to. If it's exclusively '80s rock and pop that never came out in mono then the answer is clearly no.



However, if you listen to classical, jazz, blues or early rock and roll then there's a whole vista of available material just waiting for you to snap it up. And it gets better. Not only does this stuff sell for peanuts in second-hand record shops and thrift stores alike (the collectable *How Hi The Fi?* goes for well under a tenner - compare that to a stereo Mercury!) it sounds great, and often encompasses material that was never released in stereo. When it comes to jazz and classical in particular, there are many fantastic performers who were already well past their best by the time Stereo arrived. And if you think you've heard the Rolling Stones - think again, unless you've heard the early albums properly replayed in mono. The sheer drive, presence, energy and insistent enthusiasm are seriously infectious. You can understand why their music created quite a stir - and that's the

point of this and the rest of the demonstration.

You can have the best recording in the world but your access to it is limited by the quality of its transfer to the carrying medium and the use of the correct hardware to extract it. We are so solidly locked into a stereo norm that we tend to apply its rules and limitations to alternative approaches. Yet extracting the maximum musical return from a recording involves marrying the best

mastering to a properly optimised playback chain. The options offered by mono and multi-channel are easy to forget or ignore, but doing so risks a severe narrowing of our musical enjoyment and the material available for our entertainment. Do you really want to listen to the music recorded between 1960 and the year 2000 and nothing else? That makes no sense to me.

Finally, we'll return to the Respighi *Birds* and the lucky souls who got to compare the US original pressing to the Speakers Corner 180g re-issue. We started by playing the original and when we then got to the Speakers Corner pressing, I was surprised by the drop in musical quality. Quiet to be sure and with plenty of body and presence, but lacking snap, transparency, focus and purpose. That's

when I realised that we hadn't corrected the VTA. Sure enough, playing the disc again with +5 notches on the JMW's vernier scale restored the musical tension, drive, dynamics and direction to the piece, making it a compelling and exciting listening experience again - and surprisingly close to the US pressing in musical terms.

Let me just reiterate that this was not a small change. It was musically essential and readily audible to everybody present - none of whom were under any pressure to conform.

The audience asked to hear the recording, we replayed it to the best of our ability. It wasn't a staged demonstration but simply part of the process. The interesting thing was the scale and importance of the difference and the fact that it was heard and appreciated by everybody. Now consider that five notches on the VPI's vernier scale equates to an arm-height adjustment measured in terms of several thousandths of an inch (and this with a 12" arm) and tell me that VTA doesn't matter and we can't hear it anyway!



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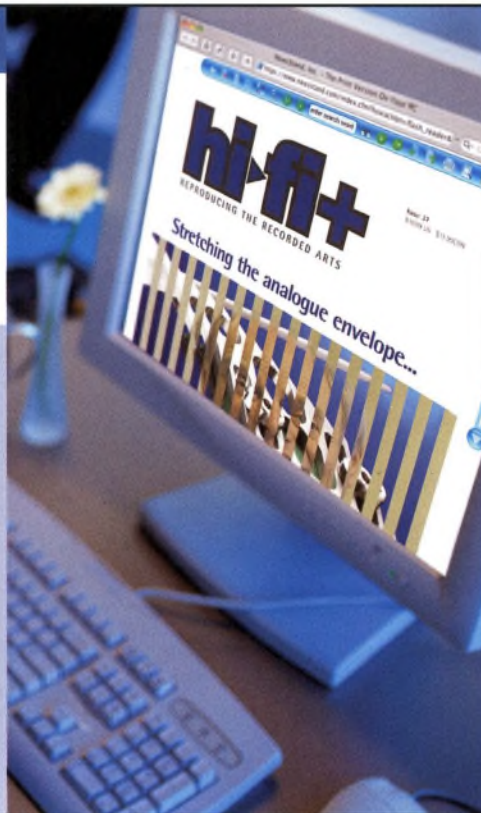
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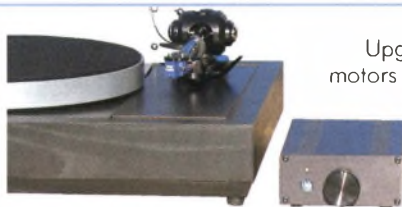
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The Zanden Audio Model 2000 Premium CD Transport and Model 5000 Mk IV Signature D/A Converter

by Roy Gregory

As often as not, the challenge confronting an audio writer (especially one faced with a group test of £200 bookshelf loudspeakers) is to make more of the same seem interesting and different. In truth, the qualitative distinctions are real enough, but the apparent physical similarities tend to undermine them in the eyes – if not the ears – of the beholder. It's a vicious circle that all too often leads to hyperbole and exaggeration as the reviewer tries to make each new piece as readable as the last. There are ways round it, like allowing reviewers much more time with products – and not reviewing also rans for the sake of it, but the basic premise still stands.

The problem is, of course, that having exhausted your supply of snappy superlatives, what do you do when faced with a product that presents a genuine challenge, a performance that stands outside of your existing experience? Not only do you have to identify the nature of its performance, but you also then have to explain it to your readers. Fortunately perhaps, such products are few and far between; more often than not it's a case of a unit that

performs way beyond its price level, although still within known bounds. But, occasionally a product arrives that does things either significantly better (or at least significantly differently) than anything else you've heard. It happened with the Nordost Valhalla cabling and it happened with the Lyra Connoisseur 4.0 line and phono-stages. And now it's happened with the Zanden Audio digital electronics – £31500 worth of four-box digital hardware which, just to make matters worse, will only play CDs.



What with the current fisticuffs between SACD and DVD-A rumbling ever onwards, not to mention the whole looming shadow of A/V and multi-channel music replay, home integration and extravagant plans for multi-media server based systems, you might well question the relevance of a CD only replay system;

especially one that consists of four separate boxes and costs more than the vast majority of people spend on an entire system. However, consider this: in a world where, for the first time, downloads are outselling CDs in the top-twenty, the long-term prognosis for new, disc-based, music carriers doesn't look good. Ten years from now it is entirely possible that optical disc production will have all but ceased, leaving the vast stock of existing CD titles as the preferred medium for high quality music reproduction (rather like the role that vinyl currently occupies, in fact).

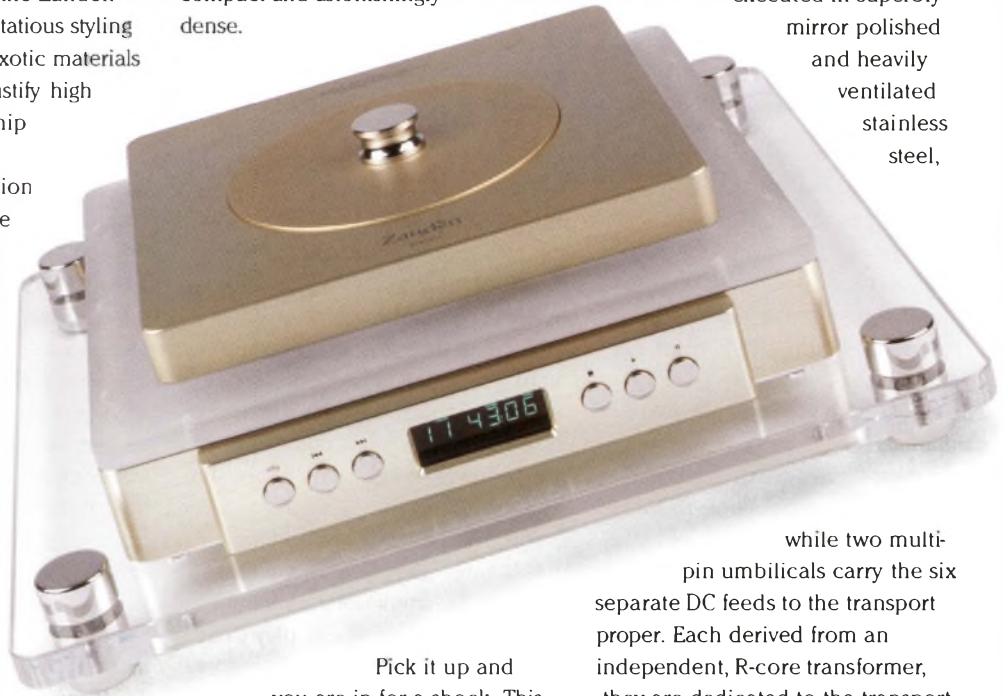
If you want a physical collection, complete with properly printed artwork and information, there's every chance that CD is going to be the basis on which it's built. If that's the case, then what is possible from what most of us would accept is a limited medium becomes a matter of considerable moment. Which is where the Zanden comes in: I may not be able to afford it, but its astonishing performance is the source of considerable reassurance.

So, having listened to the fanfare it's time to survey the goods. Zanden Audio is unlikely to be a familiar name in British audio circles, although the company has been



► building exquisite components in Japan for a number of years under the helm of Kazutoshi Yamada, starting with valve amplification. This was followed by the DAC and finally the transport, forming the combination that is the subject of this review. Like the Lyra Connoisseur 4.0, there is an immaculate quality to the presentation, fit and surface finish of the Zanden units. This isn't the ostentatious styling and extravagant use of exotic materials that has been used to justify high prices for Western flagship products. This is about extreme care and attention to detail, the appropriate use of the best materials, assembled with a craftsmanship and reverence that grows from within, both as regards the product and the people designing and assembling it. It's a quality that is hard to appreciate without seeing and feeling these products in the flesh, one that is almost impossible to capture in a photograph. In fact, perhaps the best way to appreciate it at a distance is to realise that the shape and footprint of each unit in this four-box system is entirely different, one to another, and that even the finish and materials aren't consistent across all four elements. Yet, place them side by side or set them on a rack, and they blend perfectly. Not even a complete audio novice would mistake them for anything other than a single, coherent whole. That inner integrity transcends the obvious visual differences, a philosophical touchstone that anchors and directs the sound of the Zanden just as strongly as it dictates their physical form.

Loath as I am to separate the coherence of the whole, as regards the mundane physical details I guess I'd better start with the transport. Constructed from a four-layer sandwich of acrylic and aluminium plate, each level being of a different size and thickness, the chassis of the Model 2000P transport is at once compact and astonishingly dense.



Pick it up and you are in for a shock. This particular little ziggurat might be small and perfectly formed, but it has all the physical substance of its granite cousins. Intended to resist the influence of both internal and external mechanical vibration, it sits on four solid cylinders of polished stainless steel, each with a soft polymer disc on its undersurface. The transport mechanism itself, a modified Philips CDM12 Pro 2, is recessed into a solid, 25mm thick slab of aluminium and tucked away beneath a heavy, biscuit-barrel lid in order to shield it from airborne energy. Having taken so much care in eliminating mechanical interference it should come as no surprise that Zanden isolate all noisy, AC power in a separate off-board chassis.

The slim, steel casework contains a beautifully laid out PCB, loaded with capacitors and regulation which at first seems at odds with the hand cut paper shapes stuck to the top of all the major components. That is until you realise that the "paper" is in fact copper foil, placed to help eliminate EMF leakage. The casework is executed in superbly mirror polished and heavily ventilated stainless steel,

while two multi-pin umbilicals carry the six separate DC feeds to the transport proper. Each derived from an independent, R-core transformer, they are dedicated to the transport mechanism and its output section, the crystal generator, master clock circuit, control circuitry and the display. Basic control functions are covered by the six buttons on the front fascia, with a nicely executed, sensibly solid but still manageable remote control expanding the options. The rear face carries sockets for the DC inputs and a full suite of digital outputs including an I²S optical connection for use with the Zanden DAC. Users of other models have a choice of AES/EBU or 75 Ohm BNC connections. There's also a BNC socket for a master clock output - significant as Zanden claim that their transport uses the most accurate clock available in the field of consumer audio, reducing jitter, ►

► phase related noise artefacts and clock errors; all known sources of performance problems in digital electronics.

So, nothing terribly revolutionary then. Instead, the Model 2000P CD transport represents a systematic approach to minimising the impact of mechanical, electrical and clock-derived distortion. Attention to detail is everything in this case, rather than extravagant technology, a factor that extends to the positive feel of the player's controls and the unfussy way it responds to user input; neither so fast as to confuse or so slow as to frustrate. Like everything else about this product, the user interface is somehow just right.

The Model 5000 MkIV Signature D/A Converter may not have the obvious visual interest of its matching transport, but it exhibits exactly the



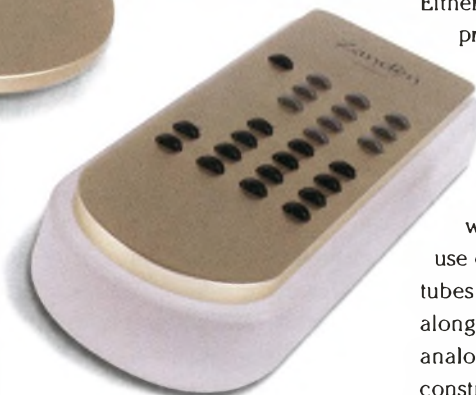
same degree of care in its design and construction. Smaller than the transport, it still weighs in at a substantial 10kg, mainly thanks to the solid, 16mm aluminium slabs that constitute the base plate, front and back panels, chosen to resist vibration. The cover is (again) mirror polished stainless steel while the front panel sports the three, beautifully tapered rotary control knobs, each with an action so smooth it's almost sensual. They allow the user to switch

from Standby to Operate, reverse phase and select between the I²S, AES/EBU, BNC and RCA inputs, status being indicated by a selection of discrete, colour coded LEDs. The rear panel supports the socketry for the digital connections (the I²S optical using an Ethernet type plug built into an XLR



sleeve) a pair of single-ended RCAs for the analogue output and the multi-pin socket for the power supply umbilical.

Zanden have identified phase integrity within the digital domain as the



biggest issue in digital sound quality. As a result they have dispensed with all brick-wall filtering, up-sampling or

over-sampling. Instead they employ a TDA-1541A Double Crown chipset, combined with their own proprietary analogue filter, optimised for minimum phase shift. The analogue output stage is a tube design based around a 6922 (ECC88 family) double triode. Component quality is exemplary throughout, and internal construction is as meticulous as the immaculate exterior suggests.

The specification sheet lists

the output level as 1.0V, but as it actually sounds rather louder than my Wadia 861SE I'm confident that can't be correct. Either way, it certainly had no

problem interfacing with either the Vibe or the HP100.

The external power supply is a narrow, almost shoe-box shaped unit (well, as long as you shop at Jimmy Choo's)

whose height is explained by its use of a pair of large 6CA4 rectifier tubes to supply the digital section, along with a single 6X4 for the 6922 analogue output buffer. Beautifully constructed, it's a model of practical simplicity that feeds DC voltage to the DAC chips as well as the higher voltages demanded by the analogue output stage. The stainless steel ►

The I²S Interface

by Martin Colloms

In the analogue domain sound is generally represented by magnitude, meaning the varying voltages in electrical circuits within the system, the cables linking them together. Magnitude controls the mechanisms of analogue storage media (magnetic field strength for tape, or groove modulation amplitude for vinyl disc). All these different elements need to be linear in performance, not distorting the relationship between low and high volume levels, as well as providing a sufficiently wide frequency response to cover the audible range with good accuracy. At its simplest you only need a pair of conductor wires, 'send' and ground return, to carry the analogue audio signal.

For digital audio, the analogue signal from the microphone or other source enters an ADC (analogue to digital converter) where a very fast reference clock, with an operating frequency at least double that of the highest required audio frequency, is used to time the sampling or momentary measurements of the instants of audio signal voltage on a continuous basis. These measurements must be 'clocked out' of the ADC with high precision since the resolution or dynamic range of this tricky conversion of the delicate analogue signal into pure numbers relies on the quality of measurement and the accuracy of the clock. While in theory the clock, which will be controlled by a resonating quartz crystal, should keep perfect time, in practice it will have small variations due to noise, circuit factors, power supply quality, interference and vibration. The resulting imprecision is known as

jitter and while it alone will not determine the overall sound quality of the replay in a high quality digital audio system it fundamentally determines clarity, transparency, spatial quality and subtle tone colour. In the way it affects resolution, significant jitter may also appear to affect the perception of rhythm and timing.

Assuming that those ADC measurements are precise and that we now have a set of numbers which in sequence represent the evolving continuum of the time based audio signal, it is not too hard to store them on computer based discs, drives, memory cards or even a Compact Disc, essentially an early, high density optical data drive.

As the disc spins the laser illuminated head reads a coded pattern, which on decode and error correction recovers, again to high accuracy, the numbers representing the audio signal. These are then held in a temporary, continuously recycling memory chip.

The transport element of a two-box CD replay system is generally connected to its DAC (digital to analogue converter) via a two-wire interface called SPDIF. It was devised by Sony and Philips to conveniently and economically interface digital audio equipment. With sufficient care it can be made to perform quite well, although noticeably better if a third, clock synchronisation line is added to the signal path (assuming the audio components are so equipped) in order to minimise replay jitter.

SPDIF remains significantly flawed because that two-wire or equivalent connection has to carry the numeric data for both channels, appropriately boxed up with left right channel switching codes to enable their later separation. Also mixed onto this two-wire, serial data connection is the

vital clock signal plus other data, called sub-code, which has signals for track and time information, and emphasis. This apparent jumble of information has the potential for increasing jitter, depending on the quality of the interface. The degree of loss also depends on the quality of the interface connection components, optical or digital cable ground issues and the like.

With some CD transports, particularly based on Philips technology, there is another, purer four-wire interface hidden inside. This is used for short path connection of digital audio data between chips, e.g. from the decode and recovery section to the digital filter, and from the digital filter to the DAC. This is essentially a parallel interface where the left and right channel data are alternately present on one line and the clock and channel word-select signals have separate signal paths. Sub-code and other data is not present.

Use this interface and the final DAC may benefit from jitter levels that are an order of magnitude lower than for SPDIF. This internal interface is called I²S and is that which has been chosen by those perfectionist designers at Zanden to send audio data more precisely from the transport to their separate DAC. A custom multi-wire cable is used and the possible variation resulting from other types of connection is thus also avoided. The resulting higher precision of the now decoded analogue signals should be readily evident in the quality of the reproduced sound. Unfortunately, this also means that components from other manufacturers interfacing with a Zanden transport or DAC will not be able to take advantage of the potential benefits this technology affords.

▶ casework is, once again beautifully finished and extensively perforated to allow proper ventilation. The main power switch is located on the rear panel.

The Zanden combination was used beside my usual Wadia 861SE and the Metronome combination reviewed elsewhere, allowing a myriad of mix and match possibilities, with effectively three transports and

three DACs available on demand. The rest of the system comprised either the Tom Evans' Vibe, Pulse and Linear A amplifiers, or Hovland's HP100 and RADIA set up, driving the Living Voice OBX-R2/Townshend Maximum or B&W 805S loudspeakers. Bass extension was delivered, on occasion, by the massive Velodyne DD18, a sophisticated sub-woofer with motional feedback and digital

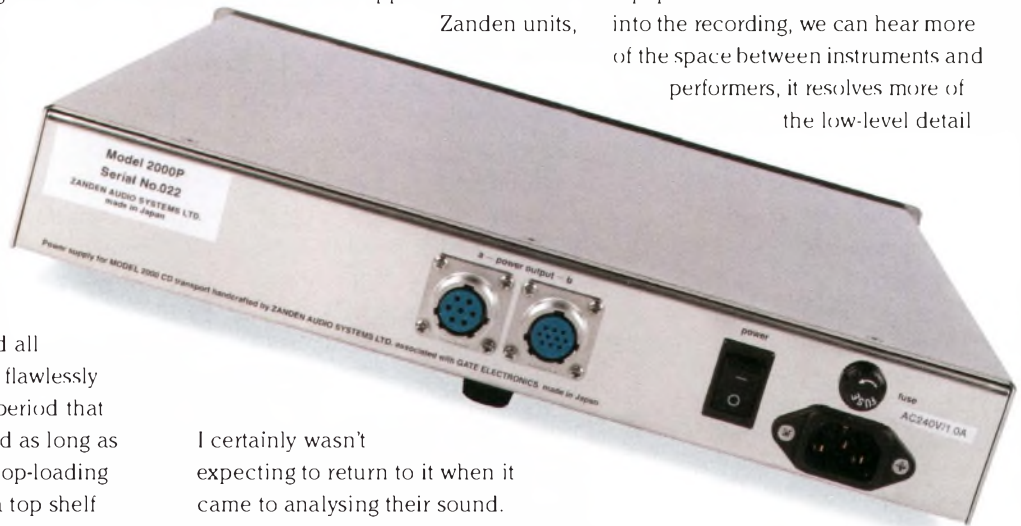
room correction capabilities. Wiring was Nordost Valhalla throughout, including mains leads and Thor distribution blocks. The only exceptions were the Zanden's dedicated I²S optical lead, and a Stereovox BNC, also employed to check cross compatibility with the other components. Where the units were mixed and matched, both BNC and AES/EBU were tried, ▶

▶ but as is generally the case, it was the former that was preferred.

The Zanden was arranged on the shelves of a finite elemente pagode HD03MR rack, although with so many boxes to accommodate, the power supplies were forced to share a single shelf, no problem given their shape. Even so, no noise problems or other nasties reared their heads and all four boxes performed flawlessly through-out a review period that I shamelessly extended as long as I possibly could. The top-loading transport demanded a top shelf position, but again, that was no problem as with so much stellar digital hardware to deploy I'd packed away the turntables to prevent them muddying the waters. After all, I reasoned, this was

my record players – but more of that later...

When I first employed the “beauty from within” analogy to describe the appearance of the Zanden units,



I certainly wasn't expecting to return to it when it came to analysing their sound. Maybe it was a sub-conscious linkage, growing out of my initial listening, but

explain what I mean.

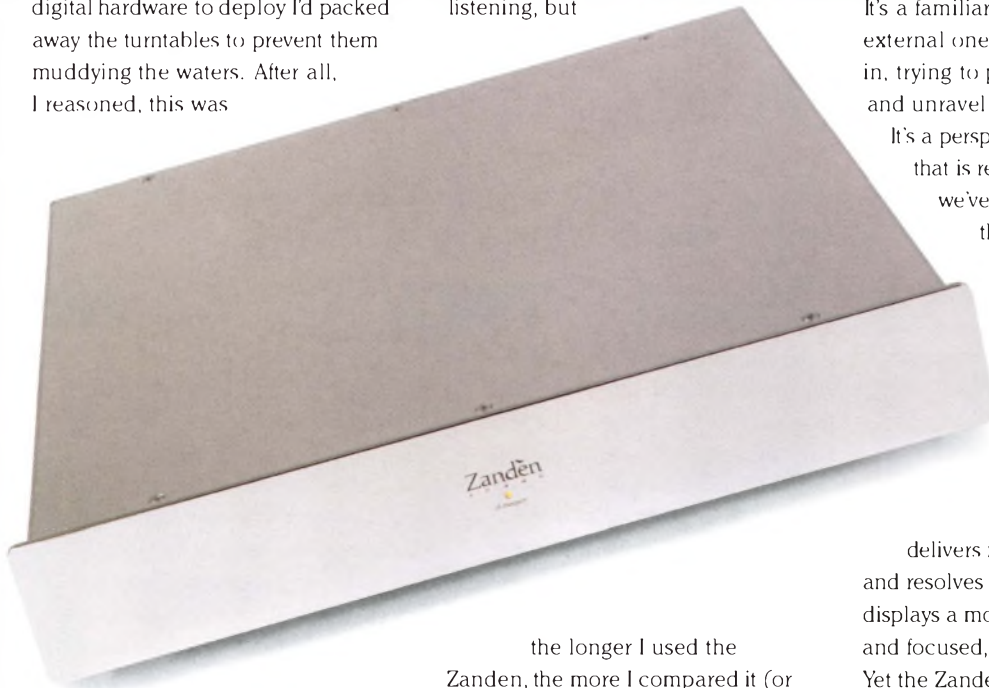
Often with hi-fi, especially high-end hi-fi, we approach it from the aspect of access; this piece of equipment allows us to hear further into the recording, we can hear more of the space between instruments and performers, it resolves more of the low-level detail

that brings the instruments closer to life. It's a familiar model, but it is also an external one. We are always looking in, trying to penetrate from outside and unravel what's in front of us.

It's a perspective and epistemology that is reflected in the language we've derived to describe the quality of sound: transparency, depth, focus and resolution. What's more, in these traditional terms, the Zanden can be out-performed by the other players here.

The Metronome delivers more sheer information and resolves more detail, the Wadia displays a more distinctly separated and focused, even etched soundstage. Yet the Zanden is, to my ears, significantly more musical, indeed musically compelling, than either of them.

There is an internal chemistry that drives the sound of the Zanden, one that binds the musical performance together. This is the most musically coherent CD replay



supposed to be about the absolute state of digital replay, not how it compared to vinyl. What I wasn't expecting was that, for the first time, what I was hearing would have me seriously re-examining the sound of

the longer I used the Zanden, the more I compared it (or its elements) to the other players, the more the idea took hold. Music played on the Zanden has an organic, lifelike correctness to it that seems to emanate from within the playing and the instruments themselves. It's an odd description, so let me try and



▶ system that I have ever used, the relationship between performers within a piece, rivalling the best I've ever experienced from any source. Yet each element is also independent, preserved as a separate and distinct entity within the whole. The ability to isolate individual instruments within the context of the whole is unrivalled, the quietest contribution surviving whole and undisturbed beside the loudest, the separate strands that are bound together to create that whole never clearer or more apparent. Yet this separation isn't dependent on spatial isolation or resolution, the kind of 3D hi-fi spectacular that pulls the music apart and rips the subtle ties that bind. Instead, the Zanden possesses an uncanny ability to preserve the quality, quantity and nature of the energy emanating from each instrument or voice. With it comes presence and correctness of tonal colour, natural dispersion and thus a natural sense of perspective, scale and dimensionality. The instruments and voices are separated because each is allowed its own, specific and unmistakable nature. That innate feel for presentation and placement extends to the temporal, with timing, the sense of ensemble, the shape of melodic strands and even (perhaps especially) the placement of individual notes, allowing the performance a vibrant, breathing, rhythmic flow – one that sounds neither fast nor slow, crisp nor relaxed; it simply sounds right, because each and every note appears exactly where and when the musician placed it. The end result is

a machine that reproduces CD with an effortless quality that conjures and encompasses the full range of musical emotions with a convincing, attractive and almost addictively lifelike quality.

That's what it does, but what does it actually mean in musical terms? Time for an example or three, or four, or more – because every search for a single disc to illustrate a point inevitably becomes a protracted ramble through the most surprising musical pastures. However, forcing myself away from the system and back to the

the instruments don't clash or compete for space. Indeed, even the smallest of well-balanced systems should sound good with this. Add to that the disdain that comes with familiarity and you might consider it an odd choice. But that's exactly the point. There's little or nothing familiar about the presentation from the Zanden. Sure it's the same recording and the same tune, but in presentational terms that's where any similarity ends.

Hearing those familiar instrumental contributions (and bearing in mind the experience of half a dozen stereo LP pressings, ranging from original through "audiophile"



keyboard (it's a good thing my iBook died and Apple are taking an inordinate time to repair it or this review might never have got written) I'll use an example with which many of you will be familiar, 'You Look Good To Me' from the Oscar Peterson Trio's *We Get Requests* (a 1964 recording from Verve, 521 442-2). Not only is this an album full of familiar standards and popular chestnuts, it's been played to death at hi-fi shows and demonstrations for years. How we all marvel as we "hear" Ray Brown putting down his bow, aren't we all impressed by the realism that a hi-fi system can bring to the smallish forces involved in a jazz trio, where

re-issues, as well as a couple of mono discs, which are actually musically the most impressive as well as the best balanced) the Zanden experience immediately stands apart from the crowd. Most of the stereo mixes are hard left and right, with Peterson's piano recessed in the middle, cast almost in a supportive role to Ray Brown's bass, quite unlike the mono discs which achieve a much better, almost piano dominant balance which leaves the listener in no doubt as to the relationship between Peterson and his rhythm section. ▶

▶ What's more, the stereo discs tend to divorce the drums and bass, placing one in each speaker, and presenting the trio as three, distinctly separate elements with no continuity between them - an effect that extends to the musical interplay. As often as not, the piano and bass wander through the intro, never coming together until Brown puts away his bow and Peterson lifts the tempo. Meanwhile, Thigpen's triangle is aimless and distracting, contributing nothing to the structure at all. Which is exactly how the Wadia presents things, a reasonable facsimile of the stereo records, it's focus and separation if anything exaggerating the separation between the instruments.

Playing the disc with the Zanden, that artificial sense of separation is totally dispelled. Thigpen's drums are placed slightly outside the left-hand speaker, Brown's bass behind and just inside the right-hand one. Peterson's piano is again central, but all three instruments are much larger, with greater presence, colour and body. The effect is to shorten the gaps between them, restoring the balance between piano, bass and drums while placing all three in a single, smaller but far more intimate acoustic. Now, part of that intimacy comes from the physical

proximity, but it's underpinned by a new sense of musical connection. Brown's long, bowed notes on his bass fiddle now tie to Peterson's languid yet far busier piano phrases. But the revelation is Thigpen's triangle, the instrument that came in from the cold.

astonishingly natural, as is the woody resonance of the bowed or plucked bass. The separation of brush and stick, their texture against skin or metal is perfectly realised,



Suddenly it's locked to Peterson's melodic lines, delineating their passage, binding the bars together. Finally, its presence makes sense.

The other thing you notice immediately is the sense of texture. The decay on the triangle and cymbals is

as are the subtle changes in weight employed by Peterson as he steps forward to drive the track. Ray Brown's impromptu vocal contributions finally appear in time and in tune, enhancing rather than distracting, and whilst we've known all along that it's his bow that he's putting down, there's a moment of shocking familiarity when you realise that now it really does sound exactly like a bow - a particular

sound if ever there was one. Alongside that instrumental naturalness comes the independence of character and contribution that

I mentioned earlier. Now you hear the sublime, almost telepathic understanding that exists between Brown and Thigpen, a subtlety and sophistication to their patterns that brings an effortless swing and flow to the track. And even as the piece builds it's still possible to ▶



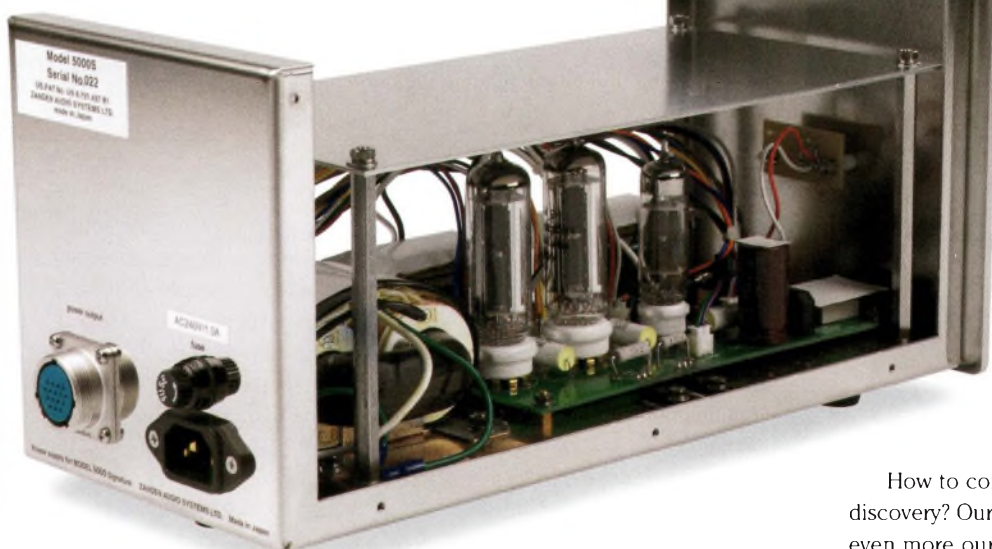
▶ separate and enjoy each player's individual as well as their collective contribution. The ability to define the precise nature and pattern of the notes produced by an instrument allows instant recognition of the tonal identity, texture and nature of the energy produced. At the same time that in turn dictates superb discrimination and tracking of dynamic range. Each instrument is brought, vividly to life, yet the whole still surpasses the sum of the parts. When I said that the Zanden had me questioning the capabilities of my turntables it's this

recordings. The system might no longer match the scale of the musical forces involved, but within the constraints imposed, the tonal, temporal and spatial rightness and separation is still there. The contrasting crescendos that characterise these works, full-on and ramping ever upwards for the Rachmaninoff, threatening yet abbreviated in the Sibelius, are beautifully handled, creating exactly the response intended. The Chesky disc, which has always been a murky

Stewboss, you also get to hear just what a superb drummer Jano Janosik is. His contribution to the simplicity of this song might be simplicity itself, but it's executed with an understated grace and sophistication that is a pleasure to enjoy.

Even the most intense and dynamically demanding tracks benefit from the Zanden's effortless grace and textural discrimination. Whether it's *Mari Boine Remixed* or the Boban Markovic Orkestar (traditional Balkan brass meets drum machines, samplers and Balearic sensibilities to create a kind of "Pigbag on acid" sonic bomb-blast) the slabs and flanges that comprise the bass foundations are beautifully rendered while the fragility of vocals or slash of a trumpet phrase are positioned and preserved with precision.

How to conclude this voyage of discovery? Our musical appreciation, even more our appreciation of hi-fi, is the result of long and varied experience. We learn lessons along the way; in the case of hi-fi they can be attributed to individual components. The Lamm ML2's taught me about tonal (as opposed to spatial) separation. The Lyra Titan taught me about dynamic discrimination, the Nordost Valhalla about even energy distribution across the bandwidth and the Connoisseurs about the budgeting and distribution of that energy. Tom Evans' many products have led me along the line of phase correctness and the structural organisation that results. The Zanden doesn't so much add to this list of steppingstones, but ▶



area to which I'm referring; the ability to keep the elements in a performance at once separate yet together, irrespective of scale, complexity or level. In this regard the Zanden is unique in my experience, yet it is also one of the key aspects that separates live from recorded sound.

Playing larger scale works like the Johanos/ Dallas Rachmaninoff *Symphonic Dances* (Analogue Productions APCD 006) or the Barbirolli Sibelius *Symphony No. 2* (Chesky CD3) demonstrates emphatically that these qualities still apply to less dramatically natural

recording, wasn't suddenly revealed in crisp, new transparency, but the instruments did blossom from within, adding character and identity to their contributions.

Less than wonderful recordings benefit too. Greg Sarfarty's over-miked vocals on 'Midnight Shift' (Stewboss *Sweet Lullabye* TDBCD064) are revealed as exactly that, the sibilance simply becoming an incidental artefact that somehow makes the vocal more real and convincing rather than distracting from it. The passage from flickering hope to melancholy is perfectly mapped, the emotional transit traversed in full. And while we're on the subject of

► draws from each and every one of them. Its astonishing musical coherence is the result of binding each and every one of these attributes, to a greater or lesser extent, into a single, meaningful whole. Only the Blue Pearl Gem turntable has previously achieved such a convincing portrayal of musical performance, and the Zanden can happily trade qualities with that.



Just like the GEM, you don't hear the Zandens working. Who would have thought that such musical results were possible from the humble CD.

What makes the Zanden transport and DAC so special is the directness of their musical communication. Their quality comes from within the music and that's what they deliver, rendering the limitations of recording and format incidental and of almost academic interest only. Used separately they are undoubtedly impressive, the DAC in particular

proving an excellent match for the Wadia transport, but there is no escaping the fact that their whole is considerably greater than the sum of their parts. Perhaps those lucky few who can seriously contemplate ownership (and if you can then you definitely should) should simply be grateful that they can at least approach the purchase in slightly more palatable chunks. Unfortunately,

I suspect that once you hear the full effect, delaying its implementation might not seem quite so attractive. For the rest of us, the relevance of the Zanden relates to the potential performance it unlocks from CD. The future's bright, it's brushed gold – along with polished stainless steel and frosted Perspex.

Previously, if someone had offered to replace my record players and record collection wholesale with CDs and a player of my choice I'd first have questioned their sanity and then I'd have shown them the door. Now, I'd have to consider that offer seriously. That's how big a step the Zanden digital electronics represent. They don't sound like any CD player I've heard before – they sound better. They don't sound like any turntable either – they're different. In many ways they've redefined my expectations of recorded music. Just when we thought that CD was dying, if not exactly dead, Zanden have brought it back to real, breathing, life – somewhere it's never been before – and that's good news for all of us.

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

2000 Premium CD transport

| | |
|----------------------|---|
| Type: | Two-box CD transport |
| Transport Mechanism: | Philips CDM12 PRO2 (modified) |
| Outputs: | 1x I ^S 1x AES/EBU 1x BNC (SPDIF) 1x BNC (Master Clock Output) |
| Dimensions (WxHxD) – | |
| Transport: | 398 x 137 x 398mm |
| Power Supply: | 352 x 60 x 390mm |
| Price: | £19000 |

5000MkIV Signature d/a converter

| | |
|---------------------|--|
| Type: | Two-box digital to analogue converter with valve output stage and valve rectified power supply |
| Chipset: | Philips TDA-1541A (Double Crown) |
| Tube Complement: | 1x 6922 1x 6X4 2x 6CA4 |
| Inputs: | 1x I ^S 1x AES/EBU 1x BNC (SPDIF) 1x RCA phono (SPDIF) |
| Outputs: | 1pr RCA phonos |
| Output Level: | 2.0V (actual) |
| Dimensions (WxHxD): | 398 x 103 x 254mm |
| Price: | £12500 |

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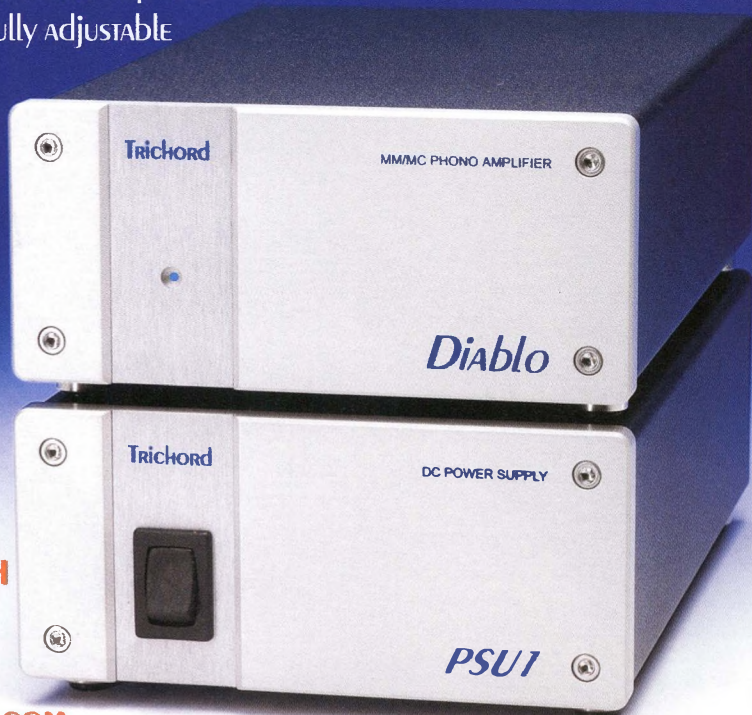
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METRONOME TECHNOLOGIE



METRONOME TECHNOLOGIE

The Metronome Technologie C2A Signature DAC

by Roy Gregory

Back in Issue 27, we were impressed enough by Metronome Technologie's Kalista CD transport to put it on the cover of the magazine. Of course, its striking appearance helped with the decision, but there was no escaping from the fact that it delivered greater detail and insight from Red Book optical discs than anything else we'd tried, making its performance as impressive as its looks. Well, now we have the matching C2A DAC to go with it, a combination I've awaited with some anticipation.

Metronome's flagship converter is housed in a pair of the slim-line cases employed for the transport's external power supply. This shallow chassis has a beautifully sculpted front-panel that goes a long way to relieving what would otherwise be rather bland looks. Indeed, stack three of the units together on adjacent shelves (as you would if using the DAC and transport together) and the effect is one of understated elegance that sets off the transport rather nicely. The only part that lets the side down is the fact that whilst the two power supply units use centrally located blue LEDs to indicate status, ones that match the display on the transport, the data lock LED on the DAC switches from red to green, while the display text is also green. Given the uniform appearance of the three boxes this stands out like a sore thumb, a bit like sticking a spire on one block of the Rockefeller Centre. It's a small point but one that Metronome need to sort out if they are to compete at this rarefied price level. Each chassis stands on three large, cylindrical feet, recessed underneath to accept small cones. These should definitely be used.

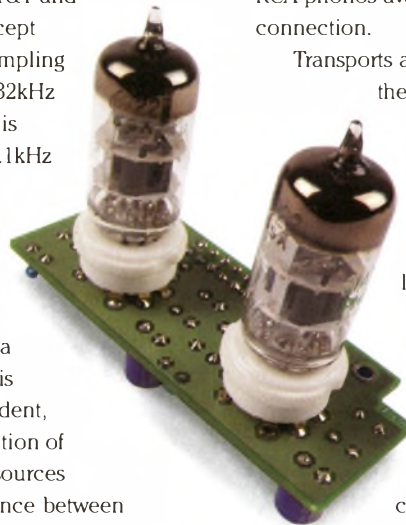
Electrically the DAC is a model of common sense. The noisy AC power is confined to the power supply, which then feeds pure DC to the DAC itself. The C2A offers four digital inputs on AES/EBU, AT&T optical and two SPDIF (via RCA/phonos). Internal dip switches allow you to select the default setting for switch on, although given the lack of a front-panel stand-by switch this seems somewhat extravagant. I left the DAC powered the entire time it was present for review. The AES/EBU, AT&T and RCA2 inputs accept signals with a sampling frequency from 32kHz to 96kHz. RCA1 is optimised for 44.1kHz only, offering improved decoding precision and stability over the others at this data rate. Each input is entirely independent, allowing connection of multiple digital sources without interference between them. There is also a connection and switch on the back panel to override the internal clock in favour of an external unit, increasingly common practice with high-end, high-bit digital replay systems.

A sample rate converter is employed to convert the input signals to 24bit 192kHz before feeding them to independent dual differential Delta-Sigma chips for left and right channel digital to analogue conversion. Metronome keep the number of components in the analogue signal

path to the absolute minimum, employing a pair of 6SN7 double triodes to drive the Class A analogue output stage. The company chose to employ the valves for their musical qualities, a decision shared with the Zanden DAC. However, where Zanden also produce vacuum tube amplification, Metronome are more solidly wed to solid-state technology, making this a choice to take seriously. Transformers are employed to derive a balanced XLR output option, with RCA phonos available for single-ended connection.

Transports available for use with the C2A included the Zanden, the Kalista and the transport section of the Wadia 861SE, although in practice it was the latter two that did the lion's share of the work. I didn't try the AT&T optical input, but instead relied on the AES/EBU and SPDIF connections. Outputs were single-ended to the

Vibe, driving either the Linear A or Hovland RADIA amplifiers. I also had the Weiss Medea on hand for comparison, for which purposes I employed the Stereovox HDXV digital cable. At £70 this lead is an absolute bargain, terminated as standard with BNCs, but including 75 Ohm phono adaptors in the package, meaning that I could use the lead to feed the RCA sockets on the C2A and the Weiss from the BNC output on the Wadia. Interestingly, whilst converters like



▶ the Weiss and the Chord DAC64 allow a twin-wire connection to increase data-rates, the C2A keeps things standard, thus ensuring compatibility with the widest range of driving transports. The option to start using special connection arrangements such as I2S and twin-wire systems further confuses an already bewildering array of choices facing the high-end digital consumer.



The answer has to be to keep things within their own systems and recognised standards. Thus, I listened to the Zanden with and without the I2S connection, the Metronome C2A with and without its own transport. The Weiss, while it provides a benchmark, was denied a twin-wire capable transport, meaning that ultimately I couldn't optimise its performance, something to bear in mind (as you'll see) before you draw firm conclusions.

To a great extent the story of the Metronome C2A is the story of its various inputs. Yes, they differ in sound – and yes, it's enough to affect your judgement of its musical (if not its technical) capabilities. Starting at the beginning I initially listened to the two SPDIF inputs and quickly established that the 44.1kHz optimised Input 1 was superior to Input 2. With more clearly resolved detail, more presence, more body and a much crisper, more insistent sound, it proved far more

musically engaging. Take one small detail as an example – the tambourine on 'Right In Time' (Lucinda Williams, *Car wheels On A Gravel Road*, Mercury 558 338-2). Played via Input 2 it has a familiar digital tinniness and lack of substance, more of an irritant than a musical contribution. Switching to Input 1 locks it in time and space, hitching it directly to the beat. Now it has body and presence, a shape

and complex structure. Now it sounds musical and its strike on the beat carries the track through the quieter verses and into the up-tempo chorus so that it becomes a change of density rather than one of pace. The rhythm remains the same, it's just the way the vocals and the band use the space within it that alters. Suddenly, the musicians sound tighter, the playing more confident and sure-footed. The tambourine might be one small detail but it's a microcosm of the way the music is treated as a whole.

The difference between the

AES/EBU input and the optimised SPDIF Input 1 is a closer call, although the results here are muddled by the lack of identical cables. Good as the Stereovox is, it isn't in the same league as the Valhalla digital lead. The latter sounds big, bold, incredibly stable and confident. It also sounds a shade rounded and dynamically a little smoother and flatter than the single-ended connection. This sumptuous quality is something I've come to expect from balanced digital connections.

What's interesting is that, despite the comparative lack of weight and low-end definition, the Stereovox gets awfully close, with a lighter, sprightlier and dynamically much more agile sound. Images might not be as dimensional, but there's plenty of space between and

around them, and a larger, more open soundstage. The upshot of all this is that preferences for the two inputs might well change with the track played. On the delicate, melodic fluidity of 'Right In Time' it's definitely the single-ended connection that wins out. But play the straight-ahead blues of 'Can't Let Go' and the AES/EBU comes into its own with a solid, driving performance that propels the music forward.

Which brings me to the conclusion that what I'd really like to hear is the C2A running on the end of

a purpose made BNC to Phono Valhalla lead. But before we start getting all wistful about



▷ possibilities let's keep two things in mind: firstly, the fact that the C2A sounded so damned good with the available leads and secondly, just how crucial it is to optimise all aspects of support and especially interfacing if you are going to really realise the potential performance of one of these DACs.

When JMH reviewed the Weiss Medea he rightly noted just how much the performance was lifted by the twin-wire connection.

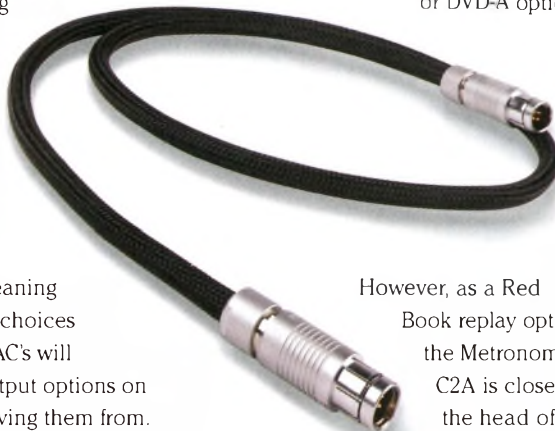


I was unable to supply that, but running AES/EBU or SPDIF RCA it still performed a valuable service as a benchmark and context for the Metronome, matching or slightly bettering the French DAC's SPDIF 2 input but losing out on AES/EBU. The best sound I achieved (most of the time) was via the C2A's optimised Input 1, meaning that to a large extent, choices between these two DAC's will come down to the output options on transport you'll be driving them from.

The sound of the Metronome is quick and airy. There's a delicacy and finesse to it that is at once engaging and attractive as well as musically unobtrusive. It mated equally well with

the Kalista and the Wadia transports, making use of the exceptional information delivered by both of them. The difference in the sound of the various inputs is down to how well it deploys that information, the sense it makes of it. Like the Kalista, it's lucid and open, integrating the finest detail into a single, musically coherent whole. Feed it well and the C2A will repay you with an intimate and directly communicative sound that draws you into a vocal or a performance. Its ability to track micro-dynamics, the subtle shifts in bow-pressure or inflections in a voice make it both natural and convincing, meaning that you can get drawn past the simple mechanics of reproduction and into the music itself.

With so many options vying for the attention of potential high-end digital purchasers, the Metronome C2A faces stiff competition. It also offers more limited decoding capabilities than some of the alternatives, with no SACD or DVD-A option.



However, as a Red Book replay option the Metronome C2A is close to the head of the queue when it comes to decode-only options. In conjunction with the striking Kalista transport things get even tougher, with complete replay systems from the likes

of Zanden and dCS also entering the fray, the one offering a dedicated interface, the other high-resolution playback. In that scenario, the final decision will rest with the purchaser, depending on sound and required facilities as well as looks and budget. The Metronome combination can stand tall and take its chances, but I can't help feeling that it's as a standalone DAC that it's really going to score. ▶+

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

| | |
|---------------------|--|
| Type: | Two-box DAC with vacuum tube output |
| Valve Complement: | 2x 6SN7 |
| Chipset: | Delta-Sigma dual differential 24bit-192kHz |
| Input Frequencies: | 32 – 96kHz |
| Inputs: | 1x AES/EBU XLR 1x AT&T optical 2x SPDIF BNC 1x external clock BNC |
| Outputs: | 1pr balanced XLR 1pr single-ended RCA/phone |
| Output Level: | 2.5V |
| Output Impedance: | 47 kOhms (single-ended) 600 Ohms (balanced) |
| Dimensions (WxHxD): | 450 x 75 x 410mm ea. |
| Weight: | 10kg (DAC) 11kg (PSU) |
| Price: | £11,350 |

UK Distributor:

Integrated Engineering Solutions
Tel. (44)(0)23 8090 5020
Net. www.highendaudio.co.uk

Manufacturer:

Metronome Technologie S.A.R.L.
Net. www.metronome-technologie.com

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POWER



SACD/CD



PLAY/PAUSE



PREVIOUS



NEXT



STOP/OPEN

The Lindemann 820 SACD player

by Jason Kennedy

Norbert Lindemann has been building audio electronics in Germany for over twelve years and this is his second SACD player; a hefty lump it is too. Build quality is superb, easily on a par with the likes of Mark Levinson, with great attention to detail and finish. Operationally it is highly encouraging as well, the disc drawer closing as if it were pneumatic. It likes to close its drawer too, I guess you would too if you could do it with so much subtlety, leave it open and a minute or so later it has closed though you rarely notice it happening.

The Lindemann 820 is clearly a bit of male jewellery, which is no bad thing so long as what's on the inside lives up to the expectations created by the casework. Norbert seems to have been doing his homework here as well; this is not just an SACD player, it's a digital pre-amplifier as well. There are four digital inputs each with the potential to accept signals up to 192kHz. That is of course a theoretical maximum sampling rate as there is no connection system for this data rate that uses phono sockets. At present there is only Firewire or iLink (which uses a different connector and a handshake system that is unlikely to hook up to third party digital components lest they be, dread of dreads, recorders). The music industry must be aware by now that SACD piracy is completely insignificant in the grand scheme of music piracy as MP3 has surely proved once and for all that sound quality is not what drives music demand. If it were then formats like SACD would

have been a success by now rather than something that pundits in the real world (see newspapers) are writing off as another Betamax.

To get back to the 820, it does not of course have the ability to take onboard signals from an SACD player but will work with the 96kHz rate offered by some DVD-A players as well as most other PCM



bitstreams, be they from your Sky box or your DAB tuner. If you don't have an analogue source in your system the digital pre-amp/player route pioneered most visibly by Wadia, has a lot going for it, not least because it will, or at least has the potential to, upgrade all your digital sources in one fell swoop. Cyrus has cottoned on to this with its DAC/pre-amp the DAC XP, which does a very good job indeed for a reasonable price (watch this space for a full review).

Just because this is a player/pre-amp doesn't mean you have to get by with fewer facilities. Options provided allow you to change phase, balance, sampling rate and whether or not the digital output is on or off. You can put the player in direct mode and bypass the pre-amp functions but that is only available via the balanced outputs.

Conveniently for some however you can run both single ended and balanced outputs simultaneously.

At the heart of the Lindemann 820 is a single clock, a Colpitts oscillator built around a very low noise, gigahertz transistor. Lindemann uses a clock distribution buffer to stop components influencing one another and the master clock is isolated from the DSP using a device called an I-coupler. This is an inductive transmitter designed for high-speed data lines in industry, and apparently it can cope with 2,500 volts for one minute. Of more interest is its speed capability of up to 100 Mbps and the fact that it separates the signal from the ground by using a pair of coils to pass signal but not ground noise. Ground noise is produced by many of the elements in the DSP and the drive servo at both high and low frequencies and if it is allowed into the digital to analogue conversion circuitry is more than likely to cause distortion.

Unlike some highly regarded SACD players (Krell's SACD Standard player comes to mind) the 820 does not convert DSD into PCM at any stage but rather sends it directly to the converters where it is filtered. This is why the player uses an analogue volume control rather than a bit reducing digital type which has to operate with a PCM signal.

I don't normally go in for feet but these ones felt a little different and turn out to be based on a 'ball bearings in cups' design that's claimed to sink the resonances in the player and stop furniture

▶ borne vibes from getting in. I am often sceptical about any form of 'isolation' technique which works on the premise of reduced contact area. Essentially this is like a spike except it doesn't nail itself into anything, so perhaps it's better than a spike. However, it must be said that this player certainly shares the kind of timing benefits you sometimes get from other spiked equipment, so use them I did.



This is a stereo only SACD player, something that should theoretically be an anomaly in these days of 5.1 this and 7.1 surround systems. When I asked Norbert why he had not built a multi-channel machine to take advantage of the full potential of the medium he made a couple of salient points: "We do not think that multi-channel SACD is necessary in order to enjoy listening to music. Most recordings are based on two or three-channel equipment only so multi-channel is nothing more than an effect. We are very conservative and think that stereo is more than sufficient to enjoy music. And don't forget that SACD multi-channel is not compatible with standard home cinema equipment. You need to have a system with five identical channels using full range speakers. If you do not have all this, I think stereo sound is more than satisfying. Another problem is that most multi-channel players are using the

same budget or less for six channels as we are using for two channels. The result is poor signal quality deriving from cheap converter chips and simple analogue output stages. We intended to create the maximum possible quality today for two-channels without any compromises."

On one hand he has a point, music is not intrinsically more enjoyable because it comes through more channels, but just as stereo gives the recording engineer a bigger window through which to channel sound than mono, multi-channel

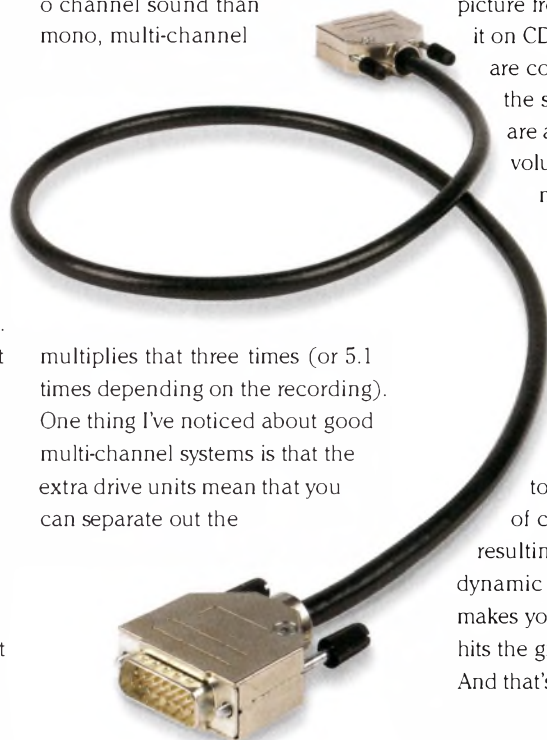
multiplies that three times (or 5.1 times depending on the recording). One thing I've noticed about good multi-channel systems is that the extra drive units mean that you can separate out the

channels from the mixing desk and give the speakers an easier job. I spoke to producer and musician Martyn Ware recently (Heaven 17, Terence Trent D'Arby, Erasure etc) and he is producing musical events using 16 channels or more and finds the process of mixing for lots of channels significantly easier than mixing for stereo because there's so much more acoustic space to work within.

But good multi-channel depends on factors like the original recording technique and having, as Norbert points out, five or six identical channels of amplification and loudspeakers, not to mention that rarest of beasts, a decent multi-channel preamp. So in the end I agree with him that two channels are difficult enough to find, afford and house and that we don't need any more for now thanks.

Using the 820 as a pre-amp with its balanced outputs connected to ATC SCM150 ASL active loudspeakers was a very enjoyable experience, so Norbert seems to be on the right track. This is a relaxed and luxurious sounding player which can produce a good, solid stereo picture from any decent recording be it on CD or SACD. I guess when you are connecting it to a pre-amp with the single ended output you are actually going through two volume pots, but the 820 has a max level switching option so the effect of the one onboard should be fairly benign. It would take a very decent preamp indeed to get a better result than the 820 direct.

With the latest Yo Miles SACD Upriver – a direct to DSD jazz/rock recording of considerable quality – the resulting sound is stunning. The dynamic range is huge and positively makes you jump when the 'needle hits the groove' on the opening track. And that's even if the volume hasn't ▶



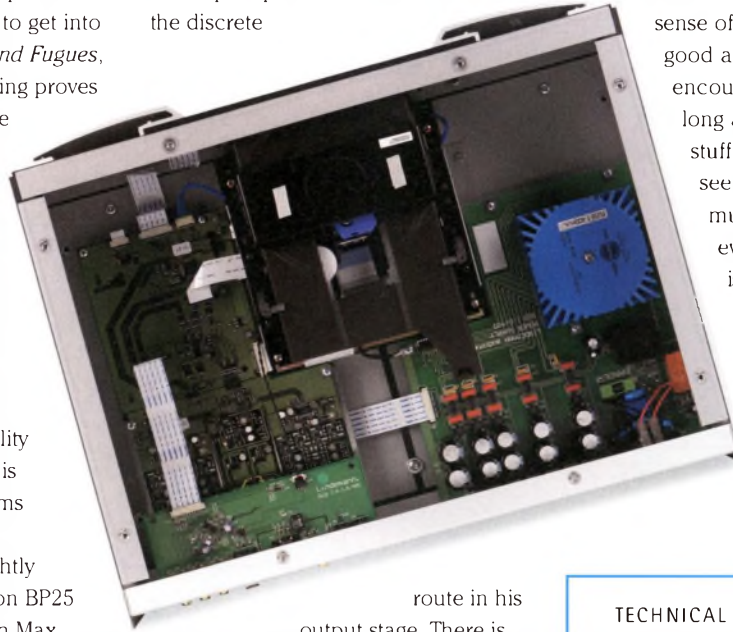
▶ been left too high! Bass guitar on this album is simply gorgeous, well defined yet rich, round and throbbing. At the other end of the band cymbals have life and air enough to sound highly convincing and in the middle things are clean and silky smooth – a bit like the drawer mechanism.

With a Keith Jarrett solo piano CD that I have rarely been able to get into (Shostakovich – *Preludes and Fugues*, ECM) the 820's sense of timing proves quite revelatory. It makes the recording interesting and enjoyable, previous players albeit more affordable ones, have tended to make it seem rather monotonous. The presentational style of this player seems to have a slightly deeper varnish than is strictly neutral but its quality of timing suggests that little is being smoothed over in terms of definition.

Played through the slightly etched character of a Bryston BP25 pre-amp and compared with Max Townshend's TA 565 Evo 2 universal player there is a distinct shortfall in the resolution of reverberant detail. The Townshend revealing a lot more about the acoustic in which a cymbal for instance was recorded, which suggests a degree more transparency in the mid-band at least and is why there is a stronger sense of vibrancy and life. It is less likely to make your foot tap though and I wonder if that's because there is more detail to take in and thus less clear cut leading edges. In other words that extra detail brings out other aspects of the music such as its timbre and energy level. A bit like the way a drawing is more clear cut than a photograph; both can give a recognisable semblance but the drawing can emphasise one aspect of the image over the others. The 820 isn't like an old style Naim amp, it doesn't have a slightly hard treble that brings

out the leading edges above all else but its ability to make your foot tap does suggest a slight emphasis.

The Lindemann is twice the price of the Townshend and has at least twice the build quality. The fact that it trails it sonically in some respects could be because where Norbert has used op-amps Max has taken the discrete



route in his output stage. There is no denying the rich, full bodied appeal of the Lindemann's sound however and those lucky enough to own this player will derive a great deal of pleasure from their disc collections be they Super Audio discs or otherwise. While it may not reproduce the obvious space and detail of the Townshend, it's hardly bereft in this regard. It's rather that the balance is relatively dark. Instruments and voices have plenty of depth, shape and colour. Missy Elliott's vox on the hard hitting 'Beat Bites' track (from *Da Real World*) is as strong and 'for real' as you like, scary in its palpability and somewhat less sugary than she sounded when success came her way. Lines like 'Would you still be in love with me baby if I cut your throat' making things perfectly clear!

Whilst bass is satisfyingly solid and weighty, the fastest and most complex tracks can find it wanting a little agility.

Of course, that speed comes as a direct trade-off against weight, and in this particular balancing act, erring slightly to the solid is no bad thing.

The Lindemann 820 brings a lot of positive qualities to the disc playing party: it is beautifully built, comprehensively equipped and makes a sound that is rich and revealing. Its sense of timing is extremely good and it's this that encourages you to listen long and loud, even to stuff that might otherwise seem uninspiring. This musicality means that everything you spin is, as Norbert says of two-channel audio, great fun. Beautifully built and equally carefully voiced, the Lindemann 820 is a very classy act indeed. ▶

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

| | |
|---------------------|--|
| Type: | SACD Player |
| Chipset: | BurrBrown PCM1792/ SRC4192 convertor |
| Sampling Rates: | 44.1kHz, 88.2kHz, 176.4kHz |
| Digital Inputs: | 3x coaxial electrical, 1x AES/EBU |
| Preamp Functions: | Volume, balance, absolute phase, source switching |
| Digital Outputs: | 1x coaxial electrical, 1x AES/EBU |
| Analogue Outputs: | Balanced XLR or single-ended phono |
| Output Channels: | 2 |
| Dimensions (HxWxD): | 13.3x44x34.3cm |
| Weight: | 13.2kg |
| Price | £6,999 |

Distributor:

GT Audio
Tel. (44)(0)1895 833099
Net. www.lindemann-audiotechnik.de

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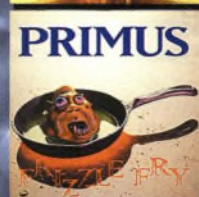
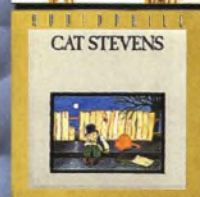


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The B&W 803D Loudspeaker

by Paul Messenger

Worthing-based B&W is the largest and most successful hi-fi speaker maker on the planet, and a key factor responsible can be traced to the launch of the upmarket Nautilus 800-series in 1998. Although the range hasn't remained entirely unchanged since then – a couple of extra models were added in 2001 – the core has survived unaltered for nearly seven years, which is a testament to the quality and longevity of a startlingly original range that was stuffed with radical innovations.

At the end of 2004, however, it was time to bring the whole series up to date, and incorporate the numerous lessons that B&W's large research team have learned over the last seven years. The range itself has been significantly expanded, especially on the home cinema side of things, and the Nautilus part of the name has now been dropped, though the new 800-series models do look remarkably similar to their predecessors.

The original five stereo pairs, from the monster N801 through to the dinky stand-mount N805, all have equivalents in the new range. There's also a new version of the top-of-the-line N800, which was the 2001 addition to the range, and which I reviewed for Hi-Fi+ back in issue 20. That amounts to six all told. However, the new range actually includes seven models, because an additional 803D has been shoe-horned into the middle, primarily to provide something close to 802D performance within a conventional looking single-box enclosure, as a number of potential customers find the 'separate head' styling too extreme. It also fills the otherwise rather large gap between the 803S and the 802D. And it's that all-new £5,500/pair 803D which is the subject of this review. By

way of context it sits below the 802D (£8,000/pair), 801D (£10,500/pair) and 800D (£13,000/pair), but above the 803S (£3,800/pair), 804S (£2,700/pair) and the 805S reviewed by RG.

The 803D is quite a formidable looking beast, especially if you leave the grille off and reveal a front panel covered in drive units. It weighs a considerable 45kg, and stands quite tall, measuring 118cm at its highest point on its rather spindly 6mm spikes, with the tweeter tube on top of that. But that merely ensures that the midrange driver is mounted appropriately near to seated ear height. By using multiple (ie 3x 180mm) bass drivers, the flat front panel is kept to a reasonably slim 22cm, while the rest of the enclosure is formed from a continuous elliptical curve, 30cm at its widest and 42cm deep (excluding grille, terminals), and the top surface is slightly domed and down-tilted.

The top section of the enclosure is a separate sealed chamber that loads the midrange driver, while the lower section is loaded by a flared damped port down near the floor. While the curved shape helps stiffen the structure and disperse internal reflections and standing waves, additional rigidity and dispersal is supplied by complex 'honeycomb' Matrix stiffening. The whole thing is wrapped in an attractive, if understated, real wood veneer – my samples came in 'rosenut' but cherry (as photographed) and black options are also available. I can't help feeling that some sort of plinth would enhance the appearance and lessen the impression that the speaker is standing on tippy-toes, but the whole thing feels very secure and stable, and who am I to query Morton

Warren's estimable design talents?

Another minor quibble is that just two pairs of terminals low down on the rear are used to feed this three-way design.

What's in a name, and why the Ds, or for that matter the Ss? The new range is split into two, and the four more favoured and expensive models have D suffixes, referring to the fact that their tweeter domes are manufactured in pure diamond. The three less costly S-suffixed models all use more conventional aluminium dome tweeters, developed from those used in the Nautili. Diamond tweeters are not exclusive to B&W – a German drive unit maker called Accuton has been making sapphire and diamond dome tweeters for some years, and supplying them to high end speaker brands like Avalon – but the size of B&W's global operations (and product range) brings economies of scale that make the technology much more affordable than hitherto. Rather than effectively putting an additional five figure sum onto the price of a pair of speakers, the premium for B&W's diamond



tweeters is probably closer to £1,500 over and above the aluminium equivalent (though precise like-for-like comparison is not possible, because of other differences). Even that is far from cheap, but the manufacturing processes required, involving chemical vapour deposition at 1,000°C and laser trimming, are necessarily very costly.

Why diamond? Essentially, because it's the hardest material on earth. That means that it creates the stiffest possible dome structure, which in turn



► ensures its first break-up resonance is at a significantly higher frequency than an aluminium alloy dome. Although it has somewhat greater density than metals like aluminium, titanium and beryllium, which is a potential disadvantage, this is more than outweighed by the far greater stiffness (Young's modulus). Where B&W's S-type ally dome has its resonance peak at 32kHz, the D-type diamond version postpones this until 74kHz, which is roughly two octaves above the limit of human hearing, and so ensures that any ill effects stay well out of the way. Furthermore, its behaviour throughout the ultrasonic region is much smoother than that exhibited by the aluminium dome.

The diamond dome tweeter is clearly a key attention-grabbing marketing tool, but numerous other less glamorous changes introduced for this new range probably make equally important contributions to the total performance. Staying with the tweeter, a new surround material has significantly lowered the fundamental resonance, and that in turn has allowed the use of a much gentler-slope, single-component, first-order crossover feed. And B&W has gone to German component specialist Mundorf to develop the high quality capacitor that is used. Like all the Nautilus and new 800-Series models, the tweeters are mounted on top, in a separate tapered tube-shaped enclosure which is mechanically decoupled from the rest of the

speaker, and absorbs the radiation from the rear of the diaphragm down a damped trans-mission line. Probably significantly, the tubes used with the D models are hefty cast alloy affairs, while a smaller, lighter plastic moulding is used in the S models. A small magnetically held mesh grille covers the fragile 25mm diamond dome, and is maybe best left in place, as an accident here could be very expensive.

All the New 800s (bar the little stand-mount 805S) are three-way designs, and therefore get to use B&W's unique 'surroundless' FST midrange driver. The idea here is that a midrange-only driver doesn't need to make the substantial fore'n'aft excursions required of a bass or bass/mid driver. Since the surround around the edge of the cone has no need to flex to accommodate excursion, its shape and material can be specifically chosen to absorb (rather than reflect) the vibrations that travel out through the woven Kevlar matrix cone from the voice coil. As a consequence, this 150mm driver actually has a fractionally larger cone diameter than the 180mm bass units with their conventional roll surrounds. Klippel's computer modelling techniques have been used extensively to refine the FST driver since it was first introduced, and the latest examples have plastic 'bullet' polepiece extensions, as metal is better avoided here.

The bass units are also new, with 140mm 'sandwich' diaphragms made from 8mm thick Rohacell structural foam, laminated between woven carbon fibre, providing high structural stiffness and minimising the transmission of

unwanted sound from inside the enclosure.

Measurements show that the claimed 90dB sensitivity is comfortably met, but so is the 3 ohm minimum impedance, so there's no real advantage to be gained from this above average

figure. In fact the impedance stays below 6 ohms from 55Hz up to 1kHz, rendering the "normal impedance 8 ohms" quoted in the specification somewhat specious. Although the amplifier load is quite demanding in current terms, the speaker does deliver seriously deep bass, registering -1dB at 20Hz under in-room far-field conditions.

The tonal balance, again under far-field in-room conditions, shows that the bass end is quite smooth and even as well as very well extended, though the midband, 500Hz - 1kHz, is rather forward, and output falls significantly thereafter to very restrained presence octave 2 - 4kHz, before the tweeter stages some recovery. Although the bottom end is somewhat better balanced than its somewhat bass heavy 802D bigger brother, the latter, with its separate midrange enclosure, is significantly smoother and more even through the mid and presence.

The 803Ds actually arrived a week or two after a pair of 802Ds I was reviewing for another magazine, so direct comparison was not only possible, but inevitable. In fact, by the time these 803Ds turned up, I had already fallen deeply in love with their bigger 802D brother, which I reckoned (from memory) already significantly improved on the Nautilus 800 in all round



▶ performance. (I view the prospect of trying the new 800D with no little trepidation!)

Not surprisingly, the 803D falls somewhat short of the 802D's capabilities, but the family resemblance is still very close, and not everything is in the more costly model's favour. For starters, the 803D costs less than 70 per cent the price of the 802D, and I reckon (with the caveat that such a guesstimate shouldn't be taken too seriously) it delivers something like 80 per cent of the performance.

I started off using my usual sources and driving system – Naim CDS 3, NAC 552, NAP 500 electronics, Magnum Dynalab MD102 tuner and a Linn/Rega hybrid record player, hooked up with Naim and Vertex AQ cabling. With single-wire cabling I started off using the supplied terminal links, but subsequently substituting the Vertex AQ links brought a significant improvement.

The height of this speaker is an undoubted plus, giving the soundstage extra air and space, and emphasising the superb out-of-the-boxes imaging. Precise placement and tight focus is accompanied by unusual phase accuracy – information recorded deliberately out-of-phase is reproduced well beyond the space between the actual speakers, which is a trick few speakers can manage.

Dynamic range is exceptionally wide here, even the subtlest details coming through clearly and unambiguously. How much of that is down to the diamond tweeter is impossible to say, but the

top end has an unforced naturalness that's indisputable and thoroughly persuasive. The sound is open yet entirely free of exaggeration, and the best compliment one can pay that costly tweeter is simply to say that you're hardly conscious that it's there at all. Discretion is the watch-word here, all the more so because the top end remains unobtrusive despite the audible lack of presence energy.

The bass is even, smooth, and drives the music along well, while the most serious criticism lies in the lack of strict neutrality through the midband and presence, which tends to make voices sound a little thickened and slightly 'shut in'. This is certainly the most obvious element of 'character' in this speaker, and while it is unquestionably audible

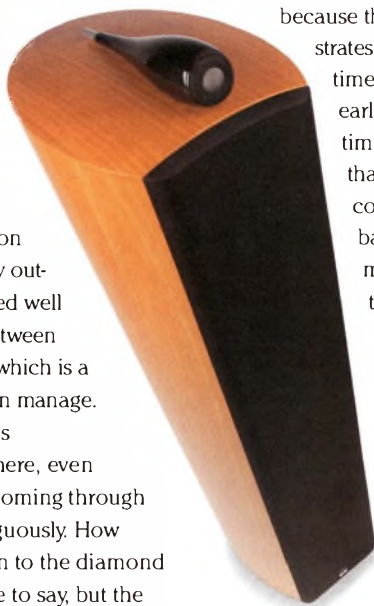
– significantly more so than with the 802D, it must be said – the effect seems much less obtrusive and distracting than was the case with the Nautilus 800 series models that I tried. This is, I believe,

because the new range demonstrates substantially improved time coherence than the earlier range, and tight timing is the key factor that (more than) compensates for tonal balance deficiencies in musical communication terms. With the earlier Nautilus 800s I found it necessary to raise the volume somewhat to distinguish speech, but improved timing renders this unnecessary with this new range.

The acid test for any

speaker system is how clearly it reveals and highlights fundamental differences in the underlying characters of the various sources we use. Here the 803Ds proved quite outstanding, demonstrating the basic superiority of vinyl over CD, as well as unusually good suppression of surface noise effects. FM radio possessed the sort of creamy smoothness one always felt lay just below the surface, making even 'difficult' serious music very accessible. And even the superiority of Nicam TV sound (from analogue terrestrial) over MPEG (from digital satellite) was clearly audible.

The 803D might fall a little short of the 802D in mid-band smoothness and all round dynamic expression, but it remains an excellent loudspeaker nonetheless. It also provides plenty of evidence of the substantial improvements B&W has wrought in making the transition from Nautilus to New 800 Series, thanks especially to much improved time coherence. ➤+



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

| | |
|------------------------|---|
| Type: | 3-way vented-box loudspeaker system |
| Drive Units: | 1x 25mm diamond dome HF 1x 150mm woven Kevlar® FST midrange 3x 180mm Rohacell® bass |
| Nominal Impedance: | 8 ohms (minimum 3 ohms) |
| Sensitivity: | 90dB/2.83V |
| Crossover Frequencies: | 350Hz, 4kHz |
| Power Handling: | 50W - 500W |
| Dimensions (WxHxD): | 310x1180x460 mm |
| Weight: | 45kg each |
| Finish: | Cherry, Rosenut, Black Ash real wood veneers |
| Price: | £5,500/pair |

Manufacturer:

B&W Loudspeakers Ltd.
Tel. (44)(0)1903 221500
Net. www.bwspeakers.com



The B&W 805S Loudspeakers

by Roy Gregory

B&W's Nautilus 800 Series are close to iconic status, so successful have they been in reshaping the hi-fi buying public's notion of what an expensive speaker should look like (as well as the company's profile and fortunes). But how did a company as traditional in outward appearance and reputation and as staid in styling as B&W shatter the mould so completely yet successfully? The answer of course is that whilst the mechanical aspects of their loudspeakers had always been built on a sound technological basis and extensive research, they'd been producing radical and radical-looking speaker designs for quite some time. The original Nautilus "Snail" was developed at the same Steyning research facility that took that thinking and reworked it into the 800 Series – hence the Nautilus moniker. But more than just the technology was carried over. For the first time, rather than some flagship or niche product, the bold aesthetic was applied to a mainstream product range. It wasn't just that the 800 Series used a few clever ideas (some of which we'd seen before anyway, loudspeaker design tending to the evolutionary rather than the revolutionary). The difference was that for the first time, everyday loudspeakers were wearing that technology very much on the outside, rather than tucking it away inside rectangular boxes. Whether it's the bright yellow cones or the polished, modular head units, the curved, sculptural cabinets or the "jet-tails" on the mid and treble drivers, these speakers wore their hearts very firmly on their sleeves.

History will point to the coincidence of opportunity. Curved cabinet technology of the type used in the 800 Series wasn't developed by B&W, but they were the first to popularise it.

Combine it with the dramatic visual reworking of the original 801/802 boxy head unit and one thing was for sure – like it or loathe it, nothing was ever going to be the same again. Looking back, it's easy to forget just how completely removed from the norm the Nautilus 800s were, now that even £300 speakers are boasting curved cabinets or Kevlar drivers. But aesthetically speaking, loudspeaker design was in the doldrums

and the market was ripe for just such a dramatic statement, a situation underlined by the outstanding commercial success of the B&Ws. Mind you, having all that data and a nice technological story to go with the other-worldly looks didn't hurt. I previously described the 800s as "mainstream" products, but let's not forget that they started out as the flagship range. It was the staggering sales that they achieved (numbers that even took B&W by surprise) that made them mainstream, and in doing so, virtually single-handedly rehabilitated the expensive, technologically advanced loudspeaker as an essential element in the serious hi-fi system. From here on in people actually wanted to spend money on their speakers again – but they also wanted more than simple, off-the-shelf drivers stuffed in an MDF box with a high-zoot brand name on it.

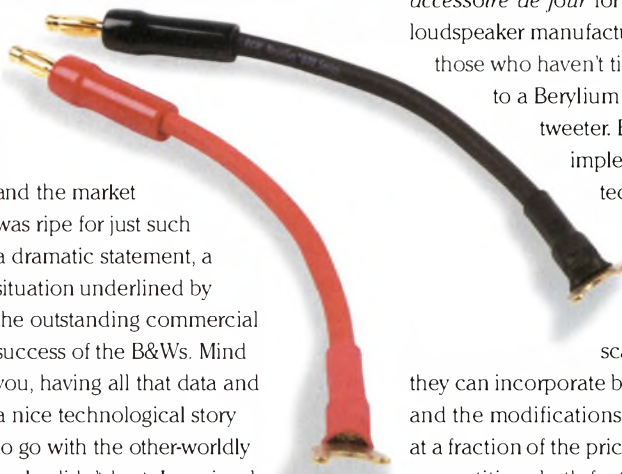
Nothing stands still, least of all fashion, and if familiarity hasn't exactly bred contempt, the longevity of the

Nautilus 800s along with a swarm of clones and imitators means that a makeover is probably overdue. That it's been delayed is as much to do with perfecting new technology as any reluctance on the part of the company. The "New Technology" in question (that would probably read NEW TECHNOLOGY if I was completely fashion conscious and on message) is of course the diamond tweeter, latest *accessoire de jour* for all serious loudspeaker manufacturers – at least

those who haven't tied themselves to a Beryllium mast or ribbon tweeter. But whilst B&W's implementation of the technology is undoubtedly impressive, and whilst economies of scale mean that

they can incorporate both the tweeter and the modifications it necessitates at a fraction of the price of the existing competition, both facts really rather miss, or at least distract from the point. There's much more to a loudspeaker, any loudspeaker, than just a fancy high-frequency driver. Which is one of the reasons why, as far as I'm concerned, the most interesting model in the new range is the 805S, one of only two models that don't have at least the option of the diamond diaphragm.

But this is more than just a case of technological bloody mindedness from a Luddite reviewer. Whilst it was impossible not to be impressed with the physical, material and technological content of the original Nautilus 800 Series, I was always less convinced by the sound, in part at least because the wide-bandwidth, three-way approach with its low sensitivity and awkward



▶ load characteristics jarred so violently with the lower powered amps I tend to prefer. Undoubtedly revealing, the floorstanding B&Ws tended to reveal exactly what I didn't like about the kind of amps necessary to drive them. Not really surprising then that it was



always the two-way, stand-mounted N805 that I liked the most. What makes it even more interesting in this context is that unlike the rest of the range (apart from the N800) the N805 has also enjoyed a mid-life update with the introduction of the Signature model some two and a half years ago. Thus, not only does the new 805S act as a showcase for the non-diamond developments to the 800 Series, it also faces stiff sonic competition from a tweaked (and 30% more expensive) version of its immediate predecessor.

Why no diamond tweeter? Despite the economies of scale that derive from using the same unit across an entire best-selling range, incorporating it into the 805 format would have simply pushed the price too high. To justify the cost would require much more than just the fancy tweeter, and whilst such a development is clearly possible, I wouldn't go holding my breath.

However, don't allow the lack of diamond to put you off. There's still plenty to admire about the 805S.

The first thing to appreciate is that whilst it doesn't use the diamond diaphragm, the 805S's does employ the other developments that went alongside it, most notably the new roll-surround, attached in this case to a aluminium dome. The tweeter housing itself is also now decoupled from its cosmetic sleeve, itself far more effectively decoupled from the cabinet.

In fact, the tweeter element is disconcertingly floppy - so please don't be tempted to make use of its obvious attraction as a handhold when moving or unpacking the speakers. The other really big change is in the crossover, which is now a first-order design rather than the previous model's third-order filter. This in turn has necessitated the development of a sonically superior capacitor, for which B&W cooperated with a major German component manufacturer, and a repositioning of the tweeter itself, half a wavelength further forward so as to correct the phase relationship between the drivers*. Other, minor developments include the elimination of the phase-plug in the bass-mid driver, in favour of the slightly greater effective area offered by a conventional dust cap, and the virtual elimination of the scalloped cut-out in which the tweeter used to sit. This latter change is purely cosmetic and affords the speaker a slightly softer look, in keeping with the rest of the new range.

The end result of all these changes is surprisingly small, in numerical terms at least. Efficiency stays the same (at 88dB) and so does bandwidth, with a -3dB bottom-end of 49Hz. However, one effect of the crossover change is a new minimum impedance of 3.7 Ohms, down from the previous 4.4 Ohm value,

* First-order crossovers do not invert phase in the way that third-order ones do.

a factor which does effect amplifier choice. I used the 805Ss with amps as varied as the Bryston 9B and Tom Evans Linear A, but whilst the speaker is quite capable of dealing with the delicacy and transparency of the latter, the 30 Watts on offer never really got hold of it, and with the RADIA on loan chez CT (who seems strangely reluctant to return it) I turned to the Levinson 383 integrated, which proved an excellent match. Set-up also proved critical, with the speakers' spacing, toe-in and their distance from the back wall all having a clearly defined influence on the sound. Cabling too, proved readily audible, meaning that whilst I was perfectly happy with my normal Nordost leads, you'll certainly hear the impact of alternatives and some will undoubtedly prefer them. Stands should be 24" high and as solid and heavy as possible; I used the



Garrick stone stands which proved an ideal match. Bottom line here is simple: this speaker might be the baby in the range but it's just as demanding, revealing and critical of set-up and the driving system as the far more expensive models. Getting it right is just a case of taking the appropriate care, rather than some convoluted and obtuse rite of passage. Just don't go thinking that you can hang the 805Ss on the end of any old thing. You'll get a result all right ▶

▶ – it just won't be the one you want.

Which makes my first conclusion concerning the 805S all the more ironic. In its latest incarnation this is a fundamentally more coherent and forgiving speaker than it ever has been. Yep... forgiving. In other words, whilst it's going to tell you all about poor equipment or poor decisions upstream, what it isn't going to do is punish you for them. Why this subtle yet important difference? It's all to do with the integration between the two drivers and the musical continuity that results. Listen to the 805S and the first thing you'll notice is that the treble doesn't draw attention to itself the way it used to in the earlier models. The detail is still there, and so is the texture, but it's happy to find its natural position in the musical landscape, rather than stepping forward and waving! This makes for less distraction but also reveals a far better top to bottom balance and greater continuity through the crossover – which is now all but inaudible.

Of course, it's tempting to rub one's chin sagely and mutter about the obvious superiority of first order filters, but that would be a mistake. It's not enough to simply employ 24dB slopes. You have to have the drivers to do it with and the crossover components too. After all, you're talking about a very gradual fade that's going to be audibly active across at least an octave at any given time; that demands impeccable out-of-band manners from your drivers and also offers the crossover components a very real opportunity to be heard. Add in the inherent simplicity (and low component count) of a first-order filter and you can't rely on one part masking another to blur or smudge stark sonic effects. B&W have done a beautiful job here, balancing all those elements and

the end results reach both up and down the range. As we've seen before, clean up and balance the top and you'll here it at the bottom. That's exactly what's going on with the 805S. As PM put it when we discussed these little speakers, "When did they learn about timing?"



Yes, I know it's a somewhat hackneyed, even flat-ish point of

view, but it accurately reflects the improved coherence that affects every aspect of this speaker's performance.

Playing the John Coltrane Quartet's album *Ballads* (Impulse IMP 11562) the little B&Ws step away from the performers, uncovering the subtle complexity that underlies the apparent simplicity. Coltrane's sax is wonderfully breathy and intimate, the contrast of his elongated lines on 'Say It (Over and Over Again)' with McCoy Tyner's piano beautifully captured. Without the ability to sustain his notes, Tyner uses three to 'Tranes one, yet despite the inner rhythmic convolutions the pieces of the melodic jigsaw fit perfectly, counterbalanced by the understated yet perfectly placed contributions of bass and drums.

It's this ability to open a path to the inner structure of the music, to capture the character and shape of the individual elements without ripping apart the subtleties that bind them

together that makes the 805S special. It does it just as effectively on any sort of music, from Lloyd Cole to Alison Krauss, Senegalese guitarists to Shostakovich (the Berglund *Leningrad Symphony* was simply awesome). But what separates this latest 805 from earlier incarnations is the fact that it does so more readily and without drawing attention to itself.

Don't let the lack of a diamond tweeter put you off; this is a fully paid-up member of B&W's flagship 800 Series. It's also the most affordable and most accessible route into that exalted company. Of course, you could spend this sort of money (or a little more) on a pair of the latest fancy drivers. Or you could spend it on inner coherence and musical integrity: Me? I think the 805S is a honey. ➤+

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

| | |
|---------------------|--|
| Type: | Two-way reflex loaded loudspeaker |
| Drivers: | 1x 25mm aluminium dome tweeter 1x 165mm woven Kevlar bass/mid |
| Crossover: | First-order at 4kHz |
| Bandwidth: | 49Hz to 22kHz \pm 3dB -6dB at 42Hz and 50kHz |
| Efficiency: | 88dB |
| Impedance: | 8 Ohms nominal (3.7 Ohms minimum) |
| Dimensions (WxHxD): | 238 x 418 x 351mm |
| Weight: | 11.5kg |
| Finishes: | Cherry, Rosentul, Black Ash |
| Price: | £1650 |

Manufacturer:
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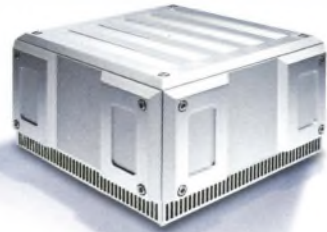
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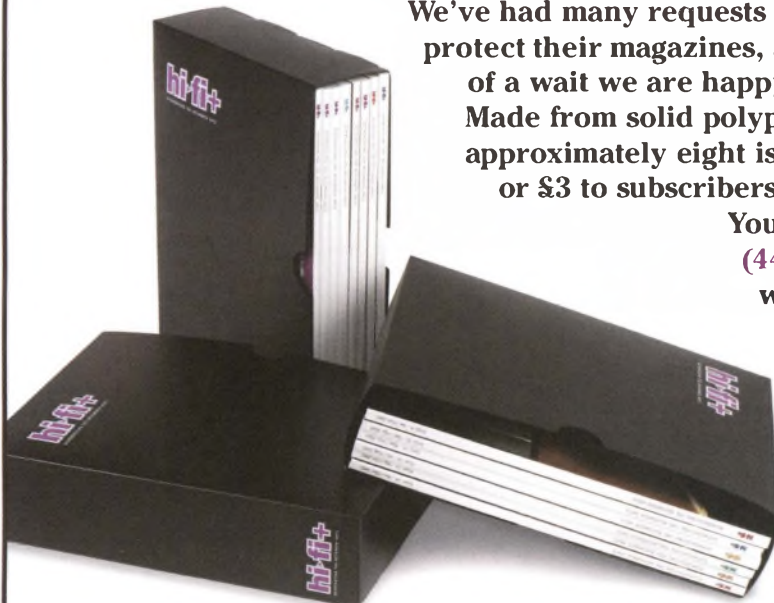
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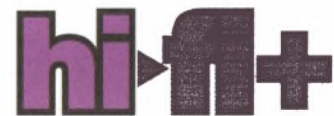
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The Eminent Technology LFT VIII Loudspeaker

by Roy Gregory

The U.K. hi-fi market has always had a special fascination for planar loudspeakers, perhaps grown from the presence of the various Quad electrostatics. The sense of air, space and scale that comes from a dipolar design and the capacious soundstage that results is certainly attractive, overcoming for many listeners the visual impact of such designs and the difficulties of integrating them into the listening room. Indeed, of only five imported loudspeaker brands that have ever made a significant and lasting impact on the British psyche, three have been dipoles. (All three were also imported by Absolute Sounds, but that's another point entirely.) The loudspeakers of Apogee, Martin-Logan and, last but not least, Magneplanar, were all outstandingly successful and influential. But whereas the Logans were electrostatic designs, both the Apogee and Magneplanar speakers employed a hybrid of ribbon HF and planar-magnetic main drivers. Yet, despite many attractive qualities both have faded from the market, leaving the Logans to hold the field.

When Magneplanar speakers first reached these shores they were something quite outside my previous experience. An early MG3 demonstration left a lasting impression and set me on the course to eventual ownership. Here was an inherently simple dipolar design that delivered

all the benefits but without the cost, complexity and fragility of contemporary electrostatics. Large panels made for decent bandwidth while the drivers themselves were almost indestructible (at least in normal use – I did arrive home one day to be met at eye-level by a kitten clinging to the back of the speaker!). However, nothing's perfect and the planar-magnetic approach imposed its own costs. The comb-filtering effect of rear-wave cancellation at low-frequencies made placement and toe-in absolutely critical, while the single-sided magnetic structure wasn't great in terms of driver linearity or control. In short, the greater the excursion the less grip delivered by the amplifier, a situation that demanded significant power if wide-bandwidth and believable dynamics were to be delivered; and this in the days before the popular acceptance of bi-amping. Add a less than enlightened policy to export pricing on the part of the manufacturer that made what was an audiophile bargain in its home market into a high-priced, high-end product in Europe and it only needed the strengthening of the dollar to make the brand's UK survival marginal. One nudge, duly delivered by the arrival of the sonically and visually transparent Martin-Logan CLS, and they were gone.

Which was a shame, because I for one always felt there was plenty of

mileage in the concept. The great simplicity, the absence of matching transformers or a high bias voltage and the resulting additional costs that those things entail, means that cost-effective full-range designs are quite achievable. Over-drive a planar magnetic and all you do is flap the diaphragm against the magnets. The speaker tells you to back off long before there's any chance of damage. In fact, the biggest single problem with a full-range planar-magnetic design is its sheer size and visual bulk. *

Wind events forward fifteen years to the present day and Magneplanar are still happily supplying product to the US market. However, despite technological development at the top-end of their product line, the entry-level designs are still recognisably the same as they were all those years ago. Unfortunately, so is the distribution arrangement, a fact which makes the range unviable to distribute in this country. Walrus Systems offer the MG1.6 (\$1700) and smaller MG12 (\$1200) models, but only as a dealer on behalf of the European distributor. Onward distribution within the UK would make the pricing totally unrealistic.

However, there is an alternative for those interested in planar-magnetic technology – the Eminent Technology LFT VIII loudspeaker system. Although I'd read a lot about and always been intrigued by the various ET LFT designs, products of the same fertile imagination that created the outstanding Eminent Technology tonearm, I had never heard them until I chanced across them at the 2004 CES. As impressed as I was by ▶

* Magneplanar resorted to a clever three-panel folding screen design for its Tympani IV flagship model, with a ribbon tweeter and planar-magnetic mid-range combination on one section and a planar-magnetic woofer on each of the others. Ironically, more often than not, owners ended up separating the high and mid-frequency panel from the bass-units, allowing them to optimise the position for each, but in the process completely destroying the subtle visual disguise.

▶ the sound, I was equally bowled over by the value for money, something that's always been an Eminent trait. Add in what looked like some seriously sensible responses to the inherent weaknesses of earlier planar-magnetic approaches and you've got one serious product; serious enough for RP to import a pair for his own use, and serious enough to warrant a review.

Okay, let's start with the drive-units. Designer Bruce Thigpen recognised many years ago that the single-sided magnetic structure of early Magneplanar designs was, if not a serious weakness then at least an opportunity for significant advance. With that in mind he set out to develop a viable, push-pull planar-magnetic driver, or Linear Field Transducer; the fact that the model under review is the LFT VIII should give you some idea of just how convoluted that process has been. The end result, as reviewed here, first appeared in around 1992, and apart from three, small and retro-fitable upgrades, has remained the same ever since. The panel is essentially constructed from the metal plates that support the magnetic assemblies for the drivers, with extension plates fitted to the top and bottom of the shorter, HF driver in order to match the length of the midrange unit. These are braced up each side by a right-angle section that in turn supports the wooden trim.

Visually, the appearance is dominated by the long strips of the permanent magnets, and the cross braces that clamp them in place. The layout, of course, is the same, front and back. Between the magnetic arrays are suspended the Mylar diaphragms,

carrying etched voice coils created in the same fashion as tracks on a printed circuit board. The end result is light-weight yet robust, whilst also allowing closely spaced, extremely uniform and precisely positioned tracks.

By positioning the magnets in steel channels, their individual fields have been further focussed increasing both the strength and linearity of the field that encompasses the diaphragm. The end result is that, regardless of excursion, the diaphragm always remains within

the optimum magnetic field, resulting in far greater linearity as well as significantly greater dynamic range. The skeletal Magnetic structure also means that Eminent can dispense with the perforated sheet that is usually employed to support the magnets in such designs. That means a lot less material between the diaphragm and the listener (the reason why a lot of people preferred the sound of Maggies played "backwards"). The channels and cross-bracing also create a more rigid, composite structure, less prone to the single, dominant resonance of a uniform sheet assembly.

By now, anybody who has looked at the pictures that go with this review will have worked out that this is a hybrid loudspeaker. The right-angled bracing extends down beyond the depth of the open baffle and is used to fix it securely to the bass cabinet. Of course, the mating of a moving-coil bass driver to a dipolar mid and treble panel is the potential Achilles' heel in any such design – witness the number of electrostatic hybrids out there compared to the minuscule proportion that actually achieve a seamless join between their disparate driver types. However, this is a planar-magnetic hybrid and as such it's a cat of quite a different colour. Many of the problems associated with hybrid electrostatics are a direct result of the vanishingly low mass of their diaphragms, a characteristic that at once affords unlimited speed coupled to distinctly limited bandwidth and power

handling, at least if you want to keep the dimensions manageable. Thus, the matching woofer needs to be quick, it needs to reach a reasonable way up towards the mid-band and at the same time deliver good bass extension, a combination which, if not impossible to achieve is pretty much on a par with unearthing the speaker designers' holy grail – and about as likely.



► Compare that to the equivalent situation in the case of a planar magnetic. The midrange panel has a much thicker (although still lightweight) diaphragm material, which combines with the mass of the voice coil etched onto its surface to create a driver that, whilst quicker than a moving-coil, doesn't offer (suffer?) the same dramatic disparity in speed you find with an electrostatic. What's more, the greater excursion and power handling available mean that, for a given panel size you can get more low-frequency extension. Thus, the moving-coil bass driver doesn't have to reach nearly as far up the range, or work so hard to keep up with the mid-band – an altogether easier engineering problem to solve.


Of course, bass alignment can make or break any speaker, let alone a hybrid. The very low 180Hz cross-over point allowed by the LFT midrange driver means that spurious mid-bass output needs to be avoided at all costs. For this reason, Thigpen rejected all the available, off the shelf options, opting instead to purpose build a specific driver. He ended up with an 8" unit, driven by a massive magnet assembly. A heavy, coated and felted paper cone delivered

excellent self damping and a natural mechanical roll-off below 1kHz. Combined with a compliant surround, long throw motor and a compact sealed box this delivered the necessary low Q for the excellent transient response. The good mechanical characteristics meant that a 1st order cross-over could be employed, further helping the blend with the lower-mid. The cabinet itself is extremely rigid.

bi-amping. These are quite the best sounding binding posts out there, and are a real treat on a speaker at this price. Spade connections allow you to alter the tweeter level in 3dB steps above or below the mid-point. The speaker sits on two square section, solid steel rods, pierced front and back by small but not too pointed spikes to allow levelling. This last aspect is about the only physical point I'd criticise. Something much more substantial would certainly pay dividends, and sure enough,

when I asked Bruce Thigpen about this he confirmed that Sound Anchors do offer an after-market stand for the LFT VIII at a cost of \$200 which he happily endorses. And speaking of price, what will the LFTs have cost you? US retail is \$1500 a pair, which makes this a lot of speaker for your money in any currency! But before you get too excited, remember that importing a pair to the UK will add shipping (and they're heavy), duty and 17.5% VAT to the price.

So once you've assembled the speakers, following the excellent instructions, what have you got? A pair of tall, slim panels, five feet high and a little over a foot wide – and surprisingly heavy. The sloping back on the bass cabinet makes it visually quite unobtrusive, while grilles are supplied for front and back. The wood trim is available in oak, black oak or walnut. Impedance is a pretty flat 8 Ohms but efficiency is well down at 84dB. Mind you, you can add about 3dB to that because of the dipolar output but it does raise the first big issue when it comes to matching these speakers to the driving amps. You are going to need power. Even better, you are going to want to bi-amp the LFT VIIIs: Ironically, this doesn't necessarily have to be expensive as in this case, quantity actually comes before quality. I used a single RADIA with some success, but switching to four channels of



Despite the sloping rear and small panel sizes, a further five internal braces help control resonant modes. This rigidity, combined with the sealed box loading makes for an extremely linear and extended bass response, essential when you receive the additional bass reinforcement that comes from placing the woofer so close to the floor. The end result is a -4dB point at 25Hz, which is impressive in any company.

It's nice to see too, that no corners have been cut on the ancillaries. Two sets of the superb, solid-copper Edison Price Music Posts allow bi-wiring or

► Bryston 9B SST really woke things up, which rather underlines the point.

Set-up, beyond the question of matching amplification, is a case of painstaking adjustment. The hybrid design with its moving-coil woofer means that you don't need to worry about comb filter effects caused by rear radiation. On the other hand, the depth of the bass and the proximity of the bass driver to the floor means that even tiny movements can create big differences in the sound balance. But, before you do anything just check that the retaining screws on each woofer are tight. Once you've done that, set the tweeters to minimum output and make sure that they're on the inner edges of the speakers. Then, starting from the positions where a free space speaker would normally stand, move the LFTs forwards and backwards (with the spikes wound up) about half a centimetre at a time, until you get the best bass balance. Now do the same thing, moving first one and then the other sideways in both directions. It's time consuming but boy is it worthwhile. Finally, once the bass is working and well integrated, you can adjust toe-in for correct imaging. I used the invaluable LEDR test tones for this, although as far as I'm aware they are currently unavailable. If you don't have or can't borrow them, use a familiar recording or one of the other spatial tests from a test disc. Finally, check the speakers are absolutely vertical, and then using a range of familiar material, try swapping the tweeter level connections to check for HF energy levels (I settled on the mid setting but more on that later). I also tried

removing the top strip of the wood trim, a simple case of undoing a pair of screws. Sure enough, it resulted in more air and space and music that breathed a little easier. Simple and reversible, it's well worth trying. The grilles should also go, at least for listening – while speaking personally I actually prefer the look

then that's because it is - that's the price you pay with any dipolar speaker. But all that care and attention pays dividends when it comes to finally settling down to listen. That's when you start to hear why people get so excited by dipoles: But first, let's tackle the question of bass integration. The numbers don't lie in this instance, and the LFTs go very deep, and with real power when properly driven. With any hybrid there's an almost irresistible urge to reach for something

with plenty of bass to see just how easy it is to trip it up. Well, I'm only human after all, and the Slatkin/St. Louis *Pictures At an Exhibition* (MFSL UDSACD 4004) beckoned enticingly from a nearby stack of discs. But there was no

cause for concern. The Eminents responded with bass that was not just powerful but full of pitch, texture and timbral information, easily separating the organ from the lower registers of the grumbling double basses. There was no discernable shift as the speaker crossed-over to its midrange panels, either in character or substance, and at the price this has to be the most impressive bottom end I've heard – indeed, impressive at any price.

It's impossible to underestimate the importance of those low frequencies to the way this speaker presents recordings. Out of the rock solid foundation they provide grows the tremendous presence and stability the LFTs bring to music. Whether it's the heartfelt intimacy of Dave Alvin's 'California Snow' (MFSL UDSACD 2007) or the grungy textures of Aimee Mann's 'Lost In Space' (MFSL 1-278) the voice is solid and uncannily natural, the instruments substantial and locked in space. The multiple guitars on 'California Snow' are beautifully separated, both in tone and space, while the textural treatment of the



of the speaker without them: the great British public may feel free to disagree. Finally, spend some time getting the speakers absolutely vertical – it's even more important with these than most others and you'll hear the difference in both the tonal balance and soundstage coherence. If that all sounds pretty involved

A Brief History Of Panels

The earliest, and simplest planar drivers were ribbon designs. These simply suspend a metal film in a magnetic field and pass the signal down it. Excellent in many ways, the problem with ribbon drivers is that it is almost impossible for them to produce low-frequencies. To do so the space between the magnets becomes so wide that there is little or no field at its centre. The answer is to place the magnets behind the diaphragm (as in the Apogee "ribbon" designs); however, once you do this, the driver becomes a planar-magnetic. In a planar magnetic driver, a "voice-coil" or grid is spread across the surface of a tensioned diaphragm. This is then placed in front of a stationary magnetic array. By passing the signal through the grid, the diaphragm to which it is attached is pulled back and forwards relative to the magnets and thus produces sound. The problem with this design is that with the driver

at maximum excursion, which is exactly when you need maximum control, the magnetic field is at its weakest, resulting in poor linearity. Electrostatic designs dispense with magnetic in favour of electrical attraction. They employ a thin, conductive diaphragm to which is applied a very high bias voltage. Grids on either side of the diaphragm are connected, via a transformer to the outputs of the amplifier. This transformer applies a very high positive voltage to one grid and an equally high negative voltage to the other, but the polarity will be altered by the amplifier's AC output signal, thus pulling the diaphragm backwards and forwards with the music signal. The advantage of such an approach lies in the very light diaphragm and push-pull operation which yield excellent transient response. However, excursion tends to be limited while the fragility of the diaphragm limits power handling and bandwidth. Finally, not everybody likes the idea of an extra transformer in the signal path – although it does help explain

why OTL amps and electrostatics tend to work so well together!

The LFT drivers developed by Eminent Technology are push-pull planar-magnetic designs. I've discussed the constructional benefits in the main text. The operating principle is of course identical to a single-ended planar-magnetic, but the topology is very different. (Clearly now, the diaphragm is suspended in a uniform magnetic field which improves linearity and dynamic range compared to a single-ended layout. The magnetic construction, by dispensing with perforated metal sheet places less between you and the diaphragm as well as increasing the power of the magnetic field and the maximum allowable excursion. It is this structure that separates the LFT drivers from other panel designs (although I believe that Magneplanar might employ a push-pull topology on their current flagship, the MG20).

► opening riff of 'Lost In Space' hovers behind the vocal, ephemeral until the slashing bite of the guitar line that climbs into the chorus. It's an impressive performance that makes for engaging listening, but don't go thinking it's all about brute force. Play the 'Bridal Ballad' from *The Merchant Of Venice OST* and you'll hear Hayley Westenra's voice soar with effortless grace in a huge acoustic space. It's delicate and precise, but those qualities come from her superb control. There's steel and power behind the shimmer and these speakers leave you in no doubt that the voice, wondrous though it is, comes from a living, breathing human being. Ironic really, given that this is exactly the sort of music that one would expect to excel on an electrostatic. Yet the Eminent move you that much closer – and make it that much more rewarding.

With such excellent low frequencies and separation, it should come as no surprise that the LFTs can establish a convincing soundstage when it's appropriate. Indeed, even

studio recordings exist in a space beyond the plane of the speakers, with no tendency for instruments to clump around the panels or emanate directly from them. Play something with a truly coherent soundstage, like the afore-mentioned Mussorgsky, or any number of RCA or Decca LPs and you'll be rewarded with a palpable acoustic space, peopled with carefully spread instruments. Even the over-voicing of the solo instrument on the Piatigorsky Dvorak *Cello Concerto* is somehow diminished and enclosed by the coherent sonic stage. The stage itself tends to be set a little higher than I'm used to but that's quickly adjusted to. Perspective is slightly distant, although not quite mid-hall, but this speaker should never ever sound forward.

Which brings us to one of its foibles. Played quietly, you'll notice that the LFTs allow music to flow smoothly and effortlessly, breathing easily with the natural ebb and flow. But play something immediate and full of micro-dynamic detail like the

Harmonia Mundi *La Folia* and you'll find the plucked strings and myriad percussion sound rounded and lacking in jump. That is until you advance the volume. Suddenly the soundstage snaps into focus, the dynamics come to life and the cloudiness that has seeped into the stage is swept away by newfound transparency. It's the same with voices, especially the Dave Alvin, but for each recording you'll find that there's a precise level that suits and brings the music to life. This is where you have to avoid temptation. Increase the tweeter level a notch and you'll gain much the same sense of increased air, transparency, focus and musical snap – at least at lower levels. Advance the volume even a little and you'll realise just how grievously this upsets the natural tonal balance of the speaker. Suddenly voices are harsh and congealed, strings robbed of their natural overtones. Resist at all costs as you'll be selling the speaker, and system, well short.

Part of this lies in the choice of matching amps. My brief flirtation ►

▶ with the Tom Evans Linear A demonstrated just how natural and intimate a voice or solo instrument could sound – if you were prepared to accept the complete collapse of the acoustic space. So, fast and powerful is the order of the day, which is where quality will start to repay the investment. I reckon RP's chosen solution of four up-rated Alecto mono-blocks is probably hard to beat for sensible money, and that gives you an idea of what you are after. Either way, with power comes the fun whilst quality will add resolution and dynamic discrimination. I'm still trying to come up with the ideal, affordable amps to drive these speakers and they're out there somewhere. If I find them I'll let you know... but when I do I reckon it'll create one giant killer of a system.

The Eminent Technology LFT VIII offers a stunning balance of virtues. Wide bandwidth, convincingly natural and with effortless instrumental separation it is capable of astonishing

results given its modest price, worthy of and growing with the best ancillaries. At the same time, a forgiving balance means that lesser electronics are not embarrassed and recordings are never less than musically engaging. As a means of enjoying recorded music in the home they are, quite simply, excellent, finally delivering on the affordable performance so long promised by planar-magnetic technology. And if they don't match electrostatic levels of resolution and transparency, the substance and believability they deliver instead more than make up for the loss. Meanwhile, the scale, staging and absence of boxy colouration are all present and correct in a design that, properly set-up and matched, may not remove itself from the signal path, but does a damn fine job of ensuring that you forget it's there. Turn out the lights, turn up the volume and lose yourself in your record collection. All we need now is a UK importer... ▶+

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

| | |
|--------------------|--|
| Type: | Push-pull, planar-magnetic hybrid loudspeaker |
| Drive Units: | 1x Eminent Technology Linear Field Transducer HF 1x Eminent Technology Linear Field Transducer MF 1x 8" felted and coated paper coned LF |
| Cross-over Points: | 180Hz and 10kHz |
| Efficiency: | 84dB |
| Impedance: | 8 Ohms |
| Bandwidth: | 25Hz – 20kHz ±4dB |
| Recommended | |
| Amplifier Power: | 75 Watts minimum |
| Dimensions: | 330 x 1525 x 432mm |
| Weight: | 41 kg ea. |
| Finishes: | Walnut, black or natural oak |
| Price: | \$1500US (see text) |

Manufacturer:

Eminent Technology Inc.
Florida, USA
Tel. (001) 850 575 5655
E-mail. info@eminent-tech.com
Net. www.eminent-tech.com

"Panel Beaters"

Living with the Eminent Technology LFT VIIIs

by Reuben Parry

I've owned the pair of Eminent Technology LFT VIII hybrid loudspeakers used for the review since April last year and in that time (spent listening to both analogue and digital formats) I've learnt an awful lot about their qualities as well as coming to love what they do with music. On paper the panel dimensions might lead you to the conclusion that these speakers would be an inappropriate choice for an average sized home. Think again. My listening room is a modest 14x12 feet, yet after careful positioning fine results

have been achieved. Of course when sat directly facing the LFT VIIIs they are pretty damned imposing, but in reality the overall speaker footprint is smaller than many floorstanding enclosures, while the slender panel is also less visually bulky. However, I would hasten to add that these speakers are seriously heavy, both because of the substantial bass unit and all that metalwork employed in the panel construction. So you need to get these babies as near to the optimum listening position as possible before assembly – or risk that

double hernia. The accompanying instruction manual offers a few useful suggestions on the subject of location and this serves as a good starting point, but as always the placement depends a lot on the size, shape and furnishing of each individual room. This booklet also provides the common sense and easy to follow assembly instructions. Attaching the panels to the separate bass units is perfectly manageable on your own if you are prepared to religiously follow some simple logic. Aside from the weight and physical presence, the other shock ▶

to the system in an age when beautiful wood veneer finishes reign, is the blue collar industrial aesthetic. Personally, I approve of this severe looking appearance – one that is dominated by a raft of dull metal and an austere oak trim. Visually there are no distractions, these speakers just roll up their sleeves, knuckle down and get on with the business of reproducing music.

There is of course a certain knack to getting the best out of them. In a sentence, “feed them as much quality power as they can possibly take”. I started out with a single pair of Trichord Alecto 130 watt mono-block amplifiers. This was nowhere near enough juice. Doubling the number of mono-blocks made huge differences to the musical presentation. There were obvious improvements right across the board; finely captured midrange strings had far better definition and there was a palpable sense of openness and space surrounding the vocals. Undoubtedly, bi-amping the LFT VIIIIs is an essential step. With four mono-blocks in play I began to appreciate just how well integrated the bass units and the panels really are. This could well be the speaker's greatest asset. You have all the wonderful transparency you might expect from an electrostatic, but down in the engine room you get real power and continuity too. The bass is rhythmically accurate and it can and does rock. Suddenly you understand that this is a panel with balls and not one limited to reproducing smaller scale vocal, chamber and jazz pieces. The next step was a relatively inexpensive amplifier upgrade. Each Alecto mono-block was sent back to Trichord for modification and upgraded to 250 watts. Now for a word of warning: the LFT VIIIIs are only rated to 200 watts, so I am taking a small liberty here by running them with a higher than recommended output. That said I was more than pleased with the outcome.

While the LFT VIIIIs will never have the “depth charge deep” and “tight as a drum” bass extension offered by over-damped cabinet speakers, what they do deliver is a really crisp, resonant and believable sound. So when the drum is repeatedly struck and the blows roll throughout the soundstage in say the Strauss *Thunder and Lightning Polka*, (Fritz Reiner CSO LSC-2500 RCA/Classic Records) they do give us a solid dynamic snap that is very convincing – convincing because of the weight, authority, sense of scale and power contained within these musical images. When these attributes are successfully integrated, dovetailed or tied to a truly spacious and exceptionally sweet midrange (that also has the ability to gloriously open out the top end) then you have a beguiling package. When returning to an album like *Diamonds & Rust* (Universal A&M 393 233-1) and that beautifully poetic title track, you will appreciate where these

speakers excel – which is of course in the reproduction of the exquisite Joan Baez vocals and shimmering acoustic guitar. They soar with the high notes that radiate throughout the acoustic and then fall as her lyrics become laden with disappointment. From the lower mid on up, these speakers manage to combine warmth, presence and attack. But just as importantly, here and on songs such as ‘Simple Twist Of Fate’, ‘Blue Sky’ and ‘Fountain Of Sorrow’ these qualities extend downwards, with the

Jim Gordon drums, Larry Knechtel piano and that Wilton Felder/Reinie Press bass playing providing a rhythmically solid backbone – an unexpected, steely stratum that drives the music forward.

Bruce Thigpen has worked the tumblers and unpicked a very difficult lock without ever forcing the mechanism. The key to it is in the integration of apparently disparate elements, the woofer working hand in hand with the panels delivering midrange and treble. Purists may bridle at the mixed technological marriage but the results cannot be denied. The earth is no longer flat; it has a definite curvature and the LFT VIIIIs continue to chart a remarkably true course around it. I hope my enthusiasm for this product is infectious enough to prompt a UK distribution deal. This is such a lot of speaker for the money that nearly a year on they still have the ability to leave me open mouthed. Next step in this particular odyssey is a pair of heavy duty bespoke stands – all for the princely sum of \$220 plus shipping from Sound Anchor (info@soundanchors.com). I anticipate distinct improvements in bass resolution, so watch this space. ▶



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The Triangle Solis Loudspeaker

by Paul Messenger

Triangle is a French loudspeaker brand, so if you want to show off your knowledge of that language you should pronounce it Tree-ngle. It's a relatively young brand, founded in the early 1980s, yet has grown steadily to take the number two slot (behind Focal) amongst France's hi-fi speaker makers. Better still, it has done so by taking a totally distinct and individualistic approach to speaker design.

That of course is both a strength and a weakness. Triangle speakers tend to polarise opinions – there's nothing bland about the sounds that they make, and people tend to either love 'em or loathe 'em. To my knowledge, no other major brand takes on board such unconventional techniques and choices – and gets away with it. This rather extreme position is arguably also its biggest strength. A market leader is more or less obliged to make products that are as acceptable as possible to the broadest possible majority, whereas the smaller operator can find success by developing products with a particularly strong appeal to a minority of listeners.

And when it comes to Triangle, I'm happy to admit I'm part of that minority, having been seduced by something called a Zephyr II about six years ago. Subsequently I've tried something like a dozen other models in the range, from the cheapo Cometes

stand-mounts up to the monstrous high-end, three-box Magellan. All, at whatever price and size, show a single-mindedness of approach that leads to a certain consistency in sound quality, delivering notably



superior dynamics and timing, but at some cost in terms of smoothness and colorations.

Even by Triangle standards, this Solis is a most unusual design, if only because there are precious few other examples of three-way stand-mounts on the market, and in order to achieve such a configuration, the

Solis' bass driver and its associated ports are mounted on the back panel.

At £1,550/pair, the Solis is the smallest of five stereo models in the Stratos range, and the only stand-mount. A matching stand is available for an extra £375, but for the purposes of this review I used my regular Kudos S100s. The Stratos models sit in the middle of Triangle's ranges, sandwiched between the least costly (though hardly 'budget') Espace series, and the expensive Magellans with their attractively curved sides, and the prime intention is to provide a healthy dose of Magellan technology and performance at a much lower price.

There are no two-ways amongst the five stereo Stratos models, for the very logical reason that Triangle has its own very distinctive midrange driver, which uses a flared paper cone within a relatively stiff doped-fabric 'double-S' surround. It's the sort of approach that was common enough decades ago, and is still often found amongst PA drive units, the intention being to terminate midrange frequencies without the hysteretic energy storage that rubber surrounds often exhibit. Such a surround is ill suited to the relatively large fore'n'aft excursion required of bass units, so Triangle prefers to use an additional bass driver



▶ wherever possible. (The exception is the £500/pair Cometes ES, which requires the midrange driver to undertake bass duties, and is therefore somewhat bass-light, needing close-to-wall siting for best results.)

Said bass driver also has a flared paper cone, this time terminated in a 'single-S' rubber surround. Both drivers have magnificently hefty cast alloy frames and generous magnets,

because the horn mouth much more closely matches the size of the midrange diaphragm than a small dome, the integration of the two through the crossover region is improved.

From the front, the Solis' 220 x 440mm front panel and two drivers looks much like any other large stand-mount. The fact that it's a three-way is only really revealed when viewed from

so the net effect is perhaps a little austere, though handsome enough nonetheless.

The front- and rear-mounted cone drivers are separated by a vertical partition situated somewhat forward of the centre line, so that the bass driver operates into a port-loaded volume of around 17 litres, while the sealed midrange enclosure is roughly half that volume. Furthermore, the partition ensures that the whole enclosure is exceptionally stiff and

rigid. Top quality ingredients are used throughout, including an impressive custom alloy terminal block with twin terminal pairs. While this speaker is large by stand-mount standards, it's still smaller than most floor-standers, so serious bass weight and extension is hardly to be expected. My in-room measurements showed some lack of bass output compared to the midband with the speakers mounted well clear of walls, indicating that some wall reinforcement

could be welcome. After further experimentation, best results were found with the speakers 40-45cm out from the wall, which gave a pretty decent overall tonal balance, though not without several distinctive characteristics that were also clearly audible. The bass end delivers pretty good in-room output from 40Hz on up, but there's a clear lack of output in the upper bass (or lower mid) octave, 120 – 240Hz. Further up the band there's a rather obvious peak at around 1.6kHz, and while most of the treble is quite well ordered, output rises quite sharply above 12kHz to a significant peak at



and are firmly fixed by six socket-head bolts. Another unusual – nay controversial – feature is a horn-loaded tweeter, based on a titanium dome diaphragm. Adding the cast alloy horn apparently increases the sensitivity by 7dB, which translates directly into extra headroom. It also serves to control and restrict the directivity, and time-align mid and treble voice coils. And an interesting third reason I was given is that,

the rear, where the bass driver itself is visible, or the side, where its unusually large 400mm depth is something of a giveaway. It's also one of the better reasons, I daresay, for considering the matching stands, though I had no problems using the Kudos provided the speakers were placed so that the pillar was beneath the mid-point.

The cast alloy horn, driver frames and terminal block all look purposeful and shiny, and the box is finished in real wood veneer (either mahogany or 'beech amber'), but the French seem to favour rather plain veneers with little visible grain,

► 18kHz (which might or not be audible depending on the age of your ears!).

The Solis just about manages its rated 91dB sensitivity, through the upper midband at least, and the load it presents to the amplifier doesn't look too problematic. The ports are tuned to 35Hz, and the impedance stays around 6 ohms across most of the band, though dipping to 4 ohms around 100Hz and falling to 3 ohms at 17kHz.



Auditioning immediately brought to mind previous Triangle speakers. Transients are clean, clear, punchy and thoroughly convincing – few rivals can match this brand's sheer 'start/stop-ability', and that factor alone sets this Solis ahead of the pack when it comes to musical communication skills. Many speakers will tell you what notes are being played, but few are as good as this one at conveying the much more subtle information about how the

notes were being played.


Because of the way a horn operates (a little like the way a lens works with light), the top end follows a fairly tight beam, so you really do have to sit down to enjoy this speaker. Stand up and the top end drops away significantly, along with much of the image precision; sit down and everything snaps into focus, delivering a sharp image with vivid coherence.

The bottom end might not delve the ultimate depths, but it more than punches its weight, with the crisp clarity that is the usual bonus of stand-mounts compared to floorstanders.

The Solis packs a generous and entirely persuasive thump, and does so without adding any unwanted heaviness or thickening to the sound. Where it does lose out, however, is in a lack of warmth and tonal richness. The sound is just a little too cool overall, and the bottom end sounds just a shade detached from the rest – tonally, not temporally, because time-coherence remains excellent.

Large acoustic instruments like pianos, cellos and basses lack some body and their full resonant richness, while the mild forwardness in the upper mid-band adds to the cool character and emphasises the fine detail. Voices are notably clear and speech is very articulate, even when playing the system at very low levels, though there's also a fair measure of pinched and nasal coloration that some will certainly find distracting.

This is unquestionably an idiosyncratic loudspeaker. It has

great strengths in terms of fine dynamic expression, tight timing, superior coherence and image focus, but these must be set against some lack of warmth and smoothness, plus a significant mid-band coloration. The three-way configuration helps it pack much more punch than conventional stand-mounts, though it still benefits from the small box signature of the type. 

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

| | |
|---------------------|--|
| Type: | 3-way, vented and standmounted loudspeaker |
| Drive Units: | 1x horn-loaded titanium dome tweeter 1x paper-cone midrange 1x paper-cone bass |
| Sensitivity: | 91 dB |
| Nominal Impedance: | 8 Ohms |
| Minimum Impedance: | 3 Ohms |
| Crossover points: | 150Hz, 4kHz |
| Power handling: | 100/150W |
| Dimensions (WxHxD): | 220x440x400mm |
| Weight: | 18kg each |
| Price per pair: | £1550 (matching stands £375) |

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The Zingali Prelude 2 Loudspeaker

by Roy Gregory

It's less than a year since I reviewed the splendid Vivid Audio B1 loudspeaker in these pages, and at the time I praised the brand for its originality in cleverly combining the aesthetic benefits of a floorstander with the acoustic advantages of a stand-mount. As Sod's Law dictates, as soon as you dub one thing as original, another thing comes along to prove you might have got it wrong. I've no idea whether Vivid or Zingali was the first to come up with the integral stand concept, but I'm very happy to find another brand, this time from Italy, pursuing the same good idea.

Like most overseas brands, Zingali has had rather sporadic representation here in Britain - so much so that I've encountered only one amongst the 900 or so speakers I've tried over the past fifteen years. That was in 1999, under a previous importer, and I should add that that Overtue 2S was memorable for at least two reasons, and in one respect unique. In a world where many models are distinguishable only by their maker's badge, Zingali offers a horn-based engineering solution it calls Omniray Technology that is uniquely its own, which is itself a good reason for carrying out this review.

The new importer LEARS International has another reason for bringing Zingali to Britain - "stunning looks". LEARS has declared war on ugly hi-fi, and Zingali's loudspeakers are amongst the first wave of shock troops. And I can only endorse LEARS' judgement: Zingali's Prelude 2 is indeed a gorgeous little loudspeaker, with an elegance that sets it well ahead of the pack. Such style and sheer class doesn't come cheap, but the £1,400/pair price-tag doesn't seem too excessive when the high quality ingredients are taken into account.

This is at heart a simple two-way,

based on a relatively conventional 170mm bass/mid driver loaded by a 15 litre enclosure and rear port, crossing over at a nominal 1.8kHz to an anything but conventional tweeter: a compression driver feeding through a generous 140mm diameter exponential horn that's beautifully crafted in wood. The dimensions of a horn determine its low frequency cut-off point, and this example is by no means large by horn standards. Zingali makes other much larger and more costly speakers, with horns as large as 380mm diameter, and these operate at a nominal crossover frequency as low as 900Hz. The benefit of operating the horn to a lower frequencies is simply that it moves the crossover out of the 2-3kHz presence region, where the ear is most sensitive, though the inevitable down side is to create something that's much bulkier and visually more intrusive.

Not everybody likes horns, though I reckon their dubious reputation is ill founded, probably as a result of bad experiences with dodgy FA rigs. A well designed horn can offer outstanding performance, as I discovered when I encountered the JBL K2 S9800 back in 2002 - horn-loaded above 800Hz and the finest speaker ever to grace my listening room. Whether this altogether more modest Zingali will excite similar enthusiasm is for me and the reader to discover as the review progresses, but there's no doubt in my mind that horns are capable of delivering their own

special kind of magic, provided that they're well executed and applied.

Horns do indeed do it differently from conventional direct-radiating drivers, and this has a number of important implications in the end result. A horn does for audio what a lens does for light - it focuses the sound into a relatively tight beam, and in so doing increases 'acoustic gain' (which effectively translates as an increase in sensitivity). Not only does this increase

the available headroom, it also means the tweeter doesn't have to work so hard for a given listening level. Perhaps the least obvious and most useful by product of the horn is that the air within the horn behaves as a single mass of molecules, that helps to damp the diaphragm of the tweeter directly, reducing unwanted spurious vibrations right across its surface. Because a horn restricts the sound output into a beam, this tends to reduce the amount of room-reflected sound in the final mix, which is ultimately a matter of taste. However, since Zingali uses an exponential horn with a much wider radiating angle than most (a claimed 140 degrees), this effect is minimised, and the dispersion discontinuity between bass/mid and tweeter is also reduced.

The construction is very clever. The wood veneered box is sandwiched between thick matt black MDF sections that form the front and back panels. These have elegantly post-formed edges, and are also extended down to the floor, where they're fixed to a substantial plinth to create the stand. Sockets here accommodate chunky 8mm spikes. While the horn mouth is flush with the front panel, the bass/mid driver is



▶ fitted to the inside edge of the 35mm thick front panel, firing through a flared orifice that more or less matches the shape and size of the horn mouth. The enclosure is port-loaded by another smaller orifice in the rear panel, sited just above the twin terminal pairs.

Measurement shows that the port is tuned to a relatively high 65Hz, so deep bass will not be on the agenda here, though with room assistance output was maintained down to around 40Hz under our conditions. The load is a relatively easy one from the amplifier's point of view, staying comfortably above 6 ohms across most of the band, and therefore rather easier than the specification suggests. However, the claim for 90dB sensitivity looks a little optimistic - 87dB is closer to the real world mark under my in-room far-field conditions. The tonal balance looks quite even through the broad bass region, and again across the treble, but the integration point between the two is not well handled, showing an obvious peak at 1kHz, followed by a sharp drop to a dip at 1.5kHz. Clearly there's room for improvement here, and the tweeter seems to be struggling to maintain sufficient output right down to the crossover point.

While that measured mid-band discontinuity looked rather alarming, it didn't seem to spoil the sound quality as much one might have expected. There is some mid-band coloration here, particularly noticeable with speech, but in other respects - especially in the remarkably delicate and subtle fine detailing - this is a thoroughly enjoyable and entertaining loud-speaker, fully vindicating its costly and elaborate tweeter.

'Letting Go', from Nitin Sawhney's excellent *Beyond Skin* album, opens with the



sound of rain, which sounded eerily realistic on the Prelude 2. And while the subsequent percussion and bass on this track is powerful, complex and deep, this speaker still managed to make a pretty good fist of supplying the rhythm with good timing and convincing power, even if it didn't plumb the full depths of weight and scale. The articulation of the scat style vocals sounded absolutely superb, while the tabla and similar percussion were beautifully taut, delicate and well differentiated. Images are beautifully focused and precise, and able to spread the soundstage well beyond the confines of the speakers themselves.

Massed orchestral strings are one of the trickier things to handle well, and here the Zingali again excelled, its ability to reproduce coherently the finest of details helping bring genuine texture to the soaring strings of Wagner's *Tannhauser Overture* (Karajan/BPO/EMI). At the same time, the tonal balance does rather favour the violins over the basses and cellos, and a little more all

round warmth would have been welcome.

The Prelude 2 does tend to lead with its top end, but that's understandable enough because the horn tweeter is quite delicious in its coherence, subtlety, focus and communication skills. The upper mid-band could be smoother and less coloured, and the broad mid-band a little stronger, but within the inevitable constraints of a compact two-way, this is much more than a gorgeous looking speaker - it's a very fine sonic and musical performer too.



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

| | |
|------------------------------|---|
| Type: | Two-way hybrid horn-loaded loudspeaker system with integral stand |
| Drive Units: | 1x 25mm compression HF with 150mm Omnidirectional horn 1x 170mm bass/midrange |
| Sensitivity: | Claimed 90dB; measured 87dB |
| Nominal Impedance: | Claimed 6 ohms; measured 8 ohms |
| Recommended Amplifier Power: | 10W - 100W |
| Crossover Frequency: | 1.8kHz |
| Dimensions (HxWxD): | 21x105x31 cm |
| Weight: | 18kg each |
| Finishes: | Cherry or walnut real wood veneer wrap with shaped black MDF front, back and plinth |
| Price: | £1,400/pair |

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The Nordost Brahma Mains Lead

by Roy Gregory

When I described Nordost's Thor mains distribution unit as "the final piece in the jigsaw" I was only partly right. Yes, it meant that it was finally possible to have a coherent, mono-filament cable loom from wall-socket to speaker terminals, but what it didn't do was close the yawning price chasm between the Vishnu power cord at \$425 and the Valhalla at £1700. Well, now Nordost have done something about that too, in the shape of the new Brahma power cord, priced at £900 for a two-meter IEC lead.

Aimed squarely at those folks who want something better than the Vishnu but who can't stretch the considerable cost distance to the flagship leads, the Brahma is a logical synthesis of the two products that flank it. The problem in any such exercise is selecting the bits you are going to include and the ones you are going to leave out. So, to put the Brahmas in context a brief recap on the construction of its brethren is essential.

The Vishnu consists of three, mono-filament conductors twisted into a conventional mains lead and terminated with a Wattgate 320 IEC plug and whatever wall plug is appropriate to the user's national grid. The External insulation is a

tough, transparent layer of THV, while the tubes that are extruded over the mono-filament spiralled conductors are Teflon. That thin filament of Teflon that winds around the silver-plated copper solid-core keeps the insulation spaced and creates a virtual air dielectric. It's the same technology that's used in the Valhalla and Valkyria signal and speaker cabling, but with much heavier conductors.

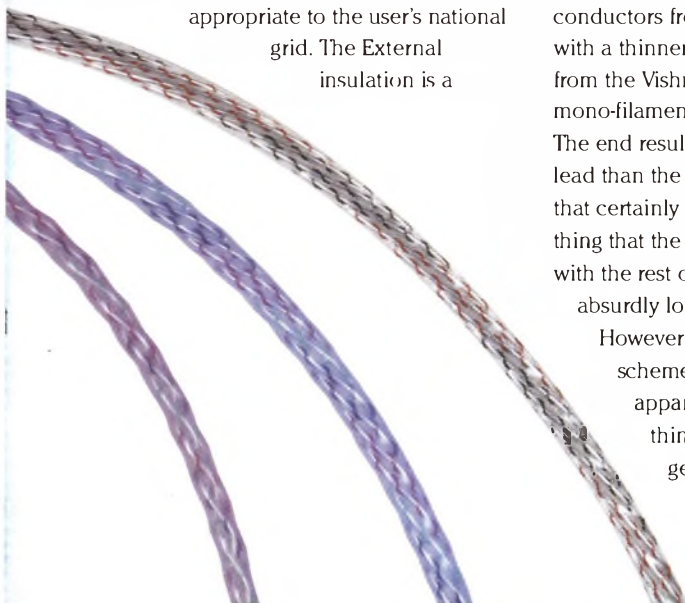
The Valhalla power cord is a far more complex beast, and in certain respects represents the first in a new generation of Nordost products. It uses seven, heavily silver-plated, 16 gauge copper solid-core conductors – three for live, three for neutral and the last for earth. It also uses higher grade connectors, but the real difference lies in its use of dual-filament construction. By twisting two, thinner filaments together before winding them around the conductor, an even lower level of physical contact is achieved, a costly and complex exercise but one that delivers a serious musical dividend if performance is anything to go by.

Enter then the Brahma, clad in an unfamiliar yet fetching translucent blue. It uses five of the heavier gauge conductors from the Valhalla, albeit with a thinner silver coating inherited from the Vishnu, along with the latter's mono-filament spiral and connectors. The end result is a far more substantial lead than the cheaper version, and one that certainly looks the part. The other thing that the Brahma has in common with the rest of the Nordost family is an absurdly long burn-in period.

However, its place in the overall scheme of things is pretty apparent even from new, and things, as they say, can only get better. I managed to get

three weeks of continuous use on the Brahmas before settling down to assess them in earnest, and even a cursory listen revealed the extent of their improvement over that time. As far as auditioning went, I used the Brahma leads, together with a Thor distribution unit in a variety of systems. However, when it came to closer comparisons I relied on a combination of the Metronome four-box CD player and Levinson 383 integrated amplifier, just to keep things manageable. The rest of the Cabling was Nordost Valhalla and the speakers were either Living Voice OBX-R2s or the B&W 805s. The other element was of course the Thor distribution unit, the foundation stone of the Nordost mains loom and the starting point as far as purchasing goes. Thus, anybody considering Brahmas should already have (or at least have considered) the Thor, which, whilst it might seem expensive, will make a far greater difference to the sound of the system overall than a couple of Brahma power cords. It's something that's readily demonstrable so if you don't believe me, factor it into your mains lead auditioning. It's also the approach assumed and intended by the manufacturer, so ignore it if not at your peril, then with considerable care.

Whilst I listened extensively to the Brahmas in isolation, for the purposes of comparison and in order to place them in the context of the other Nordost products, I compared them directly to the cheaper Vishnu and flagship Valhalla to see how effectively they bridge the gap. Most of the listening concerned their superiority (for it's abundantly clear) to the Vishnu. Substituting Brahmas for the cheaper cables brings an immediate improvement in dynamic range, ▶





▶ discrimination and definition. Playing the Reference Recordings disc of the Rachmaninoff *Symphonic Dances* (Eiji Oue conducting the Minnesota Orchestra RR-96CD) demonstrated the differences perfectly. Right from the opening violin notes the improved focus and spatial definition is obvious. The acoustic space is blacker, with a quieter background which makes the side and rear walls of that space much more apparent. The texture of the insistent notes is also more obvious, as is the sweep of the awakening orchestra as the opening bars pass across the strings, the punctuation of the percussion that much more emphatic. Starting from a quieter noise floor, the ramped dynamics that build into that opening crescendo (not to mention the even bigger one that follows) are more precisely delineated, more convincing in their substance and body.

All of which is nice to have, but the really important difference is the combined musical effect of those advances. The superior micro dynamics allow greater instrumental texture and character across the range, making for more colour and more contrast, but it's the greater drama that scores. Oue takes the opening at a fast tempo, one that sounds hurried and a little headlong with the Vishnu, robbing the music of structure and tension. The Brahma's greater control and easier instrumental distinction makes sense of the rapid tempo so that it becomes a musical decision rather than a nervous choice. With it comes the sense of

tension that is so crucial to the opening passage and that creates the contrast with the second, more pastoral one. Whilst I don't think Oue's approach enjoys the powerful, almost ponderous inevitability and shattering eventual impact that Johanos achieves with the Dallas, the Brahmas allow you to see where he's going with the lighter, fleeter touch employed. It's an important musical insight and one that if it doesn't entirely escape from the Vishnu, is certainly well buried.

The added colour and separation serves vocals equally well. Shawn Colvin's cover of Steve Earle's 'Someday' (Cover Girl Columbia 477240 2) takes on new attack and twang in its guitar lines, better separation, placement and identity in the percussion, but it's the greater presence, immediacy and internal subtlety that makes the voice more convincing and intimate, giving the song a new focus and core. Here's the small-town girl, secretly confessing her frustration and longing to escape from her humdrum existence. The Brahmas deliver that confessional hesitance just as they also deliver the triumphant escapism of the chorus. Once again

they simply make more musical sense, delivering more dynamic resolution and sheer information, but also binding it together into a coherent and legible whole. As impressive as the Vishnus are in the context of their price peers, the Brahmas more than justify the two-fold increase in cost, making a fundamental contribution to the musical message.

The next question, naturally enough, is how they compare to the Valhallas, and do they offer flagship performance on the cheap. Well, the differences are just as cut and dried – and the sad answer to your question is “no”. It's interesting that simply substituting a single Valhalla betwixt wall socket and Thor produces a pretty dramatic difference, a result that

underlines the fact that the Valhalla possesses qualities that are quite distinct from those of the Vishnu and Brahma. Listening to the more expensive lead, as above but more so when used throughout the system, brings a degree of natural colour and dimensionality to instruments and voices that renders them far more present and convincing. But the real kicker is the way that everything opens out temporally as well as spatially. Rhythms become unforced and much more expressive, everyone having more time and space within which to make their contribution. Suddenly the internal shape of musical strands and the chemistry between the instruments weaving them becomes totally clear. This new accessibility constitutes a transformation in the musical integrity of the system, and returning to the Brahmas is a sobering experience – albeit one that saves a colossal amount of money: over £3500 in this fairly straightforward system!

But don't get too depressed. If we return to what the Brahmas do, the impact they deliver over lesser cables is just as emphatic as the coup de ▶

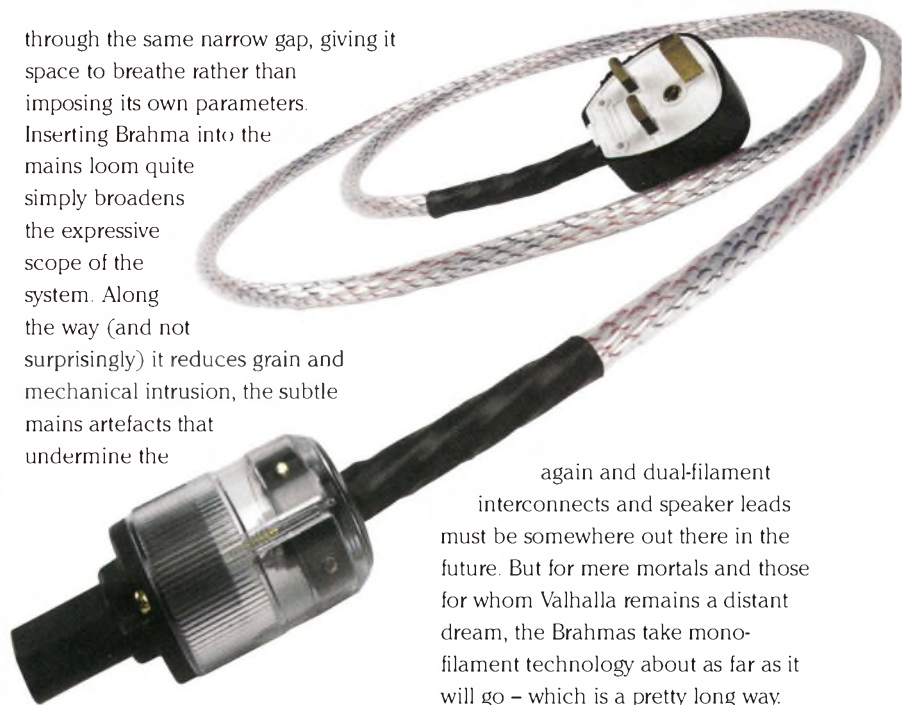
▷ grace administered by the Valhallas. High-frequency definition and resolution is a particular and dramatic example of their lack of grain and ability to focus energy. Just listen to the gentle cymbal strikes that accent the opening bars of 'Someday'; the strike and shimmering decay is astonishingly natural and beautifully defined despite the other, louder instruments hogging centre stage. This control of musical energy has always been the attribute that separates Nordost cabling from the competition. Getting the right amount of substance in the right place in the soundstage and at exactly the right time is what defines the shape of notes and the structure of the music. In this regard the Brahma power cord is better than anything short of the Valhalla, and in the same way that a single Valhalla will lift the performance of a Thor feeding Brahmas, so a single Brahma will elevate a loom of Vishnus. The hierarchy is clear, with genuine benefits delivered in terms of added bass weight, power and pitch definition, pace and placement of notes. These are the musical foundations on which the rest of the musical spectrum is built, a fact that will soon become abundantly clear if you start experimenting with these various cables. Understand that and the musical value of the Brahma also becomes clear, which in turn translates into its monetary value, which is exceptional. Whilst it's difficult to consider a £900 mains lead as a bargain, its performance and more importantly, the options it creates within the context of a Nordost mains loom as a whole, make it exactly that.

By delivering improved dynamic definition, resolution and transparency, the Brahma makes a real, musical contribution to the system, providing greater sense and legibility rather than simply more sparkle and fireworks. Of course, it does that too, but only when appropriate, opening the gate wide for the signal rather than simply forcing it

through the same narrow gap, giving it space to breathe rather than imposing its own parameters. Inserting Brahma into the mains loom quite simply broadens the expressive scope of the system. Along the way (and not surprisingly) it reduces grain and mechanical intrusion, the subtle mains artefacts that undermine the

illusion of real people and real music. Indeed, it fulfils its brief perfectly, significantly extending the attributes of the Vishnu whilst failing to erode the position of the Valhalla.

In fact, that sums it up nicely. Consider the Brahma as a natural progression onward and upward from the Vishnu, bridging the price gap to the Valhalla – if not entirely the qualitative one. The additional flexibility it brings to the range and the additional cost/performance options it opens up are welcome indeed. Unfortunately, Valhalla performance still needs Valhalla technology and the top of the range mains lead remains for me Nordost's most impressive single achievement in a short history littered with impressive, musically expressive and commercially successful products. With the arrival of the Brahma power cord, the performance gap becomes easier to live with while the price makes the savings an effective salve. I'd like to say that it really is the final piece in what is now a very sensible jigsaw – and in many ways it is. But once you let technology out of the box you can't un-invent it back inside



again and dual-filament interconnects and speaker leads must be somewhere out there in the future. But for mere mortals and those for whom Valhalla remains a distant dream, the Brahmas take mono-filament technology about as far as it will go – which is a pretty long way.

Yes, I realise that the cost of a Thor and a full suite of Brahmas is a frightening (yet scarily cost-effective) prospect, but the real value of this lead is as an upgrade for Vishnu users, delivering additional performance in bite sized chunks. Suddenly, the next rung on the ladder got a whole lot closer.



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

| | |
|------------------------|---------------------|
| Type: | IEC power cord |
| Mains Plug: | Most types to order |
| Prices – | |
| 2m Terminated: | £900 |
| Each Additional Meter: | £160 |

Manufacturer:

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The LINEAR 

LINEAR

The Tom Evans Audio Design Linear A Power Amplifier

by Roy Gregory

In days of yore, when the industry went through the rediscovery of the thermionic valve as applied to power amplification, many of us resorted to vintage designs as the only available and affordable option. Rather than the more fashionable alternative my weapon of choice was. However, my affections lay elsewhere, and unusually, in a rather more prosaic direction. At 10 Watts a side it wasn't as powerful as the Radford or the Quads, although, in practise it sounded more powerful and dynamic than either. It was also far cheaper and more readily available than the more fashionable options, and with a single pair of EL84s a side, re-tubing it was equally easy on the pocket. In fact, it's a regard that's never dimmed, and as I write this there's a Stereo 20 lurking on the shelf beside me.

The thing that really drew me to the Leak was the directness and solidity of its sound. It may not have been the most refined or detailed of the vintage amps, but boy did it have musical authority. Which is why it was no surprise when I discovered that Tom Evans was also a fan. He too loved the amp for its musical confidence and dynamic gusto, but for him, it was the price and availability that really scored. There was simply no way of getting more musical bang for your limited supply of bucks. The performance/value equation is, and always has been an enduring theme of Tom's designs; whilst they aren't exactly cheap, they have all, without exception, delivered sound quality that is normally associated with competitors at stratospheric price tags.

Of course, Tom is also best known for his work with phono and line stages. It was only relatively recently that his first power amp (at least since the Alecto,

designed with Graham Fowler of Trichord and for Michell) saw the light of day. Reviewed back in Issue 23, the Soul was mightily impressive – but mightily expensive with it. And if the performance was surprising, the hybrid, single-ended, vacuum tube circuit topology was an even bigger shock. In fact, just about everything about that amplifier was revolutionary, and it had looks to match. It's gorgeous modular chassis was constructed from aluminium extrusions and Perspex covers, a finned ziggurat enclosing the KT88 output tubes, a massive and practical horizontal grab handle allowing you to manoeuvre it into place. Like anything truly striking, not everyone was convinced, but for me, the looks were the logical end point of the Evans trajectory. The Soul too, was a collaborative effort, conceived in association with Anthony Matthews of Tube Distinctions, who also builds the amplifiers.

Now we have the oddly named Linear A, (there should soon be a more powerful and entirely different technology) Linear B. Compared to The Soul, it's more practical, more kid-friendly, much more thermally efficient, has nearly twice the power and costs half as much. The only casualty is the looks. I have to say that, for all the practical advantages of the new, fully enclosed and precision-engineered casework, it is, unfortunately, plug ugly. That's only a personal view and if past experience is anything to go by, most of you will disagree with me. However, The Soul's Fritz Lang aesthetics are the only thing I miss; the Linear A measures better, drives better and sounds better – as well as leaving an extra four grand in your bank account. Sounds good to me. And whilst I'm no fan of the casework I

have to admit that the standard of fit on what is a complex and inherently problematic construction is superb.

It's important to understand this amp's lineage if you're going to appreciate just what a huge breakthrough it represents. The Soul started as a project to realise the benefits of a valve output stage by providing it with the optimum working environment. The full story is covered back in Issue 23 so I won't repeat it here, but the basis is that very often the worst thing to drive one valve with is another valve, due to their inherently high output impedances. Thus, although the valve output stage and its associated transformer offered real benefits in terms of power delivery and immunity from back EMF; much of that benefit was compromised by parasitic problems in the driver circuitry. Use state of the art solid-state regulation and driver circuits and you should begin to really hear what the output stage could do – a premise that was proved in spectacular fashion by The Soul.

Now, the Linear A takes that concept a whole stage further. By employing novel, current feedback i/c technology the inherent distortion in the driver stage has been reduced by two orders of magnitude. Combine that with the latest Lithos regulation and you're getting just about the cleanest, quietest feed going. But the really interesting thing is the output stage. This was the brainchild of Peter Chappell who designed the output transformers for The Soul. Looking at the available output tubes he concluded that there was nothing that met the ideal electrical parameters. However, by running four EL84s in parallel he was able to create a composite tube with almost identical characteristics to the legendary Japanese No 10 valve, but ►

▶ with one big difference: the No 10 puts out around 2 Watts whereas the composite EL84, connected for ultra-linear output will produce 25 watts Class A. It will also have around a third the output impedance of the KT88 used in The Soul, giving it that much greater grip and control over the speaker. What's more, despite the ultra-linear connection, the amp measures as an almost perfect model triode, promising to deliver the often sought but rarely realised linearity benefits of triode topology without the practical limitations that so often accompany it. Okay, so 25 watts isn't exactly a power house and B&W owners might well be looking elsewhere, but there are plenty of speakers out there that will be perfectly at home in this kind of company. It's an interesting approach and having heard the results, one it's hard to argue with.

I've already touched on certain of the practical aspects of this unit, and there's no denying that it is certainly proof against little fingers while the thermal efficiency of the internal chimney arrangements mean that it can dispense with a fan. However, be aware of two considerations. The Linear A is wide, at nearly 19 inches, but more awkwardly, it's ten and a half inches tall, and that's without allowing it space to breathe. Make sure you can accommodate it before you get too excited! Other than that, it's practicality personified (even if it does look like an overgrown Liquorice Allsort). All connections and the on/off switch are on the rear panel, meaning that you'll leave it permanently powered – not a problem given the affordable tubes employed. You get an IEC mains input, phono sockets for signal inputs and a single set of basic but perfectly acceptable binding posts for each

channel. There are no separate output taps, the standard amps being configured to run five to ten Ohm loads. You can order the amp wound for lower impedance speakers, but the manufacturer suggests that the low impedance of the output stage means that it's inherently less affected by speaker loads anyway, so try the standard version before you assume that you need a special one. I'm not quite as optimistic as Tom (see my comments later) but see efficiency as the number one priority when it comes to speakers. The point here is that the output transformer has been wound to deliver



linear output across the five to ten Ohm band, something of a feat in itself. However, if your speaker dips below the five Ohm mark, then the alternative, low-impedance transformers will prove preferable and restore performance to the expected standard. They won't of course increase the output power, but the mere fact of delivering it more effectively achieves similar results in sonic terms. Dealers should be able to advise on the appropriate matching, while should you opt for a Linear A and then subsequently change your speakers, transformers can be swapped for a nominal charge.

I used the Linear A on the end of the full Tom Evans front-end of Groove Plus, Vibe and Pulse. Speakers were the Living

Voice OBX-R2s and briefly, the Eminent Technology LFT VIIIs (amongst others) – just to see how the amp coped with something really inefficient.

So, I hear you asking, how does it sound? Well, before we get to that there are a few things to consider. More so even than The Soul, the Linear A represents the final part in a Tom Evans jigsaw. So, what you hear isn't just the amplifier, it's a whole that's considerably greater than the sum of the Groove, Vibe, Pulse and Linear A parts. In that much it's the same as The Soul, but in another, and very important way, it's quite different. Consider for a moment the nature of a high-resolution audio system. It's not enough to simply pass information. The system has to be able to

retain the order and pattern of that information, or the substance of the message will be diluted. You'll still get the gist, but the subtle, textural nuances will be disturbed, displaced or removed all together. In fact, you could argue that total removal is preferable to displacement; at least it's not actively confusing. The Soul

was unquestionably high-resolution, but it lacked the absolute control over bass weight and body to deliver the essential foundation on which to build the musical performance. It relied instead on the organisational abilities and dynamic coherence of the Vibe and Groove to deliver those qualities. Which is why it never worked as well with other pre-amps. It stood aside from the music, just like a good amp should, passing the signal with minimal interference. What it didn't do was provide the sort of solid footing to really launch the music.

Well, the Linear A betters The Soul in two important respects. Firstly, it offers exactly the sort of musical foundation that anchors the performance, a quality that in combination with the TEAD driving electronics (no slouches in ▶

▶ this regard) delivers an exponential increase in authority and substance. It also means that you can use the Linear A with other pre-amplifiers, and whilst you might not get the maximum potential performance that way, this amp has capability to burn, so it still sounds pretty darn impressive.

However, returning to the amplifier's natural habitat reveals that this is a breakthrough system, an amplification set-up that successfully combines the agility and intimacy of a small amp with the authority, stability and substance that normally only comes with really serious power. As such, it represents a mirror image to the Hovland RADIA and conrad-johnson Premier 350 amplifiers in that they are also narrowing the performance void between large and small designs; they're just approaching the problem from the other end. The advantage that the Linear A holds is that, being of lower power, it is also inherently cheaper, making it more affordable – assuming of course that you have appropriate speakers.

Play something familiar and the first thing that hits you is the sheer physical substance and rock solid stability of the sound. This level of bass definition and transparency only normally comes from very large amps indeed. But here you have the speed and impact, the dynamic jump of a small amp. It's the solidity of the foundation that's delivering the quality, and that's a direct result of the amp's ability to grip and control the speakers.

What is happening here is that the stability and noise floor of the Linear A is acting almost like a seedbed for the incoming information, delivering perfect placement and a sure footing for each layer of detail. This goes beyond using information into the realms of actively making it useful. Such is the authority of the presentation that it's not just the amp that steps back behind the music – it takes the speakers too. It's almost as if the amp has got a tighter grip and stopped them misbehaving. The end

result is an independent sonic picture that is compact and immediate, solid and intimate, but above all, incredibly coherent.

Let's not get carried away and forget that we're talking 25 Watts Class A. That means speakers of 93dB or so, and there are few of those that go really deep in the bass. Anything below 40Hz is a real bonus, so when I'm talking about big amp stability and authority, clearly there are limits. You don't get a walk-in soundstage. The RADIA delivers more air and space, the Prem 350 a greater sense of volume and dimensionality – and don't start me on the subject of the Karan mono-blocks. Running the Linear A into the totally inappropriate Eminent Technology panels, I was surprised how loud it would go, but then volume and control are not the same things. Decent levels are one thing, but the severe curtailing of low-frequency extension, timing and coherence, coupled to a thinned mid-band that lacked presence was way too high a price to pay for the benefits on offer. Even the B&W 805S (88dB but a 3.7 Ohm minimum impedance) lacked the sort of joyous enthusiasm that it has with a serious 100 Watter doing the driving. So, you have been warned (and contrary to rumours currently circulating) if you want to hear what this amp can do then select the matching speakers with care. I'd consider 90dB and a nominal 8 Ohm load (unless you opt for low-impedance transformers) as the sensible minimum, and as I suggested before, 93dB would be preferable.

The Linear A is an exciting product and not just in the musical sense. Select your speakers with the proper care (a caveat that applies if you want to get the best out of almost any worthwhile amplifier) drive it from a Vibe and ideally a Groove too, and you'll have access to genuinely high-end performance at a fraction of past prices. This amplifier represents another huge step in the process

of making high-quality audio more affordable. No, it's not as universal as the likes of the RADIA, but at its best it's capable of a glorious, breathtakingly convincing musical delivery. Along with all the traditional strengths of a low-powered amplifier, you also get the resolution and noise performance of the other Tom Evans designs, coupled in turn to the stability, transparency and authority that normally only comes from hugely powerful and hugely expensive alternatives. Which brings me right back to where we started. Imagine a Leak Stereo 20 that's been through a time-warp (and received dramatically enhanced capabilities along the way) and you'll start to get the picture. The Linear A occupies the same market position, shares many of the same practical limitations yet delivers the same direct musical appeal as its spiritual ancestor. Less fashionable and less pretty than the various alternatives, it is also half their price, but get it working at its best and it's one of the biggest bargains out there in high-end audio land. My Stereo 20 is still going strong and showing current designs a thing or two. I suspect the Linear A is looking forward to a similar track record... ▶

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

| | |
|---------------------|----------------------|
| Type: | Hybrid power amp |
| Valve Complement: | 8x EL84 |
| Output Power: | 25 Watts |
| Input Impedance: | 15K Ohms |
| Input Sensitivity: | 700mV |
| Rated Load: | 5-10 Ohms (see text) |
| Dimensions (WxHxD): | 475x267x327mm |
| Weight: | 20Kg |
| Finish: | Black |
| Price: | £3990 |

Manufacturer:

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The Pathos Inpol² Integrated Amplifier

by Chris Thomas

At first glance the new Pathos Inpol² looks like a bit of a brute of an amplifier, with its sheer size and imposing glossy finish. But this is one of those cases where looks deceive absolutely, as this latest integrated offering from the Italian company turns out to be a rather modestly powered pussycat, concerned more with musical subtlety than sheer air movement. This is the first time that the Inpol circuitry (which carries a worldwide patent) has found itself in such a relatively low cost design. The other models that incorporate Inpol are the TT and the Inpower, both significantly more expensive and exotic designs. The principles of Inpol technology mean that this is a true hybrid design where the whole of the pre-amplifier section is pure valve design while the power amplification is provided by Mosfets which have a character of sound all to themselves. Unlike the excellent little Classic One that incorporates valves at the input stages only, the Inpol² utilises two ECC 82 tubes per channel at the pre stage and is fully balanced. Both sections have their own independent power supplies. Pathos of course have their own take on the separate power sections that drive both halves of the amplifier with the specific type of current that they require. The pre-amplifier section receives low current while the Mosfets are equipped with a switch mode supply to allow for low load impedance current delivery. Each independent supply can be seen glistening through the Inpol²'s gridded top. Power output is a modest 50 watts

per channel into 8 ohms but this, according to the requirements of Inpol is pure class A.

The notion of the valve/solid state hybrid is not new and is one of those design approaches that seems on the surface to make so much sense that you wonder why many more manufacturers are not doing it. Take a low level valve pre-amplifier stage, claimed to have better integrity when it come to preserving the harmonic content of the music and use it to drive a solid



state power section to bring better grip, speed and sheer controlled drive to the party. My only real question over this approach is one of rhythmic coherence and focus throughout the amplifier. It seems to me that valve amplifiers in general are slower than solid-state designs. This rather sweeping statement is based on listening experience rather than any solid scientific knowledge and I am told by those rather more familiar with top-end valve amplifiers than I that at the highest performance level, valve designs are in fact faster than their solid state counterparts. But my experience to date is the opposite in that I have never heard a valve amplifier that remotely approaches the speed of transient

response and recovery of something like a Spectral or Naim amplifier. And what has always concerned me about hybrid designs is that the slowest section, which will most likely be the valve part, will always ultimately dictate the overall speed of the amplifier and this internal struggle could compromise the performance when it comes to the sense of rhythmic cohesion and integrity throughout the bandwidth.

I wouldn't expect Pathos to agree with me of course and it certainly seems that the twin Inpol circuits that are employed in opposite phase to each other both remove the need for any negative feedback in the system and go some way toward eliminating this. The result is an amplifier that, while by no means the fastest and most overtly dynamic you will hear, certainly has tremendous top to bottom rhythmic resolution and 'shape' even under arduous conditions. But more of its musical nature later.

As I mentioned, the Inpol² is a physically big amplifier. Too big to site anywhere but on the top shelf of most racks It has five feet and Pathos have been clever enough to mount the four outer ones inward on its base which means that it will sit quite comfortably, though with a fair amount of overlap, atop a Naim Frain with its relatively small glass shelving. You'll need plenty of room around it for air circulation too as valves and class A operation means that it runs quite hot. It presents a very minimalist and ultra smooth face to the world but has plenty of input possibilities. Five single-

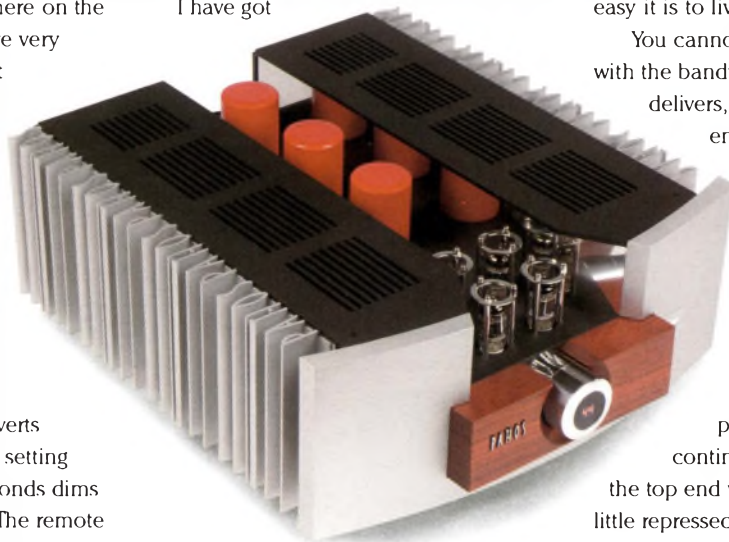


▶ ended RCA inputs and an additional tape-out socket are supplemented by a useful pair of XLR balanced inputs. Speaker connections can accommodate single or bi-wired leads. There is also a pair of RCA terminals that can be used to drive a sub-woofer.

Apart from the company name there is no writing anywhere on the fascia but the controls are very intuitive. A small discreet button is used to scroll through the inputs and the information is displayed on a compact but legible LCD readout in the centre of the large chromed volume control. Once the required input has been displayed the readout reverts back to the volume level setting and then, after a few seconds dims to a less obtrusive glow. The remote is excellent and replicates the input switching as well as the volume control. Everything about the visual style of the amplifier and the way it operates is ultra slick (check out the company name-shaped heat-sinks) which is why I personally find the relay noise it makes while changing input or especially level, disappointing. Internally the Inpol² uses the same volume control as the Logos. It is an optical device driving a set of relays connected to a network of laser-trimmed resistors and the result is that you can hear the loud clicking as the volume ramps up and down the relays. I have heard this sort of arrangement before of course but never quite as loudly and while this may not be quite such an issue during daytime level listening I found it really intrusive during late night sessions where the clacking of the relays could so easily break the mood. This is a personal thing obviously, but for me it was a real negative point of living with the Inpol² and I think that Pathos

really need to investigate ways of muting the rather cheap sounding mechanical clang that reverberates through the amplifier whenever the volume or input is adjusted.

I have been listening to the Pathos, more or less exclusively for a couple of months now so I have got



to know it very well. I have used it with both the Naim CDS 3 and the Burmester 001 CD players and apart from models yet to be reviewed, the JMLabs Micro Utopia Be has been the main speaker of choice. Cabling was Nordost's superlative Valhalla. But a word of caution here regarding the mains cable. Pathos, like all good amplifier manufacturers supply a custom cable with the Inpol². This utilises a filter network close to the mains plug and although the Valhalla might sound a little bit better than this, it also introduces some rather odd RF effects, which I first noticed as an unwelcome squelching on the Tivoli radio in the kitchen. Without the supplied mains leads the amplifier also became quite sensitive to mobile phone interference. So the Pathos

mains lead is a must. As for warm-up I found that the Inpol² took about a half hour before it began to stretch its legs though I never heard it sound better than when the system had been running for the whole day. This was the best time to appreciate just what an excellent amplifier this is and how easy it is to live with.

You cannot fail to be impressed with the bandwidth that the Inpol² delivers, especially the sheer low-end extension which strikes the balance between weight and control just about perfectly. Move up through the mid and there is an undeniable sweet clarity, even a feeling of warmth to its performance and this continues right up through the top end which might seem a little repressed to those whose speakers are not up to conveying

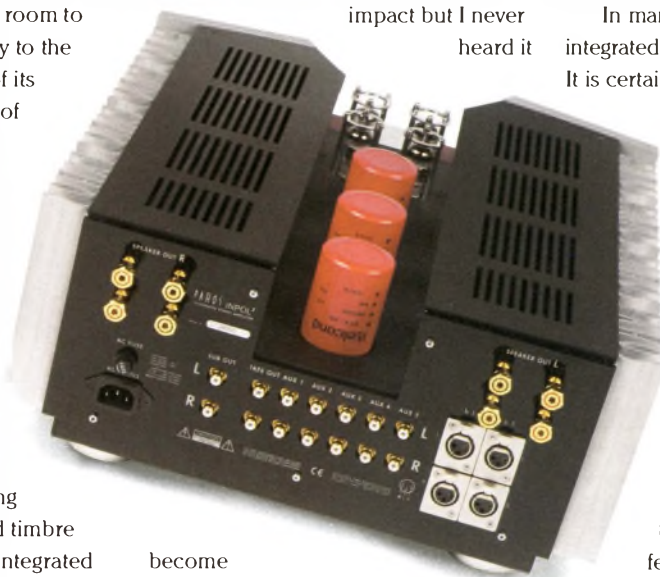


the subtlety and true extension that this amplifier is capable of. If you have spent years listening to pure solid state designs the Inpol² may well seem to lack that ultimate sense of grip and control that you are used to but what it gains is a sense of harmonic freedom and flow. The music never sounds as if it is being squeezed out of the electronics and there seems very little leading edge compression to give it that feeling of artificial dynamism and speed. It seems more like the 'open tap' type of amplifier in that you cannot feel it ▶

▶ exerting electronic control and shaping the sound. Instead there is a natural flow and integrity to the way it makes music that grows on you over a period. Pretty soon you learn to trust the amplifier implicitly and to respect the way it can deal with a wide range of musical challenges. That it always seems to have the time and room to do so is due in no small way to the amazing width and depth of its soundstage and the feeling of unwavering stability that it specialises in. The acoustic, be it natural or studio-created is laid wide open before you with exceptional focus and great presence. Add this to the superbly broad tonal palette it possesses and you have an amplifier which can sound very intimate, bringing you closer to the nature and timbre of the instrument than any integrated amplifier I have heard.

Down at note level it brings a sense of breadth and weight to stringed instruments that can be captivating. Alison Krauss And Union Station's new CD, *Lonely Runs Both Ways* (RRCD 525) features some of the nicest studio recorded acoustic rhythm guitar that I have heard for a while. This album could have been made to showcase all that is good about the Inpol². The sheer range and harmonic expression of high-tension steel strings and vintage tone woods in the hands of very high quality players is really tremendous. There is no snatching and no exaggeration of the leading edge as the note or chord gets the room to expand tonally through its colourful sustain before decaying naturally. And the closely-miked lead vocal offers the perfect counterpoint musically and most certainly spatially. Where appropriate it projects across the room so she is almost singing in your ear while the distance between

her and the male backing vocals practically enable you to hear a three-part harmony in 3-D. But it never pulls the music apart. One of its strongest points is the top to bottom rhythmic coherence. It is not the fastest amplifier certainly and will perhaps not grab attention with its pure rhythmic impact but I never heard it



become remotely flustered regardless of what combinations of tempos it was being asked to deal with.

As I mentioned at the beginning, this amplifier is somewhat less powerful than its looks would suggest. The 50 watts of class A power and the nature of the way in which the Inpol² reacts to the volume control might leave you feeling a little short changed if you use inefficient speakers and/or you are a total headbanger who places pure level high on their list of requirements. Push the volume up and you get more of just that - sheer volume of the voluminous kind. You don't get that sense of drive and momentum - or maybe you just don't get the edge of distortion as the amplifier teeters on the brink. Instead it swells and gets bigger, stronger and more imposing. The Micro Utopias are of average efficiency so I found that I was pushing the Pathos high up its volume scale before I finally realised that high level listening is not what this amplifier is all about. It's not that it

doesn't go loud, just that you don't notice it (or get any real 'benefit') from it doing so. Don't get the impression that it has no strength. There is nothing lightweight about the sound at all at any level. It's just never less than refined, which rather undermines the obvious impression of drive.

In many ways this is the best integrated amplifier I have heard. It is certainly the easiest to live with over a long period as it is completely fatigue free, has such impeccable balance and no real musical weaknesses. I would avoid using it with matching electronics or cabling that is excessively smooth, or speakers that are very inefficient. It is obviously not cheap and anyone looking to spend this kind of money may still feel that they would naturally be better off with a separate pre/power combination. I doubt it. This is a serious piece of kit designed for serious listening and it has a musical focus that similarly priced separates often fail to match. I could live with it quite easily. ➤

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

| | |
|---------------------|---|
| Type: | Class A hybrid integrated amplifier |
| Valve Complement: | 2x ECC82 |
| Inputs: | 5x line-level (RCA) 2x line-level (balanced XLR) |
| Input impedance: | 100 kOhm |
| Power Output: | 50 watts per channel |
| Dimensions (WxHxD): | 430 x 185 x 520mm |
| Weight: | 37 kg |
| Price: | £5650.00 |

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The Jadis JCA30 Mono-block Amplifiers

by Roy Gregory

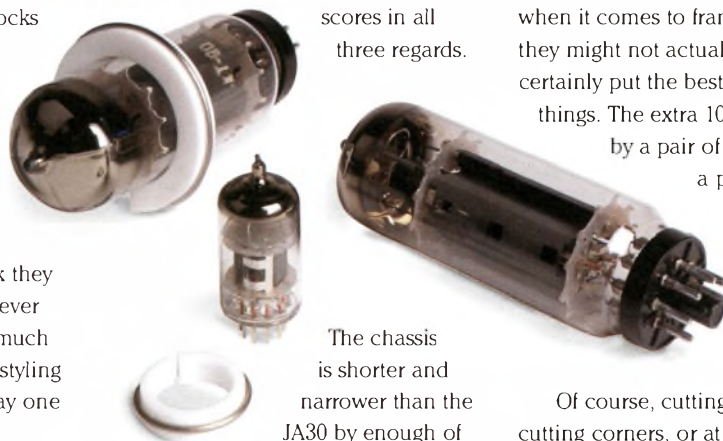
Of all the long-standing valve amplifier manufacturers inhabiting the high-end, Jadis are perhaps the most legendary. Legendary in the sense that they have a stellar reputation for sound quality, legendary in that they are not without character, but above all legendary in the sense that they are seldom seen and even more seldom heard. We are fully paid-up fans at Hi-Fi+, yet in six years we have only reviewed two products! That despite the fact that I've been running a pair of the legendary (that word again) JA30 mono-blocks for the best part of 20 years: and they still do voices and the broad mid-band better than anything else I've ever heard.

Resolutely impervious to fashion, the company occasionally adds new models, but digital products aside, I think they still make every product they've ever launched. The triode fad pretty much passed them by, and the chassis styling hasn't changed one iota since day one – although in this case it's very much a case of if it ain't broke...

Which makes our reviewing of their new JCA30 mono-blocks, in one respect at least, all the more ironic. You see the J stands for "Jadis" and the A for 'Amplifier', common nomenclature from the existing flagship amplifiers. It's the C that separates these new products, intended as they are for home Cinema use, presumably (perhaps that should be hopefully) in packs of five! So, ironic indeed that here we are, deploying them in a stereo mode; the company makes a deliberate attempt to respond to changes in the market and what do we do? Carry on

ploughing the same old furrow.

Of course, there's more to making an amplifier for home cinema use than simply sticking a C in the model number. It needs to be cheaper than existing mono-blocks in the range (because you'll need five of them), it needs to be smaller than the existing amps too (because you'll need five of them) and it will need to produce maximum power from the basic circuit topology in order to meet the dynamic demands. The JCA scores in all three regards.



The chassis is shorter and narrower than the JA30 by enough of a margin to give it around 60% of the more expensive amp's footprint. The price per mono-block is more than halved, the JCA30 costing £1200 each – not exactly chicken feed, but an absolute bargain compared to previous Jadis monos. Which leaves the power output and the use of KT90 output tubes capable of delivering 30 Watts from a push-pull pair whilst still operating in Class A. That's about as good as it gets – my JA30s produce about 20 Watts from EL34s or 24 Watts from 6CA7s (at the expense of some midrange finesse). If you want to operate with a single output pair –

and there are sound reasons why you should (if you'll excuse the pun) – then the 90 delivers as much muscle as you can realistically expect.

All of which actually applies just as readily to a stereo system. The big frustration with the JA30 is finding the ideal speaker to partner it. With only 20 Watts on tap you are really talking about 93dB or more – and I'm afraid that when it comes to efficiency, loudspeaker manufacturers are about as trustworthy as bicycle manufacturers when it comes to frame weights; they might not actually lie, but they certainly put the best possible gloss on things. The extra 10 Watts delivered by a pair of KT90s (or at a push, KT88s or 6550s) opens the field significantly when it comes to matching speakers.

Of course, cutting costs means cutting corners, or at least simplifying things. Anything you can do without becomes an additional bonus. So, apart from the dimensions, the most obvious difference between the JCA30 and its forefathers is the change in the input and driver circuit. Where the JA series amps all use an ECC82 input followed by an ECC83 phase-splitter, the JCA30s combine both functions into the two halves of a single 83, cutting down both the component and valve count. Mains and output transformers are also smaller, although still wound in-house at the Jadis factory. I wouldn't get too hung up about that as the units used in the JA series amps are so

►ridiculously over-spec as to be beyond overkill. The JCA30s' transformers simply reel in a little of the slack. Take the bottom off and construction is the familiar combination of hard-wired signal path and PCB mounted power supply, so the sonic essentials have been kept well and truly up and together.

Indeed, apart from the simplification and downsizing mentioned, the main cost savings have been made in the chassis. Instead of the expensively folded, welded and finished item used for the JA series, the JCA30 is built on a simple, folded base with bolt on end panels. It doesn't look as sleek or tidy, but it saves a huge amount of money.

The front panel carries the on/off and standby/operate switches, along with a bi-colour LED which shows red for half-power and green for full output. The rear panel carries all the connection socketry, including the IEC input, moved from its top-plate position in the JAs in another cost saving step. There's a single phono input and a set of five-way binding posts. That's your lot.

The overall impression is unmistakably Jadis, from the layout and finish to the gold badges and the neat valve cage. The packaging is exactly the same as the excellent material used for the big amps, and whilst that might not seem important, it's another indication that there's been a lot of thought given to just which corners it's acceptable to cut and which represent a compromise too far.

I had no qualms plugging the JCA30s straight into the main system, £30000 CD player or not (although sadly not until the Zanden had already departed). No matter, I had a sneaking

suspicion that they might rather suit the Metronome. Cabling was Valhalla throughout whilst speakers were the Living Voice OBX-R2s and the Reference 3A Da Capos. The one tweak applied to set up was the installation of a set of the excellent Duende Creatura valve dampers (available from PM Components: Tel. (44)(0)1634 848500, Net. www.pmcomponents.co.uk). These affordable, sensible and cost effective Teflon and titanium rings

wrought such

an improvement in clarity, focus and timing that they should be considered an essential purchase with these amps. Whether it's down to the size of the KT90 and its elongated internal structure I really don't know, but it's an explanation that makes some sort of sense. Needless to say, once installed they were there for the duration.

The JCA30s stepped straight into the shoes of the Tom Evans Linear A, an amp of similar power and extraordinary performance. At \$4000 it's also an amp that costs considerably more than the Jadis pairing. Well, the little French mono-blocks can't compete in terms of transparency, extension (at either extreme) or sheer focus – even with the damping rings in place. But the good news is that the mid-band is all, 100% Jadis, which makes for magical vocal reproduction. Makes

sense I guess, in the context of a cinema system. Makes even more sense with a stereo one!

Pick a vocalist, any vocalist, and you'll hear them brought to living breathing life. It doesn't matter whether it's Ella or Peggy Lee, Leontyne Price or Jackie Leven, male, female or indeterminate, these amps, like every Jadis amp I've ever heard, have an uncanny ability to let voices breathe, to free them of the mechanical restraints of the recording and instil them with natural emphasis and inflexion. It's a neat trick, given that we are more critical of, more used to, the sound of voices than any musical instrument.



Yet the JCA30 is astonishingly convincing in their reproduction. Real? Maybe that's going too far, but "natural"? Definitely.

It has to do with the way these amps let music flow at its own pace. Voices and instruments, words and notes are never forced or chopped. Instead, the delivery follows the pace of the singer's breathing, hesitations and all, a rhythm we know and live, so that when the lyrics fall we know exactly where they should land. And they do – which is why these amps convince so effortlessly and ►

▶ completely. It's a performance that is all the more remarkable given their obvious flaws and deviations from reality.

Listen to guitar, or any plucked instrument for that matter, and you'll hear a roundness to the leading edge of notes. The lower the frequency the rounder they get, exactly what every critic of valve amplification will tell you to expect. But before the "told you so" comes crashing through the window of your willing suspension, just hold your horses. Let's not forget that mid-band. If the bass was all over the place it would smudge and muddle, smear and generally confuse things further up. Let's just listen to those bass notes a little more. Well, they swing – and they're anything but one-note in nature.

In fact, listen and you'll see that what they are is actually the right weight, and they're in the right place (which is why they don't disturb the great scheme of things). That makes them fine for pitch and rhythm – it's just that they're a little soft round the edges. It's a characteristic that carries right across the bandwidth, more so at both frequency extremes than in the mids, but if you want carved from solid, etched images then you'll be looking elsewhere. If, on the other hand, you want an amplifier that actually delivers (rather than airily promising) all the valve virtues, that will play long and surprisingly loud, and let you listen the same way too, then the JCA30 could well be exactly what you're after – even if you don't know it.

Whether it's the poignant delicacy of the picked guitar line that accompanies 'The Ballad Of Yvonne Johnson' (Eliza Gilkyson's *Land Of Milk And Honey*) or the

multi-tracked air-guitar heroics of 'Forest Fire' (Lloyd Cole *Rattlesnakes*) the little Jadis mono-blocks manage to scale the music to the occasion perfectly. The binding strand of the playing that underpins Gilkyson's heartfelt vocal is perfectly captured, as is the surging power of the backing band in the finale, while crescendos have real presence and dynamic impact, whether they've been engineered in a studio or derived

orchestrally. The JCA30 will play recordings



without fear or favour, putting the music first. If you want garnish and a bi-coloured fruit coulis to dress it up, detailing to go with the core substance, that they don't deliver. But their good, wholesome fare should be plenty satisfying enough.

An awful lot of trees have died in the cause of promoting single-ended amplifiers. An awful lot of listeners have turned in that direction, frustrated or worn down by the hardened uber-reality of high-definition solid-state amplifiers (you know – the ones that crush the music with the same ruthlessness that they eradicate noise). Drawn in by the shimmering warmth and romance of the sweet and colourful sound, it's only later that they recognise that it's all too often

a mirage and that the pace, structure, drama and meaning in the music has folded its tents and disappeared too. Such is the risk of cannoning from one extreme to another. The JCA30 treads a middle path of its own design.

Working outwards from the midrange it preserves the musical integrity of the signal, ensuring that nothing upsets its natural flow and the message it holds. The end result won't ever satisfy the high-definition mafia, but there's no denying its musical appeal. Just the argument in fact that's deployed in favour (or defence) of single-ended triodes. Ironic then that the promise is realised in an ultra-linear design, and doubly ironic that it originates from the "never mind the quality, feel the width" world of home cinema. But then, it is French and unmistakably *un vrai Jadis*.



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

| | |
|---------------------|--|
| Type: | Ultra-linear Class A valve mono-blocks |
| Valve Complement: | 2x ECC83 4x KT90 |
| Rated Output: | 30 Watts per channel |
| Load Impedance: | 4 – 8 Ohms |
| Input Sensitivity: | 900mV |
| Input Impedance: | >100 kOhms |
| Dimensions (WxHxD): | 160 x 180 x 45mm each |
| Weight: | 15 kg each |
| Price: | £1200 each |

UK Distributor:

Absolute Sounds Ltd.
Tel. (44)(0)20 8971 3909
Net. www.absolutesounds.com



The Real Deal

The Castle Richmond 3i Loudspeaker

by Jason Hector

Sometimes you wonder whether the equipment that arrives for review is actually worth the hassle. Here's a cheap pair of speakers to replace my dearly loved – and painfully paid for – Shahinians, which not only demand that I turn the living-room upside down, but need stands and bi-wire cables too – neither of which I possess. Thankfully, these tribulations were considerably eased (by the Chord Company and Audio Plus respectively) making the ten-fold drop in price to a £320 speaker less organisationally painful than it would otherwise have been. But the real story is that it was less musically painful too. Worth the hassle? Yes Indeed!

The little Richmonds may not be the most resolving of speakers, certainly not the widest bandwidth but, vitally given their price, they are also not the fussiest speakers I have used. What they are is a sensible balance of virtues that should ensure that they will work in a range of systems and rooms. I am convinced that they will also allow some serious upgrading before they become the limiting factor. In all of these respects they remind me of the Creek 4340SE integrated amplifier that I mainly drove them with – mainly, but not solely. The reason for my confidence is that I also drove them with my normal system of Dynavector electronics and Well Tempered Turntable, to surprising effect.

For the bulk of the review the system I used with the Richmonds was fronted by a Naim CD5x, with and without the Naim Flatcap2x power supply. Amplifier duties were filled by the previously mentioned Creek integrated and speaker cabling was the Chord Odyssey. Atacama

single pillar speaker stands were bluetacked to the base of the speakers and part filled with Kitty litter (fresh from the bag I hasten to add) to dampen some ringing. This all formed an apposite and potentially potent, source-first system that the speakers absolutely thrived on.

The reason I've gone into so much detail regarding systems and circumstances is to encourage similar care on your part. The little Castles will really respond to every bit



you lavish on them. Take bi-wiring; these speakers really benefit from being bi-wired. I am sure this is as much due to the difficulty in linking the sockets together without sonic compromise as it is due to clever crossover design, but whatever the reason, if you don't bi-wire you will hear a much more congested and frankly turgid sound. So much so and you will start to

wonder what MC and I are getting so excited about.

Something that doesn't usually impress me that much is the ability to project a stereo image. The Castle speakers are surprisingly, almost shockingly, good at throwing a wide soundstage. Not only is there no hint of a hole in the middle but the various performers and their instruments are locked into position and very tightly defined. But best of all this is achieved without losing the integration and relative timing of the various musical strands. In fact it helps to sort them out, just like imaging fans say it's supposed to. Now, to be honest the rest, including the imaging, can go hang if the musical message is lost, but the Richmonds are more than able when it comes to communicating the nature of a band working together. How Castle and their design consultant Karl-Heinz Fink have achieved this at this end of the market is anybody's guess but I can think of many other brands who could learn a great deal from these speakers. Castle have been producing the Richmond in one form or another for over ten years. But the 3i is not just a re-badge exercise, and pretty much every component has been changed in one way or another. They now have a bigger cabinet and the drive units have been improved to increase sensitivity and the dynamic capabilities of the speakers, while the crossover has been reworked to make them easier to drive. The construction is to a high standard. Socketry is good quality (if you ignore the linking connectors supplied) and the veneer is to Castle's usual



▶ high calibre both in material quality and in application. The interior surfaces of the cabinets are also veneered and damped with bitumen (like) pads. All of this produces a small but strong and solid cabinet in the best British tradition. It might seem surprising that a relatively small (but long standing) player like Castle can sell speakers with cabinets like this at this price. That's until you remember that Castle not only produce their own cabinets, they build them for many other manufacturers as well. This means that not only do you get a classy veneer, you are offered a choice of eight different ones and all for the same asking price!

This speaker is beautifully balanced across its frequency range, avoiding the temptation to impress with exaggerated highs or hyped dynamics. The result is a very uniform treatment of instruments and the transition between the two drivers is very difficult to spot. I think this explains why the portrayal of vocals is extremely persuasive. If you like singer songwriters, male or female, you will love the Richmond 3i. The intelligibility of lyrics and speech is excellent and the subtle intonation that separates great singers from the merely good is perfectly apparent. You hear the strain at the top of a climactic moment and the relaxation afterwards. From Johnny Cash pouring his soul into the song 'Hurt' on *American IV: The man comes around*, to the anger and self-righteous passion of a Joan Baez protest song, emotional content is superbly delivered.

While the Richmonds don't plumb the depths, the bass they do produce is very tight and can always track the tunes and dynamics of the musical message.



The wallop of a bass drum or timpani doesn't rattle your organs but you get a plausible impression through the handling of the harmonics. I much prefer this sound to the typically bloated and slow bass produced by the majority of floor-standers at this and higher prices.



As I mentioned above the Richmonds are not a difficult or fussy speaker, which is probably the Castles' strongest point in a commercial sense.

You can get a reasonable performance without taking too much care (bi-wiring excepted) and this makes them easy to buy with confidence. Ease of amplifier matching is assured through the relatively high 88.5dB/W/m efficiency and nominal 8 Ohms impedance. They are also straightforward to site.

I found they needed just over 12 inches between them and the back wall to allow the rear port to breathe and a bit of toe-in helped to produce the fantastic imaging and ... that's about it really. From then on, everything else is cream. Better amps, better sources – the sound just keeps getting better, the inherent simplicity of the speaker imposing its own clarity on musical proceedings. They can't match my Obelisks for bandwidth or subtlety, but driven by the

Dynavectors they have an appealing life, bounce and enthusiasm that is musically very appealing indeed.

At £320 the Castle Richmond 3i loudspeakers are a bargain. I have moaned several times in the pages of this magazine about the lack of good quality, easy to use, well-finished and affordable equipment. The Richmonds are the very embodiment of the sort of product I think the industry needs desperately to produce. They'll grow with a system just the way we need them to if people are going to take the first important steps on the upgrade path. They have totally redefined what I expect from a sub-£400 pair of speakers and you will need to spend about three times that price to comfortably better them. Hear the Richmonds on the end of a serious system and you might even question that!



Take Two...

by Martin Colloms

It is all too easy to dismiss small, relatively inexpensive speakers in favour of elaborate and weighty offerings. Yet a well-designed small speaker can be surprisingly satisfying in musical terms. In fact, thanks to their diminutive acoustic profile and their potential simplicity, some examples can pack quite a performance punch.*

There have been a few classics in the £200 to £300 price range over the years. Whilst good quality, compact, two-way 'book shelf' speakers can be found, most of them benefit enormously from a decent pair of stands, so extra budget needs to be found for these, as well as cables – after all, you wouldn't buy a good TV and run it off a coat hanger aerial.

This issue's 'Ray of Light' shines forth from Castle Acoustics' latest version of their evergreen Richmond, now the 3i. No bigger than the diminutive LS3/5a, it is beautifully finished in razor edged real wood veneer, while the cabinet feels strong and dense. Some visual interest is provided by the sculpted grille, although this is best discarded. In an arrangement first pioneered by Henry Azima at Mission Electronics, a long while ago, the 130mm die cast alloy frame bass mid unit is positioned above the proprietary 19mm soft dome tweeter, a layout that affords some degree of time alignment. Castle take this a step further and offset and mirror image the tweeters.

At a genuine 88.5dB the Richmond is more sensitive than most of the competition and surprised me with

decent sound levels from as little as 30W per channel. Yet, at the same time, it was clearly capable of responding to up to 100W of power from classy £1000 integrated amplifiers. In fact, so consistently did it play out of its class, that this Castle speaker could be regarded as compatible with driving electronics ranging in price from £600 to well over £2000. At the lower budget limit, you would value its moderation, its sheer performance and compactness, while its impressive musical integrity comes into its own with higher quality ancillaries. It obviously doesn't produce deep bass, but from around 60Hz upwards this speaker was lively, punchy, most intelligently tuned and inherently well balanced. Through the mid it had good weight and clarity and was not at all tinny or thin sounding. That woven carbon fibre cone has an appealing combination of smoothness and crisp definition, and is sweetly blended to the high quality treble. Vocals were articulate but not too forward, with no perceptible sibilant exaggeration or roughness. Both rock and classical material were handled with surprising conviction. Stereo images were wide, quite deep and thanks to the small enclosure size, really well focused and in this respect the Richmond was way above average.

This delightful compact speaker exemplifies all of Castle's traditional strengths – proprietary drive units, classy cabinet making, furniture grade finish plus good engineering. Combine those qualities with a healthy dose of system design flair and it lifts the end result

well above the ordinary. I have enjoyed and been entertained by this classy little box in equal measure and it now represents a new personal benchmark for budget performance.

The high value is unmistakable and at a retail of £320 it is assured an enthusiastic recommendation from me.



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

| | |
|-----------------|--|
| Type: | Compact, two-way bass reflex with front port |
| Bass driver: | 130mm cast alloy basket, woven carbon fibre cone, double magnet motor system |
| Treble driver: | 19mm soft dome |
| Bandwidth: | 60Hz to 20kHz, ± 3 dB |
| Impedance: | 8 Ohms (nominal) |
| Efficiency: | 88.5dB |
| Power handling: | 15W-75W |
| Enclosure: | 15mm MDF, balanced veneers, bitumastic panel resonance damping |
| Connections: | Gold plated, bi-wire binding posts (Castle recommend deleting the brass straps and replacing them with single strand copper wire. We did this for the review.) |
| Finishes: | Real wood veneers in cherry, maple, walnut, natural oak, black oak, antique oak, mahogany and Santos rosewood. |
| Price: | £320 in all finishes |

Manufacturer:

Castle Acoustics

Tel. (44)(0)1756 795333

Net. www.castle.uk.com

*Sadly, not always the case. It's true to say that many speakers priced at under £200 are pretty nasty, though none of the reputable brands descend to the depths demonstrated by some of the models sold by high street multiples. If you buy an entire home theatre system in a box for £199, you have to realise that it's all about specifications and appearance, and very little (or nothing) to do with sound quality.

The Michell Odyssey 2004 Limited Edition Turntable

by Roy Gregory

When this industry lost John Michell it lost one of its longest standing, most respected and popular members. Well, what better way than to remember this gentlest of gentlemen than with the limited edition Odyssey 2004 turntable. Based around the full-case version of John's best-known creation, the Gyrodec, the turntable will be produced in a numbered series of 100 pieces. But this is far more than simply an engraved version of the standard item. The all black finish and black Perspex base contrast with the signature spinning weights suspended beneath the platter. However, in this instance the weights are nickel silver plated rather than the standard gold. The Odyssey also gains the clear acrylic spider used for the skeletal version of the Orbe, adding an extra level of isolation, along with that deck's one-piece record clamp. A matching, black finished HR power supply completes the turntable.

Tonearm is a black version of the Michell TecnoArm A, a drilled out modification of Rega's RB250, aimed at reducing its effective mass. Michell Engineering also replace the counter-weight stub with a precision machined item, and use that to support their under-slung and calibrated Techno-Weight. Wiring is a high-quality silver litz that runs in a single, uninterrupted piece from the cartridge to the phono-stage. Cartridge tags are beautifully machined in-house items while the phono-plugs are heavily silver plated. Finally, the company fits one of its VTA collars to the arm, allowing you to adjust arm height and lock it off with the knurled thumb-screw.

All told it's a complete and nicely

balanced package that manages to capture both the longevity of John's designs and his constant quest to improve them. The original Gyrodec looks as fresh today as it did when it was first launched over twenty years ago. The arm, the clamp, the power supply and the improved suspension arrangement reflect his latest thinking, as well as his reliance on beautifully

executed and mechanically sound engineering to realise sonic benefits. Every part of this deck reflects the attention to precision engineering and surface finish that characterizes all of Michell's products. Whether you liked the looks or the thinking that went with John's products or not, you couldn't fault the execution – or the material value, which put most of ▶



▶ the competition to shame.

Whilst it has been fashionable to team the Michell decks with SME arms I've always preferred them with something a little lighter.



The improved Rega offered with the Odyssey hits the mark perfectly, both in mechanical and price terms, being well able to support cartridges up to and including the quality of the Lyra Helikon. I can't help feeling that the latest version of the Cartridge Man's Music Maker might be a rather

appropriate choice given the arm's lightened structure. Its combination of meaty presence and decent detail retrieval will mesh perfectly with the Gyro's sound.

Buy the Odyssey 2004 and you'll be buying a piece of British audio history. The monochromatic Metropolis styling is classy and striking

while the sound quality and price of this limited edition deck ensures that the 100 units will be swiftly snapped up. The ultimate expression of John's finest work, this turntable represents a milestone that at once marks the closure of one chapter in the Company's journey and the opening of another. The future's in good hands. ➤

Price: £2150

For further information, contact:
Michell Engineering Ltd.
Tel. (44)(0)20 8953 0771
Net. www.michell-engineering.co.uk

Flying Moles...

DAD-M100 proHT digital amplifier monoblocks

by Martin Colloms

Whilst digital amplification is hardly news these days, these new generation units, emanating from Hamamatsu in Japan, the work of a couple of engineers with considerable experience on a major project for Yamaha, have been attracting quite some attention.

They have created a catchy brand, Flying Mole, for an attractive little light alloy package, the size and weight of a paperback, which packs a big, nearly 200W punch for a single channel. Buy a pair for stereo or install them in a lightweight rack and you have almost as many as you like for multi-channel audio, home theatre, studio monitoring

or PA use. Promising exceptional efficiency they barely get warm in use and need neither heat sinks nor fans. There are versions that provide for XLR balanced or single-ended RCA input sockets, 8ohm or 4 ohm load matching. There is a clue here to output matching and it is related to the necessary output filter for this class of amplifier. These are optimised for best treble response and roll-off for one or the other impedance. However, in practice the performance variation between the two is fairly small while real world loudspeakers show considerable variation from their rated impedances in any case and this is likely to prove

more critical to performance. The tidy form factor for these little devices has seen their ready acceptance in studios, for example conveniently strapped to the back of monitor loudspeakers.

Despite the marketing blurb, operating principle behind the Flying Moles is pretty straightforward. "Bi-Phase Fusion Technology" is a fancy name for a high-speed switching output stage operating constantly at 200kHz where the audio signal is modulated through feedback into micro-pulses, current amplified through the output stage and reassembled by a low-pass or pulse excluding filter. There's no ordinary ▶

► mains transformer either. As is common with these devices, the off line rectified mains supply is converted by high voltage switching to direct current lines for the amplifier via a tiny, but very powerful high frequency transformer of exceptional efficiency.

I borrowed a pair of the 4 Ohm versions with single-ended inputs from the UK agents PMC, and after letting them run in for a few days tried them out on a couple of different speakers. I chose the Epos ES22, an easy to drive 6 to 8 Ohm model and the Avalon Eidolon Diamond, a true 4 Ohm design which could take all that these Moles could deliver.

clearly, plenty of power was being grabbed from the wall socket and dumped into the test speakers. Towards full power there was a touch of compression, a softening of dynamics, almost a subtle blurring of bass impact and precision; certainly not the sharper, harder type of sounds heard at the clipping limit with linear technology.

However, in the company of trusted audio power amplifiers in the £1000 region these neat amplifiers did not

As an aside I also noticed that the residual high frequency noise which these amplifiers inevitably put out, particularly down their mains cables, took the edge off the quality of my sources and line control, in this case the conrad-johnson ACT 2 and NAIM CDS3. However, this interaction might well be less noticeable in a system of more comparable price.

In a studio environment with live or master quality feed and many noisy power sources I suspect the Flying Moles are just fine for their intended purpose and know for a fact that they are better than many professional monitoring/FA amplifiers. However in the quieter, more critical environment of home audio they do not stand up to the 'Hi-Fi' competition. ➤



The results were fascinating since these digital amplifiers, or more correctly switching type amplifiers are something of a moving target. There were clear differences between the results for the two speakers demonstrating the degree of load dependence. First impressions might lead you to think that they were very good indeed.

Initially I was impressed by a big sound, with a sparkling, almost 'direct-coupled' clarity, which compared well with the faintly dulled, even mildly distanced effect you get with many normal amplifiers (even if this is well accepted and considered par for the course). The high sound levels achieved, with good control, belied their insubstantial physicality and

make the grade for me. That initially attractive clarity turned out to be fickle, varying with the complexity and loudness of the programme, much as the less capable examples of delta-sigma (e.g. 'BitStream') digital audio technology do. With the Epos speakers the Moles' mildly emphasised the lower treble with a wiriness on string tone, while with the Avalons the exemplary treble definition of this speaker exposed some roughness and grain, plus a kind of spot-lit sibilance, almost an 'Aphexed' sound effect.

A solo flute could be glorious, with ample space and ambience but when the band kicked in it was noticeable that some of the quality had evaporated. Viewed critically, the timing was all over the place, the sense of cohesion in a small rhythm ensemble was diffused and I was left wondering what all the fuss was about.

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

| | |
|---------------------|--|
| Type: | Digital switching mono-black power amplifier |
| Inputs: | RCA phono or balanced XLR |
| Input sensitivity: | 1V |
| Output Level: | Variable via front-panel control |
| Rated Output: | 100W into 8 Ohms 160W into 4 Ohms |
| Dimensions (WxHxD): | 130x51x254mm |
| Weight: | 0.65 kg each. |
| Price: | £350 each. |

UK Distributor:

The Professional Monitor Company
Tel. (44)(0)870 444 1044
Net. www.pmc-speakers.com



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











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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, Leigh Heggarty.

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-  XR CD
-  Double Disc
-  DVD
-  SACD
-  Hybrid SACD
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Sugarhill Records SUG LP 3985    

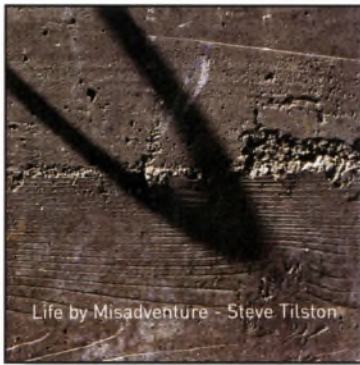
The Graceful Ghost is an atmospheric album carried by beautifully quaint and quite haunting Grey De Lisle vocals. Her delicacy and timing in the delivery of each line together with a production that genuinely captures the essence of the marvellously evocative acoustic instruments like the banjolin, celeste, pedal and Indian harmonium that are employed here (all taped by engineer Todd Burke on some vintage recording equipment) recreates an old time almost pre-Civil War era sound whose nostalgic warmth is then applied to varied experiences from across the decades. Consequently songs that warn of treacherous women (Jewel Of Abilene) or lecture against falling in love with an impoverished farmer (Sharecroppin' Man) sit comfortably alongside a bittersweet ballad like 'The Maple Tree' that tells of the tragic consequences which occur when a mistakenly reported death is announced. The gospel country style on these laments for lost loves, gentle waltzes and lullabies taps directly into an American musical heritage. The care with which this numbered limited edition twelve-track collection has been put together cannot be questioned. In addition to the lovely song craft *Graceful Ghost* comes replete with a DVD about the making of the album, postcard, poster and a 45 cut of 'Willie We Have Missed You'.

Supplier: www.vivante.co.uk

RP

RECORDING
MUSIC





Steve Tilston

Life By Misadventure

Market Square MSMCD 108 

Steve Tilston writes elegant folk songs that combine political and deeply personal sentiments – all backed up by his excellent virtuoso acoustic guitar playing. The enchanting and richly melodic *Life By Misadventure* album was first released back in 1987 on the Run River label. More recently this Market Square re-master has revisited those tapes, applied some spit 'n' polish and expanded it to include a twenty-three minute long 'Rhapsody' – an extraordinary wholly instrumental Celtic suite that draws upon traditional, classical and new age sources for inspiration – proving along the way Tilston's credentials as an arranger. Unsurprisingly, after nearly twenty years, this music still has resonance today. So even an anti-Thatcherite song like 'These Days' which reflects upon a stark socio-economic divide does not feel dated because unlike many of his contemporaries Tilston's language is carefully weighted and not that strident or angst-ridden tirade so common to the Eighties. Light vocal touches, full of deft inflexions and careful phrasings, leads us onwards to the threshold of each sophisticated lyrical insight – making intimate songs such as 'Here Comes The Night', 'I Call Your Name' and 'Nowhere To Hide' more involving. A warm and plush feeling transfer reinforces that notion of intimacy.

RP



Paul Brady

Say What You Feel

Compass Records 

In the 90's Paul Brady recorded two of my all time favourite albums, *Trick Or Treat* and *Spirits Colliding*. Both were chock full of insightful, uplifting songwriting and *Spirits Colliding* even helped him make a dent in the singles chart with 'The World Is What You Make It', a tune used by the BBC for a sitcom so memorable I can't for the life of me remember what it was called. As is so often the case with songwriters, Brady's songs have been bigger hits for other artists; the likes of Cher, Tina Turner and Bonnie Rait have all enhanced their careers with the help of his extremely talented pen. Whilst in Nashville in 2003 to pick up an award, Brady laid down six new tracks and the sessions went so well he decided to go back a year later to finish what he started. *Say What You Feel* is the result, a more stripped back affair but still displaying his keen ear for a melody. Brady originally employed a brass section on this record but removed them from the final mix because he felt it detracted from the overall intimacy of the songs. It's that keen ear that enables him to make continually engaging albums, and this little beauty is most certainly that.

AH



The Futureheads

Big Life 679L074CD 679 

Relentless. If I had to describe The Futureheads with just one word, that word would be Relentless. But then again, I could have chosen Strange. Strange and Relentless. I'm not entirely sure that these words have been used as a recommendation before, but that is certainly how I mean them here. The Futureheads use rhythm at the heart of their songs, their vocals spat out over fiercely accentuated guitar lines, stumbling and jerking through the verses before stamping out the choruses. If you think of The Jam's 'Eton Rifles' you will be on the right lines. Every track seems to be driven by a buzzsaw guitar line as they pound their instruments to submission, while the vocals pogo about with close harmonies bursting out all around. The Futureheads play for the love of it, making songs that are the audio equivalent of a hyperactive child with sugar rush. And that is why The Futureheads are relentless: because they refuse to calm down, they refuse to look at the world with cynical eyes. This is the music of happy madmen: they may be scared sometimes, they may be confused by the world, but they never tire, and they never grow bitter. The Futureheads bring to you their own full-grown musical genre, matured in secret and perfectly formed straight out of the box. Like the Proclaimers on speed the Futureheads are truly fantastic.

MC





The Prodigy

always outnumbered, never outgunned

XL Recordings XLCD 183 

So, you produce possibly the best album of the decade having fused dance and rock to create an uncompromisingly hard sound with universal appeal. What do you do next?

In 1996 The Prodigy released 'The fat of the land', eight years later, they have returned. So the question on everyone's lips is: can they live up to their past glory? The Prodigy play an interesting trick with the track-listing for this album. They open with 'Spitfire', firing out a salvo of rock guitar and screamed vocals. But where track one would sit easily alongside 'Firestarter' and 'Breathe' it is track two that really sets out the plan for this record. Because with *always outnumbered...* the Prodigy have discovered funk. This is a record that for the most part sheds their alliance with punk and instead gets back to their dance roots. That is not to say that this is huge leap for the band, a complete u-turn, but instead they have allowed themselves to move on, and in doing so have re-injected a sense of genuine energy back into their music. This, I must stress, is no bad thing. So can the Prodigy live up to their past? Of course they can, and they achieve it primarily by moving on. So let 'Spitfire' reassure you that this is still the old band you grew to love, and then relax and let them show you their new tricks.

MC



Back In The Night

The Best of Wilko Johnson

Jungle Records FREUD CD 078 

Anyone who's caught Wilko's electrifying live performances – whether with Dr. Feelgood in the seventies, Ian Dury in the eighties or solo ever since – will know the kind of excitement and power the man is capable of on stage. Capturing this type of thing in the studio is notoriously difficult but as this album shows, it can be done. A collection of album tracks, radio sessions and new recordings, *Back in the Night* is exactly what it says it is – the best of Wilko Johnson. Everything from re-recorded Feelgoods classics (including 'Sneaking Suspicion', 'She Does It Right' and a riotous live stab at 'Roxette') through to later work like the reggae-fied 'Dr. Dupree', the mutant Bo Diddley swagger of 'Down By The Waterside' and the two chord classic crunch of 'Some Kind Of Hero' is here, with 'Turned 21' showing our boy is capable of writing a soul ballad with the best of them. Although occasionally augmented with keyboards and harmonica this is very much a "guitar, bass and drums" album with Norman Watt-Roy's bass guitar outstanding throughout. The sound is rough'n'ready, the performances are as live as they come – but who would have it any other way? The term legend is often over used and rarely justified but in Wilko's case no other term will do: some kind of hero indeed.

LH



Willy Mason

Where The Humans Eat

Virgin Records 0724387537620 

Willy Mason appears to record all his music in his house, with very little help from anyone else. Whether this is really true, or a carefully cultivated impression really doesn't matter. What is clear is that this is music stripped bare of all its gloss and dead weight. Drawing heavily from country and old blues Willy Mason makes music which is essentially one man and his guitar. It's true, Willy's voice isn't great, and sometimes the guitar isn't quite right, but none of this matters, this is music from the heart. The simplicity of this record won't be lost on audiophiles; without costly post production techniques this album springs from the speakers as if the man himself were standing in your living room. Indeed, this effect is only amplified by his visceral lyrical content, laying bare his every thought and cutting seriously close to the bone.

I could go on and make the obvious comparisons with people like the White Stripes and Bob Dylan, but quite honestly, it's just not worth it. What you are buying here is a view, a perspective on the world. You are buying Willy's thoughts, his dreams and opinions, set to some of the frailest and most poignant tunes written for a long time. This is, at its heart, a protest record, made by a peacenik hippy, stuck in a bygone age. And I love it.

MC





KT Tunstall

Eye To The Telescope

Relentless Records LPRE106

Edinburgh's KT Tunstall is an exciting and versatile singer-songwriter who with this accomplished and varied debut album shows just how comfortable she is when playing contemporary pop and rock, electric-blues and even that dreaded, Norah Jones brand of cappuccino jazz on a syrupy 'Silent Sea'. Her voice, which possesses no little warmth, has enough of a rasping quality about it to fill this confessional material with a series of convincingly edgy and expressive insights. Sometimes these gentle allusions to love, life and a fledgling career are a little light-weight. But with bluesy tracks like 'Black Horse And The Cherry Tree' and 'Miniature Disasters' we hear classic songs of self-examination. While the hesitancy and thoughtfulness of her closing 'Through The Dark' is mimicked by it's deliberately slow tempo. Another slight yet subtle and intelligently conceived piece of song craft. These rub shoulders with back to back catchy and radio friendly grooves such as 'Suddenly I See' and the infectious beat of 'Stoppin' The Love' that features a cutting blues guitar in an artful contrast to the seductively smooth Tunstall vocal line. It's enough to make you forget that KC is an emerging talent. I will watch with interest the stylistic development and artistic direction taken on what should be an intriguing follow up to the accessible and neatly observed *Eye Of The Telescope*.

Supplier: www.diverserecords.com

Tel: 01633 263526

RP



The Revivals

Crushed Rock Records REV2005CD

I don't listen to very many British rock bands anymore. I didn't much care for Oasis and don't have a lot of time for The Thrills or The Coral. The Revivals, however, might just be the band to change all that. They've got a charismatic and leather lunged lead singer in Ian Hutchinson, a vocalist with stacks of attitude who can give a song a real shot in the arm. For a bunch of young lads their sound is firmly rooted in the classic rock era; It's retro but it's fresh, not unlike what the Kings Of Leon are doing right now. They even get a bit Pogues-y on the celtic 'Alright Burn Ur Bridges'. A mid-paced rocker with an infectious, jiggy guitar solo, but it's when they're pumped up and revving that the revivals really come into their own. The twin guitars of Hutchinson and Stewart Methven attack the songs with real venom, whilst the rhythm section of Dave Shaw and Mike Skinner pound out a rock solid beat. *The Revivals* isn't without a couple of weak tracks, but as debut albums go it has much to commend it. It also sounds bloody great at maximum volume in the car, but make sure you keep an eye on your speed.

AH



Dwight Yoakam

Dwight's Used Records

Koch Records KOC-CD-9805

As the title suggests there's nothing new here. *Dwight's Used Records* is an eclectic and inherently fragmented selection of thirteen covers and the songs cut with and for other people's albums. It traverses a variety of styles from rockabilly, straight country and bluegrass. However, this alternative view is never dull. The one constant is of course Yoakam's unique vocal twang. Stand out numbers include the ballad 'Waiting' which was written for and performed with Deana Carter and a really sparse and heartfelt bluegrass recording of John Prine's 'Paradise' that simply drips with emotion. The two Nitty Gritty Dirt Band performances of a traditional tune 'Some Dark Holler' and the Gram Parsons song 'Wheels' are also extremely strong acoustic country grooves. It's probably worth it for these alone. On the weird side of the tracks there's an Elvis-like stab at 'Loco-Motion' that will intrigue a few of you but send others running for cover. Yet on some of the surprising and unlikely material found here (I'm thinking mainly of Dwight's version of an old ZZ Top track 'I'm Bad, I'm Nationwide') he is far more convincing. The faithful will adore it.

RP





Candye Kane

White Trash Girl

RUF Records (CD)

Candye Kane has led a wildly rich and varied life. The daughter of a body painting hippie musician and dysfunctional mother, she was shoplifting at nine years old. As a young adult she found a way out of the ghetto courtesy of the sex trade, where she became a cover star for countless sleazy mens mags. In the early 80's Candye happened upon the music scene, cutting here teeth in various country punk bands before switching her attentions to the more mainstream country scene. Considered far too raunchy for that narrow minded and politically correct fraternity she found her spiritual home in the blues. *White Trash Girl* is her latest offering. It's a swinging, sleazy, jazz, tinged romp through the blues – Candye style! That means plenty of innuendo and sexual references ('Masturbation Blues'), observations on the fuller figure ('Big Fat Mamas Are Back In Style') and send ups of her lifestyle ('White Trash Girl'). In amongst the originals are a couple of well chosen covers, 'What A Day For A Daydream', given the swinging bluesy treatment with hip guitar and swirling organ and Lieber/Stoller's 'I Wanna Do More', all dirty harmonica and walking beat. Candye Kane might be the queen of trash but she does it with humour, humility, talent, a great band and larger than life persona. Trash maybe – but priceless trash.

AH



Hubert Sumlin

About Them Shoes

Rykodisc RCD17307 (CD)

In the blues world Hubert Sumlin is a God. For 25 golden years he was Howling Wolf's lead guitarist. He's also been the guitar slinger in Muddy Water's band and influenced a whole host of later generation guitarists, including Eric Clapton, Jimmy Page, Keith Richards and Jeff Beck. Richards and Clapton repay the debt by playing on Hubert's new album *About Them Shoes*, a masterclass dedicated to the Wolfman and Muddy Waters. Others appearing as guest musicians include New York Dolls frontman David Johansen, Ace harpist James Cotton and Levon Helm on drums. It's some band Sumlin's assembled here; it has to be said he brings the best playing and singing out of everyone concerned – particularly Clapton, who hasn't sung or played with this kind of fire or urgency for many a moon.

Most of the songs will be familiar to blues fans, seven being from the pen of Waters, four from Willie Dixon and one from Carl C. Wright. The sole contribution from Sumlin is 'This Is The End, Little Girl', where he had Richards pick sublime acoustics over Paul Nowinski's lonely double bass.

Rolling Stone felt the need to include Hubert in their 100 greatest guitarists list recently, and that's a fitting compliment. He might not be the flashiest but he's got talent to match his grin.... And by golly, can he smile.

AH



Katie Buckhaven

Hot Records Hot 1097 (CD)

The jolly nice chaps at Hot Records sent me this delightful package of joy to review, and I do it with a certain amount of awe and a complete lack of knowledge

As the press release offered precious little about Katie's background I decided to trawl the net for more information; I thought no point reviewing something if I can't give you dear readers a little background on an up and coming artist.

However, what the biography told me was.... Well not much really. I don't know if she's English but I can tell you she picked up a guitar at seven, was inspired to write by her parents record collection and has performed in Paris, Seville and Berlin, singing in French, Spanish Italian and of course English. Buckhaven's style is a little bit Norah Jones with a twist of Eva Cassidy and a hint of Joni Mitchell. In amongst the mostly well chosen covers (do we really need yet another version of 'Songbird'?) are some very tasteful and beautifully sung originals, and it's this clutch of songs that point to a very bright future indeed for Miss Buckhaven.

None other than Michael Parkinson firmly believes she has what it takes, and after listening to her crystalline voice weave its magic I'm inclined to agree with him. She'll need that vital lucky break, but at least she's on the right label.

AH



The Laurel Canyon Sound of Judee Sill

by Reuben Parry

Unquestionably Judee Sill was a complex and conflicted musician who died prematurely in 1974 at the age of thirty-five. There has always been some mystery surrounding her death. I've read somewhere that it happened down in Mexico and that this was widely reported at the time as a drugs overdose. Whether they were recreational drugs or painkillers may perhaps be a moot point. You take drugs and you die. Does the type matter? Well in Sill's case I think it does because she had previously spent three tough years battling against addiction just so she could pursue the dream of a music career. It is far more charitable to lay the blame at the door of a chronic and debilitating illness suffered after the release of her second album, *Heart Food* in 1973 and the careless use of prescription drugs to relieve those symptoms.

You may well ask yourselves why we should, some thirty years later, care very much at all about this singer songwriter from Oakland whose musical output extends little beyond a few singles, a brace of albums and some raw demo material. Putting for one moment the actual releases and the "what if" factor to one side, I think it's fair to say that while she has been moderately influential it's only really in a direct proportion to that limited output. Her concerns, though, remain timeless. David Geffen (the man who brought Carole King, Joni Mitchell and Bob Dylan to the Asylum record label) recognised this talent. Judee Sill was his first signing. He saw something special in the wistful melodies and powerful lyricism so often deeply soaked in spiritual imagery. Geffen's interest gives us a small clue to the musical potential that would only ever be partially fulfilled. If you like, you

could make some idle comparisons to Eva Cassidy but without all the ravenous record company hype. When

looking back at either, we can only imagine what they might have achieved. However, I am more comfortable in placing Judee Sill amongst the most notable of her peers. To mention her name in the same breath with that of Joni Mitchell or Carole King takes no wild leap of the imagination – although without a shadow of a doubt, Sill's roots were far less Bohemian. It was a combination of those troubled life experiences and a remarkably resilient character which underpinned Sill's musical processes.

Sometimes they directly inform her songs, on other occasions you sense a deliberate reaction against them. It is very much a case of 'know me to then understand my music' and this is definitely music that pulls in different directions at the same time.

She was once heard to (rather architecturally) describe these songs as "country-cult-baroque". I know this is an unholy sounding trinity, but it's an interesting observation on her musical prowess that I will return to in a moment. However, I think it's also a statement worth bearing in mind when taking a brief overview of Judee Sill's life. You get a better idea of where she's coming from: An unstable family upbringing and typically juvenile brushes with the law led to a spell in reform school. It was here, while immersed in corrective religious doctrine and dogma, that she learned to play the Church organ. Surely this was the embryonic beginning of a gospel style that would characterise her future recordings. Later, after dropping out of college, ▶



▶ there was the drug habit to feed and an almost inevitable descent into prostitution to achieve that end. Sometimes it's all too easy to look back at the Sixties through a pair of rose tinted glasses. But when you examine it through Sill's eyes there is certainly an unsightly and much darker underbelly, an essence of which tinges her song writing. The determination to clean up and put a pretty ragged life in order was motivated by that love of music. The fact that this did not come easily places another mark in her credit column. Resilience, ambition and imagination permeate her life and her craft.

After working extensively in the Los Angeles folk-rock community and penning songs such as 'Dead Time Bummer Blues' and 'Lady-O' for bands like the Leaves and the Turtles, Judee was ready to work on her own canvas. For the 1971 eponymous debut album *Asylum* ran with a heavy hitting production team put together by Sill. It included John Beck and Jim Pons from the Leaves and engineer Henry Lewy whose credentials included productions for both Neil Young and Leonard Cohen. The country threads running through this LP are built around airy and attractive lead vocals and the ubiquitous Sill acoustic guitar. For a sense of that baroque edifice look no further than her opulent use of strings, vocal layers and brass arrangements.

The religious connotations (be they Christian or pagan) are expressed through the use of exotic imagery, the hymnal structure to many of these songs, a heavy indebtedness to gospel music and the iconic language of lyrics and song titles. In 'The Lamb Ran Away With The Crown' and on 'Jesus Was A Cross Maker' with its gospel flavoured piano and strong harmonies we have just two of the more obvious examples. Surprisingly, bearing in mind her background, these are breezy and remarkably up-tempo Laurel Canyon songs. That dark cloud overshadowing Judee Sill can be discerned through the rich yet deeply ambiguous cosmic or spiritual worlds portrayed in her lyrics. Interestingly, the musical flow never suffers. Tonally and melodically it nearly always suggests harmony while conversely the lyrics are acid etched with words like "fear", "sacrifice", "bondage" and "screamed" which by their very nature proclaim the opposite. This establishes an intriguing

tension, exemplified by 'The Archetypal Man' when she sings, "...all through the Darkness his pain is pure".

So where am I going with this? Well, the simple answer to that question lies within the two beautifully presented and perfectly pressed 180g gatefold LPs that were re-mastered last year by the San Francisco based Four Men With Beards label. Both *Judee Sill* (4M120) and the follow up album *Heart Food* (4M121) prove themselves to be worthy re-issues. Musically, I hope I've already done enough to suggest why these LPs might be strong and significant additions to the catalogue. Play the debut – absorb the way in which it sonically picks out the warmth, range and projection in those lovely if somewhat conflicted vocals, capturing along the way those acoustic and pedal steel guitar moments with great accuracy, yet never neglecting that ethereal and other-

worldly sound employed for songs

like 'Enchanted Sky', 'Machines' or 'Lopin' Thru The Cosmos' that use dense string arrangements and backing vocal layers. The production for *Heart Food* is even more smoothly handled. Its themes are similar: Judee spends much of her time introspectively reaching for that place where the secular and spiritual world meets. The language and the images are a sometimes strange yet intoxicating mixture of the inflammatory and the devout, a place where her soul-searching pursuit is nourished by gospel

phrasing, the hymn structure of songs such as 'The Kiss' or the refrains and repeats heard in 'Down Where The Valleys Are Low' and 'The Phoenix'. This is an intelligently crafted odyssey. 'The Kiss' is also interesting for the vocals that are shaped into a Karen Carpenter-like delivery.

She also happily resumes her borrowing from the country music tradition, especially on the opening 'There's A Rugged Road' with its acoustic guitar chords and fiddle work. These and the other songs including 'The Donor', 'Soldier Of The Heart' and 'The Vigilante' continue to demonstrate the maturity and depth of her song writing. Sill's albums crack open a window to a uniquely held vision and if one line more than any encapsulates her life then I'd like to think that it was "the spark of hope is in me strong" from 'The Phantom Cowboy'.





Marlena Shaw

Live in Tokyo

Eighty-Eights VRJL 7007 **140s**

Marlena Shaw made her first appearance aged just ten at Harlem's Apollo Theatre graduating by the age of 20 to entertaining large audiences at resort hotels. With a hugely flexible voice, she can handle jazz, pop and R&B with equal confidence, although it's jazz that dominates in this live set. Recorded in June 2002 at B Flat, Shaw fronts a quartet comprising Ricky Woodard (tenor sax), Clarence McDonald (piano), Jeff Chambers (bass), and Ron Otis (drums).

It's clear from the first few bars that Shaw knows her stuff and quickly has the audience eating out of her hand. Numbers like 'Feel Like Makin' Love' see her wringing every drop of emotion from the song and clearly having a great time doing it. 'Round Midnight' sees her demonstrating her jazz chops, her technique of sliding smoothly from one word to the next working very well in this number. Woodard contributes a powerful solo here too. The recording is exceptionally natural and a real casebook example of superbly recorded live jazz. You are transported to a prime seat in the audience for this hugely enjoyable set. If the quality of this release is typical of other Eighty-Eights pressings there's clearly a whole treasure trove out there just waiting to be discovered.

Supplier: www.vivante.co.uk

DD



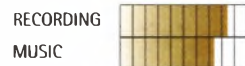
Yellowjackets

Time Squared

Heads Up HUCD3075 **CD SACD**

A strong and bouncy return to the studio for Bob Mintzer and the guys with their trademark mixture of straight-ahead and improvisational flavoured jazz funk. The opening, pulsating groove of 'Go Go', with its ear catching and pop orientated solos soaring across the canvas is heavily reminiscent of *Tutu*. This is probably an inadvertent celebration of the Miles Davis sound heard in mid 1980s. However, the following cut, 'Monk's Habit' is most definitely a Russell Ferrante homage to the rhythmically robust playing that was synonymous with the Thelonious piano style. There are generous solo opportunities throughout with electric bass man Jimmy Haslip in inspired form for the blues tinted 'Sea Folk' while 'V' offers deeply thoughtful and quite elastic solo improvisational moments for both saxophone and piano. This is an accessible, infectious and extremely agreeable album full of engaging and playful songs. Only 'Gabriela Rose', which is dedicated to Jimmy Haslip's daughter who recently survived a near fatal illness, proves to be a slower and much darker piece of a kind that naturally puts greater demands upon its audience. The Rich Breen recording made at the Firehouse Studios possesses fine instrumental detail and good separation. *Time Squared* is also available on the premier SACD digital format as HUSA 9075.

RP



Tsuyoshi Yamamoto Trio

Misty

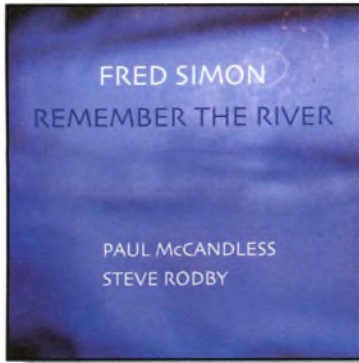
Three Blind Mice TBM 30-45 **180s**

This was one of Three Blind Mice's most popular albums in its original incarnation back in '74. Now benefiting from a major makeover it has emerged re-vitalised and ready to take on many a modern upstart. With a brief from the labels founder Takeshi 'Tee' Fujii to make the sound 'more clean, open and natural', the album has been expertly re-mastered and re-cut by JVC's Tohru Kotetsu as this double 45rpm set. Unlike so much audiophile material of the era this benefits from a truly gifted trio who demonstrate real jazz chops as they take on the standards and single 'own' composition that make up this seven number set. It's immediately obvious that an exceptional job has been done on the re-mastering. The weight and power of the piano, the dynamic range and percussive attack, are extraordinary. The band's take on 'Yesterdays' gives true prominence to the double bass conveying all the subtleties of Isoo Fukui's finger work. Side 4 opens with a delicate 'I Didn't Know What Time It Was' and closes with one of my favourites here, 'Angel Eyes'. The set, like it's equally good companion *Midnight Sugar* (TBM 23-45), is available only as one of a limited pressing of 1,000 numbered editions. Grab yours now!

Supplier: www.vivante.co.uk

DD





Fred Simon

Remember The River

naim cd081 

Playing this CD for the first time on a gloomy post Christmas January Sunday proved to be the perfect setting to realise the value of this set. The quiet winter afternoon perfectly offset the reflective, gentle music from the trio. Fred Simon (piano), is joined here by his usual compatriots Steve Rodby (acoustic bass), and the multi instrumentalist Paul McCandless on variously English horn, oboe, soprano sax, bass clarinet and penny whistle. Recorded by Ken Christianson in the warm and spacious acoustic of the Pick-Staiger Concert Hall, Evanston, Illinois, it's another outstanding job with an entirely natural, full-bodied sense of the musicians performing before you. You don't need to concentrate to hear clearly what each is bringing to the mix, but the recording properly allows the entirety of the emotional experience to get across. Each gentle number glides seamlessly into the next and each is equally strong, melodic and beautifully played. If forced to pick out favourites, I'd single out the opening: 'Kore (Oh love, where are you leading me now?)', with its delicate Eastern influenced opening, and the plaintive first part of 'Listen to the Colour of Your Dreams' (based on a line from Lennon's 'Tomorrow Never Knows'), comprising a lovely piano and oboe duet. This is another creditable release from Naim and the perfect antidote to the British, or to any other winter.

DD

RECORDING 

MUSIC 



Laura Zakian

Just One Of Those Things

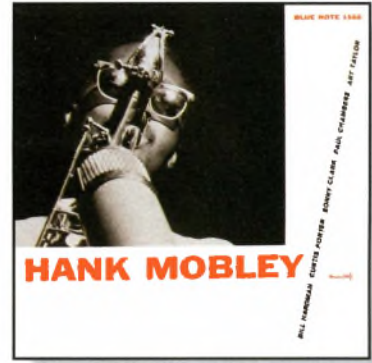
Dancing Rhino Records LZDR 002 

Laura Zakian has a real feeling for those gentle changes in weight of emphasis and range that tap into the emotional ebb and flow that is jazz. Like many of the current crop of divas she possesses a very pretty voice that has tremendous clarity. Her reading of these standards, which include Cole Porter's title track; the Noel Coward classic 'Mad About The Boy' and Brooks Bowman opener 'East Of The Sun', are instinctively handled with seamless shifts between melancholy and playfulness expressed through the slightest and most subtle variations in pitch, timbre and tempo. Behind these sultry and seductive vocals there's a solid and rhythmically tight band that supports the message of songs like Johnny Mercer's 'Out Of This World' without unduly drawing attention to themselves. Nothing flashy from Mark Lockheart's tenor and soprano sax or Jim Watson on piano which might dilute the resonant and frequently soulful cadences, just a nice swing. Instead there is the right amount of muscular and foot-tapping bass from Simon Thorpe in 'Peel Me A Grape' to establish the rhythmic framework for such a sexually charged and intimate song. This is a beautifully constructed and executed set where the singer is always sensitive to and has a firm grip upon every lyrical thread.

RP

RECORDING 

MUSIC 



Hank Mobley

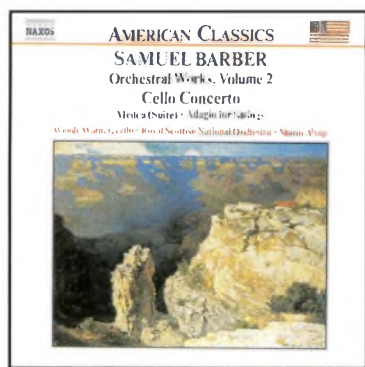
Classic Records / Blue Note 1568 

Under-appreciated for most of his career, Mobley was one of the most solid players in jazz, playing a key role in many of the definitive Blue Note hard-bop recordings of the late fifties and early sixties. A member of the original Jazz Messengers, he also worked with Horace Silver, to be followed by a less happy time with the Miles Davis' Quintet. Davis singled him out for criticism largely because he was neither Coltrane nor Sonny Rollins. Hugely unfair of course and Mobley soon returned to the Blue Note stable to record and release many solid, dependable sets. This album, recorded in 1957 when Mobley was also a member of the Max Roach Quintet, sees him leading a sextet comprising Bill Hardman (trumpet), Curtis Porter (alto and tenor sax), Sonny Clark (piano), Paul Chambers (bass), and Art Taylor (drums). Containing just five numbers, the set really comes alive for me on Side 2. There's some fine work on the first side, notably a great reading of the classic 'Bags Groove', it's simply that the second side containing just two numbers giving the band more room to stretch out. The band's extended take on Mobley's 'Double Exposure' sees some superb interplay between Mobley and Porter but also some really crisp ensemble work. The closing 'News' features highly effective solos from Mobley, Hardman, Porter, Chambers and particularly Clark.

DD

RECORDING 

MUSIC 



Barber
Cello Concerto, Medea Ballet Suite,
Adagio for Strings
Marin Alsop, RSNO
Wendy Warner, Cello

Naxos 8.559088 (CD)

For many, having the famously elegiac and deeply moving *Adagio* at this budget price will be reason enough to buy the disc. It is also expertly played by the RSNO and nicely engineered courtesy of an old warhorse in Tony Faulkner. However, if you are prepared to listen more extensively then the rewards will continue to flow well beyond those timeless string chords. Barber's animated *Medea Suite* with its repeated tension raising climaxes, acerbic instrumental exchanges and eruptions of musical colour and tactile rhythmic responses all add to a perceptibly disturbing tale. The score at every twist and turn, be it through those brazen opening fanfares on brass and xylophone or that syncopated piano in the vengeance dance, hauntingly develops towards the revelation - Medea's crime of infanticide. Marin Alsop, both in the *Suite* and the infrequently heard *Cello Concerto* provides us with telling readings. She expressively handles the complex melodies, eloquent and incisive solo and orchestral passages and is eminently supportive in the cello soliloquies, the *Concerto's* sombre and thoughtful tone reflecting a post war mood. Soloist Wendy Warner (a Rostropovitch prizewinner) is acutely sensitive to its demands - dramatic, plaintive, harmonically secure and vigorous as required.

RP



Bach
Goldberg Variations

Miki Skuta, Piano
Hevhetia

HV 0006-2-131 (CD)

Czechoslovakian pianist Miki Skuta is a versatile performer and one who is also very active on the jazz scene. Bach's music has of course had an irresistible attraction for improvisational musicians outside the classical circle (jazzmen included) throughout the ages, so don't be put off by Skuta's genre switching inclinations. He is a technically accomplished and canny classical virtuoso who taps into these joyous, spiritually engaging and sensual vignettes in some style. His emotional depth, keyboard fluidity and a freshness brought to all thirty two of the Goldberg Variations played here provides us with a really strong account on a recording made at the Bratislava Concert Hall that possesses excellent definition and clarity as it presents the piano's colour and sonority. Consequently, that complete and exceptional array of contrapuntal, rhythmic and harmonic devices employed by Bach are persuasively revealed through a subtle and tastefully illuminating advocacy. Miki Skuta's energy, dexterity and cultured approaches are neither excessive nor trapped by rigid conformity to earlier and more famous readings. It makes for an imaginative and eminently likeable CD where the varied textures and choice of tempi are given on perfect.

Supplier: cmd@czecheverything.co.uk

RP



Brahms & Bruch
Cello Sonatas Nos. 1 & 2, Kol Nidrei

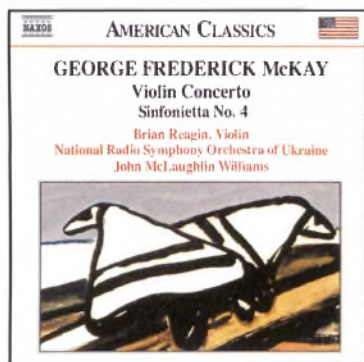
Jacqueline Du Pré, Cello
Daniel Barenboim, Piano

EMI 7243 5 57750 0 9 (CD + DVD)

If I had to describe the Brahms sonatas in a single sentence then I'd call them "strong, romantic and poetic" chamber pieces. On this 1968 recording Du Pré and Barenboim give us an ardent and youthfully passionate perspective that often focus intently and somewhat self-indulgently upon unexpected details in these scores. It makes the first sonata in particular a highly individual reading that will not appeal to everyone. There are unusual and blatant changes of tempo between the first and second subjects that also count against it. However, the sense and quality of ensemble, that essential musical rapport is undeniable throughout. On the second and most taxing of these cello sonatas they excel in revealing the classic warmth, flair and dramatic proportions found in a Brahms score. This one will win over more of the traditionalists. The prayerful, almost introverted Bruch *Kol Nidrei Op.47*, which closes this recital disc, is quite a contrast to those much more expansive moods heard elsewhere within the sonatas. A solid, well-proportioned and nicely balanced recording delivers realistic cello and piano images. There is also an accompanying DVD of the Beethoven Sonata and Piano Trio, which together with the finale of a Barenboim conducted performance of the Elgar Concerto make this mid-price release, a more attractive proposition.

RP





McKay
Violin Concerto, Sinfonietta No.4
and Song Over the Great Plains.
John McLaughlin Williams and
the NRS Ukraine

Naxos 8.559225

George Frederick McKay was a neo-romantic and nationalistic composer who created a distinctive body of work deeply influenced by the cultural and musical melting pot of the American Northwest. That said his *Violin Concerto* from 1940 (so generous in its ravishing and poetically written solo parts played here by Brian Reagin) is heavily reminiscent of Max Bruch. *Suite on Sixteenth Century Hymn Tunes* (1962) was homage to the French Psalmist, Louis Bourgeois. This transcription for orchestra, where the string parts are so lovingly and sweetly scored, is one of the mature McKay works. The *Sinfonietta No.4* (1942) has a modern and quite astringent opening but in later movements it is punctuated by some superbly written parts for clarinet, bassoon and flute. They bring with them those Native American folk images that give this an idiomatic flavour. His versatility and strong compositional techniques and instincts can be heard through the lovely dialogues between woodwinds, violas and cellos. The closing *Great Plains* song, which features pianist Ludmilla Kovaleva, musically mimics the soaring bitonal call of the Meadowlark (carried by the piano) as it flies above the rugged orchestral landscapes. Once again congratulations to Naxos in doing for American composers much of what Lyrita did for their minor but musically significant British counterparts.

RP

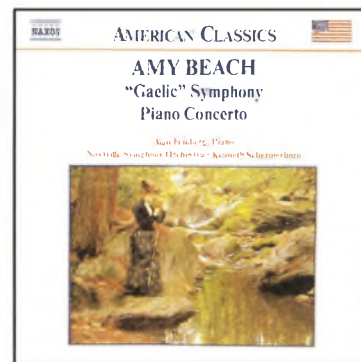


Bréville – Violin Sonata No. 1
Canteloube – Suite: Dans la
montagne

Graffin/Devoyon
 Hyperion CDA67427

During the early part of the Twentieth Century, the world of the avant-garde was gripping both France and Germany. The schools of late Romantic composition were being virtually dismissed, regarded as too conservative; yet this disc shows just how much the French in particular were missing. Pierre de Bréville is best known as a songwriter, but his epic *Violin Sonata No. 1* puts him in the same compositional class as either Chausson or Franck. Its four capacious movements reveal tremendous weight and body; yet there are also those ingredients typical to French instrumental writing; namely fluency and melodic charm. Canteloube's early work *Suite: Dans la montagne* clearly hints at the *Songs of the Auvergne*, but there is also some pure Debussy in the opening of the last movement that is rather reminiscent of the *Préludes*. With both works sublimely performed by Philippe Graffin and Pascal Devoyon, in a particularly intimate presentation, there is little to criticise here, although the recording balance just favours the violin, which in turn enhances the more delicate music of Canteloube over the richer sound of Bréville. In fact, this beautiful release can simply be regarded as a most welcome addition to the French music catalogue.

SG



Beach
Gaelic Symphony
Piano Concerto
Kenneth Schermerhorn, Nashville
Symphony. Alan Feinberg, Piano

Naxos 8.559139

New Hampshire born Amy Beach was the first successful American woman composer. She taught herself orchestration and was by repute a fine concert pianist although her performances were severely curtailed by marriage and incumbent domestic duties. Both works here (and they are amongst her strongest) were written in the last decade of the Nineteenth Century. The *Piano Concerto in C* concentrates upon tragic themes – the third movement being a lament to her late husband. There is a melodic orchestral opening to the *Concerto* and then the piano part brilliantly composed in sonata form dominates the development of the principal subjects. Alan Feinberg playing at the Andrew Jackson Hall in Nashville is superbly recorded. Every last ounce of passion, intensity and reflection is beautifully revealed. Publishing a symphony is a defining event in the life of any composer and this Gaelic influenced E minor work was no exception. Its muse is drawn from Beach's Irish heritage. She presents us with a romantic and expressive view of Celtic life. This is a lyrical Symphony created with conviction and no little skill. A finely drafted score cleverly makes use of instrumental pairings in the flutes, clarinets, oboes, trumpets, and bassoons and Kenneth Schermerhorn's musicians lovingly and evocatively play it throughout.

RP





Michael Camilo

Triangulo

Telarc SACD 63549

Michael Camilo is a versatile and fluid jazz pianist who as an arranger and for five tracks here a writer of songs goes on to deliver clever and sometimes quite cute grooves that cut across varied musical themes and colours. The early numbers 'Piece of Cake', 'La Comparsa' and 'Mr. C.I.' gyrate to a Latin beat much of which is generated by the rhythmic freedom and idiomatic percussion courtesy of the evocatively named drummer Horacio "El Negro" Hernandez. The first two of these songs lock you into those infectious, fun filled and frivolous flavours, while 'Mr. C.I.' has a deeply brooding and darkly lit Latin blues feel to it. Camilo sustains the mood with subtle shifts and carefully held notes, with Anthony Jackson's resonant bass softly reinforcing the delicately framed sentiments. Elsewhere there are introspective and pensive tracks like 'Anthony's Blues' and 'Afterthought', they find the understated piano in a more circumspect and speculative role. Dizzy Gillespie's 'Con Alma' adds a classic jazz note or two and the odd track such as dotcom-bustion has a modern shimmer. The clarity of this recording, its sharply etched keyboard images and bold splashes of percussion matched to those belly warming and vibrant strings are all artfully reproduced-enhancing the musical palette.

RP



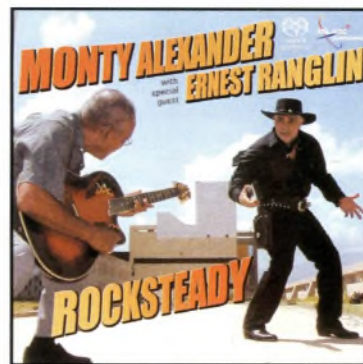
Rory Block

Last Fair Deal

Telarc SACD-63593

There are few white women musicians who can play a predominantly male genre known as the Delta blues with the same passion, range, vision, understanding, authority and reverence of Rory Block. The last album of this quality that I can think of was Maria Muldaur's quite outstanding *Richmond Woman Blues* on the Grooveland label. The country blues and gospel standards recorded here provide a marvellously vibrant canvas for Block's instinctive approach. Rory combines impassioned, soulful and tender singing with a terrific slide technique that cuts to the very heart of an immortal Robert Johnson cover like 'Traveling Riverside Blues'. Upping the tempo and hooking you in with a powerful and moving style of guitar playing, that with superb rhythmic control, fantastic riffs, blistering slide and fret board work develops all those staple themes and emotions hungrily played by blues men and women down the decades. There's the sadness and anger at a cheating husband on 'Sookie Sookie', an introspective and strikingly personal insight heard in 'Mama's Stray Baby' and the uplifting spirituality of 'Amazing Grace', 'Hallelu, Hallelu' and 'Look What The Lord Has Done'. All of these grooves invoke a classic range of emotions from joy and heartache, through yearning and sorrow on an album dripping with authenticity. Superbly recorded guitar and vocal textures are another of *Last Fair Deal's* tremendous assets.

RP



Monty Alexander

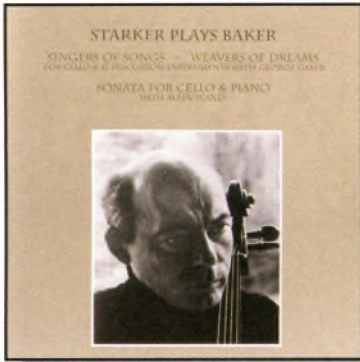
Rocksteady

Telarc SACD-63581

Since the mid-1960s Monty Alexander has had an enviable reputation as a technically brilliant and dynamic pianist. He remains a popular live performer - one who is still prepared to use his native West Indian musical heritage as an inspiration. *Rocksteady* is no exception. Monty combines jazz piano precision with a rocking reggae groove, ska/blues beat and cowboy spirit. The results are a composite of textures; images and idioms whose tonal and melodic colours are yet further invigorated by some duelling gunslinger styled exchanges with lead guitarist Ernest Ranglin. This Jamaican jamboree (an all live recording without over-dubs) is a feather light and enjoyable celebration. Its inclusion of island classics such as Desmond Dekker's 'Israelites' and 'Double Barrel' by Dave and Ansel Collins, together with a number of tributes - Bob Marley and Ken Boothe in 'Redemption Song' and 'Freedom Street' - make this an eminently accessible album that always echoes to a distant but familiar tune. A great band of sideman with rhythm guitarist Junior Jazz, Quentin Baxter on drums and the keyboard player Gary Mayone really connect. Although I personally find this to be a little frothy - this disc continually teases you with musical aromas but lacks a certain belly filling substance - many Alexander devotees will disagree and be in rapture.

RP





Baker
Singers of Songs-Weavers of Dreams, Sonata for Cello & Piano
 Janos Starker, George Gabor and Alain Planes

Classic DAD 1032

For this format you will need to have the services of a universal player like the McCormack or a DVD machine. My Tube Technology Fusion 64 was simply having none of it. That said this is a spine tingling recording that immerses you in a bold, tactile and unblemished series of images. In the *Singers of Songs-Weavers of Dreams* (a seven movement jazz suite that was written for Janos Starker and George Gabor and scored for cello and seventeen percussion instruments) we are treated to virtuoso readings of these abstract portraits and impressions of musicians like Ellington, Gillespie, Rollins and Davis penned by Indianapolis born composer David Nathaniel Baker. The persuasive and pervasive classical, jazz and blues influenced *Sonata for Cello and Piano* is a synthesis of forms that only a soloist with an impeccable technique, supreme intelligence, discipline and blinding virtuosity could carry off. Even this extraordinary Starker display cannot make the *Sonata* an easy work to digest. Far from it in fact, but jazz rhythms and blues lines that are clearly influenced by the works of John Coltrane and Wes Montgomery do have an attraction all their own. The French pianist, Alain Planes provides a seamless counterpoint to the brilliantly rich bow work captured by engineer Herschel Burke Gilbert at the Opera House of Indiana University, Bloomington.

Supplier: www.vivante.co.uk

RP



Shostakovitch/Schnittke
Chamber Symphony & Concerto for Piano and Strings
 Constantine Orbelian
 Moscow Ch Orch

Delos SACD 3259

These works are dedicated to the victims of war and terror. For conductor and pianist Constantine Orbelian this represents an extremely personal musical investment. His grandparents were victims of the Stalinist purges in the 1930s and he brings this baggage with him to the podium. Severe almost callous and emotionally draining scores symbolically reflect the dual horrors of Stalinism and the war on the Eastern Front. The *Chamber Symphony* is an orchestration of Shostakovich's *Eighth Quartet*. In either form it is a testimony to the suffering of the Russian people both at the hands of Nazism and their own masters in defence of the Motherland. The Schnittke *Concerto* is characterised by a series of dramatic variations that when combined with a sonata form it represents an endless search for truth. Complex, sometimes dissonant, always challenging and culminating in an intense moment of revelation, this is an exceptional and quite spiritual work whose imagery opens a Pandora's box of conflict and struggle. This is a deeply moving account awash with meaning. The recording starkly details the human tragedy and peels away successive musical layers in this intellectually exhausting quest.

Supplier: www.vivante.co.uk

RP



Buddy Guy

D J Play My Blues

JSP Records JSP5104

Tough and rugged, his voice full of power and authority, Louisiana born guitarist Buddy Guy (one of the last truly great blues men) cut these grooves back in 1981 at the Soto Sound studios, Chicago. Blistering and fiery guitar licks and a mean and soulful Chicago blues shape that comes from so deep down inside the man that you can't help but be moved by his gripping vision of the World form an astounding and unmistakable combination. The band - Mike Morrison bass, Ray Allison drums and guitarists Doug Williams and Phil Guy - are a tight, really focused and dynamic crowd that help make this music live and breathe. But it's Buddy, the inventive, most dangerous of performers working out there on the edge, who twists his barbed hooks into us with classic songs like 'Just Teasin', 'Girl Your Nice And Clean' or even a wryly observed 'Garbage Man Blues'. The re-master, like the man, is a live wire show and extremely hard act to follow. Transparent and highly detailed, it dramatically and dynamically builds-keeping pace as Buddy cuts loose. This is one of those brilliant recordings that re-creates all the energy, grit, aching pain and intensity of a stellar performance without unduly drawing attention to the process.

RP





The History Man

by Richard S. Foster

I guess I've been expecting this letter for a while. Having said that, some of the accusations it contains have still raised the hairs on the back of my neck, and I guess RG's too, which is why I get to reply to it.

Dear Editor,

I'm writing to you about "The Great Mercury Shoot-Out". I guess it had to come to this eventually, after singing the praises of this label in several previous issues of your magazine. But is it definitive? I think not.

Somehow discussing different pressing of audiophile recordings seems to fuel exaggeration and hyperbole.

The worst example of this was an article on www.enjoythemusic.com about the Decca/London controversy. It is

generally agreed that these pressings were completely identical, yet the author (one Sedrick Harris) claims that the Decca SXL pressings were superior to the London CS pressings in every case he tried. I just couldn't help thinking that this article was a rather transparent but still fraudulent attempt to protect the business interest of dealers (who put a BIG monetary premium on SXL pressings) and the investments and buying decisions of collectors (often the same people).

I'm not suggesting that your article on Mercury has any such hidden agenda, but when I read words like "And what a difference! Not so much a gulf as a yawning chasm" I do get a little suspicious. If the English EMI pressings are as bad as you say they are, then what were

Mercury's Cozart and Fine thinking when they were personally involved in inspecting and approving EMI's pressing arrangements (as they did according to Phil Rees' Audiophile Record Collector's Handbook)? All the evidence seems to indicate that Mercury provided EMI with finished masters specifically made for the UK market. They have EFR stampers (the E standing for EMI I should think) as opposed to the US pressing FR and RFR stampers. The earliest UK pressings even have machines stampers just like the US pressings made by RCA, while the slightly later UK pressings have handwritten stamper info like the RFR pressings in the US in the exact same

handwriting. Even the handwritten "P13" or "P17" codes are found on many of the UK pressings, indicating that George Piros did the cutting, just like he did for the US originals. Instead of just sending a copy of the master tape to the licensee (standard procedure in the industry) Mercury apparently went to this length in order to have quality control of the sonic results. Do you believe Cozart and Fine would have allowed for "the yawning chasm" you are hearing? Not very likely. Or are we to believe

that they took control over this process to ensure that the US pressings would remain superior? If so, why? Who would gain from this? Certainly not Mercury's reputation for sonic excellence.

Nonetheless I agree there are audible differences between UK and US pressings (as well as between various US pressings, but that is another matter). Mercury made the EFR masters specifically for the UK market and



▶ they seem to be cut at a lower level than the US originals (and perhaps with a different RIAA correction, I don't know). And EMI used the same vinyl as they did for their own SAX and ASD labels, which was obviously different from the vinyl used in the US. So a sonic difference is to be expected. But this difference is not as huge as you claim and the British AMS pressings are not nearly as bad as you make them out to be. You present this difference in an order of magnitude that I do not hear and that I just can't believe Cozart and Fine would ever have allowed to happen.

This article will persuade many readers to investigate these US pressings. But collecting US Mercury's can be a very frustrating activity and disappointments are almost inevitable. So I think you are obliged to inform your readers about the inconsistencies that exist within these US pressings: the very earliest FR and promo pressings may be great, but finding a copy in mint condition is NOT easy (US citizens had different ways of handling LP's than most Europeans: the word "used" actually does mean USED, not previously cherished). And even then these LP's are not nearly as silent as UK collectors are accustomed to with British Decca/London and EMI pressings and you have to put up with a certain amount of surface noise (even after cleaning). So especially when you use this kind of hyperbole to recommend something, you should also warn your readers about the existing downside, especially since these LP's do not come cheap.

Instead of just listening to a few selected LP's - as you did in your assessment - I would like to propose a different experiment: One that tells you much about these records. All you need is one day of spare time and a dozen or so Mercury US pressings. Play these LP's in their entirety at a realistic sound level and see how long you can hold out. I know I can listen to Decca/London SXL/CS, EMI SAX/ASD or RCA LSC/SB for hours - or even days - on

end without ever getting tired of the sound (even though none of them are perfect). But I certainly cannot do that with the US (or even UK) Mercury's. After several hours of listening to these LP's I start longing for a different sound, a sound less explosive, less fierce and less "spectacular". I can hold out longer with the AM pressings (probably due to the lower cutting level) but eventually these start to become annoying as well. These Mercury certainly are a different breed, but not necessarily a better breed. I have actually heard about people "voicing" their systems in order to make the Mercury's sound their best. I can understand this desire. But if they do this because they are made to believe that "if these Mercury's are right, then everything else is wrong" (as some people claim) they have a recipe for disaster. I'm not suggesting you are endorsing such a thing, but the hyperbolic way you proclaim the superiority of these US originals might not underestimate your influence on these people. They'll buy these discs and will start fiddling with their system to get that incredible sound just because you say so. I truly believe that would be ill-advised, so I feel a more balanced approach would have been in the interest of everyone concerned.

With such a balanced approach in mind I would certainly be looking forward to a solid piece on the Decca/London debate, if only to debunk the curious urban myth that I mentioned at the start of this letter. Another interesting project would be to investigate the US and UK (Decca) pressings of RCA Living Stereo. So please keep the (classical) vinyl flame alive and I do thank you for the Mercury article, even if I don't agree with your conclusions. These articles are the very reason I keep buying your journal.

Best regards,
Hans Scheepmaker
Rotterdam
The Netherlands"

Of course Mr. Scheepmaker wasn't in the room at the London show and didn't hear what Messrs. Gregory, Groome, Kuzma and myself heard. Had he been there, I'd be writing a different column. However, let's look at the evidence of the impact on someone who was present. I returned to the US with a shopping list from the editor, since fulfilled to the tune of around a thousand dollars. That doesn't buy you many of these records (less than half a dozen) but RG was convinced enough by what he heard to put his hand in his pocket for the Mercurys that are most important to him. What he got was absolutely mint, promo copies in superb condition - records and sleeves. When it comes to collectible records the sad fact

is that you get what you pay for and if you want the best then they're rare and they'll cost you top dollar.

So, let me set the Mercury record straight right here and now: Mercury was in business to make money. Manufacturing high quality, superb sounding recordings was definitely part of their strategy, whether they had their records pressed by RCA (the FR issues) or later at their own plant in Richmond, Virginia, (the RFR issues)... but we are talking U. S. pressings.

Having records manufactured in other markets, i.e. England, France and Holland is of course a necessary part of expanding one's international market share. A good business practice of course. But one also

► has to keep in mind of the history-of-the-day with respect to all the different 'deals' made for distribution in various countries and who owned what logo. (Nipper comes to mind re: EMI and RCA; US Columbia and UK Columbia are other examples as well as Decca. There was an American Decca Record Company and this is why UK Decca had to market their wares under the name 'London' in the US. [American Decca, did, for a short time in the 1950's and early 1960's, actually press records for Deutsche Grammophon and released them under the 'Decca' label]). So...the names of the game are distribution, market share and money. Period.



The UK AMS records share the same RIAA equalization curves as their US counterparts. They were simply 'cut differently' for the UK market.

There are also the major differences in vinyl formulations as well as temperatures used by the pressmen of the day. Don't underestimate the sonic impact of these details. So, even if you could take a US acetate and manufacture all the metal work required to press records in the UK, they would still sound different. And that's not accounting for the agenda of the licensee, who obviously have no interest in reducing the domestic market share for their own product, and thus an active interest in "moderating" the quality of licensed pressings.

You seem to hold Mercury high on this 'Pedestal of Perfection' and you are absolutely positive they would never allow anyone to make anything but a perfect product and that everything manufactured was blessed

by Cozart and Fine. It's a nice dream, but it's a very flawed line of thinking. Your concept of Mercury's 'quality control' is another dream...this time in technicolour.

The "yawning chasm" was just that. RG has a fine way with words and the difference was HUGE! He also had no reason to invent or exaggerate the differences (and about a thousand good ones not to!) The English Mercury issues, with one exception, are mostly poor facsimiles of their US counterparts. (The one exception where I think the 'moderated' string tone works well, is UK EMI SAX 2290/2 versus the fiercely bright-sounding US release, SR 3-9000 (Cherubini's *Medea* with Maria Callas). With this one exception noted above, every UK AMS issue I've ever heard is, in a word, rubbish.

For a collector, finding quality, quiet pressings is a worldwide problem. It's not exclusive to just filling in the gaps on your Mercury collection. We all have to trust certain dealers for the purchase of most of our used records. Fortunately there really are a handful of resellers who do understand what mint or mint-minus records actually are.



That's how I managed to source RG's requirements so completely and quickly. The problem most collectors have is that they are too cheap to buy these discs. That's right. We'll spend thousands of dollars on our equipment, but only pennies when it comes to buying 'quality' records to play on that equipment. I mean, what is a system except a delivery mechanism for the music? When working with a legitimate, quality re-seller of used records, as I said before "you get what you ►

► pay for”, is pretty accurate. Believe me. I know.

Collecting U.S. Mercurys lays opens a minefield regarding the various pressing vintages. For example, no FR pressings exist after 90265 however there are RFR examples prior to 90265 where no FR exists. Two examples are SR 90060, the Shostakovich *5th* and SR 90212, Paray's wonderful recording of works by Chabrier. But this is just a single sample of the idiosyncratic minutiae you MUST learn about the US Mercurys if you are serious about collecting the best available pressings. It took me years. And, please, don't forget about the sidebar in Issue 35 regarding the vendors. This is an important problem for collectors of this series. Vendor pressings are substantially inferior to non-vendor issues and are ALWAYS brighter sounding. They are NOT representative of what U.S. Mercury Living Presence records can sound like

When Speakers Corner released their Ravel disc of SR90213, they went to a German collector who thought he had the first issue, in order to access the correct label and jacket details. Unfortunately, as soon as I received a copy of the re-issue I realised that the collector was mistaken. Not only had Speakers Corner inadvertently reproduced a 'vendor' label, the rear of the jacket was not a colour back as it should have been. Getting the proper information regarding this catalogue is not as simple as one would think. Speaking of colour back covers... not all colour back jackets are created equal. Original, first issue jackets with a colour back are also laminated. However, there is an entire set of non-laminated colour back jackets which were released when Mercury marketed their product through the Columbia Record Club. So, knowing what you are actually listening to is far from straightforward - a fact that compromises many comparisons.

Mercury made arrangements with the Columbia Record Club in America to release their recordings. These records were ALSO cut by Mr. Piro and others and can be identified by the matrices that begin with CBF, CCFR and C1FR. These records have absolutely NO dynamics. They are the worst example of what a Mercury should sound like. These records HAD

to play on the least expensive Columbia portable stereo record player and because of this, Mercury had to cut them with almost no dynamics. So your logic regarding Mercury and how they cut their records is, unfortunately, not correct.

Truth be told, Mercury sold MORE records through the Columbia Record Club than through any other route. So, was sound quality really the holy grail that you suggest? (Oh, and by the way... the same lathes were also used to cut these records: P17, P126, etc.) Please note that I'm not dissing Mercury. They were in business to make money and the Columbia Record Club was a MAJOR source of revenue for the company.) I have found no information to confirm that Cozart and Fine were directly involved with EMI with respect to any demands regarding the quality of the sonics and how the Mercury records were to be produced. I would be most interested in seeing such evidence. Remember please, that Mr Rees states in his guides that he doesn't know what the letters and numbers in the deadwax of the EMI ASD/SAX series mean. Yet this information is readily available from the publication Hayes on Record - edited by Peter Hall and Colin Brown, a book I've personally drawn to his attention. There are certainly gaps and inconsistencies in his research and I think you should bear this in mind when using it to judge other's findings.

Let me assure you that if you have clean, quiet early issues of the original US Mercury Living Presence recordings, you can listen to them all day long. In my opinion, sonically, they have no equal. The problem too many people have with them is they think the records are bright sounding. True, there are always a few records in a catalogue consisting of hundreds of titles that are going to miss the mark, but by and large, these records are spectacular - in every sense of the word.

The reason many people think these records are 'bright sounding' is more often than not a result of the demands they place on the replay system. These are very demanding recordings and pressings that push far more actual high-frequency energy through a system than almost any others. If your system isn't up to the



▷ task... these records will tell you so. Clean power driving high-quality tweeters from a cartridge that is tracking properly and at the correct VTA will deliver superb results. Otherwise - look out!

Hopefully this has helped to explain both what we heard at the Heathrow Show and why it differs from your experience. We also recreated part of that experience for visitors to our demonstration at the Manchester Show, and I welcome comments from them regarding the Mercury "mystery". There was no mystery. The UK AMS issue we auditioned paled in comparison to its US counterpart.

I'm aware of the article written by Mr. Harris and I feel that it's not my place to offer positive or negative comments regarding his work. Those who want to read it have the URL and may do so. However, let me make my own take on the Decca/London debate clear right now. Generally speaking, and by a large margin, the Deccas are far superior to the Londons. No ifs, ands or buts...

In hundreds of comparisons I've done personally. Fewer than three Londons have EVER bested a Decca of the same issue. And believe me when I tell you I know the alphanumeric in the deadwax and am smart enough to compare the various mother, lacquer stamper information when I do my comparisons! To think the London records are 'neutral' sounding is a myth. The records are tipped in the upper frequencies, a fact that can be both easily heard and demonstrated.

I don't know where you came up with the idea that there is this great conspiracy so that dealers can make more money, or that all collectors are either fools or lemmings who believe exactly what any dealer or magazine says. After all, the evidence is available to anybody with the correct pressings so we'd be foolish indeed to distort the results. Perhaps it's more a case of what you don't want to hear because you don't want to replace your valued Londons. This of course, is your choice. But to say there are no differences between the Londons and the Deccas is laughable and totally wrong. Why would we or any magazine (that doesn't sell records for a living) propose some hoax on the record collector's market? There is no hoax. It's there and clear for all to hear!

Regarding the SB/LSC issue, there is no issue. In every case, EVERY CASE, an early, clean US LSC will better its UK counterpart. In a listening session with friends several years ago, two UK dealers provided me with clean copies of dozens of early original SBs and SFs. There was not one SB/SF that bettered a U.S. pressing, although the wonderful

Clair de Lune came close. To believe the UK issues are superior, or even equal, is another flawed myth. The problem of course is finding clean, quiet copies of the U.S. LSCs. Difficult to say the least considering many of them were pressed on vinyl that could be noisy for a few minutes at the beginning of playback. Then there's the matrix information to decode in order to discover whether records pressed in Rockaway 'R', Indianapolis 'I' or Hollywood 'H' are the best sounding pressings. There is a lot to learn.

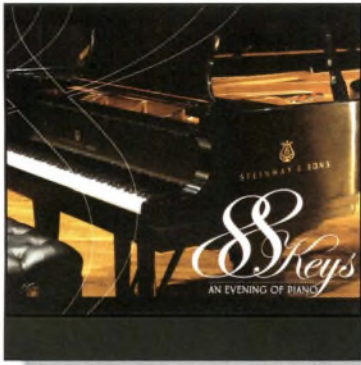
One area you've not touched on regards differences in the US released Angel recordings (even those pressed in the UK) versus the UK EMI released ASD, SCX, SAX series. I'm curious as to why you didn't mention this in your letter. The answer must be that you know the Angels are sonically rubbish. I wonder if you believe they all sound the same? Do you think EMI would want to sell an inferior product in the US? No, I think they were giving the US marketplace what they thought or were told the consumers

wanted. All it takes is one listen, no matter if it's an album from the 1960's or an album from the late 1970's, to hear the differences.

You also criticize the way in which records were handled by "U.S. citizens." Well, there are as many poorly handled records coming out of the UK as there are from the U. S. I really don't know where you get these ideas. And as to 'voicing a system' exclusively using the Mercury Living Presence catalogue. I would strongly recommend against this. Not only using just Mercurys, but the same would hold true if you just used RCAs or Deccas or Londons or Lyritas or Philips' or Deutsche Grammophons. You must use records from several companies... but records that have their own merits.

I hope I've gone some way towards explaining the basis and background for our judgements. I've been collecting and comparing these records for over twenty years... and not just with one or two examples but many hundreds. I have had Decca SXL issues which had the same mother, lacquer and stamper numbers yet they still sounded different. Why? I presume it has to do with where each example was in the press hierarchy. It was kind of like listening to copy number 100 off the press versus copy 800 from the same run. Which would you think sounded better? How about number 10? But that's a whole different issue, myth and misunderstanding... and one for another day. With so many variables it is almost impossible to execute the definitive test, but listen long enough to enough different samples and the truth soon emerges. Just be sure what it is you're listening to!





88 Keys – An Evening of Piano

Various Soloists
Weber State University



Occasionally a Hi-Fi Company will lend its support to a worthwhile cause. In this instance Ray Kimber, in the shape of IsoMike and Kimber Kable can be proud of his association with this live recital on the 15th October 2003 at the Mark Evans Austad Auditorium, Weber State University. This recording is lovely and the performances for a varied evening of music are quite enchanting. The Steinway, the viola, violin, bassoon and a four-piece rhythm section on 'Battle Hymn of the Republic' are all reproduced with vibrancy and clarity. Instruments have a beguiling and lifelike sense of immediacy. It helps to cement these interludes and fragments of larger works into a surprisingly satisfying programme. There is the Heifetz violin and piano transcription from *Porgy and Bess* that features pianist Yu-Jane Yang and violinist Shi Hwa Wang, where we are treated to a sumptuous and sprightly account of 'Summertime', 'A Woman Is A Sometime Thing' and 'It Ain't Necessarily So'. Thomas Priest (bassoon) joins them on that sugary presto taken from Poulencis *Trio*, while the Shostakovich *Sonata for Viola and Piano* moderato is sympathetically and attractively played courtesy of Michael A. Palumbo and Laura E. Bronson respectively. For the Debussy *Ariettes Oubliées* and Kurt Weil *Buddy On The Nightshift* Diana Page (piano) and Karen Brookens (soprano) combine for cultured and highly articulate readings that have real presence.

RP



The Johnny Coles Quartet

The Warm Sound

Classic Records / Epic BA 17015 200g

Coles, despite being a major talent and being around the jazz scene for decades, released very few titles under his own name. Having played and recorded with the likes of Mingus, Herbie Hancock, Duke Ellington, Ray Charles and notably with Gil Evans including featuring on his classic *Out of the Cool*, Coles never really made a name for himself as a solo artist. On the evidence of this album it's very hard to see why. His confident, distinctive tone leads this fine set whether in numbers like the hard driving bluesy opener 'Room 3', or in more plaintive pieces like the Randy Weston ballad 'Where'. Here Coles is at his most melancholy delivering a particularly lyrical solo in the second chorus. Accompanied throughout by Kenny Drew (piano), Peck Morrison (bass), and Charlie Persnip (drums), the band can do no wrong providing exactly the right platform for Coles in each number. Other standouts include a sprightly reading of Weston's 'Hi-Fly' and another of his ballads 'Pretty Strange' where Coles' yearning tone is given full reign. The pressing is exemplary and the recording full-bodied and 'in the room'. Coles has proved a real discovery and this fine set is warmly recommended.

DD



Clair Marlo

Let It Go

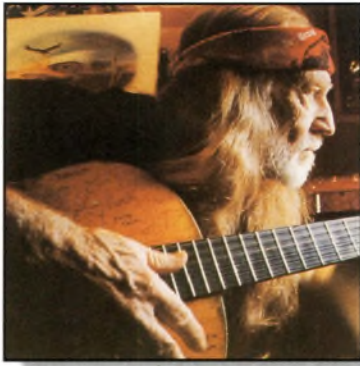
Cisco Records CLP 7008 180g

Originally released by Sheffield Labs in 1989 this West Coast audiophile classic, in its latest 180g guise, lives up to the sonic star billing. *Let It Go* was recorded and mixed direct to two-track with some spectacular results. Clair's voice (similar to that of a Nancy Bryan but working far less conflicted material) is beautifully presented as she caresses love songs like 'Lonely Nights' and 'All For The Feeling'. Cisco have recaptured her range and depth of feeling through a translucent, tactile and incredibly detailed piece of re-mastering. The array of keyboards, strings and percussive effects on an instrumental side two opener 'A Major Technicality', with its sheer presence and startling dynamics are of demonstration quality. However, I do have some reservations about these arrangements mainly because this music is very much of its time. The synthesizers, electric guitar and background vocals for 'Til They Take My Heart Away' and the electronic wind instruments on 'Without Me' have an anachronistic feeling about them. This brought back all those memories of Dave Grusin film scores like that penned for *Tequila Sunrise* in the mid '80s. That said, Clair's singing and an intelligent approach to her own songs and a pair of durable covers in the Richard Thompson 'It's Just The Motion' and Stevie Wonder 'I Believe (When I Fall In Love It Will Be Forever)' are more enduring.

Supplier: www.vivante.co.uk

RP





Willie Nelson

Me & Paul


S&P Records SPR-713 

In those days before country became hip and endlessly switched between genres there were gunslingers and weathered old outlaws like the prolific Willie Nelson who consistently delivered strong, tightly knit and sensitively performed albums like *Me & Paul* which was first released in the mid 1980s. Here Willie is joined by drummer, Paul English and guitarists, Jody Payne and Grady Martin on a dozen acutely felt songs about anguish, instability, reflection and the regret that strikes to the very heart of a wandering country musician's dilemma. He revels in the classic material on offer here. The lost loves, missed opportunities and that deep sense of musical camaraderie can be found in Nelson originals such as 'Forgiving You Was Easy', 'She's Gone' and 'One Day At A Time'. While the career low points described in the whiskey haze of a title track, and those Billy Joe Shaver covers like 'Black Rose' and 'Old Five & Dimers Like Me' give up yet more personal and memorable insights. Gutsy, straight talking and evocatively sung, this audiophile re-master of the original Columbia tapes majors on cleanly reproduced vocals, bass and guitars chiselled out of a focused acoustic.

RP



Skrowaczewski
Concerto Nicolò & Concerto
for Orchestra,
Skrowaczewski, Minnesota
Orchestra, Gary Graffman, Piano

Reference Recordings RR-103CD 

These are intriguing Concertos dedicated to Paganini and Bruckner respectively. The technically demanding *Nicolò* written for piano left hand and orchestra was commissioned for soloist Gary Graffman. It makes great use of glockenspiel, vibraphone, celesta, marimba and gong as well as providing cascading piano notes in the largo. This music is built upon stark images and although they remain quite stirring and are brilliantly played and stunningly recorded it is a work that seems devoid of warmth. Vast dynamic shifts, a solid and resounding piano sound together with those naturally hard edged yet vibrant percussive instruments create an aggressive and slightly uneasy feeling. Appropriately enough in the *Concerto for Orchestra* – once you get beyond the trademark nocturnal imagery of the prologue – Skrowaczewski develops those spiritual and heavenly themes normally associated with the eminent Austrian composer. Virtuoso passages and concentrated colours often employing exotic instruments, burn with an intensity that will have you in raptures. There is also a jubilant and majestic climax after which the conductor reintroduces half a dozen muted violins and the closing horn solo. Here the instrumental sequence reinforces that overriding sense of affection and veneration found within this musical celebration of Bruckner's spirit.

RP



Dave Mason

It's Like You Never Left
& Dave Mason

S&P Records SPR-705 

A double helping from Dave Mason's American sojourn at CBS Records which brought the melodic flair and distinctive R&B progressive pop music sound of Traffic into the 1970s with these solo albums. His strong musical instincts and fine guitar playing lie at the core of both records, while the presence of excellent big name sidemen like Jim Keltner (drums) Mark Jordan (piano) Bob Glaub (bass) Graham Nash (vocals) have a real stylistic impact of their own. They, together with Jim Krueger who plays lead guitar and solos for 'It Can't Make Any Difference To Me', 'Bring It On Home To Me' and 'Harmony Et Melody' give it a refined and really quite cosmopolitan feel that had not previously been heard with Mason's work. There's also enriching original songs and that sprinkling of covers, including a solid rendition of 'All Along The Watchtower', from the eponymous disc. This approach enjoyed a degree of success at the time but, even with all this talent on display (there's even time for some wistful Stevie Wonder harmonica on 'The Lonely One') and a sympathetic Steve Hoffman re-master, I sense that neither of these albums really achieves the sum of their parts.

RP



Follow The Yellow Brick Road... Hangin' with the blues masters at Blue Heaven

words and pictures by Richard S. Foster

For years now, I've wanted to attend Blues Masters at the Crossroads, the annual concert weekend that Chad Kassem hosts at his Blue Heaven Studios in Salina, Kansas. Chad and I would talk about it during the year, I'd get all excited and then something would come along and dash my plans.

Finally in 2004, several members of the Phonogram list decided that not only were we going to go to Salina, but we were going to go and do something not many of us have ever had an opportunity to do. We wanted to follow the chain from the 'concert/recording studio' straight through to the finished product being pressed at a record pressing plant. Plans were co-ordinated with

musicians performing in the Blue Heaven Studios while Kevin Gray cut a couple of direct-to-disc recordings. We would then go on to California where the acetates would be made ready for pressing at the RTI facilities. I will discuss the California/RTI portion of this adventure in an upcoming issue, but for now I'm going to concentrate on the events in Salina.

The concerts are held in October and this time round it was Friday the 15th and Saturday the 16th of the month. I had no idea what to expect, and perhaps this was a good tack to take. What I experienced was one of the greatest weekends of music and friendship I'd ever encountered.



the co-operation of Chad, Kevin Gray (mastering/cutting engineer extraordinaire) and Don MacInnis, President of Record Technologies Incorporated. In a nutshell, the adventure was to go to Salina and hear the

Meeting fellow writer Dennis Davis and mutual friend Jeff Bernhard in Kansas City, we began the two plus hour journey to Salina on Wednesday the 13th. We arrived at our destination and immediately ran

► down to Acoustic Sounds to see what kind of goodies we could find. Needless to say there were more than we could carry and I think we all had records and CDs sent home via mail. The people at Acoustic Sounds including Mark, Clark, Patty, Ginger, Leslie and so many more, really bent over backwards to make our trip exceptionally memorable. Thank you all.



I remember walking into the Church – for that is what Blue Heaven Studios was – for the first time. It really was an awe-inspiring moment – it sort of takes your breath away. Every ounce of decor has been carefully restored while no expense has been spared in the wiring and outfitting of a fully-fledged recording studio. They've really done an outstanding job of maintaining the look, feel and great acoustics of the church, while not detracting from this when the studio portion was added to the rear of the building. Upstairs is a wonderful



From the Blues Masters Soup Kitchen

THURS. NIGHT 7:00
Bird's Ribs & Crawfish
Etouffee

FRIDAY LUNCH 1:00
Clark's Red Beans & Rice

FRIDAY NIGHT 5:45
Jim's Beef Brisket & beans

SATURDAY LUNCH 1:00
Charles' Gumbo

SATURDAY NIGHT 5:45
Chad's Chicken (whole
grilled chickens)

DISHES ON THE SIDE:

Louisiana sausage
Tipton sausage
Corn Bread
Mac & Cheese
Baked Beans
Cheezy Potatoes
Brookville Coleslaw
Crunchy Salad
Potatoe Salad
Strawberry Jello Salad
Apple Pizza Pie
Sweet Potatoe Pie

balcony and I don't think there is an acoustically bad seat in the house.

Downstairs in the basement is another small stage and a large area to walk around and mingle with guests and musicians. But the best part of the basement takes place in the back rooms. Here there is a large kitchen and eating area and this was one of the highlights of the weekend for all of us. Normally the kitchen is not open to the public but Chad invited us to partake in a very special event. He has a large group of friends who come in for this weekend and several of them are from Louisiana. Add to this some of the great staff at Acoustic Sounds who have a fine knowledge of all things Cajun and you have a recipe for some of the most delicious

and interesting foods you could imagine. There are lots of barbecue-ribs, chicken and brisket. There is also a lot of beans, Cajun crawfish, Crawfish étouffee, Louisiana sausage, red beans and rice as well as chicken and sausage gumbo. For desert, there are tons of pies including sweet potato and pumpkin. You just can't leave hungry! Walking through the kitchen and filling your plate, sitting and talking to some of the musicians, and just

▶ generally socializing and having a great time really made this one special event.

Kevin Gray (from AcousTech Mastering) and his wife Kathy also arrived midweek. It was great to spend time with them, but unfortunately it was a while before Kevin had any 'free time'. He spent countless hours working on the Neumann VMS70 cutting lathe. This is an



Just some of the artists on the bill...

Sonny King
Cootie Stark
Homesick James
Millage Gilbert
King Alex

Leroy Jodie Pierson
Arthur Williams
Big George Brock
Robert Belfour
Son Seals

Texas Johnny Brown

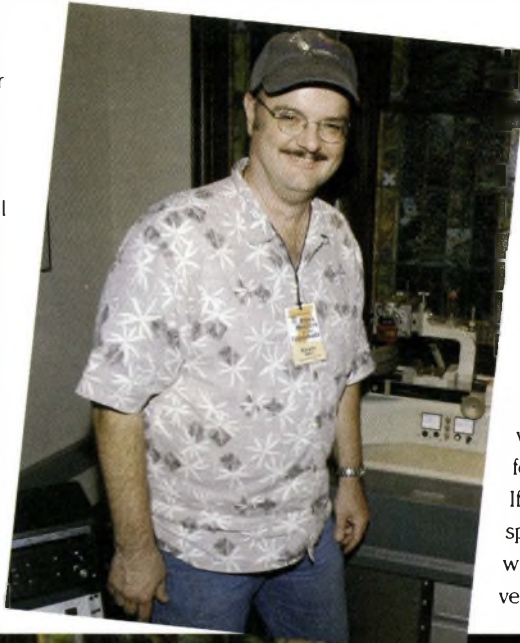


interesting animal in that it has Ortofon cutting heads and amplifiers rather than the Neumann originals. He was having problems with one of the amplifiers and it was literally only minutes before the concert was to begin on Friday evening that he finally got the beast working properly. It was a brilliant effort!

While he toiled away on Thursday and Friday, many of us were sitting in the church while musicians strolled in at various times to do sound checks for their prescribed sessions. On Saturday afternoon Kevin captured the great Jody Leroy Pierson in a 'studio' session direct-to-disc, followed later that day by Arthur Williams & Jesse Hoggard. These two direct-to-disc recordings are the ones on whose progress I'll be reporting. They will both soon be available so you'll be able to hear the end result of what I can only

otherwise describe in words. However, I'm in the fortunate position of not only having "been there" but also having heard the test pressings. They capture the excitement and unique atmosphere of this very special event perfectly and you'll be in for an aural treat when you buy them. This was the concept behind the adventure: hear the musicians live in the venue at the church and then have it captured by Kevin on direct-to-disc. The memory of this long weekend will be with me forever – reinforced by the aural window offered by the discs themselves. ▶

► As concerts go, this is one jam-packed musical weekend. No fewer than 16 acts appear in two evening sessions. The program began at approximately 7:15 in the evening and the last curtain call wasn't until a quarter after midnight. Ticket prices at the door are a measly \$40, and if that's not a bargain then I don't know what is. On top of the music there is a huge amount of activity going on in the background to further fascinate the audiophile, what with all the recording that's taking place. Katsuhiko Naito is the analogue recording engineer operating the main console and feeding the



This is one busy place. Gray was manning the lathe for both evenings and although he cut at least eight quality sides, I don't know how many of these will ever see the light of day. There are always contractual issues that arise with the artists or their managers and only time will tell if these two, two disc sets will be released.

This was such a wonderful weekend, I'm already looking forward to the event later this year. If you're an audiophile looking to spend one special weekend packed with music and great fun, this is the venue and event that I suggest you explore. Salina might be in the middle of nowhere, but this a road trip with a goal – and what a goal. The words "I don't think we're in Kansas anymore..." will never be the same again!

The Blues Masters at the Crossroads concerts themselves are open to the public, but beyond that you'd need to talk to the organizers regarding access. Also bear in mind that there are a limited number of tickets.

This isn't the Stones at Madison Square Gardens. Just in case you didn't get the message, the music alone makes the trip worthwhile (and yes, I realize that many of you are on the other side of the Atlantic!). Outside of the concerts, Salina is pretty sleepy, but that's all part of the charm. For further information, please check with either Acoustic Sounds at <http://www.acousticsounds.com> or directly on the Blue Heaven Studios website located at <http://www.blueheavenstudios.com>.



tape machines while Dawn Frank, an SACD engineer was doing her digital thing. Both are extremely busy for the entire weekend. Chad also had a full HDTV/DVD crew in, recording the concert on both evenings with no fewer than four digital video cameras going. Other players heavily involved include Micajah Ryan the house recording engineer for Blue Heaven, Oz Fritz, Brad Johnson and Travis Scanlan.



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